

A VIEW TO A CURE: NARRATIVE QUEST AND HEALING TRANSFORMATION  
IN THE WORK OF REYNOLDS PRICE

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Department of English.

Chapel Hill  
2007

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## ABSTRACT

SUZANNE SHRELL BOLT: A View to a Cure: Narrative Quest and  
Healing Transformation in the Work of Reynolds Price  
(Under the direction of Joseph M. Flora)

Reynolds Price is a writer of serious religious fiction whose unique *evangelium* reaches beyond orthodox Christianity for some of its deepest expressions. At the heart of his work is a line of radiant, threatened protagonists whom Price calls “sacrificial people. . . lambs in whose blood we bathe, whose blood we drink . . . in the sense of the god whom men kill and eat.” And the nature of such physical and spiritual grace—its swift destruction and occasional, surprising redemption—is one of the most crucial, recurrent mysteries Price explores. As sinner, battler, victim, object of Grace, and vehicle of revelation, Price’s central type surfaces memorably in characters such as Milo Mustian (*A Generous Man*), Todd Eborn (*Love and Work*), Rob Mayfield (*A Great Circle*), Neal Avery (*New Music*), Raphael Noren (*The Tongues of Angels*)—even Price’s father, Will (*Clear Pictures* and the sketch “Life for Life”). Echoing the dynamics of Jesse Weston’s core grail scene (with its ritualized gesture of identification, reconciliation, spiritual revelation, and healing), each narrative staging resembles a kind of passion play. Each embodies the spiritual dilemma of the wounded young Grail King and evinces what Emma Jung calls “the dark aspect” of the Divine, which wounds as prelude to blessing. Price’s evolving narrative approach to these “grand lost boy[s]”

traces the progress of his own quest for healing and virtue, mirroring the spiritual progress of grail knight toward wounded grail king.

This study links and examines major manifestations of Price's privately minted archetype, exploring why such iconography flourishes—scattered, buried, but persistently emergent—entwined with the mystery of a central relation Price's work has explored from the first (and in every genre). Like the grail narratives, Price's own testify to God's power and Grace—but also (with increasing fullness) to the emotional history and spiritual Quest of the “grand lost boy,” whose story implicitly demands witness and redemption (even within the tale). Price's search for the perspective from which to frame his healing narrative gesture is a key element of this study—which is in one sense a history of the search itself.

FOR MY FATHER,  
CLYDE HERBERT SHRELL, JR.

From side to side, beneath the glittering morn,  
An Iris sits, amidst the infernal surge,  
Like Hope upon a death-bed, and, unworn  
Its steady dyes, while all around is torn  
By the distracted waters, bears serene  
Its brilliant hues with all their beams unshorn:  
Resembling, 'mid the torture of the scene,  
Love watching Madness with unalterable mien.

—Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, LXXII

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This long and sometimes difficult labor of love was helped by many hands. The input and enthusiasm of Professor Weldon Thornton gave it a strong start and the strength to last. Doris Betts and Professor Linda Wagner-Martin offered advice and helpful critiques in the earliest stages of the project. My thanks go also to the Special Collections Library at Duke University and to Reynolds Price, for his generosity in our meetings and for the continuing gift of his voice in the work—the source always of “credible . . . consolations” and reasons to persist (even flourish) amidst difficulty.

But my return to and completion of this study has been no less complicated than Parzival’s return to the Castle of the Grail. I thank Professor Beverly Taylor and Dean Michael Pooch for their advice in this regard. I could not have proceeded without Professor Fred Hobson and my new committee members (Don Kennedy, George Lensing, and Kimball King). But above all I thank my director, Joseph Flora. He has offered insightful, detailed critiques and has become a strong advocate for the project—enlisting the aid of Mary Floyd-Wilson (Director of Graduate Studies) and the Dean of the Graduate School, Linda Dykstra, to whom I am deeply grateful.

I am grateful beyond words to my friends—and to my husband, Brian, who has loved me through every frustration. But I am most deeply indebted to my parents, Clyde and Gerry Shrell, for the support, laughter, and wisdom they have offered along this road. I treasure the conversation that has emerged from this project and strengthened us all.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CM</i>	<i>The Masks of God: Creative Mythology</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Clear Pictures: First Loves, First Guides</i>
<i>LaT</i>	<i>Learning a Trade: A Craftsman's Notebooks, 1955-1997</i>
<i>L&amp;W</i>	<i>Love and Work</i>
<i>LtG</i>	<i>Letter to a Godchild: Concerning Faith</i>
<i>LtMF</i>	<i>Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?</i>
<i>PoR</i>	<i>The Promise of Rest</i>
<i>SoE</i>	<i>The Surface of Earth</i>
<i>SoL</i>	<i>The Source of Light</i>
<i>WNL</i>	<i>A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing</i>

## INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years, the already remarkable career of Reynolds Price has been undergoing a unique resurgence. Price had firmly established himself as a major voice (talented, versatile, and prolific) in the years between his award-winning first novel, *A Long and Happy Life* (1962), and the remarkable success of *Kate Vaiden* (1986). But following his recovery from a three-year battle with spinal cancer (1984-1987), Price's reputation has broadened considerably, drawing renewed critical and popular attention for a flood of new projects. Since 1986, he has published two volumes of poetry, eight novels, and four new plays—venturing for the first time into the worlds of children's literature (*A Perfect Friend*) and National Public Radio commentary (see his collection entitled *Feasting the Heart*).

More striking, perhaps, is the new directness with which Price—ever generous in this regard—began to address both his life and his lifelong fascination with the sacred. He has published two memoirs—the second of which, *A Whole New Life*, directly addresses his battle with cancer. *Letter to a Man in the Fire* (an expanded lecture delivered at Auburn Theological Seminary) began as Price's reply to a thirty-six-year-old man dying of cancer who had read this second memoir and had written to ask (as Price's subtitle reflects), "Does God exist, and Does he Care?" Though Price had explored biblical narrative before, in his volume *A Palpable God* (1978), he began publishing more frequently on both canonical and non-canonical Christian texts, exploring their

implications for both Faith and narrative itself. *Three Gospels* includes his own translations of Mark and John, but the third in the volume is Price's own narrative—a redaction drawn from various canonical and non-canonical stories of the life and work of Jesus Christ. *A Serious Way of Wondering* continues this trend, using narrative as a tool to stage and explore “missing” discussions from the Christian gospels. Price considers topics such as homosexuality, women's issues, suicide, and adultery by envisioning Jesus' conversations with Judas and with “Rahab”—a character inspired by the unnamed adulteress of John 8 and the woman at Jacob's well (96-104). This new direction, and what critic James A. Schiff describes as “the more colloquial and accessible” voice of his recent writing, has found Price wider readership than ever before (*Understanding Reynolds Price* 10).

The most significant development of the new interest, however, has been serious reconsideration of earlier, largely neglected works and a deep reassessment of Price's entire canon in light of several recent publications.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his career, Price has repeatedly emphasized the large extent to which his work (particularly the fiction) draws on images and experiences from his childhood and adolescence. Consequently, his first memoir, *Clear Pictures* (1989), is now indispensable to scholars for the light it casts on those experiences and on the tight network of friends and kin who left a strong and permanent imprint on his early life. The volume is unique in its structure and emphasis—

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<sup>1</sup> Early studies—especially those prior to Daniel Frederick Daniel's 1977 dissertation, *Within and Without a Region: the Fiction of Reynolds Price*—tend to focus exclusively on Price as Southern writer, either praising or condescending to the work for its loving portrayals of life in the Virginia valley and piedmont North Carolina. Daniel's study is the first to consider in depth “connections between Price's technical and thematic interests and the larger tradition of Western literature” (12)—particularly their “romantic origins” (iii.)—and to comment extensively on its “mythic dimensions” (15). This study is also the first to stress the extremely personal quality of Price's “evolving vision.” Daniel asserts that “the difficulty of creating and sustaining a community” is at the heart of this vision (11)—ultimately comic, but far darker than most critics had realized (13).

less a conventional memoir than a highly visual gallery of recollections structured around the generosity and personal heroism of key figures in Price's life through the age of twenty-two. Though Price's "Afterword" offers a brief characterization of later periods, *Clear Pictures* ends with the death of his father, Will Price (a central figure in the volume), and Price's subsequent departure for Oxford. Equally significant for this retrospective trend has been the publication of Price's collected essays (*A Common Room*, 1987) as well as his *Collected Stories* (1993), *Collected Poems* (1997), and in 1998 *Learning a Trade* (craft notebooks from 1955-1997.) These collections, and the creation of a detailed archive of Price's papers and manuscripts at Duke University, make Price's works—and the persistent concerns of his writing life—accessible in new ways.

One of the most interesting aspects of Price's career is the remarkable unity it displays as he actively works through recurring themes, images, and situations (many of them autobiographical, in a spiritual if not a literal way.) In her book *Reynolds Price* (1983), the first to be published on Price's work, Constance Rooke asserts that this characteristic is "Ultimately a function of the author's concern with discovering the significance of his own life" (144). "There are few writers," she concludes, "whose work suggests as strongly as Price's does the integrity of a single vision. . . . each book repeats and expands the knowledge of the last" (144). In the introduction to his *Collected Stories*, Price himself notes the "recurrence of a few indelible sights, names and actions, that struck me early and have followed me always" (xiii.) And readers encountering similar echoes in Price's essays, memoirs, poetry, and plays would do well to recall Alberto Moravia's observation that writers repeat and re-envision core scenes because

“They keep trying to perfect their understanding of the one problem they were born to understand” (qtd. in Levoy, *Callings* 136).

A deeply moral and visionary writer (though not conventionally religious), Price is concerned with the relation of the solitary and unique self (often a precocious child witness or artist figure) to others—family, lovers, community—and to the hidden mysterious world that pulses beneath the palpable surface, occasionally visible to patient watchers. From the earliest stories (and with increasing frequency) Price’s work—though hyperreal in its treatment—is flooded with interlopers from this other realm of being: ghosts, visions, prophetic dreams, synchronous events, apparent “angels” (humans who appear almost magically as teachers, messengers, and guides). Following the nomenclature of Joseph Campbell, such figures can easily be seen as the “supernatural helper[s]” who assist the archetypal hero with his quest—teaching, tricking, or seducing him into uncharted psychological territory (*The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, “Supernatural Aid,” 69-77). As Price explains, “heroism” has been his constant fascination and concern in the fiction to date (*A Writer’s Inheritance*. Video.) But in *Understanding Reynolds Price*, James Schiff asserts quite accurately that “If one were limited to a single word to describe the natural core of Price’s writing, the most appropriate might be one of his own favorites: *mystery*” (18). The word conjures images of the unknown, the supernatural—but it also suggests sacred mystery plays, those performances designed to underscore the mysterious relation between one man and the next, between the human and the divine.

Price frequently describes his work as a dialogue between free will and “Fate”—which is sometimes God’s will, sometimes genetically determined, sometimes

determined by the politics and behavioral patterns of a family “web” or swarm of “feeders” (*The Surface of Earth* 139). In Price’s fiction, separation is an enormous, threatening problem. Frequently the young protagonists see themselves (or are seen by their parents) as betraying “lovers” who tear free into their own adult (and hence erotic) lives only to leave havoc in their wake: a suicide by drinking lye, a “willed” death from cancer, or a death in childbed—the too-frequent wage of adult passion. Understandably, then, Constance Rooke’s study and Roy Calhoun Fuller’s 1990 dissertation focus primarily on the darker implications of this “web”—the need to break free and fully experience individuation. Fuller’s dream study focuses closely on the demons experienced by such children (and the adults they become), examining patterns of “healing fiction”<sup>2</sup> that come to them in dreams and visions, warning them of internal danger. Their dreams and waking fantasies speak of narcissism, vampirism, incubi, and fantasies of incest and suicide—news to be heeded or refused in the struggle to free ego from a strangling net of *others*.

Examined carefully, however, the burning center of Price’s work is not only the quest for freedom (how to maintain health and sanity, not to mention a unique self, amidst family and romantic pressures) but also “an actual quest/ For radiant virtue” (“A Tomb for Will Price” 100.) In his essay “For Ernest Hemingway,” Price admits that his

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<sup>2</sup> This term (also a title by psychologist and archetypal scholar James Hillman) refers to dreams and visions in which the Self experiences aspects of itself in performance, allowing the dreamer to both witness and in some cases actively participate in the resolution of psychic disturbances. Hillman’s work is the cornerstone of Fuller’s dissertation (*The Sleeping Giant: Dreams and Artistry in the Fiction of Reynolds Price*), which provides thorough readings of key dream texts. Fuller discusses the implications of these dreams for several major characters who battle for individuation, but he also addresses their complex function for Price as an artist who frequently transcribes his *own* dreams into the fiction. The study is fascinating and complex, illuminating the mythic complexity of Price’s work without becoming reductive. But it focuses quite narrowly on what Joseph Campbell, James Hillman, and Evans Lansing Smith would call “the descent to the underworld.” By contrast, I am more concerned with such characters’ attempts to *emerge* from the underworld to a healed and healing position in the community.

own central subjects are freedom and virtue (158), and a careful inspection of the fiction, the poetry, and the essays reveals that Price's fascination (or obsession) is not only with physical and psychic pathology—"wounds"—but still more with what survives, flourishes, and can heal. Yet this healing is not for self only. Like Eudora Welty (whose favorite word, Price observes, is "radiance"<sup>3</sup>), Price is concerned with what human beings can and dare offer one another. His, too, is a "radiant" language, and the words *gift*, *serve*, *offer*, and *pledge* come to have a poignant significance in his work. Since Price so frequently asserts that one of his persistent concerns is with the nature of heroism, it may be useful to recall that the word *hero* is in fact Greek for "to serve."

How, the fiction asks repeatedly, can the Self best discover (reveal) its uniqueness and serve others, fulfilling the demands of duty, love, and honor without drowning others or being drowned? For Price's precocious young witnesses (and for the "freed" artists and sufferers they eventually become), the urgent question is how we are called upon—and how far we dare to approach one another, to answer the needs that we see or have driven in upon us daily. How can generosity survive? And what "amends," if any, are possible when it has failed us? This is an unbearably complex problem in a world where in Price's own words (put also into the mouth of the struggling writer Thomas Eborn), "Age, disease, death—and worst, disloyalty—exist and will in time win all that we love" ("Finding Work" 18; *Love and Work* 9).

At the heart of Price's work, watched closely (or remembered) by a precocious young witness or artist figure, is a line of splendid but threatened young protagonists (usually male) who constitute what Price in a 1974 interview with William Ray calls

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<sup>3</sup> Reynolds Price, "Eudora Welty in Type and Person," *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985) 257.

“sacrificial people. . . lambs in whose blood we bathe, whose blood we drink . . . in the sense of the god whom men kill and eat” (Ray 97). Price’s comment answers Ray’s observation that fifteen-year-old Milo Mustian (protagonist of *A Generous Man* and one of Price’s earliest explorations of the type I’m describing) is “full of a mysterious energy that a blessed few perceive, drink, and are changed by for life” (97). But as Price suggests here, and explores at length in his essay “News for the Mineshaft,” this sacrificial aspect of Milo—the tragedy of his adventure—went largely unnoticed by early critics. “The boy,” Price tells Ray, “is quite unequipped to pursue the sort of knight-errantry that he seems to have in mind, that he seems to feel is required by the situation of the world. . . . whatever that adolescent grace was, it was taken from him” (98).

The nature of such grace (both physical and spiritual)—of its swift destruction and occasional, surprising *redemption*—is one of the most crucial, recurrent mysteries explored in Price’s work. And Milo Mustian is only one of many avatars of the “sacrificial male” and “generous man” who haunts Price’s pages from the first of his career, surfacing most memorably, perhaps, in the characters Rob Mayfield (*The Surface of Earth* and *The Source of Light*), Rafe Noren (*Tongues of Angels*), Neal Avery (*New Music*)—even Will Price himself in *Clear Pictures*<sup>4</sup> and in the sketch “Life for Life.” But to date no study has linked these major manifestations of the type nor explored its status in Price’s canon as “privately minted” archetype (not cultural symbol.)<sup>5</sup> Neither has anyone explored the essential meaning of the type for Price by examining the highly

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<sup>4</sup> I refer here to both Price’s memoir (1989) and the documentary film based upon it (1994).

<sup>5</sup> Both Constance Rooke’s volume and the 1984 dissertation of William N. Claxon, Jr. (*The Rebel Yell: Masculinity in Twentieth-Century Southern Fiction*) have moved partially in this direction, but both link such characters as types of the Southern male rebel—what Rooke terms “the buccaneer male” (62).

unusual and revealing evolution in his frequent narrative approach to such figures over the years.

The overt and initially comic nature of the “fertility” plots and “quest motifs” in *A Generous Man* have long encouraged symbol-savvy critics to read the surface features of the novel, designating Milo as “the young virile hero, the seed-bearer, the man possessing restorative powers” (Schiff, *Understanding* 44). Few however (William Ray excepted) have seriously addressed Milo Mustian’s own impending need for restoration. And most critics have followed the lead of William N. Claxon and Constance Rooke in regarding Milo (and other avatars of the type) primarily as a celebration of male sexuality and freedom and as James Schiff puts it, “a central figure of observation and desire” (*Understanding* 28). Schiff addresses Milo’s tragedy in part, but only in the simplest terms (and with some inaccuracy) as that of a gifted individual who fails to realize his potential (*Understanding* 45-46).

Oddly, no critic has even mentioned the deeper context of the “religious” (even esoteric) tradition from which the concept of the “seed-bearer” springs. More significantly, no critic has connected the narrative core of Milo’s tale (even its supernatural component) with the core grail scene—the profoundly male spiritual mystery with which it has so much in common. The connection is not important for its own sake (behold, a Grail quest!) Rather, its value lies in the fact that this core grail scene—and its highly ritualized gesture of identification, reconciliation, spiritual revelation, and healing—quite strongly resembles an emergent mystery and “iconography” at the heart of Price’s own writing. As a result, it can serve as a kind of

anamorphic mirror, helping readers to recognize Price's own unique gesture and capture it whole.

In *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*,<sup>6</sup> Joseph Campbell takes great care to explain the “analogy of the anamorphosis,” which he borrows from the philosopher Schopenhauer and utilizes in examining James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (195). In his brief paper “On an Apparent Intention in the Fate of the Individual,” Schopenhauer had compared “recognition of the intention of Fate” to “reflection in the conic mirror [anamorphoscope],” which gathers and makes visible entire human forms from anamorphoses—pictures that appear only as meaningless fragments to the naked eye (*CM* 194). Campbell asserts that in the work of such “creative mythologists” as Mann and Joyce, the figure of the anamorphic mirror is a highly useful concept for grasping the workings of “an order in depth.” Beneath the charged fragments—“recurrent verbal constellations . . . apparently unrelated, widely separated occurrences, persons, settings, and experiences” in the text—may operate what Campbell calls “archetypes of mythic revelation . . . manifest and operative still” (*CM* 325). As we shall soon see, the use of one highly emblematic narrative (or scene) to explore the psychological and spiritual content of another is a practice that Price himself (an inveterate lover of religious paintings and Russian icons) has occasionally resorted to in planning his novels. Such an approach proves immensely rewarding in examining his work.

Each staging of this mystery by Price functions as a kind of passion play, oddly echoing the grail scene in its mystical approach to (and mitigation of) a very specific type

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<sup>6</sup> Hereafter my text references this volume (the fourth in Campbell's *Masks of God* series) as *Creative Mythology*.

of male suffering—superficially sexual, but essentially existential in nature. In much the same way as the core grail narratives, Price’s own narratives testify—in gradually fuller and more sophisticated ways—to the emotional history and spiritual Quest of the “grand lost boy” whose story implicitly demands witness, even within the tale itself. The evolution of these textual “witnesses,” and of Price’s search for the correct perspective and lens through which to shape his own narrative gesture, is one of the most crucial aspects of my study—which is in one sense a kind of history of the search itself. And strangely indeed each stage of this evolution mirrors that of the grail knight’s own spiritual progress toward the wounded grail king.

My study focuses primarily on Price’s works themselves, relying heavily on comparative analyses of his own texts (in a variety of genres) to reveal a unique—and personal—core narrative and Quest at the heart of his work. Of necessity, however, the first chapter (a more detailed introduction to my use of the Grail legends as anamorphic mirror) dwells at some length on “the matter of the Grail” to isolate the key components and to illustrate their ongoing presence and function in Price’s oeuvre. In her Preface to *The Grail Legend*, Marie-Louise von Franz (completing thirty years of Grail research by the late Emma Jung) states that “Like alchemy and its curious symbolic productions, these poetic fantasy creations and their symbolism are also illustrative of deep-seated, unconscious psychic processes that are still of the greatest significance, for they prepare the way to, and anticipate, the religious problem of modern man” (“Foreword,” *The Grail Legend* 7). That same problem has stood from the first at the center of Price’s vision. And here, too, I believe, is the secret country of Price’s richest and most surprising

narrative reflections on the intersection of the sacred with our world—home province and legacy of his vivid young men.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE GUARDIAN BOUND: NARRATIVE AS GRAIL QUEST

I dare not tell or recite  
Even were I able to,  
Nor have I the ability  
Without the noble book  
Wherein the stories are inscribed  
By noble clerics made and said.  
There is written the great secret  
That is called the Grail.

—Robert de Boron, *Roman d l'Estoire dou Graal*  
(qtd. in Jung and von Franz 308)

For Price, the pursuit of narrative has an indelibly sacred quality. His luminous essay “A Single Meaning: Notes on the Origins and Life of Narrative” (the introduction to his first volume of biblical translations, *A Palpable God*) asserts that narrative itself is “the chief means by which we became, and stay, human” (250). And in the same essay he states his conviction (equally powerful) that “the first—and final—aim of narrative” is “compulsion of belief in an ordered world” (262). “I couldn’t imagine being a writer or artist of any sort,” Price observes in an interview with Jefferson Humphries, “if I weren’t also a person whose bedrock beliefs are founded upon a powerful and traditionally Christian sense of the structure of reality” (“Feast Thy Heart” 228). But significantly he states in the same essay that “I don’t for a moment think that the Apostles’ Creed or orthodox Christianity . . . are by any means adequate descriptions of the complexity of the reality of the universe” (Humphries 225).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Price here references both Einstein and a “theological treatise” by Milton to emphasize his point

Price, in fact, has a voracious appetite for narrative of the Sacred, both East and West, and has a wide-ranging experience of such literature—a fact clearly reflected in his work. *The Source of Light*, for example, takes its epigraph from the Christian mysticism of Emmanuel Swedenborg's *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell*. Price seems equally familiar (and fascinated) with the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and Noh drama<sup>2</sup>—not to mention works both canonical and apocryphal from the Judeo-Christian traditions. In fact, Price asserts,

east and west, the novel has traditionally been, as distinguished from the poem, an instrument of reason intended for discovery and comprehension and then, of necessity, forgiveness—in fact, the supremely Christian form,<sup>3</sup> the new dispensation which rose to augment, if not supersede, older pagan forms (the psalm, epic, lyric, drama) which were hymns to mystery, human and divine.” (*Pylon: The Posture of Worship* 30)

As Price makes clear repeatedly in essays and interviews, he discovered narrative early as a tool for enacting what he calls “my spiritual work” (Wakefield, “Clear Vision”). “All my childhood stories . . . ,” Price says, “were mysteries. I heard them as mysteries, whatever they were” (“You are Needed Now” 211). The earliest stories, he explains, were bible stories and biographies. But he was soon captivated by *The Boy's King Arthur*, with “its vision of the Grail pouring light on its viewer” (215) and by the Shroud of Turin, Joan of Arc, and Bernadette of Lourdes (*Clear Pictures* 243-49).

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that God's “illimitable reality” is—as Einstein and other physicists have asserted about the physical universe itself—beyond reach of our organs of perception and understanding.

<sup>2</sup> Before introducing the ghost in *A Generous Man* (his first obvious introduction of the “supernatural” into narrative), Price first made a study of Japanese Noh drama—“the great credible portraits of spirits returned” (“The Thing itself” 13).

<sup>3</sup> Clarifying this phrase for interviewer Lyn Ballard, Price asserts that “in the West the novel has to a large extent been an instrument of compassion and forgiveness as it has studied human life” (*American Audio Prose Library*).

In his essay “You are Needed Now and Will Always Be” (1976), Price recalls the crystallizing moment in which he first “sensed a grail of my own and headed toward it . . . The knowledge of others, for my help and theirs” (217). At seventeen, having written “a quick sketch of . . . a stranger I felt compelled to know,” Price saw that he

might some year, after struggles, have a way to pierce objects and people alike and see to the centers they guarded in fear and say what I’d seen so they’d know themselves and me and welcome me into the dangerous room where they waited alone, as helpless as I. Hadn’t I known, since *The Boy’s King Arthur*, of sinful Launcelot’s sight of the Grail?<sup>4</sup> (217)

Reflecting on the motives for his “first official work,” (a play called *The Wise Men*, which he penned at the age of thirteen) Price asks,

What can the odd boy have thought he was doing? I can guess at least that the play rose up partly as an early exercise of the mystical enthusiasm that would develop rapidly through later adolescence into an unorthodox set of religious beliefs that would accompany me thereafter . . . insofar as its theme is the Quest, then I was sketching quickly at the start a central subject of my adult concerns. (*Learning a Trade* x)

As Price himself is surely aware, the word *quest*, though worn thin in casual parlance, was originally attached (in connection to the Grail, at least) to a complex and rich iconography and to a remarkably stable narrative core, the very purpose of which seems to have been communication of a metaphysical/moral imperative and the delivery of profound eschatological news. In her highly influential study *From Ritual to Romance*,<sup>5</sup> Jessie Weston in fact asserts that the legends themselves “repose . . . upon . . .

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<sup>4</sup> The passage Price recalls is quoted immediately after and reads as follows:

“Flee, Launcelot, and enter not, for thou oughtest not to do it; and if thou enter thou shalt forthink it.” Then he withdrew him aback right heavy. Then looked he up in the midst of the chamber, and saw a table of silver, and the holy vessel covered with red samite. . . .” (217)

<sup>5</sup> Published in 1920, Weston’s seminal study heavily influenced (among others) T. S. Eliot, whose poem *The Waste Land* actually disseminated her ideas in literary circles. Since Price himself had a fondness for Arthurian literature and was exposed early to Frazer and the Cambridge Myth-Ritualists, it is highly likely that he ran across Weston’s work in that context. He is almost certain to have encountered it

the ruins of an august and ancient ritual, a ritual which once claimed to be the accredited guardian of the deepest secrets of Life” (187). In the “process of transmutation from Ritual to Romance,” she argues, this “kernel, the Grail legend proper, may be said to have formed for itself a shell composed of accretions of widely differing *provenance*” (163). But Weston’s comparative study of the Romances reveals an underlying unity: “the main object of the Quest is the restoration to health and vigour of a King suffering from infirmity caused by wounds, sickness, or old age,” usually by the asking of a ritual question (20).

In Weston’s view, the core Grail scene derives from a Chaldean Mystery-tradition that was Hellenized and later taken up by the *Naessenes*, a Christian-gnostic group (152). According to G. R. S. Mead, whose translation of Hermetic texts proved crucial to Weston’s finding, this sect believed that “the Good News of The Christ” was “the consummation of the inner doctrine of the mystery-institutions of all nations”—the end of which was in all cases “the revelation of the Mystery of Man” (Mead qtd. in Weston 153). Christianity seemed to them, Weston asserts, “no new thing” but instead “a fulfillment of the promise enshrined in the Mysteries from the beginning of the world” (149). Though Weston’s core scene clearly depicts a male rite of initiation and ascension—and is connected with “vegetation and fertility” rites stemming from Asia Minor—it deviates sharply from J. G. Frazer’s well-known observations about such Nature Cult rituals.<sup>6</sup> As Robert A. Segal notes in his 1993 Foreword to Weston’s study,

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in studying the works of Eliot, Hemingway, and his friend W.H. Auden—whose own ideas of the Quest he could hardly have escaped encountering.

<sup>6</sup> These are detailed in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, a work with which Price began (at Duke) “[his] own patrols” through the roots of religion—a pursuit that continues “with undiminished appetite to the present” (“A Single Meaning” 268).

“antithetically to Frazer’s scheme, the quester seeks to restore and serve the ailing king, not to kill and replace him. Where for Frazer the welfare of the community requires the killing of a weak king, in the Grail legend the community seeks his rejuvenation” (xxix).

Frazer, says Weston, had dealt with (and in fact recognized) only the exoteric or “public” aspects of these Nature Cults. In seeking the origin of the grail mystery, Weston is concerned primarily with the *esoteric* side of such cults, which had appropriated the ritual to impart teachings about “high Spiritual mystery” (148):

This ritual, in its earlier stages comparatively simple and objective in form, under the process of an insistence upon the inner and spiritual significance, took upon itself a more complex and esoteric character, the rite became a Mystery, and with this change the *rôle* of the principal actors became of heightened significance. (109-10)

In both the Grail legends and the Attis initiation with which Weston particularly associates them, the chief actor is the initiate/Quester, whose fate is “in some mysterious manner . . . connected with, and dependent upon” the death and restoration of the wounded man (Weston 146). It is indeed this wounded figure—named “Anfortas” (literally “infirmity”) in the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach<sup>7</sup>—who so closely mirrors the “grand lost boys” and generous men standing at the heart of so many Price narratives. And in both the Grail scene and Price’s fiction, the fated meeting and interaction between the wounded figure and his primary witness/ “heir” instigates the revelatory and potentially healing action of the narrative.

When the youth Parzival first encounters him, Anfortas is already aged and wasted with years of suffering from a terrible joust wound “through the scrotum” (Wolfram 244), which he received soon after reaching manhood and inheriting his dual

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<sup>7</sup> Citing James Douglas Bruce (*The Evolution of Arthurian Romance*), Campbell explains that the name derives “from the old French *Enfertez* (*Enfermetez*),” which means “‘Infirmity’” (CM 393).

role as King and guardian of the Grail's mysteries. Moved by the plight of the besieged Queen Orgeleuse—and filled with pride in his own being and prowess—Anfortas had turned from defense and administration of the Grail kingdom to ride out in the cause of this lady, “whom he judged of excellent conduct” (Wolfram 244). But in the King's wound “God had worked a terrible sign” (135), for Anfortas was incapacitated and could find no relief from the wound despite the Grail Company's distraught (and highly elaborate) attempts to heal him.

When finally they humbled themselves, praying before the Grail for a remedy, they learned that God had already appointed such an heir and healer—a knight who would come to them and ask a question, thus ending their sorrows (246). Unfortunately, the youth knew nothing of the task to which his fate was bound. And under the austere terms established for Anfortas' redemption, both King and Company were forbidden to seek him out or reveal it:

If he omits the Question on the first evening, its power will pass away.  
But if he asks his Question in season he shall have the Kingdom, and by  
God's will the sorrow shall cease. Thereby Anfortas will be healed, but he  
shall be King no more. (246)

Fatherless and wandering abroad in his own inchoate (and haphazard) pursuit of knightly deeds, Parzival stumbles unaware upon the Grail Castle and its mysteries, little suspecting the real nature of his connection to the ravaged figure who welcomes and feasts him with such unusual solicitude. Anfortas is in fact his maternal uncle—a relation of special legal and spiritual status in the ancient world—and one which (according to Jung and von Franz) places Parzival automatically in the position of surrogate son (226).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In ancient societies, Jung and von Franz explain, “the mother's brother is granted the standing of a godfather” (226).

Indeed, in the course of the evening, Parzival—understanding little of what he sees and experiences—is offered cloak, sword, and an honored place at table as the mysterious Grail itself is brought forth. No explanation is given for this—or for the King’s wound and grievous suffering, which inspires awe, pity, and curiosity in Parzival (Wolfram 123-28).

Yet Parzival asks nothing—partly from delicacy and natural reticence, but primarily from what he has learned of knightly conventions. His teacher Gurnemanz had in fact counseled him not to ask too many questions (Campbell, *CM* 446), and having recalled this, Parzival’s youthful mind wanders to his own reputation and concerns, overriding his heart’s natural impulse and allowing the power of the Question to pass away. When he wakes the next morning, he finds himself exiled from both Castle and Grail, marked with guilt for failing both Anfortas and himself in an arrangement of which he’d been wholly unaware. Though Parzival performs many deeds of valor and seeks constantly for a way to return and amend his error of omission, he wanders for years before he is able—spiritually prepared by long trials of his own—to return to the Grail castle and the ravaged King.

Scholars almost universally recognize the King’s wound in its literal sense (beneath assorted euphemisms) to be an injury to the genitals. Yet as most also agree, the sense of the wound is far more than sexual—and the mark of something more complex than “sin.” When the “stripling” Anfortas rides out as knight-errant to defend not the Grail kingdom but Queen Orgeleuse, the cause of his wounding is not sexual desire per se (though he hopes to win her love), but rather his heady sense of his own generosity, idealism, and self-styled virtue.

This is precisely the sort of “generous vulnerability” (Roberts 180) that Price sees as a danger to such figures as Milo Mustian, Rob Mayfield, and Rob’s son Hutch—all of whom Price sees as sharing “the same kinds of energy” (Ray 124). During his magical three days, Milo—not unlike eighteen-year-old Rob Mayfield on his equally charged graduation night in *The Surface of Earth*—is filled with what Price terms an “enormous, inherent, immanent energy” that is “given by a god and taken away by other human beings. . .” (Ray 97). “It’s his coming to manhood,” Price asserts, “and also, in a sense, his entering senility, entering old age,” for at the end of that brief golden time, “his life is essentially over” (Ray 98).

R. C. Fuller places Neal Avery (protagonist of the trilogy of plays *New Music*) squarely in the same category when he observes that “to his mother, his wife. . .and his best friend,” young Neal—whose name means “the champion”—symbolizes ‘the golden boy’ (115), ‘the king’ (142), even a saint or god (140)” (“Lunging in the Dark” 225). Like the Mayfield line (for whom first Rob, then Hutch serve as designated Hope) Neal’s family is gifted with keen eyes and love of story—a point Fuller makes when asserting that their surname itself (Avery) means that they *aver*, or “bear witness” (224). But to Neal in crisis, Fuller says, his own name suggests only that he is “the champion of ‘average’ ” (225). A connection to Anfortas (“infirmity”) becomes even harder to dismiss when, in a clever note, Fuller points out that “The word ‘average’ comes from the French word ‘avarie’ (very close to ‘Avery’), which means ‘damaged goods’” (233, n. 3).

William Ray’s observation to Price that both Milo Mustian and the young Rob Mayfield (in *The Surface of Earth*) exhibit “failures not so much of will as of

consciousness” (Ray 124) is equally true of Neal Avery and can be applied to the error of Anfortas as well. At the time of his wounding, the young King (like Price’s young men) truly comprehends neither his nature, his role (his duty to God and Grail family), nor his danger at the hands of those with the power to “sap and ruin” him (even unwillingly.) As Joseph Campbell asserts, Anfortas has inherited his kingship (quite young, at that) rather than earning it through a period of spiritual probation and testing, as Parzival must do (CM 392). In this sense Parzival—“Brave, and slowly wise. . .” (Wolfram qtd. in Campbell, CM 433)—can be seen not only as the counterpart but as the actual revision of Anfortas. But as Helene Adolf observes, election to the Grail is a difficult gift to receive. Though Parzival is told that the planets have “smiled upon his election,” the Grail, she explains, “remains a gift under the sign of Saturn, that outer planet that spells disaster but that also gives access to the Ladder of Contemplation” (176).

In the medieval romances, the Grail itself is described variously, but always as a powerful talisman or object connected with the mysteries of death and resurrection. The most significant literary manifestations of the grail are as the cup that caught the blood of Christ (Campbell, CM 533); as a “food-supplying talisman” that freely produces sustenance of a markedly spiritual quality (Weston 73-74); and as the “incorruptible stone” (“ ‘Lapsit exillis’<sup>9</sup> or “ ‘ Gral’ ” in the speech of angels) that has the power to restore life (Wolfram, *Parzival* 239-40). According to Emma Jung and Marie von Franz, Wolfram’s interpretation connects the Grail with the “psychologically important realm of alchemical symbolism” (34), and both authors point also to Robert de Boron’s symbolic

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<sup>9</sup> Translator A. T. Hatto takes this to be a variant spelling of *lapis exilis* and posits Wolfram’s own identification of his Gral with that alchemical stone—though Wolfram’s original text and “all editors since,” have adopted this spelling (431).

equation of the Grail (as cup) with the holy sepulchre (125-26). In *Visio Pacis: Holy City and Grail*, Helene Adolf offers an additional, history-based interpretation of its meaning that stems from the Jerusalem of the Crusades: “namely that the Grail is first and last a substitution for the Tomb, equal to it and yet transcending it—a Tomb, as it were, on a spiritual or angelic level” (80).<sup>10</sup>

More important than the Grail’s form, however, is the consistent fact that those who seek it (or are fated to encounter it) come away with a highly charged experience to render—first of failure and horror, but then (sometimes) of healing and apotheosis. Speaking of the Grail’s appalling restorative powers, the hermit Trevrizent explains to Parzival,

By virtue of this Stone the Phoenix is burned to ashes, in which he is reborn.—Thus does the Phoenix moult its feathers! Which done, it shines dazzling bright and lovely as before! Further: however ill a mortal may be, from the day on which he sees the Stone he cannot die for that week, nor does he lose his colour. (Wolfram, *Parzival* 239)

The grail guides (both male and female) never treat the Grail as an object about which they can ask, “Did you see it?” or “Do you now possess it?” Instead they ask questions such as “Have you at last got to know its nature?” (Wolfram 226), or they await the hero’s asking (as in Chretien’s *Perceval*) “Who is served from the Grail?” (Jung and von Franz 295). This last question, according to Jung and von Franz, “reveals the hero as descendant” of a special, hidden lineage and “establishes the connection with his ancestors” (295). As Wolfram’s tale emphasizes, however, knowledge of the grail entails

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<sup>10</sup> Underscoring the elusive and esoteric quality of the grail as *object*, Joseph Campbell cites an important 1967 article (“The Orient of the Crusades in Wolfram’s *Parzival*”) by Dr. Hermann Goetz. Goetz sees in the grail a peculiar combination of the *lapis exilis* of alchemy, the *lapis exilis* of the kabbalah, and the materialized *Shekhinah* (“Divine Manifestation” or “Earthly Residence” of God) (*CM* fn. 430).

both humility (the opposite of self-absorption, which Price defines as ‘the primary sin’)<sup>11</sup> and compassion—*caritas* or *mitleid* for strangers who are ultimately revealed as kin.

Yet the key to the Grail as spiritual mystery lies not only in the unique nature of the Grail itself, but also in the profoundly existential quality of the wound that Anfortas has received and of which he must be healed. In the literature of the Grail, Campbell asserts, “The Maimed King’s wound” symbolizes “the knowledge of the anguish of existence as a function not merely of this or that contingency, but of being” (*CM* 424). And it is for this reason that Helene Adolf, in *Visio Pacis: Holy City and Grail*, observes that the philosophy of a modern theologian is “strangely reminiscent of what constitutes the paradox of the Grail: God, terrible as well as loving; man *peccator* as well as *justus*; and the Quest unmistakably eschatological” (176). In fact the central doctrine of the Hellenized mysteries that Weston finds at the root of the Christian Grail is, according to Reitzenstein,

the doctrine of the Man, the Heavenly Man, the Son of God, who descends and becomes a slave of the Fate Sphere: the Man who, though originally endowed with all power, descends into weakness and bondage, and has to win his own freedom, and regain his original state. (qtd. in Weston 154)

Torn thus by the fissure between the kingdoms of Nature and Spirit, this sacrificial type—who manifests in both the Grail stories and in Price’s fiction as sinner, battler, victim, object of Grace, and vehicle of revelation—represents the human soul confronted by “the problem of *physis* and of evil” (Jung and von Franz 212). But more important, he indicates the presence of what Emma Jung and Marie von Franz call “the dark aspect” of the Divine that first wounds (or anneals) as prelude to blessing (211).

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<sup>11</sup> *Reynolds Price: A Writer’s Inheritance*. (Video) VHS 1991 USA 29 color. Rock, Marcia.

Jung and von Franz, in fact, associate the Grail King's injury with the hip wound of the biblical Jacob—incurred in combat with a mysterious manifestation of God's presence (211). Campbell connects it also with the Mahayana Buddhist legend of “The Wheel of Terror-Joy,” which “treats of the path to Bodhisattvahood,” or sainthood (*CM* 414).<sup>12</sup> In this tale, a sorcerer named Bhairavananda (“the exhilaration or bliss of what is awesome or terrible”) prepares a whirling wheel (identified with the Buddhist “Wheel of the Law”) that settles painfully upon the bloody head of a man whose own nature and intelligible character have invited it, putting him (through the medium of his own passions) upon the path to “a truly terrible wisdom” (*CM* 415). But this wheel—like the Wheel of the Law—has two aspects.<sup>13</sup> And like the mysterious Grail, it sustains the sufferer for centuries without food or drink while he stands thus, bound in pain, and awaits the coming of the successor who will free him. As Campbell explains, a single question as to meaning—“*why do you stand thus with a wheel whirling on your head?*”—lifts the wheel from the head of the sufferer and places it on the head of his successor (*CM* 415).

One of the most important aspects of the core grail scene is that the healing Parzival seeks (through the mysterious agency of the Grail) comes not through an *answer* to the ritual Question, but rather through Parzival's asking it. As Campbell asserts in his chapter “The Crucified,” the function of this Question is above all

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<sup>12</sup> The current version of this tale, Campbell acknowledges, is indeed “worldly”—“devoted not to sainthood but to the art of “getting on” and avoiding “excessive greed” (*CM* 414). But as he emphasizes, scholar Theodore Benfey showed long ago that the legend is sacred in origin, and the key to its “religious import,” Campbell says, may still be glimpsed in the title “Terror-Joy” and in its particular use of the Wheel (414).

<sup>13</sup> Campbell explains that in Buddhist iconography the wheel has “two sides: in its commonly manifest aspect, as the wheel of sorrows of this everlasting round of births and rebirths, disease, old age, and death. . .; but also in the deeper, darker, yet more luminous revelation of the Mahayana doctrine of the “Great Delight: of . . . the painful wheel of rebirth . . . and the still state at the center of the wheel as the same” (*CM* 416).

to learn the *meaning* of a circumstance “thus come”<sup>14</sup>—to which there is no answer. There is, however, an *experience* possible, for which the hero’s arrival at the world axis and his readiness to learn (as demonstrated by his question) have proven him to be eligible. The problem of the Grail hero will therefore be: to ask the question relieving the Maimed King in such a way as to inherit his role *without* the wound. (CM 424)

The Grail problem, therefore, is one not only of spiritual identification with the wounded figure (and the risk to Self in connection), but also of reconciling with the larger and threatening Divine mystery of existence—the Mystery of Man—that his suffering represents. Quoting from Victor Frankl’s “ambrosial book” *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Campbell puts plainly the problem of both Wheel and Grail: ““What is demanded of man is not, as some existential philosophies teach, to endure the meaninglessness of life; but rather to bear his incapacity to grasp its unconditional meaningfulness in rational terms. *Logos* is deeper than logic”” (CM 424).

For years made conscious of his error, Parzival has developed the sense of suffering that should enable him to empathize with Anfortas and enact his role. Yet in his years of wandering (unable to return either to Grail Castle or wife), his vision and purpose have become clouded with suffering, his heart unreconciled to his failure and to the design of God, which seems not to have rewarded his subsequent efforts. Campbell finds great significance in Wolfram’s “fanciful” assertion that Parzival’s name (*perce a val*) means “pierce through the middle” (CM 431). For the wheel of Terror-Joy—like the Grail’s “Phoenix-Fire” and the two-sided “Wheel of the Law”—forces an intense awareness of opposites-in-balance that is difficult for many to accept and more difficult still to communicate except by direct or (as in narrative) *vicarious* experience.

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<sup>14</sup> As Campbell explains, the Buddha is called “the one thus come” (CM 424).

Significantly, it is through narrative that the hermit Trevrizent—Anfortas’ brother and a former knight errant himself—at last changes the heart of Parzival during their Good Friday encounter in the forest. Trevrizent’s tale of Christ’s redemptive suffering, followed by an account of Anfortas’ wounding and the sufferings of the Grail family, eradicates Parzival’s sense of victimization, restoring to him the humility and sense of purpose required for his task. And when—through compassion, spiritual identification, and persistence against impossible odds—Parzival finally asks the Question (“Dear Uncle, what ails thee?”), the grail restores Anfortas to a splendid and unwounded radiance next to which Parzival himself pales in comparison (Wolfram 395).

For Anfortas, Parzival, and the Grail community, the fruit of Parzival’s question—a question as to meaning and an opening for what Price might label “narrative transaction”—is an existential revelation. And the healing to be found—a literal *view* to a “cure”—resides in the combination of woeful tale and joyous sight that suggests something radical about the structure of reality itself. It permits life where death was certain, allows healing of incurable wounds, allows time to be turned literally backward (against the working of entropy)—and allows even for the upending of God’s own law in the service of his ultimate design.

Such healing perspective and the most effective means of conveying it to reader-witnesses is precisely the issue at the heart of Price’s essay “A Single Meaning,” in which he explores what he terms “the metaphysics of narrative” (265)—a concept examined closely in Chapter Three. The problem raises its head in a metafictional sense in Price’s novel *Love and Work*. “Age, disease, death—and worst, disloyalty—exist and will in time win all that we love” observes novelist Thomas Eborn (*L&W* 9), upon whose head

the wheel of Terror-Joy has metaphorically descended, plunging him into a harrowing interior adventure of self-confrontation and a brush with the supernatural. And though critics have never commented upon this fact, the unwelcome “reality” Eborn encounters—and initially “fails” in the defensive coldness of his art—is strikingly like the world of “Terror-Joy” that fifteen-year-old Milo experiences during his three-day adventure but lacks the means to convey. As Price explains in “News for the Mineshaft,” *A Generous Man* is actually a *romance*—designed to access realities beyond “those physical walls which, in fiction or in life, are our most elegant walls against the large world—that terrible, perhaps even benevolent world which turns, huge, around and beneath our neater world which agrees to forbid it. The dead, incompletions, the past which is future” (49).

Unlike Milo, Eborn has means and training—as well as the designated purpose of exploring and purveying such mysteries in his writing. Yet far from accepting such revelations and exploring them, Eborn himself has erected such “elegant walls,” using the “filagree shields” of his work (*L&W* 81) against the “terrible, perhaps even benevolent” reality near the heart of his own long-overdue narrative task (a specific and deeply personal work of love.) Eborn is fettered in part by his too-keen awareness of what Price elsewhere calls “the world’s design to maul, humiliate” (“For Ernest Hemingway” 156), a burden his narrative vision has not yet ripened sufficiently to accommodate. As Eborn discovers and Price considers carefully in his essays from the same period, a narrative transaction (like any other) can be brave or cowardly, betraying or “adequate” to the mystery at hand (“Single Meaning” 257). It can also be self-absorbed, vain, and all the many other things that a human heart can be. Mired in self-absorbed misery and sorrow,

Eborn is bitter and lost—like the renegade Parzival—unsure of his role as writer and revealer of mysteries and unable (as yet) to support even the remarkable revelation granted to him. At the novel’s end he stands in “the audible. . .roar of light” and knows that “he must stand in it all his life—separate, lidless, scalding. . .” (*L&W* 148).

The existential paradox that so troubles Eborn had already been indicated clearly in *A Generous Man*—and nowhere more completely than in the novel’s final scene. When Milo (in angry defiance) challenges the universe that has apparently sacrificed his innocent and mentally handicapped brother Rato to violent death, he receives—as if in direct response—what Professor J. R. R. Tolkien identifies in all successful wonder stories as the moment of *eucatastrophe*—the “good catastrophe” or “sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur” (“On Fairy Stories” 86). Characteristically, Milo’s experience of the “sudden turn” is striking. Rato appears before him, “safe, spared and there so sudden, unquestionably as to silence Milo, fling him back on his heels” (*Generous Man* 190). And seeing—apparently *answered*—Milo makes a crucial (but largely unnoticed) choice. As Rato strides past him toward their house suddenly “washed by new light, home,” Milo reaches not for freedom, flight, or defiance, but instead (in joy) for Rato—to shield his “bare cold back (a black rake of claws . . . abruptly halted at the spine, postponed” (190). Such moments of reprieve, Tolkien argues, “[do] not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure” but “[deny] (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat, and in so far [they are] *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (86).

This dynamic is present from the first and in nearly every aspect of *A Generous Man*—the first of Price’s works to explore it so fully. In his notebooks Price asserts that in spite of its implicit and often overlooked darkness, *A Generous Man* is, “at bottom,” about “Joy . . . the sense of exuberance which fifteen-year-old Milo himself feels at the flowering of his manhood, but also the fear which others feel at the spectacle—the sense of potential harm” (*LaT* 136). His sister Rosa’s dream of Milo poised for flight—“You will die and ruin us, Milo!”—captures this wondrous terror perfectly (*Generous Man* 47). And Milo’s reply as he leaps—“I am almost a man. I must fall to rise!” (*Generous Man* 47)—identifies him closely with the existential figure of the Anthropos, the “Heavenly Man” poised for descent into the “the Fate sphere.” Milo is still soaring as Rosa’s dream ends. But despite his adventures and aspirations, he has long foreseen his fate: to be crushed by family duty and by the tobacco farming he loathes (185-86). Rato’s apparent death (the ultimate factor in Milo’s new plan for escape) briefly threatens to alter his course (186-87). But when Rato is returned to them whole, Milo acquiesces almost imperceptibly to what seems a sacrificial fate.<sup>15</sup> In any case, as the Anthropos doctrine holds, the suffering of such figures is endemic in the Fate sphere—on the surface of earth. Thus, as Campbell observes, “The wound in Christ’s side, delivered by Longinus’s spear, is a counterpart of that of the Maimed Fisher; also, the poisoned wound of Tristan” (*CM* 425).

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<sup>15</sup> Competing explanations of Milo’s name make clear quite early his views of manhood and Fate. Milo takes as namesake “the old Greek wrestler” who “always won” at the Olympics but was trapped and torn apart in old age—attacked by wolves as he finished (bare-handed) a wood-splitting job left behind by others (*Generous Man* 17). His grandfather claims Milo was named for “[his] old blind mule” that died the day Milo was born (*Generous Man* 18). But while Milo agrees “That’s part of my namesake—you’re right, I forgot,” he asserts his right to choose his own vision “now I’m a man” and be “Milo the great, strong and brave” (*Generous Man* 18).

It is precisely this almost existential sense of Tristan (depicted vividly in Act III of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*)<sup>16</sup> that Price evokes in the “grand lost boy” Rob Mayfield—protagonist and *raison d’ etre* for both *The Surface of Earth* and *The Source of Light*. Price references the opera briefly, but significantly, in both *Love and Work* and in *The Source of Light*, the central volume of his trilogy *A Great Circle*. In fact the Tristan theme (and its accompanying, highly syncretic iconography) is woven through all three novels of *A Great Circle*. But it finds its fullest flowering in Rob Mayfield and his son Hutch, the aspiring poet through whom Price references the tale directly and in striking fashion in *The Source of Light*. Dying of cancer, Rob commissions Hutch (departing for a period of writing and graduate study at Oxford) to make sense of the Mayfield-Kendal legacy (hunger, waste, and sadness) by finding “anything like a diagram in these fifty years, anything more than harum-scarum tracks in the dirt . . .” (*SoL* 67). Wondering about the name of “whatever worm gnawed us . . . or what it was after as it ate through us all,” Rob hopes that Hutch himself has escaped that blight and can offer the answer (*SoL* 67).

Unaware that his father is dying, Hutch accepts Rob’s commission, fully intending to “protect him from his life” (*SoL* 216). Indeed, he has already voiced similar motives for the writing career that is taking him far afield (at least temporarily) from all that he loves. As Hutch—whom Price describes as “a rather intellectualized version of Milo” (Roberts 176)—explains to his lover Ann Gatlin, “My people abandoned so much

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<sup>16</sup> Wagner’s autobiography reveals that it was work on his *Tristan* that gave him the idea for the opera *Parsifal*. “For in my thoughts,” Wagner explains, “I had identified Tristan, languishing from the wound and yet not able to die from it, with Amfortas of the Grail romance” (qtd. in *CM* 391). So great was the identification, Wagner explains, that in the earliest version of *Tristan and Isolde* (drafted as he read Wolfram’s *Parzival*), he “introduced an episode” (later omitted) in which his wandering, “grail-questing *Parzival*” visited the sickbed of Tristan. (391). Two years later, finishing *Tristan*, he describes in a letter his “appalled realization” of the task before him in *Parsifal*: “it has become hideously clear . . . : Amfortas is my Tristan of Act III in a state of inconceivable intensification” (qtd. in *CM* 506).

on my doorstep—or had it snatched from them and set down here. There’s no one but me left to use it all, consume it, convert it, redeem back all my people pawned away—their generous, starved hearts” (*SoL* 46). Older than the Milo of *A Generous Man*, but similarly gifted, twenty-five-year-old Hutch has already begun to identify with his father’s suffering, knowing that “when his own manhood flared up in him,” he had become as charged and vulnerable as his father and the other Mayfield men—“a member in their own ring of prowlers, impelled by hunger” for a “food . . . which had left him burned” (*SoL* 48).

In an urgent attempt to offer Rob’s “diagram” (and to comprehend the meaning of that legacy for his own life) Hutch worries away at the Tristan tale as a kind of mirror—rethinking it, dreaming it in several versions (Wagner’s, Bedier’s, and the protagonist’s own narrative poem in progress.) And though Price nowhere mentions either Parzival or the Grail king, the dream that surfaces as Hutch sleeps in the beached boat at Tresco makes clear that like Campbell and Wagner, he has on some level *equated* Tristan with the ruined Grail King. As Hutch looks through the eyes of Gorvenal (Tristan’s lifelong witness and servant in travail), carrying the body of Tristan toward the sea while the rest depart with Iseult, he steps into a role now ingeniously conflated with Parzival’s task of service and “restoration.” And as Campbell says of Wagner’s Parsifal, Hutch’s crucial moment of realization involves “not . . . passion for the female, but . . . compassion for the male” (*CM* 508).

Hutch’s dream of carrying Tristan (dead on a bier) toward the sea constitutes one of his several premonitions concerning Rob’s coming death and burial. But the imagery is highly suggestive of ancient Adonis rituals of burial and resurrection specifically

requiring the body's commitment "to the waves" (Weston 47). As Weston notes, the public aspect of such rituals survived well into the twentieth century, requiring mourners to carry a figure representing "[Tammuz/Adonis/Attis] on a bier . . . and either bury the figure, throw it in the water . . . , or, after a mock-death, carry the revived Deity, with rejoicing, back to town" (Weston 53). The "*mise-en-scène*" of the Grail romances, she observes, has striking parallels with those celebrations: "The central figure is either a dead knight on a bier (as in the Gawain versions [of the Grail romances]) or as in Wolfram, a wounded king on a litter. . ." (48). Considering the degree to which Tristan, Attis, and Adonis figure explicitly in Price's writing and in discussions about his own generous men, it would be heedless to ignore the implications of such details in Hutch's dream.

Indeed, in *A Great Circle*, it is impossible to separate the meaning of Tristan from that of Attis (in Hellenic form, Adonis) in relation to the Mayfield men. Though Hutch eventually identifies with and casts Rob imaginatively as an avatar of Tristan (wounded in pursuit of his "Iseult"), Hutch's poem for his newly dead father recalls Rob in Warm Springs (nine months before Rob's death from cancer) as "a man / Embraced by the killing earth"—pulled under by "the circular pool of fuming / Water (female essence of the heart of the / Ground . . ." (*SoL* 309). *The Source of Light* begins with this trip to Warm Springs (once famous for its "cures"), and the sequence abounds with mythic references to phallicism, fertility, death, and resurrection. As the novel opens, in fact, Hutch cheerfully regards his penis in the mirror. Moments later, for the first time in years, he also frankly regards the aging but still powerful body of his father, who jokes "[embracing] the ridgepole" at the center of the pool—that his own romantic troubles

might have been avoided if he had “found this thirty years ago” (4). “You might not have had me,” Hutch replies seriously, aware of the uncomfortable truth in the joke. But in response (still partly joking), Rob performs a mock rite of baptism on his son, commanding him to “descend” and rise (4-5). To both men, the water itself seems female in essence—to Hutch “a large faceless woman . . . inescapable”—but to Rob, a womb he had left “insanely,” but to which he might now return and “dissolve” (5).

Hutch’s language and the details of the actual scene evoke clear connection to the Attis/Cybele (*Magna Mater*) myth that Hutch and his fiancée Ann confront directly, months later, during their ultimately disastrous romantic idyll in Rome (*SoL* 197-98). As Hutch and Ann visit the Temple of the Magna Mater, she reads him the tale of Attis from her guidebook and presents him (joking) with a marble shard from the temple mound, warning Hutch to “remember me when your razor slips” (198). Within days, however, they conceive a child that Ann will eventually (and secretly) abort, devastating Hutch.

Significantly, the Attis myth is the one through which (in *The Surface of Earth*) Hutch’s grandfather Forrest Mayfield (a Latin teacher) had “interpreted” his own spiritual condition at the creek—gutted, symbolically castrated at thirty-three—after his wife Eva’s abandonment and withdrawal with his son. Having recited Catullus’ poem “Attis” to himself while bound outward in his flight from her (63), Forrest pauses to examine his own nude body in the river (*SoE* 78-79)—a scene which resonates oddly with Hutch’s similar, albeit cheerful self-regard of his nude body at Warm Springs. The scene—both chilling and pivotal—confirms Forrest’s decision to stop pursuing Eva, finally, and to seek instead for his deeply damaged and damaging father, *Old Rob*, in hopes of learning his story and healing old wounds.

In Hutch's dream of Tristan (and even as *The Source of Light* ends) Hutch's implied query (*what ails thee?*)—his explanation and attempt at an artist's "rejuvenation" of his father's life—is incomplete. We see only the dawning of a nascent awareness in Hutch. And clearly he is also experiencing something of Wagner's "appalled realization of the task he [has] assigned himself" (Campbell, *CM* 506), for Price's narration allows that a portion of the dream's meaning may have "been refused as harmful or untrue" (*SoL* 132). But in the context of the novel—Price's demonstration to us, his reader-witnesses—Hutch's dream establishes a crystalline view of the entire trilogy's central pattern and movement. Through this peculiar "lens," Price, his protagonist Hutch, and the reader are allowed a significant insight into the nature of the passion play they are sharing: the life, death, and "restoration" of Rob Mayfield and his son's loving determination to match Rob's courage, inheriting his role without such a wound. And in such a carefully constructed narrative moment, both Price and his alter ego Hutch locate the saving perspective from which a burdened but loyal witness may do just that.

Indeed, Hutch's dream of Tristan dead on a bier echoes a number of similar, almost iconic moments of significant *witness* scattered throughout Price's fiction: the death of Mr. Ledwell in "A Chain of Love"; nine-year-old Preacher's dream vision of his father's death in "The Names and Faces of Heroes"; Thomas Eborn's nightmarish and highly charged encounter in *Love and Work* with a strangely familiar wrecked boy bleeding out from a steering-wheel wound to the groin. And the implied chain of questions beneath Price's narrative approach to these figures (only a few of whom I've indicated here) makes their correspondence to one another—and the nature of Price's passion play—even clearer. *Who was he? What is wrong with a man like that? What*

*caused him to allow, choose, or undergo such plundering of body and mind? At whose hands, by whose choice—and with what meaning?* Indeed, Price asks that second question (a version of “what ails thee?”) directly and at least twice in his published notebooks—once concerning Rob Mayfield (*LaT* 217, 3 January 1973) and again (twelve years later) in relation to Neal Avery ((*LaT* 341, 29 October 1985), product of Price’s “Burning Questions” about his parents’ marriage before him (*LaT* 381, 25 June 1987).

Such patterns begin to suggest that Price’s repeated narrative approach to the linked figures in this study constitutes a transaction of the kind implicitly invited by the Grail scene’s Question gesture and has much the same goal. Indeed, as I have already suggested, Parzival’s long and spiritually grueling path of return to Grail Castle and King provides an important mirror for Price’s own spiritual work and for his ongoing refinement of vision as he approaches the mystery of these lives and offers the sight to reader-witnesses. Just as important to consider, however, is the issue of *why* such “iconography” flourishes—scattered, largely buried, but persistently emergent—in Price’s canon. Considering the many and often surprising surfacings of Grail motifs and situations in modern literature, Helene Adolf reminds us that “what we now call ‘The Grail Legend’ . . . has become quite independent of its origins; it acts now exclusively by dint of its symbols, which correspond to archetypes never composed, only exposed and raised to prominence by events and their reverberations”(143). Focused largely on the “inner *history*” of the grail, Adolf has in mind a cultural and historical stimulus for the emergence of these archetypes into modern literature. But of course such “events and their reverberations” need not be cultural—they need only be profound.

In “Dodging Apples” (an essay part explanation, part plea, and part striking injunction), Price himself urges readers who ask only ““How is this thing built?”” and ““How does it work?”” to first risk asking

*why* was it made? Why is it this sort of machine, not some other? Why was it launched at all into a world gagging on five thousand years of accumulated poems? Why launched at this time, down these specific ways, at this specific speed? Then maybe How? again; for once having dealt with Why?, a reader is likely to find early answers to How? irrelevant. Until a reader asks that forked question—however unanswerable—he has not even begun the trek into the heart of a poem, the guarded room in which the poet left his unchained monster, his secret design upon our lives. . . . (185)

Emphasizing his belief that each work of art is essentially an act, Price concludes that the answers provided by such questions—“however speculative”—may be “among the richest lessons any act can provide” (186).

Because of the information Price’s memoirs, prefaces, essays, and notes have so richly provided, a substantial critical shift in this direction has begun. Lynne Veach Sadler, Doris Betts, and James Schiff have all written of the ways in which biblical writings have influenced Price’s own narratives, affecting even the way he thinks and writes about his own life. Sadler and Betts have approached this issue primarily from a Southern and traditionally Christian perspective, pointing to Price’s strongly Christian (if not “churchly”) upbringing and the strong influence of his Milton scholarship. Sadler places Price in the line of the “rich emblematic tradition that died out with Bunyan” (236). Betts modifies this, calling Price a “typological (but not allegorical) thinker” whose view of history (and indeed of his own life) “exhibits the same . . . thinking Christians bring to the two large divisions of their Bible” when examining the Old Testament “for inadvertent (though divinely planted) clues to the New. . .” (305).

Significantly, all three devote considerable attention to Price's account of his dangerous breech birth and the pact with God that his father (a thirty-three-year-old alcoholic) made in order to secure it.

Describing this event, which was "leaked" to him at age five through the jests of a drunken uncle, Price writes that Will "fled the house in the freezing dawn, went out to the woodshed; and there he sealed a bargain with God as stark and unbreakable as any blood-pact in Genesis—if Elizabeth lived, and the child, he'd never drink again" (CP 29).

When his father returned, the crisis was over, and Will "had the bald enormous fact of a deal with God he never questioned" (CP 32). The "unquestioned corollary," as Will understood it (and Price understood even at age five) was that "If Will Price couldn't keep his half of the bargain . . . God had every right to reclaim Elizabeth and Reynolds" (CP 32). Had he been younger, Price asserts, "I might not have understood or borne the weight of the office" (CP 36). But though Will Price was silent on the subject, never speaking to his son "of the deal and its terrors," Price (transfixed from childhood by Bible stories and by tales of saints and heroes) seems to have immediately accepted the role, even expanding it to that of *guard*. In *Clear Pictures* Price explains that (like many children of alcoholics) he developed a watchful eye toward Will. Though he never doubted Will's intentions, he dreaded having to "go off duty" at bedtime, while his father lingered with friends who were drinking. "I'd lie in the dark as long as I could," Price writes, listening "till the final weight of my diligence drowned me" (155). Price even theorizes that Will's private nicknames for him ("Preacher" or "Preacher Jones") may well have been Will's "warning to himself—*This child is both the emblem and hostage of my pledge*" (CP 159).

Schiff writes most extensively of the role this personal mythology plays in Price's canon. Price, he asserts, "has continually striven to bring to his work, and life, the intensity and mystery of biblical narrative" (*Understanding* 163), "alluding" to such stories in both his fiction and autobiographical writings" (163) and "boldly rais[ing]" the tale of birth and vow "to the level of myth" (*Understanding* 2). In such a way, Schiff argues, Price "demonstrates . . . that human existence is neither insignificant nor arbitrary, but instead a vital and meaningful part of a larger design" (*Understanding* 163). Schiff's assessment is surely correct, and Price makes clear in a number of places that such *evangelium* (to again borrow Tolkien's word) is an intrinsic part of what he hopes to achieve in his work—a by-product of his own path toward what he calls the "polar heights" ("For Ernest Hemingway" 158). But this *evangelium*, while irrevocably grounded in orthodox Christian tradition and narrative, reaches considerably beyond these for some of its deepest expressions (a fact which has scarcely been explored.) And Schiff's language (e.g. "raising" and "alluding" in order to "demonstrate") oversimplifies not only Price's goal, but also the creative process that serves it in such interesting fashion. In doing so, it risks reawakening the old misunderstanding that such elements in Price's narratives are mere devices—conscious strategies for appealing to the authority of biblical (or otherwise sacred) narrative and thereby enhancing his writing, lending it gravity and importance.

But to make such an assumption is to ignore a key paradox of Price's artistic praxis. As he admitted to Wallace Kaufman, he is indeed fond of "grand schemes" (27), and Price's own notes reveal the incredible detail with which he has planned the subtext of certain novels—with an "extreme kind of self-awareness, self-consciousness" that poet

Stephen Spender (long time friend and early mentor of Price) finds to be one of the most “striking” and definitive aspects of his work (47). But as Price himself attests and the studies of R. C. Fuller explore in great detail, Price’s work stems to a remarkable degree from his unconscious mind—to such a degree, in fact that he is able to observe to William Ray, “there are an enormous number of details, both of fact and personal feeling . . . which have emerged . . . either directly in the form of autobiographical fact or in some sort of more metaphorical or allegorical form—forms about many of which I am obviously unconscious” (57). What Fuller’s studies and many of Price’s own statements make clear is that his narratives are to a large extent arenas for discovery—and for discovery through *performance*. In fact, during a 1990 interview, Price revealed to Fuller that he frequently incorporates his own dreams into his fiction—either giving them (as dreams) to a character in that day’s writing, or weaving them into ““everyday”” details of his characters’ waking lives (Fuller *The Sleeping Giant* 50). Thus, Fuller explains,

his novels actually are his dream journal, his vigilant awareness of the need to record his dreams’ valuable images. In this manner, both Price’s immediate past (the dream experience) and his more distant past (the dream reference) dialogically communicate in the present tense of his writing and the future of potential readings.  
(Fuller, *Sleeping Giant* 50)

In a 1994 interview, Spender also comments upon the “peculiar” and privately “minted” quality of Price’s writing. Readers today, he states,

want the writer to be a public person and to belong to a public world in a way that they recognize. But when you read Reynolds Price, you are immediately entering into a private world created and minted by a private person. But it takes a very long time for a general public to catch up to this. (48)

In fact Price rather neatly fits Campbell’s definition of the “creative mythologist,” an appellation Campbell assigns to James Joyce and Thomas Mann. Such writers,

Campbell observes, are the shamans—not the priests—of literature. The “priestly, orthodox” mind, Campbell explains, is focused on the “culturally conditioned” inflection of a universal idea (8), working comfortably within local tradition. But under pressure of a powerful and otherwise ineffable experience—“of order, horror, beauty, or even mere exhilaration”—the creative mythologist actually departs from the expected order of symbolization (4). By “shattering and reintegrating” traditional mythological associations into a highly syncretic and personal symbolic vocabulary, such writers (according to Campbell) “[renew] the act of experience itself . . . [restoring] to existence the quality of adventure. . .” (7). This syncretism points through cultural inflections to “the source-experience of a truth, a mystery” that over the years has given rise to “differing symbologies” (Campbell 8). For Price, too, the *why*—the experience itself and the writer’s “fidelity to an impulse”—is primary (“News for the Mineshaft” 50). Language, allusion, emblem, and iconography are useful only insofar as they serve and reveal the presence of this deeper mystery—and not incidentally the character of the writer who is at great pains to do so. In “News for the Mineshaft,” Price explains:

Surely it might have been clear by now that, in serious verse and fiction, the language . . . proceeds from the pressure of the entire given impulse as it shoulders upward through one man (his unconscious mind, his conscious, his training, his *character*) and will therefore bear the marks, even the scars, of its unique journey. . . . what is at issue is . . . fidelity to an impulse, a willingness by the poet to display language which bears whole strips of his skin and entrails (because they are *his* entrails for good or bad, what he has to offer), and a refusal to contract with readers-on-horseback, racing by. (50)

There can be little doubt that the “source-experience of . . . mystery” most relevant to Price in part involves the seminal tale of his birth and Will’s vow to reform, the biographical event most frequently referred to by both Price and the critics. More

important, however, may be the mutually binding and ongoing nature of the *experience* this “always unstated awareness” (“A Place to Stand,” vii.) provided to Price in his complex role as emblem, hostage, and guard (“Place to Stand,” vii). As crucial as the family’s mythologizing of the tale, surely, was Will’s utter silence on the subject and the fact that Price (apparently) never asked him about it. Price describes his father as “late-Victorian in his sense of self and dignity” (“Place to Stand” vii) but observes also that Will “never found it hard to make frank statements of love, thanks or go-to-hell contempt” (*CP* 280). The silence itself, then, is for Price an integral part of their mysterious and “mutually sacrificial bond,” which (Price realized after Will’s death) had “proved stronger than either [he or Will] had suspected” (“Place to Stand,” vii.). “Who was I to him?” Price reports asking his mother, weeks after Will’s death, to which she replied, “You tell me. You know more than I” (*CP* 271).

All accounts describe William Solomon Price as an engaging, affectionate man—prone to laughter and with a “compulsion to win love through performance” (“Place to Stand” vii). “Skilled,” Price says, “in nothing more saleable than wit, charm, and a generous heart,” Will moved through a long series of jobs in his youth (*CP* 27). And in spite of better luck as a traveling salesman (of insurance, and later of appliances), he had difficulty keeping his family afloat in the difficult years of the Depression. Crichton Davis, a teacher Price honors in his memoir *Clear Pictures*, had been a childhood friend of Will Price and observes in the documentary *Clear Pictures*, “Will had so much to give the world and no way to give it. I don’t know anything he couldn’t have been. . . .” Above all, Price asserts, Will was “a desperate lover of family” (“Place to Stand” vi). But despite the closeness of their family “triad” (Will, Elizabeth, and Reynolds—until

Price's brother was born), the key silence and mystery persisted, and Price observes of their times together in his childhood, "it was mainly [Will] I joined, him I needed to tame and know" (*CP* 39).

As large as the birth story and its mystery, however, looms the event over which Price himself "presid[ed]" at the age of twenty-one ("Dodging Apples" 194): Will Price's swift, difficult, and unlooked-for death of lung cancer at age fifty-four. "To this day," Price writes in *Clear Pictures*, "it was the worst sight I've seen, in life or on film" (283). At the end, Price says, "in sight of Will's peaceful body and his utterly mysterious mind," he was still "far from guessing what" they had "transacted" in those five days (*CP* 293). But Price asserts his belief, then and now, that they were "enacting . . . a lifetime of the necessary roles that would end Will's life and certify mine" (*CP* 288). "A bond like ours," he writes, "armed through two decades to kill us both, had been silently tried a final time and found to hold" (*CP* 293). Reflecting on the experience—which he has revisited often (though sometimes indirectly) and in virtually every genre—Price observes in "A Place to Stand":

Three weeks into official adulthood, then, I had seen, at the closest possible range, a death I'd feared since infancy. His mortality had been both a frightening and a comic mutual concern. One of my earliest clear memories is of the night when he powdered his hair, came into my room, and sang "When I Grow Too Old to Dream." (I'd recently deduced that gray hair meant age: I was three and he was thirty-six, just at the end of his drinking and well before he developed its substitute, hypochondria—the dread and hope of death). (viii)

Though the incident began as one of Will's practical jokes, Price was unsettled by "this tired man with sparse white hair" (*CP* 45). In fact, Price explains, he did not recognize Will until his mother (seeing his distress) removed the powder with a damp washrag, revealing his father, young, beneath the disguise. "I couldn't know," Price

writes, “that I’d just undergone a primal scene in human emotion, the source of the richest moments in poetry—the lost kinsman found” (*CP* 46). As Helene Adolf points out, this moment of *anagnorisis*—recognizing a stranger as a relation—is a crucial component of the Grail Scene itself (20). But Price’s “almost unbearably forked moment of recognition” constitutes a far broader realization: that his father, still young, would someday be old and dead (*CP* 46). Such “unbearably forked moment[s]” become almost archetypal in Price’s work, conflating old and young. And readers of the notebooks should not be surprised to find that on more than one occasion Price has planned a meditation on Will’s face in death, but has seen only the young man from photos at sixteen or eighteen—such as the picture of Will Price at National Guard camp (*LaT* 13, 166). Price publishes this photograph in *Clear Pictures*, commenting that youthful pictures of his father show “a radiance almost better than beauty, a heat centered in the gray eyes that burn with what seems fervor—where does it come from? What fuel does it take?” (27). Unlike the young Will Price—or most Americans his own age—Reynolds Price (at the threshold of adulthood) had already learned “what waits ahead, a grinding agony, then a death and some immeasurable aftermath. Death was no longer a word, the cause of much poetry; for me now it was thousands of pictures of one good man dying” (*CP* 296).

James Schiff claims that “the emergence into manhood is perhaps *the* central ritual in Price’s work” (*Understanding* 27), and there is truth in his assertion that “Perhaps no other single moment in the course of a human life interests Price more than the male’s arrival at the threshold of manhood” (*Understanding* 42). But it should be noted that the youths at the center of this “ritual” in Price’s work are by implication

*inseparable* from Price's "grand lost boy[s],"<sup>17</sup> and as Schiff himself observes elsewhere, the death of the father is "*the* central Pricean event" ("Fathers and Sons" 272).

Curiously, Schiff does not conflate these crucial moments in male life, nor connect them in any way with Price's own harrowing deathbed vigil at age twenty-one and "the power of witness and duty awarded [him] on Will's deathbed"—which Price says "was an integral part of what I knew and must live to say" (*CP* 299). Schiff notes the tragic quality of these doomed figures, yet often (as with Milo Mustian), he simplifies their descent from the shining threshold—seeing it as a matter of poor choices, an inability to "sustain their sexual energy," or a "settling . . . for . . . conformity and rest" (*Understanding* 42-43). For Price, matters are rarely so simple, however. While these causes are often an integral part of what Price shows us in the lives of his "generous men" and "grand lost boy[s]," he presents them also—and almost without exception—as beings whose lives are *sacrificial*. Often, then (and paradoxically) the stories of these figures are not so much analyses and depictions of *error* as recapturings of lost radiance and a radical redefining of heroism itself.

"My father was the only one to turn it around," Price observed to me in a 1997 interview, referring (as in *Clear Pictures*) to the rampant alcoholism that afflicted many male members of his family (and many men of the time) as a form, Price believes, of self-medication for depression. In *Clear Pictures*, he comments that Will Price "couldn't know . . . his own broad power, the power to seize the jolt of grace and let it burn him on to the grave" (*CP* 234). In that passage—and in Price's description of Will as "a silent

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<sup>17</sup> The grown Hutch Mayfield applies this phrase to his father, Rob, in Price's novel *The Source of Light*. Homesick in England, Hutch has a sudden premonition of loss and longs suddenly to see his father—"not the Rob he had left three weeks ago but the *grand lost boy* [my emphasis] who had lain beside him in infancy," seeking in his infant son "full answer to questions the size of rock quarries. . ." (130).

wrestler in the scalding dark” (*CP* 32) are clear echoes of Jacob’s struggle in Genesis 32 with the wounding/blessing God. “I will not let go till you bless me,” reads Price’s own translation of this passage (*APalpable God* 79)—a text long favored in conversion sermons and linked also (as we have already seen) with the Grail King’s wound and his struggle toward realization with “the dark aspect” of God (Jung and von Franz 211).

Schiff’s explorations of the intense attachments between fathers and sons in Price’s fiction are insightful and highly useful in exploring the work. But since Schiff’s primary purpose is to demonstrate the presence of a “charged eroticism” and “intentionally ambiguous . . . Eros” between fathers and sons in Price’s fiction (“Fathers and Sons” 262), other—and equally intriguing—aspects of these relationships seem to have been overlooked. Chief among these must be an exquisite and spiritual sense of mutual accountability and mutual *revelation*. Trapped in a terrifying vision of his father’s future death, for example, nine-year-old Preacher McCraw (“The Names and Faces of Heroes”) vows to change his life and promises his father that he will “turn on myself my foe with you as shield” (159). In his article “Fathers and Sons in the Fiction of Reynolds Price,” Schiff considers this story at length, observing its autobiographical nature and noting that Preacher’s promise to “change [his] life” actually “mirrors” the promise made by his father during Preacher’s difficult birth (264). Yet he omits the last portion of Preacher’s promise (“I will turn on myself my foe with you as shield”), and the statement remains unexplored. Turn how—and to what end? How can his father (both flawed and “doomed”) prove to be a shield? In what sense?

Since Preacher’s vow (explored in Chapter Two) has striking implications for what I’m calling the matter of Price’s “Grail,” it should be reemphasized that Parzival’s

nobility (native though it was) was indeed *actualized* and held true by the wounds of Anfortas—his silent partner in long spiritual trial. “Will’s bargain was sealed,” Price observes in *Clear Pictures* (36). “And for all I know,” he writes, “I may yet be a piece in a larger game than I can see or begin to guess—some continuing test of Will Price’s deal or of my own worth to be his son, the life for which he sacrificed a stronger prop [alcohol] than I may ever have proved to be” (36).

Price’s frequent revisiting of what he calls “the Will Energy” and the “fictional WSP’s” (*LaT* 405, 15 Sept. 1987) emphasizes further what I have already begun to suggest—that this “game of worthiness” (and its accompanying form of self-fashioning) is in fact being played out in narrative.<sup>18</sup> *The Source of Light*, for example, is deeply concerned with just such matters, and throughout the novel Hutch hopes to locate his true “center of gravity<sup>19</sup>”—to come to terms with the hidden face which motivates him and is in some sense implicit in every compelling relation. “I suspect you’re my father,” Hutch Mayfield says to the young stone mason James, near the end of that novel (*SoL* 365). He is not, of course, yet Hutch has realized (a fulfillment of his Tristan dream and the dire warning of Rob’s lover and one-time mistress Min) that he still “has” Rob on his hands (*SoL* 268)<sup>20</sup> and that the man before him is in many ways “a gentle palpable return of the

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<sup>18</sup> “WSP” is Price’s shorthand for William Solomon Price. On 11 July 1987, Price notes “all the WSP energy” that’s in the Mayfield novels (*LaT* 387). Other figures and “fictional WSPs” share it as well, he writes—though he later observes that “Rob [Mayfield] is enough like Father for one lifetime’s fiction” (*LaT* 431, 19 March 1988).

<sup>19</sup> This phrase was Price’s original title for *The Source of Light* (*LaT* 297, 17 September 1980).

<sup>20</sup> After Rob’s death, Hutch plans to strike out on a new life of his own with Ann—freed now from love and duty. “You wanted [Rob] always; I turned out not to,” he tells Min (*SoL* 268). But the jealous Min (sidelined for years by Rob’s devotion to raising Hutch) sees more clearly, saying only, “You’ve got him, though. . . . You see that now?” (268) and forcing Hutch’s reluctant reply: “I’m very much afraid you’re right” (268).

oldest presence he'd known and needed—the vulnerable potent needy youth who'd stood at the rim of Hutch's own childhood and asked for help" (*SoL* 365).

Just as in Milo's story "old debts" can be paid by "a golden boy who never incurred them," ("News For the Mineshaft" 48), the corollary gesture of a "Parzival" figure (*his* "old debts," that is) can be fulfilled symbolically—to an avatar, so to speak. And both *The Source of Light* and *The Tongues of Angels* suggest that such connection is not only possible and healing, but in some sense morally necessary. Twenty-one-year-old Bridge Boatner (a later avatar of Price) plans to dedicate his life as an artist to "finishing my father's cutoff life" (*Tongues* 179)—a near-echo of a line from Hutch Mayfield's poem to his newly dead father: "I will have your life, / The life you hunted but never caught. . ." (*SoL* 308). In spite of his intentions, however, Bridge finds himself revisiting the mystery of another life "worked . . . To death" by love—though in a profoundly different way (*Tongues* 187). Through his relationship to fourteen-year-old Raphael Noren (an extraordinary combination of earthy, troubled boy and angelic being), Bridge revisits and significantly revises his troubling early initiation into the mysteries, horrors, and helplessness of death. Ultimately, Bridge cannot save Rafe Noren—who had accepted for some time that "his was a sacrificial life" (80), but the encounter is mutually significant since in part they help and heal one another.

The brief relationship of young Marcus Black with the older boy Deke Patrick in the story "Deeds of Light"<sup>21</sup> is eerily similar. Throughout the story, Marcus speculates directly (and with delicate suggestion of possibility from Price's handling of details) that

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<sup>21</sup> Readers may be surprised to learn that the title refers to the "common deed of light" (reflection) performed by mirrors—and more particularly to the revelatory and vaguely mysterious image of Deke that Marcus glimpses unobserved on the final night. But given the nature of their encounter and the story's reference to knights, heroes, and the Grail, the title's meaning (and the significance of Deke's reflection itself) is greatly enhanced.

Deke may in some sense *be* his own deceased father returned and restored briefly to youth. On the last night Marcus sees him, Deke is reading in Marcus' book (*The Boy's King Arthur*) of the grail's unveiling in a blaze of light. And it is in this book (for long years) that Marcus stores his only two pictures of Deke for safekeeping.

Price's "core scene" (or elements thereof) continues to resurface in refreshing and surprising variations—even in notes for new projects. More striking, though, is the gradual but significant evolution in Price's perspective on this mystery and the way this affects his treatments of both the "generous man" and his primary witness. As we have seen, the cure to be obtained in the grail stories is tied not only to the task, but to the hero's evolving *perception* of the mystery, and a similar pattern emerges in Price's approach to his own task.

In Price's earliest efforts at such transaction (examined in Chapter Two), the central sight is confronted through a remote lens—through the eyes of "another" (not an avatar of Price) or (as in the case of nine-year-old Preacher) in terms of a prefiguring vision of death, removed from the context of the actual event. The confrontation with mystery, seen through a keen-eyed and precocious young witness, occurs in relative silence (almost as a ritual observed) and without interpretation by either sufferer or witness. Instead, these early witnesses experience spiritual compulsion toward scenes of suffering and seek to comprehend and redress it by finding the right gesture toward static and largely silent "victims." Milo Mustian (hero of *A Generous Man*) is more complex—pressed into service of precisely such a mystery (and one which foretells his own doom.) Yet in spite of his knowledge and impulse to reveal what he has experienced, Milo (a

unique conflation of sufferer and witness) cannot voice what he knows. He is trapped, unable to convey his new knowledge or avoid what he fears.

In *Love and Work* (the focus of Chapter Three), Price's subject is not the tenuous, threatened heroism of the sacrificial male but that of his stymied witness and heir, the novelist Thomas Eborn. Eborn's own narrative offering (long delayed and postponed) is to be a form of witness to the lives and love of his dead parents, whose fate in love he bitterly regrets and hopes to explore so he can "help them—pitiful children—in time" (*L&W* 54). Yet Eborn's own vision is wounded and diseased as he wanders (spiritually and artistically) in a wood as trackless as Parzival's. The text itself suggests that Eborn's lingering debt and anxiety is more closely tied to the life of his father Todd (an early avatar of Will Price and "the grand lost boy" Rob Mayfield)—whose losses Eborn feels compelled to explore and redress. Examination of the novel in conjunction with Price's essays from this time suggests that (consciously or not) *Love and Work* serves in part as a rigorous examination and mid-life retooling by Price of his own narrative vision—and of his commitment to completing his own central gesture in narrative.

That gesture, though balked in Eborn's hands, flowers soon after in *The Surface of Earth* and *The Source of Light*, the first two novels of Price's trilogy *A Great Circle*—to be rounded out thematically (twenty years after *Surface*) in *The Promise of Rest*. Above all, these later fictions (explored in Chapters Four and Five) exemplify the difficult "lessons in vision" ("For Ernest Hemingway" 148) with which Thomas Eborn had struggled in *Love and Work*—and which Price himself had considered closely in his short fiction and essays of the same period. For the first time these "grand lost boy[s]" are seen in their full context, so that readers can see and explore fully what ails them.

And significantly, they begin to articulate their own suffering along with their own sense of order and worth. What these later explorations offer, finally, is not only fulfillment of the heir's promise to look, learn, and change ("pardon me this, I will change my life . . . will turn on myself my foe with you as shield"), but also an articulate and radiant vision of a man's life comprehended insofar as possible and placed ultimately (as with Rob Mayfield and Neal Avery) into the mouth of the generous man character himself.

Curiously, as this apotheosis occurs, the demeanor of the witness (i.e. the narrative perspective) also changes—a change that is most striking in the novel *The Tongues of Angels* (1990). This novel opens an interesting intertextual dialogue with *Love and Work* (1968). Fourteen-year-old Rafe Noren—boy, artist, victim, hero, and articulate sufferer—is perhaps the most remarkable conflation of qualities to be found in other treatments of the archetype. And in the matter of Bridge Boatner (aging artist) contemplating his duty and secret spiritual work in light of this early relation—the hidden face lurking between the lines of his paintings—we see a closing of a circle with the matter of Price's own grail. Above all else, Bridge says, he hopes to make the boy visible as a sacrificial life with the power, grace, and heroism to "[watch] his life and [change] his story in ways that kept it from closing in fear or waste" (201).

This is precisely the sort of project Price himself seems to indicate metaphorically in his poem "A Tomb for Will Price." Published first in *The Laws of Ice* (1986) and now the very centerpiece of Price's *Collected Poems*, this "oddly tender" and abstruse poem has virtually escaped mention by critics.<sup>22</sup> Yet it suggests the presence of an urgent and

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<sup>22</sup> In his review of *The Laws of Ice*, Robert B. Shaw cites the poem for its "bizarre inventiveness"—in particular the "nightmarish but oddly tender clarity" attending the appearance of the risen Will Price himself (102).

ongoing narrative *task* at the heart of Price's work. And like the Grail mysteries so clearly echoed in the poem's situation and imagery, Price's task here is defined by a sacred and triple purpose: reclamation of the "grand lost boy," "validation" of his own "power of witness and duty" as heir to the Quest, and edification of reader-witnesses. In the mysterious revelation and "*new light*" with which those readers depart, we can see a striking new implication for the "metaphysics of narrative" that had so concerned Price in "A Single Meaning" (265)—precisely at the time he was re-examining biblical narrative and preparing to write the long-delayed novel *The Surface of Earth*.

The speaker and "guide" to the tomb is Price himself,<sup>23</sup> who has "dug out" the three underground rooms that "*preserve and honor the builder's memory of his father's life in eastern and piedmont North Carolina* [italics in text]" (100). The first room ("largest and entirely finished") is essentially a "museum— / Based on the old brand of roadside farrago [Will] could never resist"—and displays "relics of his life before me, my ill-timed birth/At his lowest ebb." In fact many of the objects in the tomb will be familiar to readers of Price's essays, memoirs, and early fiction.

The details of the second room (an unfinished "replica of the space Will was born in") make clear, however, that the goal of such narrative recovery is more than preservation or a "dreaming back" through Will's life (even in the esoteric sense Yeats describes in *A Vision*<sup>24</sup>). By the second room, Price's language—beginning to press the most radical edges of his metaphor—has begun to suggest that his task is to defy entropy

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<sup>23</sup> "*The builder is I, his elder son (no surviving daughters)* . . . [Price's italics]" (100).

<sup>24</sup> In the "Dreaming Back," Yeats writes, the Spirit between death and rebirth is "compelled" to examine events and relationships that have most moved it, tracing "every passionate event to its cause until all are related and understood, turned into knowledge, made a part of itself" (*A Vision* 226). According to Yeats, these Spirits are able to utilize the knowledge of such events from the living, or to "examine letters and books, once they come before the eyes of the living" (228).

itself (time's arrow) in physically reconstructing key details of Will's past. "All exist somewhere; no matter is lost," Price asserts. "I must simply hunt. / The atoms spin at our ears this instant, yearning to converge / In their old shapes—the forms they filled to cradle him." Already, he indicates, listeners might perceive "a wiry cry at the threshold of sound" (101).

From the first, Price's narration has made clear that these underground rooms are not a conventional memorial, open for casual visitation. "A serious visit demands at least three hours of your life. . ." the poem begins. "Any quicker tour will deny you the secret, / And no initiate is permitted to tell you" (100). Throughout the poem, in fact, Price's language and imagery frame the "tour" as an underground mystery rite, highly secret and permitted only to select initiates (screened by Price) who "come on their own" in the summer twilight, drawn by "their need and courage" (102). "*The aim,*" of the tomb, Price explains, "*is to guide you back through the life, to a sense of its actual / Weight and refraction, the consequence of an actual quest / For radiant virtue by a travelling salesman of freezers and stoves [italics in text]*" (100).

But this "consequence" itself seems to be found only in "the ultimate light" of the third and final room which contains

*the secret—  
Core of the tomb and demonstration of all he meant.<sup>25</sup>  
Expect no danger, no threat to your eyes. Only the fact  
His quest discovered, opulent bloom on the utmost branch  
Of the single limb he managed to grow in fifty-four years. (101)*

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<sup>25</sup> *Meant* can be read both as what Will intended and what he meant to Price.

Only here, the speaker asserts, are the other “few facts” comprehensible. Yet ironically we find that Price’s monument is neither “tomb” nor cenotaph. Instead, it has clearly become a cradle for resurrection, for at its center sits Will Price himself:

The man before you  
In the overstuffed chair is no real man but a risen body.  
It passed through agonized life and death in the common way  
And is now changed flesh, changed bone and hair. My dedication,  
Your need to see, have earned it leave to come back here  
And wait for you—proof of the soul, perpetual life;  
Risen flesh in the form it will hold till all time ends. (102)

Several details in the first lines (the new moon, the holly, the tomb’s entrance described as a “mouth,”<sup>26</sup>) had already suggested an esoteric undercurrent linked to death and renewal. But that surfaces sharply here in the imagery of “changed flesh, changed bone and hair” (102). Though Will Price has returned in familiar guise—touchable, wearing bi-focals, and sitting in his overstuffed chair<sup>27</sup>—this “eternal father” (102) is truly transformed. Unable to speak our language, he knows only “the nine chief angel tongues / Unknown on earth”—a curious detail of the afterlife marked out in Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* (from which Price takes the epigraph to his novel *The Source of Light*). Stranger still is the detail that “a music/ Spins at the crown of [Will’s] head” while he sleeps, tired out by visitors. What indeed are we to make of the fact that such a surreal and potentially random detail not only echoes Campbell’s recounting of the “Wheel of Terror-Joy,” but also Robert de Boron’s account (in his *Prose Perceval*) of the Grail itself, which “radiates a wonderful melody” (Jung and von Franz 297)?

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<sup>26</sup> Symbolic descent into the underworld (a devouring) was a key aspect of orphic initiations, and the mysteries of Eleusis were enacted in caves (Campbell, *CM* 9-27).

<sup>27</sup> “The man . . . in the overstuffed chair” also appears in the tale of Todd Eborn’s ghostly return to his wife. Price tells William Ray that his mother reported seeing Will in the chair on the night before her death—a “fact” Price learned from a neighbor and incorporated into *Love and Work* (Ray 95). Price notes Will’s “overstuffed chair” in describing Will’s last visit home from the hospital (Price, *CP* 276).

Returning to Helene Adolf's point about such surfacings out of their usual context as the emergence of "archetypes never composed" (143), I would highlight her further observation (in reference to an odd thirteenth century description of the Grail) that "it is not really the shape of the Grail object which matters, rather its chemistry and physics, the forces it emits" (139). The Grail itself, she asserts, "signifies the human soul at its stage of perfection. Thus," she observes, continuing to analyze this shift in form, "the erstwhile talisman and relic signifying the Resurrection had become a symbol of the soul aspiring after transmutation into Life Eternal" (139). Price's reference to his "eternal father" as "a soul at the white-heat" (an allusion to Dickinson's "Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat?*") makes the parallel even clearer, leaving little doubt about the nature of the boon that "[Will's] quest discovered" and that Price's own "dedication" in narrative exploration and recovery has unleashed for us to "see." Dickinson's poem asks,

Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat?*  
 Then crouch within the door—  
 Red—is the Fire's common tint—  
 But when the vivid Ore  
 Has vanquished Flame's conditions,  
 It quivers from the Forge  
 Without a color, but the light  
 Of unanointed Blaze.  
 Least Village has its Blacksmith  
 Whose Anvil's even ring  
 Stands symbol for the finer Forge  
 That soundless tugs—within—  
 Refining these impatient Ores  
 With Hammer, and with Blaze  
 Until the Designated Light  
 Repudiate the Forge—  
 (*The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* 173)<sup>28</sup>

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Price is not, of course, literally resurrecting his father—nor does the poem allow us to grasp fully the meaning of the “sight” the tomb offers. As in Robert de Boron’s *Roman d l’Estoire dou Graal*,<sup>29</sup> the ineffable meaning of this key mystery—Price’s “sole exhibit on this earth now of the final/Hunger—a visible soul”(102)—can only be approached within the relevant texts themselves, the texts that form the substance of Price’s bizarre subterranean “tomb.” And in fact, Price’s closing admonishment to his witnesses is strikingly suggestive of the “elucidation” or warning common to grail literature.<sup>30</sup> “Find the long way home; hold the secret safe,” Price tells them, for “It may not be conveyed, as I warned—can’t be. Urge friends and kin / To come on their own; it must be their choice, their need and courage. / I’ll greet and serve them as I’ve served you, in simple joy” ( 102). There is a sense of urgency, though, in Price’s warning that future witnesses must “hurry; I’ve strained to my limit and may not last— / No guarantee of the sight if I fail. No heir to my work / If I cannot finish. No servant to tend this eternal father” (102).

Surely Price’s own dearest type of the figure who comprises sinner, battler, victim, object of Grace, and vehicle of revelation is *here*. And despite the poem’s mystical and heroic language, he is neither knight nor king, but instead a bespectacled man (“hands / Mottled with age”) who smiles towards the audience, once more conveying the “radiance” (though not here the actual form) of the boy from the National Guard photo. It would be absurd to argue that Will is the only prototype for Price’s

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<sup>29</sup> In this account, the risen Christ appears and reveals his mystery to an imprisoned Joseph of Arimathea, who has been arrested by the Jews for the supposed fraud of the resurrection (Jung/von Franz 305). Joseph—the first earthly guardian of the secret words Christ reveals—remains imprisoned for forty-two years, comforted only by the presence of the Grail (Jung and von Franz 308).

<sup>30</sup> The passage I have used as epigraph to this chapter is one of the most famous examples.

figure of the grand lost boy, for that would suggest that what Price himself calls the “WSP energy” is not elsewhere recognizable in our world and that Price has not encountered such lives. Instead, this study contends that for Price the meaning of such figures is irrevocably—but not exclusively—linked to the mystery of this central relation that he so frequently returns to, choosing different tools for reconnoiter and exploration. Critics have moved clearly in this direction, but they have underestimated both the extent and the nature of Will Price’s influence, which has produced one of the richest ongoing streams of work in Price’s canon. The shaping of Price’s gesture, its development and transformation over time, is an inextricable part of the relationship he writes of and worth the “serious visit” that the first line of “Tomb” demands.

The remaining chapters explore the potency of this personal mythology as it evolves and “shoulders upward” repeatedly in language, gesture, and emblem to reveal the shape of Price’s unique (and partly unconscious) narrative quest—one which nevertheless has implications for our own lives. As with the grail mysteries themselves, life “answers” (in terms of applicable *formulae*) are not forthcoming from the experience of Price’s fiction. Yet all his work suggests that virtue (though rare) is possible, and that as Trevrizent the hermit finally admits to Parzival, “tenacity of purpose”—whether that of the artist or a “saint” bent on virtue—can actually “chang[e] God’s law” (Campbell, *Transformations of Myth Through Time* 260).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE INNOCENT EYE

Those images of crucial stasis and gesture that any child hoards as his debit and capital seem to demand long submersion in the lower reaches of the mind—the zones in which transformation can occur; the alchemies beyond any conscious control that may in five, ten, or forty years accomplish an altered deliverable object, larger and more useful than the initial private matter.

—“Preface: A Place to Stand,” *Mustian*, v

Given the highly charged nature of Price’s own youth—his early and ongoing conviction of vocation and mission—it is hardly surprising that his fascination with the child’s perspective surfaced early and has remained a dominant mode from the beginning of his career. As a sophomore at Duke, Price authored a paper on the child narrator in *As I Lay Dying* (Price, “The Thing Itself” 12), and almost all of Price’s earliest fiction utilizes the perspective of young narrators, from the age of nine to the threshold of early adulthood. Major figures such as Milo Mustian (*A Generous Man* 1966), Hutch Mayfield (*The Surface of Earth* 1975), and the young Bridge Boatner (*The Tongues of Angels* 1990) make clear the later continuation of this trend in his novels, and by 1991 Price himself remarks with interest that “more than half” the manuscript for his new collection (*The Collected Stories*) involves “first-person childhood memoirs,” usually from a male perspective (*LaT* 492, 6 April 1991).

Naturally enough, emerging awareness of sexuality is significant to many of these stories. Yet the innocence I speak of, and which Price most relentlessly examines, has

little to do with sexuality per se—and nothing at all to do with the naiveté some readers might expect from such a youthful perspective. In the “Credible Light” chapter of *Clear Pictures*, Price asserts that these innocents may in some ways be more clear-sighted than the adults who surround them. “Children on the verge of maturity,” Price says, “have after all watched the adult world with the locked attention of the hunted. Better than any adult they see the fragile alliances on which adult happiness depends, the endless sell-out of daily life. They know as if by instinct many gleaming painful truths about life, truths which they seldom import into their maturity” (249).

Price’s delivers this observation, of course, in charting the growth of his own spiritual awareness and sense of vocation during youth (much of which was shaped by his awareness of Will’s vow and by his close observation of friends and family). But the statement also has clear and compelling implications for Price’s use of such figures as *textual witnesses*—innocent eyes who mediate encounters with suffering, both for us and for Price himself. In the same chapter, Price describes his years (from fifteen to eighteen) driving Methodist minister Howard Powell<sup>1</sup> to “sermons, sickbed visits, meals with the hungry or bereaved” (CP 256). These encounters, Price says, taught him “the coming necessity in my writer’s life for superhuman grades of patience if I meant to understand the human mind in the infinite disguises of its desperation” (CP 256). Not surprisingly, Price’s early fictions show his textual witnesses undergoing similar schooling. Yet his main focus seems to be not the “sight” itself, but instead the needs, worthiness, and limitations of the witness experiencing such encounters.

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<sup>1</sup> In spiritual terms, Price places Powell directly beside Will Price as “one more sane strong man who nonetheless heard a calling voice and answered it, moment by moment—hard or easy” (CP 256).

Close examination of these early works suggests that they function in part as a spiritual proving ground for such characters—hence for Price himself, for whom they constitute a remote lens or “place to stand” in relation to otherwise perilous mystery. Sensitive, keen-eyed witnesses of disease, violence, and psychic distress to which they are not at first equipped to respond, Price’s young protagonists repeatedly find themselves pressed (like Parzival) by the need for adequate response to such suffering—or the struggle to glimpse, at least, what such a response might be. The core of the dilemma is what Price himself terms “the ethic of the freely given gesture” (*LaT* 79, 26 January 1957), and this theme (one of two he refers to repeatedly in early notebooks) is powerfully interwoven with his earliest tales of love, suffering, and death, collected in *The Names and Faces of Heroes* (1963). The volume itself is framed by two such gestures by textual witnesses, and in both cases the sight encountered (the moment of aesthetic arrest) is a version of Will Price’s own death. In “A Chain of Love,” the young Rosacoke Mustian finds herself drawn to the deathbed of a stranger, Mr. Ledwell, who is dying of lung cancer. In “The Names and Faces of Heroes” (a much later story that ends the collection), nine-year-old “Preacher” McCraw confronts a prescient dream of his father’s future death—what Price describes to William Ray as “a fairly literal account of my own father’s death” (Ray 107).

As Daniel Frederick Daniel points out in his 1977 dissertation, *Within and Without a Region*, the parent-child relationship is “a major preoccupation” of the collection (16). Clearly, too, Price’s father and his literary avatars permeate the volume: “Mr. Ledwell” (“A Chain of Love”), Mr. Phil (“The Warrior Princess Ozimba”), Will Price himself in two stories (“Troubled Sleep” and “Uncle Grant”), and most clearly Jeff

McCraw (“The Names and Faces of Heroes”). In fact, every tale in the volume hinges somehow upon absent, dead, or threatened “generous men”—a fact that gives rise to the second permeating theme: what Price in his notebooks calls “the forgetfulness of grief” (*LaT* 49, 30 January 1957). In most cases, however, these lost lives are glimpsed only remotely and in fragments, for in each case the moral adventure (both tale and task) belongs to the young witness, the narrating eye. In these first years after Will’s death—having been “awarded,” as he says, “the power of witness and duty” at that deathbed (*CP* 299)—Price seems to explore the nature and limits of these obligations and to begin considering how narrative itself may be used to serve the goals of virtue.

Though Rosacoke Mustian is best known, perhaps, as the heroine of Price’s novel *A Long and Happy Life* (1962) and as Milo Mustian’s pre-adolescent sister in *A Generous Man* (1966), she appeared first in the story “A Chain of Love,” Price’s second piece of completed work. And Price himself is quite specific about the task for which both “Chain” and the character of Rosa were created. “I knew,” he explains in *Clear Pictures*, “that I must try to encompass Will’s death, then a year behind me” (172). Yet he needed, he says, “a tale-bearer different from me, to watch our pain and try to bend toward it. It had to be somebody I understood but who was better, kinder and braver than me” (172).

Coincident with this impulse (and the class assignment that gave it occasion) was Price’s second encounter with the “nameless” trio of male watchers who had “stared so fixedly” at Will’s hospital door the previous year (“Place to Stand” viii). Encamped with a less critical patient across the hall, these young country men had “stared nakedly” at Will Price’s door, “quietly searching [Price’s] face for omens” each time he entered the hall—perhaps, Price says, in the hopes of an unusual “view” (viii). Price was “partly

repelled by their eavesdropping,” he explains, “but secretly helped by their obvious sense that [he] was the main visible actor in a veiled but plainly serious drama” (vii).

Encountering them later in the corridors of another hospital (in another town), Price’s imagination was fired: “Were they there a year later . . . with the same sick kinsman? Did they have any real home or merely haunt hospitals doomed to watch pain? Were they actual men? Were they messengers to me” (“Place to Stand” (viii)?

“Unconsciously,” Price reports, he answered “Yes” to this last question and allowed them to “signal [his] move into sustained work” (“Place to Stand” viii). Instead of choosing them as lens, however, Price instead imagined a “female delegate” from among their family (viii).

Rosacoke Mustian is certainly Price’s homage to the rural children, “sons and daughters of subsistence farmers,” who offered genuine friendship during his difficult pre-teen years (*Clear Pictures* 171). More important, though, she is one of his clearest examples of the wise innocent referenced above. “They were ebullient and trusting, if prematurely long-sighted. . .” Price says of his young friends in Afton, North Carolina (“Place to Stand” ix). In *Clear Pictures* he observes that these children were “shut-out but unembittered”—“oblivious” to the “power politics” of the town children—yet “steeped” already in what he terms “agrarian . . . fatalism” (171). Though she shares all these qualities, Rosa herself is distinguished (from her family, certainly) by her sensitivity toward others and by an innate and profoundly religious sensibility not dependent on churchly ties. Price’s choice of her as “lens,” he says, was a matter of “[annexing] . . . a sufficiently distant perspective, yet one still capable of radiant energy—the heat of admiration for a generous heart” (“Place to Stand” ix). But while

Rosa's generosity may be innate, what is clear from "A Chain of Love" is that the proper and "free" giving of the gesture must be learned (as Parzival himself discovers), and this tale tracks Rosa's initiating encounter with a stranger's death and her halting progress toward some form of understanding and response.

Having volunteered to stay in the hospital with her grandfather ("Papa") and older brother Rato during tests on Papa's "tired heart," teenaged Rosacoke Mustian takes naturally to the unprecedented freedom and responsibility of her new role. Though she misses her boyfriend Wesley, she is glad for new faces and adventures—and to have private time for daydreaming and trying on make-up in the empty room across the hall. But Rosa seems especially pleased by her time alone (or nearly alone) with Papa, for whom she harbors deep affection. She enjoys looking after him, keeping him both entertained and distracted as they wait for news, and when the Ledwell family moves across the hall to keep watch on their father, she is initially relieved to think that Papa (slowly dying, though the doctors will not say) will now have "something to think about" (12). But though he enters the hospital talking and laughing with his family, Mr. Ledwell is soon caught in the crises of swift-moving and terminal lung cancer. And Rosa herself, having initially mistaken the Ledwell boy for her own beau Wesley (whom he closely resembles), finds her sympathies actively and attentively engaged with these strangers, whose ordeal seems removed from (yet strangely evocative of) her own growing awareness and concerns.

In contrast to her family (for whom death is a matter of course, leading either to Heaven or Hell), Rosa has long had a natural and visionary curiosity about the nature of death and the mystery of where people *go* when they die. When Mr. Ledwell's condition

worsens suddenly, stopping his heart so that he has to be revived, she remembers the Phelps boy, who was drowned and later revived—but would not reveal where he had been (or what he had seen.) Fascinated, Rosa recalls, she had watched him after (to see if his experience had made him different), but the boy would say only that it was “a secret between him and his Jesus” and would neither tell nor testify at church (24). Eager for the secret and frustrated with one kept from her, Rosa still craves to know why his eyes “danced all the time as if he was remembering” and laments that “you couldn’t ever know what, not ever” (25). Watchful and sensitive by nature, she has good reason to wonder at the moment, for more clearly than her family, she has felt Papa’s approaching mortality and his own growing anxiety about it. As she sits with him at night (thinking of the boy across the hall, with his dying father), she has begun to notice that Papa “turned into something else in the night” (18)—“sweeter and with white hair that seemed in the night to be growing into the white pillow his dark leather head rested on, holding him there forever” (17).

One evening, restless and worried about Papa and her boyfriend Wesley (whom she fears may forget her), Rosa goes for a walk to the “big ward” down the hall, encountering there the paradoxical banality and terror of human suffering:

It was dark down there and all these sounds came out to meet her a long time before she got to the door like some kind of Hell she was hearing from a long way away—a little moan strained out through old dry lips and the grating of each private snore as it tore its way up the throats of the ones who were already asleep. (19-21)

Though she can see only one old woman, hunched on herself and “scratching her hair real slow,” Rosa is powerfully aware of the others on the ward and feels compelled to act

somehow in their behalf. But in her first quandary over what to do, delicacy and self-consciousness raise immediate problems:

she knew there ought to be something you could do for such people, something you could say even in the dark that would make them know why you were standing there looking—not because you were well yourself and just trying to walk yourself to sleep but because you felt for them, because you hadn't ever been that sick or that old or that alone before in all your life and because you wished they hadn't been either. (20)

But worse even than Rosa's fears of intruding or being misunderstood is her sense of futility in the face of such "Hell." Any act of hers might prove fruitless, she thinks—most likely misguided and certainly never enough in the face of such suffering:

You couldn't stand there and say to the whole room out loud, "Could I bring you all some ice water or something?" Because they probably wouldn't want that anyhow, and even if they did the first ones would be thirsty again and pitching in their hot sheets before you could make it around the room. You would be there all night, and it would be like trying to fill up No-Bottom Pond if it was ever to get empty. So she turned in the open door. . . .(20-21)

There is humor, clearly, in the example Rosa chooses. But her impulse is genuine (and very serious indeed), and her sense of frustration is strong enough to turn her steps.

At that moment, however, the Ledwell boy bursts from the room, racing half-clad for the nursing station to report his father's crisis, and Rosa is irrevocably drawn to him. William Ray goes so far as to suggest that Rosa is drawn toward him—and later into his father's sickroom room—"by erotic fantasy," wakened by his resemblance to Wesley (94). There is truth in the claim, and Rosa later wonders whether "that boy could say goodbye like Wesley could. . ." (12). But matters are not so simple, and it seems that Rosa's attraction merely focuses the dilemma she has just considered in the ward, giving it new urgency and a much sharper edge. Her notion of the ward as "some kind of Hell" (dark and anonymous) has now crystallized around a face, for in this second encounter,

the boy's eyes seem to Rosacoke "the saddest eyes in the world . . . that pulled hard at her and called on her or just on the dark to do something soon. But she didn't. She couldn't after the mistake of that first time" (23-24). Notably, Rosa seems untroubled here by the sense of futility she'd felt moments earlier in the big ward. Though saying she "couldn't," she *does* "put out her hand and her foot" to step toward the boy, "whose head had dropped on folded arms" in silent grief (21-22). In the act, however, her mind wanders quickly from his grief to her own discomfiture, focusing on the conventions she had breached (as she puts it) "like some big hussy" (12). For the moment self-consciousness defeats her, obstructing all gestures, and as the light strikes her robe, Rosa withdraws quickly into the dark, "the way one of those rain snails does that is feeling its path. . ." (22).

Rosa is certainly "feeling her way," as is Price (after a fashion) when he selects her as witness to Will's death. But her ultimate determination to do something (to revise her "error" and complete her intended gesture) is stronger than her fear—and significant enough, in Price's hands, to compensate for her doubts and delays. By morning, despite her terror, Rosa has "made up her mind" to call on Mr. Ledwell and his family, if he has survived the night (23). Indeed, armed with her new urgency, only two things prevent her from going at once: the deathly silence of the room and her lack of an appropriate gift for the family. But having learned from Snowball the orderly that Mr. Ledwell is still clinging to life and might like a visit when he has rested, she writes Mama to ask for fresh flowers on Sunday and sets about making her own preparations (25-32). On the appointed day, she dresses carefully (as though for church), and taking the home-grown

altheas from her mother without explanation (holding them carefully to hide shaking hands), she crosses the hall at last (30).

The sight she witnesses there (Price's first fictional representation of Will Price's death) is for Rosa one of strangeness, ritual, and mystery—the administering of the Catholic last rites.<sup>2</sup> But despite the pathos of the scene, the “mood” here (as Price himself observes in early notebooks) is one not of tragedy, but of “lonely and wondering affirmation” (*LaT* 47). Filtered through Rosa's perspective, the mystery she stumbles upon seems quite unlike the solitary suffering she had witnessed on her walk through the Ward—remote even from the mundane and clinical setting of the hospital. Though darkness fills the room, it seems to Rosa “quiet as an open field at night with only the sky,” and when she at first sees nothing and turns to leave, the motion of candlelight “[catches] her, streaming from a part of the room she couldn't see into, drawing her on” (32). As she moves forward and her eyes adjust, she sees the boy (candle in hand) assisting the priest as three women kneel in the background. But the sight that draws Rosa's gaze suggests that the mystery is not death only—or the unfamiliar Catholic ritual—but this chain of love itself and the silent transaction between father and son that she glimpses and records as somehow central to the rite. Throughout, she observes, Mr.

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<sup>2</sup> Price observed to me during a personal interview, “We weren't Catholic, of course,” and in passing he wondered aloud why he had chosen these rites for a depiction of Will's death (17 June 1997). The “Credible Light” chapter of *Clear Pictures* suggests several reasons, detailing Price's interest in Catholicism and his close friendship with a devout Catholic family (the Cowdens) at the time of Will's death. But in terms of Price's narrative gesture and revisiting of this death, the clearest impetus may be one voiced years later by Rosa's young brother Milo in *A Generous Man*. Having seen his own father struck down smiling, as he crossed the road to join him, Milo notes bitterly “that people depart (undetained by love, unprepared for their journey) and we watch them go and they do not return” (171, 184-85). Consciously or not Price's use of the last rites—like his use of Rosa as “lens”—may constitute both fuller “preparation” and a healing revision of the actual scene.

Ledwell looks not to the priest but to the boy, “as if that sad face in the soft light that came and went was all that kept him from dying” (33). Rosa Mustian has been “fatherless” herself for as long as she can remember—her father struck down in the road many years before (3). The detail is dropped casually and very early in this story, but it is coupled with Rosa’s assertion of special fondness for “Papa” and sets up the necessary clarification that he is actually her grandfather. Far from trivial, such details add weight to her preoccupations in this scene and suggest (along with attraction) another clear basis for her empathy with the boy. Knowing that they are “getting Mr. Ledwell ready to die in their own way,” Rosa moves to leave, but when she moves the boy sees her “through all that dark” and seems glad of her presence, causing her to remain.

Without doubt, Rosa’s sense of delicacy is as native as her generosity, and having overcome her own fears and self-consciousness, she at last strikes the perfect balance between visibility (the boy needs her and sees her) and respectful (rather than self-protective) silence. She waits, a silent and attendant witness, while the boy assists in completing the last rites. But when the Priest turns to comfort Mrs. Ledwell, Rosa leaves at last because “they might switch on the light, and there she would be looking on at this dying which was the most private thing in the world. She had stayed that long because the boy had looked at her, but he might have forgotten by now” (35). Rosa’s self-consciousness here is radically transformed, for she thinks of *them* now (not herself) in her reticence. And departing she leaves her flowers on the chair since this gesture, discreetly performed, still seems to her both right and necessary. “In the light,” she thinks, “somebody might see them and be glad that whoever it was stepped over to bring them, stepped over without saying a word” (35).

Returning to Grandpa's room, she maintains a shield of privacy around the "mystery" she has witnessed—a fact separating her sharply from the rest of her family. Intent on her new role, Rosa deflects her mother's questions about "Where in the world" she had taken "Papa's flowers" (35). Rooke suggests that as before (with news of Mr. Ledwell's operation), Rosa may be hoarding the secret—pleased to possess a knowledge her family does not (41). Notably, though, her empathy and humility far surpass a child's greed for such advantage. She prevents Rato from cracking the door so they can see when the body emerges, and in an attempt to deflect her mother's idle curiosity about Mr. Ledwell, Rosa pleads genuine ignorance of the man rather than making much by implication of the little she knows (36).

But her most complex demonstration of mature empathy appears later, as she connects Papa's fears about dying away from home with her own sadness over Mr. Ledwell's dying "in that dark room" (37). While her family is taken up with other (and outward) things to pass the time, Rosa considers and comprehends the connection, and her apprehension of this new "chain of love" leads her to wonder, in turn, about Mr. Ledwell's lost life and even to worry that she has not done enough. She is glad to "know his name, at least" and tells herself that "being away from home," she had "done what she could . . . hadn't she" (37)? Yet she worries that "she hadn't ever seen him alive really" and therefore can't grasp the full significance of what she has witnessed at his death (37). In the end, still burdened by this new awareness, she feels compelled to one final task: "She hadn't ever told him [Mr. Ledwell] or any of his kind—out loud—that she felt for them. She hadn't ever said it so loud she could hear her own voice—that Rosacoke

Mustian was sorry to see it happen. That was why she spoke at last. She had been quiet so long. . .” (37).

Significantly, Rosa’s ultimate gesture is speech—a breaking of silence that constitutes both offering and moral self-definition. And when she speaks at last, though simply and to her own family, her voice “[cuts] through all the dark in the room,” bearing witness to suffering but establishing genuine connection to the dying stranger and his family: “‘It don’t seem right,’ she said. ‘It just don’t seem right. It seemed like I had got to know him real well’” (37). Price says of Rosa, his first “witness” and “lens” on Will’s death, “Her greatness as a woman, a person, was her desire, her obligation, always to make the kind gesture, the touch, the thing which seemed to her clearly, if not always desirably, *right*, and right because she thought it would make somebody else happy” (*LaT* 79, 20 January 1957).

As Allen Shepherd points out, many readers have suspected that Rosa “is in fact too good,” and he suggests that the criticism “merits consideration” (“*Collected Stories: A Whole Living World*” 247). Yet Price’s depiction of her halting progress toward the Ledwells reveals a complexity of doubts, compulsions, and inner conflicts. “‘A Chain of Love,’” Price observes in his notebooks, “does have an ethic at the heart of it, the ethic of the freely given gesture,” and clearly the ethic is one Rosa struggles with here—and will in future (*LaT* 79). Such gestures, Price continues, have a tendency to “lash back on us sometimes” when they are clouded by ego and personal agendas—and such will be Rosa’s fate years later, in *A Long and Happy Life*, when she gives herself to her young man, Wesley, in order to hold him. But speaking of that novel and the wider obligations of love also depicted in “Chain,” Price writes that “the important thing (the solution?) is

knowing what to do when one's initial gestures fail. And I'm still not sure of that—except that one must go on making gestures, only trying even harder now to make the right ones" (*LaT* 83, 25 February 1957).

In an important sense, in fact, "Chain" and its protagonist constitute both extension and revision of a quandary raised in Price's first completed story, "Michael Egerton." Though written long before Price himself first used the phrase, this earlier story (despite its quite different plot, setting, and characters) also examines "the ethics of the freely given gesture." In this case, however, that gesture is *withheld*, a matter Price considers closely years later in his essay "Dodging Apples" (1972). The plot of this much-anthologized tale is simple: a first-person account of one boy's encounter through a new friend at camp with the pain of divorce and restructured family. As most readers agree (and Price himself observes), the story is not about the title character, but rather his friend—the unnamed narrator who sees Michael's mysterious distress unfold. Despite its simplicity, however, this story (like "A Chain of Love") carries a complex and profoundly spiritual question at its heart—one with implicit and powerful connections to Price' core scene and narrative quest.

In "Dodging Apples" Price explains that the impetus behind "Michael Egerton" (in addition to a school deadline) was his desire to explore and redress a moral failure: his own failure to protest when fellow campers strung up a friend at camp—the boy who was the inspiration for Price's title character. The story, he explains, arrived in two stages while he was still a student at Duke, but only the second addresses the mystery to which both bear witness: why this boy had "changed utterly in such little time" from "glistening

friend” to “silent victim” (“Dodging” 191).<sup>3</sup> Like the camper Rafe Noren (*Tongues of Angels*) and so many of his predecessors, Michael Egerton is what Price himself calls a “golden boy” (“Dodging” 190). He is handsome and popular, gifted at everything from baseball to singing and physically mature for his age (190). From the first, however, the narrator perceives him also as curiously worn, the first indication of a hard story that lies hidden. “He was taller than I,” observes Price’s narrator, “and . . . he already had the sort of suntan that would leave his hair white all summer. I knew he couldn’t be more than twelve. . . .But his face was old because of the bones under his eyes that showed through the skin” (47-48). There is a hint of this fragility, too, in Mike’s father twice asking the narrator (a complete stranger) “to keep an eye on Old Mike—not that he would need it but it wouldn’t hurt” (48). The narrator finds this strange, given Michael’s superior size and build, but he asks nothing and agrees automatically since “that was what I was supposed to say” (48-49). Despite this early hint of mystery, Michael’s manner is confident and outgoing, and he is magnetic for the narrator, who soon claims him as best friend. “I told Michael a lot of things I had never told anyone else,” he observes (50). “I don’t know why I told him. I just wanted him to know everything there was to know about me” (50).

This eagerness to tell (and Michael’s to listen) for a long time obscures the narrator’s realization that “I didn’t know much about Michael except what I could see”

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<sup>3</sup> Price discusses both versions at length in “Dodging Apples” (1972). The first, read by Elizabeth Bowen when she visited Duke, was missing a “middle,” as she explained to Price. More sketch than story, it depicted events as they occurred but offered no reason for Michael’s sudden distress. In the second version (drafted nine months after Will Price’s death) that reason, Price notes, “volunteered itself.” Though lacking experience of divorce, Price writes, the choice was telling and linked him for the first time (consciously) with his narrator, for the “central conscious terrors” of his boyhood, he explains, had been “destitution and abandonment”—disasters he knew “as forcefully and freshly as ever” in the wake of Will’s death (191-93).

(50-51). Though Michael is an excellent listener and has asked the narrator many questions, he has been less forthcoming about his own life—particularly his family situation, which continues to puzzle the narrator. “He just wasn’t the kind to tell you a lot,” the narrator decides. Yet he notes Michael’s tendency to change the subject when personal talk shifts to him—or to anticipate basic (and potentially painful) questions “matter-of-factly,” as if to forestall further inquiry (49). Keenly perceptive when not distracted, Price’s narrator has been sensitive from the first to Michael’s silence about his mother and has not asked about her, assuming she is dead. So he is surprised by Michael’s casual, preemptory explanation and its lurking implications: “his mother didn’t live with him and his father, hadn’t lived with them for almost a year. That was all. He hadn’t seen his mother for a year. He didn’t say whether she was sick or what, and I wasn’t going to ask” (49). Underneath the cool tone he seems to have picked up from Michael, the narrator seems genuinely disturbed by this news, which deepens the mystery but makes him more than ever afraid to inquire.

What he does know (from the encounter he witnesses between them) is Michael’s intense and unabashed love for his father, a war correspondent who is headed for France, leaving Michael to live with an aunt after camp. Yet this knowledge, too, makes the narrator uncomfortable. Michael clearly idolizes his father, displaying what seems to the narrator a perilous degree of attachment. He kisses his father twice, unselfconsciously, in front of the other boys, walking him to the car and watching till he is out of sight—a hallmark of love and absolute loyalty in Price’s fiction (49).<sup>4</sup> But despite this pride and

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<sup>4</sup> In *The Source of Light*, for example, Rob Mayfield makes this meaning explicit in a final letter to his son Hutch. Though unaware that his father is dying, twenty-five-year-old Hutch stands to watch Rob entirely out of sight at their parting, just prior to his own trip abroad. That view in the mirror, Rob writes to

affection (which the narrator views with a mixture of terror and awe), the separation seems increasingly charged with another peril—one implicitly threatening to the narrator himself. The increasing brevity of the father’s letters to Michael (and his later long silence) may indicate emotional detachment or distraction by the excitement of his correspondent’s career (51). But silence and brevity imply darker threats to the father-son bond: death, injury, and the more debilitating forms of separation fostered by war. Though Will Price remained stateside (of the generation that missed both wars), World War II loomed large in Price’s own boyhood, and even offstage it constitutes a substantial threat in much of his fiction—one mask of a general force threatening separation and dissolution.<sup>5</sup> Price’s mother, Elizabeth, had been orphaned at the age of twelve, so from childhood (as Price explains to William Ray), he was struck by the fact that “your parents can indeed die when you’re young” (Ray 107). Though abandonment was no real threat to him, Price writes in “Dodging Apples,” he fantasized frequently about it in childhood and “entered passionately into the near-universal child’s suspicion that [he] had already been abandoned, was the child of unknown parents, merely adopted by the Prices whose lives [he] now greatly complicated” (193). Such fantasies, Price speculates, allowed him to address his fear by “becoming the fear” (193)—yet they suggest quite clearly the proximate threat which Michael’s experiences (real, mysterious, and uncontrollable) hold for the narrator.

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him later, is one he hopes to recall after death since “Almost no human friend will stand to watch you go or turn back one last time when they leave you. They are too expectant, too ready for change” (*SoL* 101).

<sup>5</sup> The most striking example comes from *The Surface of Earth*. Price’s notes for the novel show him plotting the Virginia Beach “reconciliation” trip of Rob Mayfield and his 14-year-old son Hutch day by day against the events of the Normandy invasion across the ocean. The details of the invasion are mentioned only briefly in *The Surface of Earth*, but they are clearly important to Price as another face of the existential threat against which this father-son relationship unfolds (Box WP-16, *The Surface of Earth*, Reynolds Price Papers, Duke University).

To this point, Michael has managed rather well—keeping his own anxieties (hence those of the narrator) somewhat at bay. For both, however, the turning point comes when Michael’s mother arrives unexpectedly before the big game to introduce her new husband to Michael. Curious about Michael’s unnamed visitors, the narrator (though unable to hear) watches him walk to the car and witnesses the awkward exchange that follows—an inversion of the scene he had witnessed between Michael and his father. Though the woman is clearly Michael’s mother (his mirror image, as the narrator observes), Michael stops abruptly when he sees her—unresponsive to her kiss and to the man who steps forward to shake hands with him (52).

But the narrator’s curiosity is tenuous, and despite these signs, he turns quickly to his own concerns—unaware of their implications. Indeed, he thinks nothing more of it until Michael (the team’s star player) misses the semi-finals that afternoon, causing them to lose the game. Finding Michael incommunicative and hidden in the camp bathroom, absently tying knots in the blinds, he makes excuses to the team, saying that Michael is sick. But he can think of nothing to ask—confronting his friend instead with his bafflement and his disappointment over the game (53). Only later, that night at the campfire, does the narrator begin his struggle to inquire, breaching his earlier reticence about Michael’s vanished mother to ask if it had been she in the car. When he asks Michael about the man with his mother, he thinks, “I don’t guess I should have asked him, but I did,” and his sensitivity is apt here, for initially, Mike refuses to answer. “Some man,” he says. “I don’t know. Just some man” (53). After a long silence, however, Michael spills the rest in a rush, “talking very fast” and obviously overcome with emotion: “My mother said, ‘Michael, this is your new father. How do you like

having two fathers' ” (53)? Confronted by this revelation from his usually casual and taciturn friend, the narrator is effectively silenced. Before he “can think what to say,” Michael has departed for their cabin, and the narrator chooses not to follow, instead sitting speechless by the fire.

Like Rosa in “Chain,” this narrator seems confused about what help he can and dare offer in the face of such private suffering—but though he is fearful of intruding, he is equally fearful for himself. In choosing not to follow, he may indeed be honoring Michael’s privacy, for he has done this before. Yet it is significant that the decision seems to worry him: “I didn’t follow him. I didn’t even ask him if he was feeling all right” (54). That night, hearing Michael turning restlessly, the narrator says, “I tried to stay awake until he went to sleep” (54). (The motif of “guarding” sleep recurs frequently in Price’s fiction.) “Once,” he adds, “I sat up and started to reach out and touch him, but I didn’t.” As with his failure to follow Michael, this choice might be understood as a reticence to invade, yet once more the narrator himself calls this into question. His observation that “I was very tired,” seems more confession than explanation and falls far short of the moral mark he seems to have set himself.

The same may be said of his next omission. Once the other campers begin to turn against Michael, tormenting him for missing the game and failing to “win” for them—the narrator again fails to act. Since from the first he has perceived Michael’s emotional life as a liability, he may loathe revealing the little he knows—even fearing, perhaps, that it might make matters worse. Given his own natural reticence, he may think to accord Michael what dignity he can, allowing him to fight his own battles. But such matters are obscured (perhaps deliberately) in the story, and the narrator’s observation that “It was no

use trying to stop them,” is clearly unsatisfactory, even to him. Beyond doubt, his keen moral intelligence has sighted the problem and refused any mitigating role connected with this burden: “They [the campers] didn’t want to know the reason, not even the counselor. And I wasn’t going to tell them” (54).

Throughout the story, in fact, the narrator’s silence is suspect as something more than mere tact, and notably, all his gestures (or attempted gestures) of help occur in private—not in a public context with peers and counselors at hand. In spite of his sensitivity and his compassion for Michael, this narrator thinks hard (like any twelve-year-old) about actions that breach social conventions, either peer or adult. And at the height of the crisis (a very public attack on Michael) he offers neither action nor remorse for failing to act, though till now he has taken his moral temperature at every turn. Significantly, the narrator at this point vanishes entirely as actor (or would-be actor) in the drama and becomes instead a pair of passively watching eyes: “He had finished dressing when four of the boys took him and tied him between two bunks with his arms stretched out. He didn’t fight. He let them treat him like some animal, and he looked as if he was crucified. Then they went to the banquet and left him tied there. I went with them. . .” (55). Though the narrator returns for a final attempt at help, he finds that Michael has freed himself and withdrawn beyond the bathroom door. And it is here, finally, that the moral adventure of the narrator breaks down entirely, confirming that while he may be sensitive and discerning, he is most certainly not brave. His final encounter with Michael through the bathroom door confirms it, for though no one can overhear, he whispers his greeting (still reticent and maybe now ashamed). And when

there is no response, he tells himself that Michael does not hear, then starts to—but does *not*—open the door.

In “Dodging Apples,” Price explains that half his intent in this story, then and now, must have been “to tame his waiting cruelty and to warn the unwarned or oblivious” (193). The entire tale, he explains, was inspired by “the surfacing of a monster whose presence” he had “forgotten”: a striking visual memory of his young friend “bound” (190). But between the first and second versions of the story, Price writes, much had happened in his own life, and the “harder and more original half” of its meaning is tied not to this image (and his failure to stop the tormentors), but to the ambiguity of the narrator’s final, aborted gesture. The “seductive threat” of the final tale, Price suggests, lies summed up in the mysterious decision his narrator makes between “started” and “didn’t” (194). “What statement, Price wonders, fills that silence?”

Isn’t it a chain of questions . . . and aren’t they these (in my voice, age twenty-one, nine months after presiding at the death of my father)?—I cannot enter the pain of another human being any more than the pain of a dog, a starling. Maybe I shouldn’t try. Maybe weak tries—“started” and “didn’t”—only strengthen, prolong the other’s pain. Maybe he asks to be abandoned in his pain, accorded the dignity of solitude and silence?—not all human beings, but this one Michael and . . . the others like him. Mustn’t I learn to recognize and honor them? (194)

Universal as such a dilemma might be in human experience, it poses a tremendous moral and spiritual quandary for Price, who from the first has purposed “to pierce objects and people alike” with his craft—to “see to the centers they guarded in fear and say what I’d seen so they’d know themselves and me. . .” (“You Are Needed” 217).<sup>6</sup> His caveat

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<sup>6</sup> Significantly, such questions drive the heart of one of Price’s favorite novels, Georges Bernanos’ *Diary of a Country Priest*. Price brings up the issue several times in early notebooks—and indeed Bernanos’ novel is one of the few treasured objects Hutch Mayfield takes with him to Oxford in Price’s *The Source of Light* (14).

regarding “the dignity of solitude and silence,” necessarily complicates this mission—as it does our picture of the narrator, whom Price had described a page earlier as “not only a traitor, but a cruel and finally cowardly one” (193). Yet taken together, “Michael Egerton,” “A Chain of Love,” and Price’s retrospective “chain of questions” sketch the parameters of a rich and evolving dialogue in his work. And both stories show unequivocally that the chief obstacles to such gestures (when indeed they are called for) lie in self-interest, preoccupation, and fear.

“The Warrior Princess Ozimba,” however, shows Price turning narrative toward exploration of a fourth obstacle: what he calls “the forgetfulness of grief” (*LaT* 43). And significantly this forgetfulness belongs not to the immensely aged black woman of the title—“the oldest thing any of us knew anything about” (38)—but to the young narrator, Ed (an avatar of the young adult Price), who pays “Aunt Zimby” a visit to fulfill family duty, but finds himself caught in her memories of his young father, Phil<sup>7</sup> (now two years dead, though the family has not told her). Near the time of the volume’s publication, Price observed to *The Duke Alumni Register* that “Warrior Princess” was written “in commemoration of my vanished father . . . in propitiation for my own forgetfulness” (qtd. in Rooke 43). But his notebooks also reveal that he had been re-examining James Joyce’s story “The Dead,” and wished “to try [himself] with the sudden force of remembered grief on one who is young” (*LaT* 43, 18 Sept. 1956).

In his earlier stories, Price muses, tragedy hasn’t really “[entered] in—except insofar as death is always *the* tragedy” (*LaT* 47, 3 December 1956). “The Anniversary”

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<sup>7</sup> Price’s notebooks reveal that the father for his slowly evolving novel “about” Will and himself was for years called Phil (for Philemon)—only later Rob, for Robinson Mayfield (*LaT* 179, 6 July 1963). Price’s full name, of course, is Edward Reynolds Price.

had indeed touched upon the theme of buried loss, in the aged Lillian Belle's gradual recall of a tragic event—the mysterious death of her fiancé, Pretty Billy, in a riding accident prior to their wedding. Yet the exuberance and generosity of Pretty Billy (another avatar of the “golden boy”) had been lost on the reserved, asexual Lillian Belle even in her youth. And this is one reason, the story suggests, that he had sought emotional (and presumably sexual) solace with Nettie Pitchford, the young girl Lillian Belle finds nursing him when she is brought to his deathbed. Lillian Belle comprehends little or nothing of these matters, however. And though she is baffled by the death and has felt a continuing duty to honor the anniversary, the degree of her grief (and indeed her self-awareness) is highly questionable—making her unfit, apparently, for the purpose Price has in mind.<sup>8</sup> In “The Warrior Princess Ozimba,” by contrast, Price's young narrator illustrates his central point that “even the most sensitive of us, those who are susceptible to beauty and dignity and the pride of age, *do* forget, and forget quickly and blessedly. But tragically” (*LaT* 47).

Compelled by duty to deliver Ozimba's traditional birthday gift of blue tennis shoes, Ed drives to her home having already (and somewhat reluctantly) taken over the role of his father, Phil, who had known and loved Aunt Zimby from childhood. In fact, the date of Ozimba's birthday (unclear to Ed's family, along with much of her history) had been arbitrarily fixed on July 4<sup>th</sup> during Phil's childhood—and at his urging—because he “wanted to give her presents” (38). Having retired eight years ago from her

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<sup>8</sup> Price's notebooks during this period show him (with input from Eudora Welty, Stephen Spender, and Lord David Cecil) struggling through drafts to clarify the real subject of “The Anniversary” (*LaT* 43, 45, 49), aware that it is not yet quite the sort of gesture he intends. A clue to a deeper impulse for both stories may be glimpsed in Price's mixed joy and dissatisfaction upon completing “The Anniversary.” Despite lingering doubts, he says, “Still, it is a thing *done*, a deed almost, another piece in that homely monument I mean to build for my father. In a sense, these stories are what he died for. And that requires a lot of repaying (*LaT* 45, 18 September 1956).

service to Phil's family, Ozimba is now nearing death herself—blind, prone to dozing, and given to mental lapses in which she confuses past and present. Despite her confusion, however, her images of the past are clear, and Ed's father (as much-loved child and youth) is still vivid in her mind. Despite her waning physical powers, Ozimba—whom Ed since childhood has suspected of “[knowing] things she wasn't telling” (41) and whom children still greet “in respect as when you speak to the sea” (44)—seems an agent of Memory itself ( a mysterious and timeless repository of lives witnessed and lost, yet in one sense easily reclaimed).

Despite her dozing and her failure to recognize Ed, Zimby's mind (because of the date, perhaps) seems already focused on Phil when his son arrives. As Ed sets down the shoes, hoping to keep the visit polite but short, she says, “You don't know my Mr. Phil, does you?” and recalls, laughing, a tale of her employer's “littlest boy” stealing mulberries—his face “round as a dollar watch and just as solemn but with the mulberry juice ringing round his mouth bright as any wreath. . .” (42). Ed laughs softly at the image, but he is still focused on his own concerns—still bent on leaving and above all on not “confusing her now and starting her to remembering my father and maybe crying” since no one has told her Phil is dead (43). “What sort of man is the narrator?” Price had wondered initially in his notebooks, wondering how an otherwise watchful and observant man could be “capable of allowing his personal sense of his father's loss to go dull so soon” (*LaT* 47). The finished story implies, however, that Ed would like to avoid such memories, for he soon admits to Ozimba (with an edge of hidden meaning), “there [are] right many things I [don't] remember these days” (44). And when Ozimba at last confuses him with his father, he is distressed to “see that—not meaning to, not meaning

to at all—I had started her” (44). His resistance is useless, however. Through Ozimba’s memories—and ironically, through the mechanisms of age—the narrator’s reticence is exposed and bypassed. Her mind plays them both a trick, and Ed (whom she now believes to be his aged father, Phil) is caught in her poignant (and conspiratorial) recollection of the proud youth at his prime—heading out to a dance in “white trousers . . . like snow” (with one of his “missy-girls”) and returning late and nearly bare, clothes draped over his arm to keep them spotless (44).

The moment is perfectly natural, yet it transports Phil’s son backward in time and “shows” him his young father, unspoiled—revealing what has been lost and what Ed must now work (and risk much, perhaps) to recover. Struck by this picture, Ed is even more distressed when Ozimba returns to the present and inquires about Phil’s health—wondering when he last came and when he will return, bringing her birthday present. Unable either to answer or offer his gift, Ed gives the shoes to Zimby’s daughter instead and stands for a while, “looking through sudden amazed tears at all that age and remembering [his] dead father” (45-46). Clearly the “ironic intensity” and tragedy of the tale (*LaT* 47), come not from Ozimba herself (her fading, which would be merely pathos), but from the narrator’s “error” of forgetfulness in contrast to Zimby’s vivid and loving recall of Phil (who is still “alive” to her). As Constance Rooke so accurately observes, Price’s vignette is a “celebrat[ion]” of Aunt Zimby and “a meditation on the precarious, suddenly blazing gift of memory which passes from Ozimba to the narrator in celebration of his father” (43).

“Uncle Grant,” the penultimate story in *The Names and Faces of Heroes*, is in part another celebration of a black servant and long-time witness to Price’s lost father—

in this case, Grant Terry, the gardener and handyman whose life was intertwined with Price's family for many years and upon whom Price models the character Grainger Walters in his trilogy *A Great Circle*. As Rooke notes, Price "asserts the power of memory and imagination to raise Grant from the dead" in this story, for Grant is not only "literally dead," but has been long out of the author's own memory (50). The story itself, she observes, is (like "The Warrior Princess Ozimba") a kind of offering to atone for forgetfulness and to "step out yonder and speak" to Grant ("Uncle Grant" 115), as Will Price had asked of his son long ago (Rooke 50). In the process, Rooke adds, Price acknowledges his family's duties and their failures of love toward Grant while affirming two things that had worried Grant at their last meeting: his worthiness for Heaven and his chance to again meet his own dearest ones (50-51)—including (by implication) his great friend, Will Price.

Most analyses of the story have focused on what Rooke calls Price's "unrelenting" vision of "inequalities based on race"—cultural mores that effected (but in no way excuse) harsh conditions even in Grant's close and long-term relationship with Price's family (50). Price speaks directly about this issue in the "Black Help" section of *Clear Pictures*, and the same attitude toward race relations informs his treatment (in *A Great Circle*) of the bond between Grainger Walters and four generations of Mayfield fathers and sons. But such discussions, invaluable as they are, have somewhat obscured the surprising extent to which "Uncle Grant" offers a portrait of not one, but *two* men of remarkable fidelity and virtue. For the story is also (albeit indirectly) a vivid and detailed portrait of Will Price, viewed through his remarkable bond with Grant Terry.<sup>9</sup> In

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<sup>9</sup> This friendship served as inspiration for that between Grainger Walters and Rob Mayfield in *The Surface of Earth* and *The Source of Light*, the first two volumes of Price's trilogy *A Great Circle*.

“working back to what [Grant] had been in previous days . . . finding I knew a good deal, finding *reasons*” (123), Price reclaims part of his father’s lost life as well—venturing more boldly than ever into personal memory and loss and fulfilling duties of love to *both* men.

As Price confesses near the end of the story, he had not (till the week before drafting his tale) thought of Grant Terry substantially in nearly seven years. Occupied with college exams, Price explains, he did not attend the funeral (and has never seen the grave)—though Grant died only a year after Will Price (just months after Price’s last visit), buried in a coffin Price’s family had purchased (123). Yet three thousand miles from home, Price writes, a postcard of the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhnaton has put him mind of Grant’s features, mysterious history, and dignity (101). Central to the mystery were his solitary nature; the whereabouts of the wife and son he had left (and never returned to) in his move south for work; and his powerful and abiding affection for Price and his father, which in some sense seems to have supplanted (or fulfilled) his own longing for family. When Price was an infant, his parents first hired Grant (who worked for Price’s aunt) to help them watch their son—perhaps, Price speculates, because Grant (a spectacular gardener) could make things grow (103). In Price’s youth (prior to the vagaries of adolescence) Grant also seemed to him a heroic figure—“three-parts Indian,” according to Grant—who helped find arrowheads and who saved the young Reynolds and his father from a maddened black snake, “crack[ing] him on the air like a leather whip” before the snake could lash out (106).

But quickly Grant became Will’s friend as well and began the long years of jokes and verbal exchanges that soon came to seem a necessity for both—leading to several

moves (in which Grant followed the Prices) and to numerous car and bus trips across the miles, even in hard financial times. In one two-year period, they lived in a three-room apartment with no yard at all. Yet Grant visited five or six times by bus in that time—trips paid for by Will, but sometimes initiated by Grant. “There was nothing he could do to help,” writes Price, “except to wash dishes (he couldn’t cook), but help wasn’t what my father wanted. He wanted just to talk” (105). Too young to retain these early exchanges, and frustrated that his mother “didn’t listen,” Price regrets that

now they are dead and nobody knows why they sat there night after night at a hard kitchen table under a bare light bulb, talking on and on, and laughing. Unless they loved each other—meaning there would come times when they needed to meet, and they never explained the need to themselves. (105)

Gradually and indirectly the revelation of Grant’s history among the Prices reveals (in great detail) the history of Will’s own shames and successes—in terms of his business and of his ability to provide for his family. Both are duties he takes seriously and which leave him “ashamed in [Grant’s] presence” on the one occasion when he cannot (in some fashion) provide for Grant also and must ask him—a friend and a man old enough to be his father—to find his own means (109). In this light, their long talks through the years seem more and more like conferences of battle-scarred veterans (one older, one younger) cheering and encouraging one another through now-lost and largely elliptical messages of care and persistence, bent on emotional survival. The portrait of Will Price that emerges parallel to Grant is that of a man who (whatever his errors) runs counter to conventional attitudes, displaying unusual solicitude and empathy not for a fellow man, employee, or servant—but for the particular person, Grant Terry. Among the things Price does remember hearing is his father’s offer “week after week” to take

Grant along on his business trips to Virginia so they might locate Grant's estranged wife and son (115). And when Grant (at 82) find himself worn out by work on the lawn (but reluctant to say so), it is Will—resourceful and solicitous of Grant's pride—who sees the problem and solves it, asking Grant to drive out with him on his rounds “and keep me company in this heat” (116). “Uncle Grant accepted,” Price notes with gentle humor, “not mentioning grass.” The depth and mutuality of the relation Price depicts makes it scarcely surprising that after Will's death, Grant Terry never again mentioned his name. “He went on speaking of others who were someway gone,” Price notes—“Ruth his wife and Felix his son . . . but never my father, not even the last time I saw him” (118).

Though Price's narrative gesture is clearly directed toward Grant—dedicated to honoring and exploring the mystery of who he was and “what he had been in previous days” (123)—it constitutes in miniature a perfect exercise of the gaze the author will soon turn more fully on Will Price himself. Through the unique figure of Grant Terry and his powerful bond with Will, this story suggests far more than previous glimpses of Will Price had allowed, laying a firm foundation for the tale that follows.

Indeed, only thinly disguised, Will Price and his son reappear (more vividly and bravely realized) in “The Names and Faces of Heroes,” the final (and last written) story of the collection. But despite this tale's singular intensity and its importance both as individual landmark and as precursor upon Price's road to *The Surface of Earth*,<sup>10</sup> the

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<sup>10</sup> In “A Place to Stand,” Price reports that in March 1961 he began a story “‘about’ my father and me,” hoping it would complete his emerging volume of short stories. As in “The Names and Faces of Heroes,” he explains, the father's alcoholism and vow to God were to have been key features (*xiii*). But though Price here speaks of “The Names and Faces of Heroes” as an entirely separate tale, his early notebooks show that it was conceived initially as a possible incident for the novel—a sort of “Jesus” story to include childhood memories and discussions Price himself had shared with Will (*LaT* 165, 2 March 1962). The novel remained stalled for twelve years, and the story evolved in a different direction. Yet it came (as Price tells William Ray) to bear much of the novel's early burden and so stands in a unique and revealing relationship to the eventual *Surface of Earth*.

significance and complexity of the vision it expresses has gone largely unexplored. William Ray is both puzzled and fascinated by this “most problematic of the early stories”—“an enigma” that he finds “ambitious” and “more interpretively difficult even than [Price’s novel] *Love and Work*” (108). This difficulty is due in part, Ray suggests, to the personality and precocious intelligence of the nine-year-old narrator, Preacher (Will’s nickname for the young Price), and to the intensity of his relation to Jeff, his father (105). But Ray seems equally mystified by Price’s presentation of the father himself—a portrait Ray finds less “objective” and “historical” than the one in “Uncle Grant,” with which he unfavorably compares it (105). It should be noted, however, that “The Names and Faces of Heroes” is a different kind of narrative act—one that fulfills an entirely different function in the hands of the author and his namesake Preacher, the boy mystic and narrator of the tale.

The primary enigma for Ray (as for many readers, apparently) is Preacher’s strange and powerful dream-vision of Jeff’s death, which Ray terms a “coda” (106) but that actually constitutes the tale’s core and climax. In fact, Preacher’s dream closely recalls and transforms the very sight Rosa had been created to witness in “A Chain of Love”—and indeed it is modeled upon the same event, the death of Will Price from lung cancer. Yet Ray, like other critics, overlooks this connection and its possible implications, questioning the use of such a complex element in what seems to him otherwise a “transparently autobiographical” and “personal” story (105). It is that, certainly—drawing almost directly upon people, situations, and discussions from Price’s own life. But this fact and the simplicity of the basic plot seem to have created expectations that obscure the story’s real function and power. Price declares to Ray that

“The Names and Faces of Heroes” is both “a love story” and “a transaction with the supernatural, with the unreal” (107). But at issue, too, is a third matter—what Price, in “A Tomb for Will Price,” refers to as his father’s “quest / For radiant virtue” (100). In fact these aspects are deeply intertwined, and the story’s full meaning and significance to Price’s canon cannot be fully approached without considering all three.

Despite its many complexities, the story is built on the spine of a straightforward plot. One winter’s night, nine-year-old Preacher and his forty-two-year-old father (Jeff McCraw) drive home after hearing the famous minister George W. Truett speak of his life-changing vision of Jesus. Jeff is an admirer of Truett’s books and sermons (notably “The Need for Encouragement”), and Preacher is intrigued since (like Price himself) he has long been fascinated with the portraiture of Jesus, wondering from his first view of illustrated bibles and storybooks what his “real” face is like (*CP* 234).<sup>11</sup> Since the previous summer, Preacher’s interest has deepened through his search for a hero to “chin [himself] . . . on” (127). The “shortcut” to manhood, a minister at camp had told him, is knowing “what your main lack is” and “seek[ing] that in some great man” (127). Remarking that “A man makes his face,” the minister had further advised, “study his picture,” inadvertently merging Preacher’s quest for exemplary men with his earlier search for the face of the Divine (127).

Yet having run through several famous names and faces (likely candidates for hero), Preacher had dismissed each on the grounds of unworthy deeds—or on suspicion of “yawning holes . . . which they hide” (131). Worrying that he cannot know the truth of

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<sup>11</sup> In his Foreword to *Clear Pictures*, Price reports that one of his first creative projects while recovering from cancer surgery and radiation was a series of brush drawings (“guesses at the face of Christ”) that returned him to one of his favorite childhood pursuits (4).

such men “until they die and their secrets appear” (131), Preacher had turned next to several male relatives. But having rejecting each finally as dismissive, alcoholic, or “fat,” he has reached an impasse (131-32). “Who *is* there these days,” he wonders, “who has there ever been broad enough, grand enough to stand day and night and ward off all my foes?” Worse still, Preacher worries, he does not yet know his own “greatest lack, my *mortal* foe” (129). But his discovery that Truett’s famous vision followed the fatal wounding of a friend has fueled his curiosity once more. Thrilled to have his father to himself as they drive, Preacher rekindles their “oldest subject” (discussion of the Divine face) and renews his search for a hero as well, seeking to involve Jeff in the quest.

As Preacher soon discovers, however, the mystery he seeks lies hidden where he has neither thought nor dared to look. And the true substance of Price’s story derives not from the boy’s search, but from this unique father-son bond and the hidden facts Preacher’s quest uncovers about it on this night. Though slow to unfold, the subject of this deeper story is at once implicit in the opening lines, which set up an odd sort of narrative frame: “After an hour I believe it and think, ‘We are people in love. We flee through hard winter night. What our enemies want is to separate us. Will we end together? Will we end alive’ ” (125)? Only later do readers learn that this narrating voice is Preacher’s and that the companion to whom he starts but hesitates to ask these questions is his father, Jeff. For a full page, in fact, Preacher’s unidentified but imaginative voice places the unnamed pair in a remarkably visual (almost cinematic) narrative of flight and pursuit, necessitating his eventual admission that “we are not lovers nor spies nor thieves” and are in fact bound home, “not fleeing” (126). While a taste for adventure, intrigue, and fantasy is not unusual for a child of this age, two aspects

of the boy's narrative hint at its deeper significance: the sight his "mind's eye" observes on the opening page (in a kind of establishing shot) and his implied purpose for resorting to such visualization.

Though Preacher wants to ask these questions of his father, he seems genuinely afraid to do so. The reasons emerge only gradually, but his intensity and the pattern of flight in his thoughts hints at more than mere play. "Maybe if we speak, even close as we are," Preacher thinks, "we will speak separate tongues after so long a time" (125), so he retreats instead to a vastly different perspective to fix their wholeness and closeness visually. "I shut my eyes," this narrating voice explains, "press hard with the lids till my mind's eye opens, then balloon it light through roof through steel, set it high and cold in January night, staring down to see us whole" (125). As children's fantasies go, such precision seems precocious indeed, yet the "whole" Preacher envisions is still more remarkable. "First," the "eye" observes, "we are one black car" on the road, "drawn slowly west by the hoop of light" before them "—the one light burning" amidst fifty miles of sleeping land and houses. But as it reaches its ultimate target, Preacher's "eye" "falls downward, hovers on the roof in the wind we make, pierces steel, sees us close—huddled on the worn mohair of a 1939 Pontiac, he slumped huge at the wheel, I the thin fork of flesh thrust out of his groin on the seat beside him. . ." (126). As Rooke observes, Preacher and his father seem "mystically isolated and joined" as they drive through the dark (52).

But the most striking aspect of this view is its emphasis on their consubstantiality and their connection at the point of generation. Preacher's metaphor of himself as "flesh thrust out" from Jeff's "groin" depicts him lying in his father's lap. More literally,

though, it highlights Preacher's unusually keen awareness that he was "born" from his father's body. As Rooke notes, Preacher is "powerfully, insistently aware of Jeff's genitals" (52), conscious that beneath him Jeff's "hollow . . . flushes" blood through the same "nodes of tissue, squabs of muscle" that had made him years before ("Names and Faces" 126). Throughout the story, in fact, Preacher repeatedly emphasizes his father's role in his conception,<sup>12</sup> and from the first this familiarity and awareness is depicted as reciprocal. The "physical component" of Jeff's attachment, Schiff notes, is just as strongly emphasized, for he "explores his son's body" as they drive ("Fathers and Sons" 263)—"testing . . . for warmth" by "ringing" ankle, shin, and knee" and resting his hand "heavy but still on the knots of boyish equipment waiting for life to start" ("Names and Faces" 126). Though emphasizing that this contact is not sexual, Schiff observes that Preacher and his father seem "as comfortable and familiar to one another . . . as old lovers" (263). Clearly, this father and son constitute a mysterious and remarkably intimate whole.

But despite its intensity, this bond is complicated—threatened by forces not merely external. In "Conversations with William Ray," Price observes that he was always sure death "waited for [his father] fairly quickly" (107), a worry enhanced, perhaps, by Will's hypochondria (glimpsed here in Jeff's frequent monitoring of heart and pulse.) But just as clearly, Preacher feels threatened by the anger, doubt, and disappointment that emerge slowly from his thoughts about Jeff. Preacher admits quickly to many of his own flaws: lack of bravery, lying, selfishness, envy, and failure to honor

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<sup>12</sup> James Schiff compares this intimate awareness to that between Rob Mayfield and his young son Hutch, who "ponders his conception in the body of his father . . .", attempting "to imagine his own life starting in that groin there, yearning out into Rachel fifteen years ago" ("Fathers and Sons" 268). For the complete passage in context, see *The Surface of Earth* 485.

parents. But he seems even more troubled by *Jeff's* "lacks" and "distances," which shake his trust in their bond and keep Jeff from being his hero (144). "I love you tonight more than all my life before," Preacher thinks without speech (127), tracing his name possessively into Jeff's wrist "as older boys gouge names, gouge love into trees, into posts—gouge proudly" (140). But *he* does not gouge proudly, he claims, knowing his father "too well" (140). Despite his size, Preacher notes, Jeff is not "physically brave" and has never been in war—where heroes are generally "made" (138-39). Hoping for bravado (or a comforting show of defiance, at least), Preacher is troubled by Jeff's calm admission (while on civilian patrol) that they would "high tail it" home if the Nazis actually came (139). Admitting that they could do nothing on their own, Preacher is nevertheless mystified by his father's response and reflects bitterly (still tracing) that Jeff's wrist "so whole so full, under its curls so ropey I cannot ring it," is "a grander wrist than he needs or deserves" (144). Eager for his own ascension to manhood, Preacher covets his father's powerful frame, but here as elsewhere he is disappointed and must confront appearances that seem at odds with reality.

One of Preacher's greatest terrors, in fact, is Jeff's gift for "turning himself into other people" and appearing in various disguises, such as that of the old man whistling "When I Grow Too Old to Dream" ("Names and Faces" 132-33).<sup>13</sup> A gifted raconteur and impressionist, Jeff McCraw (like Will Price himself) has long entertained friends and family with his "transformations" and practical jokes—his way (as Preacher's mother explains) of having "a little fun" since "he does not have much" (134-35). Preacher

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<sup>13</sup> Price reports this incident (described above in Chapter One, p. 30) in *Clear Pictures*. Later in the story—another episode recorded in *Clear Pictures* (46)—the old man returns, terrifying Preacher as a stranger come to claim him ("Names and Faces" 135-37). In the story the disguised Jeff tells his son, "I am too old to dream, Preacher," causing the boy to flee the room in tears ("Names and Faces" 132-33).

appreciates his father's talent and occasionally enjoys it, but he "take[s] fright" when Jeff begins "spinning on through crowds of old people, dead people, people I do not know. . ." (134). Although Preacher cannot explain, he is terrified at the sight of his father "ghostly, old," but he seems equally troubled by the *abundance* of faces his father can assume (132). Most clearly, the sight fuels a conscious fear that Jeff's life (with Preacher and his mother) "is not enough" for him—and may in fact be a burden (134). This last implication is delicately embedded in Preacher's first "mind's eye" view of them "whole," which describes him plainly as "the burden" in his father's lap—the "weight" against which his father's blood must "force" its way in order to nourish (126).

But Preacher's comment that Jeff is rushing "to get me safely home as if I was cherished" pushes suspicion toward resentment, hinting at deceit and a love not fully returned (144). Such doubt may be fueled by Jeff's "distances," yet it seems rooted (as Rooke suggests) in Preacher's keen "sense of difference" from other boys—and most of all from his father, whom he loves and is fearful of losing (53). Preacher seems to fear, in fact, that his father has already discounted him, and he continues to grapple with possible reasons. Coveting time alone with Jeff (a traveling salesman), Preacher enjoys their rare journeys together. But he resents waiting alone in the car (for hours, sometimes—apparently forgotten) while his father talks with strangers inside. Such neglect is even more puzzling to Preacher since Jeff asks each time, "You do not mind that [being left], do you, darling?" and promises not to forget (140). "Why did he bring me along?" Preacher wonders. "Why did he get me, why did he want me at all if he meant to treat me the way he does. . ." (141)? Still worse, in Preacher's view, is Jeff's

failure to teach him the pursuits he had loved as a boy (baseball, for example.) Though gifted at drawing and singing (as Jeff apparently is not), Preacher is pained to be “poor . . . at games and play” (skills other boys value) and had asked his father to help him learn. But after a few failed attempts, Preacher notes, his father had “finally stopped trying . . . not angry or impatient but never again offering to teach me what he loved when he was my age. What had won him friends” (141). Preacher considers that Jeff may have ceased from kindness, but he again feels shamed and abandoned—suspecting disgust, but wondering, too, if “maybe there just come stretches when he does not care” (142).

Still tracing his father’s wrist as he ponders, Preacher’s “winnowing” finger happens on Jeff’s pulse for the first time. And as he “rides” the life there—“steady and calm as if it did not know I ruled its flow”—he imagines pressing inward slowly till Jeff slumps in death, unaware that the betrayed (“poor as [he is] at games and play”) has at last become the betrayer (144). This fantasy empowers the boy briefly, but its intensity terrifies him and soon turns bitter. As Preacher’s own pulse rises (“untouched, unwanted”), he recoils, hands clenching, prompting his father to ask, “Am I dying, Preacher” (144)? Despite its hint toward humor, Jeff’s question is partly in earnest. Certain that his heart is failing and had missed beats the previous Christmas, Jeff monitors his pulse almost constantly (133). And though Preacher has often tried to find it, he has always failed and has thought (implying his own latent fears), “maybe I could not stand it if I did” (140). Yet now, grateful for sudden distraction and able to report that “it is going fine,” Preacher asks his father what he has not dared before, “Are you *scared* of dying?” (145)

The ensuing exchange leads once more to the topics of heroism and physical bravery—and to the Divine itself since Jesus, Preacher suggests, “is the one that did not die” and should be hero to those who fear Death (145). But the moment is notable primarily for its missed opportunity—carefully noted by Price—and the cognitive dissonance it reveals between father and son on their most sacred, shared topic. Though Preacher has asked the question, he cannot yet process either Jeff’s protracted silence or his frank and intriguing reply that Death is “the main thing I am scared of” (145). For Preacher, Death is still conceptual—a thing of mind and imagination to be braved, defied, or fled from as one’s own level of heroism permits. “Everybody is going to die,” he responds automatically, echoing adult reassurances, no doubt, but swerving sharply aside from both Jeff’s answer and his subsequent rejoinder: “So they tell me. So they tell me. But that is one crowd I would miss if I could. Gladly” (145). Though Jeff’s candid and colorful response is refreshing, both remarks seem slightly unusual as responses to a child, begging further (and perhaps more difficult) questions. Yet Preacher fails to inquire (from inattention, not embarrassment), and Price characterizes this omission clearly through an intrusion of Preacher’s *adult* narrative voice, unnamed and virtually silent till the story’s last line. “I am not really thinking,” this voice observes, as his young counterpart drifts even further off target, wondering aloud “what . . . people mean” by the term “personal hero” (145).

This quiet moment, faintly echoing Parzival’s innocent but disastrous inattention to signs of suffering at the Grail Castle, sets the stage for one of the story’s most crucial and ironic points. What Preacher has sought (a “hero” and personal access to the Divine) sits before him already, disguised, in the form of his father—frankly revealing both

death-fear and spiritual wounds to his son. Thinking of wounds as something external—a proof one can *see*, like the scars of Jesus—Preacher states early in the story that his father’s gunshot hand is “his only wound” (126). But he soon arrives by indirection at the hidden story of Jeff’s less visible scars by asking at last (and for the first time, remarkably) who *Jeff’s* hero is. Queried about the term “personal hero,” Jeff replies simply that “Your hero is what you need to be”—but “somebody you have got half a chance of measuring up to” (145-46). And he startles Preacher by naming the elderly, bird-like Baptist minister, Mr. Barden. Preacher has known and been puzzled by his father’s deep attachment to this man, “one of the people [Jeff] loves” and of whom his mother is “jealous” (147), but he has never known the reason—and has never asked. Now, though, he does, wondering aloud what Rev. Barden could have that Jeff actually needs.

Jeff answers simply that Mr. Barden has helped for years, “talking to me or just sitting calm, showing me his good heart. Which, Preacher, I need” (150). Yet this answer comes couched in a story Preacher has never heard—of his father desperate, “drunk and wild” in the bleak depression years before Preacher’s birth (149). At thirty, Jeff admits, “my life looked over, and I didn’t know why or whether I wanted it different. . .” (149). Though Mr. Barden urged him, “Promise God something before you *die*,” he could not, he explains to Preacher. Struggling to make ends meet, cruel and verbally abusive to his wife, he knew only that “the bottom looked close” when he “slipped and started [Preacher] on the way” (149). Only Mr. Barden could calm him then, he explains, for he was “out of what mind I had left myself” and still, he tells his son, “you came on every day, *every day*, like a tumor” (149). On the night of the birth,

however—when the labor went awry, threatening the life of mother and child—Jeff had gone to the woodshed, making his long-delayed promise to God: “If you take Rhew or take that baby, then take me too. But if You can, save her and save that baby, and I make You this promise—I will change my life” (150). Both lived, of course, and since then, Jeff explains, Mr. Barden has continued to help him keep his resolve—sitting, listening, wanting to know about his life.

Not truly comprehending, Preacher (would-be visionary and purist) asserts in response, “I still think Jesus is your hero,” missing the implications of his father’s reply: “Maybe so. Maybe so. But Mr. Barden was what I could *see*” (150). In fact, now hoping that Jeff might be his link with the “real” face of Jesus, Preacher asks, “how did he look in your mind when I was being born and Mother was dying?” But to his disappointment, Jeff reports that “He didn’t look nohow *that* day. I was not seeing faces. I was doing business. If I saw anything, it was rocks underfoot. . .”(152-53). Preacher is dismayed by Jesus’ failure to appear to his father at such a time, for it counters his firm sense of justice. “I think it is awful,” he observes, “Him not appearing. Why did Dr. Truett see him and you could not” (153)? Preacher’s desire to see “the secret” is natural indeed, and it recalls Rosa’s frustration when the Phelps boy (drowned and resuscitated) reveals nothing of where he had been during that time, saying only that it was “a secret between him and his Jesus” (“Chain” 28). Notably, Preacher loves mystery—but as we’ve begun to see, he is not fond of secrets or disguises, and there is something both amusing and deeply touching in his precise expectations and in the implicit *demands* this fledgling battler would make upon high spiritual mystery. But as worrisome to the boy as Jesus’

failure to appear is Jeff's calm assertion that he "didn't mind" not seeing Jesus—for this points to another key difference between himself and his father:

It does not worry my father that he is not privileged to see the secret. But it scalds, torments any day of mine in which I think that the face with power to change my life is hid from me and reserved for men who have won their fight—(when He Himself claimed He sought the lost), will always be hid, leaving me to work dark. As my father has done, does, must do—not minding, just turning on himself his foe with nothing for hero but Mr. Barden when it could have been Jesus if He had appeared, His gouged hands, His real face, the one He deserved that changes men.  
(153)

This last sentence shows a shift toward empathy and perhaps a dawning admiration for Jeff's toughness. Yet it hints just as strongly that Jeff has settled for less than he might have demanded. Given his own intensity, Preacher may read his father's calm as complacency—though adults will surely recognize humility, predicated on experience of a kind that Preacher still lacks. Of himself at this age—"the boy mystic"—Price writes, "he'd have given his tombstone-sized front teeth for one more sign, on the spot . . . that he mattered by name to the perpetrator of so much splendor and its still-concealed anguish. Show him death, show him pain. What was pain to him" (*CP* 263)? These are high aspirations indeed, yet they are couched (as Price notes) in the form of abstractions. Similarly, nine-year-old Preacher is asking to glimpse what he cannot yet imagine or define, and ironically—in his zeal to put a name and a single, "appropriate" face on "God disguised" ("Names and Faces" 146)—he has missed a subtle but important

truth in Jeff's narrative. Unlikely as it seems, "skinny Mr. Barden" was not only "what [Jeff] could see" (150), but also "the face with power to change [his] life" (153). As Preacher is destined to learn this night, a man may indeed (in one sense) "[make] his face" (127), but seeing that face truly is a radically subjective act—subject to the expectations and spiritual limitations of the watcher. One must watch carefully, with less self-absorption, if he would indeed risk seeing the hidden hand and face of God in the world.

Lulled by the engine and still unsure what to make of Jeff's story, Preacher falls silent and is soon asleep, having made no further response to his father. As Price soon reveals, however, Preacher's unconscious mind is already responding, processing internal reactions and illuminating hidden connections through a pair of beautifully managed episodes built upon dreams and liminal states. These revelations will flower, ultimately—in terrifying and unexpected form—in a powerful vision of the mystery Preacher has sought. But his first episode of spiritual adventure and revelation occurs not *in a dream*, but upon waking from one—from a dream, in fact, of a state Price describes as "the zone this side of sleep, the place where secrets reach us" (*CP* 295). "Of course I do not think I am sleeping," says Preacher as he falls asleep this first time. "I dream I am awake, that I stand on the near side of sleep and yearn, but it *is* a dream. . ." (154).<sup>14</sup>

It is in precisely such a zone—after hearing the tale of Jeff's vow—that Preacher wakes suddenly, but "still half dreaming," to confront what seems a mortal threat. He

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<sup>14</sup> The paradoxical elaboration and blurring of waking, liminal, and dreaming states is pronounced throughout this scene and is worthy of separate discussion. It is linked not only to Price's comments about "the zone where secrets reach us," but also to epistemological worries Preacher expresses earlier while discussing Truett's dream. Is seeing Jesus in a dream, he wonders, *really* seeing him, for "in just a dream, how would you know? What would keep him from being a trick" (151)?

finds himself alone in the snowbound car (no sign of his “vanished” father), eyes “collecting terror” as they assess his plight and the details of the abandoned, still-running car (154). At first, recalling his opening narrative of flight and pursuit, he fears that “they have won at last . . . come between us.” But soon his anxiety shifts from a sense of victimization to guilt for “causing [Jeff’s] death just now in my mind.” He worries that Jeff “knew what I thought when I pressed his pulse” and has now abandoned him in disgust (154). Worse still, “deeper towards the heart,” he suspects that God has taken Jeff “as punishment” for this fantasy (154). Both fears are intensified by his new knowledge of Jeff’s struggles. But as Preacher searches the night to know “what trials lie between me and morning, what vengeance” (154), his language shifts to an almost biblical mode that evokes Jacob’s lonely night vigil at the ford of Penuel (“God’s face”).<sup>15</sup> Not coincidentally, it also recalls the tale he’s just heard from his father.

Though he has yet to see it, Preacher has awakened in a strangely reciprocal situation—one which mirrors Jeff’s guilt and horror on the night of his vow. Driven by misery and by despair at the unplanned pregnancy, Jeff had indeed “[caused]” Preacher’s death “in his mind,” telling Mr. Barden he might help by “ask[ing] the Lord to stop that baby” (149). This admission, which confirms Preacher’s fears, suggests strongly that Jeff may have seen his son’s dangerous breech birth as a result of this wish—a consequence such as Preacher now envisions for his own guilty fantasy.<sup>16</sup> Even Preacher’s self-

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<sup>15</sup> In “A Single Meaning,” Price’s translation and discussion of Jacob’s struggle strongly emphasizes this meaning for the name Jacob bestows, saying “I saw God face to face and my soul endured” (260).

<sup>16</sup> I infer this not only from Jeff’s vow and Preacher’s worries, but also from an intriguing anecdote Price includes in *Clear Pictures*. Years after Will’s death, Price learned that his father had indeed quit drinking after his vow—but “in time . . . not all at once” (30). During those years, Price himself experienced mysterious, life-threatening seizures, which Will seems to have connected to his own occasional “cheating on a dead-earnest deal” (390). The last and nearly fatal seizure coincided with Will’s

loathing—his fear that Jeff can no longer “bear my sight” (154)—echoes his father’s speculation (shared with him earlier) that his son’s breech position might have been a sign of loathing or refusal: “You held back twenty-four hours as if you knew who was waiting outside” (149). Similarly terrified and penitent, Preacher tries his own hand in a bargain with God, revealing at the same time what he sees as his chief failing. “Send me my father,” he prays. “Send me help. If You help me now, if You save my life, I will change—be brave, be free with my gifts. Send somebody good” (155). And moments later, Preacher notes, his eyes “click open on answered prayer” (155).

At first, the savior appears to be Jesus himself—a cloaked figure who glides across snow, hands turned inward over his heart—but Preacher’s eyes (and his expectations) have deceived him. Though he closes his lips to take the “unknown kiss” of Jesus and glimpse at last the mystery he has craved, he finds that the man is his father, “returned in disguise” and checking his heart after a short hike to “pee in the snow” (155). Given the high tone of Preacher’s expectations, one might expect disappointment from such comic deflation. Yet this reunion—one of the most satisfying and harmonious moments in the story—produces only deep delight “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Preacher,” Jeff observes, “smiling . . . very deep from the eyes” at Preacher’s “Yes sir” (156). But Preacher is not disappointed, and his father well knows it. In many details the scene recalls (and revises) Jeff’s earlier disguised as an old man come to claim him. And though the discovery ends in laughter this time, rather than tears, it reinforces the power

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return from drinking a bottle of beer at a grocery. His sister Lulie revealed to Price years later, “Will knew you were dying, he knew he had caused it, and he quit then and there (33). Whatever their cause, Price observes, the seizures stopped, too (33).

of the earlier scene—and of Preacher’s assertion, then, that he had not “loved the joke” but “had loved my father found at the end with his hand stretched out” (137-38).

This time, however, the moment of revelation is more highly charged, for Preacher sees that his father’s *own* face is new to him. Jeff’s tale of the vow—and his new designation as “answered prayer”—cause Preacher to study his father with new eyes, and for the first time he sees there “scraps of beauty” he had “planned for Jesus” (156).<sup>17</sup> This new perspective is especially striking since Preacher has systematically argued that his father cannot be his hero, much less a mask of Christ. Yet in this scene the two are partly conflated—and *will* be, increasingly, as the boy’s reaction to Jeff’s story unfolds. Startled, Preacher studies his father’s face, intent on looking “till I know my father, till all this new disguise falls away” (157). Yet this new face “shows no sign of retreat,” and Preacher is for the first time forced to consider that despite their closeness, there is much he does not yet know about his father’s life. In some ways, in fact, his father’s life is as mysterious to him (and as elusive) as the “real” face of Jesus.

As Rooke notes, several small but significant physical details throughout the story suggest a connection between Jesus and Jeff—the wound in Jeff’s hand and the wound in his side (“the letter J perfect” from Preacher’s dream) that marks the removal of Jeff’s left lung (54). As Rooke so astutely observes, even Jeff’s penchant for appearing “in disguise” suggests a link with the many faces of Christ (54), and she is right to observe

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<sup>17</sup> Price’s language here (indicating Preacher’s shift in plan and vision) maps the difficult evolution of the “Jesus story” itself, as glimpsed in Price’s notebooks. “The face of Jesus haunted my childhood,” begins an early draft (March 1962), which ends with Preacher selecting Jesus (appearing to him in a dream) as hero (*LaT* 164, 167). But in a note dated August 17<sup>th</sup>, Price writes that after struggling for over a month with the first two pages, he’s still balked by such an opening—“or even . . . a blunt ‘My father was heroic’” (*LaT* 164). Clearly his focus was shifting towards a unique conflation of the two. And indeed the final version (altered to include the dream-vision of Jeff’s death) ends with Preacher’s vow not to Jesus, but to Jeff’s “abandoned face” (159-60).

that what Preacher wants in both cases is “the chameleon pinned down . . . reliable as a source of love and a guide for his own life” (53).

Just as important to note, however, are the characteristics Preacher expects to find in this single face—his implicit (and still-evolving) definition of hero and savior. Above all, he objects to the “jellied” eyes and meekness in some portraits of Jesus—faces too weak for reflecting and grappling with the bitterness of life (“Names and Faces” 152). The face Preacher has imagined for Jesus, “the one with power to change my life . . . the one that changes men” (153), must be able to do just that. Studying his father’s face as he reappears over the snow, Preacher sees that Jeff’s eyes are no longer “simply kind or gray” but instead “burn new power far back and steady (the power to stop in his tracks and *turn*)” (156). Jeff’s narrative (and Preacher’s crisis in the car) has begun to bear fruit, apparently, for *this* Jeff McCraw appears suddenly as a spiritual and existential battler—as Will Price was a battler, “no chattering fundamentalist but a silent wrestler in the scalding dark” (*CP* 32). Price’s description of Will echoes his description of Jacob’s battle in Genesis 32 with the mysterious presence who “wrestles with him silently and darkly in an uncertain struggle, won only at dawn. . .” (“A Single Meaning” 259). And in Jeff’s willingness to “[do] business” and “work dark” are reflections of both Will Price and Jacob (“Names and Faces” 153). It is worth recalling, as Price himself does in “A Single Meaning,” that Jacob’s new name (Israel)—conferred by the perpetrator after struggle and atonement—translates literally as “God’s worthy contestant” (260). For as we saw in Chapter One (pp.11-12), the mysterious figure who wounds then blesses is associated by Emma Jung and Marie von Franz with “the dark aspect” of the Divine.

And the wounded man himself (Jacob) is associated with the figure of the Anthropos, who is linked irrevocably to both the Grail King and to Jesus, the Christ.

In his article “Fathers and Sons,” James Schiff makes the intriguing assertion that “Preacher links his father mystically to Christ and views him as a flesh-and-blood representation of divinity” (263). Schiff does not pursue this idea further and seems unsure what Price might mean by it, claiming that “it is never resolved whether [Preacher’s] father fits the role” (263). Yet the last third of the story seems carefully designed to reveal this “fitness,” placing increasing emphasis on Jeff’s role as *intermediary* with the God whom Price terms “the perpetrator of so much splendor and its still-concealed anguish” (*CP* 263).<sup>18</sup> For the first time, Preacher’s fascination with the face of mystery shifts closer to home—to “what [he] can see” of the struggle in this most unlikely hero, his father. Attentive, now, he studies Jeff’s face for further clues, but sleep catches him again, and as he surrenders (one hand cupping his groin for warmth) he thinks, “Now I have lost all hope of knowing my father’s life” (157). This is an odd statement for one merely falling asleep. But it harmonizes perfectly with the boy’s fears of loss (never far below the surface) and will later serve as an important key to the dream’s meaning and resolution.

Just as important, however, it is Price’s first hint that Preacher has fallen not merely into sleep, but into a vision of the future—a dream of his father’s death. One of the more challenging aspects of this sequence is Price’s insistence that Preacher’s dream is a vehicle of external as well as internal revelation. In both the story itself and in

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<sup>18</sup> Price’s notes for an intermediate draft of the story (1 July 1962) reveal the growing conflation between Jeff and Jesus—and his own sense of its fitness—quite bluntly indeed. Though the draft opens (like the March version) with “The face of Jesus haunted my childhood,” it ends very differently: “It was my father stepping through dim moonlight . . . hung with the face of Jesus . . . looking all he claimed to be, the Son of God, at the very least, a worthy hero” (*LaT* 166).

conversations with William Ray, Price places strong emphasis on the fact that Preacher's dream is an actual *foretelling*. His repeated insistence that the dream is a "piece of knowledge, a precognition" may seem odd or even irrelevant to some critics (Ray 107). But in fact it is rather important, for it counters purely psychological interpretations of the scene and de-emphasizes the fact that Price himself is looking back, as he writes, to "a fairly literal account" of Will Price's death several years before (Ray 107). The result renders the dream mystical—akin to the dream-visions of Medieval literature, the purpose of which, as Dr. Verlyn Flieger explains, is "to imply that truth beyond observable reality is being revealed to the dream-voice, and through that voice to the reader" (*Splintered Light* 164). But in Preacher's dream these revelations come gradually, "pedagogically graded" as in the mysteries, to form what Campbell might call a series of "revelatory shocks" (*CM* 67). At first Preacher sees only his cupping hand "and a circle of light round it" (157), but his hand is clearly that of an adult and no longer cups his "own groin. Instead, it cups "the knobs of a man still twice the size of mine I held before I slept, but cold, shrunk and shrinking as my hand lifts—their little life pouring out blue through veins gorged like sewers. . ." running out under "grizzled" hairs (157). Trapped and seeing "only this terror," Preacher does not yet know who the man is, but already he begins to guess that it is his father (158).

In fact, the dream's sounds and imagery closely echo Preacher's earlier, waking fantasy of causing Jeff's death. Toward that carefully controlled "picture" and "chance," we were told, Preacher's own pulse had risen "grunting aloud in damp stripes under my groins . . . the pad of my sinking finger" (144). And as he'd imagined pressing down, causing his father to slump in death, he'd watched Jeff's eyes "shut on me (on what I

cause) . . . on what I have made—his permanent death” (144). When, in his dream, he sees the man’s face (“which of course is my father’s”) he finds similarly that “it is turned from me, eyes locked, lips shut, locked in the monstrous stillness of his rest” (158). Now, though, Preacher finds he is “bound to what I have made, have caused” (158).

Conjured by his “mind’s eye” to defuse a sense of anger and helplessness, Preacher’s waking fantasy had been only a kind of game—a way to manage feelings for a difficult beloved and to exert control over his own greatest fear. In the dream, however, Preacher must face this Death in earnest and in a “picture” entirely beyond his control. In terror, his hand “clamps on the blood”—not to kill, this time, but to *restore*: “to turn its race, to warm again, fill again what I hold” (157). But he cannot halt the process, or even break contact, and his hand remains “locked” in place, crushing, as “green piss streams cold, corrosive” through his fingers—an image of both destruction and decay (157).

As William Ray observes, Preacher is “literally pulling away the sexual life, the life of his father” (106). Yet he is not “without guilt,” as Ray goes on (oddly) to observe (106). Indeed, like the young minister Truett, who had “sweated drops of blood in misery” for inadvertently killing his friend, Preacher, too, now feels guilt for taking a life (151). The imagery embodies his horror, reflecting his earlier worry (now partly confirmed by Jeff’s tale) that his father may not—perhaps *should* not—have wanted him “sucking his life, his time, his fun for the food I need, the silly clothes, sucking the joy out of what few hopes he may have seen when his eyes were shut ten years ago, when he and my mother made me late in the night. . .” (142). Though Preacher has long feared that he is, in some ways, a disappointment to his father, the dream’s imagery faces him with an existential truth more difficult to accept: in some part, at least, his father’s life has

been exchanged for his own. This concern is in one sense archetypal, of course<sup>19</sup>—the reason, perhaps, that Preacher’s reflections resonate oddly with those of James Joyce’s hero Stephen Dedalus concerning “consubstantiality,” “begetting,” and the uneasy relation between fathers and sons. “Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting,” Stephen bitterly observes, “is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. . . .The son unborn mars beauty: born, he brings pain, divides affection, increases care. He is a new male: his growth is his father’s decline. . . .” (Joyce 170). So, too, Preacher’s dream now seems to make clear—all the more forcefully, perhaps, since Jeff has just confessed, “You . . . were not thought of, God knows not wanted, the way I was going” (149).

Yet for Jeff and Preacher, the matter of fatherhood and “begetting” has an additional, poignant complication: the unique circumstance of a second act, both willing and conscious, through which Preacher’s father and God have, as Schiff puts it, “bargained him into existence” (“Fathers and Sons” 271).<sup>20</sup> In a sense, then, Preacher is actually twice born through an act of his father’s, and it is *this* “mystical estate” of fatherhood before which he stands in his dream-vision—in crisis and praying for light, at least, to “see what I do” (158). For this mystery (this face of his father) is the one with which he must come finally to terms in his own struggle toward virtue.

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<sup>19</sup> In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell devotes an entire chapter to “atonement with the father”—a discrete stage of what he terms the heroic “monomyth” (126-149).

<sup>20</sup> In this passage, Schiff suggests the bargain as the reason Price himself “associates his entry into this world . . . with his father and God” rather than with his mother, “the traditional birth giver” (“Fathers and Sons” 264). Yet Schiff nowhere follows Price (or Preacher) in examining the consequences and spiritual ramifications of that deal for all parties concerned. Schiff’s thesis takes him elsewhere, so he does not consider either Jeff or Will Price as sacrificial, mediating figures on a literal quest for virtue. This, perhaps, explains his puzzlement about the links between Jesus and Jeff.

For all its complexities, the bond between them (and Preacher's almost mystical sense of being "born" from his father's body) has till now provided him a crucial sense of shelter and identity. When beset with uncertainties the boy has sought always (usually through the power of his "mind's eye") to reassert and affix this primary connection. So it is no accident, surely, that the light swelling "in a hoop" from Preacher's hand and their intimate connection closely resembles the "hoop of light" ("Names and Faces" 126, 148) they'd cast before them from the first page of the story. From the deliberately crafted and God-like perspective of Preacher's "mind's eye," that light had before defined a sacred space of imagined safety from the dark on their journey (125-26). But now this very light (granted by the unseen presence in Preacher's dream) seems to place them together, exposed and onstage in a theatre of terror<sup>21</sup>—a Chapel Perilous where courage and allegiance will be tried. "Dimly," Preacher perceives

a room, and in that room my whole body standing by a bed—the body I will have as a man—my hand at the core of a man's stripped body laid yellow on a narrow bed . . . the thighs ditched inward to what I crush, his hollow his core that streams on thin with no native force but sure as if drained by magnets in the earth. (158)

Here is the ritual bier, with its echoes of the wounded Grail king and the grizzled gray man of Jeff's disguises—the man "too old to dream" (132). And the "force" that drains "like magnets in the earth" is surely the existential worm we encounter elsewhere in Price—"age, disease, death—and worst, disloyalty. . ." ("Finding Work" 18; *L&W* 9).

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<sup>21</sup> In *Clear Pictures*, Price writes of Will's death, "something forced me to see each moment" (288). "The overhead light must have been on; but . . . all my memories see Will only, as if he lies in a pool of light on a wide, dark field" (288).

The image of the grizzled man, his genitals crushed and drained of life, strongly recalls Anfortas—sapped by the Life Force of Nature herself and crushed by the fruit of his own early exuberance. Not coincidentally it also previews Hutch Mayfield’s description of his father, Rob, as “a man / Embraced by the killing earth” (*SoL* 309)—and Rob’s own statement that Rachel, Hutch’s mother, had “pulled you out of me by main force. . .” (7).

Consciously or not, Schiff’s comments about Price’s “mystical dream sequence” reflect the language of vegetation rites (“Fathers and Sons” 264). This is especially clear in his observation that Price “links the two physically through the groin or ‘core’ that produces the seed that becomes the son” (264). Yet Schiff does not pursue these genuinely mystical elements, content to conclude rather broadly that the scene “demonstrates the intense bond between father and son”—specifically the powerful sense of eros he has noted elsewhere (264). Price, too, has noted the “enormous amount of Eros” in this story, which he says is “certainly a love story” (Ray 105). But the specific iconography of the dream, the visionary nature of Preacher’s Quest, and the nature of Jeff’s spiritual struggle and bargain with God all suggest that this “love story” is far larger and more significant—spiritually and metaphysically—than Schiff’s statement allows for.<sup>22</sup> For as we explored in Chapter One, the real payoff of the vegetation rites (as Frazer himself failed to grasp) lay not in the exoteric rites, but in the second, *esoteric* level of the mysteries only select initiates were permitted to undergo.

In *From Ritual to Romance*, Weston calls the mystery ritual she identifies with Anfortas and the core Grail scene “a double initiation” (182). The “lower,” she explains,

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<sup>22</sup> Schiff is right to stress the word *mystery* and to suggest that Price would “limn . . . moments and sensations” that are “beyond our powers of full understanding. . .” (277). Yet Schiff himself reminds us that these “can nevertheless be explored and partially grasped”—perhaps more fully than his thesis allows scope for here (276).

involved “the mysteries of generation” and the sources of “physical Life”; the “higher,” initiation into the mysteries of “the Spiritual Divine Life, where man is made one with God” (182). This second level is ostensibly Preacher’s goal as well—the “polar heights” to which Price himself claims aspiration in “For Ernest Hemingway” (153) and which he describes there also as “the traditional goal of virtue: the heart of God” (143). Despite its usefulness, Schiff’s thesis omits (and perhaps further obscures) this dimension of Price’s “love story”—the Divine face of “God’s dangerous love and mercy” (*CP* 245) that Preacher clearly seeks and with which Jeff himself has grappled darkly. Yet this presence (active but hidden in Preacher’s dream-vision) is absolutely integral to the meaning of this father/son love story and suggests a powerful and profoundly spiritual basis for the “enormous amount of Eros” Price finds there. In his innocence Preacher (like Price’s “boy mystic”) has demanded an encounter with the Divine “secret,” and his dream-vision is precisely that: a scene of initiation and spiritual ascension akin to that which Weston finds at the heart of the Grail romances.

Despite his terror in the snow-bound car, despite vague anxieties about “enemies” and separation from his father, Death has been for Preacher (as for Price’s “boy mystic”) primarily a concept until now. His “Everybody is going to die”—a pat, almost dismissive response to Jeff’s earlier and intriguing admission of fear—does much to confirm this (145). But as Weston asserts, the “test for the primary initiation” requires “contact with the horrors of physical death” (182), and Preacher’s dream-vision, a culmination of imagery and disquieting awareness building from the first line, fulfills this function perfectly. Graphically and dramatically, it revises Preacher’s response to his father’s greatest fear, forcing him to confront his own through the beloved body that is somehow

(and mysteriously) “consubstantial” with his own. Suddenly, Preacher’s sense of this connection seems “armed,” as Price has observed of his own bond to Will, “to kill . . . both” (*CP* 293). When Preacher tries to pull free, he is alarmed to see that their skin “has joined maybe past parting” (159). He seems trapped in Jeff’s dying, as once Jeff was trapped by Preacher’s own conception and birth, and in this dream’s powerful imagery, Price’s sense of his own “mutually sacrificial bond” with Will<sup>23</sup> is given a dreadfully concrete realization (“A Place to Stand” vii).

Here, too, Preacher at last sees the appalling implications of the Christ-like “scraps of beauty” he had glimpsed earlier upon his father’s face. For despite Preacher’s strangely worded insistence that Jesus should be Jeff’s hero since he is “the one that did not die” (145), he *did*, of course—which is at least half the point. The heroic face of Jesus the intermediary (later the Risen Christ) is linked irrevocably and necessarily with that of the Crucified—ultimate emblem of a vow freely offered and at last fully paid. Indeed, Price raises this very issue in the “Credible Light” chapter of *Clear Pictures*. Though raised a Protestant, he has long questioned the Protestant tendency to avoid realism in the crucifix and in youth had asked his minister (Howard Powell) about it, receiving what he terms “the standard argument” on the topic. For Protestants, Price asserts, the suffering of Jesus is “a distressing half-truth . . . Christ didn’t die for long;

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<sup>23</sup> Complicating Price’s complex and evolving notion of this “sacrifice,” it should be noted, is his co-existing perception (already evident in memoirs and notes for the evolving Mayfield novels) that by vowing recklessly to God, Will had also (though inadvertently) made his son a victim, offering him as surety in the deal. Though later discussions in “A Place to Stand” (1981) and *Clear Pictures* (1989) emphasize this sacrifice as mutual, Price’s early notes frequently compare the story of Will’s vow to the tale of Abraham and Isaac, or of Jephthah and his sacrificed daughter (see, for example, *LaT* 168). But while that notion is implicit in Preacher’s peril here, his role as victim is not emphasized (and certainly not explored) in “The Names and Faces of Heroes,” being at odds with the tale’s purpose and offering. In the Mayfield novels (a different sort of gesture entirely) Price explores all sides of “the deal” quite fully.

why stress those thirty-odd hours of agony and death” (248)? In Price’s view, however, “it’s another half-truth to deny the intensity of Christ’s saving agony” (248).

Though Preacher has long known the Gospel story, full realization of the whole is only now dawning. And in this terrifically charged moment, Jeff’s wounds seem to suggest him as “a sufficient face, and a credibly assaulted body”,<sup>24</sup> linked with this sacrificial aspect of Jesus—for it appears to Preacher that his father has been wounded not merely by time and disease, but ultimately (and still mysteriously) by love itself. This realization, surely, is the source of Preacher’s grief when he finds that “what I have pressed comes with me as if I had given love, not pain” (159).<sup>25</sup> Given the boy’s earlier fears and doubts, one might expect from him a measure of relief at the thought of his love fully accepted and returned. Yet Preacher’s “as if” and the gruesome intensity of the scene seem to deny such palliatives. Though he has craved proofs of love and constancy from his father—and though, like Price’s “boy mystic” he has craved clear evidence that he “mattered by name to the divine perpetrator” (*CP* 263)—he is not reconciled to a love so heedless of pain and destruction. “Set him free,” Preacher prays to the nameless and faceless presence that had earlier granted him light (159). “Let me leave him whole in peace” (159). But nothing avails; both are bound, still, by the vow. And more is required, apparently, of Preacher as he confronts the hardest of the “gleaming painful truths about life” Price had remarked in *Clear Pictures*: “the heaviest of those burdens is

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<sup>24</sup> Regardless of its origins, Price notes, his first sight of the Shroud of Turin (in photographs) during his mid-teen years provided “a sufficient face, and a credibly assaulted body, that seemed as near as I could hope to advance toward the original” (*CP* 243).

<sup>25</sup> Constance Rooke argues, with real justification, that Preacher may “prefer that his father not be aware” of this “intimate touch” and that the boy’s later plea for pardon may encompass not only his “excessive demands” and “past lacks,” but also “what he may feel is an unnatural love” (54). Yet Preacher’s real terror, I believe, stems not from such guilt, but from the much larger implications of the scene before him.

every child's ability to see, with merciless clarity, the million ways in which human beings are dauntingly responsible for one another and how the sacrifice of one life for another is often called for and is not heroic" (*CP* 249-50). Such sacrifice, Price suggests, is not the stuff of songs and legends but an ordinary matter of "doing business" in a threatening world.

This concept (absolutely integral to Price's view of love) is deeply embedded in the fiction and is crucial to Price's own definition of *heroism*—or rather of *virtue*, a term he uses frequently and seems to prefer. In his essay "For Ernest Hemingway," he defines *virtue* (rather literally) as "the manly performance of the will of God" and equates it not merely with "goodness" but with "*saintliness* [Price's italics]" (143). This last term, Price says, suggests the "fierce need" and "desperation" of a "worker" (143) who sees "the world's design to maul, humiliate" (156) but would still "[show] God lovable" (143). For Price, then, virtue is a difficult matter linked not only to deeds, but also to the unblinking clarity of the vision that shapes them.

Price's observations above are the more intriguing for Fred Chappell's casual (but highly accurate) assertion that "Price's view of love is not merely unsentimental, it is Schopenhauerean, angrily despairing, anguished" ("*The Surface of Earth: A Pavement of Good Intentions*" 84). But as Joseph Campbell reminds readers in his *Creative Mythology*, Schopenhauer treats Love not only as destroyer, but as that which "reveals . . . a dimension of truth beyond the world dominion of King Death: beyond the boundaries of space and time and . . . our life's conflicting centers of self-interest" (71). In the worldviews of both Price and Schopenhauer, sacrifice is "called for"—built into the very nature of life itself, but in both, too, the mysterious complication is that not

infrequently sacrifice is *offered* (as in the case of Jesus or Jeff)—a matter of virtue involving what Campbell calls “a voluntary participation in the fragmentation of life” (*Power of Myth* 112). Campbell applies this phrase not only to the Crucifixion, but also to the “not uncommon reality” of *Mitleid* that so captivates Schopenhauer in his famous essay “On the Foundation of Morality.” Despite the ego and codes of self-preservation, Schopenhauer notes, human beings frequently and mysteriously imperil themselves (even for strangers) through “immediate participation, released from all other considerations, first, in the pain of another, and then, in the alleviation or termination of that pain” (qtd. in Campbell, *CM* 72). And this, he argues, “is amazing—even mysterious. It is, in fact, the great mystery inherent in all morality, the prime integrant of ethics, and a gate beyond which the only type of speculation that can presume to venture a single step must be metaphysical” (qtd. in Campbell, *CM* 73). Such gestures, Schopenhauer asserts, point toward a compelling awareness that “the weal and woe” of the Other is in some mysterious way *identical* with one’s own.<sup>26</sup> Price does not press the metaphysical point so far, and this aspect of Schopenhauer is different from the one Chappell invokes. Yet it better reflects the whole of his philosophy—and it is just as deeply relevant to Price’s work, for it returns us squarely to his “ethic of the freely given gesture” and to his central question as “priestly” writer: can we, *should* we, attempt to “enter the pain of another human being”—and if so, how (“Dodging Apples” 194)?

This, it seems, is the challenge facing Preacher—who had earlier promised God to “be brave, be free with my gifts” (155). To do that, however, he must go beyond the

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<sup>26</sup> As Joseph Campbell observes, this concept forms the “grounding theme” of both Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* and his *Parsifal*, and Wagner’s autobiography shows a direct connection between Schopenhauer’s work and the creation of both operas (*CM* 71). (For a review of these matters in connection with the core Grail scene and Price’s work as a whole see Chapter One, pp. 17-19.)

bitter recognition that life feeds on life and come to terms instead with the new responsibilities incurred by Jeff's vow. As before, but more humbly, Preacher appeals to Jesus—"Come again. Come now. I do not ask to see Your face but come in *some* shape now" (159). And once again the answer comes in paradoxical form. For the "shape" this time is Death itself, and Price's description of the death spasm evokes the moment of generation and sexual release, strongly linking Jeff's death and separation from the body with the process through which Preacher was "born" from that body: "A shudder begins . . . in his core our core that floods through his belly, his breast to his throat, bearing with it the noise . . . His head rolls toward me, his yellow lips split to release the noise . . . but . . . it is not words—is it rage or pain or wish, is it meant for me" (159)? No further answer comes, however, and in his hour of need, Preacher (like his father before him) must "do business" and "work dark." Unable to stop the process or reject the terms of this "sacrifice," Preacher offers his own instead—a vow not to God this time, but directly to Jeff: "I beg your pardon. Pardon me this, I will change my life—will turn in my tracks on myself my foe with you as shield" (159). This promise—witnessed by the nameless and faceless presence Preacher speaks to (the one who grants him light)—is, as Schiff notes, a complement to that which secured Preacher's birth ("Fathers and Sons" 264), and as Preacher repeats his promise to "the place, the dream," and Jeff's "abandoned face," Preacher's own hands lift, pardoned and freed ("Names and Faces" 159-60).

To better comprehend Preacher's distress and plea for pardon, readers should consider that such requests are heard frequently (and in much the same language) throughout Price's canon. "I'm sorry if I ruined it," Hutch Mayfield tells his dying

father, meaning “[Rob’s] life, the last half at least” (*SoL* 248). “Cancel all plan of me,” says Price in “Life for Life” to a youthful portrait of his deceased father Will. “Let me not be, so you can have free time, move always sure, elude brute ambush of your gurgling death” (101). To a dying, self-wrecked boy (an ostensible stranger whose face seems one “just concealed in his memory”) Thomas Eborn says finally in *Love and Work*, “I beg your pardon. I could not help because I did not know” (69). *Help how? Know what?* readers are left to wonder, sensing implications beyond the immediate context of the scene.

In Preacher’s case, however, his promise itself—strategically paired with the lament that began his dream—answers both questions, boldly suggesting the path he will take. “Now I have lost all hope of knowing my father’s life,” he had fretted upon falling asleep—aware for the first time (after Jeff’s story), how little he has known of his father and how much remains to be reconciled between them. The dream-vision confirms it, showing a mystery Preacher (like Rosa at the stranger’s deathbed) only dimly comprehends. Unlike Rosa, however, Preacher is no stranger, but the man’s son and heir—“bound in blood duty” (as Price says of himself and Will) and all the more closely for the bargain with God that was made at his birth (*CP* 288). By vowing to turn on himself with Jeff “as shield,” Preacher acknowledges that fact with both love and humility. But just as important, he commits to “knowing” his father’s life—the key to both empathy and atonement.

Waking himself by speaking aloud, Preacher at first fears he has “offered his promise, his life too early,” warning his father of the terrible secret he has glimpsed and must now “hoard out . . . of [his] face deep into [his] mind” to maintain (160). Though

compelled “to cherish. . .while there is still time this huge gentle body I know like my own, which made my own. . .and has hurt nobody since the day I was born,” Preacher would grant Jeff “twelve years fearless to work at his promise” —years in which Preacher can “gather in private” the strength for his vow on the night of that actual death (161). As they ascend to the porch, Preacher ascends (in one sense) toward manhood. Carried safe in his father’s arms (despite Jeff’s unsteady heart), he believes at last what he had at first only dared to imagine and offers “(silent, in the voice I will have as a man),” his own answer to the question with which his child self had fearfully and tentatively opened the story: “They did not separate us tonight. We finished alive, together, whole. This one more time” (162). With these words, Preacher accepts and folds inward “for years to come” his new vision of Love’s affirmation and implicit threat, fixing their connection forever in one perfect and revealing moment of at-one-ment.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly Price’s story is no longer really one of childhood—a simple memory piece, as it may have begun in earlier drafts. And just as clearly, the face haunting Preacher’s childhood is in retrospect entirely changed. In its gradual evolution, Price’s story has indeed become a “transaction with the supernatural” (Price qtd. in Ray 107)—but most clearly, perhaps, a “transaction” (as Price has also asserted) with his father’s “ghost” (Ray 104). The dream-vision, in fact, has become the perfect vehicle for offering this reciprocal vow—for accepting “the power of witness and duty awarded . . . at Will’s

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<sup>27</sup> Following the example of Joseph Campbell, I use this spelling of the word on occasion to emphasize its original meaning of “concord” and “reconciliation”—a meaning appropriate to my discussion here. *The American Heritage Dictionary* makes clear that despite its modern association with *sin* or *fault*, the word *atone* is from the Middle English *atonen*, “to be reconciled, from *at one*, of one mind, in accord; AT + ONE.”

deathbed” and for literally inheriting that man’s “quest / For radiant virtue” through the medium of narrative art (“A Tomb for Will Price” 100).

As Schopenhauer writes in “On the Foundation of Morality,” gestures born of such spontaneous and selfless identification—“the true ground of all human righteousness of and all human love”—are grounded in neither rules nor logic, but in clear moments of imaginative vision. For “since I am not actually *in the skin* of that other,” he writes, “it can only be through my *knowledge* of him, his image *in my head*, that I can become to such a degree identified with him as to act in a way that annuls the difference between us [*italics in text*]” (qtd. in Campbell, *CM* 72). Such complete identification is inherently perilous, of course (a point made vividly in Preacher’s dream-vision.) But without doubt such at-one-ment has been the goal for Preacher’s “mind’s eye” from the very first line—and apparently for the author as well.

In *Clear Pictures* Price observes that in Will he had “the daunting gift of a brave and good, scared, hilarious man, who won the two pitched fights of his life, though the second fight killed him” (299). And while Will (as Price points out) never spoke of “the deal and its terrors” (*CP* 32), that conversation is clearly envisioned here. Preacher—who ends both story and volume by “speaking” in “the voice I will have as a man” (162)—is surely Price himself, offering his opening gambit in the ongoing game of worthiness he posits in *Clear Pictures* (See Chapter One, pp. 34). Though the author (like his young avatar) still has far to go upon his chosen path, he has opened the way, signaling both humility and a brave new readiness to explore his father’s life. *The Names and Faces of Heroes* is dedicated above all to Will, and Price’s deceptively simple epigraph (an excerpt from a letter by William Blake to Thomas Butts) clearly suggests its

ultimate purpose: “I met a plow on my first going out at my gate the first morning after my arrival, & the Plowboy said to the Plowman, “‘Father, the Gate is Open.’”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The quote is particularly apt since Price completed both volume and title story during a trip to England devoted to that purpose.

## CHAPTER 3

### RETOOLING THE QUEST: *LOVE AND WORK*, “CONSCIOUS CALISTHENIC[S],” AND CRISIS IN NARRATIVE VISION

Indeed, by the time a potential novelist begins to read, most of the encounters and relations about which he will write have passed, are history, and lie in the mind pure as diamond, unyielding to one's long education, waiting only to assert their power, to challenge one's life and all one has learned to a battle which is the battle of understanding against mystery, in which victory can only be a work of art—an act of temporary understanding, temporary order or, if not so much, a celebration of mystery itself. —“The Thing Itself” 12

Price's short novel *Love and Work* (1968) and its companion story cycle *Permanent Errors* (1970) have long been regarded as works which represent a kind of turning point or “dark period” in his career.<sup>1</sup> Though noting a broad thematic continuity with Price's other work—intense parent/child relationships, intersection of the supernal with human life, and the dual pulls of love and solitude—critics have been intrigued by Price's sharply altered style, tone, and characterizations in these two volumes. Breaking from the pastoral and small-town settings of his early work, Price here exchanges the colorful lives and speech of his yeoman farmers and small-town dwellers for the arid inner landscapes of more “modern” characters: stymied artists, academics, and

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<sup>1</sup> Price's introduction to *Permanent Errors* explains that “The book is, in several ways, a set of variations” with characters used as “quasi-interchangeable lenses” (“To the Reader” viii). The term *companion* refers to several aspects of intertextuality that prove useful in examining the novel *Love and Work*. Some sections of *Permanent Errors*, for example, were already complete when Price began the novel, and the young protagonist of the “Fool's Education” section so strongly resembles the much older Thomas Eborn that Price initially asked in his notebooks, “Is he Charles Tamplin’ (*LaT* 140) 27 April 1967)? Just as important is the fact that many autobiographical elements of the novel can be found (addressed directly, and in some ways more fully) in the “Late Warnings” section of *Permanent Errors*.

housewives. William Ray notes a dramatic shift in “the quality of the vision, the quality of consciousness of [Price’s] main characters” (90). And James Schiff carries that observation further, remarking that *Love and Work* (Price’s “most indoor and internal novel”) conveys “occasional claustrophobia” exacerbated by a harsh new tightening of narrative vision and language (*Understanding* 136-37). Price’s prose itself, as Schiff says, becomes “sparse, compressed, and tense” during this period, reflecting the perspective of his embattled narrators—many of whom are writers themselves (*Understanding* 137). His use of such artist narrators (particularly those sharing autobiographical details from his life) is one of the most striking new features of this phase. And while Price warns that neither volume offers “literal representations” of scenes from his life,<sup>2</sup> he admits to William Ray that both books share “that slightly febrile quality that highly personal, confessional material sometimes has” since they “feed out of and off of” emotions still fresh at the time of writing (92).

Yet it is Thomas Eborn (writer, teacher, and protagonist of *Love and Work*) who provides the greatest enigma. Eborn’s special relation to the life and work of Price continues to fascinate critics and may constitute the primary puzzle in what Schiff calls Price’s “most challenging and richly ambiguous” novel (*Understanding* 137). But it is also, Schiff adds, Price’s “darkest” and “least accessible” novel, and Schiff himself is forced to admit rather wide-ranging uncertainty regarding many aspects of Eborn’s story: “the novel is difficult because it offers mysteries and ambiguities which Price does not neatly tie up. For instance, one is never quite certain how Eborn’s dreams reflect upon his life; how his personal life, or love, interacts with his writing, or work; or how the

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<sup>2</sup> This does not apply, of course, to the selections in Part Two of *Permanent Errors* (“Elegies”). In his preface, “To the Reader,” Price explains that these are *not* stories, but instead “clearly personal” pieces—“intended more nearly as poems; narrative poems of personal loss, therefore elegies” (viii).

automobile accident [a twelve-page episode at the novel's center] relates to other events in the novel. The greatest mystery, though, is Price's attitude toward Eborn"

(*Understanding* 140).

With Eborn, more than any other character, Price establishes astonishing and openly recognizable links to his own life and career. As Schiff points out, Eborn and the Price writing the novel are the same age, and Eborn is the first protagonist to share Price's career as writer and university professor. More striking, however, is the photo of Eborn's parents that "serves as 'guide' to his novel-within-a-novel"—a twin to the photo of Will and Elizabeth Price on the cover of *Permanent Errors*. As Schiff observes, Eborn's description of that photo can be found, nearly "verbatim," in Price's sketch entitled "My Parents, Winter 1926"—also from *Permanent Errors* (*Understanding* 140). Price himself frequently acknowledges that the characters of Lou and Todd Eborn are based on his parents, and as he tells William Ray, even the "ghostly visit" of Todd to Lou before her death recalls the claim Price's mother made to her neighbor the morning she died—a claim that neighbor later passed to Price (95). But most intriguing of all, perhaps, is the fact that Eborn's work essay—the artistic credo through which we first glimpse his psyche—is based on Price's essay "Finding Work," published the year before (Schiff, *Understanding* 140).

Given these obvious links to Price himself and the undeniable unattractiveness of Eborn, most critics have been tempted to regard the novel as a form of self-satire. Rooke suggests that in keeping with his tendency to "explore the meaning of his own life" in his fiction, Price may be examining "the case of a person rather more like himself [writer, teacher, intellectual] to assess the costs of that more privileged existence" (76). Giving

that argument a more personal slant, Schiff observes that Eborn is “no doubt the coldest, most distant of Price’s protagonists” and asks whether the novel is “the author’s attempt to reveal in raw fashion that side of himself which is most self-absorbed and unappealing” (*Understanding* 141). Yet Schiff observes in the next breath that “there is also something unusually human about the psychologically intense Eborn, who is a kind of blunted but exposed nerve” (141).

The novel’s portrait of Eborn certainly suggests that Price is taking his measure—often harshly. But this seems only part of Price’s point, and his elusive, seemingly complex attitude to Eborn may be best explained by the idea that *Love and Work* is primarily neither satire nor confession. Instead, like a number of works Price produced in this period, it serves as a rigorous inquiry into the heart of his own narrative enterprise—an elaborate exploration and retooling of his own attitudes and narrative vision. At issue is the relation of art to love and the efficacy of artistic work in performing healing acts of love and service. But Price’s goal seems to be recommitment to an ongoing central gesture in narrative.

As Price indicates repeatedly, the years from 1963-1972 (prior to his “beginning” *The Surface of Earth*) marked for him a period of intense questioning and difficulty. Despite the resounding success of his first novel, *A Long and Happy Life* (1962), he had been repeatedly balked in completing the father-son novel started in 1961. And despite subsequent starts made in 1962 and 1963, he explains in “A Place to Stand,” he faced “total recalcitrance. It wouldn’t come” (*xiii*). In August of 1963, Price’s notebooks reflect his worry that “speculation” has caused him to drift too far from his original idea and “complicate the essential father-son story with a father-woman love theme”—

perhaps, he theorizes, because he's anxious "to write a Big Novel" (*LaT* 184). By 1965, still stranded, he had turned to the material that would become *A Generous Man*—material intended as a comic romp, "a farce for my own good cheer" ("News for the Mineshaft" 41).

But with the death of his mother in May 1965, work on that novel was suspended for ten months—a transformative gap after which Price resumed work to find Milo Mustian transformed to an essentially tragic figure ("News for the Mineshaft" 46). Though he had not known it, Price reflects, his real theme had become "loss," and his "old abandoned impulse," seemed to be "asserting itself, humping up beneath the surface glaze—waste and destruction in their homeliest forms. . ." ("News for the Mineshaft" 42). Yet the book's dark warnings and its non-realistic form (a Romance Price compares to Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*) were greatly misunderstood—a fact Price considers closely in "News for the Mineshaft" (48-49). And while noting that the book received enough "warm notices," the essay reflects his frustration with "readers-on-horseback, racing by" (50).

By 1968, Price recalls in the much later essay "A Single Meaning," he had reached (at age thirty-five) "the traditional mid-road of fatigue, choice, and question"—a confluence of personal issues and several weighty but "less private" questions concerning his work. But above all, Price says, he found himself questioning the impulse that had seemed "nearly central, surely permanent" for nearly two decades and wondering why he had "landed" in "such an odd trade" ("A Single Meaning" 247).<sup>3</sup> The "oddness" of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter One, pp 2-3. Written in 1976 (one year past publication of *The Surface of Earth*) Price's essay "You Are Needed Now And Will Always Be" reflects upon this same "impulse"—the moment when Price first "sensed a grail of his own and headed toward it. . . .The knowledge of others, for my help and theirs" (217).

trade—the hermetic and esoteric nature of the craft as Price perceives it—is captured precisely in his translation of Rilke’s poem, “The Alchemist,” which he takes as epigraph for *Permanent Errors*. Given the unusual nature of Price’s creative process, his identification with the alchemist is particularly apt. “In a manner broadly comparable to the relationship of a painter to the colors and materials of his palette and studio,” explains Joseph Campbell, “the alchemist projected psychological associations of which he was neither fully conscious nor in full control, into the metals, retorts, and other materials of his laboratory. The empty retort . . . was a vacuum” to receive whatever was “pressing for manifestation” (CM 267). Dramatizing the solitary joy and grief of the alchemist (Price’s type of the artist), Rilke’s poem makes clear that while the alchemist achieves his object—“making the thing he coveted to come”—he deeply regrets its cost. And as the “*prima materia*” rises “past him to God,” he lies “babbling” among “his priceless brittle gear” regretting “the crumb of gold he’d just now had” (1). Understandably, the essays of this period offer especially rich reflections upon the origin, purpose, and difficulties of narrative itself—with special attention to how its messages can be damaged or “balked” in transmission. But more important, perhaps, they offer a glimpse of Price’s deliberate attempts to retool and reclaim his true work and vision in the years from which *Love and Work* emerges—as he was “learning, or relearning none too soon, essential facts about my trade. . .” (“A Single Meaning” 249).

Most critics of *Love and Work* have approached Thomas Eborn’s obsession with narrative and narrators of every stripe as little more than a symptom of what Rooke calls his “excessively literary approach to life” (78). And in observing that Eborn frequently links himself with certain “literary figures” (e.g. Tristan, Christ, Cordelia, Odysseus,

Narcissus), these same critics place primary emphasis on the habit itself, rather than on the individual mirrors Eborn (and Price, of course) uses to explore different aspects of Eborn's interior dilemmas. Such a critical approach suggests that Eborn's preoccupations themselves are detached from reality—inherently diseased or misanthropic. Yet *Love and Work* emerges from the same period (and by his own account the same year) in which Price himself was similarly occupied. Doubting his power “to tell complex narratives to shrinking audiences” with the “simplicity, clarity, availability” he had once aspired to (“A Single Meaning” 247), Price began in 1968 an unusual series of explorations into the long-standing power and “metaphysics” of biblical narrative (249; 265).

After long planning and delay, he explains, he'd begun to feel “ready at last” for work on the novel he'd conceived as “a kind of realistic allegory” of his “peculiar relation” to Will (249). And he describes this first exercise (a literal translation of the Abraham and Isaac story into “true modern English”) as a “conscious calisthenic” for the novel—an attempt to “dwell” (in a “roughly analogous” story) upon “the tight range of actions and characters which has proved of any enduring interest or use to the species. . .” (249). Significantly, Price's next translations were of Jacob's struggle with the angel and the appearance of the risen Jesus to his fishing disciples. But these exercises (and the motives for them) continued for nearly a decade, as *The Surface of Earth* was published and “other pieces” of his long project began to emerge” (“A Single Meaning” 249). His second exercise, narrative renderings of four very different Rembrandt pictures of the

scene, assisted him, he says, in unpacking “the narrative implications”—exploring the scene amidst variants of staging and perspective (249).<sup>4</sup>

In “a hard time,” Price observes, he was returning to the “inscribed bases” of his long-held faith (“A Single Meaning” 249). But just as important, he was exploring as writer the secret of their long-standing ability to compel belief—a power rooted not only in the revelation itself, but in the narrative vision of the tale unveiling it. Ultimately consoling, he finds, they display “narrative wisdom” in their selection of detail—aware that depictions of victimization, suffering, and total abandonment are “*literally intolerable for long*” and that an audience can’t be told a story it doesn’t want to hear (255-56). They meet our craving for “perfect story” with the “single meaning” of the title—the revelation that “*History is the will of a just God who knows us*” (“A Single Meaning” 249). Yet these canonical narratives are “credible in their consolations,” Price notes, because they are “the least manipulative in their fantasies and designs upon us,” daring to admit difficult (even shocking) truths (265). They display “an unfrightened breadth of vision” (255) and “bear their validation in the narrative bones, bones of the visible actions they describe, and in the reckless bravery on their cloudless faces” (268).

The concept of narrative bravery surfaces often in Price’s ruminations during this time, and his central finding in both “A Single Meaning” and his remarkable essay “For Ernest Hemingway” (1972) is that sacred narrative<sup>5</sup> succeeds for both writer and audience only when the witnessing eye is not “crouched” to warn, admonish, or defend,

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<sup>4</sup> First published in *Things Themselves: Essays and Scenes* (1972), “Four Abrahams, Four Isaacs by Rembrandt (Notes Before a Novel)” is reprinted in Price’s essay collection *A Common Room*.

<sup>5</sup> Though several of these essays discuss “biblical method” and “biblical narrative,” Price’s use of the term “sacred” is far broader. It includes any work which seeks to illuminate particular mysteries of human existence, especially the interaction of human and divine. Price includes his own narratives as well as those of other writers (e.g. Hemingway, Tolstoy) in these discussions.

but is transparent to its message, trusting the potency of the narrative object itself. Though less often cited in discussions of such matters, “For Ernest Hemingway”—written in the year Price began official drafting on *The Surface of Earth*—suggests itself as another (though perhaps unconscious) calisthenic for that novel. Just as intriguing is the fact that the gaze Price turns upon Hemingway suggests much about the one he had turned toward Thomas Eborn in 1968.

In addition to acknowledging a “debt,” Price explains, he wrote the essay “to explore the central bafflement, quest, finding, and failure of Hemingway’s life-work” (“Introduction,” *A Common Room xi*). This purpose is remarkably like that Price states at the beginning of *Permanent Errors*: isolation of a “central error of act, will, understanding which, once made, has been permanent, incurable, but whose diagnosis and palliation are the hopes of continuance” (“To The Reader” *vii*). Yet the stories in *Permanent Errors* (even those using artist narrators) focus upon that “error” in terms of love relationships. Only “Scars,” with its protagonist Charles Tamplin, explores (as in *Love and Work*) the implicit threat of such dis-ease to the “priestly” task itself. By contrast “For Ernest Hemingway”—written as Price moved toward reclaiming his own “power of witness and duty”<sup>6</sup>—reads as a sort of Question gesture, carefully and rightly performed. And the Hemingway Price here approaches and reveals is not only a visionary craftsman but also a type of the “generous man” and “grand lost boy.”

Part homage, part incisive yet compassionate critique of a writer sharing his own central subjects (“freedom and virtue”), Price’s essay examines Hemingway’s approach

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<sup>6</sup> The year after publishing *The Surface of Earth*, Price describes himself (in another discussion of Hemingway) as “a man now willing to trust his own witness” (“The Best Kind of Monument” 163). The implication—however lightly we press it—is that at a previous point such trust has been at issue for Price, as it is for Thomas Eborn.

to his secret subject (“saintliness”) and his use of what Price calls “biblical method”—Hemingway’s successful adaptation of an essentially “oral strategy” from the Bible. Through “the audacity of its filterings,” this approach requires “strenuous participation” from readers in certifying the writer’s own knowledge and vision (153-54). But though affirming that the method and its motive may constitute the source of Hemingway’s truest power and appeal, Price argues that “his vision and its language” (despite its remarkable gifts to us) “failed him appallingly” (156). It failed to “allay even half his daily weight of fear” (156) and delivers, “with its greeting and offer, its crushing plea,” only “half the lesson of the desert fathers: “*Prepare, strip, divest for life that awaits you; learn solitude and work; see how little is lovely but love that*” (159).

Price’s notion—derived purely from examining the work—is that Hemingway’s eventual “depletion” as artist may have resulted not from grueling pursuit of “his submerged subject,” but instead through actual (but perhaps unconscious) flight from it—a flight fueled not by indifference, but by suffering and dread of loss (156). Impelled by evidence from Hemingway’s final novel *Islands in a Stream*, which “threatens for nearly half its length to be his best” (137), Price considers Hemingway’s oeuvre in retrospect but rests his argument in the crisis of Hemingway’s final avatar, Thomas Hudson—father, ex-husband, painter, and protagonist of *Islands in a Stream*. The opening pages of the novel, Price finds, are Hemingway’s “finest sustained fiction” for they “deal for the first time substantially, masterfully and to crushing effect” with the one human relation Hemingway had till now avoided: “parental devotion, filial return” (138). But the power of the “Bimini” section is built, Price argues, not on “style or charged moments. . .” or tenderness alone, “but on simple *threat*—potentially serious physical or psychic damage

avoided. . .” (139). In retrospect “The lovely-seeming, lazy days” (shared by Hudson and his three young sons) seem “white with the effort to speak their knowledge” and assume the weight of “dire warnings or prophecies” (139). For between the first half of the novel and the second, Hudson sees his family and troubled marriage evaporate in the car crash that kills his two youngest sons and their mother, and the book becomes, suddenly, a portrait of the artist dealing with loss.

Hudson’s paintings, “and by intimation . . . most of Hemingway’s work,” Price asserts, have from the first had a profound and secret goal—secret, he thinks, from Hemingway as well: “to enhance, even to create if necessary, the love of creation in its witnesses and thereby to confirm an approach by the worker toward goodness, literal virtue, the manly performance of the will of God. *Saintliness* . . . a saint being, by one definition, a life which shows God lovable”(143). Hudson’s paintings had always been offered to “this or that person . . . gifts *from* love and *for* love, like most gifts” (143). Stripped of his dearest audience, Hudson turns (“disastrously for his soul”) from painting to submarine spotting—the business of reconnaissance, warnings, and preoccupation with death (142). The great tragedy of Thomas Hudson, Price claims, is that he clings to life and the hope of painting again, knowing that “life is a cheap thing beside a man’s work”—yet he “never really faces up to the tragedy of having permitted family sorrow to derail his true work—his rudder, his use to God and men as maker of ordered reflection” (“For Ernest Hemingway” 142).

Price’s findings here are occasionally striking in their relevance to his own Thomas Eborn, for in *Love and Work* Price also asks of a writer (both like and unlike himself) *what ails him?*—and *what is undermining the work?* Like the Hemingway Price

uncovers in his essay, Eborn struggles through the novel as a deeply committed but anxious witness whose vision and approach to his own long-delayed project is similarly “narrowed, crouched in apprehension of the world’s design to maul, humiliate” (“For Ernest Hemingway” 156). *Love and Work* (like its predecessors “The Names and Faces of Heroes” and *A Generous Man*) is deeply concerned (if not actually obsessed) with virtue, bravery, and outstanding debts. Yet Price’s focus in *Love and Work* is not the tenuous, threatened heroism of the sacrificial male—represented by the concealed, powerful presence of Eborn’s long-dead father, Todd. Instead it is that of Eborn himself—son, witness, and sole heir—as he struggles mid-life with a “debit and capital” much like Price’s own.

For most of the novel, Eborn (not nearly so cold and blind as critics deem him) seems not only balked, but in actual flight from the mission of spiritual revelation he has set himself—a Preacher who will not preach. And the blight on his life has far less to do with what Rooke terms “an excessively literary approach to life” (78) than with his refusal (or inability) to address the mysterious and barely concealed source of suffering that arises coincident with his mother’s death. From the opening sentence, the text hints strongly that Eborn’s most threatening sources of anxiety may not be the most obvious ones (his failing marriage, his childlessness, even his mother’s death.) Instead they are literal sights—scenes and faces that remain largely concealed or can be glimpsed undergoing careful near-concealment (by Eborn, not Price) in the text of the novel itself. Yet events in the novel seem posed to counter such retreat, and from the first line these matters start coming unburied.

The opening glimpse of Eborn makes his dilemma (if not all its aspects) immediately clear. Self-isolated and embattled, he stands in his study in a posture of “absurd command, absurd resolve” (“hands clenched, jaws grating”) as the phone rings (1), bearing a mysterious message he will soon refuse though it comes from his mother, marked “personal” for him (12). The sound itself evokes for Eborn the sight most vivid (however submerged) in his consciousness—the death of his father from lung cancer. Each ring reawakens the urgency, helplessness, and horror surrounding “the call in the night, the rush to his father, the sight of that death” twelve years before (2). Torn about what to do and convinced that “phones announce disaster” and that “all calls are calls for help,” Eborn rises instinctively to his feet. Yet ultimately he resists, having posted his wife (Jane) as gatekeeper so he can “refuse all calls” while working (1). Ironically, we later learn, *this* call had implicitly offered a kind of antidote to Eborn’s distress—bearing thwarted news of Todd’s “return” and appearance to Eborn’s mother (Lou) on the night before her death. That vision—and the message Lou intends for Eborn—is the novel’s ultimate mystery, revealed only at the end (for the message she leaves with Jane is utterly cryptic.) Clearly, however, the call conveys neither demand nor disaster—promising instead an urgent and inexplicable offering to Tom: “Tell Tom to phone me when he’s free. I’ll tell him something. . . .I’ll tell him something” (12). Having refused her, Eborn cannot know that he has refused both blessing and warning—news of love and everlasting life, but also (as he later thinks) of “a corporal summons from a standard night to the sill of death” (146). For within the hour, Lou suffers a fatal hemorrhage—even as Eborn returns to his work.

The nature of that work, and the attitude with which Eborn approaches it, is equally revealing as a clue to his malaise. For it is soon apparent that despite his resolve and his confident tone in the piece (an essay, “more nearly a sermon,” on the saving value of work), his heart is not in it, and he fears it is far from offering what he (let alone others) might need. Reading it again, Eborn’s essay seems to him

dead from the start not merely balked, not merely square wind . . . but the privatest, most local of truths; meaningless to anyone less desperate than he or desperate in other ways . . . anyone born after 1940, anyone with parents other than his. . . .And worse, not even private truth but smoke-screen, fog. . . .Turbid concealment—as was all his work. Concealment of what? A hole in the heart. (13)

Rooke suggests this last image as a mark of Eborn’s failure to love (77), yet Price uses it often (in this novel and elsewhere) to imply not coldness, but a lover’s spiritual wound. In *The Surface of Earth*, Forrest Mayfield finds his father Old Robinson—the wandering, “vanished boy” (87)—“propped round the hole in the midst of his heart which years ago he’d asked even a five-year-old boy to fill” (108). Years later his grandson Rob Mayfield, enraged and disappointed by his mother’s apparently loveless behavior, collapses in similar misery. Finding himself trapped and unsure between opposing sources of solace—sexual release and companionship with the black woman Della or marriage to the fragile but spiritually compelling Rachel Hutchins—Rob Mayfield feels himself “slumped round a sudden hole in his chest” (232). In *The Source of Light*, his twenty-five-year old son Hutch (wandering at Castle Dore) thinks of his father and applies the image to Tristan himself, the “hollow heart” who lies vanquished within walls that could not defend him from love’s ravages (117). In such a context, Eborn’s belief in work as “the hardest shield for ourselves” (9)—a “wall” one can build to hold off

“madness, idleness, loss”—is telling indeed and puts him at once in the company of these wounded male lovers (120).

But Eborn’s wound is related only indirectly to his estrangement from Jane, his wife. For while the novel does explore the threatened marriage of Thomas and Jane Eborn, this woe seems secondary (though inextricably linked) to his distress concerning another “love” relationship—source of the true work and subject from which Eborn is becoming increasingly estranged at mid-life. Later in the novel (after Lou also has died), the image of the hollow heart resurfaces dramatically, just moments after Eborn (from both guilt and duty) has feigned orgasm with Jane. One might expect remorse directly connected to his failings with Jane—and this does play a role in his “loathing” and distress during the act. But after, as Jane watches Eborn, he instead envisions his father and mother “locked to a bed,” working tirelessly and without fear to “unite their lovely skins”—unaware, he thinks, of their gradual dissolution (53-54). As he watches, they make love until their bodies disintegrate “and only stains [remain],” and it is this sight—not the earlier image of himself and Jane “hitched glabrous together” (53)—that provokes his deepest and most urgent response. Seeing, Eborn feels “the emptying of an enormous sac round his own heart . . . a perfect vacuum cool and killing” (54), and here, surely, is one glimpse of the vanished and “cordate” world of parental love to which Gary Ciuba refers (202)—evidence of both Eborn’s wound and the vanished mystery to which his own heart is still inextricably bound. Caught undefended, he responds with urgent compunction and “[says] to himself all that finally mattered. ‘I must save them somehow. . . . I must help them—pitiful children—in time’ ” (54). Convinced that his

parents have “made [him] for this,” his task and the nature of his real work seems clear to him—though not yet the way to achieve it (54).

Ironically, however, the impulse is not new. For some time Eborn has felt compelled to address his parents’ tale of love and loss, and we can glimpse this clearly amid the distress and evasions of the novel’s opening scene. Troubled by a nightmare about friends injured, separated, and lost—despite his attempts “to picture each in words and gestures” (3)—Eborn begins his work essay as a tonic. Interrupted by the phone, however, he returns to his desk (call refused) and contemplates the photo of his young parents on a bridge in winter—“pushed almost off” the desk by the pages of his essay. Seeing that they are “unprotected” but “do not feel the cold,” he takes the photo as a new motive (stronger than his nightmare) for “a sacrificial lunge into work” (6). “What might have saved them, might yet save her?” he wonders, “—not from pain or death but boredom, futility, a life whose final emotion is puzzlement” (7)? Yet the work he returns to is not a story about them, but his work essay—which he thinks of as “his first gathered try as a usable answer” (7).

Though he completes several pages, he is distracted by memory of his mother’s phone call and by Jane’s lingering (and in his view resentful) presence outside the door. Though Eborn has been reading aloud to himself, he falls silent, telling himself that “Jane’s nearness would make him feel painfully visible, bathed in his own light. . .” (10). But he can shake neither his worry about the call nor his rising irritation with Jane’s pausing near the door—intent, he thinks, on interfering with his work and “subduing him” (11). Eventually, with no invitation from Eborn—and no admission from him that he has even heard the call—Jane enters the study to give him the message and express her

concerns about Lou. Their exchange, though calm, is essentially hostile, revealing Eborn's irritation and Jane's baffled sense that she has no real role in his life.

In this case at least, she is proven correct. For despite Jane's warning that Lou may be worse and that her voice sounded odd on the phone, Eborn does not phone his mother, but instead resolves to visit later in the day (bringing money.) Ironically—given Lou's fierce independence, pride, and frugality—Eborn assumes this is why she has called, and the assumption is revealing. In his own view, their monthly visits have become like short business transactions—a fact Eborn sees her accepting with “exhausted grace” (13). Lou's life, he thinks, “had surely finished twelve years before,” at the death of his father (57). And having moved into a life of his own, Eborn decides, “he no longer [wants] or [needs] her” (13). Clearly, though, Eborn feels compunction for both Jane and his mother—a pain for which work does not yet suffice. Looking round his office—at his balked novel, at the pictures of his parents and of Jane as a girl before he knew her—he feels already “chin-deep in ashes” and knows (ominously) that “more would sift down with each thought, each word” he writes (14). His remorse is prophetic, for later—arriving at the empty house—he learns from the neighbor (Ida) that Lou is dying in Intensive Care. Though he rushes to the hospital, she is already unconscious, and he is prevented from seeing her. After her death, however, he is permitted to see “the body, gray as laundry scum,” and having made practical arrangements, he heads at once “towards his study—not towards *home, house* or *Jane* but his present work, the essay to finish” (38).

The core of the essay (and of Price's “Finding Work”) is the bitter realization that “*Age, disease, death—and worst, disloyalty—exist and will in time win all that we love*”

(*L&W* 9; “Finding Work” 18). Here, stated in Price’s own terms, is the existential blight explored in Chapter One as the heart of the Grail problem—the mystery to which Eborn (like Price himself) feels challenged to respond through his work. But as devastating as the first three ills may be, it is the fourth (“disloyalty”) that constitutes the most unique aspect of the work essay—and both versions claim that for this ill, too, work can provide a kind of “shield.” What Eborn means by “shield,” however, may be somewhat different from the meaning Price suggests in his own version. There is a great difference between work as diversion from (and defiance of) pain and work as *cure*, an approach to suffering that dares engagement in order to discover what Frankl calls “the unconditional meaningfulness of life.”<sup>7</sup> Constance Rooke, James Schiff, and Gary Ciuba take the lead in raging (with justification) about Eborn’s self-enclosure and isolation from Jane, yet the true problem is neither “walls” nor “shields,” but the use Eborn (or Price) might make of them—the implications of his vision and narrative acts.

Readers missing the complexity of Price’s thought on such matters would do well to recall his affirmation of Hemingway’s “lifelong and deepening quest for a nearly hermetic but generous virtue” (“Best Kind of Monument” 163) and his parallel (and uncritical) observation that for Hemingway’s characters, such virtue rests not in “[gracing] the life of their waiting-companions” but in “[doing] their work” (“For Ernest Hemingway” 142). Price suggests, however, that clear communication of such goals to those “companions” is both necessary and humane (“The Best Kind of Monument” 163), and in this respect—a matter he has not yet considered—Eborn is entirely at fault. In “Dodging Apples” (1972), Price asserts that “The central myth of the artist is surely not

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter One, p. 13. Clearly, Frankl’s vision is in keeping with “saintliness” as Price defines and discusses it in “For Ernest Hemingway.”

Narcissus” (as some critics have supposed) “but Perseus—with the artist in all roles, Perseus and Medusa and the mirror-shield” (186). It is a myth, then, of struggle, self-confrontation, and redemption, but for Eborn art is a matter not of exploration, but defense—rigidly controlled and entirely self-enclosed.

Though Rooke, Schiff, and Ciuba all emphasize that Eborn’s essay is a version of Price’s “Finding Work” (1967), none mentions the crucial (and clearly deliberate) differences between the two versions. Unlike Price himself, who began writing “naturally, almost unthinkingly” (“Finding Work” 18), Eborn says in the parallel passage,

I wrote from the start with stiff reluctance, difficulty, even pain—more difficulty and pain with each year—but the sense of excitement, exultation, which paralleled the struggle in fear and hope (and occasionally blossomed for a moment at the end—before flaws and failure hulked into sight), this exultation in the end showed me finally that the action which produced this state was surely my work. (*L&W* 39)

This description reveals a posture strikingly like that of Gustave Aeschenbach—Mann’s brilliant and cautionary depiction of a writer driven by “The conception of an intellectual and virginal manliness, which clenches its teeth and stands in modest defiance of the swords and spears that pierce its side” (“Death in Venice” 11).<sup>8</sup> Aeschenbach’s aesthetic is one of “beauty in despite,” epitomized in his own favorite image: St. Sebastian pierced by arrows, an icon of beauty and innocence destroyed or vilified (11). And Eborn’s own early gallery of icons (glimpsed in the Eborn family home) suggests a sensibility equally aware of such bitter assaults upon love: e.g. “a dark wood cross with an oddly nailed Jesus (more splayed than hung; a body exploding)” and his own portrait of Kirsten Flagstad’s Isolde—“furious perpendicular profile . . . as she

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<sup>8</sup> Similarities between Eborn and Aeschenbach (though far from complete) may not be entirely coincidental. Price’s early notebooks reveal a special admiration for Mann’s “Death in Venice,” one of a handful of stories which seemed to him (like Joyce’s “The Dead”) “so great . . . that it almost shames me” (*LaT* 43, 18 September 1956).

flings her curse, more enduring than her love, like a wave at Tristan” (22). But while Eborn’s vision trends ominously in this same dark direction, his lingering compulsion to save and to warn separates him firmly from Mann’s toxic and death-dealing aesthetes.<sup>9</sup> Eborn’s apparent coldness is not a failure to love, but instead a refusal to acknowledge it. Yet the effect is devastating, impairing his role as witness to the very mysteries he would limn.

Most intriguing in the work essay may be Eborn’s image of “the seam at the core of my life (richest ore I could offer, however embedded in rock and ice)” (39). Though Eborn identifies this “core” with the production of stories and novels, the passage suggests clearly that the “seam” and its intractable “ore” refer not to genre *per se* (as favored medium), but in some mysterious way to his submerged source material itself. This passage is missing entirely from Price’s essay “Finding Work,” yet it closely resembles the one in which Price first considers why Hemingway “began to fail as man and artist”:

Not because of exhaustion of limited resource but because he could not or would not proceed from that first worked vein on into a richer, maybe endless vein, darker, heavier, more inaccessible but of proportionately greater value to him and his readers; a vein that might have fueled him through a long yielding life with his truest subject (because his truest need). (“For Ernest Hemingway” 140)

Price deems that Hemingway’s long years of avoiding permanent emotional relations in his work had left him at the last “unable to define his profoundest subject” (“For Ernest

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<sup>9</sup> Aeschenbach elevates his dark awareness to an almost sensual aesthetic—one both self-destructive and toxic. Enamored of the boy Tadzio, he neither flees nor warns his beloved of the plague descending on Venice. Instead, in a scene echoing elaborate preparations of a corpse, he prepares himself for the encounter with Tadzio (a manifestation of *Hermes psychopompos*), who is himself an emblem of beauty in decay.

Hemingway” 140). And despite the confident credo set forth in his work essay, Thomas Eborn seems burdened by the same affliction.

The nature of Eborn’s resistance is complex, however, and unfolds itself very gradually—a process many critics have missed by approaching him as a cold, satirical, and essentially static character. Like the young writer Charles Tamplin (protagonist of “Scars”), Eborn undergoes a kind of “Fool’s Education” —though significantly the form of this education has far more in common with Milo’s adventure in *A Generous Man*. Like that novel, *Love and Work* represents a crucial (though later) rite of passage for its protagonist, and Eborn, too, must come to terms with a number of revelatory incursions and carefully timed reactions from the supernatural realm. Young Milo—fresh from his adventure and filled with a knowledge of love to both “warn” and “delight”— feels primed to speak what he knows (169). Yet in the presence of such mysteries, he falls silent and literally wordless, a failed narrator of his own story, unprepared for the task to which he feels called. Eborn, by contrast, is specifically trained for that purpose but in *Love and Work* resists the call (literally) from what Price calls “the large world” and its “demands . . . to deal with ours” (“News For the Mineshaft” 49). Like Milo, Eborn seems designated for a specific task and revelation that pursues him even in isolation— summoning him repeatedly through a confluence of dreams, synchronicities, and openly supernatural events to which he must seek proper response. *Love and Work* seems structured upon a string of incidents that constitute something akin to Thomas Mann’s “hermetic pedagogy”—a process that leaves Eborn shaken, but profoundly changed.

The term itself, taken from Mann’s reflections on his “Grail” novel, *The Magic Mountain*, is in several ways appropriate to Eborn’s adventure—though in borrowing it, I

suggest kinship, not influence. Joseph Campbell (in *Creative Mythology*) and Evans Lansing Smith (in “The Arthurian Underworld of Modernism”) make much of *The Magic Mountain* as a modern Grail Quest—a fact affirmed by Mann himself in his essay “The Making of *The Magic Mountain*.” Mann there observes that his “foolish hero” (Hans Castorp) is indeed “a searcher after the Holy Grail . . .” and when someone “read[s] the book again from this point of view,” Mann adds, they may “find out what the Grail is: the knowledge and the wisdom, the consecration, the highest reward, for which not only the foolish hero but the book itself is seeking” (726-27). Hans Castorp (the “foolish hero”) is no artist, certainly, and Eborn—whose role as troubled “witness” seems the most crucial fact about him—bears only superficial resemblance to the cold, death-dealing aesthetes who appear frequently in Mann’s fiction. But Mann’s comments about Hans and the “correcting process” he undergoes in isolation at midlife (qtd. in Campbell, *CM* 324, 643) cast an interesting light on Eborn’s own mission, his dilemma, and the process by which Eborn is awakened (in his own case painfully) to both his task and the nature of his error.

As Campbell explains, the *vas Hermeticum* (from which Mann borrows his term) is the alchemist’s vessel—an alembic in which both “fermentation” and “spontaneous transformation” can occur (*CM* 375). Mann describes Castorp’s isolated environment at the sanatorium (the “magic mountain”) as “the hermetic retort in which his simple primary material is forcibly sublimated and purified to an unsuspected ennoblement” (qtd. in Campbell, *CM* 324). As Campbell explains, “The idea suggested is of a sealing off from historical time and an inward-turning to inward time: activation of the mind through appropriate influences from without, but then a response in terms of one’s own readiness and pace of growth, not the needs, ideals, and expectations of anyone else, any

group, or any so-called world” (CM 375). Thereby the self-exiled Hans Castorp undergoes what Mann calls a process of “progressive disillusionment,” overcoming his “Sympathy with Death” (qtd. in Campbell, CM 322).

Eborn’s self-exile is of a different kind—one which leaves him isolated psychologically (not physically) behind the “shield” he has fashioned from his work. And his transformation is achieved not gradually or dialogically (as is the case with Hans Castorp), but through a series of repeated shocks proportional to his resistance and unremitting darkness of vision. In other respects, however, Eborn’s “correcting process” (and its apparent goal) fits Mann’s description very closely, tracing his confrontations with self and universe through a series of synchronous events linking life and death, inner and outer realities, in a series of dreams and waking encounters.

Despite grief and compunction for his widowed mother, Eborn’s sympathies at mid-life seem increasingly allied with various incarnations of the “boy” whose vulnerability he finds such a dreadful liability. Significantly, the wrecked friends and colleagues from Eborn’s first nightmare—“bathed in blood, clothes torn, wounds gaping”—are *male*, “vanishing silently” (and without stopping for him) as they move through hospital doors (2-3). As the novel progresses, Eborn’s sense of this vulnerability takes a much more specific form—one which leaves his own sketch of Tristan reviled by Isolde charged with iconic significance. Bowed down by marital discord, in fact, Eborn seems increasingly troubled by a long-held and barely suppressed rage against the victimizing forces of the world—especially in its feminine aspect. Arguing with Jane, who weeps after reading his work essay, *he* feels violated, thinking of her tears as “instruments of entry—crowbars, shims” (50). Facing Jane’s claim that her own care for

him has been disvalued and abused, he feels like “an older boy, a senior adviser in a freshman dorm—every word predictable hours in advance, every answer exhausted” (51). For he had “heard it all his life,” he realizes, “always from women (his mother, his aunts bemoaning their husbands, a decade of girls with Jane at the end)” (51). A clear echo of such voices can be heard in the aggrieved and accusing letters Eborn later finds from Todd’s aging mother (demanding allegiance, comfort, money, and supplies) and equates with the raging logic of King Lear “a moment before the heath” (59). Reading the letters, Eborn comprehends her “wildness” but feels her suddenly “attached” to him—“a mouth to his throat, toothless, warm . . . never his; . . . but living now at his great expense” (59). As his father’s own wounds bleed within him, Eborn thinks he understands “at last . . . what he’d known for years—that incest and matricide are one forged axe. . . . As is the past” (59). This complicated perception of the feminine (and sympathy for the embattled male) almost certainly informs Eborn’s odd distress at his mother’s “genetic triumph on his face, a face she had made . . . with no visible help from his firm, ample father—a jaw already (just post-*Christusjahr*) surrendered to the downward slide of flesh” (15). For Eborn (in this moment, at least), the feminine seems to signify not life-renewing love and strength, but love’s paradoxically wounding softness and rage on the slide toward dissolution and death.

Perusing the papers Lou had arranged and examined on the night before her death (a departure from her usual reading), Eborn is puzzled to find her diary of his father’s last days and a letter from the young Todd to Lou, dated 1928—the same year as their photo on the bridge (6, 23) Unaware of her vision, Eborn wonders why she has dragged out such “debris,” but he commends her narrative skill and “foresight” in the journal—a

change to present tense after the second day, as though she had already glimpsed “the sprawled hideous rapid death” and could feel “a fate striding down her life” (23, 25). Though Eborn has never rendered those days in narrative, he readily admits that her “daily ten words” have “sucked the whole tide back to flood him now” (25). It is a terror he will soon revisit more vividly as he stands outside Intensive Care, awaiting Lou’s death (36). But entirely unaware of this “fate striding down” his own life, he instead dissects Lou’s two sentimental assertions: that Todd was “*brave and sweet*” on his last day home and that “*No one will ever know what it did for me when I saw him breathe his last*” (25). Of the last day home, Eborn recalls only hours spent “in choking silence” and avoidance of his father, and he rails fiercely against his mother’s apparent possessiveness of Todd, even in death. “Did for *her*?” he thinks in vehement denial. “It had not *been* for her. He had not been hers. She had not *seen* the last breath” (25). We learn pages later that Eborn had been alone with his father at that moment and had ordered his mother out of the room when she entered “in innocence, merely checking” (36).

More distressing to Eborn than the diary, however, is his young father’s love letter to Lou and what Eborn calls its “soft and desperately genuine lies” (60). As evidenced above, Eborn loathes “softness” and fears it, though from the first he partly grasps the disastrous nature of his need to banish such things from both life and work. Indeed, it is hard to say which repulses him more—his own “turbid concealment” of tenderness, or the reckless and passionate claims he equates with tenderness itself. Reading Todd’s plea to Lou—“*Please dear, love me and tell everybody that you are mine and I am yours*”—Eborn rails against the sentiment as “the fatal error of their lives . . . fatal error of Western Man” (27)! “No one,” Eborn firmly asserts, “was anyone else’s,

ever” (27). Significantly, though, Eborn at once feels that the letter is “his” and attributes his protective and sudden possessiveness to the handwriting itself—“the slow, slightly feminine script” that was “set for good” in Todd’s early twenties and had marked each word thereafter—“all his letters to Tom”—despite “crushing blows” (26).

Clearing the house after Lou’s death, Eborn discovers four more such letters (same date as the picture) and finds them intolerable—“More of the poison that had paralyzed them both from the start—‘*You are mine, I am yours. Can’t we understand that and make each other know*’” (58)? The image of a couple instantly “poisoned” and “paralyzed” by love calls to mind Eborn’s icon of Tristan and Isolde, their *liebestod* implicit from the first in the intensity of their joy and identification with one another. And two pages later, in Eborn’s desolate reference to “the boy, the girl—crushed, diseased, now dead,” his grief for his parents seems to have merged irrevocably with that archetypal story.

The tale of beautiful lovers destroyed and devoured by Death also forms the substance of Mann’s own core scene and symbolic Grail vision in *The Magic Mountain*. As Campbell emphasizes, Mann’s principal focus (in both fiction and essays) was on “the enigma of death and renewal, on the psychological factors contributing to both individual and social disintegration, and on those contrary factors that might be counted on to withstand or even overcome the processes of dissolution and death” (CM 311). And though Mann notes that he had not consciously intended (or at first recognized) Hans Castorp’s story as a Grail adventure (“—if I did . . . it was both more and less than thinking”), he makes clear in “The Making of the Magic Mountain” that Hans’ symbolic encounter with the Grail mystery is found “in the Chapter called ‘Snow,’ where Hans Castorp, lost on the perilous heights, dreams his dream of humanity” (727).

Having fallen asleep in the snow, Hans has an idyllic vision of beautiful youths, maidens, and children at play—a vision that, like a song, “swell[s], unfold[s], glow[s] from moment to moment with new radiance” as “unsuspected veils [drop] from before it one by one” (*Magic Mountain* 490). But as he observes the beautiful couples and children in delight, he sees a beautiful and smiling youth (a type of Hermes *psychopompos*) who “watches him watching” for a while and then (with suddenly solemn gaze) directs Hans’ gaze toward a temple atop a steep flight of steps. Ascending to look within, Hans is sickened to find two hags rending these beautiful beings apart. As he watches “they [crack] the tender bones between their jaws, their dreadful lips [dripping] blood” (494). Compelled and torn by the contrasting scenes, Hans faces a choice of perspectives and decides, ultimately, that “he who knows the body, life, knows death. And that is not all; it is, pedagogically speaking, only the beginning. One must have the other half of the story, the other side,” embracing both “blood sacrifice” and “joy” (495). As Evans Lansing Smith explains, Hans needs a vision of the Grail to reconcile the oppositions of the *liebestod* in his soul—love and death must be accepted on their own terms without allowing death ‘sovereignty over his thoughts’” (“Arthurian Underworld of Modernism” 56).

This is Eborn’s challenge as well, yet his vision has not yet ripened to encompass both stories. Looking at the family letters and papers that had “fueled all that wasteful pain,” his instinctive response is not to explore further but to burn them. Even his letters “from himself to home” strike him as threatening evidence of love and love’s vagaries. He vows to burn them with the family papers since “all traces of himself once committed to writing, lasted only to taunt and humiliate his future” (58). Coming from a novelist

with Eborn's stated goals, such thoughts are reckless and shocking. But instead of deterring him, they seem for the moment to fuel a drive toward work—though again in the wrong direction.

Heady with this new sense of freedom (“papers by him, tame as dogs”), Eborn speeds home to revise his stalled novel—not the story of his parents, but instead of Jane's cousin (a suicide) and her husband (61). Seeing this “small pressed man” at the funeral two months earlier, Eborn had thought with sudden intensity, “This isn't the ending. What if she had lived? Make her live. Live with her,” and he had drafted an opening in compulsive haste, pausing at the husband's discovery and first attempts to save his wife (61-62). Since then, Eborn reasons, he has been balked by his teaching and by “his own wish not to let his natural speed plunge him on too soon, his skill in advance of his understanding” (62). This may be rationalization, however. For though Eborn denies it, his identification with the “small pressed man” seems clearly implied, and the denial itself may hint at live flesh avoided—the issue of his ambivalence toward Jane. Ominously, Eborn's early dream of their empty house (with its new, “unthreatened” calm) had lacked any sign of her (42). Several pages later the pattern repeats as Eborn enters their darkened house and bedroom dreading (yet in some sense fantasizing) that Jane has committed suicide. His having “all but lived without her,” he admits (targeting the same failing his novel seeks to revise) seems suddenly “sufficient warrant for disaster—her suicide, murder, abandonment” (48).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Despite his greater warmth and humor as a character, Hutch Mayfield (in *The Source of Light*) has similar thoughts about his fiancée, Ann Gatlin. Prior to his departure for Oxford, Ann (who has accompanied him to New York) will not rouse from sleep and fails to answer her hotel door. Hutch sends for a manager to unlock it, shocked at the mixture of terror and relief he feels as he waits, imagining her a suicide (39-43).

Yet having dealt (he believes) with the “wasteful pain” of his own family’s past—“his throat free from all the hands that had held it”—Eborn feels suddenly armed to change the suicide’s tale and “end it truer” (61). As he drives, he finds “the entire centerpiece” of his novel unfolding with unusual rapidity, and this seems to him “an instant recovery, a better omen”—as though, by sheer will, he might now alter the sorrows of love (61). Calling this moment one of “supernal calm and clarity,” critic Gary Ciuba connects Eborn’s moment of vision with the Greek metaphysicians Eborn admires (196)—those for whom, Eborn observes, “the slim probe of reason” can be wielded as a weapon “to pierce its way to order, completion” (*L&W* 61). Certainly Eborn feels such an apotheosis is imminent, the cascade of scenes seeming to him (as Ciuba notes) to “guarantee final light, comprehension, truth” (196). In context, however, this “clarity” seems suspect, for it springs not from “calm” but from a state resembling euphoria—the exuberance of a mind freed from one agonizing puzzle and applied with extraordinary relief to another. And despite Eborn’s conviction of its truth, even his revision of the suicide’s tale—clearly intended as healing—seems instead profoundly evasive, like his burning of family papers to make the house “safe” (60). By changing the tale, Eborn may hope—as he’d hoped to save his parents “in time”—to avert a disaster he fears and may think he deserves: Jane’s suicide. But love’s mysteries are not so easily dispensed with. And as events soon confirm, Eborn’s primary distress (which he has yet to fully acknowledge or resolve) stems from another story entirely—from a sight he has all but concealed and a task he has long set himself but continues to misconstrue and avoid. This duty, however, is the very thing he encounters (albeit in mysterious form) as he flees toward his saving revision, rejoicing at last to be free.

The wreck scene (like Preacher's dream vision in "The Names and Faces of Heroes") has both fascinated and puzzled critics.<sup>11</sup> The events themselves are easily summarized: Eborn rounds a curve to find a single car—showering sparks, engine roaring—crushed against a light pole, trapping the male driver inside. Yet Price takes exceptional care in staging both Eborn's discovery of the wreck and the aftermath—a seamless, intricate, and highly iconic weaving of inner and outer realities that occupies nearly twelve pages at the novel's core, centering upon the meaning and identity of the wrecked boy. This mystery deepens as the scene proceeds and Eborn wrestles awkwardly in the new role of "savior," joined eventually by two helpers: a female witness from the nearby house and the patrolman she calls to the scene.

Critics have not explored the sequence in depth, accepting Eborn's conclusion in the aftermath that the wrecked boy "is my parents, may also be me" (76). But as an elucidation of the scene and of Eborn's complex, mysterious response to the old-young man bleeding out from the groin, his pronouncement is unhelpful and vague, concealing far more than it brings to light. Eborn has so far proven himself a resistant and perhaps unreliable guide to the mysteries that most compel him—a point Price himself has stressed at every turn. So it should be no surprise that the best clues to the wreck's significance have little to do with Eborn's pronouncements, which vacillate, oversimplify, and ultimately obscure. They come instead from Price's extraordinary orchestration of the scene and from Eborn's spontaneous (and often incongruous) responses to fragments of image, staging, and dialogue that operate like musical motifs, linking his experiences to other moments in the novel.

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<sup>11</sup> Rooke's brief discussion of the scene notes that it is "brilliantly written," and she glimpses a larger dimension to the story—an implication of "supernatural grace" implied with "great subtlety"—in Price's handling of the Policeman's arrival and interaction with Eborn and the boy (83).

Comprehension of that design, however, rests on the reader's realization that Eborn's experience at the wreck is in part a genuinely "supernatural" event—a striking instance of synchronicity. Paraphrasing Carl Jung, M. -L. von Franz defines synchronicity as a "“meaningful coincidence”" of outer and inner events that are not themselves causally connected," but point clearly (though mysteriously) to an "inter-relation of psyche and matter" and cluster near "crucial phases of the process of individuation" ("The Process of Individuation" 226-27). As Gregg Levoy explains, Jung believed that such incidents "mirror deep psychological processes, carry messages the way dreams do, and take on meaning and provide guidance to the degree that they correspond to emotional states and inner experiences—to thoughts, feelings, visions, dreams, and premonitions" (*Callings* 110). From the first sentence, Eborn (at a crucial passage in his life) has been immersed in all five. Read closely, Price's orchestration of the wreck scene and its aftermath does much to unify these disparate experiences, marking a turning point in Eborn's "hermetic" education and signaling the uncanny dimension of his experience in a variety of ways.

Though Price remains oppressively close to Eborn's consciousness and self-centered view of the world, the narrative perspective is never fully aligned with him—able to suggest connections that Eborn grasps only partially. And it is this narrating voice that first hints, between one paragraph and the next, that Eborn's encounter may indeed be such a "meaningful coincidence," contradicting his new direction and conviction about what is "true": "Now [Eborn] knew and could. He raced toward that through the hot afternoon. But as he rounded a long country curve, he saw a wreck. . ." (62). With great delicacy the conjunction itself seems to link Eborn's choice with the disastrous sight that

stops him. More important, however, is the implied juxtaposition between the scene Eborn encounters and the one he has been constructing as he drives. The wreck scene is the center of *Love and Work*—a matter of special importance since Eborn is mentally rewriting the “centerpiece” of his own novel (with its rescue of the suicidal wife) when he finds the wrecked boy. In effect, the wreck scene trumps Eborn’s own here and begins turning his powers of witness in another direction entirely—toward the unidentified boy and all that he signifies.

Chief among the uncanny elements of the scene is Eborn’s persistent and gradually evolving conviction that he knows the victim. From the first, key features of the man seem strangely familiar to Eborn, who wrestles not only with the meaning of these details, but with the decidedly odd perspective that overtakes his mind as the scene progresses. When a patrolman arrives and attempts to break open the door, Eborn can only stand staring, “struck . . . broadside” by the victim’s “short, ash-blond hair” and “broad unblemished neck,” which seem immediately familiar (66). It’s the hair, Eborn surmises, grasping at rational explanations as his disorientation gradually deepens, convincing him that the man is “someone he knew. . . surely a friend, some old friend he had not seen for years” (66). But this subjective eye, once awakened, will not be appeased. The man’s face remains “averted,” and Eborn avoids sight of it for as long as possible, refusing the patrolman’s directive so that he may pull from behind, without actually seeing the face. Such avoidance is futile, however, for Eborn’s mind has already turned back the clock, so that he perceives the victim “now as a boy, a friend of his youth, no longer a man” (66). Despite Eborn’s reference to “calm past encounters with death,” his demeanor throughout the scene is one of extraordinary anxiety and paralysis,

and it is the victim's youthfulness (as yet unconfirmed) that seems most intolerable to him—so that “he could not imagine being ready, now or ever,” for sight of the boy's face (66). Weightier still is his oppressive fear that he has “condemned” this boy through failings he must struggle even to name—“fear? indifference” (66)? “I have stood and let him die,” Eborn thinks (still unmoving and “cold as glass”) as the patrolman struggles alone to wrench open the door (66).

Reading the wreck exclusively as an ordinary event, Rooke and Schiff read Eborn's guilt in terms of his self-involvement and inaction at the scene—a sensible approach since Eborn himself is acutely aware of his unheroic behavior. “That was for myself,” he thinks, moments after switching off the engine and retreating to stand alone, “safe . . . and paralyzed,” across the road from the victim, whose injuries he has barely registered (63). Only with difficulty does he force himself (the first of many battles with terror and reluctance) to return to the dying man and assess the situation. From the first, however, certain details of the scene seem charged with an archetypal resonance—one increasingly harmonious with Eborn's personal crisis and odd state of mind. “I am trapped . . . as closely as he,” Eborn says aloud (actually pointing to the victim), and he must force himself to return to the man and assess injuries he had previously failed to explore. But as he feels for a pulse, his fingers “seize” when encountering blood from the man's “full groin” —crushed “beneath the slewed wheel” (63). Shaken, Eborn rises and is turning away again (“for what?—help or flight?”) when the “distant voice” of a woman recalls him (63). Such details must first be read literally, of course. But as they proliferate, their emergence as emblems (and Eborn's reaction to them as such) should not be overlooked, or dismissed as accidental. As Marie-Louise von Franz notes, Jung

himself (while exploring instances of synchronicity) observed that in each case “there was an archetype activated in the unconscious of the individual concerned. . . . It seems as if the underlying archetype is manifesting itself simultaneously in inner and external events. The common denominator is a symbolically expressed message. . . .” (“Process of Individuation” 226-27).

Encountering the wreck, Eborn has once more entered what Campbell terms a “mythogenetic zone”<sup>12</sup>—a realm he has previously encountered only in dreams or upon the threshold of waking. Now, though, Eborn finds himself caught in two orders of waking reality. In “On an Apparent Intention in the Fate of an Individual,” Schopenhauer asserts that “Every event” in what he calls “the great dream of life” is “implicated in two fundamentally different orders of relationship: first, in the objective causal order of the course of nature, and second, in a subjective order relevant only to the experiencing individual himself and as subjective, consequently as his dreams . . . each the hero of his own drama and yet an actor in all the rest. . . .” (qtd. in Campbell, *CM* 343-44). Thus, Schopenhauer explains, each person receives “what is appropriate to his own metaphysical guidance” (*CM* 343). This concept of a “*harmonia praestabilita*” (as he terms it) greatly resembles Jung’s approach to the phenomenon of synchronicity and suggests a framework for viewing not only Eborn’s experiences at the wreck, but the “hermetic” and pedagogical implications at which Price himself continues to hint through numerous small details.

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<sup>12</sup> In *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, Campbell explains, he had used this term to indicate “any geographical area in which . . . a language of mythic symbols and related rites can be shown to have sprung into being (*CM* 90). But in the modern world the usual codes are “in dissolution” and the term refers instead to “the individual in contact with his own interior life” (*CM* 93).

The woman whose voice turns Eborn's flight, for example, is in one sense entirely ordinary. Yet Price's handling of the encounter (filtered through Eborn's perceptions) again contributes a dreamlike quality to the episode, hinting at another level of meaning. Straining to see the woman in the open door of her home, he is unsettled to see only "a shape—no features" behind the screened door (64). Though he hopes she will come out, at least to wait with him, she stands on "dimly" in place behind her screen. And to his frustrated query, "Can you help?" she replies, after a moment, "I have done what I can. I am carrying a baby"(64). As Eborn soon realizes (seeing no child in her arms), she means she is pregnant and fears that the child may be "marked" by the incident (a common folk belief.) Yet Eborn is momentarily stymied, and in the twilight world of his consciousness her answer—and indeed her appearance—may signal far more.

As Constance Rooke argues, doorways themselves have special significance in *Love and Work*, marking what she calls "a passageway to another world" (80). Todd Eborn's ghost, she observes, is "'looking towards the door' " when he appears to Lou on the eve of her death. And though Eborn as yet knows nothing of this, he instinctively looks toward "an open, empty, 'dimly-lit door' " when Jane (defending her work for their life together) asks him to "look at" (consider the case of) his deceased mother, Lou (80). Through such symbolism, Rooke connects the "vague figure" and "'distant'" voice of the woman in the doorway with Eborn's mother, whose long-distance call (and later, ghostly presence) had attempted to breach Eborn's closed study door with her own mysterious message.

Eborn is clearly unnerved by the unnamed woman, a witness who has "seen and judged it all from the start" (70). And juxtaposed with the youth whose "full groin" is

“sopped in blood” (the discovery that so nearly precipitates Eborn’s flight), she suggests a type of the Magna Mater (Cybele), whose beloved Attis (like her priests after him) castrate themselves in her service. Yet Rooke is right to observe that this pregnant woman and “watcher” is neither threat nor victim, but instead delivers what Rooke calls a “life-bearing” message (80). She phones for help, proclaims Eborn’s innocence (in the face of his odd, lingering guilt), and stands as concrete symbol of sexual love and continuance—the very things Eborn’s life has lately brought him to doubt.

In this context, the woman’s reply to Eborn’s question about “help” is especially striking, for it momentarily equates “help” with the pregnancy itself. The connection is brief, of course, and surely not intended by the speaker. Within moments, Eborn has sorted out an entirely different meaning. Yet Price’s handling of the exchange serves to emphasize the equation, and indeed his epigraph to the novel (taken from Richard Strauss’ opera *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*)<sup>13</sup> makes the same point, stating clearly that “husbands and wives who lie in one another’s loving arms” are themselves “the bridge spanning the gulf over which the dead go again into life.” Deepening these implications is Eborn’s belief (voiced shortly before his purge of the house) that he was “made” for such a purpose by his parents—to “save them somehow” (54).<sup>14</sup> And while neither parent is mentioned during the scene, this task and Eborn’s convictions about it resonate powerfully beneath, gathering significance as the scene unfolds. Gary Ciuba’s comment that the wreck scene “exposes Eborn’s fantasy as a savior in fiction” is remarkably astute

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<sup>13</sup> *The Woman Without a Shadow*, libretto by Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, music by Richard Strauss, 1919. The shadow, writes Owen Lee, indicates “the ability to bear children. But as the opera gathers force, the shadow comes to mean something more . . . the human condition. Suffering vulnerability, love, guilt, death. . .” (<[www.metoperafamily.org](http://www.metoperafamily.org)>).

<sup>14</sup> In *Clear Pictures*, Price considers the possibility that his mother, Elizabeth, may well have contrived her first pregnancy as a saving device—“as a last hope of braking Will’s rush to drown” (28).

(196), and while this observation primarily targets Eborn's behavior at the scene, it suggests far more than Ciuba may have realized about the nature of the encounter itself. As Ciuba correctly observes, Eborn has long regarded narrative as "an essentially religious discipline" (199). And in an important sense, Price's wreck scene (like *Love and Work* itself) is a study in forms of "help" and "salvation"—attempts by a witness to tend or rehabilitate the dying in some fashion (or to at least convey their meaning to the living). As most criticism has noted, both the female witness and the patrolman she calls to the scene prove superior to Eborn in their ability to "help" the wounded man. Yet both are supportive of Eborn's efforts, expressing confidence that he is innocent and has help to offer—things he initially doubts.

The Patrolman offers a particularly salient lesson in help, emphasizing what Eborn (and his "saving" fiction) has failed to see and do. The patrolman arrives (as Rooke notes) like a messenger of grace (83), and with the swift, practical compassion of a man about his job, he manages immediately what the petrified Eborn cannot. He urges Eborn forward, "no question that Eborn had help to give" (65), and this subtle observation (an indirect narration of Eborn's own thoughts) is profoundly important, for it both reveals and opposes Eborn's own secret doubts in this regard, casting a pedagogical (not condemnatory) light upon interactions during the scene. Like the unnamed woman, the Patrolman is in part a guide figure whose acts and demeanor suggest a corrective not only for Eborn's actions at the wreck, but for his approach to narrative itself. As noted earlier, Eborn's pre-occupation with narrative and narrative perspectives is neither surprising nor inherently pathological, related as it surely is to Price own (eminently sane) ruminations on narrative in this period. Watching the

Patrolman “[take] the sight,” Eborn finds “no trace of knowledge, revulsion, regret” upon his face (66). Moments later, Eborn watches as “*not pausing*, with two gentle fingers,” the patrolman rearranges the flesh of the boy’s nearly severed nose, covering the skull-like opening where the septum “stood bare in a filling hole” (68). The image is that of a skull—a sight the Patrolman not only “takes” but instantly does what he can to redress.

Equally important is the fact that the Patrolman (unlike Eborn) is not silent in the face of this suffering. At their first encounter, he speaks calmly to the wounded boy, ascertaining that he is Catholic and prescribing (as might a Priest) an *Our Father* to comfort and assist him. A model of strength, competence, and compassion, the patrolman coaches Eborn through what gradually comes to resemble not rescue, but assistance at a dark and difficult birth—passage not into Life, but Death itself. With hands “sufficiently strong” the Patrolman wrenches the car door almost open, freeing the trapped legs and lifting the boy out almost entirely before asking Eborn, “Can you take the weight?”—meaning the weight of the body. Yet Eborn hears the question metaphorically as well, thinking (as he accepts the burden) that “he had taken it already, borne it all from the start” (67). Odd though the thought is, it lessens Eborn’s dread of seeing the face. And when at last he does, the narration reports that “he bore it, of course, though . . . it seemed a face only just concealed in his memory” (67)

This last observation suggests that certain puzzling aspects of dialogue (like Eborn’s obsession with the man’s face) may have little to do with the scene before him—bound up instead with a memory evoked by key details of the wreck. “I am trapped again, Eborn thinks, looking at the dead face. “In a net I have made of fear and delay, guilt, the service of others” (70). The words make clear a sense of repeated disaster that

Eborn will later (and rightly) connect with his opening dream of wrecked and “gravely hurt” male friends arriving at hospital while he (incommunicative, “memory . . . dissolving,”) cannot initially name or describe them to the nurse whose help he seeks (3). The words *fear*, *delay*, and *guilt* make sense in the context of either dream or wreck. But Eborn’s worry about “service to others” is puzzling. Who has he “again” failed to serve in his distraction by “others”? Who does he see (and not quite recognize) in the man before him, whom he has thought of increasingly as “a boy, a friend of his youth, no longer a man” (66). And what precisely does he feel he has “again” failed to do—an omission called to account in the death of the boy? These questions—and the implications of the form in which they announce themselves to Eborn—are crucial to a fuller understanding of novel and scene.

Price’s handling of the death strongly suggests that for Eborn the wreck constitutes a third resurfacing of Todd Eborn’s death, a memory first stirred by the ringing phone in the novel’s opening line. Key details of sound, staging, and gesture at the scene (the holding of wrists, the high sound in the nose, the purple lips, Eborn’s role as solitary witness) seem selected to link this death scene with the one Eborn had recalled a second time (in much greater detail) while awaiting news of his dying mother:<sup>15</sup>

Then . . . they had been alone, his father and he. . . . He had . . . pressed a thumb to his father’s pulse. . . . His own eyes had shut and he’d felt, in that dark quite timeless space, alone and on ramparts, hopeless but still guarding. Then the static had stopped, an instant of waiting—no start, no attempt to start, an end. Oh the body had fought . . . high squeals in the nose. . . . He had been standing then to see entirely, hand still on the

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<sup>15</sup> Price deliberately constructs a similar link in *The Surface of Earth*. In a scrap of note concerning final revisions for the novel, he expresses his intention to “very delicately” echo Eva’s wedding night dream (*SoE* 11) in her father’s deathbed scene (*SoE* 320) more than twenty years later (Reynolds Price Papers, Box WP-16, *The Surface of Earth*). In the published novel, this connection is based almost entirely on subtle elements of gesture and staging.

wrist. . . . and he'd seen it through alone, the nurse returning a moment after calm had succeeded the struggle. (36)

Eborn also notes that he had sent his mother out before she could see his father's "purple face" (36). Not surprisingly, as the wrecked boy begins "a steady sound like a frail wire spun through purple lips," Eborn's response achieves a new peak of strangeness and redoubled urgency, and he frets that "He had had no answer from the boy. Had asked him nothing, offered no word" (69).

Given Eborn's state of mind, the unusual order of these thoughts may at first seem unimportant. Yet the reversal shifts primary emphasis from the boy's silence to Eborn's, and the word "answer" implies a specific question—one Eborn himself needs answered for some reason, but has so far failed to ask. "Who are you?" he asks the dying man, with unusual intensity, seizing a moment when the patrolman has stepped away (69). But though the odd sound continues "seamless though finer," the boy makes no reply. As in his opening dream of the hospital, Eborn cannot quite bring a name to consciousness, but he seems to know the boy, and he seems to know (though he does not name) the thing he has failed to do. Trying again for this mysteriously important verbal connection, Eborn offers his own name instead, begging pardon for both ignorance and for an error of omission still only vaguely defined: "I am Thomas Eborn and I beg your pardon. I could not help because I did not know" (69). *Help how, and know what?* readers may wonder. By now, however, it seems clear that both issues are somehow connected with a still-unvoiced question, the boy's missing "answer," and Eborn's as yet unoffered "word."

Ironically the very youthfulness of the face Eborn perceives as "only just concealed in his memory" does much to confirm the link with Todd Eborn (67).

Throughout the novel, Eborn has perceived his lost father not as the aging man who died (an image we never see), but again and again as an endangered youth—the very epitome of the “grand lost boy” archetype. Indeed it is the young Todd (witnessed vividly by a young Lou) who soon takes center stage in Eborn’s scene of their meeting. But we have glimpsed him already (each time a painful discovery) through Eborn’s troubled eyes: in love letters; in the photo of his young parents (prior to marriage) on their bridge; in the manipulative and jealous demands of his aging mother; and in Lou’s diary of Todd’s last days, which recall him (to Eborn’s horror) as “*brave and sweet*” (25).

One glimpse, however, seems especially significant: the photograph of Todd at age 30, a few years prior to Tom’s birth and Todd’s own *Christusjahre*. Studying this photo—found hanging near Eborn’s “oddly nailed” crucifix and sketch of the embattled Tristan—Eborn sees that Todd’s face has been “retouched to baby smoothness” (22). Only “the wide propped weariness of the eyes,” he notes, remain “to hint (beneath fake highlights)” that his life was more than half ended “in terms of weight and pressure of time” (22). The presence of this photo among other images of figures Joseph Campbell calls, existentially speaking, “The Crucified” (see above, pp. 17-18) is telling indeed. And though Lou (not Eborn) placed it there, Eborn clearly notes the connection.

Yet his most potent icon of waste and loss (the face he recalls at the wreck) is almost certainly one that lies hidden, literally concealed, in the box of papers and photos he had spared from the fire “because the box was closed” (60). Stopping at the wreck, Eborn places the box beneath his seat (a second concealment) in an oddly protective gesture. Yet Price notes it carefully, and one need look no further than his contemporaneous sketch “Life for Life” (or his memoir *Clear Pictures*) to guess the

young prototype for Eborn's "concealed" face—or to reconstruct the image likely hidden in that box.

Published after (but contemporaneous with) *Love and Work*, Price's autobiographical sketch "Life for Life" (in the "Elegies" section of *Permanent Errors*) focuses ultimately upon a picture of the young Will Price that Reynolds finds while "sifting the debris of my mother's death" (99). In the story it is not a photo, but a recording of Will's voice that his son is tempted to conceal—a recorded sales pitch Price hears as his father's "endless bottled plea for hope" (100). But the sketch ends (the reason for the title) with Price silently addressing a photo of Will Price at eighteen—the same photo he publishes almost two decades later in *Clear Pictures*. By 1988, Price's approach to this image has shifted slightly, placing greater emphasis on Will's role as battler, not unsuspecting victim. Yet the caption in *Clear Pictures* also points toward Will's sacrificial vow and *Christusjahre*—the year of his vow and of Reynolds' problematic birth. At eighteen, Price writes, Will's eyes "burn with the hopeful fervor he'll fight to reclaim, fifteen years from now" (*CP* 22). The descriptions match perfectly: Will Price in 1918, his left lapel sporting a National Guard button—"an eagle spread above a waiting world" ("Life for Life" 101). He, too, is waiting "to be shipped away to the trenches of France" (*CP* 22), unaware that he'll be spared at the last moment—actually "saved in port" by the armistice ("Life for Life" 101; *CP* 22). Yet Will's face is "unclouded yet by drink or care" (*CP* 22). And "still," Price says, addressing the photo in "Life for Life," "your gaze though high is clear, undoubting; a surety that even now seems firm, not boyish foolishness, seems well-informed as though you saw sure detailed

happy futures, a life like water (clear, needed, useful, permanent, free), spared all you will so soon acquire (drink, wife, sons, labor, thirty-six more years)” (101).

Like the photo of his parents on the bridge, this image of Will clearly has a powerful and ongoing resonance for Price, and like that death itself, it has resurfaced repeatedly in the course of his work—a primary icon of loss. In a notebook entry on 6 December 1958, Price had considered writing “something—hardly a story: a sort of fantasia beginning from this photograph of Dad at National Guard Camp—‘standing there, not knowing he had 36 years to live and 2 sons to leave’” (*LaT* 13). And on 7 October 1962, while finishing “The Names and Faces of Heroes,” he had thought to end that story with a meditation on the father’s face in death—using, however, “the face I remember when I dream of him—his face in the picture Mother has . . . knowing nothing to come—with clear, calm gaze. . .” (*LaT* 166). In “Life for Life,” Price’s ironic juxtaposition of “sure detailed happy futures” with the intimation of a coming blood sacrifice (offered in love, not war) is the very heart of the matter. And Price speaks *there*—with astonishing openness—to the eighteen-year-old face at which *Love and Work* hints, but which Eborn himself has most surely concealed: “Dear boy . . . locked on your browning paper card, I offer you my life—look, it will serve. Cancel all plan of me, let me not be, so you may have free time, move always sure, accept with smooth hands what your eyes still see, elude brute ambush of your gurgling death”(101).

Price’s instinctive juxtaposition of such images (and the pathos it implies) has profound implications for Eborn’s response to the trapped boy—and indeed for the highly charged *tableau* Eborn glimpses at the end of the wreck scene. As he kneels, still holding the dead man’s wrist, he again hears the woman’s voice above him and sees for the first

time that she is “only a girl . . . with loose dark hair” (70). While Eborn does not note it consciously, Price’s description of her stance against the rail on “her high narrow porch” hints delicately at the photo of Eborn’s dark-haired mother Lou standing, young with Todd, on “their bridge” prior to marriage (83). Moments later, looking down at the dead face, Eborn sees that “now, cold and white, it was clearly a boy, eighteen at most. . .” and thinks “I am trapped again. In a net I have made of fear and delay, guilt, the service of others” (70).

As *sign*—as an eruption of an archetype and archetypal scene closely linked to Eborn’s past—the boy represents far more than Eborn is initially willing to grant, and it is this duty and identification with which Eborn comes face to face at the wreck. The partial but thwarted transaction between Eborn and the dying man displays a strong resemblance to Preacher’s urgency and plea for pardon in “The Names and Faces of Heroes.” And as in Preacher’s dream-vision (which shares key details with both the wreck and the scene of Todd’s death), the genitals of the dying man are crushed and rapidly draining—here “rendering like pork, not fat but blood” (68). Such details, coupled with Eborn’s assertion that “I could not help because I did not know” (69)—bind the scene tightly to the core grail scene and the figure of the “grand lost boy,” yet highlight a revealing difference in Eborn’s demeanor at the wreck scene. “Now I have lost all hope of knowing my father’s life,” Preacher had fretted, falling asleep—and his dream had transmuted this anxiety (among other things) into his remarkable promise and vow. Yet Eborn has actively (if sometimes unconsciously) resisted the type of knowledge that Preacher vows to seek and use for healing and self-transformation. Eborn fancies himself a healer, yet he has set himself (when he pursues the task at all) to

“discover” and proffer “the available truth” his parents died *without*—eschewing as intolerable all evidence of what they knew, and much of who they were.<sup>16</sup>

As Chapters One and Two explain, both the core Grail scene and its mysterious Question gesture stress the *anagnorisis*, the identification of two “strangers” revealed as spiritual counterparts and “kin.” And the Question itself (sign of empathy, humility, and spiritual connection) constitutes an opening for narrative transaction that reveals the emotional and spiritual history of the grand lost boy and unveils the buried radiance and meaning of his life. The wrecked boy is indeed a stranger—but “an intimate stranger” (71), as Eborn reflects afterward (and had indeed realized almost at once.) This near-recognition, as we have seen, is emphasized strongly in the scene. At the wreck, however, the *anagnorisis* is incomplete, and Eborn’s partial gesture comes late—an offering in defeat. ““Who was he?”” Eborn asks the patrolman after the man has died, “(meaning, ‘Find his papers. We must notify someone’)” (69). This meaning is practical, certainly (and no doubt what Eborn intends.) But Price’s parenthetical insertion affirms Eborn’s meaning while suggesting another—for both the question and the unusual reply it evokes. “You were here before me. Tell me. Tell me,” the Patrolman answers with peculiar intensity, his “skin like ashes” (69). The repetition itself is strange enough to lodge in Eborn’s mind and resurface three days later in his parents’ home—just after his vision of himself as a balked, “scrupulous” Cordelia and prior to the appearance of the ghosts (122). Significantly, Eborn’s question is a neat inversion of Price’s own to his mother shortly after Will’s death: “Who was I to him” (*CP* 271)? Though that

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<sup>16</sup> The question—and indeed the pathos—of what the Eborns knew or did not know recalls a point Hans Castorp raises succinctly after viewing the hidden Temple of Death: “Were they, those children of the sun, so sweetly courteous to each other in silent recognition of that horror?” he wonders. In the next breath, however (and without fanfare), he downplays the importance of this question, deciding (regardless) that “It would be a fine and right conclusion that they drew” (Mann, *The Magic Mountain* 495).

exchange is missing from the novel, the patrolman's odd response closely echoes Elizabeth's reply to Price: "You tell me. You know more than I" (*CP* 271).

In this light, Eborn's statement that the wrecked boy "is my parents, may also be me" (76) unfolds with new riches—revealing the true nature of Eborn's calling and the profoundly spiritual obstacles with which he must battle to fulfill it. The task has never been to "save" (a bitter, hopeless undertaking), but to dare participation as life-affirming witness to a splendid and terrible mystery at the literal source of his life. Juxtaposing a vision of ruin and blood-sacrifice with glimpses of a countervailing force and meaning, the wreck scene might well have been Eborn's own "Snow" moment—the one in which the hero, "if he does not find the Grail" nevertheless "divines it in his deathly dream" (Mann, "Making of *The Magic Mountain* 727). Mann's essay asserts that his *Magic Mountain* is above all "a novel of *initiation*" (725), and Campbell calls Hans Castorp's symbolic "Grail" vision and realization in the "Snow" chapter the "central ordering point" in his long corrective process—preparation for an ultimate act of "bestowal" (*CM* 643).<sup>17</sup>

In a parallel sense, Price's wreck scene places upon Eborn (in striking archetypal form) the Grail initiate's burden of interpretation and response. Schiff has made the astute suggestion that the Latin prefix "E" marks Eborn as one who is "'not' born or has not yet been born" into an adult existence (*Understanding* 144).<sup>18</sup> As with all initiations,

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<sup>17</sup> Vowing that he will allow Death "no sovereignty over [his] thoughts" (*Magic Mountain* 497), Hans gradually emerges from the safety of self-isolation, offering himself ultimately on the battlefield, driven by loyalty and love for his people.

<sup>18</sup> Schiff's observation is general and in no way tied to the wreck scene, though his reading is nicely supported there in the imagery of pregnancy and deadly "birth"—and in Eborn's pained identification with the trapped man. Schiff connects his remarks with Price's autobiographical observation that "in a central part of his mind" every human being is a child still, until his parents have died (*Understanding* 143-44).

however, the key to Eborn's further passage seems much more specific—a revision not of selfishness *per se*, but of the highly charged silence he regrets days later at the family home as he sees “(first time in three days)<sup>19</sup>. . . the dead boy, the chanting Patrolman—‘Tell me, tell *me* [who he was]’” (123). The Grail question, Emma Jung makes clear, is above all an acknowledgement and acceptance of the family legacy. “By means of his question,” she says, “Perceval reveals himself to be a descendant and establishes the connection with his ancestors” (*The Grail Legend* 295). In the de Boron version of the story, in fact, Perceval's question initiates the flow of secret information carefully guarded through the generations and handed down orally from father to son once the son reached maturity. Had he sought to comprehend the mystery, suggests Parzival's cousin Sigune in Wolfram's *Parzival*, he would have been “a stranger” to Care (226). As the one product of Lou and Todd, Eborn is in some sense both trapped and unborn while he fails to inquire, leaving their legacy buried and refused.

“Love stands opposed to death,” claims Mann's Hans Castorp—asserting after his terrifying vision, “It is love, not reason, that is stronger than death. Only Love, not reason, gives sweet thoughts. And from love and sweetness alone can form come . . . always in silent recognition of the blood-sacrifice” (*Magic Mountain* 496). Indeed, commending the couples “so sweetly courteous” in defiance of Death, Hans returns from his vision confirmed in Love's connection not with Death and Disease (inevitable conditions of life), but with what he calls *homo dei* (496)—what Jung terms “a divine life

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<sup>19</sup> Coupled with the Patrolman's question and odd demeanor, this emphasis upon “three days” seems especially significant—the first in a flood of allusions to biblical accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection. This interval is stressed more than once, for the three days between the wreck and Tom's visual encounter with the ghosts is the same period during which Eborn writes his scene of his parents' meeting.

in Man” (qtd. in Campbell 645).<sup>20</sup> This realization, in fact, is remarkably like that expressed in Price’s epigraph from *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. Sung by three guards who overlook the sleeping city, the song’s final stanza encapsulates the opera’s theme and foreshadows the apotheosis of the lovers at the close of the opera. Indeed, its revelations go far beyond sentiment and praise of domestic bliss to make what is (in both Price’s novel and the opera) a hair-raising and profoundly metaphysical point about Love’s power: “*You husbands and wives, who lie in one another’s loving arms, / You are the bridge across the gulf over which the dead go again into life! / Hallowed be your work of love.*”

In selecting this epigraph for the novel, Price places himself in the role of Hoffmannsthal’s *Night Watchmen*—announcing early a truth that his principals, like those in the opera, have yet to realize and enact. Like Hoffmannsthal’s *Crystal Empress*, Eborn is not quickly “corrected” and reconciled to this central realization and the task it sets before him—the conception of his own “hallowed work of love” to preserve and mirror that of his parents. Such love, particularly his own for that which has been lost, is the last thing he can bear to acknowledge, and he turns from the wreck scene (new emblem of the mystery) as moments before he had turned from the family home, sure it could tell him nothing now, make no reply to questions—if he’d had questions for it” (57). Having burned the papers of “the boy, the girl; crushed, diseased, now dead” (60),

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<sup>20</sup> Significantly, Mann describes Hans’ coming to consciousness in terms which evoke both birth and the biblical freeing of Lazarus from literal and figurative “bonds” in death. As he wakes from his healing vision in the snow, Hans finds that “The bonds held fast that kept his limbs involved” so that he has “a hard struggle to free himself” (497). “Up, up! Open your eyes!” cries a voice in Hans’ mind. “These are your limbs, your legs here in the snow! Pull yourself together, and up! Look—fair weather” (497)! Eborn, by contrast, cannot yet envision such transformation, seeing only the boy “born” dying from the wreck.

Eborn drives home “[straining] not to think—of the dead boy; the woman. . .”—but above all (and with unnatural dread) of “his name as witness, in the hands of police” (70).

This last thought is especially telling, for as yet Eborn’s “sympathy with death” seems not transcended but confirmed by his experience at the wreck, leaving him burdened with news antithetical to the credo outlined in his work essay. The “hardest shield” [of his work] seems quite useless now, and driving home “as though he were made of glass . . . huddled at the mercy of objects” (71), Eborn recalls a web of dreams and disasters that now seem to him intimately connected. In response, however, his questions trend not toward meaning, but toward agency—for in truth his primary goal is not to understand, but to control. Recalling his opening dream of a wreck (which seems to him “fulfilled” and “ended” in the “black allegory” of his mother’s hemorrhage), Eborn connects both disasters with “today’s dead boy, an intimate stranger,” in whom “the omen had reopened, metastasized” (71). Couched in the language of wounds and of unpredictable and proliferating disease, the thought hints again at a link between the wrecked boy and Todd Eborn. “When would it close,” Eborn thinks, “life proceed unthreatened, not darkly planned” (71)? The thought lays bare his uncertainty—his lack of knowledge and inability to control events. Yet he declares at once, “I am willing these deaths and my will is obeyed” (71), expanding his earlier assertion that the dream-deaths of friends and the “bleeding brain” of his mother are connected through his own desire for freedom: “sent on them . . . sent on her; *wished* on her by him for years, in pity, impatience, embarrassment” (30). Shocking and grandiose as such claims might seem (not least since the boy *is* actually a stranger), they resemble nothing so much as nine-year-old Preacher’s guilt-riddled fantasy of controlling his father’s pulse. Embattled as

he is, Eborn is increasingly desperate (as he writes in the work essay) “to understand, if not control, disorder in the world and in those I love,”<sup>21</sup> and his assumption of guilt here seems a strategy, however unconscious, for accomplishing both.

But it would be wrong to dismiss Eborn’s subjective reading entirely. Eborn is right—in fact long overdue—in reading certain events as signs meant for him. As we have seen, synchronicity (like the “*harmonia praestabilita*” of which Schopenhauer writes) possesses a subjective as well as objective dimension, linked to the psyche of the observer. The real problem is not that Eborn interprets events subjectively, but that he does so exclusively and from his own darkness. He eschews the objective component (the world, others) almost entirely and scarcely registers events that counter his dark view—matters Price takes care to indicate. Eborn does not, for example, reflect on his battle with “whatever had fought his nap” in the study on the day of Lou’s death (43). Nor does he recall the dream (immediately after) in which his parents, “brisk, surefooted, unblinking” had moved past him to serve as guides for the children (43). Not till near the novel’s end does Eborn think again of his mother’s mysterious, thwarted message—refused by him, as he refuses the odd pressure filling his study, “pumped full in regular strokes, as by a heart” (41). At the novel’s end, this same phenomenon precedes the arrival of the Eborns’ ghosts in a flood of light, leading Gary Ciuba to observe that Eborn has throughout been blind “to the transcendent story in which he participates” (204, n. 3).

Yet the terror and absolute precision with which Eborn repeats key errors suggests not ignorance, but increasingly stubborn awareness and avoidance. It is Eborn—not the narration enclosing him—who frames his odd experience in the study as a battle with an

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<sup>21</sup> Price’s own version of the work essay reads rather differently, hoping “to understand, if not control, *disorder in myself* and in those I love [my emphasis]. . .” (“Finding Work” 19).

unseen presence, one from whom he fears “not . . . harm, but . . . nearness” (41). On some level Eborn knows what is happening and merely wishes it to cease. By releasing the pressure in his study, he delays the encounter his consciousness (and the “large world”) has been seeking to announce. But his drive home from the wreck finds him in a similar state of denial. “It will end,” Eborn thinks, “when I let it . . . When I’ve stripped all attachments from myself; stand clean of my family, friends, hindering strangers; stand alone, my own” (71). This had been the goal of his earlier attempt at purgation, and Price’s narration correlates the two errors precisely when Eborn glances at the box of pictures and “[thinks] once more (untouched by regret for the barrel of ashes), ‘That much is done. Now I breathe new air. My life begins [my emphasis]’” (71). Nothing could be further from the truth, for Eborn has momentarily regressed, returning (consciously, at least) to his state of mind before encountering the wrecked boy. His metaphor of birth is both ironic and difficult to miss, but Price pushes the irony further. Within moments (arrived safely home), Eborn entirely disavows his uncanny experience (much as he had the pressure in his study),<sup>22</sup> deciding that he has been “briefly dunked in madness” (71).

Noting that Price has “some familiarity” with the “science” of alchemy, Lynn Veach Sadler makes the intriguing observation that in several works Price’s plots and his artistic “technique” display affinities with an alchemical cure called the “Paracelsian Overplus” (“The ‘Mystical Grotesque’ in the Life and Work of Reynolds Price” 37). Unlike “the standard Galenic mode” (which proposes that illness be corrected through an antidote), the Paracelsian overplus “applies the same matter until the patient surfeits and

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<sup>22</sup> Having opened the door to his study, Eborn “[feels] the room behind him subside” and turns to see “a room now as normal as a lobby” (42). “‘Safe,’” he thinks, and then—as if in explanation—“‘I am very tired’” (42).

‘comes right’ (or at least ‘better’)” (37). Sadler finds this technique particularly evident in Price’s story “Walking Lessons,” which ends *Permanent Errors*. The only entry in a section titled “The Alchemist,” the novella displays a pattern of repeated flight and confrontation as the unnamed narrator (a writer) “flees the suicide of his wife only to have to confront head-on another dying woman, who defeats her own death wish” (“The ‘Mystical Grotesque’” 37).

Sadler does not mention *Love and Work* in this context, yet Eborn’s hermetic education seems already to have taken this rigorous form. Increasingly, he has been confronted not merely with challenges and opportunities for reflection, but with images, phrases, and situations linked to the central story and “poison” he would deny and correct—what he calls the “fatal error of Western Man!” and decries as waste and ruin in the lives of his parents (58). As Ciuba asserts, Eborn still sees love “not as spiritual identification but only as . . . proprietary passion,” loathing “the hated genitive of possession” (Ciuba 194). Indeed, what causes Eborn to “surfeit” on the evening of the wreck is another instance of this toxic genitive applied—this time more directly to him.

Though Eborn has shaken off the significance of the wreck (if not its emotional effects), the specter and legacy of the wrecked boy soon confront him in an entirely new way. That evening, at a dinner for a young colleague (Ted) and his “wife-to-be,” Eborn sits silent and isolated, unable to follow the conversation. He sees them all “as if through the thick lens of age” and is chilled to see Jane (a “girl he’d known all his life”) now “receding from him with a silent rush” (71-72). Watching her tell a story to Ted and Alix, he catches only pieces of the tale and is puzzled to see the two “listen[ing]

gravely . . . as though she were giving [as he might] clear patterns for life that any fool could follow” (72). Overhearing her mention of open hearts, “perfect loyalty, merciless honesty,” Eborn believes she describes Ted and Alix. But within moments he is shaken to realize that she is recounting the start (and background) of her courtship with Tom. Jane’s first foray into narrative territory is both natural and appropriate, and her tone is light as she weaves (smiling) a humorous tale of the moment Tom won her heart. But she clinches the moment with a sentence that resounds ominously for Eborn, strongly echoing the words (if not the tone) of his parents own *liebestod*: “So I knew he was mine—or would have to be, if I’d have a life at all” (73).

Given Eborn’s anxieties, his opening dream of wrecked male friends, and his decidedly odd experiences at the wreck, the moment is unbearably charged. Struggling to focus and “to place [Jane’s] story in his life as he recalled it”(73), Eborn feels himself “receding not running” internally, sure at first that he is merely tired and that he “control[s] the speed” at which he withdraws (74). But when Ted turns, grinning, to ask, “Is that your story, Tom?” Eborn is pushed finally into crisis. Ted means nothing more than to prompt Eborn’s own recollections of his courtship with Jane, yet the question resounds weirdly with the unresolved issues of Eborn’s day. In their “proprietary passion,” Jane’s words recall his parents’ own written claims and the story Eborn has tried to disavow—and certainly not repeat. Pinned by Ted’s question, Eborn has what Price paints as an out-of-body experience—his mind’s eye speeding upward to see that “miles below . . . Jane had flapped out her heart like a cheap bolt of goods and called it his also” (74 ). After that he sees only “pressure, black against his face” and flees in

“clenched terror,” thinking of his guests now as “strangers, silent and hunched and misconstruing” (74).

Eborn’s silence, his panic, and his image of “guests” as “misconstruing” strangers recall his earlier moments of anxiety as witness and tale-bearer. In this context, however, his reaction points more clearly than ever to the personal crux of his dilemma as man and artist: he is in two minds about love itself—and his grasp on his own central “story” seems to be slipping away. Though he has long believed in his own powers to warn and delight, offering “clear patterns for life,” he has lately allowed personal sorrow to cloud his view (and even his memory) of actual events, threatening both his marriage and his work. Suddenly doubting his own powers of witness, Eborn is frozen in fear and uncertainty, mind racing through a chain of implied and barely suppressed questions: *What is the love story that he has to tell—and to what purpose? And how can he narrate a complex tale of love to “misconstruing” strangers when his own experience and long-held vision of love is rapidly dissolving?*

James Schiff argues, with some justification, that Eborn’s aversion (in both life and work) is to love itself. “Such trusting, all-consuming love,” Schiff writes “is simply a lie to Eborn, a man largely incapable of love, and he fervently believes his parents led lives of boredom, self-deception, and futility” (142). But much evidence suggests that Eborn (like the Hemingway Price describes as an “infinitely delicate, infinitely suffering thing”)<sup>23</sup> is in one sense *too* capable of love and highly sensitized to its sorrows. The issue of what Eborn “fervently believes” is more complex than Schiff suggests—and is in

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<sup>23</sup> Price explains that while visiting Hemingway’s Key West home for the first time, he had a “strong and unexpected” response to the place—“the rising sense” that he was “accompanied by more than [his] friend.” Though recalling the first adjective as “*delicate*,” he thought at once of T.S. Eliot’s lines: “I am moved by fancies that are curled / Around these images, and cling: / The notion of some infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering thing” (“For Ernest Hemingway” 137).

fact what Eborn is struggling (albeit unconsciously) to decide. Schiff's reading seems applicable for much of the novel, for Eborn has a great capacity for bluster and repeatedly brands any expression of sentiment as a "lie." Yet Eborn reveals just as "fervently" (and quite near the end) that for twelve years—the entire length of his career—he has sought not to warn against, but to *believe* in a love like his parents' and to extol their knowledge, which he'd "peddled prettily . . . in all his work" (120). The contrast is extreme, bringing to mind Gottfried's complaint in his *Tristan* of readers (and lovers) who would either "bathe in bliss" or wallow in sorrow (qtd. in Campbell, *CM* 38). Averse to the one, Eborn seems to have fled to the other, yet the truth he seeks is a balance, and he cannot move forward—in life or in art—until he has resolved this dilemma.

This confluence of forces drives Eborn at last toward a remorse he has long denied but does not yet fully comprehend. Fleeing upstairs, he repeats three times, "I am sorry," and for the time being can find no other words to say. Yet he feels an ambiguous compunction for the engaged couple, for Jane, for the wrecked boy, and most of all (finally) for the "barrel of ashes" and the fire with which he fears he has "hacked all of us . . . Father, Mother, me and therefore Jane—loose from our only tether, the past; our proofs of a constant need and use for love, however less strong, less lasting than our skins the love must be" (76).

Eborn's admission is a clear indication of progress. Yet the next sentence notes plainly that this "*seemed* the thing he was sorry for [my emphasis]" (76), and such a hint—paired with Eborn's unnecessarily scrupulous qualification regarding love—suggests lingering resistance at a much deeper level of consciousness. Not fully comprehending his dis-ease in regard to his parents' love story, Eborn thinks of the fire

itself as his error. Bitter and adrift, he recalls Odysseus' offering of goats' blood as "food" for the hungry shades of his parents (in exchange for their guidance.) Admitting that "most of the world's rites and monuments" were attempts to gather the knowledge of the dead—"their. . . hold on our present, which they easily steer" (77)—Eborn decides with characteristic drama that "heart's blood" will be required to force his own dead to speak. Ironically (for they have been "speaking" already, only to be ignored) Eborn is at a loss for how to proceed.

Yet that seems not to matter, for when he returns downstairs, he discovers a "monument" that pushes him (though recalcitrant) in the correct direction. Though Ted and Alix have already departed, Ted has left Eborn a poem—a memorial tribute to Lou that acknowledges her difficult life but offers a portrait of her contentment with the day-old Eborn. Eborn feels chastened by Ted's "quick plain picture" of his mother—though he reacts first with admiration, as he had to Lou's "clear foresight," instinctive skill, and efficiency in rendering each day of his father's last month in her journal (25). Neither death, Eborn realizes, has evoked a written response from *him* (their own son), and Ted's poem makes him feel "condemned in his baroque retreat, his filagree shields which had shattered at a touch" (81).

Predictably, however, Eborn finds fault with Ted's last stanza, which shows Lou as "the Bethlehem Mary"—rather than "the baffled widow of Nazareth, abandoned" (81)—radiant and paradoxically content (as mother) at the core of an otherwise difficult life:

A girl who has weathered an orphanhood,  
Daily props a soaked husband through the endless Depression,  
Curves this moment on the day-old son  
Her body has built in less than a year

.....  
He need not grin, may foul his can,  
Scald her hands in ammonia. She bears that lightly,  
Being where she belongs.  
I welcome her there. (80)

Eborn's real objection (implied by the icon he prefers) may be triggered by the poem's last line. For both the poem and its penultimate line omit the missing father and lover, defining Lou's life solely in terms of her son (who had also "abandoned" her). "My mother's life was larger than this," he asserts, finding Ted's image "lovely . . . not beautiful" and feeling instantly compelled to "prove it" through his work (81). Initially, the moment seems ominous, for Eborn's thought arrives "as suddenly as all his previous motives for work," and again he would use work not to comprehend, but to control the thing he dreads. Reversing his view that the dead "easily steer" our lives, Eborn is again sure that he can find the solution—"the available truth which [his parents] died without—and endure without (the lives of his parents being now at his mercy)" (81). His work, Eborn decides, will be his offering to the dead, "so the dead might speak, be spoken to" (81), and the next morning, having cleared his desk of all but the photo of his parents on the bridge, he begins three days of work to explore the scene of their fateful (and in his view, perilous) first meeting. He expects to reveal the background of "the baffled widow," but by consenting to this task long avoided—by "ask[ing] to be told"—Eborn uncovers far more than he had expected.

Knowing only that his parents met skating at a frozen pond (having come with other people), Eborn has no choice but to imagine his way through the possibilities. Yet instinctively, seeking to glimpse who they were (who *Todd* was), he makes the crucial choice to inhabit Lou's consciousness, witnessing Todd's grace and threatened beauty

through her eyes. Eborn's choice is critical, since for the first time he abandons the superior perspective of judgment and through Lou enters more fully into the realm of actual (though imagined) experience. He has begun to move toward Keats' negative capability in envisioning their story. Struck immediately by Todd's skill and his "elaborate power, so simply displayed," Lou chooses to be Todd's witness—"need her or not" (86)—and in the most important sense, this is Eborn's choice as well.

Ironically, Daniel Frederick Daniel sees a fair amount of projection in this account of the Eborns' courtship, concluding that Eborn's "inability to love" here "imposes itself on characters who are themselves essentially isolated" (*Within and Without a Region* 111). In Eborn's scene, Todd at nineteen is burdened already with a sense of duty to others (including a needy date) and skates alone and superbly, enjoying his freedom—though he has already taken the path to bootleg liquor. Lou (an orphan) is essentially alone, neglected by her drunk boyfriend and burdened with a heightened sense of loss. Seeing this, Daniel suggests that this "expression of a dark determinism at work" in Lou's world is essentially a projection of Eborn's, one that "mirrors her creator's apparent helplessness in the grasp of larger forces" (111). But this assessment overlooks several facts beyond Eborn's ability to manipulate. Though Eborn must imagine the incident at the pond, he has not invented either their circumstances or their emotional, passionate voices (heard already in the papers he burned at the house.) As Daniel notes, they are teenagers here, burdened with the fragility of teenagers, and Price here exercises his usual ability to capture their passionate voices (*Within and Without* 109-110). But more important for their "credibility" (and the credibility of Eborn's "scene") is the fact

that their models (Will and Elizabeth Price) were heavily burdened with the circumstances Eborn describes.

At this age Todd (like the young Will Price) was embroiled in family duties and alcoholism, followed by lifelong hypochondria, and Lou Attwater (like Price's mother Elizabeth) was an orphan subjected to a stream of early and damaging losses. Despite her resilience, humor, and love of sentiment (*all* of which are evident in this scene), Lou's caution and perception of darkness are no doubt hard-earned and genuine. In a radio interview with Frank Stasio, Price revealed that depressive tendencies ran in both sides of his family. The men "medicated" themselves with alcohol, and the women suffered (but sometimes recovered from) crushing depression (*State of Things*, 12 June 2006). Late in life, Price reports, his own mother observed of her life, "I've always been the Jonah"—the one who is heaved overboard in a storm (*CP* 153). What Daniel seems most to resist in Eborn's scene is its lack of "enough sentiment," and its glimpse at "the seed of future pain" (*Within and Without* 111-12). But to omit such a glimpse would be to impose a corrective as rigid as Eborn's own—but to err the other way, toward "bliss."

What is surprising about Eborn's scene, in fact, is not its darkness but its sudden sense of balance—the degree to which it acquiesces (as Eborn could not previously) to passion, humor, and a sense not of error (Eborn's "Fatal Error of Western Man!"), but of rightness. Though struck by Todd's singular grace and his heedlessness (nearly skating over the dam), Lou does not idolize him, and there is pride, humor, and self-possession in her dawning love. When her date sends Todd to fetch her (as she waits, sulking, in the car), she studies him and "wonder[s] mildly" that a boy with his grace and skill could "look as plain from the neck-up" and that he would "duck round" at the bidding of some

silly girl and her own drunk boyfriend (88). Having thought herself “near to pity . . . for this dumb boy barked at her window,” she begins to be curious about his story (88-89). What lives and breathes for the first time in this scene (offered on its own terms) is the grounding of the lovers’ compulsion in “spiritual identification”—the thing Gary Ciuba finds lacking in Eborn’s earlier understanding of love (194). Most surprising, however, is that Lou herself soon utters (without prejudice from Eborn) a sudden declaration like those from which he has recoiled many times: “*I will love him, no question of must, all my life. I begin this moment.*” But this avowal comes privately (in Lou’s own mind)—without grasping or overt claims. And significantly, it occurs at the end of a long and delicate exchange in which Lou and Todd, yielding to attraction and curiosity, trade their hard stories.

Like Tristan and Iseult, Eborn’s lovers share scars and face “their ugliest chances” at the outset (*L&W* 111), drinking death and bitterness (so to speak) in a scene which Ciuba describes brilliantly as “played on the edge of heartbreak” (52). Yet they are not “poisoned,” as Eborn had believed—pawns duped and paralyzed by trick, accident, or delusion. Instead, this mutual renunciation—as in Wagner’s revision of Gottfried’s tale—reveals an almost metaphysical connection, glimpsed in a moment of striking and shared insight. Joseph Campbell agrees with August Closs that the love potion is not the cause of the love between Tristan and Iseult, but merely a symbol of it (*CM* 240). Quoting the Tristan study by Gottfried Weber of Cologne, he points out that the potion is ““a metaphor for that psychological moment in love when two people of strongly sensual disposition lose control of the human faculty of free choice, under the influence of an already vehement, unsuspected, inward approach to each other”” (*CM* 241). But this

process, as Weber goes on to observe, “ ‘is elevated by the poet into an objective experience of an existential absolute and described as an independent force, more than human, opening out to the transcendent’ ” (qtd. in Campbell, *CM* 241-42). “Tristan and Iseut . . . came into this world to recognize and name each other,” reads Pierre Nogare’s twentieth-century rendering of the tale—in order, that is, to give sight and voice to one another’s lives (Grimbert *lxxii*). Lou and Todd exhibit a similar kind of mutual visibility and spiritual identification as each elicits from the other a glimpse of secret suffering—the history that defines them and has driven them together. And significantly, this charged but delicate portion of the scene is the first time Eborn uses narrative to “ask” concerning his father’s pain—albeit in the voice of his mother and in an exchange begun by Todd himself:

*“I believed your pain, which you said was loss. You could honor mine—“He pauses, unfinished; the pause greatly lengthens.  
 “—Which is what?” she says.  
 He knows. She had made him know. “Duty,” he says, “to the people I must love. Some of them I do—“  
 Lou says to herself, shuddering with the cold they have both forgot,  
 “I will love him, no question of must, all my life. I begin this moment.”*  
 (98)

Lou’s decision, however, leads to further adventures, previewing their years-long tale of love and of woe. For Todd is bound for the bootlegger’s house, bringing Lou along, and as she stands there, on the steps behind him, Lou imagines he is “changing before her” and “sliding toward strangeness,” for even his voice (suddenly “low and rough”) seems “bearded, veiled”—not that of the boy she has followed (102). Moments later, when Todd pretends death to amuse the bootleggers’ daughter, she thinks in terror (remembering her losses), “ ‘*They all fly from me*’ ” (104). But as Rooke observes, Lou’s thought of herself as *victim* is balanced by awareness of her own dark tendencies—“ ‘her

own need and readiness for ruin’ ”—and her mature understanding that “ ‘Death is not the only fear’ ” (Rooke 84). Such a vision, coming from Eborn, is remarkable indeed.

As Eborn’s scene ends, even its “narrative bones” show that it strikes Price’s mark, for it moves well past Eborn’s previous inability to “dramatize” what Price calls “the polar agonies of love, need, contingency and of solitude, hate, freedom” (“For Ernest Hemingway”141).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the scene’s final lines *encapsulate* this tension in a powerful and significant moment of visual arrest that constitutes Eborn’s unique revelation and “Snow” moment. Having faked his death for the amusement of the bootlegger’s daughter, Todd rises from the snow and steps not toward the laughing girl but instead towards the orphaned Lou, “his broad smile fading” as he takes her hand “pale from fear” (104). “*Caught,*” he says, before she can make the choice to “stand or run” (104). Lou takes back her hand but remains fixed upon his face. “*Everybody’s caught,*” she says finally, but takes the lead, turning to walk before him in the snow “—a speed she chooses so that he can follow, whoever he is or will become” ( 104). This moment, according to Ciuba, “recreat[es] the single moment that contains their whole future. . .” (198) — previewing the still-secret news that even in death Todd has come to claim her.

Daniel cites the moment as evidence of grim determinism and projection in Eborn’s scene (*Within and Without* 111). Yet Lou’s “*Everybody*” admits another reading—as does the attitude with which she takes the lead, walking before Todd and allowing him to follow, though uncertain of who “he is or will become” (*L&W* 104). Ready and open-eyed, Lou knows not only that “Death isn’t the only fear” (103), but that

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<sup>24</sup> In “For Ernest Hemingway,” Price observes that Hemingway’s work failed him in one sense because of “pain whose precise nature and origin he did not begin to face” until late in his career and “could not adequately dramatize: the polar agonies of love, need, contingency and of solitude, hate, and freedom” (141).

everyone suffers—and moves on. The only question is *how*? So against their will, almost, Lou and Todd love—yet surrender gladly and with open eyes. In this resolution, as Ciuba so beautifully observes, “The restless bondsman is once more captured at heart, and the perpetual orphan again dares to love a man who will hurt and leave her” (198). Neither has succumbed to fear.

Nor has their witness. As Gary Ciuba indicates, Eborn’s intimation of future sorrows is far less compelling than his rediscovery of “the primal love with which he had lost all connection” (198). Lou and Todd, he writes, “seem drawn together by forces of nature, fundamental laws of physics, that culminate when Todd catches Lou and then trails after her. Eborn’s art has caught his parents for all time in their permanent and exclusive mutuality as they fix themselves upon each other” (198). In doing so, Eborn takes the first step toward healing himself, for though he may take a while to absorb it, what he has found is a new reading of a story he thought he knew, having reclaimed (in Ciuba’s words) “a larger part of the story than he had ever previously intuited”—one that “makes his initial chapter already seem part of a great artistic unity” (198). Indeed, with this scene Eborn enters a long literary tradition, the tale of “fated lovers”—and Price previews his own “great artistic unity” and foray into that tradition in *A Great Circle*.

Despite widely varying critical reactions to the scene, its writing clearly opens a kind of door for the closeted Eborn. Above all it marks the beginning of gradual but substantial erosion in his resistance as son and writer, and this process is analogous to the one through which Eborn finds himself gradually “*won, not caught*” on drives to his family home (19). Though beginning each trip from a labored sense of duty and compunction, Eborn notes, “a knowledge had always come upon him, at about half-way,

that forces beyond his own guilty will had taken control and were reeling him in—not flapping and gasping but willing and soothed . . .” (19). Beginning without his usual plans or notes—guided only by the photo of his parents “which had waited for years,” Eborn finds himself similarly calmed and rewarded as he constructs the scene of his parents’ first meeting (83). For the first time he writes “easily, with the mild elation of any beginning, but none of the dread,” and drafts “as if transcribing, not inventing at all” (83). This is different from both his clenched effort on the work essay and the unnatural (almost desperate) elation with which he had rushed toward his “suicide” novel—sure that he could “end it truer” (61). On task for the first time, Eborn is struggling not to suppress, avoid, or revise this story, but instead—like Keats writing “above the pink froth of dissolving lungs” (*L&W* 47)—merely to witness it. Early in the novel Eborn had envied Keats’ ability to “see gnats and swallows, be *content* to see them and fix their lives, their dignity, in perfect language; to do one’s work. . .” (47). Three days after beginning his scene, Eborn is exuberant to feel clearly what has so long been missing:

The days had been stripped of all but the work, the effort to focus and hold a gaze which would be both recording and discovering and which, as it focused, would turn sight to fire, his vision the burning glass which makes fire from light (fire for what?—further seeing). (105)

Eborn’s visionary language (with its faint echoes of the Grail’s phoenix-fire) anticipates the novel’s ending (the virtual apotheosis of his parents)—so it is hardly “square wind,” as he’d feared his work essay to be (13). But just as important, his private and immediate reflections on the experience reveal a shift in Eborn’s attitude toward his subject—a new perspective and quality of vision borne out by the scene itself. Despite his admiration for Keats and his avowed dedication to “mystery,” Eborn has till now seemed determined to serve a didactic, not revelatory, function. With a vision as

“crouched and narrowed” as that Price describes in “For Ernest Hemingway,” Eborn (when he’s bent toward this task at all) has been poised primarily to warn, to save—to point out *how and why they suffered*. Till now, in fact, he has fled from “further seeing.” And most recently “fire” (a highly charged word in this novel) has signified only as a means of destruction—never as a tool of vision, as a way to glimpse and reclaim life whole from the ashes. Yet this is precisely what Eborn’s scene begins to accomplish. For both Price and Eborn, these pages—a miniature and complex exercise of “beautiful strength” (the literal meaning of *calisthenic*)—offer a chance to fine-tune his narrative vision, rescuing it from the malaise of personal darkness and doubt. Eborn’s scene, I believe, is the core of Price’s *own* “calisthenic”—the very heart of the larger gesture which is Price’s novel itself. For indeed Eborn’s hermetic “education” as artist leads to (and in some ways culminates) in these pages and his response to them.

Eborn’s urgent desire to share the scene (first with Ted, then aloud with Jane) marks another radical change in his approach to work—one which is not lost on Eborn, but which Jane seems not to observe. Natural as such a process might seem, it is highly unusual for Eborn—a fact revealed only late in the novel, as he gathers his pages for her. Wondering at this “strong wish . . . surely a need” to be heard by her (108), Eborn reflects that he has not read his work to Jane since their childhood. And “since he’d been serious (accepted his life),” he realizes, he has “read his own work aloud to no one but himself-in-a-closet,” loathing the narcissism he associates with public performance (109). Given Eborn’s considerable self-regard in the novel, this last thought is ironic indeed—and dubious, certainly, as explanation of a silence so long-standing and complete. Yet such reflections lay bare the extent to which Eborn has isolated himself (personally and

professionally) not only at mid-life, but from the start of his twelve-year career. In this sense, too, Eborn's drafting of the scene seems to have opened a door for him, revising the situation in the novel's opening pages and suggesting his movement toward self-assessment and change.

That change is gradual, however, and rather awkwardly achieved—a fact that either obscures or discounts it in the view of most critics. Since Eborn includes Jane in reaction to her charge that she has worked for their marriage while he “flings out scraps to slick fat strangers”<sup>25</sup> (107), many critics view his “amends” as worthless—at best, inappropriate; at worst, disingenuous, egotistical, or blind to her needs. Schiff suggests that Eborn's response (like his three-day-devotion to the scene) is essentially a “self-deceptive strategy” allowing him to avoid the real issues (142). Ciuba, who finds the scene itself “facile and false because it was written by a hypocrite,” has little patience for Eborn's insensitivity to Jane (199). There is certainly truth in such views, for what Jane covets in Tom's phone call to Ted is emotional engagement—not (as Eborn tells himself) first right to either his “news” or a reading of the scene. And though Tom asks Jane to listen, he does so only after first requiring her silence: “Will you listen to something? . . .—But *only* listen” (108)? To Jane, already bitter from days of “slinking round [Tom's] stoop” (107), such a demand could hardly be welcome, and it reinforces her complaints of marginalization. Notably, however, Eborn has just made the same demand of Ted—though for reasons he is far more careful to explain. “You can read it tomorrow,” he tells Ted, “if you'll promise not to speak or give an opinion. I know it's

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<sup>25</sup> “Strangers” refers most obviously to Ted—an indication of Jane's fury, since he is no stranger, but a close friend and colleague they have just feasted in their home. But later evidence suggests that Jane may include the Eborns, for whom Tom has labored three days in solitude.

good. It feels wide and clear; but I mustn't hear a word till I'm in head-deep—then rave away, I'll be past you and gone” (106).

Despite his assertion of the scene's quality, Eborn's demand suggests neither ego nor a sense of superiority, but instead a wish to protect what is just now (like a child in the womb) beginning to grow. More vulnerable than ever, Eborn has for three days abandoned himself to mystery—not knowing what will come and not yet trusting what he has at last (and surely from love) consented to witness. From a perspective untainted by Jane's righteous ire (and Tom's undeniable faults), this demand seems altogether reasonable. And given what his relationship with Jane has become, his gradual (eventually eager) inclusion of her seems not condescending but surprisingly generous. Emotionally, in fact, it may seem to him a renaissance like that he experienced while *writing* the scene. For as he gathers his pages, we learn that he had often read to Jane in their childhood—“poems he wrote for her (baffling—baffled . . . ) and his first haunted stories” (109). Coming so late in the novel, this detail is easily overlooked, yet it reveals another (and till now unsuspected) form of intimacy that had once existed between them. And it complements Jane's later reflection that such mysteries about Eborn had once intrigued and delighted her, generating what she calls the “ultimate fuel” of their life . . . : her own curiosity, her need to know him” (128). In this light, Eborn's choice of “amends” and assumption of Jane's “gratitude”—though proven wrong—seem not a matter of ego, but of reawakened memory and trust. Ironically, in the moments before Jane's crushing verdict, he has grasped her distress and is attempting repair:

He saw the chance and meant it: it was true . . . “It began with you—what you said that night when you'd read my piece on work. I had stripped Mother's life; your life—and ours. There were pure kinds of work that involved no products so were hardest of all, being fueled by nothing more

visible than love. These scenes will be a chart of one kind, a work of love which will find exactly that—that love can be work.” (110)

For most of the novel, of course, Eborn has been a master of deceit and “turbid concealment”—primarily in flight from himself. But he has struck to the core, now—the heart of his story—and not surprisingly the “chart” and “work of love” Eborn speaks of sounds quite like the testament Rob Mayfield will commission from his own son Hutch. Tom’s offering to Jane seems genuine and even a bit desperate at the end—the reason that he attempts finally (and against his instincts) to break her silence and “force her undoubted gratitude” (110). Having opened a passageway to “the seam at the core of his life, richest ore he could offer, however embedded in rock and ice” (39), he might well expect her to be curious, but Jane comprehends neither the source of his distress nor his methods for attempting repair. Certainly she does not see what Eborn himself has only begun to grasp and has so far been unable to explain: the relation of their own story to the one that has “caught” him irrevocably at last, demanding examination and response. “Easy lies,” Jane replies to his query. “Your scene and everything you’ve said” (111).

Many critics have granted this assessment (whether literary or moral) far more weight than it deserves, taking Eborn as a narrowly satirical figure and Jane as his opposite: the “moral” and “life-bearing” voice in the novel, a younger equivalent of Lou. Rooke in particular emphasizes this role for Jane, remarking Jane’s willingness to be “the love-centered woman that Lou was” and wondering how far she should be considered “a latter-day Lou” (85). Yet Price describes *both* Tom and Jane as “whey-faced, serious observers of their own minds” (Ray 91), and it is this same quality that marks Jane’s verdict as suspect—especially in “moral” terms. No critic has considered that Jane might launch her “possibly lethal charges” against Eborn and his scene not because it is false

(the product of self-absorbed and ungenerous vision), but precisely because it is true—a new stirring of life which does not clearly include her (114). Critics have been quick to note Eborn’s discomfort before his parents’ immortal and incandescent love—his final, agonized realization that he must “stand in it all his life . . . scalding in their trail” (*L&W* 148). But the novel shows plainly that Jane, too, is “scalded” by the sight of such resilient and generous love—and by her own role as witness to devotions she does not comprehend.

Price makes this point sharply, near the end of the novel, in a brief shift of perspective from Thomas to Jane—the only moment in which her thoughts are directly exposed, unfiltered by Eborn’s own issues. Though dazed by his own recent crises, Tom’s eye lingers briefly on a photo of his mother—her “mouth wide to laugh or to launch a small joke like a fresh-painted dinghy. . .to sweeten the day” (127)—and his recall of Lou’s grace and resilience seems free of the angst, guilt, and denial that usually attend his thoughts of her. In the same instant, however, Price shifts to Jane’s thoughts as she watches and recalls Lou’s laughter—“a corrosive” which washes over her again at the sight, making her jaw clench (128). The contrast could not be more striking, and Jane’s thoughts reveal that her resentment of Lou is both intense and long-standing. Just as important, however, they evince the same “crouched” and self-enclosed vision we’ve come to associate with Eborn. Seeing Tom pause before the photograph, Jane thinks wearily (but with a self-importance worthy of Eborn) that “the ultimate fuel of their life” has in that moment vanished entirely—“her own curiosity, her need to know him” (128). Bitter and condescending, she decides that “He was known. Harmless, tolerable, requiring close care. . .” (128), and she is sure that she comprehends his gaze.

At once, however, Price's narration specifies that she does *not* know, but has misconstrued both his thought and his gesture. Seeing Lou's smile, Eborn has remembered her undelivered message and is searching her face for its meaning. As during the drafting of his scene, Eborn's curiosity—his freedom from certainty—is awakening. Yet Jane (incurious and profoundly certain) misreads the moment as she had misread both his scene and his try at amends, seeing only "the blanched paralysis of one frame frozen in a moving film—no hope of start, continued action, or this movement used for future gestures, promises fulfilled or worked-at at least" (128). Jane's vision is tainted by her own sense of paralysis and exclusion. Too long shut out from the hermetic world of Tom's work and the charmed but closed circle of what Price calls "parental devotion, filial return" ("For Ernest Hemingway" 138), she cannot be expected to fully understand or embrace it. In "The Best Kind of Monument," Price refers again to Hemingway's "lifelong and deepening quest for a nearly hermetic but generous virtue—for sanctity even" (163). And he wonders whether this goal "was communicated to the companions of [Hemingway's] life, as it clearly has been to thousands of readers who never touched the man" (163). The question is profoundly personal, of course—*too* personal, as Price himself points out. Yet Price sees fit to raise it, and the query has profound implications for his handling of the Eborn marriage—especially the confrontation over Eborn's scene. Our single glimpse of Jane's thoughts makes her denial of Tom's scene seem (in retrospect) almost inevitable—revealing her as perhaps the least reliable judge of its truth as an act of love and witness. It is Rooke (a great supporter of Jane) who puts the issue most clearly: "Neither the obsessive darkness of

Eborn's vision nor his personal failures in love . . . vitiate the scenes that he reads to Jane" (84).

In several ways Jane's own image of "scraps" flung to strangers works against her indictment of Tom's scene as "a lie," for despite her intentions, it designates his offering as *food* (however meager) and underscores her resentment of the feast.<sup>26</sup> The words themselves hint at the miraculous feeding from scraps of bread and fish, and this may not be incidental, for it recalls Tom's nightmare from the night of Lou's death. In his dream, Eborn stands on his porch incapable of speech, bitterly resenting the vanloads of strangers ("busy midgets, maggots") who swarm his yard seeking "food" (42). He refuses them—just as (moments earlier) he had refused the ghostly "return" of his parents' presence in the study—weeping to see his parents appear suddenly, leading these strangers as guides. Since then, of course, Eborn has privately offered his scene as "food for the dead, so the dead would speak" (77), and Jane's own words suggest his willingness to give now—"to strangers"—what he had before specifically refused.

Yet Eborn's confidence in his new-found powers is still remarkably fragile, and for the moment all seems lost in Jane's sudden strike against him. He sees in her face—a moment shocking, though long foreshadowed—that she "had been all along (surely secret to both) witness, investigator, prosecutor; now judge and killer" (111). Having relaxed his usual defenses, Eborn is caught naked (so to speak) like Tristan in the bath,<sup>27</sup> a

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<sup>26</sup> The confrontation between these estranged (and childless) spouses has a curious parallel in *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*—one built also around a feast for strangers. When Barak the Dyer brings starving children from the village into their childless home, his wife is bitter and resentful, unable to enjoy either the feast or his gesture. Instead she seems set to refuse him all satisfaction and happiness in the moment: "My longing for that [for children]," she tells him, "I have had to put out of my mind: / now it is for you to put away desires that are dear to you" (Hoffmansthal 10-11).

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Campbell refers to the episode of the bath (from Gottfried's *Tristan*) as the "perilous moment . . . when Isolt tore his disguise away and exposed him as he was, at which instant her dangerous,

violation that sends him reeling internally and groping for response. Yet that response is as startling and ironic as the timing of Jane's attack. Rather than defending himself or the scene, Eborn accepts her verdict entirely, telling himself ("his only triumph") that what she has "killed" had never actually "lived" (111). Even a corpse, he thinks "has moved, breathed a time or two, threaded its blood once at least through the careful net, retracted it once" (112). The suggestion of an unborn or stillborn child is unmistakable and significant—especially given the novel's epigraph. Though he is childless, Eborn has clearly intended his work as a "bridge" between life and death (an antidote to death and loss). Yet once more, in the face of adversity, he resorts not to speech but to silence—reverting to old habits of doubt and denial and disavowing all he has gained (and revealed) in his initial draft of the scene.

Before he can relapse too far or too long, however, the universe acts again. As if to revise and restore a kind of circuit, Ida's phone call arrives like Lou's own in the opening—again marked "personal" for Tom and carrying messages both hidden and overt (112-13). Ida's call reaches its target, however, and though her full message (like Lou's) is temporarily obscured, her call suffices to bring Tom (and Jane) to the homeplace immediately. To them Ida's telephoned news—of light in the house, an open door—suggests a break-in (113). But they will find matters not nearly so simple, on arriving, for the ghosts, as Eborn will soon discover, have returned to their house, and Ida (possessed of the secret Lou had intended for Tom) has fled in stark terror, believing this

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murderous, 'other side' also came into view. In Wagner's opera this archetypal moment is replaced by Isolde's cursing of Tristan as they cross the sea (*CM* 287)—the moment enshrined in Eborn's pencil sketch of Isolde "[flinging] her curse, more enduring than her love, like a wave at Tristan" (22). In Price's short story "Scars," this archetypal scene is played out even more directly as Eborn's counterpart (writer Charles Tamplin) is literally assaulted by a woman while naked and "sapped by a bath" (17). They end in a standoff—"last two alive, only two ever alive and eternal; he brute, she victim" (19).

is what she has seen. Ciuba calls Ida's tale of "the fabulous" a "ghost story" (201), and indeed it is. But given repeated emphasis on the three days during which Eborn writes his scene (and the manner of Ida's flight and offered witness) readers cannot escape echoes of the Resurrection story. Ida's "ghost story" is really her *god-spel*<sup>28</sup>—the same gospel Eborn has been called (after a fashion) to preach. And ironically (though in keeping with biblical accounts) it is she—the simple woman of faith—who serves as tale-bearer, trumping Price's scrupulous and doubting Thomas with her news.

Jane and Tom arrive to find Ida gone, however, and Eborn (who had been grateful for the distraction) must finally confront the enormity of Jane's assault. Once inside the house, Eborn imagines Jane herself as "the breaker, the ravenous thief" (119). Watching in silence as Jane smooths wrinkles from the still-rumpled sheets of Lou's bed—"the one thing [Jane] had left him of all he'd had"—Eborn reaches a moment of near-total surrender (119). When Jane goes downstairs at his urging, he attempts to "erase" her shape from the cloth and weeps at last, acknowledging the ruin from her "possibly lethal charges"—a strike at the remaining live flesh of his heart (119). Having accepted her judgment of his scene as "Easy lies," he reverts to own conviction (not Jane's *own*, surely) that love itself is delusory. Once more he sees as "a delusion never unmasked" the one fact his parents' lives had seemed to reveal—the thing upon which he had managed to ground each word of his scene: "the knowledge and example that love was possible, however scarce; that the aim of life, the end of human effort, is the comprehension, loyalty, generosity which come at last (the light in the circle) to the few who can try. . ." (120). Eborn now seems to doubt that anyone can try—or should. And despite his own sentimental response to "wrinkles left by his mother in her last few nights

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<sup>28</sup> Literally, "good news."

. . . the one thing left” (119), he resists more firmly than ever all signs of softness and sentiment, which strike him as “treacherous” (133).

Checking his mother’s room for missing items, Eborn again rejects the small but vivid tokens<sup>29</sup> of Lou’s emotional life—Todd’s wedding gift of pearls, the pin that had been her mother’s, and an aphorism in newsprint: “*It is a pleasant thought that / when you help a fellow up a steep hill, / you get nearer to the top yourself*” (122). Eborn’s narrative of his parents’ meeting and attraction was grounded in a similar sense of mutual help and flight from hard troubles, and as we have seen already, Eborn has long viewed himself as offering help in his fiction. Yet he rejects the words his mother had chosen, calling them “Easy. And dazed. And a lie” (122). Notably, these are almost the same words Jane had used to attack his scene, and having uttered them, Eborn is doubly poisoned—by Jane’s ire and his own fresh denial. To Jane’s query about what he has found upstairs, Eborn replies, “Nothing . . .” but “then [sees], in his head, himself as Cordelia—blond, white-gowned, soft heels dug-in to tell only truth which in fact will be lie, the white string hung from the cloud-blanked ceiling labeled *Pull Me*. You pull. A black anvil falls on your scrupulous head. *Nothing will come of nothing; speak again*” (122-23).

The intensity of Eborn’s identification with Cordelia—which strikes without warning (another revelation)—strongly suggests anxiety regarding his own refusals and his need to conceal love. For though Cordelia loves Lear dearly (fully capable of the “filial return” her sisters could never provide), she refuses—with disastrous results—to

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<sup>29</sup> By contrast, the speaker in “A Tomb for Will Price,” treasures such items as essential and revelatory elements in the process of “reconstruction”—including Will’s wedding gift of pearls (101).

she speaks her heart under coercion and in the wake of the flattering, manipulative lies her sisters have offered. Determined to offer only an exact—even corrective—statement of filial love and devotion, Cordelia refuses the real plea beneath Lear’s demand, failing both herself and the father she deeply loves. With his own word, *nothing*, Eborn undermines the very things his scene had sought to reconstruct, diminishing the significance and dignity of his parents’ love and again scuttling evidence of his own. Yet he knows in the same moment that his silence and resistance are both futile and disastrous. “*Nothing will come of nothing*,” Eborn thinks, in the old king’s words to Cordelia, and knows that he must “*speak again*” (122).

The intensity of Eborn’s self-loathing at this moment, and his sense of the disaster consequent to his refusals, sharply recalls his silent and distressing encounter with the wrecked boy. Undone by personal grief, Eborn has once more disavowed his own tale of “the boy, the girl; crushed, diseased, now dead” (60). So it can be no surprise that within moments (as police pull up to his house), Eborn sees again (in his mind) the dead boy and “the chanting patrolman—“Tell me, tell *me* [who he was]”” (123). More strongly than before, hints of Golgotha are detectable in Eborn’s memories of the wreck—apt prelude to the coming apotheosis of his parents. Yet predictably, Eborn feels only guilt and terror at the thought that all that sorrowful tale “was not finished” (123). “Even now,” he reflects, unable to move toward the door, “his name—as witness—was passing from cool hand to hand through unknown channels, eternally fluorescent-lit”(123). The thought echoes his anxiety at the wreck regarding “his name as witness in the hands of police” (70). Yet that image is greatly expanded here, emphasizing not the authorities per se, but an unbroken string of readers to whom he envisions falling prey. Despite its connection

to “the police,” the image suggests a library as effectively as either courtroom or station house, and both the apprehension and its trigger seem implicitly connected (through the wrecked and dying boy) to Eborn’s early dream of “maggot” visitors—strangers “swarming his yard” in search of “food” from his dead (42).

But terrifying as these images seem to Eborn, they contain a healing and prophetic truth he has ignored, and this alchemical message arrives again (through Lou’s neighbor Ida) as Tom and Jane work in the kitchen to clean a “coil of shit” left behind by the burglars. Upon seeing the excrement, Eborn (alive to the presence of signs and dark omens) at once sees it as “high-school sign for *finished*--signed and sealed” and brands it “Personal” (132). This word, notes Gary Ciuba, is the same with which Jane had relayed the long-distance calls from his mother and Ida, and his use of it implies expectation of another “ominous summons”—his reading of “an eschatological truth in the scatological sign” at his feet (Ciuba 200). But as Campbell explains, base matter was no obstacle to the alchemists, whose task was to derive a *different* eschatological truth from even such a sign. Quoting Carl Jung’s observation that ““The substance that harbors the divine secret is everywhere,”” Campbell observes that no substance was too foul to defeat their vision of the soul’s separate but indwelling power and primacy (*CM* 272). “One of the most striking traits of alchemical literature,” he writes, “is the frequent representation of its arcana in coarse and even revolting symbols” (*CM* 273). Eborn is in no state to reflect on such things. Yet Ida’s news, the perfect counterpoint to Eborn’s grim inference, soon restores the proper balance—confronting Eborn with an entirely new view of the signs and messages he’s received in the course of the novel.

Flushed and flustered from her flight, Ida is at first reluctant to speak her odd news, hoping that Tom and Jane have already discovered it. “What had happened,” she asks, “—When you got here tonight?—the back door, the light” (137)? When Eborn replies that they’ve searched the house and found “Nothing very much,” she is not surprised. ““Nothing missing,”” she says, “—statement not question,” and feels confirmed in her suspicion that what she’d seen were not housebreakers, but the ghosts of Tom’s parents. Forced to it at last as “the one alive that knows it”—and admitting that Eborn could “tell the story better”—Ida shares her conviction and the deeper secret of what Lou Eborn had seen on the evening of her death. “You may not believe me,” Ida admits, “—I tried to escape it” (139). But feeling that she’s the one “picked out to tell,” and that “the right, the duty” has been put on her by “the dead,” she plunges ahead—a brave and faithful witness (139-40).

When Ida asserts that the house has been taken not by housebreakers, but by Lou and Todd themselves, come to reclaim it, Eborn (still mired in darkness) recoils from a grotesque vision of his parents as “thick-waisted” ghosts, “Heathcliff and Cathy wheezing and varicose . . . ; dead too late” (142-43)! Yet he is patient with Ida and points out the excrement, suggesting that the explanation is “as human as that. End of story. Sorry.” Unlike Eborn, however, Ida is not easily deterred or discouraged. The excrement, she says, is just a boy’s prank—“Just coincidence—a bad boy or two that needs a good smack” (143). But his parents’ story, she asserts is “Not ended . . . There’s another story—or there’s more to yours” (143).

And since, with his doubt, Eborn forces her hand, she tells him Lou’s “secret”—that Lou had seen Todd himself, in the overstuffed living room chair, on the night before

her own death. As Ciuba points out, Lou's account of this event is convincing precisely because of its "absolute naturalness" (201). Though he's been dead for twelve years, Todd appears quietly in his accustomed place—so naturally that Lou does not at first know what is happening and thinks only, "Todd needs a haircut" (145). When she pauses to look back through the door, the vision is gone, and the next day (pressed by Ida, who perceives something odd in her behavior), Lou tells her experience, sharing her bafflement but stressing that "Whatever it is, it's a secret" (146). Once the story is shared, both women agree to Ida's immediate assessment: "'It's a message from God, Lou'" (146). But within half an hour, Lou is dead from an aneurysm.

Hearing *this* story, Eborn believes it at once—prepared by what he himself has reclaimed, glimpsed anew, and admitted to at last in his scene: they are indeed one another's. Todd *would* come for her. Eborn does not doubt it at all, but pauses only to wonder what she saw—"Was he young or old—my father, for her? Did she see the boy she first loved and married or the man who died" (146)?<sup>30</sup> Eyes open at last, eager to see, he experiences a momentary cure like that Price considered for Hemingway's crisis of vision—accepting at last "prevenient Grace, some personal experience of the supernal" ("For Ernest Hemingway" 144).

As Eborn watches, recalling the study "pumped full, in strokes, as by a heart" on the day of Lou's death, Eborn sees the blossoming of the "nothing" he had earlier refused (147). At first sight the Eborns "[occupy] space as firmly as the stove,"—but dimly,

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<sup>30</sup> Years before, in his notebooks, Price had ruminated upon this very point, asking, "How, for instance, does Mother mostly remember my father—as a young boy? Or as the man who died" (125)? While Eborn's scene unveils his parents in "their perfect youth" (the form in which they return at novel's end), "A Tomb for Will Price" chooses the other alternative, showing the graying man in bi-focals and overstuffed chair. This image reflects "the man who died," but also (and crucially) the disguise Price remembers so vividly from his childhood—the man "too old to dream."

standing in “a murk like a skin around them” (a kind of *caul*) and looking to him (147). Seeing this, his heart opens fully and he thinks with elation, “It was not a secret . . . not for Ida. They meant it for me, their message for me, delivered at last” (147). And as he smiles toward them (accepting that “his work, his *knowledge*, was true not lies” and waving back the others) the room begins filling again, as if in response. Light pumps from the Eborns “like arterial blood” till they appear to Thomas clearly “in their perfect youth, years before his birth” and he smiles to be “the agent now of their rehabilitation” (147).

Ciuba asserts (in keeping with Price’s epigraph) that it is “Lou and Todd’s love, not their son’s work,” that “raises them to everlasting life” and that Eborn is “deluded” to think otherwise (203). Yet he asserts just as firmly that Eborn’s novel is “the quickening medium for the return of their spirit-filled flesh” (197). Price’s meaning embraces both statements but is more complex than either can convey—a fact best illustrated by comparisons with “A Tomb for Will Price” and with the final scene of *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. Transforming Eborn’s earlier conceit of his novel as stillborn child, Price’s closing scene suggests (through imagery and staging) a link to “the shadow” and a revelation of regeneration and rebirth dependent on Eborn’s own thawing heart.

In the opera’s final scene, the Emperor is freed in striking supernatural terms from the nearly-petrified “tomb of his body”—a penalty levied for his self-centeredness and his wife’s inability to “cast a shadow” through conception of a child.<sup>31</sup> Noting a “parallel situation” in Tom and Jane’s troubled and childless marriage, Schiff equates Tom’s

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<sup>31</sup> Though Schiff defines the Empress’ failure to “cast a shadow” as an inability to “become pregnant” (*Understanding* 144-45), this emphasizes the symptom rather than the underlying and metaphysical malaise indicated by the phrase (and for the sake of which the penalty of “petrification” is actually applied by higher powers).

condition with that of the Emperor, remarking that Eborn “seems incapable” of the “self-sacrifice and love” demonstrated by the Empress at the end of the opera. But although Eborn seems set to share the fate of the opera’s “petrified man” (the Emperor), he has far more in common with its central figure, the Empress, whose “heart of crystal” is shattered only at the end, freeing the Emperor from the “tomb of his body” (44). A spirit creature, through whose body light shines “like glass,” the Empress is not only self-centered and haughty (like her mate), but remote and disdainful of the incarnate world—a stranger to compassion who resists (with great resourcefulness) Campbell’s “participation in the fragmentation of life.” In this way, she (far more than the Emperor) resembles Eborn, who for most of the novel has yet to “cast a shadow” in life or in art by conceiving (so to speak) his own healing and “hallowed . . . work of love.” The shadow, writes Owen Lee, “is not only a symbol of the children [the Empress] will have, but of her awareness of pain, guilt, death, and love—all the things in human nature she wanted to have, all the things the shadow means” (<[www.metoperafamily.org](http://www.metoperafamily.org)>).

Yet ironically, too, these are the things she has sought to resist and to gather by proxy—not in her own flesh—retaining her distance and bargaining to purchase instead the shadow of the Dyer’s wife. But when her resistance is shattered at last—in a moment of spontaneous empathy and compassion—she beholds her beloved fully for the first time and rises above herself, triggering the remarkable series of events foretold to the Emperor in his imprisonment:

“The dead man shall rise  
out of the tomb of his body—  
the heavenly messengers hasten  
down from the air!”  
Thus it was told me  
when I was in death’s grip.

Now I may live again!  
Already the heavenly host  
is winging its way with song.  
(Hoffmansthal, *Die Fraue Ohne Schatten* 44).

In the same moment, writes Owen Lee, “a shaft of light” (sent by Keikobad, father of the gods) floods across the stage to touch the crystal Empress,” recompense for love and selflessness (<[www.metoperafamily.org](http://www.metoperafamily.org)>). “The meaning of the libretto is explicit,” observes Charles Osborne. “Hoffmannsthal, in explaining it to Strauss, made use of a couple of lines from Goethe: ‘*Von dem Gesetz, das alle Wesen bindet,/ Befreit der Mensch sich, der sich uberwindet.*’ (From the law that governs all life, man is freed by rising above himself)” (<[www.metoperafamily.org](http://www.metoperafamily.org)>). As the opera ends, the shadow becomes a golden bridge as reconciled Emperor and Empress stand above a golden waterfall flowing into the earthly realm. The “seed of life,” the night watchman had announced at the end of Act I (just before the stanza Price quotes), is entrusted not for the sake of the couple, but only for the sake of their love—and surely this is as true of art as it is of biological conception.

The process begun during the drafting of Eborn’s scene finds its apotheosis in the arrival of the ghosts. And while this transaction excludes Jane—at least for the moment—she has never been, perhaps, the best index of Eborn’s capacity for love and selflessness. While Lou and Todd’s mutually sacrificial love has raised them to deathlessness, Eborn’s labors—like those of the speaker in “A Tomb for Will Price”—have “earned them leave to come back here” and display their news, much as Will Price displays it in the tomb (102). Only love makes this possible, Price’s epigraph proclaims, and Eborn’s final vision of the ghosts demonstrates the power of such love to vivify and

resurrect.<sup>32</sup> Witness and transcriber of their tale, Eborn's initial and eager acceptance of them is not mere egotism, but a return to the ground of his life and a reversal of his "Cordelia-like" role throughout the novel: failure to speak his heart, concealment of love. And in this sense the ghosts' arrival promises Eborn's rebirth as well. In this "pulsing light," Ciuba observes, the "childless" Eborn experiences "the engendering love of a lifetime" and "feels in his flesh the creative passion which generated his own being and his parents' unending partnership" (57). "Would there ever be a feast. . . /" sing the unborn children at the end of *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*, "if we were not, secretly, at once the guests and also the hosts" (44).

Yet Eborn experiences secret grief (deeper than guilt or failings "exposed") that his risen parents do not regard him as he might wish or hope. "Sealed in their needlessness," they "face one another only" and do not look at him (147)—just as the "risen body" in "A Tomb for Will Price" smiles toward others, but neither faces nor smiles toward the speaker (son, witness, guide, and guardian of the secret.) Both moments recall the dream in which Eborn's parents pass him, guiding vanloads of strangers toward "the garden," but never looking toward him. "Will a soul at the white-heat need my tending, miss my presence?" Price wonders in "A Tomb for Will Price" (102)—a concern Eborn plainly shares, though he is not yet reconciled (like Price himself, in this much later voice) to rendering his task of witness and revelation "in simple joy" (102). "Ignore my fears," the speaker directs his audience in "A Tomb for

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<sup>32</sup> The same point—that "We live by Love and Love alone"—is at the heart of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, one of Price's favorite operas and one to which (on several counts) he has frequently compared his own *A Generous Man*. As Charles Osborne points out, Hoffmannsthal was inspired to create *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* by the themes and fairytale elements of *The Magic Flute* (<[www.metoperafamily.org](http://www.metoperafamily.org)>). In form and theme, then (though certainly not in style) the two operas are closely related—as are *Love and Work* and *A Generous Man*.

Will Price”—“they are my last secret;/ A burden I never foresaw, but must take (what burden’s foreseen?)” (“Tomb for Will Price” 102). For Eborn, by contrast, the sense of “burden” seems almost intolerable: “He knows he must stand in it all his life—and worse, beyond—in full sight of them, their atrocious joy, but separate, lidless, scalding in their trail” (148). In this moment of shock, personal grief undoes him again (as it had in his dream of his parents) so that he cannot speak “the worst that he knows” (148). In this sense, as Ciuba notes, he is indeed “a failed version of Price’s *homo narrator*,” unable to “utter his terrifying and transcendent conclusion” that ““The dead have their own lives”” (204).

Unable as yet, perhaps. It might be useful to recall (as Price emphasizes in *Three Gospels*) that the original ending of Mark’s gospel ended not in rejoicing and eagerness, but in flight and terror from the Tomb (72; 77). We cannot see beyond this moment and Eborn’s initial reaction—his expectations upended and unhinged, himself “caught” finally as witness to their glory. But already Eborn is far from unchanged, and whatever his fears, the message of love all but branded upon him by the end (clearly marked, still, as “Personal” and for him) revises his vision of a life ending in “dung and death”—as Ciuba so nicely puts it, quoting T.S. Eliot (200). Despite his distress, Eborn has irrevocably (if bitterly) accepted both the revelation and his own role as witness, and the final scene (including his silent realization) speaks volumes concerning both his capacity to love and the vision to which he is now bound, open-eyed, for its sake.

*Love and Work* forms a unique kind of bridge between the early fictions of the “innocent eye” and the quite different approach and narrative vision to be found in *The Surface of Earth* and *The Source of Light*. While exploring the dangers of writing as a

form of love and service, *Love and Work* both risks and accepts them—above all, the quest to bear and communicate a painful (if radiant) vision. In this difficult period of reflection and refashioning, Price has found a way to proceed with transformed, braver vision and at last begin telling his own sacred story.

## CHAPTER 4

### THIS “HIGH TALE OF LOVE AND OF DEATH”: A *GREAT CIRCLE* AND THE WAY OF THE “NOBLE HEART”

My lords, if you would hear a high tale of love and of death, here is that of Tristan and Queen Iseult; how to their full joy, but to their sorrow also, they loved each other, and how at last, they died of that love together upon one day; she by him and he by her.

—Bediér, *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* 3

Price’s trilogy *A Great Circle*—comprising his novels *The Surface of Earth* (1975), *The Source of Light* (1981), and *The Promise of Rest* (1995)—is with good reason regarded by many critics (and by Price himself) as his most monumental accomplishment. And it is a striking illustration of his assertion to William Ray, just after completion of *Surface*, that “the novel [as genre] is unavoidably and gloriously and indispensably *about time* . . . a vision of human beings as they move through time and are dissolved in it” (Ray 117). The active “present” of the books spans the years from 1903-1993—not including (in *The Surface of Earth*) reminiscences and scraps of oral history reaching back as much as two generations earlier. Some illuminate (through tales of their forebears) the precipitous choices of sixteen-year-old Eva Kendal and her teacher Forrest Mayfield—the pair whose elopement triggers all subsequent actions. Others set up the unusual (and partly clandestine) history of Grainger Walters, the black grandson of Forrest’s father (Old Robinson). Grainger is only twelve when *The Surface of Earth* begins, but his remarkable life spans the entire trilogy as he chastens, serves, and

witnesses at close range—bound by love as well as blood—four generations of Mayfield men, the “grand lost boys” who are his secret kin. Old black Bankey Patterson’s guilty tale of roving and waste in the fruitless search for his mother (lost during slavery) may seem less significant at first (*SoE* 64-77). Yet it too, is crucial—setting the stage for this black family’s covert but increasingly significant role in the destinies of the Kendal, Mayfield, and Hutchins families (the primary focus of *The Surface of Earth* and *The Source of Light*.) Just as important, Forrest’s highly charged—and almost mythical—encounter with Bankey at the ironically named Panacea Springs (where Forrest had asked for Eva’s life on a class outing) previews central themes, motifs, and patterns of interaction that recur and intensify throughout the trilogy.

In flight from Eva’s rejection, Forrest has returned to the springs (as to a battle site) when he encounters Old Bankey (almost eighty years old and living at the ruined springhouse). Hearing Forrest’s tale of grief, Bankey (a stranger) invites Forrest to his makeshift home and shares his own wild tales of solitary roaming, romantic entanglements, and makeshift families abandoned—tales that put Forrest in mind of his lost father, Robinson, and function ultimately to turn his quest there. As they share a meal both actual and metaphorical—“their mutual food”—Forrest finds his pain “not so much calmed as pressed . . . down by a greater force” and feels that “his need for rest [has] found perfect harbor in this place like a happy afterworld for heroes destroyed in the war of love. . .” (66-67). As Forrest sleeps, Bankey—driven by empathy and the misery that “pour[s]” into him from Forrest like a jolt of electric current—considers killing him out of mercy. But in a single “instant of touch,” an almost preternatural

awareness reveals to Bankey that he cannot (or must not) help this man<sup>1</sup>—“not give him the peace that lay in his power to render now,” and the next morning they part forever as Forrest sets out to find his father (74). Yet as James Schiff observes, their lines meet fatefully again in each subsequent generation. Della Simmons—lover of young Rob, servant and childhood companion of Hutch’s mother (Rachel)—is Bankey’s direct descendant. So, too, is Julia Patterson, the black woman who aborts the child Ann conceives with Hutch Mayfield in *The Source of Light*. And in *The Promise of Rest*—over eighty years after the meeting at Panacea Springs—Wyatt Bondurant and his sister Ivory (lovers of Hutch and Ann’s son, Wade) emerge as two more of Bankey’s descendants (*Understanding* 81).

The trilogy’s final twist is that Ivory (Wade’s lover when he first meets Wyatt) has borne Wade a son whom the three have been raising in secret, with the help of the boy’s grandmother (Lucy Patterson Bondurant). At Wade’s funeral—the apparent end of the Mayfield/Kendal/Hutchins line—Ivory introduces Hutch and Ann to their grandson (Raven) for the first time, symbolically renewing their hopes for atonement and continuance (both personal and familial.) *The Promise of Rest* ends with the burial of Wade—dead of AIDS contracted from Wyatt (who had committed suicide months before). And in that sense it resolves Bankey’s mad urge (decades earlier) to offer the “peace” of oblivion to Forrest—freeing *him*, at least, from what Price calls “the wheel of desire and time” (*LaT* 546). Yet something had stayed Bankey’s hand on that earlier,

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<sup>1</sup> Bankey is one of Price’s most striking (and peculiar) examples of Price’s black “angels”—a concept later (and more fully) developed in the figure of Grainger Walters. As Price stresses to William Ray, he does not mean to “[claim] supernatural status for black people,” but to make use of the fact that the word *angel* is Greek for “messenger” (128). In this scene, Bankey is quite clearly designated as a “sensitive” who for eight decades has detected “secret signals of kindness or cruelty” or “received from the world ... early warning, or rarely, confirmation of clear path ahead, invitation to safety, pleasure, rest...” (*SoE* 74).

fateful occasion. And as Hutch walks hand in hand with Raven past Wade's grave, he reflects—echoing (more hopefully) Bankey's intuition from long before—that the painful tale has chosen not to end, but to struggle on towards some mysterious (albeit partial) resolution in the next heir. “This child,” Hutch reflects, “knows the last riddle and answer”—carrying the blended hopes and future of all four family lines (353).

This small scene and its secret thread—the more powerful for what Schiff deems its “nearly invisible” beginnings (*Understanding* 81)—goes a long way to illustrate Price's concept of Fate. And it underscores his observations to William Ray (just after completing *The Surface of Earth*) about the gradual and partly mysterious parallel process that had produced the first novel—and indeed the entire trilogy. “The novelist,” Price asserts, “is an organism” producing “elaborate constructs of which it is not entirely conscious,” and this process is not only “a lovely and . . . frightening fact of the novelist's existence,” but also “a lovely and true metaphor or allegory of the shape of most human lives—if those lives can be looked at from a distance, from the aspect of time, decades” (117). And from this perspective, he notes—nearly echoing Schopenhauer's “On An Apparent Intention in the Fate of the Individual”<sup>2</sup>—the characters begin “to [take] on their natural unconscious shapes . . . patterns . . . recurrences . . . destines”—a thing his previous novels had not been able to achieve (117).

As Schiff remarks, the frequency (and sheer number) of these recurrences has troubled some critics, and he agrees that such occurrences often seem “forced and unrealistic” (*Understanding* 77). “For instance,” he notes, “three successive generations of Mayfield men desert their sons; childbirth accounts for the death of seemingly every

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 3, p. 140.

pregnant female . . . ; characters unknowingly share the same specific dreams and nightmares with other characters; blacks continually appear as “angels” to whites, delivering messages and bringing redemption . . .”; and father-child relationships are primary for “numerous” characters (76-77). Schiff nevertheless recognizes that Price is seeking “to demonstrate how dreams, emotions, needs, desires, and even actions are transmitted genetically between family members and over generations” as “situations reenact themselves, and descendants are . . . faced with the same decisions and choices as their parents and grandparents” (77).

It should be noted, however, that Price’s trilogy seems determined not only to “demonstrate” such facts about human experience, but to grapple (in profoundly existential terms) with a view toward their possible meaning. In “Amazing Crossroads in *Love and Work*,” Dan Daniel makes an assertion perhaps even more appropriate to *A Great Circle*: Price’s “insistence” on genetic fate “should be viewed [like the ghosts themselves]<sup>3</sup> as a metaphysical statement” (52)—“a striking embodiment of the supernatural” that “reveal[s] a latent theological view” (52). Such “structures” in Price’s novels, Daniel argues, “are shaped by the belief that there exist meaning, unity, and direction anterior to and beyond those actions occurring in time” (52).

This source of meaning is the “invisible center” that Price had earlier described to William Ray (the “invisible need . . . power . . . force—God, a giant in a cave” dreaming the world) toward which “the less perfect creatures” in the tale seem to yearn (127), and which they approach (though never fully) by gradual stages. But mysteriously, too, this “center,” Price says, is the source of “all sorts of vital and necessary and generally

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<sup>3</sup> *A Great Circle* has its own ghosts, of course (Rob Mayfield; Wyatt Bondurant)—as well as instances of “dreaming back” and other after-death visions.

unheeded messages,” and many of these offer intimations of a lost legacy that may occasionally be glimpsed, but in this life never fully regained (Ray 128). Dreams may point the way, however, and Eva’s dream in *Surface* of “the only school” offers a clear hint that earthly existence itself is a kind of classroom in which the pupils have “lost” a more perfect knowledge that they must struggle to once more attain.<sup>4</sup> In the “school,” Eva encounters a mysterious boy worker who seems to know her and to wait eagerly for her comprehension—asking, as she passes him, “What do you know?” (106). In answer to her query about his name, he says only, “That is part of what you have lost and must learn” (106). When Eva asks, baffled, “How did I get here?” he replies, “By needing to come” (105), but he makes clear (smiling) that she must learn on her own the need that has brought her—the nature of her task and the “name” of the partner with whom she may hope to complete it and thus “launch her own life” (105).

All children hope to improve upon the destinies of their parents—and they bear their genetic legacies (traits of body and personality) as a matter of biological fact. What is unusual in Price’s narratives is the singular intensity of his emphasis upon the fact—and the more radical direction his speculations sometimes take in envisioning possible meanings for it. When fourteen-year-old Hutch arrives at his mother’s ancestral home (glimpsed only once, briefly, in infancy), Price’s narrative insists that Hutch has no need to ask the way because “it was all in his memory” (488). Rising up in him like the “calm” and “courage” Hutch thinks he has earned by deeds, a detailed map arrives whole

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<sup>4</sup> William Merritt Singer’s 1977 MA thesis, “Revelation as Grace: A Study of the Twenty-Two Dreams in Reynolds Price’s *The Surface of Earth*,” offers a thorough reading of dream texts as evidence of Divine Grace and interaction with ordinary life.

in his mind—“more than half as a gift from the lives buried in him and the lonely day and whatever cared for him in the hidden world” (488).

Throughout the trilogy, similar messages—conveyed in a variety of ways—negate purely realistic readings of the novel, and they suggest for such genetic fate a metaphysical and spiritual function akin to that found (and earlier explored) in our discussion of the unique connection between the Tristan and Grail romances. As we have seen, those tales place special emphasis (across successive generations) on the spiritual quest of embattled males wounded by “the wheel of desire and time”—types of the “grand lost boy” we have already linked with both the Grail King and Tristan. And as we have seen, the Grail romances (like Price’s trilogy) stress the advent of redemption and “revision” by a redeeming male child and heir, who must open the way toward provisional healing and a literal *view* to a “cure.” Without doubt *A Great Circle* is Price’s “high tale of love and of death,” and in the trilogy his narrative conversation explores (more fully than before) the “wound” incurred by the heart that yearns toward virtue while engrossed (often disastrously) in pursuit of the beloved.

As Price explained to William Ray, he does not insist upon narrow interpretations of the hidden “center of rest” intimated in his trilogy (127). Yet his epigraph to *Surface*—a version of a passage from Augustine’s *Confessions*, translated and recorded in 1961 with his notes for the novel about himself and Will<sup>5</sup>—makes clear the Divine nature of this center and the implicit difficulties of any man’s “quest for radiant virtue”:

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<sup>5</sup> Price’s 1961 translation (a fuller version of Augustine’s passage) reads as follows:

But you, the Good which needs no other good, always rest, being yourself your rest.  
How could a man teach another man this? How could an angel teach an angel,  
and what angel could teach a man? Rest must be asked of you, sought in you, knocked  
for at you. Then it shall be received, found, opened. (*LaT* 145)

*But You, the Good which needs no good,  
Rest always, being Yourself Your rest.  
What man can teach another man that?  
What angel an angel?  
What angel a man?*  
—Augustine *Confessions*, xiii, 38

Behind Augustine’s narrative, writes Michael Kreyling in “Men without Women: Communities of Desire and Race in *A Great Circle*,” is the negotiation of “a tortuous route from the miasma of simple lust to a promise of rest in the will of God” (282). *A Great Circle*, he argues, opens “an intertextual exchange” with Augustine—attempting to “heal” two aspects of this vision with which Price does not fully agree” (282-83). The first is “the mutual exclusion of loving the things of creation but not the Creator” and the second is “the distance Augustine seeks to make between self and body” (283). Kreyling is correct that the two decades spanned by publication of Price’s trilogy—witnessing “the appearance of AIDS and the public response to it in the West”—have proven especially significant for “our cultural conversation” on “desire and the body” and “the nature of family as social/private hybrid” (282). “Nothing less than this entire conversation,” Kreyling asserts, “is Price’s subject matter in the trilogy”—with the issue of race “complicat[ing] his field” (282). But while this assertion is valuable for glimpsing (in hindsight) the unifying principle in a work Price conceived and executed over a span of thirty-two years, its breadth obscures the discrete and far more personal gesture informing the first two novels—the reason, in fact, for their existence.

Exploration of the volumes in context of their emergence makes clear that *The Surface of Earth* and *The Source of Light* (while partaking of the overall unity described) once fulfilled for Price an entirely different function from *The Promise of Rest*—one more closely tied to his original impulse for a father-son novel. For within the greater

unity of the trilogy (with its themes of love, death, and renewal) lies what William Ray terms the “*Bildungsroman*” of Rob Mayfield (124)—who appears first at seventeen in the aptly named section “The Heart in Dreams.” As Price notes, the tale eventually “comes to rest on the not very broad, but . . . quite strong shoulders of Rob’s son Hutch”—beloved son and “hostage” in the familiar deal with God, which in this instance saved the son, but not his mother Rachel (Ray 124). Yet Rob’s powerful presence (even after his death in *Source*) seems to dominate both volumes—and after drafting the death scene, Price remarks the loss of that “large vitality” with “real regret” in his notebooks (*LaT* 275, 24 May 1979). To an unprecedented degree, *Surface* and *Source* act for Price as narrative “catalyst and alembic” for exploring and rejuvenating the Will energy—precisely as Hutch Mayfield (in Ray’s estimation) serves as “catalyst and alembic for his father’s own rejuvenation,” offering new vision and purpose to his once-radiant, battered life (123).

Indeed, Price’s attempt to “heal” the gap between desire and rest on the surface of earth may be more radical (to modern sensibilities, at least) than Kreyling’s article suggests. And it may have less to do with revising Augustine (whose premise Price repeatedly affirms)<sup>6</sup> than with exploring for his own purposes (and to some degree unconsciously) the paradigm of a discourse that bridges the gap between lust and virtue, exploring the mysteries not of *eros*, but *amor*—the profoundly spiritual burden of what Gottfried in his *Tristan* terms “the noble heart.” *Eros*, Campbell explains (making the

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<sup>6</sup> Discussing the meaning of both the epigraph and the novel’s “invisible center” with Price, William Ray insists that Price’s characters are in search not of some Divine absolute (such as Augustine suggests) but “a *natural* harmony”—not “the Good, capital G” (129-30). But Price replies unequivocally that they are “seeking the cessation of pain and struggle and unhappiness, as I fear all created beings are. They, like you, make the mistake of assuming that the solution . . . or end of the search, can be achieved ‘naturally’; that is, within the human frame on ‘the surface of earth.’ Augustine says it can’t be. So does *The Surface of Earth*” (130).

distinction made by the romances themselves), is indiscriminate and impersonal—“a biological urge” expressing “the zeal of the organs for each other” (*Power of Myth* 186). But *amor*, the destructive yet transcendent mystery explored in Tristan’s tale, is far more complex. Profoundly personal and particular, it follows “the eyes and their message to the heart,” which is stricken in a moment of visual arrest (Campbell, *CM* 177). But unlike lust, this “sense of sight” points toward a mystery of spiritual identity, revealing (however briefly) “a dimension of truth” beyond self-interest and what Campbell terms “the world dominion of King Death” (*CM* 71). The “noble heart,” (the “nuclear theme” of Gottfried’s *Tristan*) is the one that in its generous vulnerability opens to love and in so doing “opens inward toward the mystery of character, destiny, and worth, and at the same time outward, toward the world and the wonder of beauty, where it sets the lover at odds, however, with the moral order” (Campbell, *CM* 187). Not all hearts open to love, Gottfried declares, and only “noble hearts” can learn to “[bear] together” in one vision both sorrow and delight (qtd. in Campbell, *CM* 38). Yet this is their challenge. For in Gottfried’s world, Campbell explains, “the self-surpassing power of life, which is experienced in love when it wakes in the noble heart, brings pain to the entire system of fixed concepts, judgments, virtues, and ideals of the mortal being assaulted”—not to mention the mortal himself (*CM* 190).

Price never uses the term *amor*—speaking only of *eros* and wishing, perhaps, not to evoke common misunderstandings about the cult of *amor* as a part of “courtly” literature. Yet his extended explorations of “immediate love” or “love at first sight” (confined primarily to the first two volumes) mirror Campbell’s definitions closely. And the clarification may prove helpful to readers who assume (with Schiff) that the third

volume's affirmation of Wade and Wyatt's self-immolating love constitutes "an adjustment" to Price's philosophy.<sup>7</sup> In *The Source of Light*, Rob's grown son Hutch (meditating on the family history and his own sexual choices) considers the distinction between *eros* and *amor* (though again without naming it) in direct connection with the archetypal tale of *Tristan and Iseult*. Having torn himself free (like his grandmother, Eva) from a beloved but stifling home and bond with his father, Hutch finds himself experiencing "*immediate love*" abroad with his new friend Lew Davis, but he is puzzled by its intensity and at a loss concerning the meaning and validity of this new relation. Price does not include Hutch's letter to his confidant Alice Matthews (his mother's friend and former lover), but its contents are implied in her reply, which strongly mirrors Eva's much earlier dream of "the only school." Inquiring after Hutch's "*Tristan poem*" and wondering if he isn't "*too old to be asking*," Alice affirms that love at first sight "*is not only possible*" but is in fact "*the only kind I've known: only kind likely to last as love without cooling*" (146). But her caveat near the end offers Campbell's distinction between *eros* and *amor*—and in quite similar language. "*Find out why the first sight stormed your gates*," she urges:

*False love—infatuation, the immediate need to rub and be rubbed—is what always comes as high and inscrutable with a clamor of wings. The genuine event, however, will clarify if you just watch it long enough. And when it does, the mystery will mostly turn out to be a name. You've loved the person who is either there for present grasping or the person they promise to be, the one you've perpetually needed.* (146)

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<sup>7</sup> "Waste," Schiff says, had previously been "associated with passion and hunger" but in the third volume has more to do with "stinginess, self-absorption, as embodied in [sixty-three-year-old] Hutch" (*Understanding* 113). It should be noted, however, that *waste*—not entirely synonymous with either *suffering* or *destruction*—is determined by the nature of the passion and the degree of self-awareness achieved by both participants. From the first, as we have already seen, Price has regarded self-absorption as "the primary sin" (*A Writer's Inheritance*)—closely related, in fact, to the "hoarding back" and refusal to risk for which Rachel chides Rob while pleading for a child (*SoE* 318).

Such spiritual compulsion had been previewed in *Love and Work* through Eborn's tentative approach to his parents' own lives and love—seen by him initially as part of “the fatal error of Western man.” Later (though somewhat reluctantly) Eborn affirms this “genuine” quality of their love in the scene of their meeting and courtship—an act that makes them visible and brings them (almost literally) to life. But Price's conversation concerning *amor* (and the “energy” involved in that love) continues here, more fully developed, in Price's treatment of Rob Mayfield—a portrait fully exploring his nature, his struggles, and the difficult maturation of his own “noble heart.” In *The Source of Light*, Hutch studies the profile of a young man he associates with Rob, reflecting that “That simple line from forehead to chin seemed . . . all he'd ever meant to understand, praise, and save—its brave seal thrust toward the patient fruitful matrix of the world” (217).

As we saw in Chapter Three, Price's original plans for a father-son novel had begun to fuse gradually (and to Price, mysteriously) with the idea of a father-woman love story—to be witnessed and commented on by the man's son. The original core of the tale is still present (slightly transformed) in the third book of *Surface* (“Partial Amends”), which opens in June 1944 as the father (a middle-aged widower, longing for but at odds with his young son) lies in a rented room with a woman not his wife and relives the guilt of past years (*SoE* 345-54). Though Price resists Ray's suggestion that Rob Mayfield (or any single character) is the “center” of *Surface*—much less the entire trilogy—he readily admits Hutch's primacy as witness (124). And an early first sentence for the novel suggests much about Hutch's role and attitude toward the sight Price's narrative unfolds: “I am his son and it is twenty years too late, but now I begin to understand, to grant at

least that I understood *then*, a child, what since I have proved to myself in pain and waste” (*LaT* 183, 29 July 1963).<sup>8</sup> Only a month into actual writing, Price tells Ray, he found he needed to go back—“to discover . . . the actual story which would bring us to this father and son in the summer of 1944” (113). And this comment (paired with earlier reflections from Price’s notebooks) makes clear that the first two books of *Surface* (“Absolute Pleasures” and “The Heart in Dreams”) were written to more effectively realize “the whole network of love and hate that lay around [the father] that night” in his ruined mid-life—“various ones lying awake or dreaming various attitudes and aspects of his father’s life” (*LaT* 183, 29 July 1963).

Just as important, these opening sections mark Rob Mayfield at once as a heart (like Tristan’s) that is “born to sadness.” As Joseph Campbell explains, Gottfried’s Tristan is so named because he is born into sadness (*triste*, meaning “sorrow”), marked by the deaths of his parents (the tale’s first “fated” pair). Hearing that her husband, Rivalin, has died in battle, Tristan’s mother (Blancheflor) pines and dies in childbirth, leaving her “little son” (who lives and is strong) to be raised by others (*CM* 193). *The Surface of Earth* opens as Hutch’s great grandfather Bedford Kendal recounts a notorious and representative bit of family history to his three children (Eva, Kennerly, and Rena): the death of his wife’s mother (Katherine) in childbed. Yet the first line of the novel, though acknowledging this tragedy, focuses immediately—with horror, sympathy, and vivid curiosity—on the plight of the husband. “Who told Thad she was dead?” Rena

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<sup>8</sup> At various times—in an intriguing narratological construct—Price seems to have regarded Hutch Mayfield as the “author” of *The Surface of Earth* and *The Source of Light*. Anticipating the twentieth anniversary of *Surface*, Price long considered publishing not a novel, but “a third panel—a first person narrative by Hutch himself . . . a retrospective look at his family’s history, his own life as a continuation and redemption of that long tragic arc, and a *final affirmation* [my emphasis] that all we’ve read (the whole of *Mayfield*, that is) has been written by Hutch near the end of his life. . .” (*LaT* 495, 3 December 1991).

asks, eliciting Bedford's tale of his father-in-law (Thad Watson), whose mysterious insistence on fathering a child on his ailing wife led to her death and his suicide over her body—though the child (Charlotte Watson) lived and was strong. As Price tells Ray, this question (with its implied news of disaster) is in some ways the only one asked in the novel (115). For this story provides the first of the novel's three—nearly four—childbed deaths (Hutch being the product of the last), two actual and three threatened suicides, and numerous (sometimes inexplicable) “abandonments” of children.

The nature of betrayal is a major theme in all three novels of *A Great Circle*, and Price presses the point sharply here. For even as Bedford recounts his opening tale of ruined lives and lethal choices, Forrest Mayfield (Eva's thirty-four-year old Latin teacher) arrives for what seems a graduation night visit but is instead the first step in a pre-arranged plan to elope with his sixteen-year-old pupil. Her mind on her own imminent betrayal of family, Eva hears out the partial tale of her grandfather's carnage (told in hushed tones lest her mother should hear) with no visible emotion, but an innate understanding of its desperation. Unlike Kennerly (who blames Thad without question) and Rena (who wonders aloud why he would not stay alive for the child), Eva (desperate and wild in ways her family does not yet suspect) sees directly to the core of Thad's rashness. “Thad killed her,” she asserts bluntly in response to Rena's question (3). “He already knew” (3)—and “he knew his life had stopped” (5).

Such rashness is of a piece with Eva's own rising desperation and hunger for flight, and not surprisingly, her coming marriage with Forrest proves to be a similarly devastating mistake—a failed attempt at flight from a life that seems to her already “stopped.” Though loved by her father and on good terms with the rest of the household,

Eva—independent by nature—is primarily fleeing her emotionally damaged and damaging mother, Charlotte. Mindful of the body and its lethal traps, Charlotte has lived for years (by her choice) as sister to her husband and seems clearly to resent her daughter’s confident loveliness and budding sensuality. Arriving on the porch and seeing Eva’s loveliness, “brown curls in swags to her shoulders,” she chides Eva for being too “dressed-up” and demands that she “go change” at once (5). The depth of Charlotte’s fear and loathing (a taste of what Eva may have sensed at home) can be glimpsed indirectly in her response to the news that Eva (pregnant within the year) may die as a result of her son Rob’s birth. Continuing the wave of disasters, Charlotte commits suicide in the family kitchen (mere steps from the maid) by drinking a solution of lye, and her suicide letter (typical of Kendal gloom) bears witness to her long suppressed spiritual damage—chilling in its loathing, accusations, and harsh warning tone:

Will there be another place that can bear the soul you’ve made yourself? . . . I do not want to live in a world that will harbor and succor a heart like yours. Or that in my lifetime has held two such. . . . Because you have both [Eva and Thad] torn the lives of others by seeking the sole satisfaction of *body*. That fleeting food is only found—or only hunted—in other bodies: my mother, Forrest Mayfield. And those who offer themselves as scenes for that foul catch richly earn their fate. . . . So, Eva, I precede you with something like pride, the scent in my nostrils—the first time in years, in maybe my life—of something like what other people have told me was actual gladness. (*SoE* 44)

Eva, who had nearly died at Rob’s birth—and had known for some months before that her marriage to Forrest had been mostly *flight*, not love—reads the letter in numb silence and returns home with the infant Rob. The visit becomes permanent as her father’s ill health and strong will (she has always been his favorite) persuade her that she must stay without Forrest, who later tries once—in a plan foiled by her father—to win her back. Abandoned by his wife (and cut off from the son he will not see for eighteen

years), Forrest strikes out in search of his attractive, roving father (Old Robinson Mayfield)—who had abandoned the family in Forrest’s childhood—to learn the reason and unlock the secrets of his own covered past, completing the novel’s first cycle of search for and atonement with the father. With each new generation of Mayfields, the pattern deepens and is magnified as the son, embedded in his own crises, encounters his past in the person of the missing father—finding there the complexity of human suffering, but sometimes (oddly) the signs of unexpected contentment as well.

Though Forrest is devastated by Eva’s rejection—and ultimately that of Old Rob (who shares his life story, but rejects Forrest’s urgent offer of care)—he lands as if by grace in a happy (if unconventional) lifelong partnership with young Polly Drewry, who had loved and tended Old Rob to the last. Though Polly is still tending Forrest’s father when they meet (and is barely older than Eva herself), she “[stakes] Forrest’s heart” (another instance of visual arrest) with her simple beauty, her capable ease, and her clear “flood” of natural happiness—“permanent promise . . . no threat of exhaustion” (123). This time, amidst a sorrow both humble and self-aware, Forrest feels “at his worst; the bottom of his life”—glimpsing a happiness that seems beyond him—and yet he sees truly (123). Within weeks of Old Rob’s death, he has formed a new household with Polly, and they recede for a time from the narrative. But their match (despite the griefs that later assail it) is essentially happy—the novel’s first view of a truth Rob Mayfield (after suffering and struggle) will later glimpse and voice to his son: “People get what they need if they stand still and watch till the earth sends it up, most people I’ve known. . . . What they need, not want” (*SoE* 523).

For Rob, however, this vision is long in coming—primed as he is with attractiveness, idealistic longing, and his parents’ taste for “Absolute Pleasures.” In a clear parallel to the opening section, “The Heart in Dreams” introduces seventeen-year-old Rob (as it had Eva) on the night of high school graduation—bound outward, he thinks, toward sexual initiation with Min Tharrington (whom he “imagine[s]” he loves) and toward a life of adult freedom. “*I do not thank you, and I will not stay,*” he thinks, heady with his own sense of power (and sounding like Milo Mustian) as he departs for “[his] night”, dismissing the family who loves him—and whose love he craves, though he regards them here as “a dark web of feeders” (137, 139). As Rooke notes, “Rob’s is the idealistic ‘Heart in Dreams,’” and in his need to redress the wrongs and omissions of his childhood, he seeks “to provide a script not only for the future, but for the past” (118). He regularly imagines for himself not only the perfect wife (“in a home under oak trees never struck by lightning”), but happily married parents and siblings (*SoE* 211). Chief among his complaints is that he has been insufficiently loved—neglected by Eva (whom he idealizes and craves) and raised largely by Rena and Sylvie, in ignorance of his male family. As Rooke notes, Rob’s claim of neglect is questionable at best—and is certainly unfair to Eva, whose difficult circumstances he does not fully understand (116).

But Rob’s claim is not adolescent posturing. Throughout his life, in fact, he cannot fully realize how loved he has been. “*You accept gifts badly,*” his Aunt Rena tells him in a letter (197). Decades later (after Rachel’s death), Grainger (Rob’s oldest friend and “guard”) makes much the same claim: “When have you been alone? . . . I saw you alone one time, the first day I saw you. . . . Every time since then you been *swimming* in people. . . . Young Della was people; you fed off her. What did she get back? Miss

Rachel was people. Mr. Forrest, Miss Polly. . . . Miss Rena, Miss Eva, Hutch and me. What we got to show” (387)? Like his Mayfield predecessors, Rob’s self-absorbed misery and lack of self-awareness combines with his magnetism to make him capable of real harm. Seeing his son for the first time as a man—“grand in his face as the young Alexander . . . in all his form like Aeneas at Carthage (. . . before all others most beautiful)—Forrest is stricken to recognize the boy’s power and to see his own “famished dreams of an aging boy, corrosive hungers, but potent” eating now at Rob, “the sole remains of [Forrest’s] old unhappiness” (*SoE* 218). “Oh Jesus, Son, change,” Forrest pleads. “Change now while you can. Find someone to help you and start your life” (*SoE* 218). His sister Hatt, remembering the father who deserted her, her mother, and Forrest when confronted with his infidelities—nearly refuses Rob news of Forrest’s whereabouts. “You’re a Mayfield,” she tells him, “—*Robinson* at that. My father’s all in you. He’d have hurt Baby Jesus if he needed to” (*SoE* 167). For the same reason, Min Tharrington—Rob’s intermittent lover and partner of his one infidelity to Rachel—refuses his sexual advances on their graduation night. Though she has grown up with him and worships him as “a piece of the one precious heart of things, the satisfied whole toward which parts yearned,” she resents his assumptions regarding her and can see that “He bore, all on him, the promise of harm. . . . *This is for him*,” Min thinks, “*I am not in this*” (140-41). But the narration inserts an important commentary amidst her thoughts, asserting (without questioning her choice) that “She could not see the reason (being younger than he, not living in his home)” (141).

Without doubt Rob's feelings are both deep and sincere—an aspect of his sensitive nature and “loving heart” demonstrated powerfully when he finds on graduation night (still living) a childhood gift he had once given Sylvie:

It seemed worth tears. The old fish endlessly rounding its world; a gift from his childhood when all outward gifts had been clear signals, smilingly flown, for *visits* in the midst of the busy absence of Father (gone, all questions muffled), Mother (in total service to her father). . . .a fragile gift, perfectly intact. He turned again. “Sylvie, I still give you this.” He meant it as the one good deed of his day. (*SoE* 143)

As Price asserted to William Ray, Rob Mayfield is no doubt “the most likable adult” in the book (124). And from the first (despite his many flaws), Rob's generous and idealistic nature—a more positive interpretation of “the heart in dreams”—is given (like Milo's) to the notion of good deeds and service to others. Yet this generous vulnerability seems the largest part of what ails him. Fixed upon Eva, “his first beloved” (394), Rob is elated to find her waiting for him as he returns from his night, struggling for a statement of love that will be “no more than the truth” but can recompense her child for long neglect without furnishing a weapon “to be turned back by him in justice against her” (146). Her declaration, “Well, I love you,” seems oddly distant as a result, but to Rob it seems the fulfillment of his oldest wish—accompanied also by a long-preserved letter from Forrest (written after Rob's difficult birth to express love for them both.) It seems a taste of the “family love” Rob has hoped for, and in the face of his grandfather's grave illness and charge to “take care of Eva,” Rob takes Eva's declaration as a sign that he has now has “work” to do and honorable duties to fulfill. When he tells her, “Rob will be on hand to offer his service for what it is worth,” his language is telling—the first in a lifelong chain of offers confirming him as “a noble heart” in training (159).

To Rena, who tells him that he is “the only hope of this crowd” (324), Rob mysteriously offers the life of his future child (not yet dreamed of or conceived)—“neither [understanding] his need to say it nor the fact that he meant it as his large gift” (326). Much later (miserable and adrift in mid-life), Rob “[climbs] toward his sleeping son”—remnant of his old dream of happiness—thinking of Hutch as “his chief good deed” (399). Here, too, Rob’s language reveals the heroic cast of his mind and spirit, but also the source of his greatest vulnerability. “Caring’s ruined your life,” Eva tells him at mid-life, as he laments (in the wake of Forrest’s death) that he has failed to offer what he terms “a useful life” (397-98). “Useful to what?” Eva wonders, “deeply curious but almost whispering”—for she herself (of a different nature entirely) has perfected, through years of unbroken service to her ailing father, a kind of needless self-sufficiency (397).

But Rob’s reply suggests a broader goal, revealing that he has meant his life to be useful “to God and all my family” (397)—the closest he comes to a definition of *virtue* as Price defines it in “For Ernest Hemingway.” When Eva wonders, “Useful how?” Rob’s response suggests that his unattained ideal—though once the unrealistic dream Rooke had noted—has been transformed gradually (and through the influence of his new wife, Rachel) into an ordinary vision of human happiness and family: “Just the usual ways—kindness, care, dependability. If nothing else, to furnish one rare lovely sight for others’ eyes to rest on” (397). Burdened increasingly by guilt and frustration in pursuit of what he wants, Rob for a long time does not realize that he *has* served in this way. After his death in *The Source of Light*, Eva observes, “He was one big vault people drew and drew on” (241). And though her apparent needlessness and “refusal” of Rob’s adolescent offer to “serve” drives him from home at twenty-one—anxious to prove that *others* love and

need him—Rob does find in exile the first of the two “noble hearts” (Grainger and Rachel) with whom he can set about the work of surpassing himself.

As Grainger Walters knows best of all, perhaps, Rob’s “loving heart” (349)—“tender as a baby’s blue eye” (441)—accompanies a sensitive, wildly oscillating nature, a trait fully in evidence within a day of their meeting at Hatt’s home. Rejected at the source, Rob has been moving from woman to woman, sexually confident and proud of the “gifts” other women accept and seem to require from him, but hoping to be “led” somehow to a place of perfect happiness, fulfillment, and rest—either harbor and home, or the finality of death. Despite his natural gifts for pleasure, Rob’s thoughts of suicide above the James River—to “end the whole damn relay race” and “show” his family (and the cruel boys victimizing a turtle) “what they’ve done”—are by no means the first of their kind (207). He later admits to Rachel that as a child he knew of suicide—knowing “the very gun on my grandfather’s mantel that would do the trick”—and that only his “hope” and love for Eva stayed his hand as he searched it “for signs that it wanted to serve” (*SoE* 292). In despair during his first visit to Hatt, Rob asks (terrifying her) whether he should bother to stay alive and reminds her that two of his forebears have already killed themselves (*SoE* 174).

Price merely suggests the events of these days in *The Surface of Earth*—referring to them obliquely in letters (173-80). But he unfolds them more fully in *The Source of Light* in Grainger’s vivid account of his first meeting with Rob, who is raving and wounded from the “war” of love—Tristan delirious. As Rob rages wildly in the hospital (misunderstanding Hutch’s momentary absence from his bedside), Hutch believes death is near, but Grainger warns him, “Don’t rush. This happened before” (*SoL* 246). And he

recounts in detail Rob's response to Eva's chilly, "betraying" letter and what Rob in reply had called its "*freezing offer*" not of *love* but of *honor* (*SoE* 174). Grainger tells Hutch, essentially, what he had once written Forrest to bring the boy aid—that Rob had descended into wild bouts of drinking and pleasure to numb his nerves and forget (*SoE* 198-99). But Grainger adds more for Hutch's sake, detailing the dire circumstances under which he had first "answered" Rob's call, signing on as his first helper, witness, and guard:

I rode with him. . . .He did his best to kill us—himself of course but I was along. . . .After that and some more mess, I got him to my house and thought I had him calm. . . . I watched him till it looked like he'd sleep a good while; then I went to chop wood. I'd worked half an hour when I heard his voice—didn't know it was him, but it came from the house: deep bellows like a steer. . . .He was sitting upright on the bed, staring wild and making that noise like it hurt him to do it, like lightning down a tree. . . .By then he reminded me of boys in the war. . . .Nothing you could do but throw em down and press em and moan even louder. He let me do that; he was still in two minutes and slept long hours. Then I drove him to Goshen and never left since. (*SoL* 246-47)

Days later, as *Surface* records, Grainger had stopped in to check on Rob and found him fretting about skills, job possibilities, family at home—even the possibility that "Hell, I could die in my sleep tonight" (180). In response, the narration (filtered through Grainger's consciousness) offers one of the trilogy's most striking portraits of Rob Mayfield as archetypal "grand lost boy," capturing Grainger, too, in the moment of visual arrest that compels him to remain (permanently) by Rob's side:

Grainger studied him hard by the warm steady light—the wide chest propped dark against the dark walnut, muscled as though he had hauled great burdens in heavy harness since the day he could walk, not swum through a life like warm bathwater; the face with its calm breadths on which you could lay your whole flat hand if the skin itself didn't threaten to burn with a fierce life flickering out from the eyes which could watch you as steady as a picture of Jesus, as full of Jesus of the promise to speak

and stay at hand till all wounds healed, perfect peace arrived. Grainger smiled. “You not dying no night soon, less some girl kill you.” (*SoE* 180)

Ironically, as they head to Goshen (where Rob has found work on a road crew) this is the very danger that lurks. For here, not long after his arrival, Rob meets and undergoes his own precipitous courtship and marriage to Hutch’s mother (Rachel)—the “Iseult” he seems fated to meet. As Price told William Ray, there is no “literal” or “autobiographical transcription” in the novel, but one may indeed find “elaborate metamorphosis and transformation . . . *spiritual* autobiography” (111). And this is nowhere more true than in Price’s account of Rob and Rachel, which bears (despite factual differences) a striking and significant resemblance to Eborn’s scene of his parents’ first meeting and mutual attraction. Rob’s pairing with Rachel is in one sense more obviously destructive than its parallel in *Love and Work*—for unlike the love of Lou and Todd Eborn (and their models, Will and Elizabeth Price), their mutual compulsion leads not only to suffering but to Rachel’s death in childbed. And certainly Rachel’s nervous breakdown and history of false pregnancy (prior to meeting Rob) has no analogue in the lives of Lou Eborn or Elizabeth Price. Yet Rachel’s vision, energy, and function as complement to Rob seem fulfillment of a situation glimpsed already in Eborn’s scene of his parents’ first meeting. But unlike Eborn (who narrates events directly and concisely, incorporating Lou’s reflections) Price explores the portentous pairing of Rob and Rachel indirectly and across a span of decades, through the principals’ immediate letters to confidants (Alice Matthews, Niles Fitzhugh, and Forrest and Eva Mayfield) and through reminiscence and interpretation by Rob and various witnesses much later—long after Rachel’s death and Rob’s descent into toxic remorse. This narrative strategy provides the fullest possible perspective on the relationship and submits

it to a rich and passionate dialogue exploring the nature, meaning, and validity of their “love at first sight.”

Like Lou Eborn, Rachel Hutchins is the first to realize and reveal the nature of this attraction. Having returned home after her breakdown, she confides in a letter to her friend Alice Matthews that she has found “*a large heart containing a wonderful face, strange to me till now but likely to heal, I fervently hope*” (188). And Robinson Mayfield, she writes, *is the face contained in that heart toward which all recent surprises lead*” (189). As Rooke notes, Rachel exhibits from the first a “prophetic, almost mystical vision” (120), and her image of the heart (not synonymous with Rob but “containing” him) clearly suggests Price’s “invisible center” and Hutch’s image of the giant dreaming the world—hinting toward a metaphysical reading of their attraction. More details hint delicately in this direction—while refusing to confirm it. When Rob overhears Rachel’s misery, he inquires after her “soul in distress” as “the groom. . . .The Bridegroom” who “lives in the other half of the Bridal Suite” (190). “I’m Rob Mayfield the second, and willing” (190), he announces dramatically, giving Rachel pause until she realizes that it is literally true. Since returning she has been living in the Bridal Suite—an arrangement managed by her father (190). Price executes this detail with gentle humor, and Rachel claims only that her father had put her in the room for its cross-ventilation—to aid her weak chest (189). But weeks before he had urged her to live, promising, “If you’ll come back. . . . I can promise you. I can give it like a gift—the world will open and let you in; there will be somebody to meet you when you enter” (*SoE* 291). Ambiguity lingers, however, and regardless of human intent the scene echoes the atmosphere of “fate” Campbell perceives in the first meeting of Rivalin and Blanche-flor (Tristan’s parents).

“On a tide beyond their knowledge or control,” he writes, “they were to be carried to the work—the destiny of surpassing themselves—to which they were assigned; and the occasion occurred as though arranged for them—and yet apparently only by accident” when the wounded young man (run through by a lance) was brought from the battlefield “on the very point of death” and in need of cure (*CM* 191). Soon, as Rachel’s letters reveal, Rob is deeply attached to her—jealous of Alice (who has come for a visit), but hesitant to speak further and claim her. He asks Rachel, in fact, how to win her—what “word” will bring her to him. When she replies that it’s for him to find, but that he must “Hurry,” Rob says “I will. I’m ready as you”—but can’t answer “For what?” and adds, “That’s more of what I got to find” (202).

This statement—and Rob’s second assertion of readiness—is surely one of the “curious promises” Rob mentions to his father and finds himself making to Rachel early, without quite knowing why (251). He tells Forrest he was drawn to Rachel “by needs of her own,” but what Price’s handling of their courtship reveals is that Rob is equally “fixed” from the start—though long unsure what is happening, or *why* (251). From Rachel we learn he has been talking urgently about his own life and has invited her “To be good to me” (192)—a phrase recalling Todd Eborn’s demand that Lou (who has told her own story of pain) should “honor” his own (*L&W* 98). The exchange proves immensely healing, for both Rachel and Rob. Each—lacking a central need—has felt smothered by unwanted love and worship. But as Rachel points out, Rob (despite feeling deeply neglected by Eva) has been “deeply lucky,” having had someone who could “pull you through all the time ahead” (292). In her own life, she admits, she had felt “bare as a bone,” not having found “a soul that made me want to draw the next two breaths” (292-

93). Her dream of “starting” the baby, she tells him, was her attempt to “*take hold*” rather than lose it (293).

Rob is impressed with her resilience and hastens to tell her, “You’re better. . . . In fact you are well . . . .cured. Nothing wrong with you” (190-92). Yet in Rob’s letter to Niles (which follows Rachel’s to Alice), he seems unaware (bent on his own notion of *service*) of the complementary need Rachel is gradually filling in *him*. Since Niles is the younger prankster and roving companion with whom Rob visited his first whorehouse, a certain amount of bravado is to be expected from the letter. And Rob does begin by bragging on his sexual encounters with the Hutchins’ servant Della (provider of “*the staples*”), saying, “*there are remedies, boy. The world is a doctor, if you know who to ask*” (194).<sup>9</sup> But though Rob downplays Rachel’s importance here—claiming that she’s “*picked him from air*” as “*the rescue*” and that so far, he’s “*let her and listened*”—he adds that he’s “*looking forward to her*” (194). She is “*no fool at all,*” he adds, “—*no show-off either but a good tough wit, a hard little scrapper (if she’s stronger now, it’s her own mind that’s done it). . .*” (194). This last perception (a first glimpse at the source of her strength) may be the root of his attraction to her (and his own secret hope for “healing”), and it informs even the long physical description he offers to Niles, leading him to comment that “*she does have the power to command attention*” (194).

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, however, that Rob’s simultaneous (and more immediately *sexual*) attraction to Della is more than lust. Certainly Rob opposes the two women in his mind and later describes Della’s “welcome” as a “bridge” to his healing with Rachel (*SoE* 433). But cultural mores seem the most significant factor in Rob’s discounting of Della—a fact harshly illustrated by the narrative’s assertion that in all their encounters, Rob has never faced Della during the act and “never touched her mouth” (234). Yet he relies on her as an important confidante, and more than once she acts as *angel* to sustain and direct him—most clearly when her note (tucked into a surprise lunch she has packed for him) diffuses his self-pity and stays him from suicide above the James River (207-08). Rob’s love and guilt regarding his failures to Della can be seen most clearly in his dream of meeting her on the battlefields of France, borne forward by a need and purpose he cannot define. “You safe here?” he asks, concerned. She nods and holds up her left hand—the Mayfield wedding band, freshly cleaned. Seeing, he knows it “[has] some right to be there. Yet he knows he has given her nothing and can only warn, “you’ll die before night” (446-47).

For all its self-evasions and omissions, Rob's first letter shows that he sees Rachel clearly—more clearly than (and differently from) the way he has seen other women. And this fact itself, in a man so self-absorbed, is worthy of attention. Shortly before their wedding, Rob writes Eva that Rachel is “*in certain ways a likeness of you—not in looks or size but in having . . . a death-grip on one single vision of life and of what she wants in it, and the courage and strength to seize out and hold it*” (253). Rooke takes the comparison to mean that Rob has failed to “sever his Oedipal bond with Eva” (119). Yet Rob himself feels gradually freed, and Rachel brags to Alice (after a first visit to the Kendal household) that “*Rob is freer than he was. I think I can free him entirely and soon, give him better refuge*” (307). Years later, in “Partial Amends,” Rob seems to confirm her power when he tells fourteen-year-old Hutch, “Rachel lived where I slept; and she above every other human I've known believed what I did. . . . That no power in heaven had ever intended for people to want one day of their lives, not for calm human kindness; that people could furnish each other all the needs of a good useful life if they'd set their minds to it; that some people's minds were already set and waiting” (421).

Despite reservations about Rob's motives, Rooke notes that Rachel is more complex than most critics have allowed—a “portrait” suggesting that Rob's apparently “desperate” action and choice might just as well have resulted in “success” (119). Polly (Forrest's companion of many happy years) had advised Rob to pick a girl who was “strong”—and as Rooke notes, Rachel's illness and quick attraction to Rob cause many readers (and characters in the novel) to question “the wisdom of [Rob's] choice” (119). But Rachel's strengths are numerous, and despite the false pregnancy—“nothing but nerves” (*SoE* 189) and the product of “poisonous idleness” at home (*SoE* 311)—she

seems less fragile and more clear-sighted than her ostensible protectors (her father, Alice, and Rob). Her attraction to Rob is immediate and powerful (the trilogy's most fully explored instance of love at first sight), yet her reflections on the experience show that she has few if any illusions about others (including Rob) and is, like Lou Eborn, remarkably self-aware. She grasps quickly that despite the precipitous nature of Rob's movement toward her, her own "care" for him "has grown both higher and deeper" than his for her (190). Having heard his life story and "learned to read his life through the walls," Rachel has had a glimpse (like Lou Eborn with Todd) of both Rob's nature and his needs, and she admits to Alice (anticipating his marriage proposal) that "whatever Rob offers will not be a gift but a serious burden" (203). She surmises that "he has not been well himself," but that "with him also it is nothing but nerves" (190). And though Rob thinks he has kept it from her, Rachel knows of his affair with Della—untroubled by his "need[ing] pieces off of other human beings" since she is "the only person [Rob] has asked for all of" (264). As Rooke asserts, Rachel "is determined to be happy and not to collapse in the face of risk," and she "courageously modifie[s]" Alice's warning about Rob by noting that safety is never assured and that "the beefsteak we ate for supper" could prove just as lethal (119). She expresses the same sentiment years later (after a miscarriage) in pleading with Rob for another child. Though Rob longs to protect her, she chides him gently for his failure to risk—a part of love's mutuality: "you have got to give—you are hoarding back. All I promised was love; I never promised safety" (318). Rachel's strengths are those that Rob himself does not yet display, and they suggest that she can anticipate and bear any "burden" he offers as they work toward their mutual goal. Though admitting that the marriage "may ruin us both—or him or me or some unborn,

*unthought-of, consequence*”—Rachel voices in a letter to Alice what seems the trilogy’s clearest statement on the mystery of *amor*:

*if what I honestly believe I know about why human beings choose to follow each other is true at all, then whether he is hateful as a Hun on horseback or gentle as a pastry cook is no concern of yours or even of mine and his.*

*This is what I believe, seems all I believe . . . and it’s what I have to tell you. Two people who are grown in good control of their bodies and minds, who are not being forced . . . by anything other than their own heart’s speaking, will contemplate spending the whole of their two lives beneath one roof (whatever time holds for them and the roof) for one reason only—they want each other. (264)*

Rachel believes she has long suffered not from disease, but from “*symptoms of an illness in no book known*”—from “*some strange starvation in the core of the heart*” (194). As we have seen already, this image of a “hole” or “weakness” in the chest (symbolized by TB or apoplexy) is common to descriptions of the Mayfield men (as it was to Eborn)—lovers whose passionate nature and “generous vulnerability” has left them (and those who rely on them) spiritually wounded. But as devastating as such “damage” may be, it is also the mark of “a feeling heart” that may yet be redeemed and ennobled to powerful ends. Rachel believes that with Rob’s arrival, “time” has finally “prescribed for [her],” yet she knows that those in love as she is “*believe that want is need and will always be, but here as in other ways the mercy of time is their only hope*” (264).

Rachel’s, too, is a “heart in dreams”—though her vision is more balanced than Rob’s own (more tolerant of “bliss” and “pain.”) A “noble heart” unafraid to risk, she affirms the soul’s legacy and right to reach for happy lives. But “in her intensity, in her visionary and paradoxical attractions to both life and death,” Rooke says, Rachel “comes close to revealing that the heart’s dreams will be permanently satisfied only when the soul returns to God” (121). Rachel does seem to offer the “refuge” Rob needs—and she

repeatedly says that he offers her both the “job” and the “heart” she requires to flourish, by taking “all I needed to give” (307). Ironically, she *is* flourishing when she dies in childbirth—a fact with which Rob (because of his single infidelity with Min during Rachel’s pregnancy) will struggle to come to terms. Though Rachel’s existence is less than ideal, she is happy and tells Rob shortly before Hutch’s birth (and her death), “ ‘I doubt I will ever believe it. . . . What’s here—this room, us in it’ ” (363). But ironically, this statement of contentment—confirmation of Rob’s parallel assertion to Rena that “We have started being happy” (325)—“burn[s] on through [Rob] like terrible acid,” sending him wild in the days before Hutch’s birth, which ultimately kills her (363).

As William Ray observes, this episode exhibits a kind of “seamless singularity” with the account of the childbed death and suicide that opens the novel (116). This time, however, that tragedy is averted—through Rob’s greater strength and the presence of Grainger Walters, who appears unexpectedly to Rob as he turns from Rachel’s bedside, threatening to flee into drink (or worse.) In this version of Price’s familiar story it is Grainger who fulfills the function of Reverend Barden in “The Names and Faces of Heroes,” talking with calm authority to Rob and urging him to promise something (some change) before it is too late—in this case directly to Rachel (*SoE* 392). When Rob asks who gave him the right to demand such a thing, Grainger replies, “Jesus Christ,” and though Rob wants to strike him, he cannot—nor can he deny the essential truth of Grainger’s claim (393). By the time Rob enters the birth room, Rachel is dead, but as Rob later admits to Hutch, he had taken Grainger’s words to heart and made God the promise he should have made to Rachel (426). Though perfectly natural, Grainger’s fortuitous presence and well-timed words appear almost like Grace—averting a repeat of

Thad Watson's suicide over the body of his dead wife and living, newborn daughter. Thus, as Ray puts it, Rob revises the past—deciding not to “die, sacrificially,” over the body of his son, but to live in such fashion instead (116).

Having survived the violent birth struggle that killed his mother (beginning the last of the destructive/self-destructive human epochs in *Surface*), Hutch has become in Rob's eyes, God's “hostage”—the innocent pledge of his promise to change his life, stop his drinking, and avoid harming (or touching people) for his old reasons (*SoE* 426). Rob (through the intervention of Grainger and his own strong power to seize on the vow), revises the family pattern of Thad Watson and chooses to live for his child. For nearly two years, in fact, Rob (stronger, more selfless and loving than his forebear) is true to his promise for Hutch's sake: “you were all that was left. . . . I thought you might be taken if I broke it” (*SoE* 426). But Rob's taste for touch, coupled with a heightened conscience and powerful sense of self-loathing, sets off a cycle of drinking and ruin that sends the pair (accompanied by Grainger) on a five-year pattern of wandering—rejected by Rachel's family, Rob unable to bear his own—“trailing through two states Rob's desperation and [Hutch's] own plain contentment to be with a father who could make old rocks in the road die laughing” (*SoL* 163). Though his life seems to be coming apart, Rob's love for the boy is fixed and secure, and for Hutch (who does not understand and from whom Rob keeps his “mess” with help from Grainger, Polly, and Forrest) the days seem idyllic. But at the end of five years, when Rob can no longer bear that life, he leaves Hutch with Eva and Rena in the house he'd grown up in.

In the summer of 1944 (the period constituting the core of Price's original novel), Rob finds himself at another crossroads, however. In the wake of Forrest's death, Rob is

devastated (feeling he has failed his father and not yet redeemed his life), and he has lost his job once more through a protracted lapse into drinking. Feeling pulled toward his son—for stability, love, and the chance to serve and make good on his vow—Rob returns to Fontaine to take fourteen-year-old Hutch on a long-promised road trip. Craving time alone with Rob—and stifling already in the nest where Rob had left him, relieved only by Grainger, “with these women”—Hutch is eager for flight and hopes that Rob has finally come (as he’d once promised) to reclaim him (378). As Hutch later explains to Della, this apparent abandonment by Rob is his first memory of betrayal.

He promised he would take me with him. He hadn’t even told me he was going till he went. One late August morning I was in the backyard. . . . digging by myself; and Rob came to me and said, “Sweetheart, I am going for a while to be in Raleigh. I’ve found a better chance for both of us and will come and get you . . . by New Year’s.” So I didn’t cry then, but I might as well have and got him behind me. The chance was just for him; he never kept his word. . . . He has this woman in Raleigh that he needs. He’s stayed there for her. (*SoE* 495)

Rob hopes to reconcile with his son on the trip and return to the old Kendal place (Bedford’s birthplace, willed to Rob at his death)—the spot where Rob once dreamed of setting up house (accompanied by Grainger) to tend to Rachel and their children (*SoE* 318). This time, however, he considers bringing Min Tharrington—the long-time worshipper who has eased him sexually in the years since Rachel’s death and shares Rob’s guilt in his single instance of infidelity to Rachel (just before her death in childbed). Having stood so long on the periphery, Min has at last demanded some commitment from Rob—a difficulty he must now resolve with his son, for Hutch (though he knows nothing of that disastrous indiscretion) makes clear that Min is a presence he does not want (459).

Hearing for the first time the tale of the promise Rob had made at his birth, Hutch feels more than ever confirmed in his intuition that he alone “[is] both axle and wheel for his father,” and he firmly claims payment of the debt that is owed (*SoE* 377). Initially tempted to deny Hutch such primacy, Rob soon discovers (in recalling the story) that his son’s life (despite his own repeated failures) has already made more difference to him than he’d thought (391-93). The boy is his own—and “all *you’ve* got,” as Hutch had earlier reminded him (377). This, too, Rob would instinctively deny, but “seeing the boy (his own eyes set in Rachel’s face and hair),” Rob can say only (startling Hutch, who does not understand), “Then never leave me” (377). Rob admits to Hutch and all his family (including Grainger) that despite his ease and compatibility with Min, his plan to marry her is a matter of gratitude for long years of secret (and largely unrewarded ) help (*SoE* 400). Rob does not love her, and despite Min’s years of passionately pursuing and aiding him, she seems to understand neither his essential need nor his natural (and essentially contented) pairing with Rachel—a fact clearly exposed in their joint dream of Girl, Spring, and Cure, which opens “Partial Amends.”<sup>10</sup>

In this crucial and recurrent dream—analogueous in many ways to Eva’s dream of “the only school”—Rob finds himself at age fourteen or fifteen (at the cusp of sexual maturity), bound toward the mountains in search of a cure for his “very grave” TB, though he must walk because of the war all round them. Telling the dream to Min again (she has heard it often), Rob asserts that it was not health he wanted, but “something

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<sup>10</sup> Price’s notebooks show that he had originally planned for the ghost of the mother (then called Daphne) to appear in the room—perceived by both the father and his lover—evoking the father’s terror and remorse (*LaT* 180, 9 July 1963). The dream, though ending painfully enough that Rob usually stops it, is by contrast overwhelmingly positive in its message—a timeless (and still healing) offering of news from the mysterious “center” that Price (like Rachel) affirms.

beneath it better than health: a magnet in the ground” (346). But as he walks the last miles, he finds himself walking through “a storm like Hell on the rise. Night as bright as day with lightning, trees crashing, rocks big as sheds falling at my feet—tame as dogs, sparing me” (346). Despite his fear, though, he recalls that he did not stop—and adds here a realization about suffering that he will process only years later, in his final letter of affirmation and blessing to Hutch. Here—not fully making the connection—he only recalls (with something like pride) that he didn’t stop walking: “That wasn’t what it meant anyhow, the storm. It was not for me. I just went on—one foot, then the other . . . into calm and morning which came together” (346-47). What he finds on the mountain is that they’ve “had the storm too” and that it has buried their springs. Cheered by a smiling girl who offers to dig with him—admonishing him that nothing is free and that he must not “give away anything except for *return*”—they set to work and he finds he is already cured: “I knew she was right, though I’d never told her I was sound as a dollar from the hour I met her—*because* I’d met her—and that all my digging in the mud for a spring was just work for her, to earn my gift” (347-48).

Min—for whom the dream also recurs—casts herself repeatedly as “the smiling girl” Rob kills, but mistakenly believes that what he had wanted was for the girl to love him. She cannot accept Rob’s correction—linked to his lifelong desire not to be worshipped, but utterly used: to give, to help, and to serve. What he had wanted, he tells Min, was for her “to stand there and bear my love” (348). In contrast to Min (a fact Rob sees fully much later, in *The Source of Light*) Hutch, like his mother and her avatar in the dream of the Spring, offers Rob the best job imaginable—teaching him love as mutual endeavor and demonstrating that love should never be given “except for return” (347).

The lesson is crucial for one so alternately self-absorbed or bent on selfless service—and true love, whether between “natural mates” or between parent and child, demands a mixture of both. This awareness has been present in Rob long before coming to consciousness, for in his recurring dream, the girl’s face and her voice speaking those words heals him “down to the sockets” at once—though the springs are still buried and work to reclaim them has not yet begun (*SoE* 347).

But despite Rob’s growing pleasure in Hutch’s company and in honoring the boy’s need for him at such a crucial age, Rob cannot easily relinquish either his expectations or his plans. Within days of their arrival at Richmond to clear up Forrest’s affairs, Rob’s longing for the domestic ideal that perpetually eludes him collides with Hutch’s innocent but unyielding requirements for their life together, pushing Rob toward shame, anger, and a relapse of old troubles. Though he has heard tales at home, Hutch has never witnessed such scenes and is entirely unprepared. Encountering his father naked, drunk, and “dribbling piss” on Polly’s parlor floor, Hutch at once moves to help him but misunderstands Rob’s response (spoken from a dream)—“Understand, I want this rest”—as a plea for Hutch to leave him alone (475). After covering his father and leaving messages about his plan, he flees toward his mother’s home in Goshen, filled with a terrible but vital new knowledge: “he saw now how children learn the terrors of the world—by watching their parents, suspecting them of infinite power to turn in an instant into monsters, then confirming that suspicion. *And surviving it*” (*SoE* 518).

Determined to rely on himself, now, for the urgent choices of his life, Hutch begins unaware a quest similar to that his father and Forrest had begun—seeking the still-hidden roots of his life as he wanders gradually toward Goshen. Meeting his great-Aunt

Hatt for the first time at a stopover in Virginia, Hutch steps almost literally into Forrest Mayfield's shoes. For loneliness and age have affected Hatt's mind, and she believes Hutch is Forrest himself as a boy—the youth she raised in the wake of Old Rob's abandonment and their mother's subsequent death (477-80). After humoring her confusion for an hour and accepting (in Forrest's stead) her plea that he pardon her for neglect, he briefly contemplates assuming Forrest's identity here, in a place no one would think to look for him. "Could he *be* Forrest, become Hatt's dream?" he wonders, "—not just to ease her but to help himself, save himself from the coming life which flew toward him now: Rob and all his power to hurt, power to raise love and hope by his simple words and presence and crush them each evening" (*SoE* 481). Fully aware of his family's hereditary rages from the tales of Grainger and Sylvie, Hutch considers closely the healing such a fiction might accomplish:

Hutch thought he could sleep here and rise and be new, be Forrest Mayfield and live a life free of choices that would bring down pain on himself and nine others. He knew . . . enough facts of past years—Forrest running off with Eva and the main aftermaths—to think that ten lives were bent crooked by the choice. . . . He could choose to spare them all, save Charlotte Kendal's life, save Robinson and Hutchins from having lives at all. What would flow out from him would be calm satisfaction—his Aunt's old age accompanied and tended, his own great longing for freedom quenched daily by life in this bare room, bare house. . . .reducing each [sight] to a picture in his tablet. Lasting, useful, safe, harmless.  
(*SoE* 481)

But the spell is broken when Hatt realizes her mistake, and though she asks him to stay, Hutch continues his journey to Goshen. When he arrives, he finds that his grandfather has died and has willed the nearly wrecked hotel to Della, who transfers it to Hutch after he meets her and tells the story of his life. There, too, he meets his mother's friend Alice Matthews, one of the novel's powerful solitary figures and an art teacher

who encourages the skills of solitude and sight Hutch has learned while drawing at home. In one of the novel's central scenes, Hutch compares his work to the sight he is trying to capture: "what the earth offered of its visible skin—the surface it flaunted in dazzling stillness, in the glaze of rest, to beg us to watch; the grope for its heart. (He knew that much now, had known it some weeks; but would not have said it or felt it in words)" (*SoE* 509). Noting that "the hard part as always was trees, not their trunks which were easy as human legs and as frank in their purpose, but leaves—their hanging gardens in tiers" (509), Hutch starts to erase them but decides instead to wait

until the secret of leaves, if nothing more, came into his power. First the power to watch one green leaf in stillness; then the dark banked branches in all their intricate shifting concealment—concealed good news (that under the face of the earth lay care, a loving heart, though maybe asleep: a giant in a cave who was dreaming the world, a tale for his long night) or concealed news of hatred embellished with green (that a shape like Rob's was only the jeering mask of a demon who knew men's souls and guided their steps. It seemed, now at least, that any such power would come here if anywhere. This place was an entrance. He'd need to wait here.  
(*SoE* 510)

So it is that Rob, once more refused by Min, seeks out his son in an ironic reversal of the novel's quest pattern and finds through him the reasons and means to finally make partial amends. They are reconciled, Hutch steeled by the knowledge that solitude and the tools of his art may provide a means of seeing and ordering the turbulent currents of his life into patterns. He has no idea what they are—is still sure he must leave Rob one day. But at the end, in a partial reversal of roles, Hutch warms his shivering father in his own "master bed" and offers again "love's homeliest gift, the adjacent trust of unbroken sleep" (517) as Rob renews his promise: "to take his present life and honor it, love it when he could (if never, then never: half the world had had that) but honor it daily. The actual present" (*SoE* 525).

*The Source of Light* picks up the story of Rob and Hutch eleven years later. Whereas *Surface* provided the complex yet cyclic human history of the Kendal-Hutchins-Mayfield family from 1903-1944, *Source* spans only a single year (1955-56) and focuses on Hutch's urgent struggle to comprehend precisely how the family legacy has affected him—and may continue to affect his relationship to the world he moves through. As the novel opens, Hutch (now twenty-five) is preparing to depart for a period of travel in Europe and several years of graduate study at Merton College, Oxford. Outwardly the trip seems to be nothing more than a “grand tour” or an educated young man's pilgrimage to historical sites. But the novel quickly makes clear that Hutch is fleeing from a complex and suffocating net of spiritual confinement that has finally grown intolerable. Speaking to Ann—his possible fiancéé, but only one of several problematic love relationships he is leaving behind—Hutch admits feeling pressured by “all the layers of Mayfields and Kendals and Hutchins piled on me. What I've felt is full, *crowded* even. I'm the place where a good deal of time comes to bear, and several lives—the only place on earth. . . . My people abandoned so much on my doorstep. . . .” (*SoL* 46).

Blind as Rob has often been to the brand of harm he causes, he is now all too aware of the legacy and is concerned that Hutch's inherited “taste for touch” might somehow harm him. When Hutch jokingly claims that his two vocations are teaching children English and “rushing women to heaven before their time,” Rob asks, concerned, “How many would you estimate you'd rushed? . . . I'd like to know. It would help me to know what women mean to you. It's a danger that runs in your family, you've noticed—the Mayfield side' (*SoL* 7-8). Late in the second novel, Hutch himself declares that he is heir to “a line of deep thinkers and sensitive plants, if that's nobility” (*SoL* 365). The

tone of the remark, coming at the end of the novel and his journey of self-discovery abroad, reveals the clarity with which he sees the malaise that has afflicted his family—particularly his father—and the fact that it is present in him, too, in spite of Rob’s belief to the contrary. “Somehow,” Rob tells him, “you’re the one named Kendal-Hutchins-Mayfield that escaped having whatever worm gnawed us. . . . I think what it wanted was happiness—from other humans, here and now. . . . You escaped that, didn’t you? Something spared you that. . . . I sometimes wondered if your nerves were normal or if you were slightly numb. You had good reason” (*SoL* 67).

But Hutch’s reflections on his life tell a different story entirely:

In his own childhood he’d often felt like the low but well-built cooking fire round which, at distances carefully gauged, the members of his own blood-family wheeled—for the sight and warmth, with startling forays toward him (where he lay alone also.) But when his own manhood flared up in him, it consumed his fuel and, though his family had never understood it, changed him to a member in their own ring of prowlers, impelled by hunger. He’d made his own forays, seized his own food—none of which had lasted long, most of which had left him burned. (*SoL* 48)

Burdened by this history, Hutch must carry the guilt of having abandoned—in his necessary flight—some very real responsibilities to love. Above all, he must face what feels (to him and to others) like his “abandonment” of Rob.<sup>11</sup> The strength of the bond by which they’ve held each other (the sweet, poisoned fruit of Rob’s vow at Hutch’s birth) has proved damaging to both in their sudden separation. Though he understands Hutch’s need for space, Rob sees him as “leaving in grinning indifference” and refuses to tell him

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<sup>11</sup> Hutch (“punished” repeatedly while abroad by dreams of Rob’s absence or departure) must face at his return a number of accusing voices that question his fidelity and his role in Rob’s death. Min’s assertion that Rob had “planned his death” and that Hutch had left “knowing what that would cause” (268) comes as no surprise to Hutch—resentment from “years of deprivation” when only Hutch had kept them apart (303). But Grainger’s response weighs more heavily. As they part at the airport, Grainger hints that in returning to Oxford, Hutch is making a second mistake. To Hutch’s reply that “Nobody will mind for long, Grainger says only, “Nobody else’ll *die* at least,” confirming with this “verdict” Hutch’s deepest fears (303).

the news of the burgeoning cancer (*SoL* 55)—partly from a wish to spare Hutch, but also from fear that Hutch might leave in the face of the news, showing himself “the final demon of dreams—faithless after decades of smooth deceit” (*SoL* 6). Reflecting on his illness, Rob decides that “he was actually killing himself—this racing tumor—out of pure need for help: the help of close company, lacking ten years. He was building a little partner in his chest, which would stop when he did” (*SoL* 24). Alone again in the house where he and Hutch had spent a peaceful and healing four years, he says to their dog Thalia, “remember when you outlast me that it was some kind of shame and disgrace to life that Rob Mayfield was left here with you. He refuses the blame” (*SoL* 27). He is not alone long, however, for in Hutch’s absence, Rob requests help from his mother—who contacts Min Tharrington, arranging for them to meet and reconcile.

In a letter to Rob soon after leaving, Hutch attempts to explain in part his complicated feelings about his father and their relationship: “Like a lot of children, I felt safer than you and responsible for you. The child can be ‘father to the man’ in more senses than Wordsworth meant, and you asked me to be. Or so I thought. It may be one reason I’m a little tired now. I’ve played more parts—lived them as duties—than a good many women or men age sixty” (*SoL* 180-81). Looking forward to an exercise of “his kindest skill—life in the present” (*SoL* 18), Hutch plunges into his journey initially bent on forgetfulness:

The future vanished before him, no trace—his father’s life without him; the choices Ann would face, the bid she awaited; the thousand accidents of settling in a strange place; the cold fear that soon his promise to work would uncover only empty shafts in himself and in plain view of the friends and kin who held his promise, a tangible note. . . . No agonized mother; no father drunk and stripped on a bare floor dribbling piss; no need to choose one person from the world and love only that. The present

was all—his serviceable self borne on through evening and country  
peaceful as a child asleep, its own reward, toward nothing at all.  
(*SoL* 18-19)

But ironically it is Rob, dying as Hutch departs, who provides Hutch with the real object  
of his journey into exile:

three people now alive would be grateful if anyone looked back on us (not  
down) and saw that we'd made anything like a diagram in these fifty  
years, anything more than harum-scarum tracks in the dirt as a handful of  
scared souls scuttled for cover. My dictionary tells me that a diagram is “a  
writing in lines.” I can't recall seeing an ugly diagram; so that's the hope,  
Son; that we make some figure. If we do you'd be the one to know  
(though it may take you awhile to know you know). (*SoL* 67)

Unaware that his father is dying (and still ignorant of his own deepest needs),  
Hutch fails to hear or understand truly his father's other muted request, spoken in utter  
dark as they visit Rachel's grave a last time: “once you decide—if you ever decide,  
decide soon enough. . . . Bury me wherever you think is your home” (*SoL* 11). The  
request is simple enough, but Hutch soon finds that defining “home” is not—nor is  
“burying” Rob. Hutch's attempts to seek solace in the peaceful countryside seem  
doomed by the fact that the landscape itself, with its evidence of battlefields and the ruins  
of past civilizations, seems increasingly metaphorical to him—emblematic of the  
personal and familial past with which he must come to terms.

Hutch's early travels take him to Tintagel and Castle Dore, sites connected with  
the Arthurian stories he had loved in his childhood. Yet Tintagel, “the first perfect site  
he'd seen” (108), fails to move him as expected, though—in spite of its “newness”—it  
looks sufficiently grand to have witnessed all the legends bestowed—the deceitful  
conception of Arthur and his birth by Uthor on Ygrain through the arts of Merlin” (108).  
Puzzled at his lack of response, Hutch decides that “the place, with all its grandeur was a

set; the show was long over” (108). More precisely, it is not “food” for his present and perpetual need. At Castle Dore, however, his reaction is different, even though the place is barren of anything but the green-covered mound of Castle Dore (palace of a sixth century local king named Mark) and a seven-foot plinth buried in weeds and grass. These remnants bear connections to a legend nearly as tenuous as those of Tintagel’s castle to the historical Arthur. But to Hutch, having read and reread Bedier’s *Romance of Tristan and Iseult* on his journey, “[the stone] seemed to say what he’d hoped”: that Tristan (the “Drustan” described on the burial stone) had been real—the son, not the nephew, of King Mark (*SoL* 108). Had the poets “made a hard tale softer?” he wonders—a tale of a son’s betrayal “smoothed to household adultery” (109)? Standing on the ruins of the “undoubted hill-fort and palace,” Hutch feels himself “freed—or opening slowly” (108). Thinking that “within its small ring the most famous love of the modern world, since Antony and Cleopatra at least, had blossomed and spread,” he considers Isolde’s question from Act Two of Wagner’s opera: “Have you not known. . . / The mighty Queen / Of boldest hearts, / Mistress of Earth’s ways? / Life and Death / Are under Her. / Them she weaves of joy and pain” (109).

Taking the question personally, Hutch thinks that “He’d always suspected himself of enjoying his body more than anyone else he’d known” but wonders whether he has ever known “a constant need only one could fill. . .” (110). Realizing that he has run from those (including Rob) who’ve “aimed at his eyes an offer of love, a plea for love that had now proved blinding,” Hutch kneels in the warm sun and grass to take a rock from “one of the earth’s main ganglia of love and its famished cry,” thinking “*Home* . . . then [knowing] that home had never meant ease” (110). Confused and weary—burdened

already with an unconscious (and almost preternatural sense) of guilt and imminent loss—Hutch seeks to calm himself with the assurance that he has “bought himself time” to work out “who was who, where was *homeward*” (111). But he finds that the thought itself evokes unaccustomed “cold tears” that hold him temporarily in place “on the green midden raised over Europe’s great love and foul deceit” (111). Later, seen in memory, the castle itself seems to him “a great crab extending claws from a green carapace, to capture. . . . Safety from other men,” though it had failed and Tristan (betrayed by love itself) lay within its shell, “a hollow heart” (117).

After leaving Cornwall, Hutch travels to Tresco, in the Scilly Islands, encountering there a version of Eden: “To Hutch, with his own life, it seemed perfect so far—sun, a lush garden, no cars, no town, rocks and sea as a permanent guard” (119). There, too, he meets a simple and recklessly generous island family who takes him in. But the family is not complete, the father having drowned at sea six months before. Hutch feels drawn to Kay, the mother, who is calmly generous and smiling, though her circumstances are desperate. But it her young son Archie (a child-avatar of Rob), who moves him most strongly.

In one of the novel’s key scenes, Hutch lies in a wrecked fishing boat, abandoned near the water’s edge, and reads again in Bediér’s *Tristan* the chapter called “The Wood of Morois.” In this section, Tristan and Iseult wander nine months in “ ‘the savage wood,’” accompanied only by Gorvenal, eating what they can find and “missing only ‘the taste of salt’; for ‘they loved each other and they did not know that they suffered’” (*SoL* 123). To Hutch, with his history, the tale seems “a sufficient picture of the world in itself—wild hunger generating its own food, rich and nutritious and finally lethal” (123).

When he falls asleep, he dreams of Tresco—an island “in the Garden”—where he lives with two of his lovers, Ann and Lew, learning “*patience*,” the element they try to teach him as he is steadily “balked” in his erotic desires.

But as he sleeps, dreaming with simultaneous longing for and frustration with Paradise, nine-year-old Archie climbs into the boat with him. For the first time in the novel, Price shifts the point of view to a minor character, allowing the audience to see (as Hutch cannot), the peculiar and synchronistic quality of the message the boy brings—one of many messengers in a novel as filled with revelations as *The Surface of Earth*.

“Thrust[ing] head and shoulders” through the hole in the stove-in boat (a reverse image of birth), Archie watches the sleeping Hutch, “still and silent, wondering if there were any chance in the world this man might stay here and never go. He’d wanted that since morning on the path when the man accepted his gift of the glass [a nautical magnifier]” (123-24). Lew had refused the boy’s gift, leaving him to suspect that “some part of his life had been abused,” but Hutch had taken it and thanked him, promising to “remember [him] behind it” (119).<sup>12</sup> Now, waking Hutch by his presence in the boat, Archie (“solemn as an acolyte”) triggers their peculiar exchange. “Good morning,” Hutch says, but Archie shakes his head in denial. “Good night?” Hutch teases, but Archie negates this response as well, still taciturn. “Merry Christmas?” Hutch asks, causing Archie to nod and ask solemnly, “Will you give me what I ask?” (124).<sup>13</sup> Judicious by nature, Hutch is unsure what he’s being asked for and wonders aloud if it is something he can

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<sup>12</sup> The glass “magnifier,” the fatherless boy’s generosity, and his eager sensitivity about gifts hint at the scene from “The Heart in Dreams” in which young Rob (overcome with drink and emotion) again offers Sylvie his “fragile” childhood gift of a goldfish in its shining glass bowl (*SoE* 143).

<sup>13</sup> Given Price’s fondness for incorporating synchronous signals from “the large world,” Hutch’s “Merry Christmas”—and Archie’s affirmation of its rightness—is highly charged indeed. For though Hutch cannot know it (anymore than he knows Archie’s question), Rob will die just past Christmas—not expecting (and surprised by) Hutch’s sudden return.

give—hesitating even when Archie says, “It’s easy” (124). But Archie will clarify no further, so in order not to lie, Hutch answers, “No” (124). When Archie tells him “You made an awful mistake. . . . I asked you to stay,” Hutch apologizes and asks for another chance but is refused (124). In the rising mist that makes the cottage “plain as a model under glass but unreachable . . . before the path itself would flood with impassable gray, the air go solid,” Hutch asks if they can go home, only to be told by Archie, “All right but it’s not your home” (127). A short time later, “striding “as if hunted” for the cottage hearth, Hutch thinks for the first time in weeks of his father and longs to see him:

not the Rob he had left three weeks ago but the grand lost boy who had lain beside him in infancy, seeking in a child (not yet a year old) full answer to questions the size of rock quarries—*Can I stand up from here, work one more day? Will you only smile? Will you never leave?* Hutch wanted to answer Yes to the last and, in that wish, saw nothing beyond him—the big wild garden raked by wind, the deadly sea; the cottage, safe as an iron spike rusting in stone. (130)

The dual pulls of peaceful but lonely solitude (the condition Hutch sees as necessary for clear vision) and contingency (warming and “nutritious” but proven dangerous to Self) precisely define his dilemma. Encountering yet another avatar of Rob—James, a stonemason traveling with his young daughter, Nan—Hutch feels their warmth beside him “like heaped red coals—a core of energy harmful but attractive” (156). Hutch does not think consciously of the personal images evoked by these scenes—Rob and himself wandering through Rob’s own desperate quest twenty years before, with Hutch as his primary witness and guard. Yet despite Hutch’s urge to find “one word of warning,” he feels “strong pulses of . . . peace, flickering signals which affirmed again that there were real fires outside himself—welcoming, benevolent, worth anyone’s tending. Father and child” (163).

By the time he arrives in Rome to meet Ann for Christmas, he is (without knowing it) nearly desperate with the desire for a child of his own—to surrender to Ann’s bid and to tend and be nourished himself by wife and child (the fulfillment of Rob’s old dream.) At this point, however, he is becoming partly conscious of the irony involved. Standing with Ann in what they think is the Lupercal—the “sacred grotto” where Romulus and Remus were suckled by the wolf and a sight famous for rites of fertility—Hutch finds instead that they are standing in the Temple of the Magna Mater, Cybele. Reading from the guidebook he learns the Cybele’s priests emasculated themselves in a frenzied dance ritual. And in this context Ann’s gift of a marble shard (which he imagines mottled with the ancient blood of “wild priests”) seems ominous indeed (198-99).

But on Christmas Eve, the “weight” of the mass they observe together—watching the “long gold palanquin with angels and rays whose heart was a crystal box containing ... fragments of the only Manger”—works nevertheless to “[press] from each ... their unknown will to start a child” (194). Their dreams after reveal their motives: Ann’s, to be accepted as a mature, needed, and “trustworthy” woman; Hutch’s, to recreate with his own child the “Eden” (or “forest years” of Morois) he had shared with Rob at the Kendal house. Hutch’s yearning, still largely unconscious, finds expression in “more scenes” (*SoL* 194) from an earlier dream in which James and Nan live with him in the Kendal homeplace—now mysteriously (and frighteningly) empty of Rob (*SoL* 167).

Called back from Rome by Grainger with the news that Rob is dying (a fact of which Hutch has long seemed subconsciously aware), Hutch must face the first real crisis of his adult life—the loss of his life’s “prior engine and goal” (225). And significantly,

he chooses to do it without Ann. For Ann—who had accidentally learned of Rob’s illness and has for her own reasons honored Rob’s wish by keeping the news secret (209)—Hutch’s departure is devastating and seems an abandonment. Though he has asked her to marry him (giving her the Mayfield family ring), Ann cannot be at ease and knows only (without really understanding) that he “love[s] [his] father more than anything else” (218). For he shuts her out of his grief and can think only to say to her, “‘Pardon us please’—Rob and me” (210), asking her to stay behind rather than immediately accompanying him home (218). Hutch leaves her in Rome with the child they have unwittingly conceived—and with Rowlet Swanson, a lovelorn and homesick young serviceman with whom they had briefly made friends.

Distracted by his own grief and the boy’s uncanny resemblance to Rob, Hutch misunderstands Rowlet’s question about what he and Ann must do (“two orphans in Rome”) once Hutch has departed. “I’m the orphan,” Hutch tells him, looking at Rowlet’s profile and thinking that “that simple line from forehead to chin seemed now . . . all he’d ever meant to understand, praise, and save—its brave seal thrust toward the patient fruitful matrix of the world” (217). Then, in one of the novel’s strangest and most revelatory moments, Hutch “lean[s], presse[s] his own mouth against dry hair on the ridge of Rowlet’s neck” in what seems a misplaced benediction, saying only “Good luck anyhow” (217). Hutch’s memory of this exchange arises later (after news of Ann’s abortion) to leave Hutch, too, “cut in some vital part” (367). But his inadvertent blessing encourages Rowlet, with whom—desolate in the aftermath of Hutch’s departure—Ann shares a sexual encounter, complicating her future choices about the child (though Price’s narration and her own instincts confirm Hutch as the father.)

Though Ann's actions are reckless, her fear is understandable. Early in the novel she admits her suspicion that Rob had seen her as an interloper and "never really liked her from the start" (95). And despite his letter to her saying that he likes her "grit" and hopes she'll be "a Mayfield," Ann's instinct may be right (98). For Rob's affirmation comes only after his terminal diagnosis and in the wake of Hutch's certain departure—in a letter hoping to secure her silence. Further confirming Ann's fears is Hutch's much later admission (a revelation to Alice Matthews—and perhaps to himself) that he had wanted to live alone "when Rob was alive" (*SoL* 284). Alice's reply—"And you think he's not now?"—resounds weirdly through the rest of the novel, suggesting the sense in which such deep commitments linger mysteriously, even after death (284).

Rooke observes that a major theme of *Surface* is the resistance of established households to change. "Any establishment of a new household," she notes, "damages a previous combination of human lives and may, therefore, be a mistake" (113). But that theme seems just as prominent in *The Source of Light*. After Rob's death, Ann seeks Min's counsel concerning Hutch (whom she fears she is losing) and her possible need for an abortion. Seeing her face, Min knows (having known the Mayfield men all her life), that Ann has come about them (315). When Ann protests that she has come only about Hutch, Min warns from experience, "They don't come separate. . . . Deal with both. If you can't, walk away" (316). The comment, and Ann's visit to the Kendal house—inhabited now by Grainger and by Strawson Stuart (Hutch's former student and lover, who strongly resembles young Rob)—helps to push Ann further in the direction of abortion. Stopping by to ask Strawson for help in finding an abortion, she is startled to sense his "firm air of residence" and to realize that the house has "let him in easily,"

while she “stand[s] on the sill” (321). But her final impetus toward stopping her child comes from a dream in which Min’s warning (and her own findings at the house) are dramatized. When Ann arrives at the Kendal house to help plan its remodeling, she finds herself shut out from its workings (and from Hutch) by the other “Mayfield” men—Grainger, Strawson, and Rob Mayfield himself (miraculously alive). The three are tending with care a “recumbent juniper” (an emblem of the child, perhaps—or more mysteriously of Hutch himself, renewed)—“lovely as any living thing she has seen” (326). But though they thank Ann for bringing new life to the house and vow that they will “never forget,” they will neither admit her nor answer her wonder-filled questions about the tree and its source (326-27). Despairing of her place in Hutch’s life, she resolves that the decision is her own and aborts the child in secret, weeks after Rob’s death.

Though he has returned to Rob’s deathbed and begged pardon for “ruin[ing]” the most fruitful years of Rob’s life, Hutch finds himself struggling paradoxically with the loss of his “vocation” and with the parallel (and not entirely unwelcome sense) that he has Rob on his hands for good. What Hutch cannot yet grasp—young, grieving, and craving “sufficient time” for a fuller atonement—is that Rob has made peace with his past (fully embracing Hutch’s part in it) and has literally moved on, his ghost blessing the sleeping Hutch as he visits the Kendal homeplace a final time (256).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Like Price’s inclusion of the last rites in “A Chain of Love,” the episode with Rob’s ghost may constitute unconscious revision of Will’s death and its aftermath. Price writes in *Clear Pictures* that what seemed “some form of Will” entered his room on the night of that death. The experience was overwhelming (though perhaps merely a matter of emotion), and Price diffused the presence—like Eborn opening his study door—by telling it aloud to “Go” (296). In *The Source of Light*, by contrast, Hutch sleeps peacefully through Rob’s calm and needless final visit, having taken Sylvie’s advice to wait where Rob’s spirit had been “happy”—and having invited the return by saying “Come now, if you can” (251-52). Price’s notebooks show that the idea arrived suddenly (“entirely unplanned”) as a strong and puzzling

Rob's final letter to Hutch (recalling the best days of his life) concludes with a tale from their "famous eventful" summer trip in June 1944, "chasing each other down from seashore to mountains" (182). Pausing at Jamestown (to honor Hutch's love of Pocahontas' story), Rob leaned against her statue and fell asleep as Hutch went exploring. Awakened moments later by a low thumping sound, he saw a naked child turning cartwheels like Pocahontas, but "slower than a normal child could manage," and feared it as "some revelation from the Womb of Time"—"something . . . calling me on, requiring me to give when I felt about as bankrupt as I'd ever been" (183). Within moments, though, he saw it was Hutch ("bare-chested in . . . tan shorts")—"a real revelation that would need acts of care for the rest of my life and maybe beyond" (184). Despite his recurrent dream of the storm "not meant for [him]," Rob still believed that "the world was a custom-built millstone with ROB MAYFIELD sewed neat in the neck," and he would have run, he admits. Instead, without knowing why, he said, "'Let's make a run for it,' " causing Hutch to laugh, too, and nod (184). Yet they didn't run, and Rob recalls the day as the last high point of his life—"the last big tree they let me climb" (184). In closing he admits to his son,

What I saw from there was right. We should somehow have run. . . . There must have been one place left back then where we could have hid out and had a plain life and learned to ignore all the want-lists posted from cradle to grave to train every human into baying at the stars . . . till finally we could face each other and say, "I don't want anything alive or dead but you."

Maybe that makes our Jamestown day the worst of all. . . . We were happy and knew it. Shame on us for the rest. (184)

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compulsion, and Price debated its artistic merits for days before including the episode—hesitant but "still strongly drawn to Rob's spirit-visit. . ." (*LaT* 276-77).

Just after Rob's death, Hutch sits in Rob's place beneath the statue of Pocahontas and "[knows] Rob's absence fully for the first time—the site on the earth round which he'd turned, the single point on which he'd described his own lean figures, father and goal" (286). Doubting that there can be another, everything Hutch sees—even "the cold stone behind him"—seems to answer "No" (286).

Hutch's return to Oxford finds him wearied and embittered as never before, and the news that Ann's child (possibly his) has been aborted reaches him at his lowest ebb. Though Ann has not refused Hutch and he knows he has no right to blame her entirely, he thinks, in an oddly calm moment of supreme despair, "'You were never meant for happiness.' It tolled like a bell. He actually grinned" (346). The knowledge seems to release him to provisional calm, which he now realizes is all he dare hope for. Hutch has so far felt driven—like his forebears—to find the home (person or place) that will satisfy and complete him. Yet the saving "answer" Hutch finds seems to lie not in resolution of the dialogue between flight and rest, real and ideal, but in the choice of a unique attitude and perspective from which to glimpse Rob's "diagram" and offer his answer, even now, in the wake of Rob's death.

For Hutch, the saving story exists in the transformed mythology of Tristan and Iseult, the product of a second dream he had endured in the beached boat at Tresco:

there he invented or maybe uncovered a fact from *Tristan*. At the end, after decades of adhesion and tearing, when Mark stands in blessing over Tristan and Iseult—joined, dead as soused herring—the tragic glow falls not on Mark (who fought after all for his own grim share) or on Brangien (who served the successful potion) or even on the internationally famed spent couple but on Gorvenal, Tristan's empty-handed handyman, unworn as a baby after all his long witness. Hutch watched through Gorvenal's eyes awhile and felt the same sense of abandonment that had blown in on him this afternoon. A single figure—young enough and able—who'd thought he was ready for a life of his own, left suddenly with nothing to

show but memory. The fact that Memory was mother to the Muses hadn't sunk deep enough in his mind for dreaming. Or had sunk and been refused as harmful or untrue. He saw himself stand by the glorious dead till all others left bearing Iseult above them. Then he took up Tristan, surprisingly light, and walked toward the sea. (132)

Not until the novel's end does Hutch understand the bleak but sufficient nourishment this vision can provide him in life and work—a metaphorical place to stand. After Rob's death and what seems a final parting with Ann, Hutch writes to Polly, expressing his hope that his ability “to watch things (people mainly) and copy their motions” may “somehow prove a means of love, of finding the place where each thing is still and will no longer leave” (376). And in a very real way, Price's first two volumes of the trilogy constitute this gesture—offering it (through the eyes of Hutch Mayfield) not only to Rob, but at last (though with widened provenance, perhaps) to Rob's nearest prototype, Will.

The *Promise of Rest*—though resolving the themes of the first two novels—seems in many ways a different sort of gesture entirely. Price initially saw *Promise* as an opportunity for Hutch Mayfield (now age sixty-three) to “tell absolutely everything he wants . . . about a good many things that don't seem novelistic—society, art, modern history, America's apparent fate” (*LaT* 499, 4 August 1992). Since the publication of *Source*, Price had survived the rages of cancer and paraplegia and had witnessed (but been spared from) AIDS—an entirely new and grisly manifestation of the love-death. So his urge toward social commentary and “analysis” is hardly surprising. But it represents a departure from the tone and narrative approach of the earlier books (steeped as they were in “biblical method” and committed to “validation in the narrative bones”). And with the absence of Rob Mayfield, the energy of the book (though not its themes) seems remarkably different.

Yet once again, the focus of the novel is on the healing bond of father and son and on the redemption of the ruined man by his heir and healer. In this instance however, the clearest manifestation of the grand wounded male (psychologically paralyzed and failing) is to be found not in Wade Mayfield (Hutch's son, dying horribly from AIDS), but ironically in Hutch himself, who had once hoped to escape such "wounds" through his art. As the novel opens, all his life seems to be failing. Ann, whom he had married after returning from Oxford, has left him in disgust after decades of apparent contentment. Though Hutch is recognized as a successful poet and teacher, his work (not unlike Eborn's in *Love and Work*) has lately proven sterile and unsatisfying to him. But most recently he has learned that his son Wade (once bound to him as closely as he had been to Rob) is dying of AIDS and now requires his close care, though the two have been estranged (for reasons Hutch can hardly bear to explore) since Wade formed his relationship with Wyatt Bondurant.

Feeling "alone as a dead tree" (13) and "used up to the stick" like a "worn-out broom," Hutch (now our Anfortas) seems baffled by where his life has led him (189). He feels "done in suddenly by a judgment precisely hurled at his own private failings, a plunge dead center to the heart of his error—the secret central wrong of his life. *Which is what?*" he wonders. "*What's the secret*" (188)? The novel is a set of answer to these questions, with the ailing Wade presiding (ironically) as "catalyst and alembic" for Hutch's rejuvenation. And once again, the imagery of the core grail scene and Question gesture seems prominent in the narrative. Midway through the novel, Hutch (who has been tending Wade, blind and failing in his home) experiences "a tangled dream of paralysis" in which he sees "his real body, laid here on his bed and frozen to stone in

every cell” (205). And on a chair beyond him, “in reach of his father and with sufficient strength to free him” sits Wade. “The one great need,” Price writes, “[is] for Hutch to make a simple request, a single demand of Wade, requiring an answer; but his lips couldn’t move” (205). Only a small spot in Hutch’s brain can think—and all night (silently) it repeats this mysterious “single request”—trapped in his skull but meant for Wade—*Will you give me an answer*” (205)? But it is an answer, apparently, that he must find himself.

James Schiff notes that the novel opens not only with the circumstances of Hutch’s malaise, but with [Hutch’s] paradoxical exuberance—“a strange boiling from deep in his chest”—which signals his coming renewal and is oddly akin to the feelings of release he had experienced just prior to Rob’s death (*Understanding* 106). Price’s epigraph, taken from the “Little Gidding” section of Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, puts the matter succinctly: “*We die with the dying: / See, they depart, and we go with them. / We are born with the dead: / See, they return, and bring us with them.*” In this case, what Hutch both anticipates and fears is the reunion with his son (whom he has cherished as dearly as Rob), and he thinks of father and son, “flung by love like hawks by a storm” (*PoR* 42).

Schiff believes that Hutch, “the aspiring artist who craved solitude in *The Source of Light*,” has at last “succeeded in shutting himself off from the rest of the world” and is miserable as a result (105). There may be some truth in this, for in his silent misery and paralysis, he sometimes resembles Eborn. Yet Hutch is more resilient and displays more humility—seeking emotional support and assistance from students (Hart Salter, Mait Moses), as they do from him. But what is most remarkable about Hutch’s life, perhaps, is

that he did *not* choose to remain unmarried and pursue the intermittent (and bi-sexual) company we might have expected. Alice Matthews remarks that Hutch was one of her few students to listen to the gospel of solitude and art—but adds that he “disobeyed” her, for reasons of his own (*PoR* 192). Schiff makes this point, too, noting with surprise that Hutch has opted for marriage with (and perfect fidelity to) Ann, rather than a relationship with Strawson—with whom (in *The Source of Light*) he seems to have had his most satisfying union (112). Ann asserts flatly, “You loved Straw Stuart but married me,” blaming this choice for all their pain—and oddly Wade’s as well (*PoR* 204-05). Wade tells Hutch, “Wyatt told me, the first night he met you, that you’d cut your heart off from the world the day you got married—he knew it on sight” (114). And Strawson, who at eighteen had asked for Hutch’s life in a scene implied in (but omitted from) *The Source of Light*, tells his lifelong friend, “Hell, you dealt your biggest cheat to me, when I’d offered you nothing less than my life. What have I done worse” (230)?

Hutch considers all these views in the course of the novel, but each party argues from a position of resentment and self-interest—Ann and Straw resentful over Hutch’s choices and Wyatt resentful, perhaps, of Hutch’s love and hold on Wade. And while each contains a grain of truth, the composite points to a more complex “solution” than any critic has suggested. Michael Kreyling, however, makes the intriguing assertion that in *The Promise of Rest*, “Price reduces, like a stock, several differentiated male ‘characters’ to phases of one emerging male identity desiring both love and work, but confused as to the right objects of each” (“Men Without Women” 284). The “three-way conference of father, son, and surrogate son [Hutch, Wade, Mait],” he says, “is less a dramatic conversation than an interior monologue, or even a soliloquy that shifts the

genre of the trilogy from novel to something akin to confession” (284). Kreyling argues that Maitland Moses (just emerging into an open homosexual life) is “a double for Hutch himself at a similar life crossroads (his departure to Oxford and work; subterranean reservations in his relationship with Ann). Mait in the sexual free-fire zone of the 1990s,” Kreyling asserts, “is the young man Hutch might have been if the historical conditions he faced at Mait’s age had been different, enabling Hutch to ‘think’ his multiple desires in the 1950s” (284).

The suggestion is helpful. Yet Hutch *did* pursue both courses (avidly, if not openly) in his youth, and his dream of living with Ann and Lew in the Garden on Tresco points to genuine bi-sexuality (though he resents the term) and to his ability to “think” through (and sustain) multiple desires. Though Kreyling does not say so, Hart Salter, too, seems an authentic “version” of Hutch—a reflection on his sincere love for *woman* but also of his simultaneous frustration with the female need for constant affirmation in love. “My record on love is dismal,” Hutch warns Hart, the young poet who has approached him for advice on how to “convince a woman that you actually love her” when fidelity and repeated displays do not do the trick (14). With this exchange in mind, perhaps, Hutch later tells Ann, “You know it nearly killed me when you left? . . . The truth. I thought I’d die for the first few days, flat-suffocate. It’s still like another great rock on my chest. . . . You know I’ve had trouble all my life telling people I love them. . . . I couldn’t convince you that we were barely two people . . . you seemed to need proofs of love, on the hour. . .” (213).

Critics seem to assume that Hutch’s choice of Ann (and his life of fidelity to her) constitutes a lack of boldness, poor self-awareness, or mere adherence to convention—

and that if he had chosen differently, he might have been happier. But the poem Hutch writes for Rob just after his death contains a strong clue to what may have happened in the interim—an avowal contradicting the “artistic” choice he seemed to have made in his final letter to Polly (above, p. 242). Though vowing to “remember” Rob’s warning grin at Warm Springs as he vanished into the killing earth “(female essence of the heart of the / Ground),” Hutch gives primacy to Rob’s last words (“You choose”) taking them as answer to his own question: “*What am I for, now*”(SoL 308-09). The core of his poem makes that choice very clear:

I’ve chosen, had chosen before you spoke.  
The choice is the answer—I will have your life,  
It was not you and I in a house on a low  
Hill, a dog, a manservant, your mother  
At the moat, all other bridges raised. Whatever I  
Planned as a lonely boy or you  
As a dying man in that house, we were stopped  
By two things—age and body. We were separate  
Ages (you were bound to quit before me) but  
Identical bodies. What we had was years  
Of circling a spot, mules at a mill.  
The figure was rings, concentric rings  
Round an unseen center (what were we grinding?)  
Till I fled and you quit. (SoL 308)

Hutch’s choice brings to mind Rob’s dream of “Reward,” one of many emblems of the ideal family that eluded him through life, as it has eluded the motherless Hutch (SoL 234). In this dream—the last before his radiant death-vision of his own birth “revised now and right” (SoL 250)—Rob arrives (still young) at a boarding-house where a smiling girl leads him to the sleeping boy Hutch, indicating that “the three of them will stay in the room, maybe always” (SoL 234). Given this innate, shared longing—and Hutch’s instinct to revise and complete Rob’s life vicariously—his choice of Ann is hardly surprising. Coupled with the fact that they “owe [each other] a life” (redemption of their

first, hard loss of a child), their marriage seems altogether natural.<sup>15</sup> And Straw, as we learn at the end of *Source*, had seemed bound toward a life in the Navy—prepared to depart altogether from the Kendal house.

What Ann seems most to resent is not Hutch's error—or his love of Straw (a fact with which she has long ago, albeit painfully, come to terms). She resents his lack of understanding and the trouble that has created for them all in their crisis at mid-life. Hutch's central "error" —as reflected in his dream of paralysis and silence—seems linked not to a particular path, but to a failure of consciousness. He has erred through self-deception and a disposition to withhold feelings and secrets that others openly express (and address as best they can). Such reserve may have emerged from a desire for simplification—consistent with what we observed of him in *The Source of Light*. But his silence has repeatedly allowed cracks to form—most recently in his relationship with Ann and with Wade, from whom (incredibly) he has kept his sexual life a secret.

As Price's epigraph to *The Source of Light* suggests (quoting Swedenborg's *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell*), the difference between "angelic language" and human speech is that "angels cannot / utter anything that is not in / perfect agreement with their nature." Yet this is a lesson Hutch seems not to have learned. And in this sense Wade—though physically wounded and dying from love's wounds (a physical image of the Grail King)—serves ironically as a spiritual "revision" of Hutch, functioning to redeem his father. For Wade, too, is a "part" of Hutch (as Kreyling had suggested of the other characters), and as he dies and dreams back (like Rob Mayfield in *The Source of Light*) the life he relives is (oddly) Hutch's own—and the face welcoming

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<sup>15</sup> Despite guilt regarding his role in Ann's abortion, Hutch thinks as they speak on the phone, "You owe me a life" (*SoL* 369).

him, as if in affirmation of his worthiness—is that of a man wearing a face he has never seen in life: that of Hutch’s father, Rob Mayfield (267-68). Though Hutch had been truly “dying from the heart out,” longing for a place “where Wade can finally comprehend his mysterious father” (191), that at-one-ment is achieved as Wade coaxes from Hutch both self-assessment and the buried story of his life. And in return he reveals his secret family and “chief good deed” (the child Raven, named for Hutch and Wade<sup>16</sup>)—offered in recompense for long suffering.

Significantly, the passage Strawson reads at Wade’s funeral is a version of Romans 8—Rena’s own favorite, offered to Rob at a particularly low moment in his life, as he returns to reclaim Hutch: “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God” (*SoE* 401). In its broad glance at Time and human suffering in love, *A Great Circle* brilliantly fuses the mundane and the mystical, suggesting clearly that “God wants us to understand life as a comedy”—the visionary assurance put forth by Forrest and echoed by Rachel (*SoE* 310). “May all herein find strength against inconstancy,” Bedier writes at the conclusion of his romance, “against unfairness and despite and loss and pain and all the bitterness of loving” (*The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* 151).

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<sup>16</sup> Their full names are Raven Hutchins Mayfield and Raven Wade Mayfield—continuing the name of Rachel’s father.

## CHAPTER 5

### APOTHEOSIS

No jeweled hummingbird, no angel  
Equals (much less passes) me. . . .

—the grandest bird.

I plunge down a throat more gorgeous than glass,  
A luge-run paved in Byzantine mosaic,  
Billion translucent gilded tiles—  
All joy till I comprehend the goal,  
Terminus waiting at Time's own end:  
The heart of God, God's belly and vent.  
Whelmed, doomed, I pray to stop.

No answer. *On.*

—“The Dream of Falling,” *The Use of Fire* 47

On 31 May 1984, after two days of tests, Price received news of the astrocytoma (a cancerous tumor, likely congenital and as yet impossible to remove) that would profoundly change both his life and his work. Though slow-growing, the tumor was wrapped around the upper ten inches of his spinal column, already exerting enormous pressure on the cord. In *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing*, Price's memoir of “mid-life collision with cancer and paralysis” (vii), he notes that the year had till then been one of his best (1). Having published *The Source of Light* (with its closure on the life of Rob Mayfield and Price's twenty-year journey toward a novel “about” Will and himself), Price had penned the play *Private Contentment* (his second drama) later that

year on commission for the first season of *American Playhouse* (1982).<sup>1</sup> In 1982 he had also published his first volume of poems, *Vital Provisions*. By early June of 1984, when Price underwent surgery to confirm the diagnosis and relieve pressure on his spine, he was one-third through his novel *Kate Vaiden* (inspired by the life of his mother) and had hopes of finishing by the end of the year. And indeed, after a long pause in the aftermath of surgery and radiation treatments (which led gradually to paraplegia), Price's work continued. But the tumor had been slowed, not stopped, and by late that summer (having lost the use of his legs), Price had entered a three-year pitched battle with cancer, paralysis, medication, and intractable nerve pain that would leave his work greatly transformed in voice and perspective. Not incidentally, the new work was no longer dominated by novels, but was forcing its way (at rapid speed) into a variety of genres (the most passionate "calisthenics" of his life) that were either new to him or long out of his use—plays, memoirs, short stories, and daybook poems.<sup>2</sup> As Price observes near the end of *A Whole New Life*, "the books are different from what came before in more ways than age" (193).

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<sup>1</sup> As Price notes in *Learning a Trade*, the play utilizes an "intermittent fantasy" the teenaged Price had imagined for Will—"likely the most faithful of husbands"—and had drawn upon in constructing the meeting of Forrest with Old Rob and Polly Drewry (*LaT* 303, March 1981). In Price's play, the son (Logan Melton) arrives home for his mother's funeral, but his father (piano salesman Paul Melton) introduces the boy afterward to a second, long-hidden family: Lena Brock (a music teacher) and her daughter Gail (by implication, Logan's half-sister). But Price admits that the fantasy had less to do with Will's needs and personality than his own at that age: 1) his adolescent desire for "a rich secret life" and 2) "an enhanced, complex masculinity for [Will] (who at home was a gentle, loyal man)" (*LaT* 304). Price admits that Paul Logan seems "a little like Will Price," but "not a lot—Will could never have managed the double anxieties of a double life" (*LaT* 420). For this reason, despite the father/son dynamic, I omit the play from my study.

<sup>2</sup> Several months before his diagnosis, Price explains, he had begun to keep a daybook of "quickly written poems, each triggered by . . . the pile-up of happiness and recompense in the long, calm days" (*WNL* 1-2). But by spring, he notes, they were recording "occasional ominous chords," giving him the sense that he was on "a thin-edged precipice" (*WNL* 2). The poems are gathered in two discrete sequences. "Days and Nights" appeared first in *The Laws of Ice* (1986) and "Days and Nights 2" in *The Use of Fire* (1990), but both may be found in his *Collected Poems* (1997).

Given what James Schiff calls the “immensity and variety” of Price’s work in this post-cancer period (*Understanding* 174), attempts to address the change fully would be complex indeed—and beyond the scope and intent of this chapter. Schiff’s assessment (in the “Man of Letters” chapter of *Understanding Reynolds Price*) is quite full, emphasizing above all the “more accessible” voice of the later works—simpler language (more like the sound of a human voice) and a preference for intimate and confiding first-person voices (174-75). In his review of *A Whole New Life*, Robert Coles makes a similar observation regarding Price’s calm and normalizing approach to what Coles terms “his mind’s encounter with Jesus” (140)—the waking vision that came to Price as he was beginning radiation treatment and that he describes (with neither fanfare nor skepticism) as “an actual happening” and “normal human event” (*WNL* 42-43).

Given the moment’s importance to Price (its impact on his subsequent thinking and its relation not only to his cancer but to ongoing struggles in his own *narrative* quest), the vision bears closer examination. On the morning he was to begin radiation, he was awake (lost in thought) but “was suddenly not propped in my brass bed or even contained in my familiar house” (*WNL* 42). Instead, he was lying (in street clothes) by the shore of lake Kinnereth, the Sea of Galilee, “the scene of Jesus’ first teaching and healing” (42). Price knew the lake on sight, having visited it the previous October during the journey that marked the start of his daybook poems (42). Nearby, asleep, were Jesus and his disciples, so Price “lay on awhile” and studied the detailed surroundings. But soon Jesus rose from among the still-sleeping group, beckoned Price (now bare for the rite) toward the lake and began pouring handfuls of water over his head and back, marked with purple dye in “a long rectangle that boxed my thriving tumor” (43). Having spoken

once (“ ‘Your sins are forgiven’ ”), Jesus turned to leave, but Price halted him, asking, “ ‘Am I also cured?’ ”—to which Jesus replied, “ ‘That, too,’ ” and departed. At once, Price reports, “with no palpable seam in the texture of time or place, I was home again in my wide bed” (43). Price considers alternative explanations, but only briefly. The “event,” he writes, “had a concrete visual and tactile reality” unlike any dream he’s known—and with none of the “surreal logic” (44). From the moment he returned to his room, he asserts, “I’ve believed that the event was an external gift, however brief, of an alternate time and space in which to live through a crucial act” (44). As Coles notes, the gift became a sort of talisman for Price—“a moment in his life that had great, sustaining meaning to him and helped a distraught mind touch base with its lifelong moral and spiritual assumptions and . . . resume its travels. . .” (140).

Coles’ emphasis on Price’s return to lifelong beliefs is important, and it should be noted that the scene also revisits the yearnings and spiritual questions of the “boy mystic” we’ve glimpsed in *Clear Pictures* and in Price’s young avatar, Preacher McCraw. Schiff sees in Price’s post-cancer writing a “new direction” that he interprets as “increased attention” to disease and death—an “increasingly dominant role” for “illness, death, deathbed scenes, and healing” (*Understanding* 177). He finds this attention natural in an older writer but asserts that “Price’s case is extreme due to his own illness” (177). There is no doubt some truth in this observation. In sheer numbers, perhaps, the physically wounded protagonists since 1984 outnumber those in Price’s stories and novels from earlier years—but so do the stories themselves. And as previous chapters have explored, Price’s fascination with wounds, illness, healing, spirituality, and mysticism has been encoded from the first in his work—and in his aspirations for it.

Schiff is right that Price casts *A Whole New Life* “as one-on-one combat in which he, ‘the hero of an epic struggle,’ is driven to become as ‘resourceful as any hunted man in the bone-dry desert, licking dew from cactus thorns’” (*Understanding* 170). But Price regards his battle (this “deeper fall”) as a *third* “test” for which two earlier ones had tried him (*CP* 302-03)—and to which (as we’ve seen) he had resorted to narrative as gesture and healing response. The first was Will’s death and its aftermath,<sup>3</sup> and the second, the mid-life difficulties (artistic and personal) that occurred near the time of his mother’s death (*CP* 302-03). Looking back on his life, Bridge Boatner (protagonist of *Tongues of Angels*) stresses repeatedly that his obsession with the sacred and the face of the divine existed “years before Father suffered and died” (*Tongues* 23)—a point Price makes in his own voice in *Clear Pictures*. The boy mystic Price, haunted (like Preacher) by the face of Jesus and by tales of miraculous visions and healings at Lourdes (*CP* 246-249, 263), has an innate and lifelong hunger for sacred understanding not stemming from the tests themselves, but *bringing* to them a ripeness for transformation and response no less potent than Parzival’s own in his quest for the Castle of the Grail. Indeed, Price suggests such a thing in *Clear Pictures* when he speaks of being “hunted” and “bay[ed]” by “the Hound of Heaven” (251): “For the first few decades of the hunt, my only contribution lay in knowing what was after me and in turning to face it in moments that, however scared and badly managed, began to show why it hunted *me*” (251). His strong implication (and

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<sup>3</sup> In *A Whole New Life*, Price explains that he had suffered several bouts of “cancer phobia” in the two years after Will’s death—particularly while abroad at Oxford (21). As he explains in *Clear Pictures*, he endured there “a harrowing internal contest between what I’d learned at Will’s dying side and what I hoped to believe” (296). The “outward signs of my struggle,” he writes, “were an obsessive conviction that I also was afflicted with cancer and a longing to rush home to die” (296). He visited several doctors with the symptoms (lumps in the side, vomiting blood), and he long resisted believing the reassuring test results—that the lumps were benign and most likely the result of “carbohydrate shock” (298). Though Price does not make the observation directly, his description of his “death-devoted” period closely mirrors his account of Will’s own a few pages earlier, suggesting that for a time he experienced something akin to Will’s hypochondria (*CP* 267).

evidence we have already seen) indicates that the tests are in some way related (through Price's consciousness) to long-standing wounds, goals, hungers, and guilts that evade neat diagnosis but are bound up with what Schopenhauer would call "intelligible character."<sup>4</sup>

From early maturity, Price writes in the "Foreword" to *Clear Pictures*, he knew that though his days were like those of most workers ("tepid as broth"), they were "internally . . . laced with uncanny indications of design (elegant or awful Cat's cradles of order and intent, insisting upon the unseen presence of a maker)" (5). In hindsight, even the congenital tumor seems to him laden with meaning—another peculiar bond with Will. Without pressing the point, Price remarks in *Clear Pictures* that the strange seizures he suffered in childhood—read by Will as a warning to stop "cheating on a dead-earnest deal" with God—may have been early signs of the congenital spinal tumor that manifested fully when Price reached fifty-one (33). The implications of such a thought for their "ongoing game of worthiness" are simply astounding.

In the crucial first years after the cancer, in fact, Price seems focused with new humility, patience, and watchfulness not upon "new" issues, but those that re-emerge for revision and transformation—above all Price's attitude toward suffering and the healing power of sacrificial lives. In this period, the journey of the "boy mystic" and witness-turned-author continues more fervently than ever as he gathers news for himself and the "grand lost boy." Though unable to work in the first weeks after radiation, Price's vision of Jesus—the sight of the face whose "true" nature he had long considered and speculated about with Will—launched him once more on creative work: a series of inkbrush

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<sup>4</sup> As Campbell explains, the term denotes "inborn" character that is "unfolded only gradually and imperfectly through circumstance"—though "secretly shaping" one's life (*CM* 35).

drawings. After drawing the scene at Kinnereth, Price continued to make dozens of drawings over the next two years, each a meditation on the face of Jesus: “there are ferocious Christs like wilderness prophets with baleful eyes. . . . big-eyed Byzantine Rulers of All. . . . unbearded young Christs barely sighting their fate, compassionate healers, numinous shamans, elder brothers and implacable judges. And what I was doing in so much time and with such intense effort, I’m still by no means sure I can fathom” (WNL 75). Yet the process seems remarkably like the series of “calisthenics” Price had described in “A Single Meaning,” when—during that second period of artistic and spiritual darkness—he had returned to (and questioned) the “inscribed bases” of his belief, using the first tools of “copying” and exploring that had led him to narrative art (249). Amidst that second test, as we saw, he had turned not only to translations of key biblical passages, but to “translations” of Rembrandt’s drawings—Rembrandt’s guesses (as various as Price’s sketches of Jesus) about the divinely required (and cancelled) sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, his father.

The issue in those sketches was not only the nature of sacrifice and suffering, but the character of the principals and their attitudes toward one another and the divine “perpetrator” (CP 263). *Who are these sacrificial lives? What afflicts them—and what is their attitude both to us and to the force that impels them toward it? What does such sacrificial suffering say about God—and bode for our future?* The same dynamic seems at work in Price’s post-cancer sketches of Jesus’ face. Certainly, as Price suggests, they were returning him to his childhood fascination with sacred mystery and to the roots of his adult narrative trade. “Once it had me there,” he writes, “it forced me to learn again, by hand,” how to make “orderly pictures” of the visible world and “likewise [alter] it

through the eyes of inward hope and dread” (WNL 77). Above all else the drawings seem clear attempts to answer Christ’s own urgent question to his disciples—*Who do you say that I am?*

By November, however (strengthened by this return to exploring the earliest mysteries of his life), Price was shifting his inquiries once more toward the mysterious life and energy of his father, Will Price. Though still unable to face work on his novel *Kate Vaiden*, Price accepted a commission from Hendrix College in Arkansas to write a play for their drama department, where his first play (*Early Dark* 1977) had been produced (WNL 86). As Price explains in *Learning a Trade*, *August Snow* sprang from “[his] old curiosity about the prehistory” of Will and Elizabeth’s marriage prior to his birth (*LaT* 381, 25 June 1987). Produced in the Fall of 1985, the play soon inspired Price to the drafting of two sequels (*Night Dance* and *Better Days*), and by December of 1985 he had completed a draft of his dramatic trilogy *New Music* (1989), which premiered at The Cleveland Playhouse in 1989.

Tracing the marriage of Neal and Taw Avery from 1937 to 1974, *New Music* allows Price to explore once more the phenomenon (and consequences) of love at first sight, depicting Neal Avery’s struggles for virtue and self-realization in marriage. The trilogy’s title refers to Neal’s need to find (at each crucial stage of his life) the “new music” that will keep him energized and motivated to “get through time” and realize his emotional potential. This is not an easy task for a man with unrewarding work but many gifts—including what his lifelong friend Genevieve calls a “funny-kind-soul” (*August Snow* 25). Though deeply in love, Neal (the “golden boy” and fictional WSP of the play)

is torn by his strong urge for freedom and by the opposing forces of two powerful women: his wife (Taw Sefton Avery) and his formidable mother (Roma).

As Price notes in regard to his parents' marriage, Will had been "besotted" from the first with Elizabeth—a passion he was not loathe to speak of publicly, even before his grown sons. Yet the courtship was protracted—due partly to financial considerations, but largely to disapproving jealousy from Will's mother (*LaT* 387). Reflecting on such matters in his notebooks, Price wonders how his father "ever *stopped* drinking with two such [strong-willed] women on his hands" (*LaT* 444). "Elizabeth was a natural self-spender," he explains in *Clear Pictures*, "tirelessly burning the fat and lean of a restless life. But the major virtues were hard work for Will. And though he achieved them to a degree I've seldom seen exceeded, he often showed flares from the jealousy, anger, and self-absorption that were also part of his natural state. Once he'd won the struggle with drink, he had an abiding hunger for rest; and whatever blocked his taste for peace distressed him quickly" (233).

As R. C. Fuller asserts, "Most of our major conflicts remain ours for life, and Price's trilogy allows him to show how Neal's struggles manifest themselves at various times in his life" ("Lunging in the Dark" 229). Price's trilogy, he argues "is less concerned with Neal's actions—whether he flees or not, whether he drinks or not—than with his 'mind'" (228). Taw puts it correctly, Fuller notes, in her demand that Neal be "'*present*'" in his "'right mind'" with "'clear eyes'" (228). More important than any change in "behavior" is Neal's constant need "to transform his mind's perspective of his role in the lives of those he loves" (228).

Set in 1937, only a year into the marriage, *August Snow* deals with Neal and Taw's first marital crisis—drinking and the pull of the old life against the new, including the claims of old friends and Neal's best friend Porter, the would-be lover and protector who "guarded" and companioned Neal closely for most of their lives. An orphan for most of her life, Taw is fiercely independent and strong-willed—determined (like Rachel with Rob) to free her new husband from the confines of his cradle and see him rise to his full potential. As the play opens, Neal (away for a full night of drinking and boys' fun with Porter) returns home to Taw's ultimatum: choose her and leave by nightfall, or face the end of their marriage. Though they ultimately remain together, choosing not to leave town, Taw does offer Neal a kind of freedom—adult life, work, and healing—gifts Neal will ultimately admit, addressing Taw finally (and fondly) in the third play as "The girl who saved my life years ago" (*Better Days* 242). A formidable advocate, even when asking Porter's aid, Taw declares, "Neal's meant to be far stronger than you guess. He needs to be more than a lovable smile. . . . He's waiting to find his own path and walk" (*August Snow* 55).

Yet Taw's methods (not unlike Roma's) are daring and absolute—part of what seems to unbalance Neal further. "You took my one child off and broke him," Neal's mother, Roma, declares (38). And while her ferocious and sometimes mean-spirited possessiveness rankles (and has clearly harmed Neal), she is partly right. In the opening scene, Taw (whose life has been far more Spartan than Neal's) tells him that parting with friends and family is "part of what every marriage is for—bury your dead and make a clean start. . . . You love too many people" (28). But Genevieve Slappy, Neal's lifelong friend (friendly also to Taw), finds this claim extreme and asks Taw to consider that she's

feeding Neal's need "to plow up the world just to prove he's sad" (22). "You sound like Roma Avery," Genevieve warns, "chaining people to you and gnawing their bones. . . . People in general aren't in it for the pain. If you want company—Neal's or mine or a bobcat's—you got to let up" (*August Snow* 50). Taw's pride, she adds, will not serve her here—nor will her memory of the "scars" she's taken in battling with Neal. "Forget. Now. Catch a case of amnesia. Enter life fresh as a rose, this instant" (74). But though Taw eventually modifies her methods, taking Genevieve's advice to enlist Porter's help, she is still proud to claim (whatever "mess" it causes) that "He's run up finally against one human that asks him to give her the best he's got and won't take less" (22).

Though Taw has much to learn, her impulse to fulfill Neal is not a power play, but a love struggling (like Neal's) toward its own better nature. And despite Porter's wish not to lose Neal or to see him as "putty" in a wife's hands (54), he develops an increasing (if grudging) respect for Taw's genuine advocacy of Neal—a parallel to the respect she is gradually gaining for Porter. He hears Taw out, and though they spar fiercely, she gradually absorbs his observation (echoing Genevieve's) that Taw is not "on Mars" (seeming distant to Neal), but "right at his throat" and working counter to her own purposes (56-57). Only since her ultimatum, Porter suggests, has Neal comprehended her view of their commitment and vows. He just needs more time—and she, more patience (57).

Porter admits that Taw has ruined his afternoon, telling him to turn loose of Neal and "Hunt you up your own grown life" (55). Wounded, he tells her to leave but vows (for Neal's sake) to do what he can to help. Talking to Neal later that day, he recalls for Neal the instantaneous mutual draw he had witnessed between the pair at the horseshoe

match—seeing Neal transformed by Taw on sight. Though Neal protests that no girl has ever stopped him and that “I can look and still throw” (68), Porter tells him firmly, “You weren’t just looking that day; I saw you. . . .Taw Sefton changed you for good, at first sight. . . .Previous times I’d watched you skate fast figures round two dozen girls and plow home at daybreak, not even fazed. But Taw struck you like a pig-iron truck. When I drove you home, you were still burning on high” (68). Neal admits (sounding like Rob writing Niles about Rachel), “She did look fine. And she talked plain sense, with no mean edge.” When Neal observes that “It did move fast” but that now “we’re *stopped*—hell, pasted on the windshield,” Porter reminds him of the control he *does* have: “Crank it, boy. It’s your vehicle and you’re at the wheel. But slower this time” (*August Snow* 69). For the first time in their lives, Porter refuses to be Neal’s way out or rescue from a hard emotional task. Refusing Neal’s offer of a sudden trip to the Mexican mountains and their fanciful promise of “high snow in August” (67), Porter sends him toward Taw instead, sure that this is the only way they have a chance to “end up glad” (70).

In the final scene the couple is reconciled—quietly and by almost imperceptible stages—through their delicate adjustments of vision. Neal returns, asking to “rest [his] feet” (no word of his decision) and promptly falls asleep as Taw anxiously prepares a meal she is not sure they will share. Clearly they wish to be together but are loathe to revisit the argument directly. Finally, in answer to Taw’s question, Neal responds from half inside his dream, sharing it (one he’s had many times) as though it’s his answer:

I’m ten years old. The other children hate me, and I start to run. We’re on a big ledge of a hill. . . .They’re about to catch me. . . . But I run the last step . . . and fall through space toward a sharp rock valley. The children yell, “We’re sorry. Come back.”

I wish I could; I always loved them. But I’m bound to die. Then my arms stretch out on the wind . . . And—God!—I rise fifty yards in a

sweep before I level off and glide. I'm scared cold-stiff but I flap my arms, and this time I understand I've learned to fly. . . .the cruel children line up . . . and beg me to land and teach them how. I just glide on. (80)

To Taw's response, "I thought they loved you," Neal says only, "They do, till they know me. Then *they* beg for wings" (80). The dream is complex, suggesting Neal's anxieties as victim and his paradoxical sense of his own power—but his response to Taw is a tacit acknowledgement of her feelings (or rather his own fears about them.) To his question about whether she has changed the deal—"stop my old life and leave here with you"—Taw replies now not with her earlier (panicked) wish for flight, but with her real meaning: "I meant I wanted to love you, Neal—in your right mind and *present*, after sundown, at least" (82). And with this request, which Neal now finds "simple" to grant, the two are reconciled for a time.

*Night Dance*, set in 1945, finds Taw and Neal (age twenty-nine and thirty) at another and slightly different crossroad. Whereas the first play concerned issues of commitment, the second focuses sharply on the matter of what ails Neal Avery at mid-life—examining the issue from every side and allowing Neal to voice his pain and bafflement directly to the audience, through soliloquies. Since the first play, Porter (who had clerked with Neal in the Avery clothing store) has sought his "grown up life" as a lieutenant in the Navy. But for Neal little has changed. Though he has strengthened his marriage to Taw, they still suffer the influence of his powerful mother Roma, and he continues as a clerk in the store—missing what he sees as his chance for heroic service in the War, refused because of flat feet. As Porter observes, returning home on leave, war has made the town noticeably free of men under fifty (139), and Neal feels the fact keenly, thinking of the war he is missing as "the greatest event since God said, 'Light'"

(*Night Dance* 104). At a loss over Neal's sleepless nights, Taw suggests this regret as explanation of the more general malaise Porter has sensed in his friend. "All I can find is, he's somehow shamed that the service wouldn't have him," she tells Porter, reporting Neal's disgust that flat feet have kept him at home though he is an excellent marksman (*Night Dance* 114).

But Neal tells a friend's aging father (Dob Watkins)—who suspects impotence or some bodily failure is to blame for Neal's ills—"Body works like a well-oiled rod. I've lost my will . . . will to live, just to *breathe*. I wake up every night at four A.M. . . . I lie there and try to think, 'How can I make it *through*?' then I try to guess 'Through *what*?'"  
(*Night Dance* 134). "It was one long cakewalk—my whole life till oh maybe five years ago," he tells Dob, "Then the music failed me" (135). Porter (who knows Neal well and now comprehends—even supports—his bond with Taw) offers her his own view of what ails Neal and what truly will cure this "aging boy" (140):

Taw, it looks like to me we ate Neal *up*—this town, you, me, Miss Roma. (*Smiles*) See we watched Neal's face and his stylish moves and told ourselves he was bringing us *news*, from God or wherever. And maybe he did but it turned out our long worship was all he had in the world, and it wore him *out*.

Then we grew up and looked elsewhere. Neal's nothing now but a golden boy as thin as foil. All I can guess is, he needs a new target—a thing *he* can love, that won't need him. (*Night Dance* 115).

A child, Porter asserts, "could stem his tide—let him send love *out*, not sit and drown in it" (116).

Though Porter has been a worshipper and guard for many years, his love for Neal is remarkably selfless, and he sees truly here. For as early as Neal's first soliloquy in *August Snow*, Neal had asked, "Am I ruined past help?"—wondering if he can escape his people for their good and his own. Like Rob Mayfield (too often "picked for the rescue"

and object of worship), Neal (“an average white boy with all his teeth”) knows he has been chosen—for a job and “cure” that he cannot provide (36). “Neal Avery can’t save the *shrubbery* from pain, much less human beings,” he declares, assuming this is why he drinks and acts badly around those who have chosen him. “Who do they think I am?” he wonders and asks, “If I stand still here for many years more, won’t they wear me away like the Sphinx or a doorsill, just with the look from their famished eyes” (*August Snow* 36)?

As Fuller notes, Neal’s recurrent dream of flight is a key to both “cure” and malaise—suggesting “the *puer aeternus* who finds it difficult to develop or trust his own masculine powers since the male idea in the person of the father was destroyed” (229). Says Fuller, “Neal’s dream of flight most closely resembles the Egyptian myth of Horus who rises hawklike above his dead father to redeem him,” and he quotes James Hillman’s explanation of the archetype: “‘in a young man’s life . . . the *puer* represents the necessity of seeking the fathering spirit, the capacity to father. The Horus image of flying higher and further connotes a spiritual fathering’” (229). “Thus,” Fuller suggests, “the image of the *puer* in flight, the eternal youth, is transformative: it mentors him, helps spiritually initiate him into manhood by redeeming the father, and envisions his achievement and escape from within the life he has chosen” (229). Genevieve—having committed suicide in the wake of her husband’s death—returns as a ghost to tell Neal that he is “dying at the heart” (123) and “going blind fast when you need new eyes” (*Night Dance* 124). “You stand in your life; it’s all you’ve got,” she says—echoing Sylvie’s advice to Rob when he comes to claim Hutch in *The Surface of Earth*: “Live in what you got. Too late to

change” (373). Indeed, Genevieve tells Neal what Porter has already told Taw: “Get you a child” (*Night Dance* 123).

In his final scene with Taw, Neal seems to have learned a great deal, and this time it is *he* who leads Taw toward the rescue with his plea for their child, arguing with new conviction: “It’s not what I want; it’s what *we* need. Maybe we ought to live like the humans, the rest of the poor old human race” (154). “I need a grown human life to live,” he adds, “some job to do outside my head and be some *use* to the pitiful Earth. Till I get it, I’m poisoning you. Poison’s rising, as we wait here. I know it’s up to *my* lips now” (156). His claims are persuasive, and the scene ends with the couple’s resolve to make a child.

*Better Days* opens in 1974 (in the last days of the Vietnam War) as Taw and Neal (who have left their own house to attend Roma’s final illness) prepare for her funeral and adjust to the changes her death will mean for their lives—including the highly symbolic matter of who will inherit the homeplace (and Roma’s last blessing). Taw, eager to be gone from the nest—though she had made a kind of peace with Roma—is once again pushing for freedom, resisting any thought of inheriting the house with its freight of bad memory. Neal, older here than Will managed to be, is trying to deal with the loss, mediate in the matter of the house (which Porter wants), and assess the disturbing state of mind in which his beloved son Cody (a twenty-eight-year-old captain in the Marines) has returned on compassionate leave from the war. In a soliloquy, Cody reveals the nature of his own damage (PTSD) and tells the grisly story behind the “sad damn sight” Neal has

glimpsed in his eyes—a brake now on Neal’s youthful tendency to romanticize war (*Better Days* 216-18, 232).<sup>5</sup> Cody—“a trained killer” who “can’t wait to lengthen his gory list” (231)—fears his “risky hunger” for “all the power” and knows he dare not bring it home with him (205-06). Moreover, as he tells his mother, he is loathe to return since he has found in the war “the place my whole body *works*” (206), and “for now out there, I’m very near perfect. I make a choice, I give the order. My men trust me. They proceed to obey” (205).

But equally shocking to Neal are two revelations: that his mother had for years conducted a relationship with a man (in Neal’s view a “gigolo”) four years younger than Neal himself and that Roma has *not* left the house to Neal (who has tended her for years). Instead she has willed it to Cody— who has seemed “perfect” in her eyes and unlike his father “has not given less than complete satisfaction” (*Better Days* 221). Weary and “torn,” Neal admits (addressing the audience) that “What I want is to hole up alone in these thick walls till the trump of Doom and watch my son through these old windows—making his own path, renewing our line. . . . I don’t want pity. I just want me alone in this house till we fall down, fall in, disappear. . . .I’d die this instant, in absolute torture, to save my son, who’s very-nearly-lost-his-mind” (227-28).

What turns the tide, however, is the surprising arrival of Roma’s lover (Fontaine), who comes to pay his respects, bearing a letter from her that grants *him* the house. Apparently, however, his love for her was sincere and life-changing—a fact revealed in a poignant soliloquy explaining his longing for the house: “I dreamed I could somehow redeem my life, here where I loved this hard old woman. I imagined a place like my

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<sup>5</sup> As Fuller points out, Neal has a trio of veterans to “discredit the heroism of service”: Cody, Porter, and Dob Watkins. Porter is disgusted with false stories about his bravery under fire, and Dob claims, “What they sent back here won’t me—nobody *I* respected” (“Lunging” 231).

childhood, still enough to sleep in and thronged with the ghosts of all I loved. I saw myself amounting to something one last time, as I did for Roma” (252).

This speech, heard only by the audience, forms a secret arch between Neal and Fontaine, a connection first hinted in Fontaine’s public account of their meeting. “Young man, you rather resemble *God*,” Roma says to Fontaine when she first meets him in a Richmond hotel lobby, three years after Neal’s recommitment to Taw (255). Four years younger than Neal, handsome, and adrift in formal dress among drunk girls and old men, Fontaine’s first appearance to Roma marks him at once as a “grand lost boy” unmatched and unclaimed. And Fontaine’s laughing but eager response to Roma’s beauty and self-sufficiency marks the start of a years-long clandestine affair that offers great rewards for both.

Fontaine’s age, his beauty, the greeting itself, and the *timing* of the affair conspire to suggest that Roma has “settled” on Fontaine as a more compliant substitute for Neal (just as Neal immediately replaced his own father—and Roma’s—in her eyes as object of care and worship.) Like Eva Kendal Mayfield, Roma strikes her admirers—Fontaine in particular—as powerful and needless, “a statue of Self-sufficiency, high on a Temple” (255). And as Fuller notes, this surprise glimpse of his mother taking what she needs may shock Neal, but it helps in “loosening” her grip on his mind and shows her making a life of her own without him (“Lunging” 232). Fuller may be correct that having long been “inflated” as an object of Roma’s worship and power, Neal may recognize her pattern in engaging Fontaine and may paradoxically glimpse in her (along with unsuspected new power) a long-misunderstood frailty. For all her apparent self-sufficiency, Roma has leaned on and “expected” perfection from men all her life—

including her father, shot dead at “the wrong back door” in what seemed to her a betrayal of her childish wish to flee with him (*August Snow* 65).

Confronted with this realization, with Fontaine’s sincerity, and with Porter’s wish to return and inhabit the house (sharing it with Fontaine, a surrogate Neal), the air itself seems suddenly rescued from disaster. Even Cody seems heartened by the new plan, volunteering to visit, “me and sixteen kids, if I come home alive with functional nuts” (261). “By witnessing such news about his parent,” Fuller asserts, Neal (the cornerstone of the family) is “freed from guilt and duty,” realizing his right to create (like his mother) a life of his own” (“Lunging” 232). As Fuller suggests, Neal’s final soliloquy acknowledges this transformed perception of himself—from “ ‘damaged goods’ ” to hopeful, valid witness of his own life (“Lunging” 232): “I’m the one with hope. Who’d have ever guessed that? Roma Avery’s son, the world’s oldest boy. There’s time for us all. I can see that far” (*Better Days* 262).

With remarkable efficiency, Price’s closing puts this statement of worth, life, and hope in the mouth of the grand lost boy himself—a “fictional WSP” older than Will himself managed to be—who for the first time addresses the audience directly with his news, much like the risen Will in “A Tomb for Will Price.” Though the plays do not share the “bizarre inventiveness” of that poem (Shaw 102), this culminating moment—built from long witness of a worthy man’s quite ordinary struggles—is powerful indeed. Through Neal’s speech, Fuller asserts, “Price reminds us that just as Neal’s vision allows someone “as torn as me” to still see “life” and “hope” (*Better Days* 228, 262), so too the power of our imaginative visions renews our lives” (“Lunging” 232).

Fuller's observation is particular apt in light of Price's own struggles at the time. Though his complete trilogy of plays was produced and published much later, Price completed his draft of *Better Days* in December 1985, and given Price's prognosis at the time, Neal's assertion resounds very boldly indeed, for Price had good reason to be anxious. As he explains in *A Whole New Life*, he had for weeks (even during rehearsals of the play) experienced a series of nightmares depicting "total paralysis"—possible indications that he was being "warned and trained for such a life" (120-21). The year before, as radiation therapy was beginning to take the use of his legs, Price had looked toward the ceiling and addressed "what I must have thought was God, the last unchangeable bafflement—"How much more do I take?" (80)? The audible, one-word answer, arriving after a pause and in a voice "at normal speaking strength," was simply "More" (80)—a promise that to Price seemed reiterated in his dreams of paralysis (121).

What followed those nightmares, however, was a terrifying and enigmatic dream ("the most startling" of Price's life) that suggests a rather different interpretation of his ordeal and finds him "not frozen . . . but literally swallowed, engulfed" by the Divine (*WNL* 122). Price describes the dream in his poem "The Dream of Falling," published first in *The Use of Fire* (1990) and later reprinted entirely (untitled and italicized) in *A Whole New Life*, where he offers the dream with virtually no comment—adding only that it was "prophetic," foreseeing "new rounds of defeat and surrender" and "enacting its threat in under three months" (122). To be sure, an even greater crisis and turning point was approaching in Price's battle with the tumor and intractable pain, for though he had yet to discover it, the cancer was growing again—this time "upward, toward the base of

[his] brain” (WNL 133). But as Price notes in passing (and suggests clearly in his rendering of the poem), this dream—despite its terror—is remarkably different in imagery from his earlier dreams of paralysis (122). And it carries at its heart the same iconography of immolation and renewal we’ve glimpsed before in connection with Price’s work, the Grail, and the figure of the generous man.

In the poem, Price finds himself “*hang[ing] mid-air in a dim cathedral,*” an image suggesting him as a figure of the Crucified—or perhaps (as in Llandaff Cathedral) as an image of “Christ in Majesty,” suspended in Glory. But in fact, either interpretation applies, for though Price dreams of being engulfed by the Divine as he studies “*the face of God,*” the title incorporates the word *falling*. In the poem, God’s mouth “springs open, an endless hole/ That swallows me—the grandest bird” (WNL 122), yet the title emphasizes the concept of *descent*—falling into the grave, falling out of Time, falling into “*the heart of God*”—and implicit in each suggestion is the iconography of the *anthropos*—the Christ, the sacrificial “heavenly man” who (like Milo) “must fall to rise.”

Attending to the dream’s implicit terror (and rightly scrupulous about pressing too hard for concrete meaning), Price offers no comment about the dream’s positive connotations. To be sure, however, the devourer here is God, and the “*destination*” is “*the heart of God*” beyond Time—the terrifying, mystic goal of saints and sages that Price describes in “For Ernest Hemingway” as “the traditional goal of virtue” (143) and that we explored in Chapter One as indissolubly linked with the terrifying mysteries of the Grail. Not surprisingly (for Price has been, since youth, an admirer of W. B. Yeats), several aspects of the dream call to mind the imagery and situation of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium”—in particular this stanza:

O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

(“Sailing to Byzantium,” ll. 17-24)

Surrounded in the “*dim cathedral*” by “*Enormous roses, apostles, crowns; / A thousand tints of violet, green,*” all “*Lit by setting sun outside,*” Price finds himself not only in a hallowed place, but in a vivid and gorgeous temple of sacred art (WNL 122). The “*jeweled hummingbird*” (surpassed in glory by the dream-Price himself) calls to mind Yeats’ bird “Of hammered gold and gold enameling” that is “set upon a golden bough to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium/ of what is past, or passing, or to come” (ll. 29-30). Even God’s “*throat*” (devouring him) is “*more gorgeous than glass,*”

*A luge-run paved in Byzantine mosaic,  
Billion translucent gilded tiles—  
All joy till I comprehend the goal,  
Terminus waiting at Time’s own end:  
The heart of God, God’s belly and vent.  
Whelmed, doomed, I pray to stop.*

*No answer. On.*

More significant, however, may be Price’s image of himself as “*the grandest bird*” swallowed by God, for this reference suggests the mythical Phoenix—the sacred bird whose immolation and renewal the hermit Trevrizent (in Wolfram’s *Parzival*) had associated with the appalling restorative powers of the Grail (Chapter One, p. 10) and that has been associated since the first century A.D. with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In 1988—freed at last from both the tumor and his consuming focus on irrevocable pain—Price names the phoenix directly in his poem “An Afterlife: 1955-

1988,” asserting the presence of the “*sequestered phoenix-pyre*” that “*Flares inside me, light for every / Soul in darkness*” (WNL 211). With a grandeur reminiscent of “A Tomb for Will Price,” Price’s metaphor extends to embrace grand new powers of vision, for he sees now “*In my new head a sight my green mind / Never dreamed—the eyes, lips, talons, / Rampant sons and muffled names / Of incontestable angels hid / Past this roof, past the blue abyss. . .*” (212). And seeing, the Price of the poem asserts (like the “sole” exhibitor in “A Tomb for Will Price”) that he is

*the sole relay*  
*For man on Earth and earthly beasts*  
*Of seraph hymns in adoration*  
*Praise, undying blame and glee.*  
*I breast their scalding tides of anguish*  
*Drink their essence—pain and promise,*  
*Grace and torment—*  
*Know the back*  
*Of God’s right hand (my teeth still taste*  
*His acrid blood), know Death will some days*  
*Stall at a door if strong eyes bay him;*  
*Know he marks strict time in silence,*  
*Final friend. (WNL 212)*

Nearly ten years later, in his *Letter to a Man in the Fire*, Price writes with great humility to Jim Fox, a young medical student afflicted with terminal cancer, in answer to his question, “Does God exist and does he care?” And on page sixty-four (near the center of the book) Price arrives at the crux of the problem (the man’s implied question, reminiscent of Helene Adolf’s terrible “paradox” of the Grail): “if God created this universe and all its contents and if he continues to exist and be a fatherly God, then what kind of father will permit or fail to intervene in your particular ordeal with cancer—an ordeal that came so early in a life that you’ve hoped to dedicate to the healing of others?”

The question has strong implications for Price's own ordeal and narrative quest, of course, and he answers significantly, though indirectly—with “the most nearly honest and hopeful guess he can make”—that if the man survives the ordeal “in working condition,” he is “almost certain to be a far more valuable medical doctor and person than [he'd] otherwise have been” (64). Though noting that “poets more ancient than Aeschylus have hymned the awful paradox that humankind can apparently only advance through suffering,” Price offers Aeschylus' ancient words as provisional answer: “ ‘It is God's law that he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God’ ” (*LiMF* 64-65). Here again is the “truly terrible wisdom” of the grail and the “Wheel of Terror-Joy”—the province of the Crucified and the message of the Cross. And in its elegance and humility, Price's answer suggests what his own reading of “The Dream of Falling” must now be.

Price claims never to have “shared the romantic indulgence” of Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov, who will not yield to a God who permits (or demands) human suffering (*WNL* 54). “From my pained but hilarious and magnanimous parents,” he writes, “I'd half understood that a normal life is sacrificial and is lived in good part, as in their case, for the sake of others or somehow for the unknown” (54). But as “half-understood” suggests, that understanding has occasionally proved both incomplete and troubling—a central “sticking point” in Price's work (as it had been, in his view, an insurmountable one in Hemingway's.) Indeed, as we have seen in previous chapters, Price's work has achieved and maintained its balanced vision of human suffering with great care and no small difficulty—worked through in voices (Preacher's, Milo's, Eborn's) that *have*

occasionally railed against (or otherwise resisted) the mutilating dimension of “the large world.”

In *A Whole New Life* Price observes that “the world’s most frequent and pointless question in the face of disaster—*Why? Why me?*” never occurred to him during his battle with the cancer since “the only answer is of course *Why not?*” (*WNL* 53)? Yet this comment, while devoid of self-pity, reveals what Price in *Clear Pictures* calls his “low-grade permanent case of the tragic sense of earthly life”—derived from early encounters with the deaths of kin, young and old” but largely from “Will’s deep sense of doom” (*CP* 154). Most people, Price notes, “bargue through, oblivious of danger or at least agreeing to the necessary lies of daily life.” But seeing danger too clearly, “Will wouldn’t lie. Safe in the midst of his family,” Price writes, “[Will] could manage to laugh toward the end of most days; but far too much of his energy leaked off in useless anxiety” concerning his loved ones and his own health (265). For as Price reports, Will became a “ceaseless hypochondriac” in his mid-thirties (with the advent of sobriety). “Far more than his job,” Price writes, “Will’s health was his calling” (266), and for the last decade of his life (convinced that his heart was failing), he expected early death—most likely alone on a sales trip—unable to believe “for more than ten consecutive minutes” any reassurance about his health (267). Yet he bore his worries, Price notes, “with a dignified creased brow and no other physical quailing,” a reserve that belied “the central fear of his life” (268).

In this crisis of his own, Price had new reason to reflect on Will’s death and the wounding/blessing nature of their bond. And as his own fifty-third birthday approached

(beginning a kind of countdown to Will's death-year), his daybook poems begin noting the milestone and his own long dread of an early death:

*Time is clearly no concern of the Great Watchmaker—  
Keats, Mozart, Schubert, Anne Frank, James Dean;*

*My father strangled at a hale fifty-four,  
Still working the ground at his feet (sweet laughter);*

*Me jackhammering my slow path, micron by micron  
Toward my own dread: his early ghastly howling end.  
(WNL 127)*

Price's symptoms were intensifying, he recalls (having noted the fact in his calendar on the thirty-second anniversary of Will's death), and indeed (within days) the tumor's new growth had been mapped and seen moving up to the base of his brain (131-132).

"Coming a few months earlier," Price writes, the crisis would have killed him," but with a new scalpel designed for such delicate procedures, the tumor (once inoperable) was removed in two further surgeries—in April and October of 1986 (WNL 136-37, 142).

Ironically, however, Price's last real obstacle to healing—both physical and spiritual—remained firmly in place, for though the tumor had been removed and he remained cancer free, he continued to experience "obsession" with phantom pain from dead nerves (WNL 150, 152). In mid-March of 1987, having lived Will's span of life ("*fifty-four years, forty-two days*"), a daybook poem records his plea for some form of intercession from the man who had bargained hard with God at his birth: "Father—there beyond that wall— / I beg to pass you, beg your plea / For excess life: more earthly luck / Or a longer sentence in the old appalling / Gorgeous jail in which you craved / My vivid mother, made my bones" ("15 March 1987 (To W. S. P.)" Days later, however, despite passing that milestone and recording the fact in a second poem, Price reports in another

entry “Terrific—almost comic!—pain. . . . Astronomical pain. . . . Pain, numbness, malaise, and depression spiral up relentlessly” (150). Drugs were of little avail, he notes.

Yet in the summer of 1987, for reasons still partly mysterious to Price himself, the addition of biofeedback training and hypnosis achieved results that no earlier remedy—“chemical, mechanical or psychic”—had been able to achieve (*WNL* 152). After weeks of training in hypnosis and visualization (which he soon learned to manage himself), Price felt “an immediate and almost scary kind of physical relief” and an “intense new calm” (155-56). His first sign of change was feeling “removed to a new perspective—to the safe sidelines” where the pain seemed “contained and watched from a distance by my new self-possessed mind and eased body (156). As he observes, in a passage applicable to the spiritual “cure” his protagonists have sought for years:

When I notice the pain, I see it on the far horizon of consciousness like the mute demonstration of a force from which I’m as safe as I generally am from the distant sun. Like the sun, my native pain burns there beyond me with an ignorant loyal heat, but I know I must never import it again to where I actually live and work. I must never conspire again with its aim to ground me entirely. I must *feel* it as real but not *suffer* from it. . . . (*WNL* 158)

The passage is remarkably like that in which Rob describes his recurring dream of a violent storm through which he walks in search of a cure: “The final night of the trip, all night, I walked through a storm like Hell on the rise. Night bright as day with lightning, trees crashing, rocks big as sheds falling at my feet—tame as dogs, sparing me” (*SoE* 346). Though Rob notes the storm he does not stop for it, knowing, “That wasn’t what it meant anyhow, the storm. It was not for me. I just went on—one foot, then the other, steeper up—into calm and morning which came together” (*SoE* 346-47). “The mind’s outrage,” Price observes of his own “brand” of physical pain, “is simply [and literally]

misplaced . . . *The harm is done. It cannot be repaired; pain signifies nothing. Begin to ignore it*” (WNL 159).

As he learned to distance his pain “without conscious urging,” he found his mind producing (“surely for healing needs of [its] own”) a flood of lost memories from childhood and youth—real rejuvenation and renewal. “By end of summer,” Price writes, “I was inundated in memory” (WNL 161), and evidence from the craft notebooks suggests that during this period (which produced both *Clear Pictures* and *The Tongues of Angels*), Price’s attention to his ongoing “transaction” with Will deepened considerably. At fifty-four, Price seems to have focused more intently than ever (though not exclusively) on possibilities for exploring the WSP energy and the events of Will’s life more fully. His notebooks explore a variety of ideas: another play about his parents’ marriage prior to his birth (this time exclusively from Will’s point of view) (*LaT* 388, 12 July 1987);<sup>6</sup> a play concerning the first three years of his life (“when Father was trying to fulfill his oath . . . and I was throwing those mysterious convulsive fits”) (*LaT* 390, 13 July 1987); a play concerning Will’s last days in the hospital (*LaT* 394, 27 July 1987); and a novella in which Will (having survived to age eighty-seven) writes for Reynolds an account of his marriage before the boy’s birth—a “frank owning up” bringing all the scattered, fictionalized elements from the Mayfield novels and elsewhere “home at last under a single roof—Will Price’s (or the fictional WSP’s)” (*LaT* 405, 15 September 1987).

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<sup>6</sup> This idea (considerably transformed) became Price’s play *Full Moon*. Worried about a repetition of the Neal-Roma dynamic from *New Music*, Price shifted events (consciously) rather far from their roots, adding a black-white romance for the father and a balancing parental conflict for the wife (*LaT* 391, 15 July 1987).

But Price's first major work from this period is *The Tongues of Angels*, a novel relating the story of twenty-one-year old Bridge Boatner (aspiring visual artist and latter-day avatar of Price himself) in the fateful summer after his father's unexpected and horrific death from a heart attack.<sup>7</sup> Based loosely upon Price's memories of the summer camp near Asheville where he served as counselor in 1953 (the year before Will's death), *Tongues of Angels* recounts Bridge's brief but powerful friendship with fifteen-year-old Raphael Noren—a gifted young camper with a dark, hidden past (and not incidentally, the first “generous man” who is also a skilled artist, in this case a dancer).

Like so many of Price's novels and short stories in the period, *Tongues of Angels* is cast as the remembrance of a man well past middle age—in this case that of fifty-four-year-old Bridge (now a successful artist) who is preparing a written account to answer difficult questions from his son. Preparing to write a thesis on his father's work, Bridge's son Rustum had discovered the name *Kinyan* (Rafe's Indian name, “airborne”) inscribed on the back of his father's first painting, *The Smoky Mountains as the Meaning of Things*. But after “three rounds of painful questions—who was Kinyan, what had he meant, and where was he now?”—Bridge had found himself unprepared for the trial and had vowed to “describe it all for him, as true as I could, in some bearable form” (195). Once again, the action for Price (the real story to see) is not the inner tale, but the sight of its making. Bridge's struggle toward understanding invites us to watch, to ask those same questions, and to watch Bridge both discovering and resisting the answers as he also grapples (sometimes indirectly) with *why* he needs to ask them. Near the end, he notes that Rafe as a dancer always “sought people's eyes” (200)—taking this as hopeful sign that his

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<sup>7</sup> As Price notes in *Clear Pictures*, cardiac arrest was the core of Will's hypochondria—his expectation and fear of early death (267).

explorations are not offensive. The implication, of course, is that Price, too, is one for whom “people’s eyes” are part of the goal—not only for the artifact, but for the gesture itself.

As Schiff asserts, *The Tongues of Angels* is “difficult to categorize because it is so many things: an initiation novel, a portrait of the artist, a love story, an elegy, and a mystical or visionary novel” (*Understanding* 149)—*visionary* in the sense that it is “a work of spiritual dimensions which demonstrates specifically how mysticism operates in the relationship between an artist and his subject. . .” (147). Recalling his spiritual fervor and “boyhood fantasies about Young Jesus, the one who astounded scholars in the Temple,” young Bridge sounds remarkably like Preacher McCraw. “I wanted my good-sounding name to last,” he writes (*Tongues* 23). But his primary goal would be to “paint, or make with whatever tools, pictures of the world that compelled belief. And belief not only in the reality of the world and its worthiness for contemplation and honor but a whole lot more. I wanted my pictures to inculcate, in secret of course, a trust in the hand that waits behind this brute noble Earth to lead us out and elsewhere” (23-24). But he will soon find himself confronted with “the meaning of things” not merely in the mysterious encoded line of mountains, but through what seems to Price (and ultimately to Bridge) a more potent emblem: the sacrificial life of the grand lost boy—here represented by fifteen-year-old camper Raphael (whose name itself marks him as angelic).

Above all, *Tongues of Angels* (like *The Source of Light*) is the portrait of a young man struggling to come to terms with his father’s recent death and to chart a course for himself as an artist. Even before his decision to work for the summer at Camp Juniper (an Indian summer camp for boys), Bridge recalls that he had tried to distance himself

from home—avoiding it whenever possible since “*not* remembering my father meant not seeing Mother” (10). Even then, he reflects, he must have known that he was attempting to “bury my father. . . . Bury him in my life, I [mean]” and to work at concealing the “fresh home movies” of that death that were “scalding my mind” (10). His thoughts, Bridge recalls “were as bone-strewn as any slaughterhouse” (21). And after hearing Chief Jenkins (founder of Camp Juniper) speak to potential counselors of the Prayer circle (and their chance to “pledge [their lives] to the sacrificial service of all mankind”), Bridge had settled at once on his own course: “to pledge my father the rest of the life denied to his brave weak body. Or pledge it to God, one or the other” (*Tongues* 17, 19).

Seeking to draw a distinction between *Tongues* and Price’s other portraits of the artist, Schiff asserts that Bridge’s father is “hardly developed as a character” and is “largely forgotten by the end of the novel” (*Understanding* 150). But while technically accurate, this assertion is somewhat misleading. Schiff claims that as in *Love and Work*, the young artist’s parents are “more significant through their absence” and “no longer figure in Bridge’s daily life,” replaced now by “surrogate family” (150). But as we saw in *Love and Work*, Eborn’s parents were hardly absent (even after their death), and the meaning of the lost father (“only just concealed”) was virtually inseparable from the iconic wrecked boy and the mystery of self-wounding, sacrificial love that occupied Eborn’s thoughts—and that forms the very essence of the primary “surrogate” (Rafe Noren) to whom Bridge is mysteriously drawn and for whom he feels such powerful compunction. Though Bridge’s father is largely undeveloped as a character, he is fully and repeatedly addressed (in shattering personal terms) as a *sufferer* cut down in his prime, leaving his son with burning spiritual questions. The repeatedly rising specter of

his death, in proximity to Rafe’s “whole battered graceful life” (153), hints again at the iconography of “generous vulnerability” we’ve explored in earlier chapters, marking Rafe as a more highly charged “surrogate” than Schiff’s statement suggests. For ultimately, he is mirror and emblem of a “sacred” transaction and sacrifice with which Bridge (at fifty-four) is still coming to terms, and in this sense, the novel echoes a recovery and redemption akin to Price’s own during the time of its writing.

In *Learning a Trade*, Price writes that the flood of positive memories from biofeedback and the idea of the camp story offered “rich troves of visual and spiritual memory” for him to work with (370). And early in planning he notes two decisions in particular as “exciting and liberating”: the choice of first-person narration and his decision, soon after, to shift the action from the summer before to the summer *after* Will’s death (*LaT* 397, 399). Will’s death had been much on his mind. The previous month (in July) he had contemplated writing a play of Will’s last days (“the discovery of cancer, the surgery, the wait, the death, the funeral”) to include a scene in the “dim death-chamber . . . almost filled with the dying man’s already-dead friends and kin” who “stand as company for him, unseen by the living” (*LaT* 394). By December—though noting that he’s “dealt with big pieces” of the death all along (in “A Chain of Love,” *Love and Work*, and *The Source of Light*), Price expresses relief to have at last finished the death sequence for *Clear Pictures* (“A Final Secret”), noting it as “the face-to-face encounter” he had long known he must endure (*LaT* 412, 4 Dec. 1987).

In planning the novel, Price had noted the need to “establish early” two things. The first is “Bridge’s very real core of serious spirituality and the gravity of the damage done by his recent witness of agonized death” (*LaT* 403, 22 August 1987)—what Bridge

calls “brittle inner weather” (79) and a “tendency to unbidden visits” by “dreadful” deathbed scenes (77). As Bridge makes clear from the outset, those sights were “the worst” he’d seen, though he’d been to Vietnam: his father fighting for breath, tearing out intravenous needles, and crouching (bloody) under the bed, crying out with hallucinations (10, 77). When Bridge questioned what he was seeing, his father had refused to answer, saying only, “*No. It’s for me to bear*”—a response (however delusional) that suggests his perception of himself as sacrifice (77). Yet Bridge makes clear that, in spite of its horrors, his father’s deathbed legacy to him was a sense of his own power and responsibility as an adult male. His taking of the job—not to mention his response to Rafe—is inextricably mixed with that. Yet he is thankful for the “bleeding hands” possessed by all artisans—the tactile skills that allow him to drain off “the night’s log jam of blame and dread” into the works of his hands—and it is in such pursuits (in Indian lore and drawing class) that Bridge spends his first time with Rafe (77).

Price’s second resolve was the need to offer “an advance sense” (before revelation of Rafe’s secret in the hospital) of his status as “a paradoxically fragile creature” (*LaT* 403, 24 August 1987). The point is important, since Bridge’s first sight of the boy is of him transformed in the Eagle Dance—a powerful sight of skill and grace that belies his essentially fragility. Already endowed with a grown man’s voice and body, and mature “watchful ways” (3-4), Rafe strikes his watchers as prematurely grown—given to what Bridge terms “stretches of majesty” (4). From his first entrance into the firelight, Bridge notes, he “drew all the shining directly his way” (63). More striking, however, is Rafe’s artistry itself, and clearly this forms a large part of Bridge’s attraction (as well as his blindness). Ironically—a first among Price’s sacrificial males—Rafe is at once radiant

youth, sacred victim, and artist *non pareil*. In all his years, Bridge writes, he has seen only one actor (Rafe) “*change* into what he means to be—change and stay there as long as he wanted to and keep you with him. . .” (64).

Like Bridge, however, Rafe has desperate need for the artist’s craft—a skill offered him by the Indian Dance instructor, Bright Day, and one that serves him after the fashion of Bridge’s own “bleeding hands.” Price’s narrative offers a number of clues to the “the long hard story” behind Rafe’s eyes (94)—one that the dazzled Bridge (admiring, but eager also for this artistic spirit and colleague) does not begin to guess. Mrs. Chief (wife of the founder and owner) seeks Bridge out as Rafe’s chosen friend, urging Bridge to be “extra good” to him and warn her of any trouble (70). Bridge himself notes Rafe wandering sleepless at night, and during one such nocturnal encounter, Rafe drops hints of his own: the death of his mother, his rich and disconnected father, his own “acting out” in his first year at the camp (96-98). But not until Bridge brings Rafe to the hospital, bitten by a rattlesnake and battling for his life, does he learn the truth from a fellow staff member. Years before Rafe had watched his mother (and the maid who helped raise him) raped and murdered in his home (108-09). And though Rafe will not speak of it, he indicates (darkly) that what happened that day was worse than the account Bridge has heard (117).

Overwhelmed at this news—and already distressed by the prospect of a stint in the hospital—Bridge puts “God, Time and Fate on notice,” and is panicked to feel “another sick man clinging to me. . . .A human tourniquet damming my blood” (106). But he vows to stay by Rafe, and his presence works a change in the boy. At length Bridge is pleased to realize that as patient advocate and companion, he’s done for Rafe

what he could not do for his father, rescuing Rafe from possible death and distracting him in the hospital from both pain and unbidden visions of horror. In return, Bridge finds himself “guarded” by Rafe when his own nightmares of his father arise, and he sleeps for the first real time since his father’s death—glad that “*somebody’s awake so [he] can rest*” (125). Yet it is here, in the hospital—“kidneys . . . filtering poison” but manic and demanding to continue their projects—that Rafe begins to seem reckless and “dangerous” to Bridge: “Not so much a threat to my health as to overall life in the civilized world, which of course he was not. Maybe I really meant *endangered*. Like everybody else upright above ground, Rafe was in steady danger” (121). It is here, for the first time, that Bridge sees Rafe as someone who knows and accepts (as he had earlier observed) “that his was a sacrificial life” (80).

Having seen Rafe through what he thinks is the worst of the crisis and returned to camp, Bridge does not think what Rafe will endure psychologically once he is alone in the hospital, left to “go back through everything” (117). Struck by Rafe’s accusation of abandonment, and by Rafe’s refusal of Bridge’s gift—his first serious painting (*The Smoky Mountains as the Meaning of Things*)—they find themselves momentarily at odds. And Bridge feels compelled—against his better judgment and Chief’s warning—to acquiesce to Rafe’s desire to climb with him to the prayer circle. Bridge himself has hoped for a private experience, in which to put to rest the ghosts of the winter. But under the influence and friendship of Rafe, his purpose has changed—not to finish his father’s “cut-off life,” but to use “the one real block of capital I’d been given” (179), rendering the sacred sights “barely encoded” in creation (42). Still burdened by an “inevitable sense of failure” for the last days of his father’s life and thinking he has a chance for

“final payment of all [his] ghosts, alive and dead,” he speaks “on faith” toward the boy he cannot see, inviting Rafe to lead him up” on the difficult ascent (162). Later, warned more sternly by Chief (who has glimpsed Rafe’s intent), Bridge withdraws his offer. But Rafe goes alone—still weakened by the poison—and dies soon after, having collapsed there from a massive stroke.

Hearing the news, Bridge knows that he had loved this boy “worked” by love till “it absolutely killed him” (187). The finding of the novel and its artist protagonist is that Love is indeed work—Divine work. And through the life of Rafe Noren, as Schiff asserts, “one is able presumably to glimpse God’s love” (154). Bridge’s closing admission of the extent to which Kinyan’s life has informed and “enabled” his understanding of his own artistic mission—and his observation that he “worked not only because of [his] errors but with them, as instruments” (179)—strongly recalls Preacher’s promise to “turn . . . on myself my foe with you as shield” (“Names and Faces” 159). Obviously, Bridge Boatner has to some degree accomplished this in his paintings. And as he explains near the end, his own narrative is intended as both exploration and gift (in part for Rafe himself)—an examination of “the story [he and Rafe] made in his last weeks, only one of several tales [Rafe] told in that short a life,” but the one which “enabled” Bridge” (200-01).

As a revision of *Love and Work*’s reticent embrace of love and sacrificial lives, the close of Bridge’s narrative offers a wiser and calmer offering on the promise to know and make visible the meaning and battered radiance of “the grand lost boy,” perhaps the central thing Price himself was born to understand. “Whoever God is,” Bridge writes, “he or she or it still intends to keep Rafe Noren alive on Earth till Bridge Boatner stops”

(197). Like the speaker in “A Tomb for Will Price,” Bridge sees himself now merely as guide and guardian of the revelatory sight. “*You can leave me out,*” Bridge observes, refusing the selfish egotism of guilt that he had so long entertained:

The thing that seems worth seeing from here is, Raphael Noren watched his life and changed his story in ways that kept it from closing in fear or waste. So leave me out but, long as you can, recall his name and some kind of picture against the light—a boy becoming an actual eagle or the generous giver of fire and warmth or laughing his way through mortal trial, denying his fate a few more days. (201)

This same dynamic infuses Price’s 1990 short story “Deeds of Light,” which concludes with one of his most striking and iconic scenes of the grand lost boy imperiled—a mysterious sight constituting both revelation and initiation for the story’s fatherless protagonist, Marcus Black. As in *The Tongues of Angels*, this brief and mutually healing encounter is recalled by the aging protagonist and initiated by a visual trigger—in this case, two photographs of twenty-year-old soldier Deacon (“Deke”) Patrick, uncovered as middle-aged Marcus sifts through photos after his mother’s death (239). Finding them buried in his copy of *The Boy’s King Arthur* (239), Marcus compares them to early photos of his father (who died young, in his sleep, when Marcus was four) (217). Contemplating the two as “a matched pair of young lords packed with life and hope, unquestioned by any god or man,” he explores in retrospect the meaning of his odd and meaningful encounter with Deke in the summer of 1942, when Marcus was fourteen (217).

Looking at the photos (“clipped sandy hair, eyes so light blue that the pupils fade almost to dots . . . jaws with wide mouths about to grin”), Marcus realizes how much Deke resembles his young father (217). The description recalls Will’s National Guard photo as well, and as in *The Tongues of Angels*, the protagonist’s relation with this newly

discovered “sacrificial life” continues and in some ways redeems his lost relation with the father. Unlike Price’s novel, however, “Deeds” presses hard against the edges of the supernatural, hinting strongly (without ever quite granting) that Deke’s arrival on the scene is in some way miraculous—not a substitute for the father, but in some mysterious way that same life returned.

Price explains in his “Afterword” that the story’s fictional encounter emerged from actual events. As depicted in “Deeds,” young men bound out for war flooded towns like his home in Asheboro, gathered in temporary training camps but released for the weekend to flood the town and the parks—“young, baffled, and momentarily idle soldiers on weekend leave” (248). Price was fascinated by their “paradoxical air of both young-dog readiness and of deep isolating sadness . . .” (248)—a detail recalling Will’s desperate homesickness on the way to National Guard camp, when he saved for days the bones of the fried chicken dinner his mother had sent along (“Tomb for Will Price” 101). The story’s opening paragraph vividly evokes nights when the soldiers (most of them mere boys) would “sleep by droves in the warm grass of Whitlow Park under ancient elms . . . sleeping or talking in clumps . . . a broad hill planted in shining ghosts, waiting to rise at the angel trump to tell their secret sins and hopes” (“Deeds” 216). As Price recalls, his parents never invited them over, and he never asked them to, preferring to watch from a distance and “[shying] from the knowledge that some boys anyhow were bound to be killed in the next months and years” (“Afterword” 248).

But in “Deeds of Light,” Marcus—helping his mother with a church-run Sunday breakfast for boys in the park—accepts her invitation to invite a soldier for lunch, one he has met and observed for some time. “To me, in the mercilessness of my age,” Marcus

recalls, the others “might have been dead meat,” but from the first, Deke’s “fervent demanding face” and “uncanny eyes” are magnetic for Marcus—a pull heightened throughout the story by what seems his miraculous knowledge of Marcus himself (219). At their first meeting, he knows Marcus’ name—“not that common a name,” Marcus observes—not the nickname or short form by which he is known to locals (217, 219). “Oh Marcus, wake a sad boy up,” Deke says in the food line, smiling and meeting the boy’s eyes “dead-level” (217)—and at their second encounter, “Oh Marcus, save me” (219). Though Marcus is “too young to wonder why [Deke] was sad,” his attachment to the older boy is fixed almost instantly in a moment of visual arrest. “Nothing strange happened” that first day, the older Marcus recalls—but later, watching Deke standing at the rim of the park’s small lake, “some stubborn mystery in the picture he cut, upright in weeds at the absolute verge of swimming or drowning, made me need to know him more than anything I remembered needing” (218). In retrospect, Marcus wonders if the sight of this new face had “settled down far enough” to meet “the buried face of my father,” for the resemblance is strong (218)—a fact noted later by Marcus’ mother (220). Just as compelling, however, may be Deke’s hunger and apparent plea for help, for though Marcus can hardly recall his father’s face, he has suffered numerous dreams of him, “hungry” and “locked outdoors in pouring night behind a window that [Marcus] couldn’t raise or even break” (226).

At fourteen, though—and having no prior experience with such a “wolfish fix on another face” (219)—Marcus finds himself tormented by a hunger of his own: part nascent sexuality and part desperate need (like that of Preacher in “The Names and Faces of Heroes”) for “a thorough man to learn and copy in every trait and skill that I lacked”

(220). When his mother leaves them after lunch (and eventually for the rest of the night) to see to his ailing grandmother, Marcus seizes the opportunity with a fervor that almost alarms him—not from fear, he notes, but “because [Deke’s] private presence, in my home with no other people,<sup>8</sup> was so near to being the perfect answer to years of hope that it spooked me mightily, waiting an arm’s reach from him at the table” (221). But despite Marcus’ sense of a “ringing charge in the air” around Deke—sexual awareness increasingly mixed with his perception of Deke as somehow uncanny—many of his hopes reflect need for the genial, instructive, and approving company of a father or older brother. And through the afternoon and evening, Deke functions almost flawlessly in this capacity. After lunch, he surprises Marcus by suggesting that they finish the dishes together then stuns him with joy by asking, “you got a bathing suit my size?” and donning the antique bathing trunks that had belonged to Marc’s father—a perfect fit (222).<sup>9</sup> Though Marc is put out that Deke changes privately in the bathhouse and showers with his trunks on—foiling edifying glimpses at his “secret zones” (222)—they enjoy what is otherwise an ideal afternoon together, swimming, biking, and lounging in the park (though he observes that at times Deke is unusually quiet) (222).

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<sup>8</sup> This phrase nearly echoes the definition of love and harbor that fourteen-year-old Hutch Mayfield gives to Alice as they examine the photos of his young parents. She expects to hear him speak, “like most” of “courteous lasting mutual love.” But Hutch replies simply (knowing his own need) that it is “To be still next to someone you want in a place where there’s no extra people in sight.” Untroubled as yet by the full burden of sexuality, Hutch disagrees with Alice’s view that “other people come later and are mostly mistakes,” saying, “I’ve wanted Rob with me since before I could remember. Nobody else” (*SoE* 505).

<sup>9</sup> Price makes much of this small and potentially ordinary moment, pressing its intensity for Marcus to an almost (but not quite) metaphysical conclusion. At Deke’s question, Marcus feels “the darkest shadow I’d ever known [pass] over my sight” and thinks it is from a cloud outside. In retrospect, however, he guesses that “it came from within me; whatever, it brought up a wave of gladness” (222). This is another in a new series of suggestions—emphasized, but not quite affirmed by the aging Marcus—that Deke is more than he appears to be.

Throughout the afternoon, however, Marcus struggles with a growing sense that Deke's presence implies some "secret purpose," one he must allow to "pour toward [him] in its own time" (224). Indeed, from its first mention of "shining ghosts" and Deke trapped at "the absolute verge," the older Marcus' account hints strongly that Deke (though perhaps differently from Rafe Noren) is in some sense as "uncanny" as "a creature dropped from Arcturus"—and certainly as prodigious and "*endangered*" as the Rafe who provokes the observation from Bridge Boatner (*Tongues* 121). Throughout the afternoon, Marcus thinks back through the series of anomalies feeding his hope that Deke "was maybe my father, back for this one afternoon to show me useful facts and secrets he'd failed to show when he left so young" (224). Though in most cases these oddities can be otherwise explained, they are clearly intended (by Marcus' narration and by Price himself) to suggest the possibility of some mysterious guarding presence and design—and perhaps (for *both* "grand lost boys") the chance for belated transaction and revision of lost opportunities through Marcus' narrative.

As odd as Deke's knowledge of Marcus' full name, surely, is his later *claim* to it in the park. As they drowse in the sun after swimming and a round of what Marc calls his "dumb requests for facts about [Deke's] life and the world," Marc is comforted to sense "a strong man condoning my nearness" (223). But this peace is ruined when a girl with "two-piece suit . . . and prominent parts"—"a serious threat to the day"—recognizes Deke and attempts to engage him in conversation. At first Deke ignores her, but when she persists, "breathing cigarette smoke over his eyes" and claiming to know him, he replies (without opening his eyes), "You've got the wrong man, lady. I'm Marcus Black and I was in Heaven till just this minute" (224). In the "super-charged atmosphere" of

Price's fiction—a quality even more prevalent in this later phase than when Ray remarked it in *A Generous Man* (97)—such a statement cannot be easily dismissed. In Price's fiction ghosts return frequently, and benign “possession” is as possible as it was when the ghost of Tommy Ryden appropriated Milo to fulfill his own debt to his child. Though Marcus refers to Deke's assertion as his “lie to the girl,” his reaction to Deke's words reveals (obliquely) a complicating truth we have not known till now: Marcus Black is named for his father. And taking hold of Deke's statement, the boy begins to imagine and hope it may somehow be true (224)—a view strengthened (though in no way confirmed) by Deke's verbal reaction and odd physical response when Marc (thinking to dismiss him in time for a safe return to the base) lies about his mother's returning for the night. “Don't lie to me. I *know* you,” Deke asserts with “eyes and jaw” that seem oddly “fixed and blank as any threshing machine in grain” (230).<sup>10</sup> “I'm a guard,” he adds, “I've been on guard. I'll see you through” (230).

Though Marcus expects Deke to look up after his exchange with the girl and admit the joke he's made, the man makes no move at all—a response that sustains Marc's fantasy while confirming, at least, that he is (like Marc) enjoying both the company and the peacefulness of the moment. At length, however, Marc feels the need to prompt Deke toward speech once more, beginning an exchange that recalls (while significantly revising) part of Preacher McCraw's exchange with Jeff concerning war, heroism, and fear of death. Thinking the topic a safe one, and desirous of emulating Deke, Marcus

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<sup>10</sup> Deke's odd, unfocused response at lunch seems roughly analogous. Though Marc's mother has asked Deke to saying the blessing, he sits, “head up, watching the food” and the narrative remarks that “his eyes were dry and his lips were parted but still as wood,” looking finally to Marc for guidance. “Say ‘Thank you,’” Marc prompts. But after a few seconds of silence, Deke chuckles, spreads his hands “palm-down above the food” and pronounces “*Blessing*” instead (220). Marc finds this odd in a Kentucky boy, and though he rationalizes the moment, commenting that Deke may have come from a home that omitted blessings, he notes also that the boy had stumbled on “the only appropriate way to bless, as those old Bible pictures with Abraham raising long arms up through the smoke of a burning lamb” (220).

asks with standard fervor, “Will this war last till I can join” (224)? Like Jeff’s response to Preacher’s question about his father’s greatest fear, Deke’s reply is so long in coming that Marcus thinks he may not answer—or in this case has fallen asleep. Yet this question is the thing that rouses Deke at last.

Rising to one elbow to study Marc entirely, “down [his] whole lean frame,” Deke turns the question in a different direction: “Old Marc, you a god-fearing man? . . . Then promise me, every night of your life, you’ll ask Friend God to stop this mess before it kills me” (224). Unlike Preacher, who missed the implication of his father’s answer (too intent on his own question and agenda), Marcus notes the change of direction and follows it boldly, with a perfectly developed instinct for the answer that’s needed. Smiling, he manages “somehow” to say, “That’s already settled,” and to down the question he knows he must not ask (a version of the one Preacher *does* ask with evident surprise): “*You mean you’re scared*” (225)? His choice seems correct, for Deke wakes fully—eyes wide and starting to laugh till he catches himself to say (cautious, but pleading also for reassurance)—“You got some inside dope on me” (225)? In response, Marcus “let[s] the next sentence in line roll out,” empowering, healing—but based on actual knowledge and their day together, utterly inexplicable: “You’re the strongest soul I know on Earth” (225). “I was in calm charge here,” Marcus notes, glad that “[his] elders could rest.” In such a context Price’s observations about Will’s constant need for reassurance and his paradoxical ignorance of his own spiritual power seem particularly relevant (*CP* 267). The declaration proves momentarily healing, however, and Deke leaps up like a boy, suddenly “halfway down the green hill in an excellent rolling chain of cartwheels . . .” (225).

Only after this exchange does Marcus begin to consider that something important is desired from *him* in this transaction. For though he has puzzled about Deke's sadness, his "silence and inwardness," Marc has not till now guessed the cause or felt anything approaching empathy for the man he has so far (and hungrily) envisioned as guide—a "hero" containing a "paradoxically fragile" creature like Rafe, whose presence he has intuited, but whom he has not yet truly *seen*. As they head home Marc suggests logically—but with an edge, since Deke has once more kept his body hidden while dressing—that Deke should head back to the base, rather than accompanying him home. To this dismissal, Deke responds oddly, "You forecasting harm if I don't" (225)?—a verbal sign of insecurity that will return later in the evening. "No sir," Marcus replies, shocked "to see a grown man take any words of mine that earnestly" since "no other man had and few have since" (225). But he is more startled still by Deke's response: "Goddammit, son, don't call me *sir*. You're older than me" (226). Though the words strike Marcus as "crazy," they very nearly echo Rob Mayfield's words to Hutch on his deathbed: "You were grown years before I was. I used you as guide" (*SoL* 248). And they make an impression on Marcus, who looks Deke "square in the face" for the first time and describes the features of the young/old man whose type has by now become so familiar: "At one and the same time, everything on him looked young and easy to hurt as a child set down by his mother in an open field but also older than my grandfather who'd died last year, half-starved with pain" (226).

Struck by the sight, Marcus changes his mind and invites Deke home again and still more closely into the world of his imagination and frustrations. After supper, Marcus grabs his camera, urging, "Let's take a picture before it's too late"—meaning

before Deke must return to the base. But both seem aware of the larger threat in the words, and at first Deke hesitates, saying, “You said it wouldn’t get too late—for me anyhow” (228). But Marcus persists, capturing Deke’s image, and his mother’s phone call (announcing that she will not return that night) offers Deke and Marcus a new stretch of time together. As the evening wears on, they spend their remaining hours on the model submarine Marcus had been building but despairs of completing. He is startled by Deke’s interest in it. “It was far from finished,” he recalls. “I’d already botched the tricky sanding along the hull that meant to be sleek, and now I despaired of coming near the snaky lines of the handsome picture on the box. The longer I watched Deke hold and stroke it, the worse it looked—one more thing I’d helplessly ruined” (231). This pained and self-critical voice resembles that of nine-year-old Preacher in “The Names and Faces of Heroes,” yet Marcus’ lament finds an immediate answer and remedy. Ashamed, Marcus announces his plan “to burn it up,” but Deke finds it “Outstanding” and studies the project with longing—at first volunteering to take up and complete it himself. Recalling that he will soon be shipped out, however, he “[shuts] his eyes and [rubs] the hull down the edge of his jaw,” urging the task on Marcus and saying only, “Finish it please by next weekend” (231-32).

To Marcus, then a “mad perfectionist,” the idea seems impossible, but it also wakens hope—“for the first time, somebody said he wanted something I’d halfway made” (232). And it elicits from him another manly first: a request for help from a grown man with the power either to refuse or to “crush my skull like a walnut shell and walk on free.” The thought chills him as he waits for Deke’s answer, but they work almost silently till midnight, “spelling each other,” until they have almost erased Marcus’

blunders and prepared the ground for new work. Among the lasting pictures he records from their night is the image of Deke as a skilled craftsman: “the lasting sight of a man’s strong hand, polishing slowly with a touch so light it couldn’t have marred a baby’s skin but gradually mended most of my flaws” (232). Better still, though, is the fatherly reassurance and “commission” Deke is able to give: “You knew how all along; you just got rushed. Take a whole slow week and finish by Sunday. Then I’ll give you the seal of approval” (232). Though it is bedtime and Deke still has “miles of questions to ask” (particularly about the mysteries of his new body), Marc is astonished by Deke’s interest and care and can only think to ask (recalling the larger puzzles of their day), “Why in the world are you here.” (233)? But Deke will say only (without laughing), “I already told you—normal guard duty” (233).

Telling Marcus to brush his teeth and get ready for bed, Deke seems to have ended their night, and when Marc emerges from the bathroom, he finds (a further boon) that Deke is immersed in *The Boy’s King Arthur*—his own favorite for years. “Any hour but then,” Marcus observes, “I could have sat on the edge of my bunk and recited him entire pages of the story—finding the Grail in a blaze of light, shown only to men who were pure in heart” (233). That way, Marcus thinks, he might have “bolstered [Deke’s] courage, more anyhow than I’d yet managed with my dumb promise of a healthy return.” But Marcus is tired enough to “have dropped in place and slept on the rug,” and Deke is completely absorbed in his reading, so that chance slips away. Though Marc falls asleep, however, the greatest revelation of his night (and the most delicate, but silent, exchange between him and Deke Patrick) is yet to come—one which suggests more strongly than ever that his guest is simultaneously a Kentucky soldier named Deke Patrick—bound

outward for war—and some form of Marc’s father, returned for a time but once more bound away.

Waking in the night, Marcus opens his eyes to see a naked young man standing just past his bunk, “completely naked and serious-eyed”—“not exactly” the father he has long prayed to see, but “more like a changed Deke Patrick in the mirror” (234). The nature of the change is left ambiguous. It may signal full revelation of Deke’s secret body, which (like Rafe) he has kept covered, not wanting to “terrify people” (“Deeds” 222). Or it may signify Marc’s father returned mysteriously beyond the mirror in changed flesh—an echo of Marc’s nightmare about his father trapped behind a window. But without doubt (and in whatever fashion) the sight constitutes the new and solemn presence of a fully-grown man in his splendid prime, poised at the “absolute verge” of possible destruction—and already (though Marcus is slow to understand this) in fear and grief for the loss of his unwounded body.

Marcus recognizes “the live Deke’s back,” turned to him and in reach as he stands perfectly still, staring unblinking “at the reflected man in the mirror”—almost as though he were someone else (234). Recalling the sight, the aging Marcus wonders if Deke was “in some mysterious way a younger model” of the father who had started his life. But on that night, Marcus admits, he did not at first wonder what the vision in the mirror “could mean to the man or what it meant to do to me and maybe the world” (235). Instead, “famished” for the mysteries of the body, he studies for long minutes, skin and hair, limbs and nails as finely made as any since, thinking only, “*Don’t let this end. Let it teach me everything I need*” (235). Whether or not it is his lost father, he decides, “it was

anyhow a soul that banked on me to sleep in reach of whatever this new presence was” (235).

But when Deke moves to rub tears from his eyes—one hand “prowl[ing] his chest and belly like a careful doctor”—Marcus’s sees more deeply and knows (his first “manly finding”) that Deke is “memorizing his bones,” in anticipation of wounds or of coming home “a frozen corpse or just a free invisible spirit” (235). In this sense the scene displays strong echoes of Christ’s agony in the garden of Gethsemane, and this is surely no accident. For in several key respects the story resembles Price’s “Naked Boy,” a narrative poem imagining the story of the escaped boy witness who flees the Garden in the Gospel of Mark. In the poem (which takes as headnote Mark 14: 46-53), Price imagines that the young boy is Mark himself, whose family had hosted the last supper and an earlier, solitary visit by Jesus on the day before his ordeal. In *Three Gospels* Price considers who might have heard and recorded Jesus’ solitary moments in Gethsemane and wonders whether it was Mark (the escaped, naked boy), who witnessed the “dark ordeal” and later chose to record it (158-59).<sup>11</sup> As Price asserts, Mark’s “account of this nadir”—the “muffled dread” of Jesus as his disciples “sleep oblivious” and he prays not to die—is conveyed with a power unmatched except for the “towering crest” of his assertion in John: “Before Abraham was I am” (158). Price posits that John omits the account for its too-poignant evidence of Jesus’ humanity and vulnerability—whereas Mark’s (the oldest account) has shown from the first Jesus’ hesitance and plain humanity (158).

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that Price’s poem alters this situation (apparently for dramatic purpose). In the poem, Mark arrives late—after Jesus has been arrested—having drowsed after his mother’s warning and slept through a dream of his father cured and saying he has waited all night. But Price’s speculation on Mark’s Gospel and the striking similarities between “Deeds” and “Naked Boy” mark the three as mutually illuminating parts of a single vision.

Like Marcus, the Mark of Price's poem is fatherless (his father having died three months before), and he is stranded awkwardly between child and adult longings. Jesus is familiar to his family, and Mark is passionately devoted ("would have seized adders for him"), so when Jesus arrives alone on that last day—keeping "the famous women" and his disciples at bay—Mark can hardly believe it (43). "I came to help you," Jesus announces, for the boy had told him of his own project long postponed but in the works, the building of a henhouse (43).

The dynamics of the situation are precisely those of "Deeds," for the boy despairs of completing the work while the man asserts, "We'll finish." And as they work together (the older man modeling the craft the younger needs), the boy "work[s] in a steady fever of joy, / Assuming and fearing he'd leave any minute" (43-44). As they work, though, the boy senses an urgency he cannot explain and the rising sense that his help, too, is being sought. "Please tell me all your life," Jesus says as they work and listens, the boy thinks,

as if my thin news  
Was one last missing rail  
For some bigger hut he had  
In mind, though all I could tell was the trifling  
Schedule of fifteen years in my father's  
House, my father's death three months  
Before. (44)

Already the poem hints at some huge trial or calamity from which Jesus seeks solace in the presence and company of the boy. They are nearly done when the disciples return for their supper, turning Jesus away from his task. But though they hang the door, it is unfinished. Mark wants to follow, but is refused and remains "To finish the door [Jesus had] abandoned" (45). When he rushes to the Garden that night (too late with his

mother's warning), Jesus is being arrested. But Jesus asks (before commanding Mark to leave), "Would the hens go into the house?" and though Mark knows that "he didn't mean the hens," Jesus says simply that he is sorry (46). Before Mark can ask why or offer pardon, however, they have taken him away. Though Price's poem omits Jesus' ordeal in Gethsemane, Mark's simultaneous dream of his father—"cured" and awaiting him with the words "I have waited all night for you"—hints clearly at Christ's sacrificial suffering and lone trial in the garden (46).<sup>12</sup>

In "Deeds of Light," however, Marc glimpses more fully the terrible paradox and "threat" of the generous man "endangered"—the sight first intimated in his glimpse of the old/young Deke. Marc's compassion is awakened, and he vows to keep hold of Deke's likeness in his mind—"him at his best—come what might" (235). Whatever the truth of his vision in the mirror, Marcus knows Deke is "chiming with everything I'd lost, like a tuning fork that rings in perfect harmony with an unheard chord" (236). As he watches, making his vow to remember, Marc sees Deke press his forehead to the mirror, eyes closed, and knows instinctively, "*He's telling somebody goodbye*" (236). Moments later, having crossed himself and stepped into his "drawers," Deke lies flat by Marc, not touching, but murmuring a mysterious plea for pardon—for crowding Marc, perhaps, or more mysteriously (like Jesus with the young boy Mark) for the departure he knows is imminent. Like Jesus in the poem (and Marc's father), Deke, too, will vanish untimely—breaking their bond and leaving their project interrupted and unfinished. Without doubt, however, Deke is asking pardon for his need of close company and physical nearness on what has proved for him—as for Jesus (and for Rafe, alone in the hospital after Bridge's

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<sup>12</sup> Mark's account of Jesus' struggle ends, in Price's translation, with the words "Sleep now and rest. It's paid. The hour came" (*Three Gospels* 119).

departure)—a terrifying night. Feeling Deke slip in beside him, Marc wonders whether he is “taking help or trying to give it,” yet he rolls nearer to warm Deke (also without touching), taking up his new role as guard for this burdened man and thinking only, “*This boy is lonesome. Stay still now and let him rest*” (237).

In his first notes for the story (and with still only “a dim sense of the ending”), Price had conceived the moment as “a not-quite-erotic erotic meeting,” but clearly it is more (*LaT* 484, 29 April 1990). For it also recalls the poignant and complex tableau of Hutch in the “master bed,” welcoming his chilled and weary father beside him. For Marcus the sight in the mirror (and his comprehension of Deke’s gaze) becomes an emblem of the world’s sorrow and paradoxically fragile power and beauty—the mystery of Man captured in an instantaneous realization that turns back from words:

I see the sight in my mind clear as then. No point in straining to show it here. Our language sadly lacks the meanings to summon a well-made human body, much less one as awesome as Deke’s. The truest poets fail in the try to convey any part of the simple flesh that makes our first and final claim on the world’s love and pity, its craving and rage, because no words can set such a gift before the reader, clean of shame or lure and threat.

In *Clear Pictures* (albeit in a different context) Price makes the same vital point: “fleshly tenderness” may indeed become “a guiding clue” to the deepest mystery of all, heart of the Christian faith: “How in this fragile dying flesh are we made in God’s ‘likeness’? And why do the gospels and the letters of Paul insist that Jesus rose from death in his palpable, though transformed, flesh—in that same ‘resurrection of the body’ which Christians assert in their creeds” (108)? Frederick Busch observed to Price in 1990 (during an interview for the *Paris Review*) that he sees Price’s characters “almost like those of the *Pietà* bearing themselves to one another” for comfort and healing—but

unable to “pierce that invisible membrane” that parts them (160). No better example can be found than this revelatory scene in “Deeds,” which echoes and enfolds so many other elements of Price’s ongoing passion play—the tale of the generous man and sacrificial life.

Marcus means to stay awake till first light, but soon the weight of what he has witnessed presses him, too, into sleep. When he wakes, the submarine is there, ready for his work, but Deke is gone and does not reappear at his final furlough, confirming Marc’s suspicion that they had completed their “business” before day and that neither one “needed more or had more to give” (238). Looking back, Marcus reflects that “*Things happen in their time,*” and that he had “known Deke Patrick the single day that fate intended” (239)—having learned from him that his presence is worthy (as witness and company) and that his body itself will prove a “fit companion” through a dangerous and glorious life. Not least, he reflects, he has learned a great deal about friendship—“what two people can give each other”—and “the dangerous duties you owe to neighbors and strangers” who can “show you sights like nothing your kin, your lovers, God or Nature herself will ever show. . .” (239).

Sixty-two-year-old Bridge Boatner, returned as the narrator of Price’s 1991 story “An Early Christmas,” may serve as Price’s most eloquent avatar and emblem in this post-cancer phase—over twenty years long now and fulfilling (apparently) Price’s Kinnereth vision of “cure.” In this tale, which ends *The Collected Stories* and has strong echoes of the Grail “as Tomb on the angelic or spiritual level” (Adolf 80), sixty-two-year old Bridge revisits the uncanny Christmas “night of rules reversed” in which he arrives (led by mysterious guides) not at the stable, but Golgotha—to have his “Christmas at the

core of death” (602). Moments later, seeking the Holy Sepulchre (the place of resurrection), he feels instead—“as real as the thrust of a hidden thorn . . . a jolt in [his] right thigh . . . a doubling-up deep in the bone, the certain knowledge that something had broke and would never mend” (603). But the priest nearby, named Anastos (“resurrection”), says only “Your life commences now” (603). The echoes of Jacob and the Grail King are unmistakable—as is the paradoxical blessing that comes to both (annealed for a purpose)—and now to Bridge Boatner. For “what commenced that night in the tomb,” Bridge notes, is “an astronomically unlikely mystery” (an illness) that has led, through that peculiar alembic (his body) to a profoundly spiritual cure (625). “I sleep long nights with few hard dreams,” Price writes at the end of *A Whole New Life*, “and now I’ve outlived both my parents. Even my handwriting looks very little like the script of the man I was in June of ’84. Cranky as it is, it’s taller, more legible, with more air and stride. It comes down the arm of a grateful man” (193).

## CONCLUSION

In his introduction to *Conversations with Reynolds Price*, editor Jefferson Humphries remarks “a gentleness, I would almost say a humility” in Price’s conversations that was not there before 1984 (xiii). These later interviews, he affirms, “are in some ways the best: they show a voice which has fought great battles personal and physical, and which has achieved a firm, calm peace with its own gifts and limitations” (xiii). Humphries finds that Price’s opinions “may not change in any essential way, but his manner of expressing them does, and this seems to alter the content” (xiii). Price notes in *Clear Pictures* that he is now less likely to play the “truth monger” (to diagnose and prescribe for others in the battles of life)—a tendency he was beginning to amend when the cancer struck (303).<sup>1</sup> Nor is any one of Price’s post-1984 avatars in fiction likely to place—like the boy mystic Preacher or his mid-life incarnation Thomas Eborn—either demands or implicit judgments upon the Divine.

The same trend toward humility is visible in Price’s discussion of his lifetime’s spiritual work as “preacher” in narrative—a role that readers, interviewers, and critics have occasionally (and somewhat understandably) misunderstood.<sup>2</sup> As this study suggests, Frederick Busch is entirely correct in his assessment of Price’s novels as

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<sup>1</sup> Price reports that near the end of “the second test”—the artistic and personal crises of his mid-thirties—a friend observed to him “Some people are rumor mongers, Reynolds. The trouble with you is, you’re a truth monger. You see a little; you think you understand it and can say what it means. Then you say it all night” (303).

<sup>2</sup> Despite his remarkable understanding of *The Surface of Earth*, for example, William Ray could not perceive in it any form of Christian vision—a point he debates vigorously with Price on pp. 129-31.

“serious religious fiction” (169). But though Price admitted to Sarah J. Fodor that he is “a secret preacher” (4), he cautioned Susan Ketchin that he is “many quarts low on evangelism”—a word he attaches to the worldly matters of proselytizing, censorship, and dictates for behavioral change (matters at odds with his conception of the novelist’s work): “We novelists try to just look at the world and say what we see there. . . . I think one my purposes as a writer is simply to understand as much of creation as I can and to communicate as much of that understanding as possible to as large an audience as possible” (Ketchin 75).

Price (a self-styled Christian “outlaw”) derives his spiritual work and his perceptions of the Divine from neither theology nor received tradition. Though familiar with both and respectful of each as a channel for Belief, his own stems instead from potent sights, stories, and experiences that have made for him a profoundly existential ground of Faith. From early maturity his otherwise ordinary experiences have seemed to him “laced” internally “with uncanny indications of design (elegant or awful Cat’s Cradle’s of order and intent, insisting upon the unseen presence of a maker)” (“Foreword” *CP* 5). “Belief came toward me early,” he writes (*LtMF* 29), and has formed so gradually “and in response to such personal tides” as to prove resistant to direct communication (*Letter to a Godchild* 48). But sacred narrative places no such restriction, and as he notes in “A Single Meaning,” even the attempt at “narrative transaction” may offer news of the Divine—“some sudden floater from the dark unconscious, some message from a god which can only arrive or be told as a tale” (257).

As this study has explored, Price’s *evangelium* (to again borrow a less tainted form of the word) has much in common with the mysteries of Grail. For like the Book of

Job, these mysteries provide neither answers nor solutions to the problem of human suffering, offering instead a radically different (if terrifying) perspective and approach to ineffable and “unconditional meaningfulness”—the “*logos* deeper than logic” hidden in wounding circumstance (see Chapter One, p. 13). “I think we are meant to be witnesses, witnesses and recorders,” Price told Ketchin in 1990 (79), and his interpretation of God’s reply to Job suggests that such witness may indeed constitute God’s “unexpected form of offered solace” (*LtMF* 69)—a matter equally applicable to the tale of Anfortas, in whom God “had worked a terrible sign” (Wolfram 135), and to the “grand lost boys” whose endangerment suggests grief and threat to those around them.

Price’s translation of God’s answer to Job’s “righteous cry” reads, “ ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? / Tell me, if you have understanding, / Who determined its measurements—surely you know’ ” (*LtMF* 68)! As Price remarks, God does not fulfill Job’s request for “a bill of particulars against him” (though the appeal elicits God’s response). And Price notes that God’s full answer—an “exuberant” and “sublime account” of pride in his creation—“can be reduced to sixteen sublimely unsatisfying words—‘If you were not my active partner from the start of creation, then stay silent now’ ” (69). Yet as Price points out, this reply—“unnourishing” as it first sounds—hints at the “cure” Job may find for bafflement, anger, and a sense of victimization. For God’s long tale of his creation (an “elaborate brag” seemingly at odds with Job’s urgent need for answers) may be designed to adjust Job’s perspective, indicating (like Trevrizent’s tale to Parzival) a larger narrative of God’s making and enjoining both humility and watchfulness—the qualities Price’s own narratives increasingly (and with ever greater directness) take care to commend. “Perhaps,” Price

considers, “Job’s God means something as drastic as this—*Observe that all of creation is the vehicle upon which you pursue the Creator’s will. Attempt any change of pace or direction at your own dire peril. Relish the journey for however long it lasts and wherever it goes*” (*LtMF* 69). Notably, Price states, Job is both humbled and solaced by God’s evidence of “deeper layers to the enigma of creation”—for he has been answered more fully (though sternly) than he had dreamed possible. “Job,” Price writes, “has actually seen God; and he knows it” (69-70).

So, too (after a fashion), has Price—an adjustment of perspective with which very little can compare. But years before his healing vision of Jesus (and by the age of six or seven), he had also glimpsed, “in a single full moment,”

how intricately the vast contraption of nature all round me—and *nature* included me . . . and every other creature alive on Earth—was bound into a single vast ongoing wheel by one immense power that had willed us into being and intended our futures, wherever they might lead through the pattern, the enormous intricately woven pattern somehow bound at the rim and cohering for as long as the Creator willed it. (*LtG* 24)

Price has written of this vision many times, though only since his battle with cancer. And though asserting that the vision is archetypal—“of a kind experienced by more than a few lucky children and adults”—he notes that in youth he had “never read or heard of anything like it” and took the experience as an initiating sign of “a separate and inhuman force that lay outside my own mind and body” (*LtG* 24). The image of existence as “wheel,” recalls both the Grail and the “Wheel of Terror-Joy”—though in Price’s youth (untried and untested), he “took no specific account of the evil rampant in creation” (25). He had instead, as he writes in *Clear Pictures*, a permeating sense “that everything, watched long enough, was good” (238). And he recalls his delight in finding, at age nineteen (two years before Will’s death), Yeats’s ecstatic embrace of the same mystic

conclusion at the end of “Dialogue of Self and Soul”: “*We must laugh and we must sing, / We are blest by everything, / Everything we look upon is blest*” (CP 238). He could not have guessed, he writes, that he would “[spend] a lifetime trying to say it” in his own fashion—and struggling hard (like Will) to hold through every test to “what he hoped to believe” (238, 296).

As Price well knows and remarks in *A Whole New Life*, we are addicted to our sense of special suffering, to our egos, to our remedies for coping and bolstering ourselves in trouble. Ironically, as Price came to realize in his own illness (and through “talks with chronic-pain veterans”) even physical pain may become a thing hard to let go, and there is indeed “a vicious and strong temptation to nurture the hurt we wail about” since it has “so nearly *become* us—become the whole core of our present self—that the thought of finally dismissing it . . . feels scarily like desertion or killing” (151). As Price’s narratives and his own experience testify, the fight to redeem a vision of Hope—to achieve the perspective of the *oculus infinitus* (or to ask the Question revealing the Grail’s healing power)—is an ongoing struggle. It is for this reason that Price describes Will’s quest for virtue (cornerstone of Price’s own “debit and capital”) in terms of Jacob’s wrestling. And as Price has observed often in the wake of his own cancer, Will’s lifelong battle was not primarily with drink, but with the profoundly fearful and pained sensibility (never entirely assuaged) that long sought refuge there.

In *A Whole New Life* Price wonders (sounding oddly like Schopenhauer in “On An Apparent Intention in the Fate of the Individual”) if he was intended to see “an external pattern” in the events that befell him between 1984 and 1987, bringing “new life” (WNL 176)—and promising (like election to the Grail) both “disaster” and “access

to the Ladder of Contemplation” (Adolf 176). Price hesitates “to attempt a precise map of that dark terrain”—loathe to reduce such mystery to “a trail of tea-leaves spelling a readable usable message” (176-77). But having “owned up to so much caution,” he affirms (as heir to his parents’ belief and “endless magnanimity”) that such events “seen from a tall enough height, will form at least a compelling figure, ( a clear intentional design, of use to others”—his reason for writing the memoir (177). More than ten years later, in *Letter to a Godchild*, the profound changes in his life seem only to have strengthened his view that the tumor— “congenital . . . my companion from the womb”—was in some sense intended for him, “both when it arrived so suddenly and perhaps ever after” (92). Price leaves the full meaning of this last statement unclear. Yet it brings to mind again his unique sense of consubstantiality with Will, the parallel ordeal Price had just survived (annealed and “cured”), and above all the mysterious “power of witness and duty” to which he had long felt called—most crucially from the night of Will’s death.

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to explore the reverberations of that powerful relationship and crucial, initiating event as they have “shouldered up” repeatedly (often surprisingly) in Price’s work—attached to recurring images and “verbal constellations,” but primarily to the recurring figure of the “generous man” and “grand lost boy” who has surfaced from the first of Price’s career. Critics have long underestimated the extent and nature of Will Price’s influence on his son’s narrative endeavors and on his central subjects, “freedom and virtue.” From the first, however, Price’s narratives have been driven by notions of heroism, virtue, and redemption—matters in one sense bound up with Price’s intelligible character, but in another, with the

profoundly significant legacy of Will Price. Exploring several major figures of the “generous man” and “grand lost boy” (viewed by critics primarily as emblems of male radiance and freedom), I have suggested instead that they be regarded more fully as icons of what Price calls “generous vulnerability”—as characters linked inextricably (though not exclusively) to Will and to the profoundly existential problem of suffering in our world. Certainly Will is not the only radiant sacrificial life Price has encountered—the sole bearer of what Price occasionally terms “the Will energy.” But he was without doubt the first teacher of the wonderful and terrible mystery Price has addressed with increasing directness in his work and has come (in part deliberately, in part by creative indirection) to explore quite fully over the years.

Having set forth in Chapter One the iconography of this “core narrative” (reminiscent of Weston’s “core grail scene” and its goal), I have tried in the remaining chapters to make visible Price’s evolving approach to these sights through textual witnesses—an approach mirroring the stages of the Grail initiate’s progress as he struggles to redress and restore the losses of the Grail King (or at least give them voice). This evolution in narrative perspective highlights Price’s attention to the game of worthiness he posits in *Clear Pictures*—a “continuing test” of Will’s deal and Price’s “worth to be his son” (36)—and the emergence of a central spiritual problem in his work: the dilemma of the witness in the drama of human suffering.

Confronted with such mystery, the innocent eyes of Price’s early fiction grapple (like Parzival, at first) not with the *meaning* of suffering, but with what (if anything) they may do in response to it. The damaged adult witnesses of *Permanent Errors* and *Love and Work* (most notably Thomas Eborn) respond differently—bowed down by suffering

themselves and beginning to question not only the metaphysical implications of such ruin, but their own artistic strategies for attempting to mitigate it. Eborn has been approached by critics primarily as a satire on Price's "excessively literary" side, yet he is far more notable as an index to life's anguish—a failed witness, fleeing a mystery of love too painful to be encompassed as yet by his art. Though Price asserts that he has never doubted for long the ultimate benevolence of the Creator, Eborn bears the combined and intensified force of every doubt. Bleeding unnecessarily with the wounds of those he has lost and at odds with the mysteries of love his work would ostensibly proclaim, Eborn has very nearly *become* the wounded figure. Yet the tale of his slow reclamation and "correction" (from within and without) allows Price to stage his own calisthenic in narrative—adjusting his own trend toward darkness and reaffirming a perspective more consonant with the goals of his ongoing narrative project.

What gradually becomes clear from Price's narratives is that the "cure" to be obtained (as in the Grail mysteries) is tied not to changed circumstance, but to evolving perception—to a healing perspective acknowledging suffering as real but eschewing what Thomas Mann calls "sympathy with death." The novels of *A Great Circle* (fulfilling Price's plans for the long-delayed novel "about" Will and himself) achieve this balance beautifully, exploring more fully than ever the life of the grand lost boy—in this case Rob Mayfield as son, father, lover, and friend. Though exploring the roots and consequences of Rob's malaise (asking, in effect, *what ails thee?*), Price's text grants full vision of Rob's humor and resilience as "noble heart," allowing him to articulate both his suffering and his profound (if sometimes troubled) conviction of order and worth. In Price's post-cancer treatments of the sacrificial life and his primary witness, this trend continues—

intensified by the odd fact that Price himself has experienced in life the apotheosis toward which his spiritually wounded protagonists have long been struggling in fiction. Like Parzival, he has arrived (annealed) at the most surprising of places—fully inheriting the weight of the quest he has studied, but freed from the spiritual damage he has long contemplated and sought to redress.

I cannot hope to pin down the ultimate mystery of the central relation Price so often revisits and evokes most mysteriously in “A Tomb for Will Price,” but I have tried to indicate the depth and richness of this subterranean “room” in his canon—a work of love that “*may never be finished*” (100) but waits patiently for those drawn “by their need and courage” to the difficult work of healing and self-transformation (102). Asked by Dan Wakefield what transformation he wants his work to accomplish, Price says, “I mean to make people more tolerant, to make them more observant, to make people more humane creatures in dealing with themselves” (5). And to Susan Ketchin he asserts in striking new language an idea he had first suggested in 1968<sup>3</sup>: “the end of fiction is mercy. The whole point of learning about the human race presumably is to give it mercy” (7).

Price’s narrative quest not only evinces his ongoing struggle for virtue and healing perspective, but also mirrors precisely his understanding of the challenge thrown toward us by God. “I believe finally,” he writes in “At the Heart” (1987), “that the history of our universe is an infinite *story* told to himself and, in part, to us by the sole omnipotent creative power” (403). Thus, Price suggests,

We are . . . unruly and improvising actors in the crowded unforeseeable and perhaps unscripted tale in which he has cast us for his own purpose—delight or education. The tale is likewise for us, for our pleasure too, for

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter One, p. 2 or “*Pylon: The Posture of Worship*,” *A Common Room*, 30.

our training and growth; and the lethal agonies of cruelty and disaster that are such steady features of the plot are apparently didactic, literally educational—intended by God to enrich and strengthen us, to deepen both our humanity and our comprehension of his unfathomable power and diversity and our own inexplicable failures of mind and body. (404)

Such a perspective—long emergent, but now more fully than ever achieved and consistently sustained—could not have been voiced by Thomas Eborn. But through a synchronistic intertwining of narrative endeavor and circumstance, Price has achieved in life the balanced vision to warmly embrace a mysteriously ordered world where suffering is real but need not prove sovereign in the *mind*, obscuring perceptions of joy, beauty, and the Divine. “We steadily flee a creator,” Price writes, “who can tend both the slow wheel of the galaxies and our own feverish escape while he awaits our return. For his own purpose he waits. . . . And the tale he is choosing to tell himself and all creation will not finish but will amend and augment itself, blossoming ever more grandly like the radiant choruses of Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, swelling to transform a world of farce, trial, and pain. . . .” (“At the Heart” 404).

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