

Comedy

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Book One
Archival Resurrections

Patrick McGee

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COMEDY, BOOK ONE

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For Joan and Sean
and my mother, Lillian McGee

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Preface

A PHILOSOPHICAL POEM FOR the twenty-first century—is this possible? Is it even poetry? I'll let the reader answer those questions. To some extent, this work is a dream about the democratic idea. Mallarmé said that poems are made with words, not ideas. I prefer the word “thought” to “idea” because thought implies process. Words and thoughts are inseparable in a singular, always incomplete process. Every nuanced use of language gives a different shape and direction to thought. Yet every writer knows that the finished work always misses some dimension of what moved a person to write. That excess is the signature of thought.

This book takes its poetic inspiration from Dante and William Blake and its philosophical understanding from Baruch Spinoza, Karl Marx, and an array of twentieth-century philosophers, especially Alain Badiou. Despite the three-line stanzas in the manner of Dante, it is not written in *terza rima*. The rhyming is relatively free, though I follow a few rules that should be obvious. The lines are pentameter, but the metrical feet are irregular, with an emphasis on rhetorical stresses. As Blake said of his *Jerusalem*, there is variety in the number of syllables and cadences.

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Canto 1

In Memory of Marcus Orr, My Teacher

Late in my life I came to a new place
That wasn't a dark wood but where the rain falls
In somewhat equal measure with sunlight,

And though in general my mood was bright,
I looked back on what had governed my life
For years as possibly so much time lost.

Though my desires had not been double crossed,
I no longer felt ambition like a whip,
Or maybe I just wanted something to blame

For my hesitation to risk limited fame,
Some minor reputation as a teacher
And author of books hardly anyone read,

To do something different before I'm dead,
Maybe something no one will ever know,
Though a few traces might conceivably last.

But then I heard a voice out of the past,
The formidable teacher who inspired my love
Of history and told me I could write,

And while I doubted the thing appearing in sight,
Thinking to myself I must have lost my mind,
There he was before me in his old wheelchair.

I was out for a walk in the open air
In that far northwest city on Puget Sound
On the top of a hill looking toward the lake.

He sat there with the sly smile of a rake
As if amused by the look of shock on my face,
Since I knew he had left this world behind.

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"I wouldn't have thought you to be so unkind,"
He said, "with that look on your face as if
You'd never seen a paraplegic before."

I replied, "Forgive me if I sound like a bore,
But dead people don't often walk with me,
Though you were on my mind not long ago,

Which may explain why I've put on this show.
For surely you're an image in my head
Projected onto the world like a screen."

He replied, "Don't worry about places I've been,
Since the memorial you notably missed,
Or the question as to whether or not you're sane.

In this sphere I'm in now that all seems inane.
From in your brain or somewhere else I saw
You open the book of Dante's divine vision,
Though the word 'divine' is subject to misprision
For the masterpiece of political anger,
Which for him had the more generic name—"

"*Commedia*," I said, "you taught the same
When you had me read Bergin's translation
In those three heavy volumes I just found

And decided to go for a second time around,
Which reading, I guess, awakened you in my mind,
Mostly because you were my greatest teacher."

"And you," he said, "were a most strange creature,
Half-formed and riddled with self-doubt and anger,
But something of your raw intelligence,

Something beyond emotional ambivalence,
Told me you would do something of value,
And also I could see you knew how to write."

Canto 1

“For your faith in me I was moved despite
My never feeling certain it was true.
I just wanted to be a teacher like you,

But in that art I never did get through
To nearly as many students as you.
At the end of forty years I walked away.”

“Forget the past,” he said, “focus on this day.
In life no man knows his effect on the world
And in death recognition becomes pointless.

That I exist in some unseen recess
Of your brain continues the trajectory
Of my life and all the things it expressed.

Now I’m here to point you toward something blessed.”
Then my professor stood and left the chair,
Something I never saw him do before.

He grabbed my hand and turned to face a door,
Barely visible while reflecting my present
World like a mirror, and with a swipe of his hand,

It opened onto a strange yet familiar land.
“Surely this is no inferno,” I felt
Obliged to say, but he said nothing back,

Which made me feel the awkwardness of my lack
Of understanding the thing happening to me.
But then the knowledge of where I was returned.

It was a place where I had once been burned,
After catching fire with passionate love,
Which nearly drove me down to my own hell,

And I could feel the memory in me swell.
It was a desert in the great southwest,
Miles from nowhere as Cat Stevens said

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In the song played over and over in my head,
That once reminded me of things out of reach.
So I asked my professor, "Why is it?"

This memory I had no desire to visit?
Why this spot where I stood lost and alone
Many years ago and then met the one

Who became in my mind a tender illusion
That would blind me to the force of militant love
That later brought about my redemption?"

"Look in yourself," he said, "for resolution."
I asked: "Is this the scene of my personal hell?"
He answered: "What is hell but experience,

The content of everyday existence?
And purgatory is thought as process,
The long spiral road of infinite truth."

"I'd been inclined to think hell was my youth,
But I'll accept your judgment on this point.
So what is paradise if I may ask?"

"To answer that may be our final task,
But to anticipate on what may come,
Your heaven is imagination or love,

A force neither from below nor from above,
That circumscribes thought and experience
With a vision of the possible in time."

"To me your words sound rather too sublime,
But before going forward one more question.
How is it that suddenly you can walk?"

"In life my injury became my talk,
The voice that was my true publication,
And I never felt the lack of movement

Canto 1

As requiring some physical improvement.
What you see now is what I always was,
What by intuition you must have known.”

Then I heard in the distance something moan
And turned my head to see where it came from.

It was a woman sitting on the ground.

I approached to learn the meaning of her sound.

Canto 2

She was bent toward this hardened lifeless earth,
As if she watered the dryness with her tears,
But when she looked up I knew her as no other

Than one long ago lost to me, my mother.
I couldn't bear the sight of her so sad,
Though also feeling at the same time glad

To see her again in the form she had
When I took her existence for granted.
In my ambivalence I turned to my teacher,

Who said, "Don't be afraid, quickly speak to her.
Her sorrow is what in you she has become
In the stream of infinite thought in which she's caught.

This trace is just as real as if you brought
Her back to life since her mental form is
The spirit of her life that entered your soul."

His word instantly took from me a comic toll,
For I wasn't certain I could believe
In some immaterial transcendent thing

That lived inside my physical being.
But he knew my thought before I could speak
And said, "German philosophers call it *Geist*,

And from your own knowledge you should think twice
About assuming I intend something
Inconsistent with our human flesh and blood.

This woman's tears mingling with dirt make mud
That like everyday experience can be shaped
Into a form with which you could express

A truth that cracks open time's track no less
Than some transcendent force that we have dreamed
Like that ancient God on a mountain top

Canto 2

Writing law with fire as spiritual prop.”
I turned to my mother who looked quizzically
Into my face but somehow didn’t see.

“I wonder if your face could possibly be,”
She said, “the one my son wore in my life.
You seem the same but somehow different.”

“I am your son,” I replied, “be confident,
But I am older than you were when you
Departed from a world not always kind,

Not to you or to those you left behind.”
At my words her tears ceased flowing and she looked
Around while I followed the path of her gaze.

No longer the desert of my younger days,
This place seemed like a blank and boundless void
That displayed in all directions a pure white,

Drowning all colors in its spectral light.
She spoke as she laid her eyes on me again,
“This place could be the womb of new creation,

Or perhaps what’s left after the devastation
Of my illness that stole me from my children.”
I had to ask, “Mom, do you feel such pain?

What in a place like this can you hope to gain,
Since your tears seem to have transformed the desert
Into something that invites images of desire

Like projections that could set the mind on fire.
Are you in heaven or hell?” She answered,
“Those places don’t exist, as you know well,

Except in minds that have some need to expel
Joyful or unpleasant memories into
Categorical spaces like little prisons

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In which the god in us remains unrisen,
Unable to give expression to our truth.”
“These words,” I said, “I never heard you use

In a life in which you felt so much abuse—“
“And also abused,” she said, “which is why I weep
For the daughters and sons I left alone and betrayed.

Oh, if only my death had somehow been delayed,
So that I could have lifted my understanding
Beyond the morality I served like a slave,

And all my children could say, yes, she forgave
Us as we forgave her when she could not see
What we were beyond her limited vision.

If my voice sounds like some weak rendition,
That comes from the stream of thought through which it passes
Intermixed with your thoughts and those that compose

Them coming from all the minds that seem to oppose
What you imagine as your inner essence.
Your voice was never yours alone but mine

Conditioned what you thought as if to combine
With it and all the others you’ve absorbed.
So in your voice my voice shelters and survives,

And through expansion meets with other lives,
Your brother and sisters and those you’ve read
And seen and heard and they in turn are each

Like stars appearing far beyond our reach,
Lights echoed and reflected in each other,
And across the world our mental vision spreads,

Each one of us an infinitesimal thread
That together make the unfinished whole of truth.
The living and the dead together share

Canto 2

One great intellect bound by mutual care,
And even the greatest minds cannot compare
To the multitude that thinks through human flesh

And the not human woven into this mesh.
Also understand sadness is not my hell,
It simply expresses knowledge of my acts.

The truth when confronted never detracts
From the joy of understanding who I was,
Though even in our heavens we feel pain,

Without which our joys would all be in vain,
Because you can't have one without the other,
Like when your student thought you must be sad

To think the terrible things she thought were bad.
But what seemed that way to her were comforts to you
That never made you feel nearly so blue

As the sight of minds enslaved to thoughts untrue.”
“I have to know, Mother, what about God?
Sometimes I thought your faith drove you insane

And pushed you to the acts that left a stain
On the hearts that loved you without reservation.”
She was silent for a moment and then said,

“I still believe, for me God is not dead,
But that doesn't mean I judge any others
Or think there is one church, one way, to believe

In a God no human can directly perceive.
Morality expresses human will,
And the violence and cruelty it has made

When we imagine God can be conveyed
Into our limited understanding
Has turned our life on earth into a hell.