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Time Will Darken It: Reciting/Re-Sighting the Past

In order to pay off an old debt that someone else had contracted, Austin King had said yes when he knew that he ought to have said no, and now at five o'clock of a July afternoon he saw the grinning face of trouble everywhere he turned. The house was full of strangers from Mississippi; within an hour, friends and neighbors invited to an evening party would begin ringing the doorbell; and his wife (whom he loved) was not speaking to him. . . (13)

In the opening paragraphs of *Time Will It Darken It*, William Maxwell sets the scene for a domestic drama, the kind of story that he tells so well. The simplicity of the story may veil the other levels on which this story operates. Preceding the opening paragraphs is an epigraph taken from the work of a 16th century Spanish painter, which would seem to have little or nothing to do with the events about to unfold in the pages of the novel. Francisco Pacheco (1564-1654), painter, teacher, and art historian, wrote a series of pieces over many years, published five years after his death (1649) as *The Art of Painting*. His work was revered as the guide to painting style at the time. It seems more than a bit odd, then, to find a portion of this work as the epigraph to a novel written by an American writer in 1945.

The order observed in painting a landscape—once the canvas has been prepared—is as follows: First one draws it, dividing it into three or four distances or planes. In the foremost, where one

places the figure or saint, one draws the largest trees and rocks, proportionate to the scale of the figure. In the second, smaller trees and houses are drawn; in the third yet smaller, and in the fourth, where the mountain ridges meet the sky, one ends with the greatest diminution of all. . . .

Narrative structure frames events in a particular way, and also calls into question or problematizes that structure. In *Time Will Darken It*, the narrative structure is complicated even further by the epigraph—what is the nature of the relationship between the two texts? How do they shape/influence the text as a whole? In what ways might the narrative enact the epigraph? In what way does the pattern imposed by the epigraph provide a framework for reading the entire text? I would argue that this epigraph serves as a template for how to read the story Maxwell tells in the novel. Written upon the novel, the epigraph establishes a frame for the narrative picture; it suggests a particular theme, a leading idea, which the text following it will develop. In this way, it plays an important role in counseling the reader against taking things at face value. We are urged to look past the surface of the picture/narrative to discern the more subtle elements of the story. Pacheco's advice, together with the narrator's advice on writing/reading offered within the story as philosophical reflections, guides us into a deeper interpretation of the events. The reader of *Time Will Darken It* must develop a double vision—keeping in the back of her mind the epigraph as a guide and in the front, the unfolding story. It has been said that

when his wife, Emily, read this passage, she thought of her husband's writing style, his careful attention to detail. In order to read the novel "properly" then, the reader must pay careful attention to the message communicated through the epigraph. The descriptive scenes, sequences of events, the characters, the tensions between them, the resolutions that unfold—meaning accumulates as the reader follows Pacheco's advice to painters and the narrator's commentary on the general nature of time, memory and perception.

Pacheco advises students and fellow painters to remember the basics of painting a landscape—to remember that certain rules must be observed, partly so that the painting will stand the test of time, that it will somehow outlast its creator. In using the epigraph as the preface to the novel, Maxwell calls attention to his own "painterly" style of writing—the balance of his prose style, his careful arrangement of plot elements, but more importantly to the concept that memory is affected by time—that narrative plays an important part in keeping our lives intact. Maxwell literally "prepar[es] the canvas," by which the reader understands that Maxwell will move forward with his story of domestic intrigue—love, family, attachments, separations, loss and recuperation. In the "foremost" of Maxwell's "painting" are Austin, Martha, and cousin Nora; in the "second plane," Nora's family, Randolph and Mr. and Mrs. Potter; in the third plane, friends and neighbors, and finally characters like Rachel, the cook, who enter the story only intermittently. This much might seem evident. More significantly, however, the reader can use this first

paragraph of the epigraph to find a method of reading the story itself—this kind of application goes beyond just “categorizing” characters as being either in the foreground or background and becomes a guide as to how to read the text.

The passage that suggested to Maxwell the title of his novel establishes the idea of the recurring motif of time and memory: “The drawing [of the landscape] is followed by the blocking out or laying in of colors, which some painters are in the habit of doing in black and white, although I deem it better to execute it directly in color in order that the smalt may result brighter. . . .It must not be dark; on the contrary, it must be rather on the light side because time will darken it” (Epigraph). Smalt is “the oldest blue pigment based on cobalt, was often used as an additive to speed the drying time of oil paint and to make cold tints, perhaps to counteract the natural yellowing of drying oils. Being a glass, smalt is transparent, and its particles have highly reflective surfaces.” (naturalpigments.com) This definition clarifies the importance of this passage in the epigraph, and why Pacheco might have warned against making the smalt too dark to begin with. Because it is made of glass, which reflects light, the finer it is ground, the more light it reflects. The coarser it is, the more opaque it is, and then the darker it would become with time. If the finer particles of smalt can counteract the yellowing of age, then it makes sense that the painter would use this finer degree of smalt as he laid on the colors of his painting. The question then, becomes, what is the corresponding element in

Maxwell's novel to smalt? What would be the "base" color of his palette in painting this picture of domestic life in the Midwest in the early 20th century?

The colors of our emotions enliven our world and our experiences. Without emotion, the world is black and white and gray. The brighter the emotional tone, the brighter the tone of the experience. If the emotional tone of a novel is dark, the reader perceives the events through this lens. We also tend to associate a dark emotional tone with sadness, grief, anger—negative emotions, or at the very least, somber ones. Likewise, we associate lighter emotional tones with humor, satire, or outright comedy. In using Pacheco's words as his preface, then, Maxwell orients the reader to the emotional tone of his novel—it won't be too dark or too light—the colors will have been laid out with this in mind—that the tone will darken with age and time. The darkening of the colors in a painting is also associated in the novel with forgetting, that darkness means a fading of the light of knowledge in the present, into the darkness of memory. The further in the past an event fades, the "darker" or more obfuscated it becomes—and it becomes more susceptible to being re-fashioned, colored in different tones. In some respects, the novel seems to be a quilt woven of the various stories of each character, memories of the way things used to be, stories that explain and excuse the present: the story of Austen's family obligation to the Potters; the story of his and Martha's courtship; the stories that Mr. Potter tells of his successes in business; the stories Mrs. Potter tells of life in Mississippi, and of her infidelity to Mr. Potter; the imaginary love

story that Nora writes/tells about herself and Austen, born of disappointment and loneliness. These small narratives within the larger narrative framework constitute the various colors of the painting referred to in the epigraph.

Pacheco urges his readers, the ambitious young painters, to “execute [the landscape] directly in color. . .rather on the light side because time will darken it.” The element of time is the active ingredient. As time works its “magic” to fade and darken color, Pacheco says, it is important to begin with a lighter color so that this natural darkening won’t completely fade the color altogether. Maxwell’s stories are all, to some extent, autobiographical, and remind us of how our memories alter the events as they actually happened, as well as our perception of the people in our lives at the time. Even the most traumatic or tragic events are likely to be seen “darker” than they were as they happened. Barbara Burkhardt points out that “Like Pacheco, [Maxwell] sought to neutralize time’s effects through creative means, to safeguard the past and establish human significance amid a fleeting, uncertain existence” (145). Although Burkhardt insightfully argues that the inclusion of the epigraph opens up the idea that “artistic composition, both visual and literary, [as] an underlying motif in *Time Will Darken It*,” I would argue that more than a motif, more than a map of the writer’s/artist’s process of composition, the epigraph encourages a particular kind of reading.

For instance, images of time’s effect on memory are everywhere evident in the text of the novel. At the outset, the Kings are preparing for a lengthy visit

from their distant quasi-relatives from Mississippi. The two families were connected through Austin's father, Judge King, who had been taken in by the Potter's after his own father had died. The visit had been more or less forced upon Austin as a family obligation. "Until today, Austin King had never set eyes on these foster relatives. When the name Potter crossed his mind at all, it was associated with two faded tintypes in the family album, on the page facing the stiff wedding day portrait of his Grandfather and Grandmother King" (16). It was Mr. Potter, Judge King's boyhood friend, who had written, "anxious to pick up the threads that had broken under the weights of time and distance" (17). Time and distance are important motifs in the novel, associated with the loss of "light" brought on by the years. Memory darkens all things. After the summer and the visit by the Potters had come to an end, Austin would spend time pasting photographs in the family album:

this scrapbook was part of a set, of the great American encyclopaedia of sentimental occasions, family gatherings, and stages in the growth of children. . . One's immediate impression, looking through old photograph albums, is likely to be *Why there has been no change, no change since childhood. And then But how they give themselves away!* And *Who held the camera?* is a question that recurs again and again; what person voluntarily absented himself from the record in order to preserve for posterity

the image he saw through the small glass square on the side of the camera? (186, 188)

The gathering and arranging of photographs in an album parallels the gathering and arranging of stories in the novel—both are ways of remembering and arranging the past, of preserving those moments against the damaging effects of time. As Austen finishes his work on the photo album, dusk has fallen into darkness, and “he saw the lighted room and himself reflected in the window-panes against the darkness outside” (188). The narrator seems to suggest that although old photographs provide some light onto past lives, those who have been the subjects of those photographs, and those who took them, they have been relegated to scraps in books. The people once well known and loved by family are now just images, their identities and relationships long forgotten.

The primary setting of the novel is Elm Street in Draperville Illinois in 1912, which Maxwell describes in careful detail, his narrator recreating a world long gone for readers in 1945 when the novel was published. Again, the significance of the epigraph comes into play. Pacheco advises the painter to carefully consider the arrangement of the figures in the landscape, that they should be drawn and painted to scale; the shading should be appropriate, and so forth. As the painter lays out the arrangement of the landscape, he should take into account this careful placement of figures so that the emphasis falls in the right place—the viewer’s eye would be drawn to the most important figures

in the picture. The reader can use this advice as a guide to understand the significance of the narrative landscape. The first description of Elm Street indicates a nostalgia for the past, but also the realization that nothing ever remains the same, that it can't. "Elm Street, the street the Kings lived on, had been finished for almost a generation when the Potters arrived for their visit. The shade had encroached gradually upon the areas of sunlight, and the outermost branches of the trees—maples and elms, cottonwoods, lindens and box elders—had managed to meet in places over the brick pavement. The houses reflected no set style or period of architecture, but only a pleasure in circular bay windows, wide porches, carpenter's lace, and fresh white paint. Elm Street led nowhere in particular and there was never much traffic on it. . . .The ice-cream wagon was the high point of the monumental July or August afternoon, and much of its importance came from the fact that it was undependable" (18 – 19). Maxwell lovingly recreates his boyhood home. He was intimately familiar with the scene he describes with such care. "In the daytime boys and girls played apart, but evening brought them all together in a common dislike of the dark and of their mother's voice calling them home. They played games, some of which were older than Columbus' voyages. They caught lightning bugs and put them in a bottle. They frightened themselves with ghost stories. They hid from and hunted one another, in and out of the shrubbery. For the grown people relaxing on their porches after the heat of the day, the cry of Ready or not you shall be caught was no more alarming than the fireflies or

the creak of the porch swing” (20). This world, the narrator says, is now long gone: “Elm Street is now in its old age and nothing of all this is left. There are cars instead of carriages, no gypsy wagon has been seen in this part of the country for many years. The ice-cream wagon stopped being dependable and simply failed to come” (20). The narrator insists that although this world has disappeared, the reader can still discover it in its glory, just as the archeologists unearth the old pottery from ancient Venezuelan societies: “you can start digging and with luck unearth pottery and skeletons that have lain in the ground since somewhere around A. D. 1000. The very poverty of evidence will lead you to brilliant and far-reaching hypotheses” (20).

The problem in excavating the “culture of a certain street in a Middle Western small town shortly before the First World War, is a much more delicate undertaking. For one thing, there are no ruins to guide you. Though the houses are not kept up as well as they once were, they are still standing. Of certain barns and outbuildings that are gone (and with them trellises and trumpet vines) you will find no trace whatever. In every yard a dozen landmarks (here a lilac bush, there a sweet syringa) are missing. There is no telling what became of the hanging fern baskets with American flags in them or of all those red geraniums. The people who live on Elm Street now belong to a different civilization. They can tell you nothing. You will not need mosquito netting or emergency rations, and the only specimens you will find, possibly the only thing that will prove helpful to you, will be a glass marble or a locust

shell split up the back and empty” (20 – 21). Coupled with the opening epigraph to the novel, this narratorial voice becomes a guide into the past, and a tutor in how to read the novel. Throughout the narrative, this voice comes back again and again to pull us into a more critical position with regard to the events of the novel. We must always remember, he seems to be saying, that none of this is real; that the effects of time are ravaging to the memory; that any story we tell, whether fiction or non-fiction, is subject to this effect; and that the stories we tell ourselves, about our own families and our own pasts, are probably the most vulnerable of all. But that through the retelling, through the recreation of the scenes and the people and the events that we preserve them, for better or worse.

Throughout the novel, we are reminded by our narrator, and by the epigraph, that we are outside looking in. Through references to photographs, games and stage plays, Maxwell successfully creates a distance between the events in the novel and the way we read those events. The picture he creates mirrors the ways in which our own memories operate. For this reason, we must, as we read, keep in mind the epigraph—with its reference to the effects of time on paintings—and the comments of the narrator—with his continual reference to the effects of time on memory and the way we frame those memories. One of the most striking examples of the motif of this frame, of this idea of being on the outside looking in, is found in Thelma’s hand-drawn picture of the King’s living room the night of the welcome party for the

Mississippi guests. Thelma, the daughter of the African-American cook, Rachel, is described as a “piece of sculpture. . .astonishingly beautiful” with “slanting, dreamy eyes.” She is a quiet, contemplative child, given to fairy tales and happy endings, as many children are. She sees the world through innocent, childish eyes, and sees that the life that the Kings have, she can have, that the color of her skin makes no difference at all in how her life will be in the future. In her drawing, she faithfully recreates “the Kings’ living-room, the ebony pier glass, the upright piano, and the bouquets of white phlox, just as they had appeared to the innocent eye, the eye that sees things as they are and not the use they are put to. The café-au-lait ladies distributed about the room on sofas and chairs wore long lace dresses, diamond necklaces, too many rings on their fingers, too many jeweled pendants and rhinestone ornaments in their hair. The men were more aristocratic. They might have been dark-skinned dukes and earls. No one was fat or ugly, no one was old” (56-57). Seeing her picture, Rachel says “You’re too tender for this world. I got to harden you up some way or you won’t survive” (57). Rachel’s job is to correct that picture, to adjust the frame; with the passing of time, otherwise, Thelma’s heart will be broken by a darker reality. Rachel knows that Thelma will always be on the outside.

Nora Potter is Thelma’s sister in many ways—Nora has painted a picture of a life with Austin that can never be. Like Thelma, Nora believes in the fairy tale prince and the happy ending. Interestingly enough, Nora’s mother understands this tendency in Thelma but will not tolerate it in her own

daughter: “I look at Thelma and I know that so far as she’s concerned, the practicing that comes from the house next door isn’t the Beach girls, it’s the court musicians. The garden is full of fountains splashing and rose trees, and the rats that run in the walls at night—you’ve seen the place where they live, Mrs. Danforth?—are kings’ sons coming and going. ‘Well, dear child,’ I want to say to her, ‘that’s right. They *are* kings’ sons.’” When she and Nora have a conversation in which Nora tells of her determination to stay in Draperville with the Kings, Nora confronts this characteristic in her mother as harmful to her: “You listen to other people. Anybody but your own daughter you have all the patience in the world with. . . .I want to stay up North because I feel, deep down in my heart, that there’s something here for me. . . .I want excitement. I want to live in the real world, not in Mississippi with my head in a brown paper bag” (158, 159). Her frame of reference has determined the way she envisions her life and her future, similar to the way in which Thelma envisions her own future. Mrs. Potter has no idea of the fantasy that Nora has created, but she senses that Nora will be hurt by staying. When the Potters are leaving the Kings’ house to catch the train, and Mrs. Potter realizes that Nora is indeed staying, she says “Cousin Austin and Cousin Martha have their own life to lead, and I won’t have her imposing on them in this way. . . .I don’t know what will become of her!” She intuits that In regard Nora will be on the outside looking in. As much as Nora would wish otherwise, her picture of the future will not be realized.

Austen's entire life has been framed by his family history—his grandfather, his father. Their lives frame his life to such an extent that he only plays a part in a picture that he had no hand in making:

It was never his [Austen's father] intention that Austin should become a lawyer. He died in 1901 before Austin knew what profession he wanted to follow. His father's memory, tenaciously preserved in the minds of the people who loved him, the sense of personal loss, and perhaps most of all the realization that he had never really known his father made Austin choose law as a career. After seven years of practicing in his father's office, he still did not feel that it was his own. (65)

Trapped in inevitability, Austin plays the part he thought he must play. Not until the end of the novel, when his life, Martha's and Nora's have been nearly ruined, does he realize he must reframe his life in more realistic terms.

Time Will Darken It is concerned with the act of perception, with the effects of time on perception, with the process of building perception. This novel also invites speculation about the fleeting presence of a perception before it changes into something else, as well as the way the idea that the past consistently intrudes on the present, darkening it, altering our relationships and our understandings of each other. Appearances in the novel are deceptive; the various stories that comprise the narrative structure, ostensibly told in truth, turn out to be fabrications, often unintentional, but deceptive in any

case. This novel is concerned with the lies we tell ourselves in order to survive; the lies we accept because we have no other choice. Time lays on the colors darker and darker, as is inevitable. The light that pervades the novel comes from moments of clarity, when the memories are exposed for what they are—older versions of lives and events passed down from one generation to the next without any thought for how they will be perceived later. The epigraph to *Time Will Darken It* acts as a template for reading, and also engages in a kind of dialogue with the narrative. Because the epigraph complicates the narrative and problematizes the ways in which we perceive the story, it acts as both template for reading and a metaphor of perception.

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