

“Idylls and Idols”

Kit Kat Club

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by James C. Carpenter

I. IDOLS

In classical terms an Idol is an object or image representing a deity, which is a false god – An idol is a pretender; an imposter. Idols are adored and admired blindly and excessively. The need for idols arises, I believe, from a deep psychological dimension within us that is relentlessly self centering and self deceiving. Idols give cover to selfish values, voices, and vanities. Idols pander to our ego. Idols allow men and women to pursue and marry their lies and lusts. And the world, well the world employs idols to bully and seduce-to justify and to give cover, to rape and plunder. American idols are Texan size.

(Examples-radical individualism, the gospel of wealth and possessive individualism, the City on the Hill myth-God is on our side blind patriotism, self sufficiency through our guns, libertine sexual values,)

TRANSITION

With that intro , you may either be hoping or dreading that I am about to bring my Olympian mental flux, with laserlike precision to a fun filled, vivid KodaChrome bonfire of our American vanities.

But seeing with clarity is a lonely act. Just ask Cassandra. It might make us see what we do not want to see.

Fortunately for all, myself included, that is not my purpose tonight. Rather tonight I wanted, if only for a brief moment, to go into a contrasting realm. A realm where our Kit Kat forbears often went to challenge idols.

It's the poet's corner – the place of idylls. The place where our eyes step out of our bodies and look with crystal vision back upon ourselves.

And, for me tonight, as I start there is a ghost in the room, like Hamlet's father, It is my treasured Kit Kat colleague, Al Kuhn. When I began writing poetry seriously several years ago, it was Al who encouraged me. He said “just write and then write and then write some more.” He said this with great emphasis as well as a sparkle in his eye. Thanks Al , I have and I will.

Al loved poetry and could recite endless verse from memory. He wasn't that keen on Edgar Allen Poe or Robert Frost but when I first discussed my poems with Al I hit a home run. He asked about the poets I was drawn to. I led with Wallace Stevens and his poem "The Emperor of Ice Cream". Al loved Wallace Stevens. As an homage to Al and as a provocative joy to you tonight I will recite it:

The Emperor Of Ice-Cream

Call the roller of big cigars,

The muscular one, and bid him whip

In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.

Let the wenches dawdle in such dress

As they are used to wear, and let the boys

Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.

Let be be finale of seem.

The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal

Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet

On which she embroidered fantails once

And spread it so as to cover her face.

If her horny feet protrude, they come

To show how cold she is, and dumb.

Let the lamp affix its beam.

The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Modern poetry is robust, it holds no punches, no illusions, it does not mythologize life. It confronts us with the stark reality of life.

TS Eliot in his poem "The Family Reunion" pointed out that:

"Men tighten the knot of confusion
Into perfect misunderstanding."

John Lennon, a wonderful poet of modernity , wrote in Strawberry Fields:

"Living is easy with eyes closed,
misunderstanding all you see."

Poetry is also grace and beauty and fun– here is Edna St. Vincent Millay proclaiming :

My candle burns at both ends
It will not last the night
But ah my foes, and oh my friends
It gives a lovely light!

(from Figs and Thistles: First Fig)

IDYLLS

The word Idylls first entered my world when I heard of Tennyson's poem, the "Idylls of the King". It was the epic story of King Arthur and his Knights of the round table –of Excalibur, Merlin, and the Lady of the Lake– of Lancelot and Guenevere and Mordred –and of the quest, for the Holy Grail. The Grail would bring man peace and truth. But the Knights' failed in their search. One by one they were overcome. The Arthurian idyll did not end well.

The forces of darkness remained. The great knight Lancelot, was overcome by his love for the King's wife, Guenevere. That love destroyed Camelot.

Perhaps the greatest of all poems came from the mists of time – Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey. These great poems are the gold standard of our understanding that, if we but pay attention, the journey of life changes us

such that when we come home, we are not the same people, we are wiser from our experience.

Homer tells us that when we journey there will be wonderful and magical places and people – that the sights and sounds of our journey will never leave us. He wonderfully tells us that there will be songs of sirens so intense, so powerful that we must have others tie us to the mast lest we be pulled upon the rocks. He tells us of the sirens' magical love songs which tantalizingly beckon us to early death.

But what happened to the most famous beauty of all, Helen of Troy? – The ancient poets wrote that when Troy fell, Helen was taken back to Greece and given to her husband's soldiers for their pleasure. She became known in later poems as, "many minded Helen." The story of Troy did not end well. Helen's love for Paris destroyed Troy.

Shakespeare picked up this theme in *Romeo and Juliet*, a play about the destructive power of young love. Alas, I loved Shakespeare and so do I. As Romeo is putting foot on the doorstep of the home of his family's enemies, the Capulets, as well as upon the doorstep of the love story of the ages, every ounce of him senses that there is

trouble ahead. He throws himself into his Maker's care. Moving to the side he prays:

"I fear, too early, for my mind misgives
Some consequence yet hanging in the stars
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
With this night's revels, and expire (my) term

But He that has the steerage of my course
Direct my sail! On, lusty gentleman!

These words take him to his final moments. As he stands in Juliet's tomb seeing her lying seemingly dead, he again goes in despair to his Maker :

[Come, bitter conduct, come, unsavory guide!
Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on
The dashing rocks thy seasick weary bark!"]
Act__Scene__

He would rather die than live without his love.

Juliet as well had sensed Romeo's ending. In one of the greatest of Shakespeare's love versus, Juliet prays:

And when (he)I shall die,

Take him and cut him into little stars.

And he will make the face of heaven so
fine

That all the world will be in love with night

And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Act III, Scene 2

And at the end of it all, young love is seen dead
on stage. Love and death are the poet's
chiaroscuro.

And if you survive youth, to reach a more
advanced age, does life get better? Macbeth did
not think so. He tells us:

Life is but a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more.
It is a tale told by an idiot
Full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing!

Al I think would agree when I say that
Shakespeare is the most modern of modern
poets.

In Robert Frost's "Death of a Hired Man", a man who has for decades hired in to do labor at harvest time at the same farm returns, now aged, his dignity having left as his health retreated, leaving him now unable to complete a full day's work. The farm's owners decide not to fire him, at least not this year, but their view of this man who has given his best to them for years is that he had ,

" ... nothing to look backward to with pride, and having nothing to look forward to with hope."

If idylls fail, are we left only with our idols? Answering this question, the role of the poet is pivotal. Poetry is dangerous to idols. It challenges them.

In a famous speech less than a month before his death, Pres. John F. Kennedy came to Amherst College for the opening of the Robert Frost Library. Frost had written and read poetry at Kennedy's inauguration. In honoring Frost, Kennedy said:

"It was hardly an accident that Robert Frost coupled poetry and power, for he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself. When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry

reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. ...art establishes ... basic human truth ...

"The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state. The great artist is thus a solitary figure. The artist has, as Frost said, a lovers quarrel with the world. In pursuing his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time. This is not a popular role."

PAUSE

Yet the world does indeed remain a place of great beauty.

Here's a Haiku:

Mountains weep
A thousand tears.
A stream flows.

By Manoj Sonkar

What simple elegance.

Poetry is where I go when the priorities of the world around me are upside down—when the unnatural world is too much with me. A poem demands my total attention. It is like optic chiasma. When I finish reading a poem, I cannot always precisely explain what I understood or what I experienced.

Flaubert said. "Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we hammer out tunes to make bears dance when what we long for is the compassion of the stars." Poetry manages to touch more closely man's innermost longings than any other kind of speech. Poetry appeals to the subconscious. The great poem points beyond words to something still more essential.

In his New England taciturn way, Robert Frost said, "Poetry is the kind of thing poets write." (I like that.)

I found a proverb that captures poetry's essence:

"the wind in the grass cannot be taken into the house."

What wonderful predicates to have ringing in my head as I sit down alone and write, and then

write some more, and then keep writing on and on.

CONCLUSION

At the end of my life, my children, my four girls, will likely be in my final conscious thoughts. I would give up everything for them. My bonds to. The pull me with the full force of the universe, with the full magic of the Sirens' song. So we will end with a magical poem about a parent's love for a child. It is Edna St. Vincent Millays, "The Harp Weaver".

I have asked my good friend Artie Isaac to read it

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Thank you.