

Mark S. Meritt
English 271 - Introduction to Poetry
Final Paper (Poems in last three pages)
5/6/91

Where the Heart Is

In "Homeward Bound," "The Boxer," and "My Little Town," Paul Simon deals with different feelings about being away from home. These three lyrics, written over several years, form a companionship of contrasting emotions, progressing more or less backwards with respect to the order in which they were written.

Written in 1975, "My Little Town" discusses a burning desire to leave a static hometown. The narrator remembers "Dreaming of glory" in a town where "Everything's the same." He "grew up believing / God keeps His eye on us all," possibly giving him hope for a grand future. After describing God's attentiveness to his pledging "allegiance to the wall," i.e., being bored by the pledge and drifting away from the flag, he says, "Lord I recall / My little town," which can be interpreted two ways. Either he remembers God's lesson and has remained upright, mentioning his town only reflectively, or he recalls his town specifically, implying that he is no longer there.

"Flying my bike past the gates / Of the factories" suggests a longing to leave his working-class home, attempting a symbolic rather than actual flight with a land vehicle. He wants to leave the gates, representative of all that closes him off from the rest of the world. That he must leave to live is evident in the effects of the factory smoke. Clean laundry is unable to remain clean because it is tainted when hung "In the dirty breeze."

His mother "Hanging our shirts" could suggest an image of people hung in effigy. The shirts he wears are hung and subject to pollution, as if he is being hanged himself and killed by the town's atmosphere, both actually and spiritually polluting.

Even when Nature tries to cleanse the town with rain, the resultant rainbow is one in which "all of the colors are black," due to the polluted air. Symbolically, any brightness in the town is stifled or covered up by the static character of the town in general. The narrator even says that "It's not that the colors aren't there / It's just imagination they lack," suggesting that the colors, i.e., a spiritual life, exists but is hidden. The colors need imagination to show through the soot, but if the narrator had his own imagination, he might have been able to see the colors himself. Of course, the town denies him that imagination, so he must leave in order to get past the soot, to breathe clean air and see the colors, i.e., to break free from the stagnation and experience life in its diversity. This will show him that everything is indeed not the same, unlike in "my little town," where all factories, people, and colors are black, "dead and dying." The meaning of "little" can be seen to mean more than simply small in size, but also smallminded: the town itself lacks imagination and vision.

When he then says "I never meant nothing," he could be speaking specifically of himself or in general, implying that the individual "I" does not exist but is only identified in relation to, for example, "my father's son," someone from the past, suggesting a repetition of destiny from generation to generation. This reinforces the smallminded, deindividualized nature of the town. The narrator becomes so restless in his desire to get out that he finds himself "Twitching like a finger / On a trigger of a gun," ready to kill in order that he may shoot himself out of his oppressive life. The final two lines can be

interpreted a few ways. "Leaving..." follows a few gerunds, and therefore the narrator may be thinking about leaving the "dead and dying / Back in my little town," not actually having done it. Another possibility is that he has actually gone and left the town behind, which would reinforce the notion of "recall[ing]" from earlier. However, a final meaning could be that the dead and dying are what is left, and that he himself is one of the dying, and he doesn't even ponder leaving in the sense of going away. This notion is further supported by the gun, which could be used to shoot him out of the town via suicide. In this case, he'd be one of "the dead."

Instead of longing to leave home, the narrator of 1968's "The Boxer" takes a stance in favor of returning home once gone. He claims himself a "poor boy" whose "story's seldom told," implying not necessarily that his story is unique, but that, although very common, it is sad and therefore overlooked or unacknowledged. He says right away that "promises" are "All lies and jest," but that "a man hears what he wants to hear," and thus interprets things how he'd like, not realizing the truth. This living of lies will be the narrator's downfall.

He left home when he "was no more than a boy," suggesting that he ran away, as if the narrator of "My Little Town" had decided to take a giant step and seek out his fortune. However, that fortune was simply a fantasy, and this narrator soon discovers harsh reality. In a "railway station" in "the company of strangers," he is in a hub with great potential to bring him somewhere on any of many tracks. That the station is quiet suggests that everyone is a stranger to everyone else, everybody "Running scared" like the narrator and unwilling to converse. They all share the common goal of wanting to get away, reinforcing the notion of how common the narrator's story is, since he is just one of the

multitudes here. Unfortunately, this typicality is reminiscent of the conformity in "My Little Town," and suggests that all the strangers will come to endings as sad as the beginnings they left and as sad as every other stranger.

The runaway immediately begins his path toward sorrow by "Seeking out the poorer quarters... Only [the ragged people] would know." He chooses not to seek a good place to live, but a bad place, demonstrating his willingness to settle and his lack of drive to succeed. The seemingly nonsensical chant "Lie-la-lie" then makes its first appearance. Instead of being a simple "la-la-la," however, it holds layered meanings. The narrator lies to himself, settling as he does, and he will simply lie down in his quarters to forget about his plight, perpetuating the initial falsehood.

In searching for a job, he asks "only workman's wages." While this is all he probably could get, one must wonder if he couldn't also have gotten this at home, therefore bringing into question why the narrator left in the first place. If indeed this is an analogous narrator to the one in "My Little Town," he is certainly compromising his desires, another way of lying to himself. He gets no offers for a job, "Just a come-on from the whores," possibly a vulgar pun on the kinds of jobs for which he might get an offer, i.e., hand jobs or blow jobs. He admits that he at times "took some comfort there," degrading himself by spending what little money he had on whores, and thus in a sense whoring himself, especially given the pun. He lives yet another lie, emphasized by the recurred chant, with the additional implication of lying down with a prostitute.

"Laying out my winter clothes," he finds himself thinking about leaving. Items of protection seem to remind him of the safety of home, "Where the New York City winters

/ Aren't bleeding me." He acknowledges that he has been lying to himself and that things haven't worked out as planned. The city is symbolically take the life blood from him.

The final stanza, from which the title is derived, seems very separate from everything else, but serves as actually a metaphoric commentary on the poem as a whole. A boxer stands "In the clearing," suggesting a real or imagined meadow in the country, possibly the narrator's home, or hinting at the clearing once all the dust has settled from the narrator's decayed city life. The boxer is "a fighter by his trade," and therefore not actually the narrator. The narrator is fantasizing, seeing himself as one who fights rather than the surrendering person he's always been. Again, he is lying to himself. He recalls "ev'ry glove that laid him down / And cut him." Since "laid" is a past tense of "lie," he could be remembering symbolically all the lies he allowed himself to believe. Also, the cuts cause bleeding like the narrator's city winters, certainly strong in the narrator's memory. The resultant pain is physical as well as spiritual, in the form of homesickness, echoing the dual meanings and longings of reality and spirit from "My Little Town." He cries out "I am leaving," i.e., leaving the boxing ring. This symbolizes the narrator's desire to leave the city after having been through so much pain. However, "the fighter still remains," suggesting in the narrator's fantasy that the fighter will always be a fighter, no matter how hopeless, but in reality that he himself will remain in the city because he doesn't have the strength to pick himself up. The chant is recurred once more, emphasizing the lie of the fantasy boxer which the narrator would like to be, as well as the lie of great hope in the city, which has by now become the truth of urban dejection.

1966's "Homeward Bound" stands in comparison and contrast to "The Boxer." It too begins in "the railway station," the place of potential, but this narrator has a destination,

unlike the aimless runaway. He is a musician "On a tour of one-night stands." He does his job, but sees it as an empty sexual experience, as if whoring himself in a play-and-run scenario. For the musician, "ev'ry stop is neatly planned," but though he has plans which the runaway lacked, his life away from home is still unfulfilling, and he wishes he was "Homeward Bound." This has a double meaning, in that he desires to be headed toward home as well as to be attached to home, as if he could never leave. One is consequent of the other, functioning as a similar device to the lies in "The Boxer." Only his "thought's escaping," not his body, which is on the road. Home is where his heart, or thought, is. His music is empty on tour because his heart isn't in it. Music becomes a metaphor for his spirit. Further, his "love lies waiting / Silently for me." Love can be a specific lover, who transcends even music and can be silent, or it can be love in general, i.e., his heart, and therefore once home, his spirit as a whole will be lifted.

While on the road, each day is filled with "cigarettes and magazines," vices and things meant just to pass the time. These are either negative or neutrally unfulfilling experiences for the musician. That "each town looks the same" can mean two things. They could look the same as each other in contrast to his hometown, which stands out in his mind, or, in their simplicity, they could all look just like his hometown. Therefore, everything "reminds me that I long to be, / Homeward Bound" because he either sees everything that isn't home or because he sees mere replicas of his original.

In the end, he decides to "play the game and pretend," or to continue with his performing and imagine that his heart is in it. However, like the runaway, he simply lies to himself since he knows that the heart of his music is at home. The difference is that the musician is conscious of his pretending, and he acknowledges the effects, realizing that

pretending doesn't work. His "words come back to me in shades of mediocrity." When he hears the lyrics he sings, he realizes that they are not special, "Like emptiness in harmony," i.e., his music also suffers from the pretense. He needs comfort, and can find it only at home.

Structurally, the three poems reflect their separate personalities. "My Little Town" is composed of four, block-like stanzas. Though there are differences from stanza to stanza, a quick glance proves them to be simple and similar, as if stamped out by one of its own factories. This visually reinforces the notion of conformism and how one must look very carefully to dispel that conformism and see individual characteristics. Certain hopeful words, like "colors" and "imagination" are sandwiched in the middle of lines, and while "rainbow" takes focus by ending a line, the subsequent line ends by putting that hopeful rainbow in its place by calling it "black."

In "The Boxer," rhyme elements reflect the changing course of the poem. At the end of the first and third stanzas, an A-B-A block appears, while the second stanza ends with an extended A-B-A-C-A. That middle stanza describes the first specific lie, the seeking of poor quarters, and thus this important event is emphasized by the expanded rhyme. The fourth stanza contains several repeated and rhyming elements, like "gone / Going / Going," "home / home," "winter / winters," and "bleeding / leading." This swirling rhyme scheme suggests the constant bombardment of thoughts of home. The final stanza has the most developed and coherent pattern, essentially A-B-A-C-C-B-D-D-B, where the D-D is an inner rhyme. While the content superficially has little to do with the remainder of the poem, this advanced scheme suggests, with its order, that its content should give

some order and meaning to the poem as a whole, which, as shown earlier, it does. This last stanza is a metaphoric summation of the epic "story."

"Homeward Bound," like the tour it describes, is "neatly planned." Each of the three stanzas follows an A-A-B-B-B-B scheme initially, where the Bs are two pairs of inner rhymes. Subsequently, the refrain is C-D-C-E-E-E-F. The quintuple repetition of the word "Home," along with the conformity of the three E lines reflects the conformity of a hometown like that in "My Little Town." Here, though, the conformity is desired over the daily changing scenery. The strict rhyming is an attempt to bring order to the musician's life in a different way than the A-B itinerary scheme does. The rhymes are bound to each other in the same way that the musician is bound to his home. That the word "me" ends each refrain suggests that, even in the hometown's conformity, the narrator can now go back and be an individual. After the first stanza, the F rhyme "me" appears very often in the itinerary sections, with the A element in the second stanza resembling it and the B element in both the second and third stanza's matching perfectly. As he gets closer to home, stanza by stanza, he approaches his true self-identity, his heart and soul.

In "My Little Town," the sky's literally the limit when it comes to potentially quelling the passion to leave, and the black obstructedness of that sky frustrates the narrator all the more. The sky has more potential than the railway stations, which are literally more grounded, in the other poems, enveloping the musician and runaway destinies among many others. Interestingly, though the narrator wanted desperately to leave in "My Little Town," at least he had the passion while there to want something badly, even if it was to get out. In the other poems, the narrators lack passion, and thus the longing to return home can be seen as a desire to regain that passion. "Homeward Bound"

particularly emphasizes this with its allusion to the presence of love and the heart, i.e., passion, at home.

That strong desire to leave can cause someone to snap, or to shoot from a gun as the case may be, possibly propelled into the unpreferred tale of "The Boxer," as premonitioned by the black sky of the trigger-happy narrator of "My Little Town." Having finally gone away, the runaway lies to himself for too long, blind to his predicament, and therefore his dilemma simply worsens, placing this poem in deep relation to "My Little Town." If passion is kept in check, though, as in "Homeward Bound," the narrator finds himself simply depressed and homesick, longing to return because he's happier at home, not because the situation away from home is as dire as that in "The Boxer." The musician realizes that home is the solution to his pain much sooner than the runaway does. Therefore, it seems that "Homeward Bound" is less likely the direct result of the childhood longings of "My Little Town." One who is so eager to leave would likely, once out, be willing to overlook bad things to perpetuate the fantasy of being away, contrasting with the melancholy musician.

One might wonder how Paul Simon ended up with this poetic progression since the themes run chronologically contrary to the order in which the poems were written. "Homeward Bound" would come first most logically because it appears to be most like actual experience, something any writer is inclined to explore. "The Boxer" may have come after Simon considered "Homeward Bound's" simplicity and innocuous melancholia. He may have wanted to relate a more epic, tragic tale to contrast with his earlier poem, and emphasizes this by actually saying "My story's seldom told," indicating Simon conscious of the fact that "The Boxer" is indeed a story. Having left these themes of returning home

behind, Simon later may have wondered what led to these tales in the first place, and thus "My Little Town" is a sort of explanation of what came before, completing the trilogy and tying together the motifs from a new perspective. Simon looks chronologically back at his poetry, but thematically forward.

Homeward Bound (1966)

I'm sitting in the railway station.
Got a ticket for my destination.
On a tour of one-night stands my suitcase and guitar in hand.
And ev'ry stop is neatly planned for a poet and a one-man band.
Homeward Bound,
I wish I was,
Homeward Bound,
Home where my thought's escaping,
Home where my music's playing,
Home where my love lies waiting
Silently for me.

Ev'ry day's an endless stream
Of cigarettes and magazines.
And each town looks the same to me, the movies and the factories
And ev'ry stranger's face I see reminds me that I long to be,
Homeward Bound,
I wish I was,
Homeward Bound,
Home where my thought's escaping,
Home where my music's playing,
Home where my love lies waiting
Silently for me.

Tonight I'll sing my songs again,
I'll play the game and pretend.
But all my words come back to me in shades of mediocrity
Like emptiness in harmony I need someone to comfort me.
Homeward Bound,
I wish I was,
Homeward Bound,
Home where my thought's escaping,
Home where my music's playing,
Home where my love lies waiting
Silently for me.

The Boxer (1968)

I am just a poor boy,
Though my story's seldom told,
I have squandered my resistance
For a pocketful of mumbles,
Such are promises
All lies and jest
Still, a man hears what he wants to hear
And disregards the rest.

When I left home
And my family,
I was no more than a boy
In the company of strangers
In the quiet of the railway station,
Running scared,
Laying low,
Seeking out the poorer quarters
Where the ragged people go,
Looking for the places
Only they would know.

Lie-la-lie...

Asking only workman's wages
I come looking for a job,
But I get no offers,
Just a come-on from the whores
On Seventh Avenue
I do declare,
There were times when I was so lonesome
I took some comfort there.

Lie-la-lie...

Then I'm laying out my winter clothes
And wishing I was gone,
Going home
Where the New York City winters
Aren't bleeding me,
Leading me,
Going home.

In the clearing stands a boxer,
And a fighter by his trade
And he carries the reminders
Of ev'ry glove that laid him down
And cut him till he cried out
In his anger and his shame,
"I am leaving, I am leaving."
But the fighter still remains
Lie-la-lie...

My Little Town (1975)

In my little town
I grew up believing
God keeps His eye on us all
And He used to lean upon me
As I pledged allegiance to the wall
Lord I recall
My little town

Coming home after school
Flying my bike past the gates
Of the factories
My mom doing the laundry
Hanging our shirts
In the dirty breeze

And after it rains
There's a rainbow
And all of the colors are black
It's not that the colors aren't there
It's just imagination they lack
Everything's the same
Back in my little town

In my little town
I never meant nothin'
I was just my father's son
Saving my money
Dreaming of glory
Twitching like a finger
On the trigger of a gun
Leaving nothing but the dead and dying
Back in my little town