January 27, anniversary of the 'liberation' of Auschwitz in 1945, is now honoured as 'Holocaust Remembrance Day' in many nations of the western world. This year, 2001, the day was marred by controversy, and one could hardly expect anything else. Who are we — survivors and after-comers, whether Gentile or Jew — to commemorate or honour the victims? What is entailed in such an official act as dedicating a day to a collective act of remembering? Is it that our conscience cannot otherwise cope with what we know? To what extent does remembrance implicate us in guilt? The guilt of what we might have done, had we been there, had we been faced with a choice; or the guilt of irritation, anger, against those whose memory will not leave us alone? The desire to be unhaunted is the desire that will allow no peace in paradise, if paradise is to include a knowledge of an infernal elsewhere.

'No poetry after Auschwitz' has, increasingly, the sound of jargon, of self-righteous platitude, a bid for easy indignation. There is poetry after Auschwitz, some of it explicit about its own presumptions, as in Geoffrey Hill's 'September Song', conceding a putative charge of self-serving:

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)

In such nodes of syntactic and parenthetical unease, poetry has glanced at its complicity with its theme, has tested the duplicity at the very tain of representation. To make a theme is to make it over, to play it again, to bring back, to make present once more — and to what end?
Recent debates over certain cinematic representations have been able to articulate bluntly the fear that the representation of Auschwitz makes possible, and even invites, the taking of a vicarious pleasure in suffering, if not in acts of torture. All representation opens itself to participation, not only to condemnation. Mimesis of what ought to be condemned must itself involve questionable behaviour, and excite dubious sentiments. So the argument has run since Plato. Poetry, unlike theatre or cinema, does not provoke public debate about its practices, except in the instance of Adorno’s worn pronouncement. Yet poetry’s condition — in our time and language — is not so occluded that it can make nothing happen: it has always made everything happen, within the valley bounded by the margins of the page.

The merest remembrance is a representation, and, as such, questionable. As is a name. What to call that which occurred? What name that is adequate, that does not ‘misrepresent’? For many years the word ‘Holocaust’ was deployed, given an upper-case initial to define its singularity. That ‘holocaust’ indicates in Greek a burnt-offering, a sacrifice, was remarked by a number of people who took offence at the assumption by etymology that the Jews had thereby offered themselves as a sacrifice. The word ‘shoah’ is now preferred, though it was the cinema (Claude Lanzmann’s film) that has given the Hebrew word not currency (for it knows only one context) but saliency in European languages. Yet ‘Shoah’ is a lexical appropriation of an event that involved not only Jews. Others who were systematically victimized by the Nazis, notably Gypsies, communists, homosexuals, feel excluded from commemoration, forgotten in the very proclaiming of memory.4

Equally contested is the term genocide, coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe.*5 Lemkin himself introduced the term as a common noun, to describe a phenomenon that was, explicitly, not without parallel. All arguments over these words focus on their use as either common or proper nouns. To capitalize the Holocaust or the Shoah, or even the Genocide, is to render singular and proper, to exclude parallel. Not to do so is to invite comparison and analogy, to concede that even the most dreadful events may be in some respect ‘common’: Les Murray finds in the word ‘common’ the sketch of an historical vision of decline, from the ideal state of things being held in common, to the
quotidian ordinariness of things being common (‘Poèmes and the Mystery of Embodiment’ 363). To note that two events had something in common — not that they were ordinary — was Lemkin’s motivation in describing what had happened to the Jews of Europe as genocide, for a new common noun is not given to the first instance — on which a proper noun may be bestowed — but only to the second. And the first instance, for Lemkin, was the Turkish massacre of the Armenians that began on April 24, 1915. (Note how ‘the’ modifies a people, functions as an indicator of totality, throws grammatical light on totalitarian aims: not some, or any, but ‘the Jews of Europe’, ‘the Armenians’.) At least 1.5 million were killed, representing perhaps half of the total Armenian population: ‘Half of a nation murdered. More than the mind can close around.’

Various reasons can be adduced for the abysmal failure of the modern West to confront the Armenian holocaust: these range from indifference to the fate of a small country even further away than Czechoslovakia, to the realpolitik of Turkey’s control of the Bosphorus. Any attempt at official recognition of the Armenian holocaust by any Western nation is met by gross and blatant intimidation from the Turkish state. A hideous confluence unites the Turkish veto on the mention of Armenia with that position that would hold the Jews to be the unique victims of genocide. Politicians who dare to remember, on the same occasion, the Armenians, the Jews, the Rwandans and the Bosnians (to follow a semblance of chronological order), are routinely attacked for ‘minimizing’ the horrors of the Shoah.

Here we come upon another reason that should not be overlooked: the new Turkish nation, emerging in the last years of the Ottoman Empire, had the support of the West in its ideological balance of secularism and nationalism. Kemal (Atatürk) won the approval of the West, and in this he may be regarded as the forerunner of those ‘Independence leaders’ whose barbaric practices would be condoned by the West under the cover of an emerging post-colonial discourse. What was done to the Armenians in 1915 (and to the Greeks of Asia Minor in 1922) stands as a condemnation not so much of Turkey as of the Western Powers. And the West has chosen to remain loyal to the Turkey of its own creation.
What was committed by the Nazis can be ascribed to barbarism. The interlacing of barbarism and high culture in Nazi Germany remains a phenomenon from which we turn away. We still address the Heidegger-question as if Heidegger were a uniquely enigmatic figure in German academic and cultural life; as if the complicity of modern European culture with genocidal politics must represent the unthinkable itself. What was committed against the Armenians at the inception of a new nation on the threshold of Europe cannot be ascribed to anything except liberalism’s impotence to halt ethnic hatred, even though under Ottoman rule, Christians, whether in Asia Minor or in the Balkans, were tolerated, and (in moods both active and passive) endured. That Islam should have been more protective than liberalism of ethnic and religious minorities is a fact of which the Ottoman Empire affords ample evidence. And it is a notion which our modernity cannot endure.

Fredy Neptune opens with an epigraph from the Armenian poet Siamanto, eye-witness to massacre. The naked women are ‘anointed’ with kerosene and torched:

And there was dancing. The charred bodies rolled.

In shock I slammed my shutters like a storm,
Turned to the one gone, asked ‘These eyes of mine —
How shall I dig them out, how shall I, how?’

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? There is a terrible ambiguity in witness, whereby the one who sees is implicated in what is seen. Vision makes the subject complicit with the object. It is not only the history of Christian persecution that bears into modern English the Greek word for ‘witness’ as ‘martyr’. There is also an intrinsic bond:

So it is required; so we bear witness,
Despite ourselves, to what is beyond us ....

For we suffer according to what we know. Witness is knowing; an eye-witness obtains knowledge through the eyes. And the eyes may be closed, slammed like shutters, as shutters are slammed both in and by a storm. Closed by those for whom the right to know is a cheap fiction when set against the obligation to witness, and the unattainable dream of not knowing, of unknowing what has been known:
You're guilty of what you've seen
he used to reckon. (89)

Fredy Neptune plays with the slippage between knowledge and the means of knowledge. In distinguishing knowledge from sensibility and the most basic, least refined of the senses, touch, the poem makes of its protagonist a clown-figure, a freak, a circus artiste. And only thus, behind that mask, within a masque, can Fredy be a credible witness to atrocity. For what he sees could not be borne by a living feeling human being; only an insensate monster could see that and go on living. Idiomatic uses of ‘feeling’ and ‘unfeeling’, ‘sensitive’ and ‘insensitive’ take the terms in a moral rather than ‘sensate’ ‘sense’; and it’s hard to find the word for feeling or sense that does not rise to abstraction without recourse — when we need to stay close to the skin — to the Greek ‘haptic’. And it is the idiomatic use that legitimates the device of depriving Fredy of all ‘feeling’, so that he lives without sensation, without sensual pleasure, and without sensual pain (though the latter word stands in need of that modifier less often than the former). He has been ‘numbed’, ‘desensitized’ by what he has seen, and the numbness lasts for thirty-four years, from the year of the Armenian genocide until 1949.

This is a poetic device, not a medical condition. The representation of insensation (not a word in the *OED*) draws much on the notion of weightlessness, and finds its metaphor in the airship that floats from the dustjacket through the poem. There is a detachment from all experience, a ‘sense’ or ‘feeling’ that he is not ‘really there’ and that Fredy’s physical location is determined not from within but by the external force of gravity: ‘I sat in the air with my numb bum held to the fence’ (63); ‘I went out on my grille/ and sat in the air.’ (163). The metaphor is made explicit when, in Hollywood, Phyllis Gates responds to Fredy’s invitation to look at the airship:

Like, how to tell Phyll I was sitting in the middle of the air
not supported, and touched only in my head.
I came up with Will you come with me to see the Zeppelin?—
Don’t buy me Zeppelins. I need you, not a frame of hot air. (167)

We must, in passing, note how the verb ‘touch’ is usually confined to the haptic, except in participial forms, ‘touching’ and ‘touched’,
and that it is the absence of touch that makes Fredy touched — in the head (synechoche for mind). Fredy continues the metaphor himself, but then draws the parallel to a close:

The Zep sat like me in the air,
but for real, and it could rise. No other thing is like it, (170)

as no other person is like Fredy: they meet, become comparable on the ground of their common groundlessness, their felt or supposed weightlessness:

To me, the weights that volunteers strained at, testing,
plus all the motorbikes, anvils, park seats with people on,
were just like Zeppelins: I laid hands on them, they took off
and floated overhead, as I filled them with my breath. (188)

Fredy’s phrase ‘my null numb nothing’ (22) contains two negations, and the null nothing is in the end self-cancelling. The Zeppelin is the answer — the counter-unweight, one might say — to the predominant metaphor of modernism and the early twentieth-century: flight. From Stephen Dedalus through to the war-time narratives of Saint-Exupéry, flight provides our escape from the bonds of earth, from the limits imposed by body and gravity. Figuratively, flight has been in the twentieth century the vehicle of a vast rhetorical take-off of gnostic thinking; the last can well be named one of the most gnostic of all centuries. Czeslaw Milosz, a poet who has meditated much on the neo-gnostic, neo-manichaean character of the twentieth century, remarks: ‘(Lucifer, that proud and weightless spirit, is hostile to the body).’

Fredy is not proud, and will not be humbled by a fall. Indeed, in a shockingly generous reversal of narrative expectation, Fredy is not punished, nor tripped, by a sudden access of sensitivity. He has never allowed his freedom from bodily limits to be a source of pride, rather of shame, an enduring occasion for concealment and deception. Fredy does not attain the gracefulness of a Nijinsky, nor the freedom from earthly constraints celebrated by Stephen Dedalus: Fredy is clumsy, awkward, almost oafish, we see him not in flight but lumbering like a Zeppelin; he is conscious not of freedom but of debility. The only occasions on which he uses his unlimited strength are occasions of justice and assistance, not of gratuitous or vain display. When he does allow himself to make a
heroic deployment of strength in order to release somebody trapped, his next task is the more difficult, to explain himself away; to explain himself, that is, as an ordinary person, not to be regarded as a superhuman, an Übermensch.

Fredy is the protagonist of a narrative that is, at once or alternatingly, novel, epic, picaresque; but he is a protagonist who has nothing to learn, nor a lover to gain, nor an enemy to overcome. There is an antipodean nostos, but that homecoming merely frames the telos: the return to his own senses, to his own embodiment. And here the device of Fredy’s exceptional condition, his almost surreal abnormality, serves a quite contrary and allegorical function. For if nostos is one of the fundamental myths (narratives) of our civilization, then Fredy’s adventures, on his way to recover his own bodily sensations, mark the way of everyperson. And at this allegorical level, Fredy’s debility is not freakish, but our very own: ours is the mind’s detachment from the body, ours that detached indifference to the healthy body, and the resentment at finding ourselves tied to a dying animal; ours the Cartesian mind’s scepticism towards the evidence obtained through the body, towards the evidence of the body itself, perceived as it must be through its own senses. Nor is this dualism distinctive of, let alone specific to modernity. Socrates famously (though it was probably already proverbial) equates by paronomasia the body (soma) and the tomb (sema) (Gorgias, § 493); the soul is that which is alive in spite of the body, and is waiting for its immortality to be disclosed when the body returns to dust.

Philosophical attempts to take the body seriously have been sparse and scantily regarded. Kant recognized that the quanta continua of time and space could not be known at all if they were not in relation to the subject’s own embodiment. It is Merleau-Ponty who has most thoroughly and successfully struggled to give flesh to thinking, not to argue with empiricists that knowledge is derived from sensation, but that the specifically human body is the necessary condition for perceiving and understanding anything: ‘Far from my body’s being for me no more than a fragment of space, there would be no space at all for me if I had no body.’

Astonishingly, and all but inexplicably, such philosophical dualism came to permeate even the religion at whose centre is the doctrine of Incarnation. Although the creeds all affirm the
resurrection of the body, most Christians appear to have settled for the platonic consolations of an immortal soul. Indeed, such may be preferable to the sheer awkwardness of imagining a bodily resurrection. The Incarnation concerns the embodiment of the Divine — a concept still ungraspable — and the enfleshment of words, as well as of the Word. Every word has a body, inky or airy-acoustic: there can be no purely immaterial word. Yet all our thinking about thought and language assumes their relation to body and matter to be strictly contingent. On this point Merleau-Ponty makes an ingenious move, blaming not the human mind, or the psyche’s desire for abstraction, but language itself, allowing, therefore, that language shapes our thinking about our own bodies precisely by presenting itself as disembodied:

The wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion: my eyes follow the lines on the paper, and from the moment I am caught up in their meaning, I lose sight of them. The paper, the letters on it, my eyes and body are there only as the minimum setting of some invisible operation. Expression fades out before what is expressed, and this is why its mediating role may pass unnoticed, and why Descartes nowhere mentions it. Descartes, and a fortiori his reader, begin their meditation in what is already a universe of discourse. This certainty which we enjoy of reaching, beyond expression, a truth separable from it and of which expression is merely the garment and contingent manifestation, has been implanted in us precisely by language.

Murray likewise objects to the occlusion of the materiality of language, but explains it in political rather than philosophical terms:

The non-verbal art forms such as music and painting and ballet retain and enrich their own special traditions of the bodily dimension, but within the sphere of the word the influence of the somatic has been discussed for the most part in terms of sex and sexualities; both are perhaps felt to be safe, being aspects of the matter that the Nazis did not stress and may even have persecuted. We might say that the body, having been implicated in ghastly crimes, was displaced into its own genitals, or allowed as mainly a walking advertisement for them (‘Poèmes and the Mystery of Embodiment’ 361–62)

One can add that the genitals become synecdoche for the body because they are the body-parts that give a pleasure insistently
sensual. The history of western sexual practices is marked by reduction (or concentration) from somatics to erotics, and from general erotics to erotogenics, as if the erotic alone could justify the body. A thorough neo-platonic dualism will ignore the body altogether, despise its appetites, and rage against its frailties; the modified dualism of most of us allows for the assuaging of the sexual appetite. It must not be thought that this has anything to do with embodiment, or that it might lead to a truly contrary monism.

This synecdochic or genital focus of the body cannot counter dualism because it ignores words, it overlooks the seminal etymon. To release the etymon, and to inscribe meaning in body, we must not cease to work in words. Indeed we should recognize the full measure of our dwelling within language, of our constitutive semiosis. For Murray, it is poetry that releases language from the cover of its hiding, foregrounds the device of its normative occlusion:

two obvious meanings ... join in the term embodiment ... the materials in which a work is realized, and ... its somatic effect upon the beholder. This latter effect, felt in the ghostly sympathy of breath and pulse and muscle, is particularly central to poetry .... (‘Embodiment and Incarnation’ 263–64)

Recalling to us Milosz’s parenthetical ‘(Lucifer, that proud and weightless spirit, is hostile to the body)’, Murray has described the Enlightenment as ‘a Luciferian poem, that is, one in revolt against poetry itself.’ (‘The Suspect Captivity of the Fisher King’ 333). Enlightenment is also a gain in weightlessness, and what philosophy tends to celebrate is whatever is weightless, disembodied, transcendent to the body. Such a lightening is against poetry precisely because poetry insists on the materiality of words, on the rise and fall of the syntagm, on the isometrics of rhythm and pulse. In the stress and swing and tension of the line, poetry fights back against language’s promotion of its own oblivion. Poetry has, since the Enlightenment, ceased to be one of the forms of knowledge, a legitimate and authoritative instrument of understanding, because consciousness has been deemed bodiless, weightless. The date is conventionally ascribed to the seventeenth century, Descartes the symptomatic culprit. Guy Davenport makes of Montaigne an occasion for hyperbolic lament:
Montaigne’s constant scrutiny of his urine in a chamber pot, his colics and dizzy spells, his ability to drink heroic amounts of hot sulfurous water, locate his journal in a time when the body was still part of personality. Later, it would disappear. Dickens’s characters, for instance, have no kidney stones because they have no kidneys. From Smollett to Ulysses, there is not a kidney in English literature. (viii)

And Davenport continues: ‘With the occlusion of the body there is an anaesthesia of sensibilities.’ We may note how anaesthesia bears a sense strictly physical, doing the work of the non-existent insensation, and never referring to metaphorical callousness or moral torpor. By exact contrast, aesthetic is only abstract, never referring to the state occluded by an anaesthetic.18

Poetry retains its value in adversity, as the enemy of enlightenment, as the site of resistance to the dualism that would separate a word’s semantic from its phonetic or iconic value, that would disembodify words like the subjects who read them, or even, in order that those subjects should be able to read them. Poetry makes words matter, gives them body, brings them out of the mind, and into a lit space in which they are seen to be solid objects with shadows, and indeed, as is the optical way, to be inseparable from their shadows. That words cast shadows — homophonic or homonymic, etymological, figurative, catachrestic — is what every poet knows, and what almost every philosopher (and almost every linguist) devotes a career to denying.

And poetry resists duality not only in words but in clauses or syntagms, entire sentences and stanzas, in tropes and strophes. Like disembodiment, embodiment establishes a reciprocity between subject and object. The disembodied subject will read and study a disembodied text; an embodied subject will embody a text, as an embodied text will compel a reader’s bodily self-recognition.19 Such abstract claims, however chiastically phrased, are liable to miss the body’s point entirely, as are most discourses on embodiment. But it is the recognition of what’s missing that transforms and inverts the reader’s view of Fredy: not a freak, but one of us. The challenge is that the reader should experience, in recited breathing and in the weight and flesh of words, both Fredy’s weightlessness and his rediscovered gravity: the narrative’s climax must come not as a denouement — an untying — but as a re-establishing of the
ligatures that bind, and save; as a revelation, but not an enlightenment; rather, a weighting, an advent of the incarnate.

It might be objected that this reading of Fredy Neptune elides or conflates weightlessness and insensation: that the narrative is driven at every point by Fredy's inability to feel, to suffer pain or pleasure. And nowhere is Fredy shown to be free of the laws of gravity. This may be conceded, with the understanding that the Zeppelin does much of the anti-gravitational work for Fredy. What matters/What we should keep in mind is that Fredy has no sense of gravity, and in this he is like any gnostic who, believing in the autonomy of the mind, or the nous, pays no attention to the body, and regards gravity and embodiment as mere contingent inconvenience. Writing of the contemporary French poet, Yves Bonnefoy, Jean Starobinski has spoken of the way in which the concept, the idea, Begriff, saisie, is a negation of the singular, the actual:

the concept universalizes thought about the object, but misses the object itself in its finite presence. The pride of this mental grasp avoids the pain of incarnation: using an emphatic term, Bonnefoy speaks ... of escarnation.20

The attack on poetry in the Enlightenment came with an extraordinary reduction of the function of language, a determination to conform language to the power and precision of mathematics. As Bonnefoy himself has written: 'Our language belongs to a time when geometry and existence have parted ways, when the search for laws is no longer undertaken with words but against them.'21 This was achieved by asserting the primacy of 'literal' meanings, and frowning on all figurative usage as secondary, derivative, ornamental and redundant.22 It was in the late seventeenth century that metonymy ceased to be recognized as a figure, and was uncoupled from its conventional pairing with metaphor.

What follows is a sweeping argument, that would be immensely hard to prove, but one that nonetheless seems worth putting forward: metonymy ceased to be recognized as figurative because of the discovery of gravity. Proximity had been a matter of convention, of symbolic value, and was therefore subject to figurative representation. The sentence 'The book is on the table' has no place in writing before the seventeenth century, before what we call realism. Description is based on and justified by significance,
likeness, symbolism, or causality. Proximity without causality counts for nothing.\textsuperscript{23} For Dante or Chaucer, or even Shakespeare, the presence of a book on a table would be without significance. And if there were significance, that significance would not be expressed or contained by a mere preposition.\textsuperscript{24}

The law of gravity removes spatial prepositions from the class of figures or tropes. Gravity gives causality to proximities on a vertical axis. When metonymy becomes so natural that it ceases to be a figure — that its very workings enter the occlusion of catachresis — realism is born, as the literary mode appropriate to the triumph of the literal.\textsuperscript{25} I have been waiting many years to make this point in print; that I do so now, in an essay on Fredy Neptune, is due to the fact that in this poem I find the point already made, and therefore the most difficult part of my own task (to be a lone voice) set aside. The narrative climax of the poem is here, where other ladders start, in the ordinariness of lying down:

I went home and lay on the bed and didn’t go to work.

That is, I lay on the air and the bed legitimized it. (253)

This is the moment of incarnation, but not a moment at which everything returns to normal. For the normal would be the literal of the enlightenment: I lay on the bed. But Fredy maintains not the ‘innocent eye’ (naming the narrative technique, the deferred interval between perception and explanation, found in — or ascribed to — Mark Twain’s Huck and Conrad’s Marlow, and identified by Shklovsky as \textit{ostranenie}) but the innocence of his flesh. And in that innocence he realizes the incarnation, remains alert to the work of prepositions, and to the causal convention (the law of gravity) that lies behind and underwrites the normal, the quotient, the real. Who reading this — ‘I lay on the air and the bed legitimized it’ — does not feel a pressure on the \textit{Sitzfleisch}? is not embodied, inscribed by the poem in one’s own, hitherto occluded flesh? Such embodiment by defamiliarization is best proof of our normative excarnation.

What is the ‘it’ that the bed legitimates? is it the air, or the action of lying on the air? Or is it the ‘on’? It is hard to demonstrate the presence of the figurative — whether metaphor or metonymy — in all language: the use of prepositions is not to represent ‘things as they are’ but to represent the conventions of spatial positioning figured and legitimized by the law of gravity. Not to recognize
metaphor or metonymy — to be taken in by the literal — is to be a victim of cataphresis, that is, to be unconscious of the word in its embodiment, as a solid that casts a shadow, makes a figure. We may think that we know what it is like to live in the body, but our embodiment is itself a cataphresis: the word excarnate belongs to and constitutes a disembodied world.

Once embodied, feeling the figures of his body, the air and the bed, Fredy is open to grace. Obduracy, thickness, substantive stuff are necessary for the flow and passage of grace, since the divine took up his dwelling in flesh. Openness and lightness are gnostic values, useless in incarnation. As Martin Leer has observed, in surveying the role of gravity in Murray’s work: ‘Embodying grace means to see grace in gravity.'26 And, Leer continues, in rendering grace and gravity concordant rather than antithetic, Murray is following one of his earliest and strongest influences, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Hopkins and Rilke, a translation of whose sonnet on the caged panther is astonishingly incorporated within Fredy Neptune (160).27 It is the fifth Duino Elegy, on the travelling circus performers, inspired by Picasso’s ‘Les Saltimbanques’ (1905), that addresses what Starobinski calls ‘la douleur de l’incarnation’:

    yet it wrings them, 
bends them, twists them, swings them and flings them
    and catches them again; and falling as if through oiled
slippery air, they land
on the threadbare carpet. (Selected Poetry 175).

That oiled slippery air (geöltter/glatterer Luft) echoes uncannily (for neither can have read the other) Hopkins’s windhover ‘riding/ Of the rolling level underneath him steady air’ — that air whose friction and tension, necessary for flight, are compared to those of a skate against ice. Hopkins responded to manned flight not in gnostic praise of release from the bonds of earth, but with the sense of air as material, substantive, a medium through which to fall, and to break one’s fall, against which to rise, as (in 1865, in ‘The Alchemist in the City’) describing birds seen from the top of a tower:

    I mark the tower swallows run
    Between the tower-top and the ground
    Below me in the bearing air ..... (Poetical Works 76)
Here in the bearing air we find an antecedent of Fredy’s legitimizing bed. We may also find a pictorial antecedent in the series of Picasso paintings to which Rilke responded. One gouache in particular, ‘The Death of Harlequin’, 1906, (illustrated in Richardson 387) seems to suggest that the harlequin is reposing in or on the air, as if death could be the theme of yet another trick; as if in masquerade death itself could be unmasked; as if the death-bed might turn out to be no bed at all. And Fredy:

... — How he sat in the pub on a chair he only believed was there

The word for what I needed was routines

Another, I’d hang by one hand from the swing
and draw my knees up and sit like on a chair
there in space, and drink tea...(99)

And if the air can bear, so prayer can come to the one who prays aright. A black-hooded Armenian monk tells Fredy that he will recover his feelings when he learns to pray, and to forgive what he has seen; to forgive himself, also, that he has seen it:

If ever you can pray

with a single heart to be free of it, it will leave you that day. (14)

About half-way through the verse novel, Fredy goes to confession in a church in Kentucky:

That was really rare. Like a lot of men, I felt
beneath church. (127)

The line-break cunningly disappoints the expectation that whatever he felt would be the low sensuality of l’homme moyen sensuel, such as ought to be confessed.²⁸ Yet it is the common-ness of confession that restores some feeling, and another line-break will disappoint by giving an indirect object to what’s treated:

We don’t see all of blessing and absolution,
I know — but where I felt them was in being treated
as just another person, among the Saturday confessors.
It put gravity back under me.... (127)
Fredy feels ‘beneath church’ and then, after confession, he feels above gravity, sustained and borne. We might feel, like a lot of men, beneath poetry as well. Yet, if we keep reading, we will find ourselves above it, supported by the text under us. This is performed by an ingenious apostrophe to the future reader:

Golightly’s show wasn’t travelling
for the duration. I wonder do you still
say that, up there in the future: the duration? (239).

A lexical epiphany, a moment in which a word strikes in its sheer oddity, and goes as it were on semantic strike. Up there is a way of figuring time progressively, on a vertical axis, as man ascends. And ‘for the duration’, a phrase for the near-future, the interim, is not quite the same as ‘the duration’, an interval of any length, even that between the moment of writing (1949?) and the moment of this reading (1998 ff.). And so the apostrophic deixis points to us — no, me — not only temporally — in the future — but also spatially, up there, where the reader will have taken the place of the writer, above the text: up there, as seen from and by the text. It is a moment in which the reader is spatialized directly, not analogously as by Fredy and the legitimizing bed. For at this point, the book in my hands is below me, and I (in Fredy’s future) am, by metonymy, up here, looking down on the page.

Fredy’s prayer takes us back to the poem’s opening, to the massacre in Armenia, and Fredy, supported by the bed, with gravity under him, is asked by another (or the same) ‘it’:

How good’s your poem?
Can it make them alive again after dancing in the kerosene? (253).

And the entire problem of the contiguity of poetry and suffering is arguably, or overwhelmingly, absolved. Like Rilke’s monk, Fredy asks himself to ‘Forgive God’.26 How the prayer works is beyond telling, beyond present means of analysis or paraphrase. As forgiveness must be complicit with some forgetting, so true prayer — beyond all representation — is the antithesis of remembrance.

The summer of 1926 witnessed an intense correspondence between three great poets: Rilke, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva. Rilke’s part in Fredy Neptune is plain, and considerable; Pasternak is not
mentioned, but belongs by virtue of having anticipated Jakobson in understanding the importance of metonymy to realism. Pasternak overturns all norms in being the only major poet who regretted that he could not be a novelist: he valued metonymy over metaphor, gravity over analogy. On March 25, 1926, Pasternak wrote to the third poet of that year’s intensities, Marina Tsvetayeva. Pasternak was beside himself, breathless, lost for words over the poem of hers that he had just read in typescript, ‘Poem of the End’:

I came upon the poem by chance, a typed copy, without punctuation. What else is there to say but to describe the table on which it lay?

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—. ‘Without a City Wall.’ University of Toronto Quarterly 59.3 (1990): 433–42.


NOTES

1. See Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 68–9: ‘Whoever invokes genocide, starvation, or the physical suffering of our fellow men in order to attack poems or paintings practices demagoguery.’


4. See Mann and Kerényi, 135, letter from Karl Kerényi to Thomas Mann, 26th February 1946, describing his daughter’s experience in a concentration camp: ‘... sick but with her own strength, and at the end — after her Jewish companions had received help from the Synagogue in Bratislava — alone with six gypsies. I find something symbolic and tragic in the fate of those who are not even Jews.’

5. For the exact reference I am indebted to Klein’s *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. ‘genocide’. Dr. Ernest Klein lost his entire family in Auschwitz, and sought healing in etymology. Of Lemkin’s coinage Klein notes with surpassing aridity: ‘The correct word would be *genticide*, in which both elements are of Latin origin.’ One extraordinary lexicographer calls forth another: ‘My great-grandfather’s first cousin, Sir James Murray of the *Oxford English Dictionary*’ (Les Murray, ‘The Bonnie Disproportion,’ 113).


8. For recent instances, see Mark Mazower. The British Home Office even tried, recently, to placate the Turks by making a unilateral concession to the effect that 27 January would honour only the memory of victims of genocide since 1940. The Armenian community in Britain was not so lightly to be dis honoured.

9. As I have written elsewhere: ‘No other genocide in which one and a half million were killed has been passed over so lightly... [The ideals of] nationalism, liberalism and secularism were all invested in Turkey’s modernization. Armenia represents the guilty conscience of Europe and of modernity.’ Review of *Light from the East*.

10. For an authoritative and balanced example see Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity*.

11. There is an uncharacteristic mistake in the attribution of this poem to ‘Siamanto (Atom Ergoyan)’. Siamanto was the *nom de plume* of Atom Yarjarian. I owe this information, mediated by Bruce Clunies Ross, to Professor Ian Bickerton of the University of New South Wales. Murray (or Fredy) also nods on p. 49: Sir Ernest Jones is named as the eighteenth-century Welsh scholar of Sanskrit instead of Sir William Jones, the mistake no doubt motivated by the name of Freud’s disciple and biographer, Ernest Jones. Atom Ergoyan is of course a


15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 102; cited and elaborated by Casey, 202; see also Leder. All three of these works present, coherently and almost cumulatively, the case of what, philosophically, is at stake in the body’s absence.

16. The lumbering and graceless, yet unconditionally redeemed figures of Stanley Spencer’s diverse pictorial ‘Resurrections’ may bear analogies to Fredy Neptune.

17. Merleau-Ponty, 401; cited and commented on by Leder, p. 103. The affinities between Merleau-Ponty and Murray may be most luminously focussed in the trope of chiasmus, central to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body as self and other, of the subject both detached and within the world; and a figure of fascination to Murray (see The Paperback Tree, p.312). Yves Bonnefoy writes that the poet must fight against the gnosticism inherent in the act of writing: ‘there is gnosis, or at least the risk of gnosis, the moment there is writing’; see The Act and the Place of Poetry, 152; poetry is even more subject to temptation than other forms of writing: ‘Poetic writing is, in fact, the realm where the power of excarnation will first work its ravages.’ (64).

18. Both ‘aesthetics’ and ‘anaesthetics’ came into English in the mid-19th century, the former having been coined by the Swiss philosopher Baumgarten in the 1750s. The reduction of the Greek etymon, properly applied to sensory perception in general, to the perception and appreciation of the beautiful, was resisted from the 1830s by a number of English thinkers; their revenge may have come in the late 1840s with the name ‘anaesthetic’ designating not a lack of taste but an artificial inducement of ‘insensation’: the OED is loquacious on both and even partisan under the heading ‘aesthetic’.


20. Starobinski, 190. John T. Naughton glosses thus: ‘excarnation — that call away from the situation at hand, the dream of another, better world, the refusal of time and death.… Salvation will depend on the opposing principle of incarnation: the discovery and celebration — in spite of limitation and death — of the sacred in the hic et nunc’ (11).

21. ‘Paul Valéry’ in The Act and the Place of Poetry, 98. Valéry is presented in this essay as a gnostic, oblivious to death, one who ‘never understood the mystery of presence’, virtually a traitor to poetry, an apostate, and in a phrase on which Murray’s words throw an affirming glance, ‘a new philosopher of enlightenment’ (99).


23. Analogous is the development of still-life painting in the mid-seventeenth century, a sudden fascination with things piled up, held in contiguity by gravity, or dangling over an edge; and of landscape painting. Instead of thinking of ‘realism’ as a triumph of clear modern looking over conventional pictorial symbolism, we should see realism as the most powerful of all instances of Horace’s ‘ars est coelare arte’ — wherein the very figure of metonymy has been blanked out, swallowed whole.

24. Here one must disagree with Merleau-Ponty who, for all his insistence on the
body, ignores the work of metonymy and makes such a claim as this: ‘When I say that an object is on a table, I always mentally put myself either in the table or in the object... Stripped of this anthropological association, the word “on” is indistinguishable from the word “under” or the word “beside”’. (Phenomenology of Perception 100.) The problem disappears with the recognition that prepositions are metonymic: ‘on’ differs from ‘beside’ (if not so clearly from ‘under’) in being motivated (or ‘underwritten’) by gravity, and it is a difference that can be registered historically.


26. This volume in which Leer’s article appears contains two other essays germane to present concerns: Bert Almon on ‘Les Murray’s Critique of the Enlightenment’ and Nicholas Birns’s ‘“In Our Bodies”: Les Murray’s Incarnate History’. Leer’s allusion to Simone Weil’s work awaits development — though the English translation Gravity and Grace makes by alliteration a point absent from the original title’s Le Pèlerinage et la Grâce.

27. Curiously, the most familiar translation of this poem, by J.B. Leishman, uses the same figure for the eyelid that we have already seen in the epigraph from Siamanto. In translating Marlene Dietrich’s recital to Fredy of the original, Murray gives: ‘At times his pupil, after a long recess/will lift its curtain’ (FN160). But Leishman has: ‘Just now and then the pupils’ noiseless shutter/is lifted’ (33). And Rilke, that which hangs in front: ‘Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille/sich lautlos auf.’

28. An entire essay could be devoted to the play on transitive, intransitive and reflexive uses of ‘feel’: ‘Well, a bloody fool was something I could feel.’ (239)

29. Like Thomas Hardy who, legitimized by his death-bed,

asked his wife to repeat to him a verse from the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám,

beginning:

‘Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth.’

She took his copy of this work from his bedside and read to him:

Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And ev’n with Paradise devise the Snake:
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken’d — Man’s forgiveness give — and take!

He indicated that he wished no more to be read.’ (Hardy 480–81).

30. On Jakobson’s unacknowledged debt to Pasternak, see Charles Lock, ‘Roman Jakobson and the Future of Linguistics’; see also Lock, ‘Bakhtin among the poets’ (forthcoming).

31. Pasternak, Tsvetayeva and Rilke, 43–44.
leading Danish composer Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, premiered in Copenhagen March 2001

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