Reflexive Poetics

Reflexive Poetics:
A Critical Anthology

By

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PREFACE

Passion for this project stems from my belief in the quality of the subjects' work, and from sensitivity to chance—or to what Jorge Luis Borges calls "Fate[:] the name that we give the infinite and unceasing operation of thousands of intertwined causes."[1] "It is tremendously important that great poetry be written," notes Ezra Pound. "It makes no jot of difference who writes it."[2] This comment makes *some* polemic, but still more *prescriptive* sense, as evaluative of our present situation. Some great poetry (never mind the far larger quantity of trash) *is* emerging—from who knows how many circles of devoted craftfolk. Regularly, one circle, or a figure therein, is justifiably discovered and celebrated; and consequently, influences several later coteries—the few of whom that happen to be recognized in turn exerting sway on the generation following. Hence, literary history proceeds. Yet that other exemplary artists might have set the trend I do not doubt. Thomas Gray laments "Some mute inglorious Milton," in *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.[3] These days our comparably unheralded Jory Grahams, Charles Simics, Billy Collinses, and Robert Blys might prove "inglorious" simply; hardly "mute," or only relatively so, in proportion to their number of fortunate, albeit few, readers.

For the poets themselves, then, who writes *acknowledgeably* great poetry makes all the difference, for reasons of prosperity and impact. Likewise, to a lesser extent, the nation's poetry lovers have a stake in who garners renown. Only friends and fellows attuned to the local lyric scene will own access to area gems. Yet the wider public interested in verse will know solely the (deservedly) acclaimed bards—to that clientele's enjoyment, true enough. But who can say they might not have garnered more, for instance, from **Corrine Frisch** than from Frank Bidart; or in fairness, more in Bidart via Frisch and vice-versa. The central tenet of this text holds, with Eliot and Frost—a not so unlikely coupling as might be thought, hence a perfect pair to introduce my modus operandi—that we read relationally. "No artist…has his meaning alone." "We read…C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something more out of A. Progress is not the aim, but circulation."[4] (This contention, in conjunction with Frost's commonsensical fiat to "start somewhere," i.e., upon

particular text A, is amplified in Chapter 5, concerning **Carolyn Rodgers** and **John Knoepfle**, together and separately.)

"We read," in part, concedes Harold Bloom, "because we cannot know enough people."[5] With pleasure, then, let me acquaint you with **Ms. Frisch's** elegant wordplay; **Blake Scranton**'s wit; **Kit Stokes**' mastery of craft; **Siobhan** and **David Pitchford**'s moving sonnet dialogue; with the humor and uncanny aptitude for rhyme brandished by **Sam B. Davis**; the intensity of **Mike Mikus**, and pyrotechnics of **Daniel Blackston**; with the quiet transcendence in **Kenneth Sibley** and **Martha Whitaker-McGill**, the education in silence through which transcendence speaks as taught by **Ryan Reeves**, and of the searching bestowal of voice by **Aaron Wayne** upon those silenced. Close analyses of these poets, and of the more noted, though not nearly enough read **Rodgers**, **Knoepfle**, **Rosina Neginsky**, and **Lee Gurga** accompany selections from their work. The anthologized portions of this text are dictated by representational exigency. To varying degrees my essays incorporate the poets' works. When information as to purchase of their chap-books exists, I've included it. Yet though explicitly endorsing reading them, I advance a larger argument about poets in all our respective midst, and about the boon of ***critical reflection on good poems, however well- or un-known, in relation to each other. The methodology is universally applicable.***

For of other poets in our circle I might well have written, and may someday if opportunity allows. The coincidental moment of releasing the particular chapbooks treated here, with my 'sabbaticals' from writing about Shakespeare, and Eliot and Pound, dictated this congeries. Indeed, this text might have comprised an entirely different array of poets—just as I could have spent the bulk of my scholarly time on Jonson instead of Shakespeare, Williams and Stevens rather than Eliot and Pound. Authors worth *writing about* will always outnumber literary critics. No doubt we in this valley (why, I've oft wondered, is our swathe of plain called a valley) live in lyric-rich soil (—and in this case, semantics proves fortuitous for verse derives "from the Latin *versus*, a turning round as of a plough at the end of a furrow"[6]). Still more untapped resources, pockets of poets perhaps solely familiar with one another, subsist throughout this country, throughout this world. "Beautiful thing," Williams' refrain for so much beheld in his native Paterson, New Jersey,[7] I would here apply to two phenomena:

> "Beautiful thing," the human mind;
> "Beautiful thing," language, when cared for by a human mind answering in turn, through

> Sounds [of] sudden rightnesses, wholly
> Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
> Beyond which it has no will to rise.[8]

To return to Pound's imperative, and meld it with Borges' belief that a masterwork might be composed by most anyone.[9] Might "must be written" remark *a matter of fact*? Is it not likely that our human condition, conditioned by our verbal medium, necessitates creation of great poetry? Consider our outrage at the strictures on expression in so many nations. We react as though what's natural as breathing were proscribed; that reaction may disclose a truth.

We oughtn't designate a poet brilliant by virtue of a single extraordinary piece, or even three, or ten. Yet the specific poem that does so shine is informed by, and informs through comparison with works of like caliber, to distinguish both works' strengths, dominant and nuanced. That critical premise dictates this volume's numerous settings of proven authors side by side those who have proved themselves in our small sphere. To reiterate, the similitudes and contrasts enhance appreciation mutually: enable reading Simic more enjoyably in Scranton's light; so, too, Crane in context with Blackston; as Davis within Kooser's radius, Stokes Robinson's, etc. Relations never run one-way. In each personal, timeless canon, "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present by the past." Eliot likewise observes "the existing order complete before the new work arrives";[10] and yet we can never garner *quality* enough, of poems or people—not simply to extend our knowledge but to enrich what we already possess.

In same spirit of augmentation, my "End Notes" to each piece form an intrinsic part of the interpretive apparatus.[11] Constant interruption of the essays for recourse to detailed digressions I thoroughly discourage—one would no more *frequently* refer to the essays, having plunged into the poems. The supplemental matter is purposely not placed beneath the large print text, which the small might fancifully overwhelm in a turf battle for dominion of the page. But neither are all notes clumped at the close, in essence as an ancillary appendix. Rather, the corresponding comments appear at each chapter's end, to be brooded on at one's leisure; but still I urge the reading of these. For to ply Joseph Frank's terms, the criticism conveys spatially, not to the extent of some Modernist texts, which "sacrifice syntactic[] sequence…for a structure depending on… disconnected word-groups."[12] Instead, the sense sounds, as with constellated poems mutually reflecting, by means of "The complete consort dancing together"; or by what Knoepfle, who belongs in Eliot's company, states more simply and as poetically: "confluence."[13] The Notes

also exhibit, or suggest, still further relational possibilities between poets toward reading each more productively in others' light. The chief premise of this text concerns *lighting*. To return to Frost's "Prerequisites": "The thing is to get among the poems where they hold each other apart in their places as the stars do."

Notes

[1] Jorge Luis Borges, *A Universal History of Iniquity* [1935], *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998) 16. Of the "intertwined causes" catalyzing this anthology, two merit special mention: Yvor Winters' *Poets of the Pacific* series (1937, 1949), through which Winters, Janet Lewis Winters, Edgar Bowers, and especially J.V. Cunningham first received national exposure; and the mode (including placement) of critical notes introduced to me by F.O. Mathiessen. (*Vide infra*.)

[2] "A Retrospect" [1918], *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968) 10.

[3]
> Full many a purest ray serene
> The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
> Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.
>
> Some village-Hampden that with dauntless breast
> The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
> Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
> Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood. (ll. 53-60 [1751])

Gray's lines companioning my contention are again remarked in the first of this text's critiques, on Frank Stokes.

[4] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" [1917], *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932) 4; Robert Frost, "The Prerequisites" [1954]; rpt. in Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1973) 139. Rodgers, Reeves, Mikus, Davis all lead us to comparative scrutiny of Eliot. Sibley, Stokes do that office for Frost.

[5] Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000) 19, 29. With this comment, like so many proffered by that critical titan, I wholeheartedly concur—as much as fundamentally reject his recent calculation of but "20 or so good [American] poets." As quoted in *The Boston Globe* 8 January 2006 (Wesley Yang, "Poets, Inc.")

[6] John Thompson, *The Founding of English Metre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) 4.

[7] Including, significantly, an *anthology*, "suppressed" in the quotidian yet "revived even by the dead" through the purging fire (also a "Beautiful thing") that immolates the town library (*Paterson* III.ii). "In the local inheres the universal"

trumpets as a battle-cry throughout Williams' oeuvre. His poetics are examined in the chapter on Ryan Reeves.

[8] Cf. "Of Modern Poetry," ll.21-23, *Wallace Stevens, Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: ALP, 1997) 219. Stevens' presence in our anthology rivals Eliot's and Pound's; yet discussion of poems by the Modern Weatherman occurs mainly in the preface about Ms. Frisch.

[9] Cf. "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain." "'Thinking, meditating, imagining, are not anomalous acts—they are the normal respiration of the intelligence.'" That "'great literature' is the commonest thing in the world" grossly overstates; but supposing "no man or woman…not a writer, potentially or in fact" brooks considerable validity. (Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 95, 107-8, 111)

[10] Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 5. Let me underscore the comparisons undertaken as principally, the *with* type ("between objects regarded as essentially of the same order"), vis-à-vis the *to* ("between objects regarded as of essentially a different order.") That is to state again, the poems herein held to the light of their illustrious predecessors merit the collation, to as much "point out or imply [informing] resemblances" as "differences." Commendably, Strunk and White limn this distinction, but not thoroughly enough, linking "resemblance" to *to*, "difference" with *with*. (*The Elements of Style* [Macmillan, 1959] 43.) Clearly, in relating texts of (at least) comparable quality, *similitude* and *variance*, similitude *in* variance, and variance *in* similitude, are all potentially operative.

[11] These prefatory end notes superficially display the myriad tasks their subsequent brethren undertake. Of course, as here, citations and elaborations occur throughout the addenda. But so also in them are contained *other close readings, often cast as detailed comparisons*; *discussions of poetics* (e.g., of gradations in diction, prosodic rationale, unconventional representational modes); and a reiterated *hermeneutic*—for a method of reading predicated on response to, and awareness of, *how* words convey *what* they do. Even metaphysical speculations broaching ethics (—on, for instance, *relational identity*; or concerning *the limitation of knowledge as among the things we learn*—) are lent scope in these sometimes not so tiny pensees. Never, though, do I take liberties with the reader, in the manner of Professor Kinbote: Nabokov's ingenious *alter ego* who displays how annotation can run awry. My remarks are always founded in textual interpretation. Admittedly, this note itself attests to its author's passion for the mini-genre; and contends for (what he hopes you find) beneficial provisions of verbal off-ramps, toward productively harnessing energies. **Counterpointing the many graceful lines of the poets, the commentary is, admittedly, and necessarily, dense (in the positive sense of that term).** Those familiar with F.O. Mathiessen and Stephen Booth shall already be accustomed to my method. Of others I ask your patience. No criticism satisfies in the same way as does reading a poem; still, an interpretive approach should be enjoyed, even if (sometimes, *especially in*) precluding satisfaction with the poem by prompting more questions about it. I would informatively entertain by virtue of extensive scrutiny.

[12] Cf. the seminal essay on "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," which premiered in *Sewannee Review* 53 (1945); rpt. in Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis*

and Mastery in Modern Literature (Rutgers, 1963). [13] Cf. *Little Gidding*, V.225, last of the *Four Quartets* (Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 144); and the discussion of Knoepfle's signature term in Chapters 5, 14 following. As has already been instanced with Gray, Williams (herald of "the news" in poems [*Asphodel II*]) and Stevens ("The theory of poetry is the life of poetry" [*Adagia*]), we shall oft apply lyric lines *as critique*. By like token, prose from leaders of double-lives as poets and critics services this book as an analytic reservoir.

The principal texts anthologized

Stokes, Frank. *Bethel Grove: Sonnets from "The Village Daybook."* Springfield, IL: Golden Belle Press. 2002.

Davis, Sam B. *Poetographs: Selected Poems.* Dawson, IL: d[avis] I[ndependent] P[rojects]. 2005.

Scranton, Blake T. *Gray Matters*. Springfield, IL: Gray Matter Press. 2003.

Knoepfle, John. *poems from the sangamon*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1985.

Rodgers, Carolyn M. *The Heart as Ever Green*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1978.

Frisch, Corrine. *Seasonal Affections*. Springfield, IL: Black Crow Press. 2003.

Nezhinskaya, Rosina. *Under the Light of the Moon*. New York: Slovo-Word. 2002. *Dancing Over the Precipice*. Slovo-Word. 2005.

Pitchford, Siobhan and David. *Dialogue: An Intimate Conversation in Sonnets.* Springfield, IL: Daybreak Press. 2004.

Pitchford, Siobhan. *Through the Longing Daze*. Springfield, IL: Daybreak Press. 2004.

Sibley, Ken. *A Certain Dignity*. Rochester, IL: Sibley-Gray Press. 1997. 2002.

Mikus, Michael. *The Outsider.*

Blackston, Daniel. *Shaman Flowers*. Springfield, IL: Pitch-Black Press. 2006.

Gurga, Lee. *The Measure of Emptiness*. Foster City, CA: Press Here. 1991.

Reeves, Ryan. *ár-wéla.* Springfield, IL: Hull Press. 2005.

Whitaker-McGill, Martha. *Goose Ganders at Washington Park*. Dawson, IL: dIP. 2006.

Wayne, Aaron. *Ford Heights: A Long Poem.*

CHAPTER ONE

FRANK STOKES AMONG THE MASTERS

> If verse can liven worlds that truth disowns,
> No epitaph need grace the poet's bones.

Stokes' mentor, Frost, insisted on form as a constant for "going on with."[1] Hence, as Stokes returned to Springfield to compose poetry after experiments in living out west and writing fiction; so the plots of *Bethel Grove* needed native "soil," as it were, the sonnet genre so congenial to Stokes, that they might flourish. Structurally, the whole of *Grove* owns sonnet-like intricacies. It purports to represent one fifth of "an imaginary township" via sonnets mailed to the daily paper "throughout the thirties, as few as seven in some years and as many as twenty in others."[2] But these texts were suppressed for sixty years, until a later editor of the *Sentinel* culled them from the archives. It is not precisely true, then, that "these voices do not speak from the graveyard"[3] as do Masters' Spoon River denizens. The former are further distanced through distillation of (primarily) a single point of view (whereas, the shades in the *Anthology* supposedly speak for themselves); and through the prism of a complex form (—*Spoon River* is related in free verse). But voice is *still more* problematized. Most of the poems make a pretense of narrating in first person; the acknowledged ventriloquist, one "Arnold Sasser," no village rolls record; and *that* author in turn attributes the design (and a baker's dozen of the sonnets) to *another* resident, young, doomed Christopher Baines—verifiable, though silenced by a hit-and run. "Beside the bed I sensed a mind in chains," records the nominal sonneteer about the invalid:

> By winking as I traced the alphabet,
> He spelled out poems—and this world awoke!
> ("Arnold Sasser," 4.9-10)

One might begin to suspect that Gary Bullock—the paper's editor presumably entrusted with what Sasser supposedly expanded from Baines—himself concocted *The Daybook* and the attendant machinery. That is,

until the reader recalls that all these names serve as sobriquets for a poet presiding in Springfield, Illinois.

Why this matrix of Chinese boxes, not so much recalling Frost (content enough with rhyme and meter) as Borges? Because Stokes not only requires forms within which he creates; he also loves to create forms, be they sonnets or larger, more singular, structures. The architectonics of *Bethel Grove* are analogous to those of a novel or symphony—or yes, of a contemporary lyric epic (*q.v. Paterson, The Bridge, Spoon River Anthology*): open in design yet still subject to rigorous logic; for, saith *The Waste Land* poet, "freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation."[4]

I would surmise another reason for the plan, incidentally consistent (for he harbors little ambition) with mentioning Stokes alongside recognized artists; more consciously on Stokes' part, in complement to a couplet resonant throughout the text:

> If verse can liven worlds that truth disowns,
> No epitaph need grace the poet's bones.
>
> (“Arthur Cowan, D.Litt.,” 13-14)

To quote another poet from the pantheon, *Bethel Grove* "is [Frank Stokes'] letter to the world," committed to whose "hands [he] cannot see";[5] the volume and quality of whose response, save for simply reading, matters not a wit. Because fame is happenstance, the wit must matter (as must the occasional transcendent glimpse[6]) first to the poet—and then to that audience fortunate enough to encounter him.

In this vein, Stokes recommends (aptly via the village sexton)Thomas Gray "To blunt the anguish of that coming day."[7] Gray's fame rests largely on his *Elegy* about the country churchyard where, but for connections ensuring a public, he'd have been buried. Instead he lies in Poet's Corner, Westminster, and deservedly so. For every lauded one, the elegist opines, there might exist who knows how many "mute inglorious Milton[s]"[8]. One of these could turn up anywhere—say, in Springfield, such that his muteness becomes relative. The test inheres in his talent for "liven[ing] worlds that truth disowns."

The specter of Percival Sharp, thought by some *his* author's double, issues a similar envoi:

> It is all very well, but for myself I know
> I stirred certain vibrations in Spoon River
> Which are my true epitaph, more lasting than stone.[9]

Stokes duly redeems his noted indebtedness to Edgar Lee Masters. The technique of interlocked narratives, comprising "panels" or "trypticks" to tell a tale or limn a theme,[10] Stokes has mimed, even to the point of adapting the masterplot that loosely synthesizes the *Anthology*. Of course, a tyrant's immoral mortgage over a town rings familiarly in any era—though his subsequent comeuppance is rarely sounded, as it is in both texts. (And in neither *Spoon River* nor *Bethel Grove* have the villains the undeserved dignity of closure: Ralph Rhodes' legacy is quashed by his dipsomaniac son; all that attests to the Tarr family name is a park "catty-corner from the Dairy Queen."[11]) Stokes' telling names, far less loaded than Masters', wear better. Instead of Margaret Fuller Slack, Jonathan Swift Somers, and their overdetermined ilk, Arnold (namesake of another moralizing pedagogue) Sasser teases the town folk—notably Arthur Cowan (not Conan), D. Litt. (not Doyle; and Dr., not Sir), who is asked to unmask Bethel's bard. Cowan characteristically clues us in as he declines surmise:

> The Sasser *nom de plume* may cloak a crank
> Whose idiot savant's a fiction too.
> Rather than spend our time wondering who
> Composed this quasi-literary prank,
> Take it for what it seems, *the poet's frank*
> Yet timeless sketch—his prairie Xanadu.
> (Arthur Cowan, D. Litt., 3-8)

Yet this subtler playing (I took the liberty to italicize) points again to Frank Stokes' craft. Even his hokey names have melodious torque, compared with which "Hod Putt," "Ida Chicken," "Judge Selah Lively," etc. betray the stand-up comic in Masters. Indeed, "Tolliver Brink, the Brakeman" of Stokesville recalls, in rhyme and clinking syllables, E.A. Robinson's poemscape: Tilbury, home to Reuben Bright and Miniver Cheevy.

The similar approach along with like prosodic concerns make comparison with Robinson (usually the more cryptic, though not so in this sonnet) inevitable:

> Because he was a butcher and thereby
> Did earn an honest living (and did right),
> I would not have you think that Reuben Bright
> Was any more a brute than you or I;
> For when they told him that his wife must die,
> He stared at them, and shook with grief and fright,
> And cried like a great baby half that night,

> And made the women cry to see him cry.
> And after she was dead, and he had paid
> The singers and the sexton and the rest,
> He packed a lot of things that she had made
> Most mournfully away in an old chest
> Of hers, and put some chopped-up cedar boughs
> In with them, and tore down the slaughter-house.
>
> Better than most, old Walt could read the skies
> And sense what coming season's storms would bring—
> The wood he cut each fall sufficed till spring
> And never did a flood evoke surprise.
> He'd hold back planting at an east wind's rise
> And speed his harvest if the ducks took wing
> Beneath a moon that wore a ghostly ring—
> Tomorrow's world alive before his eyes.
>
> So when senility struck down his wife,
> He left the fields and tended Rose until
> He was himself a stranger to her sight.
> Then Walt, who'd learned from farming all his life
> To gauge a winter by the darkened chill,
> Took leave with Rose through Smith and Wesson's light.[12]

Each piece yields a catalogue of little excellences. To name a few: *their initial complexity* (ought one to think Bright not a brute *because* a butcher? Is Walt better than most *generally*?); *foreshadowing* (more concentrated in Stokes: "what coming season's storms would bring"); *irony* (again with Stokes, not only via the whole but compressed within a single line: "Tomorrow's world alive before his eyes"); *the needed narrative compression offset neatly by casual tone* ("For when they told him that his wife must die"; "So when senility struck down his wife"); *arresting imagery* (more concrete in Stokes: *contrast* "cried like a great baby, And made the women cry to see him cry," *to* "speed his harvest if the ducks took wing Beneath a moon that wore a ghostly ring"); felicitous phrasing (Robinson's syncopated last four lines; Stokes' suggestive final pair). And as our subject adds an extra layer of meaning through allusion to "Mr. Flood's Party,"[13] another piece by Robinson is retrospectively enriched. Superimpose "Took leave with Rose through Smith and Wesson's light" upon:

> So on we worked, and waited for the light,
> And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
> And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
> Went home and put a bullet through his head.[14]

Eliot found it "not preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past." According to Eliot, too, "there is no competition—There is only the fight to recover what has been lost."[15] This comparative exercise aimed simply to reiterate that Frank Stokes, however unrecognized he remains, belongs with E.A. Robinson among poetry's elite.

Stokes consolidates that membership by recovering the lost art of the couplet. Given the sonnet type he prefers—a traditional Petrarchan, where the quatrains within the octave (abb*a*/*a*bba), and sometimes 'twixt octave and sestet (abbaabb*a*/*ac*ca), link; yet compassing within the Italianate pattern an English close (*dd*):—given this hybrid form (likewise favored by Donne), more coupletings accrue than would normally in sonnets.[16] The rhymes connecting sections also facilitate furthering thought beyond artificial quatrain bounds. Hence, Stokes operates paradoxically—though additional couplets increase chances for 'poetic effects,' the compounded semantic units approximate conversation:

> The first tornado or the last hard freeze—
> I mark the dates in records that I keep,
> No wind too cold, no snow too deep
> To calculate in inches or degrees.
> I'm partial to a good storm, one where trees
> Are tossed and barns leveled by winds that sweep
> The prairie clean, howling while churchmen sleep—Better the
> Real than dreams that slyly tease. (“Phineas Fletcher,” 1-8)

We can read the last line as Stokes' prosodic credo. Heeding what Wordsworth decreed, but confessed could not always follow,[17] he elicits lyricism *intrinsic* to common language.

That effect is rendered metrically as well. The iambic pattern is modeled on actual speech.[18] Just occasionally alter the foot—substitute two spondees and two trochees, in this passage ("good storm"; "barns leveled"; "howling"; "Better")—and the poetry becomes apparent.

Yet familiar diction and rhythm notwithstanding, a couplet, especially the final one, often sounds sententious. Stokes unabashedly turns this to advantage, enhancing his idiom—most notably, when descanting on art:

> Here are the lives whose patterns *Sasser* rhymed
> ...
> Wandering shadows of another day,
> Untangled strands that once were macramé.
>
> (“Prologue: Gary Bullock, 9.13-14)

—or (as witnessed):

> If verse can liven worlds that truth disowns,
> No epitaph need grace the poet's bones.

Even there, however, the "If...[then]" rhetorical paradigm intimates plain-spokenness. And of course macramé is plied by grandmothers.

Two members of that citizenry (one a would-be grandmother—"How sacred should a barren union be?"—) summarize in their last couplets Frank Stokes' situation:

> If luck is all, then God's a metaphor
> Who rolls the dice and lets the cash keep score.
> (Madge Puckett)
>
> Our shaky hopes contend with brutal fact.
> What good's a new deal if the deck is stacked?
> (Isabelle Brach)[19]

Dropping names as Stokes does rhymes, this essay maintains that the (actual) author of *The Village Daybook* could just as well be well-known. Chance or fate might continue to dictate otherwise; but like fictive towns, aesthetic economies own the advantage of profiting anyone engaged therein. "Wayfarers" will find a "good...deal" to celebrate in *Bethel Grove*.[20]

Notes

[1] Letter to *The Amherst Student*, printed in the issue of 25 March 1935. Reprinted in Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1973) 113. The import of Frost's particular locution, vis-a-vis "falling back upon," cannot be overemphasized regarding either his work or Stokes'. For both poets, form functions first as impetus, then contains; among form's contents: forms. *Contrast* the postmodern stance expressed by Creeley (quoted by Olson): "Form is never more than an extension of content" ("Projective Verse" [1950] *Postmodern American Poetry: The Norton Anthology*, ed. Paul Hoover [1994] 614)

[2] Frank Stokes, *Bethel Grove: Sonnets from "The Village Daybook"* (Springfield, IL: Golden Bell, 2002) 1.

[3] Stokes, "Prefatory Note" to *Bethel Grove*. There, and in a fine piece by Corrine Frisch, which initiated more recognition, he acknowledges Masters' influence. (*See* Frisch, "Fellow Traveler: Poet Frank Stokes breathes life into an imaginary town," *Illinois Times*, 28.39 [2003]: 6-7.)

[4] T.S. Eliot, "Reflections on 'Vers Libre'" (1917), *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (Orlando: Harcourt, 1975) 35.

[5] Cf. Emily Dickinson, Poem No. 441, 1-2, 5-6, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961) 211.
[6] Caught, e.g., in "Hilda Tanner"—

> The leaves desert the purple ash once more,
> To ride the west wind east and disappear (1-2)

—or by the prayer for "the pilgrim soul to climb To where the thunderheads blot out the skies" ("George Tansy," 7-8). [64, 117]

[7] "Arlen Crawford, Undertaker," 6-7 (68).
[8] Thomas Gray (1716-1771), *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, 59 (*The New Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1950*, chosen by Helen Gardner [1972] 444.)
[9] Edgar Lee Masters, "Percival Sharp," 25-27, *Spoon River Anthology* [1915] (New York: Signet, 1992) 155. May Swenson first identified Sharp's as Masters' epitaph, and in his foreword to *Spoon River* John Hollander concurs (xxiii).
[10] Hollander, "Introduction," xvii-xviii.
[11] Cf. Masters, "Ralph Rhodes," 132; Stokes' "Note" to "Agatha Tarr," 114.
[12] *Tilbury Town: Selected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Macmillan, 1953) 48; Stokes, "Walt Jasonby," *Bethel Grove*, 69. To reiterate, all sonnets voiced in third person are attributed to Christopher Baines, the young man "primed to write the songs of Bethel, set in epic strains" ("Arnold Sasser," 3-4)— until run down, apparently, by the suitably surnamed banker Ezra Tarr. Only Baines' *supposed amanuensis*, Sasser; and Tarr's *alleged* mistress, Dodie Breckenridge (Baines' aunt), *apparently* share with Tarr the knowledge of his guilt, for which the banker *seemingly* feels no compunction. That these references are of necessity couched with qualifiers underscores the refractions Stokes engenders. He built a marvelous instrument to satisfy his prose desires.
[13] "Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest moon
Again, and we may not have many more;
The bird is on the wing, the poet says. The resonant imagery underscores transience—more overtly, in Robinson, as a foreshadowing in Stokes. Perhaps illusion of a pair implicit in the "moon[’s] ghostly ring" owes something to the "two moons listening" in "Flood," during the most poignant passage in Robinson’s poem, reprising "silver loneliness" (ll. 47,45; *Tilbury Town*, 102)
[14] "Richard Cory," *Tilbury Town*, 38,102.
[15] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), in Eliot's *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932) 5; "East Coker," second of Eliot's *Four Quartets* (V.186), *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980) 128.
[16] In the most recent version (one hopes more shall come a la Whitman’s *Leaves*) 115 of the 121 'Italian' sonnets feature three quatrains and a couplet. Hence, though only five of the 126 (coincidentally the number comprising the Bard’s first sequence) are set in Shakespearean mode (abab cdcd efefgg), a pronounced

'British' structure is ghosted into the sequence. Like any aficionado, Stokes capitalizes on the varied rhetorical options posited by the explicit and implicit structuring. As the sonnets are supposedly selected *from The Daybook*, we might surmise behind the Sasser ruse a larger pool of pieces actually withheld from the anthology. These would warrant study for, among other reasons, gauging Stokes' rationale behind including a predominant model. Absent knowledge about a larger oeuvre, I would venture that the greater rhyming opportunities influenced his decision.

[17] It is too oft ignored that Wordsworth conceded thus in his famed "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). Though the poet "aspires to adopt the very language of men," his idiom "must in liveliness and truth, fall far short of that which is uttered...in real life, under the actual pressure of...passions" (*The Oxford Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill [1984] 600, 604). Wordsworth recognized tonal modulation as essential:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
> Little we see in nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
> This sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
> The winds that will be howling at all hours,
> And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
> For this, for everything, we are out of tune; (207)

Lines 5-7 transcend the prior homely utterance that stays "too much with" the world wherein common discourse functions. Even so, the inversion and archaism in the first quatrain challenge the notion that "verse...that can say anything...will not be 'poetry' all the time. It will only be 'poetry,'" Eliot continues, "when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance" ("Poetry and Drama," *On Poetry and Poets* [London: Faber and Faber, 1957] 74). Wordsworth's verses demonstrate gradations between the "intensely," and more mildly, poetic. Yet his prosodic ideal is shared by Stokes, who intended *Bethel Grove* as "a book of poetry for people who do not ordinarily read poetry at all" (quoted by Frisch [7]). His lyric idiom is always manifest though often self-effacing: analogous to guest-rooms primped with "feed-sack curtains for the homey touch." Yet Stokes need but slightly intensify his lighting to elevate the text:

> Add some paint, a new linoleum floor,
> Some feed-sack curtains for the homey touch—
> Don't have to make it seem a fine hotel.
> *Wayfarers in a strange land don't need much.*
> "Martha Bateman," 11-14; e.a.)

[18] Argued by John Thompson, drawing on the study of linguists G.L. Trager and H.L. Smith, in Thompson's *Founding of English Metre* (London: Routledge and

Kegan Paul, 1966) 1-14. This is not the space, nor does a Note provide enough space, to synopsize Thompson's "Introduction," the most helpful piece on prosody I've encountered. Suffice to say that the "severe[ly] or mild[ly] strained state of mutual relations between metrical pattern and language" (13) does indeed appear the lynchpin of verse, once Thompson has cogently explicated that tension.

[19] Both surnames *Brach* and *Puckett* instance Stokes' penchant for apt yet subtle punning.

[20] What Martha Bateman calls her tenants. As she runs a guest-house; as her sonnet follows the four-piece prologue; and as Stokes always writes purposefully, readers can identify themselves as "Wayfarers" in *Bethel Grove*. One's genuine sojourn there recalls the aim of "Poetry" expressed by Marianne Moore, in terms of "real toads" in "imaginary gardens" (*The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair [1980], 422).

EPILOGUE

STOKES AMONG THE PIG POETS

Those who know Kit Stokes usually appreciate, even when slightly rankled by, his dry, downright crotchety at times, candor. Granting that temperament, and lest I be derided for bardolatry in titling this essay "Stokes among the Masters," I add the following—which actually continues lauding the poet. This extra piece of text allows room for mentioning his name once more among notables, two who penned extraordinary lines concerning pigs. In *The Norton Anthology of Pig Poetry*, with Plath ("Sow"[1]) and David Lee (*The Porcine Canticles*)[2], include four sonnets from *Bethel Grove*.

Very early on, "Floyd Henry" starkly sets the tone for town folk enduring the 1930's:

> I never held my hand out on the street
> Or begged for scraps down at the butcher's shop.
> And though we never had to taste the slop,
> There's nothing on a hog we didn't eat. (4-8)

The macabre wit grafted upon homespun cadence in lines 7-8 almost overshadows the horrific implication of the comments juxtaposed. Though Stokes, via the first half of the quatrain, won't let pass the comparison of pig to man dehumanized—maybe even "butcher"ed, a phantom metaphor suggests. That last impression is soon realized:

> "Although I counseled her," the pastor said,
> "My vows forbid that I betray a trust."
> Then he in God's house knelt and bowed his head,
> Praying at length for those consumed by lust.
> That night, despite such holy monologues,
> Tim slew them both and fed them to the hogs.
> (9-14)

The Marcus murders counterpoint the exploits of Ezra Tarr (who, in addition to [plausibly] crushing Christopher Baines, may have set his mill

on fire to collect the insurance). Yet the plots coincide less because of Tim Marcus, maddened by cuckoldry, than due to Pastor Ullsvik, Tarr's pious *doppelganger*, the seducer of

Mrs. Marcus. Ullsvik's hypocrisy is betrayed in the brutal couplet; and also *by* the couplet's caustic rhyming of events.[3]

On a lighter note, where the humor keeps the moral from sounding heavy-handed, *the Countess LeBlanc* of all people alludes thus:

> I first met Fran at Blair Academy,
> Where we were "flaming youth" personified.
> Seeking what bourgeois dreams seldom supplied,
> We swore we'd live in France, where souls are free.
> Pierre was sweet but soon walked out on me,
> Leaving me wealthy—but unsatisfied.
> I wed a count in Monaco who died,
> His title now my social pedigree.
>
> Traveling to the coast, I stopped to see
> How Fran had fared in Bethel with her Link.
> O, ignorant contentment! They must think
> My days a round of empty repartee.
> And yet no chef in Paris or New York
> Could match her feast of roasting ears and pork.

Fran Mason is, twice over, unwittingly triumphant with the help of hog: her cuisine trumps dishes served in capitals of the world—and she lives "content"ed with "her Link" while the Countess blankly languishes.

"Luke Hoggett" challenges the claim that Stokes subtly name-plays. Yet one hesitates to fault the poet, who would rather not poke fun at Luke, just simply use him as a naive spokesman:

> Take Whitcomb Riley, yes, and Eddie Guest,
> Their poetry's the kind you can't forget. (10)

Indeed, neither can Stokes be forgotten—by those who never read him.

Notes

[1] *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992) 60-61.

[2] Lee resembles Stokes in lyrically chronicling rural life, and in relative anonymity. Lee is, however, published by Copper Canyon Press. *A Legacy of Shadows: Selected Poems* ([1999] which includes the *Canticles*) was followed by *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (2000), a poem with novelistic scope that those who enjoy *Bethel Grove* would also like.

[3] Pastor and banker graphically square off on facing pages (16-17). In his sestet, Tarr derides Ullsvik. Though ascribable to turning the other cheek, the absence of like reproach on Ullsvik's part heightens disappointment in the minister—especially when one learns *he* harangues young Baines' father, the village atheist. The impression of weak teaming with strong to bully the unfortunate tempers any sympathy we harbor toward Ullsvik who, unlike Tarr, is consumed by guilt. Narrative dynamics such as those marked here rifle throughout *Bethel Grove*, as through *Spoon River*.

Stokes, Frank. ***Bethel Grove: Sonnets from "The Village Daybook."*** **Springfield, IL: Golden Belle Press. 2002.**

Gary Bullock, Ed., The Bethel Grove Weekly Sentinel

These unsigned sonnets blushed unseen for years,
Hidden among the curiosities
The *Weekly Sentinel* suppressed on pleas
That privacy outvalued needless jeers.
But three score years have passed, and ancient fears
Seem petty now, for satellite TVs
Air scandals of the world's celebrities
In Bethel's living rooms – with comic sneers.

The author of these poems, courting fame,
Used every stratagem in Master's plot.
The book claims "Arnold Sasser" wrote the lot,
But village rolls show no one by that name.
Plainly, the times today are less restrained –
Those families *omitted* have complained.

— 1998

***

The sonnets which make up *The Village Daybook* were mailed to the *Sentinel* throughout the 1930's, as few as seven in some years and as many as twenty in others. The submissions seem to have dried up in the summer of 1941. – G.B.

Arnold Sasser

When Christopher, the son of Martha Baines,
Was struck and left for dead that snowy night,
We lost the poet who was primed to write
The songs of Bethel, set in epic strains.
Beside his bed I sensed a mind in chains
And read to him from Keats and Frost— despite
The empty stare, the absence of delight,
One day a random spark repaid my pains.

By winking as I traced the alphabet,
He spelled out poems— and this world awoke!
An *idiot savant* who never "spoke"
Except in sonnets, fully formed and set,
He sketched a phantom village in his mind.
Inspired, I voiced the rest as I divined.

***

The few sonnets attributed to Christopher Baines were all written in the third person. If we are to credit the last line above, the bulk of the poems —those written as first person testimonials—are the work of Sasser. Neither Martha Baines, who died in 1972, nor anyone else in Bethel ever mentioned her son's purported abilities in composition. – G.B.

Arthur Cowan, D. Litt.

When Gary Bullock pressed me for my view
Of Bethel's Sonneteer, I drew a blank.
The Sasser *nom de plume* may cloak a crank
Whose idiot savant's a fiction too.
Rather than spend our time wondering who
Composed this quasi-literary prank,
Take it for what it seems, the poet's frank
Yet timeless sketch—his prairie Xanadu.

He married happily and then got old-
That's all that Sasser tells us of himself.
As well pretend some grim shoemaker's elf
Or rumpled gnome spun gossip into gold.
If verse can liven worlds that truth disowns,
No epitaph need grace the poet's bones.

Prologue: Gary Bullock, 1998

By nineteen forty-one the village thought
The times had eased. But when the draft board sent
The young men overseas, the people spent
Their days lamenting changes time had wrought.
Traditions disappeared, and all were caught
Up by the new. The young came to resent
The rigid rules, and in their discontent
They would not keep their place as they were taught.

Here are the lives whose patterns *Sasser* rhymed
In simpler days, a timeless tangled lot
That but for art displays no single plot
Beyond the petty spats here pantomimed—
Wandering shadows of another day,
Untangled strands that once were macramé.

***

The Village Daybook begins with the next entry. I have appended a C.B. to those sonnets which Sasser attributes to Christopher Baines. Because Franklin Tarr, the editor to whom the poems were originally sent, discarded the post-marked envelopes, I have had to make my own arrangement of the texts that follow. — G.B.

Chandler Fox, Minister

If handsome is as handsome does, then I—
Who always served the Lord—have done my best
To let humility be manifest
In me, for God— not Man— I glorify.
When He saw fit to let my Sharon die,
I came to Bethel on a sacred quest
And vowed to live alone, my soul half-blessed
By joys no lissome woman could supply.

With pies and smiles the single women flock
To hear me preach, drawn by a pretty face
And not by love of God— or of His grace—
Until I've half become a laughing stock.
Although we must to God our lives defer,
I could have served Him better uglier.

Pastor Ullsvik

I passed the Marcus place for the last time
One moondark August night after the trial,
And swear I felt her watching me, though I'm
A minister of God and lack the guile
To lie. Although she'd packed her bags, somehow
He knew. Domestic violence, they said.
Though whispers reached him, she had kept our vow
Of silence. Still, he killed them both and fled.

My headlights brushed the porch swing that we knew-
O sudden light! Can deep night ever hide
That lengthened shadow of our dead child's shoe,
That open door, that chilling dark inside?
Although it burned last night, the tale's not done.
Their pain has ended. Mine has just begun.

Ezra Tarr, the Banker

Take one look at Bethel. What do you see?
This town would blow away but for my bank.
As for the ministers, I ask pointblank:
“If someone has to lead, then why not me?"
Cut out the crap of civic sanctity!
The sewer fund is sound. And, to be frank,
It wasn't Hoover's fault the markets sank
While Al Smith's Democrats got off scotfree.

The folks who want to fund a village dole
Elected Parson Ullsvik to the board
That's set to raise the taxes on my stock.
Ullsvik, that hypocrite who talks of soul!
They say Sue Marcus, when they cut the cord,
Called loudest for *the parson*— not the Doc!

Dodie Breckenridge

They found young Baines half-buried in the snow
Out front, the car that struck him nowhere round.
He never walked again or made a sound,
And yet his stare rebukes the world I know.
For Ezra left my bed that night aglow
With gin to race the blizzard, homeward-bound.
I thought it strange a banker so renowned
For thrift would trade his car that week below
The market price.

But poor girls have to live.
We chatted at the bank, for *auld lang syne*,
About discretion— and the need to give:
He signed the deed and, lo, this house was mine!
In joy my newborn soul last fall arose.
Glory to God, from whom forgiveness flows!

Joe Baines

Ullsvik, I said, when you explain the soul,
A wispy cloud is all that meets the eye
To represent the thing that cannot die-
That through eternal phlogiston must roll.
My son's a broken thing that once was whole:
He sits in silence, stares and drools. What lie
Of heavenly desserts dare codify
As fact that stuff which Hebrew myths extol?

One world at a time is enough for me.
That mystery's no mystery at all
Whose easy answer walks on Galilee
Unthreatened by the depths toward which we fall,
Though my son lives, he's cousin to the dead:
Whatever I'd call *soul* has long since fled.

Ruth Baines

I married Joe, the village atheist
Whose gentle heart had never learned to hate.
And when our only son was struck by fate
And left a broken wretch, we both dismissed
The judgment of my sisters, who insist
That his persistent vegetative state
Was caused by sins we must repudiate.
How fools do prate and play the catechist!

I was the Breckenridge who loved one man.
My sister Nancy croons that God is fair
And *won't* inflict more grief than you can bear,
While wanton Dodie, reborn, mocks God's plan.
Joe thinks if Chris once *had* a soul, it's free.
I know it's trapped inside— and cannot fle