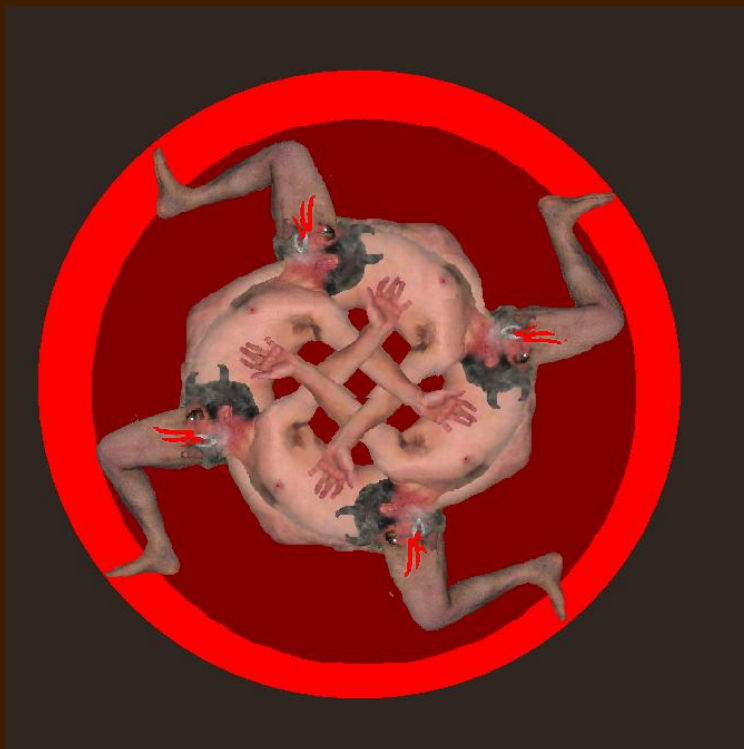


Max Wickert

[from]

THE UNHOLY WEEKS



Note: This sequence was originally planned as an epic-length poem, consisting of 52 sections, each of seven sonnets. My imagination fizzled out about a quarter of the way through, but I'm letting the work stand as a fragment. Its title was suggested by Sylvester DuBartas' Genesis-epic, *La Semaine*, usually translated as *The Holy Week*. "Light dies before the uncreating Word."

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2 Model Lady

Horned with rejections--one of what she is
and one of what she can be, she's her own
reflection in an ad. Born to be this
man's fury now, and now that man's last hope,
she's sometimes upright, and sometimes she's prone.
What they resent her for is what they miss.
Her horns suffice to make them sick with moan
for love, for honor, for a thrill, for soap . . .

She shows all courtesy: her buyers know
what they are purchasing, she is no liar.
Not their desire but its afterglow
is what they pay for. When they know her well,
they find one of their comforts in her fire
and their one choice to enter in her hell.

3 *Disco King*

He is gate and wheel: his penis is the hub.
He jams his foot soles to the scorching rim
and spins toward women who'll go down through him,
their arms like spokes diagonally spread
to his perimeter. But--here's the rub--
he falls on some he doesn't want to join,
while lucky others lunge straight for his groin
to find their paths obstructed by his head.

The few who pass the gap forget him quite
and face the music after they are through--
and live! A kind of jukebox jingle dins
each time a girl's attracted by his light,
each time he does what he's been taught to do,
dances before all eyes and burns and spins.

5 *First Price Fellow*

This best of lovers enters from the rear.
He calls your soul his wife, then bares his heart
to you and "yes he loves her." Then he sits.
His hasty greeting--just a trifle queer.
Before you know, he's offered you a beer,
made you disprize the value of your wits,
and said: "Value is feeling, when feelings start
I'm the Invisible Great Auctioneer--

"Friends, this is hell, (hear me?) a famous place,
full of the fine and valued things you see.
Best of all, all fine things in hell are free.
Here's a rear door for you! a wife! a face!
everything everyone's been bidding on
going for pence, for straws, for nothing! Gone."

6 Go-Go Girl

She nails all down in pairs--here is a plus
and here a minus, here a round, a square.
She's the matchmaker, the eternal mother.
For every one she pinions down another.
She wears her business suit and makes no fuss
if something's odd--just clucks it isn't fair
and she would, were it even, take it home.
She lives right underneath the hippodrome.

One starless night you'll meet her on a bus,
give her a glance and feel compelled to guess
how she exists. Then you'll feel nothingness.
If nothing's here, there must be something there.
Her dress is nothing but a double stripe.
If you're a stranger, you must be her type.

8 *The Tube*

Need is what everybody screams with here.
They call us Little Needers, it's a joke.
It makes us laugh. We are, it would appear,
equally affluent all and yet all broke.
Not of course quite invariably--some bloke
may have more this or that unneeded matter,
more taste, more gasoline, more grit, more coke--
still, need in both have-nots and haves grows fatter.

For man it bursts into the masculine chatter
of wild romance, while for the second sex
it plunges to a former need. The latter
makes television jokes. The former decks
all need in fictions, watches like a rube
and screams to see it in the screaming tube.

9 *Our Bag*

Need? Balderdash! Momentum is the word.
The greater sets us whirling and the less
is ours to sweep away with. What we've heard
we've heard. We've paid the piper. Now the press
is in the blood that makes our flesh go stiff.
Let us be bagpipes of desire. Success
is caught up in us and the slightest whiff
inflates our manhoods and makes us reel faster.

As for the sex, momentum is an if:
What if they have no mover and no master?
What if momentum falls to them alone?
Men drone their manhood, women drone disaster.
They're either caught up in a monotone
or pass right through to resonate on their own.

11 *The Switch*

You drop your quarter and the game is up.
When I write WHICH ONE DO YOU WANT? the game
is over. Here are two cars. Here's the cup.
(You get to drain it if you choose the right one).
These are the bullets (choose wrong and you'll bite one).
You're being shot at, you won't stay alive
unless you drive. Aren't you glad you came?
So it's your first time on this track? Well, drive!

Now turn the switch marked SECOND TRY. You lose
if less than two cars drive up and you choose--
no more than half a car perhaps, two thirds?--
to signal one thing even you can't flaunt:
either your choice or bumper sticker words
like THIS IS YOUR CHOICE. Which one do you want?

15 *The Twist*

They got it all together and the dance
seemed suddenly easy as a march, a march
around the floor, down the rug, past the plants,
out the door, up the street, and through the arch
of triumph--then around the rolling world
into the tune of every future weather.
They knew they weren't perfect but unfurled
their tattered flag and got it all together.

Now they pull all apart, all whom their power
drew into orbit, all those in their way
and all who didn't dance right. In their hour
of triumph they pull even the strong, the gay,
the singers of the burden at the heart,
the very band--pull all of them apart.

--written in 1981, published in *Shenandoah* (XXXV:1, 1983/4)

16 *The Swerve*

They were perennial flowers on the wall,
and if they ever stirred, you couldn't tell
whether the wall they hugged was heaven or hell.
Move? No. They wouldn't, or couldn't at all.
They were forever debutantes at the ball,
and if (rarely) they danced, did they dance so well
because the whole affair was boring? "Belle!"
someone called, "Belle! Belle, don't you hear me call?"

They are adornments always. Well, yes--some
(too soon? too late?) swerve--some of them
a little wilted in the cheek, some bent
or sagging ever so slightly in the stem.
Still, many of them are human as they come
and some inhuman, one hundred percent.

17 *The Hop*

Look to the left. Look to the right. They're here!
Are they upstairs fantasies or spooks downstairs?
archaic? futuristic? without fear,
or without natural enemies? Who cares!
They take possession now, they lounge, they pull
the old impossible cord. And will it work?
Yes, the once empty cup seems suddenly full.
Whoever pulls against this seems a jerk.

Back home there once were little creatures who
cooed: "Stay here, this is home!" But far ahead
some little creatures seemed to beckon too
who cried: "We're gone, but not exactly dead!"
Look to the right. Look to the left. Now stop
and watch the little creatures come. Hop, hop.

18 *The Box*

Since all your tunes are pulsing under my
transparent lid, your night need never end.
Come lift that lid. Since all your lyrics cry
to make my charts and make them, come and bend
over those charts. Since all your needs may send
commands to all my circuits, press these notched
controls, for every nickel that you spend
here is an opportunity to be watched.

So feed my slot that all your evenly matched
impulses may begin to babble and roar,
pseudo-profundities with feelings attached
may meet half-thought-out urges at the door
and trot them in as to a marathon,
ready to sink or compelled to go on.

19 *The Twitch*

They tried to move as if they liked it, but
at every second step a sudden shock
shot their arms into air. They did the rock
and roll of their reluctance. Sure, they cut
the best figures they dared. But then the first
involuntary cries came and something
irregular in the rhythm made them sing:
"It's not the best move, but think of the worst."

They thought of the effect that they might make
if hands were in control or cries could be
overwhelmingly heard--thought who might see
them think so. Now they rattle, roll, and shake
and reach for the ceiling (look at them go!)
until they set their partners' cheeks aglow.

--written 1981, published in *Shenandoah* (XXXV:1, 1983-4)

20 *The Curve*

Having sunk back in the places where they rose,
waiting to rise again at the first swell
of the muted solo sax that summons those
game for more swimming music, they thought, "Hell,
we may as well do it again." The small
mirror lights on the ceiling continued to whirl
and every man sauntered back to the hall,
flashed his white teeth and hooked himself a girl.

And now their dream band, The Iniquities,
was jamming *tutti*. Let the prom queens call
for one more oldie or for a reprise,
chase the pale green reflections round the wall
and reach Position One at each song's end
like puffed-up flotsam drifting round a bend.

--written 1981, published in *Shenandoah* (XXXV:1, 1983-4)

23 *Dingding!*

"Next thing," the scream came, "you'll be a pigeon-toed,
wart-covered mutant hobbling down the road. I
want you now. Next thing what's left of your life
will be the half-life of your afterglow.
I want the glow with which just now you glowed,
a present prince, not a prospective toad.
Next thing you'll ask me do I love you? No,
I love my child, I want to be your wife."

"Not now," the echo came. "We have our task.
Some of us grow grotesque, but the main line
is radiant to the last. No time to ask
'Will all be normal? No, we rise and shine.'
Screams at the origin, echoes at the goal.
Each echo is a plug, each scream a hole.

24 Tocsin

“Well then, it is a nasty world,” one brayed,
“and I lose count each time something's destroyed.
Better to see the end than vainly wish
for more enactments of the old charade.
Better to cease than to begin, better the void
than that same plenitude at every swish
of the whip. Neither the day knows, nor night knew
what I'll know: Sleep. That, at least, will be new.”
Choruses of responses came: “We fish
just in that nastiness and we are buoyed
within the void you're eager to invade.
We relish nothing if not the same old dish,
our heads vacant of all our eyes enjoyed,
our world fully insured, the premium paid.”

25 *Zero O'Clock*

Half, seeing ultimate rejection, strode
with blasted hopes toward the ultimate wrath,
their shirts so gossamer that the nipples showed,
nipples so bloody that the shirt-fronts stuck--
strode into anger as into a bath
of mercy, ran, conceived, carried the load,
and curled up on by one along the path,
tearing their breasts with their hands, murmuring: "Suck!"

The other half, the cock-sure ones, arrived
that moment at their ultimate success--
well mothered and well gratified, well wived,
they one by one hung fire, blessed their luck,
and plunged, each for his wounded nipple.
"Yes," they murmured, "yes, our hour has finally struck."

38 *Savor*

Nothing exists that couldn't make you drool,
nothing appears that does. Only the wine
is what you labor for and your one tool
is (be it what it may) the tongue. Confine
yourself to the available then, be poor
but strive to taste it all. Or be inane
but speak of it as best you can--unsure
or unsuccessful, yet savoring the strain.

Between the one or the other, what's to choose?
Taste is a woman and we're merely men.
Something is lacking if you always lose,
such as the sweetness or the juice. But then
something is lacking if you always win--
like eating fresh-plucked peaches without skin.

40 *White Noise*

Hypertrophy of an original feeling:
you hear something. Well don't you? Yes, the father
inside you neighs after his neighbor's wife.
Not that? Well then, sand trickles from the ceiling.
No? Then your home town is ablaze, or rather
blazed yesterday and hisses now: "Your life
has long been utterly destroyed. Don't hide.
If you like, listen. And if not, don't bother."
At any rate the noise is not inside.

Women are griddling eggs. The TV going
with all the programs over. The world's abuse
of all original feeling far and wide
sounds like this. "Hear, Sir Mankind. I am growing.
My lively spark is crackling up your fuse."

41 *Gap*

A gap is opening at the tunnel's end.
Curtains of flesh part in a vertical smile
and glamour rushes through. At once your vile
surroundings grow too vile to comprehend.
She embraced your being yesterday. Today
she beckons wanly from the verge of being.
You're seeing black, you're seeing white, you're seeing
red. And she cries: "Tomorrow you'll see gray!"

The curtains shut and as you look about
everyday properties obstruct your view:
walls, hedges, screens--and women rushing to and fro
in front of them. The show lets out. Which one
of them was she? Who knows? Your vision
has somehow lost the requisite precision.

43 *As Advertised*

The colossus, all his seven senses deranged,
is trying to find himself in the world. He thinks:
"I'm misshapen. Nothing has ever changed.
My eyes have always been in tubes, my drinks
have always tasted of blood, and my left fist
has always formed the sign of the mushroom. I
have hid my gargantuan sex in scented mist
ever since I could smell. I want to die."

On her billboard the she-colossus beams,
a cartoon of mercy, sighs and puts on flesh,
trundles down to the pavement of his dreams
to offer all herself to him afresh.
She finds him ready and, colossus-wise,
lowers her bosom toward him while he dies.

47 *One of Them*

And high on a steep, cragged hill and far
beyond the reach of every circuitry
our virginal troop adores its virginal star
called Pain, while deep below us all we see
is aboriginal technicians who
keep testing the plugs of Pleasure, randomly
pushing their stubby prongs into the deep
receptacles of indeterminacy.

Now and then one of them will faintly scabble
in zig-zags up our slope, fall in a heap
half-way, mouthing some automatic babble.
Sympathy calls to sympathy: "Let him sleep.
He wouldn't rise again, even were he able.
He's drunk. He's one of them. Look at his label."

48 *Operator*

Her fingers groped fumbling from wire to wire
of the titanic joy-machine which seemed
unalterably synchronized with our fire
until she floundered in. She reeled and screamed
at every spark of pain. Our myriad-beamed
warning lights flashed. She fixed them with a sneer,
muttering something like "I've dreamed, I've dreamed"
and hit a button there, a button here.

A spinning top whirred in her inner ear,
her nose got plugged with ozone and her eyes
seethed like small pots as she watched words appear
on our giant screen: DROP DEAD . . . BREAK FREE . . .
BE WISE . . . GO EKE A MEANING OUT OF JEREMIAH
AGENT PROVOCATEUR . . . QUISLING . . . PARIAH

50

Sir, welcome back. I'd really like to know whether what you paid for could be described like this: "First you think, 'I must have been bribed to try this out,' but then you lose your balance, and not unpleasantly. A white-hot glow, and you are temporarily blind. Your talents in music grow irrelevant. You hear the great white noise of sparks." It would appear

you followed me this far. Well then: "Although your skin was numb, you knew (though you couldn't tell, because your tongue seemed turned to lead or gold) that everything smelled of ozone you could smell. And now that you've grown sober, you don't know whether the goal you touched was hot or cold."

53

"Eat," she says. I suppose she means well. "Eat,"
she says again. If I could touch her, I
might accept food at her hands, but she's aloof
in all but her insistence upon why
I should appease my mouth and stomach. Meat
can be impure and water isn't proof
against contamination. "Eat and drink,"
she says and smiles. What choice do I have but think

she couldn't wish me ill and only tenders
the best she can afford. "Drink! eat!" Again!
Either this is some touch of death for genders,
or it's a-way that women have with men.
This chance in thousands may not be a test.
She offers me the world and I ingest.

55 *Lift*

Opens up all its darkness to the dark.
Works as if engineered by a clever devil.
Has automatic buttons for any level.
Carries the maximum gross weight it can.
Has a nickname: Nebuchadnezzar's Ark.
Has three neat signs: COME IN. STAY BACK. IT'S OVER.
Is guaranteed to slide along its groove
and return empty wherever it first began.

Once we have slipped inside, we have to move.
Sniffing the disinfected air, we frown
while automatic music plays "Hey, Lover"
and the light narrows to a vertical crack.
There's no more choice between ahead and back
or left and right. The choice is up or down.