

Labor and Writing

Labor and Writing:

Language and the Origins of Imagination

By

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PART I

CHAPTER ONE

ON PREPARING TO WRITE ABOUT SHAKESPEARE

My method for constructing *Shakespeare as a Portable Guide to the Human Condition* was practice-based. I have always been a worker in detailed imaginations. One form of that practice has been poetry, which I started with ... writing and touching things. Poetry seems to me the maximal grounding point because it works out the imagination, touches its objects, makes the memories of them into new forms.

Practising poetry has meant thinking directly by indirection, from the instant as provocation, into larger and already hallowed forms, like genres, metrical systems, and oral playgrounds. The poet is used to running into walls they have helped to construct and figuring out how to be glad of them. In practising poetry, I have found myself running into tough challengers who wrestled me to the ground like Shakespeare, and who made me climb up the ladder of their own “development.” Shakespeare was par excellence the contesting challenger who climbed his own back fence of language. If I was going to read him I had to construct a playdough simulation of his climbing process in his face.

I read Shakespeare – a kind of reading in poetry which means remaking, raging through, tapping on – and I found him charging his own engine with his own engine, like living where everything he touched became a discovery. I had to bend to that. I had to see how far he had come from. The Henry plays, with which he started as a writer of twenty, are cardboard portraits of a culture trying to stand up as a construct and deal with the fact that it has remade a lifeless king in language.

From the start, I knew Shakespeare was struggling to use stubborn historical matter. He was “writing about” a world that had no counterpart in my own culture – ancient, continuous, and “belonging” to him in a fashion that no pre-state of my world was “mine,” unless it was the Native American

counterpart, which, if beloved and interior, seemed constructed on another axis from the rapidly self-modernized America of the Second World War. I had no Shakespearean-type past, no continuous backward-stretching historical continuity to think against; nothing of that sort was germane to me in the way Shakespeare's far-older past, with its roots in the late medieval, was to him, which made it hard for me to read early Shakespeare with exuberance.

So Shakespeare climbed into his history – a mid-twenties strapper and clawer with a vision. To meet him I needed to reach toward, outwards into the world that rapidly replaced Stratford-upon-Avon and moved a dynamo of life observation and language fury into humble digs in London, close to throbbing theatre, showbiz itself, his own voracious reading, and a red fire existence in the middle of the biggest city in town. Shakespeare, as he went, laying down my own research methodology, was panting as I was along beside him, *scribblerus, scribblerus*, testifying in talk talk language to the mind inside this derivative. How soon that other was to ride me off the tracks.

Richard III was the first true thief of my placidity. To mediate Shakespeare – to fall into a methodology of another book on this canonical figure – I was going to have to up my game, eat my way into the life of a monster ruler, a figure blowing the cap off all the dignities. Richard truly deserves our own time: a monster plotter, an ego without bounds. (The citizen of a nation that has in our time created just such a monster, I have some claim to knowing the type.)

The language I squeeze out now, even to convey what kind of language was required by my testimony, is only half the kind of method a report on the nascent Shakespeare will require. Even half-measures – for the following years of Shakespeare's life, and the following months of mine – were to require lateral bursts into such diversions as *The Comedy of Errors* (1588–93) or *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1590) – splashes on the beach of language, mini-chaoses entangling themselves in eventual order – or *Romeo and Juliet* (1594) and *The Merchant of Venice* (ca. 1595) where, it became evident, the arguments were darkening, growing more personal to their maker, and demanding more attention from the poetic gadfly attempting some kind of relevant response to them.

The required scholarly manhood, like the methodology, lay close at hand, as the accouter neared the shores of *Julius Caesar* (1599) or *Hamlet* (1600–

1) and realized that he would have to mature fast to touch the genetics capable of vaulting Shakespeare from the *Henry VI* plays (1589–91) to these interior studies which no man’s education could prepare him to account for. In a decade, Shakespeare had entered such complex waters, from weak Henry’s flailing in a sea of challenges he could not cope with to weak Hamlet, mountingly appalled by challenges so exemplary that their victim becomes an emblem of the human condition.

There is no training for a dramatic achievement of that dimension, just as there is no comfortable “methodology” to encompass that kind of transcendence with a pen. You can do it, finding that, having been boosted by the writer himself, you are at least up to your own approximation of a response. Is it that you jack yourself up by your own (borrowed) bootstraps?

With Brutus in *Julius Caesar* and *Henry V* (1599) you come to an accounting for which no amount of homework would suffice, and methodology is simply doing it from what you are. Brutus, deliberating over whether to get Caesar’s back or put a knife in it, is like you talking to yourself, something which, when you do it, has no equal for intimacy, and there is little equal in earlier Shakespeare (except possibly the sonnets) where an interior voice could be more the self to the self. As for *Henry V*, there is no better guide than Dr. Samuel Johnson, who finds that the deaths of kings make the ultimate comment on mortality, and Prince Hal’s surging maturity under pressure a unique pattern, even for this author. The sonnets, to repeat, are the guarantor, behind all this depth of human portrayal, for Shakespeare’s standpoint within the polarities of the human condition, forcing you to withdraw from any refuge of simple obedience or scholarship. With the sonnets you are on your own, facing all the terrors of love.

Problem plays soon factor heavily, in Shakespeare’s midlife opus, as a wrinkle of welcome uncertainty. You run your methodology machinery into the poet in mid-career, and in *Henry V* asked to be more of a Mensch than your backcountry life has authorized. But you are equally pressed to the surprise limit by *Troilus and Cressida* (1601), *Measure for Measure* (1604), or *Coriolanus* (1607–8), which reverse the “tragic finale” grandeur and demand resolutions while withdrawing them at the same time. Does *Troilus and Cressida* defang the heroism of war to replace it with the perplexities of flirtation? Why? Does *Measure for Measure* succeed in discovering new means of judicial punishment? If so, what are we supposed to learn about humanity from it? What is the point, finally, of *Coriolanus*’s heroic

superiority? Are we entitled to live life from his point of view? To be proud, or simply proud of being proud?

Finally, having stretched your inner methodology as taut as seemingly possible, the toughest remaining test is comedy. You have finished your job, yet done so without mentioning the antic, farcical, whimsical, and mythical of another age – when entertainment was as live and in your face as in Falstaff’s fooling around – in *The Comedy of Errors*, with its insistence on mutual misunderstandings of the Abbott and Costello brand, or the cool geometry of *As You Like It*. Could these comic texts be the masterpoint of all, for seeing whether you can become, rather than just formulate, your methodology? To find out what the comic is, in a writer like Shakespeare, is to find out the reigning social norms in their culture, then see in what ways they can be effectively violated. You have to find your way inside the other before you can feel what is outside to them.

What Shakespeare requires of us, our openness and willingness to grow into him, is what we require of him, his willingness to keep making us grow to the level of his work. The mutual-labour traffic here is guaranteed its dynamism by the drama genre in which it is carried out. Not only must we be able to read Shakespeare, to the limit of our gesture system, but we must be enabled, by him, to “act out” to the fullest of our presence. Plays, unlike poems or novels, are notes on a full-bodied gestural system, the self-notation which writing a “play” is. That is why we respond up our limits, as great-play readers, and why the masterworks of the literary humanities continue to position themselves as the beacons of living culture. If life is essentially gesture, it is nowhere more concentratedly so than in theatre.

CHAPTER TWO

LABOUR AND WRITING

(An essay written under the pseudonym Frank Shynnagh, published in *Practice and Interpretation* 3, no. 4 [2018], published in Rostov-on-Don, Russia.)

The ninety years Fred grew up mythologizing himself have snuck up on him; childhood chums, we took the long path together, and here I am, hardly more than a Medicaid bum, hanging out in the same sleepy Midwest while Fred continues to slurp up the world, a bit of Russia now, an annual feed from the chaotic sunshine of Nigeria, and only rarely an hour or two for this stay-at-home. I honour him. That's what I do. When he's in town, I buy him a drink, check his pulse, and ask him what he's writing. It's always new, it's always old – to me, because I know where he's coming from.

Live it, name it. In the recent *Downloading the Poetic Self* (2018), Fred rubbed both of our noses in the earliest poems – who knew he wrote “Fragments” when he was fourteen for a dad already suspecting he didn't know his son? A profusion of prepubertal fantasies – “Love a green frog, Princess” – to which, six years later as a grad student at Yale, young Will added the marble-hard “An Emphasis for Easter,” which, with unfriendliness, split open the seams of language. The intellectual background to this “Emphasis” was a snarling in language; what else could be graduate-school text work carried out alongside the Gortyn Law Code, Mallarmé's sonnets, and the Symbolist Movement in Britain?

Two books of poems – real books, real poems; contrast the later *Being Here* (2012) and *Poetry and Philosophy as Handlung; A Tactical Sequence* (at that time not yet published) – gave a rest point for the no longer totally juvenile, as the author settled in with *Mosaic* (1959) and *A Wedge of Words* (1963), the romantic effervescing through the historical daily; some skill but little sweat on the wrist. A start.

As was *Intelligible Beauty in Aesthetic Thought* (1958), written out of the same life world as these early poems. The platform across which Plato and Plotinus thought their lives into the noosphere lay down as charmed as Sir Walter Raleigh's suit coat, before the intricate self-indulgence of Western European aesthetics; that was a platform on which busily self-aware language was forever constructing itself.

I see two smiles on my buddy. In 1958 he opens the package from Niemeyer, publisher of *Intelligible Beauty in Aesthetic Thought*, and thinks this is truly mine, for the first time. Is this what it feels like to be an author, he self-questions, reading out of the dialogue he carries from Sartre's *Les Mots*. Then there's the phone call to State College, PA, letting him know that Marianne Moore has sponsored *Mosaic* for the Penn State Press. Tidy writing and tidy thinking about art ply a single water, and leave a smile as indelible as a cat's. And as quiet, for the chap is that; cool as water, timid and bold. A loser and a survivor. Little expecting what benchmark experiences he is submitting to, in a long life of trying to get defined.

Launched into the noosphere of the schools – the high-culture pulse of a Yale creamy with European-refugee wisdom and the virtual buddyhood of fellow *poietai* – Will longed for a working relation with other voices, from his own and from within the verbal continuum. A seminal moment in outreach must have been the professional luck of meeting William Arrowsmith as a colleague in classics at the University of Texas, 1962. With Arrowsmith, Will visited Harry Ransom, regal rex of the University of Texas, in sweeping marble halls; the two scholar writers marched out an hour later as editors of the radiant and culture-changing classical journal *Arion*. Will sniffed the fresh Texan winter Renaissance.

In 1965, the editing of *Hereditas: Seven Essays on the Modern Experience of the Classical* glued Will's octopoid mind to fellow tipplers at the "classical tradition" spring, and in doing so doubtless nailed to the inner wall a poster of the classical, the original, the commitment demon he invokes today as he feels his centre of gravity slip to the Mercator right. (Have ye travelled the silk roads yet, ye classicists?)

From the get go, translation seemed to Will one way of acting out a life partly composed of global language, and the vast undercurrents of the Hellenic tradition swept him up anew from the ankles, as it had done so many years before in Greece when a poet like Seferis had come before him with the intricate powers of Sophocles. The tempestuous Byzantium of

Basil the Bulgarkiller, high medieval gypsy legend, sprang like Pierian fountains out of this kid translator in a motel in Iowa City. To this – Will now writing out of the faculty matrix of the University of Iowa – *Metaphrasis* (1965) added itself on a populist whim; Will's ultra-diverse paean to the flexibility of imagined English. The platform was readied for what in fact built itself onto it; a life in many worlds of language, a life guided by the recurring absolutions of form, and ultimately – bended knees, by golly? – by news of another that enables language without being them.

Net spread wide, ears open, Will followed whatever voices spoke with him. You write a dissertation in 1955 on Victor Cousin and his versions of Plato – a first stuffing of the thought mattress with Eurocentric reference points – and it hooks into corresponding mindsets; fellow but regional bricklayers of the micro-texture of the edifice of scholarship; that surging architectural bubble the elite have in the West been inflating since the *Etymologiae* of Isidore (AD 510), or should we say Apollodorus's compendium of ancient mythological lore (first to second centuries AD)? You make regional access at the edge of your own compendium, knowing China as a collective voice in which answering incisions into the knowledge body doubtless lurk. It is those answering incisions, the collective darkness of the whole scholarly enterprise, global and incremental, which takes Will's young cap and makes him fly.

It is the largeness to which he tries out testifying language in *Flumen Historicum* (1965), an onseaming of the global concern for the relation of knowledge to beauty. It will be only whiffing distance from here to 1993, *Literature as Sheltering the Human*, and the introduction of the fictive character Hentscher-Dompal, whose dream is to have read all that has been written, at the crux moment of death, the supreme moment of equalization.

Setting ever wider preliminaries for his flight into a life, Will opens as widely as imagination – no *techne* here – permits, into the life that the mind appropriates to itself as its fodder thickens. (The more you know the more you have to build more knowledge on.) On which wings Will let travel itself guide the finesse of classics meeting the big world; wings soaring on Fermor's *Mani* (1958) or Henry Miller's *Colossus of Maroussi* (1941). With this Will, we allow ourselves the intricacies of lived history: chiselled architraves, Victrolas playing in the blazing Maniote sun, capers on Rheneia, the island of the Dead. Will responds to such travel and travel in the mind with *From a Year in Greece* (1967), sewing his cloak tightly to the whole body of the Hellenic experience, Homer to Seferis, Monemvasia to

Stamboul, an alliance he will latterly rethink, as knowledge destiny keeps putting both Asia and the Silk Road in his face.

Literature Inside Out (1966) opens a way in through popular psychoanalysis and *Kulturkritik*, to walk literature directly into the caloric life places where it is made. Two late sixties brews – *Archilochos* (1969) and *Herondas* (1972) – prove how rampantly Will sticks with his Hellenism and optimistic noetic, even as the gates of the American city are being shaken by conflictual tumult. His soul is with the armies of the night – he refuses to carry on academic work, during the hot Iowa spring of '67; he lashes himself over the flanks of war – and yet the frame, into which he aspires to place this passion, is the flame of continuity with death that life gives us, and the life we give to death. Scholarship is the intergenerational speech of the ancestral. Poetry and scholarship seem, in this cooking mind, to be simply the mirror thinkings of one another.

Unhistorical, unmoral, self-centred; Will can only barely escape the stamp of historicity: the sequence that led from the pastoral Midwest of the early '30s, through the suckering in bludgeon of Hitlerian world politics, to the genitalia of wrecked marriage, into a '60s that seemed to let it all hang loose, the fury, the wreckage, the insanity of governance; escape he does, by the skin of his narrow ass, into a personal '70s in which text accrual proliferates, and the limits of social-marital control crumble from ceiling to floor.

From within, worldly time-things like children's births and marital playgrounds swim through the Will brain like fish in an aquarium. He is there among them, from time to time being their turmoil, at other times their observer. To himself he wonders at his monstrosity, the sectioning off of a writing testimony from a personal life in which he breaks faith, crashes into lives, self-exalts and thinks none the less of himself. *Brandy in the Snow* (1972) heralds the break out into a surrealism which dines on the unrealities of a culture no longer sure how to caption itself – a culture which since the early '60s had been one of wars, murders, greenings – and which finds itself in Will coming out through such apertures:

I hacked your face away
From a portal of burst stone.
It freed itself into a gull
Which wheeled desperately over Buda.
In the middle of the afternoon you became a god.

Praying to the god I stubbed
 My sharp knees.
 They fell apart like twigs.
 Children collected them in baskets and when
 I rose
 They sold me for ten forints
 As used furniture

When you came back,
 Testing the place I was
 You sat down.
 Your handsome wings fell apart.
 We were dust on the floor.

In worlds like these, the crookedly maturing Will finds himself registering anomalies and distortions. He will let the angular, often distressed, out through many corners of the '70s, a time of divorce for him from the comforts of what was still, during the Texan Renaissance, the mind life of studious classicism.

You too will rest
 Somewhere – he is pointing – over the bony ear of the mountain
 Where it seems cocked at the sky

Nothing, he remembers, ruins the sky like a hearing,
 Like the dark black of the ear
 Floating in the endless heavens ...

Will was squeezing this evanescent from an inner repertoire increasingly doughty about naming the growing world of the mind. One of the pressures, from which Will was moving literary historical materials, was at the centre of *The Fact of Literature* (1973).

That book churned from Will's lifelong conviction that literature targets, enflames, and displays fact; the premise for Will's always snudgy reservations about *poésie* or the Romantic Movements, which he valued as gnosis but saw as incomplete without the sciences that would harden them. Wholism of the literary body is the condition Will himself targets in an effort to consider the workworld with such "poems as the above live in." We touched lightly on his earlier work with Palamas, *The King's Flute* (1967) and *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy* (1964), and on the Translation Workshop's production of *Metaphrasis*; and in that same productive year of 1973 Will joined a colleague in making English out of Theodor Adorno's *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* [*The Jargon of Authenticity*] (1973).

The literary work exists as a thrust toward completeness, and as a revelation, in its existence, of a totality of works behind – or should we say “around”? – it. This description is only the best we can do. It is not better than that. What it attempts to account for is the central perception of the wholeness of literature, and it is natural enough that such wholeness cannot in itself be analyzed ... This wholeness is not deduced from the experiences of a finite number of literary works, but accompanies that experience. (*The Fact of Literature*, 110–11)

Translation grows, in this time zone, from one of a variety of ways of letting language define us, to a maximally tangible step inside world culture. *The Knife in the Stone* (1973) is particularly involved with the way in which translation involves us in thinking the other. (Will gets intricate, carefully dragging the translator’s act into zones of philosophy: seeing translation, for example, as a third language which is conjured, a working condition in which intelligibility – the Word of theology? – is invoked to guarantee mutual intelligibility. The work Will translates is diverse, is many voices of his own, he might say, but is no way at odds with the interior voices of his imagination, which are entering space as his own poems during these years.) *Belphagor* (1977) presses these insights back into the existential, helping Will remind himself that stepping into the world in language is stepping into the world. Nothing about the orienting act of naming does not invoke the full metal armour of being here, now – in the omnivorous now. Such thinking as that of Kazantzakis in *The Saviors of God* (1927) smashes way into the present circle of thoughts, finding in careful language work the attention germane to belief; the belief we are creating god in our moves of language and thought. This reversal of the theific, in Will’s theory of the making of god, lies comfortably beside his youthful preoccupations with the construction of selfhood out of consciousness.

Rounding up Will’s themes of thought and imagination inevitably rips away all the veils shrouding the poetic. *Poieo*, the Greek *making*-word that slips like a knife through all the glories of the imagination, and links the poem on the page – the doing and making poem that stamps itself like cuneiform on the ingenu eyelids of “modern man” – straight back into the Neolithic movement of hand and touch. The poem is a tough fist object working its way through the clay of time. Nowhere does it set fire to itself as insouciantly as in Will’s *Guatemala* (1973):

If the brick had run out.
Stone is too ardent to resemble his hand.

Wears a glove of stone.
 The temple droops like a glove on the hand.
 Though the brick had run out
 Mortar swelling the glove came to silence.

If the brick had run out.
 Poptun is trailing its one red flower
 Spills its flower like a temple of bleeding.
 The temple rises to sing in its bleeding
 Gloves its anger in a ring of leather.
 If the brick had run out.

The poem aims to be about the length of the breath which ferries it. There is nothing, in this kind of performance for oneself, which cannot be congruent with the scholarship of world equality. (Scholarship, we are trying to say, is a standing inside of what is, and at every step a training for saying the poetry in what is.) Can I say that we move, in such poetry, a Jack in the Boots stride forwards from the testimonial poetry of *Mosaic* or *A Wedge of Words*? (Remember the way back to the “Naming World” in *Mosaic*?)

Not every poem is born from
 Troy’s destruction or Laura’s smile.
 This one was not.

Once and a while
 I think of my losses.
 They are my plot.

How a bird flew
 Away, or a friend came,
 While I was gone.

How when I write
 A poem
 I have to be alone.

How a man’s eyes are shaped
 So that he only sees
 Ninety degrees.

How I am forced to be
 Here in this chair
 Not over there.

When I assemble such
 Proofs of a fallen state
 I must take pause.

I ask at every door
 How a man goes about
 Winning back loss.

I have an answer now.
 Into the naming world
 Of poetry

Write all the turning world
 You failed to hear
 You failed to see.

See how the line tightens and the being-here takes fire between 1963 and 1973? Is Will catching fire with his world – Vietnam, the Kennedy and MLK killings, urban warfare? – or is he just learning to read the ferocity of the given, as he breaks and rebreaches the world of his heart? One could say the latter, noting, just around the corner from *Guatemala* (1973), a scholastic thought-thing called *The Generic Demands of Greek Literature* (1976). Nothing arid sticks to these texts, which are spooned right out of the living cup of Solon, as he mocks his own pretensions to statesmanship, of Archilochos, as he pretend-swaggers, on the other end of what is only a distich, not a stick, or of Sappho as she measures desire spatially, pulsing in the air of what she loves. It is as though Will is cooking poetic empathy at every point, in the hubbub of serving universities with his “love of knowledge.” The tension – how to see life steadily and see life whole – breaks in the course of tracking a culture in disaggregation, and by the time of the *Epics of America* (1977) we are ready to see the wry curdling into the macabre.

Starlight in the American Stable

Red stables filled with whole horses.
 A leather window taped to prairie.
 He picks up a rock, holds it
 Coldly against the moon.
 Takes a knife, peels off the shell.
 Cuts back into naked
 Central rock.
 Starlight, dead in the rock.
 He holds a jar,

Pours in starlight,
 Puts the light back in the rock.
 He holds a jar,
 Pours in starlight,
 Puts the light back in the rock,
 Closes the rock. Closes the red stable
 Filled with whole horses.
 Takes a knife, peels
 Horses back. He pours light
 Softly under the peel,
 Watches the manes glow.
 Then he closes the horses.
 He closes the red stables.
 Everything is surface.

Fitting the poem to its time is a tricky business, but justifies itself in small clues. Go back to “Naming World” in the early ’60s. Track its maker. He and his wife sit it out in Austin, consumed by poetries and languages, and still at the front end of forming their value systems. (His own will unravel like wool in a kitten’s claws, at the prying of lust, and, far from a milieu like *Me Too*, which anxiously evaluates its chances of real change, he will live out male pre-war values with an only-child abandon, happy if happy.) He falls for the most formative piece American classrooms have given him, and the fragile house of value-cards comes tumbling; with it, respectability comforts but not, he notes, whatever gift he has for making language curative. A plunge into the darkness of language which is laughing at itself? Odd territories.

Horses

Horses block the way. Here, over here.
 Nothing budes. Manes and tails wave.
 He goes around them. Damnable horses.
 Here horsey come. He slaps the horse
 Passing its withers. Auction this baby.
 Horses scatter. Here dapple, here roan.
 Horses vanish. He sells a horse,
 Buys horses to sell: bets on horses.
 He wins, seven horses. He pens them,
 Runs looking for halters. They break,
 Easily, reach the highway. He catches
 All but one. It flees. He cries
 Here horsey. No luck. Horsey is gone.
 Horsey goes wild. He shoots horsey.
 Here horsey, he says to it, lie at my feet.

Horsey kneels before him. A game?
 He pats horsey. Nothing to fear.
 Angels take horsey covered with feathers.
 He pats horsey! Withers! Horsey
 Sinks to the ground. A big smile grows.
 Horsey laughs at himself. I took that
 Seriously? His flank hurts though.
 He looks at it closely. It really hurts.
 Then he lies down softly. He stretches
 One leg at a time. He dozes.
 Horsey, am I really horsey?
 He puts his head down. Here
 Horsey he says to himself
 Here horsey here horsey horsey.
 And then he dies.

The value grey zones our Freddy is plying are not macabre, and are not without tentacles reaching as far back as “Naming World” (1963), which in its way is also about loss; loss assessed fifteen years later in a life ever better able to hear St. Paul talk about the “wasting of the body.”

The same maturing sense of fall in things carries on into the prose and poetry of the author’s post-Vietnam late ’70s and early ’80s. There is not only more hurting of animals, the obverse of what the author can endure, and hence his argumentum with time, but the thrillology of thought in its time, *The Fall and the Gods* (1988–91). What does he think about? What kind of hurting is tolerable to him? What kind of hurting, of all that he loves, must he tolerate in order to feel on top of things – his formula for being where the thought of not being is excluded.

The Fall and the Gods is an autobiography of the mind, in its sensuous setting. *A Portrait of John* (1990; volume two of the trilogy) interweaves poetry-making with lovemaking, splicing divine names, rinsing settings with legs, and beards with couplets, until, leaning as in his various autobiographies on the Narcissus of the Eye, Mr. John settles for handing you from one sight to another, New Mexico to Querétaro, Chobham to Urbana.

This guy is a decadent low flyer, but a visionary, who flows through landscapes of hurt and beauty. One aspect of this mouth is an addiction to care in language and logic, and one would say in the twinned work those two virtues carry this out. He is convinced that good thinking and good imagining invite one another; the logical positivism of vision is no anomaly

to this thinker, for whom order, if often hidden, crowds the universe with attention. Ryle and Ayer open windows onto a being world not unfriendly to metaphor or self-projection. For *Founding the Lasting* (1991), the third volume of the trilogy, it is obvious, if requiring a meticulous working, that value, thinking, and imagination thrive on one another, and that “the lasting” will be the name of the game of disciplined imaginative attention.

Criticism is in some respects a discovery about itself – about, say, the maker of criticism, even while he tries to sidestep his own glance. (The critic can really not prove himself to be an invisible body at the source of his work, as the philosopher has to hope to be.) The self-reflective dimension of criticism is, of course, partly identical with that dimension of philosophical inquiry, in which Being is disclosed to itself by the philosophical proposition. In criticism as in philosophy, Being is induced to return to itself more adequately stated, through the expression of itself in propositions and responses. But in criticism, the thinker’s body is present as a point of reference – indispensably, of course, because that body is the point at which the critic realizes his affiliation with the bodylessness of literature or another art.

The thrust of argument, here, will construct itself in later work like *Being Here* (2012) and *Daily Life* (2018), volume nine of *Inside Freedom and History*. In the perspective of those texts the tag of materiality clings precedingly to every act in the world, and guarantees to consciousness a condition of “being anticipated,” as well as, to writing in consciousness, a continual limitation to where it comes from. This tagline of bodylessness will inevitably have tracked Will’s course through language and history, must at times, as in *The Sliced Dog* or *Entering the Open Hole*, have found in physical drag the exemplary expression of the loss in a time: in this case the ’80s – when breakup was the colour of daily life.

Bare realia piled in a bare room
 He senses that there is a corner in existence
 And that it is off to the side
 And that by leaning to the side
 And that by peering over into it ...
 Hours later he sleeps in that place

The side, which is the part of our sensorium we can barely control, makes itself into a common reminder, in Will’s poems, of what is incremental, not foregrounded. A drag, as in the *Side Poems* (232–4; *Downloading the Poetic Self*, 2018). What else is more surprised than the side to find itself the provocation of a historical right?

In the morning my arm was terribly swollen. I said nothing to mother, just went down to breakfast. They saw me lifting the weight, from my lap to the table. They saw the pressure against my cotton shirt. At first they paid no attention. Then, one by one, they approached and touched the arm. It hurt me terribly. But something impelled me. I longed to be touched. I longed to be welcomed. I longed to be included in their discovery of my pain.

It is not simply that the body we all share makes its obstructive will clear that the teller of this tale wishes to share in the common understanding of the way the body “works.” The impertinence, of this kind of existential voyeurism, is the driver for the distinctive attention Will devotes to existential conditions like sideness. He prides himself on standing at the angle where direct statement is consciously obstructing itself. It is there, he is convinced, that being discloses itself. It is in this kind of thinking-stance that Will finds himself returning again and again to the job translation does.

Common understandings – what we used to call common sense in the Middle Ages – is the basis of what Will calls “the third language,” that sustains and makes translation possible. (The word, of orthodox Christian theology, supports the following explanatory structures, fleshing out the sense that for two textualities to share a meaning, to meet in translation, is a grounded example of the way intelligibility keeps trumping and further growing itself.) Will’s earlier examples of translation from Palamas or in the *Metaphrasis* anthology exemplify objective verbal intelligence clarifying itself incrementally.

The “clarification” process, which is at stake here, takes muffled revenge on flat being in a trio of prose-poem texts which cluster around each other in the early ’90s.

In late afternoon and early evening the beach goes on darkening so slowly and richly it takes you over, possesses you. In summers the tide is just gaining strength in the course of this gradual twilight; a slow background rhythm increasing its intensity as the light loses force. Birds move into the space left between these alternating pressures. Gulls and hawks coast noiselessly over. Under them curlews prink along the thin skin of the delicate waves, plucking out of them tastes too fine and juicy for us to imagine. The evening fades off into scenes like this, against which eventually you close your eyes, and tent, into the absolute darkness of inner night. The world rolls on through that stillness. In the earliest morning light you can find the sea in retreat, and walk barefooted down through the memory of waves, and pick up things the night has abandoned. A beautiful death has left these ornamental lives in the sand. By now the receding ocean is grey and spitting, as though angry to be leaving the shore. But the drying sand is at peace with

its menagerie of corals, etched sand dollars, pink grey crabs, brown rubber kelp, fish skulls, an occasional twitching lobster. You walk through them like one of them, and before long you are only your shadow trailing invisible through the fog ...

Making literature, being in literature, these conditions are defining for the person of our moment, who is, in our wild profusion of “literate self-memorials” – for what else is the digital revolution? – swamped by what the world says, and composed by what he says. In the early ’90s, Will makes an effort in two books – *Literature as Sheltering the Human* (1993) and *Singing with Whitman’s Thrush* (1993) – to totalize in mind the language-world experience, as it achieves its most gluttonous energy, in the world of “literature.” The Faustian, in this effort to remain equal to the literary verbo-sphere, is enshrined in the essay “Hatred, Love, and Literary Study” in *Literature as Sheltering the Human*.

Professor Hentscher-Dompal, in the tale we follow, was an oddball outsider with a Faustian passion to consume all of literature “up to his moment,” to be read up to date, so to speak, so that in a privileged instant he could implode a condition of totality. Why? Why was this kind of equality with what one studies to be seen as a kind of personal consummation? Reference Faust again, the figure for whom unlimited knowledge boiled down to infinite power – an acquisition for which it is worth selling your soul to the Devil. Yet Hentscher-Dompal was unable to realize his identity with the whole Body of Literature, the Dame in whom his life practice taught him salvation lay:

The agonizing defeat of this scheme – to consume all of literature – took place at a specific instant, under specific conditions. Sometime on the night of April 19, 1972, Professor Dompal closed toward his vision. He had read almost everything, inwardly, thoroughly, from the standpoint of its own coming to being. He had gone beyond himself in every direction. He had anticipated even the killer-clause, frankly putting to himself, and over the course of years, the problem of time. No sooner would he finish his total reading than someone else would publish a significant new novel, a new poem, would break the jelly, and the known body of literature would dissolve. This too he had anticipated. Union, he had convinced himself, was union, simple and enough, and by inner definition limited to the known at a particular instant.

Meeting and union took place – to judge from the final entries Dompal left us, from that cruel Walpurgisnacht. The face of subsumption, Dompal's, stared into "all man's imaginative life," and was engulfed by it.

The living of literature at one's par, as the narrator explains earlier in the same essay, is foredoomed because the body of literature has always grown up behind and around us, even as we try to scope its progress. We inhabit a moving loop belt; when we look back over our shoulders we catch a glimpse of the past just becoming the future out beyond us. The sense of labour engendered here is in one aspect Sisyphean – culture and its products are no sooner participated in than they reconstitute themselves as our defining horizon – yet the freshness reassured in us, by the energies of history allowing us into it, is vivid, and musters Will's upcoming concerns, at just that moment in the early 2000s, with labour on the cultural landscape.

Already in *Big Rig Souls* (1991) Will had listened as empathetically as possible to fellow labourers – transport in goods, transport in words – in truck stops and motel parking lots, from whom he valued the dynamic of a culture industry seemingly driven from its position in history. ("May they realize what kind of second nature cowboys they are! Only then can they become the long awaited New Person, hardened but passionate, historically formed but not simply a product of history.") From that romantic stance, Will's inner sociology of labour, into which he fed his own self-awareness as a feeder through language, opened out into panoramas of account: *Social Reflections on Work* (2002) and *Field Research in Three North American Agricultural Communities* (2002), in both of which works Will tinkers hard with the relations between physical and mental labour.

In extending my own repertoire, from the academic/writer into a modest grasp of other labor ways, I should be extending my own capacity to labor. I should, at the same time, be toughening my sense of the stuff-moving labor the mind carries out, I should, whether or not I can, be creating myself as a kind of living bridge between pragma (deed; act) and dianoia (thought).

The maieutic of which Hentscher-Dompal seems to fancy himself capable breeds precisely the sense of the globality of labour Will is prying at here. Reaching beyond the geo-economy of Iowa, Will (and his friend Rick Molz) diversify a palette of models: bananas, corn, and cheese become the mottos of a pan-North American nusus to enter history through labour.

The Male's Midlife Rite of Passage (2006) transfers the nusus of fictive labour, which in one sense explains Will's entire life workload, into a blend of novel fiction and social psychology. Will himself plays the palpable role

of narrator for the three long fictions that compose this trilogy. In each instance he places his surrogate fictionizer *dans une situation*. In *Adventure in Algiers*, Charles Morot is from line one caught up in a bank heist and kidnapping in downtown Algiers; from that moment until the end of the tale, in and out of every possible discomfort, suffering, and romantic éclat, Charles is thrown together with the stately Frenchwoman with whom, as fate has it, he had from the first moment shared captivity by the Jihadists. In other words, the Charles we know is from the get go totally swept into history, history and the desert of southern Algeria. His travail, you might say, is a birthing, like the processes of organized labour in field or factory.

The Poppy Web takes its launch from a beach in the Peloponnesus, where an American professor, Hayes Straglund, is stretched out along the shore, enjoying the total freedom of a summer break. Suddenly he is woken by a heroin trading ship that knocks him out cold and transports him, trussed and kidnapped, to their hangout and distribution point in Bulgaria. Death is on the horizon, but what is pertinent here is the suddenness with which the midlife male is snatched up into history; Charles Morot and Hayes Straglund enact the history that has made them part of it.

In the third volume, *The Disparition*, Alfred (and his wife Ideokuta) return from an outing at the beach to find his laptop gone, stolen, loaded with the extensive files he had been researching on African culture. The theft is a shock. The moment is rivetingly historical, the projection into history, on the part of Alfred and his wife, so total that the immediately following international existential thrill search, for the computer and its own history, seems to occupy only the time breath of its initial occurrence. History labours with its products, and fictions are simply footnotes on that genetic.

That given, it is no surprise that Will peppers his opus with gestures of fiction. It appears that when he freed those gestures, in another language, he gave birth to historical landscapes manufactured from dream. In *Miroirs d'éternité: une saison au sahel* (2003) he builds out the possibilities – what else are the products of labour? – of a trip in the mind through the landscape of a country, Mauritania, of which the narrator had always presumed the maximum in transformative surprise. He was to find the virgin births of the imaginary throughout this panorama of jungle priests, prophets of sacrifice, and a marabout emerging covered with wisdom from a forty-day season of self-maceration.

The inner panorama of this trip through an invented (and experienced) land culminates in a mass of the minerals, in which a certain jungle priest, Darrin, helps the narrator and his friends to taste the earth's hungriness to be transformed into the sacrifice of our mouths and hearts. The miraculously fertile landscape, over which the narrator passes, is a journey to heal – *divorce, divorce* – and reshape.

In both *The Male's Midlife Rite of Passage* and *Miroirs*, a narrator sets forth into the trick-filled maieutic of being born, born into an historical condition within which, bracketed though it is by consecrated language, is what we indeed move through, more or less compellingly, as we take sledgehammers of language to our emotions.

The press of these fictive sorties can be as ideational as *Miroirs* or as concrete as Charles Morot in the midst of a kidnapping, but the common theme of the generative in labour binds them. (Historicity and generation shape themselves increasingly, in Will's thought at the end of the millennium, into leitmotifs for advancing awareness.)

One might say the same of the kind of mystery story the narrator creates in *The Concept of the Moment* (2008) or in *Frederic Will's Short Fiction* (2009). The former of these two books suggests the intersection point between Will as fabulist and Will as negotiator in philosophical issues. A tangled tale of alternate loves, *disparitions*, and transgendered self-overwhelmings pushes Will's global fiction over edge after edge. We might seem in another country from the narratives of labouring through we scoped above, and yet we are in a transformative universe so potentially benign that, from within it, it is given the powers to evolve, which we would in everyday life expect to have to earn.

Frank, the narrator of *The Concept of the Moment*, meets an old friend; the two of them treat themselves to lunch in "an old-fashioned Aussie pub." Charlie, a long-haul lorry driver, is a man of long spaces and private thoughts, and he makes clear, as the two guys settle to talk life, that he is dancing along certain edges of life. "I've gone underground," he says, then adds that "you can't see that part of me. Tryin to break from weight. Tryin to find an opening."

A few minutes later, Charlie unpacks a little further. "I thought of sheddin myself. All it requires is a detail or two; eatin ever day til you're full, then not another mouthful ... feeling all the time you're sheddin, comin free of

flesh ... I'm tryin to get out of here alive." The conversation is fateful, leading into the climax of the story. The news from Charlie's secretary, "heart failure in the gym," is clarified by a posthumous note found in Charlie's office:

Watch for the moment when your entire life gathers around you. When you can feel all of it on every side of you, in every cell. Then snap your life off, everything implicit, everything complete. Snap it off how? Break its history. Give it no place to go. Look over your shoulder so fully, with all of your life in your glance, that you are only a seeing, that there is nothing else to be seen. Then you'll see nothing just appearing over your shoulder. None of you will be there for you to see. You'll be all in the seeing. That will be it.

Charlie had of course not died, nor had he not died. He had become what, being what he is, he could not fail to become. The point is that being here is in and of itself self-transcending. And why? The book *Being Here* (2012) is a sketchbook of the conditions under which we live in the moment. That moment is a condition in which things have not yet been named, but in which they are on the brink of becoming their names, a manifestation in which they begin their daily work of anticipating us.

He has tried in every way to dominate
One unprotected object, a coat
That looks like a corpse.

He addresses that oddity
Which has none of the sobriety of a commodity.

Did he glimpse the thing without the name,
Before someone had time to name it?

This fertile moment, in which we are co-present to the things of the world, which are simply about to assume their names, is nailed again and again in Will's work. See "Optical Illusions" in *Time, Accounts, and Surplus Meaning* (2011), which confronts the viewer with a momentarily undefinable object in the distance up the road, an object which could be either a coat or a corpse. The question is raised, which is it? The question isolates a grey zone for the perceiver in which the answer is that the bifurcated object could be either a coat or a corpse.

Its *attente* of a naming is the moment of its existence in which it compels us; it is language on the cusp, and in its primordial awesomeness it heralds that upcoming condition in which, perhaps but a few seconds later, language

will indeed govern us, take priority over us. Driven by language, we are, as *Being Here* highlights, never masters even of our own sensorium:

Philosophers are as bad as Tupus
 When it comes to edging the world.
 They go linearly through the mess and then around the outside
 And if they are theologians they also go back far enough to where
 They can draw a line across the beginning.
 But that's a trick ordinary language philosophers

Don't even try. They'll take this sentence, which has no beginning or end,
 And carve it into little pieces.
 They'll say beyond this is God

Or how about a door frame for separating?
 Tupus finds himself all over the issue
 And is redolent with building blocks
 Like shroud or sor7u that can't be undermined.

Underlying these sallies into “philosophy” there lies a steady interest in the *ways available to us* for perceiving and naming the world. Maker of poems, maker of ideas about how and why we make poems, Will breaks a path into contemporary creative consciousness in *The Long Poem in the Age of Twitter* (2011). (The word *twitter* was barely assuming its robust media/political dimension at the time of Will's book; for him, *twitter* simply connoted staccato, frivolous, low-concentration gibberish.)

The poems in this new fractured series seemed to come from somewhere in the fashion by which ordinary life is constructed, and undoubtedly reflected the new insights digitization was lending to consciousness; forcing the mind to invent moment by moment, and to rely ever less on phrasal or conceptual continuity. A confluence of this new sensibility, which flooded consciousness in literature from the mid-twentieth century on, with (in Will's case) the awareness provided by poets he valued – Olson, Oppen – led to his making what was new to him:

The dark mediate
 Lip of frozen energy
 Tumbles into Scottsdale.

They pick it in pieces
 Away from the frame of the tire.
 Dripping retreads.

The furious scholar
 Touching his brow like a migraine
 Formulates the azimuth;

Trenches, barking from the sky,
 Dictate his path.
 At the request for laudanum

– He takes it in snuffpicks –
 The old soldiers' home
 Turns spindly and miraculous.

And a crackerbox of zoophytes,
 Tracking the lonely shore,
 Makes its way into a boxcar.

Now there's a long trauma
 Of characterless movements
 To the silt edge of the shore.

A dripping teacup
 Of semen samples
 A lone bodice –

Is it Martha Stewart's?
 Hackneyed but zipper tight
 Pees on the San Bernardino

Freeway. Too many Mexican
 Zoophytes, zoophytes
 Fighting a stiff north.

The parameters of Will's writing are wide, and I have stressed a fairly narrow pathway through the profusion; the pathway that runs through poetry, fiction, and the thinking, about both those acts, which Will calls *philosophy*. Another theme of his writing is the confession box: *A Portrait of John* (1990), *Flesh and the Color of Love* (2002), *The Concept of the Moment* (2008). Will's fiction and poetry constantly border corporeal romance, sexual self-confession, the complex dance of fidelity and longing; there is a triad of small prose poem volumes – *Recoveries*, *Trips of the Psyche*, and *Textures, Spaces, Wonders* (all published in 1993) – which are among Will's most polished work; there are travel writings – *Frederic Will's Travel Writings (1957–2007)* (2008) – and *Frederic Will's Short*