

# TRINACRIA

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## ALLONS, ENFANTS...

Our third issue hits the mail somewhat more quickly, so as to allow us to catch up with the calendar. We are now only one issue out of sync with it, which is fashionably late in literary publishing. Some august journals are three years behind schedule, placing us in good company.

Despite a small trickle of semi-literate hate mail from the usual suspects, TRINACRIA has generated an enthusiastic and positive response from readers. Here is a sampling:

I am very excited and delighted by the existence of such a magazine. (E.S.)

*Marvelous*, once again! (R.B.)

Another superb issue, packed with great poems and prose. (L.Y.)

Yours is what a formal poetry magazine should be. (A.W.)

Bravo, TRINACRIA! (J.B.)

Your publication is both elegant and courageous. (M.P.)

I've enjoyed TRINACRIA from cover to cover. (X.J.K.)

Congratulations on such a beautiful production. (R.O.)

TRINACRIA makes other magazines look like third-grade primers. (S.C.)

One common response seems to be delighted surprise. Many poets did not think that a magazine like TRINACRIA was possible under modern conditions of groupthink, social pressure, and politically correct hegemony. They are very happy that we have proved them wrong on this point.

Understand this about TRINACRIA: we don't take one thin dime of subsidy from anyone or any institution. We pay our own way on everything, right down to the smallest paperclip. In consequence we are answerable to no one, and are responsible solely to our own sense of what constitutes worthwhile poetry. We don't have some damned State Arts Council waving a list of "diversity" requirements in our face. We don't have some smarmy multiculturalist bureaucrat inquiring into the genetic makeup of our contributors. We don't have a Board of Advisors arguing like a focus group over whether a given poem is "offensive." We don't have some feminist bean-counter poring over our Table of Contents to see if there are enough female first names. No one of that ilk has anything to do with—or say about—our magazine.

There is an amazing freedom in this. The curse of modern life—mandatory consultation with others—is totally absent from our deliberations. That's not the case with most poetry magazines, where the money to publish comes from some outside source (usually academic or governmental), and where multiple editors mean compromise, concession, and the consensus of mediocrity. Working in a group always leads to the triumph of social ortho-

doxy, with all the *bien-pensant*, Smiley-Face, Goody-Two-Shoes conformist togetherness that such an orthodoxy implies. We reject all of that with contempt. We don't have to be nice to Approved Victim Groups, and we don't have to demonstrate sensitivity. And no, we don't have to follow the dictates of "good taste," at least not as that weasel phrase is understood by gutless wonders and sycophants who are desperate for grant money and peer approval.

Some persons have inquired about our practice of limiting the information in our Contributors Notes to a terse statement about the poet's place of residence. They ask if it has to do with space limitations. No, not at all. This is deliberate policy. The fulsome mix of bragging, posturing, self-dramatization, and invidious comparison that blights the usual Contributors Notes is a symptom of what is wrong with the current poetry scene. It is much too social. Poetry today is crying out to be impersonalized and anonymized, so that both creativity and criticism can be focused on intrinsic aesthetic worth rather than prestige-mongering. Poetry needs to be rescued from the clutches of the *Kaffeeklatsch*, the workshop, the discussion group, the networking conferences, the festivals, the readings and cocktail parties, the amazon.com press releases posing as "reviews," the ludicrous on-line congratulatory threads, the Poet-Laureate-As-Publicity-Shill, the mutual back-scratching and fuck-buddying and toadying. In short, poetry needs to be de-Americanized and de-socialized. For all these reasons, we refuse to make our Contributors Notes a stage for divas and drama queens to strut their stuff. And think of this blessed side-benefit: in TRINACRIA you won't read about some airhead poetess in New Jersey telling you how she "lives in a big, rambling Victorian house with her husband, their five adopted Third-World children, three hamsters, and an armadillo." Isn't that a relief? Our Contributors Notes have the reticence and dignity of La Grande Chartreuse.

OK, enough slash-and-burn. Now for some well-merited praise. Once again, we honor six poets in our last issue with Pushcart Prize nominations. They are, in alphabetical order:

- Russell Bittner for his "If Love Is to Cartography What Romance Is to Maps," a series of playful heptameters worthy of Lewis Carroll at his most whimsical.
- Keith Holyoak for his "Water Rights," an English sonnet that makes excellent use of extended enjambment to drive home an ironic point about human priorities.
- T.S. Kerrigan for his "Inherent Strengths," a tetrameter satirical piece of great wit, with a more than mordant ending.
- David W. Landrum for his "A Curse on You," a veritable *tabellum defixionis* in sonnet form, which pulls off the trick of being simultaneously indignant and funny.

- Jennifer Reeser for her “Morning on the Mississippi Delta,” a *tour de force* in iambic trimeter that describes a simple moment while investing it with religious intensity.
- J.B. Sisson for his “Tulip,” a finely honed poem with an unusual rhyme scheme, telling a quirky tale of prudery, erotic suggestion, and madness.

It is gratifying to publish such fine work. TRINACRIA is becoming, as I hoped and expected, a magnet for highly accomplished writers who believe that the tradition of formalist poetry actually has an identity worth preserving. We are not ephemeral mayflies, even if trendy ephemerality is what the Poetry Establishment currently worships.

Joseph S. Salemi  
Woodside, New York

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Peter Austin

## May and December

*Picasso was seventy when he married twenty-seven-year-old  
Jacqueline Roque. Pierre Trudeau, Lolita's Humbert Humbert,  
and Donald Trump all had relationships with much younger women.*

So, she was twenty and he sixty-four?  
May and December had married before.  
Given the gum-snapping lubbers *her* age,  
Who *wouldn't* plump for an aesthete—a sage?

If she but loved him, to hell with the clock:  
Look at Picasso and Jacqueline Roque!  
What would Trudeau have urged, Humbert, or Trump?  
*Don't get too close to the water!?* Or *Jump!?*

Well, then: he'd ask her, the next time they met:  
“Anne, would you make me the happi-”; and yet...  
Fear flushed his cloud-castle out of the air,  
Not of her answer, nor how he would fare

If it were *No, Sam, I'd rather be friends*;  
That he'd get over, like grippe or the bends.  
No; but the image of her on his breast  
Whispering, *Yes!* (how succinctly expressed!)

Swiftly gave way to a tableau, *en lit*:  
He with his bunions and troublesome knee,  
Hoping to hell that his member would stir  
And that his dentures would stay where they were,

She, eyes averted, as from a mistake  
No one who got out of high-school should make...  
Next time he saw her (and also the last),  
“How was your weekend?” was all that he asked.

Catharine Savage Brosman

## The Elixir of Love

It's *déjà vu* and *déjà entendu*.

I saw this Donizetti opera  
ten years ago, right here, but not with you—  
that was before our reconnection. Ah,

I wanted so to glimpse you in the crowd!  
Yet what would I have said? Still—half in fear—  
I looked around, and nearly spoke aloud  
from anxious longing. You did not appear.

Reflecting that Isolde's famous drink  
could be effective only in romance,  
I bade my friends goodnight. I did not think  
the philtre might provide another chance.

It took some seven years, not just a day,  
as in the story. Virtue no doubt lies  
in yearning; subtle signals may convey  
concealed desire and readiness, for eyes

prepared, though unaware. You wrote to me  
(thus giving love a cybernetic touch)  
to ask about a poet. We agree  
you wished for nothing else; and yet so much

ensued, as if a potion in your blood  
inspired each to love the other, still.  
Your note unlocked in me a weir; the flood  
of images came swiftly, as by will.

Now wed, we share in the triumphant bliss  
achieved by love's elixir on the stage.  
How joyously *amore*'s couples kiss!—  
like us: love is the music of our age.

Sally Cook

## Differences

Under the black assurance of your coat  
Lie credit cards. You hope that you were right  
To build your castle and its little moat  
Against the time when you would come this night

In expiation, longing to be free  
From chains you forged yourself, in other years.  
The ruby bottle squats. We each have three.  
You talk of other times and hovering fears.

I tell you of the winding path I took.  
You say you built your castle with small choices.  
Your hands reach out, but we discuss a book,  
And tell of how we lost those other voices:

Your father who was never there, and mine,  
Whose voice choked on the words that might have healed.  
I wish my mother could be here to dine  
In elegance she never knew. Concealed

In banter, our cross purposes explode;  
The empty salon echoes with our dreams.  
You might have been a prince; you are a toad  
Who fantasizes mild erotic scenes.

My crab cakes come; filet mignon for you  
(You've been deprived, and so deserve the best).  
In the dim light, my dress defiant blue,  
Our difference is I know this is a test.

Frederick Feirstein

## The Bitter Dwarf

We're merely helpful since we can't admit  
That life is sex, aggression, and romance,  
Determined by genetics and mere chance,  
And that sheer power turns all good to shit,

That we must act with all our brains and guts  
Or Death turns hope and love and care to dust,  
And all our steeliness becomes mere rust;  
That Snow White needs a Prince with giant nuts!

We're doomed to gaze on Snow White's purple eyes,  
Impotent, as she prays some Prince will come.  
We're doomed to be mere witnesses, humdrum  
Office workers, not adventuresome.

Malcolm Paige

## A First at Evangelical Lutheran

*(The Right Reverend Otto Schmutzen, D.D., presiding)*

Tut, Faustus,  
Marriage is but a ceremonial toy.

—Marlowe, *The Tragical Historie of Doctor Faustus*

We've come here, Pastor Schmutzen, for we need your sage advice.  
Our wedding day approaches, and we want it to be nice.  
We're the first gay couple to be married here, *n'est-ce pas?*

*That question I will answer with a strong Teutonic "Ja."*

The vows that we exchange that day—they're what we've always heard:  
To plight our troth, to pledge our faith, to give our solemn word  
To honor, love, and cherish—isn't that what we should say?

*I guess if you're the bottom, you can promise to "obey."*

Should I receive the wedding ring, or should it go to Bruce?  
He'll be in the *crêpe-de-Chine*, while I'm decked out in puce.  
I'm a trifle taller, but dear Brucie has more heft...

*Just make sure the drag-queen is positioned on the left.*

We'd like the standard wedding march as we go down the aisle,  
A choir singing *Ave* in the *a cappella* style.  
A cameraman is coming, and he'll snap us on the run...

*Fine—but please, no voguing till the ceremony's done.*

The guests that we've invited aren't what you would expect.  
They are a tad flamboyant, and a few will show up wrecked.  
Dear Pastor, does it matter if some come without their shoes?

*I trust they won't be leaving any condoms in the pews.*

Thank you, Pastor Schmutzen, and your Evangelic Church!  
All the other Lutherans had left us in the lurch.  
You'll make this nuptial day of ours the pinnacle of joy...

*Mein Gott, read Faust—a wedding's just an honorific toy.*

Jennifer Reeser

## Her Feet

“Take off your shoes,” he chuckles when they meet,  
Glasses on, to hide his rural glance,  
“And nylons—let me see those perfect feet,”  
A bent towards dereliction in his stance.

He claims it is her high and compact arch,  
The first two toes’ precisely matching height,  
Imagining her barefoot in a marsh,  
Vulnerable to asp and insect bite.

Persistently, embarrassingly pointed,  
He presses her—first raw, then sentimental:  
Christ’s own disciples’ feet not so anointed,  
Nor more adored the cloth-bound Oriental.

To her, however (resolute romantic),  
Suspicious of the slyly sensual,  
The overtures seem vainly automatic,  
His mannerisms ever casual.

He’s restless, and while she can empathize,  
Assiduous and diligent to please,  
She keeps each foot tucked in its snug high rise,  
Her laces tied completely. She foresees

Herself upon some summer afternoon  
On an ottoman squatting on a shopfront floor  
With russet walls and carpets of maroon,  
Before a boy upon his knee, before

A boy who—loyal salesman—takes her heel,  
To murmur, *In our back room, there is more...*  
Whose livelihood’s afoot, his impulse real,  
Sincerely earned in this poor family store.

T.S. Kerrigan

## The Soldier

*If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England.*

—Rupert Brooke

If I should die, think this of me,  
That in some place our flag's reviled,  
I shared my nation's legacy  
By spawning bastards far and wide,  
And left behind a girl with child  
In every town we occupied.

I'd look into their sunken eyes  
In villages like Neuve-Chapelle  
And tell them things I knew were lies.  
I played upon the hopes and fears  
Of every Fraulein, mademoiselle,  
Then left before the fights, the tears.

Within a corner of some field  
You'll find my narrow soldier's grave,  
Where I made broken women yield  
To satisfy a soldier's need,  
And giving all my country gave  
I left not merely dust, but seed.

Don Thackrey

## Beethoven

Deaf, sour, vain and crude, mad, unkempt hair...  
Those harsh details from his biography  
Should not confound us. God gave him a key  
To free our souls as if we knelt in prayer  
Immersed in grace and heard a deft repair  
Of what went wrong, the day's anxiety  
Redeemed by chords in healing harmony,  
Bright pulsing rhythm, lyric cleansing air.  
Note how the music waits in bold ink scrawls:  
Stick figures crowding staves as if a squad  
Of angel soldiers, most with flags, spellbound,  
Marks time until a baton lifts... then falls  
And instruments relay the voice of God  
To let the fallen world, for now, be sound.

Frank White

## Anatolia

Flat roofs on the Anatolian plain  
Are piled with pyramids of drying grain.  
In the sweet-pungent evening air, a train  
Of camels lengthens like a sad refrain.

The clouds above the clouds still hold sunlight  
An hour after it is lost to sight.  
The trees stretch high and strong and straight; tonight  
The dwindling moon will wash their needles white.

A scene to prove what Aristotle knew:  
Our chief delight is seeing something true.  
Beyond the stars I have no further view  
But these few things I see are not too few.

Paul Bussan

## On the Spirit of the Liturgy

*For Romano Guardini*

Without a trace of sentiment or false  
Emotion, that's my kind of piety;  
I like my faith to have a set of balls  
Instead of thinking femininity

Should be the model for how we must worship;  
To have a shot of some testosterone,  
That like the blood from cup that we will sip,  
Can make us act like we are men full grown

Instead of acting like a bunch of women  
Who always try to act like they are meek;  
Who think it is the essence of religion  
To act like God is strong and we are weak;

By each time that I've walked out the door  
I want to feel like I'm a warrior.

Gerald Sullivan

## On the Threshold

No bellhops, chambermaids all off the floor,  
Most permanents like her attending bingo  
(The calls are audible two floors below),  
She stands without her walker at the door,

Wanting a transient, someone un beholden,  
To proposition, coax into her room,  
One never seen before. She splashes perfume,  
More to blunt her clothing's odor than embolden.

A transient, surely, won't divulge her to  
The Desk—she knows if found out she'll be asked  
To leave, be packed off to a home where, bedfast,  
Pillow-propped and diapered, she can nod and stew.

Too desperate for pride (she always thought  
Not her body but her mind would be the threat),  
She hopes *Will you look at my TV set?*  
Will lead into (once he's inside and caught)

*Please change me. Get me into bed. I'm wet.*

Frederick Turner

## At Home in China

The wood-doves call around the mossy cliffs;  
A vendor calls, wheeling a bicycle;  
The air is full of quiet hieroglyphs;  
Life once again becomes a miracle.

Toddlers with oblong faces, creamy cheeks,  
Ride plastic seesaws in the little park.  
A woman from an open window speaks  
A last word to a frail old patriarch.

I saunter down the pavements to the store,  
A strange white giant smiling a “Nihao”;  
Where have I seen all these sweet things before?  
An old man still can be at home in Now.

Frederick Turner

## The Girls of China

I see your conscience and your sheer clean hair,  
Your graceful carriage, pliant as a feather,  
How when a duty of the heart is there,  
You press determined little lips together;

I see your stylishness, your quiet chic,  
As you walk arm in arm with a girl friend;  
I see the trace of color in your cheek,  
When there is something that you should defend;

I see you under your light parasol,  
Transparent darkness in your clear brown eyes,  
I see your odd thought and your forthright soul,  
Obscurely simple and naïvely wise.

# The Wild Woods of Dogtown

by

J.B. Sisson

Review of: Percy MacKaye, *Dogtown Common*  
New York: Macmillan Company, 1921  
Reprinted: Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Library, 2010  
ISBN 978-1112427459

*Inland among the lonely cedar dells  
Of old Cape Ann, near Gloucester by the sea,  
Still live the dead—in homes that used to be.  
All day in dreamy spells  
They tattle low with tongues of tinkling cattle bells,  
Or spirit tappings of some hollow tree,  
And there, all night—all night, out of the dark—  
They bark—and bark.*

So begins Percy MacKaye's *Dogtown Common*, a narrative poem about the puritanical citizens of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and their disreputable neighbors in a shabby village called Dogtown.

One Friday night in the early nineteenth century, several young men and women drop in at the Dogtown home of Tammy Younger and her niece, Judy Rhines, a notorious pair of clairvoyant witches who read palms, cast spells, and wreak mischief with the aid of dead spirits, dire potions, and bramble-pierced puppets. The plot thickens on Saturday, as Judy and her beguiled minister seek redemption. On Sunday, his sermon on sin is interrupted when the minister is accused of witchcraft. The poem ends tragically in a thunderstorm in the Dogtown woods.

MacKaye, who lived from 1875 to 1956, adopted his characters from a thirty-two-page book, *In the Heart of Cape Ann; Or, The Story of Dogtown*, by Charles E. Mann, published in 1906. Mann had interviewed elderly Cape Annans and had recorded their reminiscences of life in Dogtown, complete with tales of scoundrels and witches, including Tammy Younger and Judy Rhines. MacKaye's book-length poem *Dogtown Common*, originally published by the Macmillan Company in 1921, was recently reprinted by the Cornell University Library in an electronically scanned edition.

*Dogtown Common* is composed of eight-line stanzas with a unique rhyme scheme and a dynamic pattern of line lengths, as in this stanza describing the awesome terrain of Dogtown:

*From Pigeon Cove three miles back in the wood  
The boulders heap up in a wild moraine—  
Gray ruined tabernacles of the rain  
And starry solitude:  
A Stonehenge of the storms that Druid glaciers hewed  
In supplication to the primal pain,  
While yet the world groaned in the mortal throes  
From which man rose.*

This is the locale that John Greenleaf Whittier called “the marvellous valley hidden in the depth of Gloucester woods” in his poem “The Garrison of Cape Ann,” written in 1857. Like many before and after him, Whittier found these woods curiously eerie, and in retelling Cotton Mather’s account of an incident of 1692, Whittier evokes the apparitional atmosphere that panics the apprehensive soldiers of the garrison.

Besides poems, MacKaye wrote plays, including a prequel to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. MacKaye’s play *The Scarecrow: A Tragedy of the Ludicrous*, produced on Broadway in 1911, was inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne’s last short story, “Feathertop,” about a scarecrow built and animated by a diabolical witch. A 1972 television production of *The Scarecrow*, with Gene Wilder and Blythe Danner, is available on DVD.

Also in 1972, Harry Chapin recorded the song “Dogtown,” and Dogtown continues to attract writers. For her novel *The Last Days of Dogtown*, published in 2005, Anita Diamant adopted many of the people described in Charles E. Mann’s *In the Heart of Cape Ann*. She portrays the alleged witches Tammy Younger and Judy Rhines as healers skillful with homemade remedies. Diamant elaborates incidents of their lives into a hardscrabble requiem for a dismal and dwindling community.

Elyssa East, drawing on Mann’s book and newspaper articles, interviewed nearly a hundred residents of Cape Ann for her nonfiction book *Dogtown: Death and Enchantment in a New England Ghost Town*, published in 2009. When she was a student at a west-coast college, East was attracted to Dogtown by the work of Marsden Hartley, who painted the woods and fields of Dogtown in the 1930s. In 1999, when she began searching for the Dogtown locales of such paintings as *Flaming Pool* and *Mountains in Stone*, East learned of the brutal murder of a young woman in the Dogtown woods in 1984. She became so absorbed with this new interest that approximately half of her book is devoted to the murder and the arrest, trial, and conviction of the killer.

East’s chapters about the murder alternate with chapters about Marsden Hartley, the Gloucester poet Charles Olson, the founding of the Commons Settlement, the Revolutionary War, the pirates and witches, the “decline into the ramshackle hamlet known as Dogtown,” and abandonment by the late 1830s. If you’d prefer to read about the history of Dogtown without the sensationalistic murder story, you could just skip East’s odd-numbered chapters.

Those prose depictions of the Dogtown woods, however, pale in comparison to the eldritch evocation of Percy MacKaye's verse. *Dogtown Common* is energized by the dramatic confrontations and the brash dialogue as the characters often interrupt one another. The book's vigorous rhythm is driven by the rhyme scheme of the octet stanza, *abbaabcc*, in iambic lines of varying length. As in the stanzas quoted above, the five pentameter lines are jogged by the trimeter fourth line, the hexameter fifth line, and the dimeter eighth line.

Most long poems in rhyme employ lines of uniform length: tetrameters in Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* and Herman Melville's *Clarel* and pentameters in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows* and Bayard Taylor's *The Picture of St. John*. A notable exception to such uniformity of line length is Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, with its stanza of eight pentameter lines followed by a final hexameter line. This slightly longer line slows the pace, bringing each stanza to a sedate close. In *Dogtown Common*, by contrast, MacKaye ends each stanza with a dimeter, two quick beats that impel the reader onward into the next impetuous stanza.

MacKaye may have been inspired by the poet and playwright William Vaughn Moody, whose poem "Gloucester Moors" has often been anthologized and whose posthumous book *Letters to Harriet* was edited by MacKaye and published in 1935. In "The Daguerreotype," for example, and in "An Ode in Time of Hesitation," which includes a reference to "Cape Ann children," Moody deftly disrupts the flow of his predominantly pentameter lines to intensify certain moments with shorter lines or to solemnize other moments with hexameters. Similarly, swiveling through the irregular intricacies of the idiosyncratic stanzas of *Dogtown Common*, MacKaye elaborates his characters' crises fluently, with the supple grace of a deer bounding through the rugged terrain of the wild woods of Dogtown.

# Healthy and Honest Cynicism

by

Joseph S. Salemi

Review of: Peter Austin, *A Many-Splendored Thing*  
Canada: Harp Editing and Publishing, 2010  
ISBN 978-0-9865870-0-9

It's always a joy to run across a new book of poems that goes contrary to one's expectations. Today, in poetry's overhyped world of trendy mediocrity, expectations are usually dismal. The vagueness, the navel-gazing, the fourth-grade vocabulary, the addictive dependence on emotion, and the omnipresent first-person voice have become as predictable as rainfall in the Amazon basin. This background static is what makes the appearance of Peter Austin's new collection *A Many-Splendored Thing* so welcome—it comes forth like an Olympian god stepping out of a horde of dwarfs.

The Canadian poet Peter Austin is an English professor in Toronto whose work has appeared in many journals here and abroad. This is his first book. It is a substantial gathering of over one hundred pages of verse in a variety of forms, although sonnets predominate along with sixteen-line poems of four quatrains. All of Austin's poems are metrical, unlike the first collections of some formalist poets, where a smattering of free verse is included as a way to show that the authors are not—Heaven forbid!—atavistic or reactionary.

The book's title, taken from a schmaltzy 1950s love song, is deeply ironical. A number of Austin's poems deal with relationships, flirtations, romances, or marriages that go wrong in disastrous ways, some tragically and some hysterically. They often start out with the brainless enthusiasm of infatuation, and then crash like shot-down fighters in a ball of flame. Some of these poems are upsetting, but others make you laugh with a distinctly *Schadenfreude*-ish satisfaction. Austin's poems are untouched by the stupid "moral uplift" and Pollyanna-like optimism that too many Americans still think requisite in a literary work. Austin kicks such people in the teeth with his vividly etched world of violence, betrayal, lust, and venality.

Good examples are "Across a Crowded Room," about a one-night stand that ends in disgust, followed by the continuation of anonymous couplings; or "Folie à Deux," which deals with a loveless marriage riddled by psychological abuse; or "Betrayal," concerning a woman's paralyzing ambivalence about a potential affair. "Far More Hers than His" describes the slow collapse of a marriage after a child dies of AIDS. A particularly grim sonnet ("Widow of a Vet") is almost Faulkneresque in its presentation of long-term marital atrophy of affection, disillusion, and infidelity. I'll quote just the octet:

Her man had given banking up and barbered  
(A clerk who tied the knot was shown the door).  
It quieted a maggot that she harbored  
To say he was *in business*. Come the war,  
He saw the unendurable at Vimy,  
Returned to her with tremors, head to toe;  
On Friday nights, she primped and did the shimmy  
With guys who'd found a reason not to go.

Austin's military reference here is to the 1917 offensive at Vimy Ridge, a memory as horror-haunted for Canadians as Iwo Jima is for us. Indeed, it's wonderful to find a poet who remembers what a Bren gun was, or *Trommelfeuer*, or a Gatling. There are a great many historical and literary references in these poems that indicate wide and deep reading. One distraction, however, is Austin's rather professorial tic of adding a bracketed explanatory note at the end of every poem where there is a word or an allusion that someone, somewhere, might not understand. It isn't the poet's job to provide a trot for his readers. Let *them* look the words and references up, if they're interested enough. Or better yet, the poet should give recondite information in a succinct epigraph, where it would be more sequentially useful to the reader.

Austin also has the important poetic habit of remembering everything, and not discarding from his arsenal of tools any small fact or reference, no matter how seemingly unimportant. As a result, his poems are rich with all sorts of reminiscences and allusions that are missing from those dreary contemporary McPoems that only touch upon love, death, nature, and one's personal emotional orgasms. I smiled at an allusion to Officer Krupke, and at a poem about snake handlers among fundamentalists in the Ozarks. His poem about a murdered girl named Cecilia mentions Dryden, Pope, Rubens, and the Roman Emperor Severus who martyred the original St. Cecilia. Bobby Fischer, Roman Polanski, and Rostropovich appear here as well, along with Torquemada and Flaubert. And these are joined by a wealth of references to popular culture, both past and present.

Austin's vocabulary is also full and impressive. How many workshop dorks do you know who would dare to employ terms like *sudor*, *metathesize*, *factotum*, *coistrel*, *scholiast*, *cacogenic*, *guyot*, *secateur*, *gibbous*, and *suspired* in their poems? Can you imagine the outcry from the Plain-Diction Thought Police? In addition, Austin likes to use terms from non-Western languages, such as *fiashidi* and *ousbah*, though in such cases he always gives the word's meaning in a bracketed note.

But let's return to subject matter, which in this book is markedly non-child-friendly. Austin isn't going to win any prizes from the little old ladies in the State Poetry Societies or the *Kaffeeklatsch* literary round tables. These poems present some very in-your-face unpleasantness: serial killers, children crippled by defoliant, honor killings of errant daughters, shootouts in toy stores, child prostitution, political massacres, revenge acid-throwing, misused Taser guns, and even the smelly, gangrenous instep of a footbound Chinese mistress. The poem "Ruby Rose" is about a wife slaughtered by her Philippine mobster husband, while "Gisberta" is about the

torture-murder of a Brazilian transvestite prostitute. “Pleasure” deals with sadomasochism, and “Leone” with female desperation. All of the poems are written perfectly and precisely, in what James Joyce might have called “a style of scrupulous meanness.”

I was especially pleased by Austin’s willingness to take some solid pot-shots at the po-biz world and its stupidities. An excellent example is his sonnet “Two Launches,” describing the difference between the lack of meaningful publicity for a good book of verse, and the brain-dead commercialized hype that is given to glitzy, trendy trash put out by the fair-haired darlings of the conferences and the MFA mafia. A very cute short one is called “Belly Button Fluff,” which I shall quote in full:

Poets there are who never have enough  
Of serving up their belly button fluff,  
As if it were the Hope or Koh-i-noor,  
Glinting with enigmatical allure.

How Byron viewed his boogers, no one knows,  
Or Dickinson, the lint between her toes;  
And why is Shakespeare found on every shelf?  
Because he kept his ear-wax to himself.

How perfect that is! Will it convince our navel-gazers to grow up? I don’t think so, but it’s nice to have the disease diagnosed so aptly.

Other poems in this collection show a profound awareness of the systematic corruption of the modern world. The knockout poem “Artificial Women,” written in a slashing seven-beat strophe, satirizes our penchant for replicas at the expense of the real, and how commercial greed works overtime to nurture this vice in order to feed it with expensive fakery. “Nobody Believed” lampoons our stupid faith in corporate-subsidized “expertise,” while the gruesomely comic “One Eighty (A Revisionist Fairytale),” a magnificent dactylic piece that retells the Sleeping Beauty story, is a *tour de force* of healthy cynicism. I must quote the ending:

Pictures her waiting—an eon, asleep!  
*His*, to redeem from the morphean deep;  
*His*, to enlighten—the TV, the phone—  
Hundreds of wonders, and none of them known!

What will she think of a Moog-rendered tune?  
Microwave ovens? The walk on the moon?  
What will she say, when she sees a Skidoo?  
Catches a plane, to New York, or Corfu?...

Silent, he stands, in her breath-scented bower,  
Stunned by so lovely, so childlike a flower,  
Wondering which of his twopenny schemes  
Justifies nuking such innocent dreams?

Thinks of corruption and drunk-driven cars,  
Bennies, bad air days, dioxin and SARS;  
Thinks of the A-bomb, the secret police;  
Does a one-eighty, and leaves her in peace.

Consider those rhymes—perfect, yet still fresh and unexpected, like *cars* and *SARS*, or *Skidoo* and *Corfu*. Feel the dactylic meter, as precise as the Manual of Arms, or a thoroughbred's canter. Look at the freedom of diction—the learned *morphean*, the arresting *Moog-rendered*, the self-dismissive force of *twopenny schemes*, the use of *nuking* as a verb, and the clipped concision, both mathematical and colloquial, of *Does a one-eighty*.

That is top-notch poetry, like everything else in Austin's book. What's sad is that a poet of this level of achievement remains basically unrecognized, while scores of conference-hopping networkers and publicity hounds parlay their miniscule talent into notoriety. But then again, if we're being honestly cynical, how could it be otherwise?

# Nature, Artifice, and Poetry

by

Joseph S. Salemi

*Note:* This propositional list was put together in April of 1996, after a long discussion with Alfred Dorn at his home in Flushing, New York. Dorn urged me to compose an *aide-mémoire* of my views on the subject of poetry's relation to the natural world, with the aim of future publication in prose form. The expanded prose version never came to fruition, but I present the list here as a basis for possible debate. It does not equal the length of Martin Luther's famed Wittenberg Theses, but it constituted for me my final rejection of modernist aesthetics and the Rousseauistic romanticism that underpins them.

1. Nature is the world of animate and inanimate matter to which we are linked by our bodies.
2. This natural world is an all-encompassing *Gestalt*—we are born out of her, and we die back into her.
3. Nature functions regularly and impersonally, but seems devoid of any intrinsic meaning or external purpose.
4. Our only distinctively *human* (as opposed to *natural*) characteristic is our capacity for artifice.
5. Artifice is the creation of any technique, procedure, tool, or object by man to fulfill some purpose, embody some meaning, or delight by its design.
6. The techniques and products of artifice (the general term for which is *artifacts*) may be simple or complex, but they are all the fruits of a peculiarly human ingenuity that both transcends and thwarts nature.
7. Artifice works *within* nature, in that it makes use of material substances, but it goes *beyond* nature by removing matter from the flow of natural patterns and refashioning it into something that nature will not and cannot make.
8. Nature creates trees and flowers, but she will never create a garden, which is the fruit of artifice.
9. If man were extinct, and the universe left to its own devices, in the briefest moment of geologic time nature would subdue every vestige of human artifice to her own purposeless rhythms.

10. This is why man and nature are implacable enemies—we create ordered and intelligible structures to which she is utterly indifferent.
11. Every culture breaks stone, fells trees, kills game, and hacks at the earth to survive—in short, there is no tribe of humans that does not trade blows incessantly with the great bitch nature.
12. Our chief weapon in this war with nature is artifice.
13. The palaver about living life “in harmony with nature,” when it is not mere naïve sentimentality, is really a mask for the malignant urge to degrade human beings and discredit artifice.
14. To “live in harmony with nature” is to live like a plant or an animal or an insect. No sane human being ever does this.
15. The savage who kills a monkey with a poisoned dart is no more “in harmony with nature” than an offshore oil-driller.
16. For these reasons artifice and artifacts (whether in the form of a cathedral or a flint arrowhead) are the especial mark of man.
17. The common task of all artifice is to take a natural process or product and ennoble it *via* the human touch.
18. Artifice therefore involves a distortion of nature, but one that wrenches from her grasp a range of new possibilities.
19. We are never more human than when we bend nature and thwart her rhythms to serve our own needs and desires—that is, when we are making artifacts.
20. In order to make artifacts we have to struggle against nature’s indifference, impersonality, randomness, intractability, and ultimate entropy. We produce our artifacts in spite of her profound unconsciousness of both them and us.
21. This is why every great work of human artifice is conceived, fashioned, cut, chiseled, or wrought *against the grain*, despite its surface harmonies.
22. Eating is a natural process. Human artifice bends and ennobles it into the artifact called *cuisine*.
23. Sex is a natural process. Human artifice bends and ennobles it into the artifact called *eroticism*.

24. Movement is a natural process. Human artifice bends and ennobles it into the artifact called *dance*.
25. Insects fight battles. But human artifice came up with the Greek phalanx, the Roman legion, the British square.
26. We humans have distilled and transformed thousands of natural objects and processes in the lembick of artifice: grapes into wine, rocks into gemstones, noise into music, copulation into marriage, death into funeral rites.
27. Poetry is artifice twice-removed from nature, since it refashions language, which is itself an artifact derived from natural communication.
28. Language is certainly not natural. If it were, language would show the same world-wide uniformity that we see in digestion or parturition.
29. The impulse to communicate is natural, and language is a culturally specific artifact wrought from that impulse. Hence the multiplicity of human languages, which parallels the world-wide variations in customs, religions, cuisines, clothing styles, and the like.
30. Poetry is even farther removed from nature by being formulated and presented in a culturally inherited and stereotyped code called *poetic* language, and later on in a *written* language, both of which are themselves the products of centuries of artifice.
31. For these reasons poetry can in no possible sense be described as a “natural” or “spontaneous” outpouring. Poetry is more intensely gouged out, hammered, abraded, and polished than a mezzotint.
32. Poetry is not expressed. Poetry is made.
33. You think poetry is a natural expression of one’s true feelings? You might as well think that the Parthenon is a natural rock formation on the Acropolis.
34. Human artifice manifests itself in both constructive and destructive ways. A vaccine is an artifact, and so is a machine gun.
35. For this reason artifice may be said to be amoral—it accomplishes what it accomplishes without reference to anyone’s feelings, opinions, or preconceived notions.
36. All artifice, no matter what it does, is a manifestation of our essential humanness.

37. Trying to regulate or circumscribe artifice is profoundly wrongheaded. You cannot prevent people from being what they are, or doing what defines them.
38. You don't like land mines or *pâté de foie gras*? Fine—but the same artifice created them that writes poems, heals the sick, and heats your apartment.
39. This is one of the most delightful aspects of artifice: human ingenuity and wit function with complete disregard for the strictures of moralists, reformers, and pedagogues.
40. Better one golden calf than ten stupid commandments.
41. For this reason, when writing poetry you should never pay the slightest attention to any moral code, religious dogma, or political ideology, except insofar as they provide raw material for your artifice to work with.
42. You are a poet. You don't owe anyone anything except superb linguistic artifacts.
43. Moralistic readers will condemn you as “cynical” and “irresponsible.” Rejoice in this, for it means that you have escaped the clutches of clods with an agenda.
44. Many would-be poets are desperate for an audience. If they were serious about their art, they would be desperate to write better poems.
45. The poet who is fundamentally concerned with audience rather than artifice is at the mercy of the age and place he inhabits—he will never be able to use all his potential resources.
46. Why? Because he will be limited to the vocabulary, idiom, knowledge, assumptions, and *bien-pensant* pieties of those whom he wishes to address. The scope of his artifice will be contained by the intellectual bell curve of the target audience, just as it is in modern advertising.
47. Being concerned with audience means being concerned with pushing a message, which in turn means having an extra-poetic motive. Poets suffering from this disorder are usually trying to save the world, enlighten the infidels, or realize some other Sunday-school agenda.
48. In the strict sense, there is no external audience for your poetry—at least not one with which you should trouble yourself.
49. The true audience for your poetry is the internal constellation of aesthetic criteria, traditions, and designs that you choose as guides for your artifice. Please them, if no one else.
50. A curious thing about artifice is that it is never content to satisfy its original motive, but always tends toward greater intricacy and elaboration.

51. Such involution is often superfluous and wasteful in the strict sense, but also peculiarly human.
52. No plant or animal ever does more than is absolutely necessary to accomplish its end. A beaver dam or a termite mound doesn't have an atom of material or energy in it beyond the bare minimum required to achieve its purpose.
53. Indeed, the simple matching of means to ends is a trivial feat that nature accomplishes every day, but man continues elaborating long after his original purpose has been achieved or even forgotten.
54. Only human beings trouble themselves with the intricate detail, the complex pattern, the superfluous flourish.
55. A general rule: the more baroquely intricate, the more truly human; the simpler and more primitive, the less fully human.
56. Yes, yes—there are exceptions. I said the rule was *general*.
57. Hence, the attempt in art to simplify merely for the sake of simplification is the debasement of art below its properly human level.
58. Whom are you simplifying for? Why are you worrying about them?
59. When you try to be “natural” you are trying to be less than human.
60. A simple poem can mean two things: a poem that has been fashioned with aesthetically apt economy, or a poem impoverished in the resources of artifice.
61. Too many poems today are of the second sort—they are starved, truncated, skeletal, bloodless.
62. Unfortunately, there continues to exist a cadre of teachers and poet-pedagogues who inculcate the virtues of such poetic anemia into aspiring writers.
63. Young poets are relentlessly drilled to use the minimal amount of linguistic artifice: the shortest and most prosaic words, the simplest and most paratactic sentence structure, the baldest and most pared-down style.
64. As a result of such teaching, the bizarre notion is propagated that this sort of dessicated language strategy is somehow more genuine and more ethical than the reverse.

65. This notion is widespread among modern poets, although it makes about as much sense as the idea that a plain cotton shift is morally superior to a smartly tailored suit.
66. In addition, poets are encouraged to apply this barebones rhetoric to the narrowest and dullest range of subject matter.
67. That range is usually limited to the subjective feelings of the self-speaking ego, descriptions of the natural world, and fashionable statements of political or social protest.
68. Now many young poets are anxious to be thought of as daring and avant-garde, but they are also terrified of using artifice in ways that violate the abovementioned strictures.
69. Hence we have that peculiarly modern phenomenon: the self-consciously “experimental” or “controversial” poem that is utterly banal in both form and substance.
70. In such poems—as well as most other contemporary effusions—it seems as if the poets, on the basis of some *a priori* commitment, had deliberately denied themselves the most basic tools of their trade.
71. What tools? *The tools of artifice*: Rhyme, meter, long words, verbal tropes, figurative language, wit, insouciance, the capacity to surprise, and the willingness to shock.
72. Am I getting through to you? Artifice in poetry is the capacity to manipulate language in as cool and detached a manner as a sculptor manipulates marble.
73. Too many modern poets believe that using these tools or having such detachment would fatally damage the genuineness of their work—a genuineness which they have come to believe is rooted in a bogus “natural simplicity.”
74. Hence the predictable and numbing *sameness* of much modern poetry: its dead diction, its hesitancy, its incompleteness, its querulousness, its uncertain movement, its utter humorlessness, its elliptical thought, its stifling aura of a Seriousness That Dare Not Speak Its Name.
75. No one wants to read such stuff—that is why the general reader has rightly abandoned contemporary poetry.

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## Translated Poets

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)

Gottfried Benn (1886-1956)

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986)

Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774)

Luxorius of Carthage (*floruit Carthagine Vandatica* c. 496-534)

Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898)

Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855)

Jan Andrzej Morsztyn (1621-1693)

Sulpicia (*aevum incertum; eodem tempore Tibulli*)

# 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.