

TRINACRIA

Poems, Translations, Essays, Reviews



Issue No. 1

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TRINACRIA

Voulant des clartés, vous en faites.

—Charles Maurras

*δίξημαι δ', ὅτινι θνατῶν κεχαρισμένος ἔνθω
σὺν Μοῖσαις·*

I am going to seek out among mortals to whom I
may come with the Muses, and be welcome.

—Theocritus XVI, 68-69

TRINACRIA

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APOLOGIA PRO TRINACRIA

Does the world need another poetry journal?

In the blizzard of print that engulfs us, the immediate answer would seem to be No. One real problem today is that much good poetry is simply lost in the shuffle, as thousands of amateur versifiers churn out text, and hundreds of editors rush to enshrine it in hard copy. As Ovid might say, the song of Orpheus is drowned out by the howls of the maenads, and cannot be heard.

What has brought this about? Two events: the explosion in population growth, and the spread of universal education. We have more poetry because we have more people, and more and more of them are literate. And since the urge to poetry is innate, many persons are going to use the acquired tools of literacy to express themselves. It's as simple as that. In this sense, the current flood of bad poetry is an unforeseen consequence of a positive development. The spread of learning and literacy is a good thing, but one result is that we have a lot more chaff to sift through.

Of course, if bad poets merely filled up their rooms with reams of wretched verse, there would be no problem. We could leave them in the oblivion of Gray's Churchyard, unmourned, unremembered, and unpublished. Unfortunately, more and more worthless material sees the light of print. And that is the fault of editors.

I'm amazed that so many people who want to be editors of poetry magazines are lacking in the basic skills required for the task. Some of them can't spell. Some of them have no appreciation of good typography. Some of them can't write decent prose, or have only a sketchy grasp of English grammar. But most damaging of all, some of them have absolutely no literary sensibility in the traditional understanding of that phrase. They are not part of the world of humane letters, in the sense of being steeped in texts, and totally at home in language as a codified and ritualized product of long cultural development.

Instead, many of them think that editing a poetry magazine should be "fun," like a picnic or a barbecue or a tailgate party. These editors are happy and smiling. They burble with optimistic enthusiasm. They are "encouraging" and "positive," as if literature were a kind of therapy for mental defectives. Their countenances are plastered with good will and tolerance.

Such editors lack the severity, the asceticism, and the Apollonian coldness that are essential to the pursuit of high art. Poetry is an ancient craft, with a heritage that goes back for millennia. And even when poetry is being silly and rambunctious and Dionysian, it is still a holy endeavor not to be treated lightly. Editors who think that writing poetry is just another “lifestyle choice,” like aerobic exercise or wife-swapping, don’t have a clue as to the importance of literature. And because of their innocence, they can’t normally distinguish a really good poem from a piece of fluff. They are “inclusive,” in that horrible way that only silly moderns can be, making their magazines a farrago of good, bad, and indifferent material. Hey, we’re *inclusive!* We must be good guys!

A general idea of what underlies this magazine’s aesthetics can be found in the Statement of Principles that appears at the end of this issue. In art all rules are rules of thumb, so there isn’t anything in that Statement that need be taken as carved in granite. When it is necessary to be flexible, I will be so. But under no circumstances will TRINACRIA be the sort of amorphous, open-ended, ungrounded *potpourri* of confused elements that many editors believe is essential in our time. The world of contemporary poetry is indeed a bewildering multiverse, but the little *cosmion* of TRINACRIA is going to be its own well-defined universe.

TRINACRIA will include only poems that, in my view, are precisely crafted verbal artifacts. I don’t apologize for my tastes, nor do I expect them to be shared by everyone. My sole concern is to provide an outlet for those poems that I find pleasing, and to put them into the relative permanence of print. For this reason, publication in the magazine is by invitation only.

One final note: the poetry published in TRINACRIA is chosen according to my criteria of aesthetic excellence, and nothing else. No poet is discriminated against on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic or national origin, or political viewpoint. I make no judgment whatsoever as to a poem’s content, which in any case is merely one more factor in its rhetorical structure. These editorial decisions are made by myself, and are not subject to discussion. If there is anything in TRINACRIA that you dislike, do not write to me about it. Simply read a different magazine.

Joseph S. Salemi
Woodside, New York

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Charles Baudelaire

The Setting of the Romantic Sun

How splendid at its dawn the sun can seem,
With its explosion flinging forth good-day;
And happy he who lovingly can say
Its setting is more glorious than a dream.

I've seen how every flower, rut, and spring
Beneath his gaze swooned like a racing heart...
Let's run towards the horizon—quick now, start
And catch the final ray that's lingering.

But see the god I chase in vain retire;
Resistless Night erects its own empire
Where foetid, deadly, dismal dark prevails;

Sepulchral smells float up in the dense fog
And my foot, at the margin of the bog,
Hits unexpected toads and soft, cold snails.

—Translation from the French by Helen Palma

Charles Baudelaire

The Pit

Even Pascal was haunted by depression.
It's all abyss—desire, action, dream,
Words too! And often through my hair I seem
To feel the breath of terror's dread progression.

Up, down and all around are depths and desert,
Silence, hideous mesmerizing space...
Within the night God's expert fingers trace
An endless nightmare, multiform and wretched.

For as one fears a crater dark and deep
And filled with horrors, so I fear to sleep,
Infinity through every window seeing.

My mind over its giddiness obsesses,
Jealous of the calm the void possesses,
O, no escape from Number and from Being!

—Translation from the French by Helen Palma

Carolyn Raphael

Lexicon

The explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveler that which has been discovered by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of mass publicity.

—Paul Fussell, *Abroad: Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (1980)

So what if brave Balboa, not Cortez,
stood breathless on the peak in Darien.
The prize was the Pacific, as Keats says,
that silenced the explorer and his men.

Surveying the Acropolis is thrill
enough to satisfy the traveler's thirst,
and though explorers may unearth the well,
the second cup refreshes as the first.

Even the tourist, that much-maligned buffoon,
weighed down by cameras for a photo-op,
will thank the air for Capri's lemon bloom
before descending on the souvenir shop.

The ghosts of London's Tower, fountains of Rome
transform those voyagers who bring them home.

J.B. Sisson

Winter Solstice

At three o'clock the sun is low.
Our old sheepdog is very slow.
For him the gentle slope is steep,
but now the red ants are asleep
and the north wind has fallen still
as we walk up this forest hill.
The smooth and shaded rocks are mossed
and intricately starred with frost.

We haven't been here since last May.
Can you smell winter on the way?
Gray-faced, deaf, lame, you wag your tail,
deciphering scent clues on the trail,
though we can't know what news you find.
You limp ahead, you lag behind,
investigating everything.
Will you be here with us come spring?

Mark Allinson

Diagnostic

They speak today of pheromones and genes
When trying to account for such a state
Most often seen in young folk, in their teens
Or in their twenties, signalling a mate.
They would not think a man turned fifty-eight
Should be a candidate for such a blast
Of chemicals, or genes, or luck, or fate,
To blow him forty years back to his past.
His family and friends would be aghast
To hear their wrinkled sage bay at the moon
And warble that he'd found "the one" at last,
And call him "fool," or worse, "romantic loon."
But they don't know because they were not there
To breathe the lethal darkness of your hair.

Jennifer Reeser

from Sonnets from the Dark Lady (12)

“Thus, vainly thinking that she thinks I’m young...”

My love, lured by the mirror, stands erect,
Adjusts his collar band, cufflink and tie,
Assessing fit and finish, to reflect
On what will break before it speaks a lie:
This looking glass which will, when I undress,
Have been a witness for the unforeseen.
Some seeing us in love together guess
My love to be the elder, I the green
And younger—this *gamine*, his preening lass;
Though greater years have weighted me with curses,
And as attested by this looking glass
Vouching for truth, even while it reverses,
So vision would be blindness to surmise
I am not veteran, lying winter-wise.

Samuel Maio

Fleeing the Night

Her Furies pursue in coldest of nights.
She closes her eyes but doesn't lose sight
of needle-toothed worms tunneling her bowels
or cloven-hoofed swarms infesting her brow.

She's tired of running, she can't slow down,
they're slashing her neck, they're hissing their sounds,
she beats her ears crimson, she bites through her tongue.
No one to hear her, she screams out her lungs.

Now winged demons knit webs closing her throat.
She suffocates on a bed of soiled clothes
while flying monkeys, more real than Oz,
busy her crying brain, wrapping in gauze

the bleeding images of the car crash
she witnessed—her daughter unconscious, flashes
of red lights, her pleas, the ambulance ride...
her legs go numb, she cannot breathe or mind

her thoughts racing through the darkest of nights.
Her eyes stay open, she confronts the sight
of what *is*: alone on a distant shore,
a mother whose daughters left years before.

She has no money, no one to care or call.
What were her crimes? She's done nothing at all,
yet haunted to run through the night's cold streets.
She flees her Furies. Her Furies are fleet.

Peter Austin

Sport

Sport is French slang for sex; *blouser* is slang for prostitute.

When Gilles was young, he played the field
Like anglers play with fishes,
And few there were who failed to yield,
So well he guessed their wishes.

An opened door, a proffered arm,
His gallant way while speaking
Of mademoiselle's unequalled charm,
Secured what he was seeking.

From whom, he really didn't care
So long as she was slender,
With swelling breasts and *derrière*,
A showpiece of her gender.

But though his youth was trophy-hung,
As twenty closed on fifty
He slithered downward, rung by rung,
From debonair to shifty;

The arm he proffered dried and shrank,
His step, once peppy, faltered;
His teeth decayed, though (heartless prank!)
His taste remained unaltered.

He's eighty now, and stuck for *sport*
With squelchy-breasted blousers
Who eye-roll, while he fumbles for
The buttons on his trousers.

Juliana Beedy

The Wife's Lament

For my friend Rose R., with sincere condolences.

Good Lord, imagine my bad luck:
I'm married to a hockey puck.
I don't know how it came about—
A lover morphed into a lout!
You're a widow, not a wife,
When hockey is your husband's life.
In his world, only one thing's holy:
To get hard rubber past a goalie.
He's in a bar or at the rink
Explaining why the Rangers stink,
And when at last he gets back here,
Awash in stats and lager beer,
He won't help out with household chores
But only thinks of hockey scores,
And sits down in his easy chair
To face the TV set and stare
In unrelenting rapt attention.
If I so much as try to mention
Some other subject, he's enraged,
And screams "Not now! I am engaged!"

Alas, I can remember when
He had a different kind of yen.
In those days, when he thought of "scoring"
It was with me, and we went soaring
Up orgasmic heights of bliss.
Now? Forget it—he won't miss
A sports report or single play.
I lie there in my lingerie

Drenched in scent and looking hot.
Does he notice? He does not.
I recall some torrid nights
When he and I turned down the lights.
The steam that rose up from our sheets
Would rival Casanova's heats.
He didn't think of ice or skates
When we were on those early dates.
He played a different kind of game
With me, his one and only dame.
He wielded something hard and thick,
And I don't mean a hockey stick.

Margaret Menamin

Poets Should Not Get Married

Poets should not get married, God forbid.
That's my opinion, and I'll tell you what:
If any poet tried to date my kid
I'd fill his backside full of BB shot.
A well-versed marriage doesn't stand a chance:
Poets believe in love but not the altar
and, after the initial song and dance,
one or the other's going to slip the halter.

Just look at Ted and Sylvia; think Millay
who must have kept a pencil by her bed
for taking notes and keeping score. I say
a poet has no business being wed.
When pragmatists and sonneteers keep house
somebody's going to end up as a louse.

Margaret Menamin

Snow Does Not Honor Boundaries

Snow does not honor boundaries. Today
the sun rose on my section line; tonight
the world outside my windows has gone white,
and seamless synthesis is under way.
There is no marker now. No ridge. No line
of separation. All division's gone.
I own the woods beyond my land, and on
and on—the trees are mine, the pond is mine!

Each unrelenting flake delays the dark
and widens my dominion. You will see:
Tomorrow morning I will stake my claim
with footprints through the forest that will mark
how certainly these woods belong to me
as if they wore a signboard with my name.

T.S. Kerrigan

Getting It Wrong at the Saturday Matinee

For all their grandiose effects,
The fifties movies never gave
The least presentiments of sex.

They inculcated in my youth
The *summum bonum* was the kiss;
It stood for beauty, stood for truth,

That celluloid preemptive mean,
Bacall's or Dietrich's tempting lips,
Depicted on the silver screen.

But local girls were hit and miss,
And not a Bergman in the bunch
To satisfy with just a kiss.

I fantasized at matinees
My dates with mouths like odalisques,
But all I got were Doris Days.

On furtive drive-in rendezvous,
I gleaned the facts from girls next door
In poodle skirts and saddle shoes.

I learned the greater happiness
Was not as I was told in films,
But lay beneath a girlish dress.

But art has mirrors of its own,
Replacing *grandes dames* of my youth
With Demi Moore and Sharon Stone.

Among the first to turn the page
From years of false virginity,
They ushered in a scabrous age.

We go to films to get a glance
Of too familiar nudity
Physicians surgically enhance.

From picture house to multiplex,
From reticence to show and tell,
The movies go it wrong on sex.

Jared Carter

Cairn Submerged

It is still there, beneath the surface, known
To those who lived here once. When forced to leave,
To mark the place, each brought a single stone—

From bare foundations, sallow gardens strown
With geodes, fields where earth and boulders cleave.
It is still there, beneath the surface, known

To those who could accept but not condone
Such loss. Who sought a way, rather than grieve,
To mark the place. Each brought a single stone—

Mechanic, teacher, dairy farmer, crone,
Small daughter clinging to her father's sleeve.
It is still there beneath the surface, known,

Although the path is steep, and overgrown.
Out far, across the lake, no willows weave
To mark the place. Each brought a single stone.

In April, clouds of sandhill cranes, flown
For a thousand miles, rest on the waves. Believe
It is still there, beneath the surface, known.
To mark the place, each brought a single stone.

Michael R. Burch

Discrimination

The meter I had sought to find, perplexed,
was ripped from books of “verse” that read like prose.
I found it in sheet music, in long rows
of hologramic CDs, in sad wrecks
of long-forgotten volumes undisturbed
half-centuries by archivists, unscanned.
I read their fading numbers, frowned, perturbed—
why should such antique artistry be banned?

I heard the sleigh bells’ jingles, vampish ads,
the supermodels’ babble, Seuss’s books
extolled in major movies, blurbs for abs...
But a few poor thinnish journals crammed in nooks
are all I’ve found this late to sell to those
who’d classify free verse “expensive prose.”

Richard Moore

Out There in Here

The sun nears the horizon in dark cloud,
turns the cloud purple, scatters golden aura
out underneath, and soon appears itself
beneath the cloud, whose edge, wildly aglitter—
the sun, though nearly set, scarcely diminished,
in clear atmosphere not bloody at all,
only a deeper yellow, so you think
almost to look at it (of course, you mustn't)
and think, down in you somewhere, it is human.
Of course, it isn't. It is still a god.

Under the cloud, the sky, a flood of gold
with that sun—where exactly is it?—there
lost in its brilliance as a man is lost
within himself in love's climactic moment.
Nearby a woman watches all this also.
I feel drawn to her, feel the wish to touch her.

Lee Slonimsky

Nothing

Green mirrored surface of a pond pretends
to be a window on another world
of thick-leaved trees, songbirds and passing clouds,
one slow day in July. But ripples whirl
bright water into white ripples, remind
you how the senses can deceive. A sky
like this heat-splashed one, shimmering, extends
well past your sight but don't believe your eyes:
damp air's the frailest wisp around a stone
and lava planet. Blank void rules beyond,
and even in your mist of flesh and bone,
where mostly empty atoms whir. An oak—
near-granite to the touch and calm as light—
is fleeting seethe of quark, muon despite
its lofty reign. Nothing's the way it looks.

Sally Cook

Music Lesson

Just once a year I still recall
The smell of smoke, and music stands.
Scarlet whirlwinds, golden fall
Of willow leaves, obscuring dim
Crowding rows of desks; our hands,

Grubby from the dusty hall,
Fold. We sing of other lands
That we may never see at all,
And dream of meadowlands that skim
Wavering, wind-spotted sands.

Upon those unknown shores, your call
Weaves all the lost, forgotten strands
Of memory, both large and small,
Together on that furthest rim
Where dreams remain and hope expands.

Beneath the soft, protective shawl
Of autumn with its brilliant bands,
Overhanging, seminal,
Lurks the future harsh and grim
With all it offers and demands.

Arthur Mortensen

Deadly Romance

The bandolier suggested murder
Although the lips, mustachioed, smiled.
The gentle gaze, too, failed to gird her
Against scarred hands torn from the wild.
Her confidence lay bare, unshielded
From polished boots and silver spurs.
His chaps against her thighs had yielded
Anxiety, the kind that blurs.

Despite his reassuring words,
His cocksure posture smashed his story,
A perfect pot broken to sherds;
She knew the outcome would be gory—
A moment's call for saving grace,
Then color bleeding from her face.

Malcolm Paige

The Do-Me Feminist Speaks

Our bodies for ourselves!

—Feminist watchword from the 1970s.

Of course I'm into action and its joys—
That's why I have this drawerful of cute toys
To give me pleasure when no guy's around.
But that's not often. Frankly, I have found
It doesn't take a lot of complex doing
To find a male who's keen to do some screwing.
A wink, a smile, a vague suggestive word,
And in a flash the animal is stirred.
God, it is so easy! Lick his ear,
And the guy's as rigid as a spear.
Feminism is a fight for freedom,
And some of us like horny men, and need 'em!
Cady Stanton, when she wasn't stumping
For female suffrage, did a lot of humping.
Simone de Beauvoir rode the dick of Sartre
While they were students living in Montmartre.
Dworkin? Please—the woman was a pill.
She thought sex was “oppression.” I get ill
When contemplating what that stupid bitch
Told normal girls who have a normal itch.
And Catharine MacKinnon? What a twat.
I seriously doubt she's gotten hot
For anything except a legal text.
In fact, it leaves me angry and perplexed
To think how feminism's gone astray
And dreamt up strictures on our modes of play.
Always be on top! Well, that's a crock—
I like it when a guy begins to rock
My world while holding all my four limbs pinioned.

And then there is the fatuous opinion
That says *Don't ever go down on his rod!*
Really? Look, I *like* it when his wad
Explodes inside my lips and makes a mess.
What's wrong with that? Hey, ladies—I confess
I don't mind backdoor entries if they're smooth.
A gentle, loving bugger helps to soothe
My nerves. So this is "treason" to our cause?
Well, I don't give a flying hump. No laws
Can tell us "do-me" girls how we should act.
Miss Goody-Two-Shoes feminists are cracked
If they think they can dictate how we fuck.
Those prim Vanilla Bambis better duck
If they try telling me the rules for sex.
Our bodies for ourselves! Our breasts, our necks,
Our legs and arms and pussies and our butts!
And sometimes we just want a guy who ruts
As hot and hard as we are. Does that shock?
So get your minds around it: *We like cock.*
And all you prissy cunts who are offended—
Well, that's your problem, sisters. Sermon ended.

David W. Landrum

Achilles Contemplates Briseis

The battlefield I carry in my heart
knew peace—or truce—a while after the war,
tearing of flesh, death-cries, clatter and dust,
the thirst, fatigue, the splash of blood and brain.
The war that slew my spirit for a time,
in a foray where my vaunted battle-strength
availed me nothing—when Patroclus died—
ceased as the night drew on. The virgin moon
rose full above the waters of the sea,
casting a bridge of white etched on the roll
of darkening waves, the calm, soothing wind-rush,
sand cool between my toes as I came back
to seek the rest and safety of my tent.

She lies, as white as Phoebe's breasts, as pure
as Artemis, though gentle, dove-like, soft.
The darkness of my chamber, of my bed,
cannot unlight her presence, cover up
the glory of her body's eidolon;
a goddess in potential, manifest
divinity. My mother was divine,
the Silver-footed Thetis, who could skirt
the depths, and ask Hephaestus to make
a shield for me. This night I could mistake
this mortal woman as Elysian, form
as sacred as a sacred fire, our room
become a holy place. Tonight the siege
is lifted. I sat with my enemy,
the aged Priam, and the encircling foes
who ring my soul even in victory,
withdrew down to their ships and raised their sails
for home. I take Briseis in my arms
(the poltroon, Agamemnon let her be).
Peace, lovemaking and plowing—thoughts so dim,
so distant, they are dreams. Thus war grows still,
within, without, before it starts again.

Leo Yankevich

Moonshine, 1969

Grandpa had a gambler's poker face,
though grandma held the tattered deck of cards.
We crossed the bridge in Wheatland, and then raced
by Dunbar Slag, and two scrap metal yards.
Old Bill was sleeping near his pit-bull Pug,
but woke when he caught ear of grandpa's voice.
They went inside, then came out with a jug
of what Old Bill called "Pennsylvania's Choice."
They drank it like spring water, cold and pure,
reminisced about what two old fogies
had done for cash in 1924,
then grandpa smiled and said: "We'd better go."
Before we got back home he smoked two stogies,
stinky ones, so grandma wouldn't know.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Apollo's Archaic Torso

We have no knowledge of his ancient brow
where pippins ripen. Yet his torso gleams,
reflecting the candela, luminous streams
that yet pour from his gaze, his glance's glow

still radiant, though dimmed. If not, his bare
breast would not blind you in the silent turn
of hip and thighs, a smile not flash and burn
through groins, his genitals not ever glare.

If not, this stone would seem deformed and small,
the light beneath his shoulder's sudden fall
not seem a preying panther's shimmering mane,

not burst beyond the limits of the skies,
starlike, until there is no point or plane
blind to your ways. You must change your life.

—Translation from the German by Leo Yankevich

Mikhail Lermontov

The Dream

High noon in Dagestan, I lay marooned
In blistering heat, a bullet in my breast.
Smoke still rose in the valley from my wound
As drop-by-drop I watched blood flowing west.

I lay upon the loam of that strange land,
Cliffs closing in, the sun soon touching peaks,
Reaching past the mountain with its hand
To burn my dreaming brow and death-pale cheeks.

I dreamt I saw the flaming orb's bright glare
Feasting on poppies in my native parts,
And braided girls with flowers in their hair,
Recalling me with soft hands on their hearts.

But in the oaken table's hazy gleam
I saw another girl with half-crazed eyes.
She sat as if a captive in a dream,
Her stare the shade or shroud of starless skies.

She dreamt of that strange place in Dagestan,
Of smoke ascending over the black breast
Of a strange but somehow familiar man
As drop-by-drop he watched blood flowing west.

—Translation from the Russian by Leo Yankevich

Adam Mickiewicz

The Castle Ruins at Balaklava

These castles, whose remains are strewn in heaps for miles,
Once graced and guarded you, Crimea the ungrateful!
Today they sit upon the hills, each like a great skull
In which reptiles reside or men worse than reptiles.

Let's climb a tower, search for crests upon worn tiles,
For an inscription or a hero's name, the fateful
Bane of armies now forgotten by the faithful,
A wizened beetle wrapped in vines below the aisles.

Here Greeks wrought Attic ornaments upon the walls,
From which Italians would cast Mongols into chains,
And where the Mecca-bound once stopped to pray and beg.

Today above the tombs the shadow of night falls,
The black-winged buzzards fly like pennants over plains,
As if towards a city ever touched by plague.

—Translation from the Polish by Leo Yankevich

Adam Mickiewicz

The Calm of the Sea

Upon the height of Tarkankut

The pennant at the crow's nest rises with the breeze,
Shafts of sunlight play upon the water's breast
As on a bride-to-be who wakes to sigh and rest,
And wakes again and sighs for dreams that better please.

On naked spars the banner-shaped sails hang at ease.
The vessel is in chains now, leese side facing west,
Lulled by slow rocking. Passengers lampoon in jest,
Swabbies sigh to one another, slapping knees.

Blithe Sea! Among your jolly living creatures is
The polyp, sleeping in your depths when dark clouds swarm,
Wielding longish arms amid each starfish grave.

Sweet dreams! Below a hydra of remembrances
Sleeps in the middle of mishaps and raging storm,
And when the heart is calm, its pincers flash and wave.

—Translation from the Polish by Leo Yankevich

Paul Christian Stevens

Totally Out There

Let's give up this mad love. I must admit
At last, it's too impossible for me!
Just straight improbable and I'd give it
A serious go—but this love's totally
Out there! The world's dead set against our being
United, or merely spending a little time
Together—even the simple act of seeing
You appears some kind of weirdo crime.
Fuck it. Let's call it quits and chuck it in—
The one thing that lends poetry and soul
To this forlorn existence—and let's then
Swear once and for all time to snuff the whole
Damn dream that makes my heart catch fire and race
Through realms of light when I look at your face.

Alfred Dorn

War Phantoms

The earth is mute no longer, nor asleep.
Now buried eyes and hands of our accusers
Lift from the cratered hills in angry bloom.
Through tidal whispers of new wheat we hear
A throb of fire. The wind is a lash of voices—
Voices of deaths too young for epitaphs.

In ocean caves where drowned men change to coral,
The coil of brittle sleep is cut by dreams
That raise long tentacles. Death cannot bind
The dead and bleach their memory like their bones.
Still tethered to the pulse of earth they move
As strangers in the continent of silence.

The sky flamed red with sudden immolations.
There men who shamed the eagle's flight have torn
The eyeball of the sun with steel and bone,
And left the burning shrapnel of their dreams
In the wide wounds of sunset and of dawn.

Through soil and wind and water seethes the curse
Of lips that cannot rest beneath the rock,
Of phantoms bidding the carrion nations taste
The vitriol of their blood in harvest gold.

From *Wine In Stone* (1959)

Alfred Dorn

Synesthesia

Adagios from the lips of horns disclose
The touch of Midas and Apollo's hair;
The syrup-gold of slumber-heavy stars;
October hills in leopard-soft repose.

Flutes bring flakes of laughter from a stream
Where bathers flash like sunlight turned to flesh.
Fifes are glittering blades of cold that carve
The year's first snow to palaces of cream.

Harp are tidal as the sun-flecked foam
Breaking in spiralled whispers on a shell;
And cellos drowsily brush the mind like bees
And drop their dreams as in a honeycomb.

Wreathing violins are redolent
With moonflowers blowing on Titania's tomb,
As all the strings combine and music flows
To colors, and each color flows to scent.

Melody builds a prism with perfumes
Of roses, lips, and breasts. The moment soars
On phoenix feathers wrought of musk and fire,
And rich beyond the rainbow's pomp of plumes.

From *Flamenco Dancer* (1959)

Joseph S. Salemi

Ex Cathedra

Some poets wallow in the mood
Of vagueness and incertitude.
They pride themselves on hesitation,
Nuanced grays, and vacillation.
They think that ambiguity
Is proof of true nobility,
And atmospheres of muddled murk
Add cachet to their highbrow work.
These little whining schmucks insist
On verse that's thick with fog and mist.
Their poems have the deadpan stare
Of some shrink sitting in a chair,
Stiff in unresponsive silence,
Unmoved by joy or grief or violence.

*Just an image—nothing more!
A dish of plums, an open door!
Some chickens by a red wheelbarrow,
A glance... a touch... a broken arrow!*

That's the way these assholes think.
They want to take you to the brink
Of some unspoken, vague suggestion
And leave you with a hanging question.
If you object "I just don't see..."
They'll answer with ferocity:

*It's questioning, and not conviction
That ought to shape poetic diction!
You have to leave things open-ended—
Not slammed shut, like a well defended
Fort, where every single entry
Is guarded by a zealous sentry!*

I've got news for these boring pricks:
The verse-game is a bag of tricks.
You reach inside, pull out a rabbit,
And then with practice, it's a habit.
But what you pull out must be clear
Of any smudge or blur or smear
That renders what you're saying cryptic,
Vaporous, oblique, elliptic,
Hazy, muddy, or uncertain.
You're there to PULL ASIDE the curtain
And not raise questions for debate.
Why write at all, unless to state
Straightforwardly the things you know?
To which these poets whisper low:

*Our art's a process wherein we
Seek to unfold dubiety.
We are uncertain and conflicted.
Our knowledge is unsure, restricted—
We have no liking or endurance
For dogmatism's self-assurance!*

And that's why navel-gazing tripe
Flourishes and waxes ripe
In all the little quarterlies
Like cherries hanging from the trees;
Why clouds of ghostly apparitions
Plague and haunt small press editions;
Why stupor and hypnotic coma
Give poetry a bad aroma.
How can poets break the spell?
Now hear this, and hear it well:
If you've got nothing clear to say
Just shut your trap and go away.
Argue doubts with God and men,
But don't pick up the sacred pen.

Passion In Numbers

by

Joseph S. Salemi

Review of: Lee Slonimsky, *Pythagoras In Love*

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Lee Slonimsky's *Pythagoras In Love* is an unusual book. A five-part sequence of forty-six sonnets, it records in rough outline the imagined thoughts and experiences of the Greek proto-mathematician Pythagoras of Samos, who believed that all reality could ultimately be understood as a reflection of number, proportion, and ratio. In addition to his work in philosophy and mathematics, Pythagoras founded a quasi-religious sect of the communistic-vegetarian variety, and underwent a number of vicissitudes in the course of a rather checkered career in Egypt, Greece, Babylonia, and Southern Italy.

It is serendipitously appropriate that a philosopher so dedicated to the archetypal force of number should be celebrated in these elegant and (for the most part) well crafted sonnets. Slonimsky writes a very firm iambic pentameter line, with minimal substitutions and absolute syntactic clarity. One senses that the harmonious proportion so loved by Pythagoras is consciously imitated here, as an act of homage to the Greek thinker. Most of the sonnets in *Pythagoras In Love* are Shakespearean or Petrarchan in form, especially in the earlier sections of the text; as the book progresses Slonimsky turns to more varied rhyme schemes, and in one case does not use iambic pentameter at all. But in general Slonimsky's patterns are solidly regular. Although his tendency towards indefensible slant rhymes like *lush/mist*, *truth/math*, and *air/soar* is annoying, it is not necessarily fatal to the success of these poems. They are eminently readable, and nicely polished in the way that literary works are supposed to be, and once usually were.

Pythagoras is thought to have derived some of his mathematical insights from the observation of birds in flight, and avian imagery abounds in this little book. Geese, gulls, crows, swans, swallows, larks, thrushes, nightingales, mockingbirds, and above all hawks flit through the text as if it were a bird sanctuary. Hawks were especially important to Pythagoras, as their elliptical swoops may have suggested numerical patterns to him, and of course there is the probably apocryphal story (it is mentioned in both Plutarch and Porphyry) that the philosopher was friendly with an eagle. After a while this bird-business gets tedious, but Slonimsky manages to keep the reader's interest through the sheer force of sophisticated language.

An example of Slonimsky at his very best is the sonnet "Warning," wherein Pythagoras is found in a forest, observing a snake and two hawks. I give it in full:

*The supple gleaming presence of this snake,
her midnight-colored, glistening thin coil,
observed this morning near the sun glazed lake,
unnerves Pythagoras; his daily toil
of studying birds' winged geometries,
the way they intersect with wind and light—
originating angles with the trees—
is halted by this primitive black sight.
But intellect soon subjugates his fear;
he pauses, patient, hoping for a move
expressing undulation. Now a pair
of hungry hawks is circling right above;
he warns the hunted snake, and off she goes;*

good use for language learned from cawing crows.

This is a perfect example of fine writing; it does everything a literary artifact should do. The language is rubbed to a high sheen, the register is suitably elevated, the imagery is lucid, the narrative is direct, and the structural conceit that governs the poem (saving a snake from predators by cawing like a crow) is both arresting and delightful. The poet has no Poundian fear of adjectives—there are seven of them in the first quatrain alone! As a sonnet it follows all the rules: even the turn is perfectly placed in the ninth line, with the word *But*.

On the other hand, in a poem like “The Study Of Flight” Slonimsky (for no intrinsically apparent reason) uses six stepped lines to wreck what is otherwise a very creditable sonnet. I won't quote it here for lack of space, but I will say that this sort of thing is the one real fault I find in the book. For someone with Slonimsky's genuine skill as a sonneteer, these gratuitous stepped lines (I've referred to them elsewhere as “split-level lines”) don't make any sense. I can't help thinking that he has put them into *Pythagoras In Love* at the suggestion of someone else (perhaps his publisher, or some trendy compeer in the poetry world) who has advised him that this is a way to curry favor with outsiders. It's very bad advice. I mean, really... six stepped lines in a single sonnet? What earthly justification is there for that?

At *Iambs & Trochees*, William Carlson and I refused to print stepped lines as a matter of policy. It's not that we failed to recognize that stepped lines are a possible option and that they have been used to good effect by some poets in the past. It's simply that in the context of the free-verse insanity that engulfs us, stepped lines today are a tactical error in formalist poetry: they only serve to confuse the reader, and dull the poet's consciousness of the line. To use a military metaphor, we have to hold the line.

Nevertheless, I like *Pythagoras In Love* very much. Throughout the book individual lines and passages leap out as powerful instances of Slonimsky's poetic skill. In a poem that touches upon Pythagoras' uncertainty as to life's ultimate meaning, he writes:

*Mortality's gray scythe will never wait
for him to learn how shape and song are rules
of atoms humming now in a faint breeze.*

This sonnet is an evocation not just of one man's hesitation before the fact of death, but of the entire Pre-Socratic intellectual hunger for a coherent world-view. Pythagoras found it in number; others in water, fire, being, the One, change, atoms. Rather than merely dealing with Pythagoras as a man, Slonimsky is at pains to create a poetic portrait of him within the philosophic milieu of incipient scientific thought. It's pure pleasure to read poetry that takes as its subject matter something other than last week's feelings.

Slonimsky has one poem titled "The Cloak," wherein the central metaphor is of sunlight as a warm garment for an old man's shivering flesh. The poem comes toward the end of the sequence, and is clearly connected with the imminent death of Pythagoras:

*The way late sunshine glances off these stones,
caressing granite with its western light,
and whispering affection to earth's bones
with radiant bronze lust that would invite
hot rapture in the living, soothes him now,
as if he'll be beloved even when
his flesh declines to dust, as if somehow
the sun can feel a passion for old men
through all the darkness of eternity.*

This is solid verse, because it does everything that the quacks in the poetry workshops tell you *not* to do. The meter is perfect. The rhymes are exact. The grammar and syntax are rigorous. It has no problem with abstractions ("affection," "passion," "eternity"). But most notable is the complexity of structure—the subject *way* in line one does not pick up its verb until *soothes* in line five. That's practically Ciceronian. Moreover, the core conceit of the sun making love to the bones of the earth is carried right through all nine lines. The sustained intricacy (both semantic and syntactic) of such verse is not common in our puerile world of simple sentences and basal vocabulary lists.

Let's examine the lines carefully, for the mythology behind them is complex and interwoven. The phrase *western light* immediately suggests the Hesperides—the "Western Maidens" who guard Hera's golden fruit at the end of the world, and who coalesce into a trinity of twilight, death, and eternity. The words *caressing*, *lust*, *flesh*, and *passion*, combined as they are with the reference to *old men*, conjure up the image of Eos and Tithonus, in a myth where a great love is compromised by the relentless advance of old age. Add to all this the patent allusion to the myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where stones are called the bones of our mother earth (*lapides in corpore terrae*), and one sees how Slonimsky is putting together a detailed comment on our fear of death, our wistful hope for a love that conquers it, and the myth-structures that provide us with a tentative map in our journey towards life's end. The lines are a *tour de*

force of literary discourse. And yet in contemporary mainstream poetry criticism, they would be dismissed as artificial, mannered, and overwritten. Why? Because mainstream poetry is largely clueless as to what constitutes genuine literary achievement. Slonimsky, thank God, isn't.

This point is worth pursuing. Poetry becomes boring and aimless when it deals with the humdrum details of quotidian life. What reader of mainstream verse isn't exasperated by the endless parade of pathetic little incidents, momentary perceptions, and evanescent feelings that constitute the art's current subject matter? How you felt when smelling a rose, what popped into your head while petting a cat, what torturous link you perceived between a girl jumping rope and a vaguely recalled thought from a philosophy class... when I read insubstantial ephemera like this, I want to pick up an axe and butcher the people who write it and publish it.

And yet there is a widespread notion, fostered by modernism, that poets ought to concern themselves with such vacuous details. Ever since James Joyce began putting us to sleep with his tedious epiphanies, modern artists have consciously sought to find aesthetic exaltation in that which is plain, ordinary, and mundane. Combine this penchant for lowliness with prosodic incoherence, and you get the latrine known as mainstream free verse.

This taste for the low and the plebeian is, at root, a religious impulse. It represents a kind of asceticism *manqué*, a secular version of the evangelical precept that "He who humbles himself shall be exalted." But while the Gospel admonition might have a valid reference to one's behavior, it doesn't have any aesthetic relevance. In short, morality has no connection to creativity. And yet it is very difficult to get modern poets to see that they *don't* have an ethical obligation to deal with commonplace subjects in a humble register. They feel compelled to be low-key and colloquial. It's as if the tenets of early Franciscanism had been imposed on literary discourse.

Somehow Lee Slonimsky has avoided this terrible disorder. The poems in *Pythagoras In Love* are intricate verbal artifacts about a man who died 2500 years ago, and they are composed with conscious, consummate rhetorical skill. Appreciation of such poems demands intelligence and cultural resources in readers. They aren't addressed to *hoi polloi*. This sort of high Apollonian approach to verse is out of fashion these days, so I predict that *Pythagoras In Love* will not be popular. But unlike confessional drivel from the workshops, this stuff will survive.

It's easy to call the Apollonian style in poetry "stilted" or "mannered." Some pompous twit in *Poetry* recently referred to the practitioners of New Formalism as "neo-Edwardians." These are the sort of facile taunts that have been thrown at poets with a literary sensibility ever since the barbaric yawp of Whitman came to dominate the field. But what is obvious from *Pythagoras In Love* is that the most intense feelings can inhabit meticulous wordcraft, that there can be passion in numbers, as Pythagoras well understood. The pain, loneliness, and blighted hopes of the mathematician are as vividly

alive here as his theorems.

Pythagoras believed in metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls after death into other living bodies. He claimed to remember all his previous lives, one of which was that of Euphorbus, a warrior killed at Troy by the Spartan king Menelaos. In his final poem of the sequence, Slonimsky touches on the point:

*Pythagoras remembers how he was
the warrior, Euphorbus, slain at Troy;
his bitterness, defeated, in the dust:
his darkly blooming blood, armor destroyed.*

The phrase *darkly blooming blood* carries powerful Homeric resonances, and recalls countless instances of sanguinary battle scenes in the Iliad where black blood (*haima melan*) flows. That Pythagoras actually believed himself to be the reincarnation of this young hero, cut down in the prime of life, is both strange and touching. It also shows that for many literate persons in the past, an inherited text could be a crucial element in their self-understanding.

The poem ends with Pythagoras as a living tree, growing silently for two hundred years in a forest, still dreaming of that old combat with Menelaos, but now peacefully calm and abstracted from the savage memory of his previous death. This final vision of *ataraxia* is a fitting close to a book celebrating a philosopher proverbial for his iron control of the passions. Now if only we could re-establish that same ataraxic control in the art of poetry, we might be able to turn things around. Slonimsky's new book is a small step towards that revolution.

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Translated Poets

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)
Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841)
Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855)
Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)

TRINACRIA

A statement of core principles

We publish no free verse at all. We publish formal metrical verse only, following the example of the great pre-modernist masters, and of those contemporary writers who maintain that tradition.

We are not interested in poems that employ an excessive number of substitute feet. If we have trouble finding the stresses in your line, we will not publish your work.

We do not consider syllabic verse to be metrical verse. Moreover, we have a very limited tolerance for hypermetric lines and heterometric forms.

We are allergic to mid-line breaks, or anything else that gratuitously violates typographical conventions. We prefer left-margin capitalization of every line, but we recognize that this is not the practice of all poets.

We believe that the register of language in poetry should always be distinct from that of ordinary colloquial speech.

We believe that an excessive dependence on slant-rhymes and assonance in end-position is a sign of incompetence.

We do not publish poems that are vague, gaseous, or that indicate a flaccid and sentimentalizing mindset.

We do not publish poems that are primarily quoted dialogue, nor poems that make extensive use of quotation marks.

We judge poems primarily by their inherent craftsmanship, not their subject matter. We see no reason to publish a mediocre poem just because it trumpets virtuous sentiments, or expresses sincere feelings. We specifically refuse to evaluate any poem by the yardstick of political correctness.

At the same time, we believe that subject matter is another ingredient that goes into the overall aesthetic effect of a poem. For that reason we will reject metrically excellent poems if we find their subject matter boring or trivial or fatuous; or if the subject matter is handled ineptly; or if the subject matter does not suit the chosen poetic vehicle.

We believe that poems are fictive artifacts of a self-contained nature. For us, any poem that pretends to a bogus authenticity; or that consciously cultivates dissonance and asymmetry; or that deliberately avoids aesthetic closure, is *ipso facto* a failure.

We have taken as our watchword the sentence of Charles Maurras: *Voulant des clartés, vous en faites*. We believe that the primary task of a poet is not to discover beauty, but to create it with his own skill and energy.



Voulant des clartés, vous en faites.

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