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Contributors

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Voice as Veil: Rethinking Rhetorical Effectiveness of Voice

When we look at some of the scholarship on voice, we see that the term/concept simply cannot be fixed or defined. For instance, in *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar writes, ". . . faced with the voice, words structurally fail" (13). In his latest explication of voice Peter Elbow writes, "[Voice] means so many things to so many people that it leads to confusion and undermines clear thinking about texts. In any given usage, it's seldom clear what the term is actually pointing to" ("Reconsiderations" 182). Elbow's analytical frame in the introduction to *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing* divides voice into literal voice and "five meanings of voice as applied to writing" (xx). However, there is also the metaphoric voice that is associated with feminism and ethnic studies, with scholars such as bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Audre Lorde, who have amplified on the term as a kind of a revisionist philosophy. Lastly, there is the political voice, the legal right to speech, representation, and equality.

In all three definitions of voice, we see that as an integral dimension in rhetorical situations, it is assumed to be a positive force in society. However, I argue that voice is often masked in its operation and therefore can be harmful, undermining effective communication and functioning as a kind of a veil. Through the lens of a particular debate in critical race theory surrounding the use of minority voice, I examine how voice limited as

a medium of communication can hinder the successful voicing of injustice stemming from the construction and maintenance of marginalized subjectivities.

Disillusioned by the traditional legal language and especially by the Civil Rights acts to remedy the ills of racism and discrimination in America, critical race theorists such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Cheryl I. Harris, and Patricia Williams combine narrative with legal theory in order to identify and reconfigure the rhetorical problem of post-Civil Rights racial discourse. First and foremost, critical race theory contributes to the current discussion of race by deconstructing the rhetoric of the law, for instance in the analysis of the construction of whiteness as property in documents such as the Constitution and the Affirmative Action Supreme Court opinions. More specifically, their works can be seen as an attempt to inject minority voice into the legal scholarly discourse and at the same time reveal the veil particular to race that persists in the larger academic and national culture.

In "Minority Critiques of CLS: Looking to the Bottom," Mari Matsuda, one of the critical race theorists who have been criticized for promoting the use of minority voice, argues that

> those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen. Looking to the bottom—adopting the perspective of those who have seen and felt the falsity of the liberal promise—can assist critical scholars in the task of fathoming the phenomenology of law and defining the elements of justice . . . . When notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, are examined not from an abstract position but from the position of groups who have suffered through history, moral relativism recedes and identifiable normative priorities emerge. (324-25)

Here, Matsuda's understanding of minority voice is not unlike the works of feminists and ethnic scholars, whose voices have been central in revealing the various

oppressed or traumatized subjectivities. As bell hooks put it, the term "voice" has resonance beyond the literal or authorial sense of voice. It is a "metaphor for self-transformation," "a revolutionary gesture," "an act of resistance" (53). "Voice" specifically refers to the voicing of injustice or oppression and its pernicious effect in silencing those who are subjected to such experience. It is the act of finding, giving, or coming to voice that is stressed by bell and others who must delve into the metaphoric and symbolic expressions such as poetry, narrative, and life writing in order to break the veil that they are often confronted with when they write, speak, or teach.

Furthermore, voice in this sense, then, also must always be about the reconceptualization of the veil that resists such finding, giving, and coming to voice. The veil is often reminiscent of the veil particular to racism as ruminated on by W.E.B. Dubois in *The Souls of Black Folks*, but in feminist works, we see that it can also refer to the marginalizing effect embedded within language and discourse itself, as evidenced by works such as Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, both of which transgress the boundaries of genre in their effort to give voice to women's experience. Bell writes, "The struggle to end domination, the individual struggle to resist colonization, to move from object to subject, is expressed in the effort to establish the liberatory voice . . . . It demands that paradigms shift—that we learn to talk—to listen—to hear in a new way" (55). In critical race theory, we see that not only is the veil present in the law (as text), but it is also in the larger legal discourse community that construes voice as a mere medium of communication and/or potentiality of dissent.

Cheryl I. Harris opens her article "Property in Whiteness" with an autobiographical narrative transgressing the boundaries of legal academic writing

in order to inject minority voice into the affirmative action debate. She tells a story of her grandmother who "passed" as white during the 1930s in Chicago. Through the brief yet very poignant account of her grandmother, who remains nameless throughout the story, Harris effectively portrays the deep psychological trauma of "passing." Using her legal understanding of the Jim Crow laws, Harris imagines her grandmother's fear of being "caught" as being accused of "*tres*passing" (1711). This story, although seemingly out of place in the academic discourse of an issue of *Harvard Law Review* published in 1993, is analogous to Harris's legal argument that "passing" is symptomatic of the American legal system that "affirmed, legitimated, and protected" the racialized process, maintaining whiteness as the prerequisite identity for social benefits (1713). She analyzes such cases as *Plessy v. Ferguson, Brown v. Board of Education, Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson & Co.,* and *Wygant v. Jackson Board of Education* (the last three being affirmative action cases) and traces the evolution of the racialization in the courts' reasoning that continues the social distinction of whiteness post–Jim Crow laws. In these court cases, what is truly problematic to Harris is not that the courts acknowledge whiteness as an identity but that the white identity is construed as a claimable property to enter a more privileged social class. Harris asserts that in the affirmative action cases such as in *Bakke*, where the white student's claim of "reverse discrimination" is upheld, the court assumes the naturalness of white social status. Harris argues that

> [the Court's] analysis incorrectly assumes, first, that Bakke's expectation of admission was valid and entitled to protection, and second, that the special admissions program [affirmative action program] impermissibly infringed the equal protection rights of future white applicants. These presumptions in fact mask settled expectations of continued

> white privilege. By extending legal protection to these expectations and legitimating them as valid, the property interest in whiteness was given another form and further hegemony. (1770)

In other words, the Court's ruling that affirmative action is an infringement on the individual right of the white student assumes the naturalness of white privilege, and thus, affirmative action is struck down because it is construed as a kind of a "passport" into the social privilege largely enjoyed by whites. And through the prism of Harris's story, the Court opinion is interpreted as another instance of exclusion, as a kind of extra-legal segregation that nonetheless perpetuates the "trespassing" and "passing" logic of the Jim Crow laws. She writes,

> My grandmother's story illustrates the valorization of whiteness as treasured property in a society structured on racial caste. In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect and that those who passed sought to attain—by fraud if necessary. Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law. (1713)

In the story of Harris's grandmother, we see that "passing" is symptomatic of not just the legal restriction of African Americans but the legal protection of white interests that has economic implications for African Americans. The law is a two-fold operation in this sense: one is restrictive and the other is generative. During slavery, the law was restrictive for African Americans in that they were legally bound as property. From the antebellum period to contemporary times, the law continues to maintain the other crucial component, the legal development and maintenance of whiteness as property.

In my view, Harris's narrative as minority voice lifts the veil of racial discourse in a couple of ways: first, it is involved in the project of subjectivity in the recovery of the traumatized and/or silenced voice; second, it communicates the historical and legal injustice of racism by an explicit engagement with the legal and political process, prompting ethical responsiveness from its readers. Underneath the surface, there is also a discursive project as well. Harris's autobiographical narrative has the effect of deconstructing the legal discourse in several ways: it displaces the universalizing tendencies of the law and injects the abstraction of legal analysis with an affective human component. In dislocating the objectivity of the law and grounding it in the experience felt by her grandmother, the law is revealed to be more than an organizational force. For instance, the internalized conflict of the Harris's grandmother is reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois's "double-consciousness." It is an instance in which the law effectively prescribes and suppresses individual subjectivity. Thus, Harris's reinscription of the communal voice made possible by the narrative of her grandmother's plight reveals the inadequacy of the public policy rhetoric of the affirmative action discourse and prompts a re-voicing of racial discourse rooted in the traumatic experience of racism.

In this way, Harris's story penetrates the elusive rhetoric of affirmative action debate, but more importantly, it enacts precisely what we hope voice as political representation ought to accomplish. However, there have been objections by some legal scholars against such evocation of minority voice in legal discourse. In the article "Telling Stories Out of School: An Essay on Legal Narratives," Daniel A. Farber and Suzanna Sherry, frequently cited opponents of the storytelling practice in legal scholarly writing, argue that such evocation of minority voice is ill-fitting legal discourse.[1] They refer to critical race theorists as

"storytellers," emphasizing their difference from the conventional legal scholars not only by their unique rhetorical method but by their adherence to stories of oppression vis-à-vis the voice of the marginalized:

> First, the storytellers view narratives as central to scholarship, while de-emphasizing conventional analytic methods. Second, they particularly value "stories from the bottom"—stories by women and people of color about their oppression. Third, they are less concerned than conventional scholars about whether stories are either typical or descriptively accurate . . . . (283)

The article inquires after the "differences between the new storytellers and conventional legal scholars" and examines "the concept of different voices," which both the legal feminists and colored scholars argue legitimates and necessitates the aesthetical use of narrative in their scholarship (283-84).

Farber and Sherry go on to analyze what they believe ties both feminist and colored scholars and erroneously deduce that the substance of the work lies in what they call the "distinctive voice thesis" (283). Their statement that there is a distinctive voice of color and women is not wrong; however, we see that their inquiry only partially addresses how narrative performs voice, as oppose to voicing experience:

> So far as we are aware, there is no serious disagreement that some differences exist between the average life experiences of white males and those of other groups. It is plausible to assume that these differences in experiences cause some variations in attitudes and beliefs, particularly in those areas most closely connected with the differences in experiences. . . . Our understanding of the different voice thesis, however, is that it goes beyond assuming differences only in the average attitudes and beliefs of different groups. . . . We find disagreement, however, on the source of the different voices. (284)

The question they are asking here is whether the justification for the incorporation of narrative in legal scholarship is a valid one. In other words, they question whether the "distinctive mode of legal scholarship" is really necessary (283). Farber and Sherry write, "The best evidence supporting the existence of a voice of color is said to be that minority 'scholarship raises new perspectives' . . . . Thus far, however, there has been no demonstration of how those new perspectives differ from the various perspectives underlying traditional scholarship" (286-87). They claim that they found no clear definition of "distinctive voice of color" and that there were conflicting accounts of what should constitute a voice of color within critical race theory and minority scholarship (287). Furthermore, they argue that if there is not a clear unifying voice of color and the distinctiveness rises out of the conditions and experiences of oppression, then ideology "may be as important as race or class in defining the speaker's 'voice'" (287). According to Farber and Sherry, the minority voice such as Harris's narrative about her grandmother is not different from the "average attitudes and beliefs of different groups" (284).

Their objections reveal the paradoxical nature of voice as it functions in our political and legal apparatuses. Voice is paradoxical in that it is the quality in which group assembly and unity are made possible; however, it is also the quality that protects the individual from the majority tyranny. Furthermore, the law assumes that everyone is given equal rights to voice in that everyone has the means to voice his or her dissent; in other words, when voice is transposed as a legal right, it is assumed to be already protected by the political/legal processes and through the Constitutional rights such as the freedom of speech and the right to political assembly.

However, in practice, the very process of articulating and communicating injustice requires that

voice transcend the mere potentiality of dissent. For instance, when we think back to Harris's grandmother's condition of legal exclusion, the very conditions of passing necessitate a different range of voice in order for it to be heard in the first place. For instance, Harris argues that the grandmother's experience was akin to "self-annihilation" and "self-denial" when she could not object to the racist remarks casually thrown about in her presence, making her feel that she was somehow "complicit in her own oppression" (1711-12). At the same time, Harris's project is the voicing of her inheritance of that exclusion post–Civil Rights Acts. It accounts for the extra-legal segregationalism that results in the Affirmative Action courts' rhetoric, all of which becomes visible through the grandmother's story of passing. The dramatization by means of narrative is what makes the resonance of Harris's argument ascertainable. We can conclude that her scholarship on affirmative action cases in fact becomes meta-analytical in its emphasis on discourse analysis.

Thus, the larger concern of my paper deals with the theoretical implications of voice and the need to envision it as more than freedom of speech and the right to political assembly but also as a kind of ethical positionality. It may be that voice must be first complicated and problematized before it can be effectively and legitimately employed as dissenting voice in a political arena. One important venue of such study is in revealing the unspoken assumptions of voice that invisibly function to further suppress the political voice of the marginalized. For instance, in Farber and Sherry's article, we see that they not only refashion the question of authenticity and authority in undermining the validity of the stories but produce another marginalizing rhetoric—vis-à-vis veil—in the way they emphasize the claim of difference in the performing of minority voice by scholars like Harris. Voice is central to the democratic process. Critical scrutiny of voice

in all of its cultural and social functions is important for that very reason. Critical Race theory reveals that post–Civil Rights era, minority voice is easily dismissed, misconstrued, and constrained to ideology (identity) politics. Instead of creating exigency and ethical responsiveness, voicing injustice can be interpreted as mere political positioning and/or individual artistic expression. It the Critical Race theorists' study of the problem of racism as it has continued to persist post–Civil Rights era, we can see that the veil still exists perhaps in more virulent forms than before. Jacqueline Jones Royster, the former chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, once wrote about her experience of the veil in this way:

> What I am compelled to ask when veils seem more like walls is who has the privilege of speaking first? How do we negotiate the privilege of interpretation? When I have tried to fulfill my role as negotiator, I have often walked away knowing that I have spoken, but also knowing . . . that my voice . . . is still a muted one. I speak, but I can not be heard. Worse, I am heard but I am not believed. Worse yet, I speak but I am not deemed believable. (36)

So here lies the rhetorical problem for all of us who are invested in language to effect political change and, more important, who must teach our students to believe in their voices to make a difference in society.

Note

[1]For the debate, see the special colloquy in *Harvard Law Review* 103 (1990) responding to Randall Kennedy's article "Racial Critiques of Legal Academia," in which he criticizes the conceptualization of "minority voice" in legal scholarship of Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell and Mari Matsuda.

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The Power of Unsent Letters: Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* and *Jack Maggs*

They can be as mundane as a scribble left on a kitchen counter top or as haunting as a suicide note. They can be as practical as a friendly rate-hike notification from your electric company. They can even be as elevated as the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians. Whatever their contents and purposes, letters are one of the most basic forms of written communication—as adaptable in function as a Swiss Army knife and in style as a white T-shirt. At their most primitive, letters are written by one person and are intended for one specific person. When this is the case, the writer of the letter bears in mind all that he or she knows about the other person and the type of relationship they share. Letters can contain even the most subtle motivations and agendas of their authors as well as a consciousness of audience that few other forms of writing possess.

When a novelist like Peter Carey—a celebrated Australian author and two-time Booker Prize winner—

chooses to include letters written by a character in his work, he is employing a powerful medium for transmitting information about that character's true nature. In two of his novels, *True History of the Kelly Gang* and *Jack Maggs,* Carey makes use of the epistolary technique in two vastly different ways. If we examine the letters in these novels we can see how their presence both serves Carey's storytelling and provides insight into the lives of the characters writing them. We can also see how Peter Carey uses letters—letters that in their respective novels ultimately end up being unsent—as a means of adding layers of complexity in the development of his characters.

After reading both *True History* and *Jack Maggs,* the superficial similarities between the circumstances of their two main characters, Ned Kelly and Jack Maggs, and their reasons for penning their letters are readily apparent. Both men are criminals. They are fugitives writing to their children to provide their version of the truth and to set the story straight, as goes the cliché. This is about as simple and general as a description can get, because the two novels and the two characters are different in nearly every other way. There is, for one thing, a difference of form. *True History* is almost wholly written as a single letter from Ned to his baby daughter, with a few external points of view offered by the news articles Ned inserts and the outside personal accounts that bookend the letter on either side. On the other hand, *Maggs* is written from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator with just four letters from Jack to his adult "adopted" son placed carefully throughout.

One way to think about the importance of the letters to their respective novels is to consider what we would lose if they weren't there—if the story were told another way. In the case of *True History* we would lose that intense focus on audience that letters provide. Because Ned is writing with his daughter in mind,

we see a tenderness and sentimentality that might not come across otherwise. He calls her "dear daughter" and censors his curse words out of respect for her. He takes into account her feelings when he writes about intimacy with her mother and tells her upfront that he is worried that she might be "raised on lies and silences" (7). The fact that he is so concerned with her well-being, even in the midst of fighting a "war" (as he views his struggle), adds an endearing dimension to his character that might not be as apparent were his story told another way.

The primary importance of audience in letter-writing is no less apparent, and therefore no less revealing, in Jack Maggs' writings to his son. Though both Ned and Jack are writing to their children, Jack's purpose is less tender and paternal. The "son" he is writing to, Henry, is an adult who is no more his biologically than some random kid off the street (which Henry initially was). To Henry, Jack is merely a distant benefactor supporting him from some far-off place. When Jack comes to London and Henry is nowhere to be found, he begins writing his letter to use it as a practical tool for getting Henry to see him. He writes sensing that Henry might see him more "as a Criminal coming to harm [him]" (82) than as a kindly father figure. In writing his letters, he knows he must make a positive impression on Henry in order to be able to see him. We see this most clearly when he explains that the mirror he sends for the deciphering of his text is "the best mirror that can be obtained in London" (82). By saying this he is revealing how eager he is to impress with his taste and wealth. We know from the very beginning of his letters that everything he wants to say to Henry is designed to make him appear more attractive and approachable.

For Jack, letters are a means to this end, but for Ned Kelly, the letter is an end in and of itself. His writing is his insurance that even if he doesn't "live

to see [her] read these words" (7), his daughter will know the truth as he sees it. A corollary to this kind-hearted intent is that Ned wants her to have a sense of the greater context of his people's history, a kind of education into what he sees as the "injustice we poor Irish suffered" (7). Much later in his letter, Ned reveals an almost metaphysical motivation for writing to his daughter. After he has lost his Jerilderie letter at the hands of newspaper printers, hewrites, "I had abandoned the letter to the government. I would of give up this very history too but I knew I would lose you if I stopped writing you would vanish and be swallowed up by the maw. . . . each day I wrote so you wd. read my words and I wrote to get you born" (335-36). He writes to maintain a connection with a child that he may never meet and senses that if he doesn't continue to write to her, she will be lost to him completely. It is as if his writing has become a form of spiritual solace for him in the greater chaos of his life—it sustains him and gives him reason to go on.

Despite the paternal motivations Ned has for his letter-writing, he has another purpose for his letters that is in essence quite similar to Jack's: to persuade. As Jack wants to persuade Henry of his humanity, so Ned wants to persuade both his daughter and the general public of his. He doesn't want them to see him as a murderous monster because he realizes that he can't win his war for justice without public support. When he begins writing it is because his girlfriend and the mother of his unborn child, Mary, suggests that he write to make other people understand what really happened at Stringybark Creek, where three policemen were killed. In describing her reaction to the power of his words, he writes, "she said there were not a soul alive who could read these words and blame me as the papers did" (276). In those words we get the sense that not only does he want the truth to get out, but he also feels hurt by the newspaper portrayals. Through

the course of this one conversation, he gets the idea of writing to an influential Mr. Cameron he reads about who he thinks might be sympathetic to his plight. It is his way of taking control, of fighting back with words instead of guns. Later, he writes to the government the aforementioned Jilderie letter, which he also intends for a national audience. Through these acts of letter writing we see his innate confidence in himself and what he considers his noble purpose. He knows that if only the common folk could read his words, they would be on his side.

This need for public attention is in direct contrast to Jack's desires for his letters. In his first letter Jack makes it clear that for him, writing is a bold act. He wants his writing to be seen by Henry's eyes only, so he writes backwards and in disappearing ink. At the outset of his first letter, Jack tells Henry that he is to "BURN EVERYTHING when it is read" (82). These controlling words give urgency and gravity to his correspondence, and reveal his fear of death. Though the circumstances have required him to, as he says, "make you privy to information that could, in the wrong hands, have me dancing the Newgate Jig" (83), he doesn't take his situation lightly and doesn't want Henry to either. This fear is reflective of the type of fugitive he is. He is not a fugitive in the sense that he is being actively sought; rather if he were discovered or turned in he would be in grave trouble. The letters provide us insight into the reasons why Jack is portrayed as a mysterious figure by the third-person narrator.

Jack's circumstance stands in contrast to Ned's life on the run. Ned is also a fugitive, but one who is being actively sought. Ned is risking death no matter what he does, so writing letters is no more grave an act for him than sleeping, eating, or breathing. Ned's life on the run is also revealed in the medium on which he writes. At the beginning of each chapter—or "parcel"

as each is labeled, a term that reflects the authenticity with which Carey hopes to imbue his novel—is a description of the condition of the actual letters themselves. In these descriptions we see how Ned used whatever paper he could get his hands on. Whether it is the Euroa Bank letterhead on which he writes the first parcel, or the "12 pages . . . consisting of 6 envelopes opened to provide room for text" (155), Ned shows his determination in finding a way to continue the monologue to his daughter.

As for Jack, he is able to write comfortably with all of the necessary tools at his disposal: "a sheaf of paper, twine, a bone-handled clasp knife, a fat creamy tallow candle, a long yellow quill, a little apothecary's vial" (73). With time on his side, Jack is able to turn his writing sessions into a kind of therapy. This is also partly because of the thirty years that have passed between the events he's describing and the present day of the novel. Though this is not Jack's purpose, the therapeutic benefits of letter-writing nonetheless show themselves in the process of his setting pen to paper. For instance, when Jack is describing an exchange among himself, Ma Britten, and Tom, he says, "It is only now I write this down for you that I allow myself to feel . . . the fury in my furnace: that the bitch would make this speech before a little nipper, letting him know that he had been raised for a base purpose . . ." (117). In the act of writing he is able to confront emotions he may have been unconsciously repressing. The same type of emotional release happens in a later installment, when Jack is describing Sophina for Henry. Becoming wrapped up in his memory, he says, "Her lips were soft—so soft I break my sentence to close my eyes and mourn them" (234). Jack makes it clear that writing allows him to conjure memories so real that they can release pent-up anger and allow him to grieve. This is something of a luxury afforded by his time waiting in hiding, a luxury that Ned doesn't necessarily

have.

Despite the fact that Jack's letters occupy just a tiny portion of the overall novel, his letters and the motivations behind them give us no less insight into his character than do the hundreds of pages written by Ned Kelly. In fact, because the letters are an exception instead of the rule and we see Jack predominantly through the eyes of a third-person narrator, we can see that the purpose of the letters in the overall landscape of the novel is to develop his character and motivations. Because the rest of the novel is so action oriented and fast paced and because Jack is a silent type of guy, the letters provide an opportunity to see into his inner life. We come to understand his past, what drove him into crime, and the feelings he has about the relationships of his childhood days. These details, written into his letters, allow us into Jack's psyche to understand his motives, both in the past and in the present. The contents of Jack's letters serve the overall novel as a kind of augmentation that provides insight into Jack, but that isn't necessarily critical to the unfolding of the rest of the plot. They could be removed, and the story could still go on.

Without Ned Kelly's letters, however, there would be no plot. In reading his one extended letter to his daughter, and with no help from another narrator, it is a little more difficult to see the greater purpose of the letter in the context of the novel. To understand the purpose it is helpful to remember that Peter Carey had other options in choosing how to tell Ned's story. Without getting into the myriad ways Carey could have written the novel, it is possible to imagine what would have been lost if he had chosen to tell Carey's story in the third person or even as a conventional first-person narrative. In either case, readers would miss out on the wealth of information that words written directly to and for another person can reveal about the character.

That the letters of both men don't ultimately end

up in the hands of their intended audience doesn't ultimately matter. Jack, for one, is able to get the benefits of his therapy and self-discoveries. Ned, on the other hand, gets to feel a strong connection to a child whom he will never meet. Through their writing, the two men are revealed to be selfish and selfless, bold and fearful, descriptive and reflective. Armed with that basic form of communication, they are able to put stories into words that they may have never had the opportunity to tell. This is the great benefit of letters, even if they ultimately end up unsent. The act of composing a piece of writing with a certain person in mind takes the main characters places they'd never be able to go otherwise. For readers of these two novels, the letter form provides us with a uniquely powerful means of acquiring information and insight into these compelling and complex characters. Both *True History of the Kelly Gang* and *Jack Maggs* stand as testaments to the beauty of the epistolary technique in works of fiction as well as to the universal and intensely personal act of letter writing.

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Voices of Dissent: Difference as Problematic and Tragic Trope in Sean Delonas's Cartoon and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

It is suicidal to underestimate the banality, callousness, and cavalier destruction of talents in patriarchal societies as a result of an inherent racism and hegemony informing those societies' mores and ethics. Cartoons, like imagist poetry, are pithy, witty, and ambiguous, but they also are metronomes because they send various images and sensations, both melodious and incongruous, into people's minds. Provocative cartoons may well stimulate a strong reaction from the public and the media. Such was certainly the case with Sean Delonas's caricature of President Barack Obama very early in his

presidency as a chimpanzee who needed to be assassinated for engineering and masterminding the Stimulus Act. In Delonas's cartoon, the chimpanzee is riddled with bullets; the metronomic caption reads, "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill."

Similarly, in Toni Morrison's seventh book, *Paradise,* there is an antinomy between sameness and difference effectively masquerading as the thread with which Morrison weaves the fabric of the novel. When the leaders of Ruby, a town with a population of about 360, hear that there is a convent situated seventeen miles from their township, they decide to act violently to upend what they regard, largely, as anathema to their vision of creating a paradise on earth. With historical allusions, the inherent danger in sameness can be exposed even as difference becomes a disturbingly problematic and tragic trope in Delonas's cartoon and Morrison's *Paradise.*

In *Paradise,* hegemony is perpetuated by the leaders of Ruby who attack the convent and shoot a white woman first. For the most part, Morrison creates fallible characters who mimic typical African-American tableaux and reflect the historical milieu that over the years bred them. However, in order not to leave the characters enduring perpetually in sin, Morrison redeems them, either through the epiphany of self-awareness or through death. She uses repetition as a weapon of protest, and the flaws she delineates in her characters are the by-products of the harm and psychological trauma (post-traumatic stress syndrome) the social injustice of the past left in its wake in African-American culture. On the one hand, *Paradise* enacts the trauma of slavery. The rejection of the founders of Ruby by communities of light-skinned blacks and the painful pangs of Ruby's dying because she would not be treated in a segregated hospital are scenarios that compel Rubyites to live in isolation.

However, the founders of Ruby also believed that this country, despite the demagoguery, debauchery, and debasement of the past, is a land of limitless opportunities, a land where they too could have a second chance to fulfill their mythic yearnings for a return to paradise. Their mission in the founding of Ruby was the creation of a peaceful society, a society without racism or prejudice, without violence or corruption. But, contrary to this mission, when they learn that there is a convent located seventeen miles away from Ruby inhabited by six women whose race and origin are unknown to readers, with the exception of the only white woman among them, they decide to attack the convent.

To the men, the women in the convent seem to be enlightening some of the women of Ruby about the immoral underpinnings of their society. Thus the 8-rock men view the presence of the convent as, ominously, totally antithetical to the xenophobic mission of their township. In essence, the convent becomes an "Other" to the men of Ruby. However, the consideration of the convent as the "Other" by the 8-rock men is a fatal flaw, a result of their intolerance of people who do not have their skin pigmentation. This flaw is synonymous with hegemonic desires and taints and vilifies the inundating desire of the 8-rock men to make Ruby a synecdoche of the American Adam: fiercely independent, self-reliant, industrious, and fearless. In addition, it also turns their supposed paradise into anarchy, their dream into a nightmare, and their utopia into a dystopia, so their creation becomes a paradise without its Garden of Eden. Furthermore, the fact that the white woman is different gives the 8-rock men a good reason to shoot her first, substantiating the tragic consequences of some people's xenophobic intolerance of what looks different from them.

The shooting of the white woman by the 8-rock

men and of the chimpanzee in the cartoon by two police officers is a classic example of the repressive nature of societies in which law enforcement officers are notorious for their arroganc. Law enforcement becomes a repressive machine used to emasculate people or eliminate them altogether to circumvent the re-imagining and re-envisioning of power structures. It is also a system that perpetuates the myth of supremacy. This is what Louis Althusser labels the Repressive State Apparatus, comprising police, prisons, the courts, and the military—all of which are repressive machines that coerce, intimidate, and dominate individuals, imposing on them certain codes or modes of behavior.

These repressive forces operate at the behest of the ruling class to perpetuate hegemony. Hegemony is a system of patriarchy where the powerful objectify and ossify the subaltern and treat them as second-class citizens. The violent path charted by the history of black people in America is an all-too-familiar reminder of the inherent viciousness, cruelty, and savagery promoted by hegemonic systems. The two officers who fatally shot the chimpanzee in the cartoon are of a different race: they are white and the chimp is black. Delonas's act is a legerdemain employed by slave holders and totalitarian governments to suppress egalitarianism. Adolf Hitler used it to exterminate Jews, and slave holders used it dehumanize black people. As a result, regardless of the fact that Obama graduated from Harvard Law School summa cum laude, and in spite of the fact that he established himself as the first African American to preside over the *Harvard Law Review*, his skin pigmentation made the police officers think he was not qualified to lead the country.

Such arbitrary exhibition of brute force that pervaded antebellum America and other repressive societies in the past compelled Bakhtin to create an equally powerful antithetical voice to stir up the status quo in order to assist in transforming those societies.

In *Rabelais and His World,* Bakhtin represents the official culture of the Middle Ages as monological and accentuates the way in which Rabelais dialogizes that culture by confronting it with an opposing voice. The opposing voice becomes a supreme voice that is linked with the consciousness of the masses and is capable of torpedoing any other language—in this context and by extension, any other power (cited in Kershner 16). During the campaign, Obama castigated vigorously the way business was done in Washington and insisted upon the dire need for change. To that end, he became the conscience of the people that toppled the old ways of doing business in Washington. Is it surprising, therefore, that the two cops, who are the offshoot of hegemony and operating to preserve the status quo, fatally shoot the chimpanzee?

In spite of that, this is not to say the cartoon does not create any positive impact, for it could also be a pre-figuration of the president's fate if he is not meticulous in the selection of the core members of his inner-circle body guards. Thus, the fatal shooting of the chimpanzee could also have its poetics and hermeneutics extending far beyond the mere assassination of the president although the two police officers see him as an "Other." Indeed, to paraphrase the poet Carol Ann Duffy's "Mrs. Darwin," the last time I visited the zoo, the chimp I saw there looked exactly like Sean Delonas.

Analogically, the former Soviet Union was a remarkable example of hegemony in action. However, its grotesque dearth of appreciation and encouragement of talents outside familiar categories led to its downfall. The reliance on sameness, in this case people with similar aspirations and desires, consequently came at a costly price, and an empire was sent crashing into smithereens. In *Paradise,* the upshot of the founders' decision is the invasion of the convent and the shooting of the only white woman first. How long will it take

humanity to learn from the tragic association with sameness? Recently, some members of the Republican Party have decided to oppose anything President Obama stands for, either because he is a black man or because he is not a Republican, to the extent that they have vilified the president's engagement of bi-partisan committees to address some of the country's pressing needs, such as health care, immigration, and unemployment, The irony and seriousness of this antimony is that some members of the Republican Party who came up with the original idea of creating the bipartisan committees developed antagonistic positions as soon as the president embraced the idea. Furthermore, it is common knowledge that the measures in the Stimulus package did, indeed, assist in arresting the economic downward spiral by providing money to the needy, even if fleetingly, to spend and reactivate the economy. It also created some two million jobs, yet some skeptics think the Stimulus Act was an ostentatious and frivolous waste of federal dollars. That double standard compelled Arnold Schwarzenegger, California's Republican governor, to lambast some Republicans overtly as hypocrites because he, Schwarzenegger, knows the Stimulus money helped create some 150,000 jobs in California.

Clearly, the mere portrayal of the President, who envisioned the Stimulus Act and worked relentlessly and assiduously to ensure that it was passed by both Houses of Congress, as different from the two monstrous police officers who conspired to shoot him fatally, reenacted a perennial problem that embattles many multifaceted societies like the United States on a daily basis—racism. It emphasizes the banality of sameness and stagnation at the expense of difference and progress, even as it condones hegemony, regardless of the apparent mollification and edification as well as the insecurity and uncertainty sameness connotes. In *Paradise,* the 8-rock men fail to realize their dream

and ambition of turning Ruby into a paradise on earth because of their comical reliance upon and fruitless allegiance to sameness. Delonas reminds us that although America has elected its first black president, it is still miles away from becoming a color-blind society. More importantly, though, his election is the first step toward a positive reconfiguration of the psyche of mainstream America.

Indeed, just as post-colonial literature had to be re-imagined and reconfigured to rectify falsehoods in colonial texts, the psyche of postmodern America has to be refashioned and retooled to debunk the comforting but spurious stereotypes of the past that profoundly hurt black people, especially young black men.

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Religion as Dark Satire in Saki's "Ministers of Grace"

ector Hugh Munro (1870-1916), better known under

his pen name "Saki", is best known today for his zany short stories depicting upper-middle-class English characters, stories in which some prank has been created—the more elaborate the better. Relatively few of today's readers recognize that in these riotous narratives there is also an element of satire, as they are not necessarily interested in acquiring specialized knowledge of the period, and certainly do not need to in order to enjoy the sheer fun. In Saki's narratives "prigs, snobs, bores, politicians, and other self-important comedians, spiteful old women, and silly, smug young ones are deliciously impaled" (Lambert, "Jungle Boy" 211). L. P. Hartley found in them "two sorts of people; grindstones on which to sharpen the arrows of one's wit, plump defenceless bodies in which to plunge them" (217). The violence of Lambert's and Hartley's images is only partly exaggerated; Saki's wit was quite acerbic. V. S. Pritchett uses a violent image as well when placing the humorist in his era: "Saki grew up in the lamest and most taming period of English upper-middle-class life: hence his fancy for the paw-mark of the ferret . . ." (614). The characters marked with these ferret-claws represent those stifling values that Saki most wished to satirize and rebel against: complacency, priggishness, routine. These tendencies were very marked at that time, as the Victorians had prized habit, considering it as a guarantee of stability; they had more distrust of a man without fixed habits than of a drunkard. It was Edwardians like Saki, Woolf, and Conrad who began to illustrate the dangers of asphyxiation by habit (Fischer 5-6).

Even less frequent is regular recognition of Saki as a political satirist. There are two reasons for this. The first is that, as with his social satire, few readers find it necessary or interesting to explore in detail the finer points of political life in Edwardian England. *The Westminster Alice*, Saki's first published political satire and the one which brought him his fame, is read

today as a clever parody of Carroll and not as political commentary. The second reason is that the so-called *Complete Works* contains too little overt political satire to prompt such an exploration. This volume actually contains only Saki's collected works, those which he or his literary executor, Rothay Reynolds, put into book form. Both Saki and Reynolds favored satirical fiction over political satire. Tales like "Reginald in Russia" or "A Young Turkish Catastrophe" disguise political commentary under a discussion of other countries' politics. Others, like "The Recessional", "Reginald on Tariffs", or "Forewarned" use politics as a backdrop or excuse for the comic turn. To read Saki's overt political satire, researchers are obliged to comb the pages of *The Westminster Gazette*, *The Morning Post*, *The Bystander*, *The Daily Mail*, or *The Outlook* from 1901 to 1916 to find rich titles like "The Woman who Never Should", "The Not-So Stories", or "The Quest of the Four-Score Guild".

Of those stories in the *Complete Works* that present considerable political commentary, "Ministers of Grace" is undoubtedly the most pointed political satire that Saki ever wrote. Its original appearance in *The Bystander* (a weekly society glossy) in 1910 cites the politicians by name: Lord Curzon, a peer and member of Parliament for Ireland, "one of the most brilliantly pompous men in England", seen as arrogant because of his stiff bearing; Hugh Cecil, who had just outshone his fellow Conservatives in his fanatical opposition to the reform of the House of Lords that the current Liberal government was trying to push through in order to reduce its unoverrideable veto and in his efforts to stir the Ulster Protestants into the fierce opposition to Irish independence that still has consequences to this day; Winston Churchill, "wayward and fantastic," who had defected from the Conservative Party earlier in the century, now held the Home Office, sicced his police on the Suffragists on "Black Friday" (resulting

in the death of one woman, the severe wounding of another, and over one hundred arrests), and tried to paint the Ulster unrest as an attempt on Ulster's part to annex itself to Germany; Arthur Balfour, Leader of the (Conservative) Opposition in Parliament "from that mixture of duty and idleness which made an English politician of the old school," playing nonchalantly at parliamentary trickery and drawn in the *Westminster Gazette* cartoons of F. Carruthers Gould as slouching in his seat with his knees docked against the seat in front of him; David Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer, "less a Liberal than a Welshman on the loose," known for fiery Parliament speeches in which he included insulting ad hominem attacks (that Saki parodied in his satires "More About Him" and "Potted Parliament"); and Lord Rosebery, a former Liberal Prime Minister who "illustrated typically the strength and weaknesses of the aristocratic temperament," "fatally lacking in party aptitudes" and seen as an amateur in politics, now marauding as a maverick, critical of the government and joining and abandoning movements at will (Dangerfield 13, 18, 42, 106, 107, 112, 152; Ensor 71, 215-216, 386, 429; Saki, "More About Him" 18, "Potted" 233, 414; *Westminster Gazette* 21 February 1902: 2).

The better-known version of "Ministers of Grace" that became part of *The Chronicles of Clovis* in 1912 includes new characters, such as the chocolate magnate Cadbury, and uses disguised versions of the names, no doubt because Saki's publisher, John Lane, had become very cautious about every form of censorship or protest, having lost his review, *The Yellow Book*, because of its unfortunate and erroneous association with the Oscar Wilde trials (Langguth 167-68). In spite of this cover-up, Saki's criticism of politics is quite obvious. Saki whittles down the sacrosanct image of the politician in the same way that he whittles down the monolith of Edwardian social conventions in an attempt to stir

up the dormant faculties of the average Edwardian. It is also for this reason that his attacks go outside the bounds of political parties; although a Conservative, "[h]is point of view broadened greatly during his twenty years of writing" (Lambert, "Jungle Boy" 212), especially after witnessing the brutal repression of the abortive Russian revolution of 1905 (Langguth 131). But Conservatives like Balfour were still fair game for him: "the publication of the political satires, based on *Alice in Wonderland*, brought him into prominence . . . Mr. Balfour was his chief butt in these pieces. [Saki] was still, as he always remained, a Conservative, but he held at the time that Mr. Balfour's leadership was a weakness to the party" (Reynolds xiv). It can be conclude that what Saki detested most of all was foolishness, and foolishness exists in all parties and classes. "Ministers of Grace" plays out its deft satire by turning the political world upside-down in a gesture bordering on the fantastic, and also through a sub-thread of the sacred that is more subtle but highly powerful in its symbolism.

The story is about the young Duke of Scaw, a sort of 20th-century illuminato who decides to replace all politicians by angel substitutes having the same appearance as the originals but opposite in character. This exercise works well in the first instances, when Kedzon (Lord Curzon), Quinston (Winston Churchill), and Ap Dave (Lloyd George) change from arrogant haranguers to peaceable lovers of mankind. The Duke has effectively introduced the humble, the meek and mild, into politics with these substitutions. It is when the normally mild or prevaricating Halfan Halfour (Arthur Balfour) and Thistlebery (Rosebery) become militant and even military (Thistlebery lays siege to Edinburgh castle) that the flaw in the plan is revealed. The reverse of tergiversation and lackadaisicalness is grit, and it throws grit into the political works. England is in a state of total havoc when a second

flaw in the plan saves the day; the Duke has sent the souls of the real politicians into the bodies of different animals, some of which have stayed in their place of transformation. The Duke had changed Kedzon into a black swan and left him in St James's Park Lake; this swan takes the first opportunity to drag the Duke into the lake and drown him, thus canceling the Duke's spell, reversing the process, and bringing everything back to normal.

The commentary on politicians and political maneuvering is obvious; all of England is happy to see Parliament return to "politics as usual," a state which they had complained about before the transformations. The designation "normal" in the preceding paragraph should always be taken with a grain of salt in Saki's world. As in his *Westminster Alice*, a world is shown as being topsy-turvy precisely because the things that should seem quite impossible to those witnessing them are taken by the characters as being quite usual.

This topsy-turvy world is a typical Sakian environment, a fantastic realm in which outside forces or beings, residing at that place where the situation is at the limit of the controllable, threaten to erase the beaten path and overthrow the established center of convention. In it the fictionalized politician must bring his usual actions and decisions to bear in an unreal situation. At the same time, he cannot recognize the unreality of the situation. The fictionalized politician must act as if he were facing a normal political difficulty. The Sakian fictional victim often shows the confusion created by the aberrant conditions to which he is reacting; the politician must accept them as problems but not aberrant ones. Any recognition of the unreality of the situation would break the spell of credibility, in real politics as well as in this Sakian world, as the behavior of unbelief would be totally uncharacteristic; no politician ever reveals that he is out of his depth, whether he is or not. This difference

in itself constitutes a comment on the unreality of the political world, suggesting that in the real world an aberrant situation is treated as a normal one by a politician.

In both *Alices* (Carroll's and Saki's), Alice notices the bizarreness of the happenings around her. She is quite alone in the Carroll *Alice*, but receives commiseration from the Cheshire Cat in Saki's version. In "Ministers of Grace," however, there is no one to remark the strangeness of "politics as usual," and therefore the strange world of politics continues on its strange way. Belturbet, to whom the Duke has confided his plan, never notices the strangeness of politics, but reacts with immoderate drinking and different moments of panic to the horrible upheaval of "politics not as usual" as practiced by the angel versions of the politicians. Many other characters show surprise and sometimes anger at the acts of the transformed statesmen—we learn that their wives are particularly frazzled—and, indeed, extreme acts such as the attack on Edinburgh castle would erupt only in extreme political situations. The suggestion is that it would take an extreme situation for most citizens to recognize the unreality of politics. A secondary suggestion is that those trying to effect changes in the political world need a more thorough grasp of the complicated system that it is. The Duke's control over the entire situation is obviously quite limited. Ultimately, politics is a chaos that is hard to reform, and an unnatural milieu that the citizens have become habituated to.

These political messages are clear to the reader of "Ministers of Grace," and part of Saki's repertoire of means of creating political satire. But perhaps less obvious to the reader of this story—and much more important to Saki's satirical intent—are the religious overtones used to criticize the politicians. Religion is the woof of the story. The Duke is able to create this situation through his unusual and intense religious

beliefs, and the title plays on the idea of ministering in the religious sense and in the political sense. The Duke's intention is to give "grace" to these politicians; in this way, Saki makes it implicit that grace is an element which they lack. This seems to work with the first transformations, in which arrogance is replaced by the "grace" of kindness. By implication, the aggressiveness which replaces the weak behavior of the others is worse than graceless. Saki sends the message that the hesitant, prevaricating, or unserious politician is a worse evil than the decisive one, whatever his decisions.

Saki may also be satirizing the "do-gooders" of his time, those crusading charity workers who went into the poorer quarters of urban areas in order to raise consciousnesses and standards. The Duke's capacity to "create angels" can be seen as an extreme form of the transformations for the better that amateur social workers were attempting to effect in the lower classes. The fact that the Duke's attempt has an influence on a frequent vice, betting on horse races, further underlines this element of the story as a comment on these other "heaven-bringing" people and activities. The Duke's best intentions are indeed what Hell is paved with here.

The deepest use of religion to comment on politics is in the last incident of the story. Kedzon drowns the Duke; in other words, a politician drags a bringer of angels to his death. The Duke is the "creator" of this "miracle" of flip-flopped ministers, and therefore a type of The Creator. He is being attacked; this extends the parallel to include the most famous attack against the Judeo-Christian God, Lucifer's rebellion. This parallel suggests that in the penultimate paragraph of the story we have a rebel and a devil assaulting a god.

Two complementary interpretations can be extrapolated from this parallel. First, it is clear through the implicit opposition of the Duke's heaven-sent substitutes to the people substituted that politicians are devils. Because he is the first of the transformed

politicians, Kedzon can be placed at the head of a diabolical array of evil-doers. Saki easily modifies the ill-doing which he usually criticizes in politicians, representing it as evil-doing. In addition, like Lucifer, these politicians show the wish to wrest control of the world from the hands of others, in this case the citizens. Unlike Lucifer, they succeed, both immediately because the Duke is drowned and in general because they have used the devious means of politics to gain that control.

This fact of succeeding in dominating the innocent citizens leads us to the second interpretation that can be made of the opposition of the devil Kedzon to the god-Duke. In the world of politics, devils win over gods. The angelic Halfour and Thistlebery succeed in creating a Hell of English politics while they are running amok. Their devilish counterparts would never have wrought such destruction. Lucifer/Kedzon wins out over the Creator/Duke. Thus it is in the world of politics (and perhaps in the real world). Saki, who loved to paint politicians black, has given them the blackest image possible in comparing them to Lucifer and the blackest result possible in giving them the victory.

Such an interpretation could give one the idea that Saki was opposed to rebellions and rebels. As a satirist, he was a thorough rebel, opposed to certain prevalent tendencies of his time. It could also suggest that Saki was a moralist, and indeed Lambert designates Saki as such (Introduction 60). However, the pranks of the non-political characters in Saki's other narratives were seen at the time as simply immoral. The reviewer for the *Morning Post* says of *The Chronicles of Clovis*, "round [Clovis] the most extraordinary things continually happen. Charming and amusing things, of course, and all so delightfully immoral" ("Reginald's Successor" 2). The reviewer of *Beasts and Super-Beasts* presents a similar judgement:

> As a handbook of the gentle art of dealing faithfully with

> social nuisances – bores, cadgers, 'thrusters,' and 'climbers' – *Beasts and Super-Beasts* is quite unique; but the enjoyment with which we read of their discomfiture is somewhat tempered by the fact that the executioners are not much better than their victims. To attempt to extract any moral lesson or edification from 'Saki' would be . . . unprofitable . . . . ("Beasts" 61)

This critic doubts the morality of the protagonists of this collection because he presupposes the necessary existence of a moral hero, that is to say, one in conformity with the morality of the time. His hope for an edifying lesson in these short stories could not be met by a protagonist as "imperfect" as Saki's havoc-wreaker. This is an indication of the notion of moral superiority as it was ossified in Victorio-Edwardian culture. This critic does not recognize that Saki's stories are satirical, and as such are meant to shock (Highet 5; Garner 30). What he calls "immorality" (or at least "imperfection") in the havoc-wreakers is precisely this capacity to shock; they are there to shake up phlegmatic points of view. This shows how much such phlegmatic habits contributed, even in 1914, to forming an image of moral order.

This question of moral high ground applies as well to political satire, since all forms of satire are usually expected to have a "correcting function." But the "immorality" or "morality" of Saki is like Molière's; he uses the contemporary mood in order to create the illusion of a moral reaction to society (Taylor 327). If Saki is searching to substitute a value for those he is pillorying, he offers only that of pleasure. Saki's short stories have a ludic function, not an illuminating one. It is interesting to note that Saki never attracted criticism for the "immorality" of his political satire. If his short-story characters' behavior is seen as immoral, his politicians' behavior is seen perhaps as simply strange, but more likely as typical. Seeing the unruffled politician performing in wonderlands, whether Alice's

or the Duke's, was a release for the laughing reader. Thus the question of the morality of Saki, of the Duke, even of the angels themselves, can be set aside during the time that we live with them in that new land. "Grace" may be unattainable, but mirth pours down. And Saki is there to minister to our mirth.

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R

Kierkegaardian

Commitment in Robert Lowell's "Mr. Edwards and the Spider"

obert Lowell wrote three poems on Jonathan Edwards: "Mr. Edwards and the Spider," "After the Surprising Conversions," and "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts." The first two, written in 1944 and first collected in *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), are famous. The third, from *For the Union Dead* (1964), is less well-known. "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" is based on two works by Edwards: the treatise "Of Insects," which Edwards wrote when he was thirteen, and his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741). "After the Surprising Conversions" is based on a letter of 1735 by Edwards concerning the suicide of his uncle Josiah Hawley.

Contemporary criticism treats "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" as a portrait of Jonathan Edwards. In a paper on Randall Jarrell's influence on the shaping of *Lord Weary's Castle*, Bruce Michelson, for example, claims that the poem brilliantly portrays the three facets of Edwards' personality: "his calm, scientific detachment in observing the natural world; his genius and courage in applying what he found there to the teaching of Scripture; and the steadiness with which he could look into horror and speak its essence." In Michelson's view, Lowell's Jonathan Edwards "ultimately speaks not only an eighteenth-century mind, but a much more modern sensibility as well—detached, scientific, historical, horrified, all at the same time" (144-45).In fact, Jarrell's comments on early drafts of the poem helped Lowell achieve a similar detachment, according to Michelson. At Jarrell's

urging, Lowell transformed Edwards from a preacher who terrified his audiences to one who conveyed "the peace that comes of knowing the whole truth" of death and damnation. Lowell's presenting Edwards in that way, Michelson claims, shows that Lowell "has that same capacity for grace and calm in his own perilous moments . . ." (147).

Jonathan Edwards, however, had a much larger significance for Lowell than as a model of emotional restraint. Lowell's interest in Edwards coincided with his conversion to Catholicism in 1941, during his first year as a graduate student at Louisiana State University. The following year Lowell started researching a biography of Edwards. That project is easier to understand if we keep in mind that the most important thing that Catholicism offered Lowell was a standpoint from which to criticize what he considered the shortcomings of the modern United States, its self-righteousness and its materialism. (See the study by Jerome Mazzaro.) For Lowell, Edwards was a major element in the questions that weighed on Lowell throughout the 1940s: Why had a nation originally conceived as a "city upon a hill," as John Winthrop put it, become materialistic and arrogant? Why hadn't the faith of his—Lowell's—Puritan ancestors provided a more solid moral foundation for the United States?

The answer that Lowell found is that for all of its power and prosperity, America is a nation in what Søren Kierkegaard called "despair." Lowell's response was a dramatic act of commitment, his refusal to enter the American armed forces in 1943. This paper will show how Lowell articulated Kierkegaard's concept of despair in the poems on Jonathan Edwards and suggest how that line of reasoning led to his conscientious objection to serving in the armed forces.

Lowell was influenced in his decision to enter the Catholic Church chiefly by his teacher Robert Penn Warren, who encouraged Lowell to study English

Christian poets, especially Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Catholic apologists and theologians (Mariani 92-94). From the Catholic point of view, the initial error of the Puritans' Calvinism was in its emphasis on predestination. In its purest form, the doctrine of predestination maintained that only a minority of humans were assured, by God's grace, of salvation. Their fellows can recognize, albeit imperfectly, those individuals by the quality of their lives. In its purest form, the doctrine of predestination leaves no possibility that those whom God had not saved from the beginning could ever be redeemed. By Edwards' time Congregational ministers recognized that even among the elect individuals could slide back and stray, but those people could also be restored to grace by exhortation and timely reminders of the fate that the damned will suffer.

Allowing for the possibility that God might by the action of grace reclaim sinners still leaves Calvinism open to the objection that it denies any role to reason and free will. The Catholic position, stated in popular books such as G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* (1908), is that Calvinism leads people who do not find reliable signs of grace in themselves to despair of salvation altogether. This is the subject of "After the Surprising Conversions"; having seen a number of people he knew experience sudden and dramatic conversions, Josiah Hawley began to wonder why he hadn't been graced himself. Hawley concluded, unsurprisingly, that he was not destined for salvation, so he took his life.

Josiah Hawley's despair led him to commit the sin of self-destruction. In "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" Lowell discusses another result of despair, the sin that Edwards called "self-love" (358). Sin, in the Protestant tradition, is the failure to keep the "first and great commandment," to love God. To love God is to recognize that all human conditions, all happiness and all misery, come from God, not from

our efforts. Our happiness is a sign of God's approval. Failure and misfortune are warnings that we have not done God's will. We should be grateful to God in all circumstances—for blessing us with happiness and chastening us with misfortune.

In Edwards' view, humanity fell away from God and gave in to the sin of "self-love," what Edwards defined in *The Nature of True Virtue* as "a man's love of his own happiness" (358). One who seeks his own private and separate happiness tacitly assumes that he or she is capable of achieving it on his own, without the help of God. This position leads one directly to violate the first commandment. Therefore, the responsibility of the minister is to remind the people that no matter how prosperous they have become or how highly they are esteemed by others, they still live only by God's grace; God's grace alone preserves them from death and eternal punishment.

These points are illustrated by the material Lowell took from Edwards. In the first stanza of "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" Lowell reviews Edwards' account of the behavior of spiders in his paper "Of Insects." According to Edwards, a spider will hang from a branch and express a thread which the breeze takes up. That thread will catch on the branches of a nearby tree, and the spider will swing on it to another tree. Spiders will seem to be "marching through the air." Edwards believed that God in his benevolence provided spiders this means of locomotion for their "Pleasure and Recreation" (7). A modern biologist would say they go from tree to tree to mate and lay eggs over the broadest possible area. In the autumn, after mating and laying eggs, the spiders die, and the westerly winds carry them out to the sea. According to the speaker in Lowell's poem, the spiders, having mated, "purpose nothing but their ease and die"; since they are brute creatures, the spiders' death is oblivion.

The second stanza is a commentary on Edwards'

sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Unlike spiders, we humans have free will. Therefore we have to answer to God for our actions; we are in the hands of God. Although God holds us over the mouth of hell by a slender thread, as Edwards puts it, we are free to turn to Him. However, we are prevented by "treason cracklin in [our] blood," our inclination to sin—that is, the temptation to count on ourselves rather than on God. We try to set up barriers to sin; we rationalize our behavior and deny our dependence on God. These barriers, however, are like "thorn and briar"; they only fuel the fire of God's anger.

In trying to provide for our happiness independently of God, we are in fact playing a "losing game." Our efforts are doomed to fail because we are suffering from a "sickness past our cure." This sickness, sin, is past our cure because we cannot save ourselves from God's punishment; we must turn to God, through Jesus, for salvation. A sickness past our cure is also a sickness unto death. This, of course, is the language of Søren Kierkegaard. The sickness unto death is despair, and Lowell's interpretation of Edward's sermon echoes Kierkegaard's discussion of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*.

According to Edwards, we live only by the continuing grace of God. We can die at any moment, from the slightest cause, such as the bite of tiny spider. If dying meant only the bafflement and dissipation of the soul, we would be well off, Lowell's speaker observes. Then we would die like the spiders, in welcome oblivion. The belief that death means oblivion is the "sinner's last retreat." If nothing follows death, then we will never have to account for our lives. If death is oblivion, then there is no reason to try to live as an authentic, autonomous being, as "spirit," in Kierkegaard's term. We may as well live as what Kierkegaard calls a "psychical-physical synthesis," a combination of physical and psychological qualities that

can be managed so that we can accommodate ourselves to the situations in which we find ourselves, so that we can be reliable citizens and model employees, for example.

But as Kierkegaard points out, to live only as a combination of mental and physical qualities is to live inauthentically, and to live inauthentically is to live in despair. The only way to live authentically is to live fully as spirit, as a free individual. In Christian terms, death is "only a minor event within that which is all, an eternal life" (7). Damnation is to be isolated from God and to know that you are and will be forever. Or, as Lowell puts it, damnation is "to die and to know it." Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which Lowell echoes in the poem, presents a harrowing picture of the eternity of physical torment that awaits those who die unconverted, out of grace, apart from God. In *The Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard offers a picture of eternity apart from God that is just as harrowing, although entirely different in tone:

> And . . . if you have lived in despair, then, regardless of whatever else you won or lost, everything is lost for you, eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you—or, still more terrible, it knows you as you are known and it binds you to yourslf in despair. (28)

I'm not sure that Lowell did read Kierkegaard as early as 1944, when he was writing his first two poems on Edwards, but he could easily have picked up Kierkegaard's ideas. Most important, Kierkegaard's analysis of despair served Lowell as a link between Protestant and Catholic traditions. Reading Edwards in the light of Kierkegaard may have suggested to Lowell just why Calvinism had failed America: Calvinism's concentration on the individual failed to protect the believer from confusing a life blessed by God's grace

with one blessed by material prosperity. That material prosperity, in turn, prevented the believer from acknowledging the claims of anyone else.

Lowell wrote to his draft board in September 1943 announcing that he would not report for military service. This protest was highly publicized and controversial, even in New York literary circles. The result was a felony conviction and a prison sentence for Lowell, albeit a mild one.

Lowell refused to serve on the grounds that the Allies had, in mid-1943, adopted policies that changed the character of the Allied war effort. The first policy was the systematic bombing of German cities; the second was the demand for unconditional surrender. Lowell believed that in refusing induction, he was acting in accordance with the Catholic principle that that all human life is sacred. War is justified only to preserve life and liberty. Setting impossible conditions and carrying out pointless destruction meant that the Allies were no longer fighting a war of defense; now they were fighting a war of destruction and domination. In Kierkegaard's terms, those policies were evidence that the Allied leaders had despaired of ending the war in such a way as to restore Germany to independence and dignity. The new Allied policies, Lowell maintained, would "destroy any possibility of European or Asiatic national autonomy" because they would allow the Soviet Union to dictate terms to Europe and China, "the two natural power centers of the future" (*Letters* 40). By refusing to enter the armed forces, Lowell believed that he was resisting not the Allied war effort, but the despair that was turning it from its original, honorable aim.

Works Cited

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