

Maker and Prophet: Frank Bidart and the Mask of “Herbert White”

Mario Chard

Looking at Frank Bidart’s “Herbert White” always horrifies. The art is extreme, a mode Bidart has suggested he prefers. And why? Because he gives voice to a monster, the worst kind, a necrophiliac, a rapist and murderer of young girls. And because White’s voice is at once human, demotic, stupid even (“What the shit?”), and elevated (“how I wanted to see beneath it, cut // beneath it, and make it / somehow, come alive”), often shifting our attention the way a character’s voice can when it suddenly turns to eloquence, we get the sense of another meaning behind the words themselves, another presence.

Framed in dramatic monologue, the poem follows the associative movements of Herbert White’s mind as he recalls his murders and victims, his return to their “discomposed” bodies, his childhood forays into torture and rape, his anger in adulthood at his father for “sleeping around” and starting a new family. Above all, we are witness to White’s clawing through his mind to make us “see” and understand how “*beautiful*” his crimes have appeared to him, to go back to those moments when he could “*feel* things make sense” before his guilt would force his mind to “blur” and trick him into believing that “somebody else did it, some bastard / had hurt a little girl.” Reeling at his straightforward confessions, we forget or ignore that everything White admits is spoken in the past tense until the only line alluding to his current state of mind appears near the end and shocks us with the revelation that his guilt has finally won out, that he is burning in a consciousness of his own sins: “I hope I fry.”

But I said it was “looking” at “Herbert White” that bothered me most, and I mean it’s always the way the poem appears to me visually, broken in increasingly frenzied patterns by Bidart’s typographical flourishes: the sawed-off and dropped-down lines, the erratic capitalizations, the careful and strange choreography of human speech—not just the words but the way our bodies speak and spit them out—rendered on the page:

—Naturally, I just got right back in the car,
and believe me, was determined, determined,
to head straight for home . . .

but the more I drove,
I kept thinking about getting a girl,
and the more I thought I shouldn't do it,
the more I had to—

I saw her coming out of the movies,
saw she was alone, and . . .

That is the horror, because Herbert White as we know him—regardless of his capacity for elevated speech, despite his adulterated biblical prose (“Man’s spunk is the salt of the earth”) and his own conflation of his violent work with the creations of the God of Genesis (“When I hit her on the head, it was good”)—could never write this poem. Not this way. Someone has to be speaking for him. Someone is transcribing this, and who could that be? In persona, someone else is always there, and the horror of “Herbert White” comes when we recognize that his maker, the poet, is also his prophet.

Frank Bidart’s long interview with Mark Halliday published in *Ploughshares* in 1983, a decade after “Herbert White” appeared as the first poem in Bidart’s debut *Golden State*, is an excellent place to start for one seeking to know the personal history behind Bidart’s development as a poet. Bidart’s interviews tend to be generous explorations of intimate details, but repetitions do pile up, and a common response to questions of his typographical fascination is best stated here:

Punctuation allows me to “lay out” the bones of a sentence visually, spatially, so that the reader can see the pauses, emphases, urgencies and languors in the voice . . . By “punctuation” I mean not merely commas, periods, etc., but line breaks, stanza breaks, capital letters—all the way that speed and tension and emphasis can be marked.

And there’s a common return to Yeats for support on questions about whether Bidart’s early poems, including “Herbert White,” should be considered personal or confessional:

I’ve never been able to get past Yeats’ statement that out of our argument with others we make rhetoric, out of our argument with ourselves we make poetry. At times that’s seemed to me the profoundest thing ever said about poetry.

Understanding this, that the shock we feel at “Herbert White” depends on our seeing it not as the bald transcription of a suspect’s confession but as the imagined “voice” of a villain wrestled to the page by an actual poet’s hand—a poet arguing with his own demons—goes to the heart of our experience of the poem. What’s

more, this tension in the poem between Bidart and White is underscored by White's own desire to blame someone else for his deeds. Early on, White concedes, half-convincingly: "and I knew I couldn't have done that,— / somebody else had to have done that,— / standing above her there, / in those ordinary, shitty leaves . . ."

Further in the interview, Bidart admits that with "Herbert White" he wanted to make "a Yeatsian 'anti-self,'" an idea best explored in Yeats's *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, a small and complex book that primarily seeks to introduce Yeats's theory of the Daimon but which more particularly reveals the Daimon as a mask through which the poet speaks in "another's breath." (*Per Amica* is also the origin of Yeats's oft-quoted statement on poetry and rhetoric's essential quarreling, paraphrased by Bidart above.) Of course, Yeats famously used the occult as a means of tapping into a visionary world in which this kind of anti-theoretical exploration was possible, and much of *Per Amica* is born out of Yeats's conversations with one spirit in particular named Leo Africanus, a figure Yeats identifies as his "antithesis"—a term close to what Bidart has used to describe White in his many interviews since. Here, then, is one thing Yeats learned from such encounters:

I think all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other life, on a re-birth as something not one's self, something created in a moment and perpetually renewed; in playing a game like that of a child where one loses the infinite pain of self-realisation, in a grotesque or solemn painted face put on that one may hide from the terror of judgement.

Yeats suggesting that "all happiness" comes from assuming not just the mask of another but, importantly, a "grotesque" other, recalls Aristotle's own admission in his *Poetics* that we "enjoy looking at the most accurate representations of things which in themselves we find painful to see"—that there is pleasure for the reader in encountering a poem even as grotesque as "Herbert White" if the poem registers to us as true, if it comes close to recreating the movement of a mind—even the most disturbed. But in poetry of persona, whose mind are we seeing? If the poet is a conduit through which the persona speaks, does it matter in "Herbert White" that we see Bidart's hand too, the evidence of his presence in the form and syntax of the poem itself? Yeats's text may have an answer. Speaking of the mask the visionary poet must wear in order to channel the anti-self, Yeats adds "another thought":

The Daimon comes not as like to like but seeking its own opposite, for man and Daimon feed the hunger in one another's hearts. Because the ghost is simple, the man heterogeneous and confused, they are but knit together when the man has found a mask whose lineaments permit the expression of all the man most lacks, and it may be dreads, and of that only.

Surely Bidart found in Herbert White a “mask whose lineaments” revealed his “own opposite,” a depraved voice far different from his own. But despite this safety in distance Yeats offers, that we are free to explore the grotesque and what we “most lack [and dread]” comforted that what we seek is only our opposite, the anti-self masked is still *the self*. Maybe Yeats was speaking to Leo Africanus, the spirit, but it was Yeats’s hand that recorded the responses regardless, forced them on the page. Bidart admits that the anti-self “only has some meaning . . . if [it] shares something fundamental” with the self. A mask consumes the head (and mind), but the body is free to compose. This, then, is the result: Herbert White may be a great monster of poetry, but “Herbert White” the poem is great—through its careful punctuation and form, through its demotic speech that elevates into moments of terror—because the poem itself is the manifestation of what Yeats defined as poetry’s central argument: a quarrel with the self. White tells us what he means; we know that for him hell became a consciousness of his guilt (“—Hell came when I saw / MYSELF”). The extra level of horror in “Herbert White” is that we learn this truth from a poem in which we can see a poet masked and wrestling with the breath of another.

Someone else is there. If we dismiss the moments we sense the presence of a poet working behind his creation in “Herbert White,” we miss the point. For White, even though he “couldn’t, couldn’t,” at the end, make it seem “that somebody else did it . . . ,” there was still the poet, his maker, acting as his prophet. But which comes first? Do our creations, even devils, become our makers when we speak for them? Poetry is born of such argument with the self. A mask may conceal our face but never our voice.