

A Just Reward

SAIRE ERRICO

Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror which we are still just able to bear.

—*Rainer Marie Rilke, Duino Elegies*

Why do I delight in wild things? I write in the month of April: the trees are now capped with lacey green, not yet burdened with lush summer weight; the tulips push up through the earth, the sky is clarion blue, and although I know there have been innumerable such spring days and that I myself have lived eighteen other springs all with their fair share of glory, I cannot help but feel that the world—this world—is new, new and full of novel, untamed, untried wonders, and this thrills me. There is the very growing, the green, everything that rises up from the soil as the grey drudgery of winter fades. The earth has so renewed herself before, and she will so do again, but I will never feel it with any less delight; the world will never seem less full of potential.

And that is beauty—mutable and infinitely various. Familiarity numbs our senses. Regularity insulates us from the throes of sudden pleasure. But not even regularity does it—rather, stillness, the staid, what rests and remains, what is not dynamic. For even in the patterns and trivialities of daily life, there is much that is beautiful. Virginia Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway pushes out the front door of her home and into the midst of "carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overheard was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June" (4). It is in just what is mundane, regular, noisy and clattering that Clarissa Dalloway delights, because as she says, this is life, and life is beauty and beauty life, if it is permitted to be so. What clamor, what din, and yet beautiful, still. The very sentences are jammed full of alliterative nouns, nearly listing,

and yet it is in their very bursting, rhythmic fullness that they are beautiful, abundant, and alive.

And isn't it? Life is really enough, and more than enough, overflowing. *Mrs. Dalloway* is a novel of the city; there are museums and boutiques and fashionable restaurants, quiet neighborhoods and parks, Bond Street and the florist and armfuls of sweet peas and department stores selling petticoats, hats, silk gloves; ugly governesses and beautiful young ladies and death and illness and birth and the Queen and police and all of it is too much to know, more than one can ever hope to know, and yet beautiful, because all of it is there, and one must only plunge, precipitous, and live.

D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is set in an English countryside that is pitted with sooty mines and furnaces that illuminate the sky at night. But the mines are failing, and the villages are shabby; the earth yields no more, but in the sanctuary of the Chatterley's private park, a little faded remnant of what was once a dark great forest that stretched across the country, Connie Chatterley delights: "the lush, dark green of the hyacinths was a sea, with buds rising up like pale corn, while in the riding the forget-me-nots were fluffing up, and the columbines were unfolding their ink-purple riches, and there were bits of blue bird's eggshell under a bush" (177). The days of the mine are waning, but the flowers are blooming, and they are motley colors, vibrantly alive, new and fecund in this one moment. The mines have failed, the rich veins of ore tapped till dry, and in the autumn the green grass will turn brittle and brown, and Connie knows all of this, but she sees and feels a world that is capable of bringing itself to fruition, despite the awful knowledge that all that is fruitful will in its time fail. The buds will burst into blossom, the mottled clouds will cover the sky, and the moment will be gone, but it will at least have been had, and if what is inconstant is beautiful, it is beautiful mostly because it reminds us that we ourselves are but a shimmer, a blurred shape in a line of sight, passing, never still; not nothing, but almost so.

So I feel the thrill of spring deep in my stomach, in my loins, trembling, and I ask again—why do I delight in wild things? It is in recognition of two forces at work: things are coming into being and things are changing, and it is perhaps only in recognition of the endless variability and upheaval of nature that I am capable of recognizing my own potential for change, my own infinite variability, that I am not in fact what I presently seem to be, or at least will not always be so. Certainly, that is what Lady Chatterley knows when she feels that "another self was alive in her, burning molten and soft in her womb and bowels" (144). Connie is recognizing both her fertility ("to have a child

to a man whom one adored in one's bowels and one's womb . . . made her feel she was very different from her old self") and the power that fertility has to transform her (145). The woman—Constance Chatterley, whose very name suggests steadfastness and loyalty—is torn, pulled, splintered into myriad personalities: she is at once Lady Chatterley and Mellors's "fine gal," and she is a woman whom she herself possesses. And yet, though it would seem this affair and the resultant fall would leave her debased, she emerges rather transfigured, more glowingly alive, a truer and happier person. It is the very ecstatic moment of her love, and her recognition and obedience to that moment, that purifies her and guards her from dissolution, from despair, during the tumult of her transformation. There is always such a moment—when all the parts of a person, usually bound up neat in layers of propriety and unawareness, are instead thrown into disorder. Chaos arises. It is a condition of the external and necessarily a condition of the internal, no matter how we try to quell it. Virginia Woolf recognizes this when she writes, and D.H. Lawrence does as well. In their questing towards a more realistic form of fiction (realistic in the sense that the novel duplicates what it is to feel real, to experience reality) these novelists move away from wholeness, from what is set, solid, and complete, towards an understanding of the universe as fractious and full of contradiction, separation. Instability is the rule. Indeed, I do not think it is rational, exactly, that Connie Chatterley would leave her husband—whom she does not abhor—and her comfortable life, for the ignominy of being the gamekeeper's wife, but it is something that she must do because not to do so would be to stifle the very change that has come over her with such speed and abandon, to indeed deny that she is capable and very ripe for just such a change.

And it is a change that has come fast: sparked, in just one moment. It is a change that is almost accidental, for if Connie had not happened to see Oliver Mellors at his bath, it is doubtful that any great affection would have arisen between the two. She sees him as he is not, stripped in a moment of inversion, and in that moment, in experiencing the world not as it should be but as it is, she is stricken. In recognizing that which we see might be that which we cannot see, we leave it and ourselves ripe to be had, ripe to be taken and twisted and remade. That is the power of the earth, self-spawning, never as it was, always veering toward what must be.

Instability is necessary for change, but it is an awful necessity. Virginia Woolf's Jacob is attracted to the cold fixity of stone, to the Parthenon and the Erectheum. Jacob likes the "extreme definiteness" of these Greek ruins, the "ideas of durability" that they evoke, and Woolf tells us that, seeing how

brightly and brilliantly those marble buildings shine in the sun, it is possible to look on them not as ruins but as eternal and fixed in the eye of man. But this too reveals what is fact: the Parthenon is a ruin (167). The Romans plundered its Athena in antiquity, it was made into a Catholic church and a mosque, and in 1687 it was blown up when an Ottoman gunpowder magazine exploded. So it is that the Parthenon exists as many things, and none of them is any less or more. Can we say it has degraded? It is no longer a pure and perfect form, geometrically harmonious and flawlessly executed, but it is still beautiful enough to stir Jacob and innumerable other souls. It is not now what it once was, but it is no worse for it, so long as it can still be seen, so long as the white columns tower and are gilded by the sun. As Woolf writes, “Beauty alone is immortal” (168).

It is beauty that is the catalyst, but not beauty alone. For the mind is drawn towards that which is beautiful, but if beauty is in fact immortal there can be no imperative towards change. We must be driven forward, and we must go so far as to let ourselves be worked on by beauty. This is a greater demand than one realizes. When Connie Chatterley watches the newly hatched chicks that Mellors has set, she is utterly aware of “the agony of her own female forlornness” (122). She sees what she is not—a creature full of life, free of fear of repercussion, alive and young and living, and what she sees is at once beautiful and terrible. But often that which is most beautiful and most terrible at once holds our minds most closely, and we realize that the most terrible thing that anyone can confront is the awful necessity of change, of no longer being what we are but becoming what we are not.

Think of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*: in his mania, he believes that it is he who has the power to form and to transform, to control, when indeed it is the jungle that has remade him in its image. He is just a man. A man with a keen, dark mind, a man who has made himself into something akin to a god, but not entirely so: he is but an idol, and his imperative is not divine. Kurtz realizes that Europeans must come to the native, the denizens of the dark jungle “in the guise of supernatural beings . . . approach them with the might as of a deity,” but Marlow understands that it is really “to know what [Kurtz] belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own” that is the critical thing (92, 89). If man can indeed be graduated, European man, western man, the civilized man, tends most towards some ‘platonic ideal,’ towards a refinement of form away from all that is base, crude, dark, and dangerous. And yet in this movement towards the divine, he is severing the tenuous connection in his soul, that same connection that Marlow recognizes when the steamer is under attack by natives from the

bank, and he observes that “what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar” (65). Connie and Clifford Chatterley have this same argument: “God’s slowly eliminating the guts and alimentary system from the human being, to evolve a higher, more spiritual being,” says he (253). “Why should I believe you, Clifford, when I feel that whatever God there is has at last wakened up in my guts . . . and is rippling so happily there?” she retorts (253). And looking at Clifford’s original pronouncement, we see where his mind tends: from “human being” evolved to “a higher, more spiritual being.” No longer human! He would have us hack away at those unknowable bonds that shackle our souls to our bodies. He would mute us, deafen us, blind us to all that we can feel, make us crippled as he has been crippled, and chain us to what can be known—bland, dreary intellectualism. Connie rebukes her husband and feels God, or at least something akin, trembling deep inside her body.

This tension between that which is felt and that which is known is characterized as a conflict between Dionysus and Apollo by Monroe K. Spears in his study on modernism entitled *Dionysus and the City*. Apollo represents “the ‘classical’ wisdom of moderation, self-knowledge and self-control”; whereas, in the Dionysian thrall, one experiences “the shattering of the *principium individuationis*” (36). Spears tells us that “in Dionysiac rapture and awe walls are broken down and the bonds between man and man and man and nature are reforged” (36). This polarity between Apollonian civilization, moderation, sophistication and Dionysian barbarity, abandon, powerful communion is the binary in which ‘modern’ writers operate. They are mythic thinkers; their understanding of the past is not sequential but experiential; there is a notion of re-living. Dionysus is a god born of a mortal woman and then *reborn* from Zeus’s thigh, where he has been secreted. He is from the Orient, his rites are secret rites, knowable only to initiates, and yet any at all may become initiated. He possesses and devours and transforms, and it is this god, the god of wine and drama and derangement and the depths of what we can call human, that Spears sees as representative of the modern experience.

But what is this modern experience, and in what ways is it Dionysian? Connie Chatterley feels “the force of the Bacchae in her limbs and in her body” as she returns to Wragby Hall after a tryst with Mellors. “Ah! Yes, to be passionate like a Bacchante, like a Bacchanal feeling through the woods, to call on Iacchos, the bright phallus that had no independent personality behind it, but that was pure god-servant to the woman!” (145). This paeon to the unseen god draws together two primary forces—pleasure and regenera-

tion. Once she has known pleasure Connie wants to bring a child into the world, and why should it be otherwise? Birthing a child for Clifford would be no affirmation of bodily joy, of her bodily power to bring forth new life, but would be instead the mechanical reproduction of an heir. The child would grow up to preserve the Chatterley name in the image of an impotent foster father. But at the same time, Connie's triumphant exclamation is made in ignorance: for just as it is true that Dionysus is the god who brings pleasure, pure and ecstatic, he only does so after surrender. Dionysus's female devotee—the maenad—is at least as much his servant as he hers, and it is she who must yield, must be possessed, must give herself up; the Bacchic experience demands it. In Euripides's *The Bacchae* Dionysus proclaims, "I alone, at once, unaided, effortlessly freed myself" (212). He asserts his own axiomatic nature: he is both redeemer, redeemed, and redemption, and because of this he has the power of unknowing, of disorientation, of derangement. Dionysus grants ecstasy, but he only does so at the expense of the Self. His work is done not in the realm of the known, but in the shadow of the unknown, and to be fit to receive his pleasure one must be willing to become maenad and be consumed by the frenzy, to look upon the bloody chaos and dread and to rejoice at once.

You have to be always drunk. That's all there is to it—it's the only way. So as not to feel the horrible burden of time that breaks your back and bends you to the earth, you have to be continually drunk.

—*Charles Baudelaire*

Of all fears there is none felt more intensely and none more reasonable, more awful, and more inevitable than the fear of modern war. This fear is probably quite new. Its genesis was certain conflicts in the early part of the last century, but it is something that most people today are acquainted with: the horror of the televised air strike, shells exploding in the night, strange flickering illumination, raw pain, smoke drifting over stricken cities, rubble, insufficient humanitarian aid, tainted water, deformity, guilt, terror, holocaust. In movies and television shows and on nightly news reports, we see ourselves become the agent of our own unmaking. Our buildings fall so now their buildings must fall, but in the end there is just rubble, indistinguishable mess, and it is when we see that that we feel the panic and the chill of terror. Annihilation is the legacy of modern warfare, and with the onus of this legacy in mind, E.M. Forster, writing in 1940, reminds us that "in this day when so many brave plans have gone wrong and so many devices have jammed, it

is a comfort to remember that violence so far has never worked. Even when it seems to conquer, it fails in the long run” (“Three Anti-Nazi Broadcasts” 43).

Can this be so? Seemingly or in actuality, violence’s conquest is sealed in death, and it was more than two thousand years ago that Euripides’s chorus of Trojan women lamented: “I mourn for my dead world, my burning town, my sons, my husband, gone, all gone! What pride of race, what strength once swelled our royal sails! Now shrunk to nothing, sunk in mean oblivion!” (93). And it may be that progress has been made, weaponry created that kills in a more humane, more selective manner, a certain finesse acquired, but it is still awful death waiting at the end, the final solution, the long and lonely constant. Man has created new ways to birth: cesarean section and in vitro fertilization and fertility drugs and science draw us ever closer to knowing how we are made, to being able to calculate with unerring precision exactly how it is that the rare spark of human life kindles. We have seen the beginning, but always at the end there is the void, dark and unapproachable, and that we do not know and may never know until we go forth alone. And now, in the time of the modern war, when the actions of a very few men wielding a very few awful weapons would be enough to wipe the whole slate clean, it may be that the fear of where we are next headed has never been greater, and yet our relationship to that blackness has never been more intriguing.

Although man has always known of death’s inevitability, death itself remains the one great unknowable thing. It is not the inverse of life: it is life’s shadow, trailing along behind, never far, always present. It could be as quick as getting run down by a bus while crossing a busy street, as quick as a mis-step on an icy patch, as quick as Gerald’s death while playing football in Forster’s *The Longest Journey*, as quick as a burst capillary in the brain. It can be bright, quite as brilliant as a flare, a noble flash, a rose of color in the night sky. But as quick as the moment of death may be, and no matter how brilliant, there is always after: the long dark, eternal Elysian rest, the reek of sulfur and smolder, just the moment and then nothing? It is our doom never to know, because we are not like Dionysus, not like that god born and then reborn. Perhaps man felt that way once—felt as though he too was granted a returning, after life’s long travail was complete, granted a second and indeed infinite number of new beginnings. Man once worshiped those gods. Dionysus, twice-born, was able to draw forth from the earth, from wood, from stone, vines heavy with the harvest’s fruit—Dionysus, the patron of drama. He was worshiped with “the ritual eating of the flesh and drinking of the blood of a sacrificial victim (goat, bull, or human) who incarnated the god.” Become

other, consuming himself to renew himself, birthing himself of himself, he was capable of the utmost regeneration (Spears 39). In secret rites the earth was washed red with blood, and with wine and god, world and man were born and reborn, wrought anew as the drum struck, coalescing and dissolving, all thrumming in dance, all alive, all possible. But the secrets of that cult are long dead, and modern man does not worship the gods of the earth, the old dying and growing and dying again gods of vegetation, not in that fashion. We fear death. We are granted passage through the dark door only once. There is no returning. We go, and we are gone, and that is all we can know.

Septimus Warren Smith goes to war “to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square,” (*Dalloway* 86), and he learns that there is something called “manliness”—to be stern and hard. He realizes too that when his dear friend Evans dies, he, Septimus, feels nothing. He has learned to survive. But when the war is done and he returns to England, Septimus discovers “how Shakespeare loathed humanity—the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly” (88). Septimus, an army man, accomplished and hardened against the horrors of war, deserts life, refuses even to give his wife a baby. He will not introduce new life into the cheap squalor of a world where everything is folly and fancy and utter inconsequence, a world that has treated him with such disregard. There are so few great men, so few who will be buried in Westminster Abbey, have their busts displayed in the British Museum. The rest are consigned to the grind and drag of daily life. Septimus yearns for a life without pain, without drudgery and horror; he yearns for beauty, a bright, good, purposeful life. But consigned to a long rest, a living death, he, who might have been so happy with his little wife making her flowered hats, throws himself through a second story window.

This is not a suicidal impulse towards the void, I think, no final, desperate repudiation of life. Septimus, so muddled, still wants to live, to live at least a good life, a happy life, a life worth living, but they would give him instead bed rest, a long vacation, impotency and dumbness tucked between soft white bedclothes. That is the antithesis of living: nothing more than not living, sterility where there should be fecundity, stillness where there should be action, coldness where there should be joy or anger or terror or anything rightly and strongly felt. Across town the night Septimus kills himself, Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, hearing of the suicide of a young man, “felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved

in the air” (186). She is having her party. The Prime Minister has come, her old friends Peter and Sally have come, and yet she is glad that a young man has thrown himself out a window, escaped the press of the relentless hours, the awful march forward, the tyranny of time. He has gone, in a flash, and she is still here, and she too will go, but for now she must descend the stairs, must smile graciously, must talk with her guests. She has been ill. It is all a strain, but still her party must be a success, for all too soon she will go. Her daughter is a young woman, when such a short time ago, it was Clarissa newly bloomed, wearing short frocks and rowing and having her parties, feeling the new horror and delight of life at sixteen. It is soon enough that we are all eclipsed. There is only this moment.

And in this one moment we are never more the same. Clarissa Dalloway thinks “death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre, which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death” (184). It is in the Bacchanalia, in the rush of spring, in the embrace of someone loved, in the pounding and riotous strumming of the ritual, that we court death. Drawing near to the brink of that “suffocation of blackness,” as Clarissa Dalloway calls it, the playing field levels. In all the petty circumstance, all the trifling errands and duties and ceremonies, we find ourselves. There is a woman who is the wife of Mr. Richard Dalloway, who has a daughter, who will go buy flowers for her party, who will be the gracious hostess, and that woman is she and no other, just herself. Only at that precipice, the gaping maw, the interminable dark, does all the other fade to inconsequence. Where the woman has gone, none may know. And what is left? Shoes, letters, a wicker chair in an empty room, a body interred in the earth, burnt to ash and flung to the wind, a breath of air, the new grass waving in Flanders field, a voice, fading, questioning, “Recall the time when. . .”

But she is gone.

From this irreproachable certainty arises the misgiving that most plagues the modern soul—the nihilistic drive towards that blackness, past it into the worst vacuum. Because she is gone, and neither science nor god has yet taught us where she goes or how we might ever get her back. People devote themselves to the pursuit of that knowledge. They raise their gaze progressively higher, up towards the ineffable and divine, or they look down into the magnified depths of the cell, decode the human genome, manipulate the very material foundations of life, but for all their good work we are still quite as blind as we have ever been, and very likely more so. The world has known the fruits of this despair: war again, and prejudice, corruption, and a generally

awful and inundating apathy. But we cannot live that way. Connie Chatterley feels as if “everything in her world and life seemed worn out, and her dissatisfaction was older than the hills,” and it is only by living and finding whole and right communion with a man, and feeling alive as a woman, as a woman who can live and breathe and bring a child into the world, that she dispels the dread null and discovers what she must do (51).

She must live her life. For just as in death every person is gone, irrevocable, so in life are we only one. We will never come again, and we dare not wait until after the curtain has closed, until after the drop of the great weight. In “Toward a Poetics of Uncertainty” Ben Belitt says, “Poetry is always what is on its way to happen, but never overtaken” (186). So too with life—never known entirely—always becoming, never overtaken. Clarissa Dalloway loved Peter Walsh once upon a time, did not marry him, thought only of some sayings about cabbages, waited, held life itself in abeyance, and yet lives still.

As I delight in the gorgeous tempest, I see that we are only ourselves this one day, under this sun and this blue sky. Life is an uncertain thing. There is always the frenzy of death, drawing ever nearer as merciless the clocks count out the hours, as time marches forward with no regard for our own small passions and tragedies; in the end, we will be surpassed and perhaps forgotten, but in this world of varied and knowable pleasures, varied and knowable pain—delight and horror, tedium, offense, transgression, rapture—we need only go out and live, now, fearless in the seductive embrace of death.

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