

THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF POETRY

Leaving. Laton Carter. University of Chicago Press, 2004. *Classic Rough News*. Kenneth Fields. University of Chicago Press, 2005. *Capacity*. James McMichael. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

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In his ponderous classic of sociology, *Economy and Society*, Max Weber tells us a thing or two about the Protestants whose ethic of self-denial has formed the basis of modern capitalism:

The person who lives as a worldly ascetic is a rationalist, not only in the sense that he rationally systematizes his own conduct, but also in his rejection of everything that is ethically irrational, aesthetic, or dependent upon his own emotional reactions to the world and its institutions. The distinctive goal always remains the alert, methodical control of one's own pattern of life and behavior.

The economic payoff for those who embraced these traits was quite significant, often resulting in their rise to positions of surprising prominence given the origins of their creed in a rejection of worldliness. But as every student of sociology knows, the realm of non-popular culture is a kind of economic world turned upside down, where the ordinary rules don't always apply. In the little world of American poetry, for instance, you can't expect a whole lot of payoff for embodying such stereotypically Protestant qualities as restraint in expression, emotional reserve, a relentless self-examination of the private conscience, and an individualism tending toward isolation. While in the Weberian economic world such qualities lead to great payoffs in terms of economic capital, in the poetry world they actually impede the accumulation of cultural capital in the form of prizes, awards, and widespread critical acclaim. That, at any rate, is the conclusion to which a contemplation of the poetry of Laton Carter, Kenneth Fields, and James McMichael tends to lead us.

I'm not entirely sure about the religious backgrounds of Carter, Fields, and McMichael—the surnames are plausibly Protestant, although the title of Fields' forthcoming novel, *Father of Mercies*, gives one pause. Be that as it may, all three write poetry very much in what one might call a stereotypically Protestant manner of expression: tending to plain statement, gun-shy when it comes to heated emotion, obsessively self-analytic, wary of gaudy images, suspicious of the irrational, and, in some measure, tending toward individual isolation. Emotional reticence has been on the outs in poetry ever

since Robert Lowell shocked his eminently WASP ancestors with *Life Studies*, and self-analytic individualism has been largely eclipsed since the rise of identity politics and its aesthetics of group affiliation. Plain statement has suffered a few blows, too, first at the hands of the deep image aesthetic, and again during the current triumph of a watered-down, hybridized language poetry that too-often amounts to little more than a smug version of non-sense verse.

Perhaps these shifts in taste have been behind the late emergence of Laton Carter, whose remarkable first book went unpublished for eleven years after an early draft served as his MFA thesis. That the acknowledgements page cites only two journals as venues where poems from the collection previously appeared is further testament to the hostility of the current editorial climate toward his particular poetic. Kenneth Fields and James McMichael have also received few enough of the accolades accorded to American poets, although McMichael's new elevation to the respectable status of a Farrar, Straus, Giroux poet indicates that his stock is on the rise. But compared to their Stanford classmates, the former poets laureate Robert Hass and Robert Pinsky, Fields and McMichael have both been relatively unrecognized talents. This speaks less of the relative merits of the poets, I think, than of the shape of the American poetic field, and the kinds of poetic virtues it is most prepared to reward.

That Fields and McMichael share certain low-key poetic virtues is by no means an accident: both were students of that anachronistically Augustan poet, Yvor Winters. Winters advocated a poetry of plain statement, emotional reserve, and relentless examination of the self. His abhorrence of the irrational was legendary, his defense of reason absolute. While poets like Hass and Pinsky learned from Winters and moved on, Fields and McMichael engaged with him more deeply. McMichael's doctoral dissertation is an application of Wintersian ideas to poets unexamined in Winters' critical work, and Fields was hand-picked by Winters to be his successor at Stanford—a post Fields holds to this day. Laton Carter is too young to have been a student of Winters, but he studied under McMichael at UC-Irvine, and seems to have been drawn to McMichael for his more Augustan qualities. All three poets are in some meaningful sense in the tradition of Winters, without being doctrinaire followers, and all three have to some degree been kept at the margins of a poetic field that has never quite been able to appreciate the kind of work they do. I don't imagine they'll be the main beneficiaries of whatever new taste emerges from the wreckage that has ensued from the collision of Iowa confessionalism and Buffalo language poetry. This, of course, only gives us all the more reason to take the time to appreciate them

for their very real, and somewhat unusual, qualities.

Max Weber would certainly recognize Laton Carter's virtues as typical of the Protestant temperament. Consider the opening lines of "Counter," a poem in which an unemployed man makes a short shopping trip:

He writes *6 a.m., 7 a.m.*, down to noon,
and starts again with numbers,
all with spaces in between for the half-hour.

If, at six, he feeds the cats, follows the template he's
tried to leave as open as possible,
he can feel better about what he's doing.

One imagines Weber taking out his carefully sharpened pencil and writing, in a tight hand, some marginal notes about how the man in the poem "rationally systematizes his own conduct," and how this sort of deliberate self-control embodies the notion of an "alert, methodical control of one's own pattern of life and behavior." When, a few lines later, we see that the man feels "guilty, self-reproaching" and "returns two books he bought yesterday" we can imagine Weber noting the deep suspicion of impulse, and the rejection of immediate emotional reactions to the world.

Perhaps the same concern with carefulness and deliberateness that lies behind a poem like "Counter" informs Carter's poetics of clear, direct statement. His poems often have something like a clear thesis statement, and proceed in a mixed expository and narrative manner not unlike a well-written essay. He is not a poet trying to imitate the idiosyncratic cross-currents of the stream of consciousness, nor does he try to give you a sense of the mind as it tries out different avenues of thought. Instead of a drama of mental process, he wants to deliver well-tuned products of careful meditation. Here, for example, is the beginning of "Silence," a poem that proposes a general thesis, then illustrates and complicates that thesis:

There is an unmeasured distance between two people that means,
if they do not already know each other, they do not have to talk.

The distance narrowed, the two points moving toward each other,
causes decision: what necessary act of salutation or aloofness.

Glass dividing this distance obviates the act.
Behind a windshield of double-pane storm window,

a person's separation allows for closer, less regulated study of the other.

We're at a far pole from the elliptical poetry of a John Ashbery here, and at a farther one still from the disjunctive poetics that have become so fashionable. We're operating in a mode more like that of the Augustans, with their essayistic verse. We're also operating far outside of the norms of the old-fashioned poetry workshop, with its emphasis on the showing of concrete detail. What could be more abstract than the description of two people walking in opposite directions than "two points moving toward each other"? It's wonderfully spare, distant, and minimalist— it's almost geometry.

I don't think it's a coincidence that so many of the people in Carter's poems seem to exist at a remove from those around them, seeking connections that never quite come into being. It seems of a piece with the rest of Carter's sensibility that this would be the case: scrupulous self-policing deliberateness is rarely the product of a warm and all-embracing community. Since I've already invited one German sociologist into this review, I'm tempted to invite another, Ferdinand Toennies, to explain the phenomenon. Toennies is the creator of the *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* distinction, a dichotomy that distinguishes pre-modern from modern society. In pre-modern *gemeinschaft* societies, community is organic, interactions are face-to-face, and interactions are governed by traditions. Modern *gesellschaft* societies have none of this warmth. Capitalistic and industrial, such societies are highly administered, socially atomized, and emphasize interactions governed by rules or laws. In the world of *gemeinschaft* you are born into a definite social position and belong there; in the world of *gesellschaft*, you're on your own, one atom among others. Needless to say, *gesellschaft* is the world built by Weber's Protestant ethos, with all of its self-policing deliberateness. *Gesellschaft* also seems to be the natural habitat of Laton Carter's characters, who yearn for the warmth of human connection from a great distance. Here, for example, in lines from Carter's "Silence," we see the speaker watching an unsuspecting person's face through a window:

The kinesics of the face, watched unmonitored from a distance,
issues its own private speech. When the distance is at once collapsed,

the face's eyes drawing a line to the watcher's eyes, the speech too collapses.

The irony is palpable: in Carter's world, we come closest to really knowing each other when we catch each other unawares and give away some element of ourselves other than our public personae. When we actually encounter each other face-to-face, we withdraw behind our social roles. It's chilly in Carter's neighborhood, and not neighborly at all.

Even the titles of Carter's poems indicate reserve and isolation: the

volume includes poems with names like “Unspoken,” “New Distances,” “Separate,” “Brief Hesitation,” and “Tentative” (the last of which contains the statement “A thought can be stepped back from, / watched from a close remove”—something very close to Carter’s *ars poetica*). Although Carter shies away from traditional rhyme and meter, many of the poems in *Leaving* follow the general form of the sonnet, containing fourteen lines and turning either between an octave and a sestet or after three quatrains. This is surely a further expression of Carter’s concern with the deliberate and the controlled. Word on the street (by which I mean the internet) is that his next book will consist entirely of sonnets. One hopes it won’t be another eleven years in arriving.

Ken Fields is also drawn to the sonnet in its looser manifestations. Almost all of the 64 poems gathered in *Classic Rough News* are sonnets of sorts: fourteen-liners, loosely rhythmic, occasionally working with rhyme, and sometimes involving the *volta*, or rhetorical turn, of the traditional sonnet. They are inhabited by a cast of imagined characters reminiscent of those populating the psychological territory of John Berryman’s *Dream Songs*. Where Berryman had his Henry and Mr. Bones, Fields has alter-egos named Billy, Billie, and Burton. As their names indicate, Billy and Billie are doubles of sorts: male and female versions of psychologically fragile violence-prone alcoholics tending toward multiple personalities. Burton, too, manifests in many guises: he resonates at some times with Robert Burton, author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, at other times with the explorer and erotic *litterateur* Richard Francis Burton, and once with the Richard Burton who played opposite Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*. In Fields’ pages we meet Burton academic, Burton erotic, Burton alcoholic, Burton cinematic, but above all we meet Burton melancholic. Together with the various personalities of Billy and Billie and the poet *in propria persona*, it’s quite a posse.

The core influence behind the book isn’t Berryman, though: it’s Yvor Winters. The Wintersian doctrine was Augustan not only in its embrace of clear, expository, discursive verse, but in its distrust of impulse. For Winters, our great challenge in life was to resist our instinctive desires and impulses, and it is this element of Winters’ (very Weberian) ethos that we see most prominently in *Classic Rough News*. But where Winters liked to celebrate his hard-won victories over impulse, Fields’ book tells a tale of failed resistance, of impulse distrusted but, more often as not, yielded to. The melancholy that pervaded the book is the melancholy of the junkie, the addict, the frequently failing policer of instinct and desire. Sometimes it is erotic impulse that Fields distrusts, as in “Eyewhite Nightlight,” where the temptation represented by “That scrap of shredded paper in your wallet / The number

scrawled in a stranger's hand" becomes one of "the tiny pale white flowerlets of our pain." More frequently, though, the distrusted impulse it is the lure of drugs or alcohol. In "Right Now," for example, Fields remembers the days when he was never without "a drink in his hand," when he

held his breath while smoke
Filled as much of him as he could stand
Till, letting it out, he sought oblivion
Of the trace of memory or anticipation,
And his life fell into a death spiral.

Now, from a position of ever-tenuous recovery, he meets others who live as he once lived, and "talks to the ones who are not even sure / They want to learn how to stop killing themselves." The necessary resistance to the lure of oblivion was a great topic of Yvor Winters, who liked to make much of this theme in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," and it is a central theme of Fields' book as well. Like Keats and Winters, Fields has felt the full strength of the attraction he so distrusts. In "The Hinge," a poem near the end of the collection, Fields begins by revisiting all of his characters—addicts and alcoholics, his oblivion-loving Billies and Burtons—then goes on to explore the origins of his own obsession. Remembering a childhood moment when he underwent surgery, he recollects how, on his recovery,

the nurse told me
"I've seen a lot of little boys dragged in here
For this business, but not a one of them
Ever said he loved the ether."

None, that is, until Fields, whose dangerous impulses seem to run very deep indeed.

It isn't just the impulse toward oblivion that Fields distrusts. In his world even our nobler impulses turn out to be dangerous. "A Country Story," for example, retells an old family story from Fields' grandmother, in which a mother sends her German measles-stricken daughter away to quarantine. When the rest of the family seems to fall ill too, the mother's acts on a loving impulse and brings the quarantined daughter back so the family can die together. This impulse proves fatal, though: the family had not really fallen ill, and the formerly quarantined daughter brings the disease back with her, fatally infecting her sister.

Fields does not confine himself to the examination of dubious impulse, though. He writes of personal humiliation, he writes poems in which he

laments his own constant self-examination and self-recrimination. He only really falls flat in the poems where he vents academic spleen, complaining about dimwitted administrators, petty colleagues, and various faddish theoretical tendencies (I'd be in a better position to complain about the pettiness of these poems if I hadn't written too many of the species myself). But the theme to which he constantly returns is that of the need to keep impulse in check, and his own failure to fulfill that need. Perhaps Fields puts the matter most concisely in "Being of Sound Mind," in which he says of his alter-ego Burton "For years he'd been a cultist of control / With none for himself." An ever-prodigal Wintersian, a backsliding Weberian protestant, a clear-eyed chronicler of a flawed self—with *Classic Rough News* Fields has given us his confession.

James McMichael has written his share of poems about dubious emotional impulses—they form the core of his early book *Against the Falling Evil*—but his new collection, *Capacity* is remarkable for its ability to keep the emotions at a distance. *Capacity* consists of seven poems, or perhaps I should say seven parts, since they do add up to a single, book-length whole. *Capacity* is a strangely disparate and restrained book, but no more so than his earlier long poems. Like the first of McMichael's truly ambitious long poems, "Itinerary" from 1978's *The Lover's Familiar*, *Capacity* takes on matters of historical importance (in "Itinerary" his matter was the expedition of Lewis and Clark; in the present volume he addresses the Irish potato famine at some length). Like *Four Good Things* (McMichael's book-length poem of 1980) *Capacity* contains many apparently disparate topics. I'm not sure which of the two books wins the prize for breadth. As Robert Hass put it in an early review, *Four Good Things* is a poem about "worry, death, taxes, planning, probability theory, insomnia, stamp collecting, cancer, domestic architecture, sex manuals, the Industrial Revolution, and real estate." *Capacity* begins with a book of photographs of the English countryside, goes on to describe the wave forces working in the North Atlantic, comments on the nature of Newtonian space, describes a scene of family drama, details the process of human fertilization and gestation, outlines chilling episodes from Irish history, and works its way back to the book of photographs via World War Two and the nature of the will to live. You be the judge. *Capacity* also has much in common with *Each in a Place Apart*, McMichael's 1994 effort, most notably in its deep distrust of our most primal impulses, especially our sexual urges, which leads to ill-advised actions in both books. Like all of McMichael's long poems, *Capacity* is discursive, a poem almost essayistic in its drive to lay its materials out in expository fashion.

One could make a pretty good case for the Protestant ethic of McMi-

chael's verse just on the basis of what we've covered so far: a sober, essayistic poem distrustful of the primal drives is in some meaningful sense a Weberian poem. But there's more. *Capacity* is notable for the strangeness of both its syntax and its diction, both of which seem designed to distance us from the immediate emotional pull of the dramatic, sometimes even melodramatic, subject matter. While most poets who invert syntax do so to add to the music and emotional punch of a statement, McMichael seems to aim at an interestingly opposite effect. These lines, for example, come from a section of the poem dealing with the urgent needs of soon-to-be-separated lovers in wartime. A man thinks of his own mind as a garden, and:

He practices his absence

as the stilled reflecting surface of its pool.
With features of her person in his
stead there,
to what is not its

own anymore in wanting
the self is sent
back by the other.

Odd, isn't it? That second sentence would read more easily, and deliver its emotional weight more directly, had its clauses been ordered otherwise. But McMichael doesn't want that, he wants us to experience emotion from a greater distance.

McMichael employs all sorts of devices in pursuit of this emotional distancing, including the symmetrical A-B-B-A pattern of the chiasmus, which makes an appearance here, in lines describing the changing way of gardening in England in the nineteenth century:

Need had been made less natural.
Replaced was the old
productive ideal that the useful

good was desired.

The desired good was
useful in the new ideal.

I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. McMichael's enduring scholarly interest is Joyce, who made of the chiasmus the organizing principle behind *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

You've probably already noticed the unusual nature of McMichael's diction, which even in these short passages seems remarkably abstract. He often uses terms from logic or the sciences, especially physics and biology, to describe events not normally discussed in such terms. Here, for example, is a passage on the Irish famine of the 1840s:

Persons are
 separate in time when they are living.
 when certain maincrop tuberous parts go on being

 missed at the hearth, back as

 one again with time are persons now
 outside it for good.

With "tuberous parts" the language of biology steps in for the colloquial (and, in this context, emotionally loaded) word "potato." And the busi-ness about being inside or outside of time picks up on some very abstract physics-talk from earlier in the book. It is a very accurate, but tremendously emotionally restrained, depiction of the situation. McMichael is not one to gush, or to invite his readers to shiver with emotion, at least not in any im-mEDIATE way.

Perhaps the most extreme instance of this curious distancing comes in a passage in which a man and a woman who share emotionally-charged secrets meet after a long absence. When they come together, the as-yet un-spoken emotion strains at their fragile composure:

His having come could pass for a family call.

 She can take it as that. So can he,

 if beyond the frugal
 greeting she tenders
 she does not speak.

When she finally does speak, after a two-page buildup, we don't hear the words, nor are we told about her tone. Instead, we get an almost clinical description of the process of speech:

...the next column of

 breath she issues still gives
 nothing away.

Not so

the column after. As it leaves,
 the lappets that she draws around it
 make it tremble so positions of the
 tongue, teeth, lips and jaw can sound it

abroad

I suppose we could interpret the tremble in her voice as emotion, but then again it could simply be a matter of the formation of a vowel-sound. What is significant here is the way McMichael chooses to depict moments of intense emotion: with restraint, and through the least-emotionally charged perspective possible. You can't get much farther from the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion than this. It is this anti-Romanticism, this Protestant ethic, that makes McMichael a rare and important figure in contemporary poetry.

The Protestant ethos in poetry, embodied variously in Carter's careful self-analysis, Fields' self-recrimination, or McMichael's masterful acts of distancing and emotional control, will leave some readers cold. The dominant poetic tastes of our time tend toward cleverness, emotionalism, or both, and those who have absorbed those tastes uncritically just won't know what to do with poems like these. We would do well to let this be their loss, not ours.