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The Bill Casey Award in Letters for 1990 has been presented to

**Virginia de Araújo**
for her poems in the fall issue

and to

**Elaine Apthorp**
for her article, “Steinbeck, Guthrie, and Popular Culture,”
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The Committee of Trustees also awarded a one-year subscription to *San José Studies* to the author of the best work (exclusive of the Bill Casey award) published in the categories of (1) poetry, (2) fiction, and (3) articles. The 1989 recipients of these awards are:

**Poetry**  
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**Mervyn Nicholson** for his essay, “Romantic Desire,” in the fall issue.
The Meaning of the Merger Mania

Douglas F. Greer

During the 1980s, there were 31,112 mergers and acquisitions reported in the United States. A total of $1.3 trillion dollars in assets changed hands. The year 1986 set an all-time record for number of deals in one year—4,446. That is roughly 17 deals each business day. The all-time record for absolute dollar values in one year was set in 1988 at $236.4 billion dollars. Obviously, these are enormous numbers.¹

Here is one area of business activity in which the United States is far ahead of Japan, where takeovers are relatively rare and confined mainly to small firms.² Indeed, America’s tidal wave of takeovers has made celebrities of many business people, something not common during the last half of this century. Michael Milken and T. Boone Pickens, Jr., seem to be today’s equivalent of John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan. Moreover, if movies like Network, Wall Street, and Pretty Woman are any indication, the corporate takeover may have provided Hollywood with a new genre to replace the Western.

In discussing the economics of takeovers, this article tackles two rounds of questions. The first concerns description: What is happening? What kinds of deals are occurring? How does this recent tide of takeovers compare to earlier ones in character and corpulence? The second round evaluates events: Are these developments good or bad? What motivates all these mergers and acquisitions? What are their consequences for key measures of economic performance, such as prices, product quality, production efficiency, and innovation?

What Are We Talking About Here?

To begin with the first, descriptive, class of questions, some basic definitions are needed. A “merger,” following common usage of the word, unites two formerly separate business entities. For example, two
large pharmaceutical companies—Bristol-Meyers and Squibb—recently merged in an exchange of stock worth $12.5 billion. The word “acquisition” simply refers to a purchase, and it need not entail the blending that “merger” implies. Charte Medical, for instance, was recently acquired by its managers in a “leveraged buy-out,” which refers to a debt-financed purchase that takes the corporation “private,” so that shares of its stock are closely held by a relatively small group. Strictly speaking, acquisitions differ from mergers. Yet most acquisitions end in mergers of some sort. And, conversely, almost all mergers are achieved by acquisition. Thus, although the proper use of these two terms may differ in details, they and “takeover” are often used interchangeably, as will be the practice here.

Three categories of mergers must be distinguished. A “horizontal merger” unites two or more direct competitors. The combining companies operate in the same market, as illustrated by Beecham Group’s acquisition of another pharmaceutical company, Smith Kline, for $8.3 billion. Chevron’s $13.3 billion takeover of Gulf Oil is another example. A “vertical merger” links companies that operate at different stages of the production-distribution process. Chrysler’s acquisition of Thrifty Rent-a-Car nicely illustrates vertical mergers.

Finally, “conglomerate mergers” are, broadly speaking, all those that are neither horizontal nor vertical. This definition covers immense ground, however, so conglomerate mergers may be subdivided, in turn, into three varieties: (1) Product extension mergers involve producers of two different but related products. Black and Decker, noted for its power tools, exemplified this variety when it recently bought Emhart, a producer of home improvement products. (2) Market extension mergers involve firms producing the same product but occupying different geographic markets. The linkage of two electric power companies—Pacific Corporation and Utah Power and Light—fits this category. (3) Pure conglomerate mergers bring together firms with virtually nothing in common—as illustrated by Eastman Kodak’s acquisition of Sterling Drug Company and U.S. Steel’s purchase of Marathon Oil.

Some mergers may be so hydra-headed as to fit into all these categories simultaneously. G.E.’s acquisition of RCA epitomizes this possibility, with its horizontal dimensions in appliances, vertical features in electronic parts, and conglomerate elements in the combination of jet engines, television broadcasting, and railroad locomotives, among many other items.

What of Historic Context?

Before 1980, three merger movements high-lighted American history. Although the data for those waves and the current one are not wholly
comparable because of changes in data collection practices, quick recaps provide some points of interest. 3

The first merger movement occurred around the turn of the century. Over the seven-year period, 1897–1903, 2,864 mergers were recorded in mining and manufacturing. Compared to our current mania, this first wave may not seem like much. However, measured against the economy of 1900 and the resulting concentration of business in the hands of a few, this first wave had ramifications that exceeded even those of our current wave. 4 Horizontal mergers involving several firms in a single sweeping transaction dominated the scene, producing such giant companies as U.S. Steel, Du Pont, and American Tobacco.

The second major merger wave arose during the 1920s. From 1925 through 1930, 5,382 mergers were recorded for manufacturing and mining. This wave exceeded the first not only in raw numbers but also in variety of merger types. Horizontal mergers were again popular, but vertical mergers, involving market-extension and product-extension, were also in vogue. General Foods, for instance, was formed by such product-extension acquisitions as Maxwell House Coffee, Jello, Sanka, Bird’s Eye, and Swans Down Cake Flour. Apart from mining and manufacturing, more than 14,000 utilities, banks, and retail stores lost their independence during the 20s.

After several decades of meager ripples, momentum began to build once again in the mid-1950s. Thereafter, the movement swelled to record-setting proportions. From 1960 through 1970, the Federal Trade Commission recorded 25,598 mergers. Slightly more than half of these were in manufacturing and mining. In particular, this was the age of pure conglomerates, like IT&T, Gulf & Western, and LTV. The resulting commodity combinations appearing under one corporate roof were remarkable—lumber and bread, mobile homes and bowling balls, motion pictures and ammunition, hams and girdles. Summarizing the period in relative terms and using an averaging process, we can deduce that, over the period 1953–1968, approximately 21 per cent of all manufacturing and mining assets were acquired. 5

Stephen Rhoades has summarized the impact of mergers up to 1980 by estimating their contribution to the size of the 20 largest U.S. industrial corporations. He converted all the acquisitions of the top 20 firms in 1980 into 1980 dollar values, accounting for inflation from the time of original purchase, which could date back to the earliest of the merger movements. For example, Mobil’s 19 acquisitions would be valued at $20.3 billion in 1980 dollars. Comparing these rough estimates to the top 20’s total 1980 assets, Rhoades found that, on average, acquisitions accounted for 41 per cent of the overall size of their assets in 1980. 6

In raw numbers, the latest wave tops them all. In every year from 1984 through 1989, the tally exceeded 1968’s previous record of 2,407 mergers
in a single year. As noted, the trillion dollar volume of the decade's takeovers is likewise thoroughly impressive.  

In regard to merger types, horizontal mergers made a resounding come-back—especially in oil, pharmaceuticals, beer, steel, tires, airlines, and grocery retailing. Product extension mergers have likewise been popular. For example, Procter & Gamble, RJR Nabisco, and Philip Morris have been amassing grocery items galore into substantial aggregations. Aggregate concentration—that is, economy-wide control in a few hands—has consequently swollen.

Still, qualifiers are possible. In terms of the number of mergers per billion dollars of real GNP, the largest wave was the one at the turn of the century, not the present one. Moreover, the current craze has contributed less to aggregate concentration in the economy than might be imagined. The main feature that dramatically distinguishes the present wave from all previous ones is this: Many 1980s acquisitions have not been purchases of formerly independent firms but, rather, purchases of subsidiary firms being sold off by conglomerates. A total of 8,665 divestitures were recorded during the 1980s, worth $385 billion. Stated differently, nearly 30 per cent of all the decade's acquisitions were purchases of divested assets. Generally, these did not represent a net accumulation of assets in the hands of giants. They were transfers among the giants. Ownership of Avis Car Rental, for instance, has changed hands ten times in the last three decades.

Was the Merger Movement of the 80s Good Or Bad?

Some economists delight in the recent developments. They argue that mergers, however big and numerous they might be, are cause, not for public alarm, but for rejoicing. They say that merger-induced bigness promotes efficiency and technical progress. To quote Yale Brozen, "The reason large firms are formed is similar to that... [which] motivates almost every other regularity in commercial behavior—the incentive for efficiency."  

In contrast, efficiencies and innovation are clearly not part of the lurid picture painted by Walter Adams and James Brock:

To Americans, a casino is a gambling emporium—a Las Vegas or Atlantic City establishment for crap shooters, roulette players, and baccarat addicts.

To Italians, a casino is a house of ill repute—an establishment where specialists practice the world's oldest profession.

Today, the contest for corporate control in America features elements of both—greed and lust.
My own assessment lies between these extremes. This middle ground can best be explored by a separate assessment of horizontal and conglomerate mergers, the two dominant categories.

**Horizontal Mergers**

Of all mergers, horizontal ones generally have the greatest prospect of yielding beneficial efficiencies because the firms involved are pretty much alike to begin with. Cost savings are often found in the consolidation of marketing, research, finance, and administrative operations. Moreover, horizontal mergers among relatively small firms in an industry may allow them to compete more vigorously against their larger rivals, not only because of real efficiencies but also because of the added bargaining power that size gives them in dealing with upstream input suppliers and downstream distributors.

On the other hand, horizontal mergers have a greater potential for public harm than any other merger type, as a few examples will show.

The creation of U.S. Steel in 1901 brought together 170 formerly independent companies producing two-thirds of all semi-finished steel in America and similar percentages of other products such as rails, tin plate, and rods. Thereafter, the price of pig iron rose about 50 per cent, and the price of tin plate and wire nails, among many other products, rose or stabilized at higher levels than before.¹⁰

During the 1970s, Xidex Corporation acquired two main competitors in microfilm. The first acquisition increased its market share from 46 per cent to 55 per cent; the second from 61 per cent to 70 per cent. As a direct result, Xidex's prices jumped first by 11 per cent and then by an added 23 per cent.¹¹

Analysis by Morrison and Winston of six airline mergers occurring from 1986 through 1987 discloses varying results, depending on whether or not the reduction in competitors occurred on an airline route involving a hub city. In percentage terms, the upward price effect of losing a competitor to merger ranged “from 2 per cent to 32 per cent with no hub effects, and up to 55 per cent when hub effects come into play.”¹² The torrent of airline mergers during the 1980s is even more succinctly explained by an airline executive quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*: “Carriers are trying to achieve the market dominance that will give them better control over their prices.”¹³

I need not go on in this vein. Horizontal mergers can foster market power. And at least since Aristotle it has been recognized that market power generally lifts prices.¹⁴ Dozens of empirical studies over the past three decades have confirmed this principle more thoroughly than Aristotle's complaints about monopolizing iron mongers. Indeed, curbing market power is the main reason for antitrust policies aimed at
anti-competitive mergers.

Less widely recognized are the adverse consequences that horizontal mergers may have for consumers in non-price variables, like product availability and quality. When working for the Federal Trade Commission on Warner Communication’s proposed acquisition of Polygram, which would have given Warner top-rank and about 25 per cent of the recorded music business, I discovered that reduced competition in that industry would probably reduce the number of new record releases each year. It would have correspondingly lessened the opportunities for music innovation and for new artist development.\(^\text{15}\)

A statement by Irving Joel may serve as a summary. He was featured in *Forbes* magazine in 1988 for amassing 70 per cent of the $75 million market in men’s western and dress hats through a string of acquisitions. Alluding to the famous parlor game, Joel said, “If you play *Monopoly*, the idea is to own all the properties on the board.”\(^\text{16}\)

Why did the number of horizontal mergers rise dramatically during the 1980s? The chief reason was the substantial relaxation of antitrust policy under the Reagan Administration. The relaxation stemmed mainly from conservative ideology. The Reaganites were simply anti-antitrust. Charles Rule, Reagan’s last antitrust chief, has said, “Most people in the Reagan Administration came with certain strong principles they wanted to articulate and enunciate.”\(^\text{17}\) Events in the airlines illustrate the consequences. Despite solid evidence to the contrary, Rule said in 1986 that airline mergers are beneficial because they “provide a way for restruct­uring [the industry] in light of the new environment’’ created by deregulation.\(^\text{18}\)

A principal rationale invoked to give this *laissez faire* ideology an appearance of rationality was “contestability theory.”\(^\text{19}\) A contestable market is one that is highly competitive, not because of internal conditions such as the number of incumbent sellers in the market, but rather because of three external conditions intimidating any incumbent seller who might try to exercise monopoly power over price. First, easy birth: Entry into the market by new sellers is assumed to be ultra-free. The freedom of entry derives from an assumption that all firms—actual and potential—have identical technologies, cost conditions, production capacities, distribution opportunities, and so on. Second, easy life: The entrant can fully establish itself before the existing firm(s) can respond with price cuts. Third, easy death: Exit is absolutely costless. Sunk costs are assumed to be zero, which means that all costs incurred during entry can be fully recovered in the event of exit. All capital equipment, for instance, can be used elsewhere or readily sold without loss. In brief, a contestable market is one vulnerable to hit-and-run entry, a trenchant form of potential competition that holds even monopolists in check.

Despite the prominence of its advocates, contestability theory fell into
disrepute rather quickly because of its preposterous assumptions and internal inconsistencies. Two of its major problems are illustrative of others. First, ease of entry is a poor reason to excuse a merger that, by making a greater market share, creates a dominant firm. The resulting dominance can be used effectively to raise barriers to entry through strategic behavior. In short, any contestability present before the merger may vanish after the merger that is permitted by the contestability. This could be called the "Frankenstein effect," or, more aptly, "Frankensteinstability." Second, it is a sign of the theory's absurdity that the parents of contestability theory pointed to the airline industry as the prime example of contestability in the real world. As previously noted, lax antitrust enforcement under an administration invoking this theory has generated a mountain of evidence refuting it.

Fortunately, antitrust officials in the Bush Administration are saying that they will be more pragmatic than their Reagan counterparts. James Rill, current Assistant Attorney General for Antitrust, has remarked that effective merger enforcement is now one of his top two priorities.

Conglomerate Mergers

In theory, efficiencies may justify conglomerate mergers. Pro-merger economists argue that there is a market for corporate control, just like any other market—that for, say, apples or used cars. This merger market allegedly fosters efficiencies because the managers of well-managed firms seek to acquire control of poorly managed firms in order to replace the inept managers and to profit in the process. This theory emphasizes the place of the stockmarket, where ownership shares are traded in relatively small lots among millions of diffuse stockholders. But stockholders do not exercise close control of the typical large corporation. Control rests with managers, who can also acquire controlling interests in other corporations, financing their purchases from retained earnings or from new issues of bonds or stock. Note that this separation of stock ownership and managerial control is what allowed the poor management to occur. It needs also to be noted that the efficiency hypothesis is important because it was an official belief of the Reagan Administration and remains the view of the Chicago School economists led by Milton Friedman.

The evidence favoring this efficiency hypothesis comes from two basic facts. First, the stockholders of acquired "target" firms typically enjoy tremendous gains. The premiums paid above pre-bid stockmarket prices averaged around 40 per cent in the late 1980s. For example, Kodak paid $89.25 per share to acquire Sterling Drug, which just before the bidding was priced at $54.75—hence, a 63 per cent premium. Second, stockholders of the acquiring firms seem not to lose. Numerous so-called
"event" studies of acquiring firm's stock prices reveal no tendency, on average, for those prices to fall when acquisitions are announced. Hence, stockholders of acquiring firms appear at least to break even. As Richard Caves has nicely summarized the surmise: "A bundle for the targets' shareholders plus zero for the bidders, still sums to a bundle, supporting the conclusion that mergers create value and accordingly are economically efficient." 25

Although this conclusion may seem rock solid, it is actually a block of ice that melts when heated by scrutiny. It rests mainly on presumption. The evidence for efficiencies may be explored in three steps keyed to timing: First, "event" evidence from the time of the acquisition; second, "pre-merger" evidence; and third, "post-merger" evidence.

First, the "event" evidence lacks substance. The finding that target-firm shareholders gain huge premiums can easily be disconnected from prospective efficiencies by the fact that such premiums are paid even when, as often happens, there are no planned changes for the target firm at all. Without changes, there can be no fresh efficiencies. And since the payment of a premium does not hinge on prospective efficiencies, it offers no proof of efficiencies.

Leveraged "management buy-outs" are the clearest examples of this phenomenon. In such instances—e.g., Dan River, Macy's, and Safeway—top existing managers borrow heavily to buy ownership control of their firm and take it private, preserving their jobs. 26 The premiums paid for such control match those of takeover acquisitions. Another example is the "white knight" acquisition, in which target-firm managers escape from a hostile takeover and the resulting job loss by turning to a friendly "white knight" who agrees to buy the target and keep its management intact. For example, U.S. Steel rescued Marathon Oil from the Mobil Oil dragon. The premiums paid by these protectors match or exceed those of the dragons, despite the absence of prospective new efficiencies. Finally, there are premiums in the "greenmail" paid to corporate "raiders," and the purpose of these payments is likewise to prevent management changes.

"Event" evidence of a constant price for the acquiring firm's stock also has its problems. The constant price is not seen with the naked eye. Rather, it is seen through the lenses of the "efficient stock market" hypothesis. The hypothesis holds that stock prices reflect all available information at any moment in time. Most of those arguing for merger efficiency accept the efficient stock market hypothesis as an axiom. Yet to find empirical proof or refutation of the hypothesis is difficult, and the hypothesis has suffered numerous setbacks recently, especially since the stock market crash of October, 1987. 27 Moreover, any negative influences on the acquiring firm's share prices are likely to be obscured by the immense size of the typical acquirer relative to its target. Hence, findings
of a break-even for the buyer's owners may be a mirage. But this is a relatively minor point. Post-merger evidence to be considered shortly indicates that the buyer's owners are actually losers.

Second, to turn to the pre-merger evidence, the subject centers on the pre-merger conditions of the acquiring and target firms. If the efficiency hypothesis were correct, the superior management of the acquiring firms would presumably result in exceptionally high pre-merger profits for acquiring firms, while the inferior performance hypothesized for the target firms would presumably lead to poor pre-merger performance for the target firms. The evidence is somewhat mixed on both matters, but it generally runs against the efficiency hypothesis. Acquiring companies tend to be bigger than average, but in general they do not have exceptional managements as measured by profitability. As for target companies, two intense studies of more than 800 acquisitions in manufacturing and banking during the 1960s and 1970s by Ravenscraft, Scherer, and Rhoades reveal that target firms typically were not poor performers previous to their acquisition. Indeed, those in manufacturing have especially high profits before acquisition. Results of other studies are consistent with these findings. Hence, the bulk of the pre-merger evidence does not support the theory that mergers purge the economy of bad managers and thereby create efficiencies.

Finally, the post-merger evidence is, by its nature, the most compelling. And it comes in several forms—namely, real effects, profitability changes, product market share changes, and stockmarket evaluations.

Real effects are measured by changes in productivity, in personnel staffing, and the like. Data difficulties make studies of real effects rather rare. But on the whole there appear to be no systematic efficiency gains in this respect. Indeed, optimistic claims of efficiency at the time of merger have all too often proved embarrassing later, as in the subsequent bankruptcies of the Penn-Central Railroad and LTV-Republic Steel.

Post-merger corporate profitability changes have been much more thoroughly studied than real effects. And the great weight of evidence here, from lines of business research, shows a zero or negative impact on average.

Observed shifts in the product market shares of acquired companies corroborate these findings on profitability. If acquired firms became more efficient as a result of merger, their product market shares would presumably rise as they became more competitive, more favorable for their customers. Yet, on the contrary, evidence shows product market shares to be unaffected or falling substantially after takeover.

Finally, the stockmarket's evaluation of the acquiring firm typically deteriorates during the months and years following takeovers, something quite different from the stockmarket's evaluation during the "event," when acquiring firm share prices appear to be unaffected.
Moreover, the negative abnormal returns to share ownership apparently get worse with time. Abnormal returns averaged a minus 5.5 per cent in the seven one-year studies surveyed by Jensen and Ruback.\(^3\) Over the three-year, post-takeover period surveyed by Magenheim and Mueller, the abnormal returns were at least minus 16 per cent.\(^4\) Acquiring firm share prices fall in the post-merger world presumably because of the adverse profit and market share trends just noted.

Overall, then, the post-merger evidence refutes the efficiency hypothesis. The single most telling summary statistic in this regard is the estimate of Ravenscraft and Scherer that approximately one out of every three acquisitions of the 1960s and 1970s turned out so wretchedly that the acquired assets were eventually sold off.\(^3\) Mobil Oil, for instance, recently divested itself of Montgomery Ward after a decade of disappointment, and Coca-Cola dumped Columbia Pictures after a string of box-office bombs like *Ishtar*. In this connection, the earlier statistics may be recalled on the great many acquisitions that during the 1980s were divestitures in disguise. The causes of that deluge are now clear.

In sum, virtually all the best available evidence stacks up against the notion that the market for corporate control breeds efficiency. To be sure, many mergers do yield substantial efficiencies. But as a general rule they do not. And it is unwise to base policy on the assumption that the movement is merely a matter of efficiencies.

Once the efficiency hypothesis is set aside, three questions on conglomerates remain: Where does the purchase premium come from? What motivates mergers and payment of the premium? Why were the 1980s a particularly popular time for conglomerate takeovers?

**Where Does the Premium Come from?**

In general, the premium paid to target-firm stockholders reflects the price paid for control, not for prospective new efficiencies.\(^3\) This is why premiums are paid by managers in leveraged buy-outs and also by “white knights” in friendly takeovers. This is also why premiums are included in the “greenmail” paid to buy off corporate raiders like Pickens and Saul Steinberg. Control, like any scarce good, has a price. In politics, it is in the form of campaign spending. In the corporate world, control’s price is the premium.

The premium may also reflect grossly mistaken optimism, or hubris, on the part of acquiring firm’s management. Such is the thesis of Richard Roll of UCLA,\(^3\) and his argument cannot be dismissed cavalierly. An interesting observation in this connection is that those who are gaining the control or suffering the hubris—i.e., the acquiring firms’s managers—need not be paying the premiums themselves. As mentioned previously, the stockholders of acquiring firms apparently lose in the long run.
addition, there are many instances in which the bondholders of acquiring firms lose, a "Rape of the Bondholder," as Allan Sloan of *Forbes* magazine puts it. Large issues of new debt to launch takeovers may lower the quality ratings of established bonds. Moreover, those who buy the new bonds often suffer uncompensated risks. RJR Nabisco’s record leveraged buy-out of $24.7 billion ignited an explosion of lawsuits by major bondholders, including Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, Jefferson-Pilot Life, and Hartford Accident & Indemnity Company, because there was a big decline in the value of their holdings as a result of the leveraged takeover.

What Motivates Acquisitive Conglomerate Managers?

Charles Bluhdorn, who in eleven years guided Gulf & Western Industries through more than 80 acquisitions, had this to say about his company and himself:

No mountain is high enough for us, nothing is impossible. The sky is the limit . . . I came to this country without a penny, and built a company with 100,000 employees. This is what America is all about . . . to be able to do what I've done is a matter of pride to me and to the country.

Meshulam Riklis, who parlayed $25,000 into a $755 million dollar empire fittingly called Rapid-American, Inc., once said:

The game of picking up companies is open to everybody. All you have to do is have indefatigable drive, a desire to perpetuate yourself or your family in control of an industry, or an unabsorbed appetite for corporate power.

As these remarks indicate, desire for sheer corporate growth and personal aggrandizement probably motivate much conglomerate acquiring. There are of course other reasons, but I mention these prominently to compensate for the unjustifiably scant attention they typically get from economists.

Another motive is defensive—namely, acquiring in order to avoid acquisition. In 1989, for instance, the press announced the huge merger between Time, Inc., and Warner Communications by saying that its main purpose was "to protect Time, Inc. from takeovers." Contemporaneously, Maytag’s Chairman, Daniel Krumm, announced his company’s intention to acquire Chicago Pacific Corporation, saying that the deal was partly "an exercise in raider-proofing." These are two of several dozen instances where it is publicly known that acquiring firms
made acquisitions in attempts to lessen their own chances of being acquired. The unknown cases would surely be some large multiple of the known.

Acquisitions may provide takeover protection for a number of reasons. 43 For example, acquisitions boost the size of the acquiring firm, and statistics show that gigantic firms are less likely to be acquired than medium or small firms. Another factor here is debt. Acquiring can create a frightfully large debt obligation, something that may scare off potential acquirers. Yet another factor—and the most dramatic of all the possibilities here—is this: Acquiring another company can be an especially effective defense if that other company is the one actively attempting to acquire the acquirer. This is the "Pac-Man" defense. In 1982, for instance, Martin Marietta made a tender offer to acquire Bendix after Bendix announced its tender offer for Martin Marietta. Differing state charters delayed Bendix despite its head start on the calendar, so the strategy worked, leaving Martin Marietta independent. This same strategy has since been used by Houston Natural Gas and American Brands, Inc.

If acquisitions are a means of protecting managers against job loss, one would expect more active acquiring by those managers whose job security is shakiest and less acquiring by those whose jobs are most secure. Such has been found to be the case. 44

The defensive motive is worth mentioning in light of our earlier discussion. This motive has implications for the efficiency hypothesis of mergers. Acquiring can protect inefficiency as well as root it out. Managers who are trying to preserve their jobs by acquiring other firms may do so because they are poor managers. If so, acquisitions are perpetuating rather than purging incompetents in American corporations. Indeed, in light of the fact that a huge number of acquisitions result in distress and eventual divestiture, the acquiring itself could constitute much of the incompetence.

Why the Conglomerate Merger Mania in the 80s?

Reagan's relaxed antitrust policy was not a factor in the conglomerate mergers of the 1980s because they have always lacked the obvious anticompetitive impact that raises antitrust issues. More to the point, the timing of merger waves corresponds to that of stock market booms. The 1980s fit that pattern fairly well. Moreover, there were some more interesting factors fueling the mania of the 1980s.

Two of those factors follow directly from what has already been said. First, given the immense number of 1980s acquisitions that were simultaneous divestitures—8,665, to be exact—and given our knowledge that divestitures are prompted by failures, it appears that acquisitions were plentiful in the 1980s in large part because there were so many stupid
acquisitions in the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, during those decades, Westinghouse snapped up businesses in mail-order sales, watchmaking, and enough other lines to become a morass of 135 separate divisions. Profits stalled, and the company's traditional heavy manufacturing foundered. During the 1980s, Westinghouse shed dozens of operations and 23,000 workers in an attempt to atone for its errors.45 It may be hoped that those picking up the pieces on the acquiring end of the many stories like this one may do better with the assets, but past experience does not yield great confidence that they will.

A second distinguishing feature of the 1980s already alluded to is this: Merging has a built-in multiplier to the extent that it triggers defensive motives to merge. The past decade was a hot time that was made all the hotter by those scrambling to beat the heat. To quote the CEO of an actively acquiring big Texas bank who found himself in the middle of a "merger frenzy" in Texas banking during the early 80s, "There’s a desire here to be a player in the game, as opposed to being bought out."46

Two other special features of the 1980s not discussed earlier are easy debt financing and an increasing globalization of business. The 1980s were the decade of debt. During the heaviest dealing, from 1984 through 1988, the debt of U.S. nonfinancial corporations ballooned by an amazing $840 billion, while conversely their stock equity positions contracted by nearly $300 billion.47 The invention of high-risk, high-yield junk bonds contributed immensely to this situation. The excesses of debt financing are now being realized in the collapse of the junk bond market, an outbreak of false financial reporting, big bankruptcies, and Milken’s stint in the slammer.48

Another adverse by-product of the debt—one that again reflects poorly on the efficiency hypothesis for mergers—is the drain on research and development that has been associated with merger mania. A recent study of the top 200 R & D companies by the National Science Foundation shows a 4.7 per cent drop in R & D spending for the 16 most active acquirers and a 12.8 per cent drop in R & D spending for those experiencing leveraged buy-outs. The years 1986 and 1987 are the years of reference here. In contrast, all other R & D-performing companies reported a 5.4 per cent increase in their R & D expenditures during that period.49 Long-term necessities may thus suffer from the short-term expediencies created by excessive debt, just as a home-owner might put off roof repairs to pay off credit card extravagances.

Finally, there is the factor of a globalization of business. Among the many familiar American names that have fallen into foreign hands in the past decade are Pillsbury, Farmers Insurance, Carnation, Firestone Tires, Macmillan Publishing, CBS Records, Columbia Pictures, and Federated Department Stores. As multi-nationalism in commerce expands with international trade and economic growth abroad, more and more
mergers will be undertaken as a means of furthering global strategic plans. This was true of the 1980s. And it will likely be true of the 1990s as well.

It will be interesting to see whether the numbers generated by the 1990s will top those of the 1980s. If they do, the hope must be that the market for corporate control improves to the point of ousting those responsible for the poor qualities behind the numbers of recent decades past.

Notes

1 Mergers and Acquisitions (March/April, 1990), p. 95.
2 Mergers and Acquisitions (July/August, 1989), p. 68.
7 Mergers and Acquisitions (March/April, 1990), p. 95.
14 For Aristotle's observations see Ernest Barker (ed.), The Politics of Aristotle.


31 Hughes, *op. cit.*, Ravenscraft and Scherer, *op. cit.*, and Rhoades, *op. cit.*


36 Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp. 94–95.


39 *Business Week*, July 5, 1969, p. 34.


Employee Loyalty:
The Tie That Binds

Nancie Fimbel

N THE years since 1986 when Congress amended the 1863 False Claims Act, employees and ex-employees have filed suits against their companies at the rate of nearly one a week. These people have a strong monetary incentive because, under the provisions of the amendment, those who know of instances of fraud against the federal government are guaranteed 15 to 25 percent of the penalty awarded to the government by the courts. Guilty companies may be fined $10,000 for each instance of wrongdoing and up to three times the amount of the original false claim. The first award under the amendment went to an ex-employee of Industrial Tectonics who, in July, 1989, was awarded $1.4 million after the company was found guilty of overcharging the Air Force and Navy for ball bearings.

Although the False Claims Act Amendments may help to uncover fraud against the government that went undetected before 1986, the new law does not make heroes of whistle-blowers; in fact, they are just as likely to be labeled as disloyal as they always were. Despite some signs of acceptance, whistle-blowing is still widely characterized as "airing dirty laundry" or "squealing on the company." That "do-gooders" who complain publicly about the company that pays them can receive huge payments for being "tattle-tales" or "snitches" adds to the angry disapproval from those who see whistle-blowing as the ultimate act of disloyalty.

Yet what have whistle-blowers done to deserve such condemnation? They have tried to prevent their companies from marketing unsafe products to the American public. They have exposed ways in which taxpayers' money has been spent illegally. They have uncovered dishonesty among the highest executives of the company. Their sin is that they have rocked the corporate boat, left the corporate team. They have betrayed the group which claimed—whether or not deserved—the strongest allegiance of their lives.

Should they have acted otherwise? Do corporations have a right to
their employees's unconditional allegiance? Is loyalty an employee obligation? How does it benefit a business? The discussion that follows seeks to sort through the considerations that require attention before these questions can be answered.

**Loyalty Defined**

In ordinary conversation, the term loyalty is used as a compliment to indicate the faithfulness or constancy of a person to an abstract concept, such as a country, or to another individual. The term implies that a relationship exists between the person and the object of loyalty; people are said to be loyal to their own countries and their own mothers but not to all countries or motherhood in general. This relationship may be obvious only to the individual or to others, or it may be obvious to both.

Philosophers who have addressed the issue of loyalty have often restricted its definition. Josiah Royce, for example, considers the term appropriate only in describing a person's relationship to a cause, such as a country, a religion, or a company. John Ladd, by contrast, restricts the use of the term to relationships between an individual and other individuals or groups. For him the term is properly used in naming the relationship a lord may have with his servant or a parent with her child. In this discussion, loyalty will be used to refer to relationships, with both causes and people.

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**Figure 1: Three Definitions of Loyalty**

**Emotional Loyalty**

A feeling of devotion to a person, group, or concept with whom one has a relationship.

**Behavioral Loyalty**

A judgment by others about a person's behaviors toward another person, group, or concept; the behaviors include regular and appropriate attention to the object of loyalty to fulfill the obligations of the relationship established by the loyal person and/or social convention.

**Minimal Loyalty**

A judgment by others based on the maintenance of a relationship established by a person with another person, group, or concept.
As shown in Figure 1, the term is used with at least three distinct meanings. First and most often, loyalty connotes an emotion, a willing subordination of personal interests to those of the object of loyalty. When a daughter or club member describes herself as loyal, she probably means that she is wholeheartedly devoted to her parent or the goals and/or members of the club. In this context, one may properly speak of loyalty as "developing" or "deepening."

Only the individual knows whether he or she feels the enthusiasm that accompanies emotional loyalty. For, once embedded in the individual, loyalty becomes the reason for making behavioral choices, and these behaviors may continue long after the emotion is gone. Then, because of his one-time loyalty, a person might perform an action in which he does not believe. Observers, who must base their judgments about loyalty on the behaviors they see, may not be able to discriminate between enthusiasm and reluctance. For example, when a club member agrees to design invitations to an event sponsored by his club, his offer may be the expression of his loyalty to the goals of the club. Even if he does not favor the event, he may still design the invitations—and do so wholeheartedly. But he may also design them reluctantly, and his loyalty may be diminished by the group's decision to sponsor the particular event. Other club members may not perceive his reluctance since he has, in fact, performed an act (that of designing the invitations) that appears to indicate his loyalty.

Second, observers describe as loyal those people who give a group or person what is owed in a specified relationship. "A loyal soldier," for example, means "a dutiful soldier." People have a choice about entering into all but a few relationships; but, once they agree to enter one, they have little choice about how to fulfill it loyally. Their obligation is defined by written and oral social expectations. The more clearly defined the obligations, of course, the easier to judge the degree of compliance.

Specific obligations of loyalty are one-way: The soldier's obligations to her superiors are different from those they have to her. Further, even if her superiors are not loyal to her, the soldier can continue to be loyal to them.

Finally, loyalty may designate merely a regular, continued relationship with an organization or individuals. The usual meaning of "a loyal customer" is someone who shops at a certain store or buys a certain item repeatedly; "a loyal citizen" votes regularly and lives constantly within the law.

In ordinary circumstances, the three meanings of loyalty are not carefully distinguished. It is often assumed that those who evidence loyal behavior do so because of the emotion they feel toward the object of loyalty. But, unless the loyal person says he or she feels loyalty, such assumptions may be mistaken. "A loyal employee" may mean a person who has remained with the company for many years; it may mean a
person who fulfills a certain role by performing appropriate actions; or it may mean a person who feels devotion to the firm or its employees.

Employee Loyalty

*Minimal Commitment.* Employee loyalty requires at least the continuation of the relationship between an employee and the firm. In some jobs in the United States, little else is expected. Temporary and part-time employees, for example, are not criticized for having a strong, perhaps even a primary, allegiance to something else—perhaps family, perhaps a full-time job. They are assumed to be working at the part-time job to satisfy a financial need or other peripheral interest. Take the case of a lawyer who teaches a college course part-time. He expects college administrators to be forgiving if he must cancel a class because of his legal workload or schedule. He also does not expect to be required to attend college social functions or to advise students.

Nor do employers expect more than minimal loyalty from those employed in the lowest levels of company hierarchies. Dishwashers in restaurants, counter clerks at fast food restaurants, cashiers at retail outlets, and other such unskilled, low-paid workers must arrive at the job regularly, promptly, and ready to put in an adequate work effort. That is all. But if they show more than basic loyalty, such workers may earn promotions to more responsible and more creative work.

In most jobs, maintaining a steady relationship with a company is not sufficient to earn an employee a clear reputation for loyalty. That category is reserved for those who enter into a more active relationship with the firm, as will be shown by examining the expectations of employers and colleagues of a full-time, skilled employee.

*Behavioral Loyalty.* In U.S. workplaces, behavioral loyalty involves speaking well of the company and otherwise supporting it enthusiastically. Outsiders and insiders alike expect loyal employees to defend publicly the policies, practices, and products or services of the company. If an employee hears a disparaging remark about the company or one of its employees, he or she is expected to contradict or excuse or explain away the accusation. Even in job interviews, experts advise interviewees to describe but not to evaluate their previous workplaces. Mere descriptions prevent interviewees from being judged as chronic complainers or as talebearers who will air company weaknesses to outsiders.4

The job itself offers plenty of occasions for an employee to evidence loyalty. Working diligently, helping colleagues, speaking politely to outsiders, and in other ways showing that the assigned tasks are pleasant exhibit loyalty. Making an extra effort that benefits the company is taken to be a particularly clear sign. Working overtime to meet a deadline thus expresses loyalty, both to the abstract entity, the company, and to the supervisor, the person responsible for seeing that the job is done. The
employee's willingness to complete a task instead of going home to family or taking part in leisure activities suggests that the employee values the firm as her highest priority.

All such sacrifices indicate commitment and allegiance to the firm, the supervisor, or both. Employees who defer to the legal and moral wishes of a supervisor, even when they do not agree with a proposed decision, show that they are willing to suspend their own considered judgments for the harmony—and perhaps the good—of the organization. They thereby acknowledge that they are team players, willing to help the organization achieve its goals in whatever way they are asked.

It does not spoil the point that these actions may define something in addition to or even in place of loyalty. The person who works late may be a perfectionist compelled to finish a project before turning to another activity. Or he may be afraid of losing his job if he does not finish the task at hand. Or he may be avoiding an unpleasant home situation. Perhaps he wishes to build an excellent personal record so he can move to another company at a higher level. Or he may find enjoyable the work he is doing, regardless of whether it helps the company. Despite these possible interpretations, the behavior alone causes most people to judge the person who willingly works late as loyal to the company.

Given that companies are primarily interested in increasing their profits, employers will benefit from encouraging these actions on the assumption that the behavior is an indicator of loyalty. Employees who work efficiently and harmoniously with colleagues have high productivity. Employees who build a positive company image lure customers to buy products. Because the actions recognized as loyalty will advance an employee's career, give her a good reputation with colleagues, and make her working life more pleasant, it is usually also in the best interests of an employee to behave loyally.

The Development of Emotional Loyalty. When it develops at all, emotional loyalty is seen in employees who endorse the organization's values. These values are transmitted by the actions of others, especially immediate supervisors and top executives. Immediate supervisors are easily accessible and constantly visible. Their example and their reactions to employees's requests for time off, second or third beers at lunch, and other ordinary situations teach employees what is acceptable to those who are successful in the company.

The contents of memos from top managers convey to employees what issues are important to the company; the writing style conveys their attitude toward employees. For example, memos from executives at E.F. Hutton encouraged division managers throughout the country to increase profits by using bank float aggressively. Perhaps the flamboyant, informal style of memos of George Ball, then president of Hutton, encouraged his subordinates to think they operated in an anything-goes environment where even creating float, a technique that cheats banks out
of interest profit, was acceptable.

External communications to customers, vendors, government agencies, and especially to the general public also teach employees their company's standards. Only employees who are proud of the reputation the company develops from these external communications are likely to develop emotional loyalty to the company. For example, when Proctor and Gamble attempted to defend the Rely tampon after it was discovered to cause toxic shock syndrome in some women, employees throughout P&G were "kidded" sarcastically by bank tellers, friends, and others about how concerned their company was about consumer safety. Employee morale declined. Only after the company recalled the product did employees again express their pride in P&G.

Further, emotional loyalty develops more easily when employees believe that the product or service they offer is needed. Pet fuzzballs may sell well for a few months and bring their inventors a great deal of money, but employees at the fuzzball firm cannot develop loyalty to their company on the basis of its making the world a better place. (Of course, they may still develop emotional loyalty to a particular person in the company and be willing to follow him to another company when fuzzballs have run their course.)

The quality of a company's service or product also influences whether employees develop emotional loyalty. Employees who believe in the excellence of the product they are making have less difficulty investing their time and energy into their work than do those who regard their product as mediocre. Employees whose company's products are mediocre sometimes believe that eventually they can make the product excellent, which gives them at least a temporary sense of purpose and a resultant strong loyalty.

Emotional loyalty is also evident in employees who are proud of their particular work. Especially in large corporations, employees will be apt to develop emotional ties only if they feel satisfied about their contribution to the final product. Those who believe anyone can do their work and those whose individual jobs are far removed from the final product will tend to have a more difficult time developing emotional loyalty. Even if they are rewarded for good work and even if they believe in the value of the product, unless they see how they have contributed to that product, they may feel detached and unimportant. The allegiance of this group is more likely to be to a supervisor than to the company as a whole.

The benefits that a company uses as rewards must be distributed equitably, too, for loyalty to be engendered and to persist. Employees expect treatment proportionally equal to that given to fellow employees. For example, tuition reimbursement must be available to all employees who meet certain clearly defined criteria. Otherwise, the employee is likely to think the policy unfair. An employee who believes unfairness exists in the firm is not generally able to develop loyalty to it, even if he or
she is a recipient of benefits.

In addition, before they can develop emotional loyalty, most people need a support group of peers who make them feel they belong to the group. Accountants who have left public accounting firms often complain that the lack of a stable work group prevented them from developing, in-house, satisfying interpersonal relationships. Thus, they developed loyalty to their profession but not to a particular firm, and they did not hesitate to accept a job offer from a client.5

Employees's emotional loyalty can be influenced—or manipulated—by specific employer actions. Perquisites are used most commonly to instill loyalty. A review of the literature describing ways in which supervisors can increase employee loyalty yields these suggestions:

- Recognize employee achievements by praising long-time employees and awarding raises and promotions frequently.

- Include employees in decision-making by asking for their opinions and by communicating with them honestly and frequently.

- Provide benefits such as discounts, child care programs, fitness classes, profit-sharing, and pre-retirement planning.

- Encourage employees to make social commitments to each other by establishing training programs with mentors and by sponsoring teams and parties.

Bonuses pay employees for their sacrifices of time and energy. They cause employees to feel grateful to the company for its generosity or obligated to balance these gifts by continued hard work and praise for the company. Because of such perquisites, employees may mistakenly come to believe that they owe their companies emotional loyalty; their sense of justice tells them that they must repay the company for these extra benefits.6 In truth, however, they have already paid. They have supplied the company with expertise, time, energy, care, and behavioral loyalty. They owe it nothing further. Emotional loyalty is not an obligation but a gift that only the employee may bestow. Employers and employees who misunderstand emotional loyalty can develop false expectations that bring to light the negative dimensions of loyalty.

The Dark Side of Employee Loyalty. To be faithful to the devil is no virtue. Before loyalty can be praised, the object of a person's loyalty must be shown to be worthy. A company or supervisor that does not trust or value employees, that violates their rights, or that treats them unjustly deserves no loyalty. The workplace provides plenty of opportunity for unethical attitudes and behavior. Employees may be asked to share complicity in a
wrongdoing. They may be asked to look the other way while others act illegally or unethically or self-interestedly. Some employees may be expected to do less than their best work. Employees may discover they have been ignored or lied to or not given credit for an idea. Employees’s behavior may not be supported or rewarded by a supervisor. Employees may realize that no matter what their accomplishments, they are no longer eligible for improved company benefits. Employees may be asked to accede to the judgment of another in exchange for a later favor. Employees may discover that the company’s policies are arbitrary or unnecessary.

Sometimes, employees are not themselves asked to behave wrongly, but they learn that one employee has treated another unethically. This places them in the position of reporting the wrongdoing to someone with the power to take action or of implicitly condoning what has been done. Neither alternative is ethically comfortable: Most people do not like to assert themselves as morally superior to others, especially to hierarchical superiors whose values are unknown. But neither do they like to allow another to get away with wrong behavior if the company or its employees will have to pay a price for such behavior. An employer who knowingly makes another face this dilemma or who does nothing to correct an unethical situation deserves no emotional loyalty.

In The Moral Status of Loyalty, Marcia Baron summarizes other problems with loyalty. She argues that by definition loyalty includes partiality, acting on behalf of one’s own group. Sometimes what is good for one group is not good for others; acting can, then, lead to unfair actions, as when a company makes high profits at the expense of polluting the neighborhood in which it exists. In addition, acting partially is often the same as acting discriminatorily and makes decisions difficult to justify. People do not accept as logical the argument that something ought to be done or not done simply because a particular person or company has a stake in the outcome.7

In sum, it is possible to be too loyal; people evidencing this excess are termed “blindly loyal,” by which is meant they are unwilling to judge a situation on its own merits. Instead, they close-mindedly agree to the position of the object of their loyalty because they have declared allegiance to this object. Surely this inflexibility, this stubbornness is unjustifiable. It is nonsense to assume that because a person has proved worthy of allegiance in the past, he or she will always deserve allegiance in the future. Even if the object of loyalty provides gifts to bolster the faithful, it will be the case that mature, ethical decision-makers, will use their judgment each time they consider taking an action.

Nonetheless, blind loyalty is understandable. Since disagreeing with the object of loyalty, particularly in the workplace, may be mistaken by others as acting disloyally, such disagreement exacts a high cost. People want to be thought of as loyal. And they want to be loyal. Loyalty is a form
of well-being; it indicates inclusion in a relationship that bestows status, esteem, and even self-fulfillment on its participants. In addition to satisfying basic human needs, the work group can provide a larger purpose than the self for which to exert effort; that is, it can actually give meaning to life. To call into question the values of one's own group can be, then, to take a courageous but lonely stand.

The process by which loyalty erodes is, therefore, understandably slow. Although some incidents are offensive enough to destroy loyalty in themselves, most merely chip away at loyalty; only when they accumulate will an employee consider leaving the firm, the ultimate act of employee disloyalty.

The Erosion of Emotional Loyalty. The first offense a company or supervisor commits against an employee's moral values usually causes surprise and uneasiness. The feeling may last only momentarily, especially if other employees do not react negatively to the incident. But the feeling may persist until the employee can reestablish internal equilibrium by satisfactorily justifying what has happened. Often, a first doubt about a company's or a supervisor's values is handled personally and silently. Regaining inner peace may, however, involve asking a colleague, a supervisor, or a spouse for help in clarifying why the behavior has occurred.

An incident to which the employee cannot adjust begins to erode the employee's loyalty. Even if he ultimately dismisses the initial incident, a second is likely to remind him of it. Subsequent incidents may lead the employee to wonder whether he fits in the company and to consider, perhaps vaguely, leaving it. If this pattern continues, the employee will often ultimately resign.

Before a resignation, an employee's morale will probably decline. She may begin to complain often and loudly; she may withdraw from most personal associations in the company. In other words, a dissatisfied employee tends to withdraw from the company emotionally by finding fault with it or by detaching from its benefits. These are ways of renouncing the group so that it is no longer hers.

To counteract their desire to disown the company, some employees, especially those with seniority or high status, will try to renew their loyalty. They may talk about what disturbs them and ask colleagues or supervisors for an explanation or rationale. If they cannot accept the answers provided, they may seek reasons for the offensive behavior from higher company authorities. If they still remain dissatisfied, they probably cannot sustain emotional loyalty.

At this point, most employees will simply leave the firm, concluding that the values of the company are different from their own. If, however, they think the offensive behavior is serious, they may decide that they have an obligation as a loyal citizen or as a responsible human being to make the behavior known throughout the company or even to an outside public source. These actions are whistle-blowing.8
An employee who blows the whistle on a company may be making one last, desperate attempt to preserve his loyalty. He wants “his” company to act responsibly. Alternatively, an employee who blows the whistle may already have dissociated from the company; to his mind, this company—which is no longer “his”—must be forced to do the right thing. Perhaps the whistle blower’s motives are consumer safety, or perhaps they are revenge for the pain the company has caused him. The public, with no way to distinguish moral concern from personal vindictiveness, tends to place the onus of proving company immorality on the employee because of the valuable consequences of loyalty to social relations.

**Appropriate Employee Loyalty.** How much employee loyalty should companies expect? People who accept work in a particular company enter into a voluntary relationship with an organization and a group of people, to some of whom they acquiesce in power. Those with power have a right to expect minimal and behavioral loyalty from all employees, and they have a right to try to earn an employee’s emotional loyalty.

Minimal loyalty is necessary to define a work group; unless employees stay in continuous relationship with the company, no company will exist. Behavioral loyalty is socially necessary. Companies must be able to rely on the members of the group that is the company to accept its goals and to work in concert with other group members to achieve them. Of course, the company benefits from employees who work diligently for it. But employees also benefit: they gain financial security, self-esteem from the group, and purpose for their lives by helping to produce social goods.

The benefits to employees are even greater if they develop emotional allegiance to the company, but the penalties for misplacing their faithfulness are greater, too. Emotional loyalty is not an employee duty. Employees may owe more loyalty to other groups, such as families. And moral maturity requires that employees be loyal primarily to personal ethical standards, not to group conventions. In fact, if the company violates their personal values, employees have a responsibility to withhold their respect and faithfulness. Not doing so compromises their integrity, even if it ensures their membership in the group. Employees should test whether the company continues to speak for them every time it announces a decision in their name.

Nor can loyalty be argued to be owed to a company or its representatives on the basis of justice. Beyond the benefits to which they agree when hiring an employee, employers give employees further benefits gratuitously; employees owe them nothing in return. Employees are already contributing to company profits, which, by definition, are monies the company receives from underpaying employees or overcharging customers.

Firms and managers may certainly treat employees well in the hope that employees will become emotionally loyal, but they cannot expect to buy loyalty, any more than a suitor can expect to buy love by offering gifts.
to a beloved. To the extent that loyalty is an emotion in an employee, it cannot be controlled by the object of loyalty. In fact, companies owe employees a workplace conducive to the development of emotional loyalty. Since loyalty is fostered in an atmosphere of justice, human decency, and mutual respect to which employees are entitled, it follows that employees are entitled to work in an environment in which allegiance may develop. The company is not legally required to provide such a workplace, except in the most general way, but the company will serve its own interests best if it fosters an environment where loyalty can develop.

Psychologically, people probably need to feel loyal to someone or something. They may be tempted to surrender their unconditional loyalty to a company which provides them their livelihood and in which they spend most of their productive hours. Companies have no overt reason not to accept employee faithfulness. It is a company’s duty, however, to convince employees that it does not want group harmony for its own sake nor does it want unthinking dedication. The company must emphasize to employees that only when its goals are moral does it deserve allegiance. It must encourage employees not to make unethical decisions or agree to unethical actions—for the long-term protection of the group—and it must provide employees with outlets for voicing suspected wrongdoing. Only after acting in these ways will a company really benefit from employee loyalty.

Notes

7 Ibid., pp. 5–9.
8 Frederick Elliston, John Keenan, Paula Lockhart, and Jan van Schaick, Whistleblowing Research: Methodological and Moral Issues (New York: Praeger,
Although the stages of moral maturity are currently under intense scholarly debate, it seems clear that the individual who does what others in the work group do because others do it is using a less mature approach to decision-making than the person who acts according to a principle (for example, of rights, justice, utility, or care).
Barbara Moulton, Early Whistleblower

Roberta Ann Johnson

THREE decades ago, on February 19, 1960, at age 44, a medical doctor named Barbara Moulton resigned her job at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and in testimony to Congress went public about the agency’s questionable and corrupt practices. Although hers was part of an “epidemic of resignations,” she did not resign in silence. Barbara Moulton was a whistle blower before the term was even coined, when she testified about nontrivial wrongdoing in the agency where she had worked. Her letter of resignation was addressed to George P. Larrick, U.S. Commissioner of Food and Drugs. It called for a “militant Food and Drug Administration,” referring to “hundreds of people” who “suffer daily” and the many who die because “the Food and Drug Administration has failed utterly in its solemn task of enforcing those sections of the law dealing with the safety and misbranding of drugs, particularly prescription drugs.” Her letter was never sent; but rather it was read into The Congressional Record and became part of the testimony that Moulton gave as a star witness, June, 1960, for the Senate Subcommittee on Anittrust and Monopoly of the Committee on the Judiciary, chaired by Estes Kefauver (D., Tenn.).

Eventually, in 1962, Moulton’s recommendations would be adopted by FDA, but not because of the merits of her arguments, the will of Congress, the interest of a popular President, or aggressive lobbying by consumer groups. Reform came because of the dramatic events related to the now-notorious sedative, Thalidomide.

The author wishes to thank Kelly McLean, a student at the University of San Francisco, for her research assistance.
Originally heralded as a “miracle” drug and a “wonder” drug, Thalidomide was “implicated in the birth . . . of thousands of armless, legless, earless and otherwise malformed babies . . . .” In 1961, another medical doctor at FDA, Frances Oldham Kelsey, kept Thalidomide off the American consumer market, despite great pressure from the drug industry to approve it. That was the major problem that Moulton and Kelsey both experienced in drug regulation—the hold the drug industry had over the FDA.

In 1960, Moulton blew the whistle and revealed the cozy relationship between the FDA and the drug industry that the FDA was charged to regulate. In a recent interview, she graphically described the close ties between the industry and FDA. She said, for example, that in her work at FDA, while she “insisted on Dutch Treat, everyone else [in FDA] was wined and dined” by representatives of the drug industry. “The problem was endemic,” according to one of Moulton’s colleagues, John Nestor.

The most flagrant and well-publicized example concerned Henry Welch, who was chief of the antibiotics division of FDA and also editor of two privately owned journals which were financially dependent on drug manufacturers. Welch earned a quarter of a million dollars in one year by using his position to organize drug symposia papers and to endorse drug industry-related products.

The most publicized example of Welch’s conflict of interest concerned his involvement with a combination of antibiotics called Sigmamycin. Saturday Review called Welch the “chief blitzer” in an advertising campaign on behalf of the chemical ingredients in Sigmamycin, manufactured by Pfizer. In 1956, Moulton had been one of a number of scientists who criticized Welch for inflated claims that Sigmamycin brought the “blessings” of “synergistic combinations of drugs” and exemplified the “third era of antibiotic medicine.”

Moulton was especially critical of the FDA approval process for having standards that differed from division to division. For example, Welch’s antibiotics division had a more lenient approval process than the new drug branch. When she reviewed the evidence of safety and efficacy of Sigmamycin, whose praises as a “miracle” antibiotic were being sung by Welch, she found the tests to be below expected standards for new drugs, whether antibiotics or not.

Seeking an in-house corrective of the situation, Moulton presented her supervisor and former supervisor with substantial data on the “tragic results from abuse of antibiotic therapy.” She hoped to persuade them to strengthen the approval process and move it from Welch’s division. But “the only answer [she] received was that Dr. Welch had a great reputation and added luster to the name of the Food and Drug Administration, and that nothing could or should be done against him.”

Moulton was transferred against her wishes from the New Drug
Branch after completing a month-long project in which she succeeded in showing why a particular drug application should not be approved. Despite this success, she was moved out of the New Drug Branch because, she said, she "was not sufficiently polite to members of the pharmaceutical industry, and one of the large firms had written... requesting that [she] no longer be permitted to handle their new drug applications." Her example, she said, was a warning to others. "There is nothing but discouragement offered to those who advocate a more vigorous enforcement policy."\

According to Kelsey in a recent interview, Moulton "was with the vanguard of reform," she had the "interest of the public and agency at heart," she "wasn't treated too kindly," and as a "matter of principle she resigned." To Nestor, Moulton was a "heroine." When she blew the whistle in her congressional testimony, "she threw the first bomb". In addition to her revealing testimony about the drug industry's influence over FDA, she was the first to suggest to the Kefauver Committee that in the drug area, one cannot "prove safety in a vacuum. . . . You must prove efficacy as well as toxicity." Put simply, she was arguing that FDA should make sure that the drugs that are approved for sale perform to the standards promised.

Two factors improved the chances for publicity and thus the chances for public education on the issue of FDA responsibility and drug safety: the status and talents of Senator Kefauver and the personal characteristics of Moulton. Kefauver had become chair of the Antitrust and Monopoly Subcommittee in 1957 and two years later began an extensive and highly publicized investigation of prices in the drug industry. He was adept at getting effective media coverage.

While Moulton also received media attention, "I did not get instant publicity from the hearings," she recalled. Nevertheless, her personal background helped draw attention to her whistleblowing and led to press coverage of drug industry issues. First of all, the noteworthiness of her family name set Moulton apart. She was a member of a family long distinguished in American science (her father was founding director of the Brookings Institution, and an uncle was operating head of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and for a period only one other family name appeared more often than the Moulton name in Who's Who in America). Her education, experience, and advanced training also gave her credibility with the press and public. She was a graduate of George Washington University Medical School; she had graduate training in bacteriology (M.A. and had passed preliminary exams for the Ph.D); she had advanced training in surgery, had taught anatomy at George Washington University, and had also practiced medicine.

In addition, that Moulton was a woman increased public interest in her
in at least two ways. First, it was unusual, even more so then, for a woman to have her level of education and responsibility: that she was a "lady doctor" made hers a more interesting story. And second, consumers, toward whom the safety issues were geared, were considered to be mostly female, so that Moulton's gender may have given her more clout with women in raising issues of drug safety.

Finally, Moulton's whistleblowing had given her some notoriety as well. Willingness to go public with in-house scandals and thereby to lose one's immediate livelihood calls for courage; the risks she took sparked interest in her issues. She was aware that reprisals would most certainly follow her resignation and public testimony. Referring to those who shared her knowledge and her views but remained silent, she said,

... few are willing to risk the security of their positions by stating those views publicly. They all have families to support, and I cannot blame them. I am fully aware that in making this statement I have jeopardized, perhaps irreparably, my own opportunities for future Government employment.

Nevertheless, I feel so strongly the danger of a weak and ineffective regulatory program in this most vital area, that such a statement from one who knows the agency from the inside seems essential. 19

Thus, her background, gender, and story combined to stir interest in her issues; with the Kefauver Committee, she had a platform to mount a fight for change.

Moulton's public appearance at Congressional hearings had an impact on practices and procedures that she had tried unsuccessfully to change as an FDA employee. The specificity of her charges and the amount of detailed information she used to support her arguments to the committee added credibility. But while her exposure of the FDA resulted in some changes, according to Nestor, the FDA "was still not that scared of Kefauver." 20

The most dramatic change that followed the 1960 hearings was a "forced resignation." Arthur H. Flemming, Secretary of Health Education and Welfare, asked for Welch's resignation because of the publicity given to his flagrant conflict of interest. Further investigations of Welch's activities continued. A second fallout from the Senate Hearings was that Flemming called for two investigations into FDA's affairs; one investigation was scientific, the other, administrative.

The scientific inquiry, carried out by a National Academy of Sciences panel, advised that Moulton's recommendation be implemented; that is, that laws be changed to require new drugs to be proved effective as well as safe. But the FDA ignored the panel's advice. The administrative
investigation resulted in a report that addressed the close ties between industry and agency. The report urged an end to fraternization between FDA officers and drug makers. In January, 1961, Commissioner Larrick's deputy circulated a memo to all FDA staff calling for obedience to this injunction against fraternization. However, for some who worked in FDA, the change was seen as being more on paper than in enforcement, although, as Nestor noted, "at least now, there were memos to quote." 

In addition to the non-fraternization memo and the removal of Welch, Moulton's impact on FDA could be charted in the ways that her forthrightness and clear ethical standards greatly influenced her FDA successor, Frances Kelsey, as would become clear almost as soon as Kelsey took office. Kelsey attended the Kefauver hearing to listen to Moulton's testimony. The two women became friends.

A few months later, in September, 1960, William S. Merrill Company submitted an application to FDA for permission to market a sedative called Thalidomide. Evaluating this drug application was Kelsey's first assignment. About that assignment she later wrote:

At that time, new drugs were cleared for marketing on the basis of safety claims alone. The agency had 60 days to reach a decision that safety data were adequate or to notify the sponsor of observed deficiencies in the application. Failure to communicate by the 60th day would result in automatic approval of the drug.

From September, 1960, until March, 1962, when Merrill withdrew its application for sale of Thalidomide in the United States, Kelsey consistently resisted continuous and direct drug company pressure to approve the drug. She also withstood drug company pressure on her through her branch chief, Ralph Smith. There was even a threat, April 19, 1961, that a Merrill Vice President would go to Kelsey's top supervisor, Commissioner Larrick, if she did not approve the drug soon. According to Nestor, who shared an office with Kelsey, the Merrill representative called her several times a day; finally she stopped answering the telephone. There were too many puzzles that she thought must be solved before a thorough job of evaluating the drug could be done. No approval without thorough evaluation was her firm stand.

According to Kelsey, "Little was known as to how [the drug] was absorbed and distributed. We thought this was of importance in this drug, since it behaved rather differently from other drugs which were rather closely related; and furthermore, animal studies did not parallel human experiences." For example, it was a sleeping pill, yet it did not put animals to sleep and a person could not take an overdose of it.

While Kelsey continued her investigation and while she waited for the
additional data on Thalidomide which she had requested from the drug company, she happened to read in a British medical journal a short item that referred to a peripheral neuritis that seemed to accompany prolonged use of the drug. The item was only a letter to the editor from a doctor complaining of side effects of tingling, numbness, and coldness of the extremities which seemed to be caused by long use of Thalidomide and which seemed to stop when the patient stopped taking the drug. Kelsey was interested in severity of the side effects, their frequency, and their reversibility; she asked Merrill for more data. On September 6 and 7, 1961, the drug company brought in a dozen investigators to argue that the side effects were minimal and reversible. Merrill continued to pressure for speedy approval.

Kelsey was strengthened in her resistance to company pressure by personal encouragement and support. Moulton encouraged and privately "coached" Kelsey on "ways and means of avoiding some of the political booby traps Moulton herself had previously fallen into." Others also helped. The deputy director of the medical division, Irwin Siegel, resisted compromise too, as he was a buffer between Kelsey and both Smith, her branch supervisor, and her division director.27 Siegel was "advising her every step of the way" and "kept her out of trouble," said co-worker Nestor.28 Kelsey was also supported by other "Young Turks" in the FDA and by her pharmacologist husband who sat up nights with her trying to understand the chemical analysis that Merrill had submitted with its application.29

Yet another aid for Kelsey as she sought to do her job carefully, was that Congress had had some impact on the FDA. Moulton's exposé of the FDA in the Congressional hearings of the previous year had laid convincing groundwork for the accusation that the FDA had been captured by industry. Her testimony helped pave the way for change at the FDA. In fact, at this time, a case against Welch was about to go to a grand jury. Moulton had had a strong effect on Kelsey's actions in two ways. First, Moulton was a role model. Second, Moulton's independent and informed Senate testimony affected Kelsey's working milieu and thus contributed to Kelsey's ability to do her job effectively. Kelsey's insistence on taking the time that thoroughness required prevented an American tragedy.

On April 4, 1962, Helen Taussig left a call with Nestor's message exchange. She was Professor of Pediatrics at Johns Hopkins University. Nestor had been a fellow at Johns Hopkins working with Taussig a decade before. She had just gotten back from one month in Germany and two weeks in England and Scotland. She returned from Europe armed with statistics and photos demonstrating a link between Thalidomide and birth defects.

Phocomelia (or sealed limbs) was epidemic in Europe. Radioactivity, x-
rays, contaminated food, or detergents were thought to be possible explanations for the condition; but in November, 1961, a German doctor discovered the link with Thalidomide. This link was confirmed in Australia, then in Scotland. Taussig came home concerned about protecting America's unborn. Thalidomide had been distributed to more than 3,000 women in the United States in the guise of a clinical test, but really as a part of a marketing promotion. Kelsey said recently that even she had not realized when she was evaluating the drug how widely it had already been disseminated. After Nestor spoke with Taussig, he connected her with Kelsey, so the latter could hear the evidence.

By this time, Merrill had already withdrawn its application for approval from FDA. But the all-too cozy relationship between industry and agency meant that the FDA had not yet ordered withdrawal of the drug from doctors who had been disseminating it for "testing." The FDA had left it completely up to Merrill to contact the doctors to return or destroy the pills that were left. It was estimated that since 1959, a total of more than two and half million Thalidomide tablets had been distributed, as well as lesser quantities of liquids and powders containing the drug. On hearing Taussig's report, both Kelsey and Siegel immediately wrote memos to Commissioner Larrick about the drug's connection with birth defects and emphasized the importance of stopping its use. No FDA action followed. Taussig also wrote to Larrick and received only a curt note back. After two weeks of no FDA action, Nestor went to Larrick's office to find out why American doctors had not been told to stop dispensing Thalidomide, although the agency had the power to order and monitor the drug's withdrawal. Months later, Commissioner Larrick still defended both his hands-off decision and Merrill's inadequate efforts to inform the medical profession, even in the face of the fact, which he admitted at this time, that some of the drug was still on the market. Even the pressure of Congressional hearings did not cause FDA to take a more active role in withdrawing the drug from use. But public outcry did.

In May, Rep. Emanuel Cellar (D., NY) had scheduled hearings for the House Antitrust Subcommittee. Taussig was called as a witness. On the projector which she brought, she displayed some gruesome pictures. The Washington Post, The Washington Star and The New York Times all had representatives at the hearing. Nestor was among those who expected prominent media attention to be given to Taussig's message. But even though the press tables were filled, no articles saw print. Nestor was so upset by the absence of publicity for this appearance that he called a Kefauver Committee staff member, E. Wayles Browne, to warn him that the aims of the upcoming Kefauver hearing were in jeopardy because of the lack of publicity on the issue. Nestor's alert more than a month before the Kefauver Committee hearings were scheduled to begin, prompted Kefauver to place a personal call to the editor of The Washington Post who
had him talk to a young reporter, Morton Mintz, about the importance of
the story and how it deserved press coverage. Mintz was assigned to
cover the Kefauver hearings. At those hearings, once again, Taussig
showed her shocking slides.

In the belief that attention to Kelsey would make *The Washington Post*
more likely to publish his stories, Mintz made her the focal point of his
coverage. According to an FDA publication written 25 years later, it was
Mintz's first article on July 15, 1962, that ignited the public. "This is the
story of how the skepticism and stubbornness of a government physi­
cian prevented what could have been an appalling American
tragedy . . .," Mintz began. His story was picked up by the wire services
and after that, according to William Grigg, then of the *Washington Star,*
"You could not turn the pages of a newspaper, a news magazine, or pic­
ture magazine—nor even *Scientific American*—without these powerless,
limbless infants staring up at you." The public panicked over the issue of
drug safety.

President Kennedy had not supported strong consumer-oriented drug
legislation. In early 1962, he had sent to the House and the Senate a weak
bill developed without consulting Kefauver. But when the public
learned about Thalidomide via national publicity, the drug's effects
aroused "public horror," which was skillfully exploited by Kefauver. The
Thalidomide crisis was likened to "the calvary coming to the rescue
[of strong drug policy] at the nick of time."

By August 1, 1962, President Kennedy was assuring the public that
about 200 FDA staff were working on the recall of the supplies of
Thalidomide in this country and that he was urging Congress to tighten
existing drug laws. That year, a landmark drug law passed with provi­
sions that marked a major shift in drug policy: "The law tightened the
safety requirements for testing new prescription drugs on human sub­
jects and stipulated that patients be told if they are getting an experi­
mental drug. The law required that drug companies report adverse
effects during clinical tests and after marketing . . ., that a drug label carry
the common or generic name of the product, as well as its commercial
brand name; and that prescription drug advertising to doctors list side
effects along with the benefits of the drug." Also included in the law was
Barbara Moulton's recommendation that before approval a new drug
must be proved effective as well as safe.

The change that Moulton had recommended in her Senate testimony
was finally law. But in truth, important as the change of law was, this
whistleblower's impact on these and related events went far beyond one
new drug law. For Moulton had alerted Congress and the public to the
dangers of close ties between the drug industry and the FDA. This public
exposure helped change the climate and the rules within FDA and helped
rid the agency of its biggest offender, Henry Welch. She was also a model

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and mentor for Frances Kelsey, her successor in the FDA, whose crucial role in the Thalidomide case has been shown. Moulton's whistleblowing and coaching made it possible for Kelsey to resist industry pressure, thus both averting a great American tragedy and paving the way for the FDA to give more prominence in its policies to consumer safety.

Notes


2 Ibid., p. 12021.


5 Barbara Moulton, Interview, August 3 and November 15, 1989.

6 John Nestor, former employee, FDA, Interview, August 2, 1989.


8 Ibid., p. 40.

9 U.S. Senate Hearings, 1960, p. 12036.

10 Ibid., p. 12037.

11 Ibid., p. 12043.


13 Nestor, interview.

14 Moulton, interview.


16 Moulton, interview.

17 Lear, "Unfinished Story," p. 41.

18 Senate Hearings, 1960, p. 12019.

19 Ibid., p. 12044.

20 Nestor, interview.

21 Ibid.


24 Lear, pp. 36–37.

25 Nestor, interview.

26 Senate Hearings, 1962, p. 15.

28 Nestor, interview.

29 Jonathan.

30 Grigg.

31 Kelsey, interview.

32 Grigg.

33 Nadel, p. 125.


37 Grigg.
Conversation with Marguerite Duras

Alfred Cismaru

This work is mainly a collage and translation of two separate interviews in French granted by Marguerite Duras on March 20 and 22, 1990. It was not easy to talk to her on one subject alone. A question on a literary work often engendered a social or political commentary; an inquiry into her opinion of a contemporary event gave birth, at times, to remarks pertaining to a literary topic. All this, though, served better the attempt to grasp the quintessential Marguerite Duras in her senescence and poor physical health. This is not to say that old age or physical handicaps played havoc with the artist's perspicacity or ability to concentrate. On the contrary, she displayed an acrobatic agility in associations, in probing beyond the immediate and reaching areas which were pertinent, if distant.¹

There has been no attempt here to show that Duras was always on the right track, or that she could be always impartial or supply answers that were definitive or undebateable. Occasionally, one has even a pathetic feeling that she viewed the past, her past, as one in which she had had constantly the upper hand; and a present in which she was still desirable as a woman. There was a suspicion that she had forgotten that she was 76 years old at the time. Even when she was younger and she could stand erect, she was very short (4.7 feet—she looks much shorter now) and rather plump. Be that as it may, it was at age 70 that in 1984 she received the coveted Goncourt prize for the partially autobiographical novel called The Lover. It must have buoyed her spirit to learn that it sold more than half a million copies in France alone within the first two weeks after publication.

Autobiographies of artists and writers have always fascinated the public, even in such countries as France where the flames of spontaneous curiosity are doused by a great respect for privacy. Duras, though, never considered that privacy is an asset, always to be jealously guarded. From the 1950s The Sea Wall, to M.D. (1983), to The Lover (1984), and the latest,
Summer Rain (1990), she has always told (rather than suggested) personal and intimate details.

This candor is a principal characteristic of the "new novel" in which crypticity is made up by a structured sincerity punctuated by the first-person narration and quotations which reveal good memory and perhaps even some imagination. This characteristic explains a good deal of her success in novels, plays, and films. Almost always autobiographical in large part, all forms of art in which she engaged benefitted from a surprising degree of unabashedness. In the films especially (which afforded her more revenue than the novels and plays combined), she often appeared herself, in the company of friends and collaborators, and she was never so reticent as to avoid shocking the audience.

In The Sea Wall she had told about her sexual awakening at the hands of a Chinese lover, a rich man who had picked her up on a Saigon road where she had been waiting for a car to stop and snatch her away from misery. At 13 she was not quite ready for intercourse, and so she reached a compromise with the much older man: she would not allow him to touch her, but she would take a shower while he was watching; and his physical pleasure would derive from masturbation enhanced by the young, undulating body covered by pearls of water clinging teasingly on the tanned skin.

There had been a great deal more in The Sea Wall, but it is this episode which she enlarged in the much later The Lover. She stripped away the exotic background, the circumstantiality, the epic sweep of the tale, and instead threw into relief the stark, shocking romance of the poor French girl she was at age 15 and her more experienced Chinese lover. He would wait for her every day after school and then would fondle her in his limousine, and later love her in more leisurely fashion in his apartment. When she had written the earlier book, her mother was still alive, which prompted a certain indirectness. In The Lover, though, she was quite free to be as explicit as necessary about the daily sexual encounters, the amoral sensuousness of the frail child, and the worshipful deference of her Chinese admirer. And in between the descriptions, she gave details about the hysterical mother, the sadistic older brother, the victimized younger brother, and the nauseating beads of sweat which now remained glued to the body of the young girl. When she returned home, though, she had a chance to flaunt in the face of the entire family, by the appearance of her body, the results of the illicit sexual gymnastics performed in the course of the afternoon.

Marguerite Duras had had the upper hand in The Sea Wall and in The Lover, and as an adolescent, she was, of course, very desirable. But in M.D., published just before The Lover, she barely had the upper hand, and her desirability was an illusion. When questioned about the terrible bouts with drunkenness narrated seven years earlier in M.D., she was direct and quite unashamed, and perhaps also a little self-indulgent.
 QUESTION: You wrote M.D. seven years ago. As I recall, your roommate, or lover, Yann Andrea, helped write the book.

 ANSWER: He did more than that. He helped me. Period. His virility kept me sexually alive, which was not easy because alcohol is such a depressant. But obviously I could still turn on a young man. After making love, I would dictate to him a few pages, he would type them, read them aloud, and help me correct them.

 Q: There are rumors that he was also a heavy drinker.

 A: Not in the beginning. He loved me and he started to drink more and more just to keep me company. He ordered red wine for me by the case. We would bolt down a glass of wine, then a cup of coffee, then another glass of wine. Sometimes I would throw up, and he would clean my face and help me change my clothes. But then I would start again, and he would drink with me until we would fall into a stupor. Even in a stupor he stood by me.

 Q: You never fell into an eerie despair after such goings-on? You could still write?

 A: We lived in a twilight world then, but we were together. I know what has been said about us: that he stayed with me only because he was poor and I had enough money for both of us. I believe that he would have stayed with me regardless. At any rate, buying a gigolo is not any worse than buying dresses of the kind you are too old to wear; or jewelry that still fails to hide wrinkles or draw anybody's attention away from your dry skin. A gigolo is a much better investment. Yann, however, did not have the temperament of a gigolo.

 Q: You did not say how you were able to write.

 A: M.D. tells you that. It is the story of a depressing period, but it is above all the story of a recovery, albeit temporary. I imprisoned myself at the American Hospital in Paris and went through a painful drying-out sequence which was a nightmare—from which I awakened, however. Yann visited me every day. He bathed me, not the nurse, read to me until I dozed off, took voluminous notes of what I was able to say, and I used those notes when I became, gradually, well enough to hold pen in hand and write. My hand was shaking so, that most of the time I could not write.

 Q: Finally you did, though. The text appears to be a log of the day-to-day changes that took place under the influence of alcohol, this influence being at times greater, at times smaller. But these biological changes did not prevail in the book. There is more in the book about love, about the absoluteness of love.

 A: Of course. Love is an absolute. It is only marginally affected by biological changes; whereas everything you ingest affects your biology which is thus always in a state of flux. More than anyone before, Yann convinced me that love is an absolute, and that biology does not have to
restrict or constrict the potency of love.

Q: I ask this question with respect: isn't there some wishful thinking in such an assertion?

A: There is nothing wrong with wishful thinking. Think it hard enough and it will become reality. Look at the political world. We all thought that the tough regimes in Communist countries were wrong, and we had very little proof that changes were possible. But we wished very hard for them, and they came to be.

Q: Didn't these changes in the political arena come about because of a variety of reasons, rather than because of a sort of miracle brought about by wishful thinking?

A: Look, I had not read the newspapers for a couple of years before the end of 1989 or the beginning of 1990. I did not read because of my drinking. For the same reason I did not see any of my friends. Maybe also because I had always been a little anti-social. I saw only my two sons, but my true son was Yann. Then, one day, I opened Le Monde. I read about the budding revolution in Romania. I watched the news on television and I looked at the events in China. All this stuff was incredible. There is, then, something of a miracle. Just think of the wishful thinking that millions of the enslaved must have done, and how abruptly, the oneiric became real.

Q: You were in the hospital for nine months. First in the nothingness of coma, then in the almost awakened state of convalescence. What did you dream, or day-dream of?

A: I have been asking that myself. I have some precise recollections, and others that border on fantasy. One day I dreamt that I fell after throwing off the bed everything I could get hold of in order to find a comfortable spot on that bed. Only recently Yann told me that none of this happened, that I did not toss and turn, that mostly I was motionless. I was being tube-fed and I was tied to the bed. Then I awoke partially one day. I was incoherent when speaking to the nurse. I was told later by her that I had asked for my head to be shaved because I thought I had grown somebody else's hair. I thought at the time that she had confirmed my impression because I had imagined that she had informed me that my real hair, my teeth, my glasses, had remained in the crematory in Auschwitz where I had been killed. But all in all this was not entirely a dream. In reality, the most awful place I ever visited was Auschwitz. Auschwitz took the place of another organ in me, or had grown as an additional organ, which altered my makeup and made for the very definition of Marguerite Duras [her play, Aurelia Steiner, told the story of a survivor of Auschwitz].

Q: Then you awakened to the symphony of the revolution in Eastern Europe, to the epic events in Tienanmen Square. What were your reactions?

A: I was happy. The Stalinist oppression had lasted so long. Most
thought that it would go to the end of the world, which it would cause. Whereas, miraculously, one day everything blows up. There is so much air to breathe that the Moscovites must be getting light-headed with all this oxygen. I can breathe this pure oxygen even within the context of the horrors of continued oppression in the streets of Bucharest. I believe in the authenticity of the struggle of the Romanian youth; I have no confidence in the Front for National Salvation. It seemed to me, though, that in facing the firing squad, even Ceaucescu and his wife, for the first time, had acquired a human face.

Q: You were once a member of the Communist Party. You went on deploring Communism ever since you had abandoned it. A lot of people died spreading it and fighting its spread. Do you think that one day we shall miss that *ism* because a contrast with Capitalism will no longer be possible?

A: No. Marxism is eternal. Communists, tainted by Stalin, were terrible, stupid, conventional, blocked in the avenue of progress like a broken-down truck behind another broken-down truck. All their veins had been clogged by insoluble embolisms. Yet, Communism will not be easily replaced. Maybe the Club Méditerranée, using beads instead of money, with its imbecile bourgeois atmosphere, will have a go at it. But you must not think that leftist ideas will not continue to vibrate in man, for better or for worse. Like a ripe fruit, it is there. With a worm in it. The worm was in Marx, but it came from the outside, and there was no defense against it. But if Communism is utopia, then men will always be attracted.

Q: Do you think that the changes we are seeing are just temporary spasms or that the world will be essentially transformed, and cartographers will have to devise new maps?

A: I fear that Gorbachev will not make it. A new tyrant will rise and re-establish Stalinism. Gorbachev needs America and will become a capitalist. Socialism devoid of Stalinism is good, but it has no chance. Gorbachev arrived too late; all saviors do. He did not save Eastern Europe. Walesa did that. Gorbachev could do nothing but follow in Walesa’s steps. Now Gorbachev exhibits a serious face when addressing at home those who would partition the Soviet Union into many states. But abroad, he smiles and winks and plays up to Bush, as does a professional courtesan. Courtesans have a short existence.

Q: Do you now have an apprehension about Germany, about a united Germany?

A: I fear the German youth. Their elders did not tell them the truth. Most of the time they did not mention the Hitlerian inventions of mass extermination, the concentration camps and their crematories, the dogs and the kappos, the indecent medical experiments, and the football
games played with newly-born babies instead of soccer balls. When things like that were whispered, there was always a "so sorry, we did not mean to" attitude which made them look magnanimous later, although they had been sub-human before. Yes, I fear all the Hitlers who have been cloned and are now waiting backstage.

Q: What other fears do you have?

A: I fear the right as I fear the resurgence of Stalinism. I fear the tiny French Le Pen [an almost-fascist French politician who recently failed as a presidential candidate]. If one day he is assassinated, the assassin will be a German youth who had been told all the truth about Germany's past. By the way, wouldn't that make a terrific film scenario? Wait, I have to make a note about it [she stops and scribbles on a notepad]. The right has no program, no philosopher suggested it, and no politician has defined it. Those at the right are too mentally indigent to do that. I also fear the next great war. It is there, you can hear it tiptoe closer and closer behind you, a deft ballerina who will once again occupy centerstage.

Q: Now many writers travel through Eastern Europe. They look, interview, report, narrate. Will you do the same?

A: The spasms you mentioned are not worth the efforts of real writers. It is the job of journalism. Contingency is not the domain of a writer. Interior existence cannot be ignored because something is happening out there, even if that something is desirable and makes us temporarily happy. There is a morbid will on the part of the media to romanticize and sensationalize and turn to literature contingent events. Reporters think they are writers because their words are more read than those of the loftier, real people who are involved in literature and who probe more deeply, and further beyond.

Q: But contemporaries of yours, Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir, for example, traveled where political events were occurring and wrote, journalistically, about them.

A: Yes, but their best writing was done at home, or at the sidewalk cafes which in effect were their homes. Sartre and de Beauvoir even wrote when they were in a wheelchair. One can hardly be more at home than that. Also, like me, they did a lot of writing in their hospital bed.

Q: Isn't that where you wrote your latest, Summer Rain?

A: Not quite. I wrote the first 25 pages before I was hospitalized. Then I continued in my good moments. Maybe I even wrote in a coma. Maybe I made my best effort then. When I was released I was still drunk, but only with joy. I wanted to see Paris and I felt the elixir, not of rediscovery, but of really seeing it for the first time. Yann would drive me around, in the crowded streets, in the suburbs, in the little towns outside the Capital. I would sit in the back of the car and write when we were stopped at a red light, or when we were stuck in a traffic jam. I wrote fast and I got it published just last month.
Q: You wrote *Summer Rain* for the suburbs, did you not? I mean, for the middle class, for the poor, the immigrants who, like you, were afraid of Le Pen.

A: Quite so. The book was criticized for advancing leftist ideas, and also criticized for not advancing enough of them. Critics are imbeciles and therefore they are always right: they are imbeciles because they are incapable of creating and capable only of interpreting; and they are always right because, after all, the more they interpret, the better books sell. *Summer Rain*, in part, brought Marguerite back to life, and the critics are the ones who have given me artificial respiration.

Q: Your preoccupations seem to be consistent: avoiding the extremes at either end of the political spectrum and thereby helping the middle class and the poor without exposing them to the dangers of fascism or Communism. Is such an aim practical and reasonable, or is it just another utopia?

A: I am sure it is utopia. Nevertheless, it is not useless to seek utopia. Seeking is worthy even if you never find what you are looking for. For a while, I did what Rabelais counseled: *trinc*. I know now that you cannot just say *cheers* and drink and give up the search. There must be an *ism* better than all the others, which would make life tolerable and which would help the poor and the middle class. I don’t know what that *ism* is. I know that it isn’t in the spring rain which resuscitates trees and not people. Trees get born again; men just get a year older. The solution is neither in the frozen precipitation of winter which makes bears bury their head in the ground and thus survive. Hence the title *Summer Rain*.

Q: You said what is wrong with spring and winter precipitation. What is good about summer rain?

A: The air is heavy in the summer. Rain is a relief. But all this does not bring us very far. Nor does it explain the title very well. One searches, explores new territories. I will not find Shangri-La. But I will go on probing. I don’t really know what will help the destitute Algerians and Portuguese in our country. It is the caring that counts. I care. Wasn’t it your own President Bush who said that he wanted a kinder, more gentle society?

Q: There is a mocking smile on your face just now. Do you believe that he just said that in order to get himself elected?

A: He probably did. But at least he said it. These words are not in the vocabulary of Le Pen, nor were they part of the repertoire of Ronald Reagan. Expressing an ideal is a first step, in spite of the known limitations of going any further. Your own Constitution did not promise happiness: it just gave you the right to pursue it. I hate to use hyperboles, but I think that the American Constitution is the greatest of government documents.
Note

1 The talks took place in her elegant Parisian apartment, where she had Perrier and I was served wine. She was gracious enough to serve hors d'oeuvres, although she did not move easily, appearing to be tired. This impression was corroborated by her soft voice, even when the context inspired her with enthusiasm and volubility.
Drawings

Judy Rosenblatt
In Pursuit of the Real

H. Wendell Howard

The relationship of religion to life is a recurring concern in the literature of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Czeslaw Milosz, both writers who have been graced by the majesty of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Singer has said: “If I were able to picket the Almighty, I would carry a sign with the slogan UNFAIR TO LIFE!” His protest against the Creator on the one hand affirms his belief in a God whose divine wisdom he admires but on the other hand shows his inability “to glorify His mercy.” This duality of humility and resistance is consistent with other dualities of faith and doubt, despair and hope that Singer feels dwell simultaneously in the human spirit. Czeslaw Milosz talks of the simultaneous attitudes of acceptance and opposition that confirm that “one never stops being a member of the Catholic Church.” For all who have been raised in Catholicism, he goes on to say, the central problem, extenuated or acute, persists: “... Philosophy, whether they like it or not, will always be ancilla theologiae.” These struggles with faith are particularly evident in Singer’s The Penitent and Milosz’s The Witness of Poetry.

In the early 1970s, Singer wrote a novel that was published only in Yiddish in the pages of The Jewish Daily Forward, even though Joseph Singer had translated it into English. Through the years since its writing, Isaac Singer had listened to his literary advisors who argued that that sermonic novel should not appear in English. Yet during those same years Isaac knew that within himself was the vegetarian penitent who clearly believes that the world is as wicked as the impoverished Hasidic Rabbi Pinchas Mendal Singer, his father, had told him it was. Within himself he also knew that gratifying the senses and attempting to achieve utopia through political change can lead only to sorrow. Thus he finally chose to publish The Penitent in English, too.

The fear of his counselors had been that The Penitent would exasperate readers and activate unfavorable critics. If Anatole Broyard, writing for The New York Times, can be cited as both reader and critic, Singer’s counselors were correct, for Broyard finds the “grumpy and unconvinc-
ing” book to read more “like a series of thou shalt nots” than a novel. He also adjudges the novel to be “all surface,” with the author’s moral indignation overwhelming both his irony and his sense of craft.3

Only a few weeks before Farrar, Straus, Giroux published Singer’s novel, Harvard University Press published Czeslaw Milosz’s *The Witness of Poetry*, the text of Milosz’s Charles Eliot Norton Lectures. Here, like Singer’s critics, the champions of poetics shuddered with embarrassment, for they knew full well that Harvard had not set up the Norton Lectures as a spiritual exercise, which Czeslaw Milosz’s lectures were. This published text clearly displays Milosz as a religious thinker who venerates both human custom and the Roman patrimony of his native country. He is not embarrassed by stark spirituality; like Simone Weil, whom he admires and refers to in two extended passages in *The Witness of Poetry,*—and like Isaac Bashevis Singer—he is courageous. If he considers something true, he “will say it, without fear of being labeled,” 4 if I may use Milosz’s words about Simone Weil to characterize Milosz himself.

Perhaps nothing is truer for Milosz than the idea that the pursuer of the Real is himself pursued by the real. The capital letter suggests something not quite mystical but certainly something more than a product of awareness and judgment. Since certain “zones of reality” were excluded by religion for a long period of time, he argues, a kind of alliance existed between poetry and religion. But that exclusion does not exist in the 20th century, a time in which “both individuals and human societies are constantly discovering new dimensions accessible only to direct experience.” Direct experience determines both spiritual and poetic significance, a view that naturally leads to his quarrel with classicism; for “the literary conventions which bind author and reader form a barrier, and it is difficult to step beyond it into chaotic reality with its inexhaustible richness of detail.” For Milosz, the elementary connections between the writer and the world cannot be closed off.5

The same is true for Singer. So, using that idea as a starting point, one begins to see that *The Witness of Poetry* can be read as a clear though unintended explanation of *The Penitent*. Understanding these two works together is not an artificial exercise, for Milosz and Singer have much in common that threads through their thinking and writing; both come from Poland, both write in the languages of their childhood, Polish for Milosz and Yiddish for Singer; both are personally conscious of and horrified by the slaughters of Hitler and Stalin and the Communist captivity of half of their native continent; and both have been shaped by the same corner of Europe. “The twentieth century, perhaps more protean and multifaceted than any other,” Milosz observes, “changes according to the point from which we view it, a point in the geographic sense as well. My corner of Europe, owing to the extraordinary and lethal events that have been
occurring there, comparable only to violent earthquakes, affords a peculiar perspective. As a result, all of us who come from those parts appraise poetry slightly different than do the majority of my audience, for we tend to view it as a witness, and participant in one of mankind's major transformations." 6

Singer has come from "those parts," and he too views his literary efforts as a witness to that direct experience which joins human custom and his religious patrimony. He does not believe that literature and religion are the same thing. (Neither does Milosz, who thinks that poetry is "the passionate pursuit of the Real," not the Real itself.) In the second part of a two-part series by Richard Burgin, "Isaac Bashevis Singer Talks... About Everything," Singer makes this point when he says that no novel, poem, or short story can take the place of the Ten Commandments. "It is not enough to read the Commandments, you have to practice them. So literature will not do the job. Religion becomes literature when people don't take it seriously anymore." 8 Singer's pursuit of the Real is, in his words, his interest in "the eternal questions." Joseph Shapiro, the protagonist in The Penitent, is interested in those same questions.

At first glance, one might conclude that Joseph Shapiro is avoiding the real; in fact, many anxious critics complain that The Penitent is devoted largely to denunciations of 20th century life in all its forms. But Milosz's observation that the 20th century changes according to the point from which we view it gives us the key to understanding Singer's and Shapiro's reality. Joseph tells Priscilla: "Of all the lies in the world, humanism is the biggest. Humanism doesn't serve one idol but all the idols. They were all humanists; Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin." These were the men who perpetrated the extraordinary and lethal events that involved the "pious Jews, the Talmud Jude," as Joseph Shapiro goes on to say, who "never served any king or prince. They were driven to their deaths, but at least they didn't go of their own will." He adds that his "idol" is the reality of his faith springing from deeds. 9

This faith is a perfectly plausible response to events of this century. Millions of Germans sacrificed themselves for the idol Hitler, and millions of Russians and Jews sacrificed themselves for the idol Stalin, so Joseph Shapiro is ready to sacrifice himself, or as he says "at least suffer," for the idol "in whose name we received the Ten Commandments and the whole Torah." He argues that he is going to pick his idol, an idol that meets his requirements.

Priscilla demurs that she doesn't serve anybody. Self-delusion, Joseph counters. He points out to her that she has given up years to learn languages and has squandered her life for pleasures that are not pleasures at all. "Your kind undergo operations to shorten your noses. You wage a hopeless war against growing old. Many people like you have lost their lives in the name of Communism, Nazism, or some other 'ism.'
hollow slogan, every foolish theory demands its victims, and there is never any lack of volunteers to make the sacrifice."^{10}

All of this clearly reminds us of Milosz's anger at those "other 'isms'" and particularly at the universalism and utopianism that he sees in "the young cannibals who, in the name of inflexible principles, butchered the population of Cambodia, had graduated from the Sorbonne and were simply trying to implement the philosophic ideas they had learned."^{11} Milosz reveres custom and the Roman patrimony of his country. Joseph Shapiro, the voice of Singer, wants to serve the "idol" of life and faithfulness who demands only that one does not build his happiness on the misfortune of others.

When Joseph Shapiro entered the Sandzer study house, an Hasidic prayer house, he saw something in the members' eyes that he had never seen among modern Jews: "love for Jewishness, love for a fellow Jew, even if he is a sinner. It wasn't a feigned love, it was real. Everyone can tell real from fake."^{12} This is the Jewish pursuer of the Real being pursued by the reality of his religious patrimony and human custom as viewed from his corner of the world.

Czeslaw Milosz explains that "only an awareness of the dangers menacing what we love"—the dangers that Singer denounces in 20th century life—"allows us to sense the dimension of time and to feel in everything we see and touch the presence of past generations."^{13} His concern with religious imagination as well as the fate of poetry when it began to acquire features of a substitute religion has sprung from his years of study of "the Roman Church and dogmatics from thick textbooks that have since been abandoned everywhere."^{14}

The presence of past generations forces him, if I can be that emphatic, to continue to write in Polish, for "the language of the Polish poets of the sixteenth century ... is closer to today's Polish than the language of The Faerie Queene is to today's English. Or, if you prefer, it is closer in tone and sensibility. This means that a Polish poet has a more intimate relationship with his predecessors in the poetic craft and feels at home in the sixteenth century."^{15}

The dogmatic textbooks just mentioned, along with certain pagan notions, also inculcated Milosz with a permanent sense of sin and a strong notion of guilt from violation of the sacred. "Bypassing Rue Descartes," which he cites in his lectures, underscores this point:

As to my heavy sins, I remember one most vividly:
How, one day, walking a forest path along a stream,
I pushed a rock down onto a water snake coiled in the grass.

And what I have met with in life was the punishment
Which reaches, sooner or later, everyone who breaks a taboo.^{16}
Admitting that such "provincial exoticism," the Roman sin and the pagan guilt, is probably an irregularity for a literary historian, he then argues strongly that a strange historic regularity is "the affinity binding people who live at the same time" but great distances from one another. "The mark of a common style binds contemporaneous poets writing in various languages which may be explained by an elusive osmosis and not by direct borrowings." This affinity, this commonness, the reverberations mentioned in the opening paragraph, is certainly one of the bonds between Milosz and Singer.

At 64, Singer, in an interview with Dick Adler in the Sunday literary section of The Washington Post, commented that he was a Yiddish writer not a Jewish writer. A Jewish writer he defines as one who writes all the time about religion; the term "Yiddish writer" suits him better because "sometimes I write things of which religion would not approve altogether." And yet, in an interview with Haskel Frankel he confessed, "To me, in my work, the religious question and the eternal question—why do we live, why do we exist?—are identical. I am not completely a religious writer, but neither am I secular. In my writing religion is always there . . . even when I write sexy." Singer's writing in Yiddish is his intimate relationship in tone and sensibility with his predecessors.

The Penitent, in language and precept, relates himself to past generations by resolving to "abandon the culture that had spawned and justified all this evil and falseness," modern society. "I must become someone as far removed from this kind of culture as our grandfathers had been." He remarks that modern Hebrew has lost much of the Jewish flavor, the Jewish uniqueness. Modern Hebrew has swallowed up the old Sacred Tongue. So Singer's Yiddish and Shapiro's Sacred Tongue provide the same access to past generations as Milosz's Polish. Milosz's saying that he can feel at home in the 16th century is Singer's saying that "the tomorrow is not always cleverer than yesterday." The generations that preceded Milosz and Singer had the courage to ask passionately the meaning of existence and to receive answers, even if the answers hurt. This is the dimension of depth, the religious dimension, that modern man and society have lost to the horizontal dimension of acquiring "better and better," "more and more," and that Isaac Singer and Czeslaw Milosz are struggling to regain. In 1959, Paul Tillich, Protestant theologian, wrote:

It is the religious question which is asked when the novelist describes a man who tries in vain to reach the only place which could solve the problem of his life, or a man who disintegrates under the memory of a guilt which persecutes him, or a man who never had a real self and is pushed by his fate without resistance to death, or a man who experiences a profound disgust of everything he encounters.
One could almost think that Singer wrote *The Penitent* to illustrate Tillich’s point.

Tillich went on: “It is the religious question which is asked when the poet opens up the horror and the fascination of the demonic regions of his soul, or if he leads us into the deserts and empty places of our being, or sings the song of transitoriness, giving words to the ever-present anxiety of our hearts,” all of which Milosz does again and again in his poems as well as in *The Witness of Poetry*.

But Singer and Milosz do more than merely nod an agreement to Tillich’s conclusion about the religious function of the writer. In his Nobel Lecture, Singer emphasizes that those who have lost confidence in society’s leadership look to the writer to rescue civilization, adding, “Maybe there is a spark of the prophet in the artist after all.” A few lines later he abandons the “maybe” and affirms his conviction that literature is capable of presenting philosophical, religious, aesthetical, and social perspectives. “In the history of old Jewish literature,” he says, “there was never any basic difference between the poet and the prophet. Our ancient poetry often became law and a way of life.”

We have already shown Singer’s indestructible ties to history through language, the Yiddish language that in his Nobel lecture he calls “a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government, a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics; a language that was despised by both gentiles and emancipated Jews. The truth is that what the great religions preached, the Yiddish-speaking people of the ghettos practiced day in and day out.”

Milosz does not speak at the same length on these points in his Nobel lecture, but they are there. His poet-prophet is a person of “double vision” who depends “upon generations who wrote in his native tongue” and whose “true vocation . . . is to contemplate Being.” He notes that he had “good training in Roman Catholic dogmatics and apologetics” and was blessed by the history of “a city of 40 Roman Catholic churches and of numerous synagogues. In those days the Jews called it a Jerusalem of the North.” In these churches and synagogues the people practiced what their great religions taught.

In the end, both Joseph Shapiro and the author of the concluding lecture “On Hope” in *The Witness of Poetry* may be characterized as *vrai naif* and as not truly in accord with the overall views of Singer and Milosz. Joseph Shapiro has “finally made peace with the cruelty of life and the violence of man’s history”—using here Singer’s explanatory words in the “Author’s Note” at the end of the novel. Shapiro, by his own words, has recognized “a conscious plan and purpose in all being, in man and in animals as well as in inanimate objects. God’s mercy is often hidden, but his boundless wisdom is seen by everyone. . . . This faith keeps growing
in me all the time." But Singer is not Joseph Shapiro. Singer, again in the "Author's Note," admits that he is still "as bewildered and shocked by the misery and brutality of life" as he was when he was six years old. He does not, religious as he is, agree with Shapiro that "there is a final escape from the human dilemma, a permanent rescue for all times."

With at least some readiness, one can distinguish between the views of Singer's fictional character and the views of the creator of that character. But distinguishing between the "optimistic" and "pessimistic" views of Milosz who in the The Witness of Poetry writes without a persona is not so readily or convincingly accomplished. It can be done, however. The optimism of "On Hope" is based on Milosz's conclusion that there is a new need for the past, but his argument is not compellingly persuasive. At the end of The Witness of Poetry, the reader provides his own note that says that Milosz, religious as he is, has not successfully shed the pessimism that permeates the rest of the book. Milosz admits that there is a high price to be paid for "the human family," and concludes: "... Everyday one can see signs indicating that now, at the present moment, something new, and on a scale never witnessed before, is being born: humanity as an elemental force conscious of transcending Nature, for it lives by memory of itself, that is, in History." But never can he forget, either, that "The twentieth century has given us a most simple touchstone for reality: physical pain." In the end, Milosz does not make a leap of faith, as Singer does not. In the end, both writers are still pursuing the Real.

Notes

7 The Witness of Poetry, p. 25.
9 The Penitent, pp. 157–8.
10 The Penitent, pp. 156–7.
12 The Penitent, p. 115.
13 The Witness of Poetry, p. 4.
14 The Witness of Poetry, p. 5.
15 The Witness of Poetry, p. 6.
16 The Witness of Poetry, p. 9.
17 The Witness of Poetry, p. 10.
22 Tillich, p. 53.
24 Singer, Nobel Lecture, p. 7.
26 This and the next three quotations are from The Penitent, p. 168, p. 164, p. 169, and from The Witness of Poetry, p. 66, respectively.
ON THE American frontier, most settlers had to build their houses with their own hands. They did not stay at home—in Europe, on the Eastern seaboard—to inherit the family dwelling, but by their own efforts made a new one, emblematic of a new life. Curiously, in spite of the well-known American works in which houses are important—Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables, Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, most novels by Henry James, Wharton’s The House of Mirth, Cather’s The Professor’s House, Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, and Faulkner’s The Mansion, to name a few—only two major books focus on how the protagonists built their houses and what that activity meant.

Both Henry David Thoreau in Walden and William Faulkner in Absalom, Absalom! place a house in the center of their narratives. Thoreau’s simple hut and Sutpen’s grandiose plantation house embody their respective makers and express their purposes. In building, each man says, “This is me!” Each house has certain peculiar features which make it exceptional, and an object of speculation and wonder in its community. Each is constructed from the materials at hand, and in a somewhat primitive, forested area. Both are more than aggregates of boards, nails, and bricks. Both constitute the termini ad quem for all the journeys made in the course of their builders’ actions and yield up their meaning only gradually in those actions.¹

Yet the hut by Walden Pond and the house on Sutpen’s Hundred seem very unlike. Thoreau’s rises on a good foundation, on a site carefully chosen; Sutpen’s is erected in a swamp. Walden is about as small as a house can be; it is one small room, for one man.² Sutpen plans to make a home for a dynasty, in a structure as big as a courthouse. Whereas Thoreau’s grows organically—so its maker says—Sutpen’s manifests the...
design imposed by its architect. Walden is open to the world around; the Sutpen mansion is closed off and difficult to penetrate. The hut is involved in the ongoing process of birth, dying, and eventual rebirth in *Walden*; the mansion is integral to the process of disintegration and death in *Absalom, Absalom!* Ultimately, the cabin transcends time, but the mansion grows old and dies.

Focus on the imagery of these houses reveals extremes of scale and design, openness and secrecy, simplicity and complexity, naturalness and artificiality. It is as though the creators believe that only those houses that defy norms are worth bothering with. They are either so exceedingly easy or so incredibly difficult to build that their makers compel attention. One can either go a mile and a half outside Concord and live a frontier life, or one can confront the swampy wilderness with slaves brought from afar and erect a version of Versailles there. Yet both Thoreau and Sutpen are quintessentially American builders in combining tradition and innovation. Eventually, the central houses are implicated in the dense, sometimes contradictory meanings of their books. Thoreau's is not just an emblem of his independence/freedom but is also a mute witness to his often unacknowledged dependence upon conventions. Sutpen's house is the product and epitome of slavery, and Sutpen's story is a powerful condemnation of racism, of patriarchal tyranny over all his children. But Faulkner also admires the builder's sheer energy and will, and Faulkner recoils from black threats to the planter's house. Neither house is entirely what it seems at its first appearance.

*Walden* begins:

> When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. (p. 3)

Besides announcing that this will be a first-person account of a particular life lived in a particular place, the sentence immediately links making a book with making a house. It stresses the speaker's independence in gaining his livelihood and in his thought. It is restrained. "I lived alone" anticipates Thoreau's exploring the joys of solitude and his preference for celibacy and austerity.

*Absalom, Absalom!* opens upon a very different scene and situation, employing very different rhetoric. The narrative gives us some details about Quentin and Miss Coldfield spending a hot September afternoon together within her house, Quentin listening as she talks. Yet in the middle of the second paragraph, Sutpen's image suddenly intrudes.

Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-house-
demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a school prize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and tatter-ran. Immobile, bearded and hand palm-lifted the horseman sat; behind him the wild blacks and the captive architect huddled quietly, carrying in bloodless paradox the shovels and picks and axes of peaceful conquest. Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the Be Sutpen's Hundred like the oldentime Be Light. (pp. 8–9)

Here are Faulknerian eccentricities aplenty: the pronoun which announces the protagonist, his diabolic identity we can only assume to be Miss Coldfield’s distortion; the hyperbolic savagery of the slaves enhanced by repeated “wild”; the unexpected personification (“astonished earth”); the uncertain narrative perspective (Quentin’s apparently). In sentences dense with modifiers, Faulkner provides elements utterly foreign to Walden: slaves, a war with nature, disturbed movement. Still, building the house is the subject. The builder is the creator of his world, like God Himself. The creation of his story becomes involved with the process of his building.

The two passages which introduce the builders suggest other contrasting qualities of their works: precision and vagueness; simplicity and complication: mystery; “economy” and lavishness; relative ease and considerable difficulty; a place in its natural setting and a domain wrested from nature. Attention to the narrations of construction reinforces these impressions of dichotomy and reveals two other prominent distinctions, of size and scale, and of openness and being shut off.

Thoreau’s introductory chapter, “Economy,” explains how he came to live at Walden: first speaking generally of the principles by which a wise man lives, then showing how they apply practically in his own life. To convince the reader that it is easy to cut the cost of building the essential shelter, Thoreau carefully explains how he went about it. Using borrowed tools, Thoreau cut down pines for the timber of his house: posts, studs, rafters, floor timbers. Stones hauled from the pond formed the chimney foundation, and then Thoreau roofed and boarded his house with boards from an Irishman’s shanty which he had dismantled. He finished the building in late autumn, covering the hut outside with shingles he made himself, plastering it inside, and erecting a brick chimney. He details “the
exact cost,” which amounted to $28.12½, after announcing:

I have thus a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by fifteen long, and eight-feet posts, with a garret and a closet, a large window on each side, two trap doors, one door at the end, and a brick fireplace opposite. (p. 48)

Whether materials be first-hand or second-hand, the house is “fashioned of the very stuff of the country.” (Cook, p. 9) And Thoreau describes it so concretely that it can be easily reproduced, as it has been, with a few changes, in Concord.

House and setting are harmonious: “I did not need to go outdoors to take the air, for the atmosphere within had lost none of its freshness.” (p. 85) Thoreau’s site had all the advantages he desired—remoteness from human neighbors, nearness to tree and animal neighbors instead—as well as a southern exposure for his house and its orientation to the pond. For as Thoreau says, “I was seated by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord . . . ” (p. 86) The principal advantage was the proximity to nature: “the perennial source of our life . . . this is the place where a wise man will dig his cellar.” (p. 133) Like the builder, his house made little distinction between indoors and outdoors. In a driving rain he could sit behind his door “in my little house, which was all entry.” (p. 132) And for visitors his “‘best’ room” was his “withdrawing” room, the pine wood behind the house. (p. 141)

Again and again, Thoreau stresses the ease of constructing his cabin, hence, of entering upon this new life. Practicing his theory, that one may best help the poor by his own example, Thoreau told John Field

that I lived in a tight light and clean house, which hardly cost more than the annual rent of such a ruin as his commonly amounts to; and how, if he chose, he might in a month or two build himself a palace of his own . . . (p. 205)

But Thoreau’s solution to the problem of housing was not to be Field’s because Field could not live as simply as Thoreau, could not be a philosopher in Thoreau’s sense, but struggled with the arithmetic of capital and costs and found that they mastered him.

In moving from Walden to Absalom, Absalom! one turns from the free soul in his small house to the striving, restless Sutpen and his gigantic-scale plantation house. In the cold room at Cambridge, Quentin Compson recalls other rooms and houses so that one glimpses something of Sutpen and his house. Unlike Thoreau, Faulkner does not explain at the outset why the building process is so important, but in returning to it again and again, he finally reveals its significance. Regardless of the particular narrator, the image of the big house recurs many times
throughout the novel, expanding our awareness of its meaning until its
destruction near the end.

Twice in the opening pages, we are told that Sutpen built his mansion
out of nothing. (pp. 8, 11) Using his customary technique of expansion,
Faulkner in the next chapter explains how Sutpen managed to do that. He
himself built: "'vanity conceived that house and, [sic] built it in a strange
place and with little else but his bare hands.'" (p. 51) In a virgin swamp,
he used the materials of the place; visitors watched "his mansion rise,
carried plank by plank and brick by brick out of the swamp where the clay
and timber waited." (p. 37) Like Thoreau, Sutpen built in a wilderness—
far enough from town (12 miles) for him to own 100 square miles of land.
Even more than Thoreau's, his house was fashioned from the stuff of its
country—its earth and its trees—which "waited" for him. Thus did
Sutpen bring something out of nothing. The pride to aspire to such a
house "'drove through to get it at whatever cost.'" (p. 51) His financial
means being so obscure, he enraged his neighbors because they could
have no idea of what that cost was.

Rather than ease of building, Faulkner insists on difficulty: two years of
struggle with the help of a French architect and 20 slaves, all but the
architect "stark naked" (p. 37) in the mud. To be sure, Sutpen did not
build with his bare hands alone, but he worked alongside the black men
"in the sun and heat of summer and the mud and ice of winter." (p. 38) He
even helped to work his saw and planer together with the wagon team and slaves: "himself too when necessary, when the machinery slowed, hitched to it." (p. 37) His was no easy summer's work beside a tranquil pond.

Then before he finished and furnished his house in preparation for bringing a wife to it, Sutpen camped out in it, "a house the size of a courthouse where he lived for three years without a window or door or bedstead in it," Miss Rosa says. (p. 16) For the house was complete except for what Sutpen and his men could not make; "without a pane of glass or a doorknob or hinge in it," (p. 39) it was open to the elements. But when the time came to house a family, establish the House of Sutpen, he and his slaves installed not only the windows and doors, but also the furniture, chandeliers, curtains, and rugs—all the impedimenta despised by Thoreau. Henceforth, there was to be a sharp demarcation between outdoors and indoors, a line drawn so that much would be made of entering the house, however often characters did that.

What did the house look like? Sutpen's only apparent concern was that it be big. This house expressed its indweller because of the scale of his ambition. We are given no clear idea of what the house was like until it deteriorated, and then we learn that it had a portico, that this portico, the walls, and the porch were rotting. Otherwise, Faulkner refers to the Sutpen mansion as "the house," "that house," "the big house." From the episodes of the 1860s and 1909, we know only that it had a parlor, a library, stairs, and upstairs hall, several bedrooms, four chimneys, a gallery. Faulkner does not choose to describe it with the kind of concrete details he gives for Bayard's house in Sartoris (pp. 6-8). One may enjoy speculating about the mansion's style and plan, and one would be satisfied to know that it was originally white. But Faulkner is deliberately vague as to its appearance. About the house, as about the lives of its inhabitants, much is suggested; little is stated. The very nature of the house, looming but indistinct, underscores the mysteries concerning Sutpen's origins and actions, his decline and fall, the decline and fall of his family.

The two builders's motives for building differ greatly. Thoreau offers several justifications which relate to his ideas about man's living in harmony with nature and practicing self-reliance. Despite all Thoreau's serious joking about cutting building costs, there are more important reasons than money for a man to build his shelter with his own hands: "There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest." (p. 46) To satisfy the fundamental need for shelter, shared with all other creatures, people should do as they do, build their homes and not be dependent upon another builder. Rather than submit to division of labor and take the specialized role of client-consumer, a person may be at once builder, poet, critic, philosopher, like the Walden builder.
Involvement with the process of building makes one think of the reasons for, as well as the means and the end product of, the labor. Thus Thoreau recommends that students, instead of living crowded with others in a dormitory built according to a division of labor, actually lay the foundations for their college themselves. "How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?" (p. 51) He means something besides literally building a structure; he also means that to build is to engage oneself with life firsthand. The importance of laying a good foundation is reiterated throughout the account of building at Walden. If one does not labor himself, how can he know that his foundation is sound? Along with the movements of the sun, various manifestations of water, states of growth and decay, laying a good foundation is one of the most important images of *Walden.*

In place of a grave, dig a foundation for one's life. Thoreau moves easily from the literal to the symbolic in his references to foundations in "Economy":

I have thought that Walden Pond would be a good place for business, not solely on account of the railroad and the ice trade; it offers advantages which it may not be good policy to divulge; it is a good port and a good foundation. No Neva marshes to be filled; though you must everywhere build on piles of your own driving. It is said that a flood-tide, with a westerly wind, and ice in the Neva, would sweep St. Petersburg from the face of the earth. (p. 21)

Transacting some business, expanding one's own empire to rival the Celestial or the Russian, intersect with images of construction. In directing attention to the important though unconsidered question of what a house is—a shelter that provides the necessaries simply, rather than a debted encumbrance that vainly emulates one's neighbor's—Thoreau says:

When I consider how our houses are built and paid for, or not paid for, and their internal economy managed and sustained, I wonder that the floor does not give way under the visitor while he is admiring the gewgaws upon the mantel-piece, and let him through into the cellar, to some solid and honest though earthy foundation. (p. 38)

Then Thoreau recalls the practice of the first settlers of New England who burrowed into a hillside for their shelter or carefully dug out and lined with bark a snug cellar. They dwelt as close to the earth as possible, as animals following their burrowing instincts do. He might have said, thus was New England founded.
This important idea of building on good foundations joins the central house concept in Thoreau's keystone chapter, "Higher Laws": "Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead." (p. 221) In the Biblical passage which this echoes, Paul means that Christ is the foundation. (1 Cor. 3.9-17) But to Thoreau, living in harmony with and in respect for nature is the foundation for a man's life. The house he builds expresses him, "the inhabitant, the indweller." (p. 46) In rejecting the specialist builder, Thoreau had earlier affirmed,

What of architectural beauty I now see, I know has gradually grown from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is the only builder,—out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance; and whatever additional beauty of this kind is destined to be produced will be preceded by a like unconscious beauty of life. (p. 47)

He goes on to say that "the most interesting dwellings" in America are ordinarily those of the poor — log cabins and cottages — because they express the simple lives of the residents, without artifice and ornament. Otherwise, a house designed by an architect and constructed by a carpenter is a box without any spirit in it, and it might as well be the tenant's grave. In thus contrasting the living dwelling and the fashionable coffin, Thoreau expresses an organic theory of architecture which is more radical than Frank Lloyd Wright's in one respect: it depends upon a man's literally building his own house. (Marken, p. 33)

Thoreau's "No Neva marshes to be filled" reminds the reader that Sutpen built his palace in a swamp. Certain similarities between Sutpen and Peter the Great suggest that in pursuit of his "design" which requires his building, Sutpen resembles the Czar as much as he does King David or Agamemnon. Petersburg, its buildings planned by foreign architects, arose from the mud, and other features of Peter's life parallel Sutpen's: Peter discarded his first wife and condemned to death his son by that wife; he deigned to labor alongside ordinary workers; he had a strong physique, strong appetites, strong determination; he was regarded as antiChrist by conservative fellow-countrymen; he oppressed the peasants in consolidating his power. Whether Faulkner implies a comparison to Peter, Sutpen, like him, is undeniably heroic and ruthless in establishing his domain.

To realize his vision of the mansion, Sutpen must have an architect to design it. Why otherwise does Faulkner devote so much attention to the architect? Only an artist, said General Compson,
could have borne Sutpen's ruthlessness and hurry and still manage to curb the dream of grim and castlelike magnificence at which Sutpen obviously aimed, since the place as Sutpen planned it would have been almost as large as Jefferson itself at the time . . . (p. 38)

And why did Sutpen hunt down his architect like an animal, track him with the aid of wild slaves, when he fled from Sutpen's bondage? It was been suggested that this episode illustrates Sutpen's ruthless enslavement of all who could be useful to him. (Brooks, p. 299) Or that the architect embodies brave endurance. (Rollyson, p. 67) But there is more to it than that: the story of the architect hunt is repeated and amplified in Chapter VII, with Quentin's full account of what Sutpen told Grandfather Compson as they waited for the slaves to corner and capture the architect. This delayed explanation is the equivalent in Faulkner's narrative of Thoreau's "House-Warming" chapter, with its delayed account of making the hut winter-proof. It is here that we learn of Sutpen's "design" and his early experience out of which it came. The innocent boy from the half-rotting log cabin had had the front door of the big Tidewater plantation house shut in his face. The affront determined his resolve: "So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what the man did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with." (p. 238) Immediately after Quentin sums up Sutpen's decision to seek his fortune in the West Indies, he recounts how Sutpen's dogs treed the architect; the narrative moves in counterpoint from the formulation of Sutpen's "design" to his pursuit of the architect. By this juxtaposition Faulkner shows that Sutpen had to subordinate the architect's will to his own. The architect was Sutpen's tool to impose a design upon the house, itself the embodiment of the Sutpen "design."

Diverse in their origins as in their size, the houses certainly represent different ambitions in their makers. What happens to his little cabin after he leaves it finally does not matter to Thoreau. What matters are the endless possibilities of rebirth, new lives to live. Death is simply a necessary part of the process, not to be feared. It must be mentioned, but then it is played down and set aside. In no way is Absalom, Absalom! more unlike Walden than in its atmosphere of pervasive death, culminating in the death by fire of Sutpen's house. The novel's opening three pages alone include "dead September afternoon," "flecks of the dead old dried paint," "the long-dead object" of Miss Coldfield's frustration, "the dim coffinsmelling gloom," "the deep South dead since 1865," the reiteration that Sutpen and his children are dead. The narration is saturated in fear of disintegration and entropy. But it is also characterized by purposeful movement and energy. It is Sutpen's energy, he who "Tore violently a plantation" (p. 9), who fought with his slaves for entertainment, who had subdued an island slave revolt, who later fought for the Confederacy, who
started for a third time to realize his design. When one reconsiders all the images of decay included with Thoreau's images of growth and new life, and then reflects on the omnipresent dualities of life and death in Faulkner's novel, the two works do not seem polar opposites after all.

The most superficial resemblance between the two is the extent to which each house dominates its book. Snug in winter, in summer blurring distinctions between indoors and outdoors, remote and yet in the midst of life, Thoreau's house is at once projection of his happiness and one source of that happiness. In the middle of Walden, with Thoreau's life conforming to the natural movement and progression of the seasons, the house is as much the center of Thoreau's life as the pond. Although Thoreau refers most often to "houses" and "shelter" in "Economy"—and "house" appears more times (200) than any other noun in Walden except "man," "men," "day," "pond," and "life"—in later chapters, he names particular houses, including, of course, his own. (Ogden and Keller, Appendix A) "My door," "my nest," "my cellar" are but a few of the possessive references Thoreau makes. In all, he calls the place "my house" 53 times, and 15 times variously refers to it as "my hut" or "my dwelling" or "my home." "I lingered most about the fireplace, as the most vital part of the house." (p. 241)

Thoreau is most deliberate in describing it in the late chapter "House-Warming," in which he also tells of his dream of a larger golden-age house. At last one evening he learns of spring's advent because the light suddenly fills his house, and he sees the pond free from ice. Among the birds which come to stay, the phoebe "looked in at my door and window;" (p. 319) assessing the place as a nest site. This is the final direct glimpse of Thoreau's house in Walden. Yet the imagery of building as process persists to the very end. In a passage which contrasts a walk "with the Builder of the universe" (p. 329) to the mere restless parade, Thoreau moves once again to construction. "It affords me no satisfaction to commence to spring an arch before I have got a solid foundation." (p. 330). His experience in finishing his own house provides him with this metaphor:

I would not be one of those who will foolishly drive a nail into mere lath and plastering; such a deed would keep me awake nights. Give me a hammer, and let me feel for the furring. Do not depend on the putty. Drive a nail home and clinch it so faithfully that you can wake up in the night and think of your work with satisfaction,—a work at which you would not be ashamed to invoke the Muse. (p. 330)

Living honestly and purposefully is like building faithfully, is like creating a literary work. (Cavell, pp. 59–60)

As in Walden, in Absalom, Absalom! one indication of the importance of
the concept of house is the diction. There are 220 uses of "house" (13 "houses"), 58 appearances of "home," 25 of "cabin." "Architect" occurs 32 times. In the novel's beginning, Quentin and Rosa wait until it is cool enough and dark enough to visit the old house. In fact, Sutpen's house acts as a magnet in drawing people to it: Rosa during the war; Bon, after he met Henry; Henry and Bon at the war's end. From the vantage of the ice-cold Harvard room he shares with Shreve, Quentin visualizes the old house that he had finally entered. Throughout the narrative, starting with and returning to Sutpen's great expenditure of energy to build it, his house is the focal setting. Composing the novel, Faulkner began with the house. The mansion and an architect character were features of the first, unpublished version of Sutpen material, and Faulkner's first title for the novel which later emerged was "A Dark House." ("Evangeline"; Blotner, pp. 696–698, 828–830)

For each protagonist, Thoreau and Sutpen, the house is an expression of his plan for living. The male owner builds without a partner or co-builder, denying the need for a woman to help him create. Thoreau makes it all too clear that his is a house for one. "Two Paradises are in one, / To live in Paradise alone," an epigraph for his journal (1.19), is implied everywhere in Walden. As for Absalom, Absalom!, only after the structure is completed and furnished does Sutpen bring a bride to it. He never consults her. The house is not the woman's nest but her prison. During the war, Ellen Sutpen slowly dies in the darkened, shuttered room upstairs which becomes in effect her coffin. No man can rescue Sutpen's daughters, Judith and Clytie, from the "rotten mausoleum" (p. 350) which is their father's bequest.

Both men feel impelled to build their own houses, rather than live in another's, because to build so is to shape one's life, to assert one's identity. Both Thoreau and Faulkner insist on the differences between the central structure and the others in the vicinity. Thoreau eschews a shanty or a sty, such as some of his poor Irish neighbors lived in, or a cave or a wigwam, such as satisfied earlier dwellers. He does not wish to incur the cost of a mansion, which would cost him his freedom:

if one designs to construct a dwelling house, it behooves him to exercise a little Yankee shrewdness, lest after all he find himself in a workhouse, a labyrinth without a clew, a museum, an almshouse, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead. (p. 28)

He might have bought for a dollar one of those large boxes by the railroad that he urges on persons hard-pressed for housing. But for all the freedom it might afford, that box is suspiciously like a coffin: "six feet long by three wide," with a lid. (p. 29). Sutpen's mansion is far grander than other houses of Jefferson. It is not the "'rotting cabin'" (p. 249) of his
childhood, nor the Tidewater plantation house, nor "the besieged house" (p. 249) on Haiti, nor the rundown shack where Wash Jones lives, nor the Coldfield house in town. Implied is a Faulknerian syntactical strategy: not this, not that, not the other, but something quite different. It is true that Sutpen's mansion turns into a kind of mausoleum, a building that Thoreau loathes, but even so it stands out as unique in Yoknapatawpha.

Sutpen's house becomes a mausoleum paradoxically because it is somehow a living thing and emblematic of its maker. Faulkner and Thoreau share the idea already touched on, that the house expresses the indweller. When Thoreau first took up residence at Walden and in the woods, he imagined that his unfinished house—with unplastered walls and newly cut studs, door, and windows—was as light and dewy as the morning itself, fit for a visiting god or goddess. What is "this auroral character" (p. 85) of the house but an externalization of the builder's own hopeful spirit, his belief reiterated throughout Walden in fresh beginnings and new life? This house, a "more substantial shelter" than the tent Thoreau earlier owned, "This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me, and reacted on the builder." (p. 85) So complementary are they that house and builder are difficult to separate.

Just as we have no clear idea of what Sutpen's house looked like until it decayed, so we encounter no assertions that the house is identified with him until then. One of the oddest features of Sutpen's mansion is its sudden decline. Of course, it was neglected during the war. Rosa Coldfield testifies to the way it looked when she came to stay, four years after the war began, with its "Rotting portico and scaling walls"; "there was even one step, one plank rotted free and tilting beneath the foot" as she entered. (p. 136) It had not suffered from any enemy invasion, yet was a mere "shell . . . a skeleton giving of itself in slow driblets of furniture and carpet, linen and silver" (p. 132–133) to support the Confederate cause. Though it is easy enough to understand why the hall was now "barren," the floor "bare," and the stair "naked," (p. 137) the gardens and fields untended, it does not make sense for the structure itself to decay so soon. How could the "formal" front door have lost all its paint (p. 184) in a few years? Why should the steps have rotted so soon? Apparently, the Civil War transformed Sutpen's mansion into a ruin.

But more than the conditions of war (and it is interesting to note that the house transformation had occurred before the the South's defeat), Sutpen's absence while he was a soldier from the house he built accounts in part for its moribundity. In Sutpen's absence, it was

as though his presence alone compelled that house to accept and retain human life; as though houses actually possess a sentience, a personality and character acquired, not so much from the people who breathe or have breathed in them

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inherent in the wood and brick or begotten upon the wood and brick by the man or men who conceived and built them—in this house an incontrovertible affirmation for emptiness, desertion; an insurmountable resistance to occupancy save when sanctioned and protected by the ruthless and the strong. (p. 85)

Only in Sutpen’s mastery of his domain was the house full and sound. Ellen Sutpen died during the war in “the house on which fateful mischance had already laid its hand to the extent of scattering the black foundation on which it had been erected and removing its two mainstays, husband and son.” (p. 78) With war’s end and the seeming defeat of his design (in his son Henry’s disappearance), Sutpen returned to the exceedingly difficult task of restoring his house and land. Rosa recalls that he talked not to the family’s three surviving women but to “the waiting grim decaying presence, spirit, of the house itself.” (p. 160) Faulkner appears to suggest that the house is a manifestation of Sutpen’s “design,” with a life and death of its own.

On the subject of Sutpen’s “design,” which was first revealed at the architect hunt, Quentin also remembers a conversation between Sutpen and Grandfather Compson after the war, when Sutpen wondered what “mistake” that he made had caused the design to fail. “ ‘Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point,’ ” Sutpen said. (p. 263) By determining that the boy he had been would never again “ ‘need to stand on the outside of a white door and knock at it,’ ” (p. 261) he thought he “ ‘could shut that door himself forever behind him on all that he had ever known.’ ” But when Henry brought Sutpen’s repudiated son Bon home that Christmas before the war, Sutpen “ ‘must have felt and heard the design—house, position, posterity and all—come down like it had been built out of smoke, making no sound, creating no rush of displaced air and not even leaving any debris.’ ” (p. 267) So what is left is merely a shell of a house? Sutpen did invite Bon to enter, but in refusing ever to acknowledge him as his son, Sutpen in effect had shut the door of home in Bon’s face. Apparently, though not explicitly, Sutpen blames Bon’s maternal lineage, with its supposed black ancestor, for his earlier setback: “ ‘I was faced with condoning a fact which had been foisted upon me without my knowledge during the process of building toward my design, which meant the absolute and irrevocable negation of the design.’ ” (p. 273, italics mine) Whether manipulated by his mother and her lawyer or not, Bon “ ‘did arrive like the dynamite which destroys the house and the family.’ ” (p. 306) Yet this destruction is possible only because of the shaky morality on which the edifice was erected (to echo Mr. Coldfield in another connection—p. 260). Either from Rosa Coldfield’s perspective or Grandfather Compson’s, the house of Sutpen is vulnerable because it depends upon the founder’s strength and will alone.
In Sutpen's absence, the house speaks through his daughters, who prevent Rosa from opening the upstairs door behind which Bon's body lies. When Clytie commands Rosa not to go up there, it is as though 

the house itself . . . said the words—the house which he had built, which some suppuration of himself had created about him as the sweat of his body might have produced some (even if invisible) cocoon-like and complementary shell in which Ellen had had to live and die a stranger, in which Henry and Judith would have to be victims and prisoners, or die. (p. 138–139)

Of course, Sutpen's attempts to restore house and domain come to nothing because he is struck down by Wash Jones, outraged by Sutpen's refusal to admit another female child (Wash's granddaughter's baby) into the house. The novel's action is completed with Rosa's second, now successful, attempt to climb the stairs and enter the room where a son of the house (Henry) lies and with her second journey in 1909 out to "the doomed house." (p. 375) Rosa's reappearance triggers Clytie's setting fire to the house, "the monstrous tinder-dry rotten shell seeping smoke through the warped cracks in the weather-boarding" (p. 375) Like Thoreau's cabin, Sutpen's mansion is ephemeral, for like the cabin it is built mainly of wood. But whereas Thoreau's hopeful spirit is heartened by the thought of the "beautiful and winged life" which emerges from "woodenness," (p. 333) Faulkner, through Rosa's words above, tropes Sutpen's house as a cocoon formed from his body's sweat and pus to confine the souls of his family members.

Both writers subordinate history, make it serve their buildings and their plots. Generally resistant to precedent and tradition, Thoreau nevertheless justifies his preference for a dwelling in harmony with its natural setting by referring to early New England narratives. (p. 29–30, 38–39) In his focal "House-Warming" chapter, his dream house description fits a medieval hall house, down to the details of bare rafters, king and queen posts. (p. 243–244) Later, in the dead of the year, he recreates local history by thinking of Walden's former inhabitants (most of them slaves) and their houses. Though he scorns building monuments of stone, past or present (pp. 57–58), Thoreau cautiously applauds those who have built simply in wood, bark, and soil.

Thoreau's ideal house is but a larger version of the one he made. In creating his cheap and comfortable little structure, Thoreau attempted no radical departures from prevailing building modes. The first great innovation in American architecture, balloon framing, had been tried out in Chicago in the 1830's, and was widely used by 1840, thanks to the availability of cheap machine-made nails and milled lumber. (Giedion, pp. 347–350; Fitch, p. 13) But Thoreau instead used a framing method as old as New England, almost as old as England itself. (Cook, pp. 21, 60, 74) His
main timbers, six inches square, were mortised and tenoned (p. 42), then fastened together, and the whole heavy frame had to be raised with the help of others. (p. 45) Had Thoreau used the light timbers and two-by-fours of balloon framing, he could have built without any help and been truly independent. He chose, rather, the traditional, more familiar way.

Faulkner's use of history, though much more tangled, is just as ambivalent. Often readers of Absalom, Absalom! see the novel as centering on the difficulty of recovering the historical past, here the life of a family involved in the early settlement of Mississippi, its slave plantation society, the Civil War and its aftermath. In this view, only by means of several narrators recalling and interpreting the past can historical reality finally be known. Aside from the problem of being certain that Quentin's final hypothesis is the "true" version of the Sutpen story, not just a 14th way of looking at the blackbird (Faulkner in the University, pp. 273–274), the reader can see both accommodation and resistance to history at work in Faulkner's presentation of Sutpen's life and house.

First, the mansion is simultaneously the prototypical Southern plantation house and extraordinary. It is built of the usual materials and has the usual features (portico, gallery, stairs). It is described as huge, yet it has four chimneys only, suggesting four main rooms each upstairs and downstairs, like most Mississippi plantation houses. However, unlike others, it is designed by a foreign architect, who works two years on the spot to produce a house which turns out much like the rest. Sutpen cannot just use a pattern from a design book by a New York or Philadelphia architect, as many planters actually did (Crocker, p. xii), but must drag his Frenchman from Martinique to design and oversee the building. Obviously, Faulkner embellishes in creating and emphasizing Sutpen's architect, just as he embellishes in describing the mansion's decline—to enhance the sense of Sutpen's indomitable will and magnitude. The novel is not a mosaic of "facts" fitted together by the narrators which creates verisimilitude, but something more complicated and less tidy.

Another peculiar house in Absalom, Absalom! is that "barricaded house" (p. 249) on Haiti. As far as I know, no one has noted that Faulkner has Sutpen quell, in some mysterious way, a slave revolt at a time, supposedly in the 1820s, when slavery had long been banished from Haiti. Some readers argue that Absalom, Absalom! is an indictment of slavery and racism, because the crime of rejecting the black son and brother seems to be at the plot's core. But the plot ignores the historical existence of the heroic black Toussaint L'Ouverture, he who set in motion Haiti's liberation from the French. Haiti was free of white control as early as 1804. In the fiction, the two houses provide a certain symmetry: the Haiti house of Sutpen's employer, later father-in-law, is threatened by blacks from without; the Mississippi house is threatened by blacks from within the family. Yet Faulkner's ignoring the successful Haitian insurrection of history barely conceals a racist fear. Moreover the frisson created by
Quentin's version of the Sutpen family secret, miscegenation, appeals to racism. Anxiety about "racial purity" is at the very heart of *Absalom, Absalom!*; it is just blatantly verbalized by Shreve in the penultimate paragraph. The strands of meaning and strains of feeling are very mixed; the novel's final words, Quentin's "I don't hate it!" are merely the most obvious clue to its ambivalence. Sutpen's dark house cannot be synecdoche for the Old South—its maker is too individualized, too special. Nonetheless, it and he are implicated in Southern oppression as well as in Southern bravery and endurance, in callousness and cruelty, as well as family pride.

Unlike Thoreau, Faulkner did not literally build his own house. In 1930 he bought and restored the antebellum house in Oxford which he named Rowan Oak. Settling in, he wrote two novels each with the working title

![ROWAN OAK](image)
of "Dark House," the first becoming Light in August. Unlike it, the second, Absalom, Absalom!, is wholly somber, and its dark house is central. In creating Sutpen’s mansion, Faulkner replicated his own pride of possession, his own determination to become respectable. By locating his fictional builder in a shadowy past, Faulkner could create for him a greater mansion than his own and free him from the town’s confines, then give him the sons his creator never had. But Sutpen’s fictive freedom operates within the constraints of a slave society, and the consequences for all his children are disastrous. Faulkner expresses in Sutpen’s story longing, pity, revulsion, dread. He may have concluded that his own modest version of Southern gentility was much safer, that restoring a mansion was much easier than building one.

Though Faulkner lacked Thoreau’s will to “adventure upon life now” (15), as a writer he dared at least as much as Thoreau. Integral to both men’s narratives is the process of building a structure which defies cultural norms and from which most of the action flows and returns. For all the differences in setting and size, Thoreau’s cabin and Sutpen’s mansion are focal to their authors’ cautionary stories. Whereas Thoreau admonishes the reader to build his house and life on a good foundation, Faulkner shows what happens when the foundation is bad. Thoreau says plainly that to create a book parallels creating a shelter for oneself. Faulkner implies the same idea by introducing the image of the builder in his novel’s early pages and ending Absalom, Absalom! with the house’s destruction. Thoreau and Faulkner’s Sutpen are the obverse and reverse sides of the American design to make a new life by building in the wilderness. Their houses are alike sentient bodies for their makers’s souls.

Notes

1 Several critics have looked at the concept and imagery of house and home in Walden and Absalom, Absalom! Anderson discusses Thoreau’s use of wit and metaphor in describing his house and its building. (pp. 22–23) Gerstenberger sees the house as one of Walden’s “constantly expanding symbols.” (p. 11) Franklin compares Thoreau’s cabin with some other houses by a lake. (59–69) Sundquist (Home pp. 41–72) is primarily concerned with A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, but also takes up Walden. Cohn considers Thoreau’s house his “primary metaphor” for property (pp. 52–57); in a separate section, she briefly refers to Faulkner’s use of the mansion, including Sutpen’s (inaccurately, she says Sutpen is murdered in his mansion, later burned down by his idiot grandson—p. 140). Kronick looks at the parallels between building and writing in Walden. (pp. 89–99) Perhaps the most recent focus on Thoreau’s building is Garber’s
article. (pp. 399–412)

Kerr regards Sutpen's house as a Gothic, haunted building. (pp. 32–52) Pilkington argues "the centrality of the Sutpen mansion" in the novel. (pp. 160–162) Sundquist ingeniously relates Sutpen's house and Lincoln's House Divided metaphor to examine the miscegenation threat. (House, pp. 96–130) In the most thorough and intelligent examination of Absalom, Absalom! yet written, Montauzon sees the mansion as the novel's most potent and pervasive symbol. (152–170) Ruzicka considers the mansion in the context of architectural imagery in all of Faulkner's work. (pp. 45–54) Wadlington regards the house as comparable to the edifice in the Oresteia—on the grand scale and associated with death. (pp. 171–189)

1 "Henry Thoreau's Cabin," with plan and sketches, is included in Walker. (pp. 38–41)

3 Throughout, Cook stresses "that intimate relation between house and setting which endured until the nineteenth century" (p. 9), on which Thoreau comments in several Journal entries: September 28, 1851 (3.34), January 20, 1855 (7.125), November 26, 1857 (10.207–208), May 27, 1859 (12.192–193), June 15, 1859. (12.203)

4 For photographs of modern replicas of Thoreau's house (at Lincoln and Concord), see Stern. (p. 17, 49) It is a pity that Thoreau does not include the details mentioned by Hosmer:

The entrance to the cellar was thro' a trap door in the center of the room.
The king-post was an entire tree, extending from the bottom of the cellar to the ridge-pole, upon which we descended, as the sailors do into the hold of a vessel. (p. 51)

These are remembered many years later, to be sure. They are not included in the Concord replica on the Thoreau Lyceum grounds.

5 Ruzicka (pp. 49–50) acknowledges difficulty in making out the mansion's site plan. Elsewhere, he takes for granted the affinity between the antebellum South and classical Greece. (pp. 7–18) Kennedy refutes that line of interpretation, saying of the "white cage" of the columned plantation house: "It was no cult of Athenian democracy that animated these architectural shrines of a troubled, proud and passionate people. It was the cult of southern womanhood." (p. 345)

6 Bachelard (p. 91) views nests as primal images, and Thoreau likens his house to a nest several times. Bachelard also says that the simplest house dream is that of a hermit's hut. (31–32) He refers to Thoreau's writing five times, but more often to the Journal than to Walden.

7 Sundquist (Home, pp. 48–49) points to Thoreau's concern in all his works with foundations.

8 Rather than establishing an equilibrium between outside and inside, Thoreau's stay in the woods is a form of captivity, according to Slotkin (pp. 537–538): "Thoreau's hut at Walden is a metaphorical cell; and it is possible also to see it as a northern equivalent of the slave cabin, just as it is presented as a substitute for the wigwam." Sundquist (Home, p. 55) suggests that Thoreau in building his shelter yields to the "urge to crawl into the womb of nature."

Just once, at the beginning of "Brute Neighbors" (p. 223), Thoreau complains about housekeeping, probably because the preceding chapter, "Higher Laws,"
compelled comparisons of body and house as to cleanliness. (p. 214)

9 The Concordance to Absalom, Absalom! appeared too recently for use in this essay.

10 Significantly, Thoreau silently alters the subjunctive "'twere" of Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" (p. 63) to the indicative "are."

11 Hagan points to repeated images of imprisonment and entrapment (pp. 198–202) and remarks that Sutpen, Jones, Rosa, Henry, and Quentin are all "halted by closed doors." (p. 197)

12 Sundquist (Home, p. 72) refers to Thoreau's "constant fretting," as in Walden, that his dwelling will become "'a workhouse, a labyrinth..." but Thoreau always confidently associates the cabin with freedom.

13 Stern sees this as a visionary dwelling for mankind, praising the clarity and coherence of this longest sentence in Walden. (p. 369 n) Bachelard: "When we live in a manor house we dream of a cottage, and when we live in a cottage we dream of a palace." (p. 91)

14 Many have written on "history" in Absalom, Absalom!: Brook assumes that Quentin and Shreve are concerned to recover the past, however "little hard fact there is to go on." (p. 311) Levin tries to distinguish between "historical 'facts'" and mere conjecture. (p. 119) Holman sees the novel as a detective story focused on the narrators's attempts to discover the past. (pp. 168–176) Pilkinson's chapter title says it all: "The Stubbornness of Historical Truth: Absalom, Absalom!" (p. 157) Rollyson treats the novel as "historiography"; he asserts that Sutpen's tragedy is "his lack of historical consciousness" (p. 81); e.g., "In the Haitian dark Sutpen seems unaware of the significance of the rebellion." (p. 83) But no proponent of the novel as historical seems aware of the implications of that fictive rebellion.

Among others, Adams rejects the view that Absalom, Absalom! recovers the past, in favor of the view that Faulkner uses myth. (pp. 172–214) However, Montauzon argues that the novel's various mythic allusions and archetypes lead to no conclusive meanings. (pp. 129–170) Moreover, she shows that the historical interpretations are inevitably contradictory. (pp. 35–57)

15 Miner was perhaps the first to note that one antebellum Oxford house was designed by an architect with a French name, Calvert Vaux. (p. 43) The owner, Alexander H. Pegues, was similar to Sutpen in his ambition and success. (p. 95) Vaux was actually an English-born associate of Frederick L. Olmsted in New York. The plan for the Pegues house, Ammadelle, came from Vaux's design book, Villas and Cottages, 1857. (Crocker, p. xii)

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An Honorable Profession

Laura Deming

WESTERNERS in Africa can’t afford to be choosy; I, in particular, cannot afford to be. I drove my boss Duncan to the airport yesterday—he is based in Nairobi and comes to Liberia rarely—and I could tell by the silence of the drive that the axe was quickly falling on my illustrious career as a foreign correspondent.

When we shook hands good-bye Duncan gave me the kind of look usually reserved for naughty children. I have let him down, dishonored my profession, behaved badly, and all because nothing ever happens here—at least nothing I can report. True, there was a coup last year, but I missed it. It isn’t my fault that I was on vacation in Abidjan at the time. It is not as if the new President and I had gotten together and coordinated our weekend plans. It was just bad luck, that’s all.

I remember I was poolside at The Hotel Ivoire when the BBC Africa report came on that day, my mind full of current events like how I was going to approach the French girl in the red string bikini who kept rubbing her hands up and down the length of her long brown legs, oiling them with Bain de Soleil. Before switching career tracks I had majored in International Relations at Georgetown, and I knew what a problem French diplomacy could be. Plus, I was drinking beer, which by the looks of her would mean the kiss of death for me. The radio report spared me what would surely have been a major character assassination. But I was in deep, deep trouble anyway.

The Monrovia airport was closed for three days and the roads into the country were blocked by more impenetrable checkpoints than the Bekaa Valley. The BBC man on the spot did a great job, though. I hope he got a raise. By the time I made it back to the capital the new Commander-in-Chief had already ordered lavish furnishings for the Executive Mansion and was trying to decide which of his wives he would make First Lady. I thought of interviewing her about her choice of wallpaper for the Grand Reception Hall, but decided against it.
Jack Sampson, foreign correspondent. I liked the sound of it, and when I arrived in Africa, a Peter Jennings trenchcoat slung over my arm, I saw my first overseas assignment as the beginning of a promising career. But that was then. Later I saw things differently. I had too many empty hours to fill, too much good beer, too many bad women. What I didn’t have was news. Missing the coup was the final blow. After that I surrendered to the heat and the lazy tempo of the place and found myself sitting, day after day, on the second floor balcony of the San Remo, drinking Club beer and watching the action in the city street below me as if, at any moment, something newsworthy might happen.

I had a room at the San Remo, 309, on the floor above the one where the local girls took their business every night. The rooms on the third and fourth floor were okay, crummy but respectable, and the restaurant on the ground floor was one of the best in town. I heartily recommended the Paella, or the Garlic Shrimp if the evening would be a solitary one. I seldom ate the Garlic Shrimp.

Important people came to the San Remo Bar and Restaurant. It was a major expatriate hangout and a favorite of Liberian businessmen and government officials. Rumor had it that the CIA had planted bugs in the bar at one time, and that made great sense to me. Generally spooks don’t impress me, but I hope the fellow who thought that one up got a raise.

Many official Americans stayed at the San Remo—military advisers, diplomats—and for some reason this amused me. While the shady Libyans got put up at the fancy high-rise downtown, the Americans were living in rooms that had rats and mysterious stains on the walls. I thought there was a message in there somewhere about the bad rap we often got overseas, but my job was not to climb soapboxes but to get stories. And at this I was failing. Miserably.

I failed at lesser things too, like killing rats. West Africa is full of rats. When I first moved to Monrovia I lived in a place where one was so pushy I named him, and left crumbs on the counter on purpose. But the rats at the San Remo were plump and mean-looking, bulging with the riches that come from living above a restaurant, and they bothered me. A couple of the Army guys had made a game out of staying awake at night in their rooms, leaving the lights on, and shooting their .38’s at any rat that ventured out. I knew the soldiers were as bored as I was, but their game still struck me as unsportsmanlike. At least they could have done it in the dark and given the animals a chance, I thought. I hated the rats; they reminded me that I could have chosen a more civilized line of work. But I couldn’t kill them. I hit one once—threw my shoe across the room and hit the poor beast on the ass—and felt as bad as if I’d slapped my mother. It occurred to me that I was going soft, not in my body, which is a well-kept 40-year-old model, but somewhere else, somewhere where journalists were supposed to be hard.

I was in this frame of mind, and one paycheck away from being
unemployed, when I decided to toss scruples to the wind and make something up. I’d been reading *Scoop*, the novel by Evelyn Waugh, and its storyline provided my beer-sodden brain with the precise amount of inspiration required. Soon I had a plan, and for the first time in months I was as excited as if I were on the trail of a hot lead, a real story.

“A headline—I’ve got to have a story from you worth a headline,” Duncan kept insisting, and I resolved to grant him his wish. One good story and my career would be solid again, then I could afford to wait for some real news. I couldn’t look to the local reporters for help. They were apparently as desperate as I was. “Human Grease Found in Sinoe,” “Running Stomach Leads to Student Boycott,” “Girl Held for Biting Man’s To-Do”—these were the stories that brought their paychecks in on time. No, I would have to work alone, keeping my wits and imagination about me, to bring in the scoop of the year.

It was simple really, beautifully simple. Michael Martin, the rebel leader who’d been first choice to be Head of State in the new regime, had disappeared the night of the coup, never to be heard from again. He didn’t know it yet, but he was going to grant me an exclusive interview.

Without a word to anyone I checked out of the San Remo the next morning and flew to Cape Palmas, a quiet town near the Ivory Coast border. Game plan: to spend a day and half at the Seaview Hotel, drinking and looking like I was waiting for something, then to disappear for a few hours, after which I would head back to the capital like a man with a mission and file my story.

Cape Palmas was the kind of town you hoped the tourists never found. Built on a hillside at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean; it was a haven of swaying palms, warm breezes, and smiling faces. Cape Palmas was what Africa should be like, or maybe once was. I’d been there before, covering a story that had made the usually peaceful spot the talk of the country. Several local officials had been tried and later hanged for murdering and eating an adolescent boy. Even the lady who did the cooking had been hanged—an interesting touch, I thought. And Duncan liked the piece I wrote about the case, but it was killed at the bureau. The verdict: too distasteful a subject for breakfast table reading in Middle America. Cape Palmas was the site of another one of my failures. But I liked the place anyway.

It was late afternoon by the time I got to the Seaview, and the hotel was just as I’d left it. Same tacky nautical decor, same two white bodies propped up at the bar—Karl, the shipping agent, and his English assistant Paul.

“Jack, my boy! What brings you to our sleepy little town this time, son?” Karl was my age but looked old enough to be my father.

“Oh, I needed a break—wanted to get away from the noise and pickpockets—”
"You don’t fool me," Paul said in a moment of coherence between drinks. "I bet you’re chasing a hot story." This was my cue. I looked mysterious and changed the subject.

The young Liberian girl behind the bar brought me a gin and tonic and I filled the guys in on the latest gossip from the capital. They were hungry for news and hungry for company. They were the only Europeans in town.

"Let’s have dinner here tonight, Jack," Paul said, his words slurring only slightly.

"No, no. I’ll cook—come on over to my place," Karl said. One way or another we would all eat together. I opted for the home cooking.

Karl’s house was large and half-empty, as if he’d started out there once with a family, which he had. Now he lived alone except for three chimpanzees and the largest toy train set I’d ever seen. It was an after-dinner ritual to play with these trains, and I tried to appear interested. Paul dozed in a corner while train whistles blew, warning bells rang, and the chimps did somersaults around the artificial hills and valleys that blanketed the living room. But in the midst of all the commotion Karl looked as lonely as a man stranded on a desert island. I was glad when the evening was over, and I walked back to the hotel quickly, trying not to think about what Africa can do to those who stay too long.

I was roused from these maudlin meanderings by the sight of a woman waiting patiently outside my room. It was Karen.

"News travels fast," I said. I know I was grinning, happy to see her.

"Welcome back, handsome," she said. In her hands she held a bouquet of flowers. The flowers were a joke between us; she had brought me some the first time we met, when I was in Cape Palmas on the cannibal story.

Karen was a skinny blond from Chicago, a Peace Corps volunteer who taught school in a nearby village. She was a kind-hearted soul who, when she’d heard an American was dying of malaria in a room at the Seaview, had shown up with flowers and sympathy, ready to lend a little cheer to the poor fellow’s last hours. The poor fellow was me.

I suspect that all good descriptions of malaria are written by people who’ve never had it; they remember too much. For me at least, the five days of fever are days simply smudged off the calendar of my life, days when I was only human because I had been once, and might be again. The lack of air-conditioning and regularly running water at the Seaview was an extra burden, one I cursed repeatedly as I wandered in and out of consciousness. It seemed just my luck to get malaria in a town without air-conditioning. For five days I felt as if I’d been pumped full of LSD and sleeping pills and dumped in a steam room. And for five days I didn’t fear dying; I felt so bad I longed for it.

I have only a foggy memory of Karen’s first visit, but I recall being embarrassed to see she’d brought flowers. Flowers in Liberia have no fragrance, but I didn’t know that then. To me the flowers represented an
effort at air-freshening, a futile gesture in a room containing a non-flushing toilet and a man with continuous diarrhea. But Karen was undaunted. She visited me each day, until one day I was well enough to see how lovely she was, and then she stayed the night.

She was still lovely, and after I took the flowers from her and opened the door to my room, I picked her up and carried her across the threshold. We pushed the twin beds together and got undressed like two kids in a hurry. But when we got in bed we made love very slowly, to the smell of the mosquito coils and the whir of the fan. With Karen I didn’t close my eyes, and I didn’t mind the sweat. And I was happy to have breakfast with her in the morning.

I hung around the hotel most of that second day, then at 2 p.m. I borrowed the owner’s car and drove out of town. There I parked on a ridge overlooking the ocean, got out my trusty notebook, and interviewed Michael Martin.

Desperate men do desperate deeds, and often don’t even feel guilty. I knew my conscience would get me sooner or later; I hoped it would be later, after I’d insured job security and maybe paid off a debt or two. Once back in Monrovia I filed my fictitious story and with a lightness of heart that made me almost giddy I headed to the San Remo for a celebratory dinner. I checked in there too, room 314 this time, and though I vowed to get a regular apartment within the week as the next step in rehabilitating my career, on this night the San Remo felt good, like going home for the holidays when you know the visit will be over before the folks drive you crazy.

The restaurant was dark and coldly air-conditioned as usual, and I chose a corner table with a clear view of the bar. It was just after 8 p.m., the unofficial but strictly enforced hour when the working girls could begin to openly solicit their paychecks for the evening. Most of the expats had gone home, and waves of sailors from the ships in the harbor had taken over their seats at the bar. Among the San Remo’s many claims to fame was its well-deserved reputation as the best pick-up joint in the city. The girls were often pretty, underneath the cheap wigs and too-tight dresses, and most of them were surprisingly good-natured. They were there for the taking and in the past I’d taken. But tonight I viewed the action from a safe distance, as if watching a trashy TV movie about a life I could only live vicariously.

My favorite waiter Isaac was on duty and we exchanged a few words about Cape Palmas, his hometown. I lit a cigarette, then I ordered the Garlic Shrimp and a bottle of the best wine in the place. There were no ashtrays on the tables; they were stacked up, newly washed, by the cash register. I went over to get one and saw yesterday’s edition of the Liberian Standard folded up behind the counter. I grabbed an ashtray and the paper—I’d been out of touch with the news for 48 hours because of my
trip—and went back to my table. The wine had arrived and Isaac was engaged in a laborious effort to open the bottle with a broken corkscrew, thereby missing a rare opportunity to see a white man really turn white. Yesterday’s headline read: “Rebel Leader Found Dead.”

Needless to say I’ve been fired. And now Duncan is back in Nairobi after having his worst suspicions confirmed. I was not duped by a Michael Martin look-alike while the real man lay decomposing in the dust in a sleepy Monrovia suburb. No, I have been as dishonest as the dry season is long, and I admitted it. Fortunately for the reputation of the magazine, the fabrication was caught in time by a diligent cub at the bureau. I hope she gets a raise.

This morning I was in my room packing, ready to check out of Liberia for good. I’d stuffed my foreign correspondent trenchcoat in the metal trash can by the bed—a final gesture, the end of hope—and I was on my way out the door when the telephone rang. It was Bob Shultz, the local CIA station chief, a nice guy in an odd job.

“I hear you’re leaving, Jack,” he said. “Let’s get together for lunch before you go.”

Bob was a buddy of mine, but he’d never been much help as a news source. All I usually got from our lunches was the check. Once or twice he tipped me off on a corrupt government official. But if American readers cared about corruption in black Africa, the continent would teem with happily busy journalists, I would have had plenty to write about, and I wouldn’t have stolen an idea from Evelyn Waugh and ended up out of a job.

We agreed to meet at the Island Cafe, in one of those grotto-type dining rooms that populate the city like giant beehives, as if every guy who owned a restaurant had a relative in the plaster business. I got there early. By the time Bob arrived I was on my third whiskey and second pack of cigarettes of the day. I was feeling no pain as I watched him walk in. He’d put on a little weight since I’d seen him last, but he still looked like an insurance salesman, the last guy you’d ever take for a spook. He sat down and got right to the point.

“I’ve talked to Duncan and know all about your predicament,” he said. I was glad I had a full glass in front of me. “Jack, I’m gonna make you an offer you’d be a fool to refuse.”

I got a heavy feeling behind my breastbone, like lead or the beginning of laughter. I thought about what awaited me back in the States—the freezing winters, the bitter ex-wife, the Redskins who weren’t even winning anymore. I’d grown fond of West Africa, probably for all the wrong reasons. And I was broke.

“Nobody here knows what you’ve done. Duncan has agreed to keep you on officially at the magazine, but you would report to me—”
"But—"

"—We need an inside man at the San Remo. We've been missing a lot since the owner made us take out the bugs."

"But, Bob, you know I'm a cheat and can't be trusted," I protested weakly.

"Nonsense—you're just the kind of man we're looking for."

"But I'm a coward—I can't even kill a rat—"

"For Christ's sake, Jack, you know better than to think there'd be any rough stuff involved. Ours is an honorable profession."

"But—"

"Think of it as a promotion—you'll be working for your country, not some magazine. And we'll even give you a raise."

I'd just heard the magic words. I'm a sucker for career advancement and the raise didn't hurt either. Besides, if things got really tough I could reread that book by Graham Greene—what was it called, something about a man in Havana? I pushed those treacherous thoughts aside and lifted my glass.

"Let's drink to your new man in Africa," I said. And we did.

After lunch, feeling better than I probably deserved to, I came back to the San Remo. I rescued my trenchcoat from the trash can—glad for once that the maid service was so bad—and unpacked my bags. Then I got a few beers in the bar and brought them up to the second floor balcony and sat down in my usual chair. Now, here I sit. The Club beer is cold and good in the heavy heat, and while I drink it I look out at the city—at the palm trees and ramshackle buildings, the office workers with their plastic briefcases, the market women with baskets of fruit on their heads, the beggars, peddlers, prostitutes, the stray dogs—and feel oddly happy. Jack Sampson, secret agent. I like the sound of it. And I have nowhere to go but up.
Reasons To Kill

Fred W. Manzo

I had two good reasons to bash his head.

The first had to do with stealing my wife. I know that you can't steal anybody that doesn't want to be stolen, but Amy says he tried real hard to get her away from me. "He told me we'd move out to California and start a new life, and that we'd put up one of those nurseries where you can buy fresh flowers and pine trees in canisters." She believed all that stuff about starting fresh. But then she believed the lies I'd told her ten years before, how we'd live in one of the houses along Lemon Street, those big two-story houses hidden behind bushy hedges and leafy trees. She bought those lies the way a bass grabs onto a fifteen-cent lure.

We'd drive down Lemon Street in the evening, during the twilight hour just after everybody was home for supper. We'd see the lights in the windows and drive slowly, hoping to get a glimpse of the people who lived there. We made plans for our children, dreamed of them going to the private school at the end of Lemon Street, dreamed of them wearing little suits. The two of us thought we'd have a couple of boys.

Then we'd drive home to our apartment, a corner apartment just over the parking garage, and all night long we'd hear people pulling in and out and slamming doors. It wasn't so bad at first. We were warmed by our dreams at night, but after a few years, the dreams turned sour. Amy got laid off her job at the factory, and I had to work overtime at the grill just to make ends meet. She tried everything to get a job, even driving over to Clinton and putting in applications there. She was trained to handle machines that stamped out computer chips, but nobody was looking for somebody with that skill. "You're too specialized," they told her. So she moped around the apartment and started watching television—first the morning programs where they gave away the big prizes and in the afternoons, she'd sit down with some snacks and watch the soaps.

She was convinced that those programs showed real life. I'd get home for supper, and she'd tell me the details of the shows as if she was talking about real people. She'd describe their houses and how they moved around in them, and she'd say what she thought would happen next.
“It sounds pretty predictable,” I told her.
“But it’s not, Harry,” she’d say. “Sometimes things don’t come out the way you’d expect. That’s why people watch those shows. They want to be surprised.”

I didn’t mind all this sitting around the house for the first year, but after that, she started putting on weight and the apartment began to look as if she didn’t care about it. Things weren’t dusted and cleaned, and the clothes spilled over the plastic basket that we kept in the bedroom closet. Amy said she’d get around to the laundry when she had a chance, but she never seemed to find the time. I’d have to wash my own clothes and run them through the dryer. You can’t show up at the fry station wearing grungy clothes.

Then Cabot comes into our lives. He just comes knocking on the door one afternoon and introduces himself as the guy who lives two apartments down. He says he’s unemployed and lonely and he wants a chance to talk to normal people. He says he’s had the door slammed in his face for weeks, and he’s depressed. So we invite him into our lives, little knowing that he has fangs for teeth.

He and I get along fine at first, the two of us watching television and talking about taking a trip out to California to see if we can find some better work there. He says he’s been out there with an uncle when he was fifteen, and he remembers they had huge malls that towered up along the freeway. “The mall is the church out there,” he says. The son of a bitch could talk, too. He must have stayed up nights reading in encyclopedias, because he always had little bits of interesting stuff to tell us.

One evening he sits down to roast beef that Amy for once had cooked, and he says, “Did you know we wouldn’t have civilization as we know it if it weren’t for cats?”

“That’s silly,” Amy says.

Then he goes on to explain how the wandering tribes stopped roaming the earth and set up little towns and buildings to store their grain and how the cats made sure that the rats and mice didn’t sneak in and eat all the grain. “If it weren’t for cats, Harry,” he says, “we probably wouldn’t be sitting down to a meal right now.”

This was the kind of stuff he could bring up. He’d talk about novas and supernovas and describe how the scientists were working on devices that could detect the drop of a pin thousands of miles out in space. I wondered why they’d want something like that and Cabot said, “Just think about the implications, Harry. Consider the future. We’d know when the aliens were going to invade.”

That was his favorite line, “Consider the future.” He was always living ahead of himself. There never was a present or past in Cabot’s life; it was always the future, what would happen next week or next year or next lifetime. He was always talking about reincarnation. He even got Amy to believe she would come back as the wife of a very rich guy in Canada. He
made some calculations using her birthday and concluded she'd reappear in the year 2058 in a small town in Canada and have a happy life. Amy gobbled this kind of thing up. She'd listen for hours about what the future would be like—the future filled with robots and space voyages.

One night he comes to the house with this black box and he says that people will be using these black boxes to teleport themselves around in the future.

"Do people get inside them?" Amy asks.

"No," he says. "They just hold them. Like this, and then they imagine where they want to be and in the same instant they're already there."

"I can't believe that, Cabot," she says.

"It's true."

By then, I'd quit believing the nonsense he told us.

After I got him on as a fry cook's helper, he got fired for sitting back in the refrigerator bundled in a jacket and reading science fiction books.

"Don't ever bring anybody in here like that again," my boss told me. "I don't need some freak reading in the refrigerator."

You'd think that experience would have given me the clue to get him out of our lives, but it didn't. He kept stopping over and watching television, and then when I was at work he still dropped by. I'd come home from work and see Cabot sitting in my chair but didn't think anything about it at the time. I didn't notice till too late that Amy was losing weight and starting to put make-up on again and that she'd taken a new interest in clothes.

After I went to bed, I'd hear them chatting while they watched television and then sometime around two or three in the morning, in would come Amy to go to sleep. She still wasn't working so she didn't need to be up for anything in the morning. I'd get up and fix myself a cup of instant coffee, and then I'd go down to the restaurant and have some breakfast while I was getting the orders out. I'd call home now and then, and Amy'd say she was still in bed. I trusted them so much it didn't dawn on me that Cabot had come back after I left. Even if I had known he was in the apartment, I probably wouldn't have thought he and Amy were up to anything sneaky. But they were.

One afternoon when I get home from work there's a note on the refrigerator:

"Dear Harry, Cabot and I have gone off to find our future in California." That was the entire note, written in Amy's pointy little scrawl. I checked her room and saw that she'd packed most of her clothes and taken the small stash of money that I kept in the sock in the bottom of the dresser. I thought it might be a joke at first. But when it turned ten o'clock and they still weren't home, I began to think the worst. I sat up all night, listening for them on the stairs. Finally, I went down the drive way to Cabot's apartment to see if they were hiding there. Through a crack in his curtains I saw that they'd stripped his place of everything. Then, I thought
that they must have been planning for a long time to do this to me.

When I got back to the apartment, I guzzled a six-pack of beer. The next morning I called Eddy down at the restaurant to tell him I wasn't coming in. I told him my wife was very sick. Then I went back to bed and felt like I was riding sea waves all day. I spent several hours over the toilet and then finally the hang-over broke and I wasn't seeing double anymore. All I could think about was Amy and Cabot driving on those California freeways and visiting malls. Somehow, the first week of agony passed, and I went back to work and pretended to myself that none of it mattered. I closed my mind to anything but what was directly in front of me. I even volunteered to work double shifts over the weekends because I didn't want to go home to an empty place.

And then I get a phone call from a town in Southern California. Amy tells me that she wants to come home and that they've run out of money.

"That's none of my business," I tell her. I hang up the phone and wait for her to call back, but she doesn't. A month later she appears at the restaurant and sits down at the counter as if nothing has happened. I look through the window to see if Cabot's out in the parking lot, but she's by herself.

"I hitchhiked home," she says.

"Where the hell is he?"

She shakes her head and starts crying, and I ask Eddy for the afternoon off. We drive to a park and sit in the front seat, both of us quiet and uncertain. I look at her and realize that I don't really want her back, not after all these months, not after all the things she did to fool me. She starts crying and telling me she's sorry. I don't fall for any of it, of course, and I start to feel bitter about the whole business. I've gotten along pretty well without her, and I am content to go it alone until something else shows up. But she whimpers and wants to kiss me, and all of a sudden I feel so damn sorry for her that I hold her close and tell her things are going to be all right.

"Do you think we can go back to how we were?" Amy asks. "Do you?"

I look over the steering wheel and see a stray cat stalking under one of the picnic tables. It's an ugly, mangy thing, looking for shelter. For a second I wonder if what Cabot said about cats is really true. Are they really responsible for civilization as we know it? I reach down and start the ignition and Amy clings tighter to my shoulder. "Tell me," she says. "Is there a chance for us?"

It's drizzling softly on the truck windshield, and the wipers are swooshing the water back and forth. The engine purrs softly, and Amy leans against my shoulder. "Is there?" she asks again. I consider for a moment whether I should get out and rescue the cat, but it stalks away into the high weeds sprouting along the edge of the park.

All the way home through the mist and drizzle, Amy talks about the
dry desert country out there in California. That’s when I think about Cabot again, think about him telling people about cats and novas and sitting down to eat dinner with them. He’ll tell them anything, anything at all, but he won’t deliver. He took Amy off my hands and carried her away to California. There was a promise in that, a promise that he would keep her. That’s the second reason I had for bashing his skull. Holding her close now, feeling her trembling body, I realize he’d stolen her and then given her back to me, but I didn’t want her anymore.
Fatalities

June, who went to California at 45 with her aging mother.
Dora from Baltimore,
whose middle-aged embrace
clutched like hot antennae.
Why do so many maiden relatives
die of cervical cancer?

A man who thought of marrying June
turned away saying: You're too good for me,
and even my timid mother could explain:
He means she's a virgin,
though then I couldn't see why blank territory
should scare a man away.

Worse, though not a case of death,
was Dora's older brother Jack,
who not until he was fifty
met and married a woman who could keep for him
a house worthy of Talmudic faith.
He went permanently mad
a year or two later.

"C'est toujours la chose genitale, toujours . . ."
Charcot murmured to Freud, who promptly
almost forgot but deeply remembered.

These things don't happen
to most aging virgins
nor to most holy Jews who marry late.
But even as a child I could feel
the ashy emptinesses beckoning
the fresh coals of cancer cells,
and the spring of passion's trap
dumping a davening saint into the mire.
My Sister Calls the Wrong Number and Gets Me

My sister calls asking for my brother,
who still takes her calls but holds the phone
away from his ear. For over ten years now
I have said no, patiently explaining
(in letters whose drift still eludes her)
how it tears at a fabric I must keep whole.

I tell her it's me, and she says: Oh, My God!—
panicky sorry and ready to hang up.
Her address book is all out of order
and that's why she got my number!

I look
across my mind at her ricocheting
conversations with my brother, that greater
disrespect he flings and that I cannot tell her.

Hold on, I say. Is anything wrong?
Not really, she explains, then starts a tale
of one choking ill knotted to another.

That's o.k., I say. We can talk a little.
Now I really hear the long hurt in her voice,
a hurt that has nothing to do with me—
a pile of stones grinding at the bottom of a mill
and churning dusty sharp points
into the underside her life has become.

She dribbles out name after name, each dripping
with fulsome praise for poisoned triumphs.
For life is a sea of failed deservings heaving us
like gasping fish onto a haunted beach
whose killing atmosphere she cannot see
brightens her survival.

Once I, too, flopped around on those sands
drooling over others' pains or crooning my own,
whose echoes now teach me the strength of silence.
Catching Up

I saw the Frankenstein monster's brick-shaped and scar-stapled head (it was Boris Karloff's) lurch from below a cliff to rip revenge and Paul Muni's forever wronged Fugitive From a Chain Gang dodging in the mud of ditches—only in the Coming Attractions and on the outside posters of the Liberty Theater on Victory Boulevard half-way between the ferry dock and the rise of the hill just below the reservoir where we lived.

Each day my parents told me to look away from every shadow that swirled above me, and they feared these movies might fill my dreams with images worse than the fanged gorillas whose screaming pursuit of me along the Boulevard I just hinted at.

Now part of me stands forever outside the Liberty where the monster comes to solidify the bricks that every day's denials piled around me and the fugitive runs towards the justice that will not recognize his pleas—or mine.
Walter McDonald

The Middle Years

At night we flash back
to the mountains, when we hear thunder.
Curtains aside, we see stiff lightning
in clouds looming like peaks.
For seconds, we’re young again,
the air thinner in the rain.

It seldom showers here
where we live on hardscrabble
fenced by barbed wire.

Thunderstorms tumble
far away in the east
down arroyos. Darkness,

a million stars. The only sounds
the ceiling fan, coyotes,
your deep, familiar breath.
Rain Dance

Hardscrabble homes are dust,
silt in the windows,
webs in the drains.
For months, the only rain
was rumor, puff-clouds

like artillery shells
aimed elsewhere. Mornings,
we whisk oilcloths
over all dull surfaces
and even the wood grain shines.
"The Best Is Yet To Be"

We've come to expect
the hearts' bumping,
the eyes' refusal
to focus. We need the world
brought to us—remote control,
bifocals. Bending
to rake the last leaves
from the hedge, we rest
more often. In time,
the panting stops. Fanning,
sipping iced tea and squinting,
we sit on the screened porch
and watch parades
of station wagons, sport cars,
roaring trucks.
Windmills Near Escondido Canyon

Relax, it's Friday, nothing to do  
but beat the ground until iron weeds  
are dead, the hoe filed silver-thin,  
gloves frayed and molded to your fists.

Grow sorghum when it rains and feed a prairie  
black with steers, fat Angus glistening  
like whales. This year, our dry steers  
stumble to the barn at sundown,
coughing, jaws grinding side to side  
their latest cud. This is a week,  
eating red meat, praying for rain,  
kicking chalk-white caliche dust
to tanks moss-green and empty. Climb up  
and grease the windmill bearings  
one more time, connect the rods  
and duck below the rudder
swinging with the wind. Climb down  
and watch the tanks fill up,  
shove back at cattle nudging to the pump  
like pigs, stiff wind more mercy to the steers
than rain. Buzzards soaring on thermals  
keep watch on us all, lost in a desert.  
At noon, we drag cane-bottomed chairs  
under the only oak and watch dark clouds
on wide horizons. Cold beers  
condense more moisture for our fields  
than clouds. Squinting, shooting  
black buzzards with our fingers,
we face the scalding sun and wonder  
how many heads of maize we can harvest,  
how many steers to a bushel, how many times  
a pump goes around before breaking.
A Red Oak Dying In Our Yard

Bury the axe,  
and let dead oak be firewood.  
Strumming an old guitar  
by the fire is better  
than grieving for trees  
giving no shade. Lightning  
torches forests,  
cattle and mule deer caught  
in the fire storms.

Better an old man  
whittling a stick  
and spitting, than logs  
rotting on mountains.  
If nothing can be done  
to heal dead trunks,  
we'll burn them.  
We'll make the last  
of these roots live.
Where Was Everywhere?

Two parachutes floated
down as one upon their
silver color. The earth
was land and landed
a couple to plant their guilt
or lack of it. Their
choice was clothing made
from the rags or the rage
of their circumstance.

They spread greetings
a bit lavishly along the
avenues of the strange.
Why and where gave them
jokes, suits and dresses,
employment of the employable.
They met office partitions and
talked to the machines after
being dubbed Mr. and Mrs.
by the bus on the corner.

The New York
space recreated them.
The buildings there with trains
as their servants liked
Mr. and Mrs. Everydream who
conducted the music of the videos
with a spoon. They were living out
a teenage they had never lived.
They swore allegiance to symphony
to prove their patriotism
and tried to fathom the cymbal clash.
Where was everywhere, everyone? No harm was done with that experiment of jeans and rock. The future became as it inevitably will. They made it servant and served it tea. They caught the weather and tried to teach it equality, for it had convictions, too many, yet too few.

Their teenage crawled out of the tunnel of its past like a flare burned out of the fireworks of their revolt. Housing calmed them to an apartment with a table set with the grapes of awareness. It defied antiquity of any kind and they inspected mind, idea by idea.
Days of Honey

They rented luck,
they rented telephone.
It was a mystery
adhering to the wall
in tan and coloring
the timpani of talk.
The ring tuned them in
to earth-technology,
the pushbuttons defied
circularity of dials.

At the tone
the time will be
a memory.

Voices testing
bass to treble told
earth stories of party or of pain,
of difference or of gain.
Mr. Everydream learned the cities
by their limits and
absorbed instant American
from the speaker.
Paris, Frankfort and Athens
guessed at the when
of his voice, at the then
of an afternoon, at the
why of his call.
The phone was a favor,
a ritual of acquaintance,
an asking for the particular,
the particular of mode,
a mode of wires,
a wire to aspire.
It planned the schedule of the week
and shaped it
into figure or figurine
of predictions.

The phone interrupted
Mrs. E. as she swam
in a pool of her thoughts.
She liked its substance,
even its crumbs of emotion
spilled upon the mornings
of her typewriter.
It was a pause
and it was steady,
staying where it had been
all along and speaking
to days of honey.
A Frame of Nostalgia

Chimes fluttered.
The hour closed like a door.
The painting had more than nicks upon the shellac on its frame of wood. The guests asked for servings of the dust of nostalgia. Tome was becoming a luxury, the couple's popularity.

Then they said
let us be strangers once again and rediscover likenesses.
Cheeks blushed with belief.
Remember the brightness of the bulbs in the lampposts along the road.
They were trust.
What is the measure of Tome's dark of night, layers of mirth, celebrations of birth?

The couple relived the wild of the wilderness of their arrival in New York when the windows had railed against the dark as if they had a special claim on electricity.
They walked backwards along the line of time to Tome where one day was bold, the next cold.
Their town had aged
with dark that did not relent,
saying "stay here, stay here."
The houses were plain
but did not have a wrinkle
in their plans. Their
roofs of slate were
proof of their existence.

But no one needed eyeglasses
and the stars were close enough
to light the dark of night.
Jokes knit the family.
Generations piled them like blankets
in a utility closet.
The constancy of the clock
or the basket that spurred effect
were framed and paintings
decorated the sides of houses.

Tome had become
hoary with its history.
So the Everydreams had spun
the idea of the new
into the study of a place
that had room for the flexing of muscles
on the limbs of living.
They left tears and fears behind
for a flexible family.

They named their painting "Home,"
the abstract curvings of the face
of a young New York.
Perhaps someday there would be a twin
for it to call "Tome."
Contributors

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