

“Grace in Literature – Abreaction in Art” Handout

From *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954*, ed. Douglas Brinkley, Penguin Books.

I had a picture of the human intensity of men as being represented by some little agitating organism on the forefront of the brain, even on the brow, and that being the everpresent palpitation (the brain's heart) of pride... pride to humility, back & forth, in the intenser neurotic sense, pride to humility, back and forth. Can you just see that little thing beating away like a heart? – but more mental than a heart, *wilder*, more “intelligent.” The source of all our troubles, too, but now I cease, as of this moment, being a philosopher, and turn to the action and mystery and details and human horror and “beauty” of that little thing. Shall I give it a name? – it is just above the eyes, somehow, and incidentally it is *not* the thing that kills us, it is our very life itself, our being, our humanity, our pride. It is all things, in a way. It is our nervous being. But, again, I cease being a “namer” of unnamables... at least, not so much now as before. My new novel-in-mind (“On The Road”) will be among these new... precepts? ...thoughts? ...discoveries? Even a calm woman like my mother has that wild pride palpitating on her brow. You see, I've discovered *the* thing. I will be wiser now (and *that's* a prideful statement.) “True thoughts,” my new concept mentioned earlier... the thoughts that come unannounced, unplanned, unforced, vividly *true* in their dazzling light ... led me to this further discovery. Through all these things, for instance, it was possible for me to realize the following fragmentary things about myself (since “truth” can only be the truth of myself, which I see inside me, and cannot be universalized and vaguely generalized into ‘truth for all men’ whose *insides* I of course cannot see – trusting, therefore, that the truth in me may be the same in them.) – I realized these true thoughts about myself.

From *The Angel That Troubled The Waters And Other Plays* by Thornton Wilder, a collection of sixteen “Three Minute plays for Three Persons,” published by Coward-McCann in November 1928, a year after the appearance of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. All but four of these short short dramas were written when Wilder was an undergraduate at Oberlin and Yale. Although written to be read rather than produced, over the years several have appeared on stage, television and set to music. In April 1999, all sixteen had their New York premiere. And where else but on Broadway! – at the Presbyterian Church at the corner of Broadway and 114th Street. In 1998, The Theatre Communications Group Press (TCG) re-published Wilder's playlets in Volume II of *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder*. This volume also includes Thornton Wilder Society Honorary Director A.R. Gurney's thoughtful words about the religious elements in Wilder's art:

“To start the tradition of always including a short piece from Wilder’s pen with dues notices, the Society is pleased to enclose this special edition of “The Angel That Troubled the Waters.” This playlet, the youngest in the book and selected by Wilder as the title for the entire collection, was completed in late June of 1928. At the time, the author was being assaulted on all sides by the staggering success of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, a novel that also addressed questions of life, death and goodness in a tough-minded way.”

The Angel That Troubled the Waters

By Thornton Wilder

CHARACTERS

THE NEWCOMER, an valid

THE MISTAKEN INVALID

THE ANGEL

SETTING

A great pool of water.

The pool: a vast gray hall with a hole in the ceiling open to the sky. Broad stone steps lead up from the water on its four sides. The water is continuously restless and throws blue reflections upon the walls. The sick, the blind and the malformed are lying on the steps. The long stretches of silence and despair are broken from time to time when one or another groans and turns in his rags, or raises a fretful wail or a sudden cry of exasperation at long-continued pain. A door leads out upon the porch where the attendants of the sick are playing at dice, waiting for the call to fling their masters into the water when the angel of healing stirs the pool. Beyond the porch there is a glimpse of the fierce sunlight and the empty streets of an oriental noonday.

Suddenly the Angel appears upon the top step. His face and robe shine with a color that is both silver and gold, and the wings of blue and green, tipped with rose, shimmer in the tremulous light. He walks slowly down among the shapeless sleepers and stands gazing into the water that already trembles in anticipation of its virtue.

A new invalid enters.

THE NEWCOMER: Come, long-expected love. Come, long-expected love. Let the sacred finer and the sacred breath stir up the pool. Here on the lowest step I wait with festering limbs, with my heart in pain. Free me, long-expected love, from this old burden. Since I cannot stay, since I must return into the city, come now, renewal, come, release.

(Another invalid wakes suddenly out of a nightmare, calling: “The Angel! The Angel has come. I am cured.” He flings himself into the pool, splashing his companions. They come to life and gaze eagerly at the water. They hang over the brink and several slide in. Then a great cry of derision rises: “The fool! Fool! His nightmare again. Beat him! Drive him out into the porch.” The mistaken invalid and his dupes drag themselves out of the water and lie dripping disconsolately upon the steps.)

THE MISTAKEN INVALID: I dreamt that an angel stood by me and that at last I should be free of this hateful place and its company. Better a mistake and this jeering than an opportunity lost.

(He sees the Newcomer beside him and turns on him plaintively)

Aie! You have no right to be here, at all events. You are able to walk about. You pass your days in the city. You come here only at great intervals, and it may be that by some unlucky chance you might be the first one to see the sign. You would rush into the water and a cure would be wasted. You are yourself a physician. You have restored my own children. Go back to your work and leave these miracles to us who need them.

THE NEWCOMER *(Ignoring him; under his breath)*: My work grows faint. Heal me, long-expected love; heal me that I may continue. Renewal, release; let me begin again without this fault that bears me down.

THE MISTAKEN INVALID: I shall sit here without ever lifting my eyes from the surface of the pool. I shall be the next. Many times, even since I have been here, many times the angel has passed and has stirred the water, and hundreds have left the hall leaping and crying out with joy. I shall be the next.

(The Angel kneels down on the lowest step and meditatively holds his finger poised above the shuddering water.)

THE ANGEL: Joy and fulfillment, completion, content, rest and release have been promised.

THE NEWCOMER: Come, long-expected love.

THE ANGEL *(Without turning makes himself apparent to the Newcomer and addresses him)*: Draw back, physician, this moment is not for you.

THE NEWCOMER: Surely, surely, the angels are wise. Surely, O prince, you are not deceived by my apparent wholeness. Your eyes can see the nets in which my wings are caught; the sin into which all my endeavors sink half performed cannot be concealed from you.

THE ANGEL: I know.

THE NEWCOMER: It is no shame to boast to an angel of what I might yet do in love's service were I but freed from this bondage.

THE MISTAKEN INVALID: Surely the water is stirring strangely today! Surely I shall be whole!

THE ANGEL: I must make haste. Already the sky is afire with the gathering host, for it is the hour of the new song among us. The earth itself feels the preparation in the skies and attempts its hymns. Children born in this hour spend all their lives in a sharper longing for the perfection that awaits them.

THE NEWCOMER: Oh, in such an hour was I born, and doubly fearful to me is the flaw in my heart. Must I drag my shame, prince and singer, all my days more bowed than my neighbor?

THE ANGEL *(Stands a moment in silence)*: Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of

men. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve. Draw back.

(He swiftly kneels and draws his finger through the water. The pool is presently astir with running ripples. They increase and a divine wind strikes the gay surface. The waves are flung upon the steps. The Mistaken Invalid casts himself into the pool, and the whole company lurches, rolls or hobbles in. The servants rush in from the porch. Turmoil. Finally the no-longer Mistaken Invalid emerges and leaps joyfully up the steps. The rest, coughing and sighing, follow him. The Angel smiles for a moment and disappears.)

THE HEALED MAN: Look, my hand is new as a child's. Glory be to God! I have begun again.

(To the Newcomer) May you be the next, my brother. But come with me first, an hour only, to my home. My son is lost in dark thoughts. I – I do not understand him, and only you have ever lifted his mood. Only an hour... my daughter, since her child has died, sits in the shadow. She will not listen to us...

END OF PLAY

An excerpt of "Where Love Is, God Is" by Leo Tolstoy, found in the collection *How Much Land Does A Man Need? And Other Stories*, trans. Ronald Wilks, Penguin Books:

...When she was gone Martin ate some soup, cleared the table and sat down to work. As he worked he kept watching that window and every time a shadow fell across it he would immediately look up to see who was passing. People he knew and strangers passed, but no one in particular.

And then an old market woman stopped right in front of his window. She was carrying an apple-basket but appeared to have sold most of her wares, as it was almost empty. On one shoulder was a sack of wood-shavings which she had most probably collected at some place where they were building and was on her way home. The sack was clearly very heavy and was hurting her, so to shift it to her other shoulder she put it down on the pavement, placed the apple-basket on a post and gave the shavings a shake. Just as she was doing this a boy in a ragged cap suddenly ran up, grabbed an apple and tried to run off with it. But the old woman had stopped him, turned round and grabbed his sleeve. The boy tried to struggle free, but the woman seized him with both hands, knocked his cap off and caught hold of his hair. The boy screamed and the woman cursed. Martin did not wait to make fast his awl but threw it down, rushed through the door and stumbled up the stairs, dropping his spectacles on the way. Out in the street the woman was cursing away, and evidently intended hauling the boy off to the police station. He struggled and protested his innocence.

'I never took it!' he said. 'What are you hitting me for? Let me go!'

Martin separated them, took the boy by the hand and said, 'Let him go, Grandma. Forgive him, for Christ's sake!'

'I'll forgive him, but not before he's had a taste of some new birch twigs! I'm taking the little devil to the police station.'

Martin did his best to dissuade her. 'Please let him go, Grandma. He won't ever do it again. For Christ's sake, let him go.'

The old woman released the boy, who wanted to run off, but Martin stopped him.

'You should ask the old woman to forgive you,' he said. 'And don't you ever do it again – I saw you take it.'

The boy burst into tears and begged her to forgive him.

'That's the way! Now, here's an apple for you,' Martin said, taking an apple from the basket and handing it to the boy. 'I'll pay for it, Grandma,' he added.

'But you'll only spoil little devils like him that way,' she said. 'What he deserves is such a thrashing he won't be able to sit down for a week.'

'Oh, Grandma!' Martin retorted. 'That may be our way, but it's not God's way. If the punishment for stealing just one apple is a thorough thrashing, then what should we deserve for our mortal sins?'

The old woman did not reply.

And Martin told her the parable of the master who excused one of his servants a great debt and how that servant went out and seized his own debtor by the throat. The old woman listened and so did the boy.

'God has commanded us to forgive, otherwise He will not forgive us. We should forgive everyone – not least thoughtless little boys!'

The old woman shook her head and sighed. 'That's all very well, but children are terribly spoilt these days.'

'Then it's up to us, their elders to teach them what's right,' Martin said.

'Yes, I agree,' the old woman replied. 'I had seven children once, but now I've only one daughter.'

And she told him how and where she and her daughter were living, and how many grandchildren she had.

'As you can see, I'm not very strong,' she said, 'but I still have to work myself to the bone. I feel so sorry for my grandchildren – such lovely boys, all of them! No one is as kind to me as they are. And my Aksyutka wouldn't leave me for anyone. "Dear Mummy," she says, "you're such a dear!"' And the old woman was quite overcome.

'Well, I suppose it's because he's so young,' she added, looking at the boy. 'May God be with him.'

She was about to lift her sack on to her shoulders when the boy immediately ran forward to help. 'Let me carry that for you, Grandma,' he said, 'I'm going your way.'

The old woman accepted and put the sack on the boy's back.

And off they went down the street. The old woman forgot to ask Martin to pay for the apple and Martin stood there, watching and listening to them as they went.

An excerpt from *The Family Reunion*, a play by T.S. Eliot:

HARRY

This last year, I have been in flight
But always in ignorance of invisible pursuers.
Now I know that all my life has been a flight
And phantoms fed upon me while I fled. Now I know
That the last apparent refuge, the safe shelter,
That is where one meets them. That is the way of specters...

AMY

There is no one here.
No one, but your family!

HARRY

And now I know
That my business is not to run away, but to pursue,
Not to avoid being found, but to seek.
I would not have chosen this way, had there been any other!
It is at once the hardest thing, and the only thing possible.
Now they will lead me. I shall be safe with them;
I am not safe here.

AMY

So you *will* run away.

AGATHA

In a world of fugitives
The person taking the opposite direction
Will appear to run away.

AMY: I was speaking to Harry.

The final portion of the handout, which is not reprinted here, was the story "The Sweetness of a Man's Friend" by Mark Rutherford, taken from the collection *Last Pages From a Journal*, Oxford University Press, 1915.