



The Bi-Polar Express: Drive for  
Life in Late Works of William  
Inge and Sylvia Plath

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## The Bi-Polar Express: Drive for Life in Late Works of William Inge and Sylvia Plath

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On his death, William Inge was much mourned, but commentators generally viewed his demise as a natural outcome. Paul L. Montgomery's *New York Times* announcement described a "bright career turned to ashes," and Inge as a man "ill and depressed for some time" (1), while Brooks Atkinson opined that Inge had "lost his gift of seeing the living truths" and "For all practical purposes his career was over" (38). *Time* magazine's obituary referred to an "engaging but minor talent" which had clearly begun to fail, and gave almost as much space to the death of Fritz Erich von Lewinski von Manstein, who masterminded Germany's blitzkrieg against France in 1940.

Similar to Inge, Anton Chekhov's dramatic reputation rests on four plays, yet has not suffered such coldness as Inge's; one wonders if that might be due to Chekhov having had the decency to die of tuberculosis, rather than take his own life: America, especially, has never liked quitters. That, and the suggestion that some of Robert Brustein's mud apparently stuck,<sup>1</sup> made me wonder if the dearth of criticism on Inge has more to do with his biography than his writing. Critics continue to obsess over Inge's "complete despair" (Leeson 14), the "downward spiral of his career" ("Valuable" Shuman 351), and describe him in his later years as having "abandoned all hope" (Knudsen 128). Contrary to Tennessee Williams' insistence that, "Despite all of this 'heavy' material about his fate, Bill and his work were suffused with the light of humanity at its best" (8), he tends to be described as a man in deep depression, left with just one option: to die.

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<sup>1</sup> Brustein notoriously eviscerated Inge and his work in a blustering review of *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, in which he called to question the quality of all of Inge's previous work.

These negating descriptions recall the responses people initially had to the death of poet and writer Sylvia Plath, a decade earlier. Public and critics swiftly created an icon of Plath as a woman much in love with death, and relegated her life to a one-note affair of downbeat depression and inevitable demise, and sought only those images in her work. Reviewing her posthumous poetry collection, *Ariel*, in 1967, John Malcolm Brinnin dismissed her verse as “diversions of psychopathology,” and described her writing as death obsessed and, thereby, severely limited. But as Karen Jackson Ford asserts, “Instead of permitting the works of the poet to characterize her sensibility, Plath criticism too often allows her sensational biography to determine the importance of her works. This causes readers to overlook some poems and to misread others” (163). As Clurman once wrote, “Fault was found with Inge for not measuring up to standards he never set himself” (92). By the 1990s, critics were beginning to recognize more complex strains in Plath’s work, and see the drive for life that ran alongside the lure of death, and a similar consideration of Inge might help convey deeper complexities in both the man and his work.

Sylvia Plath and William Inge each had a long history of insecurity and mental illness, marked by a bi-polar up and down trajectory of happiness and despair. Both also wrote as a mode of therapy,<sup>2</sup> and both were ultimately suicides, but they shared something else in common: both fought *against* rather than *for* death, and the evidence lies in their writing. While Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel*, contains a fascinating sequence of poems, referred to as the “Bee” sequence, in which we can see her desire and will to survive, Inge left an unpublished manuscript for a short television drama he entitled *David: “Where Angels Tread.”* The first draft of this play, quite possibly the final dramatic piece on which Inge worked, is dated 27 July, 1970, with a revised

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Leeson suggests that Inge was drawn to write drama, because it gave him a “feeling of being a part of the public life around him” (5), and helped alleviate his loneliness.

version on 17 August 1970 (with the initial sermon scene dated even earlier, 5 August). While both scripts maintain a central focus on a ball-player turned preacher, the Reverend David Rush, and his interaction with the suicidal Mrs. Rose Bliss, many other aspects of the play differ. It is partly through an analysis of these differences that Inge's outlook during these final years of his life may be given a different spin.

The tone and imagery of Plath's "Bee" poem sequence forcefully suggest Plath's urgent desire to remain alive and viable as an artist, even while the seductive release of death continues to beckon. Buried by poet husband, Ted Hughes, in the center of *Ariel*, Plath had intended this poetic sequence to take a far more prominent place. As Ford explains, on completing the Bee sequence Plath wrote to her mother that she was ready to start a new life:

"I am a writer . . . I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name" (468) . . . . There is no question that she considered the Bee poems her culminating poetic statement in addition to her best work. She placed them at the end of her second book of poems, giving them precedence over the other poems in the volume. (135)

The importance of this sequence was overlooked well into the 1990s, when critics finally began to recognize their potency. The sequence of five poems, connected by their form and focus on bee imagery were swiftly written in October of 1962 when Plath was facing the break up of her marriage. They contradict the commonly held view of Plath as violent and self-destructive, in their evolving sense of ease and hopefulness. Ford insists that they "reveal a concern with self-assessment and redefinition, both personally and poetically" (135), and Marjorie Perloff describes them as offering a "parable of hibernation, a hibernation that makes way for rebirth and continuity" (195). Collectively, these poems affirm the integrity of Plath's creative self, asserting

her rights as an individual, and furnish a more hopeful end to her career; suicide is not always so intentional, or inevitable.<sup>3</sup>

There is uncertainty as to what can formally be called Inge's "final play." While Richard Leeson highlights *The Last Pad*, and Ralph Voss *The Love Death*, as plays that might offer Inge's final commentary on life (the first set on death row and the latter in the apartment of a man who commits suicide), these were both initially written in the 1960s, so *David*, postdates them both, and suggests that the close of Inge's career may have contained more elements of hope than hitherto supposed.<sup>4</sup> *David* seems closer to earlier plays in that it allows for lives to be unpleasant, but ends by urging its central characters to keep trying rather than quit. Much as R. Baird Shuman says about *Come Back, Little Sheba*, "the theme of continuance is strong" (*Inge* 32); that driving necessity to face reality, keep on living, and never give up. Despite his concentration on Inge's darker, later plays, Voss concludes his study by describing Inge's core message as: "we all need the courage to accept what life brings us, adapt our lives to life's realities, and proceed to find as much light and love as we can" (275). This certainly seems to be the message behind *David*.

While offering detailed and insightful readings of many of Inge's later plays, Voss assigns *David* to a list of plays dealing with "suicide," that "reflect Inge's sense of a world gone bad" (237). As an unpublished manuscript resting in the Inge Archives, it has otherwise been

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<sup>3</sup> "Wintering," the final poem in the sequence, concludes with what Ford describes as a "simple and understated note of hope" (162), with its calm imagery of Christmas roses and the coming spring. This, Ford asserts, "contradicts the myth of Plath as suicidal poet churning out her greatest poems to meet a frighteningly literal deadline" (135).

<sup>4</sup> R. Baird Shuman seems to identify *Overnight* (1969) as Inge's last play, but offers no commentary on its content or message. Voss describes it as being about "family failure" (237), and points to a plot in which a psychologically disturbed woman, escapes from her institution, almost persuades her ex-husband she is cured, attempts suicide, and is then returned to the hospital (247). This dynamic seems to have more in common with *David* than either *Last Pad* or *Love Death*.

ignored. While Voss asserts that Inge “did not entirely abandon his attempt to write a hopeful drama” (244), the ones he chooses to describe are fairly dark, and he later adds that “where the early work shows hope . . . the later work shows loss of that hope as well” (272). Pointing to various plays from the late 1960s, such as *Comeback*, *I’m a Star* and *The Call*, Voss persuasively illustrates Inge’s growing concern with negative criticism and his own fall from grace, but *David* was written after these, and seems to be a play that deals, instead, with the more positive idea of second chances.

In May of 1970, Voss tells us, Inge was full of hope awaiting the release of his first novel, *Good Luck, Miss Wyckoff* (261). *David*, written shortly after this, must have been penned around the time that his sister, Helene, came to live with him, and before the negative criticism of his late novels struck home. Apparently, she encouraged her brother to embrace religious faith as a possible avenue of comfort. In 1972 (although this was not the religion to which Helene subscribed), Voss tells us that Inge officially converted to Roman Catholicism (264). However, just as the play’s preacher (who is protestant) comes to realize, faith is not enough. What Inge needed was an extended psychiatric commitment—which was, for him, sadly beyond his capability, although we do know that he discussed this possibility with fellow playwright William Gibson on the very night of his death.<sup>5</sup> Like Plath, while striving for the light, he succumbed to darkness, but *David* suggests to me, that he did not go to that death completely willingly. Though written only three weeks apart, the number of differences between the two

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<sup>5</sup> In a posthumous tribute to Inge, Gibson writes about how he spoke to the playwright the night Inge successfully committed suicide. They planned for Gibson to find Inge a bed at the Riggs Center in Stockbridge, where he had undergone more successful therapy in the past than he had received at Westwood Hospital, in Los Angeles. Just as the circumstances surrounding Plath’s suicide, with the note she left downstairs for a neighbor to check in before the gas she had turned on would have had a permanent effect, which was unfortunately discovered too late to save her. Both circumstances suggest suicide attempts as cries for help rather than decisions to die.

versions suggest a work in evolution, and the trajectory is toward an increasingly more positive outcome; thus countering claims that Inge's later work was all deeply pessimistic.

There are a large number of unpublished manuscripts in the Inge collection, many being different versions of the same script, but there are only two versions of *David: "Where Angels Tread."* In both, the play begins on a sunlit Sunday morning in a large church filled with "*well clothed and well fed*" congregants (Orig. 1, Rev. 1). In the earlier version, the bright atmosphere is juxtaposed against Reverend David Rush's sermon concerning the "universal cries of the desolate and lonely" whose only recourse to salvation is through faith: "the pain of loneliness can be abated and converted into the bliss of heavenly solitude" (Orig. 1), he intones. The emphasis is on isolation: "We must always remember that man is *born* lonely, in the eyes of God" (Orig. 1). In the rewrite, the sermon is no longer about loneliness and the curative bliss of faith, but takes up Matthew 10.37, where Matthew commands his followers to love Christ more than their own families. A more strident text, demanding faith before all earthly concerns.

Rather than leave in silence, as she does in the first version, Rose declares, "I can't stand anymore of this" (Rev. 1), before exiting, as if to refute the idea that one should put faith before all else. The change in sermon seems to reflect upon Inge's need to emphasize David's initial belief that faith alone is sufficient. It is a faith he will learn to place behind medical intervention in the case of Rose Bliss, for although he is well-meaning, he is, initially, something of a naïve fool. A further difference is that the earlier version, relates how David was responsible for his own father's death and the injury he got that caused him to quit baseball; thus his embrace of the church is presented as a mode of expiation for personal guilt. However, the later version, offers no explanation as to why he left sports to become a preacher. This is not to be a play about guilt, but about compassion for someone in need. Also, while Rose leaves the church in both versions,

in the first her leaving seems a self-pitying reaction in response to its evocation of loneliness, and she later recounts her sense of claustrophobia, “I felt the eyes of whole congregation were on me” (Orig. 6), but in the latter it is more out of annoyance at not finding the answer for which she came to church. While the earlier Rose seeks sympathy, the later Rose is seeking guidance.

As Voss suggests, “Occasionally, glancing through these scripts, one finds a play that is especially revealing of Inge’s feelings and attitudes at the time” (237). Thus, given the timing of this play’s creation, it seems reasonable to view the suicidal Rose Bliss as a manifestation of the struggling Inge, with Reverend David representing the hopeful sister, urging him toward faith and trying to protect him. Interestingly, Inge changes David’s wife’s name between the versions, from Dorothy to Helen.

In the original script, Rose is wealthy, and has been leaning on David for spiritual assistance for some time; however, in the rewrite, Inge makes Rose less financially comfortable--her home no longer genteel, but a “*humble apartment dwelling*” (Rev. 7), as if to make her situation more tenuous—and this service is the first time he has seen her. A parishioner, Mrs. Bellamy, fills him in about Rose and her troubles, even referencing concern among Rose’s friends as to how to help. Rose is no longer the formerly isolated figure whose only friend is her housemaid, Harriett, who urges her to find help. In the earlier version, Rose seems more centered on her own misery, “How can I ever be happy again?” (Orig. 8), whereas the revised version presents her as more worried over her son, “If you had my worries, you’d feel anxious, too” (Rev. 7). She seems to have actual concerns rather than a vague feeling of futility. Initially, Inge has Rose phone David, and he, despite his wife’s annoyance, drops everything to go over. In the revised version it is David who goes to find Rose on his own volition, to see if he can assist, for she is too shy to come forward on her own.



On David's arrival in the first script, Rose tells him she has been advised to seek psychiatric help, but petulantly declares, "I don't want to" (Orig. 11). Her son stole a car and is in detention, she misses her husband killed a year ago, and feels overwhelmed by life: "I'm no use to the world anymore" (Orig. 13). Concern as to how others view her has increased her sense of isolation, and she openly declares, "I don't know how to live in the world today . . . I want to *die*" (Orig. 14B). In response to her pain, David ignores the comments about her son, and focusses on Rose, telling her that her grief is making her "self-centered and self-pitying" but her belief she is alone is a delusion (Orig. 14B). Explaining how he experienced the same feelings after his life-changing car-crash, he insists that by turning to religion he was able to find peace. This moves Rose to raise her spirits, and declare she does not need a psychiatrist, and he simply accepts this. David has connected with her and drawn Rose out of herself, but then he leaves to return to his family, feeling he has given her sufficient spiritual aid to get through her crisis, oblivious to her real needs. He will then go on with his life, with hardly a thought about the woman he has just left.

This changes, however, in the revised version, where Rose's concerns are presented differently. She reluctantly allows David to enter, and insists: "There's no way *anyone* can help me. Not even God" (Rev. 8). As before, she blames her current misery on the recent death of her husband and trouble with her youngest child, Tommy, who is involved, this time, with drugs. However, rather than tell David of a personal deathwish, as before, her concern seems more worry and embarrassment over her son, about whom she does not know what to do. Her attention is turned outward to others, rather than inward to her own fears. David's response is also different, and more practical: he offers to talk to the son, and try to get him into a rehabilitation program. But then he insists that Rose also needs assistance, and urges, "faith and prayer can

help . . . I know that if a person can put his trust in God . . . “ (Rev. 10A). What Rose asks for is money, purportedly to help toward food and rent, which he willingly, and we later learn, foolishly, provides--she uses the cash to buy pills with which she will try to kill herself--but at least he tries to offer practical rather than just spiritual assistance.

After David leaves Rose in the first version, the act closes, and Act Two offers several scenes of David with his family. While listening to the symphony in the park, they are interrupted by Harriet, come to report that Rose has cut her wrists and is in hospital, asking for David. He immediately leaves, but then we see him back home, abject, with his previous certainty shaken: “I simply don’t know how the woman could have become so desperate” he tells his wife. “When I left her, she showed every sign of being well again, and happy” (Orig. 27). He blames himself for thinking he could cure her ailment with his spiritual pep talk, and recognizes, “*My help wasn’t enough. She obviously needed the care of a trained psychiatrist*” (Orig. 28). Interestingly, Inge directs our attention, not toward the suicide, but toward the person who has failed to properly assist.

In the revised version, there is an additional scene in Act One in which David visits a sullen Tommy in detention. We can view Tommy as a younger variant of his mother (and Inge), for his outlook on the world is not so different. While he describes his mother as addicted to pills and alcohol, insisting she is mentally ill, he views his own drug habit as nothing in comparison, but brought on by his own despairing view of the world as a hateful place: “Maybe I’m looking for a country that helps a man to *live* instead of die” (Rev. 15), he tells David. Moved by his visitor’s concern for him, Tommy agrees to consider rehabilitation, and we will later hear that he follows through. Talking to his wife, later that evening, David now shows more concern that he may not have done enough to help, but again gets distracted by other people and concerns.

Act Two of the later version moves to a Veterans' hospital, where we witness the upbeat hope of the maimed and wounded whom David is visiting. There, David receives a call from Mrs. Bellamy who has discovered Rose in a coma from taking pills (as opposed to the more violent wrist slitting of before) and asks him to bring an ambulance. David hijacks an ambulance from the Veteran's hospital and fetches her to medical attention. We are also told that this is not the first time Rose has tried this.

The following day, David is blaming himself, not because he only offered Rose a spiritual palliative rather than a medical one, as before, but because "I actually gave that woman the money she needed to buy whiskey and sleeping pills" (Rev. 26). He still berates himself for "playing God," but the tone has changed. In the earlier version he confessed, "I can be blamed . . . for trying to play God" (Orig. 28), but now he tells his wife, "I can't forgive myself for playing God" (Rev. 26). It is an admonishment to be more aware of the needs of others, over the needs of self. He continues (in language that clearly picks up the title reference about fools rushing in where angels fear to tread), "I rushed into that situation like a fool, without knowing how sick the woman really was, and came damn close to causing her death" (Rev. 26).

In the first script's final scene, David visits Rose in the hospital. A stage direction describes her "*suddenly coming to life again*" as he enters (Orig. 30), and it is clear that she is uplifted by her connection to him. He has become her life-line, and when he left before he had let her down. She agrees with his advice that she needs psychiatric help, and asks him to not blame himself: "I did feel much better after you left me yesterday. But after a while, my . . . my euphoria just left, and I felt worse than ever" (Orig. 31). If ever there was a description of a bipolar disorder that would seem to be it. Both agree that "faith is one thing . . . and *illness* is another" but "admitting that I'm sick" Rose declares, "has made me feel better" (Orig 31). It

ends with David thanking her for teaching him “a lesson I’ll never forget” (Orig. 31), and the camera follows him out of the building to focus us on what he has learned. This end focus on David remains the same in the revised version, for this is not a play about Rose, and her attempted suicide, but a tutorial for those who wish to help.

In the revised version Rose remains grateful, and this time David has saved her life, quite literally, but her connection to him is different. She is not brought to life by his presence, partly because she did not attempt suicide this time because of his withdrawal, but because “I couldn’t bear the thought of having my boy in prison” (Rev. 28). Again, she acknowledges her illness, agrees to go to a psychiatric hospital, and David sees that this is what he should have insisted upon the last time they talked, having learned “that faith in itself doesn’t necessarily prevent illness” (Rev. 29). Rose pointedly admits, “I don’t really want to die. I thought at times I did, but I don’t” (Rev. 29). Rose does not die, but finds the help she needs, a directive emphasized in this version by the similar curative we see her son embrace, and in the upbeat optimism of the veterans we met at the beginning of the act. Now, everyone gets a second chance.

One aspect that drew me to this manuscript was the title—with its evident riff on the phrase E. M. Forster (another closet homosexual) had used for his 1905 novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, drawn from a line in Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism*: “For fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”<sup>6</sup> Forster’s novel also features a widow struggling for selfhood against the social gaze. Lilia Herriton dies while giving birth to a child created in her union with her new Italian husband, Gino, of whom her family deeply disapproved. The child’s subsequent accidental death provokes changes in the rest of Lilia’s relations, though none lead to contentment: her brother-in-law Philip gets a new lease on life but cannot have the woman he

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<sup>6</sup> Pope’s sexuality is inconclusive--though he never married.

realizes he now loves, while his sister, Harriet, loses her mind out of guilt as the baby had died in her custody. While Forster is evidently satirizing restrictive social convention, Inge's echo of his title may be more directed at these people's evident inability to understand what the people they purport to care about, truly need.

Or perhaps Inge is referring to the original source: in Pope's "Essay," the "fools" referred to literary critics of the day, whom he felt were far too ready to pick apart a fellow writer's work. The "angels," we can assume, are those less willing to tear apart the writings of others with harsh criticism. In this light, Inge's title may be referencing a venue free of adverse criticism, a non-judgmental space? Certainly, something for which he long wished. The concept of Angels treading might also imply a site of divine intervention, only we must ask who might be considered angelic in this drama? For all his generosity, David "Rush," with his self-confession of foolishness would seem to be the critic, leaving the innocently named Mrs. "Bliss" the role of angel, patiently waiting to be recognized, her namesake flower, "Rose," being the symbol of the love and hope she further embodies.

Inge was a man who fully understood, as Voss describes, "loneliness and frustration and fear" (273), but I think he was also the man Tennessee Williams once described, who rather than focusing on the "Dark at the top of the stairs," could embrace the complete opposite, so that his work might reveal "an odyssey in which the stairs rise from darkness to light through something remarkably fine and gallant in his own nature" (qtd. in Montgomery 38). It is, perhaps, this aspect of his legacy to which we need to pay more attention. As Harold Clurman wrote in 1974, "I am convinced Inge was underestimated" (92). I offer *David: Where Angels Tread*, as a tentative first step toward a re-estimation.

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