

Narratives of any kind can be described, metaphorically, as metaphors: they carry us across the space of a difference. In that difference between the written world and our own is the possibility of change. If the written world is that of ground zero, it is a metaphor but not consequently a reduction (indeed, the ultimate reduction is the literal explosion). It is fable, fiction, fantasy. And that is “not nothing at all,” as Derrida observes, recalling Freud’s comment that the unconscious makes no distinction between reality and “a fiction loaded with affect.” The unconscious is another possible name for the “not enough” of Hoban’s sentence. The contents of the unconscious are not generally known to be wholesome or optimistic, but to face them may be constructive. This outlook is not “cynical, even fatalistic,” any more than tragedy is. A resisting force may be born of that tragic vision, even if the force is as yet without body or direction.

There could be problems, then, with James’s desire for “antinarrative that leads away from the experiential knowledge of nuclear war,” if such writing leads to a systematic forgetting. A work that separates us from nuclear complicity may lead to a facile optimism, just as another kind of work may lead to a facile pessimism. Neither is a fictional necessity: everything depends on how it is done. I would have liked to have James’s reading list; my own list on his terms would include such works as Nicole Brossard’s *Mauve Desert*, Maggie Gee’s *Burning Book*, and even Dr. Seuss’s *Butter Battle Book*. The idea of an antinarrative is valuable because it sweeps away the comfort of established structures of apprehension and demands that we find our own way—in the narrative experience as in the political one.

I believe that *Riddley Walker* has this quality. But for the novel to have it fully Riddley does have to circle ground zero, a circle that is made up of many tangential apprehensions. Riddley’s pursuit of the “1 Littl 1” faces up to all the reasons that have impelled our own pursuit of the “1 Big 1”; but his search does not rest with those reasons. And when the secret of gunpowder finally yields its blast, the explosive’s makers are killed, one of them by a pestle driven through the skull. The impact of this scene on the reader may be equally hard-hitting. Or it may not: the connections in the text are labyrinthine enough that they will be threaded differently by different readers or even (as I have experienced) by the same reader in different readings. This is the nature of an open text: it allows all possible changes, including the possibility of no change at all, but makes its readers responsible for their experiences.

For reading is a variety of experience, and rationality is not enough to get us through it. We read a book and ourselves simultaneously, in a series of fissions and fusions that defies our analytical power but may also fuel it. The explosive force of a book is not the same sort as that of a nuclear weapon. But the literary explosion can help us to deal with the literal one.

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Negotiations of Homoerotic Tradition

To the Editor:

My response to Gregory W. Bredbeck’s very interesting article “Milton’s Ganymede: Negotiations of Homoerotic Tradition in *Paradise Regained*” (106 [1991]: 262–76) is meant, not to dispute his arguments, but to supplement them. Bredbeck’s extensive discussion of homoeroticism in the pastoral tradition hinges on two key passages of landscape description that he quotes from *Paradise Regained*—“a woody Scene . . .” (264)—and from *Paradise Lost*—“A Silvan Scene . . .” (265). While Milton’s words evoke settings that are indeed reminiscent of pastoral poetry, the lines that are the specific source of the passage from *Paradise Lost* (and that are also the indirect inspiration of the passage from *Paradise Regained*) happen to occur in an epic, Vergil’s *Aeneid* 1.162–65:

hinc atque hinc vastae rupes geminique minantur
in caelum scopuli, quorum sub vertice late
aequora tuta silent; tum silvis scaena coruscis
desuper, horrentique atrum nemus imminet umbra.

So far as I know, it is to Vergil that all later writers owe the theatrical metaphor that calls a natural setting a “scene” (*scaena*). Since this landscape description first arises in an epic context and since Bredbeck elsewhere discusses homoeroticism with respect to epic heroes, it would be interesting to hear his thoughts on the possible homoerotic implications of the two Milton passages vis-à-vis the *Aeneid*. There are difficulties, for the lines quoted above describe a setting near Carthage and shortly precede Aeneas’s first meeting with Dido. Throughout the *Aeneid*, the hero’s erotic entanglements are exclusively with women, and the homoerotic element seems to be deflected onto secondary characters such as Nisus and Euryalus. In short, Aeneas is generally the most heterosexual of classical heroes (I don’t

think one can make much of his *fidus Achates*). Curiously enough, however, one variant of the Aeneas legend emphatically associates him with homosexuality: the twelfth-century French *Roman d'Eneas*. In this poem, Queen Amata vociferously opposes her daughter Lavinia's proposed marriage with Aeneas on the grounds that he is a lover of boys! Whether Milton, for all his wide and profound reading, would have known this poem I cannot say, though it would be interesting to find out.

Apropos of the medieval background to Milton, I was intrigued by Bredbeck's narrowly limited discussion of Ganymede as an emblem of homoeroticism "within the vernacular of the Renaissance" (264). A brief mention, at least, of the similar symbolic use of Ganymede before the Renaissance would not come amiss. The medieval literary tradition of debate poems includes contests between homosexual and heterosexual love with titles like "Ganymede and Helen" and "Ganymede and Hebe" (see John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*), and it seems clear that there is a continuity of tradition from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance. Incidentally, Boswell's study is extremely useful for obtaining an overview of the evolution of attitudes toward homosexuality in Western Christian society during the centuries leading up to Milton's time; the work may or may not have figured in the general background of Bredbeck's study, but explicit reference to Boswell could only enhance "Milton's Ganymede."

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To the Editor:

Gregory W. Bredbeck, in "Milton's Ganymede: Negotiations of Homoerotic Tradition in *Paradise Regained*," uses as "documentation of deviant sexual behavior" an attack against Elizabeth Cellier entitled *To the Praises of Mrs. Cellier, the Popish Midwife*. He alleges that this attack appeared in 1641, at the time of Milton's prose work *Of Reformation in England*, and argues from this supposed publication something about the sexual context of that era (263).

Unfortunately for his argument, Cellier flourished something like forty years after this date, in 1679–88, and could not possibly have been attacked in print in 1641 or even in Milton's *lifetime*.

This misdating is a reminder of the real risk involved in writing an essay with a strong ideological bent while using historical data chiefly for ornamentation.

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Reply:

Randi Eldevik's observations are absolutely fascinating and deserve to be worked up into a full article. In the book based in part on my essay, I touch briefly on some of the medieval traditions, and I am of course aware of Boswell's work—but I do not cover the issues in a way that precludes Eldevik's addressing them. As her letter so helpfully points out, there is much more that can be said about my topic—and I look forward to seeing others take up this task.

I thank Anne Barbeau Gardiner for the factual correction, particularly since it arrived in time for me to alter my book. There is indeed a broadside account of the Cellier controversy dated 1641, and this date has been transferred in pencil to two other accounts, all of which are bound in the British Library in a volume of broadsides inclusively dated 1600–50—hence my confusion. I am most intrigued by Gardiner's final sentence, for it addresses neither how one might write an argument without an ideological "bent" nor the ideology implicit in her own desire to keep the facts "straight."

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The Future of Grimm's Law

To the Editor:

I am greatly disturbed by Zacharias P. Thundy's reply to Edgar C. Knowlton, Jr. (Forum, 106 [1991]: 309–11). As though Knowlton's criticism of his former remarks (Forum, 105 [1990]: 1127) were not sufficient, Thundy now offers a number of considerations on the comparative method. Putting aside the origins of *cēosan* and *taste*, I would like to comment on the following statement by Thundy: "To me [Knowlton] seems to imply that we should accept past linguistic scholarship as authoritative and unquestionable. On the contrary, I hold that all scholarship, especially study of the origin of the language families, is very tentative. This qualification applies to the laws of Indo-European, particularly Grimm's law, which governs the reconstruction of the consonants" of many Proto-Indo-European roots. Thundy goes on to say that "[m]ost Indo-Europeanists cite the many laws of Indo-European as gospel truths even though scholars have fought and continue to fight over them, and there remain many honest doubts about them."

The reason Thundy is "skeptical" of many Proto-Indo-European roots based on Grimm's law "is that