

## PATTERNS OF REFLECTION

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*The Republic of Virtue* by Paul Lake  
(Evansville, IN: University of Evansville Press, 2013)

The situation of the conservative formalist poet, especially one who is also a satirist, and thus a moralist, has never been easy. As Paul Lake once stated in an interview, “Writing in meter and rhyme is an innately conservative act.” Today, he added, such an act “really is politically incorrect” because it “shows a conservative allegiance to our traditions, our language, even our bodily pleasures.” Moreover, in an age of multiculturalism and moral relativism, the embattled traditionalist poet is faced with the task of not only satirizing deviations from norms but also defining and defending those norms.

What this kind of poet has going for him, however, is faith in the existence of universal truths deeply embedded both in words and in creation. As Lake has explained in several important essays, there are patterns woven into the structure of nature and language, patterns that bind all things together—from the subatomic to the cosmic, from the phoneme to the epic. Furthermore, it is not free verse but measured verse that is truly organic, with its ancient oral and communal beginnings and its beauty-and-pleasure-making patterns of rhythm, syntax, and sound, including rhyme. A traditional poetic form serves as well, Lake says, as a “strange attractor” for smaller units of meaning. And so, Lake has argued, “we still speak of a sen-

tence’s kernel, of its branching clauses and phrases; words are said to have roots. Our figures imply that language, and especially syntax, is a living, organic thing.”

These deep correlations and recurring patterns also imply that there are cultural norms and moral absolutes that should govern our behavior both in private family life and in the public world. In the poems of *The Republic of Virtue*, Paul Lake defends the permanent truths of human experience not only in his subject matter but also in the very structures of the poems themselves.

Section 1, “Home Free,” contains poems about truths that we often discover best in a family setting. The opening poem, “First Fruit,” is about a young daughter becoming aware of the inevitable death of one she deeply loves: “‘But is my *Daddy* going to die?’ / . . . she wracked the house with sobs and wouldn’t hear / either rhyme or reason / as she choked on salt, immitigable tears.” Lake’s varying line lengths and rhymes reflect, both in syntax and in sound, the poem’s unfolding story.

In the following poem, “Home Free,” the daughter, now almost fourteen, rebels against her parents and “in adolescent pique” goes out walking alone at night. The poet, still a protective father, finds her after a frantic search, but she will not get into the car. Now it is the father’s turn to face the reality of teenage rebellion and his daughter’s growing away from the daddy of her childhood. For the poet as father, this is

a painful but unavoidable part of life. And so "...the truth strikes home—/That you're not mine to keep—/And rounding one last block,/I leave you to the dark/Paths you must tread alone/And slowly circle back/To end our hide-and-seek,/Till love calls us back home/By separate paths, to sleep."

In poignant contrast, the brief poem "Lullaby" is a tender address to a child aborted by its young would-have-been parents: "Hush, child, invisible/As thought or silent prayer/Around a supper table,/Restless and fugitive,/Dear ghost, if you are able,/Consider the young pair/Whose adolescent love/Had not grown full enough/To grant you a small share,/And, for love's sake, forgive/Those suffered now to live/In love beneath one roof,/By absence made your heirs."

Section 2, "The Republic of Virtue," is a critical analysis of modernity. Making use of characters from the Bible, history, and literature—even the fairy tale—Lake shows his skill as a narrative poet as well as his mastery of several poetic forms, including the villanelle.

The title poem, "The Republic of Virtue," examines changes brought about by the French Revolution. With months and "Dechristened streets" renamed, a ten-day week adopted, Paris "a city stripped of saints," and rosewater sprinkled everywhere to mask the scent of death, the people—who speak the poem as a collective "we"—apprehensively enter a world of radical idealism, violence, and displaced religious longing: "...On crumbling balustrades/We fired guns and wept like communicants.//.../...Without a Sabbath/To toll the bells, a shining new Republic/Of Virtue was proclaimed." Danton and Robespierre declare that violence and terror are unavoidable components of the very revolution that will consume them. And among the prisoners freed is the

Marquis de Sade, who "...stepped bleakly from prison/To raucous cheers" only to entice "...a young beggar named Rose Keller/To his chateau and bound her there in chains[.]" The poem closes with reflections on the cost of revolution: "...We watch our tongues/And sniff the air for portents.../.../...terror/Lurks at the crossroads, smiling, suave, severe./An aging libertine, extending terms/To beggar girls. Exacting in return/For martyred flesh, the spirit's liberation./In Declarations born of blood and tears." The parallels between this revolution and later attempts to make a paradise on earth by way of slaughter and coercion are clearly implied.

Such fundamental change that would free us from traditional beliefs, ethics, and roles is evident in two poems on prototypical ancestors of today's unprincipled individualist and radical feminist. The first, "Moll," is about the chief character of Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722); the second, "Revised Standard Version," reimagines the Samaritan Woman at the Well with whom Jesus conversed in John 4:4–26.

Lake sums up Moll's long career of shady dealings and prostitution, both marital and otherwise: "What we retain is the impression/Of how an efficacious creed/Of unrelenting self-possession/Can win the day, the dough, the deed." The poem ends with an ironic apostrophe: "O true Madonna of our age,/Your life's a parable that proves/That pensions are sin's only wage,/And that though every bond dissolves/A clever girl can leverage/New deals till time depreciates/Her beauty, then with stolen cache/Purchase herself a fresh estate."

An early forerunner of modern feminists is in Lake's version of the Samaritan Woman. The woman's reply to Jesus's criticism of her five marriages is shocking:

“My sex life, sir, is none of your damn business. / I don’t know where you got your information, / But if you try this sort of thing again, / I’ll haul you into court, you stalker, you. / Who do you think you are, harassing me?” A crowd of other women soon assembles: “‘Yeah, keep your phony doctrines off my body!’ // ‘I’ve had a dozen ‘husbands’ just this year.’ // I’ll take charge of my sexuality, / With no advice from you, Mr. Misogynist . . . [.]” The poem ends with the women departing, “Waving our scarves above our heads and singing / Words not set down in your official Greek.”

Lake also adds his own ending to a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. In “Epilogue to ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes,’” the two weavers who succeed in their ruse of dressing the king in “pantomimed cloth” are handsomely rewarded. One becomes the emperor’s Minister of Information: “Now on the nightly news he spins / Transparent fictions into lines / And patterns to clothe royal sins / And cloak imperial designs.” The other weaver is given a high post in academia—“... a tenured chair” from which he “... now employs his language games / To show what lies beneath all texts / Is nothingness, or an illusion.” And what of the little boy who spoke the truth—that the emperor was parading naked through the streets? “Now universally disdained / For spoiling their festivity / The loud-mouthed boy is being trained / To show more sensitivity. / He’s learned the first law: *Don’t offend.* / Though privately he still might glower, / He’s found it’s better if you bend / Whenever truth confronts raw power.” The intertwining of weaving images throughout the poem is another good illustration of Lake’s poetics of reflected patterning.

This question of language and communication is the subject of section 3, “A Lesson in Hermeneutics.” Here Lake takes on radi-

cal language theorists who would deny that words have any stable relation to things or even among themselves.

The section’s title poem begins by considering sounds made by a vervet monkey on sentry duty in Kenya. There is one cry for a snake, another for a bird of prey. The monkeys hear each cry, understand its meaning, and take immediate action to avoid death. But what, Lake asks, if one of the monkeys were a deconstructionist? “Should one, instead, hearing a sentry speak, / Decide to deconstruct the fellow’s meaning / And prove all urgent chattering oblique, / A python’s fang or hawk’s cruel curving beak / Will punctuate the monkey’s idle preening, / Ending his dissertation in mid-squeak.”

An even more powerful example of the dangerous consequences of such theories is “Professing Rape,” a dramatic monologue that recalls Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess.” The speaker is a graduate professor who teaches his students that the relationship between words, things, ideas, and values is uncertain and subjective. The identifiable but silent listener is a female graduate student whom the professor has plied with drink in his apartment, then forced to have sex. Now she has sent a letter of complaint to the dean, demanding action.

Set in the professor’s office, the monologue is a casuistic ploy by the rapist to defend his actions by appealing to the very language theories that the young woman has learned as one of his students. And so such theories are put into practice, not simply as a game in which literary texts are violated, but in a young woman’s life. The professor verbally rapes the student in his office just as he had physically raped her in his apartment.

As in many dramatic monologues, the speaker reveals to the reader more of himself than he realizes: “Let me review our present situation / And urge you toward a

different account, / Reminding you that no interpretation / Is ever true or final, since events / Are sealed off from the hermeneutic circle / Of discourse, leaving us to choose between, / Not truth and falsehood, but competing fictions; / And that, however truly you intend / To give a strict and accurate account / Of what transpired between us in recent days, / Your testimony must inevitably / Contain within it subtle gaps and fissures / That crack its logic and disseminate / New meanings in an endless play of signs.”

The poem closes with a threat: “I’ll paint you as a clever scheming slut / Promiscuous in language as in morals; / I’ll characterize your words as perjury / And brand your scholarship as plagiarism. / And since there’s no authoritative version / Of past events with which to square accounts, / You’ll sacrifice your chances of employment / For the dubious solace of a failed revenge. / Because, my dear, in cases such as this / Where lines are drawn and facts are fluid texts, / It all comes down to your word against mine.”

In contrast, section 4, “A Local Habitation and a Name,” contains poems defending formal poetry and affirming trust in language as the poet searches for the meaning of things. Lake’s practice of writing metrical verse is strongly upheld in “Pro Forma,” with its rollicking anapestic feet. Lake mocks poets who find excuses for not writing in traditional measured verse: “If their meters don’t scan and their rhymes crack and strain, / It’s not that the rhyme scheme’s too hard to maintain— / When their sonnet falls short a few lines, their refrain / Is to sing out in chorus, ‘The rules don’t obtain! / I’m a clever young artist subverting the form!’”

Then, in the superb closing poem, “Narcissus Reflects,” Lake meditates on how metrical poetry imitates and participates in the orderly beauty of the cosmos itself. In Lake’s

account, as in the myth, Narcissus rejects the love of the nymph Echo and, punished by Aphrodite, is made to stare at his own reflection in a pool. Narcissus says that he could never have been content loving one who could only echo words that others said to her. What Narcissus wants is neither “staring at this mirror, eye to eye / With mortal beauty” nor a monologue-like relationship with Echo but “. . . a dialogue . . . / With the unknown.” And so, instead of leaning to kiss his face, drowning, and being changed into the narcissus flower, Lake’s Narcissus slowly comes to see that “. . . what began as punishment / Became a blessing.”

Looking not at but through his reflection, Narcissus finds himself blossoming as a poet who sees and celebrates a universe made up of patterns, large and small, one within the other, patterns that, like the elements of a metrical poem, mirror and repeat themselves in the constant play of chaos and creation and on different levels of organization—like the Fibonacci Sequence, the Logarithmic Spiral, or the Golden Section. “Narcissus Reflects” moves toward its conclusion with lines, spoken by Narcissus, that are among Lake’s very best: “I’ve learned to trace / In foam-fringed depth and starry firmament, / In cloud and frost, ear’s whorl and crystal eye, / Pattern reflecting pattern, until space / Contracts and in a blue bewilderment / Of pond and sky // I see how in disequilibrium / Chaotic order hovers in suspense / Till turbulence / Erupts in whirlwind, flower, painted plume, / And ramifying limb, at every scale, / Till, gathered in one magnifying lens, / Imagoes, ranged like seraphim, become / A coronal, // A budding youth, a poet’s branching tale.”

Whether satirical, lyrical, or meditative, Paul Lake’s poems are firmly fixed in the collective wisdom, perennial experiences, and traditional moral judgments of humankind. His trenchant humor and his common sense

recall both Swift and Johnson. *The Republic of Virtue* also brings to mind the words of eighteenth-century English satirist Alexander Pope: “The life of a Wit is a warfare upon

earth.” Paul Lake has fought this good fight, and, in so doing, has reminded us of those unchanging values on which alone a lasting republic of virtue might be built. †

## THICKER THAN WATER

Mark G. Malvasi

*The Natural Family Where It Belongs: New Agrarian Essays* by Allan C. Carlson  
(New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2014)

For more than three decades, politicians, clergymen, intellectuals, academics, social psychologists, and others have cautioned, with varying degrees of urgency, that stable families are essential to a healthy society. Differing in their views on such controversial matters as patriarchy, women’s rights, and same-sex unions, nearly all these experts at the same time condemn the soaring divorce rates, the diffusion of single-parent households, and the emergence of a generation of ill-educated and unimaginative, ill-mannered and undisciplined, inattentive, hyperactive, overweight, and generally disagreeable children.

However imperiled American families may be, the debate about their nature and future has by now grown wearisome in its predictability. Each well-rehearsed exchange, no matter how contentious, leaves those who seek guidance and insight feeling as if

they have heard it all before. Refreshing in its intellectual candor, to say nothing of its political audacity, Allan Carlson’s *Natural Family Where It Belongs* has renewed the vitality of an important, but languishing, conversation.

A determined counterrevolutionary, Carlson proposes not only to restore the traditional patriarchal or, as he calls it, the “natural” family, but also to reestablish the household as a center of production. Such aspirations, Carlson understands, require nothing less than the redefinition of private property and the transformation of political economy. The economic revolution that began at the end of the eighteenth century constituted the dynamic element in passage of the United States from an agrarian republic composed largely of independent and self-sufficient farmers to an industrial, capitalist, market society made up of wage laborers, salaried employees, and wealthy entrepreneurs. With the advent of the so-called market revolution, the market itself became an agent of revolutionary change, indeed, from Carlson’s reactionary point of view, the most destructive force in history.

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