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Carnivalized Narratives in the Postmodern Long Poem

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Thesis submitted to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences at West
Virginia University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of

Master of Arts
in
English

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Abstract

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Joe W. Moffett

As a decidedly American tradition, the long poem has become the premier literary endeavor for poets in the twentieth-century. Writers such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams have pursued the long poem, but under the auspices of the “modern epic.” Three postmodern long poems -- Kenneth Koch’s *Seasons on Earth*, Edward Dorn’s *Gunslinger*, and James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover* -- illustrate a dramatic rupture with the texts of modernism by introducing comic situations and multi-voiced narration -- situations described by Mikhail Bakhtin as “dialogism” and “carnival,” receptively -- into the canon of American long poems. These innovations allow the postmodern long poem to evolve past the thematic and aesthetic strictures imposed by the texts of modernism.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The only happy people in the world
are those who do not have to write long poems:
muck, administration, toil [...]

.....
A Kennedy-sponsored bill for the protection
of poets from long poems will benefit the culture (376)

With these ironic lines near the end of *The Dream Songs* John Berryman identified one of the governing factors of contemporary poetry: a poet, after an initial apprenticeship of writing short lyrics, seems destined to work on a poem of a size and scope which will contribute to the ever-evolving tradition of verse and will solidify one's place among the major statements of literature. After all, the epic poem marks the advent of western literature (*The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*), and has continued to mark the evolution of western thought; *The Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Fairie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Prelude*, *Don Juan*, *Song of Myself*, and *The Cantos* might be listed to substantiate this claim. Of course, this is not to ignore the contributions of the novel or any other literary forms; only to say that the "epic" has retained its privileged position as a mouthpiece for humanity despite the ever-shifting conception of what an epic does.

But the epic, like any other genre distinction, has its difficulties. How, after all, could one call both *The Odyssey* and Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* "epic?" Surely, Pound's poem, despite the homage it pays to Homer in its initial pages, illustrates a different approach to providing a hero whose deeds might be offered to the community in the interest of instruction, of didacticism in verse¹. This might be the reason that Roy Harvey Pearce, in his 1961 study *The Continuity of American Poetry*, remarks that Whitman, in *Song of Myself*, had initiated "An American equivalent of an epic" (83) which Pearce believes Pound and William Carlos Williams, not to mention other poets, have followed. The question which must be asked in response to this, however, is simple: what is an "American equivalent" of an epic poem?

A number of informative studies have been published in the last few decades in attempt to answer this question and explore the notion of the epic in modernity. Michael André Bernstein's *The Tale of The Tribe* chooses the designation "Modern Verse Epic" to describe the texts of Pound, Williams, and Charles Olson. Bernstein is certainly correct that the poems he examines ask to be read in terms of the didactic, older form of "epic." Other studies, like Bernstein's, have struggled with the problem of terminology. M.L. Rosenthal and Sally Gall opt for the phrase "modern poetic sequence" to describe the twentieth-century long poem. But surely this distinction avoids the very issue it's designed to clarify: is a sequence necessarily a poem? Doesn't "sequence" denote a structure whose divisions are too clear for most poems, including the modernist works for which Rosenthal and Gall are at pains to define? The only book-length study of the long poem in postmodernity has been Joseph Conte's *Unending Design* which distinguishes between "serial" and "procedural" forms. Yet Conte, in his investment in avant-garde

¹We will return to the notion of didacticism as a part of the epic tradition in our conclusion

poetry, avoids the problem a text like James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* offers to the critic of the long poem. Like Bernstein, and Rosenthal and Gall, Conte is locked into a position by his terminology.

Perhaps Margaret Dickie's *On the Modernist Long Poem* offers the most useful heuristic, arguing that the "long poem" is "long in the time of composition, in the initial intention, and in the final form"; she concludes that "the Modernist long poem is concerned first and last with its own length" (6). Dickie believes both the spatial and temporal aspects of the long poem are central to defining literary modernism: "what is American Modernism? It is the long writing of the long poem" (162). When we recognize that one of her primary texts, *The Cantos*, took a half-century to write, her distinction makes sense and at least allows her to broaden the scope of her study (including poets as disparate as Pound and Hart Crane) so that she avoids the narrow vision of Bernstein. But, of course, she loses the all-inclusive nature of Rosenthal and Gall's "modern poetic sequence." Like Dickie, "long poem" is employed here not only because it's the more familiar term, but also because it avoids the period-related implications of "modern verse epic" or "modern poetic sequence." Indeed, the long poem is vital not only in American modernism but in postmodernism as well.

The long poem, then, has been a problem not only for the poets who feel the necessity to write it, but also the critics who are given the heavy duty of classifying or extracting some essential qualities which make a text a "long poem." The notion I'd like to offer here is not so much the importance of a once-and-for-all definition of the long poem as a form or genre or anything else, but instead the opposite: that it is, by essence, an essentially "open" and ever-changing tradition which has celebrated as many ruptures as continuities². The modernists' continual search for the new in poetic forms (evidenced by the fragmentary styles employed by Pound and Eliot and imitated by figures such as Olson and Louis Zukofsky) quickly exhausted itself -- the long poem is easily the best example of this point -- and forced postmodernists to look elsewhere. It is tempting, then, to think of the Language poets of 70s and 80s as "Ultra-modernists," as Charles Jencks would say (14), at least in the reductive sense that they attempt to carry out the modernist project of a poetics which takes language as its primary subject matter.

Contrary to this point of view, postmodernist long poems mark a turn which illustrates a repudiation of modernist poetics; the postmodernist long poem delights in its transformation and essential revision of the poems (and aesthetics) which came before it. The three long poems examined here -- Kenneth Koch's *Seasons on Earth*, Edward Dorn's *Gunslinger*, and James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* -- each align themselves along different verse and narrative traditions (Koch with Ariosto and Byron, Dorn with Pope and Swift, Merrill with Dante and Auden) offering diversity to the long poem in postmodernity. We don't get the sense, as we might if we'd read the long poems of Eliot, Pound, and Williams side-by-side, that we're reading variations on a theme and a poetics; at the very least because each of these poets comes from different poetic affiliations (Dorn with the Black Mountain Poets, Koch with the New York School, and

²I use the term "open" without the associations modernists typically attached to the word, such as being a synonym for the experimental or spontaneous.

Merrill from a formalist mode influenced especially by W.H. Auden) a variety of approach and content is offered.

A characteristic which marks the long poem in postmodernity is the return of narrative, as evidenced by these poems. Marjorie Perloff, in *Dance of Intellect*, calls for the restoration of storytelling in postmodern verse, but Kenneth Koch and James Merrill had already done so long before her study was published. Koch, Dorn, and Merrill each work in narrative modes to interesting ends. First and foremost, their poems are intensely self-reflexive in the same manner that Linda Hutcheon critiques the fiction of postmodernity in her study *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. These poems foreground their own artifice as art in an attempt to continually remind the reader that what he or she is reading is a narrative poem which does not lose sight of its own status as just another text out of countless others.

The self-reflexivity enacted by these postmodern narratives undercuts the forceful desire for authority sought after by modernist works. Like the modernists, however, these postmodern poets *do* wish to analyze what a long poem can be in a “contemporary world.” To that end, they evoke the epic tradition as the modernists had before them; but unlike the modernists, they do so to ironic and parodic ends. Koch, for instance, is partly responsible for the notion that the “epic” can be rejuvenated in postmodernity. Aside from calling his own poem *Ko* an “epic” in *The Duplications*, *The Art of Poetry* has Koch deciding:

The epic is particularly appropriate to our contemporary world
Because we are so uncertain of everything and also know too much,
A curious and seemingly contradictory condition, which the epic salves
By giving us our knowledge and our grasp, with all our lack of control as
well. (*Selected* 175)

But irony governs almost all of Koch’s work -- certainly a factor here. David Lehman’s decision that “Koch has revived the epic and drama as viable vehicles for verse and revealed an uncanny knack for marrying unusual forms to unconventional matter” (207) is only partially true; in Koch’s hands genres such as the epic, or drama, are thoroughly reworked. Koch’s verse illustrates a dramatic rupture with most literature of the past: if *Ko* is an epic in the same way *The Odyssey* and *The Divine Comedy* are epics, then it seems almost any narrative can be labeled as such.

Merrill, too, finds he must clarify his position with respect to the epic tradition. But in his case, it’s the modernist revision of the epic that he feels he must contend with; he answers in response to an interviewer’s question that

There may still be poets positively yearning to write an epic. I always found myself shying away from what I saw as megalomania. What perhaps makes *Sandover* most readable is my resistance to the convention of epic -- the grandiloquence, the universal relevance. The models in this field remain what they always were: Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton. In all of them there are supernatural beings, celestial machinery, and so forth. This definition seems to exclude Pound and *Paterson* -- so be it. Lacking a muse to fill their sails, these great modernists have short, splendid passages, but keep running into mudflats from which there’s no extricating them. (White, 193)

As Merrill intimates here, the epic is beyond the possibilities of the twentieth-century poet, despite the inclinations of Pound and Williams. The lesson that Merrill learned from the modernist experiments is that one cannot embark on a project naively, imagining that just because of a poem's size and ambition it can be called a "modern epic." But out of the three poems studied here, Merrill's seems most similar to the epic as exemplified, for instance, by Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In fact, Merrill's spirit guides increase in authority as he makes his "ascent" to the ultimate knowledge: God's will. Even Dorn's poem follows the quest-motif one finds in the early epics such as *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, or *Beowulf*. A central factor, however, allows these poems to question their own epic leanings: as Mikhail Bakhtin would say, their "laughing aspect."

Bakhtin's work is relevant to these poems in many ways. On one level, these poems all work as "dialogic" narratives of the type Bakhtin sees central to the development of the novel as a genre. Indeed, these poems have the semblance of the novel-in-verse genre which Bakhtin analyzes in Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* in his essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse." Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic is perhaps best encapsulated in one of the remarks he makes near the end of his life:

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of the past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) -- they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent developments of the dialogue. (*Speech Genres* 170)

For Bakhtin, the dialogic is central to social interaction. One could look at Bakhtin's work, as one of his primary translators, Michael Holquist, has, as metaphoric of his position in the stifled environment of Soviet communism. Indeed, the dialogic exchange works against the monological underpinnings of centralized authority overall. Much of Bakhtin's work can be called, tentatively, populist in the sense that he looks continually to the masses to collectively resist the power of authority.

Another key term in Bakhtin's lexicon, "heteroglossia," is used to describe the different registers of social voices which make up the dialogic exchange. Since modernism, the long poem itself has been a particularly heteroglossic genre in that its texts consist of a collection of voices -- a "polyphony," as Bakhtin would say. *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and *Paterson* all illustrate the multi-voiced style in the long poem. The long poems under study here follow in the same mode, but with a notable difference: they don't search out for the unifying, "monological" authority as the long poems of modernism do. Whether one speaks of Eliot's remark that Tiresias "unit[es] all the rest" (148) of the characters in his poem, or cites Pound's final declaration that he "cannot make [*The Cantos*] cohere" (816), it's clear that the modernist long poem is concerned finally with the search for order in a seemingly chaotic world -- a quest, so to speak, for final authority.

The long poem in postmodernity, on the other hand, is well aware that no such authority can be found and emphasizes this fact. This brings us to perhaps the most important difference between the long poems of Pound or Williams and those of Koch, Dorn, and Merrill: the use of parodic and satiric strategies. Whether one cites the

cartoons in Koch, the sixties slang and subculture in Dorn, or the New Age spiritualism in Merrill, these postmodern long poems revel in their whimsical and playful aspects.

A principle which Bakhtin terms “carnival,” then, is central to these poems. In *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin analyzes the carnival in terms of Dostoyevsky's fiction, but perhaps his study of Rabelais -- *Rabelais and His World* in the English translation -- most succinctly details Bakhtin's view of “carnival laughter” (11). Bakhtin traces the origins of carnival laughter to the Roman Saturnalias, through Medieval folk culture, and finally to the era of his subject matter, the Renaissance. Bakhtin describes the carnival as “the people's second life” (8) in which “The suspension of all hierarchical precedence [...] was of particular significance”; he continues, remarking, “Rank was especially evident during official feast; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival” (10). Carnival for Bakhtin is a profoundly populist phenomenon, one in which “the people [...] for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (9). One could argue, of course, that Bakhtin's rather bold statements are idealizing and ahistorical. While these criticisms might be valid, they don't undermine the usefulness of the carnival as a heuristic in reading texts such as the poems of Koch, Dorn, and Merrill.

Further along in the introduction to his Rabelais book, Bakhtin pauses to list the qualities peculiar to “carnival laughter.” “Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnival laughter,” he writes,

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “comic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (11-12)

One can see a similarity of diction between this statement and the description of the “dialogic” quoted earlier. Whereas the dialogue can always be “renewed” and “every meaning will have its homecoming,” the effect of the carnival is to “revive.” The central importance of carnival laughter, as Bakhtin asserts continually, is “[the] temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life” (15).

This flattening of hierarchical boundaries allows the carnivalistic text to be filled with inversions and subversions in Bakhtin's estimation:

All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the “inside out” (a l'envers), of the “turnabout,” of the continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of extracarnival life, a “world inside out.” We

must stress, however, that the carnival is distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture. (11)

With the dialogic we remember that “past meanings [...] can never be stable (finalized)” and so too with the carnival: the ““world inside out”” seeks to repudiate and displace authority. It would seem, then, that social resistance *is* central to Bakhtin’s imagination. Indeed, Michael Holquist reads the Rabelais study as a veiled attack on the Soviet orthodoxy Bakhtin found himself contending with. On a purely literary level, Bakhtin’s view of the parodic element of carnival is important here, because as he says, and Margaret Rose corroborates in her study *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*, parody in “modern times” has lost its dynamic appeal; it only mocks. The important point here is that the parodist or satirist is part of the laughter -- not detached and judgmental -- as Bakhtin explains:

The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world’s comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people’s ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it. (12)

The notion that I’d like to offer, then, is that Bakhtin’s theories are exceptionally useful in understanding the poems of Koch, Dorn, and Merrill. Simply put, these three poets wish to view the world, and no less the tradition of the long poem as inherited from modernism, in “its laughing aspect” (13).

High culture is leveled with the low in Bakhtin’s carnival, and these poems, in opposition to the texts of modernism, seek to integrate the popular with elite. Yet Koch, Dorn, and Merrill aren’t simply content to break down the hierarchy of “proper” literary sources or themes; instead they critique low culture as well as the high. This might be the point at which we need to refine Bakhtin’s rubric. Certainly, in their use of popular culture figures and references, these poets in a sense “democratize” the long poem, shifting it from the lofty ambitions of Pound and Eliot to the populist level of Whitman. Indeed, Thomas Gardner, in his study *Discovering Ourselves in Whitman*, illustrates the debt many recent practitioners of the long poem -- from Galway Kinnell to John Ashbery to Merrill -- owe to the Whitmanian tradition. As Bakhtin says of the participants of the carnival, Koch, Dorn, and Merrill situate themselves within the culture they live; they don’t, in other words, continually try to escape the mundane as the modernists do. But unlike Bakhtin’s idealized notion of the people’s “second life,” these poets critique the low (the cartoons in Koch, the drug culture in Dorn, the spiritualism in Merrill, for instance) -- a contemporary version of the carnival -- as readily as the high, or “official” culture. Everything is subject to scrutiny in these poets, whereas Bakhtin seems to contend that once official culture was razed by the carnivalized people there remained a certain idealized atmosphere, what he calls “the special philosophical and utopian character of festive laughter” (12).

What I wish to do, then, is utilize both of the major components of Bakhtin's thought -- the dialogic and the carnival -- to analyze the underpinnings of these poems. Margaret Rose notes that

others who have followed [Bakhtin] have stressed either one or the other aspect of his work -- either his analysis of comic carnivalistic literature, or his analysis of dialogic (or "intertextual") literary forms -- but not the both at once, and have in this way continued the modern separation of the comic from the more meta-fictional and complex aspects of parody.
(155)

Indeed, one cannot fully understand Bakhtin, or recognize what these long poems are trying to do, without attempting to unite the two theories.

Seeing the laughing or parodic elements of these poems in their fullest manner has implications, too, for arguing their status as postmodern texts. Perhaps the most persuasive study of postmodern art and culture yet to be written, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism; or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, argues that postmodernity is marked by an inherent "depthlessness" (6) and that "blank parody" and pastiche are all postmodern artists can offer (17). I would like to argue, however, that these statements are undermined by even the most cursory review of the poems under study here. The texts of Koch Dorn and Merrill indicate that if anything, the parody of postmodernism is not blank.

With respect to the development of the long poem, as Bakhtin says in his essay "Epic and Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "it is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance" (23). The advent of these poems by Dorn, Koch, and Merrill illustrates a certain novelization of verse which, in an openly dialogical and carnivalistic way, allows the long poem to evolve past the general strictures imposed on it by the modernist emphasis on rejuvenating the epic in terms of a fragmentary and collagist poetics.

The poems follow here in roughly chronological order. Roughly, because while *Ko* was first published in 1959, its second part didn't come until nearly twenty years later, in which time *Gunslinger* was published in whole and *Sandover* was well underway. Nonetheless, this temporal organization offers an interesting insight into the spirit behind the poems: the sense of play and festive laughter becomes more subdued and subtle as we move from Koch to Dorn to Merrill. No doubt this reflects the different sensibilities and poetic influences each poet brings to the postmodern long poem. But one can also see that these poems sustain themselves on the cultural fervor initiated by 60s counter-culture and social resistance. Koch seems to anticipate 60s subversion in *Ko* while Dorn finds himself in the center of the cultural upheaval in *Gunslinger*. In Merrill some time has passed and the culture is a little hesitant to let the carnival laughter rise too loudly. Yet there was no turning back to what Merrill calls the "megalomania" of modernism.

Chapter 2: Kenneth Koch's *Seasons on Earth*

Kenneth Koch's *Seasons on Earth* is essentially a poem of three parts, comprised of *Ko, Or a Season on Earth* (1959) and its companion poem *The Duplications* (1977), as well as an introductory section, written on the occasion of the two earlier pieces being bound together, entitled *Seasons on Earth* (1987). The three parts do not work as a unified long poem in any conventional sense, however. Although *The Duplications* contains many of the characters first introduced in *Ko*, and although it continues some of their stories, the poem doesn't lend itself to an extended, continuous narrative in any clear manner. Instead, Koch's primary means of development in *Ko* and *The Duplications* is narrative disruption: in the same way "Meanwhile" continually punctuates the narrative of *Ko*, *The Duplications* shifts, sometimes blindingly, from one "embedded narrative," in Mieke Bal's term, to another.

Koch's career, in many ways, has been about defamiliarizing the known. One could look at his playful *Art of Love*, a contemporary revision of Ovid's *Amores*, or his ars poetica *The Art of Poetry* for evidence of his interest in revitalizing literary modes of antiquity. The model for Koch's long poem, though, is not Homer, or Dante, but instead Ariosto, as his epigraph for *Ko* illustrates. Koch attempts to use America's pastime, baseball, as the frame for his narrative, but the reader soon sees that the primary narrative of *Ko*, the Japanese player brought to the United States, is "flat" by most conventions. *Ko* doesn't develop as a character; instead his return to playing at the end of the narrative seems immensely static, overshadowed by the other illogical embedded narratives of the poem.

Koch's poetics of disruption foregrounds the self-reflexive qualities of the poem. *Seasons on Earth*, then, is intensely interested in its own dynamics and mechanics. To that end, Koch is careful, especially in *Ko*, to focus on his primary structural device: the ottava rima verse form. Almost any stanza in the poem illustrates Koch's emphasis on the form, but perhaps the final stanza of the poem shows this best:

And Amaranth sails for Asia. Meanwhile Ko
Is pitching, pitching, pitching, and he's caught
By Sanford Yu, a rookie. In Athens Do-
Ris climbs the Acropolis steps and, having bought
A ticket, enters it. And meanwhile Jo-
Seph Dah comes up on deck and bows. "It's hot,"
Says Amaranth; "don't bother bowing, please."
Huddel, meanwhile, is flaking at the knees....(131)

The content of the poem is disrupted by the demands of the form. Koch allows the hyphenation at the enjambments to emphasize the similarity in names of a few of his primary characters. This illustrates, in a way, how all characters of *Ko* are interchangeable; none is developed to the point where we feel we "know" the character. As this stanza also shows, temporal and spatial changes occur so quickly in the poem that often the narrative is ahead of us and frustrates our ability to concentrate on the action of the plot. We have the illusion that the narrator's always dragging us along as we breathlessly try to keep up.

But once we say this we realize it's not quite true -- or at least not wholly accurate. The narrator often expresses the limits of his knowledge -- "It's probable Dog Boss had picked the spot..." (105) -- or his ability to indulge himself: "If you should ask me just exactly what / The nicest place in Paris, I think / I'd say here in these Gardens..." (99). At times the narrator even grows weary of his own tale: "How many times the plate / Was crossed is too fatiguing to relate" (91). But perhaps the most entertaining and revealing of the narrator's qualities is captured mid-way through the poem (it does not seem any accident that the poem contains five cantos, mimicking the narrative shape of Elizabethan drama) where his transitions get the better of him:

Let us return, however, to the game
 In Cincinnati, which has now resumed.
 Ko is awake, and now warms up his lame
 (From sleeping on it) arm.... Well, I assumed
 That play had started; it would be a shame
 To miss what's happening in hog-perfumed
 And sunny Tucson, where Dog Boss's cousin
 Suddenly felt the pulse of life in pulsion.

We have a lot of time, it seems to me --
 The players have to get back in shape

 To Tucson, then! (79)

We find the narrator at his most playful here: he lacks the ability to predict the events of the poem; in fact, the narration controls *him* and his ability to "know" the world he simultaneously constructs and describes. Breaks between the cantos are even initiated by the narrator's apparent physical exhaustion; "I'll rest, and then explain to you" (87) he tells us at the end of the third section. We see that the narrative is bound by the idiosyncrasies of its narrator.

The narrator's (seeming) inability to know the story has many ramifications. If nothing else, the constant and often jarring shifts of scene render spatial and temporal concerns void. The physical world of Koch's narrative is easily navigable in a few seconds by the narrator or his characters; space and time don't operate as they do in the "real" world. Similarly, the collapsing of spatial or temporal codes undermines any sort of national identities; in *The Duplications*, for instance, we learn that the characters "were celebrating Easter / In African Chinese Italian style" (185).

With the breakdown of cultural and national codes, much of *Seasons on Earth*, and especially *The Duplications*, is concerned with the simulacrum, the image of the image. The "Venice, Peru" of Papend's construction in the latter poem is regarded as "an almost / Perfectly accurate copy" (137). Or again, we learn that

There are two cities right together
 One that old Philadelphia, one the new one.
 The new has all bright white or snowy weather.
 And it is hard to say which is the true one;
 Each smells of rope and roofing, leaf and leather,
 And each sense mixed sensations coursing through one.

Each time, good God! that Pemmistreck makes love
Will some new city hit us from above?

The notion of the “copy” here is taken to its logical (perhaps illogical) extreme as whole cities are replicated in Koch’s world. Of course the title of the poem itself, *The Duplications*, foregrounds Koch’s interest in copies. The duplication of cities works as a metaphor for the stance on reality Koch wishes to develop in *Seasons on Earth*: what we’re seeing (or rather reading) is a mirage; an image of something which could exist, but doesn’t necessarily. The poetry works, then, on a version of mimesis: Koch isn’t interested in what *is* so much as what *could be*. A concentration on the simulacrum is perhaps the main point that *The Duplications* adds to *Seasons on Earth*, but there is another quality as well.

While *Ko* delights in the almost cartoonish quality of its characters and the cliffhanger transitions -- “what strange fate has thrown / him there? and Dog Boss? Can it be the worst / has happened? Meanwhile...”(87) -- *The Duplications* introduces actual Disney characters to the unfolding story as a means of incorporating pop culture into the poem. The difference, however, is that these characters no longer operate in the innocent, fun way we know. Instead, as this stanza between Minnie Mouse and Clarabelle Cow illustrates, the characters are made to express normal “human” emotions:

“Clara, beware!” Cried Minnie. “I’ll not let you
So carry on with Mick while “I’m alive!
even if you make him now, he’ll soon forget you
When we go speeding off upon our drive
Over the million roads of Greece. Upset you?
Too bad! He’s mine! You, just when we arrive,
Start making cow eyes at him. Your tough luck!
Alone with him tonight I’ll squeal and fuck!” (143)

Aside from empowering Minnie with a diction not usually associated with children’s cartoons, we see Koch wrenching the syntax in a decidedly Miltonic fashion in the final line so that he can emphasize the end rhymes “luck” and “fuck.” Just as Mickey himself punctuates almost every line with “goddamn,” Minnie makes much use of expletives. Even Pluto’s sexuality is a subject of inquiry in the poem: “Thought a faggot / By some, this dog was said to favor fellas” (142). When we realize that in the car race Minnie and Mickey are driving for “Canada Dry” (143), it becomes clear that Koch is attempting to both integrate the popular into a poem which seems to have many connections with “epic” literature as well as critique the apparent banality of pop culture as everything becomes image and brand name.

Around midway through *The Duplications* the Disney characters lose their human qualities and are again relegated to their newspaper existence. This doesn’t last long, however, because soon they are resurrected, tellingly, by “high” artists; their resurrection comes about by means of a “giant portrait,” which Koch tells us,

made by the joint efforts
Of fifty painters in the USA,
England, and Greece, was to protest the severance
Of Mickey from real life. The painters, they
Felt that a work so huge construed in reference

To this event might touch him where he lay.
 By some strange chance it does. In comics sleep
 On Sunday papers, he begins to squeak.

This painting's strong effect upon the real
 Is not unique, although unusual:
 A sculpture of a Minnesota Seal
 Once caused the other team to lose the ball. (238)

Eventually, Mickey is even deified, as a "God of Everything" who resides on Mount Olympus. By the time this happens in the poem we see that Koch wishes to both illustrate the way images, such as Mickey's, are fetishized in popular culture, as well as parody epic conventions which rely on the interventions of the gods in the heroes' stories.

Koch has seemingly refined self-reflexivity, and self-reference, to an art form itself. There is, of course, the previously mentioned introductory poem to *Ko* and *The Duplications* which describes the author/narrator's experience of writing the actual poem. The writing of poems about writing other poems remains one of Koch's premiere strategies. Koch finds occasion in a poem entitled "Some General Instructions," for instance, to allude to his composition of *Ko*:

I read *Don Juan* twenty years ago, and six years later
 I wrote a poem in emulation of it. I began
 Searching for another stanza but again turned
 To the ottava rima after a while, after I'd tried
 Some practice stanzas it in; it worked so well
 It was too late to stop, it seemed to me. Do not
 Be in too much hurry to emulate what
 you admire. (*Selected Poems* 160)

Koch's instructions to the reader are of course rather tongue-in-cheek; even when he seems to be giving direct instructions there are elements of irony and play involved. This last point can be seen also in Koch's *The Art of Poetry* where his final lines undo the very point he tries to make:

At the end of a poem
 One may be tempted to grow too universal, philosophical, and vague
 Or to bring in History, or the Sea, but one should not do that
 If one can possibly help it, since it makes
 Each thing one writes sound like everything else,
 And poetry and life are not like that. Now I have said enough. (176)

The narrator stops himself at precisely the moment he's knowingly broken his own final exhortation. We see Koch offering instruction simply for the sake of instruction -- he doesn't even seem to believe his own advice -- just as *Ko* seems to be narration for the sake of narration; ironized play in Koch's work frustrates finalized meaning. He seems to say that our impulse to stabilize meaning in his poetry is, if not outright wrong, at least misguided.

It's safe to say, then, that Koch concerns himself with what art should do; even though Koch intends it parodically, the notion of the "action poem" (39) advanced by

Joseph Dah is central to *Ko*. Doris, Dah's daughter in the poem, explains her father's poetics:

“Dad's integrity
Makes him, unlike most poets, actualize
In everyday life the poem's unreality.
That dog you saw on deck with steel-gray eyes
Was but a creation of Dad's terrible musical potency.
Then seeing the dog there made him realize
That the dog was himself, since by himself created,
So in this poem it's incorporated!”

“But,” Andrews asked, “what poem? where?” and “Ah!”
Breathed Doris, “don't you know that what you're seeing
Is an ACTION POEM?” “You mean he's Joseph Dah,”
Cried Andrews, “the creator of Otherness Being?”
“The very same,” sighed Doris. “That's my pa!”
And Joseph, as if by his barks agreeing,
Shook his tan head and frisked back out on deck.
He changed, then smiled: “It's a nice day, by heck” (39)

Koch appears to parody the (partially) mimetically-based poetry which he himself is advancing in *Ko*. As we have seen, the rift between the poem and the “real” world is a central concern for Koch; at this point in the narrative he seems to tell us that the gap is unavoidable and that we shouldn't concern ourselves with bridging it. Koch thus alludes, however subtly, to the futility of any poetry which attempts to work on a political level, for social change. At the very least, throughout his career, Koch seems to have imagined his role as providing a sort of comic relief in verse after the (perhaps) over-earnest stance of the modernists. In his introduction to *Ko* and its “follow-up” (210) *The Duplications*, Koch remarks:

The Waste Land gave the time's most accurate data,
It seemed, and Eliot was the Great Dictator
Of literature. One hardly dared to wink
Or fool around in any way in poems,
And Critics poured out awful jereboams
To irony, ambiguity, and tension --
And other things I do not wish to mention. (7)

Indeed, the great strength of Koch's poetry lies in his contribution of a certain “carnivalistic” flavor to American poetry. David Lehman remarks that the New York School “used playful means to arrive at high aesthetic ends” (9). That, however, might not be wholly accurate.

While play, as John Paul Tassoni points out, is central to Koch's narratives, the poet remains wary of “high aesthetic ends” finally. After all, Koch remarks in *Seasons of Earth* that

What's here's mine if I'm no more that wit
To whom the academic world was poison
And every modern critic full of shit

(And all their works a spilled-out shaving kit)

And wished most poets would be dogs get bit. (16)

Koch does not, in other words, find any more sanctuary in the “high” culture of the academy than he does in the “low” culture of the world of Mickey and Minnie Mouse. Everything is relativized for Koch; everything, as Bakhtin would say, has “its laughing aspect.” We can laugh at Koch’s rendition of a “human” Mickey Mouse because we know he’s acting unlike he’s supposed to; similarly, we can laugh at the confused and jumpy narration of the verse because it calls into question any notions of epic, or even anti-epic. Tassoni points out that “...as the characters proliferate Koch takes every opportunity to exploit the possible combinations of sequence, making pointless any attempt on the reader’s (and perhaps Koch’s own) part to codify the poem’s transitions” (130). Indeed, as we have seen, Koch’s agenda includes illustrating that “epic” narration is not really possible in a world where the primary means of entertainment -- TV and radio -- are formatted by a continuously disruptive narrative technique.

The final result of *Seasons on Earth* is that the narrator, conspicuously named “Kenneth” in *The Duplications* (219), becomes just another character, one who finds himself critiquing everything which goes into his poem, regardless of whether the source is a comic strip character or a centuries-old verse form. The narrator’s inability to recount, much less control, the final narrative illustrates a breakdown in the discourse of narrativity. The narrative genres which infiltrate the poem -- science fiction, mystery and detective novel, romance, etc. -- illustrate an opening up of the possible fabric of the long poem. While one could point to, say, *The Cantos* or *Paterson* for a similar eclecticism of form, what distinguishes Koch’s poem, and postmodernity overall, is the self-conscious parading of popular forms. But, as we have seen, even the popular is subject to scrutiny. The postmodern long poem, and Koch’s poem is probably one of the best examples we have, thus attempts to free the form from self-importance and naiveté.

Chapter 3: Edward Dorn's *Gunslinger*

Edward Dorn's *Gunslinger* (1975), which consists of four parts, stands as one of the more peculiar statements in the tradition of American long poems. At base *Gunslinger* is a reactionary text, much like *The Maximus Poems* of Dorn's mentor Charles Olson. Like *Maximus*, *Gunslinger* (or *Slinger* as it originally appeared) takes issue with what Olson calls an annihilation of "an actual earth of value" (584). This "urban destruction" is the result of a capitalist society which favors the simulacra over the "real." This point is advanced in many ways in the text, but perhaps most tellingly in its distinctive narrative techniques.

Unlike Olson, who still stood in the shadow of Ezra Pound's poetics in *The Cantos*, Dorn abandons the fragmented poetics of modernism in favor of what seems a conservative strategy: the long poem in narrative form. Yet the narration of *Gunslinger* is not what we might expect. As we found in Koch, Dorn's characters are willfully "flat" and undeveloped. The title figure himself -- the renowned Slinger -- undergoes no transformation, unless we count his growing indifference toward his own quest to find the allusive Howard Hughes. Overall, the narrative itself is a dead-end. The quest fails, not because its participants fail individually, but because collectively they share Slinger's indifference. The poem's narrative, in other words, is continually frustrated, continually delayed in favor of an indeterminacy which draws attention away from the story to focus on the critique of culture which Dorn offers.

Dorn's critique, however, is also problematic. *Gunslinger* may be didactic, but it is not so in any conventional way: its messages are too diffuse, too varied, even conflicting, to justify saying that Dorn supplies some final "meaning." In fact, the instability of meaning in the poem only mirrors the instability of the narrative. The characters of the poem come to represent different levels of social discourses which compete for finality. The discourses, the manners of speaking, are leveled in a sense, due ultimately to Dorn's employment of a basic parodic element in the poem which allows one character to question another, and allows us to see the ways in which the character are paper-thin, cut-outs which simply spew the information transmitted through them by the poet as if they worked with a computer-like automation; the "literate projector" which occurs mid-way through the narrative only reflects the mechanical production of images and texts.

Given this, we might argue that the characters who populate *Gunslinger* -- the doubting "I," Slinger, Lil, the horse, and so on -- are the images of stereotypes, bound ultimately by the discourses they utter. Dorn is very interested in genre questions: what are the implications of the "impeccable" Gunslinger who seems to be a mirror of the archtypical hero of TV and movie Westerns? Are we indeed as bound by solipsistic thought as "I" is, and are the mind-altering experiences that I undergoes the only way to overcome subjectivity? As Robert Von Hallberg argues, Dorn's poem often "succeed[s] in subordinating the plot to the narration, the action to the language. Normally, the language of the narration is subsequent to the events of the plot [...] neither the plot nor the characters claim priority over the language of narration" (217).

Dorn is interested in exposing the conflict between the rugged yet constructed image of America's past and the cultural confusion of its present time (the "sicksties," as

he terms the period). This lead us to the major difference between *Gunslinger* and the texts of modernism: it does not wish to privilege high culture any more than the low. The only way for Dorn evaluate the culture in which he lives is to take it as a whole. He does not do like Eliot, for instance, when the author of *The Waste Land* ironically meditates “that Shakespeherian Rag -- / It’s so elegant / So intelligent” (138). Reading these lines we recognize that Eliot takes refuge in the rest of *The Waste Land*’s high diction and elitist sentiments. Dorn, however, is not so discriminatory in his stance on culture. He once commented, “I consider one thing as good as another, whether it arises from science or the so-called humanities, the newspaper or a bubblegum wrapper. All that’s equal to me, as source” (quoted in Beach, 223). Yet Dorn’s inclusion of disparate “sources” does not sacrifice his critical stance; though the materials of *Gunslinger* might be derived from TV, movies, and comic books, Dorn refuses to elevate those materials to take the place of the high. There is, in a sense, a leveling of the hierarchy which allows him to look critically at both ends of the cultural spectrum.

This last point might be best advanced by a look at the figure of the Poet in the poem. In the preface to his *Collected Poems*, Dorn writes: “From near the beginning I have known my work to be theoretical in nature and poetic by virtue of its inherent tone. My true readers have known exactly what I have assumed” (v). This mixture of “theoretical” and “poetic” perspectives finds an outlet in the Poet’s song:

Thats the mornin thats the light
 Light the mornin light the light
 Thats the natchral thats all right
 Oh baby, light the morning like the light

 Oh baby douse the funky night
 Put the mornin where it’s tight. (48-49)

The term “light” is repeated until it loses all meaning seemingly and becomes instead a mere sound. This reflects Dorn’s awareness of Structuralist linguistics, as advanced by Ferdinand de Saussure, where the arbitrariness of the sign (“light”) is emphasized. The instability of the signifier “light” becomes particularly obvious when, in the last line of the first stanza of his song, the Poet uses the term as both a verb and a noun, thereby completely obliterating the sense of the line: “Oh baby, light the morning like the light.” As to the “poetic” nature of these lines, Dorn reminds us of the oral tradition of poetry and the simple rhyming end-words indicate that the song was constructed more to be sung than read; as it is, it’s almost impossible to mine any sort of literal meaning from the song, let alone recognize an element of the multivalent often associated with “high” literature.

The poet’s semantically empty and sonically uninteresting song illustrates the way in which meaning in *Gunslinger* is always deferred, always postponed. We can’t say, for instance, that Dorn is interested in democratizing poetry, or bringing verse back to a popular level, since the popular is empty of meaning in the Poet’s pseudo-rock song. On the other hand, the Poet mimics what Dorn himself is doing: taking popular sources and re-imagining them in place of what has become the “high” tradition of verse. It comes as little surprise, then, that the Poet’s song is enthusiastically received by the poem’s seeming hero, Slinger, who remarks, “A roll of Solar Reality, / my friend, your mind / is

marvelously heliocentric” (49). Slinger’s praise of the poet’s “heliocentricism” is actually a form of self-praise since he tells us earlier, “I am the son of the sun” (15). Moved by the poet’s song, Slinger requests “will you please / then, / draw your fingers / across a variation of the line ‘Cool Liquid Comes’ / so the roots of my soul / may be loosened and grow past / the hardness of the Future” (49). Of course, Slinger employs a diction here which is certainly parodic of “poetic” language, and the Poet seems transformed by Slinger’s speech and sings a song which exceeds his previous one in terms of semantic complexity; one stanza declares, “Cool Liquid, cool liquid distilled / of the scalar astral spirit / morning sensing congealing / our way, hours of spatial cooling / weighing the lark appealing” (51).

The banter between Slinger and the Poet illustrates that one character can influence the speech of another, although Michael Davidson is certainly right that “Characters [in *Gunslinger*] do not carry on conversations; they assess, remark, rhapsodize, put down, scorn, send and receive messages, but they refuse to exchange ideas” (118). Davidson’s point is crucial because it identifies one of the factors central to *Gunslinger*. Bakhtin writes that “Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. [...] one is impossible without the other” (282). Indeed, there is no “understanding” among *Gunslinger*’s characters, each figure seemingly speaking a monologue -- or even better, a soliloquy -- which mimics the play-like nature of the poem. This “play-like” quality, incidentally, constitutes one of its central self-reflexive strategies. (Consider, for instance, the epigraph to Book I where the singularity of each discursive style is evidenced by the emphasis on a “single” speaker: “The curtain might rise / anywhere on a single speaker,” or Slinger’s direct reference of the action of *Gunslinger* as a “fine play,” 198.) Yet even though the characters fail to interact, linguistically, they do show, as Bakhtin contends, the layers of social discourse which overlap continually in daily life; there may not be a literal dialogue between the characters, but there is cultural dialogue between the discourses.

In the funeral scene for “T” discourses overlap in a clearly dialogical context. The scene seems a homage to the “rationalizing ego” of “T” who vainly tries to encompass everything by his incessant questioning:

Life and Death
are attributes of the Soul
not of things.
.....
 [Kool] Everything offered
it’s gonna be hot soon.
I only mean that I never met I
but if he turns out be put together
like most people I’s gonna
come apart in the heat.
You see what I mean?

*The boy has a point Slinger
it could get close fast in here.*

Yes, reflected the Poet
 As the Yellow Rose of Dawn climbs
 he loses the light azimuthal fragrance of his arrival
 and becomes a zenith
 of a particular attention --
 All Systems Go.
 There will be some along our way
 to claim I stinks

The Slinger considered this
 conference of voices
 yet could relate very little
 to the realness
 of the engendering emergency. (57-59)

Here the more stylized of the poem's speakers -- Slinger, the Poet, and then Lil (whose speech is marked by italics) -- speak in an interestingly polyphonic way. Lil's terse and common sense speech ("The boy has a point...") is set against the over-wrought and unnecessarily euphemistic discourse of the Poet. The Poet can be seen appropriating Lil's speech, in a sense revising himself in favor of a discourse which is purely utilitarian. Slinger's inability to recognize "this / conference of voices" comes from his inability to shift his levels of diction; language loses its communicative ability, not because of a problem inherent in the medium, but a problem in the speaker (Slinger).

This might be the spirit in which Christopher Beach observes that "even those characters [in *Gunslinger*] who might be expected to represent 'pure' discourses with clearly defined origins borrow from or become infected by the language of others" (225). Beach emphasizes the "migratory" nature of the speech acts in *Gunslinger* and shows the way in which the "semantic slippage" (211) of the poem undercuts the search for stable and finalized meaning. It is curious, though, that Beach abandons Bakhtin's distinction of the dialogic for Barthes' work in *S/Z*, since Bakhtin's paradigm aligns itself nicely with type of "utterance" analysis Beach wishes to offer.

Michael Davidson's notion, that in *Gunslinger* there is ultimately a breakdown of communication, of dialogic exchange, reinforces one of the more postmodern elements of the poem: its distrust of final authority. The diffuse discourses enacted by the characters illustrates that there can be no central, controlling voice or speech style. Even if Slinger at first stands as the leader, his authority is quickly undercut by the introduction of a marijuana smoking horse, variously called "Heidegger" and "Claude Levi-Strauss." "I" remarks that Slinger's chiding of Claude "was the only time / I ever heard anybody speak / obliquely to the Horse" (20); indeed, it is the horse who "drew on the table / our future course" (21). In other words, power and authority in the poem are decentralized and distributed among the characters, and like their speech have the possibility of shifting at any time. Perhaps the best and most complex example of the instability of a given discourse and its center of power comes in the figure of "I."

I's early narration of the poem contributes, in a large way, to the poem's narrative complexity. Book I begins with a line of alliteration -- "I met in Mesilla" (3) -- in what appears to be a traditional first-person narrative; the use of past tense only reinforces that

illusion. Only a few pages into the text we find I making traditional narrative moves, such as placing us within the time and place of a given section of text: “we had come there, false fronts / my Gunslinger said make / the people mortal [...] sound comes / at the end of the dusty street, / where we meet the gaudy Madam” (7). Soon, however, Dorn’s play with syntax begins to make us question I’s place in the narrative: “Auto-destruction he breathed / and I in that time was / suspended / as if in some margin of the sea / I saw the wading flanks / of horses spread in energy” (19). Finally, when Gunslinger takes on I’s role as questioner, the use of “I” as a proper name is revealed: “What’s your name? // I, I answered. // that’s a simple name / Is it an initial? No it is a single” (32). As with the epigraph to Book I, emphasis is placed on “single” -- a single voice, a single discourse. But interestingly, the single gives way to the collective: the group of questers take on the form of “five missionaries” at the end of the first Book, and are called a “tapestry” by the beginning of the second (42,45). Clearly the single voice, the monologue, must be replaced by the dialogue, the collection of voices.

Davidson’s argument that “I” can be seen as “the last vestige of the self-conscious, rationalizing ego” (120) proves useful in understanding this important character. He seems to represent the danger of reason and the systematizing of knowledge; Claude the horse, for instance, tells I:

I study the savage mind.
 And what is that I asked.
That, intoned Claude leaning on my shoulder
 is what you *have*
 in other words, you provide
 an instance
 you are purely animal
 sometimes purely plant
 but mostly you’re just a
 classification, I mean it’s conceivable
 but so many documents
 would have to be gone through
 and dimension of such *variety*
 taken into account to realize what
 you are, that
 even if we confined ourselves
 to the societies for which
 the data are sufficiently full,
 accurate, and comparable
 among themselves
 it could not be “done”
without the aid of machines. (35)

Again Dorn makes a clever connection between the “theoretical” and “poetic” aspects of his work: “the savage mind” is also the title of a Structuralist work by Claude Levi-Strauss and the horse’s study of that work implies a certain self-reflexivity. One must not forget, too, that the Structuralism of Levi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp was interested in distilling the key elements of narration; Dorn’s invocation of this theoretical school as

well as his use of a static narration (in that the plot and character express little dynamism) offers a notable self-consciousness to the poem. Of course, Dorn also parodies scientific discourse and methodology (“*the aid of machines*”).

I is an instance of classification (and Structuralism is certainly concerned with classification) which several members of Slinger’s group are at pains to avoid. Early in the narrative, Slinger decides: “it is dangerous to be named / and makes you mortal. / If you have a name / you can be sold / you can be told / by that name leave, or come / you become, in short/ a reference” (32); he concludes, “The mortal can be described [...] that’s all mortality is / in fact” (33). It is clear that Dorn, in the fashion of Olson, seeks to overcome the epistemological systems -- rationalization, classification, humanism -- which are at the core of western philosophy. Through his parodying of the discourses enunciated by his characters, Dorn celebrates the implications of the dialogic in its fullest. With the competing discourses of *Gunslinger*, Dorn is able to repudiate the systems of thought which are his cultural inheritance.

To reinforce the importance of a new subjectivity unhindered by a rationalizing impulse, “I” transcends his mortality. Of course, whether that has something to do with the influence of LSD on I or not is unclear; Dorn is forever disabling our interpretative machinery. Nonetheless, in his absence “I” assumes a privileged status as the group anxiously awaits news from him via the “Night Letta” (139). By the time “I” returns, he, not Slinger, seems to be the most active member of the “tapestry.” In one scene, for instance, I’s “50 Caliber Derringer” “drilled two holes in the manager’s skull” (156) whereas we learn slightly later that “Zlingers Forty-four” is “Made in Japan” (158). Clearly, because I’s pistol is more authentic for the Western genre in which the poem works he has supplanted Slinger whose gun, presumably, is a cheap knockoff (“Made in Japan”). I’s upward mobility in the group is also reflected by his appropriation of Slinger’s circular and illogical manner of speaking:

And what I, have you brought us
from your tour of the Cumulus
the Zlinger asked

I had one eye out
for the prosecutors of Individuality
and the other eye out for the advocates
catching in that spectrum
all the know species of Cant (161-62)

I’s newfound status in the group quickly dissipates, however, as his speaking parts become fewer and the “fine play” reaches its final pages. The central power of the group shifts, then, but seemingly to no end. (Even Lil takes on the guise of power when she must awaken Slinger and tell him about the group’s sighting of Hughes.) There appears to be no “final word,” then, no ultimately privileged discursive form. Even if he uses one aspect of his speech -- his philosophical and didactic mode -- to impose order and authority in the group, Slinger (and I and the Poet who both appropriate his manner of speaking) finds his status unstable.

The implications of the character “I,” then, are numerous. Dorn’s dissolution of the character (and subsequent first-person narrative) allows him to repudiate “epiphany”

poems, as Marjorie Perloff suggests. This turn, from an I-centered narrative, is corroborated in the text by the comic dialogue of the Poet and Lil: “*What happened to I she asked / his eyes dont seem right. // I is dead, the poet said. // That aint grammatical, Poet. // Maybe. However Certain it seems, look, theres no reaction*” (56). One can see the semantic “slippage” Beach speaks of in this exchange -- surely one of the more humorous moments of the poem.

“I” figures, then, as an example of the poetic (and philosophical) discourse which Dorn suggests has reached the limits of its relevance. Perloff’s and Beach’s pronouncement that *Gunslinger* is “anti-epic” avoids the issue of *Gunslinger*’s parody, since by its nature a parodic text evokes a past work in attempt to transform it into something new. In its most realized form parody would function more than parasitically, the condition to which Perloff and Beach seem content to relegate *Gunslinger* when they call it an “anti-epic.” In fact, Slinger’s comments on the death of “I” nicely summarize *Gunslinger*’s relationship to the tradition of the epic:

we’ll keep him with us
for a past reference
Thus are his cheeks the map of days outworn,
having plowed the ground
I has turned at the end of the row
a truly inherent versus
.daeha sa kcab emas eht si I ecnis (56)

Indeed, Dorn offers a new aesthetic, but one he knows is influenced by his time period, “the sicksties.” Both Dorn and his poem are too wise to imagine themselves as “anti” anything. *Gunslinger* is certainly subversive in intent, but in a particularly postmodern way; it, as Linda Hutcheon says of postmodernist fiction, seeks to “[c]hallenge, but not deny” (6) what came before it.

Chapter 4: James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*

James Merrill's expansive long poem *The Changing Light at Sandover* -- comprised of three volumes and a final "Coda" (1982) -- asks to be read as it was written: a meditation oscillating between what Merrill calls "two minds" (*Recitative* 51). In *Sandover* the division between the "two minds" seem due to the simultaneous incredulity and acceptance expressed by the poem's protagonists, JM and DJ. The nature, not to mention credibility, of this approach, however, Merrill does not elucidate. Simply put, what are we to do with the seemingly disparate strategies of *Sandover*: its dire warning of the annihilation of humanity and the pure silliness of the action of the poem?

In *The Consuming Myth: The Work of James Merrill* Stephen Yenser amplifies the essential duality which lies at the heart of the poem. Yenser does not confine himself to *Sandover*, however: he illustrates this basic, foundational principle in all of Merrill's work. Certainly, *Sandover* does makes much of the importance of duality; near the end, where the revelations come quickly, we learn "duality" is an integral part of our genetic structure:

LET US DIVIDE THE FORCE OF HIS NATURE, JUST AS WE WILL
MAKE

TWO SIDES TO ALL NATURE
FOR IN DUALITY IS DIMENSION, TENSION (408)

Indeed, "tension" does give Merrill's poem "dimension." Yet one would want to break this statement down to decide what the implications are for a poem the size and scope of *Sandover*. Provisionally, we might say this: the tension is the result of the poem pulling in two directions: divine revelation and irreverent laughter.

One idea stressed by the "two minds" paradigm is that the parodic elements of the poem only serve to question the grave, austere predictions it offers. *Sandover's* internal tension has undoubtedly been one of its more difficult qualities to rationalize. Denis Donoghue argues that the poem's "subject is nothing less than the meaning of life, but the poem degrades the theme and makes a poor show of itself with camp silliness and giggling" (181). *Sandover's* "camp" tone has been examined by many critics, from Robert Von Hallberg's appraisal (110) to Vernon Shetley, who decides that the elitism of Merrill's poem distances it from its audience. Shetley writes: "that gay men gain access, by their refusal of reproduction, to a range of valuable feelings denied to people who follow more conventional life patterns is an entirely plausible notion, and suited for poetry (CLS 156); the difficulty comes in the implication that heaven agrees" (110). This notion leads him to decide that "Merrill's epic ultimately collapses [...] under the weight of its unexamined assumptions" (101). Yet Shetley fails to recognize the self-parodying nature of the poem -- an important factor in the "two minds" schema.

Shetley's example shows that except for the critics who declare that *Sandover* is "as central to our generation as *The Waste Land* was to the one before us" (Pettingell, 161) those who are puzzled by the poem's strategies, as Donoghue and Shetley are, find it difficult to negotiate the seemingly disparate agendas of the poem. Yet the poem's oscillation between motivations -- between mystical prophesy and B-movie banality -- allows it to maintain a greater awareness of its own mechanics, its own agenda, than a poem like *The Cantos* which suffers from its own politics and sincerity.

The “camp” tone, however, is only one of the many discursive styles which Merrill’s poem includes. Self-reflexivity is central to the poem. The primary discourse is the narrative voice which begins in a notably diffident manner:

Admittedly I err by undertaking
 This in its present form. The baldest prose
 Reportage was called for, that would reach
 The widest public in the shortest time. (3)

There are several points to make about this curious introduction to the poem. For one, the self-conscious narrative voice, “I err,” undercuts itself by the girth of the poem; apologies seem insincere from one who writes a 500 page poem. Yet Merrill allows himself to broach the problem of the long poem without the bravado evident in the epic tradition as in Virgil, “I sing of arms and a man” (1), or the mock-epic of Ariosto, “I sing of knights and ladies, of courtly chivalry, of courageous deeds” (1). The poem, it seems, is a frustrated novel: “the baldest prose reportage was called for,” and Merrill points us toward another poem, “The Will,” which tells of the lost manuscript of a novel which would have taken the place of *Sandover*. Self-allusion will become one of the premier strategies of the poem, both to Merrill’s past work and to different sections within *Sandover* itself. Finally, irony underlies the statement: what “public?” Given the small readership for poetry in the latter decades of the twentieth-century, Merrill, despite his good intentions, knows he won’t reach the audience the poem is intended to instruct.

So, it would be fair to say from the beginning we have a problematic narrative and that much of the work a reader must do in the scores of pages to follow is attempt to rectify the difficult aspects of the poem. By the second volume, *Mirabell*, the narrative divides into a number of competing voices and discourses, from bat angels to Arch-Angels, from theological speculation to mundane chattiness, moving from the single voice style of *Ephraim* to a multi-voiced narration. This layering of discursive styles allows the poem to foreground its own status as a poem -- not as a stylistically coherent religious tract, for instance. One could offer many illustrations of this self-reflexivity, from *Sandover*’s organization (the linguistic and numerical symbols of the Ouija) to the absurd dialogues it contains (on topics ranging from UFOs to unicorns).

Yet self-reflexivity is a strategy Merrill had worked out prior to *Sandover*. There is, for instance, the telling lineation utilized in the second section of one of his most successful early long poems, “The Thousand and Second Night.” Here we find “T.S. Eliot” coupled with “*So what?*” (95) in the end rhymes of Merrill’s often-used envelope quatrain -- a rhyme scheme (ABBA) Auden will eventually reveal as another name for God in *Sandover*. Additionally, in the fourth section of “The Thousand and Second Night,” Merrill offers a classroom scene where an inarticulate professor attempts to explicate the early parts of the poem to his students:

Now if the class will turn back to this, er,
 Poem’s first section -- Istanbul -- I shall take
 What little time is left today to make
 Some brief points. So. The rough pentameter

Quatrains give way, you will observe, to three
 Interpolations, prose as well as verse.

Does it come through how each in turn refers
To mind, body, and soul (or memory)? (*Selected* 101-2)

Here Merrill is at his most playful prior to *Sandover*: he simultaneously parodies the New Critics' rubric of "close reading," as well as their emphasis on "great" literature, even as he seems intent on carving himself a permanent place in verse -- a sort of self-parody, then.

It is also instructive to compare the seriousness of Merrill's pre-*Sandover* Ouija poems with the play and subversion that occurs in the long poem. In "Voices from the Other World" we find ominous transcripts -- ALL IS LOST / FLEE THIS HOUSE. [...] OBEY YOU HAVE NO CHOICE" (47) -- which strike the reader of *Sandover* as somewhat puzzling in retrospect. The poem ends with a bit of melodrama -- "Last night the teacup shattered in a rage. / Indeed, we have grown nonchalant / Towards the other world" (48) which David Jackson assures us never happened in the "real" Ouija sessions (302). We can see, then, that Merrill had to *write* his way to the tone we find in *Sandover*, and that its essential "campiness" frees the poem from potentially over-dramatized ghost-movie moves. When Merrill returns to the subject of Ouija board transcriptions in "The Will" he had learned to use the mystical aspect of his subject matter to richer, more symbolic ends -- even if the poem is still weighed heavily with over-enthusiastic sincerity. Again the spirit utters threats unfamiliar to the reader of *Sandover*:

SET MY TEACHINGS DOWN

Why, Ephraim, you belong to the old school--
You think the Word by definition good.

IF U DO NOT YR WORLD WILL BE UNDONE
& HEAVEN ITSELF TURN TO ONE GRINNING SKULL
So? We must write to save the face of God? (275)

Of course, in *Sandover* Merrill is commanded to write "POEMS OF SCIENCE" (113) but the tone is not so threatening; JM is offered the respect a "scribe" merits. Interestingly, "The Will" also introduces the importance of the relationship of Merrill and Jackson to the Ouija board communications; this element of the poem will be important for commentators such as Ross Labrie and Judith Moffett who will see the near dissolution of JM and DJ's relationship in *Ephraim* as central to the development of the first book of the trilogy.

In comparison to his shorter, early Ouija poems, Helen Sword believes that in *Sandover* the functioning of the Ouija as a trope (used also by Sylvia Plath) allows Merrill to overcome the unexamined mysticism of W.B. Yeats and others. The modernists failed, she believes, to capitalize on the "low" culture aspects of a divination method such as the Ouija:

For both Merrill and Plath, the Ouija board functions as a sort of psychic leveler, a fulcrum balancing the prophetic pretensions and iconoclastic impulses of high and low culture, respectively. As a tool for other worldly inspiration that is also a best-selling parlor game, in other words, the board imbues ancient vatic tropes with a sense of self-reflexive irony, even play. (556)

Clearly “play” does not operate in “Voices of the Other World” and “The Will,” illustrating that Merrill realized he could approach spiritualism too earnestly. The “parlor game” quality of the Ouija is important for defusing the potentially explosive aspects of *Sandover’s* revelations; how, after all, can we believe any information imparted by a medium consisting of a piece of cardboard and a teacup?

This, of course, is the “self-reflexive irony” that Sword identifies in the poem. The poem’s narrative turns allow the reader entrance into the self-reflexive irony Sword mentions. In effect the poem is the culmination of a shared “I”: the perspectives of DJ and JM merge and each is an indispensable part of the narrative fabric as the “hand” and the “scribe,” respectively. Merrill foregrounds the artifice of narration by odd disembodiments which occur throughout the narrative. We see, for instance, an occasional turn from first to third person narration when Merrill wishes to mark the passage of a large span of time. This shift in perspective helps Merrill “novelize” the verse as DJ and JM lose their hold on the poem:

DJ crosses the ocean. JM, alone
Through the mild autumn months in Stonington,
Quarries from the transcript murky blocks
Of revelations, now turning a phrase
To catch the red sunset, now up at dawn
Edging into a place a paradox --
One atop the other; and each weighs
More than he can stop to think. Despair
Alternates with insight. (298)

Not only does the narrative point of view shift, but the writing of one section of the poem is detailed while the next section is “lived” by its narrator:

Stonington. February. Dust off the Bible
And reread *Genesis* -- has it come to that?
Still, as the days grow longer
Mirabell -- by now more Tower of Babel

Than Pyramid -- groans upward, step by step.
I think to make each Book’s first word its number
In a different language
(Five is go in Japanese), then stop

Sickened by these blunt stabs at “design.” (311)

We see here how Merrill give us clues on how to read and interpret the poem. Of course, by the time the reader meets this passage he or she has already read and either noticed or missed the grand design of *Mirabell*. Nonetheless this reference follows the same recursive pattern that the poem gives itself overall: as soon as we reach the last word of *Sandover*, “Admittedly,” we are propelled to its first in an endless cycle of text. Throughout the trilogy Merrill also often refers back to an earlier section so that the reader is forced to acknowledge the recurring themes and overall “design.”

Despite these “blunt stabs at ‘design,’” though, the narrator’s central concern is that the poem is a “received” text which he can only partially tame. The spirit guide

conspicuously named “W.H. Auden” remarks, “ON WITH THE WORK! THRILLING FOR U JM,” to which JM counters:

And maddening -- it’s all by someone else!
 In your voice, Wystan, or in Mirabell’s.
 I want it in mine, but cannot spare those twenty
 Years in a cool dark place that *Ephraim* took

.....

I’d set
 My whole heart, after *Ephraim*, on returning
 To private life, to my own words. Instead,
 Here I go again, a vehicle
 In this cosmic carpool. Mirabell once said
 He taps my word banks. I’d be happier
 If I were tapping them. Or thought I were. (261-62)

Although Merrill might lament his inability to dictate the poem, that he can’t yet “BE RETURNED TO [...] CHRONICLES OF LOVE & LOSS” (176) as he was promised, Auden assures him that he must consider “WHAT A MINOR / PART THE SELF PLAYS IN A WORK OF ART” (262). Indeed an anxiety of “‘cooked’” (466) poetry pervades *Sandover*’s argument of the origins of art. Interestingly, though, Merrill negates his statement by a cleverly chosen line break: “He taps my word banks. I’d be happier” on its own denotes the opposite of the line read with the enjambment. The line read singly indicates that narrator wishes the poem *weren’t* his own; that he was a medium, not an originator.

Sandover is a poem of “voices” which overlap and compete in a way which is clearly heteroglossic. These voices are both visually marked (capital versus lower case texts) as well as metrically marked. JM and Auden confer on how the verse should reflect the hierarchy of characters and to that end Merrill employs numerous verse forms; JM asks Auden,

Don’t you agree
 We *human* characters should use this rough
 Pentameter, our virtual birthright?
 THE 5 MOST FITTING So fourteeners might
 Do for the bats? NOT SKITTERY ENOUGH
 WHY NOT MY BOY SYLLABICS? LET THE CASE
 REPRESENT A FALL FROM METRICAL GRACE
 Wystan, that’s brilliant! (240)

Aside from being a good example of the curious tone of the exchanges between Auden and JM, we see JM attempt here to emphasize the competing discourses even while they are already marked visually and linguistically (“MY BOY” punctuates Auden’s speech just as “ENFANTS” marks Ephraim’s, and so on). The phrase “rough / Pentameter” also begs us to recall the use of that same phrase by the explicator of Merrill’s poem in “The Thousand and Second Night.” Interestingly, the metrical marking works in mimetic ways -- inversions and substitutions can apparently indicate gender -- as well:

“TETRAMETER FOR US, PENTAM FOR THEM, / NEF EVOKED BY THE ONE FEMININE / ENDING, & PLATO BY THE ONE SLANT RHYME” (345). Here

Merrill takes poetic terminology to its most playful extreme: Plato's transgenderism is reflected in the "slant" rhyme.

This polyphony, the dialogic interaction of one voice corresponding with another, overlapping and providing texture to the poem, allows Merrill to emphasize the more carnivalistic aspects of *Sandover*. There is, of course, the camp tone already noted, as well as the flippant way JM often reacts to divine commands in the poem -- "Poems of *Science?* Ugh." (109). The carnivalistic spirit employed by Merrill knows no limit to its objects of laughter; the arguably central figure to the poem -- God B -- is self-consciously rendered as one of JM's rhyme schemes:

DJ. has God no other name? Biology seems
So sort of--

WHA. HUSH MY BOY (IN PRIVACY
I'VE HEARD THEM SPEAK OF "ABBA" SOUNDS TO ME
LIKE ONE OF JM'S FAVORITE RHYME SCHEMES (478)

The more absurd declarations of the poem are tempered by their parodic features. At one point Merrill is informed that his poem will have a transformational power, akin to the establishment of a new, trans-national religion by nature of the "LIFE RAFT LANGUAGE" (119):

THE NEW MATERIALS, YOUNG POET, FOR A NEW FAITH:
ITS ARCHITECTURE, THE FLAT WHITE PRINTED PAGE
TO WHICH WILL COME WISER WORSHIPPERS IN TIME (446)

By the time we reach this point even the most sympathetic reader must begin to doubt the sincerity of the poem. Indeed, with instances such as this one, Merrill seems to beg us to read the poem in the same self-doubting way it presents its messages.

It would seem, then, that the "two minds" which Merrill declares central to *Sandover* are really one mind divided in duality: the sincere aspect and the laughing, subversive one. The mastery Merrill exhibits by successfully executing many distinctive verse forms indicates his supreme command of the poem: in a sense he outdoes his progenitors, and boasts about doing so. On the other hand, as a collage of western verse forms, *Sandover* gestures towards the fragmented perspective that is also his inheritance from the modernists. The anxiety which Merrill illustrates by trying to explain away the grand moments of poetry -- the "tapping" of "word banks" -- is mediated by his attempt to pay homage to those before him, especially by the reading of *Sandover* in front of an audience of his poetic influences at the end of the poem. In a sense *Sandover* is a culmination of voices and perspectives of centuries of verse, a distinctively long poem revision of epic and mock-epic traditions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin writes, "the problem of carnivalized literature is one of the very important problems of historical poetics, and in particular of the poetics of genre" (107). Indeed, a tenuous relationship to poetic genre marks the poems of Dorn, Merrill, and Koch (poetic, of course, in the narrow sense). When considering these poems, one initially wants to align them with the tradition of the epic, and indeed that's how many commentators have looked at these poems: as a rejuvenation of epic conventions. Yet, as I hope to have shown here, any such reduction of what these poems do necessarily ignores their diversity in approach and format. Bakhtin recognizes the tendency to reduce as an impulse to force carnivalized genres into easily discernible groupings. He speaks of the "multi-styled and hetero-voiced nature of all these genres" and continues by remarking that "They reject the stylistic unity (or better, the single-style nature) of the epic, the tragedy, high rhetoric, the lyric. Characteristic of these genres are a multi-toned narration, the mixing of the high and low, serious and comic" (108)

As we have seen, whether it's Merrill's use of the Ouija, Dorn's incorporation of pop culture slang and cultural references, or Koch's employment of cliffhanger-style narration and Disney characters, the low is appropriated to disruptive and comic ends. Bakhtin points out that "Carnivalistic laughter [...] is directed toward something higher -- toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders.... This is a profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world. Such is the specific quality of ambivalent carnival laughter" (127). Even though each of these poems is intensely self-reflexive and self-conscious, their spirit is with the masses; they laugh at the elitism and high sincerity of modernism and "high" culture. They attempt, as Bakhtin would say, to "decrown" the institutions of authority -- whether they be literary or cultural -- with their ambivalent laughter. Foucault believes that Jorge Borges' fiction contains a "laughter which shatters" and the same can be said for these poems.

The implications for the long poem in postmodernity are clear. Rejecting the "modern epic" stylizations of Pound or Williams, or many others, these poems illustrate an opening up of the tradition of the long poem -- one in which forms of the past are revisited, but also changed. There are affinities with the epic to be found in these poems, but there are just as many changes wrought on that tradition. In particular, the didactic aspect of the epic important to Pound, Williams, or Olson, is questioned by Koch, Dorn, and Merrill.

In *The Tale of the Tribe*, Michael Andre Bernstein details some qualities, even though he admits they might have only a "provisional, heuristic value" (15), common to the epic and which were especially important to a poet like Pound in the creation of his *Cantos*. Bernstein offers a four point rubric of which the first and last statements are relevant to the epic's instructive qualities:

- (a) The epic presents a narrative of its audience's own cultural, historical, or mythic heritage, providing models of exemplary conduct (both good and bad) by which its readers can regulate their lives and adjust their shared customs. [...]

(d) The element of instruction arguably present, if only by implication, in all poetry, is deliberately foregrounded in an epic which offers its audience lessons presumed necessary to their individual and social survival. (14)

These poems, with the exception of Merrill's which we will return to in a moment, do not foreground their "instructive" qualities. While each poem certainly offers many critiques of high and low culture for the reader to examine, finalized meaning, as we have seen, is avoided by these poets. Dorn, probably more so than Koch, finds the need to challenge western philosophy and poetry; Koch is more interested in evaluating the relevance of narrative and poetry to a culture dominated by cartoon characters and brand names. Pop culture, of course, does play an indispensable role in Dorn's poem, but more as a means to an end than in Koch. The ultimate point here, of course, is that while these poems offer points for the reader to examine, they do not, as Bernstein says the epic should, "offer [...] lessons presumed necessary [for the audience's] individual and social survival." Merrill tells us "I always shied away from what I saw as megalomania." Indeed, a poem written with the kind of import Bernstein ascribes to the epic could not be anything else and would be decidedly un-postmodern in spirit.

Yet the message that Merrill's poem sends us -- that we are on the path to eventual nuclear devastation -- seems to be in the vein of a "lesson" necessary for "individual and social survival." But it is a lesson which surely could be had without *Sandover*. So, we might say that while Merrill does work in the didactic mode one finds present in the long poems of Pound, Williams, Olson and their predecessors, he questions his message with what Denis Donoghue calls "camp silliness and giggling." Merrill realized that such a move was necessary: if one is to retrace Dante's steps, they must surely lead somewhere else late in the twentieth-century than they did during the early Italian renaissance. Overall, one could argue, perhaps convincingly, that these poems have little to offer, that they are more entertainment than instruction, and indeed that would only reinforce that notion that authority is diffused, and nearly irrelevant to the worlds that these poems create.

It is thus the nature of parody -- to both invoke and critique a work while not being slavish tied to it -- which these poems take as their central, driving force. Perhaps, though, Bakhtin has said it better:

Parody, as we have already noted, is an integral element in menippean satire and in all carnivalized genres in general. To the pure genres (epic, tragedy) parody is organically alien; to carnivalized genres it is, on the contrary, organically inherent. In antiquity, parody was inseparably linked to a carnival sense of the world. Parodying is the creation of a decrowning double; it the same "world turned inside out." For this reason parody is ambivalent. [...] Everything has its parody, that is, its laughing aspect, for everything is reborn and renewed through death. (127)

Surely, Bakhtin's paradigms -- the carnival, or the dialogic, or other key notions in his canon -- can be criticized for idealization or ahistoricism, or any number of things. Yet if we take Bakhtin's own central idea -- that authority can never be finalized -- we can just as easily take his arguments as hypotheses, not theories, and they do the same work. It will be interesting to see, as postmodernity gives way to some other style, what kind of

“renewing” effect these poems will have on the relatively recent tradition of the long poem. If, as Bakhtin contends, carnivalistic literature seeks to call into question the more “pure” genres, the poems of Dorn, Merrill, and Koch will seem likely to be viewed as part of what John Barth calls a “literature of replenishment.” That is, the parodic and comedic aspects of literature which fell out favor at least by the beginning of the twentieth-century are revived in Koch, Dorn and Merrill and perhaps indicate a diversifying of literature, and especially the long poem, after the more stylistically and thematically coherent texts of modernism.

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