

The Anatomy of Yuppiedom in Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*

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Just a few years after his prize-winning travel book, *From Heaven Lake*, Vikram Seth produced a work that was utterly different, completely unexpected, and astonishingly successful. With its publication in 1986, *The Golden Gate* created a literary sensation in the United States, and Seth, as he put it later, “took in a ‘fizzy gulp of fame.’”¹ This novel in verse gained Seth lavish praise and widespread recognition for his ability to deal in captivating fashion with a modern subject in a traditional verse form.² The novel depicts the lives of some San Francisco Bay Area yuppies in 590 tetrameter sonnets, and the author’s capsule biography, the acknowledgements, the dedication, and the contents are all in sonnet form, too. This stanza, sometimes called the Pushkin sonnet, has the demanding rhyme scheme aBaBccDDeFFeGG, where the lowercase letters indicate feminine (or two-syllable) rhymes, and Seth was inspired to adopt this form after reading Charles Johnston’s praised translation of Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*.

Seth has spoken of how he became enraptured by Johnston’s translation and gripped by the idea of a novel in verse.³ After a night of feeding demographic data on Chinese villages into a computer for his dissertation in economics, he wandered into the Stanford bookstore poetry section, started comparing two translations of *Eugene Onegin*, and got caught up in reading Johnston’s version for the story. Possessed by the thought of

writing such a novel, Seth spent the next year obsessively thinking and writing in iambic tetrameter. At first it was not easy to find a publisher, and in an oft-quoted stanza, Seth gives the usual reaction to his strange hybrid:

A week ago, when I had finished
Writing the chapter you've just read
And with avidity undiminished
Was charting out the course ahead,
An editor—at a plush party
(Well-wined, -provisioned, speechy, hearty)
Hosted by (long live!) Thomas Cook
Where my Tibetan travel book
Was honored—seized my arm: “Dear fellow,
What’s your next work?” “A novel...” “Great!
We hope that you, dear Mr. Seth—”
“...In verse,” I added. He turned yellow.
“How marvelously quaint,” he said,
And subsequently cut me dead. (5.1)⁴

Fortunately, Seth persevered, *The Golden Gate* was published, and, although the world may have lost an economist, it gained a major writer. His mother captures this turning point in a nicely balanced sentence in her recently published autobiography: “Vikram continued at Stanford, trying to complete his dissertation, but literary inspiration intervened, and he wrote *The Golden Gate* instead.”⁵

It would seem that the Pushkin sonnet’s demanding rhyme

scheme, with its strict alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes, and the speed of the tetrameter lines would severely handicap Seth, but he avoids any mechanical rhythmic effect because his lines are so seldom obtrusively end-stopped. In addition, Seth runs many different syntactic patterns over the lines, and the sense of what is being expressed so completely dominates both the rhyme and rhythm patterns that the reader, quickly caught up in the story, scarcely notices either.⁶

Paradoxically, the brilliance of Seth's poetic achievement in *The Golden Gate* is that we rarely notice the rhyme scheme and completely forget we are reading tetrameter sonnets. Occasionally a clever rhyme—such as Hondas/anacondas (2.8), magnolia/melancholia (5.21), or rhyming iguana consecutively with Lana (4.31), manana (4.35), Ecbatana (4.38), banana (4.43), and sultana (4.49)—will call attention to itself, but for the most part the regular rhymes are remarkably unobtrusive. In Seth's hands, the elaborate rhyme scheme and regular metrical pattern are ordinarily completely transparent to the reader, who is carried raptly along by the narrative.

Seth is able to use this demanding sonnet form with equal facility for exposition, narration, and description, and several of his descriptive pieces, while always remaining integral to the narrative, can be savored for themselves, as the following example demonstrates:

Outside, the red sky dyes the river
That murmurs down the valley, where
The leafless weeping willows quiver

And where at dusk a shivering hare
May be seen poised or crouched or bounding.
There Liz one spring saw an astounding
And lovely sight just after dawn—
A gray doe suckling her young fawn.
The doe looked round, unagitated
By Liz (then nine), who held her breath,
And who, though frozen half to death,
Volitionlessly stared and waited
Until the fawn had drunk its fill
And doe and fawn slipped off uphill. (10.25)

In Seth's capable hands, the Pushkin sonnet smoothly accommodates asides, interjections, and reflections, as well as Fr. O'Hare's lengthy anti-nuclear speech (7.16-34), but perhaps Seth's most distinctive characteristic is the ease and naturalness with which he renders contemporary, fragmented conversation in formal verse, and the early encounter between John and Janet in a Chinese restaurant is a typical example:

The food arrives as soon as ordered.
Impressed and ravenous, John relents.
His chopsticks fasten on beef bordered
With broccoli. Enticing scents
Swim over the noise, the greasy table.
Two bottles each of beer enable
Small talk and large, in cyclic waves,
To wash their shores, and John behaves

At last less stiffly if not sadly.

“How are the cats?” “Just fine.” “And you?”

“Great.” “And the sculpture?” “Yes, that too.”

“Your singing group?” “Oh, not too badly.

But I came here to hear your song.

Now sing!” “Jan, I don’t know what’s wrong.” (1.22)

Befitting its length, Seth’s novel in verse incorporates a number of epic (or mock-epic) devices, and the invocation that begins the book—“To make a start more swift than weighty, /Hail Muse.” (1.1)—is a clear echo of Byron.⁷ Seth makes frequent, effective use of catalogs, ranging from bumper stickers (2.12) to the contents of an attic (10.22–23), but they are spaced out so that they never seem intrusive, nor do they impede the flow of the narrative. Indeed, the catalogs may serve as speed bumps to keep the rapid pace of the narrative under control.⁸

As Seth has noted, he restricted himself to an “occasional authorial intrusion.”⁹ There are only eight such intrusions throughout the thirteen sections, most notably at the beginning of part five (5.1–5.5), when Seth speaks directly to the reader about himself, poetry, the stanza and meter he is using, and his inspiration in Johnston’s “luminous translation” of Pushkin’s masterpiece. Seth also gently mocks himself, appearing twice in the guise of Kim Tarvesh, a rather dreary graduate student in economics who is futilely wrestling with his dissertation. He is a “joyless guest” at a housewarming party (4.12) and a wedding reception (11.10), and his name is a fairly obvious anagram of Vikram Seth. Seth’s intrusions may be infrequent, but the penultimate one, the author’s apostrophe

to St. Francis, while both timely and appropriate, is also a radiant sonnet in its own right:

Patron of your beloved city,
O San Francisco, saint of love,
Co-sufferer in searing pity
Of all our griefs, whom from above
Birds would alight on, singing, feeding
Within your hands—hands pierced and bleeding
With Christ's own signs—who, stigmatized
As dupe and clown, apostrophized
The sun in its white blistering starkness
As brother, and the blistered moon
As sister, and who, blind at noon,
Opened your heart and sang in darkness—
And where it was, sowed light, look down.
Solace the sorrows of your town. (13.4)¹⁰

A. The Anatomy of Yuppiedom

Even at this early point in his writing career, it was clear that Seth felt no reluctance about attempting new genres, as he had written two volumes of lyric poetry and a travel book before the surprising popular success of *The Golden Gate*. Ordinarily, a long narrative poem would have little chance of commercial success, and the fact that *The Golden Gate* became a highly praised bestseller is no doubt due to a combination of factors: the story was topical, dealing with the lives of Silicon Valley yuppies; the narrative, with its soap-opera entanglement of those lives, captivated and carried

along the reader's interest; and Seth's dexterity in using the Pushkin sonnet made the poetic elements nearly subliminal.

Yet despite the book's subtitle description as "A Novel in Verse," it is important to recognize that *The Golden Gate* is actually an anatomy, a form of fiction (usually prose) that is primarily concerned with intellectual attitudes rather than character. The specification is more than just a pedantic point about genre, for the most common criticism of *The Golden Gate* is that the characters are flat, and the implication is that this is Seth's failing rather than a characteristic of the genre.¹¹ As Seth was well aware, the "narrative propulsiveness" of the tetrameter did not allow for "detailed *description* of character," and the stanza format severely constrained the space available for "character development."¹² Seth makes his claim as a poet rather than in terms of literary criticism, but the point is the same: genres have distinguishing characteristics, and it is misguided to criticize a genre (anatomy) for not being another (novel). It is the point that Northrop Frye made years ago: "If [Sir Walter] Scott has any claims to be a romancer, it is not good criticism to deal only with his defects as a novelist."¹³

As an anatomy, *The Golden Gate* offers a survey of the attitudes of some young urban professionals—or yuppies—the type that became so prominent in the United States during the high-tech boom of the 1980s. The word itself seldom appears, though it is used in the lonely-hearts ad that Janet proposes and writes (1.32, 2.3, 2.26); the narrator uses it once (2.57), and John uses it rather self-deprecatingly (4.15). In sharp contrast, the book is filled with references to yuppie trappings, habits, and concerns. There are frequent mentions of coffee, food, and wine, including cabernet (2.48), Bordeaux (4.11),

Chablis (4.12), champagne (4.42), port (6.13), zinfandel (10.1), and chardonnay (11.3). We also hear of Tsingtao (1.21), Michelob (3.8), Dos Equis (4.42), and Schlitz (11.39) beer. On the other hand, drugs are rarely featured, with a single appearance by Rose, a coke-sniffing English party girl (4.6), and three brief references to smoking pot (1.3, 5.27, 6.47–48).

We hear of theaters (2.19), music (1.8, 3.28), art (1.29, 4.31), books (1.19, 4.30), and movies (1.30, 2.54). Scrabble is both mentioned (3.25) and played (8.16). Coffee shops and restaurants are important, particularly Café Trieste (1.15, 2.35, 6.34, 11.41), the Tree of Heaven (2.54, 7.37), and Printers Inc (8.14), as is the Winking Owl singles bar (11.34). Yuppies often keep pets, and several cats inhabit the pages. Liz's Charlemagne becomes a major force in a love triangle, Jan has Cuff and Link, and the Doratis have the Winery Cat. Ed has a green iguana, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who appears surprisingly often.

Seth confines his observation to the San Francisco area, and he primarily surveys the attitudes and affairs of five main characters, three male (John, Phil, Ed) and two female (Jan, Liz), three of whom (John, Jan, Phil) knew each other in college at the University of California, Berkeley. Seth focuses on their concerns—their careers and social issues such as the threat of nuclear war—but even more on their feelings of loneliness and their search for love. The heart is central to any anatomy, so it should come as no surprise that the word dominates *The Golden Gate*, mentioned nearly 80 times, sometimes in compounds (heartless, 12.3; heartrending, 11.22), sometimes in expressions (heart's blood, 6.16; heart of gold, 6.24), twice in French (*affaires de coeur*, 2.20; *cris de coeur*, 2.34), and once

in a graphic ("I ♥ L.A.," 2.12). Protecting the heart was the predominant theme of Seth's early poetry, and in *The Golden Gate* he expands his concern into a sustained anatomization of his characters' lives, loves, and attitudes.

B. John and Liz, Phil and Ed: The Disasters of Passion

In Seth's early volumes of poetry, *Mappings* (1981) and *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985), the love poems were usually about the disappointments of love, emphasizing the intense pain that accompanied the inevitable failure of love affairs. The reader of the poems is repeatedly warned of the threat of passion, for it is hard if not impossible to control and carries ruinous destructive potential. The intensities of love burn, exacting a painfully high price, and the reductive ravages of passion steal an individual's self-control, even deranging the victim. Thus, for anyone familiar with Seth's earlier verse, *The Golden Gate* reads as an extended narrative depiction of the sad examples of and repeated warnings about the dangers of uncontrolled passion.

1. John and Liz

As John Brown, 26, an engineer who works in the weapons industry, is walking across Golden Gate Park one late September evening, he is nearly hit by an errant frisbee, a seemingly trivial incident that causes John to realize the extent of his loneliness (1.1-2). John's "appetite for work's abnormal" (1.3), and since these days "files take precedence over friends" (1.9), he has effectively cut himself off from any contact with friends from college, and when he wanders into an ice cream parlor, the awareness of his solitary state becomes

painful: "It hurts that only he's alone" (1.7). Back home, seeking consolation, John decides to call Phil, a friend with whom he drank beer and double-dated in their Berkeley years. John is a little reluctant to call because Phil, a fellow engineer, has recently left his job in the defense industry to work for peace, and John worries that politics might spoil their friendship (1.9-10).

There is no answer when he calls Phil, so John next tries Janet (Jan) Hayakawa, a former lover (1.11). As he dials, John recalls Janet's "warm beauty" and "vagrant charm," but he only reaches her answering machine, so he just leaves his name and number instead of mentioning anything about "his heart's woes" (1.18). Janet, a sculptor and drummer in a loud, discordant band called Liquid Sheep (1.12), calls back when she gets home, even though it is well after midnight, because she has detected the strong note of sadness in John's brief message, and she invites him to meet for lunch the next day (1.19). As they talk in the Chinese restaurant, John professes not to know what is wrong with him, but as he pours out his yuppie lament in a catalog of clever metaphors, Janet's diagnosis is instantaneous:

"I'm young, employed, healthy, ambitious,
Sound, solvent, self-made, self-possessed.
But all my symptoms are pernicious.
The Dow-Jones of my heart's depressed.
The sunflower of my youth is wilting.
The tower of my dreams is tilting.
The zoom lens of my zest is blurred.
The drama of my life's absurd.

What is the root of my neurosis?
I jog, eat brewer's yeast each day,
And yet I feel life slip away.
I wait your sapient diagnosis,
I die! I faint! I fail! I sink!"
"You need a lover, John, I think." (1.23)¹⁴

Janet's advice is practical and to the point, that he should advertise for a partner, but John's initial outraged reaction is just the first example of his major character flaw, and Janet has to caution him that his "mind needs cleaning / Of the debris of prejudice" (1.31-33). Acting on her own, Janet composes and sends off a personal ad on John's behalf—"Young handsome yuppie, 26, / Straight, forward, sociable, but lonely..." (2.3)—then forwards the replies to John, who is again furious with Jan (2.6). Eventually John calms down and answers three of the replies, without any success, but a late response from Elizabeth (Liz) Dorati, who is responding to such a personal ad for the first time, impressed by its "*literate prose,*" arouses John's interest (2.26). Liz, 27 and very attractive, is a graduate of Stanford Law School and an attorney in a law firm. She has, as she writes, "*not yet known romantic heaven, / But harbor hopes of getting there*" (2.27). Living in an apartment with her cat, Charlemagne, Liz feels "a little lonely," so, not wanting her life to come down to a choice between "a legal partner's life / And being a legal partner's wife," she sends off her unprecedented reply with a "quickenning heartbeat" (2.33-34).

The two meet one Sunday morning in the Café Trieste, and their initial reactions are promising: "John's heart gives a lurch," and Liz

finds John “quite attractive” (2.35–36). They are soon so “rapt in discussion” that John does not even notice Jan come in (2.39–40), and after Liz accepts a dinner invitation for Thursday evening, “the pair parts . . . (with shaking hearts)” (2.41). At the Tree of Heaven, their waiter quickly realizes why they are so uninterested in his recommendations: ““They’re moonstruck”” (2.44). John confesses that Liz had transported him out of his desperate loneliness, and the sympathetic Liz feels “helpless in a surge of feeling” (2.45–46). They are soon kissing and embracing, almost in desperation—“They cannot hold each other tight/Enough against the chill of night” (2.50)—and when “John wakes to sunlight streaming/Across an unfamiliar bed,” he thinks: “I must be dreaming—” (2.51).

However, Seth has already begun to warn us that this state of dream-like bliss cannot last. No sooner does he describe Liz as “helpless in a surge of feeling,” than he cautions us in the very next line that such a surge of emotion is “An undertow to common sense” (2.46). The morning after their night together, John is described as “Besotted” (2.52), and Liz’s colleagues think she must be high on coke, acid, or speed, though her worldly boss recognizes that “She’s/Hooked on stronger drugs than these” (2.53). As if these negative connotations were not warning enough, Seth now intrudes in the final three stanzas to caution us about the lovers’ “rash delirium and delight” (2.55), and to disparage the following “weeks of sweet addiction,” during which their love-talk makes “Their brains appear to be dissolving” (2.56). Professing embarrassment at their love-struck condition (2.57), Seth invites the reader to look away from the “amorous mist,” but not before strongly warning us once again, in a reference to the threatening San Andreas Fault, that

“convulsive shocks” can fracture love, just as earthquakes “rip the hills and split the rocks” (3.1).

Unfortunately, John does not see what is most important. John and Liz find a place (6.7), fix it up and move in together (6.9-10), and hold a celebratory housewarming party (4.1-29), but when John takes approving stock of his improved condition, he gets it all wrong:

John looks about him with enjoyment.
What a man needs, he thinks, is health;
Well-paid, congenial employment;
A house; a modicum of wealth;
Some sunlight; coffee and the papers;
Artichoke hearts adorned with capers;
A Burberry trench coat; a Peugeot;
And in the evening, some Rameau
Or Couperin; a home-cooked dinner;
A Stilton, and a little port;
And so to a duvet. In short,
In life’s brief game to be a winner
A man must have...oh yes, above
All else, of course, someone to love. (6.13)

John had all this—barring love—before, and he was miserably lonely, yet in this catalog of requirements for the good life, love is just an afterthought, and the deflation of all before in the stanza by the undercutting thrust of the “oh yes” addition is typical of Seth.¹⁵ Needless to say, John’s seeming disregard of love does not bode

well for his relationship with Liz.

John's major character flaw lies in his temperament. Described as "A passionate man, with equal parts of/Irritability and charm," whose "flaring temper" has "singed the hearts of/Several women" in the past (1.4), it is a scant two months after their first meeting that John begins showing "acid bolts of irritation" with Liz (6.3). To make things worse, John has a worthy competitor for Liz's affection, for Charlemagne, Liz's cat, loves her "with a loyal passion" (6.19) and jealously regards John as a "Loathed intruder" (6.18). Charlemagne continually gets the better of John—pissing on his tux the night of the housewarming party (4.3), clawing a report to tatters (6.16), urinating near John's head while he is in bed (6.23), and fouling John's briefcase (6.25)—and John's threats become increasingly angry. His threat to have Charlemagne declawed reduces Liz to tears, so he agrees to let Janet mediate, but when Jan declares "Declawing is a mutilation" (6.29) and suggests a cat psychologist (6.30), John's outburst of anger expands from Jan to the entire state: "Jan, you're nuts! / ... This whole damn place is going bonkers—" (6.30).

Their relationship continues to go downhill, and by autumn John is muttering "It's that cat or me" (9.1) and telling Liz: "You cat freaks are, quite simply, crazy" (9.3). Liz's reaction gives a clear indication of how far they have fallen from their bower of bliss: "Stop it, John— /When you go on and on and on/I love you, but I just can't stand you" (9.3). Many things about Liz now aggrieve John, and Seth again quotes Wordsworth—"As high as we have mounted... / (Ah, Wordsworth!) ... do we sink as low" (9.4)—to emphasize his belief that the strongest passions are subject to abrupt

reversals.¹⁶ When Phil drops by, John laments his lack of freedom (9.10) and expresses his disappointment with Liz—she’s great in bed and dresses well, but her brain is “shot to hell” (9.11)—but when he learns that Phil has been having an affair with Ed, Liz’s brother, his disgust and rage erupt in an inclusive outburst:

“Anything goes in this damned city.
Your brother’s either sick or mad
—And you know what? You’re just as bad
—And your gross cat—It’s a real pity
Ed hasn’t seen a shrink—And you
... (He turns on Phil) ...should see one too!” (9.19)

When their relationship completely breaks down at Thanksgiving, which John and Liz spend with her parents at their vineyard, it is largely due to John’s blindness. As Liz had confided to Phil after John’s outburst, “at times he’s almost blind,” prone to explode in destructive outbursts of anger (9.38). Since Mrs. Dorati is so eager for her daughter to marry, John, blind to the consternation he has set raging in Liz’s heart, mistakenly thinks the time is ripe for a proposal, so he is puzzled when Liz puts him off, saying “Give me some time, John,” and giving as her reason for this request her belief that “There’s more to life than love” (10.26-27). By which she means that there is more to life than passion.

The next day, when John is again feeling confident his proposal will be accepted, he finds a thick letter addressed to Liz, and a “disbelieving hatred sinks/Into his gaze” when he recognizes the handwriting as Phil’s, a recognition that leaves him “scoured with

shock and pain” (10.36). When Liz walks by, John furiously grabs her shoulder, for Seth an action that brands John as totally unsuitable for Liz, consumed as he is by “jealous loathing” (10.37). For John, his timing could not be worse, as Liz has just learned from her father that her mother is dying, so her thoughts are distracted. The letter is innocent enough, dealing with Phil’s trial for protesting, but John refuses to accept that, and when he crudely accuses Liz of a romantic interest in Phil, she cries out: “John, I can’t take it—don’t accuse me/Of having an affair with Phil— / Don’t drive me to it—or I will” (10.38). Liz leaves, weeping as though “her heart were breaking,” shuddering at John’s touch as he tries to take her hand (10.38), and John quickly packs and drives off, glaring at Ed “with transferred hate” as he goes (10.40). It is as though Seth had inflated one of his earlier cautionary poems into a narrative, for in the story of John and Liz we see yet another example of passion going wrong.

2. Phil and Ed

Philip (Phil) Weiss, 28, is different from the other main characters, for he has been married, to Claire Cabot, and has a six-year-old son, Paul. Phil, a self-described West Coast atheist Jew (3.17), had married Claire, an East Coast Wasp, despite her family’s objection (3.16). They shared a love of music, and Paul cannot understand what destroyed their happiness—“I think our home / Was what I’d always longed and prayed for” (3.18)—but a year previously Claire had run off with a “snooty tweedy/Son-of-an-East-Coast-bitch” (3.15), and Phil is still perplexed and grieving: “I think of you and I despair/Of any happiness without you” (3.16).

The narrator steps in to balance the picture of Claire, and Seth provides another example of love's fragility and the abrupt reversal of feelings:

Post-marriage incompatibility
Of taste and style and interest,
Now hammering on love's fragility,
Exposed its contract to the test.
Phil's vigor, once his great attraction,
Exhausted Claire now; her reaction
To argument was to withdraw
Into her life and close the door. (3.26)

Like John, Phil is an engineer, and he also worked in the defense industry, where his specialty was guidance systems for missiles (4.17). Concerned about the destructive potential of the missile race, Phil has quit his job at Datatronics—"The SOS his heart was hammering/Had grown too loud to be ignored" (3.6)—and now he spends his time caring for Paul and organizing peace protests. Phil shows many good qualities as a father. He is creative, making up stories to entertain Paul (3.7-10), he is sympathetic about Paul's loneliness for his mother (3.13-14), and he assures and comforts his son (3.19-20). Phil has been wounded by Claire's departure and silence (3.14), and when Paul says "You talk like Mom is dead" (3.12), Phil's reaction is immediate and intense: "An abrupt torque of pain and sorrow/Wrenches Phil's heart" (3.13). When Phil's landlady, Mrs. Craven, drops by, we learn that her daughter Rowena has her sights set on Phil, but her mother begs her: "Please

don't crush/Poor Phil's heart into quivering mush" (3.23). Phil's heart, clearly, has been damaged and is vulnerable.

Phil attends John and Liz's housewarming party, where he is very nervous about meeting Janet, who is Claire's friend and openly hostile to Phil (4.8-10). Phil begins drinking too much (4.14), and when John goads him about quitting his job to save the world (4.15-17), Phil begins describing—"Speech strained and clarified by passion" (4.19)—the disastrous effects of nuclear bombs falling on the world (4.19-21). Phil's speech attracts the attention of a young man with a "pale, slender, passionate face," who "stands there wordless, half in love," staring at Phil (4.12). This is Ed Dorati, 23, the adored brother of Liz and Sue (4.22-23), and he and Phil are soon discussing Ed's pet iguana (4.24-27). When the conversation turns to marriage, the drunken Phil mutters a crude slur against women in general, but Jan overhears and begins furiously scolding Phil (4.27-28). Phil is so drunk that he does not even know what he said to upset Jan, so Ed, aware that Phil is in no condition to drive, offers to share his bed (4.29).

At Ed's apartment, Phil notices a Bible, some religious books, a crucifix, and "Holbein's sketch of Thomas More" (4.30-31), so he is rather bewildered when he "sees Ed/Cross himself twice, then come to bed" (4.32). Phil thanks Ed, then reaches across the bed to touch Ed as he says good night, and the following stanza is filled with tension as the two make tentative contact before they embrace:

... Good night." Ed fears to answer. Trembling,
He moves his hand across the space
—What terrifying miles—assembling

His courage, touches Philip's face
 And feels him tense up and go rigid.
 "I'm sorry," Ed says, in a frigid,
 Half-choking voice, "I thought you might—
 I didn't mean—I mean—good night."
 Taut with a cataleptic tension
 They lie, unspeaking. Phil thinks, "Why
 Be so uptight? He's a great guy.
 I've never bothered with convention.
 God! It's a year that I've been chaste . . ."
 And puts his arm around Ed's waist. (4.33)

At this point, "just as . . . Ed and Phil were making love," the narrator coyly interrupts, blaming the "official censor" for the intervention: "Forgive me, Reader, if I'm surly / At having to replace the bliss / I'd hoped to portray with this" (4.34). Seth is being evasive, but in this case he is not denigrating the lovers' bliss as he did on the earlier occasion when John and Liz were making love (2.55-57). Since Paul is staying with a friend, Phil and Ed spend the weekend together. Saturday night, chaperoned by the iguana beneath their bed, they only sleep (4.44-45), but Sunday night they make love again. Although Phil had "made it with a guy at college" once or twice, he does not understand why he has fallen for Ed so rapidly, though he knows part of the reason is that Ed admires him so much (4.47-48). Ed, for his part, though both eager and confused, is passionate in bed, finding it good to be desired (4.48).

It is this homosexual relationship between Phil and Ed that has provoked some critical condemnation. Rowena Hill, for example, is

offended by what she sees as “the plea for homosexual enjoyment” in *The Golden Gate*.¹⁷ Carol Iannone faults Seth for his “casually sophisticated portrayal of homosexuality,” particularly because, in her view, he morally evaluates it as “life-enhancing and spiritually expansive.”¹⁸ In this case, Makarand Paranjape and Mala Pandurang are wiser, as they note that the point is not homosexuality but the response to it.¹⁹ Liz’s attitude, in sharp contrast to John’s sputtering disgust, is open-minded and accepting, even though Ed is her brother. Although she suspected that Phil and Ed were having an affair (9.21), she did not say anything, let alone react with outrage or disgust, and when Phil laments that Ed is “inaccessible,” Liz responds: “Phil, give Ed a chance, /He’s young; I’m sure he’ll change his stance” (9.34). Janet, too, displays a broad-minded attitude. When John sharply objects to her question about whether he might be interested in meeting some nice guys, she replies, “Well, don’t knock what you haven’t tried” (1.28), and soon after she tells him he needs to clean his mind of prejudice (1.33).²⁰

John’s narrow intolerance is the other extreme, and when his manifest disgust enrages Phil, Seth makes use of a rare extended simile to emphasize the danger of such a blinkered attitude:

As brother grimaces at brother
When a dense veil of hate descends,
They stare with loathing at each other
Who just two minutes past were friends. (9.16)

A blinding veil of hatred is greatly to be feared, and in *From Heaven Lake* Seth expressed his abhorrence of a mind clouded

with rage, particularly when it was his own.²¹

In any case, the affair between Phil and Ed is soon over. Ed, in what his sisters call his “godly mood” (4.23), decides he wants a chaste relationship with Phil (5.11), but Phil thinks Ed is wrong to trim his heart and deny the love they have shared (4.51, 53). However, in “A Little Distance” (*The Humble Administrator’s Garden*), which uses a similar vocabulary of “chaste” and “monastery,” Seth has warned us that the safe choice can have its own dangers, as the couple in that poem are reduced to the inanimate state of sun-warmed stones. Phil later opts for “a clean affair” rather than a passion-denying farce (8.32), but if Ed wants to keep his body pure, regarding it as “God’s instrument” (4.52), then he should not visit gay bars (5.18) or invite a man home to share his bed.

The two have extended arguments (4.50–54, 8.19–35), and Phil’s repeated point, to simplify, is that Ed should heed his heart rather than adhering to teachings or doctrines. Whereas Ed wants to strive for “purity/Of heart” (8.27), resisting what he sees as debasing desire (8.32), Phil insists Ed should go by what his heart tells him is right (8.33), and that when his heart is “aching with desire” (8.34), he should heed it, for “Love’s whole/Or else it’s nothing” (8.35).²²

Phil has openly declared his love for Ed (8.10), so he feels “maddened” when he hears Ed express contempt for their lovemaking (8.25). The essential difference between them is mirrored in their Scrabble techniques: Phil is flamboyant and daring, whereas Ed’s wary words chew up the board, “Sealing Phil’s options one by one” (8.17). And so it is in their relationship. The strain of constant arguing leads to insult and a brief, cathartic fight (8.22–23), but even though they make up, Phil knows the relationship is over. This is

shown physically when Ed withdraws his hand and pulls back (8.35), and when they lie apart on the same bed, “each keeping, / Unshared, his bitterness of heart,” with the unsleeping Phil resisting his desire to touch again the man he loves (8.36).

C. Phil and Liz: The Moderation of Passion

Phil first meets Liz at a string quartet concert at Stanford. Liz’s sister Sue, the youngest of the Dorati children, plays the cello in the Ionian Quartet, so Liz has invited John. As is typical, John is “sour and surly” about the Schönberg part of the program, but he spots Phil and Paul in the audience, and during the interval he goes to say hello, introduces Liz, and invites Phil to their housewarming party (3.28–33). Phil is full of praise for the cellist, surprised to hear that she is Liz’s sister, and Liz tells Phil that he will be able to compliment Sue in person at the party (3.34). When John and Phil exchange a few words in private (John expresses his sorrow about “this thing with Claire”), Phil flatters John with his first impression of Liz: “— Your new friend...and housewarmer—is / Lovely, I think— although we’ve merely / Exchanged two words... I’m glad for you” (3.35–56).

At the party, the considerate but unknowing Liz steers Phil to Jan and Sue, and she introduces Phil to her sister (4.7–8). Jan glares at Phil and quickly excuses herself, and Phil avoids Sue’s question about Jan before hurrying to praise her performance. Sue smiles warmly at Phil, and across the room, John and Liz, who have been watching, reveal their sharply different perspectives. John, blind as usual to nuance, assumes that romance is in the air—“She’s falling for him—bet she is!... Yes, it’s reciprocal—I’m sure”—while the more

canny and perceptive Liz believes that John is jumping to a premature conclusion (4.10-11). It is not long after this, of course, that Phil leaves with Ed (4.29).

Several months later, Phil drops by to ask Liz for some legal advice about the protest march against Lungless Labs that he is helping organize. John, who has been increasingly outraged about Charlemagne, transfers his anger to a new target and attacks the protest as disgraceful and inexcusable (6.40), but Phil, significantly, is able to control his own rising emotions:

John stops, face dark with agitation.
Phil, startled by his vehemence,
Starts flashing fire, but moderation
Prevails... (6.44)

Thanks to Phil's moderation—and "A reconciliatory hit/Of dope"—the two are able to part on friendlier terms. Phil leaves some literature, including Jonathan Schell's influential *The Fate of the Earth*, asking John "to try to see it through our eyes," but that is impossible for John, who cannot see things clearly even through his own eyes (6.47). Phil leaves with a handshake for John and a kiss for Liz, but it is when Ed arrives soon after that Liz notices something—the same mismatched socks (9.21)—that first shocks, then baffles her, but her preoccupied manner is a far cry from John's soon-to-follow enraged revulsion (6.48-49).

At the demonstration, Phil is surprised and openly delighted to see Liz appear, complete with placard and Charlemagne in a baby carriage, though he is perplexed when she asks, "by the way, how's

Eddy?” (7.12-14). The bulk of part seven, the physical and thematic core of *The Golden Gate*, is Fr. O'Hare's anti-nuclear speech, and the thematic strand that runs through the speech—and which in broadest terms could be called ecological—is the stark choice with which he concludes:

“Let me close
With Deuteronomy's plain prose.
Here it is: 'I have set before you
Life and death... therefore choose life.'” (7.34)²³

When this speech ends, Phil expresses his surprise that John let Liz attend, but Liz assures Phil that John expressed strong approval—“His exact words were ‘Go to hell— / And take your fucking cat as well!’”—so we hear yet another example of John's corrosive anger. Liz tells Phil that she admires him and offers to take care of Paul (7.30), but before she can leave, she is pressed to make a short speech. Phil encourages her, and she offers a variant of Fr. O'Hare's theme, telling how the ozone depletion resulting from nuclear warfare would lead to blindness and starvation throughout the animal kingdom (7.44-47). As they part, Liz is appeasing Charlemagne's dissatisfaction (7.48), but, as we know, she is unable to appease John's.

The next time Phil stops by, his timing could hardly be worse, in one respect. John has just given his “It's that cat or me” ultimatum to Liz (9.1), and when he starts to leave, full of grievances, is when he meets Phil, who has just driven up (9.6). After complaining about Liz, John explodes in disgust when he hears

about Phil and Ed, and when Liz waves the two inside for some freshly baked muffins, she sits stunned in dizzy disbelief at John's offensive behavior (9.17-20). Liz, hoping to restore peace, goes after Phil, who has walked out, and she suggests a drive to the bay and a walk (9.22).

It is during the drive and walk that Phil and Liz become strongly drawn toward each other. When Phil thanks Liz for giving two *Tintin* books to Paul, they discover that they both delighted in those books in their childhoods (9.24-26), and when Phil remarks that his brief prison experience with other protesters was a paradise of "Like-minded souls in dense proximity—" (9.27), we are reminded that two like-minded individuals are at the moment in close proximity.

There are numerous descriptions of nature throughout *The Golden Gate*, and sometimes Seth uses them primarily for backdrop or setting, but nature is frequently emblematic and revelatory in these descriptive pieces, and such is the case at the end of their drive:

They park the car by the Marina.
The surface of the cobalt bay
Is flecked with white. The moister, keener
October air has rinsed away
The whispering mists with crisp intensity
And over the opaque immensity
A deliquescent wash of blue
Reveals the bridge, long lost to view
In summer's quilt of fog: the towers,

High-built, redgold, with their-long span
—The most majestic spun by man—
Whose threads of steel through mists and showers,
Wind, spray, and the momentous roar
Of ocean storms, link shore to shore. (9.28)

Here, the cleared vision that brings revelation is what Phil and Liz have both gained and achieved, but the revelatory view also emphasizes that cleared vision is precisely what John lacks and needs. Moreover, the revealed, connecting span also suggests the strengthening connection between Liz and Phil.²⁴

They wander, taking in the view and the sight of the golden span, then start across the bridge. When Liz voices her hope that Phil and Ed “are suited for each other” (9.33), Phil tells her that “we both know it’s over now” (9.35). When Phil admits his loneliness—

“Christ, I’m so lonely—
This past year’s been—God knows I only
Want to—O God knows what—to live
Without this emptiness—to give
A little love, to get a little.” (9.35)—

Liz in turn confesses the failing in her relationship with John:

Then, with an effort: “Well, love’s fun
At first...but living with someone
You love can be less than appealing

If everything's just great in bed
Yet nothing's shared inside your head." (9.36)

In his earlier parallel complaint to Phil, John had narrowly-mindedly blamed Liz for all his dissatisfactions (9.11). That Liz is more insightful about the source of their problems is no surprise, and earlier during the drive, as Phil and Liz enjoy their shared delight in *Tintin*, we are made aware of the comforting warmth that sharing provides (9.24-26). Emboldened by Liz's confession and his sense of their growing intimacy, Phil reflects on how his expectations have changed, expressing the idea that is central to *The Golden Gate* and all Seth's writing:

"I now yearn less for heart attacks,
Passion's angina, and love's blindness
Than company and warmth and kindness." (9.39)

Love, passion, and the heart may be the trinity of romance, but from Phil's pained perspective, they are all too often coupled with attacks, angina, and blindness, so he (and Seth) opt for the more temperate—but less dangerous—and nurturing trio of companionship, warmth, and kindness. As they walk back, taking in the open view—"The westward arc of ocean...gleams with light"—it is surely a promising sign that Liz's emotions are now "quietened," and that the two "talk/With their old ease" (9.40).

At the end of section ten, the "self-damned, self-banished" John has driven away from Liz and the Dorati home in a fury of jealous loathing and hatred (10.36-40). Section eleven begins with

the same three lines as section ten—

The clapboard church with the white steeple
On a gray, frozen day extrudes
A complement of cheerful people. (11.1)—

but instead of a Thanksgiving service (10.1), this time the cheerful people have attended a wedding, and it is a surprise to both those attending and the reader that it is the wedding of Phil and Liz. In fact, Liz's father expresses his concern and asks the pertinent question:

Mr. Dorati seeks his daughter
Amid the crowd and tugs her sleeve:
“Liz, dear, a word... (and now he's brought her
Toward the door)... Liz, I believe
That you're aware of what you're doing.
I'd hate to see you sad, or ruing
The day that you became a wife....
You do love Phil?” “Not on your life!”
Liz giggles: “Oh, Dad, don't look gloomy—
I like him, though. Here, have some more!”
And rapidly begins to pour
The Korbels. “Dad, he's gentle to me.”
“Well, Liz,” her father says, perplexed,
“Should I be pleased, appalled, or vexed?” (11.12)

As she walks away from her father and towards Phil, Liz gives

us a partial answer in her thoughts—

.....“Whether
It’s love or not means nothing much.
Love by itself’s a tightening tether,
A habit-forming drug, a crutch....
I like Phil, and he likes and needs me.
.....
..... Though I wouldn’t
Say I’m impulsive, and though Dad
Must think I’ve lost my head, I’m glad
We’ve married with such haste. I couldn’t
Hope for a better better half:
A good kind man who makes me laugh.” (11.13)—

and Sue, who shares her sister’s gift of thoughtful observation, although troubled by the haste of the thing, finds reason for approval:

“Liz seems so happy, though. She’s clowning
With Phil now.... Would she carry on
So unconstrainedly with John?” (11.11)

However, the reasons behind this impulsive marriage are of utmost importance to Seth and *The Golden Gate*, so he provides a lengthy flashback (11.14–23) in order to elucidate them. Liz successfully defends Phil and the other protesters in court, but when they have a celebratory lunch, Phil notices that Liz is upset.

Emotionally bruised by the traumatic ending of her relationship with John, Liz tearfully admits as much to Phil, which provokes his astonishing response:

...“Phil—it’s over—it’s no use—
I’ll never marry him.” Phil, sighing,
Said, “Are you sure?” Liz bent her head.
“Oh well then, Liz, try me instead.” (11.19)

Although Liz bursts into laughter and anticipates her father’s later concern when she points out what would ordinarily be considered a fatal flaw—“—we don’t love each other!”—Phil’s reply is the heart of Seth’s concern:

“I’ve found
That love’s a pretty poor forecaster.
I loved a woman—and was dropped.
I loved a man—and that too flopped.
Passion’s a prelude to disaster. (11.20)

On the other hand, and in counterbalance to the disasters of passion, Phil admires many of Liz’s qualities, and he is certain they “could be happy with each other” (11.21). Now it is Phil’s turn for astonishment as Liz laughingly agrees—“All right. First thing next week”—but in her assurance that she is not joking, Liz gives her parallel version of the wisdom gained through painful experience, for she, too, has learned to distrust passion:

Phil started. "Liz, don't joke. I'm serious."
"So am I, Phil—I like you too—
You're stimulating, unimperious...
What's more, you've opened up my view
To the whole world.... And I'd far rather
Marry a man who's a good father
Than someone... I too don't feel sure
I can trust passion any more..." (11.22)

Here, then, in two facing sonnets, is the thematic core of Seth's literary works, but it is crucial to note that Seth's repeated assertion about the danger of passion is not a simple-minded claim that passion is bad. On the contrary, passion can be vital and life-affirming, as when Liz is "impassioned" in the courtroom, seeming to "flame and burn/With sorrow, and with high concern" (11.18), but this is passion under control. And Phil, we should recall, argues for passion, for trusting the heart, against Ed's desire to control his heart's desire to the point of denial.

No, the danger is not that passion is inherently bad, but that it is so powerful and overmastering. The danger is that passion, once aroused and unchecked, can be so terrifyingly destructive. Once passion takes control, reducing the impassioned to subservient status, the victim falls easy prey to the destructive impulses of jealousy, rage, and violence, whether verbal or physical. If you have learned to distrust passion—if, like Phil and Liz, you have been burned and survived—you are wise to embrace the more moderate temperatures of affection, respect, and kindness, which are supportive and expansive rather than repressive and confining, and Sue is

right to find reassurance in the sight of her sister acting “unconstrainedly” with her new husband (11.11). In similar fashion, Seth offers his readers the assurance that Phil and Liz, though married in what may seem a “rash” act, are about to “Set sail on the calm pond of life” (11.23).²⁵

While their marriage promises to be much calmer and happier than the acrimonious and argumentative relationships they have recently ended with John and Ed, their pond of life soon turns out to be far from calm, as Phil and Liz suddenly find themselves at the center of a large and growing family. Their abrupt marriage is only the first of a series of dramatic changes that occur late in *The Golden Gate*. A tragic traffic accident, the fault of a drunken teenage driver, takes the lives of Matt and Joan Lamont, though Joan is able to shield Chuck, their son, who survives (13.2). Joan was a pediatrician and Matt was Phil’s physician and friend, as well as godfather—“second father to Phil’s son”—to Paul (5.30). Paul and Chuck are friends, so Liz and Phil take in Chuck after the accident (13.3), and Phil later learns that Matt had wanted him to adopt Chuck in just such an eventuality:

...I wonder why
Matt left that note about adoption
—It’s kind of eerie—in his will:
If we both die, we hope that Phil...
Of course we’ll want to take the option. (13.34)

The accident also killed Janet, who, at Phil’s suggestion, was catching a ride with the Lamonts after her pickup would not start

(12.26-30), and now “Cuff and Link are playing with Charlemagne” (13.3). Moreover, Liz is pregnant, and Phil is nearly stunned by the changes that have taken place:

Phil thinks: “It’s so abrupt, it’s numbing.
Last August, it was Paul and me—
And now it’s two, plus two, plus three:
Seven! And soon an eighth is coming...” (13.32)²⁶

Liz’s main worry is her mother, who is dying (13.35, 37). Although her parents do not appear often in *The Golden Gate*, the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Dorati dominates section ten, which, as is appropriate during the Thanksgiving season, emphasizes the importance of family life.²⁷ Sue and her boyfriend, rummaging in the attic, find ample intriguing evidence of the “plaited streams of family history” (10.23), and the Doratis are presented as the embodiment of an ideal marriage:

Downstairs, Sue’s father makes the fire.
“Real gems, our kids!” he says, and looks
At sleeping Ed. The flames rise higher;
The old folks settle down with books:
He with *Tom Jones*, she with a thriller
Entitled *Jack the Lady-Killer*.
Though he reads his, and she reads hers,
From time to time a thought occurs
That must be shared—for instance, whether
Arsenic grows into one’s hair—

Or how Tom plots his debonair
And raffish gambits. Thus together
They pool their prose, and intertwine
Their lives along a common vine. (10.24)

The final image is certainly fitting for a couple who own and operate a vineyard, but the entire sonnet emphasizes the comfortable companionship, the shared pleasures, and the mutual support that unite the two as a loving couple.

Mrs. Dorati dies and her ashes are mingled with the vineyard earth (13.49), but not, as if in answer to her daughter's prayer—"Please, God, keep her alive/Another month..." (13.38)—before Liz's baby is born, to the delight of the entire family (13.45). Marie Dorati's desire to have a grandchild is fulfilled, and her sight of the baby links the old and new families (13.38). The Lamonts have been killed and Marie Dorati dies a week after the baby is born, but the union of Phil and Liz has created a new family that combines elements of the Lamont, Dorati, and Weiss families.²⁸ Before the baby was born, the formerly embattled Charlemagne had surveyed his suddenly and surprisingly enlarged menage from his "high station" on the piano with an approving placidity (13.36). Once the baby is born, we look on the newly expanded family that Phil and Liz have created out of their tempered passions. While we may not experience the "raptures" of Mrs. Dorati (13.48), neither should our response be as enigmatic as that of "the immobile Charlemagne" (13.36), for we must certainly, as surely Seth intended, survey the new family with warm and heart-felt approval.

D. Janet and the Salvation of John

As is clear from the first, John needs saving. As a lonely “linkless node” (1.7), John has severed contacts and friendships, dedicating himself to a career in which “files take precedence over friends” (1.9). He wears his plastic name tag “around/His collar like a votive necklace” (1.3), having chosen to devote himself to “the Chip, a jealous God” (1.9), and the result is the profound and dispiriting sense of loneliness that he feels. In the past it had been otherwise, for in his college days John had had friends, including Phil (1.9), and he and Janet had been lovers in what Janet later refers to as their “days of fire and smoke” (11.43). Although John and Janet had mutually ended their passionate relationship out of career concerns—

A standing truce

Shelters their friendship from all passion.

They'd felt their union would constrict

Their separate lives. (1.11) —

it is to Janet that John turns at his loneliest.

Initially, it seems that John has made the right move, as Jan's immediate concerned response (1.19), their lunch (1.20-41), which ends with them parting “with a lightened heart” (1.41), and her ad on his behalf (2.3-4) eventually lead to John meeting Liz (2.35), which for a time appears to be a blissfully—even embarrassingly—happy ending to John's loneliness (2.55-57). Yet even during their lunch there are hints that Janet may have more work to do. For one thing, John's casual sexist reference to “hooking chicks” earns a

sharp and angry response from Janet—“You’ll blow it badly / Till you clean up your Pigspeak act . . . ‘To hook a chick’— / Such porcine lingo makes me sick” (1.26)—and John’s reaction to her tentative suggestion that he might be interested in meeting a nice guy—“Oh, come on Janet, / I just don’t go for that, so can it” (1.28)—foretells his later eruption of anger and disgust at Phil and Ed (9.14-19). John does not seem able to appreciate the value of Jan’s friendship. Later when Janet is feeling low and calls John for some comforting words, he wounds her with a casual insult, referring to her as “a virago.” John cannot see the “veil of pain” that passes across her face, but the word has entered her heart and made it grieve (6.36).

Although John may have been temporarily rescued from loneliness, he obviously still needs to be saved from himself. His defense work on “Compaction / Of payloads” (4.17) appears as the external counterpart of the compaction of his heart, and during their lunch Janet explicitly warns John about twin perils of yuppie existence: “hearts stored in formaldehyde” (1.35) and constricted hearts (1.36). John is sometimes described as a frozen man, one who is both chilled and chilling, as at the party they host to celebrate Janet’s exhibition, when the unexpected appearance of Phil and Liz, who had been invited by Jan (12.23), causes John to “abruptly freeze” (12.32), and his ungracious, fleeting greeting leaves Liz and Phil “chilled” (12.33-34). Clearly, John desperately needs Anne T. Friese, the name Janet uses when she writes a reply to John’s ad (2.23-24), for the frozen John desperately requires antifreeze.

Even though she has engineered the arrangement, Janet is still upset when she happens to see John and Liz at their first meeting, “rapt in conversation,” their faces elated and radiant (2.39). As we

know, the blissful state does not endure, and the relationship between the two breaks down almost entirely due to John's irritability and intolerance. Metaphorically, John is a crustacean or mollusc, a creature with a hard shell. He may well be "Tender beneath a carapace / Of well-groomed tastes and tasteful grooming" (1.4), but it is the crusty carapace that dominates. John's politics may have "Rigidified," but that is only "a reflection, in a sense, / Of a rigidity deeper-seated" (2.14). Phil tries to account for this quality in John —

Phil says, "You know, Liz, this rigidity
Of John's is less a function of
Innate intemperate rabidity
Than of a childhood lack of love..." (9.37) —

and when Janet considers his "extreme response" to Phil and Liz, she "does not believe / John's stance is reasonless or heartless; / She sees it, though, as rigid" (12.3). In his calmer moments, John is able to loosen his "cancroid armor" (6.47), but he is still wrapped and trapped in it, unlike Jan, who at will can doff "her defensive armor" (2.40). John may still be tender inside, but when he is hurt, he reacts as does an oyster, by growing an ever-thicker but also a more-entrapping outer shell: "Each day's accretion / Of labor settles on his pain / Its nacreous coat of insulation" (11.29). The danger is that John may no longer be reached from or respond to the outside.

Significantly, however, John's metaphorical status also points directly to what he is lacking, and that is a vital connection to nature. There is, moreover, an ironic aspect to this lack, for from

the first John has felt the pull of metaphorical tides and currents. When we first meet him walking in Golden Gate Park, John “feels an urgent riptide drawing/Him far out, where, caught in the kelp/Of loneliness, he cries for help” (1.2).²⁹ Later, John mistakenly feels “the tides have turned” his way with regard to his proposal to Liz (10.33), “The icy flow of his closed pain/Touches his coast” after Liz marries Phil instead (11.31), and he is isolated “by a hysteria/That soaks through him like a high tide” after Jan’s death (13.19). Yet these images all serve to emphasize that John has too little connection with nature, as Seth shows in other ways, sometimes humorously. For instance, stanzas 9.9 and 9.10 begin with the identical blunt description, “John frowns.” The rest of the first sonnet—

John frowns. A premature but mellow
 Carved pumpkin grins down from a high
 Bow window. Ginkgos, green and yellow,
 Trace fall’s itinerary. A spry
 October breeze gusts up and blusters.
 The pyracantha, whose red clusters
 Blackbirds get stoned on till they lurch
 Unsteadily about in search
 Of their lost nests, is now fermenting
 Its friable pulp, and bumbling bees
 Hum round the pomegranate trees;
 And resinous cedars, gently scenting
 The sun-seeped air, anesthetize
 The garish sumac’s autumn dyes. (9.9) —

is a lovely autumnal description, and by rights John should be smiling in response to the warmth and beauty that surrounds him, so the ensuing “John frowns” shows, graphically, humorously, but depressingly, that John has cut himself off from the mellowing influence of benign and fruitful nature.

After Liz and Phil marry, John descends to the predatory world of the Winking Owl singles bar (11.34–35), the realm presided over by Bjorn, the Swedish runner, who is the embodiment of “cold, appraising lust” (4.12).³⁰ Hearing that John has been seen at the Winking Owl (11.36), Jan decides to drop by in case John might want her help (11.38). When she finds him there, she is upset by his “cool tone” (11.39), and “Her heart is irked by his hard-boiled/Slick patter” (11.40), but Janet nevertheless sets about her rescue, sweeping John up out of the pit of the singles bar and taking him to the Café Trieste (11.41). Now wiser than in their days of passion, Jan realizes she can do John some good, and indeed her presence has an immediate positive effect: “Her voice—or something—has restored him/To gentleness” (11.42–43).

Janet invites John to join her for a Sunday picnic at Muir Beach to watch the migrating whales. Though facetious at first, mistakenly insisting that he finds his “love life much improved” (11.44), John shouts excitedly when he sees “The great gray whales . . . blow a trail of spouts/Along their exodus” (11.47). This recalls the day in the vineyard when Mr. Dorati taught John “how to clip and prune,” and how John, “callused, weary, pleased, and proud,” laughs out loud as he sweats in the sun (10.21). Both instances show the promise of possible renewal through contact with nature, and John so thoroughly enjoys the outing with Jan—

the whales, the wine, the food, the sea breeze, and the company—that he asks to do it again the following Sunday. Even more revealing, he nearly forgets his work:

“Dammit—I’ve been meaning
To read these files all day. How come
I’m so relaxed my brain’s gone numb?” (11.48)

As usual, John gets it the wrong way around: his brain and heart have been numbed by work (11.29), not by this brief and briefly restorative enjoyment of the natural world.

The next weekend is totally different—depressing, dark, and drizzling (11.49–50)—so they resign themselves to strolling together for a while along the shore. As they do, Janet finds a treasure:

Jan sees a smooth, wave-worn sand dollar.
“Intact!” she thinks, and rubs it clean.
.....
The lunging water lifts and crashes
Down on the sand and spills and thrashes,
But Jan hears nothing as she stands,
Looking at what lies in her hands:
A cinquefoil perforated flower
Pricked out upon a disk of white—
Defectless emblem of delight
And seal of oceanic power. (11.52)

The emblematic shell causes Jan to think of her grandmother—

“In midlife journeying to another / Language and continent and life” (11.53) —and since John must break out of his self-created shell and journey into a new life, Jan, “placing / The mystic circlet in his hand,” presents the shell to John. Sadly, John is still as unseeing as before, and he makes a trivializing yuppie joke about the precious icon: “Huh? A sand dollar. . . . A welcome earning: / Four sand quarters or ten sand dimes. . . .” (11.54). John is increasingly enjoying Jan’s company, and he even kisses her “quickly on the cheek,” but it is still ominous for him that they leave the shore, dark and drizzling as it is, to enter “the Musée Mécanique” (11.54-55).

Partly due to a “vernal verve of feeling” prompted by springtime (12.6), but mainly owing to “His new companionship with Jan,” which is able to “Distract his heart from its contusion” (12.8), John finds that his “heart burns / With an old longing” (12.10), and he and Jan become lovers again. For the first time in a long while, John feels at peace (12.11), but neither of the pair will speak of the love they have shown and feel for each other (12.12). Cruelly, Jan is killed before John can speak openly of his feelings for her and before she can effect the reconciliation of John with Liz and Phil (12.24).

When Janet dies, John’s descent is even more precipitous than before. Crazy with grief (13.12-19), his tormented existence becomes a kind of death in life.³¹ His desire to protect himself from emotional pain has now become a source of torment—

The knowledge that he never mentioned
His love for her, or heard her say
That she loved him—his well-intentioned
Design to keep all pain at bay,

To shield him from the agitation
Of passion with the insulation
Of casual conduct, light and bland—
Hurts like a nail torn from his hand (13.23)—

so he searches desperately “for some small proof, some written/
Message from her” that will assure him of her love (13.24). He finds his reply to Anne T. Friese in Jan’s desk (13.24), but, filled with self-reproach, he cannot bring himself to accept it as the proof he needs, so he continues futilely trying “to wring/
Meaning from things that have no meaning” (13.26).

John’s hate-filled reply to their wedding invitation—“His hatred wilts his decency”—has seemingly severed forever any connection with Liz and Phil (11.24-26), and when Ed reports that he has seen John “in a crumpled suit, unshaved . . . He looked real—sleazy,” Phil tries to calm Liz: “The fact is, he’s so isolated/
By all this pain and bitterness. / There’s not much we can do, I guess . . .” (13.43). It would seem so. Mrs. Dorati dies (13.49), and John’s death appears to be verging from figurative to literal, for his yard is untended and “dust settles/
Through his disordered rooms” (13.50).

The wedding invitation that Liz sent to John had “burnt his heart to frost” (11.24), an apt oxymoron for this man who is both frozen and fiery. There have been numerous references to his cold, sore, lost heart and the “icy flow of his closed pain” (11.29-31), but we also know that “the flames/
Of hatred” have burned “his spirit through and through” (12.1). The same sorely afflicted heart may be both burned and frozen, it appears, but it cannot long survive such abuse, and John might well be settling into the dust of his disordered

home just as Mrs. Dorati's ashes had mingled with the earth of the vineyard (13.49).

Fortunately, John is saved again. To be precise, John is saved twice again. Unexpected and deeply affecting help arrives in the form of a note from Liz and Phil:

*It says, Dear John, We have a son.
We hope that you'll be his godfather.
We've called him John. We would far rather
Have you than any other friend.
Please speak to us, John. In the end,
We'll all be old or dead or dying.
My mother died two weeks ago.
We thought perhaps you might not know.
Phil and I send our love. Liz. (13.51)*

The note leaves John in tears, a visible sign that the frozen man is thawing. These are not the shaming tears that John would only allow himself to release "in a madness/Of uncontrol" while sleeping (11.28), for these tears contain what Ed thought of as "The salt of human love" (8.7), and they bear the cathartic promise of life and renewal.

Although John briefly "feels his heart revisit death" (13.51), it does not stay there, and when John goes to Jan's desk, this time he is able to perceive the message he has sought:

He gently touches Jan's sand dollar.
It soothes him in the ache, the squalor

That is his life, and she seems near
Him once again, and he can hear
Her voice, can almost hear her saying,
“I’m with you, John. You’re not alone.
Trust me, my friend; there is the phone.
It isn’t me you are obeying.
Pay what are your own heart’s arrears.
Now clear your throat; and dry these tears.” (13.52)

The sand dollar, now more mystic circlet than oceanic emblem, provides the link that makes it possible for John to hear Jan’s message, much as once it had enabled Jan to envision her grandmother (11.53). Marjorie Perloff tries to denigrate the ending of *The Golden Gate* by rendering it as the old AT&T ad, “Reach out and touch someone.”³² In fact, however, that is precisely what John must do, for it is vital that he reestablish a revivifying contact with nature, with old friends, and with his own best self that Jan was in the process of resurrecting.³³

In “The Crocodile and the Monkey,” one of the stories in his *Beastly Tales* (1993), Seth tacitly approves of the notion of hiding one’s heart away in a protective hollow, safe from pain and danger, but we should not forget that the protective hollow is just a ruse, and the Monkey actually protects his mango-sweetened heart through quick thinking. We should also note the implied threat, for if you leave your heart behind in the protective hollow, as the Monkey tells Kroop he has done, then you are left heartless. In John’s case, we see the danger of going to the other extreme, of protecting yourself to the extent that you harm yourself. For John,

the protective hollow has become an enclosing and isolating nacreous shell, as the thickening layers of emotional insulation become a hardening carapace that traps and restricts his heart. It is only when his damaged and self-constricted heart goes out to Janet in sympathy that we have a clear sign that John will—with Janet's help—be able to break free of the shell he has created (12.21).³⁴

Now, having heard and heeded Jan's final message, John can dry his liberating tears and clear his throat to speak once again to Liz and Phil...and to his newly born namesake. John owes his tortured heart a great debt, it is true, but such a debt can be paid. And, in this case, as we know if we have gained from Seth's revealing survey of these lives, the debt will surely be paid.

Notes

¹ Jeremy Gavron, "A Suitable Joy," *The Guardian* (7 Apr. 1999) 7 July 2002 <<http://doononline.net/highlights/seth/guard2.htm>>.

² For example, John Gross, "Books of The Times," *The New York Times* (14 Apr. 1986): C16, declared *The Golden Gate* to be "a splendid achievement, equally convincing in its exhilaration and its sadness," and John Hollander, "Yuppie Time, In Rhyme," 194 *The New Republic* (21 Apr. 1986): 32, calls it a "glittering novel... brilliantly fashioned... marvelous." Cynthia Haven, "Poetic License," *Stanford Magazine* (May/June, 1999) 9 Mar. 2003 <<http://www.standordalumni.org/news/magazine/1999/mayjune/articles/seth.html>>, notes that Seth's "astonishing first novel written entirely in sonnets... won international accolades."

³ "Forms and Inspirations," *London Review of Books* (29 Sep. 1988): "But I had found myself in the course of reading *Eugene*

Onegin both laughing out loud and weeping, and so the *Onegin* sonnet struck me as being more accommodating, more flexible, than I might at first have imagined” (20). Seth gives another account of being carried away by Johnston’s translation of *Eugene Onegin* in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, “Eleanor Wachtel with Vikram Seth,” *Malahat Review* 107 (Summer 1994): 90–91, and he told Jeremy Gavron that he was “enraptured” by *Eugene Onegin*.

⁴ *The Golden Gate* (1986; New York: Random-Vintage International, 1991). All references are to the individual sonnets, which are numbered by part and stanza.

⁵ Leila Seth, *On Balance: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2003), 293. She goes on to mention the novel’s surprising acceptance: “It created a literary storm when it came out. Gore Vidal called it the Great Californian Novel and others a *tour de force*” (294).

⁶ Hollander points out that although the Pushkin sonnet “is a complex instrument . . . in practice the reader is made aware not of the structure of this intricate framework, but of what is being woven into it,” and that Seth’s story moves “effortlessly along, showing none of the skeletons of contrivance” (33). X. J. Kennedy, in his review of *The Golden Gate*, *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (6 Apr. 1986), makes a similar point: “A splendid tour de force, *The Golden Gate* finally hooks us into caring less about its author’s skill than in caring how its sad and wistful comedy will turn out. For pages, we forget Seth’s incredible dexterity. Mesmerized, we watch, as in a kaleidoscope, the shifting and resettling of five lives” (7).

⁷ Byron begins the third canto of *Don Juan* as follows: “Hail, Muse! *Et cetera*.—” Seth frequently alludes to and quotes from the

Romantic poets, and a number of critics have remarked on the Byronic tones in *The Golden Gate*. See, for example: Kennedy, 7; Bruce Bawer, "Pushkin by the Bay," *The New Criterion* (May 1986): 78; Marjorie Perloff, "'Homeward Ho!': Silicon Valley Pushkin," *American Poetry Review* 15:6 (Nov/Dec 1986): 37; Brian Abel Ragen, "Vikram Seth," *DLB 120: American Poets Since World War II, Third Series*, ed. R. S. Gwynn (Detroit: Gale, 1992): 283; and Frank Day, "Vikram Seth," *DLB 323: South Asian Writers in English*, ed. Fakrul Alam (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006): 347. Most peculiarly, Devesh Patel, "Vikram Seth: A Poet in Exile," *Contemporary Poetry Review* (25 Sep. 2000) 7 July 2000 <<http://doononline.net/highlights/seth/contemporary.htm>>, feels that "the Byronic influence filtered by one of the great Russian writers has no place in a novel about San Francisco, circa 1980." Granted, Silicon Valley is not St. Petersburg and the Bay Area yuppies are not Russian aristocrats, but surely readers familiar with *Don Juan* would agree that a Byronic tone is not only admirably suited to but practically demanded by Seth's survey.

⁸ Seth, "Forms and Inspiration": "I accepted that I should follow Pushkin in using tetrameter, not simply because it was a noble meter that had fallen on hard times, but also because it seemed to me to have a narrative propulsiveness that more than compensated for the slight extra difficulty of rhymes more densely spaced than in pentameter" (20).

⁹ "Forms and Inspiration": "In the course of telling the story, I allow myself an occasional authorial intrusion.... I use authorial observation far less than the work that inspired me. But in this, too, I have a precedent: *Eugene Onegin* has far less authorial

commentary than the picaresque and delightfully digressive *Don Juan* which was its initial inspiration” (19–20). However, Alan Hollinghurst, “In the *Onegin* Line,” *Times Literary Supplement* (4 July 1986): 733; Perloff, 38; and Patel all find this self-restriction to be a flaw, believing that the narrator should in fact be *more* of a character in the novel. Seth limits himself to eight intrusions: 2.55–57, 3.25–27, 4.34, 5.1–5, 6.14–17, 11.14, 13.4, 13.46–47. Kim Tarvesh appears in 4.12 and 11.10.

¹⁰ On the other hand, the author’s final intrusion, the two stanzas about the selfishness, ugliness, and noisiness of babies (13.46–47), seems both a lapse in taste and a violation of tone. The stanzas may express Seth’s true feelings, for when his brother and his wife had a baby, Nandini, who was his parents’ first grandchild and an arrival treasured by the whole family, Seth wrote one of his charming acrostics in celebration of her first birthday, but he could not forbear to mention nighttime crying:

No baby born of Peace and Song
Arrives on earth without delight.
No parents with a love so strong
Deserve less than your voice all night.
In limb and lung as you increase,
Nandini, my beloved niece,
I wish for you both songs and peace.

(*On Balance*, 446).

With the birth of John Weiss so important to Mrs. Dorati, to Liz and Phil, and, ultimately, to John Brown, I think the two stanzas are

an unfortunate intrusion of Seth's tendency towards flippancy. In this case, I agree with Rowena Hill, "Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*: A Quick Look," *The Literary Criterion* 21:4 (1986), who finds the comments "silly" (89), though I think her disparagement is too mild. Yet Kennedy quotes one of the stanzas (13.47) as an example of Seth's wit (1), and Gross finds the "heartfelt diatribe against babies" to be one of the "Incidental pleasures" that abound in *The Golden Gate* (C16). Even in matters of poetic judgment, apparently, there is no accounting for taste.

¹¹ Here I am referring specifically to Santosh Gupta, "*The Golden Gate*: The First Indian Novel in Verse," *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*, ed. Kirpal Viney (New Delhi: Allied, 1990), 96, but numerous critics have remarked on the flatness of the characters, including Carol Iannone, "Yuppies in Rhyme," *Commentary* 82 (3 Sep. 1986): 54; Bruce King, "Postmodernism and New Formalist Poetry: Seth, Steele, and *Strong Measures*," *The Southern Review* 23:1 (Winter 1987): 225; Patel; and Mala Pandurang, *Vikram Seth: Multiple Locations, Multiple Affiliations* (Jaipur: Rawat, 2001), 92. Whitney Balliett, "John and Liz, Phil and Ed," *The New Yorker* 62 (14 July 1986), asserts a contrary view, at least with regard to one character: "... John, for all the misery he brings down on his difficult self, becomes comprehensible, and even affecting by the end of the book" (82).

¹² "Forms and Inspirations," 20.

¹³ *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1957), 305. Here, Frye is contrasting the romance and novel, which, along with anatomy and confession, make up the forms of prose fiction. The anatomy is discussed on pages 308-312.

¹⁴ John's final exclamatory line is a variation of a memorable line in the third stanza of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "The Indian Serenade":

O lift me from the grass!
I die! I faint! I fail!

Shelley: Poetical Works, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford UP, 1967), 580.

¹⁵ Thomas M. Disch, "Sunlight, Coffee, and the Papers," *The Washington Post Book World* 16:12 (23 Mar. 1986); Hollander; and Makarand R. Paranjape, "The Golden Gate and the Quest for Self-Realization," *ACLALS Bulletin* 8:1 (1989), all quote from this stanza, but Paranjape ignores the effect of the ellipsis and takes the afterthought without any qualification as "that something extra which makes everything meaningful" (63), Hollander, who quotes the entire stanza, detects only "a mildly Popean irony" in the catalog (33), and Disch, who likewise quotes the whole stanza, is completely tone-deaf to the ironic, undercutting force of the ending, reading it simply as an illustration of yuppie "zest for the good (\$50,000 per annum) life" (11). No one who had read Seth's earlier poetry could be so unaware of and unresponsive to his characteristic use of ironic reversals.

¹⁶ The Wordsworth quotation is from stanza four of "Resolution and Independence":

But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might
Of joy in minds that can no further go,

As high as we have mounted in delight
In our dejection do we sink as low;
To me that morning did it happen so;
And fears and fancies thick upon me came;
Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could
name.

(*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 4th ed., 723)

¹⁷ “Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate: A Quick Look*,” 89. Hill also finds “a dose of gloating” in Seth’s “celebrations of the Californian way of life, which can be irritating to anyone who has been exposed to the Californian claim to represent the vanguard of humanity in awareness and knowhow” (87). Unfortunately, it is obvious that Hill has allowed her own feelings about California to distort her view of Seth’s work. *The Golden Gate* may be filled with passages that celebrate the natural beauty of the Bay Area, but that is a far cry from gloating, and Hill’s strange claim may have arisen out of her apparent distaste for the homosexual relationship between Phil and Ed (89).

¹⁸ “Yuppies in Rhyme,” 55, 56. Iannone is also opposed to what she regards as Seth’s “vision of breezy bisexual integration as an ascendant moral norm” (56). This is just wrong. Although Seth clearly favors Liz’s open-minded tolerance rather than John’s narrow-minded revulsion as the better attitude towards relationships that are not the norm, he just as clearly establishes the marriages of the Doratis, the Lamonts, and Liz and Phil as exemplary models.

¹⁹ After referring to Iannone’s comments on homosexuality in

The Golden Gate (though getting both names wrong, as he calls her “Carl Ionnone”), Paranjape remarks: “The point as I see it, however, is not one of homosexuality, but of flexibility and tolerance” (68). Pandurang has a similar opinion: “The homosexual relationship between Phil and Ed is a thematic concern, but homosexuality as an issue, does not contribute to the central tension of the narrative...” (91).

²⁰ Homosexuality can be hard to accept even for loving and supportive parents, as we learn from Vikram’s mother, but at least Seth’s parents were closer to the openminded acceptance Liz displays than to John’s intolerant outrage and disgust. See Leila Seth, *On Balance*:

At the time [1982, when she visited Vikram in China] I didn’t realize that Vikram was bisexual. This understanding came to me much later and I found it hard to come to terms with his homosexuality. Premo found it even harder. I also knew it was considered a crime in India and was afraid that someone might try to exploit him because of it. But we loved him and accepted it without understanding it. It is only now that I realize that many creative persons share this propensity and that it gives them a special nurturing and emotional dimension. (429)

²¹ In *From Heaven Lake*, Seth describes his reaction to his outburst of anger: “I walk towards the bridge, hoping to regain some clarity. A mind clouded with rage is fearsome even to itself” (111).

²² In its most general terms, Phil's argument is a version of the ecological theme of *The Golden Gate*, which is to choose life, whether in the mundane terms of Phil's breakfasts—"But celebrating what?" 'Oh yes— / Just that we've still alive, I guess'" (5.22)—or in the more apocalyptic terms of Fr. O'Hare's speech (7.17, 7.34).

²³ Fr. O'Hare begins his speech with another version of the choice: "Did they serve life? Or injure it?" (7.17). This lengthy speech is at the physical and thematic center of *The Golden Gate*, but the ecological theme pervades the book, whether appearing as an appreciation of the landscape (3.4-5), picking olives (5.29-34), pruning vines (10.20-21), or watching whales (11.46-48), to mention just a few instances.

²⁴ Only Jay Curlin, "'The World Goes On': Narrative Structure and the Sonnet in Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*," *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association* 22:2 (Fall 1996), and Pandurang make much of the bridge. For Curlin, "the central metaphor" of the bridge is the concept of linking, particularly of individuals (18), whereas for Pandurang the bridge "enables the protagonists to connect back with their natural surroundings, and then with each other" (87).

²⁵ For Seth, this is clearly a positive image. When his younger brother Shantum married GITU in a ceremony by the Ganga, Vikram read an acrostic poem that he had written that morning, and the poem ends with a variation of the same image that is used for John and Liz:

So, after years, the hesitater
Has made his choice (or so we think)

And though he might regret it later
No-one has snatched him from the brink.
The girl, though far too brainy, pretty,
Unfairly lovely, wise and witty,
Makes chocolate cake (yes! by the batch)
And *therefore* is a suitable match.
Now under the full moon of Holi
Down by the Ganga, let us bless
GITU and **SHANTUM, G & S**
In the sure hope that, swift or slowly,
Their raft, from this high shore set free
Unfettered makes the open sea.

(*On Balance*, 437)

²⁶ Phil's final reflection on this dramatic upheaval in his life is an example of extreme understatement: "...odd how things can change" (13.33). Odd, indeed, but sudden and startling changes do take place, and Seth is fond of using parallel examples—even if very brief ones—to make his point. Earlier in this final section, Phil had been surprised to hear that Mrs. Craven now had a pilot's license and that her daughter Rowena had forsaken her former hippie existence (3.22) to become a City Councilor (13.7-8). And in the next stanza, as if to underscore the thematic point, Phil mentions another dramatic change in the cigar-smoking (5.35) Mrs. Craven's life:

But if, last year,
Someone had told me she'd quit smoking
I'd bet my life that he was joking.

Of course, if someone said she'd fly
I'd do the same.... (13.34)

Actually, Phil had announced the theme very early in his first appearance, for the story he makes up to entertain Paul, *Chromiska's Glory*, is about a cat who liked to drink ink as a kitten, but who suddenly “Grew silver-haired...Down to her last eyelash and whisker” one winter night (3.7-8).

²⁷ Peculiarly, Perloff condemns Seth as “merely patronizing” for depicting Mrs. Dorati as what Perloff condescendingly refers to as a “Hallmark Card Mother...so tired a cliché.” For Perloff, there are likelier alternatives: “Mrs. Dorati might be a health-food and exercise freak, spending her time at the gym or lunching with her friends at the salad bar. She might have affairs with younger men...She might be on drugs” (42-43). Such comments are petty and short-sighted. For myself, I am happy we have the Mrs. Dorati that Seth gives us, and I think Pandurang is much more perceptive about the significance of Mrs. Dorati: “While on the one hand, there is Paul’s loneliness as a single child, and Chuck’s pain at the loss of his own parents, on the other hand, there are the compassionate motherly figures of Mrs. Craven and Mrs. Dorati who offer a sense of stability and security” (87-88).

²⁸ On this point, see Curlin—“Before Mrs. Dorati dies, however, Liz gives birth to a son... They also adopt the Lamonts’ son Chuck, the only survivor of the accident...As two families disappear, therefore, another is born containing elements of both” (24)—and Paranjape: “Phil and Liz also constitute the prototype of the favoured new family that emerges after the turmoil of the book” (69).

²⁹ The earlier descriptive lines in the stanza—"but as flights/Of silhouetted birds move cawing/Across the pine-serrated sky" (1.2)—may also suggest loneliness, for they seem to be a faint literary echo of Wang Wei's "Living in the Hills," a poem Seth translated in *Three Chinese Poets*, and in which the solitary speaker is isolated behind his wicker gate even from the cranes nesting in the pine trees. Although *Three Chinese Poets* was not published until six years after *The Golden Gate*, Seth had already studied Chinese at Stanford and spent two years in China before writing *The Golden Gate*. Moreover, not many stanzas later *The Golden Gate* contains an explicit reference to Wang Wei when Janet contemplates "a scroll by her grandfather: /A twilight poem by Wang Wei/He calligraphed that shameful day/In '42: Internment" (1.17).

³⁰ In addition to his appearances at the housewarming party (4.12) and the Winking Owl (11.34-36), Bjorn turns up at the party for Jan, where he is again linked with John, who "freezes" at the sight of Liz and Phil: "... Oh, oh, there's Bjorn, /Courting that Sheep with crumpled horn.... /Dammit, where's Jan? This is her party! /His ponderings abruptly freeze/As, turning to the door, he sees/—Oh, God! How could Jan do this to him? /... Liz and Phil here?" (12.32-33).

³¹ This motif is suggested early in the story when John is stopped for speeding on his way to work. The police officer politely refers to him as "Mr. Brown" and cautions him: "Better late than late," or dead (2.9). Two stanzas later, back on the freeway, John tries to avoid the distraction of roadside advertising: "John tries to curb his vagrant eyes/And heed the poet's admonition: /'Beneath this slab John Brown is stowed. /He watched the ads and not the

road” (2.11). Both stanzas evoke the Civil War song, “John Brown’s Body,” with its repeated refrain: “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave.”

³² “Homeward Ho!: Silicon Valley Pushkin,” *APR*, 44.

³³ As has been previously noted, Balliett found that John became “affecting” (82), and Gross is broader in his praise: “But once we have been hooked by John and Liz and Janet and Ed and Phil (and Charlemagne), what would have been merely decorative or ingenious becomes infused with feeling” (C16). In an interview with Debashish Mukerji, “A Suitable Author,” *The Week* (9 May 1999) 15 July 1999 <<http://www.the-week.com/99may09/life2.htm>>, Seth acknowledged his primary motive in writing *The Golden Gate*: “There were predecessors; Pushkin, my primary inspiration . . . Pushkin was inspired by Byron . . . Long narratives in verse have been written in English and other western languages . . . Anyway, I was not concerned about where I fitted in in the history of English literature. I just wanted to write that story about John and Janet.”

³⁴ John feels sympathy for Janet because her exhibition of sculpture has been savaged by the art critics that Seth describes as vultures and worms in search of carrion (12.19–20). When Jan is killed and thus becomes a “human-interest story,” these same critics hurriedly revise their judgments, and Seth is scathing in his depictions of the “scabrous scurf” of critics, who are now “Scavengers at a scene of slaughter,” and whose now-zealous praise is “flatulent bombast” (13.27–30). See Pandurang, 100–101, on Seth’s “misgivings” with regard to academic reviews.

Seth’s attitude might seem overly sensitive for a writer who has earned such resounding praise, but only until one reads an article

such as Marjorie Perloff's "Homeward Ho!: Silicon Valley Pushkin," a lengthy attack on *The Golden Gate*. Perloff finds fault with just about everything. The material is not interesting (37), Seth is not in the same league as Pope, Pushkin, and Byron, and anyway rhyme is "too confining and restrictive" to allow for the "delicate curve of . . . lyric emotion" (38). Ignoring—or ignorant of—the fact that John is mouthing song lyrics, she finds some of these snippets "alien to John's own speech habits," and she faults Seth for not measuring up to Cole Porter as a lyricist, as though Cole Porter had ever attempted a song of 590 stanzas (39). Vignettes fall flat, the plot turns are predictable, women wear *panty hose* rather than nylons, and the characters are paper dolls (40–42). Mrs. Dorati is a cliché, Seth's tone is archly superior, and the whole thing is a cream puff that failed to rise (43).

Perloff is a respected academic, teaching English and Comparative Literature at Stanford at the time, and her article appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, a highly reputable journal, but the article—so nitpicking, petty, and flawed—does not make much sense until the last section, when we learn that Perloff has been very upset by James Fenton's attack on John Ashbery's kind of poetry, which she favors, so her own mean-spirited review of Seth is a form of reprisal. For Perloff, the lines are clearly drawn—"the battle is being fought between the Creative Writing Workshop and the Graduate Seminar in Theory" (45)—and it is manifestly clear which side she supports. No wonder Seth has "misgivings" about academic critics.