

# English Departments I<sup>1</sup>

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*From my colleagues who teach mainly poetry, I understand that even the most sophisticated students still tend to have little idea about prosody and are not quite sure why it should matter. This is not a case of fallen standards. Graduate students are more precociously professional than ever before. But by and large, under the sway of teachers from my own generation, they do not become aspiring professors in the old religious sense of that word: believers, testifiers, witnesses. Lately, I have noticed some signs that this may be beginning to change—hints of a revival of interest in what lifts a style out of the pedestrian and makes it distinguished. If I am right, our students are ahead of us, because my own generation seems permanently marked by the spirit of the 1970s, when literature, which had been celebrated by the “New Critics” in the 1950s as a counter-universe to the spiritually barren world in which they found themselves living, and by the “Myth Critics” in the 1960s as a way of entering the unconscious life, first came to be widely thought of as not a sphere of beauty but an instrument of power (210).*

—Andrew Delbanco, *Required Reading* (1997)

Prince Hal: *Where shall we take a purse tomorrow, Jack?*

Falstaff: *'Zounds, where thou wilt, lad; I'll make one; an I do not, call me villain and baffle me.*

Prince Hal: *I see a good amendment of life in thee; from praying to purse-taking.*

Falstaff: *Why, Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal; 'tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation.*

—*Henry IV, Part I*

## 1. Marvell's Crown of Thorns

Below is a poem by Andrew Marvell, "The Coronet." It has to do with anyone's motives for writing, and also, perhaps, with anyone's motives for reading and teaching—or for that matter, with anyone's motives for laboring in a given vocation. Each of us must find a way to do that without sinning, as Falstaff supposes he has in purse-taking. "The Coronet" is Marvell's attempt. The poem opens up for me what will be, in the pages that follow, the main debate, which runs along these lines: Is it possible to be compromised, even corrupted, by what we write and read and teach, and by how we write, read, and teach it? Over the course of the last thirty years, many of us in the English Department said it was possible, as we came to suspect that the literary works we had traditionally taught, and the traditional canon itself, were (in a purse-taking way) tainted by racism, sexism, and empire—as we came to suspect, as Andrew Delbanco puts it, that literature might be not "a sphere of beauty but an instrument of power" (210).

As for his own vocational ordeal, here is what Marvell had to say:

When for the thorns with which I long, too long,  
    With many a piercing wound,  
    My Saviour's head have crowned,  
I seek with garlands to redress that wrong:  
    Through every garden, every mead,  
I gather flowers (my fruits are only flowers),  
    Dismantling all the fragrant towers  
That once adorned my sheperdess's head.

And now when I have summed up all my store,  
Thinking (so I myself deceive)  
So rich a chaplet thence to weave  
As never yet the King of Glory wore:  
Alas I find the Serpent old  
That, twining in his speckled breast,  
About the flowers disguised does fold,  
With wreaths of fame and interest.  
Ah, foolish Man, that wouldst debase with them,  
And mortal glory, Heaven's diadem!  
But thou who only couldst the Serpent tame,  
Either his slippery knots at once untie,  
And disentangle all his winding snare:  
Or shatter too with him my curious frame:  
And let these wither, so that he may die,  
Though set with skill and chosen out with care.  
That they, while Thou on both their spoils dost tread,  
May crown thy feet, that could not crown thy Head. (54)

In the first line, “for” means “in place of,” or “instead of.” Marvell—we may as well dispense with the fiction of a “speaker”—is making a confession. He has “long, too long” brought to the altar of his poetic vocation a crown of thorns. The reference, of course, is to the poems he had written on love or other secular subjects, and which he still somehow is writing every time a reader entertains him (these poems are the “garlands” and the “fragrant towers” he soon speaks of—“To His Coy Mistress,” for example). Marvell is saying that the motive of his poems ought properly to be devotional, but that

as often as not they crucify instead, through failure of self-abnegation, or through indulgence in worldly affairs (these latter may involve either erotic attachments to a “Shepherdess,” or what he here calls a quest for “Fame and Interest”). Marvell goes so far as to claim that we almost always find entwined, even in our very best work, the “Serpent old.”

The “moral” of the poem, then: “Working from impure motives is a sin, and there can be no truly secular work—no occasions when we might relax our vigilance in this matter. We are always responsible, in our vocations, to something higher. Even when we suppose ourselves to be dealing in merely private pleasures, such as Marvell’s engagements with his ‘shepherdess,’ we are properly indentured to the Good and the True. In fact, there can be no merely private sphere in which we can set aside these obligations.” Marvell never published his poems—most of them anyway—and still he felt they committed him, if not to the public, then at least to God. He had to come clean. There is a note of Puritan confession about the sinfulness, or ephemeral worldliness, of poetry in the parenthesis “my fruits are *only* flowers.” That is to say, the flowers he’s dealt in aren’t apple blossoms; they cannot bear fruit. And by their fruits ye shall know them: What *had* the poets of England done with their talents since the theaters closed? What had poetry itself ever done for a world well lost? And to move on to more immediate vocational concerns: What had the English Departments that teach poetry ever done to relieve, or at any rate attend to, the world’s injustices—to the Good and the True?

The “moral” to which I just referred in speaking of “The Coronet” was adopted with zeal by Marvell’s successors in the Bermudas (as he might say) of the New World, where the more radical of the Protestants sought their self-reconstructive refuge, the better to build what they hoped would be a

more perfect, and more pure, society. All differences allowed for, that moral was adopted as well by what might be called the more exacting Roundheads in the English Departments of the New World in the 1980s and 1990s, when I was myself a graduate student and a young professor. We came to believe that, in teaching literature, and also in writing about it, we were responsible to something higher, something that has more to do with the (politically) good than with the (merely) beautiful. We came to distrust the whole category of the “aesthetic,” and to distrust as well the claim that we might, in our classrooms and offices, set aside an arena in which private pleasures, rather than public commitments, might be pursued. We discovered—it was a discovery worth making—that our literary-critical coronets had often, in fact, been crowns of thorns; that we scholars and teachers had debased with mortal glory Heaven’s diadem. Our vocation, we now saw, had “long, too long” been somehow implicated, if only indirectly, in sins—sins against women, against the disinherited, against the colonized. Following Marvell’s example, we set about dismantling all the fragrant towers of our own canon, which came to look suspiciously Cavalier in its elitism. We convinced ourselves that there should be no “secular” teaching, no teaching not devoted to the good, as against the beautiful (either we serve God, or we serve the Serpent old, just as Marvell says). And we set about to purify the vocation.

But if we take “The Coronet” seriously, we have to concede that proper vocational “redress” is not so easy to achieve. Remember how the poem turns out. Having forsworn both courtly poetry and the poetry of courtship (the “coronets” he had made for his shepherdess), Marvell offers up a crown of “flowers” rather than of “thorns” to the Lord, as he sees it, of the only “real” world—the world of Spirit, Eternity, and the Good, not the world of Flesh, Time, and Beauty. He thinks that he has set his vocation right—that he

has found his true calling. But all the while he is very likely deceiving himself—flattering himself, really—that the King of Glory never wore “so rich a chaplet.” With that last thought sin enters in, again. The Serpent old insinuates his “speckled” breast—it is always maculate, never immaculate—into the weaving lines of this poesy: infecting the supplicant’s motives are “Fame and Interest.” It goes hard for any poet, any writer, or for that matter any teacher, when he tries entirely to disentangle these from his wreaths. So much is sin a part of us that it infects even the acts of contrition and penance we undertake; the thing we wish to purge takes vigor from the act of purgation. Poets are not exempt from this stern law, and neither are the men and women who assign poets to undergraduates in English Departments. We can sin even in our efforts to be sincere. We like very much to be praised for our works when we dismantle the fragrant towers of the past, as we did in English Departments in the reforming 1980s and 1990s. But if we are Marvellian about it all, our conscience says (as Emerson would have it): Not unto us.

There is certainly a Puritanical drift to all this, as I have implied. “The Coronet” enjoins those who teach it in the English Department candidly to “interrogate” themselves and their works (as we now say). It asks that we exercise what American Communists in the 1930s used ominously to call “self-criticism.” Exactly how bourgeois, how counter-revolutionary, have we, in the profession, been? Exactly how patriarchal, how “white,” and how “Western”? Our virtue—all of it—may be a foolish splendor. We may merely be sorry conductors in a sorry circuit of worldly (Foucauldian) Power. That is the truly chastening—and, I believe, the truly humane and helpful—insight of “The Coronet.” We might consider efforts, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to purge Paul de Man and deconstruction from the discipline of

literary studies as having fallen out along roughly Marvellian lines. We thought we were weaving the richest chaplets literary critics ever wove, but found them, all at once, infected, compromised, and haunted. Much self-criticism followed. There was in our (deconstructionist) work still a weakness for Charles I, and a suspiciously “New Critical” sort of unworldliness that left us blind to what we ought have always already seen. How else to explain that a man who had authored anti-Semitic articles for a collaborationist newspaper in Belgium had become the darling of academe, teasing out lacunae in the language of Romantic poetry, while diverting our eyes from history (including his own)? History had to be brought to bear. So we said, “Off with Paul de Man’s head,” this time executing one of the executioners in a second phase of the literary-critical revolution that writers like de Man himself had helped to begin.<sup>2</sup>

The suspicion we in the English Department must labor under is this: our vocational sins may well invade the remedies we put over against them, with the result that we can never really be sure when we have got our business in order (as with de Man). Marvell wanted his poetry to do justice to God (or to the Good), but always found it marred, or always suspected he found it marred, by worldly and merely private aspirations and pleasures. Poetry was at once his redemption and his disease. So far as we in the English Department are concerned, the same might be said about the “canon” and “canonical” ways of teaching it: these are both our redemption and our disease.

## 2. Dante and the Henchman

This brings me to a very old theme: the relation of the Good to the Beautiful. I want to talk about this relation in the halo of light cast by Marvell's "Coronet." Some in the English Department, let us say, love literature for the Good it can do, others for its Beauty, and some for both. The first of the three groups (whom I'm calling Roundheads) sometimes regard the second (whom I'm calling Cavaliers) as a little decadent, as not quite wholesome: the Beautiful must never—*can* never—be detached from the Good, they say. Plato is in this camp of course; he might be said to have founded it, as Mark Edmundson suggests in *Literature Against Philosophy*.<sup>3</sup> In setting out a countervailing plea on behalf of an "aesthetic" approach to literary criticism, an approach more attuned to "the beautiful," Denis Donoghue complains, in *The Practice of Reading*, that that very term "aesthetic" now troubles many critics and teachers: "It is thought to connote moral lassitude, political irresponsibility, decadence" (79). He has in mind, partly, what W. J. T. Mitchell describes as a shift, in literary studies, from criteria of "meaning" to criteria of "value" (quoted in Donoghue, 96). We ask not so much, "What did this poem mean to Andrew Marvell, or to readers in the 17th century?" as "Is this poem, or what this poem represents, good for us now—good, in fact, for the culture?" We have ended up with a classroom in which, says Donoghue, with some exaggeration, "it is difficult to speak of language, form, style, and tone without appearing decadent, ethically irresponsible" (258)—without feeling as Marvell did when he contemplated the garlands he'd woven for his shepherdess's head. Frank Lentricchia purports to see in the "literary wing" of the academy "an eager flight from



literature by those who refuse to take the *literary* measure of the subject, whatever the subject may be,” and who instead take their measure from political criteria.<sup>4</sup> Ross Posnock, for his part, reports that in his English Department (he thinks of it as representative) literature and “indeed the aesthetic itself” are in “very low repute.” Literature, he suggests, excites a “suspicion,” namely the suspicion that claims on behalf of a purely “literary” sort of study are, if not immoral in their bearing, at least irresponsible (quoted in Berube 7-8). As Mark Edmundson has it, “The philosophical critique of poetry is ascendant. In the provinces of literary criticism, Plato’s heirs have apparently won out,” with the result that “the practice of submitting literary writing to categories, particularly of a moral and political sort, may be at an all-time high” (2; 116). Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach reads: “Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” Why should literary critics and teachers exempt themselves from the business? Shouldn’t we all join Teachers for a Democratic Culture, an organization founded in 1991 on the Roundheaded assumption that our vocation simply must be committed?

In speaking of submitting literary writing to categories of a moral and political sort, Edmundson has in mind such still-influential arguments as this one, from a classic and often-taught essay by Annette Kolodny, “Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism”:

When feminists turn their attention to the works of male authors which have traditionally been accorded high aesthetic value and, where warranted, follow [Tillie] Olsen’s advice that we assert our “right to say: this is surface, this falsifies reality, this degrades,” such

statements do not necessarily mean we will end up with a diminished canon. To question the source of the aesthetic pleasures we've gained from reading Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and so on, does not imply that we must deny those pleasures. It means only that aesthetic response is once more invested with epistemological, ethical, and moral concerns. It means, in other words, that readings of *Paradise Lost* which analyze its complex hierarchical structures but fail to note the implications of gender within that hierarchy; or which insist upon the inherent (or even inspired) perfection of Milton's figurative language but fail to note the consequences, for Eve, of her specifically gender-marked weakness, which, like the flowers to which she attends, requires "propping up"; or which concentrate on the poem's thematic reworking of classical notions of martial and epic prowess into Christian (moral) heroism but fail to note that Eve is stylistically edited out of that process—all such readings, however useful, will no longer be deemed wholly adequate. The pleasures we had earlier learned to take in the poem will not be diminished thereby, but they will become part of an altered reading attentiveness. (2159-2160)

I would not take issue with much of this. But it does strike me that Kolodny is disingenuous in suggesting that the pleasures we had earlier, in our more strictly aestheticist days, taken in Milton will not be "diminished." If those pleasures had been at all implicated in what Olsen, in the passage to which Kolodny alludes, calls the "degrading" drift of certain literary texts, or in the "falsification of reality," then how can our pleasures in them not be "diminished"? How can we not wish to dismantle these fragrant towers? How can we not deny those pleasures that might distract us—for the

implication is that they will distract us—from ethical and moral concerns? Haven't we, in indulging those pleasures, neglected the salvation of our students, if not of our souls?

There is always to be answered W. E. B. DuBois's challenge in a 1926 address before a convention of the NAACP, published subsequently in *The Crisis* under the title "Criteria of Negro Art": "The apostle of Beauty thus becomes the apostle of Truth and Right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is but freedom is ever bounded by Truth and Justice; and slavery only dogs him when he is denied the right to tell the Truth or recognize an ideal of Justice. Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent" (985-86). The "wailing of the purists" has been heard often enough since 1926, when DuBois wrote these remarks, and in fact the purists had their day in the academy—several decades of it in fact, from about the time the revelation of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Moscow Show Trials, and the murder of Leon Trotsky sent the literary left into retreat, until the 1970s, when the New Left (of the 1960s) began to come into its own in the academy. During that interregnum, art, whatever else it was to have been, was thought to have nothing to do with "propaganda," even in DuBois's nuanced sense of the word.

The reaction against this since the 1970s has, to be sure, been often enough emphatic. Many in the English Department now take it for granted that our vocational interest in literature *must* be allied, somehow, to the pursuit of

justice, to the pursuit of “the good” more than of “the beautiful.” “In the waning years of the Vietnam War and its bitter aftermath,” writes Andrew Delbanco, “literature was revealed as just another means by which we are indoctrinated into pernicious doctrines like patriarchy and progress. We were invited to study books as a part of the state apparatus. Literature began to be talked about with metaphors of incarceration—as a ‘prison-house of language’ or a ‘hermeneutic circle.’ Culture came to be thought of as totalitarian, and books, no less than gulags, became instruments of domination” (210). The category of the aesthetic, many came to believe, had as one of its chief functions what Marjorie Levinson, in an influential (and more or less Roundheaded) essay on Wordsworth, calls the “suppression of the social” (37).

Edmundson, of course, makes no mistake when he says that criticism grounded in moral or political concerns reached, in the 1990s, a high water mark, from which, I would add, it has never altogether receded. And we might profitably approach the business through a kind of counter-example. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in a sonnet titled “Dante,” likens *The Divine Comedy*, and by implication all truly powerful poetry, to a cathedral we enter in order to leave the “tumult of the time disconsolate” behind. This is what reading Dante, or perhaps just reading, is like for him, as he tells it in a fine Petrarchan sonnet:

Oft have I seen at some cathedral door  
 A labourer, pausing in the dust and heat,  
 Lay down his burden, and with reverent feet  
 Enter, and cross himself, and on the floor  
 Kneel to repeat his paternoster o’er;

Far off the noises of the world retreat;  
The loud vociferations of the street  
Become an undistinguishable roar.  
So, as I enter here from day to day,  
And leave my burden at this minster gate,  
Kneeling in prayer, and not ashamed to pray,  
The tumult of the time disconsolate  
To inarticulate murmurs dies away,  
While the eternal ages watch and wait.

The sonnet might be a plea on behalf of poetry of the sort Longfellow wrote, as opposed to the sort written by his abolitionist Quaker contemporary John Greenleaf Whittier (about whom, more presently). After all, Longfellow is one of DuBois's "purists," while Whittier most assuredly is not. In any case, the sonnet makes a religion of poetry, as the American Romantics sometimes did, and as the New Critics—in the story we now often tell about them anyway—did as well. Longfellow takes for granted, but also quietly argues, that the aesthetic is properly a category detached from society and history. The latter are profane and worldly, the former sacred and eternal—quite literally so, as Longfellow sets things out here. Reading Dante is, for him, like entering a cathedral. He lays down his burden in the narthex of poetry. The implications, for my limited purposes, are clear. Poetry is, as given us by Longfellow, otherworldly, an idea gently upheld by the Christian association hanging about the word "consolation," which figures in the poem by way of its very worldly antonym, "disconsolate." The world, with its affairs, is prosaic, noisome, diverting and dull. It affords no consolation. When we read, we leave "the tumult of the time" behind us. Here, the

aesthetic most certainly does entail the “suppression of the social.”

In the 1980s and 1990s literary “Cathedrals” were no safer in the hands of literary critics than real ones were in the hands of militant Puritans in 1642. We had been made “ashamed to pray” (to borrow Longfellow’s phrase) at the altar of poetry, or at least at the altar of the poetry of the past. Why else would George Levine find it necessary, in his introduction to *Aesthetics and Ideology*, to face up to what he calls his “own anxieties about what [his] passion for literature will seem like to the critical culture with which [he wants] to claim alliance” (11)? His passion will seem indulgent, naive, counter-revolutionary, or what have you; he may even be denounced as something of a crypto-purist (to recur to DuBois’s dyslogistic term). We in the English Department make our sternly Protestant reply to Longfellow: “Let’s get rid of the censers,” we say, “together with all the other trappings of literary priest-craft, and put in a plain pine bench. Let’s see the poem as in itself it really is, not as the poem prefers to see itself (its preferences in this regard will almost always be deceptive).” Stained glass windows, such as Longfellow thought he found in the poetry of Dante, are something to be suspicious of, no matter how beautiful they may be. This time the Puritans among us will not spare the windows of Fairford Cathedral. Like Cromwell at Ely, they will stable the horses of the people’s army even at the communion rail itself, where scholars and teachers used to pray with no thought of the tumult of the time disconsolate. Poetry and art can be seductive, even dangerous. Beauty is often felt to be. That is why the “apostle of beauty,” as DuBois says, must “ever” be “bounded by Truth and Justice.” And so, as Mark Edmundson puts it, adapting an argument of Arthur Danto’s, literary criticism has moved to “neutralize art”—to contain and demystify its seductions, the better to uphold the Good. Literature, after all, has what

Edmundson calls its “disciplinary affiliations,” its work of coercion to do, just as does the church (195). And the real work of Longfellow’s sonnet (some might now say) is to put those “disciplinary” offices well out of sight and out of mind.

But we cannot long ignore the “tumult of the time disconsolate.” Longfellow’s pious “laborer,” laying his burden down, might not need cathedrals at all if life beyond their confines were not so alienating. So we dispense with Longfellow, reproaching what we take to be the glib maneuver with which, in the sestet, he identifies himself—this New England reader in Modern Languages at Harvard—with a European peasant laboring in the “dust and heat” of worldly strife, with (say) Jean François Millet’s *L’homme à la houe*. Is Longfellow’s alienation really the same as his? Maybe. But similitude is not identity, even if poetry, in its metaphors, would sometimes have us believe otherwise. We must make no such assumptions as Longfellow makes as to what is really best for that laborer in the dust and heat: the paternoster or the barricades. This creates a problem for readers more than for Longfellow. It is no longer possible to be at ease with what we read, *especially* when we feel its seductions. We do not quite trust it. We wonder what our pleasure in reading certain texts—by Emerson, Mark Twain, Conrad, Faulkner, Eliot, Frost or Marvell—indicates about the condition of our souls. We wonder also whether or not, as Tillie Olson puts it, we have somehow been “falsifying reality.” No one would argue in favor of complacency in a case like this. So serious has our attachment to “the time disconsolate” become in English Departments—so complete is our dedication to making its “inarticulate murmurs” articulate in the classroom—that, as Edmundson argues, “history is now something of a sacrosanct word in literary criticism; challenging its status can draw professorial bile. For to be

historical is to be, almost by definition, responsible, a good citizen of the academy and of the world. The proponent of historical criticism is likely to see the purveyors of close reading, whether they seek organic form [as in the New Criticism] or the breaking of forms [as in deconstruction], as decadents, self-indulgently removed from real people and events” (16). There can be no world elsewhere, not in Longfellow’s minster, not anywhere in poetry. Break up the Church of Poetry. Dispossess it. That has been the idea, which is why what might be called High-Church critics like Harold Bloom have, just as they did in 1642, so vigorously protested.

Above I gave a title to Longfellow’s sonnet: “Dante.” I was cheating a little there, because that title is given the poem not by its author, but by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who included the sonnet in his widely read *Oxford Book of English Verse* (1900). In fact, the sonnet originally appeared as a part of a sequence of sonnets on Dante, which Longfellow published under the general title “The Divine Comedy.” In isolating the sonnet from that larger context, Quiller-Couch tells us something about his own assumptions as to what poetry ought to be. He stands firm in what we might call Longfellow’s counter-Reformation camp: for him, a poem can be, and without sin, readily isolated from its contexts, bibliographical and historical alike; it can be abstracted from time. He is one of DuBois’s “purists.” For him, poetry is already hardly of this world anyway.<sup>5</sup>

In view of this, it is interesting to consider the case of the poem that succeeds “Dante” in Quiller-Couch’s *Oxford Book of English Verse*: “The Henchman,” by John Greenleaf Whittier. A “henchman” was, formerly, the attendant of a nobleman or noblewoman (the term carried no negative connotations in its native settings). But why do we find, here in Quiller-Couch’s anthology, a pretty little lyric of medieval (or at least Cavalier)



England penned by a radical American democrat, by a Quaker abolitionist no less, and in 1877? For that was when “The Henchman” was written—a little sadly, I like to think, for the aging abolitionist in that year of the Southern “Redemption” from (and demolition of) the radical Reconstruction experiment in inter-racial (and inter-class) democracy. The immediate occasion for the poem, Whittier’s biographer tells us, was a request from a friend’s young daughter that the earnest and worldly old poet compose what he had never before composed—a charming love lyric, which she might set to music. As the young woman knew, Whittier had been writing about politics and social class for decades, as an abolitionist and antinomian democrat (he is definitely a poet of “the time disconsolate”).<sup>6</sup> She wanted something more in the Longfellow line. And Whittier obliged her, or anyway tried to. In a letter to an editor about “The Henchman,” he himself remarks: “I send, in compliance with the wish of Mr. Bowen and thymself, a ballad upon which, though not long, I have bestowed a good deal of labor. It is not exactly a Quakerly piece, nor is it didactic, and it has no moral that I know of. But it is, I think, natural, simple, and not unpoetical” (Pickard 648). “Poetical” means, here, what Longfellow implicitly takes it to mean in the poem Quiller-Couch calls “Dante”: a far cry from “the loud vociferations of the street.” And the question I would raise in reading “The Henchman” is simple. Could a poet of Whittier’s more or less radical turn of mind write a lyric entirely innocent of “morality” and “didacticism”? Could he leave the “tumult of the time disconsolate” altogether behind? My answer is that he could not. This radical Quaker democrat may attempt to write a Cavalier lyric that smacks of aristocracy. But the better angels of his abolitionist nature win out, even in that grim year of the Southern Redeemers, when the condition of (American) involuntary servitude was beginning to be cloaked

with otherworldly romance in the new literature of the “plantation” school. Whittier simply cannot represent the un-republican situation he takes for his theme as admirable. We are brought to feel, in “The Henchman,” that “caste” is un-natural, and that submission to our “betters” is an indignity, perhaps a pathological indignity. From a strictly “Quaker” point of view, then, the “coronet” he weaves for his young female friend has in it less of the Serpent, not more, than might be supposed.

In the paragraphs to follow, I will suggest that “The Henchman” is in certain respects incoherent, that its motives are impure. The lyric proves unable to manage the tensions that arise between its eulogistic aspiration to make the subordinate relation of servant to mistress charming—as, again, such relations were made to appear in post-Reconstruction “plantation” literature—and an inexorable tendency to condemn that same relation. To put the matter another way: Certain implications in the metaphors the poem depends upon are not altogether controlled by the purpose of “naming” the aristocratic situation in a charming way. The idea requires some explanation. But first, the text of “The Henchman”:

My lady walks her morning round,  
 My lady’s page her fleet greyhound,  
 My lady’s hair the fond winds stir,  
 And all the birds make songs for her.

Her thrushes sing in Rathburn bowers,  
 And Rathburn side is gay with flowers;  
 But ne’er like hers, in flower or bird,  
 Was beauty seen or music heard.

Oh, proud and calm!—she cannot know  
 Where'er she goes with her I go;  
 Oh, cold and fair!—she cannot guess  
 I kneel to share her hound's caress!

The hound and I are on her trail,  
 The wind and I uplift her veil;  
 As if the calm, cold moon she were,  
 And I the tide, I follow her.

As unrebuked as they, I share  
 The licence of the sun and air,  
 And in a common homage hide  
 My worship from her scorn and pride.

No lance have I, in joust or fight,  
 To splinter in my lady's sight;  
 But, at her feet, how blest were I  
 For any need of hers to die!

As William Empson points out, the most general type of ambiguity found in poetry has to do with metaphor itself, “where one thing is said to be like another, and they have several different properties in virtue of which they are alike” (2). Empson cites Herbert Read, here, who said that metaphor marks the “synthesis of several units of observation into one commanding image; it is the apprehension of a complex idea, not by analysis, nor by direct

statement, but by a sudden perception of an objective relation.” How “objective” that relation truly is will vary, because it indicates as much about the person establishing the relation as it does about the things related. Consider what Whittier has his Henchman say of himself and the lady he serves: “The hound and I are on her trail.” Implicit in the line is a comparison of the Henchman to the “fleet greyhound” that accompanies the lady. The two have “several different properties in virtue of which they are alike.” They are both in service to the lady, both loyally devoted to her, both of a low or mean rank, and so on. But another layer of associations emerges. To say that the hound and the Henchman are “on the lady’s trail” makes us think not so much of “fleet greyhounds” as of hunting hounds. Perhaps the “trail” is a hunting trail, and the lady the quarry. This complicates our feeling about the relationship between the henchman and his lady. We suspect that there may be something illicit about it, something transgressive. Plainly, the Henchman himself believes there is, because he points out that he shares the “licence” of the sun and air *unrebuked*. He means that if his lady knew how he felt she (or those around her) would chastise him. He has to hide his love, whatever love it is, because it would do some violence to good social order; his is a love that dare not speak its name. He can only “lift” his lady’s “veil” vicariously, appointing the “wind” his deputy. It is as if the Roundhead Whittier would, but cannot, achieve the frank ease of the Cavalier poet Richard Lovelace in his “Song: to Amarantha, That She Would Dishevel her Hair”: “Let it fly as unconfined,” the Royalist writes, “As its calm ravisher the wind, / Who hath left his darling th’ east, / To wanton o’er that spicy nest.” Whittier sets about to allow himself the sort of imaginative liberty Lovelace simply takes for granted. But he cannot do it.

The mild note of moral censure implicit in the word “licence,” as it

appears in Whittier's poem, is appropriate. Whittier catches this word midway along a career from its origin as a term condemning a morally undue freedom to its modern, more neutral sense of permission to take a particular liberty to which one has been entitled. The breeze enjoys the liberty of lifting the lady's veil, but not the Henchman. This only cements his "class" solidarity with the hound, so to speak, as the lady doesn't so much *lead* the Henchman along as become, ambivalently, the object of his desire. The natural elements, the weather, are "democratic" and permit free congress; the social world of caste is not and does not. This makes us suspect that the barriers that ideologically provide for a "rebuke" of this Henchman's imaginary "license"—and he has "conscientiously" internalized these barriers—are not really "natural." And *this* is surely a "Quakerly" sentiment. The Henchman must take his liberties on the sly. (His lady is no Lady Chatterley; or, to put it still another way, she will not be bringing him home to dinner.) He hides his liberties in a "common homage," which is to say in the very general homage paid to her by the total environment of this lady, for whose sake "Rathburn side is gay with flowers." The word "henchman" unstably begins to work in its more shadowy 19th century American sense, the one to which Whittier's readers' ears were inevitably attuned in 1877. By that date, the term had already become one of opprobrium, denoting someone who, in vassalage of one sort or another, slavishly does the dirty work. The poem's several equivocations derive from the peculiarity of the project Whittier set himself: namely, to write, Quakerly democrat that he was, a poem of an aristocratic mode of life.

In light of this, we might ask how Whittier has been anthologized over the years. Quiller-Couch chose for *The Oxford Book of English Verse* only "The Henchman," clearly unrepresentative of Whittier's work. (Whittier himself

recognized its unrepresentative quality, as the letter cited above indicates.) For his *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (1912), Quiller-Couch chose, in addition to “The Henchman,” seven more poems by Whittier, only one of which concerns slavery, “Song of Slaves in the Desert.” This latter is among the least “political” poems on slavery Whittier ever penned; an anecdote drawn from the annals of the Moorish slave trade, the poem is closely adapted from the journals of James Richardson (1809-1851), a British explorer of the Sahara, who gave an account of a song he once heard sung by slaves from Bornu.<sup>7</sup> Quiller-Couch’s readers will know none of this. When plucked out of the bibliographical context of Whittier’s *Anti-Slavery Poems and Songs of Labor and Reform*—where detailed notes, quotations from political debates, newspaper articles, and other such items, scattered among the poems, firmly fix the book in the American abolitionist movement;—when, as I say, the poem is plucked from its native context, “Song of Slaves in the Desert” is rather more sentimental than political, and I’d wager that sentiment was what Quiller-Couch heard in it, and expected his readers to hear. (One can, of course, shed a tear about injustice without doing a thing about it.) *Anti-Slavery Poems and Songs of Labor and Reform* opens with poems on William Lloyd Garrison and Toussaint L’Ouverture,<sup>8</sup> perhaps the most hated men in the American South (until John Brown came along). Interestingly, “The Henchman” found a place in, of all un-Quakerly books, *A Vers de Société Anthology*, edited by Carolyn Wells (1907). In his *Oxford Book of American Verse* (1950), F. O. Matthiessen prints six of Whittier’s poems, four of which bear on his political commitments. As for anthologies used in classrooms, the editors of a fairly recent one-volume edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1998) represent Whittier with two political poems. One is highly topical in interest: “Ichabod!”—a poem

denouncing Daniel Webster for supporting the Compromise of 1850, which included the infamous Fugitive Slave Bill. The second poem in the *Norton*, the prelude to *Among The Hills*, is more generally social in interest, but nonetheless firmly political in theme. The editors of the Heath *Anthology of American Literature* (1990) represent Whittier—more generously, given their convictions—with four vigorous anti-slavery poems. To them, Whittier is clearly a poet of social change and protest. After all, his is the sort of poetry on which *The Heath Anthology* places a premium (as an anthology it is as Roundheaded in its bearings as Quiller-Couch's is Cavalier). Neither the *Norton* nor the *Heath* includes "The Henchman." Nor for that matter does the Library of America's extensive two-volume anthology of 19th century American poetry (edited by John Hollander), which includes more of Whittier's work than any anthology now in print (eighteen poems, totaling more than fifty pages). This much data suffices to indicate how telling Quiller-Couch's choice is. In his anthology, Whittier will not, must not, be the (often fiercely) political poet that he unequivocally was in his own day. Quiller-Couch wants his lyric pure, set apart from the "tumult of the time disconsolate." That Whittier's "Henchman" should follow "Dante" is perfectly fitting; it is as close as this Roundhead poet ever got to a Popish Cathedral.

In his widely read primer *Literary Theory*—more than 30 years after its first publication, still a fixture in undergraduate classrooms—Terry Eagleton discusses at some length the problem of isolating a literary work from its historical contexts (which also include its bibliographical contexts). An orthodox New Critic (as Eagleton somewhat Roundheadedly caricatures him) would read "The Henchman" without reference to Whittier's life, to his activism, or to the peculiar place the poem holds in Whittier's body of work.

He would not be interested in the anachronistic fact that this “Cavalier” lyric was written in 1877 by a Quaker and abolitionist—even as the Reconstruction collapsed, and as the new, sentimental cult of Antebellum plantation “aristocracy” began to flourish in America. (At last, Whittier had written a poem fit for Southerners and their “faithful retainers.”) Nor would our orthodox critic bring to bear in his reading of the poem Whittier’s own remarks about it, in the letter I quoted above. For my part, I have taken into account biography, the general nature of Whittier’s poetry, Whittier’s remarks about “The Henchman,” and so on, all in the interest of representing the poem as Whittier’s unsuccessful effort to adopt a Cavalier persona, and to leave behind his quite different Quakerly identity. Implicit in my argument is a proposition of a more or less Roundheaded nature: that Whittier’s failure was fortunate; that his failure is, in fact, what makes the lyric “valuable”; and that had Whittier truly succeeded in what he undertook for his young friend we might find very little to say about the poem.

Whittier’s account of the poem, in short, is inadequate to the poem he actually produced. This raises a subsidiary question, which is by now old hat. In what sense may a poem be said to “express” intentions of which its author is unaware? We can, of course, read not for a poet’s “intentions” in a limited, every-day sense of the word, but instead for the “intentions” (figuratively speaking) of the larger social body to which he belongs, which is what we were urged to do in the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond (though literary critics had certainly done this before). These intentions do not form a part of a poet’s consciousness. Instead, they may be said to constitute that consciousness—to mark out the contours and horizons of what is “thinkable,” even in such a way as to “falsify” reality. It is proper to try to understand these socially situated “intentions” (they are what we have in mind in speaking of



“ideology”), even if doing so requires that we break a few stained glass windows. At the end of the day, that is the relatively modest claim put forward by critics interested more in the Good than in the Beautiful—critics who hold that the Good comprehends and includes the Beautiful, and who therefore follow (Roundhead) Whittier instead of (Cavalier) Longfellow. Under the influence of critics like these, literary study in the major universities of the United States, and even in minor ones like the one I worked at in the 1990s and early 2000s, underwent their Reformation. It is in this sense alone that literary study might now properly be said, and with all due respect, to be “Puritanical,” even as writers like Donoghue, Delbanco, Bloom (and others) register a kind of “Cavalier” protest (or anyway, a tentative and worthwhile qualification).

### 3. The Hornet in The Garden

It is worth summarizing, here, what I take “post-structuralism” to be, because this is the general rubric under which so much literary criticism in American Departments of English has been done since 1980. I want to approach the matter from a naive point of view, the better to see things whole, because criticism of all kinds undertaken in the last three decades is rather more of a piece than we often suppose, so tightly bound up, as we are, in intra-vocational squabbles. So, what *do* “post-structuralists” have in common, at least from a more or less “ethical” or “moral” point of view? They are interested—whether in the field of psychoanalysis, post-structuralist Marxism, feminism, deconstruction proper, or in that cluster of habits called the New Historicism—in how a more or less “coherent” subjectivity is consolidated, in a given person, out of an essentially “chaotic” and multiple

array of phenomena (desires, drives, dispositions, vagrant states of consciousness, and so on). The making of a coherent “subjectivity” out of this unthinkable manifold is, for the post-structuralists, usually an act of violence in which one set of possible aspirations, desires, or states of consciousness is marked out as “essential,” “rational,” “normal,” and Real, and another set is marked off as “accidental,” “mad,” “perverse,” merely Apparent, and so on. This “marking out” characterizes what is often called “logocentrism”—or, when a writer wishes to emphasize a connection to feminism, “phallogocentrism.” (Derrida, of course, coined these terms.)

Consider Gayle Rubin’s classic essay “The Traffic in Women,” which has, and with good reason, cast a very long shadow, and which has lately been reissued to some fanfare. Rubin depends on three metaphors to describe the consolidation of (cultural) “men” and “women” out of (biological) “males” and “females”: “sculpting” (783), “engraving” (784), and “taming” (784).<sup>9</sup> The “gender/sex system” (as Rubin calls it) goes to work on the infant as a sculptor goes to work on a block of marble: it produces a coherent, symmetrical “subject,” but in the process chips away at, destroys, makes invisible—in a word, *represses*, or renders inarticulate—the better part of the psychological “matter” of the infant. The residue that remains—the cast-off marble—can haunt the finished product, of course; we all bear some traces in our person of the violence of the work of “sculpting.” We appear before one another with the debris at our feet, even if the “successful” consolidation of our subjectivity requires that we not be able to see it *as debris* (we see it instead as the unconscious, the abnormal, the absurd, the Other). Rubin speaks also of “engraving.” We enter the world *tabula rasa*, it would seem, and are “inscribed” by culture, engraved, made legible, put into circulation, and so on. At other points, Rubin speaks of “taming”: “The wild profusion of

infantile sexuality will always be tamed,” she says (784). Taming, sculpting and engraving, then: all name forms of “cultivation”—the bringing of something out of Nature and into Culture.<sup>10</sup> What Rubin wants to inquire into—what she wants us all to inquire into—is whether or not we can recover and accommodate any of the “wild profusion,” any of the originary dispositions, of the psyche, and bring them back into play; whether or not we can make them, again, articulate. Terms of praise in her writing include: “unruly,” “insurrectionary,” “free,” “liberating,” and so on. And it is worth noting, in this connection, that Rubin speaks of “the straitjacket of gender” (785). The metaphor of the straitjacket is provocative, if by now a little tired. It says: Anything outside accredited forms of psycho-sexual experience is marked out by culture as “insane,” and is made subject to certain penal and therapeutic interventions (with the added implication that the penal and the therapeutic are indissociable). “The gender/sex system” of which Rubin speaks is in fact the clinic/madhouse/prison-house in which we all reside: tamed, sculpted, done violence to, engraved.<sup>11</sup>

For the post-structuralists, the mechanisms that effect the primary consolidation of subjectivity—which is also always the primary act of repression—are generally five in number: psycho-social (as in the family unit and its larger analogues); linguistic (as when a person acquires a language, and, moreover, resides chiefly in what might be called a specific discourse or region of the whole language); socio-economic (as in capitalism, late capitalism, feudalism, and so on); racial (at least in the West since the 16th century, with its invention of “whiteness” and “blackness” as social, political, and juridical categories); and patriarchal. From the work done on him/her by these several mechanisms—and they overlap and conspire with one another—the typical subject emerges as (to take a familiar contemporary

example): “rational” or “sane”; gendered; heterosexual; “raced”; Western; and given to undue sympathy for possessive individualism, private property, and free trade. We might cursorily trace out these several “consolidations” in the writers (and writing) we have so far considered, or which we will consider in the pages that follow. Longfellow, having undergone his ordeal of engraving, sculpting, and taming, emerges with a way of seeing the world, with a “subjectivity,” that says: “The suffering of the ‘laborer in the heat and dust’ can find no real remediation in this world; that suffering is inevitable in all times and places. He must look instead to the future world he prospectively inhabits when he opens the ‘minster gate.’ And I, Longfellow, am essentially like that peasant laborer—nothing really important divides us in our interests. Neither the church, nor poetry about the church, has anything of value to say about the tumult of the time disconsolate; the best they can do is allow us access to a world elsewhere—which is precisely what poetry does.” Marvell undergoes his ordeal and says, quite as if he were speaking “common sense”: “Woman is too much of the world; we must turn our back on her, or at any rate quarantine her, if we are ever to be pure of sin.” Jack Kerouac—to anticipate myself a bit: I take him up in part two of the present essay—has been led by these several consolidating pressures to say in *On the Road*, though without quite knowing what he is up to: “Look at the black men and women in the Denver ghetto. Look at the Mexican laborers in the dust and heat of the California cotton fields. How enviable they are in their happiness and liberty! And by comparison how miserable it is to be ‘white’.” Twain, having had his “consciousness” consolidated along “white” lines, sees in Jim not so much a man as something strangely unreal: part self-sacrificial Christ-figure, part man-child, and in part a figure of ridicule (as in the scene, which might have been borrowed from the stage of any minstrel-show, where

Jim can't for the life of him understand why Frenchmen don't speak English).

We must think of literary criticism in the era of “post-structuralism,” at least so far as its politics are concerned, as an effort to advocate, champion, or merely even to describe, what this complex process of “consolidation” leaves out, represses, or does violence to—as an effort to see Nigger Jim as a whole man; an effort to rethink “woman” as something other than a body over which man must exercise due vigilance, or from which man must always be in retreat; or an effort to consider the possibility, against Longfellow, that the suffering of all those “laborers in the dust and heat” is not a permanent feature of all possible social arrangements, such that the church alone, or poetry written about it, can offer them consolation. (In this way we take requisite care of race, gender, and class.) The tendency, now, is to detect in “canonical” literary works instruments that effect the consolidation I have spoken of rather than resist or perturb it (that is precisely why, the supposition goes, a work is made “canonical”). “Literature” names an institution that is itself a mere subsidiary of the five mechanisms listed above. The idea is that in no area of culture—no matter how innocent of coercion and “interest” it may seem to be—are we free from these processes of sculpting, taming, and engraving. That is why teachers of a post-structuralist turn of mind are often so much on their guard—so much so, in fact, as to strike traditionalists as “suspicious” of literature as such. That is why, with Tillie Olson and Annette Kolodony, they sometimes wonder aloud whether or not the reading and teaching we used to do might actually have “degraded” us. If (phallogocentric) Power—the thing that does the sculpting and engraving to which Gayle Rubin refers—really is everywhere, then so must be resistance to its operations; we are always already worldly, or such

has been the claim of much academic literary criticism since about 1980. We find ourselves now at the point where literary theory assumes, as with a Baconian ambition to “take all knowledge for its province,” the project of creating also a New Organon—an utterly new “logic” of inquiry. And that New Organon partly serves, or so its theoreticians hope, to make way for the New Atlantis, as imagined, for example, by Edward Said: “a community or culture made up of numerous anti-systematic hints and practices for collective human experiences . . . that is not based on coercion or domination” (quoted in Donoghue 29).<sup>12</sup>

The better to understand what this might mean, I want to pursue this business of the “gender/sex system” a bit further, with a summary glance back at Simone de Beauvoir, whose great book *The Second Sex* put into play so much of what has followed in the English Department (through the work, to take but one example, of the theorist Hélène Cixous, who was very much in the air when I was coming along in graduate school and at work as a junior professor in the United States). Beauvoir shows how it was no accident that imperatives of “order,” “reason,” “logic,” “structure,” and “form,” became associated with “masculinity.” As she sees it, this association was a consequence of an effort on our part to slip the bonds of earth—our effort to establish some manner of control over the “natural” fates that had always determined us, and from which we had “mysteriously” sprung. (The onset of patriarchy, on her account, coincides with the development of agriculture, which for the first time made the natural world subordinate to our purposes: no more catch-as-catch-can, no more gathering.) We sought above all things to transcend mere “repetition,” mere “animal” life, and to realize ourselves as self-determining “existents” (to borrow Beauvoir’s existentialist vocabulary). In so doing, we came to see in “woman” a creature

more intimately bound up with “Nature” than is “man.” In part, this was due to a certain asymmetry in the different relations men and women have to the “natural” reproductive process: that process much more intimately enlists the bodies of women than it does the bodies of men (from menarche, to pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and so on). In fact, the body of woman came to seem as if it were the very site at which the “natural” realm laid hold on us, and it was from that realm that we sought our emancipation. In woman, as Beauvoir has it, men behold their point of origin, as well as a token of the fact that they were once utterly dependent on another being for survival. Men hate this, Beauvoir suggests, because they wish to be “autonomous” and “free.” And man’s construction of a temple to Order and Logic and Reason is a part of a larger project to master his contingency, his limitation (both of which, again, he associates with woman, who appears to him irrecoverably bound up in the “animal” processes of nature). All of this, Beauvoir suggests, explains the origins of the “binary oppositions” that so govern our thinking, and which are essentially “patriarchal” in character.

I’ll rehearse, here, a few such familiar oppositions, to the analysis of which so many post-structuralist enterprises have been devoted. All of them are ranged under what might be called the master opposition of “Feminine” to “Masculine”: Mere life/Authentic Existence, Animality/Humanity, Immanence/Transcendence, Fate/Power, Species/Individual, Body/Mind, Other/Same, Passion/Reason, Passivity/Action, Disorder/Order, Darkness/Light, Matter/Form, Earth/Sky. As the feminist theorists who followed Beauvoir correctly maintain, these binary oppositions damn the feminine and exalt the masculine, and that is why we speak of them as patriarchal. And they so thoroughly permeate our discourse (philosophical, theological, aesthetic, political, medical) that it may reasonably be said that our language

is itself “patriarchal” in “structure”—that is to say, in the “structures” through which it organizes meaning. We must emphasize the point: The animosity that often colors this subordination of one value to another is ultimately a function of “male” contempt for his “natural” origins; it is just that deeply seated. Beauvoir says: “Woman inspires man with horror: it is the horror of his own carnal contingency” (148). This “horror” is expressed most starkly in the many strictures and taboos that ancient peoples (and some modern peoples) establish around menstruation and childbirth (148-49).

Beauvoir calls “the female” “the victim of the species” (20). This idea arises, as might be expected, from consideration of the mechanism of reproduction: “Even when she is willing or provocative, it is unquestionably the male who *takes* the female,” Beauvoir explains. “Often the word applies literally, for whether by means of special organs or through superior strength, the male seizes her and holds her in place . . . In this penetration her inwardness is violated, she is like an enclosure that is broken into. The male is not doing violence to the species, for the species survives only in being constantly renewed and would come to an end if eggs and sperms did not come together; but the female, entrusted with the protection of the egg, locks it away inside herself, and her body, in sheltering the egg, shields it from the fecundating action of the male. Her body becomes, therefore, a resistance to be broken through, whereas in penetrating it the male finds self-fulfillment in activity” (21). The point to bear in mind, here, is that the “interests” of the “individual” woman and the interests of the “species” are not necessarily in harmony. If we consider the “interests” of the “selfish gene,” it is indeed easy to see how the individual female becomes “the victim of the species” (it is as if the “species” realized itself by hijacking the bodies of particular females, whose “private” aspirations, insofar as these conflict with the demands of the



species, are never allowed to develop). The problem for us is that “morality” and “ethics” have precisely to do with individual men and women, and *not* with “genes” or with “the species” (radical ecological theory, of course, might not take this view). In us, Nature happened upon a species whose individuals may regard themselves as (characteristically) in conflict with Nature, and as set apart from it. So far as Nature is concerned (to speak fancifully), we may in fact be a terrible mistake: we’ve come to realize that our interests need not be the interests of Nature at all—that Nature’s interests, which certainly have to do with what Beauvoir calls “mere life,” are not necessarily ours. Where these interests conflict, we have to “take sides”; that is one of the things that radical feminism has done. The point Beauvoir would make is very simple: there isn’t any reason whatsoever that the category “Nature” ought to play a determining role in our lives. The final conquest of Nature by Culture, its final subordination to “human” purposes, means that the ancient asymmetry can be redressed. Woman will no longer be “the victim of the species.” (This dream accounts for the utopian investment that radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone—author of the now-neglected *Dialectic of Sex* (1970)—once placed in advanced reproductive technology, envisioning, ultimately, gestation *outside* the womb.) At the end of the day, as Beauvoir tells us, “it is only in a *human* perspective [as opposed to a “natural” or “biological” one] that we can compare the female and the male of the human species. But man is defined as a being who is not fixed, who makes himself what he is” (33-34). And with this thought, Beauvoir anticipates a major insight of post-structuralist theory: “Man is not a natural species: he is a historical idea” (33-34). In certain respects, Darwin laid the basis for this recognition, and as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett make clear, it is a perversion of his thinking to

argue from supposedly “Darwinian” grounds that “morality” either inevitably has, let alone must have, a basis worth calling “Natural” in a strong sense (as popular writers on evolutionary psychology sometimes assume it does). To put it in the contrarian sort of way that Dawkins might approve of: The more “un-Natural” we are, the better and more “human” we become. We don’t need Camille Paglia, that most Schopenhaurian of critics, to tell us that Nature is not necessarily our friend. “Society is not a species,” says Beauvoir, and it should not, therefore, be considered in a “biological” or “Natural” light (36). But do these ideas help us read?

Consider “The White-Tailed Hornet,” a poem by Robert Frost first collected in his 1936 volume *A Further Range*. “The White-Tailed Hornet” begins with an anecdote, related in Frost’s ingratiating way, about a hornet who strikes not unerringly, as one might expect an “instinctual” creature to do, but in an all-too-human, fallible sort of way. This hornet mistakes nail heads and huckleberries for flies, and when he finally does strike a fly, he misses. So much for instinct, Frost says, and then he continues:

To err is human, not to, animal.  
 Or so we pay the compliment to instinct,  
 Only too liberal of our compliment  
 That really takes away instead of gives.  
 Our worship, humor, conscientiousness  
 Went long since to the dogs under the table.  
 And served us right for having instituted  
 Downward comparisons. As long on earth  
 As our comparisons were stoutly upward  
 With gods and angels, we were men at least,

But little lower than the gods and angels.  
But once comparisons were yielded downward,  
Once we began to see our images  
Reflected in the mud and even dust,  
'Twas disillusion upon disillusion.  
We were lost piecemeal to the animals,  
Like people thrown out to delay the wolves.  
Nothing but fallibility was left us,  
And this day's work made even that seem doubtful. (254)

Frost has Darwin in mind, here—the thinker whose “downward comparisons” forever detached us from the angels. And though he doesn't say evolutionary theory's “downward comparisons” are “untrue,” he does imply that they are somehow not beneficial for us, that they have bad “human” consequences. He is giving us, in a playful sort of way, a “pragmatic” reason for doing away with Darwin, at least in certain arenas of human endeavor (this is precisely what Dawkins himself does too, in his own rather different way, and to his own rather different purposes). The poem advocates something like a *principled* ignorance. But what does it wish to remain ignorant of? What does it hope to put well out of mind? What accounts for this turn away from “the natural” and back toward “the *super-natural*,” if that is in fact what the poem involves? Why should a discovery that we all have feet of clay—that our image is reflected in the mud—be so utterly dispiriting? Frost is “denied his transcendence,” as the existentialists say: No more of those “stout” “*upward* comparisons” whereby we once identified ourselves not with the body but with the soul. Now, nothing but our cherished “fallibility” is left us, and even that seems “doubtful,” the

poem tells us, as an index by which we might finally distinguish the “human” from the “animal” (because “animal instinct,” too, can “err”). We “lose ourselves piecemeal,” in a hard Darwinian turn, “to the animals.” Which is essentially to say: Nothing but “the body” is left us.

Literary critics indebted to Beauvoir, and to the tradition she founded, might argue along the following lines: The chastened air of “The White-Tailed Hornet” is really a function of a particular man’s contempt for his own “contingent” and “carnal” origins. He looks down at the dust out of which he arose, which is also the place where he is destined again to lie (the womb and the tomb of earth). He loses himself to brute Nature. And he doesn’t like it. Man’s curse, says Beauvoir, is to have “fallen from a bright and ordered heaven into the chaotic shadows of his mother’s womb. This fire, this pure and active exhalation in which he likes to recognize himself, is imprisoned by woman in the mud of earth” (146). It is not at all gratifying—or so poems like “The White-Tailed Hornet” make it appear—to find your “image” “reflected” in the “mud” and “dust.” Much better to bear with the old “upward comparisons,” which promise otherworldly origins and ends, and a “bright and ordered heaven.” It is possible to discern, here, a “patriarchal” habit of thought, even though the question of “woman” never once arises in “The White-Tailed Hornet.” Literary critics of the Roundhead stamp simply ask that we weigh the importance of this habit of thought in the total context of the poem. How much sin is here, and how much sincerity? Does “the Serpent old” gleam from within the lines of this coronet? Is there something more, here, than a mischievously pragmatist response to Darwin—something from which all the charming wit and play might well distract us?

Of course, “The White-Tailed Hornet” is complicated by a knowing irony, which says: “It is foolish to resist these ‘downward comparisons.’ The

‘upward comparisons’ of the Christian epoch were just a splendid fiction, worth indulging in now only in a qualified, winking sort of way, or worth relying on only insofar as they insulate us from ‘naturalist’ reductions of human motives, experiences and possibilities.” No one seriously attached to those “upward comparisons”—and untold millions still are attached to them—could tolerate Frost’s pragmatism, which is, at the end of the day, thoroughly anti-foundational in tendency. He would deny any account of our “human” nature a secure purchase on the way things “really are”; his criterion for choosing between such rival accounts as Darwinism and Christianity has nothing whatsoever to do with whether one or the other more truly “corresponds” to the world.

But what are we to say to the Andrew Marvell of “The Garden,” a poem in which we find the “patriarchal” habit of thought just traced out in “The White-Tailed Hornet” untempered and pure? I ask the question because that poem to this day enjoys a place of real prestige in all the teaching anthologies, and so lies precisely at the heart of the canon. I regularly teach it myself.

1  
How vainly men themselves amaze  
To win the palm, the oak, or bays;  
And their uncessant labours see  
Crowned from some single herb or tree,  
Whose short and narrow verged shade  
Does prudently their toils upbraid;  
While all flow’rs and all trees do close  
To weave the garlands of repose.

2

Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,  
 And Innocence thy Sister dear!  
 Mistaken long, I sought you then  
 In busy companies of men.  
 Your sacred plants, if here below,  
 Only among the plants will grow.  
 Society is all but rude,  
 To this delicious solitude.

3

No white nor red was ever seen  
 So am'rous as this lovely green.  
 Fond lovers, cruel as their flame,  
 Cut in these trees their mistress' name.  
 Little, alas, they know, or heed,  
 How far these beauties hers exceed!  
 Fair Trees! wheres'e'er you barks I wound,  
 No name shall but your own be found.

4

When we have run our passion's heat,  
 Love hither makes his best retreat.  
 The gods, that mortal beauty chase,  
 Still in a tree did end their race.  
 Apollo hunted Daphne so,

Only that she might Laurel grow.  
 And Pan did after Syrinx speed,  
 Not as a nymph, but for a reed.

5

What wondrous life is this I lead!  
 Ripe apples drop about my head;  
 The luscious clusters of the vine  
 Upon my mouth do crush their wine;  
 The nectarene, and curious peach,  
 Into my hands themselves do reach;  
 Stumbling on melons, as I pass,  
 Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass.

6

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,  
 Withdraws into its happiness:  
 The mind, that ocean where each kind  
 Does straight its own resemblance find;  
 Yet it creates, transcending these,  
 Far other worlds, and other seas;  
 Annihilating all that's made  
 To a green thought in a green Shade. (100-101)

This is a poem of “retreat,” of which there are many in the 17th century—retreat from the city, from the court, from the field of battle, and, indeed, from the world. Men “vainly amaze” themselves—confuse themselves—by

pursuing military, political, and literary glory (of which, respectively, the palm, the oak, and the bays are emblematic). Better to retreat to the “garden,” where “*all trees do close*” to “weave the garland of repose” (that is, we need satisfy ourselves with no “*single herb or tree*,” as with the “palm,” the “oak,” etc.) By contrast to the city, where “busy companies of men” abound, Marvell’s garden is an orderly, hermetic place (as are also Marvell’s stanzas: eight lines of eight syllables each).

This is all well and good, and unexceptionable. But Marvell is in retreat not simply, not even chiefly, from “busy companies of men,” with their emblematic palms and oaks. He is in retreat from the “white” and the “red” that were emblematic of feminine beauty: “No white nor red was ever seen / So am’rous as this lovely green,” he says, speaking of the trees that weave the garlands of a repose that women could only perturb. “Cruel lovers” carve their mistresses’ names in the bark of trees (as does Orlando in *As You Like It*). Marvell, if he “wounds” the trees at all, carves only the names of the trees themselves, writing “Birch” on the birches, “Oak” on the oaks. He is a dendrophiliac. After all, the trees “far exceed” in “beauty” any woman of whom he might once have been enamored. “The Coronet,” as we know, involves a turn away from woman, and, by implication, also from sexuality; and so it is here. This poem of seclusion is a poem of chastity; Marvell writes with an almost Buddhist aspiration to abolish sensual desire. “When we have run our passion’s heat / Love hither makes his best retreat.” Love ought not be passionate, ought not be fleshly, ought not be “of the body” at all. This lesson we know even from the old myths: All the gods who chased “mortal beauty”—that is to say, beauty of an “embodied” sort—ended up in the trees (e.g., Apollo pursued Daphne, only to find her transformed into a laurel). Why not follow the example? Why not “withdraw” from the “lesser”



“pleasures” of the body into the higher pleasures of the mind, wherewith we might “annihilate” the merely physical world (“all that’s made”) into “a green thought in a green shade”? Whereupon Marvell drives home the point:

7

Here at the fountain’s sliding foot,  
Or at some fruit-tree’s mossy root,  
Casting the body’s vest aside,  
My soul into the boughs does glide:  
There like a bird it sits, and sings,  
Then whets, and combs its silver wings;  
And, till prepared for longer flight,  
Waves in its plumes the various light.

8

Such was that happy garden-state,  
While Man there walked without a mate:  
After a place so pure, and sweet,  
What other help could yet be meet!  
But ’twas beyond a mortal’s share  
To wander solitary there:  
Two paradises ’twere in one  
To live in paradise alone.

The logic goes like this: When we make our “best retreat,” Soul is released from Body (it “casts the body’s vest aside,” the body being but a kind of inessential “garment” for the soul); Reason is released from Passion

(“passion’s heat” no longer unsettles the temperate movements of the mind); and Man is released from Woman (“Such was that happy garden-state, / While man there walked without a mate”). The “binary oppositions” of which I spoke above, in summarizing Beauvoir’s arguments, do all the thinking here: Man is to Woman as Soul is to Body (to turn away from the one is to turn away from the other), or as Reason is to Passion, or as Heaven is to Earth (the soul, redeemed from the body, “whets and combs its silver wings,” readying itself for upward flight). Marvell withdraws into his bright and ordered heaven, the better to escape the chaotic (and chthonic) shadows of the womb. It may be precisely as Beauvoir says: “Woman inspires” Marvell, as she does all men, “with horror.” After all, she is the Devil’s doorway; Tertullian said so—and he, too, was thinking of Adam’s mate (would that he had walked alone!).

Now, in laying bare the structure of “binary oppositions” that supports this poem we are giving sense to the idea that it is “patriarchal.” We are suggesting that what Gayle Rubin calls the “gender/sex system” had consolidated in Andrew Marvell a “subjectivity”—a way of being in the world, a way of “seeing” and “feeling”—that could contemplate woman only with a kind of anxious contempt. And here is the claim made by contemporary literary criticism—that is, by literary criticism conducted under the general auspices of “post-structuralism,” as I have described this above: To the extent that we associate ourselves with the views taken in “The Garden”—to the extent that we take real “pleasure” in reading it, let alone in teaching it—we involve ourselves inevitably in the “logic” and the language of patriarchy, and therefore also in the *institution* of patriarchy; we become a vector through which the infection is transmitted. Should we “trample” on this “coronet,” as the sinner Marvell himself might have us do once we find

in it the Serpent old? Should we purge the canon of it? Teach “the conflicts” through it, as the (Roundhead) scholar Gerald Graff would say? Become “resisting readers,” as the feminist critic Judith Fetterly would say? Or—to shift coordinates a bit—should we point out that Marvell’s thinking is continuous with that of the Church, and so may be said to further (or anyway to *have* furthered, in the 17th century) the imperatives of that “ideological state apparatus” (I borrow the term from Louis Althusser)? Will doing these things in the English Department help, in any way, to bring into being a New Atlantis free of “coercion and domination”? And if it will help us to do this, are we being irresponsible, or even immoral, when we attend to what might be called the “beauty” of “The Garden,” as I am about to do? In reading “The Garden,” then, by all means let us attend to what Annette Kolodny, in the essay quoted earlier, calls “aesthetic pleasures,” and also to the “perfection” (or anyway to the grace) of Marvell’s figurative language. And let us ask ourselves whether “ethical and moral concerns” (as Kolodny puts it) might require of us a “denial,” or at least a serious qualification, of those pleasures.

For example, we might speak of the “balance” and “proportion” of its eight-line stanzas, each composed of eight-syllable iambic tetrameter lines whose tempered regularity of movement registers a kind of already-achieved poise—a poise that seems, for all the world, to arise out of precisely the setting that “The Garden” describes. To put the matter another way: “The Garden” effectively (and affectingly) *creates* the condition of mind to which it aspires: we are reading a poem already “chaste,” a poem already well rid of “passion’s heat” (there is nothing whatsoever intemperate about it). And what is more, this poem may be said to mark the “sublimation,” the elevation and redirection, of a “passionate” eroticism. The desire that might once have been directed toward the “red” and “white” of a (female) lover finds its

redistributed object instead in the things of this passing strange garden, which are described with a sensuality at once unmistakable and, somehow, utterly purged of “heat”: the “delicious” solitude, the “luscious” grapes, and so on. Incidentally, I wonder whether or not the idea of the Eucharist somehow hangs about these “luscious clusters of the vine” (Herbert’s poem “The Cluster” may warrant the suggestion). It would be no surprise to find in “The Garden” a merger of “redemptive” and “erotic” experiences; this sort of thing is often to be encountered in 17th century writing, and is hardly peculiar to the 17th century. In any case, we know from “The Coronet” that Marvell would, so to speak, be the *bride* of the Shepherd rather than the *bridegroom* of the “shepherdess.” There is paradox here, just as there is in John Donne’s sonnet “Batter my heart, Three-Personed God.” This garden both “ravishes” and “chastens” Marvell. In fact, it chastens him by ravishing him: he is “ensnared,” “fallen,” enraptured—but all the while finds his soul the more redeemed from bondage to the body and worldly affairs. Of course, we must qualify any analogy to Donne as soon as we make it: “Batter my heart” is as intemperate and unbalanced in its movements as “The Garden” is poised. In reading Donne, I always suspect that, only with great difficulty, does he achieve any “retreat” at all from “passion’s heat.” Marvell makes the thing look easy.

But when we speak of such matters, are we at all derelict in our duty, or lapsed in our commitments to the common good? Is it an evasion of the real work—is it a “mystification” of the poem—to suggest that “The Garden” is not so much an instance of “patriarchy” as an instance of a more “general” will to detach the self from the body, the better to achieve some redemption from the “passionate” claims on us of what Beauvoir herself calls “the species”? And to suggest, further, that in its artful poise and temperate wit

the poem already vouchsafes us an experience, or foretaste, of that “redemption”? Must we think of “passion’s heat” as a positive good, in the way we emancipated Westerners often do? (I have in mind, here, our general tendency to “celebrate” the body and its desires rather than to treat it and them with wariness—as when Gayle Rubin speaks with nostalgic sympathy of “the wild profusion of infantile sexuality.”) If we abstract from “The Garden” not merely those “memes” peculiar to patriarchy (to borrow a useful term from Richard Dawkins), but also those peculiar to the Christian Church, we may find in it merely an aspiration toward what Buddhists might call perfect detachment. After all, “The Garden” is a kind of “fire sermon.” And maybe we should, rather liberally, take from it the following admonition: It simply must be possible to turn away from “the body” (even without believing in “the soul”).

But however that may be, one thing we certainly can say. In the English Department we are no longer able to read “The Garden”—let alone to teach it—with a kind of unruffled confidence in its general integrity. Literature no longer awes us, as it apparently did awe Longfellow in “Dante.” Most of us have been made ashamed to pray. Our otherworldly gig is up.

The philosopher Richard Rorty has given our new “demystifying” attitude a name: “knowingness.” “Knowingness,” he says, “is a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe. It makes one immune to romantic enthusiasm.”

This state of soul is found in the teachers of literature in American colleges and universities who belong to what Harold Bloom calls “The School of Resentment.” ... They substitute knowing theorization for awe, and resentment over the failures of the past for visions of a better future. Although I prefer “knowingness” to Bloom’s word

“resentment,” my view of these substitutions is pretty much the same as his. Bloom thinks that many rising young teachers of literature can ridicule anything but can hope for nothing, can explain everything but can idolize nothing. Bloom sees them as converting the study of literature into what he calls “one more dismal social science”—and thereby turning departments of literature into isolated academic backwaters. (126-127)

David Bromwich writes to much the same effect: “In the last generation, we have executed a series of ever more intricate turns and dialectical involutions to prove to ourselves that we do not work in an ivory tower: that knowledge and interest go together in all-too-human ways, in every conceivable enterprise.” “Scholars,” Bromwich argues, are no longer “permitted even the illusion of sublime ends which common citizens do allow themselves to believe that they serve from time to time. What an odd outcome this is—and how consistent with the steps we took on the way” (232-233). The problem for Bromwich and Rorty, as in a different way for Bloom, is that the curators of literature have become iconoclasts: where once we had shudders of awe, romantic enthusiasm, and “sublime ends,” we now have knowingness, resentment, the ritual exposure of “interests,” and disillusionment; we “interrogate” literary works and their authors. An apposite passage in Emerson’s essay “Worship” comes to mind. “Another scar of this skepticism,” he says, “is the distrust in human virtue. It is believed by well-dressed proprietors that there is no more virtue than they possess; that the solid portion of society exist for the arts of comfort: that life is an affair to put somewhat between the upper and lower mandibles. How prompt the suggestion of a low motive! Certain patriots in England devoted

themselves for years to creating a public opinion that should break down the corn-laws and establish free trade. ‘Well,’ says the man in the street, ‘Cobden got a stipend out of it’” (886). Have we in the literary precincts of the academy *really* become well-dressed proprietors, inasmuch as to say, “Well, Harriet Beecher Stowe got a stipend out of Uncle Tom, just like a Kentucky mistress,” or “Mark Twain got a stipend out of Jim”? So they did, if you want to be particular about it.

But there must be more to say about the matter. Here is my question: How can we, as critics and curators of literature, salvage ideas like “mystery” and “beauty,” how can we salvage the “sublime ends” David Bromwich alludes to, or the “romantic spontaneity” of which Rorty speaks? How do we make these ideas continue to do good work for us without simply drumming the iconoclasts out of the English Department because, like Harold Bloom, we don’t like the sound of their taunts? How can we, like Marvell in his “Horatian Ode on Cromwell’s Return from Ireland,” acknowledge the claims on us of Cavalier and Roundhead alike? How can we bring history (and politics) to bear on a literary work such as *The Red Badge of Courage* without waving the bloody shirt at its author (I have been known to do as much, with regard to Stephen Crane)? Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* can tell us how, with a little help from Louis Althusser—a terribly knowing, terribly impious philosopher, a philosopher whose interests lie almost entirely on the side of “the tumult of the time disconsolate” and over against the sanctity of Longfellow’s cathedral. It is time for a little close reading.

*(To be continued in the next number of Doshisha Studies in English.)*

## Notes

- 1 This is the first part of a longer essay, the second part of which will appear in the next number of *Doshisha Studies in English*. I thank my colleagues for thinking it worth the while.
- 2 See David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul De Man* (Poseidon Press, 1991). One caveat: Lehman is a conservative with an axe to grind about the academy. In a forthcoming biography, *The Double Life of Paul De Man* (Liveright, 2014), Evelyn Barish argues that the erasure of an anti-Semitic past had been only one of many deceptions in which De Man engaged concerning his early life, even as he practiced a style of writing, and a criticism, disengaged from history. Derrida himself drew fire for the retruse and elusive defense he mounted of De Man in “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War” (*Critical Inquiry* 14 [Spring 1988]: 590-652). See, for example, Jon Wiener, “On Jacques Derrida’s ‘Paul de Man’s War’” (*Critical Inquiry* 15 [Summer 1989]: 797-803).
- 3 Of course, in certain respects debates within the English Department about the proper place of “aesthetics,” or of “beauty,” in literary study merely reframe debates that are very old, and, in fact, ancient. It is nothing new to treat a fascination with “beauty” or “form” with suspicion. George Santayana lays out the coordinates of the debate with his usual clarity in *The Sense of Beauty*: “The relation between aesthetic and moral judgments, between the spheres of the beautiful and the good, is close, but the distinction is that while aesthetic judgments are mainly positive, that is, perceptions of good, moral judgments are mainly and fundamentally negative, or perceptions of evil. Another factor of the distinction is that whereas, in the perception of beauty, our judgment is necessarily intrinsic and based on the character of the immediate experience, and never consciously on the idea of an eventual utility in the object, judgments about moral worth, on the contrary, are always based, when they are positive, upon the consciousness of benefits probably involved. Both these distinctions need some elucidation. Hedonistic ethics have always had to struggle against the moral sense of mankind. Earnest minds, that feel the weight and dignity of life, rebel against the assertion that the aim of right conduct is enjoyment. Pleasure usually appears to them as a temptation, and they sometimes go so far as to make avoidance of it a virtue. The truth is that morality is not mainly concerned with the attainment of pleasure; it is rather concerned, in all its deeper and more authoritative maxims, with the prevention of suffering. There is



something artificial in the deliberate pursuit of pleasure; there is something a little absurd in the obligation to enjoy oneself. We feel no duty in that direction; we take to enjoyment naturally enough after the work of life is done, and the freedom and spontaneity of our pleasures is what is most essential to them” (16-17). This puts the case of what I will be calling the “Roundheads” of the English Department as eloquently as it might ever be put.

4 For an argument similar to Lentricchia’s, see Eugene Goodheart, *The Reign of Ideology* (Columbia University Press, 1997): 1-12.

5 Quiller-Couch writes, in the preface to the first edition of the anthology, published in 1900: “The numbers chosen are either lyrical or epigrammatic. Indeed I am mistaken if a single epigram included fails to preserve at least some faint thrill of the emotion through which it had to pass before the Muse’s lips let it fall, with howsoever exquisite deliberation” (ix). Elsewhere he tells us that, though “care has been taken with the texts,” he has “sometimes thought it consistent with the aim of the book to prefer the more beautiful to the better attested reading” (viii). And he gives himself license to excise “weak or superfluous stanzas” or to “extract a few stanzas from a long poem when persuaded that they could stand alone as a lyric” (viii-ix).

6 Whittier’s class analysis in the abolitionist poem “The Haschish” is withering, shaded, as it is, by a kind of intuitive Marxism:

Of all that Orient lands can vaunt  
Of marvels with our own competing,  
The strangest is the Haschish plant,  
And what will follow on its eating.

What pictures to the taster rise,  
Of Dervish or of Almeh dances!  
Of Eblis, or of Paradise,  
Set all aglow with Houri glances!

The poppy visions of Cathay,  
The heavy beer-trance of the Suabian;  
The wizard lights and demon play  
Of nights Walpurgis and Arabian!

The Mollah and the Christian dog  
Change place in mad metempsychosis;  
The Muezzin climbs the synagogue,  
The Rabbi shakes his beard at Moses!

The Arab by his desert well  
Sits choosing from some Caliph's daughters,  
And hears his single camel's bell  
Sound welcome to his regal quarters.

The Koran's reader makes complaint  
Of Shitan dancing on and off it;  
The robber offers alms, the saint  
Drinks Tokay and blasphemes the Prophet.

Such scenes that Eastern plant awakes;  
But we have one ordained to beat it,  
The Haschish of the West, which makes  
Or fools or knaves of all who eat it.

The preacher eats, and straight appears  
His Bible in a new translation;  
Its angels negro overseers,  
And Heaven itself a snug plantation!

The man of peace, about whose dreams  
The sweet millennial angels cluster,  
Takes the mad weed, and plots and schemes,  
A raving Cuban filibuster!

The noisiest Democrat, with ease,  
It turns to Slavery's parish beadle;  
The shrewdest statesman eats and sees  
Due southward point the polar needle.

The Judge partakes, and sits erelong  
 Upon his bench a railing blackguard;  
 Decides off-hand that right is wrong,  
 And reads the ten commandments backward.

O potent plant! so rare a taste  
 Has never Turk or Gentoo gotten;  
 The hempen Haschish of the East  
 Is powerless to our Western Cotton!

Here, Whittier shows us how “common-sense” public morality, institutional theology, and “representative” politics all speak for the class in whose hands power and capital are concentrated—in this case, the cotton magnates of the lower south, and their Northern industrial affiliates, for whom the white “weed” of cotton is a kind of intoxicating drug (hence “The Haschich”). Essentially, this poem concerns what Louis Althusser, in *Lenin and Philosophy*, calls “Ideological State Apparatuses,” or “ISAs”—institutions not apparently affiliated with the state that nonetheless do the state’s coercive work, and do it, moreover, for the benefit of those who chiefly own the means of production characteristic of the economy in question (in the present case, a slave-holding one). Whittier understood power quite well. He knew how easily (and how unwittingly) we lend ourselves to its purposes. He also knew that in the late 1850s, 50-54% of all revenues from exports in the United States derived from cotton.

7 When Whittier collected “Songs of the Slaves in the Desert” in *Anti-Slavery Poems and Songs of Labor and Reform*—issued in a number of editions from 1850 through 1888, and thereafter brought into the several, multi-volume editions of Whittier’s collected works—he prefaced the poem with the following note:

“Sebah, Oasis of Fezzan, 10th March, 1846.—This evening the female slaves were unusually excited in singing, and I had the curiosity to ask my negro servant, Said, what they were singing about. As many of them were natives of his own country, he had no difficulty in translating the Mandara or Bornou language. I had often asked the Moors to translate their songs for me, but got no satisfactory account from them. Said at first said, ‘Oh, they sing of Rubee’ (God).

‘What do you mean?’ I replied, impatiently. ‘Oh, don’t you know?’ he continued, ‘they asked God to give them their Atka?’ (certificate of freedom). I inquired, ‘Is that all?’ Said: ‘No; they say, “Where are we going? The world is large. O God! Where are we going? O God!”’ I inquired, ‘What else?’ Said: ‘They remember their country, Bornou, and say, “Bornou was a pleasant country, full of all good things; but this is a bad country, and we are miserable!”’ “Do they say anything else?’ Said: ‘No; they repeat these words over and over again, and add, “O God! give us our Atka, and let us return again to our dear home.”’ I am not surprised I got little satisfaction when I asked the Moors about the songs of their slaves. Who will say that the above words are not a very appropriate song? What could have been more congenially adapted to their then woful condition? It is not to be wondered at that these poor bondwomen cheer up their hearts, in their long, lonely, and painful wanderings over the desert, with words and sentiments like these; but I have often observed that their fatigue and sufferings were too great for them to strike up this melancholy dirge, and many days their plaintive strains never broke over the silence of the desert.”— Richardson’s Journal in Africa.

8 Whittier’s prefatory note to “Toussaint L’Ouverture,” a poem celebrating the great black revolutionary—whose legacy made unquiet many a South Carolina plantation owner’s sleep—bears reprinting here:

Toussaint L’Ouverture, the black chieftain of Hayti, was a slave on the plantation “de Libertas,” belonging to M. Bayou. When the rising of the negroes took place, in 1791, Toussaint refused to join them until he had aided M. Bayou and his family to escape to Baltimore. The white man had discovered in Toussaint many noble qualities, and had instructed him in some of the first branches of education; and the preservation of his life was owing to the negro’s gratitude for this kindness. In 1797, Toussaint L’Ouverture was appointed, by the French government, General-in-Chief of the armies of St. Domingo, and, as such, signed the Convention with General Maitland for the evacuation of the island by the British. From this period, until 1801, the island, under the government of Toussaint, was happy, tranquil, and prosperous. The miserable attempt of Napoleon to re-establish slavery in St. Domingo, although it failed of its intended object, proved fatal to the negro chieftain. Treacherously seized by Leclerc, he was hurried on board a vessel by night, and conveyed to France,

where he was confined in a cold subterranean dungeon, at Besancon, where, in April, 1803, he died. The treatment of Toussaint finds a parallel only in the murder of the Duke D'Enghien. It was the remark of Godwin, in his Lectures, that the West India Islands, since their first discovery by Columbus, could not boast of a single name which deserves comparison with that of Toussaint L'Ouverture.

- 9 As for Rubin's continued and interesting currency, see the panel on her work arranged for the 2009 convention of the Modern Language Association: "Rethinking Sex." See also *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, published in 2011 by Duke University Press.
- 10 Steven Pinker attacks this general way of thinking in his controversial, and interesting, book *The Blank Slate* (2002).
- 11 To some extent, Rubin's concerns are familiar from earlier developments, as she herself points out at length. The "Oedipus complex" is, for Freud, the story of how certain unwarrantable dispositions are marked off and repressed as "anti-social," and so on. He, of course, regards this process of repressive consolidation as essentially desirable—as, in fact, necessary to the constitution of "civil" society, notwithstanding its attendant "discontents." For him, repression is a kind of blessing, if nonetheless a mixed one. All the same, as is clear from *Civilization and Its Discontents*, even Freud writes, on occasion, a kind of elegy for what is repressed as a vagrant "infant" subjectivity is organized and matured.
- 12 A related matter: often literary critics now say that language or discourse "constitutes" what it makes present to consciousness. What can this mean? I ask because we often find ourselves making just such claims as this one in classrooms populated by men and women who are not in the habit of speaking in quite this way. Can the business, then, be put simply? Let us imagine that a woman stands before a man. She no doubt "exists" as a body, though to speak of her "body" may already be to "make" her rather than merely to "find" her. To get round this we might say instead that she stands before the man as so much matter—water, salt, carbon, calcium, etc.—which would be, admittedly, to take a radically "ecological" view of things. But in any case, this woman is present to our imaginary man's consciousness *as something*: as a "woman," or as a "tomboy"; as "Britney Spears"; as someone like Britney Spears; as someone altogether unlike Britney Spears; as a German, or a Spaniard; as a card-carrying member of the ACLU; as an employee; as a "white"

person; as a “gay” woman; as a CEO; as “a man trapped in a woman’s body”; as a heterosexual; as an aunt; as a woman who reminds him of his aunt; as a lover; and so on. Every one of these designations implies a “discourse”: a particular way of speaking about the world, and about the people who inhabit it, that divides experience up in special ways (according to class, gender, vocation, kinship, race, nationality, and so on). It is impossible to think of our imaginary man as not having an experience of the woman *as something* (impossible to imagine him as having, instead, an unmediated relation to her). And insofar as she is taken up into a discourse—a discourse of gender, of nationality, of kinship, or anything else just named—she may rightly be said, as present to the consciousness of the man who stands before her, to have been “produced” by “discourse.” And if we can say this of something that is so apparently already out there as is “a woman,” then so much the more so can we say it of abstractions like “white people,” or “Christ the Lord,” or the “proletariat,” or “private property,” or “free” markets, or “tradition.” Such things are not “out there” waiting to be described; they are not waiting to be “found” (“whiteness” was invented more or less in the 17th century, and it will someday disappear, the sooner the better). They are brought into being by the languages we use; our languages occasion them. And they are hardly inconsequential. In the names of some of these “discourse-produced” things, men have driven one another into the grave by the millions. It follows from all this that a truly radical break in the “language” we use to become “aware” of the world—the language we use to “divide it up,” noticing certain things, not noticing certain others—may actually “produce” radically new ways of being in the world, ways which may not include the categories “American,” “white person,” and “Spaniard” (let alone the categories “tomboy,” “card-carrying member of the ACLU,” and “*unlike* Britney Spears”). As I understand it, this is all that the post-structuralists maintain, though it is much.

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