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Emily A. McDermott

University of Massachusetts Boston, emily.mcdermott@umb.edu

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EMILY A. McDERMOTT
University of Massachusetts Boston

Ovid, Christians, and Celts in the Epilogue of Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*

CHARLES FRAZIER HAS CAREFULLY SITUATED HIS NOVEL ABOUT AN American Civil War deserter within Greek and Latin classical literary traditions. Since its publication, *Cold Mountain* has all but universally been hailed as an “odyssey” by readers, critics, and scholars, in recognition of its structure as an adventure-laden homeward journey, with the end goal of reuniting two lovers; it is rich with Homeric allusions (even to the point of quotation) and typologies of both character and scene (Chitwood; McDermott, “Frazier *Polymêtis*”; Vandiver). In the first chapter, the author further introduces two fragments of the pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus (18), a thinker whose “challenge to mankind is to learn to understand . . . the discourse of nature” (“Heraclitus” 501); in the course of the novel, reflection back on these fragments will contribute substantially to a thematic assertion that war’s devastations may be healed by return to a life attuned to nature (Chitwood; McDermott, “Frazier *Polymêtis*” 102-03, 122-23). A recent study (McDermott, “Metal Face”) also demonstrates the author’s indebtedness, in the same thematic context, to the Golden-Age motif originated by Hesiod in his *Works and Days* and featured as well in Virgil’s *Georgics* and fourth Eclogue.

The novel further abounds with explicit references to books important to its characters. Inman soothes his grueling journey by analectic consultations of Bartram’s *Travels*, and the pages devoted to Ada, Inman’s “well read” Penelope (22), bear a certain resemblance to a St. John’s reading list: she reads to her unlettered companion Ruby from the *Odyssey* (“Books and their contents were a great novelty to Ruby, and so Ada had reckoned that the place to begin was near the beginning” [81]) and regales her with “the entire thrilling plot of *Little Dorrit*” (79). She dips into Lawrence’s *Sword and Gown*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Scarlet Letter* (26), *Bleak House* (200), and *Adam Bede* (271), reflects on “Endymion” (272), and ponders the calming effects on man and beast of recitation from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (322).

On both these accounts (the author's penchant for classical allusion and his characters' proclivity to literature), it is unsurprising to find a direct reference to an oral reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the novel's penultimate paragraph. Nor is it odd that this reference will prove neither casual nor arbitrary, but thematically significant.

In the novel's three-page Epilogue, the surviving protagonist and her makeshift family engage in quasi-celebration of the harvest by feasting, fiddling, singing, and dancing. Just before they retire to bed, "the children begged for a story" and "Ada took a book from her apron and tipped it toward the firelight and read." Her choice of story is explicit: she reads to them of Baucis and Philemon (356), an elderly husband-and-wife pair made famous by the Roman poet Ovid in the eighth book of his epic poem, *Metamorphoses*.

When a thousand other houses in town shut their doors in the faces of two wayfaring strangers, Jupiter and Mercury in disguise, Baucis and Philemon receive them hospitably, sharing with the gods a modest repast of "olives, black or green, and cherries / Preserved in dregs of wine, endive and radish, / And cottage cheese, and eggs, turned over lightly / In the warm ash, with shells unbroken" (8.664-68), all served in earthenware crockery and beech-wood drinking cups. "And all around the table / Shone kindly faces, nothing mean or poor / Or skimpy in good will" (8.677-78).¹ The husband and wife are a joint typology for marital fidelity, piety to the gods and other men, and finding Plenty in rustic poverty. In their kindness, humility, and tranquil symbiosis, they offer an apt paradigm for the harmonious family of Frazier's Epilogue. In the generosity of their hospitality, they align themselves both with the benevolent poor who recurrently offer Inman hospitality in his wanderings and with the legendary hosts of Cherokee legend whose hospitality almost wins them entry into a paradise inside Cold Mountain (196-98);² they also emblemize simplicity, reverence, and freedom

¹All references are to Rolfe Humphries's translation *Ovid: Metamorphoses*.

²One of the important moral barometers of Homer's *Odyssey* is the respect in which a character or society holds *xenia*, the sacred guest-host relationship translated normally as "guest-friendship." Frazier assigns similar ethical weight to hospitality in *Cold Mountain* (McDermott, "Metal Face" 278-79, n. 9). The Yellow Man, the goatwoman, Sara, and the unnamed woman whose baby has just died all receive Inman hospitably, as Ada and Ruby in turn receive the boy from Georgia and a family displaced by Federal invaders. Their generosity affiliates them with Nestor, Menelaus, Aeolus, Alcinoos, and

from destructive ambition. These are all virtues treasured by the modern author as antidotes to the brutal realities of war fever and cruelty that have corrupted his characters' times: like Ovid's humble couple, Ada's family of eight dines sumptuously in simplicity (on four small barbecued chickens, potato salad, string beans, corn, corn bread, and milk straight from the milking-pail [354-55]), evinces gratitude for a life of oneness with nature, each other, and God, and aspires to nothing but waking up the next day to a dawn "as early and demanding as always" (356). Baucis and Philemon's earlier embodiment of these same virtues goes a long way toward explaining Ada's choice of oral reading material in the Epilogue.

The most notable hallmark of the Baucis and Philemon story, however, sits less well with the dramatic action of the novel. Offered the opportunity by Jupiter to choose their own reward for piety, the old couple opts for the privilege of dying at the same moment: "May one hour take us both away; let neither / Outlive the other, that I may never see / The burial of my wife, nor she perform / That office for me" (8.709-10). Thus, in Ovid's original, husband and wife will undergo simultaneous metamorphosis into intertwined trees. It is this last detail of the Ovidian tale that Frazier specifically features in his final paragraph: "When Ada reached the story's conclusion, and the old lovers after long years together in peace and harmony had turned to oak and linden, it was full dark" (356). At first glance, then, it may seem that Frazier has chosen a strange *exemplum* to seal the romance that has occupied his novel, only to come to an abrupt halt with Inman's premature death at the hands of the Home Guard one page before the Epilogue begins.

Eumaios (among others) from the *Odyssey*. By contrast, in extreme breaches of *xenia*, the Cyclops eats his guests, and the sinister nymph Circe turns Odysseus's men to pigs—much as in *Cold Mountain* Junior (who, it is hinted, may be cannibalistic himself [172]) and his sexually predatory wife Lila betray the hospitality code by drugging Inman and Veasey and handing them over to the Home Guard to die. The ravaging Federals, like the Suitors, are (*vice versa*) guests who abuse their hosts. Frazier further assimilates classical mythology to Native American legend through the Baucis and Philemon reference: just as the Ovidian gods come among men disguised as mortals, are received hospitably by Baucis and Philemon, and reward their hosts' generosity, the Cherokee tale told earlier by Inman about a Golden-Age society situated within Cold Mountain begins with the arrival into town of "a man looking like any other man" and proceeds from his desire to reward those who "greeted him and fed him" (197).

Frazier's final chapter ends with a "tableau" of Inman's reclining, shot and wounded, in Ada's lap and the author's characterization of it: "A scene of such quiet and peace that the observer on the ridge could avouch to it later in such a way as might lead those of glad temperaments to imagine some conceivable history where long decades of happy union stretched before the two on the ground" (353). There are indeed readers of such optimism that, even after the author's clear suggestion that they are naïve to do so, they will turn the page to the Epilogue still hopeful that Inman might have miraculously survived his wounds—that he and his "Penelope" may live happily ever after. Once disillusioned for good by Inman's non-appearance in the Epilogue, such a romantically-inclined reader may find it incongruous that the last explicit literary allusion of the novel is to a couple who lived out their days in marital harmony, only to be granted simultaneous death rather than having to live singular for even a moment.³

The ending of the novel has, in fact, been a sore point for some readers. One online respondent's lament that the author seems to have "tacked on a nasty, pointless death in the coda, like a sucker punch" may be taken as paradigmatic of reader resentment: "It's gorgeously written and moving and evocative of a lost time . . . and the ending will make you bang your head on the table" (Megan). Although this reader locates her disaffection particularly in Inman's death, it could perhaps more accurately be said to proceed from the nature of the Epilogue. Presented at the end of the final chapter with an Inman on the point of death (and feeling by heft that the book is all but over), readers naturally crave direct closure to the romantic plotline that has been the novel's central focus. Yet the male hero will not appear in the Epilogue—neither in person nor even by name. This is a *dénouement* triply distanced from its climax: it not only disregards the matter uppermost in the reader's mind (Inman's as-yet-unconfirmed death); it not only jumps ten years into the future; but it also retreats from direct explanation to obliquity, allusivity, and symbolism.

This distance, however, is vital to communication of the author's theme. It is by wrenching the reader away from concentration on the

³Vandiver sees the affective power of the contrast posed by the allusion: "once again, the marriage Ada and Inman imagined for themselves is held up before our view, in Ovid's fairy-tale portrait of idealized old age. But this only reiterates such a marriage's nonreality for Inman and for Ada" (147).

here and now of Inman's death that he sets the stage for assertion that in truth Inman has hardly died—that he “lives on, in the mountains and through the seasons, in Ada and their child” (Chitwood 243). Spoken directly, this message might seem but a consoling platitude. It issues from the elusive and allusive Epilogue, however, as a nuanced expression of the author's profound thematic concern with the antithesis between the eternal cycling of the natural world and the ephemerality of any given human life. Wicker catches the essence of the contrast:

Cold Mountain reassures us that life goes on despite all sorts of “unhappy” events and endings, and yields its joys not alone in ephemeral moments of gratification but continually, in natural compensations—sunsets, a child's discoveries, a task completed, crops in season—that have only to be realized. (311)

Especially as the novel approaches its close, the author consciously and pointedly invokes seasonal imagery and intimations of death and rebirth. In his final chapters, even as he focuses his lens hard on the reunion (and union) of his male and female protagonists, he also pulls away from them, scanning as far back in time as the Stone-Age past, then into a nebulous future. Thus, he both anticipates and emphasizes the pathos of Inman's coming death and at the same time prepares the reader to look upon it philosophically, as part of the ever-regenerating sweep of time. Central elements of this thematic assertion include allusions coded into the lyrics of songs sung by Ada's family in the Epilogue, the Baucis and Philemon reference, and an archaeoastronomical image pattern that culminates in the Epilogue's seemingly tangential account of the amputation four years earlier of the first digit of Ada's forefinger.

Stobrod's choice of “Bonnie George Campbell” as a song to fiddle after the family's dinner is a first hint of Inman's abiding presence in Black Cove. It is a spare hint: the author cites the song by title alone. The reader who chooses to delve into the potential relevance of its lyrics, however, will be rewarded. Indeed, the entire plot of the novel is subsumed in broad outline by the lyrics of this traditional Scottish ballad:

*High upon Highlands, low upon Tay,
Bonnie George Campbell rode out on one day.
All saddled all bridled and booted rode he,
And home came the saddle but never came he.
My barn is to build, my baby's unborn,*

*But Bonnie George Campbell will never return. . . .
Home came the saddle all bloody to see,
And home came the good horse but never came he.* (Waltz)

Like George Campbell, Inman has failed to return from war and left his bride pregnant and trying to run a farm without his help. Inman's history is memorialized in song at his family's celebrations as recognition of his enduring importance to them, indirectly making clear that Inman and his story remain a part of this family's fabric. It is a mournful tune, but—pointedly—Stobrod manages to metamorphose it into something cheerful, “speeding it up and overlaying a dance jig” (355). The resulting transformation of Inman's biography from mournful to celebratory is the Epilogue's first indirect indication that the pain and loss Ada has suffered through Inman's death has somehow been transformed into the contentment of her present existence (McCarron and Knoke 282-83).

This hopeful message is reinforced by the Gospel tune Stobrod sings with Ada's daughter after the children fall to the ground “flushed and damp” from their dancing. Though the only line Frazier records of this song is “Bear me away on your snowy wings” (356), its first stanza opens, “My latest sun is sinking fast / My race is nearly run / My strongest trials now have past / My triumph is begun” (“Angel Band”). The hymn's complex of race, sunset, and triumph is an obvious metaphor for a life of tribulation, death, and rebirth to a Christian afterlife. The metaphor can be applied doubly to the events of the novel.

Primarily, as applied to Inman, it suggests his immunity to extinction: even though he has died, he has succeeded to the “triumph” of resurrection. The author's quotation of the line, “Bear me away on your snowy wings,” additionally makes pointed reference back to a “lone drake” that Inman has seen as he tracks Ada on the mountain. When he first spots it, it is swimming in a “black pool,” oblivious to the chill waters “constricting about it” (315);⁴ the image is a clear foreshadowing of Inman's coming fate. As he later descends the mountain to now-imminent death, he passes the same pool and notes the absence of any trace of the drake: “It had drowned and sunk to the muddy bottom or flown away. There was no telling which, though Inman pictured it

⁴This first appearance of Inman's drake, in turn, refers to an almost concurrent sighting by Ada of three black ducks in a “pool of still black water,” floating “motionless . . . , their heads tucked against their breasts” (306); Ada takes them as a “type” for fear, prefiguring her impending devastation by her own drake's death.

flapping and struggling and then rising into the sky, trailing shards of the ice that had clutched at the taut yellow webs of its feet" (348). This second vision, expressed in terms clearly suggestive of resurrection, constitutes a happier foreshadowing of a stage in his future when death in turn will yield to rebirth. Retrospectively, from a distance of ten years, Stobrod and Inman's daughter may imagine the hero's rebirth as passive and peaceful transport in the arms of angels; for Inman himself, it was a laborious and hard-won ascent, fittingly figured by a shattering of ice chunks rather than by a dusting of snowflakes.

Secondarily, the hymn's metaphor of travail turned to triumph signifies the sublimation of Ada's "trials" (her loss of Inman) to the triumphant renewal of her life in harmony with the cosmic cycle. The life pictured in the Epilogue embodies this triumph; it is Ada's response to a question characteristically posed by post-pastoral texts: "How can we learn to understand our inner nature by feeling its continuum with the outer?" (Gifford 90).⁵ The transformative process by which it has been achieved is, in turn, figured by the anecdote of Ada's amputated finger and its link to Baucis and Philemon.

While reading aloud from Ovid, Ada has trouble turning pages because "the end of her right index finger" had some years before been "pinched off . . . clean as snapping a tomato sucker" in a logging accident. "Ruby poulticed it," however, and shortly it had "healed so neatly you would think that was the way the ends of people's fingers were meant to look" (356). The loss of a piece of Ada's finger represents her loss of Inman.⁶ The manner of the finger's healing represents the grieving process: something is permanently missing, but the wound heals over to the point of imperceptibility to the outside eye. Ruby's poulticing of the finger reminds us that she (along with the healing regimen of work that she imposes) has been responsible for imparting to Ada the self-sufficiency that has enabled her to experience this loss as painful but

⁵Cf. Heddendorf's conclusion that Ada's journey in the novel is "outward, not inward," allowing her to find "her figurative place in the world by acknowledging the literal place where she lives" (192).

⁶Gibson likewise notes, though without elaboration, that "there seems to be a parallel between this loss [of the tip of Ada's finger] and her loss of Inman" (428). McCarron and Knoke point to the antithesis between Ada's injury, which heals, and Inman's, which leads to death, but seem not to identify the wound to Ada's hand symbolically with Inman's death (284).

not crippling.⁷ Implicit in the author's observation on the neat healing of Ada's wound is not only the essential interiority of abiding grief but also a comment on the untraditionality of the family arrangements of the Epilogue: Ada, husbandless, and her fatherless daughter (born of Ada's brief interlude in the Cherokee hut with Inman) live on in contentment, enveloped by Ruby's three-generation family. So Inman's loss, a disfigurement scarcely noticeable to the eye after ten years, is turned to an assertion of healing and renewed wholeness.

The author emphasizes this message by linking the accident to Ada's finger to a sub-theme established earlier concerning the winter solstice. The alert reader may note that Ada's presence in the Epilogue "up on the ridge alone cutting trees in the spot where she had marked the sun setting the day before from the porch" (356) is motivated by a wish voiced some hundred pages previously, before her reunion with Inman: "Were she to decide fully to live here in Black Cove unto death, she believed she would erect towers on the ridge marking the south and north points of the sun's annual swing." She wants to trace the moment at the winter solstice when the sunset stops inching in one direction and starts its swing back the way it came: "Over time, watching that happen again and again might make the years seem not such an awful linear progress but instead a looping and a return" (260). Her craving for "a looping and a return" is tantamount to denial that life is simply a "linear progress" toward death; it also bespeaks her desire to fit her own life to the rhythms of nature, which run in an ever-recurring cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

The winter solstice is the point in the agricultural cycle traditionally most intimately associated with the turn of the natural cycle from death to rebirth.⁸ It was a "time to encourage the sun to grow again" (Bram

⁷Citing page 325 ("You don't need him, Ruby said. / I know I don't need him, Ada said. But I think I want him. / Well that's a whole different thing"), McDermott notes the postfeminist "improvement" Frazier has made in his Homeric model by having his Penelope welcome her Odysseus back "for the 'right' reason (love), rather than the 'wrong' one (female helplessness)" ("Frazier *Polymêtis*" 104).

⁸Winter-solstice-based holidays include, among many others, the Greek Lenaia, the Roman Saturnalia, the Viking/Germanic Yule, the Christian Christmas, the East Asian Dongzhi Festival, and the Hindu Makara Sankranti. Though the particular import of different New Year festivals is widely variable, their common essence lies in "elimination" of the old and tired (= death) and the "inauguration" of the new and powerful (= rebirth) (Henninger 10:416).

14:134). Many cult sites across cultures are aligned to the solstices for the specific purpose of regenerating life (Gimbutas 9:342).⁹ Probably the best-known of these is Stonehenge, where the monuments are arrayed to a “major line of symmetry established along the line of the summer-winter solstices” (Johnson 176), but solstitial alignment was also characteristic of pre-Columbian architecture in North America (Morgan 118, 104).

It is no accident that Inman’s death happens either at or just before this momentous astronomical phenomenon¹⁰—nor that, six years later, on the day after the solstice, and within a few days of the anniversary of Inman’s death, Ada loses her finger while trying to memorialize the site of the solstice sunset. The moment of Inman’s death is the moment that her life stops moving in one direction and turns to move in another—but the location of this moment at the time of the solstice is consoling. Thus, the author depicts Ada—first in the planning stage (260), then six years later in the implementation stage (356)—of building her own little cult site dedicated to cosmic rebirth: the two “towers” that she originally contemplates building to track the sunset are tantamount to a poor-man’s version of the woodhenges that mark many solstitially-aligned sites; her eventual decision to forego the towers and simply “clear some trees to notch the ridge at the turning point” (260) reflects the need to assure visibility at forested solstitial sites.¹¹ The two passages are respectively a foreshadowing and a confirmation that the change wrought in Ada’s life by Inman’s death will not prove unremittingly malign—that in some sense Inman’s death has been impermanent—not simply the result of an “awful linear progress,” but subject to “a looping and a return.”

⁹This view supplants the older assumption that such sites served simply as solar or lunar “observatories.”

¹⁰Pairing Ruby’s comments that the boy from Georgia has a journey of at most two weeks before him and that he should reach home by Christmas (296), we may date Ada and Ruby’s departure from Black Cove to December 11 (or a couple of days later). This calculation, given their absence for six days, puts Inman’s death on December 17 or a few days after.

¹¹An elaborate woodhenge at Cahokia in Illinois featured four posts, two feet in diameter and thirty feet long, that marked the points of the compass, with a ring of forty-four more around the perimeter and a forty-ninth serving as observatory point (Morgan 118).

The assertion of rebirth after death is a conception native to Christianity, and Frazier invokes this Christian connection when Stobrod and Ada's daughter sing of the triumph of resurrection. This invocation, which sits comfortably in the context of the Epilogue, points back as well to an earlier, more anomalous hymnic quotation. Immediately after he has ambushed and killed three Federal soldiers in defense of his hostess, Sara, a rue-laden Inman sits back, smokes a cigarette made from tobacco he has extracted from one of the dead men's pockets, and hums to himself, "*The fear of the grave is removed forever. / When I die I'll live again*" (250). In context, his choice of song teeters on the edge of the macabre. He is performing a subverted funeral rite, assuaging his guilt with the notion that the men he has just killed will rise again; after he sings his song he will entomb their bodies in a rock cave (248, 251), not from respect for the dead, but to hide the evidence of their slaughter. Is he also (more palatably, perhaps) leaping forward to thought of his own resurrection, as a cleansing from the horrifying actions he has been forced to commit in the name of war? Either way, both this hymnic extract and the one from the Epilogue sound the theme of redemption and Christian rebirth.

Redemption and rebirth are not only Christian conceptions, however. They date further back to pagan, agriculturally-based religious practice, focused on the annual natural cycle of death and rebirth of crops (the essential "looping and . . . return"). Primitive *homo religiosus*, Eliade posits, saw generation, death, and regeneration as "three moments in a single mystery" in eternal flow: "Hence, for religious man, death does not put a final end to life. Death is but another modality of human existence" (*Sacred* 197, 148). As Frazier pushes toward the close of a novel that prioritizes wholesome agrarian virtues over acquisitiveness and war-mongering, that deals specifically with the redemption of a hero deeply scarred by those vices, and that makes the physical site of Cold Mountain emblematic of the sort of sacred space where such mysteries come naturally, he ecumenically knits together both Christian and pagan suggestions of rebirth. A third strand of thought entwined with these is Heraclitus's more secularly spiritual vision of a cosmos that comprehends all opposites (including life and death) simultaneously within itself (Chitwood 242-43; McDermott, "Frazier *Polymêtis*" 121-23).

As Inman and Ada move toward reunion on Cold Mountain, Frazier recurrently takes elaborate care to invoke a pagan context, not only

through the prominence he gives the winter solstice but also by infusing the landscape of his protagonists' reunion with a mystical, Stone-Age atmosphere. The abandoned Cherokee encampment in which Ada and Inman will come together and conceive the child who assures their place in nature's continuum is, of course, pointedly non-western and non-Christian—but it is also filled with reminders of an even more ancient epoch.

At a point after their reunion, Inman and Ada leave their hut to forage for food. As they engage in this hunter-gatherer role (in and of itself suggestive of a prehistoric past), they spy an arrow embedded in an ancient poplar tree: "Grey flint point, chipped in smooth scoops. As perfect in symmetry of shape as a handmade thing can be" (337). Examining it, they muse upon its age ("A missed shot a hundred years back. Maybe more. Long ago"). Ada casts it "as some relic, a piece of another world," conceiving it, linearly, as "an object already numbered among the things that were." This explicit evocation of a primeval past emphasizes the vast sweep of time predating Inman and Ada's entry into this eerie place. Inman's further attempt to construct a human back-story around the relic adds to its import: "Someone went hungry. . . . Was the missing due to want of skill? Desperation? Shift of wind? Bad light?" Ozymandias-like, his reflections suggest the evanescence not only of those who crafted the artefact but also of those now gazing on it. Taking this lesson quickly, Inman moves to imagining a future time when he and Ada, "grey as ash," will bring children to the site to reveal the arrow to them in turn (338).¹² The cycling of time is aimed palpably at a future when Inman and Ada will be as faceless as the arrow's original shooters. Paradoxically, though, it also holds the promise of a measure of permanence, for it implies that, like their ancient forebears, Ada and Inman have now become a not fully delible part of this place's story.

Significantly, though, the arrow in the poplar is but the culmination of a series of references to archaeological finds in the novel's second half, all similarly suggestive of human stories not quite erased by the circling sweep of time. The first of these is the cave that becomes the burial site for the three Northerners Inman has ambushed and sung a hymn of

¹²McDermott connects the motif of the arrow in the poplar to the Golden-Age topos that originated in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and abounded among Roman poets of the Augustan age, and the children Inman and Ada will bring to the site to the mysterious wonder-child of Virgil's fourth Eclogue ("Metal Face" 253-54).

resurrection to. This cave bears signs of an ancient population—ideograms and a “lost pattern of writing” that “None alive now could look on . . . and tell alpha from zed” (248). Feeling the flow of time around him, Inman rushes to fix his own place in the cave’s story by grabbing up a piece of charcoal and drawing more pictures that “fit in like near kin with the antique scratchings already put there by Cherokee or whatever kind of person came before them” (251). His pictograms are quasi-epitaphs for the two Philadelphians and the New Yorker entombed in the cave, but they also reify and memorialize his own passing presence there.

Other relics encountered on Cold Mountain range from a Cherokee rock cairn—“whether way marker or memorial or holy place was now unknowable”—that Inman similarly contributes to “as commemoration of some old upward yearning” (277), to two elaborately-described sites that predate even the present indigenous population of the area. The first of these is a “round flat stone marked from rim to rim with all manner of odd scripture” (284), under which Ada and Ruby hide food for Ruby’s outlier father. The writing on the stone, like the cave-writing Inman has added to, is mysterious:

It was about the size of the mouth of a washtub, and the markings showed not any feature of the Cherokee style. They were too abrupt and strict in the angles of their characters, which jittered across the stone as a spider on a skillet. It might have come from some race prior to man. (284-85)

The hyperbole of the last sentence (which seems to refer to a time when gods, giants or other mythic figures still walked the earth) stresses the artifact’s vast antiquity. This stone can perhaps be identified with one presented as non-fictional by Frazier in an introductory essay to his second novel, *Thirteen Moons*:

Potsherds and bird points turned up every spring when gardens were plowed. I knew a place in the woods where a flat stone covered in strange scripture lay hidden under leaves. In a nearby town, I worked for archaeologists excavating a town house and turned up pieces of wall daub with handprints still visible in the dry clay. You couldn’t live in the mountains and not be reminded constantly of the land’s previous occupants. (“Author Essay”)

Here, the author makes explicit his interest in archaeological remains as links with a place’s past. Interestingly, though, in his *fictional* account

of this rock, he takes care to portray it not (as might be expected) as a relic of known indigenes, but as a relic of a mysterious and alien race of inconceivable antiquity.

A recent survey of pre-Columbian architectural sites in the US lists “a relatively small number” of such sites in the Tennessee, Appalachian and Piedmont area, all from the relatively late period 800-1500 AD; their characteristic architecture is of earth, not stone (Morgan 185, 1).¹³ The eastern seaboard does abound, however, with stone relics and structures that have been put forward either hopefully or through deliberate hoax as remnants of a Celtic Stone Age. In the early 1980s, for example, Barry Fell, a marine biologist turned amateur archaeologist, made an enormous splash by contending that two inscribed rocks from West Virginia (the Horse Creek and Luther Elkins, or “Wyoming County,” carvings) were Christian messages written in Old Irish language and transcribed in the ancient Ogam alphabet. Fell dated these to the sixth to eighth centuries AD and held them up as evidence that St. Brendan had discovered North America in the sixth century. The beginning of the Luther Elkins Petroglyph, according to Fell’s translation, declares the solstitial arrangement of the monument: “At the time of sunrise a ray grazes the notch on the left side on Christmas Day.”

Fell’s findings have been discredited by mainstream archaeologists.¹⁴ Nonetheless, there is remarkable coincidence between the solstitial message he imputes to this petroglyph and Frazier’s archaeoastronomical sub-theme in the second half of the novel. The characters on Fell’s two petroglyphs also match precisely the author’s description of abrupt, strict, angular, jittery script.¹⁵ Given the great publicity garnered by Fell’s theories among both professionals and the general public, it is not unreasonable to infer that the West Virginia petroglyphs indeed served as the direct visual models for the stone relic on Cold Mountain. This is not to say, of course, that Frazier necessarily gives credence to Fell’s interpretation of the script on the carvings: he could describe a similar stone under the assumption (more acceptable to mainstream

¹³References to stone construction or artifacts are rare in Morgan, though see 191, 104.

¹⁴See “The ‘Ogham’ Petroglyphs” for a rich compilation of source materials (pro and con) on this colorful controversy.

¹⁵Several images of the two carvings may be viewed online at “Fell.”

archaeologists, and more in line with his observations in the “Author Essay” quoted above) that it was carved by an earlier Native American population. Whatever the author’s beliefs on the historicity of St. Brendan’s discovery of West Virginia, however, for symbolic and thematic purposes he may consciously have drawn Fell’s notorious petroglyphs into the landscape of his novel. Speculation that he did just that is bolstered by his later description of a second Stone-Age site that has even more distinct Celtic affinities.

After wending their way through a forest of “monolithic” trees (291) on Cold Mountain, Ada and Ruby seek shelter under “a tumble of great flat rocks,” three of which have “fallen upon each other so as to form a lean-to, a sort of accidental dolmen” (299). After further description of the small enclosure’s interior, the author sums up: “As architecture, its shape reminded Ada of the symbol for pi” (299). The description is striking. Though many readers may be unaware that modest or mid-sized dolmens sharing this shape and dating from the Neolithic Period still dot the British and French countrysides, the reference to pi readily conjures an image of the monumental *trilithons* of Stonehenge, the best-known Stone-Age Celtic site of the world. This imagistic leap stresses the further connection that, within just a few days of the winter solstice, the women are seeking refuge in a rock formation whose prototype is famously aligned to that astronomical phenomenon. The little shelter’s contents—arrowheads, “[f]ragments of charcoal and splinters of flint” (300)—are additional clues to its Stone-Age origins. The mystic quality of its site is heightened by the author’s surrounding it with a spring bubbling up from the ground and a ring of “chestnut and oak trees that had never been cut since the day of creation” (299). This is in truth a “sacred grove,” reminiscent of the animistic *nemeta* of a Celtic Stone Age, metaphorically injected here into a primeval North Carolina landscape.

In describing these latter archaeological finds (as well as the Cherokee rock cairn, the arrow buried deep in the poplar tree, and the cave where Inman entombs three federal soldiers), the author emphasizes the grandeur, the animistic sanctity, and the perpetuity of the Cold Mountain terrain, in contrast to the ephemerality of the human generations that have passed (or are presently passing) through it. These effects are achieved regardless of the particular identity of those human generations. Nonetheless, the author seems also to have purposely

introduced imagery that infuses this North Carolina mountainside with a specifically Celtic or quasi-Celtic aura. In doing so, he subtly connects these two rock relics to the solstice theme he has threaded through his final chapters, coupling the artifacts' obvious representation of antiquity with a complementary assertion of rebirth. Thus, he paves the way for Inman's explicit "correction" of Ada's initially linear interpretation of the arrow in the poplar tree: it is not just a "thing that was," but also an emblem for the synchronization of human life to the "looping and . . . return" of the physical cosmos.

The author also makes a formal loop here, linking these pieces of a Celtic past back to the beginning of his novel, where Ada's father, the evangelizing Monroe, pooh-poohs the animism he finds among the "odd" and "unreadable" (42) residents of his new parish, especially his closest neighbor, Esco Swanger:

Monroe found no evidence of religion other than a worship of animals and trees and rocks and weather. Esco was some old relic Celt was what Monroe concluded; what few thoughts Esco might have would more than likely be in Gaelic. (44)

By the end of the novel, Monroe's acerbic reflections on Esco's unorthodox beliefs will have proven more than humorous asides. Rather, Esco, a "dipped Baptist" (45) with animistic pagan affinities, is an early prefigurement of the author's own ecumenical vision of a life on Cold Mountain fitted to the cosmic cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

In simple terms, the Epilogue's point is that, despite Inman's death, the novel has had a happy ending, because in the long view there *is* no ending. Inman has been redeemed to life by union with Ada: "He had been living like a dead man and this was life before him" (341). He welcomes her "loving touch" as "the key to life on earth" (331), the endpoint and goal of his homeward journey. Gibson cites both these passages (among others) in making his case that Inman has undergone a specifically Christian redemption (426). But, *pace* Gibson, even Inman's redemption shares in Frazier's ecumenical vision. Inasmuch as the hero's spiritual and sexual union with Ada represents fulfillment of his quest, it also signals an end to his cosmic purpose. Symbolically, then, he becomes assimilated to the seasonal vegetation god who dies after

fulfilling his role as inseminator.¹⁶ As a result, Christianly redeemed, paganly sacrificed, he has been able to die within a Heraclitean epiphany of completion and unison with the universe: “Apple trees hanging heavy with fruit but yet unaccountably blossoming, ice rimming the spring, okra plants blooming yellow and maroon. . . . Everything coming around at once” (353). For her part, Ada avoids the trap of regret and achieves a life of harmony and fulfillment. In her failure to remarry, she not only demonstrates her lasting fidelity (as character) to her lover; she is also assimilated symbolically to a fertility goddess: she becomes the tree that through Inman’s seed has been enabled to grow strong and “bear fruit” (McCarron and Knoke 285). The daughter the two have begotten represents both their personal, genetic “looping and . . . return” and their contribution to the cosmic cycle; her birth assures that their love story will come to no end.

Frazier has nuanced and reinforced this basic message through layers of allusivity and symbolism. His recurrent infusion of Stone-Age relics and solstice-based pagan religious practice into the sacral space of Cold Mountain emphasizes the endless cycling of birth and death in nature and human life. Christian hymnic quotations and direct references to personal redemption prepare the reader for symbolic rebirth. Imagistic assimilation of Ada to a fertility goddess and Inman to her dying consort lays the ground for her assumption of the role of unmarried matriarch in the Epilogue. The soothing semiotic of healing embodied in the odd detailing of her digital mishap—likewise linked to the solstice—similarly pulls the reader’s focus away from the particular and actual (Inman’s death) to the cosmic and symbolic (ever-regenerating life).

Given the author’s strategy of pulling back in his Epilogue from linear narration of plot, entering instead a sacred wood of metaphor and allusion, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* prove an especially apt source for his capping literary allusion. Metamorphosis, after all, is an alternative to linear death. It partakes intrinsically of both elimination and inauguration, setting the two opposites into uneasy stasis, and is therefore fittingly invoked in an epilogue that propounds the symbiosis of life and death. Transformed magically into oak and linden, Baucis and Philemon mediate between lower and upper worlds, their roots digging deep into the earth, while their branches reach to the sky. The

¹⁶McCarron and Knoke sexualize the image of the arrow Ada and Inman find embedded in the poplar tree, likening it to Inman and the tree to Ada (284-85).

perpetuity of their love is figured by their continued intertwining in tree form.

Absent the magic of metamorphosis, Ada and Inman suffer the initial separation brought on by death, but the novel's recurrent promise of continued life assuages death's sting. The Epilogue's image of Ada's healed hand points instead to the truth that life and death are simply different aspects of the same life-continuum, implying that indeed Ada and Inman continue to grow old together, like Ovid's old couple. Part of their capacity to do so rests in what McCarron and Knoke style "physical separation turned spiritual fusion" (284). Another part transcends the joining of two human souls, resting rather in spiritual fusion between humankind and the physical cosmos. In this context, the harmonious synchronization of Ada's life in the Epilogue to agricultural rhythms is a euhemerized replication of Baucis and Philemon's metamorphosis into trees.

Thus, Ada's choice of a story to read her patched-together family is proven an appropriate capping reference not only because of the ethical lessons it puts forward concerning reverence, humility, and right conduct of human relations, but also because it reinforces the author's contention that Inman's story has not ended with his death—that he has in some sense been reborn and subsumed into the cosmic cycle. It further reveals that, contrary to the author's implication as Inman lies dying in Ada's lap, the "conceivable history where long decades of happy union stretched before the two on the ground" (353) has in actuality been achieved—and the person of "glad temperament" who has "conceived" it is the author himself.

As her family prepares their October picnic, the author informs us that, of all the seasons, Ada most prefers autumn—"and she could not entirely overcome the sentimentality of finding poignancy in the fall of leaves, of seeing it as the conclusion to the year and therefore metaphoric, though she knew the seasons came around and around and had neither inauguration nor epilogue" (355). There is a flick of metafictional humor in the author's encoding into his novel's Epilogue notation that epilogues have no place in the natural world. The thematic point is both serious and iconic, however: by overlaying the "tragedy" of Inman's death with evocation of a cosmic cycle poised for rebirth, the author achieves an ending focused less on death and its "awful linear

progress” than on the “looping and . . . return” implicit in a fulfilled life in accord with the redundant cycling of nature.

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Eudora Welty

Review



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