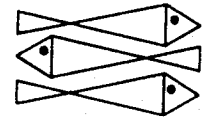


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The Freedom of the Poet



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Memory went swirling back, I could hear the little bell die as I hushed it and set it on the felt, Father Boniface looked at me tall from the top of the steps and smiled, greeting me in the darkness before dawn as I came to serve, the men pressed around me under the lamps, and I could remember nothing but *visibilium omnium . . . et invisibilium?*

"I don't remember it."

The Irishman laughed with his certainty.

The papers in my pocket, I thought them over hurriedly. In my wallet. What would they prove? Details of ritual, Church history: anyone could learn them. My piece of Irish blood. Shame, shame: shame for my ruthless people. I will not be his blood. I wish I were a Jew, I would change my blood, to be able to say *Yes* and defy him.

"I'm not a Jew." I felt a fool. "You only say so. You haven't any evidence in the world."

He leaned forward from the rail, close to me. "Are you cut?"

Shock, fear ran through me before I could make any meaning out of his words. Then they ran faster, and I felt confused.

From that point, nothing is clear for me. I stayed a long time—it seemed impossible to leave, showing him victor to them—thinking of possible allies and new plans of proof, but without hope. I was tired to the marrow. The arguments rushed on, and I spoke often now but seldom was heeded except by an old fat woman, very short and dirty, who listened intently to everyone. Heavier and heavier appeared to me to press upon us in the fading night our general guilt.

In the days following, as my resentment died, I saw that I had not been a victim altogether unjustly. My persecutors were right: I was a Jew. The imaginary Jew I was was as real as the imaginary Jew hunted down, on other nights and days, in a real Jew. Every murderer strikes the mirror, the lash of the torturer falls on the mirror and cuts the real image, and the real and the imaginary blood flow down together.

1945

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Wash Far Away

LONG AFTER THE PROFESSOR HAD COME TO DOUBT WHETHER lives held crucial points as often as the men conducting or undergoing them imagined, he still considered that one day in early spring had made a difference for him. The day began his deeper—deepest—acquaintance with "Lycidas," now for him the chief poem of the world, to which he owed, he thought, as much as anything else, his survival of his wife's death. The day had humbled him and tossed him confidence. One decision had come out of it—to give up research. He had gone back, of course, two or three times, but briefly, guiltily, without commitment and without result, abandoning it again each time more firmly; now he had not touched it for years. He knew that his appointment with tenure, four years later, must have been opposed on this ground, and barely managed through by his department chairman. The sense of stepping up on Alice's body came bitterly back—she had just died, and he had even at the time seen clearly what silenced the opposition. Not that he had cared for promotion, for anything, then. And that day seemed to him the last day of his youth, though he was already a year over thirty and had not for a long time thought of himself as young.

He sighed and smiled awry: he *had* been young. He closed his eyes.

This is not exactly what he remembered.

He stepped down into the brilliant light, blinked, sweating, and set out. My God, away. The small leaves of the maple on the corner shook smartly as he passed. Alice's fierce voice echoed. Sunlight plunged to the pavement and ran everywhere like water, vivid, palpable. I am a professor, he reflected, moving rapidly, or a sort of professor; there is a breeze, a wild sun. As he levelled his palm sailing along the even hedge, it tingled. He felt his toes in his shoes. The hedge danced faintly.

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My life is in ruins, he thought. She begins the quarrels, but they are my fault. Here is this weather and we are desperate. Hugh and Penny never quarrelled. I'm no further on than when we started—I started.

He groped back seven years to the brimming fear that had choked him while he waited in the hallway before entering his very first class. He had handled it, empty, irrecoverable. But the students had been friendly. What passion that year called out! Hugh and he had been worked like Percherons, and they had stood it and done more than anyone wanted, half the night up with papers, all day with students, planning coups in class, coaxing, worrying, praising, ransacking like a bookshop the formless minds in front of them for something to be used for understanding, levering rich in alternatives, roaming the real world for analogies to cram into the boys' world for truth. He saw the faces strained, awed, full, at the hour's end. I must do it again.

He had been teaching for seven years and he felt quietly that he had been dead for the last five. The Dostals' garden, anemones, snapdragons, crimson, yellow, rose-pink; colors swimming, the air sweetened, he went by. He thought: I enjoy myself, I quarrel, but I am really dead.

What could change? Hugh, it seemed to him with the first resentment he had ever felt for his friend, kept steadily with him like a deadweight he could never live up to. He had once thought of himself as going-to-be-a-writer; but he had never actually written anything except his dissertation, some unfinished stories, three articles. Hugh *had* been a writer. They had been going to revolutionize scholarship, too. The professor acknowledged that he had no such wish now. He was just a teacher (word he didn't like—assistant professor was better); not a very good one, and stale.

Of the class that was meeting this afternoon, he really knew—what? Nelen was dark, from Philadelphia, lazy. Warner was articulate and disconcerting; the blond fashion plate who sat by the door, Stone, was not so dull as he looked; Landes, who was always carefully prepared, always grinned; Holson twitched and could not keep to the issue; Rush was a wit. The others were dimmer, except Smith, who took in every point made, a likable boy. He liked them all, and he was aware that they liked him (he wondered why), but he didn't know them. Yet he could still write out, he supposed, half the troubles and strengths of his students of that first year of teaching.

He was doomed to the past or an unalterable present. What could change his hopeless relation with Alice?—quarrel and recon-

ciliation; quarrel and reconciliation. Another emotion mounted new to the history of his memory of Hugh: he felt that Hugh was lucky—if he had lived, he and Penny might have quarrelled. They had had two years only; that was lucky.

The bell rang slowly down from the campus.

He could determine to teach today as he hadn't for a long time, to swing the whole class to a fresh, active relation, an insight grave and light. Well, he did determine. What must it come to, under the inescapable routine? Since the first year, the boys repeated each other. He repeated himself. Teaching was worthy, and indispensable; but it was dull. No riskiness lived in it—not after the beginning. Perhaps when one came to organize one's own courses; but he doubted that. It was no use pretending: what had truly counted—the reciprocal learning—who older could set up again? He thought he was a man modest enough, but greater modesty than his was wanted to hope to learn from Landes or Stone.

Yet he was glad of his resolution. It seemed to bring forward for possible settlement some issue that he could hardly define but knew should be at stake. He glowed, unsmiling, and strode faster, confident.

The professor paused for traffic and experienced a disappointment. "Lycidas." He was teaching "Lycidas." He crawled across the street.

There was no poem he liked better. In his junior year he had written a defense of Dr Johnson's supercilious remarks about it, then had his position swept away by his experience of the poem when reading it next. But he knew the boys would find it formidable, egotistical, frozen, their hatred of Milton developed to a fine pitch in the schools. A burden fell on him—that unpleasant majesty, cold grandeur of Milton. And the poem was about Death and Poetry; what did they care for either? He could substitute some attractive poem of the period in their anthology. The boys not having been assigned any other, time would be wasted; he cast about all the same, dawdling, magnolias gleaming on the wall ahead. He would have to do "Lycidas."

If he shirked the greatest poem in English—he turned into the gate—what could his resolution be worth, or his teaching? Nothing, and his confidence returned in the sunlight. "A dreamy and passionate flux," he remembered Robert Bridges's phrase, though none from his own essay, and entering the high doorway of his building smiled at himself for the comparison, half pleased nevertheless with himself and remembering that at any rate Bridges hadn't known Milton bor-

rowed his river-god Camus from Fletcher, not made him up. Except for one student and a committee meeting—no, called off—he would have the whole morning for preparation. Which Fletcher? He had forgotten (not John, anyway); and he found two students waiting to see him.

One rose and stood forward, diffidently holding a paper while he unlocked the door of his office. Sperry, dull and willing. Don't know the other, do I? "Good morning, come in."

The professor was no scholar, though he had wearied through several Elizabethan authors to find a degree; but he had once noticed Camus, he had a memory, and it vexed him to forget. Settled at his desk in the low bright room, he answered questions and helped the boy normalize a small bibliography, feeling attentive, virtuous, competent. Phineas, I expect, but where? ". . . and remember that the authors' names are *not* inverted in the footnotes; only for alphabetizing. Good luck with it."

Sperry closed the door. In a moment there would be a knock. The sun lay level across his blotter, photographing the dust on a dust jacket. Abruptly he saw it in a line-end, "old *Chamus* from his cell," guarded by a hundred nymphs or something—some short piece of Phineas'. "Come in!" he called, radiant.

This was a young man with a high forehead and a nervous smile who wanted advice about majoring in English, his adviser having given him less than satisfaction. He explained that the professor had had his brother several years before, so that he— Oh yes: what was his brother doing now? His brother was lost in Italy.

The professor's mind as well as his brow clouded.

He remembered Sutton: a broad brow like this boy's and large eyes, a yellow sweater, smoking. Once they had had an argument about *Volpone* in conference, and he had an impression later that Sutton was right. He remembered it all. Indeed—he thought with a vacant grind—do I do anything ever but remember? Does anything happen? Why yes . . . yes . . . students in yellow sweaters die. "Camus, reverend Sire, came footing slow." As the line sounded heavily in his ear, its movement was terrifying, as if Camus were Death. It would be good to say, "Sutton, you were quite right about *Volpone*, I hadn't considered it deeply enough." A ranging mind, original. "Sutton, Wade" on a course or casualty list, the name forever reversed. With the most serious effort he had required for some time, the professor wrenched himself to expectancy, muttering, "I'm sorry . . ."

Sutton's brother kept him nearly half an hour. After the first ten

minutes, urgent for the afternoon, he itched to come at "Lycidas," but he couldn't bring himself to hurry the boy, and the record, the possibilities, dragged on. The portrait of Hugh, with its living depthless eyes and indefinable unease, watched them from the low shelf over the books at the back of the desk. The sunlight died, returned, died. He spun an ashtray, talking. At last the boy stood up, effusively grateful, knocking a book on the floor, effusively contrite, and undecided departed.

Instead of plunging into Milton, the professor went to his window with a fresh cigarette and looked down a little into the bright, sunless lawn. The rememberer. Teaching is memory. If it came to that, he could remember enough. How proudly he had begun at some point to say, "I haven't read that for ten years." Hugh's golden stories the summer in Canada. Tunes that summer. This was the superiority of aging one waited for: just to remember. True or false, evil or gay, never mind. The Nobel Prize for Memory. Recipient a suicide en route to Stockholm, having remembered all his sins at once, sitting in a deck chair sharpening a pencil.

Now the sun moved out from a cloud, and forsythia blazed by the walk. ". . . think to burst out into sudden . . ." Hugh lay on a couch in the August sun, his short beard glinting, saying, "It's just as well. I could never have got done what I wanted to." Later, when he had got very weak and was chiefly teeth and eyes, his wandering mind wanted pathetically to live, certain he would. But the professor clung still to the resignation, the judgment on the couch; he himself had done nothing he wanted, and he had come to believe that Hugh was right. He had come to believe this after his grief had dimmed. When he took over Hugh's classes, he had felt, perhaps, as a tree would, growing into a dry riverbed grieving still for water—good, but unexpected, trembling, and wholly inadequate. He stared at the forsythia beyond the flat green. "Came footing slow . . ." Came footing fast. But it was "*went* footing slow," and recalling this he exorcised suddenly the ominous in the line. He felt unaccountably relieved, normal; he enjoyed an instant the luminous scene, and turned back to his desk under the torn beloved print of the "Anatomy Lesson."

The professor was a systematic man. He opened his Milton and read the poem thoughtfully, twice, before he laid out side by side two other Miltons got from the library early in the week and began to work his way through the editors' notes. The professor was also honest. Though he'd not looked at the poem for months, he felt very little as he read except admiration for the poet's language and minute

flirts of emotions he had probably experienced in previous readings, and he did not pretend to feel more. Consistently Lycidas was Hugh—even was Sutton—but without pressure. What were teachers if not shepherds? “Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore,” he whispered reverently to the brown portrait, thinking of his class, “. . . and shalt be good / To all that wander in that perilous flood.” The second time through he was uncomfortable with the sterile complaint, “What boots it with uncessant care / To tend the homely slighted Shepherd’s trade . . .” Both times he was gently moved by the exquisite melancholy of a semi-couplet at the end of the flower passage:

For so to interpose a little ease,
Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise.

He wrote “exquisite melancholy” in the margin the second time.

The editors he read closely, he read long, and he was astonished when he learned that “flashy” meant insipid. What were the “songs”? Preaching . . . teaching. Insipid teaching, like his. Was all this preparation a mistake? His teaching during the first years had been very disorderly, quick, dialectical, free. He and Hugh had hated elaborate plans—sometimes, too, they hadn’t a moment to prepare, but for reading the assignment—but they had learned and worked things out *with* the students, and that made the difference. Today he would be as free as he could. He wanted still to learn, he didn’t feel superior to the students (Smith, Sutton) more now than then. But his experience was what it was. Who would know “flashy” unless he told them? He went eagerly on.

A student knocked, went off with a book.

As Milton’s imitations and telescopings multiplied, he commenced to feel restless, distant, smaller. What one editor neglected, another observed, and he began to have a sense of the great mind like a whirring, sleepless refinery—its windows glittering far out across the landscape of night—through which poured and was transformed the whole elegiac poetry of Greece and Italy and England, receiving an impress new and absolute. *Mine!* it seemed to call, seizing one brightness, another, another, locking them in place, while their features took on the rigidity and beauty of masks. Through the echoing halls they posed at intervals, large, impassive, splendid; a special light moved on their helms, far up, and shadows fell deep between them. The professor collected himself and glanced at the time.

Naturally he wouldn’t finish. It would take fortnights to weigh all the notes. And questions marked for further study would have to

go—not that they were likely to come up. Making a late lunch, he ought to be able to do everything else. He stretched, luxurious, warm. When had he felt so thoroughly and profitably occupied? Throwing the window wider, he went rapidly, speculationless, through the notes to the end of the poem. This done, he closed the books except one, put them aside, pulled his ear, and stared at “Lycidas.”

Now came the part he called “penetration.” Although he knew very well what the subject of the poem was, he pretended he didn’t, and pondered it, pencil in hand, to find out. Elegy by an ambitious, powerful, obscure man of twenty-eight for a successful junior of twenty-five, drowned. Academic status: Non-Fellow (grand poet) for Fellow (little poet). Probably commissioned or at least requested.

Invocation, or *complaint*.

Elegy proper: another invocation

(his own death)

their friendship

Nature’s lament

Nymphs, where?

(Fame: Apollo)

the cause? Triton, Aeolus

University mourns: Camus

(Clergy: St. Peter)

flowers for hearse

where now? Nature godless

Consolation, by metamorphosis (Christian, pagan)

Ottava rima “Thus sang . . .” & so an end.

Four sections, with three personal digressions. And the opening was really another personal digression, this displeasing insistence on his being compelled to write. No one *made* you, after all. The Milton passages came to less than a third of the poem—but where the power was. Reasonable enough; Milton may never have spoken to Edward King, except to ask for the salt. The professor studied the text and his notes, waving his pencil slowly by his ear. Cunning. He saw that. The testimony of Triton and Aeolus, and the speeches of Camus and Peter, actually made up a sort of trial—so that the poet’s diverse materials would be given an air of unity. What on earth made Milton think of a trial? . . . *Oh*. His own inquisition of the nymphs above! They had deserted Lycidas when he needed them: who then *had* been with him, for evil? Let a court find out.

The professor leaned back in his chair with surprise. All this

revealed only in the word "plea" and the sense of the passages. And one meaning of "felon." His vision of the refining plant recurred to him, but he grimaced impatiently at it. Better say Vatican. Only the "privy paw." A Puritan Vatican then, with catacombs.

Bending to the poem again, after a new cigarette and a dozen notes made compactly on a small yellow pad, he approached almost warily, as if toward an animal long familiar suddenly displaying resources unsuspected, even dangerous. But in the first moment he saw that his discovery made the fame passage more obviously than ever an excrescence, and with a touch of indignation he relaxed. It split the trial. Milton's mounting sense must have worked strongly indeed if he was willing to do this; and then that fantasy of arrogance wherein Phoebus singles him out by touching his ears! The professor, no poet, pulled his own ear.

He drew up a schedule for the discussion. How many hours, he wondered, would it take to teach "Lycidas" properly? I might give a course (first semester) English 193: "Lycidas" 1-84. He stretched again, smiling, crinkling his eyes toward the light stream.

And finally—it was very late—the "lesson." He wouldn't have admitted to anyone, of course, that this was what he called it, but call it this he did, had for years. He remembered a time when he hadn't used the "lesson," when in fact he had detested above all things a "message" (his derisive tone he heard still) of any sort. So had Hugh. His face shadowed, and he shifted his eyes to the portrait, which the sun reached. Have I betrayed you? Here in the sun? Feeling melodramatic, he set his mind uneasily to the "lesson."

Then all at once he felt hopeless. What could a one-hour class do to change what he had become? He had been a fool. One class, he raged, and the new man leaps from the old skin. With his schedule and his "penetration" and his "lesson." He stops catering to the boys' shiftlessness, he develops tongues of fire. A marriage like a tiger lies down and purrs. Dark in his office at one-thirty, he sat clamped in despair. And the despair threw him onward. No, he *had* been a fool, but he was a fool still, a worse one. You have to start. You have nothing to lose. Jump overboard now, you might as well try. At least you can become serious, and let the rhetoric take care of itself. If you fail, you fail anyway. He would finish his preparation and do everything he could do this afternoon, and see. Even the "lesson." Why not? It was only a joke with himself. Hating "teacher," he pretended to submit to "lesson"—merely the general moral truth, or some general moral truth (God knows, he wasn't dogmatic) arising out of whatever they were doing. Nothing pretentious, or original, but if

you didn't make a form for it you might pass it by altogether. Hastily he wrote at the bottom of the schedule, cramping his hand, his "lesson" for today, and as he wrote an image sprang up of Milton rapt forward unconscious at a window table in the twilight, his drastic mind and dull eyes on the shade of King, his pen and the swirling threshold forces on himself: "Whatever we do and think we are doing, however objective or selfless our design, our souls each instant are enacting *our own* destinies." Moral enough! Did the boys even believe in souls?—they didn't give a hoot for immortality. But this was the point of teaching.

He arranged his notes and ideas with returning satisfaction. Hat, window. But after these hours he was tired, very tired, and the breeze and the blaze brightened him less than he would have liked as he hurried toward the club, deciding to have—how rare for him, how usual for others—a cocktail before lunch.

The bar was nearly empty, the martini firm and immediate.

Through lunch he resisted the silly recurring desire to say aloud what he heard again and again in his head, "Nor yet where Deva spreads her wizard stream," a line that gave him intense pleasure; for example, to his speechless neighbor at the round table, a dry short man, very hungry, evidently, in Classics. The verb seemed as brilliant as the epithet. King sailed from Chester-on-Dee. Deva, the Dee, like Wordsworth's Winander. Charles Diodati lived on the Dee; maybe he and Milton (Milton the diva of Christ's—beaten, disappointed genius) had sat on the bank the summer before and traded legends of the sacred stream . . . "youthful poets dream on summer eves by haunted stream." "What do you think of Edward King?" a soft voice. "I doubt he deserves a fellowship," a stern one from the incredibly youthful face, "and it came to him too soon." Behind the slight body, clenched grass. "Your luck, John, wait, will change." The late-afternoon airs, the dappled water. There was more in that line than the fatal sailing. He didn't even mention King in his letters to Diodati between the death and "Lycidas." However. Had he written to anyone of Hugh? None ever: how? Diodati had a year to live. Who did Milton write to then? God-given, God-withdrawn. The Dio stoops to the Dee; twice. And stoops no more.

He drank his coffee slowly. He hoped the boys had prepared well; he had told them to use the stacks. The dining room had emptied, a waiter hovered, still he lingered. He was remembering a lunch he and Hugh had had together once on a day as bright as this one—Friday, too—in a restaurant neither could afford. Italian bread. Something had gone very wrong for him, and Hugh was consoling

and sympathizing with him in the merriest, gentlest way imaginable. They had told jokes, and were free together as two old friends can be in a strange, agreeable setting. He was leaving next day, he recalled; so that the occasion had urgency forward as well as back. But what was odd? He couldn't hear their voices. He could see the glints and sheen from the table, his own arms on the table, hand on a wineglass, he saw Hugh's face and the white wall, he saw the whole scene, but he heard nothing. It was completely silent. The professor struck his palm on his table and rose, his heart beating, and left.

The breeze had died away, leaving the campus placid, almost hot. Crossing, however, he looked forward eagerly like a defendant facing the last day of a suit that had so far gone well: anxious and confident, pacing out the final hour of his imputed, fantastic guilt. He went by his office for a book and notes, opened the window, touched the frame of the portrait, and arrived in his classroom just before the bell.

Where were the others? The high, dark-brown, sun-filled room, too large for a class of fourteen anyway, seemed all but deserted, and he looked around it annoyed while the bell rang. Who were missing? Only Cotton, it appeared, in the infirmary ("A good place for Cotton," said somebody), and Fremd. He smiled, throwing his Milton on the table, and felt better, although where was Fremd?

"Well, gentlemen," he went over to the windows—well known for roaming and for picking up chairs, he knew, but he had long ceased trying to refrain, "how do you like it? I assume you acquired an unholy aversion to it in school, as also to *Macbeth* and some other works not perfectly uninteresting. But what do you think of it this time, Mr. Rush?"

"Marvelous," the young man said mildly.

"Your diction is rich, but your tone is slack"—the professor smiled—"as applied to the most celebrated poem in our language. What precisely is marvelous about it?"

Rush grinned above his olive tie and thought. "There is a marvelous lack of emotion."

"Oh?" Crossing for the book, he read the opening lines aloud. "Unemotional? Did the rest of you feel the same way?"

No, they didn't.

"I meant emotion about his friend," Rush amended.

"Well, what about these?" Refusing to be hurried into his thesis, he read aloud some other lines:

But, O the heavy change, now thou art gone,
Now thou art gone and never must return!

Their languid gloom oppressed him. "Those are about King straight enough."

"Well . . . all those nymphs and flowers and wood gods . . ."

"Such properties needn't be inconsistent with strong emotion, as we'll see presently. But let's find out what Milton's subject is. What's the poem *about*, gentlemen? What lay essentially in his mind as he set about it? We have a poem in the form of a pastoral elegy, heavy in certain parts with passion. What about?"

"It's about his friend's death, isn't it?" Wright duly said.

"No!" Landes's high, confident voice broke out. "It's about Milton himself. In other words, it has a subject he felt very strongly about, and it's very emotional whenever it comes to him or things that interested him. King was just the occasion. If his cat had died instead, the poem might have been just as good."

"Hardly his cat," said the professor, "though Gray did well enough. But I agree with you that the poem is not on the whole passionate about King . . ." He talked easily and warmly, striding about the room with restless sudden turns, his ideas thronging. As he sat down lightly on the table edge, the sun streamed in afresh, glowing on the rim of Warner's glasses and white collar.

". . . In his crisis of discontent with hard long solitary study and protracted obscurity, *doubt* of the poetic priesthood he'd entered, *scorn* for the worthless pastors of the priesthood he had refused to enter," he caught Hale's eye back in the corner and realized with vexation that the tall, bland youth was engaged on some very different speculation of his own, "in this crisis all his passions and anxieties welled up at sight of a young man, dedicated as he was himself, though hardly in the same degree, *cut off*. Ah! To what end, then: self-denial, labor, patience, wisdom even? King's had simply vanished, and so might his."

"I don't see why he was worried about dying," said Nelen's good-natured, empty face.

A real young man's remark. "Two things. One I just indicated—a colleague five years younger suddenly being killed. The other is that there was some actual danger. The plague was fierce. People had died even in the little place where Milton was, Horton. And he planned to go to Italy the next year. As you sit here, a voyage from England to Italy seems safe enough, but travel was risky three hun-

dred years ago. If King had drowned going just to Ireland, why couldn't he, going farther?"

"But there are only four lines about his own death," Smith drawled, in the voice that made everything he said sound like a man dreaming.

A hand moved, Nelen's again. "Sir, who is King?"

Ugh. "Edward King," the professor explained with Oriental restraint, "was the *friend* of John Milton about whose death the poem we are discussing ostensibly is." Or rival.

"It seems to me the poem is about King," Stone said doubtfully, uncrossing his legs.

"Critics pretty much agree—Legouis and the rest—that Milton's feelings about himself are the real subject."

"Could they be wrong?"

Warner's simple, uninflected question somehow moved the professor very much. The trust, the measureless respect both for them and for *his* judgment of them, entered him so deeply that he couldn't answer for a moment but merely looked at the dark boy tilted back in his chair smoking. Perhaps it *was* after all an honour to be a critic, or even a teacher. But how deserve such confidence, this privilege?

"They certainly could. I've told you all year not to take anybody's word for anything if you feel competent to judge it yourself and can bring evidence forward. Sometimes, it's true, in matters of *feeling* there isn't much evidence. But here there is a good deal. Take the last line: 'To-morrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.' What do you make of that? Anybody."

Smith sat forward. "He doesn't want to be any more where his friend was with him, and all the things he sees will remind him of his loss."

Dumbfounded he looked down at the page. Smith's rapid intelligence working through the incantation of his voice had often affected the professor, but this time he felt as if an oracle had spoken.

. . . Why not? "Yes, it seems possible. It's simpler . . . What I was going to say was that the line is usually taken as a reference to Milton's plans either for moving to London or traveling to Italy. Of course, there might be an allusion to this anyway. But your contemporary meaning is better—after all, his readers knew nothing and cared less about Milton's plans."

"Sir? Did people like this poem when it came out?" asked Holson, crawling about on his seat.

Did they? "No, they didn't, so far as we know. In fact, at least a

century passed before any attention was paid to it at all, before any of his minor poems were recognized."

Curiously, from Rush, "Who recognized them?"

The professor, puzzling still over Smith's point, felt cornered. He cast back. "I think Warton was the first important critic on their side, but Pope and Gray knew them well. It was really the beginnings of Romantic taste that rescued them." Or so I say.

"Classics don't like them?" Landes wondered.

"Well, Milton is a classical poet, but he is also a Romantic. The word is difficult, as you probably know . . ."

He described its ambiguity, called Johnson's *Life of Milton* a model of respectful churlishness and vindictive merriment (he remembered his undergraduate phrases, after all), and glanced at the Pound-Eliot campaign against *Paradise Lost*, abbreviating, anxious to get on.

". . . But let me ask *you* some questions. Who are the 'rout'? In fact what does 'rout' mean? It's in line sixty-one."

"The Maenads," said Warner.

"No doubt. And who were they?"

Nobody knew, or nobody answered: he explained; and nobody knew that "rout" had any but its modern sense. Holson, indeed, thought the modern sense would be better. Briefly, and without expressing the asperity he felt, the professor laid down precepts of submission to a poem and fidelity to an author's sense. He was aware of some resistance in the class. He should have been fuller. What was "welter"? Nobody knew exactly. He read a few lines aloud, farsing. For five minutes he probed their familiarity with the meaning of details.

"You've got to look these things up, gentlemen. It's not only the matter of intellectual responsibility" (who would ever have taught them that? the major thing?), "it's a matter of enjoyment. We miss quite enough anyway, inevitably. How many of you know jessamine, crow-toe, woodbine—have visual images when you see the words or hear them?"

One hand hesitated.

He went off to the windows. "I don't myself," he said, looking out. Forsythia, daffodils, snapdragons. "Now it's true the passage has literary sources and a symbolic intention, but if the flowers are nothing more than words for us, we miss a good deal. Jammed in cities, we have to. The whole country experience is disappearing. Not only the country. Do you know the old rhyme about London bells? I can't

remember it all, most of it though, but each couplet rings the bells of some church, at first senselessly, and then a frightening continuity commences to emerge.

Brickbats and targets
Say the Bells of St. Marg'rets,
Brickbats and tiles—it was *Bull's-eyes* and targets—
Say the Bells of St. Giles, and so on.

It's violent and beautiful still, for a modern reader. It sometimes stands my hair on end. But how dim must the effect be, compared to its effect on its first hearers, accustomed all day to hear the ringing of the peals, high and low, now here, now there, from the hundreds of churches all over London, pealing like friends and warnings across the otherwise more or less silent city. No traffic or machinery, only the voice of the militant Church, the bells. The poem must have been a nightmare of reality. From this point of view, in fact, our prolific, active cities, with all their noise, have become in truth absolutely still—still than that," he gestured to a print of the Roman Forum high on the sidewall. "You lose out of literature some experience every year, and you need all the knowledge you can get." Hugh would have liked that. How quiet the room feels. Here comes Warner, here comes a chopper.

"What's the knowledge *for*?" said Warner in a loud voice bristling like his hair. "Poetry is supposed to be dreamy and vague, like Keats. Why pick it apart? I'd like to know how a super-jet works, that's useful knowledge, but I don't care how a poem works. This poem makes me feel half asleep. I like the feeling. I don't think a poem *does* work, I think it loafs, and teachers pretend to—no offense, sir—pretend to know all sorts of things about it that don't really exist."

The professor picked up his chair. A true feeling, though lazy enough; "dreamy and passionate flux"—and then all the claptrap.

"Tell me, Mr Warner, would you admit that there are conventions in 'Lycidas'?"

"Sure," the boy stretched. "They're not real shepherds, they're Milton and his friend. The nymphs are fanciful, and so on. But that's all obvious."

"We might be more definite than that, and fuller . . ." He elaborated a little, dangling his chair, on the artificial character of the properties. The poem seemed *Watteau-ish* as he talked—he did not like *Watteau*—and he felt abruptly that he was tired. Was he doing as well as he wanted to? What had happened to his excitement?

". . . So. Now: who is the 'blind Fury,' Mr Warner? Line seventy-five."

"What's-her-name. Atropos. The one who slices."

"Very accurate." (The yellow sweater smoked on, faceless.) "Except that she isn't a Fury."

"She's not? The fellow I read said she was."

"I doubt if he did. Atropos is a Fate. The poet in his rage against her *calls* her a Fury." He put the chair down.

Warner was decided, superior. "What's the difference?"

The professor suffered a flick of rage. The cold self-assurance in the voice cambered as from endless metallic contempt for these subjects, these feathers.

They age, like ours, O soul of Sir John Cheke,
Hated not learning worse than toad or asp.

"The difference is between understanding a world-poet, Mr Warner, and not. Or between cultivation, and Ignorance truculent." Warner sat straighter. (Fatuous, and then unjust?—as to Alice) "Of course I don't mean yours, but the difference is frankly as great as if one of your friends referred to your mother as an aging woman—say she is one—and another called her a witch, an evil witch." Frank, indeed. "The point is that the anger and horror of the line will be wholly felt only by a reader who already knows that Atropos is not properly a Fury but a Fate. As most readers, I suppose, do, or did." He didn't look at Warner, then made his voice general, "Let me give you an analogy. Some time ago, a century and a quarter, say, an audience assembled to hear a new piano concerto in Vienna. Piano, orchestra, conductor, a large aristocratic uncomfortable room, ladies, gentlemen. Now there is nothing very striking about the concerto's opening phrase but, as the piano began it, every nerve in the audience tightened." He stopped.

Silence, curiosity.

Doubtfully, at last, from Holson, "Did you say the *piano* began . . .?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"The piano played the introduction? But the orchestra always does," the boy said nervously.

"That's the point. It's the orchestra, gentlemen, in a piano concerto, that begins and prepares for the entrance of the piano, which is the star of the occasion. That night, for the first time in history, a piano concerto began *not* in the orchestra but with the piano. It was Beethoven's Fourth. What sort of position is a listener to it in who

simply does not know that concerti begin in the orchestra? He won't even hear the most important thing about the opening phrase. This is an affair, isn't it, of pure knowledge? No quantity of attention or insight will assist your ignorance, if you happen to be ignorant."

Hale wanted something! "Yes?" That admirable courtesy.

"Is there a good recording of that, sir?"

"What it comes to—just a minute—is that what the artist does is sometimes even more interesting in its negative aspect, that is, in the alternative or other possibility that it displaces, than in what it is itself. So in 'Lycidas.' The fact that Milton couldn't keep to his subject, or his nominal subject, shows that he had powerfully other matter on his mind. The digressions are in a way the poem's best testimony to his complete seriousness. But the reader observes them precisely in the sudden disappointment of expectation; that is, the poem ceases to be about King. Mr Hale, I think there is a recording by Schnabel, if not, there is one by somebody else, and a question more remote from the drowning of King I haven't heard for fifteen minutes." He looked at his watch, "Sixteen minutes."

Several boys laughed.

The professor had looked at his watch, however, to see what time it was, having lost during the Warner moment his usual sense of what piece of the fifty minutes had lapsed and what remained. More remained than he had feared, but it wasn't much.

"Sir," Smith spoke just before he hurried on, "what do you mean, that the poem ceases to be about King?"

Surprised, he explained: the two long, intense passages on Fame and the corruption of the clergy were obvious excrescences.

"But Milton qualifies their differences from the rest, doesn't he?"

"He does? Where?"

The slow-voiced, serious boy bent, scanning. Motes waltzed in a sunbeam across Hale.

"Here, eighty-six. He says *that strain* 'was of a higher mood' . . . from a god, that is. And 132, 'the dread voice is past.' At the end of each."

The professor studied the lines. He felt, uneasily, as if he had never seen them before.

"Maybe '*various* quills' at the very end is more of the same explanation," the boy went on.

"I don't quite see how these *explain* them. It would be easy to invent transitions at the ends after you had left your theme—or come to it, rather, nakedly, since Milton is his own theme."

"But they grow naturally out of the situation," Smith argued. "Each of King's masters gets a word in: Apollo, Cambridge, St. Peter. Orpheus perished horribly, like Lycidas; therefore, why break your neck to be a poet? Then the Church mourns, right after the university—promising son lost. What's out of order about that?"

"It's not so much that they're out of order, as that they're about Milton, not King," the professor repeated.

"Well, Milton felt them hard. It might be his own situation. It is King's though, isn't it? The only things I know about him are that he was a scholar and poet and was going to be a clergyman." The boy considered. The others were listening to him with interest. "It's King's life that got slit, and then Apollo consoles Milton by saying that his lost friend, after all, will be judged in Heaven, not here. So will Milton, but that doesn't keep it from being about King."

"But it's Milton Apollo singles out by touching his ear," exclaimed the professor, resisting a weak sense that the discussion was getting—how?—past him, dragging him.

"Only to defend him," Stone said unexpectedly. The blond, handsome boy lifted his book, "My editor said if your ear trembles, you're being talked about, that is, people would be saying Milton had his own fame in mind, so Apollo reproved them—for him. Fame is only Heaven's judgment, where King is."

"But the genuine rage is in the other passage," drawled Smith. "It seems to me King's death is awful to Milton, especially, because the Church needed good men."

"Why didn't Milton go in then?" Rush asked.

"How do I know?" Smith tilted his chair to see past Holson. "You don't have to do something yourself to want other people to do it well. Milton was a damned serious man. Maybe he thought poetry was more important."

"He quit it for politics for years. He probably was too aggressive to be a clergyman," Stone said from his corner.

The professor found his voice. The storm that had seemed to be gathering around him, from Smith, had somehow not descended. But was the boy right? What do I think? He wished the hour were over. Milton or King, he wondered wearily, what matter? He smiled at "aggressive" to raise his spirits; Stone it was who had remarked admiringly that Shakespeare's Cleopatra "had *id*."

Pacing the front of the classroom again, he told them his discovery of the morning, the Trial that linked Triton-Aeolus-Camus-Peter. "What brought into Milton's imagination, do you suppose, the

notion of a trial?" he asked, sitting on the warm sill and lighting a cigarette. "Mr Nelen, any ideas?" Mr Nelen had no ideas, he revealed. "Mr Holson?"

While Holson was reflecting the professor made a short excursion. He climbed, dripping, under a blinding sun, up and up a sand dune, one of the vast dunes hanging over Lake Superior, panting. He was laughing and calling up. Once he looked back, fearful. Hugh helped him at the top, and as he stood up a wind caressed all his skin. The miles of blue lake gleamed. No other dune so white as this. The sky was full of the sun. He wanted to say. But he knew Hugh was saying, "It's wonderful," running back toward the edge. "Just step as far as you can with each foot," then disappeared over it. Now he had to? Yes. He shuddered, cold, came toward the edge, shrank. Feet moved by strong love on. Fought. He leaned erect off the world's edge, toppling, and stepped! Through empty air straight down, terror of the first, the bounce and astonishment of the second. Pure joy the third, his eyes cleared. He rushed through the sunlight wild with delight in deep jumps, foot far to foot, touching the earth, down and down toward Hugh, bounding far below. Far off, another world.

"Himself," Holson said.

"I'm sorry?" said the professor, getting up.

"Did he want to show what a trial it had been for himself?"

"Hardly. The trial, I think, gentlemen, continues the dramatic method of Milton's own inquisition of the nymphs, earlier. It's a way of clamping his material together, producing an illusion of unity."

"Why the inquisition in the first place?" Stone's voice, after the pause, was thoughtful.

"Why not?" He smiled.

"Well," the young man in the corner went on deliberately, "but if the unity or the meaning isn't real, is just an illusion, how can the poem be good or true?"

The professor reached for his book, but a light came on in his brain. *Why!* He heard his voice sudden and tense: "Why the inquisition! What does a man think when a friend dies, what does he do? He asks questions—not loud, but deep. *Why? Where now? Why? Where?*" He saw the class again, and realized he was trembling. "But you can't just ask these questions over and over again in a poem, as you do in life. You have to have something to ask them about. What situation will let you ask the most questions? A trial. An inquiry, a trial. It doesn't matter what the questions pretend to be about. Where the nymphs were on Tuesday, which wind blew. What matters is that there *be* questions. Behind all the beauty we haven't had a chance

to discuss, the versification, the imagery, behind the foliage, there is this urgency and reality."

His difficult, morning sense of the poem as a breathing, weird, great, incalculable animal was strong on him again. He returned to the table excited, constrained, for the book.

"That's like what I meant," Smith hastened his drawl. "He really asks the questions about King. They're his questions, but he kept himself out of the poem as much as he *could*."

His questions. Did he? The professor as he opened the book felt that all things were possible, and seeing the flower passage he imagined a rustling, as if his metaphor were true, and under the passage moved the animal, the massive insight of the grieving poet.

"Yet the flowers are to satisfy himself, not King. Of course, the whole elegy is in King's honour, but I mean their pathos is less than their beauty. The melancholy is all Milton's. Listen.

Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,
And daffadillies fill their cups with tears,
To strew the laureate hearse where *Lycid* lies.
For so, to interpose a little ease,
Let our frail thought . . ."

At this point, an extraordinary thing happened. The professor saw the word "false" coming. FALSE. He felt as if snatched up by the throat and wrung. "False" threw its iron backward through the poem. The room shook. Then the unutterable verse mastered his voice and took it off like a tempest:

"dally with false surmise.

Ay me!"

The cry rang hopeless through his mind—

"whilst THEE the shores and sounding seas
Wash far away, where'er thy bones are hurled;
Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides,
Where THOU perhaps under the whelming tide
Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world—"

A bell sounded, and the professor was able to dismiss the class a moment later—remembering that he had forgotten after all the "lesson." But whether he could have read a line more he wondered, as he closed the strange book and held it in both hands. The students made for the door. The sun shone steadily in at the windows. The class was over.

The professor sat a long time in his office, not thinking of anything and perhaps not unhappy, before he went home. Once he read over the transfiguration of Lycidas, and was troubled by the trembling of light on the page; his eyes had filled with tears. He heard the portrait's voice. At last he rose, closed the window, and took his hat. Shutting the door as he left, in the still-bright hall he looked at the name engraved on his card on the door. He felt older than he had in the morning, but he had moved into the exacting conviction that he was . . . something . . . not dead.

1957

Notes

MARLOWE'S DAMNATIONS. Published here for the first time. Judging by internal evidence, it was written in 1952.

THOMAS NASHE AND "THE UNFORTUNATE TRAVELLER." Written to introduce a new paperback edition of *The Unfortunate Traveller; or, The Life of Jack Wilton*, by Thomas Nashe. Edited by Louis F. Peck with an introduction by John Berryman, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1960.

SHAKESPEARE AT THIRTY. Originally printed in *The Hudson Review*, vol. VI, Summer 1953, pages 175-203.

NOTES ON "MACBETH." Originally printed in somewhat different form in *The Arts of Reading*, co-edited by Ralph Ross, Allen Tate, and John Berryman, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1960.

SHAKESPEARE'S LAST WORD. Published here for the first time. The date of composition is not certain, probably 1962.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANNE FRANK. Published here for the first time. It was written in 1967.

CONRAD'S JOURNEY. Published here for the first time. It was written in 1962.

THE MIND OF ISAAC BABEL. Originally printed in somewhat different form in *The Arts of Reading*, co-edited by Ralph Ross, Allen Tate, and John Berryman, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1960.

"THE MONK" AND ITS AUTHOR. This introduction to the Grove Press edition of Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk* originally appeared in 1952.

THE FREEDOM OF THE DON. Published here for the first time. The date of composition is not certain, probably 1960.

NOTES

THE IMAGINARY JEW. First printed in *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 7, no. 4, Autumn 1945, pages 529-39, and awarded first prize in the magazine's story contest. Reprinted as an appendix to Berryman's posthumous novel, *Recovery*, 1973.

WASH FAR AWAY. First printed in *American Review* 22, edited by Theodore Solotaroff, 1975, pp. 1-26. It existed in draft form in 1957 and may have been written somewhat earlier.