WHY ORVILLE AND WILBUR BUILT AN AIRPLANE

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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Denton, Texas
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This dissertation comprises two sections. The title section collects a volume of the author’s original poetry, subdivided into four parts. The concerns of this section are largely aesthetic, although some of the poems involve issues that emerge in the introductory essay. The introductory essay itself looks at slightly over three centuries of poetry in English, and focuses on three representative poems from three distinct periods: the long eighteenth century and the Romantic period in England, and the Post-war period in the United States.

John Dryden’s translation of Ovid’s “Cinyras and Myrrha,” John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” and James Dickey’s “The Sheep Child,” whatever their stylistic and aesthetic differences may be, all share a concern with taboo. Each of the poems, in its own way, embraces taboo while transgressing societal norms in order to effect a synthesis that merges subject and object in dialectical transcendence.

For Dryden, the operative taboo is that placed on incest. In his translation of Ovid, Dryden seizes on the notion of incest as a metaphor for translation itself and views the violation of taboo as fructifying. Keats, in his Nightingale ode, toys with the idea of suicide and reconstructs a world both natural and mythic on the ephemeral foundation of the nightingale’s song. Closer to our own time, James Dickey, in “The Sheep Child,”
envisions a circumstance that forges a union, however transient, between the human and the natural worlds—a union that, in violation of religious taboo, directs gentle parody at the merger of the human world with the divine.

Each of the poets employs, in Keats’ words, “negative capability” as a tool with which to escape the prescribed order of existence. This ability to “live with uncertainties” beyond the world’s conventions fuels the poets’ invocation of epiphany, of satori, of the transcendent moment.
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The poem “South of Red-Wing” was selected as an AWP Intro Journals Project national winner.

And yes, Cathy, this one’s for you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introductory Essay: Dark Matter and Taboo: Dryden, Keats, Dickey  
---  1

Poems: Why Orville and Wilbur Built an Airplane  
---  60

## I

The Sign  
---  63
Why Orville and Wilbur Built an Airplane  
---  65
Rain  
---  66
Honey  
---  67
What the Loon Believes  
---  69
My Little Suede Shoes  
---  71
Vernal Equinox  
---  73
Talking to Myself  
---  75
Heirloom  
---  77

## II

Wedding Music  
---  79
What the Bar-back Says  
---  80
Practice Before the Bar  
---  82
Science Fair  
---  83
How Domenica Lazzari Survived on Light  
---  84
Circus Girl  
---  85
Third Door Surprise  
---  86
Sculptor  
---  87
Pedestrian  
---  88
Stigmata  
---  90
Testament  
---  91

## III

Undertow  
---  94
The Miracle of the Field  
---  95
Aquaman  
---  98
Neighbor  
---  99
Blue Eyes and a Wild Marimba  
---  100
After Dinner  
---  101
Potosi 102

IV

Redemption 105
The Dim Estate 106
Ode: La Mordida 107
Strangling the Dead 110
Adhesion 112
South of Red-Wing 114
The Way Light Gets to Be 116
The Devon Watch 119
Cosmologists, in an effort to determine whether our universe is one of infinite expansion, of repeated expansion and contraction, or of an approximately static and unchanging nature, have attempted to measure its material density. Obviously, the greater the mass of matter in the universe, the greater will be the gravitational force operating to slow down or stymie the universe’s continuing expansion.

Astronomers estimate the total number and mass of stars in any given galaxy by measuring the quantity of light emitted by that galaxy. This light measurement gives astronomers a reasonable idea of the number of stars in the galaxy, and a way of extrapolating their mass. Similarly, interstellar and intergalactic baryonic gas may be measured. Baryonic gas is constituted of protons and neutrons—normal matter of the type with which we are familiar. Cool gas emits radio waves that are detectable from the earth, while hot gas emits x-rays, easily observed by instruments launched beyond Earth’s screening atmosphere on rockets or satellites.

This light-emitting matter, however, provides only a small percentage of the mass needed to close, or even flatten, the universe. Although this quantity of mass is enormous, it is astonishingly low in spatial density. For example, the “critical density,” or minimal density of matter necessary to define the universe as closed by its own gravitation, is roughly equal to one ounce of matter in every 50 million billion cubic miles. Even at this seemingly low density, however, if only the combined masses of visible stars and gas were counted, our universe would fall far below the critical density,
and we would regard it as an ever-expanding entity, facing a future in which every atom will so far separate itself from its neighbor that gravity will cease to function; universal structures will cease to hold any architectural meaning.

However, in 1932 a Dutch astronomer named Jan Oort determined that some type of "dark" matter must exist. By observing the motions of certain stars, Oort came to the conclusion that these motions could not be explained by gravitational forces resulting solely from the mass effects of visible matter. Since that time, astro-physicists have developed strong inferential evidence of dark matter's existence.

Such dark matter abides in the minds of all major poets. Known matter accounts for a small portion of what we are able to see and articulate in a poet's output: the conscious and semi-conscious lexical, semantic, and ideological reactions to the baffling condition of existence. But activity in the arena that Freud terms "the subconscious" is beyond direct observation; by definition, this region lies outside the perception of consciousness and acts on consciousness in unfathomable ways. Like dark interstellar matter, its existence may be posited only through its effects on "poetic bodies."

Society, like the poet, harbors its own dark matter. The "taboo," differing as it does from culture to culture, warns the members of a given cultural group that certain activities, thoughts, or objects are forbidden. Transgression of the taboo may constitute an act of rebellion, empowerment, foolishness, or criminal insanity—but such transgression marks a moment of decision that plunges the individual into such intense contradiction with her culture that the subject-object dichotomy is momentarily fused.

Because "taboo" has meant different things to different people (for example, to
Polynesians, who created the word, “taboo” means both forbidden and sacred, although not necessarily both at once) (Cook, qt’d in Steiner 26-27), I should explain that I use the word more in the contemporary sense of “strictly forbidden,” and with the elements of social danger that Franz Steiner observes:

Taboo is concerned (1) with all the social mechanisms of obedience which have ritual significance; (2) with specific and ritual behaviour in dangerous situations. One might say that taboo deals with the sociology of danger itself, for it is also concerned (3) with the protection of individuals who are in danger, and (4) with the protection of society from those endangered—and therefore dangerous—persons. (20-21)

The taboo mechanism serves as a barrier between the society and the society’s unthinkable “other,” much as a psychological membrane normally separates the conscious mind from the unconscious. Taboo performs two functions: the classification and identification of transgressions, and the institutional localization of danger (147). Clearly, transgression has much to do with localizing danger, and vice-versa. The transgression of taboo results in a Keatsian state of uncertainty—that state in which a poet attains “negative capability” and becomes something akin to his own anti-matter.

Taboo exerts a remarkably strong hold on a society’s members, even members of a “scientific” and “enlightened” modern society. Douglas Robinson, for example, suggests as an experiment that one “ask any Christian, or just about any atheist who was raised a Christian, or just about anyone raised in a Christian society, to throw a copy of the Bible on the floor and jump on it . . . or spit inside it, or urinate on it” (xvi).
Certainly, society also maintains a light taboo against "book-burning," but the psychological forces that protect even mass-produced copies of the Bible (or any sacred text) are striking.

If this theory is generally correct, by which I mean useful to a greater or lesser degree, then it may explain the seeming unwillingness of my own poems to come to grips with the most puzzling aspects of my existence; although I await some poetic Oort who will come along and devise a formula to determine the gravitational effect of my own internalized taboo upon what may yet prove to be a subliminally therapeutic body of work. Given, however, the well-known suicides, addictions, and anti-social behaviors that statistically adhere to poets more than to practitioners of the other arts, I pray to be excused from an overly optimistic anticipation.

We discover dark poetic matter in much the same way as we discover dark intergalactic matter. By close observation of the poetic text, the reader becomes aware that orders of danger lurk behind, below, or even interlaced with the poem as a given artifact, and reverberate throughout. In this preface I propose to look at three examples culled from poetry writing and translating in English over the last three hundred fifty years, with an aim to exploring the ways in which these poets have engaged taboo with art. That this is a highly indirect commentary on my own work, normally the subject of a preface, has not escaped my attention—but the method is more ideogrammic than syllogistic; and, after all, how could I comment meaningfully on the hidden aspects of my own poems?

My own sublunary work pales when compared to a universe resplendent with
such darkly radiant bodies, formed in the terrific collision of taboo and imagination, as
John Dryden’s thoughtful translation of Ovid’s “Cinyras and Myrrha,” with its
penetrating engagement of incest; John Keats’ evocative “Ode to a Nightingale,” in
which suicide is a mere draught away; and James Dickey’s startling poem, “The Sheep
Child,” a lyric exultation of rural bestiality myth. Each of these poems employs that most
subversive of poetic methodologies, the violation, either covert or overt, of major
sociological taboo, and expresses the poet’s drive to embrace negative capability and to
live with uncertainty. Each poet resolves, however temporarily, the age-old dichotomy
between subject and object.

Silvio Ceccato proposes that it is the relative position of “pure attention” to the
“thing” under consideration that determines the conditions of subjectivity and objectivity,
and declares that “the category of thing preceded by a pure state of attention constitutes
the category of object,” while the category of thing followed by a pure state of attention
constitutes the category of subject (118). Relying upon this metaphor, it is evident that
the poet’s momentary resolution of duality depends upon maintaining attention both
precedent to and antecedent to the poetic object/subject. Such intensity of attention can
only appear transgressive to a world in which virtually all relations require the
participation of an objective “other” as counterbalance to the infinite subjectivity of
individuals.

The Art of Incest: John Dryden, Ovid, “Cinyrus and Myrrha”

John Dryden, assembling his final collection, Fables Ancient and Modern,
anticipates Ezra Pound's notion of the "ideogrammic method"—the practice of imagistic juxtaposition in order to produce effects on the reader unavailable through syllogism. Unlike Pound, Dryden does not perform this operation within a single poetic unit, but the *Fables* exhibit this kind of strategy as a whole. Dryden is a self-conscious translator who often addresses questions of translation philosophy, and who cannot resist the opportunity to speculate on the nature of the act of translation, an act imbued with ambiguity and question, an act that is fundamentally involved with the question of creativity and originality. The poem "Cinyras and Myrrha" involves a complex voicing strategy, a strategy that operates outside the reach of any single author, whether the unknown Grecian myth-maker, the Roman poet Ovid, or John Dryden himself. Accordingly, I attempt to locate the levels of dialogue, and to position them in horizontal, vertical, or oblique relationships, especially as we reach beyond the purported narrative voice of Orpheus and encounter the disembodied and fragmented voices of the author, the author's persona, the translators, and the translators' personae. In seeking to clarify the issues implicit in the act of translation, Dryden seizes on the vehicle of incest to use in his translation metaphor.

Scholars universally agree that the writing, as well as the attitude, of John Dryden underwent a substantial change following James II's removal from the throne and Dryden's own subsequent fall from favor. Kirk Combe points to Dryden's politicized translations of Juvenal and Persius in 1693 (36), and J. R. Moore states that Dryden, in his later plays, expressed dissent after the Glorious Revolution and that he "certainly did not lack either courage or consistency in the face of overwhelming opposition" (42).
Referring especially to Dryden's final translations, in *Fables Ancient and Modern*, Cedric Reverend coins the term “final mode” (203) and proposes that Dryden’s project is primarily subversive. David Bruce Kramer sees a writer whose very persona, whose personal metaphor, has undergone wholesale restructuring, reappearing in feminine guise. Judith Slocum and Earl Miner present, in the *Fables*, a Dryden of unity and purposefulness behind the diversity of texts which he chooses to translate. It is almost certainly true that social and political motivations drive a great deal of *Fables*, but it appears that Dryden allows his speculative side free range as well. Ovid’s tale from Book X of *The Metamorphoses*, “Cinyras and Myrrha,” provides Dryden with the ideal metaphor for translation: incest.

Dryden’s choice of materials to include in *Fables* does not appear to be capricious, nor does he appear to be interested in assembling a “greatest hits” of ancient literature; Dryden, like Ovid before him, engages in deliberate choices as he constructs his miscellany, juxtaposing texts in order to create entirely new relationships (Galinsky 86); Dryden not only translates Ovid, but translates Ovidian technique.

Ovid, of course, while he is the source for Dryden’s version of the *Fables*, is not the originator of the narratives. Like Dryden, Ovid engages in deliberate, constructive choices when assembling the *Metamorphosis* (Galinsky 86). “This procedure . . . is typical of Ovid’s way of creating ‘speciem unius corporis’ (species of a single body): he avoids the obvious, such as a strict parallelism or a direct analogy, but prefers to work with a freer, more allusive thematic connection” (Galinsky 90).

In his prologue to “Cinyras and Myrrha,” Dryden points out that *this fable springs
from the fable which immediately precedes it in Ovid, "Pygmalion and the Statue," in which the sculptor Pygmalion creates a stone woman who, with Pygmalion, begins a familial line which will result in Cinyras and his daughter, Myrrha. The operation of an artist creating material without any living antecedent stands in bold relief against the "tradition" implied by the incest metaphor. The levels of voice begin to pile up here. The prologue to "Cinyras and Myrrha" is delivered by a narrative voice standing outside of the versified narration of the poem proper. The poem itself is, like "Pygmalion and the Statue," presented as the narration of Orpheus.

The poem opens with Orpheus addressing his audience, and, in the first four lines, connecting the story (somewhat obliquely) to the Pygmalion legend. In line five, the narrator specifically adopts the first-person singular--"I sing of horror; and, could I prevail,"--and locates his audience in the second-person indeterminate--"You should not hear . . .," this relationship between narrator and audience continues through line twenty-one, even settling into a cozy identification when Orpheus tells his listeners that the poem's events occurred "far . . . distant from our Thracian shore" (14). Even as Orpheus warns his listeners away from the tale, he is clearly baiting a narrative trap, and actually luring his listeners along (Glenn 140).

Suddenly, at the end of the twenty-first line, in mid-sentence, the narrator makes an astonishing shift. Orpheus maintains the second-person address, but it becomes specific and locatable, a second-person singular, and Orpheus's speech is no longer aimed at the audience, but rather at Myrrha herself, "Cupid denies to have inflamed thy heart,/ Disowns thy love, and vindicates his dart:/ Some fury gave thee those infernal
pains. And shot her venomed vipers in thy veins” (22-5, italics mine). Along with the shift in address, Orpheus changes the narrative’s emphasis and exonerates Cupid from any culpability in the still-mysterious affair; what blame there may be is affixed to “Some fury,” and not to Cupid, nor, notably, in view of the foregoing castigation of “the crime,” to Myrrha.

Looking at this from Dryden’s position, the poem takes on an alarming complexity, as translation, by its very nature, is a questionable operation, and the one which most obviously demonstrates double-voicing. Dryden is located in roughly the same relation to Ovid as Myrrha bears to Cinyras, in a posture of both longing and impossibility. In relation to the poem, Dryden stands beyond Ovid, in a place midway between the English language reader and the Latin poet. Ovid himself is a putative transfuser (one who adapts another’s work) of Orpheus’s narration to a Latin audience, an audience that, since the authorial Ovid does not remove himself from the work, is always in the position of auditory voyeur, of overhearing, rather than hearing, Orpheus.

The poem’s narrative lineage begins to betray a skewed familiarity. The Roman religious authorities regarded incest as a crime to be dealt with by the gods rather than by men. In a culture of high formal integrity and structural cohesion, incest was a crime of confusion, a crime in which familial and relational lineages were jeopardized and could be destroyed beyond recognition (Liebeschuetz 41-43, 45). One of the problems inherent in translation is the same muddying of relationships; there is a threshold beyond which the operations of different language systems can no longer be trusted, and the translator is thrown to his own devices. These difficulties cause the reader to wonder just whose
"baby" Dryden is bearing.

Orpheus continues berating Myrrha for her paradoxical crime of excessive love:

“To hate thy sire, had merited a curse; / But such an impious love deserved a worse” (26-27). After a brief explanation of Myrrha’s availability to her suitors, Orpheus again changes direction. “She knew it too, the miserable maid, / Ere impious love her better thoughts betrayed, / And thus within her secret soul she said” (32-34). These read like a stage aside, even to the judgmental appositive, with the speaker turning to the audience confidentially and speaking in a stage-whisper. In these lines Myrrha appears in the third-person, as the narrator/ Orpheus seems to maintain a greater separation between Myrrha and the audience.

Myrrha herself then begins what must be an interior monologue (35); had this passage been written for the stage, Myrrha could declaim these lines to the audience. At this point the poem has moved into a complex layering of polyvocality. Myrrha, who is herself a construct of the Orpheus/ narrator, is now directing her rhetoric to herself, to the gods with whom she identifies “the sacred laws” (36), and to the same audience to which Orpheus himself is pledged.

Myrrha engages herself in a debate concerning the proprieties of her desire. In the first four lines, addressing herself in third person, “Ah, Myrrha! whither would thy wishes tend?” (35), Myrrha immediately begins an apostrophe to “Ye gods, ye sacred laws,” (36) in which she pleads with the gods to defend her soul “From such a crime as all mankind detest/ and never lodged before in human breast” (37-8). Not only does she express the crime as detestable, but as unthinkable—ignoring the paradox by which the
crime could be both detestable and unthinkable. John Robert Ross suggests that Dryden
may have embedded, consciously or subconsciously, an allusion to incest in the very
"est" rhyme employed in lines thirty-seven and thirty-eight.

Myrrha then exercises a rhetorical about-face, and defends her desire against the
charge of sin (41). Having exposed the law against incest as a creation of man, Myrrha
goes on to find examples throughout nature of incestuous practices—practices which are
by no means disruptive to the natural order, but rather serve to maintain it. She cites the
mating practices of cows, goats, horses, and chickens, as arguments in favor of natural
incest (43-9). Returning to attack "ill-natured" man-made laws and the unnatural concept
of sin, Myrrha claims that the "spice of envy" is mixed up with the creation of laws
against incest (56). Myrrha concludes her self-justification by pointing to the existence
of "some wise nations" (58) which "own no laws, but those which love ordains" (59), and
where filial "piety is doubly paid in kind" (61). Notably, such nations are not named.

Myrrha has allies in her argument. The Sophists, and later the Cynics, "appealed
to the precedent of animal behaviour for the 'natural laws' which should govern human
conduct" (Hopkins 791). The Cynics went so far as to declare that animal behavior
preserves a state of nature that humans, in their rise to civilization, had left behind
(Hopkins 791). Myrrha argues for the restoration of natural law as a replacement for
what she regards as a temporally and culturally bound law which has its roots in envy,
although she does not explain the cause of such a far-reaching envy.

In a world that admires the creator of "original" literary work, Myrrha represents
the translator's lust toward his source material, perhaps even the poet's desire to effect
union with the "other," the objective world that becomes art only through the willful coupling of its subject. Dryden will justify precisely such a desire to be entered by the progenetive spirit of the foregoer, the "father" text, in his working-out of Myrrha's obsession.

Having attempted to cleanse her guilt by placing it in the lap of her culture, Myrrha again confronts herself, defining her prior thoughts as "impious fancy" and "forbidden thoughts" (64-5). She denies her own urge toward the transgressive procreative union, and defines the "proper" father-daughter relationship as a subject-object relationship in stunning imagery, stating that "Eyes and their objects never must unite / Some distance is required to help the sight" (75-6).

Myrrha hints of a strategy by which she would leave her country and travel to a far land in order to remove herself from the object of her temptation (77-8); she believes that if she cannot see Cinyras, her mind will restore itself to a normal condition. However, Myrrha cannot bring herself to make this break with Cinyras, and in line eighty-two alludes again to her forbidden desire: "To talk, to kiss; and more, if more I might"; at this point, Myrrha's apostrophe to the gods breaks off, and she, as though startled by her own unexpected return to impiety, resumes addressing herself in second person: "More, impious maid! What more canst thou design? / To make a monstrous mixture in thy line / And break all statutes human and divine?" (83-5).

Myrrha's self-reproach reveals the insecurity of the translator. One reason for the ancient taboos regarding incest, and one that persists to the present day, is the belief that in-breeding creates freaks, "monsters," and genetic anomalies of various types. Dryden
is ever concerned about the possibility of miscarriage—the absolute failure of translation
to result in anything but a partially formed fetus—or the possibility of giving birth to a
monster. Of course, the incest taboo has always been violated (hence the need for a
taboo), most notably by the ancient Persians, and by the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt.
Cleopatra herself (renowned for her perfect beauty) was the product of a minimum of
eleven generations of incest, and was herself a sibling lover (Twitchell 11).

Dryden, although like Myrrha insecure and reluctant to mate with his poetic
“father[s],” nevertheless exhibits an intuitive understanding of the fructifying
possibilities—possibilities only now being revealed by modern genetic studies:
In the popular imagination it [is] . . . inbreeding that resulted in . . .
hemophiliacs in late nineteenth-century European royalty, as well as the
slack-jawed mountaineers of Appalachia. Are these and other biological
aberrations the direct result of incest per se? Most modern geneticists
suspect not. . . . In most populations, be they racehorse, beef cattle, or
human, the risk of dysgenic abnormalities is counterbalanced, in the short
run, by “hybrid vigor.” (Twitchell 11)
The taboo-abiding poet is one who is self-generative in the creative sense, or perhaps one
who surreptitiously “borrows themes,” or “betrays a certain influence”—both phrases
exemplify the euphemistic terminology by which both translation and transfusion are
transformed into “legitimate” and “creative” activity. Dryden’s concern is centered then
on two areas: that of failure, and that of social illegitimacy.

Dryden’s fear of social illegitimacy regarding poetic incest is paralleled by social
concerns regarding sexual incest. We have seen that the Romans of Ovid's time were 
disturbed by the familial disruptions incumbent upon incestuous activity, and they were 
not alone. It is true, however, that "Other societies [...] measure family with different 
gauges, such as descent through the maternal or avuncular lines, [and] prohibit different 
partners" (Twitchell 9). Genetic risk, in such cases, is not the problem, as cultures that do 
not understand genetic causality invariably enforce some kind of incest restrictions 
(Twitchell 11). The problem of social illegitimacy is itself a legitimate problem for 
Dryden, and for culture at large--but it is at least a problem of codification as much as it 
is a problem of pure genetics.

The naming function of language by which we assert the father / mother / sister / 
brother / uncle / aunt / cousin placement may well be one of the strongest 
announcers and enforcers of the taboo. The process of naming is the process 
of categorizing, which is the unconscious establishment of limits, in this case 
sexual limits. Marry your cousin in our society and you risk unbalancing your 
family, not your progeny. (Twitchell 9)

The social codes of incest may in fact supplant the comparatively harmless codes of 
inbreeding announced by biology and genetics.

Myrrha picks up this theme of familial disruption at line eighty-six: "Canst thou 
be called (to save thy wretched life) / Thy mother's rival, and thy father's wife? / 
Confound so many sacred names in one. / Thy brother's mother! sister to thy son" (86-9). 
Exactly such a relational confusion persists in our own culture, as evidenced by the 
popular song of the 1940s, "I'm My Own Grandpa."
Myrrha's monologue concludes with her attempt to free herself from the unwanted incestuous desire. Myrrha asserts to herself that she will "in time the increasing ill control" (94)—a line that declares a morbid prefiguration when read in its doubled sense, with "the increasing" as a noun phrase. She vows not to "debauch" her body by her soul, to "secure" quietude of mind, and to preserve what she has previously argued against, "the sanctions nature has designed" (95-7). She declares that Cinyras is "sinless" and is "Observant of the right" (99-100), and believes that any attempt she may make to seduce him would fail, although she asserts a desire that her father should "cure [her] madness" (101), or, preferably, share it with her.

Myrrha emblematizes the ambiguity of the translator's stance. Wishing to be adapted and transformed by the original, the translator is rendered both subject and object, an object subjected to the "juice" of his original as well as a subject by whom transmission may be balked. There is a sense, as well, in which the parent-text must subject itself to rewriting even as it is the object of the rewriting process. In the apparent simplicity of the one-on-one exchange, we find a complexity of relationship.

Orpheus returns to the third-person narration, and, in a "meanwhile, back at the ranch," sort of gesture, introduces Cinyras, who has been trying to arrange a marriage for Myrrha. Cinyras is reluctant to make the choice for Myrrha, but asks Myrrha for her own opinion regarding the various nobles. Myrrha is taken aback, and, gazing on her father, begins to cry "Round tears [...] that scalded as they ran" (111). Thinking her "modest," Cinyras inadvertently inflames Myrrha's desire by stroking her cheeks and bestowing "holy kisses" (115) upon her. The kissing and stroking, however innocent in appearance
and intention, stir Myrrha to “more pleasure than a daughter should” feel from her father’s intentions (117). When Cinyras asks Myrrha which of the suitors suits her most, she responds to him with the poem’s first example of interpersonal dialogue, “One like you” (119). Cinyras misunderstands her implication, and is complimented, bidding her ironically to “continue still” (121) and crediting her with a becoming filial piety which causes Myrrha to “blush... with shame” (122). Here, the poem completes its polyvocal construction. At last the characters achieve direct dialogic communication, and the Orpheus/narrator, still necessary as the story’s transmitter to the imagined audience—the “audience” located intermediary between Orpheus and Ovid—is not a necessary intercessor between the figures who operate within the poem itself.

We can now perceive a dialogic and narrative structure that extends from Myrrha and her companion characters through Dryden. A horizontal dialogue takes place among the characters of the fable: between Myrrha, Cinyras, and the Nurse. A more oblique form of dialogue takes place during the monologic sequences. In these moments, there occurs what we may call a false horizontal—Myrrha, for example, specifically addresses both the gods and herself, using both the singular and the plural second person; but such address is not intended solely for the gods or for herself alone, but, like dramatic monologue in the theater, is directed at the same audience that Orpheus addresses; the difference between the discourse of Orpheus and that of Myrrha is that Orpheus possesses an explicit awareness of his dialogic function, whereas that of Myrrha, like her desire at the moment of initial monologue, remains hidden.

The poem moves from horizontal and oblique dialogues to vertical dialogue with
the recitation of Orpheus. (Although properly monologue, I retain the term dialogue here for two reasons: first, that the possibility of discourse between the narrative voice and the audience persists; and second, to avoid certain unwanted implications of the word “monologic.”) Orpheus is situated outside the fable proper, presented as a presenter, and bringing the tale up, as it were, to the audience’s attention. Although primarily vertical with respect to the storyline of the fable, the Orphean dialogue is horizontal with respect to the audience, to whom it is presumably addressed. Orpheus is the sweet-singing, ultimately persuasive intermediary through which the Ovid persona presents the entire fable. The Ovid persona has only a peripheral contact with the presumed audience, and maintains a vertical connection with the Orpheus/narrator. The persona also maintains a vertical connection with Ovid himself, through whom the persona comes into being. The Ovid of the presented Latin language is not correspondent with Ovid the man, although the degree of vertical separation may be very small.

There is a much larger degree of vertical separation between Dryden and Ovid—a separation so great as to engender the problems we associate with translation, and yet a separation made to be bridged by the translator’s child-like lust for the progenitive author. At every level of voicing there is a transfusion of meaning, and a demand for clarification and legitimacy; at no level is this as imperative as between the translated author and the translator, and yet at no level is the result more problematic, as Dryden is well aware:

All translation [...] may be reduced to these three heads.

First, that of metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line,
from one language into another. Thus [...] was Horace his *Art of Poetry* translated by Ben Johnson. The second way is that of paraphrase, or translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered [...] The third way is that of imitation, where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases. (Preface to *Ovid’s Epistles* 569)

Dryden himself advocates holding a course midway between the “extremes of paraphrase and literal translation” (Dedication of the *Aeneis* 64), and argues that the highest grace is to be found in the author’s words, and “those words ... are always figurative” (64).

What Dryden does not say is that all language is translation, that the act of reading is itself an act of translation. In one sense, then, translation as we normally think of it is actually a secondary translation. Reading and participating in language renders us all, as it were, incestuous. At every step in the voicing process of “Cinyras and Myrrha,” transfusion and amplification of meaning take place. Further, in every act of translation, there is an act of transformation. This transformation consists of two operations: in one of them, the culturally foreign which is present in all languages other than the native tongue allows readers access to emotions and cultural considerations which are otherwise unavailable; in the second operation, translation opens the expressive limits of the native language, and through word borrowing and grammatical adoption expands the native
language's operations. According to David Kramer, "a list of Dryden's introductions from the French would be long indeed, [and] it would be found that many of his words . . . have become standard usage" (113). Dryden subsumes certain elements of the French language and the French literary tradition into a larger whole, one which, while making vigorous use of them, finally transcends them (Kramer 114).

The subsequent section of "Cinyras and Myrrha" details Myrrha's depression and despondency at the seeming unavailability of Cinyras. Dryden's translation begins with an example of direct unconscious discourse, "'Twas now the mid of night" (124), blending the past of the fable with a "now" that engages the audience's identification, then continuing to the use of two "ours" in the following line. We see Myrrha in bed, "Her body rolling" (127) "Mad with desire" (128) as she debates her fate. Her fervent masturbation reenacts the frenzied state of the translator deprived of a primary text. Dryden pictures Myrrha as a colossal phallus, a pine tree, wavering before the final ax blow, and threatening disaster to all who are luckless enough to be in the area. The falling tree/phallus is equated with death, and Myrrha, by means of sexual substitution, is equated with Dryden the translator: a translator who has metaphorized himself as translator into the female, who "takes the works of other poets inside him, is penetrated by them, lets them gestate into new births of which [ . . . ] he may style himself the mother" (Kramer 138).

Myrrha, unable to conquer her ungovernable lust, resolves to die, then directs a short speech to the absent Cinyras, asking him to "Pardon the crime in pity to the cause" (148). The tree/phallus from the passage above is now transformed into the would-be
instrument of death: the gealdreowe, or gallows-tree: the beam from which Myrrha resolves to hang herself.

As Myrrha draws the noose around her neck, her nurse, “her faithful guard” (149), hears, coming from Myrrha’s room, “murmurs,” “signs,” and “hollow sounds” (151-2), “Though not . . . words” (151). Myrrha’s communication is reduced from articulation to pure meaning; the importance of the raw sounds conveys a message that frightens the nurse, a message that calls her to Myrrha, but a message that operates beyond the boundaries of any semanticized language. The translator has fallen to a state in which exposition is impossible in the seemingly unattainable state of the object text. Language is reduced to the level of guttural, animalistic gurglings.

Significantly, the nurse “springs a light” (153), and in this state of illumination responds with her own primal cry, a shriek. The nurse cuts the dangling Myrrha down from the beam, resuscitates her, and then begins to interrogate her regarding her attempt at suicide. Initially, Myrrha, still in a sub-lingual state, can only sob; then, recovering herself, although still in despair over her failed suicide and her continuing incestuous frustration, she refuses to speak. Understanding the uselessness of words, the nurse “bare[s] her withered breast” (165) upon which Myrrha suckled, and attempts by the power of gestural sign to engage Myrrha’s confidence. Myrrha continues to resist the nurse’s approaches, but the nurse will not be denied and offers Myrrha not only confidentiality but also practical help concerning whatever problem has caused her to make the attempt on her life. The nurse offers “diligence,” “charms and medicines,” “powerful verse,” and “prayers,” directing each of these remedies toward a different set
of hypothetical circumstances, and paralleling the steps in translation from workman-like attention, to inspiration, to the artful, and culminating in the transcendental finished work.

The nurse, still not apprehending the nature nor the extent of Myrrha's problem, surmises that love is at the root; she lays Myrrha in her lap and attempts to soothe her. Speaking directly to Myrrha, the nurse offers her own "experienced age" (192) as help, and then, in another ironic comment, assures Myrrha that Myrrha's secret will be safe, and that "Nor shall (what most you fear) your father know" (195). The nurse's persistence evokes from Myrrha the confession that her hidden shame is "impious e'en to name" (205); this revelation merely redoubles the nurse's cajoling and elicits from her a renewed promise of assistance.

Myrrha's nurse is playing the role of muse to the unwilling translator. One problem faced by the muse of poetry is that she can inspire poets to song, but she has no actual control over where the song may lead. In these passages, the nurse/muse operates on the poetic will of Myrrha/translator and offers unconditional support to a poetic operation whose result she (the muse) cannot know beforehand.

After three failed attempts to confess her illicit desire to the nurse, Myrrha finally masks her own face with a veil, then sighs, before saying "O happy mother, in thy marriage bed!" (221). After this utterance, Myrrha "groan[s]" and falls silent. Myrrha distances herself in every conceivable way from her own human utterance, first through the symbolic action of wrapping her face and, most significantly, her mouth, behind her veil; and second, by surrounding her somewhat elliptical statement with animal-like sighs and groans, sounds which exist outside the boundaries of semantics--sounds that may
even prefigure Myrrha's later birthing experience. Even Myrrha's clearly culturalized statement invoking her mother is an apostrophized noun phrase, not a complete sentence. But Myrrha's statement is sufficient to deliver meaning to the nurse. Horrified with this new knowledge, the nurse "reproach[es]" (226) Myrrha, and endeavors to cure "the madness of the unhappy maid" (227).

The nurse fails to shake Myrrha's intent; Myrrha is resolved to "possess or die" (231), and the nurse/muse, having pledged herself to Myrrha's cause, is compelled to follow through with her oath, "Against her better sense" (233). Inspired by the nurse/muse and aided by diligence and experience, Myrrha is prepared to seek the transmission and transformation of the father-text's juice.

Myrrha's opportunity comes during the festival of Ceres, when matrons "shun" "For nine long nights the nuptial bed" (242). The poet again utilizes the tree imagery, as it is Ceres' tree which both bleeds and cries out when struck by Erysichton's ax—a tree which is thoroughly identified as human, and the murder of which haunts Erysichthon unto his self-cannibalization (Hamilton 284). The poem betrays a paradoxical stance, and hints here that the gods will not be trifled with while prefiguring Myrrha's fate, yet at the same time implying that the uninspired, signified by Erysichthon, are fated to waste away in a world of their own subjectivity.

The nurse seeks out the king, and finds him "easy with wine, and deep in pleasures drowned" (249). Judith Slocum sees this line as proof that Orpheus is admitting that "men provide the occasions for female deviations" (191), although Cinyras seems more passive than the verb "provide" would indicate, and is perhaps more
vulnerable to suggestion than Slocum suggests. At this moment, Cinyras resembles nothing so much as the popular image of an inebriated, inhibition-freed coed at a fraternity party, ready (willing or not) to be seduced.

The nurse/muse goes to work on the father-text, fanning passion’s flame. The object text must be willing to be translated, just as the translator must be willing to be entered and inspired by the text. Cinyras indicates his willingness to be “worked,” and is pleased to learn that his lover will be the same age as Myrrha.

Free at last to begin her quest, Myrrha has second thoughts; although joyful that she will have her opportunity to make love with her father, Myrrha’s excitement is also “clogged with guilt” (259). As she makes her guilty transit to the trysting site, Myrrha is plunged into darkness, even as a translator moving into the dark, unyielding otherness of a foreign text. The moon and stars withdraw their light from Myrrha, and, most significantly, the constellation Virgo (the virgin) slides tellingly “down the belt” (271) and renounces her station.

Myrrha’s nurse provides Myrrha’s support on this mission. Myrrha herself, plagued by the twin obstacles of virginity and guilt, hesitates in fear of her upcoming action. At the precise moment that guilt and fear conspire to draw Myrrha from the field, the nurse pulls Myrrha forward, thrusts her into Cinyras’s chamber, and calls to him the fatal words, “‘Receive thy own!’” (292).

When Cinyras receives Myrrha, they fall into lovemaking; no sooner does the nurse/muse deliver the Myrrha/translator to the father text (“she delivered kind to kind” [293]) than “their devoted bodies join...” (294). Dryden presents the pair involved in a
complex of intended and unintended communication: “Perhaps he said, ‘My daughter, cease thy fears,’ / Because the title suited with her years; / And ‘Father,’ she might whisper him again, / That names might not be wanting to the sin” (300-303).

Dryden says that Myrrha leaves the “incestuous bed” “full of her sire” and carrying “in her womb the crime she bred” (304-5). The process of transfusion and translation has begun, and cannot be undone. Moved by her newly inhabiting spirit, Myrrha returns night after night to Cinyras, as their joined and fructifying seed grows within her. At last, Cinyras’s curiosity will no longer be denied. He lights a candle, an artificial light which exposes his artificial lover. Myrrha and Cinyras find themselves exposed as criminals engaged in their awful crime. Cinyras is promptly affected by “Grief, rage, [and] amazement” (312) and, significantly, cannot speak. He draws his sword, but Myrrha escapes into the night, which “favoured first the sin,” and now “secure[s] the flight” (315).

Dryden presents Myrrha in flight for nine months, a “flight” to which he jokingly alludes by using the verb “mewed” when describing the moon’s horns as if they were feathers to have been shed. Myrrha, alone in the “Sabaean fields” (323) at last collapses, weary of travel and with the child of Cinyras great within her. Myrrha prays to the gods, uttering a confession of her misdeed, and accepting her punishment.

The time Myrrha spends running through the wilderness corresponds to the human gestation period; by the time she intones her plea to the gods, Myrrha is at the very edge of giving birth. The trials and tribulations she has encountered during her flight parallel those of the translator who struggles to make a coherent whole from an
alternative semantic system. She is both impregnated by the object text and rejected by it. Something yearns to be born, but that new creation will be something very different than its parents.

In her prayer, Myrrha rejects her own right to life, “since my life the living will profane” (329). Alternately, she argues that her death would only be a blight upon the “happy dead” (331), who would be stained by her own death. Following Myrrha’s dismissal of the two major options, she asks the gods to grant her passage to “a middle state,” where she can be neither wholly alive, nor wholly dead (332-5). This “middle state” corresponds to the middle road which we have seen Dryden recommend as appropriate to the translator—that the translator not follow slavishly the denotations of the object text, but that he not allow himself an excess of liberty in interpretation, either.

“The prayers of penitents are never vain” (336), and thus Myrrha’s are answered. The ground rises around her and envelops her feet, legs, and thighs. Her toes become roots, burrowing into the earth, and the rest of her body begins to transform itself into a tree. Even her womb is taken over by the tree. Myrrha’s last human function is to drop her head and cry. She has become the tree which, some lines hence, was to have been her gallows. Myrrha’s tears become a permanent aspect of the tree which retains her name: the fragrant sap of the myrrh tree.

Finally, the tree Myrrha has become begins to distend and swell (354-6); Myrrha would like to pray to Lucina (goddess of childbirth) for help, but is unable. She is able to produce only a “hollow sound” (362) which resonates from her bole. Myrrha cannot win her battle with language; “there is no such thing as an adequate translation; at best, one
can hope for some tentative approximation” (Friedrich 15). Myrrha produces more and more of her fragrant drops, tear drops, and suddenly Lucina, unbidden, stands beside the myrrh tree and, hearing the “groaning wood” (365), reaches out her hand and incants the “powerful spells that babes to birth disclose” (367). Myrrha opens up and delivers herself of her offspring, who is tended by wood-nymphs who are waiting and ready for him, and who wash him in his mother’s aromatic tears.

The child, of course, is Adonis, that most beautiful and well-formed of men, destined to be loved by both Persephone, the Queen of the Dead, and Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love. The baby is born “with every grace” (374), and will live (and die) to wreak his unintentional revenge upon the Goddess of Love, who so fatally wounded his mother. Dryden pays some lip service to defining the disrupted familial order, linking Adonis with Myrrha’s teardrops through an association with Cinyras’s sperm: “The drop, the thing which late the tree enclosed / And late the yawning bark to life exposed” (384-5). Adonis is defined as a child “His grandsire got, and whom his sister bore” (383), and thus placed in vertical relation to Cinyras, and in horizontal relation to Myrrha. In the fable’s schema, Adonis is the translated text—a new creation more stunningly beautiful than anything which has previously existed.

This position of rough equality with Myrrha works to justify Dryden’s final contention. The literary equivalent of incest, which is translation, when properly effected, will produce such beauties as may not be had by any other method. The whole of the two texts is greater than the sum of their parts. The motive, generative power is provided by the original text, and becomes the creative power of the translated text. The
translator has the responsibility of keeping the newly devised text in a rough proximity to
the original text in stylistic terms (and style is as important to Dryden as it later becomes
to the modernists). That which is ambiguous, for instance, in the original text can
scarcely benefit from clarification in the translated text; neither may voicing be
transformed too severely. Common diction in the original text should not become
elevated diction in the translation. Finally, the function of incest as metaphor for
translation itself stands within a vertical structure: “The transfer of meaning between
languages appears [itself] as an image, limited and controllable, of the whole traffic of
meaning between the world and our understanding” (Pearcy xi).

If the two objections to incest consist of a confusion of relationships on one hand,
and the possibility of monsters on the other, Dryden, in his translation of “Cinyras and
Myrrha,” contends that relationships can be reclarified or redefined, if necessary, in order
that we may enjoy the fruits of an incest which is propelled by genuine love. In this type
of relationship, eros trumps ethos; eros is transgressive, a confounder of order, a breaker
of taboos, and as such forges forbidden unions. These unions, typically transcending
subject-object dichotomies, are by their very nature self-referential, as is, clearly, incest.
Such an incestuous relationship, whether between father and daughter, or between
original text and the translator, is not to be feared as monster-producing, but admired, as
the generator of angels. In fact, it is this necessary fusion of the subjective and objective
worlds that drives the artistic imagination. And after all, as Yves Bonnefoy tells us,
“There is no poetry but that which is impossible.”
An Easeful Vintage: John Keats and the Nightingale

John Keats, the arch-romantic English poet, would appear to be a convincing antithesis to John Dryden, the imperial poet of the "iron age." Dryden represents a classical aesthetic; his work draws deeply upon his reading in Latin and other European languages, and covers a wide range of genres; while to Keats, knowledge represents a dropping-off from sensation. Something of a phenomenologist, Keats famously aims for "a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" (Hoffman 111), associates artistic value with "intensity," and declares that "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth" (Hoffman 110). In a word, Keats foreshadows the Aesthetics in privileging the body and eros over the mind. Nevertheless, Dryden and Keats are identical in their poetic need for an enabling vision, a vision achieved by means of transgression. For both poets, the forbidden, perhaps impossible union between subject and object provides the catalyst for their great work.

Keats is less prone than most poets to question mystery. Indeed, his concept of "negative capability" advocates that the poet be able to survive in an insecure world. In the well-known passage from a letter to his brothers, Keats defines "negative capability" as a condition that exists "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Hoffman 114). Living in the post photographic age, the modern reader cannot help but identify the word "negative" not only as adjectival, but also as the noun indicating an inversion of the normal roles of dark and light; surely, however, this connotation existed for Keats as well, as engraving relies on a similar inversion. For Keats, death is a constant companion--a condition with
which the poet is driven to merge, an "other" with whom he is forbidden consummation. Darkly romantic, John Keats' poems represent the tip of the proverbial iceberg: most of the work is below the surface.

If one accepts the popular characterization of lyric poetry as that poetry "which most closely approaches the condition of music," then John Keats is among the most polished "composers" of lyric poetry between the time of Shakespeare and that of Wallace Stevens. Granting that such a claim may not be subject to proof (how do we "prove" a Beethoven symphony more aurally pleasing than a train wreck?), Keats' musicality is widely enough recognized to have become something of a cliche. Keats' intellectualizing, if not profound, does not suffer in comparison with that of Stevens, while his conventional coherence remains stronger than that of his American inheritor even though the poetic convention within which Keats writes is more restrictive. If Keats is not the most gifted of the Romantic poets in terms of intellectual and "philosophical" theory (and it must be borne in mind that he passed away at age twenty-five, scarcely an age at which most people have perfected their critical and theoretical powers), he is surely the most musical. In "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats leaves us a poem of tonal beauty that provides a movingly articulated account of the poet's mental and emotional processes as he intensely engages beauty's transience. In this piece, the reader is struck repeatedly by images rendered with close attention to sonorific detail--images which are dazzlingly alive with sensorial detail, and yet which, under close scrutiny, are but figures of the persona's imagination.
“Ode to a Nightingale” is one of the most lyric of poems in the sense that it almost perfectly resists narrative; it is a poem of intense negative capability, exhibiting a kind of indirection characteristic of the nodule point where duality attempts to consume itself. Throughout the poem, virtually nothing occurs; the poem’s persona relaxes in slightly changing states of consciousness while conjuring images—and perhaps the sense of voluntarism evoked by even this statement is misleading: one has the sense that the images are very nearly reflexive, creating themselves out of a deepening cosmic flux. But, as Lawrence Kramer writes, the major insight of the Romantic “movement” was the uncovering of consciousness itself, both individual and transcendent, as a phenomenon demanding attention, both philosophically and artistically (18). Keats, as a second-generation Romantic and thus an inheritor of both German Romantic philosophy and the first wave of English poetic exploration of consciousness, was in the ideal historical position to write such a poem as the nightingale ode--itself a more abstracted inheritor of such meditations as Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” or “This Lime-tree Bower my Prison.”

Theodore Adorno addresses the subject-object relation as it pertains to aesthetics in his essay “Reconciliation under Duress,” stating that

Art and reality can only converge if art crystallizes out its own formal laws, not by passively accepting objects as they come. . . . In the form of an image the object is absorbed into the subject instead of following the bidding of the alienated world and persisting obdurately in a state of reification . . . . Art is the negative knowledge (emphasis mine) of the actual world. (qtd. in McGann 53,
This identification of the artistic imagination with objective reality, it seems to me, in its most abstracted extreme, is what Keats accomplishes in the "Ode to a Nightingale," where the barest of outside worlds is negatively interiorized in order to confound, if not critique, the "actual world."

It is commonly observed that the poem is organized around the theme of pure music, and comes, perhaps, as close as words are able to achieving an effective mimesis of absolute tonality. Music, dance, and the spoken word are the most elusive, temporary forms of art, lacking until the historically recent invention of recording devices any sense of artifact (audio and video recordings are, of course, equivalent to a printed copy of a painting--they are fundamentally not the thing itself). The nightingale herself exhibits pure musicality, that is, musicality without the ideational aspects of lyricked song. As Helen Vendler cunningly observes, "it is vocal without verbal content" (78). In the same essay, Vendler claims that Keats, by choosing music as the poem's "artifact," has opted to concern himself with "beauty alone, without truth-content" (78). This claim strikes me as excessively bold, as Keats equates the two clearly at the conclusion of "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and then not equivocally, but rather with a clear neo-Platonic identification of the true and the beautiful with "the good." Since "truth" in common parlance is now as it was in Keats' time heavily connotative of verbal gesture, it is simply poetic shrewdness to eliminate the word from a poem whose concern is with the evasion of

1 I am reminded of a comment by Eric Dolphy picked up on tape during a live recording at New York's The Five Spot during the late 1950's. The great alto saxophonist coughs, then remarks, "Music--it's there--and then it's gone."
rhetoric during the throes of intense experience.

The “great odes” are written, for the most part, in an innovative ten-line stanza descended from the sonnet (“Ode to Psyche” uses a markedly longer stanza, and “To Autumn” adds one rhymed line to the sestet). John Minahan observes, in *Word Like A Bell*, that Keats manipulates the sonnet both in rhyme scheme (by following an English quatrain with an Italian sestet) and in length. By shortening the sonnet-form, and yet “deploy[ing] those units over a larger yet patterned stretch of lyric time,” Keats achieves a highly flexible form, with a strophe-length greater than the Spenserian stanza, with a more tightly compressed logic than a sonnet, and with a stacking capacity that allows the poet to construct poems of any length (144-45). The “Ode to a Nightingale” thus possesses another type of mimetic overtone: its relatively undemanding rhyme-scheme is none-the-less repeated regularly. The shape of the tune remains the same, even as the nightingale’s song exhibits little variation, but the semantic meaning undergoes dynamic variation from stanza to stanza, reflecting the shifting consciousness “carried” by the age-old birdsong. Additionally, the repetition of certain thematic words (“fade,” “adieu,” “casement”) provides a unifying undercurrent to the poem which is magnified in the odes at large. Northrop Frye defines this strategy as a kind of “tonality” (xvi), and while this is a general analogy, it is literally the case that same-word repetition has the capacity to, if not the necessity to, sound the same note.

Keats begins “Ode to a Nightingale” with a curious trope in which the persona is both plagued by a heart which “aches” (1) and a paradoxical “numbness,” (1) that “pains” (1) his “sense” (2). This sensation is likened both to the operation of a poison
"hemlock") and an unspecified "dull opiate" (3). This imagery, confusing at first glance, is designed to inculcate in the reader a threshold state midway between that of dying and that of dreamlike depressive intoxication. In point of fact, this is a condition in which Keats literally would have spent much of 1819, the year of the ode's composition, as he drew near his own death from tuberculosis, a disease for which opiates such as Laudanum were the conventional therapeutic. Extraordinarily sensitive to the music of vowels, Keats employs the [a] sound five times in the four opening lines, along with five unaccented instances [a]. Although it is dangerous to ascribe prescriptive emotion to pure tonality, the effect of the "short 'u'" tone may be considered low and depressive, and its degree of concentration in this passage is not repeated elsewhere in the poem.

The tactile ("aches") and contra-tactile ("numbness") imagery in the opening quartet gives way to a brief and surprising explanation for the persona's physiologically depressed condition: he is possessed of excess happiness! Keats invokes the nightingale itself, appositioned as (redundantly) a "Dryad of the trees" (7). In line eight, Keats plays a three-way pun on the word "plot" (one of which maintains the death-imagery that persists through the poem) into a quick vision of green beeches and infinite shadows, followed by an invocation of the bird's actual song to conclude the stanza. Within the poem's introductory lines, Keats produces images pertinent to three of the five senses; significantly, the visual imagery is situated no where. The bird's song reaches the persona from "some melodious plot" (8); thus, the "beechen green, and shadows

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numberless" (9) are a parcel of imagined territory.

The second stanza maintains this strategy of indirection, and takes up a traditional invocation of the muse, although in this case Keats has disguised the dual motive of inspiration and poison twice, first by hiding it behind the lush figurations garlanding the "draught of vintage" (11) and secondly by enfolding it within the stanza's concluding subjunctive wish to "drink, and leave the world unseen, / And with thee fade away" (19-20). The wine itself is laden with imagery redolent of taste ("Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth, / Tasting of Flora and the country green" [12-13] etc.), while at the same time suggestive of the Mediterranean regions of southern Europe in its reference to Provence and Greece. It is in his allusion to the Hippocrene fountain (allegedly dug by Pegasus' hoof) that Keats calls upon the Muse, for the fountain is located on Mt. Helicon, the Muses' home—and it is by drinking from the Hippocrene fountain that poets may acquire their voices. In this passage, the Hippocrene produces a purple wine that not only would inspire the persona, but further his "fade" (20) from the quotidian world into the "forest dim" (20) of death and/or the subconscious.

Again though, the entire second stanza takes place in a subjunctive mode of desire and inaccessibility. The persona does not actually drink from the Hippocrene, nor, at least yet, does he truly "leave the world unseen" (19). In fact, that very phrase is itself ambiguous, leaving the reader to puzzle whether the poet wishes to invisibly and unnoticed leave the world behind, or whether in some sense he actually wishes to depart from an unseen world—with the strong implication that even the world of his own imagination is somehow insufficient, or frustrating, or in some undefined way to be
The use of “fade” (21) to begin the third stanza with an echo of the second provides another example of Keats’ use of ambiguity. The word could be used as an imperative verb, with the further complication of being directed either at the nightingale with whom the poet proposes to “fade” in line twenty, or at the poet himself. Furthermore, since the nature of the complex periodic sentence that makes up six lines of stanza two and all of stanza three does not actually require an operative verb at this point, the stanza’s first four lines may be read as a sort of verbally-rooted appositive which leads into the anaphoric lines of elegiac despair with which the stanza concludes. Keats’ critics have pointed to this sort of structure as muddy, claiming that his thought is incoherent, but in point of fact none of these readings negate the others, and the multiplicity of interpretation active simultaneously creates a layering of associative response in the reader that results in a more neatly defined and precisely articulated emotion than the poet would otherwise be able to express. Such a strategy, while not the exclusive property of lyric poetry, is one of the lyric’s characteristic strengths.

In these same lines, Keats toys with the word “leave(s)”—using it, like “fade,” as a bridging device between stanzas two and three. In line nineteen it appears as a verb, with its primary meaning the common denotation we know today, but with overtones of the archaic “leaves” as a form of “to leaf,” with implications of ornament mixed with vitality surprisingly resonant as it pertains to the “world unseen” (19). Here, however, the simultaneous reading, while evocative, even contrapuntal in a musical sense, does present a situation where the meanings are, on a literal level, mutually exclusive; it is
incongruous that one should at once depart from, and ornament, any world, "unseen" or otherwise.

Keats, of course, is comfortable "being in uncertainties." The world of irresolution is the world in which the poet lives, and moments of transience are moments of rare beauty. The third stanza introduces one of the poem's unresolved conflicts, the antithesis and interdependence between beauty and decay. Keats moves the death trope from the expected world of "men" who "sit and hear each other groan" (24) while "palsy shakes a few, sad, last, gray hairs" (25), to a far more personal world where "youth" (Keats and/or his brother) "grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies" (26), and where even the consideration of the world's grievous dichotomies causes sorrow. In this realization, Keats aligns himself with the first great truth of Buddha, that all existence is suffering.

Functionally, the stanza serves to enact a rationale for the poet's willingness to become enraptured by the nightingale's song. In a world where neither beauty nor love can endure, can the poet's soul endure? And yet, it is the inspiration imbibed in the far more attractive world of stanza two which gives the poet the ability (negative capability?) to so associate himself with the nightingale as to have the opportunity to fade away with her.\(^3\) The disassociation with the body with which the poem begins is motivated in this stanza by despair, and yet the ability to expand consciousness beyond the bodily subject is hinted at--although this ability is confounded by the notion of "fade"ing.

While the fourth stanza begins with an exultative imperative, presumably directed at the nightingale, the causative sense of "for" in "for I will fly to thee" (31) seems

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\(^3\) I assume a feminine gendered bird because of Keats' earlier association of the nightingale with the dryads.
unnecessary, and attached more to the poet's sense of escaping with the bird than with any syntactically mandated connection. In this verse-paragraph, the persona disdains the wine he invokes in stanza two, preferring to fly "on the viewless wings of Poesy" (33) than to be "charioted by Bacchus and his pards" (32). Due to Keats' multiple treatment of the wine in the second stanza, the reader is left to puzzle out how the persona mounts the poetic "wings" without the Hippocrene inspiration alluded to earlier.

This puzzling doesn't last long, however, because abruptly, in line 35, the poet is "Already with" the nightingale ("as though the dull substance of [his] flesh were thought," says Shakespeare in Sonnet 44), aware of the moon's and stars' presence (perhaps as a result of the flight?), yet now located in a "here" devoid of light--all light, at least, save what is "blown" from heaven (well, Keats was no fan of Isaac Newton, and considered that *Opticks* had destroyed the poetry of rainbows). Reeves sees indication of envy in "Already with thee! tender is the night" (93), although my sense is that the colon serves to bring some part of the persona's sensibility to the nightingale. Vendler labels the speaker's "retirement" into the forest grove as a "horizontal motion" (82), although there appears to be no actual motion at all; certainly the speaker does not physically fly away with the bird. The speaker is now in a location, whether spiritually or physically transported makes little difference, with the nightingale. This new locale is distinguished by "verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" (40) and thus resembles nothing so much as the "perplex(ed)" and "dull" (34) mind of the poet, presumably still in the state of intoxication described in stanza one. In Freudian terms the persona has arrived at his own subconscious, the area where poetry exists in its most inchoate form.
Here, the poet has entered the "verdurous gloom" (40), and whatever faint light may be breeze-blown, it is not sufficient to break the "enabled darkness" (43) and allow the poet to see either the "flowers" (41) or the "soft incense" (42) (strangely, a visual image) that "hangs upon the boughs" (42). Keats now employs indirection to visual representation, and introduces a sort of hideous beauty. Indeed, "verdurous gloom" may perfectly describe the objective state of the poet's lungs. Despite the dark, crypt-like description of the poet's location, the flora is "sweet" (43) and "endow[ed]" with its sweetness by "the seasonable month" (44). The concluding six lines of the stanza invoke visual imagery, either directly, as in the "White hawthorn" (46), or indirectly, by naming plants whose names convey their color: the "Fast fading violets" (47) which, objectively, are further occluded from view by being "cover'd up in leaves" (47), or the "musk-rose" (49). The very cataloging of plants is also implicitly visual. Additionally, the "musk-rose" (49) reinforces the idea of smell introduced by the "incense" allusion, while "dewy wine" (49) not only foregrounds the sense of taste, but hearkens back to the Hippocrene wine of the second stanza, and perhaps even to the drinking of hemlock and opiates in the first. The stanza concludes with "the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves" (50),--an onomatopoetic device that, by the use of primarily soft, elisive consonants ("m," "r," "s," "l," "v," for example), coupled with predominately low, short, humming vowels, effectively reproduces the soft buzzing of the insects in a compellingly mimetic image. The flies themselves, so beautifully invoked, are inextricably linked with death imagery at its most hideous.

Here, Keats delivers the poem's obsession with death and imagination in
miniature. The speaker, denied all sensory input save that pure music of the nightingale, is compelled toward an imagery of visual, aural, and olfactory concretion. The ode offers almost nothing of the physical; it turns again and again upon the speaker's fancy, and creates a sense of movement and place that is highly hallucinogenic.

Lillie Jugurtha, writing in her book *Keats and Nature* (187), finds fault with the fifth stanza's image of "fast fading violets," (47) declaring that "fast fading" is a contradiction in terms. I would point out that "fade" is a process, not a speed, and that the speed at which the process occurs is a purely relative matter. The covered violets exist in clear parallel to the doomed humans in stanza two, and more particularly to the speaker himself.

The fifth stanza is remarkable for its use of concrete imagery in an imagined space, a hideously beautiful space that the persona cannot see, and in which he is, as it were, entombed. But in case the reader has not sufficiently followed the juxtaposition of the "embalmed" dark, the aromatic flowers, and the buzzing flies, Keats invokes Death directly in stanza six. We are told that the persona has "been half in love with easeful Death" (52), and "Call'd him soft names" (53)—this latter in addition to the personification with which Death is introduced to the ode.

Death is, of course, the ultimate surrender, or loss, of one's subjectivity, and in this stanza the poet is prepared to surrender his own breath into the surrounding air in a gesture of absolute unity. It is as though one were to dip a cup of water into the ocean: relieved the bounds of its container, the water itself is united. As the poet contemplates this pouring out of his breath into the infinite air, he remains entranced by the nightingale
who is "pouring forth [its] soul"—perhaps into the infinite soul—ecstatically. Slowly, the poet loses consciousness, and as his breath joins the air, as the bird’s song joins the universal soul, so too does the poet’s body, synecdoched as his ears, join the “sod” (60).

In a curiously humorous apostrophe, Keats addresses the nightingale as “immortal Bird” (61), punning on Shakespeare’s title of “immortal Bard.” He declares that the nightingale “wast not born for death,” nor is compelled to move on by the incursion of “hungry generations” (62). This reinforces the association of the bird with the Dryad in stanza one, who will live as long as her tree-home will live, and contrasts the natural world with the increasingly crowded world of urban man at the dawn of the industrial revolution. The voice the poet hears is the same voice, or tune, that nightingale fanciers have always heard, because the bird is a perfectly fitted cog in nature’s wheel, and all nightingales from ages forgotten have sung the same song. In this stanza, the poet seems to have recovered from the intoxication of death with which he was oppressed in stanza six, and actively engages the nightingale, speculating on the social order and making a biblical allusion.

Keats gestures toward breaking down social barriers when he points out the availability of the nightingale’s song to all classes of men, from “emperor [to] clown” (64). Although not a social revolutionary in the same degree as Byron or Shelley, Keats, coming from a lower social order than the gentrified poets, has a greater stake in seeing a society where the privileged aristocracy no longer objectify the mass of humanity; perhaps he sees the nightingale, with his ancient artifice, as emblematic of the poet who, through his subversive art, is able to break down the barriers erected by society.
Switching his emphasis somewhat, the poet invokes the biblical Ruth in an image of homesickness; here, plainly, Ruth is herself a metaphor for the persona who, seeking “easeful Death” (52). He feels himself amid “alien corn” (67) while enfolded with the plants in the “embalmed darkness” (43). He proceeds to attribute to the bird’s song the charming of “magic casements” (69) which open onto “perilous seas”—a striking contrast to the casement in “Ode to Psyche” that is “ope at night,/ To let the warm Love in!” (67). Again, the bird functions as a mediator to the sensation of transition/transience, of a movement between two realms, that of the “faery land forlorn” (70) of temporal existence, and that of the oceanic realm into which all subjectivity is subsumed.

“Forlorn” completes the seventh stanza, and opens the eighth. Keats draws further attention to the word by commenting directly upon it (“the very word is like a bell” [71]) and striking its importance as the vehicle that, in some undefined way probably related to a combination of tonality and association, “toll(s)” the poet back from his revere brought on by the nightingale’s song to his “sole self” (72). That the self must be defined as “sole” is telling, connoting as it does the condition of expansion by which “self” must have been defined during the period of imaginative inflation and identification experienced as the bird held sway over the poet.

Thus, when the poet bids “Adieu” in lines 73 and 75, apostrophized to the

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4The “easeful death” reference may be much misunderstood. Writing to George and Georgiana Keats against his “wooing of death” in the sonnet “Why did I laugh tonight?” Keats said that, upon completing the poem, “I went to bed, and enjoyed an uninterrupted Sleep. Sane I went to bed and sane I arose.” Universalizing this sentiment to the world of poets, he wrote that poetry “is the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake. They say poets never or rarely go mad... but are generally so near it that I cannot help thinking rhyme is so far useful in anticipating and preventing the disorder” (qtd. in Abrams 139). To amplify this question, we may look at a letter Keats wrote to Charles Brown very late in (Keats’) life, 30 September 1820: “I wish for death every day and night to deliver me from these pains, and
nightingale, it seems probable that he is equally bidding farewell to the state of mind in which he found himself, a state of mind intimately associated with the bird's music, a state that is conversely both death-like and all-embracing. The poet comments, perhaps wistfully, that "the fancy cannot cheat so well/ As she is fam'd to do" (74)--perhaps startled that the tonal value of "forlorn" should evoke sensations sharp enough to recall him from the drug-like state into which he had so willingly fallen.

Commencing with line 75, the nightingale's song fades, until it, rather than the poet, is "buried deep/ In the next valley-glades" (77-78) (emphasis mine). The death imagery has shifted attachment, and is now associated with the bird's whistling—a whistling that is yet undiminished in the valley-glades that house the nightingale.

Katherine R. M. Kenyon suggests that Keats is uncharacteristically inaccurate in his portrayal of the nightingale in this poem--an ornithological shortfalling to which he does not succumb when referring to nightingales in other poems (27). Her first point, that the nightingale ceases to sing in late June, is immaterial and stems from what I take as a misreading of the first stanza, in which the bird "singest of summer" (10) (emphasis mine), not in summer. Clearly the time within the poem is prior to mid-May, as "mid-May's eldest child"(48), the musk-rose, is described as "coming."

It is Kenyon's second contention that concerns us here, that nightingales are known to sing only from their own branches. This identification of the bird with its home-tree accurately parallels Keats' description of the bird as a Dryad. If we presume that Keats retains his normal observational accuracy, then it is also logical to presume

then I wish death away, for death would destroy even those pains which are better than nothing. [...]
that the bird has never physically changed its position, just as Keats’ persona never physically flew away in its company. The music appears to flee because the poet has shifted consciousness; rising up from his profound reverie, the poet finds that the bird’s music is no longer foregrounded, and the enchantment is progressively lifted.

The poem concludes with another assonantal rhyme in the final couplet, echoing the device of the penultimate stanza by which the rhyme scheme achieves a bound unity in the sestet. It is perhaps significant that the words thus emphasized are “dream” and “sleep.” The poem also concludes with a question that has puzzled some readers; the only logical reading is to interpret “vision” as a sleep-dream in opposition to a “waking dream” (79). Without the contrast between vision and reverie, or daydream, there is no logical cause for the last line’s confusion as to whether the persona is “[a]wake or [a]sleep” (80), with its inherent metaphorical identity with being alive or dead.

The speaker, reverting back to our common, natural world, is confused, and feels as though the world out of which he has awakened was a more authentic world, a world in which his subjectivity was in sympathy with, and embraced, that world’s constituent elements. Although the striking imagery and melodious tones with which the poet has described that world present it as the world of nature, it is anything but that; and the readers of the poem are as seduced by Keats’ melodious song as the poet is by that of the nightingale. Rising from “Ode to a Nightingale,” we pause a moment before believing once again in our own quotidian world.

dead is the great divorcer for ever” (qtd. in Gradman 83).
Love from Another World: James Dickey's "The Sheep Child"

John Keats' ability to seduce the reader into believing in an alternate world in 1819 resonates in the American poet James Dickey's hideously beautiful paean to rural seduction. In "The Sheep Child," Dickey violates the strong western taboo forbidding human sexual intercourse with animals while creating a clearly legendary poetic figure, the offspring of a human and a sheep that, for one moment, merges the natural world with the distinctly human. Following the moment of illumination, the sheep child remains as a sacrificial "lamb" warning against such mergers. Again, as is the case with the Augustan John Dryden and John Keats the Romantic, the hard-edged neo-romantic American poet James Dickey seizes on proscribed behavior as a pathway to a state of consciousness that, however brief its duration, merges subject with object and liberates the creative imagination.

Both Dryden's "Cynira and Myrrha" and Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" are readily available to the common reader. As Dickey's "The Sheep Child" is not a "canonical" work, there is some chance that the reader could have difficulty locating a copy. For this reason, I take the liberty of reproducing the poem as it appears in Dickey's collection, Poems 1957-1967 (252-53).

The Sheep Child

Farm boys wild to couple
With anything with soft-wooded trees
With mounds of earth mounds
Of pinestraw will keep themselves off
Animals by legends of their own:
In the hay-tunnel dark
And dung of barns, they will
Say I have heard tell
That in a museum in Atlanta
Way back in a corner somewhere
There’s this thing that’s only half
Sheep like a woolly baby
Pickled in alcohol because
Those things can’t live his eyes
Are open but you can’t stand to look
I heard from somebody who...

But this is now almost all
Gone. The boys have taken
Their own true wives in the city,
The sheep are safe in the west hill
Pasture but we who were born there
Still are not sure. Are we,
Because we remember, remembered
In the terrible dust of museums?

Merely with his eyes, the sheep-child may

Be saying saying

I am here, in my father’s house,
I who am half of your world, came deeply
To my mother in the long grass
Of the west pasture, where she stood like moonlight
Listening for foxes. It was something like love
From another world that seized her
From behind, and she gave, not lifting her head
Out of dew, without ever looking, her best
Self to that great need. Turned loose, she dipped her face
Farther into the chill of the earth, and in a sound
Of sobbing of something stumbling
Away, began, as she must do,
To carry me. I woke, dying,

In the summer sun of the hillside, with my eyes
Far more than human. I saw for a blazing moment
The great grassy world from both sides,
Man and beast in the round of their need,
And the hill wind stirred in my wool,
My hoof and my hand clasped each other,
I ate my one meal
Of milk, and died
Staring. From dark grass I came straight

To my father's house, whose dust
Whirls up in the halls for no reason
When no one comes piling deep in a hellish mild corner,
And, through my immortal waters,
I meet the sun's grains eye
To eye, and they fail at my closet of glass.
Dead, I am most surely living
In the minds of farm boys: I am he who drives
Them like wolves from the hound bitch and calf
And from the chaste ewe in the wind.
They go into woods into bean fields they go
Deep into their known right hands. Dreaming of me,
They groan they wait they suffer
Themselves, they marry, they raise their kind.

"The Sheep Child," suggests by its very form a Keatsian primacy of the imagination while simultaneously asserting, in firmly grounded language, the palpability of the imagined world in a double-voiced piece that operates in much the same way as a binary star: we observe an enormous quantity of mass in rotation, but the singular point upon which everything pivots is a point with no mass whatsoever. The poem takes up, in a somewhat more skeptical, although highly overt, manner, Dryden's concern with forbidden union, and Keats' intrigue with hideous beauty. Blended with Dickey's own sense of the transgressive and the perverse, the poem finally works to both exalt the merger of the human and the natural worlds, and to parody the Christian merger of the human with the divine.

Dickey begins his poem with what we take to be the voice of his own persona, a "James Dickey" who wishes to inform the reader, from a reasonably objective third-person viewpoint, of the sexual maturation practices common to young farm boys. This
voice, which encloses the farm-boy voice in the second stanza as well, moves forward in
a quick, largely three-beat line—a line that is highly irregular, with a high percentage of
unstressed syllables. Eschewing endstops and highly enjambed, Dickey’s line in the
poems opening stanzas is vigorous but not rushed, and seems designed to lure the reader
unsuspecting to the denser, more “poetic” section enunciated by the sheep-child later in
the poem.

In a poem that will later “couple” its persona, the reader is given a hint in the first
line of the poet’s intention: “Farm boys wild to couple” (emphasis mine). The first of the
three eight-line stanzas that open the poem emphasizes the willingness of adolescents to
satisfy their burgeoning sexual desires by any means available, to couple “with soft-
wooded trees/ With mounds of earth mounds/ of pinestraw” (2-4). Thus far, the
speaker remains aloof from such practices, reporting only the asserted facts. Despite the
uncomfortable allure of sex with a heap of pinestraw, the boys discourage themselves
from coupling with the (presumably) more attractive animals. They pass rural legends to
one another while doing chores or goofing off in the barn. The stanza ends with its first
foray into the colloquial, “I have heard tell” (8), and proceeds to a description of a
legendary creature deposited in the bowels of an unnamed Atlanta museum.

Dickey writes the second stanza as overheard conversation: the legend in the
process of passing from one boy to another. The poem takes on the rhetorical gestures of
rural conversation; the pickled creature is kept “Way back in a corner somewhere” (10)
(emphasis mine). This device serves to lend immediacy to the folk transmission of the
legend, while at the same time deflecting the reality of its existence by verbally pushing
the artifact “Way” in the distance, and locating that distant corner in a vague
“somewhere.” The boy-speaker explains that there exists a “thing” that’s “only half/
Sheep like a woolly baby/ pickled in alcohol” (11-13), and it becomes clear that the
creature is the outcome of a taboo relationship. The boy-speaker goes on to explain that
such creatures “can’t live” but that “his eyes/ Are open but you can’t stand to look”
(14-15). The eyes of the corpse possess the power to engender the most primitive racial
guilt in the viewer, but the stanza’s final line reinforces the mythic quality of the tale, as
the speaker admits that he “heard it from somebody who . . .” and drains away into foggy
ellipses. The effect of this performative stanza is to excite the reader’s curiosity; “The
voice drawing them in is that of the pitchman” standing at his “tarpaulin flap at the
county fair” (Bowers 40-41).

The third and final of the eight line stanzas returns to the original speaker, who, in
good-humor, informs the reader that “this is almost all/ Gone” (17) (emphasis mine), and
that the boys have now married and taken their “own true wives” into the city. “The
sheep are safe in the west hill/ Pasture” (at least from the speaker’s generation of country
boys). Everything appears to be fine, except for the presence of the coordinating
conjunction “but.” Dickey employs unusual syntax to end the stanza. The speaker
admits that “we who were born there/ Still are not sure” (21-22), and then moves into this
question: “Are we,/ Because we remember, remembered/ in the terrible dust of
museums?” (22-24). At once, the pickled sheep-child in his bottle is given a taste of
consciousness. The persona imagines himself “remembered,” then goes on to assert that
“Merely with his eyes, the sheep-child may/ Be saying saying” (25-26). These last two
lines are separated from the third stanza, and isolated by empty line-spaces above and below. The spacing of “saying saying” seems to replicate the timing of the sheep’s nonsensical and distinctive “baaa baaa.”

At this juncture, the poem effects an abrupt transition. The persona of the first twenty-six lines disappears, and is replaced by the sheep-child himself. The dramatic monologue that follows (a send-up of Browning?) in italics comes from the eyes (not the mouth) of the sheep-child, who, mythological himself, “may” be reciting it.

The sheep-child’s disquisition is delivered to the reader? the persona? his father? a museum visitor? over three free-verse stanzas of unequal length. Dickey makes the language of the poem more lyrically appealing; the lines lengthen and the diction is heightened. In order to heighten the sheep-child’s tragedy—dying for our sins, as it were—Dickey makes a poet of the wooly, alcohol saturated fetus. But the sheep-child’s language is the outcome of the poet’s imaginative union; the transgressive gesture has once more effected the poet’s ability to conjure, to seduce. The sheep-child begins with biblical allusion (“I am here, in my father’s house” [27]), thus compelling the reader to consider the relationship between man and sheep in the great chain of being as metonymic of the relationship between god and man. The sheep-child stakes his claim to these two worlds, explaining that he is half of “your” world, and then retelling the story of his own conception and birth.

This opening stanza describes the seizure of the sheep-child’s mother, an attentive ewe who “stood like moonlight/ Listening for foxes” (30-31) until she was seized by “something like love/ From another world” (31-32), to which she gave herself, “without
ever looking, her best/ Self to that great need” (34-35). Following her rape, the ewe bent her curiously human face “into the chill of the earth” and “in a sound/ Of sobbing of something stumbling/ Away” (36-38) began to carry the child. The ambiguous sounds the ewe heard are presumably those of her violator, although she herself may also have been “sobbing” and “stumbling away” (37-38). The stanza ends with the sheep-child’s nearly paradoxical observation that “I woke, dying” (39).

The stunning second stanza of the sheep-child’s monologue takes up in mid-sentence where the first stanza left off: “In the summer sun of the hillside, with my eyes/ Far more than human” (40-41). The half-human, half-beast saw, “for a blazing moment” the world “from both sides,/ Man and beast in the round of their need” (41-43). For one brief moment the sheep-child has been granted, much as are human mystics, a searing vision, an awareness of both parts of his being; the sheep-child experienced this epiphany coupled with a keen awareness of the natural world and of his own body, and felt “the hill wind stirred in my wool/ My hoof and my hand clasped each other” (44-45). The creature is granted a brief moment to suckle “one meal/ Of milk” (46-47) and then dies, “Staring” (48).

It is an open question whether the sheep-child could have prolonged his “blazing moment” of vision, his stupendous blending of the natural world with the human, by declining his dam’s milk. It is as though this simple gesture toward the bestial condemned his bi-fold spirit to death. Certainly, like Christ, the sheep-child perishes from the earth, only to come to his “father’s house” (49) where “dust/ Whirls up in the halls for no reason/ When no one comes” (49-51)--the same dust, of course, from which
God made Adam in Genesis. Unlike Christ, a melding of the human with the divine, the sheep-child melds the beast with the human, and rather than “scouring” Hell for three days, he is condemned to his jar, “deep in a hellish mild corner” (51) where the “sun’s grains” (53) fail to revivify him through his “immortal waters” (52). The alcoholic brine may possess a sort of immortality, but the sheep-child lies dead in his “closet of glass” (54).

In the second half of the final stanza, however, Dickey offers the sheep-child a resurrection; and, if it is less than eternal life, it is at least the kind of eternal usefulness to which humanity puts both heroes and bad-examples. The sheep-child pronounces himself “surely living/ In the minds of farm boys” (55-56), and then goes on to declare, in a moment of high, if comic, lyricism, that

\[ I \text{ am he who drives} \]

\[ \text{Them like wolves from the hound bitch and calf} \]

\[ \text{And from the chaste ewe in the wind.} \quad (56-58) \]

The result of the sheep-child’s legend—a rigidifying of the bestiality taboo at work in western culture—results in the farm boys going back “into bean fields” and “into their known right hands” where, “Dreaming of me,/ They groan they wait they suffer/ Themselves” (59-61) until they are able to marry and “raise their kind” (62). Not surprisingly, Dickey himself is an enthusiast of folklore and legend, having answered an interview question submitted by Henry Hart that

\[ \text{I’ve always liked ceremonials of various sorts, and I’ve always liked primitivism} \]

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5 A taboo that is not, by the way, universal. Certain New Guinea cultures include bestiality as a traditional
and primitive tribes, when things were both very basic and simple and revolved around staying alive and surviving. (Kirschten74)

Here, he is able to play changes on the resurrection motif in a way that is at once culturally didactic ("don't screw the sheep") and culturally transgressive ("what if we screw the sheep?"). Taboo is always a charged issue, and the taboo is usually left in the dark, unspoken; even the suggestion of its possibility is enough to tempt certain members of society into forbidden action.

"The Sheep Child" is a curious poem in the manner by which the voices of the original narrator (and his farm-boy alter-ego) and the sheep-child himself inform one another. Certainly, the sheep-child is the "stuff" of legend; but his musings have a highly spiritual edge that the narrator lacks—and it is the narrator, after all, as Richard Calhoun and Robert Will observe, who confers legendary status on the sheep-child (77). Oddly enough, it is the sheep-child, whose spiritual vision has allowed him to see at once the world of humanity and the world of nature, who plays the fundamental role of preventing human beings from attempting bestial miscegenation; his vision proved to be unbearable, and his fate casts serious doubts on the desirability of such lower order mysticism. Jane Bowers Martin sees the sheep-child as a creature that unites nature with art,

"transcend[ing] reality, life, in the same way that his floating existence is a transcendence of life . . . born to a world of perpetual transcendence, a world it is unnecessary to live in" (qtd. in Calhoun 79). This view may be somewhat disingenuous, avoiding as it does the ultimate fate of the sheep-child as a parody of Christ. I am inclined to agree that the

part of their rite-of-passage into manhood.
sheep-child unites nature with art, but that it is through the medium of his own poem as much as it is through the glassy iconography of his pickle-jar.

Through its subject matter as well as through the interfacing dictions of its persona, “The Sheep Child” is a poem of high imaginative intensity, a quality valued by Dickey, like Keats, tremendously. The poem forges radical and transgressive unions on both the sexual and linguistic levels as it presses toward a kind of possessive madness—and for Dickey, “madness—even as it leads to death—is preferable to a life that lacks intensity and ‘consequence’” (Calhoun 97). The genius of “The Sheep Child” is that the poem is able to avoid a trivialized sexual sensationalism while presenting a folk-narrative that approaches the “ghost story” genre (with its attendant possession), and at the same time effecting a vehicle for the sheep-child’s remarkable soliloquy.

The three poets at whom I’ve chosen to look, however briefly, are poets who are widely separated from one another, temporally, stylistically, and in terms of personality. John Dryden led a long life filled with tremendous social ups and downs. His self-image appears to have wavered from that of a poetic conquistador to that of a barren mistress. Although never an advocate of incest, this taboo provides Dryden with a perfect metaphor for translation, perhaps even for the poetic rifling of his European rivals. For Keats, too, the taboo operates as a gateway into the depths of the imagination—and in some ways death is that great night out of which all temporal dreams are born. James Dickey, a southern American poet too near our own time to be an “immortal,” is another writer well served by the social taboo; bestiality functions in “The Sheep Child” both as
warning and as icon. Perhaps only Mary could birth a Christ, but the sheep-child may enact a lower-case christ for the rest of us.

A glance at my own poems will reveal influences far more wide-ranging than the three poets treated in this short preface; and it will reveal influence at work more profoundly in my own poems than that of any of these three poets. But I live in an age when most of the old taboos have been broken, and our new taboos are too recent upon the scene, and frequently too silly, to excite much response by their breaking. However, having said made this statement, I must admit that taboo has an insistent nature of its own, and in an age of stylistic conformity and political correctness it is not so difficult for a poet to fall out of step with the times; if the current broken taboos are not as blatant as those forbidding incest, suicide, or bestiality (and certainly, these taboos have by no means significantly lessened their grip), their transgression may still prove useful to the degree that it services the poem's desire for resolution and transcendence.

John Keats is famous for spouting off about "truth" and "beauty." In the U.S., we pay lip-service to a strict taboo on lying. The story of George Washington and the cherry tree identifies the nation's very "father" with scrupulous honesty. Perhaps the following story will explain as much about my own poetry as anyone would want to know.

One bleak, blustery March afternoon, sixteen years old and ducking a biology exam, I wandered downtown Wichita, Kansas, fancying myself a young Kerouac in my red checked lumberjack shirt, my trusted pal by my side. We struck up a conversation with a pair of Lolitas playing hooky from their high school. My friend styled himself "a painter," and I was always "a drummer" when we engaged in these (usually fruitless)
attempts to impress the opposite sex with the depths of our artistic, if pimply, souls.

“And what do you do?” asked the tall, almond-eyed blonde, her pupils lazering on mine with unexpected promise.

I shook back my tangled red mane and answered in what I prayed was a careless, sexy voice. “I’m a Drummer.” This seemed somehow insufficient for those eyes, that pale golden hair, those long, long legs, and where it came from I’ll never know, but it popped right out of my mouth. “And a Poet.”

“A poet? I just love poetry. Here, let me give you my phone number. Maybe we could go out this Friday or something? I’d love to read your poems.”

Ah, yes. The Poems. And I’ve been lying ever since.
Works Cited


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WHY ORVILLE AND WILBUR BUILT AN AIRPLANE
Let wise men piece the world together with wisdom
Or poets with holy magic.
Hey-di-ho.

--Wallace Stevens
The Sign

Here are earnest sorrows, enough
to twine their poor fibers around
this bony armature, this tough
cartilage of foolish wishes bound

for a short draught and a long sleep.
Paint me paler than spirit, lapped
milk beneath God's swift pink
tongue, and consecrate me, trapped

in the shallow bowl of my own sins.
Where is the green girl, mild and moist,
who used to tremble when I'd hoist
her into my lap and slyly rinse

her nascent breasts with promises,
caress her urgent thighs with lies?
And what has become of her tender kisses,
her elfin smile and her low replies?

And what of the boy I used to be,
goosing my Ford down a blacktop road
in the iodine air by the tumbling sea,
with never a thought for the debt I owed?
Near red-eyed dawn I’d stumble home
where Grandfather dozed, glasses half-mast
on his nose, worn out with gutting the tomb
of a dead language, surfing the crest

of Aramaic, or ancient Brahmi.
I’ve stumbled home a lot since then,
but he’s translated himself away
where I can’t seem to follow: heaven

or bust. Something semiotic in
the way that oceans whisper sand—
the way the tides, like hands on skin,
massage the troubled face of land—

and the way they flatten out and die
into the Kansas chalk, distill
to cumulus and scrub, chills
the heat of every prayer I try.

I swallow a sign and bow my head,
trace a fish in the tabletop dust,
then mark a small cross where its eye must
go; it smells like a mackerel, dead.
Why Orville & Wilbur Built an Airplane

Life, as we all know, is a bicycle
with no kickstand: pedal
along for a while,

then lay it down. Some
of us glide serenely down
a long, easy hill on three-

-pound Italian racers, scarcely
using any of their twenty-two
well-lubricated gears. Others

of us dismount to walk
our leaden Western Flyers up
that hot, steep slope, mugged

by our corduroys under a midsummer
sun, light from the heavy chrome
fenders kissing our eyes closed,

the bright air that clogs our passage
thickening with effort--our
wire baskets filling with rocks.
Rain

The weight of rain rings on the window,
blurs this lucid neighborhood
into one soft body dripping
at the edges, the gelid
figures of Monet.

Should we open our roof to this baptist
moment, hold up our hands to the holy
wash of a passing ghost
who keens in steady half-light, devote
ourselves to that dogged revision

of a known territory required by our new
atlas? You still me with a single
finger to your joined lips, gaze
through the mirror our window has become
at the rain’s daughters

sweeping the long ground
with gray gowns, walking the way
girls walk who are foolish
with love, muffling the traffic’s hiss,
the suddenly important bells.
Honey

Then there's the sound a vow makes when it shatters

--Bruce Bond

Our old terrier would vomit on the divan, but we don't
harbor any old terriers, and our clean couch,
short and rigidly uncomfortable, may be more
properly termed a love-seat. Out in that world
where people meet for paychecks, beer, and slow-pitch

softball, dust seeps into the pores, a brush
of windborne pollen sullen on moist skin.
This is the way we planned it--our elder in-laws
die, or wrap themselves in the gauze
of an impossible past, arteries thick-sludged

with all they wished for us, as if they ever thought
of us as anything but unrelenting youth
accumulating layers of adipose. Our daughter
follows her body into adolescence, trails
a tumescent line of swains across the fading carpet--

the last blue-jeaned spasms of electricity
before the television signals us to silence
and communion: O spirit-eye who pries
our hearts to advertise, turn us from reverie
in obedience. A knock at the door. We flinch,
arise to answer, in a worn-out vernacular,
the oldest visitor of all. And out beyond her
shoulder, the landscape starts to flicker, the patient
shrubbery eases out of its skin, becomes a breath
where bees linger at twilight, listening for honey.
What the Loon Believes

The slow, humid breathing of shadows
grows, one on top of another, until we
are a dove's call, an owl's murmur, a soft radiance
strolling the river at dusk.
This is not our first trip, timing the ripples

where feeding perch strike the surface
of your blues, your mortal appetite
smelling of willow and sedge.
What if a fire-scorched birch, black as imagination,
charms those people we never made
time to become?
Will these lavender weed-tips at wood's edge
grieve, or thrill to the mutual dying
of our paired sexes?
White wings blaze beneath the canopy

and are gone, lost and silent as light.
That woman, more gone than the rest, posts me,
declares that now she is finally content.
There is weightlessness, suspension,
walking along this bank, two bodies buoyed
between dozens of atmospheres.
Quivering between God and his works,
we are gifted with the word
which echoes, numinous, across calm water.
You are egret, I am loon.

eeging one another on.
So we start over, casual as friends
against the skin, pale feet sunk in mud,
and I rehearse my error, believing
there is this one thing a woman knows.
My Little Suede Shoes

Our Studebaker’s radio
croons a saccharine lullaby,
the guiltless sugar of Bing,
cheery Rosemary flacking for L & M.
The music brightens, chorus to chorus,
a brassy wave of saxophones
and background girls, close harmony’s
timeless progression:
friend, baby, honey, lover—
and you swear me to Cuba,
to marriage and merengue,
the florid bars of Bautista’s Heaven.

Your hairy fists choke the wheel,
driven to negotiate this snowdrift
two-lane blacktop,
patch ice sparking toward our tires.
The past enfolds me,
coal tar lungs embrace a weakened heart,
and I am seven once again, combed
and fragrant in Sunday taffeta
watching my youngest uncle’s grimy hand
worry his crotch in the back seat plush.

They never found his body, vaporized
in smoky plumage offshore
Tarawa atoll. We sunk his empty, 
flag-draped casket into the rain-slogged marsh 
of the county cemetery. I never cried. 
We know time, out behind 
the doghouse where it squats, 
a limber greyhound between trophies.

Now I scrape myself clean 
against the dandelions and the funerals, 
my teal frock trimmed in aspic. 
You stare deep into the rippling arms 
of the Platte, the Cimarron—those western 
rivers plowing east. You drive. 
I sleep nights.
Vernal Equinox

Turning the corner down to the market,
in love with myself, the laughing sparrows
slapping their knees, lined
on the telephone wire,
I imagine we date ourselves with our post
modern jokes and the way our auras
flame through the common atmosphere.

I pass a wire fence abundant
with honeysuckle and am reminded
that there are some things that simply
cannot be revealed. Because I live
in “The Air Capitol of the World”

a noisy little airplane buzzes overhead.
It passes its loud shadow across me,
but is, in fact, a cheery number in blue
all trimmed out with yellow. It has a big
number on its tail, which makes me think
that maybe dogs should too, which makes me
notice a striped tabby cat lurking

beneath somebody’s juniper tree.
Perhaps I should buy
a canary,—blue or yellow, I can’t decide
and go to calculating the cost of seed.
Things are looking good when I realize
I don’t subscribe to the newspaper.

Strange little automobiles bleat
to themselves as I whistle my way
across the street, hands a’pocket, that crazy
sun making chlorophyll everywhere,
but none for me, I wear a hat

and a pink tint. What if the teenage
girl with the big pair falls
for me? With my balding pate and my pot
belly handsomely bobbing, do I not appear
European? If only I had a memory,
I could be like Proust! A Coca-Cola
and a jelly donut remind me of yesterday!
Talking to Myself

Decked out in tails and spats, he crowns my knee,
regurgitates stale jokes to this burlesque
house: puerile anecdotes, some stolen, some bought,
some spun of pure sawdust from the head of my dummy
whose wooden jaw snaps in a sort of grotesque
mock of Yankee speech and whiskied thought.

Grandmother Stafford, God rest her, could scarcely have thought
that the red-haired grandson who drooled like a drunk on her knee
would ever devolve this way: a balding, grotesque
comedian, his life a bitter burlesque
of the many times she'd told him "You're no dummy"--
as he memorized rhymes from the marked-down books she bought.

I've sold-out my goals. Christ, they were cheaply bought.
Life's a grind, but there's always Cleveland, I thought,
a hundred a week and room for a rummy and dummy.
Plop a showgirl on my other knee?
There you have it, the real perk of the burlesque:
a surfeit of floozies, if your taste runs toward grotesque.

Grotesque? or simply run out of options? Grotesque
is my bond with this carved and sanded, lacquered, store-bought
chunk of wood. This silly, wise-ash burlesque
of a man of means. This tuxedoed puppet who thought
himself alive, who threatens to root in my knee.
He dresses like a fancy-man, this dummy.

His tree may have flourished at Harvard; he's still a dummy
slumped in a corner, leering at a steamy grotesque
bump and grind: pink hips, a dimpled knee:
the plumage and flesh of a dame who can't be bought,
only rented. Who never gives him a thought
as she grazes the local dandies, the best burlesque.

So it's Saturday night in the lime-light. We'll burlesque,
this top-hatted, wise-cracking son-of-a-birch, and dumb me.
The nickel beers will foam. I've always thought
that drunken laughter sounds too damned grotesque
unless I'm fortified. But the men who bought
the tickets love the block-head on my knee.

So I burlesque a fool, and he a grotesque
man, a dummy like the ones who've bought
the gags we've thought up, like children at our knee.
Heirloom

There’s a certain virtuous pride
in finding oneself collectible, at one
with the German bisque aquarium
mermaid figurine; the outsized
paper dolls Ann and Mary, “Sunshine
Girls”; the broad spectrum
of transistor radios, from Texas
Instruments’ original Regency TR-1 (perfect for the bomb
shelter when the cagey Russian decks us)
with its long-life battery,
to the two-tone plastic-bodied chrome-
grilled popsicle-colored boldly
stylized Global GR-711, the last
of the great Japanese shirt-pocket sets:
I am set in her glass case, joining
pederast and alky: a nest of failures past
redemption, last in a string of bad bets.
Wedding Music

She stands at the sink and wrings
her marriage into the unlikely mobius
of a waltz-time comic strip.
Everything, she muses, is her
side of the story.

Their lawyers both agree it's best
to leave the children in the dark;
he slips into a bungalow, floats
paper-airplane checks,
pretends he's still their cross-town father.

There's nothing left of supper
but pawprints on the table
and a stain in little brother's
underwear. A fascist song
plays softly on the radio,
every one starts to hum
like a choir of Frigidaires;
you can hear it all
over the neighborhood
like a comb and tissue rumor.
What the Bar-back Says

We call her the color
of scotch and soda,
“just a splash”
on the rocks and round
the limelight’s fringe.
She fingers her crystal,
stages her relapse
against the advice
of those blue-jowl
Joes numbing by
degrees between what
the back wall mirror
says and does. Now
she is several, now she
returns from the powder
room balancing the dance
floor’s mirrored ball
on her nose---
an insect's faceted eye,
looking us over and over
looking us.
Practice Before the Bar

There remains the oily thread
of litigation we may slip
along with blind, anxious

fingers, counting the years
in knots, as did the fabulous,
plumed Incas of Macchu Pichu.

But this is serious, topical
trouble with a largely
unwilling cast, boiling

its way through the modest
courthouses of middle America
with their sub-basements

awash in perjury.
There is no relaxing the grip
as our rival attorneys clasp

hands at day’s end, debate
just which of them must pay
for the night’s martinis.
Science Fair

"A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea"

--Edmund Burke

Scarcely a hiccup between the speech act,
--the handshake with its concomitant knife--
and those more recondite and severe mathematics, as anyone would tell you
who, having memorized the suppository declensions from which Fermat's ornate
analytic calculus induces its way
to the sublime, the mediated terror--I mean,
popping a bag in the face expresses nothing
like the sedate grandeur of a Greek ideal.
Our classic human masks intone
a numerical scripture love crawls through

like a mime-encapsulated spread-shot
onto a gallery wall. It is this precise clawing sentiment that sends us
to the chloroform--doping the innocent blue-eyed angels, pinning their wings to a cork board, redeeming them beneath our glass.
How Domenica Lazzari Survived on Light

She cups stigmatized hands into the brash
well of it, laps at lazy red
strontium, violet potassium,

verdant hum of barium.
Indifferent to substance itself, she transmits

the radiant joy of her Christ,
spectral, ethereal, attentive,
the length of her passion’s waves.

She opens her knees to unrelenting rock,
flays her back to bloodied tatters,

drains her perfumed wounds
before the reliquary as taut prayer twists,
colors the spectrographic lines, shrinks

those dark regions where hunger urges,
bends her to a bacchanal of light.
Beasts, inevitably available, swagger before the succulent, ambrosial years. Spots alternate with stripes and the entire fur-bearing world sleeps with the aid of generous machines; serendipity is no watchword,

and a suspension between the air
and its unspeakable resting place
could be true impressionism, a hint
of rot in the breeze charging a lightly oppressive mist. Some people dress in pineapples and orchids; these

are the ones who walk like the hissing of tires
in geometrical cities, buying, always,
an advertisement like a hat, an argument telling itself an ageless joke. She sets out wheat and sunflowers in a pale green bowl for her tigers, and gruel for the tubas.
Third Door Surprise

* A nutcracker, if it could talk, would do no differently. 
  --Andre Gide

And so the famous regimentation tugs at itself,
first digging its grave, then trembling with song
in a red enameled birdhouse, each demi-quaver

a stick in Kitty’s eye, each pinch of bird-lime
an incitement to Heaven’s riot. There are causes
for each of the principle Arabian vowels; even

the most casual observer cannot fail to marvel
at the link between the veiled, chadored women prowling
their temporal market stalls and that quick

wash of a private tongue, bumpy and wet,
over a tasteless joke. With each passing
moment our own mouths, held in agreement

as if victimized by gravity, feed more ineluctably
on risk (More Carthaginians! More Elephants!)

than our prudent counterparts. We signal a parade
with our own paws: bands, cowboys, floats
like admiration bedecked in raw blossoms.
Sculptor

One speaks in half parodic sequences
a central self, a core of wool and blather
to hang a face upon. All Christian leather
stiffens at His touch.

That voice commences
a simple reconstruction of one’s other;
homo rhetoricus chips at Heaven’s fortress,
wields a drop-forged hammer, chiseling nonsense
into the primal, fundamental ether.

One marks the question Jacob Epstein posed:
“Do you carve directly into stone?”
Or does one dress straw figures up in clothes?
The festive bloom rescinds, demurely closed,
a floral fist, and one is led, forlorn,
to juxtapose such matter as one shows.
Pedestrian

i.

He is the least metaphoric of the unread,
crushing his theology
into a dense little brick
heaved through this Shrove Tuesday
stained glass mythology. He
is fundamental tautology, a scream
resonating from straw-packed head
to chickenshit breast,
and if this seems like recovery, it is
tertiary: soapy water and clumsy
huge electro-magnets: primary
is a lamp’s wick falling to ember.
Occasional pleasure swells him
like a doe dead on the road shoulder,
without flies or that stench
which yet distinguishes life
from cinema, the held hand
from the handheld camera.

ii.

He pauses to think of the others, jealously,
slinking to confession over the cobbled
roadway, knees broken and faith
an enormous sail stuffed full of wind.
Now he seeks to recover the shame
that invigorates middle age, seizes
the mounting waves of slander,
throws himself on the mercy
of the prepositional, chops down the true
cross and drags it across his cheap
notepad, publishes a trail of splinters
in Death's grim eye. He wishes to fall
straight from the sun, as village idiots
are said to arrive, but he is not
on the sun--and is much too smart to fall.
Stigmata

A ten-year-old girl bleeds like Christ.
She has stitched together a mink coat
for a parrot who recites Chaucer.
Rerouting the high & holy traffic, repentant,
she crawls down the gay boulevard
festooned in florid lights & pastel

...tissue paper, flogging herself, cat-o-nine merciless, flailing tails.
Later she reconstructs a poodle:
clips him “Miami Sweetheart,” centers
fur hearts on hips & back, sculpts lathe-smooth
pantaloons, tassel ears

and a Van Buren moustache dripping
from his muzzle. Who is more Christian?
Who more French? A red top-knot ribbon!
--and a pom-pom tail that floats like a helium balloon. These are emblems,
nails of flesh harden in her wounds.
Testament

She'll go, she declares, to her grave
like a painting to a wall,--
hers pain's long disintegration a flaking

of gilt from some renaissance angel's wing
trim. What of her remains
tumbles in the air-conditioner's freeze-dried

hum, the narcotic embrace
of her rented middle-aged nurse.

* * *

Once she was eclogue and honey,
a task of feverish bees in a meadow,
sheep in a lover's ravenous valley;

now her little black hooves tap
on the cheap linoleum, a telegraph
spelling the relatives, as if

she remembers their faces, the cruel
way they bend into one another.

* * *
At last she is antiseptic,
Peppered with toxic molecules, the old
Tongue waxen behind stitched lips.

Her cargo of incidents slips like a jilted love into the deep: jettisoned ballast drifting from her swift-sailing barque. Only the translucent flowers suffer her useless name.
Undertow

The curse of the half-wit surfer--
like chili pepper in your Dom Perignon
for keeping that axle between

the ears turning--invokes itself
on the sands at dusk. When he crumples
himself up to be hurled savagely

against our metaphors, we are torn
into separate camps by the violence
of our applause. When those laughing

blondes have gone home from Huntington
and Redondo, when every beach is a litter
of Pampers and aluminum, he

is the tampon floating beside a bell buoy.
Your Pacific, with its long drone
and lazy crash, tosses

a pinch of salt over its left shoulder.
Much of the work these tides do is rote
and mediocre; hell, could be done by anyone.
The Miracle of the Field

*Flimsy between cloth, what may I attain
who slither in my garments? there's not enough of me
Master, for virtue. I'm loose, at a loss.*

—John Berryman

Who savors the salt of his Lord's kiss,
blind as a king on his bare precipice,
waving numb, blue arms against
a constricting circle of gulls?

And why does the red sun freeze,
a shiver of fire iced on the sea's
flat indifference, indelible smear
on a brine-gray cloth?

The one who has chosen to love me
stalks a field's edge where blue-bottle
flies ride the dead in grim ecstasy,
severs their fingers, their small parts,—

cracks the teeth from their sour
mouths with a palm-size rock.
Rot fouls the gumline, her smock
a canvas of butcher's gore.

She stumbles over a broken shaft,
its trampled guidon rent
by iron hooves and the muddy
buskins of armed peasantry,

and spills her basket in the grime--
a sloppy treasure for the monks.
A few months buried in quick-lime,
and St. Digna's distal phalanx

prods the rapt pilgrim to glory
from its wrought silver monstrance,
silk-lined and inlaid with ivory,
in a chapel tangent to the nave.

Candlelight against its crystal
window trembles, a keen young priest
raises the host as the mystical
relic floats at the rim of sight.

The forge that fires a Christian's zeal
to weld with the Savior's intent
is not above deceit—
a righteous lie to save a soul.

They come from Palestine, I say,
or Rome. A string of Cappadocian
martyr's foreskins from a Turk,—
some good luck on the Via Dolorosa,

attested by a bookish friar.
She beads them on a leather strip
beneath her skirts; none but a bishop’s silver buys their audience.

Our fee is little, by my faith,
that scours one man from Hell.
Anoint thyself with Mary’s milk
or count thy prayers on Joseph’s teeth;

attend the dangers we embrace
for Christ’s sake, and for his sheep.
Luke’s hair we plucked from a Saracen palace,
and laid in the palm of our blessed Pope.

Now she flails at a crow that grips
a flax haired boy’s blue cheek.
It plucks his eyeball free, snaps
the tendon and perches in an ash tree.

She genuflects, presses his eyelids shut. At the briar-fretted forest’s fringe, a vixen and kits pace as the wounded sun collapses.
Aquaman

He needs a plain conjecture
to skim the waves and the white-lace
spume trimming the blue-green sea;
to have risen out of brine
to hear the curlew's piping,
the whale song spreading like ink

in the chill brack; and not to blink
back tears in the wind’s screech,
the tidal wash on worn rock

that sounds the whirling earth
with its vast magneto brushes,
that rushes the same red ears

he bends, neither fish nor fowl,
to the primitive ocean, beneath
the sign of desire, in quest of want.
Neighbor

He strikes a Blue Diamond
match in the walk-in closet,
fires two delicate ebony tapers
on each side of his shrine,
kneels, bows his swollen face
chin on chest,
and prays to his wooden monkey.

A squirrel in the attic
races through the pink fiberglass
pile, scratches a nest
between rafter beams.
His neighbor's Toyota sputters
its hymn to the yen, graces
the air with The Stamps Quartet.

It's some kind of African
boxwood, warm to his touch
when he wipes down the plastic
composite altar-top
weekly, religiously.
He wears special underwear
to speak with God, and seeks
His secret conversion.
Blue Eyes and a Wild Marimba

She piles up her booty in the check-out lane and reconsiders her doctor's instructions. Butter-pecan ice-cream, pork tenderloin, irradiated Brie. The *Weekly World News*, its five-year-old moms, its skeleton bride plumped with a Martian's lovechild, is the only choice in a basketful that could meet with her doctor's approval. She tugs her GI surplus rag of a jacket farther over her full thighs.

It's her heart that's the problem, bloody stone she chucks at the world, too swollen and brackish to wear on her sleeve. She tells herself she needs handcuffs and a keeper, blue eyes and a wild marimba to serenade the *Cuba Libres* on parade down her parched, tropical throat.

She shuffles the automatic doors into wind-driven sleet, vinyl boots lined with synthetic fur, home to the tube--where her stair-master serves as a coat-tree.
After Dinner

Beneath this meal you've ordered
that I eat, crow a l'orange,
the carpet holds its breath.
I whip the tablecloth,
wrist-flick dexterity slashing the bottom
from dinner, a matadora bulling her way
through another social anxiety.

Now all the utensils applaud.
The wineglass sways on her delicate stem
as an upstart Cabernet laps the lipsticked rim
in a mute wash. The china whispers in character.
Even the bill comes fluttering down
in a hush of dove wings,
the kind of music that rocks
your piano to sleep.

What kind of girl, I wonder, do you expect
me to be. We're way past dessert,
that gavotte of sugar and sauce,
beyond the tip, and moving up fast to the part
where the door slams, where the window-glass
cobwebs the planes of your face.
So colloquial in their rococo frame,
the smeared words of your portrait
ring up our dreamlike vows
of acquittal, the sordid paste
we made of San Luis.
I surprise myself,
something in the dark
after a long absence.

You hunch, a gargoyle streetlamp
at the plaza’s corner,
eyeing the mask museum,
the regional pride of this state
capital. Here you incarnate
a scooped-wooden devil
with bottle-cap eyes,
a blind Medusa twisting
your hemp coiffure
in a mariachi hip-hop.

I blink, and the silver has melted
out of the mountains,
leaving us singing
a song of upheaval,
tilling a measure of salt
where every inscription
replaces unwarranted pleasure.

What I call sand, you
call vapor.
A conjugal grit yellows
the breakfast harvest.

I chew the placenta.
You express a distaste
for the personal pronoun
I have become
and our small hotel room
with its blue enameled maid.

You explain how it’s only a metaphor
for salt, for brilliantine,
for any half-baked cubist zirconia,
unzip yourself from our museum
and its curandero rattles,
its bobcat capes,
its paper-mache Judas,
and take your long unsteady hike
beyond the domed and sanctified
cathedral, beyond its gilt
ceilings and mute penitante,
to mount your lucky Golgotha
in a desert alive with thorns.
Redemption

It’s coming up Easter again
and the blasted warblers
shove their song in my face.

Martin lies in his chrome cage,
three years old and hooked
like an astronaut to life

support: his monitor, I.V. drip,
red-flecked catheter tube
twining along the bed-frame.

He cries in his sleep, paws
the oxygen line at his nose
with swollen hands.

I finger the cool call-button,
but atropine and dopamine
disconnect his pain.

He wrinkles his face and whimpers.
I whisper a curse to heaven
and pray for his leggy nurse.
We crave the meat within its hull,
    a sweetness in the cask—
    a song unsung in unrung bells—
    an image in a glass

that no eye yet has dallied on.
   A sotto voce snowfall
mutes the colors of our town
    with blankness prodigal,

stanches words we would have said
    before we crossed to sleep.
The moon on leaden snow will shed
    reflected light, not grief.

Our city's cars are long and black,
    an angel on each hood.
The men who drive are lorn and bleak—
    they never speak a word,

but sip an antique beverage
    of vinegar and rue—
they wheel us to our acreage—
    a narrow one will do.
Ode: *La Mordida*

i. (strophe)

I bear the bite of mother's aging foxhound—
a smear of something tonic in the oak trees
dwindling to dank compost, or a beauty nightgowned
in the sweat and stench of one more night's release.
   And I have come like someone in a garment
   stitched of lily-leaves and daffodils,
   one light-bedazzled by a distant glass
   to vow this fertile world to be her convent.
   Neither gentleman nor bobadil
   shall taste the distaff pleasure of my ass.

I bind myself with thongs of parables,
lie among the daughters of the dead
who shoot the fragrant morphine of their fables
like sacrament: the poppy-juice they fed
   their fathers, when their fathers braved the fire
at Illium, or Inchon. The oracle's sores
erupt: words and deeds of valiant men,
tender with their own suppressed desire.
They bear their needles like a troop of lancers,
each bloodied tip the cock-song of a hen.
ii. \((antistrophe)\)

How violet the meat around this wound!
If I myself were teeth I might demand
the pearl-pink flesh, the bite of maiden-sound
that sours the table, blackens every viand
      on its plate of Chinese porcelain, that turns
each fork to pitch, that rings our Devil's name
      like tarnished silver coinage. But I am not
the missionary blaze, the paraclete that scorns
our dry cross-wood; I stand aloof from shame
and stare temptation in the eye, more hot

than any sawbuck whore, or anchorite
in her disheveled cell, her crucifix
mere furniture of sorrow, the tripartite
God up to the last of his parlor tricks.

      And now the headlights flash their brief attention:
one more night when roads lead on to hunger.
The men wear little feathers in their hats,
babble of pentecost. I don't mention
that some of us are judged, and some are judgers,
but we with feathers in our mouths are cats.

iii. \((epode)\)

"Never bite off more than you can chew,"
my mother offered. She should have told the dog—
that fuzzy bitch who barked without a clue.
In the gears of canine culture she was just a cog
locked in to other cogs whose bark
was customarily worse than their bite.
I splash a shot of whiskey on the dark
coagulate—the germs can drink tonight—
then lip the bottle like a cold glass penis.
If we’ve no love, let commerce flow between us.

The woods around my house are filled with rats
who sing like nightingales. I give them names
like Keats or Shelley, invest their plaintive claims
with lyric passion. They must be autodidacts,
learning by imitation, then climbing the trees
where the charming birds once lived, the birds I slew,
that I boiled alive for my spicy Portuguese stew
and supped at my leisure, feeling the prophesied peace
that passeth understanding. And I understood
nothing but peace. I understand that’s good.
Strangling the Dead

The blush marble virgin
each night in the churchyard lies,
her savaged skin
a counterfeit of day-

light among the tombs,
their cold granite teeth
searching a tongue
for the bone-dry dust beneath

each long spook's lid.
Lorn is the tone she lows
to the bent willow,
something like autumn dead

on bleached grass
(if death could brute a sound)
or the stony round
of mourners at a mass.

The townsmen have pegged
her: cold, immaculate
in cunning, great
in a sheer, gorgeous hatred.
And all the wives
whose red years end with ivy
at their throats,
with half-deflected threats

and promises unkempt
as tangled grave-hair,
release their remnant
grief and glide in prayer

like lighting wrens.
The epitaphs pronounce
a canabin
that lingers in each mouth.

She lowers herself
to one green god who festers
in her pelt,
her supple-limbed master

below the empty
poplars, branched forks
in the moon’s eye.
How slowly a statue chokes.
Adhesion

The string murmurs and the string forgets.
Charms fade, break, or scatter
through the diffused glare of a hazy May
afternoon; you approach glory like a slow
horse, tail to the ground, nose to the wind.

You declare yourself the sum
of everything ever forgotten--
purse your lips and, like stray Angus, graze
my flat scenery, my utter sincerity.

We cram our tattered baggage
with things we haven’t found, handcuff
it to our wrists. You would be mad. I would be lord.
We would be made of sterner stuff
than our fathers, armored in Puritan bluster,
elect. I kneel, a repentant convert,
then set to counting the names of God.
Now our universe rubs itself
against my retina, wiping off

the sticky light that adheres to us.
Something ripples the length of your longing:
red-tail hawk strikes thatch like feathered lightning,
gigs a meadow vole astir in her dray.
Far away, another kind of child cries, mewls
her furious air with a rigorous insolence.
South of Red-Wing

I wake up on the wrong side of the equinox,
geese in isosceles drops
trace a path down the world’s face, stop
to ravish the harvest’s sun-dried trash

piled in furrows and hedgerows.
A clatter of crows stitches the air
with black derision, brushes a red-wing
off the taut wire of her direction.

Summer’s long truce is broken, the mice
have returned for the catfood, gnawed
their dank passage to that yellow sack,
peppered our floor with their delicate scat.

This bounty and need, feeling
the leaves crack as the cat stalks
his own red meal, whiskers his way
through the crisp buffalo grass.

Something has burrowed into the half-arsed
pumpkin patch,—skunk, badger,
another hair-shirt mendicant
telling her beads along the food chain,
clicking the beetles’ lacquer-thin shells,
snapping the brittle seed-hulls
in her frowsty cell, far from the sun’s ache,
taking no thought for the morrow.

Thin fires kiss the evenings now
beneath the railway trestle; and the men
with cardboard signs, trolling the highways
in denim and flannel, all drift south.
The Way Light Gets to Be

This is what your body ought to feel,
the lukewarm swish as a tongue’s ideolect
murmurs: your furrows and tummy crease, every fold
of thigh or hip-dimple brimming with shadow.
The meat of us stiffens and swells, our human
skin bleeds honey and rosebruise.
We kiss away the sheets, a linen field
that buries us like dead children.
When God speaks He scratches
commandments into the freckled flesh
you wear like a distant day on the Pont Neuf,
or a Sam Cooke song in deep blue drizzle.
You dress this way to keep the light at bay,
that photo-degenerate carving the oncological surface.
Even Mona Lisa’s fifteenth-century aura,
hers scrim of dancing photons, is lured
like a soul by the sun’s grand camera.
The wet world calls us too, of course: the vernal
surge of crocus bulbs, soft shoots of fuzz-buttoned
pussy-willow, dogwood’s snow-burst
petal-shiver pasted to a rainy sidewalk’s frieze.
Bulge and seepage, drip and thrust, each tumescent
fungus, every resinous milk-stemmed weed
that roots for nitrogen, the rock-fed lichen
doodling its milipartite portraiture: the Virgin Mother
scrawled across a streamside limestone sheet
torn by scrambling paws of crawdad-rustlers.
The swarm that feeds and replicates awaits
our death. Every glistening image listens
for breath-taking light’s uneasy stir.

A kind of anesthetic to the daily
miracle keeps us plodding.
My father lies in the antiseptic heart
of a hospital, under a rubber mask and a local,
hears each stainless scratch, the scooping
of his eyeball jelly, the laser’s focused hum.
The round world on his retinal wall
is underexposed, expiration date unclear.
Once, in Mexico City with Alex,
I chewed the stubborn rubber of *tacos de ojo de vaca*.

like gnawing a golf-ball’s banded innards. The eye
is tougher than it looks. And, as any *chi-chi*
observer of popular culture could tell us,
has nearly no taste. The doctor sends my father home
with a silicone buckle, a guitar, and a tin cup.
The zen-like notion of a detached retina--
as though the bond that binds to us oceans
of lilacs, phosphorus sea lips
drawling our languorous hours
over the vacant sand, was not our business
but only that of light—a macula receptor
blindly processing empty gesture, a vain
evolution unwinding that stupid helix
of the visible. You awaken,
fingers, hair,—your eyes plaqued with matter.
And here, we rub and taste and burn our soft
hides together, a fleeting stay against the pitch.
Into one another, we curl
frightful shadows, the spindled film of our own
blank days, of everything we love.
The Devon Watch
for Cathy

After we've slept beneath a hundred years of earth, and everyone we touched has swept to dust in narrow quarters, that old romantic moon will chime its muted light, a gauzy veil across the Severn's mouth, and hush the southern coast of Wales. Will couples take their tea with scones and curdled cream? Stroll the leaf-wet paths of Nether Stowey? Fade at dusk to shades where bell-formed towers peal a crimson brew into the open mouths of Devon's bees?

Will purple cumulus still flash and roil, raindrops punctuate the wood-owl's call? An old man tamps his pipe before the ancient poet's cottage—chimney-pots and lime trees blend a scent as rich as you once breathed. A single western star, beyond the bay's blank tide, blinks out. But we erode: thin names in stone, or dustbin books,—or nothing, nothing at all. And lovers, hand in sly hand, deep in the mud-lilt Quantock hills, rub themselves to flame in springtime's verdant fiction.