

*Wide Angle*  
*a journal of literature and film*

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## Mission Statement

Literature and film continually reimagine an ever-changing world, and through our research we discover our relationships to those art forms and the cultures they manifest. Publishing one issue each semester, *Wide Angle* serves as a conduit for the expression and critique of that imagination. A joint publication between English majors and faculty, the journal embodies the interdisciplinary nature of the Department of English at Samford University. It provides a venue for undergraduate research, an opportunity for English majors to gain experience in the business of editing and publishing, and a forum for all students, faculty, and staff to publish their best work. As a wide-angle lens captures a broad field of vision, this journal expands its focus to include critical and creative works, namely academic essays, book and film reviews, and commentaries, as well as original poetry, short fiction and non-fiction, short films, and screenplays.

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*Michael Arthur*

## **The Films of Power**

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**T**he *Lord of the Rings* films may in fact be better than the novels. This claim may be repulsive for most aficionados of J.R.R. Tolkien's work. Those individuals understand that Tolkien's work addresses a variety of philosophical issues and deserves the acclaim acquired over the decades. Close readers of the novels realize that Tolkien's works fundamentally deal with one single issue: the use of power. Tolkien lived through a time of tremendous upheaval. He fought in World War I and saw the horrors of World War II. In each of these instances he saw how individuals used the power they had collected for good and for ill. These life experiences infuse the work of Tolkien as much as his background as a scholar of languages and Icelandic sagas. Thus *The Lord of the Rings* novels display characters dealing with the issue of how to utilize wisely the power given to them. However, the theme conveys more emotion and feeling through the films due to the greater empathy the protagonists elicit from the audience.

First, it is important to explore why the audience identifies with fictional characters. Berys Gaut, in *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* states that viewers identify with characters via their suspension of disbelief, that while the viewer does not believe they are the protagonist they will react as if they were the character because of identification (Gaut 225). The audience is imagining themselves in the same position as the characters and thus responding to the challenges the character faces as if the audience themselves were in that situation (Gaut 257).

This identification surpasses the novel due to its immediate sensory impact (Gaut 247). The visuals of film, essentially recognizing pictures, are more accessible, requiring little to no linguistic knowledge necessitated by imagery used in novels (Gaut 247). While reading, the audiences retain the capability to think through a scene rather than just experiencing the scene. The scene no longer creates a visceral impact but rather an intellectual one. Thus film has the power to bypass this intellectual impact. The visceral impact of film exhibits itself primarily through the portrayal Aragorn and Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* films.

One of the most striking differences between the novels and the films is the portrayal of Aragorn. In the novels, Aragorn stands ready to enter into his kingdom and uses his authority and strength to protect his people and his land. His journey consists of rallying the disparate communities of the Men of the West in order to withstand the coming onslaught of Mordor. There is nothing wrong with such a character—indeed, having a king reclaiming his rightful inheritance fits within Tolkien’s conception of what a hero should strive towards. The Aragorn of the novels would feel quite comfortable either in *Beowulf* or the *Hrolf Kraki Saga*.<sup>1</sup> However, the reader discovers that Aragorn has self-doubts like any other leader. However, these moments of doubts appear infrequently and overshadowed by his feats of martial prowess and his commanding presence. This is an individual who is in full control of his authority and comfortable exercising his power. When he meets the Rhohirrim for the first time, he displays his authority, ““Elendil!” he cried. ‘I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn, and am called Elessar, the

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<sup>1</sup> The *Hrolf Kraki Saga* is an Icelandic epic that expounds on characters and stories found in other ancient Anglo-Saxon texts. Tolkien would have studied this text along with *Beowulf*. The *Saga* provides inspiration for Tolkien particularly in *The Hobbit*. The *Saga* also reinforces the heroic tropes found in *Beowulf* that had tremendous impact on Tolkien’s writing. The protagonists are characterized by their power, strength, and prowess in battle. In short, it provides a framework for Aragorn in the novels (Rateliff 256-60).

Elfstone, Dúnadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil's son of Gondor. Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again! Will you aid me or thwart me? Choose swiftly!” (Tolkien 423).

In comparison, the film version of Aragorn displays the self-doubt mentioned in the novels, regularly. Instead of immediately taking charge by virtue of his heritage, Aragorn actually tries to deny his heritage (Perf. Mortensen, New Line Cinema). He consistently tries to deny the power of his bloodline, even going so far as to assert that his bloodline no longer has the moral right to be Kings over Gondor due to the weakness of Isildur. This portrayal resonates more clearly with the audience of the film. The self-doubt of the protagonist echoes the self-doubts of the audience. As individuals, people question their decisions on a daily basis, unsure of their future and whether the decisions they make are morally correct. The audience feels empathetic with Aragon because of the shared struggle over decisions. It is the struggle over how individuals exercise their will or their power on a day-to-day basis. Ultimately, Aragorn in the films overcomes his self-doubts and uses his power to improve the world around him. The audience celebrates this correct use of power because Aragorn arrives at this solution through the same process as a normal individual despite his exalted status.

Another important difference is the portrayal of Frodo Baggins. In the novels, Frodo is a middle-aged hobbit who is thrust unexpectedly into a quest that will determine the fate of the world. Hobbits, by Tolkien’s own description, tend to be genteel individuals with rather static and comfortable lives (Tolkien 2). Thus when Frodo is put in a position with one of the most powerful objects in Middle-Earth, he is afraid but also remarkably calm. He must resist the corrupting influence of the One Ring until it is destroyed. As he journeys, he changes slowly until he ultimately subverts his quest by refusing to destroy the ring. Tolkien uses the mythic

story of the Ring of Gyges<sup>2</sup> to create the One Ring, a Ring which makes the user invisible.

Tolkien also uses the Ring to answer the question, “Who are you in the Dark?” Frodo shows that even the most inherently good individual could be corrupted. While the novels do characterize this change adequately, it is difficult to comprehend this transformation truly because the change is not as visible through Frodo’s dialogue.

The films, however, give us a visual representation of Frodo’s corruption, the corrupting power of the One Ring. Frodo at the beginning of the films is young, vibrant, and full of hope. As the films continue, the power of the One Ring visually changes the young Hobbit. He begins to lose his energetic step, his eyes begin to lose focus, and the sense of adventure is replaced with one of despair. The longer he bears the burden, his behavior changes, becoming more aggressive and more prone to violence. An example appears during the siege of Osgiliath: Frodo attacks his constant companion, Sam, his only support on his quest (Perf. Wood, New Line Cinema). This scene symbolizes Tolkien’s viewpoint of the corrupting influence of power. Power left unchecked will turn the individual into a being concerned only for his/her selfish desires. This visual representation is striking and disconcerting and provides a memory that will remain with the audience. The audience sees themselves in Frodo, fulfilling the theory of identification, and thus sees his corruption as a possible future for them.

With these two characters, Tolkien shows how power can be a dangerous subject.

Through Aragorn, the audience sees the need to mediate power through deliberation and through Frodo, the corrupting influence of power. Both characters show this process through the novels,

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<sup>2</sup> The Ring of Gyges is a myth found in Plato’s *Republic*. Socrates and Glaucon discuss whether an individual can resist temptation to do evil if there was no possibility of being caught. The device used to illustrate this concept is a magic ring which makes the wearer invisible. The legend relates that Gyges uses this ring to overthrow his king and take the throne for himself. The lure of power coupled with the magic of the ring lead Gyges to commit acts of evil (*Republic* 35-36).



but the films provide characters with visual representations that resonate more strongly with the audience.

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*Sam Hahn*

## Hope Beyond the Trenches: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Lost Generation

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With the eleventh of November approaching, the Britons in London donned paper poppies on their autumn jackets in commemoration of the First World War. Marking the one hundredth anniversary since Great Britain joined the Great War, the symbol of the poppy reminds its bearers to honor the fallen heroes of the armed forces, from both the past and the present. Moreover, the floral tributes remember not only those who died, but also those who survived: the Lost Generation, as popularized by Ernest Hemmingway, to which J.R.R. Tolkien belonged. Although included among peers disillusioned by the trenches, Tolkien responded atypically to warfare within his fantasy literature—particularly, in *The Lord of the Rings*—by affirming hope beyond the battlefield.

Following the trauma of the First World War, the literary climate of Britain shifted dramatically, becoming overwhelmingly nonviolent and antinationalistic, fueled with the disillusionment driven by the horrors of trench warfare. Literature throughout Great Britain—produced by notable authors like Siegfried Sassoon—proved reactionary against the propaganda used by the government to inspire loyalty to the royal crown and resolve against the German enemy. One such example appears from a poem by Wilfred Owens, “Dulce et Decorum Est,” reading:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 [. . . . .]  
 My Friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
 Pro patria mori. (qtd. in Jackson 53)

After experiencing the terrible conditions within the trenches, the postwar authors largely rejected the viability of warfare, attempting to heal their psychological wounds inflicted while witnessing the outrageous slaughter of their friends and foes.

However, despite enduring similar experiences in the First World War, Tolkien reacted quite differently. From numerous personal letters and several firsthand accounts, the record of Tolkien's involvement in the Great War remains well documented. Serving as a communications officer in the British military, Tolkien participated in the Battle of Somme. Although surviving the conflict, Tolkien returned home before the end of the war after contracting trench fever, only learning of the deaths of his closest friends thereafter. Hence, on account of his involvement in the First World War, Tolkien found himself amidst the generation of young men disenchanted and disillusioned by the horror of the trenches. Yet, unusually for his context, Tolkien avoided the ranks of the critical postwar veterans, who declaimed the killing as useless, preferring the opposite outlook. Looking beyond the bloody atrocity of the Great War, Tolkien saw war as just and death as honorable.

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien depicts warfare as necessary, rather than useless. During such major battles as Helm's Deep, Minas Tirith, and Pelennor Fields, the free peoples of Middle-earth contest the hordes of Orcs and Uruk-hai, namely, the military forces of

Sauron and Saruman. Notably, Tolkien never discusses the ethicality of the free peoples slaughtering their enemies. Instead, Tolkien describes the military conflict within *The Lord of the Rings* as the stark struggle between good and evil, pitting elves, dwarves, and men against the hosts of Mordor and Isengard. Therefore, warfare becomes necessary to protect the peoples of Middle-earth from the oppression of evil. In “The Window on the West” from *The Two Towers*, Faramir confirms this interpretation of Tolkien by saying, “War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all” (672). Until the triumph over evil, the waging of war, Tolkien asserts, must persist in order to preserve goodness, truth, and beauty within the world.

In addition to justifying war, Tolkien portrays death in battle as inspirational, rather than traumatic. Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien regularly sacrifices his characters in defense of Middle-earth. In “The Battle of the Pelennor Fields” from *The Return of the King*, the Witch-king of Angmar descends upon the battlefield, intending to turn the tide against the Rohirrim by breaking the body of their beloved king, Théoden. However, upon seeing the mutilated body of Théoden, Éomer says, “Mourn not overmuch! Mighty was the fallen, meet was his ending. When his mound is raised, women then shall weep. War now calls us!” (843). At the conclusion of the exhortation, Tolkien describes the response: “*Death* they cried with one voice loud and terrible, and gathering speed like a great tide their battle swept about their fallen king and passed, roaring away southwards” (844, Tolkien emphasis). Other examples include Boromir at Amon Hen, shot by arrows in defense of the Halflings, and Gandalf on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, falling into the abyss to protect the Fellowship from the Balrog. Hereby, Tolkien presents the reality of death—amidst the sorrow and horror—heroically, without a trace of irony or irreverence. Rather than producing disillusionment and despair, the honorable deaths of

Théoden, Boromir, and Gandalf all inspire their witnesses to fight and die with greater resolve.

Having established Tolkien's vision of warfare and death throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, the question remains as to how Tolkien avoided the disillusionment of his contemporaries. The answer seemingly appears in "The Last Debate" from *The Return of the King*. Following the triumph against the forces of Sauron at Minas Tirith, the leaders of the free peoples of Middle-earth gather together to decide upon the final strategy to defeat the dark lord. During the council, Gandalf memorably asserts, "This war is without final hope. [. . .] Victory cannot be achieved by arms, whether you sit here to endure siege after siege, or march out to be overwhelmed beyond the River" (878). Upon receiving the fearful indignation of the assembly, Gandalf continues: "I said victory could not be achieved by arms. I still hope for victory, but not by arms. [. . .] We cannot achieve victory by arms, but by arms we can give the Ring-bearer his only chance" (878-80). Through the voice of Gandalf, Tolkien reveals the reason for his hopefulness amidst the death and destruction of battle: war cannot be hope. Whereas the Lost Generation had looked toward the Great War to eliminate evil and had become disillusioned when the bloodshed failed, Tolkien considered warfare not as the solution to, but as the restraint of, evil. Tolkien never trusted in war to solve the problems of the world and, thereby, never became discouraged when war failed to accomplish change. In fantasy, victory came not through the weapons of elves, dwarves, and men, but through the destruction of the One Ring; in reality, victory comes not through superior military strength but through the annihilation of evil. Ultimately, in affirmation of his Roman Catholicism, Tolkien established his hope for mankind's liberation from evil upon the triune divinity of Christianity and the promise of resurrection.

Unlike his contemporaries, Tolkien believed in hope beyond and apart from the battlefield, allowing him to look past the Great War and to accept war as necessary and death as

inspirational. Finally, Faramir's words fittingly summarize Tolkien's understanding of war: "I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend" (672).

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*Stone Hendrickson*

## **Into Nature with “Young Goodman Brown”**

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**W**riters often produce their greatest works when they deal with subjects relating to them in a deeply personal manner. Whether stories give authors opportunities to recast autobiographical facts or describe themes with great personal concern, close connections with their work inspire authors to write at their most elevated levels even as they reveal their most deeply held beliefs. This is certainly true of one of the great American Gothic writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne. A direct descendant of the New England Puritans, Hawthorne was well aware of his direct connection to the infamous religious practices of his ancestors. In fact, one of his forefathers served as a judge in the Salem Witch Trials. Hawthorne displayed his concern with this connection when he made a slight change to his last name so as to create a more distinct identity for himself. This concern with his troubling heritage manifests itself in the Puritan themes and settings that pervade Hawthorne’s work. He particularly focused on the faults of the Puritans’ religious practices and worldview. Many of his works testify to this perception. One of his most famous short stories, “Young Goodman Brown,” offers a dynamic and complex view of Puritan theology and its practical effects. While exploring his quintessential themes of guilt and the social environment of the Puritans, Hawthorne creates a character, Goodman Brown, who is unable to cope with his sin in his Puritan context. Specifically, the morally dichotomous simplicity of Puritanism forces Brown to project his suppressed guilt onto others while in the uncertain context of nature.

“Young Goodman Brown” begins with a delightful scene involving goodman Brown saying goodbye to his pretty, pink-ribboned wife, Faith. In this scene, Brown mentions the fact that he and his wife are but three months married (Hawthorne 620). In her essay concerning Puritan conversion and “Young Goodman Brown,” Jane Eberwein describes the reference to Brown having been married to Faith for three months as indicating his recent conversion (25). The official marriage relationship was a public pronouncement of a status of full conversion to Christianity in the context of the Puritan church (25). As such, Brown is subject to certain pressures and fears peculiar to those who have only recently obtained full membership. Eberwein writes, “Hawthorne presents him here as he encounters the first real test of his conversion, the experience that will indicate whether he has really achieved faith and experienced grace” (25). This early period of his participation in the Church appears to be crucial for the remainder of his life on earth and his eternal fate.

The pressure placed upon Brown by Puritan conversion theology would have taken a specific form. Eberwein writes that in Puritan New England, “[. . .] churches actively attempted to restrict membership to those who could give satisfactory evidence of their conversion” (24). In doing this, “[. . .] the judgment [of] the church congregations came to seem almost definitive, imposing a special relationship between the searching Christian and his community” (25). This relationship is one example of a larger component of the Puritan worldview. For the Puritans, the external was always directly and infallibly indicative of the internal. This is the context for goodman Brown’s intense guilt. As a Puritan recently converted, he must continue to perform appropriately in order to assure his community and himself that he is in fact one of the elect. Hawthorne seems to indicate that Brown has done this successfully while residing in an urban



environment. No one seems to suspect the nature of the dark deed in which he is about to participate.

At this point, it is important to establish some aspects of the Puritans' relationship to nature. It is no accident that Brown's bizarre experience happens while he is in the woods rather than in his town. Urban settings are by definition objects of human construction. Consequently, they provided ideal settings for Puritan life, which depended so heavily on manipulating external reality so as to control what was internally indicated. This aspect of the town creates the possibility for Puritans such as Brown to live righteously in the perception of others while maintaining deeply sinful ideas and thoughts internally. However, in the Puritan conception, nature was fundamentally opposed to urban settings in this sense. Because the wild woods were not as subject to the whims and dictates of humans, the Puritans could not so easily control and manipulate them. They generally considered the wilds of nature to be the dwelling places of demonic spirits and Indian savages, although they often failed to make a distinction between the two. However, as will become apparent, this sharp Puritanical distinction between nature and town does not actually correspond with reality, at least as Brown comes to perceive it. This is particularly problematic for the Puritans' construction of reality in terms of a strict moral dichotomy.

Thus, Brown's journey into nature develops and exposes his inner conflict. The narrative gradually reveals that Brown is going to participate in a meeting with the devil and his worshipers. With the clarification of his agenda, Brown seems to present a character deeply committed to evil. This is strong evidence that Brown is actually reprobate and does not ultimately want to be a member of the elect. Yet, Hawthorne insists that Brown is experiencing internal tension and truly desires to reach the Christian's paradise. Brown's "heart smote him"

when he departed for the meeting, and he determined to follow Faith to Heaven after his one devilish escapade (Hawthorne 620). Hawthorne seamlessly aligns two fundamentally conflicting ideas about Brown. Although only recently converted, he still seems to be a Puritan in good standing with the Church. Further, he is happily married to Faith herself. Yet, he is interested in investigating witchcraft and devil worship. By way of explanation, Michael Colacurcio describes Brown's illicit interests as "presumptive" when he writes, "[H]e [believes that he] can now explore the dimension of diabolical evil with impunity. Having joined the ranks of the safe [. . .] he can, he believes, have a little taste of witchcraft" (271). Colacurcio points to Brown's desire as a symptom of the Puritans' concept of "total depravity *par excellence*," the inherently sinful nature of all human beings (271, author's emphasis). Even if Brown appears, and on that basis considers himself, to be a truly converted Christian, he still secretly evidences the evil desires native to his depraved soul. The tremendous importance of maintaining an outwardly righteous appearance intensifies Brown's conflict with the fundamentally dark purposes of his heart.

Goodman Brown's journey into the forest forms the heart of the story even as it reveals the true nature of Brown's own heart. When Brown leaves Faith at the beginning of the story, he begins to reveal the inner tension with which he is struggling. According to Colacurcio, "And, as an external sign of his compromised internal condition, he has *already* begun to be suspicious of others, even those in whose virtue he is most accustomed naively to trust" (264, author's emphasis). Colacurcio goes on to describe Brown's attempts to quiet his wife's fears as indications of his unnecessary suspicion of his apparently innocent wife (264). When Brown asks, "[D]ost thou doubt me already, and we but three months married!" (Hawthorne 620), he reveals the anxiety produced by his own guilt. The true depth of his guilt becomes much clearer as the story continues with his journey into the woods. According to Michael Tritt, "In an

attempt to *escape* his guilt-consciousness and the concomitant moral anxiety, Brown projects his guilt onto those around him” (114, author’s emphasis). Thus, Brown’s journey into the woods becomes an opportunity for him to deal openly with the weighty guilt hanging on his soul. Freed from the rigidly established semiotic structures of the Puritan town, he begins to create his own semiotics. Brown externalizes his guilt by imagining other Puritans participating in devil worship to a much more heinous extent than he himself. For instance, he first notices that the Satan figure with whom he is walking bears a resemblance to an older version of Brown (perhaps his grandfather) (Hawthorne 621). Brown then recognizes his teacher, Goody Cloyse; his deacon; and his minister, each journeying to the devilish meeting in turn (622-24). The shocking nature of Brown’s projections reveals the horrible depth of his guilt. His disturbingly evil mission in the forest shakes Brown to his moral core (Tritt 116). As a result, he begins to reject his most basic and dearly held conceptions of his spiritual guides and role models and “inadvertently [. . .] create[s] for himself [. . .] the distorted and fantastic people’ who become his neighbors” (116). The open and uncertain environment of nature allows Brown to project characters who, like himself, maintain a holy visage in their Puritan town but reveal their inner darkness in the woods.

This jarring discordance quickly leads Brown to act out openly the dark nature within himself. Colacurcio writes, “Surely this contradiction of evidences will prove unsettling to a young man who has the habit of believing the moral world is adequately defined as the mirror-image opposition between the covenants and communions of God and Satan, and that these ultimate differences can be discovered with enough certainty to guarantee the organization of society” (272). Indeed, his “unsettling” visions cause Brown’s previous understanding of God and Satan and the world in which he lives to collapse totally. After seeing these visions, Brown is “maddened with despair” and cries, “There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come,

devil! for to thee is this world given” (Hawthorne 625). Tritt writes, “Inevitably, Brown tumbles into ‘the heart of the dark wilderness [. . .] with the instinct that guides mortal man to evil’ (83)” (114). Giving up his pretenses, Goodman Brown gives himself over to the demonic brotherhood and embraces his inner wickedness (114). After enduring the pressure of maintaining a holy façade in his town, Brown loses all restraint in the shadows of the morally ambiguous woods and finally gives full expression to the devilish desires of his soul. His fantasy begins with visions of his neighbors and mentors throwing off their hypocritical semblances of holiness and culminates in his own wild and total embrace of darkness.

Although it is tempting to create a sharp distinction between the town and the forest, the relationship is much more complex. Admittedly, the setting of the story presents an apparent opposition of good and evil from the outset. According to David Kesterson, this dichotomy is expressed in two sets of nature images (43). He points out that the “sunshine” images are consistently associated with the Salem village but that the “cloud” images are used in the context of the woods (Kesterson 44). Hawthorne also uses phrases such as “the gloomiest trees of the forest” and “deep dusk in the forest” to emphasize further the darkness in nature (Hawthorne 620). This imagery is expressive of a typical Puritan understanding of the world. In an essay about understanding evil in “Young Goodman Brown,” Michael Jaynes writes, “Semiotically, if approached simplistically, the story is overwrought with obvious and easy signs signifying traditional symbols of good and evil” (67). However, Hawthorne is actually saying much more. Such a superficial approach to the story parallels a superficial approach to morality. Hawthorne seems to be suggesting that just as a naïve reader might perceive this story in terms of a simplistic dichotomy, so the Puritans perceived all of reality simplistically. In fact, a closer reading of the text reveals subtle signs that the dichotomy is not completely adequate. As Brown

is departing the village at the beginning of the story, Hawthorne gives the reader clues that the situation is unclear and unsettled. Brown's wife Faith declares that she is "troubled with such dreams and such thoughts, that she's afeard of herself, sometimes" (Hawthorne 620). As described above, Brown responds by asking if she doubts him (620). As he departs, Brown wonders if Faith's uncertain expression means that she knows what he is about to do (620). All of these interactions expose cracks in the façade of externalized dichotomies of good and evil so carefully developed by the Puritans in their urban environment.

This uncertainty grows as the story follows Brown into nature. While in the woods, Brown has even less control or understanding of external, physical signifiers and consequently grows ever more confused as to the reality signified. Hawthorne repeatedly uses language that indicates vagueness and uncertainty in nature. Upon initially entering the forest, Brown fears that "there *may be* a devilish Indian behind every tree" (620, emphasis added). His companion's staff "bore the *likeness* of a great black snake [. . .] [which] *might almost* been seen to twist and wriggle" (621, emphasis added). Later, the deacon and minister *appear* to ride by without casting a shadow (624, emphasis added). The darkness of nature facilitates all of these fears, doubts, and uncertainties. In fact, Tritt writes, "The forest in this context reflects a world of Brown's sinfulness. Johnson describes 'the landscape through which [Brown] travels' as a 'hellish externalization of his own heart'" (114). Brown's projections in the midst of nature are dark and dubious. Jaynes writes, "A closer reading of the story shows that it is more likely there is only human nature, and the terms 'evil' and 'good' are empty signifiers [. . .] and are often based on the irrational construct of religious doctrine which tends to force supernatural signifiers on natural phenomena" (69). Brown experiences a crisis in his understanding of good and evil that seems to be facilitated by his journey into nature. His projections in the woods reveal his

awakening understanding of the complexity inherent in morality and the lack of clearly defined moral dichotomies.

Brown's crisis eventually culminates in his desperate plea to his wife: "Faith! Faith!" cried the husband. 'Look up to Heaven, and resist the Wicked One!'" (Hawthorne 628). With these words, the devilish assembly disappears and goodman Brown finds himself alone in the woods (628). Hawthorne then relates the deeply troubling and revealing end of the story. Brown returns to his village where the Puritans are still living in their firm righteousness. However, after his forest experience, Brown refuses to accept this appearance as reality and believes his teacher, minister, and even his wife to be utter hypocrites of the foulest variety. Hawthorne writes, "A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from the night of that fearful dream" (628). Sadly, Brown seems to embrace totally his spectral dream as evidence of the true nature of his neighbors.

This response by the main character forces the reader to consider whether the forest journey was a dream or actual reality. In fact, Hawthorne directly asks the reader, "Had goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?" (628). Next, the reader must consider whether that question is even consequential in terms of the story's ultimate meaning. Colacurcio interprets this story as a statement by Hawthorne about spectral evidence when he writes, "Literally, in the seventeenth century, Brown 'sees specters' that *seem* to reveal the diabolical commitment of the persons to whom they belong; but this seeming is highly untrustworthy, and Brown's inferences are illegitimate [. . .] we can only conclude that specter evidence *is* projective fantasy" (275, author's emphasis). Colacurcio believes the spectral appearances in "Young Goodman Brown" to be a matter of projection.

This approach to understanding the forest experience also provides a sufficient framework for understanding Brown's attitude toward his neighbors upon his return. Having accepted his fantastical dream about his neighbors being "devil worshippers," he continues to project this idea onto them even after returning to conscious activity in his town (Tritt 115). "Reeling from his self-revelation, he 'inadvertently [. . .] create[s] for himself [. . .] the distorted and fantastic people' who become his neighbors" (116). Brown does not seem to be able to bear the possibility that he could be alone in his terrible guilt. If he is not a true convert and member of the Church according to the strict Puritan standards, then no one else can be. Raised in the intolerant moral dichotomies of Puritan theology, Brown can conceive of people only as entirely good or entirely bad. Yet, his own existential guilt testifies to the combination of good and evil that resides within himself. His desire ultimately to attain true goodness is at odds with his involvement with the devil. This intolerable tension inevitably results in his fantastical projections, which assure him that others must be just as guilty as he is. Upon returning from his dream journey, Brown continues to project his guilt onto others in order to cope with the reality of moral complexity that he has experienced. As a result, Brown ostracizes himself from the society that he now perceives as corrupt and hypocritical.

In this ending, Hawthorne reveals his own perception of Puritanism's inherent flaws. In his understanding, a theological system that attempts to compartmentalize reality into a simplistic understanding of good and evil will inevitably lead to guilt expressed in absurdly fantastic experiences. Hawthorne clearly perceives Puritanism as an artificial system relying on projection in order to survive. The Puritans categorically project evil onto nature, Indians, and often women in order to exorcise the demons from their own hearts. Brown, a product of Puritan thinking, follows suit by projecting his inner evil and guilt onto his own Puritan neighbors when

he travels into nature and even when he returns to civilization. Hawthorne creates a story in which the Puritans' inaccurate understanding of good and evil ultimately results in the disintegration of their societal constructions of morality in the mind of goodman Brown.



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*Lauren Morris*

### **Creusa, Dido, and Juno: Virgil's Triptych of *Pietas* in the Ideal Roman**

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In the Classical sense, the word *feminine* describes a woman who is “deeply ambiguous” (“Women”).<sup>3</sup> She is necessary yet irrational. While her reproductive roles are crucial to the establishment of humanity, she is “easily deceived” and, therefore, “unable to make sensible judgments.” Furthermore, in Classical literature, writers such as Sophocles and Aeschylus often imbue women with the characteristics of “spite,” “treachery,” and “lack of self-control.” As a result of their perceived physical and emotional weakness, women consistently “fall short of the ideal which is the adult male citizen.” The female figures in Books One, Two, Four, and Six of *The Aeneid* are no different. While Creusa embodies the Romans’ duty to family, Dido and Juno provide foils that clarify the importance of the citizens’ dedication to Rome and its gods. In brief, Virgil uses female tendencies illustrated through the actions of Creusa, Dido, and Juno to demonstrate the characteristic of *pietas*—devotion to one’s family, country, and gods—in the ideal Roman.

Virgil primarily conveys the Romans’ duty to family through Aeneas’s wife Creusa. When the Achaean forces ransack Troy, Creusa’s initial address begs Aeneas to uphold his familial duties: “Your first duty should be to guard our house” (Virgil 2.843). She even “fl[ings] herself at [the] feet [of Aeneas] and hug[s] [his] knees” (2.837). Holding their precious son Iulus “up to his father” (2.838), Creusa pleads, “If you are going off to die [. . .] / then take us with you too, / to face the worst together” (2.839-41). In these lines, Creusa displays her

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<sup>3</sup> In this paragraph, I will be borrowing heavily from the entry on women in *Brill’s New Pauly Encyclopedia of the Ancient World*.

devotion to family and encourages Aeneas to maintain familial unity and dedication, modeling *pietas* to her reputable husband. Additionally, Creusa exemplifies her unwavering commitment when Aeneas seeks refuge for his family and asks Creusa to follow “in his footsteps at a distance” (2.885). In contrast, he *carries* his father Anchises to safety. Her familial charity, which is championed by Trojan culture, encourages Aeneas to act as an ideal Roman, prioritizing his patrilineal blood over his marriage. He further demonstrates his fidelity to his father when he cries out, “Come, dear father, climb onto my shoulders. / I will carry you on my back. This labor of love / will never wear me down” (2.880-2). Aeneas’s intensely endearing tone reveals his allegiance to his patriarch rather than his matrimony.

Aeneas values the responsibility to Anchises over his marriage, and Creusa seems to support this hierarchy. In fact, the father-son bond between Anchises and Aeneas is so strong that, when Creusa is lost in the turmoil of the battle, Aeneas “never look[s] back” and Creusa “never cross[es] [his] mind” (2.920). Though he briefly looks for his lost wife, nothing ultimately hinders him from preserving his patrilineal lineage. Margaret Homans states, “Aeneas’s most important epithet can apply only to a man’s relation to his father, his son, his gods, and his civilization, not to his marriage” (Homans 372). Furthermore, Creusa continues to support Aeneas’s patrilineal dedication when she appears to him as a ghost. Through informing him that “great joy and a kingdom are yours to claim” and urging him to find a “queen to make your wife,” she spurs him to his future endeavors and demonstrates her commitment to helping him exhibit *pietas* to his family (Virgil 2.971-2). Creusa understands that her death is a pathway that Aeneas must cross in order to actualize his Roman fate.

Aeneas’s interaction with Creusa’s ghost can be juxtaposed with his interaction with the ghost of Anchises. In both occurrences, Virgil uses the same four lines to describe Aeneas’s

experience; however, the results of each encounter are very different. While Creusa's ghost leaves him "dissolving into empty air" (2.982), Anchises's ghost inspires him with the imperial formula for the prosperity of Rome (6.981-4). Creusa leaves Aeneas "long[ing] to say so much" (2.981), while Anchises's ghost bears the same emotional burden as Aeneas. To illustrate, when he saw Aeneas in the underworld, "tears ran down his cheeks" and "a cry broke from his lips" (6.794). "I knew you'd come," he called, "I counted the moments – / my longing has not betrayed me" (6.797-8). As opposed to "arresting the onward flow of narrative," as the ghost of Creusa does, Anchises's ghost advances Aeneas's journey, providing "assurance that the future and especially the successive generation of sons, will come to pass" (Homans 373). The differences between these encounters uncover the importance of rescuing Aeneas's *paterfamilias* and, therefore, warrant his commitment to his legitimate family, which includes Anchises and their male kin.

However, Anchises is not the only person Aeneas intentionally saves when he escapes Troy. Aeneas is responsible for preserving his male lineage, especially with regards to his son Iulus (Ascanius), whose destiny is to be a forefather of the Roman people. Creusa's parting words verifiably plead for Aeneas to "hold dear the son [they] share," in the view that Iulus will be instrumental in the creation of Rome (Virgil 2.978). Similarly, Creusa urges Aeneas to protect his son, as this responsibility, if not taken seriously, has grave consequences for the honor of Aeneas's family and for the future of Rome. Yet again, Creusa is the catalyst for Aeneas's display of *pietas*, both to his family and to his country.

Although Aeneas takes his duties seriously, he experiences momentary distraction when he lands on the shores of Carthage and falls in love with Queen Dido. Her influence on him, as compared with Creusa's, is extremely destructive. After Aeneas and Dido consummate their

relationship in the cave, Dido “cares no more / for appearances, nor for her reputation. She no longer thinks to keep the affair a secret” (4.214-6). As Paul Allen Miller observes, Dido’s disregard for her city is extremely “dangerous to Carthage,” because it “caus[es] work on the city to grind to a halt and lead[s] to Dido’s final curse of eternal enmity between Romans and Carthaginians” (Miller 231). More importantly, her forfeit of *pietas* to her country negatively influences Aeneas. During his time in Carthage, Aeneas is very different from the traditionally disciplined Roman man. Heedless of Rome, he “warm[s] / the winter with obscene desire” (Virgil 4.242-23). He is an “abject thrall of lust” (4.244). King Iarbas, son of Jupiter, even calls Aeneas “the Dardan captain / who [ . . . ] / pays no heed to the cities Fate decrees are his” (4.280-82), commenting: “This is not the man his mother, the lovely goddess, promised” (4.284). While in love with Dido, Aeneas is unprincipled. He focuses only on his relationship and consequently forfeits *pietas* to his country. Therefore, Dido’s influence briefly causes Aeneas to become less than the ideal Roman man.

Nevertheless, Dido’s negligence of *pietas* to her country reinforces the strength of Aeneas’s loyalty to Rome the moment he decides to leave Carthage. When Aeneas discovers that it is the destiny of his patrilineal line to found Rome as the New Troy, he puts his love and desire for Dido aside for the good of his fatherland: “Troy is the city, first of all, that I’d safeguard, / Troy and all that’s left of my people whom I cherish” (4.426-27). This is what finally impels Aeneas to “fit out the fleet,” “muster the crews,” and set “all tackle to [ . . . ] shore” (4.357-58). Despite his love for Dido, he refuses to “put personal desire ahead of the welfare of the social whole” (Miller 231) and instead vows to “seize on Italy’s noble land,” calling it his newfound home (Virgil 4.431-33). In culmination, Aeneas’s resistance to the feminine influence of Dido

reinforces his dedication to his country because it enables him to leave a woman and a city that he loves in order to found Rome.

Aeneas not only resists Dido, but he also thwarts the influence of Juno, Queen of the Olympic gods. He instead devotes himself to male deities. Although there are many instances in which Juno attempts to rob Aeneas of his destiny, the most profound illustration of “cruel Juno’s relentless rage” (1.5) is her unyielding enticement to “bind [Aeneas and Dido] in lasting marriage” (4.155). Yet when Jupiter sends Mercury to inform Aeneas of his apparent domestication (4.330-3), Aeneas not only listens, but he does so without rebuke or rebuttal. Furthermore, despite the “full force of love and suffering deep in his great heart,” his resolve to leave Carthage “stands unmoved” (4.564-5). As deeply as he yearns to comfort Dido, he “obeys the god’s commands and back he goes to his ships,” bearing a “heart shattered by [. . .] great love” (4.495-500). In spite of the fact that Juno constantly tries to push him off the course of his destiny, Aeneas demonstrates *pietas* to the male gods who properly direct his paths.

Aeneas’s dutiful resolve to his country and his stoic piety in relation to the will of the gods provide a sharp contrast with Dido’s hysteria when she discovers that Aeneas plans to leave Carthage. While “Aeneas sl[ee]ps in peace on his ship’s high stern” (4.692), Dido’s “mind [will not] yield” (Virgil 4.663) and her anguish “surg[es] back in heaving waves of rage” (4.665). Still, Dido’s unreasonable passion does more than just prevent her sleep; it multiplies her fury and diverts her from her duty to obey the will of the gods. As Miller contends with regards to Classical literature, “Women and the sexuality they present become destructive the moment they escape their space of containment” (Miller 227). In other words, when women lose control of their emotions, they become dangerous. Because of Dido’s frenzied and womanly nature, she cannot permit Aeneas to pursue his destiny. Aeneas’s stoicism, on the other hand, enables him to

leave Carthage so that he might honor the wisdom of the male gods as would an ideal Roman man.

Like Dido, Juno represents the trope of the deranged woman. The cause of her desire to “force [Aeneas] / to brace such rounds of hardship” (Virgil 1.11-2) is her failure to win a beauty contest: “Deep in her heart” is the grudge she holds against Paris for “the insult to her spurned beauty” (1:25-6). Hence, women “represent a source of passion that escapes rational (i.e., masculine) control” (Miller 227). The inability of both Juno and Dido to restrain intense emotions is potentially destructive and consequently dangerous to Rome. For that reason, it is acutely significant that Aeneas overcomes the fervor of both of these female characters in his devotion to the male gods.

Aeneas’s chiefly Roman principle, correspondingly, is piety in relation to his progeny, country, and masculine gods. The portrayal of women in *The Aeneid* only furthers this depiction, although in different ways according to the woman. Creusa encourages Aeneas to maintain his *pietas*, particularly to his family, while Dido and Juno discourage him from remaining steadfast to Rome and the male gods. Both, however, emphasize the dedication of the ideal Roman man. Aeneas’s example, therefore, provides a precedent for the whole Roman populous to shadow and hence influences the values of every nation that finds its roots in the Roman Empire.

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*Caleb Punt*

## **A Truncated Sublimity: The Sublime Experience in *Walden* and “Howl”**

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**W**ithin the realm of literature and literary analysis, the definition of the sublime traditionally includes a designation of source. The Romantics in particular,<sup>4</sup> with writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau looking out at the American wilderness, cemented the association of the sublime with nature. *The Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era* calls the sublime “the disjunction between what the mind can imagine and nature can present” (Otto, n. pag.) The Romantic era attached a designation of source—the sublime experience is to be found in Nature—to the definition of the sublime within the context of literature. If we return to a more universal, truncated definition of the sublime, one that does not presuppose the source of this experience of danger, pleasure, and awe, previously closed areas of analysis across literary eras present themselves. One such connection can be made between Henry David Thoreau’s Transcendentalist-era *Walden* and Allen Ginsberg’s Beat Generation manifesto “Howl.” Both works share a common understanding of the fundamental attributes of the sublime experience. However, they describe different ways of achieving this experience. Thoreau’s discussion on Nature in *Walden* suggests that Thoreau experienced the sublime as a sequestered individual taking in the sublimity inherent in his surroundings—in Nature, while Ginsberg’s analogous presentation of drug-use and sex shows a sublime experience that originates not from his surroundings but from the sublime potential of his own body, experienced within the context of a

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<sup>4</sup> Leo B. Levy describes the Romantics as “votaries of the sublime,” tending to embrace “the awful and the immense” (392).

coterie. Their respective sources of the sublime produce similar experiences; both describe a similar, fluid sense of danger or potential to overwhelm that manifests itself in a variety of ways. Discrepancies between the works arise in their attitude towards community or fellowship, which differ in relation to the particular source of their experience.

Clearly outlining this universal, “truncated” definition of the sublime is difficult, as the word *sublime* has the uncomfortable task of representing an experience traditionally thought to be inherently ineffable. Rabbi Abraham Heschel refers to the sublime as “the [. . .] allusion of things to a meaning greater than themselves [. . .] that which our words, our forms, our categories can never reach” (39). Therefore a definition, as Heschel states, must be indicative, indirect, rather than directly descriptive (181). The *Oxford English Dictionary* attempts this by defining the sublime as “that which [. . .] inspires awe [or] great reverence [. . .] by reasons of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur” (“Sublime”). *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* gives nuance to this basic definition by adding, “the experience of the sublime is to an important extent unpleasant [. . . but is] accompanied by a certain pleasure: we enjoy the feeling of being overwhelmed” (“Sublime”). *Aesthetics A-Z* elaborates on this “unpleasant” aspect of the sublime by calling the sublime “our ability to enjoy the fearful overpowering of our own mind by things that are fitted to excite the ideas of pain and terror” (“Sublime”). From these indicative definitions, it seems that the universal definition of the sublime has two main components: an experience of the beautiful, grand, vast, or transcendent accompanied by a fear or awareness of the overwhelming nature of the experience.

First, it must be established that Thoreau and Ginsberg, in their respective works, describe the same fundamental experience regardless of the source of that experience, i.e., the two basic components of the sublime experience are present in both works. Thoreau says in the

second chapter of *Walden*, “I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life [. . .] to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms and [. . .] if it were sublime, to know it by experience. [. . .] For most men [. . .] are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God” (906). Here the author expresses a desire to uncover the truth about life, to rise above any additions to its essence (“reduce it to its lowest terms”), and experience its unadulterated potential and beauty. Also present is a reference to the tension between a potential for good and for bad that is inherent in this search for life “at its lowest terms.” Thoreau observes that most men are not certain if the basic experience of life is “of the devil or of God.” The two basic characteristics of the sublime experience, the sense of wonder, awe, grandeur etc., and the sense of danger are present. This is Thoreau’s initial description of the sublime experience and his desire to obtain it.

Ginsberg’s presentation of sublimity does not differ in the nature of the sublime experience. “Howl” still reflects a desire to cut through “the mud and slush of opinion, prejudice delusion, etc.” (Thoreau 910) to a higher experience, despite apparent dangers. The great critic of the Beat Generation,<sup>5</sup> Norman Podhertz, says that Ginsberg and his coterie were in search of “an expanded consciousness open to new dimensions of being: more adventure, more sex, more intensity, more life” (6). The search for an “expanded consciousness” shows a desire for something analogous to the beautiful and transcendent experience Thoreau refers to as “sucking the marrow out of life.” Vivian Gornick, who, in contrast to Podhertz, was a clear admirer of the Beat Generation, provides elaboration: “They drank, got stoned, and flung themselves across the country in search of heavenly despair” (5). The phrase “heavenly despair” shows the second

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<sup>5</sup> Vivian Gornick (see Works Cited) suggests that “Howl” was essentially a manifesto of the Beat Generation (5). It is assumed in this paragraph that comments on the Beat Generation’s lifestyle are expressed by “Howl.”

aspect of a sublime experience, the tension between the potential for beauty and the potential for danger.

This fundamentally similar understanding of the sublime experience is achieved through different means in the respective works. *Walden* ultimately reveals both explicitly and implicitly an experience of the sublime through perception of Nature. Firstly, Thoreau directly says, “We are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us” (909). Written during his stay at Walden Pond, this “reality which surrounds” can be assumed to be Nature itself. The phrase “the perpetual instilling and drenching” refers to how Thoreau accesses this sublimity inherent in Nature. In his article “To Play Life: Thoreau’s Fabulous Reality,” Ron Balthazor suggests that in *Walden* reality is experienced through the senses, creating a personal experience for the viewer in his own mind. Balthazor says, “Reality [in Walden] is anchored in the eye and the mind, or more specifically [. . .] in the ‘I’ of the text” (1). Thoreau’s senses (“the eye”) allow him to re-create Nature inside his mind and thereby experience its sublimity. This is the “perpetual instilling and drenching” of reality referred to in the text. In this statement, Thoreau outlines his experience of the sublime as something to be taken in from Nature through the senses.

Secondly, Thoreau implicitly reveals this approach to the sublime through romantic descriptions of Nature that simultaneously depict its wonder and its potential for dangerous mystery and power. Thoreau, as a peaceful observer, eloquently describes a sunrise: “As the sun arose, I saw [the pond] throwing off its nightly clothing of mists [. . .] its soft ripples or its smooth reflecting surface was revealed, while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in every direction into the woods as at the breaking up of some nocturnal conventicle” (903). The viewer appreciates the beauty of the pond’s “soft ripples” and “smooth reflecting surface.”

However, there is also a sense that, as the sun illuminates the waters, the pond loses an ominous quality. The mists are described as ghosts fleeing a nightly assembly. Although the pond may be a beautiful and innocent sight while the sun is shining, Thoreau implies it acts as a ghostly meeting ground by night. This tension between the beautiful and the ominous in Nature is an instance of sublime experience in *Walden*.

A second instance of Nature's potentially destructive power comes when Thoreau describes his perception of the Sudbury meadows surrounded by water as "a coin in a basin [. . .] a thin crust insulated and floated even by this small sheet of intervening water" (904). He goes on to say he was "reminded that this on which I dwelt was but *dry land*" (904). Through the image of a small coin precariously floating in a large basin and the emphasis on "*dry land*," Thoreau expresses his sense that he is able to stand where he is only by the mercy of the water. It feels to him that the character of Nature is powerful and potentially fickle; the dry land he is standing on only exists on account of some delicate balance. The power of Nature adds to its sublimity, and this observation is another example of *Walden*'s presentation of the sublime experience.

Rather than taking in the sublimity of nature through the senses, Ginsberg reaches the sublime through "more sex, more intensity" and through drugs. The experience comes from unleashing, through drugs and sex, the sublime potential of the body. This method is shown throughout "Howl." Drug references in "Howl" are plentiful and elaborate. Within the first ten lines, Ginsberg describes his generation as "angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night" (2540). This is a very elevated description of what is essentially a quest for hallucinogens. The "connection" refers to a

drug dealer<sup>6</sup> who will be able to help his customer experience transcendence, the “starry dynamo,” even while trapped in the confining drudgery of Moloch, the “machinery of night.” Ginsberg further describes the drug experience by recounting stoners who “shrieked with delight in police cars” as a result of their “wild cooking pederasty and intoxication” (2542). From these two instances, Ginsberg presents drugs as giving an experience that is both enlightening and pleasurable.

Ginsberg completes the presentation of drugs as a *sublime* experience by inserting references to their dangerous potential as well. In one instance he talks about those “who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley” (2541). In this statement, Ginsberg equates drug usage to eating fire, an act that may convey a strong sense of power and daring but carries abundantly obvious risks as well. In the next line, Ginsberg describes these fire-eaters as people who “purgatoried their torsos night after night with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares” (2541). This statement continues the theme of danger alongside pleasure. “Purgatoried” is assumed to be a negative term and dreams occur right alongside “waking nightmares.”

The experience of sex in “Howl” has many parallels to the experience of drugs. Ginsberg continues the tendency to describe traditionally earthy acts in elevated terms by referring to his generation as those “who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors” (2542). As with drug usage, sex is a source of pleasure. Those engaged in sexual activity “scream with joy” just as those using drugs “shrieked with delight.” “Howl” depicts a full immersion into the sexual experience with the restrictions imposed by the repressive society completely lifted. Ginsberg speaks with adoration towards those who “sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset” and who “scatter[ed] their semen freely to whomever come by” (2542). If, as “Howl”

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<sup>6</sup> This comes from a footnote in the Norton

suggests, sex is an essential way to experience life, Ginsberg makes sure to “suck out all the marrow.”

The reader also finds the dangerous, unpleasantly overwhelming aspect of the sublime experience in the sexually licensed and drug-infused lifestyle “Howl” describes. “Howl” is written in a frantic, almost panicky style. Ginsberg intends for each anaphoric phrase to be read in one breath (Ginsberg, “Notes” 133), and the result is an anxious pacing that points to the potential for danger or burnout that could accompany the extreme lifestyle choices in which Ginsberg and his coterie engage. Further evidence comes from Ginsberg’s descriptions of his generation. He alternates between passionate listings of their countercultural lifestyle and disturbing glimpses of depression and potential insanity. The same people who ate fire and were “fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists” also “created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff-banks of the Hudson” and “cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessful” (2543). While some of the references to suicide and depression undoubtedly refer to the oppressive nature of Moloch, it still outlines the inherent danger associated with following the lifestyle described by “Howl.” If a person would like to throw off the oppression of Moloch and accept the Beat Generation’s understanding of life, they can also expect flirtatious encounters with depression and suicide.

There is an interesting comparison to be made between the feeling of danger that Thoreau experiences in the objective, external Nature around him and Ginsberg’s subjective experiences attained through drugs and sex. Because he derives his sublime experience from the physical world around him, it is tempting to relegate Thoreau’s sense of danger to a simple regard for his own bodily safety. Our common perception of danger in the physical world is physical danger. *Walden* does indirectly refer to this genre of danger in a pensive, almost theoretical manner.

Thoreau does not climb any waterfalls or peek over any cliffs, but he extrapolates the dangerous power of the natural world through his philosophical reveries. This can be seen through reexamining his description of the meadows as a “coin in a basin.” From his quiet view atop a nearby peak, Thoreau reflects on the potential of the waters surrounding the distant meadow to transition from peaceful and calm to physically powerful and dangerous. A coin in a basin floats only on account of some delicate balance. He concludes his contemplation by acknowledging the physical power of Nature: “this on which I dwelt was but *dry land*” (904).

However, Thoreau’s imaginative descriptions of Nature also reveal a different sense of danger not derived from Nature’s brute physical power. The account of the sun rising over the lake introduces a spiritual or ominous sense of danger that makes Thoreau’s depiction of danger more nuanced. While Thoreau’s sense of “ghosts [. . .] stealthily withdrawing in every direction” fleeing some kind of “nocturnal conventicle” (903) still originates from the objective reality that is Nature, they make no reference to physical power or danger. Instead these observations produce a spiritual or perhaps psychological sense of unease. Thus, from his vantage point of a pensive observer, Thoreau experiences or recognizes the dangerous aspect of Nature’s sublime potential as a fluid property able to manifest itself in a variety of ways.

One may be similarly tempted to relegate Ginsberg’s experience of danger to fear of an unstable mental state, a psychological danger, brought about by unrestrained drug use and sexual activity. This sense of danger is obviously present, as the third section of the poem deals extensively, if indirectly, with the idea of insanity: its nature, what it entails, and perhaps how it can be fought. But the phrases and word choice of the first section of the poem have a degree of physicality that suggests that Ginsberg’s sense of danger, like Thoreau’s, is more fluid. The “best minds” are “starving”; they “plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg” (2543).



They drag themselves through the streets, sit chained to subways, burn cigarette holes into their arms, and, in the midst of their transcendent psychedelic and sexual experiences, they sit “hollow-eyed” (2540-2543). Furthermore, even a superficial knowledge of this time period is sufficient to recall that physically overpowering the body with a drug overdose or contracting a lethal STD was a serious concern for people like those described in “Howl.” These descriptions of the physical exhaustion and trials accompanying the sublime lifestyle show that Ginsberg’s sense of danger in the sublime experience, while originating from a subjective source, has both physical and psychological aspects to it. It is similar to Thoreau’s experience in its mutability.

The objective vs. subjective distinction between these author’s respective sources of sublimity provides insight into their relative attitudes toward community. Thoreau, the short-term hermit of Walden Pond, sees community as a hindrance. Seeking solitude is an essential part of “reducing life to its lowest terms,” as community encumbers the experience of the sublime in Nature. Ginsberg’s attitudes toward community are more complicated and reflect the challenges that come with an internal source of the sublime. Ginsberg values the relationships between “the best minds of [his] generation” as a method of balancing the potential for pleasure and danger in his unique means of experiencing the sublime.

Although we may question his dedication to solitude, seeing as Hollowell Farm was only two miles from town, Thoreau makes it very clear that he values the perceived isolation of his sanctuary. When deciding the location of his sabbatical, he says, “The real attractions of the Hollowell Farm [. . .] were its complete retirement” (904). He wistfully claims he lived “as far off as many a region viewed by nightly astronomers” and that he possessed, “my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself” (910-1). In order to reduce life to its lowest terms, Thoreau believed he had to immerse himself in Nature without distractions.

The origin of this belief comes straight from Thoreau's source for sublimity, from Nature herself. Thoreau answers imaginary inquisitors with this observation: "I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond herself. What company has that lonely lake, I pray? And yet it has not the blue devils, but the blue angels in it, in the azure tint of its waters" (914). Thoreau gets his antisocial tendencies from his observations and experiences of Nature. Because he experiences the sublime through communion with Nature, company has no role to play, besides that of distraction. Solitude takes on a divine quality and community a devilish one. As the text suggests, "God is alone,—but the devil [. . .] he is legion" (914).

An article from the *Journal of Modern Literature* by Jonathan Quinn<sup>7</sup> is useful in connecting Ginsberg's experience of the sublime with his attitudes towards community and fellowship. Quinn suggests "Howl" shows a need to "make the distinction between people who are insane and suffer [. . .] and people who are beatific and experience mystical visions" (199). Because the experiences of the Beat Generation were completely countercultural and usually internal,<sup>8</sup> Ginsberg feels the need to verify his experiences with others who share them. Quinn writes, "What Ginsberg does is mobilize a coterie of fellow-visionaries to counter this antinomian hazard. It is as if he says that the vision [or experience] must be 'real' if so many people experience it" (195). Essentially, by seeking out people with similar experiences, Ginsberg fends off the Orwellian definition of a lunatic as "a minority of one" (Orwell 80). As long as there is another person who experiences the same thing, Ginsberg succeeds in remaining a visionary, as opposed to a lunatic.

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<sup>7</sup> Quinn's article explains how Ginsberg used a coterie to combat the antinomian implications of a political movement based off of transcendent visions. This essay uses Quinn's idea and applies it to the discussion of the sublime.

<sup>8</sup> As in, they were not reacting to an external reality but creating a subjective, inner experience through drugs and/or sex.

Quinn's observation is directly applicable to Ginsberg's take on the sublime experience. In "Howl," sublimity is experienced by the unleashing of the potential of the body through drug usage and sex. It is a fundamentally subjective experience as it happens within an individual's body and mind. Drugs create an altered state of mind by interfering with the brain's normal ways of interpreting reality. Sexual expression provides a subjective feeling of pleasure, satisfaction, togetherness, etc. There is no objective, external reality to anchor these experiences, to distinguish them from the subjective experiences of a lunatic. However, Ginsberg distinguishes his sublime experience from insanity by pursuing the sublime within the context of a coterie. If other people experience the same sublimity that Ginsberg does, then he successfully staves off the accusation of lunacy, which is, by definition, a minority of one.

Throughout "Howl," community acts as a safety harness while Ginsberg and company dance the line between transcendence and insanity. Every line in the third section of the poem begins with the phrase, "I am with you in Rockland" (2546). Rockland refers to a psychiatric ward (Baym 2544).<sup>9</sup> Through declaring "I am with you in Rockland," Ginsberg assures his coterie that he shares their "insanity" and, in doing so, keeps them on the good side of the visionary vs. lunatic dynamic.

A truncated definition of the sublime, one that leaves out reference to the source, allows the reader to compare and contrast Thoreau's *Walden* and Ginsberg's "Howl" more effectively. While both share a fundamentally similar understanding of the sublime, as an experience evoking both a sense of wonder or grandeur and a sense of danger and fear, each achieves this experience in a different manner and from a different source. Thoreau experiences the sublime as a solitary body perceiving and taking in the sublimity of Nature. In "Howl," the experience of the sublime comes from unleashing the body's own potential, through taking in foreign substances

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<sup>9</sup> This refers to footnote seven in the *Norton Anthology American Literature Shorter Eighth Edition*.

or through engaging in sexual acts. The difference in the source of the sublime experience influences discussions throughout both works and creates a fruitful point of comparison across their respective literary trends.

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*Alexandria Da Ponte*

**BACHE Reading by Tayari Jones**

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Oftentimes people will question the difference between a short story and a novel. At a recent BACHE Reading at Samford University, Tayari Jones explained this difference by reading from her novel, *Silver Sparrow*. As a contemporary author of African-American fiction, Jones has sought to write the novel of her generation. She said, “A short story helps readers understand a moment. A novel makes readers understand a world.”

Jones began her reading with the first line of her book: “My father is a bigamist.” Using a careful and steady tone, Jones introduced the story of a girl whose father has two wives and two daughters. The first paragraph alone was filled with alliteration that made the story pick up speed and instantly captured the audience as Jones presented a story of a “double-duty daddy,” “bigamy and the blade,” “cult and cultural.” As Jones continued to read from the first chapter of her book, she spoke in the quiet voice of a young girl at times, while also mastering the ability of speaking in a different tone when she took on the persona of the mother figure. This ability to change her tone helped the audience to feel the emotional connection between the mother and daughter.

After her marvelous reading, Jones allowed the audience to ask questions about her writing style and her novels. Jones spoke about how she strives to make an impact, specifically in African-American literature, by not joining the authors who are writing about the forgotten and lost stories of the past generations but instead writing the story of her generation. By creating characters that are similar to those of her generation, she is able to keep better track of

events occurring at the particular moments and is, therefore, able to capture her childhood events and memories. One of these examples of emphasizing the story of her generation occurred in her reading of *Silver Sparrow* when Jones read, “My mother applied Mary Kay makeup to improve her appearance.” Jones took this theme of low self-esteem and the search for beauty to a deeper level by bringing the audience to the scene through the eyes of the child who watched her mother better her appearance with Mary Kay, a make-up brand with which many modern readers are familiar. This sense of strong descriptions continued throughout Jones’s reading as she used words to create a vivid sense of sound: for example, by comparing the mother’s grinding teeth to that of a car wheel or by describing the strong smell of the father’s cigars. Jones advised the audience to develop the habit of reading their writing aloud in order to gain better clarity of idioms and flow of the language. The audience laughed along with Jones, who described herself as a natural eavesdropper and explained how this habit has helped her to develop strong dialogue in her novels. Jones spoke more on developing her creative sense, saying, “An autobiography is like a raw egg; you’ve got to turn up the heat and add new details to make it into a scrambled egg.”

One particular trait that was evident to everyone who had the chance to spend an hour in the presence of Jones was her sense of joy. Jones answered every question with an example that made it clear that she enjoys her craft and career. Throughout the night Jones offered honest insight on her struggles of becoming an acclaimed author. The audience laughed as she said, “I wouldn’t advise doing this, but I like a little adventure, so I do it.” Jones shared that she writes all of her work on a manual typewriter and, even though it physically pains her, it helps her to slow down and concentrate. Her writing process is much like driving without a map, as she does not believe in outlining but instead cuts straight to the chase. Throughout her reading, her

philosophy was evident from the very first line, which got directly to the point of the father's being a bigamist.

While Jones warned her audience against following some of her techniques, she did offer advice on how to become a better writer. Through the retelling of her personal experience of being dropped by publishers, Jones gave an honest glimpse into the harsh circumstances that occur in the publishing world. She told her audience, "The first book is easy, and the second book you have to make up the money you lost selling the first. The third book is just rough." Her personal story and journey to finishing *Silver Sparrow* without a publisher was inspirational. Jones serves as an example of someone who truly enjoys the art of writing for her own sake and believes that if she does her part the rest will happen. At the end of the evening, it was clear that Jones understands her characters, is confident in her writing style, and has the ability both through her verbal communication and written words to help readers understand a new world of contemporary literature.

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*Franklin Lowe*

**The Presence, Power, and Perseverance of History in Chad Davidson's *From The Fire Hills***

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Chad Davidson's 2014 collection, *From the Fire Hills*, is rich with metaphor and simile, characters and scenic imagery, and humankind's inevitable journey through history. Davidson intersperses the language and chronicles of Italy within his poetic accounts of modern Italian towns and a California he retains and remembers from childhood. His poems comment on humanity's understanding of history, and through them, he notices its exceptions, ironies, and juxtapositions. The history that Davidson puts in *From the Fire Hills* is confusing, except when it becomes a web of metaphors, and broad, except when it is contained in a single mundane recollection or reflection. From living under this concept of transcendent, invasive history, Davidson's speaker seems to see his world as fully determined for him. The speaker feels imperfection and fear, observes the constancy and similarity within the history of certain locales, and expresses his actions in terms of distance and closeness with both time and space. Throughout the thirty-six poems and plots of *From the Fire Hills*, Davidson comments on history's overpowering effect on humanity.

The poems of *From the Fire Hills*, replete with recurrent themes and common images, merge into a cohesive, though not conclusive, story of the speaker's journey through history and his loss of agency to overpowering, outside forces. Davidson begins his collection with one poem, "In Ravenna," which he sets apart from the subsequent five sections of poems, seemingly as an introduction to the larger body of his collection. He uses its lines to initiate his discussion

of overwhelming forces and to introduce many of the phrases and images that he develops throughout the rest of his collection. In the first few lines,

Three young boys, old enough to hurt someone,  
 young enough to think it doesn't matter,  
 sat outside the small green plot I came to.

Dante's grave. (1-4)

Davidson presents the forces of age, through the figures of the three boys, of society, through the predetermined appropriateness of their actions, of journeys, through the speaker's action of "coming," and of history and death, in the form of Dante and his grave. He then admits to the power of various outside forces, saying, "All of us pulled there, / experiencing gravity, out of control / for different reasons," and "They were a type / of beauty, as far as beauty is ignorant of itself," and "Then, some wrecked mosaic, awkward / in the transom of a secondary church, behaves / just so, as if the artists thought of me and all / my imperfections" (4-6, 12-13, 19-22). In these lines, Davidson presents his speaker as under the influence of a meshing of physical gravity and fate, by types or archetypes, like this predetermined form of beauty, and finally, by an example of art that reminds him of his connections to history, individuals from other parts of time, and his own imperfections. He finishes "In Ravenna" with powers affecting others—"They have been dying here for millennia"—and himself: "and there is little I can do" (a line that reflects his growing lack of agency) (25, 26). In the first poem of *From the Fire Hills*, Davidson introduces themes and entities such as age and death, societal opinion, and moments of connections in spite of historical distance that will continue to overwhelm his speaker throughout the collection.

After this first poem, Davidson continues to describe Italy's language, people, food, and religion as oppressive forces, but they remain different from history, which continually overpowers the speaker and blurs the lines of era and environment through thin spaces, memories, and shared locales. "Controlled Burn" is, perhaps, most indicative of history's power to confound linear stability. Its lines move between three scenes: a childhood Californian wildfire, introduced with the lines, "The brown hills of California are on fire / again, the desert scrub, burning bush"; a cooking show, the present of this poem, which begins with "On television, the host of a cooking show / breaks down the cuisine of Pantelleria"; and excerpts of letters from the 1936 Italian sack of Ethiopia, such as "*We had set fire to the hills, wrote Mussolini's son / of Ethiopia. The fields and little villages*" (1-6, author's italics). These three couplets follow each other in quick succession and attempt to prepare the reader for the bombardment of memories that is attacking the speaker. In this poem, the burning fields of Ethiopia become those of California, and the speaker is a son, just as Bruno Mussolini is a son. Its lines, such as, "*Now that's what I call living, the host says. / With a damp towel over my head, I swallowed steam. / The dry grass began to burn, wrote Mussolini's son,*" exist in pure and painful juxtaposition; history begins to repeat itself as Bruno quips for a second time, "*The bombs hardly touched the earth before they burst / into white smoke,*" and the speaker leaves, questioning distance and "another kind of nearness" (31-33, 51-52, 55, author's italics). "Controlled Burn" represents Davidson's poems that are structured to reveal history's presence and governance within the speaker's thoughts and memories.

Two other poems, "Labor Days" and "The New World," continue the distortion of linear history that features so prominently in "Controlled Burn." "Labor Days" primarily exemplifies the power of history through its plot, in which the speaker has flashbacks to a Californian dress

shop after watching a woman in the Roman Forum. Yet, Davidson also fills it with phrases that speak of constancy, time, and history. For example, the speaker says that the dress shop's register proclaims, "*Life's like that,*" without questioning any input he might have (9, author's italics). Similarly, he recalls the weather of his youth in terms of faultless pattern, quipping, "It was California after all, where snow fell / only after baseball on TV" (10-11), and he preserves the constancy of time in a seamless mix of imagery:

How eerily  
the hours crept, imperceptible as the glacial  
style that governs necklines, drawing deeper  
into autumn's cleavage. (13-16)

In this poem, Davidson's speaker also discusses beginnings and the fluidity of the present, saying:

But for me, life really takes off in Rome,  
in the Forum, when I watch a woman  
stoop to the marble's face and read herself  
into history (22-25)

because even his observations are tinged with the terms of time. "The New World" also breaches the line between Italy and California, but its Italian epoch is from the childhood of the speaker's father. Devoid of the pleasantly confused tone of "Labor Days," "The New World" returns to the bombs and the town, Pantelleria, of "Controlled Burn." This piece further explains the speaker's connection to Italy, and especially Pantelleria, and it shows Davidson applying the patterns of repetition and constancy that plague his speaker through the overall structure of his collection. Though "The New World" has repeated lines such as "ring by ring" and statements such as

“falling / like the memory of Sequoia I keep” (15-16) that place it in line with Davidson’s other poems about the blending of history, it also speaks in darker tones than most of the collection by introducing ideas of inherited fear, insignificance, and being found in a place of weakness and compulsory humility. This poem’s final narrative, lines twenty-five to forty-three, contains this darkest side of history’s might and completes Davidson’s treatise on history because it highlights the interdependence of historical events and the speaker’s emotions and existence. “Labor Days” and “The New World” display the positive and negative sides of Davidson’s forces of history upon his speaker’s perspective and understanding of memory.

In addition to these poems that blend California with various versions of Italy, “The Churches of Italy” speaks more broadly of history’s potency. Davidson claims that Italy’s churches “possess and are possessed by history [. . .] / As if they never breathed” and that humanity gladly accepts their beauty “in their uselessness” because “We cannot help / but humor them” (11, 13, 15-16), a statement that speaks of humankind’s appreciation of beauty as much as it does history’s sway over human reaction. “The Churches of Italy” also highlights the constancy of history through its phrase, “stone still in all our million photos” (12), which is similar to the subject of “The Gothic Line,” “the fizzy wine, which Dino— / from *Constante*, constant, forever—bottled himself” (21-2) and of “The Grief Industry,” “the eternal recurrent, the everlasting/last [. . .] as if sparrows / that will, no doubt, return” (13-6). Eventually, however, all of these constancies cause the speaker to view much of his world as utterly unsurprising, and he is able to claim that “the rain’s signature on pavement” is “pocked with insignificant histories” (7-8) in “Little Shoe.” Rather than seeing a world of free will and novelty, the speaker sees it through shades of repetition. For example, in “The Screaming Toddler in Santa Maria Novella,” he observes that art and religion obey certain laws, declaring, “In any of the many

Mother and Childs I have seen, / the infant Jesus, in byzantine luster or plain pastel, / is mute [. . .] with a glint of all to come,” and “The father, yea, / as is customary in Christendom, was absent,” before finishing the scene with a stamp of history: “in the year of our Lord 1294, amen” (1-4, 12-13, 27). As Davidson relates in “The Gothic Line,” “I confess now my ignorance / of war, that I first entered the vast cathedral / of its history” (38-40), history is an all-embracing entity that may be entered, suffered, or experienced, but it is not the sort of force that can be bent by the will of the speaker or any human.

*From the Fire Hills* centers on the impact of history that overwhelms the speaker of the collection and that decides his fate, actions, memories, and observations. Davidson embellishes this theme through images, metaphors, and allusions that he repeats throughout the collection, almost as a structural embodiment of the predetermined, overwhelming constancy that affects his speaker in each individual poem. From single words and phrases that show the transcendence of history to poems that blend far-flung plots and an overall structure that is heavy with recurrent imagery, Davidson creates a world for his speaker that is devoid of agency but not devoid of humor and beauty. Though the speaker sometimes seems to chafe under the confusing burden of language or the predetermined role of religion, Davidson does not leave him in tragedy. Rather, the speaker moves through *From the Fire Hills* in a state of self-aware enlightenment in which he recognizes the powers of history moving over him but still accepts the goodness that these forces produce, such as new growth after a wildfire.

*Katy Ward*

**Broken Nostalgia in *From the Fire Hills***

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**T**hough Chad Davidson's beautifully illustrative language sits on the tongue like Italian cuisine, the book is more than linguistic gelato. The speaker in *From the Fire Hills* takes readers into a struggle to appreciate Italy's momentous past from the limited perspective of a modern foreigner. The book must contemplate memory inasmuch as each poem involves the speaker's own past experience, but since the speaker has a memory bank full of suburban American consumerism and safety, he labors to remember Italy fittingly. Each part of the book contemplates contemporary issues and history from a different perspective, moving in and out of characterizations and physical sensations to maintain the reader's sense of vicarious experience. Part one begins with his own inadequacy as he attempts to learn Italian and process new experiences, and by the end of the book this gap in understanding has grown to a cynical commentary on Italy's raw history as only relevant in fiscal terms and fading pity. But the riddle of the form and of the genre ultimately comes to the narrator's aid. By finishing his book of poetry, the reader develops a thoughtful awareness of the Italian history, war suffering, and personal memories that the narrator wrote to eulogize.

Part one of the book opens with a lament, as the speaker first recognizes his own naivety as compared to the older Italian man's experiences of war and suffering: "the grandfather" can only see the narrator as an American Ally still in opposition to his continued Axis allegiance (6). The Italian sees a "version of me forever fixed in his past" (6) of World War II. The narrator feels framed by a time and title outside of his experiences. The poems go on to think about his

inadequacy in learning a foreign language, and as “Vandals” is caught up in modern terms such as “top 40,” “boom box,” and “grotesque pop spasms,” so the speaker begins to understand that his own experiences hardly equip him to sympathize with the experience of an Italian such as the grandfather who “spoke a broken dialect gauzed in bookish Italian” (6). By way of effective enjambment, the speaker realizes he is “caught in the eternal present” and “cannot understand / the remote past” (8). The speaker only begins to notice this same jarring disconnection in the people around him in “Lovers in the Capuchin Crypt,” when ignorant tourists stand out because of the “outrageous color” they are wearing and sexually demonstrating in the Italian catacombs. As the chiding intercom passes over the couple’s displaced attentions, so the speaker seems to notice them ambivalently. They are excused by the “ignorance of where they are headed” (11), as the speaker is thus far excused by a communal “portion” of “our ignorance” and by “our monstrous Italian” (7). Still in this first section, the speaker’s romanticized view of Italian culture and history is naive enough for him to find humor in *The Screaming Toddler in Santa Maria Novella*, a scene which he might look upon disparagingly in later sections of the book.

In the second section the speaker travels back into his own memories, thinking of California forest fires and experiences with family in an attempt to relate to his present experience of Italy. He finds Italy the kind of city that makes a visitor experience all of its presence on the globe at once because of its many ruins and ancient monuments “possessed by history” (43). He uses the section to compare his provincial memories to this palimpsest experience in a sort of pathetic reach. He begins by alluding to the war that ravaged Italy in “Aerial,” as “planes banked” to address California forest fires. But the comparison is not a one-to-one comparison, since the poem revolves around a celebratory wedding instead of some desolate aftermath that could legitimately compare to war. The poem ends with another



discordant comparison of his own memories to Italy's war memories: childhood injuries from cans represent bombs, and a wartime white flag of surrender becomes "my sister's dress" (23). The section opens observing discrepancy in the speaker's experiences "of the late twentieth century" and the somber memories of "the imprecision of bombers, / until the enemy surrenders" (23). The section grows increasingly disparaging of "the second golden age / of suburbia" (25), as the speaker understands Nero by comparing his villa to *Star Wars* and claims that American holy rituals are only the moments where a consumer "slaps her checkbook open, and composes her elegy" (29). Italian autumns, with "trees / shorn of their spring collections" over the "millennia after the stones were laid," warps in America to become "store bought vacation" in "autumns cleavage" (30-31). The speaker's bemused sense of inadequacy in the face of Italian culture has turned more cynical, as he recognizes the inability of his own culture to comprehend Italian scope and history. America is a place "stinking of success" (29); it is a spoiled child compared to Italy's "galleries / perfected in the forges of archetype" (41).

The third section seems to change course, as each poem characterizes particular people or places. This section makes the reader sympathize with the speaker a bit more, as the reader travels through relatable experiences of baristas, the feeling of Venice, an Italian celebrity and a strange hotel, among other characters. He mediates the cynicism and cultural commentary that began in section two with observational, personal experiences. For instance, the speaker recognizes in this section's montage of characters that he has in fact "entered Italy," "through history" and "from the otherworldly fluorescence of a bus terminal" (41). The credit he gives his own experience legitimizes the reader's participation as a sympathetic travelling companion through Italy and through memories.

Cynicism and cultural commentary could distance a reader from the subject, where “from far enough away, / even Dido looked content” (68). But the speaker tries to close that gap with this book by noticing that distance and bringing the reader to lament it with him. The speaker’s attempt to create sympathy, understanding, and an informed appreciation for the past drives the book, and section three emphasizes that point by drawing the reader out of distanced nostalgia and cynicism into his face-to-face experiences with the characters of Italy.

The fourth section takes a now sympathetic reader to an immediate, visceral experience as poem after poem focuses on the senses. The first line states the message of the section: “Consider the irony: *bones of the dead* / as confection” (49). The speaker sustains the sympathy of the reader with relatable experiences of the senses, writing in terms of sight, taste, lust, and smell while commenting on the appetitive consumer’s inability to understand a prolific Italian past. Shards of the timeless *Pietà* become an opportunity for irreverent onlookers to practice kleptomania, and a “higher purpose” becomes “sugar boiled down / to a salve, pulls my mind into my mouth” (51). Perhaps the best example of distracted and appetitive characters is in “Dispensation,” when the speaker and his woman become lovers in a crypt themselves. “Awe for death” is only mandatory here, while “fingers,” “nude,” and “buttons” make the speaker wonder “how can I stop / thinking” about “bodies tethered to sweetness” (53). Just as modern humans are too caught up in their capitalistically conditioned appetites to appreciate history, so too the speaker realizes that “not even sanctum / kept me” (53) from “Limoncello” (51), “Blood Orange” (52), “Truffles” (53), and flirting over cheap pasta (54).

Section five finishes the book by emphasizing cultural and intellectual distances that are so “immense” that “Jets / are necessary. Whole days in them (74). In “Before the Bombing,” the speaker laments the distance between the real experience of war and the commodified memory

of it, as “Only prom slogans-- / *Remember Yesterday, The Time of Our Lives*-- / persisted, as if the past were just some neutral state” meant “to sell / to the consumers of oblivion” (65). “The Grief Industry” makes a disparaging case of excessive and “fastidious” modern consumers who are so preoccupied with their immediate present that they moved in on top of historical towns and “forgot which city was which” (71). Consumerism distanced war-torn history from any modern relevance first by making an “industry of grief” and then moving on simply to manufacture “some economy of impatience” (71). In the final poem, the speaker regrets this distance and loss, lamenting “as if exile / could be managed by social institutions [. . .] when I only want the clock to keep on going” (75).

In the very first poem, before the first section, the speaker approaches Italy just as the reader approaches the book: “I stand in front of history and feel nothing” (1). The speaker means to bring his unfeeling modern culture into sympathy and appreciation of a past that historical cities such as Italy commemorate, and he helps the reader to appreciate that history through relatable characterizations and physical experiences. By the end of the book, he has closed the distance between the past and present by bringing one more modern person (the reader) into respectful appreciation of that past, if through broken memories and affected nostalgia.

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## Review

*Taylor Burgess*

Griswold, Eliza, and Seamus Murphy. *I Am the Beggar of the World: Landays from*

*Contemporary Afghanistan*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. 143pp. \$24.00

(hardcover).

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**W**hile the subtitle of Eliza Griswold and Seamus Murphy's book, *I Am the Beggar of the World*, is *Landays from Contemporary Afghanistan*, that describes the text only in part. Or in third. Griswold, editor and translator, arranges sections around and focuses content on the landays—two-line, spoken-word poems—but Murphy's photography accompanies each page of poetry, and Griswold's detailed commentary often fills the next.

And while an editor or translator's thoughts (in this case, the same individual) are usually of secondary importance to the verse itself, in *Beggar* they are the majority of the text. Griswold's translation, interpretation, and curation of these poems heavily inform the way Western readers will approach them, and it is worth noting the assumptions and aims of her perspective.

In her introduction, Griswold defines the landay as "an oral and often anonymous scrap of song created by and for mostly illiterate people" (3). The poems are with almost no exception spoken by women. Griswold also describes the limited structural properties of the form, which are mostly syllabic rules and occasional end rhyme. The translated versions included in the book, however, "rhyme more often than the originals do because the English folk tradition of rhyme

proved the most effective way of representing in English the lilt of Pashto" (10). In the process of rendering the landays for the ears and eyes of an English-speaking audience, Griswold effectively transforms them into another form entirely, even if that form has no intrinsic connection to the original. Thus, landays such as, "If you couldn't love me from the start, / then why did you awake my sleeping heart?" (67), stripped of context, could be any couplet in the history of Western verse.

Consider also Griswold's selection process: "In the car or during lunch, we'd rough out an English version to assess whether the landay merited the time it would take to render it properly in English. Many were too flowery or made absolutely no sense" (10). Implicit in this dismissal is the landays' incoherence within Griswold's culture specifically. Griswold writes that "I could sound out the words, although I had no clue as to their meaning" (10), and that she ultimately "transcribed poems that interested us" (10). So, "Beggar" presents a relatively narrow selection of landays processed by and of interest to one American writer, who does not speak the native language (Pashto).

What types of landays interest Griswold? The book is divided into three sections: "Love," "Grief/Separation," and "War/Homeland." The first section includes many poems much like the one quoted above—sentiments of affection that can be easily extracted and universally understood. The second section is similar. The titular poem—"In my dream, I am the president. / When I awake, I am the beggar of the world" (63)—is accompanied by a sympathetic photo of a impoverished woman on an Afghan street, but the poem's subject and, in a sense, the woman herself could easily be transmuted to another culture or time. The last section is more specific to Afghanistan itself, yet a number of poems address the country and people's conflict with the United States: "May God destroy the White House and kill the man / who sent U.S. cruise

missiles to burn my homeland" (121). Or, in others, Griswold explains how Americans have become shorthand for "liar" and other pejoratives and replaced the original nouns in traditional landays: "My darling, you are just like America! / You are guilty; I apologize" (109). In short, Griswold's chosen poems tend either to concern her culture directly or contain sentiments that are coherent within it.

Are Griswold's perspectives faulty, and do they invalidate the work she has done in this book? Of course not. It is impossible to shed one's own culture completely when entering another, and Griswold is no exception. Further, when tailoring a book for English-speaking people, it is logical to rely on material that will appeal to that audience. It is even unlikely Griswold approached the landays in such a calculated way. Her translation and selection choices are probably, and positively, the subconscious function of a well-intentioned outsider who deeply cares about the poetry and lives of the women she encountered in Afghanistan.

The problem, perhaps, is that Griswold cares too much to carry the book to its potential. The inclusion of more landays that "made absolutely no sense" to Griswold and less of an exclusive focus on those that seem politically or culturally relevant might have formed a more objective and broad picture of the landay form, rather than one of personal importance to Griswold.

Incidentally, Griswold closes the book with a personal anecdote, wherein she surreptitiously meets a young Afghan girl who is a member of Mirman Baheer, a literary circle for women. During the encounter, the girl, Meena, makes an interesting request regarding her own poems: "They were no good, she said, plus she didn't want them rendered in English, the enemy's language" (142). While this sentiment hardly negates what Griswold has accomplished

here, it does call for sensitivity to these women poets, their wishes, and the society to which they belong. Their art should be discovered on its own terms.

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*Adam Quinn*

Blair, Paula. *Old Borders, New Technologies: Reframing Film and Visual Culture in*

*Contemporary Northern Ireland*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2014. 271pp. \$72.95

(softcover).

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**F**or many, Northern Ireland is a region of the world that has faded out of view. A mainstay of newspaper reporting and violent media footage during the Northern Irish Troubles in the late twentieth century, Northern Ireland is now regarded as a post-conflict society, engaged in the difficult process of making peace with the past while looking toward the future. In the wake of regular media coverage, however, film has unfortunately played an impedimentary or even inflammatory role in the Northern Irish peace process. Films telling stories about the conflict have either been propagandized, such as Neil Jordan's 1996 biopic *Michael Collins*, or have apolitically refused to engage with larger conflict narratives at all, such as Steve McQueen's 2008 film *Hunger*. Even though the Northern Irish landscape is a popular filming location for fantasy settings (most prominently HBO's *Game of Thrones*), filmic representations of the full breadth and complexity of the conflict and peace process have been glaringly absent from the Northern Irish film industry. Paula Blair, in an expanded version of her doctoral thesis, seeks to populate this vacuum by expanding the popular definition of cinema to include experimental film, mixed-media art installations, and live and performance artwork from the vibrant Northern Irish artist community to unearth new possibilities for representing the conflict in ways that prompt and enable community reconciliation and individual healing.



Blair organizes this project around four distinct themes: imprisonment, surveillance, memory, and mythology. Approaching what Blair admits is “a tangled mass of stories,” however, often requires a departure from traditional film forms or even a traditional definition of *film* (7). Embracing the category of “expanded cinema,” the art Blair references is commonly non-narrative, non-linear, and sometimes even non-filmic (15). In discussing each theme, Blair uses examples from a different field of art to introduce new possibilities for representation. Under the theme of imprisonment, Blair details conventional narrative films that use unconventional subjects to bring marginalized stories back into mainstream consciousness, including the experience of prison guards, female prisoners, and even an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* cast with real Northern Irish prisoners titled *Mickey B* (Tom Magill, 2007). Under the theme of surveillance, Blair explores mixed-media art installations that expose and invert the omnipresent threat of security cameras, particularly the way distinctions between perpetrator and victim can easily be switched or confused. Willie Doherty’s 1993 art installation *The Only Good One is a Dead One*, for example, forced the viewer to watch security footage and try anticipating perpetrator/victim binaries, often unsuccessfully. Under the theme of memory, Blair describes live and performance artworks that refuse to allow some memories to be forgotten, offer cathartic ways to work through traumatic memories, and force communities to process memories such as grief together. Blair cites works such as Alastair MacLennan’s 1998 performance *Naming the Dead* as examples of performance art dealing with memory. On the day the Good Friday Agreement was signed, ostensibly ending the conflict, MacLennan publicly attached sheets of paper to buildings around the city bearing the names of each person killed in the conflict. Finally, under the theme of mythology, Blair tackles pastiches of media images with other art forms that explore mass media as a modern mythology and attempt to offer new

mythologies through which to understand the Northern Irish conflict and peace process. Duncan Campbell's 2008 experimental film *Bernadette*, for example, stitches together real media footage of the career of nationalist MP Bernadette Devlin McAliskey with a fictionalized version of her career injected with Beckettian surrealism that contradicts her media representation.

Although Blair goes into a greater depth of analysis with a few more significant works, *Old Borders, New Technologies* is better approached as a survey cataloging possibilities for experimental artwork rather than a comprehensive history of Northern Irish art or film or a work of technical film criticism. Blair is more interested in marshaling long lists of relevant works with short summaries than getting bogged down in the context and reception of each work. However, within this survey a few figures inevitably stand out as artists and filmmakers whom Blair features under each of her thematic categories. Belfast native performance artist André Stitt, Belfast-based live artist Alastair MacLennan, and Derry native mixed-media artist Willie Doherty form the informal core of Blair's work and the most accessible touchstones for her understanding of expanded cinema. Using these artists and many others as indications of cultural currents, Blair is able to identify patterns that cut across themes and remain consistent for conflict and post-conflict works. Although *Old Borders, New Technologies* could appeal to readers interested in experimental film or art, Blair's primary audience is more appropriately readers interested in Irish culture and the creative interests of artists in post-conflict societies.

The underlying assumption Blair argues in each of her four themes is that the role of current experimental cinematic art forms is to repair the damage of mass media's original filmic representation—or misrepresentation—of the Northern Irish conflict. As the Northern Irish conflict flared into various degrees of violence from the late 1960s through the late 1990s, Northern Ireland became a testing ground for new, primarily visual, reporting and surveillance

technology. Blair labels Northern Ireland the first modern surveillance state at the height of British military occupation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, comparing the urban centers of Belfast and Derry to Michel Foucault's nightmare version of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon.<sup>10</sup>

Through this lens, these artists' experimentation with expanded cinema is best understood as a reaction to the simplistic, stereotyped narratives adopted and made hegemonic by thirty-second news reports broadcast to televisions all over the world in favor of complex, human narratives that reject simple explanations in favor of nuanced individual experiences. Combining Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation<sup>11</sup> with Roland Barthes's understanding of mythologies,<sup>12</sup> Blair targets media representation as a "stereotype" that "sits uneasily between reality and fiction, between what is actual and what the apparatuses of mass culture can convince us is actual" (185). In a literal example of Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle,<sup>13</sup> we can never know how the Troubles would have been resolved or remembered if the entire conflict had not been filmed and broadcasted as Blair's stereotype.

In this way, the work of Northern Irish artists dismantling mediatized narratives is directly applicable to any society that has experienced conflict since the rise of televised news reporting in the 1960s. Just as Northern Ireland was used as a laboratory for the invention of mass media war reporting, Northern Ireland's experimental art can be used as a case study for ways that artists can reclaim narratives from the media and reframe a cultural memory and mythology of the conflict on their own terms.

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<sup>10</sup> See Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Random House, 1995. Print.

<sup>11</sup> See Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995. Print.

<sup>12</sup> See Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. Print.

<sup>13</sup> First articulated by Werner Heisenberg in 1927, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle is a theory of Quantum mechanics that broadly states that the act of observing an experiment inextricably alters the results of the experiment.

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*Teddy Champion*

Middleton, Jason. *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship*.

New York: Routledge, 2014. 186 pp. \$115.00. Cloth.

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Media scholars have attributed the relatively recent popularity of nonfiction entertainment to an array of industrial and cultural changes in the past three decades, including improvements in production technology, the explosion of distribution outlets on cable and the Internet, and a rapid proliferation in audience sophistication. Jason Middleton builds on this historical context to theorize specifically on a growing trend towards *awkwardness* caught on camera as a tool for satire, commentary, and social change. In his analysis of films, television shows, and viral videos, Middleton has chosen subjects with great potential to attract young film scholars and even fans. He introduces his book by ambitiously stating his goal of contributing a critical paradigm that will “make visible the ways in which awkwardness connects and subtends a range of transformative textual strategies, political and ethical problematics, and modalities of spectatorship in documentary film and media” (1). While Middleton’s terminology may be a little too cerebral for some readers, his objective is a worthy endeavor. When Michael Moore confronts a gun advocate in *Bowling for Columbine* or Sasha Baron Cohen interviews feminists in *Borat*, most audiences instantly feel the awkwardness of these moments. Yet, the purpose and effect of these moments may not be so obvious, and critical thinkers such as Middleton seek to unpack these scenes, theorize on the filmmaker’s intent, and comment on audience interpretation.

Individually, Middleton's five chapters of formal inquiry are well done. In chapter one, he supplies an ample amount of literature in humor theory—dating back to Plato, Thomas Hobbes, and Sigmund Freud—for his reader to appreciate the historical significance of today's trends. "Superiority" and "incongruity," for example, are key components in many types of humor, and Middleton skillfully explains how nonfiction filmmakers use them to construct awkward scenes (24-28). In Moore's *Roger and Me*, the scene with the "bunny lady" naturally lends itself to feelings of awkwardness when she discusses her financial problems or bludgeons one of her rabbits to death on camera. The director accentuates the situation's awkward incongruity by cutting to reaction shots of himself, establishing the bunny lady as both a comical figure and a tragic, memorable representative of the larger economic situation in Flint, Michigan.

Middleton's primary analysis is complemented by the use of contemporary reviews and even promotional interviews with documentary subjects. *American Movie*'s Mark Borchardt, for example, described his on-screen persona as a "character" when interviewed after the documentary's release, yet he also asserted the film was an honest depiction of his life at the time. This dichotomy presents its own awkward tension that the viewer must negotiate. Understanding that audiences see and read these follow-up interviews, often *before* they see the movie itself, Middleton treats the documentary as merely one component in the overall discourse of a subject. I welcome this kind of supplemental inquiry because it represents a healthy blend of the textual and the contextual that inform a more complete understanding of a film.

Despite the vulnerability to subjectivity or bias that this kind of analytical work invites, Middleton's conclusions are largely valid based on the facts that he presents. Additionally, efforts like this often raise more questions than answers, and the possibility for audience self-examination is one element that Middleton should more fully explore. When I watch the works

of Sasha Baron Cohen, for example, I identify the awkwardness I feel as stemming from my own paranoia that my values or the values of my family and friends might be closely aligned with the ridiculous characters in *Borat*. Middleton's key inference is that audiences feel awkward because they are unclear about what is real and what is staged on the screen, but by including Cohen's work in the canon of awkward documentary films, Middleton introduces a wonderful opportunity to challenge audiences to consider not only what is real, but what is right. If, in fact, Middleton does make this argument somewhere in his conclusions, perhaps he could make the point a little clearer so that all of his readers—academics as well as practitioners—can comprehend it.

Two concerns I have with Middleton's book are not his arguments but the structure and choice of subjects. The "Introduction" goes beyond most book introductions in that it offers premature analyses that are repeated in more detail in later chapters. Middleton often mentions his book's own attributes, almost as if he is citing other's reviews, with statements such as "*Documentary's Awkward Turn* examines disrupted encounters in documentary film and media" (3) and "*Documentary's Awkward Turn* explores these contrasting, but dialogically related, effects of *implication* and *insulation*" (9, author's italics), and he seems to expect his reader to understand his arguments before he has presented them. These kinds of statements are more appropriate for paragraphs and sections at the end of his chapters or in a dedicated conclusion chapter.

Furthermore, I fail to understand the logic in some of Middleton's choice of texts. He exerts considerable effort identifying awkward and humorous moments in the spoof film *This is Spinal Tap*, for example, yet he provides no evidence that these conventions influenced later documentary filmmakers. Why, then, include analysis of a work of fiction in a book dedicated to

documentary? Likewise, *The Office* uses documentary and reality-style conventions to deliver awkward humor, but I would suggest paying closer attention to a series such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, a sitcom in which successful TV producer Larry David plays himself. Like *The Office*, this show features a blend of awkward conversations and reality-style camerawork that saves the writers from having to create elaborate physical comedy, witty dialogue, and other laugh-track moments from sitcom tradition. But whereas *The Office* is purely fiction, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* evokes real people and contributes to awkward humor by asking the audience to question its own authenticity. Do these characters act like this in their real lives? Are they representative of all wealthy suburbanites and/or all privileged Hollywood producers?

While texts such as *The Office*, *Borat*, and *This is Spinal Tap* may or may not be appropriate in a study of documentary trends, their chapters in this book point back to a larger problem of the book's structure and the need for a sharper editor. Why does Middleton dedicate a review of humor theories in his chapter about Michael Moore and then rarely mention superiority and incongruity in later chapters? These concepts easily apply to other texts in the book and would therefore be more suitable to address in the Introduction. Individually, the chapters contain skillfully framed arguments, and I do believe they have a place in graduate film and media studies. Unfortunately, the book's overall structure, combined with Middleton's tendency to use verbose, academic descriptions, may turn off the very readers who could benefit most from this material—young documentary filmmakers and their core audiences.



*Laura Bone*

**Autumn Funerals**

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This morning greeted with a crimson smile  
The sky showed signs of blood poisoning  
The sun grew ornery and barely woke  
The clouds peeled back in slices  
and I knew it had come.  
Someone turned down the thermostat outside  
Closeted old knits and layers are dug  
from their dungeons and let out  
to turn hairless beasts into bundles  
and I pulled Big Brown over my shoulders.  
Aroma of coffee, pumpkin bread, and savory  
bacon draws noses close into heated romance  
Fog-smearred window panes groan  
against the weight of wind  
Mahogany swings wide calling inside icy fingers  
and I slip out amongst the calls  
for "Shut that door!"  
Pianos swing Maple Leaf Rag  
Clear, crisp notes swing, and sway, and fall  
Irises try to regulate the light of cold fire  
that enters the lenses and overwhelms the senses  
and I push my foot to take the step.  
Crunchy carpet awaits the stealthiest hunter  
The long awaited show has come to town  
Rake it into piles and take a leap of faith  
The wonder of a beautiful death  
and I lay in the heap. "Oh, October  
funerals, warmer than summer weddings."

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*Franklin Lowe*

**In that Africa**

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This salted rain, the sign  
of fever's break across  
the dusted plain that mars  
her face in tattoos of a tribe  
who sold their gods for grains  
of shredded dollar bills: fetishes  
with eyes like leaves  
first found by Europe's second sons,  
their blue-hatch maps  
of towns now thatched  
with sheets of iron ore and shored  
by rivers run in tongues  
unshaped to shade a brimming  
calabash or palm wine wound  
by talking strings and Tuareg dreams,  
but built with barcodes, spaced  
even and upright, to place  
a family deep inside.

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*Franklin Lowe*

**Atlas, en pointe**

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I wait, with heartbeat falling into *first*,  
each sinewed spine of breath withheld, within,  
and *port de bras* restrained, until I burst  
above the polonaiseing violin.

The spectrum of my vision blurs to black  
as all my bones extend against their pains  
and echo with commands of *lift* and *back*  
*to fifth* for *rond de jambe*, the step that feigns  
a rippled branch along the water's shore.

There, flocks of firebirds *glissade* and land  
with strokes of pointed toes and heels before  
they grasp the wooded ballast-*barre* in hand,  
but I must stay to train my spinning mind  
before I leave this mirror-sea behind.

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## Poetry

*Katy Ward*

**Wax and Feathers**

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Your fingers band with tattoos calloused black  
and work stained, midnight oil and wishes bled.  
You shirtless mayhem, feathers web your back  
your mind a wheelhouse whirring miles ahead.  
I let my palms caress your waxen wings  
and keep my thoughts enjambed behind my lips.  
My leaving spurs declawed, withstanding plea:  
*You cannot have your Kate and still persist  
like Icarus.* You know an iron neck  
unravels lovers, fraying sinews neath  
my covers. Fly you sunward. I'll collect  
these heart tips warm kissed feathers worn beliefs--  
Bare hands unclasp, knees buckle at the tryst  
toward the sun. Ambition's sweltering cyst.

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## Short Story

*Franklin Lowe***Three Settings of Anna's Palette in Purple Orchid**

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**O**n the Tuesday after I finish moving in, I invite my first boyfriend to my apartment for dinner. Once he accepts, I ask my mother to come over and help me cook. Though her words fall heavily, she accepts and asks what time she should arrive.

*Three.**Ok. I'll be there. Seems like the thing to do.*

I agree, and she hangs up in response. Sometimes, she forgets to say goodbye.

She lets herself in at three-fifteen, weighed down by the stretched-out plastic bags that cut into the soft of her arms. I hug her, and she seems happy, but I'm not convinced.

I sit a few feet from her stiffly folded knees, and we begin to work through the last few weeks. She asks about the projects I've been doing around my apartment and then tells me that this might finally be the year for a Democratic majority on the school board or for the arts camp she's been planning. It reminds me of the summers we used to spend talking, and the lazy nights when it felt natural to be her son.

At four, we get up from the saggy couch she gave me and return to the kitchen. We take the bags of chopped-up onions and peppers out of the freezer, and she begins to pull the fat from the chicken breasts lined up on the counter. I wait for the white of the onions to turn clear, then brown. When they begin to jump up, they release their incense into the air, and I turn the heat down to its palest, powder-blue flame.

*Smells good, doesn't it?*

*I can't smell it, she says, I'm too close to it.*

We rotate around the room, orbiting to the slow drumbeat of a hipster CD that Scott bought me.

*I like this song, I try.*

*Me, too.*

She cuts the chicken into long, uneven strips and wraps the packaging in a grocery bag before putting it in the trash can.

*It's from Scott.*

*Oh. Well. It's still nice.*

She hums along, but she looks hurt by the melody. We place the chicken on top of the mosaic of wilted vegetables and our hands briefly touch. When she doesn't pull back, I smile at her. She smiles back and it seems to help.

*Didn't you used to wear that shirt when I was little?* It's long-sleeved and made of cotton that's been worn soft. It's covered in the memories of navy blue flowers but has no discernable pattern left.

*Yep. It used to be your favorite to fall asleep on.*

She breaks the seal on the cardboard box of rice and places two perforated bags in the boiling water.

*I love you.*

*I know, she says, love you, too.*

I dice tomatoes and okra, pull sausage from its casing, and measure out cups of broth before marking each item off her list. Because I'm caught up in the rhythm we've been keeping, I don't even notice her accusation until she repeats it a second and third time.

*Why didn't you tell me to buy beans? Her voice becomes tight and irritated. I could have gotten them. I almost did. I wondered why you hadn't thought of them.*

*I bought a bag last week.*

*Tyler. You have to soak them. Dry beans aren't like canned beans. Didn't I tell you that?*

*Mom, the pot's in the fridge. I made them last night.*

*You could have said so, earlier.*

*I'm sorry.*

*Don't apologize.*

*Yes, ma'am.*

When the timer for the rice goes off, she pours out the water, snips the bag, and fills the pot back up with rice that I then fluff with a fork.

*Who taught you to do it like that? Scott?*

*Food Network.*

*Oh.*

At a quarter after five, she empties a box of Jiffy mix into a Tupperware bowl. A soft poof of pale yellow dust briefly fills the air around her. She seems happy, serene, surrounded by her cornmeal halo; the sunlight that breaks through the window pane circles her and she reminds me of the Madonnas from the coloring books she used to buy me. I wonder if she'd identify herself as a Pietà, instead.

To the waiting piles of washed and cut strawberries, we add raspberries and cubes of sponge cake. The whipped cream is waiting in the fridge. It's my grandmother's recipe. Mom doesn't do real whipped cream. Neither do I, usually, but Scott's worth it, I tell her.

*Worth using the stand mixer?*

I don't answer.

*You used to like Cool Whip.*

*I still do.*

*No. I don't think you do.*

*Ok.*

We return to our respective silences until she looks up suddenly from the head of lettuce she's been shucking.

*Tell me about him.*

*Mom. Why? What do you mean? You know about him.*

*I know what you want me to know. Now, I actually want to know about him, know if he's good enough for you.*

*He is, momma. Really.*

*That doesn't tell me anything.*

Her tone is flat, as are her lips. She is determined, and her determination is not a force I care to tamper with. I try to think about the Scott she'd like to know but quickly abandon any attempt to edit him.

*He studied architecture at school, but now he's thinking about law school, so he's interning at a firm downtown.*

*Right, I mean, his résumé could have told me that.*

*Oh, guess so. Well, he's tall and he works out some, so that's sure not something we have in common, but he likes artsy stuff, too. He took me to the art museum for our first date and he just stood there for, like, five, six minutes just looking at the lobby. I mean, there wasn't even any art in the room, but to him, I guess there was.*



She continues to mechanically transform the stacks of plastic-sealed cartons into a rainbow-hued vegetable trifle. She seems content doing it and content listening to me, so I keep talking.

*He's sensitive, but not too sensitive, you know?*

She nods.

*And he's really perceptive, like he can always tell what's going on beneath the surface, when I'm upset or scared. And he takes care of me. And he needs me, and I need that.*

I drone on with his biography until I notice that the chopping of the vegetables has stopped. She's wiping tears from her eyes – round, perfect tears that shake on the edge of her cheek when she finally lets out a quiet, shallow breath.

Though her voice sounds far-off, it's eerily steady.

*I just can't take it right now.*

*Mom, you asked about him.*

*Damn it, Tyler, I know that, I know that. I mean I can't take you having him right now. I just can't, I thought I could, I tried, but I can't.*

Her face is screwed up into a desperate pout. I move towards her, my arms anticipating an embrace, but they fall to my sides as she hurries past.

She steps into my living room and starts to rummage through the stack of pillows and blankets on my couch. With a series of small, brisk motions, she tosses the pillows onto the floor, until my rug is strewn with square blocks of red-grey flannel and navy blue stripes.

When she grows tired of her volley, she sits down and starts to carefully fold and refold one of the blankets. I tiptoe towards her and watch as she unbraids the fringe in her lap.

*Mom?*

I wait as her hands still.

*Not now, Tyler. Not now.*

*Fine*, I want to tell her, *Fine, I don't need your approval. I don't need this shit and I don't need you*. But, of course, I don't open my mouth. Instead, I cover the bowl of salad with the aluminum foil that she's left on the counter, and I turn my attention towards the dining room.

Last night, besides soaking and cooking the red beans, I also washed and ironed the napkins that Scott gave me as a house-warming gift last month. They're a sort of deep, watery teal and they look very faux-boho with their swirls of gold threading. I take them out of the buffet and place them next to the tumbling pile of silverware and the cardboard box of china that I got out of my storage unit this morning. I peel back the strips of packing tape and momentarily revel in the layers of bubble-wrap that pad the box's contents.

The china inside is light between my fingers, and when I set each piece down on the hardwood table, they release a dull ring. Dinner plates, salad plates, saucers, and coffee cups alike, each piece is the perfect balance between pristine bone white and a viscous pinky purple that *Southern Living* identified as Orchid. *Orchid*, like the rows of nodding heads in the green house of the retirement home where Scott's grandmother lives. *Just a friend*, he'd called me, but I hadn't said anything at the time.

My fingers run across the burnished gold band that encircles the scooping quatrefoil of the plates and bowls. "Creative, yet classic," the website had said.

I take my time unwrapping each piece and stacking them on top of my too-trendy slate chargers. I begin to develop points of conversation for the impending dinner, but my thoughts are cut short by a voice from the doorway.

*What are those?*

*Anna's Palette in Purple Orchid. It's a new pattern that was all over the magazines last year.*

*Is that really what you think I meant?*

I turn. Her eyes are red from scrubbing her face over my sink, but the red is just another layer over the faded lines of tears.

*Why do you have them, Tyler? Why do you have china like that?*

Her voice is solid in the air, filling in for the gap left by the word she leaves out.

Wedding. This is wedding china to her—the stuff of family bridal showers and thank-you notes.

I put down the dessert fork I'd been polishing with my shirttail.

*Because I knew I wouldn't have a wedding and I just bought my own.*

She stares at me, attempting to bore into me, but when she can't, she leaves the room, disgusted. I hear her flip through a few of the magazines in my foyer, her fingers crumpling the pages with each turn.

I finish setting the table and go back into the kitchen. I watch the clock, the front door, my phone. My mother does the same.

He texts me at six-thirty. He's stuck behind a FedEx truck, but he'll be here soon. I tell her this, and she places the magazine back in its wicker basket.

With her back turned to me, she walks through my kitchen, moving pot handles away from the edge of the stove and turning off the oven—*So the cornbread won't burn*—before putting her glasses back in her purse.

*I hope you two have fun.*

*Mom, don't go.*

*Tyler. Everything's done, just don't forget the salad since you put it in the veggie drawer.*

*You'll be fine. Have fun.*

*Momma. Stay.*

*No.*

I light the two champagne-colored tapers on the dining room table and follow her taillights as they fade around the curves in the road. When they disappear, I put the third setting in the bottom drawer of the china cabinet. Scott arrives at seven.

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Screenplay

*Hudson Reynolds*

**The Stairwell**

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\*The text of the screenplay begins at the top of the following page.

--*Wide Angle* Editorial Staff

INT. WINDOWLESS STAIRWELL

A MAN (30s) in a business suit with a briefcase enters a stairwell through a doorway.

The door containing the words: "6th Floor" closes behind him.

The MAN walks down the flights of stairs.

After an unnaturally long amount of time passes, he stops next to a doorway.

He looks at the door to see the words: "6th Floor."

The MAN stares at the doorway, confused.

He walks up a flight of stairs to reach the floor above him.

He looks at the door to see he is still on the 6th floor.

MAN

Wha-?

He grips the handle of the door but cannot open it.

He places his briefcase against the wall opposite of the door.

He heaves on the door but cannot open it.

The MAN knocks on the door.

MAN (CONT'D)

Hey! Someone open up!

The MAN pounds on the door with both hands.

MAN (CONT'D)

(screaming)

Hello!?

He notices his knuckles are bruised.

MAN (CONT'D)

Damn it.

He removes his business jacket and places it on the floor. He rolls up his shirtsleeves.

The MAN notices a large ant crawling towards his jacket. He steps on it while loosening his tie.

*Wide Angle*

## Stairwell

He places his tie on top of his jacket. He picks up his briefcase.

He continuously runs down the flight of stairs. He notices the jacket and tie every time he reaches the next floor.

Exhausted, the MAN stops. He stares at his jacket and tie on the ground.

MAN (CONT'D)  
(yelling)  
Fuck!

The MAN throws his briefcase against the wall.

He removes his cellphone from his pants pocket to see he has no service. He tries calling 911, but the line does not connect. He tries opening the door.

He drops the phone and slumps against the wall to the ground.

DISSOLVE

INT. WINDOWLESS STAIRWELL (LATER)

The MAN sits against the wall. He has taken off his shoes and collared shirt. He repeatedly tries calling 911. The line never connects.

He stares at the fire extinguisher in a case attached to the wall.

He pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from his pants pocket. He removes the last cigarette and tosses the empty pack.

He lights the cigarette and smokes. He stares at the floor.

He taps the back of his head against the wall. He looks again at the fire extinguisher. He notices a smoke detector high above the fire extinguisher case.

He stands and walks to the wall containing the smoke detector. He takes a long drag and blows smoke towards the smoke detector.

He waits a few moments. The smoke detector remains silent.

He takes another long drag and abruptly coughs. He drops the cigarette.

He spits ash onto the ground.

Stairwell

MAN  
(yelling)  
Ugh, fuck!

Ants crawl out of the cigarette filter.

He furiously stomps on the ants and cigarette repeatedly.

He forces himself to continue coughing and repeatedly spits saliva.

He stares at the dead ants and flattened cigarette in confusion. He wipes his tongue with his hand and spits again.

MAN (CONT'D)  
(screaming)  
What the hell is going on?!

He gazes at the fire extinguisher.

MAN (CONT'D)  
Fuck it.

He removes the fire extinguisher from the case.

He slams the fire extinguisher against the door repeatedly with no results.

He wheezes from exhaustion.

The cellphone rings. Confused, the MAN looks at his phone.

UNKNOWN NUMBER (TEXT)  
*WHERE'S THE BAG?*

The MAN exits out of the text to see he still has no service. He tries calling 911, but the line does not connect. He returns to the text and responds.

MAN (TEXT)  
*PLEASE HELP ME. I'M TRAPPED IN A  
STAIRWELL IN HODGE'S LODGES ON  
121ST STREET IN CHICAGO. PLEASE  
CALL 911.*

The MAN resumes hitting the door with the fire extinguisher with no results.

He drops the fire extinguisher and sits down against the wall.

The phone rings.



Stairwell

UNKNOWN NUMBER (TEXT)  
*THE ANT SLAVED AWAY UNTIL THE DAY  
IT FINALLY LAY.*

MAN  
(yelling)  
What!?

He looks at the dead ants.

MAN (TEXT)  
*YOU HAVE THE WRONG NUMBER, BUT  
PLEASE PLEASE CALL 911.*

UNKNOWN NUMBER (TEXT)  
*THE FATE OF MAN IS JUST AS GRAY.*

MAN (TEXT)  
*Have you called them???*

UNKNOWN NUMBER (TEXT)  
*Look in the bag. Then I'll call.*

The MAN stares at the text angrily.

He looks forward to see a small bag a few feet away.

MAN (TEXT)  
*WHO IS THIS?*

UNKNOWN NUMBER (TEXT)  
*OPEN THE BAG.*

MAN (TEXT)  
*What's in it?*

UNKNOWN NUMBER (TEXT)  
*:)*

The MAN stares at the bag suspiciously.

MAN (TEXT)  
*I'll open the bag if you get me out  
of here. Call 911!*

UNKNOWN NUMBER (TEXT)  
*You're going to open the bag.*

The MAN angrily stares at the phone. It rings. The man throws his cellphone down the stairs.

The cellphone repeatedly rings.

Stairwell

MAN

Shut up!

The cellphone stops ringing.

He stares forward blankly.

He looks down at his right hand to notice there's a red substance under his fingernails.

He notices that his left inner-arm has the words: "OPEN THE BAG" carved in his skin. Horrified, he shakes as he stares at the words.

Still shaking, he slowly crawls towards the bag. He stares down at the bag. He unzips it.

MAN (CONT'D)

No.

The MAN stares at a large knife in the bag.

He zips up the bag and tosses it down the stairs.

The cellphone rings. The MAN realizes he is holding the phone. The cellphone reads: "Incoming Call: Unknown Number."

He answers. Still shaking, he holds the phone up to his ear, waiting a few seconds for someone to speak.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

(softly)

Kill.

The MAN throws the cellphone against the wall. He grabs the fire extinguisher and smashes the cellphone repeatedly.

As he smashes it, another man approaches from down the stairs. The MAN turns around to see the OTHER MAN. The OTHER MAN turns and runs down the stairs.

The MAN turns to see in his left hand a knife and the words deeply carved in his right inner-arm: "KILL."

MAN

Wait!

The MAN drops the knife and sprints after The OTHER MAN.

MAN (CONT'D)

Please! Wait!

## Stairwell

The MAN catches up to the OTHER MAN at the bottom of the staircase. He grabs the OTHER MAN's shoulder.

The OTHER MAN collapses onto the floor.

The MAN realizes he has the large knife in his hand with blood on the blade. He drops the knife.

He stares at the OTHER MAN in disbelief. He turns the body over and checks the OTHER MAN's pulse. The OTHER MAN's eyes remain open.

He backs away while staring at the body in shock.

The MAN sees his own clothes on the ground that he placed earlier. He looks at the door to see the words: "6th Floor."

He looks back at the OTHER MAN's lifeless body.

The MAN shakes and dry heaves.

OTHER MAN  
(softly)  
The ant slaved away until the day  
it finally lay.

The MAN looks at the OTHER MAN in shock. The OTHER MAN lies motionless without blinking.

MAN  
Who the hell are you?

OTHER MAN  
(louder)  
The fate of man is just as gray.

The MAN stares angrily.

OTHER MAN (CONT'D)  
(louder)  
The ant slaved away until the day  
it finally lay.

The MAN grabs the OTHER MAN. The OTHER MAN remains motionless.

MAN  
(angry)  
What the fuck is going on?

OTHER MAN  
(louder)  
The fate of man is just as gray.

## Stairwell

The MAN punches the OTHER MAN's face. The OTHER MAN's head jerks with the punch but remains limp.

MAN  
Who the fuck are you? How'd you  
lock me in here?

OTHER MAN  
(screaming)  
The ant slaved away until the day  
it  
(The MAN stabs him)  
finally lay.

The MAN continues stabbing the OTHER MAN.

OTHER MAN (CONT'D)  
(screaming)  
The ant slaved away until the day  
it finally lay.

The MAN frantically stabs the OTHER MAN.

OTHER MAN (CONT'D)  
(screaming)  
The fate of man is just as gray.

The MAN grabs the fire extinguisher and smashes the OTHER MAN's face repeatedly.

Realizing the OTHER MAN is silent, the MAN stops and reaches into the OTHER MAN's pocket.

He pulls out the OTHER MAN's phone and dials 911. He sits against the wall waiting for the call to connect.

The line does not connect. He goes into the OTHER MAN's sent messages. The messages sent to the MAN are not in the phone.

MAN  
No. No. No. Oh, Fuck!

The MAN throws the phone against the wall. He stares at the OTHER MAN's deformed corpse.

He tears up. He shakes and gags.

He looks at the words: "KILL" in his inner-arm.

He feels the marks with his finger. He grunts with pain.

He looks at the corpse. He removes the knife from the body. He covers the OTHER MAN with his business jacket.

## Stairwell

With the knife in hand, he sits against the wall. He takes the knife and holds it to his wrist.

He shakes as he stares at the blade.

He throws the blade down the stairs. He hits the back of his head against the wall.

He turns around to see a large smiley face drawn with blood on the wall.

He realizes his palms are covered in blood. He wipes his palms against his pants.

He looks at the OTHER MAN's body. The body is no longer covered. The jacket lies next to the body.

The MAN returns the jacket over the corpse.

Footsteps become audible in the distance. The MAN hears the footsteps and stands.

A young PREGNANT WOMAN descends from the stairs into view.

The MAN realizes he is holding the knife.

MAN (CONT'D)  
(screaming)  
Hey!

The PREGNANT WOMAN looks at him and continues descending.

MAN (CONT'D)  
I, I have a knife!

She continues walking towards him.

MAN (CONT'D)  
(frantic)  
You see this?!  
(points at the corpse)  
That's a dead body. I bashed his  
face in! I did this! His blood is  
on the fucking wall!

She steps over the corpse. The MAN backs against the wall.

MAN (CONT'D)  
Please. I don't want to hur-  
(tearing up)  
hurt anyone else.

## Stairwell

She stands close in front of him. His hands shake. He plunges the knife into his own belly.

He stares into the PREGNANT WOMAN's eyes.

The MAN feels his own stomach with his hand and realizes that there is no wound. He looks at the PREGNANT WOMAN to see a knife deeply plunged in her stomach.

The PREGNANT WOMAN passes out. The MAN catches her and gently places her on the ground. The MAN cries as she dies.

Weeping, the MAN stares at her dead body in his arms.

A creaking sound comes from the PREGNANT WOMAN's stomach. The MAN looks at the large belly in confusion.

The knife is pushed out from the inside of the belly.

A small dog-sized ant crawls out of the knife wound.

The MAN stares at it in horror. The ant crawls on the dead woman's body towards him.

He puts the woman down and frantically backs away into the wall.

The ant bites the MAN's ankle. He cries out and tries kicking it off.

The ant bites through the MAN's ankle, dismembering his foot. He screams and kicks the ant away.

The MAN grabs the fire extinguisher and hits the ant until he crushes it.

He backs against the wall with the fire extinguisher still in hand.

He looks at his footless leg. He sees he is losing a large amount of blood. He pales.

The MAN laughs hysterically. He continues laughing and repeatedly hits his face with the fire extinguisher.

His forehead and nose bleed.

He shakes uncontrollably. He stares at his inner-arm wounds and realizes ants are crawling out.

Ants crawl out of the man's forehead wound.

The MAN tries wiping the ants off his face as more crawl out of his arms.

## Stairwell

Many ants crawl out of his footless leg.

Copious ants crawl from his forehead and nose.

Covered in ants, the MAN screams and frantically attempts to rub them off. Ants crawl into his mouth as he screams.

The MAN vomits ants.

He sees ants crawling underneath the skin of his torso.

He pushes his fingers into his lower sternum and pulls his ribcage and chest apart. Swarms of ants crawl from out of his opened torso.

CUT TO:

INT. GIANT STAIRWELL

The MAN wakes up naked sitting against a wall. He wipes his eyes. He feels his chest to see it is still intact. His foot is no longer gone.

He looks forward to see an expansive room. There are giant stairs in the distance.

He looks to his right to he see a giant door containing the words: "6th Floor."

He gazes at it in disbelief.

He stands and walks towards the distant door. A massive coat drops in front of the MAN.

He looks to his left to see a large figure in business attire. He looks up at the figure's face to see it is an ant.

The ant loosens its tie.

The ant lifts its leg and motions to step on the MAN.

CUT TO BLACK

THE END

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