Amy Bauer

"The Mysteries of Selma, Alabama"
Re-telling and Remembrance in David Lang's *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*

1.

In his Los Angeles Times review of the Long Beach Opera's 2011 production (repeated due to popular demand in 2014), Mark Swed declared that David Lang's *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* was about the "difficulty of existence … a hybrid opera/play, unlike any other I know" (Swed, 2011).[1] Based on a one-page story by Ambrose Bierce (1842–ca. 1914), Lang's "opera" concerns a plantation owner in the antebellum south who—in full view of witnesses—disappears into thin air while crossing a field.[2] As a "hybrid opera/play," the work's form thus matched its subject. Words, music, and drama folded into one another, mimicking the way each character's view of the opera's central mystery collapsed into the unknowable absence that drove its narrative. Although Mr. Williamson's disappearance remains ambiguous, the work's setting does not: The thoughts of his slaves, neighbors, and family reflect different existential viewpoints even as the relations between slaves and owners, and among Williamson and his wife and daughter, fix the story squarely in 1854.

I saw *Difficulty* in 2011 in that same production. Based on the anecdotal report of a man's disappearance with no immediate rational, poetic, or allegorical import, *Difficulty* could glibly be said to be about nothing. Yet the entire music-theatrical experience left me with a sense of profound importance and unease. Mac Wellman's libretto made deft use of the 700 words in Bierce's restrained account to illustrate the suspension of logic and time, while Lang's string quartet lines circled literally and figuratively around the hypnotic spoken and sung exhortations. Andreas Mitisek's novel staging for the Long Beach Opera further emphasized the gap between observation and reason by putting the audience on stage, while singers and

---

[1] Swed also reviewed a workshop production of the work, pleading that "this astonishing work … not be allowed to vanish into thin air" (Swed, 2002). Since 2010, the opera has received at least six productions.

[2] The story was first published in the *San Francisco Examiner* on October 14, 1888, and was included in the collection *Can Such Things Be?* (1893). The full text can be found online at the *Ambrose Bierce Project* (http://www.ambrosebierce.org).

actors moved forward and back, and up and down, from various locations in the fog-shrouded and dimly-lit auditorium.

The opera's narrative, such as it is, is explicitly, almost didactically, structured around an absence that cannot be explained, that indeed cannot even be named. Thus Wellman's libretto proceeds as a series of seven numbered "tellings" removed from chronological time, but positioned to comment on each other through hidden repetitions and associative connections, aided by the almost subliminal effect of the subdued string quartet that accompanies most of the stage action. Each telling recounts the central event from a different viewpoint, one informed by the memories, psychology, and ideologies of those for whom Mr. Williamson's disappearance had exerted such a strange and troubling power. My examination of *Difficulty* will similarly attempt to account for the opera's compelling affect through a series of seven "re-tellings," in which I move from a discussion of the libretto's source materials to the specifics of the Long Beach Opera performance that I witnessed and back toward a more abstract contemplation of the work as a whole. This global "re-telling" envisions *Difficulty* as less of an opera than a convergence of seven entwined narratives that work together in a successful production of the opera. The minimal musical score and its accompanying libretto present the most obvious strands; they offer independent, if complementary, narratives that structure the opera's surface. But the saga of Bierce and the history of America on the cusp of the Civil War cast long shadows over every production, while the libretto as a play occupies a particular place in Wellman's long career of crafting political, often confrontational, theater. Finally, the Long Beach Opera's provocative staging forced the audience to become a part of the production: The audience's perceptions of the shifting work in a sense establish a seventh narrative journey that travels beyond the production, if only to circle back to its central mysteries.

2. The First Re-telling: Bierce the Bitter, Quixotic Crusader

Recent scholarship has bolstered Bierce's reputation, as a minor figure of nineteenth-century American letters, and one of its most notorious investigative journalists, by acknowledging the proto-modernist strains in his fiction. As Cathy Davidson notes, Bierce was an almost postmodern "literary hippogryph," who conjoined elements from realism and impressionism, naturalism and surrealism, while rejecting wholesale the sentimental and ideological assumptions of his contemporaries (Davidson, 1984, pp. 1–4). Bierce is popularly known for the twist in *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1891), among other Civil War tales, and the cynical witticisms of *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911) (Bierce, 2001). Yet Bierce's stories moved far beyond standard tales of the war and the macabre. Riddled with gaps and ambiguous details, they often challenge the reader's perceptions of events and characters, exploring the limits of the narrative as a mode of expression (Griffin, 2009, p. 137).

His stories influenced authors as diverse as Ernest Hemingway and William Golding, while Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Julio Cortázar, and Jorge Luis Borges have borrowed explicitly from specific stories (Davidson, 1984, p. 124; Berkove, 2002, p. 189).

Although Bierce may be best known for his Civil War narratives, his gothic and tall tales share, with the war stories, a singular obsession with time and the fallibility of human psychology. His protagonists share a faulty perception of their world, one that escalates into an often entirely preventable crisis of their own making. Thus each crisis—be it the soldier who dies outside of a sanctioned battle or the wanderer who murders a delusion—is presented as the fateful, ironic outcome of an extreme subjectivity rooted in his or her environment. Within this world, the uncanny exists to upend the blinkered assumptions of an ostensibly rational, well-read protagonist whose confusion is often mirrored in the text through the incorporation of nonlinear plot lines, the juxtaposition of multiple points of view, and precise but indeterminate language that conceals as much as it reveals. Bierce's narrative method blurs the line between perception and imagination in a way that reflects, in the words of Martin Griffin, "the profound loss of redemptive potential in the flow of memory" (Griffen, 2009, p. 153). This loss is often focused by an arrested moment, a kind of hallucinatory tableau vivant that, paradoxically, is always in motion. The stories are structured so that the act of reading recapitulates the doomed strategies that a protagonist employs to understand his or her predicament. Yet the reader is always allowed the option of escape: the luxury to misread, re-read, and adopt several conclusions, or none at all.

Difficulty is the slightest of a particular subgenre in Bierce's oeuvre, wherein an inexplicable event—here a disappearance—is left unexplained by either rational or supernatural means. Bierce provides the reader with no means by which to judge the reliability of the event's observers or to untangle subtext from text. Thus *Difficulty*, despite its brevity and presentation, could be seen as the prototypical Biercean tale. A journalistic report of the disappearance is followed by one of Bierce's favorite tropes: a trial or, in the words of *Dictionary*, "A formal inquiry designed to prove and put upon record the blameless characters of judges, advocates and jurors" (Bierce, 2001, p. 229). We could turn to Bierce's *Dictionary* for further subtext regarding every aspect of the "case," from his satiric take on "inadmissible evidence" (i.e., that of the Wren boy and the slaves), down to the property across which Mr. Williamson strides, defined as an "object of man's brief rapacity and long indifference," as well as a notion that "carried to its logical conclusion, … means that some have the right to prevent others from living" (Bierce, 2001, p. 74).

3. The Second Re-telling: The Theater of Subversion

Wellman, of course, greatly expanded Bierce's text in his original play through repetition and the explicit incorporation of seven "tellings" (Wellman, 2008, pp. 123–70). In this, he drew on the inspiration of Bierce's *The Moonlit Road*, a ghost story composed of three tragic narrative threads representing a bereaved son, the amnesiac father, and the ghost of a mother who speaks from the beyond despite having no more insight into her plight than the living do. More significant perhaps is that *The Moonlit Road* itself is most famous as being the source of several subsequent re-tellings: Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa explicitly rewrote it as *In a Grove*, a story later absorbed into director Akira Kurosawa's screenplay for *Rashomon*. Wellman's attraction to Bierce as a model for staged re-tellings follows from the playwright's fascination with dated language, his unease with aspects of American culture, and his highly developed ethics of theater.[3]

Wellman's obsession with language and diction stemmed initially from the concern of a loss of richness in the American vernacular, one that has led to a concomitant flattening of affect and meaning. He thus often tries to reconstruct dated oral systems in order to both preserve the physical beauty of language, like "old wood [with] a texture and grain to it," and to establish a new speech with mythic qualities (Robinson & Wellman, 1992, p. 44). For Marc Robinson, "watching Wellman's plays is like taking a rollercoaster ride on tracks of speech," a ride intended to evoke real feelings as opposed to the artificial emotions that rule contemporary theater (Robinson, 1992, p. 40).

The artificial emotions that Wellman derides reflect an American culture whose "demonic" lack of restrictions has led to a base political culture, commercialization, and homogenization (Savran, 1999, p. 20). Much of Wellman's work in the 1990s was overtly political and exemplified the values stated in his famous 1984 screed against the *Theatre of Good Intentions*, an epithet later shortened to "geezer theater" (Wellman, 1984). In this essay and subsequent ones, Wellman railed against the devolution of American Naturalism to stock notions of character and theatricality that exist primarily to manipulate emotion. He accused contemporary playwrights of confusing the world with "schematizations of the world," most egregiously in their reliance on what he called the Euclidean, "rounded" character that, reduced to a formula, could never achieve the inner life of a Hamlet or Woyzeck. As Wellman notes, "a play that is a perfect and seamless summation of itself and its own intentions, and nothing else, can only be consumed once" (Wellman, 1984, p. 64). In later years, Wellman widened his critique, stating that "sentimentality is the canker on the bud of American art—in fiction, in poetry, in the movies" (Garrett & Wellman, 1997, p. 95).

_____
[3]   Wellman's interest in Bierce led him to pen a further "re-telling" shortly after *Difficulty*: the monologue *Bitter Bierce or The Friction We Call Grief* (Wellman, 2008, pp. 171–226).

Wellman's concerns with language and culture ultimately feed into a highly developed theatrical aesthetic, one that eschews consistent character and psychological subtext for an ethics of presence. He explicitly rejects political theater that simply reinforces one's assumptions for a kind of didactic open-endedness rooted in the "junk of the real" (Wellman & Lee, 2006, p. vii).[4] One tool of this "poetic theater" is a chaotic approach to form that employs repetition on various levels, with the aim of allowing the work to move beyond the facile journalistic accounts of an issue (Wellman, 1993). As a result, as Helen Shaw notes, many plays are practically vaudeville in their substance, with a porous structure that allows meanings "to clamber in" (Shaw, 2008, p. vii). In recent years, Wellman's ethics of openness has embraced collaborations that have further transformed his work, chiefly among those who allowed Lang great freedom in setting *Difficulty* as a libretto (Garrett & Wellman, 1997, p. 91).

Wellman's politics and aesthetics are expressed materially by his concern with the physicality of language—words such as "objects flying around the room" (Robinson & Wellman, 1992, p. 49). This embodied aesthetics may be best illustrated in *Difficulty* by those scenes in which slaves appear to spout nonsense. For instance, the first scene where the elder Virginia Creeper intones, "But I fear his true mode of locomotion, like that of Prince Zandor, was more humble: the singleton crutch, or cane. Of the tribe of Crutch, or Cane" (Wellman, 2008, p. 125). We are unsure whether the character is speaking of Mr. Williamson or of the previously cited John C. Calhoun; even less do we know whether the puzzling allusions to "locomotion," "Prince Zandor," or "the tribe of Crutch" reflect an underlying belief in Voudou, Christianity, or the occult, or if it simply alludes to a special knowledge that the slave chorus shares: a kind of understanding beyond sense.[5] Wellman calls these passages "moments of transcendence, moments of being absolutely spiritually naked" (Garrett & Wellman, 1997, p. 88). In the repetition of simple words and phrases ("crutch, crane"), the language transforms and interacts with the music, which has a life of its own.

_____

[4] Wellman's collaborators present his aesthetic in a round-table discussion on "Writing and Performance" archived in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (Mapp et al., 2012). Paul Castagno discusses the way meaning emerges from a "linguistic force field" in Wellman's plays (Castagno, 2012, p. 118), while Ehren Fordyce discusses the social psychology of his dramas (Fordyce, 2005, pp. 538–39).

[5] Calhoun was a leading American political theorist during the first half of the nineteenth century who defended slavery as a "positive good" and inspired many Southern secessionists prior to the American Civil War. Luke L. Leonard (2010) discusses the ambiguity of Wellman's libretto.

4. The Third Re-telling: A Fractal Journey

The seven tellings of Wellman's original script for *Difficulty* survive intact in the libretto. But whereas the play began with the first courtroom scene, Lang suggested in rehearsals that Mrs. Williamson lead the first telling (Wellman, Lang & Munk, 2000, p. 35). Allowing Mrs. Williamson's singular, troubled voice to frame the dry legal proceedings brought an intimacy and poignancy to the production that might have risked sentimentalizing it, were her character not so closely identified with the central erasure at the play's center. Mrs. Williamson is identified with the face of the moon and with the gaps in a language that cannot name what is "more than a mere disappearance." At the very beginning of the opera, we learn that, as she has no other name than "Mrs. Williamson," her identity has been effaced along with that of her husband. The chorus of slaves that follow her introduction exist on a different ontological plane, their proper names replaced by mundane objects and qualities such as Round, Juniper, Crabgrass, Clock, Nuisance, and Doorbell, and Virginia Creeper whose double name signals his leadership status. This first scene also introduces the primary themes that distinguish the play from its terse source material. Building a nation requires the erasures of Calhoun, a defender of slavery and Southern entitlement, the Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854, and "arrangement and regularity." Yet mysteries of Selma, Alabama, appear to extend beyond these and appear to be intimately caught up with the Fortean disappearance of a man from his field. We meet, as well, the boy Sam and the Williamson girl. The former's membership in two classes whose speech is ignored—slave hands and children—serves as a counterweight to mad Mrs. Williamson, while the Williamson girl seems to access a hidden knowledge similar to that of the slave chorus. Thus, the members of the Williamson household share affinities with the field hands and thereby stand apart from those characters who participate in the legal proceedings to come.

The presiding magistrate opens the second and fifth tellings in a closed room, where he interrogates Selma planter Armour Wren and the overseer Andrew, the first an ostensible witness to the event, the latter a biased witness to the "monstrous and grotesque fictions" of the slaves. Wren's testimony draws liberally on Bierce's richly detailed language, including the discussion of some horses that motivated Mr. Williamson's stroll. Within each telling, the events are re-told several times, highlighting the "gaps … in the factual evidence," but perhaps moving closer, despite the magistrate's insistence, to the truth. Andrew's testimony veers into a manifesto on slave management, but when he admits his ignorance of the matter at hand his discourse changes radically, as though he were swallowed up by the knowledge of the slave chorus. The fifth telling culminates with the central irony of Bierce's story: "It is not the purpose of this narrative" to answer the question of Williamson's disappearance, but to render a verdict that will ensure his *legal* disappearance so that his estate may be distributed.

The central third and fourth tellings are devoted to a family flashback in which we meet Mr. Williamson just prior to the event and discover that his daughter tried to warn him with a vague poem in which "Someone or something goes. Someone or something stays in the night, or in the open and visible, in broad daylight." In the sixth telling, Mr. Williamson recapitulates on arguments with his family, the memories of other witnesses, and the motion of light and shadow across the field while narrating his own disappearance. Consonant with Wellman's interest in fractal structures (Robinson & Wellman, 1992; Wellman, 1993; Garrett & Wellman, 1997), each telling contains within it multiple re-tellings, and dialogue introduced by one character migrates to the speech of another without warning, as in the case of Andrew the overseer. This process accelerates in the final, seventh telling, an epilogue that brings together the Williamson family, Sam, and the slave chorus, as the mother sits perched on the roof where she will stay until "they tell me this is a fiction, and I am not who I am." Robinson notes that most of Wellman's characters are obsessives, "certain that if they sustain an intense scrutiny of an idea, its importance will reveal itself and the quandary of belief will be solved" (Robinson, 1992, p. 42). But the central lack that drives Wellman's circular narrative is less of an idea than of an immutable object, no more susceptible of explanation than that of the pasture in which it takes place.

5. The Fourth Re-telling: A Noble Music

Carey Perloff of San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater first suggested that Lang work with Wellman; rather than begin a new project, Lang agreed to use *Difficulty* as a libretto as it already seemed to adopt "premusical strategies" (Wellman, Lang & Munk, 2000, p. 35): recycling, repetition, and permeable characters. What resulted was, in his own words, his "favorite piece" (personal communication, 13, April 2012). His avowed aesthetics meshed with that of Wellman: a rejection of the manipulative in favor of "art that allows multiple doorways, multiple interpretations," aided by music with an objective, often of highly abstract quality (Wellman, Lang & Munk, 2000, p. 37; c.f. Adair & Lang, 2011). Lang calls himself a tinkerer which, not coincidentally, is one of Wellman's self-descriptions; and the intricate structures that Lang fashions to elucidate characters are constructed from the same prosaic materials as the libretto, to much the same ends. Lang speaks of the nobility of classical music in the twenty-first century as a musical experience that—in opposition to the music of definite intention that surrounds us every day— allows the listener the luxury of an unexpected emotion (Alburger & Lang, 2000, p. 3; Faires & Lang, 2010). In *Difficulty,* this includes the music's suggestion that the slave owner, Mr. Williamson, has more in common with us than we would like to believe, that the chorus knows more than any single character in the play, and that Mrs. Williamson's madness has its own peculiar lucidity.

Difficulty's score relies on two basic harmonic/vocal-leading models and their variations. The opera begins with an introduction in E minor that provides material for a series of chorale variations. A related series of four measure (or slightly longer) ostinato figures arises from a simple contrapuntal framework: a four-note descending tetrachord set against a descending step-neighbor, as shown in a harmonic reduction in Example 1.

Example 1: First Vocal-leading Model, mm. 1–4

This pattern appears in different modes and vocals, with both the scale fragment and the neighbor motive appearing in canon (see the first variation in mm. 21–6). The chorale model is opposed to a simple two-chord progression whose root motion descends by step. This vamp figure is a familiar signifier in minimal music, but here it may conjure for the listener the D minor to C major motion that symbolizes the unknowable forest at the opening of Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The vocalist enters in Scene 1 with scale degrees ^5-^1-^b3-^2 in E minor over this vamp, introducing a horizontal (0, 1, 3) trichord as a significant motive regarding vocalists and the violin, set against the whole-tone (0, 2, 4) harmony that closes the progression, as shown in an annotated reduction in Example 2.[6] This vamp will travel through several related modes: vocalized in several octaves (mm. 172–4), with the bassline altered to produce a more emphatic i-v progression (mm. 196–9), or at times pared back to a barely perceptible harmonic tic (mm. 216–19).

_____
6   Pitch-class sets follow the conventions established in Forte (1974).

Example 2: Second Vocal-leading Model, Scene 1, mm. 2–5

Lang's polyrhythms are as restrained as his harmonic language. The first i-VII vamp establishes a rhythmic cycle in diminution, as exemplified by the pattern of attacks cited in Example 2 (where 1 = eighth note). When the slave chorus enters at A (m. 64) with an even more static pitch and rhythmic presentation, droning fifths suggest repetitive cycles within cycles, as indicated by four levels of rhythmic motion from a half-note to an eighth-note triplet (see Example 3, mm. 80–2).

Example 3: Levels of Rhythmic Motion in mm. 80–2

As Scene 2 opens, the step-semitone motive turns in on itself and infiltrates the chorale model to produce a chromaticized neighbor that expands outward symmetrically around C, as an A minor triad blossoms into G# major, as shown in Example 4.

Example 4: Scene 2, mm. 1–7

These hollow fifths, followed by abrupt, almost violent changes in collection and mode, herald the entrance of the law and history, as they intrude on the private mystery. The neighbor progression expands and grows more dissonant in the third, fraught scene with the family just before Mr. Williamson's disappearance. The Williamson girl complains, "I think today is the day we all should stop talking" about thickly orchestrated root position harmonies (Example 5, mm. 1–5), which shifts to the second inversion when her discourse moves from the pragmatic to the poetic (mm. 41–72; 113–16; 129–36; 281–312; 345–64; 441–66). The cycle halts only when the Williamson girl serenades the moon with her mother (mm. 101–12; mm. 117–28), although it takes a more subdued form as the scene winds down, Mr. Williamson begins his journey across the field, and Scene 4 opens.

Example 5: Scene 3, mm. 1–5

The only exception to the choral and vamp models presented above is a gospel-tinged walking bassline in compound time during Scene 4, which accompanies the

boy Sam and the slave chorus as they take center stage. Yet even here, Lang remains within a four-bar, minor framework (excerpted in Example 6); he turns this model upside down when the slave overseer Andrew takes the stand in Scene 5.

Example 6: Scene 4, mm. 98–101.

As Scene 6 begins, the neighboring figure who introduces the courtroom in Scene 2 reappears, elaborated by rising tetrachords as the Williamson girl cries plaintively, "What is the point of talking crap like that?" Scene 6 closes with the boy Sam, followed by a "wordless prayer of thanks"—sung by everyone *but* Mrs. Williamson—which expands the rising, stepwise motion to reveal a third relation from E minor to C major, as shown in a harmonic reduction in Example 7 (mm. 1–6).

Example 7: Wordless Prayer of Thanks, mm. 1–6

The final scene opens with the only true aria of *Difficulty*, an unabashed, unaccompanied ABA, compound ternary form for Mrs. Williamson, with recursive aspects that summarize the opera's themes, as indicated by a chart of the aria's form in Ex-

ample 8. Two four-measure phrases centered on E minor outline a two-chord vamp (in three dotted-quarters) followed by a series of straight eighth notes (mm. 1–3). The opening A section is followed by an 11 measure development of the (0, 1, 3) motive (shown in mm. 11–14), in which Mrs. Williamson reflects—in another circular, recursive passage—on her immediate reaction to the disappearance. This small B section, representing the recent past, ends with a cadential phrase ("what an awful thing") on a modal dominant (A, m. 18), whereupon the A section repeats. When the aria reaches measure 32, the quasi-dominant cadential phrase is elided with a B section featuring rising scales in E minor at "more than a mere disappearance" (m. 33, marked c on the chart). Here, the solo violin answers with the entire aria in canon. At measure 52, the mezzo soprano returns to the opening A section, followed by a dotted-quarter vamp and the dotted-quarter "more than a mere disappearance" scale motive, which continues through m. 88 as the violin's canon trails off. The boy Sam, the Williamson girl, and the chorus continue, yet Mrs. Williamson interrupts with one last unaccompanied solo in straight quarters: "I am staying up here till they tell me that this is a fiction and I am not who I am." Her daughter concludes with the quartet and the music that opened Scene 4: "Someone or something carries a candle in the night, or in the open and visible, in broad daylight."

Example 8: Formal Chart of the Aria, Scene 7

6. The Fifth Re-telling: A Field in Long Beach

A line of ushers at the Long Beach Opera directed the audience to the seating on the stage. Here, we faced a cavernous, dimly-lit auditorium framed by the proscenium

and bisected by a metal hanamichi-like platform. The Williamson family members occupied the orchestra pit on a bed and chair; Mrs. Williamson portrayed the roof, seated atop a ladder masked by her voluminous skirts. The slave chorus tended the auditorium's empty chairs, rising up out of the blackness at various places to repeat, comment on, or take over the proceedings from the solo vocalists. The Lyris string quartet appeared to float off in the distance like a moon casting light on an empty field, while the presiding magistrate held forth from the balcony, when the same actor was not in the pit as Mr. Williamson, or heading into the gloom along the narrow platform as he "re-told" his own vanishing. The staging had the dual effect of both increasing the audience's intimacy with the performers and our distance from the material, as if we were part of the proceedings and might at any moment be asked to judge something that we never actually witnessed. Although period clothing and skillful casting rooted the narrative in mid-nineteenth century America, these touches of verisimilitude paradoxically rendered the question of the disappearance more abstractly, as though the performers functioned as avatars for earlier versions of ourselves.

7. The Sixth Re-telling: A History of the "Disappeared"

Bierce's politically astute, dispassionate, and succinct treatment of race, class, and history offered, in Wellman's terms, "a very elegant way of posing an enormous number of questions," not least those that involved American politics in 1854 after the Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed the antislavery clause of the Missouri Compromise (Garrett & Wellman, 1997, p. 90). But writing about slavery directly, Wellman claims, would rob those characters "of their cunning silence, patience, their terse and succinct truth-telling. Their irony" (Garrett & Wellman, 1997, p. 90). The chorus of slaves in *Difficulty* make no more conventional sense than the—admittedly mad—character of Mrs. Williamson. As "it is not the purpose of [their] narrative," owners and authority figures eventually depart the stage, leaving the dispossessed to "answer that question": the slave chorus, the women, and the children, whose voices have been stricken from the official record. Yet like Mr. Williamson, those with titles and power seem more present in their absence. Neither the slaves nor the Williamson women bear Christian names that would accord them subjectivity in their community. Thus, both groups suffer a double loss: The disappearance of "Mr. Williamson" is also the loss of the signifier that knit them to their symbolic universe. Near the opera's closing stages, the Williamson girl forges a bond with the boy Sam, but Mrs. Williamson remains on the roof "till they tell me this is a fiction and I am not who I am."

8. The Seventh Re-telling: Go Forth and Multiply

In the end, *Difficulty* does not so much pass the burden of truth to its audience as acknowledge that truth—that, as Bierce put it, "ingenious compound of desirability and appearance"—is a burden to be questioned (Bierce, 2001, p. 230). All who witness the series of seven numbered "tellings"—the central event recounted from different viewpoints—are implicated in a further cycle of "re-tellings" that spiral outward from each production. The opera's libretto, music, and the Long Beach Opera's particular staging all work to deny the redemptive power of narrative even as they offer repetition, remembrance, and re-reading as an ethical act. In Bierce's day, opera was "A play representing life in another world, whose inhabitants have no speech but song, no motions but gestures and no postures but attitudes," wherein the actor took for his model "the ape that howls" (Bierce, 2001, p. 174). Yet Lang and Wellman's opera most assuredly represents our world, a world whose inhabitants shift speech modes, postures, and sometimes identities without a clear resolution in sight. By replacing a central figure with a central lack, and a conventional plot with a circular, almost motionless narrative, *Difficulty* emphasizes the central mystery of the modern subject as a lack laid bare. Mr. Williamson has exited both the material world and the roles he played as patriarch, landholder, and overseer, a powerful figure who speculates in horses, land, and men. Yet he is not categorically dead, and thus cannot be memorialized: put to rest in his proper symbolic place. His disappearance rents the social fabric while offering an example of the unbridgeable gap that always exists between a subject and the symbolic order.

But this is only the first of the opera's many revelations. For it reminds us, as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel wrote about the Egyptians, that "the mysteries of Selma, Alabama" are mysteries for the Alabamians themselves and, by proxy, their audience. For Hegel, the Sphinx was the "objective riddle par excellence," a work whose meaning remains obscure to all who witness it (Hegel, 1988, p. 360). So may *Difficulty* have remained an enigma for Bierce, Wellman and Lang? If Mr. Williamson's absence points to the lack that animates the social and economic disparities of the pre-Civil-War south, then perhaps the opera's marriage of hallucinatory images, cyclic repetition, and stagecraft bear witness to a lack that—in the present—drives the creation of new musical theater in a culture confused about opera's relevance in the twenty-first century.

References

Adair, Marcia & David Lang. (2011). A chat with composer David Lang. *Los Angeles Times*, June 14. http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/06/disappearing-a-chat-with-david-lang.html (accessed 14 August, 2014).

Alburger, Mark & David Lang. (2000). Bang on an Ear: An Interview with David Lang. *21st-century Music, 7* (9), 1–24. http://www.21st-centurymusic.com/ML210009.pdf (accessed 14 Aug, 2014).

Berkove, Lawrence I. (2002). *A Prescription for Adversity: The Moral Art of Ambrose Bierce*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Bierce, Ambrose. (2001). *The Unabridged Devil's Dictionary*. Eds. D. E. Schultz and S. J. Joshi. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press.

Bierce, Ambrose. (1888). The Difficulty of Crossing a Field. *The Ambrose Bierce Project*. Ed. Craig A. Warren. http://www.ambrosebierce.org/difficulty.htm (accessed 14 August, 2014).

Bierce, Ambrose. (1907). The Moonlit Road. *The Ambrose Bierce Project*. Ed. Craig A. Warren. http://www.ambrosebierce.org/moonlit.htm (accessed 14 August, 2014).

Castagno, Paul C. (2012). *New Playwriting Strategies: Language and Media in the 21st Century*, 2nd edition. Oxford and New York: Routledge.

Davidson, Cathy N. (1984). *The Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Faires, Robert & David Lang. (2010). Mystery is Where It's At. *Austin Chronicle*, 30 April. http://www.austinchronicle.com/arts/2010-04-30/1022401/(accessed 14 August, 2014)

Fordyce, Ehren. (2005). Experimental Drama at the End of the Century. In D. Krasner, *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (pp. 536–51). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Forte, Allen. (1974). *The Structure of Atonal Music*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Garrett, Shawn-Marie & Mac Wellman. (1997). Werewolves, Fractals, and Forbidden Knowledge. *Theatre, 27,* 87–95.

Goho, James. (2014). *Journeys into Darkness: Critical Essays on Gothic Horror.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Griffin, Martin. (2009). *Ashes of the Mind: War and Memory in Northern Literature, 1865–1900.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1988). *Lectures on Fine Art, vol. 1*. Trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leonard, Luke L. (2010). Directing *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*: A Symbolic and Corporeal Approach. M.F.A. Thesis, University of Texas at Austin.

Mapp, J., Skiptares, T., Jesurun, J., Forti, S., Paxton, S., Hopkins, C., Maxwell, R., Parson, A-B., Lee, Y.J., Kalb, J., Lazar, P., Copper, K., Oswald, S., Greenberg, N., Weaver, L. & Kempson, S. (2012). Writing & Performance. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art, 34* (1), 119–40.

Swed, Mark. (2002). Portal to a Realm of Eerie Ambiguity: An Ambrose Bierce Tale Becomes a Haunting Musical Question in the New "The Difficulty of Crossing a Field." *Los Angeles Times*, 25 March, F14.

 Swed, Mark. (2011). Opera Review: David Lang's "The Difficulty of Crossing a Field" Given Southern California Premiere by Long Beach Opera. *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June. http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/06/opera-review-david-langs-the-difficulty-of-crossing-a-field-given-southern-california-premiere-by-lo.html (accessed 14 August, 2014).

Robinson, Marc. (1992). Four Writers. *Theater, 24* (1), 31–42.

Robinson, Marc & Mac Wellman. (1992). Figure of Speech: An Interview with Mac Wellman. *Performing Arts Journal, 14* (1), 43–51.

Savran, David. (1999). The World According to Wellman. *American Theatre, 16* (2), 16–21.

Shaw, Helen. (2008). Mac Wellman and Things of the Devil. In M. Wellman, *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field: Nine New Plays* (pp. vii–xii). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wellman, Mac. (1984). The Theatre of Good Intentions. *Performing Arts Journal*, *8* (3), 59–70.

Wellman, Mac. (1993). A Chrestomathy of 22 Answers to 22 Wholly Unaskable and Unrelated Questions Concerning Political and Poetic Theater. *Theater, 24* (1), 43–51.

Wellman, Mac. (2008). *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field: Nine New Plays*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wellman, Mac, David Lang & Erika Munk. (2000). The Difficulty of Defending a Form. *Theater, 30* (2), 34–43.

Wellman, M. & Y.J. Lee. (2006). *New Downtown Now: An Anthology of New Theater from Downtown New York*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.