The Modernist Impulse and a Contemporary Opus

The Modernist Impulse and a Contemporary Opus:

Replaced by Writing

By

Frederic Will

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Frank Shynnagh, ‘Opus,’ Vol. 22 (1992), issue 3, 189–202.

Albert Cook, ‘On Frederic Will,’ Vol. 22 (1992), issue 3, 203–209.

INTRODUCTION

The following book deals in personal examples, and traces the author's own arc of writing, but aspires to speak of the writerly condition generally, in whomever or wherever it appears; the result is an anthropology of the writerly act as an act of self-replacement, by which an author-person fills his/her own tracks through life with those of another person, with another I in whom the author's first I re-finds itself. You might say that the inquiry, here, is partly into the identity of that 'other person,' who has emerged from the initial author's footprints. Who is this other I, whom I am replacing myself with when I write? After I've been uploaded, who am I? And then there's the question of what it can mean that 'I refind myself in this new person.' Was I ever not in this 'new person'?

The work we will describe, starting with section 1 of Part I, is but a fragment of the considerable formulation Will has long been creating. When you consider that formulation you first of all see a proliferation of genres—poetry and prose fiction, literary critical essays, cultural history, agricultural sociology, labor interviews, translations (many from modern Greek), philosophical inquiries—chiefly in aesthetics, and investigations of the everyday sociology of things such as habits and tastes and manners of perception. These genres are, so to speak, the major languages this large formulation is made up of, and that provide different inflections of the way the author takes position in the nameable world. But all Will's generic accesses are not equal. In a sense, poetry is the native language even of the native languages of this jam-pack of actions, for the author by nature thinks metaphorically—if not, at best, transformationally; by so saying I describe, not praise, this poetic word-storm of a person, who though far from anything greatness would require is not far from wanting to enter other lives at their highest altitude of poetic comprehension. I describe a voice machine wired tightly across Broca's and Wernicke's areas of the brain, and devoted to the simulacrum of inner dialogue, where it is the meditation of self upon self, given outward poetic form. I describe in this person a poetic voice that our cultural history has subdivided into *themes*, and exposed to the imagination of an audience for which no demographic sounding boards exist. I describe a voice whose written opus aspires to requiring a whole listening, one part to be played in terms of all the others, a *Gesamthoerwerk*.

What are the themes that have supplanted the voice on a brainstem, which poet Will is? The first is *attention to the world—mindfulness: would that term, both ancient Buddhist and trendily modern, help to clarify Will's entire formulation? Speaking to himself is his opus, his mute opera, and in that speaking he asks himself and others for awareness, for a talk-talk passageway in language for language, an appeal for awareness and discovery. Mindfulness* lays claim to being the master theme, as though the mindfulness-mandate, which history has directed at its simplest soldiers, was self-justifying. And what does one do, when one is formulated as mindful? One looks around, feels, talks, gets better at figuring out how to say what one observes or scoops up, and (in Will's case) one trades this jagged perceptuality for the rope ladder of the book, on which the person climbs tremulously toward some outstretched fellow hand, a reader who himself formulates, who is opening his/her space for you. A Buddhist-Catholic is working this territory. But it needn't be. That's just the label for the Joe in question here. Not surprisingly, in such a bastard of drives as this Will's, *mindfulness* invites in its collateral wake collateral themes: *aestheticism*, *confessionality*, *ironic transformation*, and *sacrifice as historicity.* All these sub-themes play their hands in the florid deck mindful Will shuffles; a deck which, though rigged, settles with a natural feel down into the comfortable coat of habitual world-grasps. Will writes to save, to share, and to die happy.

Order and disorder have each other by the necks in this opus made of regulatory themes; there is an under-ridingly joyful desperation binding all these voice-registers. The person made of the voice that claims the present flood longs for his versions of the salvation 'modernists' strove for. He wants to go to heaven on a truckload of distichs, you might say. And he dares bite this aspirational bullet in a noosphere where such institutions as the Church—which by instinct he admires and bends the knee to—have for two thousand years organized the interpretation of salvation, and which in our fleeting moment may inflect its message in rock nirvanas, IED jags, or endless waves of immigration reaching for usually withheld promised lands. The author dares think that by massing this opus—his jagged mantra—he makes moves that are congruent with the heady challenges of aging, especially the salvation challenge; he walls his privacy like a fortress, and says no to intruders; but at the same time he hopes to give a gift, so substantive that it will justify his putzing around through others' lives and others' intentions.

The works-gift Will offers is an ostention; a true laying before you, and he hopes an oblation. You take these books of mine—he mumbles to himself—you align their titles and spines, and you offer them up. To

whom? To the folks whose positive concern for things and their names crowds out error, self-concern, regionalism. You take all those titles and all those *sigla*, all those 'character spaces,' all those jots and tittles, and put them in a folder. Yes, you zip-drive all the texts you have written—that have written you—and collect them without their cell walls. They're like a long scroll that goes on as long as your life. *Then* comes the issue of salvation, of teasing that scroll into a noosphere sensitive to the human climate, and historical for the advent of the speaker. Is it you you are saving, old guy, or is it your byproduct in time? Is it mankind you are trying to save, or yourself as a sprig of mankind?

How greatly you want to say that it, the question of salvation, is both that you are saving yourself and saving the world. That would go the modernists one better, wouldn't it? You are saving yourself, you are giving into the noosphere. Are you then making of your writing a religiously charged act? Are you taking it on yourself to save yourself, and to do so by letting your mortal footprints be refilled by a hero of spirit, who has been shadowing you for a lifetime, and who appears there in full replacement mode as you kick the bucket out from under yourself? By the replacement trick, do you not step aside, at the last minute, and gesture *this is me, up here*, as the opus materializes, walking off along your own historical tracks into a sunset only Bugs Bunny has truly seen? Or is the very reference to that little critter evidence that 'I'm just kidding, boss'? Must a third party deal with the salvation issue, for you? Do you need one of the big guys from the Abrahamic tradition to burst in here and shake you free?

Look here, home-grown theologian, history is real, human history is us, and having lived it, and been lived by it, one has become a move inside all that is. Works in words are as giving as you are replaceable, death as trap is as openable as you are there to flee it. To make this secular transcendent claim is to bet your bottom dollar on what Kant seems to imply: that the merit and reward system, appended to extensive work with care, like virtue, is the ground for anticipating immortality. You will not be immortal for the reasons that Milton is immortal—because he hammered a rich world-vision into an English just tough enough to endure Latin—but because the *globus* your gifts of spirit infuse is on a mission to Mars, which only the ontology of spirit and final cause undergirds.

If there are progenitors for the drastic world-view I propose to live in, they are (for yours truly) the same team I played on fifty years ago. There is Samuel Alexander at right tackle, Nikos Kazantzakis at left guard, and Plotinus at quarterback. These good chaps are carrying the ball for emergent evolution, their banner reading *Free the Deity!* Their mantra?

Novalis' *aus schmerzen wird die neue Welt geboren.* If there is any text they share with the press, when goaded for a readable download, it will be Kazantzakis' *Saviors of God*, which presses human over-achievement into the service of making the future. No soul but faces—shall we say *is*?—that challenge, urgency, and opportunity.

PART ONE

1. *The author describes his fictive work*

i Fictions

Frederic Will (1928–) is an omni-probing American writer, who has sparred with diverse genres—poetry, travel, autobiography, philosophy, cultural criticism, and translation.[1] To date his *prose fictions* have barely been reviewed. This body of fictions is both 'philosophical'—in the sense of questioning our being here and our ultimate homescape—and empirical, saying what is right there before us—and in both dimensions Will wades far out into the sensibility of our time, our concern with the intersections between the temporal instant and the 'idea' rooted in that instant. Much of Will's prose fictive work foregrounds the *male's* registers, as well as the border psychology in which our current preoccupation with languages flourishes. We will be chiefly concerned, in this essay, with Will's prose fiction.

There are nine prose fictive texts in question.

Miroirs d'éternité, PUCI, Abidjan, 2003.
Flesh and the Color of Love, PUCI, Abidjan, 2003.
The Male's Midlife Rite of Passage: Three Interlocked Novels: Adventure in Algiers, The Poppy Web, The Disparition, Mellen, Lewiston, 2006.
The Concept of the Moment, Mellen, Lewiston, 2008. (Author: Will's pseudonym, Frank Shynnagh.)
Literature as Social Critique: Frederic Will's Short Fiction, Mellen, Lewiston, 2009. (Author: Will's pseudonym, Frank Shynnagh.)
Dinners with Fred, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2016. (One of three parts of *Essays on the Condition of Inwardness: Pieces of Otherness.*)
An African Threshold, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2016. (One of three parts of *Essays on the Condition of Inwardness: Pieces of Otherness.*)
Ryerson (under construction; 2005–present).
The Almanach de Gotha of Time (under construction; 2000–present).

All of these books were published (or first put in draft) within a six-year period, although the 'spiritual work' that made them dates from the nineties of the past century.

ii *Miroirs d'éternité* and *The Disparition*

Miroirs d'éternité—it was published in Abidjan, written in French—is a fantastic moral tale. Its narrator is Frederic Will, whom personal fate has at the moment of writing led to the brink of marital breakup, and to a longing for a clean slate. He sits with his son in a hotel lobby in Dakar, to which the two have gone on a father-son bonding trip, a kind of closure to the now-fading comforts of the nuclear family. As they pass time in the lobby, the narrator eyes a large wall map behind the counter, and with his mind moves his imagination, filling up the empty spaces of a giant rectangle called Mauritania. Is he not storing the image as an escape route in the mind? He inquires about renting a jeep and spending a few days on a jaunt north, but is dissuaded by the cost and shortness of time. He takes the plane back across the ocean, where he survives the remaining days of marital shutdown. Mauritania—a land and culture scape that figures largely and often in Will's fiction—will never be far from his mind.

The text proper begins with the narrator's return to Mauritania, several weeks later. He settles down in the most promising-looking hotel, a family establishment on the sleepy main drag of Nouakchott, and waits for his future to address him from the walls. His room is open, his heart is modest, and he is scraped clean. He goes down to dinner like a prince.

At dinner the narrator is joined by a middle-aged business type, Salah, whose business is the sale of antacids throughout West Africa; he satisfies, he explains, a huge local need to deal with indigestion. Salah and Fred talk at self-introduction until they are joined at table by an elderly gent, at this point simply *le vieillard*,[2] who brings with him an old-world Moorish classiness. Between them these two figures out of the walls converge to lay out, for Fred, not only a Mauritania tour sure to blow the top off the narrator's fancy, but a plan for the three of them to meet again, a half-year later, in the same spot. These two guys are destiny-shapers. The *saison au sahel* is underway.

Am I supposed to be story-telling? I who am the figure put in motion by the above tale, for action in the world, and self-transforming there? I who am supposed to be both the maker of this book, and what it is about? Me, wearing a teacher-teacher hat but still telling Mom how to get in touch with me? Well, Ma, I took the bus up the coast from Nouakchott to Nouadhibou, two days weaving through inlets against forests of gray

scum, the Atlantic barking over my left shoulder. I was on my way into the mercurial cult world of Darin the Black, and his dreck followers who were there killing the original Moorish populists; I tented in the latrine of society. And from there, when the odor grew too heavy, I yanked myself northward and inland onto the second arm of my journey, Atar. South of Atar lies the sacred oasis in which the inverted *marabout* arose from his pit of prayer and fasting to dispel my thickest life-clouds. OK Ma? Tracking me? Found me on the map?

This marabout guy I mention was a good man I released from within myself. He was a model for self-trimming, self-entering. From which point, in the third angle of the quadrilateral of my Mauritanian trip, I let the drum beat of pan-psychism embed me in the tale of a flooding river, tamed by the sacrifice of a young stalwart—right tackle for the Bruins?—who endured evisceration as the price of supporting the *axis mundi*. (The transformation of natural force through living sacrifice will invite a revisit during *Dinners with Fred*, 2016, a later text which doubles back on *Miroirs d'éternite*, and deepens the setting in which sacrifice can be seen as gain.)[3] My host in distant Tichitt, in the far east of the country, is the second guest, le viellard of my initial dinner with Salah in the Hotel El Amane. This wrinkled hit man, I could now conclude, had been sent by history to contextualize the Yank! His head, bent low to the furrows where time and nature swallow each other, moves the tale to the final waystop, Rosso in the jungle on the southern border with Senegal, where at a mass of the elements a fervent *prêtre de la jungle* takes this bread and drinks this cup of things—metals at angles, banyan roots, *ranollen*—consummating a ritual required of him by being-here under the banner of humanity.

So Freddy told his little story, and into it swept the fantasies—of pan-cosmic salvation, miraculous transformation, asceticism as subterranean and as lofty as the heavens—which constitute this fiction's 'n, which glows through the garment of this tale, will entangle itself with the surface of later Will fictions, and like them stamp an autobiographical face on the language of each of these texts. (Mr. Fred is a devotee of theological chance-takers like Charles Williams, in *Descent into Hell*, or Jacob Boehme, who sees the structure of the universe in the sunrays reflecting off a water-filled brass cup; their daring left a trail of crumbs, backward through the dark forest of Will's own past.) That autobiographical face will swim into focus, in *The Disparition*, the third volume of Will's trilogy, *The Male's Midlife Rite of Passage*; in this third novel the protagonist, an academic, once again splays openly to whatever comes, and once again lets Africa make him its launching pad. The launching act

is once again a passivity, like the *fortuit* of dining with Salah and the dark stranger in the El Amane Hotel, or before that—but in that time still to be written *Dinners with Fred* (2016)—in the fortuitous events with the African savant, Hosansche, in the Cloche d'Or. Alfred and his African wife, who are living in Côte d'Ivoire on a research grant from Alfred's university in Miami, have been to the beach one afternoon, and are just returning to their Abidjan condo, when they are greeted with shouts, before even getting out of their car. In their day's absence, their flat has been broken into, their possessions ransacked, and, most important, Alfred's laptop has been stolen.

A brutal sequence of realizations explodes onto Alfred and his wife; the extensive research work Alfred has been carrying out, on *Sport in Africa*, was on that stolen laptop, and is not backed up. A moment of silence follows, and then, violently, Alfred shouts, *everything is gone*. What at first seems a staggering loss of data slowly discloses that it is in fact a loss of identity. Alfred will ponder, ever after, over that transition from an empirical awareness to an existential one. The difference is both small and huge. In this instance we talk identity *metaphysically*, for Alfred has *become* his series of carefully poised reflections, not just on the African notions of space and sport, and the artificiality of colonialized gaming practices, but on the complex poise of the Colonial in a West Africa which is to this day 'somewhere else.' Alfred and Ideokuta's ensuing chase, to recover the laptop which could restore Alfred's identity, will lead them into regions where the futility of their quest becomes increasingly apparent; we realize with ever stronger evidence, that Alfred's self-search through the Mauritanian desert is one with what is to become his global search for the I, which writing into a small laptop had replaced him by. What matters most is not the sites of the quest—Indonesia, Germany, Florida—but the baffling network of agents who are at once making use of Alfred's 'material.' These agents are pilfering various sections of Alfred's work, selling it and publishing it on foreign markets, and profiting royally from the assistance of the Director of the U.S. Press for which Alfred has been preparing his work. Suffice it to say that the loss of will, power, and ultimately self, which Alfred is becoming the 'site' of, drives him to a desperate act, murder, and to an even more desperate condition, incremental loss of self, which ultimately cancels him out, and leaves him a mewling caterpillar of a person.

iii *Kenosis*

Miroirs d'éternité and *The Disparition* tap a central vein in Will's prose fiction: the abandonment of the individual to a phantasmagoric take-over destiny, through which the person is rinsed clean, or even rinsed away. (One thinks of that 'emptying,' or *kenosis,* introductory in the great religions to any effective access to God.) While this thematic plays out even in Will's more realistic fictions—like the first two novels of *The Male's Midlife Rite of Passage*—it is up front and center in many of his works of dramatic passivities: in several of the tales embedded in *The Concept of the Moment* (the tale of the Lithuanian shamanness, pp. 10–14; of the colonialist and the marabout, pp. 97–101, in which we enter the mystical webwork of all history in a point; of 'we all live in a ring of spirits,' p. 47 *et passim* of the 'ghost experience,' pp. 129–134; of Hugh and the Arjuna experience, pp. 143–150; of Tornado Tom, pp. l52–158): in the recent sequence called *Dinners with Fred*, 2016, in which two retired American anthropology professors meet, travel to, and try to comprehend life-threatening paranormal events in the Nigerian bush: in *The Almanach de Gotha of Time*, in which, yes, the launching-pad American prof solves the marriage issue by generating cardboard offspring, who with great cantanker take him through the ardors of paternity—not to mention murder and an ultimate expiation in the deserts of Algeria. In Will's *Dinners with Fred*, this phantasmagoric passivity theme is explicitly pushed in the direction of 'philosophy,' which is not to be confused with academic philosophy, though it refers generously into that tradition, but with the metaphysical inner lining of a discipline like epistemology, which opens whenever the implications of sensation and perception are given free rein. Two professors of anthropology wander into the arms of two African savants, placeholders for a deep knowledge of the difference between space, the true setting of being-here, and time, which is guarded illusion. The theme of phantasmagoric learning pervades Will's prose fiction, while that theme is complemented by an opposite; in such work as *Flesh and the Color of Love,* 2003, a fictionalized autobiography, or in *An African Threshold,* 2016, both of which texts work out materials to celebrate the *discovery* of a bride—an active intercultural epithalamion! In these last two works, Will's fictions grind reality up into themselves, emerging as expositions, but with the sting of a language which refuses to be less than absolute ringmaster of its content.

iv *Mid-zone cruising level*

The mid-zone cruising level of this prose fiction opus can be found at the altitude of a realism saved for the first two novels of *The Male's Midlife Rite of Passage*, the unfinished novel, *Ryerson* (discussed below), or certain of Will's short stories, in *Literature as Social Critique*, 2009. Style, in all those texts, tends to be converted into event, rather than into self-pursuit. In the *Dinners with Fred* text we are guided to a setting proper to this stress on event. Two African philosophers, whom the two American profs meet in Southern Nigeria, belong to an inner-darkness cell, a cult nucleus from which they detach and distribute what they see as knowledges from and of 'the interior.' (They induce the Yanks to enter in mind a nondescript rock, from within which the omnipresence of interiority, space from within which time melts away, self-obliterating, becomes a universe of its own.) The priority of space over time here grounds the privilege of the event, as distinct from the temporality of the narrative, which Will's characters regularly interpret as simply the mercy of eternity, the supreme action onto their passivity, in banal terms the measurement of change, but not a *to on,* Aristotle's term for 'what is' in the *Metaphysics*.[4]

Adventure in Algiers, the first novel in the trilogy, *The Male's Midlife Rite of Passage*, opens with an event which stamps its power onto the whole text, and is incrementally more resonant at the end than at the beginning; an event, therefore, which eats up the time of the novel. Charles Moreau is sauntering along the main drag of Algiers, close to the main branch of the Bank of Algeria, when a rat's nest of collateral events smashes into him. Two masked guys, who have just robbed the Central Bank of Algeria, and are dragging a female hostage behind them, smash into Charles before he 'knows what is happening.' What is happening includes his own abduction, as he and the lady are tossed like gunnysacks—this imagery will return in the second novel of the trilogy, when Hayes Straglund is imported into Bulgaria drugged, stitched into a gunnysack—and out of several motion diagrams a vehicle filled with two masks, two bruised and terrified Westerners, and bags of 1,000 dinar notes assembles itself. That assemblage, an event, is what will be decoagulated by the end of the novel—the permanent separation, in nostalgia, of Charles Morot and Helene. Time will have been wiped out by the recreation of the initial event, now at the end of the text in decrescendo.

The present 'event' (in *Adventure in Algiers*) is followed by a tale that grows increasingly ramified, as widely unrelated agencies struggle to solve 'the Morot case,' and then, at mid-text when a crucial memo aids in the *locating* of the desert-crossing hostage pair, the text and the tale began

to close down, stage by stage, toward the ultimate condition of rest latent in the Big Bang of the bank heist. The protagonist of the diagrammatic tale is appropriately a passive hero, thus a natural trackpad for a graphed text, yet he is a passivity whose passion is an action. His fidelity to Helene, which grows into compassion, then into jealousy-driven erotics, faces a central challenge; Morot's attempted escape into the desert night, in sight of Helene but of none of the masks. Morot circum-wanders the hostage takers' camp, losing it from sight for long enough to realize his total weakness as a disoriented individual in the desert. Returning as a whipped dog, chained to the jeep while the team relaxes and Helene flirts with Ahmed, who has been courting her, Morot splays out into the second half of the fiction, which will take its vengeance on a Morot-Helene pair who have not the power to control—only to inflect—their destinies. Their destinies, controlled for them, will be the flight corridor in which passivity is turned into an easily recognizable personal-event profile. During much of the desert voyage, Morot is fully himself, Condillac's simple man to whom the senses have been one by one added.[5] The captors flee from one oasis, and one safe house, to another, in an ultimately vain effort to retain their two priceless pieces of human property. Stickers serving as placeholders for the senses crop out like measles one by one, on the for long stretches simply passive Morot. Helene is a yet paler counterpoint of this nomadic personality beside her. Destiny is the originating event and the finale, simultaneously.

Which is exactly the moment to lay out the groundplan o*f The Poppy Web*, the second novel in *The Male's Midlife Rite of Passage*. Here too, as in *Adventure in Algiers*, passivity grows out into an action. First, though, a nod to the theme of sexual degradation, which will in Will's prose fiction play a role wherever destiny is calling shots which the individual must first fire. Morot whipped by conditions and moods; the narrator of 'Fidelity' (from *Literature as Social Critique*), giving himself over to the pleasures of another guy's sporty gameplay with the narrator's wife; the narrator's homoerotic love play in *The Concept of the Moment*, where the narrator is enwhored to himself: these adventures in paraphilia ensure that the mid-level narrator of Will's fiction will never become 'a man without characteristics,' or even an anonymous Joseph K in search. Morot, Hayes, and their confrères, throughout this prose opus, are on a quest to become the time-consuming curve they are as narrative. Could one not say the same for the 'naïf' protagonist who is brushed clean of miracles in *Miroirs d'éternité*? Will reaches into the Quixotic tradition and comes up with a *picaro* of the mind, as bearer of what, contemporarily enough, is

essentially the message that he is bearing a message. One marvels here at the intersection of paraphilia with postmodernism.

Which is to alert us to the bridge in sexual structure between *Adventure in Algiers* and *The Poppy Web*, whose groundplan we now owe the reader. Both novels open with a resounding event, which will mirror itself off in a time-consuming finale. Both highlight an early mid-life academic male, out of his element in a culture which is sharply other, and throw him against the cliffs of bondage. Bondage to their destinies becomes both of these males; Charles, as his co-captive Helene sees and laments, is of a passive breed and not much help to her; her sell-out to Ahmed is the more spiteful as she has seen Morot wander fruitlessly in the desert, to escape the destiny he has made himself deserve. The first chapters of *The Poppy Web* configure the personal history of Hayes Straglund, as he has made his way south through the Eastern Peloponnesus, taken the sun from a café in the ancient mediaeval fortress of Monemvasia, and wandered a few kilometers south to bed down in a sandy cove. His past in Greece, and in the study of Greece, has earned him this holiday in the mind, where nostalgia traces unfinished business to an obscure recess, far from his career life. He is the peace of the waves lapping on the shore beside him. Imposingly enough, the other, in the form of three ocean-going drug traffickers from Eastern Europe, has also been embedded in sea throes and sea depths. The drug runners are as amazed as Straglund, to meet him, not the other they expected. They were directly concerned with a certain Albanian mule, who was about to appear on the headland, just as the bank robbers, in *Adventure in Algiers*, only wanted their bags full of dinar notes. What is seen, here, features itself as accident, but swims in lateral consequences.

Wham! The other smashes into Hayes, as he enters the depth of a sleep—a sleep as rinsing and forward as that of Odysseus on the Phaeacians' island, after he has made it across from Circe's seductive hideaway. Like Charles Morot, who was only semi-conscious as he was transported across the Atlas mountains down onto the plains of northern Algeria, Hayes Straglund, heroin-injected by his captors, is carried almost comatose, bagged and hidden in the hold of a rickety skiff, northward through the choppy Aegean to the work-home of these international traffickers. With both protagonists (Charles and Hayes) the awakening is equally gradual, as though it is a coming out onto a new plateau where destiny will complete its script. Each energumen eventually emerges into a world where woman appears as the definer—whether Helene, jealous desire for whom opens Morot back to the world again, or the sultry Satabonda, in the Bulgaria to which Hayes is transported—and in their

own ways, each postulant for time-consumption succumbs in the end to the perfect Venn diagram. We have seen that Charles and Helene separate as they have joined, stretching their canvas and hanging it out to dry. After the travail that makes him a lover, a bauble of temporality, an unsought world traveler, a sub-player in intersecting drug and diplomatic contests, Hayes Straglund is once more deposited on the campus of Wayne State University, square one filled with the squares he left for what turned out to be a sensationally prolonged leave of absence. He saunters out on a Sunday afternoon near an expressway bisecting Detroit, steps out of his car, is caught in the crossfire of a drug trade action, and dies immediately. The whole cycle of destined capture, passion, and death is abruptly, and in the finest contemporary fashion, brought to self-completion in passion as action.

One must think, here, to what lies ahead of these two robust and mid-course novels, those fictional works of Will's that most draw on the tradition of European social fiction; and one must think ahead because works like *Dinners with Fred*, currently in press, and *The Almanach de Gotha of Time*, old but in remake as we speak, indicate the kinds of philosophic dimension Will's fictional work intimately heralds. Even to proclaim that dimension of mindfulness is to sketch out the wider argument of Will's creative opus, and to touch freshly on both the prose and poetic—not to mention the 'intellectual'—dimensions of his ambition. He aspires to a makership which will enable him to meet his maker.

v *Dinners with Fred*

Dinners with Fred brings to the fore a miracle trip through Africa, as did *Miroirs d'éternité*—but with a change. We noted that *Miroirs* rinsed its protagonist clear, through phantasmagoria. It did not, however, wisen him up, even to the extent we have to suppose for Charles Morot or Hayes Straglund, not to mention Alfred, in the *Disparition*; protagonists who emerged completed by their attritions. In *Dinners*, the two anthropologists have been taken through a jungle dinner in which they are induced—by the savant Claude—to see the world from the inside of a rock, or to intuit what suffering is from inside another—the monitor lizard. What exactly this learning is, becomes incrementally clear to the two men, and at a level of deepening passed over at the altitudes of *Miroirs d'éternité.*

Returned to their guest house in Ughelli, after the dinner with Claude in the jungle, *le vieillard*—remember again, please, the old chap who approaches the narrator on his first night in the hotel El Amane, in Nouakchott—Hosansche makes clear in the course of discussion that on

the day the profs left Claude in the jungle, the day of the Ughelli Festival which ostensibly brought them to Africa, what they have gone on to witness is a ritual sacrifice, in which a young man has been dismembered by Igbe dancers. (Remember again, please, the purifying sacrifice in *Miroirs d'éternité*; which is an imaginative forerunner to *Dinners with Fred.*) It cannot escape the two cultural anthropologists that the 'from within,' from the heart out, from space out, is where Claude had been trying to take his dinner guests. Nor can they fail to see that the dark sodality, into which Claude is wishing to indoctrinate his guests, and which brought Hosansche, the Urhobo savant, to Detroit, is the working organ of the worldview these nativists wish to remodel the world with: making it into a world from the inside out. How metaphysically celebratory is the ambition of these two oracles of darkness—oracles who will remain mere representatives—we are about to learn; making contact with a movement taking up space in the noosphere, from one end to another of the globe. The finale of *Dinners* will see the foursome of questers at the ultima Thule of their quest for the being inside: in Rosso, in southern Mauritania, where a renowned priest of the interior, Father Pachau, is celebrating a mass of the elements, in which the building blocks of organic life and their yearning syntheses—carbon, malachite, onyx, marble—appear as the radiant hosts of a 'Take this and eat it' of the earth itself, its promise from the inside, of a bridge role in the earth's recreation of itself. *Miroirs d'éternité* returns to us once again, in this festival of African transformation, for it was in *Miroirs*, in the Rosso jungle, that we first encountered *le veillard*.

vi *The Almanach de Gotha of Time*

The Almanach de Gotha of Time rests on labyrinthine turns, as it plays out the destiny of a professor of anthropology (again), James Dorfer. Anthropology? The organization of the quest for the other, for knowing the other from the inside of it out. The tale also tracks the destiny of a local Arkansas mayor, and of the Professor's primary assistant, Murray. What brings these elements together?

Dorfer supervises the dissertation of Murray, one of his most inquisitive graduate students, who is studying North African missionary traditions. This young man follows his own research into the deserts of North Africa, where he makes acquaintance with members of the Touareg community. Under the guidance of a Touareg elder, Murray arrives at the mountaintop hermitage (Assekrem) of Charles de Foucault, a saintly

French man (1858–1916) who gave his life to work and pray for the Touaregs.

During his own two-week retreat at Assekrem, Murray falls into conversation with a French priest, Father Paul, who has been assigned to occasional parish duty in the remote mountaintop chapel. In the course of their dining together the older man calls Murray aside. After an evening walk with him along the parapet of the Church precinct, the priest confides that he possesses, in the sacristy of the church, an especially interesting text he would like to show the young man. The typewritten text, he says, has been molding on a shelf, forgotten by time. The priest himself lacks the English to read the document.

Murray agrees to read the text, which in description fascinates and intrigues him, and which, in photocopy and with the priest's permission, Murray brings back to the States; he shares the text with knowing scholars like his Professor, James Dorfer. The Professor too falls under the spell of the text, forming a desire to present and edit it; after some delay the professor acquires, from the Assekrem files, permission to publish the following précis, which Dorfer considers part of the anthropology of North African culture.

> *A Mayor of indeterminate age finds himself existentially lonely, in Paris. To alleviate his loneliness he gives birth to two partially cardboard children, Melissa, a girl in her late teens, and Weezy, a girl of six. He feels the family is incomplete. A male is needed. The trio travels south to Tunisia, where a male child, around twenty, is born by the man's inner fiat. Charles (the needed male) joins the group. All three children are creations of will worked onto the elements; all three have their origins and personalities in the earliest chemistry of the cosmos. They are chips off elements.*
>
> *The group returns to the States, the man's home, and settles in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The man is employed by the State Board of Natural Resources. He soon goes into activist local politics, and becomes Mayor of Fayetteville; Weezy enrolls in grade school; Melissa takes a job as secretary with her Dad's political campaign; Charles pursues a life of deep religious devotion, centered around the Church, then joins a political party opposed to his Dad.*
>
> *As a radical Green ideologue, the Mayor takes pains to reeducate his community, winning friends and influence; then tragedy strikes. A close-to-home conspiracy has been forming against the Mayor, in the bosom of his family. As a believer in the power of divine mercy, Charles, his cardboard son, opposes any policy of social activism,*

including his Dad's position of social action. Melissa too turns against her Dad, falling for a virulent political opponent of the Mayor. Thus there is a three-person cabal—Charles, Melissa, and the 'political opponent'—opposing the Mayor. This cabal takes terrible revenge on the Mayor. They kidnap and murder little Weezy, after collecting and spending the Mayor's ransom money.

Overcome with grief, the now childless Mayor—Melissa and Charles are in the pen for life, Weezy is dead—throws himself into political life. He buddy-buddies with the Governor of Arkansas, and quickly makes his way to Washington, where a chance encounter with a Chadian seductress and her State Department boss opens the door to government-level political activism. The now former Mayor is assigned a State Department mission in Central Africa.

His mission is to Chad, where a new pipeline has been constructed, exploiting oil from the Sahara and transmitting it through Cameroon to the Atlantic coast, where it can be transshipped to nations in the southern hemisphere. (The United States has taken a geopolitical tilt south, aligned itself with the new powerhouses of Latin America and southern Africa, and the Mayor's mission is in line with that policy.) He is to spy on a particular Chadian tribe, which is suspected of working for the Northern Alliance, and of attempting to disrupt the flow of oil to the United States and its Southern interests.

The text goes on to describe the former Mayor's month of isolation in a Chadian Kotoko village. Mystified by the 'politics' of the desert, the former mayor is even more puzzled by the presence of a shadowy figure, who flits through the desert background, under the moon and stars. Though the Mayor does not know it, this shadowy figure has connections both with the former Mayor's children and with the future his fate is leading him into.

At the beginning of the final section of this unique memoir, the Mayor has returned to the States, revisited his own incarcerated children and the grave of Weezy, taken a quick look at the prospects for a political career, and decided to transship back to the African desert, which has captivated his imagination.

This time the Mayor-turned-diplomat directs himself toward Algeria, from where Murray had gotten the text transcribed here. Charles, the oldest of the mayor's children, had often spoken of Algeria, long calling himself *Charles de Foucault, in memory of that sainted Frenchman who gave his life in the Algerian desert. It seems to the ex-Mayor, who is himself growing in religious sensibility, that he too understands the spirit of Charles de Foucault. It strikes him*

that the meaning of the strange willed birth of his own children may be hidden in the Algerian desert.

As the former mayor is en route to Charles de Foucault's hermitage, however, a new kind of hell breaks loose, a hell that belongs to the mayor's lifelong discovery process. He learns, through the desert grapevine, that the shadowy figure who crossed his visual purview in Kotoko country, was a counter-spy, a major player in the efforts of the Northern Tilt to counteract the Southern Tilt. He learns even more. He finds out that he was being shadowed throughout his time in Chad, and marked for a death which would occur only after he had been shorn of his secrets. (How few those were, only this kind of adversary could fail to know.) Like a modern Pilgrim, the former Mayor must again in Algeria fight desert battles against his adversary before he can reach the Holy Mountain of Assekrem, where Charles de Foucault passed his last days. These desert battles, against phantoms and djinns, are the stuff of the mayor's deepening surrender to the spirit world.

That the historical Charles de Foucault himself was finally murdered by the Touaregs, the northern Saharan tribe that is plaguing the Chadian oil pipeline, begins to seem a meaningful part of the pilgrimage our friend the Mayor is undertaking. This realization, and others—spiritual and political both—constitute the finale of the tale of the former Mayor. The black flashing character from the Kotoko village, who was spying for the Touaregs, resolves briefly into the form of Charles himself, the Mayor's own pasteboard son, who is in a sense his murderer. The Mayor's lifelong diary, which culminates in the return to Assekrem, is left with Father Paul, the then (1963) priest of Assekrem, from where it finds its way into Murray's hands.

After the end of this summary, the text returns us once again into the presence of Professor James Dorfer, who has just received his first copy of what has become a printed book, the Mayor's memoir edited by James Dorfer. The professor reflects on the relevance of this book to his own life, which has been one of spiritual quest, ontological fragility, erotic diversions, openness to mystery, and finally of the dream of automatic self-dissolution in the desert. The Mayor's obscure Assekrem text, having long lain in its obscure retreat, has widened the circle of its own meanings, and through the publication process has brought James Dorfer himself into wider meanings of his own life.

Not long after the experience with his student Murray, and indirectly with the Mayor's life itself, the Professor retires from teaching and moves, with his young Nigerian wife, to the house that they have had built for them in the oil-rich south of Nigeria's Delta State. If ever there was a playground for the anthropologist it is there! A variety of tribes—Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Isokko—interact, displaying their sharply different cultural practices. The professor plunges into the sequence of committed African activities—writing, exploring, gossiping, reading—which have for a lifetime intersected in him. Life goes on and life goes on well. He is a happy retiree, as old profs are.

One day, however, Professor Dorfer falls ill, contracts a terrible fever, writhes with stomach cramps, and begs his wife for medical help. In the absence of a credentialed M.D., in their remote corner of southern Nigeria, the couple call in a traditional healer. Johnson Aferiere is an Ibo of indefinite age and uncanny herbal knowledge. After examining the Professor, Johnson prescribes the use of a rare herbal dear to the indigenes of the Lake Chad basin. With this admonition, and because he is drawn to pre-Western healing techniques, the Professor and his wife take a Land Rover into the Fulani bush country of Northeastern Nigeria, and in the village of Makorlo come to the renowned curing facility of the healer, Ornoowo. At that site the anthropology Professor, though trained to accept differences in cultural practice, finds himself confronted with the radical other.

The form taken by the radical other, in this instance, returns the present novel to the point from which it took birth. Our professor and his wife have dreamed of childbirthing, but this pleasure alone has been withheld from their otherwise successful marriage. The great healer immediately perceives this truth about the aging prof, that only a volcanic event, like birthgiving, will enable him and his wife Maria to find that mirror of themselves which deep love requires. In this achievement, the prof's illness would be wiped away. This commonplace of psychosomatic wisdom, better than herbs, drives him deep into himself. Where, he wonders, can he turn in search of the healing Ornoowo prescribes?

Fortunately the Professor has shared the Assekrem text—the text about the Mayor—with his own wife, and though at the time of reading she was bored by the endless cardboard tale, she now starts to take interest! Is the tale transcribed by Murray not the way through the labyrinth of her and her husband's isolated life? Is willed birth not the path, dangerous it is true, but faithful to the *condition humaine*? The professor hears her intuition, wills to will what the former Mayor had

willed, but knows—from his life and his reading—that only a spiritual *hegira* will take him to the place in which he could be able so to will.

In the finale of the Professor's notes, on his hegira within an hegira, we live with the Professor through the tragic/comic, bitterly threatening practices by which he wills to birth a single scion for himself and his wife Maria. A certain figure of the elements, an umbilical cord of time attached to the initial radiant glow of our cosmos, will become the prof's replacement, as Charles, Melissa, and Weezy had temporarily become for the Mayor, in the tale Murray rescued from the dusty shelves of Assekrem. Living with the consequences of his perilous act will be the prof's ultimate tribute to the power of Mr. Mayor. But that benign conclusion will not be the end of the story.

The Professor has, in the final scenes of his mortal existence, taken on the kaleidoscopic features of the former mayor himself. The rage to spawn unites the two driven men. The prof breaks from his Nigerian corner one day, and disappears into the bush around Lake Chad, where for many months, it is said, he put the final touches on the manuscript of his hegira to Assekrem. What he was writing was eventually deposited in the Church of the Holy Annunciation in N'djamena, Chad, where it lies today.

The last chapter of this tale within a tale is written by the successor to Dorfer, a genial anthropologist who becomes Wayne State's titular replacement for the deceased Dorfer. This finale recounts the advent of a mysterious stranger to Chad, a young American Fulbright professor. (This is in fact the new professor, Dorfer's successor.) To this man the prof's manuscript is handed in confidence, by the humble priest of the Church of the Holy Annunciation. The new anthropologist accepts the challenge in Dorfer's personal testimony. The underground hegira of Dorfer becomes incumbent on yet another member of the 'sodality of the interior ones.' Another quest and another birth-search take their inception, as does the premise, nestled within that search, of new willed births and artificial paradises conjured up from the sand. The last we know is that Professor Sorenson can be found buying sabbatical year tickets for a trip to the Algerian Sahara.

vii *Short stories*

The critical phase of Will's prose fiction, in which he turns his optic onto himself while portraying a world to review, develops into *Literature as Social Critique: Frederic Will's Short Fiction,* 2009: a work attributed to Will's nom de plume, *Frank Shynnagh*. In this work six fictions are interspersed among six two- or three-page commentaries, in which the

fictions are studied for the social critiques implicit in them. The first three tales, and the points they drive in, concern aspects of global consciousness (finding the broad energy of universal karma in everyday life; displaying the intersections between a small liberal arts college and the international festival of events that surround it; entertaining the mysterious doom contemporary existence predicts of itself through the subdued violence of a few archetypal characters). The last three tales reduce the global to the bedroom (adultery followed by compensatory humiliation; self-exposure and deep injury) and to the dreamworld of the mind (*The Strange Bachelorhood of George Laughlin*) in which one man's search for fatherhood leads him into cardboard generations of a family which ultimately self-destructs, taking him with it. (This last thematic reviews material worked centrally in *The Almanach de Gotha of Time*.)

The author of these tales imagines, most comprehensively when he either grows to the size of the world, as in 'Cherryhill,' or to the size of the creativity of a man (the Mayor of Fayetteville) who creates his own world by fiat. That author needles in most sharply when, as in 'The Event,' he most avidly rubs his own nose in humble-pie paraphilia. The voice at work, taking on this gamut of self-reflections, is more nearly that of the *homme moyen* of our time, than of the more ecstatic raconteur of novel texts. Note the openings of three of the stories:

> *Hugh was fighting an old battle.*
>
> *Whenever Margo visited him, and they had one of their limpid, languid weekends together, and she bent a little and talked a little of maybe they should get married, have kids, all those things that took him back into his own nurturing if boring parental family, he felt a dread of her departure.*[6]

> *I'm in my car—87 Mercury Tracer—in Iowa City's Old Capitol Mall after a morning busy with details. What matters is the damp cold of the garage, the distracted concentration I bring to getting in the car.*[7]

> *The sun was near the meridian, there was a washed coastal sky spotted with random pigeon flights, the temperature in the low fifties. And outside on the cement there was the flow of traffic, which already, in the late forties, was a cascade of steel, shrieking brakes, hissing eighteen-wheelers.*[8]

The destinations of these prose entry points are very different, and yet the point of origin, as was the case in the three novels of *The Male's Midlife Rite of Passage* (2006), is right off the street or the moment of the day. As it should be, for the claim of all the stories in this book is that, starting from right now, wherever, and pursuing it into the meaning implicit in it, is inevitably coming onto the humility of the narrator, even his humiliation. (The way destiny manhandles all of Will's narrators, from start to finish, suggests he lives a universe which is fundamentally minimizing him, like the tragic universe that beclouds the earthly work of Oedipus or Antigone.) The archetypal figure at the center of 'The Centers' best lives out the spooky sense, that runs through all these stories, that the individual is the target of the cosmos' desire to punish. In this, of course, Will skirmishes with the idea of fate, for fate is an objective nexus, and the desire to punish is personal. Will's protagonists are asking for it, and getting it in the face, sometimes *kindly and instructively*, as in the jungle dinner with Claude—in *Dinners with Fred* (2016)—or in the small ways the day was imposing on Hugh—*Literature as Social Critique* (2009)—sometimes *threateningly*, as in the way The Mayor of Fayetteville (in *The Almanach de Gotha of Time*) was being darkly shadowed across the continent of Africa, sometimes *sadistically* as in the cases of 'Fidelity' and 'The Event,' in both of which stories the protagonist is given the Prometheus treatment, his liver chewed away by agents of retribution. We are not in the world of Kafka, where mysterious unnamable nexuses catch up the main figure, but in the world of psychological error—sometimes psychological bliss—in which an ego representative delivers surprising retribution.

viii *Flesh and the Color of Love*

The Will who exists poised between just plain me and artifice comes closest to being his own fiction in *Flesh and the Color of Love* (2003), a fictionalized autobiography. Here we see the same relentless outing from the narrator that we saw in the *Male's Midlife Rite of Passage* (2006). Will continues to be his own text, and in a sense his only text.

> *Eight thirty at night, mid-July of 1998 in the parking lot of Tony's Super Market in Lincoln, Nebraska, U.S.A. How specific can you get? You can go down to the genetic code of the people in the lot, or to the molecular structure of the materials those people and their cars are made of. You can go to the infinitely small of matter, the kernels, but then aren't they simply electricity, and isn't there, under and in that electricity, just an evanescent geometry of forces, which nothing can*

name? Doesn't the more and more specific simply squeeze its way out of the bottle until you're left holding thin air?

Climbing out of the car I drop my specific keys on the partition between the two specific front seats. With one instinct my Nigerian wife Beatrice and I reach for the keys in the half-dark, and come on them at the same time. Our fingers intertwine, and for a moment, in the eerie fluorescence of the parking lot's arclights, we both stare at the framed hands that seem to belong equally to both of us. Black, white, the different-colored fingers form a single knot.[9]

The mystery of the specific haunts Will, not only in the effort to think out the specific-universal components in his marriage, but throughout his work on the struggle between universal and concrete meaning. Right here, in fact, Will touches the oldest nerve in his historical repertoire of thoughts, the meanings of the eighteenth-century English concern with precisely the problem of the universal and the concrete, which for many thinkers of that period—Samuel Johnson, Joshua Reynolds, Canova, Victor Cousin—is the site at which they define their world-sensibility. In *Intelligible Beauty in Aesthetic Thought* (1957), Will's first published book, he anatomizes the thinking of the four figures mentioned above, as they work through their conviction that the 'universal' takes priority over the specific, a conviction that allies them with the Aristotelian perspective on what meaning is. Throughout his fictions Will looks at human action as an invitation to its own meaning, to the place where the individual becomes a vehicle for the significance engendering it. At the same time, of course, since he is writing fiction and not philosophy (or theology) Will builds his imagination around concrete universals, those touchdown points—those specific intertwined fingers—which form crosshairs between the concrete and the supraspecific.

Flesh and the Color of Love entertains not only the concrete-universal theme but the equally pervasive and subtly related issue of freedom and necessity. The author knows that the text events he has worked through could not have been different from what they are. He is, in other words, writing one more piece of evidence for necessity, and yet he is locking that necessity tightly into the choice that gives necessity meaning. (The protagonist of this fiction is gambling before our faces, exercising radical freedom to build a new life for himself, and yet in so doing he creates a webwork of eventualities of which at the end he can do nothing except say that they had to be as they are.) Couldn't it be said, he asks throughout his fictional work, that the concrete, though not itself a site of meaning, basks in its released universality, as necessity basks in the dimension of freedom?