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Introduction to My Poems: Understanding the Soul in Tieck, Leibniz, Shelley, and Kleist

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Previous volumes of Kaleidoscope have included wonderful poetry. Volume 2 presented Phillip Sauerbeck’s own poetry and his rumination on translating poetry from the original Greek. Volume 3 contained Melanie Fee’s narrative of a relationship through her collection of short poems entitled “A Letter Would Have Been Fine.” This year, three outstanding young poets submitted their works to Kaleidoscope. Together, these works allow the inclusion of an entire section of the journal devoted exclusively to poetry and to the discussion thereof. Given the notable quality of these works, it is to be hoped that many other undergraduate poets will contribute their works for future issues.

Mentor:
Nikky Finney,
Distinguished Professor,
Associate Professor of English

A phenomenon is by definition a very notable, extraordinary, or exceptional fact or occurrence. It is something or someone remarkable for some unusual quality. Many phenomenal things are made up of gases and minerals, others make their way into our lives by torrent and wind power beyond our imaginations, and still others are composed of a sweet profundity of language, intellect, and heart tissue and walk in our classrooms in magnificent human form. I don’t believe in using already overused words in more overused ways. As a poet I choose my words carefully for their truth and accuracy. I believe our young people need all of the truth and accuracy we can possibly stand up and say about them. If something or someone is phenomenal then we should call them by their name, no matter how embarrassing it might be to them. Tasha Pedigo is a phenomenal young poet.

Tasha is a marvelment of what the head, heart, and hands can accomplish when they live in sync and work in tandem, when they burn with the fire of loving one something so much that all else nearby is touched by the smoke, ash, and light of it. The vast world of poetry is Tasha’s greatest love. I was Tasha Pedigo’s instructor this past semester in ENG 507 Imaginative Writing.

She was highly self-motivated. Always prepared. Always doing more than what was asked of her. Her mind was always at work churning the windblown topsoil over to the riches beneath. At the end of the semester she was without a doubt the highest ranked student in the class. Her final project in the class was a joy and a sensation to read. This is what I would like for you to know: Tasha Pedigo is something to write home about, she is surely one for the book, a stunner, a creative lighthouse, a live Christmas tree of ideas and imagination. I’ve instructed young creative writers at the University of Kentucky for the last twelve years. Tasha’s ability and desire are rare and profound. What Tasha is willing to work for, what she wants in this life is just now taking a fine and definitive shape. I’ve never met or taught a more promising young artist, scholar, and human being.

Tasha Pedigo is a grounded down-to-earth student who respects her honest fears and honest questions about life and learning and is not careless or cavalier about her bright mind and probing heart and her greatest love — poetry. She is not gregarious about her gifts. She connects with her peers. She is helpful and attentive to what they too are trying to probe up and under in these rich discovery years. Her prospective trip to the Sorbonne, in the cobbled streets of Paris, in the museums, at the libraries and bookshops of Paris. Right now, I am at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris working on my collection. I’m really enjoying being in France and exploring all the famous bookshops and cafes that my favorite artists frequented in the early 2oth century! As excited as I am about the trip, I’m also a bit nervous to be living in France for two months, working in a poetic form that is new to me, and producing my own body of work.

I will be a senior English major, French minor next fall. I am in the Honors Program and edit the Honors newsletter Tidings. I am particularly interested in French and American literature. I study poetry and hope to earn a joint MA/MFA degree. This fall, I will be applying to graduate schools. I want to thank my advisor, Nikky Finney.
nature. I have talked with Tasha about paying great attention to both her lights. Her future as a scholar and as an artist is strong and highly probable. I have shared my understandings of the Ph.D. in Creative Writing with her. This particular degree requires this kind of dual passion and intellectual interests. I believe her summer in France might be the stepping-stone to that very future.

The design and map for "In Baudelaire's Footsteps," Tasha Pedigo's project for the summer of 2005, is daring and impressive. Picture this: The young undergraduate honors student from the University of Kentucky, the contemporary poet, the diligent French and English major, takes on Paris with head, heart, and hands, for the first time. She uses as guide and frame, the historical work of one daring poet, Baudelaire, and the uncanny predilections of another, David Lehman, to "see" and then tell, in her own words, the France she encounters in these 21st century unpredictable times. It is historical. It is artistic. It is geographical. It is bohemian. It is novel. It is a fabulous idea and she is indeed the student to first dream it up then accomplish it with great aplomb. I speak as a teacher and as an artist: I do not feel simply duty bound to help her accomplish her stated mission. I am wondrously excited, inspired, giddy, about what Tasha will discover about herself as a poet and what she will find in the work that will pour forth from her gifted hands.

This is the first time in my teaching career that I have ever agreed to sponsor a student over the precious summer months. Typically, I spend these months as faculty at various writing retreats around the country, or in deep summer hibernation, working to finish work that I wasn't able to complete during the school year. But when Tasha approached me about her idea and her proposal I simply couldn't say No. It felt like a once in a lifetime opportunity. It sounded like one of those journeys that solidifies a young person's leanings in a certain life and professional direction. As I listened to her describe her plans I could clearly see the emerging phenomenon; the gathered up dreams, the unfolding stories, the various mosaics, the evocative snippets of life, the tastes, the provenance of Paris itself, the girl-poet returning as the young woman-poet.

Tasha Pedigo will return to the University of Kentucky with a body of work that I believe will have the potential for publication (Yes! She is that good and that ready before Paris). I'm already dreaming that it might even be printed by a small old Kentucky press, one where the letters of each poem have to be set by hand, each book numbered, and one of them perhaps offered to the University of Kentucky and its Special Collections Department. We must be this young artist's literary witness. We must rally around her Bon Voyage! And her joyous triumphant return!

Vincent van Gogh once said, "I put my heart and soul into my work, and have lost my mind in the process." It seems that the soul is always used to refer to someone's passion or to reference someone's true nature. Though many people have speculated on where the soul is located in the human body and what the soul is responsible for, it seems no one will ever discover the true nature of the soul. Some of the greatest work concerning the soul was written by Aristotle. He said, "It is the substance in the sense of which corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing's essence." (1) The word "essence" seems to invoke the idea of a soul being an intrinsic characteristic that is somehow unique from all other souls. This is the essential mission of poetry — to capture that essence of an individual, a moment, or a feeling.

Poetry is comparable to the nature of the soul because each is said to be a sort of concentrated core to their greater body — poetry being a compression of a moment or feeling and the soul being a distinct nature of an individual. Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the term inscape to identify the very soul of art. Hopkins said, "an attempt to capture inscape in poetry will mean unique precision and distinctiveness in language, imagery, and metre." (2) In other words, poetry is compressed, tightly woven language that triggers feeling and emotion in the way that fiction, essay, and biography do not. The soul is the individual's morale compass — it does seem to be the nature of the individual. In my readings of Heinrich von
Kleist, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Mary Shelley, and Ludwig Tieck, I have come across many instances of the soul acting in unique ways.

Immortality of Souls, the first of my poems, was written with the ideas and teachings of Leibniz being applied to a romantic relationship. In this poem, I explore the theme of separation verses unity by looking at two people being separated and the proverbial line “It is all for the best.” But is it always for the best? How does it feel when one loses a loved one? Often times it does not seem as if the pain undoubtedly leads to the best of all possible worlds. Many people are simply unable to get through losing a loved one and die an early death as a result of the feeling of being separated. The speaker is someone who has been abandoned — the only reason given for the need to “go soul searching.”

This is a situation that would anger anyone, but the speaker for the most part is taking the break-up in stride and putting his or her faith in a greater being who oversees what has been done. Leibniz was a champion of this idea of the all-perfect and omniscient God. In this poem, I included the final stanza to make that idea concrete. Although the tone of the speaker in the first half was a bit light-hearted, the final stanza is solemn and solid in its message — that one cannot change events — one cannot play God. One has to accept that some things cannot be understood because the future cannot be foreseen. Though the speaker was inwardly more conflicted in the first half of the poem, by the end of the poem, the speaker’s soul is at peace, because there is no longer the struggle to alter whatever his or her fate may be:

I can’t alter the days
(Or the moment the tide will scatter every shell)
I am not the maker of the
Fact of us.

My second poem, The Sound of A Piano Between Valleys, incorporates elements from Ludwig Tieck’s “Fair Eckbert” and also some elements from Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy. This poem is about the ability to trust — and then what feelings are felt when that trust is betrayed. Eckbert was continually tormented by his own musings on whom to trust. In the poem, the hound itself can be read as the desire to trust, but also as a metaphor for Tieck’s bird that tortured Bertha with its incessant singing. The theme of separation and unity arises in the idea of Bertha’s desire to separate herself from her past, and again in the novel Anna Karenina when Anna separates herself from her husband and child. Vronsky, Anna’s lover, was the person who ignited the passion in her life and also made her life all the more tumultuous through their adulterous affair. In the story “Fair Eckbert,” music plays a haunting and nostalgic role as the song sung by the bird serves as a constant reminder of her past, Bertha eventually kills the bird.

In my poem, I included music because, in “Fair Eckbert,” music served as a motif for nostalgia and the less complicated past. In the poem, the music is coming from an opera and two people meet again by chance. Both heroines and the speaker have lost their innocence as a result of having ventured into the world and left the paradise of solitude — and complacence. This gala-like atmosphere can be connected by the early stages of the romance between Anna and Vronsky, because that is where their feelings for each other first took flight. I placed Vronsky’s name in the fourth stanza to parallel with the outside world, which always seems to corrupt the innocent and create uneasiness in the soul. For Bertha, it was not a Vronsky per se, but the idea of being loved by a young handsome man and going out into the world.

These thoughts are not so different from Anna’s. This dichotomy is also found in the person opposite the speaker in this poem. Toward the end of the poem, the speaker is left dreaming with a disquieted soul about possibilities and the ideal circumstance. I incorporated music terminology to stand as a parallel to the music that serves as the backdrop for Bertha’s ideas about the outside world and also Vronsky’s illicit courtship of Anna at the glamorous 19th century Russia gala. In my poem, the speaker hopes for a change, a possible mending of the severed ties:

I would meet you there —
Between measures
And in our quarter rest,
Change.

These thoughts of my speaker parallel Bertha’s thoughts when she is living in the old lady’s house and reading about all the possibilities in the outside world from which she is separated. Once she acquires reason, she is no longer content with the life she had led in the woods. The speaker in my poem is left wondering about the “hundred possible outcomes” in the same way that Bertha wonders about society.

Savior is the most compressed of any of my poems included here. This poem reveals as much in its form as its content. In my reading of “Fair Eckbert,” I noticed that a repeated theme was the desire to trust someone. In the case of Eckbert, once that trust had been established, he continuously second-guesses himself and wonders if he has made a mistake in doing so. In order to capture the conflicted nature of Eckbert,
I incorporated dashes to mirror his hesitation and feeling of doubt. I also chose the words tense and shivering to show uneasiness and the discomfort of bearing a secret and having no one in whom to confide. The word “winter” has often been symbolic. In this poem, “winter” portrays an extreme loneliness — the death that comes upon an individual because of extreme stress. Eckbert has no one in whom to confide and is completely lonely. In many ways he is living in a winter within himself. Therefore, though this poem begins with the question of friendship and how it is created, it ends by longing for companionship:

I remember
Adam’s petition to God:
Almonds to fill his empty skeleton.

Eckbert finds it very difficult to share his true story with anyone and it troubles his soul greatly. He does not want to be separated from everyone. In my poem, I suggest that this desire was also found in Genesis when Adam asked for a companion.

My fourth poem, The Craft, is a compact poem of passion — the passion of a dedicated writer who aims to tell the truth no matter what the truth may be. The last four lines tell about words being written on the page that are so true and extreme in their content that they make the page blush:

Words —
Running around this nudity.
Flashing
A blushing page.

This idea of writing what has never been written before is similar to Dr. Frankenstein’s creation of what had never been created. This passion for the written word captured by the speaker is similar to the love that Dr. Frankenstein has for science.

In my final poem, Savannah, I have applied the grace found in the marionettes to people and place. In the poem, the people are not self-conscious of their movements and interactions. They are portrayed in the poem as being full of grace because their actions are natural, easy going, and in touch with the past. Savannah is also about a place untouched by time.

The place I have crafted has been separated from the present so that a fantasized era has been brought to life. Although this world is separated, it is unified by the people, the place, and actions.

During the Romantic Movement, nature was an important theme; therefore, I decided to create a poem in praise of a place and an eclipsed era. Like the marionettes, there is no shame or embarrassment to be found. In the writing of Heinrich von Kleist, puppets were described as being far superior dancers, because they lack self-consciousness and, in Kleist’s writing, self-consciousness is more of a hindrance for humans. However, puppets have extraordinary grace because they are unaware of this — they have no soul to reason and make them aware of the possibility of making a mistake. In creating this poem, I tried to capture a place hidden and beautiful, unaware of its timeless charm and, like the marionettes, full of grace and soul, by making sure to illustrate the people, traditions, and culture:

As Georgia sat on its thumbs
Tapping its foot to a saliva live jazz
scratching a black dirty chest:
farmer in drought.
Grey smoked eyes widening with the disbelief

The soul is a mysterious essence in everything and in everyone. Aristotle said, “It seems rather to be the soul that holds the body together” (1). Though there is not a clear definition, it seems that the soul can, in the case of Eckbert plague us with worry, self-doubt, and, in the case of Dr. Frankenstein, make us lose our sense of balance and slide into a moral abyss. Dr. Frankenstein’s soul was devoted to discovery — one could also say he was blinded by this intense ambition to create another human life. Though the soul has yet to be scientifically identified or even genetically mapped, we are, of course, sure that the soul exists — we see it everyday, in the enthusiasm of a scientist on the brink of a new discovery, the ardor and dedication of a medical student, and in the eyes of a mother welcoming her newborn into the world for the first time.

Works Cited
The Sound of A Piano Between Valleys

"It is indeed a misfortune that human beings acquire reason, only to lose, in so doing, the innocence of their souls."

"Fair Eckbert"
Ludwig Tieck

Hound of my blood
I will not,
Can’t quite,
Bury you.

Though words of loss were sung;
Woven in the lattice,
something holds me in
Higher form

All my figures
fall like twine —
tumble into cantos.

Between acts
I may find you:
Eyes of Vronsky
Surmising my own.

Separated by others
in the cool chromatic noise
I would feel the quake
Of a hundred possible outcomes.

I would meet you there —
Between measures
And in our quarter rest,
Change.
Savior

"At these moments delicate souls disclose themselves to each other."
"Fair Eckbert"
Ludwig Tieck

What is divined
There? — Souls?
Two worn halves
Tense and etiolate —
Shivering in winter?
I remember
Adam's petition to God:
Almonds to fill his empty skeleton.
Something like fire for
A condition like winter.

The Craft

"...but was engaged, heart and soul, in the pursuit of some discoveries which I hoped to make."
Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

Might these hands be calves?
Whole subjects.
Sucking at the pen,
digesting the milk of my thought.
Thick and necessary:
my hoof —
a cylindrical coral cannon.
Words —
running around this nudity.
Flashing
a blushing page.

Savannah

“The drawing of an eclipse does not demand any great artistry [on the other hand] there is something enigmatic about an eclipse.”
“On the Marionette Theatre”
Heinrich von Kleist

I cannot remember the name of that bay area town, but it buzzed with Spring crowds, banners, and the seafood was cheap, quick, and fast to finish.

As Georgia sat on its thumbs tapping its foot to saliva live jazz scratching a black dirty chest: farmer in drought.
Grey smoked eyes widening with the disbelief of good invention. Sounds of an old bay area.
Sounds of an eclipsed era.

Oh, yes near the water, an island town. Not Atlanta, not suburb and the park steps led right into the ocean serving as cytoplasmic carpet to the drifting boats.

The boats were truly drifting.
The breeze was cold, but I was given
a corn shucked tulip now behind my door,
a sappy mess of canola. And though yellowed, it still speaks to me in waves, the beach not forgotten, the boats not harbored, the music not resting. Any twist and knot has avoided time.

Now so many spent. The town compressed to the cream as the Bayside city expands.
The only art left is the sedentary boat hum.
So, for my own epigraph:
“The blue is all I listened to.”