

Literary Matters



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ASSOCIATION OF LITERARY SCHOLARS, CRITICS, AND WRITERS

Aut nuntiare aut delectare

FROM THE EDITOR

Earlier this summer, I came across an article entitled “Writing Fiction and Nonfiction” by Sandy Koslow.¹ Her piece resonated with me on many levels, and I find myself rereading it nearly once a week. I am sure that at some point—whether it be after I’ve memorized the essay verbatim or tomorrow morning—the charm of Koslow’s message will fade for me, and a something-new, or several of them, will usurp its position as my go-to text for anything from a pep talk to a fire I can light under my—well, you get the point.

To imagine that an article purportedly about the author’s struggle to pinpoint whether she prefers writing fiction or nonfiction (spoiler alert: she can’t choose) would have such an effect may seem odd, but for me it does. Perhaps because I can relate to it, perhaps because I find truth in it that extends beyond the personal validity it has for me. I think it is a bit of both. Just like Koslow cannot play favorites, I can’t either. It does not matter much what I set down to write. Once I start writing, I am absorbed until the thing is finished. If I step away, I haven’t stepped away—I have just put the pen down or stopped pressing the keys, and even then, I may be found walking down the street with my cell phone out, sending myself text messages so that I do not forget particular ideas, sentences, words.

But it is not Koslow’s inability to select what she likes best, or my own indecision, that is actually profound: it is the separation anxiety, the fact that writing can become such a huge part of someone that to do it is to be whole, and to not do it is to have a phantom limb. The act of writing is far more important than what species of writing is being put on the page.

For those who write out of a love for writing, regardless of the genre or medium, we are a product of our work just as much as it is a product of us. How is this so? Well, to get started, consider this: A person writes a poem, so she is a poet. Was she a poet before she wrote the poem, or is it that since what she wrote turned out to be a poem, she is thus a poet? And if she writes a novel next, is she now a novelist and no longer a poet, or does she get to be both?

¹ Sally Koslow, “Writing Fiction and Nonfiction,” *Opinionator* (blog), Draft, *New York Times*, June 17, 2013, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/17/writing-fiction-and-nonfiction/?_r=0.

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It is the progression of these questions that gets to the deeper part of what I mean when I say that we are products of our work. Each thing we write changes us, not because it happens to add another entry to our bibliographies, but because of the process we went through to write it. Writing a new piece may allow us to refine our skills or redefine our sense of what we can create; it may reunite us with a form we had all but forgotten we loved to employ; it may help us clarify our perspectives on the world, relationships, or anything else that is meaningful to us; it may humble us.

Now because the “our work is a product of us” side must look rather obvious and in need of no explanation (of course what a person writes is a thing that has indeed been created by said individual), it may seem that covering the “we are a product of our work” part should mean the point has been explained to completion. But there is most assuredly more to it than the literal mechanics, and this is evinced by Koslow’s account. What are these more complex considerations? Well, they stem from a tweaking and reimagining of the above.

How a writer creates a piece is dependent on what type of text it is intended to be, and the procedure is unique and distinct to that artist. The product

is a reflection of that. In some senses, the text is the progeny of the writer's imagination—there is shared DNA involved. Even when the subject matter has nothing to do with the author herself, the pages can tell us so much about her. Just as the uncovering and subsequent analysis of an archeological find will provide a font of information about its crafter, the society he came from, and more, so too can a text illuminate for readers the ideology, disposition, and ethos of the person who is responsible for its existence. The two feature articles in this issue of *Literary Matters* are excellent illustrations of these points.

The first piece, Simon Perchik's "Magic, Illusion, and Other Realities," describes how the inspiration that drives a prose writer to create is different from that of a poet, and then details Perchik's own methodology for composing poetry. In his view, prose begins with a specific and predetermined concept in mind, whereas poetry springs from a "hidden idea." Perchik unearths these hidden ideas by forcing himself into a state of what I would term "aesthetic-cognitive dissonance," and in attempting to resolve this staged conflict, he generates a novel thought in the form of a poem. His unique process, which is an exercise in the methodical creation and cleaning up of chaos, is an expression of his identity, just as the poem itself is. He selects all that will go into it and how to mix it together. It is the work of a well-practiced poet, one who refines his technique further with each new effort, and in that sense, each finished product, its perceived successes and failures, will in turn evolve him into the slightly different person responsible for writing whatever poem comes out next.

In "What Did Burton Really Think?," John Wallen first surveys the numerous views of Burton and his work offered by scholars and then provides his own examination of Burton's ideology through close readings of *The Kasidah* and *Stone Talk*, two of Burton's book-length poems. Neither *The Kasidah* nor *Stone Talk* is overtly about Burton—not only did Burton leave

himself out of the plot, but he also left himself out of the publication credits, in a sense, as both were published under pseudonyms. However, Wallen makes a very convincing case for believing that a great deal about the author can be gleaned from analyzing these pieces. From his review of other texts on Burton, Wallen concludes that the man was greatly misunderstood, though not because it is a mistake to attempt to understand Burton through his work. On the contrary, Wallen's essay speaks to how great the instinct is to look for the writer among his words, and how often he can be found there if the search is sincere.

For writers, there is joy not only in the act of creation, but also in knowing that what is yielded may impart something on those who take the time to engage with the text, and interacting with those who find meaning in their inventions is gratifying to them. It is this relationship between writer and reader, in addition to each role in isolation, that this organization celebrates. This is accomplished through publishing your articles, reviews, and poems, both in *Literary Matters* and *Literary Imagination*, but also through the gatherings and events the ALSCW sponsors. My hope is that in these pages, something will pique your interest, whether the pieces themselves, or the announcements about the many upcoming local meetings you are invited to attend. As always, I encourage you all to consider sharing your passion with the rest of the literary community in the form of essays, commentary, criticism, or any other mode that matters most to you. Be transformed by your own oeuvre as much as you transform it, and allow us all to be enlivened by your evolution.

Very best,

Samantha Madway
Editor, *Literary Matters*

LITERARY MATTERS

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The Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers (ALSCW) promotes excellence in literary criticism and scholarship, and works to ensure that literature thrives in both scholarly and creative environments. We encourage the reading and writing of literature, criticism, and scholarship, as well as wide-ranging discussions among those committed to the reading and study of literary works.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

BY SARAH SPENCE

The Harvard Report on the Arts and Humanities (“The Teaching of the Arts and the Humanities: Mapping the Future”¹), published at the end of May 2013, provides a major contribution to the conversation on the humanities. It is filled with incisive, lyrical expressions of the importance, role, and function of the humanities, and offers articulate and new approaches to questions about what we do. The report’s opening salvo, “The Arts and Humanities teach us how to describe experience, how to evaluate it, and how to imagine its liberating transformation” (p. 1), echoes sentiments found often in our pages and, along with much of the report, presents gratifying and intelligent arguments for the humanities. At a time when both the NEH and the NEA director positions remain unfilled, and the support for these critical institutions is frequently threatened, this report offers a welcome and fresh perspective on the central issues.

Much of the report focuses on the importance of history to the humanities:

The philosopher Bernard Williams suggests that unlike the humanities, scientific progress aims at ‘vindicatory’ advance. In the sciences, a new concept or theory may supplant its predecessors and when it does the transition aims to be recognizable to both sides as a justifiable improvement. ...But if Williams is right, then the humanities are not like this: the domains they characterize—domains of freedom and justice, of reason and goodness, of beauty and right and perhaps even of truth—are essentially human domains; their history is constitutive, in part, of what they are.

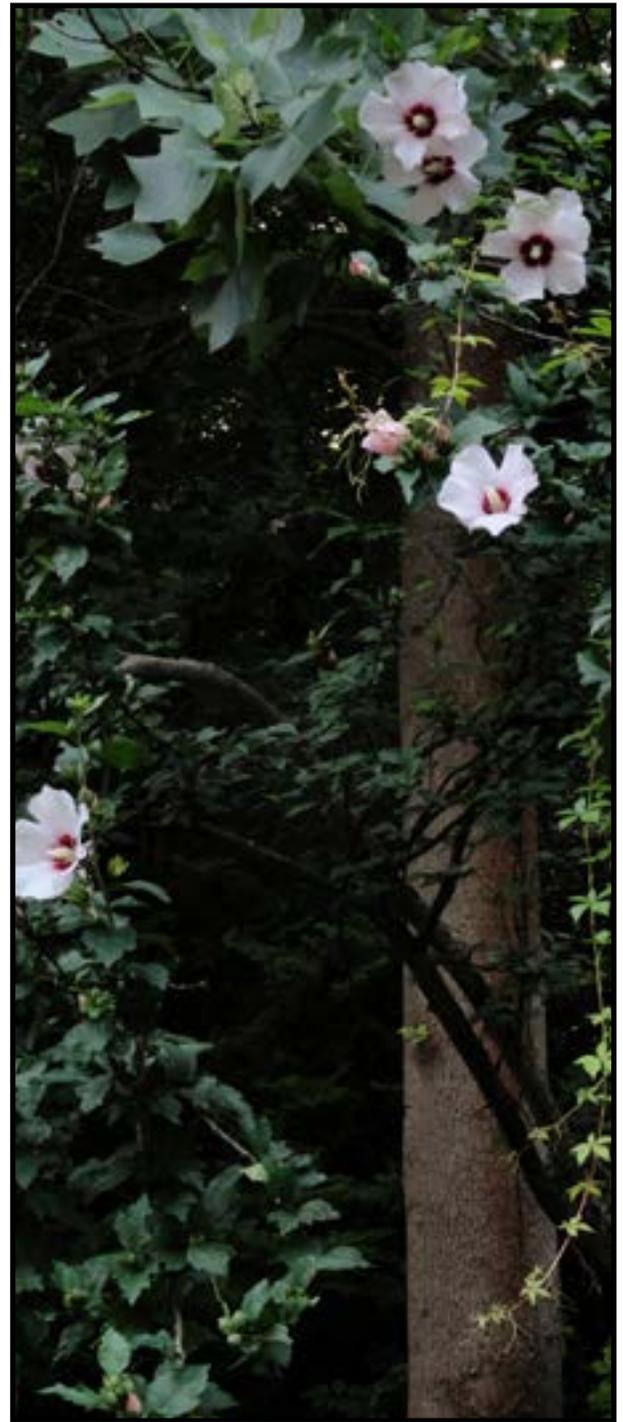
In a historical perspective, the Humanities can thus be seen, not simply as traditional, but, to the contrary, as essential to the never-ending unfolding of tradition understood as transmission and transformation. (26; 38)

This emphasis on history is tied into a rich understanding of the complementary roles played by print and digital culture and the immensely expanded archive now available:

Whichever of these categories of culture we work with, the archive is immensely rich and large. We offer abundant materials (texts, media artifacts, and objects that range from the most casual and throwaway to the most monumental and highly crafted) through which to explore the problems, dilemmas and extraordinary variety of human experience.

(continued on page 5)

¹ Sean Kelly, James Simpson, et al, *The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping The Future*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard’s Division of Arts and Humanities, 2013). All further citations refer to this publication, which can be accessed through the ALSCW’s news blog at http://alscw.org/news/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Humanities_Project__Arts_and_Humanities.pdf.



To contribute to **Literary Matters**, please send articles to literarymatters@alscw.org. Content ranges from columns on neglected authors, to interviews with those working in the literary field, to scholarly analyses of a text, and beyond. Please do not hesitate to contact the editor with any questions you may have.

Submissions for Issue 6.4 must be received by **October 15, 2013**.

News & Announcements

SAVE THE DATE: THE ALSCW ANNUAL CONFERENCE

We are pleased to announce that the 2014 ALSCW Conference will take place **Friday, April 4 and Saturday, April 5 at the Indiana Memorial Union of Indiana University**. Please pass the word to your colleagues, and greet the spring with us in beautiful Bloomington. Plans include a preliminary evening of readings on Thursday night, April 3, and an ALSCW board meeting on the morning of Sunday, April 6.

The IU Union sponsors **express bus service between Indianapolis Airport and the conference site**. Rooms will be available for conference-goers at the Union, as well as in several hotels adjacent to campus. Be on the lookout for follow-up announcements with more information. We are looking forward to seeing you this coming April.



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Literary Matters now features a section for book reviews of recent publications. Reviews may range from 500 to 1500 words, and should be critical in the full sense (not only laudatory). The review need not provide an overview of the entire work, but can instead focus on characteristics you feel set the piece apart. Book reviews may be sent to literarymatters@alscw.org. Those received by **October 15, 2013** will be considered for publication in Issue 6.4.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR PENCIL'S PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

*Calling all professionals looking to
make a difference in NYC Public
Schools!*

The PENCIL Partnership Program pairs professionals from all fields with public school principals to develop long-term capacity-building projects to improve student achievement. Architects are designing school playgrounds, lawyers are coaching mock-trial teams, composers are teaching songwriting to students, investment bankers are enhancing math curricula, and HR directors are working on staff-retention plans. There are so many ways to use your skills and expertise to help improve our schools.

We're looking for NYC volunteers to engage in year-long, customized partnerships that match the skills of the professional with the specific needs of a public school. PENCIL's dedicated team makes the match, helps in the project planning, and provides partnership support every step of the way. We have found that the partnerships that have the greatest impact take a minimum commitment of forty hours over the course of the year.

Need some specific examples? Check out some of PENCIL's great partnerships at <http://www.pencil.org/partnership-program!>

For more information, visit www.pencil.org or contact eloubaton@pencil.org.



The size of the archive has recently been underscored by the information technology revolution. The material now available to our students through electronic archives possibly offers, in its sheer quantity and variety...new oceans of material—an expanded historical range as well as range of media—and new ways of both mapping and navigating those oceans. (p. 39)

Where the Harvard report pulls its punches is in an area critical to the ALSCW: the role and function of the arts. This is highlighted in the beginning of the fourth and final section, entitled “Arts Practice”:

One of the most important ways we emphasize the positive value of the humanities is by offering opportunities to make culture as well as consume it. Practicing art is basic training for what is variously understood as the experience, attention, or innovation economy.

However, art is at home among the Humanities not only because of the ways practicing drawing—or photography, musical composition, or poetry—arms students with particular tools and aptitudes. It is because the work that happens in the Humanities—the work of putting the obvious into question and the commonsensical into relief—happens in art practice also. However, it happens there in a unique and powerful way. One can look at a drawing; one can appreciate and admire drawings. But it is something very different to hold a pencil and

make a mark. It is something very different to face the innumerable choices that will make an image look the way it does; or to see anew, as one struggles to render them, the world’s shapes, lines, and spaces. (p. 48–49)

Linking the arts and humanities is of course something we endorse. The intersecting axes that define our organization—ancient to modern, creative to scholarly—resonate with this report in most regards. We too argue strongly for the importance of history and historical perspective to the humanities. Yet we also argue for the importance of history to the arts and, perhaps more importantly, we argue—most clearly since we added the W to our name—for viewing the arts and humanities as equally integral to our *raison d’être*. The notion that the creative arts are handmaidens to the interpretive arts is something the ALSCW has been fighting since its inception: through the structure of the conferences, through *Literary Imagination’s* juxtaposition of the creative and the scholarly, and through the revitalization of the name of the organization to explicitly include writers, the association challenges this notion. In our view, the arts do not refract the humanities in the way that this report seems to suggest. Each is integral to the field as a whole, and together they make it what it is. We honor the practitioners of writing as we honor those who teach and interpret the writings of others, fellow workers in the fields of words.

Sarah Spence
President, ALSCW

A FRIENDLY REMINDER TO RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP:

Our members are essential to the growth and success of our organization—the papers you present at the Conferences, the articles you contribute to our publications, and the Local Meetings you host and attend all embody the very mission we seek to achieve. We rely on your membership to further our aims as an association, and to continue providing arenas in which you all may gather to further your own. Please take a moment to renew your membership for the 2013 calendar year.

Please note the new membership rates, effective as of December 1, 2012: The categories have been reduced to four: Premium memberships at \$125 annually; Regular memberships at \$85 annually; Senior memberships (for those 70 and above) at \$60; Reduced-price memberships at \$45 annually (those eligible for reduced-price memberships are members in their first year, students, and those earning less than \$50,000 a year). We have eliminated the category of joint domestic memberships and will simply offer two-member households the regular \$85 rate, in return for which they will receive all the benefits provided by a current joint domestic membership—a single copy of our publications and full member privileges for both persons in the household. The Executive Council voted for this change at its October meeting in an effort to meet our ever-increasing financial demands. Since this is the first time in a very long time that our rates have increased, we trust you will understand the necessity. Membership rates in our Association are still one of the best bargains in the business.

To renew your membership with the Association for 2013, please visit <http://alscw.org/membership/join/index.html>. To pay by check, please mail your completed membership form—available on page 33 of this issue of *Literary Matters*—along with a check made out to ALSCW to the Boston office: 650 Beacon Street, Suite 510, Boston, MA 02215. Whatever level of membership you choose, you will be doing a great service to literature and the humanities by supporting the ALSCW. A complete explanation of membership benefits, rights, and privileges is available at the web address noted above, should you wish to read more about the terms of membership in the Association. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the office at office@alscw.org, or by calling 617-358-1990. Thank you for your support!

MERINGOFF MATCHING GRANT 2013

August 9, 2013

Dear ALSCW Members,

I write from the Adirondack Mountains in NY on a very rainy August day to report on the Meringoff matching fund drive and to ask your continued support. As you will recall, Stephen J. Meringoff has again pledged this year to match \$13,500 raised from the membership to support any aspect of the association, including the operating expenses of the office. This is an extraordinary pledge, not only for the evidence it offers of Mr. Meringoff's ongoing generosity, but also for its recognition of the importance—and cost—of the infrastructure that keeps the organization functioning. These are the hardest kinds of funds to raise, and through the matching gift Mr. Meringoff has pledged we have the chance to see our dollars go twice as far in an area where they are sorely needed.

In the few months since the drive started, we have raised close to 60% of the funds. This amount has come from a small percentage of the membership. If those of you who have not yet given were to give something now, and if those of you who gave already were to give a little more, we would certainly approach if not exceed our goal. The council has shown tremendous leadership in this effort, raising 10% of the total before the drive began and, recently, doubling that amount through a second round of contributions. I ask you to consider joining them in their generosity.

We are setting a deadline of September 15, 2013, to report to Mr. Meringoff and, we trust, show our success. Please consider giving at any level to this important campaign. Donations can be made through the website at <http://alscw.org/donate/donate-now/index.html>. If you need to make your donation by check through the mail, you may direct it to the Boston office address, 650 Beacon Street, Suite 510, Boston, MA 02215.

With thanks and all the best wishes,

Sarah Spence

Distinguished Research Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature, University of Georgia
President, Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers

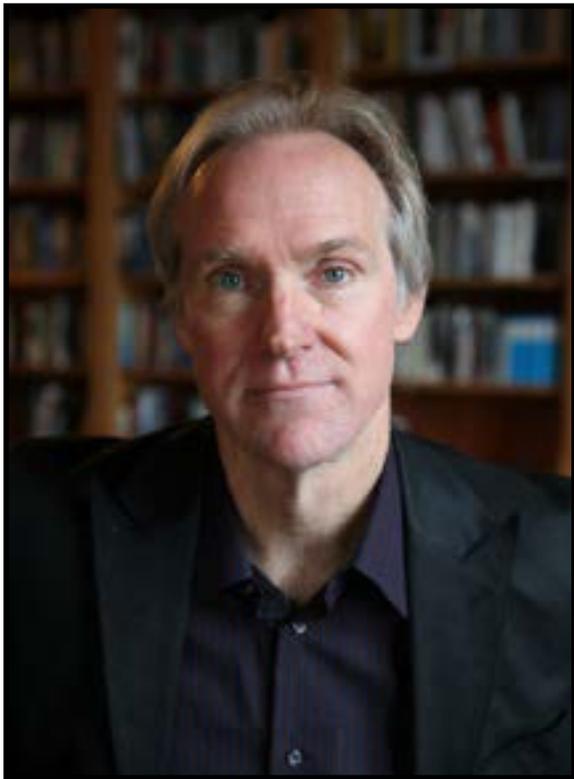


NEW YORK CITY LOCAL MEETING

OCTOBER 1, 2013

A READING BY POET TOM SLEIGH, FOLLOWED BY A CONVERSATION WITH POET PHILLIS LEVIN

The Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers cordially invites you to a reading by poet Tom Sleigh on Tuesday, October 1, 2013. **The event begins at 6:30 pm at the Martin Segal Theatre in the CUNY Graduate Center, located at 365 Fifth Avenue at 34th Street.** It is co-sponsored by the Center for the Humanities at the CUNY Graduate Center and the PhD program in English. The reading will be followed by a conversation with poet Phillis Levin.



Tom Sleigh is the author of eight books of poetry, including *Army Cats* (Graywolf Press, 2011), which received the John Updike Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and *Space Walk* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), which won the Kingsley Tufts Award.

He has also received the Shelley Prize from the Poetry Society of America, an Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, an Anna-Maria Kellen Prize from the American Academy in Berlin, an Individual Writer's Award from the Lila Wallace Fund, and grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Widely anthologized, Sleigh's poems and prose have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *American Poetry Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Yale Review*, *Threepenny*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Poetry*, *Tin House*, and elsewhere. He teaches in the MFA Program at Hunter College and lives in Brooklyn.

Phillis Levin has published four collections of poetry, most recently *May Day* (Penguin Books, 2008), and is the editor of *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet* (Penguin Books, 2001). Her honors include the Norma Farber First Book Award, an Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship, and grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. She is a professor of English and the poet-in-residence at Hofstra University.

The ALSCW/VSC Literature in Translation (LiT) Forum features international writers and translators, often in collaborative pairs, who give a bi-lingual reading and then run a discussion about the processes of translation and collaboration, as well as other matters relevant to international literary and publishing communities. The poet and translator are always acknowledged masters, and their role is to inspire the community of artists at VSC and beyond.

The fourth of these annual forums will be held from October 4 to October 6 at the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, Vermont. It will focus on Hebrew and Arabic writing, with poet and translator Peter Cole and writer Adina Hoffman serving as this year's pair. Peter and Adina will be at the VSC for their week-long residency October 3–9. A schedule of the events, which will be held in the VSC's Lowe Lecture Hall, can be found below.

Friday, October 4, 8:00 pm - Literature in Translation (LiT) Forum:

Peter Cole and Adina Hoffman will discuss the art of translation, issues in contemporary Arabic and Hebrew literature, and more.

Sunday, October 6, 7:00 pm - Visiting Writer Reading



Photograph by Adina Hoffman, courtesy of Blue Flower Arts

Peter Cole is the author of three books of poetry—soon to be four with *The Invention of Influence* forthcoming from New Directions—the most recent of which is *Things on Which I've Stumbled* (New Directions, 2008). He has also published numerous volumes of translations from both Hebrew and Arabic, including *The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2012), *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950–1492* (Princeton University Press, 2007), and *Hebrew Writers on Writing* (Trinity University Press, 2008). Additionally, Cole translated Aharon Shabtai's *War and Love, Love and War: New & Selected Poems* (New Directions, 2010) and Taha Muhammad Ali's *So What: New & Selected Poems, 1971–2005* (Copper Canyon Press, 2006). In 2011

he coauthored the nonfiction work *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (Schocken/Nextbook, 2011) with Adina Hoffmann.

Cole has had many honors conferred on him for his work, including the National Jewish Book Award for Poetry, the PEN Translation Award for Poetry, the American Library Association's Brody Medal for Jewish Book of the Year, and a TLS Translation Prize. He also received fellowships from the NEA, the NEH, the Guggenheim Foundation and the MacArthur Fellows Program.



Adina Hoffman is an essayist and biographer who often writes about the Middle East. Her books include *House of Windows: Portraits from a Jerusalem Neighborhood* (Steerforth Press, 2000; Broadway Books, 2002) and *My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness: A Poet's Life in the Palestinian Century* (Yale University Press, 2009), which was named one of the best books of 2009 by The Barnes & Noble Review and one of the best biographies of the year by Booklist Online. She is also the author, with Peter Cole, of *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (Schocken/Nextbook, 2011), which received the American Library Association's Brody Medal for the Jewish Book of the Year. Her essays have appeared in the *Jewish Quarterly*, *Raritan*, the *Nation*, and elsewhere.

Formerly a film critic for the *American Prospect* and the *Jerusalem Post*, Hoffman is one of the founders and editors of Ibis Editions. She has been a visiting professor at Wesleyan University, Middlebury College, and NYU, and served as the Franke Fellow at Yale's Whitney Humanities

Center. In 2011 Hoffman received a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. This year she was named one of the inaugural winners of the Windham Campbell Prize in Nonfiction, which is administered by the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

Previous ALSCW/LiT Forums

The inaugural LiT Forum in September 2010, with Polish poet Adam Zagajewski and translator Clare Cavanagh, drew an audience of more than ninety people to the VSC's Lowe Lecture Hall. The forum began with Zagajewski reading his poems in their original Polish and their English translations. It then moved to a discussion of Zagajewski and Cavanagh's collaborative process and the back story of Adam's poem "Try to Praise the Mutilated World" (which appeared in the *New Yorker* immediately following the 9/11 attacks).

The 2011 LiT Forum featured Italian poet Patrizia Cavalli and poet and translator Geoffrey Brock. The pair gave a presentation to an international audience on the challenging role of choice and decision making within each translation, and they read not only Brock's translations of Cavalli into English, but Cavalli's translations of Brock into Italian. Highlights also included Cavalli reading and discussing samples from her translation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into Italian.

In August 2012, French poet Emmanuel Moses and his translator, poet Marilyn Hacker, conducted the third annual ALSCW/VSC LiT Forum. The evening included a talk and a joint bi-lingual reading, and concluded with a question and answer session.

For More Information

For more information, visit <http://www.vermontstudiocenter.org/literature-in-translation-lit-program/>, or email the VSC at info@vermontstudiocenter.org.

NEW YORK CITY LOCAL MEETING

NOVEMBER 21, 2013

The Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers cordially invites you to a

A READING BY NOVELIST PETER CAREY,
INTRODUCED BY NOVELIST SIGRID NUNEZ

reading by novelist Peter Carey. This New York City local meeting is co-sponsored by the Center for the Humanities at the CUNY Graduate Center and the PhD program in English. Mr. Carey will be introduced by novelist Sigrid Nunez. **The event will take place at The Martin Segal Theatre in the CUNY Graduate Center on Thursday, November 21, 2013 from 7:00 pm to 9:00pm.** The Martin Segal Theatre is located at 365 Fifth Avenue at 34th Street.



Photograph by Ashley Gilbertson

Peter Carey is one of only three writers in history to have won the Booker Prize twice, first for *Oscar and Lucinda* (Harper & Row, 1988) and again for *True History of the Kelly Gang* (Knopf, 2001). With *Parrot and Olivier in America* (Hamish Hamilton, 2009), he became the first author to be a finalist for the National Book Award and the Booker Prize simultaneously.

A *New York Times* front-page review described *True History of the Kelly Gang* as “Triumphantly eclectic, as if Huck Finn and Shakespeare had joined forces to prettify the legend of Jesse James.” Paul Auster describes *Parrot and Olivier in America* as “possibly the most charming and engaging novel this demon of a story-teller has yet written.” His most recent novel, *The Chemistry of Tears*, was published by Knopf in 2012.

He is a Distinguished Professor at Hunter College in New York where he is Executive Director of the MFA program in Creative Writing.

Sigrid Nunez has published six novels, including *A Feather on the Breath of God* (Harpercollins, 1995), *The Last of Her Kind* (Farrar, Staus, & Giroux, 2005), and, most recently, *Salvation City* (Riverhead Hardcover, 2010). She is also the author of *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag* (Atlas, 2011). She teaches in the graduate writing programs at both Columbia and Boston University.

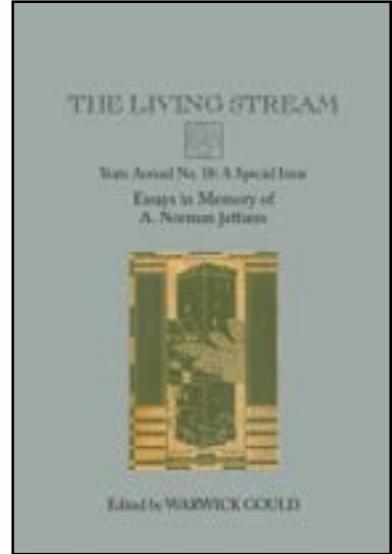
To see news of recent honors or awards you have received, notices for upcoming events of interest to ALSCW members, or information about Local Meetings you have hosted/are hosting included in **Literary Matters**, please send materials (photographs, text detailing all relevant information, and so forth) to literarymatters@alscw.org by the submission deadline for Issue 6.4: **October 15, 2013.**

NEW PUBLICATIONS BY MEMBERS

Matthew DeForrest, “Yeats and the New Physics,” *The Living Stream*, (Open Book Publishers, 2013), <http://www.openbookpublishers.com/reader/194>.

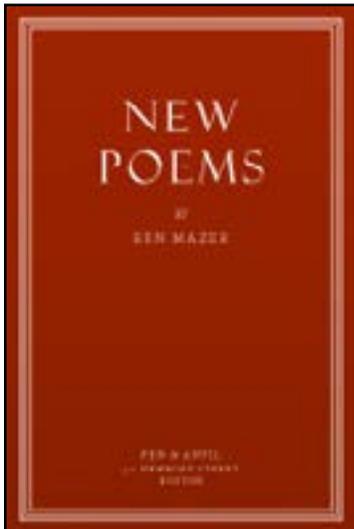
When we consider what influenced W. B. Yeats’ *A Vision*, we normally think of the humanistic inspirations: the literary, metaphysical, and philosophical sources that are regularly cited in analyses of his poetry. Yeats, however, did not limit his interests and inspiration exclusively to the humanities. He also considered the then cutting-edge theories of the New Physics.

We should not be so surprised that Yeats reached for contemporary scientific theories to try and understand what was being revealed to him through George Yeats’ mediumship—a system he characterized in one letter as “a form of science for the study of human nature, as we see it in others” (*The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade [London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954], p. 709). Yeats had worked with the Society of Psychical Research to establish scientific evidence for supernatural events. Likewise, he had been asked to leave the esoteric section of Madame Helena Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society for taking an experimental approach to confirm the teachings of that group. Such scientific explorations of occult phenomena were part of the spirit of the age, as is evidenced not only by Yeats’ work, but also by the work of many others who anticipated a scientifically based confirmation of their beliefs.



Ben Mazer, *New Poems* (Boston, MA: Pen & Anvil Press, 2013)

Ben Mazer has ever been a poet impelled to take possession of the literary and mythic past, and to experience it as if it were somehow his own personal heritage. In *New Poems*, he embraces that calling, and writes in a voice that belongs to the continuous poetic present, an illimitable moment that is all at once mid-century, Elizabethan, metaphysical, and acutely modern.



New Poems consists of works written between April 2010 and April 2013, many of which have been featured in journals such as the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Clarion*, *Harvard Review*, *Jacket*, *Poetry Northeast*, and *Spirited*. John Ashbery said of Mazer’s work, “Like fragments of old photographs happened on in a drawer, Ben Mazer’s poems tap enigmatic bits of the past that suddenly come to life again. To read him is to follow him along a dreamlike corridor where everything is beautiful and nothing is as it seems.”

Ben Mazer is the author of *Poems* (Pen & Anvil Press, 2010) and other collections. He has edited editions of the poetry of John Crowe Ransom, Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, and Landis Everson. A graduate of Harvard University and the Editorial Institute at Boston University, Mazer

lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts and manages the ALSCW’s Boston office. Mazer is also the editor of the *Battersea Review*, an online journal.

If you wish to have news of your recent publications featured in the list of new publications by members, please send the relevant bibliographic information to literarymatters@alscw.org. Those interested in doing so may also submit a blurb about the work (no more than 250 words) and a photo of the book’s cover. Submissions about articles published, journals edited, and so forth are also welcome.

2013 ELECTIONS: CANDIDATE PROFILES

COUNCILORS

Dr. Matthew M. DeForrest is an associate professor of English and interim chair of the Department of Languages and Literature at Johnson C. Smith University. His scholarship has primarily focused on William Butler Yeats and his published works include *Yeats and the*



MATTHEW DEFORREST
Stylistic Arrangements of Experience (International Scholars Publications, 1999), “W. B. Yeats’s A Vision: ‘Dove or Swan’” in *W. B. Yeats’s A Vision: Explications and Contexts* (Clemson University Digital, 2012), and “Yeats as Father in the Last Four Poems in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*” in the *Yeats Journal of Korea: An International Journal of Yeats and Modern Literature* (Yeats Society of Korea, 2013). He has presented papers nationally and internationally at events such as The Sixth International Conference of the Princess Grace Library of Monaco and The Yeats Anniversary Conference, at meetings of the American Conference for Irish Studies, and, of course, at the annual conferences of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics and Writers. He has also published on the intersection of politics and education in *Inside Higher Ed*.

DeForrest holds a PhD in Irish Literature and Mythology from the University Professors Program at Boston University, where was awarded best dissertation for the 1995–96 academic year; an MA in Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama with First Honours from University College, Dublin, in Ireland; and a BA in English and American Literature from Boston University.

ERNEST SUAREZ Ernest Suarez has chaired the Department of English at Catholic University for sixteen years. Most of his writing is on Southern literature, particularly Southern verse. Currently, he and Mike Mattison are co-authoring a book—“You Say You Want a Revolution: Poetry and Rock”—on how blues helped open rock to poetic influences. Suarez and Mattison have begun editing a regular feature, “Hot Rocks: Poetry and Song,” for *Five Points*, and occasionally Suarez writes articles on music for the *Washington Post*. His most recent publications include “Writing the South,” a chapter in the forthcoming *Cambridge History of American Poetry*; “Southern Verse in Poetry and Song,” a chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American South* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); and “Reflections on James Dickey,” in *Five Points* (Georgia State University, Winter/Spring, 2013). He was selected as the James E. Dornan Memorial Professor of the Year at Catholic University (1993–1994) and the District of Columbia Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1999). In 2000, he was the recipient of William H. Kadel Distinguished Alumni Award from Eckerd College. He was a Senior Fulbright Fellow in Spain (1999) and China (2005–2006).



Currently he serves on the editorial boards of the *Texas Review* and *ES: Revista de Filología Inglesa*, and on the Advisory Board of the Robert Penn Warren Circle. An interview with Suarez regarding the focus of CUA’s English Department appeared in *Literary Matters*, 1, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 21–23 and can be accessed via <http://inthemedia.cua.edu/SuarezLiterary.cfm>. In his spare time, Suarez enjoys endangering his children and running with the bulls: <http://publicaffairs.cua.edu/releases/2011/SuarezBulls.cfm>.

Tory recently began working with the New York Writers Coalition, and is thrilled to be part of its unique mission. She currently has the pleasure of leading two workshops for NYC's senior citizens, one at the 14th Street YMCA and one at SAGE. Tory was born and raised in Manhattan, leaving only temporarily to major in English with a concentration in African American Literature at Cornell University. She has since proved unable to resist the artistic lure of NYC, where she currently writes and reads creative nonfiction. She particularly enjoys deconstructions of popular culture through a feminist lens, and believes in the power of endless humor and wordplay, both in writing and in life.



VICTORIA MERINGOFF

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Adelaide M. Russo, Phyllis M. Taylor Professor of French Studies, directs the PhD Program in Comparative Literature at Louisiana State University. A graduate of Sweet Briar College, she received a PhD in French and Romance Philology at Columbia University. Her thesis addressed mechanisms of obscurity in Surrealist poetry. As a graduate student she focused on literary theory and the theory and practice of translation. She also held a French Government Scholarship. Her fields of research include poetry; international avant-garde movements; the relationship between poetry and the visual arts; and the dialogue between philosophy, anthropology, and literature. She is currently working on a study of the poet-philosopher Michel Deguy and two collective volumes.



ADELAIDE RUSSO

The French Académie des Beaux-Arts and the Modern Language Association recognized her 2007 study, *Le Peintre comme modèle: Du Surréalisme à l'extrême contemporain* (Presses Universitaires du Septentrion), with Le prix Debrousse-Gas-Forestier and the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize in French and Francophone Studies. Major fellowships she has received include the Mellon Fellowship in Romance Languages at Harvard University, a Camargo Foundation Fellowship, and an ATLAS Grant from the Louisiana Board of Regents. She is on the editorial boards of *mondesfrancophones.com*, *Dada/Surrealism*, *Études Francophones*, *FPC (Formes Poétiques Contemporaines)*, and the *CHIASMA* monograph series (Rodopi). Prior editorial activities include working with *Pleine Marge* (Paris) and *L'Esprit Créateur*. She held visiting appointments at Vanderbilt University, Université de Provence, and the École Normale Supérieure de Fontenay/St. Cloud. She has served as Vice Chair of the LSU Council on Research and Economic Development. In 2009, she was inducted as a Chevalier in the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

She is a former member of the ALSCW Executive Council, current member of the Development Committee and the Circle of Friends, and regularly organizes regional meetings in Baton Rouge. Her experience organizing conferences is expansive: she was involved in arranging the SCLA Annual Conference (2010), the 2010 meeting of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars, and the International Colloquium on Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century French and Francophone Literature (1987 and 2013). She has collaborated with research groups in France, Canada, Belgium, and the United Kingdom. Her complete bibliography is available on the LSU website: <http://uiswcmsweb.prod.lsu.edu/ArtSci/complit/Faculty/item18185.html>.

Powell's poems create a ravishing and ravished landscape, and the ravished beings that inhabit it. Like Petrarch and Shakespeare, his masters in the art of erotic lyric, Powell's metaphysics of love concern poetry itself as much as beloved persons, and his *ars amatoria* embraces an *ars poetica*. From the first, short poem, "Almonds in Bloom," he plunges us into a world of Stevensian plenitude and Shakespearean echoes ("Sonnet 29" rings in Powell's line, "Yes, she really

recondite words, and happily strews his verses with words like "knopped," "duodenal," and "axillary." And, like Ashbery, Powell sometimes swashbuckles in literariness, reversing syntactic order in costume-party archaisms: "then curious / seemed the stars" ("Bidwell Park," 5-6).

All this gorgeousness would be in danger of collapsing into mere style, a foppish Mannerism, if it weren't for the emotional

USELESS LANDSCAPE, OR A GUIDE FOR BOYS, D. A POWELL

REVIEW BY ROSANNA WARREN

troubles heaven with her deaf singing" [line 12]). At the same time, a tough contemporary realism intrudes, warning us that the book we've opened may hurt: "Just when we think we've been punished enough..." (8).

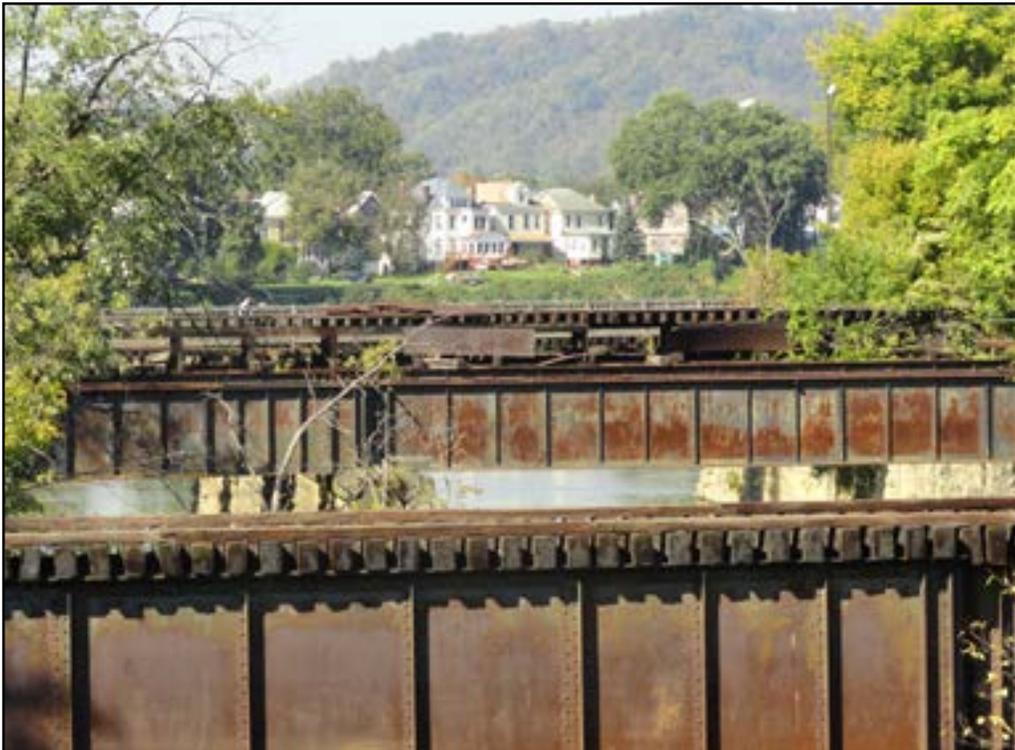
Like John Ashbery, another child of Wallace Stevens, Powell opens his poems to the deep thrum of poetic tradition and plays against it in savvy dissonances. Pentameters often hold the bass line from which other cadences stray, as in "Tender Mercies," where we find "the smack the rain plants as it smudges past" (8), or "it almost welcomed its own ravishment" (41). This is sensuous writing, licking its lips over assonances, alliteration, rhymes, and near-rhyme, and winking at its own indulgences; in "One Thousand and One Nights," "All fields catch fire. / That's not so dire" (12-13). And, "That's the gamut, dammit" (21). Powell also loves

and ethical drama driving these poems. For one thing, he observes the world around him, and his seeing is convincing as well as playful, as in "Ode to Joy," when he describes the procession of headlights of passing cars as "a thread of yellow ore" (4), and then describes himself describing them: "They are the lights of *of*" (3). More fundamentally, this is a book of love elegies in a large sense; the speaker in many of the poems, and the characters he portrays, seem wounded and ill. It is a specifically erotic damage, linked to the trashed landscapes of cheap motels, vacant lots, and garbage. Sex in these poems veers between trauma and longing, and the trauma starts early, in the third poem, "Cherry Blossoms in Spring," with the stark announcement, "I wasn't the first / kid you raped" (10-11). Later poems do not spare the reader glimpses of a bleeding anus, splashes of cum, and threats of AIDS in "Platelet Count Descending."

Powell doesn't revel in these hells, and they are only one strain in his complex harmonics. "Hell is the most miraculous invention of love" (43), he proposes in "Panic in the Year Zero" (a wise assessment of Dante's theology). What emerges most forcefully in this book is its imaginative exuberance, a transformative power and wit that can turn catastrophe into fuel while not disregarding its costs. In his own way, he sings the blues with all the lavish inventiveness of that art, announcing, in "Transit of Mercury," "I've got a heat-seeking missile for heartbreak. / & so do you."

The poem "Landscape with Sections of Aqueduct" shows Powell at his best, evoking but skirting the central fact, a suicide, a man found hanging from an aqueduct. Details of that event leap out—the man's t-shirt "knotted, so tight it had to be cut off his neck with a penknife" (5)—but the

poem's major method is oblique, starting with a lush and whimsical hexameter: "If the crown of the day is not gold, then it's a marvelous fake" (1). This is an apt description of Powell's world, one in which gold does gleam, beauty and love flash upon us, but they are always put in question. A starker idiom runs in counterpoint to the golden line: "They have taken him away and I do not know where



he is laid" (9). After a photorealist view of the graffiti on the aqueduct and the trash around it—ways of suggesting the longings and desolations the suicide may have suffered—the poem concludes with a view of cabbage moths flickering among flowering weeds. Delicate and beautiful, they seem a displaced version of the soul, and they open into a hymn to creation, a sacrament acknowledging transience and perpetuity, that mystery in whose light we all live, whether we know it or not. The moths

bore the pain of creation for a little yellow dust, a smear of light
on their fidgeting legs and the sudden buoyancy in updraft.
Ruin, by the wayside, you took as sacrament. You, abiding rock.
(22–24)

Rosanna Warren is a poet and a professor at the University of Chicago. She served as President of the ALSCW from 2004 to 2005.

Where do writers get their ideas? Well, if they are writing prose, their ideas evolve one way. If, on the other hand, they are writing poetry, their ideas evolve another way, so perhaps some distinctions are in order. Distinguishing the difference between prose and poetry may not be all that simple; there are many definitions, all of which may be correct. For the purpose of this essay, allow me to set forth the one of many that will serve as my premise in going forward.

It seems to me that there is available to writers a spectrum along which to proceed. At one end is prose, appropriate for essays, news, weather reports, and the like. At the other end is poetry. Writers move back and forth along this spectrum when writing fiction.

Thus, prose is defined by its precise meaning, its denotation, which excludes ambiguity, surmise and misunderstanding: it never troubles the reader. To define it another way, prose is faulty if it lacks a coherent thrust guided by rules of logic, grammar, and syntax. It will not tolerate contradiction. Poetry, however, is defined by its resistance to such rules. Poetry is ignited, brought to life by haunting, evasive, ambiguous, contradictory propositions.

This is not to say poetry is more or less useful than prose. Rather, they are two separate and distinct tools, analogous to, say, a hammer and a saw. They are different tools designed for different jobs. If an essay is called for, the reader wants certainty—what the words you are now reading are intended to give. If, on the other hand, consolation for some great loss is called for, the reader needs more: a text that lights up fields of reference not alluded to on the page. This calls for magic, for illusion, not lecture. The reader needs to be informed of what cannot be articulated. To be made whole, the reader needs to experience a positive change in mood, a change made more effective if the reader doesn't know why he or she feels better. Exactly like music. That's where poetry gets its power to repair, through an invisible touch, ghost-like but as real as anything on earth. A reading of the masters—Neruda,

Alexandre, Celan—confirms that a text need not always have a meaning the reader can explicate. To that extent, it informs, as does music, without what we call “meaning”—it's just that it takes prose to tell you this.

This is because prose is a telling of what the writers already know. They have a preconceived idea of what to write about. With poetry it's the opposite. The writers have no preconceived idea with which to begin

MAGIC, ILLUSION, AND OTHER REALITIES: A WRITER'S PRIMER

BY SIMON PERCHIK

a poem. They need to first force the idea out of the brain, to bring the idea to the surface, to consciousness. With poetry the writer needs a method to find that hidden idea. If the originating idea wasn't hidden and unknown, then it isn't likely it will be an important one. Let's face it, any idea that is easily accessible has already been picked over; it's all but certain to be a cliché.

Each writer has his own unique method to uncover this hidden idea for a poem. For me, the idea for the poem evolves when an idea from a photograph is confronted with an obviously unrelated idea from a text—mythological or scientific—until the two conflicting thoughts are reconciled and what emerges is a totally new, surprising, and workable idea. This method was easy for me to come by. As an attorney, I was trained to reconcile conflicting views—to do exactly what a metaphor does—for a living. It is no mystery why so many practicing lawyers write poetry.¹

The efficacy of this method for getting ideas is documented at length by Wayne Barker, MD, who writes:

If we can endure confrontation with the unthinkable, we may be able to fit together new patterns of awareness and action. We might, that is, have a fit of insight, inspiration, invention, or creation. The propensity for finding the answer, the lure of creating or discovering the new, no doubt has

much to do with some people's ability to endure tension until something new emerges from the contradictory and ambiguous situation.²

Douglas R. Hofstadter also advocates embracing incongruities as a means of developing novel thoughts. He suggests innovation and ingenuity flourish in the face of seeming incompatibility:

One of the major purposes of this book is to urge each reader to confront the apparent contradiction head on, to savor it, to turn it over, to take it apart, to wallow in it, so that in the end the reader might emerge with new insights into the seemingly unbreachable gulf between the formal and the informal, the animate and the inanimate, the flexible and the inflexible.³

Moreover, the self-induced fit is standard operating procedure in the laboratory. Allow me to quote Lewis Thomas, who describes the difference between applied science and basic research. After pointing out how applied science deals only with the precise application of known facts, he writes:

In basic research, everything is just the opposite. What you need at the outset is a high degree of uncertainty; otherwise it isn't likely to be an important problem. You start with an incomplete roster of facts, characterized by their ambiguity; often the problem consists of discovering the connections

1 See "Off the Record, An Anthology of Poetry by Lawyers," ed. James R. Elkins, *Legal Studies Forum* 28, no. 1 & 2 (2004). Further information appears in "Strangers to Us All: Lawyers and Poetry," James R. Elkins, published September 2, 2001, <http://myweb.wvnet.edu/~jelkins/lp-2001/intro/lp1.html>.

2 *Brain Storms, A Study of Human Spontaneity* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1968), p. 15.

3 Gödel, Escher, Bach: *An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1979; repr., 1999), p. 26.

between unrelated pieces of information. You must plan experiments on the basis of probability, even bare possibility, rather than certainty. If an experiment turns out precisely as predicted, this can be very nice, but it is only a great event if at the same time it is a surprise. You can measure the quality of the work by the intensity of astonishment. The surprise can be because it did turn out as predicted (in some lines of research, 1 percent is accepted as a high yield), or it can be a confoundment because the prediction was wrong and something totally unexpected turned up, changing the look of the problem and requiring a new kind of protocol. Either way, you win.⁴

Isn't it reasonable to conclude that the defining distinction between applied science and basic research is the same as that differentiating prose and poetry? Isn't it likewise reasonable to conclude that making basic science is very much the same as making poetry?

In a real way, I, too, work in a laboratory. Everyday I arrive at a table in the local coffee shop at 9 am, open a dog-eared book of photographs, open a text, and begin mixing all my materials together to find something new.

For the famous Walker Evans photograph depicting a migrant's wife, I began:

Walker Evans Farmer's wife
Tough life, mouth closed, no teeth? Sorrow?
Not too bad looking. Plain dress



⁴ *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1974; repr. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 138.

This description went on and on until I felt I had drained the photograph of all its ideas. I then read the chapter entitled “On Various Words” from *The Lives of a Cell*. With the photograph still in view, I then wrote down ideas from Dr. Thomas’s text. I began:

Words—bricks and mortar
Writing is an art, compulsively adding to,
building the ant hill,
not sure if each ant knows what it will
look like when finished
it’s too big. Like can’t tell what Earth
looks like if you’re on it.

This too goes on and on with whatever comes to mind while I’m reading. But all the time, inside my brain, I’m trying to reconcile what a migrant’s wife has to do with the obviously unrelated ideas on biology suggested by Dr. Thomas. I try to solve the very problem I created. Of course my brain is stymied and jams, creating a self-induced fit similar to the epilepsy studied by the above-mentioned Dr. Barker, MD. But that was my intention from the beginning.

And eventually, an idea from the photograph and an idea from the text will be resolved into a new idea and the poem takes hold.

No one is more surprised than I. Or more exhausted. The conditions under which I write are brutal. My brain is deliberately jammed by conflicting impulses. Its neurons are overloaded, on the verge of shutting down. I can barely think. My eyes blur. What keeps me working is the knowledge that sooner or later the rapture of discovery will come, that the differences once thought impossible to reconcile will become resolved: something once thought incapable of having anything to do with something else suddenly and surprisingly has everything

in the world to do with it. Or has nothing to do with it, but can be reconciled with something else it triggered. One flash fire after another in the lightening storm taking place in my brain.

Getting the idea is one thing, but the finished poem is a long way off. And to get there I abstract. Abstraction and music are soul mates and poetry is nothing if not music. For each poem, its opening phrase is stolen shamelessly from Beethoven. He’s the master at breaking bones open, and I may as well use him early on in the poem. Then I steal from Mahler, whose music does its work where I want my poetry to do its work: in the marrow.

Perhaps marrow is what it’s all about. Abstraction, since it contradicts the real world, is a striking form of confrontation that jams the brain until it shuts down from the confusion. It befits the marrow to then do the work the reader’s brain cells would ordinarily do. And though what the marrow cells put together is nothing more than a “gut feeling,” with no rational footing, it is enough to refresh the human condition, to make marriages, restore great loses, rally careers.

Of course, abstraction is just one of the ways writers arrive at the poem with their idea. But no matter how they come, they all leave for the reader poetry’s trademark: illusion. It is that illusion which builds a way out for the over-burdened reader.

Perhaps, as you may have already suspected, a poem, unlike a newspaper, is not a tool for everyday use by everyone: it’s just for those who need it, when they need it.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, the *Nation*, the *New Yorker*, and elsewhere. For more information, including free e-books and a complete bibliography, please visit his website at <http://www.simonperchik.com/>.

The inner workings of Victorian explorer Richard Burton's mind have profoundly interested many of his biographers and critics. Perhaps this is because the man's life seems contradictory in so many ways. Most famous for his love of Islam and his pilgrimage to Medina and Mecca, he was also a self-confessed racist who wasn't averse to using pseudo sciences like phrenology and craniometry to propagate his rather unsavory elitist views. An outspoken

WHAT DID BURTON REALLY THINK?

critic of Christianity, Burton was, however, married to a fervent Catholic from the upper class for nearly thirty years. Burton was also an iconoclast who made it his business to undermine the intellectual foundations of the Victorians' belief in their own superiority over other races of men. On the other hand, Burton spent nearly all of his adult life serving British imperialism as either a soldier or a diplomat. It is no wonder so many people have tried to understand what made Burton tick—though usually without much success.

To Thomas Wright, his first biographer (after Isabel's unreliable eulogization¹), he was a fraud who didn't deserve the title of translator, having copied his translation of *Arabian Nights* wholesale from his long-suffering friend Thomas Paine.² To his niece, Giorgiana Stisted, he was a free thinker who had been outrageously misinterpreted by his catholic wife, Isabel, who, against all logic, insisted on believing that her husband had been “half catholic” as well as “half sufi.”³ More recently, the biographers Fawn Brodie and Edward Rice have regarded Burton as a closeted homosexual and a life-long adherent of a mystical form of Islam respectively.⁴ Historian Dane Kennedy has labeled Burton a “relativist,”⁵ while feminist critics such as Rana Kabbani and Mary Louise Pratt have deplored the sexist, paternalist and imperialist themes in the writer's work.⁶ It is hardly surprising, in the light of such profoundly disorienting contradictions, that many of those who have written about Burton have also been determined to try and get to the bottom of their man's psyche to find some existential explanation for such glaring anomalies, believing that this would, somehow, make

BY JOHN WALLEN

This paper was presented at the ALSCW's 2013 Annual Conference during the “Literary Impersonation” session held on Saturday, April 6, 2013.

1 Isabel Burton, *The Life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1893).

2 Thomas Wright, *Sir Richard Burton* (London: Everett, 1906), 1: xvi.

3 Georgiana Stisted, *The True Life of Captain Sir Richard Burton* (London: H. S. Nichols, 1896). See Quentin Keynes private letters, Stisted/Linton.

4 Fawn Brodie, *The Devil Drives* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967), 180–181; Edward Rice, *Captain Sir Richard Burton* (New York, NY: Scribners, 1990), 232.

5 Dane Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 9.

6 Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* (London: Saqi Books, 2008); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992).

the numerous contradictions disappear in a proverbial puff of smoke.

Perhaps Edward Rice has been most guilty of creating a Burton that was to the liking of his own imagination. Although Rice can be illuminating on the young Burton during his time in Sind, he too frequently jumps to the conclusion he wants to arrive at, such as his apparent belief in a sexually rampant Burton, constantly “bedding” native women during his expedition with Speke to the lakes of central Africa.⁷ More importantly, Rice is dogmatic about Burton’s early “conversion” to Islam, believing that circumstantial evidence—which has been examined again and again by many diverse scholars and biographers—incontrovertibly proves that Burton became a Muslim during his time in Sind.⁸ Rice’s belief in this is a mere leap of faith: although Burton’s high regard for Islam—especially during the first half of his life—has been well chronicled, there is nothing to prove that he ever actually became a Muslim. Indeed, as Dane Kennedy points out, if conversion to Islam means adhering to the five pillars, such as regular prayer and always fasting during Ramadan, then Burton quite obviously was not a Muslim.⁹ Moreover, Burton was a heavy drinker all his life and this, taken together with his well-documented fascination with sex and pornography, would seem to suggest that he felt little need to place any religious restrictions on his own personal habits and predilections.

Perhaps the most influential misinterpretation of Burton and his ideas in recent times has come from the pen of Edward Said in his famous book *Orientalism*.¹⁰ In this seminal

work of criticism, Said puts forward a very particular view of Burton which has become influential in critical circles without, in my estimation, having much real justification. Said portrays Burton as the master of society’s codes and rules, as someone who could easily assimilate the traditions and values of a culture—and emulate them—without ever feeling any real sense of connection or alliance with the culture involved. This approach enables Said to account for Burton’s well-known love and deep understanding of Islam without having to place him outside the theory of Orientalism that Said develops during the course of that book. Burton is presented as a genuine lover of knowledge and as a great scholar who never had any doubts about where his own essential loyalties laid. His unique skills, subtle and mostly hidden, were always at the service of the imperial center and, it is implied, the religious and cultural values it was inspired by.¹¹

This has proved to be a very influential view of Burton—as it is one which is supportive of the whole postcolonial set of ideas—and many scholars subsequent to Said such as Rana Kabbani and Mary Louise Pratt have taken a similar line. Unfortunately, this point of view happens to be wrong. Burton was not at all someone who easily understood the rules and codes of other societies, a point that can be supported by reference to his unhappiness at Oxford due to the continental manners (acquired during his peripatetic upbringing abroad) which he found impossible to change or adapt once he arrived in England.¹² This is further evinced by his later dismissal from the consul’s position at Damascus as a result of his boorish hotheadedness and

7 Rice, *Captain Sir Richard Burton*, 382.

8 Rice, *Captain Sir Richard Burton*, 201.

9 Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 81–82.

10 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1979).

11 Said, *Orientalism*, 194–197.

12 Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 22.

inability to understand the local rivalries and enmities of the region.¹³ In fact, Burton's love of Islam was genuine and not at all part of some imperial sham for the benefit of the British empire and for his own advancement. Certainly, he did not possess the subtle chameleon-like adaptability that Said credits him with in *Orientalism*. Said's determination to praise Burton for qualities he clearly never possessed casts genuine doubt on his detailed knowledge of Burton and his achievements. Very likely, for Said, Burton was nothing more than an awkward example that had to be fitted, somehow or other, into the confines of his theory on Orientalism.

Subsequent postcolonial scholars—and critics of colonialism in general—have been less kind even than Said in their writings on Burton. Rana Kabbani, in her book *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* (Saqi Books, 2009), embarks on a startling would-be demolition of Burton, motivated by a clear and strong desire to destroy his reputation in all areas of scholarly endeavor. According to Kabbani, Burton is a sadist and misogynist who so loved the East and its ways because he found in them a confirmation of his own perverted



attitudes towards sex and women. Kabbani seems to take real pleasure in denouncing Burton and even seems to hold him accountable for the high number of British clitoridictimies that took place during the Victorian age.¹⁴ Her essential view about Burton appears to be that his racism, sexism, and imperialism can stand as a mirror representation of the racism, sexism and imperialism of the Victorian period as a whole. This is surely a grossly unfair conclusion. Why hold Burton personally responsible for all the shortcomings of the age? It would be fairer to reverse the equation and view Burton's ideas in these matters as largely belonging to the general cultural outlook of the Victorian period itself.

Mary Louise Pratt's book *Imperial Eyes* (Routledge, 2003) has become almost a staple textbook of postcolonialism and, as with Said, she seems to give a certain pre-eminence to the travels of Burton. It would appear that the very title of the book itself is a reference to Pratt's rather minute examination of Burton's description of his first sight of Lake Tanganyika when, according to Pratt, the lake is first aestheticized prior to being appropriated

Mary Louise Pratt's book *Imperial Eyes* (Routledge, 2003) has become almost a staple textbook of postcolonialism and, as with Said, she seems to give a certain pre-eminence to the travels of Burton. It would appear that the very title of the book itself is a reference to Pratt's rather minute examination of Burton's description of his first sight of Lake Tanganyika when, according to Pratt, the lake is first aestheticized prior to being appropriated

¹³ Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 181–185.

¹⁴ Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, 81–111.

for the colonial power by Burton's "imperial eyes."¹⁵ Perhaps it would be at least equally pertinent to observe how Pratt herself constructs the scene from her own epistemological preconceptions, animating it with a kind of mystical immanence which perhaps has little real tangibility beyond her own postcolonial concerns. Certainly, it's perfectly possible to read Burton's account as a simple text of discovery: the explorer's moment of joyous realization as the desired goal is finally reached after many months of uncertainty, hardship, sickness, and personal deprivation.

I have already dealt with some of the Burton biographers such as Isabel Burton and Edward Rice, but Fawn Brodie, Mary Lovell and Jon R. Godsall are others who have constructed "Burtons" in their own images.¹⁶ Brodie wrote in the sixties when Freudian psychoanalysis was strongly in vogue and she is determined, in her biography, to trace almost all of the important elements of Burton's personality back to his childhood and early sexual urges. Brodie concludes that Burton was probably homosexual.¹⁷ On the other hand, Mary Lovell's biography, *A Rage to Live* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), is far more balanced than Brodie's. But in its determination to view the union of Burton and Isabel as an equal partnership, it overemphasizes Isabel's intellectual contribution to Burton's fame. Jon Godsall's is the most recent of the biographies, and it is mostly accurate and comprehensive. However, Godsall's persistent need to point out Burton's many lies and deceits, both major and minor, eventually begins to create an unbalanced

picture of a Victorian charlatan who was undeserving of the acclaim he received. Though I am sure this was not Godsall's intent, it is at times the actual result.

Dane Kennedy's *The Highly Civilized Man* (Harvard University Press, 2007) is perhaps the most interesting book written about Burton in recent times. Kennedy uses Burton as a fulcrum for understanding the Victorian age as a whole. He comes to the conclusion that Burton was a relativist: he did not sincerely believe in any religion as "true," but was most interested in the accumulation of data with the purpose of constructing reasonable hypotheses in the scientific manner. Kennedy makes a strong case for Burton's relativism, and there is clearly a lot of truth in the picture of Burton he creates. However, Kennedy is sometimes guilty, like the others, of making a Burton in his own image in spite of his ability to see Burton's racism and anti-semitism. Kennedy's Burton has little irrationality about him, but it is my belief that irrationalism played a large and important part in Burton's personal make up.

From this survey of writers on Burton, it can be seen that there exists a wide discrepancy of views. Frequently, individual writers have created the Burton they wanted by emphasizing certain points while minimizing the importance of others. So, in a possibly hubristic attempt to get closer to what Burton really thought, I intend to look in a detailed way at Burton's two long imaginative poems, *Stone Talk* in 1865 and *The Kasidah of Haji Abdu El-Yezdi* in 1880.¹⁸ I intend to look at them as potential

15 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 204–205.

16 Mary Lovell, *A Rage to Live* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2000); Jon R. Godsall, *The Tangled Web: A Life of Sir Richard Burton* (Leicester, UK: Matador, 2000).

17 Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 213.

18 Richard Burton, *Stone Talk* (London: Robert Hardwicke, 1865); Richard Burton, *The Kasidah of Haji Abdu El-Yezdi* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1880). All future citations of the poems refer to these editions.

sources of information concerning Burton's most deeply held ideas and attitudes.

Why should we expect to find out anything about such things in these two works of fictional narrative? Well, both were written under pseudonyms and, therefore, give a certain amount of license for the expression of perspectives which may be different or unusual: Burton possessed some odd attitudes for his time, which is supported by the wide range of antagonistic views he expressed over his long working life. We might reasonably surmise that while some of his contentious views—his polygenism and his anti-semitism for example—were explicated in his normal writings, other deeply personal beliefs may have been more fully expressed in his two long poetical works. The Brahmin in *Stone Talk* is given free rein to express the most extreme opinions, and it is at least interesting that some of them—such as the idea that the planet would be better off without humanity on it—had even occurred to Burton. We certainly will not be able to take all ideas expressed in *Stone Talk* as Burton's own, because the aim is essentially to lampoon, shock and amuse. In spite of this, it is still of value to follow Burton's sometimes absurd lines of reasoning to attempt to isolate those ideas which may have been his own. In contrast to *Stone Talk*, *The Kasidah* is a serious and high-minded poem. Burton's philosophical Haji is clearly very similar to himself and, as Burton struggles to give poetic longevity to his creation, it will not be surprising if the level of personal sincerity is high.

First, I intend to look in some detail at *Stone Talk* and see what can be gleaned from it of a personal nature. After that, I will examine the more biographically fertile ground of *The Kasidah*.

Stone Talk

The ridiculous premise of *Stone Talk* is that a drunken Dr. Polygott, PhD is engaged in discourse by a paving stone that is, in fact, the reincarnated spirit of a Hindu Brahmin. As Gavan Leroux points out in his introduction to the 2007 edition, "*Stone Talk* is best read as obfuscated autobiography, for its reflections of Burton's highly idiosyncratic concerns."¹⁹ It is in this latter spirit that I will examine the poem.

As an initial point of some importance, it can be stated that during the stone's early narrative of its reincarnated history down the millennia, a strongly scientific and Darwinian perspective is emphasized:

How from the Monad's starting point,
Began a chain whose latest joint
Ever put forth another link,
Till matter learned to speak and think;
How 'scaped from the primeval sea,
Grass became herb, herb shrub, shrub tree;
How fishes crawled to birds, and these
To beasts (like you) by slow degrees.
(p. 20)

At the time of *Stone Talk*, Darwin's *Origin of Species* was little more than five years old, and the publication of *The Descent of Man* lay six years in the future. Nevertheless, in 1865 Burton clearly embraced the idea of evolution. This is reinforced a little further on by a reference to apes as the ancestors of man:

Ah, what a sight were you when first
By freak of matter Adam burst

¹⁹ Richard Burton, *Stone Talk* (London: Hardwicke, 1865; burtoniana.org, 2007), <http://www.burtoniana.org/books/1865-StoneTalk/>.

Through Simian womb! Scant then man's prate
Of human nature's high estate.
(20)

Interestingly, Burton seems strongly aware that men in general, and Victorian England in particular given its role as colonial master, needed to mythologize and heroicize their less-than-glamorous past.

Now you have tales enough to hide
Your origins and salve your pride.
(21)

Burton also asserts that language is the ultimate civilizing force: the crucial source of all future elaboration.

Pali or Hebrew (each tribe tries
To prove its own the primal speech)
(22)

From line 644 on, there begins a long meditation by the Brahminic stone on how much better off the earth would be if it were once and for all rid of man, who has deprived the animals of their habitats.

"Now, man! Suppose the globe once
more
Had some convulsion as of yore—
Enough to exterminate the pest
Of nature and to spare the rest—
What a glad scene my mental eye
Through the dark future doth espy!
(28)

It is not easy—especially for Victorian imperialists—to imagine a world lacking the presence of the human species. European Cartesianism even doubted if an external world existed at all if there wasn't a human mind to perceive it. Burton shows a pessimistic and realist side of his personality in considering the possibility of a world without humanity (and even suggesting



that such a state of affairs could be desirable).

In the best and most sustained sequence of poetic language in the poem, Burton states his idea that there is nothing particularly factual about facts:

Facts are chameleons, whose tint
Varies with every accident:
Each, prism-like, hath three obvious
sides,
And facets ten or more besides.
Events are like the sunny light
On mirrors falling clear and bright
Through windows of a varied hue,
Now yellow seen, now red, now blue.
(27)

This touches on Burton's relativism and belief that groups of men and women will always twist "facts" in the way that is most suitable to them. Perhaps an even more extreme philosophical point is present here: there is no such thing as facts! Facts are merely a conglomeration of atoms or particles that give the illusion of conveying truth: they have come together gratuitously for an instant before changing into something else. Humans, however, insist on ossifying these wandering particles, accrediting meaning to them, and even believing in their universal applicability. It is natural from this that Burton should put forward an ambiguous attitude towards "truth" itself:

Truth, sir's a lady strangely made,
As centaur, Pan, merman or maid;
In general, a Protean dame
Never for two brief hours the same.
(29)

Burton here states his belief that men can never agree about the nature of "truth"

because it will always change—and continue to change—according to what each man's own self-interest might be:

Why need I prove that each man's thought
Is each man's fact, to others nought?
Yet, mark me, no one dubitates
Himself, or owns he errs. He rates
Against his fellows' folly, they
At his; and both are right I say.
(30)

This is surely very interesting. In what sense could people with completely different answers to the same question both be right? Presumably, only in a relativistic way. Both beliefs may be considered "correct" if their function is not absolute truth, but the welfare of the person or persons propagating the belief. This interpretation would certainly be in line with Burton's belief, frequently expressed, that cultures and religions develop idiosyncratically with the purpose of instilling strength and longevity into particular groups of people.

The stone is also highly critical of England's colonial role, seeing its empire as nothing other than selfish plunder.

See India, once so happy, now
In scale of nations sunk so low—
...
[Till] ravening Saxon, like simoom,
With fire and sword brought death and
doom.
(34)

It is profoundly thought provoking that Burton, frequently interpreted as an arch imperialist and orientalist, is able here



to clearly appreciate the tenuous nature of England's claim to empire. It would seem that Burton's relativism made it impossible for him to overlook the opportunistic nature of England's colonialism. England had conquered an empire because it could and, while Burton as an individual Englishman might do all he could to uphold and even expand that empire, philosophically he was unable to deceive himself about the "civilizing" benefits of that control for the native inhabitants.

There are also references to Burton's possible Sufism in the poem:

What is a soul but life derived
From life's Eternal Fount deprived
Of power to gain its upward source
Or leave unbid the prison-corse?

(44)

Burton had studied Sufism under the Isma'ilis in Sind, and it was their profound belief that the soul was like a bird constantly in search of the higher spiritual home from which it had come. Importantly for Burton's relativism, Sufic spiritual insights lay beyond conventional notions of truth and falsehood,

good and bad—which were perceived as being infinitely malleable. In other words, it is possible that Burton's Sufism might have actually been the primary source of his relativism. At the most profound level, perhaps he just didn't invest too much of his spiritual identity into conventional ideas about morality and "truth."

Stone Talk also speaks at length about the ills of capitalism, the deviousness and cupidity of English politics and politicians, the immorality of slavery, and the foolishness of fashion. Overall, one gets the impression of a Richard Burton enjoying himself and paying back old scores, safe and secure by being far from home (the poem was probably composed in West Africa where Burton was working at the time of the poem's composition). However, as can be seen from the present examination, although the essential aim of *Stone Talk* may have been comic, there is a fair chance that during the course of composing more than 3000 lines, some of Burton's deepest beliefs may have been revealed.

In particular, a profound relativism runs through the poem—which is also typical of Burton's own intellectual life. A deep pessimism is also present which, in spite of Burton's adherence to the English ruling class, makes itself most felt in the insistence on the opportunism and rapacity of colonial dominance and the belief that nations conquer others only for their own gain and profit. Finally, there is just a hint that mystical Sufism might provide spiritual insights that lie beyond the contrasting moralities and practical beliefs of conflicting men and societies.

Let us now continue our quest to find at least some few elements of Burton's highly individual belief system by examining *The Kasidah* in some detail.

The Kasidah

The Kasidah provides a more interesting source for Burton's ideas than does *Stone Talk*. In the first place, it lacks the latter's comical and fantastical intent. Secondly, Burton is writing under the pseudonym of a Muslim wise man, Haji Abdu Al Yazdi, and it is well known and generally accepted by scholars that Burton possessed a profound sympathy for Islam and its beliefs. Consequently, this should be a sober-minded Burton providing the reader with insights into what he liked and admired most about this foreign faith. Finally, in *The Kasidah*, Burton was attempting to write real poetry, something that certainly wasn't true of the-mostly-rhyming doggerel of *Stone Talk*. Given the juxtaposition of Muslim beliefs with high poetic intent, we might reasonably expect to find more of the true Burton in *The Kasidah* than in *Stone Talk*.

After an atmospheric opening and many couplets in the pantheistic style of Omar Khayyam, Burton begins to touch on his own relativism. He also expresses the belief that the diverse societies of men in the world make God in their own image and out of their own self-love.

Man worships self: his God is Man; the
struggling of the mortal mind
To form its model as 'Twould be, the
perfect of itself to find.

(p. 8)

A little later, Burton makes his relativistic take on morality even clearer:

There is no Good, there is no Bad; these
be the whims of mortal will:
What works me weal that call I 'good,'
what harms and hurts I hold as 'ill'.

(9)

This is very much in keeping with what we know of Burton as a pioneering anthropologist, interested in every belief system he encountered and eager to show that none of them had any absolute claim on truth.

Burton goes on to develop his point, under the guise of the learned Haji, that all morality is relative and changes from society to society, and even within the same society.

They change with place, they shift with
race; and in the veriest span of Time,
Each Vice has worn a Virtue's crown; all
Good was banned as Sin or Crime:

(10)

This must have been a disturbing thought indeed for a conservative, expansionist, and imperialist English society, which wished to impose its own vision of the world on its subject races.

Burton makes it clear that conscience itself—the quality that so many religious thinkers of the time believed separated us from the animals—was something that developed only after evolution and language had separated man, in his own estimation, from the natural kingdom.

The "moral sense," your Zâhid-phrase, is
but the gift of latest years;

Conscience was born when man had
shed his fur, his tail, his pointed ears.
(11)

Such a bald statement of belief in conscience as a corollary of language, evolution, and social activity must inevitably have outraged more conventional thinkers of the time. According to “Haji Burton,” Soul, like Conscience, has been created in the minds of men only after his extrapolation from the animal kingdom:

Where was his Soul the savage beast
which in primeval forests strayed,
What shape had it, what dwelling place,
what part in nature’s plan it played?
.....
Words, words that gender things! The
soul is a newcomer on the scene;
Sufficeth not the breath of Life to work
the matter-born machine?
(13)

Burton next goes on to make the point that ideas about absolute truth, morality and eternal souls are merely the result of a highly sophisticated society that has developed far beyond its original lowly beginnings.

Life is a ladder infinite-stepped, that
hides its rungs from human eyes;
Planted its foot in chaos-gloom, its head
soars high above the skies.
(14)

We may pride ourselves on the fact that we, unlike the animals, are creatures of reason and intellect; but, according to Burton, this is only to mask our knowledge of from where we sprung.

“Reason and Instinct!” How we love to

play with words that please our pride;
Our noble race’s mean descent by false
forged titles seek to hide!
(15)

Just as Burton asserts that we are really a part of the animal kingdom and all our beliefs concerning our special status are false, he also states that human conceptions of heaven and hell are erroneous and based on our narcissistic need to view ourselves as special.

There is no Heav’en, there is no Hell;
these be the dreams of baby minds;
Tools of the wily fetisheer; to ‘fright the
fools his cunning blinds.
(15)

Belief in a particular faith is a mere accident of birth: we follow the belief system of the land we are born in:

Faith is an accident as well.
(16)

But if all civilized concepts of morality, heaven and hell, good and evil are false, what can make life worthwhile? According to Burton (still in the guise of Haji Abdu), to live a genuine life a man must be honest, face these difficult truths, and search to advance his own self-worth and knowledge.

With ignor’ance wage eternal war, to
know thyself forever strain,
Thine ignorance of thine ignorance is thy
fiercest foe, thy deadliest bane;
(19)

In advancing the position that knowledge and self-growth are the most important aims of life, Burton is perhaps not too far away

from his younger contemporary, Nietzsche, who, while declaring that God was dead, advocated the birth of a new Superman.

To seek the True, to glad the heart, such
is of life the HIGHER LAW,
Whose differ'ence is the Man's degree,
the Man of gold, the Man of straw.
(20)

Nevertheless, there is another trend present in Burton's thought, one that was inspired, at least to some extent, by his early study of Sufism in Sind: What about the possibility that life itself is no more than an illusion, the Maya spoken of by the Indian Hindu sages? In this case, while we should play the game according to the rules of the illusion, good, bad, heaven, hell, and even life itself are all just intrinsically unreal things. Thus, parallel to Buddhist and Sufi beliefs, the real aim is to recognize the insubstantial nature of life and move beyond it into the ineffable light of final enlightenment and truth.

Believe in all things; none believe; judge
not nor warp by "Facts" the thought;
See clear, hear clear, tho' life may seem
Maya and Mirage, Dream and Naught
.....
This "I" may find a future Life, a nobler
copy of our own,
Where every riddle shall be ree'd, where
every knowledge shall be known;
Where 'twill be man's to see the whole
of what on earth he sees in part;
Where change shall ne'er surcharge the
thought; nor hope defer'd shall hurt
the heart.
(20-21)

If this duality was truly present in Burton's psyche, as I believe it was, it might be more accurate to title this paper "Burton: Half Sufi and Half Relativist," which would also present a better assessment of Burton's values than that offered by Isabel Burton's oft-quoted description of him as "half Sufi and half Catholic."

Summary

It may be said that through the study of these two texts, we have been able to obtain some deeper insights into the psyche of Richard Francis Burton. This psyche was profoundly skeptical of conventional ideas on morality, difference, religion, sexuality, and power. For these reasons—in spite of his own well-recorded involvement in increasing the range of the British Empire during Victoria's reign—Burton might well be considered, in retrospect, a predominantly progressive force who helped make manifest the essential equality between the British "masters" and the people in the colonies they ruled over.

John Wallen has spent most of his career teaching in the Middle East. Currently he is an assistant professor at Nizwa University in Oman, where he teaches twentieth-century American and world literature. Previously he taught at Bahrain University and Qatar University. He has published critical works on Richard Francis Burton and T. S. Eliot. In addition, he has published a novel (which he is determined to revise shortly!), several collections of short stories, and a book of poetry. He received his PhD from Royal Holloway University of London in June of 2011.

CONFERENCE

Like a rainbow trout
who by chance slid
down the arc of his
leap from the river
into my canoe, my
son Matt startled
and delighted me with
two beeps of his horn,
as he slowed to a stop
beneath the same traffic
signal as I had. Lane to lane:
a morning serendipity.
Together through the green light—
a quick park along the curb—
a fine sidewalk chat—
before he leapt quickly
into his world again. But
his colors glistened all day.

-*Michael Daher*

Michael Daher teaches English at Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn, Michigan. His commentary on James Agee has appeared in *Literary Matters*.

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Embrace uncertainty—
certainty gets scammed.
Even among the good guarantees
scams lurk.
Avoid promises—you could lose
your life savings, always your heart.

-Ellen Rachlin

Ellen Rachlin is the author of *Until Crazy Catches Me* (Antrim House Books, 2008) and two chapbooks, *Waiting for Here* (Finishing Line Press, 2004) and *Captive to Residue* (Flarestack Publishing, 2009). She received an MFA from Antioch, serves as Treasurer of The Poetry Society of America, and works in finance.

INSIDE

It takes time to notice wallflowers
and longer still to know them.
One needs a sense of purpose
not needed first to know the thing noticed.
After a while, even the loudest fades
like a feast to salt and sweet;
which may explain how thought
can drive a wedge between the world and me.
Inside all the movement and chatter,
who could guess thought could keep me so well hidden?

-Ellen Rachlin



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