

Taking Virgil's Hand

SEÁN GAVIN

The sunken road led us through the Mayfly Zion outside of town, the place where young Irish boys come to skip class and skim the cauldron black waters for the little insects they sell to the local fishermen. Between the black pond and us, a choir of bullfrogs met for Sunday mass among the water reeds, undisturbed, we hoped, by our passing. We drove in a doddering, hubcapless coupé with the windows rolled down. It was an old man's car in every way, from the stubborn diesel engine, to the rickety steel turf wagon tagging along behind, to the body of mysterious origins—manufactured cheaply somewhere in the North, or Italy, or Bulgaria at worst. Even so, it moved, clattering along the country road like pots and pans falling down a set of stairs.

The sunken road ended in the hills just above the lake. The artery of rain-worn dirt that had marked the way slowly pittered out and was filled in by coarse grass and colonies of clover. I followed the old man out of the dormant car into the fields, plodding behind in stiff rubber boots that came too high up on my legs. I soon fell behind, tumbling as I was across the unstable, spongecake surface of the bogfields. The old man, my grandfather, would turn every so often, hook his worn thumbs through a hole in his black sheep's wool sweater, and wait for me.

Below us the mossy bogside rolled gently to the banks of the Lough, giving way to the deep, black water that congealed and roiled like liquid cast iron, the cold lake interrupted only by the circadian comings and goings of water birds and indolent schoolboys. On the opposite hillside, the inheritance of the last ice age was wrought out in the dappled granite girders that interrupt the fields of moss and woven lichen.

The sky seemed to kneel upon these hills, and upon my grandfather's head above. Sky that was grey and unfenced by tall trees. Sky the color of Ash Wednesday. *Remember you are dust and unto dust you shall return.*

In the intervening years, this moment has taken on an irrepressible air of mystery. It is as if the memory itself lies on an emotional fault-line, where a vision of hope confronts something far more foreboding. One feels a similar

sense of contradiction when diving into the first pages of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, the first canto of which expresses a confrontation between two immovable forces. As yet bereft of his poetic guide, Virgil, who will lead him through the opposing realms of hell and heaven, Dante finds himself lost, caught between two worlds:

Midway in the journey of our life I found
myself in a dark wood, for the straight way
was lost. Ah, how hard it is to tell what that
wood was, wild, rugged, harsh; the very
thought of it renews the fear! It is so bitter
that death is hardly more so. But, to treat of
the good that I found in it, I will tell of the
other things I saw there. . . . (3)

The straight way lost, Dante and Virgil journey through a world of opposites, on a path descending into the Inferno, ascending into Heaven, and fading to an ellipsis. The ellipsis, notably present at the end of this quote, is the most hopeful of punctuation marks, much as “and” is the most hopeful of words. The ellipsis denotes more, that there is more—sometimes much more—to be said.

Terry Tempest Williams, in her essay “A Shark in the Mind of one Contemplating Wilderness,” deals with what more is to be said. She too finds herself before a “dark wood” of sorts. The straight way is lost before the open-wide jaws of an encased tiger shark, before the canyon country of southern Utah, before the Hayden Valley of Yellowstone and the illuminated figure of a “magnificent leviathan” (484). Williams finds a binary nature in all of these things. She quotes Federico García Lorca: “My body floats between contrary equilibriums” (484).

Williams, in other words, looks at these forceful displays of nature and recognizes that they have the power to evoke at least two distinct emotions. She focuses first on this evocative power, challenging the idea that wilderness is merely a “received idea,” that wilderness is simply a thing that *exists* (482). Rather, she contends, while gazing upon “a constellation of monarch butterflies” that wilderness is a medium that examines *existence* (483). This ontological property of the natural world leads Williams to the following question: “Why not designate Wilderness as an installation of art? Conceptual Art?” (482).

For Williams, both Art and Wilderness have the power to defamiliarize the monotony of existence. They have the power to shake up a culture in

which “we are stopped cold, our spirits suspended, controlled, controlled sensation” (481). In effect, Wilderness and Art deftly “focus our perception” (481).

But on what do they set our focus? What is the binary nature of the things they evoke—of my memory, of Dante and Virgil’s journey? What are these “contrary equilibriums” that Art and Wilderness set us floating between, and what is the product of their union? (484).

Towards the end of her essay, Williams finds herself a suppliant at the American Museum of Natural History: “I looked up at the body of the blue whale, the largest living mammal on earth, suspended from the ceiling.” She marvels at “this magnificent leviathan, who if alive with one quick swoosh of its tail would be halfway across Central Park.” Williams defines this moment as “Wild Beauty in the Minds of the Living” (484). And such is the first product of Art and Wilderness: Beauty.

In our journey up the hill, during a moment of rest or while waiting for me as I ambled behind in my toy soldier boots, my grandfather would cast his eyes down the sloping gradient of the bogside. Then, and throughout the day, he would remark on the Lough below, which was just being reached by the slantwise rays of the rising day. “Look at the sun,” he might say, “genuflecting off the water.”

And I would marvel at the genuflecting sun. If I could hardly notice his occasional slips of the tongue, the villagers below could hardly ignore them. And so he became famous for such rich pastoral spoonerisms. “The wife’s out with a bad back, sure, I came home the other night and she was flat prostitute on the bed.” Or to his neighbor’s suggestion that the beret-wearing mailman might be, “a bit gay,” his response: “Well, of course he is, sure, I’m a bit gay meself.”

When we came to the long, six-foot-deep trench that cut transversely across the bogside, my grandfather laid his tools down and began to unwrap them from the twine and ten-stone coal bags. We ate breakfast first. My grandfather thickly sliced the coarse farmhouse brown bread, measuring each piece by the width of his thumb—the same worn carpenter’s thumb that had built a hundred homes, the thumb that could peel an orange in one piece, the thumb he used to teach me to count in Irish: “*a haon, a dó, a trí, a ceathair*.” We ate in silence, he thinking about the work ahead, me thinking about the genuflecting sun and the land it surveyed.

In his essay “The Most Dangerous Game,” Michael Paterniti, like Williams, examines the collusion of Art and Wilderness to produce Beauty.

The subject of Paterniti's discourse is *Pernkopf's Anatomy*, a seminal work of anatomical drawing produced in Austria during the 1930s and 40s. The artistic achievements featured in this work are so great in their innovation and so glorious in their aesthetic quality that "all anatomical works before it will seem to be from Kansas, while *Pernkopf's Anatomy* will seem to hail from Oz" (738). Indeed, men like Professor David Williams, the subject of Paterniti's essay, are drawn so completely to the Technicolor splendor of this Oz that it consumes their lives.

To read *Pernkopf's Anatomy* is to be initiated into a world of wild beauty. No, to read *Pernkopf's Anatomy* is not really to read at all, but to be baptized—to enter a world that almost transcends beauty and approaches spirituality. "The book is blindingly beautiful, an exaltation, a paean, and a eulogy all at once" (740), Paterniti writes. "Page after page, the human body unfolds itself, and with each page the invisible becomes visible, some deeper secret reveals itself." These "deeper secrets" slowly unwind, like "a skull wrapped in red arterial yarn," as we are led through a map of the human body populated by "unpeeled penises" and "brigades of soulful brains, levitating." This book is beautiful, yes, but there is something else. Within this book there is a liminal strangeness, a fundamentally phantasmagoric subtext that "is its own kind of pornography, half violation and half wonder" (740-741).

As one moves through the paragraphs of Paterniti's essay, a second property of Art and Wilderness becomes clear. With each passing specimen, the artists come under more scrutiny: what urges their macabre undertaking? What motivates each brush stroke? What drives their Frankensteinian urge to recreate the dead? And finally, only the most terrifying question remains: where do these bodies come from?

And what if a number of these paintings have been signed with swastikas, what then? Is it impossible that only the Nazis and their myriad obsessions with the body could have yielded such a text?

And what of the dead stacked like cordwood at the Institute, their body parts pulled down by pitchfork? Do the secrets revealed in the book count less than the secrets kept by it? Does its beauty diminish with these facts of the political beliefs of its general and foot soldiers? In a righteous world perhaps it should, but does it? (741)

With each implicit answer, the rules and confines of beauty, the promises of progress, fall away and leave one thing only: Terror. Like Williams's, Paterniti's work explores the enigmatic relationship between Beauty and its antithesis, Terror—a paradox that surfaces when we consider Wilderness as Art.

We see this paradox fleshed out in *Pernkopf's Anatomy* in multiple ways. First, the drawings are both graceful and voyeuristic. Moreover, the real world implications of the book are as paradoxical as the drawings themselves. The book is filled with maniacal replications of human bodies, murdered bodies, bodies that were once stacked so high they had to be pulled down *with a pitchfork*. And yet, *Pernkopf's Anatomy* was created to save lives. Paterniti's essay introduces us to an oral surgeon at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, Howard Israel, who consulted the text before every operation. And then there is David Williams, who has devoted so much of his scholarly life to the text that his wife has to remind him that "a big part of that book is who you are" (746). In spite of its ghastly origins, *Pernkopf's Anatomy* is a book of healing.

But it is healing bought with blood. Progress bought with sorrow. Life bought with death. The book is an Anschluss of Art and Terror. How on earth can one justify such a union?

Williams makes little attempt to answer this question. Like Paterniti, however, she suggests that the line between Beauty and Terror is not so clear, that these concepts are not black and white, but rather overlap in an area of an oceanic grey. Williams immerses herself in this world of grey from the very first lines of her essay, as she stands before the "blood gaze" of a tiger shark (481). For her, each moment before Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* is a moment spent in scientific terror. Scientific because the sheer numerical vastness of the embalmed organism before her—the twenty thousand teeth, the acres of shark denticles covering skin, the boundless mitochondrial potential tied up in nautical musculature—serves as a quantitative reminder of just how thin, pale, and solidly terrestrial her own body is. Terror because Cartesian reason seems to have broken down. It should seem clear that the shark is dead, but as Williams says, "Even in death, I see this shark in motion" (481). And yet *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* is quite beautiful indeed. Beautiful in that it makes Williams question whether the shark is living or dead. Beautiful in that it makes Williams question what it means to be living and what it means to be dead—makes her question what life itself is. This, after all, is what great art does—it puts us with Dante and Virgil on the River Styx and taunts us to choose sides.

After breakfast, my grandfather set to work. He squared his shoulders to the six-foot-deep trench, picked up the long-handled turf spade, and began sinking its L-shaped blade into the earth. He worked with his whole body—

his well worn boots, stooped back, and angled shoulders all moving in one downward, driving motion. I listened to my grandfather footing the turf, forcing the spade rhythmically into the paternal soil once, twice, three times—like the iambic tetrameter of a Seamus Heaney poem. *A boan, a dó, a trí, a ceathair*.

For centuries the people of Western Ireland, living on the anvil's edge of the Atlantic, have done this. Footing the turf, excavating peat moss in fragrant bricks, called sods, to use for fuel. Turf is the composite of the decomposed organic material of centuries before. It is the product of death and decay. To burn turf is to burn the world of the dead.

By noon the old man grew tired. He wrestled clumsily with the spade as his foot began to slip from its seat and his worn thumbs struggled to hold on. Every so often he would stop and lean red-faced against the spade, the wooden shaft nestled near a heart that would give way within a year's time. Eventually, he would set to work again, "Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods / Over his shoulder, going down and down / For the good turf. Digging" (Heaney 13).

When my grandfather was done, he lowered himself into the six-foot-deep trench. I waited above in the light, at the edge, while he found a place to rest his feet. When all was ready, he handed the turf to me—transferring the fragrant bricks of ancestral earth from his hands to mine.

An old man straddling two worlds: *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*.

Williams often finds herself straddling two worlds as well. She straddles the world of Wilderness and the world of Art, recognizing that these two are united in their ability to create. But what it is they create is far more problematic. For Art and Wilderness are physical manifestations of *both* an inward grace and an inward fear. They encompass and evoke both Beauty and Terror—concepts that seem irreconcilable. How does one account for the gap between the origins and results of *Pernkopf's Anatomy*, between life and death, between heaven and hell? When examining Terror and Beauty while handling apparent contradictions, Williams sees laid out before her not a fork in the road, but an intersection.

It is not merely a case of one thoroughfare running into another, of two ideas crossing paths and then parting ways. Rather, at this intersection, Williams finds a salvific quality. In experiencing together these seemingly disparate ideas of Beauty and Terror, "we can create a sensation where people will pay attention to the shock of what has always been here" (484). Beauty,

in other words, cannot be fully noted and appreciated without its fearful counterpart.

Under the guiding hand of Virgil, Dante travels the allegorical realms of heaven and hell, building line by line the case that each realm is defined by its contrast to the other. *The Divine Comedy* snaps between screams and psalms, inviting us to appreciate the melody of the latter by its opposition to the former's dissonance. Such is the purpose of a shark in the mind: it presents contrast. Its rising caudal fin breaks the surface of calm waters, awakening the mind and begging the apprehensive, the settled, the contrite to take Virgil by the hand and turn terror into beauty.

By midday we had finished. My grandfather and I packed the briquettes of turf, now dried like a mummy's fists, into the ten-stone coal bags. Later we would put them on the hearth and set them ablaze, releasing the smoke that smells like the center of the earth. For now, we descended together and packed the old car. I sat on the axle of the turf cart, letting my feet dangle. We started, together, down the sunken road—my grandfather steering with his worn thumbs, and I listening to the sound of water reeds and the sacramental canticle of the bullfrog. . . .

WORKS CITED

- Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977.
- Heaney, Seamus. "Digging." *Death of A Naturalist*. New York: Oxford UP, 1966. 13-14.
- Paterniti, Michael. "The Most Dangerous Beauty." *Occasions For Writing*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2007. 735-49.
- Williams, Terry Tempest. "A Shark in the Mind of One Contemplating Wilderness." *Occasions For Writing*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2007. 481-84.

100 - MERCER STREET