

Lightning and Lashed Rod: our Role in *The Seafarer*

"You kept the trail of light, of broken beings
that the abandoned sun, sinking, casts at the churches.
Stained with glances, dealing with bees,
your substance fleeing from unexpected flame
precedes and follows the day and its family of gold."

-- Pablo Neruda

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Lightning and Love, Winter and Storm

Now is the time to consult imagination. Not for escape, for guidance. The now of our current Post-Modern world. A time in which sarcasm has become the language and coolness the pursuit -- such a lonesome, selfish, material era, with solipsism our guiding philosophy: daily more inured to a slipshod apathy which threatens to take over for good. Have we forgotten about poetry? about art, about the stage and play? At times it seems so. Seems as if poetry has become hip-hop, art become graffiti, the stage become the screen and the play become the movie.

Literature itself is largely to blame for these changes -- or, rather, the turn it took with Post-Modernism (specifically its more grumpy half), which in jest mocked the era's cultural devolution so wryly that too few got the joke, and somehow mistook the writers' derisive criticism as a patchwork of instructions.

But, luckily, we seem to be nearing a kind of cultural renaissance. A new generation gets its turn. Writers who have grown weary of the cynicism and isolating-

snark of their predecessors, of their "reaction against the sentimentality embodied in Victorian and post-Victorian writing," suggests Richard Hugo in *The Triggering Town*, "was so resolute writers came to believe that the further from sentimentality we got, the truer the art"; Hugo then offers a solution: "As Bill Kittredge ... has pointed out: if you are not risking sentimentality, you are not close to your inner self" (Hugo 7).

David Foster Wallace has offered what is perhaps the best solution. Though he examined the idea throughout his second novel and throughout many of his short stories, it's in the essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" that it comes out clearest. He calls for the rise of literary anti-rebel; a collective of artists who, devoted to the cultivation of sentimentality, "treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in ... life with reverence and conviction," who eschew the "self-consciousness and hip fatigue" of "[t]he old postmodern insurgents," who, he suggests, "risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism," and, thrilled by the power, ignited an odious devotion to the self above all else (Wallace 192-3).

Wallace's forethought has played out so far, leading, hopefully, to the restoration of spiritual tranquility. If so, we could advance, not only scientifically and technologically, but artistically and metaphysically. As Mr. Browning put it: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp / Or what's a heaven for?"

The Seafarer has just such a reaching toward heaven. It devotes heart and presage to those "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions" Wallace valued. It risks sentiment, without sacrificing truth. Forgotten, deep-seated visions of man reemerge, and serve as anodyne to bleak depravation, as inscape noticed and instress

sworn, night gone to day, in birdsong sung to bloomed fit of color.

The play is ours. We, the unsullied ones: who, unlike Lockhart, still have a chance, a choice, an outcome yet unmade. And Sharky is our representative. Shocked wordless and plain on stage, he, hooked, is easily you, or me, the audience -- each reader.

I'd like to suggest, however, that he doesn't represent us as we are, but we as we were fallen and as we can fall. Appropriately, it's exactly this Eden-wasted lowness in which we first find our protagonist. He's a man with "the rare gift which is, unfortunately, the opposite to whatever the Midas touch was" (McPherson 62). A cursed and starving man: fighting candle flits from the sacred heart of Jesus, fighting teenagers in dread of boredom, he, Sharkey, cold at night, broken-faced, riven by nightmares, unkempt, sloven, legs smothered by gaudy pajamas and welts from mother's chair or lowdown bar fights -- bitter, lovelorn, self-pitying, angry: lost in despair.

The air around him turns as cold as his damned-soul emptiness. Richard even complains that their house, much like Lockhart's Hell, is "freezing" (McPherson 9). Lights and candles move of their own accord, a home that's gone out the possessed witch. Men like blind mice surround him, noses intent on finding booze and solace. In his nightmares, he meets the man he murdered. It frightened his children. He's almost a ghoul.

The vanity of Sharky plays out so that he uses even the smallest inconvenience to evince the meaningless sorrows, his life. When, for instance, he's explaining to Ivan the travails of the lost lawsuit (and the money it promised), Sharky becomes remonstrative -- theatrically -- with the memory of the lawyer, the shark (McPherson 17-8). Or more clearly, in his past: so cruel to his mother that she, who "only ever had one problem in her

life : Sharky," became violent; and she would weep from broken heart (McPherson 63).

Nor can Sharky be spooked easily, seemingly unaffected by the ghost of poor electrocuted Maurice Macken (McPherson 19). Instead, he maintains his countenance of grunting dispassion; he's even (at first) unimpressed with, or maybe dismissive of, the present from Miriam, the woman he proudly, haughtily steals from a husband. As if his arrogantly celebrating the affair weren't enough, Sharky, rejoices in admitting that the husband was his boss, grinning as he gloating boasts to Ivan: "His wife, Miriam, she's very ... you know ... She's a very nice lady" (McPherson 20).

But the gravity of the darkness hid in Sharky doesn't emerge fully until his first one-on-one with Lockhart. The two men by artifice alone; as outside the cough and burst of storm in thunder ricochets. Slowly, Sharky's longheld disregard for life boils out -- hate which began at a young age, eventually congealing into such a paucity of life that -- despite the abjure! abjure! abjure! he try as -- he brutally killed Laurence Joyce, the sixty-one year old vagrant, harmless, childlike, the man who "said his wife was once the Cardiff Rose" (McPherson 38).

Then, in what's itself a Lynchian display, he plays *cards*, not for his soul, but for the chance to outmaneuver justice . He wants to bypass the inconvenient punishment dealt a murderer in this world, to *go on* with his life, exasperated -- inconvenienced yet again -- willing, or so he thought, to count his losses should that need arise. But, moving quick into denial and quicker from regret, the bill always arrives. The grey man calls your number, the wolves catch your scent. What the veil hid, glass can't hide.

As such, Lockhart, our number-calling wolf, is actually the one responsible for pulling Sharky from the deadening torpor of his carrion comfort. Sharky's idleness will

no longer do, he won't have the choice.

Because Lockhart rang their bell. Looked all over. He's returned. Hungry for Sharky's soul, come to collect, baffled, "You're seriously standing there telling me that it never struck you as odd, down all these years, that you just walked out of jail?" (McPherson 36).

Venom-eyed, Lockhart. In venom, he attacks. Pounces on Sharky for the waste he's made into a worthless life, "twenty-five years on the lash like some old borderline wino"(McPherson 37). He's only gotten worse, made ruin of his chance freedom and left nothing of his soul -- so what good is it to him, snarls Lockhart, looking into Sharky snarling, "What chance *haven't* you fucked up?" (McPherson 37).

As testament to the severity of Sharky's lowness, it's alone the rage of Lockhart -- not the apologetic compassion of Nicky, nor the puppy-dog friendship of Ivan, the admonishments of his ex-wife, the promise of women to come, not the love of his brother -- which awakens Sharky: defenselessly broken, darkly overcome with what? -- not shame, not compassion, not love, not faith, not hope, not even fear. No. It's self-importance. And, boy, is he shaken. He ceded control of his fate. He has become the limply draped flag exactly at the midpoint of the rope being tugged in both directions -- and the tension McPherson creates here: that Sharky will be pulled either down or toward light; no longer free to lay across a dull nothingness of unwanted days. Both sides urge him on; Lockhart -- with heart ever-locked -- uses the clash of thunder and winter; Richard, with lightning and lashed rod: "Sharky, come on! ... Sharky!!! Let's play!!!" (McPherson 41).

The second occasion that Sharky and Lockhart are alone further cements a fate

that will lead him either through hole in wall into ice-spined coffin or into pinhole of cloudlight of weightless surrender, afloat in the entrancing daylight of a spirit freed, released of the inferno's fecal slime.

Seeing him toss money at Lockhart -- finally comprehending -- was like seeing a panicking child vainly try to reshape his once proud towers and gates and spires and minarets, all now transmuted into droopy sand, as the ocean devours the lawn chairs once kingly to that patch, chief of their own land.

When you go to the bad place: you lose two worlds, not just one.

Sharky's first change comes when, after he fighting so desperately to win fails, resigns himself to the eternity he's somehow chosen, finally able to say, "I have to go ... I have to do it myself" (McPherson 73).

Miracles, miracles -- perfectly-timed. Which do their job when they're meant to; not by request. We thought we'd lost Sharky, there, didn't we? Worse, it really seemed as though he'd lost his humanity for good well before. It was easy to assume that he hadn't any human left in him, empty and nightmared.

Who knew that there still winked a microscopic match's flame of grace way deep down in Sharky. That can send its upward clarion call. The reddened flicker whispers. The goodness remaining in Sharky, if only but the fingernail of an atom, is enough -- and it chimes its cricket-calls to an important buddy abovehead, who turns fours into aces.

Lockhart: "Somebody's done you a big favor, Sharky" (McPherson 74) Fours into aces. Remember to live, live, live, says Richard. Live, boy, go on. So that we end with a man who can celebrate the gift of life, setbacks included. For though we move from earthy coal to immortal diamond, it is only by and through the torrents and tragedies and

fires of the life we're given that this transformation can occur. We make a home of our painful lifelong struggle to find a home (Kafka). We're lost but, hell, we're free. And, as Theodore Roethke puts it in "I Knew A Woman": "What's freedom for? To know eternity."

For Lockhart, however, there is no freedom; eternity is a rack, a Sisyphean exercise. All the proof we need is on pp. 59-60. Those; the ice-fanged pages in which an insurmountably tormented mind struggles to describe Hell with sufficient evil. Exhausts himself in his search to find the most hellish words available. The worst part is, he's just pulling up memories. He's delineating for Sharky the brazed pit of scorched shale and tempered bile he's long meant called "kingdom" when he really mean "cage."

Naturally, he is incredibly misfortunate. His underworld puts the *designs* misfortune -- it wouldn't even exist if it weren't for his Fall. Kicked out of the daylight, banned, barred, asked to just, like, leave the humans alone, "Don't go near the garden." The ultimate reject and loser.

In other words, Lockhart has it worst in the play -- no doubt -- by dint of his role as the very image of misfortune. There is none more unfortunate than Satan, no fate more gruesome than his. There's no sympathy for the devil. And the same goes for McPherson's rendition. Lockhart, less magical than Woland, more subtle than Judge Holden, and about as funny as Mephistopheles....

The Seafarer affords humanity a redeeming goodness over evil which previous Faustian works of literature have disregarded, forgotten, or spurned. For instance, unlike Young Goodman Brown, we escape the darksome sylvan nightfall; unlike Faust, we elude the eternal empty; unlike Gibreel, we resolve mind to matter.

It's interesting, too, that Lockhart gets sloppy after some potteen, too human -- where, typically, the devil figure either seems immune to such things or has some weird episode in which his liver leaks pentagon-emblazoned bile through ever-festering skin (no specific reference). We can only observe his continuing fall, clearly anguished.

Slowly, this abjection unfurls, bursting through the well-polished countenance and exquisite manner Lockhart preens perhaps out of boredom, or perhaps vanity or spite. He hides within his "stupid insect body," but, anytime he loses it, the whole room notices, even surges with electricity. More than anything else, though, it's music that paralyzes marks his cursed fate (McPherson 59).

What misfortune -- I can't imagine any worse a fate -- to hate the sound of music; for such a divine thing to be more than "just an ugly sound" (McPherson 56). There's a certain horror, as well, in seeing Lockhart crippled below the beauty of music, backbent into the furniture and begging them, turn it off, turn off the radio! (McPherson 55).

The obvious upside to the devil broken by music is akin to seeing a thing as beautiful insofar as it nullifies what's hideous. Selfsame to the way *The Seafarer's* powerful humanism is made purer and more marked by the act of negating bad/evil, by overcoming it, likewise, the beauty of the scene in which Lockhart cowers from music, rises from a mutter the Dark One uncontrollably hisses out: his admission that music is the sound of heaven. Music, which is here "to soothe the soul" (McPherson 55).

Seeing Lockhart's vehemence at the sound of music emboldens our understanding of its music, allows us to feel the joy for our own freedom. It's largely this scene, in which we see the tormented misfortune of Lockhart, which imbues us with a certain lightness, a remainder of the play's celebration of Man's ability to overcome evil, so that

in the end we have nothing left of Lockhart, only pure good: a warm halo and the beauty of music.

This pure good is selfsame to Richard. Obverse to Lockhart. Richard. Kind, brimming with compassion, thoughtful, selfless, pious, a booze-loving saint. Poor blind Richard. Who, neither poor nor blind of spirit, stands by his brother and the muck and hate that have long festered within him. Richard is the model. He's who we ought to be.

Of course, just as Sharky underrepresented us, Richard makes us look *too* good; he portrays what we ought to rise to. We, like Heaney says of poetry, rest somewhere in between. A space that must narrow before it can expand. Where we're treated and hurt, tempted, but, through despair and all else, enlivened by the reach toward heaven and the flame of soul alive. Narrowing, narrower, closing closer but still a wide ring of spotlight. The music has started and Sharky is holding a card as the sunlight pulses.

It's you, or me, or Sharky -- it's the ushers who've snuck in for the end of the play. Up there on stage, alone, as the edges of that sloven room dim inward, the beam narrowing, as it environs carefully. It's the actors offstage. It's any eye lifting the words from script or drawing the scene from memory like steam off bathwater, each alone in the shrinking pinhole of light, safe from a hole in the wall, safe, a luminous encapsulating, an almost rise, up past eyes, rose, that music a pearled mist risen you're each second more a part of, surrounds of lighted melody -- so so near that it covers you as skin, closer, nearer, do you feel the spotlight wind round your head like a gilded crown? a cautious feather? Light like calm warmed hands, blanched lilt of cloud, by cotton, through lovely-like-mist soft rain mid gentle breeze, wrapped, you your own lightscape, about to spread, but closer first, closer, until it's under flesh and organ, into light from lightship, a part of the spirit

now, lifting, upward, snow floating up, slow still ascent, brume of frost, with drift, in
petals, lost mint linen, taper of lambent candle's waver, lilies of cloud, so close, sift
skyward, into the lambent sky, spreading, and sweet -- light of your own: sweet, sweet.
Tufted sweet mystery blooming, sweet. Grace, weep. Weep for all the heart's little
patience lost; hear that music: the patient little drift of light. If we lose any, only keep a
little always. Lambent brume in each heart striding, each so little.

In the meantime, there's the good earth -- with its soil half feces.