

# MAGNAPOETS

taking over the world one poem at a time

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## FEATURE INTERVIEW

L. Ward Abel interviews author and editor David Herrle in an interesting cultural exchange.

**WARD: David, I used to ask people to name the last tape they listened to in their car...but now I'll just ask what was the last song or combination of songs that you last listened to?**

DAVID: I recently introduced my infant daughter to The Who's best album (just above *Who's Next*), *Quadrophenia*. And I've been jamming the band Helvetia. However, I've been burned out on my usual repertoire, so I've been de-pressurizing with Rihanna lately. (Don't tell anyone, OK?) Her *Loud* album is splendid. "All you need to know that I'm a two times five." "It's gettin' *Coyote Ugly* up in here, no Tyra/It's only up from here, no downward spiral." "It's a .22. I call her Peggy Sue." Brilliant. Love Rihanna.

**WARD: Do you agree that poets like yourself operate in a strangely obscure environment within today's artistic e-world? Isn't poetry the most obscure of all arts even with a better potential for reaching readers in the web? (Or am I wrong?)**

DAVID: In one of my favorite comic-book series, *Doom 2099*, the ever-resourceful Doctor Doom dares to plunge into cyberspace and does battle with some virtual-reality foes. (*The Matrix* before *The Matrix* and *Tron* after *Tron*.) Though he gets screwed pretty badly at one point, he adapts and triumphs. Well, that's a crummy analogy for doing art in the e-world. It's still a weird medium, if you think about it. It's there and *not* there. You turn that laptop off or the power grid collapses, it's gone. But it's also so *there*, everywhere. Click and you're in India. Click and you watch Paris Hilton give lousy you-know-what. So, yes. There's better potential for reaching readers in cyberspace (or whatever the kids call it nowadays). Though I prefer books and magazines – tangible, yellowable, creasible, (sadly flammable) flip-and-sniff-the-pages books and magazines – it seems that you need to pull a Doctor Doom to get good exposure these days.

As for poetry being obscure, I'd say that poetry is more scofflawful. Folks say that it celebrates language, but I think it antagonizes language – in a good way. Think about it. In the quest of trying to say something relatable in a non-clichéd way (to leave a fingerprint, not a store-bought stamp), the poet must hurdle rules, dilute or twist glossaries, F with words rather than bow to them.

**WARD: Your home city has a reputation for tough individualism. Has living in Pittsburgh had a tangible effect on your writing?**

DAVID: That's a curious rep that Pittsburgh has elsewhere. Pretty cool. I'd never considered my birthplace as the source of my opposition to communitarianism, but you raise a curious question. I think that reading and learning have more to do with my sense of tightrope-walking between the so-called Common Good and (impossible) atomistic individualism.

**WARD: Your great new book of poetry, *Abyssinia, Jill Rush* (Time Being Books, 2010), is a powerful journey that gives me hints of Coltrane or even bebop Miles in some of the profound word-play. You give us music *and* poetry.**

*A tear is the ultimon.  
The irreducible particle of everything.  
The answer to the abyss is a tear;  
the crucifix pearl, the demiurgent eye, the egg of Grace.*

(From “A Tear Is the Ultimon”)

**I also love the line, “tears are our salvation.” Do you believe that suffering’s a prerequisite to attaining some level of enlightenment?**

DAVID: Sometimes I’m guilty of sonorousness over substance, or hinging an entire piece on a decorative line or passage. I like riffs. I fall in love with lines and passages in others’ work too. This is the same for music. You name Coltrane, who’s one of the biggest influences on my life. My favorite piece by the Holy Quartet is “My Favorite Things.” Though Coltrane’s alto is lovely, I adore the song for Tyner’s piano interlude, which is more than perfect. *That’s* the song’s winning line. (Sorry, John.) By the way, here’s how I like to describe the expression of unknown knowledge in Coltrane’s desperate latter-day blasts. In A.A. Milne’s Milne’s “Explained,” Elizabeth Ann asks Jennifer Jane how God began:

*And Jane, who didn't much care for speaking,  
Replied in her usual way by squeaking.  
What did it mean? Well, to be quite candid,  
I don't know, but Elizabeth Ann did.  
Elizabeth Ann said softly, "Oh!  
Thank you Jennifer. Now I know."*

Tears. Suffering is ontological. Enlightenment itself is suffering. Think of *The Matrix*. If you want to wake up in the real world, you have to get used to the fact that life can blow: shitty food instead of sirloin steaks, shitty clothes instead of designer threads, shitty physics instead of gravity-defying kickassery. Birth is painful. Existence is entropic, full of loss, traumatic, capricious. When pseudo-optimists paint pretty pictures on tombs, I fume. Then again, when nihilists surrender to the Reaper, I tremble. “He who perceived death perceives a sense of the human comedy, and quickly becomes a poet,” said Lin Yutang.

Sometimes I think that laughter is our salvation. Think of Joseph K’s giddiness in the face of annihilation at the end of Welles’ (superior) film adaptation of Kafka’s *The Trial* or Roberto Benigni’s understandably problematic treatment of the Shoah in *Life Is Beautiful*. Consider the genuineness of a belly laugh or the hurts-so-goodness of hysterical amusement. However, I also believe our tears to be salvational: our capacity for pity, for heartbreak, for grief. “Butchery is gleeful,” I wrote earlier in the poem you site above. “Torture is hilarious.” Hilarity can be perverted, but sadness seems undebauchable. As soon as I hail the almighty laugh, I’m struck with the almightiness of the tear. I laugh and cry within a single breath. This is why Emerson wrote that “our moods do not believe in each other.”

**WARD: I know you have an interest in political philosophy, and, without reference to any particular viewpoint, does Politics in general enter into your work?**

DAVID: Mother Mercy, deliver me from political animals. You mistake my philosophical interest – these days, at least. I used to boil and rant politically, I’ve gone down paths of puritanism, liberalism and conservatism, but I’ve since resigned from most of it, though I’m not complacent. If anything, a deeper and sharper insight into politics can build a sturdier hermitage. I prefer tension over political harmony. Give me gridlock over “We are the world.” All the memeists squawk about “civility.” I want to hear more buzz about checks and balances. Listening to the latest State of the Union Address, I don’t know what nauseated me more, the president’s nothing-spiel or the applause. (Most applause chills my bones.) I’ve summed myself up in my “Pendulum” poem: “When a cause trumpets, I long for silence;/when the frivolous reigns, I want manifestos.” As Orwell’s friend, George Woodcock, said of the writer: “[He] hated political doctrinaires, professional do-gooders, and faddists of all kinds.” Hear, hear!

As far as politics enters my work, it’s scorned, derided. I’ve no faith in so-called democracies, monarchies, tribes, collectives. I’ve no faith in the stupid cult of Myself either. However, though I tend toward resignation, I know that – *Hagakurically* speaking – trying to stay under the rafters to avoid the rain won’t keep me from becoming soaked.

**WARD: What’s a rough estimate as to how many hours you put into any issue of your respected poetry magazine, *SubtleTea*?**

DAVID: I couldn’t guess. I put each edition together one pixel at a time, and I’ve never tallied the hours. This is part of the reason of why I’d be a lousy businessman. I do everything spasmodically. I’m never flatlined. So an edition can take a few weeks to put together, or a few days.

**WARD: Where do you write the majority of the time (room, porch, the john, office, car)?**

DAVID: I used to be a notebook nerd, but I’ve since lost all patience for that method. Now I’m all laptoppy. I like to see text unfold as I write. After all, that’s how the writing is going to end up. I dig writing in dim, out-of-the-way places, at home and (sometimes) among the lunchtime bustle of the city, which I despise and adore.

**WARD: Finally, I just have to ask you. Who are you reading these days?**

DAVID: I’ve almost no patience for fiction nowadays, although a lovely friend recently gave me A.A. Milne’s early detective novel, *The Red House Mystery*, which is muuuuch different (and better) than Hammett or Spillane. I can’t praise the book enough. It’s a tight, witty, humorous thing, and it deserves to share the throne with Milne’s *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*, which I reread like sutras.

Recent reading includes Gabriel Marcel, Emerson, Lacan, Chuang Tzu, G.K. Chesterton, Susan Sontag, Berdyaev, Epictetus, J.L. Talmon, Howard Bloom, Orwell, Frye, Cornell West, Azar Nafisi. I binge on histories, essays, philosophy, art studies, biographies, memoirs, letters, Manson Murders stuff,

*Magnapoets* – interview with David Herrle

Ripperology. Forget Rousseau's treatises, but read his lovely *Confessions*. Forget Camus' overrated *The Stranger*. Read his impactful *The Fall*. It's a cousin to Dostoyevsky's *Notes From Underground*.

I also adore comic books and graphic novels. *Ms. Tree, Sabre*, 1970s *Amazing Spider-Man*, the bygone but glorious Milestone books (*Blood Syndicate, Xombi, Shadow Cabinet*). However, I've strayed from my primary superhero obsession to more mystical and macabre stuff (*Swamp Thing, The Spectre, David Lapham's Crossed; Family Values* and *Psychopath, Madame Xanadu*). Probably because of my current fear-the-Reaper/Ingmar Bergman/Kurosawa frame of mind. Despite my teleological tendencies, I feel the pull of the despair-filled Abyss more acutely than ever before in my life. Long ago, in middle- and high school, I read a lot of Stephen King then strayed. I hanker for the King of Horror again. Guess who's choking on his own tail these days.

**WARD: Thank you for the honour of interviewing you, David.**

**David Herrle** is a technical writer, freelancer, founder/editor of *SubtleTea.com*, and author of *Abyssinia, Jill Rush*. He lives in Pittsburgh with his wife Marsha and daughter Kara-Zeal.

Poet, composer of music, lawyer, aspiring teacher and spoken-word performer, **L. Ward Abel** lives in rural Georgia, and has been published at *The Reader, The Yale Anglers' Journal, Versal, The Pedestal, Pale House, Kritya, Ditch, Open Wide, Moloch*, and hundreds of others. Abel has recently been nominated for "Best of the Web" by *Dead Mule* and *The Northville Review*. He is the author of *Peach Box and Verge* (Little Poem Press, 2003), *Jonesing For Byzantium* (UK Authors Press, 2006), *The Heat of Blooming* (Pudding House Press, 2008), and the forthcoming *American Bruise* (Parallel Press).

**DAVID HERRLE**



***What is your idea of perfect happiness?***

*I can't imagine it or even hope for it. We're tragic creatures built for both grief and happiness, and I think the desperate hunt for complete bliss on this earth is a great evil. Like Huxley's Savage, I claim the right to be unhappy.*

***What is your greatest fear?***

*Being tortured and mutilated. Being at the mercy of a barbarian or world-loved tyrant.*

***Which historical figure do you most identify with?***

*Three-way tie between Dostoyevsky, George Orwell and Byron. Moody, pendulous, contradictory and – as my wife always says of me – “hard to pin down and classify.” Dogma's for the dogs.*

***Which living person do you most admire?***

*My wife. How can her affection and toleration of me ever be doubted as the most admirable feat ever?*

*Magnapoets – interview with David Herrle*

***What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?***

*Impatience. And constant worry.*

***What is the trait you most deplore in others?***

*Herdism.*

***What is your greatest extravagance?***

*Buying issues of Elle, Allure, W., Marie Claire and Vanity Fair. And Starbucks.*

***On what occasion do you lie?***

*When the truth would break hearts.*

***What do you dislike most about your appearance?***

*Everything above the neck and below the hairline.*

***When and where were you happiest?***

*On the very brink of each of my billion crushes on chicks throughout my life. That dawning moment is a timeless, agonizing heaven.*

***If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?***

*My hesitation and aversion to social events.*

***If you could change one thing about your family, what would it be?***

*I'd add a sister to my two brothers.*

***What do you consider your greatest achievement?***

*Oh my. Ask me when it happens.*

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**Who is your favourite artist, and who is your favourite composer?**

*Three-way tie between Magritte, Klimt and Hopper. Beethoven, if not just for his Ninth Symphony and Egmont Overture.*

**What is your most treasured possession?**

*My collection of books.*

**What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?**

*Dehumanization. Becoming what Gabriel Marcel called a broken essence, a functional drone rather than an ontologically transcendent person.*

**Who are your heroes in real life?**

*I have none in real life. Everyone fails and disappoints in the long run. I prefer comic-book superheroes.*

**What is it that you most dislike?**

*Intolerant “tolerance,” political correctness, cultural suicide. And Halloween.*

**How would you like to die?**

*With ample warning, lucidity and time to remember. Or, as a Graham Greene character said (if I remember correctly), with enough time to look around at what I’ll be leaving behind. And not in a hospital bed.*

**What is your motto?**

*You only know when you were middle-aged when you die.*

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