

## Et Ego in Arcadia: Death in "Resurrection," John Peale Bishop's World War One Fiction

John Peale Bishop, whose literary reputation has settled comfortably within the middle rank of American writers published between the World Wars, was one whose 1918 experiences of the battlefields of the first great conflict influenced his work profoundly, as was the case with other, better known authors. The pastoral spirit that had existed pre-war—before “the lights went out all over”—found itself invaded and superceded by a fascination with the naturalistic and the grotesque that tempered and improved, rather than diminished, his work, as it did for many other writers of that singular generation. This is most evident in the strength of his descriptive passages based on insights into and obsession with death and decay. This theme runs unrelentingly through Bishop's short story “Resurrection,” and planted a seed which sent its tendrils through his literary work for the remainder of his life.

In 1922, at the age of thirty, Bishop wrote a tale, almost anecdotal in its spareness of plot, which is of special interest because it deals with the theme that fascinated Bishop throughout the rest of his life—the harshly disillusioning, anti-romantic fact of human death and decay. Although he was not to tackle this theme again until his later book-length fictions, Bishop showed himself already involved in the post-World War re-evaluation of the optimism implicit in pastoral and romantic traditions in American literature as it had existed before the European conflict. This was, of course, hardly a phenomenon with Bishop; many of the best writers of his generation were profoundly and permanently changed by the war. As a Southerner, however, Bishop knew well a culture that had experienced a crusade which turned out less than it had been touted to be. Therefore, he was to bring a different sort of innocence to the *rite de passage* that World War One provided for his generation. His naivete was part that of the bookish romantic, part that of the rural boy, aspiring to recognition for his refined and cultured behavior, who was hurt when others saw as coarseness the matter-of-fact manner in which one brought up around farms could discuss the behavior of animals, including humans, as a matter of course. Such opinions, often opposed to the occurrences of Bishop's life, developed a tension that, as they gradually grew more complex, improved rather than hindered the quality of his writing.

The first of his stories, “Resurrection,” appeared not only in *The Undertaker's Garland*,<sup>1</sup> the collaboration with Edmund Wilson, but also in the August 1922 issue of *The Bookman*. It deals almost entirely with a single incident—the disinterment for reburial of an American soldier killed and hastily buried during the battle of the Argonne. Told in the third person, the story is narrated by an American lieutenant named Archer, who is in charge of a stockade filled with German prisoners of war awaiting exchange now that the Armistice has been signed. Since Archer's duty duplicates that of Bishop, the autobiographical nature of the story has been obvious to those critics who have given it consideration. However, it should be pointed out that Bishop was in France for only the last month or two of the war, a period of “false armistices”

and tired, stalemated armies who no longer wanted to fight and often did not. Thus, Bishop saw little battlefield action, either as a participant or an observer. Like Archer, Bishop "had thought it a desirable thing that life should go out violently when the blood was at its full and the body unspent" (p. 184). Instead, he was a witness to dissolution and decay, and he saw that even an A.E. Housman's young-dying athlete enjoyed a posthumous glory that in the end was a falsehood.

"Resurrection" begins with Archer smoking in his tent amidst the usual objects to be found in an officer's possession—the exception, "an empty, brazen shell crammed with branches of fragrant green" (p. 175). The greenery turns out to be May linden, the sight, the scent, and feel of which remind Archer of his Maryland boyhood, his memory conjuring up a scene which is part of Bishop's own youth: "a frail, white boy of ten lying between cool sheets on a sunlit bed, begging his mother to bring him an armful of linden . . ." (p. 175). The cigarette and linden both are intended not only for Archer's pleasure, but also to cover the stench of the prisoners and the empty graves on the hillside of Montfaucon. In fact, all of nature seems to have stalled, if not died, and the story presents not the verdant spring landscape of the bucolic, but a drought-stricken waste land very similar to Eliot's *Waste Land*: "Now the spring wandered like a vagabond, in a discolored raggedness, more desolate than any autumn. . . . A week had passed since he had come here, hot without rain. Always it seemed, the sky hung over this difficult land an arid blue, heavy with heat, cloudless" (p. 176). Archer cannot help but contrast his hopelessly stagnant present with all the varied dreams of his childhood, dreams all the more vivid and romantic because the imagination was ironically given free rein by the fact of the body's being immobilized by illness, a phenomenon repeatedly pointed out and dramatized in the tales of Poe.

The German prisoners are kept busy repairing the shell-damaged roads, guarded by a "tithe" of Americans while they work. The task of digging up and reburying corpses is left to American Negro troops commanded by whites. The significance of these divisions of labor is not lost on a Southerner like Archer, whose upper-class tastes have been developed on a rural estate. In fact, he is put off not only by his prisoners but also by his second lieutenant Blecker, whose cultural outlook is indicated by the comparative degree of his name and "whom he [Archer] had come to hate with all the hatred of exacerbated nerves" (p. 177). Archer's feelings of superiority over his men are shown by the fact that the tent causes them to bow or stoop in his presence, from which they must back away after speaking, not having room to turn around. The news that the grave in the prison compound is about to be exhumed is the first thing that can bring Archer out of the cocoon of the tent, where he has been sitting in his controlled environment, shutting out the reality of his surroundings. He is confronted by a scene of men reduced to stubborn animals by their squeamishness, their machine laughing snidely at the weaknesses of human flesh and blood:

Outside in the dusty sunlight stood a truck obstructing the roadway, chortling under its long heavy body. . . . Two negro soldiers clothed

in blue denim leaped from the board of the truck, dragging after them picks and spades and coils of wire. They moved slowly, grudgingly, like tame crows from their food. (p. 187)

In other words, nature is so disordered here that scavengers balk at carrion.

Archer is further impressed by the desert-like quality of his encampment, seeing the tents as rank upon rank of pyramids. Inside the stockade, the posts curve inward, trailing a curtain of barbed wire that glitters in the bright sunlight, forming a cruel mirage to the imprisoned men, for the wire is "rain-bright." Archer's eye for the apparently self-contradictory finds such other details as the varnished visor of the ranking prisoner's cap, "making a black crescent of light as he moved" (p. 179). This prisoner sergeant major has captured a magpie in a basket and converses with it by crouching over its wicker prison, an ironic image compared to the Americans, also black and white, who shrink from their unpleasant task with the skittishness of nervous fowl. The officer in charge of the Negroes "was an unkempt little man, who, when he talked, jerked his head like a bird, and the wax-blue film on his eyes made them like the bird's eyes" (p. 179).

To Archer's eyes, the earth gives up its dead unwillingly, almost vomiting up its secret in spite of itself:

The starveling sod, rusty with sorrel, gaped under the strokes of the pick and spat out pebbles and thick clots of clay. The point of the pick overturned clumps of grass, the clinging earth threaded with tiny filaments, white as nerves . . . laying bare a level of naked clay. (pp. 179-180)

Although he, like the others, is primarily concerned with the turning of his stomach, Archer, as he enters the stockade, notices first and before anything else what has become of the Christian promise of redemption in resurrection—"The white cruciform stake was down . . ." (p. 179). As the corpse is unearthed, the curiosity of the guards draws them to the gravesite. Their comments reveal not only their fascination with this evidence that man is not what he promises himself he will be, but also their horror of touching the putrefaction, as if their eyes could be hallucinating, but their hands cannot be distrusted or denied. When the Negroes begin to discern the outline of the corpse, the officer-in-charge suddenly becomes more animated—now is his moment of self-importance. "The officer hovered at the edge of the pit, looking, with his crooked nose and blue-filmed eyes like a chicken, like an old cock moulting his dusty and bedraggled plumage" (p. 181). To Bishop, man has constructed myths, rituals, beautiful lies to convince himself that he is more than a mere mass of chemicals and to give himself dignity; but in the case of this disinterment of-icer, dignity is reduced to the vain stupidity of the barnyard.

The green which spring has failed to bring to this landscape now appears in a horrible, unexpected form: "An equivocal mass, bundled in olive drab wool

bulked under the sticky clay. Once where the pit [sic] had torn the rotted blanket, it crumbled and pushed out a lichen green grit" (p. 182). At this point, Archer's nerve temporarily fails him, and he looks to the surrounding landscape for relief and solace. The blasted, torn battlefield is still a horror, but it is interesting to note that Bishop's memory of the West Virginia Blue Ridge is echoed in the distant French hills, which offer Archer some unspoken promise that allows him to return to the gravesite rather than lose his subordinates' respect. Note the different adjectives used to describe the green of the landscape, depending on its proximity to Archer:

Archer turned away, looking out over that hard arid plain to which the freshness and green of May could bring no relief, nor the sun which elsewhere gilded the earth any colour. The uneven ground was still, after a winter of rain, littered with the refuse of battle, knapsacks, pack-carriers, bits of clothing, shoes, rifles—everything that could be thrown away in the hurry and despair of fight. Pitted, broken by depressions, the greenish drab soil dragged slowly toward the hills at the sky's edge, the once contented hills, rounded with thickets, their slopes open and fox-red where six months before hollow shelters had been scooped out by bayonets. In the dizzy blue distance, overtopping the nearer trees, shone the heights of the Argonne ragged with gay green forests. Over them the sky drew thin streamers of hazy white.

Then he thought: "This is too soft. I'm a damn weak-wad if I can't stand looking at it." And he walked back, keeping close to the barbed wire. (pp. 182-83)

The corpse is being raised with a coil of wire; Archer recognizes the body only as an "amorphous mass" that seems to provide its armpits as the means to haul it out. Once again, Bishop combines the image of the fowl with the green of putrescence as Archer looks on what had once been a man. "Something broke near the throat and a greenish blue substance, like a fowl's ordure, crumbled and fell over the sweater" (p. 183). The corpse becomes a horrid parody of resurrection with wounds that can only disgust, arms that spread out in a gesture that is neither crucifixion nor welcome, and the repulsive impotence of rotted genitals. Nevertheless, it seems to Archer as if the corpse is rising of its own volition:

An arm was embedded in the earth at one side. The pick tore into the soft flesh and the aperture showed a horrid pink; something was left behind in the hard clay. The cadaver began to lift itself from the grave. The jointless head fell back, thickening the greenish ooze on the neck; the uneven arms spread out with each jerk of the wire, hunching their slimy sleeves. In the space where the thighs divide a glinting puddle of muck had seeped through the breeches cloth. The legs trailed woodenly. (pp. 183-84)

This caricature of elevation, or rather levitation, pleases the bird-like officer immensely; the "resurrected" man has "returned" exactly as expected—"There!

he didn't come so badly at that. A lot better'n some of 'em. Now roll him over in the blanket' ” (p. 184). Archer now tries to identify with the boy the corpse had been while the officer begins “palping” the green slime of the throat and chest to find the dog tags. Archer finds he can accept the single fact of death, but this proof that it is an ongoing process is as much a rape of his sensibility as it is of the “sanctity” of the tomb:

He had never dreaded death, only manglement and disease and the slow dissolution of time. But here the body was not utterly dead; it had acquired a new life in its very putrefaction. It would go on for a long time yet, still younger than the earth in which it was hidden, not utterly dead as the dust and stones are dead. He stared down into the violated pit. (p. 184)

This religious moment of insight is followed by a spell of dizzy nausea as Archer's heaving stomach finally gets the better of him. Suffering from a feverish thirst, he turns to what looks like refreshing rain, only to be cruelly deceived by the reality of the mirage caused by the curtains of barbed wire.

Black flies were dangling in the air. Hands were fumbling at a green discoloured throat. Wires were wheeling in circles of steel with tiny prickles of light. His stomach was turning with the wires. His eyes were being jabbed by the steel barbs. That was why he was so hot. He must get away . . . to his tent . . . it was cool there with linden boughs and shadow and sweet. (p. 185)

Not all the witnesses are relieved of their self-deceptions, however. Those who will continue to think in spiritual terms about the dead are the same ones who are denied the right of a gentleman's “honorable” death. The company clerk is conversing with a southern sergeant:

“I bet them black bastards thinks about ghosts the rest of their life.”

“Well, that's all they're fit for, ain't they? Every time they put 'em in to fight they run—right over in these woods here—the black sons o' bitches ain't fit for gun fodder!” (p. 185)

Archer returns to the security of his tent, haunted not by a spirit, but by the lack of one. He walks, “dragging a shadow not cast by the sun.” This Poesque metaphor for Archer's realization of the finality of his own existence is followed by a train of thought that leads to his recognition of why the French landscape so oppresses him. He is at the locus of all that is rotten in civilization, all that led to the lies about the glory of war, especially World War One—he can see nothing around him worth having fought for.

. . . the blanketed mass he had just seen, with its poor upturned face, had broken down within him some last wall of resisting flesh. Even the air seemed to belong to the dead, and this plain, lying as it did

midway between the Argonne hills and the Meuse, had, perhaps because he was an American, become to him the centre of all the rotting desolation which filled the world. (p. 185)

Although he did not see as much dying as did his contemporary Robert Graves, John Peale Bishop had experienced so much of death and the dead on the blasted battlefields of the "Great War" that, as one of the very last American soldiers to return from France, this theme became an integral part of his post-war fiction. In both his chief book-length works, *Many Thousands Gone* and *Act of Darkness*, violent death and irresistible decay manifest themselves again and again within the gentle landscape of his native West Virginia. The shock of the grotesque would thus remain a hallmark of Bishop's style for the remainder of his life which ended in the spring of 1944—in the midst of another great combat laying waste the fields of France.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> John Peale Bishop and Edmund Wilson, *The Undertaker's Garland* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922). The collaboration consists of the alternating of pieces (poetry, drama, and fiction) individually composed by either Bishop or Wilson, but not both. "Resurrection" (pp. 175-91) is therefore entirely the work of Bishop. Hereafter in the text, page numbers from the above edition will be given parenthetically.

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