

# into thoughts of poetry ...



romance, lost histories. An idyll, yes — but before long Skilmer's domestic bliss was shattered. He was followed to Yucatan by Mrs. Chloe P. Robbins of Ashtabula, a steamfitter's widow. With her came her daughter, the 47-year old Honesta Lou, whom Skilmer called his "buxom nymph o' siren voice" — she was six feet two, her flaring red hair vivid with purple highlights. It is this vision of somewhat menacing loveliness that is now evoked in lines that recall Coleridge's

Beware, beware  
His flashing eyes! his floating hair!

With deft economy, Skilmer laments the timelessness of his plight by using the archaic "'Ware' for 'Beware.'"

6.

Po'Em's our maid. 'Bye, fools! Like me,  
Butt only. Godkin may kertree!

Almost from the beginning, it was clear to a happy few that what seemed "poem" was really "Po' Em," a poor Southern girl named Emma or Emily. Her identity long eluded researchers, until Dr. Cecily P. Wunkhead, basing her argument largely on blood tests, litmus paper, and *Old Crow 1066* (and rejecting the famous "succotash reading" as spurious) proposed that the unknown Em was none other than Emily Dickinson. To show that Emily is the mouthpiece not only for New England but for all America Skilmer resorts to an amazingly simple device: he gives her a *southern* voice: probably not since Praxilla has the ethos of inner dynamic been so functionally aligned with dialectical specificity.

Any why Emily Dickinson? Because she is the American Muse, ever at our side to lend a helping hand with torch on high — a servant, she, or servants of the laurel. Po'Em's our *maid*, and with our trust in her we can afford to dismiss the vulgar many, as Skilmer does with much the same testy arrogance that Yeats and Jonson flaunted. Whereas Jonson needed ten words or so in his

Far from the wolves' dark jaw, and the black asses' hoof

Skilmer does it in two burning words, "'Bye, fools!" But immediately compassion returns, and he remembers that the ordinary man, just as he, is only a butt for the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. This might have set a-moping a less resilient bard, but Skilmer recovers, to conclude with a thundering diapason of *Jubel und Ruhm* such as not even Beethoven has ever equalled: the magnificent "Godkin may kertree!" Godkin: a little god, that least of the divinities in man, godkin *may* — but how the gala vowel, long a, implies lyric certainty in a word which, heard by the intellect alone, might seem to allow for doubt. *May* what? He may "kertree"! It is fitting that the pinnacle of Skilmer's sublimity should glitter in this final phrase of his greatest poem. And how like him to achieve sublimity by means so simple! Here he seizes from its lexical limbo the humble prefix *ker-*, as in *kerplunk*, *kerplop*, *kerflooie*. A prefix that only once before in English and assumed nobility, in J.F. Dudley-Andover's sublime translation of Dante's

E caddi come corpo morto cade  
as  
I plopped kerplunk, as corpses plopp kerplunk.

Holding the precious *ker-* in the jeweler's forceps of his wit, Skilmer works it into a new thing entirely by fusing it with the unexpected "tree": to "kertree," to burst into flower, into foliage, nay, into very tree itself! One sees the creativity of the universe, the vital breath taking form in a great efflorescence of green, a cosmic sneeze as if the whole sweet growth of April and May, by some cinematic magic, were effected in an instant.<sup>6</sup>

It is around this magical last line that scholarship itself tends oftenest to kertree. "Godkin" in particular has stimulated the finest hermeneutic acumen of our century to new Everests of perception. Professor Fiedler has explored in depth the profound viscerality of "gutkin." The Cambridge School has constructed a breath-taking new theory of the origin of tragedy on the reading "goat-kin." It is hardly surprising that "incentive psychologists" make much of "goadkin." Professor Fitts, citing γὰρ-ἀνδρῶν, finds a fish-dog, or dogfish, allusion that unfortunately cannot be discussed in these pages. Nor can the suggestion of certain Welshmen, who urge an early form of "gwiddcwyng." Professor Rakóczy is more to the point in reminding us of what careless readers might forget:

"gyodzskin" is a medieval South Hungarian gypsy cant word (though hardly the most common) for a thickish wine made out of half-rotted artichokes: what vistas open here! Only recently Nopancópi Hopail has removed the whole question from the field of linguistic speculation to that of biographical allusion by proposing — how imaginatively! — that "godkin" is "Godkin": E.L. Godkin (1831-1902), who came to America from

Ireland when twenty-five, founded *The Nation*, and was a disciple of the Bentham-Mill-Grote school of philosophy.

On the whole subject, however, no one commands more respect than Professor Fredson Bowers, whose monumental fifty-volume edition of Skilmer, *The Fourteen Poems and Certain Fragments* is promised for 1970 by the Southeastern Arkansas Junior Teachers' College Press. As early as 1962 Professor Bowers wrote: "I wonder if you have thoroughly considered the evidence of *Old Crow 16?* In this version, possibly a trial, 'May' is capitalized and must therefore be taken as the month.<sup>7</sup> If this is so, the possibility obtains that the godkin referred to is the month of May, and hence we can explain the diminutive. After all, in the month of vernal growth there is something godlike in the creative surge of the sap and the burgeoning of the chlorophyll. However, the syntax is then in question. There is perhaps no need to associate 'godkin May' with the 'butt', even though a month that pretends to be a little god might be a butt for something. I think on the whole we are to take 'godkin May's' activities with approval, not with disapproval. If so, then I suggest that Skilmer, overcome with the wonder of vegetable love and the rites of spring, finds that normal syntax deserts him and is reduced to two paired but mutually discrete exclamations. 'Godkin May!' or: Oh the wonder of it all! And then that exclamation that sums up the plosive force of May, 'Kertree!'"

This is brilliantly reasoned and would seem to be the last word on the subject — but Professor Bowers had not yet done with it. A few years later he decided that the line had further subtleties, which he explained, in bibliographical terms, as follows: "It could be read as a series of ejaculations, rising to a climax. The lack of punctuation appropriate for this reading is of course nothing unusual with Skilmer. That is: only Godkin — the one God — He only. Then in remembered ecstasy of that Mexican spring, May (and here Professor Bowers shows his grasp of contemporary allusion) just busting out all over, like the bursting sap, the springing leaf, in the ultimate mystical union with Nature, kertree! Thus exclamation points should be placed after each unit. I suggest these are at least alternate readings."

But perhaps these are matters beyond the power of man to determine. However it may be, Godkin may indeed kertree — but it takes a poet of supreme insight to perceive this, a poet able to wrest language from dead strata of the past and kerplunk it living in the midst of men. But explication is no substitute for the poem. Here, for the first time presented in its ur-textual splendor, is what many\*\* would consider the greatest lyric poem of our literature:

THERESE  
by Joe. E. Skilmer

I think? That I shall never, see!  
Up, owe 'em love. Leah's a tree.

A tree — who's hung? Greymouth is pressed  
Upon the earth-Swede, Flo Ingbrest.

Upon whose boozin's (no!) has lain  
Anne D'Intagh Mittley — lives wi' Thrane.

A tree that looks it! Gawd! Auld, eh?  
And Liffs hurl eaveyalms, tout pretts.

A tree ... that Mayan summer! 'Ware  
Honesta Robbins! Henna hair!

Po' Em's our maid. 'Bye, fools! Like me,  
Butt only. Godkin may kertree!

<sup>1</sup> Crudd P. Crass, "Joe E. Skilmer's Uncurling Lip," *LBJ* ix, 167-761.

<sup>2</sup> Clementine P. Pugh, "Joe E. Skilmer: Metonymy Sil Synecdoche No!" *EETX*, cxi, 930-954.

<sup>3</sup> Louis P. ("Lew") Gubrious, "Greymouth: Effeminate Lecher," *PMLX*, clv, 10-656.

<sup>4</sup> Lemuel P. and Lizzie X. Legion, "Who's Hugh in American Letters," *ACDC*, xi, 1066-1492.

<sup>5</sup> So Professor Nims alleges. There are others who take a less simplistic view. "Liff," as every schoolboy knows, is the way Dubliners refer to the River Liffey, whose waves are here in reference, since one casts alms, or bread, upon the waters. It would seem that Skilmer is alluding to the future *Finnegan's Wake* (Anna Livia Plurabelle) which was to be so profoundly influenced by "Therese." *Editor*.

<sup>6</sup> Wozlok DeTritus, "Rubbish-Schmubbish: The Ding-an-sich in Late-Middle Skilmer," *RSVP*, ix, 51-52.

<sup>7</sup> Skilmer's neologism has itself kertreen. One example out of many: Nancy Hale, one of Skilmer's most sensitive readers, has written, "The flowering of New England, that literary outpouring, kertreed everywhere ..." *New England Discovery* (Coward-McCann, 1963), p.353.

<sup>8</sup> Professor Bowers has established elsewhere the fact that Skilmer refused to accept "May" as a girl's name. "You might as well say 'June' is a girl's name," the poet would guffaw. Cf. F. Bowers, "Skilmer and the Non-Nomenclature of Womenfolk," *QED*, ix, 7-9.

\*\* Does this include professor Ian Watt? *Editor*.

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