

## BURGIN'S ELM

Richard Burgin. *Shadow Traffic*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

*James Walton*

I am inhabited by a cry.  
 Nightly it flaps out  
 Looking, with its hooks, for  
 something to love.  
 Sylvia Plath, "Elm"

Seasoned readers of Richard Burgin will recognize in "Do You Like This Room?" another version of a story that haunts his imagination to the point where it might be regarded as his nuclear fiction. It occurs in "Vacation," "With All My Heart," and "The Horror Conference" (*The Identity Club*, 2005), "Mayor Bat" and (obliquely) in "Dates in Hell" (*Conference on Beautiful Moments*, 2006). The repetition consists (chiefly) in no mere recycling of used material but rather a circling or restless exploration of linked themes that supply the *motus animi continuus* for much of his work: male vanity, sexual tension, gender ambiguity, power relations. In the course of a sexual encounter the man invents reasons for feeling insulted as a pretext for using sudden force and terror on his partner. Like the androgynous heroine of "Dates in Hell," the aggressor, prompted by "fear and desire," uses violence to fill an "empty space" within.

The motif of beaked and taloned "love" gets its richest development in the novel *Rivers Last Longer* (2010) where it's linked with another familiar device of Burgin's: the splitting of a passive-aggressive personality into separate characters. The two principals in *Rivers Last Longer* were friends since childhood. In an accession of rage and bad faith Barry the Aggressor once violated their friendship, which after inheriting his mother's fortune he sets out to repair by making Passive Elliot his dependent. Having installed his friend in an upscale apartment and introduced him to the New York art scene, he fixes his vampirish glare upon Elliot's only love.

No stranger to vampire fiction, Burgin ends *Rivers Last Longer* on a note that recalls a Victorian classic of the genre. Elliot's familiar demon, exorcised, persists in his memory: "...they were listening to Mahler's 'Resurrection' symphony.... Barry closed his eyes because the music was so heartrending. Meanwhile, in the present,...Elliot opened his eyes and shuddered." No reader will have missed the homoerotic element in the Barry-

Elliot connection. In Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" (1872), the heroine's seducer, a lesbian vampire, has been destroyed but survives in memory and dream "with ambiguous alternations—sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend."

Both Barry and Elliot are writers whose unequal success seems a function of the contrast in their personalities. Yet as Anis Shivani has observed (*NDR*, Summer/Fall, 2011) it is disappointed Elliot who delivers the author's manifesto. It's a strange one, claiming that literature has generally failed by depicting people as "good or evil." (This is true of no modern work worth reading.) Thanks to "political correctness," quoth Elliot, no play like *Othello* could "be produced today." (Not so.) If this is really the author's view it falls far short of his achievement. The one valid point in Elliot's argument is its insistence on the ambivalence, the real complexity, of moral relations. The male lead in Burgin's stories is half-smothered by mixed memories: of a remote, abusive, or affectionate father; of a protective, controlling mother; of a lost childhood idyll; of a crime that torments present consciousness but that conferred in its time a feeling of creative (even God-like) power. (In "Do You Like This Room?" the identities of sadist and author seem unnervingly to merge: "he was looking at her in a kind of inhuman way, like a camera recording everything.")

In "Memo and Oblivion" Burgin departs from his usual *unheimlich* realism for an allegory on the ambivalence of memory. Its Everyman, Andrew Zorn (A to Z), finds himself trapped between two drug-dispensing organizations—one that offers to augment memory, the other to obliterate it. A "double agent," he feels threatened in the end by competing totalitarianisms.

Allegory returns in "The Justice Society" and "The House." In the former, the eponymous sect, a closed system, devotes itself to the recognition of "true" values in opposition to the corrupt standards of the "other world." In "The House" a man is delivered from internal conflicts arising from a failed marriage, a futile writing project, and above all an estranged daughter, by imprisonment in a mansion of the living dead. In the end he's left unmixed dream-memories of his lost child and is filled with "an intense sense of joy." The reader feels a chill.

The allegorical turn in *Shadow Traffic* yields a more stable manifesto than the one conveyed through Elliot. Art, it says, purged of internal contradictions, produces sterility. Characters who have been locked in to a "pattern" of relationship or response achieve a measure of redemption (or at least relief) from a sudden inconsistency. The guilt-ridden title character of "Caesar," obsessed with a life of sexual secrecy, feels his burden lifted (for a

time?) by his response to another's distress and the gratitude of two people representing the world whose judgment he has feared. In "The Dealer" the submissive narrator dreams his way to a physical transformation that turns him into the image of the character he has allowed to take charge of his life. The change makes him "sad and happy at the same time as if I'd finally found the reason for my life being the way it was." Robert Zaller (in *Broad Street Review*) has read this cryptic remark as an acknowledgment that such passivity as the narrator's works as a form of control.

In "Mission Beach" a randy divorcé's love for his bright, hyperactive son enables him to relegate to the order of fantasy a tantalizing sexual invitation. The conclusion avoids mere sentimentality by following upon a recurring *dark* fantasy of the father's (delivered in the second person) that amounts to a displacement of aggression: "someone hurting him physically and then your rage-filled, violent response." The child's imagination, in turn contains its own intimation of violence in the form of a "nefarious amusement park": "Burl Lee was a sadist and Burleyworld was in his image."

Redemptive moments in Burgin are generally such narrow escapes. In "The Interview" a farm girl turned abject B-movie starlet is saved from suicide by an imaginary leap from a tractor into a hay—"yellow," that is, a golden, "world." "Memorial Day" is a tortuous tale of father atonement, told (oddly) from a public pool. Finding himself in the company of his annoying hot-tubbed grandfather (named Pool!), the narrator broods over the emotional damage brought on by his father's death and the consequent wreck of a promising love affair. The father, gentle but virtuous in the style of another day, has acted since death as a ghost censoring his son's desires. Following a dream in which he plays hide-and-seek with his father, then merges with him, he sees in "the dreamlike light of the pool" his father's face in the old man's and "wouldn't mind if he talked now." The interior monologue, the redundancy of "pools," reinforce the paradox that self-contemplation, narcissism, can prove the way to an isolated character's union, however fragile, with the other.

"The Dolphin" belongs to a substantial subgenre of fiction that might be called "A man walks into a bar...." Parker, the man in the case, troubled by his attraction to a transvestite hooker, enters a strip club in Boston's "Combat Zone" and finds himself mismatched with a "menacing" figure who has arrived for the purpose of shooting his stripper-girlfriend when she appears on stage. Leather-jacketed, gun-toting Nick addresses Parker as "bro." Both drinkers wish to "kill" memory. Both feel "dead," but Nick means it literally, as if he were Parker's ghost, shade, shadow, in Burgin's flickering city traffic ("You think I'm a regular flesh-and blood person like

you are?”). A modern-style “socialization,” which Shivani finely discusses in his review of *Rivers Last Longer*, tends to stifle creativity, to bury the individual talent under a spurious and diffident substitute for tradition. In Burgin it also serves as a weak restraint against aggression, but in “The Dolphin” it works. Parker turns Nick’s bitter memory of sacrificial acts of tenderness toward his intended victim into a tacit recognition of his love for her. For the peacemaker, the moment brings a certain beauty, “like a strange kind of Christmas tree,” to the Combat Zone, but not before he has resolved to warn the club owner of Nick’s possible return.

Ghostly doubles, fathers, and victims aren’t the only specters in Burgin’s world. *Shadow Traffic*, like Joyce’s *Dubliners*, might best be approached as a collection of ghost stories. A traditional function of fiction’s ghosts (obvious enough, perhaps, to escape notice) consisted in filling a vacancy. The narrator of “Single-Occupant House” is a compulsive, flesh-and-blood haunter of vacant houses whose story calls for an epigraph of its own:

One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—  
 One need not be a House—  
 The Brain has Corridors—surpassing  
 Material Place—

Emily Dickinson’s theory is consistent with a purpose behind Victorian hauntings, arising from a fear of emptiness (*horror vacui*), and Burgin’s unbalanced narrator belongs to the same tradition, drawing the analogy between House and Mind: “Strange how we keep secrets from ourselves, like our mind is a house of endless rooms and the truth hides in just one of them.” Observing that the knick-knacks in the present house are “meant to save memories,” he declares that his apartment contains no such “mementos,” therefore “In my home I can’t feel myself.” Like Burgin’s other subjects he aims, in fact, to block certain events of his past and refurnish the House of Memory: “when you stay in someone else’s house you sometimes can imagine you’ve had a different life.” He shuns basements, which recall the site of a violent crime he committed in his childhood home, and seeks an attic, where he sought refuge from a brutal father. But “the voices and visions were hiding from me waiting for the right chance to pounce.” The trespasser’s monologue alternates awkwardly with an account of his final escapade as a crazy cabdriver. Only in this section does he confess his crime—to the passenger who has tried to calm him for both their sakes and who as surrogate for the audience draws attention to the whole narrative as a wild ride.

Burgin’s metaphoric ghosts, vampires, and zombies, his Jekyll and

Hyde and material or paranormal hells have always belonged to a rigorously contemporary, popular or “polite” cultural scene. His *Brave New World* is amply supplied with soma in the form of pot, ‘ludes, alcohol, prescription downers, TV, encounter groups and La-Z-Boy chairs (!). Casual sex and internet dating provide the desired balance of intimacy and detachment. Two of his characters identify our predicament with a prosy line from T. S. Eliot’s “Dry Salvages”: “We had the experience but missed the meaning.” Burgin would lead his readers either to supply the deficiency in their own way or to open their eyes, according to Keats’s famous formula, to ineluctable “uncertainties, doubts, Mysteries.”

A particular form of praise already accorded to other writers might carry the present review to the threshold of triteness. We must nevertheless apply it to Burgin. His stories read *us*.