

A Good Place for a Pump and a Dump (December 2005)

The critic Norman Holland believes that a literary work is something we turn to in order to satisfy “rather unsavory wish[es]” (104), without alarming our conscious ego or superego censors. We might expect such a viewpoint from a critic heavily influenced by psychoanalytic thought, and it is one I will use as the basis of my exploration of Bertram Brooker’s *Think of the Earth*. I contend that for certain readers this book can serve as a fueling site, a place where oral needs for attendance and love are satisfied, and also as a dumping site, a place where undesired aspects of oneself can, if only temporarily, be expunged from one’s system.

Freudians, who understand everyone’s psyche as similarly structured—id, ego, and superego—still of course accept that human beings are not then a homogenous lot. They would *of course* acknowledge that some texts better serve a particular reader’s therapeutic needs than others would. And who might best make use of *Think of the Earth*? The reader would have to be one who could readily imagine himself akin to Tavistock, for in order to make best use of this book a reader must be able to use him as a proxy. So most certainly he will be male, and very likely, college educated—someone who possesses a liberal education and/or is familiar with at least some of the Great Books. This person will be in his twenties and thirties, that is, just beyond the age where excessive periods of pensive contemplation is only to be expected and maybe even appropriate, and who is (or at least feels that he is) beset by members of an older generation asking him what he’s going to do with his life. And, most importantly, this person (hereafter: “ideal reader”) will have a substantial need for self-validation.

If you can imagine oneself as Tavistock, you can for the duration of the book situate yourself amongst a provincial, primitive surround, possessed of admirable “sunsets” (81) but absent anyone who might draw or write about them at all well. So *why* on earth would you want that? The sad answer is because the ideal reader of this book is not only unsatisfied, he is insecure, and therefore couldn’t bear it if for the duration of the book Tavistock was placed amongst those equally gifted young men the Canon was once familiar with (during his College years). Situated in this particular setting, however, the ideal reader is well placed to easily imagine himself affecting people in the same way we are told the sudden sight of an unusual tree had upon

those who had never see its like before: that is, as if hereto they had never before known anything “tall, [anything] [. . .] that soars, [anything] [. . .] mysterious” (80).

These provincials not only contrast very nicely with Tavistock, they also recognize and appreciate his ostensible substantial depth and greatness, his real humanity. Gregory, the foreman, for instance, had many discussions with Webb concerning Tavistock, and came to conclude that though “[h]e’s high and mighty, [. . .] “there[’s] [. . .] [also] something gosh-awful human” (28) about him. Fetterly, the lawyer, we are told, “looked at Tavistock as though he suspected him of being out of his mind, but in the burning eyes there was a light of compassion so contagious that his manner immediately softened” (45). Gawthorpe, the editor of the *Monitor*, decides that “[t]here is a queer kind of magnetism about him [Tavistock], even in repose” (124), and eventually that “[h]e had never felt such sympathy for anybody in his life,” that “[h]e is a wonderful fellow,” that he’d never met such a fellow” (127).

Each one of these men should be counted amongst the town’s most respected citizens, and the text attends far more closely to their reactions to Tavistock than to anyone else’s. Indeed, the two most respected men in town, the Canon and Dr. Bundy—two men who cannot walk public streets without “[p]eople hush[ing] their chatter as they went by, ready to nod or speak if either of them should glance their way” (13)—judge Tavistock a profound, deep-feeling, sensitive man. The Canon is also awed by Tavistock’s vitality. The doctor, thought by many to be Tavistock’s intellectual equal, does not react reverantly to him until the very end of the text, but he does do so. With all the textual attention to how people come to respect Tavistock, the ideal reader cannot be one who really wants to detach himself from society. He might, like Goethe’s young Werther, slip further into his inner self, or link himself to celestial and/or literary patriarchal orders; but his greatest wish is to be brought down to earth and count himself amongst an earthly one. But he would want this only when the time is right, specifically, only when the text makes clear that most work is just busy acquisitiveness, and only after the notable elder townsmen consider him more someone to be respected than someone who hasn’t yet amounted to much.

We note that these men respect Tavistock, not simply owing to his intensity and profundity but because they sense in him a profoundly generous, selfless nature. They assess him as someone who is sensitive to other people’s pains, and who intends to do all he can to do away with as much of it as possible. Basic and base desires, held by most, have no hold on him: he is quite willing to divest himself of his family

fortune if it might help Linklater's grandchildren. He is the perfect person for the ideal reader to identify with, for the ideal reader, despite his immense need for attention, cannot admit to the enormity of this need, cannot admit to using the text to satisfy this need, without thereby arousing the disapproving attention of his superego—always alert, as it is, to press down with guilt the rising of any such deeply felt need to indulge. The text enables him to think of himself as selfless—as Tavistock—while all the while actually satisfying his need for worship-like interest and attention.

Tavistock *does*, however, admit to feelings of egotism. He admits to himself that, concerning the great act he would do for humanity, he “had looked past the act to its consequences,” that he had enjoyed imagining himself “a man whose life and death would be looked back to by countless generations” (248). But this comes at the end of the text, that is, *after* his ability to attend to those in need has already been demonstrated and/or referred to, and just *before* the omniscient narrator informs the reader of how Tavistock had divested himself of all egotistical motivations. But he still admits to being needy. Would this admittance arouse the ideal reader's punitive superego? Likely not. For even if Tavistock's owning-up to selfish needs might draw the ideal reader to attend to and reflect upon his own neediness, upon how his own needs are being satisfied, quite possibly, at this point of the text, the reader feels absent any desire in need of a punitive hemming-in.

Tavistock's ostensible goal is to wipe the world clean of its guilt; the text provides means for the ideal reader to be cleansed of any he felt loaded down with. It accomplishes this by providing him with another proxy, one he can use to dump all aspects of himself he would be rid of—Harry. Both Tavistock and Harry are likened to one another, which makes it easy for the reader to split off all his good qualities into Tavistock and all his bad into Harry. Both are charismatic. Both are familiar with the arts (a rarity in that part of the world). Both have “been places,” and are the subject of Laura's keen interest. And both are in fact initially assessed in the very same fashion—as high and mighty. But the key difference between them is that while Tavistock's ostensible real depth and worth eventually becomes apparent to those who get to know him, those who get to know Harry come to think of him as a superficial jerk.

So though Tavistock contends there is no such thing as good and evil, the text actually encourages this binary: there is Good—Tavistock, absent of all id desires—and also Evil—Harry, in possession of nothing else. The reader can identify with

Tavistock and enjoy, with the disposal of their now pollutant-filled proxy, feeling delightfully absent of sin.

If the ideal reader is someone who wants to feel clean and virtuous, one should ask if Tavistock's intention to murder someone (even if to effect greater good) means rather fewer of them exist to take advantage of the book than I've made seem the case. In my judgment, however, ideal readers might still not mind identifying with Tavistock, despite his murderous intent, for they would understand his desire to murder as a risky but still necessary means to address their proxy's gentleness, which could readily be mistaken for insufficient manliness, for impotence. Tavistock conveys the ideal reader's concern that he needs to do more with his life, that he needs to act more and think less. And, given that the reader must attend to others' appraisals of their proxy as "nurse[-like]" (29) and "womanish" (30), given that he must endure having not just hapless Pitt but manly Ruff, the Russian revolutionary, think him too gentle to harm anyone, he is no doubt pleased that everyone who thought they knew him, including Pitt and Ruff, come to believe him fully capable of murder.

But though the ideal reader wants to be thought of as a man, this isn't to say he's averse to being associated with strong women. Tavistock admits at one point that his purpose in life had been profoundly moved by his mother's lineage, that "his long held idea belonged to the cold Maunders, after all" (208). And it is through drawing on his *mother's* influence, upon her cold but potent strength, that he feels empowered to "confront Death and 'stare him out'" (208), "to face the idea of murder—in cold blood" (255). To chill his blood to murder, he might be drawing on Clara's strength as well—on her "cold vehemence," which he admits "could chill his blood even now" (38). Since he admits there is "truth" behind Clara's assertion that "a man who cannot kill is only half a man" (255), and that he was surprised by her preference of Pitt over himself, we know that Tavistock wants to be thought capable of murder so he can make claim to her full respect.

With their being portrayed as cold and powerful, as haunting, determining, and empowering Tavistock's present purpose, Tavistock's mother and Clara are described in such a similar manner we should take them as being the same thing, both mother-figures, this is, with Clara simply being a duplicate, a proxy, of his mother, manifested in his early adulthood. The needy ideal reader would be someone denied the love he needed from a mother incapable of well attending to him—the primary source of his

long-lingering need for attention. This mother wouldn't have attended to his needs because she needed him to satisfy her own, and when he moved apart, he experienced his mother's anger and dissatisfaction, i.e., "the cold vehemence" of her nature. He is drawn to obtain her respect and love, but also to associate himself with her strength, so he can see himself as capable of defending himself against her sadism, something not sufficiently well accomplished by running away or by associating himself with biblical, literary, or earthly patriarchies.

The ideal reader would have to be one, then, who though he seeks to establish himself amongst a patriarchal order, most certainly doesn't mind keeping some links to a matriarchal one. He would also have to be one who could bear having *a woman* almost be responsible for the action his proxy believes will accomplish his great gift to mankind—that is, he would have to be one who doesn't mind that the text plays with having *Laura* be the one who performs the miracle of committing murder while remaining sinless. The ideal reader would not be troubled by this, however, and in fact would be delighted by it. For, however briefly, *Laura* is likened to the reader's (and Tavistock's) cold mother, and Harry inflicts upon her the one action the ideal reader's superego cannot see effected without also needing to see crushed: namely, he is allowed to rage at her for her lack of warmth—for her not adequately attending to his needs.

Laura is accused by Harry of being "grudging and cold" (199), a crime Harry intends to punish her for: "You will listen to me. [. . .] You're out here and you're gong to stay out here till you've heard what I've got to say" (199-200). And though *Laura* is elsewhere in the text described as gentle and attendant, we note that just before we learn of Harry accosting her, she, like Tavistock's mother, like *Clara*, is also described as being able to control others through her coldness—specifically, through the coldness of her tone (198). Moreover, just pages afterwards, the text helps establish the link between *Laura* and Tavistock's mother by having Tavistock dream of "his mother's face—and *Laura*'s—[. . .] [being] queerly mixed in his dreams" (206).

Since we are told his "words rang again in her ears," and that, though she managed to block out some of what he had to say, she couldn't "banish" (200) the image of him from her mind, Harry *gets to* *Laura*—he rattles her. And then he dies—no doubt to the delight of the ideal reader: for Harry expressed the rage the ideal reader has for his own unattending mother *at* this mother-substitute, and the expected punishment is met out to *him*, not to the reader. And perhaps, with his rage

expressed, the ideal reader may share Tavistock's ability to subsequently bring to mind all the vile qualities of another of the text's mother-figures—Clara—with tolerance and acceptance (250).

For some, then, *Think of the Earth* offers considerable satisfactions. But given that few are acquainted with thinking of literature as a place we visit to satisfy oral needs and sadistic desires, those who would prefer others read this now neglected Governor General Award-winning book would probably be better served to direct potential readers to its other notable qualities. They might argue that it is to be admired for its modernist spirit, that through Tavistock's vital soul-searching, through his search for a deeper, perhaps more mythic way of being, it amounts to a challenge to Canadian realism and mundane Canadian respectability. Yet even with its perhaps atypical endorsement of the rebellious modernist spirit, the text's argument that you ought to think of others before you think of yourself is hardly foreign to the average Canadian. Foreign would be the argument I have been advancing, that the preference for modesty and selflessness always goes hand in hand with intentional neglect, with the designation of certain human beings as pollution-filled refuse to be dumped from sight.

Works Cited

- Brooker, Bertram. *Think of the Earth*. Toronto, Brown Bear, 2000. Print.
- Cantor, Norman. *The American Century: Varieties of Culture in Modern Times*. New York: Harper, 1997. Print.
- Holland, Norman. *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. New York: Basic Books, 1959. Print.
- Rheingold, Joseph. *Mother, Anxiety and Death: The Catastrophic Death Complex*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1967. Print.