Contents
3 Guest Editor John Ruff / in luce tua: the news from my chat room
5 Tom Baer / from 7-9 (verse)
6 Meridith Brand and Mike Chasar / that bloomin’ canon: a poetic noir
13 Michael Caldwell / translation as interpretation: Robert Fagles’ Iliad and the republic of letters
21 Steve Jensen / catechism (verse)
22 Erik Peder Ankerberg / the function and fulfillment of sacerdotal office in Paradise Lost
26 Mark Conway / far away lies (verse)
27 Fredrick Barton / film: cinema gripes
31 Maroon Schoeberlein / the world in the rain (verse)
32 Tom Willadsen / letters from the front: return to the empty tomb
34 Daniel Tobin / transparencies (verse)
35 Mark Conway / during (verse)
36 Paul David Steinke / sunday on ward a (verse)
37 Daniel J. Langton / a tale (verse)
38 Jeanne Nuechterlein / the hawk, the mouse, and i (verse)
39 book review / Utzinger on Carpenter (Fundamentalism)
41 Phillip T. Egelston / holding on (verse)
42 notes on poets, reviewers
43 notes on covers

THE CRESSET is published seven times during the academic year by the Valparaiso University Press as a forum for ideas and informed opinion. The views expressed are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the preponderance of opinion at Valparaiso University. Manuscripts should be addressed to the Editor and accompanied by return postage. Letters to the Editor for publication are subject to editing for brevity. The Book Review Index and the American Humanities Index list Cresset reviews. Periodicals postage is paid at Valparaiso, Indiana. Regular Subscription rates: one year -- $8.50; two years--$14.75; Student subscription rates: one year -- $4; single copy -- $1.00. Entire contents copyrighted 1999 by the Valparaiso University Press, Valparaiso, Indiana 46383, without whose written permission reproduction in whole or in part for any purpose whatsoever is expressly forbidden.
Postmaster send address changes to The Cresset, #10 Huegli Hall, Valparaiso University, 651 S. College Ave., Valparaiso, IN 46383
This issue of *The Cresset*, with so many pages dedicated to giving space and air to so many good poems, has provoked me to think about poetry in the new millennium. Now there is big subject. I remember Ezra Pound worried at the beginning of this century that he had devoted his life to a mode of art that had gone out of date, outlived its usefulness, been displaced by prose fiction as that literary medium most suited to expressing and even shaping contemporary life. He wondered if being a poet in the twentieth century would be like showing up at a cocktail party wearing a powdered wig. I suppose we do live in an age in which people who read for pleasure tend more often than not to read fiction or nonfiction prose rather than poetry. And people who read for business—people like me, people who by profession read and study, write about and teach literature and writing, profess literature and writing, if you will—my hunch is the much more traveled path leads towards prose. This worries me, because despite the great proliferation of poets, and creative writing programs creating more poets and larger audiences for poets, despite the proliferation of prizes for poetry and fellowships for poets, despite the huge number of little magazines coming into existence like so many micro-breweries of the Word, it is still the case that most people only meet poems and poets in textbooks when they are in school and are unlikely to ever encounter a poem or a poet in the wild. Like in this place for example, *The Cresset*, where they come upon poems without extensive biographical notes and footnotes, without careful labeling of the parts, without discussion questions. Poems by poets who are alive. Often really alive. In places like this poetry counts, and not just for the test. Of course that is the test: if poetry will count and how.

In our century it has become possible to see the movie instead of reading the book. Or if you are patient you can rent the video. Not many poems get made into movies or videos. I am sure there are some, probably made in Italy, probably epics. I used to tell myself I was going to write a long poem that would be made into a movie that even my father would pay good money to see. I never got further than the title: “A Long Poem To Be Made Into a Movie That Even My Father Would Pay Good Money To See.” I suppose my goal was to write my own version of Pound’s *Cantos*, my own poetic ragbag into which I’d stuff everything I’d ever thought or felt or feared or thought funny. It would the project of a lifetime, and it would be readable. My father and good people like my father would read it, understand it, like it, and then they could go see it or rent it.

Because we live in the age of the information highway, nothing prevents me from writing that poem and posting it on my own home page, distributing it myself to all my friends, posting it on their home pages if I am invited. And I could jazz it up with computer graphics, bring in video, stills, and of course music. I could make it interactive. I could put a counter on it so I’d know exactly how many readers had visited my site. Why court rejection? Better to count hits. Why go to all the trouble of finding someone to publish it? I could broadcast it myself to the world.

I have been thinking about what new electronic technologies are making possible, and what effect it will have on the the work I do, not only as a poet but more so as a teacher.

I use e-mail and phone mail and word processing every day; now and again I use the Internet to retrieve articles and reviews for teaching and research and I am sure I will do it much more often in the future. There is no turning back. My students are mostly ahead of me in their use of, their dependence on the new electronic technologies. My university is deeply invested in the new technologies and is doing everything it can to get my colleagues and me wired, onboard and up to speed.
The new technologies will change how we do things. Certain basic relationships may be changing as I process these words.

Oh, what a troubling phrase, “word processing.” Like “chat room.” Like “virtual time” and “virtual space.” And “distance learning.” I fear there is already too much distance in our learning. It is my good fortune to teach in a university where the majority of my students live on campus, a short distance from their classrooms. Three or four times a week we meet in real time and real space, and I often ask them to sit in a circle, and pull their chairs forward to tighten the circle.

Often our business is to help them become better writers—a business I love. And as I think about it, I love the sheer physicality of it all. For example, I love watching people write, and groups of people more than individuals. In classes I teach, I will often ask my students to begin by doing some writing in response to something I read them, or some question I have put on the board. Sometimes I will write; more often I watch them and listen. It is very soothing, listening to a room full of young people writing, unless they are writing an examination. A room full of young people writing an examination has a different sound, and it is not soothing. I prefer the sound of pencils to pens, because pencils are just a bit louder. The thinking that goes into the writing seems more audible, more palpable with pencils. I tell my students I have tapes of people writing with pencils that I listen to at home. They think I am kidding them but they are not sure.

A room full of people working away at keyboards is not the same. It’s too busy. The room rattles and hums with energy, you can hear the electricity, it sounds like things adding up, and adding up rapidly, and that’s not a bad thing. However, you don’t hear thinking in the same way—somehow it’s all particle and no wave. With pens or pencils on paper, there is a sort of carving of the silence that you hear. With a room full of people writing, a quiet orchestral carving.

Sometimes I hesitate to throw my voice and my business into that calm pool; it’s not unlike breaking a spell. Of course some students will have already run out of steam; others will be just catching the wave of something at that moment when I tell them to come to the end of that sentence and look up. It takes a moment, and I usually wait patiently. There’s something quite gratifying about watching someone race to get some last thing, some last portion of their thought written down. Down and done. Period. They look up. Sit back. Take air. It’s a rather quiet sort of spectacle I enjoy.

I also enjoy the louder spectacle of a room full of students reading to each other what they have written. I find the hesitation I see in some faces quite poignant; I am inspired by the looks of generous attention; I like the look of exertion in their faces, a narrowing of the focus, a determined looking down and ahead as they attempt to block everything out but what their partner is reading; I am uplifted by the often raucous laughter. A room full of people enjoying the airing of their thoughts; I like being in a room like that.

My students submit the first drafts of their papers to a small group of peers in the class, and are given or asked to make real time to write their responses to those drafts, both in a letter to deal with the whole of a paper and in itemized reactions to its parts. Then they come together to talk about their reactions face to face before they give back the drafts. I stop them if they try to just hand back the papers with the responses written on them—I want them to talk. They may read aloud what they have written in their responses. In fact, I encourage that. Some of the very best, most moving writing my students do is in the comments on each other’s drafts. The situation requires tact as well as critical thinking, generosity as well as intelligence. And the permissions and encouragement they give each other—it may not require a person-to-person, face-to-face encounter, but it sure seems to help. I spy on the groups, rather than sitting in; each group is like a four-person rubber raft, and my climbing aboard pitches all of the weight towards me and overboard. But from my vantage point, from a very close distance, I love what I see.

Finally, I love reading my students’ papers aloud to my students. I used to always make copies of the papers first so they could read along, or make transparencies I would project on screen, but I am doing that less now. I want them to learn to listen, to remember, to imagine. I want the writers to see and hear what their writing does to a room full of students. I want them to hear how the
unrolling of a sentence can still the room, thicken the air, make audible the nervous creaking of a chair. I want them to listen, to hear what happens as their writing bounces off walls, ceilings, and most importantly, live bodies. I want them to hear what’s there and what’s not there, what clicks and what clunks. And the other students—as I said, they listen, and for a couple minutes I will ask them to predict in writing what they will remember. And when I finish we all know those parts where we all laughed, and we talk about them. And I ask them to remember the beginning, and the end, and talk about if and how they connect. Often a student will say I can relate to that because of such and such, and another will say I can relate to that because of such and such, and soon the paper has become an imaginary mirror into which all of us are looking, many of seeing something. Ourselves and others, our worlds and others’ worlds. We can relate to that. We connect.

These poems you’ll read: I hope you find in them wonderfully habitable spaces. In poems the pleasure is largely a matter of paying close attention. Read them aloud, find people you love to listen. Listen yourself to the listening.

JR

FROM 7-9

The members of the anxiety, depression and panic disorder self-help/support group don’t steel drum down Bourbon Street, rather find that they’re poured out like water. . . And all their bones are out of joint. . . And their hearts are like wax. . . .

The members of the anxiety, depression and panic disorder self-help/support group don’t high life down Bourbon Street, rather crush shrieks at the Peninsula Medical Center 200 yards south of Granada Boulevard on A1A in Ormond Beach, Florida, Monday nights from 7-9. . .

Tom Baer
April is the cruellest month. Whatever Joe first said that sure had his gun aimed straight.

The rain fell outside my office window like the fists of a bought jury and I looked at the pile of paper on my desk. Bills. More bills. Calloway had called that morning to tell me if I didn’t have my last two months rent by Thursday it was so long buddy and I might as well join my snoop Charlie in his cardboard box in the alley. And considering Charlie’s affinity for Limburger and showtunes, I thought I’d best get moving on my next and only case, however distasteful it might turn out to be. I picked up the phone and made the call.

“Gimme Charlie.” The bartender at Charlie’s current watering hole, the Five-Spot on Fifth and Dickinson, was so greasy it felt like someone fried a pound of bacon on my phone’s receiver.

Charlie picked up immediately. In his cups. Again.

“Listen, buddy, I need a tail on someone on the East Side,” I said. “Guy by the name of Bloom—real tweedy type. I need to know when he’s in, when he’s out, when he changes his drawers. Got the picture? Gimme a call when the place is empty and there’s an extra twenty in it for you.”

Silence from Charlie like a ton of bricks. He’d either passed out or was writing it down.

“My rent's riding on this one, Charlie, so don’t let it slip. And another thing,” I added, “don’t breathe with your mouth open.” But he’d already hung up.

When Charlie rang me, I was in the middle of Beethoven’s Fifth with a dame who had a big pair of blue eyes. She called me a dick when I made for the door, and I had to agree. But a job is a job, so I left her with my 1040 EZ and headed to Bloom’s.

Less than twenty minutes later I was feeling more fortunate. I stood in Bloom’s foyer, just inside the door I’d jimmed, and looked around. My source said Bloom made cannons, and it looked like one had just gone off in his Ivy League row house. Doors and cabinets gaped at me, papers were knee-deep on the floor. My first thought was that I could poke around without leaving a trail. But then it occurred to me that what I wanted probably hadn’t been left behind. I took a quick tour of the place, noting family photos and stray credit card receipts. What I found in the upstairs hallway made me stop and think.

From the floor-to-ceiling shelves opposite the stairs, someone had pulled all the books. They were mounded like a funeral pyre, the paper jackets curling up like smoke and offering me view after view of a now-familiar face sans family and mutt. I picked a 568-pager off the top and realized Bloom had written it. He had written all the books junked at my feet. And it looked like someone didn’t like what he had to say.

Suddenly, I suspected somebody was playing me for a fool.

When the guy first walked into my office a couple of days before, I’d taken him for a lawyer, with his pilling jacket and run-over shoes. He looked like the kind of sap my ex-wife—the one I’d never really gotten around to marrying—periodically sent around looking for sympathy and a couple of C-notes. I took a last few drags on my smoke and let him cool his heels while I looked him over. Finally I told him to cut to the chase. Turns out he’s a college professor with a request for a seek-and-hide—I look for something he’s lost without looking like I’m looking. An easy paycheck, except I didn’t know what, exactly, it was he wanted me to look for.
I sharpened my pencil. "Name?"

A pause. "McKuen," he said. He was lying. With a face like that he probably lied about a lot of things.

"I only take cash," I said. "What am I looking for?"

He scratched the back of his neck. "A license."

"Driver's?" I asked. "Marriage?"

What a clam, I thought and almost told him to come back when he'd had time to figure it out. But the something I didn't say managed to grease his jaw.

"Poetic," he said.

My turn to pause. What sort of shin was this guy trying to dig?

"Poetic," he said again and pulled out a roll of twenties.

Poetic, indeed, I thought. I was sold.

To understand poetry . . . we must understand words and the word. We might bear in mind the remark made by Mallarmé to Degas—which, had it not existed, it would have been necessary to invent—that poems are not made out of ideas, they are made out of words. Or so the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics told me. I sat in the reference section of the local library and rubbed my chin, wishing I knew what the hell that meant. My primary experience with poetry was with Hallmark and the dirty rhymes carved into the stall doors at the Five Spot. And, to me, there were only two types of words. Those my mama used, and those she didn't.

Then it all started to come back to me like a bad dream. Mrs. Greer and high school English class. Books as big and mean as junkyard dogs. Words as long as the beer lines at Yankee Stadium during seventh inning stretch. Theories about love from guys in Europe who died of consumption. And the memorization—sheesh! She wanted us to memorize it all.

I wondered what had happened to poetry since my G.E.D. that had McKuen in such a fit and mumbling on his way out of my office, "You gotta get him off my back—he's killing me."

And here I'd thought all the poets had died out a long time ago.

I lit up and leaned against an old desk in the hall. Still staring at the pile of books heaped before me, I wondered whether this McKuen guy was on the up and up. Despite how he'd described Bloom in my office, something in the house had set the hairs on the back of my neck on edge—a foolproof sign that something wasn't quite right.

"You might have a messy technique, but it appears you at least have good taste," a voice behind me said.

I whirled around, reaching for the gun I never carried.

"That's a seventeenth century secrétaire à abattant you've propped yourself up with," he said, raising an eyebrow.

It was Bloom—in the flesh.

In his cardigan and loafers he didn't look dangerous, but, as the word was he dealt in cannons, I wasn't taking chances. "It was like this when I got here," I said, thumbing toward the books on the floor. "Looks more like your line of work anyway. I hear you blow things up."

If I was waiting for a reaction, I didn't get one.

"On the contrary," he replied, turning to glide down the strewn staircase. "I try to keep things together."

When I caught up with him, I got a whiskey on the rocks and an explanation. My sixth sense had been right about McKuen—the guy was small potatoes and way out of line. Bloom was the real McCoy in the poetry world and tried to clue me in on what was going down.

"It's like that secrétaire you mistook for a chair," Bloom began. "In an age of e-mail and prefab furniture it doesn't seem like much. To your unpracticed eye it's probably just an old, scratched-up 'desk,' but that's only because you don't know enough to know how unusual it really is. You could offer your next year's salary for that—whatever that comes to—and it would be a steal because you would then possess the most beautiful and unusual work of its time. For centuries, craftsmen made only symmetrical furniture because that's what was beautiful and that's what worked. But this desk
was designed for use solely by the left hand—we believe its owner lost the use of his right arm—and is thus asymmetrical. And the fantastic thing is how the craftsman compensated for the lopsidedness by carving that ornate frontispiece to create the appearance of symmetry. Thus, in that piece of furniture—"

Here Bloom stood up, nearly spilling what was left of his drink.

"In that single piece of furniture in my hallway is embodied the creative genius of a craftsman to combine the necessary usefulness of the piece with a strangeness and beauty which, until then, was nearly unimaginable. And when you go to Ethan Allen today, or even when you go to Office Max for a desk, every piece you see coming off their machine-spun assembly line is either a pale reflection of this piece, or is paying homage to it. And I'm not about to just sit by and watch it get carted off in favor of something a little more flashy."

Bloom paused to drink what he hadn't spilled.

"Let me put it this way," he said. "Every P.I. knows his Sherlock Holmes, right?"

I didn't tell him what I thought of Holmes, or that I was more of a Sam Spade type of guy. I just nodded and killed my drink. Either way, I knew what he meant.

Bloom's Act II soliloquy had gotten me interested in this poetry thing. So when he turned down my offer to help him clean up the place—either this sort of thing happened all the time, or else it wasn't too different from his normal working conditions—I gladly let myself out, following up a lead McKuen had unwittingly dropped in my office. It's not just in detective stories that people leave matchbooks in all the wrong places; this one had a black cover with "Emilio's" scripted on its matte finish. I looked at my watch and figured I could hit the West End in fifteen minutes. Whoever Emilio was, I hoped he kept the grill open past eight.

ELMS BACK OF VATS

I tapped the pen against the words I'd just written and gave them a second thought. And then, after listening to the hollow sound of rain dripping into the metal waste basket in the corner of my office, I thought about them again. The chili dog with onions I'd ordered at Emilio's wasn't the only thing that kept coming back. It wasn't the microphone on stage echoing "vats," but the purple-lipped bartender's north-side accent that I kept turning over in my mind.

"Don't tell me you've never heard Robert's work before," she had said. I hadn't, but it seemed like everybody else in the place had. And though they were well acquainted, it seemed, with poems only four words long, their commentary ran much longer. Looking at it now, I still couldn't get over the "vats"—a word that brought to mind a crummy industrial skyline—but at least I understood what it was all about. The bartender, gaga either over Robert or his little poems, had jawed at length to her barflies over the poetic genius in that verse. And I had to admit, there was more than met the eye.

She claimed the piece was a jab at "conventional poetic license"—a turn of phrase that reminded me that McKuen was on my list of Things To Do. "Vats" was perfect, she'd said, precisely because it was dirty and rough and almost the direct opposite of "elms." Seems "elms" was too poetic for her, a condition she made sound as appealing as being too pregnant or too married. And I saw her point. I didn't even know if I could tell you what an elm looked like. We certainly didn't have any down on 8th Street. The only reason the one straggly bush on the parkway survived was because Mrs. Beedle walked her six dogs there four times a day.

"This is a real poem for real people," she'd said, "and it shows how the traditional poetic lexicon" (I figured she meant "elms," since she was so down on it) "is outdated and is being replaced by more capable words" (like "vats," a word I was getting to like more and more).

I looked down at the legal pad where I'd underlined "vats" several times. Standing alone at the end of the poem and on its own line, it seemed as strong and stately as any elm should have. I held in the back of my mind the rest of her interpretation about the "blue-collar and industrial vats rising up like its proletarian counterpart to trounce the neatly-kept gardens and elms of the bourgeoisie,"
which made it sound like she’d been down to 8th and seen Mrs. Beedle and that straggly bush. Everything she said made words sound revolutionary.

Suddenly, something clicked. I scribbled a note to myself and reached for my coat.

I don’t think there’s a P.I. in business who hasn’t seen The Maltese Falcon one too many times and who hasn’t, on yet another cold and rainy night spent tailing some john to a two-bit motel, pulled his hat down a little lower on his forehead and thought himself Bogey just to make it through. I’d be lying if I said the movies had nothing to do with why I’m here—you don’t go into this business for the money. On screen, the blood’s in black and white, it’s always your partner who gets shot, and the dames look terrific. But at some point you learn that that isn’t life. Find somebody who thinks it is, and you’ve found yourself a grade-A fool. That’s why I was so surprised when I saw her.

It took me ten minutes to hoof it back downtown toward Emilio’s. The cafe, where I’d hailed a cab earlier that evening, was a Rolaids and a couple blocks east of my heartburn’s hometown. The lights were still on inside, making it easy to read the poster I’d glimpsed as the cab pulled away through the rain. The top line still screamed “POETRY REBEL YELL” but this time I leaned in toward the small print to find out what it was all about. The cracked window and the red vinyl of the empty booths inside fought for my attention. And then she walked in.

I could hear the chimes on the door as she stepped through and closed it behind her. She reached up and pulled off a scarf, letting the blond curls it had protected spill across her shoulders. If she had a name, I wanted to know it. If she had a husband, I didn’t want to know. If she’d had a free hand to hold up a cigarette, I’d have lit it—except that now she was too loaded down with packages to do more than put them on the floor, lean against a booth in the empty shop, and glance my way. She was a terrific-looking dame.

The next day I’d spend trying to remember most of what she said, but right then when she looked out at me, we didn’t need words. She simply waved to indicate the cafe was closed. It took me rapping on the window a few times and pointing at the poster to get her to unlock the door.

“But understanding them isn’t necessarily the point.”

Of the dozen pictures we were hanging around the shop—pictures, she said, which would help promote an important local artist—I couldn’t make heads or tails of any more than two or three. Most looked like finger paintings or else like somebody’s face after a really bad fight, and I’d wondered aloud whether the next night’s POETRY REBEL YELL poems would be any different. Sure, Lauren had told me how popular the monthly readings were and how many different types of people came to read. She’d even told me I’d be more than welcome to come myself, that this wasn’t some sort of high society club I needed a Park Avenue address to join, that “a pair of ears and an open mind” was enough to get me in. And she’d told me not everybody who came had to read, and that most everyone had day jobs themselves and came after work. I was quickly finding out that Lauren wasn’t your ordinary dame, but I still had my doubts about her Yell.

“Then what’s the point?” I asked. I thought about “vats” and how fishy Robert’s four-word poem sounded until I got clued in. I mean, what was the point in it all if no one understood? What did it all mean to Mrs. Beedle? And what did it mean to me if it was nothing but words slopped together like a cheap drink that was bad going down and even worse coming up?

“Look,” she said. “Remember when your Mom used to hang your drawings on the refrigerator? You’d sign your name in the corner—and she’d keep it up there for weeks?”

I wasn’t quite sure what this had to do with poems, but I nodded anyway.

“Why don’t you do that anymore?”

I stared at her. Finally I shrugged, and when I said I figured I’d just grown up, she lifted her hands and leaned in toward me. Why, she wanted to know, does growing up mean losing imagination and creative freedom? I could have answered and told her what I’d been imagining when I saw her through the window, but I didn’t have the nerve.

“You don’t lose it at all,” she insisted, and I knew she’d read me like a book. “You’re just taught
that it's not important—or else you're taught to cover it up.” She was worried, she told me, that individual people were no longer allowed individual voices and that, without them, important things would go unsaid. And her cafe—she couldn’t hide her pride and excitement at telling me this—was a space where individual voices weren’t just allowed but were encouraged.

I imagined the place full of people and the noise of everyone shouting to make themselves heard, and I told her so.

“But individual voices don’t always yell,” she replied. “Sometimes they can barely be heard. It’s not the volume but the act of speaking that matters.” She looked above my head and for a moment her own voice dropped to a whisper.

And if I cut off my long hair,
if I stopped speaking,
if I stopped dreaming for other people about parts of the car,
stopped handing them tall creamy flowered silks,
and loosing the magnificent hawks to fly in their direction . . .
if I stopped crying for the salvation of the tea ceremony,
stopped rushing in excitedly with a spikey bird-of-Paradise,
and never let them see how accurate my pistol-shooting is,
who would I be?

I had to say that all her talk of talking left me speechless, although I wondered briefly just how accurate she was with a pistol. But I knew that wasn’t the point. I stepped back to look at the picture we’d just hung. It had begun to make a lot more sense.

“I was lousy.”

I’d never said it before and I didn’t like the way it sounded. She tore her eyes from a painting and shot a puzzled glance at me.

“My pictures on the fridge,” I said. “Even Ma had to admit I was no Whistler with a crayon.” I waited for her to laugh—which she didn’t—and wondered, “What would you do if I’m as lousy a poet as I was an artist?”

Her answer was at length and very serious. That might be a concern for someone somewhere on down the line, but it was not a concern in this cafe. When you’re hearing a voice that hasn’t been used in years, you don’t expect it to be beautiful. And some of the voices are voices we haven’t heard before—ever, she said, in any form, because the people speaking haven’t ever been in a position to speak before this—so they might sound ugly because they’re different. But what do we have to judge them against except themselves? And the sound of their voices is so much more beautiful than the silence.

She didn’t like silence, so I didn’t let this one grow when she stopped speaking, but right away I asked, almost in disbelief, “Don’t you see any ugliness in the world?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I see it right in this cafe, in what some of the people talk about when they finally find their voices. It’s hard to hear about the ugly stuff that people do to one another. But it’s even harder to live in a world where we let it go unsaid.”

It sounded like the closest thing I’d heard to a prayer in a long time. I bowed my head and added a silent “Amen.”

It was still raining. I sat at my desk trying to make sense of everything I’d seen and heard. It’s not easy when the job you’ve been hired to do seems like it doesn’t need to be done, and as many questions rattled around inside my head as there were thumbed-out butts in the ashtray. One, who was McKuen and what did he have on the line that made him come to me in the first place? And had Bloom really threatened to kill him, or was that just more of the fancy word-play I was coming to expect of poets? Two, who’d rifled Bloom’s place, and what were they looking for? And why didn’t Bloom seem too put-out at his new decorating job? Three, my bartending pal at Emilio’s and the
dame: were they mixed up in all of this? Was some revolution at hand—and was that what had McKuen spooked? I tried to imagine any of the characters I'd met in this case packing a rod with license to kill, but I just couldn't. Bloom in his row house, the chummy bartender, the dame with her intense love of everyone . . . What kind of person could have a grudge against any of them? In fact, the only thing besides the chili dog that had left a bad taste in my mouth during this whole business was my encounter with McKuen himself.

I played a hunch and found him slouching in the poetry section of the downtown Barnes & Nobles. His arms were full of trade paperbacks and the HOW CAN I HELP YOU, I'M—nametag had a foil "salesman of the month" sticker for September entirely covering his name. I waited until he'd taken a few more books off the shelf and then rounded the stacks and confronted him. He looked guilty as a Mormon moving out of Utah, and I paused to let him return the books to the shelf before I dragged him over to the coffee bar, sat him down, and told him, "Now talk."

McKuen broke like cheap china. The minute I mentioned I'd been to see Bloom, he began to spill the beans. He'd done it. He'd trashed Bloom's.

"How'd you find out? Was it fingerprints? Hair samples?" he asked, then glared at me. "I don't really care. You can't do anything to me—I checked." Here McKuen gestured to the Law & Order section of the store and went on. "I didn't take anything. Breaking and entering is no big deal. And besides, Bloom had it coming to him."

I just sat and waited for the motive to come out. And it did, sure as last night's chili dog kept coming back. He'd wanted to threaten Bloom, give him a taste of what it was like when someone didn't like your work. McKuen talked on like Bloom was personally responsible for every nail in the coffin of McKuen's dead career. And as I watched, I almost felt something like pity—who knows, I thought, maybe some of the dame had rubbed off on me after all. His black turtleneck had faded to grey. It looked like he hadn't had a good meal in weeks and I could only guess when his last haircut was. And here he was pulling down a couple bucks an hour shelving, of all things, everyone else's books.

A cappuccino and a crumpet later, McKuen topped off the short story of his dismal career—spotty publications, no tenure due to said spotty publications, crappy retail job to supplement his adjunct salary—by saying he had three manuscripts wrapped up and ready to go, if only someone wanted to publish them.

"Only no one does," he said. I asked why.

"Bloom's got everyone hyped up on originality," he complained. "Ever since his book claimed that greatness comes from strangeness, everything's got to be new, one-of-a-kind. New forms. New styles. New voices. New ways of looking at things. If you ask me, all you get is a bunch of stuff that either doesn't look like poetry or doesn't sound like it. I mean, what kind of sonnet is about the Beach Boys anyway? And you've got to see Susan Howe's stuff—words all over the page, and you can't even figure out which way is up. And some of the stuff you have to have a PC in order to read. Hypertext!" He shook his head in disgust. "Is it even poetry if it's three-dimensional?"

I didn't have an answer for him, so he went on without one.

"Sometimes it doesn't even matter if it's written down. At these poetry slams, the 'art' is in the performance. But what happens after the show? What happens when people get tired of all these gimmicks?" McKuen looked at me sadly and drummed his fingers on his empty mug. "Is poetry going to be gone?"

I didn't know which was the real McKuen—the jealous writer or the champion of his Art. Outside my office windows, the rain had stopped and the clouds were breaking up. From time to time, sunlight flickered through the dirty glass, giving me about as clear a picture of my desktop as I had of this whole case. I still didn't quite understand why McKuen was feeling threatened by all this; from what I'd seen, poetry was more alive and inclusive than it had ever been. Nor did I un-
understand what I had that McKuen wanted. Why had he come rapping at my door in the first place?

I thought back to my encounter with McKuen at the bookstore, to the stacks of books he had removed and replaced from the shelves, to his own unpublished and unwanted books gathering dust on his desk at home. During our conversation, he had told me that more books of poetry are being published now than ever before. I could go back to the poetry section and look, but I was pretty sure my guess would be right on: the new books belonged to new voices from places like Emilio’s and the dame’s cafe. And McKuen, I recognized, with his complaints about the current emphasis on originality, had tipped his hand. He was probably halfway decent at what he did, but the poems he turned out were a bit too common.

It reminded me of my Uncle George and his partner, who’d sunk their life’s savings into a company competing with Ma Bell. They spent their last dime perfecting a rotary phone just as touch tones were entering the market. When it came to poetry, I thought, McKuen’s work was probably the equivalent of that rotary phone—it worked really well, but nobody would choose it over the new cell phones on the market today.

Finally being able to see things from McKuen’s point of view helped me begin to understand his predicament. I guess when a guy puts everything he’s got into something and sees it amount to a hill of beans, then he’s got a right to belly up to the bar and moan about it for a while. And I guess, I realized a moment later, he’s got a right to expect the bartender to listen, or at least pretend to listen. If McKuen came to me looking for an audience—and who knows why we choose the bars we do—it was fine by me. I’ve made my rent in worse ways. Besides, I wondered if somewhere along the way I hadn’t picked up a little something else as well.

While the puddles burned off the sidewalks and the city shifted from shower to sauna, I went about tying up a few loose ends. I paid Bloom a courtesy visit to let him know McKuen had confessed to trashing his place. We enjoyed another drink while Bloom waved away my story as if McKuen didn’t matter in the least. And as Bloom showed me the door, as classy as he was, I couldn’t help but resent him for how quickly he wrote off McKuen.

Later I put in an appearance at one of the dame’s poetry Yells. Though I can’t say I was too taken by the poetry, I’m definitely taken by the dame. She didn’t seem unhappy to see me; so I think I know whose case I’ll be working on next.

I also talked to my bartending friend at Emilio’s and it turns out the kitchen does take out. I ordered up a couple of dogs with everything and sent Charlie over to drop them off for my ex-lady friend who’d ended up getting me a nice-sized tax refund. I didn’t want to seem ungrateful, but I also knew that after Emilio’s “cuisine,” I wouldn’t hear from her again—although I was pretty sure she’d be hearing from those chili dogs for a while herself.

I did go back to Barnes & Nobles, during the day, when I figured McKuen was hard at work grinding through his composition classes. Although I felt a little self-conscious standing around the poetry section, I eventually came out with with three “How-To” books and an anthology of American poetry. Back at my office, I took the phone off the hook and pulled down the shades. With a fresh sheet of paper rolled in my Olivetti, I cracked the spine of Write What You Know and opened to the chapter on metaphors. Lucky as shit, I thought. I just might be good at this.

notes


The short poem on page 8 is from Robert Grenier’s Sentences (1978), referenced in Bob Perelman’s The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History (Princeton University Press, 1996). In Chapter Three, Perelman offers a discussion of this and other of Grenier’s poems which we find engaging.

Translation as Interpretation: Robert Fagles' "Iliad" and the republic of letters

Michael Caldwell

Good morning and welcome to the conversation. At the risk of completely losing your attention, I guess I should begin by explaining how unqualified I am to lecture you on the "Iliad" today. Like Shakespeare, I have little Latin and less (that is, no) Greek, so I cannot regale you with line by line expositions of the poem from the original language. Nor am I a classical historian, so I cannot offer supple contextualizations that illuminate social arcana in the text. I cannot even lay claim to being a Homeric scholar, so I cannot really discuss this work with respect to other poems by the poet or poets we call Homer, nor can I speak with a specialist’s knowledge of the history of Homer criticism per se. Having confessed what I am not, I should own up to what I am. Namely, a literary historian. This profession, as I understand it, has two parts: the study of literary texts in context (sound familiar?) and the reconstruction of context through texts. Or, to steal a line from another literary historian (Stephen Greenblatt), I’m into speaking with the dead.

Normally this is not as hard as it sounds, since most of the dead people I talk to are from seventeenth-and eighteenth-century England (a couple are from France), and speak more or less the same language as I do. Or rather, I can speak the same language that they do, now. For dead people from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England speak a somewhat different dialect of English than I normally use, and it has taken years of practice and listening to be able to pick up on their conversation. Let me explain what I mean with an illustration. When I was a student here at Valparaiso, I took advantage of the university’s semester abroad program in Cambridge, England, and perhaps my favorite place in Cambridge, besides David’s bookstore, a Chinese takeaway called the Blow-Out and the gardens behind Clare College, was a little pub around the corner from my house called the Grapes. What I liked best about the Grapes were the hordes of small, grimy working-class Irishmen who drank there. My last name being what it is, I was taken for a long lost member of their tribe and frequently traded rounds with my ‘countrymen’ till closing time. The problem was I couldn’t understand a thing they said. All of them were about five feet six inches tall, all of them spoke a hundred miles an hour, and none of them opened their mouths more than an eighth of an inch. I quickly learned that the easiest way to hold a conversation with them was to nod and smile and buy another round. However, by the end of my stay, through osmosis, practice or East Anglia’s finest ales (or more likely a combination of all three), I was able to make out a good deal of what these Irishmen were saying. Learning to talk to dead eighteenth-century English persons is a little bit like that (minus the ale): by spending a fair amount of time in their company—through books and conversations—one slowly begins to pick up the dialect.

Same language, different dialect. But what if you don’t speak the language, never mind the dialect? Learning to talk to ‘Homer’—whether one thinks he was a single blind bard or an oral tradition handed down through years of folk-singing or the collection of a few scribes in seventh-century BCE Greece—is considerably more difficult, especially if, like me, you don’t speak or read a particular dialect of Greek. For most of us, this conversation requires an interpreter. Notice I didn’t say you needed a translator. As I myself will demonstrate in a moment, any fool can be a translator. A translator merely carries words across (that’s what the word ‘translate’ means in the Latin—remember I said I had a little) from one speaker to another. An interpreter acts as a kind of agent be-
tween two parties, she does more than merely carry words between them—(again going back to the Latin root) she is a broker or a negotiator. Thus a good interpreter is always a good translator, but not all translators are good interpreters, and when we try to speak to Homer, we would do well to pick a translator who is also an interpreter. And in fact, what we mean when we deem one translator better than another, finally, is that they are better interpreters. More of this in a moment.

So how do you pick a good translator/interpreter of Homer? Show up to class and hope your profs order the right edition from the bookstore? Look on the back of the translation to see if it has won any awards? Or follow the method of one of my uncles and just buy the one with the most pictures?

The nineteenth-century English scholar and poet Matthew Arnold offered some thoughts on what went into a good rendering of Homer, and I thought I would share some of them with you this morning, as a way of approaching and evaluating the translation of Homer you are reading for this class. In his lectures “On Translating Homer” (delivered at Oxford in 1860 and published in 1861) Arnold suggested that a good translator of Homer should be “penetrated” by four qualities of Homer—they are that “he is eminently rapid;” “he is eminently plain and direct, both in the evolution of his thought and in the expression of it, that is both in his syntax and his words;” “he is eminently plain and direct in the substance of his thought, that is, in his matter and his ideas;” and “he is eminently noble.” To paraphrase: a good translator captures something of Homer’s speed; his simple diction and syntax; and his nobility.

As a set of ideas about translating Homer, these seem reasonable by themselves, but putting them together seems difficult. They remind me of the choices Arnold Schwarzenegger’s character makes in the film Total Recall, when he identifies his fantasy woman as beautiful, athletic and sleazy. That is to say, I don’t normally think of noble writing as rapid, and I don’t usually equate simple ideas and diction with elevation and grandeur. In any case, how do (Matthew) Arnold’s criteria help us think about the translation/interpretation of Homer we have asked you to read, namely, Robert Fagles’ rendition of the Iliad?

In my remaining remarks, I would like to do two things. First of all, I would like to draw your attention to certain qualities of Fagles’ translation by contrasting his rendering of certain passages in the Iliad with other translations. Through these comparisons, I would like to help you to appreciate a little better perhaps, the Iliad as a poetic performance. Secondly, (and this is really an outgrowth of my first aim) I want very much to raise the issue of Fagles as a maker, a poet in his own right. That is to say, if the original Greek text of this poem is a kind of score, think of Fagles as a conductor whose choices emphasize certain parts of the symphony at the expense of others.

Perhaps no part of the Iliad is as well known as its opening lines, the Beethoven-esque dum dum dum dum of Homer. And these opening lines are usually the place where translators suggest the key, the register in which they plan to “play” the poem. Take a look at the following “extremely literal translation of the first seven lines of the Iliad.”

rage sing goddess, Pelcides Achilles
destroying (rage) which (a) myriad (on the) Achaeans, pains set
and many strong pysches (to) Hades forth-throw
heroes' (psyches) and themselves seizable (spoil) made (for) dogs
and all birds; and Zeus's plan was realized
from that (time when) indeed first apart-stood quarrelling
Atreides (Agamemnon) king of men, and godly Achilles

What strikes you as interesting about this? (A quick word of explanation about word order. Greek, like Latin, is an inflected language. What this means is that word order is relatively unimportant. The endings of words suggest their relation to one another, and they can appear anywhere in the sentence. English is uninflected, and juggled word order not so good is. For better or worse, we tend to regard it as the mark of the non-native speaker, the illiterate, the comic.) Because the Greek syntax leaves so much to the imagination, one can imagine any number of interpretations of these opening lines (and in fact, there have been hundreds). For example, the old-standby English prose
The wrath do thou sing, 0 goddess, of Peleus’ son, Achilles, that baneful wrath brought forth countless woes upon the Achaeans, and sent forth to Hades many valiant souls of warriors, and made themselves to be a spoil for dogs and all manner of birds; and thus the will of Zeus was being brought to fulfilment; —sing thou thereof from the time when at the first there parted in strife Atreus’ son, king of men, and goodly Achilles.

Not bad, it stays sort of close to the text, but one can hear the urge to poeticize, to sing, creep into Murray’s prose. Now listen to E. V. Rieu:

The wrath of Achilles is my theme, that fatal wrath which, in fulfilment of the will of Zeus, brought the Achaeans so much suffering and sent the gallant souls of many noblemen to Hades, leaving their bodies as carrion for the dogs and passing birds. Let us begin, goddess of song, with the angry parting that took place between Agamemnon king of men and the great Achilles son of Peleus.

What happened? Murray may lean toward poetry, but Rieu falls face first in it. (I should add that this prose poem version of the Iliad has had its day, and for decades was the best-selling book in the Penguin catalog.) Now if mere prose translators of the poem cannot resist the urge to song, or, more importantly, the urge to interpret, to embellish, we should be able to detect motives a little more easily in deliberately poetic versions of the opening.

Consider the following strange beast of a translation of the first seven lines of the poem:

He was angry goddess. Tell us about it, tell us how many Greek men Peleus’s son did off to Hell, meek men who birds ate, dogs ate when dead. Tell how Zeus’s plan came about after Achilles and Agamemnon argued Michael Caldwell.

As I said, any fool can translate Homer, and this particular fool seems dead set on rendering the simplicity, the directness of Homer. His meter is not so good—he’s got a series of one-footed lines and the emphasis is sometimes on the first and sometimes on the second (and occasionally on both or neither) syllable of the foot, and there seems to be no compelling reason for his line divisions. Over all he’s a pretty bad metrist. He’s got the simplicity down, but unless you are a first grader, you’ll miss the nobility in a version of the Iliad translated thus. In addition, it’s not particularly rapid. It’s sort of quick, but that’s owing more to the many monosyllables of the piece than anything else—15,000 lines of this would be like hearing See Spot Run for 10 hours straight. Perhaps his greatest achievement is getting his name into the poem’s “metre”. (C-.)

Now let’s consider something altogether more sophisticated. This opening is by George Chapman, whose translations of Homer drew the highest praise from John Keats:

Achilles' baneful wrath resound, O Goddess, that imposed infinite sorrows on the Greeks, and many brave souls loosed from breasts heroic; sent them far to that invisible cave that no light comforts; and their limbs to dogs and vultures gave: to all which Jove's will gave effect; from whom first strife begun betwixt Atrides, king of men, and Thetis' godlike son.

This is an Elizabethan couplet form we call fourteeners—that is, rhymed couplets consisting of lines fourteen syllables long. According to C. S. Lewis (not just a Christian apologist but also a brilliant literary scholar—I prefer the scholar), badly handled fourteeners (that is, most fourteeners) are like a slow truck going up a hill in low gear, making the summit, and speeding down the other side. These fourteeners however, are not so bad, and as they rumble along, even in this short example, one can see that Chapman’s Homer captures (or could capture) the rapidity of Homer. It also seems to score rather well on the nobility scale. But what about Homer’s directness, his simplicity? Arnold really criticized Chapman for embellishing and complicating Homer, and even in these lines we can see some of that. Chapman heightens all over the place: sing becomes resound; myriad becomes infinite, Hades becomes that invisible cave that no light comforts (maybe yes maybe no, I imagine hell is a well-lighted elevator car with Jay Leno), and godly Achilles turns into Thetis’s godlike son.
Take the last of these embellishments—by specifying whose son godly Achilles is, Chapman provides more information than appears in the original Greek. There may be good reasons for doing this, but note that we have moved from simple translation (carrying words from one language to another) to interpretation. This interpretation may or may not be good (it meets some of Arnold's qualities of good translation but not all) depending on what your criteria are.

Here is Alexander Pope on the poem's opening:

The Wrath of Peleus' Son, the direful Spring
Of all the Grecian Woes, O Goddess, sing!
The Souls of mighty Chiefs untimely slain;
Whose Limbs unbury'd on the naked Shore
Devouring Dogs and hungry Vultures tore.
Since great Achilles and Atrides strove,
Such was the Sov'reign Doom, and such the Will of Jove.

A couple of things spring to mind on hearing this, I suspect. The verse form here is heroic couplets: that is, rhyming iambic pentameters. Ten syllables, with the dominant stress falling on the even-numbered syllables. In the hands of a master like Pope, the heroic couplet can do great things. And there seems to be no question, at least in this selection, that Pope has got the grandeur, the nobility of Homer down. The first seven lines of this translation all follow this meter, and yet they do not sound like a metronome ticking off slowly. That is to say, the variation in the speed of this, which is, for the most part, rather quick, comes close to Arnold's ideal for translations of Homer. The Iliad is a long poem however, and no translator can juggle all Arnold's requirements all the time. When Pope does sacrifice one of Arnold's qualities, he tends to emphasize grandeur and nobility over rapidity. Partly this is a matter of Pope's verse form—heroic couplets are really good for ringing declarations performed methodically, slowly. Arnold claims Pope fails in other places, and here I have some disagreement with him. It is not my purpose to vindicate Pope here today, but unlike most poets who write in heroic couplets, Pope does not have to torture his syntax in order to get rhymes at the end of his lines. For the most part, Pope keeps Homer's simple expression—he does unduly elevate Homer's thought at times though.

We might think about this by listening to Pope's version of the famous Trojan watchfires passage at the end of book eight. Most renditions of this passage strive to replicate the calm quiet of men resting before bloody warfare. It is a deeply human moment, when evening's ease gives rise to reflection and contemplation of the next day's danger. As Bernard Knox suggests in the introduction to the Fagles translation, these are lines of "unearthly, poignant beauty." Here's Pope:

The Troops exulting sate in order round,
And beaming Fires illumin'd all the Ground.
As when the Moon, refugent Lamp of Night!
O'er Heav'ns clear Azure spreads her sacred Light,
When not a Breath disturbs the deep Serene;
And not a Cloud o'ercasts the solemn Scene;
Around her Throne the vivid Planets roll,
And Stars unnumber'd gild the glowing Pole,
O'er the dark Trees a yellower Verdure shed,
And tip with Silver ev'ry Mountain's Head;
Then shine the Vales, the Rocks in Prospect rise,
A Flood of Glory bursts from all the Skies:
The conscious Swains, rejoicing in the Sight,
Eye the blue Vault, and bless the useful Light.
So many Flames before proud Ilion blaze,
And lighten glimm'ring Xanthus with their Rays.
The long Reflections of the distant Fires
Gleam on the Walls, and tremble on the Spires.
A thousand Piles the dusky Horrors gild,
And shoot a shady Lustre o'er the Field.
Full fifty Guards each flaming Pile attend,
Whose umber'd Arms, by fits, thick Flashes send.
Loud neigh the Coursers o'er their Heaps of Corn,
And ardent Warriors wait the rising Morn.

This is a bit too stately, too majestic. While I would reject any reading of Pope that suggests he cannot render moments of intense beauty in nature in heroic couplets, I would agree that here he has sacrificed the quiet evening for the thunder of “refulgent lamps of night” vivid planets’ roll and floods of glory. It is a conscious choice in a poet as good as Pope, but, if we accept Arnold’s account of good Homeric translation, we must agree that this falls a bit short of the mark. Here now is Fagles on the same moment:

And so their spirits soared
as they took positions down the passageways of battle
all night long, and the watchfires blazed among them.
Hundreds strong, as stars in the night sky glittering
round the moon’s brilliance blaze in all their glory
when the air falls to a sudden, windless calm . . .
all the lookout peaks stand out and the jutting cliffs
and the steep ravines and down from the high heavens bursts
the boundless bright air and all the stars shine clear
and the shepherd’s heart exults—so many fires burned
between the ships and Xanthus’ whirling rapids
set by men of Troy, bright against their walls.

I think what I like best here is that air falling to a sudden, windless calm. Where Pope’s couplets thunder, Fagles’ verse almost comes to a complete stop, and in the silence his verse produces, one can nearly feel the still evening sounds drop away to nothing. There is elevation here, too, particularly in that exulting shepherd’s heart, but it does not overwhelm the essential quiet of this scene. Fagles’s’s lookout peaks seem almost human in scale where Pope’s “rocks in prospect” sounds almost alpine.

I cannot move on without giving you a good example of what heroic couplets at their best can do. Recall the beginning of book twelve. Hector and the Trojans have driven the Greeks back to their wall. Zeus has promised the Trojans glory up to that point, but no farther—he has even sent a warning to the Trojans. Polydamas, Hector’s companion, counsels, as always, caution. Hector, as always, ignores him. The battle for the wall begins in earnest, and at this most dramatic moment of the poem (so far), the Trojan Sarpedon suddenly addresses his friend Glaucus. It is an odd moment, where the din of battle briefly gives way to a meditation on heroism and leadership, a meditation that justifies and comments on the slaughter that is about to commence. In Fagles, this moment seems almost casual and chatty—he sacrifices nobility for plainness. Here’s Pope:

Why boast we, Glaucus! our extended Reign,
Where Xanthus’ Streams enrich the Lycian Plain,
Our num’rous Herds that range the fruitful Field,
And Hills where Vines their purple Harvest yield.
Our foaming Bowls with purer Nectar crown’d,
Our Feasts enhanc’d with Music’s sprightly Sound?
Why on those Shores are we with Joy survey’d.
Admir’d as Heroes, and as Gods obeyed?
Unless great Acts superior Merit prove,
And vindicate the bount’ous Pow’rs above.
’Tis ours, the Dignity they give, to grace;
The first in Valour, as the first in Place.
That when with wond’ring Eyes our martial Bands
Behold our Deeds transcending our Commands,
Such, they may cry, deserve the sov’reign State,
Whom those that envy, dare not imitate!
Could all our Care elude the gloomy Grave,
Which claims no less the fearful than the brave,
For Lust of Fame I should not vainly dare
In fighting Fields, nor urge thy Soul to War.
But since, alas! ignoble Age must come,
Disease, and Death's inexorable Doom;
The Life which others pay, let us bestow,
And give to Fame what we to Nature owe;
Brave tho' we fall, and honour'd if we live,
Or let us Glory gain, or Glory give!

Where Pope’s earlier bugling overwhelms a flute-like moment of quiet, here his trumpeting is right on cue. Why, Sarpedon asks, do we kings and heroes deserve the honors and riches men give us, unless we earn them by the bravery we show in battle? No draft evading here—Sarpedon claims that “great Acts superior Merits prove / And vindicate the bounteous powers above.” That is to say, our courage in battle justifies the gods’ election of us as rulers—our deeds justify our wealth and status. While this version of noblesse oblige may seem somewhat unfamiliar to us today, it nevertheless has the ring of true heroism about it. Yes these men are egotistic, self-interested murderers, but they deserve their place because they don’t simply send men to do their bidding: they themselves “glory gain, or glory give.” Pope’s sonorous couplets here neatly mirror and emphasize the noble sentiments conveyed in this speech. Pope the translator, here, is also a terrific interpreter.

Let’s consider some other alternatives to translating Homer. Pope’s heroic couplets commit him to certain kinds of expressions and moods—English has other verse forms however. Irritated by what he thought of as Pope’s stilted translation, the poet William Cowper rendered the Iliad in blank verse in the later eighteenth century. Inspired by Milton’s Paradise Lost, Cowper avoided rhyme, but retained a roughly iambic pattern in his ten-syllable lines. Here is his opening to the poem:

Sing Muse the deadly wrath of Peleus’ son
Achilles, source of many thousand woes
to the Achaean host, which numerous souls
of heroes sent to Ades premature,
and left their bodies to devouring dogs
and birds of Heaven (so Jove his will performed)
from that dread hour when discord first embroiled
Achilles and Atrides king of men.

Not much to complain about in this passage: it renders Homer simply, without adding ideas to him, and it moves fairly quickly. Only in the parenthesis do we get a hint of the inversion that everywhere dogs Cowper—that is to say, one normally says “Jove performed his will” not “Jove his will performed.” Now why would Cowper invert his verb and object here? He doesn’t have to do so in order to make a rhyme, and he could have allowed for some metrical variation here. Instead he tortures the syntax. Why? Because he’s a bad writer? I don’t think so, though the effect he produces may not be so hot. I think Cowper wants here to achieve a slightly more noble expression. He does this because, in the main, Milton is his model. Milton’s blank verse epic constantly resorts to inversions, stops, garbled syntax. “Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste / Brought death into the world, and all our woe, / With loss of Eden, till one greater Man / Restore us, and regain the blissful seat, / Sing heavenly muse.” It is a classic piece of writing, but as Arnold reminds us, it is not particularly Homeric. Like Milton’s, Cowper’s inversions, which he thought elevated and ennobled his poem, render his poem less direct.

What then of twentieth century translators? There have been many, but I will mention just two, both of whom have influenced Fagles. The first is Robert Fitzgerald and this is his version of the poem’s opening:

Anger be now your song, immortal one,
Akhilleus’ anger, doomed and ruinous,
that caused the Akhaians loss on bitter loss
and crowded brave souls into the undergloom, leaving so many dead men—carrion for dogs and birds; and the will of Zeus was done. Begin it when the two men first contending broke with one another—the Lord Marshall Agamemnon, Atreus' son, and Prince Akhilleus.

Fitzgerald is, more or less, an improvement on Cowper. He uses a five-beat, ten-syllable line, and he swings along at a good clip. He manages to avoid the inversions that muddle Cowper's line—these are the advantages. The disadvantage of Fitzgerald's shorter line is that he ends up sacrificing some of the grandeur of the poem—the epithets for example—Hector's flashing helmet or swift-footed Achilles tend to contract into single adjectives or they disappear from the text altogether. Here's a bit more from Fitzgerald, from Priam's lament to Achilles in book 24:

Noble sons
I fathered here, but scarce one man is left me.
Fifty I had when the Achaeans came,
Nineteen out of a single belly, others
Born of attendant women. Most are gone.
Raging Ares cut their knees from under them.
And he who stood alone among them all,
their champion, and Troy's, ten days ago
you killed him, fighting for his land, my prince, Hector.

Not bad, but one only realizes what one is missing here when one reads Fagles:

I fathered hero sons in the wide realm of Troy
and now not a single one is left, I tell you.
Fifty sons I had when the sons of Achaea came,
nineteen born to me from a single mother's womb
and the rest by other women in the palace.
Many, most of them violent Ares cut the knees from under.
But one, one was left me, to guard my walls, my people—the one you killed the other day, defending his fatherland, my Hector.

Fagles's's longer line (he writes in a six-beat line, of some twelve to fifteen syllables typically) allows him to amplify certain expressions, and thus deepen Priam's pathos here. Priam's fifty sons are set off by the "sons of Achaea" in Fagles's's translation—Fitzgerald cannot afford the luxury of four syllables in his shorter, less flexible line and has merely "Achaeans." There are other examples of this amplification through repetition: "many, most of them violent Ares cut" or "one, one was left me." These reiterated words that Fagles's's longer line can accommodate help express the powerful sense of loss felt here by an old man whose many sons have all died. Fitzgerald's translation renders this moment quickly, but not as deeply.

One last comparison to Fagles. This rendition of the opening lines (and it is terrific) is by Richmond Lattimore, whose translation was perhaps the most common in undergraduate courses until Fagles:

Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians, hurled in their multitude to the house of Hades strong souls of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting of dogs, of all birds, and will of Zeus was accomplished since that time when first there stood in division of conflict Atreus’ son the lord of men and brilliant Achilleus.

Arnold might be really happy with this translation: it uses the meter he thought best suited for
translating Homer—hexameter. It is direct and hardly embellishes (that “division of conflict” is a little wordy, but Lattimore is trying to get the feet right), and it is reasonably fast. There is only one problem here, and rather than run the risk of insulting a fine poet and translator I’ll allow Douglass Parker to do it in a 1991 article from the New Republic: “He [Lattimore] might have kept telling himself not to commit personality: ‘be thou dull’. And... dull he became.” I am not the person to swear you off of Lattimore, and he certainly has many defenders, defenders far more able than I am to elicit the drama from his translation. Let me just offer a quick comparison of a passage you know from Fagles. Here is Agamemnon replying to Achilles after his “shamelessness” speech in the poem’s first book. Lattimore: “Run away by all means if your heart drives you. I will not entreat you to stay here for my sake.” Fagles: “Desert, by all means—if the spirit drives you home! I will never beg you to stay, not on my account.” The first version sounds like a character in a play pretending to be angry—the latter sounds like a petulant, real man trying to act as if he is not a petulant man.

I have now finished the first part of what I wanted to convey. Whether we take Arnold’s criteria or not, these different translators all highlight different facets of Homer’s Greek text. Whether one approves one of these texts more than another depends, I suppose, on what you are looking for from your interpreter. In any case, I suspect you have a better idea now of the kinds of choices Fagles seems to make. I would like, rather quickly now, to suggest some places where I think Fagles may fall short, as well as to point up a couple of very brief images that I think demonstrate his excellence as a translator.

Not being a classicist myself, I have had to rely on what others suggest about the passage where Chryses the priest wanders away from Agamemnon and the Greeks after his ransom for his daughter is refused. What I have learned is that this passage, in the original, is meant to be rather quiet: Chryses alone with the god he serves, along the shore in prayer. It is intimate and it is fervent. Fagles, perhaps temporarily channeling the spirit of Pope, doesn’t quite get this moment right: “The old man was terrified. He obeyed the order, turning, trailing away in silence down the shore where the battle lines of breakers crash and drag.” Too much in that crash and drag of the waves. There is some precedent in the Greek apparently for the sound of the waves here, but there is nothing about battle-lines. This is Fagles metaphorizing nature, anthropomorphizing, if you will, the water. Why does he do this? It’s pure speculation on my part, but I suspect he was thinking of all those moments in the poem where hordes of battling men are compared to rushing water, to tidal waves or streams swollen into raging torrents by the showers of spring. I think he thought that it might be clever to reverse the tenor and vehicle here, to compare water to raging men. If it is cleverness, it is over-clever, because it takes away from the directness and simplicity of Homer in order to achieve a rather subtle metaphorical effect. Not quite aces according to Arnold.

Now praise. Two passages, the first is Fagles’s opening of the poem:

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles, murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses, hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls, great fighters’ souls, but made their bodies carrion, feasts for the dogs and birds.

Fagles has picked up a trick or two here from earlier translators about assonance and alliteration, about repetition. The end of the second line—that “cost the Achaeans countless losses”—iterates in its hammering home of those hard c sounds how much these deaths hurt the Achaeans. (I suspect there is even a kind of echoing effect of “countless losses” as if they were totals that keep ringing and ringing up on some register of the dead.) Fagles repeats sounds again in the third line that force on the hearer the idea of repetition, that these bodies keep going down: “hurling down to the House of Death.” Rule of thumb, whenever a good poet metaphorizes in his translation, ask why. Fagles could simply have said, as so many translators before him do, Hades. House of Death, which is an equivalent for Hades, allows him to repeat that h - d concatenation of sounds again, and again remind the reader of the many deaths Achilles’s anger begets. What Fagles sacrifices in directness
and simplicity in that image, he makes up for in nobility and grandeur.

One last piece—three lines—and it is a rather subtle point I want to make here, that I hope will further suggest Fagles’ skill. Again, I return to the scene between Achilles and Priam. Priam has just begged for the body of his son, and has done so by recalling for Achilles that he has a father somewhere who soon will mourn for him. This speech has a powerful effect on Achilles, and he and Priam both soon dissolve in tears for Hector, Patroclus and Peleus. Achilles asks Priam to take a seat—perhaps his most human moment in the poem, and says “Let us put our griefs to rest in our own hearts, / Take them up no more, raw as we are with mourning. / What good’s to be won from tears that chill the spirit?” Almost like a soldier laying aside arms, Fagles here denies himself the showier tools of poetry like assonance and alliteration (unless you want to make something of “raw as we are with mourning”) and resolves his version of Homer here in the simplest, most basic vocabulary he can. Virtually every word is a monosyllable, the exceptions being the closing words of the second and third line, an effect that almost certainly derives from Pope. Note that the long string of monosyllables here (unlike some we have looked at) resist quick reading. Fagles deliberately slows the pace here, and resolves each line with a disyllabic word. It is an almost perfect marriage of form and function, as these lines depict a moment in which sorrow temporarily ceases, the clamor of war subsides, and a Greek king gives comfort to a bereaved and grieving parent.

I spoke before in the metaphors of music, suggesting that Fagles is a kind of conductor who produces a certain performance of the music that is Homer. Because most of us cannot read this music, as perhaps many of us cannot interpret a score, I have tried to suggest ways in which this performance succeeds and sometimes fails by referring to other performances. Just as we may not know all there is to know of say, film-making or playwriting, still, by watching different performances of Hamlet, we may be able to come to some conclusions about what we prefer. If we are very careful, we may even be able to move beyond simplistic verdicts like “thumbs up” to formulate rules and criteria that we are prepared to defend against other forms of evaluation. I would like today’s lecture to serve as a kind of invitation to this discourse about standards and ideals.

Welcome to the conversation.

Michael Caldwell
(VU '88) is a
visiting lecturer in
Christ College
He expects soon to
complete
a Ph.D.
at the
University
of Chicago.

CATECHISM

At the entrance of heaven I will be asked, I’m told, one question.

But I may lose my wits when I grow old, like grandfather Olson, whom we found lying on his back in front of our door, smelling of urine and smiling; he had fallen backwards while watching the sky.

I may wander in circles among the wrong clouds, my answers long since forgotten, cheerful, yet lonely in the Great Blue until a firm hand takes me quietly home.

Steven Jensen
As Americans sit fixated in front of their televisions, eagerly seeking to be "touched by an angel," they participate in the idolatrous spiritual wanderings that characterize the post-modern age. Today's society, seeking spiritual satisfaction, finds relative comfort in the emblem of the angel, rather than in the God who created the angelic ranks. Mistaking a humanly constructed knowledge or mythology for the mystery and efficacy of the Christian faith, such thinking reflects most modern Americans' failure to remember or recognize that since her inception, Christ's Church has asserted that God reveals himself through his Word and Sacraments, and consequently, through the divine office of the priesthood—those who literally are Christ to his people.

Not surprisingly, this confusion of knowledge and faith is as old as Christendom. What is surprising is the number of significant writers who confront this conflict. One primary example is John Milton, who in his epic *Paradise Lost*, continually probes this tenuous relationship between knowledge and faith. Critic William G. Madsen has identified one of the more interesting aspects of this relationship when he explains the epistemology of knowledge and faith in *Paradise Lost*. He notes the limitations of eyesight and the potential of hearing (Madsen 156-157). These images mirror a pattern of the Gospels, where Christ condemns the eye's role in sin ("If your eye causes you to sin . . ." [Matthew 5:29]) and promotes the necessary relationship between hearing and faith ("My sheep hear My voice . . ." [John 10:27]).

The emphasis John Milton places on hearing raises the reader's awareness of the myriad of voices that fill this poem. Despite the fact that Satan's voice tempts Eve and Eve's voice tempts Adam, God's voice dominates this epic. God not only speaks directly, but also through the power of the sacerdotal office. Michael, God's Son, as well as Milton's narrative voice, all fill the role of this office in an attempt to "justify the ways of God to men" (I, 26). These priestly figures attempt to proclaim God's desire that humanity "know to know no more" (IV, 775), but Michael and God's Son deconstruct the dichotomy of God and Man in a post-Fall world. Knowledge of God is as elusive as in a pre-Fall world, and one can only begin to "know" God through Michael's words and the words that promise the Incarnation of the Word, God's Son.

In order to "know" God, one must grasp the nature of the office of the priest. For Luther, this office functions in both the Old Testament and New Testament churches in response to a divine call. According to theologian Mark Nispel

in Luther's thought and terminology a divine command given to the patriarchs was considered a call from God. A *mandatum Dei* is a *vocatio* (call, Beruf). Abraham received a command; Abraham obeyed. And Luther states that the opposite of being called is to 'venture' to do something without divine command. (6)

Nispel and Luther are certainly not limiting the notion of the priest's call to the patriarchs. Luther is asserting that one's office is the thing God bids one to do. Thus a "call of God" to the priesthood is, according to Luther, a divine command given to an individual (Nispel 7) and the efficacy of this office comes from its connection to God's Word because all authority of the church, its sacraments,
Luther, in his usually verbose style, asserts that Michael is the angel of the Lord, and the angel of the Lord is a direct reference to Christ the incarnate Doctrinae. In his analysis of the Old Testament book of Zechariah, Luther explicates a scene involving Joshua (who himself often prefigures Christ), Michael, and Satan. In the process, he links Michael (whom he has previously identified as the “angel of the Lord”) and the second Person of the Trinity:

Once again he here shows that there is more than one Person in the Godhead. For Zechariah first tells how Joshua had stood before the angel of the Lord, and immediately thereafter he says that the Lord had rebuked Satan, as if he were pointing out the fact that the angel had been the Lord Himself. For he says nothing of the Lord’s having been present, but rather of an angel’s; and yet he says that the Lord was speaking, even as Abraham, Gen. 18:2f., adored the Lord in the person of an angel and spoke with Him. For give attention to the words, how they follow one another. He speaks thus: “Joshua was standing before the angel of the Lord. And the Lord said to Satan, ‘The Lord rebuke you, etc.’” If the angel were not the Lord Himself, the text would have read better thus: “Joshua stood before the angel of the Lord. And the angel said to Satan, ‘The Lord rebuke you, etc.’” And one Lord is speaking of another Lord as one God of another God (for “Lord” at both places here is the one true name of the true, real God). It is as if I spoke thus: “God said to Satan, ‘God rebuke you, etc.’” Here it would of course be understood that one God was speaking to another God, as in Ps. 45:7: “Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You,” from which psalm, as we know, the Epistle to the Hebrews proves that Christ is God. And the remarks of the prophet are obviously the same as these: “God says to Satan, ‘God rebuke you.’” Besides, the whole speech says that too. For Joshua is standing before the angel with Satan as before God, so that all these things are happening and are as valid in his conscience as before God, as was said before. And the angel also gives commands like a God to the others who are standing before him, that is, to the angels: that they should clothe Joshua. And so in every way Christ is here shown as being God and an angel coming into the world. (Luther, Zechariah 208-209)

The power of the priesthood is Christ’s presence in the Predigamt. Christ is truly present in the functions of the office if the gospel is preached in full accord with a pure understanding of it. If the priest desires Christ to be present in his words, then he limits himself to the pure corpus doctrinae (Noland 49). In essence, the church teaches that God deals with the individual through the priest (Predigamt). God Himself literally speaks, exhorts, absolves, baptizes, etc. . . . through the sacerdotal office.

The office of priest gains more significance when one remembers that “Christianity is . . . primarily a religion of the ear” (Madsen 158). George Herbert warns his parson to use his ear and not his eye when choosing a wife; he instructs his parishioners to close their eyes during the divine service because all comes in through the ear (Madsen 161). For both Herbert and Milton, as well as for Christ, hearing correctly is the skill that allows faith to transcend mere knowledge.

Milton may place God’s Son, the primary actor in God’s plan of salvation, at the symbolic center of Paradise Lost, yet he appears only sporadically in the text, primarily as a figure of action. Michael the archangel plays a much more public, vocal, and in a sense, prominent role in the development of this epic because Milton celebrates the power of language as much as the power of action. Michael, as God’s spokesman to fallen humanity, continually performs the sacerdotal office throughout this epic.

Milton represents both God’s Son and Michael as successfully performing sacerdotal duties in Paradise Lost. He inextricably links God’s Son and Michael, a connection with powerful historical roots. Michael’s name even indicates the might and power of God; it asserts that He alone is all-powerful, is all-sufficient; He has power over everything, never requiring the help of others; He is able to give all things to all (Luther, Genesis 231).

Likewise, Reformation theologians often emphasize the intimate and reflexive relationship between Michael and God’s Son. In his analysis of the Old Testament book of Zechariah, Luther explicates a scene involving Joshua (who himself often prefigures Christ), Michael, and Satan. In the process, he links Michael (whom he has previously identified as the “angel of the Lord”) and the second Person of the Trinity:

Luther, in his usually verbose style, asserts that Michael is the angel of the Lord, and the angel of the Lord is a direct reference to Christ the incarnate Son of God.

Such a relationship makes sense when one considers that in many ways, Michael performs the
same sacerdotal functions as God’s Son. God the Father commands him to fight Satan’s forces (VI, 44-46). Michael accepts his call and obeys the Father’s command; he sounds the archangel trumpet and begins the heavenly conflict (VI, 203).

Michael performs the priestly office as he clearly proclaims God’s truth in book VI. He wields the sword of God’s word, wounding Satan as he “preaches” to him (VI, 262-280). Michael recognizes the deep tragedy of the evil that threatens Heaven. He proclaims the law, condemning the wickedness before him, while proclaiming the soothing gospel that Satan will not permanently disturb Heaven’s peace. He anticipates God’s plan of salvation, centered in the Incarnation: “In the truest sense, Michael is looking forward to the coming of the Son. Like the Deutero-Isaiah, he cries forth the kingdom; like John the Baptist, he announces the way of the Lord” (Revard 123).

Michael must anticipate God’s Son because although he is successful in wielding the sword of God’s word in his sacerdotal capacity, the war in Heaven becomes a stalemate after the second day. In God’s plan, the Son, the complete fulfillment of the sacerdotal office, will win the war on the third day, anticipating the Resurrection and the Second Coming (Revard 121-122). Milton appears to develop a pattern; Michael functions as Christ figure: acting as obedient priest, combating Satan with the very Word of God, yet God’s Son ultimately plays the role of true victor; he wins the war and revels in the Father’s glory and honor.

Despite the victory God’s Son wins in Heaven, Adam and Eve are still in dire straits and require the attention of a spiritual physician. Just as their failure to listen properly led to their downfall, they need to be healed through what they hear. The angel Michael will minister to their needs and perhaps Michael’s greatest sacerdotal function is His preaching to Adam and Eve in Books XI and XII. Adam and Eve have fallen before God’s Son and repent of their sins. Both confess their sin to God’s Son, the priest, who intercedes before the Father on their behalf:

See Father, what first fruits on Earth are sprung
From thy implanted Grace in Man, these Sighs
And Prayers, which in this Golden Censer, mixt
With Incense, I thy Priest before thee bring,
Fruits of more pleasing savor from thy see
Sown with contrition in his heart, than those
Which his own hand manuring all the Trees
Of Paradise could have produc’t, ere fall’n
From innocence. (XI, 22-30)

Part of this priest’s mediation between God the Father and man will be his willful self-sacrifice. He will “interpret” their words and act as their “Advocate” and “propitiation” (XI, 30-44). God’s Son recognizes the devastating effect of the Fall, but more importantly, he looks forward to future where the cross and the empty tomb once again unite God and man, just as the Incarnation unites God and human flesh.

Milton emphasizes the separation of God and man in God’s pronouncement that Michael will deliver God’s news of punishment to Adam and Eve. God’s Son judges and intercedes, but does not proclaim the gospel to Adam and Eve. Instead Michael will

... reveal
to Adam what shall come in future days,
As I shall thee enlighten, intermix
My Cov’nant in the woman’s seed renew’d;
So send them forth, though sorrowing, yet in peace

(XI, 113-117)

God will enlighten Michael the priest as to what He will say; in a sense, God speaks through Michael. Douglas D. Fusselman explains that such action is conceivable when one considers Reformation theologian Martin Chemnitz’s assertion that:
God himself is said to be actually doing the functions of the ministry in and through the particular person regularly placed into the office. This divine/human relationship is not in any way contingent upon the individual's faith (that would be Donatism), but is said to be entirely the result of vocation. For Chemnitz, everything hinges upon the minister's legitimate call. (Fusselman 50)

Classical Lutheranism would even understand Chemnitz as saying that when performing his Office, the priest is God Himself.

In His priestly role, Michael preaches the reality of God's law and gospel to Adam and Eve. He tells them that they are no "longer in this Paradise to dwell" (XI, 259). He banishes them from Paradise and sends them "from the Garden forth to till" (XI, 261). For Adam the worst aspect of this punishment is their implied separation from God. Michael responds with the gospel; he asserts that God's "Omnipresence fills Land, / Sea, and Air, and every kind that lives" (XI, 336-337). Adam should "surmise not then / His presence to these narrow bounds confin'd / Of Paradise or Eden (XI, 340-342). Michael himself, acting as God's priest, is the embodiment of this truth. As a priest, he is God to Adam.

Michael must also proclaim the ultimate reality of sin: physical and spiritual death. Michael reveals the many facets of death in Adam's dream-vision. Adam weeps in horror Michael asserts that death is their fate, yet Michael comforts Adam with God's gospel—God controls death and brings life out of death. The rainbow signifies that not even the flood will destroy all life. Noah and his descendants "shall live / With all the Creatures and their seed preserve" (XI, 872-873).

Michael also comforts Adam with the ultimate cure for death: the Messiah, the one who "all this good of evil shall produce, / And evil turn to good" (XII, 470-471). This Messiah will:

Alone fulfil the law; thy punishment
He shall endure by coming in the Flesh
To a reproachful life and cursed death
Proclaiming Life to all who shall believe
In his redemption, and that his obedience
Imputed becomes theirs by Faith, his merits
To save them, not their own, through legal works. (XII, 404-410)

God's Son is the priest who is the Messiah through the miracle of the Incarnation. God's Son takes on frail human flesh that he might be "slain for bringing Life" (XI, 414) to his people, eventually rising, and returning to "receive them into bliss, / Whether in Heav'n or Earth, for then the Earth / Shall all be Paradise, far happier place / Than this of Eden, and far happier days" (XII, 464-465).

The Messiah's redemptive work will restore the spiritual "paradise within" (XII, 586) and the physical perfection of both the individual and Eden.

Humanity's search for knowledge leads to the Fall. Satan capitalizes on this desire for knowledge, perverting the use of the senses so that humanity fails to see, speak, or listen correctly. Adam fails to obey God's command and fails to speak God's truth, with multiple consequences. Humans now corrupt language and can only speak about God using metaphors that lead to idolatry. Humanity now cannot rely on its knowledge from its previous state of perfection. Adam and Eve have lost that, and they now only know their limitations. They must confront the reality that they cannot "know" God as sinners; they are separated from God and ultimately, must face death.

Now humanity is trapped in a seemingly inescapable binary. On the one hand, the fallen Adam knows he cannot trust himself as self-sufficient priest because he is a failure; yet on the other hand, sin separates him from God. God's Son may act as man's advocate; as the "second, greater Adam," he is the perfect fulfillment of the priestly office, especially as he will serve as the atoning sacrifice for sin. Significantly, Milton still anticipates the Incarnation. God's Son possesses holiness and glory that separate him from fallen man, consequently God the Father sends Michael to minister to Adam and Eve. Moreover, Milton ultimately deconstructs this opposition between God and Man through the office of priest. Michael functions as the precursor of Christ to Adam and Eve. Linked to Christ through his sacerdotal office, Michael presents the tangible physical hope of the Incarnation, the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation for mankind. Michael manifests this priestly role—he obeys
Erik Peder Ankerberg, currently completing a Ph.D. degree at Marquette University, teaches at Concordia University, Mequon, Wisconsin.

God’s command, touching Adam and Eve physically, comforting them with the words of the gospel, as they leave the Garden. This Michael—this Christ—leads his people “hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow” as they embark toward a new life, the new life that is still the hope to which God’s people desperately cling.

works cited


FAR AWAY LIES

Far away lies what should come down at nightfall; here the flatlands speak with birds. A rustling sweeps from the drape of the great sleeve of evening, the clatter of a going out. Then it starts again: the second shift of night-hawks, all those that prefer to hunt at night.

The darkening fields breathe within their fences, merge in the dusk, then disappear. You have yourself and a distant racket, foxes eating together. Be honest—it isn’t peace you miss. As you heft the hen’s cracked neck, you’re not content. Instead, you smell the clotted air, staring into the blooded, rising fields.

Mark Conway
film

cinema gripes

Fredrick Barton

i. Let me tell you how bored I am with contemporary conventional Hollywood. I'm so bored that I yawned all the way through Tony Scott's Enemy of the State, and actually, as brainless, formula fare goes, Enemy of the State isn’t half bad. Will Smith stars as Robert Clayton Dean, a high-powered Washington labor lawyer who is currently trying to get the mob out of a union election. (And don’t forget this set-up because it becomes important later). Bobby is a Georgetown law grad whose wife Carla (Regina King) is an ACLU lawyer very much concerned about Fourth Amendment privacy rights. And wouldn’t you know it, Bobby gets right in the middle of a big Congressional struggle over domestic intelligence powers for the National Security Agency’s anti-terrorism unit. A big cheese Republican Congressman (Jason Robards) is assassinated when he won’t cooperate with spy world’s latest enforcement initiative. And in a progression of events that’s only completely far-fetched, Bobby comes to possess a digitized video of the hit going down with electronic sleuth guru Thomas Brian Reynolds (Jon Voight) caught red-handed. Meanwhile, in a development that’s only entirely still more far-fetched, Voight and his legion of computer Nazis discover the existence of the video and track it to our hero. You still with me? One way producer Jerry Bruckheimer tries to keep us from scoffing is to blitz us with so many developments we don’t notice the hooey until we’re on the way home.

The meat of the picture is run, run, hide, hide. The spooks do all the usual nasty stuff. They get Bobby’s credit cards refused. (This is the Yuppie equivalent of being tarred and feathered.) They put bugs in all his remaining possessions except for his undershorts. (This is the Yuppie equivalent of a modesty panel.) Bobby will soon have to strip to elude the bad guys, but at least he won’t have to go nude until he becomes the latest cast member on NYPD Blue. They get him in serious Dutch with his wife. (This is the Yuppie equivalent of getting him in serious Dutch with his wife.) They see that his wife gives him the boot. (This is just plain old Hollywood sexism, a way to have a woman in the picture without really having to have a woman in the picture.) Oh, and for good measure, they frame him for murder. We think this will surely become important, but it doesn’t.

As is true of all action flick heroes, Bobby Dean is an uncommonly good runner and hider. When he’s chased down a tunnel, he knows just which ladder up the side will lead to a manhole cover in the street and just the correct moment to push his head out without getting it squashed like a pumpkin by a speeding vehicle. Eventually, as is often required, Bobby acquires a sidekick, in this case a grizzled and embittered electronic wizard named Brill (Gene Hackman) who knows as much about using computers to mess somebody up as anybody working for Reynolds. Pretty soon, Brill is getting Reynolds’ credit cards refused and getting Reynolds in Dutch with his own wife (Anna Gunn). Presumably Brill would also toy with Reynolds’ wardrobe and cause him to strip except that Voight has negotiated a “no skin” clause in his contracts ever since he, Donald Sutherland and Christopher
Walken agreed to alternate playing the villain in every studio movie this decade.

Cars smash. Buildings blow up. Helicopters swoop. Bullets fly. And heroes prevail. How they prevail in this particular flick boggles the mind. Save the most preposterous for last. Remember, I warned you not to forget about the mob and that union election. This film is like a meat processing plant: nothing goes to waste. Certainly not the cash a flick like this inevitably generates, the requisite $100 million plus since its release last December. And I hasten to make this clear. As blockbuster Hollywood goes today, this is the good stuff. Somebody has demanded that the plot make at least linear sense and has refused to allow Bobby to behave like a moron. But whatever the merits of the execution here, we've seen it all before. And we will, no doubt, see it all again. Soon.

ii. While I'm venting my spleen, let me pick on a picture some people took seriously enough to include on top ten lists and pencil in for year-end award nominations. Last May, Peter Weir's The Truman Show arrived at local theaters in the midst of almost unparalleled critical endorsement. Entertainment Weekly hailed the picture on its cover as "the year's best movie." Newsweek called The Truman Show "the number one film to see this summer. "But for the life of me, I can't figure out the reason for such inflated hullabaloo. The best film of the year? By my count it didn't rank in the top fifty. The number one film last summer? The Truman Show was better than Bullworth or The Opposite of Sex or Henryfool? The Truman Show was better than Saving Private Ryan? How to explain such mindless hype? The best I can imagine is that The Truman Show was treasured by certain people in the motion picture and television industry because it proceeds from the premise that a man's entire life could be orchestrated as entertainment. Perhaps, even if people in Hollywood don't think such a notion is actually true, they wish it were.

Jim Carrey stars in The Truman Show as Truman Burbank, a now thirty-year-old insurance salesman who has unwittingly starred since the moment of his birth in a twenty-four-hour-per-day documentary about his life. Truman's wife Meryl (Laura Linney), his mother Angela (Holland Taylor), his best friend Marlon (Noah Emmerich) and everyone else he knows is actually just an actor playing a role in a long-running television production. Seahaven, the picture-postcard of a town Truman lives in, is actually an elaborate soundstage with 5,000 cameras poised to capture Truman's every action. All of this is overseen by the documentary's creator and director, a self-satisfied manipulator named Christof (Ed Harris). The picture's premise is that Truman's life has become a national obsession, with people watching videotapes of treasured moments from the past and gathering in bars to watch current developments. Given Truman's white-bread existence, I can't imagine why this might be true.

The narrative in The Truman Show is generated by Truman's sudden suspicions that his life is not normal. One of the lights from Seahaven's dome falls from the "sky" and lands at Truman's feet. More seriously, the actor who played Truman's father and supposedly died in a boating accident when Truman was a child, sneaks back on the set disguised as a bum. At first Christof's minions try to hustle him away, but eventually they allow a reunion, and in parody of stock soap opera formula tell Truman his dad has been suffering from amnesia. Christof has long tried to invest Truman with phobias that would keep him from venturing outside Seahaven; now Christof fundamentally imprisons his star as Truman makes repeated attempts to flee.

My primary beef about all this concerns the film's weakly developed premise. Marlon tells an interviewer that the show isn't really fake, just controlled. And that indeed must be the case. But if it has been so tightly controlled before, why is it breaking down now? Once we ask that question the whole concept starts to crumble. Just how is it that Truman's "father" manages to sneak onto the set? Long before that, how did Christof control all the child actors who played Truman's schoolmates? My neighbor can't keep her six year old from telling family secrets to people standing behind her in a grocery line. In a flashback scene we're shown studio thugs strong-arming a young woman named Lauren (Natascha McElhone) who, of course, is really an actress named Sylvia. Sylvia has committed the sin of flirting with Truman
when Christo£ has scheduled a romance with Meryl instead. But given Sylvia’s rebellion, why does Christo£ allow Sylvia to remain in the production long enough to warn Truman that his life is artificial? And for that matter, where’s the camera when this warning takes place? Moreover, if Christo£ can get the warning on film, why does it take him so long to have Lauren/Sylvia’s “father” arrive to announce that their family is moving out of town? Afterwards, Truman pines for the girl he knew as Lauren, but he seems to forget completely what she’s told him. Why is that? In this episode and others, viewers seem eager for Truman to learn the truth and escape. Why then is there no public outcry at the cruelty of subjecting an innocent man to such an elaborate hoax?

Then there’s the whole business of Meryl, an actress we’re asked to believe who fully well intends to have a child with Truman even though she actually can’t stand him. How much do you have to pay someone to take a role like this? And how does an actor in a role like this have a private life to enjoy her salary? How, for instance, do vacations work for her? Why indeed is Truman even married to Meryl? He doesn’t seem to like her either. So how did Christo£ manage to arrange their marriage without Truman rebelling against it? Even though his life is fake, Truman thinks it’s real. It’s one thing for Christo£ to control Truman’s environment down to the people with whom he lives and associates. But if he can’t control Truman at age thirty, how has he controlled Truman until age thirty?

Weir and screenwriter Andrew Niccol presumably want The Truman Show to be a canny indictment of the pervasive role the television medium plays in our lives. But this picture doesn’t offer any fresh insights, nor is it particularly clever. The film can’t even make up its mind about the nature of its villain. Christo£ is deeply misguided, but he’s neither as malevolent as he might have been nor quite redeemable. He’s manipulative and selfish, but not nearly as ruthless as we at first suspect. A movie like this begs the viewer to contemplate its metaphysics. You don’t name a character Christo£ if you don’t want people to puzzle over the nature of God and God’s relation to man. But there’s nothing here other than a paean to human free will. Few of us have endured lives so utterly blessed as on some occasion not to have challenged God’s authority by blaming Him for our misfortune. Thus we understand Truman’s defiant cry of “Is that the worst you can do?” But I shudder at contemplating Christo£ as Weir and Niccol’s concept of a weak, self-centered and inhumane divinity.

iii. Meanwhile, as Jim Carrey bests Tom Hanks for a best actor Golden Globe for a role in a picture infuriating for its marriage of artistic pretense and intellectual emptiness, a film that dares to challenge its viewers like Jonathan Demme’s Beloved is widely dismissed as a failure. I grant that Beloved is both uncommonly difficult and otherwise flawed, but I think its precipitous fall from critical grace has less to do with its artistic failures and far more to do with a desire to take producer Oprah Winfrey down a peg or two.

At a Southern literature conference on the campus of Baylor University last fall, I heard African-American theologian Riggins Earl reflect on the stubborn persistence of forgiveness in America’s black community. He pointed to the kind words spoken about George Wallace by such former civil rights activists as the estimable John Lewis against whom Wallace once sent attack dogs and about the astonishing support Wallace was able to garner among black voters during his last Alabama gubernatorial campaign. Elsewhere, Professor Earl pointed to the resistance African-American churchgoers have shown to removing images of a white Jesus from Bibles and stained-glass windows in their own sanctuaries. Sometimes, it would seem, black Americans find it a greater challenge to forgive their own transgressions than those who have sinned against them. This issue of forgiveness in the African-American community is one of the many and complicated themes examined in Beloved.

Adapted from Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, Beloved is as difficult a moviegoing experience as most viewers will ever encounter. It moves back and forth in time as if the boundaries between current and past event did not exist. And it introduces ghosts who interact with the living as if death were not inviolable. Both Beloved’s strobe-light narrative and profusion of charac-
ters, some of whom go by more than one name, keep us off balance until the picture is nearly half over. Some puzzling passages are never clarified. In the end, faithful to Morrison’s original, screenwriters Akousa Busia, Richard LaGravenese and Adam Brooks remain more interested in symbolic subtext than in accessible text. All that said, however, Beloved is memorable storytelling, well worth the hard work it requires of its viewers.

Beloved is the story of Sethe (Winfrey), an African-American woman who escaped slavery in early adulthood but has not been able to elude the myriad horrors of having been a slave. We meet Sethe as a woman in her early to mid forties in 1873 when Paul D (Danny Glover), an old acquaintance from her Kentucky slave plantation, discovers her living near Cincinnati with her eighteen-year-old daughter, Denver (Kimberly Elise). Sethe invites Paul D to remain for a rest and a visit, but she warns him that her house is haunted, and indeed it is, dangerously so. And so begin the film’s complicated mysteries.

Paul D seems to perform a successful exorcism, and the violent, invisible spirit seems to depart the house. But as Paul D begins to court Sethe and make gentle, paternal overtures toward Denver, the ghost reappears in human form, in the body of a twenty-year-old African-American woman who calls herself Beloved (Thandie Newton). Beloved is a disturbingly unearthly presence. She arrives at Sethe’s house as if dressed for church but covered from head to toe with insects. Denver responds to Beloved like a loving sibling would to the arrival of a new baby sister. Beloved appears in a young adult body the exact age of a child Sethe lost to tragedy shortly after escaping from slavery, but Beloved is indeed like a baby. She speaks haltingly, smears herself when she eats, drools incessantly and lacks toilet training. Eventually we come to understand that she is Sethe’s lost child, grown but stymied at the age of her death.

The combination of Beloved’s appearance and Sethe’s relationship with Paul D leads to revelations about Sethe’s horrific plantation experiences in the ironically named Sweet Home. Some things are murky, but shortly before her escape in 1855, while pregnant with Denver and still nursing a baby daughter, the young Sethe (played by Lisa Gay Hamilton) is ravaged by a vicious gang of white men, led by the infamous Schoolteacher (Jude Ciccolella—the novel makes clear as the film does not that this character is the Sweet Home plantation overseer). Whether they sexually penetrate her is not revealed, but they certainly violate her, holding her down, stripping her naked and then taking turns suckling from her milk laden nipples. Afterwards, they beat her with a rawhide whip, permanently scarring her back. When she heals, the marks on her back take the vague shape of a tree.

Sethe’s flight is dramatized, though not with any particular vividness, and the explanation for why her husband did not accompany her is relegated to a dialogue account delivered by Paul D. But quite clearly Sethe arrives in the free state of Ohio in an exhausted condition of justifiably paranoid confusion. There she takes refuge with her mother-in-law Baby Suggs (the magnificent Beah Richards), but she remains fearful that Schoolteacher will come for her and take her back into slavery.

We have no way of knowing whether Sethe is conscious of the national struggle being waged over slavery in the 1850s, but 1855, the year in which she escapes, is nonetheless of symbolic importance. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 has not only reasserted the right of slave owners to the return of their escaped slaves but requires the assistance in such return of all federal authorities. In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act has overturned the Missouri compromise and opened up the expansion of slavery into U.S. territories. And in 1855 a federal appeals court (subsequently upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court) has ruled in the Dred Scott case that no free status attaches to a former slave by virtue of residence in a Northern state. So if Schoolteacher comes for her, even into the free state of Ohio, he will come with the law on his side. Indeed law enforcement authorities are required to assist in the capture and transportation back to the South of the slaveholder’s “property.” It is at first frustrating that the film fails to identify clearly the group of whites who do indeed make an appearance at Baby Suggs’ home shortly after Sethe’s arrival. But eventually we come to understand that what’s both enduringly important and, devastatingly tragic is Sethe’s now innate fear of
white people. Her terror leads her to respond in a way that will in this case literally haunt her.

Morrison's *Beloved* is so distinctly literary a novel it was long considered ill-suited for translation to the screen and, strive mightily though they have here, the filmmakers' efforts cannot be judged an unqualified success. Fans of the novel will surely miss important scenes at Sweet Home which have not been included in the film. And in other ways the final cut sometimes proves disconcertingly elusive. Moreover, I don't quite understand why the ever youthful Winfrey chose not to play the *Sethe* in flight from Sweet Home (though Hamilton stands in for her ably). The acting here is uniformly fine, though few year-end honors have been directed toward such worthies as Glover and Elise. In fact, to my astonished consternation, Newton's work as Beloved has met with mixed reviews. I found her performance in a very difficult role astonishingly courageous and devoid of vanity, the very kind of selfless acting that great players rise to.

In the final analysis, though, *Beloved* is memorable for the daring, painful things Morrison says in her book and Demme and his collaborators bring to the screen. The horror of slavery lives on even after the slave is free and the institution is defunct. The license of slavery stole the milk of black generations to come. *Sethe's* children don't die of starvation; they die of second-hand trauma, of terror passed from mother to child. Sometimes they die of a spiritual malnutrition that manifests itself in shattered families, irresponsible pregnancies, fundamental lack of self-control. Sometimes they die of violence perpetrated by loved ones. This is why *Beloved's* time line is a soup of past and present. The past isn't dead when its implications carry on into an indefinite future. *Beloved* is a metaphorical horror story, but not one devoid of hope. Denver's agoraphobia is finally faced, and she takes her place in the world. There she will continue to face the indignities of racism, but there she will also be assisted by a black community selflessly skilled in nurturing across family lines.

And, of course, *Sethe* edges her own way toward the peace of self-acceptance. The choice of her name is no accident, a feminization of the Biblical Seth, third son of Adam, and after Adam the father of humankind as described in the fifth chapter of Genesis. *Sethe* is the metaphorical mother of African America. She lives with ghosts of slavery and ghosts of freedom. She is haunted both by what was done to her and what she did in response. Crucially, though, *Sethe* endures. She is not always clear-headed, she is sometimes guilty of misjudgment, and she does not always make the right choices. She suffers greatly, but in the agony of suffering she continues. In the face of calamity she invents herself as a free person. And in a world where slavery's past lives on in the stubbornly racist present, this perhaps sadly remains the challenge of all whose ancestors were brought to these shores in chains.

But a picture of such bracing insights and artistic daring stumbles at the box office and ends up in critical limbo, dismissed by some, faintly praised by others, championed by few. The public clearly prefers the escapism of *Enemy of the State*; the pundits endorse a trifle like *The Truman Show*. And my wife wonders why I'm so persistently grumpy.

Fredrick Barton teaches at the University of New Orleans. A syndicated film columnist, he is the author of three novels.

---

THE WORLD IN THE RAIN

The world is one scared woman in the rain. Across the cups of silver she runs
To find a house, any house where her laugh
Will build a fire, where in some tiny place
The sun's old fiddle plays a song.

Marion Schoeberlein
Easter is coming. Which means that my annual illness is also on the way. Most years it hits the week after Easter. Its vague, but real symptoms reduce my functioning by about seventy-five percent. For about a week I’ll have a low grade fever, I’ll sleep a lot and I’ll be unable to think abstractly. Questions like, “Do you want cheese on your burger, Tom?” are answered by a long pause, then a giggle, because I see that even something as simple as that is beyond my addled capacity. Last year I wasn’t so lucky; The Stupid Disease hit a week before Palm Sunday.

I’ve learned that The Stupid Disease is a sign my body sends to me that I’ve been pushing myself too hard. One year on the Saturday before Easter I spent the afternoon putting the finishing touches on my sermon for the next day and I kept thinking, “I feel weary.” For some reason weary feels different from tired to me and I now know that’s the first sign of TSD.

Most ministers find that Lent is the busiest time of the year. That it culminates in three extra worship services in four days makes it even more draining. This year Easter falls on the switch to Daylight Savings Time. The one morning all year Christians have a tradition of gathering early in the morning is also the one morning all year that comes an hour earlier. The Reverend Amy Schacht of Glen Burnie, Maryland, wants that to be known by one and all.

The last time this happened I was in charge of leading the early service, then coordinating the senior high youth group’s continental breakfast (herding cats), then leading another worship service. I fantasized about rewriting the Biblical account of the Resurrection. In the Book of Tom, the disciples are so devastated by Jesus’ death that they sleep late (a sign of depression) on Sunday morning. Some of them get together about noon and decide to go out for brunch. Maybe some blueberry pancakes and strong coffee will help them see what to do next, Thomas suggests. After a hearty breakfast, a good long night’s sleep, and a good cup of Joe, Jesus appears at their table, asks what’s going on locally and then either a: changes the maple syrup into a select microbrew or b: “when he picked up the check, their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” After that the story picks up at John 20:24.

Over the years I’ve noticed that other clergy-folk are also affected by our High Holy Days. Recently I asked a number of colleagues three questions: How do you prepare for Easter?, Do you do anything special to get ready to lead worship on Easter morning? and How do you recover from Easter?

Observance of Lenten disciplines varied widely among the clergy I surveyed. The Reverend Tom Speers of Dickey Memorial Church in Baltimore makes an effort to fast on Wednesdays during Lent, then breaking his fast at their weekly evening meal and communion celebration. Amy Schacht builds more quiet time into her mornings, taking as much as 25 minutes to just sit and be still. The Reverend Tim Stern of Odenton, Maryland, takes more time to pray during his morning shower during Lent. The Reverend Magdalena Garcia grew up Protestant in communist Cuba, for her family not observing Lent helped to distinguish them from the Roman Catholics. She remembers that the radio stations did not play popular music beginning on Maundy Thursday. Magdalena found that her Spanish-speaking Presbyterian church in Chicago was more observant of
Lenten traditions than her family had been in Cuba.

The Reverend Gisele Berninghaus of Hands of Christ Deaf Ministry in Oshkosh, WI has found that Lent is a time to instruct her congregation in the basics of Christianity. Most of her members have had no contact with Christian tradition. Those who have some familiarity with church have taken part in hearing congregations, where they have not been able to fully understand what happens in worship. Gisele also tries to take on a family discipline or project during Lent.

The Reverend Amy Miracie’s church in Denver, CO gave up meetings one Lent. They decided to “put aside the church’s business and focus on our business with God.” Amy also uses the devotional booklet her church compiles during Lent and takes Holy Week, “pretty doggone seriously.” The Reverend Steve Minnema’s church in Mankato, MN holds midweek worship services with lay speakers during Lent. Steve finds this to be very nurturing for his spiritual life. He also looks for examples of new life breaking out which can be used for his Easter sermon.

Most ministers I contacted did not do anything special to get ready to lead worship on Easter. Amy Miracle’s one word prescription is “Coffee!” Gisele Berninghaus found that she missed singing “Alleluia” as she led a deaf worship service last Easter, for a change her voice didn’t give out. Still, the sign for Alleluia is big, with both arms raised over the head so her arms and shoulders were sore the next day. Amy Schacht trusts the music to carry her through her church’s services. “I’m not responsible for it,” she reasons.

Unique among the clergy I contacted was Amy Miracle, she said, “Theologically, I’m always surprised that Easter happens.” The custom at her church is to shroud the sanctuary on Maundy Thursday. Easter’s service begins in the dark and children carry in lillies. “It’s wonderful chaos.” Then Easter happens, the people are first startled by the Resurrection, then overjoyed.

Then all the people go home. Many years I feel like I’ve hosted a party, but never gotten a chance to sit down and enjoy it. Amy Schacht says some years she doesn’t find meaning in Easter. “Easter is exhausting and it’s my job.” Magdalena Garcia finds that she’s “pretty beat” after a vigil, a sunrise service and a heavy service or two. “Most of the time I go home and crash.” Steve Minnema looks forward to planting his early garden on Easter afternoon. Tim Stern says, “On Easter Jesus comes out of the tomb, but I go in.” Amy Miracie’s two priorities are “alcohol and sleep.” Monday afternoon she joins a friend annually to shop for shoes. Tom Speers says, “Come Easter afternoon, I, and all the ministers I know, are headed for the tomb that we know is empty, and plan to roll the stone back.” “They can’t find me here!”

My wife and I began an Easter afternoon tradition before we were married. She invited me to go to the woods to see which wildflowers were coming up. I didn’t see the obvious theological content of such an invitation. I was in love and Easter afternoon was the first time I knew I would be free. Now, every year we find a park or forest preserve and look for bloodroot and skunk cabbage and a lot of other things. Those are the only two I remember from six years of searching. Obviously, The Stupid Disease hits me about noon. 😎
TRANSPARENCIES

"If the eye were a living creature
its soul would be its vision..."
—Aristotle

1. Body
To be precise it must be like the split-second when a rose burgeons from its bud or water boils, though without the requisite rumbling inside the kettle’s hollow dome to signal the beholder; though being there, wherever absence crackles into sight, ought to fix us as certainly as a star, even if to say so is fancy, and flight is more the way the world makes manifest the many of what it is: a camera flash, paparazzi swarmed into a host, the scientist bent before the chimera in the dish, all shudder as the flow stands still, and the eye rounds itself to zero.

2. Soul
The proverbial eye, Aristotle’s trope for showing what we are, depends on form. So each soul assumes its place, its proper pinnacle. So worlds amass in vision’s atoms. And it’s not just the human. Oak and ax have their bourne too, the one to grow toward light, the other with its dream of calloused hands lifting it to the trunk as though for flight. Which is why the warrior names his sword, the child his imaginary friend. We need a world intent and animate to bring us otherwise back to ourselves, lover and lover lying down, the spirit awash and content in the body’s knowledge.

Daniel Tobin
DURING

We won’t be air-lifted today, we won’t see
the house from above or the braided branches
of the Sauk snake through Anton’s bar.

The river’s down a foot; it’s almost certain
we’ll be saved. The runoff from upstream
sloshes against the niteclub stairs, the landmark

“Fish and Whiskey” sign sticks out near a half­
filled Coup de Ville. I finally saw two geese
flash past my window yesterday. I’ve heard them

for weeks now, flying behind a prolonged low fog.
Greasy water gleams with nitrates from dairy farms
up the Sauk. Brown with pigshit, the river shines

like a violin. Smoke won’t rise in this low, the water
does and then falls, floodwaters dilate into fog. The kids
were disappointed we weren’t lifted up today

to see our house as the place we used to live. Honkers
slice through the gray air, a moaning whistle fanning
from their wings. The barometer won’t rise, the river

chills, freezing aprons of ice on bare willows doubled
in the shallows. Broken sticks mark minarets of coiled
sewage from Cold Spring. We have to stay.

The Sauk will clear and carry rafters to the restaurant
for a beer. The fog will turn sultry, falling into a mist.
We have funerals next week, the river spills

its banks again. The geese rise harlequin white and black,
oiled into the air. Spring bonfires flare on the shore
and burn the insides of the fog dark orange.

Mark Conway
SUNDAY ON WARD A

The room is stamped out
like chrome and plastic chairs;
offers no asylum to souls
assembled for the Eucharist.

A boy falling through gray
eyes stumbles into worship,
calls me snapdragon, wakes
me from sleep of endless Sundays.

The Invocation signals
patients to snuff cigarettes;
A Dunkard farmer, white beard,
in bib overalls, laced boots,
kisses me on the lips.

A woman, hair wild, pushes
aside the Communion Host,
bread might as well be
stone. She empties the cup
like a geranium unwatered
for weeks.

Inner voices counsel
the girl with black lashes,
accuse her of having sex
with God. A smile
crosses her lips,
a sliver of grace.
A TALE

The king will grant what she desires, the queen will think awhile, will say “Come and talk with me, sit and eat while music plays.” And so he will, wine and warmth from pleasant fires as servants note the fading day. “Reverse the letters, cool the heat. My love, my king, let rage be still.”

Thus Esther the queen saved the Jews and all their daughters, then till now, who keep her name in daily trust, who hold the cup of life and choose to think of others, not of how to do the least, but what they must.

Daniel J. Langton

THE HAWK, THE MOUSE, AND I

Saul, blinded by Light
on his way to Damascus,
heard the voice of Jesus.

Blake, in London,
glanced through a grimy window
and saw God fluttering there.

I sniff my way in the dark,
nose to the ground
like a foraging mouse,

seeing one grass blade ahead,
and listening
for the rush of battering wings.

In our last blink of time
will there be for mouse and me
a blinding epiphany?

Will God’s voice shatter our eardrums,
His face so beautiful
we turn away?

We cannot hide.
The hawk can see a lit match
miles and miles away.

Jeanne Nuechterlein
ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS, NYC

Angels on unicycles guard
the entrance to the sanctuary.
Acolytes scoot between mahogany
pillars in a forest of totems.
The thurifer swings a one-eighty
as blazing charcoal draws the sun
through the windows. We inhale
the scent of prayers rising
to heaven from the bottom
of our lungs. The space between
our shoulders as we stand for
the Eucharist is thin as skin.
Priests glide by offering
the slow substance of life
to upturned hands and lips.
A helicopter hovers over us
ready to whisk us to eternity
in a New York minute.

Paul David Steinke

Long-time Cresset readers will be interested to know that former poetry
editor René Steinke's novel The Fires has recently been published by
William Morrow and optioned for a film by Madonna.
The Editor welcomes queries and comment from readers at 219-464-6809,
fax at 219-464-5511 or email Gail.Eifrig@valpo.edu.

At the last meeting of the American Academy of Religion, the Evangelical Theology group held a colloquium on the topic of “the Use, Misuse, and Disuse of the Term Fundamentalism.” Among the very fine papers presented was a reflection by Elmer L. Towns of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. Towns might rightfully bear the title “Mr. Fundamentalist” as a right-hand man to Jerry Falwell and long-time editor of the journal *The Fundamentalist*. Near the end of his discussion Towns provocatively (but with good intentions) reminded the audience of academics that they should remember that fundamentalists themselves are rarely interested in their scholarly ponderings and almost never read their books. I could tell that many in the audience (in between their chuckles) felt slighted by Towns. Just another example of “close-minded” religious conservatism isolating itself from the mainstream. I, however, liked what he said. His comment, in my opinion, points to a problem found generally in the field of American religious history, especially in studies of fundamentalism. Scholars have tended to present the theological, political, and moral ideals of the movement without placing it in the context of the living communities of faith which gave rise to and nourished such religious sentiments. Joel Carpenter’s *Revive Us Again*, however, should be a welcomed remedy for those tired of two-dimensional interpretations of religious history. Carpenter does not limit his narrative to interesting side-shows, apologetics, and public crusades. The fundamentalists in *Revive Us Again* go to church, attend bible camp meetings, try to live holy lives pleasing to God, and witness to the faith in a world they often perceive as hostile (but very redeemable).

*Revive Us Again* picks up the story of fundamentalism in the United States where George M. Marsden’s classic *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (Oxford, 1980) left off. Marsden ended his narrative in 1925 at the Scopes’ Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. This public and embarrassing event, according to Marsden, pushed the fundamentalist movement underground and out of the public eye. At this point in history, the critics and enemies of the movement hailed their defeat and declension. Carpenter, however, begins his history by challenging the very notion of fundamentalist declension after 1925. Borrowing the title of Charles Spurgeon’s London periodical, Carpenter describes the fundamentalism of this period as a *Sword and Trowel* movement. The first half of the book considers the “trowel” side of this depiction. While fundamentalism continued to militantly denounce modernism, it also began a period of institution building apart from the infrastructure of evangelical denominations. In fact, the “separatist impulse” of American fundamentalism, according to Carpenter, is key to understanding the shape and development of the movement. A natural and difficult question is why did some self-described fundamentalists remain in their denominations while others left to begin new, separate church communities? Further, if indeed “separatism” became a defining impulse for the movement, to what extent can one describe those who remained in their home denominations fundamentalists?

These questions belie simple explanations. Carpenter notes that “comeouters” formed new fundamentalist denominations like the General Association of Regular Baptists, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and the Bible Presbyterian Church, while many conspicuous fundamentalist individuals like William Bell Riley and Donald Barnhouse remained in their home Northern Baptist Convention and Presbyterian Church in the USA, respectively. Furthermore, such ecclesiological differences were often a source of dissention and division within the movement. “Comeouters” often questioned the faithfulness of those remaining behind, while loyalists believed that the schisms crushed any hope of wresting denominational power from modernists and liberals. Despite the apparent difficulty sur-
rounding the issue of separatism, Carpenter persuasively argues that many fundamentalists effectively avoided the troublesome issue of schism by helping to erect parachurch organizations and allegiances which operated outside of denominational organs and structures. So, while some fundamentalists asserted that institutional purity provided the only acceptable option for faithful Christians, others in the movement maintained a de facto separation by actively supporting ministries and schools with fundamentalist ties and cultivating a religious subculture within their denominations.

Carpenter spends a good deal of time explaining how constituents within the movement created a sense of identity from the ashes of their failed public crusades. Not only did their failure become a badge of honor itself, fundamentalists taught that the separated life meant not only “pulling away from the world and its values” but “drawing closer to Jesus Christ” (76). He shows that the militant anti-modernism of the movement (while never fully extricated from the fundamentalist mind) gradually gave way to the born-again conversion experience and the subsequent living of a holy life as the key defining factors in followers’ self-identity. Another important factor in the development of the fundamentalist subculture included the dispensational premillennialism held by many of the leaders and constituents of the movement. This prophetic world view became a key for individual members of the movement to understand and view their place in the world and in history. Radio programs (like those of Paul Rader and Charles Fuller), bible vacation camps (like the one at Winona Lake, Indiana), popular literature and periodicals, bible schools (such as Moody Bible Institute and BIOLA), along with a host of other parachurch organizations helped to disseminate broadly the fundamentalists’ message among the faithful and consolidate their vibrant and popular subculture.

The second part of the book traces the “sword” portion of the fundamentalist story: the movement of fundamentalism back into the public arena during the 1940’s. Carpenter writes that “fundamentalists and their allies in the postwar evangelical coalition were beginning to occupy a different place in American life by 1950 than they had only a decade earlier” (233). Key terms that jump out in his conclusion are “resurgence,” “comeback,” “recovery,” “reawakening,” and “revival.” Of course, the title of the book itself, Revive Us Again, speaks to this conclusion at the beginning. However, this focus on revival also points to the chief difficulty in the book as well. If ideas of declension have been the main fallacy of previous studies on fundamentalism in this period, as Carpenter contends in his introduction, it seems that the revival paradigm he employs does not serve him well with his intention to correct the scholarly assertions of fundamentalist decline after their failed public crusades. One might consider who the “us,” in Revive Us Again, should really be. Carpenter’s title suggests that the “us” is fundamentalists, but should the “us” perhaps refer to Christian America?

I do not wish, however, to overplay this difficulty. The careful scholarship, the excellent narrative, and the keen insight of this book far outweigh any troubles. In particular, Carpenter has made it clear
that religious histories that have overemphasized mainline denominations have missed something very important in American culture. Not all religious groups suffered the religious depression claimed by Robert Handy many years ago. (*Church History*: 29, March 1960: 3-16). Carpenter rightly observes that fundamentalism’s growth and expansion during the 1930’s suggests that by then mainline denominationalism had begun to wane. Further, the respectability that the new evangelicalism gained in American culture calls for a new look at religion in the 1950’s. After Carpenter’s monograph, David Halberstam might be slightly embarrassed that he mentioned Billy Graham only once in his recent book *The Fifties* (Fawcett Columbine, 1993), not to mention that the purpose of his discussion of the evangelist was only to note conservative reaction to Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Joel Carpenter’s *Revive Us Again* is a book to be recommended, because Carpenter ably brings the reader closer to an important religious movement that has, in one significant way or another, touched most Americans.

J. Michael Utzinger

---

**HOLDING ON**

I’m holding an ancestral photo taken in 1864. Its hickory-shingle back has leached acid into the trapped photograph. This only, single stare—spotted and brown—peers through thin glass at a world as fixed as the picture’s angled frame.

How many days, how many evenings, how many nights’ and midnights’ repetitions come down to the simple, single act of holding—to the *fact* of holding on and of finding something to hold on to as we’re driven out of existence, over time, and, finally, out of time to somewhere beyond the frame?

Phillip T. Egelston
on poets—

Tom Baer's work appears internationally.

Steve Jensen
is in his fifth year of teaching English at Palm Beach Atlantic College in West Palm Beach, Florida. He has previously published a poem in Bellowing Ark.

Mark Conway
has published work in the Boston Review and Agni. He lives in Avon, Minnesota, with his wife Therese Nierengarten and sons Sam, Cullen and Liam.

Marion Schoeberlein

Daniel Tobin
enjoys travelling to poetry readings, and has published poems in many journals, including Poetry, The American Scholar, and The Bellingham Review. He is presently an associate professor of English at Carthage College, and visiting poet at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Paul David Steinke
is Director of Pastoral Care and Supervisor of Clinical Pastoral Education at New York University Medical Center, Healthcare Chaplaincy, Inc.

Daniel Langton

Jeanne Nuechterlein
has published poetry in Daughters of Sarah, Broken Streets, Christian Life, The Cresset, and poetry, short stories, and articles in This Day (no longer in print). She has been married for 50 years, has three children and five grandchildren.

Phillip Egelston
attended Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. His work has appeared in a variety of literary magazines and in The Saturday Evening Post. He also writes short fiction and is a painter.

on reviewers—

J. Michael Utzinger
is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia and has recently been appointed a Lilly Fellow for 1999-2001.
Works by two Lutheran artists appear on the covers of this issue. These two paintings mark different sensibilities about the sacred and its manifestation, but share a deeper attitude. Charles Burchfield, working in the American tradition of the spirit-saturated landscape, records a natural epiphany. The tree vibrates as a medium that cannot contain the reality it bears. It emanates luminous waves of motion. Points of pure, unrefracted white light penetrate the center of the tree, disclosing both the presence of the sun and the limits of its representation. The landscape is the holy place where spirit infuses matter. Yet at the heart of the manifestation is an opaque whiteness that transcends any embodiment. Around this blank, burning core the tree is transformed into a dark silhouette of forms. Along its upper edges the leafy mass congeals into something like the shape of a painter's palette, the whole of which, where the artist places his thumb, is the white light of the sun boring through the tree. Nature is the work of the divine artist just as painting is the product of the human.

Siegfried Reinhardt's Design for a Crown is also a picture organized around a radial moment of illumination. A trinity of spheres forms the composition: an anguished face within a soldier's helmet and armor, a tranquil face circumscribed by thorns, and the empty halo-crown surrounding a dark recess in the upper right. Embraced by the arms' dual gesture of benediction and crucifixion, the three centers of focus configure the persons of the Trinity: the Son in agony, the Spirit who comes in the wake of Christ's execution, and the Father in transcendence, signified by the dark absence and the upright sword that cancels and forbids any act of representation.

A disturbing pair of ambiguities comes to the fore in Reinhardt's picture. The anguished head in the helmet is both Christ and Rome; and the symbol of God the father is both his absence and the violent emblem of Roman authority. It would be easier to interpret the three spheres as actors in a narrative series: the executioner, the executed, the resurrected. But there are other associations that remain unresolved. Does the soldier with the sword he might be thought to hold aloft actually portray a remorseful Longinus, the centurion who testified to Christ from the foot of the cross? Or could the sword be a reference to the weapon brandished by the angel placed at the entrance of Eden to prohibit access to the tree of life? If so, perhaps the painter alludes to Christ's sacrifice as a reopening of the door? Perhaps he draws open the curtain of history (with the cord dropping into his open hand) in order to usher in a new dispensation. A straightforward narrative reading of the three foci as successive moments in the crucifixion fails to account for the hand clutching the screaming head (dressed in medieval, not Roman armor) and the prominence of the erect sword radiating a golden spiral of thorns. The violence of execution and the violence of iconoclasm have something to do with incarnation and transcendence.

Reinhardt showers us with hints while Burchfield immerses us in a single moment. One regards historical events as the theatre of the holy, the other sees the landscape as the site of revelation. But both refuse to say in the convenient script of symbolic devices just what they mean. They show it and they refuse to show it. Or they show the mystery that shows itself and refuses to show itself. It's about icons and anti-icons, about immanence and transcendence, about an incarnate God and a hidden one. It's about Lutherans and their paradoxes.