

Review of *PROLOGOS*

Written by
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Let others have their say, for me reading *PROLOGOS* by Jonathan Bayliss (Basilicum Press, Ashburnham, Mass., 1999) was a struggle because it is interwoven with too many strands picked up from too many netting baskets. As Shakespeare said in another context, "It out Herods Herod, pray you avoid it." Yet if there is anything I have learned from reading so many well-intentioned books by so many well-intentioned authors it is that readers should not criticize simply because it is easy to do so. A writer, any writer, strives to express ideas some of which may be elusive. He/she can only go so far. Nevertheless by attempting what he/she is doing, he/she gets farther than the un-achieving reader. Thus it is with Bayliss and thus I can say that though I find *PROLOGOS* to be repetitious and pedantic, I respect Bayliss for trying. It is better to climb mountains than to look at them. As the poet Robert Browning said "a man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?"

Bayliss has attempted to make his book --- novel is too inadequate a term --- as complicated and confusing as he could. If one reads the lines and underlines carefully, he/she can find that Bayliss was his most astute critic for time after time with character after character he mocks himself for his garrulousness, and tomfoolery. Yet, having said this there is much in his contradictory divagations to give the reader pause. I think especially of the observations about the effects and after effects of the atomic and hydrogen bombs or the effects and after effects of over-population. These indictments are proclaimed in the last chapter though almost everything about biological as opposed to human sex written before leads up to them. By advocating the use of contraceptives Bayliss is aware that he is subverting the purposes of Nature, yet by defying determinism, or its synonym predestination, he is asserting his ability to make up his own mind and to do as he wishes. The enigmatic motto taken from Richard Henry Dana at the end of the book was written by an abolitionist who supported the emancipation of slaves, yet in the twist (or is it gyre? --- the word popularized by poet William Butler Yeats that Bayliss uses over and over) the motto applies to Bayliss and to others who would take its implications seriously: "To work hard, to die hard, and then to go to hell afterwards would be hard indeed."

I disregarded Bayliss' suggestions for three "curriculum" or five "syllabuses" readings of his book. I doubt very much that these readings would make it any simpler. At times, however, I have made my own simplifications. In this spirit I offer the following as suggested narrative lines: The central and for the most part only character is Michael Chapman. Except for Caleb Karcist, his disciple, accessory characters and even Caleb are viewed through Michael's stream of consciousness. Of course, many of Michael's thoughts apply to Bayliss, but the reader should focus on the character rather than on the author. Michael is self-educated and has a remarkable ability to recall bits of everything he has read and seen and to put them into a shifting mosaic as he traverses his outer and inner worlds. Michael came from Gloucester, Massachusetts, worked as a

machinist in New York City, served during the later stages of World War II on an LST in the Pacific Theater of Operations, and is, for most of the book, an employee of a book store in Berkeley and a resident of a ramshackle apartment in Oakland, California. He is the husband of a woman called Ruth who is one of the Ruths who figure in the novel as objects of his desire, whether this desire be real or imaginary. Perhaps as with his wife when his desire is most real it is most imaginary and that is the reason why he and his wife harmonize only when their separate longings and imaginings coincide.

The book has two highpoints. The first occurs when Ruth, the wife, takes the man's role and rapes her husband, though the rapee achieves a peak of enjoyment that he may not have experienced in ordinary forms of coitus. This concupiscent melee, the reasons for it, and its results are steeped in irony. For some this incident and others of a like nature may smack of pornography. I can see why adolescents or young curious and poorly informed girls and boys, or men and women may experience salacious thrills by reading these pages. For me it was not thus as I have read so much of a similar nature before and as life itself has already shown me the needs and extravagances of sex. If the reader wants another Henry Miller or D. H. Lawrence exulting in the exchanges of connubial bliss this is the place to find it.

To me the second highpoint was more mysterious and lasting than sexual euphoria. This was an incident that occurred to Michael while serving as a radio operator on his LST during a typhoon off a Pacific atoll. In the midst of this stormy scene Michael hears music coming from a record player owned by a superior officer which he later thinks comes from Bizet's *Carmen*, though it is not the too often heard Toreador song, and he has an esthetic sensation that comes from parts of his body or his mind that are not dominated by what he calls Mr. P. I am willing to let this episode stand out because it is so compellingly told. The similarities to Wordsworth's *Lines on Westminster Bridge* or to Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* or to James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* do not detract from its impact.

The book is balanced by a party that Mike's colleagues give him on his thirty-fourth birthday, which happens to be very didactic, because, like the autocrat he is, Michael expounds on his favorite cultural subject --- the uses of ritual and myth --- and by another party at the end of the book, this time given by Mike. At this later party Michael does not expatiate but, internally if not externally, he has thoughts about world devastation and over population that accord with his vasectomy. Ironically, however, his wife Ruth has presented him with a fourth baby that like the third, who had unaccountable blond hair, may or may not be his. I think wife Ruth was honest and that Mike was the real father, but the reader, if he/she is cynical, may have other ideas.

When he is not collaborating with Michael on a treatise about tragedy and the role of the hero in society, Caleb has a tempestuous affair with Hecuba a seemingly free-loose woman who is engaged to Silver Fox, a gangster impresario, with the understanding that she must produce a child. Unbeknown to Caleb, at least a first, this is the reason for their assignations. Hecuba's situation is thus like wife Ruth's who wants a daughter so she can reproduce a successors to herself (boys simply won't do). Hecuba gets her old-man

“godfather” and also her baby, while Ruth gets her baby --- with or without Caleb’s assistance, for Michael has had a vivisection, but it turns out to be a boy. Michael’s thoughts about this are not given, but, taking everything we know about him. he is probably resigned. After author Bayliss tires of calling Michael an archangel, he refers to him as a horned owl so there is indeed a possibility that he is a cuckold.

Close to the beginning of the book Michael inserts a review of *Homo Ludens* by Johann Huizinga. The subject of humor as an engrossing dynamic and life as a game is dropped thereafter for both Michael and Caleb concentrate on the plays and prose of William Butler Yeats. Michael’s various esthetic and philosophical ideas occupy the book’s syllabuses. I take this flashing display of ideas casually as it means more to Michael and Bayliss than it means to me. I think the meditations lead toward art for art’s sake, which is to say that man’s creative imagination is greater than any other faculty he may have to cope with urgencies, such as earning a living or procreating his kind. To this end Michael quotes a famous sentence from Phillippe Auguste Villiers de l’Isle Adam in *Axel*: “Living? Our servants will do that for us.” Critic Edmund Wilson has discussed the implication of this attitude, to which I will only add that to bring their fantasies to the maximum Alex and his soul mate Sara commit suicide, which is not the end that Michael, Caleb and the rest of humanity generally seek.

PROLOGOS may be exhausting, but also, more often than not, it stimulates the reader due to the verve, playfulness and invention of its continually changing prose. While it is risky to say this, I think Bayliss was a process-oriented philosopher who like Heraclitus thought everything was constantly changing. This accounts for the shifts in Michael’s consciousness, from high to low, from absurd to reasonable, from slang to pedantry. Unlike his other books *Gloucesterbook* and *Gloucestertide*, as far as style goes, I think the main inspiration for this book was Francois Rabelais (c. 1494-1533). As far as the ideas expressed go, when they are not torn by the tussles of sex, I think Jane Harrison was the source for the ritual-myth explorations. Chapman mentions Harrison’s name from time though he claims he has made his emendations. T. S. Eliot does not get a nod in this book as he does in *Gloucesterbook*; nevertheless it is interesting that Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* played much the same role in the creation of *The Waste Land* that Jane Harrison’s *Themis: A Study in the Social Origins of Greek Religion* played in the creation of *PROLOGOS*.

The fishing city of Gloucester, Massachusetts is a magnet for many of the reflections and some of the images used in *PROLOGOS*. Other than its use as a generating source any other city on the eastern New England seacoast would do as well. In the last chapter settled and resigned Michael sells restless us Caleb his ticket to Gloucester thus making it possible for the book -- or the flux --- to continue with *Gloucesterbook*.

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