

Spring turns a man's fancy

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Genuine revolutions in literary taste and theory occur on an average only once every seven generations; therefore it is a source of satisfaction to have myself piloted what may be the most shattering reappraisal in our literature. I am referring — as the world of letters now knows well — to the discovery (made about the time that flying saucers began to be widely observed here and abroad) of that core of inner *is-ness* in the poetry of the long misread, long underrated Joburt Eggson Skilmer, or Joe E. Skilmer as he himself signed his poems. Slighted by serious readers for what seemed the facility of his technique and the pious banality of his thought — especially as shown in the poem known as "Trees" — Skilmer was in reality the perpetrator of an existentialist hoax on a public that prided itself on knowing what was genuine.

For many years, many of us had been dissatisfied with the reading generally accorded this remarkable poem — the kind of official reading that provoked academic guffaws in a thousand classrooms. "There is more here than meets thee, eye," I would murmur to myself, teased by a host of ambiguities, of velleities that never quite came clear. It was a question of tone. Perhaps my first breakthrough came when I heard Professor Wrugson O. Muttson reading a line from Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter":

A fourteen I married my Lord you.

Muttson read the line as if it expressed wifely devotion. But it was obvious to me, as to any especially sensitive reader, that Pound intended the line to be heavily ironic, and that the "tone" might better be represented by something like

At fourteen I married (my Lord!) you?

My trouble had been that I was ventriloquizing, putting my own voice into the poem, instead of letting it read *itself to me*. Do not read poems — this became my principle — be read to by them. This approach led to a number of discoveries, of which possibly the most earth-shaking was my article proving that Hamlet's famous soliloquy is not about suicide at all but about his meteorological and alchemical experiments with a number of test tubes (the "retorts" he is famous for), of which the tube lettered "E" seemed the most promising if the most vexatious:

Tube "E" or not tube "E" — that is the quest, chum.

Weather? 'Tis no blur in the mind ...

But this reading, now officially adopted in the best textual editions, is too well known to need further quotation. I have also found my method of "deep reading" fruitful in the perusal of several thousand lines of *Paradise Lost*, and I suspect that our whole literature will have to be reread in the light of it. However: it was on the basis of this strict principle that I returned to Skilmer's great love poem to Therese Murk of Peoria. Called simply "Therese," or "T'rese," it had too long been thought of as having something to do with "trees"! The misconception arose from Skilmer's supreme irony; he had all too successfully "achieved an overlay", as he liked to say when speaking of the technique of poetry. That is, by a triumph of art he had given a shallow surface glaze, a pretty spindrift, to the profound abysses of the poem — a glaze so *trompe-l'oeil* that many were never able to see beneath it. What the public had been doing was reading only the "overlay" instead of what he called the "substruct," and what they settled for was something miserably like this:

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed
†Upon† the earth's sweet flowing breast.

Upon whose bosom snow has lain,
†And† intimately lives with rain.

A tree that looks †at† God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray.

A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

Sheer banality! (And how far short of Skilmer's own noble definition of a poem as "a shimmering spitball flung into the great catcher's-mitt of eternity.") But the poem's *innerness*, which my researches have arrived at, is another thing entirely. What I mean to do here is demonstrate the "substruct," unit by unit, explicating where I can, though it is doubtful that any reader, or group of readers, will ever arrive at an adequate notion of the riches hidden in this most wonderful of poems.

1.

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

Probably not since John Donne's "For Godsake hold

your tongue, and let me love" has a poem opened with such explosive élan. "I think?" he rages; and in that fury is a ringing refusal to see life merely in terms of the "cogitations" that have amazed lesser poets. Here the whole Eliotic tradition of intellectualized verse is swept cleanly away forever — an achievement the more remarkable inasmuch as that tradition had not yet come into being. But few poets have had antennae so sensitive, been so unflinching a Tiresias (Therese? Ah yes!) in divining the yet-to-come. Crass indeed is the reader who fails to sense, in the proemial words, the poet's curling lip,¹ or who fails to note the hoot of scorn in the derisive "see" that concludes the line with a vulgarity ah how *voulu!* Almost blatant, this effect; and yet, beneath the brassy fanfare, what delicate counterpoint of grammatical woodwinds in the antiphony of declarative mood to interrogative, an antiphony that becomes harangue when we feel it in terms of the inner dialogue, the colloquy of a soul tormented by an age when all values have turned moot. Yet, as always in Skilmer, violence tempered with amenity: instead of the scowling "will" of resolution, only the disclaiming modesty of that simple "shall."

The second line, opening with courage and defiance, can but deepen the stated theme. "Up!" (cf. the Italian "Su! coraggio!") as the poet, confronting the inenarrable chaos of his world, lifts himself from that slough of despond by the Muses' very bootstrap. Don't give love away, he exhorts himself; don't wanton away so rare a substance on the all and sundry. Owe them love; do not pay when payment is despised. How much terser these moving words than such romantic maundering as

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
"Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away ..."

But — oh the marvel of art — again the tight-lipped acerbity is softened by one of the loveliest transitions in all poetry. After the corrosive cynicism of the opening, the gentle evocation of Biblical womanhood fuses, as in Dante, with the mythology of the ancient world, in a line that sums up the fugacity of all things mortal. "Leah's a tree" indeed; Leah has *become* a tree, has escaped from the aggressor's pursuit, from the weary wheel of being. When Skilmer says "Leah" he is of course thinking of Daphne — the names have three letters (if no more) in common; our poet works by preference in that hallowed *three*, perhaps more meaningfully here than elsewhere, since in his sturdy American dialect *Therese* and *threes* would have been pronounced alike. It is no accident that the number of lines in the poem (12) is easily divisible by three, with none left over. Characteristic too of Skilmer's esemplastic knack is this grafting of image onto image; it is wholly natural that in thinking of the Ovidian Daphne, he should conceive of her *a lo divino* — see her not as some mincing pagan, but aureate in the scriptural halo that Dante too looped like lassoes of tinsel round her.

2.

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

A tree is indeed a tree, embodies as nothing else the very essence of the arboreal. An image of the world's green beauty — but no less an emblem of its horror. Skilmer's panoramic imagination sees the tree as a death-image, a very gallows with its dismal fruit. Painstaking Dantists ("In our age," the poet dourly quipped, "there are no painless Dantists") may well see here the influence of Dante's Wood of the Suicides.

We have learned little about Flo Ingbrest — Florence C. Ingbrest of 1222 Stitt St., Des Moines. Her address is known only because it was found tattooed on the left hip of a sailor washed ashore at Tampa after the great hurricane of '23. It is clear that Miss Ingbrest meant much to the poet, who saw in this simple Swedish girl a power participating so fully in the chthonic matriarchal atavism of the dark earth itself that he calls her simply his "earth-Swede." Her earthy affections, however, were soon alienated by the vague and sinister figure the poet calls Greymouth, a misty shape ominous as any of the ghosts that slink nameless through the early Eliot. Though much research has been done on the unknown Greymouth, little has been ascertained. Dr. Woggs Clurth, basing his argument soundly on the morpheme "rey" in Greymouth, has proposed that he was really Watson King of Canton, the affable rapist; Dr. Phemister Slurk, dispensing with what he derides as "evidence," has suggested that he represents Warren G. Harding, an Ohio politico of the '20's. Cavillings all: Greymouth, whosoever he may have "been" in the world we think of as real, now, through Skilmer's artistry, exists forever in the purlieus of the Muse — slinking, loose-lipped, drivelling, livid with his nameless vice.

3.

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

In the third stanza, sometimes insensitively printed as the fifth, the tragedy grows blacker yet. After Florence C. Ingbrest and a handful of casual flames, the poet sought solace with the Mittley sisters of Boston. Researchers have shown that there were two: Daisy (or "Diz") Mittley, and her much younger sister Anne D'Intagh. It was the younger the poet loved, but again the romance was blighted by a conniving interloper: this time the wealthy Thaddeus Thrane of Glasgow whose nationality is slyly derided in the dialectical "wi" for "with." The butt of frequent barbs in the Skilmer corpus, he is here dismissed with a contemptuous phrase. Though his beloved Anne lived "wi'" Thrane the time the poem was written, Skilmer seems less troubled by this passing infidelity than by her amorality with Greymouth — for Greymouth is the true antecedent of "whose." We now learn that he was a heavy drinker — and immediately the mysterious soubriquet is clear. Extensive research has established that *gris* is the common French word for grey. But *gris* also means drunk. Greymouth then is unmasked as Drunk Mouth. Indeed, so great a guzzler was Greymouth that the lovely Miss Mittley was said, by a witty metonymy (synecdoche)² to have lain not on his bosom but (with pun that anticipates Joyce by several weeks) on his "boozin's". One almost hesitates to mention the "bosoms" too has its questionable advocates.³ Be that as it may, one wonders if in all literature the tragedy of four lives has been so harrowingly adumbrated? All one can conjure up for comparison is Dante's

Siena me fe; disfecemi Maremma.

But Dante, with his five and a half words for one life, is long-winded compared with Skilmer, who averages mere three words per head, or even less, if one counts the "wi" as fractional diction. In this grisly aperçu, so true of all humanity, the resources of typography too are put to unexampled use, with the two-letter "no" followed by an exclamation mark that is like a spirit straight with moral indignation, and enclosed in the semicircularity of parentheses, like lips rounded in incredulous refusal. But the "no" is uncompromisingly jostled by the assertive *has*, with its harsh aspirate, distorted from honest Roman type into italics, set askew from the vertical: even the letters, means the poet, have *lost their aplomb* before the moral horror. A textual note: there are those, and their name is legion, who read "Hugh Inta Mittley" in the second line. But nothing in Skilmer's emotional history gives countenance to a suppositious passion for Anne's little brother Hugh, then three years and some months old.

4.

A tree that looks it! — Gawd! Auld, eh?
And Liffs hurl eavey alms, *touts pretts*.

And so it goes. The world-weariness, the melancholy Skilmer in the depths of his Hamlet mood, or what he himself ruefully called, in the bad German he has learned from "certain ladies" in Milwaukee, "meine Hamletische Gesauerpuskeit." Does even Hamlet, whom so many have called the "Danish Skilmer," have a line so weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable as "A tree that looks it"? — in which the poet accepts the humdrum monotony of things as they are in their weary *haecceitas*, the sad fact that they are only what they are, and so *tu look* what they are, instead of embodying the splendor of their Platonic archetypes. "The interminable pyramical napkin," broods E.E. Cummings — but he sesquipedalian this in comparison with Skilmer's demotic oomph. And from time immemorial the nauseating sameness — old indeed, and more than old. Probably there is no more plangent understatement of the language than Skilmer's simple but despairingly "auld." For the poet, unable to tear his ravaged heart from thoughts of Thrane, glumly Scotticizes: "Auld eh?" he spit out, thereby more keenly identifying Thrane with all he most distrusts in reality. Cosmic gloom induces wide-ranging speculations: the bard's restless mind hovers around the anthropology he loves so deeply, and from what sad strata of the past he has so disinterestedly his pregnant and touching lines about the Liffs. A Liff, as we know now, is the baseborn son of a Riff father and a Lett mother.* But even a Liff born who knows where in semi-savagery, may hurl the alms of charity (as the miserly Thrane never did), alms that shelter us like eaves from the cold the rook-delighting heaven, alms that are always ready, *tout pretts*, to relieve us. In his polyglot technique, Skilmer, as so often, anticipates the practice of Ezra Pound, his former epigone: he uses the French words to imply that even the barbarous Liffs have achieved a measure of urbanity, as compared with certain uncivilized Scots he could mention. The touch of Gallic vivacity brightens, but all too briefly, the poem's Stygian verges. (Again a textual note: some read "A tree that looks it" and explain it as referring to the illusory nature of perceived reality. Rubbish!)

5.

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