English & Cultural Studies 1A03: Study Notes

Dr. David L. Clark

(updated 22 Sept 2016)

Scene from Angels in America (directed by Mike Nichols, 2003), adapted from Tony Kushner's play of the same name.

Donald Justice, "The Wall" (1960)

Last evening we looked at both Donald Justice's poem, "The Wall," and Henri Cole's poem, "Torso." These poems are posted in a single document posted on the coursepage on Avenue.

Let me say a few more things about "The Wall" to help you understand how the poem works. (See poem below, along with some beautiful paintings that depict the "same" scene that Justice conjures up in his poem . . . but then rewrites).

Here are some points and questions to consider:

1. Every text has a context, indeed, many contexts. That's a kind of "law of literature," i.e. a principle that applies to all kinds of literature, including the poems and shorter fictions that are the focus of this course. **Contexts** are already existing cultural and literary settings or circumstances that inform, activate, and irrigate a text–a poem like "The Wall," for example. But don't forget this: poems, like all literary

texts, are in a robust relationship with their informing contexts, actively negotiating with those contexts, in dialogue with them, rewriting them, over-writing them, adapting them, sometimes almost beyond recognition. Contexts inform texts. But texts refashion contexts. The "law" should then more accurately read: Every literary text has many contexts; and every literary text wrestles with those contexts. The relationship between text and its context goes both ways and is a major source of the endless source of energy coiled up in a poem like "The Wall."

2. Two major contexts inform "The Wall." They are not the only two, but they are a helpful place to begin:

i) The biblical story of "The Fall of Man." Many world religions, perhaps all of them, contain "origin stories," i.e., richly suggestive accounts of where human beings first came from, what it was like at the beginning of humankind, and thus how on earth we came to live in the dangerous, complicated, mortal, sorrowful, and beautiful world that we do now. Origins stories say a great deal about the cultures in which they are important. They can be central to how we think of ourselves. They resonate with us and form a deep source of inspiration for thinkers and the faithful, poets and painters, because they speak to such elemental questions: Where do I come from? What is home? Why did everything change? What schools us into wanting things to be like we imagine they once were? "Once upon a time" is how many of these stories about the beginning *begin*, evoking a distant past that nevertheless has a strangely haunting pull on our lives. In the Book of Genesis, we are told, Adam and Eve lived happily in Eden, a paradise, a protected place of innocent joy. They were told by God not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But they did anyways, and for that offence they were cast out of Eden into the world. Stern angels guarded the gate back into Eden, forbidding Adam and Eve and all of their descendants from every going back. This story has resonated with thinkers and artists for many centuries. It has been the subject of many famous paintings, two of which I have included below. Why do you think this story fascinates artists? What is it that attracts them? Why is it an endlessly fruitful source of interpretation, contemplation, and recreation?

--A still from my favourite film, Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987) (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, "The Sky/Heaven Over Berlin")

Donald Justice returns to the story of the "Fall of Man" but he rewrites it in very significant ways. Sussing out how he rewrites the story, tracing the ways in which he puts the resources of poetry and language to use in rewriting that story, is a key to understanding the poem and engaging with it. Write out for yourself how the story unfolded so compactly in "The Wall" is different from the one told in the Book of Genesis. List tens ways in which that story is told differently, marking in each case not only that Justice rewrites the story but also, and more important, how he rewrites it, how he marshals the language of poetry to accomplish that task.

In the biblical story and in many of the subsequent reflections on it, the moment that Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and commit the crime for which they and all their descendants are punished is a deeply momentous event. As I said in class, the great 17th-century poet, John Milton, characterized that moment this way: *Earth felt the wound*, i.e., the crime shook the foundations of the world. (Milton wrote that phrase in a long poem entitled *Paradise Lost*. Justice's poem has been characterized as a poem that condenses Milton's 10,000 line poem into 14 lines!) But in this poem, we barely notice the crime. The poem scrupulously under-emphasizes the very thing that the biblical story gives maximum emphasis. The poem seems hardly willing to marks the event; indeed, it avoids characterizing the event as a crime or offence of any sort. All we are told is that the fruit was tasteless, i.e., unimpressive, just like the great crime its consumption supposedly signifies. –Very odd. Why does Justice rewrite the biblical story in this key way? And how does that change effectively rewrite the entire story of the "Fall of Man"? In this Garden of Eden did a crime actually take place? Perhaps the crime is not one that the inhabitants committed . . . but someone else. Justice minimizes the significance of the crime that is the lynchpin of the biblical story in order to give emphasis to another problem, a problem with Eden itself as

a place of immobilized perfection. It is not "they" and "she," the inhabitants of Eden that are the cause of the problem but the angels, those creatures who threaten the inhabitants with their "unfurled wings."

In the biblical story, Eve is said to be the source of the fall of humankind and the loss of Eden. She is often characterized as the temptress who persuades Adam to commit the crime with her. But in Justice's poem, the character identified as the woman is very different. –Not the temptress but the one who wakes everyone up. How so? Why? Look at the poem's fine-grained details, for it is in those small details that a great deal is to be found. For example, note that the woman is the only inhabitant of Eden who is identified. The poem says there are others, but doesn't say, for example, that there is the man, as we might expect, given the original story. Why? And again, to what effect?

In "The Wall," the woman is the dreamer; she has a dream, she possesses the power of imagination to see things as they really are rather than as she has been repeatedly told they are. (Remember how the last lines tell us that she and the others in Eden were told and told what to do, how to behave. By repeating that sentiment, it is as if the poem is scolding the inhabitants of Eden.) In her dream, the dream that wakes her up, she sees a lion sharpening its claw. As I said in class, that is a metaphor, i.e., a richly suggestive turn in language that slows us down in order to invite comparisons, reflection and discussion. What does this metaphor mean? In other words, what is the range of possible meanings of the image of a lion sharpening its claw? What does that vivid image stand for . . . and why would that wake the dreamer from her slumbers. In her dreams she sees Eden for what it actually is: a place of danger not safety. Why is it dangerous? What could be dangerous about a world where nothing ever changes?

The woman dreams. She dreams a dream that awakens her. To what is she awakened? How is the world in which she lives different from the one in which she had been living? Perhaps while she lived in Eden she had always been living in a kind of dream but the time has long since come to wake up. What seemed like a flawless place wasn't. The world into which she wakes is full of flaws and claws. But perhaps it is preferable to living in a world menaced by angels who hide the walls just as they hide their furled wings.

The woman dreams. The dream comes in the form of a metaphor. It is a little snippet of poetry. She writes a bit of poetry in this flawless place, poetry that is ominous, startling, and, most important, the kind of poetry that brings her to her senses. Poetry is not meant to soothe and quiet us, but to bring us to our senses. In this poem, the woman is the first poet. The poem is there to bring us to our senses.

The great American poet, Charles Bernstein, said this in a poem called "The Klupzy Girl:"

> Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference:
> it brings you to your senses.

That's a useful bit of poetry to remember going forward in this course. As Bernstein suggests here, poetry is designed to captivate you, slow you down, offer up a space of intense and rigorous discussion, thinking, and reflection, taking you abruptly away from the day-to-day. But its function is not to offer an

escape from the day-to-day but much rather a smarter return. Properly speaking, poetry's *effect* is to sharpen your mind, focus your concentration, encourage you to be aware, as never before, about the fine-grained details of the world around you: "it brings you to your senses." In what ways does each of the texts we explore work to bring you to your senses? And how, in each case, does it accomplish that waking work?

ii) The sonnet. Another important informing context for "The Wall" has to do with the kind of poem that it is. Justice chose to write "The Wall" in a particular form of poetry called a sonnet. We will return to the sonnet several times in subsequent lectures, but for now it helps to know that the sonnet is an ancient and honoured form of poetry, a highly and conspicuously structured form of poetry. Sonnets share certain features:

--they are 14 lines long;

--they are often characterized by their immediacy or directness, as if the speaker of the poem were sharing something intimate and urgent with us;

–they often have regular rhyme schemes;

–they fall into discernable movements, i.e., they often pose a problem or establish a scene, then there is a turn, and the poem shifts gears, takes a different tack, sometimes offering a resolution to the problem that it has just established, sometimes qualifying and complicating the problem it has just posed.

Not many contemporary poets write sonnets any more, which means that Justice's poem feels strangely old-fashioned. In its contemporary context, it feels a bit rule-bound, walled in. Why would Justice have chosen this difficult, highly scripted form of poetry for this poem?

Look carefully at "The Wall" to locate the features of the sonnet form that I have described here. Track how the last words in each verse or line rhyme with other last words. I've marked up the copy of the poem below so you can see this for yourself and can do this sort of analysis with other poems on the course. Poems very often work with sound patterns, including rhyme. The repetition of sounds is a source of pleasure; it also paces a poem, marking the time it takes to unfold; and it helps to knit the poem's parts together, forming patterns to contain its prodigious content. Not all poems are rhymed, as we will see on this course. But rhyming remains important; think of how almost all the lyrics of all of popular music are written in rhyme. But rhyme does more than give pleasure and does more than thread the various parts of a poem or lyric into a complex whole. Rhyme is also part of how a poem works. It signals shifts in the progress of a poem. Look carefully at the rhyme of "The Wall." Where does the rhyming pattern change? In the copy of the poem you see below, you can see both the repetitions and the changes in the rhyme. Sounds get repeated as the poem unfolds—not exactly repeated, but often very close. Note how the rhyme helps us see and hear how the poem falls into two large parts:

--Part 1 is made up of the first eight lines.

--Part 2 is made up of the last six lines.

Historically, many sonnets are organized in this way: the first eight lines set the scene, pose a problem, make a claim; the last six lines complicate matters. The poem changes gears and changes its rhyme scheme at line 7, the point at which the first part of the poem yields to the second part. That's the turning point in the poem. Turning points in poems are called a *volta*. What is happening at the point that the poem makes a turn, a change, important? As the rhyme changes, so does the poem. How so? What is happening in the poem that makes a rhyme change important and generative?

Rhyme is only one way in which a poem puts sound patterns to use. The repetition of words and phrases is another way. Look at the last several lines of the poem, tracing the repetition of certain words and phrases there. Why does Justice repeat himself at this moment in the poem? What is the cumulative effect of that repetition or pattern?

Nnedi Okorafor at Buffalo RiverWorks. Wings courtesy Shasti O'Leary Soudant (MFA '11).

As I said in class, the beginnings and the ends of literary texts, including poems, are always weighted and freighted with significance. Where and how a poem starts and how it concludes are important questions. "The Wall" is a great case in point. The last line is especially complex, as if the Justice were condensing a very great deal in the poem's last breath, concentrating in one place all of the complexities of the poem as a whole. What takes place in the last line of "The Wall"? The end of the poem describes the end of a certain time in the history of humankind. The ancient and honoured stories of that time characterize it as a moment of terrible sadness, loss, even horror–as you can see in the paintings below. But is that the case here? In the old stories, Eden is a place of flawless perfection. "The Wall" invites us to consider whether flawlessness is perfection. Do the inhabitants leave Eden in the same way as Adam and Eve appear to do in those paintings?

The word used to describe how a poem ends is ***closure***. That's a word I will use in subsequent lectures, so it seems good to raise it here with you. Closure a word that has certain meanings in conventional English. We say, for example, that a person grieving loss "seeks closure," seeks a way to bring something wildly uncontrollable to an end. In literary criticism, closure means something a bit different. Closure means how a poem ends or resolves itself. Another "law of literature" might be: Poems must draw from within themselves the resources for their own closure. In other words, a poem cannot simply and

passively stop. *It must actively bring itself to an end*. It plans for its end, so one of your tasks as a reader is to look for the ways in which it anticipates its own end and thus brings about its own conclusion. But one of the wonderful things about poems is that their resolutions or endings often raise as many questions as they answer. Closure marks the end of a poem, and it marks the culmination of its efforts along the way to bring itself to a conclusion; but the end of the poem also marks the beginning of interpretation. How does "The Wall" bring itself to this kind of ambiguous end? By rights the poem should end unhappily. But that doesn't accurately describe what is happening here. For many extraordinary artists and poets, and for the faithful, the "Fall of Man" and the expulsion from the garden of Eden are sorrowfully memorable events, etched into the memory of a culture. But in Justice's hands, things are much more ambiguous. Why?

One of the ways in which the end of "The Wall" leaves matters wonderfully open-ended is the use of *ambiguity*. Poets like Justice mine the English language for its richness, for the ways in which words, even ordinary words like "they" and "advanced" can, in certain contexts, have several competing meanings. The poem uses ambiguity to keep itself from being walled in to one meaning. Whose wings are "unfurled"? Who advances? Who are "they"? "They" can mean the angels: "they advance" *on* the inhabitants of Eden, threateningly. But the poem itself has prepared us for another possible meaning: "they" may be the inhabitants, who have been making "advances" all along, led by "she," the one who had a dream that suggested that Eden was dangerous because perfect, unchanging, and immobilized. That life is undergoing a transformation. The inhabitants are on the move. They advance now; they have purpose; they are capable of change and are changing, passing through the gate into another world, a new world. Perhaps it is *their* wings who now unfurl, *not* the angels' wings. Look carefully at the ambiguities characterizing the last line of "The Wall." How does Justice put them to work? I.e., how do those ambiguities help us understand the poem as a whole? As important, what other points of ambiguity can you find in the poem, places in which Justice uses language in a way that invites debate, discussion, and questioning? Poems bring themselves to a conclusion. That means that the poem has, from its very opening moves, started to prepare itself for its own ending. Look at the ending of "The Wall" with that principle in mind. Where in the poem do you see hints in place that the poem will end in the curious way that it does? As I say, sussing out those hints is an important part of learning how to read a poem.

Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, *The Visitation*, part of *The Architect's Brother* (2000)

See poem below:

Donald Justice (1925-2004), "The Wall"

	Rhyme Scheme	
The wall surrounding them they never saw;	a	[saw]
The angels, often. Angels were as common	b	[common]
As birds or butterflies, but looked more human.	b	[human]
As long as the wings were furled, they felt no awe.	a	[awe]
Beasts, too, were friendly. They could find no flaw	a	[flaw]
In all of Eden: this was the first omen.	b	[omen]
The second was the dream which woke the woman.	b	[women]
She dreamed she saw the lion sharpen his claw.*	a	[claw] *metaphor
As for the fruit, it had no taste at all.	c	[all] Shift or *volta*
They had been warned of what was bound to happen.	b	[happen]
They had been told of something called the world.	d	[world]
They had been told and told about the wall.*	c	[wall] *repetitions
They saw it now; the gate was standing open.	b	[open]
As they* advanced, the giant wings unfurled.	d	[unfurled] *ambiguity / "they," who *advances?*

From *The Summer Anniversaries* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1960)

See 18th- and 15th-century paintings of the scene of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden below:

Masaccio, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (1425)

Benjamin West, *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise* (1791)