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Zahida Zaidi

EARLY MASTERS OF MODERN DRAMA

Like the Greek Classical Period and Elizabethan Age in England, the Modern Age is one of the most significant periods in Western Drama, matching the earlier two periods in depth, seriousness and in its spiritual quest, and surpassing them in its expansiveness, variety and creative adventure. It spreads over more than one hundred years, embracing almost all countries of Europe and making inroads into American Drama. It also incorporates some of the most significant dramatic movements like Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Symbolism, Absurd Drama and Epic Theatre.

Realism existed in a crude and rudimentary form in the early decades of 19th century in the form of "well-made play" and "drawing room comedy", popularized by Scribe and Sardou. But the surface realism of these plays was devoid of serious commitment or significant content. In fact with their shallow romantic notions, stock characters and conventional concepts of morality, they falsified rather than revealed reality, encouraging narrowmindedness and escapism. It was Henrik Ibsen, one of the greatest masters of Modern Drama, who evolved realism of an higher order, enriching it with social and moral penetrations, philosophical perceptions and psychological insights. This more enlightened concept of realism was further developed and polished by G. B. Shaw in his brilliant comedies and was finally perfected and refined as Poetic Realism by Anton Chekhov in his major plays.

The movement of Naturalism, on the other hand, initiated by Emile Zola and his compatriots, was redefined by August Strindberg and turned into an instrument of acute penetration and unique insights. The "dream technique" in drama, which captured the profound and bewildering experiences of the unconscious mind, was also an invention of Strindberg's intensely creative mind. It was developed, subsequently, as Surrealism and Expressionism. The Surrealist dramatists tried to capture the elusive movements and subtle nuances of the unconscious mind with the help of fantastic images and strange events, thus opening new vistas of insights into human psyche. The Expressionists, on the other hand, set out to come to grips with the problems of a fast changing world, under the impact of science and technology. They abandoned surface realism in favour of a deeper and more authentic realism, reflecting the new challenges and complex problems of contemporary society. They employed experimental techniques to project the bewildering experiences of man and his predicament. Their characters, situations and settings are abstract, indicating man's relations with society, with machines and with himself. A more popular and purposeful form of Expressionism was Piscator's Political Theatre, which focused attention on contemporary society and political problems, using experimental techniques in diverse imaginative ways. It achieved a considerable degree of success foreshadowing certain later developments.

The Symbolist Movement in drama also gathered momentum in this period. It is true that in earlier ages too, many important plays have a symbolic dimension, or incorporate symbolic elements for extension of meaning. The Elizabethan Dramatists, for example, often used symbols to penetrate deeper into human experiences. The finest example of this mode are, no doubt, Shakespeare's great plays, having an intricate symbolic structure revealing layers after layers of meanings and rare insights. But Symbolism as a self-conscious movement belongs to the 20th Century, manifesting itself in poetry, painting, sculpture, and drama. The Symbolist dramatists tried to capture elusive experiences of man and reveal the mysteries of life that were felt to be beyond the reach of language. And they achieved this by employing rich and imaginative symbols and images. What is important in these plays is not the external action, but the inner movement that the symbols reveal. Due to their lack of action or minimal action, such plays came to be known as "Static Theatre". One of the most gifted dramatists of this school was Maurice Maeterlinck, a Symbolist poet who came to the theatre with refined sensibility and new ideas . He infused his romantic plays with a sense of mystery and a brooding presence of the invisible. Some of his plays like *Joyzzle* (1903) and *Blue Bird* (1908) are still popular and continue to fascinate with their sense of mystery and unique charm. They have also been converted into a ballet and a film respectively.

Several other striking dramatic movements also flourished during this period, e.g. the revival of poetic drama in England and America, reinter- pretation of Greek mythology in modern terms in England, in several countries of Europe and in America, Garcia Lorca's peasant theatre, Irish dramatic movement, Existentialist Drama and above all Absurd Drama and Epic Theatre. But the limits of this paper do not allow even a cursory glance on these movements and trends. Besides, the depth, imaginative richness and profound vision of Modern Drama cannot be adequately appreciated just by looking into the movements and trends that found their way into the theatre and drama during this period. For that we will have to turn to the dramatic works of the great masters who realized the vast potentialities of this rich and multidimensional form, infusing it with moral, social, philosophical and psychological insights and above all translating the eternal spiritual quest of man in artistic forms. These great dramatists also probed deeply into the intricacies of dramatic form and discovered not only the rich creative potentialities of language but also drew attention to its pitfalls. In short the masterpieces of these great dramatists are a permanent and invaluable treasure of human culture, often transcending movements and tendencies and embodying a profound vision in unique dramatic forms with multiple possibilities of interpretation. The achievements of all the important and great modern dramatists cannot be naturally even mentioned within the framework of this paper. So I propose to focus on the works of three early masters of Modern Drama, viz. Ibsen. Strindberg and Chekhov.

II

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a Norwegian dramatist who rose to the stature of a European dramatist and was the harbinger of a significant revolution in the very concept of drama. His major plays are a unique achievement of intensity of thought and feeling, high seriousness and depth of vision. Ibsen's early life was an unmitigated chain of misfortunes and losses but by virtue of intellectual and moral strength, he sublimated these painful experiences into rare insights and profound thought. His plays portray both the inner anguish of the artist and strains and pressures of the external world. He probed deeply into the outmoded and hypocritical concepts of religion and morality, dead weight of conventions and conflict between individual and society. In the early phase of his career Ibsen was associated with the popular theatre of his day. But disillusioned with its artificiality and narrow concept of morality, he abandoned it to write plays not for the contemporary stage but for posterity. And his three important early plays viz, *Brand*, *Emperor and Galilean* and *Peer Gynt* written between 1866 and 1876, though not very stagable, are daring feats of idealism and imaginative vision.

Brand is a poetic play of epic dimensions with autobiographical overtones. The hero is an idealist with a magnificent vision of human destiny of absolute freedom. The setting of snowclad mountains and blue sky is the external manifestation of this visionary idealism. But the hero's stern idealism causes untold miseries to those near and dear to him, and his conquest of the heights is only a prelude to his own destruction. Ibsen's next play *Peer Gynt*, too, is a poetic play. But here the focus is not the exceptional individual but average humanity and the drama explores the fine distinction between character and personality, subjective experience and social mask and dramatizes the conflict between individual and society. His next important play *Emperor and Galilean* is more ambitious and Ibsen considered it to be his masterpiece, characterizing it as "world historical drama". It has at least three levels of meaning – as a drama projecting the conflict within the hero's soul, as a magnificent historical drama and as a symbolic drama, appraising the contemporary situation in a historical framework. In this play Ibsen uses the prose medium but it is essentially poetic in conception and exhibits intense personal involvement and creative freedom.

In the next phase of his dramatic career, Ibsen subdued subjective involvement and imaginative freedom in favour of prose realism and social commitment. The turning point was *A Doll's House* (1879) which was a resounding success, giving Ibsen the status of a European dramatist . *A Doll's House* has generally been characterized as a "feminist drama par-excellence", which it, no doubt, is. But it also incorporates several other important recurring themes of Ibsen's work, like the conflict between individual and society, the question of personal identity, a clash between personal and social morality and the concept of freedom and responsibility. Yet, for all this ambitious scheme, Ibsen is not yet quite at home in this new mode, and the play tends to lapse into mechanizations of a "well made play". A more confident venture in this new mode is *The Ghosts*, which exhibits a greater fusion of experience, form and vision. The hero, Osvald, is a victim of his father's sexual transgression. But this hereditary disease, in its turn, is symbolic of the dead weight of convention and hypocritical morality that is sapping the life blood of society. And neither Parson Mander's conventional concept of morality, nor Mrs. Alving's pseudo-modernism is able to cope with this vast problem.

The Ghosts was followed by a number of plays in a realistic mode enriched, and sometimes complicated by symbolic elements. Here, by and large, Ibsen's focus is on moral problems, but the psychological aspect is equally important, and the past is a sinister presence in several of these plays. Of the three more popular plays in this group, *The Wild Duck* is rich in psychological penetration and is marked by compassion and pathos, *Hedda Gabler*, on the other hand, is a brilliant case study of an unusual woman, with bold psychological insights, but is somewhat marred by a melodramatic conclusion. In *Rosmersholm* – the finest play in this section – the psychological, social and moral aspects are well integrated in an action, which is only outwardly realistic, but is essentially symbolic, with a spiritual core.

In the final phase of his creative venture, Ibsen, once again, turned from social moral commitment to the storm within and to visionary idealism. And the four significant and unique plays of this period viz, *The Master Builder* (1892), *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and *When we Dead Awaken* (1899) are marked by passionate subjectivity, expansive vision and unusual creative freedom. While using the prose medium, they are essentially poetic in conception. In several respects they bring to mind early epic-poetic plays. In *The Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken* the heroes are men of exceptional gifts and soaring idealism. And again, their conquest of the heights, is a prelude to their destruction. However it may be pointed out that Ibsen, here, is more mindful of artistic perfection and theatrical exigencies. In these plays, the external action is so thin and unimportant and symbolism so pervading that they can also be seen as extended metaphors. Altogether these last plays constitute the high point of Ibsen's dramatic career, which is characterized by an essential unity of his creative vision and a continuous process of its enrichment and a profound spiritual quest.

III

In sharp contrast to Ibsen's achievement it would be futile to look for unity, consistency, and a well-defined direction of development in the creative output of August Strindberg (1849-1912). His work is characterized by intense subjectivity, amazing variety, bold experimentation and restless explorations of mysteries of life and the inner world. Strindberg's personal conflicts often assumed the dimensions of moral and spiritual crises or an existentialist protest against the very fact of being. But his genius lay in his ability to translate his existential anguish and spiritual crises into forms of rare beauty and significance. He imbibed sporadically the elements of Atheism, socialism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Swedenborgian mysticism. He also claimed to have been deeply influenced by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Schiller, Byron and several others. These diverse intellectual forces were sometimes at war with each other, but more often, passing through the crucible of his amazing creativity, they dissolved into a vision, entirely his own and compelling in its power and intensity.

His first notable play was *Master Olof*, a historical drama, which like Shakespeare's plays is less interested in bare facts and more in texture of experience. It also reflects the author's personal history, as the three main characters in the play are conceived as aspects of his own self. This is a remarkable play and a work of genius. But Strindberg's peculiar genius is more in evidence in his next group of plays in which he dramatizes in a unique and powerful way some of his pet obsessions, particularly the "sex-war", based, according to him, on the eternal conflict between man and woman.This group of plays is commonly known as his naturalistic period. But Strindberg's conception of naturalism is a far cry from that of the French school led by Emile Zola. According to him, "Naturalism is not simple photography". But true naturalism seeks out those points in life "where the great conflicts occur" and "rejoices in seeing what cannot be seen everyday". And his two well-known plays of this period, viz, *The Father* and *Lady Julie* certainly fit this definition. They dramatize intense conflicts and clashes and are quite unusual not only in the dramatic action, but also, in their treatment of their themes and conclusions.

The Father (1887) conceived as a naturalistic drama has a rudimentary story. The conflict between the Captain and his wife Laura starts on the question of their daughter's education. The Captain, a free thinker, who does not believe in afterlife, wants to give her scientific education and mould her mind strictly according to his own views. And thus, he hopes to leave a "Clone" of himself behind, and achieve eternity vicariously. Laura, on the other hand, wants to give her religious training and undertake an artistic career. When other arguments fail, Laura challenges her husband to prove that Bertha is his child. Deprived of his hope and vision and dismantled by the manipulations of several women in the house, the Captain resorts to violence and then gradually lapses into insanity, and we see him going to pieces right before our eyes.

At one point, the Captain suggests that he has no will because he was the unwanted child of his parents. This has an autobiographical ring, as Strindberg himself was an unwanted child of a sea captain and a servant girl – the offspring of a casual romance. But *The Father* is less of a naturalistic or psychological drama and more of a nightmare of unique power and intensity. And like a nightmare it has an inner logic of its own which makes the external contradictions seem irrelevant. According to Robert Brustein *The Father* has a relentless power that carries it though without psychological complexity or manipulated action, to a violent and furious conclusion"[1]. The Captain is defeated not only by evil Laura but also led into a trap by maternal Margret, which brings to mind the voilent end of king Agamemnon, caught in a trap by his wife Clytaminestra , and drowned in the royal bath. According to Allardyce Nicoll, "It is one of the greatest drama of the late 19th century theatre. Its action is of the soul and characters elemental, giving a concrete shape to Strindberg's powerful obsessions."[2].

In *Lady Julie* Strindberg dramatizes the "sex-war" from a different angle, giving it an undertone of "class war" as well. In sharp contrast to *The Father* here the male is triumphant and the woman is crushed, according to the notion of the survival of the fittest. Julie, the neurotic child of a degenerate aristocracy, with a love of sensations and confused romantic notions, makes love to her valet, Jean, and finds herself in his power. Jean, an ambitious servant with materialistic outlook, has confidence in his sexual superiority, which is tinged with vulgarity. He incites Julie to steal her father's money and then suggests that her only remedy is to end her life and Julie proves her aristocratic superiority in her dignified suicide. Among all the plays of this period. *Lady Julie* is in a way closest to the conventional concept of naturalism. The social and psychological history of the two main characters is carefully established and they seem to be controlled by their heredity and environments. Yet the play is not simple photography and for all their naturalistic trappings, Julie and Jean, too are elemental characters and the action is packed by symbolic suggestions. The recurring dreams of Julie and Jean in which Julie is in danger of falling from a high tower and Jean tries to pluck a golden nest from a tree are symbolic. The linguistic structure, too, as Strindberg suggests, has symbolic overtones. Altogether, *Lady Julie* is a bold venture saturated by Strindberg's creative energy. *Lady Julie* was followed by a number of plays in this mode in which the focus is on the moment of crisis and the sex war is presented with several variations . In some of these plays the influence of Nietzsche and Darwin has been noticed.

We should now turn to the final phase of Strindberg's dramatic career which is even of greater importance. In the middle of 1890's Strindberg underwent a profound spiritual crises of which he has given a vivid and harrowing account in his prose tract *Inferno*. And when he finally emerged from this moral and spiritual crisis, he was a changed person. And his art also changed profoundly. His rebellious spirit was subdued and his resentment and protest was transformed into compassion for humanity. We can now see a genuine spiritual quest in his plays of which the finest examples are his two later plays, viz. *A Dream Play* and *Road to Damascus.* Here his art has become entirely subjective and at the same time more comprehensive and universal. Both of these plays exhibit great power, depth and imaginative sweep. Here Strindberg has also evolved a new technique which came to be known as "dream technique". Strindberg, himself elaborates it in these words:

> "The author has tried to imitate the disjointed but apparently logical pattern of a dream. Anything may happen. Time and Space do not exist. On an insignificant groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns-- a mixture of memories, experiences and unfettered fancies, absurdities. Characters are split, doubled, and multiplied. They evaporate are diffused and concen- trated. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all – that of the Dreamer".[3]
>
> Preface to *A Dream Play*

A Dream Play is a powerful realization of this technique, which portrays the subconscious movements of its author's mind. It abounds in contrasts and contradictions and life is seen as an upside down copy of the original. The melting scenery and dissolving enigmatic characters are all symbolic and often pregnant with multiple possibilities of meaning. The castle, which is growing because it is manured, is an image of life itself, of the human spirit trying to escape from the massive filth of existence and aspiring upwards. The clover door, which is supposed to enclose the secret of life, when opened, reveals a vast emptiness. Indira's Daughter, representing the spiritual force, descends from heaven to help humanity. She suffers with it and concludes that "Humankind is to be pitied". But she also believes that "Love conquers all". When she finally ascends to heaven, the castle blossoms into a huge chrysanthemum. This has several possibilities of interpretation and can be seen as a realization of the aspirations of human soul and triumph of spirituality. In this play the elements of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity are dissolved into a vision of great imaginative force. At the same time, the employment of the "dream technique", which opened new vista's of creative expression in the theatre, is also of great significance.

Road to Damascus also employs the dream technique but it is more regularly constructed. The theme of spiritual regeneration is developed in three parts which constitute a thematic and imaginative unity. The action incorporates a roundabout search for self-knowledge and redemption. The characters are not persons but symbolic figures enacting the drama of a single consciousness. Here, too, the characters melt into each other and the introduction of masks underlines the enigmatic nature of reality. The play explores the problem of evil and the possibility of redemption. It also explores the concept of time, for in this dream world, there is no before and after. The present, past and future exist simultaneously. It has been often pointed out that Strindberg based the drama on his personal experiences. But the personal experiences have been fused, sublimated and transmuted into a vision of universal import and the play is also a highly original realization of a deeply considered theme.

This brief account of Strindberg's dramatic work and his significant experiment in dramatic technique can hardly do justice to his extraordinary literary achievement, which is not only massive, including poetry, drama, fiction, autobiographical and psychological studies and a scientific tract, but also highly original and path-breaking. Both Expressionism and Surrealism owe their birth to Strindberg's nonrealistic approach and his dream technique. And hardly any notable dramatist since then has been able to escape his influence, particularly with regard to his explorations of the inner world and projection of this mysterious realm in dramatic terms. Even the Absurd Dramatists who combine Expressionism, Surrealism and Symbolism in more meaningful ways, acknowledge him as one of their masters; the other being Anton Chekhov, to whom we should now turn for a closer look.

IV

Turning from the philosophical idealism and passionate individualism of Henrik Ibsen and the intense subjectivism, the bold experimentation and acute probings of the mysterious inner world of August Strindberg, the drama of Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) may appear cool, casual and down to earth. But indeed it is a highly subtle and sophisticated art hiding under apparent casualness and effortlessness not only acute perceptions, fine discriminations and profound psychological insights, but also a richness of texture, amazing artistic control and a well-considered architectonic quality. And his mature plays embody a profound vision of life and a fine sense of complex and multidimensional reality. Chekhov also freed drama from artificial conventions, mechanical concepts of plot and character and shallow notions of morality. Indeed, he was so much ahead of his time, that his major plays did not fit in any of the time-tested moulds and were variously described as "naturalistic drama", "mood plays", "static drama", "drama of atmosphere" and "drama of indirection". Each of these epithets contains an element of truth, illuminating at least one aspect of Chekhov's multidimensional art. But his dramatic art, I think, can best be described as "poetic realism", which on close examination is found to incorporate elements of naturalism, impressionism and symbolism all fused and harmonized in his creative imagination to make a significant poetic statement.

Chekhov believed that the texture of life was woven with ordinary everyday events. But beneath these ordinary happenings, extraordinary develop- ments were also taking shape. His naturalism is way apart from the "slice of life" naturalism of Zola and the French school and their bitter and harsh approach. Chekhov's realism is warm and humane and his close observation of life is modified by meaningful selection and subtle organization. Nor is it static like French naturalism, for Chekhov's art captures life in its immediacy and flux, revealing fleeting moods, sensations and fine shades and nuances of experience, leading to acute psychological insights. And this quality brings his dramatic art closer to impressionism, which is the art of capturing luminous and vibrant shades and colours, fine interplay of light and shade and delicate atmospheric effects, in their immidiacy and flux. These impressionistic elements lend a lyrical texture and poetic quality to his later plays. This poetic quality is enriched by an all pervading symbolism which is the chief source of expansion of meaning and universalization of the poetic statement. But Chekhov's symbols are never superimposed. They are deeply rooted in the dramatic texture, action and environments, and an intricate pattern of symbols gives these plays depth and multiple possibilities of interpretation.

The action of Chekhov's plays is outwardly slow and may appear to be even static, but beneath this surface calm flows a powerful current of feelings, sensations, perceptions, moods and ideas that constitute the inner movement. The focus of his plays is not a particular character but a social group, which is studied from various angles, revealing the general state of affairs and the social and psychological attitudes of all these characters.

Similarly, unlike the plays of Ibsen and Shaw, Chekhov's plays are not concerned with one particular theme, but there is an intricate pattern of themes, ideas, perceptions, observations and insights interwoven in the texture of the plays, lending them depth and complexity. Consequently his plays, particularly his major plays, do not have a linear movement but a symphonic quality, with its richness, intricacy and magnificent architectonic pattern. Chekov's plays also do not fit into the conventional concepts of tragedy or comedy. But he often blends the tragic and comic modes to make an authentic statement about life. Another important aspect of Chekhov's plays is that he has embodied a social theme in each one of his longer plays. These themes have not only historical validity but also a striking element of universality; for example the theme of natural and social environment and its impact on human personality and its creative potential that he has embodied in *Uncle Vanya* still seems to be very relevant.

Chekhov is the author of about two dozen plays, including several full length plays. His longer plays embody significant themes and his shorter plays enjoyed great popularity. But his claim to greatness rests primarily on his four major plays, viz *The Seagull* , *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters* and *Cherry Orchard* But here we can discuss only two of them, viz *Three Sisters* and *Cherry Orchard.*

Three Sisters is one of the most significant plays written at the turn of the century (1900) and also, in my opinion, the greatest play of Chekhov. In fact by virtue of its comprehensive vision, depth and complexity, its social and universal insights and acute penetration into human nature, as also by virtue of its texture and highly creative use of language and dramatic resources, it can be compared only with the great plays of Shakespeare. The background of the action is a distant and sleepy town in the North of Russia, where currently a Military Regiment is also posted. The three sisters Olga (28) Masha (22) and Irina (20), the daughters of late General Prozorov, are well educated and cultured and feel ill at ease in their backward and restricted social environment. They idealize Moscow, where they spent their childhood and hope to go back there when their brother Andrey (26) gets a professorship there. In their imagination Moscow stands for art, culture, civilization, refinement and all that is best in the world. But things are shaping differently Andrey is lazy and is loosing interest in his studies. He has got involved with a local girl, Natasha, who is a striking embodiment of the local culture, its vulgarity and corrupt values. Masha, the second sister, who is the most beautiful and gifted, has ruined her life by marrying a local school master, who is a well-meaning person, but a man of very limited capacities. Disenchanted with her life Masha is always dressed in black. Olga, kind-hearted and responsible, is a school mistress, but does not like her work. Irina, the youngest, is very youthful and idealistic. A young but plain military officer, Toozenbach, is in love with her. But Irina dreams of going to Moscow and finding her prince charming there.

The first act is presented in the central drawing room of the Prozorov family, which is decorated with flowers and flooded with sunlight. The season is spring, time is mid-day and the occasion is Irina's nameday party. The most important event of the act is the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Vershinin (42) who comes from Moscow and had known the Prozorov family when the sisters were very young. Although unhappy is his personal life, he is affectionate, intelligent and an idealist. He impresses the three sisters, particularly Masha.

In the second act the place is the same but time is evening and season is winter. The occasion is the expected arrival of a carnival party. The stage is dimly lighted and in a state of disarray. Natasha is now the wife of Andrey and mother of his son. But she is also having an affair with a local VIP. The process of destruction and disinheritance of the sisters has already started and in the course of the act Natasha asks Irina to move into Olga's room so that her little son may acquire a warmer and brighter room. She is a kill-joy and is not only extinguishing the candles but also orders the carnival party to go back. Irina is now working in the post office and is quite dissatisfied with her work. She still craves to go to Moscow. In the course of the act Vershinin's wife, who is a psychological case, threatens to commit suicide and he has to leave in the midst of an interesting debate. And we now see Andrey completely demoralized and going the way of Dr. Chebutykin, i.e., drowing his frustration in gambling and drinking. But there is also a silver lining in this winter of discontent. The delicate friendship of Masha and Vershinin has developed into a touching romance. And the other bright spot is the philosophical debate touching upon the nature of life and its creative potential, the impact of social and natural environment on human personality, the importance of science, education and civilization and finally the bright vision of the future and of a perfect society and also the human responsibility in realizing this dream. This debate, which in fact had already started in Act I, interpenetrates the action, till the end, like a persistent theme in a symphony.

In Act III the scene is Olga's room, now also shared by Irina and cluttered up with furniture and people and symbolizing the narrowing space the sisters now occupy in their own house. The season is summer and the central event is the fire which has devastated a good part of the town. The fire symbolizes the invisible fire ignited by Natasha's sinister manipulations, sapping the life blood of the sisters and also destroying their brother. Here not only the loneliness and helplessness of the sisters but also the pathos of Andrey's plight, who has lost the key to his sisters' heart, is well brought out. And not only the drunken Dr. Chebutykin breaks the precious clock of their mother, but Irina's dream of going to Moscow and meeting her prince charming there, is shattered against the hard rock of reality and under the advice of Olga she decides to marry Toozenbach. The contrast of Olga's humane efforts to help the victims of the fire and Natasha's pretentious and uppish plans to take up their cause is very significant and Natasha's sinister role is further highlighted as she passes through the room with a lighted candle and Masha remarks that it seems as if she has ignited the fire. But this desperate picture is enlivened by Vershinin's high spirits and his vision of a bright future. And finally the rendezvous of Masha and Vershinin in the garden, presented in musical terms and enriched by cultural symbols, is a miracle of romantic presentation.

Act IV presents a huge and magnificently informal garden in front of Prozorov Mansion. The season is autumn, time is morning and the occasion is the departure of the military regiment. Olga is now the head mistress of the school and lives there with her old nurse Anfisa. Irina is going to marry Toozenbach and is going to live with him, and her luggage can be seen near the portico. Masha who now never goes into the house is also in the garden. Andrey is pushing the pram of Natasha's little daughter who, presumably is the off-spring of her lover and Natasha and her lover are comfortably established in the house and strains of some cheap and vulgar music can be heard from the drawing room. And all these details are symbolic indicating that the process of usurpation and disinheritance of the sisters is now complete. An unexpected event in this act is the death of Toozenbach in a duel with his rival, as a result of which Irina is left lonely and without the hope of a reasonable future. One of the most impressive scenes in this act is Andrey's speech before the deaf servant in which he describes the town, its meaningless repetitive life, corrupt values, its deplorable past and present and bleak future. Another very touching scene is Masha's leave taking from Vershinin which is quite heart breaking for her. And after his departure her laughter in the midst of tears and sobs at the funny actions of her husband, who is trying to console her, is a miracle of Chekhovian art. And finally the chorus of the three sisters – as the departing music of the regiment is heard in the background, they renew their resolve to go on living and to try to understand life more deeply, and also reassert their faith in the bright distant future to which their personal suffering and efforts will contribute their mite. It is a masterly presentation. They reinforce Vershinin's positive vision and convey the hope that the light of intelligence, education and culture can penetrate even the most unpromising environment. The autumn of this act completes the cycle of the seasons, which is symbolic with a mythological dimension. But the autumn of *Three Sisters* is not just the season of falling leaves and tragic departures, but also, like Keats's *Autumn*, a season of "maturity" and "mellow fruitfulness". The three sisters, after passing through their sad and painful experiences, have gained in depth and maturity, and the childish dream of Moscow, the central symbol of the play which dominated the first act, was quite important in the second and was shattered like a delicate object in the third act, is completely absent from the fourth act. The sisters are now preparing to face life with equanimity and a profound sense of responsibility. But the pathetic condition of Andrey and meaningless ramblings of Chebutykin present the negative side of the picture. And so, on his profound poetic statement the play ends.

Three Sisters is rich in social, psychological, philosophical and universal insights and its magnificent architectonic quality resembles a symphonic form. The diverse strands of thought, feelings, ideas, sensations, events and insights give it the complex harmony of a great symphony, which has no rival in modern drama.

Cherry Orchard, the last play of Chekhov is also an amazing masterpiece. But a full consideration of this very popular play is not possible within the limits of this paper, only a few hints will suffice. *Cherry Orchard* is considerably shorter than *Three Sisters*. But Chekhov's artistic control over his material is even tighter, and the vision of the play is beautifully revealed within its unique framework. The central theme of the play is the collapse of feudalism and rise of capitalism, although it embodies many other social, psychological and universal insights, and its central symbol is cherry orchard, which not only controls the action but also helps to define various characters – their social positions and psychological attitudes. For Madam Ranyveskya and her brother Gaye, the owners of the property, it is the most beautiful and significant object in the neighborhood that should not be mutilated. For Trofimov, the revolutionary student, it is a symbol of exploitation of the deprived people. For Ania, the young daughter of Ranyveskya, who has been influenced by Trofimov, it is a beloved object that has lost its charm, and she believes with Trofimov that the whole of Russia is their garden. For Feers, the old servant, it represents the ideal system that people do not understand now. For Lopakhin, the grand-son of a serf, who has now risen to the status of a capitalist, it is a useless old garden, but if it is cut down, the land can be put to a profitable use. On the whole it can be seen as a symbol of the feudal system but some critics have defined it as a symbol of beauty, whose destruction is always sad and tragic.

The first act of *Cherry Orchard* is presented in the nursery, which is symbolic, since the main characters , though quite grown up, are no better than children in their understanding and capacities. The second act is presented in a kind of wilderness from where the distant outlines of the cherry orchard and an industrial town can the seen. As the night falls, the cherry orchard is drowned in darkness and the industrial town is illuminated brilliantly. And so we see the collapse of feudalism and the triumph of industrial society with our own eyes by this unique device. In this scene the antics of the servants bring the play very close to Absurd Drama. The old nurse Charlotta shows magic tricks, but the masters of the house are no better, for they, too, are waiting for some magic event or miracle to solve their problems. In the third act the dance party in the magnificent mansion – while the fate of its owner is being decided in the town, as the cherry orchard and the mansion are being auctioned, is very ironic. But the undercurrent of tension and desperation beneath this lively atmosphere is very well controlled. The irony is deepened as Lopakhin, who was trying to help the family, enters the party as the new owner of the Cherry Orchard and the Mansion. The final act is a masterpiece of meaningful concentration and rare insights, and combines comedy and pathos in a memorable manner. The final leave taking of the masters is very touching. And in spite of the best efforts of Ranyveskya, Lopakhin fails to propose to her adopted daughter Varia. And we see that this 'positive' character is deficient in finer shades of feeling as he is too busy making money as a capitalist. And so is the revolutionary student Trofimov as he declares that he and Ania are above love. But the masterstroke in this act is the very last scene when all the characters have left, the house has been locked and the windows sealed and the old servant Feers enters to find that they forgot all about him and he has been locked inside. "My life's gone as if I'd never lived", "nothing is left, nothing" he mutters as he lies down on the sofa and his voice is drowned in silence and we hear the noise of the cutting of trees in the background and also a strange sound of breaking of wires. This is perhaps the most significant and memorable ending in modern drama. As the brief account of his two major plays will bear out, Chekhov is one of the greatest master of modern drama. And though inimitable, his influence has been far reaching and path breaking.

The early masters of modern drama should also include G. B. Shaw, particularly a discussion of his concept of comedy and philosophical outlook and of his sparkling inimitable style. But the limits of this paper do not allow this discussion. Besides, the Indian readers and scholars are so familiar with Shaw's work that a brief account can serve no useful purpose. At the same time it may be pointed out that Shaw, although a great master in his own right, has not been quite as influential in the subsequent development of Modern Drama as Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov. Another dramatist who has been very influencial and is also very significant is Luigi Pirandello. But he, too, deserves a close analysis and fuller treatment, which is not possible within the framework of this paper.

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GEORGE HERBERT: A STUDY OF HIS TRANSCENDENTAL VISION

George Herbert has been described as a 'holy' man by several commentators. During his stay at Bemerton as a priest from 1630 to 1633, he undoubtedly attained a holiness of character. He was previously a man who cherished strong ambitions for political advancement by virtue of his birth in an aristocratic family. While reading some of Herbert's poems, like 'The Agonie', one surmises that his personal holiness would not have attained the kind of genuineness which it did, had his ambition to become the Assistant Secretary of State been fulfilled after being appointed Orator at the University of Cambridge in 1619. Man sometimes becomes conscious of the mysterious ways of Providence when he is not able to take the course of his choice and it is also then that he learns to await a new dispensation from Him. It is precisely this quality that one finds behind that holy image of Herbert so often reflected in his verse.

The poets with whom Herbert may broadly be compared are John Donne (with reference to his Divine Poems) and Richard Crashaw, if we do not take into account his baroque sensibility. By entitling his collection of poems *Steps to the Temple*, which was published in 1646, Crashaw admiringly refers to Herbert's *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*. Gerard Manley Hopkins, according to his friend, William Addis, regarded Herbert as his 'strongest tie to the English Church'.[1] In spite of close meditative similarities, Hopkins' linguistic and syntactical idiosyncrasies set him apart from Herbert. The fact that Henry Vaughan and the American poet, Edward Taylor, were conspicuously influenced by Herbert attests to his individuality as a religious poet. It is significant that Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans* bears the subtitle *Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*. Herbert had already given this subtitle to *The Temple*. Some of the metaphors used by Vaughan in his sacred verse are also derived from his lyrics. While criticising a majority of 'wits', Vaughan pays his tribute to Herbert:

> The first, that with any effectual success attempted a *diversion* of this foul and overflowing *stream*, was the blessed man, Mr. *George Herbert*, whose holy *life* and *verse* gained many pious *Converts*, (of whom I am the least) and gave the first check to a most flourishing and admired *wit* of his time. After him followed diverse, - *Sed non passibus aequis*; they had more of *fashion*, then (sic) force: And *the reason* of their so vast *distance* from him, besides differing *spirits* and *qualifications* (for his *measure* was eminent) I suspect to be, because they aimed more at *verse*, then (sic) *perfection*; as may be easily gathered by their frequent *impressions*, and numerous *pages*: Hence sprang those wide, those weak, and lean *conceptions*, which in the most inclinable *Reader* will scarce give any nourishment and help to *devotion*; for not flowing from a true, practick piety, it was impossible they should effect those things abroad, which they never had acquaintance with at home; being onely (sic) the productions of a common spirit, and the obvious ebullitions of that light humour,

> which takes the pen in hand, out of no other consideration, then (sic) to be seen in print.[2]

The collection of Herbert’s poems, *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*, published by his friend, Nicholas Ferrar, in 1633, is dedicated to God: ‘Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee.’ The dedication is foreshadowed by two sonnets he wrote during his first year at Cambridge. He sent them to his mother, Lady Magdalen Herbert, on New Year’s Day, 1609/10. In a letter enclosed with the sonnets, he explains to her that he is not a votary of the classical Muses: ‘However, I need not their help, to reprove the vanity of those many Love-poems that are daily writ and consecrated to *Venus*; nor to bewail that so few are writ, that look towards *God and Heaven*.’ He concludes: ‘For my own part, my meaning (*dear_Mother*) is in these Sonnets, to declare my resolution to be, that my poor Abilities in *Poetry*, shall be all, and ever consecrated to Gods (sic) glory.’[3] Both the sonnets were printed in 1670 by Izaac Walton in his biography of Herbert.

In Sonnet I, Herbert raises important questions which bear upon the kind of poetry he was going to write in the future:

… Doth Poetry
Wear *Venus* Livery? only serve her turn?
Why are not *Sonnets* made of thee? and layes
Upon thine Altar burnt? Cannot thy love
Heighten a spirit to sound out thy praise
As well as any she? Cannot thy *Dove*
Out-strip their *Cupid* easily in flight?
Or, since thy wayes are deep, and still the same,
Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name?
Why doth that fire, which by thy power and might

Each breast does feel, no braver fuel choose
Than that, which one day Worms may chance
refuse.
[ll. 3-14]

Herbert is more explicit about his religious stance as a poet in Sonnet II:

Roses and *Lillies* speak thee; and to make
A pair of Cheeks of them, is thy abuse.
Why should I *Womens eyes* for Chrystal take?
Such poor invention burns in their low mind
Whose fire is wild, and doth not upward go
To praise, and on thee, Lord, some *ink* bestow.
Open the bones, and you shall nothing find
In the best *face* but *filth*, when, Lord, in thee
The *beauty* lies in the *discovery*.
[ll. 6-14]

The sonnets reveal the fact that the kind of beauty which poets usually like to celebrate is what Hopkins calls 'mortal'. Herbert highlights the mortal character of physical beauty in the following lines of the above-mentioned sonnet: 'Open the bones and you shall nothing find / In the best *face* but *filth*, ...' For Herbert, Eternal Beauty is an attribute of the Godhead, the infinite joy of whose perception lies in its 'discovery' which he continually makes in many of his lyrics. These two sonnets clarify the fact that the process of becoming a religious poet had started in Herbert when he was in his teens. One finds his quest for Divine Beauty gradually intensifying as one reads subsequent poems in *The Temple*.

Writing religious verse is not an easy task. Lord David Cecil, in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, is of the view that a large proportion of religious verse written by different poets is unimpressive.

The reason, according to him, lies in the fact that the poet writing on a religious theme often '… does not say what he really feels, but what he thinks he ought to feel.' The content of a religious poem is sometimes determined by a poet's adherence to the doctrines of a particular Church or by the poetic conventions of the age in which he composes it. While reading Herbert's poetry, one is struck by the fact that it mostly transcends these constraints. Herbert's 'The Flower' is an example characteristic of this transcendence. One of the instances of his deviation from the contemporary poetic conventions is the use of commonplace imagery in his verse. It is in tune with the mental make-up of the parishioners of Bemerton amongst whom he spent the last three years of his life as a priest. It, however, seems unlikely that his verse was meant to be read by them. Though none of Herbert's sermons is extant, it may well be surmised that he might have used in them that sort of imagery along with illustrations from daily life in order to make theological truths easily comprehensible to them. This practice was necessary for Herbert to enable him to function as a successful priest amongst his parishioners who, by no stretch of the imagination, could be regarded as fully educated. The kind of imagery Herbert uses in his verse is, in all probability, the result of this conditioning of his mind under the above-mentioned circumstances. In this particular respect, his poetry is very different from that of Donne.

Herbert highlights in 'Providence' the diversity of the habits of God's creatures drawing on everyday human observation:

Most things move th' under-jaw; the Crocodile not.
Most things sleep lying; the Elephant leans or stands.
[ll. 139-40]

The following lines from 'The Dawning' deal with the significance of the Resurrection of Christ with singular lucidity:

Christ left his grave-clothes, that we might, when grief
Draws tears, or bloud, not want a handkerchief.
[ll. 15-16]

The manner is repeated in 'Evensong':

Thus in thy ebony box
Thou dost inclose us, till the day
Put our amendment in our way,
And give new wheels to our disorder'd clocks.
[ll. 21-24]

It is a Christian theological truth that the bliss of the hereafter is attained by human beings after undergoing self-sacrifice during their temporal existence. Man's expectation to enjoy Divine Bliss in the temporal world without fulfilling the prescribed condition is dismissed by Herbert in a line which reads like a proverb:

Wouldst thou both eat thy cake, and have it?

['The Size', l. 18]

It was because of his fascination for proverbs that Herbert compiled *Jacula Prudentum* when he was Public Orator at Cambridge. Like Lancelot Andrewes and John Selden, he made an intensive study of adages, aphorisms and maxims, many of which might have been incorporated in his sermons. He also infused 'The Church-porch' with some of them.

Herbert believes that Divine Love is God's eternal gift for him. Expressing this belief through an image from the Holy Communion, he writes in 'The Agonie':

Love is that liquour sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine.
[ll. 17-18]

He communicates to his readers the meaninglessness of human life with his characteristic directness:

Man is a foolish thing, a foolish thing,
Folly and Sinne play all his game.
['Miserie', ll. 2-3]

The human soul is forewarned almost in a similar manner:

Then silly soul take heed; for earthly joy
Is but a bubble, and makes thee a boy.
['Vanitie (II)', ll. 17-18]

Herbert expresses a sense of personal futility in some of his lyrics through images from the world of Nature. They play a functional role in conveying his meaning in the following lines:

I reade and sigh, and wish I were a tree;
For sure then I should grow
To fruit or shade: at least some bird would trust
Her household to me, and I should be just.
['Affliction (I)' ll. 57-60]

Hopkins treats a similar theme in 'Thou art indeed just, Lord'[4]:

… birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
[ll. 12-13]

In his farewell to flowers, Herbert emphasizes their two-fold utility for man:

Farewell deare flowers, sweetly your time ye spent,
Fit, while ye liv'd, for smell or ornament,
And after death for cures;
['Life', ll. 13-15]

Herbert played the lute with gusto, and was fond of sacred music. His fine musical taste made him write many canorous lines, of which the following passage is a specimen:

Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust,
Thy hands made both, and I am there:
Thy power and love, my love and trust
Make one place ev'ry where.
['The Temper (I)', ll. 25-28]

It was because of this quality of Herbert's lyrics that the seventeenth-century composers John Jenkins, John Wilson, John Playford, John Blow and Henry Purcell provided musical settings for some of his lyrics.[5] In regard to Herbert's penchant for music, Walton writes:

> He was a most excellent master and he did himself compose many divine hymns and anthems, which he set and sung to his lute or viol. And, though he was a lover of retiredness, yet his love to music was such that he went twice every week, on certain

> appointed days, to the cathedral church in Salisbury; and at his return would say that his time spent in prayer and cathedral music elevated his soul, and was his heaven upon earth. But before his return thence to Bemerton he would usually sing and play his part at an appointed private music-meeting; and, to justify this practice, he would often say, Religion does not banish mirth, but only moderates and sets rules to it.[6]

Herbert's plain imagery and illustrations from everyday life have always fascinated his readers. They facilitate the understanding of the mystical aspect of the Christian faith which he sometimes treats in his verse. These elements also make his poetry highly persuasive in character. As already stated, he might have applied them to his sermons preached to the rustic congregations of Bemerton. If the conjecture is true, he must have done this in imitation of the practice of Christ who, as Herbert writes, 'by familiar things … might make his Doctrine slip the more easily into the hearts even of the meanest. [The] labouring people (whom he chiefly considered) might have every where monuments of his Doctrine, remembering in gardens, his mustard-seed, and lillyes (sic); in the field, his seed-corn, and tares ….'[7] Herbert was of the view that verse, characterized by these elements, could be powerful enough to perform a sacred function:

> A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies,
> And turn delight into a sacrifice.
> ['The Church-porch', ll. 5-6]

One important quality of Herbert's poetry lies in the fact that it combines menial tasks with devout life. An example of this is found in the following lines of 'The Elixir' which, according to Edward Bliss Reed, are quoted as frequently as Alexander Pope's epigrams:

> Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
> Makes that and th' action fine.
> [ll. 19-20]

Herbert writes in *The Country Parson* that the Holy Scripture 'condescends to the naming of a plough, a hatchet, a bushell (sic), leaven, boyes (sic) piping and dancing; shewing that things of ordinary use are not only to serve in the way of drudgery, but to be washed, and cleansed, and serve for lights even of Heavenly Truths.[8] Hopkins shares this idea with Herbert in the 'Principle or Foundation':

> It is not only prayer that gives God glory but work. Smiting on an anvil, sawing a beam, whitewashing a wall, driving horses, sweeping, scouring, everything gives God some glory if being in grace you do it as your duty. To go to communion worthily gives God great glory, but to take food in thankfulness and temperance gives him glory too. To lift up the hands in prayer gives God glory, but a man with a dungfork in his hand, a woman with a sloppail, give him glory too. He is so great that all things give him glory if you mean they should....[9]

Herbert exploits in his verse the persuasive and argumentative elements of the art of rhetoric by toning down its ornamental traits at the verbal level. This aspect of his verse may well be compared to that of Donne's sermons which have unfortunately received far less critical attention than they should have. Herbert's style would perhaps have been somewhat like Crashaw's, had it not been direct and without ornateness. The difference of style is well exemplified by the language of the two poems on a Christian saint: Herbert's 'Marie Magdalene' and Crashaw's 'The Weeper'.

The two 'Jordan' poems may be regarded as 'manifestoes' of Herbert's poetic practice. The titles of the poems are difficult to understand and have caused puzzlement to the commentators. The Jordan has a religious significance in Christianity because Christ was baptized in its waters. The waters of the river have, therefore, been associated with 'spiritual cleansing' and 'renewal' which have a significance of their own in Herbert's poetry. By entitling the poems 'Jordan (I)' and 'Jordan (II)', he seems to point to the fact that the goal of his poetic endeavour is the purification of his verse by giving it a sacred orientation. Writing on 'Jordan (II)', Helen Wilcox explains: 'The river Jordan signified for the Jews a boundary to be crossed in order to reach the Promised Land; the poem attempts to find a way into the enticing territory of devotional verse, where the basic poetic materials, like the Jews themselves, remain the same, but the perspective, and "sweetnesse", are radically new.'[10]

In 'Jordan (I)', Herbert satirizes the 'artificialities' of pastoral love poetry and the 'fictive' emotions of a lover who celebrates the beauty of his sweetheart's 'hair' without perhaps knowing that it is false and can never be the subject matter of poetry. Herbert's words 'Is there in truth no beautie?' may be regarded as the core of his argument in the poem. He repeatedly expresses the belief in his poetry that Primordial Beauty rests with God and whatever diverse forms of it we perceive in human beings are the infinitesimal portions of that Beauty:

True beautie dwells on high: ours is a flame
    But borrow'd thence to light us thither.
Beautie and beauteous words should go together.
    ['The Forerunners', ll. 28-30]

Herbert's prime aesthetic concern is the 'discovery' of Divine Beauty which is in his poetic credo a source of spiritual rejuvenation:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in any thing,
    To do it as for thee:
        ['The Elixir', ll. 1-4]

Herbert's lyrics show his remarkable fidelity to the concept of God in Protestant theology. Intelligibility is one of the hallmarks of his way of glorifying God. Lines 9 and 10 of 'Jordan (I)' 'Must all be vail'd, while he that reades, divines, / Catching the sense at two removes?' highlight, by contrast, the straightforward manner in which Herbert communicates his theocentric vision. His attitude to the 'allegorical' and 'pastoral' poets is, nevertheless, free from grudge:

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing:
Riddle who list, for me, and pull for Prime:
I envie no mans nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with losse of rime,
    Who plainly say, *My God, My King*.
        ['Jordan (I)', ll. 11-15]

The words '*My God, My King*' are those of the Psalmist. They signify that the wellsprings of Herbert's poetic inspiration lie in the Holy Scripture.

Herbert's 'Jordan (II)' may be regarded as an amplification of the poet's argument in 'Jordan (I)', though the technique in this poem is widely different from that of 'Jordan (II)'. As the poem begins, Herbert seems to be flashing back to the days when he used to deliver his Latin orations at Cambridge. The first stanza points to his training in classical rhetoric in which 'quaint words', 'trim invention' and a tendency to deck the meaning with 'curling' metaphors have a stylistic significance of their own. In the last line of this stanza, which is significant, he regards his early practice in his Latin orations as no more than 'Decking the sense, as if it were to sell' in the marketplace. Line 11 'Nothing could seem too rich to clothe the sunne' seems to point to an acknowledgement of the fact that his 'quaint words', 'trim invention' and 'curling' metaphors were not effectual enough to 'clothe the sunne' because its radiance is absolutely unbeatable. It would not be out of place to mention that there are repeated instances of punning on *sun* and *son* in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English poetry. If line 11 is a case in point, Herbert may be alluding here to the spiritual radiance of Christ. It is difficult to ascertain which of his poems Herbert alludes to in the first stanza of 'Jordan (II)', if it does not apply to his Latin orations. The kind of language he uses throughout *The Temple* is characterized by a stylistic uniformity. Besides, it is not an easy task to ascertain the chronology of his poems. The poet avows in the last stanza that he communicated meaning to his readers/listeners in the beginning just 'As flames do work and winde, when they ascend.' The image of weaving in line 14 suggests the toil and 'complex patterns' of thought involved in writing his 'early' poems or delivering his

Latin orations, whatever the case might be. A 'Christ-like' voice intervenes in the last stanza and resolves the whole dialectic of 'Jordan (II)' in a dramatic manner:

> But while I bustled, I might heare a friend
> Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence!*
> *There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:*
> *Copie out onely that, and save expense.*
> [ll. 15-18]

The voice of the poet's 'friend' exhorts him in the above-mentioned lines to copy out the message of Divine Love enshrined in the Holy Scriptures. Herbert could never have played the role of a mere 'copier', for it would kill his creative powers as a poet. What he is being exhorted to do is to adopt a scriptural directness in communicating his meaning.

Herbert reaffirms the basic argument of the 'Jordan' poems in 'The Forerunners' where he claims to have consecrated 'sweet phrases' and 'lovely metaphors' to the service of God and His Church:

> Farewell sweet phrases, lovely metaphors.
> But will ye leave me thus? when ye before
> Of stews and brothels onely knew the doores,
> Then did I wash you with my tears, and more,
> Brought you to Church well drest and clad:
> My God must have my best, eve'n all I had.
> [ll. 13-18]

The poem, from which the above lines have been quoted, bears testimony to the fact that Herbert tries to 'please' God through his verse in token of his profound gratitude for endowing him with poetic powers. He firmly believes that the fineness of his verse is conditional upon his fully succeeding in this endeavour:

He will be pleased with that dittie;
And if I please him, I write fine and wittie.
[ll. 11-12]

Donne must have played an important role in forming Herbert's religious attitudes at a tender age by sending a copy of his *Holy Hymns and Sonnets* to his mother, Lady Magdalen Herbert, along with a sonnet addressed to her. The fact is duly attested by Donne's letter to Lady Magdalen dated July 11, 1607. Herbert must have read them when he was only 14 years of age. There is a poem by Donne called 'The Autumnal' supposed to be addressed to her whom he perhaps first met at Oxford around 1600. He befriended her on the grounds of her intellectual accomplishments. Donne also preached her funeral sermon in the parish church of Chelsea on July 1, 1627.[11]

Donne had an advantage over Herbert. The surprisingly great powers of methodical reasoning, masculine language and the use of paradox, which characterize Donne's love poetry, were easily adapted by him to religious purposes, and the 'sighs' and 'tears', caused to him by his mistresses, were rechannelled into his *Holy Sonnets* with contrite overtones:

O! might those sighes and teares returne againe
Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent,
That I might in this holy discontent
Mourne with some fruit, as I have mourn'd in vaine.
[*Holy Sonnets*, III, ll. 1-4]

While reading Herbert's poetry, one finds in 'Providence' a catalogue of everyday observations intended to highlight the munificence of God which characterizes the Creation:

Thy cupboard serves the world: the meat is set,
Where all may reach: no beast but knows his feed.
Birds teach us hawking; fishes have their net:
The great prey on the lesse, they on some weed.

Nothing ingendred doth prevent his meat:
Flies have their table spread, ere they appeare.
Some creatures have in winter what to eat;
Others do sleep, and envie not their cheer.
[ll. 49-56]

Herbert deals in the following lines with the idea of an ideal co-ordination between the various organs of the human body for which man ought to be grateful to God:

Man is all symmetrie,
Full of proportions, one limbe to another:
And all to all the world besides:
Each part may call the furthest, brother:
For head with foot hath private amitie,
And both with moons and tides.
['Man', ll. 13-18]

He emphasizes in the above stanza a close relationship between man and Nature inasmuch as the 'moon and tides can affect the well-being of man's head and limbs.'

The two foregoing quotations from Herbert's 'Providence' and 'Man' show that he does not present the idea of God in terms of a theological abstraction. There is a continual striving in many of his poems to highlight in concrete terms the permeation of God's loving care and prudence through all kinds of animal life.

Herbert expresses in some of his lyrics an acute spiritual agony caused by his consciousness of sin. He repeatedly deals with the idea of the accountability of his sins and those of other men to an 'awesome' but 'gracious' God. Like other Anglicans, he lays emphasis on faith which receives affirmation from the human heart. In 'Sion', he contrasts Solomon's temple, the impressive architecture of which is hardly of any devotional significance to God, with the temple inside the human heart. As David Loewenstein suggests, Herbert believes, most probably under the influence of John Calvin, that the Church rituals are ineffectual to ensure personal salvation. What really matters in this regard is the intensity of one's Protestant faith. Herbert writes in the above-mentioned poem that 'one good grone' of the heart of man is much dearer to God than 'All Solomons sea of brasse and world of stone' (l.17). He also emphasizes the importance of the human heart with regard to the worship of God in 'The Church-floore':

Blest be the *Architect*, whose art
Could build so strong in a weak heart.
[ll. 19-20]

This is essentially the manner Herbert deals with devotional matters in a language characterized by biblical felicity.

Both Donne and Herbert suffered a 'cleavage' in their personalities because they undertook ecclesiastical responsibilities after they had found that their secular ambitions were not going to materialize. We find a process of the gradual mending of this cleavage in both the poets. In Donne's case, it is evident from most of his Divine

Poems and sermons and in Herbert's from his lyrics in *The Temple* and *The Country Parson*. The fact that Herbert fully reconciled himself to his ecclesiastical charge is further corroborated by his biographer, Izaac Walton:

> When at his induction he was shut into Bemerton Church, being left there alone to toll the bell as the law required him, he stayed so much longer than an ordinary time before he returned to his friends that stayed expecting him at the church door, that his friend Mr. Woodnot looked in at the church window, and saw him lying prostrate on the ground before the altar: at which time and place (as he afterwards told Mr. Woodnot) he set some rules to himself for the future manage of his life, and then and there made a vow to labour to keep them.[12]

No account of Herbert's verse would perhaps suffice unless one deals with the element of grievance against God in such poems as 'Affliction (I)', 'Deniall' and 'The Collar'. Reading these poems, wholly or partly, puts the reader in mind of the grumblings of Job and the Psalmist about having been forsaken by God. After making a devotional commitment to the Supreme Being, man sometimes feels that He will not delay bestowing His grace upon him. Man begins to experience a feeling of what Donne calls 'holy discontent' when the duration of the absence of grace from his life is prolonged. This feeling is acute in Herbert's 'Affliction (I)':

Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me
None of my books will show:
I reade, and sigh, and wish I were a tree;

For sure then I should grow
To fruit or shade: at least some bird would trust
Her houshold to me, and I should be just.
[ll. 55-60]

In spite of an obvious note of grievance in the poem, Herbert is mindful of his human limitations and does not ignore the fact that though he has been 'clean forgot' by God, He is none the less worthy of his whole-hearted devotion which he has perhaps not shown Him in full measure on account of his temporal attachments. He believes that if his love for his Maker is 'conditional' and 'imperfect', he should better not love Him because the love He deserves from human beings must be whole-hearted and selfless:

Ah my deare God! though I am clean forgot,
Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.
['Affliction (I)', ll. 65-66]

Herbert passionately entreats God to grant perfection to his love for Him. He, at the same time, expresses his belief that the excellence of his poetic art is conditional upon the advent of divine grace:

O cheer and tune my heartlesse breast,
Deferre no time;
That so thy favours granting my request,
They and my minde may chime,
And mend my ryme.
['Deniall', ll. 26-30]

The poet feels in the above-mentioned poem that his soul is 'untuned' and 'unstrung' because of being in disfavour with God. As Walton mentions, Herbert was very fond of playing the lute. Hence, there is a recurring metaphoric use in his lyrics of the words *tune* and *string* in their various forms.

'The Collar' is one of Herbert's significant poems from more angles than one. The word *collar* was a seventeenth-century equivalent for '*discipline*'. It may also be treated as a pun on '*choler*' which the poet directs in the poem against God. The note of rebellion in the poem is characterized by an immediacy of its own which is felt by the reader through the irregularity of rhyme in all its stanzas excluding the last. It is accentuated through a highly original use of metre. The 'unequal' lines of and the 'irregular rhyming' in the poem show a closeness to 'free verse' and successfully enact the drama of the fragmentation of the poets's self. Commentators express the view that the poem recalls three texts in the New Testament: Luke 15:13-21, Matthew 11:29-30 and John 20:16. The language of the poem shows a conspicuous kind of malleability. The words 'board' (in the sense of the communion table), 'bloud', 'corn', 'wine', 'fruit' and 'harvest' have biblical resonances with which many of us are already familiar. The use of this phraseology in *The Collar* alters the direction of its theme. It elicits a religious response from the reader's heart. Reading between the lines, one feels that Herbert, strangely enough, affirms his relationship with his Maker by raving against Him. The poet's rebelliousness is dramatically resolved in the last four lines of the poem where the rhyme also attains regularity:

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
At every word,
Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child*!
And I reply'd, *My Lord*.
[ll. 33-36]

Herbert's 'Easter-wings' and 'The Altar' typographically represent the poems' subjects. Both are examples of what is called 'the poem as hieroglyph'. The lack of the intensity of feeling in both the poems may be ascribed to the fact that Herbert's attention, while composing them, was focussed on the pictorial representation of the objects they deal with. Addison regarded these poems as specimens of 'false wit' and recorded his adverse remarks about them in *The Spectator*:

> It was impossible for a Man to succeed in these Performances that was not a kind of Painter, or at least a Designer: He was first of all to draw the Out-line of the Subject which he intended to write upon, and afterwards conform the Description to the Figure of his Subject. The Poetry was to contract or dilate itself according to the Mould in which it was cast. In a Word, the Verses were to be cramped or extended to the Dimensions of the Frame that was prepared for them; and to undergo the Fate of those Persons whom the Tyrant *Procrustes* used to lodge in his Iron Bed; If they were too short he stretched them on a Rack, and if they were too long chopped off a Part of their Legs, till they fitted the Couch which he had prepared for them....[13]

It is necessary to examine Herbert's 'The Pulley' for a proper understanding of his verse. The title may be regarded as a conceit which is subtly elaborated in the poem. It has for its material the account of the creation of man in Genesis and the story of Pandora, though he makes minor alterations in them to suit his thematic purpose. The poem treats man as a privileged creature because God endowed him with 'strength', 'beautie', 'wisdome', 'honour' and 'pleasure' – the qualities Herbert himself highly prized in human life. God, according to the poet, deprived man only of 'rest' so that he may not consider himself 'self-sufficient' and be disposed to 'rest in Nature' in lieu of 'the God of Nature.' If that happened, both God and man would be 'losers' in as much as the bond of reciprocal love would break off. The absence of rest from human life was, therefore, intended to lift man to his God:

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessnesse:
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tosse him to my breast.
[ll. 16-20]

The above-mentioned lines point to the fact that 'wearinesse', which seems to be tantamount to a sense of spiritual disconsolation, is a basic requisite for attaining divine grace, the advent of which Herbert feels in 'The Flower' at a late stage in his life:

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: O my onely light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.
[ll. 36-42]

The line 'And now in age I bud again' is full of spiritual significance because Herbert was previously no better than

A sick toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing;

Nay, his own shelf:
My God, I mean my self.
['Miserie', ll. 76-78]

Herbert's 'Vertue', which was adapted by John and Charles Wesley, W. H. Reid and George Horne to their own purposes during the 18th century,[14] is a lovely poem. The first three stanzas of the poem deal with the transience of the beauty of Nature. It is in the fourth stanza that Herbert gives the poem a moral orientation. While the refreshing beauty of a 'cool' and 'bright' day, a 'sweet rose' and the 'spring' is fleeting, 'Onely a sweet and vertuous soul' survives the ravages of time:

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.
[ll. 13-16]

The word *coal* in the foregoing stanza seems to have been used in lieu of *ash* because *coal* rhymes with *soul*.

After Herbert was appointed Orator at the University of Cambridge in 1619, he got an opportunity to be personally known to King James I who sometimes visited the University. After the death of King James in 1625, the prospects of Herbert's political advancement suddenly came to an end. He renounced a life of 'Pleasure' when he took over as a priest in the parish church of Bemerton in 1630. But he continued to live a life of 'Learning' and 'Honour' in the new environment at Bemerton where he acquired a 'saintly' reputation on the score of the integrity of his character and dedication to the spiritual uplift of his parishioners. Herbert was, after all, a man. After giving an ecclesiastical orientation to his life like Donne, he must have been troubled, as he mentions in the following lines from 'The Pearl', by the temptations of his senses which could not overpower him on account of his devotional commitment to God:

I know the wayes of Pleasure, the sweet strains,
The lullings and the relishes of it;
The propositions of hot bloud and brains;
What mirth and musick mean; what love and wit
Have done this twentie hundred yeares, and more:
I know the projects of unbridled store:
My stuffe is flesh, not brasse; my senses live,
And grumble oft, that they have more in me
Then he that curbs them, being but one to five:
Yet I love thee.
[ll. 21-30]

The greatness of Herbert's poetry lies in its individuality of feeling on account of which he certainly outstrips the nineteenth-century religious poet, John Keble. The image of God in the following lines of 'Love (III)' could have been presented by no other poet than Herbert:

I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.
[ll. 9-18]

There are passages in Herbert's verse, like the following from 'The Temper (I)', which are simultaneously religious and human in essence:

How should I praise thee, Lord! How should my rymes
Gladly engrave thy love in steel,
If what my soul doth feel sometimes,
My soul might ever feel!
[ll. 1-4]

In the lines quoted above, Herbert, on the one hand, tries to find a way to eternalize God's love and, on the other, gives expression to his characteristically human 'alterations of mood'. He shares them with most of his fellow human beings whose lives are characterized by inconstancies. The last two lines of the stanza in question are significant because they clarify the fact that Herbert does not ignore his failings when he, as a human being, takes stock of his relationship with God.

In many of his lyrics, Herbert tries to determine his relationship with his Maker being all the time conscious of his unworthiness as a human being. As Loewenstein points out, the way in which Herbert dwells on an uneasy relationship between him and his God is reminiscent of the close interrelation between religion and politics in earlier seventeenth-century England which becomes quite pronounced with reference to the element of absolutism in contemporary English monarchy. Herbert so often tries to present his relationship with God like the relationship of an unworthy subject with an all-powerful king.[15] This aspect of his poetry comes to the fore when he examines his feeble self vis-à-vis the omnipotence of God. It is precisely this that makes his verse highly 'introspective' and self-exploratory in character. Since he examines his self within the framework of the Christian doctrine, his poems have always elicited immediate response from his co-religionists.

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THE POWER OF THE FEMININE IN KEATS'S POETRY: UNRAVELLING 'GORDIAN COMPLICATIONS'

The story of womanhood is as old as time itself. In Classical mythology we have the triple–goddess who is pursued by and who associates with both mortals and immortals to create enigmatic myths that have provided inspiration to poets down the ages. The quest of the male protagonist for the perfect visionary woman is loaded with gender complications that have been explored and identified by thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and Jacques Lacan.

The poetry of John Keats acquires significant new meaning when read through these ideologies. One of the central preoccupations of the Romantic poet is with the male protagonist's dizzying quest for the mysterious, beautiful, superhumanly perfect woman. In *Endymion*, *Lamia*, 'The Eve of St. Agnes', 'Isabella', and by implication in the major Odes the questing hero sets out on long, agonizing, torturous journeys. The protagonist is the dreamer, the passive object of rapt devotion activated by the manipulation of the enchanting, elusive female who controls him through erotic dynamics before finally accepting or abandoning him.

In recent times scholars like Terry Eagleton[1], Alan Richardson and Barbara Gelpi have defined the feminine or maternal principle explicitly influential for nineteenth century writers like Shelley and Keats in different ways. According to Eagleton the principle implies a distinction not between 'art' and 'life' but between the 'whole region of human perception and sensation in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought'. He goes on to comment on the segregation of women into domestic areas of 'sentiments and affections' where they were responsible for looking after the physical and emotional needs of children. Richardson[2] furthers the idea by claiming that 'in moving from the 'Age of Reason' to the 'Age of Feeling' male writers drew on the memories and fantasies of identification with the mother in order to colonize the conventionally feminine domain of sensibility. Gelpi[3] goes ahead to say 'the role assigned to mothers with its attendant effects on the construction of subjectivity and the acquisition of language has consequences for every possible area of human activity, including literature.'

In Keats's case, we are confronted with his unresolved and confused emotions about his mother. Joseph Severn[4] records Keats's lament that 'his greatest misfortune had been that from his infancy he had no mother' Keats's mother died when he was thirteen years old. His father died before his mother. She remarried two months after his death and disappeared, deserting her children. She returned alone and affected with consumption a few years later, only to die after two long years of the gruelling illness. The child John Keats took charge of her and rendered care to the ailing woman through nursing, reading to her, and guarding her door while she slept. The anxieties of this period, intensified by her death, remained with the poet for the rest of his life and surfaced in his poetry.

There is an abundance of women in Keats's poetry. Every poem has at least one female character who provides the central metaphor. The poet has problematic relationships with them. Like the other Romantic poets, Keats, too, exhibits the anxiety to find his poetic voice and to recreate a perfect world in his imagination through his poetry. This ideal world is peopled with two kinds of women. The first is the “fair maid’ like Isabella and Madeline who nurtures, cherishes, offers joy and security. The second is the devilish woman like Lamia and Belle Dame who, ‘entrammels’ and ‘enthralls’ and then betrays and abandons. This attitude creates the greatest contradiction in Keats’s poetry. Even the Muses, who are traditionally female, result in his ‘demon Poesy’ (*Ode on Indolence*)

The benign association with the female characters changes to enthralling possession as the poet journeys from the simplicity of ‘Imitation of Spenser’ to the tragic grandeur of *The Fall of Hyperion*. The elusive, visionary, quest-object female persona provides a psychological alternative. The baffling attraction–rejection pattern has many links when studied from this point of view. In the rendering of his mortal and immortal heroines, Keats has animated many shadowy regions.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century literary traditions to which Keats adhered were essentially male oriented. The high priests for the poet were Homer, Burton, Shakespeare, Milton. The female, though very much in focus, was limited by the boundaries of male perceptions. Culturally indoctrinated in this manner, the male writer, whenever unable to perceive or understand, remodelled her identity to suit these boundaries. An example of this can be found in Keats’s letter to his brother George (*Letters* II: 191-192)[5] where he quotes from Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*. After quoting Burton’s views that ridicule smitten lovers through bawdy caricatures of mistresses, Keats goes on to define the female in his poetry as necessary to the imagination. The perfect woman exists in the imagination and has the ability to change with him and for him. In his poetry, animated by creativity and instinct, she often breaks through the control of and subjugation to the poet and changes from healer to destroyer. The poet believes this inconsistency indicates her own confusions about her relationship with the hero. What he fails to perceive is that the confusion is essentially his own. More than being the object of love, she is also the creator of the need to love and also the ability to love.

Another example of this typically male blunder can be found in Keats's famous letter about Adam's dream:

'Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth'

(*Letters I*: 185)

Keats uses a comparison where the ideal is represented in the myth of the Genesis. However, he ignores the role of Eve, who more than Adam caused the event.

Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne reveal the same idea. Replying to her "half--complaint once' that he admired and loved just her beauty, Keats retaliates that

> 'without- Your Beauty.. I could never have lov'd you – I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have far you but beauty.. So let me speak of you (sic) beauty'.

(*Letters II*: 127)

In another letter Keats claims that he will not spend 'any time with ladies unless they are handsome' (letter II: 20) In further epistolary perusal one discovers a comment on

The generality of women... appear children to whom I would rather give a Sugar Plum than my time

(*Letters I*: 404)

Keats is aware of not having 'a right feeling towards women' which he terms, in a letter to Bailey as 'a Gordian complication of feelings, which must take time to unravell' and take 'care to keep unravelled'

(*Letters I*: 341-342)

Tension between physical attraction and moral critique is in itself a major Romantic issue. The skeins of complications weave through Keats's letters and poems. In later letters to Fanny, the aggression changes to powerlessness and vulnerability and finally he acknowledges the pleasure of surrender:

> .... It seems to me that a few more moments thought of you would uncrystallize and dissolve me—I must not give way to it – but turn to my writing again. If I fail I shall die hard O my love, your lips are growing sweet again to my fancy – I must forget them – Ever your affectionate, Keats
>
> (*Letters II*: 142)

Similar prejudices of social heritage are visible in Keats's poetry. Beautiful female visages populate dream-worlds, delinked from reality, social responsibility and adult demands. Keats describes in 'Sleep and Poetry'

… a lovely wreath of girls
Dancing their sleek hair into tangled curls (149-150)[6]

Ensconced with erotic luxury h shares 'sweet kisses' and 'the other o'erwhelming sweets' with numberless, faceless women 'without grief or care'. The tempo of the poem changes with a reference to the 'strength of manhood' and the poet declares that he must 'bid these joys farewell' and 'pass them for a nobler life' of 'agonies' and 'strife'

Similarly in *Endymion*, Cynthia, the quest–object appears as the 'completed form of all completeness' (BK I: 606). She doubles and then triples her identity and creates great puzzlement for her mortal lover. Peona, his wise practical sister, represents the social voice when she reprimands him for shirking adult responsibility. This patriarchal concept of danger to vocation by the feminine persistently recurs as an issue throughout Keats's poetry. However, the tripling of identity guides Endymion through experiences that educate him in sympathy and patience. Not only Endymion' but also Glaucus's patient endurance is elevated when after an entire millenium he is reconciled to his love. The visionary woman, thus can be interpreted as the symbol of poetic insight into the universe. When freed from the trammels of patriarchy and in control of pure feeling, the poet can rehabilitate his heroine as a revelation of higher understanding.

The Great Odes, too, have female figures as the central metaphor. Psyche is a goddess of beauty and achievement. She is identified as the 'loveliest vision far / of all Olympus's hierarchy' but she was not deified by the ancients. To compensate for the ancient neglect, the poet strives to build an imaginary temple in his mind. His thoughts are 'new grown with pleasant pain' of new understanding. Along with Psyche, her poet-priest also the passes the test of sanctity. The nightingale combines with 'fancy' that 'cannot cheat so well as she is fam'd to do'. The song of the nightingale 'enthralls' him and he is propelled on the 'viewless wings of poesy' which can be read as an example of feminine creativity. A vision of the tearful Ruth forces him to return to reality. The Grecian urn is recognized as an 'unravish'd bride' and catalogues females about to be ravished as 'maidens lot' pursued by 'men or gods'. The urn, hence, is identified as the source of eternal endurance—

That leaves a heart high – sorrowful and cloyed
A burning forehead and a parching tongue
(ll. 29-30)

This exhaustion causes spiritual despair in the quester and he petitions the

feminine identity –

Thou silent form, does tease us out of thought
As doth eternity…
(ll. 44-45)

and is appeased by the pronouncement of the urn that admits a decentering of gender—

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'- that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know'
(ll. 49-50)

"Isabella', 'The Eve of St Agnes', 'Lamia' and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' make–up cluster of lyrics that provide a network of feminine metaphors that animate, energize and enact aspects of the male-female relationship. The goddesses of earlier works acquire magical and subversive powers that the poet expresses in sexually implicative terms like 'enthrall' 'entrammel' and 'ensnare'. The female entity of the odes had been incapable of identifying with the mortal world e.g. the nightingale has 'never known /The weariness, the fever and the fret' and the Grecian urn, fountain-like overflows with 'more happy love / more happy, happy love!' Now, encountering the destructive and negative aspect of the feminine identity, the poet explores the paradoxical nature of the gender further. He, in fact, seems to be attempting to overcome his fear of her.

The deranged knight, in 'La Belle Dame Sans Mercy' and also the love-struck Lycius in *Lamia* seem to have only one regret, that is they are left bereft of what could have been a most satisfying relationship. The knight lingers on, in a state of deprivation at the bottom of a hill where 'the sedge is withered from the lake / And no birds sing'. (ll. 47-48)

He does not care that hundreds of other men had been victimised by the Belle Dame. He continues to wander wretchedly searching for her. Similarly Lycius, too, does not heed the warnings of the patriarchy and submits himself to Lamia's coercions. Trouble begins when in a traditional display of male superiority he desires a wedding to flaunt his prize before the world. The patriarch, Apollonius, destroyes her through 'cruel', 'piercent' unmasking. Judgement is exercised by the male poet who encourages the readers to punish the female impulse rather than the errant male.

Similar problems occur with the innocent heroines Isabella and Madeline (*The Eve of St. Agnes*) too. Isabella's young man is murdered by her materialistic brothers and she is deprived of her lover and later also of the 'pot of basil' and then driven insane. Madeline is a dreamer who is seduced by Porphyro and thus made a victim of deliberate betrayal. This debasing of the feminine reflects the predominant male bias. The female may be subservient or dominant to the male but never his equal. She is a convenient symbol for the poet's imagination because she is traditionally fragmented into the nine Muses resulting in the reduction of the weight of her significant characteristics. She is separate from the male poet inspite of serving as his inspiration because while he gives energy and purpose he also, at will, imposes limitations to her literary shape.

Keats claimed he did not write for women. He 'detests' the prospect of 'women .. tak(ing) a snack or luncheon of literary scraps' (*Letters I*: 163). He wrote to his publisher:

> I equally dislike the favour of the public with the love of a woman – they are both a cloying treaclec to the wings of independence
>
> (*Letters II*: 144)

On another occasion Keats insisted that he does 'not want ladies to read (his) poetry... (he) writes for men' (*Letters II*: 163)

Keats's ideal woman takes shape when he abandons the desire for a lovers' relationship. The 'feverous relief' (*Letters I*: 370) turns to a calm understanding when he portrays her as 'sound asleep/ Drows'd with the fume of poppies (*Ode to Autumn*), This attitude which Keats himself describes as 'disinterestedness' (*Letters I*: 293) reflects his mature vision. This also recaptures his earliest fantasy that the ideal woman was a 'pure Goddess' who slept in 'the soft nest' of his mind (*Letters I*: 341)

Moneta, the heroine of *The Fall of Hyperion* is the last goddess to appear in Keats's poetry. She combines the power and beauty of both the mortal and immortal worlds. She gathers together the powers of maternity, divinity and femininity and transforms the dreamer into a poet. This transformation is equivalent to the process of procreation and the poet occurs in the vision of the change himself. Liberation from the destructive sexuality of the earlier poems allows him to be sated rather than famished. Moneta generates the powers of redemption. Keats, the poet, finally realizes the serenity which he had described in his letter of September 21, 1819 to George and Georgiana:

> Some think I have lost that poetic ardours and fire'tis said I once had – the fact is perhaps I have; but instead of that I hope I shall substitute a more thoughtful and quiet power..... I want to compose without fever
> (*Letters II*: 209)

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INTERPRETER OF MALADIES: A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

I

The story by Jhumpa Lahiri has its own pace. It does not unfold events; it unfolds the mental layers. But that does not mean that it exposes the mental reality in depth or in its multi-aspects. It gives glimpses of it and leaves a lot to the reader for rumination. The story serves as a stimulus.

As in a traditional narration, the physical context is presented along with factual and coloured information. It would be interesting to note these parallel presentation:

SNo	Physical Context	Information
i.	The morning is dry, bright. It is mid July. The outward appearance especially the dress: Das: in T-Shirt, shorts, camera. Mina: skirt and a strawberry shaped blouse.	Mr. Das and his wife Mina. They have three children: Ronny, Bobby and a girl Tina. The couple is in their thirties. Mr. Kapasi is their tourist guide. He is assigned this work as he knows English. The family looks Indian but are dressed as foreigners.

SNo	Physical Context	Information
ii.	The kids watch a goat Kapasi: 46 years old. Dress. Tina's doll and dress. Shirtless Indians at a tea stall. They see monkeys on the way. Das takes photograph of a farmer.	It is Tina's first trip to India. Das is a teacher. Das and Mina were born and brought up America. Their parents now in Assansol. They visit them every two years. Mina absorbed in herself. Indifferent to children. Mina criticizes Das for taking an ordinary taxi. Kapasi works as an interpreter to a doctor. He is a tour guide on Fridays and Sundays. Kapasi knows many languages. He was a teacher. Wanted to be an interpreter for diplomats His first son died; poverty; since then doctor's interpreter. His wife is cold, reserved. Mina shows interest in his job; it is romantic. Das - Mina not good match.
iii	Lunch at a restaurant. Das takes a photograph of Mina and Kapasi.	Mina talks to Kapasi. Kapasi gives his address to Mina. Kapasi dreams of correspondence with Mina.
iv.	Konark: sun-temple.	Kapasi never had love

SNo	Physical Context	Information
	Carved figures of lovers. Das is left alone as he takes photograph.	relations with his wife. Kapasi wants to be alone with Mina.
v.	At 4:30 they drive back. Visit to Udaygiri added by Kapasi. Monkeys. Das and children go. Mina and kapasi stay back. Mina is 28 now. After getting frustrated with Kapasi, Mina joins the family. They find Bobby is missing. He is surrounded by monkeys. Kapasi saves him. Mina acts as a matured mother. Kapasi's address flutters away in the wind.	Kapasi wants to spend more time with Mina. Mina discloses that Bobby is not Raj's son. She has kept the secret for 8 years. She met Raj when they were very young. The families decided their marriage. She was never close to her parents. She got the first child when she was very young. Busy with child care. Raj's Punjabi friend visited them for a week and Bobby was conceived one afternoon. The friend later on married a Punjabi girl and they still exchange family photographs. She has no special love for Raj. She wants Kapasi to interpret her problem and suggest a remedy. Mina has fallen out of love with life. Kapasi is hurt as Mina looks at him as a parent. When

SNo	Physical Context	Information
		Dapasi decides to be a mediator, Mina loses her interest in him.

The physical context is not closely related to the information disclosed in phrases. The story could have taken place anywhere. The Indian milieu is not a necessary for the story.

Do the characters share any Indian values? Not necessarily. They are brought up in America and apart from their accent and Mina's acceptance of her marriage with Raj, there is nothing Indian in the characters.

Do we call English fiction Indian simply because the setting is Indian or the writer is Indian?

II

As we have already noted the presentation is traditional. Narration, description, a little bit of dialogue and presenting one's view or attitude in a straight forward way constitute the structure of the presentation. Even the use of symbols, which is very rare, is quite traditional. The mismatching of Raj and Mina, Kapasi and his wife is openly stated by the author. When Raj takes a photograph of Kapasi and Mina at lunchtime, one expects some hint, some implication but that never comes. Or Mina rips a page from a film magazine for writing Kapsi's address; the page contains a photograph of a hero and heroine in embrace. This looks however like a wasted symbol. The strawberry blouse and the wheel life at Konark are also not fully exploited as symbols. Only the loss of paper on which Kapasi's address is written strikes as a symbol.

Only two devices are at work. One is parallelism for showing contrast. What appears to be a thankless job for Kapasi becomes a responsible job for Raj. Kapasi's wife shows her resentment by calling him 'doctor's assistant' whereas Mina likes him for his job. The Das family looks Indian but is dressed as foreign one. Mina is shown as a lonesome person, absorbed in herself, indifferent to others. Only for a short time she is shown interested in Kapasi. But at the end she is back to her earlier mood.

The language is simple without any preponderance of Indian -English words; in fact quite a few culture - bound items are described in simple English. Expressions such as elephant god, puffed rice, fritters, magenta umbrella with white and orange tassels, graham-flour batter, hibiscus petals, lotus oil balm are some of its examples.

The structure of the plot or the outline of the story also is simple:

Uneasy marriage of a young woman - moment of infidelity - seeking a person who can share and interpret the secret - no remedy from the expected person - retreating into the earlier self - cold, indifferent - the man's dream collapses - back to the positions where they were.

Is this simplicity in presentation, language and plot-structure indicative of anything?

III

Three men that come in Mina's life are presented in the short span of the story. Other men seem to have been intentionally excluded. For example, nothing is said about

Mina's father or her father-in-law. True, Mina is said to be a lonesome person but if the Punjabi person who comes in her life only for a week has place in the story, there must be some intension in keeping out say her classmates, her school-mates or her other male relatives. What could be the purpose of keeping them out?

Mr. Raj Das, her husband, is a person whom she knew since her childhood as the two families had close relations. When Raj and Mina grew up, the families arranged their private meetings. But 'they never caught them at anything'. It was coming together without much passion or urge. The marriage just happened and Mina accepted her role as a part of routine.

The Punjabi friend who came to stay with Raj for a week was a complete stranger. There was no possibility of Mina having any emotional involvement with him; nor was he emotionally attracted towards her. But one afternoon when they were alone, he had a desire and she did not resist. Bobby was conceived accidentally; it just happened. After that there was no friendship, no attachment, no over between the two. But Mina kept it a secret. Was she repentant? Did she have sense of guilt? When Kapasi asks that, Mina just walks away. She wants Kapasi just to interpret her pain, suggest some remedy. When Kapasi gets personally involved in the case, unlike a doctor, she keeps him aside.

And the third person is Kapasi. She is indifferent to him as she is to ail initially. It is only when she knows that he is an interpreter for a doctor that she gets excited. This excitement appears rather strange at the beginning. But in that mood she is nice to him: she asks him to take lunch with her, allows Raj to take their photograph, takes his address, watches Konark carvings in his presence and finally when she alone is with him at Udaygiri, she tells him the secret of Bobby's birth. She wants Kapasi to explain her malady. Her interest in Kapasi is not that of a woman in a man. And when she finds him of little help she leaves him.

The three men have failed; failed to rouse her deeper feelings. She meets them but they cannot communicate with her. She remains inaccessible. They touch her at the surface and the surface is dry, too obvious and humdrum. That is why perhaps there is nothing unusual, nothing remarkable in the presentation, language and plot-structure. The structural elements of the three create the intended 'tone'. Her depths are unfathomable; the story leaves the reader engrossed in reaching the deep structure all by himself.

IV

A look at the way Lahiri projects Mina could be rewarding.

- Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about who take Tina to be toilet. Eventually Mrs. Das relented ... She did not hold the little girl's hand as they walked to the rest room.

- Mrs. Das, for her part, had flexed one side of her mouth, smiling dutifully at Mrs. Kapasi, without displaying any interest in him.

- She wore a red-and-white checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip-on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close fitting styled like a man's undershirt. The blouse was decorated at chest-level with a calico appliqué in the shape of a strawberry. She was a short woman, with small hands like paws, her frosty pink fingernails pointed to match her lips, and was slightly plumb in her figure. Her hair, shorn only a little longer than her husband's was parted flat to one side ... She walked slowly, carrying some puffed rice tossed with peanuts.

- ... the girl began to play with the lock on her side ... but Mrs. Das said nothing to stop her. She sat a bit slouched at one end of the back seat, not offering her puffed rice to anyone.

- Mrs. Das continued to polish her nails. She had still not removed her sunglasses. Every now and then Tina renewed her pleas that she wanted her nails done, too, and so at one point Mrs. Das flicked a drop of polish on the little girl's finger...

  "Isn't this an air - conditioned car? She asked.

  "Quit complaining," " Mr. Das said. "It isn't so hot."

  "I told you get a car with air-conditioned;" Mrs. Das continued. "Why do you do this, Raj, just to save a few stupid rupees. What are they saving us, fifty cents?"

- "But so romantic," Mrs. Das said dreamily breaking her extended silence ... For the first time, her eyes met Mr. Kapasi's in the review mirror: pale, a bit small, their gaze fixed but drowsy.

- Mrs. Das listened attentively, stroking her hair with a small plastic brush ... asking more questions for yet another example.

  "What's your address, Mr. Kapasi?" she inquired, fishing for something inside her straw bag.

  "You would like my address?"

"So we can send you copies," she said. " Of the pictures." She handed him a scrap of paper which she had hastily ripped from a page of her magazine.

- "For God's sake, stop calling me Mrs. Das. I am twenty -eight .. You probably have children of my age."

  "Not quite." It disturbed Mr. Kapasi to learn that she thought of him as a parent. The feeling that he had toward her ... evaporated a little.

  "I told you because of your talents." She put the packet of puffed rice back into her bag without folding over the top.

  "I don't understand," Mr. Kapasi said.

  "Don't you see? For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn't even suspect it. He thinks I am still in love with him. Well, don't you have anything to say?"

- He looked at her, in her red plaid skirt and strawberry T-Shirt, a woman not yet thirty who loved neither her husband nor her children, who had already fallen out of love with her life. Her confession depressed him...

- "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?"

She turned at him and glared, mustard oil thick on her frosty pink lips. She opened her mouth to say something, but as she glared at Mr. Kapasi some certain knowledge seemed to pass before her eyes, and she stopped. It crushed him; he knew at that moment that he was not even important enough to be properly insulted. She opened the car door and began walking up the path...

These descriptions do not seem to be motivated. They do not bear any striking features. That way the story is not Indian; it does not have to be. These bits and pieces of information are set in an Indian context but they are not culturally loaded.

The whole presentation is obviously the viewpoint of Mr. Kapasi and therefore one cannot expect objectivity and point out certain gaps. That Mina shows interest in Kapasi, is Kapasi's interpretation. That she takes his address is interpreted in one way by Kapasi, but her reply shows that there is not much significance to it. Why she discloses her secret to Kapasi is a question one could ask but Kapasi's presentation does not give the information. It may sound a bit unnatural - but that could be the result of Kapasi's failure to understand Mina. That she does not care any more for Kapasi also is his view.

In fact the lack of understanding the human being in Mina is Kapasi's failure to understand, does not necessarily show the weakness, the faults in the presentation. Or one can even go to the extent of saying that the gaps, the unexpected turns are intentional; they point out the unfathomable depth underlying the outward behavior of Mina.

Shouldn't one accept that Lahiri is speaking through Mrs. Das? That would be a result of the reader's habit of finding out author's viewpoint, the author's mouthpiece. The story demands dismantling of this could. The closing part of the story that once again refers to Mina is a sign of it.

- 'Poor Bobby.' Mrs. Das said. 'Come here a second. Let Mommy fix your hair.' Again she reached into her straw bag, this time for her hairbrush, and began to run it around the edges of the translucent visor. When she whipped out the hairbrush, the slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi's address on it fluttered away in the wind.

The reader has a choice. Take Kapasi's viewpoint as the author's wonder at the human mind and consider the end as a traditional symbolic end. Or detach himself from Kapasi's viewpoint, take the scattered pieces as Kapasi's with their incompleteness or unexplainability and admire the dexterity in making the outward representation simple, dry, non-striking to suggest complex, intriguing and, striking reality.

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JAMES BALDWIN: *GIOVANNI'S ROOM*

James Baldwin's contemporaries, the reading public and the critics alike, accepted the fame of Baldwin, the essayist, more readily than the success of Baldwin, the novelist. In an article written in 1964, "James Baldwin's Other Country," the critic could state: "He has learned the art of the novel, but taught the art of the essay."[1] However, even then it was pointed out that the importance of the essays should not necessarily mean attributing less merit to Baldwin's novels. Alfred Kazin, for instance, said: "I'm sure that Baldwin doesn't like to hear his essays praised at the expense (seemingly) of his fiction. And I'm equally sure that if Baldwin were not so talented a novelist he would not be so remarkable an essayist."[2]

While Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which appeared in 1953, had been an immediate success and became the work for which the author is remembered, *Giovanni's Room*, which came out three years later, was to become the least successful of Baldwin's works in terms of sales and critical acclaim. Writing in 1965, a serious critic judged the novels thus:

> The best of Baldwin's novels is *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and his best is very good indeed. It ranks with Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a major contribution to American fiction. (…)
>
> *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is by far the weakest of Baldwin's novels. There is a tentative, unfinished quality about the book,

> as if by merely broaching the subject of homosexuality Baldwin had exhausted his creative energy. Viewed in retrospect, it seems less a novel in its own right than a first draft of *Another Country*. (…)
>
> *Another Country* (1962) is a failure on the grand scale. It is an ambitious novel, rich in thematic possibilities, for Baldwin has at his disposal a body of ideas brilliantly developed in his essays.[3]

From the beginning, Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* was read and praised as the story of the author's boyhood and adolescence. By stressing the importance of the autobiographical element, the author is cast in the role of the person lending his authenticity to the world he describes: a Negro growing up in Harlem, ghetto and heart of New York, inheriting the world he is born into by accepting that world's rites of passage and saying "Yes" to the God of his father. Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room,* is set in Paris and the south of France where the author spent his formative years: like many American post World War II writers, Baldwin chose exile, living from 1948 to 1957 in France and Switzerland. Autobiographical elements are woven into the plot of this novel also, presented in the locale and in the major theme, an American youth's coming of age in Europe. The homosexual experience and the encounter with death are of crucial importance for the development of this theme in *Giovanni's Room.* The central issue is man's search for his identity and, through coming to terms with the self, the acceptance of life: "the great difficulty is to say YES to life."[4]

In his essays also, James Baldwin had taken up the theme of America's encounter with Europe. Not surprisingly, he had first become known in Europe for these essays on the "international" theme of American literature.[5] The essays written during the years when Baldwin was at the height of his fame lecturing widely on civil rights were collected in 1963 under the evocative title *The Fire Next Time.*[6] Most essays appeared originally in journals such as *Harper's Magazine* which carried the powerful "Notes of a Native Son" in 1955. This title was also chosen for the collection of essays[7] published in England in 1964 containing, inter alia, "The Harlem Ghetto", "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown" and "Equal in Paris". A sequel appeared in the same year: *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son,*[8] containing two essays which deal with the themes taken up in the form of the novel in *Giovanni's Room*: "The Male Prison"[9] and "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American".[10]

> 'It is a complex fate to be an American,' Henry James observed, and the principal discovery an American writer makes in Europe is just how complex this fate is.[11]

If this beginning of Baldwin's essay makes us uneasy it does so on many counts, one being the simple fact that the acknowledged master's brief statement, not very profound by itself, combined with the young author's endorsement, is shown up as unsound reasoning. And if the rhetoric here served the purpose of alerting us to platitudes and fallacies, it also makes us aware that the young essayist needed the perceptive advice which, at a much later time,[12] came to him as a novelist: concentrate on the detail, observe reality, go beyond self-deception. Intriguingly, Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* has many passages fulfilling these basic demands of the novel. Moreover, the protagonist's quest for identity is presented within the framework of the American novel's staple theme, the interconnections between the new continent and the old, between the present and the past: the American protagonist's catalyst to a deeper understanding of self is the outspoken European, Giovanni who says at the time of their parting: "The Americans have no sense of doom, none whatever."[13] The Italian felt sure from the beginning that they were fated to meet and surrendered to passion without questions asked, obliterating their past, feeling secure of their future.[14] In this relationship, Giovanni's commitment is total, all-encompassing, whereas David keeps up his attitude of a detached, critical observer, an outsider in a foreign land. Out of fear of making commitments, David had preferred always to live in a state of in-between, displaying tragic blindness towards his own motifs. Striving for a life of unlimited freedom, he becomes a man who experiences individuation to a tragic degree.

The "real" time of the narrative is one night, from evening to dawn --- the beginning and the end of the novel. The telling of the tale is done with the help of an intricate structure of flashbacks and flash-forwards and a fusion of time and space, as the first person narrator and protagonist recalls his life. Was the complicated structure the reason why Baldwin's second novel was never a popular work? Was the novel ignored as a consequence of the young Negro writer's solecism of choosing an all-white caste of characters for his autobiographical masque? Did the author add to this affront by his use of irony while dethroning white middle-class America's cherished ideals and aspirations? Or was the author's presentation of the homosexual experience an affront to all --- to those for whom homosexuality was taboo and to those for whom homosexuality was the panacea for a happy end in life and in the novel?

With regard to this last aspect, Baldwin tried to explain in his essays and interviews:

> (…) those terms, homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual are 20th-century terms which, for me, really have very little meaning. I've never, myself, in watching myself and watching other people, watching life, been able to discern exactly where the barriers were. Life being what life is, passion being what passion is (…).[15]

That this was a difficult stance to hold was pointed out by Colin MacInnes in 1963 in the course of his detailed discussion of Baldwin's oeuvre: "It was not all that easy for any writer in English to confront this theme in 1956, and, more particularly, a Negro writer who was already vulnerable on so many other grounds to mean and hostile criticism."[16]

Are we now ready to approach *Giovanni's Room* without compartmentalization of the human experience? Can posterity be a better judge because there is less tension concerning the themes presented in Baldwin' work? Will this novel, upon re-reading, reveal strengths that are not derived primarily from the tale itself, but from the telling? Can we find layers of meaning in the author's use of language and symbolism? While discussing American writers of the post World War II generation,[17] John W. Aldrige expressed the firm opinion that Baldwin's works will be among those that have lasting value:

> Cliché Weltschmerz, cliché psychology, cliché dipsomania, cliché satyriasis --- these were among the counterfeit coins left to the war writers by the twenties and thirties. At one time it was almost impossible to tell that they were

> counterfeit because there was so little else in circulation (…) In the last several years an altogether different group have come to prominence consisting of, among others, Saul Bellow, James Baldwin, Bernard Malamud, J. D. Salinger, Philip Roth and James Purdy. And these writers are minting a new and genuine currency of the creative imagination, one that seems certain to remain the legal tender of the serious American novel for a long time to come.[18]

Has Baldwin's oeuvre stood the test of time? Once read, is *Giovanni's Room* forgotten or recalled as a novel in which the author succeeded in creating characters who voice "insights and longings and despairs"?[19] If we concede that the artistic endeavor stems from the specific situation and proceeds to the general, we may gauge the artist's creativeness by the measure of the extent of transposition of the personal into the universal human experience. The focus on this intrinsic relation between poetry and truth, *Dichtung und Wahrheit,* will be essential for an interpretation of the writer's work. Seen in this perspective, *Giovanni's Room* portrays indeed a world that was a part of the novelist's life and becomes the medium to carry his message. James Baldwin's following declaratory remark on the role of the writer is the idiom of mid-20th century America, yet we can recognize clear echoes of Goethe who speaks of his works as *Bruchstuecke einer grossen Konfession,* i.e. fragments of an all-embracing confession:

> All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up.[20]

Baldwin's brief second novel is told throughout from the point of view of the protagonist, the young American, alone at night in a dilapidated villa in the south of France. Drowning his despair in drink, David recalls his life as a series of failures. He vomits the anguish up: the alienation from his peers and his father; the rejection of the upper-middle-class society into which he was born;[21] the feelings of confusion and guilt after the first sexual experience:

> It was borne in on me: *But Joey is a boy* (…). The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would lose my manhood (…). I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in* me.[22]

The adolescent has a brush with death in an almost fatal accident caused by him through his reckless driving; he has a number of homosexual and heterosexual affairs, the most recent of which led to a broken engagement: Hella Lincoln, the American girl he chanced to meet in Paris, left him to return alone to New England, after pleading in vain with him to keep his promise of marriage:

> 'David. Don't you think we ought to go home? (…) Please. I want to go home. I want to get married. I want to start having kids. I want us to live someplace. I want *you*.'[23] (…) 'Americans should never come to Europe', she said, and tried to laugh and began to cry, 'it means they can never be happy again. What's the good of an

> American who isn't happy? Happiness was all we had.'[24]

There are no regrets on the part of the narrator that the emancipated woman left him, no 'My Bonnie is over the ocean' lament, but only matter of fact statements:

> My girl Hella (…) has been gone a week. She is on the high seas now, on her way back to America. (…) I told her that I had loved her once and made myself believe it. But I wonder if I had. I was thinking, no doubt, of our nights in bed, of the peculiar innocence and confidence which will never come again which had made those nights so delightful, so unrelated to past, present, and anything to come, so unrelated, finally, to my life since it was not necessary for me to take any but the most mechanical responsibility for them.[25]

Whereas Hella still hopes to find fulfillment in pursuing "The American Dream", the encounter with Europe has made David more mature. He has reached the perception that he cannot accept the values of the past as a guide to a meaningful life. Thus, the quintessence of *Giovanni's Room* can be traced to the legacy of Thomas Wolfe's great novels, from *Look Homeward, Angel* to *You Can't Go Home Again*. In Wolfe's autobiographical–fictional world an escape from the unsatisfying present is still possible by a search for new solutions. For the protagonist of Baldwin's austere, dark novel there is no return and no way forward, and this failure of the quest for identity --- "the germ of the dilemma which resolved itself, that summer, into flight"[26]--- dominates from the opening scene to the end. The existential dilemma is the breakdown of human relationships, the inability to accept the self and to be compassionate to others: isolation, barrenness, darkness characterize the foreign landscape and are, at the same time, images of a deeply narcissistic self. The portrayal of man in the end-situation shows the close affinity of the American writer's works with French existentialism: *Giovanni's Room* can be read as Baldwin's version of Sartre's *La Chambre*. In Baldwin's novel, the central image stands for man's total isolation: in Giovanni's room the protagonist's flight from self comes to its impasse; the futility of that flight becomes apparent in the coldness, isolation, emptiness, and chaos in the rented house in barren hills far from the coast, the place where the inner drama is staged and where the narrator stands accused before his conscience. From the opening paragraph to the end, the central image is linked with this psychosis:

> I stand at the window of this great house in the south of France as night falls, the night which is leading me to the most terrible morning of my life. I have a drink in my hand, there is a bottle at my elbow. I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams.[27]

In the protagonist's soliloquy the outer and the inner world are not experienced with immediacy, but only through the reflection; outside contours are blurred to the extent that forms disappear. This house was the stage where he attempted to follow accepted norms by forging a lasting bond with Hella; the night of reckoning turns this place into his purgatory where he faces the inevitability of death. David leaves this house forever the next morning, resigned to a life of tragic isolation.

In the parallel narration of past and present, the pattern emerges through the common symbols interwoven in the strands of narrative. Thus the alienation from family and peers, though presented with great economy of narration, is an important aspect of the experience of otherness. It centers around the room-symbol projected through the narrator's consciousness. Rooms were never a sanctuary for Baldwin's protagonist, there is not any mention of a safe haven, only of frequent change of places: from the Golden Gate on the west coast, San Francisco, to the Bronx, to New Jersey, back to New York and, via Connecticut, to Paris and the south of France.

At loose ends in the city of his self-imposed exile, during his fiancée's trip to Spain, David had lived together with an Italian, one of those "young boys from the provinces,"[28] who come to the city in search of fortune, only to meet their doom; in Giovanni's case the homosexual bars which David frequents:

> Most of the people I knew in Paris were, as Parisians sometimes put it, of *le milieu* and, while this milieu was certainly anxious enough to claim me, I was intent on proving, to them and to myself, that I was not of their company.[29]

Attracted by the new barman's beauty, unsullied innocence and unbroken pride, David had found the fulfillment of passionate love in the sordid surroundings of Giovanni's claustrophobic rented room near Les Halles. While living with Giovanni, the young American had to admit to himself his affinity with a way of life he had until then disdainfully observed:

> The beast which Giovanni had awakened in me would never go to sleep again; but one day I would not be with Giovanni any more. And would I then, like

> all the others, find myself turning and following all kinds of boys down God knows what dark avenues, into what dark places?
>
> With this fearful intimation there opened in me a hatred for Giovanni which was as powerful as my love and which was nourished by the same roots.[30]

The "fearful intimation" of being close to danger recurs in the fear "to be locked forever in that room with him"[31] and is part of David's flight from his own self. David takes Hella's return as his excuse to escape from Giovanni's room. Rather than facing the "beast which Giovanni had awakened,"[32] the protagonist leaves him at the brink of the maelstrom of the homosexual underworld. Deserted by David, Giovanni commits murder, strangling Guilleaume, "a disgusting old fairy,"[33] and is sentenced to death by execution.

In all human relationships the protagonist acts with that insincerity towards himself and towards the other which is the sign of immaturity, of self-centered, wishful thinking, of denial of reality. Without insight into the suffering he inflicts, David treats his partners as objects. In the structure of the novel this means that the minor characters are shown only in that role in which the first-person narrator perceives them. Consequentially, Hella and Giovanni are only fragments of David's past, not fully developed characters; and the other minor characters are given even less space. They are mere personifications of ideas: the *Urerfahrungen* of sexuality and woman as mother are represented by Joey and by the concierge of the house in the south of France; evil is represented by Guilleaume, the owner of the bar, and Jacques, the aging homosexual play-boy, the tempter, and the cicerone to *le milieu.*[34]

From the beginning of their relationship, Giovanni had with intuitive insight seen through David's deceptions and self-deceptions, had loved him in spite of his dishonesty and shiftiness. Giovanni is the mature partner who can accept the other's immaturity, because he can trust his own bearings: he feels instinctively that theirs is a fateful meeting. If their parting is bitter, it is also a moment of truth where the problem of David's life stands exposed by Giovanni as self-centeredness, denial of reality, and inability to love:

> You do not (...) love anyone! You never have loved anyone, (...). You love your purity, you love your mirror – (...). You want to be *clean*. (...) You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. You want to *kill* him in the name of all your little moralities. And you – you are *immoral*.[35]

An image from the opening scene, the window-panes, is used throughout the novel and recurs in this crucial passage as the mirror, the dark glass. This image for man's as yet imperfect understanding of life is taken from the "Love Chapter" of the Bible;[36] there are passages reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount in the protagonist's vision of the execution, marking his beginning awareness of the interdependence of their lives. As in Baldwin's other works, it is the language of the Bible that lends poetic beauty and deep meaning to this novel.

Giovanni's Room, the writer's portrayal of existential despair, does not show a way out. There is no solution of the protagonist's crisis. Rather, from the parting, the road leads straight to disaster for Giovanni, to a crime of passion in the homosexual underworld; David -- - a modern man making use of unlimited freedom while negating responsibility for fellow human beings --- acknowledges his guilty self only in the poignancy of the end-situation. The understanding that theirs was a fateful relationship comes to David only during the drunken vigil he keeps the night before Giovanni's execution:

> I think we connected the instance we met. And remain connected still, in spite of our later *separation du corps*, despite the fact that Giovanni will be rotting soon in unhallowed ground near Paris. (…) No matter how it seems now, I must confess: I loved him. I do not think that I will ever love anyone like that again. And this might be a great relief if I did not also know that, when the knife has fallen, Giovanni, if anything, will feel relief.[37]

It is significant for the tight structure of the narrative that David's confession "I loved him." comes immediately before his vision of Giovanni's execution: the new sincerity towards the self comes only through the awareness of the inevitable, unchanging finality of death.

That death comes at dawn is a reversal of the conventional image of dawn as the usher of new life. It is Baldwin's coded sign for the tragedy faced by modern man: to continue living in a world of lost values and to experience the failure of human relations. That the dirge is sung in the night preceding death is again a reversal, that of the dirge being sung by women mourning the death of the young Adonis. David's mourning for Giovanni is a man's dirge for Adonis and, at the same time, a lament for all human guilt, suffering and loss: "Nobody can stay in the Garden of Eden."[38]

Out of fragmented sequences of episodes there emerges a deeper insight into the past and future of all human existence. Hope for forgiveness and for love appears as the sum of life in this novel which Baldwin inscribed with a motto from Whitman's *Song of Myself*: "I was the man; I suffered, I was there."[39]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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[1] Sayre, Robert F., "James Baldwin's Other Country", in: *Contemporary American Novelists,* ed. by Harry T. Moore, (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press 1964), p.168.

[2] Kazin, Alfred, *Contemporaries*, (London 1963), p.255.

[3] Bone, Robert A., "James Baldwin." In: *The Negro Novel in America*, revised & edited by Robert Bone (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp.215-239; reprinted in: *James Baldwin, A Collection of Critical Essays,* compiled & edited for the Yale University Series, Twentieth Century Views, by Keneth Kinnamon, (Prentice – Hall, Inc. : Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1974, pp. 28–51), esp. pp. 31, 38, 41.

We may wonder which ranking on this list would have been accorded to Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974). Or was by then a new list made, with *Giovanni's Room* at the top?

[4] Baldwin, James, *Giovanni's Room*, (©.1956 by James Baldwin, Gorgi Edition, London 1963), p. 8. All further references to the novel are to this edition.

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[5] See *Encounter*, ed. by Stephen Spender and Melvin J. Lasky, vol. XXV, no. 1 (July 1965), pp. 55 ff., "Race, Hate, Sex, and Colour – A Conversation between James Baldwin, Colin MacInnes, and James Mossman":

> Mossman: (…) You are clearly not an American in the ordinary sense of a White American, are you? You're not an American Negro; that's not an identity, really.
>
> Baldwin: Then I can't answer it. I'm part of a totally incoherent people at the moment, of African origin, with Indian, Spanish, and European blood in my veins. I'm part of a country which has yet to discover who and what it is. (p.57)

[6] Baldwin, James, *The Fire Next Time,* (©.1962/1963 by James Baldwin, Delta Edition, New York, n.d.)

[7] Baldwin, James, *Notes of a Native Son,* (©. by James Baldwin, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1953, 1955, 1964; this collection first published by Michael Joseph Ltd., London 1964)

[8] Baldwin, James, *Nobody Knows My Name*, *More Notes of a Native Son.* (©. by James Baldwin, 1954, 1956, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961; and ©. by *Esquire, Inc.* for "The Black Boy Looks At The White Boy"; this collection first published by Michael Joseph Ltd., London 1964). The title is adapted from the essay which was written for the *Partisan Review* in the winter of 1959, i.e. two years after Baldwin's return to the United States and two years after his first visit to the South: 'Nobody Knows My Name: a Letter from the South'.

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[9] First published as 'Gide as Husband and Homosexual' in *The New Leader* (December 13, 1954).

[10] First published in *The New York Times Book Review* (January 25, 1959).

[11] *Nobody Knows My Name*, op. cit., p.17.

[12] See: Irving Howe "James Baldwin: At Ease in Apocalypse", which appeared first in *Harper's Magazine*, 237, no.1420 (September, 1968) and is included in *James Baldwin, A Collection of Critical Essays*, op. cit., pp. 96 – 108. The discerning critic wrote:

> Now, after having read Baldwin's new novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, I have come to feel that the whole problem of Negro writing in America is far more complex than I had ever recognized, probably more complex than even Ellison had supposed, and perhaps so complex as to be, at this moment, almost beyond discussion. *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* is a remarkably bad novel, signaling the collapse of a writer of some distinction. (p.98)
>
> Strangely, however, it also shows, in a few scenes, what Baldwin's true gift as a novelist might be. It is not a gift for sexual *Sturm und Drang,* whether hetero or homo or bi; nor for militant protest; nor for political prophecy. Baldwin's true gift as a novelist is for comedy of manners, nuanced observation, refinement of detail. (p.107)

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[13] *Giovanni's Room,* p.108. This passage is in the context of David's moving out of Giovanni's room, and leaving for the south of France with his fiancée:

> 'You know very well,' said Giovanni, slowly, 'what can happen between us. It is for this reason you are leaving me. (….)We will separate. But I know you belong with me. I believe, I must believe that you will come back.' (…) He waved his hand. 'I said we would not fight any more. The Americans have no sense of doom, none whatever.' (pp.107/108.)

[14] Ibid., p. 83.

[15] *Encounter,* July 1959, 'Race, Hate , Sex, and Colour', op. cit., Baldwin's words, p. 59.

[16] MacInnes, Colin, 'The Dark Angel, The Writings of James Baldwin', in *Encounter* (August 1963, vol. XXI, no.2), p.. [illegible].

[17] Aldrige, John W(atson), 'The War Writers Ten Years Later', in: *Contemporary American Novelists,* ed. by Harry T. Moore, (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press 1964), p. 32 ff.

[18] Ibid., pp.39-40.

[19] Kazin, op.cit. , p.256.

[20] Baldwin, James, 'The Northern Protestant', *Nobody Knows My Name,* (op.cit.), p.148. This essays appeared first under the title 'The Precarious Vogue of Ingmar Bergman' in: *Esquire,* April 1960.

[21] See *Giovanni's Room* , pp. 12, 93.

[22] Ibid., p.11.

[23] Ibid., p.120.

[24] Ibid., p. 123.

[25] Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[26] Ibid., p. 12.

[27] Ibid., p.7.

[28] Ibid. , p. 23.

[29] Ibid., p. 21.

[30] Ibid., p. 64; see also pp. 24, 33, 43, 44.

[31] Ibid., p. 108.

[32] In this connection, see also, Leslie A. Fiedler, *An End to Innocence, Essays on Culture and Politics,* (© 1948/1952, Beacon Press, Boston 1955), pp. 145-146.

[33] *Giovanni's Room,* p. 81: Giovanni's words to David.

[34] See ibid., pp. 21-23, 45.

[35] Ibid., p. 106.

[36] I Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 12; Baldwin also cites verse 11 in full.

[37] *Giovanni's Room,* pp . 36, 84.

[38] Ibid, p. 23.

[39] Ibid., p. 6.

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