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## “I Know Well, but All the Same... [It was easy]”: The Structure of Perversion in Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer Series

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ear the conclusion of Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye* (1953), Philip Marlowe explains his ongoing investigation into the disappearance of Terry Lennox with the glib statement “Let’s say a question of inheritance is involved” (236). This comment is an apt epigraph for any definition of hard-boiled detective fiction, as the most fundamental question of the genre is the status of the father and his legacy. Critical and popular adoration of this “tough guy” fiction has often ignored this determination, focusing instead upon the more salacious and identifiable B-film trappings for which the genre is so well known—that is, ineradicable and lethal intrigue, sexual or otherwise. Of course, it is just these characteristics that Chandler praised in the “The Simple Art of Murder” (1950), the essay in which the author famously celebrates the tough realism of the new American detective, a clear break from the lineage of the English formula mystery. Fredric Jameson’s conclusion that Chandler’s work epitomizes the nostalgia that sustains the hard-boiled project provides a ready response to Chandler’s assertion that the detective is a “complete man,” sufficient unto himself (533).<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, sentiment and nostalgia—indeed, the very structure

of mystery—demand an interlocutor and, necessarily, another order (beyond the urban chaos) that guarantees the search for “hidden truth” that remains this man’s story, as Chandler has it (533). If the stalwart sleuth confronts the menace of the city with resolve, he does so with an equal amount of lamentation for a time gone by, an era represented by the flagging, hard-boiled patriarch, a figure that inevitably holds the highest fascination for the detective.

Recent criticism has moved beyond the manifest content of the hard-boiled detective’s discourse and focused upon the symptomatically split gesture of this narrative of masculinity. Abbott, Forter, and Plain have each identified a hysteric component—that is, a demand that asks to remain unfulfilled—in the hard-boiled ethic. To state this shared argument in its most basic terms, each author assumes that the hard-boiled detective’s demand for radical separation from the social, flight to a space where men might be men, is paired with a quest for transcendence—even to the point of subjective dissolution—of the strictures of gender construction made according to the standard binaries of masculine and feminine.<sup>2</sup> On this point, Leslie Murdoch’s memorable jibe at Marlowe in Chandler’s *The High Window* (1942) perhaps says it best: “. . . your tough guy act stinks” (1005). In the hard-boiled project, this contested status of gender identity and sexual difference are necessarily part and parcel of the genre’s preoccupation with the question of authenticity.<sup>3</sup> As traditional definitions of these identities fail, the detective seeks knowledge (and therefore a master of this knowledge) to answer these questions at the same time that he critiques the status quo. To these ends, as Plain summarizes, for the hystericized detective, the father remains an “unseen power who must, paradoxically, be both defended and defied” (57-58).

Elsewhere, I have read the hard-boiled narrative according to the psychoanalytic structure of obsessional

neurosis.<sup>4</sup> As even a brief perusal of criticism indicates, there is not a single critical theory that has not found a ready partner in detective fiction, a fact that reveals all too well that any theoretical interpolation of literature is a framing in the fullest sense. However, in the case of hard-boiled fiction, psychoanalysis is especially apt—if not exhaustive—as it so frequently appears at the level of narrative itself. Indeed, increasingly throughout the 1940s and beyond, psychoanalysis (or psychiatry more generally) becomes a stock figure of sinister forces that limit the independence of the detective, that threaten his very being—an anxiety that is entirely warranted.<sup>5</sup> This theoretical approach is equally germane as both hard-boiled fiction and psychoanalysis revolve around the question of the paternal function, that is, the place of the symbolic—rather than actual—father. As Verhaeghe has argued, “Nowadays, we are living in a period when the symbolic father as such is murdered, together with the belief in him” (135). In twentieth-century American literature, there is perhaps no greater archive recounting the history of this symbolic murder than hard-boiled fiction.<sup>6</sup>

Before proceeding, a word must be said about the father function as it is understood in psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the subject is structured (as either a neurotic, pervert, or psychotic) by the formative response made to its passage into language, an entrance that is presided over by the Name-of-the-Father, or the paternal metaphor. For the neurotic, this operation is two-fold: first, the father’s prohibition splits the mother-child dyad, providing safe distance from her enjoyment; subsequently, the Name-of-the-Father symbolizes the mother’s lack, an effect not of her failure but of the metaphoric function of language, which is here inaugurated (Fink 52-53).<sup>7</sup> The neurotic will follow the metonymy of desire opened by this founding (empty) metaphor, always seeking the object that would truly be “it,” which would thereby guarantee the completeness

of the symbolic order, or what Lacan calls the Other. First represented by the parents within the familial drama, this Other is the symbolic space in which all subjects are alienated insofar as they must take up this “foreign” language to articulate their wants and needs. Though the neurotic imagines that this space is logical and whole—in this way it becomes the site of authority, convention, and knowledge—this is an effect of fantasy, a construction plagued by ever-present neurotic doubt.

Žižek offers an instructive reading of the varying nature of the Other in classic and hard-boiled detective fiction.<sup>8</sup> In the classic case, though the symbolic order is initially disrupted, its ultimate consistency is guaranteed by the expert knowledge of the detective who produces a criminal, thereby eradicating disarray and sparing all (but one) of the *dramatis personae* an encounter with their own desire—that is, the desire to have killed the murder victim themselves (Žižek 59). In the hard-boiled world, the ultimate consistency of the Other remains in doubt—which is not to say that the dream of order is no longer operative—a fact that necessarily raises the fretful question of desire that plagues the hard-boiled detective, particularly via the *femme fatale*. Confronted with this symbolic peril, he must forsake the desire represented by the woman and work on behalf of the Name-of-the-Father, defending the patriarch’s good name. As Plain has claimed, the hard-boiled detective is not the ideal man spoken of in “The Simple Art of Murder”; rather he seeks a “big man” who would ensure meaning and safety in the lawless city and within the sexual relation as well (65).<sup>9</sup> The neurotic fantasy *par excellence* is the possession of authority and knowledge that would offer such certainty and wholeness—that is, an end to desire. This brings us to Mike Hammer.

Even a perfunctory reading of the Mike Hammer series (thirteen books, published over the course of almost fifty years, 1947–1996) reveals the inappro-

priateness of characterizing this detective in terms of neurosis. Indeed, the first Hammer novel, *I, the Jury* (1947), quite purposely dissolves the familiar hard-boiled, neurotic traits of sentiment and doubt. Neither tentative nor forgiving, Hammer is without question a “real man,” happily assuming his position as the law (and jury) unto himself in the degraded underworld of New York City. As the detective himself famously summarizes, “The law is fine. But this time I’m the law and I’m not going to be cold and impartial” (7). Simply put, Mike Hammer is the ideal “tough guy” detective described in the “Simple Art of Murder,” sought by Marlowe, and awaited by the genre itself.

Keeping to the tack of psychoanalytic criticism,<sup>10</sup> in the remainder of this essay I would like to consider the Hammer series according to the psychical structure of perversion. As Freud identified, all neurotics long for the pleasures enjoyed by the pervert and, in this way, Hammer is the (perverse) dream of hard-boiled detective fiction. Far from betraying his more literary precursors with a base—yet marketable—prurience, Mickey Spillane inventively galvanizes several hard-boiled preoccupations by working the structural logic of the genre to its conclusion.

To begin, it must be emphasized that psychoanalysis does not invoke perversion as a moral judgment, nor does it define this concept through a simple symptomatology of perverse traits.<sup>11</sup> As Fink explains, perversion is a result of “*the inadequacy of the paternal function*” that keeps the child from distancing himself from the mother’s enjoyment through the paternal metaphor (47-48). Contrary to the popular notion that this subject enjoys unending transgressive pleasure, the pervert actually works to instantiate the law of the father to defend against the crippling anxiety that accompanies this psychical structure. In this sense, the pervert is the most law-abiding citizen imaginable, precisely because he himself must constantly strive to produce the *No!*

of the father. Like the neurotic subject, the pervert wishes above all else to erase the desire of the Other; but whereas the neurotic subject will do this through separation and distancing, the pervert will achieve this by engaging the Other's enjoyment.<sup>12</sup>

Without recourse to the paternal metaphor that symbolizes the lack in the Other, the pervert is forced to maintain the infantile fantasy of the mother's wholeness. She remains a phallic (i.e., not lacking) mother, the pervert acting as her object of enjoyment, ensuring that all subsequent relations with women will be governed by the binary of the Madonna and the whore—the status of desire being the deciding factor of categorization. As Mannoni has explained, the pervert doesn't truly believe that the mother possesses a phallus, but because the paternal metaphor remains ambiguous, and therefore incapable of initiating the subject into the symbolic order fully, he disavows his knowledge of sexual difference. The motto orienting his fantasy is, thus, "I know well, but all the same . . ." (Mannoni 70). With no recourse to the big Other as such, and therefore no symbolic pact, the maintenance of this fantasy of sexual "difference" becomes central to the pervert's psychological life, in which all must be regulated with certainty. All potential fathers, then, threaten this ordering and become potential usurpers of the pervert's own enjoyment.<sup>13</sup>

In the first three Mike Hammer novels,<sup>14</sup> there is a compelling occurrence of the failure of the paternal function to name the enjoyment of the Other. In the first text of the series, *I, the Jury*, Hammer meets and falls deeply in love with the murderous psychiatrist, Charlotte Manning, while investigating the murder of an army buddy, Jack Williams. In the passage quoted above, Hammer's perverse relation to the law is established in the early pages of the novel—he will remember all that the law forgets, which is to say he will engage the law through enjoyment rather than the



prohibition of desire, as the neurotic does. This is the *modus operandi* of the perverse detective whose method of investigation is to identify with the enjoyment of the killer, which in *I, the Jury* is signaled by the presence of a chair left pulled out from a table. From here, the killer sat and watched Hammer's friend slowly die of a stomach wound while he attempted to reach for his gun. Of course, the enjoyment referred to here is that of Charlotte, who, in addition to being a murderer, is a drug dealer (the obligatory hard-boiled characterization of the psychiatrist) and a blackmailer. Intimations of such transgressive pleasures are, no doubt, part of the detective's initial animal-like attraction to the *femme fatale*, yet these will come to signify desire—rather than enjoyment—and this the pervert cannot abide.

Upon first meeting, Hammer describes Charlotte in terms that will become common throughout the series: she is described as an artwork, "what you would expect to find in a painting if each of the world's greatest artists added their own special technique to produce a masterpiece" (26). The perverse detective's anxiety surrounding sexual difference is given order in this textual production of fantasy.<sup>15</sup> The (gendered) ambiguity of this process is underscored by Hammer's attraction to strong, powerful women, and Charlotte is such a woman, as her manly strength, libido, and, of course, name attest. Spillane carries the logic of this fantasy strategy to its terminus in that all Hammer's "perfect" women inevitably wind up dead—something that is, at a certain level, acceptable to the detective, as they have essentially been dead in his fantasy life from the start. On the surface, this perhaps seems a poor representation of the hyper-sexualized women portrayed by Spillane. However, it must be remembered that the pervert will maintain the fantasy of the "whole" woman through the question of enjoyment—be this coitus or other sexualized ritual. Sexually satisfied, she remains without desire beyond the pervert, revealing the latter's

paradoxical (i.e., active) role as object of enjoyment.

Unfortunately, as is also the case for neurotic subjects, the pervert's fantasy objects are at the same time bound to flesh and blood, resulting in the inevitable fall from grace. In keeping with hard-boiled convention, this debasement is typically a function of the woman's greed, and her most frequent instrument is blackmail. Each item is equally distasteful to the pervert's fundamental fantasy, as both bring the woman into the symbolic order—that is, desire beyond the pervert—to exchange commodities. The method of exchange, blackmail, is all the more horrendous as its very purpose is to elicit the desire of the other. As a corrupt psychiatrist, Charlotte Manning is dedicated to assessing the desire of her male patients—the pitiful “little men” she treats (52)—and, when possible, use this information against them. Despite their liaison, in the end she will attempt to prey upon Hammer, as well. In the famous scene that ends the text, Charlotte depends upon Hammer's sexual appetite for her to buy her time to kill him. In Spillane's perverse twist on hard-boiled convention, she depends not on Hammer's sentiment but on his lust. As she stands naked before him, with a gun behind her back, the detective shoots her in the belly, famously telling the incredulous and dying woman, “It was easy” (147).

Of course, this is not exactly the case, as Hammer will be deeply haunted by this loss. In the following novel, *My Gun is Quick* (1950), he searches desperately for symbolic defense against the memory of Charlotte and her (homicidally) consuming desire. This ambivalent appeal to the father is found in Hammer's relation with Arthur Berin-Grotin, an aging captain of industry whom Hammer meets, apparently accidentally. Quite occupied with his own patronym, he asks Hammer to use only its first portion because, as he says, “Hyphenated family names have always annoyed me, and since I am burdened with one myself I find it

expedient to shorten it" (175). As this emphasis upon address makes clear, the father wishes to be whole, unmarked by a division of any kind, a possibility that is quite appealing to Hammer. He imagines that this old-school gentleman possesses a name of true currency; it is of value itself and is, therefore, exchangeable, offering the perverse subject potential entrance into the symbolic order and safe distance from the enjoyment of the Other.

However, the paternal metaphor remains deeply problematic for the perverse detective. In the larger mystery of the story, Hammer seeks the identity of an anonymous murdered girl whom he knew only briefly—for the duration of a few drinks—as Red.<sup>16</sup> She is quickly idealized by Hammer, becoming a Madonna figure who is appropriately killed as quickly as she accedes to this space—reality again falling in line with fantasy. Berin does indeed name the woman. He was her grandfather. But rather than working to form a pact between the subject and the symbolic order, the father's own enjoyment, past and present, ensures an ongoing rivalry. Typically, the patriarch had squandered his fortune, forcing him to team with gangsters in order to maintain a lifestyle deserving of his family's grand legacy. His most damning sin was to refuse his granddaughter support when she became pregnant out of wedlock, leaving her to become a common prostitute. In this Berin himself participates in that "enjoyment" of her, becoming a marauding father rather than a potential bearer of the paternal metaphor. And for this, Hammer must kill him and leave him to an anonymous grave.

*Vengeance is Mine!* (1950) serves as a repetition of this failure of the paternal metaphor and the emergence of the Other's desire. The novel again begins with the murder of a war buddy, Chester Wheeler, who dies while Hammer sleeps off a hangover in the same hotel room. Though the death is ruled a suicide, the D.A., liking neither Hammer's proximity to the ordeal nor

his demeanor, revokes the detective's license and gun permit. Hammer persists in spite of this, and his early investigation brings him to the Anton Lipsek Agency, where he meets another heavenly woman, Juno Reeves. Characteristically, she is described as a text of "supernatural loveliness as if some master artist had improved on nature itself" (375), yet there is "something else, too" (377)—as Hammer repeats after each of his encounters with the goddess—that keeps the detective from satisfying his urges. This excessiveness is all the more uncanny for the detective as he sees Charlotte Manning—who "wouldn't stay dead" (408)—every time he draws near to embrace this second divinity, resulting in bouts of hysteria that send the unmanned, and unarmed, detective fleeing.

Until very near the end of the novel, the solution to the case seems to center on a blackmailing operation run by an old underworld acquaintance, Dinky Williams, and the photographer Anton Lipsek, who entertain the city's elite and photograph them with prostitutes from behind expensive paintings in the bedrooms of Lipsek's loft—importantly, sinister desire lurks behind these texts of the great masters. Unaccounted for in this theory is the well-muscled murderer who has left a trail of bodies after Hammer's investigation, killing each of the victims (when possible) with his bare hands—a mark of the killer's enjoyment that is not lost on Hammer. After all other options are exhausted, it becomes clear that Juno is the criminal sought. The final confrontation scene is nearly identical to that of *I, the Jury*, save for one small item: after Hammer momentarily looks away, he turns back to see her naked before him, making certain beyond all doubt that "*Juno was a man!*" (513).

In finding another plundering father in this denouement, the perverse detective reveals that the fantasy of the Madonna is only a failed strategy for producing the paternal metaphor. The limits of Mike

Hammer's transgression, as law unto himself and figure of enjoyment, are clear, and the neurotic hard-boiled fantasy of the "complete" man is revealed as just that—fantasy. The father returns again in each case. Of course, this is not to say that the father (as man or symbolic function) has the answer to the question that is the subject itself. However, it is through the paternal function that this inquiry enters into the exchange of the symbolic order, and it is only here that investigation and interpretation as such may occur. Paradoxically, then, hard-boiled critique of the father's legacy must indeed occur at the same time as its defense. If not this, then matters become much worse.<sup>17</sup> This is the lesson of Mike Hammer, whose claim that "It was easy" remains patently false, leaving the detective to fall back into the anxiety-ridden logic of perversion that desperately seeks the aegis of the Name-of-the-Father. However, far from celebrating the violent conservatism and loneliness inherent in the genre, as some critics have suggested, I would argue that here Spillane engages in a parodic criticism of hard-boiled sentiment and nostalgia, forcing the detective to constantly reassess—rather than retreat from—his position in respect to the social order, knowledge, and the sexual relation, a project that remains ongoing throughout the remainder of the Hammer series.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Jameson's essay "On Raymond Chandler," *The Critical Response to Raymond Chandler*, ed. J.K. Van Dover (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995) 65-97.

<sup>2</sup>See Megan E. Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Greg Forter, *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel* (New York: New York UP, 2000); and Plain.

<sup>3</sup>This is true not only of the sentimental Chandler but also

of the less-maudlin Hammett and—at the farther extreme of the genre—Spillane as well. The well-known charges of Marlowe’s homosexuality are especially instructive here. This critical anxiety indicates the success of Chandler’s inquiry into the changing nature of manhood through the index of sentiment, just as it underscores the well-entrenched sexual codes at stake.

<sup>4</sup>See my forthcoming “The Detective and the Analyst: Truth, Knowledge, and Psychoanalysis in the Hard-boiled Fiction of Raymond Chandler.” *Clues: A Journal of Detection* (Summer 2006).

<sup>5</sup>The Lacanian analyst does in fact demand the dissolution of the subject insofar as it is nothing more than the sum of its symptomatic enjoyment, which is traversed in the process of analysis. To these ends, Žižek has read Hannibal Lecter, the infamous cannibal in the film *The Silence of the Lambs*, as representing American anxiety at the function of the psychoanalyst. See Žižek’s “In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large,” *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 1992) 211-72.

<sup>6</sup>Historical accounts that read the development of hard-boiled fiction according to the loss of male agency that results from the fallout of the Depression, New Deal liberalism, and the Women’s Movement of the first half of the twentieth century provide crucial historical context for this phenomenon. See especially Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) and William Marling, *The American Roman Noir: Hammett, Cain, and Chandler* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>For further discussion of the Lacanian subject, the reader is directed to the work of Bruce Fink. See his *Lacanian Subject* and “Perversion.”

<sup>8</sup>See Chapter 2, “Two Ways to Avoid the Real of Desire,” in Žižek 48-66..

<sup>9</sup>Plain is speaking here of Chandler’s Marlowe, particularly in *Farewell, My Lovely*. However, given my own framing of the genre in the current project, I would argue that this transferential relation is true of hard-boiled fiction generally.

<sup>10</sup>Again, such an approach is in part authorized by the presence of an analyst as *femme fatale* in *I, the Jury*, and an ongoing vilification of medicine (psychiatric or otherwise) throughout the Hammer opus.

<sup>11</sup>Each of these options has been used as a mode of aspersion in Spillane criticism, popular and academic, nearly from the beginning of the Hammer series. Early on, the passionate dislike of Spillane was so great as to prompt the assertion that the author was responsible for the increased crime and moral decay of the early 1950s. For examples of such extreme claims, see, notably, Malcolm Cowley, "Sex Murder Incorporated," *New Republic* 11 February 1952: 17-18 and Christopher La Farge, "Mickey Spillane and His Bloody Hammer," *Saturday Review* 6 November 1953: 11-12+.

<sup>12</sup>For a discussion of the psychical structure of perversion as it is understood by psychoanalysis, see Joël Dor, *Structure and Perversions*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2001) and Rothenberg, Foster, and Žižek.

<sup>13</sup>For a discussion of the father-of-enjoyment, the so-called "anal father," see Verhaeghe. This second moniker, anal father, speaks to the regressive, pre-oedipal or non-symbolic nature of this figure.

<sup>14</sup>These are *I, the Jury* (1947), *My Gun is Quick* (1950), and *Vengeance is Mine!* (1950).

<sup>15</sup>Thus, the pervert inevitably engages the "picture" (i.e. fantasy) of his perfect woman, an activity that indicts the thinly veiled desire at the heart of the knightly code of the neurotic hard-boiled detective—a preoccupation that Spillane plays upon by so frequently turning detective fiction's traditional tool of forensic truth, photography, into literal pornography.

<sup>16</sup>In Spillane's work, the ideal woman is frequently, like Red, met only for a moment, allowing Hammer's callow sexuality to create the woman as he sees fit. In the early novels, Hammer's secretary Velda serves as an ever-present and largely untouchable Madonna, functioning as a sort of redundant fantasy system behind the whirligig of Hammer's other angels and whores. However, her characterization will later become interestingly complicated, making Velda quite unique in the genre.

<sup>17</sup>Lacan describes the subject's "choice" as *Pire ou Père*, bad or worse. The subject can either renounce its enjoyment and seek substitute satisfaction in the symbolic order, or worse: forsake the paternal metaphor and fall into psychosis. Structurally, perversion occupies a sort of middle ground between these structures. See Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 49-68 and Fink, *Clinical Introduction* 165-202.

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# My Interview at the Lord's University

It was Wayne Booth, the celebrated literary theorist and amiably disaffected Mormon, for whom I was doing research at the University of Chicago, who suggested I apply for an English teaching position at Brigham Young University, where I had studied as an undergraduate. I was aware of the many professors who had been either disciplined or dismissed from BYU on ideological grounds. What follows is my account of the series of interviews I underwent there.

It was the spring of 1997, and I was en route to my interview, flying over the Rocky Mountains and descending into the Utah basin, an emotional experience for someone like me who feels herself a part of the proud history of the state, coming as I did from "pioneer stock." I am, in fact, a direct descendant of the most significant pioneer, Brigham Young, who led the saints away from the religious persecution they faced in the East and across the plains in their covered wagon trek.

Upon arriving, I rented a car and set out for Provo, resignedly, and with an edge of interest. I checked into the room that had been reserved for me and tried to get some sleep, but it didn't come. It felt strange to be back in "Happy Valley." I wondered how I managed to attend school here, but it really was a very contented time in my life. BYU is a safe place for a mainstream Mormon, which I was back then: vibrant, bright-eyed, fervently faithful. The beautiful campus is restful to the mind and the spirit, surrounded by rocky snow-capped mountains that slope down into the foothills that shelter the "Y." There's a bell tower clock that tolls the hour to the Church hymn about the Mormon pioneers:

“Come, come ye saints, no toil nor labor fear.” Class materials were presented so as to shelter and nurture my faith. In the morning before classes I would kneel and pray, then go about my activities filled with the calm assurance that my future was bright and everything in order in my life. And in the evening I would read the scriptures and kneel in prayer again before sleeping. Sundays, I and everyone else would dress up and walk to Church services.

Fifteen years had elapsed since that time, however, and during these years I had attended graduate school at a decidedly secular institution. The University of Chicago immersed me in feminism, and I found it shockingly appealing. At BYU feminists were viewed simply as men haters, for the Mormon patriarchy very efficiently shut out women’s attempts to foment for more opportunity and authority. Women were steered very carefully to marriage and motherhood. I had every intention of fulfilling this expectation. But at BYU, the first glimmerings of restiveness began. It annoyed me that women primarily came to BYU to marry rather than to pursue an education, so I made a quiet resolve to graduate from BYU with my B.A., not my Mrs. That, more than one Mormon matron subsequently told me, was my first mistake, for in a patriarchy the family unit is the *sine qua non*, and women, men too for that matter, who failed to marry in a timely fashion inevitably felt out of place in the faith. At the University of Chicago, with feminist theory so prevalent in my mind, marriage, particularly within patriarchal Mormonism, became increasingly dubious. As the years passed during which I pursued my degrees rather than bend my head to the yoke of marriage, I began my movement to the periphery of my faith, where I remained for a decade. I was reluctant to leave the fold entirely, for it was a caring, close-knit community that had known and nurtured me since infancy; and yet I was unable to participate in the trustful way I once had.

As I completed my Ph.D. and readied myself for the precariousness of the job market, Wayne Booth encouraged me to apply for a position at BYU. I was ambivalent. He suggested that I was uniquely prepared to make a go of it at BYU since I thoroughly knew the faith and was sensitive to the conflicts Mormonism attached to such theories as feminism and psychoanalysis.

"But," I observed, "feminism and psychoanalysis figure prominently in my theoretical orientation, and in my dissertation, so why go to work at a place where I would be setting myself up for censure and conflict?" He told me that he had recently participated in an outside assessment of BYU's English department and found the faculty to be dedicated scholars. He felt I would manage there just fine, and it wouldn't hurt to apply.

"That's so," I reasoned. "But what of the women like Cecilia Farr and Gail Houston who have been recently dismissed from the university, specifically because they have been feminists?" (Stimpson, Waterman).

"Granted, you would need to be diplomatic in expressing your feminist views. But you don't strike me as particularly strident, and maybe they were. And, realistically, political machinations and ideological prejudices enter into every institution. Where do you think I honed my interest in rhetoric? Through interacting with my savvy and slippery colleagues at the University of Chicago. You might find yourself happier at BYU than at another more secular place."

I considered this. "But," I countered, "at BYU, a crucial difference is you are not dealing with individual proclivities but with an organized, institutional determination to squelch the intellectual freedom of faculty who challenge Mormon doctrine. This is much more problematic, no?"

He thought about that. "Yes," he acknowledged.

“But it wouldn’t hurt to investigate the possibility. Why don’t you apply and see. I’ll write you a letter of recommendation. My good word could open the door for you. They seem to respect my opinion.”

“OK,” I agreed. “The job market is so dismal, I’ll need to pursue all options.”

And so it was decided. I applied. Wayne Booth wrote me a glowing letter. And I got the call inviting me out for a campus visit. A few days before the visit, a manila envelope arrived with the ominous “Statement on Academic Freedom at BYU” enclosed. I was instructed to read it before I arrived. My roommate, Grace, also a graduate student and a Mormon, read it too. We both scratched our heads over it and agreed it was a perplexing document.

“This is a crucial point, it seems to me,” I said. “Statement 5 reads that ‘a limitation on [individual academic freedom] is reasonable when the faculty behavior or expression seriously and adversely affects the university mission or the Church,’ and then it gives, as an example, if the expression ‘contradicts or opposes, rather than analyzes or discusses, fundamental Church doctrine or policy.’” (I wrote boldly in the margin: “So, the faculty member cannot be seen as opposing or contradicting Church doctrine. Consequently, feminism, is out!”) “Patriarchy,” I said, “is the integral social organization of the Church, deeply imbedded in Church doctrine, Church culture, the priesthood, the religious ceremonies of the temple, etc., so adopting a stance that is critical of patriarchy, which feminism inevitably does, would be a violation of the type of academic freedom described in this document.” I threw up my hands. “There is no point in my even going on this interview.”

“You already knew this. We’ve intimately experienced, as single Mormon women pursuing advanced degrees, the implications of Mormon doctrine and patriarchy in a way that Wayne Booth has not. We know how paranoid the Church is about women’s chal-

lenging the types of roles prescribed for them under patriarchy. And English departments, or any studies in the liberal arts, would be inclined to do this more than, say, law or business.”

“I just wonder how the English Department manages to survive and remain a part of the larger intellectual academic community when it fails to explore a theory as vital and important as feminism.”

“Well, as the Academic Freedom document states, Mormonism holds itself apart from the secular academic community, preserves its right to maintain its religious mission, and feels that it has an important responsibility to challenge the secular establishment. And it certainly does do that. See this part here where they state that all institutions infringe in some way on academic freedom: ‘. . . universities have censured professors for racist, anti-Semitic, or otherwise offensive expression. In addition, state universities have prohibited the advocacy of religious values to protect a separation of church and state.’ So, they claim BYU is exercising the same right in order to safeguard their religious mission. And, they’re right. Feminism, if allowed to develop at a place like BYU, would seriously undermine Church doctrine.

“Apparently the faculty in the English Department were given just enough rope in the past decade to hang themselves with, and people like Cecilia Farr and Gail Houston were sacrificed, as well as others, as an example to the rest.

“Notice the date on this document, September 1992. This was the time that Cecilia Farr was being sanctioned and the paper trail laid to fire her. The issue was getting national attention. Obviously the Church decided they needed a document that would protect them from litigation in view of their determination to crack down on problematic faculty. See the note in the back here on the Works Cited page stating that the American Association of University Professors directs

that ‘limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in writing at the time of appointment.’ So, this document is their attempt to cover themselves. You receive this document as you are preparing to interview. You are left without excuse should problems arise down the road.”

“Well, in two days I’ll have a chance to see the implications of this document, up close and personal.”

Noting the first rays of the dawn filtering through the window of my hotel room, I stopped my exasperated tossing and turning and decided to get ready for the day’s events. As the time approached, I headed for campus and walked down the familiar halls of the English Department where I had walked so many times in that former life. The secretary of the department head, cheerful and maternal, greeted me. And then the head, Dr. Wilson, came out. He had a kind, genuine face. I liked him. We sat down in his office and talked about the English Department, the curriculum, the faculty, the struggles that they were passing through because of the Church perception that literary studies and critical theory were somehow threatening to Church teachings. He expressed his own discomfort with the way the Church watched them too closely and micromanaged the hiring in the department.

I smiled in recollection of an experience I had had as a student at BYU. “I recall that the only reference to Freud that I encountered here was when a professor pointed out a phallic symbol in a scene from a William Dean Howell novel. I remember being mystified. What’s a phallic symbol? I thought.” We laughed. “At the University of Chicago I learned that and a lot more about Freud and psychoanalysis.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Wilson mused. “We do offer a course in literary theory now, and I believe there is a section dealing with Freud, so I guess we’re doing somewhat better. But frankly, much of modern-day literary the-

ory is problematic if it challenges Mormon doctrine. Feminism, as I'm sure you've heard, is a particularly nettlesome theoretical orientation, but even theories like psychoanalysis, postmodernism, and deconstruction raise eyebrows. The Church authorities don't understand their purpose. That's a chief source of frustration for us, that people with no expertise in the field of literature are sticking their noses into the methodology of the discipline and passing judgment."

"I see you have women's studies offered in the curriculum. How can women's studies be taught in a climate of patriarchy that refuses to allow for questioning of this social organization? Isn't the person who teaches such a course setting herself up for disciplinary action?"

He considered this. "We have a number of women on the faculty here. Some do feel that they are hushed up, and others don't seem to be uncomfortable with the direction their teaching and scholarship is obliged to take, because of Church teachings, and given that it's a Church school with a distinctive student body. It was hard on the department when Cecilia Farr and Gail Houston were targeted. I was particularly close to Gail Houston, a very fine professor and scholar. And the department was divided by it. Some are more cooperative about the Church mission concept than others. But, in the end, each faculty member needs to come to his or her own terms with the special conditions of teaching at a place like BYU." He considered for a moment, then asked: "Well, what can I do for you while you are here to help you to know if BYU is a place you would like to teach?"

"I would like to talk with some of the female teachers and get their impressions."

"OK. I think you'll have the opportunity to meet with some of them."<sup>1</sup>

My next interview was with the Head of the Humanities Division, Edward Geary. We talked about what it was like to teach at BYU. He confirmed what

John Wilson had said, that it was necessary to craft one's approach for a conservative Mormon classroom. He said that there was so much that one was able to talk about that the few things that one needed to steer clear of didn't seem to him to be very serious. I acknowledged that it was part of the teaching challenge to be sensitive to the feelings and values of one's students, but also noted that it was a teacher's responsibility to encourage students to think critically, to move from a stance of perhaps naive belief to belief that is founded on a more secure foundation of strenuous thought and sound reasoning. On women's issues, he reiterated what John Wilson had said, that there is a lot of scrutiny brought to bear here, and one needed to be very careful. He talked about a few of the feminist teachers who had been fired. I told him that I didn't have any subversive agenda to pursue, that mainly I just wanted to feel free to study literature, wherever that might lead.

I was next instructed to sit in a conference room and wait for professors to come and talk to me. An older, very tentative woman entered. She told of how she was very nervous when she interviewed, but didn't have any serious dedication to feminism or anything else that might be threatening to the leaders, so she didn't have a problem. The woman left and a cocky, friendly guy walked in, sat down, stretched out, flung his arm along the back of the adjoining chair, and asked me when my interview with the Vice President was going to take place. He glanced at the open door, then leaned toward me conspiratorially: "Look, they're going to ask you about the Academic Freedom document. They're devoted to it. You just have to respond that you don't have any interest in teaching or publishing anything that would be considered subversive to the Church. Feminism, gay issues, they just aren't going to comprehend anything you might have to say about it, so it's futile to try to defend the value of exploring these



issues. I wrote an article in which I just mentioned the word 'homosexuality,' and I was called to account for it. Writings are kept on file and studied for subversive content. And it's not just the Church leaders and the administration that are watching. There are numerous students who are very quick to report you if they feel that you are teaching something that challenges Church doctrine. The important thing in these interviews is to just get through them and keep your answers brief and innocuous. Then you can decide if you want the job after it is offered to you."

I listened, intrigued by the level of deception he was so blithely advocating. "Tell me," I probed, "how do faculty feel about this level of scrutiny and, well, repression? Feminism, for example, is, in my view, one of the most significant theoretical movements that have swept through our discipline. I don't see how to skirt around it. I wouldn't feel academically responsible if I did. I would feel complicit in institutionalized sexism, gender-based discrimination?"

He brought his hands down flat on the desk, considering this. "Well, that's harsh."

"Where did you go to graduate school?"

"University of Michigan."

"And you were exposed to feminist theory there, no doubt?"

"Hell yes. Had it rammed down my throat."

"You were annoyed by the theory?"

"Well, no. I agree it's important. Look, we don't like that we have to steer clear of it, of course. But BYU, it's a special place to teach. The students are great, respectful, hard working. And the faculty, due to our common religious orientation, have a strong bond that you wouldn't have at other places. I think most of us feel that we can live with the repression in view of these other benefits. Those who can't can go somewhere else. No one is forcing them to be here."

I nodded in acknowledgement, but felt mystified

and concerned, since I knew that it was doing BYU students a disservice to not expose them to feminist theory. I had spoken to some of them over the past few years and learned about how feminism had caught fire here among many of the students, and how upsetting it was to them when the professors who had inspired them were reprimanded and dismissed. There had even been an organized student protest, unheard of at BYU (Waterman).

The time for the talk with the Vice President arrived. On the way to the administration building I walked by the statue of Brigham Young, and paused to look at it searchingly. "Well, Mr. Patriarchy, here I am, your great-, great-, great-granddaughter, probably about to destroy any possibility of my teaching here." And then I turned and walked into the building and down the corridor, passing by the portraits of all the leaders of the Church, all white males, looking so benign. James D. Gordon, III, the Vice President, sat behind his desk, and rose to extend his hand to me in a floppy hand shake. He looked weary. Behind him along the wall was the standard family photo, and eight separate portraits of his eight children ranged in single file above it. "Wow," I said, "That's quite a crop." He gave me a wilted smile and said mournfully, "They're very special." I smiled at his lack of conviction. As he perfunctorily questioned me, head resting on his hand, he yawned repeatedly and seemed so bored with the whole process that I felt amused.

Then a woman entered, Susan Stone, the Dean of Students, and the air of the proceedings became more intent. I was surprised to meet a woman in a significant position of authority since I knew that affirmative action was not pursued with any dedication here.<sup>2</sup> I knew what to expect from her. I knew that she would be unusually committed to the patriarchal structure of the Church; otherwise the patriarchy would not have chosen her. For a long time I had wondered why

women defended patriarchy when I knew it was against their better interests, but then I realized that after a woman has married, raised children in, and sacrificed her life to a particular religious orientation, it is highly unlikely that she will recant it, because it would be tantamount to calling her life a fraud. Susan Stone mainly just sat and observed me closely while James Gordon asked the questions.

“Well, let’s just get better acquainted, shall we? Tell us about your experience at BYU. Did you enjoy your time here?”

“Yes. I had a very positive experience, was really very contented.”

“How was your experience at the University of Chicago?”

“It was wonderful, perhaps the most intellectually, spiritually invigorating time of my life.”

“Really? More so than BYU? Why?”

“Well, the University of Chicago is a very scholarly place . . .”

“More so than BYU?”

“Well, yes. It’s chiefly a graduate school.”

“And how was the experience spiritually invigorating?”

Well, the Church community there was really wonderful, the Hyde Park Ward. It’s very diverse. There are the students and teachers of the University that go there, a very scholarly element. Then there’s the inner-city element, a lot of different ethnicities and economic levels. It makes for a climate of difference, and consequently there’s a need for a lot of openmindedness. The discussions draw on widely different realms of experience, so there’s the opportunity to learn things from each other we hadn’t considered before.”

“And this made for a very spiritual experience?”

Yes. There’s a quote from Elder Neal Maxwell I like, ‘Faith is strongest when it is without illusion.’ I find that my spiritual life is most alive when I’m searching

for truth in a strenuous way and willing to explore the ways in which my faith may be immature or misdirected, perhaps based on illusions that should be thrown out or revised. The climate of the ward enabled that process in a way that a ward where the congregation is less diverse and less probing would not. In addition, I was in the process of going through a very grueling graduate program that challenged a lot of my beliefs and assumptions, and frequently I would go to Church wondering about some belief, and invariably I would leave after Church feeling spiritually fed and invigorated, stronger, and like my doubts were often resolved or my belief system clarified in such a way that my faith grew.”

“Tell me an example of a doctrine that was challenged.”

Patriarchy is the best example, I thought, but I can’t mention that. “Well, it’s hard to locate any particular thing. It was just a lot of little things. The University of Chicago has a proudly secular tradition. It doesn’t feel the need to cater to religious beliefs. The way in which learning at BYU passes through a religious filter just doesn’t happen at Chicago.”

“Which do you think is the better approach?” he challenged.

“They probably both err on the side of their particular extreme. I think the University of Chicago could have benefited from a perspective that allowed for the less rationally affirmable realm of experience. And probably BYU could benefit from opening research up more to a scholarly probing scrutiny of what it calls spiritual truth. Truth is revealed best in a climate where both the intellectual and spiritual are joined equally.”

“Well, we claim that we do have a perfect balance of the intellectual and spiritual in our scholarship. Did you read the document on Academic Freedom?”

Oh no, I thought, “Yes.”

“What was your opinion of it?”

“Well. It states that scholarly inquiry mustn’t challenge doctrine, so to me this would indicate that intellectual and spiritual inquiry are not equally joined.”

He placed the tips of the fingers of his two hands together, eyed me warily, and said, “I see.” He paused, and then asked nonchalantly, “In one of the letters of recommendation in your application, the word ‘homoeroticism’ is mentioned. Could you explain this?”

I swallowed. “My dissertation dealt with imperial fiction, which is dominated by men traveling together and attending to the business of empire. Women were basically left out of this business, or just included on the fringes. Homoeroticism addresses the intensity of the male bonding that was frequently more powerful than the men’s desire to relinquish these bonds and participate in the domestic sphere of marriage and family. Rider Haggard’s novels, for example, are always about men who are closely bonded as they pass through their adventures together. And the excitement of their experiences is the high point of their lives. Marriage and family rarely enter in, and when they do it is as a sort of diminishment, a relinquishing of a more intense engagement with life and with each other.”

“Freud and psychoanalysis are mentioned in your recommendation letters, too. How do they enter in?”

“In writing a dissertation one needs to consider methodology, or how the research and scholarship fits in with current critical theory. I found psychoanalysis to be the most useful critical approach to use.”

“Why?”

I paused, thinking carefully. “Well, Freud originated the idea of narcissism and how it relates to psychological nature, the way in which our interactions are dominated by unconscious needs to protect ourselves, and this fit in very well with my own theories about imperial fiction.” I stopped, hoping that would be adequate.

“Tell me more.”

“I’m not comfortable with much of what Freud

the *Plaza*. He said, "I've read Freud's New York Times perspective on women, for example, but nevertheless in his theories of narcissism he revealed how our relationships between nations, between men and women, are dominated by unconscious, selfish drives, and these theories revealed much of what I found in studying Haggard's writings about the British in their portrayal of and interactions with the natives of Africa."

"Freud's writings and theories are highly sexual," he observed, critically.

"Yes. But life is highly sexual, isn't it?" My glance darted to the eight portraits of his children.

He shrugged. "It's curious to me that you would have chosen Haggard, a man who was possibly very conflicted in his sexuality, and Freud and psychoanalysis, which are also very strangely sexually charged areas. What is the value of studying this type of thing?"

I shrugged. "In literature we study where the literature leads us, the insights it has to offer about the human condition. Haggard's writings were very suggestive about the things English society was struggling with. His novels, particularly one entitled *She*, revealed the trauma that his male-dominated society attached to the women's movement, for example. This is very interesting to me."

"Why?"

"Because . . . I'm a woman concerned that women are given every opportunity to develop themselves." I knew we were getting into dangerous territory—but one gets tired of covering up. I went on, trying to divert the theme some: "And as for Freud, his misogyny was very revealing to me about how social structures, particularly when they are dominated by one sex, can be dangerous and deforming to both men and women. As my dissertation progressed I was frequently dissatisfied with his misogynistic perspective. It wasn't just misogynistic; it was xenophobic. He just viewed difference, whether sexual or racial, in a paranoid, siege-

mentality way.”

“What do you mean by siege mentality?”

I explained this phrase, its relation to particularly rigid socio-cultural, “them-versus-us” orientations, which I knew Mormonism excelled in.

“OK, Dr. Young. Shifting the topic some . . . we have a special student body, particularly invested in its Mormon heritage and system of beliefs. How do you intend to safeguard this?”

“I don’t have an agenda to undermine my students’ belief system. A thoughtful study of literature reveals and reinforces truth.”

“But some literature can certainly undermine a belief in Mormon doctrine.”

“But doesn’t truth prevail? And isn’t it essential that students develop the ability to look hard at the information before them and determine what is truth, and why?”

“OK, Dr. Young. Thank you for your time.” The three of us rose, shook hands, said our goodbyes with forced smiles.

My interviews for the day were over, and I drove to the restaurant where I was to have dinner with several of the faculty. There was one female professor there, seated to my right, a creative writer, Linda Beckett. She had blondish hair, cut straight around the level of her chin. She wore no wedding ring. She wore a shapeless beige smock dress and sandals. She was nice and I liked her. During the dinner she leaned over and said in my ear: “You aren’t permitted to write anything about the woman’s body. Anything bordering on challenging the status quo, patriarchy, the traditional perceptions of men and women, is viewed with suspicion.” I listened, astounded, and whispered back, “How do you manage to write under these conditions?” She shrugged. “I’m just careful about what I publish.” Kent Bourbon was the man who had contacted me about the interview. We didn’t like each other from the start. He struck me

as *Physical and Cultural Rev. in the New World* (W. W. Norton, 1999). He brought me down with his questions and trying to rattle me. He asked me if I had any questions, so I asked about the level of scrutiny brought to bear on the department, which they all agreed was a problem.

“I was called in about writing the word ‘homosexual’ in an article,” one professor said.

“Well, it’s the Church school. That’s just a reality of working here, and you need to be able to contend with that, the restrictions that go along with that.” Kent rattled this off mechanically. And that put an end to that topic.

“What do you value about teaching at BYU?” I asked.

“One great thing is there is a lot of money available for travel and research projects. As you know, Church tithing is the major financial endowment of the university, which is another reason why we are obliged to bow to Church doctrine.”

I went around the table and asked about the different specialties and interests of each. They told me of their projects. I didn’t want to talk about my own, but Kent pressed me about the sort of new and exciting courses I would be interested in teaching, and I returned withered responses relating to my dissertation, colonial literature, etc., but the pressure to avoid the mention of feminism, a chief area of interest, blighted my ability to respond more effectively. He pressed on with questions about research interests, and I forced out more lackluster responses. I was just going through the motions at that point. The modicum of enthusiasm I had mustered had run out long ago. I knew I wouldn’t be able to teach here. I wondered that any of them were able to. It just seemed as if Big Brother was encroaching on their development as scholars. There was a large aquarium of tropical fish behind Kent’s head. I got through the meal by watching the fish dip and dart, now and again diving down behind Kent’s head and



coming out of his ear, etc. It passed the time until the bill arrived and the fortune cookies. My fortune: "A good position and a comfortable salary will be yours." I laughed and read it to the group.

"Well, I guess that means you won't be teaching at BYU," Kent responded sardonically.

The next morning I awoke early and got ready for the hour's drive into Salt Lake to meet with one of the Twelve Apostles, the highest leaders of the Church. It was a lovely, sunny day, and the drive was a nice one, through farm lands, and then the suburbs of Salt Lake, temples in the distance nestled at the foothills of the mountains. Utah really was quite beautiful and restful. As I neared the city center a song came on the radio, "Pretty woman, walking down the street." I turned up the volume and sang along, feeling brazen and determined that I would not let the Church Office Building flummox me. I wended my way successfully through the Church security, past the secretaries, all female, seated with blissful smiles on their faces. I sat outside Parley Condie's office and glanced around me. Along one wall were pictures of all the mission presidents and the areas where they were serving. I got up and went over to see the pictures more closely. Among the hundreds there were a few black presidents, even one interracial couple. I raised my eyebrows at this—surprised. I heard a door open behind me and turned to see Elder Condie waiting for me, a benign smile on his face.

"An impressive sight, isn't it? Missions covering the globe," and he swept his arm out.

I smiled in response, approached him, we shook hands, and I entered his spacious office. There were a number of African-style decorations, and I asked him what his interest was in Africa. He explained that he had been the Regional Representative of the missions there, and we settled in by talking vaguely about my dissertation that dealt with Africa. He said he wasn't here to appraise my level of scholarship—this had been

done at BYU. So, and the fact that York had made it too, his office indicated that I had passed the test. I started at this, wondering if it was true.

“How will you like teaching at BYU?”

“I’m not sure it’s a done deal yet.”

“Well, typically they wouldn’t waste a General Authority’s time if they weren’t intending to offer you the job. The process would have been ended before now.”

I listened, unsure if that was the case.

“Tell me about your experience interviewing. The English department has been under a lot of scrutiny. What is your impression of this?”

I paused. “I think the scrutiny is excessive.”

“You do? Tell me why.”

“It’s producing a cautious approach to scholarship that goes against the basic purpose of a university.”

“Explain what you mean.”

I paused, pursed my brows in thought, and he leaned back in his chair and waited, watching me, encouragingly. He was a nice man, meant well. “University studies are the time to help students to stretch themselves intellectually, socially, spiritually, psychologically, to provide for a climate of challenging scrutiny, fill their minds with thought-provoking ideas, teach them to explore their naive assumptions and wrestle with ways to develop greater intellectual and spiritual maturity. It’s very possibly the only time in their lives when many of them will have an opportunity to do this, in the type of intense way that the university system is supposed to cultivate. An environment that fears to question undermines this. And the purpose of a university, to safeguard probing thought and intellectual inquiry, is lost.”

“Hmm. You don’t think there’s academic freedom then, at BYU?”

I paused, shrugged. “Not very much. There’s only freedom insofar as it doesn’t challenge accepted

Mormon thought, which isn't much freedom at all."

"And you think it's important to challenge accepted Mormon thought?"

"Yes. I think all thought needs to be challenged in order to become strong, not flabby, especially religious thought."

"I see. What's your opinion of the Academic Freedom document at BYU?"

"It seems to me to be talking out of both sides of the mouth. It says that if you are in tune with the spirit of God you will not question Mormon doctrine. But that's not true. And it says that at BYU we have the opportunity to explore truth with greater purpose, since we also have the restored light of the Gospel to guide us, which I can accept, but then if the exploration leads me to question certain things about Church teachings, suddenly I'm no longer listening to the Spirit of God. Reading it I felt all tied up in knots," I finished inadequately, throwing up my hands.

Well, I understand what you mean," he said vaguely. He leaned back in his chair and considered me. "Well, let me get along to the interview portion of this meeting." He paused, smiled at me disarmingly. "Do you have a testimony of the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ?"

"Yes."

"Have you been to the temple?"

"Yes. I served a mission back when I was twenty-one, to Peru."

"Did you? That's wonderful. Did you enjoy your mission?"

"Yes. Very much."

"Missionary work is an inspired thing. Do you have a current temple recommend?"

I thought about that. I knew it was expired. "I'm not sure if it has expired. The last time I went to the temple was a few years ago."

"Well, you'll have to get it renewed.<sup>3</sup> And do you

wear *Plouton's Spine*, *Remedies*, New York: W. Norton, 1999.

"Well, unless it's one of those horribly humid days in Chicago and hundreds are dying of heat prostration," I equivocated.<sup>4</sup>

He leaned his head back and laughed. "Well, under those conditions, I think God would forgive you." His voice grew softer, more intent, "Do you support the Priesthood, the leaders of the Church?"

I paused. "Well, I think they have a hard job, and I certainly support them as they try to follow God and do their best with it."

He smiled at this admittedly equivocal answer, and nodded. "Well, that's all. I hope you'll be very happy teaching at BYU, Dr. Young." He stood up, walked with me to the door, opened it, and stood in the doorway, shaking my hand. He said to his secretary. "This is Dr. Young. She'll be teaching at BYU, in the English Department."

The secretary smiled encouragingly. "That's wonderful. Congratulations."

I walked away. That had been easier than I thought. I was surprised he didn't challenge me more on my answers. He didn't seem very worried. I wandered around the building some, looking at paintings. I walked along the large mural depicting Christ giving his final instructions to his disciples before his ascension into heaven, Jerusalem in the background. I recalled the many times from childhood on up that I'd stood in this spot. I crossed the street and wandered through the temple grounds, kindly repulsing the advances of all the missionary couples. I sat down on a bench facing the temple and considered the apostle's statement that I would probably be hired at BYU. I still didn't believe it. The interviews hadn't gone that well. But it worried me just the same, and I thought again about whether I could teach there. I needed a job, but did I need a job that much?

I arrived back in liberating Chicago, very relieved, entered my Hyde Park apartment, and walked down the hall to unload my luggage.

“How was it?” Grace called to me from her room. I went in and settled myself down in her easy chair. I knew she’d been waiting in anticipation for our tell-all session. I paused, teasingly. “Well?” she prodded. “Do you have a job?” and her eyes danced merrily.

“I don’t think I’m BYU material,” I told her in mock dismay. “The Lord’s University is extraordinarily sexist!”

“Surprise! Surprise! Didn’t I tell you, I only survived the year I taught there by guzzling Maalox.”

The call came a few days later while I was cooking. Grace handed me the phone, eyebrows raised expectantly.

“Dr. Young. John Wilson here.”

“Oh, yes, hello. How are you?”

“Fine, just fine. I’m calling to tell you, that we very much appreciated your coming out for a campus visit. The faculty was impressed with you, felt you were a very gracious person. But we’ve decided we won’t be hiring you. In fact, our search has come up empty again this year.”

“Oh, I see. Well, thank you for inviting me out for a visit. It was interesting.”

“Dr. Young, I was just wondering. Had we offered you the job, well, would you have accepted?”

I paused, considering, then felt compelled to speak my mind. “Well, I’ve been wrestling with whether I could teach at BYU. I’m a feminist. And having been raised in the Church and personally experienced the insidious way the patriarchy sits on women and shuts them up, I was deeply troubled by the oppression of women that the University and Department engage in. Frankly, I decided that I couldn’t in good conscience work at BYU.”

*Please Welcome to Renew*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

ered talking to you was that you came so highly recommended by Wayne Booth. We at BYU respect him a lot.”

Obviously I had struck a nerve. My blood boiled at the insult, although it wasn't surprising to hear that the Old Boys' network was alive and well at BYU. I jabbed back at him, “Well, as it turns out, I'll be going to Mexico. I've been offered a job at the Tecnológico de Monterrey in Mexico City.”

“Oh, I see. Well, congratulations.”

We were both growing terse. It was time to say goodbye. “Thanks for the call, Dr. Wilson, and good luck to you and the English department. You have some fine faculty there.” I hung up the phone and bit my lip. So, they didn't want me. It wasn't really a surprise, but rejection always smarts just the same. But, by the time I'd walked back into the kitchen and served up my food, the umbrage was already fading. My instincts had been confirmed. The path I was on, the path that was right for me, was not the path my Church condoned. Well, all right then. I threw up my hands in mock surrender to my destiny, and sat down to eat, as Grace settled herself into the chair across from me to talk about it.

Several months later when I was teaching in Mexico City I received an email from Wayne Booth. He wrote that BYU had received permission from its accrediting body to include in its interview process questions regarding a candidate's marital status, and whether he or she had children.<sup>5</sup> Obviously they had a very specific profile they wished their faculty to fulfill. Diversity and multiplicity of perspectives were not their objectives. Booth also informed me that BYU had been placed on the list of institutions sanctioned by the American Association of University Professors for violations of academic freedom. It seemed appropriate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Aside from the one brief meeting with the one cautious Mormon woman, I never did have an opportunity to talk revealingly with any female faculty members.

<sup>2</sup>Waterman and Kegel note in *The Lord's University: Freedom and Authority at BYU* that "BYU had only a weakly implemented affirmative action policy for women; only three female administrators, none a vice president; and only two women among the school's fifty department chairs. Despite the church's emphasis on 'family values,' BYU offered no maternity leave." To access this excerpt, see [www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/lords.htm](http://www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/lords.htm).

<sup>3</sup>Temple attendance is an indication of Mormon orthodoxy as only devout Mormons who follow the most stringent doctrines of the Church are permitted to enter the temple. In order to get a temple recommend, you need to pass a series of questions. The questions Elder Condie put to me are an indication of this process. BYU Mormon faculty are pressured to be worthy of temple attendance if they are to keep their jobs.

<sup>4</sup>Following entrance into the temple where Mormons take on special covenants, they receive symbolic underwear that reminds them of their covenants. They are instructed to wear the garments day and night. Made of a light-weight white material, they cover the torso, have cuffed sleeves, and extend to just above the knee.

<sup>5</sup>BYU faculty are pressured to marry and have children if they are to keep their jobs. This new line of questioning was apparently crafted to weed out before hiring those who were disinclined to marry and procreate.

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## Intertextuality: Words, Literature, and the World

. . . I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves. . . . [The library] was then the place of a long, centuries-old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another, a living thing, a receptacle of powers not to be ruled by a human mind . . . .

*(The Name of the Rose 342-43)*

**A**dso, a fourteenth-century monk, stands in an enormous library, transfixed by a stunning thought: books, texts, have woven—are weaving—an endless tapestry which, word by word, book by book, stitches human beings’ very lives into the panorama of its unfolding story.

One of the prominent concerns of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been that of “intertextuality,” a phenomenon arising out of a pervasive preoccupation with language as such. Paul Ricoeur points out that there emerges, as the result of the interrelation and interpenetration of texts, a meta-world of inter-textual relations. The chain of interpretations produced by the community of readers and writers, re-incorporated into the dynamics of further texts, is the working out of meaning upon itself (see especially 52-53).

Part of the thesis of the present discussion is that intertextuality can have value for us only if we anchor the span of this hermeneutic arc in the ground of our own lived experience—in our own world. This discovery and study of texts, this anchoring of the perceived meaning of those texts<sup>1</sup> in the living, present world, is a struggle against the loss of meaning, against estrange-



ment from meaning.

Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* is a brilliant inquiry into intertextuality and meaning, and thus a focal point of considerations here undertaken. We look at one of the less obviously foregrounded metaphors of the novel: mirrors and mirroring.

Late in the novel, Adso and Brother William ponder the problem of how to enter the inner sanctum of the library. They must get into this room, for in it they believe they will learn the truth of their situation. But the secret to breaching the closed passageway eludes them. They have a cryptic clue to the problem: "*primum et septimum de quatuor*" ("the first and seventh of four").<sup>2</sup> But they cannot figure out what the four objects are to which the clue refers, much less how there could be a seventh of four objects. A passing remark by Adso precipitates a sudden insight in William. He realizes that it is not four "things" they are looking for but the word for four: (*Super thronos viginti quatuor*) located above the unyielding entrance. In order to solve the riddle, the word must be seen not as a word but as a thing which has seven elements. So William realizes that it both is and is not four: not four "things" but a word-which-must-be-seen-as-a-thing, i.e., the word for the number 4. Therefore, the mistake was looking through the word to its meaning instead of looking at its surface, its thingness.

The obstacle they are trying to "go through" is a mirror. The idea of "going through the mirror" to get to the truth raises interesting questions. What do Adso's and William's own images in the mirror represent to them? Can they "see through" to the truth behind the images in the mirror—when no one can see through his/her image to the immediately present surface of the mirror? That surface is like the "truth" behind the image we face: it is responsible for generating the enigmatic cipher behind which it hides, but remains itself invisible.

William and Adso are ensnared in a contradiction shared by all humans—at what level are we to interpret, surface or depth? Is not the positing of “levels” itself an interpretation? William and Adso were frustrated in their attempts to “translate” the cryptic clue they had before them, because they were unable to set aside the deeply imbedded habit of looking through the “thingness” of the words to what the words abstractly “mean.” They could not see the words as things because, like the enigma that faces each of us as we contemplate our own image in a mirror, words are both the question and the answer. Yet looking “beneath the surface” to deeper meaning is unquestionably one of human beings’ most “human” and most valuable characteristics.

The instability of these precarious and contradictory reflections produces tensions that fill us with anxiety. We face them in life and in all great literature. Yet it is these very tensions that spur us anew to our quixotic journeys through the experiences of life and in great works, the paths of our efforts a many-mirrored, intertextual labyrinth—its glistening surfaces reflecting each other in an explosion of possibility—even as they swallow us up in an infinite regress of our own image.

We can pursue some of these possibilities, these images of images, through the use of several texts that incorporate, exemplify, and speak of the things we seek, that speak of intertextuality, that are the whispering, the mirroring, of texts “among themselves.” We begin with a passage from Jorge Luis Borges’s *Book of Imaginary Beings*:

In one of the volumes of the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* that appeared in Paris during the first half of the eighteenth century, Father Fontecchio of the Society of Jesus planned a study of the superstitions and misinformation of the common people of Canton; in the preliminary outline he noted that the Fish was a shifting and shining creature that nobody had ever caught but that many said they had glimpsed in the depths of mirrors. Father Fontecchio died in 1736, and

the work begun by his pen remained unfinished; some 150 years later Herbert Allen Giles took up the interrupted task. According to Giles, belief in the Fish is part of a larger myth that goes back to the legendary times of the Yellow Emperor.

In those days the world of mirrors and the world of men were not, as they are now, cut off from each other. They were, besides, quite different; neither beings, nor colours nor shapes were the same. Both kingdoms, the specular and the human, lived in harmony; you could come and go through mirrors. One night the mirror people invaded the earth. Their power was great, but at the end of bloody warfare the magic arts of the Yellow Emperor prevailed. He repulsed the invaders, imprisoned them in their mirrors, and forced on them the task of repeating, as though in a kind of dream, all the actions of men. He stripped them of their power and of their forms and reduced them to mere slavish reflections. None the less, a day will come when the magic spell will be shaken off.

The first to awaken will be the Fish. Deep in the mirror we will perceive a very faint line and the colour of this line will be like no other colour. Later on, other shapes will begin to stir. Little by little they will differ from us; little by little they will not imitate us. They will break through the barriers of glass or metal, and this time will not be defeated. Side by side with these mirror creatures, the creatures of water will join battle.

In Yunnan, they do not speak of the Fish but of the Tiger of the Mirror. Others believe that in advance of the invasion we will hear from the depths of mirrors the clatter of weapons. (Quoted in Dews 3-4)

One of the more salient elements of this text is that “reflections” or “representations” in a mirror are reflections both of ourselves and of something else that is very impatient to “present itself,” rather than succumb to the re-presentation that we ourselves have forced upon it. Again, this gets to the core of our problem. Literature and artworks reflect to us certain things, many of which have been subsumed under discourse committed to the reduction of things to concepts: to

theory<sup>3</sup>—but there is a stubborn remainder in certain artworks and literature that defies reduction. The resistance of literature and artworks to such coercion is what Theodor Adorno sees as their promise: that rationality cannot reduce, entirely, the world to concepts. This is the promise of a utopian vision, harbored in certain literature and artworks: rationality cannot enslave either things or us, if we remain alive to, if we “see through,” the seductive forces that conspire to effect our enslavement.

Borges’s story is about mirrors that mark the division between “reflection” and “reality.” We see, also, internal to this story, that it is already a labyrinth—that the story itself goes through the hands of at least two Western writers, the first of whom has described part of a Chinese tale that, later, a second writer takes up, showing that it is a myth within a larger myth, developing it beyond the first writer. Further, the implication is that this myth has evolved different versions in different regions.

But the source from which this article, the article that you are now reading, has drawn the story by Borges is another book. That book is a collection of essays by various philosophers who are inquiring about that which the title clearly delineates: *The Problems of Modernity*.

Peter Dews, in the first essay of *The Problems of Modernity*, “Adorno, Poststructuralism, and the Critique of Identity,” draws his iteration of the Borges story from an essay of another philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard.

Dews’s purpose in using the Borges story is to critique the concept of identity, to show that “Adorno offers us some of the conceptual tools with which to move beyond what is increasingly coming to appear, not least in France itself, as a self-destructively indiscriminate, and politically ambiguous, assault on the structure of rationality and modernity in toto” (3).<sup>4</sup>

So, we see that Dews says Lyotard says Borges's story says that

[s]ubjectivity presupposes reflection, a representation of experience as that of an experiencing self. But through such representation, which depends upon the synthesizing function of concepts, the original fluidity of intuition, the communication between the human and the specular worlds, is lost. Consciousness becomes a kind of self-contained theatre, divided between stage [mind] and auditorium [world]: *energy* is transformed into the *thought* of energy, *intensity* into *intentionality*. (4; my emphasis)

Then Dews quotes Lyotard:

Borges imagines these beings as forces, and this bar [the bar between representation and the represented] as a barrier; he imagines that the Emperor, the Despot in general, can only maintain his position on condition that he represses the monsters [emotions, intuitions, the a-rational, etc.] and keeps them on the other side of the transparent wall. The existence of the [rational] subject depends on this wall, on the enslavement of the fluid and lethal powers repressed on the other side, on the function of representing them. (4)

Dews's concern is not that Lyotard's insights into Borges<sup>5</sup> are not interesting and valuable in themselves, but that they are contextualized by a philosophy (yet another entire range of texts—the “receptacle” within which, for now, all of the present conversation takes place) that enables a “destructively indiscriminate” attack on rationality. (The subtitle for Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition is A Report on Knowledge*, one of the chief themes of which is the “loss of confidence in grand narratives.”) The problem to which Dews refers is the “slippery slope” of (radical) relativism.

Dews' intention is to find a way, by means of a careful study and interpretation of Adorno's work, to avoid that slope by respecting knowledge for what it can give us, not by destroying the import, the value of

knowledge, by giving rein to the destructive force of radical relativism. Adorno attempts to find a way out of the dangers of relativism without going over to the illusion of safe harbor produced by an overly optimistic, supposedly transcendent, human rationality.

Adorno is concerned with respect for difference as such: his “utopian” idea is that we struggle toward “difference without domination.”<sup>6</sup> This respect cannot be achieved if human beings persist in seeing the function of knowledge as essentially instrumental, i.e., the task of “controlling” or “dominating” the (dangerous, natural) world to maximize both the comfort and the duration of our existence. But more than this, the “natural” or “animal” passions within us are perceived as even more dangerous by those committed to this kind of totalizing rationality. Since these passions, it is feared, are us, they must be even more decisively overcome (as if, although they are “in” us, they are really separate from us, something else—something not-us). In this regard, it is interesting that in the Borges story, the “other side” is “represented” by creatures of nature, by animals, by fish, or tigers—not by humans, who have ever more tendentiously divorced themselves from nature. It is certainly no accident that in Borges the metaphor for the relation between the two sides of this “division” is war. The war of rationality is, ostensibly, against the perceived irrationality of “nature,” of “the world,” but it is a war, indeed, against ourselves—for we seem unable to reconcile the uncertainties (the changeability, the fluidity) of irrationality, with the seeming consistency and certainty of rationality. We retreat from these fears into the “appearance” of rationality. We fail to grasp that the fullness of human experience cannot be attained in the identity of the world and concepts, but in the difference between the two. That there is a possibility of escaping the reduction of everything to concepts is the upshot of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, and it is his utopian message. Adorno’s “difference without domina-

tion” is both an (ever-receding) ideal and a measure of the depths of our immersion in an almost wholly commodified human world: we are radically separated from nature and preoccupied with endless reproduction of the same.

Adso and William do not, therefore, have to break through a mirror as such (because the mirror is, after all, a mere physical thing, and we humans often get the better of “things”). The mirror is, rather, the symbol of the hermeneutic arc of language, history, contextuality—reflected back through them in the form of their own image. They must break not through the mirror, but through “themselves.” They must, through the strength of their own subjectivity, smash through the all-too-“set” concept of what their image, their persona, is—that is, what past understandings of language, history, and constructed contexts have led them to see—to a new truth, to a recontextualization of the past in the voice of the present.<sup>7</sup> But the “new truth” becomes, only too quickly, the “objective reality” for us, a “world” we have constructed. To rest in this “truth” is our death, not our salvation.<sup>8</sup>

Escape from rigidifying thought is the utopian message that Adorno offers. Art and literature, because they have so obviously resisted reduction to rational categories and “definitions,” offer a beacon of hope that other things—even we ourselves—may be able to escape such reduction. Art and literature must, however, continue to reinvent themselves—in the sense of providing living reflections of the human condition, emerging out of the soil of our own world, reflecting, in their many complicated ways, the truths of our own, living existence—which can never be absolute, but which can be of use.

The story of *The Name of the Rose* takes place in an Italian monastery in the early fourteenth century. A central metaphor is an enormous library—which is also, in fact, a vast, intertextual labyrinth. The problem for Adso and William is how to penetrate the inner

sanctum of the library in order to learn the “truth.” My discussion here has led, “through” the metaphor of a mirror, to a consideration of mirrors written in a piece of fiction by the famous Argentinean writer and scholar Jorge Luis Borges, a blind man as it happens, who became the director of the Argentinean National Library, and among whose works is a book of fantastic stories called *Labyrinths*—which contains a story about an infinite, labyrinthine, meaningless, library—and a story of mirrors in which human beings deny their emergence out of nature. The man who is waiting for William and Adso to enter the inner sanctum (because he is certain William will have found the answer, and thus be able to walk “through the mirror”) is a Spanish monk. As it happens, his name is Jorge de Burgos, ultimate master of the library, and the catalyst through whom the momentous and horrific events in the monastery have unfolded. He is blind. (Cohen 72).

This is no accident. The image of a blind person controlling and knowing intimately the labyrinthian passages of textual memory is a stunning one. He or she would be able to find the book, but not to read it. Think of this in terms one of William’s most advanced technologies: his glasses. They help William see things in the world, but are of no use in deciphering their meaning. We forget such simple lessons. We often treat technology as though it can advance the production of meaning—as if there were no difference between advances in technology and human progress. Science holds many of us enthralled; its success in reducing the world to our service seems a perfect reflection of our rational powers. We luxuriate in this image, seeing “progress” in technology as advancement in the quality and expansion of our rational domination of the world—and as evidence of our control of “irrational” or “a-rational” nature. In this, our radically commodified world is insidiously complicit, covering over memories of our a-rational roots with a shiny surface that reflects



to us an image of control and success, lulling us into thinking, "We are better than that—we are not a-rational, or "irrational." We are beyond those ugly memories. We will not devolve into chaos. And if we have setbacks, they are mistakes, not evidence of a broader failure of rationality, or the failure of rationality to accommodate something else—the a-rational aspect of human nature. Accommodation of that kind is a recipe for madness and disaster.

Adso is shocked at the realization that the two men, who have seemed until this moment diametrically opposed, in fact mirror one another. Adso's shock is the first step in the collapse of faith in intellect and knowledge for both himself and William. Jorge and William have each relished the competition and admired the intellect and commitment of the adversary. Ironically, their intellect and commitments, while bent on reaching this confrontation, have had little to do with the realization of this moment. William realizes that his search has been but the groping of a blind man: he has achieved his desire, not by cleverness and special sensitivities, but by fortuitously stumbling through a maze of happenstance. Jorge, far from being the all-powerful nemesis, has arrived at this point as well, but as the result of events entirely unforeseen by him. In this final meeting, Adso realizes that it is their commonalities, not their differences, that inspired profound mutual respect—and that, in many ways, they are more alike than different. Jorge and William carry within them beliefs wholly committed to opposing world views. Jorge's commitment is to a ruthless maintenance of scholastic tradition and absolute faith in absolutes. In William's view, the primacy of change seems inescapable. Both stand, in fact, on the same side of Borges's mirror—the side of rationality. Both reject the "irrational." Their confidence in knowledge is founded on belief in an inviolable connection between the absolute rationality of God and linkages they are confident bind

the chaotic events and signs of the world into a reflection of that rationality. But where to look? On the surface? In the depths? In the past? The present? This clash of such intractables spells chaos for them and everyone in the novel. The cleverness of William and Adso has enabled them to learn the secret, but not the truth. Their cleverness leads, in fact, to the utter destruction of the labyrinthian library, the symbol of knowledge that lies at the very center of Eco's novel.

The result of conflicts spawned by one-sided, blind commitment is chaos: the destruction of knowledge, orderly human existence, and, even more disastrous, trust among human beings. Clearly, Eco's chaotic world is not dissimilar to the one in which we live. In our world, human beings seem unwilling to accept a world of change in which certain only relatively stable entities emerge, flourish, and fall away. The well-known image of life as riding the currents of a shoreless river on a raft is apropos. The raft constantly loses parts of its deck even as we struggle to lash passing flotsam to the remainder. Our existence depends on the relative stability of the raft even as it changes beneath our feet—and there is no firm shore upon which to stand. Our hope is that there will always be something in the flow that we can lash to our craft.

Fear motivates the desperate search for permanence, and hopeless relativism resides in a world perceived as total flux. Jorge believes that the past has already given us all truth—no change is necessary. There is no need to “anchor the hermeneutic arc” into our living world—no need to rearticulate anything of the past in terms of our own living present: the truth is “there” in the text—our task is only to understand, not interpret. William sees the value of change but cannot reconcile it with either the world in which he lives or his faith. Certainly one of the many important messages generated by this great novel is that, until we can accommodate—better yet, fully engage and benefit from—the

seeming contradiction of change and permanence, we will continue to refuse that which seeks to present itself, that which seeks to show itself through our own reflection: change without fear, difference without domination.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>And here I include as “texts” various art forms, as well as philosophical and religious texts.

<sup>2</sup>All translations from Latin are from Haft, White, and White.

<sup>3</sup>That this critique is drawn from a form of discourse that is essentially imaginative gives us pause. The relation of the special situation of “literature” to discussions critiquing discourse, while both fascinating and germane, is, except for the specific discussion now underway, beyond the range of this discussion.

<sup>4</sup>Identity is the term that Adorno and other critical theorists used to indicate the tendency of rationality to reduce the world to concepts—to rationality itself—thus identifying the world with concepts. This is also known as the correspondence theory of knowledge: the belief that knowledge is in some way a true reflection of the world (“corresponds” to the world), not a rationally mediated version of it. The reference to France reflects concerns raised by the move towards a radical relativism by certain elements of postmodern thought.

<sup>5</sup>Liotard’s essay, by the way, is not on Borges, but on the painter Jacques Monory.

<sup>6</sup>See Adorno: “That art, something mimetic, is possible in the midst of rationality, and that it employs its means, is a response to the faulty irrationality of the rational world as an overadministered world. For the aim of all rationality—the quintessence of the means for dominating nature—would have to be something other than means [an end in itself], hence something not rational” (53-54).

<sup>7</sup>The idea of “breaking through the subject with the force of subjectivity itself” is Adorno’s.

<sup>8</sup>This discussion makes significant reference to the situation of science in the late twentieth and early twenty-first

centuries. Although there are many problems with it, Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962) is right on the mark when Kuhn argues that scientific paradigms are rational structures the nature of which we quickly rationalize as immanent to the world: discovered, not made. One of the best, most succinct descriptions of this oft-discussed problem is by Joseph Margolis, who refers to "the realization that we cannot in principle distinguish between the constructed nature of our intelligible world and the independent structure of the brute world . . ." (6).

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## Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and the Epic Tradition

W

E.B. Du Bois was less than satisfied in 1902 when the publisher A.C. McClurg pressed him to submit a few essays that had previously appeared for publication as a book. “I demurred,” he writes in *Dusk of Dawn*, “because books of essays almost always fall so flat” (80). Du Bois responded instead by revising eight previously published essays and writing four original essays and a short story to fashion a new publication: *The Souls of Black Folk*. In studies calling attention to the book’s unity, critics acknowledge that *Souls* is more than simply a collection of essays and a short story. However, few critics have discussed literary types associated with the text.

Shamoon Zamir points to the possible influence of the form of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and suggests that *Souls* may be viewed as a *Bildungsbiographie*, which exhibits a fusion of the history of individual consciousness with the collective consciousness of a race and features a metamorphosis of the protagonist through a multiplicity of voices, forms, and guises—a transformation from which he emerges with his original identity intact (*Dark Voices* 158-59).

Robert B. Stepto notes the autobiographical ele-

ments, but contends that “Du Bois’s impulse [in *Souls*] is unquestionably toward the creation of a generic narrative text” (147). And Arnold Rampersad argues that Du Bois’s text is a “direct, parodic challenge” to certain “forms and assumptions of the slave narrative” used to support Booker T. Washington’s arguments in *Up From Slavery* (106). There is, however, another kind of literature—the epic—with which *Souls* has close affinity. And an in-depth textual analysis, using the approach of New Criticism, demonstrates how epic features support Du Bois’s rhetoric and function dialogically to address social and cultural needs of African Americans at the turn of the century.

In *Heroic Poetry*, C.M. Bowra defines an epic as a lengthy narrative dealing with grand and important events that result from actions, especially violent actions such as war (48). Although war is not the central focus of *Souls*, the Civil War and its aftermath form an essential backdrop against which events unfold. E.M.W. Tillyard asserts in *The English Epic and Its Background* that an epic must exhibit “high seriousness” (5); “amplitude, breadth, inclusiveness” (6); and “a control commensurate with the amount included” (8). The relevance of Tillyard’s description of the form to an assessment of *Souls* is immediately apparent.

Although the epic is generally associated with a central character or hero and Du Bois himself is the central hero/narrator, one might say of *Souls* what Seymour M. Pitcher says of Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “It is deliberately conceived . . . to give meaning to the destiny of a people, asserting the implications of their history and recognizing the significance of contemporary events in relation to the past” (243). If *The Souls of Black Folk* is about any subject, it is indeed about the heroic struggle of the African-American people, one of several epic themes powerfully conveyed in the book:

of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this the land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity. (16)

An epic feature sustained throughout *Souls* is the strong narrative quality or tone underlying its series of expository essays. Narration is conveyed through multiple stylistic elements, including the repetition of the word "tale" or "narrative" or diction related to storytelling as in "Of Alexander Crummell": "This is the history of a human heart,—*the tale* of a black boy who many long years ago began to struggle with life that he might know the world and know himself" (134; emphasis mine) and in "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others": "And *the tale* of the methods by which he [rose to power] is a fascinating study of human life" (34; emphasis mine).

Often the imagery of *Souls* is also associated with storytelling, as in "Of the Black Belt":

On we wind, through sand and pines and glimpses of old plantations . . . Only in the cabins appeared now and then a bit of *lazy* life. I could imagine the place under some weird spell, and was half-minded to search out the princess. An old ragged black man, honest, simple, and improvident, told us *the tale*. (80-81; emphasis mine)

Again, words and phrases such as "weird spell," "princess," and "old ragged black man" in the above passage convey a story-like quality. *Souls* is replete with diction highlighting narration rather than exposition.

Furthermore, cursory allusions to the glorious African past and to shared concepts of the history of African Americans infuse *Souls* with a sense of antiquity and psychological depth. And in lieu of successive chapters of historical chronology—which might have lacked depth, given that in 1903 African Americans

*Plantation South*, Rev. ed., New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. were not yet forty years removed from slavery—*Souls* simulates narrative texture and depth through a plethora of essays—historical, sociological, fictional, etc.—each reflecting, as it were, an angle of vision or light on the African-American history or culture. This layering of essays on various topics also adds narrative weight or detail, characteristic of the epic.

In addition, C.M. Bowra's point that the hero "gives dignity to the human race by showing of what feats it is capable . . ." (4) is clearly applicable in *Souls*. Furthermore, heroic qualities in African-American people are extolled throughout *Souls*, as Houston Baker notes in *Long Black Song*, observing that Du Bois "pays tribute to the black church . . . to black leaders . . . to the black folk who have striven to meliorate their condition . . . and to the spirit of endurance and beauty that has always characterized black folk culture . . ." (106).

The epic, perhaps more than any other literary genre, conveys the values of the community. Among the themes demonstrating African-American communal values is pursuit of literacy, a theme echoed by Booker T. Washington in *Up From Slavery*: "Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for an education. . . . it was a whole race trying to go to school"(19)

"Of Our Spiritual Strivings" captures the drama in Washington's observation in epic fashion. The movement is massive in its depth and earnestness. *Souls's* hero/narrator says this movement is a story yet to be told:

Up the new path the advance guard toiled, slowly, heavily, doggedly; only those who have watched and guided the faltering feet, the misty minds, the dull understandings, of the dark pupils of these schools know how faithfully, how piteously, this people strove to learn. It was weary work. The



cold statistician wrote down the inches of progress here and there, noted also where here and there a foot had slipped or some one had fallen. To the tired climbers, the horizon was ever dark, the mists were often cold, the Canaan was always dim and far away.(13-14)

Du Bois's argument for the higher education of talented African-American youths is also implicit in the development of the literacy theme since ultimately the freed slave's attaining literacy was contingent upon adequate numbers of black teachers.

This thematic treatment of communal values further links *Souls* with the epic which has long been recognized for its communal function. E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Epic Strain in the English Novel* makes this point in his discussion of the "epic spirit": "What most makes the epic kind is a communal or choric quality. The epic writer must express the feelings of a large group of people living in or near his own time" (15).

Structurally, *Souls* also suggests linkage with the epic. The journey forms a linear structure in *Souls* as well as in the epic and the slave narrative. However, one segment of the journey peculiar to the epic, and replicated in *Souls*, is the catabasis, the segment of the journey in which the hero descends into the Underworld (Clark 13). The placement of the catabasis, midway in the epic, is similar in *Souls*. Typical features of the catabasis such as the trusted guide and the detailed description of the place, or imagery conveying otherworldliness, are replicated as well. For example, the persistent allusions in "Of the Black Belt" to darkness and shadows suggest a place, not unlike the epic Underworld:

Below Macon the world grows darker; for now we approach the Black Belt,—that strange land of shadows, at which even slaves paled in the past, and whence come now only faint and half-intelligible murmurs to the world beyond. (76)

*Plantation South*. Rev. ed.. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

Also consistent with the catabasis are the detailed descriptions of places and residents (Benton, Sears, etc.), along with the occasional questioning of the residents (for example, the preacher's wife):

We plunge even now into great groves of oak and towering pine, with an undergrowth of myrtle and shrubbery. This was the "home-house" of the Thompsons . . . . All is silence now, and ashes, and tangled weeds. . . . Yonder is another grove, with unkempt lawn, great magnolias, and grass-grown paths. The Big House stands in half-ruin, its great front door staring blankly at the street, and the back part grotesquely restored for its black tenant. (79)

Just as the purpose of the journey in the *Odyssey* and *Gilgamesh* is to seek information, although that information may differ (Clark 51), so too in *Souls*. According to Clark, "many stories of Journeys into the Unknown seem to have been cast into a kind of cata-batic framework . . ." (34). It can be said that in *Souls*, the hero/narrator makes a journey into the Unknown (the black world) to get information and to tell a tale. Collectively, the vignette of each resident becomes, as it were, a story which reveals the reality of African-American life in the South to the hero/narrator, and, more importantly, to the reader.

Even *Souls's* composition of essays and a short story (without Du Bois's "chapters" designation) would not have placed the work outside the epic tradition since, as John McWilliams states in *The American Epic*, "[The] epic must be a heroic narrative, but that heroic narrative may assume many forms" (4). Honoré de Balzac's epic, *La Comédie humaine*, for instance, consists of a series of novels, rather than episodic chapters.

Although structural features such as the journey link *The Souls of Black Folks* with the slave narrative as well as with the epic, other aspects—the content, for

example—apply exclusively to the epic. The content of *Souls* is consistent with the specific content of the epic as described by Gilbert Murray in *The Rise of the Greek Epic*: “There are masses of mere fiction, that is, stories and personages deliberately invented by the poet out of his head [e.g., “Of the Coming of John”]. There are, secondly, the shapes of myth and folklore which the poet narrates in good faith, as he received them, with at least a modicum of belief in their reality [e.g., “Of the Wings of Atalanta”]. And, thirdly, there are fragments of definite history [e.g., “Of the Dawn of Freedom”]” (218-19). The epic is recognized for its inclusiveness as Barbara K. Lewalski notes (4-5). She further states, “Renaissance critical theory supports the notion of epic as a heterocosm or compendium of subjects, forms, and styles” (4), again traits that are mirrored in *Souls*. John Wideman, in his introduction to the Vintage edition of *Souls*, points out that Du Bois’s essays, which were “written at various times, with various styles and purposes,” include “Empirical studies of rural poverty in the cotton-growing Black Belt of the South, a mini-history of Reconstruction and the Freedmen’s Bureau, metaphysical reflections on black identity, polemical outcries against racial violence, an ethnomusicological treatise, personal essay, elegy, short fiction, allegory, poetry” (xiv).

Promoting inclusiveness are the epic conventions, such as preservation of the legacy of a people by embedding cultural fragments and significant allusions into the text, also evident in *Souls*. The struggle for higher education, for example, is preserved in *Souls* in the inscription on a huge boulder on Atlanta University’s campus:

IN GRATEFUL MEMORY OF THEIR  
FORMER TEACHER AND FRIEND  
AND OF THE UNSELFISH LIFE HE  
LIVED, AND THE NOBLE WORK HE

PLANTAGENET, THE NEW WINNERS  
 WHOUGHT THAT THE NEW WINNERS  
 CHILDREN, AND THEIR CHILD-  
 DREN'S CHILDREN MIGHT BE  
 BLESSED. (69)

Of course, musical bars from the Negro spirituals forming epigraphs for each chapter are themselves preserved elements of African-American culture. So too is the representation of African-American folk beliefs in the allusion in "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" to "Ethiopianism," the belief in the eventual resurgence of Africa (Moses 156-57.) In the tradition of the epic, *Souls* preserves a multiplicity of culturally significant fragments and allusions, while maintaining textual unity.

As is the pattern in *Souls*, however, textual features serve both literary and rhetorical ends. In addition to cultural fragments and allusions rooted in the African heritage, *Souls* also includes allusions and fragments from the Western literary tradition, a heritage to which African Americans are also heir. Although these are dispersed throughout the text, the most noticeable fragments are those from British and American literature preceding the chapters and the allusions to classical mythology ("Of the Wings of Atalanta" and "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece"). Cumulatively, these fragments serve a very important rhetorical purpose in the turn-of-the-century national discourse. They demonstrate that the goal of a broad humanistic education for talented African Americans can be achieved, as evidenced by the author himself. *The Souls of Black Folk*—the text itself—is, by example, Du Bois's concept of education for African-American leaders: an education producing leaders of broad vision, with an ability to master massive bodies of knowledge in a variety of disciplines, and to apply this knowledge to finding solutions to problems confronting the race.

*Souls* also includes a catalog of heroes, an epic

technique which serves to enhance the self-worth of the community, since the grandeur and courage of a people rise as they become aware of the greatness of the leaders they have produced. A simulation of this catalog appears in “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others.” Here the hero/narrator recalls names of African-American leaders who fought against social oppression—among them “the terrible Maroons, the Danish blacks, and Cato of Stono” (37).

Finally, the language of *The Souls of Black Folk* simulates poetry, the form of the traditional epic. John Wideman’s comment that the “precision and evocative lyric power of [Du Bois’s ] language touch[ed] me” (xv) recalls John Daniels’ words more than eight decades earlier: “This is no mere descriptive, analytic or argumentative treatment of the race, but something which is much deeper and broader, and more ultimate; it is a poem” (37). While on its surface the prose style of *Souls* is largely Ciceronian, on close examination, poetic features emerge. First, poetic meters underlie larger patterns of prose rhythms, as demonstrated in the following sentence from “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” a polemical essay which would seem least conducive to a poetic approach: “And yet this very singleness of vision and thorough oneness with his age is a mark of the successful man” ( 35). The sentence is structured in three nearly perfectly iambic movements, beginning with a pentameter line, followed by a tetrameter line, and ending with another pentameter line:

And yét / this vé / ry sín / gle néss / of ví / sion  
 and thó / rough óne / ness wíth / his áge  
 is a márk / of the / suc céss / ful mán.

Scanning sentences throughout the text reveals a plethora of poetic meters underlying the prose rhythms in *Souls*.

Second, the prose includes heavy patterns of allit-

erated in *Poems and Prose*. Multiple examples of alliteration occur in “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others” (“mark of the successful man,” “Nature must needs make men narrow,” and “disappointment of displaced demagogues”) as do examples of assonance (“In the North the feeling has several times forced itself into words” and “outward expression by the public opinion of the nation” (35-36). Again, poetic techniques dominate the prose style of *Souls* and replicate a heightened quality and tone, the grand style of the epic.

Because *Souls* partakes of several literary genres—autobiography, parody, slave narrative—it resists narrow classification into one. But perhaps the epic tradition allowed for Du Bois’s literary and rhetorical aims and was ideally suited to the era in which *Souls* appeared.

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## Rethinking Ambiguity

If you can accept that you're always starting at the beginning you can avoid a certain kind of despair.—Alice Walker

*F*

irst there was nothing. Out of nothing, came the universe. Language evolved and separated this from that, allowing humans to feel safe within categories, names, and identifications . . . or so the story goes.

Circle the correct answer below:

Question:  
Does truth exist?

Answer:

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Yes, but we can never know it.
- D. Yes & no

We often enter into discourse with the preconception that there is one correct answer that will rescue us from the powerlessness of chaos and confusion. If I just figure out this one idea, or this one sentence, the entire essay will be complete. If we could elect the right politician, fund an innovative social program, or discover a cure, problems like injustice, poverty, and disease



would all disappear, right? Actually, this messianic lens distorts our perceptions. This way of thinking triggers us, as writers and writing teachers, to solicit clear and rational answers couched in the most accurate language, the most effective method, the recipe that cannot and should not be altered. Our firm, almost immovable, convictions constitute a drive toward correctness, coherence, and finite conclusions. And finally, we submit to the cultural urge of trying to construct clarity out of chaos. But what if chaos is actually “less chaotic than it seems” (Elbow 34)?

Read the sentence below and then circle the best answer:

Fork through yawn is creative not piecemeal.

Question:

What does this sentence evoke in you?

Answer:

- A. Confusion
- B. Boredom
- C. Curiosity
- D. A burning desire to inquire or discover

Operating under dominant cultural beliefs, ambiguity is faulty logic and poor exposition. Our students must learn to write clearly so that they can succeed in the real world. It is better to be clear, precise, and to the point. If I were to wander tangentially at this point in my discussion, you might get bored and fling the paper aside. Yet “the new Rhetoric sees [ambiguity] as an inevitable consequence of the powers of language and as the indispensable means of most of our most important utterances . . .” (Richards 981). How do we negotiate this tension between the need for clarity and

the unavoidable consequence of ambiguity?

I have tossed and turned at night trying to resolve the problem of this essay. But what if the problem is unsolvable? If writing is the attempt to establish fixed answers and resolve inconsistencies, how do I adapt to the fact that there may not be one answer beyond which nothing else is necessary?

All discourse, with the exclusion of science, has a “multiplicity of meaning” (Richards 980 ).

A clarification might actually create more ambiguity when presented alongside an additional contradictory clarification. As an example, I am telling you that this essay is about how we over-identify with clarity because it gives us a sense of coherence and safety. On the other hand, I am telling you that clarity is necessary. (Am I being clear?) These two concepts create a tension, a feeling of uncertainty that drives the discourse forward. Hegel’s thesis/antithesis elucidates this—opposites are necessary in order to create momentum and synthesis. Foucault says power is the product of an exertion or a movement. And so ambiguity, as that moment when there appears to be no solution, no clear understanding, engenders movement toward learning. Even further, “an intolerance for ambiguity has been associated with a number of anxiety-related problems, including worry, obsessions/compulsions, and panic sensations. . . . open-mindedness, which has been equated with tolerance for ambiguity, may be a predisposition to critical thinking” (DeRoma 104).

We have little tolerance for empty spaces, middles, vagueness, and obscurity. The voice of my pen contextualizes me—locates me on a map. Make the second right, then the third left. You’ll find me within these words. I exist as these words exist, filling space out of fear of void. Writing helps me cling to ideas, concepts, beginnings, and the illusion of clarity. The idea that I am a writer is no more true than the lie that I am a doctor. I write to get clear on the idea that there may

not be any clarity.

Clearly, how we struggle with ambiguity reflects how we struggle with writing and life. The writing process reflects the personality, life experience, and cognitive functioning of the writer. Ambiguity incites me to unravel what is unknown. Writing is the expression of my urge to resolve inconsistencies. As a teacher, I suggest various so-called truths, histories, and theories. I teach so that I can become more and more unnecessary. I use language to consciously reflect on the world, not clarify it.

I believe in stream of consciousness, creative meandering, revolts against convention, and, of course, ambiguity. I write without clarity to challenge my reader to construct meaning. We are conditioned to fear ambiguity because dominant culture values the authority of science over the inventiveness of the arts and humanities. Writing is learning and learning is thinking beyond cultural conditioning. Writing refashions. It opens a portal to previously unacknowledged insights that may come in the form of questions or vague impressions. Writing either

- A. deconstructs preordained understanding,
- B. preserves the status quo,
- C. ignites a spark, or
- D. corrals sewage into an already clogged system.

Learning to write is realizing that you are not an automaton. There is not one way to write or learn or think or behave.

I also believe in discipline, clarity, convictions, and rules. Clarity is necessary as we construct social and historical truths.

Question:

100 million Africans were uprooted from the African continent. Where are they today?

Answer:

“100 million Africans were uprooted, 100 million Africans . . . —excuse me for raising my voice—were uprooted from the continent of Africa. At the end of slavery you didn’t have 25 million Africans in the Western Hemisphere. What happened to those 75 million? Their bodies are at the bottom of the ocean, or their blood and their bones have fertilized the soil of this country” (Malcolm X 28).

Clarity has purpose. We steer clear of ambiguity because of its association with emptiness/zero/meaninglessness/vagueness. We have socially constructed zero into a four-letter word. Yet ambiguity reminds us that there are many things (even in writing) that cannot be clarified.

This essay, for example, and the cognitive activity involved with it. Tension builds as I try to put thoughts onto the page. Writing can never exactly reflect thinking because thinking is not a static process. Written words on the page represent the thoughts we have conceived but are in no way an end to cognition. Words deconstruct themselves as I write so that the process goes something like this: think, re-think, decide, re-think, re-decide, put fingers on keyboard (or pen to paper), rethink words as they become visual images, move on after the original thought has been thoroughly disassembled.

Ambiguity transforms us into passionate critical thinkers. It has agency. As writing teachers, we must recognize the inherent cultural and linguistic mark on the meaning of clarity and reflect on how we impose that on our students and ourselves. Clarity might be lucid, bright, and luminescent, but when viewed as the only answer, it veers us away from the processes and cognition that lead toward learning and knowing. What

seems chaotic, when viewed with an open mind, transforms into a pivotal juncture of learning.

I've been preparing for a teaching engagement for weeks now . . . reading, re-reading, memorizing, reflecting, and planning. I am struggling to arrive at some finite conclusion. Yet it is the very idea of a conclusion that troubles me. Half of me wrestles with an insatiable drive for knowledge while the other half recognizes the inability to reach a fixed conclusion or answer. Teaching and writing are inexact disciplines that immerse us in a search for exact methods, discourse, and language. In this inexact search for knowledge, we learn and re-learn how to convince ourselves and our audience that we have in fact reconciled the problem of ambiguity.

And so the story goes . . . First there was nothing. Out of nothing, came the universe. Language evolved and separated this from that, allowing humans to feel safe within categories, names, and identifications.

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## Racial, Gendered, and Geographical Spaces in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

**I**lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm," begins Dana, the narrator in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. When asked why Dana, the main character, had lost her arm, Butler replied on a visit to Towson University, "She could not have come through this experience without having scars. This scar is physical but there are many other kinds. She could never look at herself and not remember."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this process of memory is crucial to Dana's story and the stories of the many black women who endured the physical and emotional scars of slavery. As Deborah Gray White reminds us, ". . . ? we cannot consider who black women are as black people without considering their sex, nor can we consider who they are as women without considering their race" (6). Gender had been a primary consideration in Butler's choice of a protagonist because, as she observed, if she had chosen a male character, his chances of survival would have been almost nil. In fact, her original character had been male, but according to Butler, as she wrote the story she realized that he would have been perceived as a danger or he would have been killed.

Butler's emphasis on Dana's body part continues

the tradition of identifying black womanhood begun in relationship to seventeenth-century laws that taxed women based on the types of labor in which they engaged. In fact, *Kindred's* theme—an emphasis on slave lineage—and its structure place it in the genre of neo-slave narrative: the fact that Dana's ancestors are slaves with no space or rooms of their own is a primary factor in the telling of the story. As a neo-slave narrative, it not only draws upon the themes of slave narratives but also connects the past with the contemporary, sometimes drawing upon the conventions of traditional slave narratives, other times borrowing from while simultaneously deviating from these conventions. *Kindred* joins other contemporary, twentieth-century women's voices in neo-slave narratives, such as Shirley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, to rectify the omission of women in the telling of the slave's story. These autobiographical descendants of the slave narrative rewrite traditional male stories, such as that of eighteenth-century Olaudah Equiano and nineteenth-century Frederick Douglass<sup>2</sup> and William Wells Brown, to emphasize the centrality of black women's experiences.

*Kindred's* protagonist closely resembles William Wells Brown's Clotel, the heroine in his fictional slave narrative bearing the same name. A chapter entitled "Today a Mistress—Tomorrow a Slave" (143) foregrounds the fate common to so many slave women, especially mulatto ones. With the plight of these mulatto women in mind, Butler cleverly has Dana shift between being a woman who inhabits her own "home" and one who, like her slave ancestors, resides on a plantation owned by white men. In other words, she goes from a sense of power and control of her own environment to a sense of being controlled, thereby gaining an awareness of her ancestors' physical limitations. Using the genre of a neo-slave narrative, Butler shows us the impact of race and gender on black women's experi-

ences during the period of antebellum slavery as well as contemporary times, specifically the year 1976.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, it explores the opportunities as well as the constraints for black women as shown by the geographical spaces that the protagonist Dana inhabits. Indeed, as Butler theorizes, a black woman protagonist can successfully navigate spaces from which black males would have been barred. Through the neo-slave narrative form women are shown as empowered characters who “reinscribe history from the point of view of the black woman” (Beaulieu 2), who thus gains a heightened understanding of herself as a spiritually and intellectually emancipated individual. By comparing the neo-slave narrative form to the antebellum narrative, we can better comprehend the effect of gender, race, and geography in shaping the fate of the characters.

When the novel opens, Dana is in her own space in Los Angeles, California, in 1976, in a home she shares with a white husband, who, like her, is a writer. She journeys often across time and geographical space from her home in California to a plantation in Maryland, where her ancestors lived. Her place as a wife to her white husband is not acceptable in antebellum Maryland. Thus, by having the contemporary Dana engaged in a legally binding interracial relationship, Butler reverses the taboo of miscegenation upheld by laws in the antebellum slave narratives. What does Butler achieve by making the contemporary couple an interracial one? She draws attention to interracial marriage, an issue with a complex history in the racial dialogue between blacks and whites. By making a statement advocating interracial marriage, she helps to dilute some of the degradation historically associated with a problematic issue for both black and white communities. One consequence might be that readers begin to accept interracial relationships and view them as a means of achieving racial harmony, rather than a source of discord.



When Dana makes geographical journeys across time and space, these trips represent a reversal of the usual pattern of travel in a slave narrative, in which the character moves from freedom to enslavement, back to freedom, instead of making the usual journey from enslavement to freedom. As critic Robert Stepto has observed, the region known as the South can be viewed as more a symbolic geography than a specifically definable region (67). Dana's journey can be illuminated using the framework of narrative patterns of "ascent" and "immersion" that Stepto has identified, in which one usually moves between an enslaved "symbolic South" and a relatively free "symbolic North" (167). The journey North, labeled "ascent," allows the sojourner to experience "relative freedom" while the journey South, labeled "immersion," allows one to reestablish communal bonds (167). With slight modification, these patterns can explain Dana's journeys. Experiencing several circular journeys, she travels from Los Angeles, equivalent to the urban North, to Maryland, which is located south of the Mason Dixon Line. The choice of Maryland, according to Butler (Interview), lends a touch of realism because of its proximity to Pennsylvania, giving the character a strong, realistic chance of escaping.

Butler also gives prominence to literacy, most commonly a vehicle for freedom in traditional male-authored slave narratives. In California, the home Dana shares with Kevin and their parallel occupations emphasize intellectual literacy. For Douglass and most slaves, especially males, literacy was forbidden. By privileging literacy in the contemporary space, Butler reverses the motif in slave narratives in which literacy is denied to slaves and in which whites believe that blacks are incapable of attaining it. The artifacts associated with literacy abound in Dana's home, which is littered with books. In one scene in the home that Dana and Kevin share, Kevin is sorting the books because, accord-

ing to Dana, “We had so many books, we had to keep them in some kind of order” (12). On one of Dana’s return trips to Los Angeles, she reads one of the many books in her home library to devour as much as she can about slavery. But no amount of reading will prepare her for what she learns firsthand about the brutalities of slavery. When Dana is transported to antebellum Maryland again, she experiences the danger and fear of being a literate slave, along with the negative consequences of teaching slaves to be literate. Literacy, though not encouraged for slaves, was more acceptable for black women than for black men, as Harriet Jacobs demonstrates in her narrative. Still Dana’s high level of literacy is beyond the comprehension of the blacks on the Weylin plantation. In one instance, her slave family label her a “reading-nigger” and associate her literacy with whiteness (74). Nigel accuses her of “talking white” when he asks her directly, “Why you try to talk like white folks?” (74). Fearful for Dana’s safety, Nigel later warns her that her literacy and articulateness would be cause for Marse Tom to dislike her. Dana’s education works to her advantage because once Tom Weylin, the plantation owner who buys Dana, recognizes the extent of her ability, he defies the stereotype of the white man and enlists her assistance by ordering her to teach Rufus the rudiments of literacy—reading and writing. He even asks her whether she has numeric literacy. Weylin later hires Dana’s husband, Kevin, to tutor Rufus as well. Thus Kevin enjoys a privilege that would have been denied to him if he were black.

As a neo-slave narrative, *Kindred* treats the issue of sexuality from a woman’s viewpoint notably missing in narratives by men. In his *Narrative*, for example, Frederick Douglass mentions Caroline’s having been used as a breeder (93-94), but we never hear Caroline voice any sentiments about her plight. Douglass relates that she was “fasten[ed] up every night” with a Mr. Samuel Harrison, and as a result this “miserable

woman" (Caroline) gave birth to twins at the end of that year (94). Additionally, black women's bodies were considered public property, and these women were commonly victims of violence that desexualized their bodies. When Dana leaves home in California and travels to Maryland, she finds herself in the spaces inhabited by her slave great-great-grandmother Alice. Since her place as wife to her white husband, for example, is not acceptable in antebellum Maryland, she must take on the role of his slave, the only way that she is allowed to sleep in his bedroom. As Crossley reminds us in the introduction to *Kindred*, when Dana and Kevin submit to this public pretense of a slave/master relationship, it brings the pretending nearer to reality. Dana's realization forces her to admit, "I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed" (xix). Certainly, Dana does not adhere to the cult of true womanhood—prevalent from 1820 to 1860—which was characterized by the virtues of piety, submissiveness, chastity, and domesticity, factors that defined white female social identity.<sup>4</sup> Mary Helen Washington concurs with the notion that a woman slave like Dana deviates from the cult of true womanhood as Harriet Jacobs does from the culture of true womanhood (4). Washington observes the different ways that gender manifests itself in the production of a slave narrative:

When [Harriet Jacobs] comes to write her story, she encounters a problem that no male slave autobiographer had to contend with. The male narrator was under no compulsion to discuss his sexuality or his sex life; he did not have to reveal the existence of children he may have fathered outside of marriage. However, neither Linda Brent's sexual exploitation nor her two half-white children could be ignored in the story of her bondage and her freedom. The male narrator could write his tale as a reclamation of his manhood, but under the terms of white society's ideals of chastity and

sexual ignorance for women, Brent certainly cannot claim “true” womanhood. (4)

Brent obviously represents Jacobs herself.

Margaret Weylin, mistress of the house, further reminds us of Dana’s exclusion from this cult of true womanhood with her direct insults when she calls Dana a “filthy black whore” (93) for sleeping with her own husband.

Again, Dana fits the Harriet Jacobs mold—as one fighting for the survival of her community, unlike the male in pursuit of individual freedom. She, in a sense, salvages the female gender component of her dehumanized identity. Slavery degendered slaves by assigning them chattel-like roles. A prominent role for women identified in Jacobs’s and Douglass’s narratives was that of breeder, a role which underscored women’s sexual difference. However, that slaveholders often failed to distinguish and acknowledge gender differences is apparent in labor practices and general work patterns. Both males and females were commonly assigned the same kind and quantity of work, especially the back-breaking demands of field labor. Ultimately, women and men were equally viewed and treated as merchandise. This degendering of slaves, consistent with the animal images and metaphors that abound in slave narratives, allowed slaves—both men and women—to be classified in a sexual, not gendered manner.

A tool for regendering the identity of black women is best exemplified through an emphasis on motherhood, as Venetria Patton has illustrated in her treatise exploring the intersectionality of gender, motherhood, and sexuality. Thus *Kindred* became an important text illuminating this regendering of women. Butler’s construction of Dana in links *Kindred* to such a reconstruction of women’s images. Not quite an outraged mother like Jacobs, because Dana has no biological children, she becomes the mother of her lineage in that she must

ensure their survival—an othermother,<sup>5</sup> a prevalent image in the writing of African-American women. Whenever her white ancestor's life is in danger, Dana is summoned to rescue him. By protecting Rufus, Dana is protecting and preserving her ancestry and herself. Neither she nor her family would exist without Rufus's survival to father her great-grandmother Hagar. Dana's mission, as she articulates it, then is "not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure [her] family's survival, [her] own birth" (29). After Dana has fulfilled this responsibility to her past, she can have control over her own life in the present. Dana engages in a strong-willed struggle to counter the invisible forces which place her in slavery as well as to counter the apparent consequences of her enslavement. Charged with the awesome responsibility of saving the lives of her ancestors and herself, Dana redefines woman as an heroic figure in this new genre of slave narrative—one who reaffirms ties with her cultural and ancestral past.

Using the form of the neo-slave narrative, Butler plies her craft to merge fiction with history in keeping with a uniquely black feminist worldview. As scholar Henry L. Gates, Jr. writes, ". . . fact and fiction have always exerted a reciprocal effect on each other" (29). Like Butler, authors of neo-slave narratives, those highly imaginative and creative renderings of the slave experiences, illustrate this reciprocation as they note the relationship of the spaces of race, gender, and geography in the retelling of the slave's story as herstory.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I interviewed Octavia Butler at Towson University, October 5, 2004, as part of the Book of the Year celebration, in which *Kindred* was a book read in common by several freshman writing and American and African-American literature classes.

<sup>2</sup>Butler had done extensive research in Maryland while

writing *Kindred*. An important part of her research included the careful reading of Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*.

<sup>3</sup>The year 1976 has significance since it is the year of America's bicentennial celebration, the 200th birthday of the nation's freedom from England. This year occurred during the post-Civil rights era, when African Americans had enjoyed more civil liberties than they had in times past.

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed discussion of the cult of true womanhood and black womanhood, see Beaulieu 29-35.

<sup>5</sup>For a full discussion see "Bloodmother, Othermothers, and Women-Centered Networks" in Collins 178-85.

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