The Problem in the Poem

By MARTIN E. GINGERICH
Western Michigan University

T. S. Eliot's famous image for "meaning" in some poems as "the bit of nice meat" the burglar brings along for the house-dog is too good to improve; but I wonder if the roles are not reversed when the reader approaches a difficult poem, the "concentrated" poem of the burglar-poet who brings no meat. The reader in this reversal becomes the burglar and looks for a way into the house of the poet. And though I do not wish to ruin a good image, perhaps the reader should supply himself with a "bit of nice meat" for the house-dog of the poem. The burglar-reader, of course, cannot quiet the dog with "meaning" because to a large extent it is "meaning" he wants to find in the first place. He comes instead with questions as his tools of entry, and among them perhaps are some that can quiet the dog. He comes, on the advice of several good critics and poets, believing that if he can discover "What is the poem?" and "How is the poem?" he can learn "Why is the poem?" I have approached Eliot's own poems often enough, however, to know that what and how reveal only the stuff the poems are made of; and after looking up all the allusions, translating all the foreign language expressions, and analyzing all the images, I still on those occasions did not know what is going on in the poems. The same statement, I am afraid, can be made of my experiences with other poems. Eric Thompson in an article in the Ohio University Review (1966) solved part of my problem by showing that the why of a poem involves whatever mutual concern the writer and reader have in it. Then, it occurred to me, beginning with the why and finding out what I am expected to be concerned with in a poem may be the way to enter the poem and gain what a reader comes to a poem for.

Coming to the poem from the direction of why naturally produces questions that relate to the what and the how; indeed

some explication and some acknowledgement of critical opinion are unavoidable. I do not intend even to try altogether to avoid them. For the question of what writer and reader have mutually at stake in the poem invariably raises questions like "What is the conflict?" and "What forces are arrayed against each other?" and "What stage in the resolution of the struggle is marked by this division of the poem?" Always, of course, too, the reader assumes by this approach that what is at stake is a human problem, not just a literary problem. For our interest in whether or not a poet can write a sonnet that does not sound like a sonnet depends, unless we are poets or prosodic technicians, upon the poet's ability to make the literary problem a human one.

The following poem is probably difficult enough and unfamiliar enough to test the success or failure of this approach. In addition, William Moynihan's assertion that analysis of this poem is not worth the trouble adds another unattractive feature to the poem. Still another is that only two critics, so far as I know, have written on the what and the how of the poem: William York Tindall in A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas and Elder Olson in The Poetry of Dylan Thomas. The poem, "When, Like a Running Grave," has then all the advantages of difficulty, unfamiliarity, apparent worthlessness, and relatively little critical comment.

When, Like a Running Grave

When, like a running grave, time tracks you down,
Your calm and cuddled is a scythe of hairs,
Love in her gear is slowly through the house,
Up naked stairs, a turtle in a hearse,
Hauled to the dome,

Comes, like a scissors stalking, tailor age,
Deliver me who, timid in my tribe,
Of love am barer than Cadaver's trap
Robbed of the foxy tongue, his footed tape
Of the bone inch,

Deliver me, my masters, head and heart,
Heart of Cadaver's candle waxes thin,
When blood, spade-handed, and the logic time
Drive children up like bruises to the thumb,
From maid and head,

For, sunday faced, with dusters in my glove,
Chaste and the chaser, man with the cockshut eye,
I, that time's jacket or the coat of ice
May fail to fasten with a virgin o
In the straight grave,

Stride through Cadaver's country in my force,
My pickbrain masters morsing on the stone
Despair of blood, faith in the maiden's slime,
Halt among eunuchs, and the nitric stain
On fork and face.

Time is a foolish fancy, time and fool.
No, no, you lover skull, descending hammer
Descends, my masters, on the entered honour.
You hero skull, Cadaver in the hanger
Tells the stick, 'fail.'

Joy is no knocking nation, sir and madam,
The cancer's fusion, or the summer feather
Lit on the cuddled tree, the cross of fever,
Nor city tar and subway bored to foster
Man through macadam.

I damp the waxlights in your tower dome.
Joy is the knock of dust, Cadaver's shoot
Of bud of Adam through his boxy shift,
Love's twilit nation and the skull of state,
Sir, is your doom.

Everything ends, the tower ending and,
(Have with the house of wind), the leaning scene,
Ball of the foot depending from the sun,
(Give, summer, over), the cemented skin,
The actions' end.

All, men my madmen, the unwholesome wind
With whistler's cough contages, time on track
Shapes in a cinder death; love for his trick,
Happy Cadaver's hunger as you take
The kissproof world

Our first task ought to be, in thieves' parlance, to case the joint. Probably our mutual stake in this poem involves the narrator, who in all poems is either the poet or a persona created by the poet. The narrator here almost immediately distinguishes himself from head and heart, who are his "masters." When time tracks down head and heart (you), their response is to create illusion, as the narrator inelegantly puts it, hauling love in all her trappings to the dome of an ivory tower; they presumably pretend that nothing has changed or believe that everything is now better. This act of head and heart leaves the narrator bare of love, barer than Cadaver's trap, which comparison brings a new actor on stage. Cadaver along with time seems to be the opposing force to head and heart and the narrator. Olson reads trap as "mouth," which has support from

parallels like love's "gear," "hauled," "sunday faces," and "dusters," all slang or colloquial expressions, and of course from "foxy tongue." "Robbed" implies that Cadaver's trap would not be bare of love if it had kept the foxy tongue. Cadaver's possessions in the poem, however, are a curious lot: It has a trap, a footed tape, a candle, a country, and hunger (It also speaks to the hero skull in line 30). Except for these, Cadaver seems to be the one actor of this drama most easily identified in its relation to the others. Without the capital letter cadaver simply designates a man's dead body; and a poet might extend this to body as a means of focusing a particular attitude towards it, i.e., of something inevitably to be dead. Capitalizing Cadaver, however, personifies this deathly potential contained in body and need not refer to any individual body. In addition, since Cadaver seems somehow allied with time against head, heart, and narrator, capitalizing tends to exalt it and make it superior to all the others. Cadaver may be the real hero of the poem. It is with the "I," however, that we are most concerned. The drama is his drama; the struggle is his struggle; and his concern is our concern. If Cadaver is his problem, Cadaver must be transformed. If Cadaver is untransformable, the narrator must be transformed. How, in any case, do the possessions of Cadaver relate to the narrator's predicament?

The actions of head and heart seem bent on idealizing love, which before tracking down time had some other dwelling than the dome of the tower, perhaps a fleshier one more closely related to Cadaver's country. It is not until the approach of time and "tailor age" that head and heart "haul" love to the dome. Though the verb is passive and the sentence does not explicitly give an actor, either these actors do the hauling or the actor's identity is not important. Time, tailor age, and Cadaver then seem to blend together, Cadaver taking on some of their attributes, and share the blame for love's move up the stairs to the dome. This move leaves the narrator in need of deliverance because he is left bare of love (does he dwell in the lower part of the house?), deliverance from "maid and head." At this point, heart becomes allied to Cadaver and head to time (lines 12 and 13). What is the nature of this relationship? As a result of time and Cadaver, head and heart are now in control of love; i.e., spade-handed blood and logic time now produce children painfully. Olson sees the blood handling a spade to prepare a grave; but in the mere aiding by its action the move towards the grave, blood may be said to be "spade-handed" with additional connotations of clumsiness. In any case, love, for the narrator at least, is in much worse condition after the move to the dome than before. It is now possible to see that these "possessions" of Cadaver's relate to love's new condition.

The first two items are used as comparisons of the narrator's barrenness. Of love he is barer than Cadaver's trap robbed of the foxy tongue and than his footed tape robbed of the bone inch. Olson probably makes trap mean mouth because of the foxy tongue; but there are other possibilities. Two images established in these first stanzas are time as a hunter tracking down its prey and age as a tailor. If Cadaver has characteristics of both the hunter and tailor, we might interpret trap accordingly. A steel trap with which a hunter catches his prey has jaws and therefore may have a tongue, the analogy with mouth occurring in the open jaws of the trap having a "foxy tongue" that entices the prey with bait. Without the bait, of course, the trap repels or at least fails to attract, hence is bare of love. Sometimes the metaphorical qualities of a word are so lost because of common usage that the poet can turn the metaphor into a further metaphor. I admit I fail with Olson's mouth image because it seems arbitrary and wasteful of the "tracks you down" in the first line. For the second item, "his footed tape," Olson apparently reads, "barer of love than his footed tape is bare of love of the bone inch." Given the special kind of tailoring Cadaver does, however, his tape is as useless without the "bone inch" as his trap is without its "foxy tongue"? We may read instead, "barer of love than his footed tape robbed of the bone inch." Without the gradual preparation of the final garment implied by inch, i.e., revealing the tailor's progress by the foot in robbing his tape of inches, the grisly act is revealed for what it is, bare of love. All these images, are, of course, more than an indirect way to say the narrator is impotent; they suggest the significance of his condition and the attitude we are to assume towards it. We ally ourselves even more strongly with the narrator as a result of this rhetoric.

At this point also the narrator cries out for deliverance specifically to his masters, head and heart, and urges for special attention an aspect of the situation that apparently very closely concerns him, "Heart of Cadaver's candle waxes thin" (line 12). This concerns the narrator more closely than it does his masters, we know, because he believes they can help him; the adverbial clause (lines13-15) describes a changed condition or position for the narrator who once, it is implied, had a much greater role in such activity. Now that he is bare of love and cannot perform, he also has difficulty accepting that "Heart of Cadaver's candle waxes thin." His difficulty is focused by his need to be delivered from "maid and head" or as Olson says, from girls and thoughts of girls. The pun on maidenhead, according to Tindall, contains "feminine heart, masculine dome, and deathly love," from which, if true, the narrator pleads deliverance. Why should he want such deliverance? Tindall thinks it is because these bring about death, because

the narrator is a shy adolescent, "timid in my tribe" and "robbed of the foxy tongue." Such a narrator would only anticipate the condition described in stanzas one and two and want to forestall it by deliverance from all love. Though this sort of narrator is possible, I find a narrator already involved in the condition described, which represents a change from a previous condition when time wore some other guise than that of a running grave. In fact, who shares with head and heart a concern in Cadaver's country; who acknowledges (at least under the circumstances of the poem) the mastery of head and heart; who finds most fearful of all, heart of Cadaver's candle waxing thin; and who once held a position of greater prominence in matters of love; who but body? Or, if preferable, he is the poet as body and speaking for body.

Among the actors of this drama, body has most concern with the change in the guise of time; for head and heart have achieved some sort of readjustment by making of love and time an illusion, a foolish fancy. The impossibility of this course for body reveals the futility of his prayer to his "masters" and accounts for his timidity (tribe, country, nation, and state are all conditions of being) at the same time as it emphasizes his helplessness. Once, body's role in love was far more natural and realistic; body's response must have been acceptance of that role in "the lamb white days" before time wore a threatening aspect. Body now aware of time's destructive nature must somehow achieve deliverance from his intolerable condition. When in stanzas five and six he sees clearly his predicament and assesses accurately the futile efforts of head and heart, he knows that they are no help and that he must find his own deliverance. That of course will also be the poet's, and ours.

The actions taken by head and heart for their deliverance have left body torn and divided in stanza five by the necessity for body to respond to their morsing. In order that time may fail to bring off what it has threatened and is threatening, body has had to go about both "sunday faced" or "chaste" and with "dusters" or as "chaser." "Cockshut" aptly describes the condition of body tracked down by time. Freudian interpreters of this poem have explored the sexual over-and-undertones of cockshut, and it is very tempting. The plain meaning, however, has sufficient connotations of its own. Body, though not without his own "force," must "Stride through Cadaver's country" to defeat death according to the decisions of his "pickbrain masters," who, he sees now, are wrong and who produce the condition of stanza five.

Body has become aware by the end of this five-stanza sentence that head and heart are no help to him against time

and Cadaver; the eunuchs and nitric stain make that most emphatic. The complexity of the long first sentence derives from body's notion of the complexity of the situation. To gain further clarification he tries in several short and simple sentences in the remaining five stanzas various responses to the actions of head and heart already described. Ignoring time and Cadaver as foolish fancies will not help; Cadaver is in command over lover and hero (who are both, incidentally, working to overcome time). The stanza demonstrates the "actions' end" of the last lines of the poem, the actions of lover and hero. These are not the actions of body but efforts of head and heart to ignore time. This sixth stanza, beginning the second half of the poem, implies deliverance through acceptance of Cadaver, though it is of course only readying the acceptance expressed in the last stanzas. Stanza six expresses the facts of the case as body sees them. Stanzas seven and eight, if read together, give two different attitudes, one from the tower dome of head's and heart's air castle ("the house of wind," line 42) and the other (What is open to body?) from acceptance of Cadaver. Both pursue joy. "Joy is no knocking nation" or its appositives; "Joy is the knock of dust." Other identifications follow: "Cadaver is shoot of bud of Adam..., love is twilit nation and the skull of state...is your doom." One attitude fosters illusion; the other accepts reality. While stanza seven devotes itself to what joy is not, the first line of stanza eight promises to dispel illusion ("I damp the waxlights in your tower dome"), implying that what follows describes reality. What has been offered so far is escape by means of emotion or reason (logic), neither of which satisfy because they do not take body into account. Body wants to look at conditions as facts, and one of the facts is body himself. He is evidence against illusions; his existence in time and the changes working in him in time work against the illusions of head and heart. His only deliverance, and theirs for that matter, comes only by acceptance of body as body and of certain facts listed in the last four lines of stanza eight.

Tindall glosses these lines and the last two stanzas and directs us to Thomas's story "The Orchards." There Marlais the poet ends his world much as Thomas ends this poem, though for Marlais the nightmare becomes reality. Here acceptance of Cadaver is acceptance of end and a cure for the sickness of illusion, "the unwholesome wind." The image of time as runner on a cinder track, apparently first offered by Olson, is supported by Tindall. The usefulness of this interpretation rests in its accounting for the "virgin O" of line 19, and thematically time's rounding the track forms a zero which stands for the nothingness of death. Body, it seems to me, struggles with the "somethingness" of death' and the solution to the

struggle in the poem occurs through the ending of time and this "somethingness" of death. The text of "The Orchards" reads, "It is all one, the rain and the macadam; it is all one, the hail and cinder, the flesh and the rough dust." The cinder image seems so close to "the knock of dust" as to track; and "macadam" along with "Mac Adam" has as much to do with flesh and texture as with tracks (Cf. cemented skin, naked stairs, coat of ice, boxy shift, and the like). Time running in a circle, moreover, presents an endlessness that denies the conclusion of the poem; but even if time is on a cinder track, he nevertheless "tracks you down" ultimately to death. Love, ironically, aids time and shapes "Happy Cadaver's hunger"; and body concludes that the world is "kissproof."

We may by summarizing the various stages in the poem review our stake in the poem, for of course the poet finds his deliverance finally in getting head, heart, and body back together again. As in many poems, the initial awareness of the narrator brings horror, in response to which he casts about for various means of relief. In the drama of "When, Like a Running Grave," body as a persona for the poet expresses his awareness of the effects of time in the images of threatening hunter and tailor. He pleads for deliverance from two other actors whom he acknowledges as his masters, head and heart. Their response to the threat only intensifies the condition and divorces body from them, for their salvation lies only in ignoring body, who dwells in Cadaver's country and upon whom the threat of time is greatest. They choose, as it were, other places to live: the twilit nation of love and the barren state of logic, both of which presently appear to body as mere illusion and therefore of no help to him. Their action results for body only in division, not union; he, because they are his masters, must act two ways at once in an effort to "stride through Cadaver's country" and escape death. With the realization of the failure of this remedy comes the turning point in the poem. Though such action increases the threat of time and intensifies the effects of tailor age, body sees clearly what he must do. In the last half of the poem, he does it.

The poem in coming to an end accepts end not only as something to be tolerated but as something good. Head and heart have been wrong not to accept, for the mere existence of body ought to show them that their flights only worsen the condition for themselves as well as for body. Yet their actions too are perhaps inevitable; they only mistake body's role and try to make him live with them. If, however, love's "twilit nation" is heart's home and head's doom is the "skull of state," then "Cadaver's country" is the right place for body. Once body, and we, realize this, the last two stanzas do not express

failure; they express facts, acceptable, inevitable, perhaps joyous facts. Deliverance comes with end. The ending is all. Time shapes death; love takes for his trick (or turn) Cadaver's hunger (happy Cadaver now); as you, head and heart, take the kissproof world. Inevitably, "Everything ends,....The actions' end."

We may stop short of evaluating the metaphysics of the poem at this time, content that the narrator's struggle, which is the reader's stake in this poem, has been brought to a successful conclusion. Though it is perhaps true that the poem asks us to work harder than some other poems ask us, we discover upon our entrance that the poem has significant concerns which for their development need the externally difficult form. We discover ironically that the imposing structure erected by the poet was all along meant to be burgled.
