

## Roads Not Taken

The *Connotations* symposia are a biennial event, organized by a scholarly society that has formed around *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*. Members of the society are asked to offer suggestions for conference topics, and are then to vote on them. Still, the symposia are not general membership meetings of the society but anyone interested in the theme is invited to submit a proposal. The topic of our next symposium (July 31 to August 4, 2011) will be "Poetic Economy."

The one who first suggested "Roads Not Taken" as a topic is my co-editor Burkhard Niederhoff, whose ideas and suggestions will be reflected on these pages. Inge Leimberg, our founding editor, Angelika Zirker, our far more than assistant editor, Burkhard Niederhoff and the undersigned then set about to select the proposals that led to an invitation to the conference hotel of Tübingen University in Freudens-tadt in the Black Forest, where we met in August 2009. Our criteria, of course, had to do with the ideas of the subject we had developed in several meetings and discussions, and which finally made their way into the proposal for support by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, whom we would like to thank for their generous funding of the symposium and of the editing of this issue which contains a first selection of revised conference papers.

The topic of our conference was not "roads in literature," for the simple reason that we might then have just as well called it "literature." Neither is the topic just "decisions" or "decision-making processes" in literature. A variant on the topic of Hercules at the crossroads does not necessarily mean that the road not taken is actually relevant to the work in question. Some of the speakers will remember messages in which we asked them: is the road not taken really more than just a possibility mentioned; does it actually play a role in the texts you have chosen for discussion? Thus, whereas at first the

theme of our symposium seemed ubiquitous, upon reflection we came to realize that it may be quite rare, or at least that it may require careful analysis and close reading to make it visible.

Still, I think our symposium has led to tangible results and new readings because we actually found that “Roads Not Taken” combines two essential features of imaginative literature. There is, on the one hand, the representation of character determining action, or action determining character (Aristotle’s basic criteria). It seems—and this is one of the questions the *Connotations* editors have been discussing—that especially in modern and postmodern literature the relation becomes increasingly complex in so far as characters are not only defined by what they do but also by what they did not do but might have done, and that, accordingly, their question “who am I?” (or our question: “who are you?”) is not to be answered in a straightforward manner. And there is, on the other hand, the fact that any imaginative or fictional literary representation is a “road not taken” in that it shows us not what is but what might have been, or, in the words of Aristotle: “it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity” (*Poetics* section 9). In this respect, the road not taken may be the road we should take, in the author’s view. At the same time, any decision by a writer about a character, an event, a description, and so on, is a road taken, and all the other options a writer has, the characters that do not appear, the events that do not take place, are roads not taken. Of course all this is only relevant to our theme—and to critical discussion in general—when the very alternative becomes part of the author’s project, i.e. when he or she shows us that the text we read is meant to be a road we have not taken (but might do so), or when the author shows us that there might have been an alternative to what we read, i.e. that the writing process is a road on which the author had to take decisions and reflect on alternatives.

A classic example that comes to mind is Aunt Betsey’s disappointment in *David Copperfield* about the news that David is a boy and not a

girl, which causes the narrator to reflect on the fact that the girl, “Betsey Trotwood Copperfield was for ever in the land of dreams and shadows, the tremendous region whence I had so lately travelled; [...]” (chapter 1). This means that she remains in the shadowy land of the imagination, does not become the “favourite child” the author calls his novel in his preface. Much of David’s painful experience, many trials and errors, the reader is made to think, would have been avoided if his aunt had taken care of her sister-in-law and her child, instead of leaving them in disappointment; but of course this would never have been Dickens’s novel, which became a famous *bildungsroman* for the very reason of David’s being very much on his own.

This takes us back to the question of how to represent what is not there and does not happen. Of course there may be characters actually imagining lives they never lived but which might have come true had they acted differently. But, as we realized, this is comparatively rare. The road not taken may appear instead, as in Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, by a character reverting again and again to a person and a scene, in this case the girl in the punt, which might have led to a different life. The road not taken may even appear as a person the protagonist might have become, such as Steerforth or Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*. Still we may ask ourselves where there is a road in such a case, or whether our theme does not evaporate if applied too loosely in a metaphorical sense. But even where we actually get alternative roads their status is by no means a matter of course. An example is Robert Frost’s famous poem, where the speaker imagines not so much the difference of the roads but rather a moment in the future at which he will learn that taking the road “less travelled by” eliminates the difference of the roads for by his taking that road it will have become as worn as the other. Furthermore, the view of the road not taken before a decision is made and the retrospective view upon that road appear to coalesce.

Our topic, this is to suggest, began to get blurred as soon as we believed to have come to terms with it. Through the symposium we were hoping to achieve some clarity, not least with regard to the

historical aspect of "Roads Not Taken." In fact, we came to realize that, although the nostalgic or painful reflection on an alternative life that might have been is perhaps a post-romantic phenomenon, central elements of what we discussed were to be found much earlier.

When it comes to a work in which we find both a reflection on possible paths into the future and a retrospective consideration of what might have been, *Hamlet* is my personal favourite. As to the first, one need only think of his famous "Now might I do it pat" speech (3.3), in which he imagines that Claudius might go to heaven ("fit and season'd for his passage" 3.3.86) if he kills him while he is at prayer. Hamlet abstains from avenging his father at this moment because he wants to make his revenge more lasting by sending Claudius to hell and not to heaven. Similarly, in the even more famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, it is the imagination (or the reflection on the imagination) of a road that might be taken that will lead to Hamlet's not taking that road (or perhaps no road at all). It is "the dread of something after death" (3.1.78), the fear of "what dreams may come" (3.1.66) that will prevent him, "us," as Hamlet says, from making his "quietus [...] With a bare bodkin," a dagger (3.1.74-75). As to the second element, a retrospective consideration of a road not taken, this comes to the fore in the funeral of Ophelia. "I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife," says the Queen at this moment of anagnorisis (5.1.237), when Hamlet realizes who it is that is to be buried in the grave dug for "One that was a woman" (5.1.131). Only when she is dead does Hamlet realize "I lov'd Ophelia" (5.1.264). The funeral procession shows us that it is actually a path that Hamlet did not take when he sent her, in 3.1, upon the road to the nunnery (3.1.121, 138, 141). These remarks can do little more than point out that our theme is there, in this most influential of literary texts. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the poetological side of our subject, the evocation and rejection of an imaginative road to be taken by a writer, is there too. Shakespeare evokes the path typically chosen by the protagonist of a revenge tragedy only to reject it. And he would not be Shakespeare if he did not do it in the very scene in which Hamlet most closely fulfils the

pattern evoked by the “revenge code” (Jenkins, Arden Edition 514) when Claudius is at prayer: “Eleanor Prosser [...] assembled from English literature 23 cases of a desire or plan to kill a foe in such a way as to damn his soul as well” (Jenkins 514-15). In endowing Hamlet, for a moment, with this stereotypical desire, Shakespeare shows us that he does not tread the path of stereotype, for of course this is, ironically, the last moment at which Hamlet could have acted according to the pattern of revenge tragedy and does not. Shakespeare sends him another way, to England. (The acceptance of a providential pattern will lie ahead of him.) We could go on, for even the representation of alternative roads of action by means of contrasting characters is there, in the actor playing Hecuba, for example, or in Laertes, or in Fortinbras.

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Matthias Bauer

For the Editors of *Connotations*