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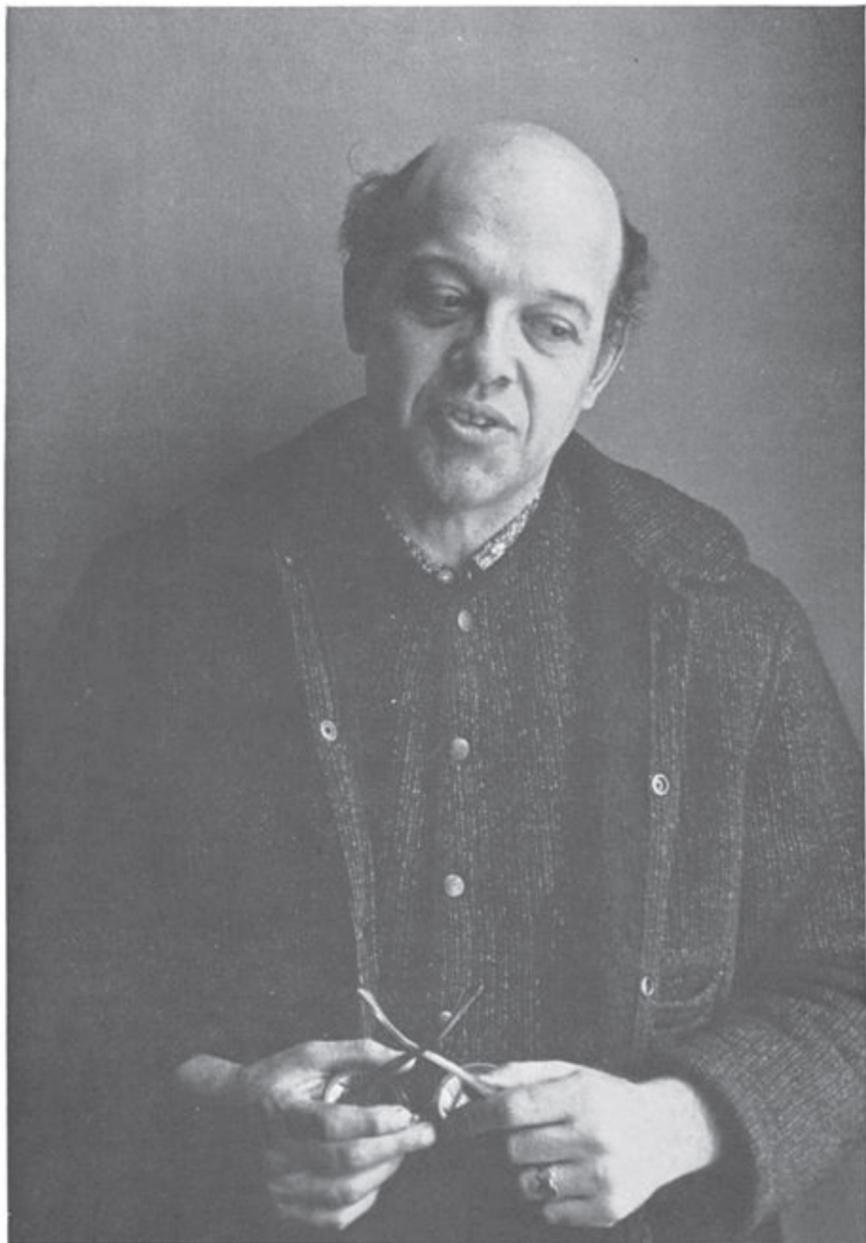
AN INTRODUCTION TO GERALD STERN'S "THE PINEYS"

BY RICHARD HAZLEY

THE PINEYS are the inhabitants of a large section of southern New Jersey known variously as "The Pines," "The Pine Barrens," or the "The Pine Flats." The region is an anomaly. Located roughly halfway between Philadelphia and Atlantic City, bordered by some of the most populous areas of the United States, transversed by concrete roads and parkways, it is a nearly primitive wilderness of 1875 square miles stretching across parts of seven counties. In this time of expanding cities when we speak of a megalopolis extending from Boston to Richmond, or think of the east coast as a continuous reach of city, suburb, and concrete with only the occasional pause of a well-tended park, so civilized that it awakens no reminiscence of what only two hundred years ago the land must have been like, we ordinarily ignore that strange woodland that lies at the heart of the area and that to date has proven intransigent to any permanent inroad of civilization.

Mr. Stern provides a description and history of the Pines in Part Two of his poem.¹ It is an enormous pine and pine-oak forest whose dominant tree is the pitch pine, *pinus rigidus*. Though it is now practically empty, or at the most given over to a few recreational and merely peripheral economic activities, it was once the location of

¹ As the reader will discover, the poet's research into the geography and history of the area was extensive; a great deal of this research was done in the New Jersey Room of the Rutgers University Library, the depository of an extensive collection of materials on the Pine Barrens.



GERALD STERN
Author of *The Pineys*

such important industries as lumbering, ship building and iron manufacture. At its center are the East and West Plains, two areas of scrub pine growth which have been practically untouched by civilization. These areas have been constantly ravaged by fire—even more so than the rest of the forest—and as a result the trees that survive are twisted and grotesque. By and large, the soil of the Pines is sandy, lacking in nutrients necessary for cultivation. The forest is crossed by a dozen streams that were once flanked by giant cedars. The water is pure and the streams still run silky brown, stained by the roots of cedars now making second growth. The area is rich in unusual vegetation and has been an important place of study for botanists for over a century and a half. Recently much of it has been acquired by the state of New Jersey—principally a large area known as The Wharton Tract, for Joseph Wharton of Philadelphia who originally bought the land for investment. Its future is uncertain, but to date it remains a vast and only sparsely inhabited region where an unbroken wilderness stretches for distances almost unbelievable in an area so close to New York and Philadelphia.

The history of those who tried to develop the Pines or to speculate in the land is a history of failure and bankruptcy: land developers, planners, speculators with dreams of wild profit, manufacturers of iron and silk and glass—they came, built their factories and mansions, had visions of wealth and vast estates, saw their enterprises fail, and left. For the most part what they built disappeared into the ever encroaching wilderness and today there are fewer houses and inhabitants in the Pines than there were a hundred years ago. A few broken walls and dams remain, some gun clubs, a few small towns, one old mansion made into a museum and a network of roads that deadend somewhere in the wilderness. John McPhee, in his excellent book, *The Pine Barrens*, says that over the years more than a million people have bought or otherwise acquired lots in the Pine Barrens on which no houses have ever been built. For the past fifteen years there has been talk of a completely planned city and a vast jetport to serve the East, but as yet the Barrens remain a region primitive in their desolation and haunting in their effect upon the imagination.

The Pineys themselves are relatively few in number and heterogeneous. They are not an ethnic group, nor have they a distinctive

folk culture though there is a collection of tales known by the inhabitants, a witch named Peggy Clevenger and a mythical monster known as The Leed's Devil. Because in 1913 a psychological researcher named Elizabeth Kite did a study of the poorest families of the Pines, which received wide publicity and became the basis for what is now known to be a spurious family tree, "The Kallikaks," the name "Pineys" has come to be associated with poverty, degeneracy and feeble-mindedness and is resented by many of the inhabitants. Elizabeth Kite was motivated by all the nineteenth century ideas of propriety, cleanliness, and hard work and her report is an almost hyperbolic distortion. The people of the Pines for the most part are reasonably decent, perhaps more than usually gentle, and relatively law-abiding. What unites them rather than folkways or ethnic similarity or character deficiency is something negative. Their origins are a matter of speculation but their attitudes are shared: from the first they have been that element that resisted or rejected the demands of our culture. Very early in the history of the region there were those who deserted their colonial villages for a forest life as a protest against rigid rules. Many of these were Quakers, others were young men of leisure or adventurers who were attracted to the unsupervised life that was possible in the wastelands. Later there were deserters from the Revolutionary army, Tories seeking refuge, Hessians. Many of the family names are those of the earliest settlers. Today there are still those who by chance or curiosity wander into the area, find the life amenable and stay on.

The life they find there is uninfected by the American dream of success, hard work, and plenty. Now that the industries of the nineteenth century are gone, living follows the seasons. Ferns and wildflowers are gathered in the spring and summer, in the fall there are huckleberries and cranberries to be harvested, in winter pine cones and boughs are collected. There is still some lumbering; there is a need for guides for the urban deer and duck hunters, and if some ready money is needed there are the cities beyond the forest where one can work for awhile. Some leave for a few months or sometimes years to work outside the Pines; they nearly always return. They are not afraid of work, but unlike most of us neither are they compulsive about it. Long before the term was coined, they were the drop-outs from our civilization.

The Pines and its people have a perennial fascination. They have been and continue to be the subject of books, doctoral theses, ecological and sociological studies, botanical guides, and Sunday supplement articles. In Part Two of his poem Stern says:

Everyone who saw them found a little identity
According to his own intelligence and bufoonery . . .

The identity we find is perhaps that compensatory fantasy that grows stronger as life becomes more complex, demanding, and urbanized. There is the mystery, the dream of escape, the imaginative identification with a people that are somehow not enmeshed in the political and economic machine, the grids of the planners and our daily pressures. "It is good to get back to the old familiar gloom," says one writer. The incongruous location, too, adds to the mystery. If the Pines were in northern Maine or a part of the Florida Everglades they might be less likely to awaken that sense of the strange. But located, still uncivilized, in the heart of the East, that nearly untraversed wilderness appeals to what is dark and irrational in us—to that side of our character fascinated with the possibilities of the defeat or extinction of the whole structure of civilization. It appeals to the part of us that delights in the contemplation of New York City emptied of people, given over to birds and rodents and blown scraps of paper, that imagines Washington, D.C. decimated of its power, its neo-classic marble sinking back into the swamp that the land once was. That suppressed part of our nature responds to the mysteries of the Pines, and we hope that the anomaly survives.

II

Early in the first section of Part Three of "The Pineys" Stern says,

I first came across the term in 1958
In one of those *Sunday Bulletin* magazine articles.
I was struck immediately by the power of the uses
And walked around violent half the night in Logan.

The "power of the uses" is the essential subject of the poem. In the expression of that subject the Pineys become the symbol for one of the two forces or energies of life. The White House, or sometimes the owl, is the symbol for the other force. One may think of the

Pineys as the force of the irrational so long as the term is not used only in the pejorative sense, and so long as one does not think in terms of a disjunction or absolute polarity of the two forces. To approach the poem in this way would be to oversimplify and do damage to the complexities of meaning that accrue in the progress of the writing. The final meaning resides in the total metaphor and is not susceptible to simple formulation. What is important is not the reduction to simple formula but the passionate involvement of the author in all the implications of the symbol. In his attempt to explore those implications with all of the attendant ambiguities, Stern involves himself in what is perhaps the chief subject of American literature, the opposition and, at the same time, the synchronous existence of the forces of light and dark. More perhaps than just the subject of American literature it is the basic subject of history, which America has seemed to personify. The virtue of Stern's poem is that he has found in the Pineys a symbol that answers to all of the requirements of meaning that he attaches to them, without distortion or false attribution. His initial and at the first mysterious apprehension of the subject, first awakened in the popular literature of a Sunday supplement, proves throughout the long writing of the poem to be valid beyond his first instinct and sufficient to all that he required of it.

"It's just that easy for Pineys to get into the White House." In the first line, with a directness reminiscent of "Call me Ishmael" the terms of the poem are set forth. The first part of the poem is divided into three sections, each of which attests to the presence of that which the Pineys symbolize in activities or places that would seem to negate that presence.

In section one, in a semi-comic telescoping of our presidents and their periods, from the establishment of Washington, D.C.

Even when the poor squabbling Fathers coupled off to provide
Whole miles, like an ocean, for the new capital . . .

through the Eisenhower years

And the age of the halo, age of the holy pumpkin,
Jack-o'-the-blue, iceblink, last o' the Georges

the Pineys, ubiquitous, are there

At weddings, at dinners, in the good or gentle circles
 Taking their places along with the oldest and saddest.

Sections two and three of the first book discuss the same presence as distraction and vertigo, first in the generalized figure of the man of action (“the builder, the despot”) and second in the person of the author. In section one the Pineys are personified—presences wheeling and flapping, collecting passively, a negative conglomerate, in the rooms of state. In sections two and three they are seen as a negative psychic force with which “the labor of purity” must contend.

In section one the picture of the Pineys in the White House has the flavor of the absurd that accompanies the discovery of them in our rooms of state:

The furniture crashed with wit and there were Pineys
 Roaring in stately chintz and dimity . . .

In section two the tone changes. The builder, the despot, is seen as the man obsessed with his abstractions—the numerous comparisons to philosophers and periods of history is important. The figure here is one who destroys in the name of a private vision engendered by his own malaise. The Pineys are that which he denies, the forces of vertigo, the “infelicity,” perhaps for the despot the concrete and the humane, that propel him as he struggles against them to his fits of elevation, irony, or vanity. The language approaches anger as that last infirmity is described:

Or in a fit of irony he hides
 His vertigo behind obsequious falls,
 Or in a fit of vanity he drags
 His bastard stringers in consoling circles,
 Or smears the scalls with blood, or dips them in acid,
 Or sulphur, or lime, whatever the labor of purity.

Section three concerns the author and the relationship of the same distracting forces to his own labors of purity. No less nominal, born out of a craze of luxury, they, like the despot’s dream, are an astringent. After that recognition, the rest of section three, only two sentences that comprise over seventy-five lines, is a sustained invocation to the author’s concept of peace. Peace would be freedom from the astringent, freedom from doubleness and the sense of the coex-

istence of mutually discordant elements. It would come with the recognition of each thing for only what it is, and as such, its own good justification. The second of the two long sentences is autobiographical, tracing what has been mutually discordant in the poet's life: the conflict between the ideal of the rational, with the owl now symbolizing education and the search for the rational, and the opposing love of flame and fire, the destructive forces associated with the Pines.

Part Two Stern calls the "prose section" of the poem. The "uses of the term" in Part One were the symbolic uses. Part Two discusses the actual Pineys, their history, their causes, the nature of the treatment of them by others, particularly Elizabeth Kite, but in addition all of the "lurists," including the author, who have been fascinated by the area and its people. Its content furnishes the prose meaning for the symbol. Its style, straightforward without being journalistically literal, provides a relaxed transition after the sustained figurative intensity of Part One. The purpose of the descriptive history is to discover the cause of the fascination:

Everyone who saw them found a little identity
According to his own intelligence and buffoonery
And they were used as the poor are always used,
Both to be the impoverished and to pay the debt.
Myself I am a phantist finding in their lives
An intense connection with my own severance.

It is only relatively that this section is "prose." It does not sacrifice the language of metaphor even while describing the facts of history. Here are the lines that discuss the method of Elizabeth Kite:

She was obsessed with "lines" and though she paid
Lip service to the new theory of environment
Her real loyalty was to the theory of blood.
She does three things: first she pulls them together,
Then she draws a picture of their origin,
Then she moves like a hammer through their wilderness.

In this part of the poem the attitude toward the Pineys becomes more complex, as it will continue to do in each section of the poem. Thus, Part Two, while somewhat flatter in language than Part One, carries the line of the poem forward, preparing for the following sections.

What is chiefly responsible for the increasing complexity in Part Two is the author's implicit dislike for the "defenders" of civilization typified by Elizabeth Kite. The Kites of the world see the pine people only as degenerates who must somehow be "saved," be reformed to fit the shapes proper to the culture. In reaction to this self-righteousness the author shows signs of a clear affection for and even identity with the Pineys.

Part Three is divided into four sections. It climaxes the theoretical search for definition with a sense of comic irony and desperation, seeing, as the complexities increase, the comic and hopeless connection of the two symbols, thus negating with its sense of the whole absurdity the possibility of freedom from the sense of doubleness. Section one resorts to a comic pseudo-algebra, section two is a list of 299 "things" that the Pineys are or may be conceived of as being. In its incongruous juxtapositions of things related and opposed this section of the poem reaches a pitch of desperate, innovative comic invention that is unparalleled in contemporary poetry. Like the measurement of the whale in *Moby Dick* it proceeds, realizing the hopelessness of the effort of reduction to discursive, measurable terms, but determined in the attempt. Section three returns to algebraic symbols, this time with distinctions that deliberately result in impossible complications and a sense, not of comic, but of bitter irony.

"The question of course is what am I trying to save." There is a questioning now of the original symbolic premise. The search for definition has come full circle and it seems possible that "the good glint of illumination" may not be in either the White House or the owl, those symbols of "reason," but in the Piney himself. Two things are questioned at the end of section three: first, there is the possibility that our civilization may not be structured around that which is rational and enlightened and suffering from the presence of the irrational and dark. It now appears that the Pineys may not be the opposing force, or at least not destructive even if opposing. What destroys the noumenal White House may not be the forces of the "black, destructive, and cunning," but an excess of the very thing that the White House represents. It is a vision of rationality run wild like a cancer and feeding on itself:

It is not, it is *not*, the "black, destructive, and cunning"
 That eats into the White House, not "wolves and spiders,"
 Or not them alone, or "black, destructive, and cunning"
 Must be the description not of spiders and wolves,
 Or not them alone—the brain, the brain in its lushes
 Eats up its own puzzled cells, the brain in its trenches
 Destroys through its own perversions its own puzzling meshes,
 Or operates out of a fluke or out of a weakness,
 And in its luscious operations the dove and the lamb
 As well as the wolf and the spider eat and are eaten.

Second, what now appears to be a possibility generally may be also true of the writer's life. The owl reappears in section three as it did in the first part of the poem. (The structure of these two parts show interesting parallels.) It is now evident that the owl is the subjective surrogate symbol for the White House. There is the author's sense of having been duped in his pursuit of the owl:

Aside from the fact that the owl was the bird *I* followed
 In stupid unvarying unswerving dull monotony,
 Year after year, fall by melancholic fall—
 By default at first, like half the others, but finally
 Out of limitation and laziness and simple-mindedness, . . .²

A note concerning the structure is relevant here. What provides the tension in the poem is the exploration of the contradictions and complexities. The dynamics that move the poem through this long search for definition result from the knowledge that the writer gains as he goes. Section one of Part Three recalls the initial simple apprehension—the pole of the White House or owl, and the oppo-

² Temple University, where Stern spent seven years as an English instructor in the service of the owl (Temple's emblem), is an important point of reference in the poem. Those were the seven years he lived in Philadelphia, the "city" of the poem, and, good or bad, the experience at Temple was *the* owl experience he had, or was permitted to have. Many of the references, particularly in Part One, are to Temple. "Old Acres" is the founder of Temple, Russell Conwell. Johnny Ring was the little Civil War drummer boy who turned back over the burning bridge (it actually happened) to retrieve his missing Bible, died in the attempt, and by this act converted Major Conwell, a former scoffer, to the holy cause. (Conwell became a Baptist minister, made a fortune delivering a little lecture called "Acres of Diamonds" in which, in typical Carnegie fashion, he taught that the true diamonds were in your own back yard. With the proceeds he founded Temple, which was at first a night school for "deserving youth.") "College" and "Carnell" and "Conwell" are the names of some of the buildings at Temple. Just as there is in the poem a constant comparison, or "play" between the ideal and the real White House, so there is a similar play between the ideal and actual "owl."

site pole of the Pineys. The last lines of section one and the next two sections show the evolution of the vision, the balance and the contention and the increasing (and questioning) awareness. It is this that gives the poem its vitality—the willingness, even with frustration as the outcome, to take on the possibilities without succumbing to the dogma of the first simple perception. It is the willingness and courage to admit to the duplicity of the idea without negating its value and also to admit to other possibilities.

Another possibility is noted in section three—the possibility of a new starting point:

Perhaps it is here that the unconnected symbol
Of the Piney and the owl have a starting point or meeting place
As travelers meet in a haven or a temporary hell . . .

The possibility occurs as the writer faces the idea that the White House and the owl also eat upon and destroy the very thing they represent.

To this point, the method has been speculative; its region has been the region of the mind, its movement the relentless exploration of the *idea*. There is an abrupt shift in section four of this part. The area of action changes, or is changed, by the stark frightening reality of an event—the assassination of John Kennedy. In the face of that terrible fact the long search for definition seems first of all quixotic. Paradoxically, the quest for meaning that finally led to the realization that the forces of destruction might be not the Pineys but a part of the quality of reason itself, and that altered the author's own unswerving pursuit of the owl, was itself the work of reason, the flight of the owl. Suddenly now the mind is torn "loose from its coil" and pushed out into the violence of the street. It is an occasion for the author to turn his irony upon himself. The "delectable tropes" of his poetry are not sufficient to the occasion. All that he has discussed in the privacy of his own mood has been dramatically and brutally simplified by a single violent act, and the intrusion of real life has stolen the purely mental thunderings of the poet:

I, who should have known, found myself stupidly outwitted
By the insanely simple and conventional mind of the murderer
Who had lost, evidently, any deep respect for proportion.

“Who had lost, evidently, any deep respect for proportion”—a line of intense and self-conscious irony, the type of the scholar’s complaint—here satirized—against the bruising harshness of reality, that has so little respect for his ideal configuration.

Still, even through the confusion of the act and its aftermath, and even though the reverie has been broken, the author sees the event as an affirmation of his concept. The murderer is the type of uncivilizer; Kennedy is the representative of civilization and the White House. The symbolism has been rendered simple again and the actual can no longer be ignored. We are prepared for Part Four, the final book of the poem.

Part Four like Part Two has no divisions; it is narrative—an account of a journey into the Pines and a return to the poet’s home in Philadelphia. The time of the journey is precisely noted. It is April, 1963, the year of the greatest fire that the Pines ever suffered—and it is a region where extensive fires are common. The violence of the assassination and the violence of fire in the Pines parallel each other, and lend a true polyphony to the poem. (There are numerous other instances of this same sort of parallelism.)

The beginning of Part Four, like Part Two, is factual. The extent of the fire, the public and official reactions, are recorded. The lines move with deceptive slowness; the reader is being prepared for a series of extraordinary visions that will conclude the poem.

After the facts have been presented and the fires extinguished, the poet goes to the Pines. He enters first into the East Plains, a part untouched by the fire, but his fascination is with the other, the West Plains, that have been completely destroyed. There he walks through the char, brushed by the fire-blackened stems of dwarf trees:

These were completely, and grossly, destroyed by the fire
Which must have gone through them without the slightest interruption.

The fire, also, is a murderer lacking a sense of proportion. The West Plains have become a literal wasteland, a hell:

. . . no wretched
Imaginary frozen Piltdown forest
Or scarlet boulder land of either Hell
Could be the equal to this in pure morbidity.

There, impelled by feelings he does not attempt to explain, in the midst of that burnt-over carnage, occurs the first of three extraordinary events:

And it was here that secretly and guiltily
 I broke a stick and traced in a valley of sand,
 Between the dead trees, an image of the White House,
 With doors and porticoes and stately windows,
 And little terraces and sandy walks,
 And a tiny twig of a man nearby for perspective.
 God knows the complexity of my feelings—
 The range of confusion—from mockery to fear
 To veneration to affection to simple vexation;
 I think I knelt in the sand for half an hour
 Digesting the humor and strangeness of my design.

From the charred section of the Plains he walks quickly toward a ridge, hardly more than a slight ground rise in rolling country, but here, by contrast, a kind of mountain. It has been high enough, this rise of only sixty feet, to stop the fire on its northern slope. Here it is green with laurel, arbutus, and huckleberry. He lies there on the ridge's top and the contrast in height and between the living and the dead causes the mind to slip. With tremendous self-consciousness, half in parody, half seriously, aware of the actual height, he permits himself the fancy of being on a mountain top. He has experienced now the two contrasting visions of hell and the mountain.

The events move more rapidly now. He leaves the hill, returns to his car for the drive to Philadelphia. (Like Washington, it too is the city of civilization—the city of the Constitution, the Quakers, Benjamin Franklin.) On his way through the city he sees a group of bums (Pineys?) at a soup kitchen. He arrives home exhausted. The house has been cleaned, the children and his wife are happy.

My wife had polished the windows or killed the spiders
 Or done some secret thing to give her that brightness
 And the children were clean and quiet as little supplicants.
 It was the pure *sinfonia domestica*, . . .

Then as he sits in his chair in that condition when the fatigue of the body seems to make the nerves more than usually acute and subject sometimes to hallucination, he has a third experience. Through the windows he seems to see, gathered on the porch, draped around the

pillars (his own White House?), the ghosts of the presidents. Dressed in ragged and ludicrous costumes, wailing and shaking their heads, they appear to be planning, in some insane and unorganized way, an assault on the house. He stares, then blinks in amazement:

And sometimes they would lose their great dignity
And fall to whooping or bend their heads and weep—
The ones without beards were painted white and the hair
On the others was false—the whole thing was outrageous—
And I strained my eyes to see the secret explanation,
Then blinked them to dispel the vision in water,
Then crossed them to dispel the vision in chaos,
Then closed them to dispel the vision in mind
And let the good lamps of evening filter the horror
As, room by room, the shrieking fellowship of light,
Pushing the buttons and pulling the chains and tassels,
Plunged the house in blazing ferocious incandescence.

What can be said of the three actions that conclude the poem? They do not seem to admit to paraphrase. The author does not explain them; he records what he has done or seen and the poem ends. It is apparent that the long discursiveness of the first three stanzas of Part Four anticipates them, that they (the actions) must bring into focus the multiple realities that these stanzas discover. The discursiveness is the map we need in order to have some idea of where we are going and what we will see. The rest of Part Four is the journey where what we have learned to think about becomes reality—the mutual meanings attain immediacy: in the midst of the irrational destruction caused by fire, it is still possible, sitting in the ashes, to draw a picture of the White House that symbolizes proportion and reason; on what is only a Lilliputian mountain it is possible to experience a romantic vision, even though we know just exactly how high we are and are fully, even laughably, aware of that tradition and its triteness; or, sitting at home with the family we may experience a sort of revelation of what we sometimes suspect, and see the presidents as Pineys.

It may seem to some that the poem ends on a note of cynicism and damnation, exposing those public figures who are the closest to heroes that we have today. Much of the poetry we are familiar with would condition us to expect such an ending. But that would be a

denial of the final lines of the poem and a misinterpretation of the tone. The vision of the presidents as Pineys is dispelled as the children turn on the lights in the house. The poem ends in light, not darkness. The light is simply and unavoidably there, and more, it is the children, happily shrieking through the house, who make the light. The world, in spite of our fears, in spite of our sense of being able to resolve nothing, in spite of our knowledge of having been cheated, is a place for affection, and it will go on.

That is the tone of the poem. Finally, it is a comic tone. It is comic in its discursiveness, in its love of language, in its enjoyment of the play of the mind, in the XYZ sections and in the long list. It is comic because it admits that one thing is another and says that this is what the world is and will be. And it is too full of the sense of the world to dwell on eschatology. It is comic because it understands the absurdity and seriousness of its own pursuits and poses. It sees a man on a mountain top, but that man is not and never can be Manfred, because it knows that after all the self-indulgent prophecies of doom the world still goes on. It is not committed to destruction or condemnation, but to understanding and perspective, and when those commitments are met sympathy is always stronger than anger. If there is no freedom from doubleness, there is still the possibility of some understanding. If there is much to be angry at, there is still room for affection. And affection, in spite of the bafflements and injustices, is what one feels in "The Pineys."