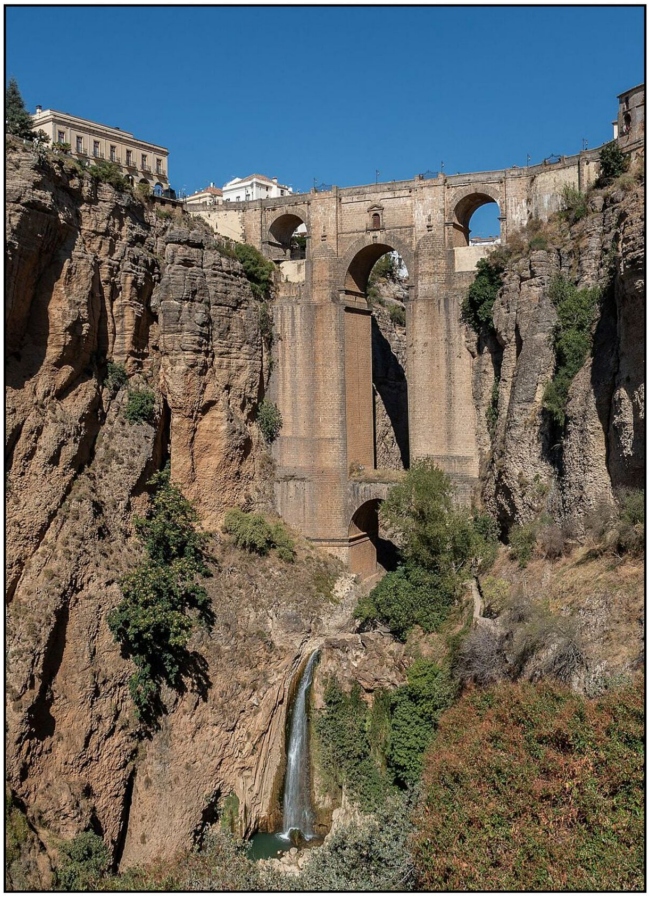
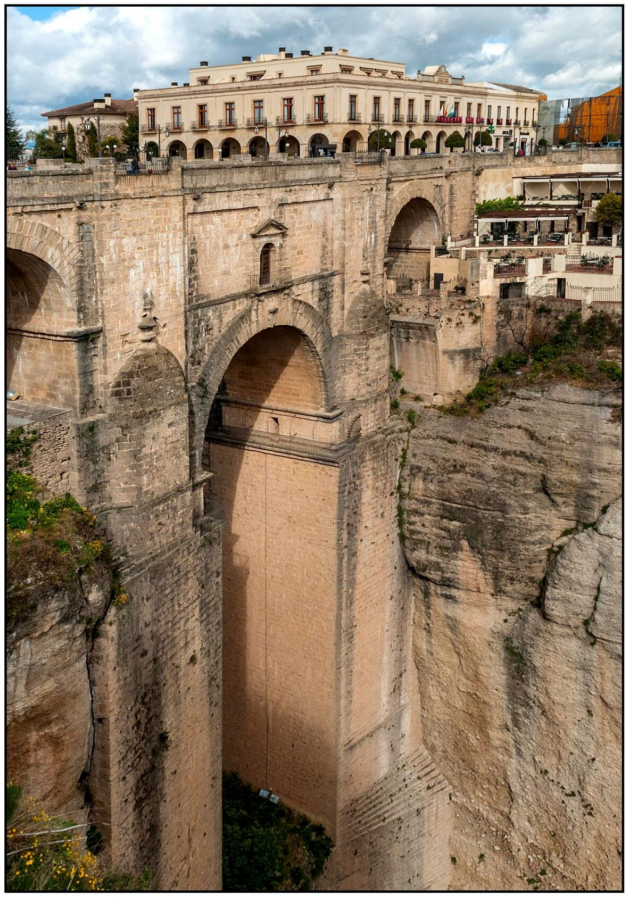
History, Myth and Fiction

This post describes some of the events that occurred in Ronda, a town in southern Spain, during the summer of 1936. After the Spanish Civil War broke out, Anarchists quickly took control of the town, and murdered many supporters of the Nationalist cause. Two months later, advancing Nationalist forces captured Ronda, and drove most of its people from their homes. Those that refused to leave suffered bloody reprisals. These events quickly became mythic rather than historic. In one story, the Anarchists had murdered the town's Falangists by having them beaten to death in the town's plaza and then thrown into the canyon that cuts through the center of the town. Ernest Hemingway recounted this version in his 1940 novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. However, most historians now agree that this never happened.

Ronda

Ronda is one of the most beautiful of the *pueblos blancos* ("white towns") perched on the inland hills of Andalusia. The name comes from the buildings that were white-washed to protect them from the heat of the sun. Through the center of Ronda runs the Guadalevin River, which has carved through the limestone cliffs a steep-walled canyon, *el tajo*, reaching depths of more than 100 meters. The most striking bridge over the river is the *Puente Nuevo* constructed in 1793 at the point where the canyon opens into the huge valley know as *la caldera* (cauldron) The following illustration shows the bridge viewed from the West (left) and from the Southeast (right).





The large building just to the north of the bridge used to be Ronda's *casa consistorial* (town hall) where the *ayuntamiento* or local council met. In the 1990s this was converted into a *parador* (state-owned luxury hotel). The following illustration shows the old city hall with its arcades facing the large town square. On the far left can be seen a low wall looking over the canyon.

Ronda has many other luxury hotels. The Hotel Reina Victoria, a summer resort for the English stationed in Gibraltar, was built on the cliff overlooking *la caldera* in 1906. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke stayed there for several months in the winter of 1912-1913. The gardens beside the hotel have a commemorative statue of Rilke gazing out over valley (shown below in a photograph by Bryan Appleyard).

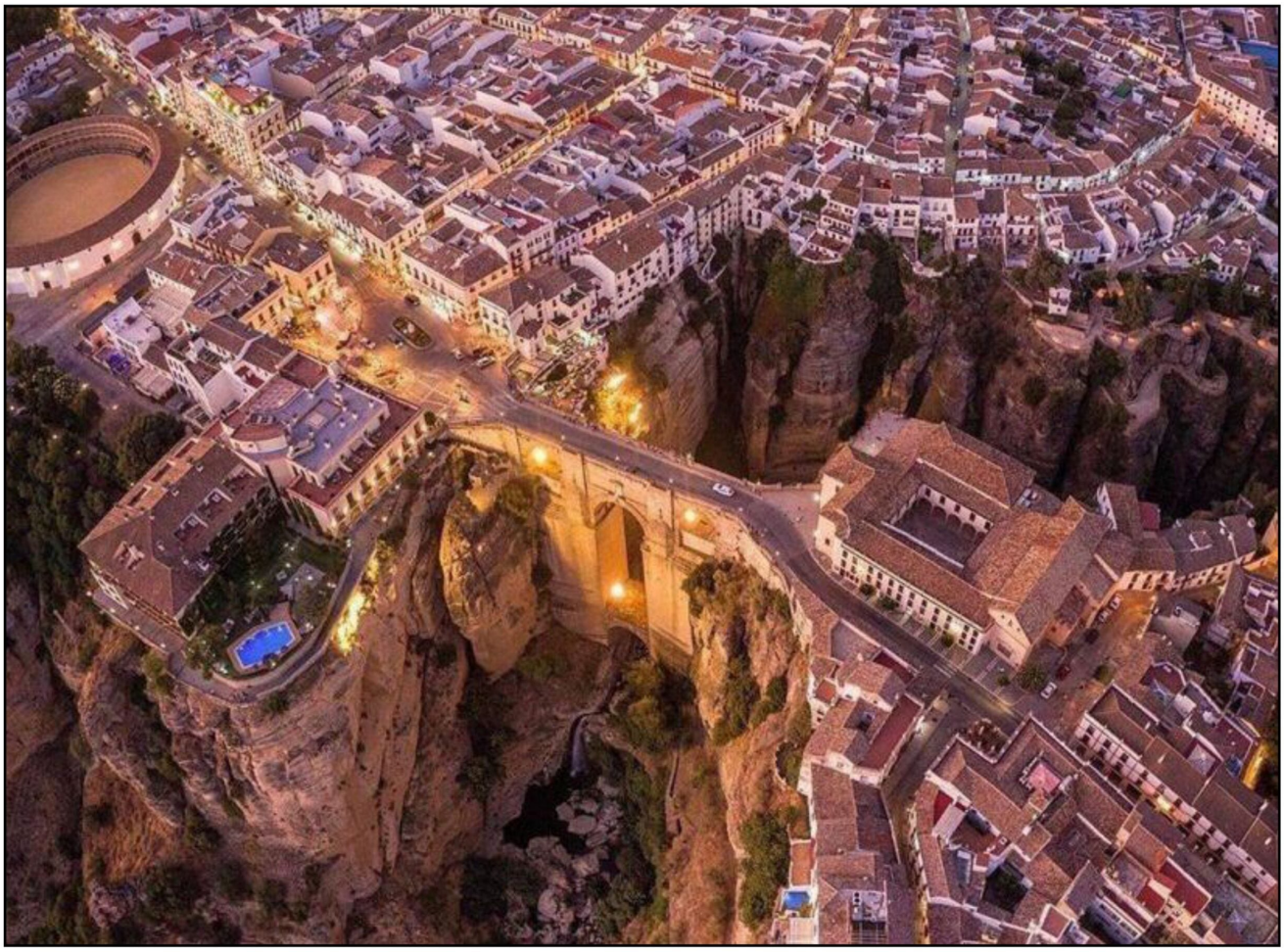
In Ronda, Rilke continued working on a set of poems that would not be complete until ten more years had passed – the *Duino Elegies*. He was also able to compose several poems about Spain. In the third part of a poem called *The Spanish Trilogy* he praised the peasants he could see in the valley, hoping that he might become as attuned to the universe as a simple shepherd:

> Langsamen Schrittes, nicht leicht, nachdenklichen Körpers,
> aber im Stehn ist er herrlich. Noch immer dürfte ein Gott
> heimlich in diese Gestalt und würde nicht minder.
> Abwechselnd weilt er und zieht, wie selber der Tag,
> und Schatten der Wolken
> durchgehn ihn, als dächte der Raum
> langsam Gedanken für ihn.
>
> slow stepping, not light-footed, his body lost in

thought,
but splendid when he stands still. A God might
secretly take his form and not be any the lesser.
By turns he tarries and continues on like the day itself
and the shadows of the clouds
pass through him, as if the vast space
were thinking slow thoughts for him.
(translation Paul Archer)

The poetry is beautiful. However, one cannot help but wonder about how shepherd felt looking up toward the hotel on the cliff. And whether this young shepherd would participate in the revolution some twenty years later.

As well as the canyon and its bridge, Ronda is famous for its *plaza de toros* (bullring) which was built in 1785. The bullring is seen in the upper left of the aerial view of Ronda in the following illustration:



Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) first visited Ronda in 1923 and became enamored of its site and of the bullfights (Buckley, 1997). In his 1932 book on the traditions of bullfighting, *Death in the Afternoon*, he remarked

> There is one town that would be better than Aranjuez to see your first bullfight in if you are only going to see one and that is Ronda.

Hemingway visited Spain during the Civil War, although at that time he could not visit Ronda, which was controlled by the Nationalists. He returned to Ronda many times in the 1950s. For the bullfights, and for the memories.

The Spanish Civil War

In 1931, the Spanish king was deposed and a new government was proclaimed: the Second Spanish Republic, the first having lasted for less than two years (1873-1874) before being aborted by a military coup. The governing coalition of the Second Republic was composed of many separate and feuding parties, among them Anarchists, Communists, Republicans and Catalonian Separatists. The right-wing opposition contained parties favoring the Monarchy or the Catholic Church. The Falangist party, a fascist organization was founded in 1933 in response to the new republic.

The government had to deal with multiple problems

- much of the land was owned by the aristocrats, who managed large tracts of land (*latifundia*), and who treated the peasants as slaves
- the military was far larger and more powerful than necessary for a country that had long ago lost its empire
- the church sided with the generals and the aristocrats, for they were the source of their power and wealth
- the new industries, run by a small number of capitalists, exploited the workers who made the factories run, and who were organizing into unions
- the police force – the *Guardia Civil* – mainly existed to support the landed aristocrats and the capitalists.

The course of the Second Republic was extremely turbulent. The government reduced funds for the military, and closed down the military academy in Zaragoza, run by General Franciso Franco. Strikes occurred and these were put down with excessive force. Attempts to take land away from the *latifundista* were unsuccessful. The government tried to restrict the role of the church in the educational system. Many of the poor, urged on by anarchists and communists, attacked the church. In 1933, Pope Pius XI published an encyclical *Dilectissima Nobis* ("Dear to us") specifically deploring the anti-clerical violence in Spain.

In the election of January,1936, the left-wing parties in the Popular Front won a majority against a coalition of the right-wing parties named the National Front. Many have suggested that the election was rigged to some extent, and the voting was followed by much violence. Manuel Azana Diaz (1880-1940), who had served in various positions in the preceding government, became the president of the newly elected Republican government.

In July 1936, General Emilio Mola, supported by General Franciso Franco, called for a coup to end the republic and to return the nation to its previous form. The leftist parties reacted by calling for a Revolution of the workers. The country descended into anarchy. The Nationalists (or Rebels) were able to take control the north of the country, but the Republicans (or Loyalists) held off the coup in the south and in the major cities. The Civil War had begun (Thomas, 1961; Graham, 2005: Payne, 2012).

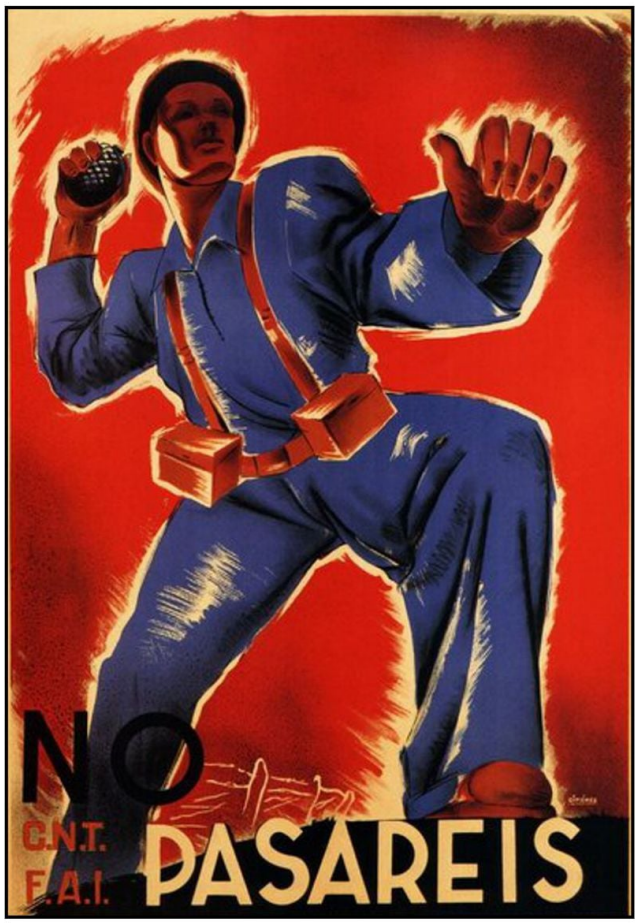
The governments of Germany and Italy immediately provided assistance to the Nationalists, and Russia came in on the side of the Republicans. England and France decided that they should not intervene in the internal politics of Spain. However, volunteers from these and many other countries (even Germany and Italy) began to organize the International Brigades to fight with the Republicans: among them were the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the United States and the Mackenzie-Papineau Brigade from Canada.

Soon after the coup was declared, Franco borrowed planes from Italy and Germany and transported troops from North Africa to shore up the Nationalists in Seville, a Catholic stronghold. The regions of the country controlled by the Nationalists (blue) and the Republicans (white) in July, 1936) are shown in the following map (derived from Preston, 2012, p 658):

From Seville, General Franco sent troops northward to join up with the Nationalists besieging Madrid. Another key point in the fighting was near Teruel, where Nationalist soldiers were attempting to advance to the sea to cut off Barcelona from Madrid. Franco also sent troops eastward to relieve the city of Granada.

Mola died in a plane crash in June of 1937, and General Franciso Franco Bahamonde (1892-1975) became the supreme leader (*el caudillo*) of the Nationalist forces. The following illustration shows the leaders of the two sides. On the left is a modernist stone statue of Manuel Azena by José Noja and Pablo Serrano that was not erected until 1979. On the right is a bronze equestrian statue of Francisco Franco by José Capuz Mamano initially cast in 1964. Various versions of this statue were erected in several of the major cities of Spain.

The following figure shows propaganda posters from both sides of the civil war. On the left is a poster stating "*No Pasareis*" (You shall not pass). This slogan and its variant "*No Pasaran*" (They shall not pass) was used by the Republicans throughout the war. The Communist politician Dolores Ibarruri Gomez (also known as *La Pasionara* – the passionate one) used the latter version in a famous speech urging on the defenders of Madrid in November 1936. The Republican poster comes from the two parties that were the mainstay of the Popular Front: the CNT (*Confederacion Nacional de Trabajo*) and the FAI (*Federacion Anarquista Iberica*). The right poster is from the Falangists. In the background are the four red arrows held together by a yoke, the Spanish version of the *fasces* (bundle of rods) of the Italian Fascists. Superimposed is a hand on a rifle. The call is "To arms – Homeland, Bread and Justice."



Events in Ronda during 1936ca)

Soon after the military coup was declared in July, 1936, members of the CNT took control in Ronda and many of the small towns in Andalusia. Members of the *Guardia Civil* and many local Nationalist leaders were executed. Similar outbreaks of violence occurred in many regions of Spain. This “red terror” was not condoned by the Republican Government, which had difficulty controlling its many factions.

Once the Nationalists had shored up control of Seville, Franco placed the bloodthirsty General Queipo de Llano in command of retaking Southern Spain. After Granada was relieved, the Nationalists returned to the other cities of Andalusia. Reaching Ronda in September, 1936 they quickly subdued the town, and took bloody revenge. Those killed by the Nationalists far outnumbered those who had been murdered in the summer (Preston, 2012).

Exactly what had happened in Ronda during these early months of the war was not clear. The Nationalists declared that the anarchists had murdered several hundred people and thrown them over the cliff. This claim was used to justify their reprisals.

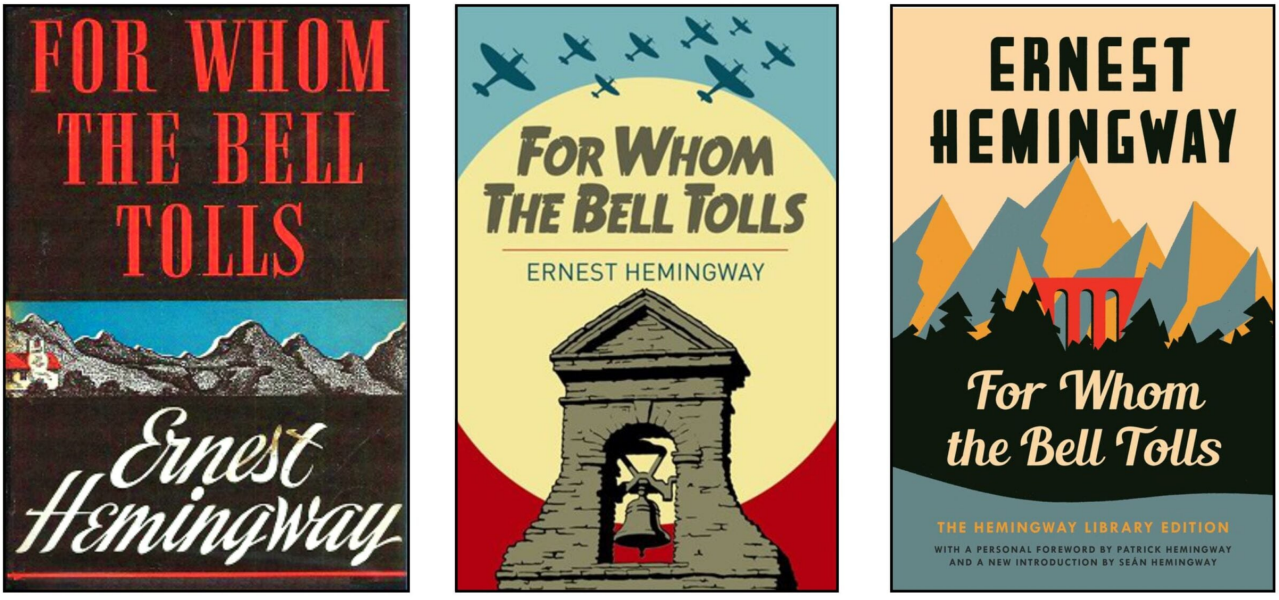
Many of the townspeople left Ronda and fled to Malaga, but this city soon fell to the Nationalists in February 1937. Republicans in Malaga were rounded up and shot. The Nationalists boasted that they executed more Republicans in seven days than the Republicans had killed in the seven months they were in control of the city (Preston, 2012, p 177).

Most of the citizens of Malaga, together with a few surviving Republican soldiers, then tried to reach Almeria along the coastal road – walking, riding donkeys and hanging onto rickety vehicles for a distance of about 200 km. These refugees were strafed and bombed by planes, and shelled by Nationalists warships. The number of people killed in what became known as the Malaga-Almeria Massacre was over 3000. The Canadian physician Norman Bethune used the few vehicles available to him to help the refugees travel to Almeria (Stewart, R., & Majada Neila, 2014), but this had little effect. The following photograph shows the refugees:

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Ernest Hemingway came to Spain toward the end of 1937 to produce a documentary film on the Civil War – *The Spanish Earth* – to help raise money for the Republicans. The photograph below shows him in the Republican trenches at Teruel (low center) together with the filmmaker Joris Ivens (high center).

After the Spanish Civil War ended in1939, Hemingway wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), a novel based on what he had heard about the violence perpetrated by both sides during the conflict. The following illustration shows some of the covers used by various editions of the book, the original on the left:



The epigraph to the novel is from John Donne's *Meditations*

upon Emergent Occasions (1624) The quotation ends with:

> any mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.

The novel's central character is Robert Jordan, an American Professor of Spanish, and an explosives expert, now a volunteer serving with the Republicans. In the spring of 1937, he is ordered to blow up a mountain-bridge to prevent Nationalist forces from Segovia from reaching Madrid. For this task he recruits the help of a band of Republican guerillas, led by Pablo and his woman Pilar. Jordan falls in love with Maria, a beautiful young woman serving as the band's cook. Maria's father, the Republican mayor of Valladolid, and her mother had been executed by the Nationalists early in the war. She herself had her head shaved, and was raped and imprisoned, before finally escaping to the mountains.

One evening, Pilar tells Jordan and Maria what had happened in Ronda at the beginning of the war. Pablo, the leader of the local anarchists in the town, had captured the barracks of the *Guardia Civil* and executed all the guards. He had also rounded up the main supporters of the Nationalists and imprisoned them in the city council. Pilar describes the center of the town (see preceding illustrations):

> The town is built on the high bank above the river and there is a square there with a fountain and there are benches and there are big trees that give a shade for the benches. The balconies of the houses look out on the plaza. Six streets enter on the plaza and there is an arcade from the houses that goes around the plaza so that one can walk in the shade of the arcade when the sun is hot. On three sides of the plaza is the arcade and on the fourth side is the walk shaded by the trees beside the edge of the cliff with, far below, the river. It is three hundred feet down to the

river.

Pilar then describes how the town square was set up for the execution of the fascists:

> Pablo organized it all as he did the attack on the barracks. First he had the entrances to the streets blocked off with carts though to organize the plaza for a *capea*. For an amateur bull fight. The fascists were all held in the *Ayuntamiento*, the city hall, which was the largest building on one side of the plaza. It was there the clock was set in the wall and it was in the buildings under the arcade that the club of the fascists was.

Pablo organized the peasants and workers who had gathered in the square:

> He placed them in two lines as you would place men for a rope pulling contest, or as they stand in a city to watch the ending of a bicycle road race with just room for the cyclists to pass between, or as men stood to allow the passage of a holy image in a procession. Two meters was left between the lines and they ex-tended from the door of the *Avuntamiento* clear across the plaza to the edge of the cliff. So that, from the doorway of the *Ayuntamiento*, looking across the plaza, one coming out would see two solid lines of people waiting.
>
> They were armed with flails such as are used to beat out the grain and they were a good flail's length apart. All did not have flails, as enough flails could not be obtained. But most had flails obtained from the store of Don Guillermo Martin, who was a fascist and sold all sorts of agricultural implements. And those who did not have flails had heavy herdsman's clubs, or ox-goads, and some had wooden pitchforks; those with wooden tines that are used to fork the chaff and straw into the air after the flailing. Some had sickles and reaping hooks but these Pablo placed at the far end where the lines reached the edge of the cliff.

The assembled crowd was told that they must kill the fascists by beating them to death. One of the peasants asked Pilar why, and she reported the following exchange:

> “To save bullets” I said. “And that each man should have his share in the responsibility”
> “That it should start then. That it should start.” And I looked at him and saw that he was crying. “Why are you crying, Joaquin?” I asked him. “This is not to cry about.”
> “I cannot help it, Pilar,” he said. “I have never killed any one.”

One by one, the fascists were led out of the city hall and made their way through the crowd of peasants. One by one, they were beaten and clubbed to death. And one by one, their bodies were cast over the edge of the cliff into *el tajo*.

This fictional representation of the Anarchist terror in Ronda is extremely powerful. In the novel Hemingway also describes Nationalist atrocities in Valladolid – the summary execution of Maria’s parents and her abuse and rape by the Falangists. This vivid portrayal of the brutality of the war should make us rethink our hatreds. We are all in this life together; we are diminished by the death of any man; the bell tolls for us.

Later in the novel, Jordan and the guerilla band succeed in blowing up the bridge. but Jordan is severely wounded and unable to move. He convinces that the rest of the band to retreat while he stays to delay the advancing Nationalists. He insists that Maria leave with the guerillas. The novel ends with Jordan trying to stay conscious as the soldiers come closer. Talking to himself, he claims

> And if you wait and hold them up even a little while or just get the officer that may make all the difference. One thing well done can make □

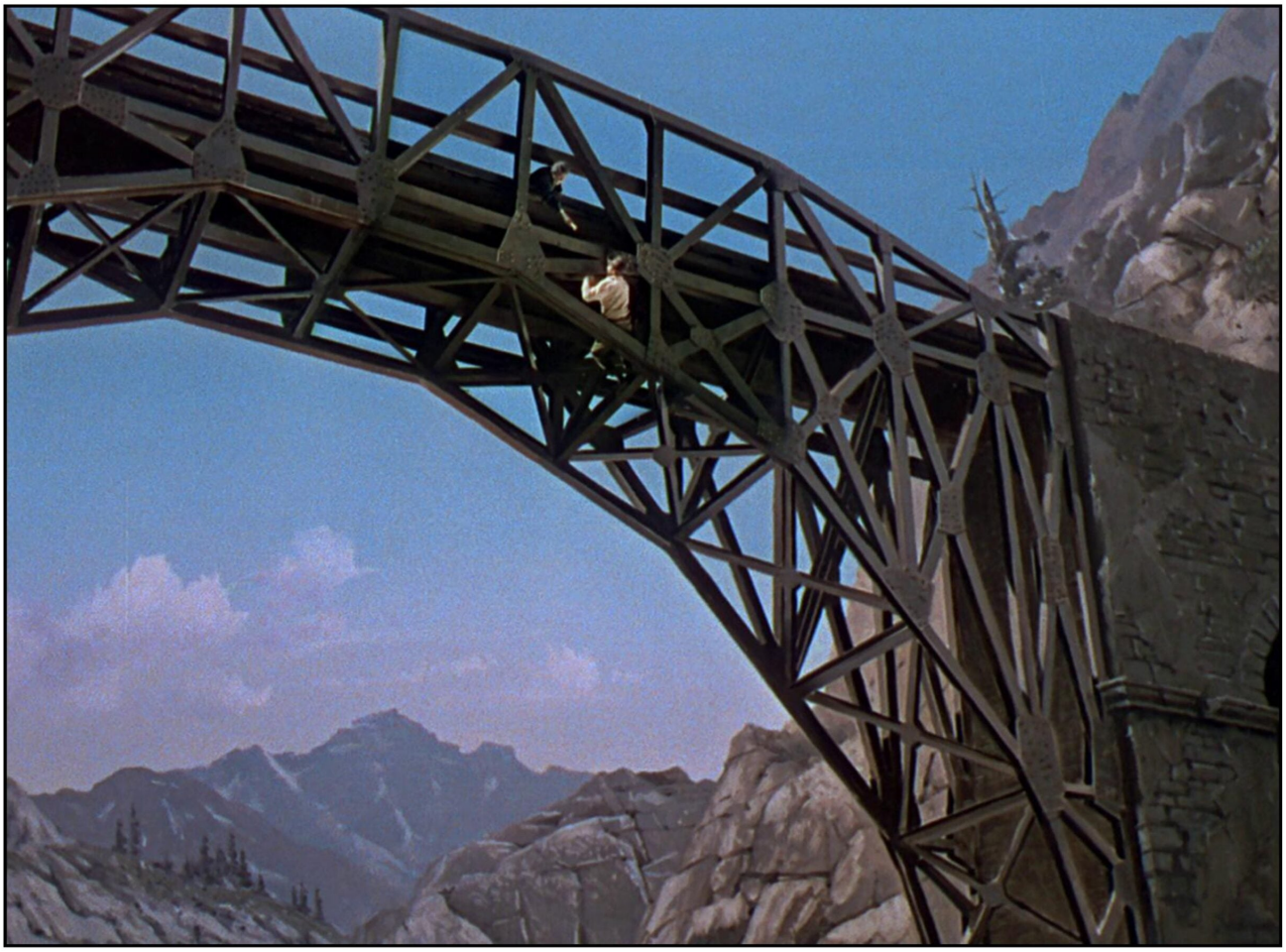
Hemingway leaves the thought unfinished. The novel ends with

an officer of the Nationalist forces riding slowly up toward where Jordan awaits him.

The book sold well, and in 1943 it was made into a film starring Gary Cooper as Jordan, Ingrid Bergman as Maria, Akim Tamiroff as Pablo and Katina Paxinou as Pilar. The film was an international success, although it was not distributed in France or Germany until after World War II (see posters below). The film received multiple nominations for the Academy Awards, with Katina Paxinou winning for best supporting actress.

The film follows the novel quite closely. When Pilar recounts her tale of what happened in Ronda at the beginning of the Civil War, the movie shows in flashback some of the brutal executions in the plaza:

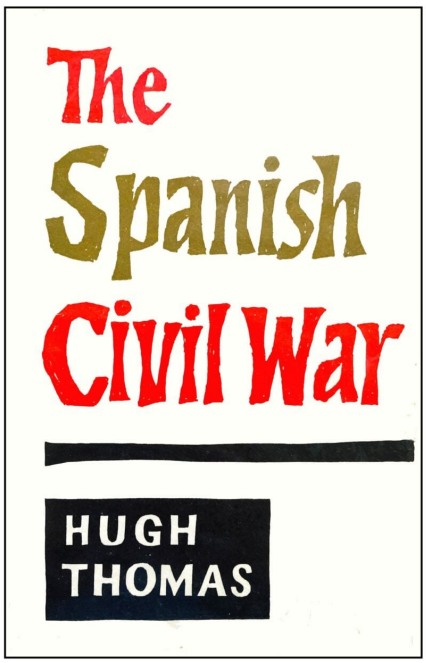
The bridge that Jordan dynamites just before the end of the movie is as high as the Puente Nuevo in Ronda:

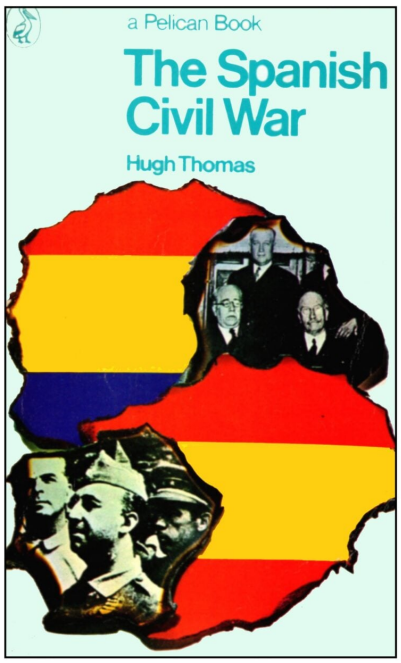


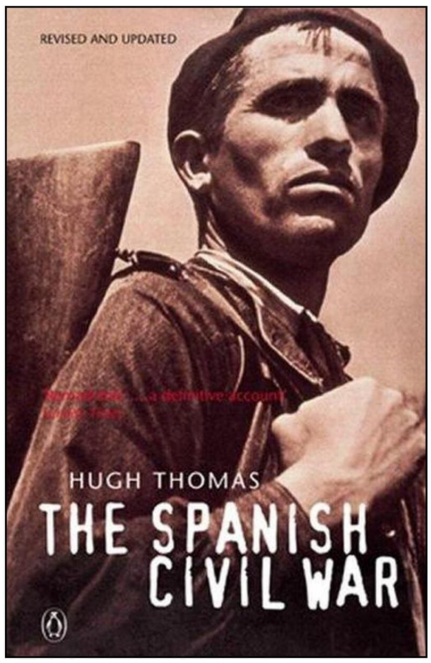
Historical Accounts of the Events in Ronda

The history of *The Spanish Civil War* (1961) by Hugh Thomas was the first major examination of what happened in Spain during

the war. The book became a best seller soon after it was published and it has since gone through two revisions and multiple printings:







Thomas discussed the events in Ronda:

> In country districts. revolution itself often consisted primarily of the murder of the upper classes or the bourgeoisie. Thus the description, in Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, of how the inhabitants of a small pueblo first beat the male members of the middle class and then flung them over a cliff, is near to the reality of what happened in the famous Andalusian town of Ronda (though the work was the responsibility of a gang from Malaga). There, 512 were murdered in the first month of war. (p 263 in 1989 printing)

Other historians have proposed that the Ronda executions described by Hemingway, although based on accounts he had heard, was completely fictional. Buckley (1997) described what happened in Ronda in the Summer of 1936, according to the records maintained in the town hall:

> On 19 July 1936 the commander of the small army garrison in

Ronda, upon reports of a military uprising in Morocco, went to the Town Hall with a small platoon and demanded that the mayor submit to his authority and publicly announce that the city was under martial law and the army was taking control. The mayor belonged to the left-wing coalition known as the Popular Front. He refused to follow the commander's orders and swiftly disarmed him and his small band of soldiers, heavily outnumbered by the peasant groups beginning to assemble on the plaza outside the town hall. Thus, Ronda remained loyal to the Republican government of Madrid, and did not fall to the fascists until 18 September 1936.

However, it would be would be wrong to assume that during these two months the Republican government in Madrid had any control over the town or its inhabitants. As soon as the reports of a military rising in Africa began to spread, the peasants from neighboring villages poured into Ronda and in effect took control. Although the mayor was nominally in charge, the real power belonged to a "Comite" formed by the peasants themselves, most of whom belonged to CNT (Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo), the Anarchist Labor Union.

The task of this committee was three-fold: first, to arrest all persons suspected of having fascist sympathies; second, to insure that food was evenly distributed to all inhabitants (money was outlawed and vouchers with the CNT rubber-stamp were issued); third, to prepare to defend Ronda from a probable attack by fascist troops stationed in Seville.

The word "revolution" immediately comes to mind when we attempt to describe the situation in Ronda in summer 1936. The Secretary's "Record of Proceedings" for 28 July 1936, preserved in Ronda's Town Hall, displays revolutionary rhetoric: "[W]e are living through a moment of historic transcendence … the fascist coup has spurred the populace to rise to the last man and to demand social justice . . . a new society is being born, based upon liberty, justice and equality … justice has now become `revolutionary justice'

> designed to cleanse the state of all fascist elements as well as to establish the basis for a new social order etc."

Many priests and supporters of the Nationalist cause were executed. However, these victims were not killed in the plaza, but were driven away from the center of the town and shot. It is difficult to determine the number of those killed, but it was likely much less than the 512 claimed by the Nationalists. None of the bodies were thrown into *el tajo*. This story seems to have been invented by General Queipo to inflame his troops as they went about their reprisals.

Corbin (1995) considers the story about the executions in the plaza and the casting of the bodies into *el tajo* as an example of myth-making. Myths have their basis in historical events but the stories become altered in the telling, often to justify the actions of those in power:

> Any story of the past has a double construction and a double truth. The truth of the tale told is its historical truth; the truth of its telling is its mythical truth.

The story of the executions by *el tajo* served the purpose of the Nationalists: it portrayed the class hatred of the anarchists and communists and the violence that they promulgated in the early weeks of the Civil War. This then justified their violent repression. Society must be protected from any recurrence of such revolutionary terror.

In *The Spanish Holocaust* (2012) which describes the repression of the Spanish Republicans during and after the Civil War, Paul Preston summarizes the events in Ronda:

> Famous for its Roman and Arab bridges and its exquisite eighteenth-century bullring, Ronda had suffered a pitiless repression at the hands of anarchists led by a character known as 'El Gitano.' Initially, the CNT committee had maintained a degree of order although churches were sacked and images destroyed, but soon there were murders being

> carried out by anarchists from Malaga and also by locals. However, there is no substance to the claim, first made by Queipo in a broadcast on 18 August and popularized by Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, that large numbers of prisoners were killed by being thrown into the *tajo*. The many rightist victims were shot in the cemetery. Francoist sources claim that victims of the red terror from Ronda and the nearby pueblos of Gaucin and Arriate numbered over six hundred. On 16 September, when Varela took the town, the defenders fled and his forces suffered only three casualties in the assault. His men stopped and interrogated anyone found in streets and shot many of them. Over half of the population fled towards Malaga. Under the new authorities, those of the town's defenders who had not fled were subjected to a bloody repression and the theft of their property. (p 171)

In the White City

The American poet, Philip Levine, spent time in Spain trying to learn more about the Spanish Civil War and the poets that wrote about it (Levine, 2016). He also wrote about Ronda in a prose-poem entitled *In the White City* (2009).

> From up there—& he points to the bridge high above us—they tossed down the fat barber, the Falangist, to his death. "It is all in the book by the American communist." "The communist?" I say. Yes, the friend of Fidel Castro, Comrade Hemingway "The tourists come because of your Mr. Hemingway, that is why you are here." Who can argue with this young, balding lieutenant of the Guardia Civil who has dared to leave his barracks lacking his tricorne & with only a small sidearm? In felt house slippers he stands at ease on the west streets of his town, Ronda, to show me the world. "On those rocks," he continues, pointing to a ledge half way down the

> gorge, “he first hits & his belly explodes. Then they rape his beautiful daughter, the film star that is Swedish, & when they have finish they shave her head. That is why we execute them all.” Does he mean that is why in the novel the Nationalists executed them. (I am careful not to say “the fascists”; it is 1965.) “No, no, executed them here, in life or death”—he smiles at his little joke—“up there on the bridge”— & he points again,— “by military firing squad one at a time, properly. That is why the whole town must witness & learn. It is educational.” But, I insist, the death of the Falangist was merely in a novel that made no effort to be true to events, *una novela*, a fiction, a best seller. The lieutenant enjoys this repartee, he’s amused by my innocence, he shakes his head, he is discreet & patient with this visitor to his ancient city that boasts the first Plaza de Toros in all the world. “You Americans,” and he suppresses his laughter, “you think because he was a famous red he could not tell the truth. They do not give Noble Prizes to liars.”

The poem illustrates how history becomes mixed up with fiction, with movies, and with photographs to form the myths that we remember about the past. Hemingway was not a communist and, though he spent time in Cuba, he was not a friend of Castro (Michaud, 2012). This idea stems from photographs of the two of them together at a fishing competition, the only time they ever met. The character Maria in Hemingway’s novel, played by the Swedish film-star in the movie, was the daughter of a mayor who was executed in the Civil War, but this was in a different town, and the mayor there was a Republican executed by the Nationalists. The poem ends with the idea that fiction written by a winner of the Noble (sic) Prize has to be true.

The following is an etching of the *Puente Nuevo* in Ronda done by Gary Young for a broadside edition of Levine's poem.

Epilogue

By the spring of 1938, the Nationalists ultimately made their way to the sea, isolating Barcelona from Madrid. After Franco's troops marched into Barcelona in January 1939, Manuel Azana was among the thousands of refugees who fled from Barcelona to France. In March, Madrid was taken and Franco declared victory on April 1, 1939, and became the Prime Minister of Spain, continuing in this office until 1973. During and after the war, many thousands of Republicans were executed by the Nationalists in a repression known as the "white terror" or the "Spanish Holocaust" (Preston, 2012).

Hemingway's novel was translated into Spanish as *Por quién doblan las campanas,* but was not allowed into Spain until 1969. The movie was not shown there until 1978. Hugh Thomas's history of the war was forbidden in Spain until after the death of Franco in 1975. Today Spain continues to unearth the bodies of those executed during and after the war, and to seek some understanding of the violence and brutality of those days (Anderson, 2017). The myths need to be converted back into history.

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Edward Hopper

Edward Hopper (1882-1967) painted the independence and the loneliness of 20th-Century America. He was a realist in the days when most painters tended toward the abstract. Yet his paintings incite the imagination far more than the works of any abstract expressionist. His enigmatic images force the viewer to wonder what is going on:

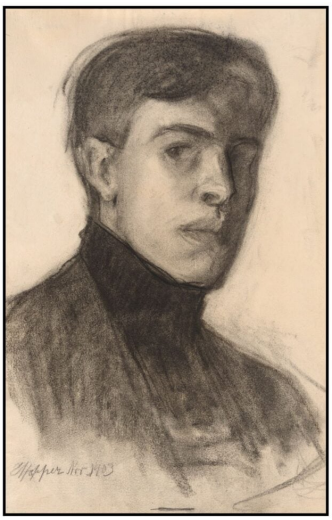
> Hopper was neither an illustrator nor a narrative painter. His paintings don't tell stories. What they do is suggest—powerfully, irresistibly—that there are stories within them, waiting to be told. He shows us a moment in time, arrayed on a canvas; there's clearly a past and a future, but it's our task to find it for ourselves. (Block, 2016, p viii).

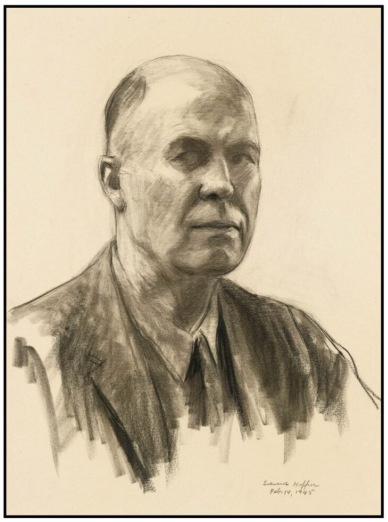
More than any other painter, Hopper has inspired writers to find the stories and meanings behind his paintings. This post summarizes his life, describes his working methods, and presents some of his pictures together with the writings they have stimulated.

Early Life

Hopper was born in Nyack, a town on the Hudson River some 25 km north of the upper end of Manhattan (Levin, 1980a, 2007). He decided early to become an artist and studied at the New York School of Art and Design in Greenwich Village, where he was taught by William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri, among others. Hopper considered Thomas Eakins his artistic hero.

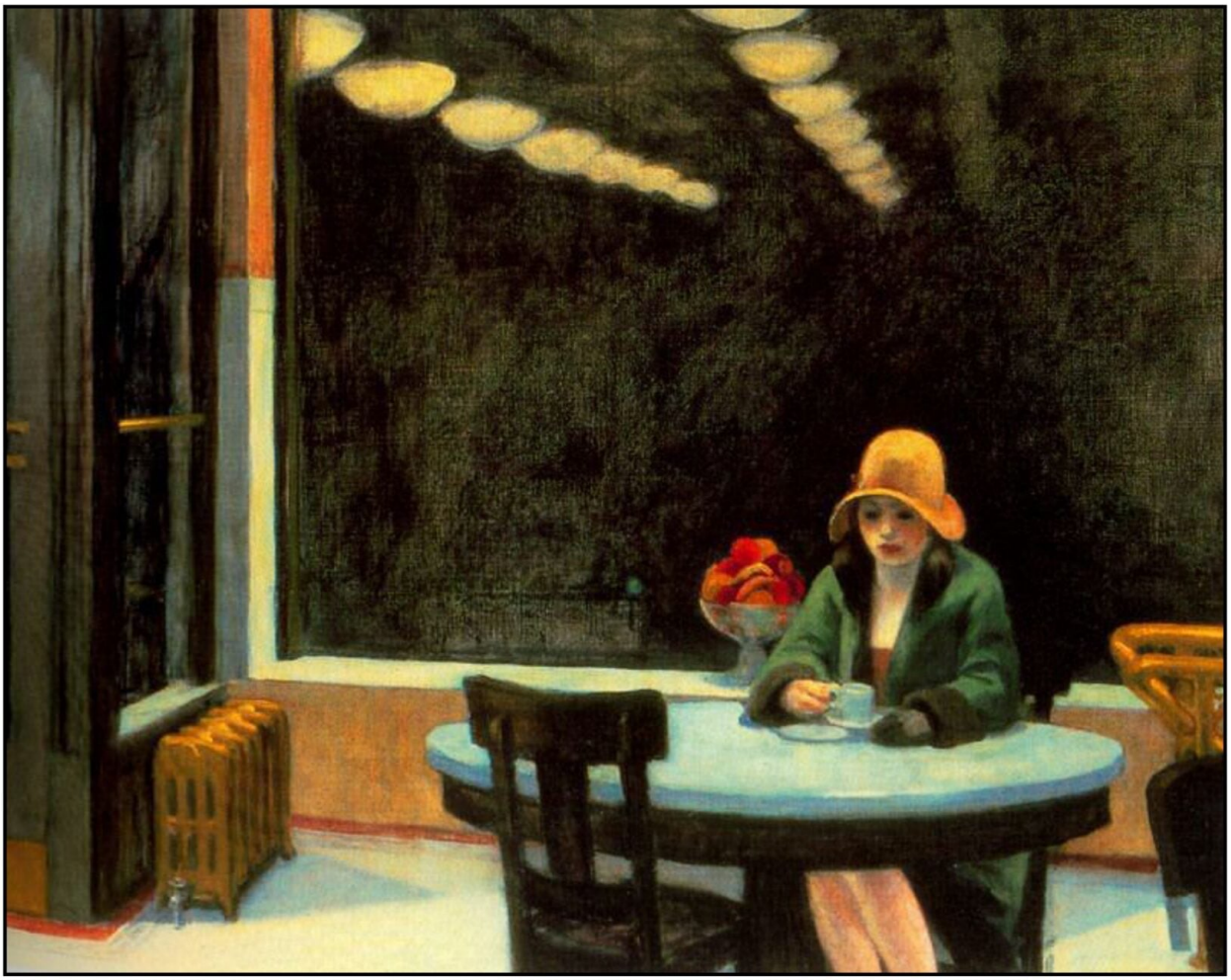
The 1903 self-portrait, illustrated on the left below, shows the conscientious young student. The others are from 1930, when he was becoming successful, and from 1945 after he had become famous.

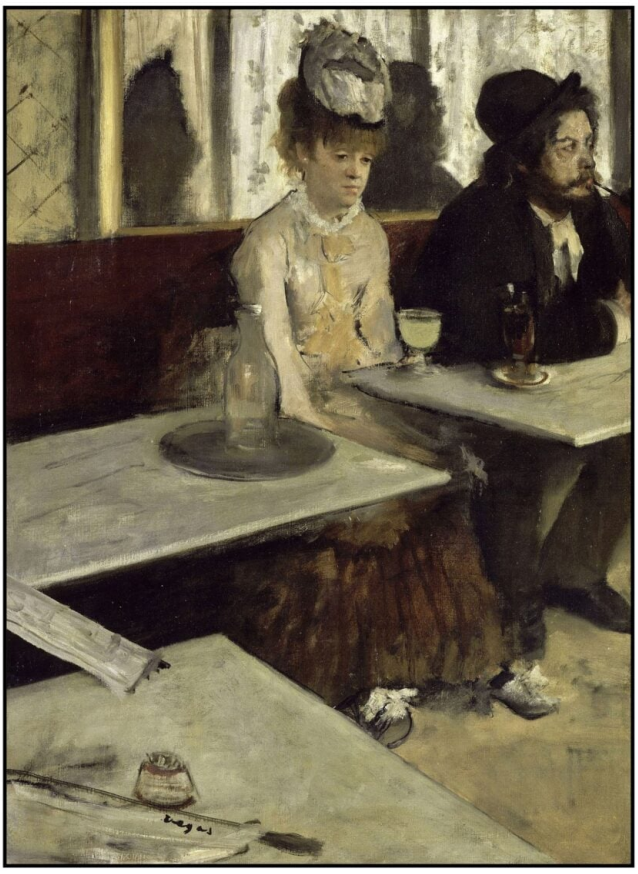




In 1906 Hopper made his first trip to Paris, where he stayed for almost one year, making occasional journeys to other cities in Europe. He returned for two further shorter visits in 1909 and 1910. In Paris, he visited the museums, attended classes, and sketched and painted *en plain air.* The illustration on the right from the graphic biography by Rossi and Scarduelli (2021) was derived from a 1907 photograph of the young student sketching (Levin, 2007, p 68).

Hopper was influenced by the impressionists, in particular Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas (Kranzfelder, 2002, p 150). His later painting *Automat* (1927) shows similarities in mood and structure to Manet's *The Plum Brandy* (1877) and to Degas' *The Absinthe Drinker* (1876):





Another influence was Eugéne Atget who had photographed the empty streets of Paris (Llorens & Ottinger, 2012, p. 263). Since his camera required long exposure-times, Atget chose to photograph early in the morning before there were any people moving around in the streets. His haunting images foreshadow Hopper's lonely city-scenes. Walter Benjamin in his Little History of Photography (1931) remarked that Atget's photographs sometimes seem to portray the "scene of a crime." The same can be said of many of Hopper's paintings.

The ongoing modernist revolution in Paris had no effect on the young American. Hopper paid little attention to the post-impressionists (Van Gogh, Cézanne and Gauguin), and was apparently unaware of the current work of painters like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse.

One of the last paintings from Hopper's time in Europe was entitled *Soir Bleu* (1914). Various characters interact on a café terrace:

On the left is a *macquereau* (French: mackerel, slang for "pimp"). In the center, a garishly made-up prostitute attempts to entice a client from a table where three men are seated:

someone who appears from his beret to be an artist, a soldier with epaulettes on his uniform, and a clown in full make-up and costume. On the right a bourgeois man and woman survey the scene. One is tempted to consider Hopper as the clown, out of place and without voice among the French. Three of the figures are smoking: the clown, the pimp and the artist. This may suggest something similar in their livelihoods: they all survive by selling to the rich and powerful: the couple on the right and the soldier. Hopper exhibited the painting when he returned to New York, but it was never sold and stayed in storage at his studio until his death.

The painting's title may come from a poem *Sensation* (1870) by Rimbaud, which in its second verse talks of being mute like the clown.

> *Par les soirs bleus d'été j'irai dans les sentiers,*
> *Picoté par les blés, fouler l'herbe menue :*
> *Rêveur, j'en sentirai la fraicheur à mes pieds.*
> *Je laisserai le vent baigner ma tête nue.*

Je ne parlerai pas ; je ne penserai rien.
Mais l'amour infini me montera dans l'âme ;
Et j'irai loin, bien loin, comme un bohémien,
Par la Nature,—heureux comme avec une femme.

Summer's deep-blue evenings I will go down the lanes,
Tickled by the wheat-berries, trampling the short grass:
Dreaming, I will feel the coolness at my feet.
I will let a northern wind bathe my bare head.

I will not stir my tongue; I will think of nothing.
Yet love infinite shall at once mount in my soul;
And I will go far, very far, like a gypsy,
Through Nature,—enchanted as with a woman.
(translation by Gregory Campeau)

Back in New York, Hopper was unable to sell more than an occasional painting. He therefore supported himself by

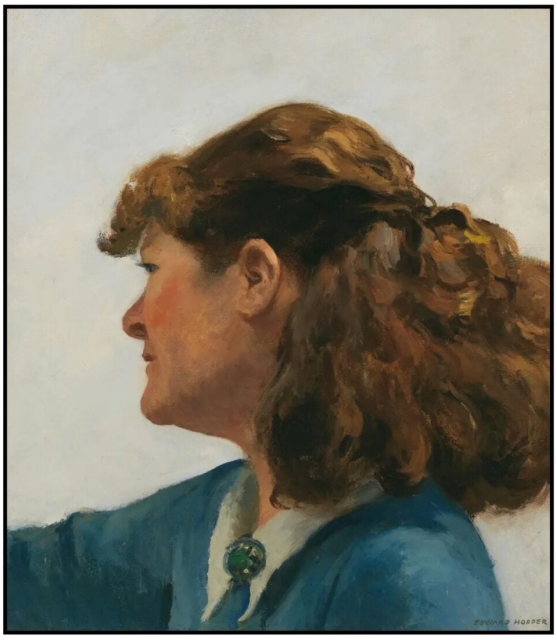
providing illustrations for magazine stories and advertisements. For a while he learned etching with Martin Lewis. From these studies, he developed a better sense of how light plays on surfaces, especially at night. He also began to define spaces more distinctly than the impressionists that he had hitherto been following.

In 1913, Hopper moved into the top floor of Number 3, Washington Square North, Greenwich Village. This was his studio and residence for the rest of his life. The following illustration shows the building, the roof-top view from the top floor (Levin, 1985) and Hopper's 1932 painting *City Roofs*:

Jo Nivison

In the summer of 1923 on a painting trip to Gloucester, Massachusetts, Hopper re-encountered Jo Nivison, who had been

a fellow-student at the New York School of Art and Design. They both painted water-colors and on their return to New York, Nivison was instrumental in getting Hopper’s work exhibited. They enjoyed each other’s company and were married in 1924. Both were 41 years old. They were physically and psychologically different: he was 6 ft 5 inches while she was just 5 ft; “she was gregarious, outgoing, sociable and talkative, while he was shy, quiet, solitary, and introspective” (Levin, 2007, p 168). The following illustration shows a 1906 portrait of*: The Art Student Miss Josephine Nivison* by Robert Henri, a photograph of Jo and Edward (from the 1930s), and a 1936 painting of *Jo Painting* by Hopper.



Edward painted and Jo took care of things. She modelled for his figure paintings, and kept meticulous records of his paintings in a set of notebooks. She sometimes rebelled against her help-mate status, and urged her husband to promote her own artistic career. There were arguments, some of which degenerated into physical fights. Nevertheless, their marriage lasted until Edward’s death in 1967. Jo died a year later, leaving all her husband’s unsold paintings to the Whitney

Museum of American Art. The museum also accepted her paintings, but many of these were discarded. Jo Hopper was not given the recognition that she deserved (Colleary, 2004; Levin, 1980b, 2007, pp. 717-728; McColl, 2018).

Working Methods

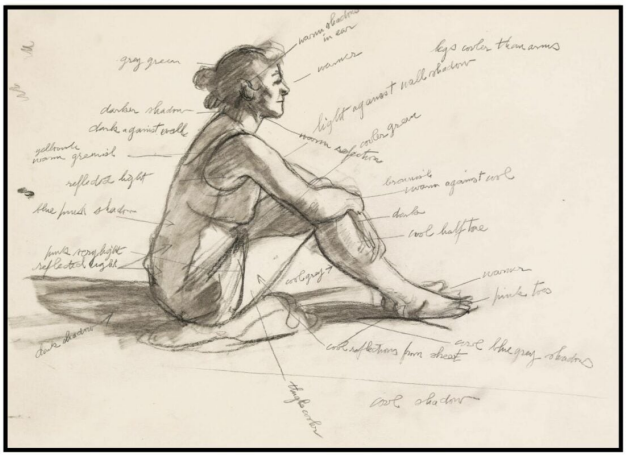
Although Hopper worked *en plein air* in France and during his summer excursions to New England, most of his pictures were painted in the studio from sketches made *in situ*. His images are thus based on reality but tempered by the imagination. The perspectives are altered; the surfaces are simplified and flattened; the colors are changed to what they might have been rather than what they were. His 1946 painting *Approaching a City* shows the rail lines of the Metro-North Railroad entering the tunnel at 97th Street to travel under Park Avenue to Grand Central Station. The painting provides a heightened representation of what a traveler might experience coming into a city for the first time. The illustration below shows the painting together with contemporary (Conaty,2022, p 13) and more recent (Levin, 1985) views of the scene.

The perspective of the painting would only be possible from

the level of the rail-lines. Hopper has tried to see from the point of view of a passenger in a train rather than a pedestrian on Park Avenue. Even if the graffiti were erased, the opposite wall is (and was) not as it appears in the painting. Hopper has flattened its texture and removed the cables. The buildings above the wall are not those on Park Avenue, either now or when the painting was made. Conaty (2022, p 13) remarks

> Here. the building types – from the nineteenth century brownstone to the modern industrial structure at the far left – suggest the passage of time in the histories that coexist, pictured as a single mass of forms seen from the train track below.

The illustration below shows Hopper's 1954 painting *Morning Sun*. The preparatory sketches show both the general layout of the room the effects of the bright morning light, and a more accurate representation of the model (Jo) with extensive details about shading and color:



The Lonely City

Although Hopper painted many different subjects, he is best known for his pictures of lonely urban surroundings. The most recent exhibition of his work at the Whitney Museum focuses on his depiction of New York City (Conaty, 2022).

The 1930 painting *Early Sunday Morning* shows a deserted New York Street. Though long considered to represent 7th Avenue in

Greenwich Village, recent evidence has pointed to a source on Bleeker Street (Marcum 2022). The painting has a wonderful visual rhythm: the repetition and variation between the different units and their windows reminds me of the stanzas and rhymes of poetry.

John Updike (2005 p 199) describes the painting:

> *Early Sunday Morning* is a literally sunny picture, with even something merry about it: bucolic peace visits a humdrum urban street. We are gladdened by the day that is coming, entering from the right, heralded by the shadows it throws. The glow on the sidewalk is picked up by the yellow window shades. The barber pole is cheerful, the hydrant basks like a sluggish, knobby toad. But the silent windows, especially the darkened big shopwindows, hold behind them an ominous mortuary stillness. The undercurrents of stillness threaten to drag us down, even as the day dawns. The diurnal wheel turns, taking the sun on one of its sides. But the other side, the side where sun is absent, has its presence, too, and Hopper's apparently noncommittal art excels in making us

aware of the elsewhere, the missing, the longed-for. He is, to use a phrase generally reserved for writers, a master of suspense.

The painting takes liberties with the shadows. Neither 7th Avenue nor Bleeker Street run directly east-west, and the morning sun could not cast shadows so long and so parallel to the buildings in either place. As noted by the poet John Hollander (in Levin 1995 p 43), the long shadow on the sidewalk is especially mysterious:

Long, slant shadows
Cast on the wan concrete
Are of nearby fallen
Verticals not ourselves.
Lying longest, most still,
Along the unsigned blank
Of sidewalk, the narrowed
Finger of shade left by
Something, thicker than trees,
Taller than these streetlamps,
Somewhere off to the right
Perhaps, and unlike an
Intrusion of ourselves,
Unseen, long, is claiming
It all, the scene, the whole.

A striking aspect of the painting is it overwhelming silence: the calm before or after the storm of normal life. Ward (2017, p 169) remarks

Hopper's paintings are uniquely silent, conveying a sense of unnatural stillness. The silence is more active than passive, mainly because it suggests little of the calmness, tranquility, or placidity commonly associated with it. Hopper's silences are tense—hushed decorums maintained with terrific strain.

Probably Hopper's most famous painting is *The Nighthawks* (1942), wherein a man and a woman sit at the counter of an all-night diner. They are served by a young waiter and observed by a solitary man at the other end of the counter. The diner is brightly lit; outside it is dark. The streets are deserted: it is likely long past midnight. We sense the couple's anxiety and we are grateful for the light.

Hopper may have based the painting on a restaurant near the intersection of Greenwich Avenue and 7th Avenue (now Mulry Square). More likely it is an amalgam of various diners in the area. The title apparently comes from the beak-like nose of the man sitting with the woman.

The poet Mark Strand (1994, pp. 6-7) described the general effect of the picture:

> The dominant feature of the scene is the long window through which we see the diner. It covers two-thirds of the canvas, forming the geometrical shape of an isosceles trapezoid, which establishes the directional pull of the painting, toward a vanishing point that cannot be witnessed, but must

> be imagined. Our eye travels along the face of the glass, moving from right to left, urged on by the converging sides of the trapezoid, the green tile, the counter, the row of round stools that mimic our footsteps, and the yellow-white neon glare along the top. We are not drawn into the diner but are led alongside it. Like so many scenes we register in passing, its sudden, immediate clarity absorbs us, momentarily isolating us from everything else, and then releases us to continue on our way. In *Nighthawks*, however, we are not easily released. The long sides of the trapezoid slant toward each other but never join, leaving the viewer midway in their trajectory. The vanishing point, like the end of the viewer's journey or walk, is in an unreal and unrealizable place, somewhere off the canvas, out of the picture. The diner is an island of light distracting whoever might be walking by—in this case, ourselves—from journey's end. This distraction might be construed as salvation. For a vanishing point is not just where converging lines meet, it is also where we cease to be, the end of each of our individual journeys. Looking at *Nighthawks*, we are suspended between contradictory imperatives—one, governed by the trapezoid, that urges us forward, and the other, governed by the image of a light place in a dark city, that urges us to stay.

Night makes us aware of our insignificance. A café can fend off these feelings. The older waiter in Hemingway's story *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* (1933) notes how his café provides an elderly customer with some sense of security in the night:

> It is the light of course but it is necessary that the place be clean and pleasant. You do not want music. Certainly you do not want music. Nor can you stand before a bar with dignity although that is all that is provided for these hours. What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it

needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was *nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada*. [nothing and then nothing and then nothing]

Strong (1988) remarks on the similarities between the isolation of Hopper's images and the loneliness of Robert Frost's poems. Hopper read and admired Frost's poems. Jo Nivison painted a picture of him reading Frost in 1955 (Levin, 1980b). Frost's poem *Desert Places* (1934) ends:

> And lonely as it is, that loneliness
> Will be more lonely ere it will be less –
> A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
> With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars – on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

There is something essentially American about the lonely individualism – the internal desert places – of Hopper, Hemingway and Frost.

Ecphrasis

Ecphrasis (Greek: words about) is the verbal description of a work of art, either real or imagined, expressed in vivid poetic language (Heffernan, 2015; Hollander 1988, 1995; Hollander & Weber, 2001; Panagiolidou, 2013). Ecphrasis is concerned with the effects the art on the viewer whereas "interpretation" deals with the what and how of these efects (Carrier, 1987).

Perhaps more than any other artist, Hopper has stimulated the imagination of poets and writers. Poems and stories written in response to his paintings have been collected in several anthologies (Block, 2016; Levin, 1995; Lyons et al., 1995),

and individual poets have composed whole books inspired by his images (Farrés, 2009; Hoggard, 2009; Strand, 1994). The following are three examples of Hopper's images and the poetry and prose that they have evoked.

Hopper's 1921 etching *Evening Wind* shows a nude woman about to lie down in bed as the wind blows the curtain into the room. The viewer feels that he is in the same room as the woman, and this intimacy recalls Degas' paintings of women bathing. The Hopper website suggests that the sudden interruption of the wind might be akin to the appearance of a god, like the annunciation to Mary or the shower of gold that fell upon Danae.

Robert Mezey (Levin, 1995, p 24) describes the etching in a beautifully constructed sonnet:

> One foot on the floor, one knee in bed,
> Bent forward on both hands as if to leap
> Into a heaven of silken cloud, or keep
> An old appointment – tryst, one almost said –
> Some promise, some entanglement that led
> In broad daylight to privacy and sleep,
> To dreams of love, the rapture of the deep,
> Oh, everything, that must be left unsaid –
>
> Why then does she suddenly look aside
> At a white window full of empty space
> And curtains swaying inward? Does she sense
> In darkening air the vast indifference
> That enters in and will not be denied,
> To breathe unseen upon her nakedness?

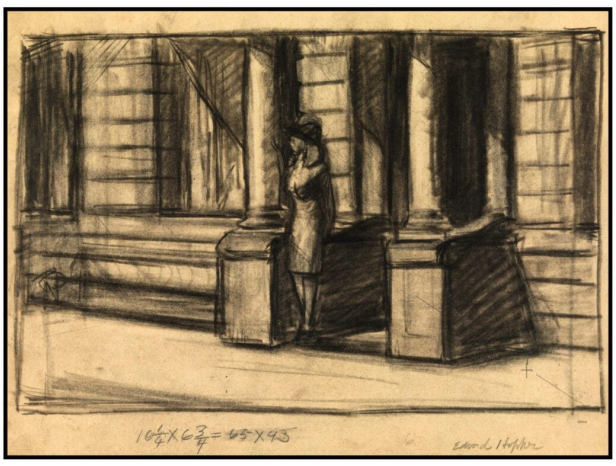
Hopper’s 1939 painting *New York Movie* depicts an usherette at one of the grand movie theaters in New York. She is standing beautifully and pensively near the side exit.

Leonard Michaels (Lyons et al, 1995, p 3) wonders about who she might be:

> Of course, she wasn’t going anywhere. I mean only that there was drama in the painting, a kind of personal story, and it was more engaging, more psychologically intense, than the movie on the distant blurry screen, a rectangle near the upper left corner of the painting, like a window in a dark room. The usherette isn’t looking at that movie, isn’t involved with any movie drama, any mechanical story told with cuts and fades while music works on your feelings. Her drama is mythical, the myth of Eurydice doomed to wait at the edge of darkness. The red flashes in the shadows of the painting are streaks of fire and streams and gouts of blood. Eurydice stands at the edge of Hades waiting for Orpheus.

This movie theater, like many others in Hopper's day, is called the Orpheum.

The 1943 painting of *Summertime* shows a young woman in a thin dress standing at the door of a New York building. She is about to face the day. She feels warm but a cooling breeze blows the dress against her body.



James Hoggard (2009) imagines Hopper talking about his painting:

> It’s good you noticed, if you did
> A number, I’ll say, have not come close
> This one’s a nude, the clothes a guise,
> a mask, a witty, illusory stab
> at idiot propriety – imagination strips
> everything bare, as I’ve done here:
> the nipples and heft of breasts in view
> and the screaming delight of thighs
> rising toward the truth between them,
> as suggested by the curtain’s cleft –
> all this a celebration of my mood,
> and my mood trumps anything that’s yours
>
> This lass, who looks sweetly nubile now,
> is Jo, my wife, whose age has been reduced
> by the cleverness of my brush and paint
> I’ve stripped her nearly bare, but I
> have also preserved defiant ghosts
> in the willful set of her swelling lips
>
> The tensions and songs here are mine
> You can do with your own what you will

Homage in Film and Photography

Hopper’s work has had a large influence on the visual arts as well as on poetry. Many of Hopper’s paintings depict large ornate 19th-Century houses – often standing isolated from other buildings. One such picture is *House by the Railroad* (1925). According to Levin (1985) this was likely partially based on a house in Haverstraw just north of his home in Nyack (lower left of the illustration below). This house is across the street from the railway: Hopper often compressed the distances

between things in his paintings. The Mansard roof and central tower and columned porch were also found in other houses that Hopper painted. These houses defiantly insists on their isolated existence.

Variations on this house have appeared in several movies: most importantly Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Terrence

Malick’s *Days of Heaven* (1978). These sets are shown in the illustration above (lower middle and lower right).

Many photographers have been profoundly influenced by Hopper’s pictures. Phillip Lorcia diCorcia photographs isolated people in urban settings: his images suggest what Hopper might have seen he had lived a further fifty years (Llorens & Ottinger 2012, pp. 306-309). Even more recently, the photographer Richard Tuschman has recreated many of Hopper’s paintings in photographs. The illustration below shows Hopper’s 1926 painting *Eleven a.m.* together with Tuschman’s *Woman at a Window*, 2013. The chair has changed from blue to pink and the model now wears heels. Most importantly her face is visible.

Empty Rooms

Hopper was always intrigued by the play of light in empty rooms. His 1951 painting *Rooms by the Sea*, shows an empty room leading through an open door to the sea. The image derives from the Hopper's studio in Truro on Cape Cod. The door does not directly open onto the sea: Hopper has compressed the space. The main room in the painting is completely bare. On the left, however, another room can be glimpsed with a couch, a chest-of-drawers, and a painting on the wall. Hollander (2001, pp. 72-25) suggests that the two rooms might represent the memories of the past and the presentiments of the future.

One of Hopper's late paintings *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963) is devoid of detail. The room contains nothing but the light. The

stark simplicity almost approaches the abstract, though Hopper would insist that the image is still tied to reality.

Strand (1994, pp. 57-58) remarks:

> In the later painting, *Sun in an Empty Room*, there is nothing calming about the light. It comes in a window and falls twice in the same room—on a wall close to the window and on a slightly recessed wall. That is all the action there is. We do not travel the same distance—actual or metaphorical—that we do in *Rooms by the Sea*. The light strikes two places at once, and we feel its terminal character instead of anything that hints of continuation. If it suggests a rhythm, it is a rhythm cut short. The room seems cropped, as if the foreground were cut away. What we have is a window wall, with the window framing the highlighted leaves of a nearby tree, and a back wall, a

> finality against which two tomblike parallelograms of light stand up-right. Done in 1963, it is Hopper’s last great painting, a vision of the world without us; not merely a place that excludes us, but a place emptied of us. The light, now a faded yellow against sepia-toned walls, seems to be enacting the last stages of its transience, its own stark narrative coming to a close.

Last Things

Hopper’s last painting, *Two Comedians* (1965) portrays two actors taking their bows on a stage raised high above the audience. They actors are the artist and his wife. Representing himself as a comedian refers back to his earlier painting *Soir Bleu.* The illustration below shows the painting together with Scarduelli’s impression of the elderly couple in their studio (Rossi & Scarduelli, 2021).

The Portuguese poet Ernest Farrés (translated by Lawrence Venuti, 2006) imagines Hopper’s comments on the painting

Perhaps it’s the costume
that lets me laugh,
or smile as it were –
for me they’ve been the same

Perhaps it’s the clown’s disguise
that lets me be
looser than I usually am
strutting cock-proud now,
goofy-eyed at a crowd,
the illusion of a crowd
no one sees but you and me

Clowns, we move toward stage’s edge,
a place I’ve made like a roof’s edge,
with threat or promise of a fall

But the moment seems sweet,
our domestic wars almost done,
and white-clad and foolscapped,
we seem blest as we press
toward the last edge we’ll meet,

our lyrical selves always in France,
our final days just bibelots:
Nous sommes, Jo et moi, les pierrots

Final Words

Hopper painted the real world, but he allowed his imagination to interact with his perception. Conaty (2022, p 14) remarks that he often felt torn between working from the fact and improvising upon what he saw. Hopper argued against abstract expressionism, insisting that art should always have its source in “life.” The following is his 1953 statement on art from the short-lived magazine *Reality* (quoted in Llorens & Ettinger, 2012, p 275):

> Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the

> artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world. No amount of skillful invention can replace the essential element of imagination. One of the weaknesses of much abstract painting is the attempt to substitute the inventions of the intellect for a pristine imaginative conception. The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of color, form, and design. The term “life” as used in art is something not to be held in contempt, for it implies all of existence, and the province of art is to react to it and not to shun it. Painting will have to deal more fully and less obliquely with life and nature’s phenomena before it can again become great.

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Intimations of Mortality

We have been here before. The coronavirus pandemic has many precedents. Over the centuries various plagues have swept over our world. Many millions of people have died before their time. From 1347 to 1351 the Black Death killed about 30 million people in Medieval Europe: over a third of the population. From 1918 to 1920 the Great Influenza killed about 50 million people: about 2.5% of the world's population. Each of these pandemics was as deadly as World War I (about 20 million) or World War II (about 70 million). Pandemics are more worrisome than wars: we cannot sue for peace with a virus. Most of us survived even the worst of past infections. Our systems of immunity will likely once again become victorious in this present pandemic. But just like after a war, we shall be severely chastened. How close we will have come to death will change the way we think. Everything will be

seen through the mirror of our own mortality and the transience of our species. The nearness of an ending will distort our thinking. We shall have strange dreams and frightening visions.

John of Patmos

Such dreams and visions came to a man named John almost two millennia ago. In the second half of the 1st Century CE, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, the Christians of the Roman Empire were severely persecuted, the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and the Roman Empire was shaken by attacks from without and rebellions from within. There was no pandemic but life was just as uncertain.

On the island of Patmos just off the west coast of what is now Turkey, a Christian named John experienced disturbing visions of the future. He described these in a manuscript that began with the word *apokalypsis* (Greek for "unveiling"). This became *Revelation*, the last book in the Christian New Testament (Koester, 2014; Quispel, 1979). The illustration on the right, from the *Bamberg Apocalypse*, an illuminated manuscript from the 11th Century, shows an angel telling John what he should write:

> The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his

servant John (Revelation 1:1)

For many years, Christian scholars assumed that John the Apostle, the youngest of Christ's disciples, was the author of *Revelation,* the Gospel of John and the three Epistles of John. Most modern scholars consider it unlikely that he wrote any of these works. They suggest three separate authors one for the gospel, one for the three epistles, and one for the apocalypse. One telling point is that each author describes the end-times very differently. For example, the Antichrist is mentioned in the epistles (e.g. 1 John 2:18), but not in the apocalypse. The author of *Revelation* was probably a Jewish-Christian prophet living in Asia Minor – John of Patmos. He may have written the book over many years. One suggestion is that he began writing as a Jew and later converted to Christianity (Koester, 2014, pp 68-71).

The visions described by John are stunning in their force and detail. The Whore of Babylon, the Seven-Headed Beast, and the Four Horsemen have become part of our collective consciousness.

Revelation is the most interpreted and least understood book of the Christian Bible (Quispel, 1979; Koester, 2014). Some have interpreted the visions as describing the troubled time in which they were experienced. The Seven-Headed Beast could then represent Rome (with its seven hills, or its seven emperors), and the Rider on the White Horse could represent the Parthians who threatened the peace of the Middle East. Others have considered the visions as prophesying the later history of the Christian Church. The Whore of Babylon was the papacy of Rome for Protestants and the heresies of the Reformation for Catholics. Others believe that Revelation foretells the Last Days, that are yet to come, when Christ will judge both the quick and the dead.

John's first vision was of the Lord seated upon a throne in Heaven. This is illustrated below in the 11th-Century Bamberg

Apocalypse, and in the 1498 woodcut by Albrecht Dürer. Around the throne were four beasts in the form of Man, Lion, Ox and Eagle, probably representing the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Around them were four and twenty elders, clothed in white and wearing crowns of gold. In the Lord's right hand was a book "sealed with seven seals." The structure of this book is not clear. Perhaps it is made up of seven scrolls one rolled up within the other (Quispel, 1979, p 51). A mystical lamb appears and proceeds to open each of the seals.

The Four Horsemen

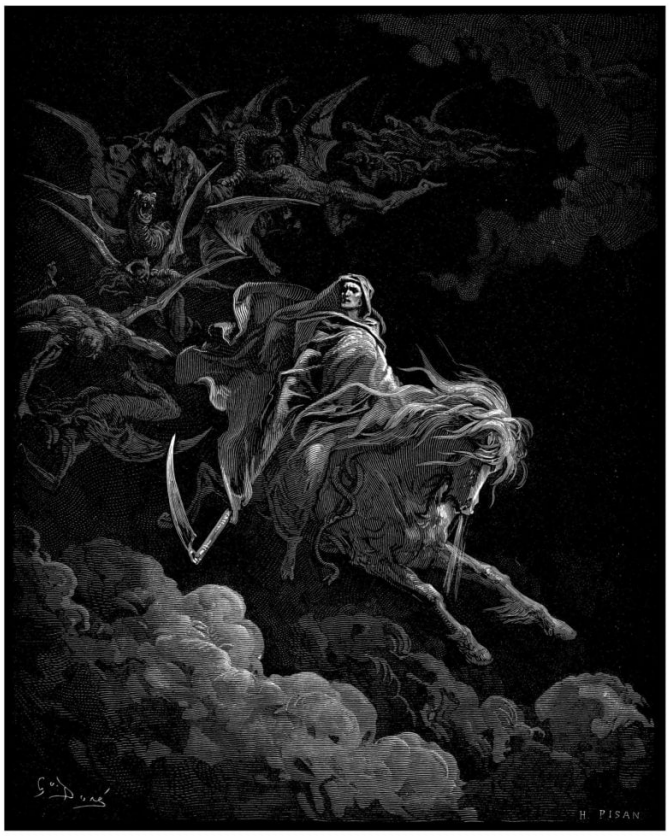
As the first four seals are opened four horsemen appear:

> And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.
> And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.
> And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.

> And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.
> And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.
> And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.
> And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see.
> And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth. (Revelation 6:1-8)

Only the fourth horseman is clearly identified by John as Death. The color of his horse has been interpreted as “pale,” although the Greek *chloros* is actually better translated as “green.” Perhaps John envisioned a sickly pale green color. The identity of the other three is unknown (reviewed by Koester, 2014, pp 392-398; and in Wikipedia). The rider of the black horse with his scales for weighing and pricing food was almost certainly Famine. The rider of the Red Horse was probably War. The first horsemen has been interpreted in many ways. Perhaps he is Christ, perhaps the Antichrist. Some have considered him as Conquest though this seems to overlap with the rider of the Red Horse. Pestilence or plague seems the most reasonable interpretation. His arrows could then represent the transmission of infection.

The most famous depiction of the Four Horsemen is the 1498 woodcut of Albrecht Dürer, illustrated on the right. The first three horsemen look like mercenary warriors from the Hundred Year War. Death is a skeletal figure riding an emaciated horse. He clears the world of those who die from pestilence, war and famine.



The 1865 wood-engraving by Héliodore Pelan based on a drawing by Gustave Doré gives Death a more majestic appearance, and grants him the scythe that has become his symbol. The scythe refers the apocalyptic passages in the Gospels that consider the final harvest of human souls. Doré also depicts the dark shades of Hades that John saw following after Death.

Pale Horse, Pale Rider

In 1918 Katherine Anne Porter almost died from the Great Influenza while she was in Denver working as a journalist (Barry, 1963). In 1939 she published *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* a short novel about that experience. In the novel she calls herself Miranda (from the Latin, "to be wondered at"). *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* was published together with two other stories – *Old Mortality* and *Noon Wine* – and gave its title to the collection.

The novel opens with a dream. Miranda is about to go riding, but she cannot decide which horse to borrow for a journey she does not wish to take. She decides against Miss Lucy "with the long nose and the wicked eye," and Fiddler "who can jump ditches in the dark," and choses Graylie "because he is not afraid of bridges." These horses are those that were ridden long ago by Amy, the wife of Miranda's Uncle Gabriel. Amy was a beautiful and spirited young woman, who committed suicide before Miranda was born. Her story was told in *Old Mortality,* one of several Miranda stories.

In the dream Miranda must go riding with a stranger who has been hanging about the place. She mounts Graylie, and urges him on. They fly off, over the hedge and the ditch and down the lane:

> The stranger rode beside her, easily, lightly, his reins loose in his half-closed hand, straight and elegant in dark shabby garments that flapped upon his bones. (Porter, 1939, p 181)

Suddenly, she pulls Graylie up, the stranger rides on, and Miranda wakes up.

She remembers the events of the day before, particularly her visit to the infirmary at the army camp, and her tryst with her new boyfriend Adam, a young and handsome soldier about to be sent to France. She is not feeling well, but goes to work

and once again meets Adam.

The next day she feels quite ill, and is seen by a doctor who prescribes some medications and says he will check on her later. Adam comes to see her and comforts her. They talk of their love for each other, about the war and about old songs they had heard when they were younger. One of these is a spiritual that began “Pale horse, pale rider, done taken my lover away.” The doctor returns and arranges for Miranda to be admitted to hospital. She has contracted influenza, perhaps from her visit to the infirmary.

While in hospital Miranda comes close to death but survives

> Silenced she sank easily through deeps under deeps of darkness until she lay like a stone at the farthest bottom of life, knowing herself to be blind, deaf, speechless, no longer aware of the members of her own body, entirely with-drawn from all human concerns, yet alive with a peculiar lucidity and coherence; all notions of the mind, the reasonable inquiries of doubt, all ties of blood and the desires of the heart, dissolved and fell away from her, and there remained of her only a minute fiercely burning particle of being that knew itself alone, that relied upon nothing beyond itself for its strength; not susceptible to any appeal or inducement, being itself com-posed entirely of one single motive, the stubborn will to live. This fiery motionless particle set itself unaided to resist destruction, to survive and to be in its own madness of being, motiveless and planless beyond that one essential end. (pp 252-3).

She has a vision of a place reached by crossing a rainbow bridge. Graylie was not afraid of bridges. There Miranda sees in the shimmering air “a great company of human beings,” all the people she had known in life. From this apparent heaven she returns to the reality of the hospital. She has miraculously comeback from the dead. She lives up to her name

– someone to be wondered at.

In her convalescence she learns that Adam had also became ill, probably having caught the disease from her. However, though Miranda had survived, Adam had died.

Outside the bells are ringing to celebrate the end of the war. As Miranda prepares to leave the hospital, she requests some essentials to begin her new life:

> One lipstick, medium, one ounce flask Bois d'Hiver perfume, one pair gray suede gauntlets without straps, two pairs gray sheer stockings without clocks … one walking stick of silvery wood with a silver knob. (p 262).

She will be pale and elegant like the rider she dreamed about at the beginning of her illness, the rider that done take her love away. She has been irretrievably marked by death. As she leaves the hospital Miranda thinks

> No more war, no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns; noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything. (p 264)

Life is now defined by what it is not – no war, no plague, no noise, no light. Porter's words recall Wilfred Owen's 1917 poem *Anthem for Doomed Youth* which begins with the "monstrous anger of the guns" and ends with "each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds" (Owen, 1985, p 76). Much poetry was written about the terrible loss of life in the Great War. Very little is concerned with the great epidemic of influenza that marked its ending (Crosby, 1989; Fisher, 2012).

Miranda's final claim "Now there would be time for everything" is the tragedy of the book. She is now free to do as she wishes but there is nothing that she wishes to do.

Porter spent many years before she fully recovered from her experience in Denver. She did not publish her first stories until 1930, and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* did not come out until 1939. Some sense of Miranda's feelings at the end of that book is perhaps present in the 1942 portrait drawing of Porter by Paul Cadmus.

The Great Influenza

The influenza that almost killed Katherine Anne Porter swept across the world between 1918 and 1921 (Barry, 2004; Crosby, 1989; Spinney, 2017; Taubenberger & Morens, 2006). No one is sure where it began. The first cases were seen in Kansas, and the disease spread rapidly through the US army camps where young men were being trained before going to fight in France.

The following is the iconic image of the epidemic: the make-shift infirmary at Camp Funston, Kansas. The photograph is strangely still. It should be accompanied by the sound of intermittent coughing. The light rakes across the camp cots,

randomly selecting one soldier or another, much as the disease would select those who would die. There was no treatment: oxygen would not be used for pneumonia until after the war (Heffner, 2013). About a quarter of the young men in this photo likely died of influenza. More US soldiers died of influenza than during battle.

The disease quickly spread to the battlefields of Europe. None of the combatant-countries wished to acknowledge that their troops were ill. Since the first officially reported cases occurred when the disease spread to Spain, the pandemic was thereafter miscalled the Spanish Flu. In this posting it is called the Great Influenza.

The 1918 pandemic was unusual in that it the young and healthy were more susceptible to the disease than the elderly. This may have been related to the close quartering of the young soldiers. Or it might have been caused by an overly reactive immune system.

Coronavirus COVID-19 acts similarly to the influenza virus in terms of its spread through airborne droplets, and in terms of how its major morbidity is due to a viral pneumonia. The

coronavirus differs from the Great Influenza in that it affects the elderly more than the young. Nevertheless, we should look to the Great Influenza in terms of what might happen in our current pandemic.

A pandemic is characterized by two main parameters. The contagiousness of the disease is measured by the basic reproduction number (R_0). This is the number of new people that will become infected from one individual patient. If R_0 is less than 1 the disease dies out; if it is greater than 1 the disease spreads exponentially through the population. The virulence of the disease is assessed by the case fatality rate (CFR). This measures the proportion of infected patients that die.

For the Great Influenza R_0 was about 2 (Ferguson et al. 2006), and the CFR was about 2.5% (Taubenberger & Morens, 2006). We do not yet know for sure how the present coronavirus COVID-19 compares. Early data from China suggest that R_0 is about 2, and the CFR about 5% (Wu et al., 2020). Since we have not yet done sufficient testing to be sure of the number of cases in the population, the CFR is likely overestimated. Most of the tested cases are patients who have been severely symptomatic. If there is a significant number of asymptomatic (and untested) cases, the CFR will be lower (discussed extensively on the World in Data website). It might approach the CFR estimated for the Great Influenza, but it will be at least an order of magnitude greater than seasonal flu (<0.1%).

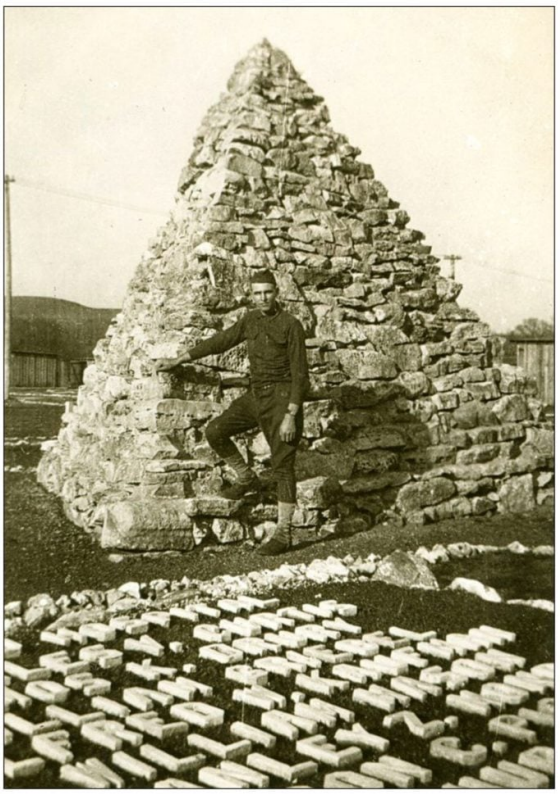
For those who wish to consider all the other great epidemics of human history, Wikipedia has listed their estimated values for R_0 and CFR.

The numbers for COVID-19 Pandemic indicate we must be extremely cautious so as not to endure a repeat of the Great Influenza. Since stories are often more convincing than numbers, we can briefly consider the effect of the

Philadelphia’s Liberty Loan Parade on September 23, 1918. Despite warnings about the influenza, the city went ahead with a huge parade to drum up support for the US war effort. A few days after the parade, hundreds of people became ill. Soon the number of ill patients increased. Hospitals rapidly became overcrowded and unable to take new cases. By the end of the years the number of cases exceeded 100,000 and the number of dead approached 13,000, over 1% of the city’s population (Barry, 2004, pp 220-227; Kopp & McGovern, 2018)). In contrast after the first recorded cases of influenza in St Louis, that city quickly instituted measures against the spread of the disease, such as closing schools and banning public gatherings. The number of deaths in St Louis per 100,000 population during the epidemic was less than half that in Philadelphia (Hatchett et al, 2007).

In Philadelphia and across the world morticians and gravediggers rapidly became overwhelmed and bodies began to pile up in the streets. In Rio de Janeiro, Jamanta, a famous carnival reveller, commandeered a tram and a luggage car and swept through the city picking up bodies and delivering them to the cemetery (Spinney, 2017, p. 54-55).

Despite its death toll, the Great Influenza was largely ignored by historians until the possibility of new influenza pandemics became real toward the end of the 20th Century. Thousands of monuments memorializing those who died in the Great War exist all over the world. Monuments to those who died of influenza are scarce, even though those who died of the disease outnumbered those who died in battle. The soldiers at Camp Fenton erected their own memorial to their colleagues who had died of the influenza (illustrated on the right, with its designer Henry Hardy). The monument was a simple pyramid of piled up stones with the names of the victims written in smaller stones on the grass. The camp and its monument have been long ago abandoned.



One of the reasons for the lack of attention that the Great Influenza received may have been that it did not fit with any overarching narrative. Though many died, they did not die for some noble cause. The disease was largely random it its killing.

The Black Death

Even though it did not kill so many, the Black Death had a far greater impact on our history. It shattered the society of the Middle Ages, disrupting the feudal system, and questioning the power of the Church. Part of this impact was due to the Bubonic Plague being far more virulent than either the influenza or the coronavirus. The Case Fatality Rate during the Black Death was over 30%. The disease was caused by a

bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which is endemic in rats and transmitted to human beings by fleas. The infected rats and their fleas came to Europe from the East on merchant ships. The plague began in port cities such as Naples, Venice and Genoa, are rapidly spread throughout Europe (McMillen, 2016; Snowden, 2019).

Nowadays we have antibiotics that can kill the bacteria that causes the Bubonic Plague. Furthermore, we understand how it is transmitted and can prevent this by controlling human exposure to rats and fleas. In the 14th Century there was nothing to do but flee. This flight actually increased the spread of the disease, which was carried by the fleas on all those who ran away.

The Black Death bequeathed us with our most potent image of death as a skeletal figure, often clad in a shroud or black cloak and carrying scythe – the “grim reaper.” Such figures were often portrayed leading various people from all stations of life in a “dance of death.” The statue illustrated on the right is from the tomb in Trier Cathedral of Johann Philipp von Wallerdorff who died in 1768.

Many considered the Black Death as God’s punishment for humanity’s sins, and decided that a great return to God was necessary. Yet the plague had randomly killed both saint and sinner. Others thought that the plague was God’s demonstration that the Church had gone astray and needed to be reformed. Yet both priests and parishioners were equally affected.

And so, a few came to the idea that perhaps there was no God. The only justice in the world was at the hand of human beings. And their only recourse was themselves. And if they could ultimately survive the plague, they could perhaps settle on a different world, where reason ruled instead of faith.

The Seventh Seal

In *Revelation* after the four horsemen, the fifth and sixth seals are opened. These bring forth to John a vision of the Christian Martyrs, and then a vision of all those who had been saved by faith in Christ. Finally, the last seal is opened:

> And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. (Revelation 8:1)

Christians interpret the silence as representing the awe that occurs when one realizes the greatness of God and his program for the future. Ingmar Bergman considered it differently. Much of his work is concerned with the silence of God. All our prayers no matter how fervent are met with silence. He made this the subject of a trilogy of films: *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light* (1963) and *The Silence* (1963).

The idea is also at the heart of his earlier 1957 film *The Seventh Seal*. The quotation from Revelation about the opening of the seventh seal and the silence in heaven begins the film. A knight Antonius Block (Max von Sydow) has just returned to Sweden from the Crusades. He has brought with him a game of chess that he learned in Palestine. All of Europe is in the grip of the Black Death. On a beach Antonius prays to God. After his prayer, Death (Bengt Ekerot) appears. Antonius challenges Death to a game of Chess to decide his fate. The following is a clip from the movie. The sound of the waves goes silent when Death appears.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/7thseal-chess-x.mp4

Bergman based the idea of the game of chess from a 1480 fresco (right) painted by Albertus Pictor in the Täby Church near Stockholm. As the film proceeds, Death ultimately wins the game, and leads Antonius and his family off in a dance of death. The film is not accurate historically: the crusades ended long before the Black Death. However, it is one of our most vivid depictions of human mortality.

Playing Chess with Death

Death is now among us. Not in as the dark figure portrayed by Bengt Ekerot, but in the form of a coronavirus epidemic. The disease is not as virulent as the Black Death. However, it is likely just as contagious and just as virulent as the virus that caused the Great Influenza. How do we prevent what happened in 1918 when Death took millions of people before

their time?

How do we play our game of chess with Death? We still have no specific treatment, and there is as yet no vaccine. Unlike in 1918, however, we now have oxygen therapy and, if necessary, artificial ventilation. These procedures can help patients with pneumonia survive until their immune systems can finally destroy the virus. Furthermore, we have monitors such as finger oximeters that can determine when oxygen therapy is needed.

What is most important is to inhibit the spread of the disease in the population. The most powerful means to do this involves identifying all patients with the disease, tracing all people who have come in contact with these patients, testing these contacts, and quarantining both the patients and their contacts (whether or not they are infected) until they are no longer contagious. Since we have tests that are reasonably specific for the virus, this approach is definitely possible, and is being used successfully in China and in South Korea.

In the absence of contact tracing, we can limit the spread of the disease by staying away from our fellows beyond the distance that airborne drops can travel: “physical distancing” (a more appropriate term than “social distancing”). Physical distancing can certainly slow down the spread of the disease so that hospital facilities for treating those patients that develop pneumonia do not become overwhelmed. However, it will ultimately have to be replaced with contact tracing. Or the Dance of Death will continue.

Despite our best efforts many people will die in the pandemic. Though we know we have to die sometime, we generally believe that this will not be tomorrow. Nowadays death is closer. We need to come to terms with it. Through whatever stories, dreams and visions we can muster. We cannot play chess well without equanimity.

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Antigone

Sophocles' play *Antigone* tells the story of a young woman who defies the laws of the state in order to do what she believes is right. The issues considered in the play remain as important now as they were almost two and a half millennia ago. Should one follow one's conscience or obey the law? Does justice transcend the law? How does one determine what is right?

In the words of Hegel, Antigone is

> one of the most sublime and in every respect most excellent works of art of all time. Everything in this tragedy is logical; the public law of the state is set in conflict over against inner family love and duty to a brother; the woman, Antigone, has the family interest as her 'pathos', Creon, the man, has the welfare of the community as his. (Hegel, 1975, p 464).

The word *pathos* most commonly means the quality of something that evokes pity. However, Hegel uses the word to denote "an inherently justified power over the heart, an essential content of rationality and freedom of will" (p 232). Pathos is the emotional commitment that defines a person – his or her driving passion. Sophocles' play presents the conflict of these passions.

The Theban Myths

In order to understand *Antigone* we need to know what has happened before the play begins. Antigone (441 BCE) was the first of what are now known as Sophocles' three Theban Plays, the others being *Oedipus Tyrranus* (429 BCE) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (409 BCE). The plays were not conceived as a trilogy and *Antigone* was written before the other two. Aeschylus had also written three plays about Thebes but the initial two of these (about *Laius* the father of Oedipus and his version of *Oedipus*) have been lost. Only the third remains: *Seven Against Thebes* (467 BCE), which describes the siege of Thebes by the Argives. *Antigone* begins just after the events described in this play.

From the extant plays we can piece together the mythic narrative that leads to Antigone. Laius, king of Thebes, married to Jocasta, is told by the Delphic Oracle that he can only keep his city safe if he dies childless. After having drunkenly fathered Oedipus, Laius has his son left on Mount Cithaeron to die. However, the boy is found by a shepherd and ultimately adopted as a son by King Polybus of Corinth.

When he comes of age Oedipus is told by the Oracle that he will murder his father and marry his mother. Oedipus flees Corinth to prevent this from happening. On the way to Thebes at a place where three roads meet, he comes upon another traveler. They argue and fight; Oedipus kills the man; the man was Laius.

Oedipus continues on to Thebes. The city has long been plagued by the Sphinx, a monster sent by the gods because of some ancient crime of the Thebans. The Sphinx poses a riddle to all who pass by and devours those that fail to answer correctly: “What goes on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three at night.” The illustration at the right shows a representation of Oedipus and the Sphinx in a vase from around 500 BCE, now in the Vatican. (The sphinx seems much less monstrous than the legend indicated.) Oedipus solves the riddle – “man, who crawls in infancy, walks as an adult and uses a cane in old age.” This releases the city from the monster’s power. In gratitude the citizens of Thebes make Oedipus king and grant him the recently bereaved Jocasta as his wife. Oedipus and Jocasta have four children: the boys Polyneikes and Eteokles, and the girls Antigone and Ismene

The gods, displeased at the unrevenged death of Laius, bring a plague down upon Thebes. In order to stop the plague Oedipus searches for his father’s murderer. In the course of his investigations he realizes first that he was the killer, and ultimately that Laius was his father and Jocasta his mother. Jocasta hangs herself. Unable to bear the pain of his

knowledge Oedipus blinds himself with Jocasta's brooch pins. Exiled from Thebes he seeks sanctuary in the grove of the Furies at Colonus, a village near Athens. Here Theseus, king of Athens, takes pity on him.

His daughters Ismene and Antigone come to comfort their father in Colonus. In Thebes the sons of Oedipus initially decide to alternate the kingship, but Eteokles then banishes his older brother Polyneikes and becomes sole king of Thebes. Polyneikes visits Oedipus in Colonus to get his blessing for a revolt against his brother, but Oedipus curses both his sons and prophecies that they will die at each other's hand. Oedipus dies. His daughters return to Thebes.

Polyneikes and six other generals raise an army from the rival state of Argos and attack Thebes. The Thebans ultimately defeat the besieging army. Near the end of the siege, Polyneikes and Eteokles fight and kill each other.

The deaths of Polyneikes and Eteokles became a popular motif for sculpture, the illustration below showing a relief on an Etruscan funerary urn from Chiusi (circe 200 BCE).

The following illustration from a 19th century jewel shows a more restrained view of the brothers' deaths.

The Story of Antigone

After the deaths of Polyneikes and Eteokles, Kreon, the brother of Jocasta, becomes king of Thebes. He decrees that Eteokles be given a hero’s funeral rites but that the body of the traitor Polyneikes’ be left to rot. Anyone who disobeys this ruling will be put to death. Despite the warnings of her sister, Antigone refuses to obey Kreon’s commandment and casts earth over Polyneikes’ body. The illustration below shows Juliet Binoche in the 2015 production of Antigone at the Barbican in London.

Antigone is caught in the act. The following illustration from a Greek vase (circe 400 BCE) shows Antigone, flanked by two guards holding spears, brought before Kreon.

This is the crucial exchange between the two:

> **Kreon**: Now tell me, not at length, but in brief space,
> Knew you the order not to do it?
>
> **Antigone**: Yes

I knew it; what should hinder? It was plain.

Kreon: And you made free to overstep my law?

Antigone: Because it was not Zeus who ordered it,
Nor Justice, dweller with the Nether Gods,
Gave such a law to men; nor did I deem
Your ordinance of so much binding force,
As that a mortal man could overbear
The unchangeable unwritten code of Heaven;
This is not of today and yesterday,
But lives forever, having origin
Whence no man knows: whose sanctions I were loath
In Heaven's sight to provoke, fearing the will
Of any man. I knew that I should die –
How otherwise? Even although your voice
Had never so prescribed. And that I die
Before my hour is due, that I count gain.
For one who lives in many ills, as I –
How should he fail to gain by dying? Thus
To me the pain is light, to meet this fate:
But had I borne to leave the body of him
My mother bare unburied, then, indeed,
I might feel pain; but as it is, I cannot:
And if my present actions seems to you
Foolish – 'tis like I am found guilty of folly
At a fool's mouth! (ll 446-470, Young translation)

This is one of the greatest speeches ever spoken on the stage. It comes in four parts. First, Antigone scorns the proclamation of Kreon. Made neither by the gods of Olympus nor by the lords of Hades, this was an "order" rather than a "law." Second, she vaunts the eternal "unwritten code of Heaven" that guides human behavior and that must not be disobeyed. In the third section of the speech, Antigone recognizes that her defiance might bring about her death. However, this will bring relief to one who has already lost father, mother, and two brothers. Finally, she tells Kreon

that she is not the one who is acting foolishly. He who does not understand the code of Heaven is far more fool than she. The following film-clip shows Irene Papas as Antigone and Manos Katrakis as Kreon (Tzavellas, 1961):

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Antigone-and-Creon.mp4

The chorus is upset by Antigone's defiance. Kreon refuses to grant Antigone mercy and sentences her to be buried alive in a cave. Kreon's son, Haimon, in love with Antigone, pleads with his father, but Kreon remains adamant. In his defense, he states the case for the rule of law:

> Obedience is due
> To the state's officer in small and great,
> Just and unjust commandments; …
> There lives no greater fiend than Anarchy;
> She ruins states, turns houses out of doors
> Breaks up in rout the embattled soldiery;
> While Discipline preserves the multitude
> Of the ordered host alive. Therefore it is
> We must assist the cause of order.
> (ll 665-676, Young translation)

Haimon urges his father not to be so stubborn:

> it's no disgrace for a man, even a wise man,
> to learn many things and not to be too rigid.
> You've seen trees by a raging winter torrent,
> how many sway with the flood and salvage every twig,
> but not the stubborn—they're ripped out, roots and all.
> Bend or break. The same when a man is sailing:
> haul your sheets too taut, never give an inch,
> you'll capsize, and go the rest of the voyage
> keel up and the rowing-benches under.
> (ll 710-717, Fagles translation)

Kreon refuses to listen to his son.

Meanwhile, Antigone bemoans her fate. She accepts that she did what she had to do, but she regrets that she was not able to marry or have children. She does not understand why the gods have not intervened to save one who served them truly. Before she is taken to the cave she asks the Thebans to behold one who has been condemned

> τὴν εὐσεβίαν σεβίσασα. (ten eusebian sebisasa) (l 943)
> In an act of perfect piety (Carson translation)
> For doing reverence where reverence was due. (Brown translation)

The noun *eusebia* means an act of reverence or piety; the verb *sebizo* is to worship or honor. Carson (2015, pp 5-6) remarks about this emphatic conclusion:

> Both noun (*eusebia*) and verb (*sebizo*) derive from the Greek root *seb-*, which refers to the awe that radiates from gods to humans and is given back as worship. Everything related to this root has fear in it. But *eusebia* is a fear that moves as devotion – a striving out of this world into another and of another world into this.

Teiresias, the blind seer, tells Kreon that the gods are displeased: they wish Antigone to be freed and Polyneikes properly buried. Kreon orders Antigone's release but she has already killed herself. In grief at her death, Haimon commits suicide. In grief at the death of her son, Kreon's wife Eurydike also commits suicide. Utterly broken, Kreon is led away, his life emptied of any meaning. He is "as a dead man who can still draw breath." (l 1167, Gibbons translation)

The Choral Odes

One of the great attractions of Sophocles' play is the way in which the chorus of Theban elders comment on the action. The play contains six main choral odes. The first is a celebration

of the Theban triumph over the besieging Argives. The most exciting recent translation of this begins

The glories of the world come sharking in all red and gold
we won the war
salvation struts
the streets of sevengated Thebes
(ll 100-102, Carson translation)

The choral odes were sung and danced by a chorus of about fifteen men in the area of the theatre known as the *orchestra* ("place for dancing"). Carl Orff wrote music for the performance of *Antigonae* (1949) that suggests how the chorus might have sounded. The following is Orff's music for the introduction of the Chorus and the beginning of this first ode:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/orff-interlude-and-beginning-of-blick-der-sonne.mp3

The second ode, often known as the *Ode to Man*, considers how wonderful is the creature called man, who can navigate the sea, cultivate the land, tame the animals, build homes for protection against the elements, and find medicine for his ailments. The following translation of the beginning of the ode attempts the rhythms of the Greek:

At many things – wonders
Terrors – we feel awe
But at nothing more
Than at man. This
Being sails the gray-
White sea running before
Winter storm-winds, he
Scuds beneath high
Waves surging over him
On each side
And Gaia, the Earth

Forever undestroyed and
Unwearying, highest of
All the gods, he
Wears away, year
After year as his plows
Cross ceaselessly
Back and forth, turning
Her soil with the
Offspring of horses.
(ll 332-345, Gibbons translation)

The following is Carl Orff's 1949 setting of the opening of the *Ode to Man*. Orff used the words of Hölderlin: *Ungeheuer ist viel. Doch nichts ungeheuerer als der Mensch* (Many things are wonderful but nothing more wonderful than man). Orff's music captures the awe at the beginning of the ode, and then gives a driving rendition of human achievements.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Orff-antigonae-ungeheuer-ist-viel-beginning.mp3

The Greek word used to describe man at the beginning of this famous ode – *deinos* – usually means "extraordinary" or "wonderful." It also has connotations of the supernatural or uncanny, the unexpectedly clever, or even the monstrous. The word comes from a Proto-Indo-European root *dwei* denoting fear. An example of this root in English is "dinosaur." *Deinos* has no obvious equivalent in English. The German *ungeheuer* (enormous, terrible, unnatural) used by Hölderlin captures many of its meanings.

The later choral odes in *Antigone* tell how human hopes often come to naught, describe the power of human passion, console Antigone as she is led away to her fate, and at the end of the play praise the gods who teach us wisdom. The following are three modern translations of the final words of the chorus:

Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy,

> and reverence toward the gods must be safeguarded.
> The mighty words of the proud are paid in full
> with mighty blows of fate, and at long last
> those blows will teach us wisdom
> (ll 1347-1353, Fagles' translation)
>
> Wise conduct is the key to happiness
> Always rule by the gods and reverence them.
> Those who overbear will be brought to grief.
> Fate will flail them on its winnowing floor
> And in due season teach them to be wise.
> (Heaney translation)
>
> There is no happiness, but there can be wisdom.
> Revere the gods; revere them always.
> When men get proud, they hurl hard words, then suffer for it.
> Let them grow old and take no harm yet: they still get punished.
> It teaches them. It teaches us.
> (Paulin translation)

Fagles has the gods teaching all of us, whereas Heaney has them only teaching the proud. Paulin gives both meanings. This section from Orff's *Antigonae* is appropriately otherworldly: *Um vieles ist das Denken mehr denn Glückseligkeit.* (Thought is much greater than happiness).

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Orff-antigonae-acct-5-ending.mp3

The following is a clip from the ending to Tzavellas' 1961 film with Manos Katrakis as Kreon and Thodoris Moudis as the leader of the chorus:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Antigone-ending.mp4

Conflict

The heart of the play is the conflict between Kreon and Antigone. Steiner (1984, pp 231-232) notes that

> It has, I believe, been given to only one literary text to express all the principal constants of conflict in the condition of man. These constants are fivefold: the confrontation of men and of women; of age and of youth; of society and of the individual; of the living and the dead; of men and of god(s). The conflicts which come of these five orders of confrontation are not negotiable. Men and women, old and young, the individual and the community or state, the quick and the dead, mortals and immortals, define themselves in the conflictual process of defining each other. Self-definition and the agonistic recognition of 'otherness' (of l'autre) across the threatened boundaries of self, are indissociable. The polarities of masculinity and of femininity, of ageing and of youth, of private autonomy and of social collectivity, of existence and mortality, of the human and the divine, can be crystallized only in adversative terms (whatever the many shades of accommodation between them). To arrive at oneself—the primordial journey—is to come up, polemically, against 'the other'. The boundary-conditions of the human person are those set by gender, by age, by community, by the cut between life and death, and by the potentials of accepted or denied encounter between the existential and the transcendent.

In his assessment of the play, Hegel focused on the conflict between a person's kinship-duties and the allegiance owed to the state (Reidy, 1995; Young 2013, pp 110-139). In his mind *Antigone* represented civilization's necessary change from family-loyalty to state-citizenship. This fits with Hegel's general view of history as a sequence of dialectic conflicts between different world-views. Progress occurs as the two competing ideas become reconciled. The tragedy occurs because neither Antigone nor Kreon can see the other side of the conflict. Antigone feels no duty to the state; Kreon pays no

attention to his family, completely disregarding his son's concerns.

The balance between Antigone and Kreon is what makes *Antigone* a tragedy. Albert Camus (1955/1968, p 301) differentiated tragedy from drama:

> the forces confronting each other in tragedy are equally legitimate, equally justified. In melodramas or dramas, on the other hand, only one force is legitimate. In other words, tragedy is ambiguous and drama simple-minded. In the former, each force is at the same time both good and bad. In the latter, one is good and the other evil (which is why, in our day and age, propaganda plays are nothing but the resurrection of melodrama). Antigone is right, but Kreon is not wrong.

In the conflict Antigone and Kreon are very similar in character. Steiner (1984, pp 184-5) points out

> Both Kreon and Antigone are *auto-nomists*, human beings who have taken the law into their own keeping. Their respective enunciations of justice are, in the given local case, irreconcilable. But in their obsession with law, they come very close to being mirror-images.

The tragedy evolves because neither Antigone nor Kreon is able to compromise. They are both bloody minded – obstinate to the point of bloodshed. However, Kreon is the more reprehensible: his edict forbidding the burial of Polyneikes is not based on either divine rule or reasoned thought.

Three conflicting forces are at play in *Antigone*. One is the law (*nomos*) of the state (*polis*). The second is the set of "unwritten rules" (*agrapta nomima*) that tell us what is right. The third is fate (*moira*) – the working out of what must necessarily happen. Of these only the first is easy to understand.

Natural Law

Antigone's "unwritten code of Heaven" is often considered the same as the "natural law" – that which we know because it is an essential part of our being (Robinson. 1991; Burns, 2002). Natural law is understood by "conscience" – our intuitive sense of what is right and wrong. Regardless of how we are educated or how our society operates, conscience tends to work similarly: murder and incest are wrong; hospitality and compassion are right. Human history has long realized that the laws promulgated to maintain order in particular societies may come into conflict with an individual's conscience. In these cases, the natural law should generally be paramount. This is the basis of civil disobedience. An unjust law – one that is out of harmony with the natural law – need not be obeyed:

> How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. (King, 1963).

However, the natural law is often difficult to determine. It is understood by intuition, and followed by inclination (Maritain, 2001, pp 32-38). So when should conscience take precedence over the law? The laws promulgated by a state should be and often are derived from the natural law. However, they sometimes also exist to entrench the status of the powerful.

The laws or commandments proclaimed in religious scriptures are also related to the natural law However, even this relationship is complex. On the one hand, the natural law can be conceived as independent of divinity. Hugo Grotius famously stated that we know what is right "even if we concede … that

there is no God" (*etiamsi daremus … non esse Deum*). Others, such as Maritain (2001, p 46), propose that the natural law as perceived by man derives from the "eternal law" as perceived by God. Human perception of the divine law is as yet imperfect.

The relation between natural law and nature is also complex. Laws of nature (*phusis*) are deduced from experience of the real world. They portray what is rather than what should be. Such laws can be demonstrated, analyzed and tested. The natural laws for human behavior are understood by intuition. We know what is right but we do not understand how we know. Nor can we demonstrate or test the laws that we follow.

If the natural law is the sum of human dispositions, then we might be able to study it in terms of evolution. Since most of human existence was spent in small bands that hunted and gathered on the African Savannah, many human dispositions to behave in particular ways may have been selected to promote the survival of these small groups. Commandments against murder (other than in self-defense) clearly facilitate group-survival. Edicts against incest decrease the probability of deleterious recessive genes becoming homozygous, and by promoting exogamy (marriage outside of the group) enlarge and strengthen the group.

If natural causes such as evolution are the basis for our morality, perhaps we can determine what is right by what is considered natural. Many people consider homosexuality "unnatural." In the Abrahamic religions, early laws expressly prohibited homosexual relations on pain of death.

> If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them." (*Leviticus* 20:13).

Aquinas argued that homosexuality is unnatural because it does

not lead to procreation, which is the natural purpose of sexual intercourse (*Summa Theologica* II I 94). Yet who or what defines the natural purpose of an act and why should there be only one purpose?

How does Antigone know that she is right to bury her brother, even if her act will entail her death? She is following a "custom" – the Greeks buried their dead. Other cultures cremate their dead, or leave them out to be devoured by carrion-eating birds – "sky burial." It is difficult to see burying the dead as an absolute requirement of natural law, though some unspecified honoring of the dead seems common to all human cultures.

Fate

The Ancient Greeks attributed much that happens in life to fate. Fate was often personified as three women – the *moirai*. The word derives from *meros*, a part, share or portion. *Clotho* spins the thread of a life; *Lachesis* allots the life to a particular person; and *Atropos* cuts the thread at death. Neither human nor divine intervention can affect the actions of the fates. The following is a print of *The Three Fates* (1558) by Giorgio Ghisi.

Although Antigone has obeyed the unwritten code of heaven, the

gods cannot intervene to save her from her ignominious death. That has been otherwise ordained – it is her fate. After Antigone is led away, the Chorus remarks that such apparently unjust ends have been suffered by others before her. Fate is a terrible thing:

> The power of fate is a wonder,
> dark, terrible wonder –
> neither wealth nor armies
> towered walls nor ships
> black hulls lashed by the salt
> can save us from that force.
> (ll 951-954, Fagles' translation)

Fate is described as *deinos* (terrible), the same word that the chorus used to describe man. We are both made and unmade by fate. We should follow the unwritten code of the gods, but doing so will not prevent death. The Fates operate according to some other code. Perhaps they follow necessity rather than justice. Perhaps they follow laws that operate beyond the individual life. The chorus briefly mentions such a possibility: Antigone may be paying for the sins of her father. However, it is possible that the Fates do not follow any code of justice. They may just enforce the physical laws by which the universe operates.

Justice

Justice is the human concept of what is right. Our words related to justice – law, morality, fairness, equity, right, righteousness – overlap in their meanings. The Greeks at the time of Sophocles also had many words (Steiner, 1984, pp 248-251; Nonet, 2006). Precise translations distinguishing these one from another are usually not possible, and the usage of the terms changed over the years.

The Greeks often personified their ideas in terms of gods. *Themis* was a Titaness who personified divine law. Zeus and

Themis had three daughters: *Dike*, law; *Eunomia*, order; and *Eirene*, peace. Dike is customarily represented with a sword and a set of scales for weighing right and wrong (as in the illustrated statue from the Frankfurt Fountain of Justice, an 1887 bronze replacement for the original 1611 stone statue). Another Greek word *dikaiosune* came to mean both a system of justice and the virtue of righteousness (Havelock, 1969). Antigone appeals to Dike as the supporter of the unwritten laws which require the burial of the dead.

The Greeks differentiated *nomos* – the set of socially constructed laws – from *phusis* – the laws underlying the universe. The word *nomima* (laws, regulations, customs) derives from *nomos* but Antigone used it to distinguish the eternal and unwritten laws from human laws. Words do not clearly show us what is right. And they fail to clearly differentiate laws that are given from those that are constructed. Sophocles' tragedy deals in part with our inability to know with certainty what is just.

Modern Adaptations

The story of Antigone has been retold many times (Chancellor, 1979: Steiner, 1984). These versions stress different aspects of the story, supplement the main plot with other events, or place the story in a different time and place. For brevity I shall only consider a few recent adaptations.

(i) Anouilh

During the Nazi occupation of France, Jean Anouilh wrote a version of Antigone that was set in modern times. The play was accepted by the censors and produced in Paris in 1944. Anouilh made Kreon a more sympathetic character. He removed from the play the character of Tiresias, who in Sophocles' original play confirmed that Antigone was right. The chorus was no longer a group of Theban citizens who commented on the actions. Rather the chorus acted as a foil between the audience and the actors, describing what was going to happen and why. In this way Anouilh distanced the audience from becoming directly involved in the tragedy.

Anouilh's Antigone is more of an existential heroine than a tragic one – she did what she did because she was seeking a reason for her life. As Kreon explains

> She wanted to die! None of us was strong enough to persuade her to live. I understand now. She was born to die. She may not have known it herself, but Polynices was only an excuse.

At the end after everyone who had to die has died, Kreon goes on about his work of governing the city. The chorus explains

> It's over. Antigone's quiet now, cured of a fever whose name we shall never know. Her work is done. A great, sad peace descends on Thebes, and on the empty palace where Creon will begin to wait for death. Only the guard are left. All that has happened is a matter of indifference to them. None of their business. They go on with their game of cards.

Anouilh's chorus thus appears to attenuate the tragedy. However, Anouilh and his audience most certainly understood the nature of Antigone's fever as *La Résistance*.

How could the German occupation authorities have allowed such a production? Steiner (1984, p. 190) notes that the evaluation of Antigone's story in Germany between the world wars differed

from that in other countries. Frightened by the communist revolts that followed the Great War, Germans saw the need for people like Kreon to maintain the safety of the state. So even if they might have felt that Antigone was right, they also knew that Kreon was not wrong. The great German philosopher Hegel had said that the state must necessarily take precedence over family and personal conscience.

(ii) Brecht

Bertolt Brecht wrote and produced a theatrically stunning version of *Antigone* in Switzerland in 1948. The play was preceded by a prologue set in Berlin in April 1945. This tells the story of how a young deserter from the army came to his sisters' home bringing food for his hungry family. However, he was captured by the police and hung for treason. His body was left hanging as an example to other would-be deserters. The prologue is doubly distanced from the play. As well as being set in the near present, the prologue is narrated to the audience by one of the sisters but acted out by both. The prologue ends with a police officer asking the sisters whether they knew the traitor. The first denies her brother, but the second goes out to cut down his body.

The play then reverts to Thebes. However, the situation differs from that of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Thebes had not been under siege. Rather Kreon had embarked on a war against Argos to gain their iron ore. Eteokles had been brutally killed during this war. Polyneikes saw his older brother being trampled to death, deserted from the futile battle, and was then killed by his own people. The opening choral ode, rather than celebrating the survival of the city, welcomes the wagons of booty and plunder returning from the war.

When Antigone is captured and brought before Kreon, she is bound to a board. Effectively she is carrying a door upon her back. A door she cannot open. The illustration (taken from the Suhrkamp edition of Brecht's play) is from the first

production:

Brecht’s Antigone acts politically. She defies Kreon not so much because of any unwritten laws but because she considers him an evil tyrant. She tries unsuccessfully to goad the chorus to join in her defiance. The exchange between Antigone and Kreon is more extended than in Sophocles. After her initial speech of defiance (much the same as in Sophocles), Kreon praises the success of the war, and Antigone continues:

> **Antigone:** The men in power always threaten us with the fall of The State.
> It will fall by dissension, devoured by the invaders
> and so we give in to you, and give you our power, and bow down;
> and because of this weakness, the city falls and is devoured by the invaders.
>
> **Kreon:** Are you accusing me of throwing the city away to be devoured by the enemy?
>
> **Antigone:** The city threw herself away by bowing down before you,
> because when a man bows down he can’t see what’s coming at him.

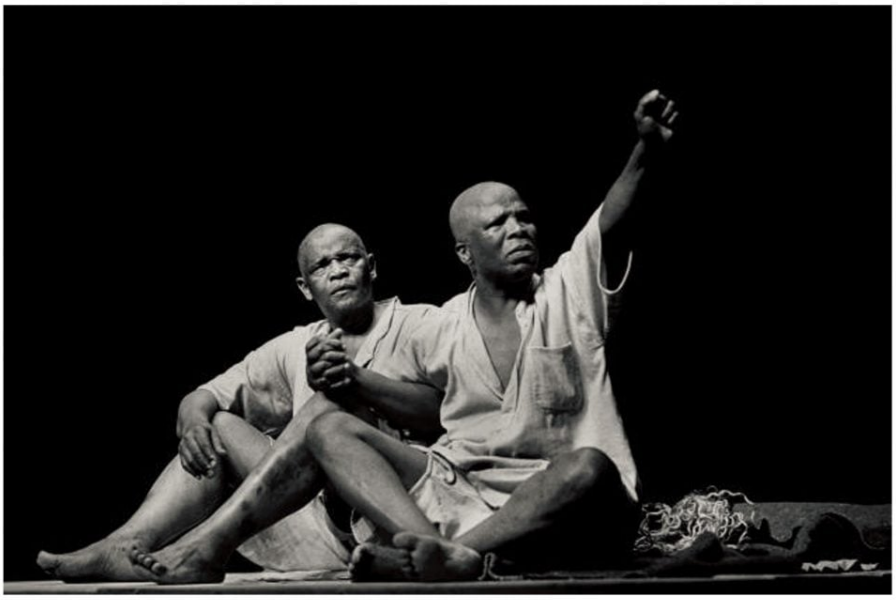
The story plays itself out as in the original Greek, but at the end the city falls to its enemies. The tragedy is that of the people who foolishly followed and who keep following a tyrant. The final words of the chorus are those of despair:

> For time is short
> and the unknown surrounds us; and it isn’t enough
> just to live unthinking and happy
> and patiently bear oppression
> and only learn wisdom in age.

(iii) Fugard

Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona created and produced a play called *The Island* in South Africa in 1973 as a protest against the persecutions of apartheid. The play is set in an unknown prison camp clearly modelled on Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was held. The play follows two cell mates, played by Kani and Ntshona, in prison for the minor offences of belonging to a banned organization and burning an identity card.

In successive scenes, the two men work at digging holes in the sand and filling them up again, rehearse a performance of Antigone that they plan to present to the camp, learn that one of them may be released but not the other, pretend to talk on the phone with friends and relatives, and finally present the dramatic confrontation between Kreon and Antigone. Below is a photograph showing Ntshona and Kani in the National Theatre revival of the play (2000):



Winston fears that his appearance as a young woman will only cause ridicule, and indeed John bursts into laughter when he first sees him in wig and costume. Yet no one laughs during the final scene when on a makeshift stage Winston tells John

> You are only a man Creon. Even as there are laws made by men, so too there are others that come from God. He watches my soul for a transgression even as your spies hide in the bush at night to see who is transgressing your laws. Guilty against God I will not be for any man on this earth.

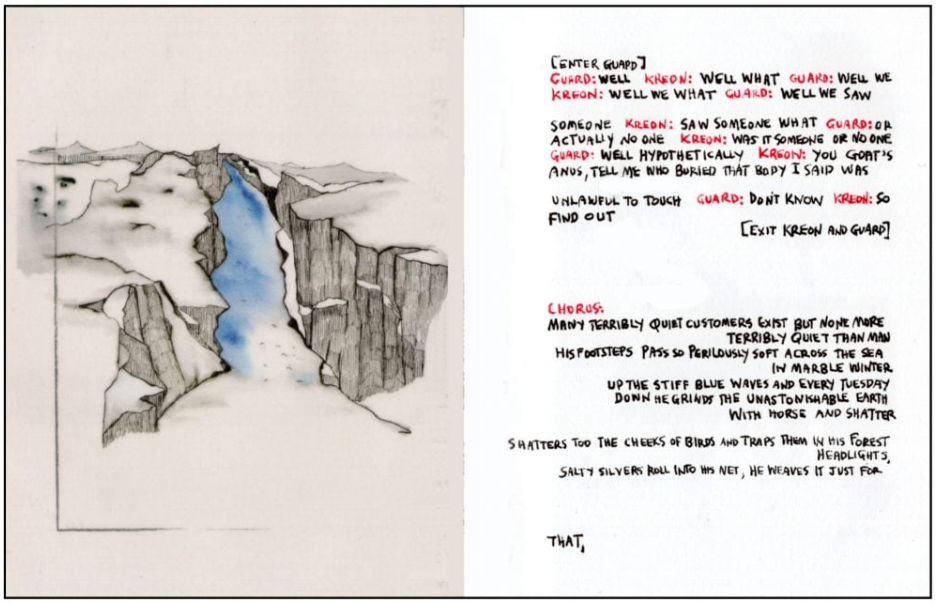
Nelson Mandela was imprisoned in 1962 for conspiring to overthrow the state. He was not released until 1990.

(iv) Carson

In 2012 Anne Carson wrote *Antigonick*, a version of *Antigone* that is more concerned with depicting the ideas and feelings of the play than rendering a literal translation. She added to the play the character of Nick, a surveyor who intermittently and mutely takes measurements of what is happening. Nick stands for the modern viewer who must somehow assess the play coming from a society many hundred years before our own.

The book is presented with a text that is handwritten by

Carson in small black capitals and illustrated with desolate landscapes and surrealistic images by Bianca Stone. These illustrations do not directly relate to the text but add to the book's sense of incomprehensible passion. Below is a representation the book's pages at the beginning of the *Ode to Man*


[ENTER GUARD]
GUARD: WELL KREON: WELL WHAT GUARD: WELL WE
KREON: WELL WE WHAT GUARD: WELL WE SAW

SOMEONE KREON: SAW SOMEONE WHAT GUARD: OR
ACTUALLY NO ONE KREON: WAS IT SOMEONE OR NO ONE
GUARD: WELL HYPOTHETICALLY KREON: YOU GOAT'S
ANUS, TELL ME WHO BURIED THAT BODY I SAID WAS

UNLAWFUL TO TOUCH GUARD: DON'T KNOW KREON: SO
FIND OUT

[EXIT KREON AND GUARD]

CHORUS:
MANY TERRIBLY QUIET CUSTOMERS EXIST BUT NONE MORE
TERRIBLY QUIET THAN MAN
HIS FOOTSTEPS PASS SO PERILOUSLY SOFT ACROSS THE SEA
IN MARBLE WINTER
UP THE STIFF BLUE WAVES AND EVERY TUESDAY
DOWN HE GRINDS THE UNASTONISHABLE EARTH
WITH HORSE AND SHATTER
SHATTERS TOO THE CHEEKS OF BIRDS AND TRAPS THEM IN HIS FOREST
HEADLIGHTS,
SALTY SILVERS ROLL INTO HIS NET, HE WEAVES IT JUST FOR
THAT,

As can be seen in the ode Carson's choice of words is designed to bring the audience the sense of the original Greek. The word *deinos* becomes "terribly quiet" – a description that captures the connotations of incomprehensibility and menace.

> Many terribly quiet customers exist but none more terribly quiet than man
> His footsteps pass so perilously soft across the sea in marble winter

The following illustration shows three other images from the book, one of a wedding cake in desolation, the second of cutlery flying apart under the influence of a thread (perhaps of fate), and the third of a horse upsetting a feast.



In addition, Carson sometimes includes commentary in the text. This brings the meaning up to date. In the original play just before Antigone exits to her death, the chorus provides a long discussion of the way in which fate has acted unfairly, quoting various stories from Greek mythology. A modern audience would not know these examples. In *Antigonick* Carson therefore replaces this choral ode by verse that slowly goes from mundane commentary to intense grief:

how is a Greek chorus like a lawyer
they’re both in the business of searching for a precedent
finding an analogy
locating a prior example
so as to be able to say
the terrible thing we’re witnessing now is
not unique you know it happened before
or something much like it
we’re not at a loss how to think about this
we’re not without guidance
there is a pattern
we can find an historically parallel case
and file it away under

Antigone buried alive Friday afternoon
compare case histories 7, 17 and 49

now I could dig up theses case histories,
tell you about Danaos and Lykourgos and the sons of Phineas
people locked up in a room or a cave or their own dark mind

it wouldn’t help you
it didn’t help me
it’s Friday afternoon
there goes Antigone to be buried alive
is there
any way
we can say
this is normal
rational
forgivable
or even in the widest definition just

no not really

(v) Zizek

In 2016 Slavoj Zizek, a provocative philosopher and communist, wrote a version of *Antigone* that provides three different endings. This idea of multiple endings came from Tom Tykwer’s film *Run Lola Run* (1998). The plot of Zizek’s *Antigone* proceeds as in Sophocles until Kreon sentences Antigone to death and is told by Tiresias that he has offended the gods. The first ending then follows as in Sophocles and results in the death of Antigone.

In the second ending the people of Thebes enflamed by the way Kreon offended the gods, rise up and murder him. They set fire to the city. Antigone survives though she is half-mad and does not understand why her simple act of defiance has led to such devastation. The chorus tells her that divine laws are not the ultimate authority:

> A society is kept together by the bond of Word,
> but the domain of logos, of what can be said,
> and this mysterious vortex is what all our endeavours
> and struggles are about. Our true fidelity
> is to what cannot be said, and the greatest wisdom
> is to know when this very fidelity

> compels us to break our word, even if this word
> is the highest immemorial law. This is where
> you went wrong, Antigone. In sacrificing everything
> for your law, you lost this law itself.

In the third ending Kreon and Antigone are reconciled, but the citizens of Thebes rise up against their rulers. Kreon is brutally executed because

> Much greater evil than a lack of leadership
> is an unjust leader who creates chaos in his city
> by the very false order he tries to impose. Such an order
> is the obscene travesty of the worst anarchy.
> The people feel this and resist the leader. A true order,
> on the contrary, creates the space of freedom
> for all citizens. A really good master
> doesn't just limit the freedom of his subjects,
> he gives freedom.

Antigone claims to be on the side of the revolution. But the leader of the people has her executed:

> But the excluded
> don't need sympathy and compassion from the privileged,
> they don't want others to speak for them,
> they themselves should speak and articulate their plight.
> So in speaking for them, you betrayed them even more
> than your uncle – you deprived them of their voice.

There is no catharsis. The revolution is brutal. The chorus attempts to excuse the horror by repeating the *Ode to Man*

> There are many strange and wonderful things
> but nothing more strangely wonderful than man

But one is left with the nightmare of revolutionaries settling scores by murder. One longs for the simplicity of Sophocles's original wherein Kreon and Antigone were both striving to do what they thought was right. In Ziztek no one is right. Violence is the only outcome. Justice is not possible. This is not my idea of *Antigone*. Zizek has not found a way out of the conflict at the basis of the story. Nor has he, a committed communist, portrayed the necessity of revolution as in any way attractive.

Novels

Natalie Haynes has retold the stories of Oedipus and Antigone from the point of view of Jocasta and of Ismene in her novel *The Children of Jocasta* (2017). In Sophocles' play Ismene, Antigone's younger sister, is the only member of Oedipus' family to survive. She initially serves as a foil for her sister, proposing compromise instead of defiance. Later she stands by her sister, though Antigone refuses her support. In Haynes' novel the plot has changed from that of Sophocles' plays, but the story still has its necessary confrontations and reconciliations. The plague plays the role of the Fates.

In *Home Fire* (2018) Kamila Shamsie has reinterpreted the story of *Antigone* in terms of Aneeka a young Englishwoman of Pakistani background. Her brother Parvaiz is recruited to ISIS and serves with the terrorists in Syria. Parvaiz is assassinated in Turkey when he tries to leave ISIS. The English government refuses to allow his corpse to be returned to England for burial, and arranges for it to be sent to Pakistan. Aneeka goes to Pakistan to protest this ruling but ultimately the body, the sister and her fiancé are blown to pieces in a suicide bombing.

The situation envisioned by Shamsie is clearly very possible. A citizen should have the right to be buried in his homeland. This right was recently tested in the case of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, one of the bombers at the Boston Marathon

(Mendelsohn, 2013). No funeral director or cemetery in Massachusetts would accept his body. After much dispute, a Christian woman in Virginia intervened, and the body was finally buried in an unmarked grave in a small Muslim cemetery in Virginia.

Novels are discursive. They provide us with a wealth of detail, in terms of both things and thoughts. They can discuss what might have been as well as what was. They lack the harsh simplicity of a play.

A Play for All Time

Sophocles' *Antigone* remains as a stirring invocation to do what is right. The world needs its Antigones. This was particularly evident in the days of Hitler (von Klemperer, 1992). Those who resisted Nazism did not succeed in changing their government. Yet they did show their countrymen that there were other ways to live and die than slavishly to follow a leader more concerned with power than with humanity.

Sophocles' play returns time and time again. Whenever governments repress the conscience of their people. World War II generated the *Antigone*s of Anouilh, Brecht and Orff. The situation in South Africa brought about Fugard's *The Island*. The situation in Northern Ireland led to Paulin's *The Riot Act*. Judith Malina translated Brecht's *Antigone* while in jail in 1963 because her Living Theatre had run afoul of the US government.

The philosophy of Sophocles combines a respect for human morality and responsibility with an acquiescence to fate (Kitto, 1961, pp 123-127). In this recognition of the role played by fate, Sophocles differs from his predecessor Aeschylus:

> The Aeschylean universe is one of august moral laws, infringement of which brings certain doom; the Sophoclean is one in which wrongdoing does indeed work out its own

> punishment, but disaster comes, too, without justification; at the most with ‘contributory negligence.’ (p 126)

Wonderful though man is he cannot control everything. This is most obvious in the fact of death. Yet before we die we can do what we believe to be right. This will not prevent our death but it will pay reverence to whatever ideas of transcendence we have conceived, be it the gods or the good.

We do not understand fate. I have already quoted the final words of Sophocles’ chorus – their praise of wisdom. Just before this they make two comments about fate. In reply to Kreon’s desire to die the chorus states

> That’s in the future. We must do what lies before us.
> Those who take care of these things will take their care.

And then when Kreon says that he prayed for what he longed for, they answer

> Don’t pray for anything – for from whatever good
> Or ill is destined for mortals, there’s no deliverance.
> (Gibbons translation, ll 1334-5, 1337-8)

Sophocles is clear. Do what you think is right. Be open to the ideas of others. Do not expect reward. You will die. Life will carry on.

Texts

Note: the lines for the quotations in this posting are those in the original Greek (Brown edition) and may not fit the lines of the translations.

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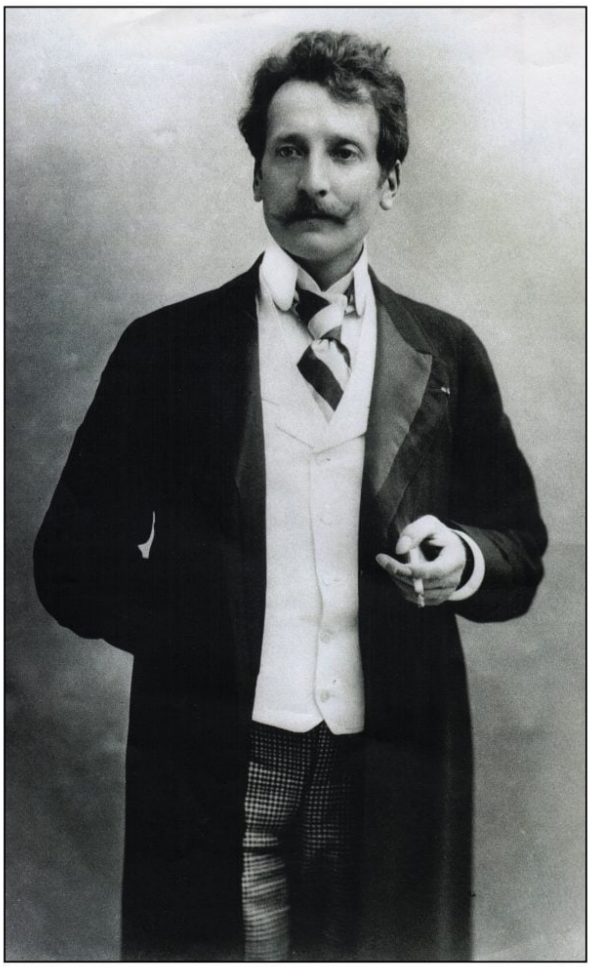
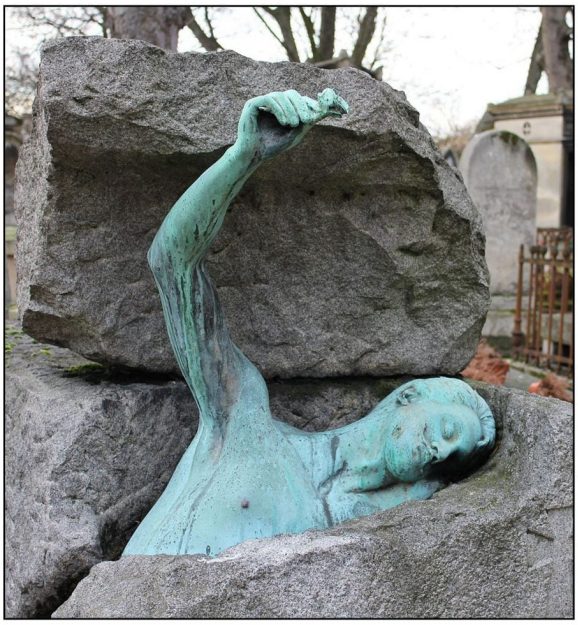
Bruges-la-Morte

In 1892 Georges Rodenbach published a short novel entitled *Bruges-la-Morte* (“Bruges, Dead City”). Although the book deals more with internal emotions than external reality, Rodenbach included in his book 35 photographs of the city of Bruges (Flemish, *Brugge*). The city thus plays as much a part in the novel as its human characters. This was the first time that a work of fiction had been photographically illustrated.

The Author



Georges Raymond Constantin Rodenbach (1855–1898) was born in Tournai, Belgium. His French mother and German father soon moved to Gand (Flemish *Gand,* English *Ghent*) in the Flemish northern region of Belgium, not far from Bruges. Rodenbach studied law at the University of Ghent and practiced briefly before turning to poetry and journalism. He moved to Paris in 1888, where he married a fellow journalist, wrote for the *Figaro* and served as a correspondent for the *Journal de Bruxelles*, He became friends with the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, and participated in the literary salons of the day, where he met Edmond de Goncort, Auguste Rodin, the young Marcel Proust, and Odilon Redon. As the 1894 photograph by Nadar shows, Rodenbach became quite the dandy. Bruges-la-Morte was initially serialized in the *Figaro* and then published in book form by Flammarion.



Rodenbach died in 1898 from the complications of an appendicitis. He was buried in Père-Lachaise cemetery. His monument by sculptor Charlotte Dubray (1902) is outrageously romantic. A bronze likeness of the dead poet emerges from the shattered grave holding aloft a rose. Beauty triumphs over death! Joël Goffin suggests that the tomb alludes to various occult and gnostic ideas promoted by the *Salon de la Croix+Rose* (1892-1897) established by Joséphin Péladan.

The City

Bruges was a major city in the medieval County of Flanders in the northern coastal plain of what is now Belgium. Connected to the North Sea by the estuary of the River Zwin, Bruges became an important trading center, closely associated with England through the wool trade, and with Scandinavia and the Baltics through the Hanseatic League, which maintained a major office (*Kontor*) in the city.

The city promoted religion as well as trade. The Church of Our Lady has one of the tallest spires in Europe. The Basilica of the Holy Blood enshrines a relic of Christ’s blood brought back from the Holy Land after the Second Crusade. The city was home to one of the larger Béguinages, communities of lay religious women. Some say that these housed women of the middle and upper classes whose fathers or husbands had died in the crusades.

Religion and trade both fostered art. Two great Flemish

painters of 15th Century, Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling, lived in Bruges. Within the Church of Our Lady is a sculpture of *The Virgin and Child* by Michelangelo, bought in 1504 by two wealthy merchants from Bruges.

Flanders changed hands several times during its golden age from the 12th to 15th centuries. At various times allegiance was paid to France, Burgundy, the Holy Roman Empire, and Spain.

However, by the 16th century, the River Zwin had become too silted to allow the passage of merchant ships. Wars of religion and succession devastated the countryside and the city lapsed into obscurity.

In the late 19th century Bruges returned into the public eye as a center for tourism. Most of its medieval buildings remained intact. Most striking is the medieval bell tower on the main square with its carillon. The atmosphere of past glories evoked by the canals and cobblestones fit well to the melancholy sensitivity of the fin-de-siècle.

Bruges remains to this day a beautiful city. The following photograph (Emmanuel Parent, 2013, Flickr, cropped) shows the Spiegelrei canal looking toward the Jan van Eyck square and the Burghers' Lodge (*Poorterloge*)

The Book

A brief summary of the plot of *Bruges-la-Morte* follows, with occasional quotations (from the Mosley translation) to illustrate the book's poetic style.

Five years after the death of his beautiful young wife in Paris, Hugues Viane remains in mourning. He has moved to the city of Bruges, whose quiet melancholy suits his persisting sadness. He tries to remember all he can about his wife. He does little else. Every day he walks around the city:

> In the mute atmosphere of the lifeless waters and streets Hugues felt his heartache less, and he could think more calmly about his wife. In the line of the canals, he was better able to see and hear her again, to discover her

> Ophelia face floating along, to listen to her voice in the high-pitched song of the carillon. (p. 18)

In a special room in his house Hugues keeps mementos of his wife: several portraits, furniture on which she had sat, cushions that she had embroidered, curtains that she had hung. The most treasured of these objects is a plait of her golden hair, displayed in a crystal case.

On one of his walks, Hugues sees a young woman who looks exactly like his dead wife. Entranced he follows her until she enters the theater. She turns out to be Jane Scott, a dancer in the opera *Robert le Diable* (Meyerbeer, 1831). She plays the spirit of the abbess Helena who comes back to life in the graveyard of the cloister along with her nuns. Tools of the devil, they convince Robert to steal the sacred branch from the tomb of Saint Rosalie. This will give him magical but unholy powers.

Hugues meets Jane, and she soon becomes his mistress. Hugues installs her in a pleasant house on the outskirts of Bruges. The people of Bruges and Hugues' housekeeper are scandalized by this affair. However, Hugues cares not. His sadness lessens. His memories have become a person.

> When he took her head in his hands and brought it close to him it was to look into her eyes, searching them for something he had seen in others: a nuance, a reflection, pearls, even some flowers with roots in the soul. (p. 42)

After a while Jane tires of her sad and serious lover. She takes up with her old friends, though she keeps Hugues as her lover and financial support. One day she decides that she should visit his house, to assess his fortune and see what jewelry she might acquire. She cajoles him with

> that tempting voice possessed by all women at certain times, a crystal voice that sings, swells into haloes, in eddies where men surrender, whirl around and let themselves go. (p.

88)

She visits Hugues on the day of the Procession of the Holy Blood through the streets of Bruges. Hugues is enthralled by the color and the music. Jane is bored, and jests about the mementos of Hugues' wife. She pulls the golden braid out of the crystal case and plays with it, winding it around her neck like a scarf. Hugues tries to retrieve it. Jane resists. Hugues becomes incensed. He pulls the braid taut and strangles her.

> She was dead – for having failed to guess the Mystery and that one thing there was not to be touched on pain of sacrilege. She had laid a hand on the revengeful hair, that hair which, as emblem for those who soul is pure and in communion with the Mystery – implied that the minute it was profaned, it would itself become the *instrument of death.* (p. 101)

The procession returns. The bells ring.

> Hugues repeated incessantly, "*Morte… morte… Bruges-la-Morte*," with a mechanical look, in a slack voice, trying to match "*Morte… morte… Bruges-la-Morte*," to the cadence of the last bells: slow, small, exhausted old women who seemed languishingly – is it over the city, is it over a tomb? – to be shedding petals of flowers of iron. (p. 102)

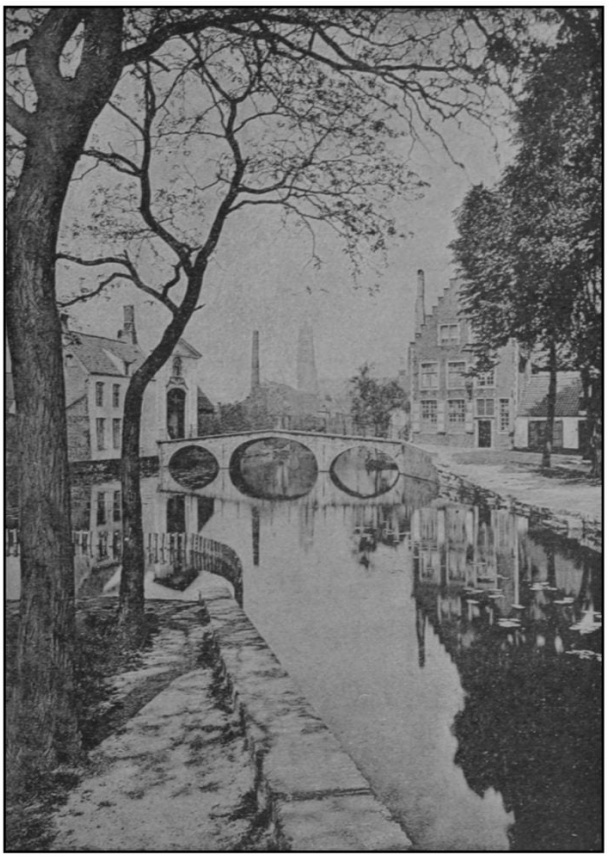
The Photographs

Rodenbach considered the photographs an essential part of his book. In his foreward he states that Bruges acts as a "main character, a city associated with states of mind, one that is able to advise, dissuade, induce action." Since Bruges was not simply a back-drop but a force in the action, Rodenbach thought is essential to have the city "reproduced visually within the text: the quays, deserted streets, old residences,

canals, Béguinage, churches, belfries, cult objects."

The illustrations for *Bruges-la-Morte* were chosen from the catalogue of Lévy and Neurdein, who specialized in touristic photographs used for postcards, souvenirs and stereographs. Most of the chosen images contain no people.

The photographs are loosely associated with events occurring in the text. They show the reader with what Hugues might be seeing while the text describes what he is feeling. For Hugues, Bruges had become the incarnation of his lost love. Like his wife Bruges was once but is no more alive and beautiful.

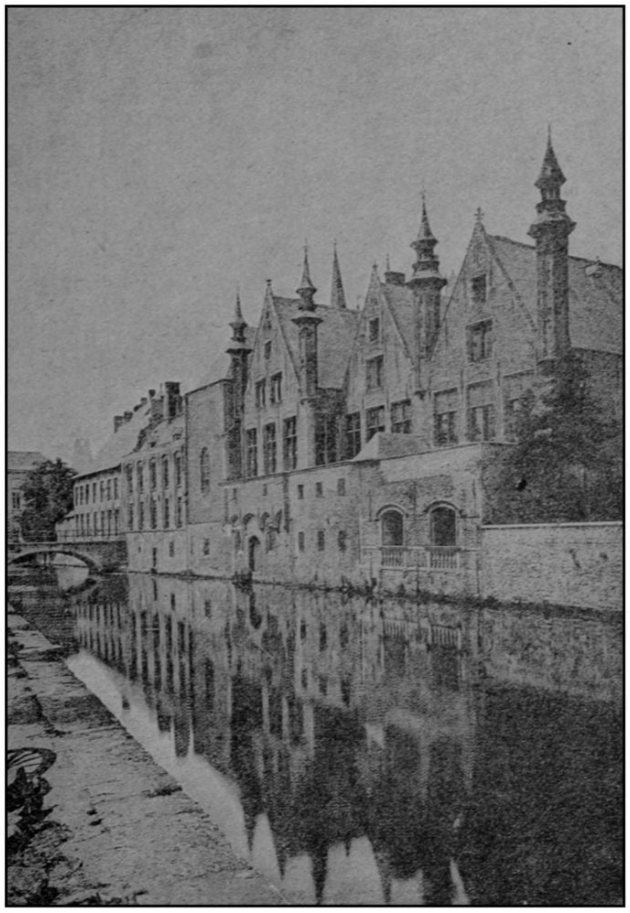


> But as evening fell, he liked to wander about, looking for resemblances of his sorrow in the lonely canals and the religious quarters of the city. (p. 18)

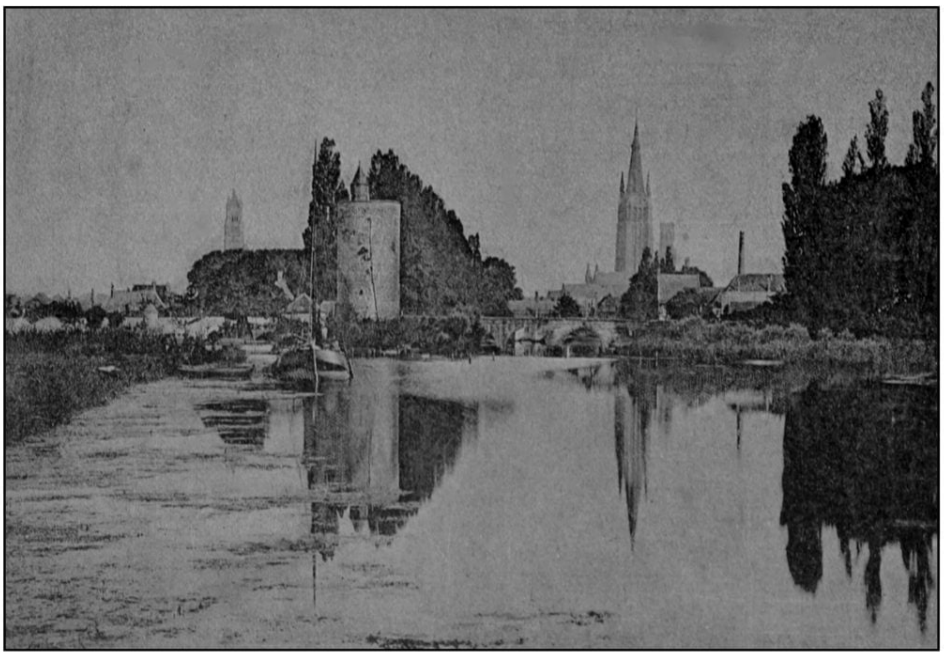
On the right is the illustration that faces the page containing this quotation. It shows the canals and the bridge leading to the entrance to the Béguinage.

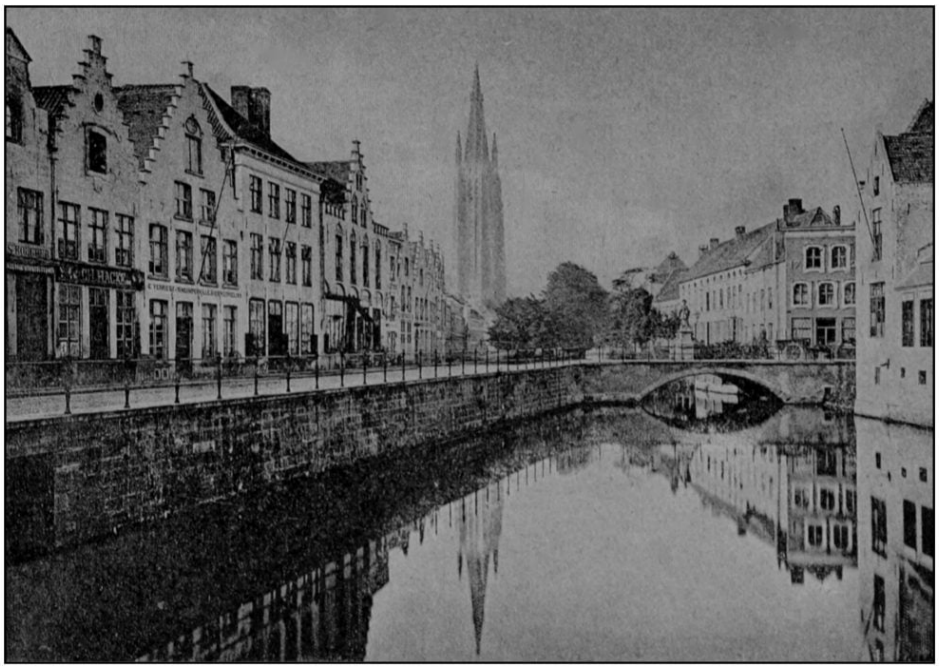
The new art of photography was a way of fixing forever the essence of a person or a place – a way of stopping time. One of the main themes of the novel is that time can neither be stopped nor reversed. The dead do not return. *Bruges-la-Morte* is a novel about memory and representation. Does Jane

represent Hugue’s lost wife or is she simply a resemblance? Photography is intimately related to memory. Old photographs are an aid to remembering the when and where of our past. Sometimes the photographs become our memories.



The canals in Bruges are a boon to the photographer. They allow the real and the reflected to be captured simultaneously. The images suggest another world in the reflection beneath the real.





The use of photographs in novels did not catch on. Readers thought that it was the writer's responsibility to describe in words where things occurred as well as what was thought. Rodenbach himself noted in a later discussion about the concept of an illustrated novel that "even a mildly astute reader would always prefer to imagine the characters, since a book is only a point of departure, an excuse and a canvas for dreams." (Dossier in Flammarion edition of *Bruges-la-Morte*, 1998, pp. 331-332). However, I believe he is more concerned in this comment with illustrations that depict the events and

characters in a novel rather than just its setting.

Recently, W. G. Sebald has used photographs in his books *Vertigo* (1990), *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1999) and *Austerlitz* (2001). Like *Bruges-la-Morte* these writings deal mainly with states of mind. The low-resolution photographs provide a setting for the emotions.

Fernand Khnopff

Flammarion engaged the Belgian symbolist painter Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921) to provide an illustration for the frontispiece of *Bruges-la-Morte*. Khnopff had spent his early childhood in Bruges. His etching shows Hugues' dead wife lying upon the waters of Bruges before the bridge leading to the Béguinage.

Her pose recalls the 1852 painting of Ophelia by John Everett Millais. This fits with the text

> In the line of the canals, he was better able to see and hear her again, to discover her Ophelia face floating along, to listen to her voice in the high-pitched song of the

carillon. (p. 18)

Secret-Reflet (“Secret Reflection”), one of Khnopff’s later works (1902), is in the Groeningemuseum in Bruges. It combines two images. The upper circular picture shows Khnopff’s sister and muse Marguerite touching a mask of Hermes, the messenger of the gods. The lower shows a pastel drawing of the houses of Bruges reflected in the canals. This is similar to the illustrations in *Bruges-la-Morte*. The painting alludes to a secret life beyond or beneath our transient reality. The symbolists were fond of the tradition of hermeticism, deriving from the writings of the mythical Hermes Trismegistus. These brought together various strands of mysticism and Gnosticism to suggest the idea of a secret world, of which only the esthetically sensitive were aware.

Meanings

Bruges-la-Morte can be read as a simple story of how a young dancer was murdered by her lover. As such it vividly depicts the mental and emotional state of the murderer. Most importantly it shows how the atmosphere of a place – the mist, bells, reflections, loneliness, and religious processions of Bruges – can accentuate the emotions of love and grief, and allow them to change into rage.

This is a prototypical symbolist novel. Literary symbolism was a reaction against the naturalism of Balzac and the realism of Zola. Rather than dealing with the external forces that control one's life, the symbolists focused on the internal emotions and motivations that cause action. The protagonist is typically a solitary and sensitive individual, a precursor of the existential hero of the mid-20th century. And the story looks less at the events and settings and more at their effects on the mind. As Stéphane Mallarmé remarked the goal was 'to depict not the thing but the effect it produces.'

A symbol is a way of representing the invisible. It combines concealment with revelation: an idea is reproduced only through allusion, and yet this allusion increases our

understanding of the idea. The Symbolist Movement tended to spiritualism and the occult. More concerned with the ideal than with the specific, it was perhaps literature's way of replacing the religion that science and realism had defeated.

In his introduction to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899/1919), Arthur Symons concluded

> Here, then, in this revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition; in this endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realized by the consciousness; in this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech. In attaining this liberty, it accepts a heavier burden; for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes ltself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual. (p. 9)

Much, then, rides below the surface in Rodenbach's novel. The story alludes to various myths that tell of the return of loved ones after death, most importantly that of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the canonical version of the myth, Orpheus succeeds in convincing the gods to release Eurydice, but then disobeys their injunction not to look back to see that she is following him out of Hades, and she vanishes. Other versions (e.g. Plato) suggest that the returning Eurydice was only an apparition.

Rodenbach's story is also related to the magical golden bough that mortals need to descend into Hades (e.g. Aeneid, Book VI, ll 171-203). Jane dances as one of the demonic nuns in *Robert le Diable* who convince the hero of that opera to take the magic branch from the tomb of the saint. The golden plait of his wife's hair that Hugues has preserved has both magical and murderous properties. It maintains the memory of his love and

acts as an instrument of death

Die Tote Stadt

Erich Wolfgang Korngold was impressed after reading a dramatic adaptation of *Bruges-la-Morte* that had been translated into German as *Die stille Stadt* (“Silent City”) or *Der Trugbild* (“Mirage”). In 1920 he completed an operatic version of the play – *Die tote Stadt* (“Dead City”). The libretto, attributed to a fictional Paul Schott, was actually written by Korngold and his father.

The operatic story differs for that of the novel. Hugues becomes Paul (**P**) and Jane becomes Marietta (**M**). Paul’s first assignation with Marietta occurs at his residence. She plays the lute and sings an old song, sounding exactly like his dead wife. The song itself is concerned with how love should persist after death. The singing becomes an ecstatic duet:

: Glück, das mir verblieb, rück zu mir, mein treues Lieb. Abend sinkt im Hag bist mir Licht und Tag. Bange pochet Herz an Herz Hoffnung schwingt sich himmelwärts.	Joy, that near to me remains, Come to me, my true love. Night sinks into the grove You are my light and day. Anxiously beats heart on heart Hope itself soars heavenward.
P: Wie wahr, ein traurig Lied.	How true, a sad song.
M: Das Lied vom treuen Lieb, das sterben muss.	The song of true love, that must die.
P: Ich kenne das Lied. Ich hört es oft in jungen, in schöneren Tagen.	I know the song. I heard it often in younger, in better days. It has yet another verse– Do I know it still?

Es hat noch eine Strophe— weiß ich sie noch?	Though sorrow becomes dark, Come to me, my true love.
M & P: Naht auch Sorge trüb, rück zu mir, mein treues Lieb. Neig dein blaß Gesicht Sterben trennt uns nicht. Mußt du einmal von mir gehn, glaub, es gibt ein Auferstehn	Lean (to me) your pale face Death will not separate us. If you must leave me one day, Believe, there is an afterlife.

Paul falls passionately in love with Marietta. The rest of the story – the loss of love, the desecration of the golden plait, and Marietta's ultimate murder – follow in a similar fashion to the novel. However, in the opera these events turn out to be a dream rather than reality, and Paul awakens to find that Marietta is still alive. His dream finally reconciles him to the death of his wife. He sings a new verse to the lute song, bidding her farewell until they meet again – not in this world but in the afterlife.

arre mein in lichten Höhn – hier gibt es kein Auferstehn	Wait for me in heaven's plain – here we shall not meet again.

The opera conveys the intense emotions of the original. However, the addition of music attenuates the sadness, and makes the story far more sensuous.

The following is a 1924 version of the duet *Glück das mir verblieb* with Richard Tauber and Lotte Lehman.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Lotte-Lehmann-Richard-Tauber-George-Szell-Gluck-das-mir-verblieb.mp3

The duet is often sung as a solo concert aria. The following

is a 1994 version by Anne Sofie von Otter with the accompaniment adapted for piano quintet.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Mariettas-Lied-a-s-von-otter-forsberg-piano-quintet.mp3

Aria

In 1987, Don Boyd asked ten different directors to produce short films based on famous opera arias. These were put together to make the feature film *Aria*. Bruce Beresford visualized *Glück das mir verblieb* as an intensely erotic engagement between two young lovers (Elizabeth Hurley and Peter Birch) in the city of Bruges. The soundtrack is from the first recording (1975) of the full opera with Carol Neblett and René Kollo. Enjoy!

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ARIA_Die-Tote-Stadt.mp4

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and also at Archives et Musée de la Littérature.

The 1998 Flammarion version reproduces the original text and photographs and contains extensive notes by J.-P. Bertrand and D. Grojnowski.

The illustrations are reproduced in Wikipedia Commons

My quotations are to the English translation by Philip Mosley, originally published in 1986, and reprinted in 2007 by University of Scranton Press. This has no photographs. Another English translation by Will Stone and Mike Mitchell, published by Dedalus Press in 2009, includes a series of photographs of present-day Bruges. Since the original illustrations were an essential part of the book, this seems inappropriate.

Bruges-la-Morte Website

Joël Goffin runs an impressive website *Bruges-la-Morte,* which is packed with information about the book and its author, and which presents his own book (2017) about the novel: *Le Secret de Bruges-la-Morte*.

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Hammershøi

The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) has recently acquired a 1905 painting by the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916), the first by this artist in a Canadian public collection: *Interior with Four Etchings:*

The etchings are arranged on the wall above an elegant side-table, upon which stand three pieces of Royal Copenhagen porcelain. The details of the etchings cannot be seen, but the upper two appear to be portraits. Light comes in from the window on the left, giving a subtle violet tinge to the grey walls and emphasizing their white trim. To the left of the table stands Hammershøi's wife Ida. She faces away from us, and we cannot see what she is doing. Perhaps she has just placed the plate on the table and has turned to look out of the window; perhaps she has taken something to the window to look at. The sunlight on her neck is vaguely erotic. Everything is balanced: the shadows share the space with the light; the blue-white porcelain complements the red-brown frames; the human figure suggests movement in a room that is otherwise completely still.

To celebrate this acquisition, the gallery is exhibiting this picture alongside 25 other Hammershøi paintings, all except one coming from the National Gallery of Denmark (*Statens Museum for Kunst*). The exhibition runs from April 16 to June 26, 2016. This is one of the most impressive exhibitions I have seen in recent years. I apologize that my enthusiasm has led to another long post. However, it contains more to see than to read.

Hammershøi is quite different from other painters. His palette is austere. The main colors are, gray and white and black. On one of the walls in the AGO exhibition is a commemorative poem

by Sophus Clausen written in 1916. The poem, at least in the English translation, is unremarkable except for occasional lines:

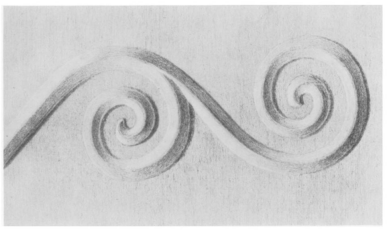
> How sweet to know that blacks and greys
> Give shelter to the light and let it stay
> …
> Gray is not grey nor is black ever black.

The greys in a Hammershøi painting are subtly tinged, often with violet, sometimes with yellow, occasionally with pink or green. On the predominantly grey background, objects are delineated in subdued browns. The most striking characteristic of the paintings is the way that they represent light. Light seems almost to move through the painted surfaces, filling out the space, defining what is present, bringing people into existence, and leaving without a sound.

The restricted palate of Hammershøi's paintings lead his friend Karl Madsen, an artist and historian, to suggest that he was Denmark's first "neurasthenic painter" (quoted in Vad, 1992, p. 73). The diagnosis of neurasthenia was popular at the time (Harris 2013). Its various symptoms, both physical (fatigue, dizziness) and mental (anxiety, melancholy), were attributed to a weak nervous system, unable to cope with the stress of modern urban life. The diagnosis is out of fashion nowadays, though similar symptoms occur in modern disorders such as chronic fatigue syndrome and dysautonomia. Although Hammershøi was quiet and withdrawn, he was far too productive to be considered neurasthenic. Nevertheless, his paintings have a tranquility that can provide respite from the hubbub of city life. They might represent a cure for rather than a result of neurasthenia.

In this posting, the paintings in the exhibition have been photographed within their frames; other paintings by Hammershøi and paintings by other artists are shown without frames.

Early Life



Hammershøi was the son of a prosperous Danish businessman. He displayed an early talent for drawing, and his family arranged for him to have lessons from the painter Niels Christian Kierkegard, a cousin of Søren Kierkegaard. The drawing on the right (Vad, 1992, p 11), from when Vilhelm was 11 years old, illustrates his early appreciation of light and shadow.

He continued his studies both at the Royal Danish Academy of Art and in the Free Study Schools. One of his teachers, P. S. Krøyer remarked that

> I have a pupil who paints most oddly. I do not understand him, but believe he is going to be important and do not try to influence him. (quoted in Vad, 1992, p 24)

His 1885 *Portrait of a Young Girl* (his sister Anna) was entered into competition for a prize at the Academy. Though it did not win, it was acclaimed by his fellow students, who protested the judges' decision. It is a remarkable painting: the face and posture are sensitively portrayed; the muted palette of the background gently situates the figure; the hands suggest both rest and tension. Anna's left hand steadies the image and allows the picture's transition from three to two dimensions.

In the autumn of 1888, Hammershøi stayed with his friend Karl Madsen, who lived in an old house just north of Copenhagen. There he painted his first "interior" – a picture of an old stove with an open doorway leading into a brightly sunlit room. The light seems almost personified – it enters the other room, comes through the door, pauses on the floor and casts a shadow toward the stove. The painting makes the viewer long to go into the next room to see whence the light comes from. This type of painting was to become Hammershøi's signature style.

Though an accomplished painter of portraits and of architecture, Hammershøi is most famous for pictures showing the effects of light on lonely rooms.

In 1888, the dentist, writer and art-collector, Alfred Bramsen, bought his first painting by Hammershøi. Over the next quarter century, he was an unflagging promoter of Hammershøi's work. After Hammershøi's death in 1916, Bramsen arranged for the first catalogue of the paintings. Artist and patron were totally unlike: one introverted, reticent and solitary, the other gregarious, confident and worldly-wise.

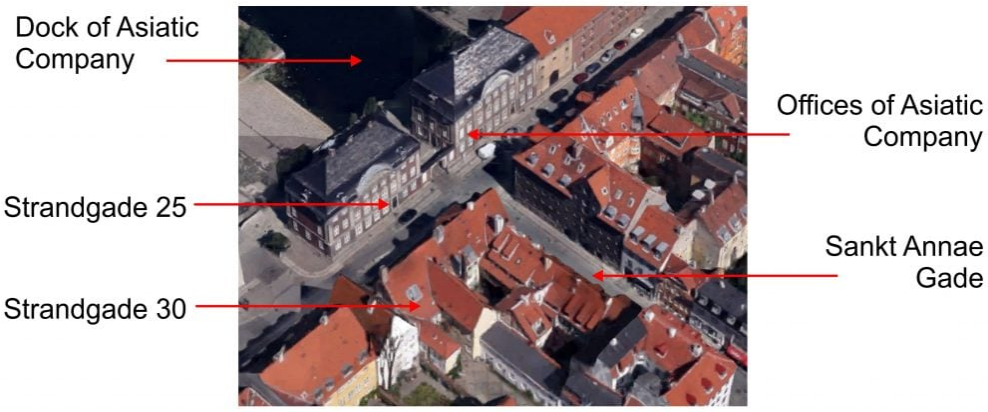
With this patronage, Hammershøi became self-sufficient, and in 1891 he married Ida Ilsted, the sister of a fellow artist, Peter Ilsted. Following the wedding, Vilhelm and Ida went to Paris for six months. They then returned to Copenhagen, living for a while in the Hammershøi home together with Vilhelm's mother.

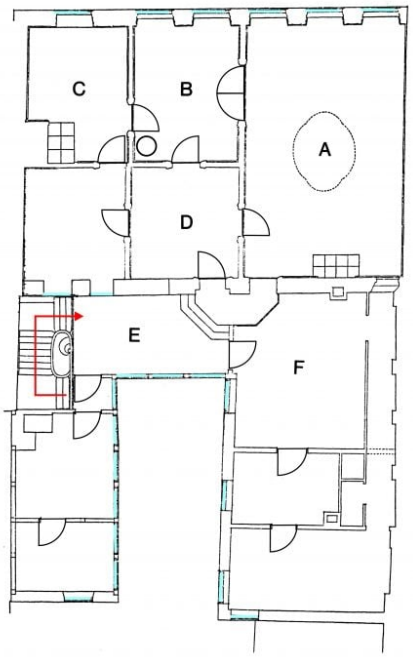
Over the next few years, Hammershøi painted landscapes, portraits and architecture. In 1897 Bramsen commissioned a painting of Kronborg castle in Helsingør (Hamlet's Elsinore). Hammershøi produced a masterpiece in terms of its striking perspective and subtle color.

Strandgade 30

In December 1898, Hammershøi rented an apartment on the second floor of an old building on Strandgade in the old dockyard district of Copenhagen called Christianshavn. The building had been constructed in 1636. Hammershøi was likely pleased that his home originated in the time of Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch. The apartment was spacious and endowed with windows facing in all directions. As well as a home, it served as both studio space and subject matter for his art.

The building still exists. The following figures show its location on a google world-map, as well as a recent photograph (from Wikipedia) and the floor plan of the apartment (from Vad, 1992, p 187, with several revisions based on another published plan: the position of the window in room F corrected, the door between B and F doubled, and room D divided).





Strandgade 30, Copenhagen

In his new apartment, Hammershøi began to paint the interior pictures that became his most recognizable images. Many of the pictures were painted in Room F facing the window and door. In some the room is empty; others include a portrait of Ida sitting or standing to the left of the window. *Interior in Strandgade, Sunlight on the Floor* 1901 (in the AGO exhibit and illustrated on the right) shows Ida working at some task at a table. The painting is both realistic and impressionistic. The old house had shifted slightly over the years, and the painting shows clearly that the door is slightly askew. Yet it is impossible to tell the subject of the etchings or the focus of Ida's concentration.

This view painted with the room empty is the subject of some of Hammershøi's most famous pictures, such as *Dust Motes Dancing in the Sunbeams* (1900, Ordrupgaard, Denamark) and *Moonlight, Strandgade 30* (1906, Metropolitan Museum)

The AGO painting *Interior with 4 Etchings* (1905) was painted in Room A. Over the years the arrangement of the furniture changed. An earlier painting *Interior with Piano, Strandgade 30* (1901), illustrated on the right, shows the same view but with a piano and a bookcase rather than a table. Hammershøi tended to simplify his pictures as he grew older. His later paintings show less detail and a more restricted palette.

Interior with the Artist's Easel (1910) was painted in Room B looking toward Room A. It is a variation on a theme long used painting: the artist at his easel. Yet here there is no artist other than the light coming in the window. Since we can only see the painting from its back, we have no idea of its subject. The true subject of the actual painting is the bowl on the table in the far room. The shape of the bowl and the reflections of the light upon its curves are rendered exquisitely. If this were a photograph rather than a painting, the bowl would be in focus, and the easel in the blurred foreground.

Hammershøi's new apartment was directly across from a striking building that housed the offices of the Asiatic Company. This was the subject of several large architectural paintings. The 1902 version in the AGO exhibition shows the offices in fog. The buildings are visible but the dockyard behind them, accessed through the arch, is obscure. Masts of ships are faintly visible in the harbor-fog. Other versions of this painting show the buildings without the fog.

Sources

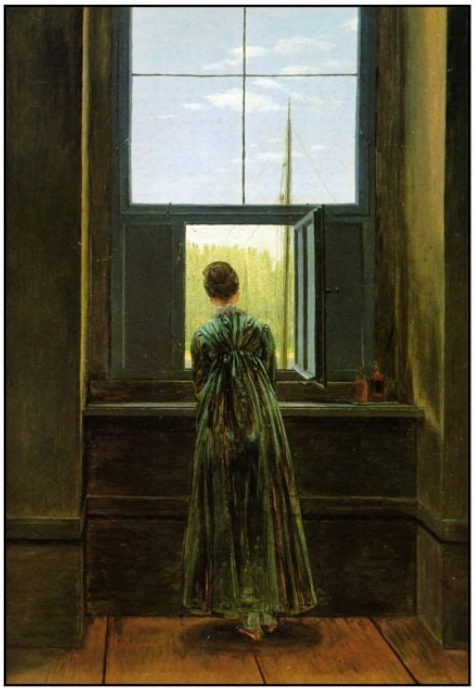
Hammershøi is often considered as isolated from the history of painting, as someone whose work was without either precedent or following. Yet all persons are part of the past they learn about, and all are made by the present that they experience. And everyone affects the future.

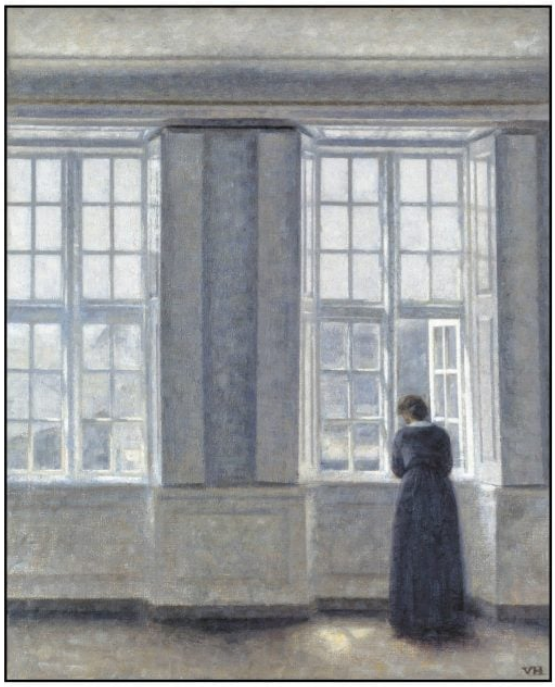
Hammershøi's paintings ultimately derive from the great paintings of the Dutch Golden Age of the 17th Century, when Vermeer and de Hooch depicted the effects of light coming through windows onto people. Hammershøi's paintings study the way light plays on domestic interiors, but the interiors are minimal rather than extravagant, the light is cool rather than warm, and the people are either absent or unobtrusive.

In the late 19th Century, James Abbott McNeill Whistler

(1834-1903) had begun to work with a restricted palette. His most famous painting is entitled *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1 Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1871). In Hammershøi's 1886 portrait of his own mother the color is even more subdued and the background even less detailed.

Many of Hammershøi's interiors include a representation of Ida viewed from the back. This motif derives from the *Rückenfigur* ("figure viewed from the back") used in German Romantic painting, most characteristically by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). Most of Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren* are in landscapes, but occasionally they are in domestic interiors. The following illustration compares Friedrich's *Woman at a Window* (1822) with Hammershøi's *The Tall Windows* (1913). The latter was painted after Hammershøi had moved across the street to Strandgade 25.





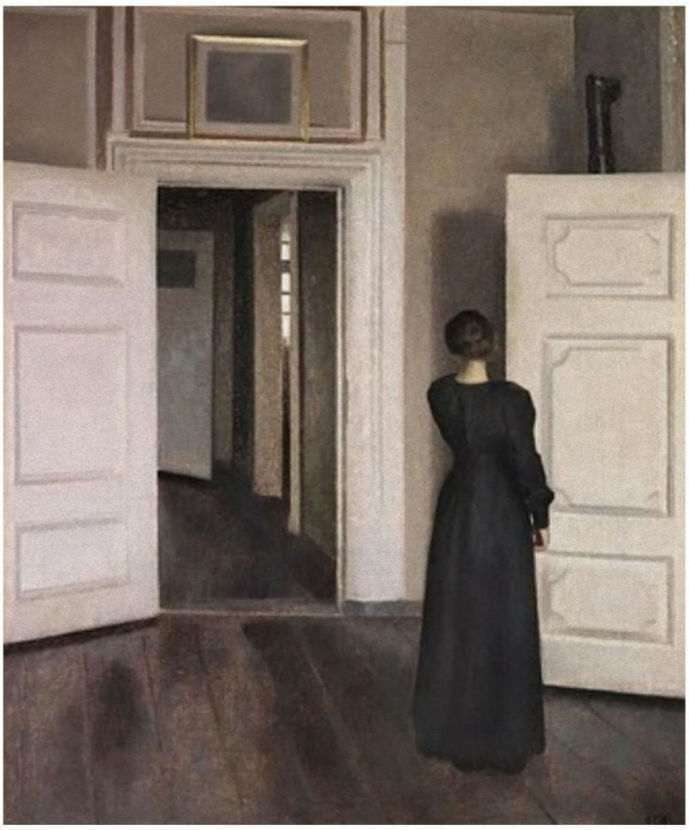
The *Rückenfigur* can be used for various purposes (Koerner, 1990, pp 233-244; Prettejohn, 2005, pp 54-59). One is to provide a foil for the viewer to enjoy the same perceptions as the artist who painted the picture. The *Rückenfigur*

is not just a represented object in the picture, but also the embodied subject of the aesthetic experience of the picture – we look *with*, rather than merely *at* the *Rückenfigur.* (Prettejohn, 2005, p 56).

In some sense the *Rückenfigur* obscures what the painting is about. We see the man rather than the sunset. We feel that we have come late – the glories of the sunset have already been seen and we can only imagine what the experience was like (Koerner, p. 233).

The presence of Ida in Hammershøi's paintings differs from Friedrich's *Rückenfigur.* Most importantly, Ida usually stands or sits on the edge of the painting rather than in the center. She complements rather than obscures the picture's subject. She gives the image a sense of intimacy: we are sharing her domestic space. We get a sense of her existence: the small tasks that make up the domestic day. She gives a human ground

to what we see and prevents it from becoming too abstract.



Sometimes, as in the *Interior with a Woman Standing, Strandgade 30* (1905) painted in Room A looking into Room D, the viewer feels uncertain. By which door has she come in? Which door is she about to go out? The woman seems “caught in the moment of deciding which door to pass through” (Alsdorf, 2016, p. 271). Although this uncertainty derives simply from the static nature of the representation, it resonates with our inability to know what is in the mind of another person.

This particular problem fascinated the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). In a recent article, Bridget Alsdorf (2016) considers Hammershøi’s interior paintings in relation to Kierkegaard’s book *Either/Or* (1843). The title of the book highlights the idea of uncertainty. In the section of the book entitled *Shadowgraphs*. Kierkegaard wrote about the difficulty in representing in art the inner state of another

person, especially the state of “reflective sorrow.” Kierkegaard’s idea is that art can only represent such a state of mind indirectly. He likens the process to a “shadowgraph:”

> It is this reflective sorrow I now propose to draw out and render visible, so far as that is possible, in some pictures. I call them ‘shadowgraphs’, partly to remind the reader by the very designation that I am summoning them from the dark side of life, partly because, just like shadowgraphs, they are not visible straightaway. If I take a shadowgraph in my hand, I gain no impression from it, can form no real idea of it; it is only when I hold it up to the wall and look not at the immediate image but at what appears on the wall, it is only then that I see it. Similarly the picture I want to show here is an inner picture which can also only be detected by looking through the exterior. There may be nothing striking about the exterior, it is only when I look through it that I discover the inner picture, which is what I want to show, an inner picture too refined to be visible on the outside, woven as it is of the softest moods of the soul. If I look at a sheet of paper, to outward observation there may be nothing remarkable about it; it is only when I hold it up to the light of day and see through it that I discover the delicate inner picture which is as though too insubstantial to be seen immediately. (p. 130)

Unfortunately, Kierkegaard is quite unclear about the nature of a shadowgraph. On the one hand it might be like a transparency or silhouette through which light is projected to give an image on another surface; on the other hand it might be like a watermark seen when paper is held up to the light. In either interpretation, the image is not immediately apparent but only occurs when light is passed through the artistic representation. Kierkegaard’s metaphor is as ambiguous as the title of his book.

Kierkegaard then goes on to consider the state of reflective sorrow in three characters from literature. His bravura

descriptions of their invisible state of mind *either* subvert his claim that such states cannot be represented in art *or* clearly demonstrate the process of the sympathetic shadowgraph.

Alsdorf also considers what Hammershøi might be trying to represent in his interiors by relating them to another section of *Either/Or* entitled *The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage*. In this section, Kierkegaard's character Judge William compares romantic love with married love: the one an ever-changing erotic quest, the other an unchanging relationship. Hammershøi interiors certainly suggest the timeless intimacy of the latter.

Hammershøi's images have a mystical aura to them. They are delicately balanced between serenity and disquiet. Perhaps a little like meditation when one begins to feel an underlying eternity but still senses the sorrows of the real world.

Many critics have remarked about the lack of narrative in Hammershøi's paintings. When the rooms are empty, we cannot know what has happened in them; when the rooms contain a solitary person, we have difficulty seeing what she is doing and we cannot know what she is thinking.

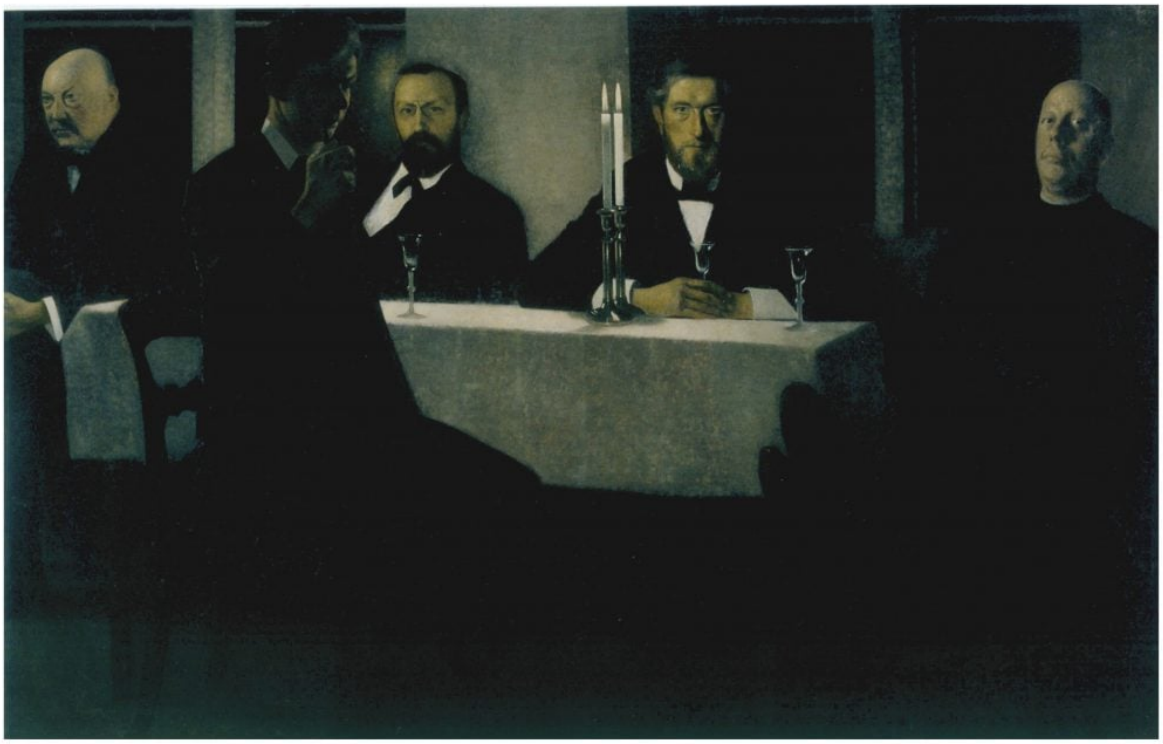
Yet there is an emotional force in the paintings that no amount of exegesis can attenuate. The emotions are like those aroused by music. Hammershøi appreciated music, and counted the English concert pianist Leonard Borwick among his friends. We do not fault music for lack of narrative or the absence of simple interpretation. Hammershøi's paintings fit very well with quiet music. Try them with the beginning of the Allegretto from Grieg's 1887 Violin Sonata Opus 45 (Ingolf Turban and Jean-Jacques Dünki):

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Sonte-C-Moll-Allegretto-espressivo-alla-Romanza-beginning.mp3

Portraits

Hammershøi was an accomplished and sensitive portraitist. The 1907 portrait of Ida with a teacup illustrates clearly the intimacy of their relationship. She stares off into space. We cannot know what she is thinking; perhaps even she does not know. The initial impression is of sadness although another version of the same portrait perhaps shows the hint of a smile. The portrait is very affecting. There is something timeless and classical about its serenity, but it is also quite momentary and individual. We can almost hear the clink of the spoon as she stirs her tea.

The 1901 portrait at the left is of J. F. Willumsen, a friend and fellow-artist. The strength of the gaze is clearly represented, but the portrait is otherwise unremarkable. However, this picture was a study for Hammershøi's largest painting entitled *Five Portraits*, completed in 1902 and presently in the Thiel Gallery near Stockholm. This fascinating painting shows four colleagues seated around a table at night in front of the windows in Room A. Karl Madsen is on Willumsen's right. In front of the table, Hammershøi's brother Svend is seen in profile. The two colleagues on the edges of the painting are the architect Thorvald Bindesbøll and the painter Carl Holsøe. The latter has his feet up on a chair, and his shoes give the painting a striking three-dimensional tension. The group appears to be gathered for after-dinner drinks, following a late but not last supper. The painting's darkness contrasts with the lightness of most of Hammershøi's interiors (and makes it difficult to obtain a good representation – I have done my best):



The most striking aspect of this group portrait is that no one interacts with anyone else. Each person seems completely engrossed in his own thoughts. Monrad (2012, p. 29) quotes a review of the painting's first exhibition:

> The situation is more or less this; there has been profound talk about something or other that has moved everyone deeply, and they are now waiting for a conclusive word from a sixth party.

The sixth party could be the painter. This interpretation is possible, but Monrad discounts it as not in keeping with Hammershøi's general lack of narrative.

Robert Rosenblum (in Fonsmark et al., 1998, p. 45) remarked:

> The effect is like standing before a tribunal, which comes into fixed, focal focus with the hypnotic stare of Willumsen.

It is unsettling to be judged by a painting.

Despite its starkness, I find the picture comforting. Each

person exists within his own intense solitude. Yet, as in the daylight pictures, the play of light on the faces and the table serves to bring them all together.

After Hammershoi

Hammershøi died of cancer in 1916. Bramsen donated his collection to the Statens Museum for Kunst in 1917. But fashions change, and in 1930 the paintings were returned to the donor. Hammershøi came to be considered only a minor artist in Denmark; in the rest of the world he was almost completely unknown. His reputation only began to change in the early 1980s when a retrospective exhibition of his paintings was mounted at Ordrupgaard, a gallery just north of Copenhagen, and other exhibitions were held in North America.

Hammershøi had little direct effect on subsequent artists. His friends Carl Holsøe and Peter Ilsted continued to paint interiors, though their pictures were more detailed and less affecting than those of Hammershøi. In France, Pierre Bonnard and Eduard Vuilliard painted domestic scenes. One might even consider the possibility of an artistic movement called "intimism' (Hvidt, in Monrad et al., 2012, pp. 197-218). Yet their paintings lacked Hammershøi's simplicity of color and the underlying mysticism.

The American Edward Hopper (1882-1967) painted pictures that are imbued with a similar mood to those of Hammershøi. They depict the same lonely silence, the same play of light on simple interiors, and the same existential anxiety (Rosenblum in Fonsmark et al., 1998, p. 42). Yet Hopper was likely unaware of Hammershøi's work. Their relationship is an affinity rather than a direct connection. The following illustration compares Hammershøi's *Ida in an Interior with Piano* (1901) with Hopper's *City Sunlight* (1954).

To me the glowing color spaces of Hammershøi's paintings presage the completely abstract paintings of Mark Rothko. Rosenblum (1975) has suggested that a tradition in art that is particularly "northern," one that sees light as cool rather than warm, one that tends towards abstractions, one that goes from Friedrich to Rothko. Rosenblum does not mention Hammershøi in his book, but we could easily place him along this path.

The Danish film director Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889-1968) was profoundly affected by Hammershøi's images (Balló et al. 2006). The closing scene of his 1ast movie *Gertrud* (1968; Schamus, 2008) ends on an image that could easily be a Hammershøi painting. The movie, based on a 1906 play by the Swedish writer Hjalmar Söderberg (1869-1941), concerns the passionate life of a woman who sought the freedom to love whomever she wished to love. At the end of the movie, the elderly Gertrud, living as a recluse, is visited by her old friend Axel Nygren. She returns his letters; he burns them: they say goodbye. The final minute can perhaps serve as our farewell to Hammershøi

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Gertrud-final-scene.mp4

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Folia and Sarabande

Listening to variations on a theme is one of my great musical pleasures. I remember the original notes and am fascinated by how they change. The comfort of the old plays with the excitement of the new. Sometimes I am amazed by how much more can be said about something I already know. Sometimes I am more impressed by the many different aspects of one message.

This posting is about two of the most popular themes in Classical music and their variations. Be forewarned: such catchy tunes may stay in your head for a while.

Basso Ostinato

Western music often uses a bass line to set the rhythm and to determine the chord progressions. In much of Renaissance and Baroque music the same bass line repeats throughout the piece. The melody is played (and widely varied) in the higher registers while the basso ostinato (stubborn bass) continues in the lower. The meaning is in the high notes, the rhythm in the low. The idea of the "tenor" as the voice that "holds" the melody can also describe the main line of thought in spoken or written communications.

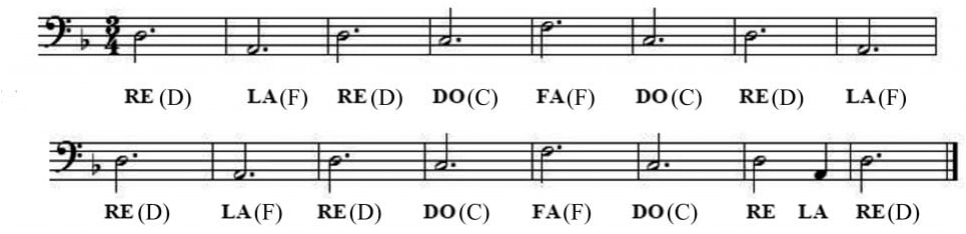
In some ways, this type of music is very similar to the way we speak. The fundamental of the voice is determined by the vibrations of our vocal cords. These vibrations continue throughout our speech. They provide a basic pitch and their on-and-off rhythm determines the cadence of our speaking. The meaning of the speech is then determined by modulating the higher harmonics of the sounds to give consonants and vowels.

The ground bass is the underlying structure of such forms as the Chaconne, the Passacaglia, the Folia and the Sarabande

(Ross, 2010). It provides a stable rhythmic and harmonic structure for the melody to play upon. Many of these musical forms came into prominence in the Iberian Penninsula in the 15th and 16th Centuries. Some likely derived from medieval folk tunes. Some may have arrived from the New World or the Canary Isles.

La Folia

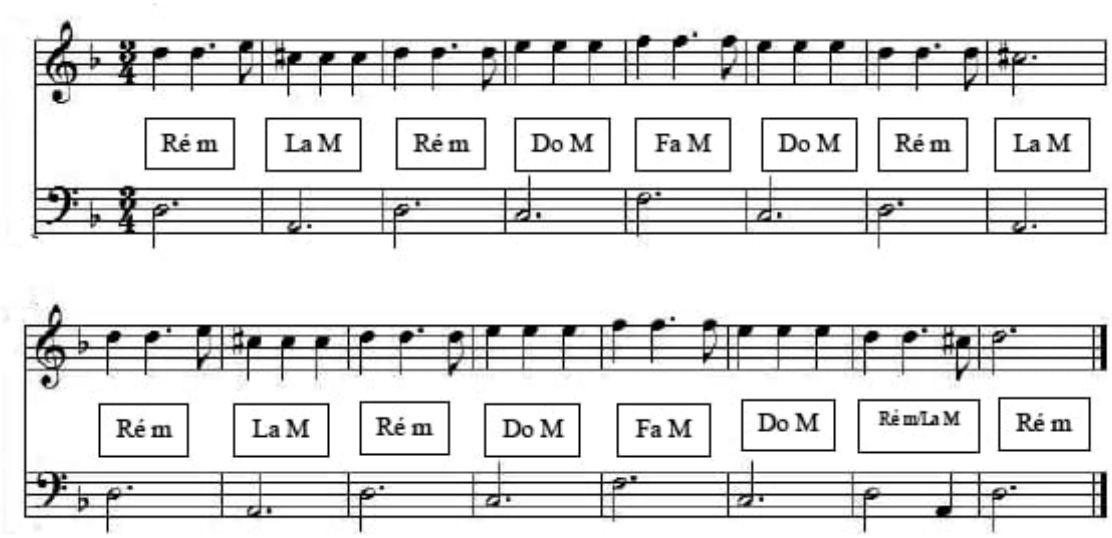
La Folia appears to have begun in Portugal. The word means "folly" or "madness." Italian spells it "Follia." Various versions finally evolved into the "late Folia" (Hudson, 1973; Gerbino & Silbiger, 2016):



Diego Ortiz (1510-1570), a composer in the Spanish court, wrote several ricercadas based on La Folia (1553). A ricercada is a form of variation, often using several melodies, and sometimes playing these together in a fugue. The following is the eighth ricercada, played by Jordi Savall and his colleagues:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Diego-Ortiz-Recercada-Ottava-sobre-la-Folia-1553.mp3

The most common of the chordal progressions built on the bass line of La Folia is in D minor, as illustrated in the following example (from Campenon & Rustique, 2012) which has a very simple melody in the upper register:



The 16-bar chord progression is

/Dm___ /A7___ /Dm___ /C___ /F___ /C___ /Dm____ /A7___ /
/Dm___ /A7___ /Dm___ /C___ /F___ /C___ /Dm A7_ /Dm___ /

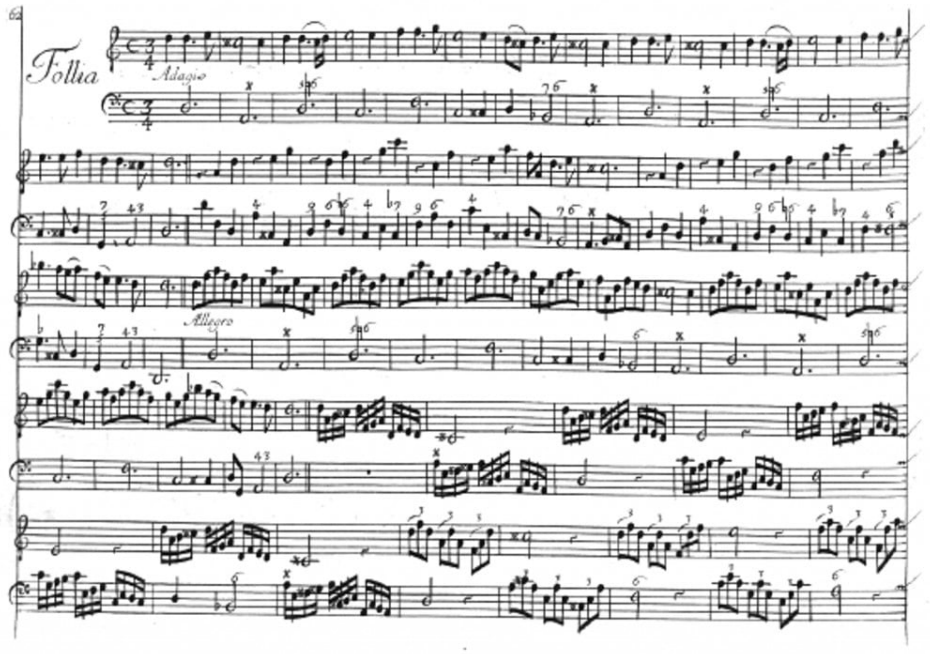
Corelli

The most famous piece of music to use this progression is the Violin Sonata XII of Opus 5 (1700) of Arcangelo Corelli

(1653-1713), an Italian composer working in Rome. The following is the beginning of the sonata played by Andrew Manze (violin) and Richard Egarr (harpsichord):

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Corelli-Violin-Sonata-No.12-in-D-minor-op.5-beginning.mp3

This is the first page of the sheet music:



Corelli’s sonata was immensely popular. One of his pupils, Fancesco Geminiani (1687-1762) arranged the sonata for a string orchestra in 1726, while he was composing and teaching in London. London was quite taken with *La Follia*. The following selection is the latter half of the Geminiani adaptation as played by *Les Violons du Roy* under the directions of Bernard Labadie.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/geminiani-follia-violons-du-roy-ending.mp3

In the years after Corelli, the theme of La Follia was widely used by many different composers in many different contexts. The internet hosts a great website on Corelli (Campenon & Rustique, 2012), and a truly magnificent website devoted to La Folia in all its manifestations.

Sarabande

While in London, Geminiani's violin-performances were often accompanied by George Frideric Handel at the harpsichord. In 1733 Handel published his Suite No. 4 in D minor for Harpsichord (HWV 437). One of its movements is a Sarabande, a stately dance in three-quarter time (Hudson & Little, 2016).

Handel's Sarabande uses a 16-bar progression similar to that of La Folia:

/Dm___ /A7___ /F___ /C___ /Gm___ /Dm___ /Gm___ /A7___ /
/Dm___ /A7___ /F___ /C___ /Gm___ /F___ /Gm A7__/Dm___ /

Compare this to La Folia:

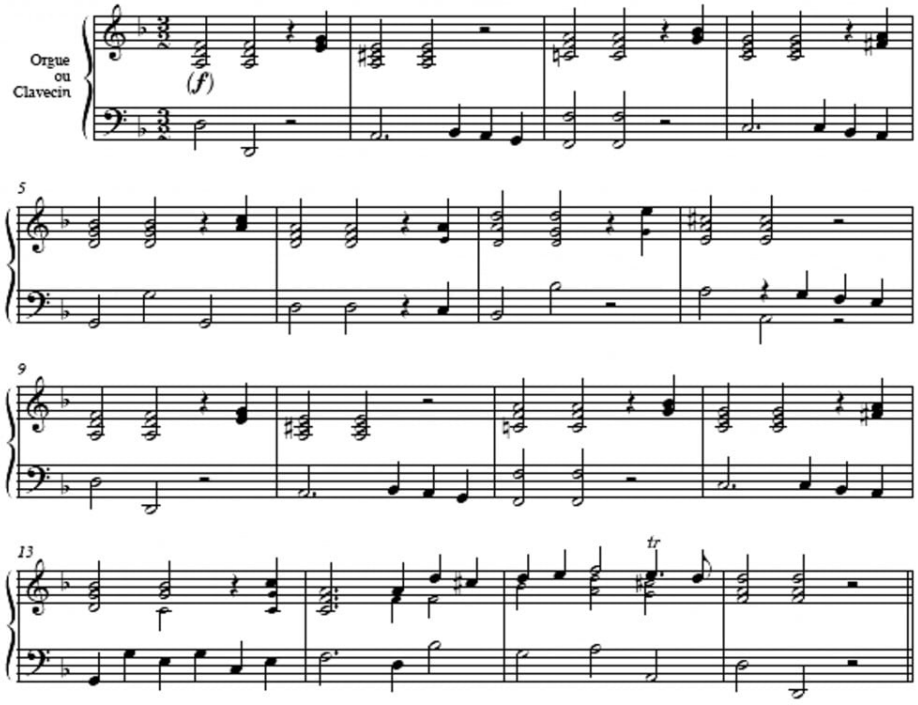
/Dm___ /A7___ /Dm___ /C___ /F___ /C___ /Dm___ /A7___ /
/Dm___ /A7___ /Dm___ /C___ /F___ /C___ /Dm A7__/Dm___ /

Though similar, it is clearly not the same. However, as the webpage on La Folia, states “this piece breathes the same atmosphere, and most likely Handel had the Folia-theme in mind when composing this Sarabande.” Indeed the movement became known as “Handel’s Folia.”

The following is the beginning of the Sarabande played by Alan Cuckston:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Handel-sarabande-beginning.mp3

Together with the sheet music for the theme:



Variations

In 1897, The Norwegian violinist and composer Johan Halvorsen wrote a lovely series of variations on Handel’s Sarabande for violin and viola. Halvorsen’s virtuosity as a violinist was only matched by the elegance of his moustache. The following is the beginning of his variations as played by Natalia Lomeiko (violin) and Yuri Zhislan (viola):

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/halvorsen-sarabande-con-variazioni-first-half.mp3

In the 20th Century the popularity of La Folia increased. In 1929 Manuel Ponce wrote a set of guitar variations for Andre Segovia. And in 1931, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) wrote a bravura set of piano variations on La Follia. In the following clip, Mikhail Pletnev plays the theme and first seven of the twenty variations:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Rachmaninov-Variations-on-Corelli-Theme-and-first-7-variations.mp3

I shall conclude this posting with the main title theme from Stanley Kubrick's 1975 film *Barry Lyndon*: Handel's Sarabande as arranged for the National Philharmonic Orchestra by Leonard Rosenman. The movie is characterized by stunning photography,

with many of the indoor scenes lit by candles. (I have appended a still photograph of the opening scene.) The music is perfectly chosen to represent the time and the place. The film won Academy Awards for both Cinematography and Musical Score.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Rosenbaum-Barry-Lyndon-Sarabande-Main-Theme.mp3

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Camille Claudel

The photograph is striking. A young woman stares defiantly at the camera. One feels her passion and her sensuality. Her unkempt hair is tied back from her eyes. She is in working clothes but for the camera she has wrapped a scarf around her neck and fixed it with a pin. The photographer went by the name of César, but nothing else is known about him. The photograph was taken in 1883 or 1884. The Rodin Museum in Paris has an albumen print. The photograph was published in 1913 in the Parisian journal *L'Art Décoratif* (Claudel, 1913b).

The subject was Camille Claudel (1864-1943). Her younger brother remembered her:

> this superb young woman, in the full brilliance of her beauty and genius … a splendid forehead surmounting magnificent eyes of that rare deep blue so rarely seen except in novels, a nose that reflected her heritage in Champagne, a prominent mouth more proud than sensual, a mighty tuft of chestnut hair, a true chestnut that the English call auburn, falling to her hips. An impressive air of courage, frankness, superiority, gaiety. (Paul Claudel, introduction to the 1951 exhibit of Camille's sculpture, quoted in Claudel, 2008, p. 359).

At the time of the photograph, Camille was twenty. For two years, she had been learning to sculpt, sharing a studio with the English student Jessie Lipscombe, and studying with the sculptor Alfred Boucher, one of the few art teachers in Paris willing to tutor women. When Boucher left Paris for a year in

Florence in 1882, he recommended his student to Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). Camille Claudel became Rodin's student, his model, his lover, his muse and his colleague.

Ten years later Camille left Rodin, and set herself up in her own studio. Rodin tried to send commissions her way, and for several years she was able to work productively. After successful exhibitions in the Galerie Eugène Blot in 1905 and 1908, however, Camille became withdrawn and unable to work. She became convinced that Rodin and his "gang" were trying to steal her ideas. She destroyed many of her maquettes. She boarded up her studio and lived in dirt and squalor, coming out only at night. In 1913, her family had her forcibly committed to an insane asylum near Paris. With the onset of the war, Camille was transferred to the Montdevergues asylum in Provence. There she remained until her death in 1943 at the age of 79.

Passion

The affair between Rodin and Camille was well known to their colleagues. However, it was hidden from society, and little documentation survives to describe their passion. Novelists (Delbée, 1982/1992; Webb, 2015), musicians (Heggie & Scheer, 2012) and actors (Anne Delbée, 1982; Isabelle Adjani in Nuytten, 1988/2011; Juliette Binoche in Dumont, 2013) have imagined what it was like to be Camille, but we remain unsure.

Camille's position in the affair was by far the more precarious. Rodin already had a mistress – Rose Beuret, a former model. She tolerated Rodin's affairs but maintained the right of primacy. Rose was indeed considered by many to be Rodin's wife, although they were not formally married until 1917 (just before both Rodin and she were to die).

Camille came from a conservative Catholic family. Her desire to be an artist ran counter to her family's wishes. When they learned of her affair with Rodin, they were completely

scandalized. Only her father continued to support her both emotionally and financially. Camille spent much effort trying to persuade Rodin to give up Rose, but to no avail. However, she did get Rodin to agree briefly to a "contract" in 1886, wherein he promised that

> I will have for a student only Mademoiselle Camille Claudel and I will protect her alone though all the means I have at my disposal through my friends who will be hers especially through my influential friends (Ayre-Clause, 2002, p.71).

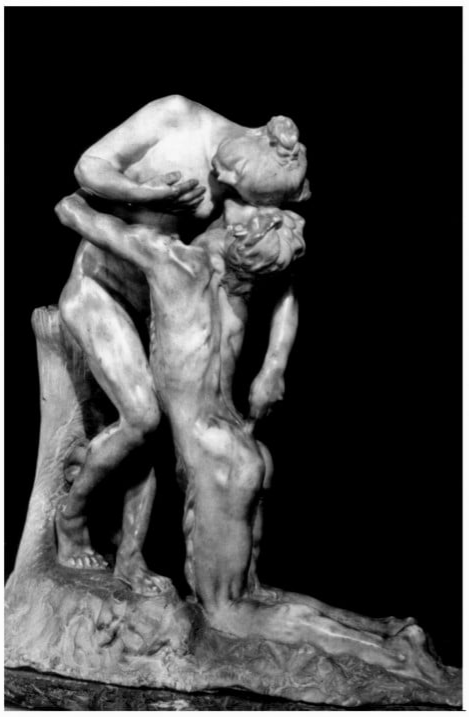
The social position of an unmarried woman artist was extremely difficult. Rodin could do as he pleased. Having affairs with beautiful women was one of his pleasures. Camille had no freedom. Even my treatment of the couple shades easily into such differences – I refer to her by her first name and him by his last. (Part of this is to avoid confusion with Camille's brother Paul, but part is probably because I have picked up the viewpoint of *fin-de-siècle* France. This issue is discussed by Wilson, 2012.)

Rodin's passion for his muse was intense. Camille's biographer Odile Ayre-Clause (2002, p. 60) quoted a recently recovered letter from Rodin to Camille. This appears to have followed one of their quarrels:

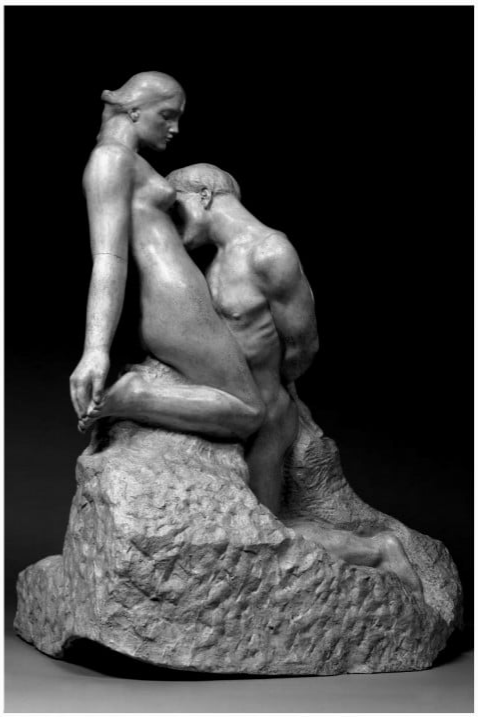
> Have pity, cruel girl, I can't go on, I can't spend another day without seeing you. Otherwise the atrocious madness. It is over, I don't work anymore, malevolent goddess, and yet I love furiously. My Camille be assured that I feel love for no other woman, and that my soul belongs to you. … Ah! Divine beauty, flower who speaks and loves, intelligent flower, my darling. My dear one, I am on my knees facing your beautiful body which I embrace.

Their physical passion was allied to creative cooperation. Similar themes occur in the work of both artists. Perhaps the most striking parallel is found between Camille's *Sakuntala*

and Rodin's *Eternal Idol.* Camille's sculpture is based on an Indian legend about a king who married the maiden Sakuntala, but then was cursed and lost the memory of both his wife and his son. Ultimately the curse was lifted, and the sculpture depicts the moment of their reconciliation.



Claudel, *Sakuntala*, 1888-1905



Rodin, *L'Eternelle Idole*, 1888-1889

Rodin's sculpture has no clear derivation. Rainer-Maria Rilke, who served as Rodin's secretary from 1902-1906, described its effect:

> A girl kneels, her beautiful body is softly bent backward, her right arm is stretched behind her. Her hand has gropingly found her foot. In these three lines which shut her in from the outer world her life lies enclosed with its secret. The stone beneath her lifts her up as she kneels there. And suddenly, in the attitude into which the young girl has fallen from idleness, or reverie, or solitude, one recognizes an ancient, sacred symbol, a posture like that into which the goddess of distant, cruel cults had sunk. The head of this woman bends somewhat forward; with an expression of indulgence, majesty and forbearance, she looks down as from the height of a still night upon the man who

> sinks his face into her bosom as though into many blossoms. He, too, kneels, but deeper, deep in the stone. His hands lie behind him like worthless and empty things. His right hand is open; one sees into it. From this group radiates a mysterious greatness. One does not dare to give it one meaning, it has thousands. Thoughts glide over it like shadows, new meanings arise like riddles and unfold into clear significance. Something of the mood of a Purgatorio lives within this work. A heaven is near that has not yet been reached, a hell is near that has not yet been forgotten. [*Ein Himmel ist nah, aber er ist noch nicht erreicht; eine Hölle ist nah, aber sie ist noch nicht vergessen*.] Here, too, all splendour flashes from the contact of the two bodies and from the contact of the woman with herself. (Rilke, 1907/1919, pp 42-43).

At the time that she was ending the affair with Rodin, Camille was working on a sculptural ensemble called the *L'Age mûr* (Maturity). It depicts a man being led away from a pleading young woman by an old woman. The figure of the young woman was also reproduced by itself as *L'Implorante* (Supplicant). The ensemble can be interpreted as fate leading man away from youth toward death. However, it is impossible not to see the Rose Beuret, Rodin and Camille in the figures.

L'Age mûr (maquette), 1898

L'Implorante, 1900

Achievements

Claudel, *La Valse*, 1891-1905

After her break with Rodin, Claudel worked as an independent artist. She had very little money to support large bronze castings and her major sales involved small pieces for tabletop. Camille became adept at creating sculptures for personal rather than public enjoyment. Two pieces are worth noting. The first is *The Waltz*, several copies of which were cast in bronze. One graced the piano of Claude Debussy. Its fascination lies in the way it combines both movement and stillness.

This sculpture is evoked in the song cycle *Camille Claudel: Into the Fire* (Heggie & Scheer, 2012), recorded by Joyce

DiDonato and the Alexander Quartet. The following is a brief excerpt:

> Is it in the spirit?
> Is it in the flesh?
> Where do I abide?
> Console.
> Oh, console my eyes with beauty.
> Allow me to forget
> That every dance of love
> Is mingled with regret.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/didonato-lavalse.mp3

Claudel, *Pensée Profonde*, 1905

Another piece – *Deep Thought* – shows a young woman kneeling before a fireplace. The piece combines both bronze and onyx in a marvelous mix of texture. It is difficult to say why this resonates so deeply. Perhaps it suggests the dreams of what might be or what might have been.

Paul Claudel described his sister's achievement in terms of its "inner thought:"

> Just as a man sitting in the countryside employs, to accompany his meditation, a tree or a rock on which to anchor his eye, so a work by Camille Claudel in the middle of a room is, by its mere form, like those curious stones that the Chinese collect: a kind of monument of inner thought, the tuft of a theme accessible to any and every dream. While a book, for example, must be taken from the shelves of our library, or a piece of music must be performed, the worked metal or stone here releases its own incantation, and our chamber is imbued with it. (Claudel , 1913b, translated by Richard Howard in Paris, 1988).

Paranoia

For a sculptor, large compositions were essential to recognition and success. The sales of the small pieces did not bring in very much money, and Camille's stipend from her father was not large. She lapsed into poverty, depression and paranoia. She attributed her lack of success to Rodin, whom she accused of stealing her work and making money by re-casting her sculptures and selling them to "his pals, the chic artists" (letter to Paul Claudel, 1910, quoted in Paris, 1984/1988, p 132). By 1913, Camille's condition was dire. Dr. Michaux, the physician who certified that she should be committed to an asylum, said that she had sealed up the windows of her studio, had sold everything except for an armchair and a bed, never washed, never went out except by night, and often went without food (Wilson, 2012).

Camille's father died on March 2, 1913. As soon as this last support was gone, the Claudel family quickly moved to have Camille committed. On March 10 Camille was forcibly interned in an asylum near Paris. Her diagnosis was paranoid psychosis.

Some of her supporters voiced objections, but these came to naught. When the war began Camille was transferred to the Montdevergues asylum in the south of France, where she remained until she died in 1943.

At the asylum, Camille continued to have paranoid thoughts about Rodin. After Rodin died in 1917, Camille transferred her suspicions to his followers (and to various Protestant and Jewish cliques). She insisted on preparing her own food, since she was afraid that her enemies were trying to poison her. Nevertheless, much of the time Camille was quite rational. She was never aggressive or violent. Her doctors continuously recommended that she be taken back to live with the family, or at least transferred to a hospital near the family, where she could be visited more easily. The family refused any such suggestions. For fear of scandal, they insisted that Camille not be allowed to send or receive mail from anyone other than her brother and mother. Paranoia sets up positive feedback loops: when patients perceive that people are acting against them, they actually often are.

Paranoid thinking is common. Delusions of persecution occur more frequently than delusions of grandeur. About 10-15% of people harbors thoughts that they are persecuted (Freeman, 2007). Most of these do not require treatment. Modern cognitive psychology considers persecutory delusions to be largely caused by a willingness to “jump to conclusions” when entertaining theories about the origin of stress (Freeman & Garrety, 2014). Additional factors are social isolation, which decreases the chance of anyone providing meaningful feedback, and a lack of sleep, which leads to dream-like rather than rational thought.

Paranoia is a continuum. Although many people with mild delusions can function normally, more ingrained delusions can lead to problems adjusting to society. In the past, mild forms of paranoia were considered paranoid personality disorder, and more severe forms paranoid psychosis, although these specific

diagnostic categories are no longer recognized. The psychiatrists Lhermitte and Allilaire (1984) reviewed the psychiatric history of Camille Claudel and came to a diagnosis of paranoid psychosis.

In 1929, Camille's old friend and colleague, Jessie Lipscomb, who had returned to England and married, found out where Camille was hospitalized. She and her husband then visited her in Montdevergues. Jessie insisted after their reunion that Camille had shown no signs of madness. Jessie's, husband, William Elborne, took two photographs. One shows Camille alone, seated with her arms folded. The other shows Camille and Jessie seated together. As noted by Ayre Clause (2002, p.231):

> With her arms folded around herself, Camille does not seem to see Jessie's hand softly reaching out to her. The long years of isolation have taken their toll; Camille looks empty and withdrawn.

Social isolation is probably the worst approach to treating paranoia. Somehow, the patients must be induced to interact with others. They must learn to consider themselves as others see them. Clearly this must be commenced gently with a therapist whom the patient trusts. The treatment must try to decrease the ingrained suspicion of others, and to help the patient to use more rational modes of thought.

None of this was available in Montdevergues. Most of the inmates were far more psychotic than Camille. She lived in a veritable hell. She wrote in 1934 to Eugène Blot, the owner of the gallery where she had exhibited her work:

> *Je suis tombée dans le gouffre. Je vis dans un monde si curieux, si étrange. Du rêve que fut ma vie, ceci est le cauchemar*. I have fallen into the abyss. I live in a world so curious, so strange. Of the dream that was my life, this is the nightmare. (quoted by Morel, 2009).

Compassion

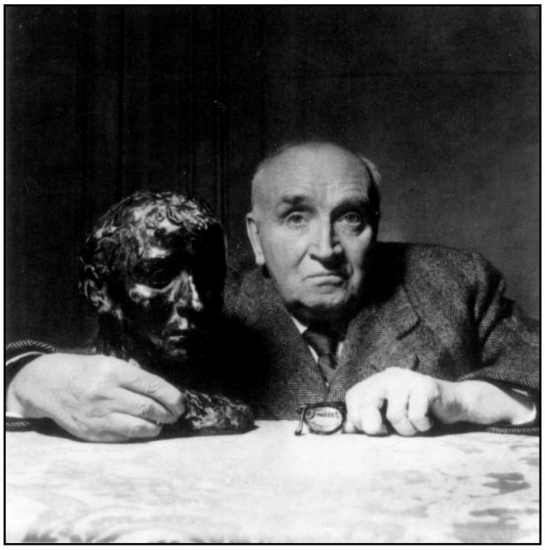
The position of Claudel family toward Camille is difficult to understand (Lhermitte & Allilaire, 1984; Schmoll gen. Eisenwerth, 1994, pp 109-114; Ayre-Clausse, 2002, pp 237-253). Camille's mother was so scandalized by her daughter's behavior and so constrained by her rigid religion that she never once visited her in hospital. Louise also could not bring herself to have anything to do with her wayward sister. Some of this rejection reflected the way mental disorders were considered at the time (Lhermitte & Allilaire, 1984): mad relatives were hidden away from society and ignored.

Paul Claudel (1868-1955) was Camille's younger brother. In 1886, at the age of 18, he experienced a mystical revelation while listening to the *Magnificat* in Notre Dame, and thenceforth was a devoted Catholic. He became a renowned poet (e.g., Claudel, 1913a) and playwright (e.g., Claudel, 1960). His poetry is impressive: he used a new form of blank verse with the length of the line related to the time it takes to speak the line before taking a breath. His poetry has the sound of litany and incantation. At times, however, the writing becomes tedious, so closely is it related to his religious beliefs. Paul became a professional diplomat, representing France in the United States, China, Brazil, Denmark and Tokyo. Despite his devoutness, he carried on a long adulterous affair with a married woman, until she finally

broke of their relationship.

Paul was Camille’s favorite sibling. One of her first major sculptures was a bust of Paul as a young Roman. Paul promoted his sister’s career, writing articles in magazines glorifying her sculptures (e.g., Claudel, 1913b).

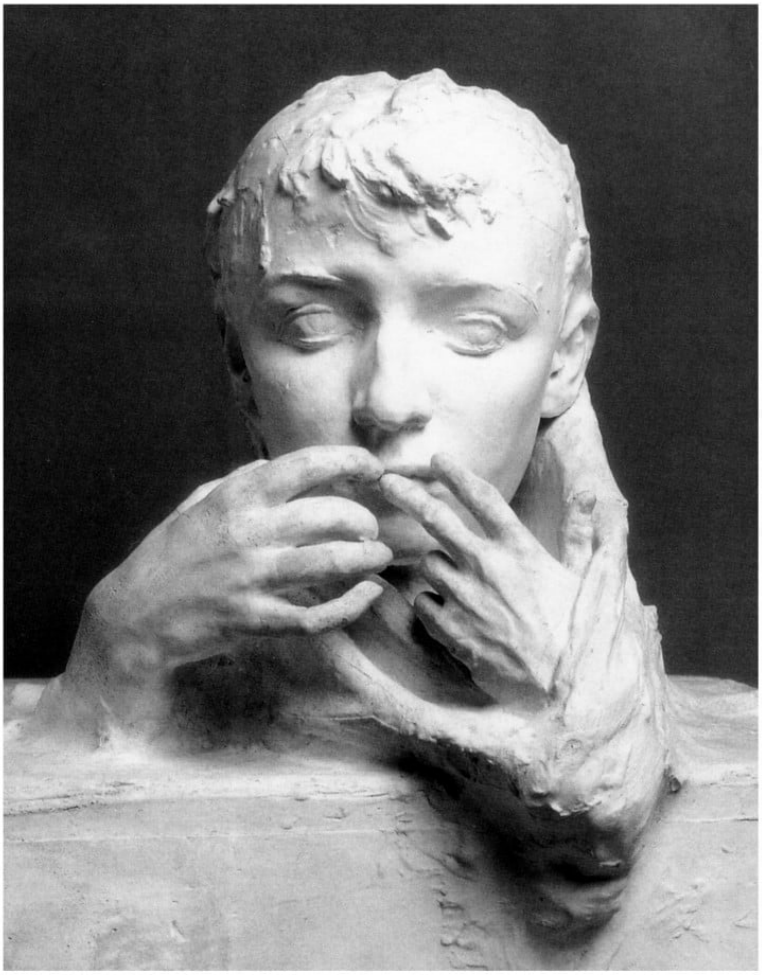
Despite their closeness as children and despite his enthusiasm for her art, Paul had little to do with Camille after she was admitted to Montdevergues. He visited her only a few times, and refused all of her requests to be released or transferred closer to the family. Some of this may have been related to his diplomatic appointments, but he did not visit even when he retired and he settled down in France in 1936. This lack of compassion is strange in a man so religious. Sometimes the mystic forgets himself in his visions and forgets to care for others.



In a photograph taken in 1951, the elderly Paul Claudel holds onto a bust Camille made of him when he was young. The photograph is imbued with regret. Yet it is not clear whether it is for himself or his sister.

Farewell

We should not leave Camille without seeing her as she was in her time of passion and creation. One of the most insightful impressions of Camille is a plaster cast by Rodin, a portrait of Camille, aptly entitled *The Farewell*. Both the hands and the face are exquisitely moulded. The sculpture is ambiguous. Are the hands reaching up to stop the tears, to shut out the world, or to gather something in?



Rodin, *L'Adieu*, 1892

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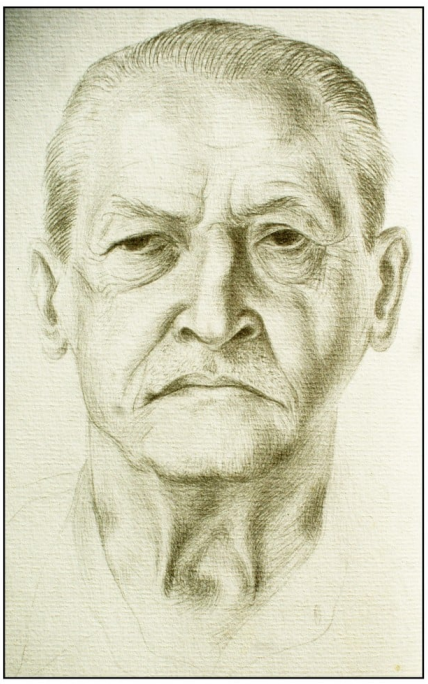
Death Speaks



W. Somerset Maugham, silverpoint by Bernard Perlin, 1946

Somerset Maugham's last play *Sheppey* (1933/1997) tells the story of a barber Joseph Miller, who was nicknamed Sheppey after his birthplace in Kent. Sheppey wins one of the Irish Sweepstakes prizes and decides to use the money to help the poor. He is quickly considered crazy. His doctor states:

> It's quite obvious that a sane man is not going to give all his money away to the poor. A sane man takes money away from the poor … The normal man is selfish, grasping, destructive, vain and sensual. What is generally termed morality is forced upon him by the herd, and the obligation that he is under to repress his natural instincts is undoubtedly the cause of many of the disorders of the mind.

The idea of the play hearkens back to one of Maugham's early short stories, *A Bad Example,* published in 1899. Neither the story nor the play were very successful. However, one brief speech from the play has become one of the most renowned texts of 20th Century literature.

At the end of the play, Sheppey is visited by Death in female form. She will take him away before he is certified insane. Sheppey wonders whether he should have fulfilled one of his dreams and gone to a cottage on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. Perhaps Death would not have thought of looking for him there. Death tells him it would not have mattered.

> There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market-place and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.

This is an old Arabian story. Maugham's source was probably the Sufi parable *When Death Came to Baghdad* from the *Hikayat-I-Naqshia* ("Tales formed according to a design") by Fudail ibn Ayad who lived in the 9th Century CE (Shah, 1967, p 191; Ross, 2010). Samarra is a city about 125 km north of Baghdad, and home of the Al 'Askarī Shrine, one of the holiest sites of Shīa Islam.

The Mishnah of the Babylonian Talmud from around 200 CE has an even older version of the story in Sukkah 53a. One day King Solomon asked the Angel of Death why he was sad. The angel replied that he soon had to take two of Solomon's favorite

Ethiopian attendants. In order to forestall this, Solomon sent his attendants to the city of Luz, where the Angel of Death had no power. However, they died just before arriving at the gates of Luz. The next day Solomon asked why the angel was so cheerful. Death replied that Solomon had sent his attendants to the exact place where it was decreed that they should die.

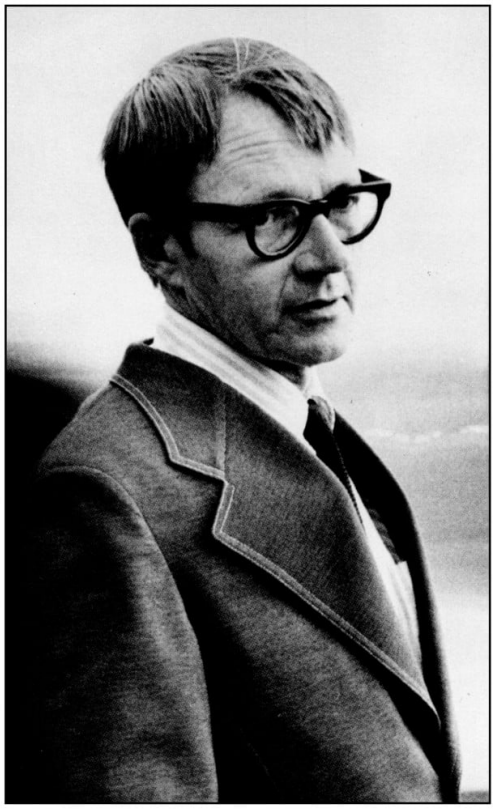
The Maugham story has been retold many times. John O'Hara used it as the epigraph for his 1934 novel *Appointment in Samarra* (1934), which described the rapid, alcohol-fuelled decline of Julian English beginning on Christmas Eve in 1930 and ending with his suicide two days later. Jeffrey Archer quoted Maugham's tale as the first story (*Death Speaks*) in his collection *To Cut a Long Story Short* (2000).

Boris Karloff told the story in the 1968 movie *Targets*, directed by Peter Bogdanovich. Karloff played an elderly horror-film actor who suggested to an interviewer that he tell the story rather than answer foolish questions. The audio is below. A movie clip of the entire scene is available at Turner Classic Movies.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/karloff-samarra.mp3

The Maugham story was converted into rhyming verse by F. L. Lucas in *The Destined Hour* (1953). The poem ends with Abou Seyd meeting Death in the market.

> Loud swarmed the buyers round each booth and stall;
> But there by Omar's Mosque, at the market's end,
> Watched one shape like a shadow, gaunt and tall.
> Then drawing near, said Abou Seyd, "My friend,
> Why threaten my poor slave – so wantonly –
> That harmed thee not at all?
> In my hot youth I might have threatened thee,
> Forgetting Allah, Lord of all men's days."
>
> Then that dark face upon him bent such eyes,
> The scar upon Seyd's cheek grew grey with fear.
> "I threatened not thy servant, Abou Seyd.
> But in surprise
> I raised my hand, to see him standing near.
> For this same night God bids my hand be laid
> Upon him at Samarra, far from here.
> Yet Allah is the Lord of all men's ways."



Donald Justice, photograph by Thomas Victor (Howard, 1974)

The American poet Donald Justice used the story as the basis for his 1967 poem *Incident in a Rose Garden:*

The gardener came running,
An old man, out of breath.
Fear had given him legs.
Sir, I encountered Death
Just now among the roses.
Thin as a scythe he stood there.
I knew him by his pictures.
He had his black coat on,
Black gloves, and a broad black hat.
I think he would have spoken,
Seeing his mouth stood open.
Big it was, with white teeth.
As soon as he beckoned, I ran.
I ran until I found you.

Sir, I am quitting my job.
I want to see my sons
Once more before I die.
I want to see California.
We shook hands; he was off.

And there stood Death in the garden,
Dressed like a Spanish waiter.
He had the air of someone
Who because he likes arriving
At all appointments early
Learns to think himself patient.
I watched him pinch one bloom off
And hold it to his nose –
A connoisseur of roses –
One bloom and then another.
They strewed the earth around him.
Sir, you must be that stranger
Who threatened my gardener.
This is my property, sir.
I welcome only friends here.
Death grinned, and his eyes lit up
With the pale glow of those lanterns
That workmen carry sometimes
To light their way through the dusk.
Now with great care he slid
The glove from his right hand
And held that out in greeting,
A little cage of bone.
Sir, I knew your father,
And we were friends at the end.
As for your gardener,
I did not threaten him.
Old men mistake my gestures.
I only meant to ask him

To show me to his master.
I take it you are he?

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/justice-incident-in-rose-garden-2.mp3

(Author's reading of the poem 1982).

We have personified death in many ways. Our most common image is the Grim Reaper, an emaciated or skeletal man dressed in black and carrying a scythe. This likely derives from Christ's parable of the harvest: after the reaping the wheat is gathered into the barn but the tares are separated out and burnt (Matthew 13:24-30). This was one of the few parables that Christ explained to his disciples:

> …the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels.
> As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world.
> The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity;
> And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:39-42).

The skeletal nature of the Grim Reaper probably comes from the representations of the Dance of Death in many medieval churches. Skeletons conduct the sinners, be they rich or poor, young or old, powerful or weak, to their assigned places in Hell. As well as the scythe, the skeltons also carried hour-glasses to signify the running out of time, or musical instruments to maintain the rhythm of damnation.

Another image of Death has him riding a pale horse. This comes from the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in Revelations. At the opening of each of the first four seals, one of the horsemen appears. The last rider is the only one directly named: "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name

that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him" (Revelations 6:8). The other three riders are variously identified, most commonly as war, pestilence and famine. Sometimes, as in the Tarot pack, the rider of the pale horse is portrayed as a knight.

In some cultures, Death can be a woman rather than a man (Guthke, 1999). This may in part be related to grammatical gender – in French *la Mort* is feminine and in German *der Tod* is masculine – though this effect is slight. In the Maugham story Death is female, whereas in the Justice poem he has become male.

Death can evoke longing as well as fear. Sometimes death releases the dying from their suffering. Sometimes death can have erotic overtones. Many are the tales of lovers who come together through a shared death. In the stories of Death and the Maiden, Death is considered as a lover either kind or lecherous. And for the young man, Death can be the Dark Lady.

In many stories, Death may be questioned. However, this can only delay the end, not change it. In Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film *The Seventh Seal*, a knight (Max von Sydow), just returned to Sweden from the Crusade, meets Death (Bengt Ekerot) upon a cold northern beach and challenges him to a game of chess before he dies. The outcome of the game is not in doubt. Yet perhaps others might escape.

The film is an essay about the distance between man and God

(Bragg, 1998). The knight asks why it is “so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses? Why should He hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles?” The title of the film comes from Revelations 8:1 “And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.” God answers our questions with silence.

Death is both unpredictable and inevitable. We can neither foretell the time nor alter it. This is the main point of the Maugham story. And the reason for Marcus Aurelius’ teaching in *Meditations* VII:69.

> To live each day as though one’s last, never flustered, never apathetic, never attitudinising – here is perfection of character (Staniforth translation). (Alternate: Perfection is to live each day as if it were the last, without agitation, without apathy and without pretence)

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