

"Oh, that?" Ives said. "That's shadow counterpoint. That's the shadow the main theme gives off." In Ives's music, bandstand tunes and hymns and college fight songs are forced together, invited to share the same musical space in a sort of aural brawl. Ives's music likes to end with exaltation, explosions, and exhaustion.

Stories bring characters together, too, mixed and matched, sometimes pushing them toward each other like chaperones who see to it that the diffident seventh graders in dancing class are suddenly, and against all expectations, in one another's arms.

Rhyming Action

after Virgil Thomson

For the last three hundred years or so, prose writers have, from time to time, glanced over in the direction of the poets for guidance in certain matters of life and writing. Contemplating the lives of poets, however, is a sobering activity. It often seems as if the poets have extracted pity and terror from their work so that they could have a closer firsthand experience of these emotions in their own lives. A poet's life is rarely one that you would wish upon your children. It's not so much that poets are unable to meet various payrolls; it's more often the case that they've never heard of a payroll. Many of them are pleased to think that the word "salary" is yet another example of esoteric jargon.

I myself am an ex-poet. My friends the poets like me better now that I no longer write poetry. It always got in the way of our friendships, my being a poet, and writing poems. The one thing that can get a poet irritated and upset is the thought of another poet's poems. Now that I do not write poetry, I am better able to watch the spontaneous combustion of poets at

a distance. The poets even invite our contemplation of their stormy lives, and perhaps this accounts for their recent production of memoirs. If you didn't read about this stuff in a book, you wouldn't believe it.

Prose writers, however, are no better. Their souls are usually heavy and managerial. Prose writers of fiction are by nature a sullen bunch. The strain of inventing one plausible event after another in a coherent narrative chain tends to show in their faces. As Nietzsche says about Christians, you can tell from their faces that they don't enjoy doing what they do. Fiction writers cluster in the unlit corners of the room, silently observing everybody, including the poets, who are usually having a fine time in the center spotlight, making a spectacle of themselves as they eat the popcorn and drink the beer and gossip about other poets. Usually it's the poets who leave the mess just as it was, the empty bottles and the stains on the carpet and the scrawled phrases they have written down on the backs of pizza delivery boxes—phrases to be used for future poems, no doubt, and it's the prose writers who in the morning usually have to clean all of this up. Poets think that a household mess is picturesque—for them it's the contemporary equivalent of a field of daffodils. The poets start the party and dance the longest, but they don't know how to plug in the audio system, and they have to wait for the prose writers to show them where the on/off switch is. In general, poets do not know where the on/off switch is, anywhere in life. They are usually *off* unless they are forcibly turned *on*, and they stay *on* until they are taken to the emergency room, where they are medicated and turned *off* again.

Prose writers, by contrast, are unreliable friends: They are always studying you to see if there's anything in your personality or appearance that they can steal for their next narrative. They notice everything about you, and sooner or later they start to

editorialize on you, like a color commentator at a sports event. You have a much better chance at friendship with a poet, unless you are a poet yourself. In your bad moments, a poet is always likely to sympathize with your misery, and in your good moments to imagine you as a companion for a night on the town. Most poets don't study character enough to be able to steal it; they have enough trouble understanding what character *is*.

Of all human occupations, the writing of poetry leaves the most time for concentrated leisure activities. Poets have considerable quantities of time and a low boredom threshold, which makes them fun and scary to be around. With poets, you are likely to find yourself, as I once did, driving around town at 2 a.m. looking for a restaurant that sells roast beef sandwiches; the sandwiches, in this case, were not for the poet but for his hunting dogs, who had become accustomed to this diet. Loyalty is a religion for poets, and in any case they need the requirements of friendship to fill the other twenty-three and a half hours of the day. They are distractible, however, since they are usually thinking about an image or a favorite phrase or a new approach to the sacred. Prose writers have to spend hours and hours in chairs, facing paper, adding one brick to another brick, piling on the great heap of their endless observations, going through the addled inventory of all the items they've laboriously paid attention to, and it makes them surly—all this dawn-until-dusk sitting for the sake of substantial books that you could prop open a door with, big novels with sentences that have to go to the far right-hand margin of the page. Fiction writers get resentful, watching poets calling it quits at 9:30 a.m. Writing prose is steady work, but it tends to make prose writers grumpy and money grubbing and longfaced. They feel that they should be rewarded for what they do: observing everything and everybody with that wide-eyed staring look, like a starving cat painted on a velvet canvas.

Poets are the nobility of the writing world. Their nobility has to do with their spiritual intelligence and mind-haunted love for language and their subtle perfectionism. Poets can trace their lineage back to Orpheus, but prose writers can't go much further than that money grubber, Samuel Richardson, or that jailbird, Cervantes. Like it or not, prose fiction writers have always been part of the middle class; like other members of the middle class, they perk up when the subject turns to money. You can be a prose writer without having any kind of primary relation to the gods, but poets are often god-touched, when they are not being butchered by the gods, and this fate affects them in curious ways. They think about fate often if not obsessively. Like other nobles who spend their days scouting the heavens, however, poets have little understanding of most worldly occupations, except for writing poems and falling in love and having great sex, which is why half of their poems are about writing poems or falling in love and having great sex.

It's a good thing for prose writers that poets generally gave up telling stories in poems around the turn of the century. Each one of the English Romantic poets, with the possible exception of Shelley, was a great storyteller, and even Shelley wanted to write, with *The Cenci*, a play that could be produced on the stage; Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* has a great story to tell and Keats's story of *Lamia* has a startlingly nightmarish quality. The story of *Don Juan* will keep you stimulated and alert, and even Tennyson could tell a story, although there is a softening in Tennyson that gives his narratives a gauzy mix of the medieval and the romantic that we now associate with the paintings of Maxfield Parrish. Despite their great achievements, Pound, Eliot, and Stevens and many other Modernists and Postmodernists did not care to get themselves involved with extended narratives of any kind. They saw, or thought they saw, that progressive narrative was itself a

fiction and led to a progressivist view of history in which they did not believe. All their stories have turned into little shards of broken glass, each shard an enclosed historical moment, and part of the experience of reading their poems involves spending hours gluing these pieces of glass together. It is interesting to me that poets have mostly renounced telling stories in their poems, but as an ex-poet I am pleased that they have done so, because it gives me a mission in life.

The stories that poets have always liked to tell tend to be somewhat hypnotic and mesmerizing. Poets have often attended to what I would call narrative echo effects. The narrative echo effect is itself an almost subvocal denial of historical progression. You see this in medieval romances and in the ballad tradition.

All ballads love repetitive actions, or cycles of doubled events. You can easily imagine stories like this. Anyone can make them up. In this summarized form, they're not particularly interesting, but I'll give a thumbnail example. A boy goes to a city park in the spring to fly a kite. The scene is infused with a kind of lyric innocence and bravery. The kite is yellow, and in the wind it rises so that it can hardly be seen. The narrative knows that the child is missing something, but the child does not know what this element is and could not articulate it even if he felt it directly. This is a characteristic of adolescence, having feelings without words to identify them. Conrad Aiken's stories are usually structured in this manner. Years later, when the boy has grown to be a man, he happens to walk into the same park and sees a young woman who is flying a kite. She's with another man, but her blouse is the same yellow as the boy's kite once was . . . and the man who sees her is suddenly struck with what we sometimes call *déjà vu*, which is only an eerie sense of some repetition, of a time spiral, of things having come around back to themselves. Now that he

has words for his feelings, he's able to take some action. It's as if something about these events has started to rhyme. The effect is a bit like prophecy, except prophecy run in reverse, so that it cannot be used for purposes of worldly advancement.

Prophecy run forward gives the prophet the power of forecasting and a habit of denunciation. Prophecy run backward, into rhyming action or *déjà vu*, gives the participant a power of understanding. A forward prophetic power is worldly and has something to do with magic and foresight; a reverse prophecy, a sense of rhymed events, is unworldly and has something to do with insight. It moves us back into ourselves.

Robert Creeley once said about his stories, "I begin where I can, and I end when I see the whole thing returning." This is an interesting idea about certain narratives, particularly those that deal with discovery or growth. But the unsatisfactory nature of thinking about fictional form as a circle becomes apparent after a moment or two. The mechanical nature of Creeley's formulation is bothersome. Particularly in short stories, this automatic homing device would return the reader to a starting point before any initial materials in the story had been really lost from view. The immediate return of a story to its beginning would be like a rhyme that insists too quickly and bluntly on itself. Dramatically, this idea of the story as a circle would turn every journey into a trip around the block. If *every* story is a circle, ultimately returning to a source, then the sense of discovery along the way is slightly fraudulent. It has to be imaginable that any story may want to end up in a different locale from the one where it started. The return to a starting point is only a discovery if you've forgotten where you started out from in the first place. And you won't forget your starting point if you know ahead of time that you're bound to end up back there.

It's customary to talk about effective language or effective dramatic structure in fiction, but almost no one ever talks about beautiful action. At first glance, it's a dubious category. For years I have wondered about how to define beautiful action in fiction, and whether it's even possible. I don't mean actions that are beautiful because a character is doing something noble or good. I mean actions that feel aesthetically correct and just—actions or dramatic images that cause the hair on the back of our necks to stand up, as if we were reading a poem. My conclusion is that it often has to do with dramatic repetition, or echo effects. I think of this as rhyming action.

Almost every narrative struggles with two features of action in time. The first, and more common feature that I'm referring to, involves the change of a situation, its mutation into a new condition. It's what we mean when we say that in a story, something has to happen. One event follows another through a chain of causal events. The dramatic occurrences of a story push us forward toward a new state, a new condition, into the future of manifest possibilities. Any narrative that leads us toward this future also invites us to wonder or to worry how things will turn out. We turn pages, we are in suspense, we wonder whether Dr. Aziz will be convicted of doing harm to Miss Quested.

The other feature of action in narrative time, however, occurs when narratives move in reverse—when they come dramatically or imagistically to a point that is similar to one they have already seemingly passed. We see an image that we half remember. We hear a voice that we think we have heard before. We watch as someone performs an action that someone else did very much that way years ago. Something about the onward flow of time has been tricked. Poetry is interfering with the onward course of events. We *are* stepping into the same river twice. We discover that there is in fact an illusory quality about the whole

concept of progression. These are the stories that poets often like to tell, but most stories have some elements of time reversal, of what I'd call stutter memories, or rhyming action. Huck Finn finds himself reliving, under Tom Sawyer's supervision, the flight and liberation of Jim, only this time in the last chapters of his book, in travesty form. In John Hawkes's *Travesty*, a trauma is being reenacted, restaged, for the second time. In Alice Munro's "Five Points" Brenda finds herself in present time accidentally playing the role of the exploited fat girl that her boyfriend Neil has told her about in a story.

Any fiction writer who begins to use the techniques of dramatic repetition can imagine the dangers it presents. A flat rhyme is more regrettable than no rhyme at all. An awkward repetition lends to any story a taste of the overdetermined and stagi. Worse, it presents all symmetries as meaningful and interesting. Not every symmetry is beautiful. The bars on a jail are symmetrical but hardly beautiful. Compulsions are often symmetrical. Neurosis often has a terrible symmetry built into it.

For this reason, I recognize that in talking about rhyming action I may be giving what amounts to bad advice to writers. Using echo effects or rhyming action can feel contrived and corny—mostly, I think, because in life we are seldom conscious of the way things come back to themselves. With that in mind, what I would argue for is the employment of rhyming action with so subtle a touch that the reader scarcely notices it. The image or action or sound has to be forgotten before it can effectively be used again. Rhymes are often most telling when they are barely heard, when they are registered but not exactly noticed.

When we see two similar events separated by time, it's as if we are watching an intriguing pattern unfolding before we know exactly what the pattern is. I don't think that the pattern has to explain itself to be beautiful. It doesn't even have to an-

nounce itself. In fact, I think it's often more effective if the echo effects, the rhyming action, are allowed to happen without the reader being quite aware of them. If the subconscious or the unconscious gets us into these time tricks, these repetitions, then it's in the subconscious or the unconscious where they should be felt.

If we lived in Poland or Bosnia, overrun for centuries by invading armies or warring factions, we might very well believe, as Polish writers have tended to believe, in the semitragic nonprogression of large historical events. Eastern European writing has a somber and sometimes lyric concern with the invisible force of the repeated act or the echoing rhyming image. Think of Kundera, of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a novel that is in part a meditation on Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, and that is filled with images concerning the impossibility of any singularity. *Once*, it turns out, is *always*, is *forever*.

African writers, with their warring factions and their history of colonialism, have produced in the twentieth century a literature much closer to Central and Eastern European literature than to ours. Bessie Head and Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka are, in their different ways, writers obsessed with patterns and rhyming action. Living in a new nation-state does not mean that one lives in a new state of mind. Quite the opposite.

I can imagine someone—probably an American—objecting to all this by saying that the true beauty of a story often has to do with freedom, with choice, and with the feeling of a unique action, a one-time-only occurrence happening in front of our eyes. Americans love singularity. Ah, we say, the unexpected. How beautiful the unexpected is. (No: The unexpected is seldom beautiful.) The more we talk about patterning, the more we reduce spontaneity, and the more we increase the impression of

heavy-handedness, a kind of artistic overcontrol. All right, yes, perhaps. But I'm not just talking about narrative technique here anymore. I'm talking about the way some writers may view the world. Technique must follow a vision, a view of experience. No technique can ever take precedence over vision. It must be its servant. It is not the unexpected that is beautiful, but the inevitability of certain literary choices that surprise us with their sudden correctness.

In *Lolita*, the narrator, Humbert Humbert, whose name is already a double, makes a great point, in the early sections of the novel devoted to his American child-love, about her habit of chewing gum, particularly bubblegum. Much of the time when we see her, she's moving the gum around in her mouth, between words—words like “gosh”—and her half-formed sentences.

Late in the novel, long after she's been violated successively by Humbert and Clare Quilty, Humbert goes to Pavor Manor to kill Quilty, who, along with Humbert, has taken most of what it is possible to take from *Lolita*, including her innocence, which has been visually identified throughout the novel with her bubblegum. Humbert has violated that innocence too; they're both guilty, although Humbert is the one who feels both anger and remorse. Quilty feels nothing but contented satisfied corruption. In any case, in a scene that is horrible and comic and terrifying, Humbert finds Quilty in Pavor Manor, and after several pages of verbal confrontation, begins to shoot him. The wounding bullets seem to energize Quilty, and he trudges in a magnificent bloody progress up the stairs and down the hall until at last he arrives at his bedroom.

“Get out, get out of here,” he said coughing and spitting; and in a nightmare of wonder, I saw this blood-spattered but still buoyant person get into his bed and wrap himself up in the

chaotic bedclothes. I hit him at very close range through the blankets, and then he lay back, and a big pink bubble with juvenile connotations formed on his lips, grew to the size of a toy balloon, and vanished.

In the act of dying, Quilty visually brings forth *Lolita*. There she is, her visual tracteries coming out of his mouth. He has taken her innocence, and it's inside him. The gum is still echoing there, but now it's grown up, gone through adolescence, and become bloody. This is a small example of a visual rhyming effect, the transformation of an image from one person to another. What better proxy than Quilty, who is both a gummy and bloody boor, to bring this image back to us?

The first sentence of the last paragraph of James Joyce's “The Dead” is a simple declarative statement: “A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window.” It's a seemingly innocent pronouncement, and it does not force itself—or anything else—upon us. But in the previous paragraph, Gabriel Conroy has imagined Michael Furey, a “young man standing under a dripping tree,” as a part of the “vast hosts of the dead” whose region he is approaching. The next paragraph begins with those few light taps upon the pane.

The narration does not say that the taps are those of falling snow until the next sentence. If we stop at the end of the sentence, and if we bother to remember what Gretta Conroy has just told Gabriel, we will remember that Michael Furey used to announce himself to Gretta by flinging pebbles and stones against her windowpane. That sound has returned. We are hearing its echo. But this time it is brought to us by the snow, which Gabriel has introduced into the story from the moment he walked into his aunts' house, scraping snow from his galoshes.

We're just far enough away from Gretta's story so that we

probably have forgotten those taps on the window. But here they are again. Although Michael Furey is dead, the same sound he created is present again at the window. All right: It's just the snow. By this time, however, the entire landscape has been transformed, so that we have entered the region of the past made manifest—the return, not of the repressed, but of the missing and the lost.

In Sylvia Townsend Warner's story "Oxenhope," published in 1971, the protagonist, a man named William, returns by car to a place in the Midlands he visited on a walking tour when he was seventeen. He had taken the walking tour at that age because he felt his mind collapsing before the pressure of adulthood and the prospect of going to a university on a scholarship. The narration describes this condition as "brain-mauling." His mind had gone empty: "All the facts he had grouped so tidily had dissolved into a broth stirred by an idiot." In his walking tour, the boy chanced upon Oxenhope and was taken in by the woman of the house, who gave him milk and scones his first night there.

The first part of Sylvia Townsend Warner's story gives us his activities and his tasks during the month that the seventeen-year-old William stayed on with his hosts at Oxenhope while his mind recovered, but it also filters these memories with William's travels now, as a retired widower of sixty-four, with a grown daughter. One of his tasks, forty-seven years ago, was to clean up the family gravestones, picking the lichen out of the inscriptions with a knife. In present narrative time, he does the job again. But what he really wants to do is return to the streams and the ponds and the lakes he remembers. His memories are narrated as self-enclosed and seemingly unrecoverable:

The past was in the present—the narrowed valley, the steeper hills crowding into it, the river running with a childish voice. . . .

Hauling himself up from waterfall to waterfall, here by a rowan, there by handfuls of heather, he had come to a pool, wide enough to swim a few strokes across, deep enough—though it was so clear that its pebbles seemed within hand's reach—to take him up to the neck. He had stripped and bathed in the ice-cold water, threshing about like a kelpie, and then clambered out on a slab of rock to dry in the sun. He had lain so still in his happiness that after a while an adder elongated itself from the heather roots, lowered its poised head with its delicate, tranquil features, and basked on the rock beside him. There they had lain till a hawk's shadow crossed them, and with a flick the adder was gone.

The point is made here, quietly but insistently, that happiness sometimes has a quality of invisibility to it—transparency is possibly a better word. The story is invested in the clearness of the water and the transparency of the boy. William was, in his youth, empty, harmless and unharmed, filled with bad nerves and a sense of wonder. He left no mark upon anything, he cleared and cleaned things instead, even when, as the story subsequently tells us, he went out on Cat Loch with Oliphant, the keeper of the boathouse, and caught a fish. You catch a fish and then you clean it.

Now he is an older man, having been in the foreign service, and walking around these same locales. Without putting too fine a point on it, this is not a promising situation for a short story. The baffling loss of innocence, an older man gazing at his younger self—we've certainly seen this situation before. So far, William's memories are just that: memories, and there are few situations less edifying than those in which an aging person contemplates the past. Nostalgia, after all, is usually memory raised to a level of kitsch.

Many writers would end the story right here, disastrously, with the dying fall of memory. Regret and immobility are pretty

obviously inadequate dramatic responses to the challenges of recollection and aging. The story needs something else, a counter-movement. A good story is often like a good conversation: just as a conversation carries with it a statement and an answer, good dramatic structuring often involves a call-and-response. This action—William's return to Oxenhope—calls for a return, the action flung back on itself.

So we should not be too surprised at this point, late in the story, when William, staring off in the middle distance of the field, sees an almost invisible boy watching him from a hiding place. William was once almost invisible himself. "Sliding his glance in the direction of the watcher, he saw two brilliant pink flowers lighting a clump of heather: two outstanding ears with the sun shining through them. The boy had concealed himself very well, but his ears betrayed him." Like William next to the adder, the boy is next to the flower, but not actually concealed by it. We don't have to remember William and the adder, however, for the purposes of this scene, and it's not an exact rhyme anyway.

William returns to his car, the boy following him. "When William was down and approaching his car along the grassed road, he saw the boy approaching it from the opposite direction. Though his ears were no longer translucent, they were certainly the same ears." Translucency, transparency. Sylvia Townsend Warner's story is at this point inflected with an exact intelligence about the tactful relations between an older man and a young boy who are strangers but are filled with a civilized interest in each other. "The air was full of chill and poetry, and it was the moment to put on an overcoat. Ignoring the boy, who was now standing by the car without appearing to have stopped there, William leaned in and released the lid of the bonnet." The boy makes a cry of surprise (the engine is at the back), and they begin to talk.

The boy takes the man to be a stranger to the area and be-

gins to identify the valleys and the hills. Then, in a subtle shift, the boy rouses himself to tell legendary stories about the place. "Youn's Scraggie Law," the boy explains. "There was a man once, put goats on it. They were Spanish goats. They didna do.'" He then tells a story about a pool where sheep fell in and kicked each other to death. "William had heard that story from Jimmie Laidlaw," the narrator informs us. In other words, the story is at least fifty years old.

Sylvia Townsend Warner has laid down an intricate pattern here, and part of the pleasure of the story involves watching the characters work their way out of it. Observing the movement of the story, we expect the boy to give an account, a little piece of folk memory, that might have involved William when *he* was a boy in Oxenhope. This the boy does. But as it turns out, it's a visionary, apocalyptic story about Cat Loch, where William once went fishing. Here is what the boy says: "There was a man once, set fire to it. He was in a boat, and he set fire to the water. There was flames coming up all round the boat. Like a gas ring.'" When William asks the boy what color the flames were, the boy says, "They was blue."

In the pause that follows, William remembers what actually happened forty-seven years ago. "Oliphant, interminably rowing about the loch for likely places, had thrust down his oar to check the boat's movement. Bubbles of marsh gas rose to the surface. William saw himself leaning out of the boat and touching off their tiny incandescence with a lighted match."

This is what I mean by a beautiful action. It's like a couplet. The loud apocalyptic story the boy tells, and the quiet exact memory of William setting fire to the little bubbles of marsh gas—these two go together perfectly, and they are perfectly right without anyone worrying over their symbolic applications. Apart from the precision of the language, we have been brought around in

this episode to earth, air, water, and fire and their capacity to reintegrate someone after a brain-mauling. Furthermore, in a last feeling for stutter memory, William is no longer transparent. Children want to be transparent, but old people want to be permanent and visible. Through this legend, William has acquired permanent heroic visibility. He is a song, a hero, a successful Orpheus. Here is the story's last paragraph:

"Jump in," William said briskly, and turned the car. When the surface allowed, he drove fast, to please the boy. He put him down at Crosscleugh (there was still a white marble dog in the garden) and drove on. There was no call for a backward glance, for an exile's farewell. He had his tenancy in legend. He was secure.

I have gone on about "Oxenhope" not because it's on the scale of *Lolita* or "The Dead," but because in its modest way, the story creates a beautiful set of dramatic scenes that make intuitive sense. These scenes feel right when set next to each other. And they feel radiant before the story has been analyzed for its themes. These images—the boy cleaning the gravestones, lying next to the adder by a rock pool, or leaning out of the rowboat to set fire to the bubbles of marsh gas—have a quality of sensible tactile life. I don't think the pastoral and rural setting accounts for their beauty. It's not the countryside but the boy's wonder that transforms these scenes, and wonder is partially created out of the rhyming action. The boy setting fire to the bubbles of marsh gas has a place in the story because the story has already laid before us another dramatic scene, that of a lake of fire, which, if we bother to think about it, is Hell, but is, otherwise, just a visionary place. Place another image next to that one of a boy in a rowboat igniting the marsh gas with matches, and you have, if not heaven, at least its close earthly locale. Lazy little explosions, an afternoon of pleasing pointlessness.

"Oxenhope" doesn't force the reader into a jail of symmetrical images. It doesn't sit you up and ask if you've been paying attention. It won't, with nagging small reminders, find you inadequate as a reader. Nabokov, by contrast, with his aristocratic intelligence and fierce game playing, is capable of giving his readers a failing grade if they forget where they saw that image or that phrase before. *Pale Fire* and *Ada* can sometimes seem more like final exams than novels. They are gorgeous, in their various ways, but their symmetries gently close out much of the world. They have, at times, a suffocating overdetermined beauty.

The feeling of memory in "Oxenhope" is very light. It does not press hard on William as an adult, and its reverberations sound softly, almost inaudibly, in the reader's ear. Memory has not trapped its protagonist, because, if I understand the story properly, it has been communal. *A memory doesn't have to be accurate to be liberating*, the story claims, *it only has to be shared*.

Rhyming action exists in that curious area of writing between conscious intent and unconscious or semiconscious impulse. The writer who becomes too conscious of what s/he's doing, using this technique, would create labored and implacable symmetries. We like to think that the craft of writing is conscious and learned. That's why certain features about it can be taught. So how can I argue that the best forms of rhyming action are probably half-conscious? How can I argue for a half-conscious relaxing of the grip, for half thinking?

It feels to me as if I have worked myself into a false position. But in practice I believe it is probably not false at all. When we write, we reread what we have already written. Then, if we are not too anxious, we allow associations to mingle with those elements we have already laid down. We do so in a state of alert attentiveness that welcomes memory and progression and puts

them on the same stage and then lets them go. But if we dwell on our intentions too hard, we kill the spirit. Here, in a letter, is Sylvia Townsend Warner on Benjamin Britten's opera *The Turn of the Screw*:

The boy sang magnificently, and somehow gave the impression of singing with a hallucinated attention to what he had learned in fear and trembling and now was defiantly sure of. And it was so delicately done by the composer, with such bleak avoidance of appearing to dwell on it or turn blue that it was as matter of fact as a snake, an interval of terror and gone in a flash. Lovely!

Wonderful phrase, "bleak avoidance of appearing to dwell on it or turn blue . . ." I also love the way that quick terror, its sudden appearance and disappearance, is experienced as lovely. An event becomes beautiful without reference to its ethical character. What can be beautiful about terror? Terror is not lovely when it weighs eight hundred pounds. But when, in art, it is as light as a wingfeather, and as quick, it takes on the rapid half-lost half-found aura of the glimpse, or a dream that has lost all content but its coloration.

The act of writing anything can be as much consent as creation. One agrees to let certain passages come into the work. As a result, the story takes on a quicksilver quality, as memory drifts and glides through it.

Postscript: Sylvia Townsend Warner, for much of her adult life, intended to revise the Scott Moncrieff translation of Proust's *À la Recherche*. . . . She never got the rights from the Proust estate.

Our friends the poets are falling asleep. All this talk of memory probably annoys them. But in ceding progressive narrative to the prose writers in the twentieth century, they have also, in

large part, given over the poetry of memory. The poetry of memory in this century belongs to Proust and Faulkner and Woolf and Achebe and the others. It is more difficult to say that the Modernist poets wrote the poetry of memory. *The Cantos* is an act of cultural memory but not in equal part personal memory. True also of *The Waste Land*. American poets, in this alarming century, have more often insisted on memory-as-trauma. When one thinks of the poetry of memory in this century, one thinks of the shocks that those memories have sustained. An insistence on memory-as-trauma, however, demonizes the entire realm of remembrance—it demonizes, I would say, one's entire foundation of experience in the past. This demonization is one that many poets have bravely explored. But trauma is not a progressive narrative. It is a loop. It begins where it can, and ends when it sees the whole thing returning.

But when it is not traumatized, the action of memory on our present life may be closest to the feeling that rhyme creates, not full rhyme, but half rhyme, assonance, slant rhyme. One of the features I love about Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is that, although it is written in blank verse, the events within the poem contain a rhyming logic. Memory does not have to attach itself to its replica in our present moments. It can be oblique, sidling, scary and luminous in its distant relatedness to us. The tree branch, the one without bark outside my window now, does not remind me of another tree branch, nor even a bare arm. That would be too easy. It reminds me of something else. And those broken strings hanging from the basketball hoop are like nothing so much as dangling spider webs I remember from . . . another time. What are these trace memories, these images, but visitors or visitations from our pasts? The best visitors are the shy ones. They hardly want to come in. They stand at the doorway. If you look at them too closely, they'll probably run away and disappear.

We have to save them. We have to save them by turning away a little, pretending to do something else, like lifting the hood of the car and tinkering with the engine, before they'll befriend us. These memories, our children, are not all demons. To claim that *all* memory is demonized and traumatic is to count oneself among the permanently damned.

Paradise is less plausible than Hell, but it is surely no less real.

Note

Virgil Thomson, "Survivors of an Earlier Civilization," in *The State of Music* (New York: Vintage, 1962): 37-53.

Maps and Legends of Hell: Notes on Melodrama

Certain subjects, like melodrama, have a tendency to transport a person back to the aromatic scenes of childhood. In my case, it's the Tonka Theater, stinking of rancid buttered popcorn, in Excelsior, Minnesota, where the first aesthetic response of my life was enacted, at age five. I crawled under the seat to escape from the images passing on the screen. The movie that did this to me was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. I don't remember the actual crawling, although it was reported to me, and I don't remember much of the movie except for the wart on the witch's nose, and the redness of her cartoon apple. I am not certain if my memory is correct on this point, but I think a single hair was growing out of that wart. My friends the cineastes tell me I am misremembering that movie. I don't care; it doesn't matter now. I saw *something*: I remember the witch's psychotic condition as she sat in front of her mirror thinking that she could get into a beauty contest with Snow White. Before she turned herself into an old crone, with the nose and the wart, she was sleek and corrupt, like a female Ming the Merciless. What craziness was that? It wasn't just that she was corrupt, although her looks could stop a truck. She was insane.