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THE FRAGMENTED SELF IN THREE OF ROCHESTER'S POEMS*

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These supple variations and contradictions that are seen in us have made some imagine that we have two souls, and others that two powers accompany and drive us, each in its own way, one toward good, the other toward evil; for such sudden diversity cannot well be reconciled with a simple subject.¹

The subject himself is marked off by the single stroke, and first he marks himself as a tattoo, the first of the signifiers. When this signifier, this *one*, is established—the reckoning is *one* one. It is at the level, not of the one, but of the *one* one, at the level of the reckoning, that the subject has to situate himself as such. In this respect, the two ones are already distinguished. Thus is marked the first split that makes the subject as such distinguish himself from the sign in relation to which, at first, he has been able to constitute himself as subject.²

These passages from Montaigne and Jacques Lacan, one well known throughout the seventeenth century and the other quite

* It is a pleasure to record at the outset my gratitude to my friends and colleagues Alan Dunn, Steve Watt, and Dick Penner for their good talk about contemporary criticism and suggestions for reading and writing.

¹ Montaigne, "Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 2.1.242; cf. Rochester's witty expression of similar ideas in an undated letter to his wife (*The Letters of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. Jeremy Treglown [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980], pp. 75-76).

² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 141.

contemporary, can be seen as bracketing a modern sense of the fragmented subject, and an awareness of this expanded context can help us understand the intensely self-conscious and threatened subject as it is cleverly celebrated by the earl of Rochester in his finest lyrics and in his longer, most complex poems. In "Love and Life," for example, Rochester wittily articulates some emotional and intellectual implications of a fading of the grounds of being. Here Montaignesque or even Cartesian doubt—as well as Hobbes's discussion of memory as "decaying sense"—is made to serve the speaker's sense of the fragility of life and love.³

All my past life is mine no more;
The flying hours are gone,
Like transitory dreams given o'er
Whose images are kept in store
By memory alone.

Whatever is to come is not:
How can it then be mine?
The present moment's all my lot,
And that, as fast as it is got,
Phyllis, is wholly thine.

Then talk not of inconstancy,
False hearts, and broken vows;
If I, by miracle, can be
This livelong minute true to thee,
'Tis all that heaven allows.⁴

Unframed by a physical or social setting, except the extreme unlikelihood that any traditional Phyllis would calmly acquiesce in the speaker's argument, "Love and Life" conveys a sense of the radical contingency of a subject barely grounded in a fragmented, disappearing past, simultaneously generated and alienated from himself in the present through his generosity of giving (the word

³ The possible discontinuities of Cartesian doubt are best represented in the French version of the *cogito*, "Je pense, donc je suis." On memory as "decaying sense," see *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), p. 10.

⁴ Quotations from Rochester's poetry are from *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. David M. Vieth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). My views of Rochester's lyrics are indebted to, but different from, those in Vieth's "Pleased with the contradiction and the sin": *The Perverse Artistry of Rochester's Lyrics*, *TSL*, 25 (1980): 35-56.

"got" suggests a sexual generosity of begetting as well), and uneasily projected into the uncertain, perhaps nonexistent future. What remains is the vital moment—true, wholehearted, utterly given, and miraculous in its brevity. But even as this gift is proffered, its evanescence is emphasized in the speaker's final comment, which can be read both as an extension of his basic insecurity and as a threat whose aim is to forestall his mistress from making unrealistic demands.

The "miracle" of line 13 is thus either the vital, authentic moment or the flat impossibility of long enduring a demanding woman, or both. In the same way, the "heaven" of the last line can be read as meaning "the order of things" in several senses: for example, it may simply denote the quite limited, specific, brief "heaven" of her arms ("that heaven"), or it may signify the order of nature or the fiat of God. In the poem's fragmented order of experiences, these significances need not exclude one another, although they do not guarantee one another either. In fact, it may be that in an otherwise chaotic world merely pretending to order only the pleasures of love can guarantee anything like an authentic, living moment that is of the self and is also capable of the paradoxical selflessness love demands. An idealism of the passionate moment that is true to the speaker's experience may be poised against a "false" idealism of enduring commitment. On the other hand, it is not impossible to imagine a different kind of idealism in the poem—one that holds that God sets all earthly relationships at naught. The paucity of details—the purely relational setting, the absence of specifically identified social and ideological content—highlights the rhythm of experience, the punctuation of meaningless intervals with vital moments whose content seems less important than the drama and release of energy in their occurrence. The structure of such rhythms seems almost purely dialectical.

One explanation of these manifold indeterminacies and the lack of closure is that poems like this one constitute traps or series of traps that require readers to create their own poems. David M. Vieth, for example, argues that, "to give an illusion of meaning," Rochester's best poems "employ 'paradoxes': a Rochester poem distinctively works

by placing its speaker at the intersection of two or more conflicting sets of values, with the speaker a surrogate, not for the

author, but for the reader. Because the poem represents the interaction of a vulnerable real-life reader with a manipulative real-life author using late seventeenth-century issues as his instrument, it calls for contextual rather than cognitive criticism.⁵

A poem of this kind, Vieth adds, is a work of "'entrapment,' designed not to convey a meaning but to trick, beguile, or perplex the reader into making a response whose intensity seems out of all proportion to its cause" (p. xvii).

This point of view relegates every reading of a poem (except its own) to a dustbin of partial, distorted, and inaccurate interpretations; there is, however, something in it to which nearly every sophisticated reader can assent, for in poems dominated by paradox, irony, and pun, structure is dialectical because the underlying structure of such tropes is dialectical. Every paradox, every ironic statement, every significant pun constitutes a trap because readers must read it at least twice in order to grasp both its "confusion" and its provisional significances. To the degree that readers expect clarity and find opaqueness and multiplicity, they are betrayed or at least entrapped by aporias.⁶ Some of these are amenable to easy resolution and some are not. In other words, dialectic involves conflicts of subtexts within a poem. Such conflicts may impugn a poem's authority, insinuate the split subject of the text, and challenge the confidence of readers as they become aware of their own various or "split" responses to entrapping, conflicting subtexts. Thus a reader-response critic might well look at every paradoxical or ironical statement as a kind of minidrama of reader entrapment since all such statements must be read at least twice.

The reading of any poem that extensively employs tropes based on dialectic may seem a succession of now minuscule, now great entrapments and crises, but this must not be allowed to obscure or to trivialize larger distinctions and other processes. For example, prescriptions about Rochester's poems may fail to specify that their entrapments inevitably point to the split subject of the text and its significance, for in Rochester's mature poetry the fragmented sub-

⁵ David M. Vieth, *Rochester Studies, 1925-1982: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), pp. xvii-xviii.

⁶ For use of the term *aporia* in a somewhat similar way, see William C. Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx: An Introduction to the Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 22-23.

ject is in evidence because he or she not only manifests a divided consciousness but also is often conscious of a divided consciousness.⁷ Such awareness points to intellectual and social conflict and stimulates a reader's sensitivity to it as existing both then and now. (The absence of setting in "Love and Life" is a sign of the speaker's alienation from conventional scenes and attitudes.) In short, several of Rochester's poems make a theme of their technique, a feature that is surely part of both their seventeenth-century and their contemporary contexts—as the quotations above from Montaigne and Lacan suggest.

Thus, as I suggested at the beginning, readers, in constituting the meaning of a poem, need to be acutely aware of the two fundamental contexts that are related in any act of reading: the intellectual context in which readers perform is as relevant to their readings as a "factual" knowledge of the historical contexts of the literary work. In the case of "Love and Life," readers are bound to be aware of the Montaignesque, Cartesian, and Hobbesian contexts, the context of traditional *carpe diem* poems, and the traditional "stable" contexts these question. But they also need to be forthright about their understanding of current cultural assessments of the philosophical and psychological problems reflected in a poem. What I wish to urge, therefore, is that Rochester's poems often reflect concerns with problems as well as strategies for dealing with them that are analogous to quite contemporary issues and strategies.

Consequently, "Love and Life" is not merely one of Rochester's traps for the reader but can also be seen as a quasi-modern expres-

⁷ In his prescriptions about the poems Vieth passes over this thematization of technique. Moreover, one must note the self-limiting logic of reader-response criticism like Vieth's: if, as reception theorists insist, the reader has a constitutive role in any act of reading, how can Vieth's description of the way a Rochester poem "works" have a critical status categorically superior to that of all those interpretations he criticizes in *Rochester Studies* as historically limited? Despite its metahistorical pretensions, Vieth's description of Rochester's poetic technique is based on historically shaped concretizations of Rochester poems: his description of Rochester's conscious poetic strategy answers to a twentieth-century reception theorist's general description of the actual conditions and procedures of all reading, not just of reading Rochester's provocative poems.

On successes and embarrassments of reception theory see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 78-85: "If one considers the 'text in itself' as a kind of skeleton, a set of 'schemata' waiting to be concretized in various ways by various readers, how can one discuss these schemata at all without having already concretized them? In speaking of the 'text itself,' measuring it as a norm against particular interpretations of it, is one ever dealing with anything more than one's own concretization? Is the critic claiming some Godlike knowledge of the 'text in itself,' a knowledge denied to the mere reader who has to make do with his or her inevitably partial construction of the text?" (pp. 84-85). My own attempt to solve this problem is somewhat similar to that of Jauss as described by Eagleton (pp. 83-84).

sive formalizing, thematization, and enactment of an inner division akin to those that Montaigne described and that Lacan and others have called the "split subject": the subject of the poem not only communicates the fragmentary, discontinuous quality of his conflict-ridden existence (the *énoncé*)—for example, through the strange foreshortening of the first stanza—but also is somehow able to sum it up with a modicum of coherence as well as with great suggestiveness (the *énonçant*). The "heaven" of the last line has a straightforward, general, intelligible meaning, and whether that meaning is capable of engrossing all the other possible readings of the word in its context is a speculative problem indicative of the fragmented subject. Such passages doubtless "interpellate" the reader—that is, the poem's questionings of authority and of the subject's autonomy "interrogate" the reader's sense of authority and autonomy.⁸

In times when a prevailing ideology does not question the sense of the subject's autonomy, as in the era of New Criticism, the subject in the poem may incorporate a poem's tensions. In the postmodern period the subject is split by these tensions—or at least so our current understanding of both Rochester's seventeenth-century and our contemporary contexts suggests. Once a reader becomes aware of these contexts of the poem, then at best only brief whole moments or problematic glimpses of a reality not synchronized with language can be achieved in time, and they too are immediately sundered and swept away into the discrete fragments of a lost past or obscured by a nonexistent, unfathomable, or imaginary future. The split subject is a historical phenomenon representing sundering historical forces, and it is detectable by subjects whose autonomy is itself constantly in question because of the play of historical movements.⁹

The self undermining the self is similarly intricate in Rochester's satires, in which the processes of self-betrayal are embodied and

⁸ On the critical significance of the split subject, on the "interrogative text," and on "interpellation" (a term ultimately derived from Louis Althusser), see Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 85-102, 61-67. I have modified Lacan's terminology: he speaks of the *I* of discourse (the subject of the *énoncé*) and the *I* who speaks (the subject of the *énonciation*). I have simplified the distinction to that between the *énoncé* and the *énonçant*. See also Lacan, pp. 67-76, 138-42, 198-99, 210-13.

⁹ A similar kind of analysis can be performed on Rochester's wonderful "Absent from thee I languish still," in which the following dyads of values are poised against each other: life/death, head/heart, constancy/change in love, being/becoming, innocence/experience, peace/nagging, the sacred/the secular.

thematized in the very notion of perception and expression—in the perils of self-inscription (or of writing or *écriture*).¹⁰

¹⁰ For this use of the Derridean term *écriture* I am indebted to Terry Eagleton, "Écriture and Eighteenth-Century Fiction," in *Literature, Society, and the Sociology of Literature: Proceedings of the Conference Held at the University of Essex, July 1976*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Colchester: University of Essex, 1977), pp. 55-58: "We have become accustomed since Derrida to associating a traditional Western prejudice for 'living speech' as against script with a potent metaphysic of the human subject, centred in the rich plenitude of its linguistic presence, the fount and origin of all sense. It is in this refusal of the materiality of the sign, this ineradicable nostalgia for a transcendental source of meaning anterior to and constitutive of all sign-systems, that Derrida finds the Western tradition most deeply marked by idealism. The speaking voice, obliterating its own materiality in the 'naturalness' of its self-production, opens a passage to the equivalent 'naturalness' of its *signata*—a passage blocked by the thwarting materiality of script, which (for this lineage) is thus destined to remain slavishly external to the spontaneous springs of meaning" (p. 55).

The next section of the poem therefore not surprisingly reveals that the split in human consciousness characterizes not merely man's deliberations (his efforts at wit and at speculative and practical reason) but also his actions within society. This section picks up the ideas of man's fearfulness, egoism, and intellectual embarrassments variously articulated in earlier sections of the poem and develops their analogues in depictions of human moral fearfulness, rapacity, duplicity, and hypocrisy in contrast with bestial unanimity, directness, and economy of violence. Just as wit has been seen as self-defeating, now honesty is judged "against all common sense" (159) in such society.

And yet not even this scathing indictment of mankind stands unqualified. The poem's last section—an indictment "hurled" against "the pretending part of the proud world" (174-75) rather than a simple blast of the truth—continues to enact the poem's dialectical strategy, for the speaker initially reminds the reader of the stipulative or conditional and self-critical nature of the foregoing arguments: one must remember that the poem begins with an "if" statement ("Were I . . .").²⁰ After recollecting his initial provisos, the speaker now develops a counterstipulation that at last allows for exceptions to the satiric hypothesis. Yet even while possible exceptions to the satiric rule are being discussed (an avaricious nobleman who can nevertheless rise to honesty and a meek, sensible clergyman who believes despite the limited evidence of the senses and practices charity), it is clear that they are chiefly mental phenomena that arise from the dialectical play of mind characteristic of the entire poem. Their existence as subject positions in the mind and their possible existence in society lead to that restatement of an ancient paradox which the poem can be said to develop and enact: "Man differs more from man, than man from beast" (221). It is a paradox from Plutarch repeated by Montaigne, both specifically in his theriophilic "Apology"²¹ and in a more general way in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay. The formulation of even a modest ideal against the poem's devastating evidence of

²⁰ Johnson's essay makes this point.

²¹ See *Essays* 2.12.342. On the general background of the "rationalism" and fideism with which theriophily was variously associated, and on the general relationship of Rochester to these problems, see Don Cameron Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), pp. 186-223.

human fallibility and evil represents as well as states the way the human consciousness is irremediably fractured.

Throughout the "Satyr" the reader is entrapped with the satiric subject in a series of failures that constitute the speaker's social, intellectual, and ethical development—failures arising from the satiric subject's inability to escape both the temporality of self-consciousness and the resultant split within the self. As we have seen, the poem dramatically begins with this split in the self, and the speaker then proceeds to describe a man's frustrated efforts to understand the world through reason, to enter into society, and to win esteem through his wit. After rejecting the speculative reason of the *adversarius* and attempting to achieve a down-to-earth "right reason," he must face the failure of that project as well, for despite its satisfactory dialectical articulation, his "righted" reason scarcely seems spontaneous or immediate and is in any case deeply unpracticable in a human society inimical to any but the most subtly concealed selfish and destructive motives. Like the speaker, we as readers may face the promise of one aspect of life after another only to be disappointed and finally trapped in a radical inconsistency with which we began—our spontaneous halves yearning for a kind of freedom and harmony of body with mind, of individual with society, of earth with heaven, but thwarted by our multifaceted consciousness of ourselves and of others, and by the moral equivalent of that consciousness: our pride, fearfulness, "wantonness," and duplicity. Yet, as the poem's epilogue reveals, from our imaginations and our consciousness of human duplicity rises the paradoxical possibility of altruistic or fideistic behavior: we may consciously act against our own interests, we may believe what we cannot see or prove, we may suspend judgment or entertain a range of alternatives, and we may thereby attain a modicum of self-knowledge and even of freedom. The splitting of the subject may make barely possible a freedom within difference and the open-ended comprehension of "*differance*" or the attainment of a skeptical poise: in Rochester's "Satyr," at least, man does differ more from man than man from beast.

That self-consciousness enables the speaker to describe the predicament he also enacts, and it may also enable him to imagine achieving a critical distance even from the destructiveness of self-consciousness. There is a possibility in the poem that the speaker

and the reader, who are thus entrapped and victims, are also in a way liberated from the severities of the satire. A distancing of the self from the self in the speaker, a reflexive process, requires analogous considerations and adjustments in the reader, and while it cannot restore innocence of "threatening doubts" or reconstruct a shattered sense of confidence in reason or a sense of totality or unanimity, it suggests the efficacy of an imaginative "as if," a discovery within difference of a "negative capability" or freedom of contrariety emerging out of the duplicity of humankind even if these are not clearly free of reason's entanglements. The speaker's inability to achieve bestial unanimity and spontaneity even as he distinguishes between human reason and the reason of animals enacts its own theme. Yet the split subject's capacity for self-reflection seems to offer the bare possibility of self-knowledge and perhaps even freedom as well as an uncertainty not hitherto noticed (or needed) among the less perplexed beasts.

Still, the reader is aware that these considerations may be delusory and that they undercut the force of the satire. Just as there may be no rescue from "the defiles of the signifier," it may be that the satirist (and the reader along with him) cannot avoid becoming the victim, on one side or the other, of his own doubts about mankind.²² The subject is split.

As readers we are able thus to reconstitute the poem perhaps because the ancient distinction between animal's unanimity and man's duality (a contrast related to theriophily at least as early as the Cynics) has a counterpart in the contemporary philosophical discourse about being and self-consciousness that has exercised phenomenologists and their critics—indeed it is a legacy of Romantic and post-Romantic thought. The antinomies that vexed the Restoration poet have their counterparts in contemporary psychology's sense of the split subject and in contemporary philosophy's onslaught against "presence." The reader can respond empathetically to the ancient theriophilic charge that raises beast above man because the ancient trope attributes to animals and denies to humankind the fullness of the self's presence unto the self. There is a

²² It is interesting to compare Pierre Bayle's critical assessment of his contemporaries' views of human and animal faculties with a review of the current deconstructive attack on phenomenologists and others; see, for example, "Rorarius," *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, trans. Richard H. Popkin, Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 213-54; and *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 1-34.

sense in which the theriophilic paradox both exalts and deconstructs what Derrida has called Western man's preoccupation with ideas of origin and presence, and in this sense theriophily and Rochester's split subjects are self-deconstructing—self-consciously but cleverly awkward articulations of Western primitivism revealing primitivism's promise and the fissures in its logocentric fictions. Modern skeptics have affinities with their ancient and seventeenth-century counterparts.²³

In the last analysis the appearance of the split subject may be a problem of history—of conflicts of social facts and values. One idea of love, of freedom, of fidelity, of reason, of blessedness, of order conflicts with others in ways that prevent or forestall assurance and “poetic” closure. Such conflicts can be seen as external conflicts, but they are also internalized as ontic and thetic aspects of the subject and can surely be constituted as such by readers in periods of ideological stress and fragmentation. Rochester's best poetry distrusts the privileging of single subject positions or “fictions” just as some contemporary critics are distrustful of all “master narrative fictions” yet strive to mitigate the ravages of skepticism through an acute awareness of the “prison” of the signifier and through a gamesmanship that seeks to exploit the play between master narratives or fictions.²⁴ In any case, it is not farfetched to say (indeed truth may require us to hold) that the poems we have been considering are today more compelling than they were ten years ago, just as they may have been of greater interest ten years ago than twenty years before that—because of a growing awareness of the triumphs and despairs of postmodern thought.

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²³ Kirke Combe, “English Verse Satire, 1641-1688,” Ph.D. Diss., Oxford University, 1988, pp. 362-70, contrasts the accommodative conclusion of Rochester's satirist with the unrelenting intransigence of the satirist in John Oldham's “Satyr. Address'd to a Friend, that is about to leave the University, and come abroad in the World.”

²⁴ See, for example, Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).