

Not-So-Sacred Conversations

Aaron Kachuck, Cambridge, Postclassicisms, June 2013

Criticism 1, 2, 3

William Francis Jackson Knight
Couldn't fall asleep last night,
Knocked on Theodore Haarhoff's door
And said, "Take me to the *portitor*!"
So off they go to Julia Lloyd,
Famous clairvoyant, then employed
As Sibyl to the studious pair--
With pen in hand, and "*hac iter*",
They scrawl with automatic hands
The *lemmas* Virgil's voice commands.

Oh simian Knight, your pains to hear
Shrill spirits' voices tins your ear--
Though Haarhoff huck and Julia buck,
We mock at bunkum English'd muck.
Hark! Gavin Douglas comes aground
And finds your methods wild unsound,
Lays he strong hand on pasty throat,
And chokes you, yawping with glad gloat:
"The spreit o life fled murnin wi a grain,
And wi disdain unner daurk erd is gane."

Look to the swoon and the curve of the moon,
The dusks that feed and the dawns that prune--
Learn better ways to spend your night,
Poor William Francis Jackson Knight.

--

A reader has his reticence (from *reticere*,
Ticking time to organic detriment):

"No yawping in the library--
Keep ears to the ghosts,
And thickening goat's blood in the pails."

--

The snails' chronicle of time
Is bigger than mine
I see
Encased with dawn
Dry light on dewy antlers.

J'ai lu tous les livres.

Words, words, words.

Helas! Je n'ai lu aucun livre.

Introduction

"The child is father of the man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety."

-William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (cf. "My Heart Leaps Up")

We have a problem, and it's (one of) Euthyphro's problem, too: we want to be pious, but we want to kill our fathers. Or if, perhaps, tempted by sentiment, dialectic, or history, we should happen to want to keep the father figure, we at least want to neutralize the middleman, to become our father's father, child as father of the man. Self-generation as patricide is at issue here in Wordsworth's lines, as it is in Euthyphro's twin-horned dilemma, and as confronted by Cronus, Zeus, Achilles, Harold Bloom, and, last but not least, Reception Studies. It all starts with a gnawing at one's self, with a thought that worries: am I a creature of the second degree? Or worse--of the third?

Our literary father, the classical cannon, swings imposingly over us in our collective shower: so large, distant, imposing, foreign, and blind to us--to quote Ausonius, *monstrum horrendum informe ingens, cui lumen ademptum*. So we must despair of understanding it, or of attaining something like it for myself. But then we find that there are others who have gone before us, older siblings, who have made great headway and sometimes even exceeded father, and who have explained father's dominance and peculiarities in their own fascinating ways, and we think, "Aha, now I don't need to know or equal father, because these others have become as fathers to father." But that still doesn't solve the problem, since we don't stand outside the scene, but are in the shower with dad and the older brothers, and we can't become their fathers by just looking. We cannot--rather, I should say, *I* cannot, insulate myself from this challenge--"it tolls for thee."

And so we turn, in Reception Studies, as we are turning these days, to the language of the Event, of Reception as a happening. If everything is just as it is received, then either you record receptions, one after another, and things take their place like so much matter in the vast morass of researched stuff, and you go to this or that because it's contiguous and in front of you, and you become an endless archivist of similitudes. That would not be a bad way, perhaps, of spending eternity, but it is its own kind of pit of despair for certain types, which is what leads people like Brooke Holmes and Will Shearin to speak of what they feel must be our turn, as students of "reception studies," towards an "affective encounter," your own "encounter" with text:

Moreover, in place of a performance theory of reception, we prefer to speak of reception as an event. The term "event" better captures, we feel, the dynamics at play in reception, particularly the sense that interpretation is an affective transaction. This transaction may not be directed entirely by either the reader-performer or her text. Instead, we suggest, something complex happens in reception--namely, an event--and one of the most significant traces of this event is often its affective impact. Additionally--and here we turn to another significant focus of the present volume--"event," at least as it can be understood as an *eventum* ("accidental property"), is a term of Epicurean physics. (Holmes and Shearin 2012:11)

Here's something of a challenge, though, that I'm not sure they cover. If you despair of "getting it right" with an ancient text, then turn to reception studies and eventually come to