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Interview with Albert Goldbarth

by Cole Rachel

Albert Goldbarth's palatial estate in the south of France is difficult to find, hidden away as it is on the farther side of a dense row of ornamental trees sculpted to look like various canonical literary figures and well-known delicatessen sandwiches. Only a tinkle of laughter, and the light sound of splashing, gives it away—this, from the pool, where his corps of live-in assistants (his "sylphs," as he calls them) take time out from their typing duties, and indulge in a vigorous au naturel game of water polo. On this afternoon, it's the poet himself who answers my timid knock at the door; he's dressed in a red silk lounging jacket, and has the frowzy look of disrupted genius attending him. Graciously inviting me within, he.... Well, actually, it doesn't really happen like this at all, which is sad really. In truth, I called Albert Goldbarth at his home in Wichita, Kansas (itself nearly as glamorous as the south of France) and asked him to do a short interview for Westview, to which he happily complied. Having known Albert for several years now, as a reader, a student and as a good friend, I was not surprised that our Q&A exchange would take place via the good ol' postal system, his communication device of choice. The following exchange is culled from our correspondence over the past month. Not surprisingly, Albert's responses are as lively, as informed and as interesting as he himself is, and as is his work.

RACHEL:

One of the things that originally drew me to your work is the sense of "universality" inherent in most of your writing. In that, I mean that the poems (and the essays) seem to contain all of the universe at once, embracing all manner of historical and current "pop-culture." What are your feelings about popular American culture at the moment? Since I know that you refuse to touch a computer, what are your thoughts on technology? How are these things reflected in your work?

GOLDBARTH:

Reviewers are often emphasizing the place of popular culture in my poems. I'm not surprised, and I don't deny its high-profile positioning in my work. I'm someone who still makes a monthly visit to his local comic book shop. But I should add that the term "popular culture," although I yield to its common use and co-opt it for the title of one of my own books, doesn't exist in my own head as a very useful demarcation. I know some Greek mythology; I also happen to know about the Nicole Kidman/Tom Cruise divorce. I can talk a bit, in

my own layman way, about the pre-Biblical flood narrative in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and I know a bit about Roswell, New Mexico and about fuzzy dice hanging from rearview mirrors. Last week I received my copy of an anthology of essays from the University of Georgia Press in which I provide the introduction; it's a gathering of essays on the interface between the arts and the sciences, and I talk a little about C. P. Snow's well-known phrase "the two cultures," and the implications of that bifurcation. But I could hold forth just as long and at least as eloquently on the career of Carl Barks, who created the character Uncle Scrooge McDuck for the Walt Disney comic books. It's *all* part of my life, of my thinking, without particular prioritization.

Lately I've been pondering the wonderful way in which certain arenas of "popular culture" allow us to see movements between various socioeconomic levels over time, and to think about ideas of exclusion and inclusion within the culture at large. I'm thinking of the way corned beef travels from being disreputably a dish of Irish immigrants to



being an accepted staple of the culture at large, the way a name that would once have been associated with the upper crust (say, "Tiffany") becomes a common name for strippers, the way the tattoo has moved from the keeping of boxers, sailors and hookers to the bellies of our most valued celebrities and the forearms of lawyers. It's a lovely mix: a "yeasty mix," George Eliot says in her novel *Daniel Deronda*. I think my psyche's mix is an "everythingmix": for better or worse, I've invited Rocky and Bullwinkle to grab seats around the table in Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," and I've asked nerdy Clark Kent and nerdy Stephen Hawking to talk as equals about their superpowers.

But I'm not a careerist of "pop culture" in any way—any more, really, than I'm an expert on, say, Elizabethan literature—and there are vast holes in my knowledge. As you know, the entire burgeoning world of computer possibilities exists beyond my interests. Just yesterday the mail brought my advance copy of my new book of essays, *Many Circles* (which by the way makes a terrific Christmas gift or birthday present) and at the conclusion of its four pages of end notes I say "... none of these pieces was researched or composed on a computer, or was submitted to a publisher on disc." I'm talking about a 316-page book, its essays culled from twenty-one years of published prose of mine, I'm talking about four pages of end notes that credit the books, monographs, and newspaper and magazine articles that helped feed my own creations over all of that time ... and so I'm pretty serious about keeping the computer screen out of my life, and still pretty pleased with the amount of input from the universe that happily crosses the membrane into my head and heart. In any case, our headlong rush toward becoming a global computerocracy is something I witness with dismal foreboding.

I don't usually proselytize on this issue, and anyway couldn't be as soulfully eloquent on it as writers like Neil Postman and Sven Birkerts: the latter's *The Gutenberg Elegies* is, I think, one of the seminal books of the last of the twentieth century. But I will try to keep my fingertips computer-

keyboard-virginal for as long as I can, to live outside of the wired hive; and so my popular culture experience obviously doesn't include Nintendo, any more than my reading life takes place on a Palm Pilot. Go figure. I must own over a hundred toy space ships from the 1950's, but I think I've actually held a cell phone all of twice in my life.

RACHEL:

Again, as someone so obviously well-versed in all manner of historical and current popular culture, where do you find inspiration? And if you don't really watch television and can't turn on a computer, how do you feed this fascination? On a somewhat unrelated note, what do you see as the future of poetry? Given the nature of literature in the information age, is there a future for poetry?

GOLDBARTH:

I've just returned from a one-month residency at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, working with student poets in the MFA program there. Wilmington is where *Dawson's Creek* is filmed (there was also a new Travolta vehicle being shot while I was there ... the wife of the Creative Writing Department Chair is an extra in some crowd scenes), and I was certainly able to keep up with casually witty (well, semi-witty) observations on the show and its cast (it's a hobby among the MFA students to compile complete sightings of the major cast) even though I don't own a television ... in fact, have never owned a television (although, as a child in my parents' home, it was an important enough part of my development: why, *would* you like me to sing the words to *Car 54, Where Are You?*). Anyway, I'd be happy to talk with you about whether or not Jennifer Lopez should go crawling apologetically back to Puff Daddy; for that matter, thanks to a friend's long distance phone call, I can describe to you her transparent blouse at (it was just last night) the Academy Awards. Yes, as the parenthetical in your question implies, I enjoy reading the tabloids; they're merely a mild version of a sensational press that, like pornography and women's romances, have been with us in a strong steady stream of communication since printed communication first began;



and, like their proto versions that exist from before the age of printed text, they answer the questions posed by deep joys and fears in the human psyche. They're fun, they're scary, they *are* America. I mean, if you wanted me instead to try to summarize Witold Rybczynski's discussion of the domestication of interior space by the Dutch in the generation preceding Rembrandt, I could try; that, or my loose understanding of the Human Geonome Project. But I'd be just as pleased to talk about Bigfoot's latest sighting, or Mariah Carey's latest fling. It's been my experience that, if one reads with relative enthusiasm and embrace, one doesn't need a television or a PC or a ticket to the local multiscreen mall complex to get damp in the stream of popular culture issues. As to the future of my reading pleasures, if I continue to do my Bartleby shtick in the face of owning a computer . . . well, that future is difficult to see. It's possible that one day I'll visit Dripping Springs or The Big Apple, check into a motel, look for the Yellow Pages so that I can research used book stores in the area . . . and be faced only by an in-room computer terminal, beyond my use or willingness to use. No phone, no phone directory. Will the weekly issue of *The Enquirer* only be online by then? (Ditto everything else, from *Biblical Archeology* to *Playboy* . . . to *Poetry*)? I don't know: our predictive skills can no longer travel faster than the speed of change, which is why it's also impossible to answer your question about "the future of poetry." First, of course, one would have to define "poetry"—is "slam poetry" the same as "poetry" for purposes of your question and my answer? is ritual chant from an oral tribal tradition "poetry" (it's listed that way in the contents of anthologies, but it's galaxies removed, in form, in intent, in structure, from a poem by Billy Collins in *The Georgia Review*). I could natter on uninterestingly about whether "the poem of the future" will be formal or free verse, for "the people" or "the elite," privately scribbled or publicly funded . . . but the poem of the future may be something we can't even *begin* to envision now, may be something that would be as unrecognizable as "poetry" to my sensibility as

a book of mine would be to someone in a field, chanting to the rain god for the clouds to open up.

RACHEL:

What advice might you have for young poets? For example, how valuable do you feel MFA creative writing programs are for emerging writers? How much or how little do you feel that contemporary literature is influenced (or controlled) by academia?

GOLDBARTH:

About a geologic age ago—far enough in the past so that I was a student in an MFA program myself—I had the chance to ask Galway Kinnell (then a kind of poetry god: *The Book of Nightmares* had just been published) what he thought of the MFA experience; something in my phrasing or tone of voice must have indicated I had doubts about its validity. I believed then, as I do now, that the greatest poets we can still read never had an MFA and perhaps wouldn't have even understood the concept . . . Dante, Blake, Dickinson, Whitman, Donne, Goethe, the whole Crowd of Greatness perhaps extending into even the generation of people like Marianne Moore and Berryman; if anything, their greatness is indexed especially by the fact that their work speaks powerfully across vast gaps of time (or nationality or language, maybe) *without* the need to hear them rattle on in a "craft lecture" (or be interviewed by Cole Rachel); if anything, Rilke earned his poems in the heart of a devastating and glorious fire that seems to have little to do with earning three hours of academic credit. But Kinnell provided a very moving description of his own student life at Princeton, in a time where poets were not normally accepted into university life as either students or faculty, in a place where the admission of being a poet (or wanting to be, Kinnell might more modestly have said) was cause for perplexity from the world at best, derision quite possibly. He was very eloquent in addressing the loneliness he felt, being "out of it," and the necessary sense of community he thought MFA programs then provided young writers. He was very persuasive. Of course one might want to point out that, whether or not there's a connection



between that background and his growing life as a poet, Kinnell did emerge from that experience on a road that would lead him to the writing of *The Book of Nightmares*, a darkly radiant and exquisite long poem. And in any case, his small speech to me was now two (would it be approaching three?) generations of American poets ago, with many small mushroom-caps of MFA programs having sprouted up in between. The Associated Writing Programs was in its first one or two years of existence then, its regularly appearing self-congratulatory newsletter still a big dream away. Poets didn't have home pages on the Web; there was no Web. There wasn't a first book publication competition at every third small college on the Rand-McNally Atlas; Creative writers now are a very established part of the academic community, indistinguishable from their second-rate scholarly colleagues with their conference papers and resumes and letters of recommendation and career networking and favor-trading and deviating tenure-track concerns. And at the same time, the kinds of needs so genuinely described by Kinnell are now easily met in any number of ways that don't necessarily have to do with diplomas and job markets. The MFA experiment has proved an interesting one, and in some ways, for some people, I'm sure a beneficial one. (Uh, Cole . . . you're not sorry you studied with me for three years, are you?) But maybe it's time for a new experiment, returning the writing of poetry (and fiction) into the hands of taxi drivers and neurosurgeons and rare coin dealers and househusbands and housewives and archeologists and call girls and pool players and deacons, people who may write and publish for the passion of it, and not because the next appearance in *The Paris Review* is going to mean an annual raise. Me, I teach creative writing in a university, always have, probably always will. And I'll continue to try to do well for my students as they march through my life . . . to look at their work with some version of honesty and commitment. But one can try to do honorably within a system without giving the system itself one's full loyalty.

That the kinds of distracting and cheapening "po biz" values I've been hinting at can blight lives even outside of academia is undeniable, I know this. All you need is a local bar and any two writers. But I think it's time to reconsider what it meant to be Dickinson, meant to be Keats, as opposed to . . . well, you'll meet them readily enough at the cash bar at this year's Associated Writing Programs conference. I think it's time to remember that the deepest way to study under another poet is to *read* that poet, ferociously and empathetically, to learn from the *work*, and not to sit for three hours in that poet's classroom, watching the clock drag its load of minutes around in a circle.

RACHEL:

Would you say that you have a motto? Any guiding principle that influences not only your work, but also your life?

GOLDBARTH:

Picking a motto, as you request, is bigger labor than I'm ready for right now. But I will provide two quotes that have always seemed appropriate to my life:

"What the Boy chiefly dabbled in was natural history and fairy tales, and he just took them as they came, in a sandwichy sort of way, without making any distinctions; and really his course of reading strikes one as rather sensible."

—Kenneth Grahame

"All the world will be your enemy, oh Prince With a Thousand Enemies, and when they catch you, they will kill you. But first . . . they must catch you."

—Richard Adams

RACHEL:

How would you like to be remembered? or, more dramatically, how would you like to die? How's that for a final question?

GOLDBARTH:

As I've already said, the future is difficult to read. So far as I'm concerned, we don't know that I *am* going to die. I'd like to think not. And I believe it's rather crass of you to even imply its possibility.

