

Causality, Chance, Intertext, *Topos* and Plot in MM's *Happening*

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Common reason says that every event has an efficient cause preceding it. Madison Morrison, however, seems to argue that an event can take place by pure chance. *Hap-penning*, as his title might facetiously be read, pens together events that exhibit no prior causal connections. Viewed differently, *Happen-ing* exhibits events not as accomplished but as in the process of becoming: the present tense marker, the “-ing” underlines the processual status of events that “happen” as the text unfolds:

Continuous arrival of new faces. Husbands, children in their arms. *Mother Aruk* introduced, she spreads her legs apart in a defiant gesture of territoriality. Behind the human cluster, seated in the street, a threesome of small naked children, playing. A passing elder shouts at them.... (19)

If the author's words are cast in the present tense, the citations in the text are for the most part in the past tense:

Bombay overhead park scene, 9:00 am, view from the fourth floor, YMCA international Guest House. Three skinny teenagers at cricket pitch, batsman cleaning the ball in a large rain puddle. “In the long contest of the European nations for India, England emerged the winner.” On the basketball court 2 much younger kids play 2-man soccer, their ball a patchwork of black and white. At the corner of the park, a large humped white Brahma bull lazily grazes at refuse. “Her gift was partly the gift of fortune.” (284-5)

What kind of time does such an extract unfold in? The repetition of the quoted words alongside the author's own words indicates two movements: one in reverse (towards the past), the other forwards (in the present). Or is the repetition a recollection forward—doesn't the textual extract, by repeating certain words about the European conquest of India in the context of the author's description of children playing three European games, transpose the repeated words into the now? The repetition here exhibits a paradoxical movement between past and present, for the “European conquest” is renewed in the games played by the children in the *now* of the author's words.

Just as the *time* of *Happening* is two-fold (the quoted past renewed in the now of the author's in situ narration), so many a character is multifaceted:

While priest—at furthest reaches of ladder—festoons Nandi's neck with jasmine braids, a cow begins her descent over step 700, followed now by 3 more brindled herdsmates. Above wait the bulls, as Krisna—descended from station before Nandi (where he had been turning about on a vertical axis, hands held in *namaste* posture) arrives to pelt them with stones. . . . Krisna to author's side. “Gola,” he says, giving author what author presumes is his last name. Asked for rupee, is rewarded with peanut. “Hosoo,” he replies, in response to author's request for the word “bull” in Kannada. (210)

The Krisna of history is here incarnate in the cowherd of Karnataka and the mythical Nandi is realized in the temple cow. Such character-evocation on the

margins of myth and reality raises the question: what or which world(s) do the characters/events inhabit? Doesn't the continual interruption of the in situ narrative split its *ontological* coherence by obtruding into it a distinctly other world? And doesn't the co-presence/nesting of multiple worlds within a textual stretch present the reader with the task of making sense of their interrelation? Indeed the reader finds himself at the site where the multiple writings (both citations and the author's words) that constitute the text converge. One may be tempted to venture that the reader, not the putative writer, of *Happening* is the one who weaves together the narrative incoherencies to derive its textual meaning:

"The women arrive unaccompanied." Empty lobby. "And of their own choice." Taj Inter-Continental Hotel, air-conditioned humidity. "And they are well over the age of majority." A rather unluxurious setting, lawn furniture heavily overpainted, upholstered, in green vinyl. "Before they first set foot in the Bombay *bandar*." Octagonal coffee table, ashtray atop it. "On the whole their treatment in the brothel is not bad." Elevator doors continue to open, close, in regular rhythm. "And they are not subjected to cruelty." None of them in use but all alternately indicating their availability. (261-262)

Here two spaces are superimposed: one of a brothel, the other of a five-star hotel. How is the reader to tease sense out this weave of two distinct (almost mutually exclusive) scenes? What kind of reading does such an extract demand?

Happening, like Morrison's *Realization* and *Engendering*, shares the salient features of modernist (one might add postmodernist) writing. Arguably, the text's predominant feature is its intertextuality: at the level of surface-structure intertextuality is expressed in the text's interweaving of citations of past writers with the author's own words; at a less visible level intertextuality finds expression in the textual production of meaning at every instance of such interweaving. Given its pervasiveness in the text, it would be fruitful to view intertextuality as the rubric under which all other textual features may be discussed. As employed in *Happening*, MM's intertextuality throws into relief a number of philosophical/theoretical questions, the confrontation (if not comprehension) of which may offer a valuable purchase on the text's "meaning." It might thus be best to pose such questions and to reflect upon them without actually "answering" them.

Happening opens with a significant citation of Walter Hamilton's "Preface" to his *Description of Hindostan* (1829):

The composition of this publication having been undertaken with a view to the information of those persons who have never visited India . . . it must be recollected . . . how impossible it is to describe so vast and populous a country in a small compass, or by a few general phrases, none of which applies universally, for unless the information conveyed has distinct and local reference, it leaves no definite impression on the mind. . . . Conciseness has been . . . aimed at, but probably the reader . . . will think with doubtful success. . . . It is obvious . . . that satisfactory delineation of so immense an empire must be the result of a progressive accumulation of facts on the precision of which reliance can be placed, and that acquiescence in the prior details of accidental travelers tends to perpetuate error. (1)

The passage is significant in itself, but also because it serves as a preface to the author's own words which immediately follow:

We leave by bus for Tandarai, the mid-morning sun already more than ample. Our destination: Wilson's parents home, in a village, 10 kilometers from Chingleput, where he was raised . . . (1)

How exactly does Hamilton's "Preface" act as foreword to the author's own text? Hamilton's preface, while verbalizing the problems any writer on India is likely to face, recommends two ways of tackling them: recourse to distinct and local reference, and the progressive accumulation of facts. *Happening* continually anchors itself in local soil as it sets out to chart India. Does not Hamilton's "conciseness" express itself in terms of the author's meticulous noting down of the distances covered, the time(s) of various events, the impressions of people the author happens upon, and the responses of the people the author interacts with? The opening subtext here, as in every other chapter, acts as a context for the rest of the chapter.

Intertextuality manifests itself not only in the juxtaposition of two or more "discrete" sections of separate texts but also in the splicing/twinning of sentences from different texts:

"The yogic pose in the form of Dakshinamurthy." As author begins temple proper approach, 3 12-year-old girls in red, yellow, green kurta-pajamas pass (North Indian tourists). "Symbolizes the spiritual quest." Author smiles. "And conquest of the Self." All 3 return his smile. "These constitute the very essence of Indian religious thought and practice" (quotations from *The Bronzes of Tanjore*). (33)

What happens when such splicing is simply semantically incongruous? How does one read a passage where each constituent sentence makes perfect sense and yet the resultant order/sequence of sentences does not yield a coherent order of meaning? Does intra-sentential semantic impertinence demand that the reader privilege a second order/metaphoric meaning over literal referential meaning? Perhaps a theory of metaphor such as Ricoeur's may help. Ricoeur claims that metaphor in the form of "A is B" constitutes *prima facie* a category mistake, one that can be addressed (if not resolved) by holding together the perspectives A and B. In the splicing of citations on the yogic pose of Dakshinamurthy with an in situ description of the author's interaction with three girls two perspectives are telescoped: the quoted writer's view on Dakshinamurthy is "seen as" the words of the in situ portions and vice versa. Since "seeing as" occurs at the juncture of any two successive sentences, their twinning redefines our understanding of both the yogic pose and the observation of the girls at play. Put differently, where the literal senses of the sentences jar and founder a new second-order reference arises—a metaphorical meaning that is not already inscribed or implied in the words of the text but is rather engendered when the reader holds together the conflicting literal senses of the sentences. There occurs, in other words, a "happening" at the intersection of authorial and subtextual sentences. More specifically (with regard to the passage

quoted above), the intermeshing of a reflection upon a bronze statue with an in situ recording of the exchange of smiles between author and three twelve-year-old girls confers on the bronze a “luster” borrowed from the girls even as they themselves are “transformed” by being located within a metaphysical reflection upon Indian religious thought. What are the epistemological implications of such an interweaving? Two different truth claims made—one by the repetition of the words of a person other than those of the author, the other by the author’s own words. In juxtaposing both truth claims the text calls them both into question. Is there then a “textual” attempt to articulate a different truth claim—one, that is, which arises from the textual interweavings? These matters emerge into sharp relief in the three opening paragraphs of Chapter 4:

Hamilton (1829):

“The approach to Madras from the sea is very striking; low flat sandy shores extending to the north and south, and the small hills that are seen inland, the whole exhibiting an appearance of barrenness that is much improved on closer inspection. The beach seems alive with the crowds that cover it. The public offices and store houses erected near the shore are fine buildings, with colonnades to the upper stories, supported on arched bases, covered with the beautiful shell mortar of Madras, hard, smooth, and polished.”

Wheeler (1861):

“Tuesday, 11 July. The sea having for about 10 days past encroached upon this town, and we, hoping as it is usual, that it would retreat again of itself, forbore any remedies to keep it off; but now that instead of its losing it mightily gains ground upon us, and without a speedy course be taken the town will run an apparent hazard of being swallowed up, for it has undermined even to the walls, and so deep that it has eaten away below the very foundation of the town, and the great bulwark next to the sea side, without a speedy and timely intervention, will certainly in a day or two more, yield to its violence: it is therefore ordered forthwith that the drum be beat to call all coolies, carpenters, smiths, peons, and all other workmen, and that sufficient materials be provided, that they may work day and night to endeavor to put a stop to its fury: for without effectual means be used in such an eminent danger and exigency, the town, garrison, and our own lives, considering all the foregoing circumstances, must needs be very hazardous and insecure.”

Author (1989):

January 15. Madras at mid winter. A return, by bus, from Anna Square (pronounced “Squire”), on this the last day of Pongal, first festival of the year. The streets are half deserted. Not only a *seat* on the bus, but the bus half empty, half of those seated bearing in their laps dishes in metal canisters to deliver to relatives for the mid-day meal. The women dressed in silk sarees, or in the case of the poor, their best cotton. All have flowers in their hair, an air of expectancy. (75-76)

Although the three paragraphs are all set in and about Madras, they offer three strikingly different views on the city: the difference that arises when they are placed thus stimulates the question of the status of place in *Happening*. Place or *topos* (to use a broader term) is made manifest at different levels and in different senses. At the level of surface structure, there is the space bracketed by the words enclosed within quotation marks; parallel to this is the space created by the author’s own words—a space that is always delineated in the

present continuous tense as the author's own words are produced in situ. *Topos* seems to be the principle that underlies the organization of the book in terms of chapters: the contents are composed of place names. This is not to suggest that *topos* is a positivistic geophysical idea. Rather, the *topos* is every now and then stripped of its positivistic properties and constructed in terms of the narrator's imagination. *Topos* as a site of textual space partakes of the conventional "real" and the "fictional" (these terms should not suggest that reality and fiction are necessarily mutually exclusive). Indeed as with time, *topos* represents a complex multilayered site, as exemplified in the following passage:

"Your vehicle is ready, sir" (small brown van ready for temple trip). Early going retraces route of author's day-before pedestrian outing. Combination of Indian streets, Indian vehicle suspension system makes in situ writing impossible. Finally, stop by Cauvery river (50 yards onto bridge): two men bathing below. "One of the Chola Kings bought from a merchant." Two men working above on the bridge itself. "An attractive beautiful necklace." To break up concrete floor of its sidewalk. "Of pearls." By hand. "And presented it" Using 6-foot metal poles. "To his beautiful queen." With spikes on the end. "Next day the King and the Queen came to the sacred River Cauvery." Progressively distant view of other bathers. "To take their holy baths." River ghats. "When the Queen reached the shore." Line the water-depleted river bed. "She found that her necklace was missing." Sighting, on northern horizon. "Everything precious and everything costlier." Of Srirangam pagoda. "Would be offered at the sacred feet of God Jumbanatha and went to Thiruvanucka with his queen." Left turn in pagoda's direction. "The priest who brought the holy water from the River Cauvery." Temple approach at breakneck speed. "Poured it on the Sivalingam." Horn-honking van aswerve. "The beautiful necklace of the queen fell round the neck of the Sivalingam." Around-bend gopuram-appearance. "In the very presence of royal couple." General Srirangam frontal view. (172-173)

In splicing an already written account of the myth of the necklace with the author's in situ description, the text actually reconstructs the setting of the myth. Indeed, the text's *experience* of the Sacred River and the equally sacred place of Srirangam are constituted in the author's ride to Srirangam under the shadow of the mythical account. The ride culminates in an epiphanic revelation of the frontal aspect of the place, coinciding with the moment of the Queen's discovery of the necklace. It is as if the *topos* of Srirangam emerges at the end of both the myth and the author's in situ narration, thereby presenting *topos* as a realization (mimesis) that occurs at the end of an action plotted simultaneously along a dual axis.

This brings us to the question of plot. What specific notion of plot does such intertextual writing reflect? Does the plot unfold in teleological fashion? Can one speak of plot in terms of a beginning, middle and a predetermined end? The citation from Hamilton's "Preface" that opens the text argues that "the satisfactory delineation of so immense an empire must be the result of a progressive accumulation of facts." The plot or plots of *Happening* seem more like an accumulation of accounts. What kind of progression do they show? Clearly, there seems to be no gradual teleological unfolding of a grand design. Perhaps a return to the text's title may offer a clue as to the nature of its plot(s). The title "Happening," grammatically a participle, suggests the present contin-

uous tense, and by extension the idea of things in progress or in process and thus resisting division into temporally enclosed constituents such as a beginning and an end. However, common sense may protest: doesn't the text begin on page 1? Doesn't each chapter open and close? Of course common sense is valid, but only in so far as any construct worth the name of "text" necessarily opens and closes. But common reason fails to fathom many of the text's openings and endings. Just as the chapters are not ordered in the sequence of their author's experience, so the sections of any chapter do not necessarily proceed in linear fashion: a chapter simply breaks off, terminates, it does not end:

Flickering charcoal fires. "Till every power hostile to it." (The ruins of which are traceable fifty-seven miles north-east of Delhi.) "Was overthrown." (On an old bed of the Ganges.) To the modern traveler's oasis: "And its supremacy was completely established." The aerodrome. (352)

Many of the events that the text represents may be construed as primarily self-referential in so far as they draw insistent attention to their eventness. Consider the concluding lines of two different paragraphs:

. . . thence to quick shoreline passages of "boatments". . . and again to the sudden emergence of office buildings. A little girl passes in magenta frock top, polkadot trousers in green and pink. (270)

The girls have put on skirts, red socks, tennis shoes. Elder women [with] large nose ornaments in sunburst design, at the center of which, rubies. From under the skirt of one of the elder women, the cry of an infant. (113)

What we witness here as elsewhere are clusters of impressions that are in no apparent way linked to one another. Each cluster, as above, exists as an evocation of an event for its own sake, as a pure happening. However, these independent evocations can be seen to be serially connected through the reader's memory. Indeed, in retrospect, the reader discovers patterns of verbal repetition that often draw the apparently disparate segments together. Verbal repetition is the basic constituent of the plot of *Happening*. It is the principle upon which the text's coherence rests. Repetition occurs at different levels. Most ostensibly, it is present in the text's quotations, which comprise a site of multiple suggestion/recollection of the original sources from which they have been abstracted. Consider the passage that interweaves the author's description of Delhi with a citation on Taimur's conquest of Delhi:

"Taimur crossed the Indus on September 20, 1398." I arrive. "After capturing a fort and a town on his way he arrived at Multan, which he took in October." Am greeted warmly (relations always nothing if not cordial). "In November Bhatner succumbed." "We've sent out those telegrams for you." I breathe a sigh of relief. "On December 15 the forces of Delhi were defeated in the field." . . . "And Delhi was occupied." Reason? "It's so late in the year that their programs have already been planned." (72)

In repeating the words of an account of Taimur's conquest in the context of the author's visits to various American officials in Delhi, the text brings toge-

ther Taimur and MM, whose words register his desperate attempts to get the USIS to organize a lecture program alongside Taimur's invasion of Delhi and his success as a plunderer. The almost simultaneous evocation of the two worlds brings Taimur's success to bear upon the author's failure: the repetition of the quotation, apart from reproducing its original discursive context, invests it with irony at the point where the two discursive worlds of the author and Taimur intersect. This happens in the sentence: "And Delhi was occupied." Delhi was occupied or "conquered" (its original discursive meaning) by Taimur but is also busy (the ironic meaning it takes on when it recurs in the author's context) with matters that leave it indifferent to the author's requests.

Repetition often occurs at a less obvious level. In a chapter entitled "Delhi" the repetition of clusters of adjectives in description of Delhi is particularly noteworthy. The chapter opens with two separate accounts of the capital:

"I do not believe there is a climate in the world more perfect than that of Delhi in the cold weather. . . . Most of the English flowers seem to flourish. . . . Of these there was a great pergola at Viceregal Lodge, crimson linum grew close by, and behind them the sun used to set. The flood of golden light would catch up the crimson, the purple and the green and make of them a glory indescribable." (59)

—Yvonne Fitzroy, *Courts and camps in India*

What to make of Delhi?—for it yields little by itself: a serene depression, a meaningless expanse of boulevards . . . finally to arrive at Connaught Place, a great disappointment: colorless, inefficient . . . billboards in unimaginative color and design. . . . The faces of merchants bland, bored, affectless. They are doing nothing; there is nothing to do. (59-60)

And again:

What to make of Delhi? For it is neither a puzzle nor transparency. So little variety, so little mystery, so little vitality for a nation's capital. (61)

The negative "nothing" used in the author's first account and deployed in the second in the use of "neither" recurs within a citation at the chapter's close:

"*Delhi*." Notwithstanding its antiquity, and the long period of time during which it has ranked as the first city of Hindostan, there is nothing in its locality particularly attractive." (Hamilton) (73)

These words recall the author's adjectives describing Delhi as "colorless," "bland," "unimaginative" and suggest a concordance of Hamilton's and the author's views on Delhi. However, in the citation that follows Hamilton's the word "attractive" (used by Hamilton above) recurs in a different context.

I had, of course, taken my wife to the scenes of the fights at Agra, Aligarh, and Balandshahar, but Delhi had the greatest fascination for her. It is certainly an extraordinarily attractive place. . . . for hundreds of years it had been the seat of Government under Rulers of various nationalities and religions; few cities have the remains of so much pomp and glory, and few bear the traces of having been besieged so often, or could tell of so much blood spilt in their defence, or of such quantities of treasure looted from them. (Field Marshall Roberts) (73)

The word “attractive” as used at the close recalls three earlier contexts of its presence: the vivid color-imagery that suffuses Fitzroy’s account of Delhi at the outset of the chapter; the author’s accounts where the key-tone is colorlessness; and Hamilton’s comment where “attractive” is used in the negative. Further, the words “pomp,” “glory” and “various” in recalling the author’s phrase “so little variety” throw light on two different contexts where “variety” is used to convey diametrically opposed views on Delhi. The repetitions of words such as these, far from offering a harmonious view of Delhi, create a series of disruptions and dissonances between the different contexts of their repeated usage. What gathers together the different views on Delhi is simply the repeated use of certain adjectives in varying contexts. Delhi, the object of critical attention, doesn’t become progressively clarified as the chapter progresses. Rather, each different/separate comment on Delhi represents a repeated, albeit inadequate, attempt to “capture” Delhi, to present it from a particular vantage point. What emerges when the chapter is viewed retrospectively is a collage of jarring views pasted together—a collage where no single view is dominant and where the views relativize each other: the author’s poor impression of Delhi is no sooner corroborated by Hamilton than it is refuted by Roberts and Fitzroy. The idea of the collage most adequately describes the plot of *Happening*. Just as a collage exhibits no central unifying idea, so the travels the text highlights head in no specific direction. Places are visited for the sake of being visited; a single place is sometimes visited twice but the two visits are so independent as to suggest no causal link. Just as many an impression or event calls attention to its status as impression/event and so bears no relation to preceding or successive impressions/events, so the travels are not related (as they are in a modernist journey-motif, where the end is anticipated in the beginning). A chapter begins with slight reference to the preceding chapter(s), simply breaks off, terminates, does not end. This is nowhere more evident than in the closing chapter:

Flickering charcoal fires. “Till every power hostile to it.” (The ruins of which are traceable fifty-seven miles north-east of Delhi.) “Was overthrown.” (On an old bed of the Ganges.) To the modern traveler’s oasis: “And its supremacy was completely established.” The aerodrome (352).

As with time and space, so with plot: does not *Happening* in breaking with the traditional idea of plot as a linear thematic movement call into question traditional ways of reading a text? In the light of these observations one may well ask: Can the text not be opened anywhere and read? And isn’t the reader expected to read in such a way as to de-sign-(ate) it—to invest it with meaning? Perhaps meaning is not quite the word, for there is no total meaning to be had. What is to be had is a spectacle of individual events that relate by accident (hap—for the words that present them are mere signs that serve as props for their performance. These signs are denotatively used—mere signifiers that point literally to these events. There is perhaps another way of reading the

text—a way in which the reader herself/himself becomes the writer of the text. To follow this way is to presume two things: (1) that the text possesses a potentially coherent pattern of meaning and (2) that Madison Morrison has merely put together arbitrarily “the always already written, spoken and read into a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”

Introduction to *Divine*

Arvind Thomas

In the middle ages one way of doing penance was to go on a pilgrimage: late medieval pilgrims typically traveled to distant lands, visiting shrines in hopes of mitigating or even expiating their venial sins. With the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 the Church enjoined all Christians to confess at least once to their parish priests and perform such penances as were imposed upon them. Consequently, pilgrimage enjoyed an unprecedented canonical status: some of the finest literary production of this period bears witness to its enduring popularity as a communal and perambulatory form of penance. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Dante's *Divina Commedia* are but two of many works located within the specific framework of pilgrimage and the general structure of penance.

Can one speak of a contemporary western equivalent of the late medieval pilgrimage? More specifically, is it possible to write a contemporary epic that incorporates the elements of such epics of pilgrimage as Dante's *Commedia*? Can one conceive of a work that embodies and expresses the tensions between hope and despair that Dante's pilgrim embodies and expresses so consistently in his comic epic? In short, can one possibly write a contemporary comedic pilgrim-centered epic without turning it into something anachronistic, downright crazy or morbidly religious? A quick answer to all these questions is a resounding "YES." I am not thinking of modernist attempts to recover and refashion the past. For once one need not scurry to Eliot, Pound and Joyce, or, for that matter, Synge. Instead, one need only turn to one of the 26 segments of Madison Morrison's **Sentence of the Gods** to find an exemplary Dantesque epic poem in prose, the account of his pilgrimage to Italy, called *Divine*. Indeed, among contemporary writings that most compellingly engage the canon without capitulating to its terms, MM's *Divine* stands out as a striking example. But how exactly is *Divine* similar to, and yet strikingly different from, its chief medieval prototype, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, to which it owes so much: its overall structure, its citations and myriad allusions, its hypertextual imitation of the *poeta divina*?

One way to address the question of MM's indebtedness to Dante is to approach his text with little or no canonistic baggage. Unlike works of the modernist writers mentioned above, this text calls for no prior academic orientation on the part of the reader: one need not have studied the literary tradition starting with Dante or Renaissance criticism closely to detect and appreciate how MM's *Divine* puts the *Commedia* to work in strikingly new or modern surroundings. Mere familiarity with the *Commedia* would suffice. Apart from all else that one needs to appreciate Morrison's work is a sensibility sufficiently open to discern and enjoy its many internal resonances. Consider

the very opening sentences of the text as they adumbrate the chief themes of the *Commedia*:

Under the Emperor Diocletian, in the early Christian period, a young woman named Agnes, propositioned by an official, rejected him. Stripped naked in the stadium of Domitian as punishment, she survived humiliation when her locks miraculously flourished to cover her shame. A balding man passes, black sunglasses atop his head; on his arm, a woman in red dress, black shoes, red lipstick, a luxurious fur coat draped about her shoulders. (1)

We are at once catapulted into Dante's *Inferno*: Agnes, having been found *guilty* is *condemned* to suffer *shame* and *humiliation* in the world but earns *martyrdom* as a saint and, presumably, finds in the afterlife the *salvation* that was denied her on earth. The choice of such themes as I have italicized shows that the text explicitly and implicitly invokes the Christian register of Dante's *Inferno*. Here is no simple mimesis but a redeployment of terms distinctive of the culture of shame and guilt that the work evokes only, as we shall later see, to debunk. In keeping with many of the segments—its individual books—that comprise **Sentence of the Gods** the author's voice is always and already refracted through the narratives of other texts: here *Divine* locates itself firmly within the framework of an institutionalized historical record only to rework both the themes contained within and the boundaries constraining them. Agnes's contemporary—the woman in red dress against whom she is juxtaposed—is no sinner sentenced to suffer torments or everlasting death. Put differently, the finery of the woman in red comes across as strikingly sensuous and haughty when contrasted with the nakedness and shame of Agnes. MM invokes Agnes and by implication her concomitant culture of shame and guilt only to substitute it for one of unfettered sensual expression. Extrapolating from the quotation above, the author's chief themes emerge as: ancient and modern Rome, ancient and modern femininity, love and its repudiation, shame and punishment. Thus, the author figure who wanders the streets of Rome is no plodding Dante oppressed by the onerous burden of the sins of his past. Instead, he seems to revel in what in Dante's world (to which Agnes belongs) would undoubtedly be sin, as he wanders from lane to lane, feasting his eyes on God's sinful plenty. Where, then, are we? Who *is* this author? And how do we read these invocations of the worlds of late antiquity and the late middle ages?

Perhaps it is best to begin where MM himself begins: at Rome. Let us, like the author, who devotes the entire first section (50 per cent of the book) to the Eternal City, tarry there, with the Italian or Latin form of the word Rome, which he himself cites, and attempt to puzzle out its anagrammatic meanings. The four letters comprising ROMA, as the author himself observes, when their order is inverted, yield "AMOR." But not only do they yield this meaning, they also yield two other significant principles that underlie *Divine*: "ORAM" and "MORA." "ORAM" in the Latin is the accusative not only for "boundary" but also for "people" and "region," whereas the nominative "MORA" stands for

“delay” and “division.” In short, what we have is a reading of ROMA consisting not of *vie/cerchi dolorose* but of *vie/cerchi amorose*, topoi that the author need not hurry through like Dante, out of fear or anguish, but may linger with awhile, in hopes of finding joy, however ephemeral. Furthermore, MM, like the Christian precursor whom he emulates, has reliable guidance. In fact, unlike Dante, who for two thirds of his journey has but Vergil, MM from the outset has many guides: a Chinese girl of nubile beauty, a professor at the University of Rome, to say nothing of many of her students: Alessio and *his* Chinese girlfriend, the two Simonas and Floriana, whom he interviews in the coda to the narrative.

Divine's parallels to the *Commedia* go beyond thematic concerns: they find expression at levels of structural organization. Like the *Commedia*, *Divine* has a three-fold structure: the three sections of MM's text appear to be modeled after those of Dante's poem. Part 1 (which covers the author's stay in and travels throughout Rome) imitates the *Inferno*, whereas the other two sections imitate, respectively, the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*. However, no sooner does one bring up the issue of imitation than one begins to sense its woeful inadequacy. To what extent and how does Part 1 of *Divine* imitate the *Inferno*? One wonders just how “infernal” the Roma that the author explores in the company of his numerous guides is. There are no *lacrimae rerum* shed over love: instead as the young escort Alessio asserts: “The Italian people do not cry about love” (308). There is, instead of the gloom of Avernus, plentiful sunlight: indeed MM's *Inferno*, to all intents and purposes, is a sunny “ORA” resonating with the laughter of men and women delighting in acts that some of Dante's sinners were having to pay for: there is much talk, by Alessio, of *fige* and *pulzelle*; Michelangelo invites comparison with Madonna, the contemporary “material girl”; the pilgrims at one point descend from the Trinità dei Monti into McDonald's. And so on. Does Part I of *Divine* imitate the *Inferno* by consciously departing from its penitential spirit? Is such “imitation” ironic or parodic of the larger scheme of salvation that undergirds Dante's whole poetic enterprise? Perhaps yes. Perhaps no. One cannot be too sure, for the author, we are told, “tread[s] the pathways trod by Vergil and Ovid” (295), even if the pathways of contemporary Rome and the ancient ways that they cover do not always lead anywhere in particular:

The passageways are vacant, the fountains empty, the trellises bare. The way too is directionless. An alley deadends at a wall of the palace. (295)

In such images of vacancy, emptiness and bareness one may discern metaphors of the author's break with the redemptive teleology that informs the movement from Dante's *Inferno* through *Paradiso*. However, as we have already seen, the passageways are not always vacant, the fountains not always empty and the way not always aimless: Part I abounds in images of a Roma pullulating with wanderers tracing the pathways taken by Vergil, Ovid and Dante. Such

wanderers like our author and his friends do not see themselves as sinners or lost souls in search of salvation in the vale of darkness. The darkness that envelops them, far from being indicative, as in Dante's *Inferno*, of the soul burdened by sin, represents something quintessentially secular and mundane: the extinguishing of morning streetlights, or the obscurity of the ruins of ancient Roman buildings. Dante's penitent sinners are replaced by visitors with little or no sense of remorse. One may be tempted to view them as indifferent or even disrespectful to the Christian spirit that once animated the ruins that they behold. In *Divine* one finds a resolute insistence upon the here and the now even as the past is continually disinterred, interrogated and animated. Unlike Professor Speranza, who adopts a reverential and unquestioning attitude toward the Roman past that she claims a privileged knowledge about, the author continually and unabashedly raises questions concerning this past, posing them to his guides (many of whom are not schooled in any academic tradition), and thereby implying that the only way to know the past intimately is to seek answers in the present, from its living inheritors, even if they don't happen to be academically qualified like Professor Speranza. Thus, the author asks in earnest one such inheritor and inhabitant of the Roman ruins:

"Do you think there was any connection," the author inquires, "among the great cultures that developed the form of the pyramid?"(287); "Rome," the author ventures, "is a relatively small city, isn't it?" (288); "What, may I ask, is your *view* of Nero?" (291); And, above all, "What about Sapienza [wisdom] in general?" (309)

Alessio, to whom the last question is posed, seizes the occasion to discourse on what he sees as the distinctive characteristic of the Roman spirit, not Sapienza but rather Amore:

More important for the Roman," Alessio concludes, "is La Vita Amorosa." The girls have rejoined us, we all four now turning to study the comical, mythical, raunchy expressions of the amatory spirit penned, painted and engraved on the balustrade itself. As we look over the railings to the churches of Rome, another question occurs to the author: "What, then, finally is your view of religion, Alessio?" (309-310)

From Alessio's reply we glean a sense of what *Divine* at bottom probably sets out to accomplish: that is, to de-Christianize Dante's epic and in so doing radically redefine the terms of the immediate epic tradition that Dante had belonged to. Whereas the comic element of the *Commedia* resides in the joyously sublime religious vision attained to at the very end of the *Paradiso*, MM's *Divine* expresses the joyousness of actual life. Whereas Dante's terrain in his opening section is the underworld, Morrison's world is the actuality that we inhabit above ground: there is no *aldilà*: the past and the future are to be found in the transient present, which he and his companions inhabit. Hence, the author never wearies of asking stimulating questions concerning the relevance of other poets: would Shakespeare have enjoyed himself in the Rome of today? Does Michelangelo not live on in Madonna? Does Dante, might one hazard, having shed his Christian anima, not find himself incarnate in the author and in some

recondite way guide him towards a temporal rather than eternal salvation? Surely he does, but in a radically unchristian way: for the Dante whom we encounter in *Divine* is at the helm of all the world's civilizations, guided not only by Romans but also by someone who has only recently come to Rome, from distant China: MM's young Chinese friend Qian-hui, who at several points, we might say, serves as the author's Vergil. Not only that, in Morrison himself we encounter an older, and perhaps more mature, Dante insofar as our twentieth-century scholar, teacher and writer has had the benefit of studying Dante's travels and travails twice as long as the Dante of the *Commedia*, when he stumbled upon his journey through the *selva oscura*. MM does not lose his bearings in any *selva oscura*: to begin with, his dark forest is rather one that he seems to *find* himself in; it is, to borrow from a much celebrated metaphor of the modernist poet Baudelaire, a forest of symbols, and sensual ones at that: symbols that appeal to and find their referents in the world of sense experience. The passageways that the author and his guides take, far from leading towards the beatific vision of the multifoliate rose, tend more towards the fulfillment of the senses: the author delights in seeing; his young female guide is drawn every now and then to food; Alessio revels in talking and listening to women. Truly, we are not amidst any *selva oscura*, but more properly, along the *vie amoroze*. MM's journey begins not with a wandering but rather with a recovery of his sense of direction: as tourist with an itinerary (however subject to the whims of his winsome guides), he comes to his Dantesque task almost too well equipped to dig into the past in light of the wisdom of sensual youth. In a sense, MM is probably fated to undertake a task similar to that of a skilled archeologist. Like the modernists, he cannot but draw upon an already existing epic tradition, especially as he seeks to write in the epic vein. He cannot but pay homage to those writers who contributed to it the most: Dante, Boccaccio, Tasso and Ariosto: "A pilgrim among pilgrims, he understands and shares their memories of the past and their longing for the future." (338)

Morrison, however, is not guilty of the sins of his modernist predecessors: incomprehensibility, excessive facticity, and notorious obscurity. For his *Divine* is no incomprehensible *Finnegans Wake*, no obscure *Waste Land*, nor, for that matter, does it imitate the exotic pastiche of the *Cantos*. Reading it, we are neither befuddled, nor humbled, nor dazzled by the variegated nature of its canvas. Here is no display of erudition for its own sake—though MM certainly displays considerable erudition: despite his long experience of, and respect for, primary, secondary and tertiary epics of the western literary tradition, he takes care not to imitate them slavishly. No, he keeps his distance from Dante enthusiasts like Pertile and Speranza. He has no readymade answers: unlike the scholars, he makes no overt proprietary claims to knowledge about Dante or even about the epic tradition in general. What, then, does he do? Why does he invoke Dante, interweave his in situ observations with segments from a range

of works that include Dante criticism? One way of addressing some of these queries is to turn to a telling passage on page 377 in which MM quotes from a critical text that discusses Ariosto's unique relation to the epic tradition:

"At the outset Ariosto establishes his independence by breaking chronology and beginning anew at a point of his own choosing; in effect he dismantles the *Innamorato* and incorporates various portions of its narrative into his own, recomposing as he proceeds. What distinguishes him from his predecessors is an ambition to reshape the entire story before completing it. In so doing he introduces a design, as well as a realism, into Boiardo's rich but shapeless and rather fantastic material." (377)

What is said of Ariosto can be said with equal justice of MM: he uses his canonical sources as mere hypertexts insofar as they provide rudimentary and highly provisional frames of reference. Located within such a matrix, Professor Morrison and his cortege of young pilgrim-tourist-students traverse the paths that their illustrious forbears had. At the same time, however, the frames of reference provided by these hypertexts are significantly breached and redefined, partly by the professor, partly by the students. MM, we might say, if not himself a rebel is an inciter of rebellion, which he relishes and profits from. One may say that the "past" enshrined in the hypertexts is continually questioned and rendered comprehensible in terms of the immediate present. Arguably, by the very end of *Divine* it is MM's distinctive tone of voice that rises above the din of the hypertextual resonances.

Sure enough, Morrison's characteristic way of taking the past to task involves primarily his strategy of continually juxtaposing multiple narratives set in multiple time frames. Rarely does one get to read a single paragraph cast in one key. Instead the author takes great care to interlard his in situ observations with lines extracted from both primary and secondary literature. Plot summaries, commentaries and translations into English comprise his hypertextual tributes to Vergil, Dante, Tasso and Ariosto. The experience of reading such a work is not very different from the experience of entering a monument in which multiple voices resonate at the same time, and yet one gets a sense of being led onward by a reliable guide.

Apart from Dante, the one writer who seems to have an abiding resonance in all three parts of *Divine* is Vergil. At the conclusion of Part I, the author interweaves a plot summary of the *Aeneid* with his account of a pre-designed outing. In Parts II and III one finds quotations in English translation from the *Georgics*. Within the very in situ narratives of MM's travels to Rome (Part I); to Siena, Bologna and Ferrara (Part II); and to Venezia, Verona and Firenze (Part III) the spectral presence of Vergil looms large only as the guiding daimon. We flit through the ruins of the *urbis* that Vergil founded in imagination; we slip in and out of alleys that Vergil had once literally explored. One senses the *frisson* that the author seems to feel when he enunciates the names of the various streets that he traverses, impressing upon us the feeling that he, like Dante, is following in Vergil's footsteps: Viale del Monte Oppio, Via del Colosseo, Via di

Campo Craleo, and the paths leading in and out of the Foro di Augusto and the Foro della Pace.

But the author is no academic Vergil enthusiast, such as Speranza or Pertile. He does not seem to rely exclusively upon scholars to guide him through Vergil, nor, for that matter, through Dante's Rome. In fact, the author's guides have little knowledge of, or interest in, Vergilian scholarship: one wonders if he chose them *because* of their complete indifference to classical and medieval academic training. His principal guides include those to whom Vergil (or Vergil as he is made out to be in academia) signifies at best an ossified past and at worst nothing at all. His Chinese guide, Qian-hui, has no patience with the likes of Vergil, nor with the monuments that would evoke associations to him. Pigeons and the resplendent midday sun captivate her more. Likewise, Alessio probably sets greater store by the works of Shakespeare and Ovid (given his interest in romantic women) than by those of or about Dante and Vergil; the author himself at places seems to betray an ambivalent attitude to Vergil, juxtaposing scholarly comments on the *Aeneid* lines with observations about demotic life in an equally demotic (in situ) vein:

And a stern fate, as we shall see presently, awaits Turnus too. We call for the bill. Having pursued the Trojan stragglers, Turnus reenters the scene. When it arrives, author pays it. The opposing forces suspend their struggle, and he and Aeneas fight. Only as he is leaving the restaurant. Aeneas wounds Turnus . . . A man in a yellow Volkswagen bug stops to pick up his wife. (331)

One might in all fairness suspect that Morrison wishes to vie with Vergil for the attention lavished upon him by the western world. Perhaps MM seeks the honor that Vergil has enjoyed as an epic poet. Perhaps, in his choice of multiple registers (signified not least in his use of three kinds of fonts), multiple/racially diverse personae, multiple linguistic references (Chinese, Italian and English), one senses the subtle ways in which MM shows Vergil's limitations, his cultural provincialism. Thus, by implication, Morrison advances his superior and more tenable claims to global fame. This is not to say that MM is presumptuous. Far from it. Like the Catholic *iconodules*, he venerates the literary apostle and saints without adoring them. He offers the respect due to them but at the same time feels the obligation to bring to greater fruition their tasks as epic writers: specifically the extension and, if you like, transformation, of the epic to suit a more comprehensive taste, a more diverse audience, a more vibrant and, shall we say, youthful and feminine Rome.

Thus, unlike the male Dante who follows his male mentor sheepishly, MM adopts a quasi ironic—one might almost say critical—attitude towards the figure of Vergil. MM's Vergil, as I have already mentioned, is no disembodied soul and certainly no avuncular male figure. More often than not he is cast in the personae of the young women and men in whose company he traverses the streets of Rome, with whom he visits the holy shrines and observes his fellow tourists. Such Vergilian figures include young women like the sixteen-year-old

Chinese Qian-hui, whose name signifies a thousand wisdoms. At one point it is she who decides where to lead the author to lunch:

At the foot of the stairs we must thread our way through a choir-like arrangement of black-jacketed youth. Qian-hui takes a seat on the lowest step to consult her guidebook. For lunch she has chosen McDonald's. (315)

Qian-hui is left alone for the most part. She flits about with such a nonchalant attitude to the Roman ruins that one wonders if she has seen them all in another life, if she has always and already been here. At times, it may seem that she is a figure from the *Commedia*: perhaps playing Beatrice to MM's Dante. In using the collective "we" to speak of their perambulations, MM deliberately dismantles the hierarchical relationship that governs Vergil and Dante's respective positions, showing yet again that the contemporary epic writer need be no respecter of rank based on age or sex.

Just as Morrison's epic attempts to privilege the authority of the young over the old, the living over the dead, the female over the male, so he ensures that his tourists include those least likely to be associated with Dante's pilgrims: Asians. Most significantly, there is a strong Japanese presence amongst the people whom he represents. Everywhere that we travel we seem to encounter these pilgrims, notably in Venice and Florence. Likewise, MM seems to learn about Rome more often than not from the perspective of those who are themselves visitors to its ruin:

Of the nine members of the causal touring brigade that the author has become a part of, the other eight are all Japanese. He takes a seat before the House of the Vestal Virgins, within which the two girls continue to chatter. Arising he joins them in the inner court, lined with statues of grim-faced Roman maidens in various states of disrepair.... (300)

Clearly, Morrison sees Rome from perspectives that neither Vergil nor Dante could have conceived of. The medieval pilgrim in Dante's time would probably have encountered fellow Europeans but rarely, if ever, people from the East. In a sense, the contemporary tourist, surpassing the pilgrim, is the one best equipped to help advance the frontiers of the epic tradition.

With tourists come many tongues: if the *Commedia* may be said to rest firmly on Italian foundations, then *Divine* clearly has other foundations reinforcing it, principally English and Chinese. Toward the close of Part III, the conversation that MM has with three Italian women-students represents a subtle juxtaposition of Italian against its more global counterpart, English. With English, the canvas necessarily broadens: Professor Morrison and the students find themselves discussing other cultures: Japanese and Chinese, Irish and Spanish. And, not surprisingly, Ancient Roman history and the Italian Classics: Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, Ariosto and Tasso. The young Floriana has no qualms about pronouncing upon them all, being perhaps a trifle dismissive in her view of Ariosto and Tasso.

In the last analysis, Morrison's *Divine* embodies a curiously populist mimesis of Dante's *Commedia* in particular and of the epic tradition in general. Populist, because *Divine* is such a reader-friendly text: anyone with little or no knowledge of Dante and his world can easily inhabit it. This is because, as we have already pointed out, the text incorporates the scholarly data that a reader may need to read it critically. Written in English and incorporating many styles, *Divine* cannot but appeal to an audience that includes a largely non-Roman component. From the point of view of the audience, the key question that *Divine* explores may be well be: "How do or how can any youth of today anywhere in the world respond to the vision of the *Commedia*?" What we see is at once an updating and emendation of the *Commedia*: the pilgrim mutates into the tourist; divine love/*caritas* into human love/*eros*; age into youth; the Roman into a more global or universal inhabitant. Interestingly, this Dante is American, or is he? Just as Dante, though Florentine, makes of himself a universal Italian or European, so MM has further aggrandized himself in his up-to-date version of the Comedy.

Focus and Transfiguration in Morrison's *Divine*

Frank W. Stevenson

"Florence is a white rose, whose petals unfold for a moment before the silver pool of Time." (405¹)

"We are mounting the hill . . . Little else of the past, however, remains. The passageways are vacant . . . The way too is directionless." (295)

In *Divine*, the last book of five in *Scenes from the Planet*, Madison Morrison has written an extremely complex, indeed intentionally excessive work. Here we have a recurring allegorical theme, that of the Dantean quest "upward" toward God (or some sort of epiphanic vision, moment of enlightenment)—one that we may or may not see as ever "arriving." (Of course, even Dante's God at the end of the *Paradiso* lies beyond human vision or comprehension, at least insofar as these can be expressed in words²; the Dantean God is in this sense, like Morrison's own text, necessarily "excessive.") This Dantean quest is ironized and parodied in various ways by the author-narrator's own "tour" of Rome and northern Italy; for instance, he is accompanied (and in some sense guided) by a young Chinese lady-friend, his Beatrice. The ironic distance or doubleness of the allegory is reinforced by the technique of textual juxtaposition or embedment familiar from earlier stages of Morrison's **Sentence**: classical texts (pre-eminently those of Vergil and Dante) are interspersed with the immediate, empirical travelogue-narrative.

But in *Divine* the travelogue-quest intertextual or "dialogic"³ passages are themselves interspersed with, their irony reinforced by that of, passages of formal "dialogue." These are most often conversations between the author and Qian-hui and interviews of Italian university students; the latter can be read as part of the empirical travelogue, the journalist's "report." Yet here Morrison tends to play an ironic Socrates, subtly qualifying or critiquing the point of his interlocutors, ostensibly for the Socratic purpose of elucidation⁴:

MM: "What of the future? . . . Is the future for you going to be the same as the present is for your parents? . . . Or the past for your ancestors?"

¹ All citations from *Divine* are from *Scenes From The Planet: In All Excelling Or Divine*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2001

² Dante in the *Paradiso* compares seeing God to seeing, "ingathered / and bound by love into one single volume— / what, in the universe, seems separate, scattered / . . . I think I saw the universal shape / which that knot takes. . . ." (Mack, 1427-1428)

³ In Bakhtin's sense of dialogism or double-voicedness as "carnival": the peasants' voice mocks and subverts the "official" voice of the upper class (culture, ideology, religion, philosophy, morality). Bakhtin sees dialogism as the essence and foundation of the modern novel (from Rabelais; Cervantes and Shakespeare fit the pattern well); he also thinks epic (i.e. Homer, Vergil and Dante) is inevitably "monologic" (dominated by the official cultural voice). How then to read Morrison's own form of "dialogism" here?

⁴ Bakhtin sees the ironic dialogism of Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire as two springs of the novel.

Simona 1: “I think the main difference is our education. My mother had only the primary school. But I am in the university.”

MM: “Does this make you better, or worse, than your mother? . . . Will you, then, be happier than your parents because of all your education?”

Simona 1: “I don’t think so. Culture makes people more frenetic.” (410)

By foregrounding, in his very framing of the question, the cultural and historical temporality of past (ancestors), present (“us”) and future (descendants, heritage)—and more specifically the metaphysical “problem” of time itself—Morrison plays off the central transcendent problem of the Dantean quest: we strive upward, through space and time, toward a God (or perhaps a final meaning and purpose for our lives) who (or which) by definition dwells beyond space and time—and thus, again, beyond the possibility of clear human vision, understanding, expression.

In my feeble attempt at “interpreting” a book whose very overflow, divine excessiveness seems to stifle, stymie, stupefy all such merely human efforts (hermeneutic quests), I want to emphasize just these spatio-temporal dimensions of Morrison’s Dantean “mock-epic,” in relation to the technique of visual or spatial “framing,” “focusing” and the problem of the “figure,” of figuration and transfiguration. But let us first contemplate an intertextual passage that presents in barest form the Dantean quest-theme:

Pigeons strut across the open space of the inner court. We begin our climb. *“What they feel with much greater intensity is their distance from God.”* . . . One floor from the top we pause to look down into the Campo’s fountain, onto its tiled rooftops. *“Dante climbs the mountain with them.”* Off in the distance the marble cathedral glistens. *“A pilgrim among pilgrims, he understands and shares their memories of the past and their longing for the future.”* (338⁵)

Engendering and other earlier books in Morrison’s **Sentence of the Gods** have led us to expect a certain *Gestalt*-switch ambivalence in his textual juxtapositions: we may see the academic or classical texts as “embedded” in the immediate, quotidian narrative, as a form of running “commentary” upon it, but we may also see this the other way around, with the empirical text as commentary on the classical and scholarly passages. The same is true here, so that once again there are two ways of reading the dynamic: the classical and academic texts, by “transcending” the transient world of the immanent, empirical narrative, reinforce but also ironically comment upon it, emphasizing perhaps its very contingency and fleetingness; the mundane objective realism of the travel-narrative can reinforce, as by example, and also ironically undercut the “pretensions” of more ancient and abstract utterances.⁶ However, in *Divine* the

⁵ Compare this sense of an accelerated “longing for the future,” a distance-from-goal felt “with much greater intensity,” with Simona 1’s comment on “progress” in the above-quoted dialogue: “Culture [or, in effect, ‘the future’] makes people more frenetic.” While some travelogue-narrative texts are interpolated with passages from Vergil or Dante, and some with passages from derivative Italian Renaissance romance-epics already in the allegorical tradition, like Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, here we are placed at a still further “allegorical distance”: the italicized “classical” text is in fact a commentary on Dante by contemporary Dante scholar Lino Pertile.

⁶ See Stevenson, “Sign and Ritual in Morrison’s *Engendering*,” *Engendering* (Taipei: East & West), 165-180.

interposed and highlighted classical Italian and academic English texts more directly “accompany” the embedding/embedded narrative: “We begin *What they feel . . .*” . . . we pause . . . “*Dante climbs . . . he understands and shares.*” There is now less “distance” between the two texts—thus a greater ambivalence regarding priority, a greater potential for *Gestalt*-like reversal or “inversion” at any moment—even a “textual longing” echoed by the “much greater intensity” of one’s perceived “distance from God” and the longing to overcome that distance, that is, the longing-for-goal, “longing for the future.”⁷

Morrison has, in addition, introduced (or at least made much more explicit) a new technique in *Divine*, one whose relation to the familiar technique of juxtaposing classical-academic and empirical-narrative texts, and to that greater “proximity” here between the two and thus more ambivalent “order of priority,” will need to be further explored. This is the technique of spatial or visual “framing”: often scenes are framed (or embedded) within spatially wider scenes, as these are empirically viewed from a certain perspective. In the above passage the overtly visual (spatial) scenes are clearly part of the empirical travelogue-narrative: “Pigeons strut across the open space of the inner court . . . We begin our climb . . . One floor from the top we pause to look down into the Campo’s fountain, onto its tiled rooftops. . . . Off in the distance the marble cathedral glistens.” In fact this empirical scene is one of climbing and looking back and forward along one’s journey—of physical movement and visual perspective—which of course is “echoed” by (and/or echoes) the Dante scholar’s text. But such movement upward (climbing)—both that of the narrator-author and of Dante’s pilgrims—is actually contrasted with (and parodied by) the pigeons, who simply move horizontally, “strut across the open space of the inner court.” And yet we feel this particular space, both *open* and *inner*, is somehow very significant in the passage, that in some secret way it might frame the allegorical pilgrims’ quest itself, perhaps even frame the very goal of that quest. Let us then turn to some purely spatial and perspectival passages in *Divine*, in order to see how these might also indirectly suggest, perhaps conceal within themselves (within their frames), the spatio-temporal “divine quest.”

⁷ See the later discussion regarding the “magnetic pull” of the future (ultimate vision of God) in the Dantean allegorical tradition, but also that of the “absolute past.” (See note 11.)

Frame

At the Piazza's south end a casement opens inward, its square panes reflecting: the eastern, the West, the western, the East. An unshaven man scurries by, a document headed "Manifesto" under his arm. Within the rectangular, glassless opening is framed a rain-dappled, cobblestoned square. We have arrived today by way of the Corso Rinascimento, white billowy clouds scudding the sunny skies above. IN VERONA A MANIKIN IS DRAPED IN A FULL-LENGTH MINK COAT. Seated facing west, we have just been served our drinks, a *caffelattè* for MM, a *succo d'arancia* for Qian-hui. THROUGH THE SHOP'S WINDOW ARE VISIBLE IN THE CEILING TINY LIGHTS, REFLECTED IN THE GLASS AS AN AUREOLE ABOVE THE MANIKIN'S BLACK-MASKED HEAD. *Rome Antique*, reads the title of a tour guide, white against red, on sale at a kiosk, its cover photo reconstructing a pristine coliseum. Across the garret's aperture the Piazza reads like a painting or tableau. (275)

We get this scene in the book's second paragraph.⁸ Here we are not quite sure whether the speaker (author) and his Chinese friend (Qian-hui) are sitting in an "indoor" or "outdoor" café, whether they are inside looking out through a "rectangular, glassless opening" or—as we would more likely assume with "THROUGH THE SHOP'S WINDOW," but where *is* this shop?—outside looking in. Again the sense of reversibility, inversion, the *Gestalt*-switch. We do know the couple is "facing west," but the "eastern" pane reflects "the West" and "the western, the East;" the directions got confused; "the way too is directionless" (295). Perhaps this glassless opening (like the "way" itself) mysteriously "frames" the whole narrative. Or is the "MANIKIN/SHOP'S WINDOW" passage the ultimate frame here? Instead of God in the center—from which vantage point a divine perspective might be assumed—we have (ironically) a mere manikin (for selling woman's clothes), a virtual doll-God; the "CEILING" here, whose "TINY LIGHTS" could (if they were stars) create a true halo or "AUREOLE" for the divine manikin-goddess, is a merely *virtual* sky (or heaven); the aureole is a deceptive image created by artificial lights "REFLECTED IN THE GLASS." The uncertainty as to spatial location, a function of uncertainty of perspective (*whose* perspective?), is a problem for interpretation, for "reading." And Morrison also foregrounds the theme of "reading" here: "*Rome Antique* reads the title of a tour guide, . . . **Across the garret's aperture the Piazza reads like a painting or tableau.**" But again, is this view of the Piazza "real" or merely "virtual"—a photograph in a tour guide, perhaps? As work of art it becomes more beautiful than reality itself; perhaps it

⁸ Ideally such passages should perhaps be read step-by-step, gradually filling in the parts. (I considered first leaving out the "MANIKIN" passage in capital letters.) It is almost as if they were "designed" in this way—to be reconstructed. Lessing says that the painting gives us "everything in one moment," while the poem (narrative) gives us "the succession of scenes through time, but never everything at once." Morrison is perhaps combining both strategies.

becomes “surreal.” And again, who *has* this perspective on the Piazza from “across the garret’s aperture?”⁹ (The couple, omniscient author, reader, God?)

At dusk, lights in the basin below have turned its waters golden, . . . barely so, as we look down from divine perspective on the whole square . . . An elderly man ambles past in a black overcoat, his wine-colored fedora set at a jaunty angle. *Roma Antica*, white against orange. *Domitian used the site as a racetrack*, hence the shape observable in the aerial photo. *Antica Rom . . .*, in white against brown. *It also served as the site of mock naval battles*. Brown and white predominate, roof-top tiles and marble structures. Two carabinieri . . . clop by . . . **A fourth photo, upside down, turns all inside out, the floor of the piazza transmogrified into the turquoise roof of a surrealistic building.** (276)

Here the framed passages, neither in boldface nor italics, represent events—a man “ambles by,” carabinieri “clop by” on horses—as well as views, but the “abstraction” (as in abstract painting) of framing-views (“**Brown and white predominate**”) is to a degree repeated with variation in the framed-views (“in white against brown”). The opening framing-passage, a view from above “on the whole square,” reminds us of the opening of *Genesis*: “lights in the basin below have turned its waters golden.” There is a kind of subtle spatial inversion (or inversion of perspective) here, as well as an echo of the ceiling’s “tiny lights, reflected in the glass” of the earlier passage. The virtuality of “reflected lights” is also reflected in that of “mock naval battles.” But we are perhaps most struck by the final framing-line here, which echoes the divine and/or aerial-photograph view of the Piazza in the earlier passage, now explicitly reversing and inverting it, rendering it “surreal” in a *renversement des sens*: “**A fourth photo, upside down, turns all inside out, the floor of the piazza transmogrified into the turquoise roof of a surrealistic building**” (276). This is clearly the author-narrator’s perspective; he has (randomly we assume) looked at an upside-down photograph. But it also “points toward” a more absolute divine perspective, one from which, perhaps, all reality would be (not ordered into unity but) blurred and mixed in a grand chaos. Or perhaps we have here simply “carnivalized” heaven (Bakhtin) by inverting heaven-and-earth (heaven-and-hell).

And the “postcard view” appears again, with variation, in this passage:

Having stopped for coffee at a bar in the *Via dell’Aracoeli*, just opened at 5:30 am, author exits into a little piazza to head upward, mounting what appear to be the steps to the Campidoglio. Totally alone in this even smaller, building-surrounded space, he opens the map to determine its identity. . . . **Here the postcard view represents an imposing grandeur, the square inscribed with a circle, within which a twelve-pointed star, at the center a pedestal for a since removed equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius.** . . . The sky, only just beginning to lighten, has a rosy, grayish gloom about it; off in the distance gleams a single red traffic light. **Again the postcard view greatly overgoes in detail and coherence this incomplete account, showing us, if not naming, the Tempio della Concordia . . . along with other monuments . . . to say nothing of a half moon held in place above the Coliseum.** Author continues descent . . . as crows caw . . . (293-294)

⁹ “Garret” is from *garite*, “a watchtower” and *garir*, “to watch”; it means “the space, room or rooms just below the roof of a house, especially a sloping roof; attic.”

As the street narrows, a smart boutique . . . advertises itself. “The description of Angelica tied to the nudo sasso suggests a veritable inversion of Alcianian ‘unnature.’” We are passing a large sign in orange on white: “In such passages as the following.” “Gli Ingegneri del Rinascimento.” “Angelica is linked directly by textual echoes to Alcina.” “Da Brunelleschi a Leonardo da Vinci.” “While at the same time replacing the fairy’s mere seeming with real, natural being.” Above it rises the tightly designed Palazzo Strozzi. “La bellissima donna, così ignuda / Come Natura prima la compose.” We continue along the Via de’ Tornabuoni, beside a highly colored, vastly enlarged, transparent photograph of a slinky model . . . She seems at this point to be a composition of Nature itself.” Prosperous Florentine couples, having dined in restaurants, stroll across the avenue . . . “Her ‘meaning’ is unveiled, present on the gorgeous surface, without the allegorical depths of Alcina.” A clock erroneously reads fourteen minutes to 11:00.

The seeing/textuality interplay is already clear here through the omnipresence of *signs*, visual-and-written signs, through the interfusion of, or confusion between, these signs and the “further” texts/signs toward which they point: “. . . a smart boutique . . . advertises itself.” “. . . a large sign in orange on white: “*In such passages . . .*” “Gli Ingegneri . . .” “*Angelica is linked . . .*”) But the central “point” of the passage is also the opposition between “real, natural being” (personified by Angelica, a symbolization or allegorization which may seem to slightly debase its “naturalness”) as that which is “present on the gorgeous surface,” and the “mere seeming” (artificiality) and “allegorical depths” of “unnature.” What is immediately present on the surface is of course what we actually see, as opposed to what is subtle, hidden, “veiled”—the artifice of metaphorical language, the abstraction of “transcendent” metaphysical thought. But we cannot quite correlate the “surface” here—that totality which the painting shows us “all in one moment,” in Lessing’s view—with the vision itself, any more than mere language/textuality can ultimately reach to the allegorical depths. Yet Morrison is reversing the hierarchy: we *want* the clear physical beauty of the mere surface (and/or, analogously, of “physical language”) rather than the concealed vision/abstract understanding. The beautiful surface is nature itself, it is what we get in nature; we do not *need* to transcend upward (as in Plato’s *Symposium*) from this beauty (as presented perhaps in this “immanent textuality”) to an absolute Beauty (or allegorical “truth”).

What we want, after all, is pure immanence, pure *visibility* which may not be presented by that widest, most encompassing “frame” (or aerial, “postcard view”) but rather in the concrete details *within* the frame. It is in the quotidian experience of this multitude of details that we will seek the divine, even or perhaps especially when these are most purely contingent, deceptive, false: “Her “*meaning*” is unveiled, present on the gorgeous surface . . .” A clock erroneously reads fourteen minutes to 11:00.” And yet here we end up, again, with the merely *virtual*: the manikin-goddess framed by the shop window, the absent equestrian statue at the center of the abstract geometrical design. This is a key difference from Dante: if the Morrisonian God is not totally absent then He (or She) possesses the sort of “lack” we associate with the virtual beauty of mere

surfaces, of figures, photographs, and perhaps also *maps*. Although if “the way too is directionless” perhaps even maps would be needless (absent), the map embodies a sort of virtual space pointing to a larger (or in rare instances smaller) “real” space; but its very smallness (“secretness”) as well as virtuality might suggest that this is where the divine, after all, can if anywhere be “located.” It is as if within the smallest imaginable space, from which we would escape, the map opens out—thus in effect inverting the frame, inverting space itself: “Totally alone in this even smaller, building-surrounded space, he opens the map to determine its identity.” (293)

Focus and Transfiguration

We now need to focus more narrowly on a point that has no doubt already been implicit in our discussion of the framing passages. The more immanent, empirical, quotidian reality framed within the wider spatio-visual “scenes” is the reality of *events*, a dynamic, spatio-temporal reality in contrast to the pure spatiality of the frames. In the “MANIKIN” passage the empirical arrival in Rome of “Dante and Beatrice” is framed as a “detail” within the wider spatial context of the “painting”: **“Within the rectangular, glassless opening is framed a rain-dappled, cobblestoned square. We have arrived today . . . IN VERONA A MANIKIN . . . Across the garret’s aperture the Piazza reads like a painting or tableau.”** (275) But once again there is a central ambivalence in the technique. On the one hand we would assume, as the “general case” (without really “looking at it”), that Morrison is here putting the temporality of the moment within a wider, timeless spatiality; but actually he is (also) putting the empirical event of an *earlier arrival* (“We have arrived today”) within the purely spatio-visual frame *seen at this moment* in a café: the view of a “glassless opening,” view “across the garret’s aperture.” Now consider again the “divine perspective” passage: **“as we look down from divine perspective on the whole square . . . An elderly man ambles past. . . . Domitian used the site as a racetrack, hence the shape observable in the aerial photo. It also served as the site of mock naval battles. Brown and white predominate . . . Two carabinieri clop by . . . A fourth photo, upside down, turns all inside out. . . .** (276) In the framing-lines we are “looking down” *now* (even if *via* the distanced simulacrum of an aerial photo displayed on a postcard or in a tour guide); the man *ambles* past and the soldiers *ride* by, but “Domitian *used* the site as a racetrack” [my emphasis]; present-tense empirical events and a past event are framed within the context/perspective of what is now being (divinely, virtually) seen.

Thus Morrison gives us the *presence* and (sometimes) the *past* of real events framed within the “living present” of “seeing,” of the “field of vision”; the latter, though happening we assume “now,” takes on the sense of a timeless

present over against the real time (temporality) of actual events which move from past to present to future. In the “equestrian statue” passage this absent statue appears at an ambiguous level of textuality between frame and framed: “. . . **at the center a pedestal for a since removed equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius.** . . . The sky, only just beginning to lighten, has a rosy, grayish gloom about it; off in the distance gleams a single red traffic light.¹⁰ **Again the postcard view** . . . The “emerging present” of this “just beginning to lighten” seems a crucial part of what one might almost call the author’s “divinatory” dynamics here; it echoes the “just-having-arrived” of the earlier passage: “We have arrived today . . .” Here we have “just beginning” and “just having ended” as variations on/of the idealized case of a momentary event frozen to eternity (Keats’ Odes), or set beside it: “Florence is a white rose, whose petals unfold for a moment before the silver pool of Time.” (405)

In the “pigeon” passage, whose intertext is Lino Pertile’s commentary on Dante, “arrival” is of course absolutely what is at stake:

“Like earth, Purgatory is in time, it has dawns and sunsets . . . The penitent are not frozen in their earthly individuality; they move on together . . . listening intently, or gazing. . . .” Pigeons strut across the open space of the inner court. We begin our climb. “What they feel with much greater intensity is their distance from God.” . . . Having forgotten to bring her camera, [Qian-hui/Beatrice] is in a bad temper. “Like a reversed nostalgia, this sense of separation and exile characterizes their ascent, transforming it into a pilgrimage toward the heavenly home. . . . Dante climbs the mountain with them . . . A pilgrim among pilgrims, he understands and shares their memories of the past and their longing for the future.” (338)

The pilgrims’ own longing for a future vision of God (longing for Heaven) is no doubt the counterpart (or even the equivalent) of the pulling force of God’s Love at the end of the *Paradiso*.¹¹ But the force of this longing for a divine vision in/of the future cannot be clearly distinguished from that force of “reversed nostalgia,” our nostalgic longing for an idealized, romanticized past. Is the remote past also, like the remote future, a powerful “magnet” pulling us, accelerating us back toward it—a center-of-gravity like that of the earth (whose “Satanic” center the final canto of the *Inferno* depicts), such that the closer we get to it the faster we “fall”? If so, then what stands in the past as the counterpart to God in the future? Morrison sometimes suggests a model of circular time, so that we have God at “both ends.” But in one of his “interviews” he offers what might be an alternative view, one that focuses on the “detachment”

¹⁰ The dark-light ambiguity of “rosy, grayish gloom” catches the in-betweenness of dawn. Friedrich associates the ancient Greek/Near Eastern figure of Aphrodite with Eos, Dawn; note the following comment on the “blossoming” of Florence’s “white rose.” The “single red traffic light” may be the rising sun, its positive connotation (“rebirth”) offset by the negativity of “stoplights.” (The day/night, life/death interface again.) *Divine’s* mundane reality is often permeated by mythopoetic significance.

¹¹ At the end of the *Paradiso*, God is a force of Love that “moves the sun and the other stars [and] my / desire and will” (Mack 1429); Aquinas takes God as both Aristotelian First Cause (an “efficient cause” that “moves”) and Aristotelian Final Cause that “pulls.” (The Unmoved Mover as the universe’s End, *Telos*). Of course, in both Aristotle and Aquinas God’s “force” of logical necessity (e.g. that of the truth of “A = A”) is closely tied to both the “pushing” (logical deduction) and “pulling” (logical induction) forces.

of an absolute past which (whatever degree of “divinity” we wish to attribute to it) parallels that of the “ultimate vision”’s absolute (or “apocalyptic”) future:

“It has been a magnificent tour,” says the author. But the tour is not over yet.

“This,” she says, “was all an ancient Roman cemetery. And there is the house of Maecenas, where Vergil worked. They held wild parties.”

“Oh they did?” author responds, inquiring of her views about Vergil.

“About certain people we are not accustomed to have views,” she replies, laughing. “They simply are.” They are simply great. We are asked to learn them by heart but not to have views. . . . The American tendency to recapture the past, the idea of Pound, the *Kulturmorphologie*, which he got from the Germans, of making the past alive, this is not an Italian idea. The past in Italy is an object of veneration. That is all. . . . Because Aristotle is a god. You cannot touch.” . . .

“Do you think that Plato, the dialectician, would have agreed?” author inquires. But we have suddenly reached the end of the tour. (291-292)

In this “perspective” then the remote, glorious past of classical history is “an object of veneration,” monumental, virtually divine. The notion of virtuality is perhaps indeed relevant here, inasmuch as the monuments and statues by which we remember great figures of the past (the missing equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius) are mere *simulacra* (signs, representations) of what is gone. In this sense, and in keeping with my reading of the framing passages in terms of a framed “immanent reality” at whose heart is often found virtuality, the virtual (as monument) is still in the present; the (transcendent) “real” toward which it points is absent, located in a distant past. This sort of absolute *power*—“I have only a view of immense power,” the same interlocutor responds when asked about Nero (291)—of past-as-monument might be contrasted with the more “romantic” conception of a Golden Age with which Morrison, in his coda, brings *Divine* to a close. Here he quotes, in the intertext of another dialogue, Vergil’s description in the *Georgics* of a time when mankind lived in pure harmony with nature. This was an age that existed before human society began its decline into greediness, power-hunger and corruption, tied (as also by Lao Tzu) to the increasing rule of rationality and law:

BEFORE THE RISE OF THE CRETAN / LORD . . . BEFORE IMPIOUS MEN
SLAUGHTERED BULLOCKS FOR THE BANQUET. . . . SUCH AS THE LIFE THAT
GOLDEN SATURN LIVED UPON EARTH. . . . MANKIND HAD NOT YET
HEARD THE BUGLE BELLOW FOR WAR. . . . HAD NOT YET HEARD THE
CLANK OF THE SWORD ON THE HARD ANVIL. . . . THE FRUIT ON THE
BOUGH. . . . THE CROPS THAT THE FIELD IS GLAD TO BEAR. . . . ARE HIS
FOR THE GATHERING. HE SPARES NOT A GLANCE FOR THE IRON / RIGOR
OF LAW. (407-408)

This “absolute” or “monumental” time of the Vergilian past and Dantean future are clearly nothing like the framed immanent-present and immanent-past/future (“about to emerge,” “just having emerged”) discussed above. Rather, the transcendent past/future suggest something more like a *spatialization* of time, and thus correlate in a certain way with the living present, or eternal present, of the *visual frame*, the (divine-authorial) “view.” Perhaps we are being

pointed here toward a view of our own present as something momentarily framed by an eternal or absolute past and future.

The mythopoetic spatialization of time may also be closely tied to ancient cosmography, the pervasive topocosmic model of mythopoetic thinking¹²: we exist on the earth's flat surface; above us is the inverted bowl of sky, beneath us (the bowl of?) Hades. Vergil's version (from the *Georgics* again) of the Orpheus myth, here presented as intertext, locates or identifies the instant of Orpheus' "forgetting" (not to look back at his wife) as that of his *arrival-at-(earth's)-surface* (after the upward climb from Hades):

ORPHEUS, SICK AT HEART, SOUGHT THE COMFORT OF HIS HOLLOW
LYRE. . . "YOU, SWEET WIFE," HE SANG ALONE BY THE LONELY SHORE . . .
"YOU AT THE DAWN OF DAY," HE SANG, "AT DAY'S DECLINE YOU?" . . . NOW
HE HALTS. . . EURYDICE, HIS OWN, IS AT THE LIP OF DAYLIGHT.¹³ . . . ALAS!
HE FORGOT. . . HIS PURPOSE FINALLY BROKEN, HE LOOKED BACK. . . HIS
LABOR UNDONE, THE PACT THAT HE HAD MADE WITH THE MERCILESS
KING / WAS ANULLED. . . THREE TIMES DID THUNDER PEAL OVER THE
POOLS OF AVERNUS. (383)

that draws us back to the traumatic memory of the past is echoed by the real (and/or mythopoetic) gravitational force that pulls/pulled Eurydice back down to Hades.

Whoever sees that Light is soon made such / that it would be impossible for him / to set that Light aside for other sight; . . . but through my sight, which as I gazed grew stronger, / that sole appearance, even as *I altered*, seemed to be changing. In the deep and bright / essence of that exalted Light, three circles / appeared to me; they had three different colors, / but they all were of the *same dimension* . . . / That circle—which, begotten so, appeared in you as light reflected—when my eyes had watched it with attention for some time, / within itself and colored like itself, / to me it seemed *painted with our effigy*, / so that my sight was set on it completely. / . . . so I searched that strange sight: I wished to see / the way in which *our human effigy* / *suitably the circle and found place in it*— / . . . But then my mind was struck by light that flashed / and, with this light, *received what it had asked*." (Mack 1428-1429, my emphases)

Morrison's *Divine* does seem to be playing with the possibility of such inversions or transfigurations. And yet, again, the possibility of a genuinely (or seriously) "divine" transfiguration seems more often to be ironized and subverted by that virtual surface whose mere "blankness" extends extremely far (if not quite to infinity), that surface which in effect "cuts through" or "flattens out" the (possibility of a) dynamics of interchange, of transfiguration. This surface is (in one of its many manifestations) the black-masked figure of the

¹² Kristina in "Woman's Time" distinguishes a male Chronos (linear time/history) from two female times: the "cyclic" ("seasonal") time of mythopoetic thought and "monumental" time, apparently a spatialization or "flattening out" of time which suggests too Deleuze's *aion* (see note 16) as "mere eternity."

¹³ This "lip of daylight" is striking. "Lip," a feminine and sexually-charged image, suggests "mouth": the mouth of the singer himself (who "sings the earth") juxtaposed with the earth's "mouth." The latter could suggest earth-as-mother (earth-womb) but also "chaos"; Greek *Xaos* (from *xaien*) originally meant "gums" or (the mouth's) "yawning gap." Orpheus own singing mouth points us back to the earlier image of his "hollow lyre": hollow like (again) a mouth and like the earth. Perhaps Morrison's technique in *Divine*, with its absent or "excluded middles," is that of playing an Orphic (divinatory) "hollow lyre."

MANIKIN whose AUREOLE is in reality the ceiling's "TINY LIGHTS, REFLECTED IN THE GLASS . . ." An "aureole" (suggesting ghostly "aura") is the halo of a holy figure in a religious painting, and also the "aura" around the sun during a total eclipse. Here we have the absence of the center again, of the sun whose own mere virtuality is represented by its *trace* (its now empty "frame"), of the equestrian statue (in the center of an elaborate geo-metrical design that should have pointed upward toward God) that has left behind, as aura or trace, its "pedestal."

The final passage of the main text of *Divine* (before the appended Vergilian coda) leaves us suspended in a state of "expected transfiguration," one whose *arrival* may need to be put off indefinitely: "Outside a candy store, its vitrine full of multicolored offerings, a dazzling beauty stands on a white marble pedestal to wash its window." (406) Here Morrison plays together several of his recurring motifs, and leaves us (once again) with a multiplicity of interpretations. We are left with the puzzle, fundamentally, of three relationships: that between the living woman standing outside the shop window and the statue of a (beautiful) goddess whom (as "dazzling beauty") we would have expected to see standing on this pedestal; that between this woman washing the window—in order to see what stands behind it—and the MANIKIN within the vitrine, now absent because this is a candy (not clothing) store whose "multicolored offerings" nonetheless suggest the sacrificial worship of a deity, perhaps a goddess of pure pleasure; and that between the absent manikin within and the absent statue without. Of course, once the window is clean the woman may only see her own reflection; in a virtual world, a world of mere surfaces, transfiguration can finally only be self-reflection. Perhaps this standing woman, the pedestal completing her own (dismembered) body, has been somehow placed outside her own frame, leaving the center (once again) empty. Here, in this echo of the opening MANIKIN passage, the absent simulacrum within the "glass opening" mediates between human woman and divine goddess, yet is less "real" than either, parodying and debasing both.

Conclusion

In one of the late passages building up to that "*description of Angelica tied to the nudo sasso*," an academic text, one that seems to be removed to a safe allegorical distance, is ironically juxtaposed with the subtle violence, and not-so-subtle sexuality, of "two female torsos painted gold from pubis to neck":

"The completion of the circle guarantees that the education in and through metaphors at the literary antipodes finally leads back into historical reality . . ." As we turn into the Via Porta Rossa the pavement has begun to dry. "Thus the journey allegorizes the translation of historical experience by textual reference." "La Gatta Cenerentola," a fancy clothing shop, shows two female torsos painted gold from pubis to neck. "And the corresponding motion from textual insight back into readerly experience." (393)

The trope of dismemberment fits manikins, dolls and other sorts of (detachable, assembled and disassembled, deconstructed) simulacra, but “real” dismemberment (disfiguration) comes with murder, torture, human and animal sacrifice. The opening passage of *Divine*, coming just before the frame-scene of the “glassless opening,” presents

. . . a young woman named Agnes, [who,] propositioned by an official, rejected him. Stripped naked in the stadium . . . as punishment, she survived humiliation when her locks miraculously flourished to cover her shame. A balding man passes, black sunglasses atop his head . . . Condemned to be burnt at the stake, she proved impervious to the flames. A man in a wheelchair glides by, drooling spittle. Dismayed, Diocletian ordered her head cut off. His attendant glances at author . . . Across the Piazza Navona . . . , the Chiesa di Sant’ Agnese in Agone, which houses the *sacra testa*, her severed skull, marks the spot where she was martyred. Agnes had been tried and found guilty. (275)

This torture and disfigurement is perhaps a sign of Purgatory, a symptom of perverted, defective and/or excessive love: “In the *Purgatorio* the seven capital sins are allegorized.” . . . “The first three (Pride, Envy and Wrath) represent the perversion of love.” . . . The fourth (Sloth) is a sign of defective love.” . . . “The last three (Avarice, Gluttony and Lust) represent excessive love.” (303) But in having her head removed from her body Agnes (Agony) is literally “transfigured.” The absence of her *sacra testa*,¹⁴ itself suggesting a work in stone, makes of Agnes a statue ruined (disfigured, decapitated) by time, the armless and headless figure of “The Crouching Aphrodite” (Friedrich 138). Yet it is her skull, we recall, which has been “housed,” that “marks the spot.” Such scenes remind us of the other side of Beatrice’s angelic love that guides Dante up to the Empyrean, a more purgatorial and indeed infernal side: something like raw “desire,” which would (we suppose) need to be contrasted with God’s powerful Love at the end of the *Paradiso*, pulling the universe into Itself/Himself. We are reminded that Morrison’s technique of framing, focusing, inversion and transfiguration in *Divine* may not be purely “virtual” and “two-dimensional” after all, that there is real violence here, real force—just as God’s Love is real force.

And yet it seems, at least on the reading I have suggested here, that the “bare surface” still predominates in this text: the detached, purely aesthetic surface of the woman’s, the goddess’ body, before it has been touched and violated. *Divine* remains in the first place a “work of art”; the guiding angels and goddesses are after all (assembled) manikins behind and within the “glassless openings” of squares, frames, shop windows, where their function is to entice the (male and female) spectator with the beauty of their clothing. We are living after all in the “real world” of the early 21st century, where the real guiding angel is a superficial beauty created and promoted by a late-capitalist-driven economy. But the irony is not just that, every day in numerous ways, we see the transcendent (or the possibility of any transcendent) subverted and debased (leaving only its “pedestal”) by the immanent; it is that the radical contingency of immanent reality, as it appears to us from all sides, fills our world to bursting

¹⁴ In her best-known birth story, Aphrodite emerges from the “foam” of her father-god’s severed testes.

and thus “flattens out” the (possibility of) any meaning whatsoever. Immanence and transcendence are collapsed together. Once we are forced to read graffiti as sacred inscriptions there can be only a single encompassing text (“*il n’y a dehors de texte*”), a single textual surface:

“*To those that do not see entire.*” “Fotti il Sistema,” reads a graffito, as we skirt a carabinieri van, a computer and a fax machine visible through its rear window . . . “*The immediate impression is alone taken into account.*” . . . we pause . . . “*For those drunken with this wine.*” Where two Africans, in bright baseball caps, are laughing. “*Filled with the nectar.*” . . . bicycles crowd . . . “*All their souls penetrated by this beauty.*” . . . we linger a moment. “*They cannot remain mere gazers, for no longer does the spectator gaze upon an outer spectacle.*” Above “Biblioteca Universitaria” sits a five-pointed star, within it a five-cogged wheel. “*Instead, clear-eyed, he holds that vision within himself.*” Entering a triangular square, a yellow scooter, its two headlights shining, seeks a parking place. “*Though, for the most part, he knows not that it is within.*” (345)

Apparently he who is “drunken with this wine” is able to see beyond the “immediate impression,” to “see entire” only by seeing “that vision within himself”—and yet “he knows not that it is within.” Perhaps this is because there is no longer a difference between within and without; perhaps “seeing the whole surface” depends on (or is) an underlying ambivalence as to which side of the window we are on—that is, which side of us “it” is on. In the vitrine of Morrison’s *Divine*, the multitudinous, involuted, “in-framed” texts displayed before us, ironically self-reflecting in the glass, cancel one another out, leaving blankness. The divine excessiveness of this multiplicity, and/or of the frame that could possibly contain it, silences the would-be interpreter. He is left staring at the “blank gaze” of the book and/or at his own blank and stupefied gaze. The “virtual” reversal or inversion assumes of course that the textual surface, like the windowpane, has two sides. Or might it, like Borges’ disk, have only one?¹⁵

¹⁵ In “The Disk.” (Perhaps we might also think of his Zahir, “coin,” in another sense.) The “Biblioteca Universitaria” of course suggests Borges—many of his texts but most literally “The Library of Babel.” One also wonders, thinking again of the early Wittgenstein (see note 10), whether—and especially if we are thinking here of the “world” as a *one-sided* textual surface—we might indeed say, “*Unser Leben ist ebenso endlos, wie unser Gesichtsfeld grenzenlos ist*”; “Our life is endless in just the way that our visual field is without limit.”

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Inventing *Divine*

Monbray Allan

Until its narrator begins to kick up his or her heels half way through, the narrative mode of *Ulysses* is, it turns out, not the “surrealism” of one’s first impression, but simply “super realism,” realism carried to its extreme by disdain for the usual novelistic deference to the reader as a stranger needing introduction to an unfamiliar world, a deference quite “artificial” and anti-realistic, by the way. (I use “surrealism” in a loose and “popular” sense.) Or say that the book *pretends* to be written for a small group of intimate friends and acquaintances, though really intended for the world and for the ages. Or say that *Ulysses* begins *in medias res*. And so, in its different way, with Madison Morrison’s *Divine*. The strange mixture we meet at first soon resolves itself into identifiable elements, though with novel nuances. Part I begins thus:

Under the Emperor Diocletian, in the early Christian period, a young woman named Agnes, propositioned by an official, rejected him. Stripped naked in the stadium of Domitian as punishment, she survived humiliation when her locks miraculously flourished to cover her shame. A balding man passes, black sunglasses atop his head; on his arm, a woman in red dress, black shoes, red lipstick, a luxurious fur coat draped about her shoulders. Condemned to be burnt at the stake, she proved impervious to the flames. A man in a wheelchair glides by, drooling spittle. Dismayed, Diocletian ordered her head cut off. His attendant glances at author, a cigarillo drooping from his lips. (275)

We go on to discover that the “author” is seated in Rome’s Piazza Navona across from the Chiesa di Sant’Agnese in Agone and can thus deduce that the italicized words come from some sort of travel guide, while the regular font is used for a narrative of the author’s actions and above all for an account of what takes place in his presence as he records it.

In fact, *Divine* openly presents itself as an account of an actual writing tour of Italy starting in Rome and continuing counter-clockwise through Venice, Florence and back to Rome, includes references to its own composition, and identifies the narrator as “author” or “MM.” Interwoven—whether paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, or phrase by phrase—with this travel account are quotations, usually identified, from guidebooks, popular or classic (e.g., Ruskin), and from authors mostly Latin and Italian, and from scholarly articles and books on the same, and, occasionally, with “readings” of picture postcards or photographs. (The prospective reader should be assured that the author wears his learning lightly, however. At one point we are told that “In preparation for today’s adventure author has reviewed, standing at a book stall in the Stazione Termini, a comic book version of Vergil’s *Aeneid* in 24 “canti.” There follows a summary of the *Aeneid*, interspersed with quotations from Fitzgerald’s translation, so that the reader, like me, weak on Vergil need not despair.)

Given that the narrator is identified as “author” or “MM” and that the author is a teacher of literature, at university level, the literary citations are consistent with realism or a Joycean “super realism,” and in fact, at one point we read, in caps, “AUTHOR IS TREADING PATHWAYS TROD BY VERGIL AND OVID.” The narrative mode of *Divine* can be taken (however it was actually composed) as realistic description of the contents of the author’s consciousness, while on a tour of Italy. However, when the interweaving takes place phrase by phrase, as it does from time to time, we are alerted that we have to allow place for some artifice that goes beyond straightforward prose realism. The various quotations are rendered in different fonts, so as, probably, to aid the reader in distinguishing them, when interwoven with each other and with descriptive passages. In fact, the book as a whole, despite having its roots in narrative realism, may become for most readers something closer to poetry than to prose, and is probably intended to be read so. For so unusual a composition, however, each reader will have to invent her own way of reading.

The literary guide pointed to by the title is Dante, but in fact his place in *Divine* is mostly implicit, there being only a few scattered explicit references, as against the constant quotations from and about Vergil throughout, Tasso in “Purgatorio,” and Ariosto in “Paradiso.” This is not as strange as it might seem at first: although Dante is by no means a transparent narrator—in fact we have to distinguish the Dante who is character in the poem from Dante the author—still, naturally enough, within the poem Vergil, and then Beatrice, attract more of the attention of the narrative point of view and thus of the reader. Vergil’s appearance here is delayed, until halfway through Part I (presumably the “Inferno,” given a writing named *Divine* that is divided into three parts). On the other hand, here Vergil does not vanish part way through, but travels with us to the end. The *Aeneid* guides the author through Hell—the first visit to Rome—and the *Georgics* through the rest of the poem, I and II through “Purgatory” (Siena, Bologna, Ferrara), and IV, on bees, through “Paradise” (Venice, Verona, Florence, and Rome revisited). (I had not read the *Georgics*, but typing several of the most unusual words from quoted passages into the Yahoo or Metacrawler search engines quickly identified the passages and took one to electronic texts of the whole poems. Reading allusive texts is now easier than in the old days!) I should say, having made these comparisons, that as far as I can see no invidious judgments on those Italian cities, or their inhabitants, are intended, the differences, if any, taking place within the author, and perhaps the reader, as in, for example, *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker*. I should also add here that the reader should not expect any close imitation of the *Divine Comedy*; I believe that our author would say he imitates or invokes Dante, rather than Dante’s poem.

This last point might be elaborated. Many readers will agree that one of the most fundamental pleasures of reading is the experience of communing with the spirit of a great genius, the author. That such can really happen has been

put into question not only by postmodernist theorists but also by some modernist critics, such as Eliot, at least in certain periods of his criticism. To such doubts one can respond that this experience occurs with some authors and not others, or some more than with others (though not necessarily with those we count “best”), and that, if we are but communing with ourselves, we are at least communing with some new part of ourselves. Still, since such questions can never be answered in theory but only in practice, let us simply say that for many, absent the illusion at least of communing with the spirit of the author, or of some of one’s authors, reading would be a much less valuable experience. Even Eliot, in old age, was willing to acknowledge “the experience which is the same for all human beings of different centuries and languages capable of enjoying poetry, the spark which can leap across those 2,500 years” between us and, say, Sappho. (In saying this, by the way, Eliot is exactly repeating the universalism of the 18th century, whether of Hume or of Johnson: it is not an unexamined assumption rendering shaky any critical theory based on it but in fact a position deduced with full awareness from the very experience of being able to enjoy Homer, say, in much the same way one enjoys a current author.)

One can conceive the relation between Dante and Vergil this way, and the presence of Vergil in *The Divine Comedy* as testimony to Dante’s experiencing Vergil in some such way as just referred to. And we might go on so to conceive Morrison’s relation to his authors, in place of any simple form of “imitation.” If a reader should find this account of *Divine* useful I understand it might also be useful for three other books in the sequence *APHRODITE: Possibly, Renewed*, and *This*. Finally, I might indulge in a further guess, that Vergil’s greater explicit prominence and presence, as compared to Dante’s, in *Divine*, is due to MM’s experiencing Vergil more vividly and more concretely, than he does Dante.

Returning to the opening sentences above, we might feel that an ironic or comic contrast is intended between the past and present, the miraculous locks and the luxurious fur coat. But if so, we should also accept much of responsibility for that interpretation, for, in general, in much of the writing in regular font, the choice of matter seems left to fate, or chance, or the universe—however one wants to put it, and is not forced into obvious relationship with the past invoked by the quotations. Madison Morrison calls it “in situ” writing, the recording taking place “on site,” whether by pen and paper or tape recorder. Though not all of the regular type is “in situ” writing, it is for me by far the most interesting writing in the book, and so needs some comment and analysis.

You could say that if MM’s energy holds out, we shall all of us have our fifteen seconds of fame. Again, you could say that the “in situ” writing takes place from an objective point of view. I am aware that purists in defining point of view would find, even in that opening passage above, “violations” of strict objectivity, as in *luxurious*. Let us take a passage that seems even more to depart

from the objective (we are now with the author in the square before the Basilica of St. Peter):

At the Square's center, within its circle of pillars, sits an elaborate creche, two stories high, from which issue the strains of recorded Christmas carols, entrance to which is barred by a heavy metal gate. A Mary in rust-red and grey-blue with white overgarment holds on her lap a white-clad child several years old, as to one side Joseph, in yellow cape and brown undergarment, regards the scene with weary patience. In a separate compartment stand the three Magi, one Arabic, the other two African. At a lower level, beneath a stone arch, a sheep looks out quizzically at the viewer. At the head of the square stand two black-booted figures, the backs of their blue jackets reading in large white letters, "POLIZIA," "POLIZIA." A black-hooded priest in black skirts scurries through a narrow aperture into the Via della Conciliazione. (284)

We may indeed feel a warmth of identification in that "weary patience" and "quizzically" that we seldom find in the in situ writing in *Divine*. However, the purists who would count these violations of the objective point of view seem to be defining not so much an objective as an inhuman point of view. I would say that the author is simply trying to describe, objectively but precisely and in a way to appeal to the readers' imaginations, what he sees. Further, observe that the persons described in the last two sentences are at the opposite extreme from fictional characters created by an author to play a certain role, and fit into a certain context, in a fictional narrative. Rather, our author is as passive as can be; he describes the persons presented to him by chance at a certain time and from a certain vantage point. He does not adapt them to a narrative or other form; they will never reappear in this text. The author does not pretend to understand them.

(Before moving on, it is perhaps worth savoring the nuances of the writing. Note, for example, the syntax of the first sentence. When you read the "entrance to which" correctly, that is as parallel to "from which," and not as the "faulty reference" it seems at first, the whole rhythm of the sentence changes, becomes more like poetry than prose, if you will.)

We should note that the passages so far come from the "Inferno," Part 1 of *Divine*, and that the opening passage should correspond to the opening of Dante's poem, though such is not signaled explicitly, except through the title. The first readers of *Ulysses*, too, it should be observed, were given nothing of the author's allusive plan except for the title, and at a first reading would have found the relationship to the Odyssey just as much to seek as is the case with our text. Now a complete reading of *Divine* would at some point have to take account of this parallel, but some readers, including myself, will delay consideration of that aspect until we have come to terms with the surface of *Divine*, again, just as we did with *Ulysses*. (In fact, even an experienced reader of *Ulysses*, while absorbed in reading, will probably have left far behind conscious awareness of the parallel with Homer, though that is not to say that the parallel is entirely inoperative.) In fact, I suspect that what Eliot said of *Ulysses* will be true for *Divine* (and for that matter, for Eliot's poetry), at least for many readers:

he justified the parallel with the ancient text as enabling the author to organize his experience rather than as a necessary aspect of valid reading.

What is more evident on the surface is that this book consists of a sort of archeological examination of the sites it visits, and of “Western Culture” in general perhaps, just about the most perfect site for this archeology having been chosen. The opening sentences are a good example, with their collocation of ancient paganism, Christianity, and the (neo-pagan?) present. As the quotations from the guidebooks make clear, the Piazza Navona is both the site of the stadium of Domitian and is shaped by it and also includes the Chiesa di Sant’ Agnese in Agone, built, supposedly, on the site of the martyrdom it memorializes. But what direction does this archeology follow, the usual stripping away of the present and more recent levels of the past, so as to discover origins, or just the reverse, stripping away the levels of the past so as to discover the present? We may examine another example, this time from near the end of the second part, that is, “Purgatory” (352-53):

Author traverses the Via Carlo Mayr. “[Eros] *is neither the cause.*” The weather so cool that he must put his hands, along with recorder, into his pockets. “*Nor the victim of injustice.*” Traffic (pedestrian, cyclic, vehicular) is nonetheless moving equally in the wintry ambiance. “*He does no wrong to gods or human beings.*” Two workmen gesticulate over an open trench. “*He abhors violence.*” At the Corso Porta Reno we turn to recross Via Carlo Mayr. “*In addition to the virtue of justice.*” Heading north, we come upon a pub called “Antas,” a new wooden railing around it. “*He displays the greatest temperance.*” We pass “Ristori,” a movie theater with preview stills of “Extreme Measures,” starring Hugh Grant and Gene Hackman. “*Because he controls Pleasure and Passion.*” Two longhaired girls glance at author, one in tight black aerobic pants, a white stripe running up the leg; the other, in yellow jeans, fires up a cigarette. “*He is also full of courage.*” Both sixteen, they have identical silvery-green jackets. “*He can even control Ares.*” In its window “Parfumerie Douglas” displays “Natural Life Replay.” “*For he is the fountain of wisdom.*” Lancôme’s “Poème de Bath.” “*All arts flow from him.*” Estée Lauder’s “pleasures.” “*Before his birth necessity was king among the gods.*” The long window concludes. “*But since his birth.*” With Iffina’s “Success Night.” “*To mortal and immortal alike all good things have come through love of beauty*—Agathon’s view of Eros in T.K. Seung’s summary (*Plato Rediscovered*)

An orange bus number 2 arrives to head on out for Via Pattachelsa. Author pauses to record “He Ping Fan Dian,” in red Chinese characters, “Ristorante Cinese,” circled in green, “la Pace,” in yellow on black; four silvery doves emblazon its window pane; at either side of its doors, two golden lions, to either side of them, pots of pink azaleas. In blond hair, beige jacket and green pants, he regards his own reflection in the restaurant’s door, his Panasonic “Fast Playback” held before him. “Nuova Ferrara” reads a plaque above a newsstand advertising the town’s paper. Next door white letters on a blue white-bordered ground read “blue ocean,” three geometrical squiggles indicating water. From within, behind a rank of pastel-colored tee shirts, a salesperson peers out over her computer to observe author’s activity.

The passage from Seung here concluded and identified began six pages earlier. Elsewhere passages are quoted from Plotinus and from renaissance neoplatonists. Perhaps this neoplatonism is a sort of transition between the pagan and Christian levels of our “archeological” tour of Italy. Or is the author suggesting a novel point of view on Christianity, taken as from a great height, not as a revolutionary movement that displaced the “classical,” except for some

shards, but as a limited modification of the classical, not necessarily more important than a number of other changes in the history of Western Culture? In any case, occurring in the “Purgatory,” this passage could be considered the equivalent of the “Unified Field Theory of Love” (“love” being the source of every movement in the universe all the way from the attraction of the mind to God to the falling of water, and all being, in fact, versions of desire for the Unmoved Mover) expounded by Dante’s Vergil, the neo-aristotelianism of that being more pagan than Christian, if anything, and if we distinguish the two. (One might think that the Greek wording of the texts on which Christianity is presumably based, and above all, the appearance of the word *Logos* at a crucial point in the Gospel of St. John, render such a distinction problematic.) If some such readjustment of our unexamined sense of the relative importance of the Christian versus the pre-Christian ingredients of the present is occurring here, whether in MM’s intention or the reader’s interpretation, Dante, as one of the most important of the great humanists, is certainly a suitable guide to the landscape we are excavating.

Back to the passage from Seung and to the *Divine Comedy*, this time sticking closer to the text: the sublimation of desire is a recurring theme of the quotations from “high culture” in *Divine*. But here as elsewhere, the movement of sublimation seems to be overwhelmed, or distracted at the least, by the insistence of the present and by other voices. During these six pages, passages from the Seung are interwoven, as well as with external description, with passages from *Georgics* II, from Hippolyte Taine on the un-sublimating women of Italy, from a guide-book description of the Cathedral in Ferrara, and with graffiti and commercial messages.

What are we to make of these juxtapositions of ancient and modern, of ancient heroic or ideal with modern reality? The Yahoo search engine tells me that Lancôme is a Parisian maker of cosmetics, so that “Poème de Bath” is probably some sort of scented soap—talk about pretension! Is this modern overreaching mocked by the true grandeur of Plato, or do the modern techniques of exploiting sublimation to pander to the erotic expose and undermine Plato’s pretensions, and perhaps Dante’s as well? As we try to answer questions like these, some modernists can provide useful comparison and contrast, not only as to such juxtapositions but also to the recording of concrete sensory detail not unlike MM’s in situ writing in its seeming resistance to interpretive control by author or reader. I would say that Morrison tends toward the tonally neutral, as compared to the similar juxtapositions in modernism. There is little of the obvious humor of *Ulysses* or of the explicit irony we have learned, for better or worse, to find in Eliot, though I would certainly not say that these are altogether absent.

Let us take a passage from the end of “Wandering Rocks,” Chapter 10 of the “Corrected Text” of *Ulysses*, one of the parts, along with Chapters 3 and 4,

which would seem closest to the mixture of objective in situ composition with allusive meditation, as in *Divine*. The viceroy's carriage is passing:

At Haddington road corner two sanded women halted themselves, an umbrella and a bag in which eleven cockles rolled, to view with wonder the lord mayor and lady mayoress without his golden chain. On Northumberland and Lansdowne roads His Excellency acknowledged punctually salutes, from rare male walkers, the salute of two small schoolboys at the garden gate of the house said to have been admired by the late queen when visiting the Irish capital with her husband, the prince consort, in 1849 and the salute of Almidano Artifoni's sturdy trousers swallowed by a closing door. (209)

It is soon evident that Joyce is fairly old-fashioned and conventional, in his control over concrete details, in comparison with MM. We have already met and can place Artifoni. Moreover, the joke of a voice teacher being named "Art Sounds" is obvious enough, as is its likeness to other jokes about the Irish infatuation with things Italian, especially in music, such as the reference to the singer "Foli." The two "sanded women" would be Florence MacCabe and Anne Kearns, whom we met at the beginning of Chapter 3, "Proteus." Subsequently, Steven used them as the "Dublin vestals" of his story *A Pisgah Sight of Palestine* or *The Parable of the Plums*. True, that was something of a shaggy dog story, and we can't say exactly why the universe has brought just these people together to comment on the passage of the viceroy, but given that in "Wandering Rocks" much in the novel passes in quick review, we have no trouble accepting their presence or feeling that they contribute to the evocation of Dublin.

Compared to Joyce, then, MM is a comparatively non-directive author. Still, often the in situ writing takes on a pleasing pattern, whether luckily found in reality or generated by the focusing of attention:

Before an orange phone an orangecoated woman searches her wallet for a coin. Two orange motorbikes whiz by, continuing on up the Via Parione. As the street narrows, a smart boutique, above a crosshatched window grate, advertises itself with a single bright orange word: "Dinastie." (393-394)

The orange pattern continues for another page.

Though not signaled nearly as obviously as in *Ulysses*, in *Divine* also one can find some suggestion of the mock epic in the rendering of minute particulars of modern life in the context of a parallel with ancient epic. But in neither case does serious satire seem to be the main point (Hugh Kenner's attempt to Eliotize Joyce seems to have found no takers, so far as I am aware, and perhaps we should rethink Eliot *moralisé* as well). Rather in both authors one might find a sort of humorous putting of modern trivia up against the ancient glories: from the point of view of eternity, Almidano Artifoni's sturdy trousers are seen to have achieved the same triumph over time as Achilles' shield. Though in Morrison's in situ descriptions, people of all ages are attended to, it is soon evident that he takes a special interest in youth (as might be expected, given his occupation as teacher), in their clothing, graffiti, language, gestures, in their

styles, in short. Notable, for example, is his confidence in assigning exact ages to young people he has presumably observed for a few seconds only—see the passage above. Is Morrison putting the world version of American pop youth culture up to challenge all the “great civilizations” of the past, its graffiti literally and figuratively defacing and replacing the ancient monuments and their monumental inscriptions? As I used to say to my students, “Since *you* are now the world’s great cultural imperialists, it is only fair that I impose some multicultural imperialism on you.” Perhaps it would be safer to back off a bit and say that this is the subversive rather than approved side of his vision, but what choice do we old ever have but to hand over the world to youth?

After saying that so far I find MM tonally neutral and “non-directive” of interpretation, relative to Joyce, I should qualify that judgment by adding that I have lived with *Ulysses* far longer than with *Divine*. Still, in seeming at least to allow the universe a free hand in filling in the concrete details of a writing project, or, if you prefer, in bringing to bear on observed reality a variety of allusions many of which seem chosen for private more than for public reasons, MM might seem closer to some of Eliot’s poetry than to Joyce’s work. But it is notorious that Eliot filled in, with extra-textual guidance, the vast chasms between the fragments from which he made up his long “poems,” or at least we assume that he did so, and we take this guidance not only from the notes to *The Waste Land*, but from anywhere in the large corpus of his literary criticism and sociological, political, and religious writings. And we know that MM has published literary criticism. In what way and to what extent should we avail ourselves of extra-textual guidance in interpreting *Divine*?

Obviously, those who become familiar with the whole, or even a large part, of **Sentence of the Gods** will read *Divine* very differently from the uninitiated beginner. How much help should the latter be given? Are there useful shortcuts, in place of reading the whole life’s work? There is, of course, no one answer that will fit all readers, but let me here strike a little blow, or a tap on the wrist, in the name of reader liberation.

The presentation of *The Waste Land* to students in the Norton and other anthologies is a major literary scandal, pretty well defacing and replacing the poem itself, scholarly graffiti. I used to try to introduce the poem to students gradually, by having them read parts as independent poems before tackling the whole, one of the most promising for this purpose being “Death by Water,” easy enough as a poem yet profound in its technique (I forbade them to read the notes, no doubt thereby only calling greater attention to them!). When they seemed to need more guidance, I gave them “Dans Le Restaurant” (with translation, of course) to show them the original version, in its context. I even explained who the Phoenicians were and noted the possibility of discovering a wreck of one of their ships off Cornwall. Finally, I assigned “Death by Water” along with other “Ubi Sunt” poems from Norton, Volume 2, still ordering

them to read it as a poem unto itself and to ignore the footnote. Still, the students all and always came in professing not to have the faintest idea of what “Death by Water” is about or any pleasure whatever in reading it. When I probed for the causes of this bafflement, it always came down to the footnote (just look at that travesty of a footnote—you might think it one of the mock footnotes to *The Dunciad* or from some *Stuffed Owl: Anthology of Good Bad Scholarship!*). And we continue blindly to try to batter our way into the poem from below, in the face of Eliot’s own repeated repudiations of his notes and acknowledgements that supplying them had been a bad mistake: “I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.” He even tried (with perfect tact, I think) to redefine the poem as “a petty and personal grouse against life” (not that we should take him quite at his word!). But those notes have proved the awful daring of a moment’s surrender which an age of prudence can never retract. Beware of giving your readers something to aim at other than the text itself.

Should we not try to get a fresh start with Eliot by acknowledging that all our critical and scholarly efforts over 75 years to elucidate him have come to almost nothing—whatever of moderate help there is in it being offset by what is positively misleading, coming between the reader and the text? On the one hand, Eliot is perhaps the most quoted poet since Shakespeare, and I mean on the popular level, at least in the sense of generally educated readers, as against literary specialists. How many books have been named or epigraphed out of the *Four Quartets*, and I don’t mean literary books? No doubt most of these people who quote Eliot could not begin to give you even an elementary account of the unity or “meaning” of any of the poems they quote—and they don’t worry about that, which is their salvation. For among us literary scholars, who is there that can formulate the unity of *The Waste Land*, in any way even to be helpful to himself, let alone to anyone else? It may even be that we would eventually have to acknowledge that we can find no objective, public unity in Eliot’s major poems, and must leave them as fragments to be digested by each reader as best she can, but fragments, some of them, fit to shore against our ruins. We might even go on to wonder, as Eliot himself did, whether the chief use of the ‘meaning’ of many other poems besides his may be to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work on him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog. That would at least be better than “obfuscating our senses by the desire to be clever and to look very hard for something, we don’t know what,” again to quote Eliot.

But after all, there is not much use worrying about the futility of Eliot criticism, given the vanity of vanities of life itself. I would not puritanically deprive a reader desiring to discuss a work of literature of his vain pleasure. I once in an intercontinental phone call with MM made a distinction that seems

to have interested him, since he referred to it years later. I distinguished between poetry that is more fun to read than to discuss (Pope, Dryden, and Tennyson) from poetry that is more fun to discuss than to read (Wordsworth, Shelley, and Milton). But of course all poetry is capable of giving both kinds of pleasure, and readers will disagree about specific examples of each of these categories. The reader of *Divine* should be encouraged to take the freedom to read it for fun, ignoring any extra-textual obligations that interfere with that. That is not to say the freedom to make of it what he will, for the aim in reading should be to commune with the spirit of the author. In return, I lift any ban on the pleasures of discussing **Sentence of the Gods**.

Finally, I observe that not all the travel narrative is objective description of strangers. There are several sections of interaction with persons the author knows well enough so that we get dialogue and authorial affect and personal point of view—with the author's female companion as well as with some Roman acquaintances. But these are so much more conventional in style that, to tell the truth, I feel a bit let down by them. There is no question but that the pure, nearly objective in situ writing poses serious challenges both to author and to reader, if it is sustained at length, as here, but it is the really fresh and novel writing in *Divine*, and once one has risen to that challenge with at least partial success, one hesitates to descend to something less bracing. It's like stepping down from poetry to the novel.

It is not only the author's own other writing that the objective in situ style puts into the shade. The fact that, once over the novelty of it, one does not notice its style, until one reads it consciously and deliberately as poetry, is a sign of its strength. It is direct and unpretentious, without morbid and futile ambition to shine, self-effacing, relaxed, self-communing and self-centered but unselfconscious, completely absorbed in the task, the still point of the turning world. Yet when one does turn to savoring it, one notes an unfailing precision in the choice of words that becomes a kind of elegance, even. To my mind, compared with this style, the over-reaching and self-promoting pretensions of the quotations from present day literary and art criticism come out worst. I present this as my response, not as the purpose of the author, and, to be fair, I note that if the author, or I, were to write criticism, we would probably do it in much the same way as the authors of the quoted specimens.

Like all serious authors, MM is quite beyond the pale of the reasonable and the realistic, in the obligations he would put upon the reader. After all, even Joyce was content to lay only about four books upon us (and I am quite content to leave the last unopened!). As I think I have shown, you could spend a lifetime on the long poem which is *Divine*, leaving the fitting it into the rest of the **Sentence** for eternity.