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‘An act hath three branches’: Being and Acting in *Hamlet*

WILLIAM CHRISTIE

The Final act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* opens in a graveyard with an extended meditation on dying and death. The two most reliable versions of the play (the second Quarto and the First Folio) record in their stage direction the entry of ‘two Clowns’,[1] though the first character is revealed to be the senior gravedigger or Sexton and the second—the ‘Other’—soon to be dispatched in search of ‘a stoup of liquor’, is most likely his assistant, another gravedigger. The occasion and point of departure for this meditation is the burial of Ophelia:

> CLOWN
> Is she to be buried in Christian burial, when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?
>
> OTHER
> I tell thee she is, therefore make her grave straight. The crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial.
>
> CLOWN
> How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defence?
>
> OTHER
> Why, ’tis found so.

[1] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 225n. This is the edition cited throughout the article.

> CLOWN
> It must be *se offendendo,* it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches—it is, to act, to do, to perform; argal, she drowned herself wittingly.
>
> OTHER
> Nay, but hear you, goodman delver –
>
> CLOWN
> Give me leave. Here lies the water—good. Here stands the man—good. If the man go to this water to drown himself, it is will he nill he, he goes—mark you that. But if the water comes to him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life.

Whether or not Ophelia has indeed taken her own life, as is suggested here and later by the priest who can offer her only 'maimèd rites' (5. 1. 186), remains unclear. Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death makes it sound accidental (4. 7. 166-83), though how far we are meant to trust this, or indeed whether we should expect consistency on the issue at all, remains a moot point.

Suicide or not, it encourages a comically earnest interchange between the Sexton and his assistant as they seek a more precise legal and theological characterisation of the act. In this apparently casual interchange, and in the one immediately following between Hamlet and the Sexton—who, incidentally, proves to be the only character in the play capable of matching wits with, even outmatching Hamlet—Shakespeare, typically, 'by indirections find[s] directions out' (2. 1. 64), concentrating all the issues that haunt Hamlet the character and *Hamlet* the play. Image by image, line by line, they are all there in this scene: the questions of power, fate, self-determination, responsibility, mortality, and meaning that have been raised directly by the acutely self-conscious hero, as well as (again indirectly) by incident and recurrent imagery. Ophelia's drowning herself 'in her own defence', for example, echoes Hamlet's meditation on suicide and his famous question of how appropriate it is

> to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them.
>
> (3. 1. 59-60)

As the Sexton composes the scene of mortal confrontation—'Here lies the water—good. Here stands the man—good'—theatrically re-enacting the death in order to prove his case just as Hamlet has had his father's murder theatrically re-enacted to prove his, the metaphor of taking arms against the sea undergoes ironic and intensive realisation. The first to take arms, moreover, as the Sexton reminds us—punning on the heraldic, anatomical, and martial meanings of *arms*—was Adam (5. 1. 33), the same Adam who brought death into the world and the meaning of whose name ('clay' or 'dust') generates the endless wordplay that serves as a constant reminder of human mortality. This is also the same Adam whose sons, Cain and Abel, are invoked by Hamlet (via the striking jowl or jawbone) when the meditation drifts momentarily from mortality to fratricide, reminding us that Claudius's crime re-enacts this 'first murder' (5. 1. 64-6). It is not long before Hamlet is reprising his hysterical demonstration (having killed Polonius) of 'how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar' (4. 3. 28-9) with a morbid fantasy about the world-conqueror, Alexander, 'stopping a bung hole': 'Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth' (5. 1. 172-7).

Prior to this, in a spirit of forensic whimsy comparable with the Sexton's own, Hamlet has reduced the vast estates of an acquisitive lawyer to a graveplot—'The very conveyances of his lands will scarcely lie in this box, and must th'inheritor himself have no more, ha?' (5. 1. 92-4)—echoing an earlier case of disputed inheritance and perverse scale: Fortinbras's attack on a plot of Polish ground too small to inter the soldiers who will die fighting respectively to protect and acquire it:

> to my shame I see
> The imminent death of twenty thousand men
> That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,
> Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
> Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
> Which is not tomb enough and continent
> To hide the slain.
>
> (4. 4. 59-65)

The pun on 'plot'—political scheming and the graveyard—holds good throughout the play.

Pre-eminent in this comic re-enactment of the play's themes, however, and the issue I want to focus on in this article, is the question of action. How can the drowned Ophelia be entitled to a Christian burial, asks the Sexton, 'unless she drowned herself in her own defence?' The coroner has ruled otherwise, but the Sexton is convinced 'it must be *se offendendo*', or in her own *of*fence. Editors often gloss this passage by suggesting that the Sexton has garbled the correct legal phrase *se defendendo*, 'a justiable plea in homicide' as the Cambridge editor, Philip Edwards, puts it.[2] But the Sexton knows exactly what he is saying: Ophelia must have meant to *offend* herself, to take her own life: 'For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches—it is, to act, to do, to perform; argal'—which is to say, *ergo* or *therefore*—'she drowned herself wittingly'. 'There is general agreement', writes Edwards, that Shakespeare is recalling the 'celebrated legal arguments' offered in the case of Sir James Hales, who had drowned himself wittingly in 1554:

> In a suit over whether his lands were thereby forfeit, there was much fine discussion on the nature of the act, including the argument that an act consisted of three parts, the Imagination, the Resolution and the Perfection.[3]

It does not take much imagination or resolution to recreate this legal debate, but if Shakespeare is indeed recalling the Hales case he does so only with his own fine discriminations in mind: 'to act, to do, to perform'. Each of the Sexton's alternatives contains its own ambiguities and collectively they present as at once indistinguishable (synonymous) and yet at the same time subtly distinct, amounting to a repertory of human action. In an interlude, at once comic and choric, the Sexton reminds us that meaning for both the play and the prince turns on the complex, polyvalent infinitive, 'to act'.

Young Hamlet's main plot and purpose, after all, is 'the *acting*' of the ghost's—his father's—'dread command':

> HAMLET [*to the Ghost*]
> What would your gracious figure?
> . . . .

[2] *Hamlet*, ed. Edwards, p. 225n.
[3] *Hamlet*, ed. Edwards, p. 225n.

> Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
> That, laps'd in time and passion, lets go by
> Th'important acting of your dread command?
> O say.
>
> (3. 4. 104ff.)

The same 'dread command', which earlier the young Hamlet had sworn would live all alone 'within the book and volume of [his] brain' (1. 5. 103), remains, of course, *unacted*, and Hamlet's own 'purpose' (and sense of purpose) 'blunted' (3. 4. 110). Three hundred years of Hamlet criticism, it is fair to say, has exerted and often contorted itself in an effort to find out why this should be so, why Hamlet, in Dr Johnson's words, 'is rather the instrument than the agent'.[4] 'Shakespeare meant', in a nutshell, 'to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it', insists Goethe's Wilhelm Meister.[5] One of the first things we remark is the frequency with which, throughout the play, derivatives of the Sexton's infinitives 'to act' (action, acting) and 'to do' (doing, deeds) recur, more often than not in opposition to, or in tension with, 'thought', 'thinking', 'words', and 'discourse'.

> HAMLET
> Now, whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
> Of *thinking* too precisely on the event,
> A *thought* which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward, I do not know
> Why yet I live to say 'This thing's *to do*';
> Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
> *To do't.*
>
> (4. 4. 43-6, my italics)

Thoughts and words are seen to cripple action, action in turn defies conceptualisation. 'What have I *done*', asks Gertrude of Hamlet, 'that thou dar'st wag thy tongue | In words so rude against me?' 'Such *an act*', explains Hamlet, 'such *a deed*', that Heaven itself 'Is *thought-sick* at the *act*' (3. 4. 39-51, my italics). 'To be or not to be' asks Hamlet in arguably the most famous line in all literature, 'that is the question' (3. 1. 56). But

[4] Brian Vickers (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage [1623-1801]*, in 6 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974-81), vol. 5, p. 161.
[5] Jonathan Bate (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 306.

it is only one question. The far more urgent question is how or whether or when to act: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to act or not to act. Whether to be *is* to act, or whether it is something quite separate. (And this even before we explore the pregnant confusion of 'acting' as both doing and pretending to do.)

Let me start by looking at the famous interpretation of *Hamlet* by the Romantic poet and philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the first great character critics. Of all Coleridge's readings of Shakespeare, performed in public lectures given over a period of ten years from 1808, it is that of Hamlet which has proved most influential, both in criticism and in the theatre. Here are the notes taken by the recorder, John Payne Collier, at the lecture on *Hamlet* Coleridge delivered on 2 January 1812:

> [Shakespeare] meant to pourtray a person in whose view the <external> world and all its incidents <and objects> were comparatively dim, and of no interest of themselves, and which began to interest only when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind. . . .
>
> Shakespeare places him in the most stimulating circumstances that a human being can be placed in: he is the heir apparent of the throne: his father dies suspiciously: his mother excludes him from the throne by marrying his uncle. This was not enough but the Ghost of the murdered father is introduced to assure the son that he was put to death by his own brother. What is the result? Endless reasoning and urging—perpetual solicitation of the mind to act, but as constant an escape from action—ceaseless reproaches of himself <for his sloth>, while the whole energy of his resolution passes away in those reproaches. This, too, not from cowardice, for he is made one of the bravest of his time—not from want of forethought or quickness of apprehension, for he sees through the very souls of all who surround him, but merely <from> that aversion to action which prevails among such as have a world within themselves.[6]

[6] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 5, ed. R. A. Foakes, in 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), vol. 1, p. 386.

Coleridge's Hamlet is a victim of his own restless intellect and intense introspection, paralysed not in spite of, but precisely because of his being 'deeply acquainted with his own feelings, painting them with such wonderful power & accuracy':

> the aversion to externals, the betrayed Habit of brooding over the world within him, and the prodigality of beautiful words, which are as it were the half-embodyings of Thought, that make them more than Thought, give them an outness, a reality sui generis and yet retain their correspondence and shadowy approach to Images and Movements within.[7]

Hamlet is also, in other words, a victim of his own noble imagination, overcome by 'a sense of imperfectness' in a world incommensurate with his high ideals.[8] Having retired into his mind, Hamlet has transmuted a political into an ideal world in protest against inhibitions placed on his imagination. It is this, more than anything, that makes Coleridge's Hamlet so characteristically Romantic, treading as he does a fine line between vision and narcissism, first cousin once or twice removed of the poet in Shelley's *Alastor*. And it is this that makes Hamlet, for many of the Romantics, Shakespeare's greatest creation.

In the end, Coleridge reverts to a moral and what we can legitimately call *Classical* reading of the play as an affirmation of action as 'the great end of existence'. With every new provocation to action Hamlet 'still yields to the same retiring from all reality' and 'seizes hold of a pretext for not acting': 'he is all meditation, all resolution <a far as words are concerned>, but all hesitation & irresolution when called upon to act; so that resolving to do everything he <in fact> does nothing'.[9] In spite of this, however, all the emotional weight of Coleridge's extended analysis is on Hamlet's side. The Prince of Denmark remains more heroic for having retired from reality than he could ever have been indulging in the vulgar activism of a Laertes or a Fortinbras.

The reason for Coleridge's critical ambivalence towards the Prince is not hard to find. Coleridge's friends all recognised the extent to which his Hamlet was modelled on himself, indeed Henry Crabb Robinson

[7] Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, vol. 1, p. 540
[8] Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, vol. 1, p. 388.
[9] Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, vol. 1, p. 390.

doubted 'whether he did not design an application to himself': 'Somebody said to me, this is a Satire on himself; No, said I, it is an elegy'.[10] Aloof from and superior to the world around him, Coleridge's Hamlet remains an essentially heroic figure who comes to occupy an archetypal place in the new spiritual hierarchy of the Romantics, a hero distinguished by his philosophical and poetic imagination. Coleridge, after all, was not the only one who saw himself in Hamlet. At different times throughout the nineteenth century, artists of the stature of Goethe, Beethoven, Byron, Victor Hugo, Stendhal, Chateaubriand, Berlioz, Lermentov, Dostoevsky, *all* saw themselves as Hamlet—or as *a* Hamlet. To characterise what the Romantics felt about Hamlet it is conventional to resort to critical commentary, as I have done in citing Coleridge's lectures. I could as easily have gone to August Wilhelm Schlegel—though for a very different Hamlet—or to William Hazlitt, or before them all to Wilhelm Meister's long digression in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.[11] But formal critical analyses like these only tell us part of the story. Moody, disaffected, melancholic, caustic, lyrical, emotionally manipulative—Byron made a persona and a career out of the Prince of Denmark, and Europe followed suit. The identification of these artists and intellectuals, it is interesting to note, was not with Hamlet's author (as fascinated as they were by Shakespeare's genius), but with what is, after all, only a character in a play, a fiction.

If Coleridge, then, was not the only modern sensibility who has fancied himself, however fleetingly, as Hamlet, Coleridge nevertheless gives us a strong intimation as to why Hamlet has functioned in this way, and why there has developed in the modern world what we can call a Hamlet-syndrome. Talking in the preface to his *Poems* (1853) about why he had renounced his own poem *Empedocles on Etna*, Matthew Arnold is more explicit and more disapproving in reading Hamlet as the harbinger of a Romantic modernity. In *Empedocles*, writes Arnold:

> I intended to delineate the feelings of one of the last of the Greek religious philosophers, one of the family of Orpheus and Musaeus, having survived his fellows, living on into a time when the habits of Greek thought and feeling had begun fast to change, character to dwindle, the influence of the Sophists to prevail. Into the feelings of a man so situated

[10] Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, vol. 1, p. 391.
[11] Bate (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, pp. 303-52.

> there entered much that we are accustomed to consider as exclusively modern; how much, the fragments of Empedocles himself which remain to us are sufficient at least to indicate. What those who are familiar only with the great monuments of early Greek genius suppose to be its exclusive characteristics, have disappeared; the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared: the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust.[12]

Arnold identified in Hamlet a modern, autonomous, and conflicted consciousness: a characteristically modern tendency towards a vertiginous and paralysing self-reflexiveness, encouraged by a sense of living at a critical moment of history and of having to negotiate unprecedented changes.

> The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite
> That ever I was born to set it right!
> (1. 5. 188-9)

We witness the intense privacies of the self as personality, a subjectivity that would become characteristic of the progressively more democratic world that lay on the far side of Elizabethan England, when every man would become a prince and the age would grow 'so picked, that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe' (5. 1. 117-18). Since the early nineteenth century, writes Huw Griffiths, 'there has rarely been a time in which our view of Hamlet has not reflected what it means to be a modern man. More than this, at times our view of what it means to be Hamlet has come to define what it means to be human'.[13]

As Coleridge suggests, Hamlet's imagination and idealism isolate him from the action. There can be no doubt that Coleridge exaggerates this isolation, no less than he ignores much of the selfishness and *schadenfreude* ('malicious joy') that offended Schlegel and, in the twentieth century, G. Wilson Knight:

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[12] Matthew Arnold, *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 203.
[13] Huw Griffiths (ed.), *Shakespeare, Hamlet: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 21.

> Hamlet is not flesh and blood, he is a spirit of penetrating intellect and cynicism and misery without faith in himself or anyone else, murdering his love of Ophelia, on the brink of insanity, taking delight in cruelty, torturing Claudius, wringing his mother's heart, a poison in the midst of the healthy bustle of the court.[14]

What is certain, however, is that for Hamlet the questioning becomes a way of not doing anything. Hamlet's refusal to avenge his father's death is, at the very least, ironic in that his protracted meditations on the virtues of decisiveness and action only postpone decision and paralyse action. So irrepressibly cerebral and verbal a character is this prince that in four to five hours—'the play is huge', crows Harold Bloom, 'Shakespeare's longest because Hamlet speaks so much of it'[15]—he manages to touch on just about everything that can be said about life, death, and the universe, and everything that can be said about *his own place* in life, death, and the universe. 'To be, or not to be' is not just a weighing of the relative merits of survival and suicide—though it is that, and Hamlet goes on to talk of our fear of 'the undiscover'd country from whose bourn | No traveller returns' (3. 1. 79-80). The question 'to be, or not to be', with its ponderous infinitives, is also a question about what we *are*, about what a piece of work man *is*. A morbid, melancholy Hamlet may be 'thinking too precisely on th'event', as he says (4. 4. 41), considering the matter 'too curiously', as Horatio suggests (5. 1. 174), but the questions themselves are not going to go away: what does it mean to be human; what does it mean to be?

It is, of course, Hamlet himself who is the first to remark on the irony of his own self-consciousness, the first to diagnose his own diseased will to action and to reflect on the paralysing effect of his own reflectiveness.

> HAMLET
> the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pith and moment

[14] G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy*, second edition (London: Methuen, 1949), p. 38. For the Schlegel, see Bate (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, p. 309.
[15] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), pp. 383, 423.

> With this regard their currents turn awry,
> And lose the name of action.
> (3. 1. 84-8)

All of Shakespeare's tragic heroes have their moments of lucid self-reflection—even Lear and Othello, as profoundly obtuse as the two of them can be in their own ways. But only Hamlet consistently anticipates, consistently pre-empts analysis, seeming to know more than his audience because he is, preeminently and narcissistically, his own audience. Being so acute, and so acutely self-conscious, Hamlet is also acutely self-critical. The moment requires his immediate and princely attention and Hamlet retreats into thought and into language, and into thought as language:

> HAMLET
> Why, what an ass I am! This is most brave,
> That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
> Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
> And fall a-cursing like a very drab
> (2. 2. 535-9)

Yet this self-criticism—Hamlet's effort to exert some intellectual control over his world—serves only to highlight his lack of understanding and to exacerbate his lack of control over circumstances. In a moment of devastating irony, having witnessed the precipitate action of the Norwegian army, Hamlet resolves 'from this time forth, | My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth' (4. 4. 66-7). It is not his *thoughts* he should be encouraging, of course, but his *actions*.

The paradigm behind the notion of self-consciousness is a theatrical one, and here the ambiguity of the word *acting* becomes especially relevant and carries a special charge. In Hamlet, 'history' becomes the 'histrionic', as acting (doing) takes the place of acting (pretending to do). What we witness in the play is the way the very idea of interiority—of having 'that within', as Hamlet protests to his mother, 'which passeth show'—generates the possibility, indeed from a social point of view the necessity, of duplicity, of a gap between seeming and being:

QUEEN
Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

HAMLET
Ay, madam, it is common.

QUEEN If it be
Why seems it so particular with thee?

HAMLET
Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'.
'Tis not alone my inky coat, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passeth show —
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
(1. 2. 72-86)

Here Hamlet's 'actions that a man might play' subtly insinuate the whole issue of performance, the distinction itself (between seeming and being) coming from a consummate actor who cannot act to revenge his father. How are we to interpret what L. C. Knights calls 'Hamlet's habitual tendency to make everything, even what he deeply feels, into a matter of play-acting'? 'Again and again', explains Knights, 'intrinsic values, direct relations, are neglected whilst he tries out various roles before a real or imagined audience'.[16] Indeed, so consummate an actor is Hamlet that to this day criticism remains unable to settle the issue of his most challenging and provoking role—his madness—a challenge as much to our understanding of madness itself, it should be said, as it is to our understanding of the character. How far is madness an escape from the burden of expectation into self-protective 'play-acting'?

[16] L. C. Knights, 'An Approach to *Hamlet*' [1960], in his *Some Shakespearean Themes and An Approach to Hamlet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 157-219 (p. 201).

It is no coincidence, then, that there should be a play at the very heart of the play. Hamlet welcomes the players, before showing off his familiarity (and comfort) with the theatre, and with theatrical illusion, by teaching them to suck eggs:

> HAMLET
> Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.
>
> (3. 2. 14-29)

Hamlet welcomes the players, but especially 'He that plays the king': 'his majesty shall have tribute of me' (2. 2. 318). A good deal might be said on statecraft as performance and of Shakespeare's metaphorical use of the stage. The very least we derive from this gesture is Hamlet's own cynical conflation of majesty with melodrama, as well as a parenthetical jibe at his uncle's comporting himself in borrowed robes—'these are actions that a man might play'—and acting the part that had come 'naturally' to Hamlet's own father. The cynicism is potentially larger than just Hamlet's, however, as the play worries away at the idea of performance as somehow constitutive of what and whom we are, and at the impossibility of achieving any kind of integrity or authenticity beyond 'acting'—which is to say, beyond 'pretending to do', with its repertory of gestures and livery of costumes—the authenticity that Hamlet aspires to in his protest to his mother, and that Polonius envisions in his famous injunction to the parting Laertes:

> This above all, to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou can'st not then be false to any man.
> (1. 3. 78-80)

Self-consciousness makes us actors in our own dramas, especially (though not exclusively) when we move onto the public stage that is society. At what point does what we are—Polonius's 'own self'—subsume and authenticate the actions and emotions others expect of us, or that we expect of ourselves? Unable to find the grief 'within' that he should be feeling for his father's death, Hamlet beholds with envy the grief that the players 'act out':

> O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
> Is it not monstrous that this player here,
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
> Could force his soul so to his own conceit
> That from her working all his visage wanned,
> Tears in his eyes, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing?
> For Hecuba!
> What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
> That he should weep for her? What would he do,
> Had he the motive and the cue for passion
> That I have?
> (2. 2. 502-13)

Meanwhile, back on the battlefield, young Fortinbras, all thoughtless action, hovers in the margins of the play as Hamlet's opposite or anti-type, ironically the true 'son' or inheritor of Hamlet's heroic father in this generational drama. In Fortinbras we witness an unreflective expeditiousness and a (surely irrational and indiscriminate) commitment to military honour, one that is deaf to philosophical and ethical scruple. Having said earlier that for the Romantics Hamlet became a new kind of spiritual hero, I hasten to qualify by saying otherwise that it is not often enough remarked just what an unlikely tragic hero the Prince of Denmark in fact is, 'as little of the hero', to quote William Hazlitt, 'as a man can well be'.[17] Indeed, Hamlet's protracted dithering—his unwillingness to resolve and 'perfect' or realise—makes the play decidedly *un*heroic in a

[17] Bate (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, p. 325.

strict Aristotelian sense. 'A tragedy', according to Aristotle, 'is a *mimesis* of a high, complete action', an imitation of 'people *doing* things'. (Aristotle's word is *prattontōn*, meaning 'people performing responsible and morally characterisable actions'.) Again, sliding between literature and life:

> A tragedy is a *mimesis* not of people but of their actions and life. Both success and ill success are success and ill success in action—in other words, the end and aim of human life is doing something, not just being a certain sort of person.[18]

Hamlet the character and *Hamlet* the play, then, stand as a challenge to the Aristotelian primacy of behaviour and action. Hamlet's seemingly endless soliloquising and philosophising are not just unheroic, they are also mock-heroic. As a literary genre or trope, the mock-heroic is equivocal or double-edged. For while Hamlet's remaining incommensurate with his father's 'dread command' diminishes or mocks him as a tragic hero, at the same time the play also mocks the very *idea* or *ideal* of the heroic that Hamlet has inherited and which he invokes to humiliate and punish himself, a masculine or masculinist, largely military ideal. Hamlet's seemingly inexplicable reluctance to fulfill his destiny turns out to be no less a critique of that destiny, in other words, than it is of Hamlet himself. Both are inarticulate or 'out of joint'.

It is at this point that the questions of meaning and value in the play—whether to act or not to act; whether to be is to act—merge with the family romance. There are, after all, two Hamlets in the play and the first Hamlet introduced to the audience is not Hamlet the son, but Hamlet the father (or at least the ghost of Hamlet the father), whose name is first mentioned (1. 1. 84) much earlier than is young Hamlet's (1. 1. 170). And as there are two Hamlets, so are there two Fortinbrases, involving the succession plot in a neat chiasmus or cross over as Fortinbras the son recovers lands from the dying Prince Hamlet that had been ceded to the late King Hamlet by Fortibras the father. To describe the ideal of the heroic under which young Hamlet labours uneasily as one that he 'inherited' is almost pedantically appropriate, for it comes with the genes, no less than with the culture. The image of Hamlet the King conjured by

[18] Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in a New Translation*, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), pp. 92, 97-9.

the play is, like that of his ghost, handsome, valiant, austere, proud, aloof, decisive, expeditious, *demanding*—in all, 'so majestical'. Horatio immediately recognises in the apparition that appears before them on the ramparts

> that fair and warlike form
> In which the majesty of buried Denmark
> Did sometimes march . . .
> Such was the very armour he had on
> When he th'ambitious Norway combated;
> So frowned he once, when in an angry parle
> He smote the sledded Polacks
> With martial stalk.
>
> (1. 1. 47-9; 61-3)

And again:

> Our last king,
> Whose image even but now appear'd to us,
> Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,
> Thereto prick'd on by a most emulate pride,
> Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet--
> For so this side of our known world esteem'd him--
> Did slay this Fortinbras;
>
> (1. 1. 83-7)

More to the point, this is the way Hamlet the father appears to Hamlet the son, who invokes him in a formal, hyperbolic style that (rather like the Marlovian moment of Priam and Hecuba recreated by the players) borders on the comic:

> HAMLET
> Look here, upon this picture, and on this,
> The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
> See, what a grace was seated on this brow;
> Hyperion's curls; the front of Jove himself;
> An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;
> A station like the herald Mercury
> New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;
> A combination and a form indeed,
> Where every god did seem to set his seal,

> To give the world assurance of a man:
> This was your husband. Look you now, what follows:
> Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear,
> Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
> (3. 5. 53-65)

'So excellent a king, that was'—compared with his successor, Claudius—'Hyperion to a satyr' (1. 2. 139-40). But if Gertrude thinks that the lady in the play protests too much, how much too much does Hamlet protest his love and admiration for his dead father—for his father's many heroic attributes and heroic values? For all his insight, Hamlet is blinded by the brilliance of the Titanic sun-god, Hyperion, who is his father, and 'as his memory of his father pushes increasingly in the direction of idealization', as Janet Adelman has remarked, 'Hamlet becomes more acutely aware of his own distance from that idealization'.[19]

There are, as it happens, alternatives in the play to the oppressive rectitude and martial glory of Hamlet the King, who (in a colloquial phrase that is uncannily apposite) proves to be a hard act to follow. Gertrude, for example, escapes into the less demanding, more sensual and self-gratifying world of Claudius, only to have her nose rubbed in her own vulnerable humanity during a visitation from her dead husband's son. More to the point, back in the graveyard scene where we began this discussion, we are given a glimpse of a very different kind of fatherhood from the patriarchal ideal represented by Hamlet senior, as different as can be imagined ('fancy' being one of the keywords):

> Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rims at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that.
> (5. 1. 156-65)

[19] Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 13.

Hamlet's gorge rises at the memory and he is quick to adopt the attitude that has since become iconic, with the melancholy prince addressing the skull of Yorick, aloft, and transforming it, reductively, into a *memento mori*. The episode in fact speaks volumes, obliquely, not just about death but also about life. We become aware that Hamlet is haunted by the ghost of two dead fathers, not one: the first an aloof male figure issuing *ex cathedra* demands that paralyse his unwilling son, the second the carnival, feminising imago of Yorick, lord of play ('he hath borne me upon his back a thousand times'), of song and jest and fancy, and of affection ('those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft')—a surrogate father *and* mother to the young Hamlet. The self-mockery, the sudden and compulsive 'flashes of merriment' so characteristic of Hamlet and so threatening to the image of a noble Hamlet, both in the play and for subsequent literary criticism—these would appear to derive from this surrogate father. 'We are to take Notice', wrote George Stubbes in *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet* (1736), 'that the Poet has mix'd a vein of Humour in the Prince's Character which is to be seen in many Places of this Play'.[20] It is Hamlet's inability to discipline these histrionic, carnival propensities in line with the 'dread command' that is his real father that leads to the rapid changes of mood and idiom that (again, both in the play and for subsequent literary criticism) invite speculation about his madness. And that leads, perhaps, to an inability to act.

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[20] Vickers (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 3, p. 58.

Cinema's Autonomous Image in Michelangelo Antonioni and Francis Ford Coppola

BRUCE ISAACS

1. Can a Film Display Time?

Time is a basic material property of cinema. As Babette Mangolte suggests, time maps movement in the projector and on the screen. It inscribes flow through editing—images in time-code.[1] This uniquely cinematic temporality is the root of the common argument against cinema as historical truth. How can history be represented in a compression *of time*?[2] Bazin's celebration of the realist image was intimately connected to time's 'presence' within cinema. Deleuze's *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* build a theory of the presence of time within the moving image, which takes Bergson's several theses about time and movement and puts them against, and within, the image of cinema. In fact, I would argue that Deleuze's conceptual movement—which Elsaesser and Hagener call 'the single most important resource in film theory in the last two decades'[3]—is toward time as the object of cinematic experience:

> The movement-image has not disappeared, but now exists only as the *first dimension* [my emphasis] of an image that

[1] Babette Mangolte, 'Afterward: A Matter of Time,' in *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida: Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson*, ed. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 262.

[2] For an overview of the discourse of cinema as perverse historical representation, see Hayden White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty,' *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988), 1193-1199. See also Robert Rosenstone, 'History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting onto Film,' *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988), 1173-1185.

[3] Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 157.

> never stops growing in dimensions… While the movement-image and its sensory-motor signs were in a relationship only with an indirect image *of* time (dependent on montage), the pure optical and sound image, its opsigns and sonsigns, are directly connected to a time-image which has subordinated movement. It is this reversal which means that time is no longer the measure of movement but movement is the perspective of time: it constitutes a whole cinema of time.[4]

Time, suggests Deleuze, is the manifestation of the potentiality of cinema. The cinema of the time-image is thus a cinema of maturity, complexity and aesthetic sophistication. This is a cinema filled with philosophical possibilities. We must contemplate the image of time to comprehend (though this is not exclusively an intellectual, nor strictly affective process) the cinema of Kubrick, or Antonioni—a filmmaker Deleuze accords special status in the promulgation of the image of time.[5] The crisis in the image of movement manifests as a restlessness, or tension, within the movement-image itself. There is still montage (how could cinema function without splitting time into discrete sections?), but now the flow of time across these sections is restless, or unsettled. In Antonioni, time materializes as a strange, unrecognizable thing, and we are shocked to discover our aversion to its effect. The image of time is initially unrecognizable; it registers as a change in the order of things, an intervention into narrative progression. But Deleuze, working through Antonioni, takes this much further. The image of time is not merely a breach of narrative—such a breach would construe narrative as the natural cinematic form. Instead, it is the rendition of an entirely separate register of the image. Gradually, in Antonioni, the spectator perceives the *material* presence of the image of time. We might say that such an image acquires autonomy from the narrative itinerary of cinema, exhibiting the image as an aesthetic object. One such moment is striking in Antonioni's cinema, demonstrating the crisis in action, and the subtle, incremental, separation of movement from time.

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[4] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 22.

[5] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 23-24: 'Antonioni's art is like the intertwining of consequences, of temporal sequences and effects which flow from events out-of-field.'

In the penultimate narrative segment of *Blow Up* (1966), the photographer searches for the body he has apparently photographed. While he has previously seen the body once, only the night before, he now desires to photograph it—the photograph takes on the substance of reality and reality the ephemeral substance of an image. This inversion of a basic ontological relationship between reality and its image is a philosophical notion at the core of several of Antonioni's films.[6] At 1:43:50,[7] the photographer approaches the tree in the park, camera in hand. Antonioni shoots the entire sequence to the apparently diegetic sound of the wind in the trees—precisely whether this sound is diegetic or non-diegetic is unclear. Shots in depth and duration provide an odd sense of the immensity of the space; for Antonioni, the park is ontologically separate from the space of the city. As the photographer comes into shot, standing in the space in which he had previously seen the body (the body is now absent), the image cuts to a tighter shot on the photographer, and shifts slowly in through a perceptible zoom. His exhaustion, the outcome of the confrontation with his own insubstantiality, is palpable.

The intensity of the shot is captured in this gradual movement toward the photographer. The diegetic sound of the wind is brought up to immerse the photographer within the space. At this moment in the film, the park is a hermetically sealed space, an ontological insularity. It is thus fitting that Antonioni will render here a concrete image of time, requiring the spectator to contemplate time as an independent variable in cinema.[8] In *Blow Up*, Antonioni will subtly disturb the mechanism of shot reverse-shot (that treasured tool of cinematic continuity) to 'intervene' in the narrative flow of time. At 1:44:20, the image cuts to an overhead shot of the photographer crouched on the ground [**figure 1**]. The sound of the trees increases in volume, as if in crescendo to this movement, and the photographer raises his head to the sky [**figure 2**]. What is he listening to? What has he heard? The image holds momentarily, then cuts to the standard point of view shot of the trees that are indeed swaying in the wind [**figure 3**]. This is a simple point of view shot relation, establishing

[6] While *Blow Up* is obviously the most explicit meditation on the subject, the ontological threat to the object manifests in subtle and not so subtle ways in *L'Avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1960), *La Notte* (1961), *Zabriske Point* (1970) and *The Passenger* (1975).

[7] Time code references are to *Blow Up* (DVD), Warner Home Video, 2004.

[8] David Rodowick, 'An Elegy for Theory,' *October* 122 (Fall, 2007), 105.

the photographer's gaze. While the photographer's eye-line does not move across the line of the camera (the standard camera move contriving point of view), the spectator is aware of her subject-identification with the photographer through the turn of the head, the eyes focused upward, and the cut to the shot of the trees. It is precisely here, within the concrete continuities of shot reverse-shot mechanics, that Antonioni installs a subtle optical image that grants a 'perspective of time.'[9] 'Perspective' is entirely appropriate; the image is a new perspective, configured temporally rather than spatially.

Figure 1

[9] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 22.

Figure 2

Figure 3

The (photographer's) point of view shot holds for several seconds. The spectator must anticipate the reverse shot—a return to the photographer—that will complete the itinerary of the shot reverse-shot. But this image of the photographer no longer exists. The camera that holds on the trees (holding also the photographer's point of view) gradually pans across the sky, and down, to reveal the figure of the photographer, now standing rather than crouched, now some distance from where he had once been [**figures 4-5**].

Figure 4

Figure 5

First, the spectator must account for this *movement*. How, and when, did it occur? Where did it originate? How was it *effected*? This is a question of a movement in space. But clearly, this movement was not 'recorded' by, or manifested in, some duration of time. In fact, that chain of progression, narrative flow, the very substance of movement, has been erased through a cut. What stands in for narration is a disturbance of movement, a manifestation of the inability of the protagonist to *act*, to

effect change on the body and its surroundings. The image finally cuts to a long shot of the entrance/exit to the park [**figure 6**].

Figure 6

Clearly here the photographer contemplates this spatial/temporal disturbance. And this disturbance is related directly to the conflation of time segments; the photographer is dislocated in space, but equally, in time. 'The direct time-image,' Deleuze writes, 'always gives us access to that Proustian dimension where people and things occupy a place in time which is incommensurable with the one they have in space.'[10] Is it outlandish to suggest that the photographer, an inhabitant of a *cinematic image*, is bewildered by a movement dislocated from narrative, from the ordered flow of time?

The image of time not only makes sense in this sequence in *Blow Up*, but I would argue that it is critical to a consideration of a modernist cinema (initially European but increasingly visible in American production) that manifests a disturbance in narrative progression. Is there any shot more radical in the New American Cinema[11] than the projection

[10] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 39.

[11] The New American Cinema conventionally refers to a period of aesthetic and industrial transformation within the American film industry. See David Thomson, 'The Decade When Movies Mattered,' in The Last Great American Picture Show:

of the death of Wyatt and Billy (*Easy Rider*, 1969) in a fleeting, almost subliminal image, tearing a classical temporality into so many freely associating parts? Wyatt contemplates the image of his own death, an event that will take place only in the final sequence of the film, in effect collapsing a classical deterministic relation between cause and effect, present and future [**figures 7-8]**. Similarly in *Blow Up*, Antonioni's cut is a lacuna, but the space 'between shots' is the segment of time that is now autonomous, that has its own form within the film, and that affects the protagonist and spectator not as action and movement toward, but precisely away from, spatial and temporal resolution. This movement toward insubstantiality will find its natural completion through the erasure of the photographer from the cinematic diegesis in the final shot of the film.

Figure 7

New Hollywood in the 1970s, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 73-82.

Figure 8

There is a more complex rendition of time in *The Passenger* (1975). Again Antonioni works against the shot as narrative segment. At 19:43,[12] the image opens on a spinning fan (symbolic of the simultaneity of stasis and movement), holds momentarily, then shifts downward to reveal David Locke (Jack Nicholson) sitting at a table. We hear a knock at the door, followed by Locke's 'come in'; these sounds occur off-screen. A cut then reveals that we are listening to a tape recording [**figure 9**].

[12] Time code references are to *The Passenger* (DVD), Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.

Figure 9

Here Antonioni employs a similar device to that of the shot reverse-shot break in *Blow Up*, though the independent variable of time is more explicitly indicated in this sequence. The voices continue on the recording as Locke gets up and moves off camera. The camera moves left across the room and out onto the balcony, where it again picks up Locke [**figures 10-13**].

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

These dual movements—that of the camera and Locke—occur in a single shot, yet the 'present' that was constituted by Locke seated at a table listening to a tape recording now encompasses the past. The figure of Locke on the balcony enacts the recorded (past) conversation *in the present*. This is not a flashback. Rather, for Antonioni, the image of the past within the present creates an independent image of time. Antonioni's image here is particularly ingenious because it moves between image and sound, with the layer of diegetic sound played through the tape recording. As past and present collide forming one whole, so non-diegetic and diegetic film collide. Who speaks in this conversation? Who utters these words? And *when* are these words spoken? For Antonioni, these are not merely breaks in narrative, such as the conventional ellipses, or what Allison Ross describes as 'narrative discontinuity,'[13] but, far more radically, *non-narrative* film images.

The fracture of the classical shot reverse-shot in *Blow Up* forms part of the philosophical fabric of Antonioni's cinema. It provides a visual expression of the photographer's growing insubstantiality while establishing a conceptual link to the final shot in which diegetic space and time are rendered immaterial. The photographer's vanishing leaves only a

[13] Allison Ross, 'Michelangelo Antonioni: The Aestheticization of Time and Experience in *The Passenger*,' in *Cinematic Thinking: Philosophical Approaches to the New Cinema*, ed. James Phillips (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2008), 48.

trace of his body (which is no longer part of that space), dislocated from a subordinate itinerary of time. In *The Passenger*, Antonioni's collapse of the present into an independent image of time projects a radical philosophy of time and subjective experience. I thus concur with Ross that such narrative disturbances work within the broader thematic of Locke's search for an identity,[14] and indeed, within the broader thematic of the individual's quest for wholeness in Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1960), *La Notte* (*The Night*, 1961), *Blow Up* (1966), *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and *The Passenger* (1975). Antonioni presents an aggressively modern cinema[15] in which the image is possessed of a radical thematic, epistemological and ontological ambiguity.[16]

2. Can a Film Display Sound?

> Is the notion of cinema as the art of the image just an illusion? Of course: how ultimately, can it be anything else?[17]

Francis Ford Coppola's landmark exploration of sound (the sound of the world, and the sound of the cinematic diegesis) in *The Conversation* (1974) remains unsettling for the contemporary spectator. As was so much of the New American Cinema, or indeed the European art cinema, *The Conversation* is a film about the inability to perceive, the inability to record and capture perception, the elemental lack in the experience of the world. Keathley calls this a cinema of 'trauma,'[18] and one might read *The Conversation* alongside other films of trauma—Altman's *Nashville* (1975) and Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) come to mind. Coppola's cinema turned this scepticism of the 1970s, which drew its inspiration

[14] Ross, 48.

[15] For an analysis of the distinction between post-classical cinema and cinema's various classicisms, see Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the* Times (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992), 192-194.

[16] For an influential analysis of the tendency toward ambiguity in European art cinema, see David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,' *Film Criticism* 4, no. 1 (1979), 56-64.

[17] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

[18] Christian Keathley, 'Trapped in the Affection Image: Hollywood's Post-Traumatic Cycle (1970-1976),' in *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood in the 1970s*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 293-308.

from various modernist sources[19] (the most obvious being Antonioni's *Blow Up*), back onto cinema's image and its attendant sound. If classical cinema's sound gave a fuller account of the visual image and was thus subordinated to the experience of the visuality,[20] cinema's modernity in *The Conversation* revealed the image as a pure sound bite, a spoken line or ambient noise that filtered over and above the itinerary of a narrative progression or visual cue.

In 1974, Coppola's film actualized what had been merely perceived, or felt, by the spectator. Altman had played with synchronicity and convergent tracks (*Mash* [1970]; *The Long Goodbye* [1973]); Scorsese had turned the pop song into an expressive aesthetic register unlike anything seen in the classical studio era.[21] However, Coppola's radical contribution to what was a developing modernist aesthetic in American mainstream cinema was to turn the image into a *sound object*—to enable the visual image to engage with the equally autonomously functioning register of sound. I wish to illustrate two simultaneously functioning registers in which Coppola's sound image gains autonomy from a visual narrative itinerary: in the capacity of the image to function as reproduced utterance, or *re-iteration*; and in the capacity of non-diegetic sound (a piano score on the soundtrack) to converge with, and indeed, mediate, the diegetic sound of a saxophone in the film.

The lesson of Coppola's film is not that the protagonist's vision is affected by the condition of modernity; the visual image in modernist cinema had been suitably detached from the object, which we see clearly

[19] Here I refer to Coppola's cinema as 'modernist' for its depiction of a fragmented subjectivity, spatial and temporal indeterminism, and a cinematic rendering of stream of consciousness—recognisably modernist concerns that would continue to drive cinematic narrative and style until well into the 1970s. Indeed, this modernist image is perhaps most radical in the opening sequence of Coppola's Conradian *Apocalypse Now* (1979), essentially an incantation of death and madness cut over The Doors' 'The End'.

[20] For an analysis of this prejudice, see William Johnson, 'Sound and Image: A Further Hearing,' *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1989), 24-35.

[21] Consider the jump-cut sequence early in *Mean Streets* (1973), clearly a quotation of Godard's precocious New Wave aesthetics, yet animated by an American pop song, The Ronettes's 'Be My Baby' (Phillies Records, 1963). For a useful discussion of the effect of popular music in Scorsese's early cinema, see Ben Nyce, *Scorsese Up Close: A Study of the Films* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 12-13.

in the vanishing body in *Blow Up*. In Coppola, modernity becomes an aural phenomenon, and modernist cinema that infects the American cinema from the French New Wave, or Antonioni's expressive minimalism, is configured as a sound image that freely inhabits, and moves between, diegetic and non-diegetic cinematic space. Classical cinema manifests a soundscape that complements (and augments) the visual-scape. Sound and soundtrack are merely accompaniments in the majority of classical films.[22] Even Hitchcock's collaboration with Bernard Hermann produces visual accompaniments; Hermann's score for *Vertigo* (1958) augments the escalation of Scottie's neurosis, inscribed most forcefully through the visual flourish of the 'Vertigo shot'; Mother's jarring knife slashes and Hitchcock's radically expressive montage in the shower scene of *Psycho* (1960) overwhelm any affective claim on the spectator made by Hermann's strings. Hermann's sounds throughout Hitchcock, and even in his last great score for *Taxi Driver* (1976), give further expression to the virtuosity of the image.

But Coppola's distinctly modernist aesthetic, and his contravention of the classical diegetic/non-diegetic split, brings sound to the forefront of the mind of the spectator. The spectator must listen to the audio track of the conversation, picking up its words and sentences, the cadence of the speech between the speakers, the rhythm built through sound that actively integrates with, and configures, the visual image. Sound is played, and replayed, heard and reheard, until it attains an ontological form quite separate from the narrative progression of the story. The remarkable mechanical zoom which opens the film functions only through the equally complex, and densely layered, soundtrack in which sound is disoriented, asynchronous, and muddled, both organic and mechanical. When Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is asked, 'how'd you get it [a recording]?' he is deliberately evasive, wishing to protect his secret and possess the sound in its fixed form. Coppola requires the spectator to actively listen, 'to know that 'the sound of x' allows us to proceed without further interference to explore what the sound is like *in and of itself* [my emphasis].'[23] Coppola's film asks, simply, *what is this sound*? What is the ontological fabric of this conversation? Where is it heard? Through which mechanism is it produced? How does the conversation

[22] See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, 'Fundamental Aesthetics of Sound in the Cinema,' in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 181-199.
[23] Chion, 33.

manifest its strange and unsettling presence? This is to ask more than what a sound *signifies*, but to ask what presents within the image beyond meaning, beyond narrative signification.

The Conversation opens on an oft-discussed mechanical zoom, a shot of some duration and complexity. The wide shot begins from a rooftop and gradually moves in to find form through an assortment of characters, the last of which is Harry Caul, the film's protagonist. Each image is destabilized through a confluence of sounds: dialogue, diegetic sounds emanating from Union Square at lunchtime, a jazz saxophone and vocal (presumably of a street performer), a barking dog that briefly enters the frame—and, almost imperceptibly, the interweaving of a conversation between a man and a woman on their lunch break. The initial vocal of the conversation, spoken by the woman, repeats the song lyric of the jazz vocal of the street performer. The conversation rises in volume and establishes coherent rhythm over the random sounds of the square. At 4:48,[24] the spoken 'what about me?' brings the conversation to the forefront of the image and reduces the background sound to random, indistinct and ambient noise.

Coppola's conversation occurs initially in the present-time of the film; one might say that in this elaborate zoom shot, the sound of the conversation, the dialogue between the man and woman that culminates in 'He'd kill us if he got the chance,' is ontologically *present*. The spectator engages with the conversation as an event unfolding in time, a sequence comprising several minutes of fragmented dialogue. While the sequence begins as a disorienting image (sound and vision in arbitrary relation), as the zoom shifts closer to the central action of the shot, Coppola brings the sound and visual image of the conversation into closer contact. The conversation gradually becomes distinct, and is isolated from background noise as the spoken words of the two figures are brought up on the soundtrack. Word-sounds are cut over moving lips and matching facial cues. Coppola frames discrete shots of the man and woman (or two-shots) through a shallow focus, emphasizing the centrality of the two figures to the spatial composition. The camera that begins in an impossibly long slow zoom approximating the gaze of a telescopic site (an indeterminate panoptic gaze), increasingly cuts into the action below, visually and aurally situating the two figures, their sounds

[24] Time-code references are to *The Conversation* (Widescreen DVD Collection), Paramount Home Video, 2000.

now cut to matching visual images. At the conclusion of the sequence, Caul believes he has acquired a 'nice fat recording,' industry jargon for the capture of the event. For Caul, the conversation is crystalized as an occurrence in time, captured through the technology of sound-surveillance, reproduced on magnetic tape. At 8:57, the sound of a piano enters the frame, a conventional non-diegetic soundtrack in the form of a pleasant, if somewhat melancholy, waltz.

The conversation of the man and woman becomes an autonomous image *only in reproduction*. Performed for the spectator in the present, first captured in a disorienting zoom, and then, incrementally, in the conventions of single and two-shots, the conversation is re-iterated through the technology of sound production. At 16:26, now in his workshop, Caul begins to replay the conversation (his 'fat recording'). This new sound emanates not from the spoken words of the conversation, but from the tape, from the reproduction in Caul's workshop. At 16:12, prior to the emanation of sound from the machine, Coppola cuts to a medium shot, framing Caul, Stan (John Cazale), and the reels of tape that now contain the sound image [**figure 14**]. The camera pans slowly, deliberately, to a set of large speakers on the wall. The image then cuts to an extreme close-up of Caul's fingers on the switches, knobs and dials—the transmission technology of the recorded conversation [**figure 15**].

Figure 14

Figure 15

The conversation—an event captured in vision and sound—is past; the recorded version—a *re-iteration*—shifts into the present of the film, effacing the previous utterance. D'escriván is thus correct to suggest that, at the conclusion of the first iteration of the conversation in actual time, the puzzle is solved, 'yet when [Caul] replays a segment…the possibilities for meaning seem infinite.'[25] In reproduction, the sound of the conversation is divested of its visual (present) itinerary in Union Square.

This sequence surely recalls the mechanics of reproduction in Antonioni's present and past sound images in *The Passenger* previously discussed; astonishingly the two films were released less than a year apart. When Coppola cuts to the visual of the conversation, cutting from inside Caul's workshop, what does the spectator *perceive*? An image accompanied by sound, or the presence of sound accompanied by a projected image? In the re-iteration of the conversation, what are we watching? What are we listening to? Words lost in the first iteration are now enhanced through Caul's technology. Technology creates a new presence of sound in the workshop, distinct from the iteration of the conversation in Union Square. In a striking moment in this first re-iteration of the conversation, the visual of Union Square opens up. The words of the conversation are replayed, reheard by the spectator, yet each

[25] Julio d'Escriván, 'Sound Art (?) on/in Film,' *Organised Sound* 14, no. 1 (2009), 70.

utterance is now disembodied, spoken through the technology of reproduction. Walter Murch, the sound designer on the film, accentuates the mechanical registers of the voice, increasing echo and reverb. These mechanical affectations reconstruct the mellifluous, organic timbre of the voices (particularly the woman's) into a technologized (and reproducible) sound. When the spectator listens to the conversation in its second iteration, spun through the circuit of a recording system, the *visual* image is an accompaniment. Here the autonomous image of sound organises a perceptual and affective engagement.

How can the spectator locate the subjectivity of a sound image (as the spectator conventionally searches for the subjectivity of a visual image)? When Coppola cuts to the visual in Union Square at 16:45, the image is asynchronous—the sound no longer matches the visual image, as it would in a classical cinematic soundscape. Shot and reverse-shot, the strongest indicator of point of view in cinema, is established between the object (the woman and man) and the sound engineer, Caul. Coppola cuts between present and past, though the flashback is not a faithful rendition of the past, but its semblance, a simulation of that which took place and is lost in reproduction. This is Coppola's subtle rendition of the paranoid subjectivity of American modernity.[26] At 16:43, the image cuts to a frame of the woman and man walking in Union Square. The image deliberately approximates a point of view—the first component of a shot reverse-shot mechanism. Yet the cut that will present the reverse-shot, the perceiving subject, is not to Caul in the present of the conversation (its actual iteration initiated by the zoom) but to Caul *in his workshop*. Shot reverse-shot traverses present and past, its mechanical relation built on a recording. This is precisely the device employed by Antonioni in *The Passenger* (employing a tape-recorded conversation) to say something very similar about the existential (and ontological) spillage of past into present.

The itinerary of shot reverse-shot in the 'present' iteration of the conversation works through actual figures (Caul's team) situated in Union Square; the itinerary of shot reverse-shot in the re-iteration of the conversation in Caul's workshop works between the object (the man and woman projected in flashback) and the technologized subject of reproduction, the sound recording. At 17:32, the visual of the first re-iteration of the conversation holds the man and woman in a two-shot in

[26] Keathley, 295-298.

shallow focus; their words are now clear over the background noise (Caul's mixing of the soundtrack and its visual representation are necessarily coterminous). Yet at precisely this moment, the characters in two-shot move out of the frame, and *Caul* is revealed in the background on a park bench [**figure 16**].

Figure 16

The image finds clarity in a sharp rack focus, and Caul is centralized. Who perceives Caul this way? In technologized reproduction, who authorizes these compositional inscriptions? While Caul sits before his state of the art recording system, for Coppola, the technologies of surveillance and recording give life to a new subjectivity of the image in sound, located within the panoptic mechanism of technological reproduction. This is to suggest that if D'escriván is correct in identifying narrative resolution in the first iteration of the conversation through the visual image, resolution at the point of the *re-iteration* of the conversation in Caul's workshop displays a subjectivity located within the panoptic gaze of technology itself.

3. 'He'd kill us if he got the chance.'

A great deal of work has been done on the unique auditory qualities of *The Conversation*,[27] and much of this work concludes with a reading of an utterance—'he'd kill us if he had the chance'—initially obscured on Caul's soundtrack, revealed at the first act turning point on Caul's recording, and reheard (by Caul and the spectator) in the film's *dénouement*. I wish to contribute to this body of analysis, framing the material presence of the image of sound in a slightly different way.

At 33:17, Caul initiates the second re-iteration of the conversation; a single spoken line remains obscured on the recording. On first playback, the line is an audible mix of speech fragment, mechanical interference and ambient noise. The voices are pronouncedly mechanical, further disembodied from the original source; the unique tonal and textural qualities of the mechanized voice are again contrasted with the initial (present) iteration of the conversation in Union Square. At 39:24, after Caul boosts the sound through an external source, the purpose of the conversation, and the surveillance, becomes clear. The spectator hears: 'he'd kill us if he got the chance.' The intonation is such that the emphasis falls on 'kill,' with a lesser emphasis on 'us'; the audio track emanates from the tape with this emphasis. Coppola deliberately cuts images of the recording equipment—knobs and dials, as well as the exposed material of Caul's concocted booster—with the visual image from the conversation as it is played in the film's opening sequence. The attachment of image to the technology of recording is deliberate, suggesting that the spoken line emanates from its reproduced source. This utterance is in a very real sense absent from the initial iteration in the present-time of Union Square. As the sequence approaches the revelation of the line at 39:24, Coppola tightens the shots on the technology of the sound image, a movement culminating in a close-up of the booster, with its casing stripped away, revealing wires and boards [**figure 17**].

[27] See, for example, Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 89-93; Dennis Turner, 'The Subject of *The Conversation*,' *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 4 (1985), 4-22; Jay Beck, 'Citing the Sound: *The Conversation*, *Blow Out*, and the Mythological Ontology of the Soundtrack in the 70s Film,' *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 29, no. 4 (2002), 156-163.

Figure 17

The revelation of the spoken line is a critical plot point that catapults the narrative into its next movement (Act Two development). The recorded line functions as a plot turning point that prefigures a conventional narrative resolution. At 1:45:50, in the film's dénouement, the line is re-iterated again: a *third* iteration. Now 'he'd *kill* us if he had the chance' becomes 'he'd kill *us* if he had the chance.' The sound revelation in a spoken line of dialogue presents as narrative resolution. Caul's mystery is solved: the man and woman have conspired to murder the director (Robert Duvall).

This all seems quite conventional. The orthodox reading of this strange re-iteration (most explicit in Silverman)[28] emphasizes the function of the utterance as narrative resolution, as the solution to a basic conflict involving an extra-marital affair and a jealous husband. The shift in emphasis from 'kill' to 'us' makes sense in the context of Caul's increasingly paranoid mind. This is how *Caul* hears the line. In its first revelation, Caul mishears the emphasis, the intonation, and thus, the spectator receives a subjective rendition of the line. Caul is looking for a 'nice fat recording' rather than the meaning of the words, and thus misses the emphasis and the correct attribution of guilt. The spectator listens through Caul's ears, not unlike the way in which the spectator sees through the subjective eyes of the protagonist in Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) or Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966).

[28] Silverman, 90.

The revised utterance, with a revised emphasis, is a redubbing on the soundtrack (in industry jargon, Additional Dialogue Recording [ADR]): the sound plays over the visual image, but the lips of the man frame the initial utterance with its emphasis on 'kill' [**figure 18**].

Figure 18

On the DVD commentary, Coppola suggests that the redubbing over the initial utterance was Murch's idea, and took place while cutting the film for picture and sound, well after Coppola had completed the shoot.[29] Thus it is Murch, the sound editor, who isolates sound from image, producing a sound image separate from the narrative itinerary of the film. On one level, of course, Murch's revised line permits the reading that Caul misheard the utterance on the tape. Yet Murch altered the line not to present an ontological truth, not to reveal the objectivity of the line as spoken, but to 'indicate to the filmgoer that the phrase now takes on a new emphasis for Harry. He hears the line *in his mind* [my emphasis] as it must have been all along].'[30] But what Caul hears in his mind effaces the initial utterance (spoken in the opening sequence of the film): 'he'd *kill* us if he had the chance.' That initial utterance is now lost to both Harry and the spectator; all that exists on the soundtrack are spoken lines in re-iteration. What materializes in the final iteration is no more substantial, or

[29] Francis Ford Coppola, 'Commentary,' in *The Conversation* (Widescreen DVD Collection), Paramount Home Video, 2000.
[30] Cited in James M. Welsh, Gene D. Phillips and Rodney F. Hill, *The Francis Ford Coppola Encyclopedia* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 46.

objectively rendered, than Caul's technologized utterance. The presence of both versions of the line within the film's diegesis, one created during production, the other during post-production, inscribes an autonomous image of sound, a line that signifies its intent, or more accurately, manifests its *presence*, in technological re-iteration. What coheres in Caul's mind as 'the conversation' is thus the output of a recording, an utterance derived not from a present time and place, but an audio-visual assemblage in perpetual reproduction.

4. The Autonomous Image of Sound

In the final scene of *The Conversation*, two classically separate soundtracks, one diegetic (a jazz saxophone piece played by Caul), one non-diegetic (a piano piece), converge. The two soundtracks present separately in the film; Caul improvises to a jazz record in his apartment, while the piano score accompanies much of the dramatic movement of the film. Coppola employs the two soundtracks as discrete significatory (and symbolic) units. Caul finds an emotional outlet in the improvisational qualities of jazz; his accompaniment to a jazz record presents an opportunity to create, to break free of the metaphorical shackles of his life. Conversely, the melancholy piano track presents as a threat to Caul, its minor key unsettling, a sound metaphor for the ubiquity of the surveillance society. Caul's jazz saxophone and the non-diegetic piano piece are symbolically opposed and musically inharmonious.[31]

At 1:47:54, Caul begins to search for a listening device in his apartment; this action (comprising several minutes of screen time) is accompanied by the non-diegetic piano track. Caul's desperation is matched by the increasing intensity of the piano, its phrases more pronounced, its tone and texture jarring. Unable to locate the device, Caul retreats again to the sanctuary of jazz. The piano maintains on the soundtrack throughout the action. The visual image cuts to fleeting shots of the conversation in Union Square, now, in its fourth re-iteration, soundless, the ephemeral image from which all sound has been lost. At 1:51:40, the diegetic sound of the saxophone enters the frame as the piano

[31] For an overview of compositional structure and harmony, see Nicholas Cook, *Analysis Through Composition: Principles of the Classical Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

continues to play its non-diegetic theme. The camera pans left to reveal Caul seated on a stool, oblivious to the ruination of his life [**figure 19**].

Figure 19

He is immersed in improvisation, as he was in Act One of the film (13:20), yet now, astonishingly, the backing jazz record is absent. In the final sequence of the film, Caul effectively improvises to the non-diegetic (and thus 'absent') sound of the piano. At this point, the spectator must ask: what animates this improvisatory movement if the piano is a *non-diegetic score*? What is Caul listening to? The fullness of Coppola's metaphor materializes in sound: what begins as a somewhat jarring improvisational performance (inharmonious saxophone and piano) is gradually synthesized into a harmonious duet between the diegetic saxophone and the non-diegetic piano, concluding in a scale run on the piano that perfectly harmonizes with the expressive saxophone in Caul's hands. What presence within the diegesis of the film authorizes this synthesis, this artificial synchronicity?

Coppola thus concludes his landmark film with a simple, yet ingenious, metaphor. The duet between piano and saxophone reveals the sound image to be more than the signification of the cinematic diegesis. Sound explodes beyond the visually-oriented narrative frame. Coppola's soundscape demands a contemplation of cinema sound beyond the givenness of meaning, and Coppola demands that sound be engaged as an object, as the essential material of cinema, no less than a visual image that inscribes its presence through compositional form. Coppola's unique

contribution to the ontology of the image is to cast the image *out of sound*. In concluding, I return to the question with which this analysis began: in the several iterations of a line of spoken dialogue reconstructed through mechanical reproduction, or a soundtrack that moves cavalierly across diegetic and non-diegetic space, what does the spectator *hear*? From what source (the authentically original or mechanically reproduced) does cinema's image emanate?[32]

5. Can Cinema be Attentive to an Image?

Peter Biskind recounts the story of Paul Williams pitching a genre script to late-1960s Hollywood studio executives: ''No, no, no, no,' they tell him. 'We want to make movies that aren't about anything. Like that *Blow-Up* picture.''[33] Cinema's affective qualities are commonly conceived as elements of narrative action—stories that inscribe progression, archetypal characters that attain fulfilment, mythological structures that speak to diverse nations and cultures. This is a mode of classical studio production that, Deleuze argues, has 'produced the universal triumph of American cinema.'[34] While this assessment of the American studio cinema is grossly oversimplified, it is nonetheless true that a great deal of studio genre cinema encodes narratives of action, clearly delineated paths of character development, and the emphatic resolution of narrative conflict. But the studio executives Biskind quotes fundamentally misunderstand the radical ethos of Antonioni in *Blow Up*

[32] Richard King, an Oscar-winning sound designer and sound editor working freelance within the studio system, describes sound design as 'constantly innovating.' For King, the sound is frequently created separately from the image, and rarely recorded during production as a complete sound object. While attuned to the image, in some sense 'sticking to it,' sound functions also autonomously from the diegesis of cinematic space. It is thus an experiential effect affiliated yet not exclusively derived from the image of cinema. King provided the example of attempting to create the sound of the removal of a face-mask for *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), calibrated to an experience of the image rather than an inherent reality within the diegetic space. This is a soundscape that cannot 'sound like life' and for which a world has been 'completely created.' Interview with Richard King conducted Feb 10, 2012 at Warner Bros. Studios, Los Angeles.

[33] Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n Drugs 'n Rock 'n Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 22.

[34] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 141.

and *The Passenger*, and Coppola in *The Conversation*. The departure from studio classicism is not a matter of narrative content. *Blow Up* and *The Passenger* are resolutely 'about something.' I'd argue that *The Conversation* is a conventional Three-Act mystery conforming to Thompson's principles of classical storytelling.[35] Rather, I have attempted to reveal a particular relationship of the image to narrative that I accord with the evolution of a distinctly modernist ethos in the European art cinema and the New American Cinema. In the simple fracture of a classical shot reverse-shot movement, or an unbroken (sequence) shot that synthesizes past and present, the image of cinema acquires a radical autonomy from its narrative casing. The classical imperative toward progression suffers a crisis (Deleuze); the elemental relationship between image and referent is unsettled. In *Blow Up*, the autonomous image materializes the existential burden of the self; the material form is consumed by the insubstantiality of its content. This is the simple though elegant metaphor of the 'blow up' sequence: the once classically perceived object (a body) is pixelated into abstraction [**figures 20-23**]. In *The Passenger*, the autonomous image materializes time as an existential burden. The sequence shot turns time into a *felt* thing. Coppola's autonomous image of sound materializes a mode of perception increasingly visible in the dystopian narratives of the New American Cinema: the pure panoptic image of technologized reproduction. Where is the listening device in Caul's apartment in the final sequence of that film? The image of perfect surveillance in *The Conversation* is an astonishing intervention into the perception image of a classical American cinema in the mid-1970s.

[35] Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 10.

Figure 20

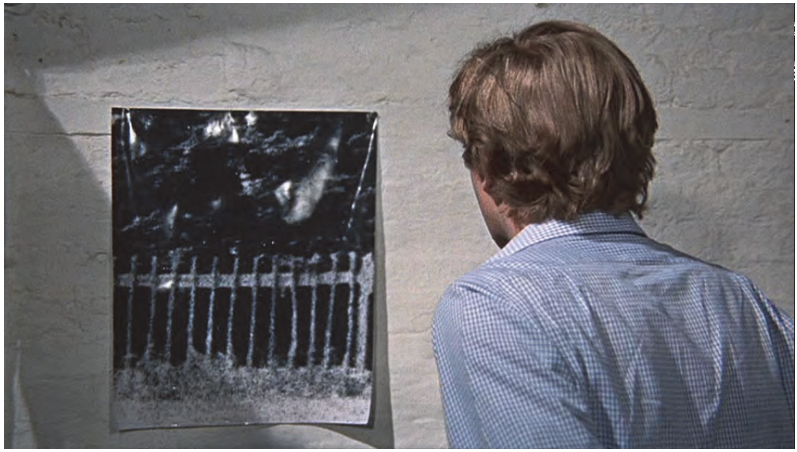

Figure 21

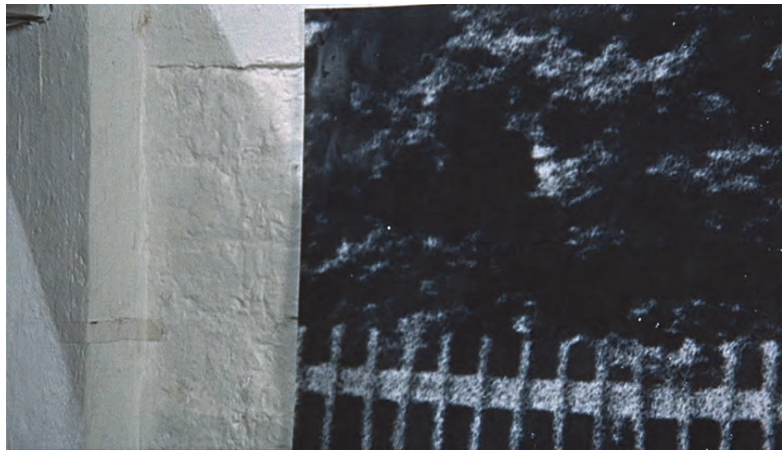

Figure 22

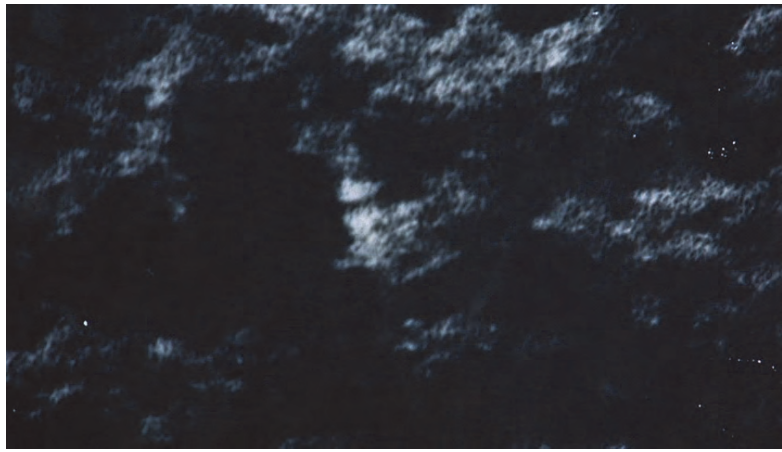

Figure 23

Fittingly, in the final bravura sequence shot of *The Passenger*, Antonioni's body is killed (or exhausted into submission) off-screen. When the autonomous gaze of the camera returns from its long itinerary, Locke is dead [**figures 24-26**].

Figure 24

Figure 25

Figure 26

But this is as much a physical death as it is the death of a mode of *being*, the death of a classical perception. Is it foolish to suggest that it is *that space* beyond the window, subjected to the autonomous movement of Antonioni's camera, that transfigures the body, that renders it now in a new form, invisible to the gaze of his wife, the hotel concierge, the police, and the spectator?

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From Status to Contract: Inheritance and Succession in George Eliot's Late Fiction

PHOEBE POON

Despite the work of the 'Law and Literature' movement in illuminating the law's representation in literary texts, it is a truth rarely acknowledged that the law is often present only in the subtext or margins of fictional narrative. As William P. MacNeil writes of law in nineteenth-century literature,

> Law, if present at all … in any substantive way, is often figured subtly, even elliptically—in a range of things: a lost deed, a long hidden testimonial, an unusual 'law-hand' [as in the case of *Bleak House*].[1]

This article will focus on the legal marginalia that rise to prominence at certain moments in George Eliot's last three novels—the 'base fee' that represents the Transomes' interest in an estate in *Felix Holt*, the entail on Casaubon's property that is questioned by Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, and the settlement of Sir Hugo Mallinger's estates that ensures their future transmission to his nephew Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda*. Through the realistic portrayal of how settlement, entail, and primogeniture operated in practice, Eliot transformed the inheritance plot from a well-worn convention of material reward for heroic conduct into a powerful vehicle of critique against anachronistic customs of inheritance and succession.

In her later fiction, inheritance is revealed as a point of stress in relations between the individual and the family, particularly among the landed classes, for whom land was treated as a patrimony belonging to

[1] William P. MacNeil, *Novel Judgements: Legal Theory as Fiction* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), p.15.

the family, rather than to individual members of family. The aristocracy and (to a lesser extent) the landed gentry preferred the practice of settling the estate on the eldest son to a more straightforward bequest by will, as settlement could restrict the rights of the son to alienate part or all of the land from the patrimony. The holder of settled property therefore was not so much absolute owner as tenant for life, whose responsibility was to look after the land and transmit it intact to future generations. As land law historian A.W.B. Simpson suggests,

> although the family … was not treated as a legal entity by the common law, which dealt only in individual property rights, landed society did nevertheless view property as ultimately belonging to the family in some moral sense, and the legal system reflected this.[2]

Ironically, this regard for land as familial or communally-owned property made the English landowner appear less 'the cultured man [who] acts more as an individual' than 'the peasant, [who acts] more as one of a group.'[3] The distinction between communal and individualist mentalities that Eliot noted in her essay, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), chimed with a post-Enlightenment vision that saw the family, rather than the individual, as the basic foundation of society. It was a vision exemplified in Auguste Comte's *Course of Positive Philosophy* (1853), in which he asserted that

> the family presents the true germ of the various characteristics of the social organism. Such a conception is intermediate between the idea of the individual and that of the species or society.[4]

This idea of the family as mediator between the individual and society was also a major theme in Henry Sumner Maine's *Ancient Law: Its Connection With the Early History of Society, and Its Relation to Modern Ideas* (1861), a work of jurisprudence which Eliot read from

[2] A.W.B. Simpson, *A History of the Land Law*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p.209.
[3] George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life,' *Westminster Review* 66 (July 1856): 51-79; rpt. in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p.274.
[4] *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, Vol. 2, trans. Harriet Martineau (1853; New York: Cosimo, 2009), ch. V, p.502.

November to December 1869 while she was working on *Middlemarch*. Within her eight pages of extant notes on Maine's 'legal best-seller,'[5] Eliot summarised one of Maine's most enduring propositions thus: 'Society consists of Families, not of individuals.'[6] The actual statement in *Ancient Law*—'the *unit* of an ancient society was the Family, of a modern society the Individual'—became the foundation of Maine's celebrated dictum at the end of Chapter 5: '[T]he movement of the progressive societies has hitherto been a movement *from Status to Contract*.'[7] Recasting the distinction between ancient and modern conceptions of society into a theory of social evolution, Maine shifted from sociological terminology (family/individual) to jurisprudential terminology (status/contract). Despite his reputation among his contemporaries as a jurist, he has been reclaimed since the 1980s as a somewhat forgotten pioneer of the social sciences, particularly sociology and anthropology. However, as Simon Petch has rightly pointed out, Maine's status in literary studies remains 'uncertain,' as his hypothesis about the movement from status to contract is often cited, but rarely accorded any substantial significance.[8] This article contends that Maine's hypothesis offers a unique conception of how Victorians viewed their world as a modern legal culture increasingly defined by contractual relations forged between autonomous individuals, a culture that developed from ancient Indo-European societies, where a person's legal status in the family had determined her rights and duties.

While privileging individualism as the apotheosis of modernity, Maine's status-contract model highlighted the deeply embedded vestiges of family-oriented custom in Victorian society. Three chapters of *Ancient Law* compare customs of inheritance and succession in the ancient and modern world: Chapters VI, VII, and VIII are titled 'The Early History of Testamentary Succession,' 'Ancient and Modern Ideas Respecting Wills and Successions,' and 'The Early History of Property' respectively. In a passage from Chapter VI, Maine wrote:

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[5] A. W. B. Simpson, 'Contract: A Twitching Corpse,' *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 1 (1981): 268.
[6] *George Eliot's* Middlemarch *Notebooks*, eds. John Clark Pratt and Victor A. Neufeldt (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), p.204.
[7] Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and its Relation to Modern Ideas*, Foreword by Lawrence Rosen (1861; Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986), p.121, 165.
[8] Simon Petch, 'Law, Literature, and Victorian Studies,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35 (2007): 381.

> The popular or even the legal conception of a Will … [is] that a Will necessarily takes effect *at death only*, - that it is *secret*, not known as a matter of course to persons taking interests under its provisions, - that it is *revocable*, i.e. always capable of being superseded by a new act of testation. Yet I shall be able to show that there was a time when none of these characteristics belonged to a Will.[9]

Maine subsequently revealed that, for Roman citizens, wills were irrevocable, public documents that took effect during the life of the testator. While the ancient Roman will was historically distant from the settlements and entails depicted in Eliot's novels, its characteristics (entirely opposite to those of the modern will) clearly resembled the deeds of strict settlement that were used by the aristocracy and landed gentry to ensure that their estates descended intact to future generations. Although not in all instances completely irrevocable, a settlement was 'strict' in the sense that conditions imposed by its original maker (the 'settlor') were not easily revoked or modified. They were private family documents, but the need to 'break' or 'bar' existing entails and resettle the estate once every generation meant that the current holder of the estate (the 'life tenant') had to disclose the legal details to his successor (the 'tenant in tail'); the contents of a settlement therefore were not necessarily secret. Finally, settlements did not, in many instances, take effect at death, as the procedure for 'barring' the entail usually occurred on one of three occasions—soon after the son's majority, at his marriage, or at the time that the father made his will.[10]

The entail was one of two main elements in a deed of settlement, the second being family provision—provision for the wife through jointure, and the younger children through fixed monetary sums or portions. As property devised to women became their husband's upon their marriage, the entail enabled landowners to create a fixed order of succession that

[9] Maine, *Ancient Law*, p.169.

[10] The advantage of *inter vivos* settlement, which took effect while father and son were still alive, rather than testamentary settlement, which took effect after the father's death, was that the father could supervise the succession of his son and witness the 'changing-of-the-guard' in his lifetime. See John Habakkuk, *Marriage, Debt, and the Estates System: English Landownership 1650-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp.26-9; Barbara English and John Saville, *Strict Settlement: A Guide to Historians* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1983), pp.32-40.

kept the patrimonial estate intact in the male line. However, the maximum length of an entail was 'a life or lives in being' plus 'a period in gross of twenty-one years.'[11] This meant that land could be tied up 'for three generations only, in the typical case a father, his eldest son, and his (unborn) eldest grandson until he was 21 years of age.'[12] While incumbent life tenants could not reduce endless generations of unborn male descendants to a life tenancy, a chain of resettlements every generation virtually amounted to the creation of a perpetual entail. For landlords with dynastic ambitions, the ideal was to keep 'a succession of life tenants on the family lands *ad infinitum.*'[13] In this manner, their estates 'would descend in the family generation after generation with never an absolute owner in possession,' who had the capacity to alienate all or part of the property from the patrimony.[14] Therefore, while the fundamental principle of land law was *tenure*, which limited landownership to an individual lifetime, settlements of landed property could provide for ownership in perpetuity not by individuals, but by families.

In every 'ideal' legal situation, there are always loopholes or exceptions, a rare one of which is detailed in *Felix Holt*. Before a certain John Justus Transome in the eighteenth century had the opportunity to resettle his estate in the manner described above, his prodigal son Thomas had tried to bar the entail and exchange his future patrimony for cash:

> Thomas … proving a prodigal, had, without the knowledge of his father, the tenant in possession, sold his own and his descendants' rights to a lawyer-cousin named Durfey; … therefore, the title of the Durfey-Transomes, in spite of that old Durfey's tricks to show the contrary, depended solely on the purchase of the 'base fee' thus created by Thomas Transome; and … the Bycliffes were the

[11] *Cadell v. Palmer* (1833) 1 Cl and F 372. See A.W.B. Simpson, *A History of the Land Law*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p.226; and J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, 2nd ed. (London: Butterworths, 1979), p.245.
[12] F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p.64.
[13] Simpson, *A History of the Land Law*, p.236.
[14] Eileen Spring, *Law, Land and Family: Aristocratic Inheritance in England, 1300 to 1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p.125.

> 'remainder-men' who might fairly oust the Durfey-Transomes if ever the issue of the prodigal Thomas went clean out of existence, and ceased to represent a right which he had bargained away from them.[15]

Without his father's consent, Thomas could only partially 'bar' or 'cut off' the entail, that is, he could sell 'his own and his descendants' rights' to the Transome estates, but not the rights of non-lineal descendants, namely the Bycliffes, known as the 'remainder-men.' The resulting legal interest from a partial barring was a mere 'base fee,' which attracted very little value on the market because its legal complexities rendered it a risky security for buyers and creditors. According to legal historian A. W. B. Simpson, a base fee was an interest in property founded on a contingency:

> The alienee [the purchaser of the fee] will be safe until the issue of the alienor [the seller] who were capable of inheriting under the entail die out.[16]

In the event that the alienor's issue does die out, the estate would revert to the remainder-men named under the original settlement. The alienee and his descendants could therefore be dispossessed of property that they had held for generations on the failure of the alienor's family line. The family line might not perish (at least not before the alienee's own), or it might take several generations and upwards from decades, if not centuries, to perish, but few buyers were willing to gamble their property on the continuation of a stranger's progeny. Thomas Transome's 'lawyer-cousin Durfey,' however, proves to be an exception, as he acquires the base fee, and changes his name to 'Transome' in order to trick others into believing that his title is more secure than it really is.

Featuring one of the most complicated settlements in fiction (or indeed fact), *Felix Holt* has attracted criticism from many readers and critics, who were frustrated by the excessive technicality of the novel's inheritance plot. As F. R. Leavis famously wrote: the

[15] George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, ed. Fred C. Thomson (1866; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.239.
[16] Simpson, *A History of the Land Law*, p.91.

> esoteric subtleties of the law of entail … demand of the reader a strenuousness of attention that, if he is an admirer of George Eliot, he is unwilling to devote.[17]

While the base fee may have been rare in legal practice, its pivotal status in the plot led G. S. Venables in the *Edinburgh Review* to the insight that 'the law supplies to modern novels the place of that supernatural machinery which was once thought indispensable in epic composition.'[18] Venables saw the base fee as a modern *deus ex machina*, the improbable contrivance or contingency which hastens the characters to their tragic ends. The contingency that would deprive the Durfey-Transomes of their estate is eventually triggered by the death during an election riot of the last of the original Transomes, a déclassé Tommy 'Trounsem'. This event makes Esther Lyon, who no one knows at first as the daughter of a Bycliffe, the rightful legal claimant.

Taking into account the literary context of *Felix Holt*, the effect of the base fee is comparable with the sudden twists of fate commonly found in sensation fiction of the 1860s, which had a tendency to wipe out a number of male issue and open the way for an unlikely candidate to inherit a landed estate. A realist novel with some notable sensational narrative elements—working-class riots, adultery, clandestine affairs—*Felix Holt* is elevated above the 'low-brow' sensation novel by the Aristotlean discourse of tragedy in which the Transome story is framed.[19] As the narrator writes in the 'Introduction':

> For there is seldom any wrong-doing which does not carry along with it some downfall of blindly-climbing hopes, some hard entail of suffering, some quickly-satiated desire that survives, with the life in death of old paralytic vice, to see itself cursed by its woeful progeny—some tragic mark of kinship in the one brief life to the far-stretching life that

[17] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p.63.
[18] [G. S. Venables], Review of *Felix Holt*, *Edinburgh Review* 124 (Oct. 1866): 435-49; rpt. in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p.280.
[19] Eliot's diary entry on 15 June 1865 indicates that she 'read again Aristotle's Poetics, with fresh admiration.' See *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.124.

> went before, and to the life that is to come after, such as has raised the pity and terror of men ever since they began to discern between will and destiny.[20]

This passage blends the language of inheritance with the language of tragedy. 'The hard entail of suffering,' for example, is charged with both moral and legal connotations, meanings for the present and future. The phrase points to the sorrows of Mrs Transome which unfold from Chapter 1 onwards, and 'entail' suggests that her present woes are the tragic *consequences* of a guilty past, namely her secret adultery with the lawyer Matthew Jermyn, which resulted in the birth of an illegitimate son, Harold. However, 'entail' also points prophetically to the ill-fated 'entailing' of the Transome estates that comes to light belatedly in Chapter 29. In legal terms, 'entail' signifies the pursuit of unbroken patrilineage, the attempt to transmit property along an indefinite line of male successors.

Felix Holt is a story of broken transmission that suggests the futility of striving for a perpetual entail, and critiques the aristocratic attitude, adopted by decaying gentry like the Transomes, of applying customary primogeniture, without questioning its efficacy for family or society. Eliot's diaries indicate that she read John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) and Henry Fawcett's *The Economic Position of the British Labourer* (1865).[21] In the former book, Mill argued that inheritance represented a duty of parents to their children, but stressed that

> the good not only of society but of the individuals would be better consulted by bequeathing to them a moderate, [rather] than a large provision.

Primogeniture ensured not only inequitable division of property, but also that the eldest child, who inherited significantly more than his siblings, was likely to rely solely on his inheritance instead of 'achieving by [his]

[20] Eliot, *Felix Holt*, p.11.

[21] Eliot's journals indicate that she read Mill's book for a second time from May 28 to July 12, 1865. She also claimed to 'have been reading Fawcett's Economic condition of the Working Classes [*sic*]' and 'Mill's [On] Liberty' in a diary entry on November 15, 1865. *Felix Holt* was written between April 29, 1865 and May 31, 1866. See *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.124-6.

own exertions a successful life.'[22] The imbecility of Harold's father and the dissolute life of his older brother support Mill's theory that primogeniture turns eldest sons and heirs into weaklings or idle spendthrifts. Focusing on the Transome's domestic life, *Felix Holt* is less attentive than Mill and Fawcett to the wider economic and social consequences of settlement and entailment, but its depiction of Transome Court's falling into a state of disrepair and stagnancy reflected actual conditions that land reformers like Fawcett blamed on the over-concentration of landownership in the hands of an elite, who had few incentives to expend capital on improving drainage and agricultural productivity in view of such expenditure enriching the eldest son at the expense of younger children whose provision needed to be raised by mortgages on the estate.[23] The critique that Eliot's novel advanced against customs of settlement, entail and primogeniture was situated therefore in contemporary debates about what economic policies would best promote sustainable and productive land practices that benefit wider society, rather than a small group of landowners.

According to land historians, the debates which came to be known as the 'Land Question' were 'particularly important at two points during the nineteenth century: during the 1840s and from the 1870s onwards.'[24] Both periods of agitation followed the passage of the First and Second Reform Bills, and therefore may signify 'post-Reform' rumblings. Although agitation was not as heated in the 1860s as it became during the agricultural depression of the 1870s, the Land Question remained a subject of intermittent interest, as demonstrated by Eliot's reading of Fawcett's book, one among a series of influential publications released by the Cobden Club, which sought to revive interest in land reform following Anti-Corn Law leader Richard Cobden's advocacy in 1864 for the creation of 'a League for free trade in Land.'[25] The catch-phrase, 'free trade in land,' became synonymous with calls among liberal and more radical reformers for the state to intervene to prevent landowners from

[22] Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, ed. J. M. Robson (1848; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), bk. II, ch. ii, s. 3, p.221.
[23] Henry Fawcett, *The Economic Position of the British Labourer* (Cambridge and London: Macmillan Press, 1865), p.21.
[24] Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman, 'Introduction,' *The Land Question in Britain, 1750-1950*, ed. Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.3.
[25] Anthony Howe, 'The 'Manchester School' and the Landlords: The Failure of Land Reform in Early Victorian Britain, *The Land Question in Britain*, p.87.

using strict settlement to keep their properties out of the free market indefinitely.

Appearing at the cusp of major agitation opposing the rights of landowners to continue transmitting their estates to eldest sons *ad infinitum*, the entail on the Transome estate is not only a contrivance that precipitates tragedy, but also a signifier of exclusive status, a symbol not of social progressivism, but of regression. The linking of Maine to the cause of land-law reform was first made in an article for the *Westminster Review* in July 1864.[26] Reviewing Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* with Francis Newman's *Lectures on Political Economy* (1851), Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics* (1851), and Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861), the article connected four texts which had developed historicised theories of social organisation. Maine's status-contract theory was used to support the contention that 'the tenure of land' should be grounded in 'relations of men to the State,' rather than in familial or tribal models of descent.[27] That contract had not taken over from status was indicated by the results of the 1861 census, which showed that, of the total British population of roughly 20 million, 'the whole number of landed proprietors [was] stated at only 30,766.'[28] In June 1866, T. E. Cliffe-Leslie conscripted Maine's ideas more explicitly by opening his article in the *Fortnightly Review* with a quotation from *Ancient Law*: 'The society of our day is mainly distinguished from that of preceding generations by the largeness of the sphere which is occupied in it by contract.'[29] He then remarked upon the tendency that 'the jurisprudence of our Courts and of the direct legislation of Parliament has been steadily in the opposite direction to that described by Mr. Maine.'[30] Both articles typified a trend of applying Maine's historical observations to contemporary political affairs that continued into the 1870s, provoking him to defend the right of private property in his 1875 Rede Lecture.[31] As a staunch liberal-conservative, Maine neither

[26] 'The Tenure of Land,' *Westminster Review* 82 o.s, 26 n.s. (July 1864): 105-37.
[27] 'The Tenure of Land,' p.116.
[28] 'The Tenure of Land,' p.123.
[29] T. E. Cliffe-Leslie, 'Political economy and the tenure of land,' *Fortnightly Review* 5 (June 1, 1866): 220, quoting from Maine, *Ancient Law*, p.295.
[30] Cliffe-Leslie, 'Political economy and the tenure of land,' p.220.
[31] 'Nobody is at liberty to attack several property [i.e. individual or private property] and to say at the same time that he valued civilisation.' Henry Sumner Maine, 'The Effects of Observation of India on Modern European Thought,' Rede Lecture 1875, delivered before the University of Cambridge, rpt. in *Village Communities in East and West*, 4th ed. (London: Murray, 1881), p.230.

sought nor desired the appropriation of his ideas for perceived socialistic purposes, and he rejected claims by the *Daily News* and the *Examiner* that he was 'a prophet of agrarian radicalism' as 'quite groundless.'[32]

The linking of Eliot to the Land Question was less overt, as lawyers and legal historians read the novel's purpose as illustrative of how entails and base fees operated in practice. Among the legal practitioners who admired *Felix Holt* were Frederic Harrison, who famously assisted Eliot with drafting the legal plot,[33] and Frederick Pollock (incidentally a great admirer of Maine), who praised Eliot for using the base fee

> with great effect and with perfect correctness, as part of the machinery of the plot; insomuch that conveyancers reading the novel have been known to lament seriously, as if the thing had happened to one of their own clients, that the parties did not take better advice.[34]

Modern legal historians have also admired Eliot's accurate deployment of the law of entail. Eileen Spring has suggested that 'George Eliot had woven a good story' around the base fee.[35] While lawyers have regarded the novel's 'legal plot' more highly than literary critics, their tendency to limit the novel to an empirical portrait of 'law-in-action' neglected the wider *political* significance of the Transome entail, which appeared in a period in which the practices of primogeniture, entails, and strict settlements were under increasing scrutiny.

More importantly, they neglected the *aesthetic* realism of a 'legal plot' that generates sympathy with as much as criticism of the declining

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[32] Letter from Maine to John Murray, 12 April 1871, *John Murray Archives*, qtd. by George Feaver, *From Status to Contract: A Biography of Sir Henry Maine 1822-1888* (London and Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co., 1969), p.120.

[33] Eliot's extensive consultation with Harrison can be traced in her letters from January 1866 to June 1866 when she completed the novel. See *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 4, ed. Gordon S. Haight (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp.214-65. Critical commentary on their correspondence is found in Fred C. Thomson, 'The Legal Plot in *Felix Holt*,' *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 7.4 (1967): 691-704.

[34] Frederick Pollock, *The Land Laws*, 2nd ed. (1883; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1887), p.110.

[35] Spring, *Law, Land and Family*, p.126. See also: See W. R. Cornish and G. de N. Clark, *Law and Society in England, 1750-1950* (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1989), p.125.

gentry class to which the Transomes belong. By weaving the base fee into her narrative so that it appears a part of the 'natural history' of the landed classes, Eliot seems to advocate the notion that 'Art,' being the 'nearest thing to life' and 'a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot,' should direct the reader's sympathy to extend in all directions, with the English gentry as well as the peasant or artisan (whose interests were represented in her essay, 'The Natural History of German Life'), or the industrialised working class (whose interests are depicted in *Felix Holt* as in conflict with those of the gentry). Workers appear more as a background to the central events which shape the Transome tragedy. With the exception of a charismatic, anonymous spokesman for working-class rights in Chapter 30, there are few individualised working-class characters in the novel, which features the climax of a rioting mass of workers, representing the kind of revolutionary anarchy both feared and deplored by Victorian middle-class intellectuals. That Eliot seems somewhat 'out of her element' when she portrays workers suggests that *Felix Holt* focuses less on Reform Bill discourses of universal suffrage, citizenship and representative government than on Land Question discourses of the responsibility of the landed classes, community and social stability.

However, *Felix Holt* does more than simply dramatise problems that confronted the landed gentry, who are partly responsible for their own decline by pandering to anachronistic customs of succession. The novel also adds another dimension to the land law debates by making Esther Lyon, the adopted daughter of a Dissenting minister, the unexpected but rightful legal claimant of Transome Court. Grounded in arguments for more equitable distribution of land, the Land Question gave little attention to primogeniture, entails, and strict settlements as instruments for facilitating and legitimating patriarchy. In contrast to marriage and divorce laws—which were more explicitly campaigned against for maintaining a sexual double standard that marginalised women—the primary objections to the land laws were oriented to interests of class, not gender.[36] The curious phenomenon in *Felix Holt* and Eliot's later novels

[36] The gendered nature of the modern history of land law is a theme throughout Spring's feminist-oriented study, *Law, Land, and Family*. While this article focuses on the issue of inheritance, there is extensive critical commentary on the agitation of Victorian marriage and divorce law. See, for example, Barbara Leckie, *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1856-1914* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Mary Lyndon

whereby property winds its way circuitously but inevitably to women (irrespective of family preference and customary practice) turned readers' attention to gender, rather than class inequality.

Esther's legal claim reveals that social reality may be the reverse of legal assumption. According to Maine, the custom of Agnatic descent, which traced genealogy 'exclusively through males,' was the basis for 'a memorable legal maxim':

> 'Mulier est finis familiae'—a woman is the terminus of the family. A female name closes the branch or twig of the genealogy in which it occurs. None of the descendants of a female are included in the primitive notion of family relationship.[37]

Contrary to this maxim and common perception, property in Eliot's novels tends to fall eventually to women, rather than men, a pattern seen in *Felix Holt* that is also repeated in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, where Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth become heiresses to property that they subsequently reject. Whereas Maine presents patriarchal authority in the ancient world as the precedent for patriarchal inheritance practices in the nineteenth century, Eliot interrogated the politics of male succession, which concealed the necessity of female succession at crucial times to ensure familial survival.

Moving from the unprivileged status of a minister's daughter to the privileged one of heiress, Esther may appear to exemplify a Mainian rise from status to contract. Her immediate trajectory, however, is simply to move from one status to another. Her choices are still limited to marriage and inheritance: which man to marry—Harold or Felix; and whether or not to accept the estate. Furthermore, she occupies the unusual legal status of 'remainder-man', a suggestive term for 'heir of last resort' which raises for Harold the whimsical image of 'a mendicant sailor with a wooden leg.'[38] As Neil Hertz suggests, the irony inherent in the legal parlance is that 'a remainder-man may be the remains of a man both

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Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989); and Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).

[37] Maine, *Ancient Law*, p.143.

[38] Eliot, *Felix Holt*, p.285.

déclassé and dismembered.'[39] While Esther possesses none of the features that might be associated with vestigial humanity, her position is uniquely that of 'quasi-heiress,' whose succession is more a strange, legal anomaly than a natural passage to inheritance.[40] Yet the survival and preservation of three patrilines—the Durfey, the Transome, and the Bycliffe—seem to depend on Esther.

Instead of remaining at a genealogical terminus, Esther finds an escape from an identity forged around the elevated status of heiress by drawing upon the dual education she receives from her father Rufus Lyon and self-appointed tutor Felix Holt. Their respective spiritual and secular guidance offer alternative principles to property by which to define her identity. Neither provides flawless guidance. Esther learns to appreciate the truth of Felix's lesson (designed to turn her from 'idle fancy and selfish inclination') that her 'father's principles are greater and worthier than what guides [her] life.'[41] Yet, Lyon's 'theory of providential arrangement' provides 'no illumination' for Esther on the question of whether to accept the Transome estate.[42] Felix's secular philosophy is also problematic, as, although he preaches renunciation as a natural course for those (like himself) who do not consider wealth as 'any peculiar virtue,' he does not realise that renouncing his love for Esther will prove more difficult than renouncing material goods. By marrying Esther in the end, he compromises his ideal of celibacy, and learns to strike a balance between worthy and needless sacrifice.

The fallibility of both religious and secular belief systems leads Esther to the realisation that she must forge her own principles. Finding her own alternative to complete renunciation, she leaves Transome Court and refuses the bulk of her inheritance, but marries Felix, claiming for herself and her husband only two pounds a week, plus 'a little income' for Felix's mother, 'enough for her to live as she had been used to live,' and a similar income for her father, 'to save him from being dependent

[39] Neil Hertz, *George Eliot's Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.89.
[40] According to J. H. Baker, historically, 'a remainder-man took by a form of succession unknown to the law; he had no prior seisin, he was no one's heir, and it was not clear what remedy he had to recover his interest.' Thus he was regarded by 13th-century legal writer Henry de Bracton as a kind of 'quasi-heir.' J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, p.233.
[41] Eliot, *Felix Holt*, p.104.
[42] Eliot, *Felix Holt*, p.326.

when he is no longer able to preach' (396). The course she chooses allows her to fulfil her duties to family, but also to avoid the constraints on self-determination imposed by her legal status. Esther therefore accepts a qualified independence or individualism, not the full severance from family bonds and commitments that Maine regarded as indicative of contractual freedom and individual autonomy.

It appears at the conclusion of the novel that the reader is left in the double bind that characterises Victorian endings for its feminine characters, for whom 'there is no readier conduit for directing [their] desire [to do something important] than through marriage with already focused and determined men.'[43] The radicalism of *Felix Holt*, however, is that it depicts a woman rejecting the bulk of property to which she is entitled, accepting only the small amount needed to care for family. The striking of a balance between individual and family welfare is the measure of truly ethical behaviour in Eliot's late fiction. Although generally given lowest priority in the order of succession, daughters, rather than fathers and sons, are the ones who prove their worth by embracing an alternative to the status economy, in which landed inheritance is the basis of wealth, power, and social position.

Middlemarch

Although less fixated on legal technicalities than *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* features not just one, but three main inheritance plots. The detailed legal briefs laying out the whole history of the Transome settlement are replaced by Dorothea's ethical question in Chapter 37—'Was inheritance a question of liking or of responsibility?'—which occurs while she ponders the disinheritance of Casaubon's 'Aunt Julia' (the grandmother of Will Ladislaw), 'only because she had chosen [to marry] a man who was poor':

> Dorothea … had wrought herself into some independent clearness as to the historical, political reasons why eldest sons had superior rights, and why land should be entailed: those reasons, impressing her with a certain awe, might be weightier than she knew, but here was a question of ties

[43] Cathrine O. Frank, *Law, Literature, and the Transmission of Culture in England, 1837-1925* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), p.127.

> which left them uninfringed. Here was a daughter [Julia] whose child—even according to the ordinary aping of aristocratic institutions by people who are no more aristocratic than retired grocers, and who have no more land to 'keep together' than a lawn and a paddock—would have a prior claim. Was inheritance a question of liking or of responsibility? All the energy of Dorothea's nature went on the side of responsibility—the fulfilment of claims founded on our own deeds, such as marriage and parentage.[44]

Dorothea's weighing up of individual 'liking' and familial 'responsibility' seems to be an attempt to determine whether status or contract ought to prevail. On one hand, her belief that 'the fulfilment of claims' should be 'founded on … marriage and parentage' suggests her preference for a status-based view of inheritance that privileges the claims of legal ties and biological kinship. On the other hand, the claim of Aunt Julia that Dorothea believes ought to have been fulfilled is founded on personal 'deeds,' and therefore, decisions about inheritance should rest on integrity of character, rather than on concerns about decline in class status, resulting from a socially disadvantageous marriage. Like Esther Lyon, Dorothea's ethical judgement seems to be suspended between status and contract.

Dorothea's interrogation of primogeniture is commensurate with her passion for land reform, which is evident from the beginning of the novel in her 'impatience of her uncle's talk or his way of 'letting things be' on his estate' and her longing 'for the time when she would be of age and have some command of money for generous schemes.'[45] Her sympathy with impoverished tenants echoes the sentiments of reformers, like Henry Fawcett, who drew attention to the plight of tenants and labourers. 'I think we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses with a scourge of small cords—all of us who let tenants live in such sties as we see round us,' she says to James Chettam, the baronet who courts her. The inconsistency in Dorothea's character, however, is suggested by her decision not to marry Chettam, who shows a willingness to indulge her passion for land reform, but Casaubon, a scholar and clergyman who does 'not care about building cottages' for the poor or 'about the philanthropic side of things.'[46]

[44] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.333.
[45] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.8.
[46] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, pp.30, 48.

Dorothea also misjudges Casaubon's 'sense of right,'[47] which she thinks would make him amenable to changing his will in favour of his cousin Ladislaw, whose grandmother's disinheritance keeps him poor. Instead of agreeing with her concerns for Ladislaw, Casaubon's 'power of suspicious construction' is agitated 'into exasperated activity,' as he imagines his cousin making 'an easy conquest' and 'entering into [his] nest' by marrying Dorothea after his death.[48] His last will and testament reflects his jealousy, as it bequeaths not only the fruitless task of completing his life's work, the 'Key to all Mythologies,' but also contains a codicil that gives all his property to Dorothea on condition that she does not marry Ladislaw. Thus he take advantage of Dorothea's dutiful nature towards him and his work, and, as James Chettam observes, 'most unfairly compromise[s]' her by provoking rumours of an affair between her and Will, and exploiting provincial gossip and public scandal to prevent their marriage.[49] Casaubon's will exemplifies the power of 'the dead hand' (the title of Book V), an instrument used both to defend his *status* and reputation as husband, and to assert his control over the living from beyond the grave by putting them under *contractual* obligation to his testamentary desires.

The abuse of testamentary power is demonstrated not only by Casaubon but also by the wealthy Peter Featherstone, who enjoys tormenting his siblings and nephew Fred Vincy by making tantalising references to the unlikelihood of their receiving anything in his will. However, unlike Casaubon, whose 'dead hand' is not rendered powerless until the end of the novel, Featherstone's impotence over his family is literally and symbolically represented immediately upon his decease:

> Peter Featherstone was dead, with his right hand clasping the keys [to the iron chest containing his wills], and his left hand lying on the heap of notes and gold.[50]

Mary Garth's refusal to accede to Featherstone's request for her to burn one of his wills results in her friend Fred Vincy losing a ten-thousand-pound bequest, and the disappointment of a testator, whose power to control the destiny of his property is removed when he cannot prevail upon his carer to carry out his intentions. Featherstone's posthumous

[47] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 334.
[48] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.375.
[49] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.434.
[50] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.285.

authority over his affairs is dealt a further blow later in the novel when his illegitimate son and heir Joshua Rigg sells his father's property, Stone Court, to Nicholas Bulstrode, a banker he despises. In labyrinthine fashion, however, Featherstone's property eventually makes its way to Fred, who becomes manager of Stone Court through an unusual act of kindness by Bulstrode.

Although not introduced until Book VI, the novel's third inheritance plot provides for the resolution of the first two plots. Whereas Casaubon attempts to deny Will the inheritance of his paternal grandmother Julia, Bulstrode is responsible for denying him the inheritance of his maternal grandmother Mrs Dunkirk, whom he deceived by keeping secret the whereabouts of her run-away daughter Sarah. The deception allowed Bulstrode to inherit the widowed Mrs Dunkirk's fortune when they married, as the latter was prevented from benefiting the grandchild she never knew she had. However, after his purchase of Stone Court from Joshua Rigg, the past threatens to engulf him, as Raffles, the unscrupulous spy who was hired to find Sarah, reappears to demand money as the price of secrecy. Casaubon refuses to recognise Will's claim and in fact hinders it by a testamentary clause, but in order to save his reputation, Bulstrode admits: 'you have a claim on me, Mr Ladislaw: as I said before, not a legal claim, but one which my conscience recognises.'[51] His offer to Will of a five hundred pound annuity during his life and 'a proportional capital' at his death arrives hot on the heels of Raffles' queries about his mother, and it is rejected on the same basis that his mother had run away to avoid enjoying any part of the 'profits' which her father's pawnbroking business 'made out of lost souls.'[52] 'My unblemished honour is important to me,' he tells Bulstrode.

> 'It is important to me to have no stain on my birth and connections. And now I find there is a stain which I can't help. My mother felt it, and tried to keep as clear of it as she could, and so will I.'[53]

By rejecting an income from Bulstrode, Will becomes the representative of 'three successive generations of disinheritance.'[54]

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[51] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.557.
[52] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.551.
[53] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.559.
[54] Henry Staten, 'Is *Middlemarch* Ahistorical?' *PMLA* 115 (2000): 1003.

Will's renunciation of wealth prepares the reader for Dorothea's even more momentous renunciation of her husband's money. The sudden onset of a thunderstorm creates an apocalyptic setting for the two lovers to acknowledge to each other for the first time the forces which divide them. The image of Dorothea and Will,

> their hands clasped, like two children, looking out on the storm, while the thunder gave a tremendous crack and roll above them, and the rain began to pour down,[55]

evokes the last scene of *The Mill on the Floss*, where the siblings Tom and Maggie Tulliver are joined together before the river sweeps them to their deaths. Similar apocalyptic language is noticeable in the scene of Deronda's parting from Gwendolen in George Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. Whereas Gwendolen's liberation from an egotistical world-view coincides with her parting from Deronda, Dorothea's 'soul' is 'liberated from its terrible conflict' before her meeting with Will, which opens as a scene of parting but ends as a scene of reunion (704). Dorothea's act of renouncing Casaubon's money takes place during an uncharacteristic outburst, in which the emotions repressed to silence while she was married to Casaubon and by his will, are finally let out:

> 'Oh, I cannot bear it—my heart will break,' said Dorothea, starting from her seat, the flood of her young passion bearing down all the obstructions which had kept her silent—the great tears rising and falling in an instant: 'I don't mind about poverty—I hate my wealth.'[56]

Instead of freeing Will from the poverty which was his portion from his female forebears, Dorothea joins his grandmother Julia's and mother Sarah's legacy of marital recklessness by marrying Ladislaw outside legal, domestic and social propriety. Despite the adverse effect of her decision to her economic circumstances, particularly from her family's perspective, Dorothea condemns herself only to genteel poverty—she still has her own income of seven hundred a year—while she gains the man she loves and a happy home life. Her marriage to Casaubon had been sterile, and it seemed as though her sister Celia, who had married James Chettam and given birth to a baby son, would become the mother of the

[55] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.724.
[56] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.725.

heir to the Brooke family's estate. With Ladislaw, Dorothea has a son of her own.

Before the novel concludes, it returns briefly to the problem of the entail, as Mr Brooke suggests half-heartedly to Chettam that he could 'cut off the entail' as a sign of disapproval of Dorothea's second marriage. Although hostile to Ladislaw and realising that Brooke's proposal would unite Tipton Grange and his own estate (a 'prospect that flattered him for his son and heir'), Chettam's honour prevents him from encouraging Brooke to take such drastic action as disinheriting Dorothea's son.[57] (730). The decision of Chettam and Brooke not to take punitive action against Dorothea for the mere sake of propriety ends a family history of disinheritances. The withholding or conferring of inheritances on the basis of individual 'liking' is finally replaced by the choosing of an heir on the basis of family 'responsibility.'

Daniel Deronda

Whereas *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* explore questions of inheritance and succession as they present themselves in English law, Eliot's last novel considers alternative principles of inheritance in Jewish law and culture. The one major difference between English and Jewish law was that the latter allowed inheritance through the maternal line. Daniel Deronda is adopted by Sir Hugo Mallinger, but the money for his education and upbringing derives from his grandfather's fortune, which is transmitted to him through his mother Leonora Charisi. As in Eliot's earlier fiction, matrilineal inheritance is as much a feature of the narrative as patrilineal. However, it is important to recognise that Eliot does not present the Jewish conception of inheritance as ideal in comparison with the English. The dominance of patriarchy is as entrenched in Hebrew as in Gentile tradition. Only a young male 'Jew, intellectually cultured, morally fervid' can qualify as the ideal type to whom Mordecai yearns to transplant his spiritual life.[58] Deronda's grandfather, a strict orthodox Jew, cared for his daughter Leonora only 'as a makeshift link' between himself and an unborn grandson to whom he hoped to transmit his spiritual legacy.[59]

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[57] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.730.
[58] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (1876; rpt. London: Penguin, 1995), p.472.
[59] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 631.

Deronda's final parting from Gwendolen suggests that the novel does not ultimately provide for an ideal union between English and Jewish cultures. Eliot appears to have wanted her story to be 'something new,' rather than 'merely another installment of the same old thing, the English novel of marriage and inheritance.'[60] As in *Felix Holt*, she consulted Frederic Harrison for advice about the law of settlement while writing *Daniel Deronda*. Her letters to Harrison suggest that she may have considered legitimisation by act of Parliament as a course by which Deronda, who is suspected of being Sir Hugo Mallinger's illegitimate son, could succeed to the Mallinger estates, and perhaps also a peerage.[61] Eliot's departure from this early plan by giving Deronda a Jewish parentage ensured that he is not set up simply as a rival to Grandcourt's heirship (as Esther was to Harold in *Felix Holt*, or Ladislaw to Casaubon in *Middlemarch*), but that his future would lie beyond the materialism of landed estates, and even beyond English shores.

Deronda's departure from the conventional English inheritance plot, however, does not free him completely from the burden of being perhaps the last surviving male of several Jewish families. The failure of the male line is a very real prospect for the English Mallingers, whose estates have run 'together into the single heirship of a mealy-complexioned male,' Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt.[62] But like their English counterparts, Deronda's ancestors have also struggled to perpetuate the patriline. At Genoa, his mother tells him that his real name is Daniel Charisi. Before his adoption by Sir Hugo, she changed his name to 'Deronda,' a 'branch of the family' which her 'father had lost sight of.'[63] The Charisi, Deronda tells Mordecai, were a 'strain that has ardently maintained the fellowship of our race—a line of Spanish Jews that has borne many students and men of practical power.'[64] In his second interview with his mother, he learns that his maternal grandmother 'was a Morteira,'[65] a family of Portuguese Jews of Sephardic (Iberian) origin, who 'were regarded as a

[60] Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p.130.
[61] See Eliot's letters to Harrison on 30 Dec. 1874, and 1 Jan. 1875, *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 6, pp.100 and 105.
[62] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.442.
[63] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.637.
[64] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.748.
[65] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.660.

kind of aristocratic stock.'[66] Despite the aristocratic blood from both maternal and paternal sides of his family, Deronda is not very dissimilar to Grandcourt, as he may be the terminus of two, possibly even three, Jewish patrilines—the Charisi, the Morteira, and the Deronda.

Instead of attempting to deny his Jewish heritage, Deronda seeks to confirm his status and racial identity, without allowing it to burden him as it burdened his mother. For a lengthy period of the novel, his status is an imposition on his freedom, as he feels that Mordecai's will for him to be his spiritual heir is as constrictive as the 'grasp of [a] dying hand.'[67] Known by his friends as virtually incapable of withholding his sympathy from anyone, Deronda's wide-ranging sympathy is tested to its limits by Mordecai's will for him to become not simply an amanuensis for transcribing a spiritual vision, but to identify with Mordecai completely. Mordecai insists that Deronda 'be not only a hand to [him], but a soul,—believing my belief … seeing the vision I point to—beholding a glory where I behold it!'[68] He desires the preservation of his consumptive, dying self and the transmission of his ideals to a 'more beautiful… stronger… executive self,' and expects Deronda to fulfil his Cabbalistic desire for a union between their two souls.[69]

> 'You will be my life: it will be planted afresh; it will grow. You shall take the inheritance; it has been gathering for ages … you will take the sacred inheritance of the Jew.'[70]

This is a far more radical form of succession than is provided for under any settlement, will, or entail in English law.

Like Esther and Dorothea in Eliot's earlier novels, Deronda finds a way of reconciling himself with his inheritance, without allowing his newfound status as a Jew to determine his life completely. After his mother confirms his Jewish blood, he travels to Mainz to collect a chest that his grandfather had left in trust for him. But when the trustee of the chest, Joseph Kalonymos, asks him whether he will call himself 'a Jew and profess the faith of [his] fathers,' Deronda resists unqualified

[66] Terence Cave, Notes to *Daniel Deronda*, by George Eliot (London: Penguin, 1995), p.842.
[67] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.564.
[68] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.499.
[69] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.473.
[70] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.500.

commitment to the nationalistic aims which Mordecai and Kalonymos wish him to fulfil, as he says:

> 'I shall call myself a Jew. But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed. Our fathers themselves changed the horizon of their belief and learned of other races. But I think I can maintain my grandfather's notion of separateness with communication. I hold that my first duty is toward my own people, and if there is anything to be done towards restoring or perfecting their common life, I shall make that my vocation.'[71]

Deronda is perhaps too aware of the dangers of cultural insularity, which turned his mother against her racial and spiritual heritage, and therefore

> at no point, crucially, does [he] explicitly embrace Mordecai's conception of guaranteed cultural transmission, or his vision of an ignited race consciousness that will automatically enact Israel's destiny.[72]

Deronda also suggests that 'separateness with communication' or dialogical interaction between Jewish and other races is the path forward. Deronda's Jewish inheritance offers him a way out of the conventional marriage and inheritance plot, but he must negotiate the extent to which he allows his Jewish inheritance to determine his actions. To turn the 'dead hand' of the past into a living and worthwhile vocation, he reserves for himself the contractual freedom to support the Zionist cause on his own terms, a freedom he otherwise would be denied if he submitted completely to the wishes of Mordecai.

Deronda's unique journey is depicted alongside the more conventional marriage and inheritance plot in which Gwendolen Harleth is entangled. Whereas Deronda struggles at first with his new Jewish status, Gwendolen Harleth struggles under her husband Grandcourt's despotic authority. Grandcourt, whose 'importance as a subject of this realm was of the grandly passive kind which consists in the inheritance of land,'[73] is entirely a creature of status, which he owes to his uncle Sir

[71] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.725.
[72] Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.135.
[73] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.584.

Hugo Mallinger's misfortune of failing to father a son. Like Transome Court in *Felix Holt* and Tipton Grange in *Middlemarch*, the estates of the aristocratic Mallingers in *Daniel Deronda* are entailed strictly to males as a consequence of an 'ill-devised settlement which [Sir Hugo's] father, Sir Francis, had chosen to make by will.'[74] Sir Hugo is the life tenant of three estates—the oldest, King's Topping, granted to 'a certain Hugues le Malingre, who came in with the Conqueror,' Monk's Topping, granted to the Mallingers 'under Henry the Eighth,' and Diplow Hall, 'a comparatively landless place which had come into the family from a rich lawyer on the female side who wore the perruque of the Restoration.'[75] Under the settlement, all three properties are entailed to male heirs. Sir Hugo is particularly disappointed that 'Diplow with its modicum of land had been left under the same conditions as the ancient and wide inheritance of the two Toppings,' as he regards it as a place 'where his wife and daughters ought to have been able to retire after his death.'[76] Grandcourt views Diplow as simply one (and certainly not the most impressive) estate among five which he expects to own in future, as in addition to the Mallinger estates, he has already inherited Ryelands and Gadsmere from his father, who died early. Whereas Grandcourt does not value Diplow highly, his uncle anxiously hopes that 'Grandcourt might consent to a transaction by which he would get a good sum of ready money' in exchange for Diplow.[77]

Sir Hugo's plans for Diplow, which 'fretted him rather more than if it had concerned Church discipline or the ballot,' are an integral part of the socio-legal fabric of the novel.[78] The desired property transaction does not occupy as intrusive a place in the narrative as the base fee in *Felix Holt*, but is deftly used by Eliot to reveal the kind of tension between life tenant and heir, which can easily arise between 'men in that relation.' Eliot requested advice from Harrison on how to create '

> certain conditions … which would make them [life tenant and heir] wish to suppress any show of dislike and would give them a mutual sense of self-interest in being friendly.[79]

[74] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.158-9.
[75] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.165.
[76] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.159.
[77] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.159.
[78] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.158.
[79] Eliot letter to Frederic Harrison, 19 Feb. 1875, *George Eliot Letters*, vol. 6, p.126.

Thus we see Sir Hugo suppressing his dislike of Grandcourt for the sake of his wife and daughters. Grandcourt considers 'his uncle a superfluity and a bore,' but tolerates Sir Hugo because he is 'gratified to have the alternative of the money in his mind,' and is 'flattered' by the prospect of 'being able to refuse what Sir Hugo desire[s].'[80] Neither can act without the other's consent, and until they can reach contractual agreement, they are both powerless. However, Sir Hugo the life tenant is rendered more powerless than his heir, as he knows that, after his death, Grandcourt will become the absolute 'master over [his] estates, present or future,' and will have the right to choose his own heir.[81] The settlement gives Sir Hugo limited bargaining power with Grandcourt, and with a family of four to provide for, he is burdened by greater responsibilities than his bachelor nephew, who is eventually prevailed upon to sell Diplow only after he marries Gwendolen.

In the context of the whole novel, the Diplow transaction is a relatively minor incident. But the symbolic significance of Diplow outweighs its narrative importance. Despite the Mallingers' adherence to primogeniture, the property ironically comes from 'a rich lawyer on the female side,' and is therefore a matrilineal inheritance.[82] Not only does Diplow come to Grandcourt from the female side, but his father's properties also belonged originally to his mother's side of the family. Upon marrying a Miss Grandcourt, his father had

> taken her name along with her estates, thus making a junction between two equally old families, impaling the three Saracens' heads proper and three bezants of the one with the tower and falcons *argent* of the other…[83]

While, on the symbolic level, it is the feminine coat-of-arms (the Grandcourt family's tower and falcons) that impales the symbols on the

[80] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.160.
[81] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.284.
[82] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.165.
[83] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.166. The 'three Saracens' heads' and 'three bezants' are symbols on the coat-of-arms of the Mallinger family. In his cursory exploration of the Mallinger family tree, Daniel admits to being interested 'only about that ancestor who had killed three Saracens in one encounter' (p.171). The early Mallingers' pride in their military success in the Crusades against Muslim Saracens is an ancient precedent of the conflict between Western and Eastern culture explored in the novel.

masculine coat-of-arms (the Mallingers' Saracens' heads and bezants), it is the male side of the family which takes the estates of the female. In addition to giving her son Ryelands and Gadsmere, Mrs Mallinger (née Grandcourt) also transmits

> a baronial streak to his blood, so that if certain intervening persons slightly painted in the middle distance died, he would become a baron and peer of this realm.[84]

From his uncle, Grandcourt will inherit only a baronetcy, an inferior title to the barony from his mother. Although his full name is 'Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt,' he is known and addressed by all as 'Grandcourt,' a patronym which is underwritten by maternal authority.

Grandcourt relies passively on his status, but he is a masterful exploiter of contract as a means of extending his dominion over others. His choice of Gwendolen as his bride (and rejection of the wealthier Catherine Arrowpoint) is motivated by a powerful, spontaneous wish 'to be completely master of this creature—this combination of maidenliness and mischief.'[85] In fact Gwendolen's financial plight improves her marital prospects, as Grandcourt knows that his economic status will only enhance his authority as a husband. In Chapter 27, the scene of Grandcourt's proposal, he adopts the pose of an ardent lover to a girl playing hard-to-get, but in hindsight, Gwendolen realises that the scene had been the enactment of a contract, the terms of which were framed entirely by Grandcourt, although she had thought at the time that 'there had been a tacit part of the contract on her side—namely, that she meant to rule and have her own way.'[86] Her status as a wife is undermined by the fact that she accepted Grandcourt, despite having promised his mistress Lydia Glasher that she would not marry him and therefore become an obstacle to the inheritance of Lydia's son. Grandcourt knows about Gwendolen's meeting with Lydia at Cardell Chase through Mr Lush, the man responsible for its arrangement, but is ignorant about his wife's sense of contractual obligation to his mistress.

Grandcourt's incomplete knowledge about his wife's conscience renders his mastery over her 'imperfect.'[87] Ironically, this imperfection is

[84] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.91.
[85] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.301.
[86] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.669.
[87] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.352.

revealed by the narrator at a point in which Grandcourt's power appears supreme—his confronting Gwendolen with the contents of his will. In the event that Gwendolen bears 'no son an issue of her marriage,' Lydia's son, young Henleigh, would be Grandcourt's heir.[88] Like Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, Grandcourt uses his will as a 'dead hand' to burden and disgrace his wife. Gwendolen is given residence in Gadsmere, a secluded house in a coal-mining district, and an annual provision of two thousand pounds, moderately wealthy by middle-class standards, but meagre in relation to the vastness of Grandcourt's wealth. Whereas Lydia, unsuccessful during Grandcourt's life in claiming the position of his wife, is dignified after his death by the will which makes her son an heir to all his father's estates, Gwendolen is forced to take the place of her husband's mistress, and occupy Gadsmere, which signifies a kind of Dantesque purgatory for the discarded, unloved woman, seeking but never achieving the status of a wife. As if forcing his wife to exchange positions with Lydia is insufficient punishment, Grandcourt intensifies Gwendolen's humiliation by forcing her to hear the terms of his will delivered by his former secretary Lush, who had been sent away at Gwendolen's request before she agreed to marry Grandcourt. The act of re-employing Lush as his spokesman represents a breach of their marital contract, and it further consigns Gwendolen to a status lower than that of a secretary, whose services are required and terminated at Grandcourt's pleasure.

There is a vengeful aspect to Grandcourt's will, which is related to jealousy of Gwendolen as his exclusive possession. Unlike Casaubon, whose codicil exposes his jealousy of Dorothea and Ladislaw, Grandcourt does not make Gwendolen's inheritance of Gadsmere conditional on her not marrying Deronda. As he considers Deronda to be far beneath him in status, the omission is unsurprising, but his consignment of Gwendolen to Gadsmere is perhaps intended to divide her from Deronda. After witnessing Gwendolen's attempt to attract Deronda's notice by wearing her father's necklace as a wrist bracelet, he rebukes her harshly for acting in a 'damnably vulgar' way, but asserts confidently that Deronda 'is not going to take [his] place.'[89] When he makes his will, his 'state of mind' is again described as not one of 'jealousy,' but the narrator's equivocations suggest otherwise: 'his behaviour in some respects was as like jealousy as yellow is to yellow,

[88] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.601.
[89] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.447.

which colour we know may be the effect of very different causes.'[90] By keeping his wife as far as possible from Deronda and the social circles which befit her rank, Grandcourt's will is a defensive ploy designed to safeguard his public reputation, even at the expense of his wife's dignity.

Eliot further undermines Grandcourt's assurance in his psychological power by revealing the partiality of his knowledge about his wife's psyche:

> He had correctly divined one half of Gwendolen's dread—all that related to her personal pride, and her perception that his will must conquer hers; but the remorseful half, even if he had known of her broken promise [to Lydia], was as much out of his imagination as the other side of the moon. … There is no escaping the fact that want of sympathy condemns us to a corresponding stupidity. Mephistopheles thrown upon real life, and obliged to manage his own plots, would inevitably make blunders.[91]

Although Mephistophelian in his ability to abuse the fears and weaknesses of others (particularly women), Grandcourt's perceptions are rendered 'stupid' by his lack of 'sympathy' with those he oppresses. He can fathom the idea that Gwendolen might hate the prospect of becoming a mother because she despises him, but he cannot perceive that she does not want a son because of a guilty conscience. 'Gwendolen felt that to desire a child for herself would have been consenting to the completion of the injury she had been guilty of.'[92] Her husband fails to attribute her dread to the fear of bearing a son who would override the claim of young Henleigh to Grandcourt's estates. Even Gwendolen herself does not seem to realise at the time that her guilt about having a child with Grandcourt was a sign that she had put Deronda's advice into practice by using her fear as a safeguard against moral compromise and as a catalyst for her moral redemption.

The Mediterranean yachting trip, which Grandcourt intended as an opportunity for him 'to feel more securely that [Gwendolen] was his to do as he liked with,' ends in his drowning at the Bay of Genoa.[93] By

[90] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.585.
[91] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.596.
[92] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.672.
[93] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.668.

imposing his 'will like that of a crab or a boa-constrictor,' Grandcourt had been 'pinching' and 'crushing' Gwendolen to the point of paralysis.[94] Gwendolen views his death as a *willed* murder—by failing to cast out a line to save him, she feels that she had intentionally 'resisted his will' and thus 'kill[ed] him in [her] thoughts.'[95] The 'white hand of his' which she feared 'was capable … of clinging round her neck and threatening to throttle her' is now a dead hand,[96] but it is just as capable of strangling her as it was when alive. Her burden of guilt enhances the prospect of strangulation. But Gwendolen's liberation is signified not by her release from the grasp of her husband's psychological tyranny, but by her decision partially to accept the terms of Grandcourt's will. While she is at first hesitant towards claiming any provision, Deronda comforts her by saying that she ought not to feel as though taking the money were 'a crime towards one who is dead.'[97] Following his advice, Gwendolen also decides not to limit the amount she accepts to eight hundred a-year, the amount which had been given to her mother while Grandcourt lived, but accepts the full two thousand pounds for her mother's and her own use.

What Gwendolen rejects is residence at Gadsmere. She is assisted to achieve this end by Sir Hugo, who, on hearing about Grandcourt's will and the disgrace which it inflicted on Gwendolen by its 'conspicuous publishing of her husband's relation to Mrs Glasher,' is moved to suggest an alternative.[98] He offers to help Gwendolen to lease Gadsmere 'on capital terms' to a man engaged in the coal-mining industry.[99] After her mother reveals that Offendene, the house she lived in before her marriage, is empty, she finds her own alternative to the life which her husband had planned for her. Gwendolen's resolution to live at Offendene with her mother and sisters marks a crucial turning-point in her movement from egotism. At the beginning of the novel, no home seemed adequate to her queenly desires and needs. Chapter 3 opens with the narrator's declaration:

> Pity that Offendene was not the home of Miss Harleth's childhood, or endeared to her by family memories! A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native

[94] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.423.
[95] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, pp. 693 and 695.
[96] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.427.
[97] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.767.
[98] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.758.
[99] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.761.

> land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth … a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection, and kindly acquaintance with all neighbours, even to the dogs and donkeys, may spread not by sentimental effort and reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood.[100]

No longer 'a quiet home which had once seemed a dullness to be fled from,' Offendene promises to be a 'spot of … native land' with which Gwendolen can learn to achieve a 'tender kinship.'[101] She may still be far from achieving this kinship, but she is as close as any of the English characters in the novel to such achievement. Although Deronda seems to face more significant geographical and political barriers before he can succeed in 'restoring a political existence to [his] people, making them a nation again, giving them a national centre,' his quest is not presented as more difficult than Gwendolen's.[102] Her final moral resolution to 'live' and 'be better' will be as challenging as the nationalistic task which he has accepted from Mordecai.[103]

Conclusion

The law becomes progressively less prominent as we move from *Felix Holt* to *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, but its subtle and elliptical presence suggests how Victorian anxieties about inheritance and succession were related to their attempts to reform social arrangements without losing touch with their cultural traditions. Inheritance is presented by Eliot as an enervating possession in the hands of those, like Casaubon and Grandcourt, who covet and exploit only the status it confers, but an opportunity for those, like Esther, Dorothea, Gwendolen, and Daniel, who accept a portion of their inheritances without surrendering their personal independence or right to decide their course apart from familial responsibilities. Reaching a pragmatic compromise between status and contract, rather than a complete movement from one condition to the other, is the preferred course of action—inheritance in moderation, a practice supported by land law reformers, political economists, and novelists. By reading Maine in dialogue with Eliot, and

[100] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.22.
[101] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.762.
[102] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.803.
[103] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.807.

using the former's status-contract theory as a conceptual model with which to illuminate the contradictory emphasis in social discourse on both family and individual rights, it is possible to show how the interconnections between jurisprudence and literature contributed to the formation of a juridical imaginary, the contours of which are seen most clearly in the inheritance plots of Victorian fiction.

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The House of Usher as Phantasmagoria

MARK BYRON

Throughout the history of cinema filmmakers and directors have found Poe's texts irresistible, and none more than 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' a story first published in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in Philadelphia in September 1839 and republished in Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* of 1840.[1] This short prose text has generated over a dozen filmic adaptations of striking aesthetic and formal variety. The combination of Gothic literary conventions, an emotionally suggestible narrator, and contemporary themes of moral and physical degeneracy provide ample stimulus for creative re-imagining of the fate of the house's inhabitants. This text provokes an unrivalled cinematic experimentalism when compared with almost any other frequently adapted pre-cinematic text, such as the novels of Jane Austen or Charles Dickens. Does something inhere in the story or its mode of narration to inspire this experimental challenge to aspirant directors? This essay will attempt to show by way of close reading that Poe's text is a literary phantasmagoria, a lantern show that invites a specifically cinematic speculation as to the nature of events, the mode of their narration, and the qualities of perception enlisted within the narrative frame that convey scene and action to the reader. The House of Usher—that reticulated system of story, building and family line—projects its oblique images, inciting its viewers to take on the powers of suggestion and to reanimate its bloody chamber in suggestible moving images.

Poe's Usher as the Threshold of Allegory

On first reading, the treatment of theme and character in the Gothic mode makes 'The Fall of the House of Usher' particularly conducive to experimental adaptation. The crepuscular atmosphere of stormy weather

[1] All citations in this essay are from Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' in *Complete Tales and Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1975), pp. 231-245.

and stark variations in light and dark functions as a fitting backdrop to the plotlines of threatening action and ambiguous motives, and operates as a looming expression of characters' consciousness. Roderick's deeply ambivalent shifting between ennui and animated terror reflects abrupt variations in the flow of narrative time, where the unnumbered days of passivity (reading, lute-playing) are instantly jolted into the rapid catastrophic finale. The afflicted characterisation of both Usher siblings reflects a narrative register imbued with the rhetoric of self-doubt and epistemological uncertainty that saturates the entire record of events, despite its aspirations to detached observation. The Gothic mode is especially conducive to allegorical contemplation, and 'Usher' has been read productively by way of psychoanalysis, economies of gender and sexuality, postcolonial discourse, political economy, and other schematic hermeneutic frameworks. The deeply suggestive narrative tone and subject matter elicit a striking variety of critical opinions concerning the story's abiding preoccupations: the southern Gothic as repressed racial guilt; the politics of reproduction and female bodily agency; the paradox of the split subject; hysteria and the artistic imagination; and so on. 'Usher' embodies and performs a narrative of suggestion, and through this modality provides ample thematic material to tempt such allegorical readings. Yet a number of elements in Poe's text foreclose on any singular reading strategy: the peculiar form of the story as simultaneously a forensic report and projected hallucination; and the complex web of relations between narrator, characters, the architecture of the house and its environment, which confounds any sense of cause and effect. This foundational ambiguity both stimulates innovative readings in the critical scholarship and provokes serial cinematic reiterations of the story's spectral display. Rather than attempt a schematic overview of specific critical responses to the text, it will be more productive, initially, to focus on specific features of the text that provoke such hermeneutic stimulus and innovative cinematic adaptation.

The tale's epigraph provides the first indication of 'Usher' as a suspended narrative: that is, as a narrative bracketed outside of the measurable time of history and social discourse, and as a narrative fusing perceptions of external events (impression) with the powers of suggestion to individual consciousness (expression). Poe quotes from Pierre-Jean de Béranger's song, 'Le Refus'—'His heart is a lute suspended; / Upon the touch it resonates'—but despite retaining the quotation in French, he changes the source quote from the third to the first person. By doing so, the epigraph is transformed from abstracted text residing beyond the

narrative frame, to a gesture of foreboding, situating the narrator's story as a tableau of diaphanous suggestibility that speaks to the reader directly. The decadent tone neatly combines characteristics of Gothic fiction (ennui, hyperaesthesia) with the theme of artistic creativity and its dangers to rational discourse.

The opening sentence provides a formal tableau within the narrative proper, and functions as a kind of establishing shot of the Usher house and estate: it resonates with adjectival foreboding—'dull, dark, and soundless day,' 'clouds hung oppressively low,' 'singularly dreary tract,' and so on. The narrator begins with a description of the scene but quickly suggests a mood of spiritual sympathy with the object of his perception, admitting 'a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit' (231). The structural parallel with Dante's journey into the *selva oscura* in Canto I of *Inferno* is confirmed later by the 'sulphurous lustre' cast upon the narrator's stay in the house (236). The hellish scene suggests spiritual disorientation, but physically resembles the blasted heath of *King Lear* III.iv, recalling that play's singular revelation of 'unaccommodated man.' The echoes of spiritual epic—and perhaps even the *nekyia* / *katabasis* in Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*—blend with contemporary expressions of ennui by means of an identifiably Romantic vocabulary. The narrator's sense of environmental melancholy, his vision of 'a few rank sedges' (citing Keats's poem 'La Belle Dame sans Merci') as well as repeated mentions of imagination and the sublime (and the dangers of fancy) distinctly and ironically inflect his speech with Coleridge's aesthetics.[2] The pathetic fallacy—another Romantic cliché—does important work at this early point in the story, establishing the concept of suggestibility and the curious metabolism of sensibility, which mediates between mimesis and creativity, empirical observation and irrational expression: the Mirror and the Lamp.[3] The tarn immediately presents itself as an object of curiosity and dread, as though it embodies and articulates the terrible depths of the imaginative faculty from which absolute separation is

[2] Numerous other Romantic citations abound in the story: at one point the narrator describes Roderick's sullen expression as like that of 'the irreclaimable eater of opium' (235), a clear titular echo of Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821).

[3] This of course is the title of M. H. Abrams's groundbreaking study of Romantic aesthetics and its figuration of the imagination as an essentially creative faculty, rather than as a function of mimetic response to external stimuli. See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1953).

impossible. This geographic feature, separate from the architecture of the house but part of its destabilising geological underpinnings, presents an index of dread and fear for the narrator, who is repeatedly drawn to its reflective, image-producing surface, as well as its (proleptic) iconicity as vacancy and the scene of annihilation. The image of the tarn, with its 'pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued' (233), externalises an ominous sense of mental and spiritual turbulence in the narrator.

As the mise en scène shifts to the interior of the Usher house, the narrator's forensic aptitudes focus upon Roderick's general appearance and condition. His evident ennui and hyperaesthesia, hollow facial features, pale complexion and 'nervous agitation' (234), lends Roderick an apparitional aura. The narrator's potential projections upon his friend bear analogy to the fissure detected in the structure's wall: this architectural fault is an icon of the fundamental split, in every sense, of personal identity, genealogical integrity, perception, and aesthetic expression. Roderick addresses the fatal implications of his 'deplorable Folly,' his 'struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR' (235). He goes as far as to identify the folly of being overtaken by the malevolent *genius loci*: his theory of 'the sentience of all vegetable things' (239) extends to the house itself. The narrator infers its sentience is a function of the arrangement of its stones and the extensive system of fungi holding it together, all the more ominous for being reduplicated 'in the still waters of the tarn' (239). The intermingling of house and watery reflection neatly echoes the suggestive narrative propensity to intensify and distort the documentary record. This atmosphere of projection is literalised shortly afterwards when the narrator reports:

> the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion (242).

This hallucinatory aura deflects attention from the curious dilation of time following Madeline's death, during which Roderick and the narrator engage in extended artistic activities. Roderick's musical *impromptus* include the recitation of the song, 'The Haunted Palace' (a poem Poe had previously published) and the strumming of his lute resonates beyond the narrative frame back to the original epigraph. The narrator admits an

admiration for Roderick's abilities in painting: 'if ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher' (237). These diversions complement their extensive reading in chiromancy and other occult subjects, culminating in the narrator's exquisitely misjudged choice of Sir Launcelot Canning's medieval romance, the 'Mad Trist.' This text (the only citation in the story of Poe's invention) induces the confluence of imagination and actuality, with the action of the romance echoing Madeline's revival from the crypt.[4] The uncanny influence of text upon sensibility also recalls the narrator's initial diagnostic assessment of Roderick's letter, in which '[t]he MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation' (232).

Such chirographic diagnostics is itself indicative of a general philological theme throughout the narrative. Roderick's genealogy tells of a ruinous singularity of issue, where 'the entire family lay in the direct line of descent' with only 'very trifling and very temporary variation' over centuries (232): that is, only one male Usher of each generation produces children, ensuring transmission of the family name in a single line of descent that might be cut at any one point. This information bodes badly for Madeline, in that her potential fertility functions as an exception to this natural law of the Usher family tree and thus marks her out for sacrifice. But a subtle textual analogy lurks here too: just as the Usher issue is vulnerable to decadence and dilution, so too any single line of textual descent is precarious. It is open to irrevocable corruption at every stage of its transmission and is denied the wider context of witness texts or versions, conventionally visualised in a stemmatic tree or dendrogram. That both familial and textual lines of descent are represented in tree diagrams evinces their fragility, and gives specific, ironic currency to Roderick's fear of the sentience of fungi and trees mingling with the stones of his family pile.[5] The final apocalypse (*apokalyptein*: to uncover, reveal) of the riven house collapsing into the tarn fulfils the proleptic narrative vision: art, perception, and narrative itself are dangerous experiments in creative imagination, capable of overwhelming the subject's equilibrium and overheating the sensorium with its emanating visions. Conversely, and perversely, Poe implicitly throws down a

[4] The library replicates the sterile malady of its owner: 'Like the family, the library produces no "collateral issue" or ideas, but reproduces a monomania.' Joseph Riddel, 'The "Crypt" of Edgar Poe,' *boundary 2* 7.3 (Spring 1979): 128.
[5] David Ketterer identifies several of Poe's alphabetical-textual rhizomes in his gymnastic study, '"Shudder": A Signature *Crypt*-ogram in "The Fall of the House of Usher",' *Resources for American Literary Study* 25.2 (1999): 192-205.

challenge to his readers and prospective emulators to dare imagine at the limiting edge of coherent creativity.

Adaptation and 'Usher'

The literary form and techniques at work in 'Usher' make it especially conducive to adaptation: the profoundly ambiguous status of fact and event, mediated by a suggestible narrative persona; the uncanny chiasmus between narrative speculation and plot; the radical rift in epistemological and perceptual verity; the dream-like suspension of ordinary events in geographic isolation; and the irresistible relation between artistic creativity and spectral apparition. Critics have remarked how Roderick's artistic pretensions are set in stark relief against the Gothic tale's generic mass-market appeal,[6] a neat anticipation of its cinematic allure. The story itself engages directly with persistence after death and the concept of haunting (both within the mind and as an external phenomenon): Mark Steven provides an engaging and critically acute account of Poe's own interment in the story and its critical reception, and whose status as 'undead' author might be considered an open invitation for iterative critical and artistic recombination.[7] Steven's appraisal of the text's 'critical afterlife' is an astute counterpart to questions of its manifold aesthetic iterations in creative adaptation. 'Usher' has been subjected to more than a dozen filmic adaptations, but there also exist significant adaptations in other media. Claude Debussy attempted a one-act opera (*La chute de la maison Usher*) in the last decade of his life, to which he contributed the libretto, but it remained unfinished on his death in 1918. Debussy followed Poe's narrative, but accentuated the incestuous undertones of the sibling relationship and raised the role of the doctor to that of Roderick's rival for Madeline's affections.[8] Steven Berkoff's

[6] Terence Whalen, 'Poe and the American Publishing Industry,' in *The Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (Cary, NC: Oxford UP, 2001), p. 91.

[7] Mark Steven, 'Movements in the Hollow Coffin: On "The Fall of the House of Usher",' *Poe Studies* 44 (2011): 5-15. Poe's cinematic afterlife is evident in the feature film, *The Raven* (2012) starring John Cusack as Edgar Allan Poe: the writer battles with a serial killer who emulates the modes of killing in his stories.

[8] Jean-François Thibault, 'Debussy's Unfinished American Opera: *La chute de la maison Usher*,' in *Opera and the Golden West: The Past, Present, and Future of Opera in the USA*, ed. John L. DiGaetani and Josef P. Sirefman (London and Toronto: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1994), pp. 198-206.

dramatic adaptation of 'Usher,' first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1974,[9] centres on Roderick's mental disintegration in his isolated domicile. The visitation of a friend, Edgar, punctuates extended sequences of discourse between the siblings (Berkoff's free invention). Madeline functions as a floating apparition, visible to Roderick and the audience but not to Edgar. Thus the audience is aware of and complicit in Roderick's hallucination, and enters into the zone of guilt-induced psychosis. Julio Cortázar also deploys the plot device of troubled siblings, remnants of a parasitic feudal order, in his 1944 short story, 'Casa tomada.'[10] The siblings are compelled to abandon their ancestral house, beset by mysterious phantasms.

Of the film adaptations of 'Usher' known to exist, four in particular aptly illustrate the variety of approaches inspired by Poe's story. Jean Epstein's 1928 French production is a silent film co-written with Luis Buñuel,[11] which shifts the nature of the sibling relationship to that of husband and wife. The techniques of silent cinema sharpen attention to the nature of perception: the murkiness of the film stock and the folk guitar accompaniment situate the action in a temporally ambiguous rural space, complete with suspicious townsfolk. As well as providing an establishing close-up shot of Roderick's letter **[figure 1]** Epstein gives sharp focus to Roderick's books, his portrait of Madeline, and irruptions of an abstract avant-garde musical score as a means for plot advancement and as symbolic evidence of Roderick's mania as it develops within the Gothic house **[figure 2].**

[9] Steven Berkoff, *Agamemnon* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (Charibury: Amber Lane, 1977).
[10] Rosario Ferré, *Cortázar: El Romántico en su Observatorio*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Literal Books; Río Piedras: Editorial Cultura, 1994), p. 49; cited in Daniel Bautista, 'Popular Culture in the Houses of Poe and Cortázar,' *Intertexts* 14.1 (Spring 2010): 3. See Julio Cortázar, 'House Taken Over,' trans. Paul Blackburn, in *Bestiary: Selected Stories*, ed. an intro. Alberto Manguel (London: Harvill, 1988), pp. 3-7.
[11] Jean Epstein, dir., *La chute de la maison Usher*, 66 mins. (France, 1928).

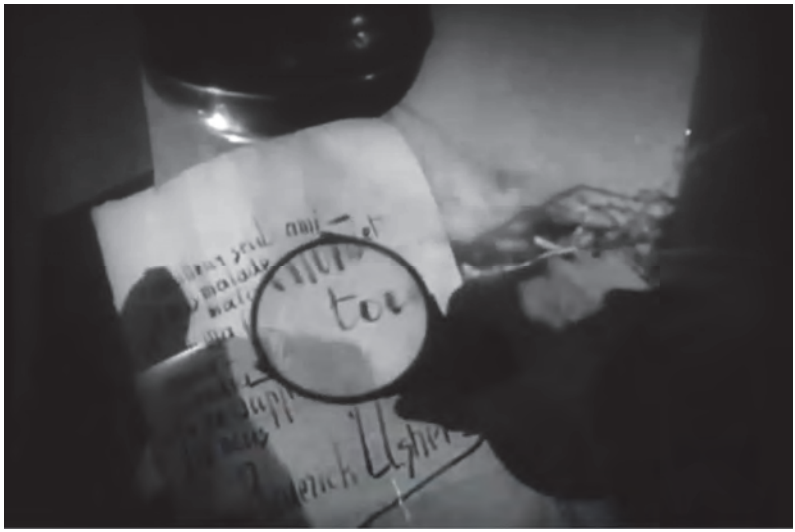

Figure 1. Allan reviews Roderick's letter on his approach to the House in Jean Epstein, dir., *La chute de la maison Usher*, at 2:27.

Figure 2. The falling 'phantasmagorical armorial trophy' on Madeline's cryptic revival (note the piles of open books nearby) in Jean Epstein, dir., *La chute de la maison Usher*, at 58:48.

The film sustains a qualified narrative fidelity in its attention to plot and the props in Roderick's study, as well as the final collapse of the house into the tarn, although the revived Madeline is saved from the house, which is destroyed by fire. By altering the central relationship the film transforms the potential causes of Roderick's mania into that of artistic obsession: Madeline 'dies' exhausted because of her husband's incessant demands that she model for his painting. This emphasis upon optical effects is in keeping with Epstein's famous thesis of the cinema as a process centred upon the visual medium: 'Truly, the cinema creates *a particular system of consciousness limited to a single sense*.'[12] Rumour has it that Buñuel quit the film in protest at Epstein's liberties with Poe's story. Epstein's wilful combat with authorial agency fits with what he elsewhere referred to as the diabolical nature of film-making[13]—neatly literalised in the infernal image of the House's apocalyptic conflagration—and stands as a direct response to Poe's challenge to his readers and emulators, to work at the limits of imagination.

Sibley Watson's much shorter film of the same year attempts a more abstract and avant-garde rendition of the story's themes.[14] The Gothic mode is sustained by virtue of an emblematic score, an opus for organ by Dietrich Buxtehude—although it should be noted that Alec Wilder, The Impossible Orchestra, and others have composed scores for the film—as well as the surrealist methods of montage and multiple frame exposure that underwrote the film's critical and popular success.[15] The emphasis on written documents establishes continuity with Epstein's film: the film begins with a montage of Poe's text scrolling in different directions,

[12] Jean Epstein, 'Magnification,' in *French Film Theory and Criticism, A History/Anthology, Volume I: 1907-1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988), p. 240 (italics in original); cited in Malcolm Turvey, 'Jean Epstein's Cinema of Immanence: The Rehabilitation of the Corporeal Eye,' *October* 83 (Winter 1988): 25.

[13] Jean Epstein, *Le Cinéma du diable*, in *Ecrits sur le cinéma*, 2 vols. (Paris: Seghers, 1974-75), cited in Ludovic Cortade, '*Le Cinéma du diable*: Jean Epstein and the Ambiguities of Subversion,' trans. Roxanne Lapidus, *SubStance* 34.3 (2005): 3-16.

[14] James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, dirs., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 13 mins. (MGM, 1928).

[15] Jan-Christopher Horak, 'A Neglected Genre: James Sibley Watson's Avant-Garde Industrial Films,' *Film History* 20.1 (2008): 35.

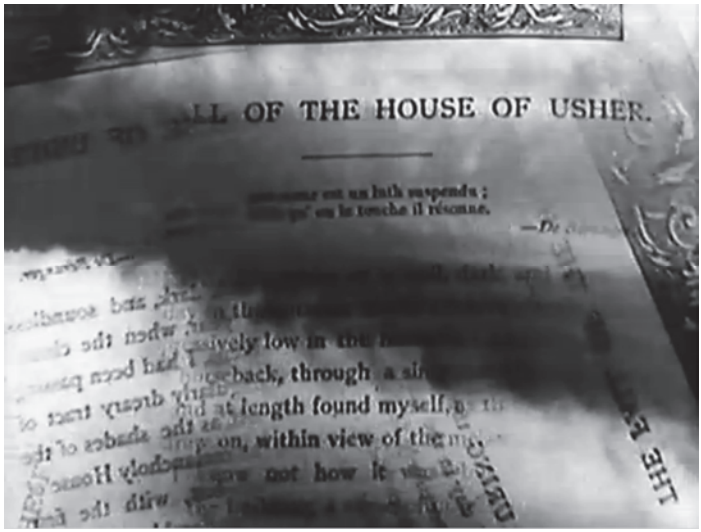

Figure 3. Opening montage of Poe's text in James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, dirs., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 0:25.

stairs in those same skewed angles morph into piles of books,

Figure 4. House interior in James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, dirs., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 7:25.

and luminous letters crowd the air around Roderick's head on the death of Madeline and the destruction of the house. Watson maintains the ambiguity of the Usher siblings' relationship, emphasising the themes of psychological disturbance and suggestibility by way of a set design that directly cites German Expressionist film sets of Robert Wiene, F. W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang, especially in skewed walls, strong chiaroscuro and sustained camera focus on shadows. One scene in which the revived Madeline appears as a sequence of apparitions, perhaps functions as a citation of the time and motion studies that were so popular in early photography and cinema.

Figure 5. Madeline as apparition following Roderick in James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, dirs., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 9:16.

Roger Corman collaborated with writer Richard Matheson and actor Vincent Price on eight film adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe, of which the first was *The Fall of the House of Usher* in 1960.[16] Corman had established a reputation for successful low-budget films in the previous

[16] Roger Corman, dir., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 76 mins. (American International Pictures, 1960; MGM, 2004).

decade. The evident economy in set design complemented the ominous expressionism of Price's acting to produce a lurid study in decadence.

Figure 6. Interior decadence and Vincent Price's Roderick in Roger Corman, dir., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 9:05.

Corman and Matheson tinkered with aspects of the plot, characterisation and setting: for example, Roderick tells of the Usher house having been transplanted stone by stone from England to New England. Significantly, Philip Winthrop (a proxy for the narrator) travels from Boston to visit his beloved, Madeline, who has become ill in her ancestral home she shares with Roderick. The family decline is explained as in Poe's story, with specific and sustained attention to the baroque furnishings, plush fabrics, musical instruments and grotesque paintings.

Figure 7. Roderick's aesthetic preoccupations, in Roger Corman, dir., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 10:35.

Figure 8. The Usher portrait gallery in Roger Corman, dir., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 39:18.

The sequence of family portraits functions quite literally as a study in criminal decadence, a warning to Philip to give up his plans for Madeline which is supported by the discreet advice from the servant, Bristol. Philip demurs, responding to Roderick's insinuation that the house inspires evil: 'The house is neither normal or abnormal. It's only a house!' (40:05). Following Madeline's sudden death and interment in the family crypt, Philip dreams of descending into the infernal crypt among the criminally degenerate Usher ancestors,

Figure 9. Philip Winthrop dreams of passing among the degenerate Usher dead, in Roger Corman, dir., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 59:38.

in a parody of the Homeric *katabasis* or even of the descent of Christ into Limbo after the crucifixion. The final cataclysm has the Gothic mansion burn and sink into the tarn, the fire initiated by dislodged wood from the

fireplace during the siblings' death struggle. By introducing Philip Winthrop as a rival to Roderick for Madeline's affections, Corman and Matheson are able to intensify the incest narrative, and avoid extensive voiceover (as in Epstein's film) or obtrusive framings of Poe's text (as occurs in Watson's film). Corman's significant liberties with the erotic tonalities of the plot align with the basic tenets of Gothic fiction (not to mention low-budget 1960s Hollywood film), particularly the expressionistic understanding of sensory perception. Philip's innate reliability and empirical judgement runs counter to the suggestibility and the blurring of perception and epistemology inherent in Poe's narrator. The bizarre, decadent world of the Usher house is offset from ordinary society (as in Poe), but as an emissary from the modern, rational world he is not absorbed into its degenerate space. This limitation produces a charismatic effect, as though the house itself is the primary character and Roderick and Madeline merely outlandish facets of it.

This rethinking of Poe's narrative in terms of the animating potential in the house is the modus operandi of Jan Švankmajer's 1980 stop-action adaptation, *Zánik domu Usherů*, in which the story is narrated in voiceover and the items of furniture enact the plot.[17] Švankmajer adheres closely to the section of Poe's text concerning Roderick's song, the reading of the 'Mad Trist,' and the consequent effects upon his mental equilibrium. The animation of the furniture,[18] and the appearance of a human visage (**figure 10**) and Madeline's name (**figure 11**) in the stone of the house, all echo Roderick's disquisition on 'the sentience of all vegetable things' and the narrator's creeping awareness of the relation between the house and 'its reduplication in the tarn' (239).

[17] Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru* (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), in *The Complete Short Films* (1980; BFI, 2007).

[18] Curiously, Poe published a satirical article, 'The Philosophy of Furniture,' in the May 1840 issue of *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, several months after 'The Fall of the House of Usher' had appeared in the same pages. See Jacob Berman, 'Domestic Terror and Poe's Arabesque Interior,' *English Studies in Canada* 31.1 (2005): 128-129.

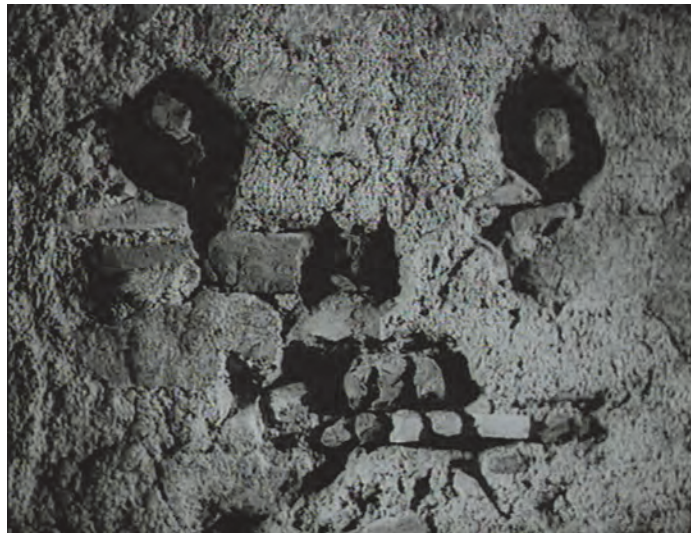

Figure 10. The "sentience of all vegetable things" transferred to the stones of the House, in Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru* (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), at 6:08.

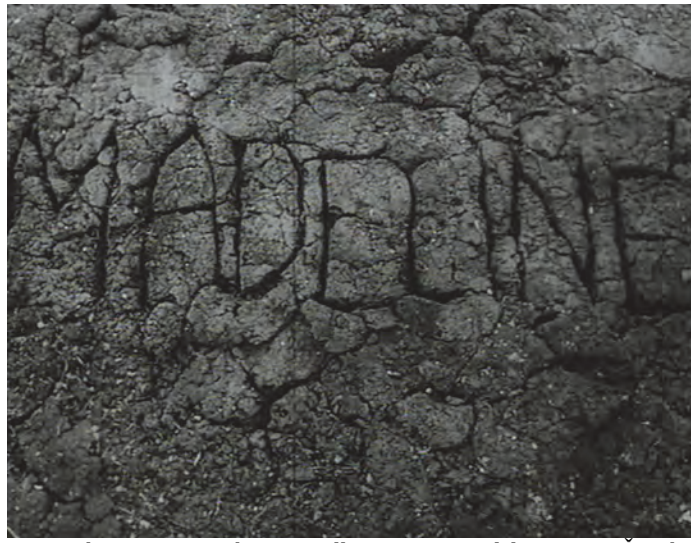

Figure 11. The House inscribing its call to possess Madeline, in Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru* (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), at 8:37.

By initiating a radical recalibration of the audience's attention to the phantasmic and hallucinatory dimensions of the story, Švankmajer's film gets to the heart of the Gothic discourse that Poe interrogates. The effects of this literalisation—the House itself is deranged, and the furniture is possessed and condemned to suicide (**figures 12-14**)—produces a surrealist theatre for the action: 'he bridges the gap between live-action and animation, proving without doubt that the two practices are not at all separate entities but merely variations within the larger realm of motion picture production.'[19]

Figure 12. Madeline's animated coffin takes her to the crypt, in Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru* (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), at 6:16.

[19] Maureen Furniss, Review of *The Collected Shorts of Jan Svankmejer*, *Moving Image* 6.1 (Spring 2006): 157.

Figure 13. The furniture of the House flees in terror, in Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru* (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), at 14:10.

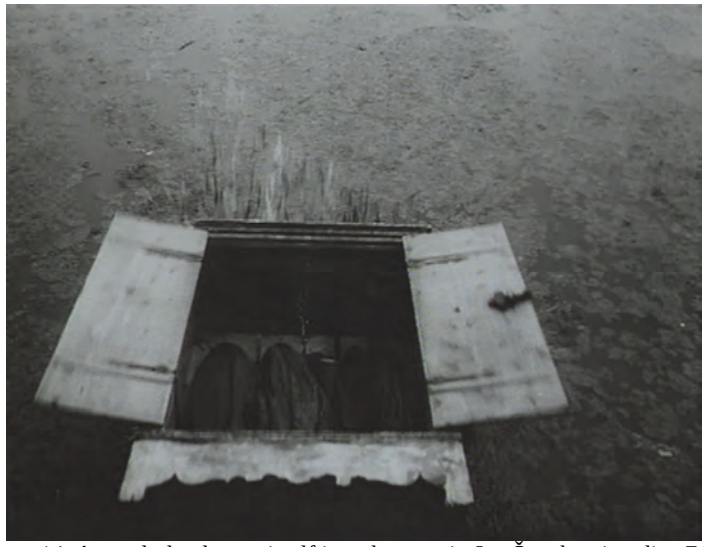

Figure 14. A wardrobe throws itself into the tarn, in Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru* (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), at 14:15.

The crypt, located elsewhere on the estate, physically resembles and alludes to the grotesque theatre of the phantasmagoria with its narrow aperture, dark interior, and compulsively reanimated protagonist. To produce a Gothic melodrama with furniture 'acting' in place of human figures is an accomplishment of artistic virtuosity, and provides a potent means for Švankmajer by which to evade Czech state censorship in an act of cinematic resistance to and figuration of that censorship. Švankmajer began his film career during the era of the Czech New Wave but was banned from filmmaking between 1970 and 1977, having been caught up in the repressions following the Prague Spring of 1968. Although he was permitted again to make films in the 1980s, Švankmajer's lifelong affiliations with the Czech Surrealists posed major problems for the distribution and screening of his films until after the Velvet Revolution in 1989.[20]

There is obvious merit in close study of these (and other) adaptations of Poe's 'Usher,' both as a means of determining the kinds of formal and aesthetic choices made by each director and as a prolegomenon to thinking about adaptive experimentation. Each film reckons with matters of plot fidelity, quotation, characterisation (and costuming and casting), emulations of the Gothic mode, visual equivalents of narrative discourse, and the inclusion and/or representation of music, poetry, painting, and other manifestations of the aesthetic in Poe's text. Each director makes radical choices of response to and emulation of Poe's text: Epstein takes liberties with the sibling plot and its thematic and psychological resonances; Watson transforms the Gothic space into an avant-garde expressionist delirium; Corman immunises the narrating figure from dark powers of suggestion; and Švankmajer displaces human agency with the animation of objects.

Rather than measure the relative merits of cinematic adaptations against the premium of fidelity expressed by George Bluestone or Dudley Andrew,[21] these films might be deployed as alternate versions of film's

[20] Švankmajer discusses the implications of his aesthetics and censorship in an interview with Eoin Koepfinger, 'Freedom is Becoming the Only Theme,' *Sampsonia Way*, 5 June 2012, at http://www.sampsoniaway.org/blog/2012/06/05/freedom-is-becoming-the-only-theme-an-interview-with-jan-svankmajer/.

[21] See George Bluestone, *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P; Cambridge: Cambridge

adaptive agency. Brian McFarlane, Robert Stam and Thomas Leitch have each argued for a need to breach the fidelity impasse in film adaptation theory, not least by crediting literary texts and film adaptations with an index of critical awareness in negotiating their responses to and influences upon their discursive fields.[22] These issues are crucial to the conceptual understanding of cinematic adaptation and the hermeneutic project as it transforms across media and through iterations of a text's 'afterlife.' A renewed focus on Poe's originary text in this adaptive field can offer a way of thinking about the cinematic from the viewpoint of its technological genealogy. Poe's deep engagement with technologies of visual projection is especially evident in 'Usher,' where the story and its mode of narration can be viewed as an experiment in self-adaptation by means of imaginative projection: both within the narrative framework, and in the way the story blurs boundaries of materiality and ephemerality, concept and sensory perception, and empirical actuality and psychological suggestibility. This conceptual matrix is mediated through the very idea of medium: the phantasmagoria.

Phantasmagoria

Poe's use of the word *phantasmagoria* in 'Usher'—in reference to the 'armorial trophies' (233) reflecting light in the dark hallway, and Roderick's own 'phantasmagoric conceptions' (237)—demonstrates its dual valency as a freighted index of light imagery and architecture, and as a critical view of psychology and sense perception. The word also resonates within the history of image projection: the phantasmagoria was developed in the late eighteenth century from the earlier magic lantern

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UP, 1957) and Dudley Andrew, 'Adaptation,' in *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), pp. 96-106.

[22] For pungent critiques of the concept of fidelity in adaptation discourse, see: Brian McFarlane, *Novel To Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); Robert Stam, 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation,' in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 1-52: Robert Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,' in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London: Athlone, 2000), pp. 54-72; and Thomas M. Leitch, 'Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory,' *Criticism* 45.2 (Spring 2001): 149-171.

Figure 15. Combination Helioscopic Lantern, Patent No. 2459, electric illuminant, Walter Tyler, London, http://www.magiclantern.org.uk/events/events4f.html

which itself descended from the ancient technology of the *camera obscura*. This mechanism entailed a dark enclosed space and an aperture through which light was admitted—a cave with a narrow entrance, for example—and in which an (inverted) image would be projected upon the rear wall or surface.[23] The first recorded reference to the camera obscura is that of the Chinese philosopher Mo Tzu in the fifth century BCE.[24] Both Aristotle (in the *Problemata*) and Euclid (*Optics*) refer to this technology, which was refined by medieval Arabic mathematicians such as al-Kindi and Alhazen.[25] The term magic lantern was coined by

[23] For a concise summary of the extensive literature on the *camera obscura*, see Jonathan Crary, 'The Camera Obscura and its Subject,' in *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 25-66.

[24] Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. IV Physics and Physical Technology, Part I: Physics (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962), pp. 78-125.

[25] Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 51. See Book XV 910b-913a of Aristotle, *Problemata*, trans. E. S. Forster, Vol. VII of *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927); and Euclid,

Johannes Kepler in his *Ad Vitellonem Paralipomena* of 1604, and made popular by Athanasius Kircher in his *Ars Magna Lucis Et Umbra* ('The Major Art of Light and Shadow') of 1646. In France during the Revolutionary era Etienne-Gaspar Robertson adapted his camera obscura to project images of ghosts, murder victims, and other macabre images, often in Gothic surroundings (**figure 16**):

> he began producing […] elaborate and bizarre spectacles in the crypt of an abandoned Capuchin convent near the Place Vendôme […] amid ancient tombs and effigies.[26]

Many of his shows would conclude with the visual rhetoric of the *memento mori* in the form of a skeleton of a young woman.[27] One show billed as 'The Night-Mare' depicted a sleeping woman dreaming, with 'a demon pressed upon her chest holding a dagger suspended over her heart.'[28] This figure anticipates Poe's narrator in 'Usher' who feels a similar oppressive presence bearing upon his chest as he tries to sleep: 'there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm' (241). The figure of Madeline escaping her interment also descends from a familiar trope in the history of the phantasmagoria. Thomas Carlyle in his *French Revolution* figured civil strife as 'a kind of spectral drama,' where Murder is personified in female form, stalking the streets of Paris during the Red Terror.[29]

Optics, in *Greek Mathematical Works, Volume I: Thales to Euclid*, trans. Ivor Thomas (Cambridge, MA: Loeb, 1939).

[26] Terry Castle, 'Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie,' *Critical Inquiry* 15.1 (Autumn 1988): 36.

[27] Margaret Cohen, 'Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria,' *New German Critique* 48 (Autumn 1989): 97.

[28] Castle: 36-37. Note that the original meaning of 'nightmare' is 'a female spirit or monster supposed to settle on and produce a feeling of suffocation in a sleeping person or animal' (OED). Robertson reversed the gender of spirit and sleeping subject in his shows, perhaps to heighten the effect of vulnerability. Note also Poe's 'incubus' is male in gender.

[29] Castle: 26.

Figure 16. Etienne-Gaspar Robertson's Phantasmagoria in a disused cloister of an old Capuchin chapel, Rue des Champs, Cours des Capucines, Paris, 1797; engraving by E. Morieu, in Robertson's *Mémoires: Récréatifs Scientifiques et Anecdotiques*, Paris, 1831, http://www.magiclantern.org.uk/history/history6.html

The magic lantern functioned as the technological forebear of various later experimental devices in image projection, among them photographic machinery developed by Joseph Niépce and Louis Daguerre in the 1820s, Eadweard Muybridge's zoopraxiscope (1879), a machine for time and motion studies, Thomas Edison's kinetograph (1890) and kinetoscope (1894), and Louis and August Lumière's cinématographe (1895). But during the nineteenth century the phantasmagoria also shifted from spectacular public exhibition to the 'phantasmic imagery of the mind,' altering the language of mental experience into one of hallucination and the spectral:

> It conveyed exquisitely the notion of the *bouleversement de tous les sens*: that state of neurasthenic excitement in which images whirled chaotically before the inward eye, impressing on the seer an overwhelming sense of their vividness and spiritual truth.[30]

This new 'metaphysic of interiority,' as Jonathan Crary describes, 'is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual and a privatized subject confined in a quasi-domestic space, cut off from

[30] Castle: 29-30, 47-48.

a public exterior world.'[31] Roderick Usher's isolation and consequent neurosis is self-evident, but the narrator's suggestibility is the real clue here: from his first description of the house and the sinister tarn he announces a predisposition to infer different registers of disorder (psychological, moral, natural) through the vocabulary of the supernatural. Madeline's apparition—whether 'real' or imagined by the hypersensitive, suggestible narrator and his host—becomes a literalisation of the confluence of mechanical optics (for both empirical scrutiny and entertainment) and a post-Rationalist discourse of mental 'daemonology.' The House of Usher literally becomes a spectral theatre, a magic lantern in which is performed the ghoulish entertainment of the phantasmagoria before a credulous audience.[32]

In her study of nineteenth-century phantasmagoria, Terry Castle sees Poe's stories both as fantastic in the sense defined by Tzvetan Todorov[33]—a performed equivocation between rational and supernatural explanations of narrated events—and as phantasmagorical in their focus on the epistemological problem of apparitions. The links between spectral imagery and the act of reading finds expression in contemporary medical literature, where 'excessive reading—and especially reading books of a romantic or visionary nature—could send one into morbid hallucinatory states.'[34] This fusion of perspective—of reader and narrator—reaches an apotheosis in 'Usher,' a story in which the narrator and his over-stimulated companion seek solace in intensive reading, an activity that ironically heightens their susceptibility to phantasmic suggestion. In 'Usher' and elsewhere, Poe demonstrates adept knowledge of the magic lantern literature in circulation:

> Letter IV of [Brewster's] *Natural Magic*, the one most frequently drawn on by Poe, discusses the use of mirrors and lenses in magic lanterns, phantasmagorias, and other apparatuses to produce optical illusions through reflection and refraction of light. Poe was clearly intrigued by the

[31] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p.39.
[32] Fictional and non-fictional texts of a generation before had illustrated the deceptive allure of the new technologies of image projection: Friedrich Schiller deploys the magic lantern as a device for deception in his prose fragment *Der Geisterseher* (1789), as does the anonymous Gothic story *Phantasmagoria; or, The Development of Magical Deception* (1803). See Castle 39.
[33] See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975).
[34] Castle: 56.

> mysterious optical and aural phenomena Brewster describes, and borrowed nearly two dozen of them for his stories.[35]

The fantastic equivocations of subjectivity and supernaturalism in the story lend it the positive valency conducive not only to a variety of psychological readings, but also to experimental cinematic representation and emulation. Indeed Joseph Boggs Beale, the pre-eminent lantern-slide artist in nineteenth-century America, produced a series of phantasmagoria slides illustrating Poe's texts [**figure 17]**. This inspiration extends to the mode of the story's telling in ways more literal than figurative or allegorical: 'Usher' is the story of a narrator caught in a magic lantern, a phantasmagoria—not so much a Man *with* a Movie Camera but a Man *as* a Movie Camera. The creative faculty of the narrative function is raised to the phantasmagorical: the narrator conjures the scenario he witnesses, perplexed by its constructed nature and its evident truth.

Usher as Phantasmagoria

The Gothic narrative of 'Usher' functions as a phantasmagoria, inducing a spectral event through the gradual heightening of psychic and sensory tension. The narrative mode neatly captures the introversion of empirical observation (the Mirror) into a process of expressionistic projection of inner anxieties (the Lamp): a negative aesthetics of Romanticism. The projective tendencies of the narrator and Roderick converge in Madeline's final appearance, and produce fatal consequences for Roderick and a swift conclusion to the narrator's spectral experience, in the tarn's cathartic absorption of the riven house.[36] The text as phantasmagoria also brings into play the visual technology of the magic lantern and the psychological implications of the epistemological and perceptual turbulence witnessed in the events of the plot and the mode of

[35] James M. Hutchisson, ed., *Selected Poetry and Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* (Buffalo, NY: Broadview, 2012), p. 400.

[36] The architecture of the Usher crypt echoes the Palladian Classicism of the Rotunda at Poe's alma mater, the University of Virginia (a building in which, incidentally, exams were held). Modelled on the Roman Pantheon, the Rotunda presents a converse image to that of the tarn, in its Gothic materialist associations: 'The mutual interpenetration of spirit and matter in Poe's prose drags spirit into the tarn of signifying matter, confines the loftiness of reason in what eventually appears, in Roderick's painting, as a sealed underground vault.' Susan Bernstein, 'The Dome of the Mind: Monticello in Weimar,' *MLN* 123.5 (2008): 981.

their presentation. In this way, the text functions as a suitable phantasmagoria for experimental cinematic adaptation, providing the accoutrements of allegory without its hermeneutic fulfilment. 'Usher' inspires cinematic innovation in the most basic way: by simulating the pre-cinematic experience of the phantasmagoria.

Figure 17: Joseph Boggs Beale, *The Raven*, magic lantern slides (set of 12), Philadelphia: American Stereoscopic Co., c. 1890

Following the narrator's approach to the House of Usher and the story's establishing shot, the focus rests upon the physical attributes of the tarn: it recomposes the scene just as the magic lantern inverts the image it projects, and offers an entry point into the phantasmagoric space.

> It was possible, I *reflected*, that a mere different *arrangement* of the particulars of the scene, of the details of

> the *picture*, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to *annihilate* its capacity for sorrowful *impression*; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled *lustre* by the dwelling, and *gazed* down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the *remodelled and inverted images* of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the *vacant and eye-like windows*. (231, italics added)

The vocabulary of mirrors, reflection, and the quality of images—inverted, as the narrator reports—has the tarn become a magic lantern, complete with aperture, and it anticipates the spectral imagery of the phantasmagoria. Indeed the single aperture of the magic lantern bears the same morphology as the single line of descent from father to son in the Usher genealogy, a corrupted provenance that proves fatal. The narrator, having established the tarn as a machinery of visual projection, enters the Usher house through a dark hallway, in typical Gothic style, but which also suggests the eye's ingress via the viewing tube into the space of the lantern: 'the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode' (233). The narrator's progress through the house is as though through the lens of a camera, where Roderick's study is 'large and lofty,' with 'long, narrow and pointed' windows at a 'vast […] distance from the black oaken floor,' and through which 'feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way' but which do not provide enough light for eye 'to reach the remoter angles of the chamber' (234). We have entered a magic lantern, in which Roderick resides, projecting his infernal images to an audience moved by the powers of suggestion.

The counterpart to Roderick's lantern-chamber is his illustration of the crypt passageway, one of his 'phantasmagoric conceptions' (237). This draws the narrator's sustained attention, who then attempts to render its abstracted form, to have it 'shadowed forth […] feebly, in words.' This chamber, 'the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device,' is the interior of the magic lantern upon its activation:

> No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout,

> and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendour. (237)

The Gothic sensorium is illuminated by its ghoulish emanations. The 'lamp' of Romantic imagination has become the proto-cinematic projector of wild fancies, in which the reader is as captive as the narrator and his projectionist: Roderick Usher. The actual tunnel to Madeline's crypt is 'sheathed in copper' (240), literalising her interment within a magic lantern, and her performance as a phantasmagoria.[37] The strange suspension of activity during the time of her entombment is given over to reading texts concerned with necromancy and matters of the occult, as though the two men are seeking out viable scripts for future projections. Among Roderick's 'wild fantasias' and 'rhapsodies' his poem, 'The Haunted Palace,' rehearses the material architecture of the magic lantern. The third stanza has the wanderers view spirits through the palace windows, but upon the fall of the kingdom to 'evil things,' the final stanza provides a melancholy coda—befitting the sinister mood akin to Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'—that situates the 'travellers' as the fixed audience of a phantasmagoria (239):

> And travellers now within that valley,
> Through the red-litten windows see
> Vast forms that move fantastically
> To a discordant melody;
> While, like a rapid ghastly river,
> Through the pale door;
> A hideous throng rush out forever,
> And laugh—but smile no more.

The precision with which Roderick's song reflects the narrator's creative architecture of the house-as-magic lantern further blurs the line between narrative suggestibility and the effects of Gothic atmospherics, and anticipates the final apparition of Madeline as the culminating *memento mori* of the classic phantasmagoria. The mutual influence of individual consciousness combines with the literalised space of the proto-cinematic lantern, in which spectral vision is both mirror and lamp, conjured by the

[37] The crypt's architecture bears direct influence upon Gothic depictions of ghostly revenants in the fiction of Henry James, particularly 'The Jolly Corner' and 'The Beast in the Jungle.' See Burton R. Pollin, *Poe's Seductive Influence on Great Writers* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2004), pp. 36-37.

audience's imagination but produced in the theatrical space of the phantasmagoria.

During the final storm the narrator's atmospheric preoccupations return to figures of projection: 'the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion' (242). These 'electrical phenomena' are given form by the 'vapor' emanating from the tarn, the initial locus of the reflective mirror and optical source of infernal imagery. Madeline's homicidal attack on Roderick collapses both of them into the hallucinatory history of the House, which, as the theatre of the lantern show, must itself collapse into the dark absence of the tarn upon the raising of the house lights: 'While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder […] and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*' (245). The final italics suggest the Gothic convention of the figural closing of the book, but it also marks out the collapse of the ephemeral proto-cinematic light-space of the phantasmagoria. This citation cuts across the various fictive and figural layers of the text (title, family name, architectural edifice and fantastic theatre). It is an index of the strange, ambiguous materiality of the narrative, and an invocation for all its future reimaginings: cinematic, operatic, and theatrical.

Conclusion

'The Fall of the House of Usher' is at once an essay on adaptation and an exploration of the potential for its own adaptation. By deploying the apparatus of creative imagining—conceptual, formal, psychological, and mechanical / technological—'Usher' anticipates and provides the conditions for its filmic adaptations. In this sense it reverses and explodes the conventional binary of original and copy, and thus diverts hermeneutic attention away from the limited and unproductive zones of adaptive fidelity, quotation, and intersection. 'Usher' provokes an open-ended, experimental array of adaptations, where each iteration discovers the basic premise of the story: that its narrator, projectionist (Roderick), principal apparition (Madeline), and theatre (the House) combine to

conjure the light of the magic lantern out of the darkened space of the tarn, to which, as the performance ends, all must return. ‘Usher’ is a tableau, a suspension from life, and by virtue of this it affords a meditation upon the processes of its imaginative contemplation.

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The Erotic Secret Heart of Christopher Brennan's *Poems 1913*

MICHAEL BUHAGIAR

Arguably the most formidable obstacle to the wider, even global, appreciation of Christopher Brennan's magnum opus *Poems 1913* is the obscurity of so many of its 105 individual poems. This is due in some cases to Brennan's espousal of Symbolist principles, which held that the reader should receive no help from adjunct material in addition to the bare symbols and images themselves; in others, to their presentation of sophisticated arguments, the main challenge to the understanding of which lies in the arguments themselves and not the manner of their expression; and in others, to the elision of certain words, and re-engineering of the syntax, in the service of rhythm and concision. However, there is also often a sense that Brennan may have chosen deliberately to conceal content in a way which does not fit into any of these three categories. An example of this is poem 63 ('There is a far-off thrill that troubles me ') in the 'Quest of Silence' section, where the precise nature of the sinful event being described remains unclear:

> I must go down, thro' chapels black with mould,
> past ruin'd doors, whose arches, ridged with gold,
> catch, in their grooves, a gloom more blackly dript,
> some stairway winding hours-long towards the crypt
> where panic night lies stricken 'neath the curse
> exuding from the dense enormous hearse
> of some old vampire-god, whose bulk, within,
> lies gross and festering in his shroud of sin.

James McAuley perceptively remarked the intense personal-erotic character of *Poems 1913*;[1] but I will argue here that this dimension is in

[1] James McAuley, 'The erotic theme in Brennan,' *Quadrant*, Nov-Dec 1968: 8-15

fact far wider and deeper than McAuley recognised, and that its intimate character might provide a very good reason for Brennan's deliberate occultation of so much of it. McAuley wrote:

> What prevents the poetry from being completely dead amidst its attempted splendours, is the fiery burning current of personal experience and feeling. Perhaps, after all, the best exposition of Brennan would be a narrative of his life, with quotations from his poems – if only we knew enough of his more intimate experience to be able to interpret the poetry, or could understand the poetry well enough to use it to throw a light into the dark places of his life.

The purpose of this paper is indeed to illuminate some important *occulta* of Brennan's life, as examined in his poetry in a typical artist's journey towards healing and wholeness.

It is of fundamental importance in dealing with Brennan accurately and consistently to interpret his symbols. The key symbol in the present context is that of the sphinx, of which there are four instances in *Poems 1913*:

> the stranger-stone, sphinx-couchant, thunder-hurl'd
> from red star-ruin o'er the elder world.
> (*poem 59 in 'The Quest of Silence'*)

> even hers, the strangling sphinx, made known
> with, on her breast, his fore-erected tomb...
> (*poem 68.x in 'Lilith'*)

> Terrible, if he will not have me else,
> I lurk to seize and strangle...
> (*poem 68.x in 'Lilith'*)

> that foe of settled peace, the smiling sphinx,
> or foul Echidna's mass'd insidious links...
> (*poem 68.x in 'Lilith'*)

The erotic character of this symbol cannot be in doubt. The Greek verb *sphingein*, whence the noun *sphinx*, meant 'to strangle', and prostitutes were known as *sphingae*, a usage which the Romans later adopted,

calling them *anxicia*, 'throttlers'.[2] In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* the sphinx is associated with eros in a mysterious and destructive way. Hardly less memorable is Aeschylus' depiction of her in *Seven Against Thebes*, where she is described as *homositon*, 'flesh-eating', as depicted on a shield of one of the seven attackers, devouring a Theban man whom she has trapped beneath her.

As a sexual predator, capable of inflicting pain and pleasure, the sphinx became a prominent theme of nineteenth century artists, who typically depicted her as half-woman and half-lioness, with a lust for seducing men by her beauty and then tearing their flesh to pieces. Heine, Moreau, Munch, Ingres, Wilde and others portrayed her in this way, while Rossetti's Lady Lilith is her alter ego. Heine's description of her in his *Buch der Lieder* (1839) is especially powerful:[3]

> There before the door lay a Sphinx,
> Half-frightening and half-seductive,
> With belly and claws of a lion,
> A woman in head and breast.
> A beautiful woman! The pale face,
> It spoke of wild desire.
> The silent lips were curved
> As warrant of a peaceful smile.
> The marble form came alive,
> The stone began to groan,
> She drank the burning passion of my kisses
> With unslakeable thirst.
> She nearly drank my breath as well—
> And at last, needing lust,
> She turned me over, my poor flesh
> Ripping with her lion's claws.

Further confirmation that this was also Brennan's intention is given by the fourth instance above, which is found in close juxtaposition with a reference to a Greek myth of particular interest:

[2] Noel Macainsh, 'Steps into the Forest: Christopher Brennan's Fatal Attraction,' *AUMLA* (November 1989): 244. Macainsh gives a useful discussion of the sphinx without following the clues to their logical goal.
[3] All translations in this paper are mine.

> but in that cave before his upstart gates
> where elder night endures unshaken, waits
> that foe of settled peace, the sphinx,
> or foul Echidna's mass'd insidious links,
> reminding him that all is vanities;
> and when, at last, o'er his nine roods he lies…

The last line is a reference to the myth of Tetyos and Leto. In this myth, Apollo seized the Delphic oracle and retained its priestess, the Pythoness, in his service. When Leto (mother of Apollo by Zeus) heard the news, she travelled there with Artemis. On arriving in Delphi, she turned aside to perform a private rite in a sacred grove. Tityos, a Phokian giant, tried to rape her. Apollo and Artemis heard her cries, and killed him with a volley of arrows. Tityos was stretched out in Tartarus for punishment, with his limbs pegged fast to the ground, so that his body covered nine roods (acres), with two vultures to devour his ever-regenerating liver.

This reference points in turn to a passage in 'Lilith' occurring just before the last-mentioned, which portrays Brennan's forcing of the issue on his wife Elisabeth, in a scene of squalor and trauma in the *letto matrimoniale*:

> He shall not know her or her gentle ways
> nor rest, content, by her sufficing source,
> but, under stress of the veil'd stars, shall force
> her simple bloom to perilous delight
> adulterate with pain, some nameless night
> stain'd with miasm of flesh become a tomb:
> then baffled hope, some torch o' the blood to illume
> and flush the jewel hid beyond all height,
> and sombre rage that burst the holy bourne
> of garden joy, murdering innocence,
> and the distraught desire to bring a kiss
> unto the fleeting centre of the abyss,
> discovering the eternal lack, shall spurn
> even that sun-god's garden of pure sense,
> not wisely wasted with insensate will.

It has not previously been remarked that these last two lines refer to Swinburne's poem 'Dolores' (*Poems and Ballads*), the subject of which is sadomasochistic sex (Dolores' sobriquet throughout is 'Our Lady of

Pain'). This 'sun-god' is Priapus, the father of Dolores, an expression of the familiar esoteric phallus = sun identification. These lines from 'Dolores' throw light on the last line above: 'We have all done amiss, choosing rather/ Such loves as the wise gods disdain'. That is, Brennan's original failure to embrace eros in a healthy, uninhibited way has produced this monstrous degradation of it. McAuley reads this passage as a deeply personal confession:

> I think Brennan is saying: 'My wife was virginal and unready. The marriage was a disaster of Miltonic proportions. The act of love became a bloody obscenity of force and pain, her flesh becoming a tomb of love. The total disappointment of my superheated ardour of sensual expectation, when no answering ardour was generated, became a sombre rage to violate her baulking purity and innocence; but all it could achieve was the realisation of an irremediable lack; so that the marital paradise I had hoped for became a ravaged wasteland.'[4]

Similarly, Axel Clark concluded that 'Brennan rapidly came to feel that his marriage was in some basic sense a failure; a particular passage in 'Lilith' ['He shall not know her or her gentle ways...'] may represent a disguised account of what precisely happened to give him this feeling'.[5] Katherine Barnes contests such a reading of this passage as a reference to Brennan's personal life;[6] but I argue elsewhere that her reading is founded on a flawed interpretation of the Eve symbol.[7]

The second instance of the sphinx in *Poems* occurs forty lines or so before the last-quoted passage, in this hitherto problematic stanza:

> *What night is this, made denser, in his breast*
> *or round him, suddenly or first confest*
> *after its gradual thickening complete?*
> *as tho' the mighty current, bearing fleet*

[4] Ibid.
[5] Axel Clark, *Christopher Brennan: A Critical Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1980), 119
[6] Katherine Barnes, *The Higher Self in Christopher Brennan's* Poems (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 121 ff.
[7] Michael Buhagiar, 'Christopher Brennan and the Greeks: The Quest of *Poems 1913*'. PhD thesis, University of Sydney, Aug. 2012

> *the unresting stars, had here devolved its lees,*
> *stagnant, contempt, on recreant destinies;*
> *and that a settling of tremendous pens,*
> *above the desolate dream, had shed immense*
> *addition to the incumbence of despair*
> *downward, across this crypt of stirless air,*
> *from some henceforth infrangible attitude,*
> *upon his breast, that knows no dawn renewed,*
> *builded enormously, each brazen stage,*
> *with rigor of his hope in hopeless age*
> *mummied, and look that turns his thew to stone:*
> *even hers, that is his strangling sphinx, made known*
> *with, on her breast, his fore-erected tomb,*
> *engraven deep, the letters of his doom.*

Many critics have engaged briefly with this passage without seriously attempting to penetrate its mystery. Chisholm notices the sphinx here, but merely as symbolic of the riddle of life, neglecting her erotic dimension.[8] The sphinx as symbol of erotic possession is the key. These lines undoubtedly describe an episode of phallic tumescence. 'Made denser', 'gradual thickening', 'infrangible attitude', 'builded enormously, each brazen stage', 'rigor', 'stone', and 'fore-erected tomb' (a reference to the Manichean *soma sema*, 'the body the tomb'), tell the story. 'Pens' bears here the meaning of 'wings' (< 'pinions'). The passage is in italics, and it serves as a kind of choric comment, as the raw expression of the undeveloped common man, deepening our understanding of the surrounding drama. The personal dimension of *The Forest of Night* obtrudes dramatically in this light.

Two lines later there appears another reference to the sphinx:

> Terrible, if he will not have me else,
> I lurk to seize and strangle...

This is the Hebrew Mother Goddess Lilith, the principal demon figure of *Poems*, speaking in the first person. The word 'strangle' indicates that she is here in sphinx mode, and that the sphinx is an aspect of her. In 'Lilith' Brennan has clearly embarked on an intense and brutally honest journey

[8] A. R. Chisholm, *A Study of Christopher Brennan's* The Forest of Night (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1970), 39

toward self knowledge, or the wisdom of Lilith who is his own self, and who is manifest initially and most powerfully as erotic possession.

In the first instance given above, poem 59 in 'The Quest of Silence' section, the sphinx symbol is a portal into an intimate and problematic dimension of Brennan's inner life, the exposure of which for someone of his sensitivity and secretiveness he might well have considered unthinkable. Not so many years later, when the world and artistic mores had irrevocably changed, another great Irish Catholic apostate writer, with whom Brennan had a very great deal in common, would not baulk at revealing similar *personalia* in his hero's odyssey through Dublin. But Brennan for now was more guarded.

Here is poem 59:

> Out of no quarter of the charted sky
> flung in the bitter wind intolerably,
> abrupt, the trump that sings behind the end
> exults alone. Here grass is none to bend:
> the stony plain blackens with rapid night
> that best reveals the land's inflicted blight
> since in the smitten hero-hand the sword
> broke, and the hope the long-dumb folk adored,
> and all over the north a tragic flare
> told Valhall perish'd and the void's despair
> to dwell as erst, all disinhabited,
> a vault above the heart its hungering led.
> The strident clangour cuts; but space is whole,
> inert, absorbed in dead regret. Here, sole,
> on the bare upland, stands, vast thro' the gloom
> staring, to mark an irretrievable doom,
> the stranger stone, sphinx-couchant, thunder-hurl'd
> from red star-ruin o'er the elder world.

A prominent aspect of this poem, and of several other poems with which it is grouped in 'The Quest of Silence', is its sense of precipitancy, of an abrupt disturbance of the status quo by an unexpected and unwanted agent. It may be, given the symbol of the sphinx in the penultimate line, that this agent is the will-to-eros. The following exegesis of the poem will add strong support to this theory.

The presiding influence of this poem is William Blake. Brennan scholars have tended to emphasise Stéphane Mallarmé as the principal mentor figure of *The Forest of Night*; but Blake is demonstrably of comparable importance. Brennan in fact took the title 'The Forest of Night' from Blake's *Europe: A Prophecy*; and Blake's highly developed spirituality and wisdom as regards the erotic dimension of humankind widely infuse this book of the *livre composé*. 'The trump that sings behind the end' is a Blakean reference; and the language and imagery of this poem strongly point toward Blake. However, Mallarmé may well have been in Brennan's field of influence as well.

The erotic symbolism of the sphinx is potentiated in this poem by the 'stranger stone', the significance of which is to be found in Mallarmé and Blake, in the former in a more general way as the universal will, in the latter specifically as the will-to-eros. The stone fallen to earth from the sky is a striking feature of the 'tombeaux' poems of Mallarmé. Here are the relevant lines of *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*:

> Si notre idée avec ne sculpte un bas-relief
> Dont la tombe de Poe éblouissante s'orne
> Calme bloc ici-bas chu d'un désastre
> Que ce granit du moins montre à jamais sa borne
> Aux noirs vols du Blasphème épars dans le futur.
>
> 'If our idea may not sculpt a bas-relief
> With which the dazzling tomb of Poe may adorn itself
> Calm block fallen here below from a disaster,
> May this granite at least show its landmark
> To the black flights of Blasphemy loosed into the future.'

'Black flights of Blasphemy' can only refer to Poe's poem *The Raven* as an epitome of his oeuvre, and these flights are clearly cognate with the dark wings of Lilith, who in *Poems* stands in relation to the sphinx as Schopenhauer's universal will stands to the will-to-eros, that is, as a superset of it. The function of the granite will be to guide the flights towards its (the granite's) and by implication their (the flights') star of origin. The relevance of all of this to *Poems*, in which Brennan identifies Lilith as the source of the libido, is plain.

Blake's *Europe: A Prophecy*, completes the picture. Urizen is tortured by Los and Enitharmon, and their son Orc. Urizen is glimpsed as an approaching meteor, and Orc is summoned:

> 'Arise, O Orc, from thy deep den!
> 'First born of Enitharmon, rise!
> 'And we will crown thy head with garlands of the ruddy vine;
> 'For now thou art bound,
> 'And I may see thee in the hour of bliss, my eldest born. '
> The horrent Demon rose surrounded with red stars of fire
> Whirling about in furious circles round the immortal fiend.
> Then Enitharmon down descended into his red light…

And there we have it: the red stars whose ruin will cast the 'stranger-stone' onto the Urizen landscape in poem 59 of *Poems*: Orc himself, the principle of passion, whose juxtaposition to the sphinx symbol indicates that it is erotic passion that is in question. *Europe: a Prophecy* was evidently also the source of poem 59's 'the trump that sings behind the end':

> The red limb'd Angel siez'd in horror and torment
> The trump of the last doom; but he could not blow the iron tube!
> Thrice he assay'd presumptuous to wake the dead to Judgement…

The phrase 'wake the dead to Judgement' is full of Freudian significance in relation to poem 59, where 'the dead' is Brennan in classical mode, and so unmindful of Lilith, who will now judge him guilty and inflict on him the eros he has denied.

We can complete more fully the scenario envisaged by Brennan. I have argued at length elsewhere that a fundamental cause of his problems with eros as a young man was, along with the puritanical Roman Catholicism of his upbringing, his enthralment by the Classics, especially Greek.[9] Oswald Spengler can enlighten us as to why:

> This very spatiality [or 'roomliness'] that is the truest and sublimest element in the aspect of *our* universe, that absorbs into itself and begets out of itself the substantiality of all

[9] Ibid.

> things, Classical humanity (which knows no word for, and therefore has no idea of, space) with one accord cuts out as the nonent, the το μη ον, that which *is not*. The emphasis of this denial can scarcely be exaggerated. The material, the optically definite, the comprehensible, the immediately present—this list exhausts the characteristics of this kind of extension. The Classical universe, the Cosmos or well-ordered aggregate of all near and completely viewable things, is concluded by the corporeal vault of heaven. More there is not. The need that is in us to think of space as being behind as well as before this shell was wholly absent from the Classical world-feeling.[10]

Spengler's 'corporeal vault of heaven' finds its correspondence in many places in *Poems*: for example, in poem 60, as the 'oubliette' which excludes the 'hidden stars' of the realm of Lilith:

> Far, where our oubliette is shut, above,
> we guess the ample lids that never move
> beneath her brows, each massive arch inert
> hung high-contemptuous o'er the blatant wars
> we deem'd well waged for her, who may avert
> some Janus-face that smiles on hidden stars.

The realm of Lilith is therefore, in the macrocosm, the illimitable space which lies beyond the Classical shell; but it is also, in the microcosm, by the principle of 'as above, so below', as stated in the esoteric Emerald Tablet (*Tabula Smaragdina*) which Brennan had studied ,[11] the unconscious mind, wherein resides the broader (in the Freudian sense) libido: and it was the libido which, irrupting the conscious mind as the raw will-to-eros, announced to Brennan the inadequacy of his accustomed world view, and the existence of a realm with which he had no choice now but to engage ('and thou must house it, thou/ within thy fleshly Now' – poem 68.iii). Blake describes just this process, of the inward journey to the centre of the self

[10] Oswald Spengler, trans. C.F. Atkinson, *The Decline of the West* (Oxford UP, 1991), 94-5

[11] A. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn (eds.), *The Prose of Christopher Brennan* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), 52

predicating the awareness of illimitable space, in these lines from *Milton* (I.17.21-30):

> The Mundane Shell is a vast Concave Earth, an immense
> Harden'd shadow of all things upon our Vegetated Earth,
> Enlarg'd into dimension & deform'd into indefinite space…
> … It is a cavernous Earth
> Of labyrinthine intricacy, twenty-seven folds of opakeness,
> And finishes where the lark mounts; here Milton journeyed
> In that Region call'd Midian among the rock of Horeb.
> For travellers from Eternity pass outward to Satan's seat,
> But travellers to Eternity pass inward to Golgonooza.

This then is the background to the opening lines of poem 59, where the 'charted sky' (Spengler's 'corporeal vault' or equally Blake's 'Mundane Shell') is disrupted from outside of itself, by a 'bitter wind', and Blake's trump sounds to announce the end of mere materiality ('the material, the optically definite, the comprehensible, the immediately present') and the advent of the unseen beyond, realm of Lilith.

Poem 59 sits with a group of poems toward the end of 'The Quest of Silence', and immediately (except for the two poems of 'Interlude: The window and the hearth') before 'The Shadow of Lilith'. The correct interpretation of poem 59, with the sphinx as erotic demon at its heart, can help elucidate their meaning. I have already noted poem 63, the last of the group, above; and I will now suggest that it describes an episode of erotic possession which grips the subject as he sits at his desk in solitary contemplation ('a faint thin ripple of shadow, momently,/ dies out cross my lucid icy cell'). Further evidence for this interpretation is provided by a consideration of the neighbouring poem 62 ('ONE! an iron core, shock'd and dispers'd '). That the sin described in this poem may well be erotic in nature—

> The corpse of time is stark upon the night:
> my soul is coffin'd, staring, grave-bedight,
> upon some dance of death that reels and feasts
> around its living tomb, with vampire grin,
> inverted sacraments of satan's priests—
> and, mask'd no more, the maniac face of sin

—is suggested by reference to Brennan's likely source, Swinburne's 'A Watch in the Night':

> France, what of the night?—
> Night is the prostitute's noon,
> Kissed and drugged till she swoon,
> Spat upon, trod upon, whored.
> With blood rose-garlands dight,
> Round me reels in the dance
> Death, my saviour, my lord,
> Crowned; there is no more France.

Poem 54 ('Fire in the heavens, and fire along the hills ') has long been appreciated as a pleasing nature poem and no more; but in light of its placement in this group, the 'cicada's torture-point of song' may quite plausibly describe, like the 'one clang' of poem 62, the same process.

'The Quest of Silence' is bookended by two sections of two poems each, 'Interlude: The hearth and the window' (poems 46 & 47) and 'Interlude: The window and the hearth' (poems 64 & 65). Poem 64 refers to a traumatic psychological event:

> Earth stirs in me that stirs with roots below,
> and distant nerves shrink with the lilac mist
> of perfume blossom'd round the lure that, kist,
> is known hard burn o'erflak'd and cruel sting.

In poem 52 ('The forest has its horrors ') we read of the potential wound of the broken blade that rusts before the entrance of the serpent's cavern; and in poem 102 ('Droop'st thou and fail'st? '):

> And in thy house of love thy venom'd dart
> was thrust within thy side—Even so! must then
> the gather'd ripeness of thy mind and heart
> be turn'd to flies? that is no way for men.

The lure, the blade, and the dart in these poems all evidently refer to the traumatic irruption of eros into the conscious ego that would resist it.

I have analysed *Poems 1913* at length elsewhere as an instance of the Journey of the Hero genre.[12] Thus, the work has its Hero (Brennan); Mentors (chiefly Aeschylus, Blake and Mallarmé); Shadows (Apollo, a god of the sun and reason, and Blake's Urizen: both of them gainsayers of the unseen realm of Lilith); Shapeshifters (Elisabeth Werth who goes from positive aspect to negative during the course of the Hero's transformation, and Lilith who goes correspondingly from negative to positive); Threshold Guardians (the academic Classical establishment); and so on. The 'Lilith' section portrays the Hero's quest in the Special World, where he confronts and defeats his demon Lilith, or more precisely transforms her in the Jungian way into a goddess. 'The Quest of Silence' is the last full section describing events in the Ordinary World, where the Hero has encountered a crisis or crises which necessitate his taking up of his quest. Christopher Vogler, developing the theme of Joseph Campbell's landmark study *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, describes the Ordinary World thus:

> Typically, in the opening phase of a story, heroes have 'gotten by' somehow. They have handled an unbalanced life through a series of defenses or coping mechanisms. Then all at once some new energy enters the story that makes it impossible for the hero to simply get by any longer. A new person, condition, or information shifts the hero's balance, and nothing will ever be the same. A decision must be made, action taken, the conflict faced…[13]

Vogler's remarks on the Shadow(s) emphasise the journey's finally microcosmic nature:

> Shadows can be all the things we don't like about ourselves, all the dark secrets we can't admit, even to ourselves. The qualities we have renounced and tried to root out still lurk within, operating in the Shadow world of the unconscious… If the Threshold Guardian represents neuroses, then the Shadow archetype stands for

[12] Ibid., 107-121
[13] Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey* (Pan Macmillan, 1999), 61-2

> psychoses that not only hamper us, but threaten to destroy us.[14]

For Brennan, the 'new energy' was undoubtedly the energy of Lilith in her sphinx aspect of erotic demon, surging to shatter the shell of his classical ego.

McAuley is highly critical of Brennan's outlook in *Towards the Source*, the first book of the livre composé:

> The pre-nuptial poems convey a perilously overwrought expectation of a perfectly ineffable fulfilment of the poet's inexperienced and suspended desire ... He seems, moreover ... to be trying, even before the consummation of their union, to fix his beloved fast into the frame of innocent girlhood, as if preferring her in that role ... There is an unhealthy sickliness of sentiment, which bodes ill for the future, in the following poem ['And does she still perceive, her curtain drawn'] ... a sickliness that is translated into the false tone and impure diction that pervade it ... But I still think that the cumulative effect of these poems suggests a dangerous tension between the pressure of erotic expectation and the infantilizing of the conception of the bride ... Brennan conveys an alarming sense of a mind so auto-intoxicated that the ideal and real have no controllable relation, and are on collision course.[15]

These observations are mostly accurate and justified. However, McAuley failed to appreciate the Journey nature of *Poems 1913*, and that in *Towards the Source* the Hero is still well and truly in the Ordinary World, with all its attendant problems. Here is Vogler again:

> But Heroes must also be unique human beings, rather than stereotypical creatures or tin gods without flaws or unpredictability… Interesting flaws humanise a character. We can recognise bits of ourselves in a Hero who is challenged to overcome inner doubts, errors in thinking,

[14] Ibid., 71
[15] Ibid.

> guilt or trauma from the past, or fear of the future. Weaknesses, imperfections, quirks, and vices immediately make a Hero more real and appealing. It seems the more neurotic characters are, the more the audience likes them and identifies with them… Flaws are a starting point of imperfection and completeness from which a character can grow.[16]

The Journey of the Hero therefore has direction, and we owe it to Brennan to acknowledge his honesty in publishing this portrayal of himself at a stage that would evidently have given him little pleasure to recall. In general he was richly endowed with flaws, as it has pleased several critics to note; but flaws are not incompatible with heroism, as Vogler notes. 'The Quest of Silence' represents the last gasp of the Ordinary World before the transformation of Brennan in his quest for the wisdom of Lilith.

We can define more precisely the significance of Elisabeth Werth in the young Brennan's life. They had met in Berlin in 1893 and become engaged, and she had travelled to Sydney in 1897 to join him. We may with some justice characterise her as a type of classical goddess. R. G. Howarth described her thus: 'When she first arrived in Australia, Mrs. Brennan, I have been credibly told, was a girl of radiant beauty—golden-haired, blue-eyed, a Nordic dream of a woman.'[17] Like Apollo's, Elizabeth's eyes were of the blue of the sky, her hair of the gold of the sun. Apollo was the dominant god of Hellenistic culture of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE which so enthralled Brennan;[18] and Spengler uses the term 'Apollinian' to describe that culture's prevailing materialistic and cosmetic bent. Classical beauty of the kind exemplified by Elisabeth Werth is the first Beauty of the first lines of poem 1 ('MDCCCXCIII:A Prelude') of *Poems 1913*: 'Sweet days of breaking light ... sweet dawn of

[16] Ibid., 39-40

[17] R.G. Howarth, 'Personalia', *Southerly*, Number Four of 1949 (Chris Brennan Number): 214

[18] See for example Stéphane Mallarmé in *Les Dieux Antiques*: 'Le culte d'Apollon fut en Grèce de tous le plus largement répandu, a eut la plus grande influence sur la formation du caractère grec' (*Oeuvres Complètes* [Éditions Gallimard, 1945], 1205).

Beauty's day';[19] while the deeper, more robust beauty of Lilith is the second Beauty of the same poem, in its final stanzas:

> And, O, ye golden days,
> tho' since on stranger ways
> to some undying war
> the fatal star
> of unseen Beauty draw
> this soul, to occult law
> obedient ever, not
> are ye forgot.

Brennan explicitly stated the nature of the problem in this letter to Dowell O'Reilly:

> What am I arguing for? Merely for the illimitableness of Beauty, which I hold is found everywhere, even in mud-flats (if you deny this, then you set a wall round Beauty & become a lousy earthworm wriggling thro' the decaying mould of classic*ism*)…[20] [Brennan's italics]

Elisabeth's love of outdoor pursuits is well recorded, and Brennan described her in 'Lilith' as 'creature of morn'. In a poem written on the steamer home in June 1894 and entitled 'Hymn',[21] to which scholars have given little attention thus far, he juxtaposes his attraction to her with his love of the Classics which evidently still held him in thrall. The two loves are continuous. It is worth quoting in full and examining closely, for the insight it gives into the central conflict that beset Brennan at this time, the healing of which would be the central theme of *Poems 1913*:

[19] Most commentators take these lines to refer to the moderns whom Brennan discovered in Berlin. However, there are strong external and internal indications that they in fact refer to the Greeks, to whom he was after all still committed in 1893 – the break would not come until 1894. I discuss this poem in some depth in my PhD thesis (132-5).

[20] Undated fragment collected in Terry Sturm ed., *Christopher Brennan*, in the series *Portable Australian Authors*, (University of Queensland Press, 1984), 396

[21] A. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn (eds.), *The Verse of Christopher Brennan* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), 210-11

HYMN

Perversity! that wilt not stay
as merely guest within my brain
arise from memory or display
if any trace of thee remain

tho' but as streaks of various hue
cast from what drugs of various dyes
for comprehension of the few
poison the equatorial skies

far other than beneath whose roof
that never took the tint of blood
my fever'd spirit stood aloof
to reach the heaven from out the mud

The flowers in the hothouse grew
(the nipping and the eager air
might charge them with no proper dew)
we enter'd—I but unaware

Yet found delight in every bloom
that pois'd upon exotic stalk
scatter'd a radiance thro' the gloom
that else had overcast our walk

and haunted by the lucid one
mine eyes forgot the others' soil
saw but the children of the sun
not of the loveless nights of toil

My heart exulted to behold
those flowers in that endless aisle
mark'd but the glory and the gold
deluded by the nostril's wile

but she that hitherto had seem'd
not any of those flowers to see

(of others not so rare she dream'd)
open'd her eyes and look'd on me

The hothouse vanish'd with its flowers
and as before the breath of spring
the fever of the winter cowers
I sate beside her listening

Let those who prate of treason know
that as we walk our farther way
flowers of far other colour grow
in this my spirit's second May

and not as agonising day
flares o'er the equatorial sea
in strangeness that has power to stay
the phantom in my memory

And if I seem to leave the strife
and forth as albatross to fare
resolv'd to lead another's life
beneath the ardent height of air

I yet behold that lucid flower
that rising from the endless sea
beneath what skies that laugh or lower
points upward to infinity

and far from that perversity
beneath the open heavens' roll
with absoluteness silently
interprets nature to the soul.

A key image here is of the 'equatorial skies', in which the noonday sun stands directly overhead, casting no shadow. 'Beneath whose roof/ that never took the tint of blood', 'the lucid one', and 'children of the sun' point in the same direction, which can only be toward Apollo. The alarming word 'perversity' opens and closes the poem; and we remember the 'benevolent tart on the side' with whom Brennan spent time in Berlin

even as he was wooing Elisabeth,[22] as recorded in the slightly later poem 'Threnos' (late 1894, see below).[23] Eros plays the role in 'Threnos' of the incubus in Classical mythology, which descends on the sleeper in his dreams.

There is an alarming sense in stanza 1 of 'Hymn', and also in 'Threnos', of Brennan striving to expunge what was in fact a constitutive part of himself. A plausible conclusion to be drawn is that this is precisely the element which he would later come to identify as Lilith in her sphinx aspect of erotic possessor, now no longer to be oppugned, but accommodated (see for example poem 68.iii: 'and thou must house it, thou,/ within thy fleshly Now'). At this stage, though, Brennan is evidently far from that state of grace.

Stanza 2 of 'Hymn' describes the corruption of his classical idyll by the ineluctable eros . In stanza 3 Brennan portrays his Apollonian strivings towards scholarly distinction in the Classics. The following five stanzas, where the flowers in the unnatural climate of the hothouse represent the intellectual triumphs of Brennan's first classical phase (cf. 'The grand cortège of glory and youth is gone' – poem 7), describe Brennan's initial introduction of Elisabeth to the wonders of his inner life – to which she is however unresponsive, offering him instead a simple natural beauty which he embraces. There is a suggestion here, however, that we are still in the realm of classical beauty ('of others not so rare she dream'd') rather than the deeper and more robust beauty of Lilith which Brennan would come to find so essential to his healing and transformation.

Brennan's enthusiasm for the Classics now wanes ('The hothouse vanish'd with its flowers'), and his Apollonian striving is now seen as a winter, beside Elisabeth's spring. The chronological correlate in his life in Berlin would plausibly be early 1894, when he began to edit his research on Aeschylus for publication, to draw a line under that phase of his life. Brennan finds his new-found love for Elisabeth now able to suppress his 'perversion' ('in strangeness that has power to stay/ the phantom in my memory'). So that his future remains, still, charged with Freudian potentialities.

[22] Testimony of J.J. Quinn. Quoted in Clark, ibid., 74
[23] Collected, with commentary, in Sturm, ibid., 132-3

Brennan had evidently transferred his affection from the Classics to the flesh-and-blood of Elisabeth: the problem being that this was in either case an idealistic love, the ideal being that of Apollo, of day, of summer, of the power of sunlight to reveal nature to the sense of sight, of body at the expense of soul. Brennan would have to learn the hard way that Apollo is deficient in the property of soul, that night and winter are constitutive to the world, and that one repudiates the inward looking, sunlight-independent vision – enshrined in Greek myth in the character of Teiresias – at one's peril. Had Christopher and Elisabeth belonged to different times and backgrounds they may possibly have been able to have a relationship and get it out of their systems and move on; but as it was, the bonds of marriage and children made it a tragedy for both of them.

Since it is of such importance to this argument, here is 'Threnos', which Brennan tried to suppress, but which survived in a letter to A.B. Piddington:

> Her place is dark in my brain tonight, her face is faded and dim,
> a picture veil'd in a sanctuary unhaunted of seraphim,
> where never mounts the incense nor memorial vesper-hymn.
> She that sunn'd herself in my love, that freely gave of her best,
> whose ghost crept back and found some warmth in the secret shrine of my breast,
> is but a piteous shadow now, despoil'd forever of rest.
> The years have gone by and left me here in a bare-blown corner of days,
> the treacherous mists have crept at length o'er the old beloved ways,
> and alas! I cannot weep for the soul that was mine in her vanisht Mays.
> Yet ah! that the years should work their will, that the wind of time should blow
> out into the wide and soundless night and Eternity's cruel flow
> of lovingkindness and tenderness and kisses of long ago.
> and ah! that the poor pale spirit that liv'd and lov'd and was tender of yore
> should sleep forever the second death, foul-murder'd on Lethe shore
> that she and I should be lost to each other, forgotten for evermore.

Here he explicitly refers to the other woman of his Berlin years, who evidently offered him the passion of Lilith – which in 'Hymn' he had characterised as a 'perversion' – even as he was wooing a spotless goddess of day. McAuley's words (quoted above) come to mind here: 'Brennan conveys an alarming sense of a mind so auto-intoxicated that the ideal and real have no controllable relation, and are on collision course.' And Clark's: 'Brennan's relations with women in Berlin, as in Goulburn, showed that, in his sexual attitudes, he was a radically divided man.'[24] And Vogler's (quoted above): 'If the Threshold Guardian represents neuroses, the Shadow archetype stands for psychoses that not only hamper us, but threaten to destroy us'.

Clark surmises that Brennan may have been clinically schizophrenic. The evidence on the whole does not support this. Nevertheless, there is a strong odour of incipient mental illness in Brennan's life and work of the early and mid-nineties, with Apollonian sunlit reason warring with the blind libido in a typically Freudian-Jungian way. The healing of this conflict would be the goal of the quest of *The Forest of Night*, begun in 1897. This would not be a case of the mere slaying of a demon of the unconscious (the sphinx), but of the transformation of her (Lilith in her wholeness) into a deity, in a way that we now associate with Jung. Let W. B. Yeats have the last word, in a passage that Brennan marked up in his copy of Yeats' study of William Blake. The context is Yeats' discussion of Blake's symbolic system:

> This means that Imagination, the great force that surrounds us within and without, coming to us in the form of Inspiration, has power to perform what are miracles in comparison with our own strength, and to make the most egotistic sensation of all in the world of Time, that of the sexual organ whose symbol is the plough, into an expansive emotion leading to the true Centre, the great mental opening which leads to the Unlimited in the world of Eternity.[25]

[24] Ibid., 74

[25] Yeats W.B. and Ellis E.J., *The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*, in 3 vols., (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), 1.407. It is a quite straightforward task to distinguish Yeats' contributions from his collaborator's, such is the difference between genius and mere competence. I have identified (ibid., 81-6) several cogent reasons for concluding that the copy of this work held in Fisher Rare Books Library, University of Sydney, is Brennan's own.

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‘This is the Word of God’: Acceptance Theatre and the Validation of a Gay Religious Sensibility – An Analysis of Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi*

JAMES MARLAND

Theatre as Theology: *Corpus Christi* and the validation of LGBT Religious sensibility

Asking its audiences to consider the spiritual and political ramifications of a gay Christ, Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi* has engendered a great deal of controversy. In the play McNally emphasised the struggle for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) spiritual rights through his depiction of a society that would seek to crucify a gay Christ. After situating the play in both theological and theatrical contexts, the discussion below will examine the way in which *Corpus* emphasises a gay religious sensibility by focusing on: the religious structure of the text (based on the Medieval Passion play), the religious narrative of the play and its challenge to heterosexist readings of the Bible and Biblical authority, and the play’s message of religious equality and its direct advocacy for a gay religious sensibility. The discussion will then consider the political nature of the text in view of its Brechtian elements including the immediacy of its polemical social message.

The Rise of a Gay Religious Sensibility

Initially, it is useful to outline the growth of a gay religious sensibility in order to contextualize the discussion of gay rights in McNally’s play. Traditionally, theological heterosexism has been fundamental in establishing the religious segregation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people. In many instances openly gay individuals

have been vilified by Christian communities and excluded from participation in their sacraments:

> In their relationships with the Church, gay Christians are subjected to the Church's vocabulary of motives that labels their lifestyle as unacceptable. In response, gay Christians have to develop an alternative vocabulary of moral motives that label their sexuality and lifestyle as compatible with Christianity. Needless to say, that Church's official stance on homosexuality generates a stigmatizing climate under which gay Christians must learn to survive.[1]

While it is an oversimplification to describe all Christian churches as willing collaborators in the denigration of homosexuality, it is true to say that the majority of church leaders and their followers are vocal in their condemnation of gay men and women. Despite rejection from most mainstream religious institutions, LGBT Christian groups have grown in number as theological heterosexism has come under increasing social and academic scrutiny. One factor instrumental in this growth has been the critical authority of queer theology and its exegetical support for the religious legitimacy of gay men and women.

Contemporary scholarship has progressively challenged conservative, literal translations of the Biblical text,[2] providing same-sex Christian groups with a solid theological basis from which to dispute oppressive readings of the Text: 'the texts are clear in terms of what they actually *say*. Yet we must recognize that they are culturally conditioned and cannot be applied uncritically'.[3] Mark Jordan notes that theology has, over the last three decades 'begun to speak about it [gay and lesbian

[1] Andrew Yip, 'Attacking the Attacker: Gay Christians Talk Back', *The British Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 1 (1997): 113-27.

[2] Literal readings of the Text are being challenged for their theological inconsistency by a number of scholars. For example, Kenneth A Locke, highlights the contradiction of Biblical scripture and the impossibility of following all its requirements and teachings, arguing that: 'in practice nobody, not even the most fundamentally Christian, follows and adheres to the teachings of the entire Bible'. 'The Bible on Homosexuality: Exploring Its Meaning and Authority', *Journal of Homosexuality* 48, no. 2 (2004): p. 127.

[3] Choon-Leong Seow, 'A Homosexual Perspective', *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox P, 1996), p. 14-27.

sexuality] more freely'[4] and, as a result of this, '[w]e now have notable first essays in lesbian and gay theology'.[5] In fact, Eric Rodriguez and Susan Ouellette claim pro-gay religious groups 'have re-interpreted the Bible in such a way that homosexuality is viewed in a positive, rather than negative, religious light'.[6] Philip Tan concludes: 'Increasingly, spirituality is […] seen as a source of empowerment that positively impacts on the lives of individuals',[7] 'is relevant to gay and lesbian individuals',[8] and as such should be supported and nurtured.

Queer theology is often positioned by the Christian orthodoxy as a hostile and separatist religious praxis. Despite its deconstructive focus, Queer theology does not seek to undermine mainstream theology; on the contrary, it desires a communion of orthodoxy and queer. In her monograph, *The Queer God*, Marcella Althaus-Reid assures that: 'Queer theologies do not disregard church traditions'[9] or seek to destroy religious communities. Rather, queer theology seeks to encourage those communities to welcome difference and theological plurality. As we will see, this aspect of queer theology is echoed in *Corpus* where McNally fosters the unification of religious orthodoxy and queer. Further, McNally's play also establishes the significance of the individual, where human diversity is celebrated. Incorporating the work of Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Althaus-Reid highlights the importance of the individual in queer theology, disrupting traditional theology's focus on conformity: 'Queer theologies are those characterised by an 'I' because the Queer discourse only becomes such when done in the first person'.[10] Althaus-Reid insists that queer theology operates through a modality of celebration, where the *individual* is championed, especially those branded as sexually deviant: 'At the bottom line of Queer theologies, there are

[4] Mark Jordan, 'The Pope Converts: Imagination, Bureaucracy, Silence', *Theology and Sexuality*. Ed. Eugene F Rogers Jr (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. 260.
[5]Ibid., p. 261.
[6]Eric Rodriguez and Suzanne C Ouellette, 'Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 3 (2000): p. 335.
[7] Philip Tan, 'The Importance of Spirituality among Gay and Lesbian Individuals', *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, no. 2 (2005): p.142.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 8.
[10] Ibid.

biographies of sexual migrants, testimonies of real lives in rebellions made of love, pleasure and suffering'.[11] While McNally has incorporated elements of queer theology, as well as issues associated with the movement for LGBT Christian rights, within *Corpus*, his employment of them is complex. Indeed, the academic discourses surrounding the movement for LGBT Christian recognition, queer theology (and queer theory more broadly) is extensive and dynamic and the nature of these paradigms makes it difficult to ascribe any one of them to the discussion of the play in an holistic way. McNally's agenda is to promote the religious validity of LGBT individuals, and in order to do so, he co-opts particular elements from these various philosophical discussions. The play is not a transparent exemplification or scrutiny of queer theology, but rather an assertion of McNally's own vision of what Christian theology should look like:

> If a divinity does not belong to all people, if He is not created in our image as much as we are created in His, then He is less a true divinity for all men to believe in than He is a particular religion's secular definition of what a divinity should be for the needs of its followers. Such a God is no God at all because He is exclusive to His members. He is a Roman Catholic at best and a very narrow-minded one at that.[12]

Acceptance Theatre

Acceptance Theatre occurs when a playwright maintains a narrative focus on the religious validity of LGBT Christians, employing a celestial or religiously legitimate[13] character to speak out against traditional heterosexist dogma. The political discourse embedded in an Acceptance play is achieved through a divinely sanctioned character [Acceptance

[11] Ibid.
[12] McNally, Op. Cit., p. v.
[13] The words *religiously legitimate*, describe a character such as a priest or any member of the religious clergy who has been authorised to perform that role by a formally constituted church. For example, in Jane Chamber's Acceptance play *My Blue Heaven.* (New York: JH Press), 1981, Dr. John, an ordained minister, marries two lesbians, Josie and Molly 'in the sight of God' p. 70. Contrary to traditional religious dogma, Dr John urges them to 'sanctify that commitment' p. 69, promoting the religious validity of gay women and men.

figure], such as a priest, angel or messianic figure, who agitates positively on behalf of the LGBT community. This radical pro-gay discourse is further underlined by political stage and performance techniques that have been derived from various political theatre traditions, especially Brecht's Epic theatre, to engage audiences critically to persuade them. The presence of Acceptance plays is significant in that they highlight the emergence of a LGBT religious sensibility.

A review of over two hundred LGBT plays, from 1900 onwards, revealed only five texts that may be considered 'Acceptance' including: Jane Chambers' *My Blue Heaven* (1981), Carl Morse's *Annunciation* (1991), Paul Rudnick's *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* (1998), Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* (1998), and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (Part I 1990/ Part II 1991). Importantly, all of these plays were written post-1980, indicating that the movement for a recognised gay religious sensibility is intrinsically modern being, perhaps, only possible in a post-Stonewall, era. It is also reasonable to associate the AIDS crisis with greater LGBT religious searching and the appearance of these plays. In fact, this syndrome is a major focus of Tony Kushner's Acceptance play, *Angles in America*. Almost all literature that deals with gay characters and Christianity prior to the 1980s illustrates one or more of the following: it elides the mention of religion and God, it enforces atheism onto the gay figures of these plays, it leads the gay character(s) to confess their supposedly sinful nature, it necessitates their removal from the Church, or it is unable to remove all obstacles that prevent the expression of a gay and lesbian religious sensibility. Many texts post-1980 also elide or problematise LGBT religious sensibility, making the Acceptance plays noteworthy as part of a small but emerging movement.

Acceptance Theatre seeks a revision of theology, not at the expense of intrinsic religious beliefs, but to make religion accessible to any who may desire membership. In this respect Acceptance Theatre has commonality with Althaus-Reid's definitions for queer theology and its focus on religious plurality. What is significant about the Acceptance plays is their determination to provide a voice for gay Christians when, historically, LGBT literature was more likely to condemn or reject Christianity by identifying the incompatibility of the two communities. Instead, Acceptance plays such as *Corpus* provide a vehicle by which theological heterosexism can be challenged and dismantled. Wendy Weber argues that the endorsement of a gay religious sensibility is an observable growing trend clearly evidenced in literature:

> Although the twentieth century has witnessed a decline in the prominence of institutional religion in the West, the privileged position of Christianity in literary and other cultural explorations of existence and identity remains. Surprisingly, even many literary texts written by gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender authors employ the rituals, rhetoric, and models of Christianity as integral to their character development. While in some of these texts, Christian tropes reinscribe heterosexuality as normative others broaden the traditionally narrow identity parameters of Christianity.[14]

McNally's Acceptance play represents a challenge to conservative theology, and is noteworthy because of its mimesis of the changing socio-theological landscape in which the religious acceptance of sexual difference is gaining increased support. Recognising McNally's play for its promotion of LGBT religious rights provides us with an opportunity to historicise the struggle for a gay religious sensibility. Of the five Acceptance plays, *Corpus* is arguably the most radical example of this theatrical paradigm.

Connection with Medieval Religious Theatre: The Passion Play

A bold challenge to conservative Christian orthodoxy, *Corpus Christi* is modelled loosely on the medieval passion play and offers one core message grounded in the belief that '[a]ll men [sic] are divine'.[15] During the Medieval period, structured theatre was devised around Christianity, plays being re-enactments of Biblical stories, the lives of saints, and reconstructions of the life and death of Jesus Christ. Performances even occurred within churches,[16] fundamentally linking religion and theatre at this time. McNally reinvigorates this relationship by insisting that *Corpus* 'is more a religious ritual than a play',[17] and should be 'told in

[14] Wendy Webber, 'Queering the Word: Patricia Nell Warren's Adaptation of Christian Sacraments in *the Fancy Dancer', International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 6, no.4 (2001): p. 267.
[15] McNally, Op. Cit., p. 20.
[16] Meg Twycross, 'The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*. Eds. Richard Beadle and Alan J Fletcher. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2008, p. 26.
[17] Ibid., p. v.

the theatrical tradition of medieval morality plays'.[18] In terms of its actual compliance with medieval theatre, *Corpus* has a much greater association with the passion play than it does with morality dramas. A morality play does not characterise any 'scriptural or legendary persons, but wholly, or almost wholly, abstractions, and which although still religious in intention, aim rather at ethical cultivation'.[19] In contrast, a passion play can be defined as a 'religious drama presenting the Crucifixion of Christ, usually performed on Good Friday'.[20] Although McNally's play does not conform strictly to the passion play, in that it extends its narrative beyond the 'passion' of Christ to include Joshua's youth and ministry, the latter part of the narrative complies with this medieval genre. Despite these complications it is clear that McNally's intention is to underline the religious focus of his play, ensuring that his narrative, as well as the play's structure, supports his religious polemic. In doing so, McNally is reviving what Tim Miller and David Román argue contemporary performance has often elided, that is the interplay between religion and theatre and its 'roots as sacred storytelling,' where 'the interweaving of ritual space ('church,' if it doesn't make you nervous) and theatre is thousands of years old'.[21]

Religious Narrative: The Challenge to Heterosexist Readings of the Bible and Biblical Authority

Corpus Christi is direct in its advocacy for a gay religious sensibility; we understand that Joshua has come into the world to die for the gay cause and to present a new theological truth:

> Pilate: Art thou a queer then?
> Joshua: Thou sayest I am.
> Pilate: What do you say?
> Joshua: To this end I was born and for this cause I came into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth.[22]

[18] Ibid., p. iv.
[19] E K Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*. (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1996), p. 151.
[20] J A Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Vol. 4th. (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 643.
[21] Tim Miller and David Román, 'Preaching to the Converted', *Theatre Journal* 47 no. 2 (1995): p. 178.
[22] McNally, Op. Cit., p. 75.

Set in the mid to late twentieth century in Corpus Christi, Texas,[23] McNally's play follows the life of the fictitious Joshua from His[24] birth through to His death by crucifixion, being a modern re-telling of the New Testament from a gay perspective. Joshua takes on the role of Christ, sent by God to promote the 'queer' cause[25] in that He is persecuted and later executed for His divine endorsement of homosexuality. The narrative parallels the story of Christ through the virgin birth,[26] His period of exile in the desert where He is tempted by the devil (although it is the ghost of James Dean in this version),[27] His ability to cure the sick,[28] His gathering of disciples – leading to His betrayal by Judas,[29] His denial by Peter,[30] and His crucifixion at the hands of Pontius Pilate.[31] While the majority of the play follows the life of Christ, McNally also deviates from the Biblical narrative to differentiate the modern Joshua from the traditional figure of Jesus. We see Joshua graduate from Pontius Pilate High,[32] attend His school prom,[33] cure a male prostitute from AIDS[34] and, most importantly, die specifically on behalf of the gay cause.[35] Usurping the narratives associated with the life of Christ and recasting Him as gay makes this text highly radical in its promotion of the gay community's religious legitimacy.

The pro-LGBT Christian agenda in the play is supported by the two Acceptance characters, God the Father and God the Son (Joshua), both of whom advocate fiercely for a gay religious sensibility. Through these characters, McNally ventriloquises his own version of God's will on behalf of the LGBT community. While McNally has chosen to call the principal character Joshua rather than Jesus, there can be no mistake as to

[23] Corpus Christi, in the state of Texas, is the hometown of playwright Terrance McNally.
[24] To avoid confusion I have chosen to follow McNally and capitalise Joshua's third-person pronouns.
[25] McNally, Op. Cit., p. 75.
[26] Ibid., p. 14.
[27] Ibid., pp. 43-46.
[28] Ibid., pp. 42; 55.
[29] Ibid., pp. 64-65.
[30] Ibid., p. 77.
[31] Ibid., pp. 74-81.
[32] Ibid., p. 35.
[33] Ibid., pp. 35-40.
[34] Ibid., p. 55.
[35] Ibid., p. 80.

His divinity, which the other characters remark on repeatedly throughout the play:

> Room Service #3: His love for the world will redeem us all.
> Mary: So you're telling me He's a special child?
> Room Service #1: We're telling you this child is the son of God.[36]

In the opening scene, John baptizes Joshua as 'Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, son of God, son of man [sic]'[37] noting that: 'I've been waiting for You',[38] and later we learn that Mary had wanted to call her son Jesus, but Joseph had forbidden it on the grounds that it 'sounds like a Mexican'.[39] Like the Biblical Jesus, His mother Mary purports to be 'a virgin'[40] and Joseph is not the biological father: 'I'm going to love Him like He's my own, even if He's not'.[41] Having established the religious authority of Joshua, McNally's Acceptance figure is able to present a new gay-positive theology. Speaking his own adaptation of God's will on stage, McNally re-models Christian theology to promote the religious legitimacy of gay men and women and establish his message of theological equality:

> *GOD whispers something in JOSHUA'S ear.*
> Joshua: What? I couldn't hear You.
> God: All men [sic] are divine.
> Joshua: Why are You whispering?
> God: That is the secret You will teach them.
> Joshua: What if I don't want to share this secret with My fellow men?
> God: You won't be able to keep it.[42]

Joshua, whose name is consistently juxtaposed with that of Jesus[43] and conducts a number of successful miracles,[44] ultimately reminds us that

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[36] Ibid., p. 16.
[37] Ibid., p. 7.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., p. 15.
[40] Ibid., p. 14
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., p. 20.
[43] Ibid., p. 77. 'Judas: And they took Jesus, Joshua, and let Him away'
[44] Ibid., p. 42. One example of a miracle carried out by Joshua: 'Truck Driver #3 Touch me! / *Truck Driver #3 takes Joshua's hands and puts them on his eyes.* /

His divinity is shared with all of humanity in that we are all, in some way, divine. The choice to name his protagonist Joshua rather than Jesus establishes a fundamental difference between McNally's character and the historical Jesus. This enables the *agon* at the heart of McNally's text, as audiences are able to compare and contrast the two figures. While the name Joshua, rather than Christ or Jesus, de-emphasises His divinity, conversely it also helps to establish His religious authority; Jesus is often translated from Aramaic as Yeshua. As we will see, McNally promotes Joshua's divinity at the same time that he represents His humanity and, like queer theology, draws our attention to the divinity intrinsic in each individual. McNally's focus then, is to expose Joshua's divinity and more importantly, to use this divinity to promote religious pluralism and equality, establishing the religious worth of gay men and women.

Central to McNally's narrative is the radical revision of Christ's teachings through a recasting of Biblical scripture. The principal passages employed by conservative theologians to demonize homosexual behaviour can be found in Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13. McNally makes direct reference to the second of these during a scene in which the Christ-like Joshua marries the apostles, James and Bartholomew:

> James: Bartholomew and I had wanted our union blessed for a long time – some acknowledgment of what we were to each other.
> Bartholomew: We asked, Josh. They said it was against the law and the priests said it was forbidden by Scripture.
> James: 'If a man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.'
> Joshua: Why would you memorize such a terrible passage? 'And God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good.' I can quote Scripture as well as the next man. God loves us most when we love each other. We accept you and bless you. Who's got a ring?[45]

During the wedding homily in *Corpus*, McNally pushes the boundaries of traditional marriage, appropriating this heterosexual ceremony for the marriage of two men. McNally avoids the complexity

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Thank You, Lord! I can see. My skin is smooth. The air is sweet. I am healed of all affliction. He has given you the greatest gift of all, son of God'.
[45] Ibid., p. 61.

associated with the queer debate surrounding this issue and simply contests the heteronormative tradition of marriage by presenting a homosexual version; arguably a radical act in itself. Paradoxically, it is Joshua's religious endorsement of this same-sex partnership that sees one of the other characters acknowledge His divinity:

> Joshua: It is good when two men love as James and Bartholomew do and we recognize their union. …Love each other in sickness and health. …I bless this marriage in Your name, Father. Amen. Now let's all get very, very drunk.
> Bartholomew: You are truly the Messiah, son of the living God.[46]

McNally makes no attempt to underplay his vehement criticism of the conservative orthodoxy that has traditionally governed Christian theology, as, immediately following the wedding a conservative high priest espouses an officious, hard-line stance that is the opposite to Joshua's message of love:

> Joshua: Have you come to bless this marriage, too, father?
> High Priest: It is one thing to preach your perversions to ignorant and sentimental men and women such as yourselves, but such travesties of God's natural order will never be blessed in the House of the Lord by one of His ordained priests.
> Joshua: This is the House of the Lord. I ordain Myself.
> High Priest: You have broken every commandment.
> Joshua: You are hypocrites. You are liars. You have perverted My father's words to make them serve your ends. I despise you.[47]

McNally not only attempts to challenge the interpretation behind these Biblical passages, but also seeks to confront the authority that society has constructed around the Bible itself. After vociferously attacking the conservative stance of the high priest, Joshua strikes him and it is left to the other apostles to remind Joshua of the 'rule' He instigated about physical retaliation, which Joshua in turn contradicts:

> Thomas: Joshua, You struck a priest.

[46] Ibid., p. 62
[47] Ibid.

> Joshua: And I'll do it again. All who do not love all men are against Me!
> Thomas: But You said we must always turn the other cheek.
> Joshua: I must have been in a very good mood. Do not take everything I say so seriously.[48]

Throughout *Corpus*, McNally attempts to dispute the way in which society has come to accept religious traditions and teachings by questioning their authority. Early in the play Joshua converses with God the Father, who reveals that He does not have omniscient powers:

> God: No more questions. I'm gone Joshua.
> Joshua: What do You mean, You're gone? You can't be gone. You're supposed to be everywhere all the time.
> God: That is a very big misunderstanding.[49]

This dialogue challenges the traditional view that God is omnipresent, demonstrating McNally's desire to deconstruct historical understandings of God. Further, the relationship between Joshua and God the Father is complicated by McNally, as Joshua criticises the actions and will of God the Father. In one scene, Joshua, known for His miracles, is approached by a Centurion who asks Him to cure his dying wife:

> Centurion: Sir, we are not worthy to have You in our home. You have only to say the word and she will be cured.
> Joshua: Go home. Your wife is waiting for you. As you believe, so let it be. / *Centurion goes*. / Truly, I tell you, nowhere in Israel have I found such faith, not even among My own disciples.[50]

Later, Joshua learns that the Centurion's wife did not survive and reacts angrily, incensed that His will is less than that of God the Father's:

> Joshua: There's our friend. How is she?
> Centurion: I was too late. She was dead.
> Joshua: I'm sorry.

[48] Ibid., p. 63.
[49] Ibid., p. 20.
[50] Ibid., p. 60.

> Peter: It was God's will, Josh. You said so Yourself.
> Joshua: Well, it wasn't mine![51]

McNally's inclusion of this scene not only contests traditional understandings of Joshua's divinity, but also highlights His humanity. Having angrily opposed the will of God, Joshua immediately acknowledges His hubris, stating: 'I'm so ashamed. Forgive Me, all of you'.[52] There are other moments in the text that similarly confront Joshua's divine power. At the outset of the play the disciple Bartholomew, a medical doctor, questions Joshua's ability to heal the sick:

> We have to heal men's bodies before we can heal their souls. Joshua didn't always understand that. 'Believe,' He'd say, 'believe and be well.' I'd be right behind Him saying 'believe and take two of these and call me in the morning'.[53]

McNally complicates Joshua's divinity and His power to perform miracles. For example, Joshua manages to raise Lazarus from the dead,[54] cure Phillip from AIDS[55] and Andrew of Touretts,[56] however, as we have seen, certain miracles do not eventuate. This allows McNally to disrupt Biblical authority and also reduces Joshua's divinity to promote His humanity.

The promotion of Joshua's humanity and McNally's quarrel with theological heterosexism is also evidenced in Joshua's same-sex desire. On His prom night, Joshua attempts unsuccessfully to grope His date Patricia: [t]hose aren't my tits, Josh. These are my tits. Are You sure you've [sic] done this before?'.[57] Having witnessed Judas kissing Joshua a moment before, Patricia resigns herself to the fact that her date is more interested in men: 'I don't think Your heart is really in it. I saw what You were doing with that guy, Josh'.[58] Patricia is quickly chased off by Judas who kisses Joshua again, but this time the stage directions tell us that

[51] Ibid., pp. 60-61.
[52] Ibid., p. 61.
[53] Ibid., p. 3.
[54] Ibid., p. 38.
[55] Ibid., p. 55.
[56] Ibid., p. 51.
[57] Ibid., p. 36.
[58] Ibid.

'*JOSHUA responds*'.[59] What is unclear in the text is whether or not the relationship between Joshua and Judas extends physically beyond kissing. As Judas pulls Joshua toward him, Joshua states: 'You can come no closer to Me than My body. Everything else you will never touch. Everything important is hidden from you'.[60] McNally does not clarify what is meant by Joshua's statement of 'coming close' to another body and whether this implies anything other than kissing. Later in the text, the apostle Simon recounts a more clear-cut moment of potential sexual intimacy with Joshua:

> One night we were around the fire. Just the two of us. He'd just performed the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Five loaves and two fish fed five thousand men, not counting the women and children. Amazing! And twelve baskets were left over. I remember an owl hooting and thinking I'd never seen so many starts, so much stuff up there to wonder about. And for what seemed like an eternity, the two of us were one.[61]

Afterwards, Joshua repeats to Simon the same mantra that he had uttered to Judas on their prom night. If it is possible to read the relationship between Joshua and Simon as sexually intimate, then it is also legitimate to assume that Joshua's actions are intended to promote a relaxation of tradition theology's focus on sexual restriction. In the 2001 Melbourne production debate raged amongst the cast as to the actual nature of Joshua's relationships with Judas and Simon.[62] Some members of the company believed that these lines proved Joshua's sexual experience, while others were reticent to accept these couplings without a more explicit line from McNally. The ambiguity of these moments delimits the LGBT religious polemic of this text as if Joshua is meant to be chaste then McNally is simply re-emphasising Christianity's traditional disapproval of sexuality. In contrast, however, if Joshua is sexually active, having had at least two sexual partners, then McNally is radical in his approach to Christian theology. While it is possible that McNally intends these moments to be ambiguous, the same-sex kissing and especially the comments from Simon, underline Joshua's same-sex

[59] Ibid. p. 38.
[60] Ibid. p. 37.
[61] Ibid. p. 64.
[62] I worked on this production as the dramaturge as well as taking the role of James.

attraction and promote his humanity by moving him away from the Christ figure.

Religion and Equality

Much of the play is devoted to espousing a message of equality as McNally encourages the view that all members of the human race are significant in the eyes of God. Joshua promotes this message as part of His missionary work, asking us to recognise the divinity present in all of humankind: 'God is our leader. I'm just this guy like you. No better, no worse. …We're each special. We're each ordinary. We're each divine'.[63] The incidental character, Mrs McElroy, Joshua's high school English teacher from Pontius Pilate High, echoes this ideal: 'I loved all my students. I can't pretend I had a favorite [sic]. I just wanted each of them to be true to himself (or herself) and reach his (or her) potential as a creative human being'.[64] Mrs McElroy clearly speaks on behalf of McNally's agenda when she cannot identify Joshua as more important than any of the other students that she has taught throughout her career: 'I was a high school English teacher. He was my student. One of many, many hundreds. I know how you would have liked me to say something else. I'm sorry'.[65] Judas reiterates the play's focus on *human* divinity, during the scene that sees him paid 30 pieces of silver for the betrayal of Joshua:

> High Priest: But this one, [Joshua] He's a dangerous man.
> Judas: What is His crime?
> High Priest: Blasphemy.
> Judas: Because He says he's the son of God?
> High Priest: No, because He says you're the son of God as well.
> Judas: We're all the son of God.
> High Priest: Unless you're looking for trouble, I would keep that to myself. The son of God is a cocksucker? I don't think so.[66]

In a direct reference to the Biblical story, Joshua denies His own family during the last supper, forging an inclusive version of the notion of family:

[63] Ibid., p. 50.
[64] Ibid., p. 30.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., p. 65.

> Thomas: Josh, there's a woman outside who says she is Your mother.
>
> Joshua: Tell her I have no mother. You are My mother and father and brothers and sisters. You are My family now. We are all mother, father, brothers, and sisters, each to the other.[67]

McNally's promotion of human divinity and LGBT religious acceptance has been noted by a number of the play's reviewers. Fiona Scott-Norman, commenting on the 2001 Australian premiere of *Corpus* in Melbourne, reflects personally in her review entitled 'The night I gave my heart to a gay Jesus'. Although an atheist, she notes that '[a]s I watched 'Joshua' preach the gospel, I was illuminated by a sudden understanding of what Christianity is about. I got it. It's about love'.[68] At the Melbourne production of *Corpus*, as with the American and UK premieres, protesters lined the street outside the theatre. *The Australian* reported that, for the 1998 New York premiere, 'religious groups threatened to bomb the Manhattan Theatre Club where it was playing and pour acid on the audience'.[69] Christian and Muslim groups led an aggressive charge against the play in Melbourne, condemning the morals central to the message of the performance. Melbourne's leading religious figures, including the Greek Orthodox Archbishop Stylianos and the then Most Reverend George Pell, Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne,[70] condemned the play in a letter to *The Age*, stating it 'is blasphemous and perverted, another assault on the traditions and restraints that hold decent and pluralist societies together'.[71] Scott-Norman depicts the paradox between the play's central message of acceptance and the religious protesters' condemnation when she recalls 'that the people who profess to worship God were loathing us outside the theatre, implacably cursing us in God's name, compressing their vinegar-lips ever tighter, and passing judgment on something they refuse to witness or read'.[72] Jacqueline Tomlins wrote a letter to *The Age* in which she pin-points McNally's

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[67] Ibid., p. 68.
[68] Fiona Scott Norman, 'The Night I Gave My Heart to a Gay Jesus.' *The Age*, Jan. 2001.
[69] Georgina Safe. 'Churchmen Denounce Gay Christ Play as Blasphemous.' *The Australian* 17th January 2001.
[70] Pell was promoted to the position of Cardinal in 2003 and now resides in Sydney.
[71] Archbishop Stylianos et al. 'Perverted Blasphemy at Taxpayers' Expense' *The Age* 16th January 2001.
[72] Op. Cit., Norman.

intention to promote inclusivity: 'I can see how for Christian lesbians and gay men struggling with the contradictions of their faith the play would be extremely affirming, and carry a powerful message. In fact, it carries a powerful message for us all'.[73]

Paul Vout, the Executive Director of Polemic Productions Pty Ltd, the theatre company that produced *Corpus* in Melbourne, identified the way McNally uses his play to promote religious pluralism: 'The point I try and make with this play is that Christ and the Apostles could be (portrayed as) women, they could be black, they could be disabled, they could be sick, they could be cast within any section of society, which has, at one time or another, been vilified, persecuted, discriminated against, by the church'.[74] C.W.E. Bigsby asserts that McNally's plays, especially *Corpus*, promote acceptance and plurality, positing: 'He [McNally] writes of people who ask for respect, who evidence a common humanity, who suffer from the same debilitating fears as one another, who seek the same comfort, who need the same redemption.'[75] McNally's text then, challenges traditional heterosexist theology promoting human divinity and theological plurality.

Political Theatre

The pertinence of the political message in *Corpus* was highlighted by the media after the play's premiere in New York, when the execution of the Christ-like protagonist Joshua was likened to the real murder of Matthew Shepard. On 12th October 1998, the day before the play opened, in a remote location outside Laramie, Wyoming, Matthew Shepard, a young gay man, was brutally attacked by two men, strung up in a crucifix-like position, beaten and pistol whipped, then left to endure freezing weather. He died later in hospital from his injuries. The perpetrators of this hate crime admitted to murdering Shepard because of his homosexuality. In the published text's preface, McNally writes provocatively that Shepard 'died as agonizing a death as another young man who had been tortured and nailed to a wooden cross at a desolate spot outside Jerusalem known

[73] Tomlins, Jacqueline. 'Corpus Christi! Shock Horror!' *The Age* 19th January 2001.
[74] Paul Vout in Carolyn Webb, 'Confronting Dogma with a Leap of Faith', *The Age* 9th January, 2001.
[75] C.W.E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama 1945-2000* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 372.

as Golgotha some 1,998 years earlier'.[76] Other critics have made the same association themselves and a great deal of media attention was given to Shepard's death at the time, with *Corpus*' social relevance remarked on consistently by reviewers: '[i]t is impossible not to think of Shepard's lonely death when watching the crucifixion scene in Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*'.[77] Robert Brustein, writing in *The New Republic*, commented: 'Homosexuals have suffered a great deal in our country. The most recent outrage, where a gay man in Wyoming was lashed to a fence and pistol-whipped to death, bore an uncanny resemblance to a crucifixion'.[78] While the merits of linking the death of Christ with the murder of a young gay man are debatable, McNally's statement demonstrates his desire for audiences to read Joshua as gay and underlines his desire to politicise the LGBT religious agenda.[79]

The nature of the relationship between audience and stage has been theorised by a variety of practitioners and scholars, especially Bertolt Brecht:

> [Brecht's] ideas for a theatre with the power to provide social change, along with his attempts to reactivate stage-audience exchange, have had a widespread and profound effect not only on theatre practice, but also on critical responses to plays and performance.[80]

Brecht asserted that by engaging a spectator critically in a performance, theatre could help to engender social change. As part of his Epic genre, Brecht devised the 'learning-play', which he argued was 'essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and how it might be changed)'.[81] Rejecting the 'sentimental' theatre of Stanislavski, Brecht devised a variety of theatrical devices to 'estrange' his audience [the

[76] Op. Cit., p. vi.
[77] Lyn Gardner, 'Unholy Racket' *The Guardian* 11th August, 1999.
[78] Robert Brustein, 'McNally on the Cross.' *The New Republic* 219 (1998): p. 34.
[79] See Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project* (New York: Dramatists Play Service INC. 2001) for a comprehensive theatrical recounting of the murder of Matthew Shepard as Verbatim theatre.
[80] Susan Bennett, 'Theories of Reading and Viewing.' *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London, Routledge, 2003), p. 21.
[81] Bertolt Brecht, 'The German Drama: pre-Hitler' *Brecht on Theatre* Translated by John Willett (New York, Hill and Wang, 1992), p. 79.

Verfremdungseffeckt] and maintain their critical focus.[82] Walter Benjamin confirmed Brecht's theories that stage techniques could 'encourage the audience to adopt a socially critical attitude'.[83] Although there is much critical literature which debates the actual influence of theatre or art on its viewers, McNally draws upon Brechtian philosophy to establish *Corpus* as a didactic tool: 'Look. Remember. Weep, if you will, but *learn* [my emphasis]. And don't let it happen again'.[84] This sentiment is echoed by the words of the disciple James, who is cast as a history teacher in the play and uses his opening soliloquy to underline the importance of the critical study of history: 'How we learn from it or we don't'.[85] The didactic intention of McNally's text is acknowledged by Frontain who argues that:

> [t]hroughout his canon, McNally is interested in theater's [sic] potential moral agency, but even more importantly, with theater's ability to recreate its audience. McNally's oeuvre, in fact, may be read as a sustained meditation upon the power of art, but most especially theater, to confront prejudice, break down resistance, and effect reconciliation.[86]

In the preface to the play, McNally informs us with Brechtian intent that 'Men play all the roles'[87] [there are a number of female parts which are played by the men]. There is no suspense. There is no scenery'.[88] These remarks can be viewed as distinctly 'Epic' for their capacity to maintain an audience's critical distance. The play opens with an actor admitting the lack of fresh twists to the plot structure: 'We are going to tell you an

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[82] Op. Cit., Bennett, p. 28.
[83] Philip Auslander, 'Walter Benjamin' *Theory for Performance Studies* (London, Routledge, 2008), p. 63.
[84] Op. Cit., McNally, p. vii.
[85] Ibid., p. 2
[86] Raymond-Jean Frontain ''All Men Are Divine': Religious Mystery and Homosexual Identity in Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*' *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*, ed Raymond-Jean Frontain (NewYork: Harrington Park Press, 2003), p. 249.
[87] Op. Cit., p. vi. The 2001 Melbourne production maintained McNally's desire to cast only men in the play, whereas the 2008 Sydney production employed both men and women. To maintain the Brechtian estrangement, the Sydney production used cross-gender casting for a variety of the characters. Both productions, then, were purposefully constructed with this specific element of political theatre.
[88] Ibid., p. vi.

old and familiar story. One you've all heard over and over, again and again. One you believe or one you don't. There's no suspense and fewer surprises. You all know how it turns out'.[89] At this point we may ask why McNally offers us a text that makes no substantial revisions to the primary source. If Brechtian theory is right, retelling such a recognisable story, altering only the figures and contexts of the narrative while still adhering strictly to the overall plot structure, will reinforce the revolutionary social and political message at the play's core. McNally knows there is no suspense in a story that we are culturally familiar with, and as audience, we will compare and contrast this narrative with the traditional one. Much like audiences witnessing ancient Greek theatre, the *agon* of the performance is enhanced through the theatrical revision of a traditional narrative. The power of McNally's storytelling is in his appropriation of Christ's narrative and its retelling from a gay perspective. Brecht states, 'Everything depends on 'story'; it is the heart of the theatrical performance'.[90] 'All *Corpus Christi* asks of you,' McNally writes:

> is to 'look what they did to Him. Look what they did to Him.' At the same time it asks you to look at what they did to Joshua, it asks that we look at what they did one cold October night to a young man in Wyoming as well. Jesus Christ died again when Matthew Shepard did.[91]

Further significant Epic features in *Corpus* can be recognised in the staging of the play. In the script's instructions McNally calls for 'a bare raked stage',[92] where 'Members of the company will sit on benches at the rear of the stage when they are not participating in a scene'.[93] In all major Australian productions (Melbourne 2001, Brisbane 2003, and Sydney 2008), to greater or lesser extent, actors were in view of the audience during the majority of the play, even when not involved in a scene. In this way all three productions maintained McNally's Epic intention. Keeping the actors on stage, even when they are not involved with a specific scene, increases the overall Epic nature of the play, as the

[89] Ibid., p. 1.
[90] Bertolt Brecht in John Rouse *Brecht and the West German Theatre: The Practice and Politics of Interpretation*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1989), p. 30.
[91] Op. Cit., McNally, p. vii.
[92] Ibid., p. ix.
[93] Ibid.

audience is constantly aware of the theatrical environment they are in; the stage is peopled with *actors* rather than *characters*. McNally emphasises this in other ways too: for example, at the outset of the play he asks actors to enter the stage dressed in their own street clothes. They then change into their costumes on stage after being 'baptized' into their roles by the figure of St. John. In this baptism ritual, John provides us with not only the name of the character but that of the *actor* as well: 'I bless you, (full name of the actor playing ANDREW). I baptize you and recognize your divinity as a human being. I adore you, (first name of the actor playing ANDREW). I christen you Andrew'.[94] Thomas, one of the minor characters in the play, is cast as 'an actor', and while introducing himself to the audience, uses his opening soliloquy to reinforce McNally's Epic agenda through metatheatre: 'I'm an actor. I mean Thomas is an actor. I'm an actor, too, of course, but you know that or you wouldn't be paying good money or even no money to sit there and listen to me tell you I'm someone else'.[95] He reminds the audience that theatre is all about 'the willing suspension of disbelief – or in certain cases the *un*willing suspension of disbelief'.[96] To confuse matters further, in the early stages of the play, the newly baptized actors inform the audience that they will diverge from their main characters and people the scenes with a variety of other figures. These figures, it appears, are selected by the actors at random, pulling out the names of characters from a hat.

> Simon: We need a cast of thousands to tell this story: men, women, children.
> James the Less: None of us knows who he's going to be.
> Philip: It's the luck of the draw.[97]

Once the various roles are divided the actors move on to deal with the props, an assortment of which are showcased in front of the audience before being placed on prop's tables, which McNally states must be '*visible stage right and left*'.[98] The actors utilise these props throughout the performance, selecting them in full sight of the audience. Metatheatrical actors who comment on the action, play a multiplicity of characters (male and female), and choose props from a location that is easily viewed by the audience: these are devices which strongly reflect

[94] Ibid., p. 2.
[95] Ibid., p. 4.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., p. 9.
[98] Ibid., p. 1.

Epic techniques and have been deliberately integrated into the theatrical structure of the play. McNally, fully aware of the purported didactic strength of Brecht's Epic theatre, has exploited the political potential of the theatre to endorse his gay polemic.

Corpus Christi is an example of Acceptance Theatre as it unifies elements of Brecht's Epic theatre to promote McNally's message of social change and advance a gay religious sensibility—an inconceivable notion not so long ago. The play strikes out at the exclusivity and authority of the religious institutions and traditions that would seek to exile gay individuals from accessing spiritual and religious fulfilment. The controversy surrounding McNally's work reveals the acute social pertinence of its message and the continuing opposition facing gay men and women who seek access to religious institutions. In the final moments of *Corpus Christi* McNally assures us that although '[o]ur play is over…the end is still to come. All these things you have seen and heard are the first birth pangs of the new age'.[99]

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[99] Ibid., p. 80.