

THEORIA

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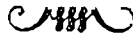
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THEORIA

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PIETERMARITZBURG

EDITORIAL COMMENT

WITH THIS NUMBER of *Theoria*, we offer an author and title index to articles published in previous issues. The work has been done by Miss R. M. McConkey of the staff of the Natal Society Library. We feel sure that readers will be grateful to her for having devoted her leisure hours to so painstaking a task. Our gratitude is considerable, for had the work been left to us, we doubt whether it would ever have been done.

Having confessed to one failure of editorial zeal, we would explain what might appear to be another—our failure to deal promptly with contributions as they come in. To the impatient contributor we would point out that, even on our Olympian heights, we are unable to sit in judgment until all who would gain entrance are assembled. For we do not—and this is a happy thought that frequently consoles us in our labours—deal with sheep and goats. We have to select by comparing one with another, and we can only do this once every six months, just before the gates of the press clang to.

THE EDITORS.

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER

by N. DENNY

IN 1959 there occurred an event without parallel in Britain since the publication of 'Daisy Miller' eighty years before. An important literary work other than a novel, play or book of verse—a 'mere' tale in fact, Alan Sillitoe's 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner'—achieved an overnight success with the literati and the general reading public that one looks back on with a certain amount of astonishment. That one does so is a measure both of the official disrepute the tale or short-story still languishes in today and of current standards of literary taste and judgment. No publisher in his right mind, we are reliably informed, will touch a volume of short stories except (cutting his losses) to placate a restive writer already no stranger to the best-selling novel lists; and I can think of only one other recent work—Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*—that goes some way to justify the acclaim with which its publication here was met (though I can think of several of at least equal seriousness and importance—Raymond Williams's *Border Country*, for example—whose appearance barely earned a mention in the weeklies and went unnoticed by the reading public). In any event, on this occasion a tale was published, a work of the imagination realized in a form supposed to be entirely out of fashion and out of favour today, which unambiguously seized the public imagination and in so doing probably did more to rehabilitate an important but misprized literary *genre* than all the productivity we have seen in it since Lawrence.

I should not want to argue the tale's complete artistic success. It has its obvious flaws, though these do not seem to me to affect the full impact of the tale. The concluding paragraphs are weak, an indulgence where they are not redundant, and embarrassing in the forced, juvenile irony of the final sentence. And the same indulgence—of unexamined personal feelings about British society—sporadically wells up in the writing, threatening to flood the galleries where the real rich imaginative ore is being mined, and sometimes succeeding. The symbolic nature of the characters, too, is, sometimes lost sight of, and long-distance runner and prison governor, say, come to stand, momentarily, not for states of mind or moral vitality, but for *all* delinquents (for a sentimental 'Us'—workers or slum-dwellers or 'Out-laws' or what you will) and all police and prison officers ('them'—management, bourgeoisie, 'in-laws', etc). There are moments, in short, when Mr Sillitoe's

artistic detachment clearly fails and he misinterprets the imaginative significance of his own creations. His readers, admirers and despisers, frequently make the same mistake.

But if 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner' has its weaknesses, it is still a remarkable achievement, the most notable piece of prose fiction, it strikes me—apart from John Wain's *Nuncle* (another short-story collection, as it happens)—to emerge from the so-called 'angry' movement of the past ten years. Even so, the reasons for its general success are hard to find. Mr Sillitoe had *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* behind him, of course (and one can be excused for doubting whether 'The Long-Distance Runner' would ever have reached the printing-shop without it); the success of the earlier book, too, and of the film that was made from it, assured the short-story collection of something more than perfunctory attention from the reviewers; and we should be remiss, I think, to scout the possibility of a quiet revolution having taken place amongst the reading public, *pace* the publishers and thanks very largely to Penguin Books and their steady publication of a string of first-class short-story collections. All these may have had something to do with the book's reception, but the most telling reason probably lies in the tale's association in theme and attitude, at least superficially, with the film, that dominant and commercially successful type of entertainment now being produced for an apparently insatiable public.

We have grown familiar with this school of modern writing, the novelists, playwrights and scriptwriters of the new 'realism' groping more or less honestly to catch the tempo of the times and to register the modes of consciousness of a welfare-state generation emergent or emancipated from the Bantustans of pre-'affluence' working-class life. I use the word 'register' deliberately, since on the whole no serious appraisal is offered by these writers of the moral landscape they elect to move in, beyond an implicit approval of its radical individualism and non-conformity, and a tacit acceptance of the whole apparatus of a triumphant commercial culture—the real nature of any tensions generated between the two, or between this commercial culture and official British morality, somehow being overlooked in an untidy clamour of protest at anachronistic bourgeois values. Superficially, Mr Sillitoe obviously associates himself with this school. But it is precisely the degree and the seriousness of his moral engagement, at least at an imaginative level, that distinguishes him so sharply from his fellows. The distinction is manifest in the altogether crisper moral focus of 'The Long-Distance Runner', in its greater clarity and tautness, in its firmer unity, moral, thematic, tonal—a clarity and unity, it seems to me, deriving from two advantages Mr Sillitoe enjoys over his competitors: an essentially superior imaginative intelligence—in spite of the wild working philosophy he appears to abstract from his writing (one of the characteristics he does share with Lawrence)—and his having found in shorter fiction the ideal vehicle for his individual exploration of experience.

Even at the 'literal' level of the tale—the level on which Mr Richardson chooses to mount his film version of it, and at which most of the other new 'realists' are content to deploy their talents—the play of this moral intelligence is apparent. Indeed, the tale's subordination to a higher imaginative control, and the economy and discipline enforced by the more exacting literary form, supply 'the Long-Distance Runner' with a range and an impact quite unusual in the novels with which it is loosely classified. At this level the central character and narrator ('Smith') is representative of a legion of other boys inexorably nudged in the direction of the juvenile courts by environmental forces over which they have no control, and by unresolved—or unresolvable—stresses produced by some of the more disruptive contradictions in modern life. He is the classic delinquent or problem child of the new age, the expendable jetsam of industrial 'affluence'. All the ingredients are there, sufficient to satisfy the sternest *Encounter* sociologist: the unfortunate home background (working-class insecurity, slum life, unemployment, periodic want); the unsettling parental factor (ambiguous relationship with the father, parental violence and—in sociologists' terms—neglect, maternal promiscuity, orphanhood); the moral vacuum (born of environmental confusion of priorities—itsself a product of the age—contempt for authority, casual criminality). The drabness, the moral torpor, the uncomprehended restlessness—the brutalized nature of this background—and with it its extraordinary vitality, its cheerful stoicism and warmth, are deftly evoked and completely convincing at every point. Yet it is a brooding background as well, heavy with a sense of hopeless inevitability. The youth lives on the page as both victim and hero.

His heroic nature expresses itself in his collision with 'society', a conflict which provides the basic tension of the tale. It is a genuine collision this, the magnitude and reality of the opposition properly conceded, not the cocked-snook braggadocio of our heroic 'anti-heroes' for a buffoonish papier-maché Establishment. Here, although such representative figures as policeman, Borstal governor and psychiatric social worker are also caricatured to a certain extent, the comedy is soberingly qualified by a genuine menace ('them bastards aren't as daft as they most of the time look'), and the created 'world' of the tale is real at the deepest levels. These figures are the custodians and the inculcators of a sterile moral code that an authoritarian middle-class British society officially decrees all men shall uphold and live by, regardless of its relevance to the facts of life of a depressed and exploited minority on whose very debasement the 'moral' quality of the social structure depends. The issue here is one of integrity. It is not so much the anti-heroic or the delinquent or even the rebel mind being studied, as it is a deep and stubborn honesty being marvelously realized—not always clearly seen or expressing itself in action, perhaps, but grimly true to itself, completely beyond the comprehension of society's agents for the 'correction' of such spirits, and innocently,

frighteningly perceptive of the rottenness and hypocrisy and hatred of life lurking at the heart of conventional morality. The 'honesty' of the exemplars and preservers of society's *principes de convenance*—'all the cops, governors, posh whores, penpushers, army officers, Members of Parliament'—is delicately presented in all its fraudulence and its irrelevance to the boy's world, despite the bitter caricature of the presentation; and so is the deep and outraged honesty of the boy himself, Lawrence's honesty, the bright live honesty of being.

People like the governor will never understand . . . that I *am* honest, that I've never been anything else but honest, and that I'll always be honest.

And this honesty finds its beautiful and heroic expression—its perfect expression in this case—in the boy's refusal to win the cross-country race, despite the liberation of the spirit, the joy, the pride in his own prowess and achievement—the self-discovery—that running has come to mean for him, and the certainty of its vindictive deprivation now.

The rush and the rhythm of this running, the elemental delight it holds for the runner, the expansion of his horizons that it brings—nothing is more beautifully and surely delineated than all this, and at the same time the brightly burning 'honesty' it is image for. But I'm not sure that ambiguity doesn't blur it at this point. Possibly I am wrong, but it does seem to me that the imaginative drift and dialectic of the tale prepare us for a *discovery* or a quickening of heretofore dormant or deeply buried 'honesty' in the boy, in or through his running. In other words, the initial rejection of the governor's world should be different in kind from the rejection that grows out of the running: straightforward adolescent rebellion and loss of moral bearings should be dislodged by positive moral polarization and fidelity to new-found 'honesty'. It seems to me Mr Sillitoe, against the current of the imaginative disclosure, insists on an honesty that was always there, a kind of *donnee* in his 'Us' representative (as it were by right)—an insistence perhaps occasioned by that external sentimentalization of his outcast, 'Out-law' characters he is sometimes guilty of elsewhere in his writing. In any event, the long-distance running *is* a liberation, compellingly and unambiguously realized, and symbol to the runner himself of a good life (clean, simple, vigorous, joyous) surely wholly alien from that other, masturbatory 'good life' proposed by the admass high priests of a frantic hedonism. For the tale itself would seem to dramatize a threat to compromise any essential 'honesty' in the boy, to stunt his moral awareness, a threat that comes from the pervasive pressure of a determined commercial culture. Here, before the boy is persuaded to train for the cross-country race, the corruptive power of admass persuasion, its strangling of the imaginative centres and disabling of the individual for anything approaching a real—full and rewarding—'good life' are

realized for us with extraordinary economy, power and sureness of touch.

It is the sly, overmastering insinuation of this voice that particularly undermines the position of the Smiths of this world. Drawn by the horses of undirected energies in the normal course of events, they are quartered in moments of stress and decision by the drill-sergeant commands of an irrelevant 'straight-bat' moral code, the facts of their own existence, their own 'natural' moral impulses, and the seductive appeal of a materialistic society consumptive (in every sense) behind the parade-ground facade of British respectability. The boy's particular, pathetic image of 'the nice life', before his running starts (what they intend to do with the proceeds of the burglary) is 'a big beano' in Skegness or Cleethorpes with a couple of amenable tarts, having 'a good time' in the arcades and pierside boarding-houses. (The vision of his elder brothers—and secretly of his preceptors too, so advanced is the schizophrenia of British moral life—would be different only in degree: a 'posh whore' instead of a casual pick-up, a casino instead of the arcades, Miami Beach or San Remo instead of Skeggie—the James Bond fantasy.) The corruption already undergone by the boy is evident in the equivocal nature of his response to the admass projections of the good life.

And the telly made all these things seem twenty times better than we'd ever thought they were. Even adverts at the cinema were cool and tame, because now we were seeing them in private at home. We used to cock our noses up at things in shops that didn't move, but suddenly we saw their real value because they jumped and glittered around the screen and had some pasty-faced tart going head over heels to get her nail-polished grabbers on to them or her lipstick lips all over them, not like the crumby adverts you saw on posters, or in newspapers as dead as doornails.

The seduction of the projection is exposed in the intimacy, meretriciousness and sexual reference of its basic appeal. And the damage already successfully done to the boy's imaginative centres seems to me suggested by the hopelessly misdirected language of judgment Smith employs here (and elsewhere in the tale, until the running commences), and by his morbid attention to the nail-varnished hands and lipsticked mouths of the advertising models: an imaginative orientation towards life that is echoed later, when a characteristic 'mixing' of admass images is also hinted at (of tip-top 'things' to be 'consumed'—Ian Fleming's favourite word), in the blown kiss to the 'everloving babe of a brand-new typewriter' the burglars are forced to leave behind. The damage is further implied by the ambiguous attitude displayed to the (themselves ambiguous) television plays:

The films they showed were good as well . . . because we couldn't get our eyes unglued from the cops chasing the robbers who had satchel-bags crammed with cash and looked like getting away to spend it—until the last moment. I

always hoped they would end up free to blow the lot, and could never stop wanting to put my hand out, smash into the screen . . . and get the copper in a half-nelson so's he'd stop following the bloke with the money-bags . . . And it was when these cops were chasing the crooks that we played some good tricks with the telly, because when one of them opened his big gob to spout about getting their man I'd turn the sound down and see his mouth move like a goldfish or mackerel or minnow mimicking what they were supposed to be acting.

Anybody who has worked with young people will recognise not only the youthful irreverence and boisterousness reflected here, the outward contempt for the crude absurdity of pop culture's interpretations of reality, but also the painful ambiguity of attitude lying behind it. Although he says at one stage that he knows a 'big boot is always likely to smash any nice picnic (he) might be barmy and dishonest enough' to make for himself—just as he and his mates had wantonly smashed up the picnic of the kids with the 'high-school voices'—Smith seems to me to be sufficiently affected by pop culture's appeal at this juncture to simultaneously regard life, if one is 'cunning' enough, as a gay 'Teddy-Boys' Picnic'.

If I'm wrong about Mr Sillitoe's loss of focus here, about his refusal to accept the implications of his imaginative imitation, I am not wrong about the general success of the tale at even this, the 'literal' level of its deployment. 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner' is a stark and deeply moving realization of a handicapped boy's mind and 'world', of his struggle to find and assert himself, of his obscurely perceived honesty, of his courage and the humanity he attains to in his final loneliness.

But it is in the extra, metaphorical dimension that the real urgency and power of the tale most unambiguously manifest themselves. Fusing the two 'levels' of the tale, besides the figure of the long-distance runner himself ('Smith' he is called, once, by the governor, his anonymity emphasizing his representative function in the tale), are two symbols, Borstal and long-distance running, which are imaginatively opposed in a manner that seems to me wholly successful, growing as they do, beautifully and inevitably, out of the rich loam of the tale's literal dimension. Though only cursorily referred to explicitly, 'Borstal' pervades the tale like some stifling, oppressive presence, pregnant with menace. Perhaps much of this stems from the inevitable associations and emotional colouring of the word—it is odd how even the name (more appropriate to some rough repulsive beast from Germanic epic) seems to possess an ugliness, and suggest a climate fetid, brutal and debased, probably quite at variance with the actual nature of the institution it refers to. In any event, 'Borstal' rolls ominous and grey through the pages of the tale, a murky vapour out of which a distinct shape is made imperceptibly to materialize, so that Borstal comes to stand, compellingly, for the known modern world, for Britain itself.

It's supposed to be a good Borstal . . . They called it a progressive and modern place, though they can't kid me . . . Borstal's Borstal no matter what they do.

For Borstal merely reflects in extreme form the regimen fondly devised by British society for the achievement of its official ideal, the 'gentleman', or, in more prosaic terms where the general populace is concerned, the 'good citizen', who can be relied upon to do nothing to upset the *status quo*. It stands, only slightly exaggerated, for all those agencies—the church, the law, the schools, the successfully castrated 'community'—delegated by an authoritarian society, or assuming the responsibility themselves, to force a dead, travestied way of life on the weak and underprivileged. The hypocrisy of the attempt and the fantasy of the way of life itself are betrayed in every utterance and every action of its dedicated curators. 'If you play ball with us', says the governor, his dishonesty and bogus mateyness creaking through the incongruous American idiom:

' . . . we'll play ball with you.' (Honest to God, you'd have thought it was going to be one long tennis match.) 'We want hard honest work and we want good athletics . . . And if you give us both these things you can be sure we'll do right by you and send you back into the world an honest man.'

'Hard work, athletics, chastity' (its role is stressed later): the military-public school Rule is familiar, keystone of the British myth of 'character' or 'the honest man'. Life is 'one long tennis match': train for it as the nineteenth-century preceptors taught you how and you'll never let the side down—maybe you'll play well enough to get some trophy from the Queen one day. The irony of Borstal's being the purest form of public school is grimly underlined.

But Smith is not seduced. His gaze penetrates with disturbing accuracy to the dead heart of society's 'honest man', and he is contemptuous, and reassured of his own essential moral superiority: 'I'll win in the end . . . because I'll have more fun and fire out of my life than he'll ever get out of his . . . when I look in his army mug (I know) that I'm alive and he's dead . . . Maybe as soon as you get the whip-hand over somebody you go dead . . . Be honest. It's like saying: Be dead, like me.' He is aware of a life within him, pure and vigorous and inviolate, that the governor and his like are uncomprehending of and incapable of ever affecting.

They can spy on us all day to see if we're pulling our puddings and if we're working good or doing our 'athletics' but they can't take an X-ray of our guts to find out what we're telling ourselves . . . I've got thoughts and secrets and bloody life inside me that he doesn't know is there.

The word 'guts' acquires a symbolic reference as the tale proceeds, similar to Lawrence's overworked 'blood', but generally more effective and relates to the life Smith's running comes to stand for.

This experience of Smith's running is beautifully realized at all its

multiple levels of significance. Cross-country running, like climbing and swimming (and at a short remove riding and sailing) is one of the few elementally challenging and satisfying, 'pure' recreational activities left to man, when not disfigured by the competitive element, and it grows in the tale into its second sustaining symbol. First and foremost it is an *activity*, but an independent activity, generating its own rewards and satisfactions, an activity engaged in for its own sake and not on any basis of rivalry, like another form of tennis match. The runner runs alone, unaided, in an elemental untamed world a-tremble with life, calling on supreme but basic qualities of effort and endurance in order to dominate the terrain, and finding in the effort, the rhythm, the obstacles overcome, the solitude, a communion with the whole uncorrupted living world—with *life*—and a joy and a liberation of the spirit not easily found in any other of modern man's myriad pursuits. I suppose the most memorable and deeply touching thing about the whole tale is its wonderful realization of the haunting beauty and loneliness of Smith's private, runner's world. The metaphorical extensions of this world are obvious enough: it has a poetic reverberation throughout the tale, signifying the only really 'honest' life available to us.

I know what the loneliness of the long-distance runner running across country feels like, realizing that as far as I was concerned this feeling was the only honesty and realness there was in the world and I knowing it would be no different ever, no matter what I felt at odd times, and no matter what anybody else tried to tell me . . . It was hard to understand, and all I knew was that you had to run, run, run, without knowing why you were running, but on you went through fields you didn't understand and into woods that made you afraid, over hills without knowing you'd been up and down, and shooting across streams that would have cut the heart out of you had you fallen down.

We can go dead in the swivel-chairs of the emasculated 'gentlemen'; we can freewheel down the lazy metalled circuit the admass engineers have laid for us; or we can run direct, as the crow flies, over the hard terrain of real life, being truly honest and electing to *live* by engaging with an intractable, elemental moral world and seeking by grit and courage and endurance to dominate it, and achieve in the process a fulfilment and a liberation, and in the end attain to an undistracted and perhaps tragic awareness of reality, which are the only credentials for being fully human and alive. For there are landscapes of experience, the 'summer afternoons' of our running that may mature out of the ecstatic 'frosty mornings' (the seasonal imagery beautifully collaborate with the 'running' image), to which the cliché, the conditioned reflex and the stock response provide no *entrée*; where we recognize, at the very moment of our domination of these landscapes, that our condition is a finite and irretrievably lonely one. 'I feel like the first and last man of the world, both at once.' The

condition may be equivocal, containing both the joy and challenge of undaunted independence and the grief and loneliness of separation, but it is a condition—the artist's one, essentially—possessing satisfactions and vital relations with truth and with reality that no substitute can offer.

A voice is going like a wireless in my mind saying that when you've had enough of feeling good like the first man on earth of a frosty morning, and you've known how it is to be taken bad like the last man on earth on a summer's afternoon, then you get at last to being like the only man on earth and don't give a bogger about either good or bad.

The close relation, or the identification, of this experience with the artist's is dramatized in the heightened sensitivity and clarity of thought it encourages, and in the almost dreamlike quality these processes possess, where openness of mind is so complete that thoughts and images come unbidden into the mind. 'On these long-distance runs I'm liable to have anything crop up and pester at my tripes and innards (so that) I'm not so sure I like to think and that it's such a good thing after all . . . magic-lantern slides (slide) into my head that never stood a chance before (but) only if I take whatever comes like this in my runner's stride can I keep on keeping on . . . and . . . win, in the crunch-slap end.' The most notable thing about Smith's thinking during his running is its complete independence, its distance from cliché and from processed thought: the perception that maybe 'you go dead' as soon as 'you get the whip-hand over somebody' needed 'a few hundred miles of long distance running' for Smith to arrive at. His thinking is discovery, the formulation of conclusions out of the felt pondering of his own experience.

And this long-distance running lark is the best of all, because it makes me think so good that I learn things even better than when I'm on my bed at night . . . So as soon as I tell myself I'm the first man ever to be dropped into the world . . . as soon as I take that first flying leap out into the frosty grass of an early morning when even birds haven't the heart to whistle, I get to thinking . . . I go my rounds in a dream . . . It's a treat being a long-distance runner, out in the world by yourself with not a soul to make you bad-tempered or to tell you what to do, or that there's a shop to break and enter a bit back from the next street. Sometimes I think that I've never been so free as during that couple of hours . . . Everything's dead, but good, because it's dead before coming alive, not dead after being alive.

The running can never be competitive, however, and retain its 'honest' character. This is one of Smith's most important perceptions, itself made possible by the heightened awareness his 'running' promotes. Even a pure and independent activity such as this,

society will seek to corrupt or to hobble and turn into something tamed and manageable. And this Smith cannot bring himself to permit.

The ocean swell that has moved so effortlessly and irresistibly through the tale—the controlled colloquial diction so perfect a medium for it—embodying in the prose the very nature of the experience treated, gathers itself into a comber now as it rolls towards its climax. The summer of the last man in the world—the blue skies full of sunshine, the green grass and honeysuckle—has flowered from the winter of the first—the frozen ponds and fields, the ‘phlegmy sunlight’ and the bare, ‘frosty-dew twigs of beech and sycamore’. The concluding pages, grown so organically out of their predecessors, are the most moving and compelling in the tale. The mounting tension, tempo and excitement of the race’s final furlongs, when the ‘honesty’ of Smith’s running must be tested, are realized in the texture, pace and rhythm of the writing, and both of them sustain and carry forward the mounting emotional crisis in the runner himself. At the climax, when the awareness ‘running’ brings reaches its point of most dazzling illumination and Smith makes his heroic decision, the ‘blocked up Boulder dam’ of his heart finally bursts. He is crying as he slows, crying for he knows not what—lost innocence, his fated parents, the squalid death of his father, his father’s courage, the sickness of society, the ‘murderous’ rage of ‘Them’ at his chosen outlawry, the loneliness of the long-distance runner . . . In any event ‘the Boulder dam’ breaks and Smith is overcome by a grief that seems to me not only to relate to perceptions of the ultimate loneliness of our condition, but also to act, poetically, as an image of regeneration: the world that was ‘dead before coming alive’ has come alive, the corn is high in the fields, the birds that hadn’t ‘the heart to whistle’ have ‘come back to whistling’ now: Smith has escaped from admass and from ‘Borstal’ and attained to summer ‘honesty’ in all its fullness. And at this moment when truth is fully apprehended, the runner’s kinship with humanity (corollary of the liberation and the attainment) as distinct from his former alienation from it, is decisively established. It is almost a Christ-like passion, for a tragically deluded society suicidally hostile to life (‘I have the feeling that it’s going to get colder and colder until everything I see . . . is going to be covered with a thousand miles of ice, right up to the sky . . .’) and in its schizophrenia sentencing not only the recalcitrant to ‘correction’ by different means, but also vast sweeps of its own members to be drawn and quartered by those same centrifugal forces that, more sensationally only, cause havoc with the young. If the grief is not for all humanity, it is certainly for all ‘Out-laws’, everywhere, not only in the limited sense of some of Mr Sillitoe’s more faltering moments (slum dwellers and so on) but in the extended sense of all those who are persecuted and abused by an intolerant society, and particularly, I should say, those whose innocence and vitality constitute such a threat to an arid system of conventional values that society must attempt to hamstring or

destroy them. Smith's grief is for the moral death-wish in society, for life hated and spurned and embattled. Borstal will 'get its own back' if it possibly can.

I smell the hot dry day now . . . passing a mountain-heap of grass emptied from cans hooked to the front of lawnmowers pushed by my pals; I rip a piece of tree-bark with my fingers and stuff it in my mouth, chewing wood and dust and maybe maggots . . . swallowing what I can of it . . . because . . . I'm not going to smell that grass or taste that dusty bark or trot this lovely path (until I'm freed) . . .

I could hear the lords and ladies now from the grandstand, and could see them standing up to wave me in: "Run!" they were shouting in their posh voices. "Run!" But I was deaf, daft and blind, and stood where I was, still tasting the bark in my mouth and still blubbing like a baby, blubbing now out of gladness that I'd got them beat at last.

Because I heard a roar and saw the Gunthorpe gang throwing their coats up in the air and . . . (the Gunthorpe runner) passed me by and went swinging on towards that rope, all shagged out and rocking from side to side, grunting like a Zulu who didn't know any better, like the ghost of me at ninety when I'm heading for that fat upholstered coffin. I could have cheered him myself: 'Go on, go on, get cracking. Knot yourself up on that piece of tape.' But he was already there, and so I went on, trot-trotting after him until I got to the rope, and collapsed, with a murderous-sounding roar going up through my ears while I was still on the wrong side of it.

This is the effectual end, the finale, of the tale. The four paragraphs that succeed these may spoil the close, but even with its other imperfections they fail to diminish the full orchestrated effect of the finished tale. Its experience lingers in the imagination as few other recent works of fiction succeed in doing. What we are left with is a shaped, complete 'emotional' condition, a tone, a flavouring of the mind and moral consciousness. For what ultimately distinguishes this tale, and lifts it to the plane of genuine *artistic* achievement is that indefinable quality that I think Dante had in mind when he spoke, in the *Convito*, of that fourth 'principle sense' or level of meaning a work of literary art would seem to possess. (In addition to the literal, allegorical and moral dimensions—the last two perhaps better combined under 'metaphorical'—he posits an 'anagogic' dimension: 'The fourth sense is called "anagogical", or mystical, that is beyond sense'.) Out of the literal and metaphorical dimensions of 'The Long-Distance Runner' another seems to grow, and subsume the other two, that some critics might attempt to account for under 'style'. This is that distinctive aura or 'life' or spirit (it is there in *Border Country* and *Catch-22*) that we all respond to in the more disturbing and memorable of the literary works we

come across and keep returning to. I can only hint at it obliquely in terms of 'tone', by pointing, once more, to the haunting lonely beauty that lingers round the tale and possesses it like a fragrance, the quality that is announced in the very title and is so much a presence of the enchanted wintry world the long-distance runner must forever stride through in our memory—the spirit Mr Richardson so beautifully captures (the tribute must be made) at moments in the film.

CHAUCER'S CANON'S YEOMAN'S TALE

by T. G. WHITTOCK

THE DANGERS, in reading the *Canterbury Tales*, of attending mainly to story-line, characterization and comic-timing, and neglecting other aspects of the poetry, must be guarded against when turning to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. T. W. Craik, for example, whose approach is limited to reading with this emphasis, is forced to regret that the tale 'is like the two fragments in its comparative lack of interest as a story.'¹ But due attention, I think, to other things—the tale's intellectual argument, its allegorical nature, its place in the pilgrims' debate, and the symbolic working of much of the poetry—will reveal that here we have one of the finest and most satisfying achievements of Chaucer's art.

The theme of the *Prologue* and *Tale* is the misuse of men's intelligence in the obsessive pursuit of false and meretricious goals. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale* the unreliability and vanity of human reason were laughed at. Chauntecleer closed his eyes to danger in the proud display of his own voice. In the confession of the Canon's Yeoman we are again shown how the single-minded pursuit of a trivial object can destroy a man. The tone is comic, the treatment partly realistic and partly allegoric. The Canon himself is presented as an actual individual case-history, but the poetry also opens out an allegorical realm wherein the nature and effects of sin are dramatized. One of the most remarkable qualities of the poem is the way it manages to create the allegorical superstructure without ever destroying the credibility of the specific human beings who are portrayed.

The opening description of the arrival of Canon and Yeoman on the scene begins at once to establish the symbolic implications of the incident. The frenzy of their pursuit of alchemy is already given an 'objective correlative' in the sweating horses.

The hors eek that his yeman rood upon (562)
So swatte that unnethe myghte it gon.
Aboute the peytrel stood the foom ful hye;
He was of foom al flekked as a pye.
A male tweyfoold on his croper lay . . .

The condition of the Canon is indeed identified with that of the horse here described: the reference changes from one to the other so rapidly that we are not sure which is being referred to (Robinson takes it that the line 'He was of foom al flekked as a pye' refers to the

¹ Craik, *op. cit.* p. 92.

Canon.²) The explicit comment on the Canon's sweating a few lines later contrasts his condition—and surely the contrast is as much spiritual in implication as physical—with Saint Cecilia's burning in the bath of fire. At the same time the line also expresses the basic attitude of the whole poem: an amused but compassionate enjoyment of the frenzy of mankind—

But it was joye for to see hym swete. (579)

At first the Host accepts the reason they give for spurring to catch up with the pilgrims, that they wished to ride 'in this myrie compaignye'; but the reason sounds implausible and the reader is anxious for the real motive to emerge. The truth is rapidly uncovered as the Host begins to query the lies of the Yeoman—in the question and answer exchange the deceits are skinned away till the Yeoman can, with evident relief, confess the true nature of himself and his master.

Initially the Yeoman highly praises his master, emphasizing great talents which seem so belied by his appearance. At last, after ascribing many other virtues to him, the Yeoman mentions his master's alchemy.

'I seye, my lord kan swich subtilitee— (620)
 But al his craft ye may nat wite at me,
 And somewhat helpe I yet to his wirkyng—
 That al this ground on which we been ridyng,
 Til that we come to Caunterbury toun,
 He koude al clene turne it up-so-down,
 And pave it al of silver and of gold.'

The extravagance of the claim points its absurdity, the notion of the road turned upside-down preparing for the futility as well as the impossibility of their endeavours (what could one do with a road turned upside-down?). The Host wonders at the bedraggled appearance of the Canon on whose behalf these claims are being made: 'Why is thy lord so sluttish, I the preye?' The Yeoman's evasions of this question carry their own ironic commentary.

'God help me so, for he shal nevere thee!' (641)

'For what a man hath over-greet a wit, (648)
 Ful oft hym happeth to mysusen it.'

Each step in the interrogation delineates something further about the Canon, but often in a way that intrigues and puzzles. For example, why does he choose to live where he does? Only later do we fully appreciate how the Canon's habitation depicts his haunted state.

'Telle how he dooth, I pray thee hertely, (654)

Syn that he is so crafty and so sly.
 Where dwelle ye, if it to telle be?'

² Robinson, *op. cit.* p. 867.

'In the suburbes of a toun,' quod he,
 'Lurkyng in hernes and in lanes blynde,
 Whereas this robbours and thise theves by kynde
 Holden hir pryvee fereful residence,
 As they that dar nat shewen hir presence;
 So faren we, if I shal seye the sothe.'

But it is with the Host's turning his attention to the discoloured appearance of the Yeoman's face that the Yeoman at last confesses to their bootless struggles in the mazes of alchemy. The lure of transforming baser metals into gold torments them with sufferings akin to those of Tantalus:

'. . . ay we han good hope (678)
 It is for to doon, and after it we grope.
 But that science is so fer us biforn,
 We mowen nat, although we hadden it sworn,
 It overtake, it slit away so faste.
 It wole us maken beggers atte laste.'

True the Canon and his Yeoman are suffering from an obsession; but, though the poetry presents all the psychological symptoms of such a state, what is most important is that it portrays the two as sinners and their torments as the consequence of sin. The suspiciousness of the Canon at what his servant is saying about him depicts the way guilty people feel that others must be talking ill of them. We are shown the pathological desire of the guilty to hide their secrets, and the shame and sorrow which make them flee from company when their actions are discussed. Clearly such moments frequently occur, and this is why the Canon has ended up living in the haunts of thieves and others who have misdemeanours to conceal. The Canon has not yet reached the later stage of guilt, where the evil-doer grows shameless and numb to his own self-debauchery. He has not yet become like the canon of whom the second part of the *Tale* speaks.

With the departure of the Canon the Yeoman's real feelings about his master, long suppressed and mounting, break forth in almost uncontrolled denunciation. In the presentation of the Yeoman's speech Chaucer's insight into the psychology of obsession never falters. It is all here: the compulsive repetition as if the only way to escape the bondage of the past is by unwinding each crooked turn again and again; the confessing and re-living of parts of the experience, punctuating the recital by sudden outbursts of condemnation; the mocking of one's own folly by noting it in others; the hope that self-laceration and humiliation will bring relief. Finally, as the process works itself out, the steady recognition of what one has been, what one was becoming. We see it all in the Yeoman's account of his pursuit of alchemy. Usually the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is read by critics and scholars as an exposé of alchemy; it is that, but more important, through every detail about the procedures of

alchemists the poetry dramatizes the Yeoman's morbid psychological state. Nor, as I shall try to demonstrate, does the significance stop here, but the events become an allegorical representation of the workings of sin and guilt.

Before starting on the *Tale* proper, one further point in the *Prologue* is worth mentioning. That is, the play on the words 'game' and 'ernest'. The Yeoman was initiated into the 'game' of alchemy (a pursuit, a trade, an activity with its own set rules, a sport which offered pleasure and reward without much effort), and soon he found it 'ernest' for himself (a thing to which one is utterly committed, a kill-joy, a pursuit which is disproportionately valued); now with the departure of his master he sees that *game* can arise again (a merry story at the Canon's expense, but also the carefree joy which is a gift of life and which he had lost). As elsewhere, Chaucer rings changes on these words 'game' and 'ernest', with the most approved meaning pointing to that joy which accompanies truth and self-knowledge.

The Yeoman, who had neglected to look in on himself in the pursuit of a delusion ('I am nat wont in no mirour to pry'), begins his story with a glance at his own portrait before and after.

With this Chanoun I dwelt have seven yeer, (720)
 And of his science am I never the neer.
 Al that I hadde I have lost therby,
 And, God woot, so hath many mo than I.
 Ther I was wont to be right fressh and gay
 Of clothyng and of oother good array,
 Now may I were an hose upon myn heed;
 And wher my colour was bothe fressh and reed,
 Now is it wan and of a leden hewe—
 Whoso it useth, soore shal he rewe!—
 And of my swynk yet blered is myn ye.
 Lo! which avantage is to multiplie.

Literally, when he says many more than himself have lost by this pursuit, he is probably thinking of the many creditors never paid, but the phrase also suggests the larger context where many are undone by their own fanatical activity. The outward change in the Yeoman obviously mirrors the inward, from health and confidence to haunted death-in-life. His eyes are 'blered' from poring over stinking chemicals in dark rooms—but the phrase also suggests the spiritual blindness possessing him. 'Multiplie' is a technical term for transmuting baser metals into gold—but, with the memory of the repeated phrase 'More for delit than world to multiplie' carried over from other tales, the word perhaps acquires an ironical tinge which contrasts the barren search of alchemists with the rewarding harvest of natural procreation.

After the fall into personal despair and misery the next stage is to ease the pains of this self-fabricated hell by dragging others into

a like condition. The Yeoman remembers that a clerk once preached this lesson to him, that the wicked wish company in their wretchedness, but only now does he recognize its truth. Next he plunges into an account of the curious practices of alchemy, giving much of its absurd jargon. At moments in the Yeoman's monologue flashes of pride flicker still as he demonstrates the hard-won products of his years of labour. In passages such as the following he is re-living his period of arduous toil as much as he is exhibiting the learning he has acquired. The poetry, however, by relentlessly piling fact upon fact, term upon term, imitates the meaningless accumulation of worthless knowledge which buries humanity beneath mounds of rubbish.

. . . Oure fourneys eek of calcinacioun, (804)
 And of watres albificacioun;
 Unslekked lym, chalk, and gleyre of an ey,
 Poudres diverse, ashes, donge, pisse, and cley,
 Cered pokkets, sal peter, vitriole,
 And diverse fires maad of wode and cole;
 Sal tartre, alkaly, and sal preparat,
 And combust materes and coagulat;
 Cley maad with hors or mannes heer, and oille
 Of tartre, alum glas, berme, wort, and argoille . . .

Failure and frustration no more deter the alchemists than the filthiness of some of their ingredients. Hope always drives them on: in C. P. Snow's felicitous phrase, 'jam tomorrow'.³

But that good hope crepeth in oure herte, (870)
 Supposynge evere, though we sore smerte,
 To be releved by hym afterward.
 Swich supposyng and hope is sharp and hard;
 I warne yow wel, it is to seken evere.
 That futur temp hath maad men to dissevere,
 In trust therof, from al that evere they hadde.

The first half of the *Tale* reaches its climax with the explosion of the alchemists' pot. The frenzied accumulation of chemical materials and the equally frenzied accumulation of the alchemists' tribulations culminate in this disastrous (and comically dramatized) experiment. The reader has been made to feel something of the suffocating confinement that characterizes obsessive behaviour, and the explosion comes as a psychic relief—an outburst of comedy that blasts apart all the false pretensions of alchemy, and restores the sanity of good-humour. The passage also illuminates the behaviour of the Yeoman: for so long all his ills have fermented and boiled like the chemicals in the pot, till the inevitable bursting point is

³ C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 1959, p. 41; 'Jam today, and men aren't at their most exciting: jam tomorrow, and one often sees them at their noblest' (*sic*).

reached and he spews forth in a spate of words his bubbling indignation. Thus Chaucer makes the external incidents of the story mirror the (internal) processes of the Yeoman's mental and emotional development.

(906)

Ful ofte it happeth so,
 The pot tobreketh, and farewell, al is go!
 Thise metals been of so greet violence,
 Oure walles mowe nat make hem resistance,
 But if they weren wrought of lym and stoon;
 They percen so, and thurgh the wal they goon.
 And somme of hem synken into the ground—
 Thus han we lost by tymes many a pound—
 And somme are scatered al the floor aboute;
 Somme lepe into the roof. Withouten doute,
 Though that the feend noght in oure sighte hym shewe,
 I trowe he with us be, that ilke shrewe!
 In helle, where that he lord is and sire,
 Nis ther moore wo, ne moore rancour ne ire.

In the last lines quoted above the reference to the fiend being with them though not showing himself to their sight makes more explicit what has several times earlier in the *Tale* been hinted at (in the Yeoman saying that he has already told people enough about alchemy to 'reyse a feend' (1.861) or his speaking of folk who 'bitrayen innocence' (1.897)). It is not merely that the pursuit of alchemy is being likened to witchcraft; rather it is that through the story of the alchemists we are being given a fable of how evil—here the evil of misguided purposes—tempts and corrupts men.

The first part of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* ends with the comic dialogue of the crestfallen alchemists who are trying to explain away their failure. Explanations, even when they may explain nothing, have a wonderful way of boosting men's morale, and there is a resonance to the following lines which suggests that we are to think of more than this particular group and we are to acknowledge a basic human trait:

(958)

We faille of that which that we wolden have,
 And in oure madnesse everemoore we rave.
 And whan we been togidres everichoon,
 Every man semeth a Salomon.

In part one of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* there is a description of how their chemicals give the alchemists a hellish stench.

(884)

And everemoore, where that evere they goon,
 Men may hem knowe by smel of brymstoon.
 For al the world they stynken as a goot;
 Hir savour is so rammyssh and so hoot
 That though a man from hem a mile be,
 The savour wole infecte hym, trusteth me.

The images here evoke associations of some fiends come from the brimstone pit, but the associations merely add to the vividness and comedy of the picture, and are not to be taken too literally. But in the second part of the *Tale*, I think, we are expected to see in the shape of the alchemist an actual fiend who tempts, betrays and destroys man. The opening lines, while still the exaggerated report of the Yeoman unloading his malice, have a greater seriousness of tone than anything in the first part.

(972)

Ther is a chanoun of religioun
 Amonges us, wolde infecte al a toun,
 Thogh it as greet were as was Nynvee,
 Rome, Alisaundre, Troye, and othere three.
 His sleightes and his infinite falsnesse
 Ther koude no man writen, as I guesse,
 Though that he myghte lyve a thousand yeer.
 In al this world of falskede nis his peer;
 For in his termes he wol hym so wynde,
 And speke his wordes in so sly a kynde,
 Whanne he commune shal with any wight,
 That he wole make hum doten anonright,
 But it a feend be, as hymselfen is.
 Ful many a man hath he bigiled er this,
 And wole, if that he lyve may a while;
 And yet men ride and goon ful many a mile
 Hym for to seke and have his aqueyntaunce,
 Noght knowynge of his false governaunce.

The images are vaster in scope: this man infects not by the mile but by whole populations. There is fuller emphasis on the paramountcy of his evil, and the vast numbers of victims taken in by him. The exaggeration is now more sinister than comic in effect. In all this world he has no peer for falsehood; but perhaps the line also suggests that in all *this world of falsehood* he has no peer, thus stressing Man's fallen state. As the *Tale* proceeds further bold strokes darken the canon's portrait, emphasizing his malign treachery:—

(1001)

ye woot wel how
 That among Cristes apostelles twelve
 Ther nas no traytour but Judas hymselfe.

The comic tones that so marked the first part of the *Tale* are now virtually gone, and we are shown evil similar, at least in kind, to the most notorious of all betrayals. Furthermore, this evil takes place within the religious realm—a priest, not a mere yeoman, is his gull—and we are told explicitly (1.1070) that it was 'Cristes peple' this canon sought 'to meschief brynge'. The religious orders are bidden to cast out the Judases in their midst—perhaps at this point we are expected to think of men such as the Pardoner or the

Summoner who thrive by exploiting their office. In line with this change to a greater seriousness of tone is a change in the presentation of alchemy itself: in part one alchemy was a foolish pursuit, a symptom of vanity and venial sin; in part two it is the device whereby the silver of truth is faked to deceive a good man, and now the alchemist acts cunningly and without conscience.

'What!' quod this chanoun, 'sholde I be untrewed? (1042)
 Nay, that were thyng yfallen al of newe.
 Trouthe is a thyng that I wol evere kepe
 Unto that day in which that I shal crepe
 Into my grave, and ellis God forbede.
 Bileveth this as siker as your Crede.'

At regular intervals throughout the second part of the *Tale* the Yeoman breaks forth with invective against the alchemist: once in words that recall the fox who nearly duped Chaunticleer.

O sely preest! o sely innocent! (1076)
 With covetise anon thou shalt be blent!
 O gracelees, ful blynd is thy conceite,
 No thyng ne artow war of the deceite
 Which that this fox yshapen hath to thee!

(The Yeoman, of course, had not been present during the *Nun's Priest's Tale* so this cannot be taken as an intentionally ironic reference on his part.) These lines support the interpretation that the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is a more specific and serious illustration of the temptations that beset man and would destroy him. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* dealt with this theme more lightheartedly.

Naturally the Yeoman's almost personal animosity towards the canon of his story leads one to wonder whether this canon was his master. But the Yeoman soon denies that.

This chanoun was my lord, ye wolden weene? (1088)
 Sire hoost, in feith, and by the hevenes queene,
 It was another chanoun, and nat hee,
 That kan an hundred foold moore subtiltee.
 He hath bitrayed folkes many tyme;
 Of his falsnesse it dulleth me to ryme.
 Evere whan that I speke of his falshede.
 For shame of hym my chekes wexen rede.
 Algates they bigynnen for to glowe,
 For reednesse have I noon, right wel I knowe,
 In my visage; for fumes diverse
 Of metals, whiche ye han herd me reherce,
 Consumed and wasted han my reednesse.

Yet the personal nature of the Yeoman's hostility remains. However, we must rule out the possibility that he is really talking about his master still: there would be no reason for the Yeoman to disguise

the fact. Anyway, the first Canon is the victim of his own folly, the second the exploiter of others' folly. Rather I think we should detect here, and in other passages, the Yeoman's feeling (not wholly rational nor even perhaps fully conscious) that this second canon, like a fiend or like Judas, is the source of evil which spreads outwards to corrupt many only most indirectly connected with it. As with the Friar's tale of a summoner, wherein Satan became the ultimate Summoner, we are made to feel there exists a hierarchy of evil. The canon himself seems to have no personality: he is simply characterized by his power to deceive.

It dulleth me whan that I of hym speke. (1172)
 On his falshede fayn wolde I me wreke,
 If I wiste how, but he is heere and there;
 He is so variaunt, he abit nowhere.

Lines such as these intimate that the canon is something more than a vagrant trickster; that he is sinister in a supernatural way.

Yet the actual process whereby the priest is gulled of forty pounds is presented with detailed realism. The interest of this section of the *Tale* lies mainly in the exposition of a confidence trick. The formula is a classic one, and has changed little through the ages. First there is the stage of establishing the victim's confidence in the deceiver and of making him feel ashamed of ever having harboured any suspicions: this the canon does by promptly returning the money he borrowed. The next step is to introduce the trick as an act of gratitude for the victim's kindness. The victim is led to believe he is being let in on a secret, and his credulity is further strengthened by permitting him to participate in the trick: thus the priest himself performs the experiment as the canon bids. The trick is repeated to settle any doubts remaining. Finally the victim himself must ask for the secret, and then be made to feel that he is buying it cheaply because the confidence trickster is too kind or too weak-minded to refuse him. The Yeoman's story follows the classic pattern of all such deceptions, and doubtless a fool has been born this minute who will one day succumb to a variation of the trick.

The canon 'takes' the priest for forty pounds. Is the realism of this part of the narrative at odds with the allegorical content I have suggested may be found elsewhere? I do not think so. The trick played on the priest is a mundane one, but at the same time it is merely an example, a specific instance, of greater and less tangible duplicity. The canon's deceit in little figures the greater deceit of Satan—just as Macbeth's killing of Duncan is a fragment of the far greater evil filling the wide vessel of the universe, of which even the three weird sisters are only a partial representation. For the medieval mind—and in spirit *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's most medieval play—could read macrocosmic patterns in the small events of this world. Furthermore, at certain moments in the story Chaucer is at pains to give a more sinister resonance to actions than the literal context requires. Thus, when the priest expresses his desire to

know the secret of the canon's craft, he speaks in words that strongly recall a bargain being struck with the devil.

'Goddes blessing, and his moodres also, (1243)
 And alle halwes, have ye, sire chanoun,'
 Seyde the preest, 'and I hir malisoun,
 But, and ye vouche-sauf to techen me
 This noble craft and this subtilitee,
 I wol be youre in al that evere I may.'

The blessing with which his speech begins contrasts with his offer of himself with which it concludes, and the passage gains considerably in irony if we recognize diabolic associations in the ambiguity of the last line. A little later, after the goldsmith has confirmed that the silver is genuine, the priest's joy is described in a passage which compares his feelings to other great joys in life; yet in the course of this comparison the poetry suggests that the priest is turning his back on the ordinary pleasures of mankind for something only speciously pleasurable. Alchemy causes men to forsake the natural gifts of God for worthless rewards.

This sotted preest, who was gladder than he? (1341)
 Was nevere brid gladder agayn the day,
 Ne nyghtingale, in the sesoun of May,
 Was nevere noon that luste bet to synge;
 Ne lady lustier in carolyng,
 Or for to speke of love and wommanhede,
 Ne knyght in armes to doon an hardy dede,
 To stonden in grace of his lady deere,
 Than hadde this preest this soory craft to lere.
 And to the chanoun thus he spak and seyde:
 'For love of God, that for us alle deyde,
 And as I may deserve it unto yow,
 What shal this receite coste? telleth now!'

The literal answer turns out to be forty pounds—the true answer is jeopardy to his soul.

The Yeoman concludes his story by drawing certain moral lessons. This latter section of the *Tale* has been criticized on the grounds that the sermonizing here makes the Yeoman speak out of character. I believe this criticism is based upon a misreading of the poem's development. The hectic speech of the Yeoman at the beginning, the obsessive outbreaks of passion, give way as the poem proceeds to a calmer tone. The agitation of a man caught in the toils of alchemy is replaced by the warning note of one who has at last freed himself and exorcized the devil possessing him and who can therefore now teach others to avoid his errors. That he has not completely shed the past is suggested, however, by his use of 'philosophers' arguments (those of Arnoldus de Villa Nova and Hermes Trismegistus) to demonstrate the futility of pursuing alchemy.

The conclusions he draws fall into place in the thematic pattern of the *Canterbury Tales*. The vanity of human wisdom, a theme treated in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, is freshly expressed.

Philosophres spoken so mystily (1394)
 In this craft that men kan nat come therby,
 For any wit that men han now-a-dayes.
 They mowe wel chiteren as doon thise jayes,
 And in hir termes sette hir luste and peyne,
 But to hir purpos shul they nevere atteyne.

Philosophy, in this context, refers primarily to alchemy, but the other meaning of 'seekers after knowledge' is not excluded. Another theme that reappears is that of false seeing: blindness of eye, the distortion of truth through clinging to illusions, the theme of tales as different as the *Miller's Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale*.

Ye been as boold as is Bayard the blynde, (1413)
 That blondreth forth, and peril casteth noon.
 He is as boold to renne agayne a stoon
 As for to goon bisides in the weye.
 So faren ye that multiplie, I seye.
 If that youre eyen kan nat seen aright,
 Looke that youre mynde lakke noht his sight.

Above all, in the final lesson (ascribed to Plato) the inviolable 'privitee' of God's mysteries is emphasized: to seek to understand and exploit what God has hidden is to reject the gifts He has lavished upon man for his enjoyment, and to commit the final blasphemy—the pride of egoism that sets up the part as worth more than the whole.

Thanne conclude I thus, sith that the God of hevene (1472)
 Ne wil nat that the philosophres nevene
 How that a man shal come unto this stoon,
 I rede, as for the beste, lete it goon.
 For whoso maketh God his adversarie,
 As for to werken any thyng in contrarie
 Of his wil, certes, never shal he thryve
 Thogh that he multiplie terme of his lyve.
 And there a poynt; for ended is my tale.
 God sende every trewe man boote of his bale!

Though these didactic conclusions grow out of the portrayal of the character, experience and psychological development of the Canon's Yeoman, and are not just grafted on, their explicitness gives them a certain (sermonizing) authority. Their similarity to conclusions drawn or implied elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales* suggests that they embody much of Chaucer's own beliefs. This raises an interesting and important question. Living in an age today when secular values are on the whole triumphant, when man's inventive and rational powers are supremely prized, and when his

right to probe and explore all realms of experience is unquestioned, how shall we take this moral teaching? I do not mean that the literary merit of the *Tale* is wholly dependent on the didactic conclusions. Clearly a writer may employ a set of beliefs which are not acceptable to organize his material (for example, Wordsworth's using the notion of the soul dwelling in eternity before birth, a doctrine he did not wholly accept, in the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*), without lessening the truth of his poetry. Clearly too, much of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* still remains valid irrespective of what we may think of its conclusions: the characterization of the Yeoman, the insight into obsession, the informed reportage of the ways of alchemists, the comedy of frustration, and so on. But, since it would seem Chaucer endorses the moral of the *Tale*, and much of the intention of the *Tale* is bound up with the moral, our final judgment must be coloured by our acceptance or rejection of its validity. I suspect Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield are right when they suggest that Chaucer would tar much twentieth-century research with the same brush he tars the alchemists with.⁴ We know that science owes a great debt to the alchemists, particularly for their development of chemical apparatus and their creation of an intellectual environment that could foster scientific discovery. Few of us would be willing today to turn our backs on the benefits brought by scientific and technological advance. Should we be patronizing towards Chaucer, and regret that he belongs to that 'traditional' culture which, according to C. P. Snow, has always been anti-scientific and reactionary and has in general responded by wishing the future did not exist?⁵

Chaucer's attitude towards alchemy is in line with medieval religious thinking on the subject. Apart from any orthodox scepticism about the purpose of alchemy, doubtless many of its practitioners were alchemists for motives of greed and power, and therefore were likely to alienate responsible opinion. Common sense too despised alchemy for its blatant record of failure. Furthermore, by Chaucer's time alchemy had fallen into a state of senility:⁶ it had pursued a dead end for too long. Chaucer had good grounds for condemning alchemy. But what of the implications of what he has to say for modern research? Chaucer's thinking followed the current of his own times, just as it goes completely against the current today. And this may be the very reason why the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* has more relevance and importance today than it could have had for Chaucer's own audience. In an age where the mindless complacencies of a C. P. Snow can have such currency, the truth in what Chaucer writes may be most salutary. Today we do accept, with far too little questioning, the validity of isolating a

⁴ Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield, *The Architecture of Matter*, Hutchinson, 1962, p. 109.

⁵ Snow, *op. cit.* p. 11.

⁶ Toulmin and Goodfield, *op. cit.* p. 132. 'Senility' is the actual word they use in describing medieval alchemy.

branch of knowledge and pursuing discoveries as far as we can go with little consideration of the consequences to the lives of our fellow-men. Traditional patterns of society are being disrupted with effects of anxiety and insecurity as debasing as the obsessive urges wrecking the Canon and his Yeoman. Much specialization too is as futile as the alchemists' search for the philosopher's stone: not only because of the many footling topics chosen for research (we need only think here of the ridiculous and insignificant subjects Ph.D. students are often diverted into that they may produce 'an original contribution to knowledge'),⁷ but also because the ever-increasing churning out of articles, books, reports, findings, experiments, proposals, digests, digests of digests, proofs and refutations exceeds our ability to assimilate the material and set it in perspective. A frequent anxiety expressed by research workers in many branches of science is whether all their experiments may be worthless because somewhere or other the work has been done before. Arising from this outpouring of specialization too is the frustration brought about by being cut off from work in other fields: the danger is not a division into two cultures but a fragmentation produced by innumerable specializations, each isolated from its neighbour. Here the disastrous effect of technical terms is seen: many practitioners take as much delight in the esoteric jargon of their field as the Yeoman did in the language of alchemy. But most important of all—and this question is at the very core of Chaucer's poem—is the question of the motive driving men on. Scientific research and technology are often justified in terms of greater goods for all—two blades of grass where only one could be grown before—but for many this is no more than a materialism which wishes to transmute stinking chemicals into smooth nylon, labour into leisure, knowledge into power, relationship into possession, investment into profit, lead into gold. And where does this take us? What do our motives do to us? Will we be grateful in the end for the Midas touch⁸ when technology has transformed the world with its success? Can science and technology even succeed in producing more for all, or is this millenium ('jam tomorrow') another illusion pursued at a cost not yet reckoned? Precisely because the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* can open up such considerations as these its didacticism remains valid, and challengingly relevant.

⁷ This type of research is summed up by the article Jim Dixon was writing, *The Economic Influence of the Development in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450 to 1485*: 'It was a perfect title, in that it crystallized the article's niggling mindlessness, its funereal parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw on non-problems.' Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, Victor Gollancz, 1953, pp. 14-13.

⁸ I was led to use this phrase by an article entitled 'The Midas Touch' by M. M. Carlin in *Makerere Journal* 9. The article deals with the assumptions underlying the financing of university education in East Africa, and shows how the naive utilitarian clichés evidenced in C. P. Snow's writing underlie the thinking of financial advisers assisting the new 'emerging' countries.

F. R. Leavis has remarked: 'In coming to terms with great literature we discover at bottom what we really believe. What for—what ultimately for? What do men live by—the questions work and tell at what I can only call a religious depth of thought and feeling.'⁹ Chaucer's poem is an excellent example of the truth of his assertion.

⁹ F. R. Leavis, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow* Chatto and Windus, 1962, p. 23.

THE THORN: BANALITY OR PROFUNDITY?

by F. H. LANGMAN

I.

GENERALLY RECOGNIZED as among Wordsworth's greatest qualities is his grasp upon the actual, his feeling for the specific concreteness of each experience. Sometimes, however, he appears to be pointlessly specific, to be labouring over details which, no matter how exact, remain insignificant. This quite often makes him look foolish, but read with proper sympathy Wordsworth's banalities sometimes prove surprisingly meaningful.

The best-known case of such apparent banality is the description of the pond in *The Thorn*.

I've measured it from side to side:
'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide.

In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge instances these lines as producing a 'sudden and unpleasant sinking' from the height to which the poet had previously lifted his readers. In another chapter, Coleridge speaks of the general defect in Wordsworth which such lines exemplify: he calls it *matter-of-factness*, and characterizes it as a laborious dwelling upon minute and accidental circumstances. Such details might be necessary to establish the probability of a statement in real life, but appear superfluous in poetry. Thus the precise dimensions of the pond do not matter in the poem, and it is ridiculous and irrelevant to think of anyone going up the mountain to measure them.

Wordsworth, in the *Advertisement* of 1798, had tried to guard against such strictures by indicating that *The Thorn* is meant to bring out the character of its loquacious narrators, and in 1800 he made the same point more fully. To this defence, however, Coleridge supplies a rejoinder in the *Biographia*. He notes, as another general defect in Wordsworth, 'an undue predilection for the *dramatic* form in certain poems'. This predilection results in incongruities of style, lines which belong properly to the poet being interspersed with lines which belong to the characters. Coleridge disparages certain lines in *The Thorn* and attributes them exclusively to the supposed narrator; others, which he praises, might better—he thinks—have proceeded from the poet's own imagination and have been spoken in his own character. He adds the withering comment that 'it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discourser, without repeating the effects of dullness and garrulity'.

As a result of these criticisms, Wordsworth made some radical revisions of *The Thorn*. He entirely omitted some lines, and rewrote others. The couplet about the measurements of the pond was replaced by:

Though but of compass small, and bare
To thirsty suns and parching air.

This avoids the banality of the original. Yet the change involves a loss. The original draws attention as the revision does not. It shows a kind of courage. Wordsworth is not afraid to carry out his ideas on the writing of poetry, even at the risk of absurdity. The fault (if it is a fault) is only an excess of virtue, in an odd way impressive.

Wordsworth would have done better to ignore Coleridge's comments on this poem. It is, of course, not the case that an imitation of a dull and garrulous discourseser must share the same faults, as the treatment of Miss Bates in *Emma* demonstrates. The narrator of *The Thorn* is not meant to be amusing, but nor is he to be taken as he takes himself. There is a deliberate incongruity between the narrator and the tale, between on the one hand the painfulness of the events and the symbolic power of the images, and on the other hand the sympathetic simplicity, the groping half-comprehension of the observer. As Professor Roger Sharrock has pointed out, *The Thorn* adopts the narrative method, employed by modern novelists like William Faulkner, of revealing the story through a narrator incapable of properly understanding it.

The very limitations of Wordsworth's narrator heighten and re-inforce the pathos and poignance of the poetry. They do this partly by contrast, as when the narrator exclaims:

Oh me! ten thousand times I'd rather
That he had died, that cruel father!

Proceeding from the poet himself, the remark would be disastrous (as a similar exclamation is in the abysmal 'Andrew Jones'), but the narrator's indignation and naiveté serve a purpose. Against the inadequacy of his simple goodness of heart, the bare facts of Martha's story touch us to a more complex compassion.

The matter-of-fact quality of the narration strengthens the poem in other ways too. It looks like a guarantee of good faith, assuring us of the authenticity of the story and indicating an attempt to play down rather than exploit its anguish. The poem's effect depends a good deal on the making of a mystery, on sketching-in the situation through conjecture and superstition. Yet this mystery, without weakening its effectiveness, contains hints of a rational explanation in the psychology of the villagers and of the half-credulous narrator. The image of the babe beneath the water is balanced by the sober description of the pond's measurements. The pond at least is no fantasy. In a poem inevitably made up of so much that is uncertain, the literal-mindedness of the narrator is invaluable. To establish a conviction of probability the poem

employs just such tactics as a novelist would use, the pretence of an intrusion of real life clumsiness into the poetry. 'I've measured it' leaves no room for doubts.

In place of Coleridge's term, the 'matter-of-fact', I suggest another: Wordsworth's finest lines grow out of what might be better named the *manner* of fact. The subtlest rhetoric seems to use none: 'Pity would be no more

If we did not make somebody poor', or 'she'll come no more', or 'She's dead as earth'. What makes such lines so strong is not only that they condense so much insight or so much of tragic experience into so few words. It is also that they seem so bare, so stripped. They reduce life to essential fact, and let the fact itself speak. And Wordsworth, not only because he broke from the poetic fashion of evasive, periphrastic language, but also because of his addition to facts and the language of facts, was able to achieve the direct and simple utterance in which a whole tragic vision is summed up. Out of context, such lines may look as flat as any to which Coleridge objects: they grow out of the same attitude to language. In *Michael*, as Matthew Arnold observed, the whole anguished story is expressed in one famous line which seems not to be heightened in any way: "And never lifted up a single stone."

The Thorn has lines equal to this in simplicity and power; all its unbearable pain is gathered in the one flat statement:

She was with child, and she was mad.

II

The Thorn differs from traditional ballads in the deliberation and complexity of its art. It looks naive but is not, the naiveté is—so to speak—a part of the act. And it differs from ballads in its depth of insight and psychological interest. Wordsworth's imagination does not rest upon the pitiful events (of a kind common enough in ballads), it participates in the strange consciousness of the grief-maddened girl:

Sad case for such a brain to hold
Communion with a stirring child.

The word 'stirring' refers, first, to the sensation of movement within the womb, but also evokes the perception that although it is yet within her body the child is assuming and manifesting its own life, is coming to separate self-hood. The word 'communion' embraces these suggestions; it conveys the idea of an intercourse, almost a conversation, between mother and child, as a mother-to-be will respond and even talk to the unborn. The sense conveyed is of a mutual participation, in which mother and child make two who are also one, organically united. The child's movements become the mother's sensations, while the mother's emotions—

her calm or excitement—seem to affect the child. So much is suggested by these lines, and with this the pathos and terror of such communion entering a mind darkened or deranged.

The description of the thorn itself contributes in a different way to our understanding of the poor woman's condition, and guides our response to her misfortune and to her possible crime. A wretched thing forlorn, the thorn is so old as to seem scarcely alive. It has neither leaves nor thorns, and its very form has subsided into a shapeless mass of knotted joints. It has so far lost the likeness of life that it is described as like a stone, overgrown with lichens. Beside this strange object there is a fresh and lovely sight, a hill of moss—exquisitely beautiful, and like an infant's grave in size. How that simile would come into the narrator's mind is easy to see. The juxtaposed thorn and heap of moss become emblematic of the relationship between the unfortunate woman and her dead child, to whose conjectured grave she returns with an obsessive persistence of grief. Once we have felt this, we are alerted to the full implications of another seemingly casual image. The narrator gives a picture of the woman as he saw her once in a storm on the mountain. She appeared to him as a crag, a projection of stone, so still did she sit beneath the driving rain. Now the thorn becomes a simplified image of the woman's ineffable inward condition, it almost takes on her identity. She has become through grief what the thorn has become through age; and as the thorn is invested almost with human feeling, so the woman in turn partakes of the thorn's strange quality. Somehow the thorn does hold on to life, it stands erect, it resists the heavy tufts of moss which seek to drag it to the ground; and the woman who sits like a stone in all weathers, whose despair and yearning to be at one with the child (which possibly lies buried beneath that hill of moss) would drag her down, also resists. She still feels life keenly enough to reiterate her painful cry. In this, paradoxical as it may sound, the poem offers some consolation. It is an example of strength for us to draw upon that even under these bitter blows of fate, her betrayal, the death of her child, and even madness itself, the woman does not subside into apathy or insentience.

The woman is not to be regarded merely with pity. There is a kind of stubborn strength in her which the poem requires us to recognize and value. Wretched, forlorn, destitute of human hope, possibly guilty, she has even now a tie to life, a place within the scheme of things. The note of her acceptance still by the universe is in these lines:

And she is known to every star,
 And every wind that blows;
 And there beside the thorn she sits
 When the blue daylight's in the skies,
 And when the whirlwind's on the hill
 Or frosty air is keen and still . . .

At the same time, these lines convey from the poem itself an acceptance of the order of existence, despite its cruelty. Suffering is accepted as a part of the order which includes whirlwinds, the revolutions of day and night, the progression of the seasons, the movements of the stars. This introduces the largest difference between the poem and an ordinary ballad: through the idea of surpassing order enclosing great pain, Wordsworth transforms a piteous tale into a tragic vision.

I have commented on a kind of stubborn strength in the heroine of the poem. This strength is not of her conscious will, and has nothing in it of moral fortitude. It relates not to our moral ideas but to our sense of wonder. It is impersonal, in a sense it is not her own. It is the strength of the life within her, which carries her on despite the darkening of her intellect. She has the persistence of instinct, of a human strength below the level of what we normally consider human, something primitive, atavistic. It is as if Wordsworth asked us to affirm our life even when reduced to its barest, poorest elements; as if in such mere blind persistence he found the centre of our meaning. And this is his theme in many poems of human creatures reduced to the elements of life, to the very fringes of insentience. Wordsworth's master figures endure. That is their meaning. Yet it is an endurance as impersonal almost as that of a natural force. And since the word "natural" has at last entered this discussion, it may serve to introduce another example of persistence in the poem. The famous pond, two feet by three, is never dry. Constantly replenished by the working of the elements high on the mountain top, the little pond in which some of the village-folk believe the babe lies drowned is also an image of nature's perpetual renewal.

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TO the Editors of *Theoria*,

Gentlemen,

The originally healthy swing towards an intelligent, critical, contextual study of literature in general and poetry in particular seems to be in danger of o'erleaping itself and falling on the other into absurdities as deplorable as the second-hand appreciations (*sic*) of the now prehistoric 'Hist. of Eng. Lit.', which some of us managed to survive.

In a book recently received from a very reputable British publisher and ostensibly designed to help schoolboys to understand and enjoy poetry, the distinguished authors (to judge by the title page) say this: 'The summation of sensory and emotive expression is made overt in imagery.'

What sort of *jargon* is that? And how is it going to help boys to understand, and enjoy, a poem—let alone learn to write the clear, simple, honest English which the authors later call on the student to 'notice' in the Wordsworth poem under discussion?

Yours faithfully,

Neville Nuttall

BLAKE'S 'MY PRETTY ROSE TREE' —AN INTERPRETATION

by J. B. THOMPSON

A flower was offer'd to me,
Such a flower as May never bore;
But I said 'T've a pretty Rose-tree',
And I passed the sweet flower o'er.

Then I went to my pretty Rose-tree
To tend her by day and by night,
But my Rose turn'd away with jealousy,
And her thorns were my only delight.

ALTHOUGH IT IS A TRUISM that the simplicity of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is deceptive, the usual interpretation of 'My Pretty Rose-Tree' fails to take this into account. This is not surprising as there seems to be no doubt of the virtue of the speaker in refusing a beautiful woman for the sake of another to whom he was attached, while the point of the poem seems to be that jealousy capriciously generates itself under any circumstances (as shown by the second woman's rejection of her faithful lover). This is certainly the case made out by the dramatic speaker, but how reliable is his testimony? Surely his crucial but unsubstantiated charge of 'jealousy' is too vaguely assertive? Yet most readers seem to find this virtual abuse poetically convincing. Failing to allow for Blake's detachment from the dramatic speaker,* they are I feel deceived into regarding the latter with a charity he does not deserve and into sharing his feelings towards the 'rose-tree'. They only listen to his side of the story or, more accurately, they do not listen to it carefully enough, for every word of his demands meticulous attention, if one is to see through his virtue.

His comparison of the first woman with a flower suggests that she was delicately beautiful with freshness and vitality. The metaphor also attributes to her an unspoilt virginal quality; though she offers herself to him, she is no 'harlot'. Her association with May confirms these impressions and suggests that she is in the prime or rather bloom of young womanhood when she offers the greatest 'delight'. The significant contrast between a flower of May and a perennial rose-tree implies that a relationship with the former woman would for some unspecified reason have been a transient one, while he and his 'rose-tree' are presumably married, or acknowledged lovers. It also suggests that a relationship with the May

*A colleague, Mr D. G. Gillham, first pointed out to me how often Blake is thus detached from his dramatic speakers.

flower would he imagines have been altogether delightful (not being bound to each other, they would presumably remain together only as long as they were happy to) while the perennial quality of the rose-tree implies the pain of winter as well as the pleasure of May. But ironically the dramatic speaker overlooks this fact of the rose-tree's thorns when making his choice.

Of course none of this alters one's impression of the man's virtue. What does reveal its emptiness is his pointed contrast between 'Such a flower as May never bore' and 'my pretty rose-tree'. The gist of his extravagant praise of the former woman is that, though a spring flower is the only thing in nature that in any way approaches her beauty, no known one, not even the best ever produced on earth, can convey an adequate impression of it. No particular kind of flower is specified, as such 'classification' might imply earthly limitations to her beauty, and blur the impression of her supposed uniqueness and perfection. When set beside such a flower, the rose is virtually stripped of its traditional meanings and is made to seem quite common. She may indeed be 'pretty', but this is made by its context to sound insipid and uninspiring, almost a mechanical tribute. Further proof that he is not deeply and imaginatively affected by her beauty is the odd fact that he refers to her here not as a rose but as a 'rose-tree'. His whole attitude to her is in fact patronizing (perhaps because he assumes that she is his), whereas he regards the other woman with awed and impassioned adoration. The romantic excess in this is probably accounted for by the fact that she is irretrievably lost to him; his refusal of her seems if anything to have intensified her attractions for him.

Considering his feelings for 'the other woman', and the fact that such an offer presupposes some sort of intimacy between the two people, is the rose-tree's rejection of him so unreasonable? To accept a man approaching her in this condescending, loveless spirit would almost be a prostitution of herself. And is it just to attribute this act of self-respect to 'jealousy', with all its suggestions of petty egotism?

This smug man has indeed been faithful, but only in his outward actions, and not in his heart. This inconsistency between his desires and his conduct is most clearly seen in the line 'And I passed the sweet flower o'er' where the almost casual action of passing her over seems to deny her 'sweetness'. In trying to show what a great sacrifice he has made, the speaker reveals the emptiness of his fidelity. Similarly the word 'but' in line three pointing to a conflict in him, stresses the difference between the way he does act and the way his own desires have led one to expect him to act.

It might be argued that it is to his credit that he does at least return to his 'rose-tree', even if he is not drawn back by his overwhelming love for her; that dutiful conformity with the letter of the law, even in the wrong spirit, is better than complete infidelity.

But does he return out of a sense of duty or loyalty? The third line of the poem is probably meant to convey that it was for her sake.

However such a gloss is too vague. The keyword is 'I've'. What he affirms is not that he is hers, but that she is his. He is not thinking of his responsibility to her, but of his rights over her, and of her obligations towards him. And uppermost in his mind is the thought that his rose-tree can produce many flowers, while the offer was only of a single short-lived flower. To be weighed against this is the intensity of the delight to be had from this unique flower, which makes the delights from mere roses seem comparatively mild. He calculates (perhaps without realizing it) that fidelity pays, that in the long run he will get more pleasure from his productive rose-tree. 'My . . . delight' is what one sees him seeking throughout the poem—not delight of the generous, paradoxically self-forgetful sort, but merely selfish gratification. Moreover, his regret at having acted righteously (when he finds that it does not pay) confirms that he was not practising virtue for its own sake.

The appearance of pure devotion in his wanting 'To tend her by day and by night' is equally suspect, not only in view of the weakness of his feelings for her, but also because such attentions are obviously overdone. (This gardener even works night-shifts!). The explanation of this excess is that it is a sequel to the offer and is more or less proportionate to the degree of attraction expressed in the corresponding line of the first stanza. It could proceed from a sense of guilt and a desire to compensate her for what he felt (and still feels) or less 'charitably' and more probably, from a sense of loss and a desire to compensate himself. Having renounced the delight of the flower, he determines to get as much pleasure as possible from the rose-tree and knows that this is best secured by assiduous attentions. Considering how strongly he has been tempted, one wonders whether another purpose behind this round-the-clock vigil is not to guard his rights over her. Even if this were not so, his charge of 'jealousy' would still be amusingly ironic, for he is very sensitive about his rights over her, and certainly adopts a proprietary attitude towards her.

His attitude to the 'flower', however, seems innocent enough at first. But the light cast on his character by the poem as a whole throws into relief the fact that here too he is thinking characteristically of taking, of accepting *her* offer. There seems to have been no question of generously giving himself in a spirit of love. Unlike her, he is incapable of anything better than the motions described as love by the Pebble in 'The Clod and the Pebble'. A fairly good parallel to the basic contrast between these two people is found in the following lines from 'Gnomic Verses'.

He who bends to himself a joy
Doth the wingéd life destroy
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.

for she seems to live more for the present and to be recklessly impulsive (if one may judge by a single gesture) while he adopts a

long-term policy in a spirit of cautious self-regard, and is also deprived of joy by his selfishness and greed.

It is this fault of his that causes all three people to end in a state of miserable isolation. In each stanza one expects the achievement of a harmonious union, and particularly a sexual one, but in each case, discord and rejection ensue. A difference between 'passed . . . o'er' and 'turned away' however, is that the former gesture suggests an attitude of superiority: despite his near-adoration of her, he still feels he has something ultimately more profitable. The parallel between them makes the ironic point that his rejection of the 'flower' leads to the 'rose-tree's' rejection of him, instead of increasing the harmony between them. Where he thought it was a matter of a simple choice between the two and 'went' to her, she 'turned away' and he was left with neither.

Indeed all this part of the poem is rich in brilliant irony. She is referred to as *my rose* in the very act of proving herself not his. Significant too, is his use here of the term 'rose' for the first time, for now that he has lost her, he seems to be more appreciative of her delightful qualities (as he was of the lost flower's too). Before he has referred to her as a 'rose-tree', but only to denote that she can produce many flowers. Now the full meaning of the term strikes him as he is confronted by the part of the tree he overlooked in his calculations, the thorns of her painful hostility. Moreover he now realizes that his tree need not yield him any roses, though his only reason for returning to it was ironically that it was a prolific bearer. In short he receives nothing but thorns where he anticipated nothing but flowers. 'My *only* delight' looks back ironically to the pleasure he 'sacrificed' for a harmonious or rather delightful relationship with this woman while his anguish is intensified by the thought that the flower he 'passed . . . o'er' (for this!) had no thorns. Furthermore the durability of the tree was, before, one of its chief advantages, but this quality is put into a very different perspective by his final situation.

The basic irony of this final situation is not, as the dramatic speaker and many of his readers seem to feel, that virtue is punished, but that vice receives its just deserts through the frustration of his schemes for self-gratification. Indeed none of the feelings of the speaker is to be shared. He is smug and self-pitying, his apparently righteous indignation is really groundless resentment and even his humour (in sarcastically calling thorns a delight) is sardonic and bitter, the natural reaction of a selfish man thwarted in the pursuit of his own pleasures.

Blake's purpose in thus allowing the dramatic speaker to 'deceive' us and so making this moral 'detective work' necessary is the serious one of presenting, by means of the same set of words, two contrasting interpretations of a situation, a conventional, superficial one easily arrived at by careless stock responses and his own profoundly imaginative one. The point of the poem as a whole is difficult to define for Blake does not deal in easy aphorisms or lay

down simple rules of conduct. What he does achieve is to shock us into a fresh awareness of the limitations of conventional 'outward' fidelity, by exposing this man's self-interest as a complete negation of the love that it appears to be.

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Preliminary Announcement

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By Professor the Hon. E. H. Brookes,
M.A., Litt.D., and Mr. C. de B. Webb,
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READY ABOUT SEPTEMBER

'SIR', SAID DR JOHNSON

by E. H. BROOKES

THOSE WHO ATTEMPT periodical Essays seem to be often stopped in the beginning by the difficulty of finding a proper title.¹ I know not by what anfractuosity I have been led to entitle this study of our great lexicographer '“Sir” said Dr Johnson’.* Nor will I attempt to add to this great subject by meretricious ornament.* Every man speaks and writes with intent to be understood, and it can seldom happen but that he that understands himself might convey his notions to another, if, content to be understood, he did not seek to be admired; but when once he begins to consider how his sentiments may be received not with most ease to his readers but with most advantage to himself then he transfers his consideration from words to sounds, from sentences to periods, and, as he grows more elegant, becomes less intelligible.² But honest toil takes time.* He that embarks on the voyage of life will always wish to advance rather by the impulse of the wind than the strokes of the oar, and many founder in the passage while they lie waiting for the gale that is to waft them to their wish.³ But to Temperance every day is bright and every hour is propitious to Diligence. He that shall resolutely excite his faculties or exert his virtues will soon make himself superior to the seasons and may set at defiance the morning mist and the evening damp, the blasts of the east and the clouds of the south.⁴ Yet let us to our industry add elegance.* Sir, every man of any education would rather be called a rascal than accused of deficiency in *the graces*.⁵

We shall speak first of Universities, of those who teach, and of those who learn—and of the scholars who teach let us remember this,* that eminence of learning is not to be gained without labour, at least equal to that which any other kind of greatness can require, will be allowed by those who wish to elevate the character of a scholar; since they cannot but know, that every human acquisition is valuable in proportion to the difficulty employed in its attainment.* Why, says the student, does this old man thus intrude upon me; shall I never be suffered to forget those lectures which pleased only while they were new, and to become new again must be forgotten?⁷ But let us remember that* the garlands gathered by the heroes of literature must be gathered from summits equally difficult to climb with those that bear the civick or triumphal wreath, they must be worn with equal envy and guarded with equal care from those hands that are always employed in efforts to tear them away, the only remaining hope is that their verdure is more lasting, and that they are less likely to fail by time, or less obnoxious to the

blasts of accident.⁸ Students may feel that their teacher* is one of those sages whom they should understand less as they heard him longer.⁹ Yet it is natural for those who have raised a reputation by any science, to exalt themselves as endowed by heaven with peculiar powers, or marked out by an extraordinary designation for their profession; and to fright competitors away by representing the difficulties with which they must contend, and the necessity of qualities which are supposed to be not generally conferred, and which no man can know, but by experience, whether he enjoys.¹⁰

But what of the students? They are often* young heirs who please themselves with a remark very frequent in their mouths, that though they were sent by their fathers to the university, they were not under the necessity of living by their learning.¹¹ To them the stroke of eleven in the morning is still as terrible as before, and they find putting on their Cloaths still as painful and laborious.¹² Their mirth is without images, their laughter is without motive; their conduct is at once wild and mean; they laugh at order and at law, but the frown of power dejects, and the eye of wisdom abashes them.¹³ By a proper mixtures of Asses, Bulls, Turkeys, Geese and Tragedians, a noise might be procured equally horrid with their War-Cry¹⁴ as though the Faculties of learning might be transformed into a Faculty of agriculture.*

But let us be compassionate towards the young.* Life is a stage . . . They that enter into the world are too often treated with unreasonable rigour by those that were once as ignorant and heady as themselves, and distinction is not always made between the faults which require speedy and violent eradication, and those that will gradually drop away in the progression of life. Vicious solicitations of appetite, if not checked, will grow more importunate, and mean acts of profit or ambition will gather strength in the mind if they are not early suppressed. But mistaken notions of superiority, desires of useless show, pride of little accomplishments, and all the train of vanity, will be brushed away by the wing of time. Reproof should not exhaust its power upon petty failings; let it watch diligently against the incursion of vice, and leave foppery and futility to die of themselves.¹⁵

But, Sir, I love the acquaintance of young people; because I don't like to think myself growing old. And then, Sir, young men have more virtue than old men; they have more generous sentiments in every respect. I love the young dogs of this age, they have more wit and humour and knowledge of life than we had; but then the dogs are not so good scholars.¹⁶

Sir, there is talk of admitting young women to the University. He that would do this would be introducing what the rascally Americans would call *co-education*.* Sir, this is a danger for nature has given women so much power that the Law wisely gives them little.¹⁷ No man is so abstracted from common life as not to feel a particular pleasure from the regard of the female world.¹⁸ Unhappy is he that has* missed the endearing elegance of female friendship

and the happy commerce of domestic tenderness.¹⁹ But will this help the young men whose lives are to be given to study? Let us take the example of musick. Of the Ladies that sparkle at a musical performance, a very small number has any quick sensibility of harmonious sounds. But every one that goes has her pleasure. She has the pleasure of wearing fine cloaths, and of showing them, of outshining those whom she suspects to envy her; and of reflecting that, in the conversations of the next morning, her name will be mentioned among those that sat in the front row.²⁰ The stranger gazed on by multitudes at her first appearance . . . is perhaps on the highest summit of female happiness, but how great is the anguish when the novelty of another face draws her worshippers away.²¹ They are always jealous of the beauty of each other; of a quality to which sollicitude can add nothing, and from which detraction can take nothing away.²² And, Sir, the advertisement of a sale is a signal which at once puts a thousand hearts in motion, and brings contenders from every part to the scene of distribution.²³ No engagement, no duty, no interest, can with-hold a woman from a Sale, from which she always returns congratulating herself upon her dexterity at a Bargain; the Porter lays down his burthen in the hall, she displays her new acquisitions, and spends the rest of the day in contriving where they shall be put.²⁴

And yet there is no class of woman from whom we are in danger of *Amazonian* usurpation. The old Maids seem nearest to independence, and most likely to be animated by revenge against masculine authority; they often speak of men with acrimonious vehemence, but it is seldom found that they have any settled hatred against them, and it is yet more rarely observed that they have any kindness for each other.²⁵

Beauty is of itself very estimable. I would prefer a pretty woman unless there are objections to her.²⁶ But shall these delightful creatures stand up in our University classes and read us moral Essays?* Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on its hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprized to find it done at all.²⁷

But let us forget these speculations of the Universities of a dangerous future, and come back to the gatherings of men alone.* Some things in a University life are well. Such is the study of History.* The present state of things is the consequence of the former, and it is natural to inquire what were the sources of the good that we enjoy, or the evil that we suffer. If we act only for ourselves, to neglect the study of history is not provident: if we are entrusted with the care of others, it is not just. Ignorance, when it is voluntary, is criminal; and he may properly be charged with evil who refused to learn how he might prevent it.²⁸ And, Sir, we need, too, the man who interests himself in Politicks; not he of whom we can say that* in the State he is of no party, but hears and speaks of publick affairs with the same coldness as of the administration of some ancient republick. If any flagrant act of Fraud or Oppression

is mentioned, he says that *all is not true that is told*. If Misconduct or Corruption puts the nation in a flame, he hopes that *every man means well*.²⁹ Such a man is of no party or perhaps of a *United Party*.*

As for Latin* there is now less flogging in our great schools than formerly, but then less is learned there; so that what the boys get at one end they lose at the other.³⁰

But what of the study of the literature of our great language? He who is taught by a Critic to dislike that which pleased him in his natural state, has the same reason to complain of his Instructor, as the Madman to rail at his Doctor, who, when he thought of himself as master of Peru, physicked him to poverty.³¹ Criticism is a study by which men grow important and formidable at very small expense. The power of invention has been conferred by Nature upon few, and the labour of learning those sciences which may, by mere labour, be obtained is too great to be willingly endured; but every man can exert such judgment as he has upon the works of others; and he whom Nature has made weak, and Idleness keeps ignorant, may yet support his vanity by the name of a Critick.³² Little does the critick think how many harmless men he involves in his own guilt, by teaching them to be noxious without malignity, and to repeat objections which they do not understand; or how many honest minds he debars from pleasure, by exerting an artificial fastidiousness and making them too wise to concur with their own convictions.³³

It is common to distinguish men by the names of animals which they are supposed to resemble. Thus a hero is frequently termed a lion, and a statesman a fox, an extortionary gains the appellation of vulture, and fop the title of monkey. So the critics may well be named* the screech-owls of mankind. These screech-owls seem to be settled in an opinion that the great business of life is to complain, and that they were born for no other purpose than to disturb the happiness of others, to lessen the little comforts, and shorten the short pleasures of our condition, by fearful remembrances of the past, or melancholy prognosticks of the future.³⁴ As for the female screech-owl, her tea is never of the right sort, the figures on the *China* give her disgust. Where there are children she hates the gabble of brats, and where there are none she cannot bear a place without some cheerfulness and rattle.³⁵

But, Sir, there are Criticks and teachers of Literature who have a just sense of other men's merits.* They will admit that* a thousand years may elapse before there shall appear another man with a power of versification equal to that of Pope.³⁶ They will acknowledge that* Milton was a genius that could cut a colossus from a rock but could not carve heads upon cherry stones.³⁷ They will see that Corneille is to Shakespeare as a clipped hedge is to a forest.³⁸ No man but Shakespeare could have drawn Sir John Falstaff.³⁸⁸ Let us have more of such Criticks.*

In our teaching of what may by a species of barbarism be called

the social sciences* there is a mode of style for which I know not that the Masters of Oratory have yet found a name, a style by which the most evident truths are so obscured that they can no longer be perceived and the most familiar propositions so disguised that they cannot be known . . . A Mother tells her infant that *two and two make four*, the child remembers the proposition, and is able to count four to all the purposes of life, till the course of his education brings him among philosophers who fright him from his former knowledge by telling him that four is a certain aggregation of units; that all numbers being only the repetition of a unit, which, though not a number itself, is the past, root or original of the number, *four* is the denomination assigned to a certain number of such repetitions. The only danger is lest, when he first hears these dreadful sounds, the pupil should run away; if he has but the courage to stay till the conclusion, he will find that, when speculation has done its worst, two and two still make four.³⁹

But, howsoever we receive these philosophick admonitions, let us not hesitate to do good in our daily life.* Those ancient nations who have given us the wisest models of government and the brightest examples of patriotism, whose institutions have been transcribed by all succeeding Legislators, and whose history is studied by every candidate for political or military reputation, have yet left behind them no mention of alms-houses or hospitals, of places where age might repose or weakness be relieved.⁴⁰ It was reserved for our holy faith to teach us this.* We are incited to the relief of misery by the consciousness that we have the same nature with the sufferer, that we are in danger of the same distresses, and may sometimes implore the same assistance.⁴¹ It is impossible to pass a day or an hour in the confluxes of men, without seeing how much indigence is exposed to contumely, neglect and insult; and, in its lowest state, to hunger and nakedness; to injuries against which every passion is in arms, and to wants which nature cannot sustain.⁴²

When Baxter had lost a thousand pounds, which he had laid up for the erection of a school, he used frequently to mention the misfortune as an incitement to be charitable while God gives the power of bestowing, and considered himself as culpable in some degree for having left a good action in the hands of chance, and suffered his benevolence to be defeated for want of quickness and diligence.⁴³ *Bis dat qui cito dat.**

I pass now to the study of what are called the Sciences* of those men who speak with indignation of morning sleeps and nocturnal rambles. One passes the day in catching spiders, that he may count their eyes with a microscope; another erects his hand and exhibits the dust of a marigold separated from the flower . . . Some turn the wheel of Electricity, some suspend rings to a loadstone and find that what they did yesterday they can do again today. Some register the changes of the wind and die fully convinced that the wind is changeable. There are men yet more profound who have heard that two colourless liquors may produce a colour by union, and

that two cold bodies will grow hot if they are mingled: they mingle them and produce the effect expected, say it is strange, and mingle them again.⁴⁴

But enough of the University.*

Deign on the passing world to turn thine eyes
And pause awhile from letters to be wise.⁴⁵

I would not advise my hearers to disturb themselves by contriving how they shall live without light and water. For the days of universal thirst and perpetual darkness are at a great distance. The Ocean and the Sun will outlast our time and we may leave posterity to shift for themselves.⁴⁶ Nevertheless these are sad times; it is a melancholy thing to be reserved to such times.⁴⁷ But Sir, it is not so much to be lamented that old England is lost, as that the Scotch have found it.⁴⁸ Sir, the noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees, is the high road that leads him to England.⁴⁹ The Irish have not that extreme nationality which we find in the Scotch.⁵⁰ They are not in a conspiracy to cheat the world by false representations of the merits of their countrymen. No, Sir; the Irish are a FAIR PEOPLE—they never speak well of one another.⁵¹

But the English themselves are not without blemish.* It is commonly observed that when two Englishmen meet their first talk is of the weather; they are in haste to tell each other, what each must already know, that it is hot or cold, bright or cloudy, windy or calm.⁵²

Patriotism, Sir, is the last refuge of a scoundrel⁵³ but duty is the strong meat of heaven.* The duties required of men are, it is true, such as human nature does not willingly perform, and such as men are inclined to delay who yet intend some time to fulfil them. It was therefore necessary that this universal reluctance should be counteracted, and the drowsiness of hesitation wakened into resolve; that the danger of procrastination shall be always in view, and the fallacies of security be hourly debated. To this end all the appearances of nature uniformly conspire. Whatever we see on every side reminds us of the lapse of Time.⁵⁴ Life is commonly considered as either active or contemplative; but surely this distinction, how long soever it has been received, is inadequate and fallacious. There are mortals whose life is certainly not active, for they do neither good nor evil, and whose life cannot properly be called contemplative; for they never attend either to the conduct of men or the works of nature, but rise in the morning, look around them till night in careless stupidity, go to bed and sleep, and rise again in the morning.⁵⁵ It is naturally indifferent to this race of men what entertainment they receive, so they are but entertained. They catch, with equal eagerness, at a moral lecture or the memoirs of a robber; a prediction of the appearance of a comet, or the calculations of the chances of a lottery.⁵⁶ But I have no timidity in my own disposition and am no encourager of it in others.⁵⁷ A man may write at any time if he will set himself *doggedly* to it.⁵⁸ When we act

according to our duty we commit the event to Him by Whose laws our actions are governed, and Who will suffer none to be finally punished for obedience. When in prospect of some good, whether natural or moral, we break the rules prescribed us, we withdraw from the direction of superiour wisdom, and take all consequences upon ourselves. Man cannot so far know the connexion of causes and events that we may venture to do wrong in order to do right.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, beware of false moralists.* Be not too hasty to trust or to admire the teachers of morality: they discourse like angels but they live like men.⁶⁰ Be convinced of the emptiness of rhetorical sound, and the inefficacy of polished periods and studied sentences.⁶¹ Clear your mind of cant.⁶² When a butcher tells you that *his heart bleeds for his country*, he has, in fact, no uneasy feeling.⁶³ Of all kinds of Credulity the most obstinate and wonderful is that of political zealots; of men, who, being numbered, they know not how or why, in any of the parties that divide the State, resign the use of their own eyes and ears, and resolve to believe nothing that does not favour those whom they profess to follow.⁶⁴ Of what use is this activity? Well, Sir,* to do nothing every man is ashamed, and to do much almost every man is unwilling or afraid. Innumerable expedients have therefore been invented to produce motion without labour, and employment without solicitude.⁶⁵

Yet an exception may be made about Collections.* The pride or the pleasure of making Collections, if it be restrained by prudence and morality, produces a pleasing remission after more laborious studies, furnishes an amusement, not wholly unprofitable, for that part of life, the greater part of many lives, which would otherwise be lost in idleness or vice; it produces a useful traffick between the industry of indigence and the curiosity of wealth; it brings many things to notice that would be neglected, and by fixing the thoughts upon intellectual pleasures, resists the natural encroachments of sensuality, and maintains the mind in her lawful superiority.⁶⁶

There is also the joy of reading.* One of the peculiarities which distinguish the present age is the multiplication of books. Each day brings new advertisements of literary undertakings and we are flattered with repeated promises of growing wise on easier terms than our progenitors. How much either happiness or knowledge is advanced by this multitude of authors, it is not very easy to decide. He that teaches us anything which we knew not before, is undoubtedly to be revered as a Master. He that conveys knowledge by more pleasing ways may very properly be loved as a benefactor; and he that supplies life with innocent amusement will be certainly caressed as a pleasing companion. It is observed that *a corrupt Society has many lives*; I know not whether it is equally true that *an ignorant Age has many books*.⁶⁷ The true art of reading is the Art of Attention. What is read with delight is commonly retained, because pleasure always secures attention, but the books which are consulted by occasional necessity are perused with impatience and seldom leave any traces in the end.⁶⁸ And, Sir, there are very

foolish books written by men who presume to make of themselves a Faculty of Education. Such is the one that has* hinted that man may perhaps have been naturally a quadruped, and thinks it would be very proper that, at the Foundling Hospital, some children should be inclosed in an apartment in which the nurses should be obliged to walk half upon four and half upon two, that the younglings, being bred without the prejudice of example, might have no other guide than Nature, and might at last come forth into the world as Genius should direct, erect or prone, on two legs or on four.⁶⁹

Sir, there is no matter what you teach children first—it matters no more than which leg you put first into your breeches—Sir, you may stand disputing which you shall put in first, but in the meantime your legs are bare—No matter which you put in first so that you put them both in, and then you have your breeches on. Sir, while you think which of two things to teach a child first, another boy in the common course has learned both.⁷⁰ I am always for getting a boy forward in his learning; for that is a sure good. I would let him at first read *any* English book which happens to engage his attention; because you have done a great deal when you have brought him to have entertainment from a book. He'll get better books afterwards.⁷¹

But, Sir, you need also to understand common affairs; to have* a great deal of knowledge of the world, fresh from life, not strained through books.⁷² And, Sir, you need to see that there is a solemnity in life and in your calling.* There are great occasions in life which force the mind to take refuge in Religion. When we have no help in ourselves, what can remain but that we look up to a higher and a greater Power; and to what hope may we not raise our eyes and hearts when we consider the Greatest Power is the Best.⁷³ From some events such as the death of those that we love, we cannot escape.* There are the calamities by which Providence gradually disengages us from the love of life. Other evils fortitude may repel, or hope may mitigate; but irreparable privation leaves nothing to exercise resolution or flatter expectation. The dead cannot return, and nothing is left to us here but . . . grief. Let Hope dictate, what Revelation does not confute, that the union of souls may still remain; and that we, who are struggling with sin, sorrow and infirmities, may have our part in the attention and kindness of those who have finished their course and are now receiving their reward.⁷⁴

Sir, we must face life with courage.* It is necessary for us to hope, though hope should always be deluded; for hope itself is happiness, and its frustrations, however frequent, are yet less dreaded than its extinction.⁷⁵ The gloomy and the resentful are always found among those who have nothing to do; or who do nothing. We must be busy about good or evil, and he to whom the present offers nothing will often be looking backward in the past.⁷⁶

And, Sir, we are greatly aided by what a worthy divine has called the sacraments of life.* To abstract the mind from all local emotion

would be impossible if it were endeavoured and would be foolish if it were possible. Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses, whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future, predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings. Far from me, and from my friends, be such frigid philosophy as may conduct us indifferent and unmoved over any ground which has been dignified by wisdom, bravery or virtue. That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plains of *Marathon*, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of *Iona*.⁷⁷

Yet we must grow old, and we must often be solitary,* nor is it always remembered how soon this mist of trifles will be scattered and the bubbles which float upon the rivulet of life be lost for ever in the gulph of eternity.⁷⁸ Piety is the only proper and adequate relief of decaying man. He that grows old without religious hopes, as he declines into imbecility and feels pains and sorrows incessantly crowding upon him, falls into a gulph of bottomless misery in which every reflection must plunge him deeper, and where he finds only new gradations of anguish and precipices of horror.⁷⁹

Let us, in the words of the Preacher, *remember now our Creator in the days of our youth*, recollecting that* all natural and almost all political evils are incident alike to the bad and the good: they are compounded in the misery of a famine, and not much distinguished by the fury of a faction; they sink together in a tempest and are driven together from their country by invaders. All that virtue can afford is quietness of conscience, a steady prospect of a happier state; this may teach us to endure calamity with patience; but remember that patience must suppose pain.⁸⁰

The chief security against the fruitless anguish of impatience, must arise from frequent reflection on the wisdom and goodness of the God of Nature, in Whose hands are riches and poverty, honour and disgrace, pleasure and pain, and life and death. A settled conviction of the tendency of everything to our good, and of the possibility of turning miseries into happiness by receiving them rightly, will incline us to *bless the Name of the LORD, whether He gives or takes away*.⁸¹

*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter.**

Where then shall Hope and Fear their objects find?
 Must dull Suspense corrupt the stagnant mind?
 Must helpless Man, in Ignorance Sedate,
 Swim darkling down the Current of his Fate?
 Must no Dislike alarm, no Wishes rise,
 No Cries attempt the Mercies of the Skies?
 Enquirer, cease. Petitions yet remain
 Which Heav'n may hear, nor deem Religion vain.
 Still raise for Good the supplicating Voice,
 But leave to Heav'n the Measure and the Choice.
 Safe in His Pow'r Whose Eyes discern afar

The Secret Ambush of a specious Pray'r,
 Implore his Aid, in his Decisions rest,
 Secure whate'er he gives, he gives the best.
 Yet with the Sense of Sacred Presence prest,
 When strong Devotions fill the glowing Breast,
 Pour forth thy Fervours for a healthful mind,
 Obedient Passions, and a Will resign'd;
 For Love, which scarce collective Man can fill,
 For Patience, sov'reign o'er transmuted Ill;
 For Faith, that, panting for a happier Seat,
 Thinks Death kind Nature's signal of Retreat:
 These Goods for Man the Laws of Heav'n ordain,
 These Goods he grants, who grants the Pow'r to gain;
 With these celestial Wisdom calms the Mind,
 And makes the Happiness she does not find.⁸²

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*My own interpolations.

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THE NEW BRUTALISTS

by D. THERON

Brutalism then, is a tough-minded reforming movement within the framework of modern architectural thought, not a revolutionary attempt to overthrow it. On the other hand, the implicit intention to return to fundamental functionalist principles in order to make them fulfill their apparent promise may involve the refusal of so many marginal compromises that an effective revolution may unintentionally result.

Reyner Banham.

Encyclopaedia of Modern Architecture.

'IT IS OUR INTENTION in this building to have the structure exposed entirely, without interior finishes wherever practicable', Alison Smithson, a partner in the firm of Peter and Alison Smithson, wrote of a proposed house in Soho in the early fifties. And out of this 'warehouse aesthetic' a new 'ism' in architecture was born—the New Brutalism which has remained a major force in English architecture right up to the present time and which is receiving fresh impetus through the work of Louis Kahn and the Philadelphia School in the United States.

New Brutalism is commonly regarded as being an essentially English movement (being widely publicized through the *Architectural Reviews* of the time) and indeed the house project in Soho and the Hustanton School, both by Peter and Alison Smithson, are landmarks on the architectural scene, heralding the conscious beginning of the new movement. Its real origin, however, can be traced back to an important group of French architects. Viollet-Le-Duc, the great architect, teacher and writer of the 18th century, rejecting the old doctrines and models, searched for new structural expression and designed buildings which were forceful and outspoken solutions of interpenetrating masses. He was also one of the first French architects to hold, in violent opposition to his teacher Blondell, that the 'material should be emphasized'.

His love for the natural material and his structural functionalism were taken further by Auguste Perret, a young French architect of exceptional ability at the turn of the century. In Le-Duc, Perret found an ideal master, suited to his temperament, and he became passionately convinced that the architectural form is determined by the structural form. Perret was the first architect to perceive the great potential of reinforced concrete as a structural material. His passion for the material has led him to design large, unbroken

areas of exposed concrete such as in his Concert Hall in Paris (1929) or the Museum of Works, Place Iena in Paris (1938)—in defiance of accepted canons of design. For the first time too, the nature of the shuttering was exploited to give texture to the concrete surface and everything which was a covering or a plaster veneer was abolished to take full advantage of the aesthetic possibilities offered by the structural forms. In the words of Perret: 'Architecture is what makes beautiful ruins'.

One of Perret's earlier students, Le Corbusier, rejected this doctrine at first in favour of a completely different set of aesthetic values. But after the first flush of excitement of the thirties had passed, and the beautiful white 'machines for living in' had become badly weathered and cracked carcasses where 'the turf had become grass and the wind and the sun controlled the composition, half man, half nature', the leading apostle of the Machine Art did his first 'brutal' building. The Marseilles Block, a block of flats which was opened in the summer of 1953 (shortly before the Hustanton School was built) was Le Corbusier's first structure which was completely of concrete—concrete in its crudest, most brutal form—*le béton brut*. 'It is timeless', wrote an inspired critic, 'it is ancient, present and futurist'. The ruthless adherence to honesty in structure and materials appealed to young architects all over the world.

In the other branches of art, especially painting and sculpture, this rebellion against the Machine Art and the superficiality of the 20th century society had occurred even earlier and was especially evident in the work of the Dadaist-group of painters, where the same Brutalist attitude of the artist to his materials and the same anti-beauty attitude (in the classical aesthetic sense of the word) is evident. 'At the moment one designs', wrote T. S. Elliot, 'one is what one is, and the damage of a life time, and having been born into an unsettled society, cannot be repaired at the moment of composition'.

The boldness of *le béton brut*, the poetry of the rough and cracked surfaces and the strong architectural forms of the Marseilles Block had a far-reaching effect on the architecture of the next decade and no doubt influenced the architects of the Hustanton School to a large extent. The latter design is marked by the same visual entity, the same simplicity and the same relationship between the structure, function and form, the same quest for 'image'. But the Smithsons have gone further in their relentless search for honesty in expression. Mechanical elements are exposed, even brightly painted. Materials other than reinforced concrete like galvanized decking, prestressed beams, steel, etc. are handled 'as found'. Every element is what it appears to be. The plan is formal, but lacks the uncompromising formality of the works of an architect like Mies van der Rohe. Service areas like the washrooms and the kitchen are allowed to 'grow' away from the classroom block. The resultant strange juxtapositions give a dreamlike quality to the building—a violent contrast to the careful and fragile design of a

General Motors Technical Centre, or the meaningless exuberant forms of the Brazilian Style. The design 'implies a particular ruthlessness—overriding gentlemen's agreements', and does not 'ingratiate itself with cosmetic detailing'. It is one of the first and purest statements of the New Brutalist Movement in England. Since then the movement of the New Brutalists towards *a different architecture* have gained tremendously in force, especially in England. The Brutalism of the expressed symmetry of the Hustanton School has been replaced by a ruthlessness in the expression of functional spaces and their inter-relationships. The building is allowed to be 'what it wants to be'—a structural, spatial, organizational and material concept that is 'necessary' for the particular type of building. Thus the Brutalism of uncompromising exhibition of materials has become allied to a Brutalism of form in the works of architects like Lynn and Smith (Sheffield Park Hill Housing Estate, 1955-61) and Stirling and Gowan (Housing at Ham Common, 1958) and Leicester University Engineering Block (1964) in England, Vittorioiano Viganò (Istituto Marchiondi Milan, 1957) in Italy and Atelier 5 in Switzerland.

At the time that the Hustanton School was built, Louis Kahn, another admirer of Le Corbusier, was building his Yale Art Centre in New England. Once again one finds an uncompromising frankness of materials: the rough brickwork and exposed concrete of the interior, the visually overpowering structural ceiling housing the ducts, conduits and electrical fittings, and the formal plan organization—the most 'truly Brutalist Building in the New World' according to the architectural critic, Reyner Banham. Since then Kahn's Medical Laboratory Block has been built in Philadelphia and has exerted an even greater influence on architectural thinking all over the world. Despite Reyner Banham's violent attack on the 'buttery-hatch aesthetic', this building must be regarded as the most important building of the decade. If memorability as an image, honest expression of materials and structure and a formal plan arrangement are three major characteristics of a New Brutalist Building, then Kahn's Laboratory Block must surely qualify as one, although Kahn himself denies that he is a 'New Brutalist'.

'We are not going to talk about proportion and symmetry', Peter Smithson said when opening an exhibition at the AA School in London and this was his declaration of war on a lingering academicism in architecture, echoing the words of a writer like Burke, who, two centuries earlier, denied in his *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* that beauty 'had anything to do with calculation and geometry'. Proportion is the measure of relative quality, 'a matter of mathematical enquiry and indifferent to the mind'.

This then, is the reaction against the shallow, beautifully manufactured and engineered synthetics of the Machine Age and the Hollywood Dream. These architects are saying that man must leave his imprint on the Architecture of the Machine Age (through the rough

formwork of the concrete structure and the coarse brickwork), that we must face the fact that the architectural slickness of the present time becomes more and more unrealistic as natural and industrial resources fail to keep up with the growth in the earth's population, that, because of rising labour costs, it is unrealistic to hide building elements which have an inherent beauty of their own.

'The function of a writer', Sartre said once, 'is to call a spade a spade. If words are sick, it is up to us to cure them.' The Angry Young Men of Architecture are calling a spade a spade. And they believe that they are in possession of the cure.

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