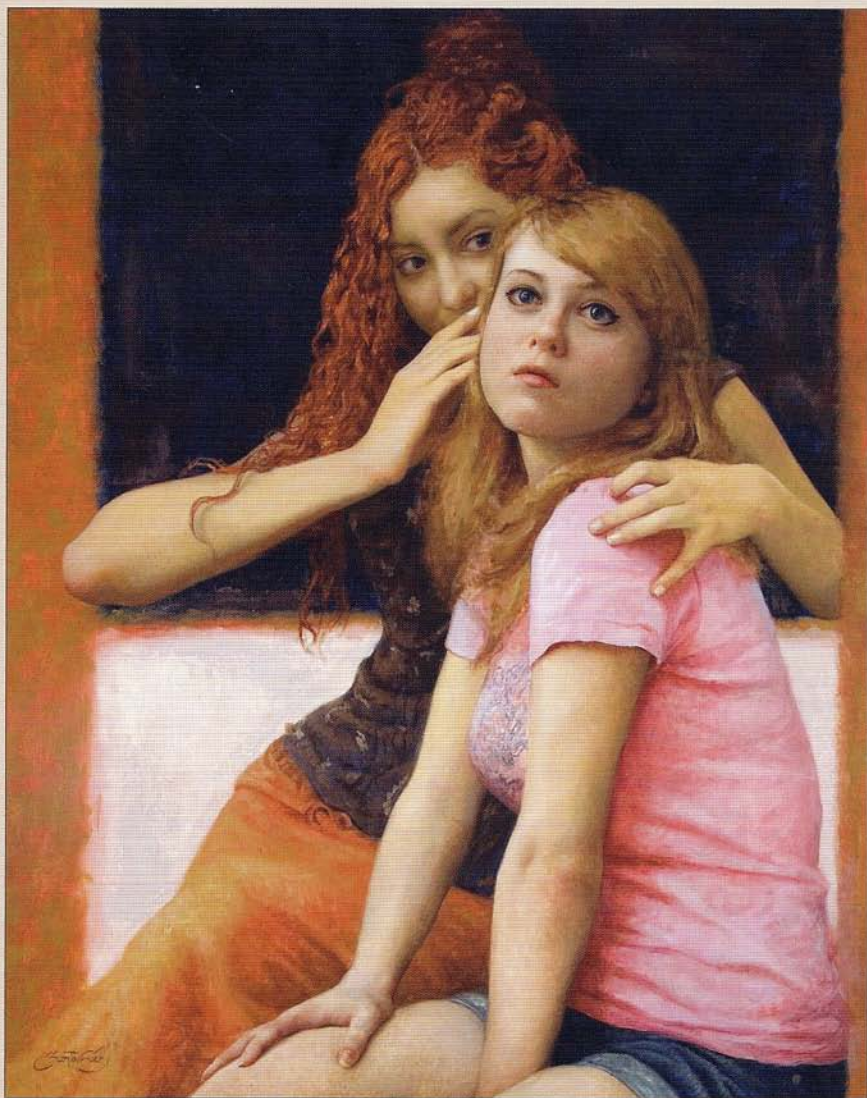


# American Arts

QUARTERLY

---

Winter 2012



Aphrodite and the Rebirth of Beauty

•

A Dialogue with David Ligare

•

"The Voice of Nature": Fidelia Bridges

# The Folk and the Classics

by Frederick Turner

Stopping for a drink in a tiny village in the remote mountains of Northern Albania, my friends and I were treated to a very ancient ritual. One of my traveling companions was an Albanian poet, Gjekë Marinaj, and his face is well known all over Malësia e Madhe. He introduced me as an American poet to the few people in the bar, and soon more people began to arrive. A huge unlabeled bottle of rakia appeared, to be drunk out of little heavy shot glasses. Food was served, though we were not hungry, having recently lunched on a whole lamb slaughtered for the occasion by the family of one of the oral poets of the region. Any payment was refused, though these are poor folk by civilized Western standards. We were toasted and made much of, and when we departed I was given a small bag of recently caught trout from the roaring stream outside, another bottle of white lightning and an elegant miniature model of the *lahuta*, the one-stringed, goat-headed bowed lute with which Balkan poets punctuate their verses.

Here was tangible evidence of a vital folk tradition in the arts; I know from Gjekë's studies of the ancient Illyrians that the tradition goes back well before ancient Roman times, indeed as Albert Lord and Milman Parry argued, up to 3,000 years ago. It is an oral tradition, yet it has coexisted with literacy at least since Homer's time. Gjekë and I have been translating the fiercely beautiful, richly ironic and wildly fresh poetry of the region. Gjekë collects poems on sound and video disk from the poets in the village coffee-houses, and patiently provides a trot for me to turn into English poems in the same rhymed tetrameter couplets as the original.<sup>1</sup>

This experience has naturally prompted a cascade of questions, chief of which is the relation between folk art and "high," "serious," "canonical" or "classical" art—with the related question of "popular" art. Is "popular" art the same as "folk" art?

If you roam Italy's old rural churches, it becomes very clear that the line between the folk tradition of Madonna and Child paintings and the "high" tradition of Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Fra Angelico and Raphael is by no means clear. The great old masters were masters because they had inherited the technical, ideological and spiritual traditions of the anonymous folk painters. The masters' work could almost be said to be making explicit and celebrating the inner meaning of the often illiterate country artists' images.

I was reminded of something that had struck me years before, listening to Japanese court music with its melancholy, meditative, protracted periods, and realizing that the melodies were almost identical to the lively, vigorous dance tunes of the rice farmers and peasants of a thousand years before. Year by year,



court musicians, perfecting their craft of the quavering flute and the bent note of the zither, had slowed the folk melody down to explore its nuances.<sup>2</sup> By now, one would have to speed up the tempo about four or five times to recover the rollicking zest of the old rice-harvest chant, battle song or courtship ditty. Likewise, I recalled my study of the haiku form, my realization that the haiku is metrically one and a half lines of the old popular heroic meter that was once sung in the stretched and oratorical "bowstring" voice by *biwa hoshi*—blind lute-playing oral poets—to country audiences. The elegant courtly haiku form is literally an eclogue, a piece extracted from a grand folk story to be held up to the light and examined.

Further, I speculated, were not the classic melodies of Bach basically a compendium of the great folk tunes of the old German markets and country churches—carols, work chants and love songs? A compendium marvelously changed and deepened and analyzed and broken open to reveal its spiritual and aesthetic depths, but bearing still the vital bloodflow of its origins. Consider what some take to be the most classical art of all: the temple architecture of Periclean Greece. Without question, it is a recapitulation in stone of the timber halls of the ancestral tribes that invaded Greece, carrying the building traditions of the northern European forests into a climate that no longer supplied fresh straight timber. But the column is plainly the tree trunk idealized in limestone or marble, the architrave a squared log beam, the row of dentils a decorative stone version of the wooden vigas that protrude from Pueblo adobe homes, the altar the high table of the tribal lord and lady.

Even mighty Shakespeare, now the essence of serious classical high art for many, was once regarded as low popular entertainment. In one of the London city maps of the period, the mapmaker transposed by mistake Shakespeare's Globe Theater and the bear-baiting arena, at that time much frequented by lowlifes and prostitutes—showing how Shakespeare's art was regarded by university types (as if "Greene's Groatsworth of Wit," which contains a sneer at Shakespeare, were not evidence enough). The Puritans, who didn't like the cultural trash of the time, abolished the London theaters when they got into power. But the trouble was not just that Shakespeare was, to them, what rock concerts are to our own cultural custodians. Shakespeare's theater, with its roots deep in country folk drama and the old Catholic miracle and mystery plays, in inn-yard performances of often bawdy pantomimes, in local semi-pagan fertility rituals, in the lyrics of local balladeers, was a reminder to the modernizers of the loamy feet of high culture, the smelly soil in which high art grows.

Most people know now that the novel itself was once held in contempt as something that scullery-maids read, a contempt still present in highbrow attitudes to westerns, romance novels, fantasy epics, adventure stories, murder mysteries and science fiction. Never mind that *Lonesome Dove* is a western, *Pride and Prejudice* a romance novel, *The Lord of the Rings* a fantasy epic, *Moby Dick*

an adventure story, that *Crime and Punishment*, *The Woman in White* and *Bleak House* are murder mysteries, and that *Paradise Lost* is science fiction. Graphic art, posters, illustration, commercial art, even of the highest quality, are still regarded as distinct from the "serious" art that shows up in the Whitney and now, increasingly, alas, in the Guggenheim. *Ballet*, *ballad* and *ball* were once the same word, as Lady Gaga's "Monster Ball" rock show might remind us.

Here I had to take stock of where this line of thought might lead. Has there really been a break between high art and its roots? There have certainly been tongue-in-cheek excursions by the "serious" arts of modernism and postmodernism into the popular realm, such as Pop Art, Photorealism and Performance Art. But the attitude is often that of one who is slumming or subverting or, frankly, sneering at the corny tastes of the unenlightened. In Cultural Studies departments across the country, the most ephemeral and crude excrescences of contemporary cultural fashion are discussed solemnly in the language of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and Walter Benjamin. But here again, the focus is almost always either on the ways in which the popular art under inspection is a symptom of the malaise of consumerist late capitalism or a covert attack upon it. The hopes, loves, virtues, joys and wisdom of this amazing middle-class civilization of ours are essentially dismissed.

But in this exploration, I objected, I had come a long way from the Albanian mountain poets, and my subject had subtly shifted from folk art to popular art. "Folk" and "Pop" are distinct categories. But are they really? I asked. What is the difference between the people and the folk? Is it just that the folk are picturesque and the people vulgar? Is the distinction a value judgment in disguise—folk good, pop bad? Or is it a matter of political prejudice: folk art is authentic because it comes from wholesome edenic natural communities where gift exchange rules, while pop art is inauthentic because it comes from a capitalist consumer market economy? A wiser anthropology has now established that markets and currency of a kind always coexisted, as they do now, with a flourishing culture of gift exchange and moral obligation. There never was a pre-market Eden. My Albanian mountaineers, I knew well, were quite capable of driving a hard bargain, boosting the excellence of what they had to sell, and getting in on a business opportunity before their neighbors. They honored poets not because they were more naive and primitive than we but because, in the field of poetry, they were more civilized. The pop-folk distinction would not hold up, I found, except perhaps as another way of talking about socio-economic and technological differences that would leave the essential aesthetic questions untouched.

Ninety percent of everything, observed the science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon, is crud. There is a very great deal of pop crud and a very great deal of folk crud—and, of course, a very great deal of high art, mainstream novel, serious music crud, too. One of the things that distinguishes between the crud



and true excellence is a sort of continuity between the roots and the flowers of culture. A popular art that has severed itself from its ancient ritual roots and withered is no better and no worse than a piece of conceptual art in a gallery that has done the same thing by its divorce from the discipline of hand and eye. A folk art form that denies any commerce with new ideas and new forms is a root only, without flower, thus without seed and a new future. Shakespeare is the great guide here; he was as at home in the cutthroat commerce of Venice as he was in the pagan forest cults of old Britain—and brought the strengths of both to revitalize the lovely elegant court arts of poetry, classical drama and pageant. Shakespeare was not slumming; he was doing what Bach did with the German folk tunes, what Raphael did with the simple old icons of maternity, what the Tang poets did with the folk ballad, what the composer of the *Bhagavadgita* did with the rough old battle-tale of the *Mahabharata*.

My friend Gjekë is a sophisticated contemporary poet, but his father, Nik Marinaj, is a true oral poet in the ancient tradition, and Gjekë has inherited the poetic vitality, passion and extravagant wit of his predecessors. In my own development as a poet, my first poems, at the age of nine or so, were in meter and rhyme, because my father had read me poems in the older poetic tradition. Later, as a teenager, I wanted to sound like the modern poets and partly abandoned meter (one poetry magazine used to counsel contributors: "No rhyme or pornography"). But the traditional forms kept drawing me back, connecting me to those millennia of poets stretching back to the unknown bard of *Gilgamesh*, 5,000 years ago. As I read more and more of the classics, began to understand classical music, and found myself arrested and changed by certain great paintings in the museums, my urge to emulate them in my chosen art of poetry linked up with that strange pressure that beginning artists feel, of something beautiful and mysterious in oneself, trying to get out. How, I asked myself, can we restore the connection, graft back our work to the vital folk/popular/classic roots of the arts? How does art stay alive?

Much contemporary poetry seemed to me to have lost touch with its roots, and as I looked at the other arts, with the abandonment of melody in music, plotting in fiction, representation and drawing in the visual arts, human proportion in architecture and mimesis in drama, the same seemed to be true of the whole world of "serious" avant-garde art. Paradoxically, it seemed that, to be able to do something new, one might have to set aside what is new, the contemporary avant-garde, and reconnect with the old. The obvious place to begin was to get under one's belt a substantial experience of both the great classics and the vernacular tradition of one's own and others' popular folk culture. The folk culture has always crossed boundaries: I have heard the same delicious quaver in folk music from Asia, North Africa, Bulgaria, the Auvergne, the Appalachians, Mexico and Peru. The Swan Maiden story is told in various forms by Russian, Japanese, Italian, Orcadian, African, Chinese and Croatian

storytellers. Folk epics all over the world, as I will demonstrate in a forthcoming book on the epic genre, have basic story elements such as the beast-man, the Fall, the journey to the underworld, the game with death, and so on.

But the crucial link by which our "serious" art culture might be reconnected with its roots is artistic technique itself. Only in the process of learning to be a virtuoso can the shamanic inner process be awakened. It was only when the Albanian tetrameter couplet started beating in my head that I could translate, with some sense of the fire and wit and urgency of the original, the trot that Gjekë gave me. Listening to the sound recordings of the poets themselves, even if I did not understand the language, I could immediately recognize the same devices and surprises that are familiar to anyone who is skilled at the practice of meter and rhyme. Artists in various genres and forms are making similar discoveries. The composer Stefania de Kenessey tells me that her music, with its compelling melodies, came alive through the study and practice of the old Greek modal scales. As Jacob Collins argues, the practice of drawing itself begins to bring an artist into the same world as that of the classic draftsmen and painters. What might seem to be imitation actually becomes an act of the imagination, of invention. The playwright/actor/director Fred Curchack creates his own extraordinary dramas by combining classical Western acting technique with Kathakali, Ludruk, music-hall, rock-concert and Noh devices. Frederick Feirstein, the poet-psychologist, argues in a brilliant forthcoming essay that meter and rhyme make up a kind of symbolic language itself, parallel to and interwoven with metaphor, acting as a portal between the primary process creative thinking that we encounter in dreams and the daylight consciousness of the waking world. We discover things about our own inner world—that we share with all other human beings—by the coincidences of metrical rhythm, assonance and rhyme. Those techniques also connect poetry back to the vital energies of popular verse. The poet Dana Gioia says in a recent interview about the New Formalism: "It moved poetry forward while also reconnecting it to its primal roots in orality and performance. (It's no coincidence that revival of form and narrative among young literary poets exactly coincided with the creation of hip-hop and slam poetry.)"<sup>3</sup>

The arts of melody, story, meter, visual realism, mimesis and proportion are important not just in themselves but in the transformation that they perform on artists themselves, a rewiring of the brain to be able to participate in a two-way conversation with our ancestors.

True art is the moment of emergence of the classic from the folk. And it happens not despite, but because of, the limitations of the human body and the strain and scarring by which the brain/body is reshaped by practice in those marvelous old artistic techniques. Malcolm Gladwell says that we need 10,000 hours of practice to be an expert. It takes seven years at a minimum to become a Karate black belt or to get a Ph.D. at a university. The recalcitrance of the brain at this work is the very chisel that reshapes the brain. Artistic theories

that attempt to liberate the artist from virtuosity, to set the conceptual free from the physical, destroy the organic connection that carries the vital sap from the root to the fruit. Dance moves us not because of how high the dancer can leap—a dancer in a space shuttle, freed from gravity, could leap higher, but the leap would be meaningless. It is the very weight of the body—opposed to the craft and passion of the dancer—that liberates the imagination and gives it purchase in the world.

Those villagers in the Albanian mountains knew all this, and that was why they brought us fishes, bread and potent distilled spirit, and sacrificed the lamb. They honored themselves in doing so, and, for me, they closed a long circuit, brought a long unresolved melody to a conclusion.

FREDERICK TURNER is Founders Professor of Arts & Humanities at the University of Texas, Dallas. He is the former editor of *The Kenyon Review* and the author of the epic poems *Genesis*, *The New World*, *Ballad of the Good Cowboy* and *The Return*. His most recent books are *Sung Across the Shoulder: Heroic Poetry of Illyria* (Mundus Artium Press, with Gjekë Marinaj) and *Two Ghost Poems* (Turning Point Press). <http://frederickturnerpoet.com/>

#### NOTES

1. The results have just been published in *Sung Across the Shoulder: Heroic Poetry of Illyria* (Athens, Ohio: Mundus Artium Press, 2011).
2. As Glenn Gould did with his amazing, daring hypnotic exploration of the *Goldberg Variations*.
3. Michelle Johnson. "Poetic Collaborations: A Conversation with Dana Gioia," *World Literature Today* (September 2011), p. 23.