The Sparagmos of Myth is the Naked Lunch of Mode: Modern Literature as the Age of Frye and Borges

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One commendable motive for Harold Bloom’s latest work is his desire to reverse the modernist merchandising of the latest art at the expense of what already exists. Bloom derives the overvaluation of modernity from the way in which modern writers have misread their special relation to the tradition. Bloom shares with the postmoderns a disaffection with the monumental assumptions of modernism but, in a chapter of *A Map of Misreading*, writes off the Sixties also as “the Age of Frye and Borges.”

Literary tradition, once we even contemplate entering its academies, now insists upon being our “family history,” and inducts us into its “family romance” in the unfortunate role prefigured by Browning’s Childe Roland, a candidate for heroism who aspired only to fail at least as miserably as his precursors failed. There are no longer any archetypes to displace: we have been ejected from the imperial palace whence we came, and any attempt to find a substitute for it will not be a benign displacement but only another culpable trespass, neither more nor less desperate than any Oedipal return to origins. For us, creative emulation of literary tradition leads to images of
For Bloom, the modern and postmodern misunderstanding of its own relation to the tradition is expressed in the “noble idealization” (Bloom’s phrase) common to Eliot, Frye, and Borges: the artist disappears into his work, and his work disappears into the ideal unity of literature as a whole. The pervasive influence of this idealization betrays modern writers into assuming a relation to the tradition which Bloom feels does not yet exist. The moderns are inevitable latecomers who can only become parodies of the tradition by pretending that they belong. At best, Bloom implies, writers like Pynchon and Barth can acknowledge their belatedness by deliberate self-parody.

Bloom is right to reject avant-garde ideology, and right also to call the Sixties “the Age of Frye and Borges.” But if we look more carefully at these “noble idealizations” of Frye and Borges for an understanding of the modern period as a whole, we will begin to find the dialectical awareness of literary tradition that Bloom feels has not yet emerged. This awareness will, in turn, help explain the predominance of demonic imagery (inversion, incest, sadomasochistic parody) Bloom has misunderstood. Finally, we will extend our discussion of the demonic in Frye and Borges to include Ellison, Conrad, Pinter, and Kosinski, in order to demonstrate what comes of imagining not simply the Sixties, or postmodernism, but the modern period as a whole, as the “Age of Frye and Borges.”

Northrop Frye has not yet systematically described his theory of the relation of modern literature to the tradition. Despite the presence of The Modern Century, we must develop such a theory by explicating the implicit relations between his “Theory of Myths” and the “Theory of Modes.” This explication will not be easy; William Wimsatt, Tzvetan Todorov, and Robert Scholes have each insisted that a fundamental contradiction in Frye’s system reveals itself at precisely this point. We can profit by introducing Frye’s own myth for his system from The Educated Imagination, where he shipwrecks his audience on a desert island to show us three levels of imagination and three uses of language. Frye encourages us to recognize first the island’s plant and animal life as set off against us, as totally other, in a language of nouns and adjectives. At this level, intellect and emotions are split: the intellect anatomizes, the emotions translate ‘this is the not-me’ to ‘I don’t like living in a non-human world.’ But, Frye suggests, our alienation will occasionally be tempered by “moods of identification, peacefulness and joy, when we accept our island and everything around us.” (EI, p. 18) Our emotions want to sustain this mood of identification, and work with the intellect to domesticate the world, to
transform nature into culture by means of a second level of imagination and a second use of language, primarily verbs, or words of action and movement.

The world you want to live in is a human world, not an objective one: it’s not an environment but a home; it’s not the world you see but the world you build out of what you see. You go to work to build a shelter or plant a garden, and as soon as you start to work you’ve moved into a different level of human life. You’re not separating only yourself from nature now, but constructing a human world and separating it from the rest of the world. (*EI*, p. 19)

To carve out a home from an environment, we need to envision cities and gardens. A merging of intellect and emotions is made possible by the third level of the imagination which constructs potential models of human experience such as cities and gardens: typical ways of civilizing, giving a human shape to a part of the natural world. Language used by the third level of the imagination is literature. The social function of literature is to present potential models of human experience—not what is, but what might be. The typical or archetypal images of transmuting part of nature into culture mediate between the imagination, which dreams of a totally human world, and the objective world, all that is non-human, all that frustrates human desire. In Frye’s familiar formula, “the limits of the world are the possible, the limits of the imagination are the conceivable.” Thus literature shows us how to reconcile our infinite imagination to the finitude of the world—in short, how to sublimate.

The study of literature as a whole realizes four archetypal narrative patterns or *mythoi*, romance, tragedy, irony, and comedy, which typify the range of human possibility in the larger non-human world. The typical setting of each *mythos* signifies the human power nature will allow. Man’s power is at its zenith in romance, the *mythos* of summer, begins to decline in tragedy, the *mythos* of autumn, disappears in irony, the *mythos* of winter, and is reborn in comedy, the *mythos* of spring. Frye suggests that literature as a whole identifies man’s fortunes with the earth’s dependence on the path of the sun each day and the cycle of the seasons. For Frye, rituals attempt a homeopathic correspondence of the human and natural worlds; by the continuous parallel which Frye establishes between fertility rituals and archetypal narratives he suggests that literature is language’s own ritual for identifying the human and natural worlds. A young warrior (romance) becomes the king who must be sacrificed (tragedy), disappear (irony), and ultimately be reborn in the spirit of a new society (comedy). Again, the social function of literature and ritual is to accommodate or sublimate our desires to nature’s greater power.
But Frye calls these archetypal narratives _displaced_ myths. Behind the story of the king who must die to affirm man’s integration into the natural cycle is the story of the sun-god who can rise, fall, disappear and reappear at will, a dying and resurrecting god who transcends natural law. Beyond the archetypal phase of literature, which reconciles wish to fact, is the anagogic phase, where the language of literature creates its own universe: “On the archetypal level proper, where poetry is an artifact of human civilization, nature is the container of man. On the anagogic level, man is the container of nature, and his cities and gardens are no longer little hollowings on the surface of the earth, but the forms of a human universe.”

4 Literature as an artifact is simile: “my love is like a red rose” is an identification of the human and natural worlds sublimated or displaced by the recognition of all the ways that my love and the rose are different. But the radical or undisplaced simile, in the anagogic phase, is metaphor: “my love is a red rose.” The job of the artist, for Frye, is to show us a world completely absorbed and possessed by the human mind (EI, p. 33). Literature in the archetypal phase helps society construct cities and gardens, hollowing out ever larger human centers out of nature, the anagogic phase of literature (undisplaced myth), inspires man to keep humanizing and civilizing until, sometime in the future, he has absorbed it totally.

In a system that sets an infinite imagination against a finite universe, society can ultimately fulfill the dream of literature, and enter a state of anagogic identity, where everything is identified with everything else; a world of total metaphor, total identification of the human and natural worlds. At that point the possible is absorbed into the conceivable, whatever we imagine happens. Now one could amalgamate Frye with Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, and John Barth, to suggest that modern man has _already_ absorbed nature into a global village, a spaceship, or a myth. Such a reading would incorporate Frye into the naively apocalyptic mythology of the Sixties which Bloom is writing against, and would limit Frye’s system to what Robert Scholes calls an “eschatology of a mythic millenium.”

5 Frye’s notion of the relation of literature to society in _The Educated Imagination_ (culture teaches society how to absorb the non-human) seems to support a myth of increasing human power culminating in an apocalypse of mythic omniscience in the modern period. Yet Frye’s concept of mode, which characterizes the hero’s power of action from classical to modern literature, suggests rather that man’s power in the natural world has been decreasing, and the imagery and myths that emerge out of the ironic mode in modern literature are demonic, not apocalyptic.

6 In order to understand this darker side of Frye’s system, adumbrated in the difference between the “Theory of Myths” and the “Theory of Modes,” we return to the unremarked but radical difference between an occasional mood of identification and a systematic process of absorption which introduced us to Frye’s myth.
A mood of identification is the imagination's momentary recognition of the co-presence of the human and natural worlds; absorption is the relentless ingesting, forming, and wasting of the world. One thinks first of the dark fictions of Beckett and Borges. One clear insight of modern literature is ecological: absorption leads not to Edenic co-presence, but to the terrible confrontation with our own waste. But instead of conceding to those critics who characterize Frye's theory as contradictory (or imperialist!), it is more intellectually responsible to determine what deeper logic forces this contradiction. This deeper logic of Frye's theory and, if he is right, literature as a whole, can be developed from the frequently made observation that he is a structuralist. The relation between identity and absorption is what structuralism calls differentiation, not contradiction. Considering what the post-structuralists have said about the instability of oppositions, it is clear that identity and absorption can be interchangeable yet contradictory in Frye's system. Post-structuralism insists that the binary opposites structuralism is so fond of analyzing can be deconstructed further into two unequal terms, one enslaved to an earlier, originating, privileged term. In Derrida's classic example, Levi-Strauss's opposition of the engineer to the bricoleur is really the bricoleur's dream of the engineer.

It is necessary to return to that desert island, to re-examine Frye's determination of three levels of the imagination and three uses of language. The intellect's anatomy of the natural world is what structuralists, depth psychologists, or existentialists would call differentiation, a bounding line circumscribing each thing outside the consciousness. What Frye characterizes at this level as a split between intellect and the emotions is really a functional opposition born of a primary differentiation of the me and the not-me. An anatomy can only be achieved across the bounding-line of a difference already established. The occasional mood of identification is accomplished by reversing the alienating technique of differentiation to imagine what it was like before differentiation: the state of undifferentiated consciousness, or nature. Frye's system, like Levi-Strauss's (I am thinking of Derrida's critique of Levi Strauss as Rousseauistic), or Erich Neumann's, generates at once an Origin and a Return from a position now redefined as a middle state. There are two symmetrical errors here, what René Girard would call méconnaissance, deliberate misunderstanding. First, the hope that one can turn consciousness inside out, reverse it in the manner of a Black Mass, to escape the opposition of Nature/Culture by granting a privileged status to another binary set of undifferentiated/differentiated, as if this wasn’t another, albeit more inclusive opposition. Secondly, the radical difference between identity and absorption is elided so that a process of relentless absorption can appear to return us to a state of identity. But absorption of that which we have already "othered" can never return us to a state of paradisal identity; it
can only identify us demonically with the terrifying alienated products of our differentiating consciousness.

By substituting difference for contradiction, the relation between identity and absorption in the motive for myth and metaphor is understood as a total phenomenon, and Frye's system elaborates the dark clarity of Yeats's prophetic poem "The Second Coming," which tells us not only that we must re-imagine our apocalyptic expectations in demonic imagery, but that the mythology of those expectations (Origin and Return, Paradise Lost and Regained, First and Second Coming) vexed or demonized the other non-Christian forms of consciousness it differentiated itself from.

but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

It is now possible to elaborate further this relation of difference by considering Frye's most brilliant and enigmatic insight that literature in the modern period returns from the ironic to the mythic mode.

The movement from classical to modern literature, from the mythic to the ironic mode, chronicles the declining power of the human over the natural world. In the ironic mode, the hero is in a state of bondage, but this very powerlessness, and the randomness of his victimization, suggest to Frye the scapegoat or pharmakos of ritual sacrifice, and thus, with side-glances toward the evident proliferation of myths and a neo-primitive attitude toward metaphor in modern literature, Frye predicts the re-emergence of the mythic out of the ironic. Here the notion of difference is critical for understanding the relation between the "Theory of Myths" and the "Theory of Modes," the synchronic and diachronic aspects of Frye's system. The four archetypal narratives, subsumed into one monomyth, are totally present at each moment of literary history, and available to any writer, like Dante or Milton, with the vision to see literature as a whole: the hero of romance becomes the king of tragedy, who is torn apart, a ritual sparagmos; his death signifies the disappearance of heroism in irony, but his heroic spirit is passed on, through the sacramental eating of his corpse, to the celebrants, the new society of comedy. Now if we can avoid the common misreading of Frye that identifies ironic mode with ironic myth, we won't predict modern literature bottoming out in irony to construct a new comedy and, therefore, a new society. And, if we can avoid seeing only a contradiction between the promise of comedy on the 'other side' of ironic myth and the demonic imagery of the ironic mode, we can see the same relation of difference already noted between identity and absorption applies also to the synchronic and diachronic aspects of Frye's system.

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We saw earlier how the vision of a mythic identity with Nature which exists before and after Culture is the product of Culture’s technique of differentiation turned inside out, in order to imagine a goal that justifies relentless absorption. The insights contained in the concept of mode, rightly understood, offer a critique of the dark side of the Dream of Literature: the *sparagmos* of myth is the naked lunch of mode, and the progressive wasting of the hero chronicled in Frye’s “Theory of Modes” tells us that man has poisoned himself by absorbing a world he has differentiated himself from. In the modern world man must eat and breathe the products of that alienation.

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table

In the ironic mode of Prufrock’s consciousness the human and natural worlds are metaphorically reintegrated with a vengeance. These lines shrewdly characterize a consciousness that has inadvertently prepared its own poison: the sulphurous fog that Prufrock must breathe because others like him thought the air could be an-esthetized to passively receive our waste, domesticated as a tawny kitten curled about the house. Now, before going further to suggest what the appearance of the *pharmakos* in modern literature means, in the larger context of literature’s motive for myth and metaphor, we must reconstruct Frye’s model for the relation of culture and society.

Saussure’s influential analysis of language as a system of differences, and his persuasive suggestions for expanding synchronic linguistics into a science of semiology, have bequeathed us, through the structuralists, a perversely effective model of culture as diacritical—a model at one with the violence and self-destruction of our times. If language is only and always a system of differences, and culture a network of signification systems or languages, then culture must operate as a system of differences. To put it another way, culture must define itself by opposing itself to what it is not—mythically, what it no longer is. The primary differentiation need not be the same for every culture, but it will serve the same function: to differentiate Nature from Culture by an arbitrary distinction. Consciousness of the power to make an arbitrary choice signifies the state of culture. The incest taboo, if it is the universal operator of Culture, tells us we are not (any longer) in a natural state because we discriminate artificially our sexual relations.

The function of the *pharmakos* is to signify by opposition what we are not. If culture is differentiation, the *pharmakos* represents the threat of the undifferentiated which must be cast out. He represents all we can no longer do if we are to sustain Culture’s opposition to Nature. Now the emergence of bottom dogs (Frye’s ironic mode heroes such as
Leopold Bloom, Roquentin, Watt) at the center of modern literature suggests that the pharmakos, once cast out and kept at arm’s length, is returning, and we are being forcibly reintegrated, reidentified with what we have differentiated ourselves from. If the “Theory of Myths” suggests that the dying king be eaten to resurrect the spirit of the old society in a new society, the oppressively demonic imagery of modern literature insists that we are now eating the pharmakos. The motive for myth and metaphor in modern literature is not to show society how to absorb nature, but to explicate and counter the imaginative system of identification/absorption that has alienated us from the world, to show us, in William Burroughs’ mouthfilling phrase, what’s on the end of every fork.

This brings us, finally, to the fundamental importance of Borges in our reading of modern literature: in Borges we have the most economical, paradigmatic critique of that differentiating and absorbing imagination, a sacrificial system now turning back on itself, whose case history is Frye’s “Theory of Modes.” Borges’ fictions incriminate what William Spanos calls the dominant character of Western thought: the metaphysical detective, the rationalist-voyeur who imagines enough space between himself and the world to see it as a labyrinth, a problem to be solved, but penetrates it only to become enmeshed, identified with (or as) its victim.

Borges works this understanding unilaterally, from detectives through historians to readers of fiction. In “Death and the Compass,” Lönnrot the detective, an ephbe of Dupin, rigorously excludes contingency from the scene of a murdered rabbi. Crime must yield up its legibility to the proper inquisitor; for the death of a rabbi he requires a rabbinical explanation, and begins by reading all the books in the rabbi’s hotel room for traces of the killer. But crimes are not passive sign systems vulnerable to the pressure of Lönnrot’s intellect. The purity of difference between detective and criminal is illusory; Red Scharlach can mimic, and therefore anticipate, Lönnrot’s method. By totally satisfying Lönnrot’s hypothesis that the rabbi’s hotel room, then all of Buenos Aires, signify, Scharlach (The Dandy) makes him the sacrificial victim of the labyrinth he has deciphered. The perverse identification of hunter and hunted takes place in the vertiginous oscillation between the rigorously alienated roles of detective and criminal made possible by the common strategy of the detective thinking like a criminal, and the criminal thinking like a detective.

In “The Shape of the Sword” Borges repeats the history of the “spiteful” (rencorosa) facial scar of the “Englishman from La Colorada.” But the Englishman is an Irishman, a traitor, not a hero, and Borges has precisely duplicated John Vincent Moon’s rhetorical device of reversing the roles of traitor and hero, character and narrator.

Borges has succumbed to the same dark strategy which convinced Cordoso to sell La Colorada to Moon. Listeners become servants of the narrators who serve them, because the narrator can mimic perfectly the
listener's expectations. "The Englishman" enslaves Borges by means of one of his favorite topoi, saying:

This frightened man mortified me, as if I were the coward, not Vincent Moon. Whatever one man does, it is as if all men did it. For that reason it is not unfair that one disobedience in a garden should contaminate all humanity; for that reason it is not unjust that the crucifixion of a single Jew should be sufficient to save it. Perhaps Schopenhauer was right: I am all other men, any man is all men, Shakespeare is in some manner the miserable John Vincent Moon.¹⁴

"Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" begins innocently enough with the magician's gesture of rolling up his sleeves. Borges admits modestly to having only the hypothesis for a story: "I have imagined this story plot which I shall perhaps write someday and which already justifies me somehow" (L, p. 72). Yet the final clause echoes the hubris of Dr. Yu Tsun of "The Garden of Forking Paths": "I foresee that man will resign himself each day to more atrocious undertakings; soon there will be no one but warriors and brigands; I give them this counsel: The author of an atrocious undertaking ought to imagine that he has already accomplished it, ought to impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past" (L, p. 22). Tsun's atrocious undertaking is to manipulate the daily account of wartime English public life as a text to covertly designate a meaning to his director in Germany. By inserting his murder of Stephen Albert into the newspaper, he will signify the exact location (the city of Albert) of the new British artillery park on the river Ancre, and show his superior that a yellow man can save his German armies. However, Albert is no passive signifier. A Sinologist who has devoted his life to interpreting the problematic novel of Tsun's ancestor, The Garden of Forking Paths, he renders intelligible, and makes his own death and his murderer an aspect of that enormous labyrinth of Ts'ui Pên.

The atrociousness of Borges' undertaking in "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" is encrypted in the projected story of Ryan, a contemporary Irishman, who will write a biography of his heroic, assassinated great-grandfather, Fergus Kilpatrick. Ryan discovers an elaborate textual continuity between Irish and Roman history, Ireland's counterplot and the "enemy" Shakespeare's plays, but he must ultimately give up his elegant hypothesis of a "secret form of time, a pattern of repeated lines," "he is rescued from these circular labyrinths by a curious finding which then sinks him into other, more inextricable and heterogeneous labyrinths" (L, p. 73). Nolan, the author and director of this huge Festspiele, has intentionally flawed the plot of Kilpatrick's heroism so that Ryan will discover the unity of traitor and hero, yet serve Nolan's myth by repro-
ducing it as it stands. On the order of Lönnrot to Scharlach, Borges to John Vincent Moon, Ryan to Nolan, or Shahryar to Scheherazade, we serve (justify) Borges’ incomplete narration as narrative by having listened to a story of a story. Borges’ relentless collapsing of difference between criminal and detective, traitor and hero, captive and warrior, author and reader, must be understood as more than a noble idealization.

In “Emma Zunz,” the expert reader-detective approves and sympathizes with the justness, efficiency, and symmetry of Emma’s revenge against the man responsible for her father’s ignominious death, until that reader notices that the spectacles Aaron Loewenthal was supposed to have taken off as he prepared to seduce Emma are already spattered with his blood. Now, fearful that Emma’s ruse will be discovered, we are forced to see detection from the problem’s point of view, victims of the symmetrical world we have imagined into being; our mistake is someone else’s clue. Any detective is a potential victim to some future or meta-detective, who solves him from a higher ground.

This is also the theme of “The Circular Ruins,” the story of a man who dreams alive another human being only to find that he himself is someone else’s dream. Idealizing the world subsumes you to someone else’s more inclusive idealization. Borges’ fictions, remarkable projections of the world we have imagined ourselves into, are the precursors of Bloom’s model of self-acknowledged belatedness, *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Paranoia is the detective’s recognition that any interpretative act renders one victim to a more inclusive interpretation. The rocket is the conspiracy that includes everyone as the culmination of man’s knowledge, and the arc of Pynchon’s rocket symbolizes the generating of that knowledge, expressing its difference from planet earth before it achieves its catastrophic reunion.

Returning one last time to Bloom’s criticism that Frye and Borges nobly (naively) idealize, for the modern period, the relation between tradition and the individual talent, we recall the theory of literature in Tlön, deceptively similar to our received ideas of Frye and Borges.

In literary practices the idea of a single subject is also allpowerful. It is uncommon for books to be signed. The concept of plagiarism does not exist: it has been established that all works are the creation of one author, who is atemporal and anonymous. The critics often invent authors: they select two dissimilar works—the *Tao Te Ching* and the *1001 Nights*, say—attribute them to the same writer and then determine most scrupulously the psychology of this interesting *homme de lettres*. . . . (*L*, p. 13)
The encyclopedia of Tlön fulfills the promise of the closed fields\textsuperscript{15} of the *Encyclopédie*, the Periodic Table of the Elements, and the *OED*: now the world is a book, a system of clues, elements, or motifs, but its readers have been overwhelmed by the labyrinth of total signification they have invoked. The world of Tlön may be a noble idealization, but the capitulation of the world to Tlön is set in a disturbingly historical progression: dialectical materialism, anti-semitism, Nazism, Tlön.\textsuperscript{16} The tradition (for Borges, the library; for Eliot, humanism, or five-foot shelf culture) has totalized itself, absorbing the individual talent. The circumstance of the man speaking Shakespeare’s lines becoming Shakespeare is told with sympathy for the personality extinguished by Shakespeare, or the Borges extinguished by *Borges*.\textsuperscript{17} Eliot and Borges came to understand that now, for the modern period, because of the engulfing presence of books, one can only speak Shakespeare or be heard as speaking Shakespeare. “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” is narrated by a metaphysical detective engulfed by his own discovery; imagining this wonderful story at the heart of the modern period might make it better understood than it is now, that the Moderns criticized more than they emulated the artifice of eternity.\textsuperscript{18}

The hypothesis derived from Frye and Borges, that modern literature criticizes western culture as a sacrificial or differentiating system now turning back on itself, destroying itself, helps to clarify the kinship of such modern and postmodern writers as Ralph Ellison, Harold Pinter, Joseph Conrad, and Jerzy Kosinski as founded in something more than a common interest in depressed status of consciousness. The nameless narrator of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (he has a name, of course, but he chooses and is chosen to be invisible to his predominantly white audience) hears his dying grandfather suggest a mysterious revolutionary program: “. . . agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.”\textsuperscript{19} This program works perfectly in Mr. Norton’s encounter with Jim Trueblood. Norton tells the narrator that his interest in colored people began after his daughter died. The connection soon clarifies itself. Norton can barely control his incestuous fantasy, but when he meets Trueblood, who has gotten his daughter and wife pregnant at the same time, he loses control altogether; he can’t get enough of Trueblood’s story. His system of differences is coming apart. Ellison is brilliant; he recognizes that white people use blacks as *pharmakoi*, loading on them all they have differentiated out of themselves to define their culture. Blacks signify the undifferentiated, all the unspeakable violations of cultural taboos, thus, paradoxically, they also signify the natural state towards which Culture, its work finished, will return. Trueblood is Norton’s naked lunch; Norton’s appetite is poisonous, and it nearly kills him.

In Harold Pinter’s early play, *The Room*, Rose Hudd identifies herself by differentiating herself from the social outcasts who must live in the cold damp basement. Halfway through the play a blind black man
named Riley comes upstairs from the basement, calls Rose by a different name (Sal), and tells her “your father wants you to come home.” She loses all difference, all degree, and when her husband returns home and kicks the black man in the head, Rose goes blind. She is identified with the pharmakos. We remember also the two misfits who come to get Stannie in The Birthday Party: a stage Irishman and a stage Jew, the two scapegoats of English culture.

Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is a nearly definitive example of the ritual of romance turned inside out. Kurtz goes into the darkness with a fine sense of his own difference but, as Marlow understands, culture as a system of differences is only a fragile shell which separates the inner from the outer darkness. Conrad gives us that magnificent image of Kurtz’s mouth, open to absorb the world but once open to the darkness, he can never establish the difference between inner and outer again. Kurtz’s madness has perhaps been replicated in certain Marine Corps experiments in Florida described by William Burroughs, where they put people in a warm pool and turn off the lights. In about three minutes they go stark raving mad because they lose all sense of difference, they don’t know where their body ends and the world begins. Marlow desperately lies to Kurtz’s Intended to save the artifice of Culture, but Kurtz’s vision of the undifferentiated is like the plague, infecting first Marlow, then the narrator, then us, erasing all difference.

The hero of Jerzy Kosinski’s The Painted Bird is a young dark-haired boy separated from his parents, who wanders by himself through rural Poland during the occupation by the Nazis. The fair-haired villagers think he is either a Jew or a Gypsy, and when anything goes wrong, they blame him. To put it simply, he is their pharmakos, driven out of one village after another. The dominant metaphor of the book, the painted bird, becomes explicit when the boy joins a love-sick bird hunter who paints captured birds in bright colors, squeezes them till they squawk loud enough to attract their companions, and then lets them go. When the painted bird tries to rejoin the group, he is attacked as an outsider, and usually killed by his own kind. The metaphor is particularly apt for the boy, who is treated in the same way by the villagers. The motivation for the bird-hunter’s emblematic behavior is grounded in his unhappy relationship with the girl the villagers call Stupid Ludmilla.

It was said the Stupid Ludmilla lived with a huge dog as with a man. Others predicted that someday she would give birth to children whose bodies would be covered with canine hair and would have lupine ears and four paws, and that these monsters would live somewhere in the forest. Lekh never repeated these stories about Ludmilla. He only mentioned that when she was very young and innocent her parents ordered her to get married to
the son of the village psalmist, notorious for his ugliness and cruelty. Ludmilla refused, infuriating her fiancé so much that he enticed her outside the village where an entire herd of drunken peasants raped the girl until she lost consciousness. After that she was a changed woman; her mind had become addled. Since no one remembered her family and she was considered not too bright, she was nicknamed Stupid Ludmilla.

She lived in the forests, lured men into the bushes and pleased them so much with her voluptuousness that afterwards they could not even look at their fat and stinking wives. No one man could satisfy her; she had to have several men, one after another. And yet she was Lekh’s great love. He made up tender songs for her in which she figured as a strange-colored bird flying to faraway worlds, free and quick, brighter and more beautiful than other creatures. To Lekh she seemed to belong to that pagan, primitive kingdom of birds and forests where everything was infinitely abundant, wild, blooming, and royal in its perpetual decay, death, and rebirth; illicit and clashing with the human world.22

Ludmilla is ostracized at the moment she is gang-raped; the barely repressed fantasies of the entire village are loaded on her. She comes to signify the undifferentiated, where man and beast merge, and she exerts a hypnotic effect on the villagers. She is the painted bird who signifies to Lekh all that Culture must leave behind, and his killing of the birds suggests that he understands the ritual sacrifice of the *pharmakos* perfectly, and Kosinski’s novel suggests, by moving from rural Poland to modern society, that Culture now is fundamentally *misunderstood* as a system of differences, and the *pharmakos* will keep returning to exact society’s admission of perverse kinship, until we learn how to imagine, in the Age of Frye and Borges, a state of identity that is not the binary opposite of alienation.

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NOTES


9 Derrida, pp. 263-64.


16 “Almost immediately, reality yielded on more than one account. The truth is that it longed to yield. Ten years ago any symmetry with a semblance of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism—was sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet?” (*L*, p. 33)

18  I have suggested this rereading in “Toward A Redefinition of Modernism,” boundary 2, 2 (Spring 1974), pp. 539-56.


