

SF COMMENTARY 92

July 2016

72 pages

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AND MANY OTHERS



Cover: Carol Kewley: 'Poems for the Space Race'

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Ray Sinclair-Wood usually writes for my magazines as **Ray Wood**. He lives in Quorn, near the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. Despite the fact that it is often very hot in Quorn, Ray enjoys bushwalking as well as reading and writing and watching films.

Ray Sinclair-Wood

Poems of the Space Race

Merely to know
The Flawless Moon dwells pure
In the human heart
Is to find the Darkness of the night
Vanished under clearing skies.
— Kojju (1121–1201)¹

1

The Space Age might be said to have begun with the 1903 book, *The Exploration of Cosmic Space by Means of Reaction Motors*, by the Russian Konstantin Tsiolkovski (1857–1935). Or with the designing and testing of rocket engines from 1914 on, by the US's Robert Goddard (1882–1945). Or on 3 October 1942, when the German Wernher von Braun's team at Peenemünde first successfully launched a liquid-fuelled rocket, the V2, to an altitude of 84 km, that landed 187 km away; Walter Dornberger, in charge of the project, said, 'Today the spaceship has been invented.' Whenever it did begin, of course the Space Age continues to this day. But what I'm referring to here is the Space Race between the then Soviet Union and the United States.

It might be said that the Space Race began with the USAF's plan to put the world's first satellite into orbit in the International Geophysical Year of July 1957 to December 1958. It was called 'Project Vanguard'. But the US's public was shocked when the Soviets, as the Communist Russians were then usually known, beat them to it by getting their 84 kg *Sputnik 1* into orbit on 4 October 1957. However, in the eyes of the general public around the world, *Sputnik 1* was when the Space Race began. It wasn't a *race* in the world's eyes before that.

It's probably difficult for young people today to understand how enormous the shock was to Americans at that time. The US had emerged from the Second World War generally convinced that the Soviet Union was a backward society incapable of any kind of truly advanced technology. Average Americans believed that they were masters of the planet, especially technologically, despite the Cold War then being so intense. And suddenly they weren't. The shock was compounded by *Sputnik* being followed by the failure of the US's 'Project Vanguard' to launch a satellite into orbit.²

One of the best descriptions of that initial American shock that I've ever read is in Stephen King's 1981 *Danse Macabre: The Anatomy of Horror*³. It's worth quoting in full. His book begins with it:

For me, the terror — the real terror, as opposed to whatever demons and boogies which might have been living in my own mind — began on an afternoon in October of 1957. I had just turned ten. And as was only fitting, I was in a movie theater [and] just as the [flying] saucers were mounting their attack on Our Nation's Capital in the movie's final reel, everything just stopped. The screen went black ...

The manager walked out into the middle of the stage and held his hands up — quite unnecessarily — for quiet ...



Ray Sinclair-Wood.



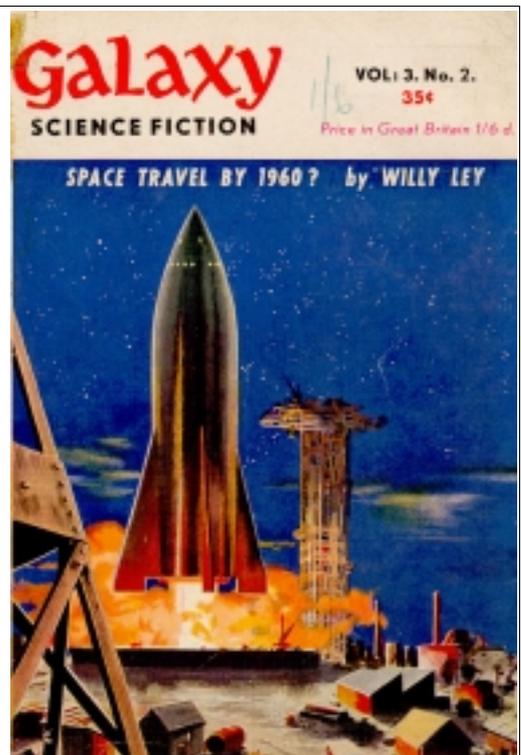
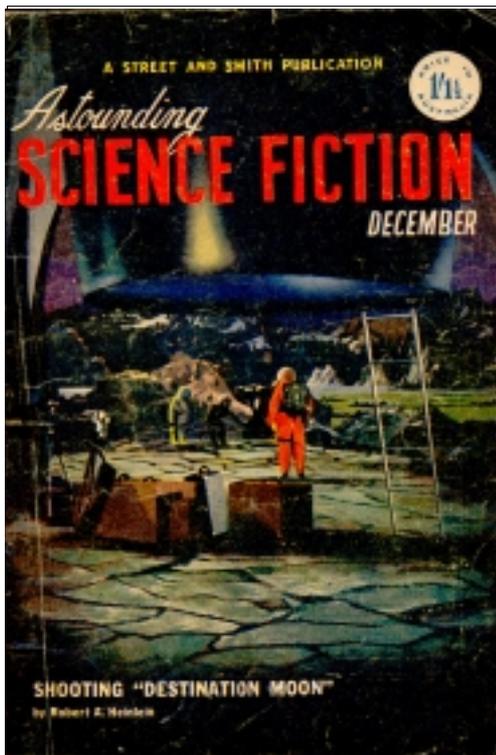
We sat there in our seats like dummies, staring at the manager. He looked nervous and sallow — or perhaps that was only the footlights. We sat wondering what sort of catastrophe could have caused him to stop the movie just as it was reaching that apotheosis of all Saturday matinee shows, ‘the good part’. And the way his voice trembled when he spoke did not add to anyone’s sense of well-being.

‘I want to tell you,’ he said in that trembly voice, ‘that the Russians have put a space satellite into orbit around the earth. They call it ... *Sputnik*.’

This piece of intelligence was greeted by absolute, tomblike silence. We just sat there, a theaterful of 1950s kids ... We were the kids who had ponied up a quarter apiece to watch Hugh Marlowe in *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* and got this piece of upsetting news as a kind of nasty bonus.

I remember this very clearly: cutting through that awful dead silence came one shrill voice, whether that of a boy or a girl I do not know, a voice that was near tears but that was also full of a frightening anger: ‘Oh, go show the movie, you liar!’

The manager did not even look towards the place from which that voice had come, and that was somehow the worst thing of all. Somehow that proved it. The Russians had beaten us into space. Somewhere over our heads, beeping triumphantly, was an electronic ball which had been launched and constructed behind the Iron Curtain. Neither Captain Midnight nor Richard Carlson (who also starred in *Riders to the Stars*; and oh boy, the bitter irony in that) had been able to stop it. It was up there and they called it Sputnik. The manager stood there for a moment longer, looking out at us as if he wished he had something else to say but could not think what it might be. Then he walked off and pretty soon the movie started up again.



Adelaide people drove north at night to get away from the city lights so they could watch *Sputnik 1* orbiting overhead. I remember when we were out there that along each side of the highway were rows of parked cars, and people standing out by them looking up at the sky. Though they were talking to each other casually, they were clearly in awe of the satellite. The roads out of the city were packed with cars going out to see it, and returning from seeing it, night after night.

The very next month after *Sputnik 1* the Soviets successfully launched *Sputnik 2* into orbit, carrying the dog Laika. With the Cold War in progress the shock of *Sputnik 2* to the West was that it was nearly 500 kg big. This meant that the Soviets alone on Earth could launch into space missiles carrying nuclear bombs, and bring them down anywhere on the planet. At that time the US couldn't do this, and in response hastily installed missiles in the UK, Italy, and Turkey to be close enough to reach Russia. Then came *Sputnik 3*, launched in May 1958. It was more than two and a half times heavier than *Sputnik 2*, and stayed in space for two years.

In December 1957, the Americans rushed to launch a satellite a month after *Sputnik 2*. *Vanguard 1* was watched on TV around the world. And moments after lift-off it fell back to earth, and exploded. The humiliation for the US and the West as a whole was great. (However, the reaction of many Australians at the time was a little odd. There was a rather guilty feeling of amusement that the Americans were failing, and that the Soviets of all people were beating them.) The first successful US launch was the 14 kg *Explorer 1* on 31 January 1958.

Just one illustration of the impact on the world is that in some respects Chairman Mao Zedong's disastrous 'Great Leap Forward' in China, which led to perhaps as many as 50 million deaths, was a product of *Sputnik*. In November 1957, while in Moscow, he declared that, because of *Sputnik*, which had so enormously impressed him, now the 'East wind prevails over the west wind'. During his 'Great Leap Forward' of 1958–62, achieving a new agricultural or industrial record in China was called 'launching a sputnik', and high-yielding farmlands were called 'sputnik fields'.⁴

And so the Space Race had begun. For several years more the US worked desperately to equal and then pass the Soviets. But for quite a while every time they seemed about to catch up the Soviets jumped ahead again. The US didn't catch up until the mid 1960s.

I don't know when the general public believes the Space Race ended, but for me it ended on 21 July 1969 when, watched on TV by an estimated one-fifth of the world's population, the US's Neil Armstrong took that first-ever human step onto the surface of the Moon. (A fifth of the world's population watching something on TV isn't unusual today, but it certainly was back then.) The Soviets, in one of the greatest exhibitions of sour grapes that I think history records, claimed that they'd never been interested in reaching the Moon first. In reality, a series of disasters in the later 1960s prevented them getting there. Therefore, the actual Space Race was over. It had lasted for a couple of months short of 12 years. And the US had won.

A slightly amusing aside. Sending animals rather than humans into space at first was because no one knew what effect it would have on humans, especially weightlessness (for example, would the body's organs still function?) But when the US launched their first test animals into space starting in 1959, they were not dogs like the Soviets' Laika, but monkeys named Able and Baker, and eventually in January 1961 a chimpanzee named Ham. It seemed to me to demonstrate the almost fanatical Anglo-Saxon love of dogs, and I suppose the fear of the outcry that risking the lives of dogs in space might incur.

I'd been reading SF from 1948 on, particularly the magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* (renamed *Analog* in 1960),

Galaxy Science Fiction from its start in 1950, and a heap of other more short-lived SF magazines. And I remember that before *Sputnik 1* orbited you were looked on as a bit weird if you read that kind of thing, even by many of your school mates and teachers (at least in Adelaide in South Australia where I lived then). *Sputnik 1* not only dramatically ended humankind's insular, inward-looking attitude to our Universe — at least for a while — but it also changed forever the world's attitude to SF. In a single day *Sputnik* had made SF respectable, because we were now living in what up until then had been a science-fictional world.

2

The Moon has always been one of our most powerful and prolific symbols. Jack Tresidder in his *Dictionary of Symbols*⁵ begins his entry about it thus:

Fertility, cyclic regeneration, resurrection, immortality, occult power, mutability, intuition and the emotions — ancient regulator of time, the waters, crop growth and the lives of women. The moon's appearances and disappearances and its startling changes of form presented an impressive cosmic image of the earthly cycles of animal and vegetable birth, growth, decline, death and rebirth. The extent and power of lunar worship and lunar symbolism are partly explained by the moon's enormous importance as a source of light for night hunting and as the earliest measure of time — its phases forming the basis of the first known calendars. Beyond its influence on the tides, the moon was widely believed to control human destiny as well as rainfall, snow, floods, and the rhythm of plant and animal life in general and of women, through the lunar rhythms of the menstrual cycle.

And as in modern times poets came more and more to live in big cities, the Moon became even more important to them because it had become the most significant element of Nature remaining in the crowded built-up streets where they now spent their lives. Hence the constant appearance of the Moon in modern poetry, one of the last remnants in it of the natural world humans had once lived all their lives in, but had abandoned for the jobs and seductions of artificial city life.

Nature in cities where it does occur can scarcely be called 'Nature' at all.⁶ Too often trees are carefully shaped, and grow in unnatural straight lines, and their debris is removed from under them. Grasses are trimmed almost to the ground. Flowers are segregated and grown in orderly plots. Dangerous animals and reptiles are banished. City-dwellers are cooled artificially from the summer heat, and warmed from the winter cold. Most walking is replaced by cars, buses, trams, and trains. Nor, as always, does one dare to look too long at the Sun. Only the Moon remains inviolate and natural and available to city-dwelling poets for long contemplation.

3

Space *had* featured in poems before the Space Race began. A poem by the Australian **Robert D. Fitzgerald** (1902–87) was published in April 1954, three and a half years before *Sputnik 1*.⁷

Beginnings

Not to have known the hard-bitten,
tight-lipped Caesar
clamped down on savage Britain;
or, moving closer,
not to have watched Cook
drawing thin lines across
the last sea's uncut book
is my own certain loss;

as too is having come late,
the other side of the dark
from that bearded, sedate
Hargrave of Stanwell Park,
and so to have missed, some bright
morning, in the salty, stiff
north-easter, a crank with a kite —
steadied above the cliff.

Beginnings once known
are lost. Perpetual day,
wheeling, has grown
each year further away
from the original strength

of any action or mind
used, and at length
fallen behind.

One might give much
to bring to the hand
for sight and touch
cities under the sand
and to talk and trade
with the plain folk met
could we walk with the first who made
an alphabet.

But more than to look back
we choose this day's concern
with everything in the track,
and would give most to learn
outcomes of all we found
and what next builds to the stars.
I regret I shall not be around
to stand on Mars.

Lawrence Hargrave (1850–1915) was the Australian aeronautical pioneer who experimented especially with wing designs using models and kites. Many people back then regarded him as a crank, yet he was an extraordinarily prolific inventor. In fact, he used four box kites to get himself hovering 3 and a half metres off the ground in 1894. I've read, though I can no longer remember where, that the Wright Brothers used some of his research for the wings of their first aeroplane. He and some of his designs were featured on Australia's \$20 note from 1966 to 1994.

For non-Australian readers, I should say that James Cook (1728–79) was the English navigator who explored the east coast of Australia, and more of the Pacific and Southern Oceans than any other explorer.

I wonder if Fitzgerald recollected his 'I regret I shall not be around/to stand on Mars' at the time of the first Moon landing in 1969? In 1954 most people would have scoffed at the idea that humans would stand on the Moon only 15 years later. I can't recollect who it was now, but in the late 1940s one of the US's top scientists was asked by the US government whether it ought to aim at getting into space at that time. His advice was that there was no sense in doing it — I think he said in the foreseeable future, or it may have been not until the next century.

What's most significant about Fitzgerald's poem is that it illustrates the eager way poets had in the past always looked forward to the future. It's significant because, unusually, as the Space Race heated up poets began more and more to have misgivings about it. And these misgivings became rather general after the first Moon landing.

Of course there are poets who write from many different roles. Some are story-tellers. Some are songsters. Some are philosophers. Some are dramatists. But some are also seers, visionaries, prophets — and it's the poet as seer whom I'm concerned with here.

4

I'll look at five poems in particular, two composed early during the Space Race, and three about the first landing on the Moon on 20 July 1969, and the first human stepping onto the Moon's surface the following day. As I said, for me this landing marked the end of the Race, so these last three might be said to represent poets' summations of it.

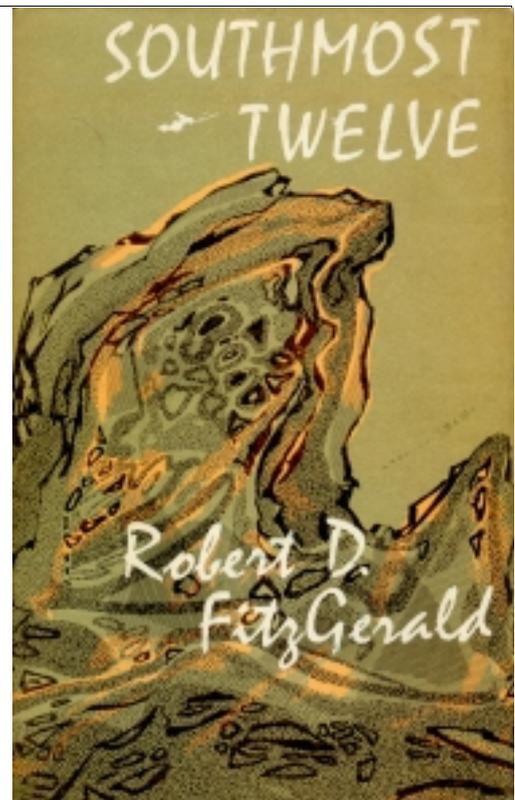
The two composed early in the Race were by Australians. The first is 'Endymion' by the Anglo-Australian poet **Randolph Stow** (1935–2010).⁸

Stow's work has been neglected, but is undergoing a much-deserved reevaluation. A recent book of his poems is John Kinsella's 2012 *The Land's Meaning: New Selected Poems: Randolph Stow*.⁹ Sydney author Suzanne Falkiner's biography, *Mick: A Life of Randolph Stow* (University of Western Australia Publishing), was published in February 2016. And Text Publishing has put back into print his later novels, *To the Islands* (1958), *Tourmaline* (1963), *Visitants* (1979), *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980), and *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984).

Endymion

My love, you are no goddess: the bards were mistaken;
no lily maiden, no huntress in silver glades.

You are lovelier still by far, for you are an island;
a continent of the sky, and all virgin, sleeping.



And I, who plant my shack in your mould-grey gullies,
am come to claim you: my orchard, my garden, of ash.

To annex your still mountains with patriotic ballads,
to establish between your breasts my colonial hearth.

And forgetting all trees, winds, oceans and open grass-
lands,
and forgetting the day for as long as the night shall
last,

to slumber becalmed and lulled in your hollowed
hands,
to wither within to your likeness, and lie still.

Let your small dust fall, let it tick on my roof like
crickets.

I shall open my heart, knowing nothing can come in.

It was first published in 1962, but apparently written as early as 1960 or 1961,¹⁰ at the time when the Space Race, especially to get to the Moon, had become feverish, and was constantly in the news.

January 1959 — the Soviets' *Lunik 1* flew past the Moon.

March 1959 — the US's *Pioneer 4* flew past the Moon.

Autumn 1959 — NASA started training the US's first seven astronauts. The Soviets were already training 20 cosmonauts; 'astronaut' in the US is 'cosmonaut' in Russia.

September 1959 — the Soviets' *Lunik 2* landed on the Moon — the first-ever human-made object to land elsewhere in space than on Earth.

October 1959 — the Soviets' *Lunik 3* circled the Moon and sent back the first pictures ever of the Moon's far side, which we humans had never seen before.

So at that time Stow would have been as aware, as most people in First World countries were, of the race to the Moon.

Up until this time Stow had been writing, particularly in his first three novels — *A Haunted Land* (1956), *The Bystander* (1957), and *To the Islands* (1958) — about how people in Australia had so badly mistreated and were still mistreating both the land and its Aboriginal inhabitants; and about the terrible damage this mistreatment was doing in turn to the very same European invaders-destroyers themselves. And here suddenly in 1959 for him was the possibility of the same thing happening to the Moon. He must have despaired of humans ever learning from their past mistakes. He must have wondered if we humans would ever learn to do better, to do differently. He must have felt that those ancient mistakes were about to be exported into space itself.

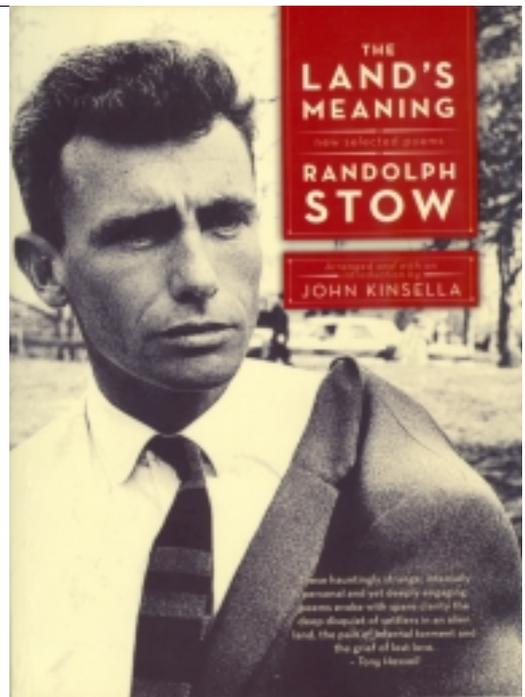
And he would have seen the photos in our newspapers of the Moon's surface shot from robotic spacecraft flying past it, photos such as the ones I still remember when they were first published, of the far side of the Moon. In Australia we had no colour TV then (not until March 1975), and our newspaper photos were still only black and white. But even though perhaps the only photos of the Moon's surface he saw were black-and-white ones (magazines might have had coloured ones — I can't remember now), telescopes had already shown that the Moon was in fact not the romantic blue-white that we see with our own eyes from Earth, and that poets had always celebrated. And these spacecraft flying close to the Moon certainly confirmed this.

So 'And I, who plant my shack in your mould-grey gullies,/am come to claim you: my orchard, my garden, of ash', is he himself, visualising a pioneer from Earth landing on the grey, ash-coloured Moon, and starting the same old act of land-violation and therefore the consequent boomeranging self-violation all over again? Of course, farming the surface of the Moon similarly to farming on Earth would be impossible. But his is a poetic image for whatever kind of despoliation humankind may inflict elsewhere off-Earth, and not a literal image for farming.

And forgetting all trees, winds, oceans and open grasslands,
and forgetting the day for as long as the night shall last,

to slumber becalmed and lulled in your hollowed hands,
to wither within to your likeness, and lie still

is how the Moon's surface will reshape that pioneer into its own image. But for the pioneer, 'I shall open my heart, knowing that nothing can come in.' After all, for Stow what *is* there on the desolate, waterless, airless, and vegetationless Moon to 'come in'? Therefore that pioneer was bound to be reduced by the Moon to its 'nothing' too.



So for Stow, the horror was how much worse the impact of an alien landscape such as the Moon's — and after it other landscapes on Mars, or Venus, or planets around other stars — would be on humans landing on them to despoil them. The meaning of the land to Stow — his best-known poem is actually titled 'The Land's Meaning'¹¹ — was inextricably related to the humans living on that land. Both had an impact on each other, and if you, the human on that land, treated it badly, it'd revenge itself on you in return. So how would the Moon treat humans who treated it badly too?

The Eastern religions he was familiar with had taught him that there are no two separate entities: Land, and Human. They're both inescapably one and the same. 'Body is land in permutation,' he says in his poem 'From The Testament of Tourmaline: Variations on Themes of the Tao Te Ching', VII.¹² As the physicist Fritjof Capra says in his book, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*,¹³ which Stow knew:

The most important characteristic of the Eastern world view — one could almost say the essence of it — is the awareness of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness.¹⁴

All is One to the Eastern mystics Stow was familiar with, and the shock of humans adding the so far pristine landscape of the Moon to the already violated landscape of the Earth must have been a blow to him, as his apprehensive poem shows.

Many poets during the Space Race, but especially immediately after the 1969 Moon landing, wrote about it, and one frequent theme in their poems about these explorations of the Moon was how they'd destroyed its ancient and revered myths. And so, many of them felt that the romance of the Moon had been diminished. Stow uses the ancient Greek myth of Endymion, who was loved by Selene the Moon-Goddess. When Zeus put him to sleep perpetually on Mt Latmos, she came down to Earth to make love to him every night. But now, Stow says of her, 'My love, you are no goddess: the bards were mistaken;/no lily maiden, no huntress in silver glades.' She is 'lovelier still by far' only so long as she is 'an island/a continent of the sky, and all virgin, sleeping', that is, only so long as she, the Moon, has not been violated by humans landing on her and colonising her.

This is far from Fitzgerald's completely uncritical 'I regret I shall not be around/to stand on Mars'. And it's interesting that Stow wrote like this a decade before so many poets reacted negatively to the 1969 Moon landing.

5

Next I want to look at a poem from probably a little earlier than Stow's, by the Australian **Elizabeth Riddell** (1907–98). It was published in November 1959.¹⁵ Only two months before, the Soviets had landed *Lunik 2* on the surface of the Moon — the very first 'invasion' of the Moon's actual surface by humans. It seems that this *Lunik* may have been intended to make a soft landing, but that it accidentally crashed instead. Riddell treats it as an invasion.

After Lunik Two

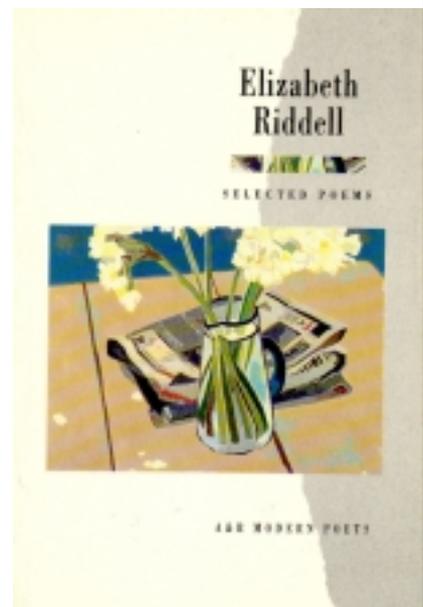
It was like falling out of love, a wisp of grief,
Identifiable pain, unease, regret
As for the end of summer when a brilliant feather
Lies on the grass and the bright bird flown on.

It was a sort of cruelty, a small torture,
A shudder in the skin, and yet
That night the pure moon floated like a leaf
Moist, pale, and patterned in her familiar way
Between her stars and clouds, the candid moon.

No mark of the insolent arrow on her cheek,
No crimson kiss or tear to show her wound,
She passed on her dark acres to the deep
Green gulf of day, and so with her
My fears and sorrows into caves of sleep.

The 'caves of sleep' also refers to the Endymion myth that Stow used. Zeus let Endymion, who was supremely handsome, choose his own fate, and he asked Zeus to put him to sleep forever so that he'd never grow old and lose his beauty. So he sleeps eternally in a cave on Mt Latmos, where the Moon Goddess Selene comes from the Moon every night to worship his beauty, and be his lover. (Her coming down from the Moon was an ancient explanation of the Moon's light shining down on Earth.)

The 'insolent arrow' — *Lunik 2* — that marks 'her cheek' has you think of

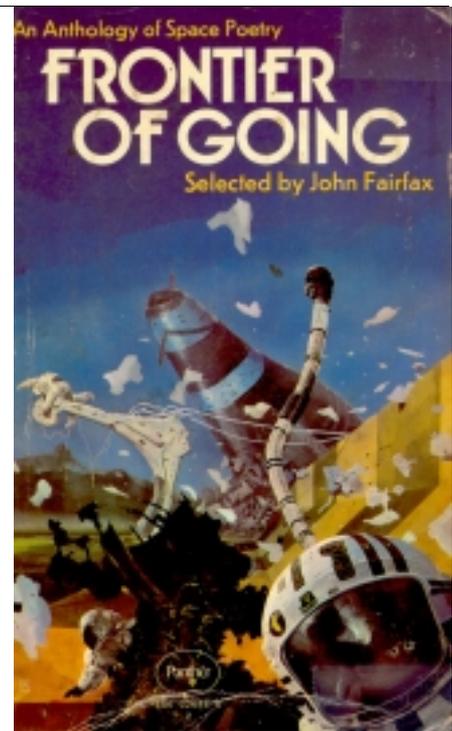


Eros' (Cupid's) arrow. If gold-tipped it inflames its target with passionate and irresistible love; if lead-tipped and blunted it repels love instead. And Eros was often depicted as mischievous, and even the bringer of tragedy through love. Hence his arrow is 'insolent', she says.

Both kinds of arrow are relevant to the poem. One interpretation is that the repellent arrow has wounded Selene so that she will never love Endymion down on Earth again. The other is that *Lunik 2*, being shot into the Moon by humans instead of by a mythic God, represents humans taking over from Selene, or banishing her, instead. Either interpretation says that the ancient and long-standing Moon myths are now only of the past, and their loss is as grievous and painful and regretful as 'falling out of love'.

But she says, perhaps with relief, though it's 'a sort of cruelty, a small torture,/A shudder in the skin', there's 'No mark of the insolent arrow on her cheek/No crimson kiss or tear to show her wound'. At least not that she can see from here on Earth. However, her 'fears and sorrows' arising from this invasion of the Moon go with Selene 'into [the] caves of sleep'. So, she's saying, the old uninvaded, unblemished Moon exists in reality no longer, not after *Lunik 2*; it can now only exist for her, Riddell — just as the Moon too can now only preserve her beauty, Selene's beauty — hidden away like Endymion in his cave, asleep.

So now the myths of thousands of years are being destroyed. And again, like Stow, Riddell has foreshadowed the general reaction of poets to the landing on the Moon a decade later on — her own reaction is to hide from the invasion of the Moon in Endymion's 'caves of sleep'.



6

Fitzgerald's poem was written before the Space Race, and Stow's and Riddell's not long after it began. The last three poems I'll now look at were written immediately after the first Moon landing in July 1969.

Two poetry anthologies appeared shortly after the landing. They were **John Fairfax's** 1969 *Frontier of Going: An Anthology of Space Poetry*, which contains UK poems; and **Robert Vas Dias's** 1970 *Inside Outer Space: New Poems of the Space Age*, which contains American poems.

There's a website listing 'Speculative Poetry Anthologies: Bibliography of English-Language Science-Fiction, Science, Fantasy, and Horror Poetry Anthologies' of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, at <http://sfpoetry.com/books/anthos.html>. It includes the recent **Tim Jones and P.S. Cottier** (edited), *The Stars Like Sand: Australian Speculative Poetry* (2014). However, the three Australian poems I've given above are not included in Jones & Cottier, though their book ranges as far back as the nineteenth century.

I'd also like to point out a book that SF fans may be familiar with, **Laurence Goldstein's** 1986 *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature*.¹⁶ His Preface, Introduction, and especially the first part of chapter 11, 'The Moon Landing and Modern Literature' — the part subtitled 'The Rivalry of Poet and Astronaut' (pp. 191–203) — are relevant to my subject.

The first of these last three poems is 'To the Moon, 1969', by the American poet **Babette Deutsch** (1895–1982). It was published the very next day after the Moon Lander had settled on the Moon.¹⁷

To the Moon, 1969

You are not looked for through the smog, you turn blindly
Behind that half palpable poison — you who no longer
Own a dark side, yet whose radiance falters, as if it were fading.
Now you have been reached, you are altered

beyond belief —

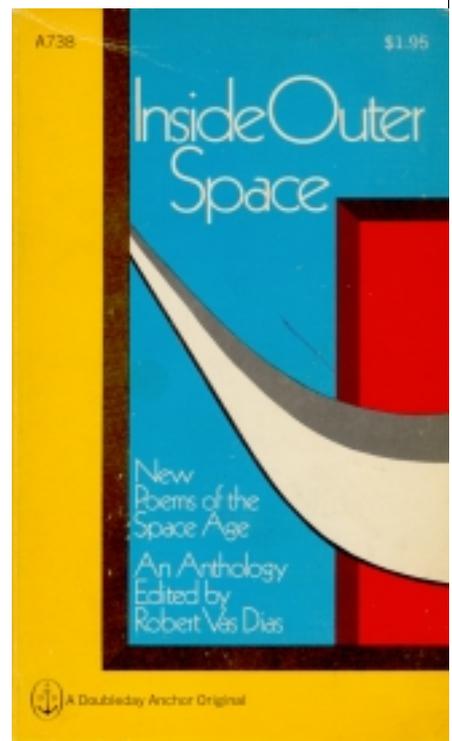
As a stranger spoken to, remaining remote, changes from being
a stranger.

Astronomers know you a governor of tides, women as the mistress

Of menstrual rhythms, poets have called you Hecate, Astarte,
Artemis — huntress whose arrows

Fuse into a melt of moonlight as they pour
upon earth, upon

water.



We all know you a danger
to the thief in the garden, the pilot
In the enemy plane, to lovers embraced in your promise
of a shining security. Are you a monster?
A noble being? Or simply a planet that men have, almost casually, cheapened?
The heavens do not answer.
Once, it was said, the cry: 'Pan is dead! Great Pan is dead!'
shivered, howled, through the forests: the gentle
Christ had killed him.
There is no lament for you — who are silent
as the dead always are.
You have left the mythologies, the old ones, our own.
But, for a few, what has happened is the death of a divine
Person, is a betrayal, is a piece of
The cruelty that the Universe feeds,
while displaying its glories.

For Deutsch the 'smog' of industrial pollution is a 'half-palpable poison' that had already blinded the Moon seen from Earth before the Space Race even began. And its once-mysterious dark side was rudely dragged out from its hiding-place when *Lunik 3* circled the Moon in October 1959, and transmitted photographs of it back to Earth. But despite throwing light on her dark side, the Moon's 'radiance falters, as if it were fading' too. So the Moon has been a victim of attack after attack, and 'Now you have been reached [by the astronauts] you are altered beyond belief'.

Those three descriptions move forward through time to the landing itself. The next three move backward through time instead. The modern scientist comes first, specifically astronomers who relate the oceans' and seas' tides on Earth to the influence of the Moon. Further back in time is that women have always measured their lives cyclically by the Moon. Furthest back of all — you might say even before humans appeared on Earth — are the Goddesses of the Moon, the Goddesses of myth: 'Hecate, Astarte, Artemis'. She gives just three names, but could have added many more such as Cynthia, Diana, Luna, Phoebe, Proserpina, and Selene.

Did Deutsch intend this rhythmical moving forward and backward to echo the cyclic nature of women's lives? After all, it was only men who went to the Moon, so it may be a gentle dig at that. In June 1963 the Soviets had sent just the one woman into space, Valentina Tereschkova, but the US sent none at all up to the 1969 Moon landing. And no woman ever landed on the Moon — only 12 men.

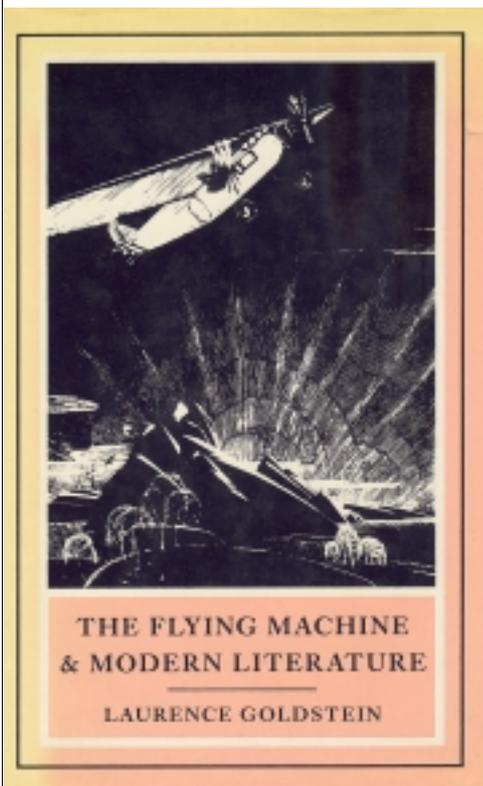
She continues the pattern of threes next, in the Moon being a danger 'to the thief in the garden, the pilot/In the enemy plane, to lovers embraced in your promise/of a shining security'. So the cycle moves from negative in the first three, positive in the second three, and negative in the third three. Three is the great spiritual number. It symbolises spiritual synthesis such as in the Christian Trinity; unity in diversity; creativity; the threesome of birth, zenith, and descent; etc.

Now, after this trilogy of triplets she asks her question, posing three possible answers, 'Are you a monster?/A noble being? Or simply a planet that men have,/almost casually, cheapened?' A three again. But her answer is only that 'The heavens do not answer'. Perhaps the heavens of previous ages no longer have any say in the matter.

There's an ancient story that, as Jesus was being crucified, at the moment when the veil in the Temple was torn into two a cry went around the world, 'Great Pan is Dead!' The name Pan was sometimes used before then for a universal God, and this cry was taken by Christians to mean that the birth of Christianity had brought about the death of Paganism. In mediaeval times Christians even pictured the Devil as Pan. But now that men have invaded the Moon, 'There is no lament for you', no lament such as 'Great Pan is Dead' for the Moon who, through this invasion, is now dead too. The Moon has been torn away from 'the mythologies, the old ones, our own'. The myths of the millennia that preceded the landing, and were so deeply embedded in us, are now no more.

However, she says, though the world is rejoicing in the landing, 'for a few, what has happened is the death of a divine/Person, is a betrayal, is a piece of/The cruelty that the Universe is witness to/while displaying its glories'. In the midst of watching this incredible act of humans putting foot on the surface of the Moon — and seeing the 'glories' of the Universe — is this cruel deicide, this killing of the ancient Goddesses of myth.

The word 'gentle' is ironic when she says, 'the gentle/Christ had killed him [Pan]'. It's echoed a little further by 'the death of a divine/Per-



son ... a *betrayal*' [my italics in all three]. That she gives 'Person' an initial capital connects 'Person' to 'Christ'. So she sees the three betrayals — of the Moon, of Pan, and of Christ — *all* as pieces 'of/the cruelty that the Universe feeds,/while displaying its glories'. Notice the three again: there's a trinity of deicides too.

Goldstein does say that this 'poem is an elegiac curse upon the astronauts for their act of deicide' (192), but I'd hardly go as far as calling it a 'curse'. Deutsch's word 'lament' is as far as she goes.

It's the same response to the Space Race as Stow's and Riddell's. It was a common response from many poets, especially after the landing.

Goldstein continues after his phrase, 'act of deicide':

From all accounts the negative response of poets to the moon landing took supporters of the space program by complete surprise. If there was one ally in the public they had counted on it was the visionary poets, who had generated for millennia the myths and texts which inspired engineers to construct machines that flew. Poetry and science had been joined in mutual wonder against drab bourgeois misgivings about spending priorities. Hardly a book exists about space travel that does not quote Tennyson's 'Ulysses' on the need to seek a newer world, 'To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths/Of all the western stars'. Or the conclusion of T. S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding': 'We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time'.

If poets once felt this way, why no longer? *The moonflight was deliberately designed as a sacred event, as the culminating modern type of 'magical flight' into the heavens. It was undertaken not principally as a source of practical benefits but as a symbolic expression of humanity's continuing quest for self-definition and spiritual renewal.* [My italics] (192)

In fact, there's an old Gaelic word for exactly the kind of voyage Goldstein describes as 'a sacred event' in the passage I've italicised. It's an 'immram'. The word means a 'wonder-voyage', that is, a journey from our real world into a spirit world, and back. Early examples of immrama are *The Voyage of St Brendan*,¹⁸ *The Adventure of Bran*, and *The Voyage of Mael Duin's Boat*. 'Immram' is not a word that Goldstein uses, although it'd have been most apt for what he says there.

However, his twelve-page discussion about poets' largely negative reaction to the Moon landing is well worth reading, though too much for me to summarise here. But for me, he doesn't go deep enough.

That's because for me an important point is that the Space Race wasn't only a conflict between Soviet cosmonaut and US astronaut to be first to step on the Moon. It also turned out to be an undeclared conflict between the technician and the poet for possession of one of humankind's most enduring and valuable archetypes: the Moon *herself*.

Throughout literary history what has the poet (indeed, the artist of any kind) been — especially the poet as seer? I think that **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** sums it up best at the end of his 1797 poem, '**Kubla Khan**'.

Could I revive within me,
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Bear Coleridge's image of the poet in mind while reading Goldstein's report of an incident that took place during the Moon landing:

On the morning of Armstrong's and Aldrin's descent to the lunar surface in their module, Mission Control reported to the astronauts:

An ancient legend says that a beautiful Chinese girl called Chango has been living there for four thousand years. It seems she was banished to the moon because she stole the pill of immortality from her husband. You might also look for her companion, a large Chinese rabbit, who is easy to spot since he is always standing on his hind feet in the shade of a cinnamon tree.

Michael Collins [the Commander] responded, 'Okay, we'll keep a close eye for the bunny girl.' What is this story, this bit of comic relief but an exorcism of myth itself? It treats parodically the traditional elements of lunar mythology, the beautiful moon maiden and the promise of immortality. The large rabbit reminds one of the theatrical Harvey;¹⁹ they occupy the same universe of blithe nonsense that Reason rolls back in its quest for

quantifiable data. The meaning of the exchange is: we have by this act outgrown the make-believe of our childhood; we declare our independence from archetypes. (196)

Coleridge's myth-making artist-poet-seer who 'on honey-dew hath fed,/And drunk the milk of Paradise' is far removed from the test pilot and astronaut Collins of *that* anecdote.

I don't mean to say that either one is superior to the other; I merely want to show the difference, and to suggest that the Moon landing threatened poets in a very fundamental way, so that most of them reacted to it badly.

To lament the diminishing of ancient myths and the banishing of old gods would not be a poetic failure, if the poets who did it *also* saw them in the nexus of this immensely greater and newer mythology to do with us humans stepping off our tiny, inward-looking planet and out into the vastnesses of our Universe for the very first time. Perhaps what was needed after the Moon landing was a new poet on a par with the Homer who turned a small intra-tribal Mycenaean stoush in western Turkey into *The Iliad* — a poet of the same stature who could turn the Space Race into a poem of a similar power. Why shouldn't our poets today get on with creating new mythologies instead of merely clinging to the old?

7

It's interesting that there was also an anthology of poems published immediately after another great twentieth century event similar to the Moon landing. This was the first non-stop solo crossing of the Atlantic Ocean by aeroplane, made by the US's Charles Lindbergh (1902–74) in May 1927, taking 33 and a half hours. His plane was named *Spirit of St Louis*. The event was greeted with incredible hysteria of the kind we might associate with the world's greatest rock stars in more recent decades.

This 1927 anthology, *The Spirit of St. Louis: One Hundred Poems*, resulted from a poetry competition. The 'Note by the Editor with the Awards' begins:

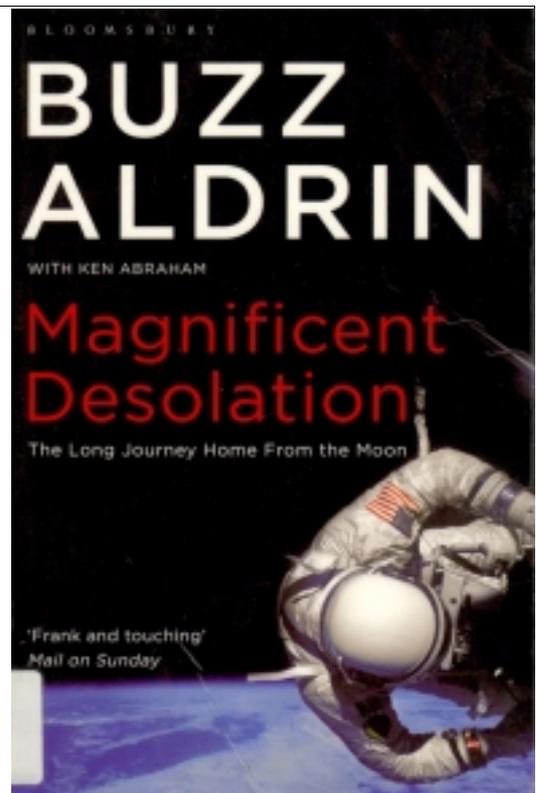
More than four thousand poems from more than three thousand contributors were received in the course of the Spirit of St. Louis competition. The poems came from all parts of the United States, and from Canada, France, England, Australia, Germany, Holland, Spain, Mexico, Switzerland and other countries. Even little Monaco was represented.²⁰

(Goldstein's Chapter 6 is titled 'Lindbergh in 1927: The Response of Poets to the Poem of Fact'.)

The competition's Third Award was given to '**The Flight**', which was by the same **Babette Deutsch** who wrote 'To the Moon, 1969'. 'The Flight' is 117 lines long, too much to quote here, but I'll quote the last sixth of it, its last two paragraphs.

Here is the thing
That in the stress of mortal life stands firm,
Setting the lion's valor in the worm,
Pouring upon this jungle world a splendor
Larger than sunset fires, and more tender,
Showing to the mean heart and cruel mind
Provinces undiscovered, rich beyond imagination,
Not to be defined.

Humbly, as he,
And with the same smiling austerity,
Let us too fly
Through the known danger and the perils chanced,
Guessing what salty roadsteads, what grim sky
Regard our struggle. So we shall have danced
Our dance with fate, the Masqued One,
And have trodden
The windy spaces that the eagles tread.
'Even the best are dead



Soon' ... But forever
Remembered virtue shines, and does not die. (85)

Now *that's* the poet in the traditional role of seer. Here there's not a single word of doubt about a flight that was 1927's equivalent of the flight to the Moon in 1969. But here the 'splendor [of the explorer is]/Larger than sunset fires', and shows 'to the mean heart and cruel mind/Provinces undiscovered, rich beyond imagination' that are so immense that they can't even be 'defined'. And she tells her readers 'Let us too fly/Through the known danger and the perils chanced' — that is, we must emulate Lindbergh's daring in our own lives and in the future.

What a difference to her saying in 1969 that the Moon may be 'simply a planet that men have, almost casually, cheapened', and to talk in terms of a 'lament', a 'betrayal', and a 'cruelty'.

Of course you have to accept that Deutsch was 32 years old when she wrote this, and 74 years old when she wrote 'To the Moon, 1969'. And of course you have to accept that 1927 was a very different year from 1969. 1927 was before the Great Depression, and after what was still called 'The War to End Wars', when the Second World War, which made a mockery of that name, wasn't even on the horizon. This was the Jazz Age, the name of the period from the end of the First World War in 1918 to the Stock Exchange Crash that began the Great Depression in 1929. These were 'The Roaring Twenties'.

But despite that, I think you still need to wonder at the huge change from the ecstatic reception so many poets gave to the Atlantic crossing, to the generally negative reception they gave to the Moon landing.

8

The next poem I want to look at in detail is '**Moon Landing**' by the Anglo-American poet **W. H. Auden** (1907–73). It was first published in September 1969.²¹

Moon Landing

It's natural the Boys should whoop it up for
so huge a phallic triumph, an adventure
it would not have occurred to women
to think worth while, made possible only

because we like huddling in gangs and knowing
the exact time: yes, our sex may in fairness
hurrah the deed, although the motives
that primed it were somewhat less than *menschlich*.

A grand gesture. But what does it period?
What does it osse? We were always adroit
with objects than lives and more facile
at courage than kindness: from the moment

the first flint was flaked, this landing was merely
a matter of time. But our selves, like Adam's,
still don't fit us exactly, modern
only in this — our lack of decorum.

Homer's heroes were certainly no braver
than our Trio, but more fortunate: Hector
was excused the insult of having
his valor covered by television.

Worth *going* to see? I can well believe it.
Worth *seeing*? Mneh! I once rode through a desert
and was not charmed: give me a watered
lively garden, remote from blatherers

about the New, the von Brauns and their ilk, where
on August mornings I can count the morning
glories, where to die had a meaning,
and no engine can shift my perspective.

Unsmudged, thank God, my Moon still queens the heavens
as she ebbs and fulls, a Presence to glop at,

Her Old Man, made of grit not protein,
still visits my Austrian several

with His old detachment, and the old warnings
still have power to scare me: Hybris comes to
an ugly finish, Irreverence
is a greater oaf than Superstition.

Our apparatniks will continue making
the usual squalid mess called History:
all we can pray for is that artists,
chefs and saints may still appear to blithe it.

Some of those words may be unfamiliar to you: ‘menschlich’ (German), ‘human/humane’; ‘osse’ (late Middle English, now dialect), ‘prophesy’; ‘mneh’, ‘whatever’, usually with a shrug of indifference; ‘glop’ (Middle English, now dialect), ‘be startled/frightened/astounded’; ‘Hybris’ (original Greek spelling of ‘hubris’) — in ancient Greek tragedy it means ‘defiance of the Gods’, which has to be its meaning here, since Auden capitalises it and uses the Classic Greek spelling; ‘apparatnik’: ‘apparatchik’ was a Communist Party official in the Soviet Union, hence what we’d call a ‘bureaucrat’ — the suffix ‘-nik’ became popular in the West after Sputnik, as also in ‘beatnik’, ‘refusenik’, etc.

Wernher von Braun (1912–77) was the German rocket pioneer who designed and perfected the V2 rocket for the Nazis during the Second World War. Afterwards he was one of the chief architects of the US space program, in particular the Saturn rocket he and his team began planning as early as 1959, and that launched the Apollo missions to the Moon. ‘Austrian’ refers to Auden’s much-loved summer home in Kirchstetten, Austria, that he owned and used regularly from 1957 until his death in 1973.²²

Auden treats the Moon landing scornfully.

He has a shot at the US allowing only men to be astronauts: notice ‘Boys’ gets a capital and refers to children, but ‘women’ doesn’t get one and refers to adults. His ‘huddling in gangs’ and obsession with measurement, i.e., with technology (‘knowing/the exact time’), led men to be less than human, less than humane. So he seems to be saying that women are more likely to be human and humane than men.

The Moon landing is ‘A grand gesture. But what does it period?/What does it osse?’ Which asks what is it both the end of, and the beginning of? That is, does it have a meaningful place in the long march of civilisation, or is it merely a slip-up, an accident that shouldn’t have occurred, a bypath that shouldn’t have been taken? He uses the Middle English words ‘osse’, and later ‘glop’, to emphasise the long and interconnected passage of time that he thinks the Moon landing is no more than an irrelevant oddity in.

Because of men’s obsession with ‘objects’ rather than with ‘lives’, from the moment men made the first tool (‘the first flint was flaked’) landing on the Moon was inevitable, though they never had an equal passion to understand their *selves*, and have made no advance on the first man’s — Adam’s — understanding of *himself*.

(What he says about tools is now outdated, in that in recent times we’ve become aware that the first tools of all may have been made by women and not men, tools that the mostly male scholars long ignored: hair string, and woven baskets.)

He even has a shot at the worldwide televising of the landing, saying how lucky Homer’s heroes were not to be filmed. He means that TV removes the mystery and the romance and the art of events, such as the Trojan War as it’s described in *The Iliad*. If the Trojan War had been filmed for the nightly TV News, how much would that have belittled it?

His shrug of indifference, ‘Mneh!’, marks the start of the second part of the poem. He turns away from both the desert-like landscape of the Moon and the ‘blatherers/about the New, the von Brauns and their ilk’, to his Austrian garden instead. Every time I read him here I can’t help but reflect how Voltaire’s Pangloss says to Candide at the end of *Candide, or the Optimist*,²³

‘There is a concatenation of all events in the best of possible worlds; for, in short, had you not been kicked out of a fine castle by the backside for the love of Miss Cunegund, had you not been put into the Inquisition, had you not travelled over America on foot, had you not run the Baron through the body, and had you not lost all your sheep which you brought from the good country of El Dorado, you would not have been here to eat preserved citrons and pistachio-nuts.’

‘Excellently observed,’ answered Candide; ‘but let us take care of our garden.’

Auden too, turns away *from* the Moon landing *to* his Austrian garden, and counts not ‘the exact time’ of the astronauts but ‘the morning/glories’ instead; turns *to* his garden where ‘to die [like Hector at Troy] has a meaning’, and ‘no engine [like the Saturn rocket that launched Apollo to the Moon] can shift my perspective [from this old Earth out into space]’.

He thanks God that his Moon ‘still queens the heavens/as she ebbs and fulls, a Presence to glop at’; the Man in the Moon still appears to him; and ancient ‘warnings [made by Gods]/still have power to scare’ him. Defying the

Gods will still bring one to an 'ugly finish' — being irreverent is even worse than being superstitious.

His third and final part of the poem, the last stanza, generalises perhaps with too little warrant from what's gone before — the poem may have been better without it. He says how our bureaucrats will continue as they always have to make 'the usual squalid mess' of things, and our only hope, the only defence against them that we have, is to pray that there will continue to be 'artists,/chefs and saints' to light up our lives, to fill them with joy. Perhaps he wants to include the Moon landing in that 'squalid mess'; and certainly his list of artists, chefs, and saints excludes the technicians — the scientists and engineers and astronauts, that is — responsible for taking humankind to the Moon.

9

You'll find this strange reversal of roles between poet and technician in many of the poems written about the Space Race, as opposed to the utterances and the writings of the astronauts and other technicians involved in it.

Fitzgerald's unquestioningly forward-looking 'I regret I shall not be around/to stand on Mars', from before the Space Race, has changed. Early in the Race it's become Stow's 'wither within to your [the Moon's] likeness' where 'I shall open my heart, knowing nothing can come in', and Riddell's 'falling out of love, a wisp of grief/Identifiable pain, unease, regret'. And by the time of the Moon landing itself at the end of the Race, it's become Deutsch's 'death of a divine/Person, ... a betrayal, ... a piece of/The cruelty that the Universe is witness to'. And there are poets such as Auden who, like *Candide*, turn their backs on the drive into space altogether, to cultivate their gardens instead.

So now it's no longer the poet in his role of visionary, of prophet, who leads humankind into the future. It's no longer Coleridge's poet of the 'flashing eyes' and 'floating hair'; no longer one who leads the poet's listener or reader to 'Weave a circle round him thrice,/And close your eyes with holy dread,/For he on honey-dew hath fed,/And drunk the milk of Paradise'. I'm talking about visionary poets in their role as commentators on the Space Race — as I said before, there are many other roles for poets, and many other kinds of poems than the ones I'm quoting.

And so the Space Race led to the technicians — the scientists, the engineers, and the astronauts (who've so often been scientists and engineers themselves) — becoming the visionaries, the prophets, the seers, in place of the poets. It's the astronaut Buzz Aldrin, who landed on the Moon with Armstrong, who said, 'I believe mankind must explore or expire.'²⁴ And the planetary scientist William Hartmann who said, 'either civilization will collapse, or humans will reach Mars.'²⁵ And the physicist and TV science presenter Brian Cox who only recently said, 'It won't turn out well for us if we sit here on Earth and don't bother with space.'²⁶

Those are the kind of things that *poets* would have said before the Space Race, but subsequently handed over to the *technicians* to say. Yet how ironic it is that the technician Aldrin himself writes as late as 2009:

Reflecting metaphysically [when on the Moon] was contrary to our mission. We weren't trained to smell the roses or to utter life-changing aphorisms. Emoting or spontaneously offering profundities was not part of my psychological makeup anyhow. That's why for years I have wanted NASA to fly a poet, a singer, or a journalist into space — someone who could capture the emotions of the experience and share them with the world. Neil and I were both military guys, pilots who were accustomed to keeping our feelings reined in.²⁷

He knew how much poets were needed to provide the words for such an extraordinary event. But the poets themselves turned out to be unable—or at the least unwilling—to do just that.

10

Auden's 'from the moment/the first flint was flaked, this landing was merely/a matter of time' belittles what I feel is the most astounding thing about our entire human story.

The early humans in themselves weren't very strong or very fast or possessors of great stamina compared with many of the other animals they lived among, and that preyed upon them too. But the three things they did have that far more than made up for their weaknesses, were the ability to reason sequentially, imagination, and the hand with four fingers and thumbs that could oppose each finger precisely — in itself an incredibly potent tool. Indeed, I'm certain you can say that the human hand is the greatest biological tool of any life form on Earth.

The hand was essential to the other two: without it they could *do* nothing at all. The hand made it possible for reason and imagination to flourish amazingly. I've read that dolphins possess reason and imagination, but if you ask, 'Where are their cities?', the answer is another question, 'Where are their hands?'

You must consider that long, long ago humans, who otherwise had only their arms and hands to hold out in defence, picked up and held sticks in front of them instead, to keep predators further at bay. And instead of clenching their fists to strike at those predators, picked up stones to hurl at them. In other words those humans had the imagination to extend their arms, and to empower their fists *with tools*.

Then consider the millennia-long development of such tools until those same humans could build a tool to take themselves up into the air off the planet Earth, out into the vacuum of space itself, taking along with them 385,000 km away and 385,000 km back, the very air and food and water and temperature that they couldn't live without, landing on the airless Moon, and walking and marvelling and leaping and joking on its surface.

The Saturn rocket alone that boosted *Apollo* into space was 111 metres high, and when loaded weighed eight million kg. The tiny Command Module alone contained over two million parts and had 566 cockpit switches. What incredible

tools *they* therefore were! And who can ever forget the immense spectacle of the fiery and thunderous launch itself from Cape Canaveral? How staggering it is to consider the distance between the tools that picking up a stick or a rock represent, and the spaceship that flew to the Moon and back. And how staggering it is to consider the entirety of no more than the imagination and reasoning behind every single part and purpose involved in it all.

How can any poet dismiss all of that as ‘merely/a matter of time’, as Auden does? Certainly you can’t fault his comment as applied to the *inevitability* of the onward progress of toolmaking and tools. But I think you *are* fully justified in expecting a far more visionary poetry than that.

11

Last I want to look at just one of the many Space Race poems that attacked it and in particular attacked the Moon landing itself as a waste of both money and industry, that poets thought should have been better put to other uses. I remember seeing an overall figure of \$US29 billion for the cost of working up to, and then landing Armstrong and Aldrin on the Moon, and that the number of people involved in the project was more than 400,000. Many of the poets of the Space Race wished all that money and effort had been put into solving problems here on Earth, such as feeding the World’s starving people, and eliminating suffering around the World. (One estimate I’ve seen of the cost of putting humans on Mars is a staggering \$US400 billion.)

The English poet **John Moat** (1926–2014)²⁸ wrote this poem, in 1969. It’s an exemplar of many other poems about the same theme.

Overture I

In whose name — the nun standing there,
Deflowered and smiling, handless Lavinia,
The hand that fed gnawed clean by friendly teeth;
That sweet smell savouring the air
Of mustard and burning children; that calf
White-eyed, white flesh on tottering knees;
That rain that strips off all the leaves;
That crate of drillings, that sack of human hair;
That nigger thrown from a moving car,
His bleeding testicles between his teeth;
That twelve years’ Jane pacing outside the bar,
Offering anything for her weekly share
Of tea; those rats now grown immune to death —
I ask you, in whose name and by what power
Have you set out to colonize the stars?

It’s a single sentence. And it begins by asking ‘In whose name’. Then between the em rules it lists eight typical abuses happening at that time around the world including in the US, to both people and to the environment. It ends by completing that opening question which has now been made ironic by that list: ‘in whose name and by what power/ Have you set out to colonize the stars?’

The Vietnam War (1954–75) was in progress at the time of the Moon landing, and I think several of the incidents in the poem occurred in that war, in particular the tortured nuns and burning children, if I’m remembering right. The nun is seen as similar to the Lavinia in Shakespeare’s 1594 Roman play, *Titus Andronicus*, in which she’s raped and then has her hands cut off and tongue cut out so there’s no way she can say who raped her. I think the burning children refers to the use of napalm bombing in Vietnam, though mustard gas used in war is not the same as napalm. Those of us old enough will probably think of Nic Ut’s photograph,²⁹ which encapsulated that war so much, of the nine-year-old girl Kim Phuc burned naked by napalm and running screaming down the road from her South Vietnamese village Trang Bang. But that happened on 8 June 1972, three years after Moat’s poem.

The ‘rain that strips off all the leaves’ may refer to the use of Agent Orange, sprayed from planes between 1961 and 1971 to defoliate trees over large areas of Vietnam to make the Vietcong and North Vietnamese enemies easier to spot, and also to destroy the crops that could feed them. Or it may be the acid rain caused by burning fossil fuels on an industrial scale since the nineteenth century. ‘That crate of drillings, that sack of human hair’ may be the gold from teeth and shaven hair taken from Second World War Concentration Camp victims by the Nazis. And the ‘nigger thrown from a moving car’ refers to the terrible crimes in the US against Afro-Americans still taking place even then — the battle for desegregation was still at a height.

However, it’s not essential to identify Moat’s eight examples in order to understand the poem. They’re all of appalling suffering inflicted upon humans, and damage inflicted upon the environment typical of the whole world. And his question is why we should put all that money and effort into exploring space — landing on the Moon being up to then the most significant symbol for that — rather than into alleviating human suffering and saving the Earth’s environment.

The question can’t be faulted, but in one way it’s unfair because it’s so selective. Landing on the Moon, and going

even further 'to colonize the stars' can be replaced by so many alternatives. You can just as easily point to, say, lavishly staging the Olympic Games every fourth year, or to the World Cup Football; or to how most people in First World countries eat far more than twice as much as they actually need, food that, if distributed more evenly around Third World countries, would probably eliminate starvation in them; or to the huge expense and labour that goes into making films for entertainment.

All the poems that savage the Space Race in general, and the Moon landing in particular, easily arouse First World democratic readers' indignation at the misdirection of so much money and effort. But that same indignation isn't aroused nearly as easily if the same poets savage instead the very same readers' extravagant living standards — their expensive motor cars, wardrobes full of clothing, lavish houses, air-conditioning, TV and films, etc, as examples of that same misdirection. Landing on the Moon doesn't affect people personally. Those other things that I list do. The Moon landing is far easier for poets to attack.

Moat's question is an example of what I call the 'Democracy Paradox'. Fundamentally, democracy puts government into the hands of every adult person in democratic countries. But individuals in such countries almost all claim endlessly that each one of them, despite having the same vote as everyone else, can't possibly change anything much at all. But that misses the whole point of democracy, that each person must all life long act — and vote — as if it's always of vital importance, as if the very fate of the country depends on him or her alone. *Each one of us* is Prime Minister, or Premier, or President, not just a single supposedly helpless woman or man.

The Democracy Paradox is that the same people who eschew their individual responsibility for their country's government also demand the maximum individual share in everything that their government offers. 'I'm not responsible' on the one hand, but 'Gimme' on the other.

However, I should add that *this* poet John Moat wasn't like that. He 'and [his wife] Antoinette, who had a wide circle of friends, channelled their resources into causes in which they believed, sometimes leaving themselves short in the process'.³⁰

The correct answer to Moat's question, 'In whose name' did these men land on the Moon is therefore, 'In *my* name' — at least in democratic countries. And it's the correct answer to all the other poets of the Space Race who asked the same or similar question in similar countries. This is not to say that the question is wrong; it's just to put it into its proper perspective.³¹

12

I find it remarkable that so many of those who wrote poems about the Space Race, and in particular about the Moon landing, abdicated from their millennia-long role as seers. It's as if the journey to the Moon and back, the reality of the Moon, and even space itself, turned out to be too big for them to handle. None of the poems that I've read about humans going out into space goes anywhere near rising up to the level of the events it commemorates. None deals with them using the spiritual power of an immram. Yet surely such tremendous events demand words with the grandeur of an epic poem, even if only in poetry as short as a lyric or an ode.

But where *is* the poem about the Moon landing so great, so visionary, that all people know it, probably by heart; recall it every time they think about the landing; and quote from it without even looking it up?

It's significant that a poem popular with astronauts themselves was not composed during or after the Space Race, but a couple of decades earlier. It was written in 1941 during the Second World War by the US poet **John Gillespie Magee Jr.** He was a Spitfire pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force, based in England.³¹

High Flight

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air ...

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or ever eagle flew —
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Michael Collins, the Commander of *Apollo 11* for the first Moon landing, carried a copy of this poem on his July 1966 *Gemini 10* space flight, and quoted it in his 1974 autobiography, *Carrying the Fire: An Astronaut's Journeys*. And the US President Ronald Reagan quoted from it in his address to the nation after the *Challenger* disaster of 28 January

1986. Those a just two examples of its use.

I quoted Goldstein above: 'Hardly a book exists about space travel that does not quote **Alfred, Lord Tennyson's** poem "**Ulysses**" on the need to seek a newer world'. In Tennyson's 1833 poem Ulysses says to his crew,

Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

So why is it that when we need to quote something magnificent about venturing out into space, we need to go all the way back to 1833 to find a poem that's equal to the task? It's illuminating that the most-quoted words about the Moon landing today are not the words of a poet of then or since, but the words of the astronaut and engineer Neil Armstrong as he took the first human step on the Moon, 'That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind'.

Why did the poets miss out so hugely? Was it that they were too overwhelmed by one of the greatest events, if not *the* greatest, in human history?

Notes

- ¹ Translated by Edwin A. Cranston, in Carol Ann Duffy (ed), *To the Moon: An Anthology of Lunar Poems* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 11.
- ² For information about space exploration I used the volume *Outbound* in the Time-Life Series *Voyage Through the Universe* (Amsterdam: Time-Life Books, 1990), and Andrew Chaikin, *Space* (London: Carlton Books, 2002), together with *Wikipedia* and a few other Internet sources. I found that *all* of these differed from each other in some details. I'd be delighted if anyone can correct me, and also source references I've had to make from no more than my antiquated and therefore now unreliable memory.
- ³ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre: The Anatomy of Horror* (London: Futura, 1991), pp. 15–22.
- ⁴ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York: Walker & Co, 2010), pp. xviii, and 37. Estimates of the number of people killed during those four years are in chapter 37, 'The Final Tally', pp. 324–34. They range between 23 and 55 million, and tend towards the higher figure.
- ⁵ Jack Tresidder, *Dictionary of Symbols: An Illustrated Guide to Traditional Images, Icons and Emblems* (London: Duncan Baird, 1999), p. 136. He has six times more material than I've quoted. Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols Traditionales* (Barcelona, 1958), translated by Jack Sage from the Spanish *Diccionario de Simbolos Traditionales* (Barcelona, 1958), has four dense pages about the Moon's many symbolisms, pp. 204–7.
- ⁶ A delicious essay about how misguided and foolish modern First World human attitudes to Nature are, is Aldous Huxley's 'Wordsworth in the Tropics', in his book, *Do What You Will* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929), pp. 113–29.
- ⁷ *The Bulletin* (Sydney: 1880–2008), 7 April 1954, p. 2. Subsequently published with six small changes in Robert D. Fitzgerald, *Southmost Twelve* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962), pp. 58–9.
- ⁸ First published in *Poetry and Audience* (Leeds, UK: School of English, Leeds University, 1953–present), 11 May 1962. First published in Australia as one of six poems by Stow titled 'Endymion and Other Poems', illustrated by Sidney Nolan, Number 9 in the series 'Australian Poets and Artists', in *Australian Letters: A Quarterly of Writing and Criticism* (Adelaide: Mary Martin Bookshop, 1957–68), Vol. 5 No 2, December, 1962, p. 6. The series was published separately in 14 booklets between 1960 and 1972 as *Australian Artists and Poets*, the Stow–Nolan booklet being Number 9 (Adelaide: *Australian Letters*, 1963).
- ⁹ John Kinsella, *The Land's Meaning: New Selected Poems: Randolph Stow* (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2012). It contains 71 of his poems, a very small oeuvre, you might say. But as Kinsella says, '[His] slim body of poetry weighs more than most oeuvres many times its size.' p. 9. Suzanne Falkiner says that Stow had around 147 poems published altogether.
- ¹⁰ Date of composition courtesy Suzanne Falkiner. Stow often wrote poems but held them back for long periods before having them published, and at other times didn't even send a poem off for publication until someone asked him for one.

- ¹¹ ‘The Land’s Meaning’, first published in Randolph Stow, *Outrider* (London: Macdonald & Co, 1962), pp. 20–1. Kinsella, op. cit., pp. 96–7.
- ¹² First published in *Poetry Australia* (Sydney: South Head Press, 1964–92) No 12, October 1966, pp. 7–10. Kinsella, op. cit., pp. 143–8. The reference to ‘Tourmaline’ is to Stow’s 1963 post-apocalyptic novel, *Tourmaline*. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu’s 6th century BCE *Tao Te Ching* is the Chinese poem in 81 chapters describing the nature of mystical experience, and how to live according to it. Stow’s *Tourmaline* contrasts its teachings to Christian teachings of the more fundamentalist kind in particular.
- ¹³ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1975). Stow spoke of reading it in a May 1981 interview with Bruce Bennett, so he’d have known that first edition — Anthony J. Hassall (ed.), *Randolph Stow: Visitants, Episodes from Other Novels, Poems, Stories, Interviews, and Essays* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990), p. 374.
- ¹⁴ Capra, op. cit., third edition updated of 1991, p. 130.
- ¹⁵ *The Bulletin* (Sydney: 1880–2008), 25 November 1959, p. 2. Elizabeth Riddell, *Selected Poems* (Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1992), p. 55. I’ve used the final version, which adds commas at the ends of lines 1 and 11.
- ¹⁶ Laurence Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
- ¹⁷ First published in *The New York Times*, 21 July 1969, p. 17. Also published in Robert Vas Dias (ed), *New Poems of the Space Age: An Anthology* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1970), pp. 61–2. I’ve used the words and setting from *The New York Times*; in Vas Dias’s collection ‘the Universe feeds,’ is altered to ‘the Universe is witness to’.
- ¹⁸ You can find *The Voyage of St Brendan* in J.F. Webb (tr.), *Lives of the Saints* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965). Brendan was a fifth–sixth-century Irish saint who, legend says, sailed a coracle to America nearly a thousand years before Columbus. The oldest version of his seven-year-long immram is from the eleventh century.
- ¹⁹ Harvey is the invisible six-foot high rabbit in Mary Chase’s 1944 stage comedy, *Harvey*; also filmed as *Harvey* in 1950 with James Stewart playing the drunkard, Elwood P. Dowd.
- ²⁰ Charles Vale [pseudonym of Arthur Hooley] (ed.), *The Spirit of St. Louis: One Hundred Poems* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), p. iii. Not to be confused with Charles Lindbergh’s own book, *The Spirit of St. Louis* (New York: Scribner’s, 1953). Deutsch’s poem is in Vale, pp. 81–5. I checked the names of the hundred poets whose work was selected against the names in the Index to Joy Hooton and Harry Heseltine, *Annals of Australian Literature* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 1992), but found none of them there. So perhaps no Australian poem was selected.
- ²¹ First published in the *New Yorker*, 6 September 1969, p. 38. Also published in Robert Vas Dias, op. cit., pp. 21–2. It’s set out here as in Vas Dias, with the third and fourth lines of each stanza indented. But Duffy, op. cit., pp. 127–8, sets it out without the indents.
- ²² Kirchstetten, in Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), pp. 387, 450.
- ²³ Voltaire (1694–1778), *Candide; or, The Optimist* (1759), translated by Tobias Smollett (1761–65), chapter 30.
- ²⁴ Buzz Aldrin with Ken Abraham, *Magnificent Desolation: The Long Journey Home from the Moon* (New York: Harmony Books, 2009), end chapter 22. In the UK edition, p. 312.
- ²⁵ William K. Hartmann, *A Traveller’s Guide to Mars: The Mysterious Landscapes of the Red Planet* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2003), p. 434.
- ²⁶ Brian Cox, quoted by Ellie Zolfagharifard, ‘Life, Love and the Universe’, *Sunday Mail* (Adelaide), 5 October 2014, p. 22.
- ²⁷ Aldrin, op. cit., pp. 37–8. In the film of Carl Sagan’s 1985 SF novel *Contact*, when Ellie Arroway reaches her destination in the Vega system and is dazzled by the spectacular view, she says, ‘They should have sent a poet.’
- ²⁸ I think it was first published in his friend John Fairfax’s (selected and introduced) *Frontier of Going: An Anthology of Space Poetry* (St Albans, UK: Granada Panther, 1969), p. 58. But I’ve not been able to verify this. Fairfax’s collection did come out in the few months after the Moon landing, so it’s likely.
- ²⁹ Nick Ut is Huynh Cong Ut (1951–), a Vietnamese photographer. The photo, titled *The Terror of War*, was almost not published because of the girl’s full-frontal nudity. The then US President Richard Nixon questioned its veracity. It won Ut the 1973 Pulitzer for Spot News Photography. Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the burned girl in the photo, is now a Canadian citizen.
- ³⁰ ‘John Moat-Obituary’, *Telegraph* (UK), 11 October 2014.
- ³¹ It’s irrelevant to the above arguments, but in fact it’s been estimated that each dollar spent on the Apollo Moon missions returned \$14. So the Apollo missions were therefore more profitable than most businesses have been.
- ³² He joined up before the US entered the war. On 3 September 1941 he flew to 33,000 feet on a high-altitude test-flight in the new Model V Spitfire. After it, he sent the poem to his parents, writing, ‘I am enclosing a verse I wrote the other day. It started at 30,000 feet, and was finished soon after I landed.’ He died in a mid-air collision a few months later. Versions of the poem vary, particularly in punctuation. The one I quote is from <http://www.skygod.com/quotes/highflight.html> and is claimed to be accurately copied from the handwritten original.

— Ray Sinclair-Wood, 2013

Michael Bishop received a Nebula Award nomination in 1916 for his novelette 'Rattlesnakes and Men'. His illustrated young person's book **Joel-Brock the Brave and the Valorous Smalls**, was published in June.

Michael Bishop

Scalehunter: Lucius Shepard and the Dragon Griaule Sequence

Discussed:

The Dragon Griaule. Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2012, \$45 hc; 431 pp.

Beautiful Blood: A Novel of the Dragon Griaule. Burton, MI: Subterranean Press; \$40 hc; 291 pp.

First published:

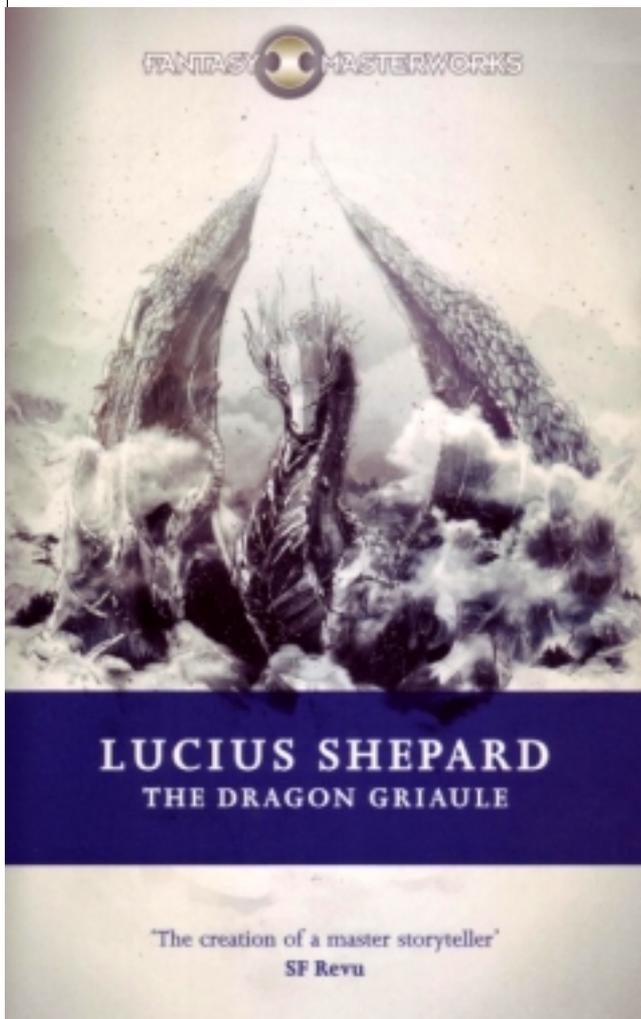
New York Review of Science Fiction 315,
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A question of scale?

Nearly thirty years ago, I was pleased to introduce Lucius Shepard's debut collection of his mature short fiction, *The Jaguar Hunter* (Arkham House, 1987, pp. ix–xii). At that early point in his career, he required little or no introduction to savvy enthusiasts of fantasy and science fiction. He had already garnered a host of nominations for Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards, and in 1985 he had collected a John W. Campbell Award as the field's Best New Writer.

What could I say about Lucius Shepard that others had not already said? His first novel, *Green Eyes* (1984) bore this front-cover prediction by writer and critic Damon Knight: 'Right now ... I believe I am one of about twelve people who know how good Lucius Shepard really is; tomorrow there will be thousands.' So I wrote that Shepard had a strong grounding in the English classics and a varied history of travel and work experience that lifted him well above novice status. I also wrote that he had already 'shown signs of outright mastery that both humble and enormously cheer all of us who believe in the power of imaginative fiction to speak to the human heart.'

Late in my introduction, I confessed, 'My own favorite . . . is "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule" — a story that, in the indirect way of a parable, implies a great deal about love and creativity.' Back then, of course, no one knew that Shepard would ever jump from my misnamed 'parable' into a work of the scale of both *The Dragon Griaule*, a collection of a half dozen long stories, and his posthumous novel *Beautiful Blood*, which together constitute his own monumental *Moby-Dick*, even if his saga necessarily has an episodic quality lacking in Melville's epic fish tale.¹



I. *The Dragon Griaule*

A. 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule'

Why did I like 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule' so much? Initially, it put me in mind of works by both Gabriel García Márquez and, less plausibly, Jorge Luís Borges. Shepard's tale is far shorter than the former's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, of course, and far longer than any of the latter's essay-like *ficciones* (e.g., 'The Circular Ruins', 'The Lottery of Babylon', 'The Library of Babel', etc). But it offers a flavourful Latin American backdrop akin to that in García Márquez's novel and suggested Borges to me by excerpting passages from several books of Shepard's own invention. (However, excerpting fictional works was something more typical of Frank Herbert in his *Dune* novels than of Borges, who did *allude* to imaginary books.) But I also liked Shepard's story's promise of heroic world building, and plotting, implicit in the Brobdingnagian dragon Griaule — 'that mile-long beast paralyzed millennia before by a wizard's spell, beneath and about which the town of Teocinte had accumulated' (*BB*, 11).

Also interesting was the fact that, despite his grand ambitions, Shepard declined to jettison from his toolkit standard genre tropes. *Green Eyes* deals with zombies, and later, in *The Golden* (1993), he tackled vampirism, but did so by borrowing his novel's setting from the etchings in Giambattista Piranesi's famous series of plates, *Carceri d'invenzione* (c. 1745; 2nd edn 1760; 'Imaginary Prisons'). Clearly, for Shepard, the quality of a story depended less on its category tropes than on the seriousness and originality with which he used them. If zombies, then why not a dragon?

In his story notes for 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule,' all original to *The Dragon Griaule*, Shepard admits that at the Clarion Writers Workshop at Michigan State University, stuck for a story idea, he scribbled in his notebook: 'fucking big dragon' . . . because 'Big stuff . . . is cool' (*TDG*, 423). Had anyone told him that this 'idea' was akin

to a ten-year-old's fascination with Godzilla and action-flick explosions, Shepard might well have grinned and invited that person to self-pollinate. So to speak.

But in the same story note, he also informs us, 'Generally speaking, I hate wizards, halflings, and dragons with equal intensity.'² But if ever he could justify using a category trope, he slid it into the pot. In this case, he persuaded himself that his 'immense paralyzed dragon', overmastering 'the world around [it] by means of its mental energies', qualified as 'an appropriate metaphor for the Reagan Administration', which, in the early 1980s, he saw as 'laying waste to [his beloved] Central America' (*TDG*, 423).

Or, at least, Shepard later *asserted* that he did. Tellingly, however, Reagan had not yet become president when he claims he conceived the tale and presumably its metaphorical underpinnings. Or maybe those underpinnings came to him after Reagan was inaugurated, for 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule' did not appear in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* until December 1984. Or, to speculate further, maybe it was not until he began writing 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter' (ca. 1986) that this metaphor took shape in his mind. Or until 'The Father of Stones' (ca. 1987) . . . Or until . . .

Purportedly, though, this take on *The Dragon Griaule* tales provided an extra-literary motive for writing these six stories and *Beautiful Blood*, but readers today will likely miss this subtext or else engage with Shepard's saga because his writing seems to transport them to a romantic alternate world that gains force through its steady accretion of real-world details. Further, the scale of his eponymous beast, not to mention that of his whole outsized fictive enterprise, demands a commitment to surface events that allows its self-alleged metaphorical content to crawl into a cave and hide — if not *just like* the dragon Griaule, then definitely *sort of* like it. Still, Shepard's subtext probably holds as little meaning for readers today as do the historical events underlying the satire in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, which most of us enjoy for its astonishing surface story.

In *The Dragon Griaule's* opening tale, Meric Cattamay arrives in Teocinte to propose painting the dragon with colors tainted by poisons that, over time, will slay it. The town has offered a fortune to anyone who achieves this feat, but the city fathers deny Meric either a go-ahead or the resources to do the job. After all, he's just told them that his method could take fifty years. *So what?* Meric scolds. They've waited centuries for a paladin to deal Griaule a fatal *snicker-snack*, whereas *his* plan's beauty inheres in its use of local plants, pigments, and labour to fulfil its goal. The council appoints Jarcke, the female mayor of Hangtown (a shanty village on the dragon's back), to guide Meric to the creature, where he beholds the 'glowing humour' in its monstrous eye in a long but evocative paragraph that may explain why Jarcke bothers to live in Hangtown at all (*TDG*, 19).

After Teocinte's city council approves Meric's proposal and the town begins its epic effort to paint Griaule, the story focuses on a doomed love affair between Meric and Lise Claverie, wife of Pardiel, the foreman of a paint crew who nearly kills Meric. But leap ahead four decades: now in his seventies, Meric must keep a haughty new mayor from proposing a 'temporary work stoppage'. This man believes that Teocinte's bully-boy army has made it a regional power and that Griaule's poisoning has now become a moot point. Meric protests, 'But all your rapes and slaughters are Griaule's expressions. His will' (31).

Later, Meric meets a young woman perched on a tier just beneath Griaule's eye. She reminds him of Lise, as most

1 Shepard's 'The Glassblower's Dragon', one of his tautest and most lyrical stories, has no clear link to the Griaule Sequence, but it repays seeking out and reading; go to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (April 1987) or to *Nebula Awards 23* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989).

2 Bob Kruger, a friend of mine as well of Lucius Shepard's, tells me in an email dated 28 October 2014, that 'Lucius' claim to despise hobbits, et al., was characteristically disingenuous. He admitted to me that he loved *The Lord of the Rings* so much that he went in search of another book with 'lord' in the title and hit on *Lord Jim*. I think Tolkien and Conrad were his two biggest influences.'

A day later, Bob sent this addendum: 'There's a tad more to it, actually. What Lucius really said was [that] he read the book "as a kid". Given what we know about his age, that's very unlikely. *The Return of the King* didn't come out until 1955 in the UK, at which time Lucius would have been twelve, but almost no one in the US knew about the series until the Ace edition came out a decade later' (29 October 2014).

women do, and explains that she remembers having once been intimate with him under Griaule's wing. Ever since, she has been 'a little in love' with him. Then she stands and declares, 'He's dead', meaning the dragon, an ending much too abrupt. Shepard, sensing its abruptness, ends his story by quoting from an invented book, *The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule*, by one Louis Dardano, an excerpt that throws into doubt the narrative preceding it by leaching Meric's whole dragon-painting enterprise of its dignity and meaning (31–8).

Or does it?

B. 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter'

The volume's second tale, 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', limns the early history of Catherine, only child of a widowed scalehunter named Riall. Riall has forced her to sleep every night on a large patch of golden scale — to inoculate her against Griaule's wrath by inducing some of its baleful essence to 'seep into her' (40). The girl's beauty and self-confidence generate in her 'a certain egocentricity and shallowness of character' (41), and she earns a reputation that prompts a man from Hangtown to essay rape. Catherine seizes a scaling hook and kills this attacker.

Brianne, a quasi-friend from Hangtown, a former rival for another man's affections, happens upon Catherine and tells her to stay put while she summons Teocinte's mayor to conduct an exculpatory investigation of the scene. Instead, Brianne tells the brothers of the foiled rapist what Catherine has done, and Catherine, seeing the brothers approach, retreats into the dragon's mouth.

Later, deeper into its gullet, she finds a protector in Captain Amos Mauldry, an odd old man who annoyingly tells her, 'We are every one of us creatures of [Griaule's] thoughts' (51). He claims to have expected her and to know in advance, via the dragon's occult mental powers, what she will think, say, and do, so that he, Mauldry, may function as her guide and confidant (52). To Catherine's revulsion, however, this man lives with a colony of devolved parasitical human beings who once saved him from death ...

Here, let me pause. When I first read this novella, in a handsome stand-alone edition published by Mark V. Ziesing out of Willimantic, Connecticut in 1988, I liked it very much. I may have recommended it for a Nebula, and I am undeniably cited on the rear jacket flap of this edition as having regarded Shepard's first Griaule story as 'a parable'. But not long after strewing laurels on 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', I learned something distressing about it.

Lucius Shepard, despite or because of his literary talent, had his quirks and demons. Feeling belittled or balked and hence justified in exacting payback, he occasionally used his gift to attack those who had affronted him or, he felt, disparaged his work. He did this more often earlier in his career than later (or so I assume on report), and I can point to at least one story from three distinct collections that takes this sort of revenge. Sadly, 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', earlier gathered in Arkham House's *The Ends of the Earth* (1988), is one such story.

Writer and critic Gregory Feeley — whom Shepard probably respected — published a notice of *The Jaguar Hunter* conceding his talent but also asserting that he did not yet have it under full control. However, Shepard apparently believed that he did, and Feeley's review steamed him, like

a clam. Perhaps thinking to disarm its criticism with ridicule and to warn off others who would deny an emerging 'Shepard Is Our Shakespeare' consensus, he stole Feeley's surname, or a near twin ('the feelies'; later, 'the Feeleys'), as his label for the human parasites in Griaule's gut. Discovering this fact did not make me think ill of other examples of Shepard's work, but it did make me queasy about *this* novella.³ And, knowing now that he reported a birth date four years later than his real one and often tweaked his own biography to self-legendise, I view these silly characters as misshapen warts on the story's structure.

Further, to keep his readers from harbouring *any* sympathy for these beings, Shepard describes them as 'Harmless creatures' that 'pass their time copulating and arguing among themselves over the most trivial matters' (52). He designates as the colony's prime ancestor 'a retarded man', one Feely (53) and describes his pseudo-clones as having 'weepy eyes and thick-lipped slack mouths, like ugly children in their rotted silks and satins' (55). In short, we are told that they are pathetic. But given their origin and their extraliterary purpose, I wish that Shepard had chosen to elevate story over 'satire'. But even if this capitulation to one of his demons weakens 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', it does not render it entirely contemptible.

Indeed, at one point, Shepard has Mauldry concede of the Feelys: 'they do have moments when they shine' (52) — as, for example, when they saved Mauldry's life and when, after Catherine begins exploring Griaule's deep interior, they carry an unconscious botanist named John Colmacos, who was gathering berries near Griaule's mouth, to safety. Still, these beings mostly discomfit Catherine and often goad Shepard's narrator to ridicule. But they do have plot uses, and Shepard does try to exploit their literary utility.

After many adventures inside the sleeping Griaule (including witnessing the attack of a giant white worm on thirty male Feelys), Catherine falls in love with Colmacos, who soon becomes addicted to a drug, brianine, that the two often take together in the weird glow of Griaule's heart wall. Catherine has also tried, without success, to escape from the belly of the creature and, at length, somewhat adjusts her attitude toward the bemused Feelys to devise a new escape plan.

Of it, she thinks, 'It wasn't much of a plan, nothing subtle, nothing complex' (57), and here I see Shepard subconsciously critiquing his own failure of imagination and pushing ahead via an act of will rather than one of creative ardor. An erotic scene that follows this passage, however, partially redeems itself by morphing Catherine's disaffection with her and the botanist's lovemaking into a credible epiphany: She realises, while aping the 'perturbed and animalistic rhythm' of the ever-lascivious Feelys, that she has reached 'the nadir of her life' (89).

Later, Catherine gives each Feely accompanying her and Colmacos to their escape point a fatal brianine-laced cake. (She has failed to consider the slightness of their builds.) Dumbstruck, she senses that 'for all her disparagement of

3 I heard of this element in Shepard's novella from Feeley himself, who, in a note, wondered how I could praise a story that mocked his name simply because Shepard resented some of his judgments in his *Jaguar Hunter* review. I replied, honestly, that I had never made the connection between the 'feelies' in this story and Feeley's surname. But once I understood what had happened, I regarded Shepard's 'revenge' as both petty and lingeringly malicious.

them', the Feelys 'were human' (91). In writing his story, then, did Shepard grow fond of these feeble-minded creatures and begin to feel a scosh of guilt for taxonomically appropriating Gregory Feeley's surname? If so, this line rings false as apology. Further, the fact that other Feelys later *thwart* their escape hints that Shepard never abjured his sad private metaphor of critics as parasites. In context, given that his take on these 'pitiful half-wits' (116) stems from personal bias, the metaphor may even work. Sometimes. Sort of.

But it still stinks.⁴

After these and other events, Catherine undergoes a parody of death (or not); revives in the body of a near-perfect double, whom we have already briefly met; and reunites with a resurrected Captain Mauldry, who leads her back into the world that she has longed for years to revisit. She returns to Hangtown and accosts Brianne, whose betrayal immured her within Griaule. And, in this climactic scene, Shepard wrings more charity and rue from Catherine's pique and bitterness than ever he squeezes from his own.

'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter' ends with a fine, if overladen, paragraph in which Catherine spares Brianne; settles in another town; composes a book called *The Heart's Millennium*; attains a fleeting fame; marries a colleague of the late Colmacos'; bears this man's sons; and limits all her later writing to a private journal. Then Shepard puts period to his tale, writing that 'from that day forward she lived happily ever after. Except for the dying at the end. And the heartbreak in between' (114).

These, I believe, are the words of a writer disclosing his heart, and, along with the scene preceding them, they echo deep into the volume's third tale, the 81-page novella 'The Father of Stones.'

C. 'The Father of Stones'

In this story, Shepard orchestrates a lurid pulp mystery and courtroom drama that you could almost expect to run across in an issue of *Weird Tales* from the 1930s, perhaps with a Margaret Brundage cover depicting a priest poised to sacrifice a drugged and naked female to his cult's dragon god while a flock of shadowy acolytes stand behind the altar as watchers. Take note: I mean this characterisation as praise, not as putdown, for Shepard treats this scenario with full pulp commitment. He narrates it in a style just far enough over the top to fit his subject matter but just subtly witty

4 Bob Kruger has a *slightly* different view of the matter, as he explains in an email sent on 28 October 2014: 'It's not fair that Greg was put to this test by Lucius' — that test being, by Bob's own definition, an act of malice. But in explanation, not exculpation, a day later he likens the provocation of calling these creatures 'Feelys' to dropping 'a flaming bag of dog poo' on the porch of someone who has withheld Halloween candy to a trickster. Also, he likens the responses of the victim and others (mine included) to *kicking* that flaming bag. This analogy strikes me as funny, but I still would not wish to have my name mocked in this public way. (Who would?) Bob ends his first message by observing that 'Outside of the text, the Feelys don't exist. At some level, your take, my take, and Greg's take on Lucius' motivations are just projection and irrelevant to criticism. You don't need to know anything about Greg Feeley to understand the Feelys, or about Lucius himself for that matter.'

enough to sell its readers on the unlikely *likelihood* of its near-risible plot machinations.

Some have argued that Shepard, in his longer stories, especially those from later in his career, strings scenes together as if making them up on the fly. 'The Father of Stones' first appeared in 1988, well before his career midpoint, and thus would escape this criticism, but let me stress that it *does* escape it, and admirably. Could it be more succinct? Sure, but, in 'The Father of Stones' the stylistic filigree and the melodramatic plot twists contribute to the sultry pulp atmosphere in ways that legitimate their presence. What we read is a Wilkie Collins *Moonstone*-style romp with existential angst stirred in to help us forgive ourselves — or the author to forgive himself? — for relishing such juicy high-camp vittles.

The mystery begins after the murder of the cult priest (Mardo Zemaile) at the hands of the daddy (William Lemos) of the drugged and naked female (Mirielle Lemos) in the cult's spooky hangout (Temple of the Dragon). Anyway, William Lemos insists that his attorney (our protagonist, Adam Korrogly) must base his defence on his self-excusing, but potentially precedent-setting, plea, namely: 'The Dragon Made Me Do It.' Korrogly both salivates over and quails from using this defence because it could (1) make his reputation, if he wins, or (2) totally undo him, if he doesn't.

Everyone in Port Chantay, where the trial takes place, knows that Griaule exerts a malefic influence over the entire country, even over citizens living outside the Carbonales Valley where the dragon sleeps — but a verdict finding Lemos not guilty of lethally conking the priest with a stone formed in the lizard's acidic intestines, would allow ne'er-do-well after ne'er-do-well to employ this defence for crimes ranging from moperly to human mutilation. Shepard sets up this situation with great economy in scenes between Korrogly and Lemos, Korrogly and Mirielle (the daughter), and Korrogly and other witnesses. The trial scenes in particular move with tension and snap, and Shepard's characterisation of Korrogly makes him at once sympathetic (in that he feels intensely his assumed class inferiority) and edgily self-serving (in that he has few qualms about using Lemos or Mirielle for his own purposes, whether career-oriented or lascivious).

To summarise at greater length would undercut the reader's pleasure in discovering the secrets of Shepard's characters — Lemos', Mirielle's, the priest Zemaile's, and those of such supporting players as the mysterious Kirin and her maidservant Janice, whom Korrogly, uncharitably, regards as a 'drab'. More summary would also dull the excitements of the trial scenes and the reversals and re-reversals that stun Korrogly and end the tale, for these finally lead him to an epiphany that seems not just a fustian revelation but an event-dictated change of perception that will rule him ever after.

Besides, the tale's final line — 'One way or another, the dragon was loose in Port Chantay' (196) — has a cool pulp fillip that causes this reader, at least, to flash back on certain scenes and to chuckle in malign delight.

D. 'Liar's House'

The opening of this novelette reverberates with the portentousness of Holy Scripture, specifically, the first five verses of the Gospel of John. Harken to a few of its grandiloquent prefatory phrasings:

IN THE ETERNAL INSTANT BEFORE the Beginning, before the Word was pronounced in fire, long before the tiny dust of history came to settle from the flames, something whose actions no verb can truly describe seemed to enfold possibility, to surround it in the manner of a cloud or an idea, and everything fashioned from the genesis fire came to express in some way the structure of that fundamental duality... (197)

This paragraph goes more floridly than the famous opening of the Gospel of John ('In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God', etc.), but Shepard, to cut him some slack, has geared it to explaining the queer duality of Griaule's soul rather than to establishing the coequality of Christ with Yahweh the Creator.⁵ (Dragons, after all, are very different from you and me.)

Anyway, in young Teocinte's only inn, called by some 'Liar's House' (but formally known as Dragonwood House, a hotel-cum-tavern-and-brothel), lives a troglodytic former stevedore named Hota Kotieb. Rampaging in Port Chantay, he once murdered ten men to avenge the death of his wife in an avoidable coach accident, then fled to Teocinte and rented an upstairs room at the back of this establishment. Its chief notoriety, besides its occupancy by working girls, derives from its owner's claim that it was built from wood sawn from trees that once grew on Griaule's back. No one credits this boast, however, because no one can believe that a sane lumberjack or carpenter would ever venture onto such spooky terrain to harvest timber. And so the inn bears the sobriquet 'Liar's House'.

Hota has no skill as a wood carver, but because Griaule fascinates him, he fashions crude images of the beast from scraps of wood and decorates his quarters with them; later, he goes abroad to make bigger likenesses and one day spies a dragon much smaller than Griaule — but a vital, living creature — circling the sleeping Griaule's snout and maybe trying to communicate with him. Hota thinks of this smaller dragon — which has a body length of nearly forty feet — as female. Soon, he watches her vanish behind Griaule's sagittal crest and scrambles after her to try to catch her up-close and diabolical. He gets his wish, but not quite as he expected, for he

slapped aside a pine bough and stepped into a clearing where stood a slender woman with bronze skin, long black hair falling to the small of her back, and wearing not a stitch of clothing (204).

And so begins a peculiar relationship that discloses this avatar of the she-dragon as a quasi-human woman self-christened Magali.⁶ Hota secures clothes for her and escorts her to Liar's House to live with him. She cannot help studying the figures ingrained in the timbers making up the

5 Dragon's souls, 'unlike the souls of men', we herein learn, '[enclose] the material form [of the creature] rather than being shrouded with it' (216). The practical effect of this phenomenon is that dragons 'control [their] shapes in ways [human beings] cannot' (*ibid.*).

6 This name evokes that of Mowgli, the boy in Rudyard Kipling's two *Jungle Books*, but I have no idea if Shepard means for us to conflate them. Still, the characters Mowgli and Magali share a feral-child nature and an initial apparent innocence that Magali's later behaviour totally subverts.

establishment, and Hota himself discovers in the wood 'narrow wings replete with struts and vanes, sinuous scaled bodies, fanged reptilian heads,' that is, '[a] multiplicity of dragons' (208).

Meanwhile, Magali develops an appetite and craves *meat*, her rude consumption of which, one evening in the inn's tavern, draws hostile stares from three male patrons. When their haughty blond leader derides Magali, Hota mangles the cad's hand and faces down his friends. Afterward, Hota and Magali learn that the townsfolk have grown wary of them and that the proprietor wants to evict them, even though Magali is pregnant (with Griaule's child, via Hota's agency) and the town has no other inns. I will not summarise it, but Shepard gives us another strong ending in his wrap-up to 'Liar's House': a gaudy penny-dreadful climactic scene of enormous power.

In his note for this story, Shepard admits that he 'received some criticism for the literate interior life of [my] ox-like protagonist', a complaint that he finds valid reasons to dismiss. He also admits that after publishing 'Liar's House', he hit upon an idea that would have explained Griaule's reasons for wanting offspring and that 'would have [also] made the link between this story and the last ['The Skull'] more apparent'. He adds, 'I was tempted to go back in and rework the story,' but decided not to (worse luck), to let his readers discover for themselves 'how a writer's style evolves'. With a candour that blithely excuses the copout, he confesses, 'Then perhaps I was just being lazy' (428).

Frankly, I would have more respect for Shepard's easy self-criticism if he'd removed that 'perhaps'. If he could write a substantive note for each story in *The Dragon Griaule*, what kept him from reworking 'Liar's House'? It's a good tale, but, by Shepard's own admission, *it could have been better*. And now, most likely, we will never know.

E. 'The Taborin Scale'

This novella centers on forty-year-old George Taborin from Port Chantay, owner of Taborin Coins & Antiquities, a numismatist who buys a glass jar of items at a junk shop in a district of Teocinte that never gets full sun and who finds in this jar 'a dark leathern chip, stiff with age and grime, shaped like a thumbnail' (244), but larger. Later, in a bordello, Ali's Eternal Reward, he massages it with a cotton ball until it emits a blue-green lustre. Sylvia, a prostitute, identifies it as a dragon scale, and agrees to provide George her services for two weeks in exchange for the scale, lured in part by his residency in a hotel considerably plusher than her brothel.

During their time there, George continues rubbing the scale and so triggers a fleeting vision of an earlier period in the landscape's history:

As [their hotel suite] receded, it revealed neither the floors and walls of adjoining rooms nor the white buildings of Teocinte, but a sun-drenched plain with tall lion-colored grasses and strands of palmetto, bordered on all sides by hills forested with pines. They were marooned in the midst of that landscape ... then it was gone, trees and plain and hills so quickly erased, they might have been a painted cloth whisked away, and the room was restored to view. (251)

Sylvia begs George to trigger another such reality break, but he cannot fathom her eagerness to revisit an experience that has so clearly unsettled her.

After telling him that he must heed Griaule or suffer misfortune, Sylvia recites from a book, *Griaule Incarnate*, purporting that the dragon is an all-controlling god whose ‘blood is the marrow of time’.⁷ She also informs George that, when bored at Ali’s, she writes stories about her fellow whores and their supportive sorority. So George rubs the scale again, and this act, the fantasy trigger giving ‘The Taborin Scale’ its status as a bastard hybrid of Wells’s *The Time Machine* and Doyle’s *The Lost World*, plunges them back into the prehistoric past — but for how long, neither can imagine.

A hawk soars high above the plain to which they have fallen. Later, trekking through this empty landscape, they find that in swooping from aloft, the hawk has metamorphosed into a dragon, with a fiery orange ‘jewel’ in its throat. The hill where Griaule once lay has vanished, but Sylvia recognises this smaller version of the lizard for Griaule as a youngster, an idea that George resists until his meeting with three other dispossessed Teocinteans, all holding Sylvia’s opinion, forces him to recant his doubts. The dragon, whatever its name or provenance, rules over this desolate plain and makes known to them, much as would God, where in its simmering reaches they may bide and where they may not.

The three adult strangers foraging for mangos have with them ‘a gangly young girl in deplorable condition, twelve or thirteen years old’ (266), whom George learns to address as Peony and whom he kidnaps because the party’s members have abused her. George takes Peony back to Sylvia, having earlier learned that her crew was transported to this hostile tract soon after her father saw Peony ‘fooling around with something’ that she refused to show him. So both the girl’s party and George and Sylvia have wound up here through an uncanny magical agency.

Their return to latter-day Teocinte occurs in an equally unlikely way, via a vast prairie fire set by the dragon, a fire that Shepard vividly evokes; indeed, it sweeps by like state-of-the-art CGI on a humongous screen. Suddenly back in their present, they hear a ‘chthonic rumbling’ and see pouring from Griaule’s mouth ‘the creatures that dwelled within’, plus many ‘derelict men and women who ... had sought to shelter inside’ (293), this last group being the ‘Feelys’ that in this 2010 addition to the Sequence, Shepard tellingly chooses *not* to identify as such. Later, George witnesses ‘a mountainous transformation, the coming-to-life of a colossus’ (294), as Griaule awakens from a millennia-long sleep, shakes Hangtown from its back, and crushes underfoot the shanties of a ramshackle barrio: a remake in prose of an early Godzilla flick.⁸

7 This same page features a footnote declaring that the book’s author, Richard Rossacher, a medical doctor, manufactured from the dragon’s blood ‘a potent narcotic that succeeded in addicting a goodly portion of the Temalaguan littoral’ (252). This ‘fact’ provides the basis for Shepard’s posthumous novel, *Beautiful Blood*, his longest and last tale about the dragon Griaule.

8 Shepard loved movies as a medium, but loathed movies that did not come up to his standards. It would be interesting to hear him speculate on what Hollywood might do with a well-funded Griaule adaptation, but if any of its moguls now elect to take on that challenge, he will never see it, never rant about how the idiots have transmuted the gold of its original literary source into special-effects pabulum for studio stooges and slavering fan boys. Still ...

In any case, George pursues Peony into what remains of Teocinte, to Ali’s, for the child loved Sylvia’s stories about the place. Upon finding her, he carries her through all the panicked refugees-in-the-making and ‘all the toxins of dementia’ (297) poisoning the town’s atmosphere. And when the dragon dies, despite Meric Cattanay’s prediction that the paint on its body would cause it to ‘cave in like an old barn’ (297, fn.), it does so more spectacularly than Meric could have imagined. The main narrative concludes in a flourish of apocalypse, mixing melancholy and half-assed ecstasy in a show of celebration and redemptive trivia — George’s certainty that he will ‘find his treasure again’ (299), *viz.*, Griaule’s private hoard. Even in rereading the ending of this over-the-top chapter, I could only grin and think, ‘Hell, yeah, Lucius — hell, yeah!’

But there’s more: Chapter Eight of ‘The Taborin Scale’ purports to be an ‘Excerpt from *The Last Days of Griaule* by Sylvia Monteverdi’, George’s whore, who notes, ten years after the dragon’s death, that she has spent her time documenting Teocinte’s ‘rebirth and its newest industry, the sale and distribution of Griaule’s relics, fraudulent and real’ (301). She explains that eight years after her last sight of George and Peony in Port Chantay, he told her that the scattering of Griaule’s body all over the world achieved just what Griaule wanted. George gave her the adventure-impelling scale, now in a glass pendant, saying, ‘We are part of a scheme by means of which he will someday come to dominate the world as Rossacher’s book claimed he already had’ (304).

Near her excerpt’s end, Sylvia writes, ‘I have not yet broken the glass in which the scale is encased, yet ... someday I will, if only to satisfy my curiosity about George’ (305). She speculates about his and the adult Peony’s supposed father-and-daughter relationship, which she implies has ‘sexual elements’, justifying the passage by alleging ‘I needed to think meanly about something I valued in order to walk away from it’ (306). It’s a second ending to a story already over: the coda of a Hollywood movie or an Elizabethan tragedy. I approve it. In my view, Shepard owes Sylvia the last word, and here he concedes it to her.

Finally, I must point out that the theme of an older man protecting a younger female, or trying to, features prominently in ‘The Scalehunter’s Beautiful Daughter’, ‘The Father of Stones’, ‘Liar’s House’ (in an odd but not disqualifying variant), and ‘The Taborin Scale’. Moreover, a hint of the incestuous erotic in the ‘protection’ that the man offers his female ward enters every story but one. However, in ‘The Taborin Scale’, it strikes me as unfair to Taborin, who in its climax (a reprise, on a larger scale, of the apocalypse in ‘Liar’s House’) acts heroically on Peony’s behalf, albeit with an affect-free doggedness that turns every other person in that scene’s encompassing chaos into an obstacle to be flung into the fire.

Yes, there is nonsense in ‘The Taborin Scale’, just as there is in many a Jacobean or Shakespearean tragedy, but there is also force, much of it stemming from Lucius Shepard’s willingness to take flamboyant, even heroic risks. If nothing else — and, in truth, a great deal ‘else’ inheres — I marvel at his daring.

F. ‘The Skull’

‘The Skull’ constitutes the most recent and the longest story in *The Dragon Griaule*. Its first publication occurred simultaneously with that of this collection. It has to rank as among

the last stories Shepard wrote before his death on 18 March 2014. I can hardly claim status as a Shepard specialist, but after three readings, I find this novella the strangest and most oddly beguiling narrative in his canon. Most of it takes place in the early twenty-first century, as none of the other stories here comes close to doing, for *their* settings range from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century and, in one case ('The Taborin Scale') at least partly in a dreamscape two millennia or more ago.

The two main characters in 'The Skull', George Craig Snow (who goes by Craig or Snow) and Xiomara Garza (*aka* La Endriaga, *aka* Yara), both embody a recognisable latter-day type. Snow, a seeker-slacker from the States, winds up in Temalagua working for a scam charity and living with a woman named Expectación. (The title of his unfinished memoir is *He Lives With Expectation*). On the other hand, Yara, when she meets Snow, is a seventeen-year-old Goth girl in Ciudad Temalagua running cash envelopes for a new fascistic group called the PVO (i.e., the Party of Organised Violence), which Shepard tells us in his final story note 'was an actual Guatemalan entity, very much in the ascendancy when I was first there' (431). Yara and Snow meet near his door stoop, when she asks a boy sitting next to him, 'Who is this asshole?' (312).

So much time has passed since the events of 'The Taborin Scale' that the opening of 'The Skull' includes backfill about the removal of the dead Griaule's scales, the draining and storing of its blood, etc., and, finally, the transfer of Griaule's 600-foot-long skull 1100 miles to the Temalaguan court. (The disposition of the blood directly influences the nation's history and so the events in Shepard's last work, *Beautiful Blood*.) The skull eventually winds up near the palace outside Ciudad Temalagua. In the early 1900s, the palace burns. Vines and other vegetation cover the skull, but tourists visit it anyway and have unsettling dreams in its vicinity. A cult arises. Nearby slums turn into battlegrounds for drug thugs and right-wing army squads.

'The Skull' carves sections out of recent Central American history and plays the magic-realism card like a trump. At the same time, though, Shepard slings around smart-ass detective-fiction metaphors as if he were Raymond Chandler or, more modishly, Robert Crais. Often, these not only amuse, but also serve to background Snow against this sinister Temalaguan milieu without emasculating him of his Americanism.

In part II, reputedly an excerpt from his memoir, Snow describes with hard-bitten Elvis Cole snark the women entering Club Sexy: 'About four PM each weekday, "*La Hora Feliz*," the ladies would come breezing in, all bouncy in their low-cut frocks, sunglasses by Gucci and make-up by Sherwin-Williams' (316). After visiting the jungle where Griaule's skull resides and fearing that he is falling in love with Yara, Snow sardonically admits that 'love was something I had hoped to avoid — she wasn't the sort of girl you gave your heart to unless you were looking to get it back FDA approved and sliced into patties' (336). But the stink of unease about the skull has instilled in him a paralysing dread, and when he has to climb a ladder after Yara to reach the dragon's mouth, he hesitates. On the other hand, when he *succeeds* in climbing into it, he reports this reaction:

on reaching the top, standing beside the wicked bronze-green curve of the fang and gazing down at the squat, I had an unwarranted sense of power. It was as though I'd scaled some hithertofore unscalable peak and was for that moment master of all I surveyed. Yara took my hand

and her touch boosted the sensation. I felt heroin high ... (322)

Just as earlier I speculated that Shepard may have been critiquing his own storytelling when Catherine faults her impromptu escape plan, here Shepard appears to share Snow's exhilaration, and to exult in his working out of his still incomplete tale. It's as if Shepard recognises, again, the epic potential of the Griaule Sequence, suspects that he is fulfilling it scene by scene, and hopes that at this point in his climb (up into the dragon's skull) he is scaling the daunting heights of his own ambition. Moreover, just as Snow beholds the favela-like squat beneath the skull with 'an *unwarranted* sense of power', Shepard realises that, this fleeting high aside, he himself still has heights to climb before he reaches either the summit or the prospect of rest.

He may have had this sense of exaltation because his setting and the actions of his characters all reflected his desire, set forth in the last sentence of his last story note in *The Dragon Griaule*, to highlight the political facets of his project.⁹ Indeed, Shepard calls 'The Skull', of all his dragon stories, 'the most grounded in my life experience and in the political realities of Central America' (431). In his mind, it has its contemporaneity to commend it, as embodied in its autobiographical elements and its political savvy. It is not *mere* fantasy, but a fantasy with clear links to our presumptively significant Here and Now. Griaule becomes a metaphor not only for nasty Reagan-era colonialism (after all, Reagan is dead), but also, after Griaule's death and dismemberment, for right-wing Central American tyrannies and — I'm guessing, as perhaps Shepard was too — for the brain-rotting influences of millennial jungle cults. In short, he felt it necessary, as have other genre writers, to justify, or at least to rank, his work by the degree to which it utilises or comments on the 'real world' as it purportedly exists today.

I share his defensive bias, and I find this story, among the six in *The Dragon Griaule*, its most beguiling and compelling — except for 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule', my first favourite because the first I read. How autobiographical is it? Shepard does not tell us, but who really cares? How faithful to modern Central American realities is it? 'The Skull' *incorporates* these realities, but does not illuminate them. It *alludes* to the autobiographical and the historical, but subordinates both to the demands of character, plot, and climax in an off-trail but oddly compelling fantasy.

The major elements here include the disembodied dragon (of course); an American expatriate (Craig Snow); a charismatic girl (Yara) with a powerful psychic link to Griaule; a jungle community of 'adherents' devoted to resurrecting at least the spirit of the dead beast; a love story between the expat and the dragon girl; Snow's ten-year exile from Temalagua to Concrete, Idaho (the inadvertent real-life hometown of writer Tobias Wolff as recounted in his memoir *This Boy's Life*); the vanishing of Griaule's skull from its jungle setting, along with eight hundred adherents and their female leader; the expat's return to Temalagua; the cold-blooded execution of two of Snow's gay friends as a direct result of his asking the owner of Club Sexy for sensitive information ...

Not to mention ... *take a breath* ...

9 Shepard: 'The important thing ... is that writing "The Skull" returned me to my original motivation in writing about Griaule, and if there are to be further stories about the dragon and his milieu, I think they'll be more focused upon the central theme, the political fantasy, than those that preceded it' (431).

Snow's Miami-based affair with the disaffected wife of the PVO defense minister, to learn what has happened to Yara; his trip back to Temalagua to a village called Tres Santos, where Jefe, the leader of the PVO, lives; Snow's meeting with this small, athletic man; his mind-boggling discovery of Yara as a counsellor-cum-servant to Jefe, whom all the women in Tres Santos fear, knowing that he has killed their men; Snow's awareness of a 'mechanical grinding' (378) in the stairwell of a lofty structure in Tres Santos, to which Jefe retreats 'to fly'; the resumption of physical relations between Yara and Snow; Yara's recounting for him of Griaule's rebirth in the form of a 'beautiful little man, naked and perfect' (381), an event foreshadowed by Magali's 'birth' in 'Liar's House'; and Yara's conspiring with Snow to slay Jefe in his 'lair' (411), the building where, every day Jefe 'flies' for hours in, amongst, and through the deluge of silver chains hanging from its ceiling.

That's plot. What about character? Snow strikes me as a sort of deracinated stand-in for Shepard, but, again, I am guessing. In any case, Snow seems aimless and adrift but for his fixation on and love for Yara. Canelo, an associate of Guillermo, owner of Club Sexy and a friend to Snow, nails Snow when he says, 'You go blundering about, thinking you can solve any problem because you're superior to the pitiful, fucked-up Temalaguans, but all you do is make more trouble for us' (354). Then Canelo says, 'You're like a half-assed method actor, man. One who almost buys into his character, but can't quite get there' (355). Early on, the reader finds it hard to refute this judgment. Even when Snow begins his dalliance with Loisa Barzan in Miami, as a way of learning Yara's fate and reconnecting with her after ten years, Canelo's assessment seems spot on.

Yara has more going on internally and historically than does Snow, even though twelve years his junior. Often, mysteriously, people call her 'La Endriaga', and Guillermo tells Snow that this sobriquet signifies 'a creature part snake, part dragon, part female' and that 'people call her La Endriaga because she lives in the jungle near the skull' (317). Soon, Snow learns that Yara has a diamond-shaped tattoo on her lower back — crudely, he thinks of it as a 'tramp stamp' — the central scale of which is 'hard', with a 'distinct convexity' (325). Initially, Yara will not let him touch it, so he assumes it an advanced or magical sort of implant, but, during sex, touching it elicits from her orgasmic reactions that startle or even horrify Snow (342).

Further, Yara does have a sort of political power. At seventeen, she raised money for the Party of Organised Violence. In the clearing where the enormous skull has its home, she acts as chief spokesperson for Griaule's disembodied spirit, taking messages from it in a closet behind its brain, dispensing jobs or counsel to its acolytes, and interpreting its agenda: 'I know the idea of a renewal is involved. An alchemical change, a marriage of souls' (338). And when Snow asks how she can trust Griaule, 'a giant lizard that has a really good reason to hate us', or believe that anything it does will help them, she says, 'Savagery, poverty, and injustice are shoved in our faces every day. We're fucking desperate! If change makes things worse ... so what?' (339; ellipsis Shepard's).

Yara's political power includes appearing to Griaule's followers from on high, from the mouth of the skull, and summoning them for a silent mass that Snow can describe only as a 'zombie-like connection between the adherents and their queen' (341). Although Yara does not speak aloud, the scene recalls Catherine addressing the Feelys in 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', to warn them that the

dragon's heart will soon beat, once, and that they may not wish to remain inside the creature when this weird millennial event occurs. Fearing a like, or worse, imminent disaster, Snow flashes on Jonestown and decides to leave while he can still save himself (342).

Ten-plus years on, he rediscovers Yara in Tres Santos, after first meeting in a cantina the 'slim, pale, diminutive man' (371) whom others call Jefe. Jefe harbours the seething anger of an abuse victim in the body of a Latin mighty mite. He announces that his obscure village has no greater attraction than he, boasting, 'People come from all over to ask for my advice. I counsel them, and sometimes I put on a little show. An entertainment. It's only an exercise routine, but I'm told it's unique' (373).

When Jefe seizes Snow's backpack to see what it contains and Snow tries to grab it back, Jefe almost crushes his hand. He then swallows five blue pills from a bottle in the pack with no observable effect. In fact, he escorts Snow to the pink building sheltering the village brothel, opens a door to a stairwell to go upstairs for 'an hour or two', and tells Snow that Yara will provide coffee, etc. (376).

Yara! Snow can scarcely believe he's found her. And, after some initial heavy-duty recriminations and wrangling, Yara fills him in on what occurred during his absence and how she wound up as Jefe's spokesperson and nursemaid. She describes in evocative detail the heat-engendered miracle (reminiscent of that in 'The Taborin Scale') resulting in 'the act of transubstantiation' (380) that this miracle required, namely, the rebirth of Griaule — an event akin to that depicted in 'Liar's House' — as the human avatar now indifferently answering to 'Jefe.' To Snow's dismay, Yara says that Jefe has a recurring dream in which he 'stands in an arena before thousands of people' to tell them that 'when the dream becomes reality he will undergo a change' that 'will enable him to regain his original form and to fly as he once did, without the need for mechanical aids' (383), these being the innumerable chains, in the extraordinary 'lair' atop the pink building, that he uses to 'fly.'¹⁰ And, persuaded of Jefe's recidivist lizardliness, i.e., the idea that any further transubstantiation of his baleful self will bode only calamity for humankind, Yara and Snow resolve to bring Jefe down, *literally* down, by acting in concert.

The story then suspensefully works itself out as it must, amid the grinding of chains and later the pouring out of a Greek chorus of village women, like Furies, who help Snow, now armed with a machete, dispatch the die-hard Jefe:

The women descended upon him first, first Itzel with a hoe, blood welling from the trench she dug in his chest, and the rest, stabbing and cutting and pounding, exacting their vengeance for rape and murder and innumerable humiliations. (417)

10 This activity of Jefe's made me wonder if it had a real-world analogue, so I took a few minutes to Google *Is there an exercise that involves 'flying' in or among chains?* The first article so summoned was 'Dragonfly Migration', which reports that every autumn during both dragonfly and kestrel migrations, these species fly south together, with hawks eating the green darners accompanying them. Many green darners predict many kestrels, just as small numbers of dragonflies imply fewer kestrels. No word in my query mentions dragons, but *flying* by itself was enough to summon them. Thank God that *chains* did not call up essays with equally irrelevant, but wholly different, subject matter.

Unfortunately, more succeeds this scene, and although Shepard clearly knew that he needed something more to bring it safely to rest, part VII, the novella's — and the entire collection's coda — consists of four Faulknerian paragraphs replete with sorrowful Latinate bombast and and unconvincing self-importance.

I will never forget Jefe flying in his implausible 'lair', or the lengths to which Snow and Yara go to halt his noisy flights, nor will I ever dismiss the story's structure as haphazard or Snow's character as less than credible, but ultimately the vast metaphorical significance of the dragon Griaule seems too slippery to hang onto and Shepard's personal implication that it represents the dire influence of the Reagan administration's — or any administration's — Central American foreign policy a self-justification that he may have had to believe to finish 'The Skull' and to begin writing *Beautiful Blood*. In any case, despite the novella's beguiling strangeness and several memorable episodes, it winds up feeling overwrought, fantastic in its least positive sense, and empty. Part VI affirms this judgment by reading as if even Shepard cannot fully approve his accomplishment. As Snow and Yara seek some semblance of safety in they drive toward the north, Snow muses:

It seemed to him all they had undergone and felt and done would one day be diminished and relegated to mere narrative, its heroes oversimplified or their heroic natures overborne by the mundanity of detail, a story so degraded, so shorn of wonderment by telling and retelling that — despite love and redemption, suffering and loss, mystery and death — it would be in the end as though nothing had happened. (420)

And:

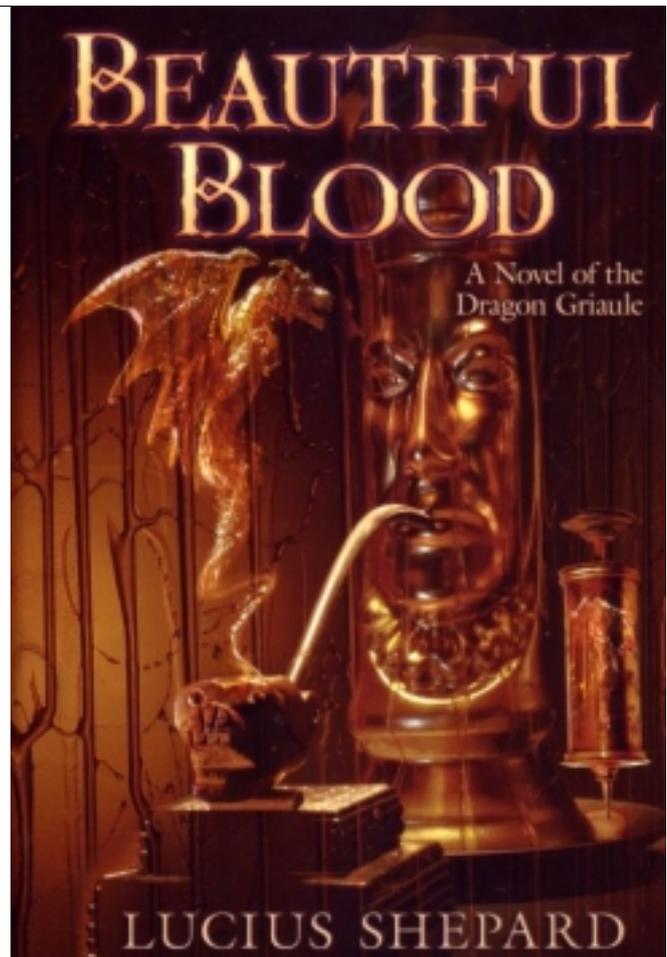
although it went against every negative of his former faith in nothing, he submitted to belief and believed ... believed in alchemy, in the marriage of souls, in accomplishment and noble obligation, and believed also that he would never fail her again, nor she him. (420; second ellipsis Shepard's)

Here, Snow strives to persuade himself both that something has really happened and that his former faith in 'nothing' has crumbled before the enumerated beliefs he now claims to embrace. But I believe (though I wish I did not) that it is Shepard doing the same damned thing, for all his rhetorical sleight-of-hand does is drive *me* to think that he would have done better to substitute for his last four overwrought paragraphs something like this: 'And Snow and Yara lived happily ever after ... almost.'

II. *Beautiful Blood*

A. Unanswerable questions

This novel — as noted, Shepard's last — takes us back to the origins of the Dragon Griaule Sequence. Its publication by Subterranean Press in 2014 occurred nearly thirty years after 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule' reached print in *F&SF* (Dec 1984). It hearkens back not only to that fine seminal story but also to its nineteenth-century time period and its main character, Meric Cattanay, who in *Beautiful Blood* makes two or three dubiously effective cameo appearances.



In *Beautiful Blood*, the more or less linear thrust of *The Dragon Griaule* yields to heavy backtracking and the expansion of the story of Richard Rosacher, a character whom Shepard first mentions in a footnote in 'The Taborin Scale' (252; see fn. 7 in *this* essay). The novel's jacket copy asserts that it has 'profound metaphysical overtones' and that it 'raises — but does not answer — significant questions', queries such as, 'Is the dragon merely a bizarre but entirely natural phenomenon? Or is he/it the manifestation of some divine purpose? And to what extent are the actions of men ... the reflections of its implacable but enigmatic will?' (rear cover flap; my ellipsis).

As the jacket copy tells us, each question remains moot, and in each instance the resultant ambiguity has the effect of acquitting Shepard of foisting off on us either pat or over-contrived answers. Apparently, having conceived of Griaule as an allusive terrestrial mystery, Shepard *cannot* answer these questions, and thus writes from a platform of narrative agnosticism allowing him to accept, dismiss, or doubt the godhood of Griaule as the loose contingencies of his story demand. In fact, the ambiguity of Griaule's meaning allows him to create characters unlike himself, or his standard world-weary protagonists, by assigning them philosophical stances vis-à-vis Griaule that encompass belief, atheism, or some posture in between.

I have a hunch, which I cannot substantiate, that this was how, apart from various forms of self-medication, Shepard wrestled with the crazy-making enigmas of life, death, and 'God'. That hunch, I confess, is an impertinent one. But if his characters' perception of Griaule as a malignant force has any metaphorical value other than his own take on the folly of American foreign policy, I would argue that it is what

he saw as the stance of the *Cosmos* vis-à-vis humanity. Does it care? Does it not care? Shepard, I'm fairly sure, leaned toward the latter view, but loathed having to do so, for the results of cosmic indifference to humanity's collective and individual fates appalled him.

Maybe that's why he keeps trying to transmute the problematic Griaule into less than credible human beings — Magali and Jefe, who, after all, are dragon spawn — or, in *Beautiful Blood*, into the drug mab (i.e., *more and better*), which affords anyone who ingests it a subjective simulacrum of the Good Life. A mab-enriched life never degrades (as Griaule's golden blood never clots or degrades), so long as one keeps taking it, and therefore gives joy and meaning to even the lowliest person, providing a remedy 'to the depredations of time itself and thus to every ill associated with aging' (14).

B. This hematologist's life

In essence, then, *Beautiful Blood* constitutes a biography of the ambitious hematologist Richard Rosacher, who realises early on that the residents of Teocinte 'would pay dearly to see their hovels turned into palaces, their lovers into sexual ideals, and they had no will ... to resist temptation, whatever toll it might extract' (26; my ellipsis). Rosacher also has some trials acquiring blood to test and process into mab (although, as we discover later, it actually requires *no* processing), as well as an adventure that nearly kills him when, to escape a shape-shifting midnight-black monster from Griaule's throat, he leaps from the dragon's lip 'into the brush below' (34).

Beautiful Blood unfolds episodically rather than via the premeditated cogitations of a well-oiled 'plot'. The one story element possessing the pleasing quality of gears efficiently meshing derives from the first appearance of Meric Cattanay, whom Rosacher meets on a bench outside Teocinte's council chamber. Cattanay has gone there to persuade the council to approve his strategy for killing Griaule. Rosacher insists on going in before him (although Cattanay arrived earlier), explaining, '[The] council will be in a more receptive mood after I have done than they are at the moment' (44), and makes good on his prediction by offering the city a percentage of his mab profits if it will legitimise the operation. Understanding that Cattanay's plan will take decades, Rosacher persuades the city fathers that a protracted death for Griaule will allow Teocinte to grow in wealth and power (if they also approve the militia he asks for to protect their investment); further, every connected townsman will prosper, along with their descendants. Here, in fact, it feels as if Shepard is cannily plotting, not just linking episodes like so many mismatched hopper cars.

Elsewhere, events feel less contingent and as random, and often as unsatisfactory, as the unfolding of life itself. Chapter 4 opens *four years* after chapter 3. Rosacher recalls nothing of their passage, but deduces that the mab trade has financed both his regal quarters and the hiring of the courtesan, Ludie, who loaned him the cash he needed to pay Timothy Myrie for securing his first syringes of blood from Griaule's tongue. Moreover, *seven years* elapse between chapters 5 and 6, with Rosacher again ignorant of their passage but savvy enough to realise that a dream messenger clad in a black suit has come to warn him of an attempt by the Church on his life. The Church, whose chief deity is not Christ but an entity called the Gentle Beast, resents the impact of mab on the faithful and resists the adoption of

Griaule as a figure in its pantheon. The messenger, though, calls the dragon 'An incarnation' and tells Rosacher, 'His flesh has become one with the earth' (72). After escaping murder, Rosacher has animal sex with a dumpling-faced servant whom he repays with 'a coin from atop the dresser' (79). Then Teocinte's militia, led by Arthur Honeyman, an illiterate henchman of Rosacher's, attacks a local cathedral as payback to the Church for trying to kill him. It may follow that Rosacher would seek such revenge, but the chapter feels at once perfunctory and melodramatic.

In any event, it abruptly ends, and *four more* lost years pass between it and the start of chapter 8, in which, seated on one of Griaule's paint scaffolds, Rosacher speaks with Meric Cattanay about 'happiness', to little real purpose, before visiting Hangtown and *Martita's Home in the Sky*, a tavern run by Martita Doan. Now a widow, once as a maid she became the virtually faceless object of his lust and so conceived a son. To her regret, Martita did not carry the child to term. These revelations affect Rosacher, but mostly to fill him with anger toward Honeyman and Ludie for failing to tell him of his unborn child's brief fetal existence. Later, on Griaule's back, these two rebuke him for his 'incompetence', claiming that mab profits 'are down nearly thirty per cent' (109) and admitting that they have struck a deal of their own with council leader Breque.

Then, by pushing him from the dragon, Honeyman tries to murder Rosacher, who again escapes death, this time aided by pieces of a shattered scale — a 'leaf storm' of golden insects — which so harry and sting Honeyman that *he* falls. When these glowing flakes beset Rosacher, they trigger in him 'a crackling scream', upon whose noise he surfs 'as if it were a wave' (116–18). With the help of Jarvis Riggins, an old scalehunter, Martita saves Rosacher, sheltering him in her tavern from Ludie's prying. This time, when he awakes, he realises that he has lost *only days, not years*, of his life. Also, mab enables him to view Martita as a goddess, in whose body he recurrently drowns.¹¹

Five weeks after Honeyman's attempt on his life, Rosacher accompanies Riggins into Griaule's gut for a look-see. Riggins accepts the dragon's divinity, an idea that Rosacher once scoffed at. Now he has an epiphany: He realizes that the creature has become an ecosystem 'supporting a vast biotic community' (133); consequently, he begins to suspect that he, too, could profitably adopt the scalehunter's vision:

He needed a building, an edifice the equal of a cathedral

- 11 Despite, as well as because of, her easy sexuality, Martita Doan is the most admirable woman in the two Griaule books. In contrast to most of the other women in these stories — Lise, Catherine, Brianne, Mierelle, Magali, Sylvia, Yara, Ludie, et al. — she has both earnestness and great-heartedness to recommend her. She is clearly of 'low birth', a 'drab' who has ascended by dint of a brief marriage and hard work. Albeit star-struck by Rosacher, she is so by virtue of her origins and her generosity of spirit, not the impact of mab. Of course, the man on whom she has fixated cannot truly love her: She is not his intellectual equal, a flaw that he finds less tolerable than pride or sexual duplicity. Sorry: We are in the realm of fantasy here, and only in hip, consciousness-raising twenty-first-century cartoons — think the *Shrek* franchise — do princesses marry ogres or princes ogresses. Shepard declares that Rosacher and Martita remain 'great friends' (149), but dramatises only two brief subsequent 'friendly' exchanges.

and devoted to a similar purpose, yet constructed in such a fashion so that its function would be unclear to the Church until late in the day ... [The Church] would rattle their sabers and might, in extremis, be provoked to send an army against Teocinte; but the militia had grown powerful enough to defend the city and, once Mospiel's troops had a taste of mab, it would be a short war. (134–5; my ellipsis)

This desire for a building supports Rosacher's apprehension that the House of Griaule (as he renames the Hotel Sin Salida upon rebuilding it after its imminent destruction) will supplant every other religion. After all, how can any church 'stand against a religion that delivered on its promises in the here and now, whose sacrament bestowed rewards that were tangible and immediate, and not some vague post-mortem fantasy' (133)?

This chapter ends when a creature from Griaule's biotope, a flat, slimy critter seven or eight feet wide, oozes toward Rosacher and Riggins, and Riggins identifies it as '*Armaga lingua*', or 'Devil's tongue' (136). Sadly, this scene reminds me of novels with pasteboard covers that, as a grade-schooler, I checked out of our school library in Mulvane, Kansas, in the 1950s. Ostensibly SF, they bore on their spines either a launch-ready rocket ship or an atom with orbiting electrons, and whenever their pseudonymous authors needed to jog the plot, they introduced the surefire menace of a hostile alien or a hideous planetary monster, so that my heart beat faster and hair arose on my nape. Despite his oft-expressed contempt for the cheesy, Shepard uses this same tactic in *Beautiful Blood* at least three times,¹² and each occurrence made me wince in dismay.

After the House of Griaule rises upon the ruins of the Hotel Sin Salida, Rosacher works to 'create a fantasy religion [wedding] the sybaritic to a faux spirituality' (142). As he does, Martita tells Rosacher that in ten years he has not noticeably aged. Meanwhile, the town's militia readies an attack on Temalagua for reasons contrived to get Rosacher out of town and keep the action rolling. Breque and Rosacher confer, Ludie dies from a fall from her horse, and Rosacher composes two essays that the adherents of his 'fantasy religion' esteem as prophetic sermons: 'On Our Dragon Nature' (162) and 'Is The God I Worship The God I Cause To Be?' (163). Rosacher falls in love with a woman named Amelita Sobral, an agent of Breque's taxed with locating Ludie's will. 'For the life of him,' writes Shepard, 'Rosacher could not fathom why he loved Amelita' (173). Neither can the reader, who, to boot, cannot fathom *her* attraction to *him*. Her end comes abruptly and beggars belief (179–85), but involves injecting herself with dragon's blood after earlier asserting that she would find it 'interesting to grow old and wrinkled' (177).

Rosacher purportedly grieves for eight months. Temalagua and Mospiel plot war against Teocinte's militia.¹³ Then, at least partly at Breque's behest, he sets off for Temalagua in search of a former scalehunter, Oddboy Cerruti, whose name appears in a secret folder alongside that of a man called 'Carlos', who, we at length learn, is the

enlightened king of Temalagua. Rosacher finds Cerruti on a vast plain and quickly picks up on the fact that he has a friend named Frederick. Frederick is one of Shepard's hybrid monsters, a man who has metamorphosed into 'a black featureless mound half the size of a full-grown elephant' (210). Cerruti communicates with Frederick telepathically, and Frederick, who has a taste for horseflesh, soon eats Rosacher's steed (albeit with his permission), and Rosacher believes that maybe the monster can kill Carlos and make it look as if some fierce animal has done for him.

Rosacher and Cerruti cross into Temalagua and arrive at a jungle longhouse. Here, Frederick snatches a woman whom Cerruti has taken to a nearby hut for a sexual encounter and spirits her away. The village headman sends a runner to tell the king what has happened, and Rosacher now determines 'that if the king could be brought to Becan [the village in question], it would ... be proof that Griaule's will was at work here' (240; my ellipsis). Even so, Rosacher also realises that to murder Carlos would be 'to kill a man who had done far more good than evil' (237).

Later scenes testify to Carlos's goodness, even if an odd 'variety of narcissism' (271) colours his personality. While hunting Frederick, who has presumably eaten Cerruti's woman, Carlos suffers a coral snake bite in Rosacher's company, and Rosacher fears that everyone will suspect *him* of murder. Before Carlos's demise, however, he learned from the king that Teocinte's militia is not as powerful as he believed and that Carlos had 'no designs against a country that is ready to tear itself apart' (258); it is Mospiel, rather than Teocinte, that the king feared. Lessoned thus, Rosacher sets off for Chisec, a Temalaguan village, suppressing his anxiety about what 'might be following behind' (272).

I felt cruelly yanked about by these narrative jumps. The only aesthetic justification I can imagine for them all would abide in textual evidence that they reflect a like apprehension on Rosacher's part, and I fail to find this evidence in his oddly unmotivated moves from one place to another throughout the novel. Perhaps this jumpiness reflects that of life itself and also the author's embrace of existential randomness. And perhaps I have little or no right to complain about this aspect of the novel. But I've summarised at such length because I could not otherwise sequence its events, which often feel to me as disconnected as the purportedly scattered pieces of Griaule's pillaged body.

C. And yet ...

Only the sixteenth chapter and a brief epilogue remain, and it is hard to find in any earlier passage a scene embodying a climax, grand or otherwise, to the bulk of *Beautiful Blood*. Chapter 16 opens with the words, 'Rosacher remained in Temalagua for *eight years*' (273; my italics). He passed this time 'organizing hunts for the creature' known as Frederick, which the men in Rosacher's hire drove 'south to the Fever Coast', at which point our protagonist terminated the hunts altogether (274).

Indeed, not until Griaule awakes and reduces Teocinte to ruins (see 'The Taborin Scale') does Rosacher work up the emotion 'to visit the country he had once called home' (275). Describing the thousands of people there 'picking over the [dragon's] corpse' (276), Shepard informs us that

Rosacher entertained the notion that he was observing the annihilation of a normal-sized lizard by a Lilliputian

12 Yes, I've done the same thing in a story or two, and, early in this essay, I praise Shepard for seeking to add life to moribund genre tropes. But *these* scenes, in a novel obviously meant for adults, lack credibility.

13 In *The Dragon Griaule*, I supposed Teocinte and Temalagua cities within the same country; in *Beautiful Blood*, they are separate countries, with cities that also bear their countries' names. (Have I misread?)

race of hominids who performed the functions of ants and beetles, and dwelled in a settlement of dirty gray canvas that hid the bulk of their repulsive habits from view. It was both an epic and [a] dismaying sight, one that called to mind the majesty of nature and at the same time posed an inescapable comment on the vile nature of mankind. (276–7)

Allusions to Brobdingnag and Lilliput illustrate that in *Beautiful Blood*, as well as in his earlier collection of Griaule stories, Shepard made scalehunting a conscious goal of both titles, i.e., raising weighty thematic concerns and highlighting vast existential ironies via imagery and rhetoric.

In the foregoing excerpt, he riffs on a well-known passage from *Gulliver's Travels* in which the Brobdingnagian king characterises Europeans as 'the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the Earth'.¹⁴ In short, Shepard uses Jonathan Swift's literary tools as scaffolds to prop up a theologically (not a politically) guyed tapestry that, from part to part, has insufficient thread to make the whole outsized structure seamlessly cohere.

Still . . .

The novel winds down with a final meeting between Rosacher and Breque in which the latter character, now 'an unrecognizable shrunken personage' (277) in a canopied bed, tells Rosacher, 'Death is simply a shabby theatricality at life's end to which we have all been given tickets ... with the possible exception of you' (278; Shepard's ellipsis). The two then talk awkwardly until Breque mawkishly announces, 'We were great men!' (280) and urges Rosacher not to judge himself too harshly. Auctorially, Shepard baldly notes that 'Rosacher could not help being moved by these sentiments' (281), a point that he might more artfully have made by indirection.

Later, Rosacher catalogues Breque's words to him 'under ... the charitable impulses of fiends, men responsible for thousands of deaths who at the end sought to bestow their blessing on the world' (282; my ellipsis). And, indeed, when Breque dies, the tremor that Rosacher feels is perhaps either an intimation of Griaule's passing 'soul' or 'a misperceived symptom of [his] own decay' (283).

The epilogue has as its setting 'an island far from anywhere' (285), a vague but quiet place where occasionally blood is spilled but where Rosacher can brood on dragon Griaule's 'evolution' through the stages of its conjunctural deity. The epilogue, and hence the novel, concludes with an excerpt from a journal that Rosacher now keeps. This excerpt contains a sketch about a crab in a wooden whistle, a 'crustacean genius nurtured by its musical house and taught to seek in all things a grand design' (290), a sort of meaningful minor of Griaule, a metaphor *without* a clear signifier. The epilogue also contains an equally brief interrupting tale about an island storyteller, one Walker James, who, drunk on the tropical sky, wonders aloud if it doesn't make Rosacher sad that 'we won't never hear a story to match all that sky and stars!' (291).

Did Lucius Shepard believe that he had told such a story?

Perhaps he recognised that he had not. I would argue that he suspected just that. His epilogue stands not as an apology but as a lament, and it features some of the most

touching writing in these in these two flawed but intermittently beautiful books.

The Dragon Griaule Sequence by Lucius Shepard: A Guide

The Dragon Griaule. Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2012 containing:

'**The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule**' (novelette), *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Dec 1984); *TDG*, 9–38.

'**The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter**' (novella), first appearance as a small book from Shingletown, CA: Mark V. Zeising, 1988; a subsequent appearance in *Asimov's Science Fiction* (Sep 1988); initially collected in a volume titled *The Ends of the Earth*, Sauk City, WI, Arkham House, 1988; *TDG*, 39–114.

'**The Father of Stones**' (novella), stand-alone title from Baltimore, MD: Washington Science Fiction Association, 1988; *TDG*, 115–96.

'**Liar's House**' (novelet), stand-alone title from Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2004; previously posted on *SciFiction* (Dec 2003); *TDG*, 197–239.

'**The Taborin Scale**' (novella), stand-alone title from Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2010; *TDG*, 241–306.

'**The Skull**' (novella), first appearance in *TDG*, 307–421.

Story notes (one entry for each of foregoing stories), first appearance in *TDG*, 423–31.

Beautiful Blood: A Novel of the Dragon Griaule. Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014, 291 pp.

Author's note

This essay-review took me far longer to write than I anticipated, and I grew weary of it owing to the difficulty of getting a grip on exactly what was happening, and why, in both *Beautiful Blood* and in more than half the stories in *The Dragon Griaule*. I felt obligated to finish, no matter what conclusions I drew, because I kept a review copy of the collection for nearly two years before asking Bill Shaffer at Subterranean Press for a copy of *Beautiful Blood*. I hoped that owning the novel would motivate me to do a long piece about both titles for the *New York Review of Science Fiction*.

Here, then, I thank Kevin Maroney of *NYRSF* and Bill Shaffer of Subterranean Press for their extraordinary patience.

I thank Gregory Feeley and Bob Kruger for replying separately to questions about either the books under review or their author, Lucius Shepard (1943–2014), whom we each knew in different capacities and from different perspectives. I also thank them for suggesting changes to the text, to improve its prose or to correct factual inaccuracies. I tried to *resist* being swayed by their critical takes on Shepard's writing, but confess that in a few instances either I agreed with these takes initially or I adopted their readings and tried to address them in my own way, seeking to be fair to both titles and their author without subverting my own standards or becoming either man's mouthpiece. Still, their help was invaluable, and I cannot fail to note that fact here, even if they dislike, as they have every right to, some—or a lot—of what they now find in this no doubt exhausting essay-review.

— Michael Bishop, 2014

14 Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Oxford, New York: Oxford World's Classics paperback, Oxford University Press, 1986, 1989, 121.