

Colin Browne / THE THING INSIDE

"It is never wise to neglect the heart's reasons which reason knows nothing of." — E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING LINES FROM A POEM OF TORMENT, pride and spiritual suffering written several hundred years before the birth of Christ by a poet whose name we'll never know. It concerns a Gentile named Job, a man of caution and integrity. He fears and obeys his God in all things and the God rewards him handsomely; Job becomes an enormously wealthy farmer. In those days — and perhaps it happens still — angels mustered before the God each year to report on their activities. On one such occasion the God finds himself boasting lavishly about Job's piety and humility. The Accusing Angel suggests that Job's faith is a function of his complacency. "Take away all he holds dear and you'll see a different man," the Angel sneers. Anxious to prove his point — and to uphold all that he stands for — the God gives the Angel permission to put Job's righteousness to the test.

Job's family is summarily wiped out; his livestock and fields are destroyed. He breaks out in hideous boils down to the soles of his feet. He is furious. Is he being punished? He complains bitterly. His friend, Bildad the Shuhite, tells him to stop whining. The God must have a reason for treating him so cruelly. Bildad's advice is oddly trusting, but what else can he say? This is not a deity with a reputation for leniency. Times are tough. Besides, says Bildad, the answer to all this suffering cannot be found in the present. Forgetting, perhaps, the God's capacity for jealousy, he suggests that Job consult the ancestors:

I urge you: ask those who came before us.
Consider the lives of their forefathers,

For we *are men of yesterday*; we know nothing; our days
upon the earth *are* as shadows.

Shall not those who came before you teach you,
and tell you, and speak from their hearts?¹

I like this passage from *The Book of Job* because it unconsciously provides one of the very first descriptions of cinema. I'm referring not only to the felicitously shared metaphor of a human image projected onto a screen, but to a function of cinema that's fundamental to our engagement with it. In the cinema's half-light we encounter the physical manifestation of our metaphysical condition; we commune, literally, with our ghosts and ancestors. What defines the experience of cinema if it is not a crying out for one's father and mother among the flickering shadows, craning forward to hear the words their hearts might speak?

We encounter something else in that darkened palace of desire: something we might call our shadow-selves. Following the figures on the silver screen as they play out their epic destinies, we find ourselves embracing a representation — both literal *and* figurative — of what we have come to identify as our divided nature. We are here, in our seats; and we are there, on the screen, simultaneously. Following the conventions of modernist fiction, the characters on the screen also experience divided natures. They're composed of a hidden "inner" self and a social "outer" self, or *selvage*, that prevents the inner self from unravelling. With time and turbulence these selves are shown drawing apart from one another, like a ship from its wharf, and inevitably the ship forgets there ever was a wharf. There's a crisis, and the characters discover that something is desperately wrong. No matter how many competent selves have been developed in the social sphere, they begin to experience an aching separation from their 'essential' inner selves, often portrayed in the garb of early childhood. To resolve the problem they must seek out and reunite with this lost inner self, with the promise of becoming whole again. And so the unravelling begins.

Underlying this narrative tradition is a 2,500-year-old theological

1 *The Book of Job* 8: 8-10.

model which continues to structure, organize and affirm one's relationship to the universe within the 'Western' tradition. This model replaced a lively pantheon of fallible divinities with a solitary male god roaming the sky demanding burnt offerings and establishing an inflexible order that mirrored his own experience of separation and alienation. Within this tradition — the Judeo-Christian tradition — human beings are violently separated from the nourishing gardens of the earth and from their own flesh. Paradise becomes a crime site. Misery, disease and war become the order of the day. Should one choose to leave this vale of tears to seek solace in a disembodied aerial form, the price is high. One's legacy from an earlier time — the perfect, beautiful body one inhabits — must be sacrificed to the bad-tempered, invisible sky god who, as poet and translator David Rosenberg puts it, is looking for an answer to his own identity problems in the world of men.² The reconstitution of the self occurs in the moment of transformation from one dimension to another. The invisible self is transformed into a sky spirit; the beautiful body is transformed into a bag of rotting organs. You are doomed if you do; doomed if you don't.

Any number of ingenious interpretive models — psychological, cultural, social, spiritual, biological, genetic, religious, environmental and so on — have been invented to locate and articulate the axes of the divided self, but our real gift is for creating lovely and terrifying images with which to animate and humanize what is, in the end, unknowable. Our hearts and minds teem with seductive and durable images and words that depict things we can never know. Where do they come from; why do they stick? There is so much before our eyes that we could know about if we wished, and certainly much that cannot be explained, yet paradoxically we defer to the invisible, to the unknowable thing inside the knowable. This essay is an exploration of the unknowable and its representations, for it strikes me that engagement with the unknowable is the origin of representation. Industrious-sounding metaphors like *division*, *separation* and *wholeness* are the result of trying to conceive states of being that are inconceivable. The elaborate and beautiful accretions of linguistic representation have built a

² David Rosenberg, *The Lost Book of Paradise: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden*. New York: Hyperion, 1993, p.5.

mental home for the bag of rotting organs where it is always welcome, a home built with our own hands to weather the unknowing. The same is true for all other representational gestures. In their performance they're like the symbols in an algebraic equation in which the zero is the unknowable. I'd like to examine, in the following pages, the equations of the unknowable we take for granted every day. And I'd like to begin with the relationship between word and image on the screen because of the way cinema has transformed us over the last one hundred years.



The cinema, from its inception, has been seen as the theatre or model of the unconscious. Upon its walls are projected the forbidden images of the unknowable. The epic battles we conceal, the forbidden loves we suppress, the archetypal creatures we fear spring to life 30 feet high in the cinema. The invisible is made visible. We should not forget that the first flickerings of the moving picture coincided with the birth of psychoanalysis, and the discoveries of one go hand in hand with and inform the discoveries of the other. The projected manifestations of our haunted shadow-selves on the screen represent (metonymically) our ancestral predicament. The struggle to suppress and embrace the derelict, unshriven shadow-creatures bellowing for freedom in their prison of bones becomes a communal experience that mirrors our dreams (do you see Lon Chaney?). The cinema with its flickering lamp and thousand expulsions of breath holds out the promise that we may somehow even learn to love the shadow within. Think of Cocteau's *Beast* — or Disney's, for that matter. It may be that *Peter Pan* — a story that begins when a boy loses his shadow — owes its genesis to the cinema. The play was first produced in 1904, the year Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* was released to theatres around the world. Pan's desire to reunite with his shadow — to become a whole boy — is thoroughly modern. Was J. M. Barrie influenced by the movies? The idea that you can only find your shadow when it's dark is an idea that could have been borrowed from the cinema, where the flickering images vanish the moment you turn the lights on to see them.³

Almost everyone who has watched an artistically-produced silent film under the proper conditions — a good print, all scenes intact, music as intended — acknowledges that the emotional and imaginative experience is far more intense than that produced by a contemporary sound picture. There's a mythic quality to the larger than life images which is diminished when spoken language and sound effects are added. In a silent picture the mind is free to engage in a profound way because it is not harnessed by the familiar conventions of dramatic language. At the same time, the imagination tends to create its own elements of complementary sound in resonance with the mythic images. Audiences in silent films will swear that they have heard sounds.⁴ Technically, the introduction of the magnetic and then the optical soundtrack was an accomplishment, but it led to the imagination's impoverishment. On the other hand, it set the stage for a renewal of the ancient struggle between words and images. In the cinema today words and images inhabit an uneasy truce. It's the sound editor's task to create and sustain the rhythms that enable harmonious co-existence, but we're dimly aware all the same of the deep division that threatens to collapse the wonderful illusion on the screen. Of course, the tensions created by this division may help to nourish cinema. Perhaps, if word and image made peace with one another, cinema as we know it would vanish. Perhaps, if we ever become whole,

3 *Peter Pan* was originally conceived as a play and produced in 1904. In 1911 Barrie published the story as a novel called *Peter and Wendy*. In 1921 it reappeared as *Peter Pan and Wendy*. The story is very much about being divided from one's place of origin, and the mythic parallels are clear from the first paragraph:

"All children, except one, grow up. They soon know that they will grow up, and the way Wendy knew was this. One day when she was two years old she was playing in a garden, and she plucked another flower and ran with it to her mother. I suppose she must have looked rather delightful, for Mrs. Darling just put her hand to her heart and cried, 'Oh, why can't you remain like this forever!' This was all that passed between them on the subject, but henceforth Wendy knew that she must grow up. You always know after you are two. Two is the beginning of the end."

4 In sound films the best sound effects are often those not added. The imagination is often more inventive than any number of complicated tracks.

we'll disappear as well.⁵

Given its mediumistic nature, its evocation of ancestor worship and its heavily-coded rituals, the cinema has become the sacred grove of the twentieth century, the altar where we commune with the invisible world. Build an altar, they say, and you summon a god. This is not to say that cinema has replaced writing, reading, singing or sacrificial slaughter, but Leonard Cohen recognized its mythic energy when, in *Beautiful Losers*, F.'s hallucination provides him with the courage to allow the newsreel to escape into the feature:

I let the newsreel escape, I invited it to walk right into plot, and they merged in awful originality, just as trees and plastic synthesize new powerful landscapes in those districts of the highway devoted to motels. Long live motels, the name, the motive, the success! Here is my message, old lover of my heart. Here is what I saw: here is what I learned:

Sophia Loren Strips For a Flood Victim
THE FLOOD IS REAL AT LAST ⁶

5 The loss of the silent film's sense of magic and immediacy was felt keenly in the years directly after its demise. Writer and film critic Erik Knight (*Lassie Come Home*), in a 1933 letter to Paul Rotha, speaks for many in the business at the time: "I can't remember any more exciting or stirring a piece of stuff in my life than the race of Barthelmess cross-cut between the Gish girl on the ice-floe in that old dog *Way Down East* [D.W. Griffith, 1920]. I remember I stood up in the theatre when I saw that and shouted out loud — actually yelled at the top of my lungs. And then I didn't even know it was cross-cutting. All I knew was that the magic screen had built up something that was the greatest pitch of excitement that I had ever known — and all the time I was perfectly aware that it was hokum — the story. I spoke to Griffith about that later. He was right — direct effect, no arty stuff. I still remember the tramp (unheard) of his soldiers' feet in America [1924], the patriots marching, more and more feet, the whole American revolution gathering tempo in two minutes of film-time. And what do we do today? Is it progress?

"I just looked at Chaplin's *The Rink*, the other day. Do you know, old Chaplins move so fast that in these slowed-down-to-walk times we can hardly watch them. I was never conscious of Chaplin being too fast back in 1915. We're too busy ringing bells these days and showing a character saying: Is zat so?" Paul Rotha (ed.), *Portrait of a Flying Yorkshireman: Letters from Erik Knight in the United States to Paul Rotha in England*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1952, p.28.

The newsreel — the apparent reality — cannot be true until it embraces and partakes of the invisible engine of desire. We can't say for sure how the projections on the screen enter our imaginations to mate with the epic performances that flow through us constantly like swollen rivers, but if the altar is the place where we alone as human beings commune with the gods, if it also represents the point on earth where the separation between ourselves and the invisible world is most clearly articulated, then it is our business to wonder about our proximity to and our relationship with the sacred.

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Despite the influence and popularity of the cinema, screenwriting is one of the world's thankless tasks. Unlike writing intended to be read, screenwriting is meant to be erased. It's an act of ventriloquism. The ideal screenplay vanishes; words succumb to their own evanescence. Since invisibility and erasure run counter to the purposes of writing, the history of the screenplay has resembled the history of a war; and, as in all wars, ignorance, ambition, greed, pride and self-righteousness have held sway. The best and the brightest have been defeated: F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner and Malcolm Lowry among them. According to Erik Knight, who was writing film reviews in 1933, "The only writer worth his salt was Hemingway. When they asked him to go to Hollywood, he told them to go to hell."⁷

Perhaps we should regard the writing of a screenplay as a kind of pilgrimage. Thousands of scripts are written every year in this country, on spec and on demand, and only one or two will ever be adapted into motion pictures. The lucky handful will be altered at every stage of the process and the writer's vision will in every case find itself overtaken by creative and economic considerations that have nothing to do with any integrity to which the script may have had pretensions. When it's all over the screenplay will be tossed aside — a useless husk. Occasionally, scripts considered to have literary or commercial value are published, although it's often impossible to ascertain which draft one is

6 Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966, pp. 223-224.

7 Rotha, p. 23.

reading. They're usually remaindered a few months later. One should never underestimate the value of scrap paper or shelf-space.⁸ Given the odds, it's hard to see why writing screenplays on spec has become the most popular form of literary endeavour of the last ten years. It's on an economic par with mink ranching. Does no one remember the sad fate of Salmi Morse, the first writer whose script was ever turned into a film — a man who committed suicide in utter despair?

Salmi Morse (did his Jewishness have anything to do with it?) was once considered the most despised human being in America.⁹ One miserable morning in February, 1884, his body was found floating in the Hudson River with 42 cents in its pocket, some counterfeit Hebrew shekels, a signet ring and a sodden clump of personal papers. He had once been acclaimed as the greatest epic dramatist of his day. Many had written him off as insane, including his estranged wife.¹⁰ His masterpiece was entitled *The Passion*, a melodramatic version of the Oberammergau passion play staged in San Francisco in 1879 and enthusiastically co-directed by the legendary David Belasco. American religious leaders denounced it immediately as sacrilegious and prevented it from being staged anywhere else during Morse's lifetime.

The Passion was resuscitated and adapted for the screen almost twenty years later by Richard Hollaman, president of the Eden Musee in New York City and his associate Frank Russell (who played the role of Christ).¹¹ Filmed in secret over a period of six weeks on the snowy, wind-howling roof of the Grand Central Palace at Lexington Avenue and 43rd Street in New York, *Passion Play of Oberammergau* is now celebrated as the first film to be based on a written scenario — in this case Salmi Morse's only slightly revised script. Nineteen minutes long with twenty-three tableau-like scenes, it was considered an epic; most

8 This isn't a recent problem. Over half the English edition of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* was "wasted", that is, turned into scrap paper, just fourteen months after publication in 1857.

9 Alan Nielsen, *The Great Victorian Sacrilege: Preachers, Politics and The Passion, 1879-1884*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1991, p. 4.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

11 Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 212.

films in 1898 lasted about two minutes. *Passion Play of Oberammergau* had a successful premiere on January 30, 1898, at the Eden Musee,¹² a beguiling little chamber of curiosities which, according to Terry Ramsaye, included among its regular exhibits "death masks of Napoleon, executions of wax criminals by wax elephants, an automaton chess player and a program of song and sometimes dance."¹³ Almost twenty years after having blacklisted the stage play, the clerics decided they loved the movie. Hollaman cashed in on the film's success by sending out a travelling version consisting of a two hour lecture illustrated by maps, slides and excerpts from the film.¹⁴

David Belasco, by the way, grew up in Victoria, B.C., and his little brother is buried in that city's tiny Jewish cemetery. Belasco is remembered today for having written and directed the original stage version of *Madame Butterfly*, the play that inspired Giacomo Puccini when he first saw it in London in 1900. In the 1860s Belasco's father had been a merchant in the Barkerville gold fields and stories from this experience were later woven into a stage play with horses Belasco called *The Girl of the Golden West* which Puccini also turned into an opera, *La Fanciulla del West*, first performed in New York in 1910. *The Girl of the Golden West* was produced as a movie three times, first in 1923, again in 1930, and once more in 1938, starring Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy. In this latter case the music was by Sigmund Romberg and Gus Kahn, and the fictional setting — if not the set — was moved from California to Canada. Sheriff Jack Rance became a Mountie and Dick Johnson a Mexican bandit: a perfect example of traditional screenplay recycling.

While they owe their narrative form to the conventions of literary fiction, from the 1920s on the movies were transforming the way fiction would be written, not the other way around. Malcolm Lowry is often credited with having developed a 'cinematic style,' but it's hard not to feel a surge of protective horror reading his 455-page screenplay adaptation of Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, composed in

12 Nielsen, pp. 230-231, and Musser, pp. 213, 216.

13 Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926, p. 367.

14 Musser, p. 218.

Dollarton between 1949-1950. It seems hopelessly *naive*, yet it triumphs in its innocence as a complicated gesture of literary faith and calculation. Lowry's "Tender is the Night" is fascinating because of its profound belief in cinema as a medium of transformation, as a source of magic.¹⁵ Here's the first sentence of the screen direction for Scene 20:

As Baby Warren begins to talk we cut into Nicole and her father, Devereaux Warren, looking down at this car from a balcony, and have at the same time a sensation of revelation, not dissimilar to the feeling some of us obtain from reading those sections of Proust which deal with those material occasions when essences recur, yet at once far cruder and more starkly dramatic, as if indeed, almost, this were a species of ghost story.¹⁶

Translating an atmospheric scene like this onto the screen isn't impossible, but in Hollywood? Proust? Recurring essences? "Tender is the Night" never had a chance.

The Lowrys saw not a penny for their efforts. Malcolm sent the script to his old editor at Reynal and Hitchcock, Frank Taylor, who'd moved to Hollywood to work for MGM. Taylor passed the screenplay on to his friends James Agee, Jay Leyda and John Huston, who was a great admirer of *Under the Volcano* and who finally achieved his dream of adapting the novel to the screen in 1984. Agee, who was busy with Huston co-writing *The African Queen* (this was 1950), immediately wrote to Lowry: "I . . . loved what little I got a chance to read of your great job on *Tender is the Night* — because besides every accomplishment of insight and atmosphere, you're of course one of the maybe dozen really original, inventive minds that have ever hit the movies."

15 While Lowry's contribution to the screenplay is considered by the editors of "Tender is the Night" to be primary, we should note that the writers indicated on the title page of the original typescript are Marjerie Bonner [Lowry] and Malcolm Lowry. Marjerie should be considered a co-writer on this project.

16 Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen, *The Cinema of Malcolm Lowry: A Scholarly Edition of Lowry's "Tender is the Night"*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990, p. 90.

And from Frank Taylor: "I have read many scripts and seen many pictures, but never before have I seen writing so purely cinematic It goes devastatingly deep, and its direct filmic evocation of life's complexities is magic and miraculous."¹⁷ Imagine all this collegial praise winging north into the mailbag in Dollarton, finding its way down to the Lowry's shack on a May morning filled with promise forty-six years ago, and yet nothing would happen — and it probably never will.

"Tender is the Night" isn't actually a screenplay; it's an extended series of musings, camera directions and literary interpretations with dialogue. These days no one in a studio would give it the time of day. But there is cinema here. There are words that evoke images that haunt us when we read them. In this respect we can agree with Agee; the writing is cinematic. Lowry loved movies as a mythic form of representation, as a way of making visible the invisible, and his fiction is devoted to this task. He notes that many writers of reputation fail in the act of writing screenplays because "they love not the film. Mysteriously, despite their protests, they love it not. They may have learned from it, they may even be able to tell you what a good film is, and write intelligently about it, but at bottom they feel superior to it — or to everything except the money to be made by it." He goes on to add that such writers "cannot think visually and aurally." If they could, he says, "*the sacrifice of words would not seem so great*. These writers cannot make you see and hear in their novels either."¹⁸

Lowry has proposed two fundamental principles of writing for the cinema. One must not treat cinema as a lesser art — as a means to an end; and one must engage fully with its visual and aural potential, transcending words by sacrificing them. To sacrifice words does not mean amputating a load of them from the body of each paragraph. It surely refers to a more radical procedure. In a dramatic screenplay words, including dialogue, must become more like punctuation marks, musical notation or wiring diagrams, an intermediary sign system for technicians who will translate it into another medium. Language must be transformed, altered. If you summon the god you must be prepared to sacrifice that which you love most.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16. Italics mine.

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Altar, the film I'm working on at the moment, is unlike most films in that the camera is the only thing that moves. It consists of a single photographic image closely examined by a moving camera and accompanied by a spoken text. The photograph is a portrait of the ship's company of *HMCs Mayflower*, a World War II corvette that saw convoy duty in the North Atlantic. The photograph was taken in Halifax on the jetty beside the ship in 1941 or 1942. I found it folded up among my father's papers after he died and apart from his presence I don't know any of the men, although any of them could have been my father. As I pore over the faces, selecting them, framing them for the camera, they seem terribly familiar. I can smell the grey paint and the engine room. The tilt of the men's caps, the Miro-esque shapes of light on their skulls, the rough texture of their blue No. 1 uniforms: these are images and fabrics I grew up with. I feel as if I'm drawing something out of myself, an offering, perhaps, as I approach a photograph that is functioning as a shrine. I can't say what it is I seek. There's no expectation that these ancestors will speak. This is no oracle. Here they are, laid out across the altar, side by side. I recall that the term for a ladder aboard a ship is 'companionway.'

Let's return to Job, this time near the end of his ordeal. He is complaining to his friends again, ticking off the offences committed against him by his God. Here he is, in a fragment of the Stephen Mitchell translation:

"I made a pact with my eyes,
that I would not gaze at evil.
But what good has virtue done me?
How has God rewarded me?
Isn't disgrace for sinners
and misery for the wicked?
Can't he tell right from wrong
or keep his accounts in order?"¹⁹

19 Stephen Mitchell (trans.), *The Book of Job*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992, p. 73.

In a nearby whirlwind his God, The Unnamable, is listening. Suddenly, thunderously, he replies. No translation matches the God's fury as it is depicted in the King James version:

"Who *is* this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me.

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding.

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched the line upon it?

Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? Or who laid the corner stone thereof?

When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

Or *who* shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, *as if* it had issued out of the womb?

When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddling band for it,

And brake up for it my decreed *place*, and set bars and doors,

And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall my proud waters be stayed?²⁰

The raging voice in the whirlwind goes on to describe in precise and chilling detail the devouring powers of death and destruction unleashed whenever anything is born — including the sweetest-smelling infant. Job is shattered, and humbled. He searches for words to reply. I often ask myself, if I was given the job of making the movie, how would I recreate this scene? How would I portray The Unnamable? Is he visible? To whom? How would I portray the forces of death and destruction? The God likens himself to a whale and a

20 *Job*, 38: 2-11. The first line is translated by Stephen Mitchell (p. 79) as "Who is this whose ignorant words/smear my design with darkness?"

bull — “He is the chief of the ways of God . . .” — to portray his ferocious energy. We enter mysterious territory here. In order to represent himself visually, the God must resort to metaphors. Could the God ever describe himself without metaphors? Yes, but he would no longer be the God he was describing. We return again to the birth of representation, which is to say, to the primary act of generating symbolic presence when what is present is absent or hidden.

According to the laws dictated to Moses, the representation of God is the central issue of visual and linguistic representation. God is omnipresent. He is indivisible. He is never absent. Hence he cannot be represented because to represent him is to propose that he is divisible, or that the representer can stand apart and depict God standing apart from himself. To suggest that one is separate from God or that God is separable from the universe is to commit the unpardonable sin. Hence the poet has Job address a whirlwind from which a voice emerges — something you can feel but never see. Yet the act of seeing God remains pivotal to the poet’s account of Job’s liability trial.²¹

At the poem’s conclusion, the poet has Job speak the following words:

“I have spoken of the unspeakable
and tried to grasp the infinite.

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I had heard of you with my ears;
but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I will be quiet,
comforted that I am dust.”²²

Job’s reach has been Faustian. He has believed himself elect to the point of being able to speak the unspeakable and grasp the infinite. He’s been walking the walk and talking the talk as if he is God himself.

21 For this term, borrowed from the world of litigation, I’m grateful to Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 296-307.

22 Mitchell, p. 88.

The poem represents a radical attack on the privilege and divine right of priests, kings and their wealthy mandarins. In his claim to the infinite and the unspeakable, Job has been bamboozled by the self-serving structures of authority he inhabits. He's a fraud but he's blissfully unaware of it. This is another version of "The Emperor's New Clothes." Job has been so busy gazetting his lofty eternity-speak that he's been incapable of seeing that which is before his very eyes. The urge to master something prevents one from *seeing* it. In surrendering that over which he has been so watchful, Job *sees* God for the first time.

At least this is what he says. In fact, the writer of the poem scrupulously provides no description of God or of God's revelation of himself. Nor does he depict Job as doing anything but *listening* to God's apoplectic account of leviathan power and potency. A whirlwind is invisible, and unless we are meant to understand that in *imagining* the metaphors for God Job *sees* God, we are at a loss to explain a process that nevertheless seems teleologically right. Clearly, there is a problem. The poet privileges *seeing*; i.e., if Job is to realize his mistake and repent, he must *see* God. God cannot be seen, however, because he can't be separated out from the world; he is the world and he is indivisible. He cannot be separated from Job to be seen by Job; he is Job. Job's surrender challenges everything God stands for, for as a part of God the implication is that God himself would be willing to surrender to a greater power than himself. This would be inconceivable.

This impossibility seems to mark the place where a new intention was grafted onto an earlier text. One wonders, how much of *The Book of Job* we see today is the work of the poet we have come to associate with it? Was his or her text violated by later compilers of the now familiar Bible? If we can see past this invasion of the poem, we will, I think, discover the poet's original intention. Job, a Faustian figure, is divided from the world by wealth, authority, self-delusion and the agricultural economy. To master his environment he has separated himself from it. He is no longer nourished by it as he would have been in a pre-agricultural time. The poet suggests that in *seeing*, he is made whole. What does he see? He sees himself. I believe that he turns from self-involvement and self-delusion to actually looking at the manifestation of the tangible, sensual, perceptible world within himself. He reconnects with his vestigial pre-agricultural self and discovers that he is

not separate from the world but an interrelated engine within it. My guess is that *The Book of Job* was not originally a religious text but a spiritual manual that invoked the gods of an earlier time. Its original purpose was integration not separation. Reading between the lines, Job surrenders not only his claim to be like a god but his indentured, divided relationship to the godhead. He embraces a pre-Judeo-Christian condition in which body and spirit are one. This may present its own problems, but in the meanwhile he has transformed himself by surrendering to the clamour of his own blood.

The language of surrender is prayer. The word *precarious* derives from the Latin root *precare*, to pray. You're in a precarious position when you're in an attitude of supplication, when you abandon your claim to knowing. What would happen if you began to re-imagine the world from this position, to write from this position, to make photographs and films from this position? Your work would be infused with your precariousness, with prayer. It would be wrong to relate to prayer as a function of religious ideology. Job's experience is hardly a function of the Judeo-Christian tradition; a Sumerian version of the legend is four thousand years old. Further, what we see shining below the surface of the corrupted biblical version is the sure hand of a poet who recognized in Job's journey of integration a parallel to the poetic process. *The Book of Job* as we know it has a happy ending tacked on: hills black with livestock, wealth, comfort, beautiful daughters, great age, etc. In surrendering to the poetic process, however, one enters unknown territory. One must risk all. One cannot say what one might find there, or if one will return intact.

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A wood.
A man entered,
thought he knew the way
through. The old furies
attended. Did he emerge
in his right mind? The same
man?

R.S. Thomas

How should we approach a photographic representation of the world? What are we *looking* for? What does it mean, 'to look'? Are there different kinds of looking? Are there rules for looking? Do we look at a photograph in the same way we look at the thing to which the photograph refers? Does a photograph act as a piece of evidence for this thing, and is this thing more authentic somehow than the photo? Can the photograph reveal to us some nature of the thing that the thing cannot reveal for itself? How slippery these words are. Is photography a transparent medium or is it a thing in itself with a history and a social/political/economic context? One is tempted to imagine that a photographic image is a tiny panel cut out of a huge photo mural that is the world, but it is not. It is an artifice that obeys rather strict conventions and if the frame were exploded and followed into infinity it would produce a universe unrecognizable from our own. This said, should we reflect more seriously than we do on a subject's hesitation to be photographed? Is the photograph a form of theft, or a binding contract? Certainly photography has always been a decontextualizing medium, subject to universal manipulation and fakery. Think of the family portrait as snapshot.

In *The Burden of Representation*, John Tagg reflects on the genesis of the documentary film. He proposes that it should be seen not as a passive record of events but as a calculated institutional response to the political and social crises of the 1930s and the failure of conventional means of representation to manage the crises. The documentary, as we know from John Grierson, was an act of social intervention, a tool for undermining dissent and radical behaviour and, to use Noam Chomsky's term, for manufacturing public consent. The agenda was dictated by government and industry.²³ In this light the correspondence between family portraits and the documentary is

23 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, p. 8. Tagg: "Claiming only to 'put the facts' directly or vicariously, through the report of 'first hand experience', the discourse of documentary constituted a complex strategic response to a particular moment of crisis in Western Europe and the USA —

clear. Both represent a strategic response to a perceived crisis. To look closely at either is to ask what crisis or perceived crisis has led to the camera's intervention, and who is dictating the terms of consent?

When it comes to family, when are snaps shot? During departures, arrivals, marriages, births, funerals: in the times of gravest danger. These are also the occasions on which we summon and speak to our gods, attended by elaborate rituals (which, for the last 150 years, have included photo-ops). The act of praying to a god to release us from danger — whether before an altar or in a sacred grove or on the deck of a rolling ship — corresponds with the moment of shutter release. This correspondence provides insight into the potency of photography and cinematography. When we make pictures we're supplementing and re-interpreting the gallery of the ancestors and ancestors-to-be. Perhaps we're also maintaining the process of propitiation while the ancestors are still among us. Family gatherings are fraught with intimations of loss and death, with the absolutely certain knowledge that "We will never be together like this again." It might not be outrageous to suggest that the camera has become a compulsory tool for the construction of family. Other tools or talismen sufficed when the hearth had shorter spokes, but consent today must be exercised over great distances. Snapshooting is a form of branding; it provides evidence of one's genealogy and commitment to a family. A photograph may not make obvious sense of social experience, but it stands for its subjects' willingness to participate in or be subjected to a particular interpretation/intervention. One might ask, what is at stake when one is willing to sacrifice one's self to the camera? Which is to say, how does a photograph dare to mean? Any answer must recognize that

a moment of crisis not only of social and economic relations and social identities but, crucially, of representation itself: of the means of making sense of what we call social experience . . . Focused in specific institutional sites and articulated across a range of intertextual practices, it was entirely bound up with a particular social strategy: a liberal, corporatist plan to negotiate economic, political and cultural crisis through a limited programme of structural reforms, relief measures, and a cultural intervention aimed at restructuring the order of discourse, appropriating dissent, and resecuring the threatened bonds of social consent."

death and the photograph are inextricably entwined. Assured that the photograph will stand as evidence of our participation in life, we take its hand as we take the hand of Hermes when he comes to say it's time to go.

I'm interested in how we look at photographs of people we don't know. There's a natural temptation to interpret certain characteristics on the basis of imagined emotional, intellectual, class and racial narratives. The photo becomes a puzzle. It must have meant something to someone: what is the unknowable meaning? Context provides clues. Is it a formal portrait, a group portrait, a snapshot, in black & white, in colour? What is its age? Does it lie hidden from the sun in a crowded album or stacked in a shoe box on a flea-market card table? The sense that it conceals something by revealing something is central to our experience of the photographic image. Christian Boltanski rescues photographs of anonymous schoolchildren from flea markets and by re-contextualizing them in assemblages that resemble altar-pieces he restores them to full participation in both one's memory and one's imaginative life. The black & white photographs that make up the series *Sites and Place Names, Athens* by Christos Dikeakos resonate with the sacred rites at the heart of the Eleusinian mysteries, yet they depict only ruins and abjection. They're haunted by ghosts. In the last ten years Dikeakos has produced over two hundred of these panoramic field notes shot along the Sacred Way between Athens and the sanctuary of Eleusis. Unidentified, they suggest a catalogue of urban neglect. Revealed as the sites of Plato's Academy or Pluto's Cave or the Elysian Fields, they're filled with the breath of life, and in juxtaposing our ancestral longing for initiation with those filthy streets and garbage-strewn empty lots we find ourselves transfixed with elemental horror and wonder. *This* is where Kora was dragged down into the underworld. The photograph of dereliction itself becomes a sacred way, conducting us to the sacred grove of the ancestors and to their rebirth in our imaginations. The rites of Demeter summoning Kora home from the underworld find their parallel in the revelatory act of photokinetic integration. We misunderstand photographs if we regard them solely as documents. The snapshots taken by twenty year-old Enid Starkey on a ranch near Kamloops on the eve of WW I are hinged chronologically into a photo album with deerskin covers and

decorated with a painted Indian in a feather headdress. She began taking photographs aboard the ship on her way to Canada, and she glued the last photos into it in England, thereby establishing the historical narrative that would structure her life from that time forward. Beginning with her arrival in British Columbia in 1914, Enid's Canadian album records her pleasures on the ranch, her engagement to Dick Ritchie in October, 1914, and ends several months after his death in combat a year later with newspaper clippings, telegrams of condolence, inspirational poems cut from magazines and a final few snapshots sent from the Middle East where he posed before being sent into action. The last few pages of the album are untouched. If the panoramas of the Sacred Way represent Dikeakos's invocation of a muse, or a god, Enid Starkey's remain as a memorial, an accusation, and as evidence of a parenthetical happiness she may, on some dark days, have cursed.

Without identifiable context, I'm not sure I trust my engagement with anonymous photographic subjects. I pick up the photo, perform an ocular cruise to see if I recognize anyone and put it down again, embarrassed. Someone else's photos seem intimate. Discarded photographs, the kind you find left in books or on the road somewhere, remind you that most people destroy photos when the memories they evoke are too painful. The photograph has become a portable tombstone. It's the memorializing attribute that makes us uncomfortable. The photo, with its long memory, is inevitably the sign of betrayal — either by its subject, or time, or both. And this is the quality that makes photographs transcend their social function. They summon out of us the fear of losing what we most fervently want to hold onto.

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In the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, a collection of 114 "secret sayings," prophecies, proverbs and parables of Jesus dating from about 140 C.E. and purportedly written by Jesus's twin brother, we encounter the following:

Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."²⁴

How do these lines relate to Job's struggle, or to the act of language? How does this aphorism relate to the photographic act, or to cinema? The Gnostics were much preoccupied with the dualism of 'inside' and 'outside.' Thomas again, or, should I say, Jesus:

"When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness, then will you enter [the kingdom]." ²⁵

And:

Jesus said, "Why do you wash the outside of the cup? Do you not realize that he who made the inside is the same one who made the outside?" ²⁶

And, one more:

[A man said] to Him, "Tell my brothers to divide my father's possessions with me."

Jesus said to him, "O man, who has made Me a divider?"

He turned to His disciples and said to them, "I am not a divider, am I?" ²⁷

I find myself embarrassed by Jesus's vulnerability, by his admission of doubt. For despite his best intentions, much *has* been divided in his

24 Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Vintage Books, 1981, pp. xiii-xiv.

25 Thomas O. Lambdin (trans.), *The Gospel of Thomas*, in James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 121.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

name, and it seems he knew it would be so. In the Gnostic tradition Jesus has come to heal the divisions, to unify the divided world: "... the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth," he says, "and men do not see it."²⁸ Think of Blake's "unknown, unprolific/self-closed, all-repelling" ancestors who divided themselves off from eternity. The great devotional texts of Europe and America record the struggle of Christian mystics to prolong their brief, ecstatic experiences of eternity. Unhappily, linguistic and other forms of representation pose an insurmountable problem in terms of portraying this experience. They can depict the divine only by cleaving it from itself.



For early Modernists the division between the visible and the invisible world was a central concern, as revealed in contemporary psychoanalytic and artistic practice. Underlying this was the intuition, or hope, that a powerful invisible essence or source of energy existed 'inside' things. If revealed, it would both account for and determine the fate of the world. It was felt that 'primitive man' had access to this essence. Artists became intrigued by indigenous art from Africa and North America. The job of Art, they began to see, was to plug into this libidinous, invisible, 'primitive' source. Only in this way could they free themselves from the social somnolence and cultural mortification that suppressed the surging, chaotic energy of the universe.

According to the young Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), art would fuel the renewal of culture. In the spring of 1915, he wrote a manifesto in praise of Cubism for his magazine, *Blast*. Abstraction, he declared, was the key to renewal. Abstraction allowed one to *see* again, as if for the first time:

We must constantly strive to ENRICH abstraction till it is almost plain life, or rather to get deeply enough immersed in material life to experience the shaping power amongst its vibrations, and to accentuate and perpetuate these.²⁹

28 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

It's remarkable to find Lewis at this ultra-combative stage of his bellicose life writing about "vibrations"! But he is trying to get to the molecular level, or to what we might call an object's essence or shaping power, the lineaments of which are visible in the object itself. What Lewis calls "plain life" (a provocative term) is the sum of the manifestations of these shaping powers, and as far as he is concerned it is impossible to represent the world *except through abstraction*.

9 The essence of an object is beyond and often in contradiction to, its simple truth: and literal rendering in the fundamental matter of arrangement and logic will never hit the emotion intended by unintelligent imitation.

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11 It is always the POSSIBILITIES in the object, the IMAGINATION, as we say, in the spectator, that matters. Nature itself is of no importance.³⁰

Naturalistic representation pandered to the worst instincts of the populace, cocooning audiences in nostalgic and sentimental reveries of a bogus past and an impossibly ludicrous future. Tongue only half-in-cheek, Lewis decreed:

12 There should be a Bill passed in Parliament at once FORBIDDING ANY IMAGE OR RECOGNIZABLE SHAPE TO BE STUCK UP IN ANY PUBLIC PLACE; or as advertisement or what-not, to be used in any way publicly.

29 Wyndham Lewis (ed.), "A Review of Contemporary Art", in *Blast* 2. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1981, p. 40. When Lewis republished the manifesto twenty-five years later in *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: From 'BLAST' to Burlington House* he re-titled it "Art Subject to the Laws of Life."

30 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

13 Only after passing a most severe and esoteric Board and getting a CERTIFICATE, should a man be allowed to represent in his work Human Beings, Animals, or Trees.³¹

The young Lewis was in many respects a neo-primitive mystic. Faced with the crises of language and representation brought about by mechanical reproduction; commercial and political propaganda; revolution and the loss of individual responsibility at the hands of the new nation states, he had determined that only the most radical attack on representation would generate a unifying vision. It's curious to find him in the company of Job's persecutor, but perhaps this type of manifesto tells us more about the nature of internalized institutional violence and generational conflict than it does about character. That Lewis was a more complex man than we usually give him credit for is suggested in the following excerpt from the same manifesto. Wrestling with the obvious flaws of mimesis, Lewis struggles once more to make the invisible visible:

19 Imitation, and inherently unselective registering of impressions, is an absurdity. It will never give you even the feeling of the weight of the object, and certainly not the meaning of the object or scene, which is it's [sic] spiritual weight.³²

We don't know what Lewis might have done with this idea of "spiritual weight" if he had not gone to war or if the world had not gone berserk with slaughter. The trenches at Passchendaele changed him irrevocably. By 1918 he had moved away from pure or dehumanized abstraction. He studied life-drawing. He became a satirist, a novelist and an aggressive art and literary critic. His grotesque cartoon Tyros represent a disturbing series of self-loathing gestures that no one seems willing to recognize as such. At the end of his life Lewis was perhaps best known for his naturalistic portraits of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. 'Best known' may be an overstatement; he was barely known at all.

31 *Ibid.*, p.47.

32 *Ibid.*, p.45.

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) too was preoccupied with inside and outside. His 'semi-Readymade,' "*A bruit secret*," is a bilingual meta-physical joke with a serious mimetic purpose. It was constructed on Easter Day, 1916, in New York City. Lewis at the time, I believe, was at an artillery camp at Weymouth studying to become a bombardier. The bloody Rising in Dublin would begin the next day, Easter Monday, April 24th. Stunned by the ferocity of the executions Yeats would write, in "Easter 1916": "All changed, changed utterly:/A terrible beauty is born."³³

Duchamp at first thought of his toy as a kind of piggy bank. Two rectangular copper plates, connected by four brass corner posts that extend to suggest legs, enclose a ball of twine into the core of which has been placed an unknown object that makes an unrecognizable sound when shaken. When first constructed the 'piggy-bank' was empty. Inscribed in white paint on the two plates were three short macaronic sentences in French and English. Dots substitute for certain letters. The absent letters, according to Duchamp, reminded him of "a neon sign on which one of the letters is not illuminated, rendering the word unintelligible" (my translation).³⁴ "*A bruit secret*" addresses the compelling mystery of that which is inside, or hidden from view. How does 'the hidden' manifest itself in the world? Through substitution and correspondence. How do these functions act to reveal while concealing? Are the macaronic phrases a code for a sentence that is apparently not in code? How do we know when a sentence is in code and when it is not? What happens when a c.de is broken? Is the sentence b.oken too? What if the de-coded sentence fails to 'make sense'? If it resembles a sentence, is it a sentence? Shifting into a judicial metaphor, can the same question be applied to one's term on earth? I've wondered if the absent letters conceal a key to the indecipherable

³³ Yeats would also write, in the same poem, "Too long a sacrifice/Can make a stone of the heart./ O when might it suffice?"

³⁴ Jean Clair, *Marcel Duchamp. Vol. II: catalogue raisonné*. Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, 1977, p.87.

phrases painted on the plates. About 4,500 anagrammatic sentences in English can be generated from these letters, including 'Elder Fresh Ginger Sir,' 'Render Fresh Leg Grin Sir,' 'Digress Here Fern Girl,' 'Dreg Flesh Linger Sire' and 'Shred Serene Frig Girl.' It may be that the unscrambled anagrams are multilingual. Perhaps the missing letters are there to represent linguistic echoes or shadows of the letters above them — a play on the notion of man made in God's image.

"*A bruit secret*" is Duchamp's joke at God's expense. The circumstances surrounding our encounter with it are identical to our encounter with the Christian God. We're faced with an inexplicable phenomenon and a cryptic text that appears to conceal a retrievable secret. We take it on faith that someone must have put this on earth for a reason. The rattle of the concealed object within reminds us that the object's meaning can only be revealed when the true nature of the object is revealed. If we can decipher the text and determine the nature of what sounds within, then we'll possess the keys to the Kingdom.

Duchamp's cunning little metaphysical/theological model of the world received its name and function as a result of his patron's intervention. Walter Conrad Arensberg was a friend and chess mate of Duchamp, an amateur cryptologist who at the time was uncovering potential cryptographs in Dante's *Divina Commedia* and searching for acrostic and anagrammatic evidence that Shakespeare's plays and poems were written by Francis Bacon.³⁵ It was Arensberg's idea to drop a small object into the centre of the ball of twine so that, when shaken, it might make an indefinable sound. Duchamp was enthusiastic about the idea. Arensberg loosened the plates in private and did the deed, neatly subverting the role of the artist. Duchamp named the object "*A bruit secret*" ("A secret noise," or, "*Un secret noise*"), and gave it to his collaborator.³⁶ Like Duchamp, we'll never know what the little clapper

35 See Walter Arensberg, *The Cryptography of Dante*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921. For an account of Arensberg's attempts to prove that Bacon was responsible for Shakespeare's works, see William F. Friedman & Elizabeth S. Friedman, *The Shakespearean Ciphers Examined*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1958.

36 Pontus Hulten (ed.), *Marcel Duchamp: Work and Life*. Cambridge: Massachusetts University of Technology, 1993, pp. 63 and April 23.

is, and this not knowing unites us. If anyone were to discover what's there the integrity of the piece would be destroyed, not to mention its *raison d'être*. It would become an outside without an inside, and how could that possibly be?



Lewis and Duchamp both attempted to achieve within their work the obliteration of division. Both challenged the conventions and convictions of representation. Perhaps this is the labour of every generation. Think of the long overdue attack on the complacent nature of referentiality by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets in the late 1970s. Gertrude Stein, much earlier, strove to write not *about* something but the thing itself that writing wrote. Language rediscovered with Stein its hidden or overlooked materiality. For George Herbert (1593-1633), writing about what was hidden required hiding what was written. In his poem "Our Life Is Hid With Christ In God," a cryptograph called an inside sequence reads diagonally, from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner: 'My Life Is Hid In Him That Is My Treasure.'

Duchamp's solution, to create an object in which both the inside and the outside are held in a sort of suspension, with visibility and invisibility manifesting themselves simultaneously, alternating between being heard and being seen, was a gesture in the direction of a transcendent equilibrium of fluid exchange. In a review of Maurice Blanchot's *Waiting Forgetting* (1962), published in 1966, Emmanuel Levinas claims to have discovered in Blanchot the idea of a transcendent state "between seeing and saying," of a language "without correlative." Blanchot's language, he writes,

... preserves the movement located between seeing and saying, that language of pure transcendence without correlative, like waiting which nothing awaited has yet destroyed, noesis without noema. This is a language of pure extravagance, moving from one singularity to another without there being anything in common between them . . . , a language

without words which gives sign before signifying anything, a language of pure complicity, but a complicity for nothing . . . ”³⁷

How is this possible? “Poetry,” Levinas writes, “can be said to transform words, the tokens of a whole, the moments of a totality, into unfettered signs, breaching the walls of immanence, disrupting order.”³⁸ Shedding the one-night-stands of referentiality, poetic language can relieve us of the burden of representation to find freedom from signification and correspondence. In such a world there will be no division because language exists in a state of “pure transcendence without correlative.” Yet if it’s also true that this state exists prior to and eventually succumbs to the act (or stigma) of division/ signification, then Levinas has managed to locate it somewhere within or inside God himself. Order is not disabled or abandoned. On the contrary, in Levinas’s deeply theological reading, poetic language disrupts order only to reinforce The Law. He admits himself that the poetic word can betray itself and sadly concludes his review with the acknowledgment that conventional language will always win the day: “It is never-fading, and always has the last word. It contaminates with logic the ambiguity inscribed in the trace of forgotten discourse and never gives itself up to enigma.”³⁹

Perhaps the difficulty for Levinas lies in his theological approach. In identifying a poetry which disrupts immanence, he proposes immanence. In identifying a totality he proposes fragmentation. In naming God he participates in division, which is why, in the Judaic tradition, one was not to speak the name of God. If to mention God’s name is to divide, then one can only deduce that the God of the Gnostics, of the Pentateuch, of Job and the Old Testament, the lonely, guilty sky god is himself The Divider. One can only ask, “Who does he work for, and who does this division benefit?”

37 Emmanuel Levinas, “The Servant and her Master” (trans. Michael Holland) in Sean Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader*. London: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 157.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

In a series of questions first presented at Essex University in May 1987, Luce Irigaray challenged Levinas's God by interrogating the passion for invisibility:

How does it come about that the God of the writing of the law cannot be looked upon? What relation in particular is established between non-figurative writing and this God? For God, in this period of theophany, does not share, he dictates (*il impose*). He separates himself, when he gives Moses the inscription of the law, an inscription which is not immediately legible. He no longer provides anything to be eaten or grasped by the senses. He imposes forms on a nation of men as he might have given forms to a man's body. But the man's body remains a visible creation, while the law, in a sense, does not. The law creates invisibility, so that God (in his glory?) cannot be looked upon. What happens to seeing, to flesh, in this disappearance of God?⁴⁰

Irigaray reminds Levinas that the flesh was at one time "the locus of a divine to be shared." The beloved was once the illumination of God incarnate, and now the Law proclaims that this same flesh is unclean, that it must be covered up. "What happens to seeing," she asks, "Where can one's eyes alight if the divine is no longer to be seen . . . ?" Irigaray takes us one step further. Division, she insists, is a form of blindness. She asks,

If this relationship is not divinized, does that not pervert any divinity, any ethics, any society which does not recognize God in carnality? And who is the other if the divine is excluded from the carnal act? If these gestures of ultimate relations between living humans are not a privileged approach to God,

40 Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love" (trans. Margaret Whitford) in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, *Re-Reading Levinas*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 116-117.

who is he? Who are those who testify to such a God? Who are, where are, the others? And why, and how long ago did God withdraw from the act of carnal love?⁴¹

For Irigaray the act of love includes looking, speaking and making representations of love. "For this exchange," she asks, "do not figurative writing and art represent necessary articulations? In particular to harmonize listening and seeing?"⁴² As a means of articulating carnal love, which is the articulation of the divine, representation becomes a means of libidinous exchange. In a world without division the ear and the eye discover themselves to be organs of divine ecstasy. Every word we speak, every image we produce is a song of praise if we choose to hear it. Representation is a manifestation of the divine. Only an army could persuade us otherwise or force us to our knees before a seething, disembodied voice in a whirlwind. And every day it does.

Life seems to be lived in a state of kinetic suspension between atomization and wholeness. We do not stop moving between the poles. Neither state is fully attainable, although fearing punishment we've been known to create the appropriate illusions. There is no name in English for this state of suspension. Perhaps 'simultaneous contrary motion' comes close. The Greeks who travelled the Sacred Way would have recognized and celebrated the condition. The god of simultaneous contrary motion is Hermes. Aeschylus in *The Suppliants* calls him the Searcher. He is the polymorphous god of shepherds and travellers, of trickery and theft, of trade, contracts and exchange; he's the conductor of souls, Zeus's messenger, a trailblazer and civilizer, the lord of sleep. He is associated with ambiguity, tireless mobility and the unexpected; he reverses, upsets and confuses conventional order. Zeus recognizes him as representing disorderly order. According to the Homeric hymn dedicated to his name Hermes is the protector of sacrificial animals and the inventor of fire and divine worship. He was the first to offer a burning sacrifice to the gods, thereby bringing a resolution to crisis and transition. In the words of Laurence Kahn-Lyotard,

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

His destiny is played along the divide, and all his functions are more or less connected with boundaries. At crossroads, at gates of cities and houses, at locks, he is found at the limits of all areas and takes his place wherever change is to be encountered. *Strophaios*, he makes the door pivot on its hinges, but he also aids the man in moving from inside to outside. On the order of the opposition of inside and outside, he opposes Hestia⁴³ while at the same time completing her: for though the goddess of the hearth represents the immobility of a home attached to the ground, the persistence of *thalamos* [the inner room, the women's apartment] and its treasures, Hermes, on the other hand, will ensure the opening of the *oikos* onto a problematic and threatening outside. He will guide the members in their encounters with the exterior and will travel at their sides through the uncertainty and mobility of the world. In this way Hermes *agoraios* takes his place at the very meeting place of the citizens."⁴⁴

As the god of simultaneous chaos and completion Hermes alternates between chasm and bridge. He is the movement from inside to outside and back again. He is immortal, *athanatos*, but he receives neither offerings nor sacrifices, so that he is also apart from divine sphere. Hermes exists neither inside nor outside the walls of paradise; he dwells among the animals in the surrounding hedge. He is the god who represents our rapturous attempts to integrate the visible and the invisible world. He is the hinge between inside and the outside, between hearing and seeing, and it is to Hermes *agoraios* that we turn to meet ourselves and to exchange in passing the whisperings of the heart. He is our exemplar, our harmonious companion.

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43 The fire burning in the domestic hearth and the sacred fire of the sacrificial altar are sacred to Hestia.

44 Laurence Kahn-Lyotard (trans. Danielle Beauvais), "Hermes" in Yves Bonnefoy (ed.), *Greek and Egyptian Mythologies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 187-8.

I'd like to return to the film I'm working on at the moment, *Altar*. As I write this the shooting has not yet been completed and only a very few people have seen the rushes. In one respect it is a very simple film. The camera moves very slowly across the faces in a group portrait of the officers and men of the *HMCS Mayflower*. Each face is transformed from about half an inch high in the photo to the full height of a 35 mm theatre screen and appears for just over a minute as the camera moves from left to right or, in some cases, from right to left across the photo. The film will be about twenty minutes long, so not all of the faces in the photograph will appear as I'd once intended.

In *Altar* I'm trying to create a cinema poem that allows for the harmonization of listening and seeing. The spoken text was going to be a single poem but has since become a juxtaposition of poetic sequences with autobiographical and mythological prose fragments; excerpts from the *Handbook of Canadian Military Law* (1941) and *The Canadian Industrial Reader* (1929); phrases from the Gnostic and other gospels; a few luminous lines from *Kamloops Wawa* (1895), the world's first newspaper in the Chinook jargon; promotional and commemorative volumes from WW II and snatches of songs and statistics.

The film begs the question of how to look at a group portrait. In my experience it's impossible to look concertedly at each face, each button, each ear. Who can sustain the emotional exhaustion, the ingathering of so many unknown but imagined lives at one sitting? Unless we're familiar with the subjects we're likely to rest our eyes on two or three faces then turn away. There seems to be in this turning away something that has to do with honouring those represented. It seems that a group photograph, as soon as it is printed, becomes a memorial, evoking all that a memorial evokes. We're entering the territory of Christian Boltanski again. A group photograph is a noisy Babel, a spasm of urgent cries burdened by history and pain and joy and unrequited yearning few if any of us can bear. We can't help but turn aside. Photography reminds me of how my memory of a person is not altered when that person dies. He or she remains as luminous within as always. Each of us is crowded with ghosts and ghosts-to-be, and I can't determine anything that distinguishes the living from the dead in our minds. We speak daily to the dead — and, astonishingly, the dead reply.

Altar addresses one of millions of group photographs, one of millions of memorials crying out to the dying present. Should we enter this noisy Babel, should we invite these voices to speak through us, we'll arrive at the most primal and intimate intersection with photography and cinematography, which is to discover inscribed within the molecular makeup of the medium the lineaments of our own desire. Context is crucial. As a filmmaker I need to know if you need to know where these men are. Do you need to know when this photograph was taken, or what ship they were serving on? What crisis lies behind this assembly? How should this information be included in the film? As written text? Should it appear in titles; at the beginning, or at the end? Should it be spoken during the voice-over? How detailed should it be? Do you need to know that my father is among these men? Do you need to look at the entire photograph? At the beginning, or at the end? Or both?

What is the act of *looking* to us? Gertrude Stein, writing about Picasso in 1938, calls him a genius because when he looked he saw another reality.

The surrealists still see things as every one sees them, they complicate them in a different way but the vision is that of every one else, in short the complication is the complication of the twentieth century but the vision is that of the nineteenth century. Picasso only sees something else, another reality. Complications are always easy but another vision than that of all the world is very rare. That is why geniuses are rare, to complicate things in a new way that is easy, but to see things in a new way that is really difficult, everything prevents one, habits, schools, daily life, reason, necessities of daily life, indolence, everything prevents one, in fact there are very few geniuses in the world.⁴⁵

This may be true. I like even better what she says a few pages earlier about temptation: “. . . he [Picasso] *always in his life is tempted*, as

45 Gertrude Stein, *Picasso*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959, p. 43.

a saint can be tempted, to see things as he does not see them."⁴⁶ Whether or not we're saints, or geniuses, I think we often succumb to this temptation, which is the pull to see what we've been pulled to see all our lives. When we look at a photograph we enter the sway of that pull. I hope in *Altar* to alter that sway, to divert that pull, to swing open new doors of perception, to plough unknown ground. What makes the heart beat? Are you really looking if you are not afraid? Look at these grains of silver, these splotches of light, these faces: what do you see? How do you resist temptation and convention? Is looking an act of bringing forth what is inside you? Can you regard these faces without nostalgia, free of history and assumption? If so, what can you see?

Over a year ago I was walking along Pender Street in Vancouver and came across a deep store filled with old books and artifacts, a store I'd never seen before. I found myself moving toward the back through the kind of book heaps that make one never want to add another volume to the world's surfeit of tracts and soul-destroying self-promotion. In a far corner, at the end of an aisle, sat a bin of posters, and strewn on top of it a pile of photographs and calendars and automotive repair manuals. Coming closer I spotted a familiar-looking photo of a ship's company, and the name on the plaque: *HMCS Orkney*. *Orkney* was one of my dad's ships during WW II, after *Mayflower*. There might be an image of my father on that piece of paper—a likeness I'd never seen before. The photograph contained over 100 faces. Experiencing an irresistible spasm of simultaneous contrary motion, I took a deep breath and picked the picture up.

The photo had been taken in 1945. The war was over. The men were smiling, some shyly, some openly. Their shoulders were relaxed. They were more at ease than the anxious and reflective sailors you see in *Altar*. After all, they'd been spared. These subjects reminded me that posing for a group photo is different from posing for an individual photo. One feels less responsible in a group; it is as if the others will take up the slack. The result is that we see subjects caught off guard, or perhaps it's just that they're less concerned with presenting an overdetermined persona. After all, we're taught to present our-

46 *Ibid.*, p. 42 (italics mine).

selves in photographs as others want to see us. My mum is very clear about this when she's choosing snapshots of her grand-daughter. She seeks her own idealized portrait and thumbs through packs of snapshots to find one that presents her with no anxiety. I scanned the faces on the *Orkney* a second time. His friend Nelson C. was there in the second row, but my father was not.

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I was terribly moved last year during the V.E. Day ceremonies. There was a time when I'd have scorned these commemorative rituals, but now I see in all these lined faces on television my father's face, and part of me wishes he could be here to remember so that we could remember together, although I also know that by the end of his life he wanted nothing to do with memorializing the war or the old Naval uniform or standing up for what he once thought honourable and right. He'd let go of that. Contending with his failing memory he could only let go. He chose to as well. He'd been betrayed once too many times by politicians and by the friends and colleagues who once formed what, in his final months, he called "a wonderful band of brothers." "I don't think we'll see . . . that group again," he said. Then, after a pause, "However, you can't go back. You can't knock on the door and ask to be let back in. Well, I wouldn't anyway." By that stage in his disease he couldn't have even if he'd wanted to, and I think he knew that too and was putting on a brave front.

We in Canada had become a nation, and we had paid the price that nationhood demands."

Governor-General Romeo Leblanc
V.E. Day Commemoration, May 8, 1995

What does Romeo Leblanc mean when he talks about "the price that nationhood demands"? He's talking about blood sacrifice, about sacrifice as a transaction, and about how, whether we like it or not, the collective covenant we call a nation is created and sustained by a sacrificial economy. A nation, to exist, must be more precious than any citizen's life, and so it must also develop cultural and ritual apparatus to

manage and memorialize the lives sacrificed in its name. Religious rituals attempt to reconcile us with this necessary violence. The icy waters of the North Atlantic are transformed into an altar. This ritualization of violence is at the root of what René Girard calls the sacred.⁴⁷ He writes, "*The sacred is violence*, but if religious man worships violence it is only insofar as the worship of violence is supposed to bring peace; religion is entirely concerned with peace, but the means it has of bringing it about are never free of sacrificial violence."⁴⁸ And, a little later:

The hypothesis of the sacred reflects the human mind in its recognition that it is surpassed and transcended by a force that appears to be exterior to it, since at any moment this force seems to exert its will on the entire community for reasons which, though they seem ultimately incomprehensible, seem nonetheless to be beneficent rather than malevolent.⁴⁹

I'm not sure if Girard's religious man worships violence *only* because it brings peace, or if the exterior force *always* seems ultimately beneficent, but I'm intrigued by his conclusions regarding sacrifice. Georges Bataille explains religious sacrifice as a function of dualism, as an attempt to escape the order of things and 'rejoin' the order of immanence. "But," he writes, "if man surrendered unreservedly to immanence, he would fall short of humanity; he would achieve it only to lose it and eventually life would return to the unconscious intimacy

47 The nationalist movements of Europe have often been fueled by a sometimes mystical sense of tribal destiny. Ideology and blood. Consider these words from the *Act of Brotherhood* of Young Europe, 1834: "Every people has its special mission, which will co-operate towards the fulfillment of the general mission of humanity. That mission constitutes its *nationality*. Nationality is sacred." E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, p. 132.

48 René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (trans. Stephen Bann & Michael Metteer). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 32. The title is from *Matthew* 13:35.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 42-3.

of animals. The constant problem posed by the impossibility of being human without being a thing and of escaping the limits of things without returning to animal slumber receives the limited solution of the festival.⁵⁰ At the festival the victim is separated from the world of things and returned to the “*intimacy* of the divine world” by means of sacrifice. Having achieved this crossing-over on behalf of the victim, the sacrificer publicly proclaims his restored proximity to immanence. Bataille has him declare, “*Intimately*, I belong to the sovereign world of gods and myths, to the world of violent and uncalculated generosity, just as my wife belongs to my desires.”⁵¹ There is no space here to paraphrase Bataille’s argument, but his conclusion, which might be disturbing to some, is that sacrifice — both animal and human — demands its intersection with our lives. Sacrifice is the synthesis of violence and consciousness. To ignore violence, writes Bataille, is to doom oneself to a life in which one is constantly turning away from oneself. At the same time, “if . . . the behaviour of sacrifice, the least clear but the most divine and the most common, ceases to be closed to us, the whole of human experience is restored to us.”⁵² Bataille would argue that if violence is ignored or suppressed it will erupt ever more terribly. He calls for the acknowledgment of what Blake named the ‘prolific’ and the ‘devouring,’ the contraries that together compose the entire beautiful, terrifying, blood-soaked, zany, ravelling world. It is within this acknowledgment that the religious and devotional sensibility finds itself.

Altar began as a meditation on the economy of human sacrifice. After reading Patrick Tierney’s account of sacrifice as it is still practised in the Andes,⁵³ before being directed to Girard, I began to investigate human sacrifice as the underlying structural principle of human culture. I found the photograph of the ship’s company of the *Mayflower* and began to think about how these vulnerable faces seemed

50 Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (trans. Robert Hurley). New York: Zone Books, 1992, p. 53.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

53 Patrick Tierney, *The Highest Altar: Unveiling the Mystery of Human Sacrifice*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

to reflect more than apprehension, fear and anxiety. There was something extra-ordinary about them, something that told me they'd entered another dimension.

Are these lambs? Look closely. Each of these young diasporas — my father, the captain, would have been 24 when the photograph was taken — has made a solemn covenant with his ancestors. If asked he would, willingly, *in their name*, sacrifice his life for a cause in which he had no personal stake and about which he had no privileged information or understanding. These young men were prepared to inflict mortal wounds on other young men who'd sworn an almost identical sacrificial oath. It was nothing personal. What is this covenant that takes someone out of himself against his own best interests? Or does it take someone *into* himself? My father when he was alive never spoke about his experience in the war; nor did anyone else's father or mother. I realize now that they couldn't. Who would understand? And why should they turn to that which had failed them, to "the duplicity/ of language, that could name/what was not there"?⁵⁴ Like their fathers before them they had lived to discover not that their best instincts had been betrayed but that their best instincts betrayed those things in which they had once believed. But what else could they believe in? What they'd seen and heard, smelled and tasted had occurred in a dimension where they discovered themselves to be other than who they thought they were. Returning home, they would have to rejig their best instincts and, as a person chooses to use language despite its indeterminacy and artifice, they would choose to live on as if nothing at all had happened.

The sacrificial covenant to which the hands of this ship's company swore allegiance divides them from all who have never taken such an oath, although the covenant is implicit, a time bomb embedded in citizenship. These young men have entered the maelstrom of the sacred; their bodies have become a sacred host. In their minds they may be experiencing ambivalence or doubt but they've passed through the gate; they're now inhabited by and have become the

54 R.S. Thomas, "Code," in *Later Poems: 1972-1982*. London: Macmillan, 1983, p. 144.

servants of the sacred. If they come home they'll look the same but they'll have changed forever, for they have brought forth what was inside them. According to the *Gospel of Thomas* they'll have saved themselves, which is not to say they'll live to see the day when they can shop at Canadian Tire. Thomas was speaking of life everlasting. Our boys, should they survive, will end up in a holding pattern: no longer part of this world and not yet entered into easeful death. Transformed by the ancient violence that turns every social and cultural value upside down, they've discovered in surrendering their old life an unspeakable new loyalty. This portrait is the memorial to the men they were, and they know it.

I feel I must be cautious in speaking about the sacred. These days it seems to surface as the sanitized darlin' of the dinner-party. In fact, the sacred is a terrifying, messy thing. Its elements are piss and shit and pus and blood; its transformations are violent and painful. For something to begin something else must die. The machinery of the sacred is frightening and cataclysmic. Birth, Plutarch noted in his *Moralia*, bears an uncanny relationship to the sacrificial act that binds us to the Divine: "Nothing is as imperfect, needy, naked, shapeless, and soiled as a human being at the moment of birth . . . All covered with blood, full of filth, he looks more like a slaughtered creature than a newborn child."⁵⁵ To engage the sacred is to begin to wrestle in earnest with the simultaneous contrary motions that erupt into culture. The bloodied, steaming altar upon which these young men in Halifax pose is none the less an altar for being invisible. Its shadow follows us in the shape of the wharf, in the frame of film on the cinema screen, at the table where we flourish knives and gulp our noodles down.

Outside Inverness in the north of Scotland near Avoch is a holy spring called the Cloutie Well, dedicated to Saint Curidan. Its waters are believed to cure sick children, who were once left overnight beneath the trees to be healed. The well is at the edge of the ancient road from Inverness to Cromarty which today is a two lane motorway.

55 Marcel Detienne, "Zeus, the Other: A Problem of Maieutics" (trans. Gerald Honigsblum) in Bonnefoy. p. 211.

Cars and trucks rush past spraying mud and gravel either side of the road. A pipe brings the water from the well to a cement waterbox on the gravel shoulder. The trees for thirty yards on either side of the waterbox and into the woods as far as the well are festooned with pilgrims' rags (cloots). When I first heard about the well I imagined a classical landscape: a single tree on a grassy knoll, a secluded oak from which a few well-placed, colourful ribbons might dangle and dance in the sunlight, a sacred grove where a passing god might find repose.

In fact, the Clootie Well is a site of human desperation and chaos. Every conceivable type of rag or shred of clothing has been tied onto the limbs of what looks like an alder thicket. Bits of nylon windbreaker, underpants, socks, t-shirts, towels, sheets, a small white teddy bear decaying in a plastic rocking chair, strips of comforter, ragged trouser legs and fraying sweaters are squashed together, one on top of the next, into a sodden, filthy wall of faded fabrics. It looks as if a truck carrying rags for recycling has exploded on the highway, spewing its cargo into the forest to rot on the branches. It's a sobering sight: a working sacred well. It has a practical purpose. People stop here regularly on behalf of their children to tie rags into the trees. Messy and disorderly, the Clootie Well would have struck Wyndham Lewis and his masculinist cohorts as being chaotic and feminine. My aunt says the clootie trees should be cleaned up; they're a disgusting sight, she says. She's right. Imagine the surface of the altar of holocausts in ancient Israel after the slaughter, dismemberment, washing and burning of the sacrificial ox. Blood was smeared onto the altar's four horns; thick black smoke billowed into the air until every part was consumed by fire. It's in the messy, bloody slime of flesh and entrail that the god is summoned and spoken to — and that the child is born.

There is no account in *Genesis* of Adam and Eve building an altar to the God. He did not demand sacrifices until after he had driven Adam and Eve from Eden. The altar is a response to and a function of division. It's the site where sacrificial economies renegotiate and reconsecrate their covenant. Hermes watches over and delights in the sacrificial paradox, for by being the first to sacrifice an ox to a god he separated himself from the gods, becoming a god and not a god. Likewise, when we commune with the gods at the altar of holocausts,

our proximity only serves to reinforce our separation from them. The Orphics and the Dionysians rejected sacrifice as a method of communing with the divine, as did the Pythagoreans. Not every culture has chosen to live within the bloodletting and savagery of the sacrificial economy. If we deny it, however, with what will we replace it?

Before he died my Scottish grandfather Colin Mackenzie was asked about his experiences with the Seaforth Highlanders in France during World War I. He thought for some time, then replied, "I'll never forget the sight of my comrades, my fellows, dying in the trenches . . . at the hands of their own officers." Wyndham Lewis's son Robin Barry told me that these executions were carried out by the Red Caps, a regiment of military police established by the British Army during WW I to maintain 'discipline.' Military police had not been 'necessary' prior to 1914. Two years later they were in heavy demand on the lice-infested front lines where the living dead stumbled forward into machine gun fire, wave after wave, day after day.

Shamed by his mother-in-law into taking his commission and thinking it was perhaps his duty — he was a father of two by this time — my grandfather left his homestead near Kamloops in 1916 to fight the Hun. He was willing to sacrifice his life for his country — whether it was Canada, Scotland or England. What he encountered was much worse than death and filth. It was the betrayal of all he believed in, by the authorities to whom he'd dedicated his life. By 1917 the British Army was murdering its own stumbling, shell-shocked troops. He and his fellow officers, all in their early 20's, discovered themselves to be deluded servants of a corrupt political/economic order. Colin Mackenzie was not fighting to save his family or defend the old order; he was, under duress, manufacturing a new order in which a man's existence had value only insofar as it served the purposes of international capital. Perhaps the function of the war was to weaken resistance to this mutation by killing off a large percentage of those who might oppose it, disheartening the rest by beating them into exhausted, compliant automatons. Instead of seeing reflected in himself an image of the Divine, or discovering in Nature his own nature writ large, my grandfather discovered himself to be an interchangeable bung in a barrel of lies. In the economy of mass warfare he was replaceable. Should he reveal the truth to his comrades he would be

summarily shot. The Red Caps would see to that. He might have believed when he left Canada that he was fighting for a lofty principle he might have called democracy. In fact he was fighting to defend the established military/industrial order from too much democracy. He must have realized the truth of this when he saw his friends falling forward into their own trenches with English bullets in their heads. To survive he would have to transfer his allegiance to the dark purposes of empire and tyranny. He would enter the ranks of the dis-illusioned: the mystical blood-brotherhood of hired assassins who cynically prey on the loyalty and good faith of earnest citizens. I'm reminded of the tribune's visit to calm the restive Roman garrison in Jerusalem as imagined by David Jones:

Let the gnosis of necessity infuse our hearts, for we
have purged out the leaven of illusion.

If then we are dead to nature
yet we live
to Caesar
from Caesar's womb we issue
by a second birth.

Ah! Lucina!
what irradiance
can you bring
to this parturition?
What light brights this deliverance?
From darkness
to a greater dark
the issue is.⁵⁶

56 David Jones, *The Tribune's Visitation*. London: Fulcrum Press, 1969, n.p.. Lucina is the goddess of childbirth and, as Pericles discovers in a moment of insight, "midwife gentle/ To those that cry by night . . ." William Shakespeare and George Wilkins, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, Scene 11, II. 11-12, in Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (eds.), *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Compact ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 1052.

Reborn into the “greater dark,” how can one return to the shores of domesticity? A dog, after running deer, is usually destroyed. Colin Mackenzie, having been in Canada long enough to have had a whiff of freedom, must have understood his predicament clearly. He survived the war, but he could never really go home again. He could never articulate the pain and betrayal he felt; it would have smacked of treason or ungratefulness. The international propaganda mill was working overtime, churning out patriotic and sentimental homilies in praise of the men and women slaughtered on duplicity’s altar. My grandfather kept his council; he did not bring forth what was within him. He experienced lifelong physical disabilities, having been buried alive by an incoming shell, and his emotional and moral bearings suffered irreparable damage. He never again succeeded at anything. He became predatory. Like my father and like so many other sacred victims of both wars he remained silent. Who at home would ever believe him? And how long would he be tolerated if he told what he knew? After all, he’d escaped with his life, such as it was, even if it did make him feel ashamed to be alive. I think he realized also that those who’d profited from his sacrifice had a vested interest in his shame. Once a member of the brotherhood, always a member.

We’ve lived through a century in which millions and millions of children, women and men have been killed to preserve the wealth and privilege of a very few. The sacrificial button is pushed daily in Bosnia, Chechnia, Burundi, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, China, Cyprus. The original programming continues to override. Can we rewire the circuit board? Think of all the children who have poured over the tops of trenches in our century. Would our sons and daughters go? Very likely. Like these young men in the photograph, how could they resist? The economy of human sacrifice continues to function as the invisible engine of Western culture. It is the taproot beneath the Sacred Grove. Do you know how many people died in World War Two? It has been estimated that the countries of the anti-fascist coalition lost 18,587,000 soldiers and 25,140,000 civilians, or 43,727,000 people. The fascist bloc lost only one-fourth as many, or 11,017,000 people. In five years: a total of 54,744,000 human beings — or 30,000 people a day. Russia, which of all countries has been determined to publicize these statistics, sustained 38% of the total losses in World War II, or nearly

21,000,000 men, women and children.⁵⁷

What can a film do with these reflections? My desire is to place the faces of these men and boys — this collective face — into a context in which the seductive architecture of human sacrifice becomes visible in the details of everyday life — in our songs, our advertisements, our utensils, our histories, our universities, our laws. If we stare sacrifice in the face we can choose whether we wish to participate in its bloody economy. We would both gain and lose if we were to abandon our sacrificial lineaments; we know this in our bones. But is it possible to imagine another path? Who does blood sacrifice serve? By imagining the unimaginable perhaps we can transcend the laws of The Divider. Unfortunately we continue to depend on the conflict resolution that sacrifice and its scapegoats provide. The new land is stained with the blood of the old land; the old land is stained by the new. Altars, in summoning the god, celebrate conjunction; they celebrate division more.

We haven't returned to the craft of screenwriting except in the most oblique way, and screenwriting is what I was originally asked to write about. I do hope, however, that I have been able to provide a rough guide to the process of making *Altar* and to the ideas and anxieties that inform both image and text. I thought I'd said all I had to say about my father in *Father and Son* (1992). He has become a central figure in *Altar*. I'd like to make a cinema poem open to the heart's reasons reason knows nothing of: a greeting, a prayer, a humble offering to those old ghosts and shadows in the land where images speak and words remain watchful; a living thing that moves like a startled deer through the fabric to encounter the terrifying machinery working inside, the beautiful deadly machinery.⁵⁸

57 Mikhail Heller and Aleksander M. Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present* (trans. Phyllis B. Carlos). New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1992, p. 443.

58 I'm grateful to George Stanley for the original source of this quotation: Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). Pascal's arguments with God and himself were assembled and published by his family in 1670 under the title *Pensées de M.*

The 'working narration' that follows is the second draft of a potential voice-over for *Altar*. I hadn't planned to write a complete script ahead of time, but delays in shooting provided an opportunity. What you read here will be much changed once I begin working with the picture. I'm grateful to Tom Wayman for originally commissioning this essay, an early draft of which was read in Vernon, B.C., in June 1995. A second draft was presented at Capilano College in February 1996. Many thanks to Jenny Penberthy for rescuing it and Pierre Coupey for asking to publish it.

16 September 1996

Vancouver, B.C.

Pascal sur la religion, et sur quelques autres sujets. In the Honor Levi translation the originating phrase reads: "The heart has its reasons which reason itself does not know: we know that through countless things." Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writing* (trans. Honor Levi). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 158.

The thing inside (for Chris Dikeakos)

What lapse in sobriety finagled a little joy out of it, what fetid moment's reveille breached its cankerous walls to issue a thin ribbon of a smile? Is it that tall ponderosa or a hawk you watch from the shore? Why does sex preoccupy the barker's devotees when surely it's not even a contender for the hardware? Take that bridge in our Grade Nine textbook, its hand-chiseled arches on a retouched riverbank, and somewhere below it (what memory stains with a pencilly, poked hole stressed by an arm's rolling muscle on a desktop), the navel its arc becomes circumference to: heirloom, formic and ripe. No fissure invades; it is fissure. No desiccated dirt icicles. Bulbs are balloons; rice's signature displaces water; a shovel slices the teeming universe in two. The nub invisible, a fiction of light — yet *there*, noisy with subterranean movement. Umbilical, wrapped in flesh, or string (Duchamp), or Hardy's Emma's little picnic tumbler lost in a waterfall, smudged between rocks and ions, wedged, irretrievable, and for all we know still there, lavishing upon the world its absence. What would you say if I told you this too would perish?

8 March/18 April 1996