

“In the Middle of Being in Two Places at Once”: Perception and Signification in William Mayne’s “*All the King’s Men*”

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A REMARKABLE ACHIEVEMENT of the three stories which make up William Mayne’s *All the King’s Men* collection is the way a very complex inter-connection of themes is explored in relatively simple and accessible terms through widely differing narrative strategies.¹ All three stories focus on existential dilemmas, especially concerning the nature of the Self and its relationship to the Other, and do so by developing as a common major theme the state of being caught between worlds; when, in “Stony Ray,” this overtly becomes a matter of a child occupying the bewildering space between her own world and the world of adults, it also emerges that the earlier two stories are, in part, figurative versions of this theme. Together they form a trio which richly challenges and broadens the reading experience, because despite their thematic similarities they are very different narrative discourses, differing not only in such obvious things as setting, period, and events, but also in modes of narration and in the treatment of perception and point of view. The main characters at no point have any control over the events which affect them, but Mayne has nevertheless chosen to focalize those events through the limited perceptions of the characters, thereby inviting reader identification with character and involvement in his/her problem and the process of resolving it.

The title story is a first-person narration by one of the King’s dwarfs, with all the self-concern, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding which a limited and fallible first-person narration entails. Though “Boy to Island” is formally a third-person nar-

ration, all its elements are presented as the boy, Colin, perceives and comprehends them (that is, he is the *focalizer*²). In "Stony Ray," the limitations of Kirsty's vision are underlined by her function as focalizing agent, a role the reader easily discerns because Kirsty is the only character to whose thoughts the reader has access, particularly through such "stream-of-consciousness" techniques as the slipping between mental processes presented as indirect thought and as free direct thought; the role is further indicated by the selection of *inquit*-tags for the other characters (Mum, Dad, Grandpa), who are thus marked by the names by which Kirsty knows them.

The pattern in each of the stories is quite similar, and conforms to some common folk-tale structures, of which two are of central importance. First, all involve a journey of some kind (to the winter palace; to the island and back; to a grandmother's), and each journey also becomes an inner journey, a rite of passage, leading towards some transformation of the Self germane to the themes of the book. Second, the stories chart the classic movement from *lack* to *plenitude*,³ though an important aspect of their inter-relationship is that "plenitude" is only ambiguously and temporarily achieved in the middle story, whereas each of the other two presents its attainment by more than one character (or group of characters). The pervasive presence of dwarfs, kings, fairies, magic, and witches evokes the folk-tale tradition as an obvious intertext, though this is an observation which applies more directly to the first two stories than to "Stony Ray," which is located in a much more realistic environment and narrated in a much more realistic mode. Part of the subtle thematic interweaving of the stories is the intertextual use of folk-tale in "Stony Ray" to show how "texts" absorbed into mental experience may be used to corrupt perception of the real world. This third story, then, might be seen as constituting a comment on the second, having the effect of pushing the reader past the fascinations and tensions of the surface to the symbolic significance. Because in this aspect, and in its concern with the problems of language and signification, "Stony Ray" stands in a largely metafictional relationship to the other stories, it seems the appropriate story around which to build this discussion.

Despite the conceptual complexity implicit in Kirsty's meditations on space, time, and language, and the extremely sophisticated narrative presentation of these, "Stony Ray" is thematically the simplest of the stories, both because it indicates theme quite directly, and because its events are structured in such a way as to enhance their thematic implications. Thus the death and burial of the old cat, Boogie, with which the story begins, introduces the experience of emotional loss which, throughout the story, is largely conveyed in a language suggesting gaps and absences. In Kirsty's strongest expression of her sense of loss, "I've got the cold of where he isn't sitting by me any more" (131), the sensory apprehension is transformed into an emotional one by the figurative element of "cold" and the negation of companionship. Later, spatial relationships are invested with a signifying power as part of the simmering anger between the parents:

Sometimes it was without words. Kirsty could feel them both being very cross when they sat down. Between them, along one side of the table, there was a gap that neither of them went into. (156)

Again, the child's perception, and the language in which it is couched, slips from the concrete and literal into the figurative, evoking the emotional tension implicit in the physical configuration.

On a larger scale, this creation of figurative relationships operates in the structural relationship between the dead cat and the grandfather. The dead cat is linked with Grandpa (through reference to age) before Grandpa is introduced, and, retrospectively, at least, the emotions which accrue around the cat throw light on the old man's strange behaviour, which is not explained until the end, and on the attitude of the rest of the family towards it. For example, the responses attributed to the other cats — one simply moves into Boogie's habitual spot; another displays unease — foreshadow the conflicting attitudes of Kirsty's parents towards the "sick" man.

In the first half of the story, Grandpa's illness has a double function: it creates the family disharmony that sends Kirsty out into the snow, and, through this, it initiates the theme of interpretation. Like Kirsty, the reader has insufficient information to

fathom the apparently cantankerous decision to die — it is hinted that such information is passed during phone calls, but because everything is focalized through Kirsty the reader must also share her experience of the adult tactic of obfuscation. What the mother thinks never becomes clear, as her opinion seems to shift at least twice. The clearest attitude, and least sympathetic, is the father's, which demonstrates a refusal to look for complex meanings, or to allow meaning to emerge from discourse. His problem is acutely expressed by Grandpa: "Your dad . . . always starts with the answer. He never gets at the question" (152). This is at once an obvious clue to the reader on *fabula* level that there is more to the illness than we know and a pointer at discourse level to the story's concern with processes rather than ends.⁴ This interest in the difference between *fabula* and "discourse" appears again soon after in Kirsty's comment on her grandfather's claim that Stony Ray brought him to the farm: "Saying that it had happened was not the same as telling the story" (154), which seems to testify to the power of discourse to re-create and authenticate.

The contrast between the Father and Grandpa is profound — between the old man's act of existential renunciation in the face of a problem he can't cope with and the younger man's materialist/realist philosophy which asserts that one should choose a more convenient time and/or place for dying. Mediating these, from a very early stage of the story, is Kirsty's experience of existential doubt — "There's nothing happening inside me, and nothing outside. . . . I am not here. I have stopped being here. Or nothing is real" (138). While the inside/outside contrast expresses comprehensiveness, Kirsty is soon after able to solve the problem of existence by a recourse to a sense of how meaning is established by a pattern of oppositions, a solution suggested to her when her father miscalls one of the cats "Fang" instead of "Chang." The phonemic minimal pair this substitution creates has obvious semantic, and hence attitudinal, consequences (an exotic name being replaced by a local one with some violent connotations), though these are not explicitly taken up. Instead, she concludes that "if there is something wrong, like Chang being called Fang, then there is something for it to be wrong against, and what it

was wrong against was what she knew to be right." Yet again, Mayne has been able to express a major tenet of the philosophy of language in a simple vocabulary which both defines and exemplifies, and at the same time is able to give direct voice to a principle structuring the three stories. The motif appears again when Kirsty, feeling emotionally helpless, is in the kitchen with her parents: "Kirsty tried to think of something calm to say, because there is room between words" (156). This is a simple way to introduce the notions of implication and sub-text, but also behind it lies the sense of the loose relationship between words and meanings, a sense which will be intensified when Kirsty is lost in the snow.

All three stories pivot on conflicts of will, and the resolution of these conflicts allows for growth. The conflict within the family in the first half of "Stony Ray" embodies the story's state of lack, since it is of a negative, emotionally alienating and diminishing kind, summed up by a remark of Kirsty's which points clearly towards the story's theme: "I get smaller when they're like this." Her adventure in the snow in the second half of the story is on the one hand an attempt to remove herself from domestic tension, and on the other a dramatic reification of the blurred perceptions which gave rise to that tension.

Like a folk-tale heroine, Kirsty sets off for Granny's house, but immediately violates an interdiction governing possible routes (see Propp 26-27). There are two possibilities — "The road was the long way to Granny's house. The short, easy way was to go across between the Brough and the Mire, and down over the moor." The short way is, of course, dangerous and forbidden, as we learn from a reminiscence about an earlier time she took it, but nevertheless that is the route she chooses. Since Kirsty at no stage leaves the farmyard, let alone gets near the mire, the function of the choice at fabula-level is essentially to send her away from the easily followed road to become lost and confused in the wilderness of snow. In addition, though, the choice functions as a connection with the world of folk-tale, since a violated interdiction is often the prelude to the appearance of the villain, and so Kirsty's act of choice is implicitly linked to her meeting with the "witch."

Moving through a realm of tangled perceptions, she meets Betty, her grandfather's wife-to-be, but cannot recognize her as another human being: Betty is first the pillar on Stony Ray, then a waff, then a fairy, and finally a witch. The gap between words and meanings had already been widened in her thoughts on being lost, as, for instance, in the discovery that the significance of the proximal deictic *here* may be subject to substantial drifting: "I know where I am. I don't know where I am is that's all. . . . I am in the middle of being in two places at once. . . . Lost is when you don't know where Here is. It is something to do with Here, not something to do with yourself" (161). As Betty approaches, Kirsty tries to find the right word to categorize what she sees, drawing on the lore accumulated from folk- and fairy-tale to do so, but without immediate success, and ultimately her pursuit of meaning through a logical process leads to a false conclusion and then an aporia: "The pillar, or the fairy, or the waff, spoke. . . . This wasn't a piece of wandering stone . . . this wasn't a fairy . . . this wasn't a waff. . . . This was a witch. . . . But she knew there were no witches outside the stories. . . . Here was something Kirsty did not believe in, clear in front of her eyes" (164-65). The incompatibility of fiction and perception is a way into the metafictional quality of the story mentioned above, as it reminds us of the arbitrary relationship between texts and the real world, that they are separate, and that to interpret one in terms of the other may be an act of misinterpretation.

The issue is placed *en abîme* in a small incident when sunlight breaks over Kirsty and Betty:

Then the witch began to be transformed. A light grew round her, brightness stood all over her, behind and in front, and Kirsty had to look away because of the dazzle.

The witch was smiling in all the radiance. Kirsty knew it was some sort of magic, and not at all real. It was not the same sort of thing as hoping that a fairy would lead the way to treasure. That would be real. This great light was not real, because it couldn't be, Kirsty thought. It was a magic act, and perhaps the snow would melt, but it would be an untrue enchantment. . . .

It was sunlight, coming down from the sun above and getting to the ground again. On the way it had lit up the snow in the air like a spotlight. It was not witch work. It was weather work, and nothing to do with either of them. (167)

The image dominating this episode, and made explicit in the final paragraph, is the theatrical spotlight, and this draws attention to the shifting relationships between make-believe and reality. The repetition of "real" emphasizes the drift in the word's significance, as the initial opposition between magic and reality is immediately dismantled by the inconsistency of the link between fairy treasure and reality, and then by the mental act which reduces questions of reality/unreality to acts of will, determinations within the Self. Kirsty's conclusion that what might happen would be "an untrue enchantment" merely winds back into the already deconstructed *magic/real* opposition, and thereby gives sharp focus to the problem of perception and signification. Do things exist because we perceive them? Do they exist in the form in which we think we perceive them? These are questions which also point back to the previous stories. Because the dwarfs of the first story lack "normal" shape and stature, and in some cases other "normal" faculties (hearing, speech, knee-joints), they are perceived as generally lacking the qualities of being human, especially the higher emotions. In "Boy to Island," the illusory beauty of the fairies induces Colin to perceive Janet (and himself) as physically repulsive ("so blotched and lumpish that he did not like to look . . . etc." [89]), even though he is quick to grasp that such perceptions come only because "his idea of things has changed" (90).

Second, the development within this episode is not merely one of clarified perception. It goes further than this to illustrate the movement beyond solipsism which is a key thematic turn in all of these stories. The solipsistic confusion of the Self with the World (which is natural in children) is the major corrupter of perception throughout *All the King's Men*, so it is important that a pivotal moment in this final story should enact a perception of phenomena external to both the Self and the Other, having "nothing to do with either of them." Only from this vantage point can the Other be properly grasped. In this sense, the transformation/illumination is a true enchantment: when the story does resolve, it is through a semantic integration which evokes but opposes earlier dissimilating speech acts. That is, "Betty, witch, granny-next-door" (182) embodies the filling of all lacks:

she does eventually direct Kirsty home, resolves Grandpa's problem, becomes another Granny for Kirsty, and figuratively returns concord to the house (embodied in the parents sharing the task of removing Kirsty's wet clothing).

As remarked earlier, the title story also has as a major structure the movement from lack to plenitude, though this is an aspect of *fabula* more than of discourse. As with the other two stories, "All the King's Men" turns on a puzzle of perception in relation to concepts of the self. The dwarfs perceive themselves as Other, located outside society with other outsiders such as the King, his daughter the Infanta, and the Archbishop. Society itself seems to consist of palace servants, such as Don Emilio and the princess's Lady-in-Waiting, and peasants, prisoners, and dogs. The main conflict in the story arises from the ambiguity of the dwarfs' social position, as they attempt to assert their notion of it in the face of the contrary, conflicting notion of Don Emilio. The distorting effect of fallible first-person narration is very pertinent here. Joachim, the narrator/focalizer, is trapped by temporality, bewildered by the present and attempting to interpret it by means of memory, which includes past experience, lore, and texts. Yet he is so absorbed with the situation and doings of himself and his fellow-dwarfs that he is unable to make cause-effect relationships perceptively enough to see that their lack is preceded and caused by the King's lack: he has lost his wife and needs to fill that space. The reader is able to see that two thematically linked stories are proceeding at the same time. While the dwarfs' lack manifests itself as physical deprivation — they are sent away, and deprived of food, comfort, and access to the King — thematically, it is the emotional lack of not belonging. Joachim remarks early in the story that "it is right that others should laugh at us" (10) and that "no one loves, or hates, a dwarf; but we are valuable" (12). It is at the King's marriage feast that the purging of the two lacks begins, but the culmination is the discovery and sanctioning of the romance between Hubert and Elise, which acknowledges their belonging to normal society:

"My Lord Bishop," says the King, "do dwarfs then love?"
 "Sire," says the Archbishop, "do Kings?"

"It is not unknown," says the King. "Good Master priest, they shall be kings and queens too in their day. . . ." (65)

Notwithstanding this positive beginning, the dwarfs still interpret the King's instruction to the Archbishop to do "what you think right" as an indication that Hubert will be executed. Their self-absorption, joined with their lack of information, thus leads them into a huge misunderstanding of what is happening. This twofold disadvantage is how the dwarfs offer an analogy for childhood, though they see themselves as more disadvantaged than children, as is seen in Roberto's comment that "They will never treat us as children, even, that might one day be men" (16). The direct comparison, of course, alerts the reader to the nature of the comparison the story is making.

The duels staged as part of the wedding feast offer a particularly illuminating example. Play and art (the difference is not always clear, of course) both frame and comment upon the events of the story. The dwarfs, in their capacity as fools, offer parodic versions of various aspects of court life (of Rafe's jokes and mimes it is said, "we knew they would be successful and that we should all be beaten for his cheek, after everyone, including the king, had laughed" [45]), but now Joachim sees that the usual parodic relationship does not apply. The soldiers play out their ritualistic game of challenger and champion with wooden ineptitude, "like the badly arranged combats in the street plays in the town at Epiphany" (i.e., comparing one game to another game), their wooden swords standing in a direct mimetic relationship to the real thing; the dwarfs use weapons which comically parody the real thing — cooking-pot lid and cooking skewer against spice jar lid and shank bone (even dipped in mustard) — but their duel is in earnest. Simultaneously, the children of the betrothed adults have retreated beneath the table, where they forge their own bond through childish disregard and disruption of the behaviour of the adults (as the dwarf-duel distracts attention from the soldiers' duel, so that the outcome is wrong, but goes unnoticed anyway). These are not separate events, though, since the re-emergence of the children leads to the helter-skelter end of the dwarf-duel, when the Infanta seizes the legs of one of the combatants.

“Boy to Island” is, in effect, about misperception — of time, of place, of self — and its relationship to the gain and loss associated with growth. When introduced at the beginning of the story, Colin is longing for the sign of social recognition that will mark him “a man” (72); at the end of the story he undergoes an accelerated growth that accomplishes this. But the cost of the intervening process has been high, and there are suggestions that its consequence is a flawed maturation, since Colin is never entirely at rest in the world. What happens to him is very complex, and our reading of his experience is further complicated by the supplementary theme of the growth of the artist, in that conventional notions about the separateness of the artist in both vision and experience qualify our sense of what becomes of Colin. The effect of his experience, though, can be seen as epitomized within the story by the simile of the torn book:

“I am dizzy with coming home,” said Colin; and he thought it might be so, but it was his seeing that troubled him, with a patch down the world now as if the middle of a page were torn out and the next showed through, reading no sense. (127)

Colin is still stranded “in the middle of being in two places at once”: the fairy world he has just left was always a text in which he was unable to read sense, because it did not conform to the human experience of the spatio-temporal axis by which we measure meaning.

Every time Colin and Janet fail to get from the centre of the island to the margin, they find themselves returned to the beginning (both temporal and spatial); the failures occur as soon as they enter a fairy pathway or green, whereupon they are immediately transported into the midst of the amoral hedonism of the fairy realm, with its endless feasting and dancing or its passive contemplation of the beauty of the fairy king and queen. The fairies appear to represent a self-indulgent impulse to remain always at play, and to resist change and growth, as they interrupt Colin’s struggles to find his way. He has to struggle against despair; and to grow beyond self-preoccupation to the point of learning to love Janet (significantly, after he has briefly escaped from the enchantment but returned into it for her sake [113-14]

they no longer see the beautiful fairies, but only the ugly, vindictive dwarfs). The fairies take and possess, but it is finally human affection which breaks their hold. At the same time, though, the mystery and beauty of their world — the world of imagination which we expect to transcend time and space — can be carried over to enrich the human world. Here, the medium for doing this is music: Colin, the trainee piper, is captured by the fairies because he plays the chanter he finds on the island;⁵ as he plays for his captors, his own tune grows and develops, though it is not complete until he has returned home.

But this positive quality is only one aspect of the chanter's very complex symbolic significance. One of the most important symbols in the story, it remains the most difficult to grasp. It enters the story as a found object, but at the same time as a temptation, as its obvious quality and rich ornamentation indicate. It takes on the function of giving a voice to Colin's imagination and creativity, but it is also the instrument of his thralldom, and a pointer to the meaninglessness of action in the fairies' out-of-time world. Its self-destruction at the end of the story, coinciding with Janet's disintegration and Alasdair's death, also figures the deconstruction of the narrative search for simple meaning. The chanter plays for the last time as Colin completes the fourth part of the tune that has been evolving as he played for the fairies and at the same time as he ages the seven years that have passed on the island beyond the reach of time, so it might seem that the *fabula* has no further use for it. Within the discourse, however, it becomes a self-reflexive element, another comment on the ambiguous and fragile connections between art and life. Its immediate link is with the figure of the torn book, but it then refers on to the concerns of "Stony Ray," and also back to "All the King's Men," to the arbitrary linking of card-games and life, and especially to Roberto's songs towards the end of the story, the first of which is an emotive reflection of a misreading of events.

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the story resists a conventional happy ending, as can be seen most obviously in the summary treatment of Colin's marriage, where the text focuses attention not on the couple but on what must constitute

an impediment to sharing and emotional wholeness: "He and Anabel came to live in Alasdair's house. Always across Colin's eyes was the streak of another world. As the years went by, that streak became wider, and he was still young when he could no longer see this world" (129).

In summary, the story can be said to pivot around the following oppositions, and the need either to determine priorities between them or to accept their interdependence:

fairies	:	humans
timelessness	:	temporality
play	:	work, responsibility
centre	:	margin
imagination	:	reality
possession	:	love

The process of sorting out these oppositions has helped Colin to grow, and to develop beyond childhood's solipsism. Like Hubert, in "All the King's Men," he has found that love can move one out of the state of being in the middle of two places at once, but he has had to lose Janet, with whom he learned this lesson, and to learn that Anabel, the girl whom Colin the boy disliked, might be loved by Colin the man. He has also grown as an artist, and has learned how the musician can give something back to the music, for the sake of the music, not for the Self; he serves his community in the appropriate way, but at the cost of eventually becoming a solitary, slightly uncanny, figure, like his teacher Alasdair before him, until he finally retreats, via blindness, entirely into the world of the imagination.

The three stories turn out to be very complex in themselves, and even more so in their inter-relationships. They demand from the reader a strong (intuitive will do) grasp on the implications of varying narrator discourse modes, and on the problematic connections between art and life, and then, through these, a sense of the pressing existential problems faced by the individual in the simultaneous process of self-development and the growth of a deeper awareness of others. Not all human beings do escape the restrictions of solipsism, but Mayne's readers will somewhere be aware of the dangers and the possibilities.

NOTES

- ¹ William Mayne, *All the King's Men* (Puffin Books, 1984).
- ² By "focalizer" I mean, in Seymour Chatman's words, "the narrator's use of a character as a primary medium . . . through which the events, other characters, and setting of the story are rendered, but rendered always in the words or 'voice' of the narrator" ("Characters and Narrators: Filter, Center, Slant and Interest-Focus," *Poetics Today* 7 [1986]: 193). In "Stony Ray," discourse slips between Kirsty as focalizer and a presentation of her thoughts in her own language. For a full discussion of focalization, see Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985) 100-14. Chatman, in the paper cited, takes issue with some aspects of Bal's position.
- ³ These are widely used concepts, assumed, for example in Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin and London: U of Texas P, 1968) Chapter III.
- ⁴ I follow Seymour Chatman for the kind of distinction made between "story" and "discourse" (in *Story and Discourse* [Cornell UP, 1978], Introduction), but have substituted *fabula* for *story* in order to retain the latter term's conventional reference to short fictional works.
- ⁵ Though I may seem churlish, I feel bound to point out that the reeds Colin is taught to make in chapter 1, and which he replicates to use in the fairy chanter, are drone reeds, not chanter reeds. A drone reed made for chamber pipes will sound in a practice chanter, but not in a bagpipe chanter, which requires a much stronger reed of entirely different construction (it is shaped like an oboe reed).