

Recollecting the Fragmented: Thematic Convergence and the Dynamics of Empathy in *The Stories of Bleece D’J Pancake*

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Bleece D’J Pancake’s only collection of short fictions, *The Stories of Bleece D’J Pancake*, was published in 1983, four years after the author killed himself with a shotgun at the age of twenty-six; since then his works have attracted constant attention from critics. Pancake was born in 1952 in South Charleston, West Virginia. He gained a B.A. in English at Marshall University in 1974 and enrolled in the creative writing program at the University of Virginia as a graduate student in 1976. Counting him among “that peculiar kind of mountain-bred southerner, or part-southerner” (7), James Alan McPherson, who taught and became friends with the author at the University of Virginia, reflects in the collection’s foreword that Pancake was “constitutionally . . . a lonely and melancholy man” who “stored all his old hurts and all his fantasies” behind his rough and unkempt persona (9, 13).

Most of Pancake’s characters are West Virginian, often vulnerable and obsessed with the memory of past and place. Given the collection’s dominant theme of desperately dreamt but totally impossible escape, Geoffrey Galt Harpham observes that Pancake’s stories are specifically focused on a “condition of deep time and narrow space” (267). In this brief essay, I will first look over Pancake’s systematic elaboration of motifs and symbols, his strong inclination for “unity of effect,” and then examine the dynamics of identification and involvement in his narratives. Through these analyses, I would like to see how Pancake’s keen impulse for authorial control closely interacts with his ability to create in his fiction an intimate but almost aching moment of empathy—a moment when “reader and writer unite within character” (Bottoms 106).

In Pancake’s narratives, a series of powerful images and details are meticulously associated with each other, gradually entrapping characters’ feelings of alienation and solitude so that they can find no possible outlet but in their fantasy. In “Trilobites,” arguably

Pancake's most representative piece, the narrator Colly has lost his father, and his mother is about to sell their farm and leave their town with him. Also abandoned by his girlfriend Ginny who has gone away to a Florida college, Colly, a collector of fossils, is searching for a specimen of trilobites in vain. He is constantly afflicted by flashbacks of the death of his father who once "beat hell out of" him with an old black snake (22). Pancake carefully explores in this story the narrator's obsession with the fragmented memory of the past as well as the perceived hollowness of his interior self.

Looking at his blighted cane fields, Colly sits alone on his tractor and conjures up the ancient scenery of the land:

I lean back, try to forget these fields and flanking hills. A long time before me or these tools, the Teays flowed here. I can almost feel the cold waters and the tickling the trilobites make when they crawl. All the water from the old mountains flowed west. But the land lifted. I have only the bottoms and stone animals I collect. I blink and breathe. My father is a khaki cloud in the canebrakes, and Ginny is no more to me than the bitter smell in the blackberry briars up on the ridge. (25)

Colly's wish for escape is directly correlated to his strong attraction to the prehistoric that allows him, at least temporally, to disperse the painful memory of the desired but lost. The fancied recollection of the ancient land and animals, however, also discourages him from breaking out. When he sees Ginny again during her vacation, he tells her: "When I was a young punk, I tried to run away from home. I was walking through this meadow on the other side of the Hill, and this shadow passed over me. I honest to god thought it was a pterodactyl. It was a damned airplane. I was so damn mad, I came home" (35). For Colly, the image of the prehistoric is both relieving and menacing in its compelling power of transformation.

At the end of the story, Colly gets together with Ginny at a railroad station nearby gas wells whose pumps "suck the ancient gases" (33). Having seen this place, where the fossil fuel is gathered and transported for consumption, Colly bitterly recognizes his complete separation from the girl. Pancake doubles the story's motifs of vacancy and immovability in this sequence by representing a tanker whose wheels are "rusting to the tracks" (33).¹ This is the environment in which the narrator explains to the girl how his father had died: "Little shell fragment. Been in him since the war. Got in his blood . . ." (34). Having told her this, Colly is lost for words: "I see myself scattered, every cell miles from the others. I pull them back and kneel in the dark grass" (34). Earlier, in his private thoughts,

he remembered how “a silver of metal from his [father’s] old wound passed to his brain” (24). Colly’s perceived dismemberment of himself and the haunting memory of his father are closely associated with a much-desired but never-acquired object: the old shell fragment deeply embedded both in his father’s body and Colly’s memory resonates, verbally and visually, with the suggested image of the scattered remnant of the dead shellfish. Pancake thus intensively explores the story’s dominant motif of a fossil, fused with ahistorical solidifications of death, by employing a sort of stratigraphic rhetoric of unearthing and overlaying.

In “The Honored Dead,” Pancake explores the paired themes of fragmented body and obsessive memory of the dead in a more direct fashion, associating them with an underlying motif of the pressure of blood. The narrator’s close friend Eddie returned home one day from battle, packed in a “plastic bag” (120). Earlier, the narrator also witnessed his friend Beck’s death in a car explosion after which Eddie and other volunteer firemen “put pieces of Beck the Sport into bags” (118). In this story, the memory of the dead itself is represented as fragmented and irrecoverable. The narrator can vividly remember how Eddie’s hands looked and worked, yet he “can’t remember his face” (117) in his disjointed narratives that constantly oscillate between present tense and past tense.

Pancake carefully links the narrator’s obsessive memory also to the recurring motif of blood. The narrator relates at the opening that his folks are “a little too keen” (115), remembering that his grandfather attributed this sensitivity to his “Shawnee blood” (115). Frightened by the memory of Eddie’s dismembered body, he evades conscription by using a trick with a soap bar under the arm that raises his “blood pressure . . . clear out of sight” at the physical examination for the draft (124). This act of fraud afflicts him with a nagging sense of disgrace and inferiority, making his friend’s memory increasingly tormenting. Added to these, the narrator repeats during his narrative: “Sometimes I want to ask Ellen [my wife] if she saw Eddie on his last leave” (122). It gradually turns out that his daughter Lundy, who is suggested to be “not jumpy like [his] folks” (115), possibly has Eddie’s blood in her veins: the narrator reflects near the end of the story that Eddie bet him, the last time they met, that he “knew what color [Ellen’s] bush was” (124). The story winds up with the narrator’s following remarks: “I cannot go away, and I cannot make Eddie go away, so I go home. And walking down the street as the bus goes by, I bet myself a million that my Lundy is up and already watching cartoons, and I bet I know who won” (125). In this way,

Pancake meticulously interweaves the narrator's impotent feelings of entrapment with the haunting memory of the dead under the elaborated theme of the pressure of blood.

Pancake's further exploration of the motif of blood can be found in "The Mark" in which he deals with a pregnant woman's "dark secrets with her brother" (91), her past experience of incest. In this tale, the protagonist Reva's persecuting memory of the past is presented along with a series of varied images of hybridity and abnormality such as a "rabbit test" for pregnancy with which Reva "imagine[s] her blood in the rabbit's veins" (90) and the breeding scene of three "spider monkeys" barred in a "chicken-wire cage" whose peculiar composite name might tempt the reader to imagine their having an extra set of limbs (97). The narrative itself is from the beginning set on the day of a bull fair in which the livestock's looks and lineage are appreciated (89). Reva's obsessive memory and her fear of "the mark of the beast" (97) are cumulatively highlighted through these recurring representations of miscellaneous animal imageries.

Pancake's characteristic use of such intense correlation of details and symbols can be discerned also in his choice of names. In "The Scrapper," for example, the name of the protagonist's friend Bund must significantly pun, as Albert E. Wilhelm puts it, on "the bond of friendship" as well as "bondage to the past" (42). In "The Fox Hunters," the lyrical portrayals of early morning in the mountains are presented with the contrasting phrasings of "the passing of an autumn night" at the opening and "the remnants of the night" at the ending (61, 82). These scenes serve as effective reminders of the name of the protagonist Bo's dead girlfriend Dawn who died in a car accident. The name of her broken car "Impala" (69) also suggests Bo's desperate desire and total incapacity for his escape both from his place and from the memory of the dead.

In Pancake's narratives, the series of associated details gradually converge into a symbolic oneness, constructing a carefully-enclosed macrocosm. It seems that, as Harpham observes, "escape is dreamt of in Pancake's stories, but impossible" (267). When Pancake depicts his characters' wretched feelings in such a condition, they are "not so distinct from the consciousness controlling the stories," and hence the mind of the author appears "fundamentally in synch with that of the characters" (Harpham 269). By way of his deep commitment to his characters, in other words, it often appears that Pancake is developing his narrative from *within* the text rather than from without. This renders a unique but almost painful intimacy to his tales, merging the author's keen consciousness to control his

narrative with the characters' desperate desire to reorganize experiences which they feel have become lost and fragmented. By finding a "rare honesty and vulnerability" in Pancake's stories, Greg Bottoms underscores the author's unusual talent to articulate a moment of "uncomfortably authentic pain and confession"—a moment when "reader and writer unite within character, creating—ever so briefly—a perfect, universal instant of empathy" (105-106).

The ending of "Trilobites" exemplifies this power of identification and involvement. After Ginny went back home, Colly is left alone in the depot and perceives a strange recovery of his spirit at the end: "I get up. I'll spend tonight at home. I've got eyes to shut in Michigan—maybe even Germany or China, I don't know yet. I walk, but I'm not scared. I feel my fear moving away in rings through time for a million years" (37). The narrator's epiphanic recognition might suggest his final deliverance from the haunting memory of the past and his consequent return to present realities. Ella Clay High observes, for instance, that Colly here comes to "recognize that only he can forge his own independence, his future, and these cannot be reached by romanticizing a place, the past, or other people" (37). The strong effect of such an abrupt conclusion may presumably evoke that of Hemingway's "Indian Camp" (1924) in which Nick Adams suddenly feels "quite sure that he would never die" (19).² Hemingway, however, deftly suggests in previous passages Nick's latent anxiety by having him pester his father with questions over the varied conditions of human death (19): this renders a subtle but compelling ambiguity to his story. Pancake, in contrast, avoids presenting such a powerful preface to the narrator's final remarks, leaving a significant lacuna in his narrative.

Admittedly, Colly "feel[s] old as hell" (36) near to the ending: his recognition is saturated with what Bottoms called "uncomfortably authentic pain and confession" and hence would allow the empathizing reader to interpret the story as a bitter sort of coming-of-age tale. Colly's suggested return to reality, however, is itself presented by the language of ahistorical romanticization: he feels his fear moving away "in rings through time for a million years." In this light, the narrator's closing utterances, which contain a regressive image of circular movement, suggest not so much his inner victory as the emptiness of his own words in spite (or because) of its emotional intensity that involves the reader so closely. Colly is, after all, still firmly entrapped in his own shell of imagination—in this manner, Pancake appears to run the gamut of the story's central motifs: transferring contentless shells from fossils to the narrator's fragmented self, and

then on to the narrative itself.³

In Pancake's stories, it is not so difficult to discern behind his vulnerable characters the author's keen consciousness and desire to control his narratives. Details and motifs are meticulously elaborated and gradually assembled into an almost systematic oneness, forming a stratified mosaic of symbols and associations. Such a characteristic of Pancake's narrative might sometimes lead, or even demand, the reader to carefully follow and interpret the author's supposed artistic agenda. His stories are essentially monologic and do not fully open up to those subtle but powerful ambiguities in which Hemingway's stories often luxuriate. Nevertheless, there exists in Pancake's narratives a certain excess: overwhelming dynamics of identification and involvement, which not only give his readers an authentic sense of pain but also entice them to deviate and break out from his story's stifling construction. As I have seen, Colly's concluding remarks in "Trilobites" can, and should, be construed as empty and barren in essence, evincing an unalterable state of his entrapment. Still, it is not easy to deny that the narrator's final words bear a compelling immediacy to the degree, as High's reading demonstrates, that the reader is lured to dream of, if not fully believe in, his possible emancipation from this carefully-enclosed world.

According to McPherson, Pancake was "extremely isolated" in the university community (8) and was "always trying to make friends, on any level available to him" (9) by offering unexpected gifts that often made people "feel inadequate and guilty" (14).⁴ With respect to Pancake's ambition to "make it" as a writer, he reflects as follows:

He told me once: "All I have to sell is my experience. If things get really bad, they'll put you and me in the same ditch. They'll pay me a little more, but I'll still be in the ditch." He liked to impress people with tall tales he had made up, and he liked to impress them in self-destructive ways. He would get into fights in lower-class bars on the outskirts of Charlottesville, then return to the city to show off his scars. "These are stories," he would say. (12)

Pancake's great ability to create an emphasizing moment of "uncomfortably authentic pain and confession" in his fiction derives from such a clear recognition of how secret "old hurts" serve as his primary material in its deliberately exaggerated, or displaced, forms of self-sacrifice. In this manner, just like the narrators of "Trilobites" and "The Honored Dead," the author must have attempted to painstakingly recollect and reorganize in his

fiction, in his “stories about estrangement and empathy” (Kadohata 35), things he perceived as lost and fragmented.

What makes Pancake’s characters’ aching feelings authentic is, I would like to argue, not only the author’s power for intimate confession but also his construction of a suffocating network of associations and symbols out of which his vulnerable characters can find no possible escape but through fleeting fantasy. Pancake’s keen authorial consciousness, which constantly prods the reader to carefully follow and re-interpret his suggested agenda, is the very thing that dominates, and thereby torments, the body and soul of his characters. In this light, it can be said that Pancake’s paired impulses for “unity of effect” and urgent self-revelation have their impetus and boosting in his drive for masochistic narcissism. In these stories, the author’s intense monologic narration holds both his displaced selves and committed readers in paralleled states of textual entrapment, providing a unique space for the close identification between the anguish of author, character, and reader in the narrative. Pancake’s strong inclination for “unity of effect” should be regarded from this perspective as the very condition and possibility for generating a brief but “perfect, universal instant of empathy” in his narrative.

Notes

¹ John Casey points out Pancake’s great sensitivity for objects: “He had a very powerful *sense* of things. . . . One of the virtues of his writing is the powerful, careful gearing of the physical to the felt” (172).

² Pancake’s literary adviser McPherson assures: “His style derived in large part from Hemingway” (9).

³ In the course of the narrative Colly also tries to empty out Ginny’s body in his mind. When he lays her down on the floor, he imagines: “I think of Tinker’s sister. Ginny isn’t here. Tinker’s sister is under me.” All he can do is to look a long time at “the hollow shadows hiding her eyes” (35). Pancake’s constant attention to the fixed image of death and hollowness is detectable also in his depiction of the apple-core-like old mine of “Hollow” and the broken Chevrolet Impala of “Fox Hunters.”

⁴ McPherson testifies to how Pancake intensely “cultivated the persona of the Provider” (17). By noting the author’s lower-middle-class origin as a part-southerner, he underlines Pancake’s strong aspirations to become an “aristocrat in blue jeans”: his fascination with “those old, aristocratic, eighteenth-century values that no longer had a context, especially in Charlottesville” (18).

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散失したものを想いあつめて

『ブリース・D'J・パンケイク作品集』における主題の集中化と共感の力学

杉村 篤志

1979年、26歳で自死を遂げたウェストヴァージニア生まれの作家、ブリース・D'J・パンケイクの短篇小説群は、1983年の『作品集』出版以降、物語背景のアパラチア的山岳風土や周縁的南部性への関心とともに、批評家の注目をあつめてきた。「奥ぶかい時間と所せまい空間のありよう」(Geoffrey Galt Harpham)を綿密に描くその作品は、強迫的記憶・断片化・空洞性といった反復主題や象徴的細部の厳密な構築性によって特徴づけられる。「じぶんの体験を売りものにするだけ」と述べたパンケイクの語りはまた、批評家によってしばしばその「痛ましい」までの迫真性と共感喚起力が指摘されてきた。慎重に統御されたその単声的な語りは、比喩的連関と象徴の複雑な編み目のうちに人物の逃避の夢を絡めとるとともに、共感的読者に対してたえず、作品の細部に託されたところの「作者の意図」を読みとるよう暗に要請する。「効果の統一」への厳密な態度と告白のモードの切迫性が被虐的ナルシズムのうちに結託するパンケイクのテキストにおいて、作者・人物・読者は、いわば小説言語によってともに苛まれた存在として親密な共感圏のうちに一体となる。