

Oedipus Wrecks

by Anthony Burgess

In Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and Shelley's *The Cenci*, the theme of incest is presented as a ghastly crime against man and nature, material for the grimmest tragedy. The taboo placed on what the Anglo-Saxon bishop Wulfstan called *siblegeru*,

or lying with one's sib, is one that not even a rational age cares to question too closely.

Inbreeding, say the eugenicists, weakens the stock, but that is too recent a discovery to explain the ferocity with which the prohibition has been enforced in most societies from the earliest times. The rationale of the ban on endogamy, or marrying within one's own social group or family or tribe, can only be presented in terms of the territorial imperative – the need to protect land through alliances, expressed in a law of exogamy. In ancient Egypt, which was powerful and stable and had no enemies, incest was not merely permitted but was mandatory in the royal house. Monarchical Europe, on the other hand, protected territory through foreign alliances confirmed by royal marriages or high-class exogamy. From ancient Greece on, incest became the most terrible of crimes because it compromised the security of the state. The legend of Oedipus, who brought plague and famine to Thebes through unwittingly marrying his own mother, is still the most potent and terrible of our myths. Freud interpreted the legend in terms of fear of the revenge of the castrating father, enraged by filial poaching on his sexual territory, and turned us all into little Oedipuses. He uncovered the main cause of our continued fascination with incest. It is evidently desirable, else it would not be banned.

In his inaugural lecture at the University of Paris, when assuming the chair of anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss examined the myth of Oedipus from a structuralist angle. He noted that before committing the deadly act Oedipus was forced to answer a riddle propounded by the Sphinx, a creature half-lion half-woman and, in some effigies, winged. If Oedipus had not been able to answer the riddle, the Sphinx would have devoured him as she had devoured countless others. What interested Lévi-Strauss about the collocation of a riddle (usually asked by a talking animal) and incest was that it was not unique to the Greek legend. Among the Algonquin Indians of North America there were legends which presented the same collocation. Clearly,

there was no question of cultural transmission from East to West, so it had to be assumed that the incest/riddle structure was built into certain cultures and was an emanation of human need. He told one story. In an Algonquin tribe a girl accuses her brother of coming to her tent and attempting sexual relations with her. The incest taboo is powerful in the tribe, and the brother is appalled at the very suggestion. There is only one explanation for her allegation, and he finds it: a boy who is exactly his double comes to her tent and tries to rape her. Enraged, the brother kills the boy and disposes of the body. Then he discovers that the boy was the son of a powerful sorceress who has talking owls. The mother comes looking for her son, and the brother has to pretend to be that son to allay an obvious suspicion – that he himself is the boy's murderer. The mother is doubtful. The only way in which the brother can convince her that he is really her son is to marry the girl. The incest taboo being so powerful, he will not do this if he is really, as she suspects, the brother. But he marries his own sister and seems to quell her suspicion. She is not satisfied, however, and sets her talking owls on him. They ask riddles, and if he gives the right answer she will know that incest has been committed and that she has her son's murderer in her power. The brother and sister escape from the situation and are transformed into the sun and moon in eclipse.

In this legend there seemed to me to be material for a novel. While working it up in my mind I happened to come across a curious anticipation of the structuralist approach to incest in the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett. Her novels all seem to have the same title – *A House and its Head, Elders and Betters, Daughters and Sons, Darkness and Day, A Family and a Fortune*: they are, of course, structurally identical – and I cannot remember exactly where she presents the revelation of incest in one of her families (all really the same family). The response to the revelation, I remember, is not one of horror but of cold-blooded reassessment of the changed family structure, children regretting that they have only one grandfather when they were brought up to believe they had two. Rereading

Finnegans Wake

in order to make a reduced version of it, I noted an even closer anticipation of the structural approach to incest. The whole dream which is the book is powered by sin, which sets the world of fallen man spinning, and the sin is the desire to commit incest. Earwicker is in love with his own daughter.

Incest

being too terrible a word to be admitted even in a dream, the term is metathetized to

insect,

which explains both Earwicker's name and the fable of the Ondt and the Gracehoper. I was particularly interested to note that Earwicker's son Shem is prevented from committing incest with his sister by his inability to answer a very easy riddle. He is asked to guess what a particular colour is. The phonemes in its name are described as 'up tightly in the front ...down again on the loose ... drim and drumming on her back ... and a pop from her whistle.' This works out as

heliotrope.

Shem wets his trousers in shame, but urine in the

Wake

is always semen, and the discharge underlines his inability to commit incest: he is doubly freed from the chance of that sin.

To my greatest astonishment, I found that I had anticipated the riddle/incest motif in one of my own books, written long before I had read Lévi-Strauss. The book is a kind of spy novel called *Tremor of Intent*.

The spy Hillier is on his last mission. He conceives a fatherly love for a girl, Clara, whose true father is dying. He has received a riddling message from his department in London, and he is not able to solve it. Clara's father dies and she comes sobbing to him. He gives comfort which turns into sexual comfort, and he feels that he is committing a kind of incest. But later he meets her again, this time as a priest, and he realizes that he had mistaken the significance of 'father'. Evidently, there is a fundamental relationship between incest and riddles, but we do not know what it is. It is in the nature of a structure to be as inexplicable as a passage of music.

My structuralist novel is entitled either *MF* or *M/F*. The first form is a pair of initials, the second symbolizes a structure. The Portuguese version of the novel emphasized the latter and filled out the initials to a basic opposition – male/female. I had been in Hollywood some years before starting the book, and William Conrad, the robust actor who played Cannon in the television series, expressed a half-serious desire to make an all-black film on Oedipus, calling it *Mother Fucker*.

This suggested the title, but the initials primarily stand for the name of the hero, Miles Faber, a name which combines two main attributes of man – the aggressive and the creative.

My own initials appear on the title page but in one of the two available musical forms – A and B natural. Beginning a scale and beginning an alphabet, it is meant to stand for a structure which is not quite a structure. For neither a scale nor an alphabet is a *significant* structure, it is merely the code out of which significant structures are made. There are two epigraphs which relate respectively to structures and riddles. The first comes from a book on linguistics by the late and regretted Simeon Potter: 'In his

Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada

Hans Kurath recognizes no isogloss coincident with the political border along Latitude 49°N.' In other words, the continuity of American English is not halted by a mere political frontier. The opposition Canada/United States is a false, or insignificant, structure. The other epigraph is from the First Folio of

Much Ado About Nothing:

'Enter Prince, Claudio and Jacke Wilson.' Jacke Wilson, who presumably played Balthazar, was an actor-singer in the Lord Chamberlain's company of players. Jack Wilson is the real name of

Anthony Burgess. There is no true riddle here. Either one knows the identification or one does not. The question that ought to be asked is: why did one name change into the other ? There is no easy answer.

The action of the first chapter takes place in a bedroom of, inevitably, the Algonquin Hotel on West 44th Street, New York City. I am telling the reader that he is on Algonquin territory, but also Iroquois, since the Iroquois Hotel is a few blocks away. Algonquin/Iroquois is a meaningful opposition, far more than United States/Canada, for the two Indian nations had different cultures and languages and they fought each other. The story to come is based on an Algonquin legend, hence the choice of one hotel rather than the other. Miles Faber, a young man not yet come of age, meets the family lawyer Loewe in his bedroom. He is highly strung and a heavy smoker, and the cigarettes he prefers are a Korean brand, Sinjantin. This will have meaning later. Miles has been sent down from his college in Massachusetts for fornicating in the open air in public: the act is taken by his fellow-students as a sign standing for undifferentiated protest. His English professor, Keteki (Sanskrit for riddle), quoted in class from a certain Fenwick's diary for the year 1596. Fenwick saw a play and says of it: 'Gold gold and even titularly so.' What, asks Keteki, was the name of the play? He will give twenty dollars to the student who can give the most plausible answer. Miles recollects that *fenek* is the Maltese word for rabbit, and thinks that Fenwick might have anglicized his Maltese name, Fenek being a not uncommon surname in Malta. The Maltese word *fenek* stands for the conjunction *or*. Or in French means gold. The play was probably *The Jew of Malta*.

Miles wins the twenty dollars and gets drunk on it. He meets a lady who persuades him to copulate with her in public. Thus he is thrown out of his college.

Miles clearly has a mad Oedipal talent. He can answer riddles and solve crosswords with no trouble. He makes, with the total automatism he gives to smoking, a riddle on the name of the lawyer Loewe:

Behold the sheep form side by side
A Teuton roarer of the pride.

Lo means behold, *ewe* is a sheep, and in German *Loewe* is a lion. Nearly all the people Miles will meet in the course of the narrative will either have animal names or resemble animals. This prefigures a sphingine danger to the young Oedipus. The Sphinx was both human and animal. The talking owls of the sorceress of the Algonquin legend combine a non-human body with a human talent: they are a kind of sphinx. When Keteki asked the riddle in class, Miles answered

without hesitation:

keteki merely

means the thing he was asking. When Loewe puts a riddle, or rather a crossword clue, to Miles, Miles knows the answer, but some instinct tells him not to give it.

Miles, having terminated his college career abruptly, wishes to continue his education privately. On the island of Castita in the Caribbean, there are said to be the literary and artistic remains of a certain Sib Legeru (you know what the name means, but Miles does not), a genius whom Professor Keteki knows about and specimens of whose work he has already given to Miles to read. Miles sees in this work a total artistic freedom, an abandonment of form and meaning, a disdain of structure. Miles, being very young, has a negative attitude to structure whether in art or in morality: his *al fresco* fornication was an indication of this. Miles wants Loewe to give him money out of his dead father's estate so that he can make the journey to Castita and study, having first located, Sib Legeru's works. Loewe demurs. Miles has a responsibility to the Faber family, of which he is the only surviving member. His father believed in miscegenation, or exogamy, holding that the future of civilization rested on the mingling of the races. If Miles will not continue his studies he ought to assume the responsibility as head of the Faber family by marrying a Chinese girl named Miss Ang and begetting a mixed progeny. But finally he yields to Miles's entreaty and gives him five hundred dollars. It is now summer; Miles's birthday, when he comes of age, is on Christmas Eve. The money should last him until then and the beginning of his adult responsibilities.

Left alone, Miles turns on the television set. The first channel shows athletes levitating to the music of Johann Strauss. The reader, if not Miles, will find the name Lévi-Strauss charaded there. The next channel has a talk show, with a member of the Nipissing tribe talking of the commercial future of the Indians. The Nipissing people are, Miles knows (he has much useless knowledge, he thinks), members of the great Algonquin family. He then goes to sleep and dreams of an Indian sorceress. He does not see her, but he hears her announced: 'It is she of the koko-koho.' He sees her owls and one of them twitters at him a strange word: *Esa esa*. He wakes up in inexplicable terror. His watch has stopped at 19.17 (the year of the birth of Jack Wilson). He dials the telephone for the time but remembers the wrong dialling formula. ULCERSS gives him no reply. He recollects that that is the Los Angeles formula; for New York he must dial NERVOUS. Time is as painful a structure as a

'Mauer

or a parallel or a taxonomy'. The

Mauer

divides Berlin, the parallel divides Canada and the United States, though not the Indians, who accept different divisions. The taxonomy, or arranging of the world into categories, is painful to him because he desires total freedom, the collapse of structures. But he cannot escape from structures as easily as he thinks.

He goes for a meal and hears the waitresses shouting their orders. He does not know that they are announcing, in acrostic form, the great Oedipal sin: 'Indiana (or Illinois) nutbake. Chuffed eggs. Saffron toast. Whiting in tarragon, hot. Michigan (or Missouri) oyster-stew. Tenderloin. Hash, egg. Ribs.' He hears a male voice dictating into a tape recorder details of the structural difference between the instant soup of American kitchens and the soup of French kitchens where the pot has bubbled non-stop for four centuries. The French soup, says the voice, is a synchronic metaphor of the diachronic: it turns time into space, history into a single edible plateful. Miles, leaving, sees an old crippled man, with a false hand and crutches, who nods at him 'in a kind of shy confidence'. From his accent he seems French but he does not look French (we are not told how not). The name on the case which contains his recording spools is Z. Fonanta. Miles does not know the meaning of this, but the reader, presumably, does: *Zoon Fonanta* i
is Greek for talking animal. Traditionally it means man, but it must mean more in an Oedipal story. Miles has also failed to note the significance of the name of a soft drink he has taken with his dinner: Koko-Koho. This name is the Algonquinian for owl. The bottle itself is in the rough shape of an owl, but the owl is comic, passive, a mere vessel. Owls, birds in general, are not to be feared.

When Miles returns to his hotel to get his bag and then leave for the airport (there is a 2200 Air Carib flight for Grençijta – 'Big Town' – capital of Castita), he finds Loewe back in his room with a hired thug. Miles is to be prevented from leaving right away. There are reasons, newly recalled by Loewe, confirmed by a lawyer in Miami, Mr Pardaleos (leopard, another animal, this time Greek), for delaying his departure. The reasons are not given. Loewe asks for the return of the five hundred dollars. But Miles is not having this. He leaves and his leaving is not seriously opposed: this puzzles him. In the hotel lobby he sees a young man in levis carrying a wreath (*St rauss* in German). An airport limousine is waiting. Two of the air companies it serves are plausible enough – Air Carib, Udara Indonesia (*udara* means air) – but the third is impossible: Loftsax. A company called Loftsax would have to have existed before the Norman Conquest.

Miles is not taken to the airport. Instead he is made to alight by two more thugs, presumably sent by Loewe, and his money is taken from him except for enough to buy a beer. He is on Broadway, outside a cinema which announces *La Forma de la Espada* (the name of an unfilmed story by Borges, another form of Burgess). He has to get money somehow, so he offers himself as a gigolo to a woman met in a bar. Her name is Irma (no animal connection), and she lives on multiple alimony. In her flat Miles finds a cutting from *See* (impossible orthography there only to fulfil a mandatory four-letter structure), the review of a novel called *Bub Boy*.

The authoress is Carlotta Tukung. There is a photograph of her, and Miles recognizes his sexual partner of the previous night. That the encounter might have been incestuous does not occur to Miles, but the review of another book,

The President's Nephews

(taking the term nepotism literally), ought to worry him: the author's name is Blutschande, German for incest. Miles gets money, though only enough to take him as far as Miami on a pluribus of Unum Airline. On the plane he dreams of Miss Emmett, his old nanny, and the fantasy does not, though its symbols ought to, disclose that she is really what her name means – an ant. He remembers her singing a song, her only one – 'You will be my summer queen'. Obliging the author quotes the tune in a footnote. There will be other tunes – a hymn, a state anthem, a wedding march – and they will all be variants of this tune. Just before reaching Miami Miles discovers that an agent of Mr Pardaleos has been quietly accompanying him on the flight. Bafflingly, this man, in black for a colleague's funeral, is also a policeman who has to arrest a certain Guzman at Miami airport.

Mr Pardaleos, a Greek, is waiting for Miles in the airport restaurant, the Savarin. The cuisine, in real life, is detestable, the name mockery. But in the narrative an onomastic magic converts the food into an epicure's dream, and Pardaleos eats heartily of it. He explains to Miles why he must not go at once to Castita. He has a sister there, whose existence has up till now been kept from him, for a demented reason of his dead father. His father committed incest with his own sister, Miles's mother- aunt (the cop in black is probably called Hamnet or Hammett), and he feared that the incestuous urge might run in the family. If Miles meets his sister, he may be tempted to repeat the paternal crime. Therefore he must wait a few days in Miami. The sister, with her old nanny or governess, is shortly to go to France (possibly to study *structuralisme*): in the meantime, by a most astonishing coincidence, she is still residing on the very island whither Miles aims to travel. Miles is horrified and shocked by these revelations. Everything is being placed in the way of his simple and chaste desire (Castita means chastity) to further his studies. A feeble attempt is made in the airport washroom to hold him back by another pair of thugs, but Guzman has just been arrested and, by pretending to be Guzman, Miles is able to join the charter flight on which Guzman was attempting to get out of America. This flight is bound for Ojeda, another fictitious Caribbean island, and in Ojeda Miles manages to find a berth as cook on a Bermuda cutter called the

Zagadka

(Russian for a riddle), owned by two homosexual Americans. They are willing to voyage to Grencijta, one place being as good or bad as another. A great storm hits them, Miles falls and knocks himself out, surrounded by the scattered contents of a nautical dictionary. Regarded as a Jonah by the Americans, he becomes a genuine Jonah, sinking into whale-belly darkness and emerging to engage his serious role – no longer a querulous rebel but a mature mythic character. He is ready to confront (though he does not know this) the destiny that the mysterious engines of the incest/riddle structure are about to impose on him.

It is a festal day in Grencijta, and there is a procession in honour of the island's matron saint,

Euphorbia, martyred under Domitian. (Domitian, according to Robert Graves, is the beast figured in the 666 of Revelations: DCLXVI, meaning Domitianus Caesar Legatos Christi Violenter Interfecit.) A choral hymn gives Miles, and ourselves, some notion of the phonetic structure of the Castitan language: *Senta Euphorbia/ Vijula vijulata/ Ruza inspijnata...* It is a Romance language in which the original Latin vowels have been raised to the limit: they are trying to break out of their vocalic bounds and become consonants. The procession is both religious and secular. It ends with a circus parade, and Miles learns that a travelling circus is at present on the island. Elefanta's or Fonanta's or Bonanza's or Atlanta's Circus: he finds the name unclear. The cheering crowd grows silent at the appearance of a strange woman in the procession – tall, gaunt, a kind of sorceress surrounded by birds screaming human language (mynahs, parrots, starlings, but no owls). She seems to look at Miles with a kind of angry recognition. He will discover why later.

Meanwhile, needing money, he earns it by setting himself up as Mr Memory Junior, offering to answer any question put by the holiday crowd. A boy quietly asks him the date of the founding of the multiracial University College of Salisbury, Rhodesia, as it then was, but Miles does not know the answer. He pretends to the crowd that the question put was really: When was the first public showing of television? The answer to this he knows: 13 July 1930, in England, by the Baird process. What he does not know is that that date is also the date of the founding of the Rhodesian college. He is being used by forces unknown. The Sphinx is due to appear, and she appears in male form, that of an old cripple whose body has been deformed into the caricature of a lion. The questions have turned to riddles (most of them Maltese), but the lionman has made up one of his own:

Throatdoor, tongueback, nose and teeth
Spell a heavenblack hell beneath.
Engage warily, young men,
Lest it prove a lion's den.

Miles knows the answer at once (*cunt*) but will not give it. It would be uttering an obscenity in public on an island whose name means chastity. He does not know the real reason for not answering.

A time of rest now, in a small hotel, the Batavia, run by a lady from the opposed Indies, an Indonesian who smokes a brand of cigarettes called Dji Sam Soe. Miles remembers that he has no more Sinjantin (stolen by the thugs of the airport bus) and this deprivation blinds him to a structural truth which casts doubt on the reality of the story of which he is a part. He notes the decor of the lobby, the garden without, a group of card-players, and hears a girl ask on the

telephone for the number 113 and Mr R. J. Wilkinson. He does not see the connection between these things. R. J. Wilkinson compiled a classic dictionary – Malay (or Indonesian) – English – and the entire scene is made out of the words on page 113 of that work. In his bedroom he finds a rulebook for association football and a referee's whistle, presumably left behind by an absentminded visiting referee. Some instinct tells him to wear the whistle round his neck, under his shirt, as a talisman. He is, without knowing it, becoming mature: a referee's whistle symbolizes rules, fair play, a rigid closed structure. He sleeps, and goes down to hear two things from the Indonesian lady who owns the hotel. He is invited to dinner at the Pepegheju (parrot: talking bird) by a certain Dr Gonzi (the name is not significant: it is merely that of the Archbishop of Malta, a kind of Castita, at the time when, in Malta, I was writing the novel). He is asked to admire the conciseness of the Malay or Indonesian language. *Tulat tukang tuil* means: The day after the day after tomorrow the skilled workman will carry a burden over his shoulder on a stick with a stick over the other shoulder to support it.

Tulat

sounds like

too late, tui

like

too ill. Tukang

means the same as Faber, his own name. He ought to have a good reason for remembering that word, but there are too many other things crowding in on him.

The Pepegheju restaurant has a talking parrot in its garden: it speaks with the accent of New South Wales. Dr Gonzi awaits him: he is the lionman, the Sphinx, and he is already drunk. He is suicidally depressed. A scholar, expert on Bishop Berkeley, he has been offered a post in the freak show of the visiting circus. He wants to die, but he would prefer to hang for murder than take his own life. He proposes asking Miles a riddle. He does not think Miles will be able to answer it. He will shoot Miles and then be arrested for murder. He certainly has a gun: he brandishes it. The riddle is not really much more than a silly word puzzle:

Move and my own self enclose

A land above the deeper snows.

Miles at once sees what it means – the lionman's own name: to move is to go, New Zealand or NZ is the land meant, *my own self* is I. But he will not answer. Gonzi's gun arm is drunkenly unsteady, and it is moreover deflected by the parrot's sudden whistle. Miles runs, remembers his own whistle, uses it loudly to bring the police. Gonzi searches for him, staggering and cursing. But a police van arrives and takes Miles to the station.

There, to his astonishment, he finds himself treated as a criminal. He is recognized as a young man who has already caused disturbance in the city. His belongings are examined, and the police inspector makes a suspicious structure out of certain vocables: Tu kang sin jan tin jee sam soo. Miles feels that, though he has come West, he is being dragged East, probably to marry Miss Ang. For the first time he recognizes dimly that he is contained in a structure he does not understand and which he cannot control. When told that his real name is Llew, he suspects that he must have a double. This is confirmed when Mr Dunkel, manager of the visiting circus, is sent for. Llew has been causing stupid juvenile trouble in the town. Miles, whom Dunkel without hesitation takes for Llew, is to be confined in the caravan which he shares with his mother on the circus site outside the city.

And so Miles comes face to face with his double. Llew, a young Welshman, is an appalling personage, crude, vulgar, given to pornography, pop music, as much raw sex as he can get. Are they perhaps sundered twins? Impossible. Llew's mother is the bird queen of the circus. She is named Aderyn, Welsh for bird. She has a whole spectrum of hawks and the talking birds Miles has already seen and heard. Her act is magical, her birds are totally in her control. Llew, a circus boy, has failed at the various circus tasks given to him, but now he suggests that he and Miles work out an act whose success will depend on Miles disguising himself in real life, so that identity can be exploited in the closed structure of the circus. Miles regards himself as the primal owner of a particular face and body and refuses hotly. They part with hard words.

The following day Miles begins his search for the literary and artistic remains of Sib Legeru. The President of Castita is shot at, and Miles suspects Dr Gonzi. In a bar he meets, to his overwhelming surprise, his old nanny Miss Emmett: she is not drinking but buying a packet of Honeydew cigarettes (in conformity with her ant identity). She has, as she always had, a pair of scissors dangling from her waist. Though not herself Welsh, in the Welsh manner she makes *scissors*

a dual word, using a singular article with it. Miles discovers that she is here with his sister Catherine. At last he meets his sister, an ugly and slovenly girl who has been mentally ill. Their father, apparently, made an incestuous attack on her, and Miss Emmett repulsed him with her ever-present scissors. The possibility of Miles's wishing himself to commit incest with her is infinitely remote: she is physically repellent as well as selfish and stupid. But he agrees to sacramentalize their meeting and his reunion with Miss Emmett by sharing a meal. They offer only sugary things; he goes out to buy wine and a piece of beef. While shopping, he finds a shop which sells Sinjantin cigarettes and also has, hanging on a nail, the key to the shed where the Sib Legeru treasures are stored. The shed is on the street where Catherine and Miss Emmett are lodged (Indovinella Street: I need not translate), but its exact whereabouts are unsure. Miles cooks dinner. Miss Emmett is unused to the thick dark wine he serves and goes to sleep in the kitchen, but not before she has told him that the shed is here, in the garden, and is loaded with old papers and other rubbish.

Nearly fainting with excitement, Miles opens the shed and is overwhelmed with what he finds – paintings with inexplicable patterns, a novel in which there is no covenant, either of character identity or continuity of action, with the reader, a poem which enchants Miles:

London Figaro infra pound
Threejoint dackdiddy Solomon
Delay delay thou Gabriel hound
Mucklewrath IHS brilliging on
Ants alley jackalent Meckerbound
Skysent stone threw sinkiss black
And caged Cardinal Mabinogion
Though M is NN copied slack
A freehand onestroke perfect round
Took that bony face aback!

He thinks he has at last met total artistic liberation from the meanings of the marketplace. His reading is interrupted by screams from within the house. He rushes there. Miss Emmett is still asleep. Upstairs in her bedroom Catherine is fighting off an attempted rape by Llew. Llew, desisting for a moment, says, reasonably enough, that he was in the street below and she at the window: she called him in, saying it was time for bed. Catherine is aghast at the apparition of a double Miles and near-hysterical at her near-deflowering. She calls Miss Emmett out of her sleep.

Miss Emmett appears with her scissors. Llew makes for the open window. Miles notes that, in a combined Anglo-Welsh structure, three duals come together: scissors, ballocks, trousers. Llew falls out of the window and cracks his skull on a broken birdbath in the garden. Miles lugs the body to the shed where the Sib Legeru treasures await his reperusal. There is danger now. Aderyn will be looking for her son. Miles, Catherine and Miss Emmett must leave the island at once, but a television announcement discloses the shutting of all ports until the attempted assassin of the President is apprehended. Miles must pretend to be the dead Llew: he has enough acting ability to go through with the impersonation, or so he hopes. Catherine must go to the police and inform them that the would-be assassin is Dr Gonzi: this means telling of Gonzi's death urge; it means also the solving of the silly word puzzle.

The story now follows the Algonquin legend pretty closely. Aderyn has her suspicions. Miles, as Llew, drives her to an appointment with an oculist: she has been scratched in the eye by one of her hawks (transference of Oedipus's punishment). He goes to see his sister to find out if there has been any response from the police, also to see how Miss Emmett, who has gone to sleep

again and will not wake up, is getting on. Aderyn pursues him. In his Llew persona Miles has to say that this is the girl he loves and wishes to marry. Aderyn agrees to the marriage almost at once, and it is arranged to take place that very night in the circus ring after the performance. All the clowns are crypto-theologians, some of them in full orders: no difficulty in finding an officiating priest or pastor.

And now there appears the man whom Miles had previously heard dictating into a recorder in a New York eating house. Catherine knows him – Dr Fonanta. She was sent to this island to be placed under his care. He specializes in mental disorders relating to passive or active involvement in the incestuous act. He seems, like Lévi-Strauss himself, to know all the traditional concomitants of a coming incestuous marriage. 'A pity there'll be no eclipse tonight. I gather there'll be fireworks, though. There's probably some rotting meat about somewhere.' There is too – that roast beef of last night. Miles hurls it on its china dish into the garden. The putrefying meat will join the economy of nature; the shards of broken plate will be the useless remnants of an aspect of human culture. But Dr Fonanta means something else – the corpse of Llew.

He is disclosed, during the bizarre wedding ceremony, as the owner of the circus. He is also a bad poet. Miles distractedly suspects that he cannot, despite his accent, be really French: one of his poems collates roast pork and apple sauce – synchronic sweet and savoury - inadmissible, according to the structuralists of Paris, in the Western cuisine. After the ceremony he makes sure that Miles and Catherine are safely bedded. Now comes the act of incest. Miles knows he is being watched and listened to: the bedroom chosen for them is full of electronic devices. He spurts seed, but not into his sister. Was this properly an incestuous act? The *vas muliere*

has been not a depository for the semen of incestuous generation but a mere temporary engine of stimulation. Aderyn is still not convinced that this is her own son. He must be given a final examination, made to submit to the riddling birds. And now Miles conceives a suspicion so intense as to amount to a conviction.

Llew was never Aderyn's true son, merely an adopted one. He was born, he discovers, on Christmas Eve, Miles's own birthday. Llew may mean lion in Welsh, but it is probably part of a palinlogue – Nowell, a form of Noel which, backwards, is Leon, another lion. Aderyn is shaken at the rupturing of a secret, but she goes ahead with her magic. A cockatoo is to ask a riddle. If Llew-Miles gets the answer wrong his eyes will be tom out by the hawks. The riddle is:

Who was the final final, say,
That was put back but had his day?

There are two opposed answers, both equally valid. One is *God*, which is *dog* backwards (every dog has his day), the final final, the ultimate reality. But the opposed ultimate reality is *devil, lived*

backwards: if you have lived you have had your day. Whichever answer Miles gives will be the wrong one. He gives it, and the hawks swoop to the tearing. Then he remembers his referee's whistle, blasts it at the birds, which, in their confusion, turn on their mistress. The true confirmatory answer should have been:

Mam mam I'm frightened take them away mam.

Dr Fonanta clears everything up. The following morning Catherine and Miss Emmett are able to leave the island. Dr Gonzi has been shot by the police. Llew's body has been quietly buried. Llew was Miles's sundered twin, no magical coincidence. Dr Fonanta is Miles's grandfather. His initials, like his grandson's, are M. F., and they stand also for his own act of incest – with his mother. By forcing Miles and his sister into an incestuous situation, instead of merely leaving it to chance and perverse nature, the strange spell cast on the Faber family has at last been exorcised. Miles will marry Miss Ang. Miles wonders if perhaps the sexual encounter with Carlotta Tukang was not incestuous. His mother may not after all have died, she may be his mother, Tukang means Faber, Miles answered Keteki's riddle correctly (Keteki, now he comes to think of it, had the look of an owl). But Dr Fonanta, or Miles Faber, reassures him. Tukang is a deformation of Toucan, a bird name. This means that Miles got the classroom riddle wrong: whatever the play was, it was not *The Jew of Malta*. As for the works of Sib Legeru, there was no such person. *Siblegeru* means what it

meant to Bishop Wulfstan; those works are aspects of the therapy of Dr Fonanta's patients. They are not denials of structure, they are confirmations of taxonomic structures, though these are essentially false structures. They are based on the alphabetic arrangement of words (like the lobby of the Batavia Hotel), or on word transformation games, like *bread broad brood blood blond bland*.

The stupidity of so-called total freedom in art, as in life, is best exemplified in a musical score of Sib Legeru's: in it a bassoon is made to go down to a low F sharp, a note impossible on the instrument.

Miles ends his story in Bracciano, north of Rome. He ends it there because I ended it there, having just escaped from Malta. He is married to Miss Ang, but they cannot have children. They have adopted children, and these may well intermarry, committing merely nominal incest. Miles Faber now reveals that he is black, though the reader may have, certainly has indeed, taken him for white. If he is black other characters are black too. The reader must reread, adjusting colours as he does. But the colour does not matter. Black/white is an unfruitful opposition, quite unlike male/female. As for the story, 'the main structure is solidly true, but would it matter much if it weren't? Those Sinjantin cigarettes have least of all to do with the structure, yet in a sense they're the truest thing about the whole narrative.' The cigarettes exist: I have a half-empty

packet before me as I write. The reader may not believe me, but it is true. What, however, is truth? All we have is structures.

I cannot really apologize for summarizing the plot of my little structuralist novel at 9Uch length. We are living in an age when books go so rapidly out of print that it is of little use to refer the reader to a work published as long ago as 1971. The pity is that not many were ready for the book when it appeared: the principles of structuralism had not yet been widely diffused. There is a generation ready now, I think, but the unsold copies of *MF* or *M/F* have long been pulped. There is, however, another reason for my summary. The plot seems totally unsuitable for a work of orthodox fiction, and it can only be made acceptable by being dressed up, as I dressed it up, in the trappings of an almost popular novel – plausible, as opposed to structural, motivations; realistic dialogue; comfortingly familiar details from the known twentieth-century world. As a bare skeleton, the story discloses all the elements of a closed structure, like a piece of music, with a labyrinth of logic that does not apply to a world where incest is just a pleasantly horrible perversion and not an aberration to be considered amorally, with reference to riddles and talking animals. Why a riddle put by a being half-animal half-human should be associated with the act of incest, we cannot say. My novel defers to the reader's need of a rational explanation by saying something like 'It is dangerous to question the mysteries of natural order, which are symbolized in riddles', but that is no answer. Questions about these structural relations are as meaningless as attempts to find out the meaning of a fugue or a sonata.

One of the laws about incest put forward by Lévi-Strauss has not, I think, found a place here. Because the oracle said that Oedipus would commit parricide and incest in Thebes, he was sent as a child to Corinth. But he got to Thebes. 'The thing you do,' says the great French structuralist, 'to avoid committing incest is the very thing that will lead you to it.' (This is a basic law which applies to other forbidden acts as presented in legend or literature.) My not quite (after all) Oedipal hero (the true Oedipal hero appears very belatedly) is sent to commit incest, and the apparent obstacles put in his way – they are all feeble and avoidable – are there to whet his desire to get to the place where incest will be committed. The whole thing seems to be rigged not by the mysterious engines of myth, but by a man who knows about myths, is quite cold-blooded in his engineering, but is superstitious in his belief that a curse on the house of Faber must be broken by control of the very means that brought the curse about. But he too is enclosed in myth.

I do not think it is possible to write many novels of this kind, but I do believe, and I think the little book proves it, that it is possible to juggle with the free will of fictional characters and the predestination of an imposed structure. This is, after all, the manner of music, in which the component strands seem to go their own way but are locked in a preconceived pattern. There may be a theological conclusion to be drawn from this, and all art may be in the service of a theological truth about the mere illusion of free will, but I refuse to venture too deeply into the

matter. It is enough to get on with the task of creating art without asking why one is doing it.

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