

TRINACRIA

Voulant des clartés, vous en faites.

—Charles Maurras

δίζημαί 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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TRINACRIA is published twice a year, in the Spring and the Fall. Issues of the journal are numbered consecutively. There are no subscriptions, but individual copies (current or old) of TRINACRIA may be purchased for \$15. Two complimentary copies are given to each contributor in every issue. Checks for any other copies should be made out to Joseph S. Salemi.

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ISSN 1944-8759

TRINACRIA is privately printed and privately distributed.

An abbreviated version of every issue of TRINACRIA can be viewed at: www.trinacriapoetry.com.

THIS AND THAT...

Now that TRINACRIA is listed at several on-line *Quellen* for poetry venues, there has been a marked uptick in the unsolicited submissions that we receive. In the past such submissions were given a cursory glance, and if a few happened to be up to our standards we might accept and publish them. The rest were returned to their senders. But lately this over-the-transom stuff has been growing in volume. It isn't a major problem, since we can tell in a flash if something is to our taste, and make our dispositions accordingly. We don't agonize over the slush pile here.

However, it is irritating to receive submissions from persons who clearly haven't the slightest awareness of what TRINACRIA is about. Effusions from brain-dead free-versers are bad enough. But if you send me a ten-line poem in which nine of the lines are in perfect iambic fives, why the bloodsucking hell is the remaining line in a different meter? Are you stupid, or just perverse? Don't you see that such a line sticks out like an angry boil?

In some cases a poet will listen to my objection to an offending line, and either accept my suggested emendation or come up with a good emendation of his own. TRINACRIA then publishes the poem. But more than a few poets are afflicted with a dreamy, glassy-eyed cluelessness that can't even perceive the basis of my objection. They'll stare at me in a state of baffled wonderment, babbling about "freedom" or "poetic license" or "creativity" or "openness" or some other bogus abstraction. Let me tell you frankly: if you are that sort of person I don't want to know you, much less receive poetry submissions from you.

In addition, there would seem to be scads of unthinking people out there who submit poems in a scatter-shot, bulk-mail fashion, using a lengthy list of compiled addresses. That may be appropriate when flogging vitamins, but submitting poetry in such a manner merely marks you as a cheap hustler. I don't need to hear from people who are too lazy to visit our website, or read our Statement of Core Principles, or purchase a sample copy of TRINACRIA.

OK, enough kvetching. Let's move on to more positive matters. In this issue of TRINACRIA we are proud to present new work from X.J. Kennedy, Jennifer Reeser, John Whitworth, Carol A. Taylor, Paul Lake, Jane Blanchard, and Jared Carter, just to mention a few. Two previously unpublished poems of Alfred Dorn are included. Leo Yankevich has provided us with new translations from the Russian poet Alexsey Porvin. There are also translations by John Brugaletta from Dante, by James McKee from Horace, and more of my own translation from my grandfather's epic.

I must also explain why I have written *two* book reviews for this issue of the magazine. To be blunt, it's becoming more and more difficult to recruit persons who will write a substantial and scholarly review of a book of poetry, rather than a brief and breezy press release made up of overhyped enthusiasm. Stuff like that doesn't qualify as a review—it's just an extended blurb similar to the "customer review" that you see on amazon.com and other on-line booksellers. I won't print that kind of twaddle. Secondly, if I think a book deserves commentary here in TRINACRIA, I hate to keep the book's author waiting half a year for space to open up in the next issue. So, at the risk of making Issue # 15 top-heavy with my prose, I've penned two book reviews. It won't happen again.

A note on the artwork in this issue: I am especially pleased to give reproductions of two color illustrations from the famous Salani edition of Collodi's *Le Avventure di Pinocchio* (Firenze, 1924). These illustrations are the work of the father-daughter team of Luigi Cavalieri (1869-1940) and Maria Augusta Cavalieri (1900-1982). The Salani edition of *Pinocchio* is virtually unobtainable today. I am fortunate enough to own a copy that belonged to my maternal grandfather. Its magnificent color illustrations are absolutely *sui generis*, and constitute the criterion by which all other illustrators of *Pinocchio* are measured. We shall reproduce other Cavalieri color plates in subsequent issues of TRINACRIA.

As always, we now announce the Pushcart Prize nominations for the last issue. The nominees and their poems are as follows, in the usual alphabetical order:

- Stephen M. Dickey for his “Home In,” a meditative sonnet that uses the imagery of a dying campfire, shooting stars, and the moon to conjure up both remembrance and regret.
- Carol Frith for her “Bast with Trailing End Rhymes,” seven playful rhyming couplets on the Egyptian cat-goddess reimagined as a pampered pet, with strong sexual overtones.
- Karen Kelsay for her “Pastoral for the Midlands,” a series of descriptive quatrains detailing the lush beauty of the English countryside, and comparing it with the scorched desert dryness of some American climes.
- X.J. Kennedy for his “Thomas Hardy’s Obsequies,” a humorous account, in tetrameter ABAB quatrains, of the improbable fate of the famous writer’s heart.
- Jennifer Reeser for her “Enigma,” a substantial poem in iambic pentameter rhymed triplets summoning up the speaker’s childhood memory of a beloved grandfather.
- Don Thackrey for his “Snow Architecture,” a Shakespearean sonnet narrating the wintertime memory of a young daughter building a snowman, with an arresting *volta* that makes a troubling parallel to the adult daughter’s emotional coldness.

Issue # 14 sold more non-contributor copies than any other number of the magazine so far. TRINACRIA now goes all over the Anglophone world. This is due in no small measure to the quality of work we choose to publish, and to the poets—like those mentioned above—who continue, in the teeth of the political bigotry and supercilious disdain of our enemies, to write as well and as freely as they do. God bless them all.

Joseph S. Salemi
Woodside, New York

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Melissa Peralta-Hovejos

Match-lock, Wheel-lock, Flint-lock

The Right of the People to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed.

—Constitution of the United States,
Second Amendment

The match-lock was the very first
Of firearms. The thing would burst
At any slight miscalculation,
Thus leading to exasperation.
Overdo the powder charge
Or load a musket ball too large
Or stand too near a source of heat
And you'd be blown to shredded wheat.
It was a truly vexing gun,
And so we made a different one.

The wheel-lock was the next big thing—
A key-wound rotor on a spring
Would spin when triggered, and ignite
Hot sparks to set the charge alight.
It worked well, but the price was steep;
You really had to sweat to keep
Its intricacies in good order,
And not too many could afford her.
And this was why the gun got slated:
It was too dear, and complicated.

Necessity calls forth ideas—
Instead of all those wheels and gears
Someone took a flinty shard
And set it to strike steel so hard
That sparks flashed in a powder-pan,
And lo!—a brand new world began.
The gun was simple, quick, and cheap
And could be fired in your sleep.
The flint-lock then took pride of place
(Until we got the cartridge case).

And that's why we'll keep buying gats
No matter what you half-assed prats
In all the Blue States think and feel—
You can moan and weep and squeal.
We don't give a flying fuck
About what some left-liberal schmuck
Screams about a weapons-ban.
Enforce it, if you think you can.
We'll defend our shooting rights.
And hey—you're in our cross-hair sights.

Laura J. Bobrow

I Said It. So There.

That is how the matter stands.
I've wished it back a hundredfold.
The time is past for reprimands.

The deed is now out of my hands.
Of course you have the urge to scold,
but done is done. The matter stands.

Rescinding's done in fairylands.
We can but watch the tale unfold.
The time is past for reprimands.

One word exudes a thousand strands.
Once out, they travel uncontrolled,
and that is how the matter stands.

I will not cede to your demands
though I am coaxed, compelled, cajoled.
The time is past for reprimands.

Don't harp on it. My crime expands,
but I am tired, and growing old.
Too bad, but thus the matter stands.
The time's way past for reprimands.

Marly Youmans

Portrait of the Magi as Three Horses

At Bethlehem, the fine, luminous threads of mane
Course from the head like a ghostly river.
Every hidden vein of body is alight in secret.
Each gossamer of mane is telling praise.

The necks of horses bend and yield like flower stems,
The weight of fragrance heavy on the stalk,
Rolling sleepy and slow like ointment from a jar
Of alabaster, oils censuring the air.

The marvelous is not that man should be a horse,
Nor that a man should bow and be a flower,
For in all this scene of mother and glistening child,
Such marvels are the very least of things.

Malcolm Paige

Macro-aggressions

To the spineless little undergraduate wimps in American colleges who are whining about “micro-aggressions.”

Hey you—dumb-ass feminist!
You’ve got your panties in a twist
Because a prof said “little girl”
When talking of the poem *Pearl*.

Hey you—traipsing tranny freak!
You want the right to take a leak
In any restroom of your choice
Whether you’re named John or Joyce.

Hey you—hairy lesbo bitch!
Your lower lip began to twitch
When Bob and Liz made love so sweet
And ran away from Wimpole Street.

Hey you—stupid eco-nerd!
You went ape-shit when you heard
How Gilgamesh, the kingly one,
Cut down forests just for fun.

Hey you—scrawny vegan ass!
Living on dried seeds and grass—
It angers you and causes grief
That Greeks at Troy ate chins of beef.

Hey you—"Black Lives Matter" coon!
You're raging like a wild typhoon
Because the bumpers on some cars
Are blazoned with the Stars and Bars.

Hey you—frowning leftist prick!
It really cuts you to the quick
To learn—*alas!*—that communism
Is deader than your last week's jism.

Hey you—little foreign greaser!
Brought here on a student visa—
You curse the U.S.A. and damn her
When profs critique your sub-par grammar.

Hey you—jilted coed cunt!
You take it as a gross affront
That Dido took her wretched life
When rejected as a wife.

Hey you—pouting undergrads!
You butt-hurt lasses and grim lads—
You don't attend class in this place
To keep bland smiles upon your face.

The world's made up of many kinds,
All sorts of outlooks, views, and minds.
We don't need your vile and poxy
Impetus towards orthodoxy.

So take your querulous complaints,
Your outrage and your fits and faints,
Your smarmy narcissistic whine
And shove 'em where the sun don't shine.

Notes

During the Vietnam War, American soldiers frequented Saigon bars and cafés where young Vietnamese prostitutes plied their trade. These girls were paid for their excellent sexual services, but they also came to expect occasional small gifts such as nylons, pantyhose, and cologne. The American GIs were happy to oblige, except for a few tightwads who tended to argue over the price of everything. The girls called these men “Cheap Charlies.” An egregiously cheap soldier was damned as a “Numbah-Ten Boo-Koo Cheap Charlie.” *Boo-Koo* is a Vietnamese borrowing from the French *beaucoup*, meaning “very much,” “exceedingly,” or “extreme.”

boom-boom: Vietnamese slang for sexual intercourse.

Hong-Kong: Vietnamese slang for falsies, or breast enhancers, made in the British Crown Colony. Many Vietnamese prostitutes had smallish, flat breasts, and wore “Hong-Kong” as a way to attract American males. A girl who didn’t need Hong-Kong had a commercial advantage.

dong: the Vietnamese unit of currency.

Arpège: an inexpensive knockoff of Arpège cologne was sold in the Orient.

mau-len: Vietnamese for “Speed it up!” or “Go fast!”

di-di-mau: Vietnamese for “Move quickly!”

chuoï hat cuom: Vietnamese for “string of beads;” the phrase refers to an Oriental sexual practice too shocking to describe here.

Choi-oi: Vietnamese expression of dismay and contempt, similar to “What the hell?”

Numbah-Ten: Term used among American soldiers in Vietnam to refer to something of the lowest or poorest quality. Vietnamese prostitutes soon picked it up.

Bruce Wise

Voltaire on Shakespeare

His is a fine untutored nature; truly he has heart;
but neither regularity, propriety, nor art.
When he is in the midst of his superb sublimity,
he oft descends to grossness and obtuse buffoonery.
His tragedy is chaos, lacking any harmony;
his style's unbridled, and there is no classic unity.
His plays are vulgar, barbarous, and truly would not be
supported by the lowest scum of France or Italy.
When I observe his dramas acted, this is what I find:
his work's the inspiration of a drunken savage mind.

Keith Holyoak

Moon Over Green Lake

Horses—unsaddled, flanks brushed dry of sweat,
Back from a trail threading through pine and aspen—
They, and their riders, sense the day complete,
The hour come round to let the cougar pass in
Places their own spoor has been newly set.
While creatures dream in stable and in cabin
I lie awake because a heartsick loon
Wailed from a ladder hanging from the moon.

I rise and walk out on a rough-hewn float
That answers to my footfall, trembling, swaying,
The full moon swaying, clear as abstract thought,
Its light like summer snowflakes falling, dying,
Into the waters, near and yet remote—
Poised on the edge I stare through ripples, weighing
Whether to climb the ladder or to swim
Down where the moon dissolves, its light gone dim.

Sometimes that moon of long ago still rises
In my eyes, reflecting on Green Lake;
Viewed through its luminance the world's disguises
Melt away—the frantic crowds, the fake
Friendships for sale, the hyped-up plastic prizes
Are gone, gone are the fraudsters on the take—
I ride through clover all the afternoon
And in the evening hear the heartsick loon.

Leo Yankevich

Martial Law, Poland, 1982

It was a time of greyness and of tanks,
of water cannons on the market square,
a time of strikes, protests, and fear. Despair
was a catchword we wore to work, the thanks
we gave for empty shelves, for brothers crushed
beneath the muddy wheels of ZOMO lorries,
the finger we would give to those, who, storeys
above us, smiled, then kept our voices hushed.

It was a time of all resistance smashed,
of vodka in our wounds and cigarette
smoke in our eyes—of promises rehashed.
It was a time of snitches, thugs on call,
of bravery, of kindness, of regret—
a time of praying—and—no hope at all.

Poet in the Shadows

by

Joseph S. Salemi

Review of: E.M. Schorb, *Words in Passing*
The New Formalist Press, 2015
ISBN: 978-83-61769-99-6

Judged solely on the basis of honors received, and prizes won, the poetry of E.M. Schorb would hold a high place in the estimation of his contemporaries. This poet's work, published in over sixteen volumes of verse and prose, has taken awards in many categories and from a wide range of competitions. TRINACRIA began publishing his poems in our second issue, but Schorb's material has appeared in more than seventy journals worldwide over the last four decades.

Nevertheless, Schorb remains fairly unknown, largely because his work is not a part of what I call Mainstream Mediocrity—that is, the great flood of child-friendly pabulum and amorphous emoting that constitute “poetry” today. His work is sharp, clear, well-structured, and solidly in the formalist camp. There is still a patent and active prejudice against the formalist revival and its practitioners—one which works to keep many good poets in the shadows despite their achievement.

This is why it is gratifying to have a major selection of Schorb's work in this fine printing from The New Formalist Press. Nearly two hundred pages of excellent material are gathered here from numerous hard-copy and on-line venues. The poems are divided into several thematic groups (“Souls,” “Love,” “Trouble,” and others), but these

are just convenient and non-rigid gatherings. There are surprises and delights in each section.

I love the kaleidoscopic range of reference that Schorb demonstrates in these many poems. He can move easily from an appreciation of the French photographer Eugène Atget to his own brief encounter with Marilyn Monroe; and from a whimsical speculation on the drinking habits of the scholarly translator John Ciardi to a dreamy evocation of Vanna White on *Wheel of Fortune*. He comments on the zoological observations of Jane Goodall, the songs of Edith Piaf, and an imaginary interaction between Rodin and Balzac. And there are literary allusions galore: Heraclitus, Skelton, Kipling, Swinburne, Housman, Yeats, Wallace Stevens, William Empson, William Carlos Williams, Frost, Berryman... here is a poet who has not just read widely, but woven his readings into the fabric of his own art.

In addition, Schorb can use history and mythology in an arresting and novel manner. His poem "Paris Recidivist," written in the voice of the Prince of Troy, is an up-to-date and cynical macroeconomic account of the causes of the Trojan War, ending with a cavalier dismissal of Helen as a silly, deluded woman who mattered not a whit in the struggle. "Letters Home" is an epistolary recounting of the death of an R.A.F. pilot in 1943. The dialectical "Blarney Stoned" is addressed to Dionysos, Greek god of drunkenness, by an inebriated Irishman tottering between alcoholism and vowed sobriety. The sonnet "Caesar and Cleopatra" is a very succinct report on how a bemused Caesar was seduced into an affair that led to the destruction of the Roman Republic.

There's much more than this: poems of joy and pain, of terror and anger, of political protest, of satiric commentary, of family remembrance. Schorb is also at home with antique poetic templates like the pastoral eclogue, the elegy, and Skeltonic verse. But rather than sing his praises abstractly, I prefer to give some quoted verses to demonstrate the man's skill. Here are the five lines ending "Elegy," written for a late friend:

Merely the blanket statement, tragic gesture,
As when some friendly hand is flung aloft
Above the crowd, remains to keep; a vesper
Of evening memory; a prayer I coughed
To save your life that wasn't saved by me.

Notice the way the governing verb in this five-line section (*remains*) is postponed to the third line, and even there it is placed exactly in the middle, followed by an extended apposition to the sentence's subject. Then there is the unusual singular form *vesper*, which brilliantly pulls the reader's mind towards the suggestion of evening and twilight while also, by felicitous homeophony, hinting at the word "whisper." This is language as used by a wordsmith of top-notch ability.

I also like Schorb's straightforward description, in more-than-vivid English, of teenage lovers petting in the bushes. This is from "Hot Teen Hogs," which appeared in TRINACRIA # 6:

They rub the blue out of their bluejeaned crotches.
They rip the teeth out of their red-hot zippers.
They fan the flames, and then curl up like kippers.
At last they check their charioteering watches.

They tell each other where to meet next week.
They shake their leather jackets free of gunk,
and she with red nails combs her ducktailed hunk,
as he wipes damp mascara from her cheek.

The metaphor of "charioteering watches" is striking, the way every new trope should be. Have you ever thought of speeding chariots when you glanced at your watch and noticed how late it was? Now you will. Sure, there's a reference to Marvell there, but the personified Time is replaced by a more mundane wristwatch. The imagery of leather jackets and red nails and "ducktailed hunk"? If you were alive in the 1950s you'll know exactly what Schorb is talking about.

There's an amazing poem, "The Big Crunch," composed as if a human life were running backwards like a reversed film strip, and clearly designed to be a sardonic comment on the "Big Bang" theory of cosmology. And Schorb is not afraid to make thundering judgments on the evil and stupidity of the human race, when he speaks of us in the poem "As Good As It Gets":

we, who are madder than the maddest hatter,
our every word a snippet of mad song;
who've served the heads of people on a platter,
or blood in a tureen for Sunday soup!

But even this indictment of our race is qualified by his asking, in the same poem, if in fact our cruelty and savagery are perhaps necessary requirements for the preservation of our lives and identity:

Karl Barth said we were no damned good. Yes, he
shared Jeffers' view of humankind. Karl Barth
was probably correct, if we agree
to measure by his standard. But what hearth
was ever won or kept by kindness?

This is the sort of brutally honest question that a sentiment-soaked and Pollyanna-ish western world had better start asking itself, instead of wallowing in suicidal altruism towards our enemies.

Schorb can write concisely, or extensively. There are many short pieces in this collection, but also ambitious long ones, such as the moving "Obituary" on the life and death of his father. He gives us part of an unfinished musical drama, "Candy Butcher," and the strange "White Stallion," an amazing tale told by a blind Irish seer about a magical horse and the futile attempts to capture it. In every instance these poems are unpredictable and intriguing. Schorb never falls into the hackneyed or the formulaic traps that that are the occupational hazard of the formalist poet. He can pen a firm and metrically precise

line, but when his subject matter requires it he will release his line from any imposed demands, and write as the flow of inspiration dictates.

Schorb has an excellent touch with simile, as when he ends a poem by saying:

...till we waken, straight and narrow,
freshened, like a new-fledged arrow.

When he speaks of “gold-nugget bees,” he has created a likeness that you will never forget. And nevertheless he can also dazzle with descriptions that have neither simile nor metaphor, as in the octet of his sonnet “The Fashion Show”:

The slim young women float their subtle curves
before a fashion-conscious audience.
Diaphanous enough to tackle nerves,
their gowns lift off them in a breezy dance
as left leg forward forces right hip out,
and small breasts, bra-less, bounce beneath a gauze
of punctuated pink. Their red lips pout.
Their veteran eyes, dark shadowed, seek applause.

It’s a pleasure to read a poet whose vocabulary goes beyond the fourth-grade basal reader. Schorb has no fear of difficult or strange words, which he uses with skill and confidence. He also has a playful streak that comes out in unusual coinages such as *leucomelanous* (which I assume from its Greek roots to mean “white-and-black”) as a way to describe salt-and-pepper hair; and he uses *firnificated* (probably from the rare *firn*, or fallen snow) to speak of white birch trees in a winter storm. Can’t you just hear the little dorks in the workshops screaming about “elitism” and “democratic accessibility”?

Schorb’s relative lack of celebrity might have something to do with the demanding nature of some of his work (and I emphasize *some*, be-

cause much of Schorb is as lucid and straightforward as a clock chime). This is not only an injustice, but also an example of the ludicrous hypocrisy that dominates contemporary po-biz. Vapidly opaque free-verse garbage is printed everywhere and celebrated, and its partisans defend its impenetrability with various asinine theories. But when a poet like Schorb writes a piece that might require a second reading, or—Heaven forbid!—a trip to the dictionary, then all of a sudden we hear murmurs about how “difficult” a poet is, and how “unfair to his readers.” In other words, you can write off-the-wall surrealist and experimental crap if you are published in *Poetry*, but you’ll be chastised for elitism and ignored if you write discursively lucid poems that demand actual thought and attention.

I can’t resist quoting one poem in its entirety, Schorb’s Shakespearean sonnet “Notice to Moderns.” It encapsulates practically the whole critique of confessional verse that new formalists have been making for the last thirty-odd years:

You solipsistic sissies, male and female,
poets about the Me, Myself, and I,
should send yourselves, and then collect, your email,
and not pretend such jots are poetry.

“Poets are actors, and their books are theatres,”
wrote Wallace Stevens. Roethke spoke in tongues.
How many voices spoke through William Shakespeare’s?
Create verse worthy of great scoptic lungs!

There is a gathering on a green hill
Where scops will sing of everything they share.
In my imagination, with my will,
I try to see that time, and who was there.

Or in a book or on a stage I try
to tell of others, not Me, Myself, and I.

Notice the wonderful adjective *scoptic*, created from the Anglo-Saxon *scop*, or poet. Here Schorb calls our errant literary clerisy home, urging a return to genuine poetic praxis in place of the narcissistic whingeing that has become *de rigueur* in our Mainstream Mediocrity. In isolation, this poem would be no more than a shot in the dark. But embedded in a collection as powerful as this one, it carries great force, and is more than just a word in passing.



The Play's the Thing

by

Joseph S. Salemi

Review of: James B. Nicola, *Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater*
Cincinnati, OH: Word Poetry, 2016
ISBN: 978-1-62549-187-9

James B. Nicola is in love with the theater in all of its kaleidoscopic variety. As a playwright, actor, stage director, and impresario, Nicola is well acquainted with the ins and outs, the joys and sorrows, the exaltation and disappointment that accompany thespian labor. He is also a poet whose first book, *Manhattan Plaza*, was a celebration of New York City. In this subsequent collection, however, Nicola focuses on his primary passions: the stage, its denizens, and its magic.

There is one problem in being a poet with a prior commitment to another art form. Poetry is a severe mistress. She demands absolute loyalty, to the exclusion of all else. This is why subject matter is programmatically assigned a secondary rank in serious poetic composition. You take orders from the Muse, not from your content. As Rachel Hadas has rightly said, in poetry the *how* is more important than the *what*.

It is also why I have always had a problem with the “expansive poetry” movement, which promoted the utterly false idea that as long as you had a rip-roaring good story to tell, your poem would essentially write itself. Needless to say, that was an unfortunate delusion, which is the reason one doesn't hear too much from the “expansive poetry” people anymore. A poem doesn't click because of its story line. A poem clicks *if it is a good poem*.

Poetry can of course deal with another art form, particularly in the case of ekphrastic verse, which as a genre addresses itself to other works from the fine or plastic arts. It does this either by straightforward description, or as a vehicle for meditation on their meaning. The *locus classicus* for the ekphrastic approach is Homer's description of the shield of Achilles in Book 18 of the Iliad. But even here the poet's main concern is not the shield itself, but its wider symbolic value as a metaphor of human dependence on and rootedness in an impersonal cosmos.

So also should it be with a book of poems about the theater, and for the most part Nicola manages the exercise quite well. Several of his poems do reach out beyond the stage to touch upon broader matters, but even more important, many of them can stand alone as well-constructed literary artifacts. Take for example the brief but perfect poem "Misanthrope," which first appeared in TRINACRIA, and the excellent "Moments," where lines ostensibly about characters in a play are actually a sobering meditation, in four exquisite quatrains, on uncertainty and risk. The poem "The Director" is a wonderful fifteen lines on the parallels of father/director and son/play. When Nicola writes like this, he shows great strength as a poet.

But *Stage to Page* contains a number of free-verse poems, and here the harmony of form and meaning breaks down. It's not—*pace* my enemies—that I reject free verse out of hand, or deny that it can be a genuinely productive aesthetic expression. It's just that, in the absence of a recognizable form and the patterned intricacies that a fixed form must evoke from a poet, free verse privileges content and visceral reader response. And when Nicola writes free-verse poems, all of a sudden the nuts and bolts and backstage workings of theatricality hit us in the face. If you're concerned about the theater, that's fine. But if your interest in the theater is merely polite or passing, a free-verse poem on the subject simply falls flat.

The problem is made manifest in the difference between a creditable villanelle like "To a Dancer, Age Plenty-Nine" (honoring

the late Bella Malinka), and the tedious “Touring,” a melange of a one-sided phone conversation and an argument with children. The first poem is a well-crafted piece of formalist verse; the second reads like the transcript of a surreptitious wiretap. The reportage of something overheard does not make poetry, no matter what they tell you in the workshops.

When Nicola sticks to formalist canons, he demonstrates a rare gift for imagery, as in “Miss Lee,” a tribute to the singer Peggy Lee:

She had the cognac voice, the brandy breast,
the corrugated heart, as iron as
the mullion giving panes the strength to hold.

Those are unforgettable lines, as tough and sinewy as the lady they describe. And there is the striking poem “Focus,” which in a nearly totally enjambed sixteen lines maintains a perfect rhyme scheme, while vividly expressing the tension and impatience of a stage director at rehearsal.

I was especially taken with the neat Petrarchan sonnet “Sylvius,” which comments on the troubled love of Sylvius and Phoebe in *As You Like It*. The poem deals not just with its Shakespearean source material, but also the speaker’s empathy, as an audience member, with the romantic drama, and how it might pertain to his own life. There is also a fine poem, “On Staging with No Bows,” that I’ll quote in full:

There was no curtain; it was in the round.
Then everything stopped. No one made a sound,
and no one bowed, which would have let us know
that it was time to clap, get up, and go.
We couldn’t just leave, what with corpses all
over the stage and peppering the hall:
Haemon, at last with his Antigone;
Ismene, there; there, Aunt Eurydice;
who, taking her life, made a widower

of King Creon. Although we knew they were
just actors, and that they would resurrect
themselves, none of the audience expect-
ed them to take so long, or their stillness
to inflict us with paralysis
that strikes me, even now, writing this.

If you disregard the awkward syllable break at the end of line 12 (a habit to which Nicola is badly addicted), this is a perfect piece—carefully rhymed, direct, clear, and as tightly constructed as a schooner.

It is disheartening that competent and lucid poems of this nature are not published more widely and to more appreciation and acclaim. What's the problem? Has there been a general corruption of taste? Yes, that's part of it. Is there a conspiracy of po-biz honchos to sideline such poetry? To some degree, yes. Have the schools failed miserably in the teaching of such poetry? Sure. But whatever the cause, we live in a world where garbage art is honored and rewarded, while competent and intelligent work is despised. And if you're about to give me an apologetic whine about diversity and inclusion and multiple wellsprings of creativity, please save your breath. You're part of the problem too.

Nicola has been considerate enough to supply some pages of Supplemental Notes to this book, in case a few of the more recondite theatrical references in certain poems might confuse a reader. His occasional use of a parenthetical explanation at the end of a poem serves the same purpose, as does a preliminary epigraph in one other piece. It's nice to find a poet who is not afraid to add this sort of discursive commentary to his published work; one of the problems with much free verse is the strong disinclination of its practitioners to explain or clarify anything they say, lest they dispel the fog of pretentiousness and pseudo-reference that hangs like a miasma over their work. Eliot included notes to *The Waste Land*—it's a shame so few contemporary modernists have followed his example.

But most of these poems don't need any sort of annotation; they speak competently for themselves. There's the very fine "Complicity," on the tenuous but crucial link between performers and audience; and the perfect "Defiance," describing the stubborn rage of an actor; and the 4-3-4-3 quatrains of "Denizen," about an unsuccessful but persistent actor. Each one of them is a well-crafted and shapely artifact.

Apart from the few criticisms I have made, I find this book to be a solid and commendable contribution to the restoration of sanity and coherence in a poetry world gone mad. Towards the end of *Stage to Page*, Nicola gives us a short but delightful lyric "American Sequel," which deserves to be quoted in full as an example of the collection's success in conjoining the life of the theater with that of the world beyond it:

A play reverts to nothing when it's done,
nothing save the potential to fulfill
what it was asking. But we never do,
it seems, not that we can't or never will,
but have been trained to play incessantly
with love and hope the clamor of Act One
and are so proud of what we have begun
and so enjoy the promise of Act Two
we never see the point in playing Three.

What a concise nine lines of clarity and directness! I think Shakespeare would have understood the sentiments of this poem perfectly, and approved.

Plain English

by

Joseph S. Salemi

The poetry scene, like every human activity, has its cant and its catchwords. As Robert Louis Stevenson said in his *Virginibus Puerisque*, the world lives principally on catchwords or unexamined assumptions passed down from conformist to conformist. For modern po-biz lemmings, the current pieties can be boiled down to a few clichés: *no ideas but in things*; *show but don't tell*; *avoid archaisms and inversions*; *write about your personal experience only*; *be sincere*. These clichés are so manifestly stupid that even the people who still believe them try not to state them openly, but instead allude to them obliquely and gingerly, as indisputable givens that one need not debate.

One of the biggest clichés is the notion that, if you are to be taken seriously as a contemporary poet, you must write in “plain English.” This is one of those absurdities that we owe to the camp-followers of modernism (the original modernists would have laughed scornfully at the idea). The lemmings in the workshops will pounce like a SWAT team on any posted poem that presumes to use a register of English beyond the ken of the average dork.

People who defend “plain English” in poetry always do so on the grounds of communicability, and connection to the audience. But in fact that is a lie and a cover story. The accessibility of a text is not the concern of these people at all. Their actual motive is *bien-pensant* conformism and the desire to be part of an elite in-group. Since the dogmatic strictures about plain English are preached and practiced widely, the ordinary poet is terrified of not adhering to an obvious public orthodoxy. So he writes the plainest English he can, in the hope of not appearing to be out of step with his betters. He doesn't really give a damn about accessibility; he simply wants elite status to be accessible to *him*.

The problem, of course, is that “plain English” is always changing. What was ordinary and common English to Shakespeare is no longer quite so plain to us. Even within a generation or two, expressions and phraseology die out or mutate. When my uncle visited Sicily in his old age, modern Sicilians were amazed at some of the unusual idioms and obsolete words that he employed when speaking. But he only knew the Sicilian of 1906, and in seventy years common speech on the island had changed in many respects.

What follows from this phenomenon is that the attempt to write in “plain English” is always going to be swallowed up by impermanence. Your plain English will become opaque sooner rather than later. And given the steady decline in literary sophistication that characterizes our time, spoken English is being debased and simplified in ways that make the common speech of sixty years ago seem positively intricate. Consider the following.

The great translator Richmond Lattimore, in the preface to his English rendering of the Iliad, insisted that he could not use any sort of consciously literary idiom to translate Homer. Lattimore’s argument went like this: “In 1951 we do not have a poetic dialect... I must render Homer into the best English verse I can write, and this will be my own ‘poetic language,’ which is mostly the plain English of today.”

Well, *i tempi cambiano*, as Michael Corleone said. I only wish Lattimore had lived long enough to see what is considered “plain English” now, and to hear the probable reactions of workshop denizens to anyone who would dare to post passages of his “plain English” Iliad on line today. I’m going to give six examples. Let’s assume they were posted anonymously, without the prestige of Lattimore’s name and reputation to shield them.

I wonder what the little dweebs in the workshops would say about this inversion:

She laid her hand upon the robe immortal, and shook it
(III, 385)

Would they berate poor Richmond Lattimore for this unpardonable atavism? Imagine how they would react to his post-positioned use of an attributive adjective in an adverbial sense:

*never the same is
the breed of gods, who are immortal, and men who walk groundling.*
(V, 441-42)

I'm sure his re-creation of the orotund rhetoric of Agamemnon would grate against modern ears:

*Let him give way. For Hades gives not way, and is pitiless,
and therefore he among all the gods is most hateful to mortals.
And let him yield place to me, inasmuch as I am the kinglier
and inasmuch as I can call myself born the elder.*
(IX, 158-61)

Can you hear the snotty comments and acidulous laughter from the jerks in the workshops if anyone with a name other than Lattimore had posted that? And how about this luscious alliteration:

*Zeus still
sleeps; since I have mantled a soft slumber about him*
(XIV, 358-59)

And then there is the rank pleonasm of Achilleus:

*since there was no gratitude given
for fighting incessantly forever against your enemies.*
(IX, 316-17)

Or consider Athene's use of an archaic adjective:

Madman, mazed of your wits, this is ruin!
(XV, 128)

I could go on and on, but you get the point. Lattimore wrote in what he assumed was an easily accessible plain English. But if any un-

known person posted text in that style at a workshop today, even in the translation section, the Plain English Thought Police would be screaming bloody murder.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with writing in "plain" or "colloquial" or "current" English, or in any kind of specialized jargon or slang. In fact, some genres and subjects in the low mimetic or ironic modes pretty much require it at times. But you have to be prepared to accept the fact that your language will become non-current, and increasingly unfamiliar to readers, at a lot faster rate than if you had written in a more consciously elevated register. Think of it on the analogy of clothing fashions—what was hot fifteen years ago is today considered a joke, or "quaint" at best.

Elevated language doesn't go bad that way. Sure, it will become less familiar and obsolescent with time, like everything else. But it does not lose its vigor and high seriousness. Self-consciously "plain" language doesn't have those qualities, and therefore becomes shopworn and superannuated rather quickly. Think of the fatuous slang you heard in the 1960s. Would you dream of saying today that something is "groovy"? Or that your friend is a "cool cat"? Or "Peace, man—hang loose"? There's an austere dignity in being five hundred years behind the times. But it's the mark of a pathetic dork to be a few decades behind them.

A student in my class once asked "But just what is this elevated language that you're talking about, Professor?" I explained that it wasn't fancy language, or strange language, or language that tried to be obscure or distant. Elevated language is a use of language that is clear and precise, but consciously separated from the slapdash folksiness and chatty colloquialism of everyday speech. It's something that *you do not expect to hear*. It is *literary*. It is *feigned*. It is even a little daunting in its archness. It is put together with intricacies and imbrications that would never normally be employed in ordinary conversation. No one talking with you in a restaurant would say "Complacencies of the peignoir." But Wallace Stevens says it, and it is pure poetry. Nobody in the local bodega is going to say "A

rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene." But Hart Crane says it, and we are blown away by it.

Real poets are constantly attuned to the potential of elevated language, its capacity to electrify with sudden and unexpected clarity. Quotidian speech (i.e. "plain English") doesn't achieve that except fitfully and sporadically. Elevated speech does it on purpose, and aims to do it all the time. Being a poet means having that purpose and aim. It doesn't mean aping the pedestrian utterances of the buffoon in the street.

Once you say this, however, be prepared to duck—you will have stimulated the reflexive pro-democracy responses of nearly everyone. They'll start jabbering about inclusiveness and openness and welcoming-ness or whatever other idealist abstraction gets their glands in gear, and you will be condemned as a cold and heartless elitist who Won't Give Folks A Chance. Well, that's OK. Just ignore them. And follow Richmond Lattimore's example by writing the best English verse you can.

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Translated Writers

Dante Alighieri (1265 – 1321)
Anacreon (*circa* 582 B.C. – 485 B.C.)
Antipater of Thessalonika (*floruit* 11 B.C. – 12 A.D.)
Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867)
Jorge Luis Borges (1899 – 1986)
Callimachus (*floruit* 315 B.C. – 245 B.C.)
Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65 B.C. – 8 B.C.)
Alexsey Porvin (1982 – *adhuc vivit*)
Rosario Previti (1882 – 1967)
Rufinus (*aevum incertum*)

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.

Privately printed, published, and distributed. Not for general sale.

TRINACRIA
ISSN: 1944-8759
Price: \$15.00

Publisher and Editor:
Joseph S. Salemi
New York City