

*ETHOS AND ANSWERABILITY IN THE NOVELIZED EPIC: PASSIONAL READINGS OF
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S AURORA LEIGH, DAVID JONES'S IN
PARENTHESIS, AND CHENJERAI HOVE'S BONES*

A Dissertation

by

PAMELA JEAN SIBLEY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2008

Major Subject: English

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Ethos and Answerability in the Novelized Epic: Passional Readings of Elizabeth Barrett
Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, and Chenjerai Hove's *Bones*.

(December 2008)

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This study proposes an approach to a solution for the problem of the perceived “separatedness” of language from reality which employs the rhetorical concept of *ethos*, the doctrinal concept of the Chalcedonian definition of the nature of the incarnated Christ, and Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “answerability.” As an alternative to theories of reading and interpretation based on the arbitrariness of linguistic meaning, radical skepticism, and the death of the author, the approach defined in this study emphasizes affirmation of the centrality of the human person and the necessity of close, loving attention as the grounds of both aesthetic vision and ethical action.

Developing three exemplary readings of novelized epics including Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, David Jones’s *In Parenthesis*, and Chenjerai Hove’s *Bones*, the study demonstrates how loving, careful attention to *ethos*—the definition of which is expanded to include relationships between language and character in literary works, genres, characters, authors, and teachers—is the prerequisite for answerability in literary relationships. Whether one is primarily interested in authors, characters, genres, canon, readers, or critical reception, attention to *ethos* illuminates the ways in which responses to literary works are conditioned by

and analogous to responses to persons. The complex and irreducible relationships between the “word” and the “person” require an individual answerability for which there is no alibi.

Ultimately, the “word” and the “world” are united in the answerable person, whether that person is an author, a character, a reader, a critic or a teacher.

DEDICATION

To my daughters: Kaitlyn, Brianna, and Madeline,

And to my granddaughters: Jael and Hannah.

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There are more people to acknowledge than I have space to thank, so in the tradition of David Jones I will simply list the first couple of dozen or so names that come to mind, and apologize in advance to those who are omitted. I wish to first thank my parents Paul and Laura Sentman, my sister Nan Schultz, my husband Cassian Sibley, and my committee members Janet McCann, C. Jan Swearingen, Clinton Machann, and Linda Radzik. Next, I wish to thank other professors and teachers by whose influence and encouragement I have been blessed: Sally Harris, Edward Hirsch, Sherry Zivley, David G. Myers, Terence Hoagwood, Kimberly Brown, and Patrick Muana. To my fellow graduate students who finished the race before me, especially Steven Marsden, I owe a special debt. To my colleagues at Blinn College: Nancy Wright, John Schaeffer, Esther Quantrill, Ginny Machann, Linda Bow, Rebecca Olsen, Dorothy McGonagle and Gilbert Schorlemmer, who encouraged my scholarly endeavors but equally and as importantly supported and inspired me in my efforts to be a better teacher. To my colleagues in the language department at Saint Michael's Episcopal School, who put up so graciously and patiently with my ignorance about the differences between teaching college students and high school students, and who were nonetheless interested in and willing to hear what I had to say, especially Ann Willaert. To the members of our little mission parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad who prayed with me and excused my occasional absences from services as deadlines approached, especially my godson, Laurus, our student reader Steven, our student leader, Christina, and Emily—who always took care of the dishes after our Sunday afternoon common meal. To all my students—those who irritated me as well as those who inspired me—thanks is due as well. Finally, thanks be to God, in whom we all live and move and have our being.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The connotations of the language of literature must be voiced, spoken by living people, to be fully expressed. . . . The human need for language is not simply for the transmission of meaning, it is at the same time listening to and affirming a person's existence.

Gao Xingjian (Nobel Lecture 2000)

That which has actual validity always turns out to be a moment of that which is possible: my own life turns out to be the life of man in general, and this latter life turns out to be one of the manifestations of the world's life. All of these infinite value-contexts, however, are not rooted in anything: they are only possible in me independently of objective and universally valid Being. And yet all we need to do is to incarnate answerably this very act of our thinking to its ultimate conclusion—to undersign it—and we shall turn out to be actual participants in Being-as-event from within it, from our own unique place. . . . One has to develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (51, 52)

1. Terminology

Perhaps the best way to cobble together a description of this project is to “unpack” its title: *Ethos* and Answerability in the Novelized Epic: Passional Readings of E.B.B.'s *Aurora Leigh*, David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, and Chenjerai Hove's *Bones*.

I intend “*ethos*” to be initially understood by its generic definition: “character as it emerges in language.” This should suggest to the reader that while my project will necessarily attend to language, its subject is *character* rather than language. The phrase “as it emerges in language” entails a *prima facie* rejection of theories which claim that language somehow “writes” or “creates” being. Language can be seen as constructive in many ways, but that

This dissertation follows the style and format of the *MLA Style Manual*.

constructiveness is based on its ability to refer and to communicate. My project also assumes that language is, in fact, capable of referring to the non-linguistic, and that *being* is not simply an effect of language.

By “**character**,” I mean, roughly, “person.” That being the case, if I were to transpose my stipulated definition of “*ethos*” into the form of a question, it would run something like, “What kind of linguistic traces, or tracks, do persons leave?” This question leads to other questions, such as, “Can we learn to read them?” and “Ought we learn to read them?” and “What kind of action might such readings entail?” The kinds of persons who are the subject of my study can most efficiently be discovered by taking recourse to Booth’s chart of the various categories of types of authors and readers, as laid out in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*.¹ I am interested in the “real flesh-and-blood” author and the “real flesh-and-blood” reader. I will also attend to narrators of, and characters within, literary texts. While it generally matters a great deal, and in certain contexts matters absolutely, whether or not a given person is real or fictional, my assumption is that personhood is the primary and irreducible unit for determining meaning and establishing value. If this is the case, then representations of persons, though not identical, nor of equal worth to real, flesh-and-blood persons, are still valuable.

I take the term “**answerability**” from Mikhail Bakhtin’s short essay, “Art and Answerability,” first published in 1919, which is also the title-piece for the book *Art and Answerability*. In this short essay, Bakhtin engages the ancient and on-going question of the relationship between art and life. He refuses to employ any identity statements: art is not life; life is not art, yet he claims that they must be united. The union of life and art must take place, if it is to occur at all, within the individual person—and Bakhtin uses the first person here, “I” and

¹ See pages 428-431 of the 2nd edition of this work.

“my”--² who is answerable in her life for what she has learned from art, and answerable in her art, for what she has learned from her life. This is clearly an ethical stance, one which can also be seen in Bakhtin’s *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, in which he again posits the individual person as the site for the union of two opposing fields, this time theory and praxis.

Why “answerability” and not “responsibility,” or one of its several synonyms? First, I mean to employ Bakhtin’s insights, and using his English translator’s term “answerability” will identify my project’s indebtedness to Bakhtin. Second, while both “answerability” and “responsibility” suggest the use of language, “answerability” is more suggestive of open-ended reciprocity, in that I am not only once-and-for-all answerable, but must be open to continuing questions. Also, I must not only answer “to” others, but be answerable “for” my responses to them. Finally, my readings, my interpretations, my arguments, must not pretend to assume the status of “the last word.” I am obligated to leave openings for questions, to provide markers indicating probable sites for further wonderment, to inscribe my own, as yet, unanswered questions.

In *The Company We Keep*, Wayne Booth identifies, as one of many reasons ethical criticism “fell on hard times,” the fact that too many times ethical critics focused on judging which literary works were beneficial and which were harmful, thus setting themselves up as *ad hoc* censors.³ While I am concerned with the putative moral value of the literary works under discussion, as well as the delineation of the *ethos* of their authors, narrators, characters, and readers, my over-arching purpose is to produce readings which are answerable. Answerable to

² Bakhtin uses the first person throughout his writing, a natural consequence of his focus on personal answerability. I will also make use of first person where appropriate, for similar reasons.

³ The second chapter of this book, titled “Why Ethical Criticism Fell on Hard Times” is well worth reading for any concerned with ethical criticism.

what, or to whom? To the works themselves, to their authors, and to their narrators and their characters. To my readers, most particularly my students, but also my peers and my teachers, to myself—to my own lived experience, and, ultimately, to that “great cloud of witnesses” noted in the book of Hebrews.

Among the many voices to which I feel obligated to attend, I have a particular interest in attending to and taking seriously the voices of the dead because despite current intellectual skepticism on this and many other subjects, I do not believe anyone ever entirely ceases to be. This is a belief I share with many others, both Christians⁴ and members of other religious and philosophical traditions. Many of my own reservations about certain critical and theoretical positions mirror those of Mikhail Bakhtin, who, as reported in the December 13, 1918 edition of the local paper, *Molot* (Hammer), “complained of, and worried about, the fact that socialism had no care for the dead. . . and that, accordingly, in some future time, the people would not forgive us such neglect.”⁵

I have reasons to believe that this book will suggest reasons for not taking such an “easier path” which will be persuasive regardless of one’s religious or metaphysical allegiances, but in the process of so doing, I do not intend to pretend that none of my reasons are religious reasons. In Psalm 103, which is sung as the first antiphon in nearly every Orthodox liturgy, the angels are described as those mighty ones who “do” or “perform” God’s word, because they “hear” or “hearken to” the voice of His word. This suggests to me that in any language event, there are two separate things to which attention can be paid: the *words* and the *voice* of the one who spoke (or wrote) them. Here, the psalmist might be understood as suggesting that the

⁴ I am an adult convert to Orthodox Christianity who belongs to a community of Russian Orthodox Christians.

⁵ Quoted from Tzvetan Todorov’s *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (3-4).

angels' motivation to perform God's word is their hearing of the *voice* of His word—and not *just* His word. I want to be the kind of reader who hears the *voices* of persons, who isn't content simply to analyze the words on the page as "text."

This observation leads to the next term to be defined in my working title: "**passional**." Umberto Eco employs this term in his reply to Richard Rorty in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, describing Rorty's reading of *Foucault's Pendulum* as "passional" (143). Of particular interest to me is Eco's brief confession following his classification of Rorty's reading; "I think that we are always reading passionately, by reactions inspired by love or hatred" (143). By modifying the word "readings" of my working title with the word "passional" I intend to give notice that my readings are "inspired by love," despite recognizing the risks entailed by this confession. Such an overt display may help the project attract its "ideal readers." Additionally, as Martha Nussbaum contends in *Love's Knowledge*, "[o]ur actual relation to the books we love is already messy, complex, erotic" (29). Nevertheless, a passional reading is not necessarily an irrational reading.

Although Donald Davidson is arguing within the context of radical translation, I believe his "principle of charity" can be applied to nearly all human communicative interactions.⁶ Radical skepticism is self-stultifying. If I don't at least assume the person addressing me is trying to "get it right," is standing by his words,⁷ how can I hear him, and what are the odds my response will be appropriate? If, as the apostle Paul writes in 1st Corinthians 13, the person

⁶ See his *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*: "The principle [of charity] directs the interpreter to translate or interpret so as to read some of his own standards of truth into the pattern of sentences held true by the speaker. The point of the principle is to make the speaker intelligible, since too great deviations from consistency and correctness leave no common ground on which to judge either conformity or difference" (148).

⁷ See Wendell Berry's "Standing by Words" in *Standing by Words*. San Francisco, North Point Press (1983) 24-63.

speaking “in the tongues [languages] of men and angels,” but lacking love is only “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal,” perhaps it is also the case that the person listening *without love* can only hear noisy gongs or clanging cymbals, if she hears anything at all. As Hans-Georg Gadamer explains, in order for something to be properly said, there must be a speaker, a thing to be said, and a listener who must be willing to really hear—to receive what is said; “It is only in this way that the word becomes binding, as it were: it binds one human being with another” (106).⁸ One of the goals of real dialogue is the forging of human relationships. Dialogue fails if attention is not paid to the persons participating in that dialogue. Another cause of failure is presumption. Bakhtin puts it this way: “If we anticipate nothing from the word, if we know ahead of time everything that it can say, it departs from the dialogue and is reified” (Problem of the Text, 122). In his Notes from 1970-71, written toward the end of his life, Bakhtin asserts that if the word is “removed from dialogue. . . it can only be cited amid rejoinders” (133). Taken together, these three quotations suggest that in order for real dialogue to take place, both persons and language must be attended to. To return to an earlier suggestion, to hear one must both listen for the *human voice*, and understand the *words*.

Love may be the best defense against deafness, but doesn’t forgo asking difficult questions. My inability to answer with any accuracy the question “Why do you love your husband?” does not *ipso facto* render my love for him irrational. Nor does the fact of my loving him entail condemning my knowledge of him as “suspect,” by virtue of my attachment to him. In fact, an argument could be made supporting the claim that I know him better *because* I love him, since love has, as one of its effects, a tendency to produce a peculiarly intense and focused *attention* on its subject. This is the type of “fine awareness” that Martha Nussbaum exhibits in

⁸ From his collection of essays, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*.

her readings of James's novels,⁹ that Wayne Booth demonstrates in his willingness to *reread* D.H. Lawrence,¹⁰ and that Stanley Cavell models as he writes about his attempts to listen to the voice of philosophy.¹¹

Finally, I decided to use the term "passional readings" in the title, and in the project, despite having also considered the more Bakhtinian term "unindifferent readings" because it underscores the necessity of love to meaningful, constructive interpretation. The primacy of love in correct "seeing" is explicit in Bakhtin's writings. Apart from love, seeing becomes destructive—disembodying and thus, dehumanizing. Though lengthy, the following quotation from his *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* merits reproduction:

The valued manifoldness of Being as human (as correlated with the human being) can present itself only to a loving contemplation. Only love is capable of holding and making fast all this multiformity and diversity, without losing and dissipating it, without leaving behind *a mere skeleton* [my emphasis] of basic lines and sense-moments. Only un-self-interested love on the principle of "I love him not because he is good, but he is good because I love him," only lovingly interested attention, is capable of generating a sufficiently intent power to encompass and retain the concrete manifoldness of being, without impoverishing and schematizing it. An indifferent or hostile reaction is always a reaction that impoverishes and decomposes its object: it seeks to pass over the object in all its manifoldness, to ignore it or to overcome it. The very function of indifference biologically consists in freeing us from the manifoldness of Being, diverting us from what is inessential for us practically—a kind of economy or preservation from being dissipated in the manifoldness. And this is the function of forgetting as well.

Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient power to slow down and *linger intently* over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute. Only love is capable of being aesthetically productive: only in correlation with the loved is fullness of the manifold possible. (64)

⁹ See, for example, her "Flawed Crystals" James's *The Golden Bowl* and *Literature as Moral Philosophy* in *Love's Knowledge*, pages 125-47.

¹⁰ In the chapter of his *The Company We Keep* titled "Doctrinal Questions in Jane Austen, D. H. Lawrence, and Mark Twain," pages 436-57.

¹¹ See especially his essay, "Philosophy and the Arrogation of Voice," in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*.

I have emphasized the phrase “a mere skeleton” here, because it figures in Bakhtin’s preoccupation with, and emphasis on the incarnated, participative thought required by his notion of answerability. Love and incarnation are related. Without love there can be no incarnation—only dry bones.¹²

While there are similarities between the types of readings I propose to perform and those of Nussbaum and Booth, there are significant differences as well. First, and most significantly, their readings do not employ Bakhtin in the way which I propose.¹³ Second, while Booth does entertain questions of what types of action might be entailed in following his model for an ethics of fiction, mainly—and appropriately—in the context of the classroom, Nussbaum seldom gets beyond the stage of reflection.¹⁴ Part of what I hope to provide in my readings is an exploration of the common dilemmas facing the fields of rhetoric and ethics which might lead to a discovery of a shared response to those dilemmas. With Bakhtin, I’m looking for motivation to *act*, and not just to engage in more reflective deliberation. This is not because I am unaware of the importance of reflective deliberation, but because—as a matter of sheer necessity—I have to act. I do not have the luxury of waiting until I am sure I have thought through everything adequately *before* I act. Since I really believe that last line from Rilke’s poem, “The Archaic Torso of Apollo” which asserts that the work of art says to us, “You must change your life”, how does my life need to change? Surely, the change is not simply or only to occur in my head. In short,

¹² After the Lord shows Ezekiel the valley of dry bones, He says “Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel’s response is “O Lord GOD, you know.” Ezekiel is then commanded to prophesy to the bones (Ezekiel 37: 1-5).

¹³ Booth does employ Bakhtin in his chapter titled, “Rabelais and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism” in *The Company We Keep*.

¹⁴ This criticism of her project as it relates to ethics is raised by Geoffrey Galt Harpham in *Getting it Right: Language, Literature, and Ethics* (1992).

my readings will entail questions of ethical action in ways that neither Booth's nor Nussbaum's do.

Third, with the exceptions of Booth's reading of Beckett's *Good Company* in the 2nd edition of his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, and his readings of D.H. Lawrence, he treats primarily "classic" or canonical texts. Similarly, Nussbaum's readings are of either ancient classical texts, or Henry James's novels. I will be performing readings of **novelized epics**, rather than novels, and am also extending the boundaries of these kinds of reading by including—in addition to the canonical Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the quasi-canonical (within the canon of First World War writers) David Jones, Chenjerai Hove, a contemporary Zimbabwean author living in exile. The reasons for my focus on the novelized epic are two-fold. First, it again gives me the opportunity to think along with Bakhtin, as I employ and interrogate his opposition of epic and novel. Second, I believe attention to *ethos* and answerability figure significantly in what Bakhtin describes as the "novelization" of genres—in this case the epic—and thus can provide a way to discuss the relative "ethics" of each genre. While the specific foci and applications will vary in my readings of these three literary works, in each reading I will be attempting to demonstrate how recourse to *ethos* and answerability is both hermeneutically and morally productive.

Finally, although Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum serve as predecessors in a sense, Mikhail Bakhtin will provide the theoretical core and inspiration for the work. This could be treacherous, as I will have to come up with a method that is a non-method in order to be true to his exacting standards. In this, Bakhtin reminds me of Plato's Socrates.

2. Of Misology and Misanthropy

On the day of his death, Socrates warns Phaedo to be on his guard against becoming misologic, of "developing a dislike of argument" (*Phaedo* 89d). He begins by stating that "Misanthropy is induced by believing in somebody quite uncritically," being disappointed often enough that one stops believing in people at all, and consequently concluding that "there is not sincerity to be found anywhere" (89d,e). Dislike of argument, Socrates asserts, happens in "just the same way."

. . . [W]hen one believes that an argument is true without reference to the art of logic, and then a little later decides rightly or wrongly that it is false, and the same thing happens again and again--you know how it is, especially with those who spend their time in arguing both sides--they end by believing that they are wiser than anyone else, because they alone have discovered that there is nothing stable or dependable either in facts or in arguments, and that everything fluctuates just like the water in a tidal channel, and never stays at any point for any time. (90b,c)

Phaedo concurs that what Socrates has said is, "perfectly true," after which Socrates continues:

. . . [S]upposing that there is an argument which is true and valid and capable of being discovered, if anyone nevertheless, through his experience of these arguments which seem to the same people to be sometimes true and sometimes false, attached no responsibility to himself and his lack of technical ability, but was finally content, in exasperation, to shift the blame from himself to the arguments, and spend the rest of his life loathing and decrying them, and so missed the chance of knowing the truth about reality--would it not be a deplorable thing? (90d)

Once again, Phaedo agrees, and Socrates concludes that *this* then, is "the first thing we must guard against. We must not let it enter our minds that there may be no validity in argument" (90e). Interestingly and, I think, provocatively, the reason Socrates provides for resisting this false way of thinking--this antipathy toward argument--is that we are *unwell*. Consequently, "we

should recognize that we. . .are still intellectual invalids," and "do our best to become healthy" (90e).

This passage is related to one in the *Cratylus*, in which Socrates is questioning Hermogenes about whether or not names can be assigned, at whim, by any individual:

Soc. Do you think this is true of the real things, that their reality is a separate one for each person, as Protagoras said with his doctrine that man is the measure of all things--that things are to me such as they seem to me, and to you such as they seem to you--or do you think things have some fixed reality of their own?

Her. It has sometimes happened to me, Socrates, to be so perplexed that I have been carried away even into this doctrine of Protagoras; but I do not at all believe he is right. (386, a,b)

When one is "ill" or extremely "perplexed" then, one is particularly prey to certain types of epistemological disorders. And this "illness" seems to be, for Plato, the regrettable but nonetheless "natural" condition of men. Hermogenes's response further reminds us that one may lapse into irrationality due to sheer mental fatigue. These warnings do seem to take a bit of the shine off the definition of man as a rational animal, by reminding us of our tendency to epistemological error.

Centuries later, Lewis Carroll points out that—when it comes to the use of words—a sense of personal power is also at play. Alice questions Humpty Dumpty about his idiosyncratic use of the word, "glory," and asks whether one can really make a word mean so many different things. Humpty Dumpty retorts, "The question is. . .which is to be master—that's all" (*Through the Looking Glass* 124). One could simply consider this type of will-to-power another form of illness. The next question then, would be how Humpty Dumpty's position here differs from Socrates's position. Their positions differ in that for Socrates, a word stood in for something *real*; it was a class of made things governed by properly authorized legislators. It is important not to

forget this, not to let words fraudulently assume essentialist poses as though they themselves are "the real things." As Jowett summarizes near the conclusion of his introduction to the *Cratylus*, "All these verbal niceties and changes are no help [Socrates] says, in finding the truth. Goodness and beauty exist and are permanent, but the words by which we try to express them will never be adequate" (421).

Humpty Dumpty, on the other hand, seems to be presciently anticipating the "linguistic turn," after which many intelligent people begin to believe that there are no really *real* things at all, but that language makes it seem so. The medium supplants the message or, becomes the only message accessible. The curtain that separates the putatively extralinguistic *noumena* from the linguistically constructed *phenomena* is widely believed to have been closed forever, the analysis of its warp and weave becoming the appropriate object of the enlightened or disillusioned intellect. Socrates's "authority" over words entails a proper humility before the Real, the True, and the Beautiful; Humpty Dumpty's "authority" is swelled up with empty conceit; he believes he really is the measure of all things. He is the progeny of Protagoras, the modern "egg-head."

But we need to back up again to Socrates's time, in order to see that rhetoric is problematic even for those who believe that truth and beauty are Real. It is problematic—especially for those who consistently argue both sides—because it begins to look as though one can, simply by learning and applying a methodology, build an argument that is persuasive without regard to the Real. Worse yet, regardless of the technical skill of the arguer, and independently of her consistency in the application of her skill, the very same argument may appear true to some listeners and false to others. After a while, she may begin to believe that this happens because *contingency* is the one true thing. Consequently, rhetoric comes to be understood as a "knack" at self-expression and/or propaganda, rather than a means of pointing

to or describing truth. For Socrates, the error exhibited by this line of thought is its *irresponsibility*. It is not merely foolish, but wrong to locate responsibility for the effects of an argument in the argument itself; the argument is merely a tool in the hands of an agent. A further complication for those living after the "linguistic turn" is the commonly held belief that the only observable data is how language works or doesn't work. We can't get beyond language to what (if anything) really is, so we can't talk about the Real, or the True, or the Beautiful. We can only express our own views, desires, and beliefs because even if there were such things as objective reality or truth or beauty, we don't have any way to access them.

Here, I would like to begin to argue for the ethical use of rhetoric. I would like to maintain that those who argue are responsible for the effects of their arguments, especially those who chiefly argue in the company of those less skilled than themselves, and who call themselves "teachers." I would point out that even those of us who believe the author is "dead," must admit that we are not—that while we might be willing to permit Dickens to displace some of his alleged "authorial" responsibility onto the socio-political matrix that was Victorian England—we are somewhat less willing to displace our own responsibility as the "authors" or "translators" of our courses or our scholarly articles. However, the field of ethics suffers the lack of real referents along with the field of rhetoric. There are some who argue that there are no observable "facts" of the matter about what is good or bad. This subjectivist school of ethics represented by A.J. Ayers is sometimes nicknamed "Boo! Ray!" ethics, because it contends that when one says stealing is bad (for example) one is only saying, "Boo! Stealing!" And one when says giving to the poor is good, one is only saying, "Ray! Giving!" Here is a more formal expression of the position by Ayers; ". . . in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind. I am merely expressing certain

moral sentiments" (107).¹⁵ So, according to the subjectivist school of ethics, while I may think I am talking about good and evil, what I am actually doing is engaging in self-expression.

J. L. Mackie further argues that a moral "fact," which could both tell us whether or not something was right and also motivate us to act accordingly is something which would be "too queer to be believed." In summing up his argument in favor of moral skepticism, Mackie's second point is "the metaphysical peculiarity of the supposed objective values, in that they would have to be intrinsically action-guiding and motivating" (49).¹⁶ Despite such arguments, I find it difficult to suppress the belief that there is anything quite so *queer* about the ubiquitous situation of moral suasion that faces me in my off-duty moments as a moral agent. It may be epistemologically "queer" that the factual situation of a child's drowning makes moral demands that are experienced as obligations, but to deny them their weight is to court a fate worse than any degree of intellectual discomfort. Nor can many claim that the moral suasion that such situations engender is merely a function of the language used to describe the events. It is an utterly unyielding fact of our experience that the real does in fact make a claim against us in moments of moral obligation, and this brings us back to the topic at hand. What are we to make of this apparent irruption into our tidy intellectual world of a sense of real obligation and responsibility? Will we allow our post-modernist sensibilities to be swayed? And if so, where shall we make the necessary intellectual adjustments?

In addition to these difficulties, rhetoric and ethics also share the problem of the third, or Mikhail Bakhtin's "super-addressee." Socrates believed that a given of human life was divine supervision. Bakhtin's super-addressee does not have to be God, but it does have to be capable

¹⁵ From his *Language, Truth, and Logic*

¹⁶ From his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*

of a broader perspective than either of the two or more parties involved in any particular dialogue or course of action. While the dilemma of referents can enable evasions of responsibility with regard to the particular; the dilemma of super-addressees can enable evasions of responsibility with regard to the universal. In his explanation of this problem, Wendell Berry discusses the necessity of internal and external accounting when using language.¹⁷ According to Berry, the problems of relying only on internal accounting are radical subjectivism and relativism, while the problems of relying only on external accounting are false objectivism and that irresponsibility which is the consequence of holding to a rigidly deterministic line. These problems are manifest in ethics as well.

Paradoxically, though recourse to the universal is a strength with regard to ethics—it is, of course, the test of the categorical imperative in Kant’s moral system—Umberto Eco, in his essay "On Being," suggests that recourse to the universal does not indicate the strength of reason, but rather the weakness of discourse. Language always fails to be particular enough: "It is impossible to say just what I mean"¹⁸ On the other hand, recent attempts to salvage the universal for the purpose of grounding ethics, such as Christine Korsgaard’s *The Sources of Normativity*, attempt to frame the universal *within* the individual’s conception of his or her own self-identity, as that which is alone seen as fundamentally inviolable.

The situation of moral suasion tells us that that which is real and true does in fact obligate us. The common dilemma facing rhetoric and ethics is the post-linguistic turn conviction that there is no way to get behind language to any real referents or any “truth of the matter.” As a consequence, since there is no way to judge whether language “squares” with the

¹⁷ See his essay, “Standing by Words”

¹⁸ T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Real, the only grounds on which to evaluate rhetoric are utilitarian. And since "good" and "bad" are only words, the only grounds on which to evaluate ethics are also utilitarian, at best. But if what human persons experience and the words expressing those experiences can be fused by acts of *intentionality* into a signifier and sign of the same extra-linguistic reality, then perhaps we may be permitted to believe otherwise about even such abstract concepts as "good" and "evil" as well.

3. On Answerability and *Ethos*

In what follows, I will argue that one "cure" for the twin ailments of misology and misanthropy is answerability. I take the term from Mikhail Bakhtin's first published essay, in which he proposes answerability as what is needed to bridge the chasm between life and art.¹⁹ To be answerable is to be personally accountable for one's life in one's art—and for one's art in one's life. The answerable person has no alibi in Being; just existing in a particular place at a particular time entails responsibility. *Contra* Hume's law, the "ought" is derived from what is.²⁰ And what "is" for Bakhtin, is the human person—who is seen as the center of both art and life. It is this focus of Bakhtin which motivates his attempt in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* to "detranscendentalize Kant, and more particularly to think beyond Kant's formulation of the ethical imperative" (ix). Bakhtin's philosophy could be classified as personalist,²¹ one which

¹⁹ "Art and Answerability" first appeared in "The Day of Art" on September 13, 1919.

²⁰ Hume's law asserts that one cannot derive an "ought" from an "is," that there is no logical bridge over the gap between fact and value. See *A Treatise of Human Nature* (3.1.1.).

²¹ Personalism, a philosophical position which posits the human person as the center of value and the fundamental category for explaining reality, was developed in the 19th century. It puts persons and personal relationships at the center of theory. Notable personalist philosophers include Emmanuel Mounier and Gabriel Marcel (France), Borden Bowne (America), Max Scheler (Germany), Karol Wojtyla (Poland), and Erazim Kohak (Czech Republic). Apart from its united insistence on the primacy of the person, there is no clear or distinct set of beliefs or methods

posits the human person as the irreducible center of meaning and value. In order to be answerable, one must express intentionality clearly, pay close attention to persons, be willing to act on one's knowledge, and take responsibility for one's actions.

Radical skepticism is inimical to answerability, for much the same reasons fear is inimical to love. Against those who argue that only an objective indifference can lead to correct vision and understanding, Bakhtin warns that "an indifferent or hostile reaction is always a reaction that impoverishes and decomposes its object: it seeks to pass over the object in all its manifoldness, to ignore it or to overcome it" (1993: 64). In the place of indifference, Bakhtin asserts the necessity of love:

. . . only love is capable of holding and making fast all this multiformity and diversity, without losing and dissipating it, without leaving behind a mere *skeleton* of basic lines and sense-movements. . . . only lovingly interested attention, is capable of generating a sufficiently intent power to encompass and retain the concrete manifoldness of Being, without impoverishing and schematizing it. (1993: 64, emphasis is mine)

Admittedly, Bakhtin is discussing aesthetic seeing here, but this does not invalidate the application of the principle to life. Productive aesthetic seeing²² requires love, yes—and since the answerable person must be (in the unity of her own answerability) the bridge between art and life—it follows that this kind of *passional* seeing will be productive in life as well. To see correctly, then, requires a willingness to trust, to cast aside the fear that we'll be violated if we risk personal involvement with the literary works we study, or their authors, or our colleagues and students.

shared by all personalists. For example, some are theists, some hold no religious beliefs; some are idealists (particularly the Americans) and some are dualists.

²² Not "productive" in a material sense, but productive in the sense that the result is embodied rather than "skeletal."

Coleridge was onto something more important than he realized when he talked about the necessity to willingly suspend disbelief, because the kind of radical skepticism (and what is skepticism if not a prejudice against belief?) that has become regnant since the linguistic turn has done more than curtail our abilities to meaningfully read poetry. It has crippled us as human beings. In an era where irony is both cultivated in the academy and practiced as the default mode of "conversation" in the street, we need to take to heart what Bakhtin wrote about irony in his notes made in 1970-1971: "Irony is a form of silence" (134).

If misanthropy and misology arise in similar ways, perhaps they can be cured in similar ways as well. It is not that we need to be uncritical, even Socrates noted that being uncritical in the wrong ways results in misplaced trust, but rather that we need to be careful that our criticism isn't the kind that enables us to eschew responsibility. It is not that we need naively believe *everything*, or return to a kind of linguistic realism that outrageously claims that words are simply transparent upon reality, such that every word instantiates a real universal, accurately and adequately dividing extra-linguistic reality at the joints. It is rather that we must not cynically refuse to believe in the possibility of a linguistic openness to reality because of an intellectual history of being misled in the opposite direction. We need to remember, as Socrates reminds Phaedo, that we are still "intellectual invalids," and practice a hermeneutics of humility. We need to become answerable, to be willing, as Bakhtin puts it, "to develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person" (*Toward a Philosophy* 52). One way of doing this in the realm of literary studies is to pay close attention to *ethos*—the way character emerges from and is related to language.

Attention to *ethos* can take many forms; one could examine a literary work for the *ethos* of its author or narrator, or for the relationship of its characters to their language or the language

of other characters about them. One could ask about the limitations of particular types of language as bearers of character—the *ethos* of the identity paper vs. the *ethos* of a letter. This may lead to additional exploration into the relationship of *ethos* and genre; how *ethos* functions within epic vs. within the novel, for example. And in all these examinations, one can consider whether what is written by scholars on the literary work is answerable. What *ethos* emerges from the “readings” of the literary works I study? From the “readings” I myself write?

4. Incarnation²³

Ethos and answerability are significantly joined by their mutual relatedness to what Bakhtin calls “embodiment.” Language textually incarnates character. Answerability incarnates in those who accept their having “no alibi in Being” the disparate and divided spiritual and material elements of art and life within the unity of their persons.

The fact that Mikhail Bakhtin’s celebrated theories, which emphasize embodiment or enfleshment and urge personal engagement, owe much to his being an Orthodox Christian and his incorporation of specifically Christological language adapted from the Chalcedonian definition, is seldom remarked upon. A notable exception to this is Alexandar Mihailovic’s book, Corporeal Words, in which he writes, “The Chalcedonian subtext offers the most irrefutable proof of Bakhtin’s engagement in the aesthetic implications of christological [sic] categories” (127). But literary and critical theories which posit absence are currently in ascendance, and theories which stipulate presence are often overlooked or dismissed as dated, irrelevant and/or naïve. It may be just that these theories’ relationship to Christianity, which at one time may have advanced them, now contributes to their marginalization. What should be intellectually

²³ An earlier, more “conversational” version of this section was presented at the South Central Modern Language Association conference in New Orleans in October, 2004

unacceptable is the reduction of such terms as “incarnational theory” or “Christian thought” to mere jargon. It is often vacuously taken for granted that everyone knows the Christian paradigms while, in point of fact, it cannot be safely assumed that the vast majority of students or scholars of English even loosely understand traditional Christian doctrines. This lack of understanding is partially due to the fact that although traditional Christian doctrines were formalized during the period of the Seven Ecumenical Councils (4th-8th centuries), the most readily available scholarship in English on traditional Christian doctrine and its applications is written from the perspective of the divided and contradictory positions of post-reformation and counter-reformation Western Church history. As a result, even those scholars who are responsibly attempting to represent traditional Christian perspectives are sometimes unintentionally re-inscribing errors.

There are substantive correspondences between the theological question of how exactly God could be with us in a human form, and the literary and ethical questions of how *ethos* can be in a literary work. There is nothing “simplistic” about the doctrine of the incarnation described by the Chalcedonian definition,²⁴ and it may be usefully adapted to serve as an approximate representation of *ethos*. What makes this feasible is not only the similarities between the problems, but the belief that what is at stake with regard to rightly understanding both the incarnation and *ethos* is life, itself.

No matter how abstract the discussions and debates which occurred surrounding the Ecumenical Councils may initially seem, the real motivation of the conciliar fathers was a burning pastoral concern to safeguard Christian teaching regarding personal salvation. It was

²⁴ The patristic fathers recognized this definition as, at best, an approximate representation of the incarnation.

important to get the doctrine of the incarnation right, because if it wasn't, what would result was a dissipation of the gospel, the good news of man's salvation by God, and the replacement of a lively faith with a despair arising from heresy. Jim W. Corder manifests symptoms of a secular analogue of this despair as he wrestles with the personal consequences of his profession's overturning the belief that *ethos* is in the text, despite its twenty-five-hundred-year tradition ("Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne" 347-48). He believes that what's at stake is his own existence; "If *ethos* is not in the text, if the author is not autonomous, I'm afraid that I've lost my chance not just for survival hereafter (that happened some time ago) but also for identity now" (348). The specific context of this quotation is Corder's conviction that the alleged "death of the author" is not merely an abstraction; it means—since he himself is an author—his own death, or—at least—a loss of personal identity. In both debates, that over the incarnation and that over the existence of *ethos* in the text, survival of persons and their relationships are preeminent concerns, whether or not the persons are authors, narrators, characters, or readers.

When we talk about written texts in terms of "voice" and "person," we are—of course—in the world of metaphors. But metaphors work because they express similarities between unlike objects which enable readers to approach some uncanny truth. That the metaphorical association of literary works and persons is so established and pervasive strongly suggests that it is *doxic* for us. We routinely discuss the voice or voices of literary works. Some of our responses toward censorship of literary works suggest that there is more at stake than whether or not a particular arrangement of graphemes is published. And our gut-level revulsion in the face of the burning of books reveals an innate—if not easily articulated—belief that more is at stake in this act than the physical destruction of reproducible, material objects.

What provides the warrant for categorizing these kinds of concerns as ultimate is the belief that persons matter ultimately. One reason the dominant literary/critical personalist paradigm of the 20th century — intentionalism — fell into disfavor was the fact that taking the author’s intentions seriously didn’t seem to perform any particularly useful function in the actual interpretation of literary works.²⁵ While I am not calling for the reinstatement of intentionalism *simpliciter*, I do believe it worthwhile to note that from an ontological perspective it is dangerous to reject a practice on utilitarian grounds. Perhaps the value of a rightly formulated personalist paradigm is not what it can *do*, but what it can *prevent*. Thinking of literary works in terms of persons and personal relationships not only prevents “the forgetting of being”,²⁶ it also — as Bakhtin reminds us — requires us to “assume a personal position in being” (“Author & Hero”, 129). Bakhtin further claims that practical orientation within a theoretical world is impossible; “it is impossible to live in it, impossible to perform answerable acts” (Toward a Philosophy 9). There is no way out into life from within the position of pure aesthetic seeing (14), and yet “aesthetic being is closer to the actual unity of Being-as-life than the theoretical world is” (18).

The inherent relationships between aesthetic seeing and Being-as-life, and between language and being, are in themselves sufficient justification for the pursuit of literary studies, but due in part to anxiety over whether or not the profession of literary scholarship is “scientific” enough, literary studies has succumbed to injections of materialist paradigms inimical or irrelevant to its traditional, broadly humanistic charter, with lamentable results. For

²⁵ For more on this see, in Wayne Booth’s *The Company We Keep*, “Why Ethical Criticism Fell on Hard Times.”

²⁶ Milan Kundera, “The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes” in his *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher. New York: Grove Press (1988), 17.

example, when I attended the summer 2003 convening of the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate, the representative faculty and students from the English departments of Columbia, Duke, Indiana University, Ohio State, Texas A&M, the University of Michigan, and the University of Pittsburg could reach no consensus on what exactly it was that their doctoral programs were supposed to be preparing their students to do, let alone which works ought to be studied, or what the value of studying English is. In fact, these questions were tabled, and it was proposed that in lieu of such consensus perhaps agreement might be reached concerning methodologies. I was forcefully reminded of Roger Scruton's statement in his essay "On Humane Education," ". . . when methods are proposed in the humanities, you can be sure that the proposal stems from disaffection: people seek for method in the humanities only when they have fallen out of relation with the object of their study—just as we take a scientific view of other people only at the margin, when we find that we can relate to them in no other way" (253). Or, as Bakhtin reminds us, *non-incarnated* thought is also possible. Non-incarnated thought is "any thought that is not correlated with myself as the one who is obligatively unique" (*Toward a Philosophy*, 28). A passional and incarnational approach to reading and interpreting literary works requires personal relationships with these works—more particularly with the authors, narrators, characters, and other readers of them.

Apart from their human value, considered as intentional acts of persons which have as part of their purpose communicating something to other persons, the study of literary works can become just one more manifestation of a brute material will-to-power.²⁷ But a person clearly is not a literary work, and a literary work is not a person, so how can the relationship between the

²⁷ Or, as St. Paul puts it, even fluency in the language of angels is reduced to the sound and meaninglessness of noisy gongs, without love (I Corinthians 13).

author and the written word be conceptualized in a way that does justice to both our knowledge of the nature of texts, and our desire to rightly value actual human persons?

The early Christian Church faced a broadly analogous situation, given its own more purely soteriological concerns, in describing and defining the nature of Christ. If Christ isn't both fully divine and fully human, the conciliar Fathers reasoned, the salvation of the whole person is impossible, despite Christ's death and resurrection. Full divinity is necessary because only God can save, and full humanity, because only what was assumed into the life of the Trinity and divinized would be saved. This necessity was the warrant for condemning as heretical any beliefs which discredited either the humanity or divinity of Christ. Equally condemned was the notion that there were two persons, and not only two natures, in Christ; for if, in the person of Christ, there could be no communication between the divine and the human, it would follow that there could also be none in human persons. Here, then, is the Chalcedonian

Definition:

Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all with one voice teach that it should be confessed that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the Same perfect in Godhead, the Same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the Same [consisting] of a rational soul and a body; *homoousios* (consubstantial) with the Father as to His Godhead, and the Same *homoousios* (consubstantial) with us as to His manhood; in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of the Father before ages as to His Godhead, and in the last days, the Same, for us and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin Theotokos as to His manhood;

One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, made known in two natures [which exist] without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the difference of the natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union, but rather the properties of each being preserved, and [both] concurring into one *prosopon* and one hypostasis—not parted or divided into two *prosopa*, but one and the Same Son and Only-begotten, the divine Logos, the Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from of old [have spoken] concerning Him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and as the Symbol of the Fathers (the Nicene Creed) has delivered to us.²⁸

²⁸ Adapted from Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. I, 524.

The enduring intellectual scandal of Christianity is its apparently self-contradictory insistence that its founder was both human, like us, and yet fully divine and worthy of the absolute devotion and worship due the Godhead.

Returning now to the context of literary studies, let me make the analogy explicit: the enduring intellectual scandal of the literary work is that it is inextricably related to being,²⁹ and yet is also the product of linguistic and semantic systems. From the perspective of personalism, the relatedness to being of literary works must be privileged, but this does not at all mean that their instantiation in material systems is insignificant. What personalism can do is provide the warrant for taking literary works *and* their material systems seriously.

I offer the following adaptation of the Chalcedonian definition to literary studies as a working draft:

It should be admitted that the literary work is related to being in that it is the product of a unique personal author, and is capable of interpretation by virtue of its instantiation in a given linguistic and semantic system. The literary work is thus both truly personal and truly linguistic, the same consisting of traces of the presence of a unique person, or persons (*ethos*) and of graphemes employed in conformity to, or defiance of, a given linguistic system.

Thus, a literary work can be said to consist in two natures, the personal and the linguistic, which exist despite inevitable confusion and change, without division or separation; the difference in natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union, but rather the properties of each being preserved, and both concurring into one *prosopon* (outward appearance or expression) and one *hypostasis* (substance, stuff or material out of which something is made)—not parted or divided into two *prosopa*.

²⁹ As Umberto Eco, following Aristotle, writes, “Whether it is said in one or many ways, being is something that is said” (22), or as Bakhtin asserts, “Language and the word are almost everything in human life” (“Problem of the Text” 118).

Such a definition clarifies what are the subjects of literary study. It posits the value of persons as the warrant for the importance of literary study while acknowledging that our communicable knowledge of persons entails the use of language, and therefore legitimizes the formal study of linguistics and other conventional mechanical and/or structural systems related to language and interpretation.

Recourse to the doctrine of the incarnation in approaching literary studies need not be simplistic or naïve. Most readers of literary works describe their experience of reading in personal terms. They hear voices. They love some authors and/or characters and hate others. In his ethics of fiction, suggestively titled *The Company We Keep*, Wayne Booth describes authors as potential friends. He also argues that: “the ideal of purging oneself of responses to persons, the ideal of refusing to play the human roles offered us by literature, is never realized by any actual reader who reads a compelling fiction for the sake of reading it (rather than for the sake of obtaining material as an essay, dissertation, or book)” (255-56). In her book, *Love’s Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum asserts that, [o]ur actual relation to the books we love is already messy, complex, erotic. We do “read for life. . .” (29). And even some scholars who lecture on the death of the author in seminars on Wednesday afternoons also argue for inclusion of works by marginalized authors so that their voices can be heard, thereby implicitly endorsing an incarnational understanding of literary works.

What I am suggesting is that we can—in a manner analogous to that of the conciliar fathers looking at Christ and attempting to describe, explain and analyze His actions both in terms of His divine and human natures—look at a literary work and describe, explain and analyze it both in terms of what Bakhtin calls “*utterance*,” the unrepeatable, unique statement which can only be rightly understood in its relationship to persons, and *sentence*, that which is

repeatable and whose meaning is determined by its functional relationship within a given linguistic or semantic system. ("Problem of the Text" 108). While Bakhtin contends that "the event of the life of the text. . . its true essence, always develops on the boundary between two consciousnesses, two subjects" ("Problem of the Text" 106), my starting point here is a description of the literary work (what he's calling a "text") itself. A literary work is the site of union between the personal and the material—the *voice* and the *word*; maximal interpretation of literary works requires attention be paid to both the work as the habitation of *ethos*, and the work as text. Unless one believes something like this about the literary work, one cannot logically move on to claim, as Bakhtin does, that there are two "consciousnesses" or "subjects" involved in literary interpretation, because a text that is simply "material" or the brute product of a system of graphemes and signifiers could not reasonably be described as having "consciousness" or as being a "subject." Such a text would be an object, and Bakhtin asserts that a "text is not a *thing*" ("Problem of the Text" 107, emphasis is mine).

5. Answerable Textual Relationships

Answerability entails a belief in *ethos*, and *ethos* and answerability enable us to respond to Socrates' worries about "orphan texts." In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates contends that no one "with serious intent" would write words "in water or that black fluid we call ink, using his pen to sow words that can't either speak in their own defense or present the truth adequately" (276c). Socrates claims that the only thing a written text can do is jog the memory of a person who already knows "that which the writing is concerned with" (275d). For though words may "seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent . . . if you ask them anything about what they say . . . they go on telling you just the same thing forever" (275d). In a mundane way, this is just an indisputable fact; the written text does not physically alter itself in response to any individual

reader's questions or desires. But Socrates' belaboring of this fact suggests belief in an uncomplicated and transparent relationship between graphemes and meaning. In Bakhtin's terms, Socrates is failing to take into account *utterance* (that which is created) due to his unifocal concentration on *sentence* (that which is given). Again, other than in a mundane way, it does *not* have to be the case that,

[O]nce a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself. (275d)

If a child's parents die, that child is by definition an orphan—but the child may be adopted or placed in the care of competent (one hopes) guardians. Similarly, the literary work does not depend entirely upon its author(s) for correct interpretation, representation, and support. It may be “adopted”, along with related works, for responsible reading and interpretation by a class of students, guided by a competent guardian—or teacher. It may be picked up by an individual reader who, albeit untrained and unsophisticated, responds to it charitably. It may, of course, also be misused, misinterpreted, censored, or even burned but, *contra* Socrates, misuse or misunderstanding is not the inevitable fate of written compositions.

By attending to *ethos*—the way character emerges from and is related to language—in our readings of literary works, and by encouraging answerability in our discussions, lectures, and articles about literary works, we can keep the human person at the center of the humanities. This, I suggest, will make us both better scholars and better people, and will enable us to answer one final “worry” of Socrates as expressed in his seventh letter; “I was not guided by the motives

that some men attributed to me, but chiefly by a concern for my self-respect. I feared to see myself at last altogether nothing but words. . ." (328c)

6. Genre, Answerability, and *Ethos*

Mikhail Bakhtin answers Socrates' worry by insisting on personal responsibility; "the answerable act or deed alone surmounts anything hypothetical, for the answerable act is, after all, the actualization of a decision—inescapably, irremediably, and irrevocably" (Toward a Philosophy 28). Answerability is that which can bridge the gap between those things which are already given and those things which are being created. The majority of Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophical concepts can be categorized as belonging to one of these two classes. This observation is part of what warrants my selection of the novelized epic for this project, given my focus on answerability and *ethos*. In the process of its novelization, the epic becomes answerable as it is shifted from the class of "the already given" to the class of "that which is created." In fact, Bakhtin's ascribing a higher value to the novel is predicated on his privileging of "that which is being created" over "that which is already given;" his obvious preference for the novel over the epic is a manifestation or symptom of this preference. The process Bakhtin labels "novelization" in his essay, "Epic and Novel" then, can be understood as the process of the epic's becoming "answerable."

With this in mind, a comparison of the descriptors used of epic and novel, on the one hand, and of answerable, incarnated thought and non-participative, un-incarnated thought, should prove illustrative and suggestive. In his essay, "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin provides the following list of epic's three "constitutive features":

- (1) a national epic past—in Goethe's and Schiller's terminology the "absolute past" serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the

epic; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives. (13)

This “epic distance,” its lack of connections to the present (15), is at one and the same time a constitutive feature of the genre of epic, and an ethical weakness of the genre from the perspective of one primarily concerned with answerability. According to Bakhtin, epic just is “inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation” (16).³⁰ If, in order to be answerable, one must “develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person” (*Toward a Philosophy* 52), and if epic, generically speaking, does not permit personal participation, then epic is an ethically suspect genre.

The novel, by way of comparison, “comes into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present” (“Epic and Novel” 27), and thus invites and obligates its readers to participate—not only by affirming, but by interrogating the work. Here is Bakhtin’s list of the three basic characteristics distinguishing the novel from other genres:

(1) its stylistic three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-languaged consciousness realized in the novel; (2) the radical change it effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image; (3) the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness. (11)

The “new zone opened up by the novel,” this “zone of maximal contact with the present,” is what makes answerability possible within the context of the novel. This zone makes possible not only the relationship between author and the narrators and/or characters of their literary works,

³⁰ This is an arguable claim, but my purpose here is not to argue with Bakhtin, but to describe his thinking about literature and his thinking about ethics, and to suggest the interrelatedness of the two.

but also the relationships between author/narrator/character and reader. That this present is characterized as “open-ended,” as opposed to the “absolute past” of the epic indicates the degree to which epic and novel are opposed in Bakhtin’s thought. The novel is superior to the epic because it participates in the ongoing process of creation in a way that epic cannot. Epic shows us what was (or what might have been); the novel enables or requires us to be subjects within the world it is always in the process of creating. Finally, the superiority of the novel is evidenced by the “novelization” of other genres which come into contact with it. To acknowledge this is not to demean the epic, but to acknowledge its formal character and the limits its form puts on the construction of certain kinds of meaning. What epic records is events; Bakhtin’s focus is actions.

The connection between aesthetics and ethics is the answerable human person. The center of value for both aesthetics and ethics is the human person. The common intentional object of both aesthetic and ethical “vision” is the human person, and the mode of that seeing—for Bakhtin—is love, not only because loving vision is responsible or moral, but because only loving vision is capable of being constructive and affirming of its intentional object. And recourse to love does permit of some relationship between the authors, heroes and readers of epic—even for Bakhtin—because “the dead are loved” too, albeit they are loved “in a different way” (Epic and Novel 20). We can memorialize the dead; we cannot communicate with them. The dead “are removed from the sphere of contact” (20), and therefore from the possibility of both real relationship and concomitant answerability. What the novelization of epic entails, then, is “a battle to drag [it] into a zone of contact with reality” (39), to render the genre one which permits, or requires, answerability.

My reason for selecting novelized epics as the focus of this project, then, is that—given the relatively non-controversial characterization of classical epics at least—it should be fairly simple to describe the ways the particular works I've chosen deviate from classical epics. This will enable me to spend more time looking at the meaning of the deviations, rather than becoming bogged down in the kinds of generic arguments beginning with a genre with a less stable definition would require. To qualify for consideration, then, the novelized epic had to have enough of the fundamental characteristics of classical epic to make analysis of deviations from those characteristics both possible and meaningful. I do not expect that each of the three works will deviate from classical epic in exactly the same ways, but I do expect that the deviations will be explainable within the context of answerability. Despite the significance of genre to this project, genre is not its primary focus. After briefly analyzing each literary work as a novelized epic, I will move on to examine in more depth the relationship between language and character in each novelized epic, as well as my own role as a reader and an author.

CHAPTER II

GETTING THE 'RIGHT GOOD' FROM A BOOK: READING THE PERSON IN ELIZABETH

BARRETT BROWNING'S *AURORA LEIGH*

1. Prologue: The Movement from Art to Life

Sonnets from the Portuguese: XXVI

I lived with visions for my company
 Instead of men and women, years ago,
 And found them gentle mates, nor thought to know
 A sweeter music than they played to me.
 But soon their trailing purple was not free
 Of this world's dust, their lutes did silent grow,
 And I myself grew faint and blind below
 Their vanishing eyes. Then thou didst come--to be,
 Beloved, what they seemed. Their shining fronts,
 Their songs, their splendours, (better, yet the same,
 As river-water hallowed into fonts)
 Met in thee, and from out thee overcame
 My soul with satisfaction of all wants:
 Because God's gifts put men's best dreams to shame.

I begin with this sonnet because it presents, in 14 lines, an analogue to the argument presented in *Aurora Leigh* with regard to the fraught relationship between art and life. In the sonnet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning charts the movement from art to life in her own life, a movement she credits to her husband, Robert Browning. The "visions" she describes are not merely daydreams but rather the characters inhabiting the literary works she voraciously consumed from an early age. Under their influence, she grows "faint and blind," until Robert comes. He is what they merely "seemed" to be. The syntax of the sonnet's last sentence is complicated, as is the idea it attempts to communicate; Barrett Browning is not saying that the coming of Robert simply supplanted her fond literary shades, but rather that their "shining fronts," "songs," and "splendours. . . [m]et in" him. The parenthetical simile compares literary

shades with “river-water” and Robert with a font, and suggests that the means of their relatedness is “hallow[ing].” It is Barrett Browning’s “soul” which has all its wants satisfied as a result, because “God’s gifts (Robert) put men’s best dreams (the visions of literary shades) to shame.” Art and life are clearly related in the sonnet, and the ligature joining them is love. All that “seems” good in art becomes truly good only when incarnated in an individual person; the person “hallows” the visions—not the visions the person.

The movement described in the poem also describes the progress of Aurora in Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*. Consider, for example, the echoes of the conclusion of the sonnet in these lines from the last book of *Aurora Leigh* (*AL*): “Art is much, but love is more. / O Art, my Art, thou’rt much, but Love is more! / Art symbolizes heaven, but Love is God / And makes heaven” (9:656-59). In the second book of *AL*, Aurora announces her vocation as a poet in her rejection of Romney’s proposal of marriage. By the fifth book, she has indeed become a poet and has sent the manuscript of her “great” work off for publication, but she is not happy and has no close human relationships. By the seventh book, she confesses, “Books succeed, / and lives fail. Do I feel it so, at last?” (7:704-5). It is only after Aurora finally admits her love for Romney that poetry regains its significance and promise for her. There is nothing simple about this movement. Art is valuable, but all that “seems” good in art becomes truly good only when incarnated in an individual person; the person “hallows” the visions—not the visions the person.

2. Reading *Aurora Leigh* as a Novelized Epic

We have been, whether knowingly or not, whether directly or not, part of a twenty-five-hundred-year-old tradition that allowed and encouraged us to believe that *ethos* is in the text, that authors do exist, that they can be in their words and own them even in the act of giving them away. Now literary theorists both compelling and influential tell us that it is not so, that *ethos* exists if at all only in the perceiving minds of readers, that authors, if they exist, do so somewhere else, not in their words, which have already been interpreted by their new owners. Language is orphaned from its speaker; what we once thought was happening has been disrupted. Authors, first distanced, now fade away into nothing. Not even ghosts, they are projections cast by readers. “They” out there want, that is to say, to take my own voice away from me and give such meaning as there might be over entirely to whoever might show up as an interpreter. “They” want me—and him out there—to die into oblivion if I should manage to write something, never to be reborn in a voice from some reader but to vanish before that reader’s construction/deconstruction/reconstruction of the small thing I leave behind.

Can I get a witness? . . . Will anyone notice that he may be here, that I may be, that this is the way I talk, that this is what in my mind passes for thinking, that this may be myself? Life is real, and the artificial compartments we create for it don’t work. What gets said in one place keeps slopping over and meaning something in other places. I’m no longer talking just about literary theory, if I ever was. I’m talking about my own identity now, the nuttiness that is mine, and whatever might be his. Jim Corder, “Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne” 348-49)

Ethos is a complicated concept. I endorse a Platonic understanding of *ethos* with regard to the personal responsibility of a person for his or her words. I also endorse the notion that readers can, by way of charitable and humble participation, experience the presence of characters—whether real or fictional—in literary works; *ethos* is real. I do understand, and willingly acknowledge that *ethos* cannot be discovered in the literary work without a reader, but I also insist that it cannot be discovered if it is not already *there* to be discovered. Another complication I acknowledge, one Corder admits to just a few sentences after the passage I’ve reproduced, is that people write “as much to hide as to reveal. . . so that [they] might show the writing to others and not be required to show [themselves]” (349). There is, after all, more to any

of us than meets the eye, and by admitting this, Corder echoes some of Elizabeth's and Aurora's declamations.³¹ But Corder is writing near the close of the twentieth century; Elizabeth near the middle of the nineteenth, and her readers, though not oblivious of the problematic relationship between subjectivity and art, are not the hardened skeptics Corder expects to find amongst his readers. Most of Elizabeth's contemporary readers expect to find her in her poetry, and assume her real presence in *Aurora Leigh*—at least those who read *Aurora Leigh* as a poem. There were also, however, many contemporary readers who read the novel-epic primarily as a novel. Readers who evaluated *Aurora Leigh* according to the standards for novels at that time found it weak for the very same reason readers who read it as a poem praised it: Aurora speaks with Barrett Browning's or Elizabeth's voice, and so do all the rest of the characters. It is fundamentally the putative presence of Elizabeth in *Aurora Leigh* which readers respond to—whether positively or negatively.

³¹ I use the name "Barrett Browning" to refer to the career author as well as the implied narrator of *Aurora Leigh*. I use the name "Elizabeth" to refer to what Booth calls "the flesh and blood author"—what I call the person.

The question of whether *Aurora Leigh* should be read primarily as a novel or a poem is a vexed one. I have chosen to use the term “novel-epic” to refer to *Aurora Leigh* because it is more specific than “verse-novel” and more descriptive of the genre of the work. “Novel” should modify “epic” —rather than “verse” modify “novel”—because *Aurora Leigh* is most usefully read as a novelized epic.³² While Elizabeth did write in at least one letter that she wanted *Aurora Leigh* judged as a novel, that she intended it as a novel in verse, and while it might be interesting and useful to hazard guesses as to why she does this, surely the intentional fallacy need not be courted—particularly with regard to formal matters. For now I want to continue to focus on how *ethos* and genre are related as regards the expectations of readers.

Take a look at the selected—but fairly representative—summary of contemporary reviews/criticism of *Aurora Leigh* reproduced on the next page. Positive evaluations are in the left-hand column; negative in the right-hand column.³³

³² Marjorie Stone employs this term in her discussions of the work.

³³ All reviews are taken from Sandra Donaldson’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: An Annotated Bibliography of the Commentary and Criticism*.

1857 [Eliot, George.] *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* 67:131 (January): 306-10.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is "all the greater poet because she is intensely a poetess. What is important is not the story of the poem but Barrett Browning's "rich thought and experience" expressed in it."

1857 *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*. New York. 9 (January):22-38. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's words are transparent and "betray the living soul within them"; to know her poems is to know her.

1859 Simonds, S.D. "Aurora Leigh." *Ladies' Repository* (Cincinnati, OH) 19 (October/November):611-15; 662-67. Elizabeth Barrett Browning has "beauty of the soul." She is "personally as beautiful as a lady need be to be truly loved," and thus "neither dangerous to herself nor others." *Aurora Leigh* may be Barrett Browning's own story but "all loved objects of the imagination take color and personality, however unconsciously, from ourselves."

1862 [Challen, J.?] *National Quarterly Review* (New York) 5:9 (June):134-48. To appreciate the poem, one must be "enraptured with the poet. . ."

(Fig. 1 Reviews/Criticisms of *Aurora Leigh*)

1857 *Boston Daily Courier*, 5 March, 2.

One of *Aurora Leigh's* main faults is that the characters "all talk exactly as Mrs. Browning would."

1861 [Stigand, William.] Review of *Poems* (4th ed.), *Aurora Leigh*, and *Poems Before Congress*. *Edinburgh Review* 114:232 (October):513-34.

Aurora Leigh is "a splendid failure in an impossible attempt." The characters are projections of Barrett Browning.

1862 *London Review and Weekly Journal of Politics, Literature, Art, and Society* 4:94 (19 April):375-77. *Aurora Leigh* is an original work, but a "provoking mixture of faults and beauties": as persons, Romney and Aurora are "insufferable prigs." Barrett Browning's failures may be attributed to her drawing "too little from observation and knowledge, too much from the depths of her own unique and passionate nature."

1868 Hincks, Edward Y. "Elizabeth Barrett Browning." In *Eminent Women of the Age*. Hartford, CT :S.M. Betts & Co., 221-49. Reprint. New York: Arno Press, *Women in America*, 1974. *Aurora Leigh* is far from great because the plot is improbable and the characters are puppets that "express the thoughts of the writer."

As a general rule, those who read *Aurora Leigh* primarily as a poem or subordinate formal concerns to their personal love and respect for Elizabeth or Barrett Browning write positive reviews of the novel-epic. Included in this category would be John Ruskin, who claimed *Aurora Leigh* to be the equal of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Readers who declared *Aurora Leigh* a failure, though not often using the word "novel" in their negative reviews, critique the narrative features of the novel-epic. *Aurora Leigh*'s characters are described as "projections" of Barrett Browning and/or Elizabeth, as "insufferable prigs," and as "puppets." They are all said to speak with Elizabeth's voice. While weak or unconvincing characterization is the most frequently mentioned novelistic flaw of the work, its "improbable" plot ranks a close second, and its dependency on other novels is often noted.³⁴ What is most interesting about all this, however, is that there is such strong consensus between those who praise and those who criticize *Aurora Leigh* regarding their perceived presence of Elizabeth in the work.

These contemporary readers of the novel-epic are not reaching different conclusions about the merits of the work because they are focusing on different elements of it, but rather because they either endorse or condemn the element which is obvious to all of them, namely the strong identification of the work with its real, flesh-and-blood author. Furthermore, the decision to endorse or condemn is largely influenced by which genre's conventions are being taken into account. If read as a poem—or as a type of Victorian sage literature—as Marjorie Stone suggests,³⁵ the conflation of the "I" of Aurora and the "I" of Elizabeth is acceptable; if read as a novel, the same conflation is seen as evidence of lack of novelistic skill in drawing realistic characters, further evidenced by the fact that all of the characters, and not just Aurora, allegedly speak in Barrett Browning's or Elizabeth's voices. In short, Barrett Browning is a subjective writer—which

³⁴ Staehl's *Corinne* and Bronte's *Jane Eyre* are most often mentioned.

³⁵ See "Juno's Cream: *Aurora Leigh* and Victorian Sage Discourse, in her book, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Women Writers Series (New York: St. Martin's Press):134-88.

is fine, to a point,³⁶ in a poet—but objectivity is required in order to write a good novel. It is the case, as feminist scholars have been pointing out for years, that there are negative reviews which consider *Aurora Leigh* insufficiently “feminine”, but a significant number of these are written by readers who are appalled in part because of what they see as a radical and perplexing disconnect between the work and its author. How could the woman who wrote *Sonnets from the Portuguese* write *Aurora Leigh*? How could such a strident voice come from such a small, excruciatingly modest woman? Here again, the readers assume a close correlation between the identity of Elizabeth and the identity of the implied authors of her works; they also expect there to be consistency of character expressed in the implied authors of her work.

So very little of Elizabeth’s life occurred apart from the reading and writing of literary works that it is genuinely difficult to demarcate her “real” life from her “literary” life. And given that the vast majority of her life was spent reading and writing both prose and verse, it almost seems inappropriate to try. However, it can be said that when people who knew Barrett Browning through her writing first meet Elizabeth in person, they often remark on the contrast between the strength of her (Barrett Browning’s) written voice and the fragility of her (Elizabeth’s) body. Elizabeth both draws attention to and makes a joke of the disconnect between her literary *corpus* and her physical body in a letter to Miss E.F. Haworth: “As for me, whom you recognize as ‘so much myself,’ dear, I have a stout pen, and, till its last blot, it will write, perhaps, with its ‘usual insolence’; (as a friend once said).” The “stout pen” of Barrett Browning is in vigorous health, and Elizabeth accepts with good humor her friend’s mistaking its stoutness with her own. There is a remarkable change of tone, however, in the letter’s next line, “but if you laid your hand on this heart, you would feel how it stops, and staggers, and fails.” This is, perhaps,

³⁶ “To a point” because there were readers who read the work as a poem and praised it as a vehicle for Elizabeth’s voice, but who also predicted that because of its peculiarly individualistic nature, it would not survive the test of time.

as a kinder, gentler non-fiction version of Aurora's retort to Romney, "You have read / My book, but not my heart" (8:475-76). Elizabeth seems to be making contradictory claims in *Aurora Leigh* and in her letters about the relationship between a writer and her words; she both asserts and denies identification with them, and so also with Barrett Browning. Elizabeth assures Arabella that the readers of *Aurora Leigh* will be able to see the truth of herself in the novel-epic. Barrett Browning / Aurora refuses to acknowledge any equivalency between Romney's reading her book and reading her heart.

3. Reading as an Ethical Enterprise

The attempt to find oneself in the product of the act/deed of aesthetic seeing is an attempt to cast oneself into non-Being. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (17)

The unity of the world in aesthetic seeing is not a unity of meaning or sense—not a systematic unity, but a unity that is concretely architectonic: the world is arranged around a concrete value center, which is seen and loved and thought. What constitutes this center is the human being: everything in this world acquires significance, meaning, and value only in correlation with man—as that which is human. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (61)

The claim that reading literature makes one a better person boasts a venerable tradition which has often been urged by the advocates of literature. There is another tradition of course, itself at least as old as Plato, which counters that certain kinds of literature ought to be banned because they are dangerous, inimical to the health of individual and societies. Both positions are grounded in the representative nature of literature. Those championing the cause of literature argue that because it is mimetic—because it does "mirror life"—literature is a means by which readers can learn about the real world and real people, both without being hazard to the risks entailed in gaining such knowledge by experience and to an extent that is, practically speaking, impossible apart from literature. Despite the concession that such knowledge is secondary, it is asserted that it is nonetheless valuable because it is transferable to real life, increasing readers' proficiency in both empathy and critical judgment. On the other hand, those warning against the

dangers of literature insist (beginning with Plato's Socrates) that precisely because literature does such a good job of representing the real world, it needs to be banned, or at least resisted. That it seems so much like the real thing may seduce those reading it into accepting literature as equal to life. Rather than serving as a means of gaining "virtual" experience, literature here is seen as offering a means of absconding from participation in real life.

In her argument with Romney about the relative merits of art versus social programs in making the world a better place, Aurora claims that art is better suited to motivate social change because all real change begins with the change of an individual soul, and that it is art—not social programs—which can best effect such change. She counters Romney's claims for his social programs, contending that he will be unable to effect substantive material improvement in the condition of the poor "without a poet's individualism / To work your universal," because "It takes a soul, / To move a body: it takes a high-souled man, / To move the masses, even to a cleaner sty" (2:475-81). Readers of *AL*, knowing it is a novel-epic written by a woman poet about a woman poet, expect to find within its pages proof of Aurora's claims. And they do indeed find an impassioned *ars poetica* in Book 5 which insists on the relevancy of art and asserts that contemporary social and political issues are the proper subjects of art. They witness the rise of Aurora as a poet whose skill is endorsed by peers and critics alike while simultaneously either witnessing (as in the case of the aborted marriage with Marian) or hearing about (as with the burning of Leigh Hall) the disastrous results of Romney's attempts at social engineering. They even hear, from Romney's own lips, his confession of being changed upon reading Aurora's great poem, and are generally reassured that Romney now classifies Aurora's poetry properly as her real "work," and will support her in it after their marriage.

What readers of *AL* do not see, though, is Aurora herself becoming a better person *as a result of her literary efforts*. Evidence abounds of her vast reading of both classical and

contemporary authors. We watch her as she discovers her father's books, and as she waits for daylight so she can begin reading the volume she's tucked under her pillow. We look over her shoulder as she describes her plan for becoming a great poet, and hear her as she criticizes her failed poems. We discover, in a letter to Aurora from Vincent Carrington, that her great work is indeed great, winning critical acclaim and a popular readership. Romney reverses his skepticism regarding women poets upon reading this work, confessing that he has found the truth in it. But, for all her literary acumen, Aurora fails to read—even competently—the people around her. More than that, she fails to read her own heart accurately, confessing finally that she “mistook [her] own heart, and that slip / Was fatal” (9:709-11). Her aunt, the functionally illiterate Marian, and even the much-maligned Lady Waldemar, are all better readers of Aurora's heart than is she. Aurora's incompetent reading of herself, Marian, Lady Waldemar, and Romney raises questions about the validity of her claims for art. There is no doubt that Aurora is changed in the progress of the novel-epic; her soul is in fact moved—but it is not moved by art, but rather by persons—not by reading or writing, but by love.

This discrepancy between Aurora's claim and the evidence available in *Aurora Leigh* to support it is not one which I've seen addressed, but which ought to be—if one takes Elizabeth seriously when she writes, in the dedication of the work to John Kenyon, that it contains her “highest convictions upon Life and Art.” My motivation to examine this discrepancy then, is my sense of obligation to Elizabeth, the flesh-and-blood author, to Barrett Browning, the career author as well as the implied author of *AL*, and Aurora, the narrator and main character of the novel-epic. In short, I am responding to persons—whether real or fictional—and taking their claims seriously. This is a kind of ethical criticism which involves paying close attention to the relationship between art and life, and which entails being “answerable,” as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin in his first published essay, “Art and Answerability”:

The true sense, and not the self-proclaimed sense, of all the old arguments about the interrelationship of art and life—that is, the real aspiration behind all such arguments—is nothing more than the mutual striving of both art and life to make their own tasks easier, to relieve themselves of their own answerability. For it is certainly easier to create without answering for life, and easier to live without any consideration for art.

Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability. (2)

What this unity of answerability would require of Aurora is that she “answer with [her] own life for what [she] ha[s] experienced and understood, so that everything [she] has experienced and understood [will] not remain ineffectual in [her] life” (Bakhtin, “Art and Answerability” 1). While Aurora argues from Book 1 of *AL* that poetry is important because it can change lives, it fails to change hers—at least spiritually. Her poems provide her with neither objects to love or with love itself. Again, despite Aurora’s claim that “We get no good/ by being ungenerous, even to a book” (1:702-3), for most of *AL* Aurora is generous *only* to books. She does not spring “headlong” into relationships with others, but is guarded and prideful and quick to judge. Even Aurora’s eventual kindness in offering a home to Marian is preceded by her swift judgment and easy condemnation of her. And as late as Book 8, Romney justifiably claims that Aurora wrongs him by misreading his “life-signature” and accepting a forgery of her own making in its place (8:1232-35). This is one of many reading and writing metaphors that occurs in *AL*. They are usually employed in a context that suggests misreading is taking place, as does this one.³⁷ Aurora, the famous poet and student of poetry, is seemingly incapable of transferring her secondary knowledge of literature into a useful primary knowledge of people. She wonders whether or not it is finally true that “Books succeed, / and lives fail” (7:704). Romney, who admits to having misjudged the world, acknowledges the futility of his socialistic schemes, and has

³⁷ For an earlier claim that Aurora misreads Romney, see 2:81-21. Note also Aurora’s counter-claim that she reads Romney quite well in 2:835-39, in which she compares his heart to a holy book she has closed.

suffered the loss of his family mansion and his sight as a consequence of this “misreading.” However, within the context of *AL*, his misreading—though severely punished—seems insignificant when compared to Aurora’s persistent misreading because Romney does not make the claims for reading that Aurora does. He champions action. If Aurora’s immersion in literature is not what changes her character for the better, what can be said about the relative merits of such immersion?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning lived almost entirely in language. In her essay on *AL*, Virginia Woolf argues that her literary experience takes the place of, or makes up for the absence of, actual experience; “Books were to her not an end in themselves but a substitute for living. She raced through folios because she was forbidden to scamper on the grass” (638). Consequently, given her own “life in books” as well as her escape from a merely literary life through her marriage to Robert, it is not surprising that in her most ambitious work, *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth interrogates the relationship between life and art. While much criticism indicates the ways in which reception of *Aurora Leigh*, in particular, and the status of Barrett Browning, in general, can be explained by identifying this work and its author as “feminist” within various “patriarchal”³⁸ contexts, and while all scholars of this work and author are indebted to the feminist scholars whose efforts have resulted in the re-recognition of Barrett Browning as a Victorian poet of the highest order, my approach to *Aurora Leigh* is only related to feminist criticism in that both can be said to fall under the broad canopy of ethical criticism. Rather than attempt to further bulwark or contest the claim that *Aurora Leigh* was marginalized and/or undervalued because of its feminist critique of society and representation of an independent heroine, I argue that getting “the best good” from *AL* entails reading the novel-epic not as a platform for promoting feminist concerns,

³⁸ I put these terms in quotations because I grow increasingly convinced that they have become terms which, rather than standing for any stable content (meaning) indicate endorsement or condemnation (evaluation). In some contexts, to say something is “feminist” to say it’s “good,” which is to say, “I endorse this thing I’m calling ‘feminist.’”

nor as speaking of any identified special interest group, but as a record of the voice of a mature individual profoundly interested in the relationship between art and life. To do this, I will perform a reading of the novel-epic that pays careful attention to persons. This requires thinking in terms of *ethos*. The rhetorical term *ethos*, which has the basic meaning of “character as it emerges in language,” has a complex history. My contribution to this history is both in the application of *ethos* to literary works,³⁹ and in my expansion of the basic definition of *ethos* to include the notion of character “as it emerges *from* language,” as the result of writing and/or reading literature. Here, I only attempt to provide sufficient context to clarify the approach to *ethos* I employ in this chapter, and how it is warranted by the kinds of problems and issues *Aurora Leigh* presents.

Lysias (B.C.E. 445-380) developed the technique of *ethopoeia* (discourse revealing character attributed to living persons) in response to the demand of the Athenian courts that people speak on their own behalf. The “ghost-speeches” he composed for others both had to be consistent with the character of the person facing the courts, and be persuasive. Many readers’ complaints that the speech ascribed to Marian in *Aurora Leigh* fails to accurately represent her station in life can be understood, in these terms, as a problem of *ethos*; a failure of Barrett Browning to write in a language which is appropriate to the character of Marian—so that the real character which emerges from Marian’s language is not Marian’s, but Aurora’s/ Barrett Browning’s—or, as is often remarked—Elizabeth’s.⁴⁰ To be just, it must be noted that—at least with regard to the first installment of Marian’s story in Book 3, Aurora admits she is not writing Marian’s story in Marian’s words: “She told me all her story out, / Which I’ll re-tell with fuller utterance, / As coloured and confirmed in aftertimes / By others and herself too” (3:827-30).

³⁹ I am indebted here, as elsewhere, to the late Jim W. Corder. See his “Varieties of Ethical Argument.” *Freshman English News* 6 (1978):1-23

⁴⁰ Such uniformity of style can be described as merely characteristic of epic.

However, this doesn't answer the common observation that the only voice in *Aurora Leigh* is Barrett Browning's.

Plato takes exception to Lysias' practice, saying that such use of rhetoric does nothing but exhibit a certain "knack" at getting what one wants even if that requires unscrupulous methods. Plato requires a personal relationship to and accountability for one's words. His standards for this accountability are so high that in some dialogues, the *Phaedrus*, for example, he condemns writing as immoral because the very act of writing separates the writer from his or her words, leaving behind—as it were—an orphan text that cannot answer for, explain, or defend itself. The distinction between Platonic and Aristotelian notions of *ethos* can be simply expressed as follows: for Plato, *ethos* defines the space where language and Truth meet and are made incarnate in the individual; for his student, Aristotle, *ethos* is an aspect of invention, which—together with *logos* and *pathos*—constitute types of artistic proofs in argument. Argument from or appeal to *ethos*, in Aristotelian terms, is character-based. Aristotle contended that the speaker's moral character is to be constructed within and by means of the speech itself, so *ethos* is the element of the speech which presents the speaker to the audience as trustworthy. A Platonic understanding of *ethos* is one which sees *ethos* primarily in terms of the relationship between the individual, his or her words, and Truth; it has strong moral implications. An Aristotelian understanding of *ethos* is one which sees *ethos* primarily in terms of construction, whether by language or by habit and/or convention. While it would be overly simplistic to claim that Plato is concerned with the spiritual and the personal, while Aristotle is concerned with the political and the social, the generalization is apt.

That Elizabeth studied Plato, in both Greek and in translation, is well known. Her volume of Plato, "bound like a novel" to deceive her doctors, is often remarked upon, and her understanding of the relationship between herself, language and Truth is essentially Platonic.

Elizabeth identifies strongly with her writing. For example, in a letter written to her sister, Arabella, a little less than a year before the publication of *Aurora Leigh*, she writes:

[T]he advantage for me is that though I write myself out with a good deal of frankness, neither you nor Robert will find much, if anything in me objectionable—the poetry will wrap me up & make me acceptable. Why? just because I express myself better, more intensely, in poetry--& then you *see* the truth of me—understand me—which you don't, in poor conversational prose. [February 27, 1856]

This is a clear statement of the intimacy that Elizabeth claims exists between herself and the implied author (Barrett Browning) of *Aurora Leigh*, if not Aurora Leigh herself. However, since Aurora is the narrator of the poem, her "I" and Elizabeth's "I" become conflated. Elizabeth claims that poetry enables her to "write [herself] out with a good deal of frankness" and that it "wraps [her] up & make[s] [her] acceptable." What the reader⁴¹ will "see" in *Aurora Leigh* is the "truth" of herself, the real, flesh-and-blood person. This is just one of the many ways in which the role of love is essential to consider in understanding Elizabeth and her work. Here, a kind of hermeneutic value is ascribed to love. Readers who love Elizabeth (or Barrett Browning) are more likely—not simply to endorse *AL*—but to get the "truth" of it. That love is a hermeneutic principle may be one reason we doubt the legitimacy of Lady Waldemar's claim, on first meeting Aurora, that "truly we all know you by your books" (3:654). True knowledge of authors comes from books only to those who love their authors, whether implied or flesh-and-blood.

Assuming this relationship between Elizabeth and Aurora legitimizes the practice of attributing at least those statements made by Aurora in the novel-epic to Elizabeth herself. So, for example, on the subject of the relationship between the poet's words and Truth, one might direct attention to the following lines from Book 1: "The poet suddenly will catch them [the common men] up / with his voice like a thunder, - 'This is soul, / This is life, this word is being said in

⁴¹ It should be noted here that the readers Elizabeth has in mind are people who know and love her.

heaven, / Here's God down on us! What are you about?" (1:873-76). The poet is inspired and speaks the same word "which is being said in heaven;" the poet is the site of the relationship between spiritual Truth and language. The "holy ground" on which this event occurs just is *ethos*, within a Platonic context. To be a poet, then, is a privilege, but one entailing a great deal of responsibility.

Elizabeth believes that she is personally accountable for "every step of [her] foot and every stroke of [her] pen." She further believes that these actions have not only temporary, but eternal results.⁴² As she writes to Ruskin in 1859:

What would this life be . . . if it had not eternal relations? For my part, if I did not believe so, I should lay my head down and die. Nothing would be worth doing, certainly. But I am what many people call a 'mystic,' and what I myself call a 'realist' because I consider that every step of the foot or stroke of the pen here has some real connection with and result in the hereafter.

'This life's a dream, a fleeting show!' no indeed. That isn't my 'doxy.' I don't think that nothing is worth doing, but that everything is worth doing—everything good of course—and that everything which does good for a moment does good for ever, in *art* as well as in morals.

This statement illustrates the positive, empowering aspect of a belief in the moral or theological inseparability of the writer from her written words. Part of Elizabeth's motivation to continue to write, despite her poor health, is her belief that whatever good she manages to perform as a result of her writing, even for a "moment" somehow does good "for ever"; there is "some real connection" not only between life and art, but between earth and heaven. There is a negative aspect, too, of course, and this can be seen in her letter of July 8, 1850 to Miss Mitford, in which Elizabeth begs her not to publish any of her juvenile poems:

. . . *don't* breathe a word about any juvenile performance of mine—*don't*, if you have any love left for me. Dear friend, 'disinter' anybody or anything you please, but don't disinter me, unless you mean the ghost of my vexation to vex you ever

⁴² This is a divergence from Plato, who—in *Ion*, for example, suggests that the poets cannot be held responsible for his poetic activities because he is under the influence of divine madness. Plato's poets are not really rational.

after. . . All the saints know that I have enough to answer for since I came to my mature mind, and that I had difficulty enough in making most of the 'Seraphim' volume presentable a little in my new edition, because it was too ostensible before the public to be caught back; but if the sins of my rawest juvenility are to be thrust upon me—and sins are extant of even twelve or thirteen, or earlier, and I was in print once when I was ten, I think—what is to become of me? I shall groan as loud as Christian⁴³ did.

What she writes here, and the urgency with which she writes it, gives evidence that she believes her poems will have some sort of moral effect on the individual readers of her poems—and that she will be held personally accountable for those results throughout eternity. The relationship Elizabeth posits between herself and her poems here is one of identity: to publish her poems is to “disinter” her.

And yet. . .

Another current, just as insistent if not as pervasive, ripples through Elizabeth's letters and poetry, especially *Aurora Leigh*. It can be felt when Aurora refuses to conflate Romney's reading of her book with knowledge of her heart; “You have read / My book, but not my heart; for recollect, / 'Tis writ in Sanscrit which you bungle at” (8:475-77). Earlier in the same scene, she responds to Romney's confession that he has read her book—a confession which readers expect to receive a warm, if not enthusiastic response from Aurora, with the clipped, terse statement: “You have read it . . . / And I have writ it, - we have done with it. / And now the rest?” (8:262-64). In the passages of *Aurora Leigh* in which Aurora discusses and interrogates her own progress as a poet, the reader comes across passages which would seem to deny that personal presence has anything to do with the writing of good poetry: “for me, I wrote / False poems, like the rest, and thought them true / Because myself was true in writing them” (1:1022-25); or “. . . in a flush / Of individual life I poured myself / Along the veins of others, and achieved / Mere lifeless imitations

⁴³ An allusion to the main character of John Bunyan's popular allegory of Christian life, *Pilgrim's Progress*.

of live verse" (1:971-74). Indeed, the book that has so moved Romney moves him because he does *not* see Aurora in it:

In all your other books, I saw but *you*:
 A man may see the moon so, in a pond,
 And not be nearer therefore to the moon,
 Nor use the sight . . . except to drown himself:
 And so I forced my heart back from the sight,
 For what had *I*, I thought, to do with *her*,
 Aurora . . . Romney? *But in this last book,*
You showed me something separate from yourself,
 Beyond you, and I bore to take it in
 And let it draw me. You have shown me truths,
 O June-day friend, that help me now at night
 When June is over! Truths not yours, indeed,
 But set within my reach by means of you,
 Presented by your voice and verse the way
 To take them clearest. (8:599-613, emphasis is mine)

From this passage it might be inferred that Aurora has, in this last book, finally written a word as it was "being said in heaven." What Romney hears are truths—not Aurora's truths, but truths "presented by [her] voice," which are thereby "set within [his] reach," and made clear. Aurora's individual voice is important, because it is the vehicle of these truths, but it is the truths—and not Aurora—which are seen by Romney. This observation complements Aurora's recognition that "being true" in writing verses does not necessarily result in writing true poems.

4. Reading *Aurora Leigh* as Autobiography: Art vs. Life

“—An autobiography of a poetess—(not me) . . .”
 —Barrett Browning, letter to John Kenyon: March 1855.

Of writing many books there is no end;
 And I who have written much in prose and verse
 For others' uses, will write now for mine,'-
 Will write my story for my better self
 As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
 Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
 Long after he has ceased to love you, just
 To hold together what he was and is. (I. 1-8)

Margaret Reynolds provides the following footnote to the second line of this complicated opening stanza of *Aurora Leigh*: “This applies as much to Elizabeth Barrett Browning as to Aurora herself” (5n), and while on the merely prosaic surface of the statement, it seems uncontroversial enough—surely Elizabeth *did* write a lot of prose and verse—it also raises an important critical question: just who is this “I” writing *Aurora Leigh*? Whose *ethos* are we talking about when we talk about the character which emerges from the language of this novel-epic? How does it matter whether or not clear lines of demarcation can be drawn between Aurora Leigh and Elizabeth? As has already been illustrated, paying attention to the *ethos* of the poet (whether Aurora Leigh or Barrett Browning or Elizabeth) can help make sense of the varied critical responses to the novel-epic.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Elizabeth herself was confused over the contemporary reception of *Aurora Leigh*. She expected to receive a great deal of criticism over the work, predicting in a letter that she would be “put in the stocks and pelted with the eggs of the last twenty years.”⁴⁵ Indeed, the overwhelmingly positive reviews the work received seem to have surprised her. In a letter to Mrs. Martin, she writes: “The extravagances written to me about it would make you laugh. . . and the strange thing is that the press, the daily and weekly press, upon which I calculated for furious

⁴⁴ It may also suggest the ways in which the male and female Victorian poetics are substantively different, even when the poems are formally similar (e.g. Robert Browning's vs. Augusta Weber's dramatic monologues).

⁴⁵ Letter to Mrs. Jameson. [February 2, 1857]

abuse, has been, for the most part, furious the other way" [December 29, 1856]. She then admits, "I don't know upon what principle the public likes and dislikes poems." This unknown "principle" is *ethos*. The reader's response, whether conscious or not, to the *ethos* of *Aurora Leigh* plays as significant a role in his or her assessment of the work than formal or technical issues. Finally, though, what is important is that the readings of *Aurora Leigh* which were mediated by recognition of and/or love for Elizabeth, when the presence of the author is endorsed by readers' expectations, are largely positive and—to use Aurora's term—"generous."⁴⁶

Contemporary readers of the novel-epic did conflate Elizabeth and her hero, to the extent that events in Aurora's life were sometimes attributed to Elizabeth in biographical sketches and reviews.⁴⁷ One negative review putatively related to this conflation is Coventry Patmore's criticism of the work. Since the only woman poet who bore any resemblance to Aurora was Elizabeth, herself, he argued that the novel-epic was of little use to the general reading public.⁴⁸ This criticism denies Aurora's own claim for the general "universality" of poetry. In any case, neither the poet nor the contemporary readers of the poem believed any significant disconnect existed between Elizabeth and Aurora. Later critics, such as Virginia Woolf, also noted that the "most pervasive" impression upon reading *Aurora Leigh* "is the sense of the writer's presence," and suggested that this is a sign both of Elizabeth's "imperfection" as an artist, and "that life has impinged upon art more than life should" (681). While most recent critics are careful to uphold, if not invoke, the convention that the "I" of the poem is not coterminous with the poet, the obvious parallels between the two do not go unnoticed, because they cannot be. They cannot be, both because the parallels really are there, and because "it is impossible for the most austere of critics

⁴⁶ "We get no good / By being ungenerous, even to a book" (1:702-3)

⁴⁷ Elizabeth's anticipation of such conflation might be one motivation for her portrayal of Aurora as pure and above reproach.

⁴⁸ *North British Review* (Edinburgh) 26:2 (February):443-62. (Granted, Patmore was also angry that his current book wasn't receiving any critical attention at all, and believed that Barrett Browning had plagiarized from his *Angel in the House* in Books One and Two of *Aurora Leigh*.)

not sometimes to touch the flesh when his eyes should be fixed upon the page" (Woolf 681). Furthermore, given the predominance of feminist approaches to the work since its 1978 publication, introduced by Cora Kaplan, the determination of whether a given statement is attributed to Elizabeth or Aurora is of limited concern; the statements are what count.⁴⁹

I am not suggesting that there are no obvious differences between the flesh-and-blood poet, Elizabeth, and her hero, Aurora. I do think, though, that there is no clearly observable and defined difference between Elizabeth and the implied author of *Aurora Leigh*, or between the implied author and the character, Aurora. So the *ethos*, the character which is revealed in the language of *Aurora Leigh*, is the site at which Elizabeth and her hero meet in the language that circumscribes the implied author of the work. Now the *ethos* of the character, Aurora, is much more limited than that of the implied author, because her existence is limited to the textual boundaries of *Aurora Leigh*. The implied author, by virtue of her unmistakable and undeniable relationship to Elizabeth, has an *ethos* which is grounded in whatever other of her works the reader has read. For those reading these works whom also had or have access to her letters, they too contribute to this *ethos*. As Robert Browning writes in his "Essay on Shelley"⁵⁰:

Letters and poems are obviously an act of the same mind, produced by the same law, only differing in the application to the individual or collective understanding. Letters and poems may be used indifferently as the basement of our opinion upon the writer's character; the finished expression of a sentiment in the poems, giving light and significance to the rudiments of the same in the letters, and these, again, in their incipiency and unripeness, authenticating the exalted mood and reattaching it to the personality of the writer. (1007)

⁴⁹ It is worth noting, though, the contortions critics perform at times in order to demonstrate how Aurora's statements which seem to represent "patriarchal discourse" are either "immature" or "ironic."

⁵⁰ It is worth noting that the objective of this essay is to defend the "honor" of Shelley, which Browning does primarily by constructing a critical wall of separation between the *ethos* of Shelley and the implied authors of his works (biography isn't helpful when dealing with an "objective poet"), and by suggesting that he was about to 'grow out of it.' If he had lived longer, he would have become a Christian.

If a reader has met the author, this, too, will factor into the construction of the *ethos* of the implied author. Many of the negative reviews *Aurora Leigh* received can be understood as the consequence of readers bewildered by what they experienced as a real discontinuity between the implied author of *Aurora Leigh* and the implied author of, as already noted, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. In any case, it is not finally Aurora who is criticized, but Barrett Browning and/or Elizabeth.

While there are specific historical reasons which would tend to endorse reading Aurora Leigh as autobiography⁵¹: it was a popular form for women writers, for example, and Wordsworth's own *Prelude* is a kind of verse autobiography, and despite Elizabeth's disclaimer to John Kenyon that *Aurora Leigh* is an autobiography of a poetess—but not of her, the conflation of Elizabeth and Aurora is primarily due to the undeniable similarities between the author and her hero and the collapse of epic distance which is one result of Elizabeth's novelization of the epic form by setting her novel-epic in the present.

Then, too, there's that enigmatic opening stanza. Enigmatic because, though *Aurora Leigh* is often read as an endorsement of the belief that poetry can be socially effective, here the poet affirms only that she is writing her story for her "better self" (1.4). The simile which follows compares/ sets in tension this "better self" with a friend who might keep one's portrait in a drawer to look at, even after "he has ceased to love you, just/ To hold together what he was and is" (1. 7-8). The "better self" is like a friend who may stop loving one, but who will keep a portrait of that formerly loved one to look at—even after the love is gone—in order to "hold together" his former and his present selves. But there is only one person really being referred to in these lines, which ultimately can be read as an assertion that there is a strong correlation between writing,

⁵¹ Several contemporary reviews categorize it as Barrett Browning's "spiritual autobiography." For an provocative and insightful reading of *Aurora Leigh* as a re-writing of autobiography, see Linda H. Peterson's *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing*.

reading and identity. Aurora Leigh's book is a portrait in which she will be able to see the "truth" of herself at this moment from some future one. It is the act of "looking" or reading which will enable the poet to hold the present and future versions of herself together. The book is important because it bears witness to, embodies a person. If the book doesn't contain traces of the person, if there is no *ethos* in the text, the act of reading in and of itself will be ineffectual. There must be a reader, but there must also be recoverable traces of the human in the work. The poem matters to the poet because it bears witness of the poet's being at a particular spatio-temporal location, and therefore can be read in the future as a means of ensuring some kind of continuity of identity for the poet even if—*especially if*—that future, better self no longer loves the past self.

Aurora doesn't say she is "writing her better self;" she says she is writing "for her better self" (1:4, emphasis is mine). She does compare her story to a "portrait," but the portrait is not what is being referred to as her "better self." The "better self" is a projection of herself in the future, who is compared to a "friend." Ostensibly, she is not writing to compose or present a "better self" to others, but rather to provide a stable vehicle for establishing the relationship between her present and future selves. The project is described in terms which suggest that preservation of identity is one of its primary objectives. In other words, she believes that what she writes can contain *ethos*, "character in the remaindered text"⁵² That the presence of *ethos* in a text guarantees at least a kind of immortality, as a being recognizably related to its author, is something the loss of which Corder laments. In the following passage, he characteristically takes an abstract theory and applies it personally: "If *ethos* is not in the text, if the author is not autonomous, I'm afraid that I've lost my chance not just for survival hereafter. . . but also for identity now" (348). What is amazing about the opening stanza of *Aurora Leigh* is not that the poet hopes for some kind of continued existence in writing, but that she values that continuing

⁵² See Corder, "Hunting Lieutenant Chadbourne," page 348.

presence—not for the sake of fame—nor as a keepsake for those she loves, but as a way of integrating herself—holding her “selves” together.⁵³ Finally, That *Aurora Leigh* might be a vehicle of integration for Elizabeth—a way for her to hold her “selves” together, is one way of making sense of the facts that Aurora is so like Elizabeth with regard to her vocation as a poet, while Marian is so like Elizabeth with regard to her physical appearance and her unbounded love for her son.

5. Reading *Aurora Leigh* as Philosophy of Love

Socrates: Shall we read his first words once again?

Phaedrus: If you like, but what you are looking for isn't there.

Socrates: Read it out, so that I can listen to the author himself. —*Phaedrus* 263d.

For it is certainly easier to create without answering for life, and easier to live without any consideration for art. Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability. —Mikhail Bakhtin, “Art and Answerability”

Natural things

And spiritual, - who separates those two

In art, in morals, or the social drift,

Tears up the bond of nature and brings death,

Paints futile pictures, writes unreal verse,

Leads vulgar days, deals ignorantly with men,

Is wrong, in short, at all points. —*Aurora Leigh* (7:763-9).

If its opening stanza outlines the faith that art can provide a means of ensuring the survivability and integrity of its author's life; *Aurora Leigh*, taken as a whole, suggests that the site of the relationship between art and life is the responsible—or, to use Bakhtin's term—“answerable” person. Bakhtin's concept of answerability and a Platonic understanding of *ethos* share an insistence on personal accountability for one's words; the value assigned to any

⁵³ In her discussion of *Aurora Leigh* as a revision of *A History of the Lyre*, Peterson suggests that the focus on memory as the means by which things are held together, in the first stanzas of each work, provide evidence of this (14). While I generally agree with her reading, I would argue that it is the *book* Aurora writes which is described as holding together her present and future selves. Memory requires the book.

performance in words is dependent on the “signature” of the author. This can be illustrated even in the case of oral, rather than written literary works in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Socrates performs his first “false” speech on love with his head covered. He explains the necessity of doing so to Phaedrus as follows: “then I can rush through my speech at top speed without looking at you and breaking down for shame” (237a). Later, after accusing himself of blasphemy by speaking ignominiously of love, Socrates declares that he has “to purify himself,” and will do so by means of a new speech which he will give “no longer veiling my head for shame, but uncovered” (243a,b).⁵⁴ This ancient insistence on being present and recognizable in one’s words is reaffirmed by Bakhtin; “One has to develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person” (*Toward a Philosophy of the Act* 52). While one of the challenges Aurora faces is that of becoming a poet and being recognized as one within the context of a society which is represented as denying this as a possibility for women, I would rather claim that Aurora’s epic journey, as it stands written, shows the progress of a woman learning to speak of love with her head uncovered. She cannot speak of what she does not know and cannot see. And despite her great claims for poetry, Aurora—like the poet of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, seems to grow “blind” beneath the “vanishing eyes” of the literary visions which have supplanted real men and women in her life (Sonnet 27:7-8).

There are numerous events throughout *Aurora Leigh* which support the claim that Aurora is misreading what is going on around her (and in her own heart), particularly as regards her relationship with Romney. When she takes offense at his proposal of marriage, he accuses her of “translating” him poorly (2:369). When her aunt hears that she has rejected Romney and denied she loves him, she compares Aurora with “a babe at thirteen months,” and states, “God help you,

⁵⁴ It is not irrelevant here to note that, upon drinking the poison which kills him, Socrates apparently covers his face, but just before dying he uncovers it in order to say his last words to Crito (*Crito* 118a).

you are groping in the dark, / For all this sunlight" (2:582-86).⁵⁵ But the most telling accusation that Aurora, for all her learning and skill, is a poor "reader" of persons, occurs near the end of the novel-epic:

. . . But here again
I'm baffled, - failing my abasement as
My aggrandizement: there's no room left for me
At any woman's foot who misconceives
My nature, purpose, possible actions. What!
Are you the Aurora who made large my dreams
To frame your greatness? You conceive so small?

I do not think that any common she
Would dare adopt such monstrous forgeries
For the legible life-signature of such
As I, with all my blots, - with all my blots! (8. 1222-28; 1232-35)

Romney Leigh hurls these words at Aurora on learning she believes he has married Lady Waldemar, and ends by saying, "Dearest, men have burnt my house, / Maligned my motives, - but not one, I swear, / Has wronged my soul as this Aurora has" (8. 1245-47). It is inconceivable to Romney that a woman with the ability to write a book which has so moved him and "made large" his dreams could "conceive so small." Aurora has not been seeing straight; she needs to uncover her head both to recover her vision, and to successfully reintegrate in herself what she has wrongly separated: the artist and the woman.

Doing so entails her willingness to assent to the primacy of love over truth and art, a move she herself suggests in her "translation" of the story of Zeus and Io: "Is it so? / When Jove's hand meets us with composing touch, / And when at last we are hushed and satisfied, / Then Io does not call it truth, but love? (7:894-7). This is preceded by her declaration that "Love strikes

⁵⁵ Some critics have made much of Aurora's insistence to "walk, at all risks" on her own (Helen Cooper, for example), but they fail to take into account her aunt's comparison of Aurora's ability to walk with that of a toddler. Given that her aunt turns out to be right about Aurora's love for Romney, it seems likely she's right about Aurora's "groping" and unsteady walking as well. Just the kind of walking one would expect from someone with her head covered.

higher with his lambent flame / Than Art can pile the faggots" (7:893-94). Within the context of *Aurora Leigh*, treatment of relationship of love and art is more central than the question of truth, because in *Aurora Leigh* truth is seen as something which transcends human persons: "For the truth itself, / That's neither man's nor woman's, but just God's" (7:752-53). The poet is understood as the vehicle of truth which the poet must give "voice / With human meanings, -else they miss the thought" (5:125-26), and so it is rather understanding of the nature of the relationship between art and life required to enable these transmissions, than the nature of truth, which is of critical importance. The ligature between art and life is that love which is guaranteed by "personal presence" (1:885).

In addition, that love is ultimately something higher than truth is already understood by Aurora as early as Book 3, when she announces, "I love love: truth's no cleaner thing than love" (3:702), but—she says this in a pique during her first meeting with Lady Waldemar, by way of self-defense. Aurora does not always live as though she believes in the primacy of love; for all Lady Waldemar's unattractive qualities, she does accurately attribute an unnatural coldness to Aurora. And Aurora, self-admittedly, does work against her own heart, all the while expressing her jealousy of male authors who have doting mothers and/or wives (5:533-35), and the creeping certainty that she might have done better to have gotten married herself (7:184-88). Nearly all of *Aurora Leigh's* readers, and most of its characters, are aware Aurora loves Romney, well before she recognizes it herself.

As the subject of love is not amenable to discussion in terms of "scientific proofs," the best one can hope to do is indicate "roughly and in outline" the role of love in *Aurora Leigh*, keeping in mind that the work is written against theory and systems. On this subject, Patrick Brantlinger observes that, "Aurora and Elizabeth see theories as a sort of vampirism, draining the life's blood from the veins of individuals" (156). One example of this is Romney's disavowal of

“systems” near the end of the novel-epic: “Fewer programmes, we who have no prescience. / Fewer systems, we who are held and do not hold. / Less mapping out of masses to be saved, / by nations or by sexes” (9:865-68). Aurora’s strategy to become a great poet is systematic, and successful, but she cannot find love in fame, as she admits: “To have our books / Appraised by love, associated with love, / While we sit loveless! Is it hard, you think? / At least ‘tis mournful. Fame, indeed, ‘twas said, / Means simply love. It was a man said that” (5:474-78). To strategically craft poems is one thing, to be famous is another, and to be “theoretically loved” yet another altogether. Aurora’s success as a poet fails to bring her closer to love or, as Mermin would put it, fails to make her “happy”(199).

Aurora’s journey to reach the place from which she can speak of love with her head uncovered is not a simple one, and the difficulty is not only that she is a woman in England during the middle of the nineteenth century. The relationship between life and art must be grounded in the individual person, because the individual person is the only site where the two meet. Furthermore, learning to write “true” poems entails the individual poet’s assuming correct relationships, not only to the poets in the tradition in which she works, but also to the people she comes into contact with in her daily life (5:365-88). So, to become a “true” poet entails assuming the obligations of various relationships, which are not easily negotiated, and which are made more complicated in a social context in which men and women do not enjoy equality. This inequality renders Aurora’s assumption of the obligation of a relationship with Romney difficult, because for her to do what is best for herself ultimately means she must do just what that society charged her to do in the first place: get married. What Aurora fails to acknowledge for a good deal of her “poet’s progress” is that her endorsement of the importance of the individual for real social change, and of the ability of poetry to enact that change just is the endorsement of a theory. She is, to some extent, as guilty as Romney of being married to a “theory” (2:408-10) and of living

“by diagrams” (3:744). What Aurora finally confesses is that she “forgot / No perfect artist is developed here / From any imperfect woman” (9:647-50). She “wronged [her] own life” in confusing art, which but “symbolises heaven” for that “Love” which “is God / And makes heaven” (9:644; 659-60.) One cannot love “in theory.” Bakhtin argues that one cannot even exist in theory:

Any kind of practical orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible: it is impossible to live in it, impossible to perform answerable deeds. In that world I am unnecessary; I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it. The theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of that fact—“as if I did not exist” (Toward a Philosophy of the Act 9).

But how can the fall into theory be avoided? And what can prevent a practice from becoming a “system”? The primary answer provided by *Aurora Leigh* is love, and this love begins with *mothers*.

But still I catch my mother at her post
Beside the nursery — door, with finger up,
'Hush, hush—here's too much noise!' while her sweet eyes
Leap forward, taking part against her word
In the child's riot. . . .

Women know
The way to rear up children, (to be just)
They know a simple, merry, tender knack
Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes,
And stringing pretty words that make no sense,
And kissing full sense into empty words,
Which things are corals to cut life upon,
Although such trifles: children learn by such,
Loves' holy earnest in a pretty play
And get not over-early solemnised,
But seeing, as in a rose-bush, Love's Divine
Which burns and hurts not, -not a single bloom, -
Become aware and unafraid of Love. (1. 15-19; 47-59)

Aurora begins with a memory of her mother, whose eyes take part “against her word” to the young girl that she’s being too loud; she censures with her words, but takes part with her eyes (which are windows to the soul) in “the child’s riot.” Given the epic task Aurora is embarking

on, it is interesting that her memory here is one of her mother seeming to endorse the notion that children ought to be silent. Elizabeth's much-remarked lament that she can "find no mothers" in literary tradition to provide some sort of path for her comes to mind here. But it may be more important that Aurora interprets her mother's *eyes* against her *words*, than that she is being instructed to be quiet, offering perhaps a spiritual—if not a linguistic—exhortation. And in fact, in both Aurora's return to God and her return to Romney, the "wordlessness" that characterizes these significant scenes would seem to endorse the belief that there are some truths and/or loves which are beyond words. In one, Aurora asks God to listen only to the beat of her blood and believes that she is heard (7:1266-72). In the other, though words are spoken, Aurora records her inability to write them down three times in the space of fifteen lines; some things mean "beyond / Whatever [can] be told by word or kiss" (9:725-40). These scenes also belie any notion that truth or love is merely a construct of language.

The second passage offers what are nearly appositional statements regarding language, "sense," and persons. I wonder about the phrase "(to be just)," which stands between the claim that women know how to raise children and the qualification of that claim: "They know a simple, merry, tender *knack*. . ." (1. 48-49, emphasis is mine). To have a "knack" for something is to have a kind of cleverness about something which is hard to analyze or teach. In saying that women have a "knack" for raising children, this ability is bracketed as an innate ability rather than an acquired or teachable skill. However, that it is not easily analyzed or taught does not render it unimportant. Women's ability to "string together pretty words that have no sense" and of "kissing full sense into empty words" results in the child's becoming "aware and unafraid of love" (1:51-52, 59). The first ability might be placed in a category labeled "beauty," the second, "truth." Both the pretty, senseless words and the empty words that can only be imbued with sense by means of kisses, are described contrarily as both "corals to cut life upon" and "trifles."

This “play” between women and their small children is significant and holy because it teaches children that Divine Love will not hurt them (even if they can’t understand what Love is saying), or—better still—that Love is what makes sense of words—makes them meaningful—in the first place. Returning to the parenthetical phrase “(to be just),” the reader may infer that the recognition of women’s “knack” at raising children is not something men can be blamed for lacking; “Fathers love as well,” but with “heavier brains” (l. 60-61). Perhaps it is partly due to her early loss of her mother, and the subsequent influence of her “heavier-brain[ed]” father, that Aurora becomes “over-early solemnised.”

The significance of the relationship between language and persons, which seems to be mediated and/or facilitated through love is emphasized further by her father’s dying words to Aurora: “His last word was, ‘Love- /Love, my child, love, love!’ –(then he had done with grief)/ ‘Love, my child.’ Ere I answered he was gone, / And none was left to love in all the world” (l. 211-14), and is also notable the first time Aurora hears her aunt speak: “And when I heard my father’s language first / From alien lips which had no kiss for mine / I wept aloud, then laughed, then wept, then wept” (l. 254-56). A transition from mother-love to father-love has occurred, and that this transition could also be described as a move from silence to speech. Aurora, while arguing that mothers have a peculiar right to be missed, also recognizes the importance of “heavier-brained” fathers.⁵⁶ In fact, *Aurora Leigh* employs at least two narrative strategies to discourage comparison between Aurora’s mother and father: first, by describing women’s abilities with children as a “knack” Barrett Browning brackets this ability within a particularly female “tradition,” and second, by the real distinction between Aurora’s “mother-tongue,” Italian—and her “father-tongue,” English, Barrett Browning eschews providing any realistic

⁵⁶ In their eagerness to discuss the role of mothers in *Aurora Leigh*, some critics have overlooked the positive role of Aurora’s father—who was not, after all—Elizabeth’s father, and does nothing in the book to merit a reader’s approbation, unless that reader agrees with Aurora’s aunt that he ought never to have married an Italian woman.

standard for comparison. It makes as little sense to argue whether Aurora's mother or father loves "better" as to argue whether Italian or English is the "better" language; they are simply different from one another.

What is of crucial importance in understanding *Aurora Leigh* is that love—both human and divine—is the *telos* of this novel-epic. Aurora, like Achilles, has to put aside her anger and assume her obligations to others. As Odysseus had to find his way back home, so Aurora has to find her way back to love; this is her epic journey. In this context, it makes no more sense to focus exclusively on Aurora's skills as a writer than it does to focus exclusively on Achilles' or Odysseus's skills as warriors, *if* what one hopes to gain is an understanding of the meaning and value of these epics as unified works. This is not to say that Book 5 of *Aurora Leigh*, which outlines an ambitious poetics in narrative blank verse, can be overlooked, and because of the very novelty of its existence as a poetics written in poetry, by a woman author, the amount of critical attention this aspect of *Aurora Leigh* has received is understandable and—to some degree—warranted. But only "to some degree." *Aurora Leigh* doesn't end with Book 5; it ends with Book 9. If one were mapping the plot of *Aurora Leigh*, Book Five marks a kind of crisis for Aurora. She has her poetics down pat, her major poem is finished and on its way to the publisher, but she is still alone and has not learned to love. The resolution of *Aurora Leigh* does not occur until Book 9, although substantial progress is made between Books 5 and 9, as evidenced in Aurora's searching for and choosing to shelter Marian Erle.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Standard English Literature survey anthologies grossly amputate *AL*. Current editions of both the Longman and the Norton anthologies have expanded coverage of *AL* from previous editions, but do not reproduce any material from Books 6 through 9. Nothing in footnotes or head-notes indicates that Aurora repents of her pride, acknowledges/admits her love for Romney, and consents to marry him by the conclusion of novel-epic. The Longman includes more excerpts than does the Norton, but again—none from any beyond Book 5, and similarly misrepresents the work.

6. Reading *as if* for Life

If *ethos* exists in the way I argue it does, and if character not only emerges *in* language, but *from* language—as a result of the experience one gets from reading, what might close attention to *Aurora Leigh* reveal about the relationship of character to literary exposure? As has already been suggested, one thing which will be revealed about the relationship is that it is not easily plotted in terms of methodology, nor predictable in terms of cause and effect. For example, Aurora, whose reading is associated with a father she loves, and who has the benefit of knowing "authors," seems to have a much more difficult time translating her reading skills to interpersonal skills than does Marian, who does not know "authors" (3:999-1000), and has not even had the advantage of reading whole books (3:968-87). Romney, whose reading clearly includes the bible, various socialist writers—such as Fourier—and Aurora's poetry seems only too eager to transfer what he reads into action. And when he admits to being moved by Aurora's great poem, it is not because he sees her in it, but sees only the truth—albeit expressed in her voice. Still, there is no definitive way to determine whether Romney would have been moved by her poem if he hadn't first been moved by her. Finally, Aurora's difficult relationship with her own writing needs to be taken into account, as she seems to demand from her poems far more than poems can be expected to give.

Aurora sickens and weakens nearly to death in England; her determination to live, and the natural and spiritual means which provide nourishment for her to do so, are nature and her father's books. Her appreciation of nature, which begins with the lime tree, finally results in her recognizing her obligation to be thankful to God. She imagines the sun rebuking her, saying, "I make the birds sing—listen! But, for you, / God never hears your voice, excepting when / You lie upon the bed at nights and weep" (1. 557-59). That God should want to hear her voice is something that had not occurred to her in her misery. She also reads the books her father had

given her, "Without considering whether they were fit / to do [her] good" (1. 701-2).

Thankfulness to God for the created natural world finds its complement in generosity: "We get no good / by being ungenerous, even to a book" (1. 702-3), but at this point in her development, Aurora is only capable of being generous to books—not to people—despite the fact that her love for her father conditions and qualifies her reading experience. As Aurora explains, "What my father taught before / From many a volume, Love re-emphasised / Upon the self-same pages: Theophrast / Grew tender with the memory of his eyes, / And Ælian made mine wet" (1. 710-14). While the fact that Sarah Stickney Ellis⁵⁸ is no Theophrast undoubtedly had something to do with Aurora's disparagement of the books her aunt assigned her to read, it is also true that Aurora's reading experience is self-confessedly influenced by love, and she has little for her aunt.

Initially, Aurora reads "for memory," but then she begins to read "for hope" (1. 730-31). She believes that through reading, she can continue the path "'gainst the thorny underwood," her father had begun to trod out for her (1.735). This leads into an extended passage on the dangerous, seductive world of books—which is "still the world" but "worldlings in it are less merciful / and more puissant" (1.748-50). To allow a child to read without guidance is compared with leaving a "child to wander in a battle-field / And push his innocent smile against the guns" (1.774-75). Aurora admits to reading both bad and good books, but she emerges unscathed due to her earthly father's instruction, and to her heavenly Father's protection, for "both worlds have God's providence," and He "saved [her]" (1.793,798).

Marian's reception of books is a marked contrast to Aurora's. Transmission to Aurora was personal, through her father—who had also given her instruction at his knee. Transmission to Marian was impersonal; she was tossed whatever fragments of text the peddler had. Aurora notes that Marian is "ignorant / of authors" (3:999-1000). Marian receives no formal instruction,

⁵⁸ A writer of the types of books her aunt deems appropriate for Aurora.

and apparently couldn't write until Romney taught her,⁵⁹ but knew *instinctively* that some books were helpful and some harmful:

But she weeded out
Her book-leaves, threw away the leaves that hurt,
(First tore them small, that none should find a word)
And made a nosegay of the sweet and good
To fold within her breast, and pore upon
At broken moments . . . (3: 986-92)

Marian's practice of folding up healthful book-leaves and tucking them in her bodice,⁶⁰ and her practice of tearing up the book-leaves she found hurtful into such small pieces that not even a word could be read are equally compelling, because such practices indicate that—despite her lack of personal instruction—she knows that books are a form of personal communication and assumes an obligation to prevent other readers from being harmed by words “that hurt.” There are several indications that, lack of education notwithstanding, Marian is a better reader of Romney than is Aurora. She is certainly willing to expend any amount of effort learning to read him. She claims that she will be a better wife for Romney “than some / Who are wooed in silk among their learned books” because she will “set [herself] to read his eyes, / Till such grow plainer to me than the French / To wisest ladies: (4:230-34). Marian concludes by asking, “Do you think I'll miss / A letter, in the spelling of his mind?” (4:234-35). And she does prove an astute reader of Romney—and of Aurora. Indeed, Marian is both a more generous and accurate reader of persons than is Aurora.

Marian tells Aurora, in summing up what her experience of having been tossed scraps of literature and taking recourse to the healthful ones when she could has done for her, that “If a

⁵⁹ In her futile attempt to gain Aurora's aid in preventing Romney's marriage to Marian, Lady Waldemar accuses Aurora of being “indifferent / That Romney chose a wife, could write her name, / In witnessing he loved her” (3:721-4).

⁶⁰ I feel compelled here to mention J.D. Salinger's *Seymour: An Introduction*, in which the narrator acknowledges having unintentionally cured his pleurisy by placing a “perfectly innocent-looking Blake lyric” in his shirt pocket and wearing it as a “poultice for a day or so” (117).

flower / Were thrown you out of heaven at intervals, / You'd soon attain to a trick of looking up" (4:1009-11). In other words, Marian's experience with literature inculcated in her a kind of expectant attentiveness.⁶¹ She did not become hardened or skeptical, but anticipated good. From all her intellectual and educational advantages, Aurora reaps skepticism, and consequently mistranslates those around her, misinterpreting both their intentions and their actions. On a superficial reading of the novel-epic, some might argue that Marian is injured precisely because she is so trusting, but closer reading reveals that this is not, in fact, the case. The great misfortune which befalls Marian occurs not because she has misread Aurora, Romney, or even Lady Waldemar—but rather because Lady Waldemar has misread her former hairdresser. Some may still want to argue that if Aurora is an example of a too-skeptical reader of persons, Marian is an example of a too-naïve reader of them. However, even were this true, accurate reading requires trust—or, in Aurora's words—generosity (1:702-9). And the novel-epic suggests that Aurora's self-inflicted wounds are more difficult to heal than those that are inflicted on Marian by others. Finally, what this comparison between the ways Aurora's and Marian's reading experiences effect their personal experiences suggests, is that there is a correlation between the risks of reading and the risks of relationships, and failure of love is inimical to both.⁶²

Though the positive value of art is heavily endorsed and underwritten in *Aurora Leigh*, it also argues that even the most dedicated study and practice of art is not the equivalent of love. As Aurora admits to Lord Howe, "My lord, I cannot love: I only find / The rhyme for love, - and that's not love, my lord" (5:895-6). Her plan to go "To London, to the gathering place of souls, / To live mine straight out, vocally, in books" (2:1182-3) is one in which she cannot succeed

⁶¹ "Never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the attention wasted." See Simone Weil's "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," page 106.

⁶² For more on the relationship between distrust of "argument" and distrust of people, see Plato's *Phaedo*: "Misology and misanthropy arise in just the same way" (89d). This "way" is that of absolutely uncritical belief. The solution, however, isn't the assumption of skepticism, but rather forming relationships based on an accurate understanding of human nature.

because, despite the numerous comparisons between books and persons throughout *Aurora Leigh*,⁶³ a book is not a person because it has no life of its own.⁶⁴ Two passages are of particular importance in understanding this: the one in which Aurora compares her poems to “embryos,” and the one in which she employs the Pygmalion and Galatea myth to describe her own experiences as an artist.

The first passage can be usefully read within the context of Aurora’s statements regarding the ways in which mother-love proves necessary and foundational in establishing a healthy stance toward love, and comes immediately after Aurora admits to herself that Romney was right about her ability to write poetry: “oh, I justified / The measure he had taken of my height: / The thing was plain – he was not wrong a line; / I played at art, made thrusts with a toy-sword / Amused the lads and maidens” (3:237-241). She had been receiving letters from admiring readers who profess love for her as a result of having read her poems, but Romney “did not write” (3:233). The combination of these two events (she fears she may become “almost popular” on the one hand, but has heard nothing from the one reader who clearly matters most to her, on the other) motivates her to dissect her poetry. She “rips” her verses up, but finds “no blood upon the rapier’s point; / The heart in them was just an embryo’s heart / Which never yet had beat, that it should die; / Just gasps of make-believe galvanic life; / Mere tones, inorganised to any tune” (3:245-50). Here, in a common conceit, a work of art is compared with a human person. Aurora finds an “embryo” where she would find what? A man? She will later contend that “Poems are / Men, if true poems” (5:90-1). But *Aurora Leigh* also resists an interpretation which would equate

⁶³ “Poems are / Men, if true poems” (5:90-1).

⁶⁴ It is often remarked upon in contemporary reviews and criticism of *Aurora Leigh* that it could not have been written by Elizabeth Barrett Barrett—for a variety of reasons. I agree, but for a reason I haven’t yet seen in print. Until the time of her marriage (and to some degree, even after it) Elizabeth lived a life almost entirely circumscribed by reading and writing. The belief that “the world of books is still the world” was arguably necessary for her to hold in order to survive intact under such circumstances. It is after meeting Robert that she can realize that she was only “living with visions” for her company—and not real persons.

literary works with persons; it may be a very good thing to write a true poems, but even writing the truest of poems is not really the equivalent of bearing children. Here, Aurora states that though her poems are only embryos, she still feels “it” in her, burning “Like those hot fire-seeds of creation held / In Jove’s clenched palm before the worlds were sown” (3:251-3). She diagnoses her problem as a lack of the requisite “nerve,” but alludes to another possibility as well, she “had grown distrustful” (3: 255-5;264).

The presence of embryos, burning, and love in the passage warrants a return to the beginning of *Aurora Leigh*, where Aurora describes the positive effects of mother-love (1:46, 48-58). The ligature between art and life is love—not fear, and not pain. Women teach their children this by “kissing full sense into empty words.” That Aurora “burns” is fine; that she feels pain is not. She is grasping her “fire-seeds of creation” tightly in her clenched fist, unable to open it due to lack of nerve, and considers the possibility that by the time she can open her fist, she may only be able to prove “the power” that lay there “by the pain” she experiences as a result of her holding it, unused. Rather than being “aware and unafraid of Love,” Aurora is unaware of love, and distrustful of Spring. The “mother-want” (1:40) she feels as a consequence of losing her mother at the age of four is the want of the awareness of and courage in love. She has become cynical about love.

The second passage, which alludes to the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, should be read with the whispered last words of Aurora’s father as subtext: “Love, my child, love, love!” (1:212). These are words which “hum ignorantly” in her ears (1:318), but are never entirely forgotten. Evidence of this pervades the novel-epic; it is the quest for love—more than the quest to become a woman poet—which presents the challenge for Aurora because she not only wants her poems to be true, she wants to be able to love them—as though they were persons themselves. Her confusion is natural enough given the close association between her father and books. After the

death of his wife, Aurora's father falls back on the only resource he has—his knowledge of books—and attempts to pass this on to his daughter as a kind of equipment for living.⁶⁵ But his lessons were negative, rather than positive ones, as Aurora recalls; “out of books / He taught me all the ignorance of men” (1:189-90). This early passage in *Aurora Leigh* is one of its first statements against system and theory, and it is important to note that the lesson is associated with father-love:

He sent the schools to school, demonstrating
A fool will pass for such through one mistake,
While a philosopher will pass for such,
Through said mistakes being ventured in the gross
And heaped up to a system. (1:194-98)

In her exile in England, after her father's death, her discovery of her father's books, presumably those he taught these errors from included among them, affect—in combination with the healing balm of nature—Aurora's recovery from her gradual and largely self-willed decline into death. She reads for memory; “What [her] father taught before / From many a volume, Love re-emphasised / Upon the self-same pages: Theophrast / Grew tender with the memory of his eyes” (1:709-12), and then “for hope” (1:730). Fond association is one thing; personification is another. For Aurora, her father's books become persons—or, at least—have “hearts.” She tucks a book under her pillow, and feels it “beat” (1:841).

The extremity of her loneliness after the double-loss of mother and father, exacerbated by the coldness of her aunt in what is to Aurora a foreign land, results in her substituting the world of books for the real world.⁶⁶ Seen in this context, Aurora's charting her progress as a poet largely in terms of gauging her relationships with other poets (dead, like her parents), and

⁶⁵ On the treatment of literature as equipment for living, see Kenneth Burke's “Literature as Equipment for Living.”

⁶⁶ The parallels here between the Aurora's relationship with books and Elizabeth's are obvious, though Elizabeth's was more extreme than that of Aurora's, and more complicated.

judging the success of her own poems on the basis of whether they are “alive” and/or “loveable” makes a kind of sense which is not merely metaphorical. The passage in which Aurora employs the myth of Pygmalion is one wherein the stress marks are becoming obvious. Others’ books have “lived” for her, and she has loved them; nothing she writes lives (as seen in the previous passage)—nor can she love any work of hers. As a result, she confesses she is sad, and wonders:

. . . if Pygmalion had these doubts
 And, feeling the hard marble first relent
 Grow supple to the straining of his arms,
 And tingle through its cold to his burning lip,
 Supposed his senses mocked, supposed the toil
 Of stretching past the known and seen to reach
 The archetypal Beauty out of sight
 Had made his heart beat fast enough for two,
 And with his own life dazed and blinded him?
 Not so; Pygmalion loved, - and whoso loves
 Believes the impossible.

But I am sad:

I cannot thoroughly love a work of mine,
 Since none seems worthy of my thought and hope
 More highly mated. He has shot them down,
 My Phœbus Apollo, soul within my soul
 Who judges, by the attempted, what’s attained,
 And with the silver arrow from his height
 Has struck down all my works before my face
 While I said nothing. Is there aught to say?
 I called the artist but a greatened man.
 He may be childless also, like a man. (5:399-420)

First of all, it is important to note that at this stage in her development Aurora is still insisting that a “book . . . is a man too” (5:398). In her re-imagining of the Pygmalion myth, she casts herself as Pygmalion, but Galatea is not mentioned. It is not his skill as a sculptor which is coveted, but rather Pygmalion’s ability to love. Pygmalion, like Aurora, refuses to marry. His famous statue is carved to represent the ideal woman, the kind of woman he *could* marry. Even before Aphrodite grants his petition and brings Galatea to life, Pygmalion treats the statue as though it were alive: giving it presents, dressing it, and putting it to bed at night with a soft

pillow under its stone head. He has, in fact, made an idol of his statue, and one of the reasons his petition is granted is because Aphrodite sees in Galatea a mirror image of herself.

But Aurora (or Barrett Browning) is suppressing this part of the myth. She does not mention Galatea because she does not want to admit the possibility that she is trying to replace Romney with a life-like poem. What she is half-willing to admit is that she is hoping her poems can be children for her, but along with the admission of the desire comes the admission that the desire may not be obtained; the artist “may be childless also, like a man” (5:420). Given the unhealthiness of Pygmalion’s relationship to his art, Aurora’s comparison of herself with him is disturbing. Pygmalion is a mythical artist—not a real one. Aurora’s “failure” here is due to her asking of art more than it can give, but being sane enough to recognize—despite her confusion on the subject—that a book is neither a husband nor a child.

So she sits loveless, while her books are “appraised by love” and “associated with love” (5:475). Not only are her books incapable of being loved as a husband or children might be, the acclaim they win her is an unsuitable replacement for love as well. Aurora comments that whoever said “fame . . . means simply love” was a man (5:477-78). She envies male poets their mothers and wives (5:534-36), and asks “who loves me?” (5:540). Once again, the question of love predominates over all other questions. Aurora has, for understandable reasons, confused and conflated the real world with the world of books:

We poets always have uneasy hearts,
Because our hearts, large-rounded as the globe,
Can turn but one side to the sun at once.
We are used to dip our artist-hands in gall
And potash, trying potentialities
Of alternated colour, till at last
We get confused, and wonder for our skin
How nature tinged it first. (5:1180-87)

She is looking for love in all the wrong places; she needs to become a better reader of hearts, especially her own. Her decision to go back to Italy is a good one in this context; Aurora will be

traveling back to the land in which her mother-tongue is spoken. And her selling the majority of her father's books to do so should not be interpreted as a "rejection" of her father, or of "patriarchy," or of the male poetic tradition,⁶⁷ but rather as a sign of Aurora's becoming well. She can sell her father's books because they are *not* her father; it is no betrayal to sell them.⁶⁸ Finally, it is worth noting that from this point on in the novel-epic, Aurora stops writing except for letters and the diary entries which compose the last four books of *Aurora Leigh*. Her book is done and has been sent to her publisher. The question that remains to be answered is not whether or not Aurora will be published, but whether or not she will let herself love and be loved. That this will be affected, if at all, by some other means than eloquent words has already been foreshadowed in her confession to Romney:

I've known the pregnant thinkers of our time,
 When some chromatic sequence of fine thought
 In learned modulation phrased itself
 To an un conjectured harmony of truth;
 And yet I've been more moved, more raised, I say,
 By a simple word . . . a broken easy thing
 A three-years infant might at need repeat,
 A look, a sigh, a touch upon the palm,
 Which meant less than 'I love you,' than by all
 The full-voiced rhetoric of those master-mouths. (4:1098-1108)

The change in Aurora is brought about in large part by her caring for Marian⁶⁹ and Marian's infant son—and through that infant's love for her:

Surely I should be glad.
 The little creature almost loves me now.
 And calls my name, 'Alola,' stripping off
 The *rs* like thorns, to make it smooth enough

⁶⁷ Peterson notes that the Aurora's selling of her father's books has "long been read as a rejection of the masculine poetic tradition" (136).

⁶⁸ It should also be noted that she doesn't sell all of her father's books. She keeps the Proclus, which she can't "afford to lose" (5:1244-5).

⁶⁹ "Aurora's growth into a harmonious selfhood is achieved through love as well as art, and through a compassionate sympathy for Marian's situation on Marian's terms, not according to convention. Marian is the instrument of this transformation" in Cooper's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Woman & Artist* (172).

To take between his dainty, milk-fed lips,
 God love him! I should certainly be glad,
 Except, God help me, that I'm sorrowful
 Because of Romney. (7:952-59)

That women may be saved through children⁷⁰ is often alluded to in *Aurora Leigh*; "I thought a child was given to sanctify / A woman" (6:728-30).⁷¹ But justice cannot be done to the concluding books of *Aurora Leigh* without noting the importance of God in bringing about the "perfecting of the woman" Aurora has neglected in pursuing her art. It is Aurora's prayer to God, on her knees on the pavement—her head "upon the pavement too"—that "He would stop his ears to what I said, / And only listen to the run and beat / Of this poor, passionate, helpless blood" (7:1265-70), and her confirmation of her belief that "He heard in heaven" (7:1272), which precede and condition what happens when Romney comes to see her and Marian in Book 8. And it is after having this profoundly religious experience that Aurora's "trade of verse" seems ended; "I did not write, nor read, nor even think" (7:1302,1306). Feeling God so close, she could not "sing of God" (7:1304).⁷²

Finally, the primary value of Aurora's involvement with art, for herself, is that it finally teaches her that art is no substitute for love. The most important message of *Aurora Leigh* is not that a woman can be as fine a poet as a man, but that being as fine a poet as a man cannot ultimately give a her what she needs—which is love. Art is, as Romney states in his assessment of the importance of Aurora's vocation as a poet, only an "intermediate door" (9:919) between matter and spirit. Upon encountering that "door," the goal is not to stand *before* it in admiration, remaining in that liminal space between the material and the spiritual, nor to stand *behind* it, as a

⁷⁰ Marian is saved through her child, if salvation is understood as the ability to respond to love.

⁷¹ cf. 1 Tim. 2:15: "Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty."

⁷² In a secular analogy, one might point out that there is something unseemly about writing a love-letter to the beloved, when the beloved is sitting directly beside one.

shield to protect one from the hazards of real life, but rather to push through it; “Art’s a service,” —not an end in itself (9:915).

7. Postscript: “Let us go. / The end of woman . . . / Is not a book” (7:883-5).

The human need for language is not simply for the transmission of meaning, it is at the same time listening to and affirming a person’s existence. Xingjian (599)

We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. Man cannot discover them by his own powers, and if he sets out to seek for them he will find in their place counterfeits of which he will be unable to discern the falsity. Simon Weil, “Reflections (112).

We are already implicitly ethical critics, provided that we engage with the poem as a representation offered by one human being to another, rather than inspect it, say, as a random datum for some other kind of inquiry. Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep* (107)

Aurora Leigh is an important book because it so clearly affirms that books are not —after all—terribly important, unless they are joined with life by a ligature of love. After hundreds of lines on the importance of poetry and all of Aurora’s agonizing over the relative worth of her poetry, poetry is relegated to a supporting role in the closing books of the novel-epic. Aurora questions the relative worth of art vs. life herself; “Books succeed, / And lives fail. Do I feel it so, at last? (7:704-5). Earlier, she had written:

We play a weary game of hide-and-peek!
 We shape a figure of our fantasy,
 Call nothing something, and run after it
 And lose it, lose ourselves too in the search,
 Till clash against us comes a somebody
 Who also has lost something and is lost . . . (6:284-89)

Which is, perhaps, another way of saying:

But I who saw the human nature broad
 At both sides, comprehending too the soul’s
 And all the high necessities of Art,
 Betrayed the thing I saw, and wronged my own life
 For which I pleaded. Passioned to exalt
 The artist’s instinct in me at the cost
 Of putting down the woman’s, I forgot

No perfect artist is developed here
From any imperfect woman. (9:641-49)

In *Aurora Leigh*, to be a perfect woman entails a capacity to love and be loved; for Aurora specifically, it means she must be able to speak of love with her head uncovered — without shame—and without apology.

What prevents this throughout most of *AL* is not so much Aurora's pride or willfulness, though she does consistently remind herself to "be humble" (5:1), but rather her unwillingness to and/or fear of succumbing to anyone. She is perpetually in a mode of defensiveness, except sometimes when she is reading. Her father's dying word to her is "love," but love, for Aurora, is associated with vulnerability and loss, and soon after meeting her paternal aunt, Aurora closes herself to everything except books and nature, with occasional allowances for God. Aurora does this because she associates love with loss of self. She believes that to succumb is to be "dissolved." In fact, allusions to dissolution or "melting" occur throughout *Aurora Leigh*.⁷³ In Book 3, Lady Waldemar, as part of her attempt to convince Aurora of the unsuitability of Marian as a wife for Romney, asks her to visit Marian, to "see the girl / In whose most prodigal eyes the lineal pearl / and pride of all your lofty race of Leighs / Is destined to solution" (3:680-83). Reynold's note to these lines relates the story of Cleopatra's having "consumed pearls of fabulous worth dissolved in vinegar" as part of a contest with Antony to "provide the most extravagant banquet" (93 n9). Within the immediate context of her conversation with Aurora, Marian is that vinegar in which the Leigh pearl will be dissolved, unless someone intervenes to stop the marriage. That Aurora herself experiences succumbing to love as "dissolution" or "melting" is evident in passages relating both to divine and human love.

⁷³ See 3:680-83, as well as Reynold's note, 5:1075-85; 7:947-50 and 1305-11; 9:429,719-24 and 815-19).

In the presence of God, Aurora not only describes herself as becoming incapable of writing, reading, or thinking, but as “dissolving”:

With God so near me, could I sing of God?
I did not write, nor read, nor even think,
But sate absorbed amid the quickening glooms,
Most like some passive broken lump of salt
Dropt in by chance to a bowl of ænomel,
To spoil the drink a little and lose itself,
Dissolving slowly, slowly, until lost. (7:1305-11)

Here, Aurora describes herself as “passive” and “broken.” She has “lost” herself in the presence of God. Many, if not most, current readers of the work will find this analogy disturbing. Given Aurora’s strenuous efforts to be self-determined and directed, such dissolution seems not only vaguely dangerous, but counter-productive as well. But Aurora trusts God, and believes Him to be good. She has cried out to God because she believe she “was foolish in desire” (7:1267) for the very things for which most current readers (as well as some contemporary readers) want to champion her. The things Aurora has desired and gained (such as independence and fame) she here describes as “offal-food” (7:1268).

If the fact that the love of “wedded souls” is an image of divine love means that in order to properly love a man, the woman needs to be passively dissolved into his being, readers of the novel-epic will not be alone in their consternation at the ideal, for while Aurora seems to endorse as positive her dissolution in God, she has not shown the slightest hint of interest in being “dissolved” into Romney. There is much evidence in her letters that Elizabeth wrestled with this ideal of marriage herself. But she did marry. Rebecca Stott explains Aurora’s struggles with succumbing to marriage as a struggle—not against the notion of succumbing to love in itself—but against the notion of doing so thoughtlessly or blindly: “Love is idealized in [*Aurora Leigh*] as what makes heaven, but unthinking love is disparaged” (140).⁷⁴ It is the act of thoughtless or

⁷⁴ In Avery, Simon and Rebecca Stott. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. London: Longman. 2003.

blind marriage that results in a woman's "losing herself" in a destructive way—not the act of marriage itself. And, in fact, when the long-deferred embrace between Romney and Aurora occurs, it is not Aurora who "melts," but *words* (9:719). There is mingling and confusion; Aurora wonders, "were my cheeks / Hot, overflowed, with my tears, or his? /And which of our two large explosive hearts / So shook me?" (9:716-18), but this is not equivalent to the kind of dissolution Aurora experiences in the presence of God. Indeed, when Aurora attempts to describe her experience with Romney in terms of an object being dropped in a liquid; she does not refer to herself as a "passive broken lump of salt" (7:1309), but as a "pebble" (9:818): "O great mystery of love, / In which absorbed, loss, anguish, treason's self / Enlarges rapture, -as a pebble dropt / In some full wine-cup over-brims the wine" (9:816-19).⁷⁵ So, love is the cup of wine into which persons (pebbles) fall, and what results is not dissolution of self, but the over-flowing of love. To be "absorbed" in this way (rather than "dissolved") is to enlarge rapture, or happiness. This is the "mystery" of love. Such "absorption" does not require a blind plunge, but does require openness. To categorically refuse to succumb, to take a perpetually skeptical stance toward love, is finally to reject it. And if there is a hermeneutical property of love, to refuse love is also to refuse love's knowledge.⁷⁶ Truly, we get no good by being ungenerous, whether to books or to people.

Near the beginning of this chapter, I contend that Aurora is a poor reader, that her high claims for the efficacy of art in changing lives are unsubstantiated by her own life. And, in troubling and provocative ways, evidence of this persists to nearly the very end of the novel-epic.

⁷⁵ While Aurora is talking about herself Romney could equally be described as a "pebble" in this context.

⁷⁶ For a full-length collection of essays on the relationship of love and knowledge, see Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge*.

Her engagement with literary works does not affect the change in her own life.⁷⁷ What does affect the change in Aurora is her unavoidable confrontation with her own misreadings: of Marian, of Lady Waldemar, and of Romney. In those confrontations, there can no longer be anything merely rhetorical in her endorsement of “humility” or “generosity.” It is finally the example of Romney’s response to the failure of his own social plan which teaches her that “humility’s so good, / When pride’s impossible” (8:1049-50). And it is only upon becoming aware of Romney’s blindness that Aurora can admit her love for him with her own head “uncovered.”

Despite the ecstasy of Romney and Aurora’s deferred union and the apocalyptic imagery borrowed from the book of Revelation, the end of *Aurora Leigh* is not quite a triumphal ending. Aurora’s great poem seems to have helped others, though not herself. It remains to be seen whether she understands exactly what Romney means when he calls art a “service” (9:915). She has, though, found her way back to love, completing at least part of that epic quest expressed in her dying father’s exhortation to “Love, love my child” (1:318), and books are what sustain her until she completes it. Perhaps the fine distinction which needs to be drawn is between reading *for* life, versus reading *as if for* life.

The one consistent claim of *Aurora Leigh* regarding art remains that it can enact positive change in the individual human soul. What develops is Aurora’s understanding of how this change is affected, as she journeys along her own poet’s progress. Art is no less important in Book 9 than Book 1 of *AL*, but that importance is conditioned and constrained by real relationships with persons—whether divine or human. Aurora has learned that the proper object of love is persons—not poems, and that unless the aesthetic is subordinated to the personal, works of art become idols replacing or supplanting that of which they are merely signs. Evidence of this abounds, but one of the clearest expressions is Aurora’s statement that “Art is much but

⁷⁷ It might be argued that Aurora had to become a successful poet before she could be certain poems were inappropriate substitutes for persons as objects of love, but this is a different point.

Love is more" (9:656). Her explanation of the claim is that though art is "much," because—in this formulation—it "symbolizes heaven," love is more important than art because "Love is God/ And makes heaven" (9:957-9). If one comprehends "all the high necessities of Art," but betrays the human nature and souls it enables one to see, one "wrongs [one's] own life" (9:642-5). This is one reason Aurora judges her misreading of her own heart a more serious misreading than Romney's of the world; "He mistook the world; / But I mistook my own heart, and that slip / Was fatal" (9:709-11). Art does not make, and cannot replace the world. Even in the midst of her passionate defense of epic, Aurora is careful to articulate that any poetic "bosom *seems* to beat still, or at least / It sets our beating" (5:220-21, emphasis is mine). "Living art," then, is only living because it "presents and . . . records true life" (5:221-22). Art's "bosom" is merely metaphorical. Finally, to get the "right good" (1:709) from a book, one must close it.

CHAPTER III

CANONICITY AND AN INDIVIDUAL *ETHOS*:

THE UNAUTHORIZED READING OF DAVID JONES

1. An "Introduction" to David Jones

Without grotesque artifice, no whole person, least of all David, can be made to fit the discipline proper to a lecture or thesis. . . Harmon Grisewood

Perhaps what I want to say now is true of all literary criticism. I am sure that it is true of mine, that it is at its best when I have been writing of authors whom I have wholeheartedly admired. T.S. Eliot "To Criticize the Critic"

We shall break up the academic categories for dear truth's sake. David Jones "Art in Relationship to War"

David Jones (1895-1974) was an Anglo-Welsh modernist poet who served as a private during the First World War with the Royal Welch Fusiliers,⁷⁸ the same regiment in which Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves served as officers.⁷⁹ He served without any real distinction, but did survive to write about a portion of that war in what is arguably one of the most important works produced as a result of it: *In Parenthesis (IP)*, which was published in England in 1937 and with an introduction by T.S. Eliot in America in 1963, and won the prestigious British Hawthornden Prize for poetry. He was also considered as a potential poet laureate for Britain.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ As Jones writes in a letter to Rene Hague, 15 April 1973: "My Division was the 38th (Welsh) Division and I was in the 113th Infantry Brigade of the Div. and the 15th Batt. R.W.F. I was in 'B' Coy of the Batt. In Number 6 Platoon. At least for practically all the time—for a while I was in the Field Survey Company. But only for a few months. Got the sack from that job because of my inefficiency in getting the right degrees of enemy gun-flashes . . ." (Hague, 241)

⁷⁹ They didn't meet, though. As William Blissett writes, "[Jones] impressed upon me the fact of the great gulf fixed between officers and men: it was just about absolute during the Great War, and he could never have met Graves or Sassoon even if he had heard of them (51).

⁸⁰ Blissett recalls some of his and Jones's "gossip" about the Laureateship, "Betjeman, [Jones] said again would grace the position since so much of his best work is occasional. Recently the TLS had said that the three best poets were too old for it—Robert Graves David Jones, and 'that Scotsman' Hugh MacDiarmid . . ." (96). Blissett also reports that "David laughed at the thought of the Laureateship but took some pleasure in being named (97).

Although critics are divided as to the personal and psychological toll the war cost him, Jones himself attributed his nervous breakdowns to the strains of trying to practice his art under unfavorable cultural conditions, and not to any sort of war-induced neurosis.⁸¹ In his letters, up to the last he wrote before his death, he often referred to and recalled with great precision his experiences during the war. For example, in a July 1958 letter to Harmon Grisewood, Jones writes, “. . . Forty-two years go, yesterday and today, I was engaged in the operation in Mametz Wood described in Part 7 of *In Parenthesis*. By this hour (the evening of the 11th July) I was comfortably in bed in a very, very, very hot tent, of some sort, ten miles I suppose, From the scene of conflict” (Hague 174-5).⁸² Indeed, if Jones had had his way, he would have enlisted with the White Russians after his demobilization from the First World War, but his father strenuously objected to this course of action.⁸³ The only side-effect of his experience in the war Jones would regularly admit of was his pronounced preference to remain indoors; he rather liked looking at nature through his window than being out in it.⁸⁴ Jones was not a scholar in any conventional

⁸¹ During a 1973 conversation recalled by Blissett, “David said that he suffered only normal fears during the Great War and had a deep irrational conviction that he would survive it” (122). Blissett also reports that Jones’s “four years in the army, the months in the trenches and the bloody battle of the Wood left him spiritually and psychologically unscarred and even invigorated: and for a short time at least ready for more soldering. After demobilization he wished at first—until dissuaded by his father—to join the British forces in Russia” (28).

⁸² Here’s another example from the same book, in a letter from 1964: “I remember our digging a new ‘assembly Trench’ –it had to be dug in one night, seven feet deep about. . . and then covered over with branches of trees, etc. before it got light. The leafy branches we cut from a hedge just behind the new trench, and I remember thinking of ‘The wood of Birnam / Let every soldier hew him down a bough’” (Hague 215).

⁸³ William Blissett notes that “[Leslie Poulter] . . . almost persuaded David to join him in enlisting in 1919 for the Archangel Expedition against the new Bolshevik regime” (133).

⁸⁴ In a 17 July 1964 letter to Harmon Grisewood, in describing his meeting with Siegfried Sassoon Jones reports, “We were left alone in a jolly nice, quiet room. . . Sir Alan L. was jolly decent about that, for after lunch he said, Let’s now go and sit in the garden. But I said, Well, if you don’t mind, I’d prefer to stay in this room as I loathe sitting in gardens” (Hague 211).

sense. His only degree was from Camberwell Art School.⁸⁵ As a general rule he distrusted professional critics and academic institutions.⁸⁶ And *IP* wasn't simply a "one-off." The *Anthemata*, a second book-length poem, was published in 1952 by Faber, and won the American National Institute of Arts and Letters Russell Loines Memorial Award for poetry in 1954. This work was accepted for publication by T.S. Eliot,⁸⁷ lauded as "one of the most important poems of our time" by W.H. Auden, and judged a comparable work to Pound's *Cantos* and Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* by critics. Jones went on to receive the CBE in 1955 and the Bollingen Prize in 1959.

That the seriousness of David Jones's artistic vision, the skill with which he executed this vision—in painting and engraving as well as writing, and the critical acclaim and recognition of his writing by T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, W.B. Yeats, and William Carlos Williams have not resulted in his being endowed with canonical status has been and remains a source of bewilderment and frustration for the small coterie of critics who tirelessly (some would add "tiresomely") plead his case. Elizabeth Judge's description of what she calls "the requisite preface to writing on David Jones" is apt; the writer "lament[s] that he is 'known but not assimilated' and then "invok[es] a parade of canonicals to testify on his behalf" (179). And it is not only luminaries of the past who praised Jones's work (and not just writers—Stravinsky came to visit him⁸⁸), but current critically

⁸⁵ William Blissett notes that the pressure that had been put on Jones during the FWW to put in for a commission was dropped once it was discovered that his "school" was Camberwell School of Art" (78).

⁸⁶ John Johnston points out that "Unlike most of the wartime poets, Jones had no public school or university background" (321).

⁸⁷ Although Jones told William Blissett that Eliot had not seen "any part of *In Parenthesis* before it was submitted to Fabers. . ." Jones also opined that "Fabers would very likely have taken it even if Eliot had not been a director there, and it was someone else who wrote the letter of acceptance; but they probably would not have taken *The Anthemata* without him" (101). This also foreshadows the difference in critical reception of the two works.

⁸⁸ Here is Anthony Hyne in his preface to *David Jones: A Fusilier at the Front*: "Henry Moore attended his Requiem in Westminster Cathedral; Igor Stravinsky made a surprise pilgrimage to meet him in his room in Harrow" (16-17).

acclaimed artists such as poet Seamus Heaney and composer John Tavener.⁸⁹ What are the causes of this disjunction between promise and fulfillment, expectation and experience, attention and disregard? Why, as late as 1980, did a book published by Faber on David Jones advertise itself as an “introduction” to the poet?

Many reasons have been proposed by Jones’s critics through the decades, and Judge does a competent job of cataloging them in her article: a “densely allusive and formally elusive” style, a committed Roman Catholicism, and a “potentially reactionary” politics (182). These reasons, as Judge herself points out, fail to hold up under even cursory reflection. The majority of canonical modernist writing might be described as “densely allusive and formally elusive;” T.S. Eliot’s Anglo-Catholicism did not hurt his canonical status, and Ezra Pound’s explicitly and unabashedly reactionary politics did not result in his *Cantos* becoming critically marginalized. Jones is a “tardy” modernist, but while the lag time between the publication of *IP* in England and America might have initially provided a plausible explanation for his slower admission into the canon, it does not constitute a reason for his continued non-admission.⁹⁰ Thomas Dilworth, the most prolific and ardent of Jones’s scholars goes so far as to suggest that “the affinity between the *Cantos* and *The Anathemata* is one of the reasons David Jones has been neglected” (Shape of Meaning 367), arguing that Jones’s poor reception is collateral damage of the backlash against modernism in general and Pound specifically.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Paul Robichaud argues that Jones “archeological poetics of culture and place has been his most important legacy to other poets, such as Basil Bunting, R.S. Thomas, Geoffrey Hill Tony Conran, John Montague, and Seamus Heaney, to name but a few” (4).

⁹⁰ In his comments about the reception of *The Anathemata*, William Blissett states, “It is as if, by tacit agreement, the canon of modernism has been closed: heavy investment no longer required in late-century difficult authors” (2).

⁹¹ Jones was frustrated by the persistent critical project of searching for the “influences” of other poets on his work. In a 1954 letter to W.H. Auden, Jones writes, “. . . I must confess to having not read the *Cantos* until after *The Anathemata* had gone to the publishers. This is a pretty disgraceful admission on my part, but it happens to be true” (Hague 160).

Given the current impulse in the academy of further opening and extending the canon, of finding and championing “lost” or “marginalized” voices, confusion over Jones’s continuing marginalization is compounded rather than abated. Even those sympathetic to his cause and convinced of the significance of his work, and who are writing primarily to an audience who should be equally sympathetic and convinced, are compelled to admit—as does Gerald J. Russello in his 2006 essay in *The New Criterion*—that Jones’s “cultural influence remains opaque. Today there are no Jones disciples and he is eclipsed by the other British Modernists” (36). This is an overstatement; there are Jones disciples—or rather—there are friends of Jones, but most of these are aging men who actually knew Jones. Among those friends there are also scholars of a younger generation, such as Thomas Dilworth, who invested much intellectual and professional capital in his painstakingly thorough and sometimes too apologetic analyses and evaluations of Jones’s work. Here is a typical example of Dilworth’s evaluation of Jones’s achievement:

David Jones brought to completion what Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot began. He did it by achieving in his long poems a kind of unity absent in the long-non-narrative works by other Modernists . . . Only David Jones has written a Modernist long work that is open in form and yet formally whole. He was able to do it because he was one of Britain’s most accomplished visual artists before he became a poet. (Deluge 5-6)

Apart from the confidence of tone, what is of course notable about this statement is its begging of significant questions, among them that what Pound, Joyce, and Eliot “began” needs to be “brought to completion.”

On the other hand, there are scholars such as Elizabeth Ward, whose book on Jones participated in the current of criticism of modernist poets and poetry determined to flag them as fascistic⁹², or Katherine Staudt-Henderson, whose much more sympathetic and sometimes insightful book on Jones nonetheless projects a kind of post-modern paradigm onto his work that

⁹² Elizabeth Ward, *David Jones: Mythmaker*. Dover, N.H.: Manchester U P, 1983.

entails a misreading of his project and a rejection of his own intentions regarding his work.⁹³ She seems to want to “rescue” Jones from critical oblivion, but even if she succeeds what would be rescued would not be Jones, but her own version of Jones.

There are, in comparison with the major British modernist writers, relatively few books and critical articles on Jones; there is no satisfactory biography of Jones, but excerpts of his work—typically of *IP*—are now more often anthologized than in the past. Still, teaching Jones is problematic. Among other considerations, since the excerpt of *IP* is included in those sections of British Literature survey anthologies devoted to First World War writers, and since the poetic form critically identified with FWW poetry is the trench-lyric—typically written by beautiful young men who didn’t survive the war— to teach an excerpt from an epic written by a veteran of the war presents problems. The poem is a generic anomaly and the survival of its writer a troublesome fact; they resist the prescribed forms and uses of FWW poetry and poets. Furthermore, *IP* is not ideologically aligned with the didactic, anti-war stance evident in and/or ascribed to the poetry of Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon. Another way of expressing this is that Jones’s work expresses an *ethos* in some ways at odds with critical expectations of First World War writing in a form that is not easily packaged for use in the academic market.

The *Anathemata* presents problems which are similar to those of *In Parenthesis*, but are rendered more acute by the fact that while the *ethos* of *IP* is in line with the critical expectations that the poet be one with first-hand experience of war, and which provides a first-hand account of a portion of that war, the *ethos* of the *Anathemata*, because of its partaking of the same *ethos* as *IP*, is entirely inimical to critical expectations of modernist poetry. That this *ethos* is primarily

⁹³ Kathleen Henderson Staudt, *At the Turn of a Civilization: David Jones and Modern Poetics*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994.

evident in the copious self-annotation of the text by David Jones does nothing to alleviate the problem.⁹⁴

Reading of David Jones, then, is “unauthorized” in the sense that he has remained a perpetual outsider—excluded from the ranks of canonical modern writers despite the undeniable modern form(s) and concerns of his work. My insistence on reading Jones is passionate. I read Jones because I love his work, and because I respect the *ethos* which emerges from both his poems and his essays. Years of such unauthorized reading has provided evidence to support my claim that readings of at least particular kinds of works—in this case the epic—without taking *ethos* into consideration will result in flawed or incomplete readings of the work. *Ethos* should matter, then, even to those readers for whom character and human nature are of little concern, because attention to *ethos* is one of the clearest and simplest ways to explain otherwise bewildering problems regarding critical reception and classification of some kinds of literary works.

2. *In Parenthesis: A Novelized Epic of the First World War*

Men march because they are alive.

R.S. Thomas

You ought to ask: Why/ what is this/ what's the meaning of this./ Because you don't ask,/ although the spear-shaft/ drips,/ there's neither steading—nor a roof-tree.”

David Jones (*IP* 84)

Despite some confusion about genre which typically accompanies any book-length work not entirely constituted by prose, *In Parenthesis* has been largely treated as epic by critics from its

⁹⁴ Jones himself was not unaware of the problem his notes presented. In a 24 February 1954 letter to W. H. Auden, Jones admits, “Yes, ‘the Notes’! Insoluble problems, but I think that it was the only thing to do, for reasons explained in the preface” (Hague 163).

first serious analysis by John Johnston in the 1960s.⁹⁵ This analysis and interpretation of *IP* was first published about the time of *IP*'s publication in America in 1962, and Jones believed it to be the best available.⁹⁶ Here is Johnston's description of the work:

In Parenthesis is a 40,000-word narrative . . . which is divided into seven parts of varied lengths. Each part follows the stages of a British infantry unit's movement from its depot in England to the great summer battle (obviously the Somme Offensive) which is destined to consume it. The story is told sometimes in prose, sometimes in verse; the fundamental conception—considering the level of sensibility, the texture of the language, and the compressed or elliptical verbal technique—belongs, however, to the realm of poetry rather than to that of prose. (286)

With regard to significance, Johnston asserts that "*In Parenthesis* is the most comprehensive attempt to deal with the novel physical and psychological conditions" of the First World War (327). While there were certainly more negative assessments of the work, Paul Fussell's in the *Great War and Modern Memory*, for example, the difference in opinion is not over genre, but rather whether it is appropriate to attempt to write an epic about the First World War.

So, *In Parenthesis* is usually classified as an epic. Here is Thomas Dilworth's assessment of the work:

In Parenthesis is original, powerfully moving, and beautiful. It is the most complex and profound literary work in any language to emerge from the experience of the First World War and is unsurpassed by subsequent works on war. It is certainly the greatest literary treatment of war in English. And it is the only authentic and successful epic poem in the language since *Paradise Lost*. (Although critics have called the *Cantos* an epic, it is not a narrative and so cannot, strictly speaking, be considered an epic.) We have seen how *In Parenthesis* expands the genre, as all important epics do. If Jones had written nothing else, he would deserve to be considered an important poet. *Shape of Meaning* 368

⁹⁵ This essay is published in his *English Poetry of the First World War: A Study in the Evolution of Lyric and Narrative Form*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964.

⁹⁶ He also wondered again at how and why it was (and is) the case that his work is so much more sympathetically and critically well received in American and Canada than in Britain. See Blissett's *Long Conversation*, pages 32 and 35.

Despite a tendency toward hyperbole, Dilworth's criticism of Jones is essentially sound, and at least with regard to *In Parenthesis*, he is not arguing against the critical mainstream—he is merely employing the use of too many superlative and/or restricting modifiers. Furthermore, one cannot do research on David Jones without becoming indebted to Thomas Dilworth; for comprehensive treatment of the Jones *oeuvre* Dilworth is the best critic in the field. And should the reader be tempted to attribute Dilworth's choice to champion Jones to any deficit of critical acumen on his part, it is useful to remind (or inform) the reader that, with regard to the merit of *IP*, a critic of the stature of T.S. Eliot himself recognized the greatness of the work, though even he stumbled in trying to describe it in his introduction to the first American edition of the work.

Perhaps this "stumbling" was partly due to the awareness of the worrisome facts that a work he was "proud to share the responsibility of" the first printing of, regarded as a work of genius, and predicted for the same type of critical attention received by the works of Pound and Joyce was, after a gap of 25 years still largely unknown (vii). Indeed, the prose of Eliot in his introduction suffers some of the same excesses as will Dilworth's. Here are some excerpts: "On reading the book in typescript I was deeply moved. I then regarded it, and I still regard it, as a work of genius," and "When *In Parenthesis* is widely enough known—as it will be in time—it will no doubt undergo the same sort of detective analysis and exegesis as the later work of James Joyce and the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound" (vii). Eliot is also already, as Dilworth will be in the future, testing out possible explanations for the lack of critical attention being paid to Jones's work—both *IP* and *The Anthemata*. Perhaps it is his practice of self-annotation of his poems (vii), or the fact that of the company of moderns in which Eliot includes Jones, Jones "is the youngest, and the tardiest to publish" (viii). In short, Dilworth's anxiety over the canonical case of Jones cannot be written off as symptomatic of critical incompetence.

Eliot's introduction also points that while the "lives of all" of the modernist writers "were altered by that War. . . Jones is the only one to have fought in it" (viii). It is hardly surprising that one of the few soldiers to survive the First World War and subsequently turn to writing within the context of high modernism should write an epic—or that that epic would not quite square with traditional epic. In one of Kathleen Raines' rambling but insightful personal essays on Jones, she describes *IP* as Jones's "poetic novel, or epic poem, of the First World War" (*Solitary Perfectionist* 1). *IP* is unarguably an epic. It is novelized on account of its author's intimate and contactual knowledge of and participation in its subject.

For despite being an epic of war, Jones's *IP* is an anti-*Iliad* of sorts. Grant that Simone Weil is right in her assessment of Homer's epic—that force is the real "hero" of the *Iliad* and therefore provides the center of the work. The center of *IP* is not force—it is the struggle to "stay connected" in the context of a fragmenting world. One way Jones attempts to achieve this is by insisting that the mere fact of being a soldier provides a means of "connecting" to other soldiers in all times. Kathleen Raines expresses this well:

The army [Jones] saw as a way of life, a human condition, the same at all times and places. He had no less a sense of identity with the Roman forces in the city of Jerusalem about the time of the crucifixion; with the Welsh cavalry defeated by the Saxons at the battle of Catraeth; with all armies whose condition he shared in his time and place, than with the Royal Welch Fusiliers, Company B, to whom his *In Parenthesis* is dedicated. (*Loved and Known* 12)

There are no heroes in *IP*; there are just one's fellow soldiers and those who are "enemies" but who the author describes as those who "shared our pains against whom we found ourselves by misadventure" in the epigraph of the work. This is another novelizing feature of the epic.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Paul Robichaud notes that, "The total absence of triumphalism—or even mention of the battle's outcome—throughout *In Parenthesis* acknowledges the paradox of war, that every victory is someone else's defeat and vice versa" (102).

In the *Iliad* there is no disjunction between human will and human action unless the gods intervene, and even these cases are relatively unproblematic. It is this uncanny ability of the heroes of the *Iliad* to act with clear, unclouded consciences and to suffer no “shadow” between intention and act that effectively “dehumanizes” them. As Bakhtin would say, these characters are already “finished” and “complete” (Epic and Novel). In *IP* there is none of this tidiness. A soldier (and he is not even identified by name, but referred to as “you”) lobs a grenade into the brush, both knowing the consequences of his action and vainly hoping (with his eyes shut) that he won’t see the blood spattered foliage when he rises.

You tug at rusted pin—
 it gives unexpectedly and your fingers pressed to released
 flange.
 You loose the thing into the underbrush. . . .
 You huddle closer to your mossy bed
 you make yourself scarce
 you scramble forward and pretend not to see,
 but ruby drops from young beech-sprigs—
 are bright your hands and face. (169)

The “enemy” does not die immediately, and “you” are forced to listen as he “calls for Elsa, for Manuela, / for the parish priest of Burkersdorf in Saxe Altenburg” (169). This is, in some respects, closer to the *Iliad*. One of the great lies that close reading of the *Iliad* exposes is that there were any substantive cultural differences between the Achaeans and the Trojans, and Jones’s depiction of the dying German soldier calling on the parish priest, just as would most dying English soldiers, focuses attention on similarities and connections rather than dissimilarities and divisions. But the heroes of the *Iliad* never hesitate to kill the enemy, and suffer no pains of regret afterwards, regardless of their sometimes open admiration of the other’s valor and strength in battle. As a novelized epic, *IP* is more closely aligned formally to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, in that it exhibits characteristics of traditional epic, than it is to Chenjerai Hove’s *Bones*. However, it is unlike either *Aurora Leigh* or *Bones* in that it is not written from a first person

perspective. Furthermore, though both Aurora and Marita are answerable for their actions, there is no comparable character at the center of *IP*. The obligation of answerability in *IP* falls on the shoulder of its author, David Jones, who attempts to discharge his duty both within the words of the epic and his notes to it—and its readers, who are implored to ask the right questions. Thus, it is the *ethos* of the real, flesh and blood author of *IP* that primarily emerges from the language of the epic, not of a created character as in *Aurora Leigh* and *Bones*.

In *Aurora Leigh* and *Bones* it is the novelization of the epic that contributes most to the *ethos* of the works; in *In Parenthesis* it is the choice of epic—rather than the more personal trench-lyric which is the iconic form of FWW poetry—that reveals the *ethos* of the writer. The concern of *IP* is not just with what the poet saw or what it meant to him—but *how* what he experienced *means*, and how all of Britain was affected. Kathleen Raines expresses it this way: “David Jones is not a personal writer: he is a national writer, a bard in the strict sense of the word. He invites us to participate not in a private world but in a shared and objective world, to which each of us is attached by the same texture of living strands as is the poet himself” (*Loved and Known* 13-14). This desire to uncover and forge connections is one which is at once characteristic of epic and uncharacteristic of most FWW poetry, which rather stresses how the current war was irrevocably different from any that preceded it. It was primarily this characteristic of *IP* which motivated Paul Fussell’s criticism of the work in his canonical critical work, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.

The reader comes away from this [work] persuaded that the state of the soldier is universal throughout history. But the problem is, if soldiering is universal, what’s wrong with it? And if there is nothing in the special conditions of the Great War to alter cases drastically, what’s so terrible about it? Why the shock? But Jones’s commitment to his ritual-and-romance machinery impels him to keep hinting that this war is like others . . . (150)⁹⁸

⁹⁸ This quote from Fussell begs the question that the First World War was irrevocably different from all other wars, and assumes that all “true” literature of that war must be anti-militaristic.

And it is the *ethos* of all of Jones's work, one of a bard more interested in national survival and meaning than in personal, which is at odds with both FWW and modernist expectations.⁹⁹ This *ethos* is at odds with the expectations of FWW critics because the collective rather than the individual is the focus of concern, and with the expectations of modernist critics because it exhibits a foundational belief in a kind of universalism most modernists consider mythical.

Jones's desire to make historical sense of the First World War by suggesting connections should not be taken as evidence of any naivety about the nature of that war on Jones's part. He did have particular aims in writing *IP*, and admitted in his introduction to the work that the kind of work he was trying to write could probably not be written if he had not chosen to end *IP* at the point of the Somme offensive. In his own words,

The period covered begins early in December 1915 and ends early in July 1916. The first date corresponds to my going to France. The latter roughly marks a change in the character of our lives in the Infantry on the West Front. From then onward things hardened into a more relentless, mechanical affair, took on a more sinister aspect. The wholesale slaughter of the later years, the conscripted levies filling the gaps in every file of four, knocked the bottom out of the intimate, continuing, domestic life of small contingents of men, within whose structure Roland could find, and, for a reasonable while, enjoy, his Oliver. (ix)¹⁰⁰

Jones was palpably and experientially aware of the disjunctions between the experiences of the FWW soldier and those of previous wars; "We feel a rubicon has been passed between striking with a hand weapon as men used to do and loosing poison from the sky as we do ourselves" (xiv). Jones both acknowledges and appreciates his culture's advancement "into the territory of physical sciences," and worries that the "unforeseen, subsidiary effects of this achievement" are

⁹⁹ Two years before his death, Jones admitted to William Blissett, "I don't love this life, but I think I have a lot more poems to write—a lot more to do for . . . Britain" (97). Blissett goes on to explain that Jones "hesitated, briefly, then chose the awkward 'Britain' over the easy 'England'" (97).

¹⁰⁰ Jones addresses this subject in a 1973 letter to Rene Hague; "Those of us of my unit who had been in the contest in the woods of the Somme in July 1916 felt the great change that 'mechanization' in one form or another had unconsciously changed things quite a bit. Some, by a chance give-away word betrayed their feelings, the 'instress' that they would, if they could, bring back that sylvan terrain where so many Agamemnonns had cried aloud" (Hague 252-53).

not understood (xiv). These technological and scientific advances “heighten” and “clarify” perception, require “a new and strange direction of the mind,” and facilitate “a new sensitivity . . . but at a considerable cost” (xiv). Nonetheless, Jones both insists that there is “no doubt at all” that at least some of the experiences of past soldiers are “substantially the same as you and I suffered” (xv), and admits that he finds himself facing dilemmas that were not faced by “the old authors” (xv) in representing those things he “saw, felt, & was part of” between December 1915 and July 1916 on the Western front (ix). Such admissions would be difficult to align with an aim of producing a traditional epic about a modern war. Novelizing the epic enables Jones to ask the questions regarding his experience of the war which he believes must be asked—not just by him—but by all those affected by the war:

You ought to ask: Why
 what is this
 what’s the meaning of this.
 Because you don’t ask,
 although the spear-shaft
 drips,
 there’s neither steading—nor a roof-tree. (84)

3. *In Parenthesis* in the Context of British First World War Poetry

Later, reading *In Parenthesis*, I felt that David Jones belonged to a company of men whom, through this poem, he had mythologized and made holy. His letters show that he thought constantly about the war, even up to the last week of his life. Stephen Spender

James Campbell, in his essay “Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism,” argues that much standard criticism of First World War poetry (notably Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*) participates in the same ideological blind as do many of the trench lyrics it is attempting to criticize. Campbell defines “combat gnosticism” as “the belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience” (203). He

argues that this belief contributed to the once narrowly constructed canon of FWW literature as well as its status “as a discrete body of work with almost no relation to non-war writing” (203). I want to save the second part of this observation for later consideration, and begin by discussing the non-formal ways in which *IP* does and does not conform to the “defining elements” of FWW canonical poetry: an “emphasis on personal experience” the legitimacy of which “depends upon the putative accuracy of its representation of its writer’s experience in the trench” (205), and what Campbell calls “an ethic of passive humanism” in which “the mature” poems of writers such as Owen and Sassoon are read “as poems of ethical protest” (211).

In the opening lines of Jones’s preface to *IP* he affirms that “This writing has to do with some things I saw, felt, & was part of” (ix). One could hardly ask for a more authoritative claim. Indeed, the language here is evocative of that of Saint John the Evangelist in his first letter which begins, “We declare to you . . . what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands . . .” (1:1). Jones is not writing from hearsay or speculation; his writing is based on his own experience.¹⁰¹ And Jones’s uncanny ability to accurately describe what he experienced during his time on the Western front is often remarked upon in criticism of *IP*. For example, here is John X. Cooper in his essay “The Writing of the Seen World: David Jones’s *In Parenthesis*”; “I want to put the mythic to the side and concentrate on a particular aspect of the work’s realism: Jones’s consummate skill in visual imaging” (303), and “Jones’s particular descriptive talent lies . . . in representing, with extraordinary verisimilitude, the world in continuous transformation, the world, in short, as process” (308). Jones was a veteran of the FWW, and he did actually participate in combat, thereby fulfilling the first

¹⁰¹ In one of many passages which could be used as evidence to support this claim, William Blissett remembers that “Tom [Dilworth] asked [Jones] if the Christmas sequence [of *IP*] was taken from his own experience. It was: the unit did arrive at Christmas time, 1915, and the carols were the ones they heard and sang. . . The episode of the fist shell (p. 24) happened to Private Jones, mangolds and all; and *The Oxford Book of English Verse* was the ‘one book’ that was all you could carry” (Blissett 107).

requirement of the type of war literature Campbell asserts is valorized by FWW critics of the particular ideological tenor he is analyzing. What follows is a passage which relates what John Ball experiences just before, during, and a shell explodes near him. It is a long passage, but merits reproduction in full in order to appreciate the order of Jones's skill at so precisely describing an event which occurred at least ten years before Jones begins to work on *In Parenthesis*.

John Ball would have followed, but stood fixed and alone in the little yard—his senses highly alert, his body incapable of movement or response. The exact disposition of small things—the precise shapes of trees, the tilt of a bucket, the movement of a straw, the disappearing right boot of Sergeant Snell—all minute noises, separate and distinct, in a stillness charged through with some approaching violence—registered not by the ear nor with any single faculty—an on-rushing pervasion, saturating all existence; with exactitude, logarithmic, dial-timed, millesimal—of calculated velocity, some mean chemist's contrivance, a stinking physicist's destroying toy.

He stood alone on the stones, his mess-tin spilled at his feet. Out of the vortex, rifling the air it came—bright, brass-shod, Pandoran; with all-filling screaming the howling crescendo's up-piling snapt. The universal world, breath held, one half second, a bludgeoned stillness. Then the pent violence released a consummation of all burstings out; all sudden up-rendings and rivings-through—all taking-out of vents—all barrier-breaking—all unmaking. Pernitric begetting—the dissolving and splitting of solid things. In which unearthing aftermath, John Ball picked up his mess-tin and hurried within; ashen, huddled, waited in the dismal straw. Behind "E" Battery, fifty yards down the road, a great many mangolds, uprooted, pulped, congealed with chemical earth, spattered and made slippery the rigid boards leading to the emplacement. The sap of vegetables slobbered the spotless breech-block of No. 3 gun. (24)

This is one of the longest passages of such description in *IP*, but there are many other shorter of such passages which testify to the authority and authenticity of the literary work and its author.¹⁰²

¹⁰² As John Johnston states, "Almost any page of *In Parenthesis* will afford similar examples of Jones's sensibility with respect to the physical experiences of warfare" (299).

One early essay on *IP* took pains to make explicit these facts about the work; it was titled “David Jones: The Man Who Was on the Field: *In Parenthesis* as Straight Reporting.”¹⁰³ This is largely hyperbole, although Jones himself admitted the parts of *IP* were “straight—reportage”.¹⁰⁴ Jones joined the Royal Welch Fusiliers as an artist—not as a writer, and the journal he kept was predominately of sketches.¹⁰⁵ ¹⁰⁶In his preface, Jones claims that “none of the characters in this writing are real persons, nor is any sequence of events historically accurate” (ix). This, as all authorial comments, must be taken with a grain of salt. In numerous letters Jones reveals the identity of the real-life model for a specific character.¹⁰⁷ Then, too, Jones finds himself, in writing a preface to a literary work about his experiences in the FWW in 1937, in a very tight corner indeed. There are no FWW veterans alive writing anything like what Jones is attempting to write, yet he feels obligated to all those he fought with and against to try to express and describe what he (and they) experienced. As he writes in his published fragment from “The Book of Balaam’s Ass,” “. . . it is inevitable and meet;/ while there is breath it’s only right to bear immemorial witness./ There were breakings of thin ice I can tell you and incomings/ to transmute the whole dun envelope of this flesh” (*Sleeping Lord* 99). It is T.S. Eliot who reads the manuscript; it is the period of high modernism, and the FWW values of authenticity and realism have been supplanted by impersonality and disassociation.

¹⁰³ Colin Hughes, “David Jones: The Man Who Was on the Field: *In Parenthesis* as Straight Reporting.” In John Matthias, *David Jones: Man and Poet*, 163-91.

¹⁰⁴ Jones writes in a letter to Harmon Grisewood dated 15 November 1970, “. . . in, I think, Part 6 of *In Paren*. On a sunny chalk down where I lay with three of my closest friends on the even of our assault on the Bois de Mametz. . . That was straight—reportage. . . (Hague 229).

¹⁰⁵ A selection of these sketches, with relevant passages from letters and *IP*, is published in Anthony Hyne’s *David Jones: A Fusilier at the Front* (1995). Hyne is a nephew of David Jones, and the executor of his estate.

¹⁰⁶ William Blissett reports seeing Jones “rummaging about in his stacks of old papers” and coming up with “the pencil sketches he had made in the trenches—against standing military orders. ‘Bloody art-school stuff, most of it’ he said. . . ” (23).

¹⁰⁷ Lazarus Black is “the Lazarus Cohen of *In Parenthesis*” (Blissett 74), and Colonel Bell is “the ‘well Dell’ of *In Parenthesis*” (Blissett 78).

Indeed, one of the most striking differences between *IP* and the canonical trench lyric—all formal considerations aside—is that it is not written from a first-person perspective. The authorial and authenticating “I” is relegated to the preface and to the notes of *IP*. The work itself is written in third person, with occasional unsettling and unconventional uses of second person. Here is an example from Part 3. The troops are marching toward the place they will be billeted, and the poet emphasizes the difficulties of even such a seemingly mundane task:

And sleepy eyed see Jimmy Grove’s irregular bundle-figure, totter upward labouringly, immediately next in front, his dark silhouette sways a moment above *you*—he drops away into the night and *your* feet follow where he seemed to be. each in turn labours over whatever it is—this piled brokenness—dragged over and a scared hurrying on—the slobber was ankle-deep where *you* found the road again. 33 (*emphases are mine*)

This use of “you” absent the use of “I” can be disorienting for the reader and raises questions about the referent of the pronoun “you.”¹⁰⁸ Is the poet, who has chosen to eschew the first person narrative stance, nonetheless writing as if he were writing from the first person? If so, the “you” may refer to soldiers in a rather straightforward and uncomplicated way. But sometimes it seems that the “you” is the poet, and that the poet, from the forward trench of the present, is addressing himself—or his remembered self—in the past as “you.” Finally (and this is the reason we tell our composition students to avoid the use of “you” in their academic essays), the reader of *IP* when confronted with a “you” must involuntarily and momentarily identify that “you” as herself. Only momentarily of course, this reader at least was never “ankle-deep” in “slobber” at the Western front. While I cannot attribute this disorienting use of “you” to any act of conscious intention on

¹⁰⁸ John Johnston comments on this phenomenon as follows: “. . . Jones quite often shifts to the present [tense], especially when the second-person point of view is used. Such a device of course, strengthens the impression of immediacy; the action is simultaneous with the reader’s experience of it” (293).

the part of Jones, it does bear a striking similarity to the disorienting use of pronouns in modernist poems such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

One of the ways, then, in which *IP* can be important which has not yet been sufficiently exercised, is as the only British modernist poem written by a FWW veteran about FWW.¹⁰⁹ In this sense it is a liminal or hybrid work in which a poet is attempting to write under two, often contradictory, sets of literary conventions and expectations. In this case, Jones manages to meet the requirements of canonical FWW poetry with his first person claims in the preface and the notes to *In Parenthesis*, as well as passages of vivid realistic description in the poem itself. On the other hand, Jones conditions his FWW poem to meet the requirements of canonical modernist poetry by denying the historical veracity of element of the poem in the preface. The poem itself, of course, looks modernist. It is experimental in form, highly allusive, and indeterminate with regard to meaning. *IP* is important not only for what it represents, but because the work and its author provide a way to explore the relationships between FWW and modernist writing.

To briefly sum up, Jones's *IP* does meet the first requirement of canonical FWW poetry as described by Campbell (who is summarizing Fussell). It was written by a soldier-poet who experienced combat, from the perspective of an eye-witness, and with accurate and realistic description. However, *IP* does not meet the second "ethical half" of the requirement as he describes it (Campbell 211). It does not represent "an ethic of passive humanism," and it is not a poem of "ethical protest" (211). Katherine Raines takes on this issue directly, with reference to

¹⁰⁹ As John Johnston explains: "*In Parenthesis* is thus clearly a product of the decades between the two great wars; that is to say, it could not have been written in its present form before 1920, and it is doubtful whether some of the unusual characteristics we have discussed could again be brought into precisely the same poetic combination today. Unlike his surviving contemporaries, Sassoon and Blunden, Jones took full advantage of the new freedoms that postwar literature seemed to demand as it sought to accommodate itself to the deepening complexities of modern consciousness" (322-23).

Yeats' famous (or infamous) justification for excluding FWW poetry from the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*; "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry" (xxiv). Here is Raines:

Many times it has been pointed out that for David life in the trenches was not, as Yeats objected was true of many war poets, a matter of "passive suffering". Yeats rightly said (indignantly as he has been blamed for this) that passive suffering is no theme for poetry. For David Jones the situation of men in even the worst conditions of war was certainly not one of mere passivity; most of B-company are killed in action but they are not therefore cannon-fodder; they are still enduring the human condition with courage and fear, with companionship and patience, and their death is not meaningless (*Loved and Known* 20)

Criticism that this passage begs several questions may be warranted, but illustrations from *IP* will support Raines' main point here.

The most extended example of this lack of passivity is Dai's Boast. Dai "adjusts his slipping shoulder-straps, wraps close his misfit outsize greatcoat" and launches into his monologue with the words, "My fathers were with the Black Prinse of Wales/ at the passion of the blind Bohemian king" (79) and continues for five pages during which Dai identifies himself, as a soldier, with other soldiers throughout history. Some may argue the comparisons are strained, that the connections cannot be made. Even if this is so, this represents an active effort at locating meaning through identifying oneself as a member of the eternal fellowship of soldiers.

There are abundant examples of a lack of passivity to choose from; these struck me at a casual flipping through the well-worn pages of my copy of the book. First, three more examples from Part 4; despite being surprised by an enemy patrol and admitting a desire "for a private hole to go to," the poet asserts, "we maintain ascendancy in no-man's land" (70-71). Immediately preceding this scene, the poet describes the reactions of John Ball when, serving as sentry, he notes movement "at two o'clock from the petrol-tin. He is indeterminate of what should be his necessary action. Leave him be on a winter's morning—let him bide" (67). Fear and indeterminacy are not passivity. The soldiers act. Ascendancy is maintained. The enemy soldier is

permitted to get away unscathed. A couple of pages further along in the text, even the act of waiting to receive the daily rum ration is described as active. The waiting soldiers first cajole the administrating soldier to “dole out the issue . . . for christ’s sake let us be warm,” while urging him to be careful, “O have a care—don’t spill the precious” (73). They then turn on each other, “O don’t jog his hand . . . do take care. O please—give the poor bugger elbow room,” and finally break into mild cursing when the rum is spilt: “Would you bloody-believe-it” (73). Later, in Part 7, when the soldiers are waiting to go over the top on the morning of July 1, 1916, the following lines are ascribed to them: “Perhaps they’ll cancel it./ O blow fall out the officers cantcher, like a wet afternoon/ Or the King’s Birthday./ Or you read it again many times to see if it will come different/ . . . / It just can’t happen in our family” (158). While there is certainly apprehension and some degree of denial depicted here, apprehension and denial are not “passive”.

Nor is it “passive” to act when action cannot achieve the desired result or prevent the inevitable from happening. The soldiers continue their efforts to dig foxholes for themselves even though “it’s no good you cant do it with these toy spades” (174). And when the soldier next to John Ball “gets it in the middle body,” despite the fact that he “is not instructed” and could not “stay so fast a tide” of blood, and notwithstanding the fact that the “First Field Dressing is futile,” Ball attempts to dress the wound (174). This soldier dies, but the efforts of the carrying-parties struggling to carry the wounded to an improbable healing are noted on the next page. These “burdened bearers walk with careful feet/ to jolt [the wounded] as little as possible” (175). After John Ball himself is wounded near the end of *IP*, the concluding five pages of the work are primarily devoted to description of his struggle to carry on without abandoning his rifle. He finally realizes he must abandon the rifle, but holds on to his gas-mask (186). And even after Ball

abandons his rifle and resigns himself to wait for the stretcher-bearers to find him, he decides to “drag [himself] just a little further” as the enemy “may counter-attack” (187).¹¹⁰

In short, Raines’ assessment is accurate; the soldiers in *IP* are not depicted simply as “cannon-fodder; they are still enduring the human condition with courage and fear, with companionship and patience” (*Loved and Known* 20). A soldier being relieved from his front-line position leaves “some dryish wood under [the] fire-step” for the soldier replacing him (49). In even the mundane, practical suggestions provided for the rookie soldier: “. . . if you’re a Skinny Lizzie, it’s best to/ put a sock under the shoulder-straps [of your pack]” (118), this lack of passivity is evident. Though the private soldiers may “know no more than do those hands who squirt cement/ till siren screams, who are indifferent that they rear an archi-/tect’s folly” (87), they are “worthy of an intelligent song for all the stupidity of/ their contest” (88-89). The soldiers who fought in the FWW may not have been conditioned for what they faced, and may have faced horrors they could not have anticipated, but the poet of *IP* insists that they did what was required of them, even if they sometimes cursed as they were doing so.

The single most significant cause of the differences between the stance of Jones’s *IP* and the stances of Wilfred Owen¹¹¹ and Siegfried Sassoon¹¹² toward the war may be attributed to the

¹¹⁰ Jones writes To R.H., 27 September 1974 an extensive description of his war experiences — with special attention to the account of his being wounded at Mametz — which is largely represented “under the sign” of John Ball in Part 7 of *IP*:

I don’t know how far I crawled and my rifle with bayonet fixed I had somehow managed to sling over my shoulder and it hung a dead weight and somehow ‘fouled’, as sailors say, with my tin hat, but I did not want to be without my rifle, partly for the obvious reason that I had no other weapon. . . . after a bit more crawling I found I should have to abandon it, which I did, still with a sense of shame and a feeling that can only be described as real affection (akin to the feeling of leaving a mate or something — or as when a child has to leave a toy it has had an affection for. ‘The fair flaw in the grain, above the lower sling-swivel’ on p. 184 corresponded to an actual streak in the wood) for what I was leaving. My gas mask I kept on ground of sheer ungraced, pure utility. (Hague 259)

¹¹¹ About Wilfred Owen, Jones writes in a letter To R.J., 9-15 July 1973,

fact that Jones was a private and Owen and Sassoon, officers. None of the other causes has as much explanatory force. As a private, Jones did not have the information officers did, nor was he required to compel others to carry out orders. He lacked both the perspective and obligations of an officer, and therefore also lacked their sense of responsibility and sometimes guilt. Here is Jones in an unpublished letter to an editor:

In retrospect, it seems to be agreed by all that the events of July 1916 marked a turning point in that war. I can bear witness that when I returned to my unit in the October of that year there was a sense of change. For one thing many of ones companions were no longer present; farther there was a pervading feeling of something less intimate, more wholesale, more mechanical, Something analogous, I imagine, to that feeling of the employees of a firm that has been taken over by a larger one. But I very much doubt whether, for the private soldier at all events, there was any awareness that the Somme Offensive had been other than a victory—and I am certain that our attitude to the Staff remained the same after the Somme as it had been before it.¹¹³

Or, as Jones put it in *IP*, private soldiers may “know no more than do those hands who squirt cement/ till siren screams, who are indifferent that they rear an archi-/tect’s folly” (87). The ethical criterion of FWW poetry which Campbell calls “a humanism of passivity” (202), poetry which may paradoxically assume the form of protest—in some cases unabashedly didactic—as in Owen’s “*Dulce et Decorum Est*,” is predicated in large part on that poetry having been written by

. . . What astonishes me about Owen whose poems I have been familiar with only in recent years is how on earth he was able to write them while actually in the trenches, it was an astonishing achievement—I can’t imagine how it was done—a unique and marvelous detachment—but I don’t like his identification of the grimly circumstances . . . with the Passion of the Incarnate Logos. . . Its brilliant artistry and skill and plain stated factualness down to the right way to tie the leather thong of Field Service boots—do not, for me, at all events, justify what I think is the unfortunate theology implied, well, more than implied, but quite explicit. (Hague 245)

¹¹² After meeting Siegfried Sassoon, Jones writes in a 17 July 1964 letter to Harmon Grisewood, “I found Siegfried S. extremely nice, gentle and pleasant . . . (he said that however much he tried he could never get that 1st War business out of his system, which is exactly the case with me. . .) but I found I couldn’t make much contact, if any about *poiesis*. That was disappointing” (Hague 210).

¹¹³ Transcribed by me from a letter held at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, Wales.

officers.¹¹⁴ It does not accurately describe *IP*, but neither does it accurately describe trench lyrics written by Isaac Rosenberg or Ivor Gurney, who were also privates.

So, while I agree with Campbell's observation that much canonical FWW criticism of canonical FWW trench lyrics participates in and/or mirrors the ideological structures of the poems under consideration, and I agree with him that Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* provides too narrow a definition of FWW poetry, Campbell is merely re-writing some of Fussell's errors under a different slogan. Neither Campbell's nor Fussell's critical campaigns take adequate account of the FWW poetry of privates. Since one of the putative objectives of teaching FWW poetry is to provide students with some "truth" about how soldiers felt about and understood the war, this too often unconsidered bias, this subordination of the poetry of privates to that of their officers—which is of better service to a predominately liberal academy's interpretation of that war—is lamentable. To the extent that scholars and teachers are aware that the attitudes expressed about the war in the poetry of the canonical FWW poets is narrowly that of officers, and not widely representative of that of the ordinary soldier, any misrepresentation of these facts to their readers and students is itself unethical. How horribly ironic that in the efforts to widen and enlarge the canon of FWW poetry to include women, conscientious objectors, and other non-combatants, the poetry of FWW privates becomes as marginalized by virtue of being ideologically suspect as it was under the "old" canon. I am not arguing that the poetry of FWW privates was and is not being read; I am strenuously objecting to its critical marginalization because it does not serve the anti-militarist agendas of some literary scholars.

¹¹⁴ William Blissett recalls that Jones "compared Owen's poem 'Dulce et decorum est' with his own cheerful or complaining acceptance of the 'old lie', and told me what he had not told anyone else, that he had done a heroic war drawing with that title which had appeared during the war in the *Illustrated London News* (122).

Jones himself was concerned that *IP* was included, in a leading article titled “When the Barrage Lifted,” among poetic works which made “special reference to the Somme Offensive,” because the claim of this article was that these works “generated pacifism in the post-war generation down to 1939.”¹¹⁵ Jones acknowledges that he can only speak of his own work and his own intentions, but clearly affirms that in his writing of *IP*, “there was certainly no intention to foster what is called ‘pacifism’, nor, on the other hand, was there any intention to foster what is called ‘militarism’.” Rather, his “sole intention was to make a re-calling of a given period of part of [his] experiences as a private soldier and the reactions, emotions, behaviour and the whole complex of historic inheritance which necessarily conditioned the mixed Welsh and Cockney personnel of the unit in which I chanced to serve.” Jones’s FWW novelized epic about war did not have as its purpose to promote or protest war, but rather to describe and contextualize his experiences of war—not just for himself—but for the sake of all who shared in the same “historic inheritance” with him. Occasionally, even artists “find [themselves] privates in foot regiments” and “search how [they] may see formal goodness in a life singularly inimical, hateful, to [them]” (preface to *IP* xiii). This “life” was “hateful” to Jones—not as a man, but as an artist. The particular, objective facts about FWW posed an artistic dilemma to him as a 20th century writer that did not appear to him to have been presented to “the old authors” writing about previous wars (xv).

In Parenthesis both accurately describes the experiences of a participant in the FWW and embodies the artistic crisis that war presents that participant. It is the only long poem in English written about the war. It is important because it is both part of the canon of FWW poetry and interrogates that canon. It is also the only long modernist poem in English written by the only British modernist who was a veteran of the FWW. It is the duality of Jones’s position, in having

¹¹⁵ From a personal transcript of a photo-copied, unpublished letter in the Jones’s archives at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth.

written both *In Parenthesis*, which is described as a FWW epic, and *The Anthemata*, which is described as a modernist epic, which makes his work such an interesting case-study with regards to the issues of *ethos* and answerability, not only because the *ethos* of FWW poetry is in many ways inimical to the *ethos* of modernist poetry but because the *ethos* of Jones's epics both assume a type of universality. This renders *IP* problematic to some FWW critics because Jones's work seems to deny the uniqueness of that war, and the *Anthemata* problematic to many modernist critics because it partakes in an allegedly hegemonic enterprise and posits the existence of only "one story"; "There is only one tale to tell" (Jones, preface to *A* 35).¹¹⁶

4. *In Parenthesis*: A Modernist Epic That "Just Happens"

to Be about the First World War

I did not intend this as a 'War Book' — it happens to be concerned with war.

David Jones

I do not propose, in this section of the essay, to offer a reading of *In Parenthesis* focusing on its form, use of allusions, or linguistic playfulness, all of which are modernist characteristics of the work which have already been competently treated by other literary scholars and can be taken, at this point in the history of criticism on *IP*, as given. Rather, I want to construct a reading of *IP* to illustrate the ways in which Jones writes the modernist anxiety over discontinuity and fragmentation under the putative subject of the work—the war. This is one way in which Jones's comment that *IP* "happens to be concerned with war" can be understood. So while on the one hand this work is obviously about and intended to be about the experiences of a company of men on the Western front over a period of nineteen months, it is equally about the experience of a

¹¹⁶ This might usefully be compared to what the editor of Bakhtin's *Toward A Philosophy of the Act* writes about him: "It was characteristic for Bakhtin to come back to certain constant leading themes in his philosophical work and to formulate new variants of his favorite ideas. In a draft for a preface to a collection of his works from various years Bakhtin noted: 'My love for variations and for a diversity of terms for a single phenomenon'" (xxiv).

modern and Catholic writer trying to discover and/or forge connections in the waste lands of FWW. This is Jones's answerability. John Cooper expresses it this way:

The several critics of *In Parenthesis* all agree that the mythical and liturgical materials of the writing are in fact modes of orientation within the utter chaos of war, modes that parallel the rigid military codes, written and unwritten, which control army life, thus teasing order from disorder by connecting the experiential uncertainties of the front to larger cultural and historical continuities (304).

This modernist characteristic of the novel epic is most evident in passages of the work which represent communication between characters.

Modernist writers typically and precariously maintain a tri-partite approach to language in their works; language is manipulated and/or played with, it is "recorded" — often by means of allusion, and it is interrogated about its ability to mean or to accurately describe or communicate. As a consequence, the *ethos* which emerges from most modernist writing is at once clever and cautious; encyclopedic in knowledge but anxious about communication, the modernist arranges his fragments with great seriousness. But if the "center" of his work does not hold, the resulting deformity will primarily be an aesthetic disaster, and all that will fail to have been communicated is the subjectivity of the poet. Nonetheless, modernist works participate in or are read as cultural critiques. While *In Parenthesis* is formally modernist, and employs many modernist techniques, the *ethos* revealed in these passages, and in the work as a whole, is one that is equally concerned with "getting it right" in its commitment to realism, and with making sure the conditions exist for meaning to be discovered. And while the poet must work, as Jones so often stressed, within the limits of what he actually knows and loves,¹¹⁷ what he attempts to describe and explain are for him (and, he claims, for all those who share his connection to Britain) "objective facts." Perhaps

¹¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin puts it this way in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*: ". . . is. . . what is clear to him . . . only the universal moments and relations transcribed in the form of concepts? Not at all: he sees clearly *these* individual, unique persons whom he loves, *this* sky and this earth and *these* trees. . . and what is also given to him simultaneously is the value, the actually and concretely affirmed value of these persons and these objects" (30).

someone cleverer will come along and read his work and be able to make sense of things in a way he cannot. His responsibility is to keep the lines of communication open and to make sure the necessary “evidence” is available, and not merely to express himself. His epic will then become a “deposit” for future poets. As the evidence for this is substantial, I will limit myself to employing the clearest and strongest examples from each of the seven parts of the epic.

Part 1: “The Many Men So Beautiful”

This first section of the novelized epic, just over eight pages in length, begins with roll-call, describes the “journey” of ‘B’ Company as it embarks to France, and concludes on the evening of its third day in France with the line, “You feel exposed and apprehensive in this new world” (9). Clear communication and directions are always important, but essential in times of war to avoid confusion which can have disastrous effects. Jones describes the actual and mundane circumstance of ‘B’ Company’s inability to hear the whole of a command, which does not in this instance result in disaster because it is the same command given to the company in front of it. This continuity permits the command to be followed by example—not by writ: “Words lost, yet given continuity by that thinner com-/ mand from in front of No. I. Itself to be wholly swallowed/ Up by the concerted movement of arms in which the spoken/ word effected what it signified” (3). The communal ties and corporate submission to and practice of orders, while not rendering the spoken word entirely unnecessary, do provide an alternate route of access to understanding the task to be completed when words fail. This “remedy” requires a continuous community to be effective. While the military “community” can provide this; the poetic “community” seems to Jones to fail on this point.

Jones worries a lot about the ability of words, even if they are physically capable of being heard or read, to be understood. He worries about the continual “thinning” of meaning resulting from a loss of contextual, communal, “thick” knowledge of the “deposits” on which such

understanding is predicated. And “translation,” trying to find an equivalent word, does not resolve his dilemma. As Jones puts it in the preface to the *Anathemata*, “‘Tsar’ will mean one thing and ‘Caesar’ another to the end of time” (13). To be sure, Jones worries about this as an artist—not as an ordinary citizen. And one of the reasons he crams so many allusions into his epics is that he hopes these poems can serve as a kind of “reserve deposit”—like the seed banks in the arctic—against an ubiquitous apocalypse which cannot be clearly identified and so cannot be efficiently battled.¹¹⁸ The poet, like the soldier, has to depend on those who go ahead and who hopefully see better for directions. He often finds himself standing ankle-deep in unidentifiable slop with rain dripping down his back because, “The bastard’s lost his way already” (5). At such times, “Various messages are passed” (5), but it’s difficult to sort out which one warrants attention. For the soldier, “some effort of a corporate will” results in “the soldierly bearing/ of the text books maintain[ing] itself through the town” (7). For the poet trying to find meaning-bearing fragments in the zone between at least two opposing poetic traditions, an analogous “poetic bearing” is excruciatingly difficult to assume. Here, for example, is Jones commenting on a passage from T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in his preface to *The Anathemata*:

It is of no consequence to the shape of the work how the workman came by the bits of material he used in making that shape. When the workman is dead the only thing that will matter is the work, objectively considered. Moreover, the workman must be dead to himself while engaged upon the work, otherwise we have that sort of ‘self-expression’ which is an undesirable in the painter or the writer as in the carpenter, the cantor, the half-back, or the cook. *Although all this is fairly clear in principle, I have not found it easy to apply in practice*” (12, emphasis is mine).

¹¹⁸ Compare with this statement from Bakhtin’s *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*: “What does an ‘affirmed context of values’ mean? It means the totality of values which are valuable not for one or another individual and in one or another historical period, but for all historical mankind. But I, the unique I, must assume a particular emotional-volitional attitude toward all historical mankind: I must affirm it as really valuable for me and when I do so everything valued by historical mankind will become valuable for me as well” (47).

The specific examples Jones uses to illustrate his difficulty in avoiding mere “self-expression” all involve word choice. Does he use the Welsh “*Gwledig*” or the English translation, “land-ruler” (12)? Is “Whosoever will” really an “effective sign of . . . “*Quicumque vult*” (12)? It is difficult for me to watch Jones as he battles with these questions, which seem to me to spring from the fact that unlike Jones the soldier, Jones the poet has no sufficient community of fellow companions or readers. What is being described by Jones as a crisis of language from the perspective of the poet might equally be described the crisis of the loss of a real community of readers. Without a community of readers, all writers are reduced, in one way or another, to mere self-expression.

Part 2: “Chambers Go Off, Corporals Stay”

The second section of the epic, about twelve pages in length, relates the experience of the troops in a rest area so far unmolested by the war, their desultory training, and the beginning of their being paraded up to the front. It concludes with John Ball’s¹¹⁹ first experience of being near incoming artillery, an extended passage of description already quoted in part three of this chapter. Here is the uninitiated narrator’s attempt to say something about the actual field of battle: “It had all the unknownness of some/ thing of immense realness, but of which you lack all true/ perceptual knowledge. Like Lat. 85 N. —men had returned/ and guaranteed you a pretty rum existence” (15-16). The rookie soldiers know from testimony of those who have fought and returned that the war is real, but have no personal, “perceptual knowledge” of it. Although it could also be said that they had had no perceptual knowledge of France in general, or the rest area, they were arguably imaginable in a way a battlefield is not. The modernist concern evident in this section to which I’d like to draw attention is the cluster of problems impinging on the notion of continuity.

¹¹⁹ John Ball is generally considered the main character of the epic.

First, as the men prepare to parade, they gather up elements of the kit and “pack” them as they can: “The last few moments, came, and became the past. The/ last candle was snuffed out and thrust still warm at the/ wick and pliable into your tunic pocket” (16). The candle here might be read as a metaphor for significant, if small, items that can be transported from the past to the future. The candle, which provides both light and heat, must be snuffed out before being transported, but is still “warm” and “pliable.” Other articles of kit may be abandoned as not being worth the effort of carrying, or as being easily replaceable. For the poet the question becomes: what of the past tradition(s)—language, style, form, myths—can be both easily transported to and prove usable in the future?

Second, the conveyance of messages continues to be of vital importance: “A cyclist slid in haste from his machine, saluted, handed a written message/ to the Company Commander, received back in initialed/ slip, again saluted—sped on wheels away” (21). The soldiers have no idea what the content of the message is, and yet it provides some comfort to see that messages are being delivered and read. While Jones is simply describing an historical fact by including this cyclist, the cyclist provides an opportunity to think about both the medium in which the messages are written and the vehicle for their conveyance. Accurate and timely communication was a desperately needed and usually unobtainable commodity during the First World War.¹²⁰ For the poet the question becomes, having decided what may be important from past poetic tradition to preserve in contemporary poems, what form is most appropriate for such salvage work? The modernist methods of allusion and fragmentation allow for both preservation and interrogation of the past, but what if one can’t find a cyclist (a publisher), or no one cares to receive the message—or receives it but cannot understand it?

¹²⁰ Among the other supplies with which some troops were burdened as they went over the top the first day of the Battle of the Somme were cages containing carrier pigeons.

Third, the hard fact that some elements of the past—despite their significance—may no longer serve in the present, must be faced.

. . .A man
with his puttees fastened at the ankle, without tunic, his cap at a tilt, emerged upon the landscape and took water in a flexible green canvas bucket from the ditch, where a newly painted board, bearing a map reference, marked the direction of a gun-position. Tall uprights at regular intervals, to the north-east side of this path were hung with a sagging netting—in its meshes painted bits of rag, bleached with rain and very torn, having all the desolation peculiar to things that functioned in the immediate past by which are no longer serviceable, either by neglect or by some movement of events. (21)

No matter how important were the “signs” once painted on those faded “bits of rag,” the signs are no longer “serviceable.” Some things which are past cannot be recycled or redeemed. For the poet, and certainly for Jones—who truly desired that nothing be “lost,” this is a bleak and joyless lesson.

Fourth, and finally, a corollary of the previous point is illustrated by the description of the contents of John Ball’s pocket, as he is looking for a match. Say the pocket is the accessible past, and the items in the pocket those elements, features, ideas or artifacts from the past that are still recognizable—unlike the bleached rag of the previous example.

. . . His chill fingers clumsy at
full trouser pocket, scattered on the stones: one flattened candle-end, two centime pieces, pallid silver sixpence, a length of pink Orderly Room tape, a latch-key. The two young men together glanced where it lay incongruous, bright between the sets. Keys of Stondon Park. His father has its twin in his office in Knightryder Street. Keys of Stondon Park in French farmyard. Stupid Ball, it’s no use here, so far from its complying lock. (23).

The problem here, both for Ball and for the poet, is not that the key is no longer recognizable as a key, or that it is no longer capable of opening the lock it was manufactured to open—but that the

key and “its complying lock” are so separated that the key is of no use. The corollary to this is that what is locked—in that other place and time—will remain locked.

Part 3: “Starlight Order”

Section three of *IP* employs twenty-eight and a half pages to get “B” Company to its trench at the front. And while the problems illustrated in the first two sections of the epic do not go away, possible means of the recovery of meaning are discovered. First, “informal directness,” the fact that the “ritual words” are being directly addressed to oneself, may render such words “newly real” (28). It is not at all difficult, for example, to imagine that the formulaic words, “On your mark. Get set. Go.” are more “real” for the athletes toeing the starting line than for anyone in the audience. Similarly, the newly baptized Christian about to participate for the first time in the Eucharist will hear the words, “This is my body which is broken for you” in a way which is more real than can be experienced by the students visiting to fulfill a requirement of their comparative religions class.

Second, if the immediate context in which the words are used and heard provides the requisite conditions—perhaps by mirroring the conditions in which the words were first used—their meaning may be recovered. Such a context can be provided by the extreme conditions (both internal and external) experienced by the soldiers on their way to engage in the actual fighting at the front.

The immediate, the nowness, the pressure of sudden, modifying circumstance—and retribution following swift on disregard; some certain, malignant opposing, brought intelligibility and effectiveness to the used formulae of command; the liturgy of their going-up assumed a primitive creativeness, an apostolic actuality, a correspondence with the object, a flexibility. (28)

The soldiers of “B” Company are no longer doing drill. Lack of attention to or failure to comply with orders may have “swift” and deadly consequences. Under their current circumstances,

commands are not at all abstract; they have assumed “an apostolic actuality” and “a correspondence with the object” (28).

Nonetheless, the effectiveness of the commands is still dependent on the chain of communication being intact, and the closer one gets to the front—to the actual fighting—the more tenuous become the lines of communication. As a result, there are numerous passages in this section of the epic regarding “connections,” both in terms of conveyance of messages and in terms of simply not becoming physically separated from the soldiers near oneself. Both of these contexts are evident on page 34, for example. The soldiers express fear that they’ve “lost connection” and are urged to “not lose connection . . . wait for the man behind.” They are in this predicament in part because they have no reliable guide, and so are having to do the best they can on their own. At the same time they must “take care” with such “messages” (34) as can be conveyed.

In reading *IP* in part as a commentary on the difficulty (comparable to that of waging a successful battle on the Western Front) of writing modern poetry, the soldiers are the current generation of poets and the guides are the poets (and teachers of poetry?) who have gone before them. What this means, of course, is that just as a soldier must be prepared to take the position of leadership left vacant if his immediate supervisor is killed, the contemporary poet knows that poets of the next generation will be expecting him to help them navigate the gap between their generation and his. So the anxiety of influence is not just that the poet cannot find or make sense of a “guide” to authorize his own poetic enterprise, but that he knows that sooner or later he will be obligated to become a guide for others—who may well wonder if “the young bastard know(s) his bearings,” and complain that the “goddam guide’s done the dirty” (34).¹²¹

¹²¹ So Jones’s “anxiety of influence” is one in which the locus of anxiety is not that his poetry will not be “unique,” identifiably distinct from those who wrote before him, but that it may not be

Regardless of whether or not he has a reliable guide, though, it is essential that he move forward and to stay in close touch with those who go before him. So the soldier follows “Jimmy Grove’s irregular bundle-figure” and, even when he “drops away into the night . . . [his] feet follow where [Jimmy Grove] seemed to be” (33). Each soldier labors in his turn “over whatever it is—this piled broken-/ness—dragged over and a scared hurrying on,” but finds the road again—even if the “slobber [is] ankle-deep” over it (33). If such closeness is maintained, speech becomes unnecessary: “Feet plodding in each other’s unseen tread. They said no/ word but to direct their immediate next coming, so close/ behind to blunder, toe by heel tripping, file-mates; blind on-/following, moving with a singular identity” (37). Unique, singular paths and creative routes are not wanted. It is better for the individual soldier to follow all the others to the wrong location than to wind up at the assigned location by himself. No soldier has his meaning alone—no poet either, according to T.S. Eliot (Tradition 38). And the soldiers’ “passing back of aidful messages assumes a ca/dency” as they repeat “mind/ The wire here/ Mind the wire/ Mind the wire/ mind the wire./ Extricate with some care that taut strand—it may well be/ you’ll sweat on its unbrokenness” (36). The “wire” here is the communication wire; if it is broken the soldiers may indeed “sweat.”

The wire remains intact, the road—though broken in places and covered with mud—suffices, the soldiers maintain contact, and reach their destination at the front. While Eliot’s *Wasteland* is desiccate, the Western Front is flooded. And though the soldiers depicted in *IP* wonder no less than the poet of the Waste Land what can forestall their ruin, their road here—

“broken though it was, seemed a firm causeway
cutting determinedly the insecurity that lapped its path,
sometimes the flanking chaos overflowed its madeness, and
they floundered in unstable deeps; chill oozing slim high
over ankle; then they would find it hard and firm under their

true to them in the sense that he may fail to pass on the requisite deposit of efficacious signs to the next generation of poets.

feet again, the mason work in good order, by some freak, in-/tact. (41)

The isolation and alienation characteristic of modern poetry is absent from Jones's *IP*, and while most 21st century readers of this work would attach a negative connotation to the word "assimilation" in the concluding passage of this third section of the epic, the poet does not.

And you too are assimilated, you too are of this people —
there will be an indelible characterization — you'll tip-toe
when they name the place.

Stand fast against the parados and let these eager bundles
drag away hastily; and one turns on his going-out: Good night
china — there's some dryish wood under fire-step — in cub-
by-hole — good night.

Cushy — cushy enough — cushy, good night.

Good night kind comrade. (49)

The soldier being cycled back to the reserve trench to rest leaves "dryish wood under the fire-step" for the soldier providing his relief. What can the poet leave under the "fire-step" of his dug-out to provide warmth and light to the poets who will succeed him?

Part 4: "King Pellam's Launde"

The forty pages of section four of the epic are devoted to describing the course of one day at the front, from daybreak until Mr. Prys-Picton's patrol comes in "well before midnight" (99). It continues the relative optimistic outlook of the previous section with regard to the abilities to maintain communication and community even in so inhospitable a place as a front trench during the First World War. In a context in which "[a]ll sureness [is] metamorphosed" (76), the poet reports that the surest and best built part of the path is in the communication trench (77). Even so, there are parts which are poorly constructed, where "[b]otched, ill-driven, half-bent-/ over nails heads protrude, where some transverse-piece joint-/ ed the lengthways, four-inch under-timber, marking where/ unskilled fatigue-man used his hammer awkwardly, mar-/ ing the fairness of the made thing" (77). Skilled craftsmanship is important to the poet, as it is to the soldier. One may "trip up on" either a poorly built path or a poorly made poem (77).

Another theme continued from the previous section of the poem is the importance of physical proximity as a means of ensuring one remains on the right path when other means of providing directions fail. But while the third section of the poem illustrates this by describing soldiers literally following in each other's footsteps while marching to the front, this section approaches the problem in a different way—through Dai's boast.¹²² This speech, which continues for six pages of the epic, is partly an attempt to link Dai, the FWW soldier, to a select but expansive genealogy of other soldiers who served leaders as various as the archangel Michael, Arthur, Caesar, and Artexerxes (79-84).¹²³ Dai's "fathers were with the Black Prince of Wales" (79); Dai served, among many other capacities, as part of the Xth *Fretensis*, which according to Italian legend "furnished the escort party at the execution of Our Lord" (83, 210 note L). The only historically identifiable soldier Dai identifies himself with is David:¹²⁴ "I took the smooth stones of the brook,/ I was with Saul/ playing before him" (80). It is significant that Dai does not align himself with kings or generals (it is not the David who is king of Israel with whom he identifies, but David the shepherd), but with the ordinary troops or foot-soldiers who served them. Furthermore, while the poet once provides a fictitious name for the soldier—"62 Socrates" (80)—the namelessness of the soldiers to which Dai claims relationship positively widens the candidates for inclusion in this genealogy of the common soldier. Finally, Dai's boast contains the only significant, extended use of the first-person in the epic, but as this "I" cannot reasonably be equated with Dai alone, the use of the first-person can represent both the authoritative, eye-witness "I" of canonical FWW poetry and the de-centered, shifting "I" of canonical modernist poetry.

¹²² Dylan Thomas made a recording of this, but I have not had the pleasure of hearing it.

¹²³ The long boast is, of course, a characteristic of epic. Johnston noted in his essay containing what Jones considered the first "serious analysis" of *IP* (Johnston 306).

¹²⁴ "Dai" is Welsh for a diminutive of David.

Dai's genealogy is eclectic and idiosyncratic; while the membership of all those enrolled can be defended, and while Jones would certainly argue that they all are part of the cultural "deposits" of all those of Great Britain, some might with reason disagree with his selections and nominate candidates of a different kind. However, because of the historical context of the epic the poet's claim or "boast" of a kind of universal heritage here tends to be accepted as rhetorically—if not politically—correct. And the poet does admit that not all the current generation of British soldiers are aware of their heritage; Watcyn, for example, is "unaware/ of Geoffrey Arthur and his cooked histories, of Twm Shon/ Catti for the mater of that" (89). Watcyn's ignorance does "pain . . . his lance-corporal/ French, for whom Troy still burn[s], and sleeping kinds re-/ turn" (89), and I would claim it pains Jones as well.¹²⁵ Jones's assertion that there is a common, even if unknown, "genealogy" of "us all" may serve in a time of war, but his continuing recourse to this belief in his next epic, and in his approach to crafting poetry, generally, contribute to his failure to achieve canonical status as a modern poet. That being said, there are similarities between Jones's idea of genealogy here and T.S. Eliot's as expressed in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

Part 5: "Squat Garlands for White Knights"

The twenty-eight pages of the fifth section of the novelized-epic describe the activities of the day before the soldiers of "B" company go into actual battle for the first time. Previous themes regarding communication are largely reiterated at this point, as for example, in this passage which occurs between the second and third halt of an exhausting march: "But soon, you only but half-heard words of command, and/ your body conformed to these bodies about, and you slept/ upright, where these marched, because of the balm of this/ shower, of the darkness, of the measure of the beat of feet in unison" (123). Here again are raised the issues regarding the

¹²⁵ As Paul Robichaud succinctly and aptly puts it, "Modernity has separated Watcyn from his own cultural inheritance" (70).

efficacy of language in extreme situations, the importance of actual physical proximity as providing a remedy in such situations, and the balm community can provide for individual suffering and/or confusion.

Largely due to the narrow focus of my reading of *IP*, a significant characteristic of the epic has gone unremarked—its humor. Fortunately, an extended and very funny passage of this section is relevant to the questions of communication to which I am directing attention. The troops have all been gathered to hear Mr. Jenkins read his “*précis* of the official text” received from General Headquarters but,

. . . With transport on the paved other road you missed half the good news . . . and have carried his trenches on a wide front . . . in the south subsector . . . our advances troops have penetrated to his third system. He raises his voice against the crying of the drivers and there is noise of stress at the bend to disrupt the tale of: his full retirement—the numbers of his elite gone to Divisional Cage—and other ranks like the sea-sand taken—field-howiters and seventy-sevens running to three figures. . . . of all caliber in our hands . . . have everywhere been reached according to plan . . . and are in readiness to cooperate with the infantry. The G.O.C. 444th Corps would take the occasion—but the four-ton changing gear by the traffic-wallah obliterated altogether his expressions of hearty appreciation.

They were permitted to cheer. (122-23)

In this passage, the environment in which the men are being given the message results in their only hearing fragments of it. They miss “half the good news,” but are probably aware that the “good news” is at least partially “cooked.” The roar of the transport on the road entirely obscures Jenkin’s “expressions of hearty appreciation,” and the men are “permitted to cheer” (123).¹²⁶ This use of understatement emphasizes the confusion of the men who have not received an adequate

¹²⁶ In a letter To R.H. on 2 July 1935, Jones writes: “On this day nineteen years ago I heard read by the Officer Commanding B Coy a document, a rescript from G.H.Q. announcing the initial success of the first attach on his trenches on the Somme. We were permitted to cheer. I can’t tell you the gnawing thoughts as well up in your bosom at this memory” (Hague 72).

communication and may also raise questions about whether the message, even if heard in its entirety, would have achieved the results intended by the officials.

Part 6: "Pavilions and Captains of Hundreds"

The period of time this fifteen page long section covers is the last 30 hours before "B" Company goes over the top into battle. As might be expected, the metaphors and analogues for the grounds for and communication of meaning become more complicated, and the requirements the immediate proximity of battle places on the soldiers stresses and undermines those tenuous strategies that had been employed to provide them some relief. The "he" in the passage reproduced below is Private Saunders, who has been informed a little more than a day before going into battle that he's been reassigned from "B" Company to headquarters (H.Q.).

His two mates said he was lucky — anything better than the Company. But they were wretched when he would extricate his ground-sheet from its place in the construction of the bivvy, which threw their little shelter miserable out of gear. They told him H.Q. was lousy with ground-sheets. He said he must be properly dressed or lose the job and get put on the peg as well most like. They mocked his timidity; and set about without any cheer, to reconstruct.

For such breakings away and dissolving of comradeship and token of division are cause of great anguish when men sense how they stand so perilous and transitory in the world. Bearing the red brassard of his office he ran about the valley to the commanders with *urgent* or *ordinary* messages. (137)

The end of the fellowship of these three soldiers is not described in abstract terms; it has its objective correlative in the communal shelter built of the ground-sheets each individual soldier has contributed. Saunders' leaving requires him to extricate the ground-sheet he contributed to the common cause. This literally and materially limits the ability of the two remaining men to shelter themselves, but the loss of the ground-sheet also provides an analogue for the "breakings away and dissolving of comradeship" which "are cause of great anguish when men sense/ how

they stand so perilous and transitory in the world" (137). Interestingly enough, Saunders' new assignment is to carry messages, which are classified as either "*urgent*" or "*ordinary*."

Though I still haven't worked out the significance of this to my satisfaction, it seems to me that there is an arresting similarity between Jones's description of the loss entailed in Saunders' extrication of his ground-sheet in the epic and his description of the loss entailed when poets can no longer employ words as signs, in his preface to the *Anathemata*: "The arts abhor any loppings off of meanings or emptyings out, any lessening of the totality of connotation, any loss of recession and thickness through" (24). The comparison may be even more clear in the following paragraph from the same preface, in which Jones is puzzling over the question of what can serve as valid material for the "effective signs" he believes all poets must have in order to make poems.

Normally we should not have far to seek: the flowers for the muse's garland would be gathered from the ancestral burial-mound — always and inevitably fecund ground, yielding perennial and familiar blossoms, watered and, maybe, potted, perhaps 'improved', by ourselves. It becomes more difficult when the bulldozers have all but obliterated the mounds, when all that is left of the potting-sheds are the disused hypocausts, and when where was this site and were these foci there is *terra informis* [a formless, shapeless, hideous or deformed land]. (25)

The soldiers' shelter and Jones's potting-shed may both serve as types of significant sheltering or meaning-providing man-made places or constructs which because built by humans of human-made materials are subject to too casual destruction by humans. Both examples also suggest that the actions of an individual must necessarily have consequences not only for that individual, but for all those whose lives are entailed in whatever communal structures his choice reinforces or compromises. The general public (if such a thing exists) would likely endorse this model with reference to a soldier, but Jones insists that it holds true for the artist as well.

Finally, there persists in this section the themes and ideas about communication evident throughout the first five sections of the epic. The night before going into battle, "B" Company spends "some hours . . . failing to get contact with/ the unit to be relieved" (147). By daybreak, though, they have reached "a shallow trench, freshly digged. They put out/ wire. It commence[s] to rain" (147).

Part 7: "The Five Unmistakable Marks"

The final section of the novelized-epic begins just before the troops go over the top into battle and ends, thirty-four pages later, with John Ball wounded and waiting for the stretcher-bearers to find him. He has painfully but pragmatically chosen to abandon his rifle, but retains his gas-mask. It had become impossible for him to drag both his wounded body and his weapon forward.

It is this section of *IP*, more than any other, which provides insight into the conflict of the modern poet with the sensibilities and values of Jones—who is unwilling that any fragment remain uncollected for possible redemption in the future. The poet who writes, "The memory lets escape what is over and above—" (153) cannot himself let any thing escape. For Jones, a poet is a maker, and a poet cannot make a poem without material with which to build one. While Jones's attention to the problem of fragmentation allies him with other modernist writers, it seems to me that his tone—and so his attitude toward them—is significantly different. That there has been and continues to be fragmentation just is a brute fact. That Jones encounters nearly insurmountable difficulties in writing poems he can consider "whole" is simply the condition of being a maker at the particular turn of a civilization which he finds himself occupying. His task is simply and impossibly to collect and preserve all the fragments he can.¹²⁷ Analogues for the poet

¹²⁷ As Bakhtin notes in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, "Being a representative does not abolish but merely specializes my personal answerability" (52).

in this section of the poem include the carrying parties (stretcher bearers), the linesmen, and John Ball himself.

The job of the carrying parties is to find the wounded and transport them to a place they can receive treatment. They are:

burdened bearers [who] walk with careful feet
to jolt him as little as possible,
bearers of burdens to and from
stumble oftener, notice the lessening light,
and feel their way with more sensitive feet—
you mustn't spill the precious fragments, for perhaps these
raw bones live. (175)

The enigmatic “you” here again serves to complicate interpretation. At one level, of course, this passage is simple description, but metaphorically—if even one of the referents of the pronoun “you” is the poet—the passage can be interpreted as the poet warning himself not to leave behind any fragments which might prove, against all odds, to live.

At this point, though, the tone of the passage becomes sarcastic:

They can cover him again with skin—in their candid coats,
in their clinical shrines and parade the miraculi.
The blinded one with the artificial guts—his morbid neu-
rosis retards the treatment, otherwise he's bonza—and will
learn a handicraft.
Nothing is impossible nowadays my dear if only we can get
the poor bleeder through the barrage and they take just as
much trouble with the ordinary soldiers you know and es-
sential-service academicians can match the natural hue and
everything extraordinarily well.
Give them glass eyes to see
and synthetic spare parts to walk in the Triumphs, without
anyone feeling awkward and O, O, O, it's a lovely war with
poppies on the up-platform for a perpetual memorial of his
body. (175-6)

This shift in tone and perspective is a characteristic of Jones's poetry which results from his unwillingness to surrender to sentimentality or false consolation—particularly about the survivability of the kind of poems he is trying to make.

In a different mode and genre, Jones addresses the question of the survivability of this type of poem in the preface to *IP*:

We who are of the same world of sense with hairy ass and furry wolf and who presume to other and more radiant affinities, are finding it difficult, as yet, to recognize these creatures of chemicals as true extensions of ourselves, that we may feel for them a native affection, which alone can make them magical for us. It would be interesting to know how we shall ennoble our new media as we have already ennobled and made significant our old — candle-light, fire-light, Cups, Wands and Swords, to choose at random. (xiv)

The salient comparison here is between the contemporary soldier who is a casualty of war being refitted with glass eyes and synthetic parts, and the modernist poem being constructed of an amalgam of arguably defunct, but humanized fragments and objects of “new media” which may or may not serve the purposes of the poet or the poem. The soldier is still a human being and the poem is still a poem—but Jones would argue that something essential, if inexplicable, has been lost—that these “wholes” are not really quite “whole.”¹²⁸

The second (or third—if one considers the doctors to be additional) analogues of the poet in this section of the poem are the linesmen who “make/ whole with adhesive tape, tweezer the copper with deft hands:/ there’s a bad break on the Bright Trench line—buzz us when/ you’re through” (177). At this point, this is a familiar analogue. The role of the poet here is understood to be one of using whatever materials one has to hand to keep the lines of communication open, a task Matthew Arnold, for example, took upon himself—and which does not necessarily entail the actual writing of new poems.

The third and final analogue for the poet in this last section is John Ball himself. He has been wounded and is struggling to gain some sort of cover where he can safely wait for the carriers to find him. He is chiefly impeded by his rifle, but is loath to abandon it; it goes against

¹²⁸ *Prima facie* evidence for Jones’s belief that art and war are comparable is his essay “Art in Relationship to War.”

all his training to do so. In fact, it takes the better part of four pages for him to make the decision to:

Let it lie for the dews to rust it, or ought you to decently
cover the working parts.
Its dark barrel, where you leave it under the oak, reflects
the solemn star that rises urgently from Cliff Trench.
It's a beautiful doll for us
it's the Last Reputable Arm.
But leave it—under the oak.
leave it for a Cook's tourist to the Devastated Areas and crawl
as far as you can and wait for the bearers. (186)

As it turns out, John Ball is the penultimate analogue for the poet; the last would be the projected finder of the rifle—the “tourist” who will be able, in the future, to bear the weight of the weapon and discover a use for it. Unlike John Ball, David Jones never could decide to leave anything behind. As a result, his art—both painting and poetry—is sometimes overwrought. One way of understanding both Jones's strengths and weaknesses as an artist is to recognize that Jones could never decide whether he was the stretcher-bearer, the physician, the linesman, or the tourist.

Of his three published books of poetry, *In Parenthesis*, the *Anathemata*, and *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments*, the two Jones considered satisfactorily “whole” or “complete” are the epics. Of these, most critics believe the *Anathemata* to be the more important, but *In Parenthesis* the more readable or accessible work. The *Anathemata* has not been “assimilated” into the modernist canon. *In Parenthesis*' position as a canonical First World War poem is secure—but that it is a canonical FWW poem and not a canonical modern poem reduces its, and consequently, Jones's status on the academic market. Jones's methods do not much vary. That *IP* is more successful, whether one measures success by its finding and meeting the needs of an audience or by its having been judged aesthetically “whole”, is primarily due to the facts that: 1) its subject is

objective and the experience it relates is communal,¹²⁹ and 2) it takes place within a prescribed time period.¹³⁰ In any case, there are plenty of ways “in” for the reader of *IP*, and this provides sufficient ballast against any particular, poetic idiosyncrasies which the reader might otherwise question or find annoying, the notes—for example—or Jones’s recourse to Welsh myth. All of these elements matter, and all offer points of contrast to the *Anathemata*, but what is arguably the most important factor behind both the willingness of its readers—both lay and scholarly—to accept *In Parenthesis* and to reject the *Anathemata* is *ethos*.

The presence of Jones in both epics is inescapable, but while this “presence” fits the template for canonical FWW poems it violates the norms for canonical modernist poems. The canonicity of a FWW poem largely depends on the authority the poet achieves by being a first-hand witness of the events being described. And though the canon of FWW has expanded to include non-combatants—the criterion of experience has not been eased. It has simply been recognized that “experience of war” cannot be justly or accurately limited to combatants; war affects everyone. Most FWW poetry is written in the first person; that *In Parenthesis* is not makes it atypical. But readers of the work know Jones was a veteran of the war, and in his preface and notes Jones does assume the authority of the soldier who was on the field.¹³¹ The closing lines of *IP*, taken from the *Song of Roland*, emphasize this point and forestall criticism: “The geste says this

¹²⁹ Here is Jones in a letter to Harmon Grisewood on St. Valentine’s Day, 1938, lamenting the limitations not being a scholar puts on his writing, and why he believes *IP* was successful: To H.J.G., St. Valentine’s Day, 1938: “My equipment as a writer is very severely limited by not being a scholar, and for the kind of writing I want to do you really do have to have so much *information* and know such a lot about *words* that I can’t really believe I can do it except in a limited way — what I did in *I[n] P[arenthesis]* was really a special thing and very strictly within my limits and by a series of accident I think I just turned the corner—but O Mary! What a conjuring trick it was” (Hague 83-4)

¹³⁰ One could in fact argue that *IP* goes a fair way toward fulfilling the classical unities of action, time, and place.

¹³¹ In describing the notes to *IP*, Johnston writes that the notes “occupy thirty-four pages and comprise 219 separate entries (some of which are multiple notes). Of these, 105 are source notes or explanations of literary allusions; the remainder (114, or over half) are devoted to explanations of military terminology and the techniques of trench warfare” (300).

and the man who was on the field . . . and/who wrote the book . . . the man who does not know this has not understood anything” (187). As has already been suggested, Jones rejecting use of the first person in *IP* is one of many indications that he is consciously attempting to write a modernist poem. But despite its modernist elements, *IP* is clearly and thoroughly grounded in the First World War, and its writer is a veteran of that war who is trying—albeit in different ways—to carry out the program of the canonical FWW poets to “get it right” and to communicate to its readers what the war was really like.¹³² In the balance, the modernist elements of the poem do not ultimately detract from or compromise its status as a FWW poem. Because he was a combatant, and because he is so obviously trying to “get it right” any confusions or infelicities resulting from Jones’s inability to let anything go, to wrench all possible meaning out of each word, to use allusions like cellophane tape to patch the breaks in the line between the past and the present, are not only excused—but seem appropriate under the circumstances. The poem works.

The *Anathemata* does not—or at least is widely judged to fail as a poem—despite recognition of the significance of the effort and its importance.¹³³ And the fact that this second, intentionally modernist epic fails—rather than the FWW epic—results in the failure of Jones to achieve canonical status. There are several contributing factors to this failure, but all of them are related to the *ethos* of the work which is still fundamentally the *ethos* of a FWW poet. This is most easily seen in the preface and notes to the *Anathemata*. Jones knows the modernist formulas, but cannot really feel or follow them. For example, he states that “biographical accidents are not in themselves any concern of, or interest to, the reader,” but feels compelled to note them “because

¹³² It is an interesting, if unanswerable question: What type of FWW poems would Owen or Rosenberg have been writing in the late 1930s had they survived the war?

¹³³ And to say that this epic fails as a poem may simply be one way of saying it is a long modernist poem. For while parts of the *Cantos* work—“The Pisan Cantos” for example—are successful, Pound’s poem as a whole is not.

they are responsible for most of the content and have had an overruling effect upon the form" of the work (11). The principles of impersonal, objective poetry are known to him. They are "clear in principle" but not "easy to apply in practice" (12). He must resort to notes because, despite his insistence that the "deposits" from which he draws his allusions "form the *materia* that we all draw upon, whether we know it or not" (40), they are also "pieces of stuffs that happen to mean something to [him]" (34), and "we are not all equally familiar with the deposits" (14). His annotations should not be considered "pedantic" (14). His intention is not to exclude, but to include as many readers as possible. Jones's notes, as notes, are characteristic of modernist poetry, but the intention behind them is not. Finally, though Jones confirms that "it would be an absurd affectation . . . to suppose that many of the themes [he] employ[s] are familiar to all readers," he insists that these themes are "without exception, themes derived from our own deposits" (14). Originality is not to be found in themes, but in the re-telling of them: "There is only one tale to tell even though the telling is patient of endless development and ingenuity and can take on a million variant forms. I imagine something of this sort to be implicit in what Picasso is reported as saying: 'I do not seek, I find.'" (35). In short, the "deposits" Jones mines are the deposits for "us all" (fellow Britons), and "form the *materia* that we all draw upon, whether we know it or not, to this degree or that, in however roundabout a way, whether we are lettered or illiterate, Christian or post-Christian, or anti-Christian" (40). In brief, Jones is still insisting upon being the stretcher-bearer, the physician, the linesman, the soldier, and the tourist, all at once, in a context where such efforts are not valued.

Jones is writing in much the same way, and with similar ends, as he did in *IP*, but the authority granted the soldier-poet of *IP* cannot simply be transferred to the poet of the *Anthemata*. Jones's insistence on being personally accountable and providing explanations is valued positively in the context of *IP*, but held against him in the context of the *Anthemata*. The

First World War is an objective, shareable, common subject; the subject of the *Anathemata* is not—no matter how many times the poet tells us so. I’ve never read a single critic writing on this epic who has doubted that Jones is following his own prescription regarding the poet: that “he must work within the limits of his love. There must be no mugging-up, no ‘ought to know’ or ‘try to feel’; for only what is actually loved and known can be seen *sub specie aeternitatis* [from the perspective of eternity]” (24). The problem is that for readers to experience this poem as Jones seems to want them to, they must engage in “mugging-up;” they must “try to feel” or pretend to know what they don’t—and what Jones himself admits they probably can’t. To remedy this is his stated purpose in self-annotating the *Anathemata*, but Jones miscalculates. One may transmit knowledge through footnotes—but not love. To believe that the poem matters for Jones is not sufficient cause for it to matter to his readers—unless they love Jones, too.

5. *Ethos and Annotation: The Enduring Presence of David Jones*¹³⁴

Love, while an undeniable influence in both the making and reading of literary works, is not amenable to tidy classifications and may be embarrassing for either authors or professional, critical readers to admit. Our relationship to books may be, as Martha Nussbaum alleges “messy” and “erotic” (29), but what would scholarship motivated by love look like, and is it possible for such scholarship to win the endorsement of scholars who cannot or will not endorse “love” as a valid criterion for professional criticism? On the other hand, what are the consequences of refusing to admit the influence of love in literary studies and instead relying solely on the criterion of power or “force”?

In her article on the exclusion of David Jones from the modernist canon, Elizabeth Judge argues that Jones, “inspired to annotate by a solicitude for the common reader and his distrust of

¹³⁴ An earlier, more “conversational” version of much of the material in this section was presented at a David Jones’s conference in Swansea, Wales, September of 2001.

certain academic exegeses, prevented his own assimilation into academic discourse and thus precluded his canonization" (202). Her argument is predicated on a market conception of literary studies. Jones's poems are of limited value to academics because they cannot be utilized by them in a way that serves and validates "professional discourse." In Judge's words, "in a discipline where indeterminacy and obscurity are desirable goods, Jones has little to offer for sale in the literary marketplace relative to Pound, Eliot, and Joyce" (190). Rather than contest Judge's claim, I wish to explore what it means if she is right.

As Judge notes, Jones's practice of self-annotation resists the methodologies of New Critical theory, which functions on the premise that texts can be disassociated from their authorial and historical contexts, and which was the regnant theory when Jones's *In Parenthesis* and the *Anathemata* were published. I would further argue that Jones's annotations continue to frustrate those post-modern theories currently in ascendance which attribute the construction of texts to a complex of social, political, and/or economic causes rather than to an individual human author. Jones is an author who refuses to "die;" the copious self-annotation of his poems bears testimony that requires us to make appropriate human responses to his works. It is impossible to read Jones's annotations and be unaware that his poems are consciously and conscientiously made things, constructed of widely diverse materials gathered by a particular author who took great pains to communicate with his readers. Jones works "within the limits of his love" (preface to *A*, 24), and employs only what is "actually loved and known" (25) in the making of his poems.¹³⁵ Jones's annotations then, constitute the testimony of an author who not only cares deeply about the poems he is making, but about the readers he is addressing and the culture he is trying to preserve. In this way, the perpetual presence of Jones recalls "something loved," and

¹³⁵ Jones himself describes his *Anathemata* as containing "[p]ieces of stuff that happen to mean something to me" (preface to *A*, 34), and as being somewhat analogous to "a longish conversation between two friends" (33).

“embod[ies] an ethos inimical to the imposition of [a] new order” (preface to *A*, 21); the “new order” in this case being those critical theories that would “proscribe the diverse uses,” “impose the rootless uniformities,” and “square the world-floor” (Jones “Tutelar of the Place”). Seen in this way, the fact that Jones’s poems are non-canonical can be positively understood as a register of their ability to resist critical “will to power.” They are extra-canonical because they are extra-utile; unlike the poet’s characterization of “spun buck” at the end of “the Book of Balaam’s Ass,” Jones’s poems are not infinitely “convenient,” “adjustable,” and/or “pliable” to the needs of most critics.

Given Jones’s attempt to make poems that serve the particular purposes of sheltering and preserving past “deposits” for future generations—his own sense that while art is gratuitous, it also performs essential cultural work—it is ironic that Judge’s analysis argues that the cause of Jones’s non-canonical status is precisely its “uselessness” to critical discourse.¹³⁶ Judge argues that Jones’s self-annotation renders critical discourse unnecessary because it “removes the need for academic explication” (187). While this is a useful and suggestive argument, Judge’s operating definition of “discourse” seems uncharitably narrow here. Jones’s poetry is not useful to critics because it “talks back.” Under this model, critical discourse is monologic, and therefore precludes dialogue. In fact, it could be argued that “explication” isn’t really a conversation so much as a kind of dissection. That being said, Judge’s demonstration of the inability of the usual ideological and stylistic reasons marshaled for Jones’s lack of canonicity to hold up under close scrutiny is sound. While there are a number of contributing factors underlying Jones’s extra-

¹³⁶ A conclusion which also stems from a belief that it is criticism—rather than literature—which is the legitimate source of “real” cultural work.

canonical status, I have argued that the main reason is the *ethos* his work projects, an *ethos* which is inimical to the dominant critical practices of the last 75 or so years.¹³⁷

Though to varying degrees and from different motivations, most of the major schools of literary criticism of the twentieth century, from New Criticism through Reader Response, Deconstruction, Critical Materialism, to New Historicism, have required the death of the author. However, FWW writers pose a particular challenge for these theories because it has seemed unethical or unseemly to some critics to deny the validity and importance of the experiences of authors in the context of war.

I have argued that the dilemma of Jones's relationship to the FWW and the modernist canons is predicated on the question of *ethos*. Jones's *In Parenthesis (IP)* has a solid position in the FWW canon, despite its bearing no formal resemblance to anything else in the canon of British FWW poetry because its *ethos* is normative for its genre. It does not meet the formal norms for the genre. *IP* is most decidedly not a trench-lyric. Additionally, critics have had difficulty identifying the precise ideology *IP* demonstrates with regard to the war. Ironically, the reasons generally given to explain the exclusion of the *Anathemata* from the modernist canon actually hold in the relationship of *IP* to the FWW canon. Yet, *IP* is canonical. This suggests that *ethos* may be at least as an important factor with regard to determining canonical status as are style, content, and ideology. *In Parenthesis* is the work most often excerpted from for publication in general and modern twentieth century anthologies and readers. Jones's poems look modern on the surface, but they do not "feel" modern due to his persistent authorial presence. Publishing excerpts from *In Parenthesis* provides a way to resolve this critical dilemma because they look modern, and any residual presence of the author can be excused because the poem is a First World War poem, and

¹³⁷ A major exception to this trend are those feminist critics who propose to enable formally "voiceless" persons the ability to enter, as valid subjects for academic discourse, their experiences "from the margins" of society.

its author is a soldier-poet. But the practice of publishing excerpts from *IP*, and of publishing them in the company of other FWW poems rather than in the company of modernist works which are more nearly its contemporaries with regard to date, form, subject, and method, itself delimits the scope of critical discourse about Jones's work.

Nonetheless, whether excerpted from *IP* or the *Anathemata*, Jones's work does currently appear in many anthologies and books of literary criticism on modernism. Even Judge admits that his work is being anthologized more frequently now (182). This is not quite the same thing as saying Jones is a canonical modernist writer, of course, but the question I want to pose next is whether or not this alleged lack of canonicity is truly a detriment, and if so, for whom? I ask this in part because Judge is absolutely correct in noting that "Academic enthusiasts of his work . . . still have a 'defensive quality' about them" (181). Might it be possible that Jones's non-canonicity as a modernist is more of a threat to the marketability of Jones's scholars than to the value of Jones's works? Could the apologies for Jones be motivated — albeit not always consciously — as much by some scholars' fears over the professional consequences of their engaging in critically "unauthorized" readings of Jones as by their fears that Jones will be disregarded? Given the current academic climate, extra-canonicity is not necessarily detrimental to the chances of Jones being studied, but the repeated rehearsals of why he is not canonical may well be. For example, Judge wonders whether the academics who write about Jones in the role of "advocate and protector" are "ultimately hurting their cause by their exclusivity and impetus to canonize" (181). Another way in which the anxiety of Jones's scholars themselves may contribute to his relative neglect is this: their apologies have become advertisements to the current generation of students and scholars of Jones's "questionable" status.

And Jones's status may well change. As definitions of modernism are interrogated, the modernism of Jones may well be discovered to be "central" now in a way it was not in the mid-

twentieth century.¹³⁸ Of particular value to understanding Jones would be discussions which consider the relationship of modernism to post-colonial writing, or the ways in which an “elitist” modernist form can be used by “subalterns” — marginalized by uncomprehending and incomprehensible forces—to write themselves and what they actually know and love in “authorized” and “approved” aesthetic objects. This is what Jones does by writing an arcane Latin Roman Catholic mass under his *Anthemata*, what Derek Walcott does by writing Homer and Dante under the West Indies in his *Omeros*, and what Dambudzo Marechera does by writing an Eliotic *Waste Land* under his Zimbabwean *House of Hunger*. Jones knew that in order for there to be orientation (or re-orientation) there must be external reference points, and he cared enough about what he was writing and the audience for whom was writing to be as explicit as possible in his notes. This brings us back to Jones’s practice of self-annotation, and the charge that by so doing he effectively writes himself out of the modernist canon.

Bernard Bergonzi admits that although Jones’s notes explain references, they cannot constitute an artistic justification.¹³⁹ What they can do, though, in their concern to identify, acknowledge and even celebrate those actually known and loved people, places and things, is convey the overriding ethical imperative of an artist who knew that whether or not “Cicily,” or “Pamela-born-between-the-sirens,” or we, or our students are bored, “It is inevitable and meet: while there is breath it’s only right to bear immemorial witness” (Jones, *The Book of Balaam’s Ass* 97,99). However, unlike the poet’s “spell-bound guests”, we can choose not to hear the tale of this particular ancient mariner; indeed, there are many ways of not listening. One way of not listening is defining academic discourse in a way that precludes the necessity of scholars really

¹³⁸ For example, in his 2007 book on Jones, Paul Robichaud points out that “Far from being idiosyncratic, Jones’s engagement with the Middle Ages reveals many tensions characteristic of Anglo-American modernism as a whole—tensions between modernity and tradition, locality and civilization, past and present” (3).

¹³⁹ See *Wartime and Its Aftermath*, page 186.

attending to the *ethos* of literary works. Scholars do things with texts; there is, however, no real consensus over the connotations of the preposition “with” in this sentence. There are certainly significant differences between doing things “with” human beings and doing things “with” inanimate objects. Literary works are not really “animate,” but they are a peculiar kind of human product; a poem is not a brick. Jones stresses the gratuitousness of art, art being “extra-utile” by nature. There is therefore something particularly troubling about Judge’s claim that Jones’s poetry is non-canonical precisely because it fails to be *useful* to scholars. In her own words, “Jones’s self-annotation “prevents the participation of the academic audience. By adopting the modernist style and then retooling it for the nonacademic, Jones created a text that *serves no one’s needs* and was destined to remain noncanonical” (187, emphasis is mine.)

The distance between Bergonzi’s concern about Jones’s notes and Judge’s represents a fall. Bergonzi is, at least, still discussing poetry in aesthetic terms; Judge is discussing poetry in terms of marketability. Not only that, she directly correlates the value of poetry to its susceptibility to a particular kind of critical interpretation (186). Eliot, Joyce and Pound are the canonical high Modernists because “Eliot’s elliptical annotational overtures, Joyce’s intriguing interpretational leads, and Pound’s clever omissions” (199) render their poetry *useful*. Jones’s poetry (and arguably, his notes as well) offers everything that the canonical poetry does, but his stated intentions and his undeniable and unforgettable presence on almost every page provide resistance to the will of the scholar. Judge cites Jones’s well-known “distrust of certain academic exegesis” (202) as a motivating factor behind his practice of self-annotation. To affirm her argument that his self-annotation is the primary cause of Jones’s non-canonical status is to affirm that Jones’s distrust was well founded. If Judge is right, Jones’s absence from the modernist canon is predicated on his presence in his poems.

CHAPTER IV

GHOSTWRITING MARITA: *ETHOS* AS WITNESS IN CHENJERAI HOVE'S *BONES*1. Words and Bones; Blood and Rain: How to Read *Bones*

The cause of the diversity of critical readings of Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* may be interpreted in various ways, but this diversity does suggest the challenges this complex work presents even to experienced readers. Because there is such disparity between the published readings of *Bones*, and because it is a work which may not be immediately familiar, I feel it prudent to make no assumptions, and to thus begin by offering my own reading of this important Anglophone African work—which was the recipient of the 1989 Noma Award—and to indicate what I understand to be its significance as a work of Zimbabwean literature.

The immediate setting of *Bones* is post-liberation Zimbabwe, four years after the end of the 2nd Chimurenga War. This is significant because it limits the sphere of responsible characters to the Zimbabweans themselves, and not the colonizing Europeans. *Bones* resists readings that would assign either the cause or remediation of the contemporary problems facing Zimbabwe to Europeans. In those passages of *Bones* which do refer to the role of Europeans in Zimbabwe, especially Chapter 7, blame is not laid at their feet, but rather at the feet of the chiefs and rulers who enabled them to take over the land, and who were motivated largely by their own greed.

The point of view from which *Bones* is told is first-person, participant, but it does not have a single narrator—it has five. *Bones* is divided into 15 “chapters.” Janifa narrates seven of these; Marume, Marita's husband, only one. Chisaga, the cook of the white boss, Manyepo, and the Unknown Woman each narrate two chapters. The central chapter is narrated collectively by “the spirits,” who also narrate the penultimate chapter of *Bones*. Despite the variety of it narrators, there is a uniformity of style in *Bones* which renders the characters linguistically

indistinguishable from one another, and which has been the subject of much criticism of the work.

Bones has at least two intertwined plots,¹⁴⁰ one in which Marita is the protagonist, and one in which Janifa plays the central role. Most published readings of *Bones* focus on the plot involving Marita. *Bones* opens and concludes with Marita begging Janifa to read her the letter her son had written Janifa when they were in school together. Though the reader learns some of Marita's history—her early barrenness and harsh treatment, her love and loyalty towards her only son who left to join the guerillas and has not been heard from in four years, her rape and torture by soldiers during the war, her hard work in the fields of and complex relationship with the white boss, Manyepo, and her frustration with her husband's refusal to mention their son or stand up for himself or the other workers—Marita's primary "action" in *Bones* is planning to go to the city to find out what has happened to her son, tricking Chisaga into stealing money to aid her in her journey, and being murdered in the city. This action is contextualized within Marita's motherly love for Janifa, and Janifa's love for her. Since Marita is killed before she finds out what had happened to her son, she is left at the very end of *Bones* still searching for him, and still asking Janifa to read her his letter.

Like most of its readers, I too see Marita as the central figure of importance in *Bones*. She is the "hero" of this novelized epic. But *Bones* has a significant secondary plot involving Janifa, who faces similar obstacles to Marita, but who is still alive at the end of the book—and who therefore provides a focal point for readers attempting to determine their own response toward the questions *Bones* raises. For all that can be determined from the work itself, Marita may be already dead when *Bones* begins. Indeed, since *Bones* opens and concludes in Janifa's voice describing the pleas of Marita, some readers have decided the whole work really takes place

¹⁴⁰ One could also map out plot lines centered on other characters of the work, especially Chisaga and the Unknown Woman.

inside Janifa's head, placing Janifa in the asylum from the very beginning of *Bones*. At least one critic has suggested that within the context of traditional Shona beliefs, Janifa's behavior could be attributed to her being possessed by Marita.¹⁴¹ I would argue that Janifa is being haunted by Marita, but may be in the process of becoming a medium for one of the ancestors, possibly Nehanda.¹⁴² None of this is clear-cut, however, and multiple readings of *Bones* do nothing to clear up the exact nature of the relationships between Marita, Janifa, and the spirits. What is certain is that Janifa spends a good deal of *Bones* thinking about Marita; she grieves over her death and does not know how she will learn what she needs to know without her. She believes Marita is guiding her as she travels home from the tormenting herbalist to whom her mother has given her. And in chapter 14, the spirits observe that Janifa prays to Marita, and the people's observation of Janifa uttering these "prayers" to Marita convince them that she should be institutionalized (103-4).

However one chooses to analyze it, there is a very close relationship between Marita and Janifa, and the plot(s) of *Bones* put them together in the same action at its opening and conclusion, and this despite the return of Marita's son, and his expressed desire to marry Jennifer (Janifa). Janifa tells Marita that her son has come back, but this is not sufficient to keep Marita from making her repeated request to be read his letter. This could be due to the fact that Marita is dead and cannot hear Janifa—or that Janifa is schizophrenic, and thus it is not really Marita who is making the request, but these explanations do not make sense within the context of the work as a whole. Janifa is still "stuck" at the end of *Bones* because she has not taken action that must be

¹⁴¹ See Caroline Rooney's essay "Re-Possessions: Inheritance and Independence in Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*."

¹⁴² As David Lan notes in *Guns and Rain: Guerillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*, "The careers of all mediums develop out of a state of crisis. A woman becomes sick. All attempts to cure [her] fail" (49).

taken for her healing, and the healing of Zimbabwe, to take place. She has not yet consented to become the wife of Marita's son—and coincidentally the mother of Marita's grandchildren.

In the last paragraph attributed to Janifa, spoken after she has ordered her mother to go live with Chisaga, she claims:

I will stand here all the time, then walk so that these chains on my legs will have no purpose. Then the keepers of this place will come and say . . . We will remove the chains soon when we know you are well . . . But I will take the broken chains with my own hands and say . . . Do not worry yourselves, I have already removed them by myself. I have been removing them from my heart for many years, now my legs and hands are free because the mountains and the rivers I saw with my own eyes could not fail to remove all the chains of this place. . . Then I will go without waiting for them to say go. 112-13

This is a strong proclamation of self-determination and autonomy, though Janifa does credit the land for making the removal of her chains possible. But this proclamation alone is insufficient to prevent Marita's repeated request. Perhaps what is needed is not words. Perhaps words are capable only of reproducing more words.¹⁴³ Janifa may be able to free herself of the chains that bind her, but she cannot reproduce children—cannot become a mother—without consenting to become a wife.

This interpretation of the conclusion of *Bones* must be evaluated on the basis of a determination of the primary conflict of the work, which is no easy task given the number of significant conflicts it describes. One could focus on the conflicts between men and women in *Bones*, or between traditional and modern values, or between identification based on "papers" and identification based on "talk."¹⁴⁴ None of these conflicts, though important enough in their own right, suggest the most important problem represented in *Bones* because they are too limited in scope. The primary problem represented in *Bones* is the profound "illness" of Zimbabwe—the desecrated land and the fractured human lives resulting from the twin evils of submission to the

¹⁴³ A whole essay could be written just on the complex subject of how words are represented in this work, and what is their relationship to bones, violence, and healing; to hiding and revealing.

¹⁴⁴ See Pauline Kaldas' essay, "Self-Definition as a Catalyst for Resistance in Hoven's *Bones*" (137).

European colonizers and the atrocities committed by Zimbabweans against Zimbabweans in the war for liberation from those colonizers. This is evident from the many references to land itself in *Bones*, by the message of the spirits contained in its central chapter, by the history and actions of the Unknown Woman, and by the emphasis on the need for proper burial rites. It is *land*—not nation—which is traditionally significant for Zimbabweans, and all those concerned with the identity of Zimbabwe as a nation must first and foremost come to terms with—quite literally—the needs of the land, its requirements for being fertile. Barrenness is a prevailing motif of *Bones*; both the barrenness of Marita and the barrenness of the land.

What the land requires fundamentally is rain. According to traditional Zimbabwean beliefs, only the rightful owners of the land can produce rain¹⁴⁵—and the rightful owners are the ancestors of any given piece of land. Each ancestor has his or her own “rules” which must be followed; failure to follow these rules (by dishonoring the totem of the ancestor, transgressing boundaries, chopping down baobab trees, or using Western materials and methods for farming such as fertilizers and irrigation systems) results in the displeasure of the ancestor and, consequently, the cessation of rain. Prohibitions against murder and requirements for proper burials also figure significantly with regard to rain. This is because, “If blood falls on the ground drought follows. Blood is, as it were, anti-rain” (Lan 97). War, *just* war—in any case—does not present a problem because blood shed in a just war is shed for good cause in accordance with recognized principles. As long as the bodies of the dead are properly buried, drought is not a natural consequence of war.

If the war is not just, though, or if there is indiscriminate killing of the type which often occurred during the 2nd Chimurenga War between Zimbabweans programmatically on the same side, drought could be expected to ensue—as could haunting by those who were murdered and

¹⁴⁵ See David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (74). Much of the background summary provided here is based on his book.

seeking revenge, or who had not been properly buried. Such a person would become an *ngozi*—a person who has led an unsatisfactory life either by being unmarried or childless, being murdered, not being buried, or not being buried in home territory (Lan 35).¹⁴⁶ As Heike Schmidt explains in the essay, “Healing the Wounds of War: Memories of Violence and the Making of History in Zimbabwe’s Most Recent Past,” it is a prevalent belief in Zimbabwe that *ngozi* “can afflict and even possess members of the lineage of the person responsible” for his or her death (302). Two signs, then, that a just war has been fought, and that murders have not occurred during the war, would be the absence of drought and of haunting. There is even a Shona proverb, *hondo haina pfukwa*, which literally means “war does not lead to haunting” (Schmidt 303). The fact that both drought and an increase in haunting and/or possession occur in post-liberation Zimbabwe is a strong indicator that much work must be done before Zimbabwe can be healed. It is this fundamental question: “What must be done to heal the land and people of Zimbabwe?” which conditions and provides the context for understanding all other conflicts in *Bones*. The very title of the work suggests this. Quite literally, the bones of those killed in the rogue violence that occurred alongside the war for independence must be properly laid to rest before Zimbabwe can be healed and begin to prosper.

The challenge for the writer, then, is to find a form in which this question can be treated. As Robert Muponde points out in an interview on “Land—Basis for Zim Literature,”

If the whole national culture and the production of consciousness hinged on immersion in the land, the writer needs to find new ways of animating the subject of his art, and these are not easy to find in a situation where writing has mostly been about representing bread and butter issues. (par. 17)

¹⁴⁶ The *ngozi* is one of two categories of people who cannot become *midzimu*, or ancestors. The other category is *muroyi*, or witches.

In *Bones*, Chenjerai Hove finds this “new way” by beginning with the literary form traditionally employed to treat large-scale issues such as national identity—epic,¹⁴⁷ and then personalizing it by his novelization of the form.

2. Reading *Bones* as a Novelized Epic

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
 Driven time and again off course. . . .
 Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
 Start from where you will—sing for our time too. *The Odyssey* (1.1-2, 11-12)

So the literature of Zimbabwe is inextricably bound to the violence of the history and land that engendered it. The land itself is not only a geographical entity, but the very text of the Zimbabwean history. It drips with blood, entombs bones of both colonial settler and Mbuya Nehanda’s children. It is suffused with memory.
 Robert Muponde

The dead are loved in a different way. They are removed from the sphere of contact, one can and indeed must speak of them in a different way.
 Mikhail Bakhtin

The first two sentences on the back cover of Chenjerai Hove’s *Bones* signal the ambiguity over its genre which is a pervasive characteristic of most criticism of the work. In the first sentence, *Bones* is described as a “confident and convincing extended prose poem,” but the second sentence begins with the prepositional phrase, “In this novel . . .” Granted, there are approaches to literature which do not require generic specificity, but correctly classifying the genre of a literary work is one prerequisite to producing coherent, meaningful readings of that work. In the event that a literary work is a hybrid with regard to genre, it is only the reasoned identification of those genres which warrants or grounds critical readings of that work. One does not criticize an epic for having static characters, for example—or an imagist poem for lacking narrative. Chenjerai Hove’s *Bones* has been variously described, but never studied as an epic. If

¹⁴⁷ Epic also has the advantage for Hove of being a form which incorporates both oral and written literary traditions.

Bones could be categorized as a type of epic, this would, in and of itself, answer many of the criticisms levied against the work.

Like any traditional epic, Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* opens in the middle of things, but its hero is not raging. Marita is demanding to be read a letter that was not written to her and that she cannot read because she is illiterate, a letter that was written by her son to Janifa, the very girl Marita is begging to read the letter to her. The subject of Hove's epic is not the raging of an Achilles, but the desperate longing of a mother.¹⁴⁸ And it is not the well-wrought shield Hephaestus crafts for Achilles at the request of his mother Thetis which is the object of attention, but rather the letter of a lost son to the sweetheart of his school days. *Bones* does in fact meet many of the requirements for a traditional epic; it is a long narrative poem set against a vast backdrop whose concern is largely the fate or identity of a nation, and which endorses values the writer believes are of fundamental importance to the survival of his nation. *Bones* achieves a kind of epic unity of time, place and action which, for critics attempting to read *Bones* as a novel, results in charges of its being nearly "plotless." Readers have as many, if not more, questions regarding the individual fates of its characters at the end of *Bones* as they had at its beginning. There are no "gods" *per se* in *Bones*, but the ancestors are often invoked, and ancestors function as gods in traditional Zimbabwean culture. For example, it is the ancestors who determine whether or not the rain will fall. The central chapter of *Bones* invokes Nehanda, one of the most important of the ancestors who inspired the 1st Chimurenga uprising of the people against their colonizers.

In addition to meeting these generic requirements, *Bones* has a hero who exemplifies characteristics of the heroic code expressed in Homer's *Iliad*: strength, bravery, loyalty, and generosity. Marita is strong; she is one of the hardest and best workers in Manyepo's fields, and she survives both brutal treatments for barrenness as well as beatings, torture, and rape. Marita is

¹⁴⁸ A mother who may also figure allegorically as Zimbabwe.

brave, repeatedly standing up against oppressors while refusing to become an oppressor herself. She also journeys to the city alone, despite her fears. Marita is loyal to the son she has not seen in many years, refusing to give up on him or to believe that he is committing the kinds of atrocities often reported of the guerillas. She is also loyal to Janifa, offering Janifa guidance and advice even after her own death. Marita is generous. In addition to her own assigned plot of land, Marita works in Janifa's as well, so that Janifa will have time to go to school. She gives her cooking pots to Janifa before she leaves for the city to attempt to find her son. In addition to all these characteristics, one could also add "craftiness," which she exhibits when she tricks Chisaga into stealing money for her trip from Manyepo by leading him to believe she will sleep with him to return the favor. Its resemblance to traditional epic warrants classifying *Bones* as a type of epic.

Another justification for classifying *Bones* as an epic is the explanatory force such a classification provides—both for its critics and its advocates. Much interrogatory and negative criticism of *Bones* seems to presume that the work can be read (or ought to be read) as a realist novel, but *Bones* resists being read in this way. Even to classify it as a "prose-novel" is problematic. *Bones* is a "novelized epic." Those very elements which novelize the epic, which personalize it and bring it into the "zone of maximal contact" Bakhtin describes ("Epic and Novel" 11), are the elements which lead some critics to call *Bones* a novel—and which subsequently seem to require their cataloguing the ways in which *Bones* fails to meet their requirements for the postcolonial African novel.

In *The Place of Tears*, Ranka Primorac includes several of Hove's works in his discussion of the novel and politics in modern Zimbabwe, including *Bones*. His choice to categorize *Bones* as a novel requires him to ascribe motives to Hove which explain the oddities of its form. Thus, Hove's novels "deliberately break up causal and temporal sequences" because Hove is more interested in "the psychological lives of his characters" than in "narrating events" (81, emphasis

is mine). Part of Primorac's statement is objectively true; *Bones* does exhibit ruptures of causal and temporal sequences. But this can be explained more efficiently by noting that *Bones* is a type of epic; such ruptures are characteristic of epics. Other observations and descriptions in Primorac's discussion of *Bones* which can be more simply understood as expressing characteristics of epic include the absence of references to "markers of historical time" (85), the "uniform artificiality" of language and "absence of change" which create its "sense of temporal stasis" (86), and the lack of "character movement and growth" (91). All of this results in the depiction in *Bones* of "a frozen world" (89). This "frozenness" and "absence of change" are the very qualities of epic which Bakhtin refers to in his argument for the superiority of the novel over the epic,¹⁴⁹ and I begin with Primorac because he specifically invokes Bakhtin in his work and admits the similarities between *Bones* and epic, but ultimately concludes that Hove's "novel" does not create "a full approximation of epic time" (91). The reason *Bones* does not fully "approximate" epic time is that it is a *novelized* epic. But that it nearly does so is evident, not only from Primorac's reading of the work, but from the readings of other critics as well.

Caroline Rooney complains that in *Bones* there is "No story at all. It ends where it begins. With the demand for the letter. And that is all there is to it. Just the demand for a letter, but never yet the letter. It postpones itself infinitely, and the story will run forever" (128). Yes, and Homer's *Iliad* begins nine years into the Trojan War and ends nine years into the Trojan War, with no end to the war in sight. Flora Veit-Wild claims that in *Bones*, Hove "escapes the limitations of historic time and arrives at what he calls 'the collective memory'" (7). Again, this is one way of accurately describing the work. But might this not also be a way of accurately describing Homer's *Odyssey*, as Odysseus spins out his repetitious and never-ending tale to King Alcinous? My argument, then, is not that most critical essays on *Bones* incorrectly describe aspects of the work, but that

¹⁴⁹ What Bakhtin calls the "absolute past" in his essay on epic and novel.

since they misclassify the genre of the work they also misinterpret the significance of the aspects they describe. At best, this results in critics having to perform more work than would be necessary if they began their readings by identifying *Bones* as a type of epic. At worst, it results in condemning the work for failing to be what it manifestly is not: a novel.

Before moving on from this point, I want to at least briefly address the issue of language in *Bones*, both because it has deservedly received much critical attention, and because his use of language in *Bones* is another way in which Hove retools epic to suit the needs of Zimbabwean literature. In *Bones*, Hove is faced with the twin challenges of representing in written form the speech of characters who cannot read or write, and of representing spoken Shona in written English. That Hove has in fact achieved something new in his use of language is almost universally acknowledged. Judgment of the achievement, however, is varied. In her essay, Pauline Kaldas notes that the English Hove writes in *Bones* “is not the English of the colonizer” (130), and argues that in his “transform[ation of] the colonizer’s language, he . . . takes one of the tools of oppression and creates with it a tool of resistance” (130). Flora Veit-Wild claims that “Hove’s ‘Africanized’ English appears artificial: a pose” (8), after explaining that “Through its relentless use of ‘African’ idiom, [*Bones*] propounds an unquestioning sense of unity with the land and with tradition” (7). In his essay, which was partly motivated by a desire to respond to Veit-Wild’s blunt criticism of *Bones*, Michael Engelke admits that “many of the characters . . . do speak alike, and it is hard to trace changes in their speech patterns” (34). However, he refuses to concede that assent to the fact that characters “speak in the same ‘Africanized English’ idiom” requires an admission that the voices of the characters can be “collapse[d] . . . into a monolithic entity” (35). Once again, the point I wish to make about this issue is that classifying *Bones* as a type of epic simplifies the discussion of language in the work and clarifies the grounds for its assessment, because “artificiality” of language just *is* one of the characteristics of epic, as is its

uniformity. The observation that there is no real difference between the speech patterns of Chisaga and Janifa, or between Marita and Nehanda, might be grounds for withering criticism if *Bones* is to be read as a novel, but if it is not this observation warrants no more criticism than does the observation that there is no real difference between the speech patterns of Achilles and Zeus, or between Agamemnon and Odysseus.

Together with the issue of genre, critical confusion about and/or dissatisfaction with *Bones* must also be contextualized within the debate about the status (and in some cases “essence”) of the “third-world text.” For example, Aijaz Ahmad, interrogates Frederic Jameson’s claims that “[a]ll third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical[;] . . . they are to be read as . . . *national allegories*” and that they all “necessarily project a political dimension in the form of *national allegory*” (39). Ahmad contends that “[t]o say that all third world texts are necessarily this or that is to say, in effect, that any text originating within that social space which is *not* this or that is not a ‘true’ narrative” (11). Though neither Jameson nor Ahmad is specifically addressing *Bones*, their exchange on the subject of third-world texts is relevant to discussion of the work because, as has already been noted, Flora Veit-Wild, the one critic who has perhaps done more than any other to bring Zimbabwean authors into the arena of Western academic attention, and who championed Dambudzo Marechera, has also written one of the most strident criticisms of *Bones*. This is not because Veit-Wild does not value Zimbabwean literature, but rather because *Bones* fails to be the kind of work she believes a Zimbabwean novel ought to be. For example, she suggests that *Bones* is “problematic” for “other Zimbabwean writers” because “its relentless use of ‘African’ idiom . . . propounds an unquestioning sense of unity with the land and with tradition,” thereby “celebrat[ing] a form of ‘Africanness’” (7) she labels “romantic” throughout her essay. This explains the title of her essay: “Dances with *Bones*’: Hoves’ Romanticized Africa.” Hove’s *Bones*, she further asserts, is “an inaccurate and misleading reflection of today’s

Africa”(5), and his “narrative perspective decontextualizes the political implications of power and powerlessness”(6). While other critics have challenged some elements of her criticism,¹⁵⁰ the conclusion is especially troubling:

But in the context of Hove’s prize-winning novel, the question arises: has the concepts [sic] of a ‘national literature’ not become obsolete? Perhaps writers and critics in 1990s Africa should find new ways and new terms to describe the multi-faceted nature of postcolonial experience. 10

To suggest that the concept of a ‘national literature’ has become ‘obsolete’ at precisely the historical moment in which many countries, having finally liberated themselves from their colonizers, are able to think about what it means to establish a national identity of their own raises ethical concerns. Furthermore, in *Bones*, Hove does in fact find a “new way” to describe postcolonial experience: by beginning with what is arguably the most “nationalistic” of forms—the epic, and novelizing it in a way that makes the work, its characters, and its readers—answerable by calling into accountability both characters and readers of the work for their roles in the making of the national myth.

The epic becomes answerable, and this is especially significant within the context of Zimbabwean history, since many Zimbabweans believe it is only through communal acceptance of the responsibility for the violence of war that Zimbabwe can be healed, that the bones can be properly buried, that the *ngozi* can be placated, that history itself can be changed. As Heike Schmidt notes, “it has been suggested that cases deriving from war violence often involve not merely the healing of family and lineage relations, but the cleansing of communities” (307). He also reports that there are chiefs who insist that “ngozi cases have to be solved ‘as a family’” (307). Terence Ranger further articulates the need for communal healing: “Soldiers need. . . to be purged of violence; widows need . . . to perform funeral rites for dead husband which had been

¹⁵⁰ See, for example Michael Engelke’s “Thinking About the Nativism in Chenjerai Hove’s Work”

denied during the war, and collective sense ha[s] to be made of terror" (705). It is in this context that Alexander Kanengoni's novel, *Echoing Silences*, must be understood. Munashe, the protagonist of the novel dies, but the families and tribes of the offender and the victim have been brought together. That the cure of the individual character is not enacted is less significant than the requirements for communal healing having been met.

The situation represented in *Bones* is more tenuous than the one in *Echoing Silences* because blood relatives do not provide even the reluctant help offered by Munashe's family. Marita's husband does not support her decision to go to the city to find out whether or not their son has survived the war; he never even speaks of their son unless he's drunk. Similarly, Janifa suspects that her own mother is complicit in her rape by Chisaga — that her mother attempts to "sell her" to Chisaga, and subsequently, to an herbalist to whom she is sent for "treatment." The Unknown Woman does not find out until after her husband's death that he was responsible for "selling out" a group of young guerillas who were killed after a three day siege. Marita and Janifa form their own family bonds, ones not dictated by blood, but by need and desire. And when Marita travels to the city to discover the fate of her son and is killed, it is not a family member who comes to claim her body out of a desire to offer the proper burial rites, but the Unknown Woman she met on the bus on the way to the city, and to whom she told her story.

Part of what Hove provides in *Bones* is a new way of defining family to facilitate the healing of wounds caused by the violence of Zimbabwe's history, despite the resistance of individual blood-relatives to participating in the process. Indeed, Marita's motivation for her actions: begging Janifa to read her the letter, leaving for Harare to discover the fate of her son, even refusing to report the abuses of her white boss, Manyepo, is that she is a *mother*—and that all persons have mothers. Yes, Manyepo may have "badness" in him, but "his badness is just like any other person" (63). And when Janifa pushes her for a satisfactory explanation of her

protection of Manyepo, Marita replies, “Child, what do you think his mother will say when she hears that another woman sent her son to his death?” (63). If healing from the wounds of war, if successfully burying the bones of all those unjustly killed so that the *ngozi* can be satisfied and at peace, if compensation and forgiveness require participation of all family members, one way to make this possible is to revise the definition of “family” by reminding each and every Zimbabwean that he or she has a mother, and by reminding mothers what is required of them to ensure the healing of their own children as well as the healing of all the “children” of Zimbabwe.

This is just one more way Hove has novelized the epic in *Bones*. Every character becomes answerable for his or her role as either a destroyer or a healer. Even the man working in the government office who refuses to let the Unknown Woman take custody of Marita’s body is held to account by the literary work and its readers—not on the basis of his choosing to endorse the value of the officially written over the value of the personally spoken—but because he does not treat the Unknown Woman as a Mother. He responds to her pleas by saying, “I am sorry, mother,” but the narrator tells us that he “listens like a teacher attending to a child’s plea” (67). Finally, it is not for lack of heroes that the land of Zimbabwe languishes, but for lack of healers. Or rather, to be a healer is to be a hero.

3. Reading *Bones* as Testimony

i am the only one
you are the only one.

the birds and the rivers
sing to me,
they speak in your voice.

if i fall silent
you will be silent too.
if i fall silent
your wounds will be named silence

i am a piece of you
and you are a piece of me.

the blood in my veins is you.
 listen to the rhythm
 of the stream of my blood
 and the echoes from the hills,
 mixed with gentle ripples
 of the waters in the fast stream.

but with time
 you will hear your voice
 in the blue skies of my heart.

in the dark clouds of my soul
 you will hear a voice
 that tells the story of your forgotten voices
 of birds long dead
 of elephants crippled by guns
 of orphans you do not deserve. Chenjerai Hove, "a poem for zimbabwe"

Chenjerai Hove writes for those who cannot speak: the dead, the illiterate, even his country which, in the poem above, is both personified and voiceless. Chenjerai Hove writes (in part) to those who cannot reasonably be expected to become readers of his texts, whether because they cannot read at all (or cannot read English) or because their socio-economic condition is one which prevents them from becoming material consumers of published texts. In his prologue to *Shadows*, Hove's second major novel in English, he writes with hope that one day those whose tale he is telling "will read it, or hear rumours of it," but admits pragmatically that this is unlikely since "they cannot read," and asserts fatalistically that "they will never read," concluding that "the world of written words is hidden away from them." Academic arguments about Hove's alleged "romanticism" or "nativism," his construction of a kind of postcolonial literary English predicated on Shona idiom and allusion, and his political engagement or lack thereof, while sometimes intelligent and provocative, miss the salient point of Hove's works, particularly *Bones*. What Hove achieves in this novelized epic is an *ēthopoiia* (literally, "creation of character") which combines characteristics of the practice of *ēthopoiia* from the ancient Greek orator, Lysias (459/8 —

ca. 380 BCE) with traditional Zimbabwean beliefs about ancestors (*midzimu*) and those who cannot, because they have led unsatisfactory lives in some way, become *midzimu: ngozi*.

Heraclitus insists that “Character is Fate,” and Lysias that character is persuasive. Hove adds to these the belief that character is immortal; it cannot die. As Marita continues to live, despite her brutal murder, so character lives on. One might write about this phenomenon as David Lan writes about ancestors in his instructive work, *Guns and Rain: Guerillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*, “The richness of their personalities and the depth of their experience do not come to an abrupt halt and dissipate for all time” (31). The ancestors do not die because their influence continues by means of mediums. Character does not die so long as there remains testimony of that character. *Ethos* is just this, character emerging from and in words—whether written or spoken. Though Marita, the central character of *Bones*, cannot read or write, the most significant object to her in the novelized epic is the letter her son, who left to join the guerillas, wrote to Janifa because “it is the only thing that can tell [Marita] a little about him” (4). And though Marita is dead and despite her inability to leave any kind of written account of herself, she continues to live and influence those who knew her and those who read about her as her character emerges in others’ words about her and their memories of her words. In *Bones*, Chenjerai Hove “ghostwrites” Marita, both in the sense that he is writing *for her*, and in the sense that he is writing *for the dead*. Marita’s character itself becomes the primary “argument” of this work. One could say of Hove’s skill here what Dionysius said of Lysias’s; it “smuggle[s] persuasion past the hearer” [qtd. in Lamb 7]. While for some a claim of similarity between Lysias and Hove, separated by culture, religion, language, and well over two millennia may strain credibility, they in fact have much in common.

Lysias was an *isoteles*, belonging to a particular class of *metics* (non-citizen residents of Athens) who nonetheless enjoyed some tax privileges. One consequence of his class was his being

forbidden by law to write or speak for himself. Since Lysias was a capable writer, and since the government of Greece insisted that each plaintiff or defendant in a case “speak on his own behalf,” Lysias made a career of “ghostwriting” speeches for others. It is his success in doing so that merits him his place in the history of rhetoric as the first serious practitioner of *ēthopoia*, and most historical studies of *ethos* begin with Lysias. Lysias’s style of writing is also noteworthy; he was recognized in his own time “as master of the language of everyday life” (Todd 7). Praise was not universal, however; some accused him of being willing to write for anyone who could pay his fee, noting the political inconsistency of the various positions he supports for his clients. Todd reminds such critics that “political alliances in Athens were much more personal and less permanent” than they are in modern party politics (6). Lysias, well experienced himself in the seeming capriciousness of the State, may have been naturally empathetic to those who found themselves at the short end of any bureaucratic stick, though it may equally be true that he simply had no real motivation, and lacked the legal status to engage in political games. He’d already suffered the consequences of playing such “games”. Then again, he may simply have wished to practice a craft he enjoyed and in which he was skilled, in the only legitimate venue left open to him. In any case, Lysias wrote for others in ways he was forbidden to write for himself, made a living by so doing, and earned as well a reputation for a plain style of writing through which the character of those for whom he wrote could be clearly seen.

Chenjerai Hove is currently in exile from his native Zimbabwe.¹⁵¹ Hove was initially quite hopeful about the future of Zimbabwe under President Mugabe, until circumstances made it impossible for him to be so any longer. Yet, to speak critically of the government is to commit treason in Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, and to render oneself liable to harassment, arrest, beating,

¹⁵¹ His critics would be quick to point out that he is a “self-exile;” he chose to leave. Others might contend that threats on one’s life and persecution for speaking and writing what one believes to be true would render a person an exile of sorts even if that person remained in his or her native country.

imprisonment, and death. Lysias, despite his status as a non-citizen resident of Athens, enjoyed more security and benefits in Athens than did Hove in Zimbabwe. What links them, though, is the craft of speaking (or writing) for others in a style from which character can emerge and be persuasive.

This emphasis on character mandates that the person, rather than any system or organization, be the focus of attention, and that words—though important and capable of being both destructive and constructive¹⁵² be subordinated to the person. If Lysias wrote his speeches keeping these priorities, this “hierarchy” in mind, and not caring overmuch about whether or not his “body of work” was systematically coherent or representative of a consistent political point of view, but rather concerning himself with the success of each speech, with whether or not the character being defended in each speech emerged faithfully and persuasively from his words on their behalf, one would expect the speeches to have just that “variable” quality that troubles some critics. That his success in representing the cases of others resulted also in Lysias earning a living does not warrant disparaging or second-guessing his very real achievements.

All conjecture aside, the following principles regarding *ethos* and the practice of *ēthopoia* can be derived from Lysias’s example: 1) character can emerge from words; words are a sufficient vehicle for conveying character; 2) character emerges not only (*perhaps not even primarily*) from a person’s words about him or herself, but from others’ words about that person; 3) the relationship between the character being “spoken” or “written” and the language used to do so must be such that the character is believable—indeed, it is not nearly as important that the *language* be believable or “realistic” as that the *character* emerging from the language be so; and 4) the ability of character to “smuggle persuasion” past the hearers or readers of narratives depends in part on a peculiarly disciplined use of words, in which the principle of fidelity to the person

¹⁵² I do not intend “constructive” to be understood as “making something *ex nihilo*” but rather as describing, confirming, or endorsing that which already exists.

being “spoken” or “written” *assumes a higher priority* than any principle of fidelity to the “objective facts” of the case. In Chenjerai Hove’s *Bones*, his writing of Marita exemplifies all these principles. The awareness that Hove privileges the person over language so that character can persuasively emerge from that language provides explanatory force for interpretation and for making sense of criticism of the work. This is not to say that language does not matter; it does. But language is a tool; that words can be variously categorized as good or bad requires that there be a basis for this classification. The basis Hove’s *Bones* provides for such classification is the effect of words on the person.

One reason for identifying Marita as the “hero” of this novelized epic, in addition to the obvious of the centrality of the character, is that she is the best exemplar of the right use of words, despite her “illiteracy.” This presents many challenges to Western readers of the work, as noted by Eun Young Oh in her essay “Toward a New Feminist Postcolonial Epistemology: The Reconstruction of Female Subjectivity and Motherhood in *Bones*.” Oh poses the following trenchant question; “Even though it is true that Marita . . . is illiterate, is she just a muted object who waits for a trained informant to ‘speak for’ her? Rather, doesn’t Marita’s illiteracy signify another kind of knowledge?” (186). Yes; the kind of knowledge Marita possesses about language is knowledge of human responsibility for its use. Marita refuses to give a bad report about Manyepo because she knows doing so will lead to his death. The fact that she must lie in order to save his life is of less significance to her than escaping responsibility for the death of another mother’s son. When Janifa questions Marita about the reasons for her decision, Marita replies, “Child, what do you think his mother will say when she hears that another woman sent her son to his death?” (63). Janifa is not satisfied with Marita’s response, because Marita had previously taught Janifa that “the tongue that lies will die a shameful death” (63). Marita does not deny having said this, but neither will she admit that it was wrong of her to lie to save Manyepo’s life;

“Yes, child, but it is better to let that tongue kill itself than to help it kill itself” (63). Or, perhaps, it is better for a tongue to kill itself through lying than to kill itself by providing information that will result in the death of another. It is significant that Marita is not lying here to save a friend or a loved one, but to save the man who “kick[ed her] in the back as if [she] were a football” (63). As has already been noted, Marita does not deny the facts of the matter; she knows Manyepo is bad, but knows other persons are equally as bad. She does not believe he deserves to die for his badness. She also contends that the reason Manyepo speaks to them and treats them the way he does is that he believes they are still children. That is why his “tongue is loose” (63). Further, Marita explains that Manyepo only does what he does because “he was brought up like that” (63), and the one who brought him up was his *mother*, ostensibly the same mother for whose sake Marita is refusing to inform on Manyepo. Marita refuses to treat even an enemy as an object.

Though Oh makes the following observation about conversations between the women in *Bones*, it is true of most of Marita’s conversations with or about others; “the dialogues between [them] are established on the basis of the meeting of a subject with another subject” (192), rather than the meeting of a subject with an object. Whether Marita speaks about Manyepo or to Janifa, she does not speak as though Manyepo or Janifa are simply the objects of her prepositional phrases. Further, the refusal of Marita to employ any alibi—*no matter how reasonable*—which would excuse her from taking responsibility for the consequences of her words is another of the ways “Marita’s illiteracy keeps calling into question what we think we already know, and in doing so establishes itself as an alternative knowledge that problematizes Western monologue” (Oh 186).¹⁵³ This alternative knowledge is one predicated on a person’s answerability for her words. Marita’s life provides an example of a life lived without making excuses, one which

¹⁵³ This kind of “problematization” is not limited to postcolonial texts. As seen in my reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, Marian—though illiterate—proves a much better “reader” of character than does Aurora.

incarnates answerability by recognizing that “That which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else” (Bahktin *Toward A Philosophy* 40) and that “I, the one and only I, can at no moment be indifferent (stop participating) in my inescapably, compellingly once-occurrent life . . .” (41). The emphasis on character, and the answerability of persons, is the primary way in which Hove novelizes his epic, and the principle character exemplifying this type of answerability is Marita.

Despite Marita’s centrality in *Bones*, not one of its chapters is spoken in her voice. That Marita nonetheless is regarded by most readers as the best-developed character of the work illustrates the point that the character of an individual does not only—and perhaps not even primarily—emerge from her words about herself, but rather from others’ words about her. This characteristic of *Bones* is often noted in critical readings of the work. Pauline Kaldas notes that, “Despite the fact that none of the chapters are told from her point of view, [Marita] still emerges as the strongest character in the novel” (128). Eun Young Oh points out that though “Marita’s voice is the dominant one . . . it is necessary to remember that her voice coexists alongside other voices without subsuming them or dominating them” (192). Building on Oh’s observation, I wish to emphasize the fact that Marita’s voice—and therefore her character—is conveyed *by and through* these other voices. What is remarkable, then, is not that Marita’s voice does not “subsume” or “dominate” the voices of Janifa, or Marume, or Chisaga, or the Unknown Woman, but rather that the voices of Janifa, Marume, Chisaga, and the Unknown Woman do not subsume or dominate the voice of Marita. *The reader knows everything she knows about Marita through the testimony of others and their recollections and recitations of her words.* Finally, the often-discussed uniformity of the Africanized English idiom spoken by the characters in *Bones*, which has already been described as a characteristic of epic, fails to figure in any significant way against the “reality” of the characters in *Bones*. If character is privileged over language—as it is in *Bones*—

then fidelity to and believability of character is more important than variety of linguistic expression.

The Zimbabwe of Hove's *Bones* is a predominantly oral culture. As in much postcolonial literature, written texts and documents are a legacy of the world of the colonizers; they are "official" but somehow not real.¹⁵⁴ For example, if a government worker insists on seeing identification papers, a Zimbabwean woman may well respond that she is the daughter of Innocent, or the wife of Dambudzo, or the mother of three sons and two daughters: her *relationships* are her identity—not any piece of paper. In *Bones*, the only written documents given any weight by Marita are the letter her son writes Janifa and the list of names in the city. For Marita, in rapture after hearing his letter being read, the fact that school learning enabled her son to write a letter, and thus leave some "thing that can tell [her] a little about him" (4) is enough reason to affirm that "it is good to send children to school" (6). The reason the letter is valued, then, is because of its explicit relationship to the person who wrote it. Words can only be understood and valued as they are related to real persons.¹⁵⁵ This connection is assumed by Marita; there is no postmodern skepticism about the ability of language to communicate.

The Unknown Woman shares Marita's beliefs about language and the ineluctability of the requirement to properly care for persons—even after their deaths. When the Unknown Woman attempts to claim Marita's dead body so that she can bury her properly, she bases the validity of her claim on the body on the fact that, while they were together on the long bus-ride to the city, Marita "told [her] everything (66)." This is an insufficient basis for her claim, according

¹⁵⁴ As this work was written and published after Zimbabwean independence, it should be noted that in this novelized epic the "oppressors" are not colonizers, but merely those who are in power—who doubtless "inherited" some practices from their colonizers.

¹⁵⁵ In this context, consider Bakhtin's observation that "Historically language grew up in the service of participative thinking and performed acts, and it begins to serve abstract thinking only in the present day of its history" (Toward A Philosophy 31).

to “the man behind the desk,” who informs her that “*We* need a relative with proof, *something to show*” (66, emphases are mine). Note the obvious contrast between the oral culture of the women and the written culture of the official “man behind the desk,” who nonetheless cannot speak for himself—but only as “we,” as a spokesperson for the government. Also in sharp contrast is what counts as “proof.” For the Unknown Woman, her oral narrative about Marita—who told her “everything” on a long bus-ride constitutes sufficient grounds for her claim of a right to bury Marita, but for the man behind the desk, written documentation is required: “something to show.”

When the Unknown Woman asks who will take care of burying Marita if she is not permitted to do so, the man behind the desk informs her that the “government” will bury her. The response of the unknown woman gives proof of her foundational belief in an intimate relationship between words and persons, as opposed to a merely institutional or systematic relationship; “Where does the government stay so that I can visit him and ask for the body?” (66). To conclude from this that the woman is naïve, or that Hove’s portrayal of the woman is “primitive” or “romantic” is to miss the point entirely. The Unknown Woman believes in and insists upon accountability between language and persons. That there is no “government” whose house she can go to and discuss this requirement for written proof *is* the problem. There is no person accountable for—or to use Wendell Berry’s formulation—“standing by” the decrees of the government.¹⁵⁶

Most readers will recognize the legitimacy of the Unknown Woman’s claim to the body of Marita, a claim not based on “right” or official protocol, but rather based on the Unknown Woman’s sense of obligation to provide proper burial rites for Marita, the woman who “told [her] everything.” The Unknown Woman does not want anything from the government other

¹⁵⁶ See the title essay of his book *Standing by Words*, pages 24-63.

than Marita's body, "I want the body, nothing else. I just want to take the body and bury it properly" (66).¹⁵⁷ The man behind the desk, though, responds to her question by defining this request as "stupid" (66), and by calling her a "witch" (67). The encounter of the Unknown Woman and the man behind the desk is an encounter between two opposing cultures inhabiting, liminally, the same space. What is most significant is not that one of these cultures is official and one domestic—or that one is masculine and the other feminine—but that *language operates differently* in each of them. In the culture of the man behind the desk, official, written texts determine the status (worth) of persons; their identity, rights, and obligations are predicated upon written documents. In the culture of the Unknown Woman, written texts are unintelligible, and a relationship of accountability between a person and her (spoken) words is assumed. Given these differences, it is not surprising that the man behind the desk adopts a skeptical pose toward the Unknown Woman, assuming she lies or is trying to gain something for herself through her narrative—or that the unknown woman is frustrated with his skepticism and seeming inability or unwillingness to deal in any meaningful or practical way with the real problem confronting them: the burial of Marita's body. Their assumptions and approach to dealing with problems is predicated (whether they know it or not) on their beliefs about how language matters and works. Finally, what matters to the man behind the desk is that written protocol has been observed and his paperwork is in order. What matters to the Unknown Woman is that obligations of relationships between persons are met.

The individual relationship between the Unknown Woman and Marita is not the only relationship that factors in this scene. The relationship between mothers and children in general,

¹⁵⁷ She here incarnates Bakhtin's assertion that "To understand an object is to understand my ought in relation to it. . . that is, to understand it in relation to me myself in once-occurrent Being-as-event, and that presupposes my answerable participation, and not an abstracting from myself" (Toward A Philosophy 18).

as well as the shared, communal relationship of all people who have mothers, figures in the Unknown Woman's response to the man's treatment of her:

You can speak like that if you have no mother, if you did not come from the womb of a mother like me. You can pour hot words out of your mouth, but you have a body in here which nobody wants to go and bury. I want to go and bury it because I have seen the woman when she was alive. (67)

In a small, but not insignificant way, the Unknown Woman's "claim" here is effective. It evokes an apology from the man behind the desk who, despite listening "like a teacher attending to a child's plea," does confess, "I'm sorry, mother" (67). The Unknown Woman does not give up at this point, but chooses to tell the young man the story of Marita's life which had been told to her on the bus. Though this story moves the young man to tears, he still insists on his incapacity to do anything to help her: "Mother, I do not know how I can help you. I do not know how honestly" (75). This disclaimer reveals the impotence of official culture—the culture of "paper"—to participate in the healing of Zimbabwe. Even though a whole nation needs to be healed, healing cannot be effected by fiat through "official" and therefore impersonal and unanswerable forms and decrees.

Character does not matter in the case of the man behind the desk. Character does not figure at all in the way official language works or means because, almost by definition, official language denies individual *ethos*. The culture of "paper" does not care who a person is, just that the requisite forms are correctly filled out. Character means everything in oral culture. A person's words and even his or her way of speaking them are understood as both constitutive and revealing of character. Thus, when Chisaga is talking about Manyepo, the white boss for whom he cooks, he admits that he cannot know what is inside of Manyepo because "he speaks in a language" Chisaga does not know: "A rough language which makes saliva jump out of his

mouth like bullets from a gun" (37).¹⁵⁸ On the other hand, the Unknown Woman claims to know Marita because Marita "told [her] everything" (66). If the Unknown Woman could speak in the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, she might well argue about herself in relation to Marita in the following way:

That I, from my unique place in Being, simply see and know another, that I do not forget him, that for me, too, he exists — that is something only I can do for him at the given moment in all of Being: that is the deed which makes his being more complete, the deed which is absolutely gainful and new, and which is possible only for me. . . . The ought becomes possible for the first time where there is an acknowledgment of the fact of a unique person's being from within that person; where this fact becomes a center of answerability — where I assume answerability for my own uniqueness, for my own being (*Toward a Philosophy* 42).

But the Unknown Woman speaks her own language, and when the man behind the desk claims he cannot help her, the Unknown Woman simply continues to relate the stories Marita told her, prefacing her telling in this way:

Marita is not someone I met on the bus. She is much more than that.¹⁵⁹ Imagine, just think of it, a woman who gives me so much of what is inside her heart without crying. In our journey she took me to the well, back into the kitchen, then to the forest to gather firewood. It does not happen every day that someone you meet shows you the pain inside her heart, the troubles inside her mind. The mind is a hidden thing. The heart also is a hidden thing. Do they not say the mouth is a small cave with which to hide the things of inside. Many burdensome things which weigh inside the breast of a person. Marita showed me all the burdens I have inside me, but she did so without shedding even a little tear or making me feel sorry for her. (67)

The mouth can either hide or reveal the things inside a person. The relationship between persons and their words is explicitly expressed in this passage. Further, the fact that Marita shares her hidden things makes it possible for the Unknown Woman to look at her own burdens — which include having a husband responsible for the deaths of a group of young guerillas because he

¹⁵⁸ From this description, and given the history of the colonization of Rhodesia, Manyepo probably speaks Afrikaans.

¹⁵⁹ As Bakhtin succinctly puts it, "Man-in-general does not exist; *I* exist and a particular concrete *other* exists. . . . (*Toward a Philosophy* 47).

told the police about them. Marita provides the distance required for the Unknown Woman to see herself by telling her story without weeping, and without requiring that she feel pity for her.

This “distance” is also provided to the readers of *Bones*—but it is a distance which paradoxically entangles readers rather than releasing them. The reader, like the Unknown Woman, hears Marita’s story. The reader, like the Unknown Woman, is not known by name. The Zimbabwean reader, like the Unknown Woman, either has his or her own story of collaboration with or participation in the violence of the 2nd Chimurenga War and its aftermath—or is related to someone who has. The reader has a choice—as does the Unknown Woman. The reader may choose to hear Marita’s story simply as a story—as weightless words, or the reader may be persuaded by the argument of Marita’s life and, like the Unknown Woman, accept as a personal obligation the proper burial of the unclaimed and uncared for bones of any person who was born of a mother. What is not possible for the answerable reader is to be “indifferent (stop participating) in [her] inescapably, compellingly once-occurrent life” (Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy* 41).

4. The End of Words: *Ethos* and Answerability in *Bones*

“Do you think that talk can take us to sunset properly?” Marita

“Maybe it is good to have stories, but it is better to have people to share them with.” Janifa

“We did not inherit this land for ourselves but for the children whom we have inside us.” The Ancestors

What, then, is the argument the character of Marita presents, and how can this “argument” bring about the healing of Zimbabwe? Marita represents an understanding of personal answerability for words, and of the belief that there is no alibi which can excuse a

person from participating in healing. In this way she endorses Bakhtin's assertion that "That which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else. The uniqueness or singularity of present-on-hand Being is compellingly obligatory" (Toward a Philosophy 40). Throughout the entirety of *Bones*, there is a dialogue going on between Marita and the other characters—primarily Janifa, but also Marume, Chisaga, the Unknown Woman, and the ancestors. This dialogue is not only about how one should live, but about the nature of language—specifically of words. Marita, the Unknown Woman, and the ancestors argue for one position, Chisaga, the man in the office, and Janifa for another. The fact that Marita does not speak to any of the chapters of *Bones* in her own voice is significant because it provides evidence that Marita's argument about language, and coincidentally about how one should live, is still echoing in the minds of those who knew her, even after her death. For Marita, language is always inextricably related to persons and is always subordinated to persons.

The letter written by her son to Janifa, which is the Achilles's shield or the Odysseus's bow of this contemporary Zimbabwean epic, is important to Marita because her son wrote it and thus it provides a physical, tangible link between them in his absence. Marita herself cannot speak the significance of the letter. When Janifa produces it, Marita "stares at [her] . . . speechless, without a word from her mouth, just her heart telling [Janifa] that [she] has something which is more important than [she] know[s]" (1-2). Marita proudly talks about him, "He was such a boy, this one," while "pointing at the letter" (7). Janifa's relationship to Marita's son and to his letter is more complicated. She keeps his letter even though she admits to Marita that she "would never marry him" (4). Indeed, at the end of *Bones*, Janifa refuses the proposal of Marita's son but still retains his letter. At least, Marita believes she still has the letter—or Janifa is still haunted by Marita's perpetual request to be read her son's letter. As has already been suggested, that *Bones* begins and concludes with representations of the same action just is a characteristic of epic. This

lack of any real progress is a generic marker, but may also signal the failure of Janifa to fulfill the tasks required for the healing of herself, Marita's son, and coincidentally Marita herself. If Janifa refuses to join with Marita's son and become a mother herself, no healing can occur. While Marita's son seems to understand that the consummation of Janifa's and his relationship, the beginning of which is inscribed in the same letter his mother perpetually begs to have read to her, is of paramount importance—not just to him—but to Janifa and to his mother, too, Janifa cannot see past or through his words to him. When he tells her that “the fight which [he] has now is bigger than the fight of guns and aeroplanes” (109), she responds by telling him to be quiet and “go and fight [his] fights alone” (109). Janifa believes that the words Marita's son speaks to her are “useless words which many mouths have uttered before” (109). That she can say this suggests her failure to learn everything Marita attempts to teach her about the nature of language and about the necessity of relating and subordinating language to persons, because if she had learned these “lessons,” Janifa would understand that words do not become “worthless” by repetition. Words become worthless when they are ascribed more importance than persons and/or when their abstraction is forgotten.

Because Marita and Janifa are so close in so many ways, it may be easy to overlook the fact that a persistent subject of their dialogue is an argument about the nature of words and personal responsibility for them. For all Marita clearly means to Janifa, Janifa remains unwilling to adopt her stance—even at the conclusion of *Bones*. There is evidence of Janifa's failure to completely understand Marita's “argument” about language early in *Bones*. Seeing Marita obviously distressed, Janifa urges Marita to talk to her on the grounds that it was Marita herself “who said talk is the medicine for the burdens of the heart” (26). Janifa is only partially correct; her memory is incomplete. Here is the record of what Marita says to Janifa *in Janifa's own words* from the first chapter of *Bones*: “You know, they say the medicine for the burdens of the heart is

talk, but I have talked and talked, and I seem to talk more and more without cure" (8). Janifa "forgets" that the saying "the medicine for the burdens of the heart is talk" is not endorsed by Marita, but rather questioned by her. Marita merely reiterates the saying, ascribing it to an undesignated "them," and then contesting it on the grounds of her own personal experience. She has "talked and talked," but talking has not resulted in her healing. While there are substantive differences in degree, the argument that language is impotent to affect a "cure" is also evident in the scene between the Unknown Woman and the man behind the desk. In that case, no amount of "talk" whether official or unofficial, can do what needs to be done: bury Marita's body. Janifa's assumption that talking in and of itself can "do" something is one Marita rejects.

Janifa errs, both by thinking too much of language and by thinking too little of persons. Marita occasionally attempts to correct Janifa's flawed understanding. One such instance has already been examined: Janifa's confusion over Marita's refusal to report Manyepo's mistreatment of her. Another occurs when Marita and Janifa are discussing the reports of the atrocities the guerillas reportedly commit. Janifa asks Marita, "Then what does one do when children are said to eat their parents, roasting them just like that?" (40). Marita replies, "First see them do it before you join the hunt for the medicine-man. People are liars, know that" (40). Here Marita stresses the importance of checking the veracity of words against the real actions of flesh and blood persons. Marita is incredulous of unsubstantiated reports of any kind. This is one of the reasons she wants to find her son, so she can ask him about whether or not the reported atrocities were actually committed. As Marita puts it, "I want to ask him if it is true, those things we heard once happened" (39). Janifa would do the same, if the person whose actions were under suspicion was Marita, but she has not universalized the lesson. Neither has she learned its limits. These twin errors result both in her over-dependence on Marita for direction, and her related susceptibility to authoritative sounding maxims.

Janifa lacks a certain mental and emotional flexibility. She would measure people against words, rather than words against people. This can be seen in her argument with Marita over Marita's refusal to truthfully report Manyepo's mistreatment of her. Janifa's response is to throw Marita's words back at her: "But Marita, did you not say that a tongue that lies will die a shameful death?" (63). Here, Janifa reveals a desire for a kind of hermeneutic tidiness which Marita refuses to endorse. Marita admits that she did say what Janifa remembers, but defers to a moral code under which lying is of less significance than homicide: "It is better to let that tongue kill itself than to help it kill itself" (63). As she so often does, Marita here shifts the focus of attention from herself to another person, in this case Manyepo. It is no longer her own "lying tongue" which is the subject of conversation, but Manyepo's. This shift of focus is not primarily motivated by Marita's desire to rationalize her own lies, but rather to excuse the behavior of Manyepo to Janifa. His "tongue is loose" because he thinks Africans "are children" (63). And Manyepo thinks they are children because he "was brought up like that" (63). One cannot reasonably expect any person to believe any differently than he is taught to believe by his own mother.

At this point, Marita makes her next move in the argument, ratcheting the moral bar up even higher by pointing out how Manyepo's error is also one made by the blacks. The subservience of blacks to the whites, their calling the white man "baas," is not something taught only by the white-run schools. As Marita puts it in her rhetorical question to Janifa, "Do you think that all of us here went to school where the white man is called baas: we were brought up like that" (69). Manyepo's mother taught him to treat blacks as inferior, and Marita's and Janifa's mothers taught them to treat whites as superior. For blacks and whites to pit themselves against each other is to blame each other for things that are "not [their] fault" (69), and to bring shame to their mothers. Janifa's immediate response to the memory of this conversation is a confession

that “the things of the heart are too many” (69). She cannot make sense of Marita’s argument, which is that the moral status of words must be determined by the human relationships of those who speak or write them to those who hear or read them. Marita does not argue here that her lie is not a lie, but she does claim that—within the human context in which it is uttered—her lie assumes a relative moral innocence.

In this “lesson”, Marita stresses—as always—the priority of persons and relationships over language. She also affirms the importance of mothers as teachers and is able to universalize her principles to include both whites and blacks. There is no alibi. One cannot even use one’s own words as a defense against a charge of doing harm to another human being. There are many such “lessons” throughout *Bones*, but one of the most startling examples of Marita’s beliefs about the relative impotency of words is revealed in what appears to be an afterthought. After telling Janifa of her plans to run away to the city to find out what has happened to her son, Marita does not demand Janifa’s silence. She instead invites Janifa to determine for herself what use to make of what she has been told, saying: “I have no quarrel with you, so whatever you do with what I have told you, it will not affect me. . .” (26). Note that Marita is not claiming that Janifa’s use of what she has been told will not affect her because Janifa has no quarrel with her—but rather because Marita herself has no quarrel with Janifa. This is an incredible claim. It posits ultimate responsibility for what happens to Marita on Marita. Words cannot negatively affect her unless she herself has a quarrel with the one speaking them.

This is among one of most difficult of Marita’s lessons, and one of several Janifa has not yet learned by the conclusion of *Bones*. Nonetheless, there are lessons Janifa learns well. If she fails to understand completely the dangers of ascribing too much importance or authority to words, she does seem to begin to understand the significance of the relationship between persons and language. For her, one of the most acute consequences of Marita’s death is silence. As early

as page 13 of the novelized epic, Janifa addresses the deceased Marita, saying, “The whole forest was full of things talking to each other when you were alive, Marita.” Janifa is dependent on Marita, even after Marita’s death, and without Marita, she wonders: “Who will tell me the things that keep me here?” and “Who will tell me the songs that made my heart sit in one place?” (28). Mapping time and—consequently—mapping progress or cause and effect is difficult in *Bones*. While I argue that at the conclusion of *Bones* Janifa is still unable to make the decision both Marita and the novelized epic require of her, this does not mean I see Janifa as entirely static. There is much repetition in *Bones*—as in any epic—and little in terms of meaningful character development, but there are indications that Janifa is in the process of learning the lessons Marita tried (and tries) to teach her.

Janifa’s categorical assertions about words cease once she learns she has been betrayed by her own mother and is raped by Chisaga, who violates her under the assumed title of “husband.” Janifa admits that,

Words are weak, Marita. Very weak. They fly in the wind like feathers. Feathers fall from a bird high up in the clouds. When the wind flows this way, the hornbill is taken from its own path in the air to another which the wind thinks is better. It is so because the hornbill has too many feathers. I hope someone plucks away some of them. It is like that with words. They float in the air like the hornbill on his journey through the path of air. (59)

This understanding of the frailty of language is complemented by the repeated passages about the benefits of silence—of a closed mouth as a cave in which one can hide. In the conceit Janifa uses above, the danger of an excess of words is compared to the danger of too many feathers in a high wind. As the bird may end up on an unintended path when the wind gains traction on it due to its excessive feathers, so may a person whose excessive words can be used to redirect him. Janifa here expresses a wish for fewer words. This may provide context for understanding her plea to Marita’s son to be quiet; she does not want any more words. Indeed,

Janifa's distaste for words may even include Marita's words, as indicated by her recollection of one of her mother's warnings to her about Marita:

. . . mother says Marita speaks useless words which waste too many ears. . . . Do not listen to all that ears hunger for. Some words are the feathers of a dead bird which you do not bring home for a meal. Do you think your mother will thank you for bringing the head of an owl to the fireplace of your own people? An owl is an owl. You cannot call it anything in order for the meat in the pot to taste nice. (90)

Here, Janifa's mother makes a similar argument to Marita's that words, in and of themselves, cannot change what is. One could dub the owl in the pot a "chicken," but it would still be an owl, a creature of particularly negative associations for most sub-saharan Africans. Chisaga can call himself a "husband" and rape, "marital relations", but the act he commits is still rape. Officials may call the freedom fighters "armed gangsters, thieves [and] robbers," but to the Unknown Women (and to Marita) they are still children: "the children of the soil" (51). The man behind the desk may, upon closer reflection, call the woman "Mother" (75) whom he has previously called "witch" (67). Words do not change anything real; they are either accurate or inaccurate representations of what is—that is all.

Another example of Janifa's "progress" can be seen by comparing her statement on page 13, from which the reader may infer that she literally finds the natural world silent without Marita, with her statement on page 60, also directed to Marita:

Today the sun has set. It will set again tomorrow. But you are not here to see it. That is the difference. Even the birds and the insects that sing, they sing the same way as they sang when you were here. But now that you are not here to hear them, that makes the difference. Suns will set, birds will sing, insects will sing, but *the difference is in the ears that hear them*. Today your ears are not here to hear them with me. Your blood is not here to tell me what all the songs of the forests of the farm say. (emphasis is mine)

Here, Janifa argues that although everything may go on exactly as it did before Marita's death—the birds and insects "sing the same way as they sang when [she was] here"—there is a difference

because Marita is no longer there to hear them. This suggests that Janifa is learning that responsibility for meaning and interpretation lies primarily with the *hearer*—and not with the speaker. This is consistent with Marita’s claim that the words of a person she “has no quarrel with” cannot affect her. It is the stance of the hearer—not the point of view of the speaker—which determines the affect of what is said on the hearer. The hearer also has no alibi—no one to blame for the affect of what is said on her—except herself.

All that remains is to elucidate what Marita’s example and “lessons” teach her readers about the requirements for the healing of Zimbabwe.

1. The role of language is correct representation of what is: it can bear witness and testimony—that is all.
2. People are people. There is goodness and badness in everyone. Each person has the capacity to be both victim and oppressor.
3. Each person is ultimately responsible for his or her own healing.
4. The bones of all the dead must be buried.
5. Women must be mothers.
6. Healing requires families and families are determined not only by blood—but by common respect of mothers and motherhood.
7. The government—the world of the official—cannot provide healing; healing cannot be legislated.

In *Bones*, Chenjerai Hove has written a novelized epic which places the responsibility for the healing of Zimbabwe on each of her citizens—or, better—on each of her *children*, whether black or white, whether literate or illiterate, whether victim or oppressor. Such healing is possible only when individuals become answerable both for their own words *and* for the effect of other’s words on them. A too exclusive or narrow focus on words themselves prohibits the proper

subordination of language to people. Abstraction of the human person is the natural consequence. An understanding of language which permits gaps to open up between the use of words and a person's responsibility for words produces an environment which fosters—or at least does nothing to discourage—violence.

In her influential essay about Homer's *Iliad*, Simone Weil argues that, "The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force" (11), defining force as that which "turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing" (12). In Hove's *Bones*, Marita argues that the only way to begin to heal the damage caused by the violence of such "force" is to prohibit the abstraction of persons into mere conceptual markers. And the "argument" Marita provides is not a written document—it is her *life*. Words are a part of Marita's life, but they are words remembered by others—not written by her. They are words which were incarnated by Marita's life, and are now enfleshed by those who struggle to remember and live by them.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Most of us will intuitively recognize that something is always left out of account when we describe our actions. Bakhtin argues this is not merely a weakness in our own powers of description, but a disunity built into the nature of things. How, then, are the two orders—experience and representation of experience—to be put together? from the introduction to *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*

For the Greeks of the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C., there were not two separate sets of questions in the area of human choice and action, aesthetic questions and moral-philosophical questions, to be studied and written about by mutually detached colleagues in different departments. Instead, dramatic poetry and what we now call philosophical inquiry in ethics were both typically framed by, seen as ways of pursuing, a single and general question: namely, how human beings should live. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*

I consider that every step of the foot or stroke of the pen here has some real connection with and result in the hereafter. . . . everything which does good for a moment does good for ever, in *art* as well as in morals. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, letter to John Ruskin

One has to develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward A Philosophy of the Act*

Answerability is not an event; it is an *action*—or better—a series of actions. Actions by definition require *agents*, not simply causes. If what one wishes to do is to approach the reading, writing, and teaching of literature with regard to ethical concerns, then one is obliged to focus on the actions of persons—whether those persons are authors, narrators, characters, readers (whether voluntary, compulsory or professional), critics, or teachers. An interpretive method which either entirely eliminates a category of relevant persons from literary relationships—by announcing the “death of the author” for example—or which privileges one category of persons at the expense of the others—as do both intentionalist and reader response approaches—also effectively limits, or at least skews, the types of conversations one is authorized to have about literary works. So, too, do approaches which see texts primarily as “products” of specified socio-political-economic complexes. Obviously, no one reader, no matter how skilled or committed, can

take into account all of the persons involved in literary relationships all of the time, and at least some knowledge of historical context may be crucial in understanding a literary work, but if one wants to engage questions regarding the appropriate human use of literary works it is irrational to ignore any of the persons involved in literary relationships. To pay attention to *ethos*, to the many ways in which character and language are related, is one way to attend to persons. While this is clearly important for those interested in ethical criticism, I have also shown how attention to *ethos* can provide approaches to questions related to reception and genre studies, as well as the determination of a particular work's canonical status. Authors, narrators, characters and individual literary works have *ethos*, but so do genres and canons.

Our relationships with literary works are, as Martha Nussbaum states in *Love's Knowledge*, "messy" and "complex" (29). Elizabeth Barrett Browning compares herself to her pen, and disguises the volumes of Plato her doctors worry may cause her too much strain by having them bound to look like novels. Aurora tucks the book she plans to continue to read at first light under her pillow, and hears its "heart" beat. David Jones acknowledges that the "one book" that was all he or his characters "could carry" in the trenches of the First World War was the *Oxford Book of English Poetry*. During that same war, Siegfried Sassoon claims he does not want to die until he has finished reading Thomas Hardy's latest novel, and Wilfred Owen carries, among the other items in his kit, a volume of *Aurora Leigh*. Chenjerai Hove wrestles with the implications of the facts that his books are inspired by people who not only cannot write for themselves, but who cannot read what he writes about them. Marita risks everything to go to the city to find the list of all the soldiers who have been killed in the 2nd Chimurenga war, despite knowing she will not be able to read it for herself—that she will have to pay someone to read it for her. *Bones* begins and ends with her pleading with Janifa to "read again" to her the letter her soldier-son had once written because it is the "only thing" that can show him to her now that he is gone. A professor of

literature nimbly bends over and retrieves a copy of the Tanakh from the floor on which it has been negligently placed by a distracted student, momentarily stopping his flow of words for the length of time it takes him to reverently and fondly kiss its cover before returning it to the student's desk and continuing his lecture.

A book is not a person, and a person is not a book, but books and people are inextricably related—and that relationship is often a passionate one. If, as Heinrich Heine famously stated in 1820, those who begin by destroying books may end by destroying people, what might be the consequences of the critical practices of teachers toward the books they teach on their students, and on themselves? And how might something as simple and powerful as the confession of teachers of literature that messy, complex, and passionate relationships between books and persons are normative help clarify what ought to be the focus of attention in a literature course by authorizing students to ask the kinds of questions most readers have been asking about books for centuries: What does this book have to say about how humans should live? What does this book mean to me? How has my reading of it changed me? What ought I to do, now that I have closed the book?

In the few courses I have attempted to teach in ways that not only permit, but require students to both approach the assigned literary works primarily as a form of communication between human persons and to perform assignments which explicitly acknowledge the relational character of reading and writing about literary works, I have discovered that the students not only become more enthusiastic and engaged readers and writers—they also become better critical thinkers and more sophisticated writers. For example, after being inspired by Susan Handelman's essay on the subject, I required students in an introductory course to African literature to write "Dear Class" letters, which were read aloud by their "authors" every Friday. As the students were divided into 4 groups, this meant that each student wrote 3 "standard"

letters, plus a midterm and final letter. There were some formal guidelines for the letters, but apart from them the only requirements were: 1) that students focus on the literary work under discussion the week in which they were writing and 2) that they write in the first person in awareness that real people—not just their teacher—were their readers.

There was a good deal of initial anxiety; this was not a “normal” academic exercise.

However, once the students realized that though none of them had a place to hide—that silence was not an option—but that the classroom was a safe space for them, most of the students became thoroughly engaged not only with the literary works but with each other. (These same classes also produced the best research projects I’ve ever gotten from freshmen and sophomores.) Being deprived of the options of adopting a 3rd person, objective stance and of writing only to and for a teacher required these students to become answerable readers and writers in a way that made sense to them. I did not have to explain to any of the students in the classes in which I adopted this approach why or how literature “mattered;” they told me. Yes, it cost me about a third of my allotted class time to implement this project, time I might have spent lecturing the students or having them write formal essays only I would read, whether or not I wanted to, but it was time better spent.

Because the students knew they were reading to have something they could offer to others, they read more carefully. Because they had practice listening to each other’s voices as letters were read aloud, they became better listeners to the voices of the literary works we read. Because they learned to attend with careful attention to the words of others, they became conscious of the care required to write. Issues generally presented in stark, legal terms of “intellectual property rights,” “copyright laws,” and “plagiarism” were instead lived and understood as the requirements of a community reading, thinking, talking, and writing together. When they responded to each others’ letters, they took care to quote each other correctly and

provide attributions—not because they were afraid of receiving “no-credit” marks for plagiarism—but because they cared enough about the conversation they were having and the people they were having it with to take the time to “get it right.” In short, they learned by experience the human use of literature, and how to responsibly discharge their obligations as participants in literary relationships.

One of the questions I began this project with was whether or not it is possible to practice literary criticism and always mean every word I say—to be willing to stand by my words—to be answerable for them and for their effects on those who hear and read them. There is, as one of my readers has pointed out to me, a “dark side” to assuming such a position; fear over the consequences of one's words may contribute to some authors' decisions to stop publishing and become virtual recluses. It is possible that demanding too strict an accountability between words and life may result in an unanticipated but no less morally perilous position than too little accountability. If we publish a decision in haste, as did Jephthah when he vowed to God that he would sacrifice the first thing that greeted him to God, and later learn that it is not possible to both live with ourselves and keep our word, we should break our word rather than our hearts or lives. We should not, as did Jephthah, sacrifice our daughter rather than break our vow. Surely if the principal of charity requires us to believe that others are trying to “get it right,” it also permits us to admit when we get it wrong—whether what we get wrong is our general critical stance, our opinion of an author, our interpretation of a literary work, or our assessment of a student assignment.

In conclusion, I want to offer another way of framing the question of *ethos* and answerability. In Dan Simmons's epic space-opera, *Ilium*, post-humans assuming the characters of the pagan gods of ancient Greece have brought back to life selected scholars who specialized in Homer's *Iliad*. They achieve this largely by reconstituting the DNA of the deceased scholars, but

the other ingredient put into the mix is abstracted from the *texts* the scholars authored, so the Dr. Thomas Hockenberry who is the oldest surviving “scholic” in Ilium is not only the product of his DNA, but of his *words*. A thought experiment, then: how would it change the way I write if I knew that my words might some day literally “make” me? If not only my “character” but my very survivability as a person was dependent on “every stroke of my pen”? I do not know whether there can be any real answer to this hypothetical, but not entirely rhetorical question. I do know that I want to be Aurora Leigh’s sister, David Jones’s niece, and Marita’s daughter. I want to attempt to be answerable: in my reading, in my writing, and in my teaching. And I know that whatever this may cost, it will give me far more than I give.

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