

Poetry and the Aesthetic of Morality

Michael McIrvin  
*Cheyenne*

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**Michael McIrvin,**

**"Poetry and the Aesthetic of Morality"**

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**Thematic Issue *Representing Humanity in an Age of Terror***

**Edited by Sophia A. McClennen and Henry James Morello**

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**Abstract:** In his paper "Poetry and the Aesthetic of Morality," Michael McIrvin charts the fall of language from its mythologized acquisition through its use in communal history and ritual to its present diminished function as advertiser's tool and means of control by those in power. The partial exegesis of a poem written in response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the subsequent U.S. response illustrates that the assignation of *otherness* on the present grand scale is emblematic of this diminishment. McIrvin argues that President Bush's misspeak leading up to the war and to the last presidential election is really a master propagandist's ploy suited perfectly for our age and our consumer culture. The poet's cultural role, as part of what Michel Foucault called the "search for an aesthetic of existence," can be to counter this diminishment of language and the reader's increasing inability to decode language.

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**Michael McIrvin****Poetry and the Aesthetic of Morality****The Myth**

The goddess Cantarita, known by some as *La Verdad*, bathed in cold clear water under a moon so full her breasts ached, her midnight aureoles dripping the deep blue milk of life. As she moved, the inchoate hum-of-being rose from her flesh, for she had left her amulet of syllables on the bank with her gown. A man peered from the bushes, frightened by the voice of creation, but he hungered for Cantarita too, and he felt ashamed. As she washed, he crept forward to touch the perfect hem of her moonlit gown and discovered the string of vocables wrapped in it. He could feel her eyes on him then, her night-black eyes, and her voice rose to a senseless shriek as he dove for the underbrush, swam through the bramble and hit the road at a dead run. When he stopped to catch his breath, he sat under a tree and used the string of sounds as prayer beads, letting them mumble through his fingers until he could intuit the many possible permutations, could taste them rising in his mouth, erupting on his tongue.

He was now the Master Signifier, but he felt an abiding guilt for his theft, which he answered by singing songs of healing for the infirm, songs of resurrection for the dead. He told histories around every fire pit he encountered as reverent faces stared at him, and he chanted the goddess's name night and day to atone for his thievery. Sometimes, he was careless, however, and left words lying about, which were stolen, re-spun and used for dark purposes, to label the neighbors *furniture* or *twisted meat* or *dirt*, so that they might be treated accordingly. The Master Signifier disapproved, but what could he do? Common criminals and kings alike ignored his pleas, and he told himself he would redouble his efforts. Chant harder, tell grander histories, sing and sing; and for a time, it worked -- but eventually the darkness deepened around him as if the light of the truth were being smothered.

One day, he happened to find himself on the same road down which he had fled with the string of sacred syllables, near the same riverbank where the goddess had bathed. She was nowhere to be seen, but he could feel just the slightest remnant of her passage in the grass and rising from the water. He fell asleep and dreamt that *La Verdad* had dissolved in the river, disintegrated in the air, and that her molecules were disseminated from where he slept to beyond the horizon. As the Master Signifier dreamt, a magician-hypnotist who had been following him, waiting for his chance, leapt forward and stole the syllables strung along a golden cord and skulked away. From that day forward, the magician-hypnotist lulled humans with deftly juxtaposed images, and most who heard could not seem to help but do his bidding. They ate what he told them to eat, wore what he told them to wear, thought they saw what he told them was real. His favorite trick was to rename their neighbors -- Filth, Less-than-Human, Not-Us -- and all who heard behaved accordingly. Now, nearly everyone seemed to hear.

**A Fragmentary Exegesis**

I was working on a novel and a new and selected poetry collection the day the World Trade Center towers melted to dust. I understood two things almost immediately following: the poetry book now needed a poem added to address this terrible event -- and to address what I knew would be the official U.S. response -- and the novel would be hard to sell to publishers (the bravery necessary in the face of an inevitable shift in market forces difficult to locate). The protagonist of the novel is a former CIA agent who worked in Mesoamerica in the last century, training so-called counterinsurgents in mayhem, particularly in the finer elements of torture, and the book is an implicit protest against that role. This intuition was strengthened by the almost immediate media chatter about increasing CIA

powers at the cost of civil liberties, but most definitively confirmed when Alan M. Dershowitz, renowned former civil rights lawyer and one-time defender of Soviet dissidents (and therefore emblematic in the extreme, perhaps), suggested that sometimes torture is a valid tool of war and offered a made-for-TV-movie argument: the ticking-bomb scenario. Importantly, he also suggested that torture be done openly and include "accountability," which stated the other way around is to "officialize" torture of course, to declare that there is such a thing as "good torture," presumably definable as the kind that the U.S. performs.

This shift away from a cultural emphasis on protecting human rights did not happen overnight, however. The attack in New York was certainly a catalyst, one that the powers-that-be obviously seized upon in something approaching a state of ecstatic joy, but the diminishment of language to a tool for dark magicians (politicians premiere among them) has a long inglorious history that merely seems to be culminating in America at the present moment. Governments have always renamed their adversaries so that they become something other, something less than human, but the practice seemed mostly unconscious, the perverse obverse of the atavistic human tendency to refer to ourselves as *the people* (i.e., the Dineh, Bantu, and Inuit -- which is also rendered "the real people," among many others, although there are notable exceptions too: Hopi means "the peaceful people"). At most, the success of modern advertising merely made the manipulation of the masses seem more overtly possible, which resulted in wars, military assaults, and weapons systems named like romantic movies -- Star Wars and Shock and Awe and Desert Storm -- which the news media has mostly insisted on repeating. This was one of the starting points for the poem to be added to my poetry collection.

The primary starting point, however, was perhaps the most amazing image ever broadcast: human beings falling feet first from the upper floors, as if children leaping from a porch, and exploding when they hit the ground. The image was like those in dreams, too odd to comprehend except metaphorically, as a cipher for some larger meaning. The images were shown as if by accident, the camera turned on and no tape delay, and then that footage was not repeated as the others from that day were, ad nauseam, as if we needed to be convinced these were not scenes from a movie. Perhaps the images were pulled from the airwaves to protect loved ones and to honor the right of those who leapt to dignified anonymity, or maybe because what those bodies exploding meant could not be withstood by those of us watching. For what we witnessed was not merely the upshot of our human being, evanescence in the extreme as it was acted out before our eyes, as a tide of effluvia spread over the pavement and washed away on the air, but humans diminished to a trope, in this case, to anonymous victims. These were not people because our brains would not allow us to see them as such, but merely one end of a metaphor, however existential and no matter that they had once been members of our category: *the people*.

Shock and grief were the dominant responses to this tragedy, but perhaps inevitable as lightning after thunder, that was soon followed by rage, which was what the poem tried to subvert in the reader -- the tendency to demand vengeance upon those with faces the general shape and hue of the killers. This was not understood by many who read the poem early on, insisting I had given "the terrorists" (now too often a catch-all for anyone who dissents, whether they throw a bomb or not, and thus the quotation marks) too much credit for humanity. After all, "they" had killed a couple thousand of "us." The fact that the poem offers a context for this act was contested most loudly, but there is always a context. Towers have long been associated with divinity because they reach for heaven, like the pyramids in Egypt and Mesoamerica, but these edifices are monuments to something else entirely in the modern U.S., to our sense of having defeated nature perhaps or to commerce unto its apotheosis. That fact in combination with the international banking activities that went on in the World Trade Center, and what those activities portend for the people who live in the third world, the poem asserts, means these towers represented Western economic oppression and the worship of mammon, the perceived evil now being pumped via satellite into countries where traditional cultures still hold sway, and mounds of debt. They represented undue Western influence and the subversion of their religion, both

in the form of temptation and economic leverage. Thus, these pyramids "wave in the sky as fingers in the face of God, / as accusation and rebuke" and represent America's "dissonant dream translated into a thousand / dialects (two-thirds dead in our lifetime) as dominion, / as winner-take-all, as devourer-of-whatever-gives-you-identity" (McIrvin 147).

This assertion of context was not intended to excuse the killers, however, who murdered not only those they assume responsible for their economic lot or who represent Western decadence and work to spread its influence, but janitors and cafeteria workers and those whose job it was to try to save everybody else. Moslems as well as Christians, atheists, and Jews, and probably a Buddhist, a Hindu, and a Jain or two. In short, the killers had made all U.S. citizens sufficiently *other* to withstand the thought of murdering the innocent, which was of course the official American response too. The poem was written long before the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, but one need not be an historian of international relations to predict the death of innocents would be the official reaction of our government. Not surprisingly, the number of dead in the towers and the number of dead in those bombing raids, mostly the blameless in both instances, were roughly equivalent. Markers were merely named something other than what they were, human beings, killed under "the rain of thousand-pound bombs" -- the poem's initial trope transmogrified -- and tallied against a perverse accounts owed entry in a virtual ledger.

The overarching theme of the poem is that both groups of killers had made the same move as regards signifier and signified (and one is tempted to term it the same PR move, however traditional unto biological such a strategy might be), made their victims less than human before assassinating them. In the poem, the rain trope transmutes once more, to the tears of God that fall now "as impotent rain," which would be a cliché except for the fact that both sets of killers are branches of the same Abrahamic tradition, obviously sharing a taste for blood as well as common ancestors. Murder is despicable, period, but perhaps all the more so when it is brothers who are killing each other, in this case, taking turns playing the part of Cain. Murder is enough to make a father weep, but fratricide is more than a double blow, the grief compounded geometrically, for there can be no *other* from this perspective, only blood kin gone under by the hand of blood kin.

### **The President of the United States as Performance Artist**

This does not completely explain the current situation in the U.S., however. Many of us were appalled, albeit less than surprised, by the revelations of torture at U.S. prisons in Iraq and Cuba, of possible secret prisons in former Eastern Block countries and kidnappings in the night (so-called "extraordinary renditions," as if the act were merely a virtuoso performance), of spying on U.S. citizens. Most hard to take, however: many Americans were not appalled. In fact, progressives have been utterly naïve, myself included, about the state of the U.S.-American psyche, the capacity for critical thought on the part of the masses. But then we did not expect such a masterly stand-up act by the President of our country: the man who was born in Connecticut and educated at Harvard and Yale speaking in a Texas drawl like an actor in a B-grade movie, telling us these macabre jokes in fractured syntax, but with a straight face because of course he means every debauched word. At first, it was hard not to simply smile and shake your head, perhaps like you did when you first heard Steve Martin in the 1970s speaking in an ersatz Eastern European drawl about liking women with heads (because, he said, he hates necks). But from the beginning the President's shtick carried an air of fear too, because he is President, because the brain is caught off-guard. We are wondering how an idiot got the most powerful post in the world, when it occurs to us: maybe he is actually a diabolical genius, Buster Keaton or Groucho or Lenny Bruce without the profanity but untoward aims. Or maybe he was simply born to the job in this age of hive-speak and language as advertiser's tool, best used for hypnotism and dissembling -- an idiot savant born to be king.

He repeated the same joke over and over prior to the election: "We are fighting a war, a war on terrorism, and Saddam walks into a bar, see, and he's carrying this weapon of mass destruction." The setup was always the same, but then he careened into some other topic before he got to the punch line, only to skip back to the setup again: Saddam, weapons of mass destruction, al-Qaeda. The effect was hypnotic, and when the time to vote rolled around, a poll indicated that 42% of the electorate believed that the Iraqi dictator had something to do with the attack on New York. This in the face of logic, in the face of expert testimony from witnesses with Capitol-cred up the kazoo, conservatives formerly on the inside sufficiently appalled by the sham to speak out. Moreover, anyone who dissented was called a terrorist, or at least a terrorist sympathizer, and sometimes this was just implied, but I swear I could hear strains of "America: love it or leave it" echoing throughout the land from some bygone era.

I doubt Fredric Jameson could have imagined that the President of the United States would eventually offer such ultimate and utterly uncomplicated proof of his assertion that "the anxieties of the absurd ... are themselves recaptured and recontained by a new and postmodern cultural logic, which offers them for consumption fully as much as its other seemingly more anodyne exhibits" (150), and in fact, the integration of propaganda in the form of absurd utterance turned out to be a simple formula, really. The President appears in media X times more than his opposition, Y times more than does the truth told by people with infinitely less cachet than the "leader of the free world," and the news media is now merely a medium (with all the passivity the word implies), toothless and slightly insane with all the concentration of power in so few hands -- afraid is a better word perhaps -- and so does not call him on this nonsense. Or maybe they were hypnotized too. After all, we are at war, or so the President says, over and over; and people are actually dying, some of "us," so it must be true -- the fact that the reasons for mayhem in Iraq were trumped-up notwithstanding -- and so the whole performance act became a circular argument: Saddam, WMDs, Osama, war that creates an actual insurgency that is backed in part by Osama, and there are continued rumors of WMDs (spread mostly by the performance artist himself), and Saddam's Baathists are part of the problem now, part of the insurgency. "See, I told you," the performance artist said, having finally reached the punch line, and the citizenry stared in dull-eyed silence for the most part, accepting as misspeak what was really a subliminal policy assertion and linguistic sleight of hand. Then, suddenly, the citizenry was accepting misspeak as the truth.

### **The Pandemic Public Use of Cell Phones as Metaphor and Sign**

Once upon a time, a conversation about your mother's hemorrhoid operation or an argument with your significant other was considered a private matter, in part because we are traditionally a wary culture about putting "our business" out there before people we do not know, but also because imposing our personal information on others was considered rude. However, the omnipresent conversation into thin air, while driving or walking around the supermarket, is now an element of the American landscape. This is obviously partly just a function of technological innovation, because people *can* now talk and drive down Main Street or walk about Wal-Mart at the same time, and it is in part merely symptomatic of the death of our tendency to privacy and public civility. However, it is also symbolic of both the ascendancy of a hive mentality and the need not to be *other*, to prove even to strangers that the speaker is part of some specific community -- people with whom they converse -- and that larger community -- cell phone users in general. We are connected. We belong, and don't you wish you did too?

Of course, this is the gist of all advertising as it has been raised to a primary tenet of market capitalism: buy to be, to belong, to be considered part of some community however tenuously; do not buy and be outside this group of lucky consumers, and my, they do all seem so happy, bouncing about the screen and smiling lasciviously, mocking you out there, on the outside. So to be *other* be-

comes the antithesis of being a citizen of the U.S. (because he/she who does not belong must not aspire adequately), and to being human (because it is only "natural" to want to be connected to other humans, to belong to the community). By default, the traditional divisions of race and class and gender all become subsumed into us-ness and otherness as defined by commodities and what advertisers purport them to signify, amorphous concepts that might indicate people who wear particular shoes and like a particular band or who imbibe one brand of beer and not another, who drive a Toyota and not a Chevy. This is not to say that the traditional divisions of in- and out-groups no longer obtain (Black men and Hispanic females and older Jewish people of both genders, etc., remain significant as target markets if nothing else, as they are sold commodity fetishes tailored to their group), but rather, that the sense of commodity community supersedes these more concrete categorizations and substantially ramps up alienation as a mechanism of differentiation in the service of market capitalism, and by extension, control.

The concept became something substantially more than merely a marketing ploy with the advent of new technologies like cell phones and, to some degree, the Internet. For now there were actual lines of communication established in the purchase, the product both significant of belonging and an actual tool of connection to said community. The fact that these are virtual associations and so less than fulfilling in any traditionally human sense aside, such nodes of shared experience come to define belonging in extraordinary ways. Not because there is a great amount of meaning in belonging or otherness so defined, but because alienation as both experience-to-be-escaped and as potential-experience-to-be-avoided becomes the defining psychological mechanism for so many. Thus, the American public nods its head to affirm whatever assertion is in vogue at the time, perhaps more easily than any other population in history, and given what has happened as a result of other populations being easily led at other times in history, this assertion should give one pause. Sheep by any other name, who can become a pack of proverbial wolves just like that.

Thus, an entire people (definable via religious affiliation, ethnicity, geographic homeland) can be deemed the enemy, and the enemy can be made *other*, that much more easily -- and so tortured and killed. The same move that yielded "gooks" three-plus decades ago yields "towel-heads," but now even such creative neologisms are not necessary because "terrorist" covers it all ("liberal" standing in for those of us who are accused of not going along, thereby relegated to a sub-category of not-us). Thus, the President can mouth certain key elements of what he wants the masses to believe, inserting them almost randomly into any speech he gives, and the masses will not only buy a subliminal policy assertion but do so readily. For by this time we know how those people are, the terrorists, and we sure as hell know what they look like (they have that damned swarthy look about them), what god they pray to, how much they hate the good old U.S.A.; and come to think of it, I would not put it past them to do something big like that again if we do not blow them to hell. And surely we have the right to pull out a few fingernails if that means America will be safe from terrorism, and the President assures us we are not safe now. And the President swears on the Bible he would not eavesdrop on any of *us* who do not by God deserve it, just those in that sub-category of *not-us*, the bastards who are only pretending to be one of *us*, who are perhaps the terrorists next door as depicted in those TV shows.

Otherness becomes easy to ascribe, a sense of pariah-hood made all the more egregious by one's fear of being assigned to the category "outsider" too. And so the listeners go along with whatever the misspeaker says who delivers policy pronouncements in code that border on the surreal but make so much subliminal sense (the following quotations were collected by Weisberg): "He was a state sponsor of terror. In other words, the government had declared, you are a state sponsor of terror" (On Saddam Hussein, Manhattan, Kansas, 23 January 2006). "I mean, there was a serious international effort to say to Saddam Hussein, you're a threat. And the 9/11 attacks extenuated that threat, as far as I-concerned" (Philadelphia, 12 December 2005) (see Weisberg <<http://www.slate.com/id/76886/>>). It is worth noting that, if the masses were actually listening (as

in critically), they could hear a kernel of the truth in these assertions too. As in much of our exalted performance artist's best material, the truth is bobbing along just beneath the surface: "the government declared ... as far as I-concerned [*sic*]" (Weisberg <<http://www.slate.com/id/76886/>>). It is almost as if the truth cannot be kept out of language, however hard the speaker might try, but increasingly, it is apparently quite a trick for most of our fellow citizens to hear it through the noise.

### **Poetry: Toward an Aesthetics of Existence**

What kind of moronic naïf expects a poem to stand up to such master-hypnotist machinations, especially given how widely disseminated, consumed like any other product, those messages are, how shot through the culture the manipulation of our sense of otherness and the anxiety it produces have become, especially given the fact that poetry is read by so few and perhaps for good reason, because it has become anemic? Besides, the best poem is too insubstantial a thing to possibly achieve agency. There is no heft in the palm as when one holds a club or a gun, or a cell phone or a Blackberry for that matter. The poem is nothing but air clipped, sliced, and twisted by the tongue, slid across its surface, maybe spanked like a buxom, a broad-shouldered lover as it is spat forth to flap away on the slightest breeze -- the poem's inarticulate mother/cousin and sea of return at once. The thing tails away into oblivion as soon as it is spoken, to silence, the poem killer.

Ironically, there is all that noise with which to contend as well, seemingly an insurmountable wave for such a tiny creature to withstand. Televisions blaring are but one source of static (in bars, restaurants, Times Square), now joined by cell phones and handheld electronic devices and computers and deep basso stereo-delivered music like the sound of the sea as migrating birds crossing Kansas must hear it. But this wave of sound is everywhere and so not a sign by which to navigate: Laundromats and eateries, exuding from implements carried by strangers and loved ones, drivers and pedestrians, the same message on all of them in one master-hypnotist's voice or another -- or mimicked by successfully hypnotized average citizens -- until these carriers-of-devices and watchers of screens must hear it in their sleep, see the electronic print. The wave threatens to subsume the hearer him/herself, so how can there be even a dime-sized space for the subtle rhythmic shift of the poem, its alliterative magic, let alone the well-placed caesura? Worse, perhaps Sven Birkerts is right: "a fundamental cognitive reorganization is underway" (115). Not only is the poem in danger of disappearing in the noise that is its context or dissolving to nothing before it can be noticed, read, fathomed, but the human capacity to comprehend the text at any level below its surface is diminishing anyway, and so poetry's ephemerality in the face of such odds is only a prelude to utter extinction. The masses do not fathom the master-hypnotist's aims, only hear his words as if in a dream, and a poem that stands in opposition is recognized only as another instance of the same disjointed syntax like they type into their palms -- c u @ home luv u:). In Birkert's words, "My intuition -- and fear -- is that ... changes in the way we live are altering our cognitive structure and moving us away, perhaps irrevocably, from former aptitudes ... Our movement into electronic environments has brought us to a threshold" (112).

I am a poet -- which is perhaps a Quixote-esque admission given what precedes it -- and thus I do not take these obstacles lightly, cannot be flippant in my approach to my art (for its own sake, as it were, is not an option). If Birkerts is right, the ability to decode text, to arrive at a deeper sense of what words contain, whether it be a poem or the master-hypnotist's dark incantations, is a muscle atrophying, but giving up is hardly the answer given what is at stake. Perhaps the poet's primary job in our age is, first, to reclaim the role of language in our lives by stealing back the tools with which the master-hypnotist has absconded, and then to insist that a reader participate in the making of meaning (that the reader exercise the appropriate muscle, as it were). I am certainly not suggesting that many will answer the challenge, successfully or otherwise, or that the wall of noise is even penetrable, but one must try. This is perhaps what Michel Foucault meant by "the search for an aesthetics of existence," which he said must follow the disappearance of "morality as obedience to a code of rules" (49).



And how else can we explain the fact that arguably the greatest democratic republic in the history of the world officially sanctions torture (or the other dark arts as practiced by the present administration) than the utter abandonment of morality-as-obedience-to-a-code-of-rules. If we are to withstand this onslaught against our humanity, it would seem that just such an aesthetic, a sense of our shared human being that countermands the diminishment of anyone to furniture and dirt, to *not-us* and all that portends, is in order.

The most eloquent defense of the role of poetry in this regard is John Berger's: "Every authentic poem contributes to the labour of poetry. And the task of this unceasing labour is to bring together what life has separated or violence has torn apart ... Poetry can repair no loss, but it defies the space that separates ... Poetry renders everything intimate. This intimacy is the result ... of the bringing together-into-intimacy of every act and noun and event and perspective to which the poem refers. There is often nothing more substantial to place against the cruelty and indifference of the world than this caring ... To break the silence of events, to speak of experience however bitter or lacerating, to put into words, is to discover the hope that these words may be heard, and that when heard, the events will be judged" (450, 451, 452). I would push this assertion further, however: if a poem is actually received, if indeed the reader does the work to "get it" (however dynamically "getting it" must be interpreted), the reader must participate not only in the making of sense the poem implies like a multivalent seed, but also deal with the experience the poem represents relative to an aesthetic of existence. As William Carlos Williams said a long time ago, "It is the imagination / which cannot be fathomed. / It is through this hole / we escape // Through this hole / at the bottom of the cavern / of death, the imagination / escapes intact" (212). In short, the imagination allows us access to all of human experience, and thereby the poem is the ground whereupon a dance between the poet and the world takes place, but it is also a dance between the reader and the poet, what he or she engendered there. And no dance is passive -- you are dancing or you are not. The poem represents the experience it conveys, and thus the reader must deal with that experience, incorporate it into his or her conception of the world or explain it away. If the experience the poem contains includes torture, whether it actually portrays the poet's lived reality or, as is the case in the following poem written for this essay, it is a radical act of creative empathy, the issue is rendered "intimate" and must be dealt with as such:

You do not recognize the voice  
as cinderblock echoes meet precisely  
where you sit, blindfolded and piss-drenched.

The current flows better now  
and you have almost grown accustomed  
to the smell of boiled urine, singed  
pubic hair, hot flesh....

Maybe it is not a voice at all, but rabbits  
being slaughtered or hundreds of children weeping  
or a nail driven through glass.

Strange to be embarrassed your tormenter  
knows you so intimately, sees you this way,  
smells you. Then shame gives way to emptiness  
big as God: the rise and fall of the voice matches  
the waves of pain inevitable as incoming tide.

And you open outward like a hothouse flower,  
 names rising like pollen on the scorched air:  
 your priest the vagabond urchins on your street  
 the man you met on the bus yesterday a librarian  
 you have only admired from afar the checker at the  
 market a neighbor's prepubescent child your dentist....

All innocent as far as you know, but you  
 can hate yourself tomorrow, the rest  
 of your life you can dream them screaming  
 in the same strained register as the cinderblock echoes.

Your tormentor removes the blindfold,  
 you blink to reveal a pair of bloodstained  
 panties, and the God-sized emptiness  
 fills with impossibly white sheet lightning.

You beg to die, but the tormentor asks patience,  
 cooperation. Just one more name so he can stop  
 hurting you, all this wailing and the mess  
 and the dreams he will have too, one  
 more name, so your daughter your wife  
 your sister can go free.

Admittedly, this poem employs a cheap trick, one of the most rudimentary tools stolen back from the magician-hypnotist. The second person pronoun demands that the reader enter the poem by taking the speaker's place even as he has taken the prisoner's place. The reader is now participating in the production of the world, but not "in the classical economic sense of the word, but ... the never-completed, always-being-produced state of experience: the production of the world as reality" (Berger 458). In short, this is not merely a vicarious experience to add to the trove that is one's life list, but requires subjective participation that yields some small change in the fabric of the universe, first the reader's personal universe and then the consensual human universe. The poem dares you to scoff, to be unchanged, to listen to lies that permit such violence without protest.

The poem implies several rhetorical questions: Could you withstand this pain, dear reader? Are you man enough? Woman enough? At what point would you too give up everyone you know? At what point beg for death? Can you see the torturer in your mind? A man/woman with dark skin or fair, light or dark eyes, wearing what uniform? Can you imagine the torturer as your neighbor, a guard at Abu Ghraib perhaps because we may never forget those images of some of *us* guilty of such offenses? And why does the torturer claim to wish to end your ordeal -- truth or ploy or both -- and what of the mention of dreams in that section of the poem? Is the torturer too a victim of his/her government's ability to make *other* some poor sap, you, who must pay with his/her blood and perhaps a descent to madness? And what did you do to deserve this fate, this pain, dear reader, this burden that you as the man/woman in the poem will never outlive? Did you speak too much? Too little? Is your religion the wrong one? Were you caught in a place you should not have been, like in the street during a rudimentary round up of people who look like you, talk like you, dress as you do, who are about your age? Does it matter? Does anyone on earth, regardless of his or her violation, deserve to be in this heinous chair? And perhaps some questions not immediately within the purview of the poem's thematic strategy will also arise for a reader in our bleak present, a further extrapolation from the poem to the world as it joins the reader's experience set, as it demands to be dealt with relative to his/her ever-developing moral aesthetic: Can you accept assertions of the *otherness* of those your government tortures? Can you simply accept the dark magician's claims of the need and efficacy of this practice? Can Alan Dershowitz read this poem and still offer a scenario from a television show (one of those designed, consciously or un-, to keep us afraid, to perpetuate the dark magician's claims) without breaking out in hives?

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## Coda

In his book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Malcolm Gladwell describes a model for society-level change that advertisers have known about for decades: ideas (and products) spread in the same way as viruses (and hence "viral marketing," and indeed, the marketing industry's embrace of Gladwell's book as a training manual). Exposure is followed by contagion, and in between are a series of incremental changes on the part of individuals that result in critical mass, or what Gladwell terms the tipping point: that moment when there is a dramatic rise in a given idea's presence in the population.

As a poet friend told me once: no one ever stormed the barricades because of a poem. The call to arms, or even to overt protest, is not the poem's purview, however. The poem works more subtly, at the level of human emotions and psychology, by enacting experience. Paradoxically, the overt aim of any authentic poem is not to change the world precisely because a poem never has, but then again, that *is* the aim as well, to change readers in some incremental way by foisting a vision of the world upon them with which they must interact, that they must subjectively assess relative to their context and their aesthetic of existence. D.H. Lawrence's assertion becomes all the more true within our present shared context, the current historical moment when the odds are so long that a poem will even get through and the noise is threatening to drown us all: "The essential function of art is moral. Not aesthetic, nor decorative, not pastime and recreation. But moral. The essential function of art is moral. But a passionate, implicit morality, not didactic. A morality which changes the blood, rather than the mind. Changes the blood first. The mind follows later, in the wake" (180).

A powerful harlequin-king rules over the present dark age, and poets' efforts seem so paltry compared to the vast media apparatus he manipulates that we aren't even on his radar screen. Although the truth resides in nearly every surreal claim (and disclaimer), there in plain view for the American public to decipher, although polls indicate that the masses grow increasingly restless at the rising body count (the tally marks in the "us" column) but more so because of the rising tab, little has changed for the good in the overall tone of U.S.-American discourse since this grand performance began shortly after the attack in New York. I have no illusions that my simple attempts to re-incorporate the other in a few poems will awaken readers in sufficient numbers to overthrow the harlequin's regime or bring about a rebirth of respect for human life, but my aesthetic of existence entails the attempt -- and my hope remains that the tipping point is closer than is immediately apparent. What can a poem accomplish in the world? Not much against such odds maybe, but perhaps just enough.

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Author's profile: Michael McIrvin is the author of five collections of poetry, most recently *Optimism Blues: Poems Selected and New* (Cedar Hill Publications). He has also written a collection of essays, *Whither American Poetry*, and a novel, *Déjà vu and the Phone Sex Queen*. He is currently shopping his novel manuscript titled *The Blue Man Dreams the End of Time*, which is partly about the CIA's actions in Mesoamerica and mostly about violence as the

bleak mechanism of history, and he is finishing a new poetry collection tentatively entitled *Hearing Voices* (one section is called "Poet in Wartime" and will include the poem discussed in this essay). McIrvin taught literature and writing for several years, most recently at the University of Wyoming, and presently makes his living as a writer and freelance editor. Email: <[mcirvinm@earthlink.net](mailto:mcirvinm@earthlink.net)>