

To Pay A Little Blood: Pursuit of the Vision in Notes to a Bald Buffalo

by

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The buffalo of John R. Milton's *Notes to a Bald Buffalo* (Vermillion: Spirit Mound Press, 1976) is maimed. He "has lost much of his hair, and has lost three legs . . . and he stumbles badly on the fourth leg and is nearly bald." Milton's buffalo, bereft of three of his legs and most of his hair, is indeed a vulnerable creature. An apology note seems in order, and, in a way, the novella is an apology note. It is also an exoneration of man who, in his human frailty, lacks the insight to see into the future or to learn from the wisdom of the past, but must, in his own present, continually discover himself anew in his relation to his world. Perhaps during the course of the three cycles and twenty-seven individual episodes of the novella, we can discover how the buffalo, whom we meet at last only on the final page, comes to this state. It may not be easy, for the story as a whole is often enigmatic and its elements so intertwined that to pull on any one thread may merely break the thread rather than unravel the mystery.

In early western literature, hunters sometimes discovered that the usually docile buffalo might become, unexpectedly, ferocious and threatening. It was not the size and strength of the creatures that comprised the potential danger, but the menacing element of the unexpected, the uncertainty just when the buffalo might rear its shaggy head and charge without warning. Confrontation with the buffalo was, then, often an uncertain venture. In much the same way, the confrontation with *Notes to a Bald Buffalo* can be dangerous business for the reader. The directions of the novella, in spite of its almost classical structure, are never obvious. Just as we seem to tame the theme, it surprises us with a frontal assault that rips our theme in two, or perhaps three or four or more. At first reading, it appears

to be a highly concentrated chronicle, rich in symbolic and mythological undertones, of the settlement of the nation's frontier. This is only the topsoil. It is the motivation for the westward movement, rather than the actual process, which interests the author, and he proceeds to relate that motivation to broader philosophical considerations. The book is, essentially the story of man's visions, his challenges, his limitations, his triumphs, and his destiny. The theme, while drawing on the western myth, spans time and space to embrace universal man, his past, present, and future. The novella reflects motifs common to much of western literature, but it does not confine itself to these limitations.

Even the structural division revolves in cycles—beginnings, middles, endings—which spin on an ideological axis that merges what seems to be the conclusion with a new beginning. Therefore, the beginning of this narrative is, we assume, the postlude to some other ending, unknown, buried "*far back in myth, perhaps, / or in a people we have not yet learned to know.*"

The cyclical structure evolves into thematic revelation in the poetic essays which frame each of the three cycles. The episodes within each of the frames expand, though somewhat enigmatically at times, the theme of the framework. Man's attempts at classification are always arbitrary, and the thematic classifications will sometimes overlap, foreshadow, or reflect back. Still, the basic structure is there to steady us when we wander too far away.

In "Beginnings," the author likens the American west to an empty cup, the very emptiness of the cup providing its function. "*When the cup is full, its usefulness has ended,*" Milton reminds us. The West is a cup of potential.

"Middles" tells us that "*we must build where we are: the present, though non-existent, fills in the shape like space within an earthen jar. . . . The past is dead, and the future is unborn. The traveler makes his way from death to birth. Eternity cannot be reached without traveling in its direction.*" The present, then, is potential plus. It is vision, but it is vision transformed into energy: "*It squirms . . . / hesitates, circles. . . .*" At this point, fate is still somewhat pliable, still somewhat subject to man's control. It waits for directions to follow.

But "*when the arrow has been shot into the sky, it cannot remain there forever. It must fall to earth.*" That is the frightening thing about endings. They are so inevitable. We wait, trembling, for the arrow to fall to earth, straining our eyes into the distance, into "Endings."

There, Milton jolts us with a division of the cycles of life into four: "ROCK BOW FIRE PIPE." What are we to be

with the leftover cycle? The structure of the novel only provides for three. We can see in the rock the foundation of "Beginnings," in the bow, the thrust of present action toward a future goal, and in the fire, the results of that action. This essay tells us that the "*ashes in the bowl of the pipe are cooling.*" Perhaps it is necessary to let the pipe rest before "*what is concluded must begin again.*"

The first cycle offers us a peek into nine cups of potential. It is not always possible to see clearly to the bottom of each cup, or, for that matter, to clearly distinguish the components of one cup from those of another. The ambiguity is deliberate, and out of this ambiguity another major theme will eventually develop. At this point, it is necessary only to recognize a possible analogy between the splitting of the cycles into segments and the split vision of the Swedish immigrant of the first segment of the cycles: "He perpetually contradicted himself with simultaneous smile and frown, joy and grim reality. . . . The left eye looked full and straight ahead, but the right eye lifted somewhat, so that the gaze went into the distance, or into the imagination."

Imagination is at its best by long distance, for the distance allows a greater romantic distortion. The visions of the Swedish immigrant carry him across an ocean and half a continent, even up to the mine shaft of his treasure-vision, a vision he abandons to his young wife's hearth-dream. He fades away in the shadow of his abandoned dreams but lives on in the "long and leafy branches" of his descendents, and his spirit haunts his great-grandchildren from his portrait. They can feel his eyes upon them and seek some other place in the house to play, away from the haunting portrait. Ghosts are frightening playmates: they may lead us into adventures we might not dare alone.

All of the frontiers of history have probably been invaded by ghosts which nudged at the heels of the adventurers. Each generation must, anew, exorcise its ghosts. Some ghosts are not easily laid to rest. When a descendent of Milton's original patriarch decides to "end the seeret and its malicious effect upon three generations of unsuspecting Swedes. . . . Dig it up, pick it to the surface, strike at it, and end it," he may be facing barriers as formidable as the rock in which the golden vision of his ancestor still lies buried. He decides to follow his own vision, to "Use imagination. . . . Cut through the old world relies," to dig for metaphors instead of gold: "He decided to dedicate his life to creation. To discovery. To the imagination." The descendent, to become free, must complete the ancestral dream or compete with it for higher stakes. He buries the pickaxe and reaches for paper and pencil instead. He wants to create "something

that no one else in all the generations of his family had been able to make."

Man seems willing to risk all to follow his visions. He will walk again and again into traps to pursue those visions, willfully, perhaps tragically, but somehow majestically defying inevitability, though he knows that the crowd may "drop . . . him into the weeds and spit on him . . . [and swear] at him, just as they had done before." He takes the risk because, like the insightfully confused protagonist in the mental institution, "He is willing to pay a little blood for the food he craves." For the pursuit of the vision.

Sometimes, as for the tourist in the novella, the vision involves challenge: "To prove that he and the car could do it, he drove to the top of Mt. Evans, 14,264 feet above sea level, 154 feet higher than Pike's Peak, 12,700 feet higher than his home." Heights can be exhilarating, addictive. The view from one high place whets the sight for the view from another. The tourist, after one high point, searches for another. Yet he realizes that after the ascent will come the "descent, at which time he will be on the outside lane by the edge, able to see over, down, down." He does not want to see the way down, down to the valley. If he looks, he may see himself and his wife "crushed among the pines, no longer able to climb." Such a vision is both fearful, symbolic of the danger of falling from glorious but dizzying heights, and yet tempting, an invitation to another adventure, the final adventure of death. It is the one experience always ahead, the completion of the cycle of life. Yet we have learned in the framework that conclusions may be but appearances that lead into new beginnings. Possible the death-wish, then, is but an assertion of the life force, urging man to a good night's rest before he wakes to the next morning, the new vision.

Man's pursuit of the vision will always be tempered by his limitations and his perception of those limitations, by his fear that he may not be able to breathe in too rarified an atmosphere. The protagonist observes that "Everyone struggles to get to the top. Some cannot make it. The machines give out. Others limp to the summit, tired machines disgorging breathless people who run for the twenty-five cent oxygen." Milton's poet, trying to capture the western scenery, seems to have surpassed his limits, to have run out of words. The scene "cannot be caught in a poem, cannot be stated as form. The best he can do is approximate the meter of running horses and use fences and roads to give a sense of frame. The country is big, almost endless, and it defies the discipline of the poet." Against the landscape his poetry cannot capture, he is a "Puny man," incapable of changing the landscape of his life. He is dwarfed by its scope and

humbled by its mystery, for "There is so much to look at that there is nothing to look at. It is huge, immense, vast, unknowable, a gigantic middle of the world with no clear beginnings and no clear ends. A tremendous sweep of—what?"

The question is hard to answer because the landscape is changeable. Part of the reason it is so illusive is that man himself does not stand still. He cannot stand still, for, as Milton reminds us, "*This motion is life.*" At one point, from his car window, the tourist has conceived the land as "a harsh and sometimes mad country . . . flat and barren and hypnotic." Yet at some other curve in the road, the view can change into an "awesome landscape," or into a threatening one, as imagination casts a foreshadow over the scene in the death-vision from the tourist's car window. And there are always the birds of prey, waiting.

Once, the tourist sees "a fieldmouse, wriggling and struggling, lifted into the blue air in the talons of red-tailed hawk. That has seemed like murder until he remembered that all creatures must eat and there is discrimination only in size and shape, never in intent." He reminds himself of the gracefulness of the hawk in flight and reaches a reconciliation: "Grace, Murder. It is an uneasy juxtaposition which is too real to be dismissed."

Sometimes it seems that the land "in its bare cleanness approaches the mystical," and at other times, the stars may appear "closer to the earth than they should be." At times like these, a sense of illusion hovers over the landscape. In this atmosphere, the historian of the novel becomes fearful that "before long he would not be in his right mind." Then he comes to realize that there are levels of reality, and he has merely stumbled into a different dimension of reality: "He knew that something had happened to him on the mesa, something chaotic in scope and intensity, but there were no details, no pegs on which to hang the experience, nothing to justify the epiphany. It was gone. Back to the dust. He could not remember." The reader can remember that in the desert, walking with his historical ghosts of the region, he has discovered not so much a sense of history as a sense of his own mortality: "He was grateful for the kinship, for the understanding that when he died he would join a great company, his dust sifting in time into their dust, all of the same soil, the same rock, the same sky. It was a comforting thought. . . . Oddly, for the first time in his life, he felt that he might die in peace in this place. It would be an honorable death." In his acceptance of his mortality, he has acquired a new reverence for the forces of life. He knows that he "must get back. Walk faster on history. Walk fast through the dust. Get back. Get back. Get back. To the present." A relationship with the

past is perhaps necessary for full comprehension of the present, but it must be assimilated into the present in order to point forward to the future. The historian, having assimilated his encounter with the past into his present situation, turns it into hope for the future, a hope that the experience will lead to "a new life, a warm life, not smothered in history."

Alone on the desert, the historian has been in good company, the best of the ages. He has even become content to die in such company. Perhaps much of the loneliness of man is but a manifestation of a fear that he might be alone, without company or kinship, at the moment of his death. The historian loses his fear of solitude as the land acquires its own identity for him.

The land, or other elements of nature, may even provide an introduction to divine company. As Elm explains the religious significance of the buffalo to the poet, "The night winds caressed the bluff and sighed into the valley and carried the refrain like a giant whisper over the grass—HOLY HOLY HOLY." Early in the novella, one of the protagonists observes that, "Devoid of everything else, this landscape must house a god. Or has the god preceded him across the plains, over the mountains, and to the sea?" Is that why he is headed westward, westward to the sea? Each protagonist in the novel is searching for answers to secrets, just as we are seeking answers to the many questions the protagonists provoke in us. The tourist seeks to learn the secrets of the Kiva religion from the Indians, but "the answer was no." He does not discover those secrets, but he finds a revelation of his own as he witnesses the breach birth of an Indian colt. After the difficult birth, "The sound of men breathing was like the rush of bird wings in flight." Creation is sacred.

So too can be human encounter, particularly the closest human encounter. The protagonist has been following not only a deity but a woman, an Eve who has been heckoning him on all through the novel, all through history. Man is a creature torn asunder. He is on a quest for completion of his self. He cannot achieve integration without a touch of both the human and the divine. The quest takes the protagonist all the way to the Pacific shore where "The girl is waiting for him as he expected, as he has dreamed for a hundred years. She is dark and beautiful, blending with the shadows of the past and ready to come out and light his way into the future. . . . It has been a long wait. . . ." The sexuality is less sensual than symbolic. The protagonist plummets toward his destiny, "reaching . . . for her heart, her soul, her inner mystery."

Hovering over the discovery of the body on the beach the next morning are "the questions hanging just out of reach, lacking color

and texture and line." Here we are, three pages from the end, and the questions, for all the questing, are still hanging. The author leaves us up in the air deliberately, for there is no One Answer but many Answers, and each of us must search out our own. No matter how hard we try, we are limited by our humanity. Being human rather than divine we have to let some answers hang. Still, we can try to draw some tentative conclusions.

By the end of the novel, the split in the ancestor's vision has finally been mended. The novel is a blend of a heterogony of characters, just as the West is a blend of many heterogonous elements. In the end, the characters span the narrative and merge into a larger entity, just as the various elements have blended into one nation. Like the composition of this nation, the merger of the characters allows for some retention of individuality, so that, while each character usually is identifiable in his progression through the novella, he also sacrifices his identity at the conclusion in which the man on the beach cannot be readily identified. Individual man, no matter how much he strives for individuality, also strives for affiliation, an affiliation to be found eventually in his merger into the common identity of man, his osmosis into the universal elements. The man on the beach is symbolic of all the prairie's "creatures, both mindless and mindful, the supreme being and the monotreme, all swimming in a dry sea, all crumbled into the dust of one man in one place." Only one body on the beach.

Milton is uncomfortable about that body on the beach. Something is still missing: "There is a need for grace." The body on the beach seems to have been identified as Man and claimed by Destiny. But what has happened to the god he thought he was following? It seems like man, like Moses, may catch only reflections of his god. He cannot come face-to-face with a deity, only with shadows. Yahweh is, as always, incomprehensible to man. That does not nullify the need for the quest, or the value of it. Nor is the quest ever really over. Because the cycles refuse to come to a stop, there can be no conclusion, so hope will always lie ahead. The girl has come, not only to complete his identity but to "light his way into the future." The fourth cycle waits. Maybe next time around. . . . As for the buffalo, if he has finished reading the *Notes*, perhaps he can more easily forgive the protagonists for trampling him beyond recognition in their endless, restless search.

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