

“CAUSE YOU’RE THE ONLY ONE I WANT”

The Anatomy of Love in the Plays of Judith Thompson

George Toles

DEE: Lionel, have some more brandy.
(to Mack) What are you thinking?

MACK: I was thinking . . . about my father having his heart attack at the top of the stairs . . . sorry, but it’s true, that’s what I was thinking, I mean seeing in my brain.

MERCY: He had it at the top of the stairs?

MACK: Yeah. The dog was at the bottom of the stairs and, she went berserk, you know, she was . . . the mother was in the kitchen, talking on the phone to the aunt, and she . . . the dog wouldn’t let her near him, she wouldn’t let the ambulance attendants . . . they had to . . . shoot her with one of those sleeping potions, then she had a stroke two days later. You’d go into the house and there was my mother passed out on the couch with a bottle of scotch and this paralyzed dog. . . She still can’t bark without slurring, really! She’s got this slurred bark like when stroke victims talk outa the side of their mouth? (*does bark*)

DEE: She’s a sweet dog. Golden Labrador.

— Judith Thompson, *I Am Yours*

IN A JUDITH THOMPSON PLAY, the question “What are you thinking?” is never an occasion for reticence. Perhaps the most distinctive, and consistent, quality of her characters is their lack of a public, social self that monitors and limits the exposure of the private self. Thompson often establishes, as in the scene from which I’ve quoted, a familiar social context (friends gathered for after-dinner conversation) whose properties are generally understood, and then shows one character after another doing violence to decorum as images from their unconscious force their way into speech. Mercy, one of the central characters in *I Am Yours* (1987), asks near the beginning of the play, “Did you ever wake up, well not quite wake up and you can’t remember where you are?” All of Thompson’s

characters know this experience. It is, in fact, the inalterable rhythm of their precarious life in the social realm. They do not, as a rule, wilfully cast off the constraints of their defined social roles, in the manner of the most intriguing figures in farce. It is more a matter of their *forgetting* themselves, temporarily losing sight of where they are in relation to others and losing hold of whatever sense and order they normally depend on. The effect of this forgetting is beautifully rendered in John Ashbery's poem, "New Ways of Knowing": "waking up / In the middle of a dream with one's mouth full / Of unknown words. . . ." And then, in Thompson's vision, being compelled to speak those words and take on their emotions as an absolute pre-condition for having memory restored. One cannot reclaim one's place in the world of others until this alien voice has done what it can to bring its own dreadful imperatives to light.

Since there is no one in a Thompson play who is not subject to this kind of seizure, it is possible to be possessed in the presence of others without shocking them. Indeed, at least the *form* of most wild utterance is tolerantly absorbed by those who listen to it: its meaning is seldom fathomed even by the speaker, but this lack of comprehension is typically not a source of distress. In the scene segment with which I began, Mack precedes his entry into the dream space of obsessive speech with an apology to Dee for being honest about what he is thinking. "I mean seeing in my brain." This brief, reflex concern with a code of correct behaviour seems very odd in a play where, from the outset, everyone seems equally driven to "go too far" in their speech and actions. In fact, Mack's friends are plainly more struck by his use of the word "sorry" than by the account of his father's (and dog's) heart attack that follows it. Moments after Mack has finished speaking, some brandy gets spilled, and everyone in the group, in a kind of imitative frenzy, cries out "SORRY! Sorry, I'm sorry." They seem to be experimenting, in the protective anonymity of a chorus, with the hypnotic *sound* of remorse, trying to bring the emotion closer as their voices rise, in a situation where there is no necessity to name (or even think about) the acts for which each of them most requires forgiveness. Mercy is openly disturbed by the repetition and asks why everyone is saying sorry. "You'd think we'd all committed a . . ." The unspoken word, sin, which refers both to real and equally tormenting imagined crimes is the core of the group's inner life, and the motive force of the constant invasion of their thoughts by "waking dreams."

The members of the group see violent agitation and loss of control as regular features of the social landscape. Such proclivities are understood to be *shared*, rather than a shameful and isolating mark of individual mental imbalance. Since circumspection plays so little part in Thompson's public realm, extremes of every sort are accommodated in the flow of the dialogue, and it is only the truly monstrous transgression that can close communication off. The startling spectacle of unfettered instinct running riot in scene after scene is movingly combined, as

in the episode I just described, with a vestigial group memory of the traditional function of "limits" and the idea of moral accountability. The characters dream of a structure secure enough to hold them in check, and, at a deeper level, of a power comparable to grace which will deliver them from the "thing" that possesses them.

The comedy which is so prominent in Thompson's work dwells, in large part, on the borderline of madness. It generates an intoxicating aura of false freedom which, in turn, masks a process of enslavement. One would be wrong to conclude that the laughter Thompson's plays invite issues from a perspective rooted in caricature or from a heartless glibness about genuine suffering. Nor does Thompson take her licence for inventing comic horrors from the always aesthetically defensible (but too often complacent) despair at being "alive in times like these." There is in her plays no poisonous embrace of vileness as the only condition left for us, with the implicit assumption that the artist is courageous for daring to say so. The nearest modern analogue for Thompson's form of comedy is the fiction of Flannery O'Connor, whose grotesque heroes are always moving, whether they realize it or not, towards "life and death" encounters with evil and grace. Hazel Motes, the preacher in O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, whose inability to rid himself of Christ's haunting image "in the back of his mind" leads him ultimately to blind himself, wrap his chest with barbed wire, and wear shoes filled with rocks and broken glass, could be seen as the prototype for Thompson's equally regressive and deranged seekers after truth. (Mrs. Flood, to Hazel: "There's no reason for it. People have quit doing it." "They ain't quit doing it as long as I'm doing it," he said.) "Freakishness," in Thompson's work as in O'Connor's, is treated as an emblem of our displacement from a condition in which sin, the redemptive value of suffering, and a love distinct from human love are realities — a "light" to see things by. Thompson's comic tone chiefly differs from O'Connor's in its closer alliance with emotion, which O'Connor generally distrusts because of its tendency to palliate the harsh truths that comedy exposes. Given this difference, it is perhaps not surprising that O'Connor's subject matter is always concerned with the mystery of faith, while Thompson is much more interested in the mystery of love.

O'Connor has declared, in her essay "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," that "when the grotesque is used in a legitimate way, the intellectual and moral judgments implicit in it will have the ascendancy over feeling."¹ Violence, to the extent that it is in harmony with O'Connor's comic instincts, is a blunt-edged, summary joke on human vanity. It is a calm "pronouncing of judgment" at the moment when the "very ground" of a character's soul has revealed itself, when the "spiritual lines of motion" are as clearly and sharply drawn as in a "child's drawing." There is a certain degree of "suffering with" in O'Connor's comic observation, but her involvement with her characters is never so strong that she cannot effect a clean break from them as they are lost, beaten, or murdered in their final ordeals. What makes her comic perspective somewhat forbidding is its sudden refusal of flexible

response. A door seems to shut, and her initial amused patience with human frailty is on the instant replaced by a severity that accepts no excuses, that appears almost to delight in the righteous scourging of weakness.

Thompson, like O'Connor, manages to keep her concern with spiritual reality available to comedy by focusing primarily on characters who do not know how to *think* ethically. The surrealist behaviour of her characters is meant to erupt on stage with an unreasoning urgency severed from any effort of the moral will; "life" which Hegel has termed "the kind that does not yet know itself." Even such "pure of heart" figures as Theresa in *The Crackwalker* (1980) and Pony in *White Biting Dog* (1984) maintain what I would call their passive rectitude in a region below conscious reflection. Their goodness dwells apart from their actions, and cannot be defined by reference to them. The rational mind has almost no access to this sort of spontaneous benevolence. It is clearly not the result of a steadily renewed choice to do good rather than evil. Their innocence, strangely combined with promiscuity and simple-mindedness in Theresa's case and an intensifying neurosis in Pony's, can best be understood as a gift for goodness, a grace that preserves the soul from infection, in spite of the frequent deep confusion of their conduct. No pattern of life that ethical conduct might enforce clearly emerges for Thompson's characters. Her comedy, however allied to a spiritual vision, is far less didactic than O'Connor's.

O'Connor's characters typically imagine themselves to be "good country people," and take comfort from the fact that their superiority to the "white trash," "niggers," criminals, and "ugly" folk around them "justifies" them in the eyes of God. O'Connor's dialogue draws much of its astringent humour from the incongruity of the vain and selfish person's assumptions that he is pious; his ostentatious self-approval condemns him every time he speaks, and tightens the noose around his neck. There will always come a moment of "abysmal life-giving knowledge" for this self-deceiver: the sky will open, as it does for Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation," so he can be pierced with the realization of what it means to be human, which comes down to the question "How am I a hog and me both?" Catholic dogma provides a lens for correcting the distortions in O'Connor's characters' hilariously awful pronouncements. But perhaps there is a hidden tendency to pride in the author's always possessing the correcting lens. It would appear that O'Connor herself is never in doubt, however mired in perplexity her characters may be, about what God is looking for. O'Connor claims that the fiction writer "cannot be an adequate observer [of the world] unless he is free from uncertainty about what he sees." But in an adjoining sentence she asserts that "Christian dogma is about the only thing left in the world that surely guards and respects mystery."² Any Christian writer would do well, I think, to ponder the implications of this second statement, but I don't feel that she is under any obligation to reconcile it with the arguably opposing requirements of the one preceding it. While it is reasonable to affirm that "open and free

observation is founded [for the Christian artist] on our ultimate faith that the universe is meaningful," does the artist not limit the presence of mystery in nature and severely qualify her own acceptance of it if she always has a secure perspective on what she sees, one that *needs* to be free of uncertainty?

I
 N THE COURSE OF A 1987 interview in Toronto (July 23), Thompson was attempting to locate a passage in *White Biting Dog* to illustrate a point she was making when her attention was caught by the stage direction in Act One that instructs Cape to "gag" at the sound of his mother's love-making. Thompson had apparently forgotten the image, and laughed with a quality of delighted discovery, as though she had come up with the idea at that very moment. Then she exclaimed, "Isn't that amazing? . . . That's just what he'd do." I have the impression that Thompson's comic sense operates in much the same way when she is writing. Her characters come to life in the act of making a full confession to her ("These were my *real* thoughts about that. . . . This is what I actually felt then, though it's a little hard to believe it. . . . How could I have done that? Well, there's no denying it. That's what I did"). For Thompson, "open and full observation" requires characters who hold no part of themselves in reserve, and who lack the good sense to defend themselves against almost certain misunderstanding. Thompson attends to their chronicles of misfortune with a kind of sympathetic wonder. This attitude does not exclude exuberant amusement at the impossible lengths to which they'll go in their dangerous, daft pursuit of a love "sufficient to their need." Ruth, the wisest character in Janet Kauffman's *Collaborators*, offers the young girl who narrates the novel two experiential truths that comprise the "soul of the action" in each of Thompson's plays: "As far as love goes, Andrea Doria, we are primitives, always primitives"; and, "I don't want to be in the middle. In the middle, everybody's lost."³ In all likelihood, one will be lost at the extremes as well, but a more complete and accurate expression of identity may be attainable there.

Thompson does not ever sentimentalize or idealize her characters' displays of "authenticity." In the first place, they achieve their emotional honesty without much effort. It is not an existential decision, earned by a difficult repudiation of inherited social and moral values. In the second place, the full acknowledgement of their status as desperate human creatures is not their spiritual endpoint. It is rather the point where they begin a long, pre-ethical phase in the vale of soul-making. Before we can think ethically, Paul Ricoeur writes:

We must discover that place where the autonomy of our will is rooted in a dependence and an obedience that is no longer infected with accusation, prohibition, and condemnation. This pre-ethical situation is that of "hearkening" [l'ecoute]. In

hearkening there is revealed a mode of being which is not yet a mode of doing and which thus avoids the alternative of subjection and revolt. Heraclitus said: "Do not attach importance to my words, but heed the logos." When word says something, when it reveals not only something about the meaning of beings but something about Being itself, as is the case with the poet, we are then confronted with what could be called the occurrence of word: something is said of which I am neither the source or the master. Word is not at my disposition as are the instruments of work . . . or the goods of consumption. In the occurrence of word I do not have anything at my command; I do not impose myself; I am no longer the master; I am led beyond the feelings of anxiety and concern. This situation or nonmastery is the origin of both obedience and freedom.⁴

Thompson's characters talk themselves out and enact their compulsions to the point of self-emptying exhaustion, in order that a space for hearing may finally be cleared within them. *White Biting Dog*, for example, builds in its last scene to a moment of unearthly silence when Cape and his mother, Lomia, sit apprehensive and motionless, as if prepared to listen for a voice other than their own for the first time. They have reached a juncture where it is possible for them to relinquish their posture of mastery. The obsessive, increasingly baroque enactments of the inner child's unfulfilled needs define the "substance" of the self's imagined autonomy, Thompson implies. The obedience to one's own desires (that is to say, the fixed, narrowly repetitive scenarios drafted by the unconscious) is demonstrably marked by the "overpowering ghost" of a child that the self can never leave behind. Each act that this self considers in its own "freedom" may well be inspired or prohibited by that implacable child, whose power vastly exceeds the shaping power of culture. What one's appetite chooses with the greatest insistence is that which the pre-ethical, "child-formed" self has least strength to refuse. Such choice does not lead to the actualization of a new being; it is a subjection to the will of our own past. Thompson treats this condemnation to repeat as a parody of the higher obedience to the life of grace. (Ricoeur describes the latter condition as an "obedience beyond fear," and a "consent beyond desire.") The name of God is hardly ever spoken by Thompson's characters, reminding me of Wittgenstein's injunction not to refer to those things that exceed the limits of one's discourse: "Whereof we cannot speak, we must remain silent." The action of Thompson's plays is the prelude to hearkening, in which the mortal counterfeits of love must be granted absolute primitive sovereignty before they can be recognized and (perhaps) overcome. The formation of a soul, in Thompson's world, depends on a moment of pristine clarity when one's whole being assents, for the first time *knowing* what ethical choice involves, either to good or to evil.

OF THOMPSON'S THREE PLAYS, *White Biting Dog* dramatizes the progression to the moment of choice most explicitly. In *The Crackwalker*,

which from the time of its first production has been wrongly identified as a naturalistic play, the pressure of environment is such a palpable influence on the characters that the mental damage they exhibit and the brutal acts they engage in might appear to be wholly the consequence of poverty, ignorance, and heredity. The climax of *The Crackwalker* involves a father's killing an ailing infant son, born retarded, whom he has come to regard as the sole remaining proof of his own identity ("that boy in there he's my son, he's my son and without my son I'm nothing get it? NOTH-THIN . . . And I wouldn't *WANT* to be nothin, understand?"⁵). His wife, the slow-witted innocent Theresa, places the dead baby in a shopping bag and walks off with the intention of burying it. She alternately remembers and forgets what she has been told about being dead, as she speaks to the baby in the bag. ("It's okay, Danny, don't you be cryin now, you with baby Jesus sittin in the cloud and the Virgin lookin like me she with ya . . . Danny? You still live? You breathin if I breathin into ya? S'okay, I your Mum! [tries to breathe into baby] Danny? You dead, eh? You not live. You never comin back, eh" [56].) Alan, Danny's father, has killed him after a long, terrible struggle with the "ugly" images and thoughts that he can't "beat out of [his] head" (37). Danny is his last, dim image of himself surviving in the world beyond his psychosis. His strangling of Danny is a symbolic suicide, a helpless surrender to the dread of his own vanishing. Danny has been a "good" picture ("like lambs in a field") that he has tried to superimpose over the sickening obsessions that "burn holes" in his mind, as a form of protection. But all the pictures that Alan has constructed since childhood to hold evil at bay have eventually transformed themselves into what he is most afraid of. Danny has been his most solid picture, actually anchored in the real world, and he lavishes on this graspable image all the remnants of tenderness walled up behind his myriad fears. When he ultimately chokes Danny, he speaks words of love to him; there is no will to murder, only a hopelessly confused attempt to save what has already been lost.

Where is the point of spiritual departure in the frighteningly bleak circumstances of *The Crackwalker*? Where is there a recognition of (or a "hearkening" to) a voice that is not "in thrall," which it may be possible to obey? I would argue that there are two such points. Sandy, a character I have not yet referred to who has been distractedly involved with Theresa and Alan throughout the play, has a final monologue in which she moves impressively beyond the crude categories of her former "knowing." She demonstrates a willingness not to pass judgment on either of Danny's parents (in fact, claims continuing friendship with both of them) and decides that the child's death is a mystery that she would do well to leave alone. The spiteful gossip, Bonnie Cain, whose version of events Sandy has always been quick to accept in the past, is dismissed as a "fuckin hound dog" whose voice Sandy succeeds in silencing at the baby's funeral. ("*She* didn't say nothin more.") At the end of her monologue, Sandy refers for the second time to the "Christmas wreath"

of flowers placed around the baby's neck in the coffin to hide the "strangle marks." Sandy declares she has seen the marks under the wreath. "The flowers never hid it they just made ya look harder, ya know? They just made ya look harder" (60). The repetition of this final phrase suggests, with a beautifully delicate obliqueness, that Sandy's perception has arrived at the threshold of a deeper dimension: a seeing/listening that is prepared to "dive and reappear in new places."

The other moment in *The Crackwalker* when the visible and invisible seem to converge is in Theresa's brief final scene, which concludes the play. Sandy, immediately prior to Theresa's appearance, has expressed concern that her fate will be to "go back down the Lido, start blowin off old queers again for five bucks" (60). But she has also acknowledged the compelling enigma of this fool-saint's nature. ("Jeez y'know I don't know what goes on inside that girl but it ain't what's goin on inside the rest of us.") Theresa's last gesture on stage is to fend off the advances of a lecherous "old buzzard," a decision she justifies by noting that he doesn't know who she looks like. Much earlier in the play, when Alan proposed marriage to her, he told her with utter conviction that she looks like the "madonna lady you know them pictures they got up in classrooms when you're a kid?" Theresa replied that she knew about her, that she loved the Virgin Mercy and often asked her for "stuff." When Theresa later expresses doubt that she really looks like "that Madonna," Alan assures her that there's a perfect resemblance, and she believes him. As I noted previously, Alan has no success in planting "good pictures" in his own mind; all of them give way to the awful thoughts that possess him. However, the "picture" that he offers Theresa in the clear "first light" of his love for her is an image that survives his own descent into madness. Theresa's final line in the play (delivered after her refusal of the man who has propositioned her) is "You don't even know who I lookin like." The words are spoken, with slight variation, twice, in order to echo the repetition of the word "look" at the end of Sandy's monologue. Theresa lacks Sandy's power or desire to press beyond the surface of things. But her memory of Alan's fleeting response to her as Madonna furnishes her with a strong, literal image of value in which she can forever see herself. Her brief lines following the stranger's disappearance may, in effect, be saying: "I have no right to ask you to respect me. After all, I've done a lot of bad things. But if you knew *anything*, you'd be able to recognize the person I look like, and respect *that*. And if you can't see who I look like, then I don't want to be with you." The "picture" formed from what was least confused in Alan's love for her may not prove sufficient to prevent Theresa's destruction. But it has made her, through the mediation of a "felt" image of the good, visible to herself as one who "belongs to" another, and thus, paradoxically, Theresa becomes *free* to say no to those who claim authority over her.

I Am Yours, Thompson's third play, explores the phenomenon of demonic possession in a psychological force-field that seems modelled on the collective unconscious. The play begins with a dream in which a small boy (Toilane) ap-

proaches a house that he is certain is his own, only to be confronted at the door by a strange woman who calmly insists, against his increasingly loud protest, that his house is *hers*, that he does not live there, that he must live somewhere else. As he turns from the door, lost, a second dream involving two young sisters breaks in upon his. One of the sisters, Dee, is certain that she hears the scratching sound of an invisible animal inside her school. The sound fills her with dread and she refuses to enter, despite the reassurance and irritated urging of her older sister, Mercy. At this point, the boy becomes a participant in the sisters' dream, confirming Dee's fear that there *is* a scratching sound, since he can hear it as well. It suddenly grows dark, though the children are sure that it is still morning. Mercy, as the eldest in the group, does everything in her power to explain the terrifying situation rationally, then as a final measure urges her companions to concentrate on the "friendly" violets clustered in the grass, while they all take the "giant steps" associated with adults to a place of safety. As all defences fail and they surrender completely to their fears, the three children awaken "with a terrible start" in what Thompson calls their "separate adult spaces."

This remarkable opening scene prepares us for the collective dream quality of the play's entire action. The dream experience so dominates the "waking sense" of the "separate adult space" that it soon establishes itself as the primary reality. There is no separate, individualized space in which one can take refuge either from the "spell" of a private dream or the abrupt in-flowing of the dreams of others (equivalent to the child Toilane's discovery that *his* house has been mysteriously taken over by a stranger). The reason for the interlocking nature of the dream visions in the play has to do with the central mystery of Dee's demonic possession. The figures surrounding Dee are all projections of some aspect of Dee's "memory drowned" core experience, which brought into being and steadily nurtured the "great, hidden beast" that now borders her life at every point, waiting (she feels certain) to devour her. *Ich Bin Dein* (German for "I Am Yours") is the repeating phrase that serves as the primary clue to the beast's identity, as well as to the source of its power. The phrase operates as the formula of an evil spell or curse that somehow binds all of the figures in the play together. Dee's sister Mercy's recurrent dream includes a medallion with these words inscribed on it. She seems always on the verge of deciphering their meaning when she is distracted by a stabbing recollection of betrayal and hurt. The translation that she and, by extension, each of the other characters is looking for can only occur beneath the ever-intruding personal sphere, at the level of what Friedrich Schelling has termed the "non-personal soul"; without that translation no spiritual integration can be achieved, and love will have no clear channel through which to flow.

When Dee, quite early in the play, opens herself to possession by "the beast," her long-standing dread of it is immediately transformed into the ecstatic freedom of merging with a stronger entity, and taking on its power. She feels a greater degree

of self-possession than she has ever known before. Her first act of “freedom” is to betray her husband, Mack, in a sexual liaison with Toilane, who is now the superintendent of the apartment building in which she lives. Having driven Mack away with a vicious repudiation that seems largely unwilling, she persuades him to come back after learning that she is pregnant with Toilane’s child. She tells Mack that the child is his, while secretly making plans to give the child up for adoption as soon as it is born, so that neither Mack nor the child’s father (who desires to raise it) will ever be permitted to see it. With each advance in perfidy, she becomes less agitated; possession transfigures her into a radiantly single-minded presence, secure to a degree she has never been about the rightness of her own conduct. She is like the serenely frenzied Agave in Euripedes’ *The Bacchae*, who displays the head of a “lion” she has killed on a pointed stake, blind to the fact that it is actually the severed head of her son Pentheus that she holds. Dee has a final recognition scene comparable to that of Agave, in which she is obliged once again to *see* herself in her actions. The awakening takes place in a hospital room after she has delivered her child. It is as though the “diabolic influx” that has subjugated her is expelled in the act of giving birth. She has lost the strong sense of shelter, of internal support that the inhabiting evil has given her. She remembers what it is to suffer, and to feel remorse. Having asked Mack’s forgiveness, she has a vision of his face, and that of her sister, catching on fire; she cries out in panic as the fire spreads to their hands and hair. It is in the midst of this hallucination of her loved ones burning that Dee stands up and asks to talk to her mother. The “spiritual lines” of the play converge on this point in the action. As the faces of those she identifies with the reality of love are eradicated, feature by feature, Dee becomes conscious of a face *behind* theirs slowly taking form, the face she has refused to know as the face of the animal divinity she has “invited” inside her — her mother’s face.

THROUGHOUT THE PLAY Dee’s sister Mercy has regularly proclaimed the goodness of their mother, who made Mercy the centre of her life. She talks about her mother’s “sandal” under a lawn chair that has become almost a sacred relic for her father after her death: something never to be moved. Only one of *Dee’s* memories of her mother is reported in the play, and we learn that the experience caused her to shake for an entire night in Mack’s arms. On the occasion of Mack’s first meeting with her mother, Dee had mentioned in her mother’s presence how scared she had been on the highway as they were coming to see her (unaware that it was the anticipated introduction that intensified her normally high level of anxiety). “In front of all of us,” Mack recalls to her, “your mother turned to you and said, “Why? Why do YOU want to live so much?” In the initial phase of her possession, before losing herself altogether, Dee tells Mercy of a recur-

ring nightmare of violent sexual release. Mercy, whose intuitions about her sister (if never about herself) have a clairvoyant accuracy, asks, without taking in the import of her words, without perhaps even hearing herself saying them: "How horrible could it be, were you devouring Mummy's brains and spitting out her teeth. . . ."

Dee's profound fear of her mother's "inhuman" strength and her complete repression of a hatred for her that "cannot be justified" become entangled with the still arduous internal struggle to find some way of giving her mother a form of love — or submission — that will appease her. Dee needs some unspoken word or resolving gesture from her mother in order to make the love her mother could not accept into something fit to be offered to someone else. The mother's death has by no means put an end to their relationship, only moved it to a deeper level now that the possibility of acceptance by the *living* mother has been taken away. The pressure of Dee's conscious need for "atonement" combined with the complex of negative feelings that she cannot acknowledge, combine to spawn the "beast" that invades her. The logic of her possession (what the beast *wants*) is first to give Dee control of her relationships with others, then to enable her to "free" herself of the relationships, so that she can finally join her mother in a condition resembling death.

Mercy has a speech midway through the second act describing the two sisters in their mother's hospital room on the day she died, "holding her head and trying to help her breathe, and then the breath getting lighter and lighter until we'd all stop breathing." Mercy describes her own emergence from the hospital after "Mummy died"; she is released into a landscape of snow where "huge icy trees" were "just . . . showing themselves . . . showing. And I was so startled . . . to hear my own breath . . . keep . . . on. . . ." By implication, Dee has elected to remain in "that dark hospital room," desperately prolonging the attempt to help her dead mother breathe, even if it means supplying her with all of her own "air," or building, in the powerful phrase of Henry James, Sr., "a literal nest of hell [for her] within [the child's] own entrails." When Dee suspects that she is pregnant, she executes a painting in a semi-trance, with a "yellow circle" (of energy, light, the life-force) enclosing a black circle (the dead mother slowly expanding inside the embryo, seeking to supplant it in the womb). Hence the idea of the child, from the very first, is hopelessly confused with the traumatically buried image of the mother struggling to breathe. Dee's original plan is to abort the foetus, but when she 'hears' the life inside her ("a breathing, a kind of breathing, a tone of voice, a step . . . [but also] a shudder of cold, your hand being squeezed, your eyes looking at me. Oh! you . . . are . . . you are") she is certain that the unborn child has communicated with her, and that she has no choice but to save it. No sooner, however, has Dee's maternal instinct been awakened, than she feels equally compelled to make arrangements to give her child away. "It could have his face!" she explains to Mercy, referring to Toilane, the child's father. "I couldn't even smile at it if it had his face! I could

never touch it, never . . . nurse . . . it.” Dee’s actual dread, of course, is not of the confrontation with Toilane’s face. By a massive act of dream-displacement that extends throughout her period of possession, Dee responds to every face she knows as though it were a mask worn by her mother. Her monstrous behaviour to others is a furious acting out of her inaccessible feelings for the presence behind them, whom she cannot succeed in identifying.

The hidden face finally becomes clear in the hospital room when Dee wakes up after childbirth. Dee stands up and announces her need to speak to her mother. Mercy, assuming that she is still hallucinating, gently reminds her that “Mummy’s dead, she’s dead.” Dee is at last able to *know* this emotionally and accept it. What she wants to tell her, in death, is that she’s sorry. Her voice builds in intensity as she repeats the words “I’m sorry” until she is wailing from the centre of her being. The words are no longer unfocused, as they were in the party scene I discussed earlier. They are discharged towards an image that has finally attained clear definition, as someone necessarily Other: “I am sorry that my love for you could never go anywhere” is perhaps the first recognition her deep cry brings forth. “I am sorry that I hated you, for I’m beginning to know and accept this hatred as a large part of what you were to me. I am sorry you could not forgive me for not being the child you thought you wanted or needed. I am sorry that I cannot be yours in death, if I am ever to learn to live as myself.” This purging action, which embraces both the forgiveness of the mother and self-forgiveness (made possible only when the former, in its immense difficulty, has been achieved) is the play’s single point of entry for the “non-personal” reality of grace. A point discovered, as so often in Thompson, on the far side of madness. But grace, whatever protection and healing it may bring to the sufferer who receives it, does not deliver her from confusion or the rending pain of loss. Our final image of Dee reveals her gazing at a row of cribs in the hospital nursery, certain that she has identified her child, who is actually in a hotel room in another city, being held by her “bewildered and lost” father. Dee softly assures the “wrong” infant that she is loved, and tells it what mother love will mean: “I want you forever because I love you.” Love that is avowed in these terms is love already beginning to betray its worthiest impulses, “I am yours,” the play’s haunting title proclaims, but it has been the burden of the action to show us how these familiar words of self-surrender generally mean just the opposite, concealing a hard unyielding claim that “you are mine.” In the constant revision of “yours” to “mine,” of sacrificial giving to compulsive clutching, the would-be “lover” involuntarily pursues her own “perfected image” in the guise of another, “in whose existence [her] own experience is confirmed and amplified.”⁶

Mercy’s approach to love, like Dee’s, is founded on the belief that it is reasonable to want to be “the centre of someone’s life.” When a person makes you his “centre,” Mercy suggests, he is doing you a “kindness.” In Mercy’s reading of her past her

mother has performed that kindness, but for all her “generosity” she could not compensate Mercy for her father’s decision to ignore her. She feels that he chose Dee at an early age for “partnership” in an exclusive “company of love” where there could never be an opening for her. (“My DAD . . . thought I was kinda a dud you know? I even heard him introduce her [Dee] as his ‘favourite daughter’ once, and they had this special club and stuff. . . . He gave her a medallion with ‘Ich Bin Dein’ German for . . . but RAYMOND thought I WAS AMAZING.”) Mercy has made her one truth the lacerating (but after long nurturing, indispensable) idea that because of Dee, she will always be invisible to men (“all the boys always looked straight at you, straight through me”). She was originally Dee’s childhood protector, then somehow fell behind her younger sister, and feels she was permanently eclipsed by her. Mercy’s natural tenderness and powers of imaginative sympathy have gradually given way to a wholly negative self-absorption. Her experiences with men, with one exception, have involved “false offers” of herself, a parody of the freedom she remembers having experienced with her first lover, the father-surrogate Raymond. She submits to the role she believes defined her irrevocably in adolescence, that of “whoredog” victim. She is attracted chiefly to men she can’t have, and makes herself available to them with a show of such pathetic, groping need that she insures either their contemptuous exploitation or humiliating refusal of her. In one of the most striking paradoxes of *I Am Yours*, she discloses that she is so afraid of her sister *because* she loves her. When Mercy abandons Dee in a crisis, as she does repeatedly throughout the play, she draws on her mother’s “strength” to abandon her. Mercy must *belong* to her mother, as she sees it, because Dee was chosen first by her father to belong to him. Both sisters feel stifled wearing the rigid emotional apparel of the chosen/choosing parent (I am yours, but I wish I weren’t). Their imprisonment only deepens, however, as they come to conceive growth as a switching of one parent’s wardrobe for the other’s. (“I will become mother, and then be free” is, in its barest formulation, the logic of Dee’s possession, or, in Mercy’s case: “I will take father away from Dee, in the form of Mack or whomever she is in love with now. Once I have father, then I will be his and he will be mine, and I will be free.”)

Toilane is yet another child yearning to break away from a parent (his mother, Pegs) whose “love” is a monstrous enclosure. Ironically, he intends to make his escape through Dee, whom he decides he loves at first sight. He finds himself drawn to her just at the point that she relinquishes all sense of personal identity, and disappears inside the demon embodiment of *her* mother’s spirit. After Toilane and Dee make love, he tells her of the vision that came to him as he entered her: “I pictured in my mind this face lookin up at me . . . this face.” The face swiftly merges with that of the omnipotent Pegs, who takes over his love affair as soon as he loses control of it, in an effort to secure her son’s “rights.” Pegs even goes so far as to preside over Dee’s labour, sitting beside her as she struggles to give birth

and assuming the office of her parent. While Dee suffers the agony of her contractions, Pegs's voice drones on interminably at her side, objectifying the mother image that Dee must recognize before she can expel the 'evil' that has taken hold of her. Pegs's recital concludes, fittingly, with a grotesque recognition scene from her own high school reunion. "But Marjorie, here I am, I'm Peggy! Didn't you see me?" Well then SHE turned three shades of red and she SAID, 'Well yes, I did, but I wouldn't have known you . . . your FACE!' My face, had got so . . . it's true I guess, I don't look nothing like my wedding pictures."

LET US RETURN ONCE MORE to the excerpt from the play with which the essay began. Mack's story of his father's heart attack can serve as a concluding illustration of how identities metamorphose in the child's memory as he attempts to summon the parent who is "gone" yet still inside him. The father having his fatal attack at the top of the stairs is immediately displaced from the centre of Mack's tale by the stronger memory image of the dog who guarded him and refused to let anyone come near. The dog also becomes confused with Mack's mother. Both are female, and there is a marked ambiguity of pronoun reference as Mack tries to account for his mother's "failure" to know what the dog knew instantly, that his father was in danger ("she went berserk, you know, she was . . . the mother was in the kitchen, talking on the phone to the aunt, and she . . . the dog wouldn't let her near him"). The dog not only takes on the emotional response that Mack might see as "rightfully" belonging to the oblivious wife on the phone, but also reacts to her as if she were an enemy of the man who needs help, as much a stranger to his suffering as the "ambulance attendants" who arrive later. The father's fatal seizure is "relieved" by the dog, who within two days of her master's death has a stroke of her own. In some sense, the father's death, because of this *imitation* of his heart failure, remains stalled just short of completion. He is not quite dead as long as his 'condition' is carried forward by his "paralyzed" but still surviving dog. The mother, for her part, is likewise imitated by the dog as she collapses in a daily alcoholic stupor on the couch, with the ailing animal stretched out alongside her. Thus, the Labrador with the "slurred bark" seems to contain whatever is left of Mack's parents. She is the mysterious emblem of what Mack must continue to take from them for his own life; Mack barks at the end of his story as if to acknowledge the fact.

Cape Race, the central character of Thompson's second (and finest) play, *White Biting Dog*, begins his on-stage existence in a situation that closely parallels that of Mack's story. Standing on a bridge contemplating suicide, Cape is confronted by a white dog with the power to speak to him. The dog tells him that he is "jumping to hell" and that he can only save himself by saving his father, who appears to be

in the last stage of an incurable illness. Cape eventually learns (or, rather, thinks he learns) what he must do to save his father after meeting a young psychic named Pony, whom he regards as an unconscious emissary of the prophetic apparition. He believes he must persuade his mother to return to his father's house "for good" and agree to be his wife again. (She left her husband many years ago, and now lives with a "boy" named Pascal, who is even younger than her son.) The plot of *White Biting Dog*, however much it defies literal sense, has a beautiful simplicity of design, in notable contrast to the Byzantine intricacy of *I Am Yours*. As with all great plots, the mere process of recounting it seems to put one in touch with a mystery of experience that is at some deep level known to us, but whose truth lies just out of reach. The stories that get retold endlessly are those that appear to "live completely" within the action of their plots, yet manage to withhold (each time we hear them) something that is required to bring them fully to rest in our minds. The pattern seems to correspond to a pattern inside us; the plot invites us to see through it to a perhaps hidden "law" of our being that we may obey without comprehending. This law might be a prohibition or a fixed accusation or, as in the case of *White Biting Dog*, an impossible but inescapable task to perform.

The meaning of a drama, Thompson believes, should never be formulated for an audience in terms of a theme or idea that is already clear to them. When this happens, the intellect too easily safeguards the emotions against contact with that area in oneself that is still fluid and volatile. Thompson always aims her plays at the fault lines in our internal defence system, the places where the self has no "prepared responses." Unreality is the cost of the imagination settling for what can be seen and, with minor adjustments, stabilized. "Arrangements or structures reveal themselves, as Marx would have it, principally at the moment and in the act of breakdown."⁷ The plot of *White Biting Dog* is a structure that our feelings, however disposed to resist, *know* something about. Before we have had an opportunity to analyse this structure enough to gain some distance from it, it begins to "heave and buckle," threatening collapse. Thompson repeatedly dislocates the audience, as she propels the spectator, with no transitional scenes and few abatements of intensity, from troubling comedy, to nightmare panic, to breakdown, and back again. Every thought or impulse that arises in a scene immediately splits into its opposite, Pirandello-fashion, so that emotion and comedy both end up having the same source and the same value. An amusing declaration always modulates into raw feeling just at the point we enter comfortably into laughter. ("LOMIA: It's because I *love* being inside of my six layers of skin; it's de-licious in here — everytime I breathe I sort of — breathe out *seeds, seeds*. I feel — I inside I feel like . . . like . . . sewage."⁸) Conversely, feeling continually betrays itself, and drops unceremoniously into the comic. ("CAPE: Pony, Pony do you feel it? PONY: (breathlessly) I don't really like to say these things out loud. CAPE: (kisses her) Oh. Oh oh. That was — almost — good" [43].) Cape's emotion is no sooner acknowledged than

it begins to disbelieve in itself. He instinctively turns against the person who has “tricked” him into a direct, uncalculated response.

One rationale for Thompson’s characteristic rhythm of dislocation and her startling, surrealist collisions of conscious and unconscious data is the necessity of keeping the thematic “machinery” of her plays invisible. She attempts to induce in us a prolonged sensation of psychic unsupportedness. We never quite know where we are in her plays, but it feels important that we should continue our efforts to find out. Thompson recently revised the final lines of *White Biting Dog* because she found them too sharply pointed. The original dialogue suddenly made explicit reference to the place where the moral consciousness of her characters had arrived by the play’s end (in other words, bringing to light what they should *learn* from their experience). Thompson became convinced that the space of mystery, which all authentic experience inhabits, was falsified by the decision to impose clarity.

The “impossible task” paradigm that provides the basic plot situation for *White Biting Dog* derives, I think, from the common belief of young children that they must be the protector of their parents when they come into conflict, that it is up to them to “save” the marriage, to somehow bridge the gulf of enmity that has opened between the mother and father. (The child often assumes that he is the cause of the conflict.) Cape is essentially reliving this archetypal scenario as an adult, without understanding his assigned role any better than he did as a child. (He is of course, by implication, *still* that child.) The external challenge that was “botched” by the guilty, fearful young boy rephrases itself, in the adult psyche, as an *internal* challenge which must be met if Cape is to find his soul and restore himself to life. The central mystery of the play seems to emanate from the words “to save.” What does the command to save one’s father mean, when that father is on the verge of death and is clearly prepared to die? And what does it mean to save oneself? Cape finds a narcissistic solace in the romantic idea of his imminent suicide. Death of self, however (like death *to* self, its spiritual double) requires a form of courage, or at least decisiveness, that Cape does not possess. Cape seizes on the literal sense of the dog’s message to him, and believes he is pursuing a noble objective as he lures his father back into a tenuous half-life with false assurances of his mother’s renewed love for him. These assurances have far more to do with Cape’s relationship with his mother and his own unacknowledged desires, than with his father’s present need. The *real* task that the white dog has given him, whose directive he cannot hear through the ceaseless, drumming din of his fraudulent personality, is to bring his father and mother together inside himself, and to save some portion of his father’s goodness, which he has not begun to understand, from dying *there*. Cape’s conception of self, like Dee’s, grows out of an unrecognized identification with his mother as destroyer. He allies himself, confusedly, with her “strength” in her long-ago decision to “abandon” his father. Before the dog commanded that he save his father, Cape had abandoned him as well. He attempts to clear the way for a

parental reconciliation by setting out to eliminate his mother's current lover, Pascal, a young man close to his own age. With an increasingly crazed confidence in his own rectitude, he seduces Pascal with the hope of "breaking him down." Through the act of sodomy, he imagines he is asserting his superior strength (superior to mother and Pascal, at once); what is actually being asserted is his greater fitness to take on the role of his mother's lover, a role to which the primitive child in him still lays claim. He moves backwards in the order of attachments to the original maternal bond, which he has neither actualized nor found any substitute for. Cape expresses most trenchantly what this bond means to him in the extraordinary encounter with her that concludes the first act. He kisses Lomia on the mouth, a stage direction informs us, as if he were "inhaling" her, after which she notes, with a mixture of bafflement and surprise, "We — we — touched tongues" (56). Cape then holds her tightly as he tries to articulate how he always feels in her presence. "I want to take you by the hair (does so) and then and then bash and bash and bash and bash and bash your head against the wall until you —" (56). Before he can complete either his threat or his half-fathomed thought, Glidden, his father, knocks on the door, re-establishing the interdict that prohibits Cape from usurping dad's place in the torture chamber of this marriage. Glidden, who may well be suffering one of his mild hallucinations, has decided, child-fashion, to play a prank on his wife and son. Thus, he appears in the doorway on all fours, with a large bone in his mouth. Not losing sight of his obligation to be an authority figure as well, he offers (for their approval) a passable impersonation of Winston Churchill rallying the troops in Australia.

The only character in *White Biting Dog* standing somewhat apart from the closed circle of Cape's familial obsessions is Pony, the psychic, who initially resembles the eccentric "helping figures" in fairy tales. She is potentially the agent of self-integration and spiritual awakening for Cape, if he can be led to accept the uncorrupted love that she freely offers him. For the first half of the play, Pony possesses the remarkable ability to "listen past" the malign intent of his cunning, manipulative role-playing; she is in touch, as no one has ever been, with the helpless confusion and not quite strangled softness beneath his self-hatred. Moreover, she is comically as "starvin' to talk" as Pegs is in *I Am Yours*, so that Cape, with all his mental agility and shiftiness, is hard pressed to keep up with her. When Pony is not giving to others (and if she has any self-concept at all, it is that of "giver"), she lives enclosed in a kind of innocent reverie, which by some fortunate spiritual dispensation, is fragilely preserved from neurosis. Cape sees her as an agent of the white dog, having the power to help him accomplish the "impossible task" of saving his father from death. Pony's power, whose purpose he misconstrues, is all in the yielding. She is the white dog transformed from an immovable judge to a figure of mercy and atonement. Pony opens herself unreservedly to Cape, in an authentic gift of love. Because she holds "nothing back," she leaves herself deeply vulnerable

to rejection. She has no capacity to defend herself emotionally against Cape's betrayal, when it comes. Nor does she know how to separate herself from him, and, in effect, return to the "old Pony" once it becomes clear that he has no further use for her. Pony's "mission," which she fulfils without comprehending, is to lead Cape to an acceptance of love that is *not* founded on control.

Cape's first moment of ethical choice in the play comes when he takes Pony to the bedroom, and decides to make love to her. He is fully cognizant of the *reality* of her innocence. He also knows that there is a fundamental difference between what she is offering him and what he has previously been able to recognize in his relationships with others (especially other women). Finally, Cape may dimly apprehend that this is his last chance to surrender the mask that hides him not only from the world but from himself, rendering his entire being one great falsehood. Pony cannot be made into an extension or "reflector" of his mother (however much he would like to *find* his mother in her). She reveals to him no aspect of Lomia's nature, against which he might retaliate and which he could justify punishing. Rather, in her unselfconscious embodiment of the strength that dwells in vulnerability and sacrifice, she affords a basis of reconciliation with his father-image, which he renounced as pure "weakness" in early childhood. (Before the white dog's command to "save" him, Glidden was merely the impotent non-entity whom Cape occasionally visited for supper. Only in the process of dying has he become visible to his son as a man with an inner life, though Cape knows nothing about its contents.)

Cape's ethical choice, with respect to Pony, is not to "let her in" when he makes love to her. In the guise of tenderness (and in a darkness that is his private darkness writ large), he uses her body as a receptacle for the hatred that he has been unable to finish pouring out upon his mother. During her last monologue, at the end of the play, Pony describes, in spiritual terms, what transpired with Cape:

I was invaded, Dad, Dad, *filled*, by the worst evil . . . you ever imagined — I guess it happened when I fell in love, on account of I had to open my mouth so wide to let the love in that the evil came in, too . . . and living with it was just like being skinned alive. (107)

By entrusting her whole being to Cape, she has quite literally *lost* herself in love. Initially confused by what has been done to her, she mistakenly identifies Cape's demon as the proof of his feeling for her, and embraces it as her own. A "marriage" of some sort *has* taken place, as she repeatedly reminds herself. As a result of her attempt to enter into Cape's will to destroy Pascal, she suffers a psychic collapse. In her panic at not recognizing herself, she realizes that she no longer recognizes Cape either, though she is now imprisoned in his "world." When she is made to see that Cape wants to be rid of her once his family rescue mission is accomplished, she appeals one last time to the *voice* of her psychic power. It was this voice, she believes, which brought her into Cape's life, in addition to being the force that

shielded the “old Pony,” somehow protecting her innocence. The voice grants her permission to take on herself the full weight of the sins that Cape has committed against her and Pascal, in the latter case with murder in his heart. (The truth of what Cape has done to Pony, while bearing the “likeness of love,” is first imaged for her in his seduction of Pascal, which she witnesses.)

The cost of Pony’s decision to translate the evil that Cape has wilfully imparted to her into a force of regeneration (so that he will not *yet* have damned himself to a place “beyond the interchanges of love”) is an immense final yielding.⁹ She must lay down her life for him, an extreme instance of the Christian idea of “voluntary suffering in another’s place.” Charles Williams terms such a decision an act of “substituted love.” It can be persuasively argued that Pony’s suicide is much more the consequence of mental disintegration than of a rational decision to “expiate” Cape’s transgressions. Unable to cope with the agony of feeling that she is either two separate people, or no one at all, and believing that there is no way back to a self that she understands, and could claim as her own, she flees to suicide. It is the only available means of restoring psychic unity. Thompson fully acknowledges the operation of these forces in Pony’s final scenes. At the same time, however, she insists that the ethical choice Pony makes as she is compelled towards death is meaningful and spiritually efficacious. It opens into the dimension of grace, and produces an atmosphere in the space occupied by Cape and Lomia that the mother and son can feel, and that is conducive to “hearkening.”

I CANNOT CONCLUDE THIS critical investigation without strongly re-emphasizing my earlier observation that Judith Thompson is not, in any usual sense of the word, a didactic writer. She would be properly horrified at the thought of being found dogmatic about the appropriate distribution of suffering. None of her characters has earned by their worthy or dishonourable conduct the “loads” that they carry around with them. And Thompson does not wish us to have the confidence to make a final judgment of any of them. When I saw the Tarragon Theatre production of *White Biting Dog* in 1984, which remains one of the most vivid and powerful theatrical experiences I have had in Canada, I was forcibly struck by the persistent quality of “objective sympathy” in her presentation of all of her characters; it is the form of sympathy I associate with Chekhov. Thompson strives for (and frequently achieves) what Alan Williamson has described as the highest transaction of personal poetry. “We feel a kind of tragic awe at entering into the inner language of a life, which is also its net of destiny; in that conjunction we come close to the essential causes of human things. But we also learn a method or discipline of possible escape from the limitations of selfhood, and from the necessity of judging and being judged by others. Or, at the very least we learn, in William

Blake's terms, to judge 'states' and not 'individuals,' by seeing how different states are built up out of the same basic human materials. (It is at this level that a deeper, earned universality rewards the reader [viewer] who has refrained from demanding a shallow one.)"¹⁰

One not sympathetic to Thompson's work might wish to argue that her relentless concentration on extreme behaviour (her characters seem always to be hovering near psychosis) makes her range far too narrow for the creation of a large-spirited, humanly various drama. Such a critic might also dismiss what I have tried to characterize as her religious vision as a sado-masochistic simulacrum of spirituality. If the readings I have offered have not been adequate to modify these objections, I rather doubt that a fuller attention to specifically theatrical gifts (her unparalleled grasp of rhythms and sound pattern, for example) would make my high regard for Thompson's work more intelligible. In my judgment, her three plays give ample evidence of a powerful, utterly distinctive, fiercely independent theatrical voice. She may well be Canada's best playwright.

NOTES

- ¹ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, selected and ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), p. 43.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- ³ Janet Kauffman, *Collaborators* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 51.
- ⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith" in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 449-50.
- ⁵ Judith Thompson, *The Crackwalker* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1981), p. 52. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ⁶ John Updike, "More Love in the Western World" in *Assorted Prose* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1965), p. 299.
- ⁷ Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 186.
- ⁸ Judith Thompson, *White Biting Dog* (Toronto: Playwrights Union of Canada, 1986), p. 68. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ⁹ The phrase is Charles Williams's.
- ¹⁰ Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), p. 13.

