

Commentary by Robert Sonkowsky on his book of poetry, UNSOUND SCIENCE.

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Dear Reader: I confess to three (a trinity of) parallel contradictions, but please remember that sometimes in the world of poetry each of a pair or opposite statements can be true at one and the same time:

First, although on the one hand I agree with Archibald MacLeish in his "*Ars Poetica*" that "A poem should not mean/ but be," yet on the other hand some analysis of what a poem might mean can be helpful. Even MacLeish's lines could benefit from explication – provided it does not become an obstacle to understanding and personal interpretation. Truly the best approach to a poem is to experience it directly rather than to waste time puzzling about its meaning, and yet nothing is lost and something can be gained by considering the poet's or some other interpreter's comments about it.

Second, the Preface to this book, the poems therein, and the information on the back of the back cover both approving and disapproving autobiographical poetry. In my own mind and heart I believe I can reconcile the contradiction as a poet as I do it as an actor: The great director and actor of the Moscow Art Theatre, Constantine Stansislavsky, felt that true performance is based upon real life and inspiring moments of contact with the real world. I believe with Catullus and Marilyn Taylor (see notes re: p.40) that I, as a person, am to be distinguished from the speakers in my poems; yet sometimes I want to be clear that I am being as autobiographical as the thinnest filter of memory will allow.

Third, though my own particular church, The Episcopal Cathedral of St. Mark in Minneapolis, is famous for a slogan to the effect that parishioners and visitors do not have to leave their minds outside the door, I nevertheless sometimes prefer to worship God mindlessly or with what you might call "blind faith." Theological History is voluminous on the subject of "Reason vs. Faith." Some of my poems are faithful, some are downright faithless, intellectually cynical, even atheistic. I furiously deny that God is providential; yet I embrace God's wisdom.

Lastly, dear Reader, Here and there I let go of all these paradoxes and appeal to you as a mystic, when my poetry comes crashing into mystery.

The Commentary:

Front cover and P.1 The book's front cover design and its explanation on the title page (p.1) are partly playful, but also anticipate something of the range of the poems. A poet-friend of mine sent me the following delightfully surprising interpretation: "Your title, despite your explanation ..., immediately brought associations for me with early 20th century French concerns about the impossibility of unsounded print words representing the music of sounded art."

P.9 "I Wonder," the first poem in the book, is a sonnet. Other sonnets are found on pp.19, 24, 45. In this kind of sonnet the rhyme scheme is abba, cddc, effe¹, gg. (The e¹ rhyme is an inexact rhyme known as a "slant rhyme.") Every line has 10 syllables. The first 8 lines reveal one perspective; the next 6 another, with the final 2 suggesting a conclusion.

P.10 "The Other Side" by contrast with the traditional formalism of the preceding poem is virtually a prose narrative, a modern development represented only here in this book. Yet, characteristically, it is it is autobiographical and mingles Classical (Virgil's *Aeneid*) with Judaeo-Christian (Michael rowing the Jordan) myth.

P.11 "Unsound Science," the book's title poem, has an epigraph (introductory quotation) that is explained in my bio on the back of the back cover of the book. The form of the poem is distinguished by having only one end-rhyme, but a highly significant one: "Prometheus" rhyming with "refuse." Again, Classical Prometheus has in common with Judaeo-Christian Adam and Eve a filching of forbidden knowledge (Zeus's lightning, Jehova's apple) from divinity). Needless to say, we can see the "refuse" of some of modern history, such as Hiroshima, in the theft by Prometheus.

Pp.12-13 "Eden and Newton:" A poem of this complexity, with so much interplay of concepts, requires reading and re-reading for your own interpretations. It plays Evolution against various suggestions. For lines 1-2 think of migrating birds using polar magnetism to find their way geographically. The amygdala is a mysterious section of the brain associated apparently with emotional attractions and aversions. "Newton." "West" of him can mean "after" him, but "apples" can refer to the apple of Eden and anticipate the apple whose gravitational fall inspired Sir Isaac.

“Cosmic cycles,” such as those precisely timed cycles of sun spots, re-evokes “interplanetary magnetism.” The lines that follow in stanza 3 represent the natural, terrestrial cycle of Winter. Stanza 4 cycles to Spring, and “sin” might make you think of Eden, and “not east of Eden” can mean the time of innocence before we ate the apple; but “west of Newton” superimposes Sir Isaac again, while the rest of the poem poses as consequences of Edenic loss of innocence. The decidedly non-military hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers” was not composed by Sousa, but many military marches were. Perhaps stanzas 6 and 7 (“whence...subsumed”) will suggest The Crusades to you, and the final 2 stanzas at the top of p. 13 could engage your faculties in a free for all falling back to Adam (whose name means “Mud”) and Eve (“Life”). You choose whether “the perfect whole” is truth, or a bad pun, or both.

P.14 “Chronobiology” is the name of the relatively new scientific field that got me involved, since 1962, with its founder, Franz Halberg, Professor of Medicine at the U. of Minnesota. As an undergraduate, I had double-majored in Classics (Latin and Greek) and Biology (with deep extra-curricular involvement in Theater). At first I assisted Halberg with the coinage of new terminology for the new field, but gradually became more closely associated with his projects and publications. This little poem reflects my own musings. “Intermittently” refers to bioperiodicity. “Circles” of stanza 2 echoes the thought of “swirl” in stanza 1 and is the Latinate equivalent of “cycles,” from Greek *kuklos*, as in “Kuklux Clan:” A social circle may or may not be “welcoming:” I hope that circles/cycles, terrestrial and galactic, though always needing more chronobiologic research, will gradually bring what I call “God,” namely “Love,” from theory into practice.

P.15 “The Reason Why My Mother” is clearly another autobiographical piece of my childhood. She was the only one in those days who called me “Bobbie” and spelled it with an “-ie.” Since then I have dubbed friends with the same suffix. The “Achilles Heel” reference is also clear. The form of the poem is free verse, but the last line, while not ending in a significant rhyme, ends, nevertheless, in a significant sound-effect: “fearless façade” has initial consonance (the “f’s”) as well as repetition of lingual dental sibilants (the “ss” and the “ç”).

Pp. 16 and 20 “At Age Seventy-Seven” and “At Age Seventy-Eight in Bed” are “the-lion-in-winter” poems by a poetic friend. The firsts (p.16), I hope,

is clearly autobiographical. As to the last sentence, my mother was a Roman Catholic, I am an American Anglo-Catholic – i.e., Episcopalian – but as such, I still need God as Mother; hence the poem evokes the Catholic Rosary and admits my fear of motherlessness when I die.

In the second {p.20) I, as narrator, am fictionally dreaming. Like other dreams, this is a frustration dream. I tried to convey this by the lack of punctuation. I suppose “The Lion in Winter” might not have needed spectacles in the dream, but would have recognized upon waking the jungle in which he lives, just like me.

P.17 “Not With a Whimper:” is a reversal of T.S.Eliot’s “Hollow Men:” “This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper.” And so does the poem approach the unapproachable of 9/11 with indirect allusions having ironic meanings:

The first rhymed couplet refers to William Blake’s “The Tyger:” “Tyger Tyger, burning bright,

In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame they fearful symmetry?”

The second couplet re-does the common nursery rhyme

“It’s raining, it’s pouring.
The old man is snoring.
He went to bed and bumped his head.
And he couldn’t get up in the morning.”

In my poem could the “Old One” be God, or the head of the CIA? Was God or he drunk or hung over?

The third couplet simply substitutes “bodies” for “rain” in another familiar nursery rhyme.

The fourth couplet re-writes the innocent

“Jack be nimble”
Jack be quick!
Jack jump over the candle stick!

Just as this original version was to signal good luck by jumping over a candle without extinguishing it, so my re-write is slightly hopeful in the face of tragedy.

P.18 “Jack Hansen” was written on behalf of grateful of the downtown Minneapolis condominium “Loring Green West” and declaimed at the retirement party of the named honoree.

P. 19 “Dream of the Rood” is the same title as, and a twist on the content of, the first Old English poem in existence. In the latter a Christian dreams that he stands before the cross (“the Rood,” cf. “the rod”) on which Jesus was crucified and converses with Him. My poem is a sonnet: What is pictured in the first four lines anticipates the Celtic cross (a cross with the sun behind it) mentioned in the concluding two lines. “Galactic,” like “cosmic” in the second four lines, joins with the concept of the “sun” in merging with the theme of interplanetary magnetism found in this book. “Nutriceuticals” is a current term hybridized of “nutrition” and “pharmaceuticals” and used by the medical profession to incorporate the two fields. Medicine begins among the Celts and others with the quest for purification, as was the attempt by alchemists to convert base metals to gold by purging them of their impurities (their “dross”).

P. 21 “All God’s Creatures.” The indignant, irreverent narrator of this poem is based in detail on an experience of mine in my neighborhood. The slant rhyme “heaven/resurrection” in the last three lines is meant to sharpen significantly the concluding outburst of theological cynicism.

P.22 “An Ultrasound” is, in a paradoxical and ironic manner, a return to faith by the narrator mentioned in the preceding poem, but this time the creature is human and the threat to life is age-appropriate. The cosmic scope of this poem resembles that of p.54 “In Microdom Just the Other Day.”

P. 23 “Angels” follows a rhyme scheme of abcaabc. I know I have seen, and experienced, a variety of both kinds of angels.

P.24 “Callipygian Eurydice or Lordotic Eve And The Sparagmos of Orpheus or Mud of Adam.” I confess to being a would-be Catullus, who seems to have used some big words in his poetry in order to impress his love Lesbia/Clodia. Apart from what a reasonably good dictionary can tell you about mine, you may wish to recall that anatomists and evolutionary anthropologists have pointed out that female humans have one more vertebra than males, enabling the former to carry babies to term without tilting forward too precariously. What perhaps goes unmentioned, though also relating to babies, is the attractiveness of this curvaceous feature to males. If you google “Aphrodite Kallipyge,” can find a photo of a Roman copy of that statue, which shows the cult goddess glancing over her shoulder at her own “beautiful derriere.” Due, I suppose, to our post-Edenic guilt we seem to

deny sex to religion. The “Mud of Adam” is a redundancy since Adam means mud. Cf. p.57 “dirt.”

P.25 “Dilapidated Skeletons:” The speaker of these lines perhaps holds a somewhat simplistic view of war in which we are the good guys and the enemy are bad guys and profiled as such. He is safe now but apparently has a guilty need to re-join his “good buddies,” dead or alive,” in accord with traditional military psychology.

P.26 “Homecoming: A Truncated Sonnet:” The archetypal warrior’s homecoming is Homer’s “Odyssey” or Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. Indeed, Eugene O’Neil’s re-write of the first play of the latter trilogy is called “The Homecoming,” which translates as *Nostos*. My poem’s warrior is very young and has not recovered from the traumas inflicted by Improvised Explosive Devices. The sonnet is “truncated” (the last line is shortened to two syllables, the second of which rhymes with the first line) just as some I.E.D. deaths left the soldiers’ bodies that way. Did the “loud single shot” signal that war-time violence had come home to American suburbia?

P.p.27-28 “Foolscap:” The title has more than one meaning relevant to the poem and open to subtextual interpretations. It could be the mock bishop’s mitre worn by the youngster playing the Boy Bishop at the medieval Feast of Fools, a lampoon on Christian Ritual. It could at the same time be the paper used in the (or fool’s cap). A loud mitral valve can indicate the defect of “regurgitation” (the valve is failing to prevent the blood from flowing back after being pumped out of the chamber. “The sternal scar” is the scar from the open-heart surgery.

P.29 “Communion:” The title of this autobiographical account contains its own irony.

P.30 “Lovey Dovey” is, I suppose, a strange counter-burst to the preceding poem. The rhymes were too easy. The thought is prayerful, but too easy.

P.31&P.58 “Mainstreamed” and “Mainstreamed II” – These two poems recount experience in Loring Park, near my earlier home in downtown Minneapolis. I have nothing to add to clarify those moments. But the second is my final outburst on a note of insane, but perhaps at last, sound science.

P.32 “Homage to J.V. Cunningham” – I never met him, but his brother, Maurice, taught me almost everything I know about poetry. This epigram on love may be like some of J.V.’s in unromantic brevity, but unlike his in succumbing to rhyme.

P.33 “Barbecue Revenue.” The lines are iambic tetrameter with scattered anapests, except line 5, which is a pentameter with an extra final syllable. The first 6-line stanza establishes a preposterous fantasy lampooning the church-picnic. The second alludes to the Classical myth of the battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs. The violent and drunken Centaurs invaded the Lapiths’ wedding to kill them, rape their women, and carry off the bride.

P.34 “The Lady of Maize” celebrates a divinely female personage, as well as a wondrous product of the Earth.

P.35 “Epitaph” could be mine; could be anyone’s: all of us are actors.

P.36 “Our Times.” Amid other sound-repetitions, the first line of the first stanza end-rhymes with the first and second lines of the second stanza; the last line of the first stanza with the last line of the second.

P.37 “Stand-by Lights.” The pattern of rhymes, like that of the preceding poem, is another “nonce” (a pattern not recognized and named in manuals of prosody). It is to be hoped that trees will outlive the electronic comparanda and me.

P.38 “The Inscrutable.” Each of the first two stanzas describes what appears to be the essential approach to life of a particular friend of mine, a male and then a female. The third and final stanza confesses bafflement as to either one and descends into nonsense verse using words that may or may not be relevant to either one. All three stanzas have end-rhymes, but the third has internal rhymes as well, many of them disyllabic. The final two lines take a mild swipe at God.

P.39 “A Soldier’s Gravestone Prayer” is a “villanelle:” the widely recognized archetypical villanelle is Dylan Thomas’ “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Goodnight.” The present poem follows that one in all respects including syllable-count, rhyme scheme, refrains. Gravestone inscriptions representing the words of the deceased speaking from the grave have a far

more ancient tradition. Dylan Thomas' father, who inspired "Do Not Go Gentle," and my soldier are at opposite ends of age.

P.40 "When I'm in Eternity." The epigraph dedicates this poem to the ancient Roman poet Catullus and to the modern poet laureate of Wisconsin Marilyn Taylor, not because either of those poets shares with the speaker of my poem her/his theological (deistic) views, but rather because both Marilyn and Catullus have expressed antipathy to assumptions that they should be identified with their poetry.

P.41 "The Daring Young Man." Stanza #1: My maternal Grandfather, Henry Nooyen, who died just before I was born, was a trapeze artist with Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey. He also rode with Buffalo Bill and had a "Strong-Jaw" act. On his death bed he amused my mother and her sisters by wiggling his front teeth, which had become loosened from his side-show act picking up a sofa in his mouth.

Stanza #2: I inherited his agility but one day at age 70, not realizing I was no longer 25 and forgetting I was on high blood pressure medicine, I sprinted suddenly to beat a yellow light and fell on my face on the sidewalk across the street. Insurance covered new front teeth for me, teeth damaged in a less dignified way than my Grandfather's.

Stanza #3: I hope the quotation from the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible is self-explanatory.

Stanza #4: This is a re-write from the hymn book of my church (Episcopal), #494, sometimes referred to irreverently as the favorite of dentists: "Crown him with many crowns, the lamb upon the throne;/ Hark! how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own;"

P.42 "After Horace Odes I.22:" This ode of the Classical Roman poet is a world-famous statement of the uttermost fearlessness of true love whatever the circumstances. Obviously I have substituted modern horrendous circumstances for ancient ones. I have also substituted my wife's name, Barbara, for "Lalage." The latter in Greco-Roman antiquity means "sweetly speaking," and the liquid "l" sounds would have emphasized this; whereas in those days "Barbara" would have been heard through a tradition of ethnic hatred as the sound of a hated foreign enemy. My version reverses this: the "r's," whether trilled or middle western American, are to my ears musically euphonius.

P.43 “A Twisted Brassiere Strap.” Just a risqué epigram. The rhyme “X/sex” echoes p.36. The rhyme “shoulder/bolder” is a prelude to p.53.

P.44 “In Memory of Bobbie Bruce.” When I was a boy, no one had informed me that such a person as Bobbie Bruce existed. Later, more civilized, I began to realize the wonder of him.

P.45 “Princess Semele and Queen Mary.” This sonnet mingles the Classical, the Judaeo-Christian, and the scientific, and relates to other poems, notably that on p.24. “Adam newly formed” is Christ; “earth and sky” connotes his human and divine combination. The mother of Bacchus/Dionysus, Semele, was reduced to ashes by the lightening bolt of his father, Zeus. “Assumed” refers to the elevation of Semele to divine status and to the “assumption” of Christ’s mother, Mary, into heaven. “Wine” is the metonymic identity of Bacchus/Dionysus, as well as that of Christ at the Last Supper or the eucharist. “Mary’s sextant” refers to her role as “star of the sea,” our guide in life and after life, connoting more generally the feminine principle of divine and human love.

P.46 “An Agnostic Poet Speaks.” The speaker in this loosely formed sonnet sounds somewhat like Tiresias might have, obscure – or at best mantic, at least “for an instant.” Was the “barking din” coming from the three mouths of Cerberus? The “wiz” must have been Oedipus.

P.47 “Snakes” not only mingles Judaeo-Christian and Classical myth, but adds allusions to medicine and Western Union. The Montessor family coat of arms described in the epigraph from Poe’s story also plays into the poem. The interpretation of the heel of Christ crushing the Devil mingles into the Orpheus-Eurydice story; the wine-god is involved in the whole wine-cellar setting of Poe’s tale. “The caduceus” consists of entwined serpents. Its use as a logo for Western Union flower delivery both contrasts and harmonizes with its intended use in the medical field: are the flowers for a speedy recovery from a hospital stay, or since the caduceus was the wand used by the god Hermes as he led the dead into the underworld, are they for a funeral. The *Titulus Crucis* was the talisman which Christ held before him as he descended into Hades to crush the head of the serpent beneath his heel and free the damned. This is the opposite of the Montessor motto *Nemo me impune lacessit* (‘None harms me with impunity’), and unchristian statement of vengeance taken from the book of Genesis.

Pp.48-9 “The World Clicks:” “Clicks” means not only the sounds and the rhythm of timed clicks, but especially ‘to fit or agree exactly,’ ‘to fit together,’ ‘to function smoothly,’ ‘to make sense.’ Not all of the world’s rhythmic advances, however, are benign. The poem ends with references to Einstein’s railroad illustration of relative time, a cardiac monitor, and echoes of a couple of songs.

P.50 “A Beautiful Hymn.” I hope this is an obvious example of a NON-autobiographical poem.

P.51-2 “To My Wife.” A little rhyming Gallows-humor.

P.53 “Coochi-Coo.” A blind friend of mine at my recent poetry reading asked me if I should not have ended the poem with “...while I grow older.” Maybe he was right, but take a look at the photo of my wife of 54 years accompanying the poem, and see how hard it has been to grow older.

P.54. See note on p.22.

P.55 “Hysteron Proteron” is a Greek rhetorical term for “putting the cart before the horse.” I wrote the poem as I was about to graduate from high school, an uncertain time of my life, but I thought then that the lengths of the lines and the visual shape of the poem expressed the truth. Today, I am still uncertain, but I do not like shaped poetry, preferring to rely on sound instead.

P.56 “At Prayer in My Swimsuit, Walking on the Beach in the Morning.” The setting is Goose Rocks Beach, Kennebunkport, on the southern coast of Maine, where my wife and I have spent the month of August for many years.

P.57 “The Ghosts of Adam and Eve Recall Revolution” is a dialogue echoing irreverent themes of this book.