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Alan Soldofsky



Bifurcated Narratives in the Poetry of Robinson Jeffers, C. K. Williams, and Denis Johnson

Narrative innovation is a nearly ubiquitous fact of modernist poetic practice. In the context of the defining narratives of high modernism—Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, T. S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland,” Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*—poets experimented with narrative structure to produce what Albert Gelpi calls, paraphrasing Crane, “epic[s] of modern consciousness” (406). These experimental narratives tended to be disjointed and, influenced by cubism and other experimental forms of visual art, attempted to represent modern consciousness itself. According to Crane, such work did not follow a linear structure but instead followed “the logic of metaphor” or, as Crane wrote in a letter about his own epic narrative, “the structure of my dreams” (qtd. in Gelpi 406, 407). In the case of Pound and Eliot, the deployment of narrative fragmentation and disintegration works as an organizing strategy, a method of cubist assemblage, particularly in *The Cantos* and “The Wasteland,” that compels the reader to construct an emotional coherence out of the text’s manifold discontinuities.

Referring to such disjunctive narrative forms in his book *Re-Forming the Narrative*, David Heyman suggests that “radical discontinuity in serious verse may well be a twentieth century invention, or at least a symbolist or postsymbolist innovation. In this context we see T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound asserting the need for complexity and concision rendered coherent by stringent controls” (164). These textual controls, both structural and stylistic, in part distance the work from the emotional claims of an autobiographical subject—a self-reflexive authorial speaker—generated within the narrative. That such a speaker would be read as the poem’s actual author—the

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actual T. S. Eliot—would threaten to turn the text into a solipsistic, self-reflexive product, and thus undermine it as an “autotelic” work of art.

Such distancing tactics have become the trademark of modernity and have proliferated in the poetry of the later twentieth century—in both the narrative and lyric modes. One such tactic, where a text’s primary narrative is juxtaposed to a second narrative line not embedded in the primary narrative, I have come to call a *bifurcated narrative*. In such works the second, seemingly tangential narrative intrudes upon the first, generating a range of relationships between them. In some cases, the second narrative displaces the first as the primary narrative. In others, though the narratives may be scenically linked, the contiguity of their juxtapositions may seem narratively indeterminate, forcing the reader to construct within the text the missing connection. The connection between the two narratives in such texts often exists metaphorically, foregrounding resemblances between the two sets of events and/or narrative frames. In still other instances, a second narrative diverges from the primary narrative, sometimes to converge with the primary narrative later in the text. In some texts of this sort, the dual narratives constitute a double structure, foregrounding the anachrony between the two narrative frames and between the two sets of events.

By bifurcated narratives I am not referring to works where a polyglossia of narrative lines proliferate or converge within the text. One only has to think of *The Cantos* or *Ulysses* to understand that such texts work through the aggregation of fragments as their controlling tactic. Bifurcated narratives, on the other hand, do not work so much through aggregation but through the juxtaposition of narrative frames, each potentially disrupting and displacing the other. To enforce the interplay between the divided narratives, such texts frequently depend upon dialogic structure as their controlling tactic, determining the extent to which the two narratives are interwoven and regulating their pattern of divergence and convergence. One question that arises when reading such bifurcated texts is whether the poem’s dominant strategy is in fact narrative after all, or whether the poem utilizes such narrative structures to produce something more closely resembling a trope in the lyric. In the following pages I will read a few such works, all shorter (lyric length) narratives, and examine how these strategies of bifurcation work.

DECENTERING THE AUTHORIAL NARRATOR

Robinson Jeffers asserted the same need as his modernist contemporaries to render coherent his densely layered narratives and narrative-lyrics, in which he attempted to create original forms of verse that could address the modern world’s chaos and terror.¹ Jeffers found a structure in the bifurcated narrative that could contain, as Tim Hunt writes, “the dichotomies between culture and nature, history and nature, and how they defined beauty” that Jeffers saw similarly to the high modernists, “as dialectical and problematic” (102). In an early *ars poetica* written in four sections, “Apology for Bad Dreams,” Jeffers describes the essentially divided nature of his project:

This coast crying out for tragedy like all beautiful places: and like the passionate spirit of humanity
 Pain for its bread: God's, many victims', the painful deaths, the horrible transfigurements: I said in my heart,
 "Better invent than suffer: imagine victims
 Lest your own flesh be chosen the agonist, or you
 Martyr some creature to the beauty of the place."

(ll. 25–29)

Here Jeffers deploys a bifurcated structure to yoke together two narratives, constructing an authorial voice, which, as Hunt notes, "call[s] attention to the narrator's stake in the tale" (98). The lines quoted above represent the location in the poem's seemingly primary narrative from which we first see the second narrative diverge. In order to examine this strategy of divergence and convergence, a common structure in bifurcated narratives, let me read "Apology for Bad Dreams" more closely, paying attention to its movement from section 1 to section 4.

The first section of the poem introduces what would seem to be the text's primary narrative. In this story line a female protagonist is seen torturing a horse, against the dramatic backdrop of a Big Sur sunset:

In the purple light, heavy with redwood, the slopes drop seaward,
 Headlong convexities of forest, drawn in together to the steep ravine.
 Below, on a sea-cliff,
 A lonely clearing; a little field of corn by the streamside; a roof under
 spared trees. Then the ocean
 Like a great stone someone has cut to a sharp edge and polished to shining.
 Beyond it, the fountain
 And furnace of incredible light flowing up from the sunk sun. In the little
 clearing a woman
 Is punishing a horse. . . .

(ll. 1–6)

In section 2, an authorial narrator disrupts this narrative carried over from section 1, displacing it with the diegesis of the poem's composition:

. . . I said in my heart,
 "Better invent than suffer: imagine victims
 Lest your own flesh be chosen the agonist, or you
 Martyr some creature to the beauty of the place." And I said,
 "Burn sacrifices once a year to magic
 Horror away from the house, this little house here
 You have built over the ocean with your own hands
 Beside the standing boulders: for what are we,
 The beast that walks upright, with speaking lips
 And little hair, to think we should always be fed,

Sheltered, intact, and self-controlled? We sooner more liable
Than the other animals. Pain and terror, the insanities of desire; not
accidents but essential,
And crowd up from the core": I imagined victims for those wolves, I made
them phantoms to follow,
They have hunted the phantoms and missed the house.

(ll. 26–39)

A careful reading of section 2 reveals that the second narrative becomes primary—the narrative describing the poet's practice. This metanarrative of the poem's creation diverges from and displaces the first with "I said to my heart, / 'Better to invent than suffer: imagine victims. . .'" These lines recapitulate the scene the authorial narrator has dramatized in section 1. The displacement of the first narrative actually begins at the end of section 1, where the poet's authorial agency is glimpsed rewriting a purely scenic description:

Unbridled and unbelievable beauty
Covers the evening world . . . not covers, grows apparent out of it, as
Venus down there grows out
From the lit sky.

(ll. 18–20)

The little stutter of self-correction in the narration ("not covers, grows apparent out of it") locates the authorial agency in the narrator's making fine distinctions in language in the act of composing. Moreover, the intrusion of authorial agency into the text is echoed in the last line's allusion to Isaiah: "What said the prophet? 'I create good: and I create evil: I am the Lord'" (l. 20). By juxtaposing this allusion with the textual correction in the previous line, Jeffers's authorial narrator foregrounds the poet's prophetic role in the production of the text.

The reflexive authorial "you" we encounter in section 2,

"Better to invent than suffer: imagine victims
Lest your own flesh be chosen the agonist, or you
Martyr some creature to the beauty of the place,"

can be read as being carried over from section 1, from the narrative of the woman torturing the horse. In the first narrative, the "you" refers to an observer who watches from a great height:

Seen from this height they are shrunk to insect size,
Out of all human relation. You cannot distinguish
The blood dripping from where the chain is fastened . . .

(ll. 11–13)

The observer's position suggests the authorial creator's objective or even disinterested point of view, the authorial agency in the narrative nearly effaced but still in-

scribed in the text. But in the metanarrative of section 2, the “you” is clearly positioned in the vocative case, the authorial speaker addressing himself as object, the speaker’s authorial agency undisguised in the text. Where the first narrative appears to simply represent an external scene, the second narrative encloses the speaker within the rhetoric of a reflexive authorial consciousness, revealed by the speaker’s addressing himself in the imperative, “Better invent than suffer: imagine victims.” Interestingly, the divergence of this metanarrative alters our reading of section 1. The “you” read as reflexive allows us to read the first narrative as the authorial speaker’s encounter with the “victims” he has invented.

Once we read the “you” in section 1 as a reflexive authorial presence, the positioning of the poem’s two narrative frames becomes more apparent. The metanarrative introduced in section 2—read as the poem’s primary narrative—is situated in the present and encloses the secondary narrative of observing the woman torturing the horse, which is situated in the past-present. The primary narrative announces both narratives’ locations—“This coast crying out for tragedy like all beautiful places” (l. 21, 25)—and declares that for self-protection, the authorial speaker has “imagined victims for those wolves, I made them phantoms to follow, / They have hunted the phantoms and missed the house” (ll. 38–39). The woman torturing the horse in section 1 then becomes one of the phantoms in the poem’s second narrative, where she is identified as one of “God’s many victims” by the authorial speaker (l. 26). Thus, we begin to read section 1 less as the narration of an external scene than as the enactment of a scene constructed within the authorial speaker’s imagination—an authorial speaker whose agency is likened to that of God.

Here lies a problem. For the poem to work, Jeffers asks the reader to locate this authorial voice as “part of nature,” as Tim Hunt suggests, and is thus able to “speak with an authority prior to and beyond the ego” (98). That is, to be positioned in the poem as both subject and object.² By splitting the narrative, Jeffers locates the authorial “you” in nature, on “this coast crying out for tragedy,” within the same diegesis as the woman observed in section 1. Both are read as actants enclosed within the same imaginative space. While Jeffers strives to construct for the authorial voice an impersonal authority beyond the ego, the poem’s inclusion of autobiographical details subverts this intent. For instance, “this little house here / You have built over an ocean with your own hands” alludes to Jeffers’s hand-built stone house in Carmel, Tor House, whose presence in the text simultaneously foregrounds yet seeks to decenter the authorial speaker through use of the second person. The insertion of such details in the reflexive “you” voice, however, does serve to distance the authorial speaker as object from the actual Robinson Jeffers. It is this reflexive voice, then, that links the two narrative frames, situating the authorial speaker as an omniscient subjective observer and also simultaneously as a character in the space of the poem’s imagined landscape.

In section 3, the primary and secondary narratives ultimately converge. But before that, the primary narrative dramatizing the process of the poem’s production is continued, further inscribing the authorial speaker’s role as actant within the text. The authorial voice in section 3 invokes the ghosts of the native Californians

whose presence lies embedded in the soil below the headland where Jeffers built his house:

All the soil is thick with shells, the tide-rock feasts of a dead people.
Here the granite flanks are scarred with ancient fire, the ghosts of the tribe
Crouch in the nights beside the ghost of a fire, they try to remember the sun-
light,
Light has died out of their skies. These have paid something for the future
Luck of the country, while we living keep old griefs in memory: though God's
Envy is not a likely fountain of ruin, to forget evils calls down
Sudden reminders from the cloud: remembered deaths be our redeemers;
Imagined victims our salvation . . .

(ll. 42–49)

By making a reference within the narrative to the disappearance of the native people, the authorial speaker moves to historicize the diegesis of the poem, “this coast crying out for tragedy,” repressing its creation as an imaginative location constructed by the speaker and instead locating “this coast” in nature through the presence of the dead native Californians. The authorial narrator, situated as living close to nature, reaffirms his position as decentered observer whose consciousness encloses the actual Robinson Jeffers. The two narratives converge at the moment when the authorial narrator is suddenly interrupted in his talismanic meditation by the fleeting apparition of a woman calling herself Tamar Cauldwell, one of Jeffers’s imagined victims and the protagonist of his long narrative poem “Tamar”:

Imagined victims our salvation: white as the half moon at midnight
Someone flamelike passed me, saying, “I am Tamar Cauldwell, I have my
desire,”
Then the voice of the sea returned, when she had gone by, the stars to their
towers

(ll. 49–51)

This is the same woman, presumably, who was observed torturing the horse in section 1. The moment represents the final appearance of the poem’s secondary narrative, which here is absorbed back into the primary narrative of poetic creation, the poem’s primary metanarrative. By means of this reflexive allusion to “Tamar,” the poem reminds us it is the narrator’s authorial agency constructing the text, including the self-reflexive figure of “Tamar”’s author/Creator, for whose construction, like that of Tamar Cauldwell’s, the decentered narrator is ultimately responsible. Jeffers seeks to position his narrator as less a temporal human ego and more an atemporal disembodied voice, “the voice of the sea,” a voice that existed prior to the authorial speaker’s.

In a further attempt to repress the narrator being read as an extension of Jeffers’s temporal autobiographic self, the poem shifts into the third-person in section 4, reframing the authorial narrative of its own poetic production:

He brays humanity in a mortar to bring the savor
 From the bruised root: a man having bad dreams, who invents victims, is only
 the ape of that God.
 He washes it out with tears and many waters, calcines it with fire in the red
 crucible,
 Deforms it, makes it horrible to itself: the spirit flies out and stands naked, he
 sees the spirit,
 He takes it in the naked ecstasy; it breaks in his hand, the atom is broken, the
 power that massed it
 Cries to the power that moves the stars, "I have come home to myself, behold
 me."

(ll. 54–59)

The "man having bad dreams, who invents victims" must be read as the poem's authorial narrator, the poet/Creator. Such a third-person construction, though, clearly seeks to situate the speaker outside the self's subjective agency, further splitting the narrator as object from Jeffers's temporal self. Here he is represented as a generic authorial Creator who is "only the ape of that God." That the authorial protagonist "brays humanity in a mortar" is transparently reflexive, as are the protagonist's other acts of washing out, heating, deforming, etc., so that the self's subjectivity looks "horrible to itself." It is in fact through the deployment of these third-person claims that the authorial voice produces a metanarrative of the authorial self as a heroic construction, a Nietzschean *Übermensch* "[who has] seen these ways of God" (l. 64). Thus, at the climax of section 4, the authorial self speaks in the first person of its own dissolution and transformation:

I bruised myself in the flint mortar and burnt me
 In the red shell, I tortured myself, I flew forth,
 Stood naked of myself and broke me in fragments

(ll. 60–62)

With its temporal ego broken, the authorial self, transformed in the narrative into an atemporal near-mythic figure, can appear in the same narrative frame as Tamar and be both subject and object in the poem. By section 4 it is evident that the poem's bifurcated structure can be read as thematizing the authorial self's will to power. In this reading, the secondary narrative about Tamar Cauldwell, appearing in section 1 and briefly in section 3, works similarly to a trope in a conventional lyric. Read this way, the secondary narrative serves as a vehicle for Jeffers's dismal portrayal of human cruelty and lack of consciousness, both toward other humans and nature as represented by the nonhuman world. It is Tamar Cauldwell's unconscious, destructive pursuit of fulfilling her desire that stands in marked contrast to the authorial narrator's drive for exploding his consciousness, deforming it, making it horrible to itself, seeing it naked, and by doing so, transcending its boundaries (as subject) in order to feel connected to the universe: "'And here I am moving the stars that are me' / I have seen these ways of God" (ll. 63–64).

THE AUTHORIAL SELF'S DIVIDED AGENCY

In writing about subjective agency and contemporary poetry, Charles Altieri cites a distinction Wittgenstein makes between the knowing and the willing subject: "There are domains in which the ego shrinks to an extensionless point, its agency subsumed under the task of description or under the rules of language games. In such cases one can imagine the 'I' was an eye that takes in a visual field but that also understands itself enclosed within what it sees. At the other pole there is a willing subject that as will cannot be enclosed within the visual field: how the eye feels about what it sees and how it gives significance or projections to that field does not appear within the scene" (228).

If one accepts the dialogic nature of the authorial self, one can read certain bifurcated narratives as juxtaposing the knowing and the willing subject, negotiating the grounds of their ever-shifting contingencies. Robinson Jeffers's "The Purse Seine," for example, can be read as just such a bifurcated narrative, interweaving narratives of the knowing and willing subject. The poem is conventionally read as constructing an analogy between sardines caught in a seine net at night on Monterey Bay and the tightening net of socioeconomic and technological interdependence of a modern city. The poem opens with an authorial speaker observing the fisherman fishing at night off Monterey:

Our sardine fisherman work at night in the dark of the moon; daylight or moon-
light
They could not tell where to spread the net, unable to see the phosphorescence
of the shoals of fish.
They work northward from Monterey, coasting Santa Cruz; off New Year's
Point or off Pigeon Point

(ll. 1-3)

As scenic description, the "I" may be read as an eye, in the manner of the Wittgensteinian knowing subject, its ego reduced to an extensionless point, its agency subsumed under the task of description. However, the scene is not merely seen but observed by an authorial narrator whose agency, it becomes increasingly apparent, is present in the text. Indeed, the authorial presence is manifest from the first word, "Our," which situates the authorial voice as possessor of and participant in what it sees. Also, the authorial speaker makes claims for not only what the fishermen do, but what they don't: "they could not tell where to spread the net." So, though we are urged to read the speaker's agency in this first narrative as subsumed under the discourse of description, the speaker's agency is in fact apparent, inscribing the terms of its subjectivity within the heightened detail of the ostensibly objective description. The description of the sardines being hauled in is interrupted at the end of the first stanza by the authorial speaker telling how he feels about what he sees: "I cannot tell you / How beautiful the scene is, and a little terrible" (ll. 7-8). Here is where we can glimpse the narrative of the willing subject beginning to diverge. Except for this disruption, the first half of "The Purse Seine" appears to present a primary

narrative of the knowing subject, the “I” that is an eye, enclosed within the objective description of sardines thrashing about in the net.

At the start of the third stanza, the poem’s second narrative diverges from the first narrative frame of sardine fishing, once the image of the seine net is established. In this second narrative, the authorial speaker describes looking down from a mountaintop at night at a brightly lit city—and how he feels about it:

Lately I was looking from a night mountain-top
 On a wide city, the colored splendor, galaxies of light: how could I help but re-
 call the seine net
 Gathering the luminous fish? I cannot tell you how beautiful the city appeared,
 and a little terrible.
 I thought, We have geared the machines and locked all together into interdepen-
 dence; we have built the great cities; now
 There is no escape. We have gathered vast populations incapable of free sur-
 vival, insulated
 From the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent. The
 circle is closed, and the net
 Is being hauled in.

(ll. 14–20)

In this passage, the authorial speaker’s subjectivity cannot be enclosed within the descriptive discourse. Instead the text, foregrounding the speaker’s subjectivity, *recalls* images from the first narrative, constructing the trope through which the poem, as a conventional lyric, is most often read. The authorial speaker, constituted as a willing subject, gazes at the city’s “galaxies of light” and recalls the luminous fish, constructing a link back to the first narrative that the second has displaced. The line “I cannot tell you how beautiful the city appeared . . .” not only is a parallel syntactic gesture pointing back to the sardines in the net but also offers the agency through which we read the sardine narrative itself: “The circle is closed, and the net / Is being hauled in.” By now the net being hauled in is understood to be both literal and figurative. The parallelism provides the poem’s controlling structure, allowing us to construct a reading of the seine net as the vehicle for an extended metaphor into which the subjective agency of the authorial voice is embedded.

As the second narrative progresses, the authorial speaker ranges further outside the “I”’s (eye’s) visual field to make claims which constitute an argument foregrounding the “I”’s subjectivity:

I thought, We have geared the machines and locked all together into interdepen-
 dence; we have built the great cities; now
 There is no escape. We have gathered vast populations incapable of free
 survival, insulated
 From the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent.
 The circle is closed, and the net
 Is being hauled in.

(ll. 17–20 emphasis mine)

In this second narrative, the authorial speaker, located on a mountaintop, generates his authority in direct proportion to his literal distance from the city he observes. Here the speaker's authority appears to be the product of the "I"'s construction of a totalizing rhetoric, indicated by a shift into the "we" voice. The speaker claims for himself the position of knowing subject, inhabiting an imaginative space separate from the others who do not know that they are imperiled: "The circle is closed, and the net / Is being hauled in. *They* hardly feel the cords drawing, yet they shine already" (ll. 19–20 emphasis mine).

The "they" represents a small but significant grammatical shift, reinforcing the rhetorical distance between the authorial speaker and all those persons located in the city, designated by the speaker as "helpless"—the "I" excluded from all those others, the "they" who hardly feel the cords being drawn. Such authorial omnipotence is further suggested in the series of metonymic substitutions from the first narrative frame: "the vast populations incapable of free survival for the sardines"; the "government take all powers,—or revolution, and the new government / Take more than all, add to kept bodies kept souls" (ll. 18, 22–23) for the "net being hauled in." Through this metonymic transference, the reader is gradually urged to read the second narrative as primary. The willing subject's now primary narrative, already ranging far from the first narrative's visual field of netted sardines, makes ironic claims in its own defense, conflating politico-cultural decline with a decline in the quality of verse:

These things are Progress;
Do you marvel our verse is troubled or frowning, while it keeps its reason?
Or it lets go, lets the mood flow
In the manner of the recent young men into mere hysteria, splintered
gleams, crackled laughter. But they are quite wrong.
There is no reason for amazement: surely one always knew that cultures
decay, and life's end is death.
(ll. 24–27)

By situating the authorial speaker as the willing subject at the locus of where the two narratives diverge, Jeffers's "The Purse Seine" positions itself to be read both as an aesthetic tract and also as lyric vision of the coming apocalypse. And its bifurcated structure serves to enclose a critique not only of the urbanized modern world but also of the poetics of modernity.

METONYMIC DISPLACEMENT

Let me turn now to the first of two examples of bifurcated narratives from post-modern poets. C. K. Williams's poem "Tar" complexly interweaves two seemingly tangentially related narratives, both told in the first-person by the same authorial speaker: the first, the story of listening to the news of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident; the second, the story of watching roofers tear the old roof off his apartment building and put on a new roof. At the start of the poem, the two stories only appear linked by their simultaneity:

The first morning of Three Mile Island: those first disquieting, uncertain
 mystifying hours.
 All morning a crew of workmen have been tearing the old decrepit roof
 off our building,
 and all morning, trying to distract myself, I've been wandering out to
 watch them
 as they hack away the leaden layers of asbestos paper and disassemble
 the disintegrating drains.
 After half a night of listening to the news, wondering how to know a
 hundred miles downwind
 if and when to make a run for it and where, then a coming bolt awake
 at seven
 when the roofers we've been waiting for since winter sent their ladders
 shrieking up our wall, . . .

(ll. 1–7)

What is most striking in the poem's opening lines is the intimacy of the roofers' narrative, how what the "I" sees is so much heightened—rendered almost cinematically by the hypotactic syntax which governs the text and by the graphic verb choices.

The two stories are presented alternating with each other every few lines. In the first stanza alone, the roofer's story interrupts the Three Mile Island story no less than three times. So the question becomes: in what manner are these two narratives linked? Both stories are told discursively by the same authorial narrator who does not merely describe the events but describes what he feels and thinks about them. About Three Mile Island the narrator asserts:

we still know less than nothing: the utility company continues making
 little of the accident,
 the slick federal spokesmen still have their evasions in some semblance
 of order.
 Surely we suspect now we're being lied to

(ll. 8–10)

Juxtaposed to the speaker's reporting the progression of news about the accident is the speaker's description of the roofers, accompanied by his commentary:

Surely we suspect now we're being lied to, but in the meantime, there are the
 roofers,
 setting winch-frames, sledging rounds of tar apart, and there I am, on the curb
 across, gawking.

I never realized what brutal work it is, how matter-of-factly and harrowingly
 dangerous.
 The ladders flex and quiver, things skid from the edge, the materials are bulky
 and recalcitrant

When the rusty, antique nails are levered out, their heads pull off; the under-roofing crumbles.

(ll. 10–14)

The second stanza is entirely devoted to the roofers, whose story I would argue appears to function as the text's primary narrative in that it dominates the poem's visual field, being directly witnessed instead of being gleaned indirectly from media reports. Moreover, the narrative of the roofers has become emotionally charged, its meaning altered by its proximity to the Three Mile Island narrative through which we are urged to read the description of the roofers. The speaker's assertion that he never realized how brutal the roofers' work is, "how matter-of-factly and harrowingly dangerous," is colored by anxiety the speaker is feeling about Three Mile Island. Every detail the speaker observes about the roofers' work is read through this heightened anxiety, which is controlling the text:

Even the battered little furnace, roaring along as patient as a donkey,
chokes and clogs,
a dense, malignant smoke shoots up, and someone has to fiddle with a
cock, then hammer it,
before the gush and stench will deintensify, the dark, Dantean broth
wearily subside.
In its crucible the stuff looks bland, like licorice, spill it, though, on
your boots or coveralls
it sears, and everything is permeated with it, the furnace gunked with
burst and half-burst bubbles,
the men themselves so completely slashed and mucked they seem almost
from another realm, like trolls.

(ll. 15–20)

The authorial speaker inscribes himself as willing subject into this passage. The presence of authorial agency enforces the signification of the lines; thus, we read the "dense, malignant smoke" that shoots up as being a metonymic displacement of the radioactive gases released at Three Mile Island. By means of the transference of signification between the two narratives, the "dark Dantean broth" becomes something much more threatening, an indeterminate substance that, like the material inside the Three Mile Island plant's nuclear core, seems bland "in its crucible," but "spill it" and "everything is permeated with it."

Read through the conventions of the lyric, "Tar"'s bifurcated structure constructs an extended analogy, the narrative of the roofers becoming linked to and displacing the anxiety-laden narrative of the news from Three Mile Island. So why, then, does the authorial speaker claim, that "I think I know, though I might rather not, why my roofers stay so clear to me, and why the rest / of the terror of that time, the reflexive disbelief and distancing, all we should hold on to, dims so" (ll. 29–30)? It is because the roofers, "the men, silvered with glitter from the shingles, clinging like starlings beneath the eaves" (l. 33), represent an immediate viewable corollary,

into which the authorial agency in the poem is invested. By investing such a large measure of subjectivity in the narrative of the roofers, the authorial speaker displaces his anxiety over the accident at Three Mile Island onto them. Following this logic, the roofers then become the material representation of the momentarily difficult human task to contain a dire, abstract, intangible danger. Because the authorial speaker can only view media images of the accident happening “a hundred miles downwind,” those images are by their nature more ephemeral than the roofers he can observe working on his own building: “I remember the president in his absurd protective booties, looking absolutely unafraid, the fool. / I remember a woman on the front page glaring across the Misty Susquehanna at those looming stacks” (ll. 31–32).

Moreover, the “tar” of the poem’s title is a substance that even when contained readily permeates (contaminates) all it touches. The word “tar” itself resonates with a split denotation, signifying both a useful construction material and a poisonous petroleum-based resin in which living things can become ensnared. In the poem, the carats of tar in the gutter left over from the roofers are given the added connotation of being so black they “seemed to suck the light out of the air” (l. 34), associating the tar with death and with what is conventionally the representation of evil.

What thematizes the final two lines of the poem into the framework of the Three Mile Island narrative are the metonymic associations carried by the line “every sidewalk on the block was scribbled with obscenities and hearts” (l. 35). This final image of obscenities and hearts, highly charged with authorial agency, has had transferred onto it the speaker’s condemnation of those responsible for the Three Mile Island accident. Also transferred to the final image is the speaker’s (and reader’s) gratitude for having survived the crisis. Adding further irony is the fact that the obscenities and hearts are inscribed on the sidewalk in tar. It is interesting that “Tar” and “The Purse Seine” are both usually read as lyric poems, the reader urged to construct extended analogies between the text’s two narratives. In both instances, the physical material named by the poem’s title is thematized, read metonymically as the vehicle for the possibility of apocalyptic mass annihilation as a result of the unrestrained—or unredeemed—use of technology.

THEMATIZATION OF BINARY NARRATIVES

The last poem I want to examine is Denis Johnson’s “Talking Richard Wilson Blues, by Richard Clay Wilson,” a poem conventionally read as a dramatic monologue or as a persona poem. The theme of this poem, with its curiously reflexive title, is that for certain individuals redemption might appear to be a form of annihilation. The poem’s binary narratives are relayed in the first-person by Richard Clay Wilson, a persona who self-referentially reviews the squalid and violent circumstances of his married life, as described in the poem’s first, apparently primary narrative. The poem begins with a crudely spoken admonishment, addressed to an unseen interlocutor, not to get involved with women:

You might as well take a razor
to your pecker as let a woman in your heart.
First they do the wash and then they kill you.
They flash their lights and teach your wallet to puke.
They bring it to you folded—if you see her
stepping between the coin laundry and your building
over the slushy street and watch the clothing steam,
you can't wait to open up the door when she puts
the stairs behind her and catch the warmth between you.
It changes into a baby. "Here's to the little shitter,
the little linoleum lizard." Once he peed on me
when I was changing him—that one got a laugh
from the characters I wasted all my chances with
at Popeye's establishment when it was over
by the Wonderland. But it's destroyed
now and I understand one of those shopping malls
that are like great monuments of blindness
and folly stands there.

(II. 1–18)

This passage appears to contain a number of small syntactical displacements that are reinforced by the line breaks. Reading such displacements, it is possible to see where Johnson's authorial agency is invested. For example, reading the lines

you can't wait to open up the door when she puts
the stairs behind her and catch the warmth between you.
It changes into a baby

the reader can detect the pun on "stairs," as well as the oddly ambiguous reference of the "it" at the beginning of the line, which seems to refer back to the "warmth between you." Later in the passage, the language suggests an almost subliminal foreshadowing of the failure of the speaker's relationship, read in the enjambment of such phrases as "when it was over" and "but it's destroyed." Also, the reader is urged to detect a self-reflexive inflection in "great monuments of blindness / and folly."

Though Richard Clay Wilson in the first narrative never simply describes events objectively from the position of an "I" fully enclosed within the text, the manifestation of subjective agency is generally subsumed, or more accurately veiled, under the task of objective description. However, the reader can detect the presence of authorial agency "dancing underneath" the rhetorical intensifications produced in the text by variances from conversational syntax or the interjection of hyperbolic language.

"Listen, I'm going to work," was all I could say,
and drunk or sober I would put on the uniform
of Texaco and wade into my life.

I felt like a man of substance,
 but the situation was dancing underneath me—
 once I walked into the living room at my sister's
 and saw that the two of them, her and my sister,
 had turned sometime behind my back not exactly
 fatter, but heavy, or squalid, with cartoons
 moving across the television in front of them,
 surrounded by laundry, and a couple of Coca-Colas
 standing up next to the iron on the board.
 I stepped out into the yard of bricks
 and trash and watched the light light
 up the blood inside each leaf,
 and I asked myself, Now what is the rpm
 on this mother? Where do you turn it on?
 I think you understand how I felt.

(ll. 23–40)

Where authorial agency is most evident in the text, the language shifts rapidly from a simulacrum of barroom speech to a disjunctive surreal lyricism. Such a shift to lyricism occurs in lines such as:

some nights were so
 sensory I felt that starlight landing on my back
 and believed I could set fire to things with my fingers.

(ll. 45–47)

As the lyricism in this first narrative reaches its apotheosis, the veiled agency of the speaker's authorial subjectivity becomes increasingly palpable, inscribing itself onto the climactic events the text describes:

At closing time once, she kept talking to a man
 when I was trying to catch her attention to leave.
 It was a Negro man, and I thought of black limousines
 and black masses and black hydrants filled
 with black water. When the lights came on
 you could see all kinds of intentions in the air.
 I thought I might smack her face, or spill a glass
 but instead I opened him up with my red fishing knife
 and I took out his guts and I said, "Here they are,
 motherfucker, nigger, here they are."
 There were people frozen around us. The lights had just come on.
 At that moment I saw her reading me and reading me
 from the end of the world where I saw her standing,
 and the way the sacred light played across her face

all I can tell you is I had to be a diamond
of ice to manage.

(ll. 49–64)

Here you can indeed “see all kinds of intentions in the air”—authorial intentions. The narrative becomes overtly reflexive here, the narrator Richard Clay Wilson’s authorial agency foregrounded in the description of what occurs after he knifes the black man in the bar: “I saw her *reading* me and *reading* me / from the end of the world” (emphasis mine). The woman is positioned as the reader at the end of the narrative frame, where the action stops and the narration freezes: “There were people frozen around us.” The protagonist/narrator himself freezes, constructing an image of repressed narrational agency at the end of the frame, what the narrator calls “the end of the world.”

The shorter second narrative diverges from the first at this point, the narrative frame shifting from past to present tense, locating Wilson’s monologue as it resumes from inside prison. By reframing the persona’s location, the second narrative subtly alters our reading of the first. The reader is urged to rethink Richard Clay Wilson as a subject; he is imprisoned, working two days a week at the “Max Security laundry above the world / on the seventh level” (ll. 75–76). Because of his position “above the world,” there is also a distancing between the speaker of the monologue and the monologue’s diegesis. It is through an awareness of this distance that one reads the second narrative. Because the speaker in the second narrative is situated “above the world,” he is no longer enclosed within but stands outside the narrative frame. So as a narrator, Richard Clay Wilson is positioned “above” the events he is narrating and thus occupies the narrational space of the authorial storyteller—both subject and object of his tale.

The second narrative urges us to read Richard Clay Wilson as an unreliable narrator whose description of events is contingent upon his shifting subjectivity:

Sometimes I stand against the windows for hours
tuned to every station at once, so loaded on crystal
meth I believe I’ll drift out of my body.

(ll. 82–84)

He is a methamphetamine-addled Judas, his subjective agency responsible for the text’s proliferating discontinuities. He is a narrator whose indeterminate position destabilizes the chain of signification within the narrative:

Jesus Christ, your doors close and open,
you touch the maniac drifters, the fireaters,
I could say a million things about you
and never get that silence out of time
that happens when the blank muscle hangs
between its beats—that is what I mean

verge in the “I” of the poem. Instead, Johnson’s poem primarily works as a dramatic monologue, as its title suggests. We are urged to read the poem as the speaker/protagonist Richard Clay Wilson’s confession, describing the chain of events leading to his incarceration and his subsequent self-awareness and apparent epiphany. As a narrative, the poem foregrounds the text’s subtle shift of both frame and point of view. The text shifts from limited first-person past tense, where the location is indeterminate, to an unlimited first-person present tense in the speaker’s prison cell. We don’t learn until after the shift that the narrator is a prisoner, or that he has apparently undergone a feigned if not real religious conversion. Neither do we understand until after the shift the purpose of the narrator’s confession. We are urged to read the poem as two chronologically distinct though contiguous narratives, the first constructed as the back-story for the second, in which the speaker’s circumstances—his punishment—bring about his epiphany. The two narratives together constitute evidence of Richard Clay Wilson’s authorial agency, as Richard Clay Wilson himself veils the presence of the poet’s subjective agency that is embedded in the text’s disjunctive syntax, frequent use of enjambment, and ironized lyricism. Such textual features also serve as controls to tacitly remind us that Wilson’s agency is itself constructed by Denis Johnson.

The binary narratives in Johnson’s poem, can be read allegorically, the second narrative allegorizing the very linearity of narrative itself, inscribed within the first. The poem’s prison location is a place where the protagonist’s story is “arrested,” and thus, at the end of the first narrative frame the narrative of the persona’s past terminates in reflexive reexamination. Because it is disrupted, the first narrative suggests a rupture with the past—the end of the persona’s marital drama and the beginning of a new self-construction. The first narrative, beginning before the speaker’s incarceration, represents from the position of the second narrative not only a reconfiguration of past events, but also an ending that initiates a new series of events occurring within a new narrative frame—the prison where he resides in the present. However, linearity in the second frame is more disjointed, the authorial narrator relocating himself “above the world,” in a position of omniscience outside of time, a position of power for which the speaker, ironically, is sorely in want. The second narrative foregrounds the speaker’s desire to locate the authorial agency above or outside the narrative frame, removing him from the narrative as an authorial agent. This relocation of agency puts the narrator into a sort of narrative purgatory—“a place where nothing bad happens.” Despite such a desire, Johnson’s/Wilson’s authorial agency is abundantly evident in the text—in its disjunctions and self-reflexivity no matter how indeterminate. Johnson’s/Wilson’s authorial agency is most clearly displayed where Wilson declares that he has “written / several poems and several hymns.” What is also clear in the second narrative is Wilson’s desire to write himself into his text primarily as object. Thus, he must repress (or annihilate) his position as subject. Also, to be redeemed as object, he seeks to position himself in negotiation with a controlling exterior agency—Jesus Christ—that can reconfigure the meaning of both the first and second narratives.

What interests me most about these bifurcated narratives is the manner in which the authorial self, speaking directly or through the guise of a persona, negotiates the

problem of agency. By constructing two narratives whose convergence or disjunction can be read to metaphorize or allegorize one another, these texts resist the production of an unproblematic, solipsistic, authorial speaker. The bifurcated narrative structure—whether the constituent narratives simply diverge or whether they diverge and intersect several times—divides the agency of the authorial speaker between the positions of subject and object, and by so doing, positions authorial agency sometimes inside and sometimes outside the narrative frame. Because the authorial self is inherently divided between these binary positions, the bifurcated narrative urges readers to continuously negotiate the authorial self's ever-shifting contingencies, and to become conscious of the extent to which an authorial narrator inhabits, or is invested in, the production of the text.

ENDNOTES

1. In the introduction to the 1935 Modern Library Edition of *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems*, Jeffers recalls his struggle to write in an original way while resisting modernist poetic practice, which he believed was “renouncing intelligibility in order to concentrate on the music of poetry” and which he perceived required too great an austerity—“originality by amputation was too painful for me” (*Collected Poems* 4:385–86).
2. Tim Hunt argues that Jeffers writes into his poems an authorial voice that “suggests neither confession nor dramatic monologue, since it must be stripped as much as possible of ‘temporary things’ that mark personality and must be generated as much as possible from the dimensions of self that are permanent and of nature” (98). In other words, Jeffers’s authorial voice is constructed to transcend the autobiographical subject, and to attempt to unify subject (self) and object (nature)—if the poem is to be successful on Jeffers’s terms.

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