

SEVEN TYPES OF ALIENATION: A SONNET SEQUENCE

(Sorry, Empson)

TYPE ONE: CITIZENSHIP

THE BODY POLITIC

The imperial way is necessity
and duty, power, destiny and war.
We stumble forth, wondering who we are
and how we shall live: seeming conformity
enforced from rank to serried rank in fee
of laborers and wives, believing one
thing as a citizen, another one
as human, loyally applauding deeds,
most bloody acts, in which we'd never engage.
And lip service to the empire's gods appeases
treacherous critics while we do as we please.
But assume nothing. In a dangerous age
of singlemindedness, Erasmus prayed
to St. Socrates and got away with ease.

TYPE TWO: NONCONFORMITY

THE REBEL

My lovely grandmother, working long ago
in a summer sweatshop, hitched her gown
some inches to admit a blessed breeze.

The Rule allowed a kerchief to replace
the chin-high starched collar of the day
but NOT O NEVER a glimpse of black wool stocking.

“MISsus CONnors, YOUR ANkle is SHOWing! “

brayed the Man, outraged. She all but lost the place
that made a frail subsistence for those she mothered.

It wouldn't have mattered if she had recovered,
but forever she was changed to see

propriety make dirty vice of need:

between her and a worldly world

the contrapuntal song of self off key.

TYPE THREE: DISCRIMINATION

THE SECOND SEX

Upon my graduation from Tinker College,
spring of wives for bankers, diplomats,
executives and such, I bolted, sat
for an advanced degree, endured the knowledge
that the worst thing any could be called
was "Girl Graduate Student." Then I married
the professor, learned the worst had varied
now to "Faculty Wife."

Hushed, appalled,
we had no language to compose lament.
For few of us had even read how Newman,
though he feared exposure of the true man,
sought to extinguish "the phantom ... which gibbers" cant
in place of one, be known as the soul within
and not a "scarecrow ... dressed up" as one's twin.

*As quoted in Spark, LOITERING WITH INTENT [New York, 1981], 149.

HAIL THE CONQUERING HEROES

(a small sonnet or sonnette)

Eliot, Frankfurter, Einstein, Fitzgerald, Joyce,
drove their tiresome wives and daughters mad;
but the worst was Freud, who hushed the desperate voice
of pleading sisters, whom he cast off sadly,
sailing from killers who stuffed their mouths with dust.
Our heroes, like all conquerors, unmask badly,
erecting the personal over what is just.

THE POWER OF BELIEF

Once upon a time, I met a child
who was a fourteen year old Harvard fellow.
He had to bring a sitter when he lectured
on the road, and all because his old
prep school math instructor thought him gifted.
Around that time, a nurse I knew withdrew
her girl from the "gifted" program in public school,
all because their doctor thought if "gifted"
she'd never grow to be a "normal woman."

Daughters were meant for a demimonde where failure
was success, success a special failure;
their role, like class, would be a comfy prison.
Where there is nothing to be striven for,
success can not be told apart from failure.

TYPE FOUR : MARRIAGE

I

It must be pleasant, if you're that kind,
to choose what others had better be
and that it's lesser by decree.

Marry a woman young and bind
her feet – leaving her womankind
a thing deformed, untraveled. Freud
gave a trash can of flowers to a bride
in easy acceptance of her bind.

Marry the wrong man, you will be
that unwanted person, She
whose dreams are of no interest, guides
to nowhere, whose jokes aren't funny. Pride
alone is yours as Silence comes
and takes a seat in the well-wrought home.

II

A much respected critic wrote
of forty years of marriage “to
one woman or the other” with whom
“I shared my bed.” Said Dank Commode,
“Living is reading,” his notion of wit.
His wives were nothing because they were his.

Would misunderstood be better or worse?
Assumed to Nabokov’s art divine
as “aurochs and angels?” Manson’s crime
mob of “young loves?” or Yeats’s verse,
made “to flatter beauty’s ignorant ear”
with poison flavorful and dear,
his gentle wrong to hobble them
by “the red rose bordered hem.”

TYPE FIVE : THE EMOTIONAL AFFAIR

WRONGFUL LOVE

Life's thread is spun between the unbound soul
and wheeling world's restrictive rule and order.

Orthodoxy conscious virtue owes

to pride of family and town rewards us,

filling all of life but a small space saved

for a useless, utterly romantic passion:

senseless, sudden, dangerous as the fate-

ful blunder serving up a lovers' potion.

Rebels will be cast out heretic

where princes of darkness strut and grin and evil

hatches out between the twisting air,

spirit-infested, and the rock's resistance.

Goodness and happiness run parallel,

but crooked Fates control the angled crossways.

ABSOLUTE DISTANCE

The pain of forgetting is sure as another ebbtide.
You are leaving me, absurdly enough,
like the Cheshire cat. There's nothing now abiding
but your fierce eyes and dark mustache.

Not for us the corny scarlet letter,*
rather black sails inching over the rim,
bringing the news. When, when was, when was the
moment of truth? The ship untied drifts
from the dock and water widens, is it now, then?
The train gives a chug, a jolt, and slowly wheels
start to turn. The plane mounts the air, was it
then? The past recedes like a continent,
our former selves like wandering spirits, exiled
from the lost Atlantis of our content.

EPIGRAPH

But time does not pass for feelings that stay constant.
Love is itself no matter the cause or cost.

*Hey, did you he-ah what them awful Hawthornes said when their cousin, poor Margaret Fuller, was shipwrecked a-comin home? They was all better off dead, they said, Boston'd never accept her Dago husband, Count or no Count, and their half-breed brat.

TYPE SIX : HIGHER EDUCATION

Improving education rips up roots,
tearing child from polis, arms of tribe,
where instruments operate men and urgent output
of disinformation rides corrupted skies –
with which he, losing, longs to be at one.

Cast off sentiment, expedience.

To be homeless for a time, agree,
setting sail on Homer's wine-dark sea.

Turn, when ready to rejoice, to shades
of miners singing rapturous harmonies
with blackening lungs on downward way to darkness—
or Arctic spring's artful flowering,
gracing the wastelands, painting in desert places,
enameled blossom hatching out from breakage.

TYPE SEVEN : DE FACTO EXILE

THE EXILED MAJORITY

They are here but exiled. Native to where?

Their home has left them. It is no longer here.

We have allowed their faith just forty years.

Where is its substance? In empty souvenirs?

Its meanings are scattered with ancient day-to-day

by tides of intruders, holding towering sway.

I'm told my culture comes from Greece, from Rome.

I am not their heir, nor theirs my home.

Celtic pagans were my family,

tramped by stampeding empires, leaving me

some silly stories for a history.

Iroquois or Irish, let us all

bless the archaeologists who crawl

in dust to touch at last a relic bowl.