

*Pleasure, Change, and the Canon*

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## I. PLEASURE

In the course of this talk I shall have to try to explain how pleasure can enter into a discussion of canons. That is one purpose of this first talk. The difficulty is that the topic of the canon is not in itself an obvious source of delight, and the enterprise may challenge the speaker's power to achieve that perception of likeness in dissimilars so admired by Aristotle. Moreover, the job will need to be done without the tedium involved in going too closely over ground, making or refuting points in a way with which we have all grown too familiar of late.

There was a time when discussion of canons was angry but simple in the manner of Dr. Leavis: should Milton be dislodged, or Shelley saved from demotion to the apocrypha? These arguments were keenly, even passionately conducted, but beneath them was a general agreement that getting the canon right was a social issue, though determined by aesthetic argument; it was rarely or never suggested that the entire canon, whatever its members, should be decanonized. The debate turned on such matters as Milton's grand style or Shelley's reprehensible vagueness. It was more or less silently abandoned when such considerations had come to seem chimerical, the real questions being whether the notion of canon wasn't a wicked myth, designed to justify the oppression of minorities—a political propaganda weapon now at last revealed as such and, as the word goes, “demystified.” Questions of literary value were for the most part set aside as without relevance or even derided as demonstrable nonsense.

By a series of institutional decisions, a very large number of people, of whom it might be said that they are paid to do the community's serious reading for it, ceased to talk much about literature, sometimes dismissing the notion that there was really any such thing, and inventing new things to talk about, for instance, “gender” and colonialism. These matters being beyond question urgent, it seemed natural to stop discussing literature as such, except when it seemed profitable to deny its existence. Criticism, as formerly understood, suffered in company with its subject, and the experts moved easily up to what, if you approved, you might call a metacritical level.

Under the older dispensation one might choose between several

critical methodologies that had in common only the assumptions that it was permissible to speak of literary quality and that one could read with a degree of attention that warranted the issue of judgments, even of declarations that some works demanded to be read by all who claimed the right to expound and instruct. Under the newer metacritical dispensation there were now many interesting ways of banning such activities and substituting for them methods of description and analysis that might derive their force from linguistics, politics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, or what were claimed to be brand new, unillusioned, and exciting ways of writing history.

Having grown old, I have had the inescapable fate of living and working under both dispensations. I have written about canons, and about many other things, with double vision and tried to take part in controversies of both kinds, the old one about dislodgment or insertion, the new one about the canon as an abuse of power. And as Chateaubriand said in the *Mémoires d'Outre-tombe*, "If I compare the two terrestrial globes, the one I knew at the beginning of my life and the one I now behold at the end of it, I no longer recognise the one in the other."<sup>1</sup>

The great turning point, as most would agree, occurred in the 1960s, when I was already in my forties, an age at which it is thought to be difficult to change one's whole way of thinking about literature or anything else. Although unhappy about this generalisation, I am far from believing that I can look back and discern a clear trajectory of belief—say, of conversion, apostasy, reconversion to a reformed faith. Muddle there must be, and what I have to say in these lectures will almost certainly confirm its presence in my head. But I imagine almost everybody in the business, a few fanatics apart, would admit to some degree of muddle. It is a function of time's passage; it must follow from the changing demands of an institution. The very new is exciting, its proponents invested at least momentarily with charisma; but there follows the well-known declension from the charismatic to the institutional, whereupon out of the resulting discontent there is generated a new charisma, detected and espoused by loyal expositors; while, down below in the graduate schools, a paradigm always likely to be slightly out-of-date prevails.

Fashions succeed one another rapidly (Pierre Cardin once defined

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 383.

fashion as that which goes out of fashion), and work that was for a while unchallenged (as to its importance, though not as to its detail)—Leavis, Frye, Blackmur—drops out of view more or less completely. Now and again somebody like Christopher Norris may, in a pious moment, attempt to “recuperate” a particularly brilliant old-style reputation by claiming its owner as a New New Critic *avant la lettre*—Empson in this case, now to be thought of as having, in his “great theoretical summa,” *The Structure of Complex Words*, anticipated deconstruction. The grumpy old man repudiated this notion with his habitual scorn, calling the work of Derrida (or, as he preferred to call him, “Nerrida”) “very disgusting,” though showing little sign of having attended to any part of it.<sup>2</sup>

I have a notion about the course of intellectual history that tries to take into account the operation of chance. Freud simply ignored Dilthey and Saussure: how might his work have differed had he read either of them? I. A. Richards got his psychology from the doctrines prevailing in the Cambridge of his day, from G. F. Stout and James Ward and William James, with some neurological stiffening from C. S. Sherrington. He knew Wittgenstein personally but did not attend to his philosophies. His philosophy master was G. E. Moore, whose authority barely survived the interventions of Wittgenstein. No one could positively say he lacked good teachers, but they closed the door of his attention on Freud. Richards was interested in a huge range of things, including Gestalt psychology, and he can hardly, even in the twenties, have avoided all talk of Freud—indeed he is said at one point to have contemplated a career in psychoanalysis—but, as in the case of Wittgenstein, there was no imprint. His course was set. Again it might have made a difference if he had bothered with Nietzsche, as with his classical background he might well have done; but Nietzsche, I gather, is never so much as mentioned in the large body of Richards’ writings.

I mention this example because here was a deeply serious thinker, in a strong position to know what was happening in the world of ideas—especially since the polymathic C. K. Ogden was his early collaborator—but who took his own road and not the one that might have had more interest for a modern audience. My point is that chance, aided by individual formation and the vagaries of personal interest and the

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Christopher Norris, October 7, 1971, quoted in William Empson, *Argufying*, ed. J. Haffenden (Chatto, 1987), pp. 52–53.

interests of interpretative communities, may cause diversions that, in the long run, ensure the total neglect of the road not taken; and this is true of the history of modern literary criticism. Only rarely is anybody ready to return to the fork in the road and take a look down the other path.

One such path, more recent but now, I think, largely abandoned, was Formalism—I mean the eastern European variety that was imported in the sixties under the influence mostly of Tzvetan Todorov, and propagated by the example of distinguished emigré authors such as Roman Jakobson, both in his early work, as it belatedly became available, and in his later adventures with Claude Lévi-Strauss and others as an analyst of Baudelaire and Shakespeare.

While I was thinking about the divisions in my own mind and reflecting that aesthetic response—pleasure—has a rather restricted part in modern critical thinking, I remembered a distinction drawn by the Czech critic Jan Mukařovský, who happened to be interested in aesthetic pleasure, not yet a tabu subject. Broadly speaking, he argued that the poetic object might be studied with Formalist severity as artifact, but that its aesthetic purpose is achieved only by the action of a responsive reader. This response will certainly be conditioned by the norms and values of the reader's community, but also by individual choices and characteristics—very roughly speaking, by what gives him or her pleasure. Mukařovský further believed that part of the pleasure and the value its presence indicates and measures is likely to lie in the power of the object to transgress, to depart, interestingly and revealingly, from the accepted ways of such artifacts.

Thus, to qualify as possessing an aesthetic function, the work must give pleasure, and it must also be new. Mukařovský believed that such works had value because they gave pleasure to the individual and were at the same time socially valuable because of the common element in the response of serious readers. The question as to how it can be expected to stay new—one remembers the point as made by Thomas Love Peacock—is a hard one. But Mukařovský was willing to take account of the changingness in time of poetic works (inevitably so, if only because the storehouse of norms and values is restocked) that continues long after their first serious readers are dead. He did not doubt that aesthetic value changed, might possibly disappear; the important point was that since its source is in the reader it will in any case be different from one epoch to another. That is an important issue for believers in canonicity, and it

is one I shall take up in my second talk. Nowadays we probably associate approaches to this problem with the work of later writers, notably H. G. Gadamer and perhaps H. R. Jauss, though it is also a matter of importance to biblical scholars.

This way of talking has an advantage denied to the anglophone variety of formalism, with its now universally deplored emphasis on the autotelic virtues of a poem, for it can deal with pleasure without neglecting the relations between art and society. Unlike some other familiar theories, it ascribes the power of the social link to the aesthetic efforts of individuals. More of that later. For the moment it is enough to say that Mukařovský thought that the poetic work, considered in its aesthetic aspect, had the power to give pleasure; and to continue to do so even though responses, and in a sense the work itself, must also change. Failure to give pleasure breaks the link, because pleasure is the very condition of the individual response. Failure to undergo change harms the work by reducing the pleasure that arises, perhaps can only arise, from modernity, from the process of defamiliarisation that is in the first place devised by the artificer and in the second place becomes the work of time.

Having remarked at the outset that pleasure and the canon may seem uneasy bedfellows, I now proceed to argue that they are not necessarily so, that the clash is only apparent. Indeed I hold it to be a necessary though not obvious requirement of the canonical that it should give pleasure. Pleasure, as the legendary Oxford don was recorded as saying, can be a very worrying subject—a further illustration, if one were needed, of the fact that praxis can be more fun than theory. Plato seems to have said that pain was the result of disorder in the organism, pleasure arising from the restitution of order. Being cold is painful, getting warm is pleasant. But there are higher forms of pleasure not involving organic processes: the fear of a painful disturbance is itself painful, the expectation of relief from that fear is pleasant (*Philebus*, 32c). The argument grows complicated, but broadly speaking one can say that Plato always thinks of pleasure in relation to a painful want or lack.<sup>3</sup>

However, we are now not likely to seek explanations so remote in time. Probably, in setting out to consider this subject, we think first of Freud and his followers. Freud talks about the “pleasure-unpleasure

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the discussion in A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (Methuen, 1960 ed.), chapter 16.

series,” and at bottom his argument is based on an idea not altogether dissimilar from Plato’s: the activities of the ego cause tensions, the raising of which is felt as unpleasure and their lowering as pleasure.<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Burke’s “Psychology and Form” propounds a once-famous theory that literary form consists in creating need (affirming lack) in the reader and then providing the compensatory satisfactions. Peter Brooks thinks the Freudian *eros*, which seeks to combine organic substance into ever greater unities, drives plot; there is, he argues, “a movement *toward* totalization under the mandate of desire.”<sup>5</sup> Thus a lack is eliminated by the conclusion of the plot. But this binding force coexists with its opposite, which seeks to undo connections and destroy—to reduce to an inorganic state. The two instincts interact and “are necessarily present everywhere” (p. 7).

And it is true that whenever one speaks of pleasure one becomes aware of the many ways in which polarities interact: most simply in the relations of pleasure and pain. It will not be denied that this relationship is often close, and not only in pathological states; the proximity of the pair is a commonplace in love poetry. One remembers Spenser’s allegorical Jealousy, for whom “painful pleasure [turns] to pleasing pain” (*Faerie Queene* III.10.60).

A more modern, more refined view of the matter was proposed by Roland Barthes, in his book *Le Plaisir du texte*. As everybody knows, Barthes distinguished between the pleasures of reading and what he called *jouissance*, a term associated in French with, among other things, orgasm and connoting an experience not simply pleasant but mixed with something perhaps best described as dismay. In the text of *jouissance*, he says, “pleasure, language, culture, are in pieces. This text is absolutely intransitive, the extreme of perversion.” The experiences of pleasure and *jouissance* are not always sharply distinguished, for they can occur together, but the text of *jouissance* always involves a loss, a dispersion; it is outside the context of pleasure, is indeed closer to pain. The experience in question is beyond the scope of descriptive criticism, for such commentary would have to be of the nature of *jouissance* itself, a desperate, crazed plagiarism amounting to “une grande perte subjective” quite different in quality from the obsessive repetition of the text

<sup>4</sup> E.g., in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (Hogarth Press, 1949), pp. 3, 67ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Reading for the Plot* (Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 37.



of pleasure, which, in its very nature, requires some form of social participation.<sup>6</sup> As Stephen Heath expresses it, pleasure arises from a link with “cultural enjoyment and identity,” whereas *jouissance* shatters that identity and is not to be identified with enjoyment.<sup>7</sup>

I want now to talk about Wordsworth, and about a particular poem I have often discussed before, as many members of this audience must have had to do. Certain aspects of this poem seem to me to be illuminated by the Barthesian pairing, *plaisir* and *jouissance*, and in this respect I believe it resembles a good many other canonical poems. Wordsworth, it will be remembered, set enormous store by pleasure, regarding it as essential to poetry and to poets and always fearing its diminution in himself and consequently a progressive failure to supply it to others. He said that the poet “writes under one restriction only, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected of him”—not as a lawyer, a physician, and so on, but “as a Man.”<sup>8</sup> That is to say, the pleasure of the individual could be related to the response expected from a citizen of ordinary formation—an educated public.

Wordsworth was keen to distinguish this pleasure from any to be derived, as he put it, from rope-dancing or sherry, the point being that poetry was not only a source of pleasure, it was philosophical. In the world as it was, “a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are . . . acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor” (p. 438). How easy, then, to lose that higher pleasure, when a man is rightly “pleased with his own passions and volitions” (p. 441) and can expect others to feel the same. A taste for rope-dancing and sherry can outlive the philosophical pleasures of the poet. Incidentally, those pleasures could only be achieved or maintained by efforts of great originality, by new defamiliarising ways of writing poetry, as Wordsworth announced in his 1800 Preface. The effort was great, and so was the effort to rediscover the power to supply these needs; and

<sup>6</sup> *Le Plaisir du texte* (Editions du Seuil, 1973), pp. 83, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (Fontana/Collins, 1977) “Introduction,” p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802),” in *Selected Poems*, ed. J. O. Hayden (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 443.

although it can itself be can be a principal theme of poetry, loss of power and the fear of that loss are sources of dismay, as Coleridge would also testify, and Yeats, too.

The conjunction of pleasure and dismay is a well-known feature of romantic lyric poetry, and it can be bewildering to criticism, which is far more at ease with pleasure than its senior partner, in a sense its opposite as well as its complement, *jouissance*. The prose of Wordsworth has nothing to say concerning the dismay that is the shadow of pleasure, perhaps because, as Barthes believed, it is impossible to write *about* it. But the poetry certainly speaks a good deal of loss and dismay.

“Resolution and Independence” is an archetypal romantic poem with a powerful influence on the future of the art. Yet it remembers anterior poetry, deferring to it with its rhyme royal, the stanza of *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, but with the last line a Spenserian alexandrine, a device used by Thomas Chatterton in his “Excellent Ballad of Charity.” The stanza is traditionally associated with narrative, and this is in its peculiar way a narrative, though highly original, like no narrative poem before it except some of Wordsworth’s own.

I have tried more than once to say something interesting, something reflecting my own permanent interest in this poem. It is very naive to begin by saying what one takes it to be about, or what it isn’t about, but one must start somewhere, so we may begin by annoying many modern Wordsworthians by saying it is really less about the poverty of the leech gatherer (a man “travelling alone among the mountains and all lonely places, carrying with him his own fortitude and the necessities which an unjust state of society has entailed upon him”) than about the prospect of the poet’s poverty, the blank fear of “a young poet . . . overwhelmed by the thought of the miserable reverses that have befallen the happiest of men, viz. Poets.” The plot of the poem, as you recall, is thus: the poet experiences joy in a beautiful morning landscape, runs with the hare in her mirth, escapes his melancholy thoughts of the previous night; but suddenly the mood changes, and it is as if such a change was the necessary consequence of joy:

As high as we have mounted in delight  
In our dejection do we sink as low;

the poet is then plunged into “dim sadness, and blind thoughts I knew not nor could name.” He reflects on a life he has “lived in pleasant

thought” but adds that though given so much he has given nothing in return. But this point, emphasizing the early happiness of the poet, seems less important than the premonition of the eventual cost of that vocation, the loss of that happiness:

We poets in our youth begin in gladness;  
But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness.

What the narrative has to do is to bring together an image of present poverty and the fear of poverty—leeches have become hard to find, and poems are likely to do likewise. And the old man loses his original outline; at first he looks as if he bears “[a] more than human weight,” but soon he is perceived as dissolving into little more than a cloud, a spectral figure. The conversation that follows establishes the man’s trade, but his voice, though dignified much as Wordsworth’s Preface said the language of such speakers should be, fades as his image fades; he is no more than a dream, and the poet in this dream returns to his reflection on “mighty poets in their misery dead.” So the poet and the poem are at once troubled by the shape and speech of the man—as if this apparition was a nascent poem, therefore an index of joy, but joy blended with the dread of the misery to come. The poem ends as the poet cheers himself up by saying that the brave old man will be an example to him as his powers and his courage fade.

Wordsworth himself insisted, in that strangely agitated letter to Sara Hutchinson, that the poem is about “a young poet...overwhelmed by the thought of the miserable reverses that have befallen the happiest of men, viz. Poets” and about the “interposition of Providence” that gave him a measure of resolution and independence, the strength to contemplate a future poverty. But that is not the whole story. The turning point of the poem (though not of the real encounter from which it took its origin) is precisely the intervention of that “peculiar grace,” the “leading from above” that brought him into conversation with the leech gatherer.

These expressions, “peculiar grace,” “a leading,” have a strong Calvinist ring, more apposite to the “grave livers” of whom he takes the old man to be one than to his own. The old man’s way of speaking is “above the reach / Of ordinary men,” by reason of it stately purity, and in this not unlike the poet’s, but with different ethical and spiritual foundations. Poets may say, “By our own spirits are we deified,” a claim

repugnant to grave livers. The two expressions of inspiration, secular and religious, are brought close together for contrast. The stony steadfastness of the old man, the grave liver, is quite another matter from the excited action of the poetic spirit, and the contrast hints at the pain of the more secular type of election.

A peculiar grace is a grace vouchsafed freely to a particular person, and here it is applied to the poet, by an intelligible analogy; but he still thinks about the price of it, the cost of achieving the state of grace that makes for poetry and joy, a state from which he may fall. Thus the condition of poetry is rather like that of the religious, of William Cowper, for example, who knows what that state is but dreads and suffers its end.

That is a kind of beginning, but it leaves everything to be said. What, then, ought one to say about this strange and sometimes apparently rather absurd poem, solemn but plainly subject, as Lewis Carroll noticed, to parody? Many interpretations directly convert the poem into material for biography: for example, Stephen Gill regards it as a response to Coleridge's "Letter to Sara Hutchinson," a confrontation of the "introverted defeatism" of that poem.<sup>9</sup> Kenneth R. Johnston detects "a bard very much worried about his staying power," experiencing "a vocational crisis" and seeking to avoid the excesses of Chatterton and Burns as well as the "irresponsibilities" of Coleridge. Whereas Coleridge at the time of the poem was lamenting a broken marriage, Wordsworth had resolved "his failed past romantic history" and was on the point of contentedly marrying Mary Hutchinson.<sup>10</sup> John Worthen in his recent composite biography points out that we can't be sure whether Wordsworth's poem was written after Coleridge's or before it. For him both poems are part of a protracted "brotherly conversation" between the poets, but in either case he feels it wasn't much use offering Coleridge the example of the leech gatherer's firm mind, or the reflection that many people were worse off than he was, considering the fix he was in. He does point out, however, that Coleridge published his poem on Wordsworth's wedding day, "as if to say 'this—unfortunately—is true for me, whatever else—luckily for you, is true for *you*.'" <sup>11</sup>

The biographical Coleridge connection is of course very strong, and

<sup>9</sup> *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 200–202.

<sup>10</sup> *The Hidden Wordsworth* (W. W. Norton, 1998), pp. 775–76.

<sup>11</sup> *The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons & the Wordsworths in 1802* (Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 189–90.

it is very unfortunate. What ought to matter is the poem itself, as Wordsworth would have agreed. In his letter to Sara the poet is defending the poem in a quite agitated manner: “if it is not more than very well [after the introduction of the old man] it is very bad, there is no intermediate state.” Sara had not liked the figure of the leech gatherer; he wants her to admire him. But, more important, he insists that the encounter, the peculiar grace, that rescued him from dejection and despair was “almost as an interposition of Providence.” The poem could only be evidence of that, however, if it was a good, indeed a very good, poem.

The 1815 Preface explains what it needed to be—what the figure of the old man and the whole poem needed to be—to satisfy Wordsworth. He was now sure it was very good indeed, so he could use it to illustrate the way imagination operates on “images in a conjunction by which they modify each other.” He chooses the lines beginning “As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie / Couched on the bald top of an eminence” and goes on to the comparisons with the sea beast and the cloud. “The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast; and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate the stone; which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original image, that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged man....” I mention this not as a bit of biography, the poet’s reading of his own poem, but as an example of the sort of struggle even very good critics must take on if they want to say something useful about a great poem.

Wordsworth is speaking as a critic of the poem, trying to explain its internal coalescences and divagations. If the poem is not very good, it must be very bad. In the letter to Sara he does say something about how he came to write it, but his concern is always with the poem. And of course he says nothing about its relation to Coleridge’s dejection. The biographical guesses have their own interest, but it is not the interest of the poem.

What concerns Wordsworth in the letter is what he calls “the feeling of spirituality or supernaturalness” induced by the old man.<sup>12</sup> The mystery, that is, is the mystery not of the old man but of the poem itself. To reduce the poem to autobiography is a policy that not only makes it less interesting but actually makes a worse mistake, by diverting the attention of the readers and so cutting off their relation with the power and

<sup>12</sup> The letter refers to an earlier version of the poem, but the point is not affected.

the complex pleasures of the work. It explains nothing about the poem's supernaturalness, its powerfully *unheimlich* quality: the identification of the poem itself with a peculiar grace, the conjunctions and disjunctions of pleasure and *jouissance*. At the end the old man's poverty is unchanged, and there is nothing the poet can do with his except hope to endure it, perhaps finding a poem as the old man finds leeches, by perseverance. The gloom is not dispersed by the prayer at the end:

“God,” said I, “be my help and stay secure;  
I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!”

Curiously, this resignation, this willingness to identify with loss and dissolution, must be thought a constituent of the emotion Wordsworth called “joy.” Again and again we find in the best of the poetry a curious blend of delight and dismay.

It seems to me that the integral experience results from some juxtaposition or collision of pleasure and dismay. In a very similar way the most remarkable lines in the “Immortality Ode” concern “those obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things, / Fallings from us, vanishings; / Blank misgivings...” The Wordsworth who wrote those lines was the poet that William Blake placed among the real poets, the poets among whom “there is no competition”; the poet whose best work made Blake feel ill, whose line “But there's a tree, of many one,” we learn from Crabb Robinson, “threw him almost into a hysterical rapture.”<sup>13</sup> We notice that the passages that so disturb Blake are about loss: the loss of the visionary gleam—the way in which the single tree and the single field “speak of something that is gone.” Those were the dismayed monosyllables that gave Blake the experience of combined ecstatic pleasure and dismay.

I understand that I am talking about the poem as if ignorant of such subtle accounts as those of David Bromwich in his *Disowned by Memory*, which place “man” at the center of the poet's interest. In a different critical dialect Bromwich remembers those fallings from us, vanishings: and he asks, why does Wordsworth press upon us these aberrant choices of subject and feeling? It was the question that Sara Hutchinson asked when she could not see why so much absorbed attention was given to the

<sup>13</sup> Crabb Robinson, *Reminiscences* (1869); in *The Portable Blake*, ed. A. Kazin (Viking, 1946), p. 687.

“Leech-gatherer.” Dorothy Wordsworth wrote back: “when you feel any poem of his to be tedious, ask yourself in what spirit it was written.” Very good advice! Bromwich finds in the poem qualities observed there by Arthur Symons ninety years earlier—Wordsworth, said Symons, “has gathered up all his qualities, dignity, homeliness, meditation over man and nature, respectful pity for old age and poverty, detailed observation of natural things, together with an imaginative atmosphere which melts, harmonises, the forms of cloud and rock and pool and the voices of wind and man into a single composition.”<sup>14</sup> Well said, but I think too calmly said; Bromwich, less calm, knows about the transgressive unease of the work, an unease that is also relevant to the poet’s understanding of “man,” of nature, and of human life.<sup>15</sup> We feel it in all of Wordsworth’s solitaires, “The Old Cumberland Beggar” and the ghostly Soldier in the *Prelude* (iv.192–254) from whom the poet departs “with quiet heart.” Then there is the narrator in *The Ruined Cottage*, who, having heard Margaret’s sad tale, leaves her and walks along his road “in happiness.”<sup>16</sup> The bleakness of these lives engenders no conventional lament because, by a peculiar grace, pleasure and loss are coactive in the creation of joy.

Like Blake, we can charge Wordsworth with many faults, but when reading these passages one echoes his more enthusiastic judgments. It is as difficult a critical assignment as can be imagined to explain why delight is so intense, why it was reasonable to say, with Blake, that such writing is “in the highest degree imaginative and equal to any poet but not superior.”<sup>17</sup> To speak of pleasure alone does not seem enough, though pleasure, and the possibility of its repeated disappointment and satisfaction, is one key to canonicity.

Perhaps one could analyse “Resolution and Independence” along the lines proposed by Kenneth Burke—considering its artifice, as he brilliantly considers the artifice of the opening scene of *Hamlet*: “We have been waiting for a ghost, and get, startlingly, a blare of trumpets. And, once the trumpets are silent, we feel how desolate are these three men waiting for a ghost, on a bare ‘platform.’”<sup>18</sup> Burke considers the way

<sup>14</sup> *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (E. P. Dutton, 1909), p. 88. I owe this reference to Professor John Stokes.

<sup>15</sup> *Disowned by Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> *William Wordsworth*, ed. S. Gill (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 44, l. 525.

<sup>17</sup> Robinson, in *The Portable Blake*, p. 689.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Burke, “Psychology and Form,” in *Counter Statement* (Harcourt-Brace, 1931), pp. 38–39.

music can “deal minutely in frustrations and fulfilments of desire” (p. 36). Or one could cite Proust on the coexistence of happiness, or of happiness deferred, with that sense of dismay, even of vastation, that seems inseparable from it, as in the pages on Venice: as Tony Tanner expressed it, Ruskin made Venice “not just beautiful but, effectively, *the* site of the Beautiful—the essence realized, the absolute achieved. As such it is almost impossible, unbearable to contemplate. . . . It is a beauty that both awakens *and*—should it turn its Medusa face—devastates all desire,” as indeed it does after the departure of Marcel’s mother.<sup>19</sup>

It goes without saying that the literature I have referred to is canonical literature. It is clearly not so on account of its collusion with the discourses of power; indeed Wordsworthians have to distinguish between the large proportion of his work that may be said to do that and the work that enters into Blake’s realm, where there is no competition, where the transaction is first between the poem and a reader and then, necessarily, between the poem and many readers, those who, in Wordsworth’s words, qualify as human beings possessed of the information that may be expected of them, a possession he seems to identify with the possession of true humanity.

However, it is “by our own spirits” that we are deified, so able to claim the power to confer upon strings of words or notes or patches of paint—mere objects—the honor of being what we call art. We would hardly do so if the objects, however grim, however dismaying, did not give us pleasure. Moreover, we make lists, canons, of what we decide is valuable, and these, in the interests of that humanity, we may press on other people, our successors. Some of the reasons we give for doing so may be false or self-serving, or at any rate fallible. But the cause is a good one. And pleasure is at the heart of it. So is change; but of that more later.

## II. CHANGE

The great statue of the general Du Puy  
Rested immobile, though neighboring catafalques  
Bore off the residents of its noble Place . . .

<sup>19</sup> *Venice Desired* (Blackwell, 1992), p. 230.



There never had been, never could be, such  
A man. The lawyers disbelieved, the doctors

Said that as keen, illustrious ornament,  
As a setting for geraniums, the General,  
The very Place Du Puy, in fact, belonged

Among our more vestigial states of mind.  
Nothing had happened because nothing had changed.  
But the General was rubbish in the end.

There are those who would take Wallace Stevens' general as an allegory of the canon, which they have been known to describe as a set of obsolete mouldering monuments. However, the statue in this case has not mouldered: nothing has happened, the statue's greatness is merely monumental and immobile, nothing has changed except the taste or opinion of the intelligentsia. But this opinion can produce what the poet elsewhere calls "a single text, granite monotony," and it is enough to dismiss the statue as an irrelevant, even contemptible survival, with no power to elicit our attention. It outlives its human neighbours and is probably the worse for that. Nobody talks about it as a work of art, for that would require a particular form of attention, and a tradition of attention, however varied in kind, that has been broken off. Without this form of attention the General is rubbish. Texts too must change; or rather, we must choose to grant them the blessing of change, for that alone will save them from their only other possible fate, namely, to be rubbish in the end. Failing that benediction, equestrian statues, and all other objects of art, belong to vestigial states of mind. The same fate could attend the *Inferno* or *Antony and Cleopatra* if our mind but changed its tune. There are signs that some would like it to do so, though others sometimes succeed in redirecting attention to works that have somewhere, in the course of history, lost interest.

Reception history informs us that even Dante, Botticelli, and Caravaggio, even Bach and Monteverdi, endured long periods of oblivion until the conversation changed and they were revived. Some hope it will continue to say new things about them, that the giant will go on living in change rather than die for the lack of it. Indeed outside the universities this group may still be large, remaining sure that although "it must change" the work can still, as it changes, give pleasure.

One consequence of canonicity is that whether the canon is formed

by theological fiat or pedagogical authority or indeed by chance, each member of it fully exists only in the company of others; one member nourishes or qualifies another, so that as well as benefiting from the life-preserving attentions of commentary each thrives on the propinquity of all: in a sense all become part of one larger book and all are changed in the process. In this regard we need to insist with Friedrich Schleiermacher that acts of interpretation have regard to wholes, not parts. A book inside a canon is a different book from what it would have been outside that canon. This is obviously true of the Bible, interrelations between the parts of which have been traced, invented, and explained by centuries of commentators. Left out of the canon, books may disappear entirely, like the gospels that didn't get in. The Song of Songs might have disappeared, for it was almost excluded from the Hebrew Bible, but it was rescued in the nick of time and so saved for the Christian Bible also, to become the source of great volumes of subsequent poetry and commentary. Or, as one biblical commentator puts it, had Ecclesiastes been excluded from the Hebrew Bible, as it might well have been, and then, after almost two millennia of neglect, had turned up among the Dead Sea Scrolls, it would be a different book even though the two texts were virtually identical. Even more obviously, the Christian Old Testament is not the same book as the Jewish Bible though in substance it is so, because Christian commentary transformed it in the light of the New Testament, a new covenant, a new deal ensuring a drastic retrospective rewriting that required no textual change.

All this reinforces the proposition that there is an element of chance in canonicity, and many examples testify to the truth of this. We ourselves make canons by attending closely to texts and contexts, but there may be among those texts some that we choose not to attend to and that remain there by inertia. Other works may have some claim to be treated as canonical but aren't. Many authors have been rescued from neglect, but there must be many more who had no such luck. A few plays of Sophocles were saved by an Alexandrian grammarian; Thomas Traherne, lost for almost three centuries, turned up on a London bookstall and benefited from the revival of interest in early seventeenth-century poetry that was gaining strength at the time of the discovery. There is no intrinsic preservative, but somebody at some point must have thought these were good things; and so began the history of their success. This person need not be a professional scholar and very often isn't; the rediscovery of Botticelli was effected by persuasive amateurs (and

was often based on paintings that weren't by Botticelli). But once retrieved the works are kept alive by conversation, eventually supported by serious scholarship.

The retrieval of forgotten music, stimulated no doubt by the compact disc, goes on all the time. Such revivals mark changes in the understanding of the audience and complementary changes in performance. The other day my interest was caught by a new recording of Handel's opera *Rinaldo*. Back in 1940 I was writing about this opera in a never-to-be published thesis about Aaron Hill, poet, theatre manager, projector, or entrepreneur in general, friend of the novelist Samuel Richardson, unwanted friend of the poet Alexander Pope. Hill was responsible for inducing Handel to write this, the first of his many English operas. Hill himself sketched the libretto, which was hastily translated into Italian by a man called Giacomo Rossi. As Handel had brought from Italy quantities of music never heard in London and therefore reusable, the collaborators were able to paste everything together in a very short time. The staging was comically elaborate and fallible, making much use of machinery; and the leading role was, absurdly in the view of some contemporaries, sung by a famous castrato, Nicolini. The result was apparently even more chaotic than the circumstances, and the novelty of the genre, might suggest, but the opera was a success, despite the sardonic notices of Joseph Addison:

An Opera may be allowed to be extravagantly lavish in its Decorations, as its only Design is to gratify the Senses and keep up an indolent Attention in the Audience. Common Sense however requires that there should be nothing in the Scenes and Machines which may appear Childish and Absurd. (*Spectator*, March 6, 1711)

Addison disliked the real sparrows, meant to inhabit the pasteboard groves on stage, which flew about the theatre putting out the candles, while their singing was imitated by "a Consort of Flageolets." In the view of Addison and others there was nothing much to be said for Italian opera, with its boring plots, ridiculous conventions, un-English language and un-English music. Outrageous to common sense, *Rinaldo* nevertheless packed them in. But *it* disappeared from our eyes and ears for centuries, remembered only when cited as the source of the aria *lasia ch'io pianga*. Sixty years ago it was almost inconceivable that I or anybody else should ever hear, let alone see, this opera. Now, with luck, one can see it staged and can choose between two full CD versions. The

scene in which the flageolet and its consorts imitate birdsong is, in spite of Addison, particularly admired. The story is impossible to remember, but it is now recognised as providing scope for some impressive, powerfully pleasing music, of a kind we had, to our cost, ignored for centuries—music very unlike the Handel who kept the attention of our grandfathers with the solemnities of *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt*.

How can we explain this change? We have a modern familiarity with the baroque, we have scholars who understand it and singers and musicians who know how to perform it; we can accommodate the heroic or pathetic gestures, the long recitatives, and the *da capo* arias. Our map of musical history has been redrawn; we have discovered how to listen to this music, a different skill from listening to Mozart or Verdi or Wagner. The change is fuelled by more generous notions in ourselves; nothing has happened to the operas except that they have come to be understood in their own pleasure-giving terms. They are no longer rubbish, like the General. We have made this music modern by acts of historical understanding; we have changed it and released its power to please. So the canon expands; of course a withdrawal of attention can by the same token contract it.

Changes in the canon obviously reflect changes in ourselves and in our culture. It is a register of how our historical self-understandings are formed and modified. At the simplest level we know about the differences between our own understandings of old texts and the understandings of our predecessors, or even those of contemporaries in disagreement because of generational differences or contrary political presumptions. We may attribute our grasp of the issue to our superior understanding generally, yet it is just that assumption we are likely to say we feel an urgent need to question if we want to rid ourselves of the historically embedded prejudices that are the main support of our conviction that we are historically privileged.

Issues of this sort first seemed important in the sphere of religion. Everybody knows Schleiermacher's slogan: "The task is to understand the text at first as well as and then better than its author." To achieve this understanding it was recommended that one study "the field of language shared by the author and the original public."<sup>1</sup> The effort called for is philological and its ambition utopian; later students saw the need

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in G. L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (Yale University Press, 1992), p. 293.

to incorporate in the relationship the inquirer's own historical situation. As Gerald Bruns puts it in his excellent book, what we now have to ask is "the question of what it is that happens...when we try to make sense of something."<sup>2</sup> The moment of interpretation is now fixed in the present. The emphasis shifts once more to the historical context of the interpreters, their powers and desires and those of their community; and so we see ourselves in the position of Gadamer, who could say that "*verstehen* is less in knowing what the text means in itself than it is in knowing how we stand with respect to it in the situation in which we find ourselves."<sup>3</sup> It follows, as he remarks, that we understand differently if we understand at all; an interpretation that merely repeated an earlier one would be false. And this is another way of changing the canon.

Pre-understandings are an important issue. Of course they vary. Gadamer calls them "prejudices." "[A] hermeneutically trained mind must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's quality of newness. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self, but the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings."<sup>4</sup> Of course it isn't easy to be aware of one's own bias, but the reward promised is great: newness. Again the fact is that it is our job to create that newness. Our way of doing so may be described as "appropriative," meaning only that we have to do something drastic to a canonical text to make it ours, to make it modern.<sup>5</sup> It must be made to answer to our prejudices; and they are necessarily related to the prejudices of our community, even if in reaction to them.

I can't go into the very interesting arguments that have developed on these points. Some "Schleiermachians" seek to inhabit original languages and communities and place each element independently and with historical precision. Others take Brevard Childs' view, as I do, that

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Truth and Method* (Sheed and Ward, 1975), p. 238.

<sup>5</sup> Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, p. 76, discusses Brevard Childs' view, arising from the Old Testament, that appropriative understanding is the means by which a text is subjected to a process of "actualization," so that it is not "moored in the past" (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Westminster Press, 1979)).

the canon is, considered from a different sort of historical point of view, all of a piece and ought not to be split definitively into independent components, as the modern "Schleiermachiens" wish.<sup>6</sup>

Prejudices change like everything else, and they are not consistently held at any particular time, being affected in obvious ways by different levels of communal assumption and doctrinal adhesion. Indeed, as we are all too aware, members of the same institution may hold very different views, have very different prejudices, and none of them may be of much interest to the public at large. Meanwhile canons are replaced, condemned, or subjected to new commentary. In any case they change.

Let me now turn to the source of change that at present interests me most. One thing is clear enough from the history of literary criticism, and that is the existence of a discernible consensus as to what is worth talking about, whether favourably or not. Certain topics gain sharp definition: Modernism, for example, and the general agreement that certain works associated with it are worth intense study, whether approving or dissenting. Modernism is now sunk in the past, and new groups of topics have, by general agreement, supervened. The question as to how these changes come about is doubtless of interest, but I shall speak instead of a more personal element in our responses, responses to individual poems or parts of poems that one may possess or be possessed by, providers of pleasure and dismay.

Most people who care at all about literature have in their heads such poems or parts of poems. It is hard (though not quite impossible) to believe that anybody would want to spend a working life in university departments of literature without having such reserves. But it is a question how communicable the private experience of such works may be. I think Matthew Arnold devised his famous touchstones with some notion of making out of such private experience a set of civilized literary norms acceptable to an educated public. Looking back at the passage in "The Study of Poetry" which sets them forth, one can't help seeing how far short Arnold falls of his stated aim: "to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touch-

<sup>6</sup> I gave an account of the dispute between Childs and James Barr, the main proponent of the historical view, in "The Argument about Canons," in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. F. McConnell (Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 78–96, where I also tried to examine the relevance of the argument to the question of secular canons.

stone to other poetry.” We might expect to find in his selection testimony to a past stage of our culture; bearing in mind the fact and the necessity of change one would hardly expect the passages to be of eternal validity. What is remarkable and still relevant is that all Arnold needed was a line here and there, sometimes even just a part of a line. There is the address of Zeus to the horses of Peleus in *Iliad* Book XVII, and that of Achilles to Priam in Book XXIV. There are three scraps of Dante and Shakespeare on the ship-boy “upon some high and giddy mast,” along with Hamlet’s “Absent thee from felicity a while” and some fine fragments of *Paradise Lost*. “If we are thoroughly penetrated by their power,” says Arnold, “we shall find that we have acquired a sense enabling us, whatever poetry is laid before us, to feel the degree in which a high poetical quality is present or wanting there.”

We might not disagree that the choices are good bits of poetry, without claiming that they have for us the power they evidently had for Arnold. And it isn’t easy to understand that power. He says these passages are true and serious—that is what his explanation amounts to. But that seems a rather piffling thing to say about Ugolini’s line *Io non piangeva; si dentro impietrai* (*Inferno* XXXIII.49) “I did not weep; inside I turned to stone”—which served perhaps as a reminder of the next words, *piangevan elli*—the children did weep and asked him what was the matter, whereupon he still didn’t weep and still didn’t answer. And Arnold was remembering, and expecting all educated persons to remember with him, the fate of these children and the pain of what follows: *Lo pianto stesso il pianger non lascia*, where weeping prevented weeping, where tears were turned back to torment the weeper. In short the fragment is intended to summon a context of pathos and of ever-increasing and irremediable pain.

The words of Beatrice to Virgil in *Inferno* II are certainly impressive: *la vostra miseria non mi tange* has, at any rate in isolation from its context, a sort of radiant cruelty: I am so made by God in his grace that your misery does not touch me. The misery or privation in question is not specifically Virgil’s or Dante’s but that of the place to which Beatrice descends to help them; yet on its own the remark seems to contrast their wretchedness with her happiness. Dante had, after all, a kind of theological pitilessness; on the gate of hell he inscribes the message that its maker was the high maker, the divine power, *la somma Sapienza e il primo amore*: the creator of this place of eternal suffering is not only wise but

loving. There is a touch of this quasi-divine indifference in the radiant immunity of Beatrice. The contrast between paradisaical content and human misery seems to have appealed to Arnold.

Indeed abandonment to or at least acceptance of suffering seems to be a characteristic of Arnold's touchstones. The horses of Peleus are weeping at the death of Priam, who was once capable of joy. Milton's Satan is defiant but battered. Ceres' search for her daughter "cost her all that pain." These passages share a sombre or stoic quality; Beatrice is there because her exemption from pain emphasises the plight of all the others. It is hard to see how a large community of readers would find the same intensity of interest in these passages. They are essentially private. All have to do with sorrow; their pleasure arises from their painfulness. It has been pointed out that the Homeric touchstones all come from the *Iliad* and are not even particularly characteristic of that poem as a whole: but "the forces that stirred beneath the surface of Arnold's life find their counterpart in the battle for Troy, the athletic and magnificent figures moving towards death."<sup>7</sup> Arnold loved the Homer of the *Iliad* better than the Homer of the *Odyssey*, with its more varied and romantic story, and its final coming home. It provided no touchstone.

So it seems that the touchstone passages, having peculiar connotations of pleasure and pain for Arnold, cannot, for all time and for everybody, bear the broad cultural significance he claims for them. If a culture is involved at all it must be that of the Victorian professional class, perhaps especially that of men educated at Rugby and Oxford.

T. S. Eliot, the nearest approach to Arnold a later century could muster, and also one who deplored the contemporary cultural situation, had his own touchstones, though he did call them that and did not explicitly recommend them for general use. Yet although they are in various ways extremely personal, they have probably enjoyed more success in literary circles than Arnold's. One obvious reason is that they lack the strong ethical colouring of Arnold, are altogether more unexpected, and were, at the time of their first exposure, less familiar. The influence of Eliot has in this as in other respects waned, not least because modes of study now in fashion have little interest in the experience of poetry, which is no longer thought to have much academic or even much cultural relevance.

<sup>7</sup> Warren D. Anderson, *Matthew Arnold and the Classical Tradition* (University of Michigan Press, 1965), p. 90.



Yet for the student of poetry Eliot's touchstones are worth a moment's attention. A favourite source is again Dante, but a rather different Dante. We think of Shakespeare as the source of so many familiar quotations that we sometimes hardly remember their connection with him, and Dante has something of the same familiarity in Italy, except that people seem more aware of the place of famous lines in the poem as a whole. By a memorable chance I once sat in Palermo with Lionel and Diana Trilling at the Christmas Eve dinner table of a Sicilian tour guide, in the company of our host's sons and daughters and their spouses, mostly schoolteachers. Invited to celebrate Dante, Lionel and I dug into our memories and produced lines that had had Eliot's magisterial endorsement: the Paolo and Francesca episode in *Inferno* V, with its extraordinarily tender sensuality: *la bocca me baciò tutto tremante*; the verse adapted or quoted in *The Waste Land*: *ricorditi di me, che son la Pia; / Siena mi fe', disfecemi Maremma*; or *sovegna vos a temps de ma dolor*; and the vanquished hero, now in hell, who ran for the green cloth at Verona and lost, but seemed like one who had won. Others came to mind: the old tailor peering at his needle, the advice of the doomed Ulysses to his men on the brink of their last voyage: "Consider your inheritance: you were not made to live like beasts but to pursue virtue and knowledge"—incidentally that does sound more Arnoldian, like "in his will is our peace." As we dug out these memories our mumblings were drowned by the chorus round the table. For this was a company of teachers and to them these and presumably many other lines of Dante were, quite without their thinking of them as such, touchstones—not ethical guidelines, though some have an ethical or religious tone; and not deliberately memorized, but part of the pleasures of their professional habit.

Among the array of fragments the ones that meant so much to Eliot were, roughly, passages that dealt with seduction, ruin, damnation, and the pains of Purgatory. For Eliot these were also not simply ethical guidelines, though he warmed to their connotations of bold sin (as he discussed it in his essay on Baudelaire) and inevitable punishment; part of Dante's powerful appeal to him was surely a certain theological or moral pitilessness. That eternal torment was ordained by love and wisdom and that Beatrice was beautifully immune to the pain of the living were paradoxes that gave him grim pleasure.

Eliot has a special interest in what might be called sexual dismay, and his favourite lines from Dante often bear its mark. It is useful to recall what he said about the reader's surrender to poetry: "You don't

really criticize any author to whom you have not surrendered yourself. . . . Even just the bewildering minute counts; you have to give yourself up, and then recover yourself, and the third moment is having something to say, before you have wholly forgotten both surrender and recovery. Of course the self recovered is never the same as the self before it was given.”<sup>8</sup> This surrender, he believed, was central to the experience of poetry. All will remember the lines from *The Waste Land*: “My friend, blood shaking my heart / The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract / By this, and this only, we have existed” (402–5). And we may also recall those lines from *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, made famous and repeatedly cited by Eliot:

Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours  
For thee? For thee does she undo herself?  
Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships  
For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute?  
(III.v.72–75)

Vindice is addressing the skull of his lover. These famous lines did not start being famous till Eliot said they should be. I have given the text of R. A. Foakes (London, 1966). There is no reason to doubt the correctness of the reading “bewitching minute,” but Eliot liked “bewildering,” which he found in an edition by J. A. Symonds (1888). Though incorrect, “bewildering” is the stronger reading, as one might say, more modern, more Baudelairian. Eliot made it his own, and “bewildering” introduces into the sexual figure just that element of loss and dismay of which I have spoken. The whole speech of Vindice is compact of dismay and a sort of ornate disgust. Even the silkworm is undone, spent. And the language is altogether remarkable: for instance, the strange use of “falsify” and “refine,” which Eliot had in mind when he referred again to the passage in his study of Massinger, and spoke of “that perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations, meanings perpetually *ingeschachtelt* into meanings which evidences a very high development of the senses, a development of the English language which we have perhaps never equalled. . . . Sensation became word and word was sensation.”<sup>9</sup> The lines

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Stephen Spender (May 9, 1935), quoted in Spender, “Remembering Eliot,” in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. Allen Tate (Delacorte, 1966), pp. 55–56.

<sup>9</sup> *Selected Essays* (Faber, 1934), pp. 209–10.

demonstrate a close affinity between sexual and poetic *jouissance*, and in substituting “bewildering” for “bewitching” we have a change, an updating, of the passage, to include a darker, more Decadent notion of the force of poetry. Here the late-nineteenth-century revival of interest in the Jacobean dramatists has made possible not only new canonical inclusions but also their juxtaposition with the likes of Baudelaire and the other French poets who had won the poet’s allegiance.

In a still later essay Eliot decided that “the cynicism, the loathing and disgust of humanity, expressed consummately in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, are immature in the respect that they exceed the object. Their objective equivalents are characters which seem merely to be spectres projected from the poet’s inner world of nightmare, some horror beyond words.”<sup>10</sup> But this excess was essential to the success of the play. In this essay Eliot is struggling to justify his view that Tourneur’s immaturity could nevertheless have produced a play unsurpassed except by Shakespeare and Marlowe, a play that expresses “an intense and unique and horrible vision of life...to which mature men and women can respond” (p. 189). And it is not without interest that he makes a passing allusion to the other, and inferior, play attributed to Tourneur, *The Atheist’s Tragedy*, singling out the line “To spend our substance on a minute’s pleasure”—on the same theme as the silkworm passage in the more famous play (p. 188).

This association of high poetry with sexual pleasure, its concomitant dismay and its subsequent disgust, recurs in other essays on the Jacobean dramatists. Massinger has “masterly construction” but is anaemic. Lacking a “nervous system” comparable with Middleton’s or Tourneur’s or Ford’s (p. 211), he inaugurates a period of verse in which the sensibility begins to be dissociated, “the period of Milton,” characterized by “a decay of the senses” (p. 210). Milton did not make that surrender to pleasure and dismay, so strong in Tourneur and Middleton. The lines in which De Flores in *The Changeling* refuses Beatrice-Joanna’s plea—“Can you weep Fate from its determin’d purpose? So soon may you weep me” (III.iv.162–63) are lines “of which Shakespeare and Sophocles might have been proud,”<sup>11</sup> but it may be that it was the loucheness of the situation enacted that reinforced their appeal. Eliot regards the play as “an

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 189–90.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

eternal tragedy, as permanent as *Oedipus* or *Antony and Cleopatra*,"<sup>12</sup> yet it is the story of an ugly seducer endowed with a language of absolute sexual power.

It is surely of interest that when Eliot wanted to reinforce his view of Middleton as a great poet he chose Beatrice-Joanna's final speech, which contains the marvellous lines: "I am that of your blood was taken from you / For your better health" (V.iii.150–51). But Eliot misquotes them: "I that am of your blood," which is weaker and indeed indefensible, losing the idea of bloodletting and making nonsense of her request that they "cast it to the ground regardlessly; / Let the common sewer take it from distinction." He reduces the figure to a mere assertion of blood relationship. The misquotation, involving a loss of sense, is an indication that it was not indeed its plain sense that made it so seductive. Eliot often misquoted lines he admired. In that same final scene he amazingly changed De Flores' words "I loved this woman in spite of her heart" to "I loved this woman in spite of *my* heart" (l. 165; emphasis added). The play he so much admired thus suffered unconscious emendation.

My point is of course to illustrate the process of surrender and incorporation that these alterations suggest. The text changes as the reader changes. It is not too much to say the changes are related to the orgasmic potential of the lines that induced surrender. These authors had to have, were made to have, something of the exemplary modernity of Baudelaire, who said that the unique and supreme pleasure of love lies in the certainty of doing ill. "He was at least able to understand that the sexual act as evil is more dignified, less boring, than as the natural, cheery, automatism of the modern world."<sup>13</sup>

So Eliot elevated Middleton and Tourneur to modernity, an essential step towards their preservation. The passages that succeeded in inducing surrender are few, and distinguished from others that might seem to have some claim to inclusion in this personal canon. Eliot liked to combine his admiration for Shakespeare with a few limiting judgments: not as good a technician as Webster, sometimes failing when confronted with Dante. He can be used to put down Milton or Tennyson, but, in Hemingway's expression, he can't go the distance with Dante. In the Dante essay of 1929 Eliot compares the figure, equally admired by

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

Arnold and Yeats, of the old tailor peering at his needle (*Inferno*, XV) with the reaction of Octavius to the dead body of Cleopatra: “she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace” (V.ii.345–46).

All admit the baffling splendour of these lines, but Eliot says that Dante’s metaphor tries to make you “see more definitely,” whereas Shakespeare’s, though less definite, adds to what you see a reminder of Cleopatra’s world-changing fascination. I would say he misses something by arguing that Dante observes “rational necessity” and Shakespeare doesn’t. If you look at the whole speech of Octavius you see it begins with some rather clinical observations—Cleopatra’s corpse lacks any “external swelling” that would signify poison; and the famous lines, when quoted alone, lack that brilliant moment of surprise as the diagnostic search for symptoms suddenly gives way to the glory. So it is only in a rather guarded way that Eliot makes his surrender. But he returns to Octavius’ speech in the Massinger essay, and yet again in his Clark Lectures, this time contrasting it with Dante’s lines on Brunetto Latini (“he seemed to be like one of those who wins, not like him who loses”); and here again Shakespeare’s lines, though they show “an image absolutely woven into the fabric of the thought,” lack the “*rational* necessity” of Dante’s.<sup>14</sup>

Eliot always wanted Dante to win, but it is plain that both of these passages are deep in his imagination, and it is worth remarking that both have to do with punishment and pain. Brunetto and Cleopatra are both sinners and losers on the grand scale, yet both have the air of having won. We may recall that other dazzling moment in Shakespeare’s play when Cleopatra, once again for a moment “this great fairy” and the “day o’th’world,” greets Antony: “Lord of lords! O infinite virtue, com’st thou smiling from / The world’s great snare uncaught?” (IV.viii.17–19)—lines to which most of us surrender, as W. H. Auden grudgingly admits when he calls the lines “marvellous,” yet recognising that the marvel comes from the splendour of exultation in the shadow of certain defeat and loss.

The moralising Auden says that Cleopatra’s “strong toil of grace” is

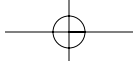
<sup>14</sup> *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. R. Schuchard (Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 123. A better parallel might be the turn at the end of Horace’s Actium Ode (*nunc est bibendum...*) where Cleopatra, whose defeat is the occasion for the triumphant ode, dies *voltu sereno*, “serene of countenance.”

the world itself, and in one way or another it “catches us all” even if the snare is grace.<sup>15</sup> Auden introduces religion, Eliot history. They have surrendered and recovered and are trying to think of something to say. Coleridge found the expression “Happy valiancy” for such great moments, but explained no better than anybody else the network of responses that invited submission, recovery, and comment. Often what we find to say amounts to no more than an expression of astonishment, which is of little use unless it induces an equivalent submission in our hearers; dull though they may be, they can do this, become part of the conversation that prevents such lines from becoming rubbish in the end.

I have been circling round my themes, pleasure and change and the canon. That the passages I’ve discussed often have an element of perversity is not surprising; they have to administer shock; they leap out of their context, disrupt it, and cause a kind of delight mingled with dismay. They often, perhaps almost always, defy “*rational* necessity,” if only in the most obvious sense; Cleopatra is enormously seductive, but in illustrating that fact for the last time there was no rational necessity for Octavian’s sudden glory.

It may be, as Eliot believed, that it is an essential of good poetry that it should, at least on occasion, have an almost prosaic quality, devoid of invitations to emotional surrender, not aiming to achieve one epiphany after another. There must be the *plaisir* that depends on continuities, poetic and social—but it is only from that base that *jouissance* becomes possible. Octavius Caesar, a prosaic figure, examines the body and then issues the great invitation to surrender, in pleasure and dismay. It is, after all, a pattern of experience familiar from ordinary life, interrupted by moments that are distinguished from the ordinary run of things and that occupy an intemporal space in our minds, a canon of memories both pleasant and dismaying. They coexist with rational necessities but are clearly distinguished from them, as great poems are from the prose that surrounds them. What is important may be, according to the predilections of each of us, a small thing, a line or two. It might be compared to that little patch of yellow wall in Vermeer’s *View of Delft* that brought Proust’s Bergotte to his final and total surrender. However, there was a whole painting, a sober view, containing the patch, and the painting had needed to be made beautiful by the informed knowledge of those who

<sup>15</sup> A. Kirsch, *W. H. Auden: Lectures on Shakespeare* (Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 238–42.



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contemplated it. Proust was already a young man when people began, after more than two centuries of neglect, to look seriously at Vermeer's paintings. They began to give pleasure, and to Bergotte something like *jouissance* (indeed it could be said that he dies of pleasure), but, before that, informed opinion had to change the canon of painting. So with Hopkins and others; individuals, sharing with others certain powers, change the canon to match their modernity. A canon changes, and the changes renew the supply of both pleasure and its potent derivative, dismay.

