descent from the heights of fame to the company of hardened criminals—what lies beyond becomes impossibly idealized. Thus, the patina of yearning that glazes over everything on the outside offers a mental escape from the inescapable prison reality and allows Verlaine to undergo a catharsis. The final exclamation is not only one of sorrow but also of postconfessional purification. “The dissolute squalor of Verlaine’s life is in startling contrast with the innocent and limpid quality of [...] his verse” (Hill 17). For the moment, sentimentality and tears offer an assuaging release—pain and regret become equipped with a comfort edge. The generic, delusive as it may be, soothes, even if it cannot heal.

—BERNHARD FRANK, Buffalo, New York
Copyright © 2008 Heldref Publications

KEYWORDS
prison poetry, Paul Verlaine, Oscar Wilde

WORKS CITED

Another Meaning of Plums in Williams’s THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I want to suggest a more sensual and emotionally intense interpretation of William Carlos Williams’s “This Is Just to Say” than has hitherto been considered. Some critics view the poem as a serious inquiry into the nature of forgiveness; more often, though, the poem is read as a portrayal of the playful sensuality in a long-standing couple. Perhaps Charles Altieri speaks for many when he sees the issue in the poem—the literal eating of the plums that were to be saved for breakfast—as illustrative of domestic relations. Altieri senses a closeness between the couple that may account for the woman’s being able to accept the man’s half-hearted apology for taking the plums: “The speaker does not ask for forgiveness because he was especially hungry or because he promises to control his desires better in the future.” Rather, he asks for forgiveness, and feels comfortable doing so, because he has “an implicit faith in
his wife’s capacity to understand and accept his deed” (Altieri 501). In contrast to Altieri’s literal interpretation, Harold Fromm goes to the other extreme when he denies “any specific interpretation” of the poem on the basis of its brevity and “insubstantial subject matter” (444).

A radical interpretation of the poem is offered by Ann Fisher-Wirth, who suggests that the poem is not about sensuality but rather about sexuality devoid of love. She views the poem as Williams’s actual confession to his wife of sexual transgressions he committed with other women, transgressions that might continue. Fisher-Wirth subverts her own interpretation, however, when she calls the poem “charming” (52). Does the poem charm if we hear a husband telling his wife that he has had extramarital affairs? Furthermore, who is to say the poem is autobiographical and addressed to a wife, or, for that matter, that it was written for any real person?

“This Is Just to Say” has more depth and beauty if one recognizes the sexual symbolism of the plums. In my view, the poem is about sex in a loving, long-term relationship. The casualness of the phrase, “This Is Just to Say,” is a charming, light segue into the man’s sharing of his deep and loving feelings for the woman. The man had sex the night before with his beloved; her “plums” were luscious. Plums are soft, juicy, and sweet. They conjure up the image of her area of sexual excitement. She was reluctant and was “probably saving” her plums “for breakfast”—that is, she would have wanted sex with him at another time, but soon. Nevertheless, he wants her to know that he relished every moment of the encounter. The man hopes that the woman will understand his impatience; thus he uses the phrase—not to be taken too literally by her or by us—“Forgive me.” She should understand that she is so desirable to him, so “delicious,” that he could not resist, could not wait to have sex with her.

One may ask why the man would tell his wife that they had sex, when she would certainly know they did. Perhaps it is his way of communicating his feelings to her and recalling the experience, which was wonderful but tinged with loneliness. The joy he recalls, however, is not the shared joy to which he is accustomed. He felt her reluctance as coldness; she was “so sweet and so cold.” A plum tastes good cold, and, similarly, the sexual experience was pleasurable. That the man finds her “so sweet” suggest that the woman did not completely abstain from participating in the sexual. He even relished the experience the next day with the hangover of love and lust. If she had only been “cold,” he would not still be savoring last night’s memory—especially because he loves her.

However, it is the repetition of the word so—“so sweet and so cold”—that tips the reader off that the situation is more complex than first meets the eye. In saying the plums were “so cold,” he communicates that he missed the passion that she usually feels. If the plums were to be viewed literally, then
the phrase so sweet and cold—without the added “so” before “cold”—would express the taste of plums to perfection. After all, are very cold plums not a bit too sharp to the taste? Do plums not taste better not “so cold”?

—JANICE MICHAELSON, New York, New York
Copyright © 2008 Heldref Publications

WORKS CITED


Sassoon’s THE ONE-LEGGED MAN: Life through Death and Destruction

“Thank God they had to amputate!” (12): The final thought of Siegfried Sassoon’s “The One-Legged Man” (1918) speaks eerily to the relief that Sassoon’s soldier feels after having been both literally and figuratively cut off from the cruel and enduring duties of military service during World War I. Intriguingly, this theme of amputation pervades Sassoon’s poem and illustrates, through juxtaposition, the interdependence of rampant death and flourishing life.

“The One-Legged Man” has received scant critical attention. Perhaps this poem proves uninteresting to critics because of the revealing title that, as Patrick Campbell writes, potentially “vitiate[s] the impact of the ironic conclusion” (26). Nevertheless, Campbell argues that “Sassoon has few peers” to rival him in the art of constructing ironic reversals (59). Campbell’s study of Sassoon’s poetry offers the lengthiest sustained reading of “The One-Legged Man” that I have encountered, and in his interpretation of the poem, he notes that it “begins as a pastoral piece” (117), thus situating it within the realm of nature poetry. Similarly, Dharmadas Banerjee regards Sassoon as “a poet of nature” and argues that he uses nature “to interpret war” (131). To Sassoon, war was an incredibly destructive force, and through his poetry, Banerjee writes, he “raises his voice against this destruction” (134). Banerjee does not consider “The One-Legged Man,” although the destruction of nature abounds