

TRINACRIA

Poems, Translations, Essays, Reviews



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TRINACRIA

Voulant des clartés, vous en faites.

—Charles Maurras

δίζημαί δ', ὅτινι θνατῶν κεχαρισμένος ἔνθῳ
σὺν Μοίσαις·

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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REMEMBRANCE

The death of Alfred Dorn in January of 2014 marked the passing not just of an accomplished and erudite poet, but also of a certain generation of litterateurs with a particular and now largely obsolescent sensibility. There were many such writers—one thinks especially of Hart Crane, A.D. Hope, and Elizabeth Bishop—who dedicated their talents to the great craft of poetry as an end in itself, rather than as a means of social networking, or gaining Brownie points towards tenure and grant-grubbing. In today's debased climate of po-biz glitz and social-media static, they appear quaintly Olympian in their cool detachment.

When I reflect upon Alfred Dorn's unassuming and reclusive life (apart from occasional travel, he lived and worked in New York City all of his days), it becomes clear to me that the man had deep interior resources which sustained him and his art. He did not need public recognition, though like all human beings he was pleased when some of it came his way. And I am reminded of a passage from Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* that touches upon the question of renown, achievement, and lasting value:

True greatness wears an invisible cloak, under the cover of which it goes in and out among men without being suspected; if its cloak does not conceal it from itself always, and from all others for many years, its greatness will ere long shrink to very ordinary dimensions. What then, it may be asked, is the good of being great? The answer is that you may understand greatness better in others, whether alive or dead, and choose better company from these and enjoy and understand that company better when you have chosen it—also that you may be able to give pleasure to the best people and live in the lives of those who are yet unborn.

No better general judgment could be made about greatness, or about the individual achievement of Alfred Dorn.

The family of Alfred Dorn asked me and Professor Carolyn Raphael (a long-time colleague and close friend of the late poet) to put his voluminous papers in order, for donation to The Poetry Archives at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo. This was a major task of several months' duration, which Carolyn and I did slowly, and with a mixture of sadness, fond reminiscence, and the occasional pleasant surprise. The deep generosity of Dorn towards other poets, in the form of his wide-ranging correspondence and his personal financing of thousands of dollars in awards and prizes, was already well known to both of us. The ample attestation of all this in Dorn's papers merely confirmed what we knew. But the surprise came in the form of a large number of excellent unpublished poems that we found among those same papers. A small selection of these previously unknown Dorn poems is given pride of place in this issue of TRINACRIA.

Once again, we take pleasure in listing those poets and poems in our last issue that have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Issue # 11 of TRINACRIA contained fine work by several poets who appeared in our pages for the first time. Nominees, in alphabetical order, are as follows:

- Sara Bickley for her "No Reunion," an expert villanelle wherein the speaker reminisces over some old mementos and curios of a past acquaintance, in an extended apostrophe to the long-gone friend.
- Barbara Daniels for her "September Equinox," a series of AAB tercets made into three perfect stanzas, with interlinked pentameter and trimeter lines that capture the momentary balance of the autumnal equinox.
- Mary Kipps for her "Tarot Reading," a partially blank verse and partially rhymed poem on the speaker's reaction to a troubling tarot card reading that suggests betrayal and infidelity.

- Tom Riley for his “Helios! Helios!”—a Spenserian sonnet in the voice of the Roman soldiers present at the Crucifixion, hinging on their misunderstanding of an Aramaic word spoken by Jesus.
- Don Thackrey for his “Whispering in Her Ear,” a short but witty seduction piece in strong iambic tetrameter with a single rhyme throughout, except for two bob-lines that cleverly switch to a single-foot amphibrach.
- Marly Youmans for her “The Nuba Christians,” a blank-verse lament, in the voice of a displaced refugee, over the Islamic Sudanese government’s campaign of genocide against Christians.

Congratulations to all of these poets for their fine work. They have helped to maintain the standard of aesthetic excellence that TRINACRIA was founded to honor. This issue completes our sixth year of uninterrupted publication, and we trust that we shall continue to receive proof from our many contributors that genuine poetry is alive, even if hard to find in the blizzard of fake poetry that swirls around us.

Joseph S. Salemi
Woodside, New York

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ILLUSTRATION

(Alfred Dorn)

Alfred Dorn

Apocalypse

An unlit boulevard shook from the tramp
of a procession without end. Warped, wounded,
everyone carried like a broken lamp
the life each hoped in vain to have refunded.
Huge as Vesuvius and void of pity,
an Eyeball crossed the sky from coast to coast
in judgment, scorching countryside and city
of a world become its own tomorrowless ghost.
The galaxies collapsed in a black hole
that sucked both sun and earth into its gulf,
but without reason left alive this sole
inhabitant of nothingness: myself.
An arctic sweat quicksilvered down my brow.
I woke and found the world still there. For now.

Alfred Dorn

Marquis de Sade

His hands were feminine, he moved with grace,
danced the gavotte, could turn a villanelle.
Blood smeared his powdered hair, his ruffled lace.

Pity the woman lured to his embrace—
he'd whip her moan of lust to pain's red yell.
His hands were feminine, he moved with grace

while scenting flesh to injure and debase.
What Freud surmised long after, Sade knew well.
Blood smeared his powdered hair, his ruffled lace.

Reading *Justine* or *Juliette*, we grimace
at thoughts that give off such a sulphurous smell.
His hands were feminine, he moved with grace—

and blew up God and the whole human race
in books that erupted from his Bastille cell.
Blood smeared his powdered hair, his ruffled lace.

I've read him, cold sweat running down my face.
He lights our darkest selves, this torch from hell.
His hands were feminine, he moved with grace.
Blood smeared his powdered hair, his ruffled lace.

Leo Yankevich

The Donetsk Morgue

(October 2014)

Some lie alone on carts,
while others who are new,
wait stacked up on the floor.
For your see: there's a queue
inside the Donetsk morgue.

Death masks and private parts
here are processed and tagged,
cadavers on display,
mere torsos, arms and legs,
mouths open, nothing to say.

They can no longer hear
the whistle of big guns,
nor feel guilt in the nude.
Outside, their blood still runs
near where they went for food.

A black crow captures a tear
in the smart phone of its eyes,
and heaven welcomes peace
established by the flies,
and calls for their release.

Jennifer Reeser

Confederate and King

(for my great-great-grandfather)

What did it mean, when they were made to choose
between their consciences and civic pride,
climb down from their secluded mountainside,
and shod their farmers' feet in soldiers' shoes?
Who never owned a slave, but could not choose
the closet of a cur in which to hide?
I see those southern uniforms—patched, pied,
perhaps pretentious—learning how to lose
with grace, denied their pension and their claim
to sovereignty. How honor must have stung!
And gutted culture, so that they would name
their sons thereafter with a “royal” tongue:
King Charles, Earl, or Duke, as though by fame
and rank, their ruined poise might be re-hung.

X.J. Kennedy

In and Out of Bed

Intelligentsia

Discussing love, to Pan's flute tunes they dined,
But all she'd give him was a piece of mind.

Purchased Love

Six times a fall guy, Jack goes up the hill
Of Venus. Sixfold safe, since on the pill,
Jill tumbles. Why does she take to her back
And let him dip his fill of her? For jack.

Routine

His pilgrimage to Red Light Row is annual,
At other times preferring his sex manual.

Wired Love

Their passion, kindled on the internet,
Guttered to ashes when at last they met.
True soulmates, they could virtually feel.
Too bad they had to face off in the real.

Mail-order Bride

Sam sent off for and blows up with a pump
A rubber woman who lies like a lump.
He thought to keep life simple and old-hat,
But every time lust swells him she goes flat.

Advice for an Instructor

Decline all overtures to intercourse
From someone doing badly in the course.

A Trull

Her love was something churned out by a factory:
Chary of charm, but cheap and satisfactory.

Carol Frith

Erotic Gardens

Eve and Adam—apple tree above—
That fleshly garden with its wild delights.
Ask Eve to ask you how to fashion love,

Sweet ingénue unwavering her nights.
Pursuit of knowledge leads a girl astray—
Into erotic gardens, wild delights,

A taste for firm sweet flesh, a yen to play
With—why not go ahead and say it—snakes.
Pursuit of knowledge leads a girl astray.

Eve blames the angel, says he's raised the stakes.
The angel cites the rulebook: no means no.
Eve understands; her cautious left hand snakes

Toward Adam's thigh, sinister and slow.
Adam claims that he's been hypnotized.
The angel says it's final: no means no.

They have to leave; they needn't act surprised.
Adam says his flesh is hypnotized.
Eve blames her passions on the tree above.
Ask Eve to ask you how to fashion love.

Angelique Wellish

To the Little Liar at the University of Virginia

Why spoil a good story with the facts?

—Gabe Pressman

I was gang-raped by five frats!
Sobs some little co-ed. That's
The signal for wild screams and howls
From a flock of fem-lib fowls.

Then it's proved the story's fake—
Rolling Stone puts on the brake.
Liberals sigh, and say "Oh well—
Perhaps the girl just didn't tell
The truth precisely—no big deal.
Campus rapes are still quite real."

Let me ask that stupid twat:
Is yelling *Rape!* what gets you hot?
Fantasy and allegations
Seem to call for *real* relations.
Maybe all your pretty lies
Mean you want some well-hung guys.
Apparently what's on your mind
Is hunger for a good long grind—
Let's invite the hockey team
To work on you until you cream.

Sally Cook

Difference

*Stay home and read a book, you said to me,
At least you can do that, and then you left.
There on the couch, with bookshelves all around
I heard your words, and yet I knew that we
Had shared our Shakespeare, loved his poetry
And songs. Still, I felt sad, alone, bereft
As I sat steeped, encased in summer's sound,
And fantasized the lovely greenwood tree,
While you were baiting fish hooks with your deft
Fingers to show the boys, tried out the heft
Of fishing poles, and tramped the muddy ground
Through nature's rough terrain. Now I can see
I differed from my mom in crucial ways—
A conundrum that has dogged me all my days.*

David Hedges

Specific Gravity

When Archimedes scampered in the nude
Through Syracuse, *Eureka!* on his lips,
He opened windows on his amplitude.

His face would never launch a thousand ships,
His form cause anyone to stop and stare
As when a trim Olympic athlete strips,

But his keen mind could peel a concept bare
Where others fumbled with the hooks and straps.
I see him standing in his underwear,

His gray cells humming as his brain unwraps
Equations in his quest to weigh the gold
Against the silver in a crown. He slaps

His forehead with a hand and breaks the mold
From which a lesser intellect is cast—
A shriveled apple dumpling, hard and cold—

When he displaces water from his bath
And knows, as sure as Moon encircles Earth
And Earth the Sun, that he can prove with math

How much the ruler's diadem is worth,
And whether some poor goldsmith's head will roll.
If folks guffawed at Archimedes' girth

Or mocked his dripping nakedness with droll
Asides, he paid no heed. His startling find
Shone like an incandescent aureole

Within the vaulted chambers of his mind,
A simple, universal truth unveiled
Because he sought a moment to unwind.

Let's say his neighbors gathered and regaled
Themselves with tales of how the scholar brought
Himself up short, his train of thought derailed

By prying eyes that ringed the square in knots.
Let's say he roared *My kingdom for a cloak!*
As graybeards, fishwives, teens and tiny tots

Flew from his path. Let's say *This is no joke!*
Rang in their ears. It gave him little pause;
He wanted only to go home and soak,

His focus solely on eternal laws.
Specific gravity! The clustered grapes
Within his grasp, the clamorous applause

His monumental find would draw, the traipse
Across uncharted landscapes, ballyhooed
For models his profundity undrapes.

T.S. Kerrigan

A Homecoming in the Next Parish Over

Remembrance is a stretch of road
The brush and scrub have overgrown.
You know each bend and cul-de-sac,
The played-out mines, the mother lode,
But always end up turning back
To pick a cowslip, kick a stone.
You're loath to pass that fallen gate
That warns the stranger not to pass,
The remnants of that old estate,
The boarded house, neglected yard,
The spavined horses, nettled grass.
The lessons of the past are hard.
It's best to leave that road alone
And pick a cowslip, kick a stone.

Athar C. Pavis

On Public Mourning

I won't be coming down to Hoboken,
Swapping stories around the kitchen table,
Condolencing with cousins whose whole tribe
Ousted her from their annual get-togethers—
And now she's died.

I won't be looking properly bereaved
Into their faces of contorted grief,
Who never saw the poet in her mind,
Mocking her poor attempts at art collection—
And now she's dead.

The only mourning is of the private sort,
Watching the sunlight wade where once we swam,
Remembering, light ribboning the shore,
Skating together on a strobe-lit stand—
And she not here.

You say this maxi-gathering relieves
Mourners whose sadness is too great to bear:
Strange, then, that they were nowhere to be seen
When trips or dinners needed to be made—
And now she's gone.

So in this public beating of the breast,
Wringing of hands as if her sudden end
Were not, for some at least, what they think best
Do not expect me to participate—
 What I have lost

One day, I know, when I begin to mourn,
Outside of these prepared scenarios,
Much later, unexpectedly, alone,
Only the little things will bring me back—
 And these are mine.

Marly Youmans

God and the Mandrake Root

You yanked her squealing from the ground,
Her ignorance and power
To poison men, enchant, and wound
Already in full flower.

And so she passed into the world,
Harming as she went—
In innocence her leaves unfurled...
She had no ill intent.

But like some magical bezoar,
You fell into her depths—
Strangeness of the garden-grower
Stirred flesh to dream. Each wept.

Charles Southerland

Eclipse

She cuts my hair outside the house at noon.
West winds massage my head like finger sharks
in shallow currents beneath gray seas. She marks
my hairline with a weather eye. A rune
falls down and out and in between her breasts.
The knotted leather thong stained dark with sweat
holds fast and true at perfect depth. I let
myself climb down the peak of carnal quests.

She trims my brows and blocks all sunlight out
with shadows from the valley. It's as though
I'm drowning, drunk with mist. And I can't see
the sun or blue above the waves which flout
their power. And I can't keep this callow doe—
I'm older now than she will ever be.

On Translating Baudelaire

by

Athar C. Pavis

Review of: Helen Palma, trans. *Selected Poems from Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal*

Brooklyn, New York: Pivot Press, 2014

ISBN: 978-0-9910850-3-3

How can anyone translate *Les Fleurs du Mal*? That was my first thought when I received this book for review—and my second was a question a colleague of mine asked: *How do you translate the title?* The answer to that is simple: you don't.

In her translation *Selected Poems from Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal*, Helen Palma chose thirty-six poems which she considered could be translated into English in both their substance and style, using metered verse and Baudelaire's rhyme scheme. In this she succeeds admirably, despite the ambitiousness of her endeavor. In her bilingual edition, Palma provides the English reader with a selection of poems translated into memorable stand-alone renditions of Baudelaire's metered lines. Translation, a commentator once wrote, is "the art of failure," but not here! Palma understands Valéry's point that fidelity to meaning alone in translation is a kind of betrayal. Somehow she manages to craft translations that read as poems, yet faithfully recreate the brooding Baudelairean landscape. This little book is a perfect introduction to a poet whose poems continue to haunt our modern consciousness.

Of course, in translation there is always the familiar specter—the trade-off between style and substance. But in Palma's translation of *Le Couvercle (The Lid)*, for example, one doesn't feel that tension. In fact, for the English ear the last verse, certainly the last line, *Humanity, immense, unnoticed, boils*, seems as if it couldn't have been written any other way:

*En haut, le Ciel! Ce mur de caveau qui l'étouffe,
Plafond illuminé par un opéra bouffe
Où chaque histrion foule un sol ensanglanté;*

*Terreur de libertin, espoir du fol ermite:
Le Ciel! couvercle noir de la grande marmite
Où bout l'imperceptible et vaste Humanité.*

*

*Up there, the Sky! A crypt that smothers all,
The flood-lit ceiling of a music hall
Upon whose blood-drenched stage each actor toils;*

*Atheist's dread and hermit's hopeful prayer,
The giant and black-lidded cauldron where
Humanity, immense, unnoticed, boils.*

How does Palma do this? Well, there is the *necessary angel*, of course. But there are also down-to-earth technical skills, like placing two seemingly contradictory adjectives, “immense” and “unnoticed,” in inverted syntax after the noun “Humanity.” With this simple syntactical inversion she slows down the pacing of the line quite deliberately, better to set off the “boils” that is humanity’s lot. Her choice of the word “unnoticed” is particularly apt, underscoring the apparent futility of human enterprise and, I would argue, a much better choice than a literal translation of *imperceptible* would have been. This is a good example of how Palma, in preferring the spirit to the letter, has made this poem especially resonant for today’s readers.

Can we pick an argument with the translation in *Le Couvercle*’s last tercet, of *Terreur de libertin* as *Atheist’s dread*? Perhaps, if one considers that all atheists are not libertines, and all libertines in our literary culture (Don Juan, Giacomo Casanova) are not necessarily atheists. Yet by the seventeenth century in France a libertine was seen as a person freed from the dogma and religious conventions of the Christian Church. Licentiousness in manners came to be equated with licentiousness in ideas. Thus those freed from tradition exercised a liberty in their actions and lived in a state of godlessness which, if it did not make them atheists, made them, at the very least, skeptics. Godlessness, however, is not atheism, which is a dogma in itself. A

libertine, after all, is defined by his actions, an atheist more by his set of beliefs.

Why then, one could ask, not use the word *libertine* itself? And herein lies the key to why these translations work. Again and again, Palma is faced with this kind of choice, and it is her ear which guides her. For even though *libertine* is an English word (albeit with a different resonance for the American reader as compared to the French), and even though both *atheist* and *libertine* are three-syllable words with first-syllable stress, the rhythmic punch of the line would be seriously undermined if the latter term were used. Baudelaire himself, in *Terreur de libertin, espoir de fol ermite*, positions the first word for emphasis, and its rich sonorous quality contributes to this effect. *Atheist's dread and hermit's hopeful prayer* makes for a markedly shorter dactyl at the beginning of the line than the use of the English word *libertine*, thus contributing to the auditory impact of those first two words. In short, not all three-syllable words are created equal. The use of the literal English equivalent *libertine* would have slowed the line to sluggishness, precisely because of the secondary accent on the English word's third and final syllable.

Does this mean that Palma's approach reflects an extreme version of Verlaine's "*de la musique avant toute chose*"? Does she sacrifice meaning to music? I would argue that the question itself posits a false dichotomy, if only because the momentous meaning of the line I have just quoted depends so much on its rhythmic thrust. In sum, the meaning of the line lies in its music.

To understand the difficulties faced by translators of Baudelaire, it is enlightening to look at different translations of the same lines. In the last tercet of *Le Coucher du soleil romantique* (*The Setting of the Romantic Sun*), in which Baudelaire writes,

*Une odeur de tombeau dans les ténèbres nage
Et mon pied peureux froisse, au bord du marécage,
Des crapauds imprévus et de froids limaçons*

various translators have produced “my timid foot,” “my apprehensive foot,” and “my anguished and frightened cold foot.” Not one of these three options is as successful as the choice Helen Palma made NOT to endow the foot with any feelings at all. Indeed, in English, the three translations cited above come across as a bit absurd, absurdly funny, in fact. Palma deserves credit for avoiding the same mistake. She translates:

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

One could argue that Palma’s word *margin* is too abstract, and that *hit* is more violent than what *froisse* suggests. Using the word *edge*, however, would have created difficulty for the rhythm of the line, unless something else had been changed, or unless it were to become *edges* which, in the poem’s context of the lone poet by the bog, would sound out of place. Preserving the superior simplicity of Palma’s unfeeling *foot*, one could perhaps have translated:

*And my foot treads, at the edge of the bog,
On unexpected toads and soft, cold snails.*

It is nonetheless obvious on reading Palma’s translations that a lot of thought has been given both to word choice as well as to form. In the first verse of *My Beatrice*, for example, the alliterative effect of *honed-heart* lends a sharpness to the line that underscores the very pain the poet is seeking to convey:

*And as I roamed, directionless, apart,
I honed my daggered thoughts upon my heart.*

Decisions abound and we hear in the ones that Palma makes her unfailing ear. Take, for example, *L’Héautontimorouménos* (*The Self-Tormentor*). The careful crafting of this translation is clearly aimed at highlighting the effect of the original. Having used the word *both* in

the verse's second line, Palma can omit it as implicit in the last, propelling the English version of the line forward in its awful power:

*I'm the wound and I'm the knife!
I'm both wife-beater and wife!
I'm the rack and I'm the limb,
Executioner and victim!*

Very different approaches have been used in the translation of Baudelaire. Susan Blood, in her book *Baudelaire and The Aesthetics of Bad Faith*, proposes as literal a translation as possible for each line, arguing that the aesthetic quality of Baudelaire's poetry is tied to its literal meaning. Faced with these lines in *L'Ennemi*

*—O douleur! O douleur! Le Temps mange la vie,
Et l'obscur Ennemi qui nous ronge le cœur
Du sang que nous perdons croît et se fortifie!*

Blood translates:

*—O woe, o woe! Time eats life
And the obscure Enemy that gnaws at our hearts
From the blood that we lose grows and gains strength!*

Blood's literal translation, particularly her use of the word *eat*, is overly concrete and distracts from the existential cry of the line. Compare it with Palma's translation:

*Alas! Alas! The life that time devours!
And that dark enemy that gnaws our hearts
Grows strong in blood as he drains us of ours!*

The difference between these two versions lies more in the memorable lilt of Palma's lines rather than in any sacrifice of meaning on her part. Her verse sings; it is memorable; and the reader will remember it. Is this not the definition of poetry? And isn't this tercet, more than just a translation, poetry itself?

In these thirty-six translations there are many gems like this, making it possible for the English reader not only to read, but to *remember* Baudelaire, to recite these translations much as he would poems in his native tongue. And isn't this, after all, the ambition of poems in translation—to succeed first of all as poems in themselves and, as Günther Grass once wrote, “to transform everything so that nothing changes”? For the English reader, Palma's translations offer a rare combination: the seemingly spontaneous and yet faithful rendition of some of Baudelaire's greatest poems. They bring to life a poet whose spleen still resonates strongly in our modern world, and they give the English reader much-needed access to the terrible beauty of Baudelaire's lines.

♪♪♪

Virtue and Other Social Diseases

by

Joseph S. Salemi

Review of: Paul Lake, *The Republic of Virtue*
Evansville, IN: University of Evansville Press, 2013
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Anyone requiring conclusive proof that there is a conscious and functioning Poetry Establishment need look no further than the general silence that has greeted Paul Lake's newest collection, *The Republic of Virtue*. That establishment is as real, cohesive, and ideologically orthodox as the DNC, and when by chance a book gets into print that questions or ridicules cherished assumptions, the book is quietly ignored.

The Republic of Virtue received exactly two substantive notices: an enthusiastic one from the conservative *Weekly Standard*, and an apologetically tepid one from Stanford University's on-line magazine, where the embarrassed reviewer did his best to whittle down and denature the book's satirical deflation of current left-liberal pieties. At the normally logorrhetic Eratosphere website, *The Republic of Virtue* generated only a scattering of terse and mostly noncommittal comments, along with some petulant dismissals of Lake's temerity in daring to publicize his own work. A website that went into hysterical fury over a triviality like Kim Bridgford's removal from her post at the West Chester Conference had practically nothing to say about *The Republic of Virtue*, despite the uncomfortable fact that the book won the 2013 Richard Wilbur Prize, a major award in formalist circles.

Why the resentment and the snubs? Simple—Lake refuses to play the game. He won't tailor his ideas, attitudes, or speech to fit in with the lemming-like conformism and rigid self-censorship that are now *de*

rigueur in poetry circles. This was abundantly clear from the general reaction to Lake's previous book, the political fable *Cry Wolf*, and even years earlier at a West Chester gathering, where a pack of dimwitted feminazis tried to browbeat and intimidate him for daring to express politically incorrect viewpoints in some of his poems. Lake—to their chagrined surprise—fought back. He's been fighting back ever since.

The first part of Lake's book ("Home Free") is not the cause of the anger—it is the subsequent material that has raised hackles. This preliminary section is largely personal and familial, with poems about children, child-rearing problems, vacation trips, and the memory of a dead parent. But it ends with the blank-verse piece "Herod's Confusion," a re-telling of the Salome story in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew from King Herod's perspective. The poem would, at first glance, seem to be out of place in this family-friendly section, but I suspect its presence at the end is a convenient way for Lake to segue into the book's primary satiric focus. The poem closes with these lines concerning Herod:

He issues orders curtly, to save face
Before his guards and guests... and only later,
As rumor of a new redeemer spreads,
Curses the witching music and wild dance
That tricked him from a world of consequence
Into a state where sad-eyed holy men
Whirl past in blurring veils of incarnation.

This is a clue to Lake's overarching argument in *The Republic of Virtue*—namely, that abstract ideas of propriety and virtue preached by "sad-eyed holy men" have made life unbearable. In Herod's day these holy men were religious; in ours they are left-liberal secularists. But in either case we have emotionally driven fanatics who insist on telling the rest of the world how to live and think and speak.

The first two poems in the next section set the tone. "Martyr of Modernity" recounts the judicial murder of the chemist Antoine La-

voisier by the Committee of Public Safety in 1794. A brilliant and apolitical scientist is sent to the guillotine for no reason except Jacobin blood-lust. The second poem, which gives its title to Lake's book, describes how the French Revolution took the silly optimism of Rousseau and translated it into political action—one consequence of which was the release of the murderously sociopathic Marquis de Sade, who made use of his freedom to resume his horrific depredations. This is a perfect *exemplum probativum* of revolutionary euphoria and its real-world results—one starts by proclaiming freedom and equality and the benevolent brotherhood of mankind, and finishes by unchaining the bestial savagery of the human id. Lake expresses all this in a chilling passage:

“If virtue be the spring
Of government in peace,” roared Robespierre,
“The spring of government in revolution
Is virtue mixed with terror...” In *Thermidor*,
The month of heat, his words rolled to their term
Among piled corpses.

This is the horror of revolution: its ideology always links terror with the fostering of “social virtue”—a phenomenon visible not just in Jacobin France, but in the Third Reich's *Gleichschaltung*, Leninist and Maoist mass executions, and in bush-league versions like the attempted imposition of speech codes in many of our colleges. Felix Dzerzhinsky, Leon Trotsky, and a politically correct Dean of Students have this in common: they are all willing to use serious coercion to enforce an ideal of proper thought and behavior. A dean can't liquidate you, but he can take away your livelihood, which for a professor is pretty much the same thing.

Lake hammers the point home in a contemporary setting—his villanelle “Intolerance: A Memo” goes after the vicious left-liberal bigotry that currently rules the roost in higher education. The poem is written as an academic memorandum from some pompous dean or provost, threatening faculty members with reprisals if they do not toe the college line on matters of “hate speech” or “insensitivity”:

Hate those who hate or be among the hated.
The truth grows clearer with each passing day:
Intolerance cannot be tolerated.

Don't think you're safe; no one's inoculated.
Hate means whatever public voices say...

As an academic, Lake is well aware that left-liberal intolerance of contrary ideas is now a standard (and increasingly mandatory) attitude among faculty who want to safeguard their jobs. It used to be an unspoken gentlemen's agreement that non-liberal personnel not be hired or promoted—today the death-grip that the left has on American education means that the mask can be dropped, and the policy made explicit in memos and directives. And as in revolutionary regimes, a herd-like submission to received orthodoxy is expected from everyone.

In the poem “Epilogue to the Emperor’s New Clothes,” Lake remolds the old Hans Christian Andersen fable into an even deeper critique of modern consensus-mongering. The poem satirizes the postmodernist fixation on factitious “narratives” at the expense of objective truth. The entire concept of truth has been undermined by academic poseurs who blather on about the uncertainty of language and the primacy of an acceptable “narrative” (what the Communists used to call The Party Line) over inconvenient facts:

Despite some murmurings, the crowd
Ignored the witness of their senses.
Whatever small boys cry aloud,
The truth is woven from consensus.

As a result of this fraud, says Lake, “...their dupes learned to adjust/ Perception to correct mere seeing.” And he expands and modernizes the tale by having those most adept at this game become commentators on the nightly news, where they can spin “Transparent fiction into lines/And patterns to clothe royal sins/And cloak imperial designs.” This poem presents a concise summary of the intellectual debasement that is happening in the Western world generally and American

education in particular: academic theorists (usually cut-rate Yankee Doodle knockoffs of Derrida and de Man in the humanities departments) are eroding trust in human language, thereby branding all perceptions as ungrounded and subject to contestation. This is then followed up by arguing that the only perceptions worth defending and acting upon are “the correct narratives” of public orthodoxy—narratives promoted, of course, by those in power and their academic toadies.

Lake zeros in on such trendy epistemological uncertainty in his “Professing Rape,” the longest and most ambitious poem in the book, and the keystone of the section in *The Republic of Virtue* that deals with hermeneutics. This remarkable piece is a dramatic monologue in the voice of a tenured professor. As in some of Browning’s examples of the genre, there is an understood but unquoted interlocutor: a female student whom the professor has raped. The monologue is the professor’s sophisticated exposition (replete with all the jargon of academic “critical theory”) as to why there can be no certainty about what actually happened between him and his student. He patronizingly tells her:

Let me remind you then what years of study
Have failed to teach: That you are nothing more
Than a de-centered and fragmented subject,
A point or node within a fluid skein
Of many texts and contexts...
And not a sovereign “self” that I’ve “debased.”

This poem turns the tables on militant feminism and American lit-crit’s deconstructionists. If you insist that something (like a rape or a sexual molestation) actually happened and needs to be punished, then you can’t accept the trendy Francophone sophistry that nothing is linguistically ascertainable or “grounded.” And if you insist that language is inherently untrustworthy and all it can provide us with are biased “narratives,” then any charge of rape is fatally compromised. It’s amazing that left-liberal academics haven’t noticed this—but then again, they are not particularly perceptive when it comes to the flaws in their ideology.

Lake often uses scriptural references as the basis for poems, but always as a way to advert to contemporary concerns. In “Lessons from Gaza,” he adapts the story of Samson in Judges to make a point about violence as a necessary tool of statecraft; in “A Sleeper” he updates the tale of Jonah, in free verse, to suggest the presence of “sleeper” terrorists in our midst. “The Tower of Babel” touches upon the modern academic’s distrust of language as a dependable tool. But Lake’s signal success is in the poem “Revised Standard Version,” which re-tells the story of the Samaritan woman’s meeting with Jesus at a well. Unlike the canonical text (John 4:4-26), in Lake’s poem the woman’s responses to Jesus are curt, unsympathetic, and hostile. When Jesus alludes to her marital status, she replies

My sex life, sir, is none of your damn business.
I don’t know where you got your information,
But if you try this sort of thing again,
I’ll haul you into court, you stalker, you.
Who do you think you are, harassing me?

A crowd of women with similar opinions gathers, and all of them attack Jesus for misogyny, chauvinism, and intrusive meddling in their sex lives:

Yeah, keep your phony doctrines off my body!
...
I’ll take charge of my sexuality,
With no advice from you, Mr. Misogynist...

These are not first-century Samaritan women at the well of Sychar. They are stand-ins for the grievance-dominated feminist harridans one meets in the typical college English department, or on Oprah Winfrey. Lake is here satirizing the reflexive feminist need to re-write or re-interpret every canonical text in such a way as to proclaim female solidarity against an alleged male conspiracy of sexual oppression. Christ’s words are taken as an insulting male intrusion into female privacy.

Lake uses various literary and historical references to great effect. My favorite poem in the whole book is “Moll,” a brilliant evocation of Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, where the title character is seen for what she is: a woman worldly wise, shrewd, unsentimental about love and sex, attuned to the main chance, and always prepared to trim her sails to the current breeze. The contemporary relevance is clear—Moll is not just an eighteenth-century whore, but the typical up-to-date yuppie careerist. In the troubling “Charlemagne’s Vision,” Lake conjures up the Frankish king on the corpse-strewn battlefield of Roncesvalles mourning his “slaughtered Paladins,” and remembering the earlier victory of Charles Martel over the Moorish hordes at Tours. Charlemagne then has a terrifying vision of a future Europe (that of today) where the hydra-headed monster of Islam chokes the cities of London, Paris, and Amsterdam with its minarets and salaams. This is a poem not simply of prophecy and protest. In a multiculturalist, alien-loving po-biz world, it is high treason. “Charlemagne’s Vision” is a poem that took incredible courage to write and to publish. I predict Lake will be *persona non grata* as a result of this particular piece. Rosie O’Donnell and Joy Behar will walk out when he gives readings.

The final section of *The Republic of Virtue* is philosophically somber. In “Testament,” Lake gives us searing self-revelation and introspection about his life, career, and dashed hopes. This poem, with its coolness and detachment, is light years beyond the posturing confessional mooning that inundates the little magazines today. Other poems deal with disease and the specter of approaching death, while “Plumber’s Song” (which first appeared in TRINACRIA) is a mordantly funny juxtaposition of gassy idealism and real-world sewerage problems. But I’ll end by discussing Lake’s “Pro Forma,” a long overdue excoriation of the faux formalists who infest our movement and paralyze it with their feckless experimentation and rule-bending. Here’s one full stanza:

Certain poets whose measures don’t seem to conform
To any known pattern, when pressed will explain,
They’re not tin-eared bards when they veer from the norm;

If their meters don't scan and their rhymes crack and strain,
It's not that the rhyme scheme's too hard to maintain—
When their sonnet falls short a few lines, their refrain
Is to sing out in chorus, "The rules don't obtain!
I'm a clever young artist subverting the form!"

Lake's poem then poses the question that these stupid young poetasters can't bear listening to, much less answering: Why are silly experimentalism and haphazard rule violation signs of incompetence in all the arts except poetry? He doesn't expect an answer—these dorks are in the majority, and they live in a self-satisfied dream world. But Lake has voiced the concern that troubles many of us: Why have we allowed fringe elements from the free-verse and performance-art freak scene to distort what the formalist resurgence was trying to accomplish? What (or whose) purpose did it serve to let new formalism be sucked into the vortex of shapelessness and funkiness? Were we so desperate for a larger audience that we were willing to abandon our identity?

The answers to such questions are, I suspect, more political and cultural than aesthetic. It is extremely difficult for a small minority, no matter how proud and self-conscious, to resist the assimilationist allurements of a larger, all-enveloping host. New formalism is just a tiny chirrup in the cacophony of American mainstream poetry. And human beings are weak creatures, desperate for acceptance and ratification. Defection to the freak scene was too much of a temptation for many faux formalists.

But let that be. At least in Paul Lake's *The Republic of Virtue* we have a stellar example of what new formalism was meant to do: bring poetry back to its senses after the century-long drunken toot of modernism and its postmodernist hangover. When one discovers a book this literate, this historically informed, this metrically solid, this unperturbed by passing fads, whether intellectual or social—well, one can imagine what a poetic renaissance would have really looked like.

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Translated Writers

Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867)
Gaius Valerius Catullus (*circa* 84 B.C. – 54 B.C.)
Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65 B.C. – 8 B.C.)
Gabriel the Prefect (*aevum Justiniani*)
Leonidas of Tarentum (*floruit* 300 B.C. – 251 B.C.)
Lucilius (*circa* 180 B.C. – 102 B.C.)
Marcus Argentarius (*aevum incertum*)
Charles Maurras (1868 – 1951)
Philodemus of Gadara (*circa* 110 B.C. – 35 B.C.)

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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