On Frederic Will · *Albert Cook*

THE SELF, the person, the individual, the shifter "I" in discourse—these have come under fragmenting scrutiny in our time, and for the good reason that the many angles on the self are hard to bring into a common perspective, as the very delicacy and the displacements of the task that Frederic Will has here undertaken testifies. Theories have defined the self by combining various sociodynamic, discursive, culturally interactive factors, but it is an oversimplification just to present the self-presenting voice of a writer as the "author dismembered" of Foucault, against which Will sets himself (I, 37). "Self-fashioning" is still more elusive in our time than it was in the Renaissance, when it was the sort of elaborate task recent commentators have deciphered.

The problem of centering formulations in the self is posed in modern times by Rousseau and Goethe. It turns out, of course, that the tell-all strategy announced in Rousseau's title of the *Confessions* involves obstacle as well as transparency, as Starobinski shows us; and de Man goes on from there to find deconstructive indeterminacies at the heart of an enterprise that Rousseau himself provides with the supplementations of his *Reveries.* Goethe too neatly tries to short-circuit (or jump-start) the problem of representation by building it into his title, *Poetry and Truth.*

Of the many strategies since, the analytic-recuperative one mounted elaborately by Proust, as his title hints, *In Search of Time Lost,* is the most resonant and commanding. There is the microscopic approach of Marcel Jouhandeau, attention given to the depiction of small-scale domestic tangles. In their light even the journals of Gide, Paul Léautaud and Jules Renard are scaled to come at the problem of self-representation, and not just to record an era, with such verbal photographs as Proust scores the journals of the brothers Goncourt for being. The anthropologists Michel Leiris and Claude Lévi-Strauss offer the self as structured by sets of motifs, where the philosopher Sartre organizes *Les Mots* around the awareness of

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Frederic Will, *The Fall and the Gods,* Wayne State University Press, 1988–1991. I: *Thresholds and Testimonies: Recovering Order in Literature and Criticism.* II: *A Portrait of John: The Midwest and the World* (1928–1984). III: *Founding the Lasting.*

and search for adequacy, and a sort of immortality, in his medium of expression. Henry Adams in his *Education,* invoked more than once by Will, insisted on the personal but also exemplary character of his portrait by publishing privately and anonymously—and by telling the story in the third person, a device Will adopts for his middle section. Will introduces the further displacement of using the first person in his theoretical sections, especially the first. In adopting such adaptive strategies he invites comparison with various subtle modern autobiographers: Paul Auster shuffles the cards into the enigma of a detective story search for a figure who is himself; Conrad Aiken in *Ushant,* using fictive names about mostly actual events as Will does, produces a riff on travel, love, and literary discourse, topics that also triangulate Will's enterprise; Howard Wolf in *Forgive the Father* deliberately fictionalizes autobiography in order to produce a kind of psychoanalytic neutrality and control over a puzzling past; Christa Wolf addresses the puzzling past through the structured return to a childhood village that offers unanswerable questions.

Will only intermittently fictionalizes; his most notable divergence between his own life and "John's" is, I believe, the figure's undergraduate career. He solves the question of theory by setting it out in separate blocks of somewhat Nietzschean abstract discourse, before and after the quasi-autobiographical narrative of his middle section. Thus he approaches not only these other, various autobiographers, but in focus and tonality the powerful, and neglected, meditations with an autobiographical cast of Jonathan Bishop in *Something Else* and *Who Is Who,* and, in shorter compass, John Pairman Brown's *The Displaced Person's Almanac.* These works, like Will's, are profoundly personal, quick with sharp observation, and resolutely integrative. This vein of meditative prose is produced in the simpler form of the shorter reflective essay (a form Will follows Adorno in here discussing), a mode popularized by trigger-ready essayists like Joan Didion and Annie Dillard. At another extreme, where condensed intensities transform poetics into a vast comprehensiveness of personal world view, there is John Clarke's *From Feathers to Iron.*

Working at his own important tasks, Will generally, here and in his impressive earlier career, shows an instinct for essences and analogies, whether it be of a whole culture (the Tarahumaras dear to Antonin Artaud), a strained and vanished subculture (the Manx) or the nub of a

single line of verse, as in his skill at successive peel-back renderings. So, for example, the probe of his language is shown in his five versions of Gloria Fuertes's poem "Yo" ("I"), where the lines "remera de barcas / ramera de hombres" become first "rower of boats / prostitute of men," then "boat-rower / man-tart," then "rower / whore," then "oarswoman of boats / whoreswoman of men," and finally "See the boat? Who's rowing it? / See that guy? Who's blowing it?" (III, 152–155). Every one of these renderings rings the bell, differently each time. Such a sure instinct guides this poet-philosopher-critic-anthropologist onto the road, and back into the meditations the road furnishes, not only the road through the space of the Americas or the Old World or Eastern Europe or Africa, but also the road through his own experiences. Thus the Trilogy, which returns to the old enterprise of Saint Augustine, for whom a search for the self is a search for God, though it should be said that this is an unrepentant Augustine who seems never to have pleaded to heaven for chastity. And it is a less nihilistic Nietzsche, where *The Fall and the Gods* provides the supposition of a balance between the two intense summaries of the nouns paired in the title. In the Trilogy Will shores his career as a poet and a commentator into a vantage. The notable breadth of commentary on classical literature and modern philosophy is assimilated, as are the Adrian Stokes and Theodor Adorno of whom Will was an early commentator. They figure here to flesh out the presentation, expanded by Jacques Maritain and Gabriel Marcel.

Here in *The Fall and the Gods* he engages the Augustinian enterprise of coming at a sense of God through an examination of his own preoccupations, poetic and aesthetic, beginning in the first volume by organizing his experiences around the aesthetic, the poetic, the philosophic iterability of a Plotinian hierarchy of orders from nature into art, along the lines of his opening quotation from Bonhoeffer, "The inmost identity of I and God, underlying everything, is simply an expression of the proposition: like is conceivable only by like." These experiences, and skeletons of rationales, are set against the disintegrative and deconstructive bent of much current discourse. As an exemplum and counter- and self-assertion he offers, with typically revelatory obliquity, not argument but five sequenced prose poems, quasi-fables, of greater materiality and concreteness than the text that surrounds them.

The illustration of "The Argument of Water" turns the density of its cross-cultural liturgical and perceptual riches into a demonstration of a witness to the beauty, and the meaning of beauty inherent in the physical elements that base and nuance our lives, as though by a historicizing Gaston Bachelard. In "The Quanta of Imagination" he sets up a possible reconciliation of the superficially opposed Gilbert Ryle and Coleridge on imagination by testing them against Max Black on metaphor, "Imaging is of a higher order than whatever in the world it is transitive toward, is at least both secondary to and more sophisticated than what is imaged" (99). So he has personalized and somewhat refocussed this essay from *The Fact of Literature,* "Logical Positivism, Language Analysis, and the Imagination."

The essay on the Essay both centers and displaces his own practice. As he does not say, his method can be defined as in its essentials the opposite of Tom Wolfe's, who tries to carry it all off by a single tone: "His language—hyped up ironically, stretched and pulled into the tensions of the society he describes—witnesses both to its world and to itself as account" (I,135). Will himself, by contrast, proceeds through juxtapositions, changes, and doublings back, and one can measure him by his choice of an alternative to such skillful procedures.

In "Limits in the Time of Consciousness" he bends back on his personal history, beginning with a trip to Greece, and once again to the experience of order in stone, moving then to examples of curtailed pastness in a New Mexico site and in certain poems, and on to an existential sense of God, wrenched from some aphorisms of Angelus Silesius: "Looking forward, for Silesius, can only mean looking into the Lap of God, yet in his forward our orientation toward a past—an eternal past—meets him. The world readored by Heidegger, Snyder, Alan Watt, Simone Weil, Charles Williams, is once again a world in which we can at least rediscover the *sursum corda,* the strange joyous silence at the center of things" (161–162). He pushes on to Villon's toughness before death, and then back to Classical poets, for whom "Sappho's light dust of sadness matches Horace's gorgeous yielding to fatality, challenging us all the more, perhaps, by its refusal to insist" (173).

The second part moves to displaced autobiography. Will keeps invoking as a measure, with an oddness perhaps calculated, Mao and Bertrand Russell. In this account of "John" from birth to the present of writing, the

amorous is interwoven with the environment-adaptive and the intellectual-developmental. The lingering and less lingering voyages are characterized through the simple placement of collocated reflections about them. Here he considerably shortens, and yet tips towards rumination, the experiences given book-length treatment in *From a Year in Greece,* a book that has its own order. So that even so this earlier book gives no attention—presumably because it would have been a distraction from the eye of the traveller—to the asthma attack in Yugoslavia that he now attends to describing, picking up the theme of the boy "John's" asthma. Poems are constantly interspersed—a punctuating intimacy of stocktaking is set up to break through, providing both chorus and ground.

"Philosophy mattered . . . only as a way of arranging data, not as a sequence of tenets . . . the hacking-ally of poetry" (72–3). The self-induced wreckages of amorous turmoils are seen from the angle of partial self-discovery and as a steady source for poetry, "Public wound forever blossomed into private testimony" (83). He recurrently mentions, as well as exhibits (but does not especially analyze) a persistent narcissism. The mystery keeps disappearing into the masteries of verse:

> What the brujo burned with his incensed foot
> Rises in masses tapers like a bone
> Grows and grows like the bones of a swan
> Sails away, and is burned for the asking
>
> (109)

Volume Three, *Founding the Lasting,* returns to the theoretical emphasis of the first volume, producing a simple formal structure: A,B,A—with the difference that the "I," now established in the second volume, diminishes out of the theory in the third. Here the body, the gods, and the languages of art, enter into strong permutation. The note of Nietzschean meditation becomes dominant: "Interest and curiosity exist as the frustration of their own passions, as the negation of their own desires to devour all. In this they resemble jealousy. They are self-promoting and incompletable emotions" (11). "The turning-in of consciousness must be implicit already in the dispersal of interest over the curious world. (The Return must be implicit in the Fall)" (14). "Tales of bracketing force us to consider the

future, the dimension in which the presence of the experience in *The Cosmos* puts on its completeness, reveals its dependence" (20). In "Making and Finding the Gods" the title turns out to include the confrontations of travel: the Parthenon is dwelt on and the Christian mass added as a supplement. "Language exists in history and has a history (we are about to touch it here) but in becoming such it confirms its suprahistorical condition, its condition as the Word, or source of intelligiblity" (37). "This bodily localization of human language is the source of our most wide-reaching, supple, profound accounts of our being-in-the-world; but it is also the limitation on our ability to give an account" (38). "The poet lives the conflict and dialectical interweaving between necessity and imagination, between his and our death and freedom. In the poet the potentials for linguistic recuperation meet with the commonplaces of marketplace speech, in which no effort is made to 'remain near the failure of the god' (as Heidegger puts it)" (56). "The arts flush body out into the open, where we see flashes of our condition, see ourselves glitter with the hopeless beauty of our position in the world" (71). This note carries through into the very last sentence of the whole, "Time as an occlusion has meaning for me only by its inherent resistance toward itself, its will to become a single point of contemporaneous meaning."

Questions of self-awareness are a persistent theme in Will's earlier studies of the Greek—of Archilochus, Sappho, Solon, and Aeschylus. These turn out now, retrospectively as it were, to be concordant with the overarching emphasis in the Trilogy. And the concern can be heard at the center of the poems that have preceded it throughout his career:

> Through what I am.
> Indigenous hosts.
> (*Planets,* "Subaquatic")

> We descend in that silence, through the old volcano.
> We grow trees from our fingers.
> We grow villages now, from the face of the fire.
> (*Guatamala*)

Once more he makes his way among the diamond gardens
Laid out before him in the bloom of a smile.
He has time in his hand.
(*Botulism*)

A little brandy in the snow shovels the walks
it eats the ground
("A Little Brandy" from *Brandy in the Snow*
and *Our Thousand Year Old Bodies*)

Sometimes we take elevators straight up through our shirts
until we can see the corners of our necks
(*The Sliced Dog,* "Variations of Ascent")

He picks up a rock, holds it
coldly against the moon.
Takes a knife, peels off the shell.
Cuts back into naked
central rock.
(*Epics of America,* XII)

The measure of surrealism is strained here to work as more than the validation of equivalences between the dream and the waking life. Will has gone on not, like some of his contemporaries, to the rapidly conventionalized formulae in the couch pastoral of confessional poetry, but rather, robustly and distinctively, to this valuable Trilogy.