

## **The Roots of Poetry**

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**Gracious Is the Earth**, by Mark Christhilf, Nashville, Tenn.: Winston-Derek Publishers, 1992. 65 pp. \$6.95.

### I

Ezra Pound's main concern, as Dr. F. R. Leavis noted in his *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (1932), "has always been art: he is, in the most serious sense of the word, an aesthete." Therefore, "Mr. Pound's poetry is very different from Mr. Eliot's. There are in it none of Mr. Eliot's complex intensities of concern about soul and body: the moral, religious and anthropological preoccupations are absent" although both "learnt to express so subtly by rhythmic means the breakdown of rhythm." Still, T. S. Eliot dedicated *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound, *il miglior fabbro*.

"*The Waste Land* would have been less coherent and more puzzling had not Eliot turned to Pound for counsel," Dr. Russell Kirk wrote in *Eliot and His Age* (1971). "What did Pound do to the poem? He improved it mightily." Yet "nearly half a century after the arrival of *The Waste Land*, it still remains desirable to inquire—for the common reader, and for a good many uncommon readers—just what Eliot was saying in that startling poem."

One wonders what would have happened to English poetry had *The Waste Land* been a failure instead of a success. Would poets have continued writing poems that rhymed, as Shakespeare's did? Many did, of course, even after 1922, but the poetic sensibility had been seared by those "thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season." "In and around 1922," Virginia Woolf noted, "human nature changed." Ironically, that year, too, James Joyce published *Ulysses*. It was hard, indeed, to

think of *Ulysses* as a novel just as *The Waste Land* caused critics to ask, "Can this be a poem?"

"A poem," Shelley wrote in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), "is the image of life expressed in its eternal truth." A poem is an icon, a picture of a subject that enables one viewing it to see beyond it, as through a window, into the soul of things. But what Eliot did in *The Waste Land*, with Pound's assistance, was to create something that became more like a mirror, albeit a broken one, "a heap of broken images." This subverted the poetic process of mimesis, by which a poet replicates a world within a world, one reflective of the truth and beauty of the cosmos. For Eliot was a genius and his achievement so dazzling that poets began to imitate his art, and formlessness, rather than the forms of life itself. And so perhaps the greatest poem of the twentieth century ironically almost struck a death-blow to modern poetry. For, as Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us, "Genius goes and Folly stays." And what ensued taught one that it is the poet who is most capable of destroying poetry, just as a teacher can best dismantle teaching, or a cleric the church. Eliot had set in motion what could become, in the wrong hands, a dreadful thing, as Shakespeare put it:

*Between the acting of a dreadful thing  
And the first motion, all the interim is  
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream:  
The Genius and the mortal instruments  
Are then in council; and the state of man,  
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then  
The nature of an insurrection.*

*The Waste Land* was first published in the first issues of Eliot's *The Criterion* (October 1922 and January 1923). The Great War for Civilization, which had ended just four years previously, proved how quickly technology could mass-produce the machinery of murder. The scattered effects of the Industrial Revolution galvanized themselves after World War I

came to a close, if ever it did. Eliot was recording, as Leavis pointed out, "a breach of continuity and the uprooting of life. This last metaphor has a peculiar aptness, for what we are witnessing today is the final uprooting of the immemorial ways of life, of life rooted in the soil."

"The poetry of earth is never dead," John Keats affirmed in his sonnet on "The Grasshopper and the Cricket" (1816). Even "when the frost / Has wrought a silence," the Cricket will echo on the hearth the "Grasshopper's [song] among some grassy hills." But Eliot, in his prophetic "projection of awareness," saw past the devastation of the Great Depression, when the land lay economically wasted, to the scorched earth of yet another World War.

When bluebirds flew over the white cliffs of Dover in 1945, the earth was writhing. The decimation of life by machines and a machine consciousness was indescribable. Language itself could not encompass it. The Word seemed almost embarrassed, having been commanded for war purposes such as code-naming the beautiful coast of France, "Omaha Beach." And the poets, whose destiny it was to speak in "wonderful vocables," were curiously silent.

No *Waste Land Revisited* shook the literary world. Man began not so much to dream and imagine as to calculate. "At such periods," Shelley reminds one, "the calculating principle pervades all the forms of dramatic exhibition, and poetry ceases to be expressed upon them." This was a tragedy, for the calculating principle went on to catalyze some of the most heinous crimes of the century—crimes against the incalculable, life itself. Had the world been graced with poetry and drama like that of Athens during the Age of Pericles, poets could have dramatized crime with such sensitivity of creation and analysis as to hold it up to moral examination. "Even crime," Shelley wrote, is in drama of the highest

sort "disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented...men can no longer cherish it." But no such catharsis was forthcoming for the audience of the terrible twentieth century.

## II

To one subsequently grown used to poetry in which poets "howl, blaspheme, vomit" it is a restorative experience to encounter a book whose title is *Gracious Is the Earth*. And as one opens the book and turns its pages, one finds within it a poetry of moral beauty that enhances human life, defines the meaning of our destiny, creates dialogue between our lower and our higher selves. As Mark Christhilf also shows in this, his first, volume of collected poems, moral poetry emerges from our material world, responds to it intimately and intensively, registers its magnificence, however transient and temporal it is, and also transcends it by including it. Unlike so much of contemporary poetry, with its technical audacities, its autobiographical excesses, its elusive abstractions, and its empty unintelligibility, *Gracious Is the Earth*, as the title itself underscores, celebrates the mystery of the cosmos and the mystery of being. And the virtue of grace pervades it in almost a religious sense, reminding one that the word "gracious" is similar in etymology to the "*gratia*" of the *Ave Maria*.

Many of the fifty-two poems have titles closely connected to the earth: "The Prairies," "Flowers," "Scheme of Sky and Plain," "Mountains," "Ocean," "The Garden," "Potato," "Cornfields: Late Summer," "Rivers," "Blizzard," "Wave," "Winter Leaves." Images of the cruelty of nature occur in "The Prairies":

*Do not be disgusted or cringe at their  
plight,  
Their desolation is natural: a tyrannical  
sky  
Presses them flat, demanding that they lie  
Prostrate before its overwhelming gaze....*

*Do not be disgusted when they cannot  
hold the line,  
For in winter the sky grows more unkind,  
And adds the weight of snow to their  
burden,  
Burying them beneath a huge white  
ocean....*

But more often, as in "Letter from Illinois," nature connects man with a third ground in the sense D. H. Lawrence had in mind when he said "We have to know how to go out and meet one another upon the third ground, the holy ground":

*Then your eyes struck rich soil beneath,  
And guessing it would support a useful  
grass,  
Stretched out the miles of tasseled corn,  
Which would feed the generations.*

Interlaced with a poetry of pastoral images are poems of the moral imagination, such as the first one in the book, "For Isaac." Inspired by the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, it could also be read as a metaphor of all fathers and all sons and of the touching distances in their relationships:

*But when he saw his own face in your  
eyes,  
He grew distant and tenderly stroked  
you....*

The second poem in the book, "Lines," dedicated to George Panichas, extrapolates concepts from the first into the groves of academe, where intellectual fathers and sons encounter each other, as the student focuses upon the face of his teacher:

*Having frowned into focus innumerable  
books,  
Your face is a chart of concentration.  
It maps your effort to discover invisible  
lines—  
Directions to be followed through life.*

Poems such as this remind one of "The Best of School," as Lawrence put it:

*This morning, sweet it is  
To feel the lads' looks light on me,*

*Then back in a swift, bright flutter to  
work:*

*Each one darting away with his  
Discovery, like birds that steal and flee.  
Touch after touch I feel on me  
As their eyes glance at me for the grain  
Of rigours they taste delightedly.*

.....  
*I feel them cling and cleave to me  
As vines going eagerly up; they twine  
My life with other leaves, my time  
Is hidden in theirs, their thrills are mine.*

The subtle interplay of "life with...leaves," of themes from nature and vignettes of persons whom Christhilf has known, often in a midwestern setting, brings to mind Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. The work has a similar lyric beauty and emotional currents that bind people and nature together. The theme of friendship is explored in poems like "At the Grave of a Friend," "Handshaking," and "On Friendship":

*You ask me why I have so few friends.  
Well, alright, I'm going to tell you....*

*If you still want to know why I have few  
friends,  
Think how long it took me to find this  
one.*

Here, as elsewhere, the poet affirms that, as Aristotle said, "Without friends no one would choose to live." Within his little book of sixty-five pages, Christhilf has created a world imitative of life rather than of art.

Ever since the appearance of *The Waste Land*, few poets have composed sonnets like Shakespeare's or odes like Pindar's. Yet, interestingly, there are "perennial patterns" of poetry in Christhilf's work. A poet focused on poetry rather than its hybrid forms, he seems to be searching always for the intensity of melody and harmony form and structure create while shying away from rigid metric constraints. Many of his poems, however, are remarkably close to being sonnets,

"Cornfields: Late Summer," having thirteen lines, "The Bowl of Cereal," on the page facing it, containing fifteen. And lines not intended to rhyme seem to, as does the poem "Ocean":

*Your wizardry would be alarming,  
But for the peace you bring,  
When your washing waves slide in  
And breathe your name over and again....*

The English language, unlike the mellifluous tongue of Homer, finds its genius in stark simplicity. Shakespeare, of all the English poets, perhaps most perfectly understood this. Whole quatrains in his sonnets rarely contain words of even two syllables:

*That time of year thou mayst in me  
behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do  
hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against  
the cold,  
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet  
birds sang.*

And Winston Churchill, in his World War II speeches, saved what Shakespeare termed "this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England," with words like "blood, toil, tears and sweat."

To write poetry in English one must dress oneself in humility, as Shakespeare put it:

*And then I stole all courtesy from heaven,  
And drest myself in such humility  
That I did pluck allegiance from men's  
hearts.*

And, fortunately, that quality is inherent in the graciousness of Christhilf's verse. Similarly, the cult of personality which so often destroys poets who know themselves to be "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" is not a snare in which Christhilf or his book is caught. Focused on truth and beauty, he remains discreet as well as discrete from his work. Concepts of Hellenism reside in poems moderate in all things, stressing nothing

in excess. There is an irenic quality to the book, reminding one of the quiet bowers of poetry, "full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing," even when poems focus on such transportational nightmares as "The Beltway." There is a steady quality also to the book, making one feel that the author will go on to write many more, ascending

#### *The Ladder*

*Grasp the next rung with the hand's palm,  
Lift your leg till the foot snags a higher  
place,  
Swing up with the breath of rising on your  
face,  
And feel the muscles stiffen your thigh  
As another view welcomes your eye.*

### **Re-Barbarizing the Western Mind**

Wayne Allen

**The Undoing of Thought**, by Alain Finkielkraut, London: The Claridge Press, 1988. 132 pp. \$ 6.95.

In *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (1928) Julien Benda identifies the metaphysical significance of modernity: "Our age is indeed the age of the *intellectual organization of political hatreds*" (author's italics). In the seeming effort to validate his 1928 observation, moderns have concocted spurious but politically obtrusive doctrines of moral decay: deconstructionism, structuralism, semiotics, and species of feminism grounded in a new animism. The corrosive effects of these pseudo-self-insights are having the effect of confirming Benda's very next sentence: "It will be one of its chief claims to notice in the moral history of humanity."

Benda has seized on the chief characteristic of modernity, the rejection of nature and the turn toward the will as the primary ordering principle of politics. In