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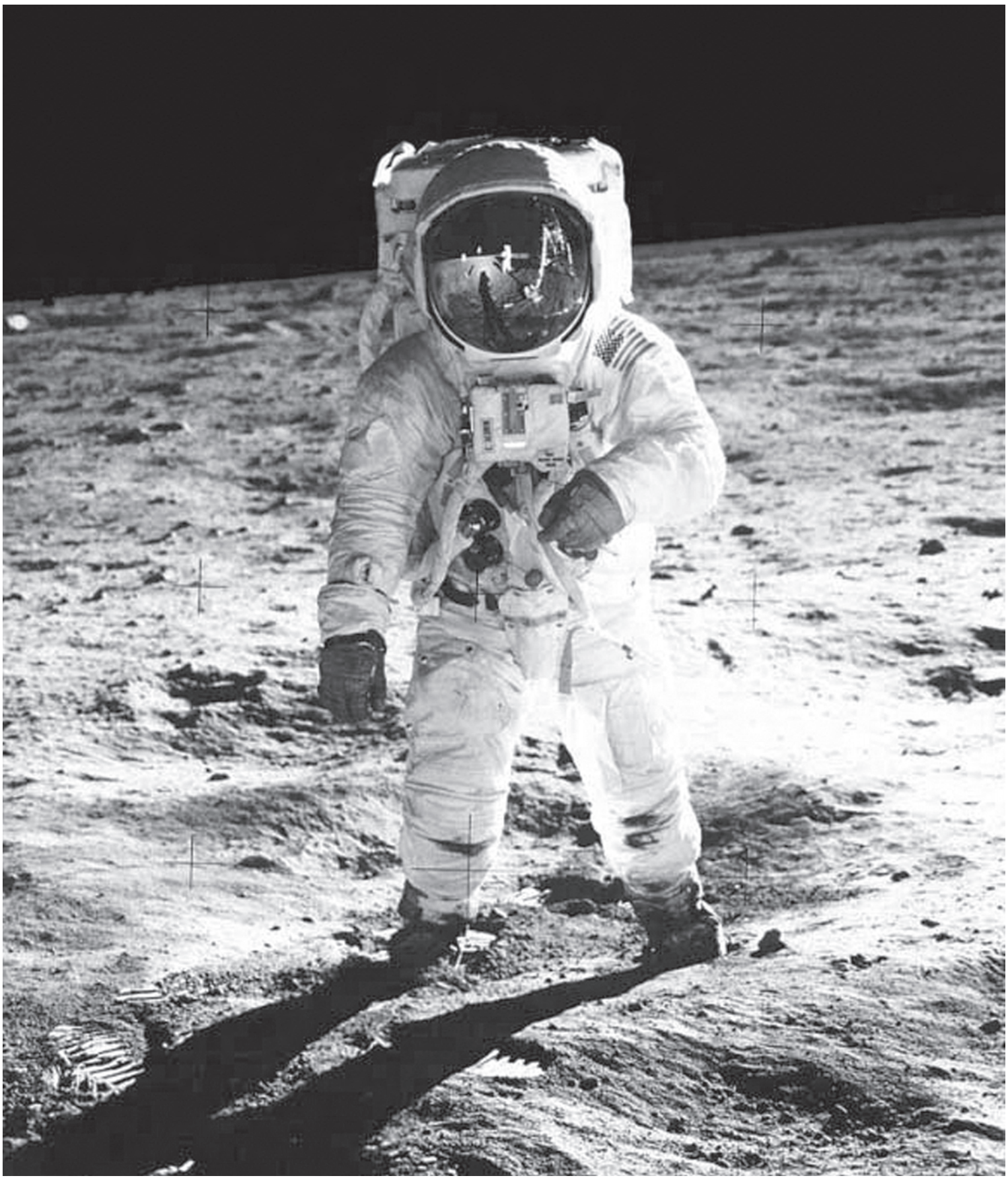

Buzz Aldrin on the lunar surface, Apollo 11 mission, 1969 (NASA file photo)

Memoirs of a Life on Mars

Arod Suliman

Modern science has long provided the assurance that there is indeed an end to history. Catastrophe or evolution, solar eruption or black hole metaphysics: the scope of human history is irremediably finite. This is a fact, not a theological fantasy, nor prophesy of doom or apocalypse. One of the most pressing questions confronting the human sciences today is how a commitment to *futurity*, grounded in the totalising notion of historical discourse, is able to come to terms with the inevitability of a "beyond (of) history."

At least since Heroditos, historical discourse has established itself upon a claim to verifiability, founded upon the facticity and truth-value of its material artefacts and primary documents. That is, upon the worldly manifestations of humanity's adventure at different times and in different localities on planet Earth. But history has, with the accessibility of new technologies, entered upon a different phase—one in which not only the presence (or past presence) of human artefacts, but also the pre-requisite condition of facticity and truth-value in its empirical sense—as something potentially verifiable—no longer can be taken

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Cadenza for the Schneidermann Violin Concerto

Joshua Cohen

Concerto for Piano & Orchestra No. 4 in G Major, Opus 58, 2nd Movement, *Andante con moto*
—Beethoven

Philosophy, like the overture to *Don Juan*, starts with a minor chord.—Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Chapter XVII, *On Man's Need for Metaphysics*

CADENZA, Italian, from the Old Italian *cadence*, meaning much the same as it does in English, a musical term (excluding the military definitions), a noun. A solo passage intended to feature a performer's virtuosity. A parenthetic pyrotechnic flourish, an ametric tangential, a brilliant "flight of fancy." Nothing to do whatsoever with living room furniture or the heroine of Monteverdi's *Frottola.* Now understood as a section of a concerto, usually situated towards the end of a first movement, a section reserved for the soloist only, the orchestra having stopped, leaving the soloist to display his instrumental proficiency. Then the CADENZA ends, soloist often signalling his finish with a long trill, and the orchestra re-enters to finish the movement. Though originally a CADENZA was a vocal embellishment, a practice which later extended itself into instrumental music. In opera, a CADENZA was improvised by a performer on a cadence in an aria. Performance practice allowed three CADENZAS in an aria, or *melismas* (as they are known vocally) the third being the most elaborate. Interesting to note that the CADENZA was defined to me, by my friend the pianist Alexander Wald, to whom I dedicate *Schneidermann*, as "an extended solo passage in an *improvisatory style*," italics mine. Meaning that the CADENZA was improvised, ex tempore, up until the advent of Romanticism (and the advent of the famous virtuoso personality) during and after which composers wrote them out, in an *improvisatory style*, a style which derived many of its parameters from violin technique. Meaning that the CADENZA focused more on instrumental showmanship and less on a soloist's exploration of a work's thematic material. Third parties—the famous virtuosos themselves—also wrote their own CADENZAS, many written as specialized practice material, and a handful of these became so widely played, and loved, that they, today, seem like they were written into the original score, a prominent example being Joachim's CADENZA for the Brahms' Violin Concerto, overthrown later, to my ear, by Heifetz's. Today, almost no virtuosos perform the CADENZAS of Beethoven or Mozart—which themselves had their genesis in improvisation, in the great tradition of the composer/performer—instead preferring CADENZAS written by virtuosi—examples here are those by Busoni and Reinecke. Today, outside of "modern" or "serious" aleatory musics (which are as deaf to the world as the world is to them) and excluding analogies in "popular," "ethnic" or "world" musics, almost no virtuosos improvise their own CADENZAS.

—music—

Has the orchestra stopped? desisted? everyone finished? Gasp—it's okay. Air on whose G string? It's about time I've been wasting until, wasted on this fermata… So, draw out the long bows, downbow for the first violins, upbow for the seconds—the bowings are as necessary as they are Schneidermann's, written in your parts, yes, believe it or not, in his *own hand*, and such hands!—and yes, the final cadence drawn out to the last and stiffest hair, to the frog and to the tip… Okay, gasp, don't asphyxiate… Sorry, I'm shouting to be heard over this (Clausewitz's first principle, that of surprise, you know) and then… *Okay*, a War word, and let's let the resonance die in the nosebleeds, fine. Listen: I am standing here on stage, under the proscenium arch, addressing you instead of performing my solo. Understand. Or this is my solo. Understand? In matters of art, you decide. And while you're deciding, allow me to wipe the sweat from my bow and my brow with a handkerchief I pocketed from my hotel, uptown, from the maid's pushtray in my hallway, hotel name of Grand something, you should look it up sometime, everything's marble… and the maid's some half-breed, indigene ingénue with the sweetest two loaves, ready for sanctification, tucked away under that off-pink uniform and her name's Maria, mother of one and divorced and I'll know more tomorrow morning, I hope, or I won't know anything more, I hope, but I'd have filled her F-holes anywhichway for ever and ever… ewig, ewig as Mahler would have it but only if Schlesinger's conducting, and he isn't… I am, sort of. Me, the world's repre-

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Gilgamesh Agonistes

Steve Nash

Making your way through one of the many formulations of the *Gilgamesh* epic, arguably the world's oldest literature, is like reading a book in which some of the best parts have disappeared. Most readers are probably grateful enough, however. That much of anything remains of this Near Eastern tale after the passage of forty centuries is an admixture of the whimsical and the miraculous that is typical of archaeological discovery. Unfortunately, current events in the lands where this tale was first told are lengthening the odds against the survival of many such treasures.

The *Gilgamesh* epic predates the *Iliad* by at least a thousand years, and Mesopotamian literature, of which *Gilgamesh* can be safely reckoned as the epicentre, is a source for both the Biblical and Classical traditions. Its literary and cultural significance consists of more than mere primacy, however. It's also a hell of story, and will soon—given our Iraqi connections and the stimulus of popular cultural interest—be more widely read.

Only a few years ago, translations of *Gilgamesh* petered out in ellipses, signifying the many places where the eleven cuneiform tablets bearing the standard version of the epic are broken and incomplete. Nearly every year, however, new bits of the story have been translated, or old fragments illuminated, at the British Museum or other collections around the world, or as more clay tablets are excavated. About 600 lines of the 3,000-line epic are still missing, but the interruptions are now less frequent.

Its most complete contemporary rendering, a critical edition by Assyriologist Andrew George of the University of London, has just been published. It consults and compares the widest known assemblage of the crumbling clay tablets. (This new work was preceded by George's far shorter and more reader-friendly Penguin Classic translation, intended for a non-specialist audience.) *Gilgamesh* attracts far more than scholarly interest, though. Dozens of translations have appeared in at least sixteen modern languages, and the story has been recreated, adapted, and derived from, in many forms. Just in the past couple of years, Joan London's novel *Gilgamesh,* set partly in Australia, and Eduardo Garrigues's *West of Babylon,* set in New Mexico, have appeared. It is also the basis of a couple of operas, countless theater productions, and—why have we waited so long?—a forthcoming Hollywood creation.

It's barely possible that some of the rest of the real *Gilgamesh* is still under the sand, and the looting of antiquities in Iraq was the subject of distraught discussion during a recent Assyriologists' meeting in London. Indeed, it was originally feared that among the thousands of items stolen from the Baghdad Museum after the fall of Hussein were clay tablets that hold promise of supplying some of the missing sections of *Gilgamesh.* That turned out to be untrue—the tablet room was not breached by the looters, according to Elizabeth Stone, a Mesopotamian archaeologist at SUNY Stony Brook, who has been to Iraq twice since the war.

What is true instead is that hundreds of looters are digging up world-class archaeological excavations all over Iraq. "The situation at the archaeological sites is horrendous," she told me. "I could give you a list of the ones we know are being actively looted in the South, and we know there are probably many more. With a couple of exceptions, I don't think we saw any sites that had not been looted. Basically, the U.S. forces are doing very little about it. If anything, things are getting worse."

A poignant/pathetic email from an Army major who describes himself as "responsible for identifying and protecting all the ancient ruins in the Babylon Province," was circulating among archaeologists by then. "I am concerned that the ruins in the outlying areas are (vulnerable) to looters," the email says—this after a whole summer of accelerating and widely noted looting. It asks how to find important sites and adds, "I would appreciate any assistance you can provide me on locating as many ancient ruins (as are) known to you."

Stone lamented: "We've sent them coordinates about a hundred times by now. Over and over and over. I don't know what happens to them. They fall into a black hole. We know where the antiquities markets are, too, but no one's closed them down."

Oxford University's Eleanor Robson has predicted that looted antiquities will appear for sale for $50 or $100 in antique stores all over the Middle East, Europe and North America or on eBay: "The unsuspecting or the unscrupulous will buy them as novelty Christmas presents or coffee-table pieces." Enter the search word "cuneiform" at the eBay site and, on many days, you will see that she may well have been correct.

Jeffrey Tigay, Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Languages and Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, says that the loss is "incalculable, in the neutral sense of that word. We can't say what has been lost, but it may be extraordinarily important. These sites may be simply ruined because of what's going on, and much of what we might have learned from them may be lost forever."

Assyriology as an academic discipline also finds itself under gathering shadows. In England and Europe, Andrew George summarizes, governments are trying to withdraw from many public sector operations, health and education among them. "What is dispensable? A small subject like the Ancient Near East is vulnerable, because many people feel it is not central to what a university should be doing, and advise that we let another university do it. Of course, if everyone is thinking that way, the thing dies completely. If you threaten the existence of expertise in the subject, it's more dangerous for its future even than the disappearance of the tablets. We still have a lot yet to do, but very, very few people who are doing it."

In the U.S., too, Assyriology is a threatened discipline on both public and private campuses, according to Tigay. He is the author of the seminal *Evolution of Gilgamesh* which managed, in the early '80s, to carefully compare different versions and trace the nature of the epic's evolution over the centuries.

"I would say that there is a kind of a loss of interest in the past, or less of an interest than there was," he told me. "University budgets are more and more driven by undergraduate enrolments, and this is not a field that attracts a huge number of undergraduates. It is not going to die, but it has serious problems now. I think at every university, people who think of it as something very important are engaged in a struggle to maintain it. Creating a tenured position in a discipline that is only going to attract a handful of grad students is expensive."

Gilgamesh was the mythical and perhaps also the historical ruler of the Mesopotamian city-state of Uruk, along the southern Euphrates River in what is now Iraq. Heroic sex and some cathartic face-offs with the gods help move his tale along. For example, the seduction of his friend Enkidu...

Shamhat let loose her skirts,
she bared her sex and he took in her charms.
She showed no fear, she took in his scent:
she spread her clothing and he lay upon her.
She treated the man to the work of a woman,
his 'love' caressed and embraced her.
For six days and seven nights
Enkidu, erect, did couple with Shamhat.

Some kinds of make-believe remain more rewarding, as a rule, than others. It's not quite fair, of course, but compare the following passage from *Gilgamesh* with the blowsy, shopworn hyperbole of a website promo for the movie:

…for six days and seven nights I wept over him.
I did not give him up for burial,
until a maggot fell from his nostril.
Then I was afraid…
I grew fearful of death and so roam the wild.
The case of my friend was too much for me to bear,
So on a distant road I roam the wild. (p. 683)

Thru thousands of years, GILGAMESH *has endured as the oldest and most revolutionary work of literature known to mankind…risking life and love on his tumultuous quest to find the answers to happiness and immortality. What he found was much less mysterious than he ever expected…and it was always there, right at his finger tips.*

So it would be well to read the original first, of course, before running the risk that your own imaginings of Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu, the wild forest god Humbaba and the harlot Shamhat, are flattened into someone else's deracinated celluloid caricatures…*much less mysterious than you ever expected.* (Then consider the film. Its producer, Beni Atoori, also produced the estimable *13 Conversations About One Thing.*)

Despite all, Andrew George is confident that the gaps in the *Gilgamesh* epic will be filled. "The eventual recovery of this literature is assured," though not in his lifetime, he says. The efforts of another four generations of Assyriologists will need to be enlisted.

It has long been established that much of the Bible, including the Great Deluge, is based on Mesopotamian literature, and there is some evidence linking *Gilgamesh* and Greek epics. "Its influence permeates our civilization through those twin streams," George says. "Because when you look back at our origins, and if you can see over the fences of the Bible and Greece, you can see beyond, to ancient Mesopotamia."

In any case and inalterably, it's a landscape we find ourselves reconnoitring at close quarters, once again.

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A Loss of Poetics

John Kinsella

To write poetry you don't have to like it. I've been increasingly recognising that language and its correlatives in music and art are not the pure coordinates or sole arbiters of poetry. There are two issues evolving out of these comments that seem pivotal to me. The first pertains to the suggestion that poetry might happen either out of necessity, or, paradoxically, incidentally. The second, that poetry does not rely on an aesthetic response to the tensions involved in reconciling interiority and articulation of the external world. These two simple principles are becoming the turning points for a personal re-evaluation of what constitutes the poem for me as a reader, or more precisely "experiencer," and what it means for me as a maker of poems.

On the surface, I am inclining towards poem as gesture or utterance arising out of the precognitive, or maybe out of the half-realised. I have often used the expressions "error zones" and "anchor points" to describe the tautological discomforts that drive the written or spoken poem for me—the error zones being ambiguities that arise out of apparent errors in syntax and form, out of parataxis and enjambment, a disturbing of the rules of prosody, juxtaposed or interacting with "realisms," points of concrete and external referentiality which clarify and focus perspective—anchor points. This is the hybridising of the unified self and the disrupted or displaced lyrical I.

So in writing poetry I have tried to merge, say, a reference to a specific moment in time, recording with subject-object certainty, and a sense of linearity, with a series of, say, tense or syllabic or syntactical disruptions. The wandoo tree covered in pink and grey galahs morphs into an exploration of something metonymically associated with tree or bird that might then evoke a series of historical or etymological associations and so on. In other words, it's a poetry of digressions and associations based largely—though by no means exclusively—in one language, having a point of reference common to the whole work in the epistemology of the language itself. And even should the work digress into other languages, the process of orality becomes the unifying signifier-signified construct. So that's how it's been, but it's no longer that way.

Two words best sum up the shift in my poetics. Mimetics and mnemonics. Poetry, in form and in language, in how it is said and why it is being said (which is desirably, at best, at least partially inexplicable on the surface level of "meaning"), is a process of imitation and reproduction. The word itself derives from the Greek "mimesis," and in many ways my mimetics is really an adapted and "personalised" mimesis. Maybe the medical meaning of mimesis is even more relevant: symptoms appearing *without* the actual disease. We might compare the process to watching a mime play, and recalling it later as being rich with language, with voices. We can hear the movements of the players. The same happens for me in the creation of a poem. The poem forms as a series of sounds and images and associations that seemingly have no specific register in language—that is, words don't necessarily correlate to what is being seen or heard, nor is explanation offered. But when it comes to placing them on the page, creating an artefact, or to speaking it aloud—that is, reciting it—language finds its dynamic equivalent, and the poem that was sounds and images becomes an imitation, a mimicry of the original languageless poem.

Sometimes this emerges as the short imagistic poem, distilled, such as the Finch poems:

[Finches]

Salt Paddocks

Down below the dam
there is nothing but salt,
a slow encroachment.

Fighting back, my cousins
have surrounded it
with a ring of trees.

At its centre
lives a colony of finches,
buried in tamarisks.