THE OSWALD Review Undergraduate Research and Criticism In the Discipline of English: Volume 2 Fall 2000

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To acknowledge the generosity of James and Mary Oswald, whose love of the written word has inspired innumerable others to a deeper appreciation of the complexity and richness of the English language and its literatures, The Oswald Review is named in their honor.
THE
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Prince Hal: 
Reformation or Calculated Education?

Jennifer Drouin
Université Sainte Anne

Over the centuries since Shakespeare first wrote *Henry IV Parts I and II*, the character of Prince Hal has often been touted as an irresponsible, wanton youth who undergoes a miraculous transformation to astound all of England as a great leader. However, what if Hal did not in fact undergo this supposed reformation? What if he didn’t actually change at all? While it is obvious at first glance that Hal appears to transform from a playful boy to a wise and temperate man, there is nonetheless evidence which also supports a second interpretation of his character, an interpretation that proposes that Hal did not change because he was already a responsible prince at the very beginning. The basis for this interpretation is his famous soliloquy in the first scene in which he appears (*HI* 1.2.219-41). Hal confides to the audience that he is planning to behave in an unsuitable manner in order later to astonish everyone in the kingdom by his unbelievable “reform.”

The most important detail about this soliloquy is that it is just that, a soliloquy, and the only instance in both parts where Hal is completely alone and able to allow the audience to know his real thoughts. In addition, from Shakespeare’s other plays, it is apparent that a character’s soliloquy, or an aside, is the most reliable indicator of true intentions. *Hamlet*, for example, much like Hal, tells the audience of his plan “to put an antic disposition on” (*Ham 1.5.171*) and to feign madness in order to carry out his mission of revenge. It is reasonable to assume that Shakespeare intended the audience to always keep Hal’s
plan in mind while watching him fraternize with Falstaff in the same way that the audience knows that Hamlet’s cruel treatment of Ophelia was a dramatization to divert attention away from his real plan.

In his soliloquy, Hal indicates that he will only study Falstaff and his followers because there are no other immediately pressing orders of state for him to administer. It is important to note that when Hal delivers this speech, Hotspur has not yet begun to rebel against the king and there is no threat to the empire at that moment. He thus takes no risk when he decides that he “will awhile uphold / The unyok’d humour of [their] idleness” (1.2.219-20). What appears to be fun and games is merely a way to pass the time, to teach Falstaff some lessons, and to study his subjects. He later relates to Pains the fruits of his study and thus confirms to the audience that this was his real purpose.

It is Hal’s conscious choice to use this opportunity to his political advantage, that is, to convince all of England that he has been neglecting his duties so that all will be in awe of him when he decides to resume them later. He is always in control of his actions, and, as his behavior later confirms, he is never swept up in the moment during this experiment. He is able, like the sun, to “permit the base contagious clouds / To smother up his beauty from the world” (1.2.222-23). The word “permit” indicates that his choice is a conscious one, and, therefore, that he alone controls his actions. Furthermore, his promise to “so offend to make offense a skill”(1.2.240) indicates that each of his acts will be deliberately and purposefully calculated to make him appear as he wishes to be seen. He seeks to master the art of deception as skillfully as an actor who portrays naturally a character unlike himself.

Ironically, Hal justifies his plan with the exactly the same reasoning which his father later chastises him for supposedly ignoring (3.2.46-54). Hal rightly recognizes the value of being seen as fresh and new, of being unknown to the people and making them long for another glimpse of his mysterious character. The difference between Hal’s philosophy and that of his father is simply the method of carrying it out. Bolingbroke chose to be rarely seen in public and then astonish the
people by making a rare appearance. Hal proceeds in a more complicated manner; first covering himself with mud, and then washing it off to reveal a new and mysterious persona which nobody remembers having seen before. Bolingbroke shone like the sun when placed next to Richard II, but Hal stages his own brilliance by shining when contrasted with his "former" self which he himself purposely contrived. Hal thinks that he "may be more wondered at / By breaking through the foul and ugly mists / Of vapours that did seem to strangle him" (1.2.225-27) He further observes that "[i]f all the year were playing holidays, / To sport would be as tedious as to work; / But when they seldom come, they wish’d-for come, / And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents" (1.2.228-31). There is little difference between this phenomenon and that which happened to the king himself. He describes his own experience to remind the prince that "[b]y being seldom seen, I could not stir / But, like a comet, I was wonder’d at" (3.2.46-47). Hal does not disregard the way in which his father won the hearts of his people, but simply re-orchestrates the same effect with a slightly modified technique.

Furthermore, from another perspective, it could be said that Hal copies exactly the method of gaining popularity used by his father, but Hal applies this method to the nobility whereas Bolingbroke sought to win the hearts of the common people. Bolingbroke was rarely seen in public and therefore revered by all when finally he ventured out into the streets. Hal, on the other hand, stopped making his appearance in the court for a month, so it was the nobles who were overcome with joy and relief when he decided to return there and take his place among them. They are all so overwhelmed with surprise at his sudden "reform" that together they all fall weakly before him. They are powerless to rebel against him, and those like Hotspur who do can no longer correctly judge his ability to withstand them; therefore, in this way Hal has minimized one of the threats to the nation. Lastly, Hal has also gained an upper hand on the French who will also soon underestimate him once he is king. For after falsely believing that he is merely a lad who can be amused with tennis balls, they too will pay for this misjudgment of his real character.
At the same time, Hal avoids the trap into which Richard II fell. He spends very little time actually frequenting the lower class, only one month (2.4.476). After this short time Hal rejects these people so that they know that he will not fall under their corrupting influence nor listen to their self-serving advice in the way that Richard was led on by his followers.

Hal also describes his intentions as wanting to “falsify men’s hopes” (1.2.235), and it becomes apparent that all goes exactly as planned when both Vernon and the king later use almost the same words to describe Hal’s behavior. Vernon observes that “England never did owe so sweet a hope, / So much misconstrued in his wantonness” (5.2.68-9). The king tells Hal that “[t]he hope and expectation of thy time / Is ruin’d” (3.2.36-7). Hal does this so that everyone will see later “how much better than [his] word” he is (1.2.234). It could be said that the transformation of Hal, later hailed like a star at his coronation, is analogous to contemporary highly orchestrated public relations.

The line “[t]hat when he please again to be himself” (1.2.224) is of great importance in the prince’s soliloquy for it gives the audience the clearest possible indication that all his upcoming acts will not be in accordance with his normal character. He consciously acts out of character, and, when the time is right, he once more becomes the real Hal. All that appears to be friendly fraternizing with Falstaff and the others is merely an act.

A simple metaphor, later furnished by none other than the character himself, explains Hal’s deception. In Henry V, Hal, now king, walks among the encampment in a cloak to disguise himself in order to talk frankly and openly with his men before the upcoming battle. In Henry IV Part I, Hal does essentially the same thing. He puts on a figurative cloak and mask and is thus able to learn much about his people from Falstaff who does not at all hesitate to talk frankly with Hal. Had Hal chosen to go to the Boar’s Head Tavern wearing his crown and royal robes and carrying a scepter, Falstaff and the others would undoubtedly have been so intimidated that they would have said
nothing to him at all. By pretending to be one of them, he wins their confidence and their trust, and thus encourages them to speak freely.

Hal uses this same method to gain knowledge when he follows Poins’ suggestion and dresses as a humble musician to spy on Falstaff (2H4 2.4.216-63). This is a physical manifestation of what he has been doing metaphorically all along. Shakespeare is reminding the audience that Hal has been spying on Falstaff from the very beginning to know how his subjects really live. It is interesting to notice that this also shows one of Hal’s better qualities; that is, he is not arrogant and is not bothered with debasing himself to a lower status if it serves a real purpose such as gaining knowledge. King Henry IV would never do this, and in contrast Hal is the better leader. He sees that he is superior to his subjects because he is powerful and educated not because he was born royal. Having been put in prison by the Chief Justice, he knows that it is actions, not birthright, that make the man, and this is why he can allow himself to easily interact with both the lower and the upper classes by simply changing how he acts in each case.

Hal also puts on a mask, or a hard outer shell, when he is feeling grief for his father’s illness and inevitable death (2.2.41-58). Had he not briefly confided in Poins, the audience would not at all be aware of what he was feeling underneath because as a great actor Hal doesn’t allow anyone to see through his disguise. This is another clue from Shakespeare that Hal is a master of deception throughout both plays, and it serves to remind the audience that he never shows his real self to his father or to Falstaff.

The audience knows that Hal’s reason for masquerading in a false persona is because he is there to study the common people who will soon be his subjects. One could compare Hal to Farley Mowatt, the Canadian biologist who in the novel *Never Cry Wolf* goes to the North to study the habits of wolves and must blend into the environment by literally acting and living like a wolf. Hal clearly says early on in the play that his goal is to study his subjects. He confides to Poins, “They call drinking deep, dying scarlet; and when you breathe in your
watering, they cry "hem!" and bid you play it off. To conclude, I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life" ( 1 H 4 2.4.15-20). Hal, having learned to talk like the common people and to act like them, has created the illusion that he is part of the pack of wolves. He has just learned how to drain his glass in one draught, a useful talent when he socializes with Falstaff, and he can also talk with these "loggerheads" (2.4.4), another necessary talent that escapes his father. All this is a necessary part of his education. Being able to understand his subjects and to communicate efficiently with them will be a great asset to Hal later as king, especially when he must convince his men to fight to their deaths in France. By sounding out his people and learning how they think, feel, and act, he will have the knowledge necessary to inspire them. In the same way that he will inspire his troops to battle in Henry V, Hal also attempts later by various means in both parts of Henry IV to inspire Falstaff to be a better person.

When one has finished reading a book, it is customary to put that book back on the shelf and subsequently to pick up another; therefore, it is not surprising that Hal would do this as well in his education of how to be a well-balanced prince. Hal’s rejection of Falstaff at the end of Part II has been criticized by some, but if Falstaff is seen as only one book on Hal’s bookshelf, it is completely normal that he should be put back in place once Hal has finished with him. Hal retains the knowledge that he has learned, but it would not be appropriate to reread the same book over and over again while ignoring others that could be equally useful. Falstaff is a book about the way of life of the common people, but Hal’s education has consisted of other elements; he has already learned physical combat, diplomacy, and politics. To linger on only one aspect of his education too long, like Hotspur who knows battle but not negotiation, would be a fundamental error in judgment and would cause his downfall. Hal is right to reject Falstaff and to put this book back on the shelf.

Warwick, one of the king’s advisors, realizes just what Hal has been doing, studying his subjects without becoming one of them.
He explains this to the worried king:

The prince but studies his companions
Like a strangeful tongue, wherein, to gain the language,
'Tis needful that the most immodest word
Be looked upon and learned, which once attained,
Your highness knows, comes to no further use
But to be known and to be hated. So like gross terms,
The prince will in the perfectness of time
Cast off his followers, and their memory
Shall as a pattern or a measure live,
By which his grace must mete the lives of others,
Turning past evils into advantages. (2H4 4.4.68-78)

Warwick's assessment of Hal is surprisingly accurate although it is questionable whether or not Hal actually grew to hate those with whom he associated. It would be more probable that, having no more use for them, he was somewhat apathetic towards their personal situations because he had more pressing questions on his mind.

Earlier, without fully recognizing the truth of his statement, Vernon also praises Hal, first as modest, dutiful, and a good orator, and then ironically as someone who has "a double spirit / Of teaching and of learning instantly" (1H4 5.2.64-5). The irony of this statement is that Vernon uses it in another sense, but, in fact, this is exactly what Hal has been doing; trying to teach Falstaff to be a better person while at the same time learning about his people.

To prove that Hal does not really change throughout the course of Henry IV, an illustration of his many princely characteristics exhibited from the very beginning of the first play is necessary. Prince Hal demonstrates many noble and redeeming qualities that may lead the reader to question his supposed rebelliousness. He displays all the desirable qualities of a king; that is, he is generous, honorable, tolerant, and just.

Before even revealing his plan to the audience in his first scene,
Hal already shows some of the qualities of a good prince. His generosity is shown by the fact that he has apparently paid for all of Falstaff’s sack, surely at great expense, and when he had no money left used his good name as credit to allow Falstaff to continue to consume to his heart’s content. Furthermore, he is honorable and honest when he categorically refuses to steal despite being pressured to participate, replying, “Who, I rob? I a thief? Not I, by my faith” (1.2.154). Hal knows that even while he descends to the lower class, it is out of the question to take this experiment too far and to actually participate himself in dishonorable conduct or behavior that would harm others. To drink a glass of sack does no harm to others, but to rob surpasses the limits of his game by actually breaking the law. He respects the law as much as possible except when protecting Falstaff, but, as is seen later, he does this too with a noble purpose and without causing harm.

The audience also witnesses Hal’s honorable traits when he and Poins decide to rob the robbers, which, while it appears to be nothing more than a practical joke, is really an act of honor. He returns the money to its rightful owners and teaches Falstaff several important lessons at the same time. Falstaff will soon learn that Hal mocks cowardice, that he cannot profit from lawbreaking, and that Prince Hal will always have the upper-hand. Hal shows that his courage does not appear out of thin air later when he meets Hotspur, but that he has always been courageous. While the audience might suspect that Falstaff is a coward, his cowardliness has not yet been established nor seen, and for the moment all that Hal knows of him is that he is a knight and thus would know how to fight. In addition, Hal and Poins are outmanned two to four, do not know for sure that the others will flee, and do still have to defend against a few blows before Falstaff actually runs away. Hal states that he does not fear Hotspur, long before he makes such promises to his father. When asked if he is afraid, he replies to Falstaff, “Not a whit, i’faith. I lack some of thy instinct” (2.4.408); that is, he will not run away as Falstaff has just done out of “instinct.”

After this incident that displays Hal’s physical worthiness, his appearance in the tavern demonstrates his intellectual prowess. As
already mentioned, he learns quickly how to drink and speak like a commoner but also shows his wit, intelligence, sense of judgment, and leadership abilities. First, he correctly assesses the character of Hotspur, with whom he has yet to do battle, as overly zealous for physical combat and completely lacking in manners and civilized conduct. Hal then demonstrates that he is intelligent by trapping Falstaff in his lie with the point that it would have been impossible to see if the men wore Kendal green in the dark, and often shows that his wit is equal too and even surpasses Falstaff’s (2.4.351-57,375-86). Hal is also the leader of the group and the others are more loyal to him than to Falstaff whom they have nonetheless known much longer. Bardolph quickly betrays Falstaff and confesses to Hal everything that happened after the robbery. Hal is a natural and effortless leader. He commands respect even when he is in a ridiculous position, as when he wears a cushion on his head for a crown. Unlike when Falstaff did this, neither the Hostess nor anybody else interrupts when he speaks during this game as they all respect him much more than Falstaff. Finally, Hal proves to be stern and truthful, even in the most unnatural of conditions, as he honestly criticizes Falstaff despite the element of game that surrounds the situation.

Hal also rightly assess Falstaff’s character, calling him an “abominable misleader of youth” (2.4.508). Even though Hal is playing the game at this point and supposedly joking, he still can be taken at his word. It is human nature, even when joking, to throw those insults which land closest to home and best describe the object of ridicule; therefore, it is logical to assume that Hal’s words are very close to the truth. The audience sees in the second play that Falstaff is in fact a misleader of youth when he becomes master of a young boy and begins to corrupt him. Hal sees right away that this is Falstaff’s nature and skillfully keeps his distance from Falstaff’s pitfalls while simultaneously pretending to be led on by him. Hal escapes the trap by simply playing along with Falstaff’s games and humoring him.

Hal’s words at the end of this play within a play may seem to be a contradiction to his later actions that could only be explained by a reformation of his character, but in fact they are not. Answering “I do,
I will” (2.4.528) to Falstaff’s plea not to banish him, Hal responds truthfully according to what is appropriate at this moment. It is Falstaff’s subsequent actions, not Hal’s, that force Hal to later banish him. As long as Falstaff remains harmless and in his place, Hal has no real reason to banish him. Later, however, Falstaff oversteps the line by trying to ascend to a higher rung on the ladder of social order both when he speaks out of place in the meeting between the king and Worcester and when he yells out to Hal during his coronation ceremony. Falstaff does not understand that Hal may descend in social order and then retake his rightful place but that he himself cannot ascend the ranks without first proving himself worthy of that honor. He does not see that he can’t talk to Hal in public or on the battlefield (2H4 5.3.56-57) in the same fashion as in the tavern. Hal has tried to teach him to be a better person, but Falstaff only degenerates and thus provokes his own rejection. Hal’s change in attitude on this subject is not an example of “reform.”

At the end of the long tavern scene, Hal appears to undermine justice by protecting Falstaff from the sheriff who is looking for the robbers. This seems to be the act of a wanton youth protecting his friends, but in fact it is the act of a merciful prince trying to encourage his subjects to reform and obey the law in the future. In fact, this whole episode could be seen as an exercise in a leader’s diplomacy. First, Falstaff does not go unpunished since Hal gives back the loot from the robbery to teach him that he can’t evade justice (even though he completely ignores this valuable lesson). He also robs Falstaff’s pockets later to try once again to reinforce the message that Falstaff should give up stealing. At the same time, Hal takes control of the situation and, though superseding him, respects the position of the sheriff. While he does lie to him, he does so for a good reason and afterwards returns the money with additional compensation so that justice is still served. Hal is diplomatic in the sense that he solves the problem to the benefit of both sides without hurting either one.

Hal must then return to court to confront his father and explain his recent actions. While Hal constantly accepts his father’s position
as right and apologizes for his own wrongdoing, this scene in which he supposedly decides to change his ways is not necessarily proof of reform. Hal must follow his initial plan through to the end and thus must accept reprimand even though he has done no wrong. He does, however, leave clues to the audience that this is all part of his plan to win awe from the court. After his father accuses him of being a disgrace, Hal replies, "I would I could / Quit all offenses with as clear excuse / As well I am doubtless I can purge / Myself of many I am charg'd withal" (3.2.18-21). Hal knows that he has an acceptable excuse for his recent behavior, but it would ruin his plan if he revealed to his father the real motivation of his actions before playing the game through to its rightful conclusion.

The king then reminds Hal that "[His] place in Council [he] hast rudely lost, / Which by [his] younger brother is supplied" (3.2.32-33). These lines also serve to tell the audience that Hal has occupied a seat in council in the past and obviously done so properly until just recently when he began his plan, because if not he would have been removed long before at the first sign of unworthiness.

It is after this conversation with his father that Hal seems to begin to "reform." One could easily believe that it is because of his father's harsh criticism, but Hal's sudden change of behavior can be explained by the fact that rebellion has now broken out. The time has come for Hal to resume his princely duties in order to attend to this new, more urgent matter. He knows that he no longer has the luxury to study his subjects and that it is time for the second part of his plan now, that is, to win back everyone's approval. He will use Hotspur to gain great honor, more than he would have gained had he not put on this show. He will use Percy as "but [his] factor... / To engross up glorious deeds on [his] behalf" (3.2.147-48). When Hal promises to his father to correct his behavior, what he actually says is that he will "[b]e more [him]self" (3.2.93), not become a new person as one would expect to hear if he had really been inherently wanton. What he is really promising to do is to take off the cloak with which he has been disguising the real Hal.
This conversation also reveals that the king has been misinformed as to the gravity of the situation of Hal’s supposedly wanton behavior. The king has never actually witnessed any of Hal’s “wanton” behavior; his opinion is based purely on hearsay and the rumors heard by his advisors. Hal refers to “them that so much hath sway’d / Your Majesty’s good thoughts away from me!” (3.2.130-31). Shakespeare uses similar words again soon afterwards when, on the battlefield, Hal also says, “they did me too much injury / That ever said I heark’ned for your death” (5.4.51-52). Each time that the king curses Hal’s behavior, he does so based not on facts but on rumor, without knowing Hal’s real reasons. Only the audience can judge Hal fairly.

Hal’s resolve to be more like himself is seen instantly when, in the next scene, he arrives at the tavern marching in a serious manner. Unlike Falstaff who is playing his staff like a flute, Hal has stopped playing games because the time for battle has come and he is ready just as he always has been. He comes to the tavern only to keep his word and to try once more to make Falstaff a honest person. He had already promised Peto that he would procure a charge of foot for Sir John and proves that he is indeed a man of his word. What seems to be a practical joke at Falstaff’s expense is really another attempt to make him choose the straight and narrow path. Hal makes him apologize to Hostess Quickly for his false accusations, but he does so unwillingly and still does not see that he should stop trying to hustle others. Hal tries to reduce Falstaff’s inflated perception of his own stature by showing that it is he who is superior in pick-pocketing and that Falstaff should give up his dishonorable ways. Hal is generous in giving Falstaff a second chance to learn to better himself, and it is eventually Falstaff’s fault that he is banished for failing to learn from his mistakes. The scene ends with Hal saying on his departure that he has “thirty miles to ride ‘ere dinner time” (3.2.221) and the audience can be led by this to suspect that Hal is quick to act when he must.

Sir Richard Vernon gives Hotspur an account of Hal in his battle armor and describes him as quick and light as an angel when mounting his horse. Because this skill could certainly not have been
learned overnight, the account leads the audience to believe that Hal has already dedicated much time to training to be a great warrior and has attended to the more important parts of his education before indulging himself in the secondary task of understanding his people. He has definitely not neglected any other part of his education before having decided to pursue this other area that his predecessors themselves ignored.

Prince Hal criticizes Falstaff’s choice of unworthy soldiers, warning him that his dishonest antics will not go unpunished in the future. Hal also commands Falstaff to be quiet when he inappropriately offers his opinion during the conversation between the king and Worcester, instituting respect for decorum and proper procedures.

Hal finally shows everyone his true courageous self, recognized only by the audience until this point, when he challenges Hotspur to battle one-on-one. He is willing to shed his own blood to spare that of others, and in the same way that he was often generous with Falstaff before, here he is generous with his life that he offers up willingly in order to protect his forces. He demonstrates again his keen sense of judgment when he correctly predicts that Hotspur’s side will not accept his reasonable offer.

On the battlefield Hal, as the sun, finally comes out as promised from behind the base clouds, that is, Falstaff, compared to whom Hal does shine. Hal, in all urgency and seriousness, twice asks Falstaff to lend him his sword. Falstaff passes back a bottle of sack, to which Hal replies, “What, is it a time to jest and dally now?” (5.3.57). Hal is himself again and has thrown off all pretense of games. He charges like a true prince into battle and, despite bleeding from his injuries, urges the others to “make up” (5.4.5), refusing to rest or tend to his wounds until the battle is won. Having saved his father by forcing Douglas to flee, he brings his plan full circle to its intended conclusion and wins back his “lost opinion” (5.4.48) from the king.

The prince’s other noble quality, chivalry, comes to light also
on several occasions at the end of the battle. He praises his fallen enemy Hotspur as a valiant fighter, he rises above petty disputes and generously allows Falstaff to claim that it was he who killed Hotspur, he displays mercy for the rebel prisoners, and he allows his younger brother who fought well the honor of conveying this message.

Hal is, therefore, constant in character throughout all of *Henry IV, Part I*. He is generous to Falstaff at both the beginning and the end, as well as noble, courageous, and just at all times. Although he may appear to reform after meeting with the king, he is already a great prince before this. In addition, it would be impossible for him, supposing he truly was a wanton youth, to change so dramatically so very quickly and with such ease. He is able to awe the rest of the court in battle only because he already had skill and prowess before descending to examine the common people. An instantaneous reformation with no apparent preparation would not have allowed him to shine as brightly as he does only days after saying that he will do so. He could not learn to be great in so short a time, thus he had to have been a perfect prince already.

Prince Hal does not appear often in *Henry IV, Part II*, but when he does, his character continues to remain constant. His first words are, “I am exceedingly weary” (*2H4* 2.2.1), but he doesn’t say of what. He could well be referring to the masquerade that he still must maintain and to his task of sounding out his subjects. He continues on to say that he desires small beer, that is trifles, from which he certainly would have experienced a certain unexpected pleasure. He decides, therefore, to descend one last time among his people to partake in those pleasures, which he nonetheless qualifies as small and certainly unbefitting of a king, and complete the final chapter of his education.

Hal briefly opens up to Poins, subtly confessing his plan, “Let the end try the man” (2.2.43), and then revealing that he must always hide his inner self under a hard outer shell. Hal’s life is always solitary, even in the presence of other people, a necessary sacrifice for a king in order to avoid being manipulated. He also confesses that reason has “taken from [him] all ostentation of sorrow” (2.2.46), his emotional
detachment from friends as well as enemies being a strength for a future king. He is ready to return to his former serious and princely self, and can no longer afford the luxury to “so idly ... profane the precious time” (2.4.338) in observation.

Hal’s real nature, however, continues to be misinterpreted by others. Falstaff wrongly theorizes that Hal valiantly beat Hotspur in battle because his blood had been warmed by sack, a non sequitur argument, for if it were true, Falstaff should have been the most valiant of all on the battlefield, easily surpassing Hotspur. Hal is valiant because it is natural to his character. The king also mistakes Hal by saying in a lie that he is generous and charitable (4.4.30-32), indicating that he does not believe this at all. Ironically, Hal has already proven the king wrong by showing the audience on many accounts that the king’s words are true.

The manner in which Hal takes the crown after what he believes to be his father’s death is wise. He has prepared himself for this moment in advance in order to be strong while the others are weak, especially since everyone had been expecting him to be weak and some may have tried to take advantage of him at this moment to gain undue power. He sets a tone that shows the others in attendance that he will be a strong leader and not the little boy that he has led them to believe that he is.

The episode with the Chief Justice near the end of the second play may seem initially to support the theory that Hal misbehaved terribly as a youth and then reformed. Apparently, there had been a dispute between the two because at some point in the past Hal slapped the Chief Justice, who then sent Hal to prison for this act of insolence. However, Shakespeare supplies no real details of the incident, and thus the whole event is open to a wide range of interpretation. It is possible that this incident was all part of Hal’s plan of feigned redemption and that he did this to create a spectacle of himself, but was caught unaware by the Justice’s severe reaction. Hal could have been showing off and then been shocked by prison into realizing that his experiment had gone
far enough. Inversely, Hal could have been purposely testing the Chief Justice to see whether he would make an honest and trustworthy advisor. He could have been testing to see whether or not the Chief Justice had enough conviction in the law and confidence in his own sense of justice to send the heir apparent to prison. After being convinced that the Chief Justice would make a loyal and honest advisor who respected the throne and England above himself and the risk of personal danger that his convictions might have, Hal rewards the Chief Justice by making him his most trusted advisor. In this way, Hal protects himself from the presence of foolhardy advisors like those to whom Richard II listened and from dishonest advisors who constantly lied to reassure Henry IV.

The last and most commented incident in *Henry IV Part II* is Hal’s outright and public rejection of Falstaff. Hal’s first words to Falstaff, “I know thee not, old man” (5.5.48), may seem excessively harsh, but are open to interpretation. First, he is saying that he no longer acknowledges Falstaff as a friend, and, secondly, that he can no longer understand and participate in Falstaff’s way of life in the same way that Falstaff cannot possibly know and understand Hal’s real way of life. This is a less severe attitude than simply to say that he does not even know who Falstaff is because these positions are based on the logic of the social structure. Falstaff, in fact, does not know Hal either because this is not the same Hal with whom he fraternized; this is the real Hal whereas the other was an illusion.

Hal must reject Falstaff because he failed to take advantage of the many chances to prove himself and thus cannot realistically expect a place in court. Falstaff has been in denial of the fact that, in the court of a great king, office is awarded by rank and merit, not bestowed freely on a whim. Falstaff is an element of disorder and could only gain access to participate in a system of order if he were to reform as Hal has often encouraged him to do. Hal nonetheless leaves the door open for Falstaff to return if ever he does decide to improve himself to a suitable level of conduct. He also provides for his sustenance in order to allow him more freely to give up his life of crime in a final generous
attempt to encourage Falstaff to better himself.

The rejection of Falstaff must not be falsely associated with the "reform" of Hal. Hal's rejection of the Boar's Head Tavern group would only be a symbol of his reform if he actually was part of this group, but he was not. Hal used the group to attain the knowledge that he needed about his subjects but always remained exterior to the group as an observer. What he actually rejects is the group's attempt to infiltrate into his world. He can enter their world (because every inch of England is his kingdom), but he must explain to them that they cannot enter his world (because the common people have no intrinsic right to the halls of power). The audience falsely associates the rejection of Falstaff with the reform of Hal because it is attached to Falstaff as a lovable character. Hal was never the na"ıve youth in danger of being molded by Falstaff but rather a wise observer who objectively collects that knowledge about his people which will be useful to him in the future. Hal has a whole kingdom to protect and cannot continue to waste his time solely protecting Falstaff if he won't even attempt to do so himself. Finally, if Hal truly underwent a reform, he would have rejected all that he had learned from Falstaff, but in Henry V he shows that he has not done so. He plays a trick on Michael Williams by taking his gage, and, in the same way that he played tricks on Falstaff, he intends to teach him a lesson for so quickly questioning the judgment of the king (H5 4.1.185-211). As with Falstaff, he also shows his generosity with his purse, and after the trick is done rewards Williams for being an upright man.

Hal's philosophy throughout Henry IV Parts I and II was always, "Let the end try the man" (2H4 2.2.43). Only the ends are important to Hal, whatever the means, and thus it is perfectly acceptable in his opinion temporarily to masquerade as someone other than who he is if this will solidify his goal of being a powerful king. None of his means to this end is important, including possibly hurting Falstaff when he no longer needs him. He does reach his goal and becomes a great king in Henry V with perfect control over subjects who do not hesitate to follow him into a foreign war. It is reasonable to assume that he may
have felt that he was right and the means of creating a false persona for himself was justifiable. From a modern perspective this attitude might seem excessively harsh, but in Shakespeare’s time, less than a century after Machiavel’s The Prince which encouraged this exact same philosophy, it is far from astonishing and even acceptable.

The philosophy proposed in Machiavel’s famous work fits surprisingly well in the context of both parts of Henry IV and in Henry V. This philosophy, centered on the individual protecting one’s own interests, is exactly the kind of philosophy that Hal needed to justify having the crown. The order of the divine right of kings had been broken by his father who usurped Richard II and took the crown from Richard’s designated heir Edmund Mortimer. It is thus Hal’s obligation to prove to all of England that he deserves to inherit the crown because he will be good king and has the personal merit to deserve this honor. He must show that he is strong and just to establish his fitness to be king. He has little choice but to adopt a plan to shock and blind everyone by his unexpected greatness. This plan is much more cunning than that used by his brother to make the rebels surrender (4.2.59-119). Hal does not trick a small army but all of England and proves that he is more Machiavellian than his younger brother. It was necessary and justifiable for Hal to think only of his own person when he devised this charade in order to validate his claim to the crown.

Hal is not really, however, Shakespeare’s example of a purely Machiavellian prince. He is calculating and cunning but not cold or without mercy. He merely formulates a plan and follows it through to the end. At the same time, he is generous, honorable and just. The Archbishop characterizes him in Henry V as well versed in religious rhetoric, affairs, policy, and war, and as an exceptional problem-solver who is able to speak so elegantly that his words are like music. His character is overall a paradoxical mix of the perfect Renaissance humanist and the perfect Machiavellian prince. He is excessive in neither extreme; instead, he does his best to maintain a balance between these two attitudes which are necessary traits of a great leader and one whom Shakespeare would choose to immortalize.
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James Joyce, often presented as a quintessential modern writer, has more recently been given the distinction of making the bridge to postmodern discourse and even of embodying it. Scholars agree on one position only: at some point, Joyce changed his style and turned the modern story into postmodern discourse; otherwise, his position in literary history straddles the modern and postmodern niches. *Ulysses* shows a transition from what Joyce himself called his "initial style." In this style, we find character Stephen Dedalus, hero of the modern classic *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. By contrast, we find in *Finnegan's Wake* a different style, which most scholars identify as postmodern. A comparison of "Telemachus," the first episode of *Ulysses*, with "Sirens," the twelfth episode, illustrates Joyce's (r)evolution in narrative technique and language usage as Joyce works to achieve a decentering of characters and narrator in order to focus on the language itself.

The decentering that occurs between "Telemachus" and "Sirens" makes the discourse postmodern in style. The shifting or eradication of centers opens up the possibility of freeplay in language, and language was Joyce's (postmodern) concern. Joyce recognized the limits imposed on *Ulysses* by the presence of Stephen Dedalus, a character unable to do anything but carry on the "initial style"; Joyce realized that this would eventually box him in, leaving Stephen and the novel's stylistics little room to evolve (Yee 52). As Derrida postulates, "the center of the structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the
total form . . . . Nevertheless, the center also closes off the freeplay it opens up and makes possible” (232). Derrida defines the center as a “constant of a presence–essence, existence, substance, subject . . . transcendental, conscience, God, man, and so forth” (231-232). In “Telemachus,” we are introduced to the expected center: Stephen Dedalus from *Portrait*, the eternal outsider, the reluctant, shabby artist who abides by scowling at all life around him. He is the reference point for all activities and characters. Buck Mulligan introduces us to the work because he is the first person Stephen talks to that morning. Every occurrence happens because Stephen exists to be affected by it; the world of the novel is Stephen’s world. In the interaction of Mulligan, Haines, and Stephen, the focus is on how the two relate to Stephen, not on how Mulligan or Haines relates to the other. Stephen is the object of their jokes, insults, and pleas. In short, Stephen is the center of the text, the point around which all action turns.

Interestingly, even the grammatical structure reveals much about Joyce’s attitudes regarding his character’s importance in the beginning episodes. In “Telemachus,” as analyzed by E.A. Levenston, the language and sentence structures substantiate the person as subject concept in action (265). Most sentences in this first episode operate primarily around the noun, a subject that “occurs in the initial, thematic position” (265). The clauses and verbs describe actions referring directly to the “actor explicitly mentioned as subject” (265). The tyranny of the noun, specifically the tyranny of the proper noun and personal pronoun, cements, from the beginning, the reader’s perception of characters as subjects.

The way Joyce narrates “Telemachus” helps cement the language and characters in his “initial style.” The conversation among Stephen, Mulligan, Haines, and the milk woman is narrated without a sifting through Stephen’s mind. This in itself seems to be an objective telling. Dialog is indicated through the use of a dash (—) followed by a simple referent. The only indicators we have to accompany characters’ speech are facts the listener and viewer could know. Thus, when Mulligan speaks, he may speak “sternly” or “slowly”—but we are never privileged
to know what is inside his mind. Yet Stephen, unlike all other characters, is privileged in two ways. The narrator tells us Stephen feels pain as he recalls his dead mother, thus revealing unarticulated knowledge as early as page four. The narrative insets tell us about Stephen’s thoughts in ways we never know of Haines’ or Mulligan’s and go even one step further. Six pages into “Telemachus,” the narrator stops reporting what Stephen thinks; instead, we hear Stephen’s unuttered thoughts without the filter of the narrator as he talks of Mulligan’s fear of his art. Here, the narration sets up a hierarchy; Stephen is more important than Haines and Mulligan, who in turn take precedence over the milk woman.

In “Telemachus,” speech and action are always distinct. All spoken language is quoted; indicated speech is usually followed by a simple referent such as “Mulligan said” or “stated Haines.” No subordinate clauses are used to report speech. The language construction is clear and clean. The expected and transparent grammatical usage confirms each character’s role and importance in relation to others. In “Telemachus,” the presented reality is that the center is Stephen, a character whose position at the center is furthered most through the narrative technique that privileges him. The words of other characters are not qualified by their thoughts. At the breakfast table, three voices are audible and Stephen’s thoughts offer the unspoken fourth. Although Stephen is privileged in that we know his thoughts as well as his words, Haines and Mulligan, through their insults and other words directed at him, keep Stephen’s voice from becoming the authority. Stephen presents himself as a pondering artist destined for greatness while Haines and Mulligan contradict all he hopes to represent. Mulligan has nicknamed him “Kinch,” meaning knife blade, and when he first calls him up the stairs, he calls Stephen a “fearful Jesuit,” a term Stephen has been trying to disprove since the middle of Portrait.

Even with Stephen as center, from the outset “Telemachus” illustrates Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of “heteroglossia,” which refers to the existence of many voices that reflect the conversation of real life (Dettmar 28). Heteroglossia is not a trope; it is the “primary condition” of language and “is prior to and subsumes most of the other important
concepts of Bakhtin’s thought,” such as polyphony and the carnival, which the text of *Ulysses* later illustrates (Dettmar 28-29). “Telemachus” reflects the “primary condition” as we hear the interaction of Mulligan’s, Haines’ and Stephen’s words, and Stephen’s thoughts. The dialogue among the characters is an example of heteroglossia that makes the text polyphonic through its ability to sustain the “multiplicity of autonomous voices” (Dettmar 30).

Within the heteroglossia, Stephen remains the center both because his are the only thoughts recorded and because he still fills the place of the favored in the narrative. In Joyce’s hierarchy of voices, Stephen is at the top; he is set apart from the other characters, privileging us with more internal knowledge, fulfilling the role of the center in the reader’s mind (Coyle 89). His primary role is strengthened also by Joyce’s attention to voice, the language and vocabularies used to separate the narrator from the characters. Whether the conversation in “Telemachus” appears objective, as it does in the beginning, or whether it is partly sifted by Stephen, as his thoughts become qualifying, the language itself is neutral, without use of “archaisms” or a particularly “literary vocabulary” (Levenston 271). The neutrality is achieved, Levenston contends, by the absence of certain structures. There are no qualifying clauses. In the beginning, the narrator gives himself no opportunity “to comment on the import of his narrating” (Levenston 265). He never explains, never offers a “because” or “although” clause, never gives a hypothetical “if.” The narrator remains objectively omniscient while viewing Stephen’s world (Levenston 265). The ability of the author to narrate apart from the characters and to let the characters sustain their own voices allows them to be something other than a “mouthpiece for the author” (Dettmar 32). In *Portrait*, Stephen seems little more than a mouthpiece for Joyce, using similar vocabulary and holding similar beliefs to the Joyce of the comparable age. In *Ulysses*, Joyce sought to move beyond that narrative correspondence of narrator with character, to differentiate between himself as the narrator and the primary character as the episodes progress.

Between “Telemachus” and “Sirens,” the techniques set up in
the novel's opening begin to disintegrate; the treatment of characters as centers, the use of grammatical structures that confirm the center, the narrative technique, and the use of language all change. Between the first episode and the twelfth, Stephen is replaced as the primary character. After three episodes centering on Stephen, Leopold Bloom is introduced and the narration follows him intimately, perhaps more intimately than Stephen was ever followed. As Bloom rises, Stephen sinks. As Bloom spots Stephen on a few occasions in the streets, Stephen is demoted. Instead of a hero-artist, Stephen is seen as a young man who is naive, poor, and nearly pitiable. His strangeness to the world is made evident in the way Dublin regards him. Bloom, older and wiser, rises as the voice to trust. By the advent of the "Sirens" episode, both Stephen and Bloom have been leveled.

Before these two characters are leveled, however, they are elevated by Joyce's attention to individual voice. Each voice is distinct. The objective narrator and the interior monologues of individual characters are carefully differentiated from one another, both when Joyce concentrates on Stephen and later when he introduces Leopold Bloom. Many scholars contend that Stephen's voice and Joyce's are nearly one. Stephen's voice has grown in intelligence and vocabulary since the beginning of Portrait and in Ulysses comes closest to Joyce's language. Hugh Kenner insists Stephen exists "in a zone of interference between 'his' habits of words and the practices of James Joyce" (Ulysses 68). Levenston contends that the narrator of "Telemachus" is not Stephen or even or even like Stephen. Stephen is sleepy; the narrator is not. The narrator uses no foggy or rambling language as Stephen does. Thus the narrative remains objective, clean, and uncluttered. (Levenston 265).

Hugh Kenner, however, recognizes Joyce's ability to widen the gap as Leopold Bloom is introduced in the "Calypso" episode. The distinction between the narrator's language and Bloom's is evident not only through structure but also in vocabulary. For instance, as Bloom prepares breakfast and talks to the cat, the description is recognizably the narrator's and not Bloom's because of the particularly Joycean vocabulary. Bloom, a simpler man, would not describe a cat as walking
“with tail on high” (qtd. in Kenner 30) as the narrator does nor would he think so linguistically as to see the cat’s sound spell “Mkgnoa” (qtd in Kenner 30). Bloom announces the cat’s arrival with a simple “O there you are” and would probably vocalize the cat’s sound with the more conventional “meow” (Kenner 30). Kenner proves how consciously Joyce presents characters with their own voices that are not usurped by the narrator’s voice and that do not exist as a continual reflection of the author. Bloom is a large success; he is not an academic, a gentile, nor has he been raised Catholic; he is not an intentional artist or writer as Joyce is. Finally, in Ulysses, Joyce successfully puts us in the heads of other characters unlike himself, even women characters. This separation between the writer’s consciousness and the character’s consciousness is imperative and the distinctions sustain individuality and separation from objective narrative.

The success of independent and multiple voices defines Joyce’s text, in Bakhtin’s terms, as polyphonic. The move from heteroglossia to polyphony begins between “Telemachus” and “Sirens,” one of the many changes that consummate the switch out of modern into a postmodern discourse. Joyce uses the carefully perpetuated distinction of voices purposely to build a hierarchy and to establish first Stephan and then Bloom as the center. Just as purposely, he lets the device collapse in “Sirens.” In fact, his entire narrative technique changes, letting the devices that characterize the earlier style dissolve to create a more extensive polyphony and something beyond.

In “Sirens,” a polyphonic text, the distinction of speech, thought, description, and action is blurred. The grammar changes; clean clear sentences operating around a clearly defined subject disintegrate into multiple clauses that ruin the possibility of clarity and distinction that we grew accustomed to in “Telemachus” (Levenston 265). The language now consists of conglomerations of words uncharacteristic of either Bloom’s or Stephen’s interior monologues, or even the narrator’s description. Some of the words derive from Joycean vocabulary but the style and arrangement are not characteristic of the narrative voice. An origin or author of the words is not discernible, unless we assume that it
is Bloom, the voice we have been trained to revere at the top of the hierarchy between the two pivotal episodes. From the outset of "Sirens," we presume to follow and trust the voice of Bloom; however, three and half pages into the episode, Bloom returns his tea tray and leaves the Ormond Bar, and we are subjected to the barmaids and customers in his long absence. The distinction of voices and their hierarchy has collapsed; the reality that "Telemachus" presented is disappearing.

Also recognizable is the change in narration, particularly the pattern of objective narrative, interior monologue, and sometimes unfiltered first person narrative. We are no longer presented with the thoughts of only Bloom or Stephen as we were before. Other characters and situations do not exist only in relation to either; neither Stephen nor Bloom is the cause or the center. Each fades to the periphery as other people and things are pushed to the forefront of the discourse. Before Bloom leaves the bar and after he returns, the interior monologue still occurs, but it is often indecipherable as such until after multiple readings. Even when Bloom is physically present, he is often withdrawn both from the surrounding conversation and the reader. The previously discernible distinction of voices was attained through Joyce’s masterful use of structure and vocabulary. In "Sirens," this and other distinctions dissolve to blur the once-objective narration; narration intertwines with Bloom’s and all others’ thoughts. Because no hierarchy or distinction of character’s voices exists, voices melt together, creating an "overall blunting of perception" (Levenston 261).

We cannot trust even the narrator as the filtering voice because we are not sure which words are narration, just as we are not sure which words constitute speech. The smallest examples come with Joyce’s way of presenting dialogue. Because he does not use quotation marks, but rather dashes, and those only in the beginning, we cannot always be sure when the dialogue stops: "-That was exceeding naughty of you, Mr Dedalus told her and pressed her hand indulgently. Tempting poor simple males" (Joyce 335). Is Simon Dedalus saying or thinking this last line? Or is the line the narrator’s or even the barmaid’s? Perhaps the thing that is most confusing is that distinctions within the narration
and privileged interior monologues are not completely gone. When distinctions are clearly made, the lack of clarity at other times is less expected and more frustrating. For instance, the objective narrative voice, although not always easily discernible as such, rises every now and then in the discourse as a shock. Certain information can be known only by an omniscient narrator, but we forget the narrator’s existence in the midst of the polyphony, the collage of voices and thoughts speaking for themselves. Here, Joyce has succeeded in displacing the narrator. Neither any character’s nor the narrator’s voice is privileged; they are often indistinguishable in the muddle of language. The hierarchy is destroyed because all voices are given equal standing. Here, with “Sirens” as the heralding episode, havoc begins and reigns.

When Joyce displaces the tyranny of the center and the narrator through changes in narrative technique and loss of the distinction of voices, he is achieving and reflecting a few different things, including the postmodern disdain of hierarchies. Hierarchies are valued in modern literature to present what is inherently valuable and trustworthy; however, the concept of inherent value and meaning does not exist in the language of postmodernity (Natoli 37). Also, Joyce employs the postmodern staple of collage, the “dramatic juxtaposition of disparate materials without a commitment to explicit syntactical relations between elements” (Bove 48). Joyce borrows from works of the huge literary tradition as well from conversations with people he interacted with on a daily basis (Booker 10). His ability to juxtapose and integrate such materials into his collage is the subject of books, but the importance here is the mere occurrence of the collage technique. This nonhierarchical collage could not have existed in Joyce’s limited initial style because of the narrative techniques that cemented Stephen as center.

Because either Stephen Dedalus or Leopold Bloom has operated as the center through which to view and evaluate Dublin life and all around them, their disappearances in “Sirens” yields confusion. The expectation and confusion are both part of Joyce’s plan; he expects us desperately to search for Bloom in order to understand the viewpoint of what is happening inside the bar when he leaves. He slips out so subtly
that we may assume he’s still there for a long time. Joyce expects this dependency and gives the narrative tease, “But Bloom?” (Joyce 333) to echo his reader’s probable question. Finally, in this episode in the middle of the text, we are painfully weaned; we must understand that neither Stephen nor Bloom functions as the center.

In “Wandering Rocks,” the episode prior to “Sirens,” Joyce begins the process of weaning ever so subtly. As the chapter weaves between Stephen and Bloom while they wander the city streets, the narrator lets other voices sift the information of the city for us; Father Conmee is even given a lengthy interior monologue (Joyce 280). This episode shows the multiplicity of centers as we see the same recurring sights such as a coin tossed to a beggar or a young woman crossing the street through the eyes of different Dublin characters. The center changes multiple times, yet a character, well defined and named, is still functioning as the center. In “Sirens,” however, Joyce is not content just to give us another character or more characters as center; he weans us completely from characters and, as suggested by Colin MacCabe, makes the subject of “Sirens” the language itself. This is Joyce’s siren; the ambiguity of language traps us.

“Sirens” is described by MacCabe as the episode where “all positions are constantly threatened with dissolution into the play of language” (14). In the collapse of the hierarchy of voices and the dissolution into a veritable Babel, we cannot even be sure whose voices we are hearing because of Joyce’s “masterful use of ‘it’” (MacCabe 96). MacCabe talks of the “necessary interchangeability of pronouns” (102) and how this ambiguity is one device that allows the destruction of hierarchy. In “Sirens,” much of what is written “refuses the possibility of any origin and therefore narrative falls back into discourse as the text refuses to give us a fixed set of rules for substitution” (MacCabe 96).

The unexpected lack of referents linking words and thoughts to characters creates what seems like mass confusion. The narrative distinctions have disappeared, discouraging us from attaching trust to one filtering voice above others. Whereas Stephen or Bloom used to be
privileged, the hierarchy now has crumbled. Throughout “Sirens,” Bloom is alternately not present or indistinguishable in the language. For instance, a passage records dialogue between barmaids and after an assigned line of dialogue, the next paragraph reads:

By Cantwell’s office roved Greasabloom, by Ceppi’s virgins, bright of their oils. Nanetti’s father hawked those things about, wheedling at doors as I. Religion pays. Must see him about Keyes par. Eat first. I want. Not yet. At four, she said. (Joyce 335)

Distinction is not easily made between the interior monologue and narration at any given time, as this excerpt demonstrates. “Greasabloom” is a name earlier assigned to Bloom in the barmaids’ conversation, either by the barmaids or the narrator (that too is debatable) on account of his greasy nose, so the repetition of the name might be a continuation of the barmaid’s conversation, especially since the most recently assigned line of dialogue comes from Miss Douce. But the given locations rips us from the bar to an outside location, Cantwell’s office. Once we as readers have followed the fast switch to understanding (if we do at all) that the narrator is speaking, not the barmaids, we continue reading under that assumption. Then suddenly, we encounter that “I.” When we encounter the reference to Keyes, we can then understand the thoughts as Bloom’s because we may remember his job assignment. The mention of “she” therefore can be understood as referring to Molly if we remember her appointment with Boylan is at four. In the next immediate sentence, the pronoun “I” ceases; we cannot know when Bloom’s thoughts end and the narration begins, if it does at all. Then, just as suddenly, Simon Dedalus is announced as entering “their bar.” To whom does the “their” refer, and who is announcing the arrival? What we are subjected to is almost the equivalent of a narrator’s stream of consciousness. Unfortunately, it is not that simple; our narrator is not one consciousness nor always predictably employed in the absence of referents.

By applying Levenston’s view that grammatical structure helps
to confirm centers as heroes and applying it to "Sirens," we find, besides less structured sentences, that the nouns, personal and proper, have often been eschewed. MacCabe's view of the "necessary interchange-ability of the pronouns" (102) in this episode means that the many voices and perspectives need to lose their referential subject of origin. The first few pages which begin "Sirens" show Joyce's intention to deny subjects of origin: here, the entire episode is summarized in language that purposely gives no origin in its plot line, which has no plot and is not linear. It consists of a language without referents, themes, or characters. Proper names are evoked but even they are simply mentioned, never linked to a verb or descriptive.

In the first three pages that chart the essence of the episode, only eighteen of the phrases with end punctuation are complete sentences, even if they consist solely of a noun/verb combination such as "Coin rang" or Clock clanged" (Joyce 329). The rest of the structures are unfinished sentences missing either object, noun, or verb. Many sentences consist of one word. The sentences substantiate no character as the subject or center. Sentences do not operate around the grammatical structure of noun and verb, let alone around a subject character and a verb followed by an object. As the episode continues, the grammatically correct complete sentence returns, but the noun and pronoun of origin often remain vague or in lapse. For instance, a line of dialogue which reads "Those things only bring out a rash" (Joyce 333) is followed by two verbs: "replied, resented" (Joyce 333). No noun or even a vague pronoun is given as a referent. Sentences like this are hidden among others and we falsely trust assumptions for subject identities, hardly noticing when we are not given the necessary information. After pages of assuming, we eventually realize that we have no clue what is going on; we realize we have insinuated incorrectly enough times too many to be officially lost and confused. But this condition is gradual in its realization; we inevitably go too far before we know we must reread.

The voices and perspectives have lost nothing inherently; rather, they simply exist apart from the source. The personal noun as subject has lost its place. Whereas virtually every sentence in "Telemachus"
confirmed a character, usually Stephen, as the center, the grammar in “Sirens” confirms no one as center because we are often not sure who is speaking or thinking or narrating.

Derrida talks of the moment when we realize that the center is not really the center at all and, in fact, was “never a presence itself, which has always already been transported outside itself” (232). The center is not a “fixed locus, but a function. . . In the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (232). MacCabe echoes Derrida’s thoughts in his description of what Joyce accomplishes in turning *Ulysses* from a story into a discourse.

“Telemachus” gives us the beginning of a story. As an example of a hierarchy existing in and through heteroglossia, this episode rests comfortably as a modern text. When heteroglossia incorporates the . . . “diversity of speech types” (Dettmar 30) existing in the structure of a text and wrestles the characters free form the narrative voice, “in Bakhtin’s terms that text becomes . . . ‘polyphonic’” (Dettmar 30). Bakhtin also gives us the term “carnivalesque.” The carnivalesque goes beyond conversation and offers continual “others” and possibilities. “For Bakhtin, the novel. [defined as the cutting edge of literary word] and the carnivalesque are almost synonymous. Just as the carnivalesque celebrates the gay relativity of all life, so the novel proclaims the relativity of all ‘truth,’ and the inherent fallibility of all discourse” (Dettmar 28). The carnival aspect is not present in the first episode of *Ulysses*; the reader still believes in a truth, a reality, a personality that exists somewhere between Stephen’s words and thoughts and the words of others. This belief is perpetuated by the narrative techniques, language, and grammatical structures; all seem to set up the promise of a truth or reality. Also, we trust the “story.” While heteroglossia occurs, we trust the words used to describe the surrounding and the people because we have no reason not to. This trust is broken in “Sirens.”

The necessary switch to non-hierarchical discourse in “Sirens” succeeds only by breaking down all expectations for the opposite. Many scholars, including MacCabe and Ellman, conclude that Joyce’s intended
center is language itself because “he does not write to represent, express or describe anything” (Coyle 103). He wants us to have the experience with language itself. The intention is for readers to experience language “through a destruction of representation” (Coyle 91) rather than to understand experience through representative language. Joyce purposely moves away from representation in order to focus on language and the importance of sound as he desires us to commune with words, not a mere story plot. To experience the language itself, to pay it primary attention, we must first let go of expectations and ties to plot; we must have already let go of the idea of a center character because it impedes the attention to language. As Derrida asserts, the “absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification” (232). No character in “Sirens” functions as this “transcendental signified.” Therefore the work, and we as readers, can experience the play of language.

The “play of language” spoken of by MacCabe is one of the terms used to describe what contributes to the breakdown of a single view of reality in the beginning of the “Sirens” episode. MacCabe relies on Julia Kristeva’s work on different concepts of truth to define what he means by the “play of language.” Kristeva talks of the symbol, the one-to-one correspondence between word and thing, a correspondence that is guaranteed; i.e., that when Joyce writes “chair” this spelled word is inherently referring to the chair in his mind and that we as readers of the word see it referring to exactly the same one named. Kristeva defines the sign as something in a world where there is a basic discontinuity between the signifier and the signified. The play of language is the play between these two concepts of language. Sometimes we read a section of “Sirens” and feel comfortable in linking Joyce’s words to object and ideas we believe we can understand, just long enough to trust that we know where we are and what is happening. He alternates the uses of language we can rely on in our conventional perceptions with that which makes our preconceptions fall apart. Sometimes Joyce employs “little triumphs of linguistic virtuosity” (Kenner 30) to create the illusion that things are being named exactly. He creates the illusion of a predictable reality just so he can uncover the illusion by employing language in a
way that deconstructs the expectations readers have. As Joseph Natoli has explained in identifying key concepts of postmodernity, language is not “transparent” or “universal” (68). Joyce reveals this truth, after easily wooing readers into a comfortable relationship of trust with language at the outset of Ulysses.

In “Telemachus,” we are led to rely on language as a system of trustworthy symbols. The language is not playful; words uttered by characters can be connected to objects described around them. The standard usage and meaning of words work in this standard narrative as Stephen reigns in the land of the subject. If we rely on our trust that every word directly corresponds with something real, exactly as named, we run into few problems. We can read “Telemachus” without confusion or doubt because Joyce is constructing the illusion purposely, just as purposely as he deconstructs the illusion in “Sirens.”

As we attempt to accompany Bloom in “Sirens,” we fall into the play of language where words cannot always be connected to visual imagery or related to the situation without a lot of inference. Because the language used to describe the setting, situations, and characters is in play, we cannot be sure of much. The largest clue in deciphering ideas and objects referred to would the identification of the speaker or the thinker because then we could at least infer knowledge by what we know is important to that particular character. However, as already identified, the narrative technique and dissolution of a hierarchy of voices often disallows such certainties. The one-to-one correspondence of “Telemachus” has left us.

One of Joyce’s articulated goals in writing “Sirens” was to create the effect of music through the written word because music happens to be the least representational art form (Yee 57). MacCabe says the musicality “destroys the possibility of a text representing some exterior reality and, equally, it refuses the text any origin in such a reality” (Coyle 98). This breaking down of an exterior reality creates the danger in the carnivalesque; it can be subversive. However, this undermining is necessary to achieve the decentering. Whenever the function of words is
primarily for their qualities of sound, this functions leads words away from any single reality (Yee 57).

Joyce succeeds in not only making *Ulysses* carnival through style, voices, narrative techniques—accomplishments most scholars recognize—but he also illustrates Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque at the sentence and word level, a move beyond the modern accomplishment. The decentering, combination of style and discourse, risk of subversion, juxtaposition and collage are taken to the individual and independent word.

In “Sirens,” Joyce first decenters the noun from its empire and uses words to fill less than standard parts of speech. Joyce became fascinated with Ernest Fenellona’s material concerning the Chinese language, an influence that is seen more obviously in *Finnegan’s Wake*, but he first experiments in the “Sirens” episode (Yee 85). In the Mandarin language, a word does not attempt to be an inherent reflection of a thing, Joyce understood. A word in Chinese also does not have a systematic grammatical function. One word performs the functions of noun, verb, adjective, etc., all at one time. This combination, Joyce believes, allows a word to embody more of the essence of what it represented than words in English. In “Sirens” we see his use of non-grammatical word functions. Even when he, grammatically, in the context of a sentence structure, provides nouns (such as the two barmaids), they are named by adjectives joined by a preposition, as in “bronze-by-gold,” (331) or conflated adjectives, “bronzegold” (334). To Joyce, this visually descriptive nomer was closer to the essence he wanted us to understand than were their separate given names of Miss and Miss Kennedy. Blazes Boylan, Moll’s lover, is named by various combinations of the words jingle and jaunty. When names are introduced by adjectives and verbs, the tyranny of the subject is destroyed in name. The reader is obliged to see the words in themselves before coming to understand the words as a character name. When they are understood as a character’s name, the descriptive words characterize the person in a significant identity, the essence of description containing more importance than a mere nomer.
Some names Joyce gives are birthed from the mixture of two seemingly separate identities. For instance, Simon, Stephen’s father, is united with Leopold in the one-word name given in the text as Siopold and Lydlydiawell is given as a combination of a barmaid and a flirting customer. The destruction of one-to-one correspondence for characters echoes the possibility of overlap. One person can have more than one name and one name can have more than one person, just as a text can have more than one origin, as words can have more than one source. For instance, many phrases that are hard to attribute to a character or narrator could be read as from multiple sources. Many repeated phrases grace this episode, for instance “God’s curse on bitch’s bastard” (Joyce 338); this phrase appears after a conversation between a barmaid and Simon as well as in many other places where its assignation is nearly impossible; the often vague context offers little help. This and other phrases echo through the atmosphere of “Sirens,” unidentified voices repeating each others’ words, often to mean different things, making the meaning relative to the speaker—a speaker who may ultimately be unidentifiable or at least variable.

Joyce’s combination, collage, and juxtaposition in names extends to other words and even whole sentences. Some words are conflated, expanded, unfinished, and made interchangeable. Joyce takes liberties such as “goodgod henev erheard inall” (Joyce 329) and “Blmstup” (Bloom stood up). Characters’ proper names are tampered with in the very opening of “Sirens.” One line read: “True Men. Lid Ker Cow De and Doll” (Joyce 330). In this very beginning, everything is as sparse as possible to sum up the unrevealed flow of the episode where we can later learn that some of the characters’ names are Lidwell, Kernan, Cowley, Dedalus, and Dollard. Joyce’s art is collage; his medium is the alphabet. Words are abstracted, reduced to their essences; words and letters are deleted and lifted to combine directly with unexpected others. Thus he achieves decentering at the word and sentence level, as well as at the plot level.

Essentially, what Joyce destroys through his play of language is an easily discernible context. We as readers pay dearly when we
assume anything; only close hard reading, multiple times, can lead to understanding context and plot. Is Joyce just mean, exhibiting as Hugh Kenner humorously suggests, the snobbish Dublin personality “capable of malice, ... a spirit which does not mind if we misunderstand wholly and never know it?” (*Ulysses* 66). Or is he bringing to our attention the postmodern conviction of the fallibility of language and representing Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque: “the relativity of all truth” and the “inherent fallibility of all discourse?” (Dettmar 28).

Joyce’s decentering is an end in and of itself. But it can have other purposes. Some think Joyce wanted us to grasp language, giving us a text impossible to deal with on plot level until we found ourselves frustrated enough in that goal to pay attention carefully to the very elements of the language. In decentering, Joyce is not eradicating a center; he simply denies us characters that fulfill the function and makes multiple centers possible through the play of language. Also, he does not destroy plot. Once we have gotten frustrated and been forced to pay attention to the language, having been trapped by Joyce’s sirens, we can then trace the threads of Bloom’s thoughts on his job and jealousy; we can find Boylan making his way by bicycle to Molly’s house and bed; we can become involved with the men in the Ormand Bar as they drink and sing and hear the barmaids gossip and flirt. We can trace the repeated and unassigned line “All is lost” to refer to Bloom’s fears of Molly’s adulterous act and hear him utter Martha’s name and write her a letter signed with his pseudonym, Henry Flower, as he copes with his knowledge of infidelity.

Joyce’s writing does not deny us the possibility of a center, a negativity even Derrida defines as “unthinkable” (232); but one cannot determine a center until one has seen what Joyce wants us to see—the multiplicity of center, one being the language itself. Hard work or someone else’s annotated notes can construct a plot out of Joyce’s puzzle pieces, but is that what Joyce intended? A given and understood context allows us to simply consume all the assumed signifieds instead of reading the signifiers, the word (Coyle 95). When we think we know what is going on, we do not depend on every single word as much and even skip
some, racing hastily through a text because its use of language is predictable. Joyce begins leading us away from this habit with "Sirens."

This is the Joyce of postmodernism. He leads us to look past the observable context by refusing to give us an easily attained one. Facilitated by the necessary decentering of characters and narrator, he lets all—context, characters, narration, voices words, letters—dissolve into the play of language, creating a carnival.
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The power and significance that an inanimate object can hold is infinite according to the nineteenth-century cultural rituals of both native Africans and their American descendants. Within the belief systems of these black communities, every pain, both physical and emotional, can be cured by use of certain natural substances from the earth. For some ailments, grass clippings were adequate remedies. For others, tree bark was the key ingredient of the medicine. However, what was more remarkable than the advantages received from these environmental drugs was the faith placed in them by each and every member of the African community for this type of treatment was the only help on which they could rely. The unification of the black population, spurred by these beliefs, created cultural pathways along which these customs were passed. The African American community claimed sole possession of their particular cultural plight and of proposed solutions to it, and held that only members of that community were worthy of owning these items. Joseph Cinque’s tooth in Stephen Spielberg’s Amistad and Sandy Jenkin’s root in Frederick Douglass’ Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave serve as symbols of African culture, signifying hope, renewal, and freedom. It is because of this that these objects were passed on to Frederick Douglass and Theodore Joadson, who, despite their affinities with and assimilation into white society, identified themselves with black culture and were in need of its strength and power.
Because the African American community did not have the same medical or psychological aids as the European American society, its members were forced to rely on each other for survival. "... There was no justice in the courts for them and no regular source of financially reasonable medical aid from the white doctors in town" (Jackson 425). Therefore, blacks relied on hoodoo. Often referred to as voodoo, hoodoo can be sociologically defined as cultural practices that utilize natural surroundings, the only available resource, as tools, and that use intuition, the only available form of knowledge, as instruction. With these features in hand and mind, the ability to care for themselves and others became possible within the African American community. Present within every village were self-appointed conjurers and medicine-men, whose sole purpose was to provide their patients with folk medicine that alleviated their sicknesses or solved their predicaments. The mysteriously logical outcomes and consequences of 'primitive' medicine attracted those of African heritage to its practice. Hoodoo practices were rather commonplace, and it was understood that "... if the magic didn't work, it meant either that it was done imperfectly or that someone else was working something stronger" (419). In essence, it was the confirmed belief in the African ritual treatments that ensured their usage and endurance.

Evidence of this cultural practice can be seen in the lives of Sandy Jenkins, who appears in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave and Joseph Cinque, a historically based character in the 1998 film Amistad, who wholeheartedly placed their faith in the powers of a root and a tooth, respectively. Jenkins, an enslaved friend from a nearby plantation, existed as a devout supporter of hoodoo, defending its ability to assuage negative emotions. Therefore, when the enslaved Frederick Douglass approached Jenkins, carrying a heart full of fear and indecision, Jenkins' first reaction was to give him a root. Frederick Douglass received the empowered item after running away from his master. Because slaveholders did not tolerate disobedience, Douglass expected to be whipped upon returning to the plantation. Jenkins saw within the runaway slave a need for strength, and therefore supplied a folk medicine remedy that was believed to repel all harmful forces from its possessor. Acting as an African hoodoo doctor,
Jenkins explained to Douglass how holding the root on the right side of his body would “...render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip [him]” (Douglass 111).

Just as Douglass carried with him the root he received from Jenkins, Cinque carried with him at all times a long, narrow wooden tooth. A meaningful gift from Cinque’s wife, the cusp functioned as a supplier of fortitude and positive faith. As a hard-working Mende tribesman, Cinque relied heavily upon the strength and support of his precious tooth. The battles and struggles that he endured daily, combined with the ubiquitous possibility of enslavement, required him continuously to summon as much power as he could, by any means possible. The tooth’s significance to Cinque became evident when, upon discovering and retrieving it from aboard the vessel Amistad, he clutched it tightly in his palm. Obviously, Cinque’s and Jenkins’ keepsakes had deep ties to their personal and cultural identity and, thus, represented a part of their ethnicity.

The owners of African relics were eager to exchange their artifacts with others, since the continuance of their hoodoo practices was largely contingent upon the items’ passage from generation to generation and person to person. However, not everyone was worthy of the cultural icon. Before an individual could participate in this gift process, two implicit characteristics had to be identified within the potential receiver: his imperative need for help and, most importantly, his maintained cultural relation to the African Diaspora. As a fellow member of the African American and slave communities, Jenkins viewed Douglass as worthy of understanding and embracing African tradition. During a period in which many black laborers were physically distanced from their African homeland, any connection to or preservation of their African roots was honored and received as identification of membership within the black cultural community, where ideas and traditions were shared. Because Jenkins and Douglass underwent similar hardships in their experiences of bondage and racism, they were emotionally connected. As a result of their African descent, they shared similar circumstances. It was because of his cultural relation to the larger African
American community that Sandy Jenkins felt able to bestow his ethnic treasure upon Frederick Douglass.

Although appreciative of Jenkins' gift, Douglass was not completely confident that the root would render him successful in avoiding the lashings of his master's switch; in fact, he bluntly pronounced his skepticism when saying, "I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would have any such effect as he had said, and was not disposed to take it; . . . to please him, [though,] I at length took the root..." (111). Even when the relic seemed to have worked successfully and prevented him from receiving a beating from Mr. Covey, Douglass rationalized the occurrence, looking beyond the logical nature of this African hoodoo tradition. The proper castigation of a runaway, a severe beating in the public square, simultaneously humiliates the slave and publicly brands his master as a failure. According to Douglass, it was Mr. Covey's desire to be regarded as "... a first-rate overseer and negro-breaker..." (114), which prevented him from sending Douglass to the whipping-post for public reprimand.

Douglass's gradual assimilation into European American society caused him to question the folkloric component of his African culture. His omission of his cultural title in the title of his autobiography alludes to his personal separation from the African Diaspora and his assimilation into Anglo-American lifestyles. Douglass taught himself how to read and write, and was therefore on the educational level of whites, unlike most African slaves. He no longer had to rely on the folkloric beliefs of his ancestors for they were not his only means of survival; rather, literacy was his crutch, upon which he leaned for support, guidance, and strength. Additionally, his ability to read taught him how to think of the world in a different way and allowed him to create alternative explanations for his experiences. Having blind faith in the root's effects did not satisfy him because he now yearned for a detailed clarification of how it was able to work its magic. Without this knowledge, Douglass was forced to remain skeptical of hoodoo practices.
Douglass did not abandon all faith in the root, though. The slave clearly stated dissatisfaction with his own rationalization when asserting, "...The only explanation I can now think of does not entirely satisfy me..." (114). This statement implicitly hints at his attribution of his salvation to African hoodoo folklore, thereby showing some remaining faith in the root and, simultaneously, in his African culture. Douglass's inability to completely repudiate his belief in the root is one way in which his own personal roots and heritage express themselves within his persona. Its coincidental logic, a rationale to which many African descendants cling, resides within Douglass’ subconscious. Although Douglass had adopted an educated view of causality similar to that of European Americans, he still retained some part of his African culture.

Unlike Douglass, with his internal cultural disparity, the African Joseph Cinque and Theodore Joadson, an African-American Abolitionist, both believed themselves to be active members of the black community. Cinque's strides to free himself and his Mende people from unjust bondage in America paralleled Joadson's efforts to abolish slavery in the United States. However, Cinque personally renounced Joadson’s racial identity. From the outset, Cinque refused to view Joadson as worthy of receiving his African tooth, primarily because of the Abolitionist’s similarities to white men. His style of dress, means of transportation, and wealthy status caused the African slave to identify Joadson with whites rather than with blacks. Joadson’s inability to communicate with the Mende slaves also created a barrier between them, a dissimilarity which Cinque could not comprehend. Furthermore, Joadson was no longer forced to experience the adversities endured by blacks in slavery since he was a free man within the United States. Cinque, on the other hand, was not fortunate enough to receive this privilege and was still suffering from the racially motivated hierarchical structures present in America. To Cinque, being labeled an African male required possession of both African lineage and the unconscious assumption of what he deemed the universal characteristics of a black man. Joadson’s physical, verbal, and socioeconomic characteristics did not fit Cinque’s perceptions, motivating the Mende slave to reject acknowledgement of
Joadson's ancestral heritage. The numerous disparities caused a rift between Cinque and Joadson which neither could close.

Nevertheless, by the culmination of the movie, Cinque was able to see that he and Joadson did in fact hold something in common: cultural understanding. Joadson's willingness to fight for Cinque's cause proved that he identified and empathized with his plight; although they were not struggling with the same lifestyle, the unjust treatment endured by blacks was recognized and fully comprehended by both individuals.

In fact, Cinque realized that, although a free man, Joadson still needed strength and power to make it through each day. Even in the North in the late 1800s, blacks were not regarded as equal to whites, and Theodore Joadson had to deal with the problems of his inferior status within that society. Therefore, upon becoming a free man by the judgement of the Supreme Court, Cinque passed on his piece of African culture to Joadson, realizing that he too needed the power of the tooth "to keep [him] safe" (*Amistad*). Cinque's freedom granted him permission to return to his native country, where he would not have to fight adamantly against racism as he had in the United States. Cinque's decreased need for strength prompted him to pass on his source of power to Joadson, who remained in need of empowerment within the unharmonious American society. The bestowal of the tooth marked Cinque's recognition of Joadson's African descent.

The tooth in Spielberg's *Amistad* and the root in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* play important roles in the development of the African communal aspect of the movie and book. Not only do they illustrate transcendent cultural practices of native Africans, they also make discernible and serve to strengthen the relations formed between identifiable members of the African American population. It is through these cultural symbols that the reader is able to note Frederick Douglass's concurrent retention of both black and white methodologies and thought processes and that the viewer is able to witness Joadson's eventual acceptance in and recognition by Cinque's African society. Through these symbolic items, the tooth and the root, African cultural influences are defended to the audience, hoodoo believers and non-believers alike.
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A Reader’s Response to *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

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In the seventh grade class I visit on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, the students keep journals about their individual reading. A few weeks ago, the students were given the class period to exchange journals for reading and response. A few of the students gave their journals to me. I’ll never forget one student’s intriguing entry. It went something like: “I just finished the book ______. It was pretty good. I really liked it. I’m not sure why I really liked it, though. It didn’t have any metaphors, good descriptions, or [other literary terms] in it. But I liked it anyway.”

My written response to her entry reflected my own experience with the same feelings. I’d recently read a book to which I had the same reaction, and I had felt horribly guilty about it. It’s not an uncommon experience, actually. I often read a book that I honestly like and enjoy, and then I can’t find any “literary” reason to justify my response. I feel as though I shouldn’t even have read, much less appreciated a book without obvious literary merit. Sometimes, a literary work has formalist merit, and I find it enjoyable. I then justify my pleasure with the language I’m supposed to use, but then I’m stricken with the guilty thought: “Is this really what I enjoyed about the book?” Such was my response to James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

I enjoyed reading *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. I connected with it at the deepest and most ineffable level. This actually concerned me because the text itself was an assignment for my Literary Criticism
class. Since Literary Criticism is a required class where undergraduate English majors are expected to read and write about literature at the most critical level (often in a formalist style), I was certain that the amount of analysis I would have to perform in order to write formally about Baldwin's book would ruin my enjoyment of it.

I often feel as though for any given text assigned to me in a class, two very different readers encounter the literature. First, the person whom Nancie Atwell calls the "good reader" approaches the text with a pen in hand and a writing/discussion topic in mind. Simultaneously, the emotional, irrational me reads the text fully, with mental and emotional connections forming through a process of engagement. As every English major knows, these connections are never "scholarly" enough to include in literature class discussion. Yet these connections proved too strong to ignore when I read Baldwin's novel. As I read, I felt the secret, invisible reader overtake the "good reader's" analysis, and I wondered how I would ever write about the novel for class.

Writing about Baldwin from the stance of a "good reader" would have been an act. It would have required me to squelch my personal reaction to the text in order to write the expected response. But good writing is never such a lie. Risking a rebellion against most of what I've learned as an English major, for my analysis of James Baldwin I threw off the mantle of the "good reader," the "educated reader," the "implied reader" and so on, and responded to the novel truthfully. When I wrote the following piece of criticism, I allowed the second reader, the one whose opinions get voiced to close friends or written in a journal or sometimes are ignored completely, to critique Baldwin's novel.

My struggle between reading a text as an educated and faithful English major, looking like a "good reader," and the hidden emotional connection I keep out of sight is paralleled in Go Tell It on the Mountain. In Parts II and III, Florence, Gabriel, John, and Elizabeth go into the church and pray. Their bodies are in the proper praying position,
their voices articulate the right words, and they sing and chant. But as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the characters are not, in fact, praying in the traditional sense. They may look penitent, singing the right words, but what goes on in their minds is not the prayer and petition traditional within churches of American cultural backgrounds. They certainly don’t pray “Our Father who art in heaven,” but neither do they pray in their hearts the “Hallelujahs” that they shout. The matter of their prayers, the connection hidden from sight, is actually story. Through stories of times past, haunting mistakes, judgment, and people, they pray.

My initial response as I began reading the prayers was “This doesn’t sound like a prayer!” But as I began to think of my own faith, I realized that I pray in a very similar fashion. When I do not pray out loud, my head is usually bowed. I might be on my knees, and my eyes may be closed, but the prayer that is actually in my heart is not an “Our Father who art . . .”, nor even a “God, please . . .” The actual prayer is comprised of story. Stories of people I’ve met, of atrocities and evil, and of incidences in my past become hauntingly real to me as I pray. My heart cries out to God as my mind experiences these stories. This is how I pray.

Interestingly, it is also how I read. My pen in hand, glasses on, book in front of me, I look like the “good reader,” noticing and underlining key points, interesting metaphors, artistic language, and shocking allusions. But this is not a true reflection of how I’m reading. The underlying process of reading has little to do with what it looks like I’m doing, just as the real process of praying has little to do with what it looks like I might be “saying to God.” As I read, I encounter much more than the words on the page. I encounter stories and biases obtained from life experience, from other stories, and from education. As I read Baldwin, instead of just meeting new characters, encountering new experiences and ideals, or interesting myself in plot events, to a great extent, I end up reading and remembering my own story, thoughts, opinions, past reading, and people from my own life.
As each of the characters in Part Two "prayed," my reading of the text mimicked their praying styles. As I read the prayers of Florence, Gabriel, Elizabeth, and John, my own stories, experiences, and faith issues came to haunt me in such a way that I was reading them more than I was reading the events printed in the text. A different piece of me was revealed and renewed in each one of the prayers. Perhaps that's why I enjoyed this book so much. In a startlingly narcissistic way, I enjoyed this text, I derived great pleasure from this text, because I was really reading myself.

In Florence's prayer, I encountered my own feminism. Feminist is not a title under which I have willingly labeled myself in the past, but I have come to realize that in recent months, I read texts, not just from a woman's perspective, but from a feminist's perspective. In the male-dominated military communities where I grew up, I had a reputation for being strong-willed (for a girl), but not necessarily an advocate for my sex. Since leaving home, however, I have been outraged at the way my opinions and thoughts have been treated at times, simply because I am a woman. My outrage greets me as I read about Deborah and Florence and their status as women in a definitively patriarchal environment. Despite my attempts to forget my feminist bias, I read more of it when I read Florence's prayer than I read her own story.

In her prayer, Florence relived her own past, where Gabriel, her unworthy brother, took every ounce of respect and education she agonizingly desired. The passionate sense of injustice she felt when Gabriel was given every advantage she desperately desired overcame me as I read her story. My own stance as a feminist did not necessarily evolve from my own experiences. I began to view events and stories with a feminist's eye when I felt that other women were deprived of advantages because of their status as women. After reading Florence's story, I found myself asking whether my circumstances would favor me as much if I had a brother. I'm sure that my life would be greatly different. My father might never have taken me on all the adventures he did, including target shooting and camping trips. He might never have resorted to having his intellectual conversations and arguments
Tell It on the Mountain are the poems and stories I remember from African American literature. Those aspects of Gabriel’s past that are too foreign to my experiences to make a connection to my past make a connection to another character from my own literary experiences. Because literature is an important part of my life, this has a deep impact on the way I experience the text. If Gabriel’s story interacts readily with other texts, it becomes a part of me I cannot ignore, and will interact with my life and reading in the future.

As Elizabeth, Gabriel’s wife, prays her sad story, I shamefully admit that I find myself reading the men who have influenced my life. It shouldn’t be a shameful admission, but since I just revealed my feminist stance with my criticism of Deborah’s prayer, I feel as though to say that Elizabeth reminds me of men is to contradict myself. But, regardless of my previously stated bias, past male friends and boyfriends encounter me in the pages of her narrative. These men have had an impact on the way I see things, and this became most obvious as I encounter Elizabeth’s prayer. Elizabeth’s remembered relationship with Richard, John’s father who was seemed hopelessly lost from the beginning, reminds me of people whom I have loved who seemed beyond saving. These are the people who meet me most often in reading and in prayer.

Fittingly, John, whose story and prayer frame the narratives of the others, represents my college years. In Part I, his birthday, he ventures off on his own and allows himself to go into a forbidden movie theater and entertains secret thoughts to completion. His birthday discovery of free thought parallels my entrance into college where I discovered free thought in reading. Since entering college, I, like John, have allowed myself to entertain thoughts to completion. If, while reading, an interesting thought demands my attention, I’ll put aside my reading for a moment, and finish the thought. In doing so, I try not to say, “Stop thinking! You’re supposed to be reading!” I also try not to say restraining phrases left over from high school: “Don’t go down that road,” or “Don’t allow yourself to entertain that philosophy.” Even though I still find these restrictions in oral conversation, in the reading
with me. Florence forced me to question how different my life would be if a brother had been born after me. The thought frightens me, and I would prefer to ignore it, but it stares me in the face the entire time I read Florence’s prayer.

As I read Florence’s story, another part of me became exposed to my own scrutiny (and, it seems, Florence’s). She didn’t want to marry a man who desired her to become his little wife and work for his household her whole life. In her circumstances, she didn’t have much of an option, and ended up settling for a man who satisfied her sexually but kept her in the poverty she despised. My circumstances are nothing like the severity of Florence’s, but as an independent (proud?) single woman, I wonder about my own unwillingness to enter a relationship. Are my motives similar to hers? Perhaps not exactly, but my fears of becoming like her overcome the dissimilarities. In her prayer and the story of her past, I encounter my own fears of being alone, shrinking under the severity with which she examines her own choices.

In Gabriel, Florence’s brother, the past meets me. In the prayers of Florence I encounter my own beliefs and fears, but as Gabriel prays, I encounter my own history. Gabriel’s history is hidden deep in his soul, and his hypocrisy encounters him full force when he prays. Memories of my past experiences wash over me as I read Gabriel’s prayer in the same way that Gabriel’s memories run over him as he prays in my reading. The memories are not concrete, but rather images and sensations: reminders of past experiences. Growing up in a very transient environment taught me to treasure my memories more than any possession. I guard them with the passion with which Gabriel guards his own faith. When they are brought to my consciousness, a great joy and anguish fills me. I tell them to others or write them down as though they are Gabriel’s divine revelations, which must not be lost.

I also encounter other stories in Gabriel. In addition to memories of personal experiences, memories of literature I have read have a tendency to lead to emotional and intellectual connections with text while I read. The stories that most freely enter into my reading of Go
I often feel as though literature that I don’t encounter in this way has a negative, rather than positive, effect on me and the way I read. The “good reader” sometimes restrains me from submitting myself to the engagement that results in “true learning.” I finished Go Tell It on the Mountain with the euphoria of the experience of the text: the real conversion I seem to have gone through. Now, the “good” formalist reader stands like the skeptic, like John’s father, daring me to call my experience real, simultaneously implying that it’s not. As I finish this decidedly untraditional critique, I wonder how real or acceptable my experience is to the critical world of which I am now a part. John became a part of the church through an experience he felt was real, but the acceptance of his father was evasive. His father cast the same critical eye that the “good reader” now casts on me.
conversation I am free to follow the train of thought to its destination. It's why I'm such a slow reader. But it brings great meaning to the reading in which I engage. John's experiences in Part I seem to parallel this well. John's conversion experiences in Part III, the day after his birthday, represent the result of this.

Entertaining thoughts to completion is dangerous. Willingness to put my whole self into discovering truth means going through a lot of "darkness" until I "see the light." This applies well to the maturing of my Christian faith in college, and is also inextricably related to the maturing of my World View. As I develop philosophies (Hegelian "syntheses") I have to first tread through the frustration of not knowing, not understanding, and nearly despairing because I feel so alone in it. Finally, in what I have come to acknowledge as "true learning," I reach the light. This is true in my faith, as well as in my reading.

When I first encounter a book, it holds a plethora of mysteries. Once I realize the book has merit, I commit myself to gaining something from it, no matter what fires I am forced to struggle through in order to attain that purpose. I plunge into the depths of the story, allowing myself to be enveloped by its difference, its "darkness." I encounter myself in the pages, for good or for bad, and then I'm forced to examine my own ideas while in the depths of the book. At the last page (but not the end of the story), I find myself completely overwhelmed by what I have seen. Eventually, however, as I process, write, and decipher my own thoughts, I come to a light, a euphoria of knowing and learning which is, in truth, why I read.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, I descended into the depths of the book, reading prayers and encountering myself. As I continued to read, Baldwin's novel completely overcame me, becoming one of the only books I have ever been able to read while losing all the distractions of the world around me. In this paper, I began deciphering what this means to me, what I have learned about life, and what I have learned about myself. That's the euphoria of the light.
"Sleeping with One Eye Open":
Fear and Ontology in the Poetry of Mark Strand

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Mark Strand’s “Sleeping with One Eye Open,” one of his earliest poems and the first of his Selected Poems, is indicative of the fear, darkness, and anxiety that permeate all of Strand’s work. Here, surrounded by a world at ease, unusually still and “unmoved,” the speaker describes his own contrasting anxiety. “It’s my night to be rattled,/ Saddled/ With spooks,” he says. The room we visit as readers is “clammy and cold,/ Moonhandled/ and weird,” and waiting out the night, the speaker lies in his bed, “[s]leeping with one eye open,/ Hoping/ That nothing, nothing will happen” (SP 1).

This fear—this continual anxiety—is typical Strand. Like few poets of our time, Strand has the uncanny ability to draw forth and make manifest the darkness that lingers beneath the surface of our quiet lives and to stir up the dust of possibilities. For Strand, the world is a place of perpetual mystery; its beauties are marked by a temporality and impermanence and “the worst is always waiting/ Around the next corner or hiding in the dry,/ Unsteady branch of a sick tree, debating,/ Whether or not to fell the passerby” (SP 6). Strand is keenly aware of the tenuous nature of our lives, and the title of his poem—the title also of his first book—seems to suggest a preferred ontological state, a way of existing where the ever present, often frightening mysteries of the world are both revealed and created. Sleeping with one eye open, in a perpetual state of both dream and wakefulness, Strand is granted a rare and frightening entry into a world unvisited or rarely visited by others.
to flounder in the stillness of your wake.

Your suit floating, your hair
moving like eel grass
in a shallow bay, you drifted
out of the mirror’s room, through the hall
and into the open air. (SP 24)

Although the speaker is moved to a series of elegiac passions and pleadings for the return of his reflection, very little seems to happen in this poem; and when his reflection returns, like “a huge vegetable moon,/ a bruise coated with light,” it seems that little has really changed since the opening of the poem. The other room, the mirror’s room, which the speaker wishes to reach, where he wishes to hide, remains unreachable, while his old self, his old reflection has been replaced by a new vision, “dreamlike and obscene,” and Strand ends his poem with these telling words:

It will always be this way.
I stand here scared
that you will disappear,
scared that you will stay.

Strand’s speaker is immobilized by his fear yet desirous, nonetheless, for the mysteries that lie behind the mirror: his other self and the mirror’s dark room. Whether his reflection stays or leaves, the fear remains, and having created this fear, through his own questioning of the unquestionable, through his own continual deferral rather than acceptance of the world, Strand creates a hypersensitive state of being, groundless, where everything becomes questionable and nothing can be taken for granted.

For Strand, the creation of this groundlessness is the necessary first step toward any kind of transcendence, and in *Darker*—an appropriately titled collection—Strand continues to explore the fear, darkness, and anxiety at the center of our lives. But unlike his first two books, *Darker* is marked by a more aggressive sense of action; less passive, Strand’s speaker, his doppelganger of sorts, has begun to seek
out the darkness more consciously. In "The Dress," for instance, Strand depicts the sense of a willful movement toward negation:

Lie down on the bright hill
with the moon's hand on your cheek,
your flesh deep in the white folds of your dress,
and you will not hear the passionate mole
extending the length of his darkness,
or the owl arranging all of the night,
which is his wisdom, or the poem
filling your pillow with its blue feathers.
But if you step out of your dress and move
into the shade
the mole will find you, so will the owl,
and so will the poem,
and you will fall into another darkness, one
you will find
yourself making and remaking until it is perfect.

In contrast to the many poems of his previous collections there is also a recognizable sense of hope in this poem. Strand has begun to embrace the unknowable and the impermanent, and the potential for revision present here, the ability of "making and remaking until it is perfect," seems to capture Strand's own sense of the possibility of change. Unlike "The Man in the Mirror," where the speaker is helplessly confronted with the slow and unstoppable loss of his self, Strand's speaker finds instead a more positive sense of change.

Regarding this movement in Darker, David Kirby, the only critic to date having written a full volume on Strand's poetry, has said that:

Both anxiety and enlightenment are present in Darker. The title may be deceptive, however; the proportion of dark to light is changing, and without knowing it, Strand's personae is on the verge of an important realization: that the poetry, which has seemed merely an
eloquent expression of his disquiet, is actually a means of remediying it. (21)

Kirby is correct in observing that Strand’s poetry is indeed beginning a slow movement toward enlightenment. He is also correct in observing that Strand’s poetry has become a means of remedy for the fear in his life. But what Kirby does not mention, and what seems essential to any discussion of Strand’s process, is the fact that Strand’s poems are not only a remedy for this “disquiet” but also a conscious creation of that state. For Strand the state of fear achieved in his poems is not only representative of his many entries into the dark and the mysterious but it is also the means by which to achieve this entry. The fear in Strand’s poetry creates a state of anxiety which inevitably leads to a confrontation with that fear and when these two collide, the world of fixed possibilities, of certainty and stagnancy is thrown into flux and change.

Looking closely again at “The Dress,” we can see that Strand sets up a conscious opposition between the first and second sentences of the poem. This opposition coincides with the contradictory elements of light and dark, and there is an immediate conflict in the poem between these two elements. In the first sentence the speaker describes the moon’s light and the bright hill while in the second he points to the unknown world that lies hidden in the darkness. The descriptions of the moon caressing the subject’s cheek and the “white folds” of the dress suggest an ominous, perhaps false sense of comfort and ease. But this comfort, suggests the speaker, only keeps us from the real beauties and mysteries of the night: “the poem/ filling your pillow with its blue feathers.” To be at ease—content on the bright hill—is to lack desire, and to lack desire is to live without a future.

It is in the second sentence that Strand reveals the true goal of the poem and of his whole poetics thus far. Whether Strand intended the symbol or not, he is the “the mole,” and his process, like the blind, “passionate” mole burrowing through darkness, is to move continually inward and away from the light. “On the bright hill,” there is only the “moon’s hand.” But, Strand suggests, stepping out of our clothes and
moving naked into the darkness, we find both the poem and the possibility of revision, of remaking the world. Out of the darkness, Strand carefully creates a world of unknown possibilities, where the owl (who hunts only at night), the mole (which spends its life beneath the bright hill), and even the poem, exist in a constantly shifting state of revision, a chaos from which comes a more formal creation.

Strand’s aim in these poems thus far has been a conscious form of negative transcendence. Strand’s figures are always moving away from the light and sometimes joyously, sometimes unwillingly into the dark. It is as if Plato’s parable were wrong, and the truth, the ideal, lies not in the bright sunlight outside the cave, but in the obscure, deceptive movements of the shadows on the wall. Outside, in the light, having never visited the dark, one is as blind and mistaken as the cave dweller. Strand seeks a glimpse of both these worlds in his poetry, but it is the movement toward darkness and the fearful joy of the unknown that are the most necessary step in his progress toward both revision and possibility. The bright and the unobscured, the delineated aspects of a comfortable world without shadows and without mystery, are Strand’s real nightmare: a tempting but ultimately false deception. Assaulted by the fear of the emptiness of life, Strand does not cling to trivial philosophies or theology. Instead he embraces this emptiness in an attempt to lose and then regain both his self and sanity. It is a baptism of fire, a continual catharsis, a revision; and constantly in pursuit of both meaning and meaninglessness, Strand’s poetry wavers between a type of fearful awe and disgust of the darkness. But Strand knows the necessary and literary steps for redemption, and his process becomes the hero’s journey through hell and back again.

In “The Way It Is” Strand moves through a self-created, self-inflicted nightmare world of horror and disgust. The epigraph to the poem is from Wallace Stevens: “the world is ugly/ And the people are sad,” (SP 79) pointing to an imaginative deficit perhaps, but one cannot help but think of Sartre’s No Exit and the dictum that “hell is other people.” The poem, as opposed to the others examined thus far, seems to be outward looking, but Strand describes this world from only the
most subjective point of view.

I lie in bed.  
I toss all night  
in the cold unruffled deep  
of my sheets and cannot sleep.

My neighbor marches in his room,  
wearing the sleek  
mask of a hawk with a large beak.  
He stands by the window. a violet plume  
rises from his helmet’s dome.  
The moon’s light  
spills over him like milk and the wind rinses the white  
glass bowls of his eyes. (SP 79)

Beginning with the “I” and moving outward from there, this poem also resembles “Sleeping with One Eye Open.” Again, the speaker is in bed, awake and unable to sleep—a common syndrome of Strand’s speakers—and again he finds himself subject to a host of unwanted visions. His neighbor is a type of vicious nationalist, “waving a small American flag” in the park, and the world outside becomes an infernal place of murder and torment. Unlike his neighbor, though, whose nationalism, self-interest, and sensuality have made him blind and immune to the suffering going on around him, Strand’s speaker-hero looks helplessly on this world of horror as if to gain some insight from its suffering. The world the speaker sees is not a real world, it is not the simple reconstruction of history or politics, it does not refer to the age he inhabits, but is an imagined world, an interior world in which the exterior world is redrafted and reevaluated, judged in an interior drama, which judges itself equally. Strand imagines himself “...in the park/ on horseback, surrounded by dark,/ leading the armies of peace” and realizes that “[e]veryone who has sold himself wants to buy himself back.” It is here where Strand draws a momentary insight from his exploration of this dark interior scene. It is the one nugget of wisdom for which Strand’s
speakers are inevitably searching, the one hard truth that comes from facing our fears and the unknowable without hesitation. The speaker realizes he has also sold himself; his vision of this world is a psychological projection of his own fears and, recognizing the horror of the exterior world, he recognizes, too, the horror of his own.

As Strand's poetry progresses, though, so does his resolve to stand in the face of this darkness and to watch and discover. In the poem "In Celebration," a somewhat but not entirely ironic title, Strand's hero speaks to us again, telling the reader, the "you," that there is celebration in this darkness. "You know..." says the speaker,

... That this is the celebration, the only celebration, that by giving yourself over to nothing, you shall be healed. You know there is joy in feeling your lungs prepare themselves for an ashen future, so you wait, you stare and wait, and the dust settles and the miraculous hours of childhood wander in darkness. (SP 91)

This is a fascinating poem. Strand's power for negative capability, his ability to praise even that that destroys us and to embrace and confront the emptiness at the center of our lives, is remarkable. This is the only possible response to the world that Strand envisions and inhabits, and as the speaker says, it is "the ONLY celebration," all other celebration being false, and is the culmination of many of the ideas in his previous books. Even more than in "Giving Myself Up" and "The Remains" in his previous volume, Strand's speaker empties himself completely and sits miraculously at ease in the center of that emptiness. In the poem "In Celebration" Strand knows, just as he did in "Sleeping with One Eye Open," that "by giving yourself over to nothing, you shall be healed." This is the negative transcendence at the heart of Strand's poetics where the taste of "absence" is "honey," and "there is joy in feeling your lungs prepare themselves for an ashen future." As opposed to an ecstatic and
revelatory joy, such as we might find in the early poems of Walt Whitman, Strand’s speaker becomes, instead, like the quenched flame the Buddhist calls nirvana. Emptied completely of ego, Strand’s speaker sits in a perpetual state of quiet celebration, embracing the slow and inevitable destruction of his self.

Alas, Strand’s transcendence is never truly a nirvanic moment. Perhaps Strand senses the limitations of any such simple transcendence for he continually wavers between an attraction to and repulsion of this darkness and fear; he celebrates his own slow destruction as an inevitable part of his life, yet continues to question and interrogate this celebration. For Strand there is always more to the story than meets the eye, and in “The Story of Our Lives,” instead of praising the stillness and the inevitable approach of death, Strand’s characters instead seek to “move beyond the book” of their lives. The wish for perpetual stillness—the desire that “nothing will happen”—which dominates many of Strand’s earlier poems and seems to characterize “In Celebration,” is counterbalanced in this volume and later volumes by a continual desire for more, which is less. The characters in this poem, instead of joyously accepting the predetermined nature of their lives, sitting back and allowing the inevitable to pass, wish instead for something more, “something like mercy or change,/ a black line that would bind us/ or keep us apart.” Instead of the fear of possibility, Strand has moved forward into a fear of stagnancy, and the via negativa, Strand’s slow refusal of self and life becomes instead a means of continual creation.

In “The Story of Our Lives,” from the volume of the same title, Strand has made of his own characters a world not unlike the vision of his own world. But again, by a negative deferral of their own lives, by giving themselves over to the book, like the poem “In Celebration,” Strand’s characters are granted the rare opportunity to step outside their predicated lives and look with both wonder and fear upon themselves. Just as Strand abstracts himself in “The Man in the Mirror,” in order to gaze more honestly on himself, in order to engender the necessary fear for that confrontation, the speaker of this poem does the same. Instead of looking at the world from the inside out, they are reading the story of
their own lives as if they were reading the story of someone else: "We are reading the story of our lives," says the speaker,

as though we were in it,
as though we had written it.
This comes up again and again.
In one of the chapters
I lean back and push the book aside
because the book says
it is what I am doing.
I lean back and begin to write about the book.
I write that I wish to move beyond the book,
beyond my life into another life.
and then later,

The book will not survive.
We are the living proof of that.
It is dark outside, in the room it is darker.
I hear your breathing.
You are asking me if I am tired,
if I want to keep reading.
Yes, I am tired.
Yes, I want to keep reading. (SP 97, 98)

Again, Strand's speaker becomes the stoic seeker of the dark and unknowable, moving determined through his fear as through a thick field of brush, slowly clearing a path, but toward what he does not know. "Yes," he says, "I am tired," but "Yes, I want to keep reading." The speaker has become addicted to his life, trapped by the story of his life, and the desire to move beyond can only be achieved by a radical questioning of both the book and his self. But the speaker's insights and his desire for more are only achieved after he has already stepped outside of his self, abstracted his own life and the life of his mate, in order to know and perhaps overcome the inherent stagnancy of that life. Yet still, as with all of Strand's poems, there is no end, no real transcendence, no nirvana, but only the desire for and the process of question and revision.
As Strand writes, in one of the most powerful and disturbing stanzas of his career:

They sat beside each other on the couch.  
They were the copies, the tired phantoms of something they had been before.  
The attitudes they took were jaded.  
They stared into the book and were horrified by their innocence, their reluctance to give up.  
They sat beside each other on the couch.  
They were determined to accept the truth.  
Whatever it was they would accept it.  
The book would have to be written and would have to be read.  
They are the book and they are nothing else.  \(SP 102, 103\)

"The Untelling" is similar in tone and intention. The character here—and I say character because Strand’s poems so often have a narrative, almost parable-like feel to them—is plagued by a repeated scene from his childhood—one he wishes to capture and record in proper form—but at every attempt he is balked by a sense of the falsity of his own words.

It bothered him,  
as if too much had been said.  
He would have preferred the lake without a story, or no story and no lake.  
His pursuit was a form of evasion: the more he tried to uncover the more there was to conceal the less he understood. \(SP 108\)

Just as the speaker in "The Dress" makes and remakes the darkness to perfection, the character of the "The Untelling" attempts to revisit and
remake his own past. In direct contrast to the “Story of Our Lives,” the character here is in control of his own story; but wrapped up in the telling, wrapped up in memory and the attempt to record the truth as it really was, the character continually fails. Only through sleep and darkness does he find that he finally enters the landscape of his writing. Then and only then does he sit down to write the final version of “The Untelling.”

He felt himself at that moment to be more than his need to survive, more than his losses, because he was less than anything. He swayed back and forth. The silence was in him and it rose like joy, like the beginning. When he opened his eyes, the silence had spread, the sheets of darkness seemed endless, the sheets he held in his hand. He turned and walked to the house. He went to the room that looked out on the lawn. He sat and began to write:

THE UNTELLING
To the Woman in the yellow Dress. (SP 112)

The movement of Strand’s character in “The Untelling” is a conscious movement through dream and word to achieve the insight necessary to write one’s life. Just as the characters of “The Story of Our Lives” are given a glimpse of themselves from the outside, the character of this poem achieves a similar state of abstraction by entering the darkness of his own book, his own words.

Moving forward, The Late Hour, like Strand’s other titles, points
toward the progression into and through the darkness of his poetry. This is an important volume in Strand’s career, for none of his future titles, excepting *Dark Harbor*, make any mention of darkness or fear. *The Continuous Life* and his most recent *A Blizzard of One*, seem to operate on a post-anxiety level. We can see in *The Late Hour*, the last of Strand’s darker volumes, a slow movement through and acceptance of this darkness. Strand, in this and his following volumes, has finally reconciled himself to the dark. The anxiety and fear seen previously, though necessary steps, have become less frightening and more natural aspects of his life, and in “The Coming of Light” we can see a radical change in Strand’s poetics. Finally, after the years of darkness and forced confrontation with this dark, Strand is granted a rare vision of light:

Even this late it happens:
the coming of love, the coming of light.
You wake and the candles are lit as if by themselves, stars gather, dreams pour into your pillows, sending up warm bouquets of air.
Even this late the bones of the body shine and tomorrow’s dust flares into breath. (*SP* 115)

There is a marked difference of tone in this poem compared to Strand’s earlier lyrics. Instead of “The closets of his unhappiness,” and the “black grass,” and “the black stars” of the poems of *Darker*, “The Coming of Light” reveals an optimism unseen in Strand’s poetry thus far. No longer looking toward the future as a place of perpetual darkness and fearful possibility, the speaker sees the proverbial “dust” of tomorrow and the dust of his own body as it “flares into breath.” Practically all the poems of *The Late Hour* make reference to light, just as many of the poems from *Sleeping with One Eye Open* made reference to the dark. In “Seven Days” each day is marked by a particular quality of light, and in “Snowfall” Strand finally finds what the speaker calls “the negative of night.” But like “The Dress” and “In Celebration,” this is a temporary, though not unimportant transition. There remains in these poems the ever-present night, and the light that he finds is followed always by a direct contemplation of the dark. In the last day of “Seven
Days” the speaker walks “late at night” in “the odor of roses” and contemplates “the old stars falling and the ashes of one thing and another.” Looking back on a dark past and looking forward to “the dream of light” going on without him, Strand’s hero continues his journey through the late night of his life.

In “Always,” a poem from The Continuous Life, Strand’s sixth collection, he returns again to the cold logic of Wallace Stevens’ “The Snow Man,” contemplating “the nothing that is” (303). Strand continues his search for a negative transcendence, but in “Always,” this transcendence is achieved not by deferral but by a very casual forgetting. “The forgetters,” as Strand calls them, were always “hard at work.”

They tilted their heads to one side, closing their eyes.  
Then a house disappeared, and a man in his yard  
With all his flowers in a row.  
The great forgetters wrinkled their brows.  
Then Florida went and San Francisco  
Where tugs and barges leave  
Small gleaming scars across the bay. (CL 30)

Strand continues from here until both North and South America, Japan, Bulgaria, and even the moon itself are gone, forgotten in a casual sitting round, drinking, smoking, and talking. Unlike his earlier lyrics, which required a conscious approach to the darkness, the negation in this poem is as casual as an evening with friends. This type of stripping away has become an intimate and continual part of the speaker’s life, as the title “Always” suggests, and at the heart of this negation, the center, which can only be called dark—or pure light, which is the blinding equivalent of the dark—is the always pursued possibility of Strand’s poetics: “the blaze of promise everywhere.” Strand has finally achieved, in this volume and his next (A Blizzard of One), the final goal of his poetics: to live in a world of constant creation and re-creation.

In “A.M.,” a very similar poem, Strand is again at the exact end of the night, the morning hours where he embraces the coming of
the day. After the many books of dark and fear-filled images, Strand’s hero moves easily now into the light, avoiding what he calls the “damages of night.” Yet, near the end of the poem, we see that the sun’s rays reveal a world that is, if not equally, then nearly as dark and frightening as the previous night.

...How well the sun’s rays probe
The rotting carcass of a skate, how well
They show the worms and swarming flies at work,
How well they shine upon the fatal sprawl
Of everything on earth.... (CL 5)

Strand, as only Strand can, has turned his whole philosophy on its own head; and just as he managed to celebrate “how the lungs prepare themselves for an ashen future” in his poem “In Celebration, Strand achieves a similar negative capability by his stoic acceptance and praise of this death-revealing light. This light, which reveals so much to us about a world we never see, is similar, though, to Strand’s earlier process. Strand’s movements into the dark and his constant curiosity and need to reveal and experience the darker images of the world are similar to the sun’s own ability to reveal the death and “fatal sprawl” of the earth. In the late poems of Strand, the stillness of his poetics remains; but his stoicism, his ability to stand in the face of fear, darkness, death, and the loss of his own self, has changed from an anxiety-filled yet determined stance, to a more casual, almost nonchalant, sophisticated, and perhaps ironical awareness of life.

This new awareness: the casual stance of the veteran hero back from his many journeys, is finely illustrated in Strand’s most recent volume A Blizzard of One. Strand has always known the impossibility of his task; his many descents into the depths of fear, his confrontation with the dark and nothingness of our lives has been a perpetual movement from dark to light and back to the dark again. From these many poems, these many journeys, Strand’s greatest insight, though, is the realization of the necessity of that journey. Strand has not given up questioning, nor has he given up his continual confrontation with what is. He has not given up his method, but has come to the perfection of
that method. The state of fear which defined Strand’s early poetics has
been replaced and overcome by a state of negative capability, where he
neither praises nor fears the unknown. In “The Night, The Porch,” an
early poem in Strand’s latest volume, we see the speaker continue the
approach toward nothing.

TO STARE at nothing is to learn by heart
What all of us will be swept into, and baring oneself
To the wind is feeling the ungraspable somewhere close by.
Trees can sway or be still. Day or night can be what they wish.
What we desire, more than a season or weather, is the comfort
Of being strangers, at least to ourselves. This is the crux
Of the matter, which is why even now we seem to be waiting
For something whose appearance would be its vanishing—
The sound, say of a few leaves falling, or just one leaf,
Or less. There is no end to what we can learn. The book
out there
Tells us as much, and was never written with us in mind.

(BO 10)

These final lines are strikingly similar to Strand’s earlier poem
“Taking A Walk With You” in Sleeping with One Eye Open. In this
earlier poem, Strand says,

The tree we lean against
Was never made to stand
For something else,
Let alone ourselves.
Nor were these fields
And gullies planned
With us in mind. (SP 9)

I mention this in order to help make meaning of this particular poem but
also to show the consistency of Strand’s thought throughout his career.
Both poems point to an uncaring reality outside the speaker and both
point to a state of abandonment that is received with stoic calm. Again,
it is this void, this place that was not made for us nor cares for us, that
the speaker finds himself questioning. It is also the state of being that both allows and creates this questioning. In this world, free from the teleology of fate, where accident is more common than destiny, Strand’s speakers, instead of giving in to the numbing effects of nihilism, find instead the freedom of possibility. When Strand asks us to “stare at nothing” and to bare ourselves to the wind in order to feel “the ungraspable somewhere close by,” it is to this ontological state—this place of being that is not ours, where we are strangers even to ourselves—that Strand takes us. To desire “the comfort / of being strangers,” to ourselves is to step outside the self into a world of constantly shifting possibilities where, freed from expectation and the choking hold of a predicated self, we move from the darkness of the world into the light of nothing. In Strand’s own words, following a line of Rainer Maria Rilke’s:

“I would like to step out of my heart’s door and be
Under the great sky.” I would like to step out
And be on the other side, and be part of all
That surrounds me. I would like to be
In that solitude of soundless things, in the random
Company of the wind, to be weightless, nameless.

But not for long, for I would be downcast without
The things I keep inside my heart; and in no time
I would be back, Ah! the old heart

In which I sleep, in which my sleep increases, in which
My grief is ponderous, in which the leaves are falling,
In which the streets are long, in which the night

Is dark, in which the sky is great, the old heart
That murmurs to me of what cannot go on,
Of the dancing, of the inmost dancing.

(Dark Harbor 20)
Works Cited


Submission Guidelines

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- one to contain title of work only
- one to contain author's name; address (both local and permanent); phone number & email address; name and address of college or university; name and department of endorsing professor.

Professor's note that the work is original with the student for a specific course.

Length: 5-20 pages.

Typeface: Times Roman 12 pt.

Materials will not be returned. SASE for results.

Postmark Deadline: February 5 (or nearest business day) for submissions.

Notification: March 31.

No electronic submissions.

Send inquiries and submissions to:

Tom Mack, Ph.D. or Phebe Davidson, Ph.D.
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Aiken, SC 29801

Email to: tomm@aiken.sc.edu or phebed@aiken.sc.edu (inquiries only)