

*Laurence Goldstein*

**“The Imagination Problem”:  
Winfield Townley Scott and the  
American Wars**

**The U.S. Sailor with the Japanese Skull**

Bald-bare, bone-bare, and ivory yellow: skull  
Carried by a thus two-headed U.S. sailor  
Who got it from a Japanese soldier killed  
At Guadalcanal in the ever-present war: our

Bluejacket, I mean, aged 20, in August strolled  
Among the little bodies on the sand and hunted  
Souvenirs: teeth, tags, diaries, boots; but bolder still  
Hacked off this head and under a Ginkgo tree skinned it:

Peeled with a lifting knife the jaw and cheeks, bared  
The nose, ripped off the black-haired scalp and gutted  
The dead eyes to these thoughtful hollows: a scarred  
But bloodless job, unless it be said brains bleed.

Then, his ship underway, dragged this aft in a net  
Many days and nights—the cold bone tumbling  
Beneath the foaming wake, weed-worn and salt-cut  
Rolling safe among fish and washed with Pacific;

Till on a warm and level-keeled day hauled in  
Held to the sun and the sailor, back to a gun-rest,  
Scrubbed the cured skull with lye, perfecting this:  
Not foreign as he saw it first: death’s familiar cast.

Bodiless, fleshless, nameless, it and sun  
Offend each other in strange fascination  
As though one of the two were mocked; but nothing is in  
This head, or it fills with what another imagines

As: here were love and hate and the will to deal  
 Death or to kneel before it, death emperor,  
 Recorded orders without reasons, bomb-blast, still  
 A child's morning, remembered moonlight on Fujiyama:

All scoured out now by the keeper of this skull  
 Made elemental, historic, parentless by our  
 Sailor boy who thinks of home, voyages laden, will  
 Not say, "Alas! I did not know him at all."

—from Winfield Townley Scott, *New and Selected Poems*, Garden  
 City, NY: Doubleday, 1967

**T**his poem is, in my opinion, the finest lyric written by an American about World War II. That it was written by a non-combatant—indeed, a gentle soul—tells us something about how a first-rate imagination operates when working upon suggestive or secondhand material. Scott wrote in his diary about the origin of the poem's composition. In January of 1944 he was working at the *Providence Journal* when word coursed through the building that a sailor was visiting the office showing off the trophy skull of a Japanese soldier acquired at Guadalcanal. The entire workforce surrounded the spectacle with enthusiasm. Invited to crow in triumph over the barbarian dead, Scott discovered with a sinking heart the barbarism of his fellow Americans. The poem witnesses that revelatory moment. It enters the mentality of a likeminded sailor, who on the long voyage home is cleansing the skull of a Japanese antagonist either to keep as a memento or give to some lucky friend or family member as a souvenir of war in the Pacific theater. The sailor is a type of the conquering hero, and the decapitated object he carries close to himself is a Medusa head that gradually turns him to stone—that is, he scours out his own humanity in the process of purifying the skull of all its human features, down to the memories of childhood and moonlight on Fujiyama stuck deep in the brain-pan. The U.S. sailor is a survivor of the soul- and imagination-destroying act of conflict, but having internalized the brutality he encountered in combat, he now is fated to inflict on himself what he most feared for his peace of mind and his civilization.

There are no statistics for the number of mutilated body parts carried or sent home from the battlefields in the Pacific. In *War Without Mercy*, John W.

Dower considers E. B. Sledge's memoir of his wartime experience in battles like Peleliu and Okinawa, including the witnessing of numerous atrocities such as the harvesting of gold teeth, ears, bones, scalps, and skulls. "Sledge found himself coming close to accepting such conduct as normal," Dower writes, and quotes Sledge as saying, "Time had no meaning, life had no meaning. The fierce struggle for survival . . . eroded the veneer of civilization and made savages of us all."<sup>1</sup> In James Jones's war novel *The Thin Red Line* (1962), set on a reconfigured Guadalcanal, the theme of atrocities recurs. "They were compelled to look at obscenity," Jones remarks of the soldiers,<sup>2</sup> and documents how the infantrymen's voyeurism gradually degenerates into active mutilation. Early in the novel, which chronicles a march across enemy territory toward a series of battles with Japanese forces, Charlie Company comes across a mass grave of enemy soldiers:

. . . the rest began to spread out around the grave edge. They seemed seized by a strange arrogance. They pushed or poked at this or that exposed member, knocked with riflebutts this or that Japanese knee or elbow. They swaggered impudently. A curious Rabelaisian mood swept over them leaving them immoderately ribald and laughing extravagantly. They boisterously desecrated the Japanese parts, laughing loudly, each trying to outbravado the other. (70-1)

One soldier named Big Queen tries to pull a leg out of the grave and succeeds in uprooting the whole corpse, surrounded by the nauseating effluvia of rotted flesh. He retreats and a song title comes to his mind, "Don't Monkey Around With Death."

Monkeying around with Death is just what Scott's sailor is doing in this poem, however. He was not in on the kill, we learn, but strolled through the aftermath of a battle scene and selected a choice item as a keepsake. He did not, that is, seize it in the carnivalesque frenzy James Jones calls "Rabelaisian" but with a calculated sense of purpose that is likely to strike the reader as less defensible, more culpable. As he manipulates the skull throughout the eight stanzas of this poem he works with the efficiency and emotional intensity of a forensic scientist, proceeding step by step toward the annihilation of all traces of soft matter. The extraordinary number of plosives in the poem, especially the often alliterated "b" sound of "Bald-bare, bone-bare . . . Bluejacket . . . boots . . . bolder . . . bared . . . bloodless . . . brains bleed," and

so forth—the oral expression of force, of disgust, of the primitive or pre-civilized—lend the poem an Anglo-Saxon cast. The plosives mimic the brute actions they describe: “ripped off the black-haired scalp and gutted / the dead eyes.” Two-stress or spondaic feet punctuate the emphatically drawn-out hexameters, isolating thematic nodes for our attention: “dead eyes,” “brains bleed,” “cured skull,” “bomb-blast.” This is not a joyful desecration but a highly ritualized, compulsive procedure captured in the mouth-articulation of words and cadences denominating repulsive events. The sailor seems to be under a spell, an automaton obeying the will of a higher authority. That authority is identified as “death emperor,” the martial spirit itself, ghastly enough when fear and loathing contort the personality, as in the passage from *The Thin Red Line*, but arguably even more obscene in the safety of a ship underway to port.

It has been widely noted that Allied forces treated the Japanese with greater repugnance and violence than they showed toward German and Italian soldiers and civilians. (And the Japanese, as John W. Dower has documented, returned the favor.) A marine on Guadalcanal told John Hersey, “I wish we were fighting against Germans. They are humans like us. . . . But the Japs are animals.”<sup>3</sup> The racial subtext is an important part of Scott’s poem. The war against an Oriental enemy inevitably involved a clash of world-civilizations with very deep roots in the Western, and especially the Anglo-Saxon, psyche. Almost the defining characteristic of a “hero” in any culture is his triumphant destruction of some person and/or tribal unit seen as inferior, alien, threatening to the integrity of one’s own cultural community and sense of personal identity. The first responsibility of a propaganda machine when war begins is the transformation of the enemy into something subhuman, perilous to the safety of one’s own cultural traditions. The Bible is the primal text in this regard, making constant discriminations between a chosen people clinging to the Mediterranean shores and any number of sinister heathen societies east of Jerusalem, especially Babylon and Assyria. Likewise, the foundation event of classical historical literature is the first of the Persian Wars, the Battle of Marathon, in which Athenians defeated a Persian army in 490 B.C.E. and thus prevented Asian forces from securing a foothold in Europe.

Marathon is the first of Edward Creasy’s fifteen decisive battles in history, and its shadow extends at least as far as World War II. Here is a poem from *Reveille: War Poems by Members of Our Armed Forces*, an anthology published in 1943 to cheer the troops and homefront alike.

### To Another Lucasta

Not, sweet, that I love honor overmuch  
 Or, schoolboy-like, too highly prize  
 War's bright insignia—for such  
 Might brook the pleading of your eyes.

Rather, a wisp of fear has wrought  
 This parting's dark despair:  
 Lest Marathon be fought  
 And I should not be there.

This poem by an American sailor, Ensign Joseph Rogers, U.S.N., plays off against Richard Lovelace's canonical poem of the mid-seventeenth century, "To Lucasta, Going to the Wars." Lovelace's lyric, an apology to his mistress for abandoning her in favor of a foreign war, concludes with the famous lines, "I could not love thee, Dear, so much, / Loved I not honor more." Honor, Rogers asserts, is not the issue; rather, the issue is glory, the automatic status of hero endowed upon the warrior in a racial and geopolitical *Kulturkampf* of epic proportions. Marathon, then and now, is a site of global consequence, in which the destiny of civilizations is irrevocably in the balance.

From the 1930s onward, a kind of Marathon Complex began to form in America related to the increasing imperial ambitions of Japan. That such political wariness was founded on a morass of racial antagonism toward all Orientals was frankly acknowledged at the time and became a part of the national folklore. Under the code words "Yellow Peril" and "Yellow Empire," and as embodied in the sinister literary figure of Fu Manchu, the visceral anxiety of whites about Asians was inscribed in the popular culture of the period. In *The Yellow Peril*, William F. Wu has studied this literature in the pre-1940s writings of figures like Jack London, Frank Norris, Bret Harte, Ambrose Bierce, and many others, including the pulp fiction writers (e.g., Dashiell Hammett) and filmmakers who constructed Chinatown as the sinister site of ever-present and bottomless evil. John W. Dower remarks on some of the later Mr. Moto novels of John P. Marquand, in which the Japanese agent is neither demonized nor applauded but presented as an articulate and dangerous spokesman for the Emperor. I would like to focus on a passage from the first Mr. Moto novel, *Your Turn, Mr. Moto* (1935), which Dower does not mention. The protagonist, Casey Lee, trying to secure American interests

in a Japan obviously gearing up toward war, has a moment of revelation:

I saw another sight which made me halt at the rail and stare—an apparition that was half beautiful, half sinister. Out of the cloud bank by the horizon appeared the masts of ships that seemed to have, at that distance, almost the impalpable quality of clouds. A division of a battle fleet was out on one of its perpetual maneuvers—gray Japanese cruisers moving behind a formation of submarines and destroyers. There was a foreboding quality to that half-visible sight, because I understood, as everyone who has walked a deck of an American warship understands, that Japan's naval strength might some day be directed at my country; that it was reaching out like an arm across the Pacific where our own fleet was watching. *There was destiny in the sight, which was a part of the obscure irrational destiny of peoples never to be wholly clarified by reason.* (emphasis added)<sup>4</sup>

In Marquand's novels the Japanese are neither subhuman nor superhuman, but the natural enemies of Western dominance of the international scene. "Enemies," rather than "rivals," seems the necessary term here, since the psychic weight of the Mr. Moto novels depends on a realization that the Japanese intend to be conquerors, subjugators, in the manner displayed with considerable publicity during their depredations in China in the mid-1930s.

The binary of black vs. white inscribed in American history mutated very swiftly in the 1930s to one of yellow vs. white, precisely because a race war seemed imminent, inevitable, as the above passage indicates. When Casey Lee sees the Japanese fleet, he remarks, "That situation made me feel very keenly the differences of race, and more aware than I think I ever have been, even in the distant days of the [First] World War, that I was an integral part of my country." Patriotism and race-chauvinism is the gut response to the sublime vista of Japanese power. The political reflex even of the sophisticated hero of Marquand's novel — and his sophistication is clearly on view in his elegant phrasing and sinuous syntax — is to retreat into the kind of tribal solidarity that constitutes pre-combat behavior. From this moment of the first novel in the series, Mr. Moto becomes a villain, not just a diplomat from a rival nation, and the violent (if necessary) destruction of his imperial power becomes the chief goal of an enlightened American foreign policy. The battle of champi-

ons emblemized in the struggle of Casey Lee and Mr. Moto is part of “the irrational destiny of peoples” that leads to Pearl Harbor and degenerates in the chaos of actual combat to the desecration of the Japanese graves in *The Thin Red Line* and the atrocities practiced by the U.S. sailor in Scott’s poem. The skull is scoured of its offensive humanity, “Made, elemental, historic, parentless.” “Historic” is the word that catches the attention in that list. The skull is historic like Marathon, a sign and symbol of the U.S. sailor’s solitary eminence. In the process of making his enemy deader than dead, of derealizing a flesh-and-blood figure anatomically like himself, he has introjected its monstrous malice deeply into the grotesque recesses of his own brain, and his culture’s being, where who knows how many generations must delve in order to debride the death wish, as well as the “bravado” and “swagger,” that comes with being a warrior. The desolated skull prefigures Hiroshima and Nagasaki as sites of total war.

In *The Thin Red Line* Jones speaks of “the imagination problem” that besets troops going into battle. Whatever their motives, selfish or patriotic or, most commonly, a combination of both, they cannot help but summon to mind the possibility, and in many circumstances the probability, of their own death. When Charlie Company hears about a report sent to headquarters detailing a scene in which American soldiers have been mutilated, it is “too much to be borne” (151). One soldier had been beheaded alive, his hands tied behind him, his head left atop his body with his severed genitals stuffed into his mouth. Every soldier could imagine—but could not endure imagining—himself as that abject figure. And so each resorts to some mental strategy to magically forestall undergoing such a ritualized physical humiliation. Corporal Fife’s response is the following: “Obviously the only way really to survive in this world of humansocalledculture we had made and were so proud of, was to be more vicious, meaner and more cruel than those one met” (152). One enacts vindictively on the enemy the same punishment one fears for oneself. Death is imaginable, in that case, not as something that threatens oneself but something objectified and projected into the figure of atrocity, the external abomination. A kind of mental and magical invulnerability—though always susceptible to renewed horror—results from the comforting co-presence of the fetishized object. It is for this reason that Jones has his character First Sergeant Welsh constantly intone that war is fundamentally about “property.” Possession and manipulation of neutralized property, precisely the psychological dynamic at play in “The U.S. Sailor with the Japanese Skull.”

The imagination problem is most visible in the closure of Scott’s poem:

“our / Sailor boy who thinks of home, voyages laden, will / Not say, ‘Alas! I did not know him at all’.” The double negative complicates our first reading of this ending, requiring that we reread it to get the precise sense. The moral failure of the sailor is laid to his inability to empathize with the humiliated skull (“Alas!”) and to acknowledge that he is sadistically degrading a (metaphorical) person for whom he had no personal animosity, a person probably much like himself. He cannot and perhaps dare not summon to his imagination the lineaments of a masculine likeness that shares his humanity. Instead, he thinks of home and the prizes he is bringing to his kinspeople. He suffers from the vaingloriousness of the warrior, and he clings to the sense of conquest in a great crusade as his armor against the “natural” impulses of fellow feeling as well as the culturally induced, specifically Christian, teachings of mercy, pity, peace, and love.

There is an almost exact repetition of Scott’s line in the closure of a famous poem by James Dickey, “The Firebombing.” It is inconceivable that Dickey did not read Scott’s poem, because he was an omnivorous reader of his American contemporaries, and especially of war poetry because he was seeking models for the war poems he began to write in the late 1940s. (If nowhere else, Dickey would have read “The U.S. Sailor with the Japanese Skull” in John Ciardi’s popular anthology *Mid-Century American Poets* [1950], or in George P. Elliott’s anthology of 1956, *Fifteen Modern American Poets*.) One of Dickey’s best-known dramatic lyrics, “The Performance,” is about the beheading of an American soldier by the Japanese army on a Pacific island. “The Firebombing” is spoken by a pilot who dropped bombs on Japan at the end of the war; twenty years later, at ease in the American suburbs, he obsessively calls back images of the heroic flight he undertook against “enemy rivers and trees,” and “town[s] burning with all / American fire.” The pilot/homeowner deep in his reverie is dimly aware that he should feel guilt for his assault on innocent civilians, but the remembered ecstasy, the sense of triumph rendered as “My body covered / With flags,” prevents him from shaking loose “this detachment, / The honored aesthetic evil, / The greatest sense of power in one’s life.” At the end of the poem, searching for resolution and relief from his indulgent daydreams, he states:

If I tried, say to any  
Who lived there, deep in my flames:    say, in cold  
Grinning sweat, as to another  
As these homeowners who are always curving



Near me down the different-grassed street:   say  
 As though to the neighbor  
 I borrowed the hedge-clippers from  
 On the darker-grassed side of the two,  
 Come in, my house is yours, come in  
 If you can, if you  
 Can pass the unfired door. *It is that I can imagine*  
*At the threshold nothing*  
 With its ears crackling off  
 Like powdery leaves,  
*Nothing* with children of ashes, *nothing not*  
 Amiable, gentle, well-meaning,  
 A little nervous for no  
 Reason   a little worried   a little too loud  
 Or too easygoing   *nothing I haven't lived with*  
*For twenty years, still nothing not as*  
*American as I am, and proud of it.* (emphasis added)

In this remarkable passage rendered in the rhetorical mode of *contrario* the double negatives abound and signify the same psychic evasion of Scott's passage. The speaker cannot imagine the strangers his bombs have killed; he is alienated from their humanity and therefore from his own. Yet he continues to reflect upon the victims in such detail ("with its ears crackling off / Like powdery leaves") that it's clear he *does* imagine them even as he resists bringing their likeness to his neighbors and himself to a full moral consciousness. Patriotism cannot entirely protect him from suffering remorse, though he asserts that his difference from his enemy insulates him from a full appreciation of the savagery of the bombings he inflicted. Dickey holds the balance between these sentiments effectively, as in that last line where the rotteness of the cliché clearly substitutes for the kind of genuine imagining of the Other building in momentum throughout the passage. Though he asserts with obvious strain that the remembered power and the glory of the war succeed in erasing his qualms, the reader hears in the conflicted syntax how dearly-bought is this confidence; the pilot can never lay to rest the ghosts that keep appearing at his threshold waiting for his gaze of recognition.

Dickey's narrative poem would strike most readers as pathological, were it not for the Marathon Complex. The poem begins with an epigraph from The Book of Job: "Or hast thou an arm like God?" The answer of man to that

question is presumably NO. But under certain circumstances in the Bible man does strike with the arm of God, as an agent of the divine wrath which punishes the enemies of the chosen people: "The Lord is a man of war. . . . Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power; thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy" (Exodus 15:3,6). A "deranged Old Testament light" underlies the firebombing because the pilot takes for granted the rightness of his violent actions against strangers. He refers to "Enemy rivers and trees," "the enemy-colored skin of families," "Oriental fish" and so forth. The mystification of difference makes war sufficient to the furthest reaches of our imagination; we who live in its aftermath, carrying its embodied or inscribed being with us as a bloody fetish, endow upon it all our anxieties. We can flaunt it, as Jones and Dickey do, to make our contemporaries blanch; we can diminish our own imagination problem, like Scott's sailor, by transforming its bloodiness to a purified, idealized, and finally empty myth: "[N]othing is in / This head, or it fills with what another imagines // As: here were love and hate and the will to deal / Death or kneel before it, death emperor. . . ." Those who know World War II only from texts, only from representation, will find most satisfying those texts that expose and critique the illusion that the death we see mirrored in the glass of art, the bone and blood of it, is anything but our own.

How unlikely it is that Winfield Townley Scott, the genteel book editor of the *Providence Journal*, who devoted appreciative essays to "the small, uncomplicated world" of Whittier's *Snowbound*, Wilder's *Our Town*, Tarkington's *Alice Adams*, and Henry Beston's *The Outermost House*, should write one of the most revelatory and widely-reprinted poems about the savagery of World War II. Scott, born in 1910, sought principally to compose poems and essays of a regional and autobiographical cast, whether in "The Owl in the Hall," his prose memoir of a happy boyhood in Newport, Rhode Island; in *The Sword on the Table*, a long verse narrative on the Dorr Rebellion of 1842 in Rhode Island; or in lyrics on conventional, often local subjects in traditional prosody. He sustained a kind of decorousness in his writing, even in periods of Depression and wartime, and quoted with approval a remark by Elliot Paul, "There's enough horror in real life without dragging it in from outside."<sup>5</sup> For a long time he exercised a courtly demeanor as his chosen lifestyle, repressing strong feelings in what he regarded as the stoical New England manner.

And yet he understood perfectly well that the legacy of Puritanism in New England culture implied a powerful "dark" set of drives and desires beneath the reserve and discipline of everyday social intercourse. He also wrote criti-

cal essays on Emily Dickinson, Edwin Arlington Robinson, H. P. Lovecraft, and John Wheelwright—all writers possessed of the kind of daemon Scott felt stirring in himself as well. During the 1930s he invented a persona named Traman; his first book of poems is *Biography for Traman*. In German *träumen* means “to dream” and Traman is the dream self, the fantasy figure of uninhibited personality, that Scott sublimated in his verse and gradually in his life.

What remains constant in his writings is his effort to describe what he called “types of Americana.”<sup>6</sup> New England literature and culture provided him, he believed, with abundant examples of all types, from the congenial and sentimental all the way across the spectrum to the “mental cases,” as he called them, represented by the line of eccentricity and morbidity stretching from the Puritans to the present. When, in “The U.S. Sailor with the Japanese Skull,” he speaks of “our / Sailor boy” he is folding this pathological case into the recognizable self-portrait endowed by American authors like Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, and Faulkner. Every reader of American literature will be able to place the U.S. Sailor within the well-studied Gothic tradition of violent personality types.

These ruminations lead us to the central work in Scott’s oeuvre, the book-length narrative, *The Dark Sister*; a poem as assiduous in constructing a “type of Americana” as any other in his corpus. Written in draft in the late 1930s and radically revised in form and content during the next twenty years, this attempt to compose an American saga about the first European settlers in America was finally published in 1958 by New York University Press. The reader for the Press was Wilson Follett, who praised the poem enthusiastically:

It is a tale greatly told, and with a noble range of poetic effects, from the classic obscenities of the seamen . . . to the splendor of [its] description of the aurora borealis. . . . The experience of this poem—a great, sustained experience that begins in the first sentence and holds into the last—is like coming above a tree line. It is an experience outspread rich and thick over sustained passages, yet concentrated in stupendous lines and fractions of lines. . . . This is a piece of literature, and it may be around to make itself felt long after the Spenderists and the Audenarians have ceased from the business of tying knots in their own brains and ours in the name of poetry.<sup>7</sup>

The fundamental sources of the poem are two Icelandic sagas about “Leif the Lucky” and his discovery of a western continent. In his prefatory “Note to the Reader” Scott credits passages by Edgar Lee Masters, in *The New World*, William Carlos Williams, in *In the American Grain*, and Sherwood Anderson, in *A Story-Teller’s Story*, for drawing his attention to the legends of Leif and Freydis. One might adduce other historicist works by modern American poets that nourished the capacious vision of Scott’s “epic”: Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, Archibald MacLeish’s *Conquistador*, Stephen Vincent Benét’s *John Brown’s Body*, E. A. Robinson’s Arthurian poems, and Robinson Jeffers’s narratives of family conflict. Like all of these poems, *The Dark Sister* explores the origins and persistent structures of violence in human nature. The poem is designed as a corrective to some of the more Romantic visions—Crane’s especially—and its postwar publication ought to have made it more welcome to readers searching for a way of understanding how America, and the world, might handle the transition from the most savage conflict in human history to a Cold War offering the prospect of nuclear annihilation. Scott was correct in thinking that he was doing something both very traditional and very innovative. *The Dark Sister* is one of the many overlooked wisdom-books of post-war literature.

Set in the eleventh century, the poem begins in Greenland, where Leif Ericson, having sailed years before with his sister and brothers to the terra incognita he named Vinland and built cabins there to secure his claim, now refuses his half-sister Freydis’s demand that they return and expand their settlement. Their brothers were killed in Vinland by the Skraelings (natives) and Leif has become a remorseful Christian convinced that “Vinland is a good land. . . . But the land is not ours; . . . we are not strong enough for it.” Not to be denied, Freydis organizes an expedition composed of Greenlanders and Norwegians, with the explicit goal of bringing back lumber and other products for quick profits. After their landing in Hop, which Scott chauvinistically imagines as his own homeland on the Narragansett Bay, Freydis begins to conspire against the Norwegians. Disgusted with her weaker husband, she seduces a young Norwegian who impregnates her, but in the course of fighting a Skraeling attack toward the end of the poem she aborts the child-to-be. She manages to persuade her homelander to kill off their Norwegian partners and she herself slaughters a group of defenseless Norwegian women. She and her kinsmen escape and return to Greenland, where Freydis becomes increasingly deranged, much to the sorrow of Leif Ericson, who broods upon the failure of his dream to settle a “miraculous” new world, warmer and

more abundant in the fruits of the earth than his own.

At the center of the poem is Freydis, whom Scott Donaldson calls “the dark, malevolent monster feared by all.”<sup>8</sup> With her raven-black hair and dark red cloak, bearing a sword before her at all times, Freydis is the type of the woman warrior, an androgynous figure who has every masculine attribute but is “breasted and slit” and capable of reproduction though she disdains offspring except as symbolic future rulers of her domain. She is not only a type but an archetype, if we believe the chorus of voices that stigmatizes her throughout the poem: “woman-shape of night . . . queen of darkness, a lean fury . . . a willful ghost . . . Freydis is dangerous. Freydis is mad . . . Empress of the ocean . . . she swallows a man like night swallows day . . . This woman has claws and fangs . . . a gaunt mask mingled of venom and fright. . . She is a witch. This whole land is bewitched . . .” and so forth. She herself says, “I am the angel of death.” Though the evil sister is a conventional figure in the Scandinavian sagas, indeed in all myth and legend, Scott seems to have gone to extraordinary lengths to demonize this semi-historical character, as if to more easily exorcise her memory from the legitimate history of the United States. When she inscribes her name in the sand with her sword upon landing in Hop, he has her rub it out and proclaim “I’ll dig deeper than that.” But she is denied any such hegemony, by the natives of the land and by Scott’s chronicle of their triumph over her malign influence.

The erasure of her name from the new world’s body, however, occurs within a narrative of her witchery and her legacy of violence. Scott means to make the pagan Freydis an unforgettable presence in the national memory, an explanatory tool for our self-definitions and our sense of destiny. Her presence in the poem can better be understood if we contrast her to the figure of Pocohantas in Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*. Pocohantas is the life-giving body of the land itself and her presence is felt from beginning to end as pioneers and vagrants make their way across the continent and then, in Whitmanian fashion, further afield in images of transportation (ships, trains, airplanes, and ultimately the Brooklyn Bridge itself) that bond the national spirit with the international and cosmic realms. Pocohantas is a figure of redemption and salvation, the never-failing grounds of belief and love in a modern world racked by discord, fragmentation, and the perversion of language by satanic agencies. Freydis is what is repressed in stories like Crane’s, the dark and demonic “trauma” that erupts into consciousness in times of crisis. She is the nation’s ancestral shadow, its Lilith, its originary anima that seeks possession no matter how often America throws her back beyond the sea.

Freydis is at once a heroic figure, brandishing her sword and her speech to irresistible effect, and a tragic one, in that all of her aggression rebounds back upon herself; she introjects the dead spirit of all those she dominates and destroys. Nominally Christian, she is a forerunner of all European conquistadors in the statement of purpose she endorses for the voyage, “We shall build the kingdom of God on the kingdom of gold.” Freydis’s greed accomplishes in short order what bloodlust and craving for “property” effect in moral narratives like this one: she loses the land, her child, the love of her beloved brother and her kinspeople, and finally her sanity. What remains is Vinland itself, “an earth-garden of Valhalla.” Scott does not sentimentalize the Skraelings; they too are “savage” and violent. But in fending off invasion and keeping “Vinland” safe from intruders for another few centuries, the natives keep the land purified of historical influences—beginning with the Puritans—that will warp the American spirit in dangerous ways. As an essayist Scott liked to think that America could be imagined in the guise of Grover’s Corners, “Our Town” down through the ages, but his poetry instructs us that Freydis is the initiating spirit both of Manifest Destiny, of westward movement, and of the reciprocal imperialism of other nations acting with the same ambitions as ourselves.

The following question asserts itself at this point: Why is *The Dark Sister* entirely absent from the chronicles of modern literary criticism? Why is a poem hailed upon publication by distinguished authors, for example by poets Lee Anderson—“It may well be the best long narrative poem in our literature”—and James Dickey, who opined in a review that had the poem come down to us from the time it treats, “it would have been reckoned a masterpiece”<sup>9</sup>—why is this poem, and its author, so obscure that Scott is not even mentioned in the two volumes of David Perkins’s *A History of Modern Poetry*, a chronicle remarkable for its comprehensiveness and its attention to minor figures? Nor do I find his name in any of a number of books on my shelf, such as Babette Deutsch’s *Poetry in Our Time*, Richard Gray’s *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, Nathan A. Scott, Jr.’s *Visions of Presence in Modern American Poetry*, and James E. Miller, Jr.’s *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction*, not to mention those well-known books that jealously and zealously confine themselves to the reputations of the same dozen eminences.

The first answer that naturally presents itself is that the verse is insufficiently distinguished to merit critical notice, that, like Freydis, Scott has inscribed his work in sand and that the high tide of critical judgment has sim-

ply erased it. Yet *The Dark Sister* has all the virtues of “The U.S. Sailor with the Japanese Skull”; indeed, it recapitulates the sonic architecture of Anglo-Saxon narratives. Here is how much of the poem sounds:

They moved toward Leif’s place, toward Hop, the air  
 quieting; still, the land around them  
 Like something the sea dreamed, the land  
 Between the wind and the light, carved out of glacial rock;  
 Like something secret the sun nourished; like no land  
 man-founded,  
 Rising in stone-bright shores, in beaches slung below  
 green bluffs, beyond in-running waves,  
 Shining froned and richly weeded, fired, and over  
 immaculate meadows that widened and burned  
 All the way to the woodside:  
 Birch among beech against oak into pine and the  
 wind-flood through them always  
 Like a land-tide, a golden surf shoulder deep  
 like a noon ocean,  
 Like something the sea begot when the sea was scoured  
 by light and the earth made,  
 Earth lifted to winey-wood as the waters fell  
 withdrawing, withering  
 From flowering of land between the wind and the light;  
 This latest land; this newest earth—strident in  
 the causeways of the west.

The full passage is longer than this quoted portion, but this excerpt will suggest how scrupulously and to my ear successfully Scott has crafted his verse so as to avoid the monotony that he noticed in E. A. Robinson’s relentless blank-verse narratives. Lines are of unequal length, caesurae are varied to offer variety of pacing, and the meter studiously breaks the iambic with a profusion of unaccented syllables and two-stress phrases. The alliteration is probably stronger than most readers prefer—the influence of W. H. Auden and C. Day-Lewis weighs upon the poem in that practice—but it is entirely suitable to the harsh world it tries to bring to life in every other way. Scott said of H. P. Lovecraft that he considered eighteenth century language equivalent to “the language of basic reality”<sup>10</sup>; clearly Scott himself considered Anglo-

Saxon scripture the fundamental language of reality, and therefore of poetry. In this passage, networks of imagery, especially of light and wind and seascape, create a portraiture that is precise but not cloying. Scott believed that “a poetry [entirely] of pictures can never be a profound poetry”<sup>11</sup>; that poetry must invest the pictorial with thematic meaning, as in this quotation the sublimity of the seascape constantly promotes a vision of America as an ideal terrestrial site, etherealized in a Shelleyan manner, a land that emerges as a glittering dreamscape for the questing voyagers. We don’t have to be told explicitly that this is the case—Scott always derided “preachment” and “intellectuality” in poetry—but in his way of presenting rock and meadows and trees he savors their attraction to the covetous eye of the invaders, as to ourselves his readers.

A second reason for Scott’s obscurity is that the poem can and will be read as an assault on the character of women because of its depiction of Freydis. One can hardly expect the poem to be praised in a feminist era when its protagonist is such a violent and unsympathetic figure. Or can one? The poem has as one of its clearest intentions the revaluation of history as a story of male supremacy and female weakness. It empowers Freydis by locating her aggressiveness in her resentment at being nothing but a “by-blow” of her (and Leif Ericson’s) father Eric the Red. “I am indeed a bastard sister,” she complains, and much of her effort is undertaken to justify her legitimacy in Leif’s eyes—and by extension, in the eyes of a kinship community that will always read her as a sign of the illegitimate, the transgressive, the morally corrupt. Her militancy arises from her assertion of privilege; her tragedy is anchored in the reader’s understanding that in her society—not a democratic one, by any means—she must resort to the overreaching of her male peers in order to distinguish herself as an “Empress,” even if “an Empress alone above slaves.”

Freydis is recognizable as one of “The Warrior Queens” that Antonia Fraser writes about in her book of that title. “Almost every culture throughout history has had its Warrior Queen or Queens either in fact or in fiction, or in some combination of both,” she remarks.<sup>12</sup> Those we find most sympathetic, such as Boadicea, Zenobia, Matilda of Tuscany (a near contemporary of Freydis), Tamara of Georgia, Queen Jinga of Angola, and Rani of Jhansi, not to mention the more fictive figures of Hippolyta, Penthesilea, Camilla, and Semiramis, preside over nations at risk through invasion, whereas Freydis is herself an invader, and her treatment of her allies is so entirely treacherous that there is no ennobling her, except to say that given the choice



of being victim or conqueror she chooses according to the fantasy of dominance inbred into Icelandic culture. Her contempt for all men, except her father and brother, as inferior creatures whose sexual needs and satisfactions she condemns in the most Nietzschean terms, belongs to the legends of female “monsters” stigmatized by male authors for not keeping to their place. Freydis cannot be a role model because she is so consumed by hatred and vindictive violence, yet her situation in her clan society makes her more than a cardboard caricature of the voracious war goddess; and her linguistic powers make her a welcome figure, like Lady Macbeth to whom Scott compared her, to a reading public.

Finally, there is the question of patriotism. Scott is proposing Freydis as a dark anima figure shadowing the American experience; she must be exorcised in order for a rule of love, and a benevolent union of the sexes, to occur. Antonia Fraser tells us that the supernatural aura of the warrior queen sanctifies the home nation’s struggle for unity and precedes a golden age. Freydis cannot and does not play this role in our national story. She is the mythical dragon; she embodies the threatening presence of the far East no less than Mr. Moto, a contaminating agent that will compel Americans to mimic her cruelty with our own. In a Cold War world, when American democratic values seemed the only bulwark against totalitarian forces elsewhere, a poem like Scott’s could not possibly fill the place given in earlier decades to *John Brown’s Body*, not to mention the “wholesome” narratives of *Our Town* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*. (To compare Freydis to, say, Scarlett O’Hara is to see at once what kind of strong-willed woman the American public would embrace and what kind it would be likely to reject—if it knew about Freydis at all.) With the novel capturing most of the likely readership’s interest in historical narrative, and modernist experiment laying claim to the more committed poetry-readers of the century, Scott’s saga may have been doomed to obscurity no matter how skillful or judicious its treatment of gender matters; but a poem so skeptical of national origins and by implication so pessimistic about the national character, was easily cast aside at the end of the 1950s and the early years of the 1960s in favor of metal more attractive—“mental cases,” for example, like *Life Studies*, *Heart’s Needle*, *Ariel*.

*The Dark Sister* could not succeed as a national epic, or even as a national story, because it dramatizes a figure who ultimately falls short of embodying the American idea, or the American creed. If the epic traditionally presents a hero with personal qualities emblematic of his nation’s, embarked on adventures that will culminate in the triumphal achievement of national goals,

Freydis fails as an epic figure who could involve the reader sympathetically in her actions. She is what America in its official dogma most forcefully refuses to imagine. She is not a rebel like Cinquez in Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage," or his Nat Turner or John Brown, rising up in order to drown a delegitimized authority structure in blood; she is simply an evil person, a Caligula not a (Julius) Caesar, who is rebuffed in her near miss at everlasting glory. She is no Columbus, no Daniel Boone, no leader of the Mormon trek toward Salt Lake City, nor the engineer(s) of the transcontinental railway nor the inventor or manufacturer of innovative technological products. *The Dark Sister* lacks an antinomian force to stand in as the reader's desire for a better world. Scott may have counted on the hope that some counter-cultural movement in American life would make Freydis more intriguing if not more acceptable to the public. But the generation of the 1960s that sang "Give Peace a Chance" would have scorned Freydis, and the poem that anatomized her, even more than the 1950s did. Freydis is likely to remain offensive to American values, a figure of unredeemable alterity, the gorgon we refuse to stare in the face.

By putting the matter in this way I seem to be suggesting that Winfield Townley Scott transforms Freydis into a Jungian shadow analogous to the U.S. sailor who annihilates the life of his alien counterpart. But the connection is in fact precisely the opposite. Scott has no imagination problem. His critique of the sailor might be read as the initiating moment of *The Dark Sister*, in which he creates flesh and blood and a clear history for a figure of power that tempts his sympathy but which he finally drives away from the borders of his self-definition as an American citizen. In both texts he considers the consequences of war without mercy, not to deny the efficacy of a just war against a barbaric antagonist but to draw an (invisible) line in the sand, line after line, behind and through which the imagination fulfills its humanizing offices.

#### Notes

1. John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 63.
2. James Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (New York: Scribner's, 1962), 45. Page numbers in text refer to this edition.
3. Quoted in Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 116.
4. John P. Marquand, *Mr. Moto: Four Complete Novels* (New York: Avenel Books, 1983), 45.
5. Winfield Townley Scott, *Exiles and Fabrications* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 52.

6. *Exiles and Fabrications*, 81.
7. Quoted in Scott Donaldson, *Poet in America: Winfield Townley Scott* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), 295-96.
8. *Poet in America*, 299.
9. Quoted in *Poet in America*, 296-97.
10. *Exiles and Fabrications*, 69.
11. *Exiles and Fabrications*, 120.
12. Antonia Fraser, *The Warrior Queens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 7.

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