

The MADISON Review

“The lawyer saith what men have determined; the historian what men have done. The grammarian speaketh only of the rules of speech; and the rhetorician and logician, considering what in nature will soonest persuade, thereon give artificial rules...Only the poet, disdainng to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like: so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done. . . Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.”

—Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*

The Literary Journal of Camden County College

Posthumous, Yet Strangely Prescient Critical Acclaim for The Madison Review

There are two ways of disliking poetry; one way is to dislike it, the other is to read *The Madison Review*.—Oscar Wilde

The point is that you have here a direct, unmistakable assault on sanity and decency; and even—since some of these works would tend to poison the imagination like a pornographic postcard—on life itself. What The Madison Literary Society has done and what it has imagined is debatable, but in its outlook, its character, the bedrock decency of a human being does not exist. It is as anti-social as a flea.—George Orwell

How to read *The Madison Review*? Why, very quickly, to begin with, and perhaps also to make an end. Why read it? Presumably, if you cannot be persuaded to read anything better, the Mad Literati will have to do.
—Harold Bloom

My congratulations to you, Mad Literati. Your journal is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good.—Samuel Johnson

Here is MAD LIT's piss-a-bed poetry... No more MAD LIT, I entreat: flay them alive; if some of you don't, I must skin them myself; there is no bearing the driveling idiotism of the Mad Literati.—Lord Byron

The Madison Review is an assault on the eyes, the brain, common sense, and the human desire to be entertained. Reading it is like waiting for a bus in a city where you're not sure they have a bus line... There is a word for this journal, and that word is: ick. —Roger Ebert

When MAD LIT's characters make love—or perform its equivalent for love-making—and they do nothing else—they not only lose all the amenities, refinements and graces which many centuries have built up in order to make love-making tolerable; they seem to reascend the metamorphoses of evolution, passing backward beyond ape and fish to some hideous coition of protoplasm. —T.S. Eliot

FOREWORD

If it seems a bit fanciful to believe in the Muses, and more than a little paranoid to repose any credit in the Fates, to imagine all twelve of these weirdest of sisters working in concert to shape the ends of a mere poetasting doggerlist like myself might strike one as downright delusional. And yet, sometimes an anecdote—even a literary one—is just so damn good one can jolly well do without the evidence. In fact, at this point even the truth couldn't dissuade me. After all, could anything less than supernatural agency ever account for the “yoking by violence together” of phenomena as “heterogeneous” as the following in a chain whose links extend all the way from a Medieval cathedral built out of words down to the slender pamphlet you even now hold in your hands?

It all began one Thursday night in April 2007—Maundy Thursday, to be exact, the eve of Good Friday on the liturgical calendar and occasion for a recitation of Dante's *Inferno*, given annually and entire, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Manhattan's Upper West Side by a collection of prominent local *literati*. Due to the venue's proximity to Columbia University, any given year a neighborhood Medievalist might drop in to declaim this or that canto in the original Florentine dialect, and poets like Robert Pinsky and the husband-and-wife team of Robert and Jean Hollander have been known to pop by with copies of their own newly-published translations to share selections from.

That year I happened to accompany my then mentor and now dear friend Rachel Hadas, daughter of celebrated Columbia classicist Moses Hadas, who was once instrumental in enshrining “canon-fodder” just like Dante in the school's vaunted core curriculum. There was something in the air that evening—comingled with the lingering wisps of incense and hushed incantations from the service held not two hours prior—that recalled the haunted atmosphere at the first poetry reading I'd ever attended, at age fifteen, in a stuffy old library at The Lawrenceville School, fittingly enough by Rachel's mentor, James Merrill, an alumnus of the same.

Together we listened as the cantor reached the legendary passage in Canto XV when Dante encounters his own mentor, Ser Brunetto, who enjoins his former pupil to revive his memory upon returning to the world of the living by spreading the good word about his tome of most unholy writ, *Il Tesoretto* (or *Little Treasure*). At the very moment Dante first recognizes his beloved teacher's face among the scorched visages of the Sodomites, I found myself glancing down under Rachel's chair at the shopping bag I would later learn contained a tiny portrait of Sr. Alighieri, itself a little treasure, that

Merrill had owned and she would that very night pass along, in turn, to me, on whose desk it continues to rest. To complete the first of several infernal—if not positively divine—circles to come, I would go on to write a poem, my first ever published, about the experience, titled, naturally “*Il Mio Tesoretto*,” which would appear later that year, just as naturally, in *Columbia Magazine*.

As literary fate would have it, fellow Columbian Ifeanyi Menkiti, a poet himself and longtime professor of philosophy at Wellesley, chanced upon the poem while leafing through his copy of the magazine (yes, our meeting too can be counted among the rogue’s gallery of leonine coincidences enmeshed in this salacious tale). As it turns out, he was also the proprietor of the Grolier Poetry Book Shop, a veritable literary landmark on Harvard Square where the likes of T.S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, e.e. cummings, and Elizabeth Bishop are reputed to have consorted over the years. For some reason as yet unknown to either of us, the man who would later assume the improbable role of my publisher and patron sat down and penned me a fan letter which he mailed off forthwith—probably the only one he’d ever written, and definitely the only one I’ll ever receive. Lo and behold, two years later he was founding a new press under the auspices of the store, with a new prize, The Grolier Discovery Award, to go along with it. Needless to say, his new, totally accidental “discovery” would be its first recipient. (Side note: After extensive research, I have concluded that it is significantly easier to win a contest when one is its sole entrant. Mind like a steel trap, I tell you....) Either way: Roar, Lions, roar!

Today “*Il Mio Tesoretto*” can be found on the first page of another little treasure, my second book, *Last Call for Ganymede*, published by Menkiti and dedicated to Rachel. Due to the kind intervention of a mutual friend and fellow versifier Moira Egan (you guessed it—a graduate of Columbia’s MFA program), a copy currently resides on a writing table at The James Merrill House in Stonington, CT, just as his Dante portrait does on one of mine. In like fashion, the first essay in Rachel’s recent critical collection, *Talking to the Dead*, concludes with an analysis of the poem, reproduced there in full. Best of all, in the mentee equivalent of being ushered by Beatrice herself unto Paradiso, Rachel recently helped secure me an invitation to join the infernal reading roster this past March. In answer to my prayers as much as my request, the organizer was kind enough to grant me Canto XV—which means I had the eerie thrill of hearing the very words issue from my lips at the lectern that I’d muttered in echo under my breath in the pews so many years earlier.

In the last two weeks, meanwhile, both *Columbia College Today* and *The Lawrentian*, my no less spiffy high-school alumni magazine, have spun

their own versions of this yarn to coincide with poetry month, during which, at the latter institution, ritual oblations are customarily lain at the late Lawrentian laureate's "feet" (if not quite yet my own).

Looking back, it now seems almost prophetic that the first gift Rachel ever gave me, some five years before that providential night, was a copy of her book *Pass It On*, a title now literalized and multiplied many times over in our friendship, like the simultaneously progressive and cyclical spiralings of Dante's epic journey itself. Together they provide a vivid illustration of the kind of interactions between literary tradition and contemporary writers, between teachers and students, that lie at the very core of her father's core curriculum, no less than at the heart of my own World Literature class here—as well as, even more pertinent to our present purpose, this very club.

In recent years, as seems fitting, I have been privileged to pass on a few little treasures of my own in due course, and in so doing join this prodigious line of chain belle-lettrists. Specifically, last spring a very beautiful, and sadly very young, woman of my acquaintance, who was likewise very dear to me, died suddenly and horrifically (if predictably). I received the news just as I was walking into one of my World Literature classes and, given my state and general lack of professionalism, proved incapable of proceeding without divulging the news to the group. At our next session, by another strange chance, we were set to cover the fourth book of *The Aeneid*, which concludes, magnificently, in the suicide of Dido, to whom Virgil accords the dignity and grandeur of a tragic heroine. I found myself lingering on the description of the moment when Dido's sister, upon discovering the spurned Carthaginian queen expiring atop her own pyre, leans down to her lips and inhales sharply, as if to catch the last of her spirit out of the air before it blew off once and for all into the wind.

I then recounted how, in the intervening days, I had offered to clean out the same young woman's decidedly less regal, if not straight-up underworldly, quarters for her family and found myself, upon entering her bedroom, reflexively drawing in breath in the same fashion to trap whatever remained of her ultimate "self-expression" in my very respiratory system, a response presumably conditioned by so many years of teaching the foundational Roman epic.

As it happens, the then president of MAD LIT (née DPS), Julia Hand, was present in that classroom, just as I had once been at a certain cathedral almost a decade previous. What's more, later that summer she surprised me by sending me a link to a website on which she had posted a poem about the experience—called "Dido," suitably—which wove together

the various elements of its literary interrelations much as my own poem had done those of Rachel and Ser Brunetto that fateful Thursday years before. In the communal spirit of passing on, then back, and so on again, I have since made it my practice to recite the two poems back to back at the beginning of every poetry reading I give. Thus it is that, to complete the last but I hope not final circle of this not-all-that-hellish pilgrimage, “Dido” appears on the first page of this volume just as “*Il Mio Tesoretto*” does on the first page of mine. Not quite Dante and Merrill, I’ll grant you, but I’ll take it any day of the week.

—Keith O’Shaughnessy
Faculty Editor