

II. Creative Voices

A Conversation with Patricia Eakins

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Patricia Eakins is the author of The Hungry Girls and Other Stories (San Francisco: Cadmus Editions, 1988). The New York Times Book Review characterized this collection as “triumphantly quirky.” Her tales deal with outlandish characters, remote in time and place, and sound like exotic fables from other days, yet they are strangely revealing of our own times. The title story “The Hungry Girls,” which received a Charles Angoff award for “outstanding contribution” from The Literary Review, is set in nineteenth-century Normandy and sustains a Rabelaisian capacity for larger-than-life bodily functions which humorously set back the limits of plausible proprieties. Other stories take place in what could be medieval Japan (“Milady’s Ploy”), or in the East of the Thousand and One Nights (“Snakeskins”), or on a South Pacific Atoll after an atomic disaster (“The Change”), or in the mythological time of Ovid’s Metamorphoses (“Auravir”). Mainly, the stories take place in a country of the mind remote enough to feel strange and yet close to our sense of actual history and culture.

Patricia Eakins’s fiction has been adapted for the theater by Collision Theory, whose production of “The Hungry Girls—A Fairy Tale” premiered at New York City’s Synchronicity Space in August, 1997. It was revived in August 1998 as part of the New York International Fringe Festival.

Eakins has recently completed a novel entitled The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste, Father and Mother, First and Last, which has been awarded the 1998 New York University Press Prize for Fiction and will be

published by NYU Press in Spring, 1999. She has graciously granted us permission to publish an excerpt from it in this issue. Other excerpts have been published in Parnassus, The Iowa Review and The Paris Review, which awarded Eakins the 1996 Aga Khan Prize for Fiction. Making use of eighteenth century narrative conventions, Eakins's novel portrays a slave marooned on an island, who bears children with underwater paramours and creates a whole new culture for himself and his children, in a world he can claim as his own. Eakins's current projects include a novel about the Catskill Mountains and a collection of essays and essay fictions with the working title Manifesto of a Dead Daughter. Her URL is: <http://www.profdir.com/eakins>.



The conversation began with comments on Patricia Eakins's collection of stories, *The Hungry Girls and Other Stories*. I wanted to know from her whether "Daddy's Ibbit Wife" was about Vietnam, and its last paragraph about... draft dodgers—"the dead who didn't get to Canada... the dead who didn't make it" (81). I asked her whether I was completely imagining things?

Françoise Palleau-Papin, a former student at the École Normale Supérieure de Fontenay-St. Cloud, is Maître de Conférences at the University of Tours. This conversation took place on June 4th, 1998, on a balcony overlooking the river in the village of Montolieu, near Carcassonne. Eakins was staying at the International Inkwell, a wonderful pension for writers in Montolieu, which is the French book-village in the Languedoc.

You are! But you were right to think of war, and flight from war. A more appropriate historical reference than the flight of Vietnam draft dodgers would be the forced migrations of Native Americans during the nineteenth century—the "Trail of Tears," the forced march of the Cherokee from Georgia to Oklahoma. Or the fighting retreat of the Joseph band of the Nez Perce, who were pursued by the bluecoats from Oregon through Idaho and Montana to the Bear Paw Mountains just south of the Canadian border. They had been heading for sanctuary in Canada, as, in "Daddy's Ibbit Wife," the dead were. My story is not about the Nez Perce or the Cherokee or the Pueblo, however. It's about a made-up group of people.

*That clarifies it. What about the quote that was made up in the epigraph—
"I give you here the flora and fauna of all the continents, beasts and
vegetables, birds and fish, I have seen myself and heard reported. Mind
there are many wonders under the sun. Which are God's creations?
Which are men's? The truth is not always the likeliest story; thus I credit*

any careful account. Jean Louis Le Montal, in the foreword of his Encyclopedia" (7, unnumbered). There is no Jean Louis Le Montal?

No. And also, the names of the French towns are made up, of course.

I didn't even check that out. Why would you make that up, and not clarify the fact that it's made up?

Just to mystify... [laughter]

Just to mystify readers?

Well, it's naughtiness, it's tongue-in-cheek, it's my sense of humor. If no one knows it's made up you might wonder what's funny, but it just struck me as entertaining to do it.

It is entertaining, but also, it doesn't sound made-up at all, it sounds genuine in the way you put it—

Le Montal said what I—you know, he's one more mask. I mean he speaks for me; he gives a voice to my aesthetic: "The truth is not always the likeliest story"—this is a very different aesthetic from the prevailing one.

You mean that the prevailing aesthetic would be that you have to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth?

Right. The prevailing aesthetic would be the memoir mentality—that a story should be the truth—

A testimony?

Yes. It's a truer story if it's confessional, if it has a non-fiction base, a confessional or factual truth. I kept reading about how science in the past hadn't been careful to distinguish between fact and fancy. And I began to wonder—perhaps science had taken a route that took it away from poetic truth.

Yes.

The older way of going about it, which was much more ingenuous, expressed truth of a different sort.

Poetic truth that would be closer to the “real” truth?

Well, it’s another kind of truth. Actually, there was a French natural historian named Buffon—you probably know him. I read somewhere that he was the last great scientist who, given a choice between the most precise way of saying a thing and the most vivid, chose the vivid. I couldn’t find a quote from him that said what I wanted to say, so I made up Le Montal. If I had found one of Buffon, I might have cited him, because I like him very much. It was a hugely important moment in human history when people describing the natural world began to choose the precise words and called that the truth and shied away from the vivid. People stopped wanting—now people don’t even want fiction in their fiction.

They’re afraid of it.

Yes, there’s a certain suspicion—if it’s invented it can’t be true—

It’s fantasy...

Right, “mere” fantasy.

I had a question in this respect, concerning your essay “Manifesto of a Dead Daughter.”

That is a memoir.

Right, but in it you also seem to be talking about different truths. You said: “the episodes of my opera radiate an antique melodrama that is hardly of this century”—and then you go on to say “Yet the arias were real, the snipers were real.”

Right.

This is vivid.

Well, “Manifesto” is a different kind of writing, you know. Here when I say real, I mean verifiable.

This is a different kind of writing. Yet don’t you incorporate biographical material, although disguised, in your fiction?

Oh, sure. As I wrote “The Hungry Girls” I very consciously had in mind my husband’s sister’s two-year-old son Niko, who was truly a force of

nature, loud, active, willful and destructive. Deep down I admired him enormously.

Niko was a source of inspiration for “The Hungry Girls,” and his father Quentin, a rural veterinarian, is in it too. Around the time I wrote the story, I had had my appendix out. At the time, I was very thin. Quentin asked if the surgeon had given me a discount. Then he paused and thought quite a while. He asked, “Can you imagine what it is like to operate on a fat beagle?” This little conversation echoes the world of Rabelais, where the boundaries between *human* and *animal*, between *brain* and *body*, seem to have been more permeable than they are in the world that I live in, the urban world where people sit at computers all day long then go to the gym to work out on more machines.

Niko and Quentin live on a farm, among horses and goats and sheep and other animals, whose bodily needs and ways assert themselves along with those of humans. The farm world has such a rich smell of animals, their unbathed bodies and their excrement. Sometimes, when I sniff the powerful odor of a homeless person on the subway, I realize that everyone at a medieval/renaissance carnival or in an Elizabethan theater probably smelled quite a bit like this. Throw in the oranges and the pomanders and the bear garden not far off and some open sewers—and you begin to realize that, by contrast, we already live in the shadowy world of the television tube or the computer screen. The thin, cerebral, utopian future is already here.

So “The Hungry Girls” is the only story in the collection that incorporates disguised biographical material?

Well, maybe “transformed” is a better word than disguised. My life is always in there somehow. Even stories that I didn’t think were very—for instance when you asked me about the draft dodgers—I began thinking about “Daddy’s Ibbit Wife.” For all that is invented, this is still the world my father was born in. He was not a Native American, but his ancestors did go out West in a covered wagon. I have a branding iron with—I don’t think it’s Bar-B, but a brand that was used on cattle belonging to my father’s father. My father was born in a sod house, and there is this sense of going underground in “Daddy’s Ibbit Wife,” burrowing into the earth, into a sod realm. It’s an echo of my family’s story.

Becoming an animal in a burrow...

Well, my grandmother ran away from my grandfather’s ranch to become a Christian Scientist in San Francisco. I was always told that life on the ranch was “too animal” for her—too much birth and death. The crumbled burrows and grass-grown mounds of the story are an echo of the

cornfield that I was told had been my father's birthplace. And then—you know, there is a playful aspect to my animal invention that is common to most of the stories in *The Hungry Girls*. It amused me to take real animals and give their characteristics to people—the reverse of fables. I coined this phrase “counterfable.” I don't think it's sufficient... for one thing, my animals tend to be invented, though they are like real animals. The ibbits have a lot of woodchuck or prairie dog in them. As for why the counterfable project, I just think it's how I see the world—I really don't see people as being separate from animals, to the extent that you could say “animals and people.” It think it would be closer to the truth to say “people and other animals.” Why I had to explore that idea in such a lot of different ways is hard for me to say, though I have often been asked. It just appealed to me to do it.

Yes. The way you work with it is very vivid. Talking about animals, your animals are very often, in your words, “vermin,” like rats (I'm talking about “The Garden of Fishes” here¹), and I was wondering— you say that the master does not record vermin in his book, he does not draw them— I was wondering to what extent you were trying to give a voice to what's been left out of...

Oh, I think so—

...out of what you call “his chaste pencil and chalks,” that is, vermin and slaves (I'm bringing them together on purpose because they were considered the same...)

Right...

They've been disregarded. In what way do you give a voice to vermin and slaves?

I can recall when I started working on the stories the excitement of the challenge that most history is unknown. I wanted to find a way to what had never been recorded. I wasn't outside of the work enough to think “what an arrogant project!”

It's not arrogant, it's necessary.

It seemed necessary to me. I had this strong sense that most people in most times in most places have been illiterate. Even most people who've given testimony, who've written things—their words have not survived.

1. *The Paris Review* 140 (Fall 1996) 202-212.

Most history is gone; there's just a hole. We look at these walls, we look at these stones, each one has a story but we could look at them a long time. In the end, you invent the story, you create the memory. And from inside the storyteller it feels as if you're listening to—say, a stone, and the stone has the voice of a Cathar in it, or whomever, and you're giving the Cathar a voice.

But why vermin in particular?

In the case of the sugar plantation, the rats were terrible problems to the planters. This business of eating rats emerged in my researches—that they actually did. After a while, my character told me that he didn't want to eat rat. But also, I have to say that in an earlier draft of the story, Pierre didn't protest against eating rat. He was not so critical of his master's work. As I worked with his story, he spoke to me more and more strongly about his sense of what had been left out. Actually I wasn't thinking of the arguments between social historians and king-and-general historians, but in a way, it is that argument.

So you look at people's lives...

...to try and imagine what their lives were like.

To re-create them?

Right. You might ask why I don't just do historical novels. But if I don't make it somehow strange for myself, if I don't make it mysterious, then I'm approaching history with a distance and confidence that people living in it could not have had. So I have to make it strange for myself in order to put myself in the position of a person who was living with the same sense of trying to figure it out that you or I would have. We can't see ourselves. We live our whole lives trying to figure out what our place is, what we're doing, what everyone around us is doing. You know, if you do a lot of research on the past, you say, "oh, *les Cathares* believed this and that—"

—and it sounds so matter of fact...

It's matter of fact to us, but it wasn't to them.

They were sorting it out.

They were sorting it out. I like to write about something I'm sorting out along with the characters. I also don't want the burden of trying to tell stories that have to be true to facts that I can never know well enough.

And in that way you are truer to facts. Here's another question I had: a critic says (about a part of your novel) that it's "what appears to be a historical novel." Would you subscribe to that?

No, I wouldn't. It has historical elements, but so much is made up. The islands are made up, though the details of sugar production are pretty accurate. Nobody allowed a slave to learn to read and write in that culture, so Pierre's literacy is made up. And his longevity—there was a terrible turnover: a terrific death rate—actually among the Europeans as well. They had a hard time in the tropics. Actually, the French weren't as foolish as the English—English houses were thick-walled, and the early settlers wore dark, heavy clothes with ruffs. I took a few liberties with time too, by the way, between the era when people wore ruffs and went out in black—

—gowns?

Well, not gowns, but pantaloons, and jerkins, and when they wore waistcoats and breeches—the eighteenth century. The relationship that the master has with Buffon is not made up. That's a relationship that Buffon actually had with his *correspondants*. But many of the animals that they record are made up, the fish in the sea, for instance.

What about the format, here, the title page: this really looks like a title page from the eighteenth-century tradition.

That I wanted, right.

What's important to you in this tradition?

Well, this does purport to be the account of a slave telling about his life, and there are authentic slave narratives— you know Olaudah Equiano?

Yes.

Why does this period interest me? Well, Buffon was pre-enlightenment. So this is the moment in history when the urge to catalogue everything, the encyclopedic urge, is present, but before the division of voices into vivid and precise. So there is observation and commitment to analysis but there's still that sense of enchantment, of the suffusion of the landscape with imagination. That moment appealed to me as a very full moment in human history. The French part of it—why he's not English—the English struck me as having been brutes in the new world. The English and the Dutch were these huge drunkards [laughter], the thoughtful

Founding Fathers notwithstanding. When you learn basic history in American grammar schools, you learn that the Declaration of Independence is the ultimate enlightenment document, the ultimate promise of democracy and suffrage. I began to realize that our Declaration of Independence, for all I think it is beautifully written—and I can see why Ho Chi Minh liked it—the French Revolution was more thoroughgoing than our own, because it granted much more suffrage, it gave a greater voice to the common man. Toussaint L'Ouverture and the people that mounted the revolution in Haiti thought they were part of the French Revolution. And then Napoleon sent troops because France wanted the sugar revenues. The Haitians won their independence, but they were terribly betrayed. To me, what happened in Haiti was another great watershed in human history, like the division between the precise and the vivid voices, and perhaps related to it. I liked working with these twinned sets of ideas, and Buffon and Haiti—the only successful slave revolt—both pointed me to the French rather than the English colonial experience. I have to say also the challenge of creating an intellectual appealed to me. You know, there aren't many in literature—there's Hamlet, there's Brecht's Galileo... I thought of creating in Pierre a great lost scientist, someone who'd had experiences that no one had had before, yet who came from a disregarded—there's the vermin!—a disregarded background. I hope the reader would become aware of what a range of lost opportunity for creativity and human development there is in the apartheid mentality that prevails even today.

You picked the French colonization rather than the English—your fable world is also very foreign. In what way does your distancing help you see things differently?

In the case of picking the French colonization, there is a fascination with French literature, although much of what I quote in the book is made up, I have to say—it's not only Le Montal, but other imaginary writers—

Such as? You said the cities were made up—

In “The Hungry Girls”?

They sound so French...

They're all made up. “Brosse-les-Bains”? [laughter] It's nonsense. “Anse-le-Marteau”—“Goose-the-Hammer”—it means nothing. “Parsee” (from the story “Snakeskins”)—now that is an actual old word for Persian, but “Galub” is not an actual city. “Salah Dey Oum” is not that I know an actual name.

But wait. "Goose-the-Hammer"—"Anse-le-Martreau"—anse does not mean "goose." Oie means "goose." Anse means "handle."

Whoops! But you know, *ansérin* means "goose-like" in French and English (*anserine*). The Latin for "goose" is *anser*. Do you think a person who "fait le pot à deux anses" looks like a goose flapping its wings as well as a two-handled pot? "Handle-the-Hammer," "Goose-the-Hammer"—I can handle all those meanings! They goose the text and the reader.

Is that what you had in mind?

The answer is the anser.

It's odd. "The Hungry Girls" sounds so French, the setting is so French—it's a mixture of what? —Flaubert, Maupassant?

I guess I woke up here in Montolieu! [laughter]. "Kyono" [from the story "Milady's Ploy"]—is a made-up place, but it's Japan-like. Li-Po was an eighth-century Chinese poet, but all these—"totojoni"—these are all made up.

What about "The Change"? Everything is made up?

"Hanewok," "Tongtu"—none of this exists. "Historian Veratius Aurelius" [from the story "Auravir"] did not exist. "Sophides" did not exist. There was one reviewer who accused me of stealing other people's history, which gave me a good laugh, because there's so much that's invented. I must have done something right if she thought that!

What about the word-forging—that's made up too, of course—more made up than anything else. Here, in "Salt," for example, what about the "slukie"?

I just liked the way it sounds—it sounds like the great silkie.

What do you mean, "the great silkie"?

"The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry" is a folksong—one of the ballads collected by Francis J. Child in *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. "Slukie" is a little sideways skittle out of "silkie"—the way "Kyono" is a sideways scuttle from—there's just a lot of sideways motion in my stories.

What is this Child ballad about?

Well, it's not quite about my monster, it's about a seal. "Salt" is a very concept-driven story, actually. I was just imagining a human history in which gender wasn't with us from the beginning.

Because there are only female protagonists.

Right. So then “Salt” is about the emergence of gender. What inspired me was reading about the chromosomes. You know there’s XX, and I was always taught that the male was XY, but recently I discovered that Y means absence of the X. So there’s XX and then there’s X-.

Minus?

Right, X(X-). I was looking to put that into a story.

Reworking the scientific background into a broader mythical scope?

I couldn’t have said it better, and I wish I had! The made-up words come from—I just liked the sound of them.

You work by sounds...

Yes. And this story has a sound that the others don’t have. Kind of an Irish sound [reading from “Salt” with an Irish accent]: “...before the slukie drove us into the fire of air. Yet I have heard of thousands of galiven laying each two eggs on the beach come spring.”

It’s almost like verse, now that you’re reading it out loud.

Well, this story has a certain rhythm.

What about the “vollows”?

“Vollow”—no diphthong. [Reading with an Irish accent] “We had to fight the gulls for vollow room...” I like the roundness— it’s like eggs, “vollow”—and it’s also like “hollow,” it’s like a “vowel.” But that’s after the fact, I just liked the sound of “vollow.”

You say it’s like “vowel.” Your characters often hatch children or words indifferently. They hatch words like so many children, or they hatch children like so many words. Could you elaborate on that?

Well, I’m someone whose children are words, so... I have that very personal sense of the world.

There’s one sentence I would have liked you to explain to me: the first sentence of “Salt.” I think it’s a beautiful first sentence, but it’s probably the most puzzling as well to me: “You sit before me your heart a cup,

and who am I to gainsay you drink?" First of all, who's the "you"? What kind of an audience are you calling up?

I can actually see the storyteller: she's very old, very, very old, she has very long white hair, a long white dress, she's sitting in a little—you wouldn't even call it a hut—it's a lean-to of reeds by the sea. It's a great flat beach with the water going way in and way out—there are rocks, high rocks... you have to walk way, way out to get to this place—it's almost like Mont Saint Michel. But you're not in danger of being drowned, it's just a long walk. She's spinning, spinning, and "you" is I or whoever is coming to hear the story. This is her story.

And we're sitting before her our "hearts a cup"— to drink from her words?

There's a meta-narrator here, quoting the whole story. You see, the story is this old woman's talking, but the person who has come to hear is implied. "You" is a character in the story, then, who becomes the reader. Or the reader becomes the person who's come to hear.

And when you say "who am I to gainsay you drink," we're drinking from her cup of words...

Well, the heart a cup is kind of a disgusting metaphor [laughter]...

What do you mean, disgusting?

Disgusting in the way that Christian relics are disgusting. Parts of the body... I grew up in the same town as (later) Madonna, "the material girl." Church and religion weren't very important to us. I did have Catholic friends who had cards in their wallets with these hearts like from an anatomy book—crowns of thorns around them. And these "sacred hearts" had veins in their pink muscle walls, maybe an artery or two poking out, and superimposed on the heart Christ crucified. There is a disconcerting literalness to the representation. One of the heresies of the Cathars was, they denied the humanity and the physicality of the suffering and resurrection of Christ. The "heart a cup" is disgusting in the same way then as certain familiar elements of orthodox Christianity.

Are we drinking blood, or almost...

Well, if the heart's a cup and then the story is poured into the heart, there is certainly quite an explicit sacrificial element there. Now I'm talking after the fact, I didn't think about this when I wrote it. But if I have to say what it means, especially since it's the first sentence of a story of origins, then I have to acknowledge that it points to the sacrificial basis that Propp

has recognized in all story, although I hadn't read Propp when I wrote "Salt." But is this anybody in particular's blood? Well... let's just say this is a story about something being lost or sacrificed.

And the mothers are sacrificed. Very often, in your fiction, the mothers are sacrificed when they give birth to words or children or eggs...

Well, you are a mother and you were just talking about not getting much sleep! I've just noticed that children eat up their parents' lives!

That's right! And you make it so real.

It's not something that people allow themselves to talk about much who have children—

They block it out?

Since I don't have them, I'm permitted to observe it...

[laughter]

But what about intellectual creation, isn't that exhausting too? And don't you get out a lot more than you thought you would?

I try not to think. I listen and I write by ear so as to block out judgment. I couldn't possibly write if I were thinking about all the things we're talking about. Thoughts—opinions about what I have done—are afterthoughts. The very notion of intellectual creation is much more abstract than the feel of the process—well, you're an intellectual yourself, so—

But artistic creation is something else, it comes from a "deeper" level, it's not analyzed.

True. And I had to learn not to analyze, or at least not to judge. The older I get, the better I understand that I come from quite a repressive background, although on the face of it, an indulgent American household. It certainly was not a family that encouraged—by contrast, if you think of Lucia of the bed-and-breakfast, if you think of her creating it and making it into a work of art in the book village that her father had so much to do with founding—right away it's an unusual family where the generations are so comfortably and creatively involved with one another.

So it's hers in the most deeply creative sense.

The most deeply creative. She's not just running it, she's making something of it. It's a little hard for me to imagine that kind of a creativity in the family context. I guess this speaks to that question you asked about filiation. It's been important for me as a woman to come to terms with this issue.

Speaking of filiation—there is a story, and I can't pronounce the title—

[Arabic accent] "R'ha-l'a R'a-H'oum"!

That sounds very Arabic! Where you say: "The elderly females swell to a tear-shape. Even as the pale, round eggs are sliding from their bodies, hatchlings are gnawing at their shells. They will battle their siblings and charge the ranks. They will not look back."² This idea of not looking back—

This is really a pitiless story...

It is. It's a very harsh one.

This is the harshest of all my stories. So little pity, I don't know what to say. We would like to think that people behave well in circumstances of scarcity, but they don't necessarily. There's a meanness to these people's lives, their physical lives, but a certain grandeur in their religious conceptions. I don't know if I would call this any kind of emblem for my own mentality, but one thing really surprises me. That is the metaphysical element. When I read through these stories as a body of work, I see that there is a rather fierce metaphysical curiosity, an appetite, really, that has no place in my conscious life. I'm not a believer, but I am hungry to believe.

Do you think being raised in a non-believers' household triggered your hunger?

Maybe! In a certain way, it was a forbidden thing in the household I grew up in. Religion beyond knee-jerk pieties was not our family's way. Somebody's idea of rebellion might be to take a lot of cocaine— mine might be to flirt with religion.

2. *Conjunctions* 18: 1 (1992) 342.

Something irrational that was not allowed, something suspiciously looked at?

Yes. It's a great luxury in a certain way. Certainly it's the only luxury (for the characters in the story "R'ha-l'a R'a-H'oum"). This is a tremendously sad story.

But it deals with very important things, you can't read it and escape unharmed.

There is hunger in the world at large. Scarcity. Pain. Cruelty. Suffering. I don't understand how people can say "you create these terrible worlds"—don't they read the newspapers? We live in islands of peace and plenty in France and the United States, don't you think?

Of course. Look at where we are... In your essay "Beaming Up: Liberal Arts and Literacy for the Next Century," you mention "hortatory and didactic genres such as sermons, morality plays, fables, and parables which present the right-wrong polarities of manipulated obedience and which thus subvert the smarmy prescriptiveness of the ["Star Trek"] series and the global, open question that characterizes liberal studies: What does it mean to be human?" Obviously, you consider those forms—fables and parables—restrictive in a way. So why would you use them?

They're teaching stories. Perhaps parables, inviting more multiple interpretation, don't quite belong in there.

What about fables?

Well, it's interesting—you know there's a new translation of Aesop. It seems the rigid little stories we know are nineteenth-century creations. The actual stories are much more like Jack stories, they're real survival stories, they're down-to-earth and really gritty. I think I need to qualify some of what I said about fables.

You mean about the constraints of the fable?

Yes. Earlier, you asked about traditional forms and inscribed voices, the "pastiche" question. The truth is that I don't work in traditional forms. I work in re-invented traditional forms.

Exactly. That's what I wanted you to get into.

I'm always surprised when the word "pastiche" is used. I'm not sure of its derivation, but it reminds me of pasticcio, pasta, cook books. There would be something cynical and crafty about a writer who mixed a pinch of this and a pinch of that, cooked the whole mess—maybe not cynical, but certainly it would be an artisanal mentality, which, come to think of it, I may in fact possess! There is a prejudice nowadays against the idea of the *work of art*—art that is patently artificial, or artefactual. And it is true that *trompe-l'œil* is an ancient tradition, mimesis, the representation of life—but so is tall tale. Anyway, supposing for the moment that I am a "mere" cook, let me give you a recipe for *The Hungry Girls*. An important ingredient is natural history, fermented by inversion, braised in hypothesis, seasoned with experimentation, a pinch of history, a pinch of anthropology, a dusting of oral tradition—a cup or two of side-ways scuttle.

What do you mean, "side-ways scuttle"?

Well, here we are in, let's say nineteenth-century France, or the France of Jean Giono or whomever, and bangety-boomer! A side-ways scuttle into the France of the imagination. That's not much of a scuttle, though; it's a bigger one from Japan to Kyono. Never in Japan were there stags with these bizarre sexual habits (in "Milady's Ploy"); sleeve-dogs I believe were Chinese. A lot in that story is made up, but it echoes the courtly conventions, of say, Lady Murasaki's Japan.

Some real anchorage, but yet—

But yet it is invented. Lady Murasaki writes about people who were so discreet that they ate behind screens. They did not want to acknowledge any bodily functions.

Is it only women, or is it men also?

Women more than men, I recall, but that's a good question.

So the concerns of Murasaki's characters are the opposite of your characters' usual concerns—her characters refuse to acknowledge bodily functions.

That's the other side of the coin, isn't it? Maybe you were writing about side-ways scuttles when you were writing about similes. I once read a very interesting article about the psychological processes that are

inherent in certain figures of speech. I can't remember what they all were, but displacement is expressed, it seems, as metonymy. And there's a sense in which all fiction is metonymy or synecdoche. I let this piece of iron and this railing stand for the house—I can't possibly replicate the whole house, and anyway, it's not about that. If I want to give the reader Françoise, I'll give them your glasses or your ears. Maybe that process is carried a little further in my stories. It's just a thought, and some of what I thought you were getting at that in your article.³

Thanks.

It is by analogies and a cantilevering out from some known anchorage that in some ways I can—it's like an inchworm: here's the leaf and then he... but maybe my inchworm starts in the leaf and then anchors himself in the air and then goes from there. But he starts in the leaf.

To go on and on.

Right. That's what I mean by a side-ways scuttle. But going back to the cookbook, the recipe, the list of ingredients—the civet may be seasoned in a few other ways too. One is—in many of the stories there's what I would call a voiceover voice—the narrator of Encyclopedia Britannica film strips I watched as a schoolchild. The film would always be rolling before the sound came up, so it would come on with a kind of whining growl into coherence. Rwhooooo...! And then there'd be some music, and this deep, bland know-it-all voice would tell about the land and people of Indonesia... Like God was talking. And that voice to a child, to me, was the voice of inescapable truth. So to give that voice to made-up things is to lend to invention the voice of veracity, of the unquestionable. Pseudologia. Playing around with that notion of the reliable omniscient narrator. Actually, my narrator isn't ever all that omniscient, because he knows he's in history, but he is sincere. In utter sincerity, the narrator gives you Brosse-Les-Bains and Le Montal. But the author's sincerity is suspect. She's having fun there, and maybe she shares with her narrators a sense of how arbitrary names are, how fragile a marker over the void, the black hole of history, the name of any village or any writer is.

And so often the narrator is wondering about his own narration at the same time—

As the author is lying—wondering and lying.

3. "La comparaison en mue dans les nouvelles de Patricia Eakins," *Revue française d'études américaines* 73 (juin 1997): 14-21.

Isn't that what fiction is all about?

To tell a big lie that's true. Or a big lie that will somehow save you. When I was a child I read a lot of books where dogs and horses were the heroes. Children's pot-boilers—Albert Payson Terhune's books about collies and Anna Sewall's *Black Beauty*, about a wonderful horse. I think my imaginary animals continue in some ways from those hero dogs and horses, but without a child's—those books portrayed a world of right or wrong, whereas my stories portray a world in which that ideal has been betrayed.

So that's a departure from the classical fable idea. And you twist around the framework of the fable to unsettle the certainty that is usually attached to it.

Yes. But “unsettling certainty” sounds like serious subversion. I think there is just a lot of mischief in my stories. A playfulness that is a very direct continuation of childhood. For instance, one influence that I can see or hear in “The Hungry Girls” is—I had a record when I was a child, a phonograph record called “The Noisy Eater”—Jerry Lewis—I can't tell you how much I loved that record. I suppose children were given it so that they wouldn't grow up to go Krrrrunch...Grrrraw...Slooorp when they ate. But I loved all the noises Jerry Lewis made, it was horrible and wonderful. I don't have the record any more.

But the memory of it is still very vivid.

Yes. When the play (adapted from “The Hungry Girls”) went up last summer—it's going to be revived, by the way, August 19-30—for the program I had to say all my influences. I said Robert Coover, Italo Calvino, Borges, Ursula Le Guin—my grad-school mentor, George Chambers—I put all that in the program, but I didn't put Jerry Lewis and hero dog books, and they belonged there too.

So the munching sounds—I mean the sounds—when you read your stories I can hear the sounds better. And on your web page, apparently, your voice can come through.

Just little sound bites, because sound files take a lot of memory, and it's time-consuming to download them.

Was sound important to you?

Very! There's a saying that the ear is the direct route to the heart, and that is true in the most literal way. You know, the ear is the only organ that

receives the world directly into the body. We register “bird” with our eyes, but a bird doesn’t fly into our brain. We register “bird song” with our ears, and the sound actually enters our brain and our body. But there was something else I wanted to say—about the idea of pastiche. That my work is not so much about inscribing a given writer’s style—though I do some mimicry. I have been much more interested in creating stories that grow from the implications of basic distinctions in made-up cultures. So there really is quite a constructive process. I am not a big reader of Levi-Strauss—but what he describes about how cultures are built up in a series of oppositions is very analogous to the process by which I have built my stories— The stories accumulate gradually, often from some very small beginning. In the case of “Oono,” I am quite sure the name came first. Then I made an animal to fit the name. Then I made people to say the name of the animal and to hunt him. Then I made the mythology of the people who hunt the animal.

Much of the writing I did in a house upstate that my husband was renovating. It was summer, the temperature on the second story of the uninsulated house rose each day to 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and while I worked with paper and pen, my husband was working with very noisy power tools. It is possible that the intensity of the story reflects in some measure the difficulty of concentrating on what I was writing under such conditions. I had to concentrate extra hard to compensate!

Later, while I was revising the story, I did do a lot of browsy reading in a very free-associational way, skipping around from one thing to another, seeing what caught my attention. Some of my reading was in popular natural history—*National Geographic* and *Natural History* magazines, which have lots of photographs. At some point I read a book called *Kabloona*, by Gontran de Poncins. I have read Jerome Rothenberg’s collection of Native American poetry *Technicians of the Sacred*, which contains some Inuit poems and stories. I recall a museum exhibition of Inuit clothing and objects. Some dioramas of Inuit life at the Museum of Natural History. And I know I have seen the Robert Flaherty film.

Then there was a book I had as a small child, called *The Eskimo Twins*. This book gave me quite a vivid sense of Inuit customs and the Inuit way of life. The story was a simple adventure story that I have long forgotten. What stayed was that early, clear sense of the artifacts of Inuit life. It was from the implications of these artifacts, and of the animals, and of the basic features of the landscape, that I made up the mythology for the people I had invented.

But *The Eskimo Twins* also supplied the basis for a more performative understanding of Inuit life. My sister and I played a long-running freeform game based on the book. There is a sense in which the Ignook hunter of ooni in the kayak out on the sea in “Oono” is a little girl

on an upside-down bridge table, paddling on the green-rug sea with a broom. The seal cooking over the fire is a milk-bottle seal. The sleeping shelves of “Oono” are the back stairs of our house, rising above a small vestibule that is the igloo. The babies on the shelves—a large collection of dolls wrapped in the hats and mufflers and jackets my sister and I would later wear outside to play.

Yet, my Ignook are not Inuit. When I wrote the stories that became *The Hungry Girls*, I made a conscious decision not to reflect any culture or known version of history in a completely accurate way. I wanted the sense of recognizable fragments joined with unrecognizable ones, but not for experimental purposes. And only a little to tease the reader. I wanted the stories to read as if the storyteller might always be on the verge of telling other stories. I wanted to create stories that read as if they came from the body of lost history. I had the sense, and have it now, that most of the history of most of the world has necessarily always been lost. And partly I wrote the stories to console myself for this loss, which I felt as a wound, a wound in the world, but also a personal wound, a loss as “original” to me as some people think sin is to mankind. A powerful sense of challenge and joy resides for me in the notion that there is a vast repository of untold story I can make and remake. To invent “the ignook” gave me a freedom that accurate ethnography would not have permitted.

It's interesting that you have to bring in very different cultures from your own.

Well, I may not always. I don't know why I started there, except I think there has always been something performative about my storytelling—as if the givens of a made-up cultural style were a costume or a skin and I were putting it on—a shaman's mask. I once saw a documentary about a Siberian shaman. She became possessed by her narrative powers after she went behind a simple curtain. She was in a room with a lot of other people, she went behind a curtain, she came back into the company in a mask that covered her head and was attached to a costume that fell all around her body. Inside her mask, her voice became the voice of the story. I think it is like that with me. Inside these masks I become the voices of the stories. However, there is quite a difference between my mask and that of the traditional shaman. The character of the traditional shaman's story was known to and shared by the culture of which the shaman was a part. There is a seamlessness, a unitariness, of culture and story. Whereas my mask is a multiple one formed of the fusion of a number of elements which are not all known to my readers or even to me and may not have been combined before, or not in this way. You could compare my narrative masks to Picasso's “*Demoiselles d'Avignon*.” There is recognizable figuration there,

the recognizable influence of African sculpture, but the point-of-view has been shattered. Sometimes the mask is the disembodied voice-over of Encyclopedia Britannica films, sometimes the voice is that of a wandering story-teller, sometimes the voice comes from within a culture, or from the border between cultures, as is the case with my character Pierre, who is first moved to tell the story of the African diaspora, and later moved to tell the story of his pregnancy, his hybrid children, and the culture he and his children share with underwater creatures he cannot completely know. Pierre sees himself as a trained observer, a *savant* in the European sense—after all he’s a *correspondant* of Buffon—but he is also speaking from his own Africanness. And of course, he learns from his fishy “sons”—his unique experience—as well. But really, you were asking not so much “what kind of masks” as “why masks”? To hazard a guess—if you read my essay “Manifesto of a Dead Daughter”—the experience of marrying so much out of caste, of being disowned and hearing yourself pronounced dead—it changes your sense of yourself and your culture. You no longer see things the same way.

And yet you still have the same history.

Yes, but you don’t know what to make of your own history. I have no objection to claiming it, nor am I ashamed of what my experience has been, but it has been very hard to speak of it. And being unable to speak is a kind of living death for a writer. But perhaps I felt somehow trapped in my culture, as if it were a coffin, I buried alive in it, all along.

Even as a small child growing up in a subdivision, I felt stifled by the narrow range of permitted culture, and there was a lot that I couldn’t make sense of. One thing, for instance, that never occurred to me as a child, and that certainly occurs to me now, is the number of houses that had white pillars, they looked like southern slave-owners’ houses, and this was in Michigan. And sometimes people even had those black iron jockeys up front with rings in their hands, fake horse-hitching posts. What were they thinking of themselves as?

Plantation owners.

Yes. And the Barthian sense of mythology really applies: here’s this architectural style that’s been borrowed to say something about these people. Here are all these children of immigrants and Okies, people risen from the working classes, who wanted to represent themselves as slave owners of the antebellum South. Marrying a Black ex-jailbird poet very young—I found myself so at odds with the subdivision culture of the Midwest, that I no longer felt at home in my own history. It was lost to me,

and I began looking everywhere for it. I think you can read in those stories a quest or a search for the buried life of the “dead” writer, an obsession with transformation and birth. When I was writing “The Hungry Girls” I was very conscious of trying to revive buried or find lost stories, though when I was writing I saw these excavations as archaeological expeditions into the collective unconsciousness.

And yet we still have to face our own history.

Yes. It’s buried in my stories somehow. I won’t say coded because I don’t think I have any sense of hiding.

You would have conformed if you had hidden.

That’s right.

To me, this is very coherent with your work.

Really?

What you were saying about the masks. When a mask enables you to say so much more—

I think that my masks helped me to speak from silence. Now whether everything I write will always be from masks, I don’t know. What I’m working on now—

I was curious about that...

I don’t want to say too much about it because it’s in process, but I’m interested in the Catskills where our house is, in the history of that region and the kinds of voices that naturally emerge from it. So that’s a little closer to home.

What about the book Pierre...

It’s a novel. It’s not yet a book.

How long a novel is it?

Maybe 300 and some pages.

Did you find it very different to work on a longer form than the short story?

So much time and research went into creating the world of each story that in some ways I was already writing novels.

But yet you chose to develop this one rather than the others.

Maybe if I weren't an ignorant autodidact, a depressive who sleepwalked through all her education, I wouldn't have to recreate the history of narrative, if you know what I mean. It's something I had to do for myself, to try on the whole history of narrative that Propp lays out. *Pierre* begins to explore the consciousness of the individuated hero, the hero of the bourgeois novel, although I didn't think that when I was writing the novel. I am not a salmon spawning my way to the mainstream, I'm just recapitulating—they say ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.⁴ What I think that means, in the womb, say, Armance (FP's baby) was like earlier forms of life before she was born—

Like a fish—

Like a fish or whatever... I think it is the same thing for me as a writer. I am recapitulating the phylogeny of narrative. I can't say anything more about it. Shall we go for a coffee?



4. Ernst Heinrich Haeckel (1834-1919) enunciated the biogenetic law that in the development of the individual animal the stages through which the species has passed in the course of its historic evolution are repeated. He was the first to draw up a genealogical tree relating the various orders of animals. *Webster's Biographical Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G & C. Merriam Co., 1959, 1st edition).

*The Marvelous Adventures
of Pierre Baptiste,
Father and Mother, First and Last*

A novel by
PATRICIA EAKINS

Excerpt from
“The Motherhood of Man”
Part the Seventh of the Whole Relation

Yet I did not leap forth, but crouched still, Homunculus Soul in my skull of wood, ears pricked to the slapping and murmuring waters. I braced myself to the cask's shift in the waves, assaying the grunt of sand beneath me. Delirious, desiccated, I sat as still as a man whose leg irons chafe at his smallest move, my mind rubbed sore by the press of paradox. Surely it were meet to rejoice, for I were redeemed from slavery, serpent and sea. Yet how numbly I mourned my likely loss, the loss of all I had known: Children black, yellow and white running through the dusty yard, their mothers' voices floating after them, the smell of yam and manioc porridge bubbling in the pots. And after supper, before sweet sleep, the stories of wives who changed to doves to please their husbands, and husbands who changed to snakes to spy on their wives, of naughty children changed to grain and eaten by their parents' hens and jealous gods who stole the rich men's cows.

Grounded in the sand of an unknown shore, I feared I would not hear again the firelight testaments, and feared I would; not to hear them I was derelict in freedom, to hear them returned to M'sieu. Oh, I did not want to

be caught, to be spitefully rented to cruel, harsh slave-breakers, to drudge in their carries, grinding bones and tearing muscles, hoeing and cutting, hoeing and cutting, dreaming of the book-filled room where I had passed so many pleasant hours. I feared the suspended whippings—the ladder, the hammock, the four-post. I feared I would be sold to a poor planter who could neither clothe nor feed me. I feared Baron Skull, the spectral master, who would burn powder in my soul's arse. Oh better a barren solitude, relieved by what comfort I could contrive!

Yet still I saw my Vérité, her cheek to the rim of the rain barrel, blowing an ashy cork across the water to her hand, spelling me to safety, as she had promised. Courage, Vérité! You will not yet see my features written on the surface of the water! It is not yet my time. I have been redeemed from the sea and now my hopes reside in land!

But what land? Despite my dilemma, I was curious. I shook off my fear to spy out the bunghole; my eye told me I had washed ashore on an island resembling St. Michel, even to the proliferation of orchids. This coincidence did not encourage me, yet though the isle appeared little if any inhabited. And so I stayed in my barrel while thirst increased; the sky I saw through my bunghole darkened a second time before I screwed up courage to explore. Then I peered out my bunghole one last time, to ascertain my safety in emerging.

There met my eye a round yellow one with a black center—the eye, methought, of a frightful large fish, the terrible serpent risen from the deep to claim me!

In thoughtless panic, I leapt from the cask, popping its cover, and saw in the dusk no greedy monster come to sup on me, but a homelier haunt—first old rat-counting madame, wrapped in rosaries, clouded crystal marbles and boys' round eyes, necklaces of rats strung tail to mouth, squeaking vengeance. Her undressed hair seemed to billow about a sea-wrinkled face, illumined from within by pale phosphorescence that shone with a fey greenish light. Her feet had been changed to frogs' feet! Oh, what restlessness had floated her out of her grave to loom before me, petulant and terrible?

"Mistress!" I cried. "I have only arrived and have not yet had time to kill any rats. I am too old for marbles. I wear drawers now; nay, I have been raised from drawers to breeches."

Her mouth opened and closed; she fixed my eye with her fishy stare.

"Pierre did not manufacture the effigy that foretold your fate, nor stuff it with rats, nor set it on fire. I pray you, show mercy!"

I threw myself at her froggy feet to plead for my life. She squeaked in an odd inhuman voice and hopped back on those amphibolous feet, her wary eyes inscrutable. She had no nose! How could she live and have her being? I gaped at her as she gaped at me.

After we had stared at each other some time, she turned on her flippered feet and dove beneath the waves. I ran behind some brush, and nestled into my haunches, and watched a while, but soon I took heart from the wave-slapped silence. For, if she were old Madame, changed by the sea, or if she were not, what was it to me? She had not summoned boatloads of men with muskets and whips to break me body and soul to their will. I had best put aside my terror and see to my immediate circumstances, for my tongue was monstrous swollen in my mouth.

Soon enough I had drunk my fill at sweet-water pools among rocks upon which I was lucky not to have foundered. Lapping at several fortuitous puddles unabashed as any dog, I cautiously circumambulated my island, peering about me 'till I knew its parts, and knew them uninhabited save by rats, mice, lizards, and birds, of types already known. I tore off the bottom of my shirt, and tied it on a stick, and planted this banner so as to claim the place for my own. The amphibolous-footed lady I had pegged for a hapless shade, a phantasm with no body, a refugee from Skull. And so I banished my terror, devoting myself to comfortable, necessary tasks, viz., I constructed a hut of stones chinked with sea weed—which the wood lice abhorred, mayhap on account of the salt—an abode larger and roomier than my plantation kennel, with a roof of reeds and a porch that furnished a view of the setting sun.

I had discovered betimes an erratic freshet, moreover, varieties of juicy fruit to suck, viz., guava, and sweet and sour sops, and mambins and mombees, and dildun berries. My dwelling erected, I dug and gingerly tasted of roots; I nibbled the spiny pear or artichoke fruit called *cactus*; I washed my sodden quilt in the sea, and hung it to dry, whereupon I settled in to battle insects, like any land-holder. If I had been able to send my linen out, and get in some books, I might have accounted myself in paradise, though I did want company and prattled to myself day and night, bidding myself good morrow and good evening, asking and answering questions on all manner of subjects.

Here, Kind Reader, I beg you consider the lonely discomfiture of a derelict, who has hitherto marked the vicissitudes of his existence but in relation to others. Thus he has made the map by which he knows himself. The peril I had escaped notwithstanding, I longed for company. I longed to taste once again the manioc stew of my godmothers. I longed to hear the people throwing stories back and forth round the fires. I did even long for the company of the master, Dufay, for though he had sold my mother, yet we shared the passion for learning. Still I fancied I heard his footfall, a damp library entrance from the dew with sketch in hand, "My Goody, I have finally got that blue parrot, which is like no other we have seen. Now do

you write Buffon for me to sign, and Dr. Hamel in St. Hildebert, and inquire if another has seen the bird and drawn it.”

Yet more than any other of my connections I missed my wife, the spicy scent of whose person rolled with mine I could but faintly sniff in the quilt I had brought in the bottom of my barrel. In truth, the whiff of home so sickened me with yearning, I flung the quilt from me, preferring to shiver in the evening damp. I sometimes dreamed of jumping back into my barrel and trying to row it home, where they would be so glad to see me I might escape punishment. Idle fancies! I had no idea which way was home. But for insects and birds and ghosts, I was alone.

Oh Uncle God, if you love me, I prayed, barrel my wife and deliver her into my hands like a hog’s-head of bacon; let her bring with her an armful of books from M’sieu’s shelves, it scarcely matters which. If you cannot, then deliver me, at least, from the endless hum of merrywings, the louder buzz of mosquitoes. For these noises do rouse me to a frenzy of distraction. My body is covered with pea-sized knobs that itch. I need my wife to daub them with vinegar. I need her come to me and help me devise a bed. For any hammock I string of vines to raise me above the jaws of the ants, they devour the very next day! Let her come to me with tar to smear on the cords! If I cannot have my wife, then let me have fire, to make smoke, yeah, let me have a tinder box; for how can I make fire, without one? Oh grant me, I pray, a blaze to drive off the winged furies. And pity, I pray, my poor feet, for the chiggers have burrowed under the nails of my toes and ulcerated all the tender parts. And my knife is rusting; and when it is dull, how will I dig the chiggers out? How will I cut reeds for thatch when my roof is devoured by wood lice? Yea, I cannot even do women’s work!

Only the drones of insects answered my ravings.

“A hoe!” I called as an afterthought. “If not a wife, or a fire, or a whetstone, then give me a hoe, to clear some ground, to mound up cones of earth around the roots of plantings.”

Now I missed the master’s estate because the land was cultivated! Oh, such is the lot of the derelict who is civic in his expectations!

Yet Pierre was not the fool to suppose the hand of the God Uncle worked in the world unaided. No, Pierre must assist. If he wished to be reunited with his wife, and commence his apprentice savantship in France, he must HELP HIMSELF. And so Pierre, who had saved his barrel outside his house, to collect the rain, planned a second oceanic journey, this one prepared as an expedition, with provisions and gear, and wherewithal to navigate.

Pierre could have no charts, but, as ancient mariners, would ascertain his mundane position from the position of fixed constellations, in relation to the horizon. He could establish the time of year from the position of the sun at its zenith. And so, if he but studied the heavens and noted the positions

of the stars on days recorded in the calendar he had made of knotted driftwood, he might navigate.

Yet unfortunately, though its joints had swollen at sea, the outside of his barrel was drying and cracking in the hot sun, while the inside rotted from the rainwater it held. And that barrel had never been easy to steer, for she lacked any semblance of rudder or tiller. Moreover, she moved entirely with and upon the tides, having no sail to catch the winds. She was all hold and no deck, no prow, no keel, though she could be weighted, as on his previous journey, with his tools, and for a second journey he could add in stones to keep her from skidding adrift on the wave.

Yet ballast would not suffice to hold direction. He must dismantle his barrel to build a better vessel, that he could steer, or he would never reach the realm of France, where he could publish his *histoire* and show his people worthy of liberty. He could not pass for cargo in the open boat he proposed to build, yet he must give up his safety in hiding for the prospect of a truer boat, one which, moreover, could hold his wife, if he could contrive to snatch her. He would saw his barrel into halves, two pods. Pierre and his wife would each be a pea in one. When he had the boat, then he would find a way to snatch up Pélérine.

He began to devote a part of each day to hacking through his keg with his by-now rusty saw, halving her through her crosswise circumference at her most swollen middle, preserving intact the hoops that held her staves together. And though the work were arduous, yet it did yield in time two sound pods, which he joined circumference to circumference with ropes of twisted and braided fiber of the silver-thatch. Yet, even in the calmest of waters, the lashing gave way. Moreover, striding a swell, the down pod shipped water.

He tied his oar aft of his aft pod, and thus ruddered the whole. He devised a balance frame, of drift sticks lashed with vine, that floated on hollow coco shells, plugged up and tied at intervals along the frame, to buoy his still-clumsy vessel and prevent her o'erturning. And now he was ready for a sail, and on this point he stuck again.

Yet it came to him he might weave mats of silver thatch, which, if woven very fine and tight, might catch and hold wind. He commenced to try proofs of his hypothesis, weaving first small patches of the stuff, then larger, which he lashed to his arms, and held to the wind, to see if he rose above the ground, a human kite, and, when he rose a little off his heels, he tried larger squares and found he rose as high above himself as a bird above a tree, though his heart be left on the ground and his body plash in the sea like the carcass of Icarus. Yet now he had reason to believe his stuff might hold. He commenced to weave still larger squares, and added for strength a diagonal crossing of his warp and weft, and then a cross-diagonal. Over and over, Pierre passed his shuttle of a hand through his

warp threads, filling, filling, filling. So occupied was he weaving sails, he did not trouble to eat for a day and a night. But now a hunger gnawed at his belly even as a rat chewing its way from an effigy into which some boys have sewed it.

Methought I would quiet my belly with turtle meat. So, after paring a spear from a drifted branch, I took me to the rock outcropping at the westward side of my domain where turtles fed. Were I to frequent these unsheltered rocks by day, the sun made me dizzy. I had fallen into the custom of standing upon them by night, to hear the boom of the surf pound in time with my heart, for my longings overwhelmed me did I stay on my pallet of thatch pining for my wife in the dark.

Imagine my chagrin, this mild adventitious evening, to perceive wriggling on my spear point the sea shade that I had mistaken, first for a serpent, then for First Madame! I had speared it just beneath the shoulder blade, where the “arm”—that long fin with fingers—joined the body. If it had been Madame I might have relished the vengeance of puncture. Yet, though blood gushed from a hole in pink-specked skin, gill slits heaved most piteously—gills! The specter was corporeal, but she was a fish!

I lay the head in the water, so she could respire, and stanchd with the rags of my shirt the flow of her blood. Still she lay in a swoon. When the sun came up, I saw she would be burned if I did not arch over her a roof of fronds and sticks, cadged from the debris at the tideline. This I did, and she lay calmly, her gills palpitating in the brine, her eyes gaping.

As the tide went out, I saw that she would no longer be able to respire, so I moved her body, lifting it in my arms to follow the receding waters. At first she struggled in my embrace, but after I had lifted her several times, she lay still, her shanky legs draped over my arm and her head with its coarse-crimped curls lolling on my breast. Only once did she bare her teeth, and then for the first time I saw the double row of needles. I took from my talisman pouch my mother’s bone hook, which I fastened to a line I had braided with threads unraveled from my shirt. I caught with this tackle the smallest, tenderest fishlings that flashed and turned in tide pools. I offered them to her, flopping still, in a seawater gravy contained in a clam’s shell, pushing said shell between her jaws lest she sink the teeth into my hand. But, seeing she took the fish very dainty from the shell, I vouchsafed to feed her with my fingers, and found she nibbled nicely. So we got on well, and her wound mended.

I wondered I had ever confounded her with Rat-Ma’am, even granting the proposition a mistress be another species than a slave; even so, this creature I now entertained were more foreign a species still, even as a snake is less penetrable in nature than a dog or a goat. I do not know why I thought of her—and think of her—as “She,” save that an early confusion

perplexed my perception thereafter. She bore no mark of the female sex, unless one count her long tarnished locks—not in truth hair, but some bony substance like coral—and elegant, long-fingered hands, that called to mind the filigree of lace.

In time, I got to know her ways, a fillip of her feet, fast, as a cat will fillip its tail when plagued by a nuisance; or a gaze following my hands when I had a fish. And I came to know many a place on her scaly skin, most particularly on her forehead, she did shiver to have touched, moving closer to my hand.

Upbraiding myself the while for foolishness, I commenced to call her “*ma bonne amie*” and finally “*Amie*.” I directed all my prattle to her and wept tears of joy and distress when, her wound having healed, she dove beneath the billows, returning only for brief nocturnal visits, to be petted on the forehead, provided the shadow of spear or hook fall not across her path.

In this independence as in her former helplessness she gawked at me as if mesmerized by my babble, but it were the talisman, hanging from my neck, she did eye in its swinging. This I discovered when she snatched it and dragged it beneath the sea, consigning it to the oblivious depths with all its charms save the fish hook, which I had accustomed myself to daily use, and so had hung with its looped line from a stick poked into a chink in a wall of my house.

She surfaced without the bag the next time she came to be cosseted; though I did scold her and wag my finger, she would not bring it back. Perhaps she had snatched it to repay the wound I had inflicted on her, but justice at my expense were small comfort. I had clung to the talisman as an orchid with its roots clutches air. Yet I kept more than my fishing hook. For I stored in my cranial conjure house my cyclopedic *histoire* of mystical, natural and diverse knowings; I had fashioned a rustic domesticity in my physical abode; my boat was abuilding. Even bereft of my cherished talisman, I did not wither or fade, but continued to weave my sails and plot my future course, which now I could do without thought of food. Though *Amie* did not breathe through a nose, she compensated the theft of the talisman and indeed made good the debt of her life according to her custom, repaying my solicitude with fish, which she chewed into mush and regurgitated at my feet. Thus, I could leave my mother’s hook hanging in my house as a charm and did not have to risk it atrawl. Nor did I need to use my spear. I would have preferred that the fish be brought me whole, yet she could not fathom my revulsion: at last I bade her vomit the stew into the calabash I had of my wife, and drank while holding my nose. I found the stew most sweet and mild, like a medley of fish and yam.

Without my rain barrel I must search for the shallow pools of sweet water that collected in the rocks, and risk desiccation if there be drought,

yet I made some assurance of supply, by hammering at a number of very large boulders, till I found one that would flake if I beat it. So by my labors I made a cistern, and in time made others, and my days fell into a pleasing pattern. I wove my sails, and Amie brought my dinner, and I gazed at the sky reflected in my cisterns and saw my Vérité, reflected in the barrel of rain in Dufay's yard. Through the open door of the kitchen, I saw that she, too, built boats, though hers were of sugar. With a long-handled spoon of charred wood she spun crystal threads from a pot, and with those threads rigged ships that would sail, not on water, but on the light that shimmers atop the waves, joining sea to land and air. Mayhap we would finish our vessels at the same time; we would meet in the middle of the sea.

One evening Amie spewed into the calabash a strange seashell, a small rosy cone which crumbled upon my inspection. Thereupon she emitted a yawp, the first noise I had heard of her, and slapped her feet on the water. She brought no more food for several evenings.

When she returned I was hungry, for I had been reluctant to leave off weaving to fish. I lay on my back then and bade her spit the mush directly into my mouth. She did so willingly, spitting into my maw as well several sharp objects I surmised at once were the cones, which crumbled on my tongue. Though I did spit out shell bits, and pick them from my lips and from between my teeth, my tongue burned as if stung. I dared not swallow for fear the shells be poisonous.

Yet after a while the burning subsided, so I judged it but the consequence of fish-frog prank! I constricted my gullet to swallow, and my tongue, though swollen, did waggle in my mouth as before. Thus, when it became too dark to weave, I passed the evening prattling, according to my custom. I called for Amie, who came not again, then called for the spider which had abandoned me. I would ask the mouth of mouths my prospect of finishing a seaworthy boat, the likelihood of reaching France, the imminence of reunion with my wife. Being quite alone, I asked and answered myself, and asked and answered again. Having talked myself to sleep, then, consider my great surprise, 'pon waking, to find myself unable to bid myself good morrow.

In vain the fingers of one hand then the other did walk past my lips, sortie between my jaws, and explore the salty cave behind my teeth. Where my tongue had rooted, there poked a stump which by wagging I could cajole to an idiot's speech, being now unable to voice half the words in my lexicon. In my disappointment I failed to remark the lumpiness swelling my cheeks, but lay all day in a damp hollow in the sand, shedding tears, too mournful and weak to weave.

I woke to discover Amie squatting above me, butting me with her forehead to be petted. Her puffed-out cheeks told me she intended to

dribble gruel between my lips; though the gruel carry more shellfish to undo me, I was too weary and hungry to protest; I parted my lips. There came from my mouth then a faint squalling sound. When I stretched a finger gingerly into a cheek pouch, it warmed to the gentle clutch of one minuscule pair of arms, then another. By careful feints with the finger, I counted four—dare I call them infants? Two in each cheek pouch.

I surmised that I was in a condition I had never looked to be in—a condition in which I believe no member of my sex has been before. If my pregnancy had not, my astonishment unmanned me.

I parted my lips and permitted Amie to flood my mouth with gruel, forbearing to swallow until by a manner of reckoning I had not known I possessed, I surmised my young had drunk their fill.

I did not sleep in my hut that night, nor any night of my gravidness, but lay curled in my dank hole by the sea, burning in the sun by day and shivering in the night's chill breeze. Yet I could not move, for the infants squealed if I but turned my head. At the end of my confinement I scarce opened my eyes and relied entirely on Amie to feed me, the tide to clean out my nest. I no longer worked on the half-woven sails, which I later found had dried and crumbled in the sun. My boat remained unfinished, two weathering pods by the side of my abandoned house. Nor did I dream of France or scheme to snatch my wife. I was suffused with tender thoughts for the young in my cheeks and thought of little else, but lay very still, crooning as best I could with my shortened tongue:

Ba-wal loo-mah ba-ha-wa loo-a-to!
Ba-wa ha-y-too ba- ba-wal loo!

Methought my mother, Marie Mandilé-ba had crooned this refrain; she had learned the song from the sufferers beside her, when she was brought from Guinée in an open boat. So I had been told by my godmothers, whose stories I now had trouble remembering—did the king whose wife turned into a monkey lure her with cola nuts or with bananas?—even as I now had trouble remembering the names of animals and plants in patois, Latin, or French. I no longer knew the difference between Pintal's idea of faith and Nerf's. I had forgotten the names of Squint's ports of call, and could not recall my godmothers' sayings. The prismatic conjure house be falling to ruin with my roof of thatch, yet sometimes I saw it, whole and radiant in the sky, at the close of day, when the clouds are layered with colors, the colors with story.

To prompt my memory, I made myself again my own blab school, wagging my stub of a tongue, mangling names of creatures & passages of authors mingled with bits of testimonies I had been hoarding for my

cyclopedish *histoire*, but the effort was fatiguing. Soon enough I returned to crooning “Ba-wal loo-mah,” which I could pronounce by feverishly working my lips, a circumstance I found most comforting. From the corner of an eye, I looked down at the curve of a distended cheek, stretched taut across the squirm and kick of life within. Did I resemble the crack-cheeked cherub winds who blew above the roses, directing sailors to the world’s four corners?

Alas! The erstwhile sailor was confined to his hold, prey to whatever vicissitudes of fortune befell him, most especially to caprice of tropical weather—to merciless sun and sudden storm. I dare not bestir myself to build another roof, but must lie in my seaside hole like a shelly fish. Yet I did not crave a dry bed as greatly as I craved companionship. For alas! Vérité no longer breathed illusion in sky or water. My consort disappeared beneath the sea each evening. I feared the young in my mouth would follow at the breaching, be lost to me as talisman and memories, I not clap eyes on them again. So I lived in moist apprehension, waiting.

Push! Pull! Push! Pull! Honor the gods, though they cannot be seen. Pull! Push! Shining great ones, help with the breach. Stay with me; do not fail me! Push! Pull! Push! I beseech you, take care. Push! Push! Pull! I bear the honor of this birth with joy. Shining Great Ones! Push! Pull! Push! Though the storm in my cheeks undo me, I submit to the will that consumes.

And when the inner storm subsided, four offspring fell from between my teeth and tumbled into the sand before my face, squirming and squalling in the manner of human infants.

They were as helpless as any human babes, and indeed they bore the impress of my features, and had the lidded eyes of men, and toes on their feet, and skin, not scales, though mostly of mottled coloration. They had gills behind their ears, but noses as well; and, as they matured, the gill slits closed. They were fine, lusty babes, of a velvety blackish green, though very much smaller than human children; all four could lie on their backs in the palm of my hand.

Curiously, they lacked those external organs by which we ascertain gender, having between their legs neither the stamen of the male nor the female’s sepals and calyx. They reproduced; their presence in my hand proved progenitors. Yet, if they bore no organs of reproduction, how did they generate themselves? Here was a question for a philosopher, most especially one with a microscope, for it were probable, the organs of reproduction were very small, as in certain plants that lack flowers. When he arrived at Montbard, Pierre would show his offspring to Buffon, for the great man had studied in his youth the organs of animal reproduction, and had done so with his microscope.

The disciple of Buffon must here confess the disloyalty of framing a most Linnaean question, viz., where his children fit in the great panoply of speciation. Yet Pierre had given birth to these children, so unlike himself. Did not their existence call into question the very notion *species*? Mayhap his children were hybrids that could not themselves breed, like mules. Mayhap his hybrid children would give birth to creatures as unlike themselves as they were unlike Pierre. Mayhap a new form of life had sprung from Pierre's mouth as heroes had sprung from the forehead of Zeus in days of old. As Gods to men, so Pierre to his offspring, and his offspring to theirs. Yet Gods were Gods, men were men; were Pierre's offspring truly his offspring? If a man put a piece of food in another man's mouth, would a baby be born? Or if he put food in a woman's? Or a woman food in a man's mouth? Or a fishsprite in a man's? Could Pierre's children have been generated spontaneously, as flies, not from rotten meat or greasy rags, but from his tongue? And if Pierre's tongue were rotten or greasy, what had made it so? If Pierre had not gangrene, nor the pox, nor any buboes, he must be rotten in a manner of speaking; he must be rotten-wicked, his children a punishment. Now as he had been a slave, his wickedness might have been the wickedness of a slave, viz., disobedience. Yet why had this punishment fallen only on him, and not, that he knew, on slaves who pilfered rum or wrecked the works or set fire to the cane? And what of the wickedness of masters, who drank rum in which their servants' bodies were dissolved? These questions, for which I have no answers, much occupied me, even as I peered at the infants waving their legs in the palm of my hand.

Now I cannot say these offspring altogether pleased me. Their very strangeness made me homesick for my godmothers' accounts of strangenesses haunting the world, viz., dog-faced demons who left point-eared babes in women's cradles, having spirited away the round-eared ones.

Yet what parent does not warm at the clasp of tiny fingers on his finger, the miracle the more apparent if the fingers of the babe do but grasp a hair on the parent's knuckle? Be these offspring sterile as mules, yet they would provide me companionship. Yea, if they could not, would not, gratify as children, then they would do as pets, to caper and fetch, to sit and roll 'pon my command, to slumber at the foot of my bedplace, if I did not kick 'em in my sleep.

The babes grew rapidly and soon toddled. *Jérôme Marie, Leo Charlotte, François Martine, Emile Hélène*: these were the names I gave them when they had lived past the ninth day and were no longer like to take fits. Having honored Uncle God in the naming of the isle, I would gratify other Gods in the baptism, the blessing by water, which honored in the bargain the cone-bearing parent. Indeed, in cobbling together

portmanteau names, I did pay homage to Chenwiye, Hermaphrodite Bone-Lord under the sea; yet first and foremost, inasmuch as I purposed a journey to France, I took a decision to honor with Christian names the God of the people of France (the deistic Not-God of certain aristocrats being necessarily indifferent to supplication, hence without servitors or names). So I proceeded in the manner of Père Gouy, though I could remember no scriptural texts, nor any suitable aphorisms of priests or philosophers, but only a comic line of de Vereau, spoken by Amouradet:

*And so with firm resolve to be brave, and hopeful heart,
we embark on our noble adventure.*

I willingly acknowledge that these words are less than eminently suitable, and do not come from an author of consequence; I was forced to eke out the dignity of the occasion with scraps. Ah well! I commended my offspring to live as sensibly, and kindly, and joyfully as they could, injuring no creatures except the need arise to kill for food, and, even as haltingly shaped by my nub of tongue, these seemed precepts enough for babes whose apprehension be all suck and slurp.

In time, I taught my babes, in accordance with their names, not only Hail Marys and Pater Nosters, Credos and Confiteors, but the service of Uncle, the sacrifices required, the manner of sending forth the dead. I taught them Chenwiyi, Damzillah, Ogun, Steward God, the Hurdy-Gurdy God and various other deities I had known, or heard of, not neglecting Gormillah. And in this manner I sought to furnish my young with full benefit of Heaven's Good Will.

I sought to teach by example, prattling to myself with my stub of a tongue. Lest it has not been made evident: my young have all been born with tongues, and taught, however slurred and indistinct, an excellent speech, first by me, and later, as my tongue did diminish even further, by siblings or mouth-parents. 'Tis true, the faculty of speech dwindles with the loss of the tongue during progressive confinements, but sing we can into old age, through shaking the cords in our throats, a song very like the chirping of birds. And indeed, my offspring do most copiously chirp, spouting maxims, flaunting commonplace, yet I have never been assured they apprehend what they say. Rather, they may sing but pattern and rhythm, yet beauties they spout and seem to know.

Emlo was first to write in the sand, where the tide would wash it out, enigma, viz., "the sea-starved sea." Be the like an exhortation to understanding? The expression of a sentiment? There is no response but to write in turn "O milk of light" or "Slippery glass of the past," conning my own enigmas no more fully than my children's. And so we have proceeded, obliquely, by contraries, trusting our fingers.

Tireless swimmers and divers, merry souls with ready laughs, by day my offspring romp in the shallows or dive beneath the sea. In the evening they wait with me for their mother—or is she, or he, their father?—to come with food. In time other sea shades have joined Amie, to spit fish and cones in our mouths and have their foreheads rubbed, and so we live as a most congenial household, half in, half out of the sea.

Yet if my offspring be PERSONS they be not entirely HUMAN; their PERSONHOOD lies partly in their fishiness. Were there some respect in which HUMANNESS might be married to FISHINESS, beyond what Pierre had hitherto conceived? Pierre much occupied himself in like rumination. Often he bailed the rainwater from a pod of his boat, and lay back in it, and looked up at the sky, and saw floating there in the reef of clouds, not only birds, but a very great number of fishes. And he recalled then M'sieu's aversion to the finny creatures and their element. Indeed, Pierre recalled his own bursting lungs, did he venture to paddle down too far. And Pierre vowed to teach his children to be FISHY PHILOSOPHERS. Their HISTOIRE would relate the annals of FISH, that M'sieu had so egregiously neglected.

Commencing with the exempli of birds, then, that Pierre himself knew well, he would teach the methodology of Buffon, viz., OBSERVATION, yet with a magnanimous spirit; for to grasp the nature of any creature, one must be able to see before one the whole history of the beast, "...their procreation, gestation period, the time of birth, number of offspring, the care given by the mother and father, their education, their instincts, their habitats, their diet, the manner in which they procure food, their habits, their wiles, their hunting methods," & so forth & so on.

And so Pierre's children, having observed with him the thrasher and the thrush and the worm-eating warbler, did then dive into the element of their greatest affinity, the sea, and commence to record the habits and proclivities of ladyfish and puffers, grunts and wrasses, surgeonfish and triggerfish, parrotfish and snappers. And not only these fish, well known to the denizens of St. Michel, even to sea-anxious Dufay, but others, quite unknown, that lived far down. And among these the Whipperlux and Needlenose, the Whiskered Grumpkin and Rainbow Skate—for so we have named them.

And not only fin-fish, my children observed, but shell-fish, pearl-oysters, limpets, slippersnails, murexes; and scuttling hard-skins, viz., the crab. Of the latter my offspring discovered several varieties that lived very far down, which shattered when brought to the top, which we called the glass-skins, viz., the glass-skin blue, the glass-skin double-claw, the glass-skin mottle.

And because we had not ink to write, having found we had no medium to fix the squid's pigment, and no paper, inasmuch as my palm-weavings were too coarse for sharpened plume to scratch on, I taught my

children to make their own cranial conjure houses. Yet when I had told them what I could of how I constructed mine, I was amazed to discover that they already had their own, though they had not hitherto stored in it provision Pierre would call Philosophic. It is different from human conjure houses, in that it is shared; they wander in it together, as if they had no minds of their own, but furnished out the rooms of a common one. And this be not so different from the common ground in language of humans, who speak to one another by whatever means. Yet my children need not such artifacts as books, or any conversation, but know each other's thought through a sensitive affinity that we humans do not possess. Thus, though I had classified my children as less than myself, indeed, as parasites, I came to understand that they had powers a human had not.

And by such shifts as these, Pierre came to a separate view from Buffon of the gulf the great man had charted between humans and other creatures. For if the offspring be exempli, this gulf be no deep chasm, that is impossible to cross, but a sea, in which all creaturely conception floats. And among animals, humans alone float upon it entirely ignorant, some more than others. For it now seems that when the Gods speak to us, through shadows or water or stones, we are being furnished with provision from a great common store.

Pierre sometimes lay on his back in a pod of his ruined boat, the iron rusted, the wood weathered silver. He looked up at the clouds and saw the chain of begetting, rotting bones and fruiting wombs. And all the past since Creation appeared as one single design of Providence that had brought Pierre to this place. He lay on his back in his foundered boat, watching the clouds giving birth to themselves, celestial aether, fruit to fruit, the tree of life that branches in death, the sacred tree that Jason saw. At the close of day, the sun-gilt twigs finer than threads of the thinnest-spun sugar; the tree of life was hung with gold-illuminated sugar leaves that looked to that shepherd-man sailor like fleeces of golden perfect wool, golden fleece between a golden woman's legs, the legs of the sea one, stretched gold and purple at close of day, her labia opening, closing, opening, closing. In the gloaming, huge and seraphic, cloud-water vulva, opal and pearl, the sea one passionate in gathering storm, passionate yet perfect, immaculate and perfect as all conception. Now, if only Vérité were with her Pierre on the Isle of the Uncle to spin it from sugar, there would be a subtlety to ravish!

An Interview with Patrick McGrath

by GILLES MENEGALDO
University of Poitiers

Patrick McGrath was born in London in 1950. When he was five years old, his father was appointed medical superintendent of Broadmoor, a large top-security mental hospital in the south of England. Thus, men and women who had committed serious crimes while mentally ill were the companions of his childhood. He heard many stories in which bizarre forms of violence occurred and his father told him a lot about psychiatry. The effect of all this, according to the writer himself, was to implant in him both a sympathy and a fascination with madness. When he was twenty-one, he left England and emigrated to Canada. He worked at various sorts of jobs, mostly in mental hospitals. Seven years later, while he was living on a remote island in the North Pacific, he decided to become a writer of fiction. He was from the outset much interested in working with literary genres, experimenting with form and style. After various unpublished attempts (a hard-boiled thriller, a science-fiction novel), he began a gothic novel and found this genre far richer in possibilities than any of the others and, with its shadows, its ruins, its ghouls, a proper vehicle for fictional explorations of psychological breakdown.

*By that time, McGrath was living in New York, trying to get his work published. His first stories were pastiche imitations of great gothicists he had always particularly admired such as Poe, Stevenson, LeFanu and others. In 1989, he published his first novel, *The Grottesque*, which was hailed by the critics. Since then, he has written three more novels and a*

collection of short stories. He now shares his time between London and New York and is busy working on his next novel, also about madness, an original and intriguing variation on the myth of Frankenstein.

Most of McGrath's fiction concerns the mind and its terrible disorders. *The Grotesque* is a hilarious and macabre tale of a country house murder. The narrator, Sir Hugo Coal, is reduced to paralysis by a brain congestion and confined to a wheelchair. Once a domestic tyrant, he is now persecuted by Fledge, his valet and wife's lover, a perfect prototype of the "gothic villain." Unable to move or speak, Sir Hugo is however endowed with tremendous imagination and he mentally reconstructs (alcohol is altering his memories) his past life and most of the strange events that took place in his decaying mansion, ironically called "Crook." Indeed, *The Grotesque* is a crooked, sinuous, unreliable narrative where the reader gradually loses all his certitudes. It is a pastiche of different genres, a subtle combination of thriller, gothic mystery and social comedy, with an almost surreal sense of grotesqueness. Scenes of cruelty and perversion alternate with lyrical passages and moments of dark, devastating humor. Through this study of devolution and entropic processes, McGrath already adumbrates some of the most specific traits of his fiction and shows his ability to manipulate the reader.

This first investigation at the frontiers of insanity is prolonged in *Spider* (1991), a more serious approach to a case of schizophrenia. Dennis Clegg, "Spider," narrates his own story, trying to establish an ordered and coherent version of the murderous facts that have led to his confinement. However, his interpretation becomes dubious as he appears to suffer from ever-increasing pathological confusion. This leads again to a twisted, intricate narrative where space and time landmarks are blurred and identities challenged, where the laws of logic and causality are subverted. McGrath admirably conveys, through powerful, obsessive, poetic images, the complexity of the inner world of the character, lost in the maze of his own mental elaborations, more and more estranged from the reality of empirical experience.

Dr Haggard's Disease (1993), set in the context of impending war in the late thirties in England, is a haunting story of desire, passion and frustration. The main protagonist, a surgeon, is an invalid, who lives, beset by grief and tormented by physical pain, in a big ghostly house set on a cliff overhanging the ocean. The visit of his former mistress' son triggers both happy and traumatic memories, and leads him to fantasize an improbable metamorphosis. The prose is restrained but terribly compelling and the sheer strength of the ever-present narrative voice leads us to empathise with a suffering, nostalgically romantic character, until we discover some flaws in his behaviour and some inconsistencies in his discourse.

In Asylum (1997), his latest novel, Patrick McGrath continues to explore the parallel labyrinths of passion and psychosis. Stella, a psychiatrist's wife, falls in love with one of the patients, a sculptor and psychopathic killer. Separated from her lover, she is compelled to live, in a remote village, with a husband she hates and she slowly drifts into madness. As we have been told from the outset, the story ends tragically. The main narrator, Peter Cleave, who runs the asylum, is no longer a central character, but rather an apparently uninvolved and neutral witness. He first appears to provide an objective account of the events, but he is ultimately revealed as devious and manipulative, beset by his own phantasms of appropriation and control of bodies and minds. In that novel, McGrath seems to have gone far beyond the gothic intertext, but he is still probing the same fragile line between normalcy and lunacy, order and transgression, while questioning the possibility to reach some kind of objective truth.



In Blood and Water, which is your first work, a collection of stories, you obviously pay a tribute to a literary heritage; we could drop a few names like Poe, Conan-Doyle, Bierce or Saki. Could you comment on that? You also show a taste for pastiche and the subversion of literary conventions.

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When I began writing, I very quickly discovered that the genre that gave me most pleasure and stimulated me and answered to the themes that I wished to explore in my work was the Gothic. But the gothic genre is a mature genre; it's a mannered genre, and to work in it with any real freshness or originality is difficult. My first impulse was to play with its very well established conventions; that inevitably became a form of pastiche as I exaggerated motifs, images, ideas that had already been well exaggerated by two centuries of development.

There's also a touch of the decadent.

This again is an aspect of the Gothic or late Romantic literature that appeals strongly to me. The idea of decay, breakdown in the Gothic is very strong; and decadence is probably the moral expression of the overall theme of decay within the Gothic, and so naturally I worked with the idea of moral decadence and forms of biological decay and architectural decay.

You seem to be very fond of Baudelaire; for instance, there is an epigraph in one of your works.

Yes that particular idea of Baudelaire's was very appropriate to the grotesque with the ideas of biological breakdown, and the fusion between the biological, the animal, and the human which were very much at the centre of the book. So Baudelaire's epigram seemed most perfectly to sum up the essence of the book.

There is also the recurrence of certain motifs such as the relation between reality and the world of fancy, dreams, fantasies, which we find in your subsequent work; and also a certain stress already on extreme psychological cases such as "Ambrose Syme" in which you explore the conflict between body and mind. Maybe you could comment.

Yes, these are two themes that seem to be present in all my fiction. The first is the difficulty the mind has in bringing its own ideas, its own versions, pictures, accounts of reality, its own designs into coherence and agreement with reality itself. I'm interested in the negotiations that we make, the adjustments, the adaptations that the mind makes in order to bring reality into conformity with its own ideas of itself. Perhaps one of the most difficult and problematic areas here is the relationship of mind and body; our highest aspirations, ideals, ethics are often betrayed and mocked by the body, by its tendency to decay, by its tendency to indulge its own appetites. I think particularly, if you've had a Catholic childhood, you're very much aware of the appetites of the body as being occasions of sin. And so in that light, that tension is particularly sharp.

This collection also reveals your taste for narrative experimentation, as far as point of view is concerned in particular. For instance, you tell a story from the point of view of a pair of boots, or that of a fly.

Well, I think as soon as I began writing fiction, I became interested in the question of who tells the story, who is speaking in any particular narrative. Something that I was very much aware of as I was living in the United States in the 1980s was the very strong possibility that Ronald Reagan would plunge the world into a state of nuclear war, and probably destroy the best part of humanity in the process. A question for the imagination at that time was what would the world look like when the humans had largely been destroyed by nuclear weapons. And the idea that narratives would remain even though there was nobody left to tell them was particularly intriguing for me, so I gave a story to an old boot in one case, to a beer can in another. My first published story was called "The Erotic Potato," and this was a story of a grand Wagnerian passion narrated by a small house fly.

There is a recurrent motif in these stories also, it is the African motif. It is dealt with in various ways, in an almost oneiric way, or with a Conradian flavour, the “dark continent” and the fate of the white man there.

This is probably an outgrowth of my interest in pastiching nineteenth-century fictions where Africa and the East represent for the colonial European, or for the European colonist or explorer, that which is very much other, that which represents irrationality, passion, danger, nature, all those states and entities that are very much in opposition to the enlightenment ideals of reason, and control, and empiricism. So I exploited this idea of Africa as that which tended to subvert, to undermine whatever European civilisation had accomplished. Africa became a symbol of the unconscious, the unpredictable, the chaotic.

There is also a story in which you subvert very conventional gothic motifs, and even more than conventional, the vampiric motif. You have a fondness for Bram Stoker; I know, but could you comment a little bit? In a way you give a medical explanation for the vampiric phenomenon.

Medical explanations have occurred. There are certain medical conditions in which a certain thinness of the blood leads to a thirst for good, rich red blood cells. I suppose that the vampire is a rich metaphor for any sort of exploitative, predatory relationship, a relationship in which power relationships are badly skewed; there is a victim and there is he who exploits the victim, and the vampire gives us a very perfect embodiment of that relationship with strong sexual undertones, so it's irresistible for a certain sort of imagination, like mine.

*This is a perfect transition to talk about *The Grottesque*, because it is also a tale that deals with exploitation, and power, and sex. On another level, *The Grottesque* is also a very experimental novel in many ways in which you mingle several traditions, indeed the conventional Gothic with the motif of the desolate mansion that is called *Crook* here, interestingly enough, and the lurking villain, the detective story plot, and the horror story with a serial touch, and a satirical novel as well, in the line of Evelyn Waugh, for instance. You blend these elements in a very unique way through the narrative voice of the main character Sir Hugo. And a key word in the book is impossible. So how does that apply to both the character and to the narrative?*

Sir Hugo is a country squire, he is an amateur scientist, and he is a curmudgeon, an ill-tempered, crusty gent, who takes a sort of

misanthropic pleasure in tormenting his immediate family and anybody else who comes within his ken. And his wife in some exasperation calls him an impossible man, who behaves in an impossible manner. At the same time, the story that he is telling is told from a wheelchair: Sir Hugo has suffered a stroke; he is not able to speak, he's not able to move. And he is giving us an account of how he got this way, of what happened to render him paralysed and silent. What we begin to realise is that there is no way that this story could have been communicated to us; this account occurs only within his own mind, and he has no means of expressing it. So in a sense the book itself is impossible; it is an impossible text. There is no way that we could ever have had access to this material.

Indeed in that book, you also subvert identities, sexes, also mingling the organic and the inanimate, the flesh and the vegetable, or the stone. How would you characterise that? I think you use the term grotesque.

The idea of the grotesque that I came to seize upon for this novel is one that derives from the original *grotescas*, the drawings that were found in the emperor Nero's palace, excavated at Pompei, in which figures were sort of hybrids of the animal, the human, and the vegetable. I began to see the grotesque as that which breaks down distinct categories, distinct orders of being. As soon as you have the natural, not natural but cultural barriers between entities breaking down, things beginning to merge, things becoming undifferentiated, I thought this is where the grotesque occurs. I then used that principle of fusion, of merging, of breakdown, in every dimension that I could manage, in the organic, in the social, in the sexual, in the natural. Even in terms of genres that are employed in the book; there is no distinct genre, there are various genres that blend and overlap. So you can't exactly say what sort of a book this is, as you were saying. That's the principle, the aesthetic principle that I have employed in handling all the major thematic decisions in the book.

Another point of interest in that book is the sense of portrait that you have. There is a wonderful portrait of Mrs. Giblet, who is another kind of grotesque in a way.

This would be an instance of the Dickensian grotesque which would be the exaggeration of the moral and physical features of the characters until they became caricatures of recognisable human types. So that's just another instance of the grotesque. I wanted to get as many expressions of the grotesque as I could into the book.

Yes, but in a way, you feel some sort of sympathy for this woman, for instance in the way she seeks for the bones, the corpse of her son, who

obviously has been murdered, in the pond—well she employs little boys to do that—that's interesting too, the way she sticks to the memory of her son.

Well, yes. She's an old woman who realises that her son has come to a bad end, somewhere in the vicinity of Sir Hugo's house, of Crook. In fact what's happened to her son, young Sidney Giblet is that he's been murdered and then fed to the pigs, which have then been given to the local community. She suspects that some such ghastly fate has befallen him, and comes to Crook to explore the Ceck marsh in the firm belief that his bones are out there somewhere. She seems to be confirmed in her suspicions when Sidney's bicycle comes to light in the Ceck marsh. Sure enough she is vindicated entirely when she does, with the help of a number of local school children whom she pays to help her search the marsh, eventually discover her son's bones.

Bones are very important in the book, on another level.

Strong theme, the bones. The most important bones in the book are those of a dinosaur that Sir Hugo has brought back from one of his early explorations in Africa. These are the bones of a dinosaur that he believes to be unique, and he has christened it *Phlegmosaurus carbonensis*. He spent his life in a barn reconstructing the bones of this dinosaur. And there is some doubt as to whether he is reconstructing them correctly; he may have gotten them wrong; certain bones are missing. And Hugo's activity in reconstructing the bones of this dinosaur somewhat reflects his activity in putting together the various elements of reality, particularly concerning events that have occurred in the recent past in his house. There are suspicions that both are equally imperfect. The dinosaur also works in various other ways. Hugo's dinosaur is very violent, and Hugo's identification with his dinosaur is also suspect in that it indicates that he may be responsible for some of the violence that's occurred in Crook. The dinosaur is also extinct, and Sir Hugo, as the social type of the landed gentry just after World War II is another creature soon to become extinct, and give way to a new man as represented by his new butler Fledge.

*Speaking of Fledge, who is the villain of the piece, so to speak. You stress a lot that master-servant relationship, with the power relation, and the inversion of course. At that level, your book is reminiscent of Joseph Losey's *The Servant*. Could you expatiate on that?*

I think Losey's movie at some unconscious level was very much an influence. I was intrigued by the idea of a power relationship that inverts itself, where you have a really clearly demarcated relationship, master-

servant in this case, the gentleman and his butler. I wanted over the course of the book to turn that relationship upside down, and allow the butler to increasingly establish power over an increasingly weakened master. And so, by the end, the roles have become completely reversed, and this is the sort of inversion, of breakdown of categories and distinctions that I was talking about in regard to the principle of the grotesque.

Indeed this shows another aspect of your work, the tension between the intellect and the body. In the case of Fledge, he stands for a certain type of man, not a virile figure, but a figure for which body and desires are very strong elements.

Yes, as distinct from Sir Hugo, Fledge is a man of vigorous appetites, all of which he uses in pursuit of his objective, which is this socially grotesque situation where the servant has control over the master. Fledge has no hesitation in using his own sexual attraction to win the affection of Sir Hugo's wife, and even, it's hinted at, Sir Hugo's prospective son-in-law, and possibly Sir Hugo himself. Fledge is indiscriminate in his seductions.

There is another motif that you use and will use in your later work, that is the relationship between perception and imagination. The case of Sir Hugo is very interesting because he is turned to the wall, so he has a very restricted perspective, and he has to imagine to compensate for that restriction.

Sir Hugo gives us a sort of an extreme case of this phenomenon, whereby in the presence of inadequate evidence, we will nonetheless always construct some picture of what is going on, of what are the facts in any given situation. Now poor old Sir Hugo is at times placed in a corner, in his wheelchair, facing the wall, and there are only the sounds of the room behind him to guide him as to what is going on in the room, and on one particular occasion, he hears various rustlings, gasps, exhalations of breath, mutterings and so forth, and he is convinced that Fledge the butler is having sex with his wife behind his back. But when his daughter comes in and turns the wheelchair around he discovers that these sounds accompanied a game of chess, rather than sexual intercourse. Thus do we often misinterpret the world through using inadequate data to create a picture of what's going on.

You prolong that approach with your next novel Spider, where again you use the device of the unreliable first-person narrator. The structure this time is even more complex and baffling for the reader.

Spider turned into something I hadn't expected once I began to develop the story. It had started off a fairly simple cheery tale of a man who

murders his wife, and then sends a woman who resembles his wife to Canada in order to account for her disappearance. The question was then who is going to tell the story; and I settled upon the child who lived in this house, the young son of our murderer, and then I decided that he would tell the story from later in life, from his own adulthood as he remembered his childhood and these terrible events. And then the question arose: what if he's getting it wrong? what if he's misremembering? There are reasons why he should be telling his story incorrectly; what if he himself was responsible for the death of his own mother, and has displaced that guilt onto his father? It was at this point that the story became properly interesting. And I began to see that for these sorts of psychological operations to have occurred my narrator must be very sick indeed, he must be quite, quite mad. And I began to see that I was dealing here with schizophrenia, and at that point, what had begun as a blackly humorous yarn, certainly acquired a much more serious significance. And I knew that in order to do it justice, I had to basically understand, as far as it was possible, the way that a schizophrenic mind worked, and then create a portrait of such a mind as it deals with its own past, its own memories, its own perceptions, and with all the incoherence and chaos of such a mind, somehow produce a narrative that was comprehensible.

You spoke of the tension between the narrative and the narrator.

This is a very good example of what always seems to happen when I attempt to tell a story. The story presents itself, and then the question comes of who is to tell the story, and at that point I'm immediately overwhelmed by the implications of a story being told. Every story teller is going to leave things out, is going to forget certain things, to change the emphasis of other things, is going to allow his or her own biases and emotions to colour certain things, is going to dramatise certain things, to downplay other things, and truth is impossible. So the relationship of the story teller to the story, the tension between the story teller and the story will become a story on a second level. And the reader, hopefully, will become implicated and involved in the storyteller's relationship to the story and will be engaged in deciphering, in analysing and understanding why it is the story teller is telling the story in a certain way. And this enriches and deepens the entire enterprise. I find it an irresistible strategy.

Sometimes, in the case of Spider, for instance, you have to read the novel twice because the account of the narrator seems so reliable, even though there are blanks in the narrative, and contradictions, because of his disease obviously, but still you believe partly what he says, and you

have to wait a long time. So in a way you are completely manipulated by the narrative.

Well, there is something very pragmatic about this. As a novelist you do want people to be engaged as passionately as possible, and this is one very good way of doing it: convincing the readers that they've been told the truth, and slowly or more rapidly pull the rug out from under them, so that all previous assumptions must now be questioned. If this man is not telling the truth, as I now perceive, so the earlier truths that I've accepted must now be questioned. And this way you produce a much more active reader. The reader's engagement is made much more vivid. From a novelist's point of view this is to be advised.

In a way, Spider himself is an image of the writer. At one point he says that he is being written. Is there a connection between that writer, fictional writer, and you as a writer?

It was very interesting what happened to Spider. He is struggling every night to scribble away in his notebook, in order somehow to contain the forces of madness and chaos that are constantly erupting in his mind now he has stopped taking the medication, and in a way, his enterprise, his attempt to control events through writing very much mirror the activity of any writer, and is very central to what writers do and why they do it. Certainly for me writing this novel, the attempt to make insanity sane, to make irrationality rational, to make chaos orderly is very much mirrored in Spider's attempt every night to take the events of the day, to take the events of the past and give them some clarity and order so that he can just cope; there is a strong parallel between those two activities. And I did find after a while, once I'd got Spider's voice, once I'd begun to understand how his mind worked and how he would react to many situations, I too had the impression of being written, as Spider's own powerlessness is expressed. He's scribbling away, and he discovers that the pen or the pencil seems to be doing all the work. This is terrifying for him. There did come a point when the work was going very well, and I felt that Spider was telling his own story. This is a rare and wonderful event in a writer's working life; it doesn't happen very often, and when it does, you're very very grateful for it, when the work does seem to be looking after itself. *Spider* was written fairly quickly and this did happen.

Why does Spider say that he has gone to Canada? Why Canada as a kind of imagined landscape?

That's a private joke with my father actually. When I was twenty-one he offered me the chance of going to Canada, to work in a lunatic asylum,

which I took, and I never really came back to England after that; I was only supposed to go for a year, but here we are almost thirty years later, and I haven't really properly gone home again. So the idea of being sent to Canada was a private joke to express something that occurred in my own life. Spider is unwilling to tell us, at least at the beginning of the book, that he has spent most of the last twenty years in a mental hospital. He uses the pretence, the disguise of having been in Canada, whereas he has been in a hospital in Gander Hill, and there is a slightly similar sound to the two words, Canada and Gander Hill, and that's how he covers and conceals his own immediate past.

There is another important aspect in that book and that is the idea that your identity is somehow connected to memory, and if memory fails, you only have fragmented scraps of information. This is what happens to Spider and also in a way what happens to Dr Haggard.

Again, as most things connected to Spider, this is an extreme case; here is a man who has created an entire structure of false memories in order to hide from himself, and bury a certain terrible secret in his own childhood. This set of false memories has in a sense become his past, his biography, his very identity. When he is discharged from the mental hospital and returns to the sad streets of East London where he grew up, this structure of false memories can no longer sustain; it begins to collapse in the face of reality, of his past, of the street, the canals, the alley-ways, the pubs, the houses around which he grew up. As the structure of false memories begins to collapse, so does his identity collapse with it. This is a sort of thesis that I formed out of the writing of this book: it began to emerge as what I think is a psychological truth: identity is to a large extent a structure built of our own memories, of our accounts of ourselves, of what we did, why we did it; all that adds up to who we are. And if that is attacked, then our sense of ourselves begins to weaken, almost to the point of breakdown. This is precisely what happens to Spider; when his memories are destroyed, as they inevitably are because they're false, then he is destroyed with them. Having said which, there is something in him that does survive, a sort of pluck, a sort of spark of life that's not altogether extinguished, so there is a hint of some sort of spiritual core in Spider that is not altogether snuffed out as the memories begin to collapse one after another as a house of cards. But that's not something that I explore very fully. The death of the self will prove to be the death of the man. As for Haggard, this is a case more of projection gone wrong: here is a man who has fallen in love very passionately, very deeply, very madly with a woman who eventually rejects him, and instead of suffering, grieving, and then recovering, as would be the case with most of us, Dr Haggard believes that

love is the highest good, that love is the source of spiritual energy, that it cannot simply die, cannot just be forgotten, cannot be passed over, from which one cannot recover. Love is that vital, that important. So this energy sort of roils around him after he retires to the south coast of England and becomes addicted to the morphine that he takes for the pain in his hip after an accident involving the husband of the woman he loved. He creates a sort of religion of his own love; he nurtures the memories of that love and of the woman that he adored. So when one day, there is a knock at the door, and he opens the door; there is the son of the woman that he loved who resembles the woman physically, who sounds like her, who sits in a chair as she used to, who in many, many ways revives these memories of her which are barely dormant; not surprisingly, that tremendous reservoir of desire, emotion, finds a new object. He projects all this unresolved emotion onto this young man, quite inappropriately, and not surprisingly, all sorts of problems arise after this, one of which is that Haggard comes to the belief that the spirit of his lover, who has since died, has travelled in a sort of metempsychotic manner into the body of her son and that he is in communion with his dead lover, and so this is Dr Haggard's disease.

More precisely, in Spider, in Dr Haggard's Disease, but also in The Grotesque and in Asylum, (we'll talk about it later), I'm impressed by your sense of place. Place used as a setting, but also as defining mood and also as related to character; Can you comment on that relation?

This is an old romantic ploy, to make landscape, architecture a reflection of character. I use this in a fairly straightforward manner. Sir Hugo lives in an old, crumbling manor house on the edge of a marsh. All of this is very much in harmony with who Sir Hugo is. Spider's childhood is spent in the East End of London: narrow streets, dark alley-ways, murky canals, small, seedy, shabby rooms, and this sense of small, tight, dark murky enclosures, of narrow passageways, these are all expressions of a confused and sick mind, very much a picture of the Freudian unconscious. Haggard is a man with a tremendously romantic sense of himself; he sees himself as one of the last great lovers. When he encounters this Victorian gothic house on the edge of a cliff, he knows that he has come home, and so he purchases this house, and this is where he lives out his curious morphine-riddled last days. This is a house with high narrow gables as in all gothic architecture, aspiring to the heights, which is where Haggard believes his true existence is. This is quite simply a very reliable way of establishing and sustaining the psychological nature of one's characters, that is to allow their environments to give us back an image of who they are.

This is something that concerns also almost all your work, that remoteness in time. You seem to privilege England in the forties or fifties, but nothing about contemporary Britain.

I think there are two related reasons for this. The first is that's an England that I have a fairly good grasp on, that I understand, not because I was alive then, although I was alive in the fifties, but I was a small child. It's been so thoroughly represented; if you grew up in England, the television you saw, the movies you saw, the books you read would tend to have that England as their setting. So I probably know that England better, or feel I know it better, than I know contemporary England or America. Related to that is the idea that this is a highly structured and predictable society. It is very easy to see or to imagine that you can see the hierarchies, the compartments, the rules, the conventions, the uniforms, the distinguishing marks of ranks, status, class, etc., in that society. And for a novelist like me who is not so much interested in producing a picture, in giving a reading of society, as in exploring psychological states, to have a society that is orderly, grid-like, against which you can place your characters, so that their particular conflict with reality or with other people can be very graphically displayed, to have that sort of grid-like social background is very useful. You can explore the complexity of psychology without having to worry too much about the complexities of society.

Speaking of social background, there is another background I'd like to explore with you now because we come now to Asylum. Maybe you can tell us about your childhood spent in Broadmoor, about your father, thus a relationship with a place, but also with a certain discourse on madness, and also the frequentation possibly of patients, and the relation with your father. Can you say a few words about this?

My father was a psychiatrist, a forensic psychiatrist who specialised in the treatment of the criminally insane, and when I was six years old, he was appointed medical superintendent of Britain's largest top-security mental hospital, which is called Broadmoor. That's where I grew up: my father was superintendent until his retirement, by which time I left England. All of my growing up occurred in a large house, a hundred yards from the main gates of this big Victorian asylum that was built on the top of a hill, in the Berkshire countryside, a place of an almost feudal hierarchy in terms of the social division. The superintendent was this benign despot, the feudal overlord of this large estate. He had the psychiatric staff, the attendant staff and the nursing staff, and finally there was the great population of patients at the base of this pyramid. Staff houses, schools, playing fields, church, all the rest of it, on the estate; it was a community unto itself. So I grew up in

this self-enclosed world, and not surprisingly I acquired, without being able to help it, a good deal of psychiatric information, and also some fascination with this abnormal psychology. I was often in the hospital. My father spoke every day about his work, and as his eldest son, I naturally drank it all in. It was when I became a writer that I discovered I had this reservoir of information about and this fascination with matters psychiatric, some of which was explored in *Spider* where I investigated what it would be like, as far as I could imagine it, to suffer from schizophrenia, and then two novels later, in *Asylum*, I took it from a different point of view. I went to the other side of the wall. I had heard a story, or rather a hint of a story when I was growing up, that there had been some sort of impropriety between the wife of a psychiatrist and one of the patients, and I took this as the germ of a story in which I imagined the wife of a psychiatrist actually forming a relationship with a patient who works on the grounds of the estate, and then allowed that relationship to develop, to turn into a full-blown sexual affair, and then followed the story until its ultimate and inevitably tragic conclusion.

The difference between this book and your previous book is that the narrative structure is slightly different: instead of a first-person narrator telling his own story, it's a first person-narrator, that psychiatrist, telling the story of somebody else, the woman character, Stella. This person also tells the story of her own involvement with her lover, the mad artist Edgar. This makes us think about a game of distorted mirrors.

Very much so, yes. My heroine is called Stella, she is the wife of a psychiatrist. Her story will be told by another psychiatrist, a senior psychiatrist in the hospital, to whom she eventually comes for treatment, the man in fact who has been treating the patient who Stella fell in love with, whose name is Edgar. What we'll have then is two very distinct interpretations of this relationship, this love affair. One is Stella's, and by her account this is a story of love, passionate, intense, glorious love, a grand passion, one of the highest achievements possible for human beings. From the point of view of the narrator, this is a story of madness; this is the story of a pathology, a story of selfishness, of self-indulgence, of the wilful destruction of a family as a woman pursues her own appetites and thereby destroys the fabric of the community in which she had a place. In that sense she is in the tradition of Anna Karenina or Madame Bovary. What I wanted to do was to set up these two contradictory, mutually exclusive interpretations of a love affair. What is central to both accounts is the lover, Edgar. For Stella, Edgar is the love object, he is the man she adores, desires. For the narrator, Peter Cleave, Edgar is a patient, a sick man. So we'll get two entirely different reflections of this man, simultaneously, as the

novel moves forward. And we have this rather fractured reflection, and the novel, I hope, draws no conclusion, pushes the reader not one way or the other. I tried to be as even-handed as possible, to allow these two interpretations to exist side by side, mutually contradictory within the narrative.

To come back to the narrator. His name is revealing, Peter Cleave, and obviously, in a way he is as unreliable as some of your other narrators, even though he seems more self-controlled and intellectually able. Could you comment on him?

He's probably the trickiest one yet. He's the first of my narrators who wields real social power; he's a man in a position of great authority, and he makes that authority felt in his tone of voice. We perceive him as somebody who is wise, sympathetic, a doctor, a mature, professional man. So as he tells us his story, we're lulled at first into complete confidence that he is giving us the facts: this is how it happened, this is what Stella did. It's only later in the novel, quite a lot later, that we begin, I think, to grow suspicious of the objectivity of his account and at that point what I hope happens is that the reader's sense of disorientation and disillusion, is quite strongly disturbed, because the initial confidence had been so firmly established; and we'll then see that this man is none of the things that we first thought him to be: he is not wise, he is not detached, he is not sympathetic. His name in fact is Cleave, which is one of those words that has two meanings, diametrically opposed to each other: "cleave" meaning to cut in half, to sever, to chop out, to divide; but "to cleave" also means to cling to, to hold to. So we have a man whose name means, on the one hand, to bring everything together, which would be appropriate to a healer, to a man who understands, to a man who makes sense of things, and makes better and makes things whole again, things that have been fractured. On the other hand, he's a man whose name implies that he divides, he cuts, he splits, and in fact this is what he does: he splits the lovers; in a sense, he splits Stella, he certainly splits Edgar. This is the nature of the narrator in this novel.

Beyond that, you could also say that he wants to possess, not only by narrating the story, but by possessing their bodies in the way of their mind; he is a kind of sexual pervert. There are complex issues of sexuality involved in this novel, both in terms of man-to-man relationship and man-to-woman relationship.

Yes, this is what is truly disturbing about Peter Cleave: his own sexual appetites are concealed, quite probably from himself. So he is operating a

particular sexual bias towards both Stella and Edgar, that he is not aware of. These sexual biases are influencing very strongly what should be a detached and objective clinical judgement.

He possesses both man and woman at the end.

He's a rather desiccated and dry character. What becomes clear is that he is a sort of collector, he's a sort of voyeur. He takes a very prurient pleasure in imagining the sexual relationship between Stella and Edgar; and what becomes clear is that there is a sexual element to his professional activity. As a forensic psychiatrist, as a man who's responsible for basically locking people up and keeping them locked up, there is an element of his work in this area that is not strictly therapeutic, there is something of the collector about him. He enjoys having creatures locked up for his inspection and his pleasure, and that's a very perverse pleasure that he takes in having human beings so completely under his control.

In a way you take sides for the lovers and not for him.

I'm not sure about that.

Well, partly. In Asylum, passion is related to sex obviously, but it goes beyond that; it also implies sacrifice of oneself and others. For instance, it leads Stella to let her child be drowned, but it is seen ambivalently: it is destructive but also positive in a way, not exactly, but as a kind of energy.

Really, there is a dark secret at the centre of our idealisation of romantic love. It is held up to be one of the highest human goods in our culture, in our civilisation, it's what binds society together; it's what fuelled art and poetry for centuries. Yet, we have to remember that love is a good only up to a point, and if you're to follow love to its logical conclusion, and sacrifice all for love, if you're to give up the world for love, you would soon find yourself in a very difficult situation, because love at a certain point has to relinquish its exclusiveness; the lovers have to become rehabilitated into the wider society, they have to re-enter the world of work. Now here are two lovers, who don't understand the rules, whose passions are of such an intensity that they are driven outside, beyond the bonds of society. They're driven literally into a place for outlaws, they're outside the law, they're in hiding, why? because they're lovers. They're lovers who should not be lovers; they belong to different orders of society: one is a mental patient; one is the wife of a psychiatrist; one is a single man, one is a married woman. It's an illicit love in the fullest sense of the word. What happens is that the further outside of society they go, the greater are the repercussions for those with whom they're connected: a family is destroyed, a community is thrown into great disturbance. Not only is a family destroyed, but

eventually, because of the consequences of this love, a child dies. What I was interested in as I began to get properly engaged with this novel was the question: if we take the strongest bond probably within human nature, as the connection between a mother and a child, what would it take to destroy that bond? In what situation can we imagine a mother failing to protect her child? Is there any situation? I wanted to answer the question and say yes, there is a situation where we can imagine it, understand it, and even accept and forgive it, and this is that situation; and that is in a way what the novel is all about. If one were to take this step, and then this step; if one were to follow Stella step by step, deeper and deeper into this wild love affair, you could well end up in a position of allowing a child to die.

Is there a relationship, a kind of projection between the child and Edgar?

That's something else, yes. There's a reason why Edgar is in the asylum obviously, and that's that he suffers from morbid sexual jealousy. He's in all respects but one a normal, intelligent, sensitive, feeling human being, but there is some deficiency within him whereby he is subject to intense psychotic jealousy; it was out of that jealousy that he murdered his first wife, in the bizarre, delusional belief that she was sleeping with twelve men every day, betraying him so profoundly that there was nothing for it but he must destroy her. When Stella and Edgar escape from the asylum, when they set up their curious home in London, it's not long before the pressures of living outside the law will begin to produce the first symptoms of that illness in Edgar again, and when this happens, Stella realises that that sort of jealousy, that sort of possessiveness is very much the possessiveness of a small child. There's something infantile about sexual jealousy, and Edgar displays that kind of infantile need, exclusive, possessive need, of the woman. At that point Stella asks herself "Why did I leave one child in order to care for another child?" And in that moment, her own child and her lover seem to require very much the same sort of things from this woman. So it is that when the child dies, Stella permits him to die, because what she sees is not her real child, but her lover, her other child, her adult child, her man child. So she makes a confusion, such is her state of mind at that time, between her boy child and her man child, and this is why she permits him to die.

Edgar is also an artist, and what is also important in Asylum is the relationship between art and insanity.

Yes, Edgar's activity as an artist is interesting. Art is conventionally associated with a sort of madness, of irrationality, with intuition, and passion. In one sense, Edgar acts that out. He's been working on a clay head of his lover, of Stella, and in his confusion and anger towards Stella, he will gouge

and scar the clay. The art is very much an expression of the madness and the disorder of feelings that's in Edgar. There is another point at which art plays a completely different role. It's when the madness, the jealousy, is erupting most violently within Edgar, and Stella is in great danger; they're alone together, and he's once again subject to these uncontrollable delusions that she has betrayed him, and the rage rises in him. It's at that point that only art is able to control that rage. He's working on his head of Stella, and in order to work he has to see her clearly; he has to control his perception of her, he has to just take on his perception of Stella, with all other feelings, biases, any other interfering influence excluded. By doing this, by focusing so intensely upon the visual, he is able to contain the murderous impulses in him. At this point, art is the enemy of madness, art is controlling madness. It's this other aspect of art, that which pursues the real, the true, which is the enemy of illusion, ironically, that saves Stella's life.

There is something also recurrent in your books, and it is that most of your protagonists are old men suffering in their body and their mind. There's a sense of degradation that is very strong, for Sir Hugo, for Dr Haggard, and also to a lesser extent for Cleave who is not quite that bad, but sixty-ish, someone who has lost some kind of energy, and the only energy that remains is intellectual. Could you comment on that?

I'm not quite sure why that's come about. It's always seemed to me almost impossible to create a narrator or a hero who is full of health, vitality, coherence, sanity, wholeness. I seem to need to have characters who have in some way or other been destroyed by their own experience. It's a particular romantic impulse. All of my characters are Ancient Mariners somehow who have had experiences of such intensity that they've somehow been burned out, so that they're like this, like Coleridge's old fellow, grey-haired loon, who grabs the wedding guests by the collar and say "listen, let me tell you my story; this is how I got to be this way." Why that should be particularly attractive, I don't know. I think it's part and parcel of the Gothic tradition. If you take on board the Gothic, you know heroic heroes of vitality and strength are not particularly attractive to you. I don't think I have a particularly good answer to that. One aspect of it may be that there's a certain way in which writers tend to feel like old men. They spend their days very quietly, often in solitude, sitting at a table, in a completely cerebral condition. We tend not to use our bodies very much, certainly not in the course of a working day. Many writers, when the day is over, go out and run ten miles, go to the gym, or drink a bottle of whisky, whatever it takes to feel that you're living in your body once more. But the actual business of writing and being imaginatively engaged in a narrative that's going to carry you for two, three, four years does have a sort of senescent effect, and you do begin to feel yourself as a mind lacking a

body; all this can also have destructive effects on one's own intimate relationships. All of this contributes to the sense that the writer has of being in some way moribund. That may at some level be what sort of influences my choice of narrator, that sort of characters. Sir Hugo is frozen in his wheelchair; poor old Spider can barely cross the road without becoming uncoupled; he doesn't quite know what to do next with his arms and legs, and Haggard is stuck in his lonely house, shooting morphine into his veins every night. Peter Cleave sort of rambles around this great asylum, and significantly we never see him outside of that particular world. These are all narrators who live in very circumscribed worlds that they are controlled by or control, and they don't have very much contact with the larger, more vigorous reality, and that pretty well describes the writer's life to me.

Your next novel will be partly about the myth of Frankenstein. You seem to be fascinated by that myth, along with other literary myths. How do you intend to use it?

Quite hard to say, because this is a work in progress. Certainly, this novel will be set in the eighteenth century, it will involve an anatomist who is in pursuit of a particular body. I think one of the interesting ways in which one can think about the Frankenstein myth is to associate it with the process of composition, of invention, and for any writer attempting a historical novel, there are so many precedents that clearly you are always going to be putting together bits and pieces from previous writers, from histories and biographies; you are going to be cobbling together, patching together some sort of hybrid creature with leftovers from other texts. This is very much the sort of activity that Dr Frankenstein went in for. I think the Frankenstein myth has a lot to say about the nature of creation: creation is never from nothing; creation is always from the remnants and relics of that which has come before. I'll certainly be doing that on one level. I'll be creating a sort of monster out of bits and pieces of previous writings. Beyond that, there will be a lot of play with corpses and the disposal of corpses, the value of corpses, the anatomising of corpses, and the placement of corpses and parts of corpses in museums; these will be themes that I'll be using in this novel, in association somehow with events in America of 1776, with lost fathers, with illicit passions as usual I expect. But quite how all these elements will fit together I don't know. Undoubtedly it will be monstrous.

Thank you very much. We're looking forward to your next novel then.

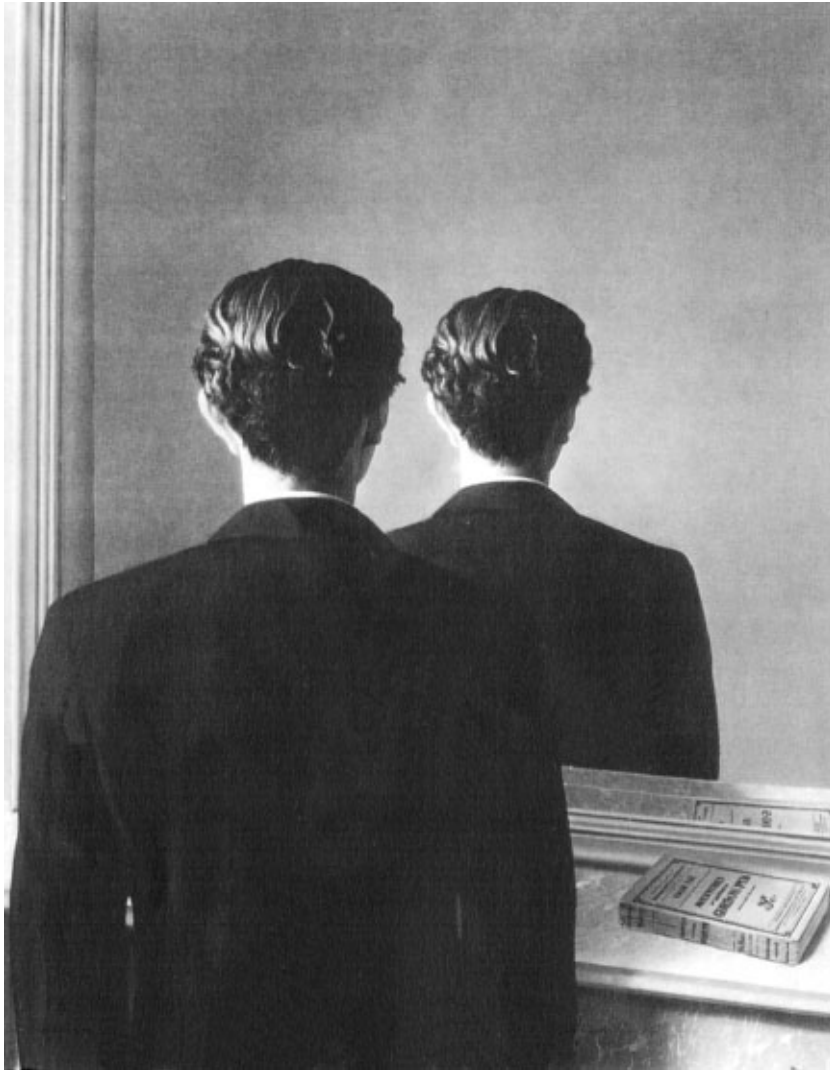


« La Reproduction interdite »
Écart entre vue et vision
dans The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym

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Starting from Magritte's painting "Forbidden Reproduction," we investigate the distance between sight and vision in Poe's Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. In the novel, perception always appears as distorted and unreliable, as though through a mirror that reflects only the back of things, or by transient photographic flashes, or by an absent/glaring eye, a seeing blindness. The only possible perception seems to come from a poetic "peripheral vision" grounded in Poe's scientific imagination as it is expounded in "Eureka." For appearances are deceiving and the mind and the eye constantly oscillate between fragments of truth, unity and multiplicity, in a vertiginous impossible symmetrical movement.

Le tableau de René Magritte intitulé « La Reproduction interdite » (1937) représente un homme debout devant un miroir ; le spectateur voit deux fois l'homme de dos car la glace refuse d'inverser son image. Le miroir offre normalement une copie fidèle (mais inversée) du sujet. Au lieu de réfléchir le visage de celui qui s'y regarde, le miroir de Magritte passe derrière le sujet, le contourne, décale le réel. Cependant, en dessous, sur le manteau de la cheminée, est posé un livre dont le titre apparaît à l'envers dans la glace : il s'agit des *Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym*¹. Le caractère dérangent du tableau vient de ce que l'homme et le livre y sont traités



René Magritte, *La Reproduction interdite* (portrait d'Edward James), 1937.
Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van-Beuningen

différemment : l'impossible réflexion de l'homme apostrophe le spectateur, mais ne serait-ce pas plutôt le reflet « normal » du livre qui pose problème car il bafoue la norme annoncée par le titre du tableau ? En plaçant *PYM* dans l'univers de sa toile, l'artiste reconnaît implicitement la puissance visionnaire de Poe². L'interdiction d'effigie à laquelle est condamné le personnage induit donc un refus de symétrie diégétique, contrairement à toutes les apparences. Cette étude se propose de montrer que, si la reproduction du titre de *PYM* est permise dans un miroir qui refuse la représentation, c'est justement parce qu'elle est condamnée à l'intérieur même d'un récit où foisonnent les copies hors norme.

De l'œil vitreux d'Augustus à l'œil du maelström³, *PYM* est une histoire de vue et d'optique faussées, une vision onirique filtrée par un prisme déformant et un miroir qui refuse le reflet, une distorsion du réel causée par différents troubles visuels. Dès lors, il conviendra d'opposer vue et vision, la *vue* désignant un phénomène physique et en principe objectif et la *vision* une représentation subjective du réel – les imperfections, le flou visuel que trahit le récit servant à étayer l'imagination de Poe. Nous allons commencer par étudier les diverses occurrences du miroir et de la vue dans *PYM* avant d'explorer le lien entre l'esthétique narrative de Poe et les lois physiques qui sous-tendent « Eureka ».

Les miroirs faussés de *PYM*

Le miroir est une figure récurrente de l'œuvre de Poe⁴ et dans *PYM* se dessine l'impossible écriture-miroir de ce que Mallarmé appelle un « langage se réfléchissant » (379). Sans viser l'exhaustivité, on peut rappeler quelques exemples de réflexivité relevés par les nombreux exégètes de l'œuvre : le message d'Augustus écrit à l'envers d'un faux (la lettre censée émaner de Mr Ross invitant Pym à séjourner à New Bedford), les anagrammes (Tsalal/Atlas, Pym/imp), les palindromes (dog/God), la gémellité tous azimuts (Pym/Augustus, Pym/Peters) et les similitudes onomastiques (Poe/Pym, Allan/Allen). Il convient également de remarquer la récurrence de plusieurs mots polysémiques (*considerations*, *reflections*, *speculations*), qui rejoignent le *mind's eye* (82) shakespearien pour faire coïncider regard et imagination. Tous ces jeux de reflets lexicaux se croisent et s'entrecroisent pour tisser un réseau de chiasmes qui mettent le récit en perpétuel déséquilibre.

Cependant, parmi ce foisonnement de miroirs, aucun ne restitue un reflet fidèle du réel et la réflexion se voit condamnée sans appel dans le roman. Sur l'île, toute velléité de narcissisme est vouée par avance à l'échec. Jean Ricardou, reprenant l'expression de Poe, articule son article autour du « caractère singulier » de l'eau des ruisseaux de Tsalal qui refuse le reflet⁵ : à l'évidence Too-wit n'a jamais vu son image. Lorsque, sur le

navire, le chef des Tsalaliens se trouve cerné par deux miroirs, il s'enfuit, terrorisé par la double reproduction :

There were two large mirrors in the cabin... Too-wit was the first to approach them, and he had got in the middle of the cabin, with his face to one and his back to the other... Upon raising his eyes and seeing his reflected self in the glass, I thought the savage would go mad; but, upon turning short round to make a retreat, and beholding himself a second time in the opposite direction, I was afraid he would expire upon the spot. No persuasions could prevail upon him to take another look; but, throwing himself upon the floor, with his face buried in his hands, he remained thus until we were obliged to drag him upon deck. (148)

La double spécularité place le chef des Tsalaliens entre parenthèses, l'évacue, d'autant que la position des miroirs soulignée dans le texte (l'un devant, l'autre derrière le personnage) induit une spécularité à l'infini, chacun se reflétant dans l'autre pour produire un hallucinant effet de « galerie de glaces ». Placé au centre des multiples reproductions de son image, le sujet est écrasé, mis en minorité, en « mirorité ». Dans « The Philosophy of Furniture » Poe souligne le terrifiant potentiel de clonage visuel du miroir : « Considered as a reflector, it is potent in producing a monstrous and odious uniformity » (Poe 1986, 417). Certes, l'image offerte par les miroirs de *PYM* est une représentation monstrueuse, comme en témoigne l'épisode du chapitre 8 : pour reprendre le contrôle du navire en jouant sur l'effet de surprise et de terreur, Pym se déguise en Rogers, l'un des mutins mort depuis le matin, et fait irruption de nuit dans la cabine mal éclairée où s'est réfugié le reste du groupe. Lorsqu'il se regarde dans un fragment de miroir (« I viewed myself in a fragment of looking glass » 71) pour s'assurer de sa ressemblance avec le cadavre, sa vision s'avère non seulement limitée à cause de l'insuffisance de lumière (« dim light » 71), mais aussi terriblement subjective. Le miroir sans *teint* ne lui renvoie que la pâleur (« appalling » 92, 166) d'un visage passé à la craie (appali)⁶. L'image restituée est diminuée, déformée, transformée. Jean-Jacques Lecercle fait remarquer l'ambiguïté du miroir qui tantôt construit, tantôt déconstruit ; « révisant à la baisse la cohérence des formes », il entraîne ici une « défaite de l'image » (Lecercle 20). Dans une sorte de scrabble lexical l'*image* (*imitation*) est altérée en *magie*, voire *mi(r)age*, « remodelled » comme celle du manoir dans l'étang-miroir de « The Fall of the House of Usher » (Poe 1986, 139). Les signes grossiers destinés à tromper les mutins (le visage grimé, le corps artificiellement gonflé pour imiter celui du noyé) suffisent à faire illusion dans l'obscurité. Mais Pym se regardant voit l'*unheimlich* remonter à la surface sous les signes. C'est dans la faille entre le réel (la mort du marin) et sa représentation que vient se loger le malaise de Pym : « at the recollection of the terrific reality which I was thus

representing,... I was seized with a violent tremor » (71 ; c'est moi qui souligne). Pym refuse la représentation qu'il découvre car le reflet qui surgit est celui d'un autre, monstrueux habitant d'un territoire refoulé, celui de « la fissure du sujet » (Barthes 1975, 5-6). A ce point extrême de dé-représentation, le miroir ne révèle qu'une image fugitive, un écart, il montre l'ob-scène. Le sujet n'a plus sa place dans un miroir qui place l'humain « en outre », le fait sortir du cadre. Le miroir triche, truque le reflet, oblitère l'original, le fait passer au second plan et opère une transformation tératomorphique. La réfraction devient entrée par effraction dans le territoire terrifiant de l'inconscient : reproduction interdite, représentation inacceptable.

La destruction systématique de l'image se poursuit avec la mort d'Augustus, double de Pym, le 1^{er} août (*August* – écho onomastique) au chapitre 13 (exactement au centre du récit) à midi (milieu du jour), au moment où le navire passe l'équateur (ligne médiane). Ce décès est le pivot autour duquel s'articule la symétrie du roman. On peut littéralement plier le livre à cet endroit et constater la duplication des expériences, la mise en miroir des événements : trahison et mutinerie sur le *Grampus* (avec le rôle du cuisinier noir) / trahison et crime sur Tsalal (la trahison de Too-wit, le chef noir) ; enfermement de Pym dans la cale du *Grampus* / dans les collines de Tsalal ; sauvetage des naufragés de l'*Ariel* par le *Penguin* / de ceux du *Grampus* par la *Jane Guy* ; expérience de la faim et ébriété dans la cale / sur le pont⁷. Dernière symétrie, un double emboîtement auteur/narrateur encadre le récit qui s'ouvre sur une préface de Pym, suivie de la prise en charge narrative du récit par Poe, et se termine avec la disparition de Pym suivie d'une « note » anonyme (de Poe ?). Ainsi, la mort d'Augustus éclaire le récit à plus d'un titre car la putréfaction de son cadavre érige un miroir au centre de la diégèse. A partir de ce moment, l'inversion devient la règle : désormais la lecture se fait la tête en bas.

Le flash du photographe

La spécularité diégétique apparaît en outre dans le contraste noir/blanc qui découpe visuellement le roman et permet de le lire comme une suite de clichés. Pratiquement la première moitié des aventures de Pym (jusqu'à la mort des mutins) se passe dans l'obscurité, de nuit ou dans la cale. Le récit bascule ensuite dans un jour permanent, avant de retomber dans la noirceur absolue de Tsalal, puis dans la blancheur hallucinée du Pôle. A l'instar de l'échiquier que dessine l'aire de nidification des oiseaux noirs et blancs (pingouins et albatros), on peut voir dans l'alternance dialectique – jour/nuit, profondeur/surface – un épiphénomène traduisant l'intuition du procédé photographique tout juste balbutiant à l'époque⁸. En forçant la

lecture, on peut dire que le négatif photographique paradigmatise le récit. Poussons l'hypothèse encore plus loin : à deux reprises, l'éclair du photographe fixe fugitivement le réel alentour. D'abord, dans la cale qui a des allures de chambre noire, de *camera oscura*⁹. L'obscurité y est totale (« The hold was so intensely dark that I could not see my hand, however close I would hold it to my face » 31). Fermée par une trappe (« trap », « aperture »), il faut appuyer à un endroit précis pour l'ouvrir : « He now pressed with his knuckles upon a certain spot of the carpet » (19). Une très faible lumière est introduite dans la chambre noire grâce à la chandelle (« The taper gave out so feeble a ray that it was with the greatest difficulty I could grope my way » 19), puis au phosphore (« a faint glimmering of light », « fragments of my matches », « a speck or two » 31) qui permet de produire un instantané éphémère¹⁰. L'étymologie commune à phosphore et à photographie (*phos* : lumière) permet d'affirmer que le propos de Pym serait, « littéralement, de "faire la lumière sur le texte" » (Richard 1990, 159)¹¹. Néanmoins, la luminosité est trop faible, la photo sera sous-exposée, le contenu du message d'Augustus à peine deviné. Le contraste entre l'aspect dérisoire du résultat et la minutie de la narration témoigne de l'importance d'une expérience d'enterrement aux confins de l'onirique et atteste la fragilité de la représentation.

Le deuxième instantané est pris lorsque Pym et Peters jettent le cadavre d'Augustus par-dessus bord : « As the mass of putrefaction slipped over the vessel's side into the water, the *glare of phosphoric light* with which it was surrounded plainly discovered to us seven or eight large sharks » (113 ; je souligne). D'où que provienne cette phosphorescence – d'une nécrose des os d'Augustus, du plancton des eaux tropicales¹² –, la photoluminescence du corps jeté à la mer, éclairant les requins qui vont le dévorer, souligne la frustration paradoxale d'un auteur hanté par le double et le miroir : avec la disparition de l'*alter ego*, la représentation s'avère impossible. La copie n'est jamais vraiment fidèle, le reflet est condamné d'avance – « Le double serait donc le leurre de l'imaginaire possible », (Richard 1990, 231). Distorsions spéculaires, carences visuelles parasitent le récit : le miroir s'avère trompeur, la photographie truquée, et la vue rarement fiable.

Les aléas de la vue

La caméra copie le fonctionnement de l'œil : la rétine-miroir capte les rayons lumineux, le cristallin jouant le rôle d'une lentille. L'iris agit à la manière d'un diaphragme et dose la quantité de lumière utile à la rétine. Le miroir de l'œil décode la perception en images et l'image de l'objet, inversée sur la rétine, est ensuite redressée par le cerveau. Que l'un de ces

éléments se détraque et la vue se trouble. Dans *PYM*, l'effet produit est toujours inverse de celui escompté. L'image n'est pas toujours redressée, et le récit s'articule justement autour d'une succession de défauts visuels. Dans le récit, la vue n'est jamais parfaite ni fiable, mais au contraire déformée, insuffisante, voire impossible. Les autres sens suppléent partiellement aux déficiences de l'œil, mais leur statut semble bien être tout aussi fragile.

Une formidable omission place l'œil et la vue en exergue du texte. Ricardou constate qu'à aucun moment du récit il n'est fait mention des yeux des Tsalaliens. Or, le narrateur insiste : il n'existe rien de blanc sur Tsalal – pas même les dents des indigènes. Il précise d'abord qu'on ne les voit pas : « Their lips... were thick and clumsy, so that, even when laughing, the teeth were never disclosed » (154), avant de révéler, à l'avant-dernière page, lorsque Nu-Nu finit par découvrir ses dents : « These were black. We had never before seen the teeth of an inhabitant of Tsalal » (194). La sclérotique de l'œil des Tsalaliens serait-elle noire, le narrateur n'aurait pas manqué de le mentionner. L'oblitération – opération d'effacement – est aussi le cachet qui fait foi de l'anomalie. Comme dans « The Purloined Letter », où mettre en évidence est la meilleure façon de cacher, l'omission attire ici plus sûrement l'attention que l'insistance. Au même titre que les nombreuses erreurs que contient le récit, « le blanc passé sous silence » (Ricardou 725) devient un faux pas, un lapsus révélateur.

Lors de l'aventure liminaire sur l'*Ariel*, ce sont les yeux d'Augustus qui révèlent à Pym l'état d'ébriété dans lequel se trouve son compagnon : « His eyes were perfectly glazed » (8). On pense à l'iridologie, selon laquelle l'œil est le miroir de l'âme et du corps, chaque partie du corps humain ayant sa « région » dans l'iris¹³. D'ailleurs, la carte de l'œil des iridologues ressemble étrangement à celle de l'Antarctique autour du Pôle Sud, et la carte du voyage de Pym se dessine proleptiquement dans l'œil f(1) ou d'Augustus. (Pré-)vision en creux, le négatif de cette première aventure se reproduit tout au long du voyage (ébriété, naufrages, enfermement) et son développement est condamné par avance. Les yeux vitreux d'Augustus augurent déjà de la fin impossible du récit.

Lorsque Pym se déguise en Hartman Rogers, le regard du lecteur est à nouveau attiré par un œil étrange : le narrateur note que plusieurs taches rouges sont apparues sur le visage du cadavre : « two or three *glaring* red splotches,... one of these splotches extended diagonally across the face, completely covering up an eye as if with a band of red velvet » (69 ; je souligne). L'occultation de l'œil rend la vue impossible – un refus paradoxalement souligné par le signal (« *glaring* ») destiné à attirer l'attention. L'œil à la fois masqué et mis en lumière, c'est une cécité aguicheuse (*eye-catching*), une cécité qui « crève la vue »¹⁴, comme celle du marin à la barre du bateau ivre, doublement aveugle puisque mort et

sans yeux (« the eyes are gone » 91)¹⁵. A nouveau, le regard d'Augustus sert de relais à l'œil de Pym lors de l'approche du vaisseau-fantôme. C'est par l'intermédiaire des yeux de son ami que Pym remarque le bateau, comme dans un rétroviseur : « I took notice of his eyes, which were *glaring* apparently at some object behind me » (88 ; je souligne). Encore une fois, l'œil luisant d'Augustus fait office de révélateur, de *voyant* lumineux. Cette vision par réflecteur interposé renvoie au miroir du tableau de Magritte, qui ne représente pas le visage de la personne qui s'y regarde mais ce que voit le spectateur placé derrière, hors-champ.

Quelle représentation autorisent les défaillances du regard ? L'épisode du vaisseau-fantôme repose sur la myopie et la nécessaire mise au point qui sous-tendent l'écriture. L'accommodation visuelle traduit la progression de l'ironie dramatique dans le renversement de la situation. Les quatre passagers du *Grampus* interprètent ce qu'ils voient (les anomalies dans la course du bateau) en refusant de voir et en faisant du vaisseau mort un bateau ivre (« we could think of no other manner of accounting for it than by supposing the helmsman to be in liquor » 89). Les cadavres qui jonchent le pont tendent à Pym et à ses compagnons un miroir dans lequel se reflète l'*image* de leur sort probable en même temps que perdurent les *images* d'espoir imprimées sur la rétine : « Yes, long and loudly did we beg, in the agony of the moment, that those silent and disgusting *images* would stay for us » (90 ; c'est moi qui souligne)¹⁶.

La vue étant rien moins que sûre, il faut ruser pour voir. Pour parvenir à discerner vaguement le message d'Augustus, Pym doit « tourner de l'œil » : « by turning the exterior portions of the retina towards it, that is to say, by surveying it slightly askance, I found that it became in some measure perceptible » (31). La rétine glisse, l'œil s'exorbite. Le champ de vision décentré, en déséquilibre, se fragmente, se parcellise et le message « reste en état d'équilibre entre le non-sens et le sens » (Richard 1990, 162). En fait, le sens se loge dans l'entre-deux, dans les failles et les angles morts. La translation latérale du regard permet à la vue de s'esquiver vers un ailleurs de la perception, un travestissement onirique du réel, de se métaphoriser en une vision poétique, en ce que Poe appelait la « vision périphérique »¹⁷. En tournant son regard vers le hors-champ, en déplaçant son champ visuel vers la périphérie, Pym voit l'invisible, améliorant la qualité de sa vision, non en termes scientifiques mais en termes poétiques, car le fragment de message qu'il capte paradigmatise tout le récit : la condamnation à l'enfermement, l'importance du message écrit, la structure ternaire (Richard 1990, 162-3), le sang versé. Tout en ayant l'air de l'ancrer dans un réel irréfragable, la vision *exorbitante* de Pym donne au récit une dimension imaginaire. Parallèlement, la structure diégétique révèle la rigueur scientifique de l'auteur qui nourrit son intuition poétique.

Visions scientifiques

En effet, l'inconscient du texte trahit les théories scientifiques prônées dans « Eureka » dix ans après *PYM*¹⁸. Dans « The Philosophy of Composition », Poe explique que l'œuvre d'art ne se construit pas au hasard, mais avec « the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem » (Poe 1986, 482). La Beauté est inconcevable sans une impitoyable rigueur mathématique, la figure géométrique sert de matrice à l'imaginaire. Vue et vision s'articulent autour de la notion essentielle de symétrie et au cœur des tensions contraires de la physique qui finissent par produire une « logique du contradictoire » (Justin 1991, 301). Ainsi, Poe bâtit son esthétique d'écriture et construit la dialectique qui travaille ses textes à partir de la loi newtonienne de la gravitation universelle. La construction de la fiction doit copier « the reciprocity of adaptation » (« Eureka » 292) et osciller entre gravité/inertie, attraction/répulsion, unité/multiplicité (nous en verrons des exemples plus loin). Paul Valéry parle de « relations symétriques et réciproques entre la matière, le temps, l'espace, la gravitation et la lumière [...], une symétrie formelle qui est le caractère essentiel de la représentation de l'Univers selon Einstein. Elle en fait la Beauté » (858). Cette symétrie invisible, souterraine, des choses et des êtres travaille l'écriture de Poe, éclairant sa spécularité : « the sense of the symmetrical is an instinct which may be depended on with an almost blindfold reliance. It is the poetical essence of the Universe » (« Eureka » 300). On peut ainsi justifier l'assimilation « symétrie = beauté » dans le moment-charnière du récit, la mort d'Augustus¹⁹. Cependant, le décès du jeune homme fédère le récit tout en le menant à sa perte, puisqu'il en est le pivot et le point de dispersion. Avec la putréfaction du corps – la jambe qui reste entre les mains de Peters – et les requins qui se jettent sur le cadavre, l'univers s'effondre sur son centre originel, les atomes s'éparpillent. L'hétérogénéité prend le pas sur l'unité en même temps que le récit maintient ses prétentions à la symétrie. Ainsi, l'impossible épiphanie finale précipite le texte en arrière, vers la préface de Pym.

Certes, le but avoué de « Eureka » est la révélation de l'ordre du cosmos, et Poe y tente désespérément d'expliquer l'harmonie du monde. Mais il faut distinguer entre la vérité unique, globale, illimitée, et les vérités scientifiques qui s'avèrent fragmentaires. L'intuition de « Eureka » pose le principe de l'unité absolue de Dieu qui se manifeste, dans le monde du phénomène, par la diversité, et le didactisme fractionnel de la science, incapable de rendre compte de la vérité globale, va à l'encontre de la vision du poète : « Science! True daughter of Old Time thou art! / Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes »²⁰. A nouveau l'écart entre vue et vision s'avère inévitable. Dans « Letter to B— » Poe explique l'erreur de Coleridge décrivant une étoile avec minutie : « He who regards it directly and intensely sees, it is true, the star, but it is the star without a ray – while he

who surveys it less inquisitively is conscious of all for which the star is useful to us below – its brilliancy and its beauty... » (Poe 1986, 382). Autrement dit, une représentation parfaite engluée dans un réel à ras de terre tandis que la connaissance globale s'obtient grâce à un « sixième sens », une intuition *poétique*²¹. Claude Richard rappelle la distinction faite par Michel Gresset entre « voyeur » et « voyant » : Gresset oppose « la connaissance stérile du voyeur, [...] savoir bloqué aux bornes du temps et du lieu, [...] contemplation fugitive du phénomène secret » à l'art du voyant qui « ne conçoit la complicité qu'au niveau cosmique, [...] habite dans l'éternel comme le voyeur habite dans le fugitif » et dont la « conscience ne peut s'arrêter aux données phénoménales » ; « pour le voyant, le visible n'est que l'écran de l'invisible. [...] Le voyeur vit dans l'acte, le voyant dans le signe »²².

Répulsion et attraction créent un système de balancements symétriques. Au point de fuite de *PYM*, l'énigmatique coda du récit, nous observons un phénomène d'oscillation. A nouveau apparaît la fascinante lueur (« glare »), fil rouge de la vision, qui ramène à la surface les deux épisodes cauchemardesques de la deuxième partie : « from the milky depths of the ocean a luminous glare arose » (194) ; « The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us » (195). Et, suivant les oiseaux, le mouvement de va-et-vient du regard entre le rideau boréal et le canot : « Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal *Tekeli-li!* as they retreated from our vision » (195). A l'approche du secret de l'univers, la vue régresse, pourtant hypnotisée par la lueur qui attire comme un phare. Même fascination du regard pour l'abîme, même aller-retour du lieu sûr au gouffre béant lorsque Pym et Peters descendent la paroi du précipice : « I endeavored... to keep my eyes steadily bent upon the flat surface of the cliff » ; « irrepensible desire of looking below » ; « I could not, I would not, confine my glances to the cliff » ; « I threw my vision far down into the abyss » (185). Henri Justin observe que Poe :

cherche à conjuguer ces deux forces [entropie/négentropie] en un couple d'antagonismes complices qui modélise l'Univers au plus près ; non pas l'univers-objet que le scientifique essaiera toujours de reconstruire sous son regard, mais l'univers qui contient ce regard même, soit l'« Uni-vers, » figure du retour de tout, sujet et objet, vers une unité d'essence que son existence contredit. (1997, 39).

Vue partielle dans un miroir faussé, symétrie chancelante, déstabilisée, oscillation dialectique du texte ne seraient-ils pas les symptômes de ce « vertige de la *symétrie* » dont parle Genette à propos du baroque français, un fait de style « tout à la fois de l'ordre de la *technique* et de la *vision* » (20,

italiques dans le texte), une symétrie contradictoire, conflictuelle entre le fini et l'infini ? En ne terminant pas son récit Poe le met sous tension, laisse ouvert le champ des oscillations, de l'unité à la multiplicité *ad libitum*. Il y a retour mais jamais au point d'origine ; la copie ne saurait être conforme. Rappelons l'insistance itérative du narrateur sur la tromperie des apparences. De fait, le récit est balisé par une série d'erreurs, d'incohérences ou de lapsus qui sapent par avance le carroyage tatillon de l'espace des mers du sud dans les derniers chapitres. Cette distorsion du réel est une stratégie d'écriture : la reproduction de l'expérience s'avère impossible et conduit à une flagrante impasse diégétique. La disparition du narrateur n'est ni une pirouette ni une maladresse, mais bien l'affirmation que la reproduction est interdite. Le récit de Pym est incomplet mais le roman est terminé : le récit ne *doit* pas s'achever – condamné à la blancheur définitive de la page (Ricardou). Représentation inconcevable, l'homme que l'on voit de dos sur le tableau de Magritte en est-il le narrateur invisible ? En ouvrant le livre, le lecteur découvre une figure auctoriale qui lui tourne le dos ; lorsqu'il le referme, la même figure déconcertante apparaît, toujours de dos. Le texte « désinauguré » (Barthes 1966, 28) se doit d'être également « déclôturé ».

La symétrie demeure donc un épiphénomène, voire une illusion. La lecture schizophrénique ou oxymoronique de *PYM* est justifiée par le paradoxe poésique, par l'écart entre vue et vision. *PYM* repose sur la science, tout en la mettant en déroute. La science de Poe n'est qu'une *feinte* (ancien terme pour désigner une *fiction*)... Son message est d'abord que l'œil trompe, que la réalité n'est jamais ce qu'elle paraît, la symétrie non plus. *L'effet* contredit *les faits*. Poe, en visionnaire, rêve la science et « scientise » son imagination – « Eureka », poème en prose, rêverie scientifique... « Tout essai repose ainsi, peut-être, sur une *vision* des objets intellectuels. Pourquoi la science ne se donnerait-elle pas le droit d'avoir des visions ? », s'interroge Barthes (1975, 94, italiques de l'auteur) – « grey visions » pour « glimpses of eternity », bien sûr²³...

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Notes

1. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, 1838. Dorénavant abrégé en *PYM*. Les numéros de page renvoient à l'édition Hill & Wang, New York, 1960 (5-198). Trad. Charles Baudelaire : « Les aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym », in *Edgar Allan Poe, Œuvres en prose* (Paris : Gallimard La Pléiade, 1951) 494-691.
2. Le choix du livre ne saurait être fortuit. L'épouse de René Magritte cite Poe parmi les auteurs favoris du peintre, et en particulier « Les Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym » (Torczyner 51). Magritte a également peint un « Domaine d'Arnheim » et un « Démon de la perversité » librement inspirés des nouvelles de Poe.
3. Contrairement à « MS Found in a Bottle » et à « A Descent into the Maelström », l'énigmatique fin de *PYM* ne fait pas explicitement référence au tourbillon violent qui se produit près des côtes norvégiennes ; cependant le phénomène décrit par Pym (« we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us ») évoque l'attraction magnétique d'un gouffre profond.
4. Le miroir figure au centre de nombreux autres contes : « The Oval Portrait », « The Fall of the House of Usher », « William Wilson », pour ne citer que les plus connus.

5. Ricardou voit cette eau singulière comme « une parfaite métaphore d'un texte écrit » (727) et l'ultime épisode du roman comme un voyage au bout de la page. Sidney Kaplan, dans son introduction à l'édition Hill & Wang de *PYM*, rapproche cette eau du Styx et lit la description manichéenne de Tsalal comme une allégorie de l'Enfer et de la damnation de la race noire.
6. Le vieux français *appalir* est à l'origine de *appal/rendered pale*. Melville met superbement en évidence le lien entre pâleur et terreur dans le chapitre « The Whiteness of the Whale » de *Moby-Dick*.
7. Notons également les deux épisodes de survie grâce aux coques de bateaux : Pym est sauvé une première fois parce qu'il est attaché au fond poli et brillant – comme un miroir – (« smooth and shining bottom », « coppered and copper-fastened » 11) de l'*Ariel*, et une deuxième fois parce que le dessous de la coque du *Grampus* se révèle être couvert de bernaches.
8. C'est en 1837 que Daguerre invente le moyen de fixer les images. Coïncidence ? La publication de *PYM* commence dans les numéros de janvier 1837 du *Southern Literary Messenger*...
9. La « camera oscura » des peintres de l'école hollandaise était une boîte entièrement fermée, dont un volet portait une ouverture ne laissant passer que les faisceaux de lumière très étroits, ce qui donnait une image renversée et floue des objets extérieurs.
10. La contagion sémantique rend le texte fluorescent : le vocabulaire de la lumière s'étend aux facultés intellectuelles : « just as the reasoning or imaginative faculties flicker » (31 ; je souligne) ; « the egregious oversight I had committed flashed suddenly upon my perception » (32 ; je souligne).
11. Richard fait une analyse de *PYM* au plus près des mots et démontre que dans le texte de Poe, tout revient finalement à la lecture et à l'écriture.
12. Il existe deux sortes de phosphore : le phosphore blanc, solide ambré, très inflammable, très toxique, qui produit la nécrose des os. Par action de la lumière ou par chauffage, il se transforme en phosphore rouge, poudre micro-cristalline rouge sombre, non toxique, stable, qui sert à fabriquer les allumettes. Certains corps (bois en état de décomposition, eaux marines – notamment dans les mers tropicales, vers luisants) possèdent la propriété d'émettre une faible lumière, visible dans l'obscurité.
13. André Perceval, *La vision*, (Paris : Que sais-je ? PUF, 1980) 87-90. L'iridologie n'est pas sans rappeler les théories phrénologiques en vogue au 19^e siècle, selon lesquelles les bosses du crâne révélaient la puissance intellectuelle – nous en avons un exemple dans la description de Peters : « His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown » (43).
14. « Point de vue/pas de vue » (Derrida, *Mémoires d'aveugle*) rappelle Jean Lancry, qui ajoute : « Le comble de la vue [...] ce serait donc la non-vue ? » (73).
15. Remarquons que, peu de temps avant sa mort, les yeux d'Augustus ont aussi quasiment disparu : « His eyes were sunk far in his head, being scarcely perceptible » (112).
16. Le lapsus de traduction de Baudelaire (il a rendu « liver-like substance » par « substance quasi vivante ») est doublement cruel et traduit involontairement l'ambiguïté du regard que les naufragés portent sur ces cadavres.
17. Dans un compte-rendu des poèmes de William Cullen Bryant, Poe définissait la faculté majeure des plus grands poètes (Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats,

- Tennyson) comme l'élargissement de la « périphérie de la vision poétique » : « The relative extent of these peripheries of poetical vision must ever be a primary consideration in our classification of poets. » (*Southern Literary Messenger* III, janvier 1837. Cité dans Richard 1990, 59 et 175, note 8).
18. *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* : 205-309.
 19. Il convient de rappeler que dans le vocabulaire de Poe « the august », « the beautiful », « the ideal » et « the mystical » sont pratiquement synonymes.
 20. « Sonnet to Science », Poe 1986, 53 (l.1-2).
 21. Poe distingue entre *poetry* (écriture en vers) et *poesy* (création artistique). Contes et essais sont des activités créatrices et appartiennent au domaine de la *poesy*.
 22. Richard 1978, 475-6. L'article de Gresset auquel fait référence Claude Richard traite de l'imaginaire symbolique à partir des éblouissements provoqués par le soleil. Michel Gresset, « Voyeur et Voyant », *NRF* 167 (1/11/1966) : 809-826.
 23. On aura reconnu la célèbre phrase du paragraphe liminaire de « Eleonora » : « They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only at night. In their grey visions, they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in awaking, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret » (Poe 1986, 243).

Thomas Paine and the Birth of the Welfare State

I. Thomas Paine's Agrarian Justice: A prophecy for our times¹

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Described by some as “the real father of Social Security,”² Paine wrote *Agrarian Justice* during the winter of 1795-96,³ while convalescing in the house of the U.S. Minister James Monroe, after his release from the Luxembourg prison where he had spent almost a year. But the piece was published only in the spring of 1797. Paine was then living in an apartment lent to him by his friend Nicolas de Bonneville, publisher and founder of the famous *Cercle Social* where many revolutionary ideas had been agitated—and printed—before the Terror. *Agrarian Justice* appeared in Paris first, then in London, a few days before the publisher, Thomas Williams, was arrested and jailed. Just as the pamphlet was about to be published, Paine decided to return to America. He left Paris for Le Havre, where he remained from mid-March till mid-May, waiting for a safe boat to take him home—but only to find out that the Ocean was more than ever under British control, and that he just couldn't go. His departure had been so hasty that Paine, unable to supervise the translation of *Agrarian Justice* into French, had entrusted a friend with the task. Back in Paris in the latter part of May, “he found that the pamphlet had done well enough to warrant a further printing, and this gave him the excuse to write a preface.”⁴

Paine wrote *Agrarian Justice* at a time when the issue of land and landed property was centerstage in France as a practical result of the abolition of tithes and as a social consequence of the sale of the “national estate” (“biens nationaux”) confiscated from the clergy.⁵ It has been estimated that 40% of the land thus redistributed was acquired by the peasantry. The rest was bought by rural bourgeois or surviving aristocrats.⁶ France had, to a relatively large extent, become a nation of land-owners. The question of representative democracy and the problem of land-taxation appeared in a new light, and raised new social issues that Paine now wanted to address differently from what he had done a few years before in the second part of *Rights of Man*.

In 1797, the Terror was over, but war was going on between France and England—with England, as Paine said, “supporting the despotism of Austria and the Bourbons against the liberties of France.”⁷ In his preface to the English edition, Paine explains that he would have preferred the pamphlet to appear later, when “the present war” was over, but that he had resolved to publish it *now* in response to a sermon delivered by Richard Watson, bishop of Llandaff—a sermon entitled “The Wisdom and Goodness of God, in having made both rich and poor.” “It is wrong,” Paine wrote, “to say God made *rich* and *poor*; He only made *male* and *female*; and he gave them the earth for their inheritance.”⁸ This, as we shall see, was to be the starting-point of his Biblical case for a welfare system.

Another aspect of the context in which Paine wrote and then published *Agrarian Justice* has to do with the French Constitution of Year III, adopted by referendum in September 1795. Paine had been one of the drafters of the Girondin constitutional project of 1793, and he probably thought of himself as an indirect originator of the new constitution. He, therefore, unsurprisingly called it “the *best organised system* the human mind has yet produced.”⁹ But, in his view, the Constitution of Year III had one important flaw: suffrage, instead of being equal, was now based on property qualification, i.e. the payment of a direct land or personal property tax. The consequence of this was that unpropertied citizens were purely and simply excluded from the republican principle of political participation and representation. This defect, Paine argued, was the original cause of Babeuf’s conspiracy. Babeuf and his fellow-conspirators, he wrote, were right to protest since a basic human right was at stake, but instead of “constitut[ing] themselves personally into a Directory, which is formally destructive of election and representation,” and is even worse than the flaw they condemned, they should have suggested a peaceful, constitutional rectification of the clause in question. “Had Babeuf and his accomplices taken into consideration the condition of France under the Constitution, and compared it with what it was under the tragical revolutionary government, and during the execrable Reign of Terror, the

rapidity of the alteration must have appeared to them very striking and astonishing. Famine has been replaced by abundance, and by the well-founded hope of a near and increasing prosperity.”¹⁰ For Paine, who thus openly supported the “Directoire” and the new assemblies, it did not make political sense to try and overthrow a regime which was much better than the previous ones, and rested on a good amendable constitution. His object therefore, in *Agrarian Justice*, was precisely to propose “to the legislature and the Executive Directory of the French Republic,”¹¹ to which the piece is inscribed, a constitutional amendment dissociating property (an acquired right) from the expression of individual sovereignty (a natural birthright of man, however propertyless he may be). The tragic end of Gracchus Babeuf, who was arrested, tried and finally guillotined in May 1797, certainly encouraged Paine to publish his thoughts on the subject, but it also compelled him to be somewhat cautious in questioning the dominant bourgeois system.

In that respect, the exact title of Paine’s pamphlet must be kept in mind: “*La Justice Agraire opposée à la Loi Agraire, et aux privilèges agraires.*”¹² Like Mably and Montesquieu who had propagated the idea, the French Convention believed that the “agrarian laws” of Roman times aimed at dispossessing rich land-owners, or at limiting land property, whereas in fact Roman legislators intended only to give the poor, i.e. the plebeians, a more substantial share of the cake (the cake being territories taken from the enemy, turned into state property... and usually grabbed by patricians). The Convention therefore passed a law (17 March, 1793), *condemning to death any person proposing the adoption of an “agrarian law”*. Paine’s apparent circumspection (compared to Babeuf’s audacity) and his insistence on *Agrarian Justice* as opposed to *Agrarian Law* is quite easy to understand in that light.

But Paine did not need a threat of this kind to believe that a mass dispossession of the propertied and the establishment of a communist system based on collective ownership *à la Babeuf* would not be a sound remedy. Like most Enlightenment thinkers, he was an admirer of Adam Smith and believed in economic liberalism, but his belief was inseparable from the idea that some kind of compensation should be granted by the community to those who were victimised by the system of property accumulation, i.e. deprived of their natural, God-given right to possess the earth. This compensation was the price to pay for social peace (together with the restoration of suffrage, as a natural right, to the landless).

With regard not to the context but to the text itself, the best approach, as I see it, and as Gregory Claeys saw it in an excellent book on Paine’s

political thought (to which I am very much indebted here)¹³, consists in comparing *Agrarian Justice* with Paine's welfare proposals in the second part of *Rights of Man*. Such a comparison will highlight the merits of *Agrarian Justice* in terms of its contribution to modern utopian thought, and as a source of inspiration and reflection for the "Basic Income" theme as it is now called and discussed by various groups of economists and political scientists.¹⁴

In *Agrarian Justice*, Paine's arguments for redistributing property were quite unlike anything he had previously suggested, and can be seen as considerably more radical than the plan proposed in *Rights of Man*, a plan based on various allowances—for the poor, the widows, the unemployed, the aged, the education of children, etc.—to be financed through existing taxes and the institution of a plan of progressive taxation on land.¹⁵

A new proposition, not of an historical but of a religious nature, was that "the earth, in its natural, uncultivated state was . . . *the common property of the human race*," man being viewed as a "joint life proprietor" of both the "soil" and "all its natural productions, vegetable and animal."¹⁶ By virtue of this new right, every landed proprietor owed the community a "ground-rent",¹⁷ as Paine called it, i.e. a kind of democratic tithe—not for God or the Church this time, but for man.¹⁸ This meant that *not* effort or industry, but land itself was the original source of wealth. Writing this was more than saying—as historians might do, or as was evidenced by the Indians of North America insistently mentioned by Paine in his pamphlet—that the earth had once been "common property"; what was central here was the religious argument about "the original bequest of the whole earth to all by God at the Creation."¹⁹ Strangely enough, Paine based his case on the Biblical account of the Creation (Genesis), in which he did not really believe, as all readers of *The Age of Reason* will remember.

In his either sincere or rhetorical view, however, the earth was not given to man for him to cultivate, but as a garden, where to hunt and pick fruit. Cultivation was a human invention, which gradually gave rise to culture and civilisation, and resulted in the current state of things, in which a landed monopoly had dispossessed at least half the population from the soil. Hence the *cultural* necessity of a compensation—and the practical measures proposed by Paine, which aimed at bringing "a revolution in the state of civilisation."²⁰ In practical terms, this meant the establishment of a special tax on inherited property, and the creation of a national fund, out of which every man *or woman* reaching the age of twenty-one would receive a sum of fifteen pounds sterling (enough for a couple to "begin the world," and "buy a cow, and implements to cultivate a few acres of land," instead of being "burdens upon society")²¹, while every person aged fifty, whether

“rich or poor,” would receive a minimum subsistence allowance of ten pounds a year for the rest of his *or her* life.

Parallel to his religious argument, and probably in order to counterbalance it by means of a more secular approach, Paine introduced a new concept, a kind of positive or dynamic “principle of progress,” to use Claeys’ phrase,²² which Paine summarises as follows: “No person ought to be in a worse condition when born under what is called a state of civilisation, than he would have been had he been born in a state of nature.” Therefore, when such was the case—like, for instance, in his own day, when the poor were worse off than the Indians—, a compensation had to be provided for, in the form of a subtraction from property “equal in value to the natural inheritance it has absorbed.”²³ This more secular argument had the advantage of taking into account what the Biblical narrative ignored, that is the gradual increase in standards of living: it meant that in proportion as their wealth increased, more money would be subtracted from the rich and go into the fund supporting the poor. Affluence would thus be profitable to all, with private property continuing, almost intact, as the cornerstone of the economic system.

But the medal of progress had its negative side. As Claeys puts it, “the great novel claim of *Agrarian Justice*,” different from his earlier optimistic views on the development of commerce, “was that poverty not only resulted from but also increased with civilisation.”²⁴ Therefore something had to be done if civilisation was to remain liveable for the poor, and was still to be based on the principle that “the condition of every person born into the world, after a state of civilisation commences, ought not to be worse than if he had been born before that period.”²⁵ If left to itself, and to the “laissez-faire” principle, civilisation ironically tended to drift toward new forms of barbarity, a paradox confirmed at the time by the development of industrial cities in both Europe and America. This *negative* drift justified Paine’s proposed compensation, which, in turn, was made possible by the *positive* dimension of progress: the neo-liberal loop was thus looped.

Even more secular, and perhaps more revolutionary, was Paine’s next argument, suggesting that “personal property is the *effect of society* . . . All accumulation, therefore, of personal property, beyond what a man’s own hands produce, is derived to him by living in society; and he owes . . . a part of that accumulation back again to society from whence the whole came.”²⁶ This notion of a *social* debt simply meant that *all* property (financial speculation, for instance, or wealth derived from manufacturing), and not only land, could be taxed or otherwise redistributed for the common good. This claim of justice for the wage-earner could not be vindicated in terms of the Biblical argument and was too loosely covered by the principle of progress. Paine therefore grounded it on the proto-

Marxist realisation that “the accumulation of personal property is, in many instances, the effect of paying too little for the labor that produces it”—the consequence being “that the working hand perishes in old age,” while “the employer abounds in affluence.”²⁷ An *economic* debt was thus added to the *cultural* and *social* necessities of a compensation. But in his practical measures Paine did not propose to tax personal property: this would have had revolutionary implications that could not be envisaged by his contemporaries—let alone by himself. The economic argument nevertheless added secular weight to his rhetoric. This, Claeys concludes, was “a step of immense importance in the history of ideas of public welfare.”²⁸

At the time of Paine, most people believed that unpropertied workers should be excluded from the right to vote if only because, being dependent on their masters, they were not free to think on their own and make autonomous choices. As John Keane, the author of a magnificent biography, recently put it: “Paine stood this old argument on its head. Instead of denying the franchise to those who currently depend politically on the rich, the dependents should be granted monetary independence. That universal guarantee of a right to a basic citizen’s income would then require—contrary to the spirit of the new 1795 constitution—a universal franchise.”²⁹ Paine’s protest against the institution of a property qualification in the French Constitution and his proposal of a universal basic income are thus closely connected in *Agrarian Justice*, although critics have often described them as a sign of intellectual inconsistency.

Due to circumstances (the war, “Pitt’s Terror” in England, the aftermath of the Terror in France, the political anticlimax that followed it), the impact of *Agrarian Justice* at the time of its publication seems to have been negligible. Paine himself had predicted that, at least in his native country, the reaction of the dominant class to his Basic Income proposal would be highly negative: “I know that the possessors of [overgrown] property in England, though they would eventually be benefited by the protection of nine-tenths of it, will exclaim against the plan,”³⁰ the irony being that this plan would in fact be less costly, annually, for English taxpayers than the war against France which they currently had to support. The wealthy, Paine argued, ought to be less blind in the defence of their own interests; they should realise that “it is only in a system of justice that the possessor can contemplate security.”³¹ Social justice as the natural companion and safeguard of economic liberalism: this is what Paine’s “social-democratic” profession of faith was all about.

There were a few unrelenting enthusiasts, like William Blake, who, after reading *Agrarian Justice*, ranked Paine with Jesus Christ as “a worker of miracles.”³² But on the whole Paine was now preaching in the wilderness.

As far as popular reactions are concerned, very little is known, except that “several cheap editions appeared in Manchester and elsewhere [and that] segments of *Agrarian Justice* were reprinted by exiled radicals in America . . . with a full edition appearing in Albany and another in Philadelphia in 1797.”³³ Intellectually, the most important response to *Agrarian Justice* was Thomas Spence’s *The Rights of Infants* (London, 1797), although its circulation and actual impact were quite negligible. Spence, a Newcastle schoolmaster and later London printer, who had been arrested for selling *Rights of Man*, called Paine’s proposed compensation based on 10% of land values a “poor, beggarly stipend,” and saw no reason why landowners should keep the remaining 90%, since most improvements brought to their property were carried out by the “labouring class.”³⁴

At a later stage, the direct or indirect influence of *Agrarian Justice* can be traced in the works or practical experiments of Louis Blanc, Robert Owen and other 19th-century socialist utopians or, as Philippe Van Parijs has pointed out, in the writings of Herbert Spencer, Henry George, Léon Walras or more recently Hillel Steiner.³⁵ Also, in his *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* published at the turn of the century, Jean Jaurès repeatedly refers to Paine’s “social fecundity” as he found it in *Rights of Man*, and discusses his welfare “plan of legislation” at length,³⁶ but no mention is made of *Agrarian Justice*, an omission which is quite baffling and uneasy to account for.

In my view, it was Edward Bellamy—with his *Looking Backward*, a best-selling science-fiction novel first published in 1888—who was closest to Paine’s pamphlet, although he never mentions it either and, unlike Paine, grounds his Basic Income proposal on a system of work requirement. Central to his famous utopia was the right of any man to subsistence, a right which, Bellamy writes, “depends on the fact that he is a man, and not on the amount of wealth and strength he may have, as long as he does his best.”³⁷ In exchange for their “maintenance at the nation’s table,”³⁸ workers were required to perform a “period of industrial service [of] twenty-four years, beginning at . . . twenty-one and terminating at forty-five.”³⁹ After that period, people could at leisure “devote [themselves] to the higher exercise of [their] faculties, the intellectual and spiritual enjoyments and pursuits which alone mean life.”⁴⁰

In more recent times, Paul Goodman, a declared admirer of Paine and a friend of Ivan Illich, also tried to connect the subsistence economy with the general economy. In *Communitas* (1947), a highly stimulating book written with his brother Percival, he suggested as the only way to get out of

the “system”—a system where, “unless *every* kind of goods is produced and sold, it is also impossible to produce bread”⁴¹—a division of the economy into two sectors: a communist, state-run sector (10% of the total production) where elementary subsistence goods and services would be provided for, and a capitalist sector (90%) for the production of convenience, comfort and luxury goods. The subsistence goods would be produced by “universally conscripted labour, run as a state monopoly like the post office or the army,”⁴² each man serving “in the national economy for six or seven years of his life.” This plan, when proposed (right after World War II), sounded as “military” in its inspiration, and almost as coercive, as the one proposed by Edward Bellamy, but Goodman forcefully argued that it was in fact less coercive “than the situation most people are used to” in modern life.⁴³ I don’t think Thomas Paine would have agreed with either of these plans. His idea, his “beautifully, disarmingly simple idea,”⁴⁴ of a Basic Income deserves more serious, more down-to-earth consideration.

The age of structural unemployment in which we are living today may be the right time for a full recognition—at last—of Paine’s merits as a prophet and proponent of the “Basic Income” concept. This concept may indeed sound more relevant than ever in the face of an economic system which is obviously going wild and can increasingly dispense with the services of mankind. In this distracted world, the most appropriate response might, once again, be that of... “common sense.”

Notes

1. Based on a lecture given on September 12, 1996 in Vienna at the B.I.E.N. (Basic Income European Network) International Conference.
2. Whitfield J. Bell, *The Bust of Thomas Paine* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1974—printed for The Friends of the Library) 16.
3. See “Author’s English Preface” to *Agrarian Justice*, in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (New York: The Citadel Press, 1945), vol. I, 609 (henceforward referred to as FO I).
4. David Freeman Hawke, *Paine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 328.
5. On June 5 1793, the Convention also resolved that all common property (“biens communaux”)—with the exception of woods, buildings and public tracks—could be shared among local citizens if one third of them asked for the sharing.
6. See Bruno Bruoit, *Les grandes dates de la Révolution française* (Paris: Larousse, 1989) 125; and Albert Soboul, *La Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984) 209.

7. *Agrarian Justice*, as part of Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (New York: The Citadel Press, 1945) 609 (henceforward referred to as FO I or FO II)
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.* 607.
10. *Ibid.* 608.
11. *Ibid.* 606.
12. Title of the English edition: *Agrarian Justice opposed to Agrarian Law, and to Agrarian Monopoly*.
13. Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social Justice and Political Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).
14. Among the most active of these groups are: B.I.E.N. (Basic Income European Network), A.I.R.E (Association pour l'Instauration d'un Revenu d'Existence) and M.A.U.S.S (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales). For a precise definition of "Basic Income," see: Philippe Van Parijs, ed., *Arguing for Basic Income* (London: Verso, 1992): "A basic income is an income unconditionally paid to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement. In other words, it is a form of minimum income guarantee that differs from those that now exist in various European countries by virtue of the fact that it is paid: 1. to individuals rather than households; 2. irrespective of any income from other sources; and 3. without requiring any present or past work performance, or the willingness to accept a job if offered" (p. 1).
15. See: Bernard Vincent, *Thomas Paine ou la religion de la liberté* (Paris: Aubier, 1987) 223-227.
16. FO I 611.
17. *Ibid.*
18. The phrase "Not for God, but for man" is Moncure Daniel Conway's in his *Life of Thomas Paine* (New York: Putnam, 1909 [1892]) vol. II, 257.
19. Claeys 200.
20. FO I 621.
21. *Ibid.* 618.
22. Claeys 201.
23. FO I 613.
24. Claeys 199.
25. FO I 610.
26. *Ibid.* 620.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Claeys 205. "Paine's efforts represent an important transitional stage in the radical secularization of natural law arguments . . . Paine's was a middle position between the Spenceans and others who unabashedly appealed to divine intention in support of positive community of goods, and the Owenite socialists of the early 1820s and later, who, both more historicist and more consistent in their deism, rejected completely appeals to the state of nature and founded property rights entirely upon labour, and community of goods upon its economic and moral advantages rather than its divine origins." (206)
29. John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown, 1995) 427.
30. FO I 619.

31. *Ibid.* 621.
32. David Erdman, *Blake, Prophet Against Empire* (1954) 277.
33. Claeys 207.
34. *Ibid.* 207.
35. Philippe Van Parijs, "Competing Justifications of Basic Income" in Philippe Van Parijs, *op. cit.* 12.
36. Jean Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1971 [1901-1904]), vol. 4, 422.
37. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (New York: The New American Library, 1960 [1888]) 98.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.* 58.
40. *Ibid.* 136.
41. Paul and Percival Goodman, *Communitas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960 [1947]) 188-89.
42. *Ibid.* 192.
43. *Ibid.* 198.
44. Philippe Van Parijs, *op. cit.* 3.

II. Agrarian Justice

To preserve the benefits of what is called civilised life, and to remedy at the same time the evil which it has produced, ought to be considered as one of the first objects of reformed legislation.

Whether that state that is proudly, perhaps erroneously, called civilisation, has most promoted or most injured the general happiness of man is a question that may be strongly contested. On one side, the spectator is dazzled by splendid appearances; on the other, he is shocked by extremes of wretchedness; both of which it has erected. The most affluent and the most miserable of the human race are to be found in the countries that are called civilised.

To understand what the state of society ought to be, it is necessary to have some idea of the natural and primitive state of man; such as it is at this day among the Indians of North America. There is not, in that state, any of those spectacles of human misery which poverty and want present to our eyes in all the towns and streets in Europe.

Poverty, therefore, is a thing created by that which is called civilised life. It exists not in the natural state. On the other hand, the natural state is without those advantages which flow from agriculture, arts, science and manufactures.

The life of an Indian is a continual holiday, compared with the poor of Europe; and, on the other hand it appears to be abject when compared to the rich. Civilisation, therefore, or that which is so-called, has operated two ways: to make one part of society more affluent, and the other more wretched, than would have been the lot of either in a natural state.

It is always possible to go from the natural to the civilised state, but it is never possible to go from the civilised to the natural state. The reason is that man in a natural state, subsisting by hunting, requires ten times the quantity of land to range over to procure himself sustenance, than would support him in a civilised state, where the earth is cultivated.

When, therefore, a country becomes populous by the additional aids of cultivation, art and science, there is a necessity of preserving things in that state; because without it there cannot be sustenance for more, perhaps, than a tenth part of its inhabitants. The thing, therefore, now to be done is to remedy the evils and preserve the benefits that have arisen to society by passing from the natural to that which is called the civilised state.

In taking the matter upon this ground, the first principle of civilisation ought to have been, and ought still to be, that the condition of every person born into the world, after a state of civilisation commences, ought not to be worse than if he had been born before that period.

But the fact is that the condition of millions, in every country in Europe, is far worse than if they had been born before civilisation began, had been born among the Indians of North America at the present. I will show how this fact has happened.

It is a position not to be controverted that the earth, in its natural, uncultivated state was, and ever would have continued to be, *the common property of the human race*. In that state every man would have been born to property. He would have been a joint life proprietor with rest in the property of the soil, and in all its natural productions, vegetable and animal.

But the earth in its natural state, as before said, is capable of supporting but a small number of inhabitants compared with what it is capable of doing in a cultivated state. And as it is impossible to separate the improvement made by cultivation from the earth itself, upon which that improvement is made, the idea of landed property arose from that parable connection; but it is nevertheless true, that it is the value of the improvement, only, and not the earth itself, that is individual property.

Every proprietor, therefore, of cultivated lands, owes to the community a *ground-rent* (for I know of no better term to express the idea) for the land which he holds; and it is from this ground-rent that the fund prod in this plan is to issue.

It is deducible, as well from the nature of the thing as from all the stories transmitted to us, that the idea of landed property commenced with cultivation, and that there was no such thing as landed property before that time. It could not exist in the first state of man, that of hunters. It did not exist in the second state, that of shepherds: neither Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, nor Job, so far as the history of the Bible may be credited in probable things, were owners of land.

Their property consisted, as is always enumerated in flocks and herds, and they travelled with them from place to place. The frequent contentions at that time about the use of a well in the dry country of Arabia,

where those people lived, also show that there was no landed property. It was not admitted that land could be claimed as property.

There could be no such thing as landed property originally. Man did not make the earth, and, though he had a natural right to *occupy* it, he had no right to *locate as his property* in perpetuity any part of it; neither did the Creator of the earth open a land-office, from whence the first title-deeds should issue. Whence then, arose the idea of landed property? I answer as before, that when cultivation began the idea of landed property began with it, from the impossibility of separating the improvement made by cultivation from the earth itself, upon which that improvement was made.

The value of the improvement so far exceeded the value of the natural earth, at that time, as to absorb it; till, in the end, the common right of all became confounded into the cultivated right of the individual. But there are, nevertheless, distinct species of rights, and will continue to be, so long as the earth endures.

It is only by tracing things to their origin that we can gain rightful ideas of them, and it is by gaining such ideas that we, discover the boundary that divides right from wrong, and teaches every man to know his own. I have entitled this tract "Agrarian Justice" to distinguish it from "Agrarian Law."

Nothing could be more unjust than agrarian law in a country improved by cultivation; for though every man, as an inhabitant of the earth, is a joint proprietor of it in its natural state, it does not follow that he is a joint proprietor of cultivated earth. The additional value made by cultivation, after the system was admitted, became the property of those who did it, or who inherited it from them, or who purchased it. It had originally no owner. While, therefore, I advocate the right, and interest myself in the hard case of all those who have been thrown out of their natural inheritance by the introduction of the system of landed property, I equally defend the right of the possessor to the part which is his.

Cultivation is at least one of the greatest natural improvements ever made by human invention. It has given to created earth a tenfold value. But the landed monopoly that began with it has produced the greatest evil. It has dispossessed more than half the inhabitants of every nation of their natural inheritance, without providing for them, as ought to have been done, an indemnification for that loss, and has thereby created a species of poverty and wretchedness that did not exist before.

In advocating the case of the persons thus dispossessed, it is a right, and not a charity, that I am pleading for. But it is that kind of right which, being neglected at first, could not be brought forward afterwards till heaven had opened the way by a revolution in the system of government. Let us then do honour to revolutions by justice, and give currency to their principles by blessings.

Having thus in a few words, opened the merits of the case, I shall now proceed to the plan I have to propose, which is,

To create a national fund, out of which there shall be paid to every person, when arrived at the age of twenty-one years, the sum of fifteen pounds sterling, as a compensation in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of the system of landed property:

And also, the sum of ten pounds per annum, during life, to every person now living, of the age of fifty years, and to all others as they shall arrive at that age.

Means by which the fund is to be created

I have already established the principle, namely, that the earth, in its natural uncultivated state was, and ever would have continued to be, the *common property of the human race*; that in that state, every person would have been born to property; and that the system of landed property, by its inseparable connection with cultivation, and with what is called civilised life, has absorbed the property of all those whom it dispossessed, without providing, as ought to have been done, an indemnification for that loss.

The fault, however, is not in the present possessors. No complaint is tended, or ought to be alleged against them, unless they adopt the crime by opposing justice. The fault is in the system, and it has stolen perceptibly upon the world, aided afterwards by the agrarian law of the sword. But the fault can be made to reform itself by successive generations; and without diminishing or deranging the property of any of present possessors, the operation of the fund can yet commence, and in full activity, the first year of its establishment, or soon after, as I shall show.

It is proposed that the payments, as already stated, be made to every person, rich or poor. It is best to make it so, to prevent invidious distinctions. It is also right it should be so, because it is in lieu of the natural inheritance, which, as a right, belongs to every man, over and above property he may have created, or inherited from those who did. Such persons as do not choose to receive it can throw it into the common fund.

Taking it then for granted that no person ought to be in a worse condition when born under what is called a state of civilisation, than he would have been had he been born in a state of nature, and that civilisation ought to have made, and ought still to make, provision for that purpose, it can only be done by subtracting from property a portion equal in value to the natural inheritance it has absorbed.

Various methods may be proposed for this purpose, but that which appears to be the best (not only because it will operate without deranging any present possessors, or without interfering with the collection of taxes or *emprunts* necessary for the purposes of government and the Revolution,

but because it will be the least troublesome and the most effectual, and also because the subtraction will be made at a time that best admits it) is at the moment that property is passing by the death of one person to the possession of another. In this case, the bequeather gives nothing: the receiver pays nothing. The only matter to him is that the monopoly of natural inheritance, to which there never was a right, begins to cease in his person. A generous man would not wish it to continue, and a just man will rejoice to see it abolished.

My state of health prevents my making sufficient inquiries with respect to the doctrine of probabilities, whereon to found calculations with such degrees of certainty as they are capable of. What, therefore, I offer on this head is more the result of observation and reflection than of received information; but I believe it will be found to agree sufficiently with fact. In the first place, taking twenty-one years as the epoch of maturity, all the property of a nation, real and personal, is always in the possession of persons above that age. It is then necessary to know, as a datum of calculation, the average of years which persons above that age will live. I take this average to be about thirty years, for though many persons will live forty, fifty, or sixty years, after the age of twenty-one years, others will die much sooner, and some in every year of that time.

Taking, then, thirty years as the average of time, it will give, without any material variation one way or other, the average of time in which the whole property or capital of a nation, or a sum equal thereto, will have passed through one entire revolution in descent, that is, will have gone by deaths to new possessors; for though, in many instances, some parts of this capital will remain forty, fifty, or sixty years in the possession of one person, other parts will have revolved two or three times before those thirty years expire, which will bring it to that average; for were one-half the capital of a nation to revolve twice in thirty years, it would produce the same fund as if the whole revolved once.

Taking, then, thirty years as the average of time in which the whole capital of a nation, or a sum equal thereto, will revolve once, the thirtieth part thereof will be the sum that will revolve every year, that is, will go by deaths to new possessors; and this last sum being thus known, and the ratio per cent to be subtracted from it determined, it will give the annual amount or income of the proposed fund, to be applied as already mentioned.

In looking over the discourse of the English Minister, Pitt, in his opening of what is called in England the budget (the scheme of finance for the year 1796), I find an estimate of the national capital of that unity. As this estimate of a national capital is prepared ready to my hand, I take it as a datum to act upon. When a calculation is made upon the known capital of any nation, combined with its population, it will serve as a scale for any other nation, in proportion as its capital and population be more or less.

I am the more disposed to take this estimate of Mr. Pitt, for the purpose of showing to that minister, upon his own calculation, how much better money may be employed than in wasting it, as he has done, on the wild project of setting up Bourbon kings. What, in the name of heaven, are Bourbon kings to the people of England? It is better that the people have bread.

Mr. Pitt states the national capital of England, real and personal, to one thousand three hundred millions sterling, which is about one-fourth part of the national capital of France, including Belgia. The event of the last harvest in each country proves that the soil of France is more productive than that of England, and that it can better support twenty-four or twenty-five millions of inhabitants than that of England can seven or seven and a half millions.

The thirtieth part of this capital of £ 1,300,000,000 is £ 43,333,333 which is the part that will revolve every year by deaths in that country to new possessors; and the sum that will annually revolve in France in the proportion of four to one, will be about one hundred and seventy-three millions sterling. From this sum of £ 43,333,333 annually revolving, is to be subtracted the value of the natural inheritance absorbed in it, which, perhaps, in fair justice, cannot be taken at less, and ought not be taken for more, than a tenth part.

It will always happen that of the property thus revolving by deaths every year a part will descend in a direct line to sons and daughters, and other part collaterally, and the proportion will be found to be about three to one; that is, about thirty millions of the above sum will descend to direct heirs, and the remaining sum of £ 413,333,333 to more distant relations, and in part to strangers.

Considering, then, that man is always related to society, that relationship will become comparatively greater in proportion as the next of kin is more distant; it is therefore consistent with civilisation to say that where there are no direct heirs society shall be heir to a part over and above the tenth part *due* to society.

If this additional part be from five to ten or twelve per cent, in proportion as the next of kin be nearer or more remote, so as to average with the escheats that may fall, which ought always to go to society and not to the government (an addition of ten per cent more), the produce from the annual sum of £ 43,333,333 will be:

From £ 30,000,000 at ten per cent	£ 3,000,000
From £ 13,333,333 at ten per cent with the addition of	
ten per cent more	2,666,666
£ 43,333,333	£ 5,666,666

Having thus arrived at the annual amount of the proposed fund, I come, in the next place, to speak of the population proportioned to this fund and to compare it with the uses to which the fund is to be applied.

The population (I mean that of England) does not exceed seven millions and a half, and the number of persons above the age of fifty will in that case be about four hundred thousand. There would not, however, be more than that number that would accept the proposed ten pounds sterling per annum, though they would be entitled to it. I have no idea it would be accepted by many persons who had a yearly income of two or three hundred pounds sterling. But as we often see instances of rich people falling into sudden poverty, even at the age of sixty, they would always have the right of drawing all the arrears due to them. Four millions, therefore, of the above annual sum of £ 5,666,666 will be required for four hundred thousand aged persons, at ten pounds sterling each.

I come now to speak of the persons annually arriving at twenty-one years of age. If all the persons who died were above the age of twenty-one years, the number of persons annually arriving at that age must be equal to the annual number of deaths, to keep the population stationary. But the greater part die under the age of twenty-one, and therefore the number of persons annually arriving at twenty-one will be less than half the number of deaths.

The whole number of deaths upon a population of seven millions and an half will be about 220,000 annually. The number arriving at twenty-one years of age will be about 100,000. The whole number of these will not receive the proposed fifteen pounds, for the reasons already mentioned, though, as in the former case, they would be entitled to it. Admitting then that a tenth part declined receiving it, the amount would stand thus:

Fund annually	£ 5,666,666
To 400,000 aged persons at £ 10 each	£ 4,000,000
To 90,000 persons of 21 yrs., £ 15 each	1,350,000
	5,350,000
	Remains: £ 316,666

There are, in every country, a number of blind and lame persons totally incapable of earning a livelihood. But as it will always happen that the greater number of blind persons will be among those who are above the age of fifty years, they will be provided for in that class. The remaining sum of £ 316,666 will provide for the lame and blind under that age, at the same rate of £ 10 annually for each person.

Having now gone through all the necessary calculations, and stated the particulars of the plan, I shall conclude with some observations.

It is not charity but a right, not bounty but justice, that I am pleading for. The present state of civilisation is as odious as it is unjust. It is absolutely the opposite of what it should be, and it is necessary that a revolution should be made in it. The contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye, is like dead and living bodies chained together. Though I care as little about riches as any man, I am a friend to riches because they are capable of good.

I care not how affluent some may be, provided that none be miserable in consequence of it. But it is impossible to enjoy affluence with the felicity it is capable of being enjoyed, while so much misery is mingled in the scene. The sight of the misery, and the unpleasant sensations it suggests, which, though they may be suffocated cannot be extinguished, are a greater drawback upon the felicity of affluence than the proposed ten per cent upon property is worth. He that would not give the one to get rid of the other has no charity, even for himself.

There are, in every country, some magnificent charities established by individuals. It is, however, but little that any individual can do, when the whole extent of the misery to be relieved is considered. He may satisfy his conscience, but not his heart. He may give all that he has, and that all will relieve but little. It is only by organising civilisation upon such principles as to act like a system of pulleys, that the whole weight of misery can be removed.

The plan here proposed will reach the whole. It will immediately relieve and take out of view three classes of wretchedness—the blind, the lame, and the aged poor; and it will furnish the rising generation with means to prevent their becoming poor; and it will do this without deranging or interfering with any national measures.

To show that this will be the case, it is sufficient to observe that the operation and effect of the plan will, in all cases, be the same as if every individual were *voluntarily* to make his will and dispose of his property in the manner here proposed.

But it is justice, and not charity, that is the principle of the plan. In all great cases it is necessary to have a principle more universally active than charity; and, with respect to justice, it ought not to be left to the choice of detached individuals whether they will do justice or not. Considering, then, the plan on the ground of justice, it ought to be the act of the whole growing spontaneously out of the principles of the revolution, and the reputation of it ought to be national and not individual.

A plan upon this principle would benefit the revolution by the energy that springs from the consciousness of justice. It would multiply also the national resources; for property, like vegetation, increases by offsets. When a young couple begin the world, the difference is exceedingly great whether they begin with nothing or with fifteen pounds apiece. With this aid they

could buy a cow, and implements to cultivate a few acres of land; and instead of becoming burdens upon society, which is always the case where children are produced faster than they can be fed, would be put in the way of becoming useful and profitable citizens. The national domains also would sell the better if pecuniary aids were provided to cultivate them in small lots.

It is the practice of what has unjustly obtained the name of civilisation (and the practice merits not to be called either charity or policy) to make some provision for persons becoming poor and wretched only at the time they become so. Would it not, even as a matter of economy, be far better to adopt means to prevent their becoming poor? This can best be done by making every person when arrived at the age of twenty-one years an inheritor of something to begin with.

The rugged face of society, chequered with the extremes of affluence and want, proves that some extraordinary violence has been committed upon it, and calls on justice for redress. The great mass of the poor in countries are become an hereditary race, and it is next to impossible for them to get out of that state of themselves. It ought also to be observed that this mass increases in all countries that are called civilised. More persons fall annually into it than get out of it.

Though in a plan of which justice and humanity are the foundation principles, interest ought not to be admitted into the calculation, yet it is always of advantage to the establishment of any plan to show that it is beneficial as a matter of interest. The success of any proposed plan submitted to public consideration must finally depend on the numbers interested in supporting it, united with the justice of its principles.

The plan here proposed will benefit all, without injuring any. It will consolidate the interest of the republic with that of the individual. To the numerous class dispossessed of their natural inheritance by the system of landed property it will be an act of national justice. To persons dying possessed of moderate fortunes it will operate as a tontine to their children, more beneficial than the sum of money paid into the fund: and it will give to the accumulation of riches a degree of security that none of old governments of Europe, now tottering on their foundations, can give.

I do not suppose that more than one family in ten, in any of the countries of Europe, has, when the head of the family dies, a clear property of five hundred pounds sterling. To all such the plan is advantageous. That property would pay fifty pounds into the fund, and if there were only two children under age they would receive fifteen pounds each (thirty pounds), on coming of age, and be entitled to ten pounds a year after fifty.

It is from the overgrown acquisition of property that the fund will support itself; and I know that the possessors of such property in England, though they would eventually be benefited by the protection of nine-tenths

of it, will exclaim against the plan. But without entering any inquiry how they came by that property, let them recollect that they have been the advocates of this war, and that Mr. Pitt has already laid on more new taxes to be raised annually upon the people of England, and that for supporting the despotism of Austria and the Bourbons against the liberties of France, than would pay annually all the sums proposed in this plan.

I have made the calculations stated in this plan, upon what is called personal, as well as upon landed property. The reason for making it upon land is already explained; and the reason for taking personal property into the calculation is equally well founded though on a different principle. Land, as before said, is the free gift of the Creator in common to the human race. Personal property is the *effect of society*; and it is as impossible for an individual to acquire personal property without the aid of society, as it is for him to make land originally.

Separate an individual from society, and give him an island or a continent to possess, and he cannot acquire personal property. He cannot be rich. So inseparably are the means connected with the end, in all cases, that where the former do not exist the latter cannot be obtained. All accumulation, therefore, of personal property, beyond what a man's own hands produce, is derived to him by living in society; and he owes on every principle of justice, of gratitude, and of civilisation, a part of that accumulation back again to society from whence the whole came.

This is putting the matter on a general principle, and perhaps it is best to do so; for if we examine the case minutely it will be found that the accumulation of personal property is, in many instances, the effect of paying too little for the labour that produced it; the consequence of which is that the working hand perishes in old age, and the employer abounds in affluence.

It is, perhaps, impossible to proportion exactly the price of labour to the profits it produces; and it will also be said, as an apology for the injustice, that were a workman to receive an increase of wages daily he would not save it against old age, nor be much better for it in the interim. Make, then, society the treasurer to guard it for him in a common fund; for it is no reason that, because he might not make a good use of it for himself, another should take it.

The state of civilisation that has prevailed throughout Europe, is as unjust in its principle, as it is horrid in its effects; and it is the consciousness of this, and the apprehension that such a state cannot continue when once investigation begins in any country, that makes the possessors of property dread every idea of a revolution. It is the hazard and not the principle of revolutions that retards their progress. This being the case, it is necessary as well for the protection of property as for the sake of justice and

humanity, to form a system that, while it preserves one part of society from wretchedness, shall secure the other from depreciation.

The superstitious awe, the enslaving reverence, that formerly surrounded affluence, is passing away in all countries, and leaving the possessor of property to the convulsion of accidents. When wealth and splendour, instead of fascinating the multitude, excite emotions of disgust; when, instead of drawing forth admiration, it is beheld as an insult on wretchedness; when the ostentatious appearance it makes serves to call the right of it in question, the case of property becomes critical, and it is only in a system of justice that the possessor can contemplate security.

To remove the danger, it is necessary to remove the antipathies, and this can only be done by making property productive of a national blessing, extending to every individual. When the riches of one man above other shall increase the national fund in the same proportion; when it shall be seen that the prosperity of that fund depends on the prosperity of individuals; when the more riches a man acquires, the better it shall be for the general mass; it is then that antipathies will cease, and property be placed on the permanent basis of national interest and protection.

I have no property in France to become subject to the plan I propose. What I have, which is not much, is in the United States of America. But I will pay one hundred pounds sterling toward this fund in France, the instant it shall be established; and I will pay the same sum in England, whenever a similar establishment shall take place in that country.

A revolution in the state of civilisation is the necessary companion of revolutions in the system of government. If a revolution in any country be from bad to good, or from good to bad, the state of what is called civilisation in that country, must be made conformable thereto, to give that revolution effect.

Despotic government supports itself by abject civilisation, in which debasement of the human mind, and wretchedness in the mass of the people, are the chief criterions. Such governments consider man merely as an animal; that the exercise of intellectual faculty is not his privilege; *that he has nothing to do with the laws but to obey them*;¹ and they politically depend more upon breaking the spirit of the people by poverty, than they fear enraging it by desperation.

It is a revolution in the state of civilisation that will give perfection to the Revolution of France. Already the conviction that government by representation is the true system of government is spreading itself fast in the world. The reasonableness of it can be seen by all. The justness of it makes itself felt even by its opposers. But when a system of civilisation, (growing out of that system of government) shall be so organised that not

1. An expression used by Bishop Horsley in the Parliament of England.—*Author*.

a man or woman born in the Republic but shall inherit some means of beginning the world, and see before them the certainty of escaping the miseries that under other governments accompany old age, the Revolution of France will have an advocate and an ally in the heart of all nations.

An army of principles will penetrate where an army of soldiers cannot; it will succeed where diplomatic management would fall: it is neither the Rhine, the Channel, nor the ocean that can arrest its progress: it will march on the horizon of the world, and it will conquer.

**Means for carrying the proposed plan into execution,
and to render it at the same time conducive to the public interest**

I. Each canton shall elect in its primary assemblies, three persons, as commissioners for that canton, who shall take cognisance, and keep a register of all matters happening in that canton, conformable to the charter that shall be established by law for carrying this plan into execution.

II. The law shall fix the manner in which the property of deceased persons shall be ascertained.

III. When the amount of the property of any deceased persons shall be ascertained, the principal heir to that property, or the eldest of the co-heirs, if of lawful age, or if under age, the person authorised by the will of the deceased to represent him or them, shall give bond to the commissioners of the canton to pay the said tenth part thereof in four equal quarterly payments, within the space of one year or sooner, at the choice of the payers. One-half of the whole property shall remain as a security until the bond be paid off.

IV. The bond shall be registered in the office of the commissioners of the canton, and the original bonds shall be deposited in the national bank at Paris. The bank shall publish every quarter of a year the amount of the bonds in its possession, and also the bonds that shall have been paid off, or what parts thereof, since the last quarterly publication.

V. The national bank shall issue bank notes upon the security of the bonds in its possession. The notes so issued, shall be applied to pay the pensions of aged persons, and the compensations to persons arriving at twenty-one years of age. It is both reasonable and generous to suppose, that persons not under immediate necessity, will suspend their right of drawing on the fund, until it acquire, as it will do, a greater degree of ability. In this case, it is proposed, that an honorary register be kept, in each canton, of the names of the persons thus suspending that right, at least during the present war.

VI. As the inheritors of property must always take up their bonds in four quarterly payments, or sooner if they choose, there will always be *numéraire* arriving at the bank after the expiration of the first quarter, to exchange for the bank notes that shall be brought in.

VII. The bank notes being thus put in circulation, upon the best of all possible security, that of actual property, to more than four times the amount of the bonds upon which the notes are issued, and with *numéraire* continually arriving at the bank to exchange or pay them off whenever they shall be presented for that purpose, they will acquire a permanent value in all parts of the Republic. They can therefore be received in payment of taxes, or *emprunts* equal to *numéraire*, because the Government can always receive *numéraire* for them at the bank.

VIII. It will be necessary that the payments of the ten per cent be made in *numéraire* for the first year from the establishment of the plan. But after the expiration of the first year, the inheritors of property may pay ten per cent either in bank notes issued upon the fund, or in *numéraire*.

If the payments be in *numéraire*, it will lie as a deposit at the bank, be exchanged for a quantity of notes equal to that amount; and if in notes issued upon the fund, it will cause a demand upon the fund equal thereto; and thus the operation of the plan will create means to carry itself into execution.