The Pathetic Fallacy

Un paysage quelconque est un état de l'âme.
HENRI-FRÉDÉRIC AMIEL

The world is a fair field fresh with the odor of Christ's name.
SAINT AUGUSTINE

MY TITLE is a famous coinage of John Ruskin's, and comes from his five-volume study called *Modern Painters.* I want to begin this evening by quoting Ruskin at some length, intruding an occasional impertinent interruption, as a way of recalling to you his original and provocative formulation, while permitting myself an obbligato of comment. I begin with a sentence of his full of high disdain and mockery.

> German dulness, and English affectation, have of late much multiplied among us the use of two of the most objectionable words that were ever coined by the troublesomeness of metaphysicians,—namely, "Objective," and "Subjective."

A promising beginning, and Ruskin proceeds with a brisk and touching confidence that these philosophic muddles can be laid to rest once and for all.

> Now, therefore, putting these tiresome and absurd words quite out of our way, we may go on at our ease to examine

> the point in question,—namely, the difference between the ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things to us; and the extraordinary, or false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy; false appearances, I say, as being entirely unconnected with any real power or character in an object, and only imputed to it by us. . . . What is more, if we think over our favorite poetry, we shall find it full of this kind of fallacy, and that we like it all the more for being so.
>
> It will appear also, on consideration of the matter, that this fallacy is of two principal kinds. Either . . . it is the fallacy of wilful fancy, which involves no real expectation that it will be believed; or else it is a fallacy caused by an excited state of the feelings, making us, for the time, more or less irrational.

I interrupt here to remark that Ruskin was no slouch at employing the fallacy when he cared to. Here, for example, is a fragment of description from *Modern Painters*:

> Such precipices are . . . dark in color, robed with everlasting mourning, for ever tottering like a great fortress shaken by war, fearful as much in their weakness as in their strength, and yet gathered after every fall into darker frowns and unhumiliated threatening . . .

That sentence continues for another two hundred and eight words. Of the two kinds of fallacy he distinguishes, the first (that of the "wilful fancy, which involves no real expectation that it will be believed") is characteristic of the poetry of wit both of the Renaissance and of the eighteenth century, and of poetry that adopts conventions meant to be recognized as conventional, and tradition that is consciously traditional. It is this kind for which Ruskin feels the easiest and most derisive contempt. The other kind (the fallacy caused by excited and irrational feelings) enlists his deeper and more serious consideration.

> All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the "pathetic fallacy."
>
> Now we are in the habit of considering this fallacy as eminently a character of poetic description, and the temper of mind in which we allow it, as one eminently poetical, because passionate. But I believe, if we look well into the matter, that we shall find the greatest poets do not often admit this kind of falseness,—that it is only the second order of poets who much delight in it.

And by way of explaining this distinction, he adds an important footnote:

> I admit two orders of poets, but no third; and by these two orders I mean the Creative (Shakespeare, Homer, Dante), and the Reflective or Perceptive (Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson). But both of these must be *first*-rate in their range, though their range is different; and with poetry second-rate in quality no one ought to be allowed to trouble mankind.

There is enough in that note to make almost any modern poet tremble; but I ask you please to observe, before Ruskin proceeds, that he has neatly arrogated the three poets of the first rank to his side as being virtually guiltless of the fallacy. Having divided poets conveniently into two ranks, only a moment later he adds another:

> So, then, we have the three ranks: the man who perceives rightly, because he does not feel, and to whom the primrose is very accurately the primrose, because he does not love it. Then, secondly, the man who perceives wrongly, because he feels, and to whom the primrose is anything else than a primrose: a star, or a sun, or a fairy's shield, or a forsaken maiden.

I interrupt to intrude as an example D. H. Lawrence's statement, "The perfect rose is only a running flame," the sort of statement that in all likelihood prompted Gertrude Stein's famous reflection, "A rose is a rose is a rose." But to return to Ruskin's third rank:

> And then, lastly, there is the man who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings, and to whom the primrose is forever nothing else than itself—a little flower apprehended in the very plain and leafy fact of it, whatever and how many soever the associations and passions may be that crowd around it. And in general, these three classes may be rated in comparative order, as the men who are not poets at all, and the poets of the second order, and the poets of the first; only however great a man may be, there are always some subjects that ought to throw him off his balance. . . .

So, having begun with two ranks, and moved onward to three, Ruskin now advances to four, though only two, properly speaking, are poets:

> And thus, in full, there are four classes: the men who feel nothing, and therefore see truly; the men who feel strongly, think weakly, and see untruly (the second order of poets); the men who feel strongly, think strongly, and see truly (the first order of poets); and the men who, strong as human creatures can be, are yet submitted to influences stronger than they, and see in a sort untruly, because what they see is inconceivably above them. This last is the usual condition of prophetic inspiration.

You will not have failed to notice how central is the notion of "strength" to Ruskin's formulation, and how for him the ideal poet of the first rank enjoys a neatly symmetrical balance of strong mind and strong feeling perfectly matched. There is, in any case, no question in his mind (nor, he assumes, in the

reader's) that strong feeling, all other considerations apart, is essential to poetry. He declares quite flatly:

> A poet is great, first in proportion to the strength of his passion, and then, that strength being granted, in proportion to his government of it; there being, however, always a point beyond which it would be inhuman and monstrous if he pushed this government, and, therefore, a point at which all feverish and wild fancy becomes just and true.

That point, for Ruskin, is the acknowledgment of the divine order and divinity itself, which, according to him, would seem to permit any kind of rant and raving whatever. For him, the forces of mind and of feeling are pitted against each other in exhausting contest, the mind obliged to govern the feelings, but the feelings determined to make it as difficult as possible for the mind to do so; and the quality of the poetry, according to this combative metaphor, will be determined by the ferocity, the persistence and inconclusiveness of the antagonism. It is, quite clearly, a distinctly romantic description of the problem, and it should come to us as no surprise that Ruskin is as loftily dismissive of Alexander Pope as he is of Claude Lorrain. He exhorts us sneeringly to "hear the cold-hearted Pope say to a shepherd girl—" and then quotes the lovely lines that Handel set so beautifully to music:

> Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade;
> Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade;
> Your praise the birds shall chant in every grove,
> And winds shall waft it to the powers above.

Of these lines Ruskin writes contemptuously, "This is not, nor could it for a moment be mistaken for, the language of passion. It is simple falsehood, uttered by hypocrisy," and one cannot help feeling that there speaks the voice of the complete prig. The entire genre of the pastoral, which presupposes a sympa-

thetic relationship between nature and rustic humanity, is here dismissed. So much for "Lycidas." Falsehood is charged, we may suppose, because we don't for a minute believe Pope (in eighteenth-century London) is really addressing a genuine shepherdess; and hypocrisy because a compliment involving the universal obeisance of nature to the young lady presents us with a pathetic fallacy so hyperbolic, so extravagant and beyond the limits of credence, that it ceases to be a compliment, and proves itself mere artifice and empty flattery. But Pope and his century ought not to be spurned quite so easily. Paul Fussell has observed that even when poetry of this period

> has not been specifically dismissed on charges of artifice and conventionality, it has been benignly neglected in favor of the sort which seems to reflect back onto us those extreme emotional states made peculiarly our own by modern history—strain, personal and collective guilt, hysteria, madness.

He proceeds to remind us that "any kind of art, just because of its conspicuous distinction from the natural and the accidental, is much more conventional and institutionalized than we may have imagined."*

Ruskin, however, turns from what he regards as the cold-heartedness of Pope to the ungoverned passion of a poem by Wordsworth, and concludes:

> I believe these instances are enough to illustrate the main point I insist upon respecting the pathetic fallacy,—that so far as it *is* a fallacy, it is always the sign of a morbid state of mind, and comparatively of a weak one.

And he adds that it is "eminently characteristic of the modern mind."

His eagerness to find this morbidity distinctly modern may perhaps be an attempt to protect a badly exposed flank. You

* Paul Fussell, Introduction to *English Augustan Poetry*.

will recall that he numbered among his poets of the first order both Homer and Shakespeare. And Ruskin is eager to forestall the charge that the earliest of the great poets was liberal in his use of the fallacy. So to anticipate our objections, he himself raises the question in regard to the famous passage in the *Iliad* in which Achilles and the river Scamander argue and fight with one another. One would suppose this was the *locus classicus* of the pathetic fallacy. But Ruskin is concerned to claim all the Greeks, and Homer as their representative, for the camp of clear-sighted realism, and he insists that the deification or personification of the river—which allows it to remonstrate, and petition, and express all manner of feeling in human language—is not to impute human feelings to the world of nature, but is the Greeks' pious deification, not of the river itself, but of the power behind and within it. There is something unnervingly question-begging about how he makes this obscure and not altogether convincing distinction, but I had best let him make it in his own words.

> With us, observe, the idea of the Divinity is apt to get separated from the life of nature; and imagining our God upon a cloudy throne, far above the earth, and not in the flowers or waters, we approach those visible things with a theory that they are dead; governed by physical laws, and so forth. But coming to them, we find the theory fail; that they are not dead; that, say what we choose about them, the instinctive sense of their being alive is too strong for us; and in scorn of all physical law, the wilful fountain sings, and the kindly flowers rejoice. And then, puzzled, and yet happy; pleased, and yet ashamed of being so; accepting sympathy from nature, which we do not believe it gives, and giving sympathy to nature, which we do not believe it receives,—mixing, besides, all manner of purposeful play and conceit with these involuntary fellowships,—we fall necessarily into the curious

> web of hesitant sentiment, pathetic fallacy, and wandering fancy, which form a great part of our modern view of nature. But the Greek never removed his god out of nature at all; never attempted for a moment to contradict his instinctive sense that God was everywhere. "The tree *is* glad," he said, "I know it is; I can cut it down: no matter, there is a nymph in it. The water *does* sing," said he; "I can dry it up; but no matter, there was a naiad in it."

Ruskin's position here is predicated on what he seems to posit as the incontestable sincerity of Hellenic pantheism, a very doubtful and certainly unprovable ground. But Homer is not as neat in his distinctions as Ruskin, and he not only exhibits to us the deity that animates the river but presents a Trojan named Asteropaeus, a valiant mortal, whose mortality is put beyond question when Achilles kills him, but who identifies himself as the son of a river. So the genetics of divinity begin to thin out a little. But Homer carries the matter further still. When Asteropaeus and Achilles were engaged in their duel, the Trojan let fly one of his spears, which grazed Achilles, drawing blood. Homer then declares, "The spear passed over him and stuck in the ground, still hungering for flesh." This locution of the hunger of the spear for flesh comes up again and again in the *Iliad*, and it has no bearing upon Greek piety or pantheism. It is a straightforward imputation of human feelings to an inanimate object. As for Shakespeare, another of Ruskin's poets of the first order, he elects to put into the mouth of Hotspur, a professed hater of poetry, what amounts to a very deliberate imitation of these very passages from the twenty-first book of the *Iliad*, when Hotspur commends Mortimer, and rises hotly to his defense before King Henry IV.

> He never did fall off, my sovereign liege,
> But by the chance of war. To prove that true
> Needs no more but one tongue for all those wounds,
> Those mouthed wounds, which valiantly he took

When on the gentle Severn's sedgy bank,
He did confound the best part of an hour
In changing hardiment with great Glendower.
Three times they breathed, and three times did they drink,
Upon agreement, of swift Severn's flood;
Who then, affrighted with their bloody looks,
Ran fearfully among the trembling reeds
And hid his crisp head in the hollow bank,
Bloodstained with these valiant combatants.

(*Henry IV*, Part I: I, iii)

Shakespeare, of course, *pace* Ruskin, is a mine and fund of instances of the fallacy, of which Duke Senior's famous speech in the Forest of Arden is a useful example.

Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,
Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court?
Here feel we but the penalty of Adam;
The seasons' difference, as the icy fang
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,
Which, when it bites and blows upon my body
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say
'This is no flattery'; these are counsellors
That feelingly persuade me what I am.
Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

(*As You Like It*: II, i)

This speech may be taken as representing the anagogic or emblematic mode of viewing nature that was nearly a com-

monplace from the Middle Ages up to at least the seventeenth century. It is a mode characteristically religious, beautifully stated in the epigraph I have used from Saint Augustine, and premised on the conviction that the whole purpose and majesty of God is made legible in the most minute, as well as the most stunning and conspicuous, parts of his creation; that attentive contemplation of any single part will reveal in code but with clarity the whole glory and intent of the Creator. This conviction is based on biblical texts as well as theological argument, and one of the best known of the texts is the Nineteenth Psalm.

> The heavens declare the glory of God;
> and the firmament sheweth his handywork.
> Day unto day uttereth speech,
> and night unto night sheweth knowledge.
> There is no speech nor language,
> where their voice is not heard.

This eloquence of the physical universe, this demonstration on the part of the natural world, amounts to a revelation to all who are not blind and deaf. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear; and who hath eyes to see, let him see." The world as holy cipher and mute articulator can be found not only in medieval texts and Shakespeare but in those emblematic or symbolic poems by Herbert and Donne and Herrick that are among the great achievements of their age, and for which I will let the less well-known poem by Henry King, called "A Contemplation Upon Flowers," stand as an instance.

> Brave flowers, that I could gallant it like you
> And be as little vain;
> You come abroad, and make a harmless shew,
> And to your beds of earth again;
> You are not proud, you know your birth,
> For your embroidered garments are from earth.

You do obey your months, and times, but I
Would have it ever spring;
My fate would know no winter, never die
Nor think of such a thing;
Oh, that I could my bed of earth but view
And smile, and look as cheerfully as you.

Oh, teach me to see death, and not to fear,
But rather to take truce;
How often have I seen you at a bier,
And there look fresh and spruce;
You fragrant flowers, then teach me that my breath
Like yours may sweeten, and perfume my death.

From such grave counsellors as these let me ask you to shift your attention abruptly to the world of fiction. Novelists were not slow to make use of strategies that Ruskin discovers in the works of poets and painters. Merely to propose to you such diverse authors as Dickens, Conrad, Dostoyevski, Hawthorne, Joyce, and Mann may suggest without further elaboration the various ways in which a "setting" is made to bear a significant burden of meaning and a virtual role in a story. But let me use Hardy's *Return of the Native* as an example. The first chapter of that novel is given over entirely to the description of a landscape, a landscape not only bleak in itself but here, in its initial appearance, devoid of human life and habitation.

> A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment.

That's Hardy's first sentence, and I invite you to notice that his chief verb, "embrowned," is not only active, suggesting that the landscape is purposively engaged in its own transmutations, but that the word is richly Miltonic, coming straight from a landscape in *Paradise Lost*:

> Both where the morning sun first warmly smote
> The open field and where the unpierced shade
> Embrowned the noontide bowers. . . .

and it bears, in consequence, the omen of a landscape shadowed by doom. I continue to quote selectively from Hardy's chapter.

> The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to the evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread. . . . The spot was, indeed, a near relation of night. . . . The sombre stretch of rounds and hollows seemed to rise and meet the evening gloom in pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as the heavens precipitated it. And so the obscurity of the air and the obscurity of the land closed together in a black fraternization towards which each advanced half-way. . . . It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature—neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly: neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony. As with some persons who have lived long apart, solitude seemed to look out of its countenance. It had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities.

The point is not merely that Hardy gives a countenance and human quality to his landscape, as might the composer of a *paysage moralisé*, but that he gives to it a dimension we may call superhuman: as *mise en scène* it becomes the destiny and fate, tragic in character, of all those who there inhabit. Hardy, of course, did much the same thing in his best lyrics, but I should like to give you instead another poetic example, one that when I was a college student in the forties was still able to

confound, bewilder, and even enrage a large number of readers. By now, of course, most of you will know these lines by heart.

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

There was in those days a certain splenetic sort of reader who never got beyond this point in the poem. Red-faced and apoplectic, he would ask explosively, "How can an evening be like a patient? How can similes be used with so little regard for visual accuracy or plain intelligibility? This is just modern hokum." But Eliot is really doing pretty much the same thing Hardy did in the passage I quoted; instead of a landscape, he presents a skyscape that shall serve as the presiding fate and destiny of the chief characters who inhabit beneath its crepuscular dimness.

Let me detain my splenetic reader in the witness box for yet a moment longer. There is so much in modern poetry that sends him into paroxysms of fury. Think of the fulminations engendered by his reading of William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow."

> so much depends
> upon
>
> a red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens.

If I may be allowed to eliminate my witness's characteristic expletives, expressions of repugnance at omissions of capital-

ization, and his blank incomprehension about the division of lines (though syllabically they form a handsome and symmetrical pattern), his central complaint comes to this: What is the thing that so much depends; and how much is "so much"? To which we may respond that the "so much" does not require measurement, being part of what is an exclamatory statement, implying astonishment at how very much indeed is concerned in this dependency. And what, finally, is the dependency but the intimate and indissoluble relationship of the inner and outer worlds, the "subjective" and "objective" states that Ruskin was so eager to eliminate. The objective is straightforward, factual, visual; the subjective is evaluative, secret and interior. The objective world is nothing but random data without the governing subjective selection and evaluation; the two are halves of a single act of cognition. So there is mystery to the poem, but it is the common mystery of our moment-to-moment existence. Thus stated, it would seem that the pathetic fallacy was almost unavoidable, however condemnatory Ruskin felt about it. And, indeed, as a puzzle, it has fascinated modern poets, who have even written about the possibility of trying to avoid it. Can it be avoided? The topic was famously addressed by Ortega y Gasset in his essay "The Dehumanization of Art," from which I want to quote selectively:

> What is it the majority of people call aesthetic pleasure? What happens in their minds when they "like" a work of art; for instance, a theatrical performance? The answer is easy. A man likes a play when he has become interested in the human destinies presented to him, when the love and hatred, the joys and sorrows of the personages so move his heart that he participates in it as though it were happening in real life. And he calls a work "good" if it succeeds in creating the illusion necessary to make the imaginary personages appear like living persons. In poetry he seeks the passion and pain of the man behind the

poet. Paintings attract him if he finds in them figures of men and women whom it would be interesting to meet. A landscape is pronounced "pretty" if the country it represents deserves for its loveliness or its grandeur to be visited on a trip. . . . Now . . . not only is grieving and rejoicing at such human destinies as a work of art presents or narrates a very different thing from true artistic pleasure, but preoccupation with the human content of a work of art is in principle incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper. . . . I will not now discuss whether pure art is possible. Perhaps it is not; but as the reasons that make me inclined to think so are somewhat long and difficult the subject better be dropped. Besides, it is not of major importance for the matter in hand. Even though pure art may be impossible, there doubtless can prevail a tendency toward a purification of art. Such a tendency would effect a progressive elimination of the human, all too human, elements predominant in romantic and naturalistic production. And in this process a point can be reached in which the human content has grown so thin that it is negligible. We then have an art which can be comprehended only by people possessed of the peculiar gift of artistic sensibility—an art for artists and not for the masses, for "quality" and not for hoi polloi.

The masses, who would include my splenetic commentator of a moment ago, can point contemptuously to what they regard as elitist paintings wherein, in Ortega's words, "the human content has grown so thin that it is negligible." In Mondrian, for example. And they are not likely to be persuaded otherwise even by so eloquent a spokesman for the opposition as is Meyer Schapiro in his fine essay "On the Humanity of Abstract Painting." But is such purity possible in a *poem*? Is it even imaginable? The puzzle lies at the center of Wallace Stevens' celebrated poem "The Snow Man."

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The poem projects a kind of mind that out of either numbness or a gritty and stoical courage can set itself apart from every chilling fact of its existence, a chill which is thermal and metaphysical at once, accepting both the coldness and the nothingness for what they are and apart from any human valuation. As a poem it is wonderful and harrowing; as a strategy to circumvent the pathetic fallacy it almost works. Almost, except that it claims of the wind that it blows "in the same bare place/For the listener," thereby attributing a motive and purpose, a curiously human attribute, either to the wind, or to some fateful agency that presides over wind and listener. But in any case the poem suggests that "objectivity" is a condition that can be approached only by cancelling our humanity, and by advancing toward a state that strongly resembles insensibility or death. Stevens is continuously concerned in his work with the peculiar relations between "subjective" and "objective" reality, and returns to the puzzle

again and again in such poems as "Esthétique du Mal" and "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas."

Though Stevens and Frost used to taunt one another about being antipodal and polar opposites in their poetic concerns (Stevens said that Frost's poetry was full of "subjects," by which he seemed to mean the sort of human interest topics that belonged to a classroom assignment; while Frost said that Stevens' poems were "full of bric-a-brac"), Frost nevertheless addressed the same puzzle so continuously in successive poems that the two poets seem curiously allied. I have had some difficulty deciding which poem of Frost's I could best employ here, having given serious consideration to "Directive," "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," "For Once, Then, Something," and "The Most of It," and I've settled on "The Wood Pile."

> Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
> I paused and said, "I will turn back from here.
> No, I will go on farther—and we shall see."
> The hard snow held me, save where now and then
> One foot went through. The view was all in lines
> Straight up and down of tall slim trees
> Too much alike to mark or name a place by
> So as to say for certain I was here
> Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.
> A small bird flew before me. He was careful
> To put a tree between us when he lighted,
> And say no word to tell me who he was
> Who was so foolish as to think what *he* thought.
> He thought that I was after him for a feather—
> The white one in his tail; like one who takes
> Everything said as personal to himself.
> One flight out sideways would have undeceived him.
> And then there was a pile of wood for which

I forgot him and let his little fear
Carry him off the way I might have gone,
Without so much as wishing him good-night.
He went behind it to make his last stand.
It was a cord of maple, cut and split
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.
And not another like it could I see.
No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.
And it was older sure than this year's cutting,
Or even last year's or the year's before.
The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat shrunken. Clematis
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.
What held it though on one side was a tree
Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
These latter about to fall. I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

Like countless other Frost poems, this one insists upon the solitariness and isolation of the speaker, involved in some sort of quest or pilgrimage, and the opening lines cannot fail to remind us of

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
> che la diritta via era smarrita.
>
> (When I had journeyed half of our life's way,
> I found myself within a shadowed forest,
> for I had lost the path that does not stray.)

The journey is perilous, over unstable and uncharted terrain, by one so lonely and uncertain that he talks to himself, as the lonely do, positing an alter ego, a companion and dialectical double, with whom to debate the wisdom of going on, and with whom to join ranks in "we shall see." The role of Doppelgänger is then taken over by the bird, onto which the speaker projects thoughts, fears, all manner of human attitudes, not least of them paranoia, which is itself an illness consisting of projecting baseless feelings upon others. It is an illness from which Frost himself was not immune, and here he is trying to make light of it with a jest that has its deeply touching aspect. That bird is clearly part of his own psyche, and, though troubled, he is also wise enough to acknowledge this. The bird may be governed chiefly by fear; the man seems directed wholly by chance (as are most of us in the main matters of our lives) and it is chance that brings him to the wood pile. As in many another Frost poem, like "After Apple Picking," "Two Tramps in Mud Time," or "The Tuft of Flowers," in which well and patiently performed manual labor symbolizes the craft of writing poetry, the wood pile is the symbol once again of accomplished craftsmanship, a human opus, a body of work, here inexplicably lost from common sight or practical utility, a carefully composed effort that has come to nothing. And what do most of our lives come to after all? Dante, of course, attained Paradise within his poem, and even worldly immortality by means of it. In this pilgrimage poem the poet, who is still as lost at the end of the poem as at the beginning, tries to put a cheerful face on a situation that looked bleak right from the start, by saying, "I thought that only/Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks/Could so forget his handiwork on which/He spent himself. . . ." But surely we are allowed to consider the possibility that the speaker is trying to cheer himself up, since other possibilities present themselves to explain the odd abandonment of that wood pile, only the most obvious

of which is that the man who cut and stacked it has died. And if his labor decays unnoticed, how much more likely is this to be the case with the work of poets, whose audiences are not inclined to be large, whose work is quickly forgotten after their deaths, if it was ever noticed in their lifetimes, unless it were to be stumbled upon by some total and unexpected stranger. The poet composes his world in solitude and anxiety, for which Frost has here found what Eliot called an "objective correlative," and he has done this, as I think, with stunning success. The poem appeared in 1914, when the poet was by no means confident he would ever be famous or remembered, and much inclined to question his entire goal and purpose.

The poet's digression into paranoia and related psychic states, the critic's coinage of "objective correlative," invite further inspection. George Steiner has remarked that "the primary thrust of all libido is towards injection of all realities into the self . . ." and in *Crime and Punishment* we are witness to a dream of Svidrigailov's in which he cunningly transforms his lust for a child by turning her into a six-year-old prostitute, and making himself her helpless victim. As for the strategies of the critic, things have come a long way since the comparative critical innocence of Mr. Eliot. Here, from an essay that appeared in the Winter 1983 issue of *Daedalus*, is Eugene Goodheart commenting upon and quoting from the work of Roland Barthes.

> For Roland Barthes, the pleasure of the text is in the making of one's own text at the expense of another's. "Thus begins at the heart of the critical work the dialogue of two histories and two subjectivities, the author's and the critic's. But this dialogue is egotistically shifted toward the present: criticism is not an homage to the truth of the past or to the truth of 'others'—it is a construction of the intelligibility of our own time." In shame-

> lessly confessing the egotism of the critical act, Barthes casts doubt upon the objective existence of "others." . . . His motive is to make the "other" vulnerable and defenseless, so that he can appropriate the text to his own purpose: Barthes speaks of the critical act as theft. Interpretation, in this transvalued sense, is not obliged to represent the text, which is, rather, broken up so that it can fill the critic's subjectivity. In declaring "the death of the author," Barthes eliminates interference from an author's intention. The critical reader's access to the text is immediate, dominant, and impermanent. The critic's text is always provisional, his relationship to the text of the other in constant change. The critic need be faithful only to his own changing, desiring subjectivity.

It was not Eliot, of course, but W. K. Wimsatt who long ago pointed out the dangers of the "intentional fallacy," i.e., limiting the meaning of a text to either what the author thought it meant (since, as Freud has told us, we can often mean more than we are aware of) or what the critic posits as the author's intention. But it is a giant step, a seven-league stride, from Wimsatt to Barthes and others of the current French School of Decomposition so favored these days in certain circles. And so, by an easy exchange of critic for lover, the modern reader, paraphrasing Theseus, may conclude that "The lunatic, the critic and the poet/Are of imagination all compact." But might not the reader also assume that however screwy the literary types might be, however lost in their subjective mists, their solipsisms, their blind self-absorption, at least the scientist, the physicist, could be appealed to as clear-headed defender of "Objectivity"? This would be rash. Listen to Werner Heisenberg: "What we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning." So much for Ruskin's easy dismissal of the terms "subjective" and "objective." But I dare

not end my lecture in a celebration of chaos and confusion. And by way of rescuing myself from that peril, I turn with pleasure to one more poem, this one by Richard Wilbur, and called, "Advice to a Prophet."

When you come, as you soon must, to the streets of our city,
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,
Not proclaiming our fall but begging us
In God's name to have self-pity,

Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,
The long numbers that rocket the mind;
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,
Unable to fear what is too strange.

Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race.
How should we dream of this place without us?—
The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,
A stone look on the stone's face?

Speak of the world's own change. Though we cannot
conceive
Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost
How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are blackened
by frost,
How the view alters. We could believe

If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip
Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,
The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,
The jack-pine lose its knuckled grip

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout
Stunned in a twinkling. What should we be without
The dophin's arc, the dove's return,

These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken?
Ask us, prophet, how we shall call
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all
Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
Horse of our courage, in which beheld
The singing locust of the soul unshelled,
And all we mean or wish to mean.

Ask us, ask us whether with the worldless rose
Our hearts shall fail us; come demanding
Whether there shall be lofty or long standing
When the bronze annals of the oak-tree close.

My motives in reading that poem here in Washington tonight are by no means confined to their pertinence to my topic, thought that pertinence is of a rich and complex kind. In his reference to Xanthus, another name for the River Scamander, Wilbur returns me to my beginnings with the *Iliad*, and in his beautiful and intricate weavings of the imagery of speech and sight, his protracted braiding of "These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken," he recapitulates the very means and methods of the Nineteenth Psalm: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge." But in addition to all these important resonances, there is the beautiful and undoubted fact that metaphor is our mode not merely of expressing *ourselves* but of expressing the world, or what we are able to know of it. And metaphor is not merely the gadget of poets; it is virtually unavoidable as an instrument of thought. Here is Ruskin himself upon the topic.

> Will you undertake to convey to another person a perfectly distinct idea of any single emotion passing in your

own heart? You cannot—you cannot fathom it yourself—you have no actual expression for the simple idea, and are compelled to have instant recourse to metaphor.

The very act of description is in some degree metaphoric, and when Socrates tries to say what the Good is, the nearest he can come is to say that it is like Light. In Wilbur's rich intertwining of voice and image, of sight and sound, he asks,

> . . . how shall we call
> Our natures forth when that live tongue is all
> Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken
>
> In which we have said the rose of our love . . .
> . . . in which beheld
> The singing locust of the soul. . . .

That glass of Wilbur's is not only the lens or prism of the sciences but also the infinitely lavish hall of mirrors, the Versailles of facets and reflections, in which wherever we look we see, as we must, unfailingly, some unexpected aspect of ourselves.