

## Recreating the Epic

by Burton Raffel

*"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."*

—Genesis 2.7

### Genesis: An Epic Poem

by Frederick Turner

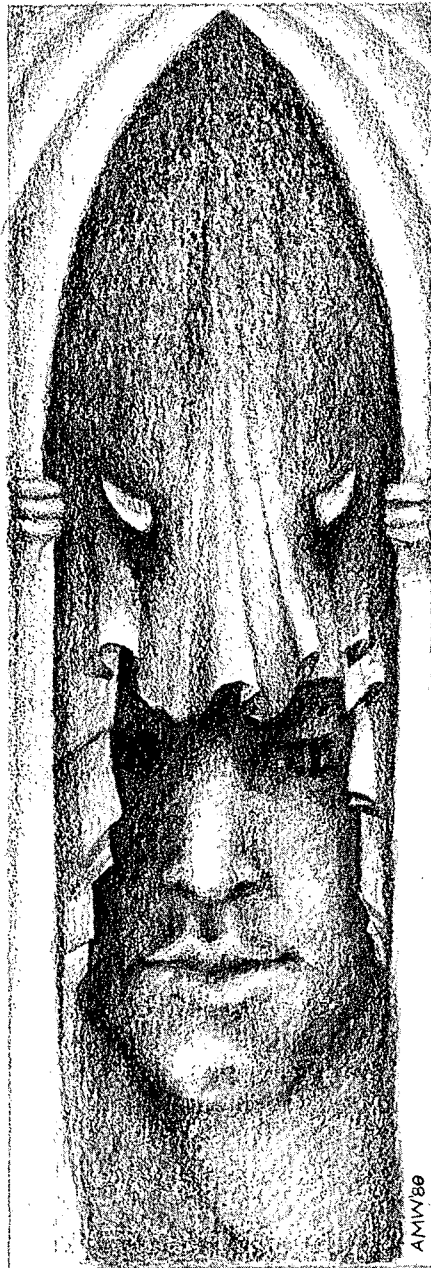
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The 19th century had an unfortunate passion for novels in verse. I have tried to read some of the more celebrated, notably Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (which Virginia Woolf somehow found delightful), and never made it through to the end. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* may be the best novel ever written in English, but her novel in verse, *The Spanish Gypsy*, is a soggy bore.

What Frederick Turner has now proven, with *Genesis*, is that the problem was not poetry but the poets who used it—and the way they used it. For instead of tackling epic subjects with epic approaches, as Milton and Vergil and Homer once did, Browning and Eliot tried to *reduce* poetry to narrative. That is, they seem to have taken the novel to be the true form and poetry to be, on the whole, a kind of pleasant accident, a grace note with which to decorate the holy sanctuary of prose. Browning's heroine, for instance, describes her father like this: "My father was an austere Englishman,/ Who, after a dry lifetime spent at home/ In college-learning, law, and parish talk,/ Was flooded with a passion unaware,/ His whole provisioned and complacent past/ Drowned out from

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him that moment."

Turner breaks this dull mold into bits. From the first moment, we hear the urgent voice of the verse storyteller, the true epic voice, which melds poetry and narrative into an inseparable, swift-moving whole:

Listen! I must tell of the  
beginnings,  
Of corpses buried in the walls  
of worlds,  
Of how those men and women  
worth a story  
Burn and consume the powers  
they're kindled by . . .

Turner is plainly a very good poet. But so, too (though not quite so good) was Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The difference, plainly, is that Turner in no way condescends to his form: he means to write an epic because what he wants to say, and the way he wants to say it, require epic dimensions. Perhaps that is indeed the key word: "dimensions." The boundaries of *Genesis* stretch—literally—to the farthest stars. This epic contains more than multitudes, it offers us complex people of epic character, performing deeds of truly epic size. And it gives us the tale of these people in flexible, clear verse that knows how to soar, just as it knows how to modulate downward without turning flabby. In a true epic, even straightforward description must sing:

By noon he's come into a waste  
of hills,  
Barren horizonless, smelling of  
darkish resins;

Each summit shows a further  
slope of stones,  
Squat black holm-oak, rosemary  
and thorns.

This simply can't be said in prose. The music of poetry, here, is as deeply wedded to the story being told as are the characters and the settings.

And those characters are fiercely real. This is not a medieval saint's tale, in which the central figure glows in the dark and can do no wrong. Everybody in this epic can and does do wrong: that is one unmistakable mark of their humanness. When Chance, the old hero, is accompanied on a supposed vacation trip by an implacable warrior, Tripitaka, he quickly realizes that the younger man is his destined assassin. He does not war with the inevitable (though when the moment comes, he fights for his life as hard as he can). Nor does the murderer-to-be, who does not want to kill this man of all others. "By the last light Chance shares the food he's brought/ With his quiet young executioner." Turner draws out the scene beautifully. "The two men wake together, look/ At each other shyly as they stretch,/ Like bride and groom on that first changed morning/ Of the honeymoon." The actual death scene seems to me perfect:

Chance is a strong man. He  
attacks at once,  
Gets in one blow. But  
Tripitaka spins;  
His left heel smashes Chance's  
knee, his elbow  
Crushes the ribcage, and  
Chance coughs up blood.  
Horribly clumsy work. The  
rising sun  
Strikes on the altar. Chance  
struggles up, smiles,  
For after all he is there in  
the world  
As happy as he always was;  
attacks again.  
Then Tripitaka breaks his neck  
and throws  
His body down the dewy chasm  
of night.

These characters are not simply true to life; they successfully embody verities that the whole of *Genesis* seeks to both portray and activate. Chance is neither sentimental nor stupid; neither is his killer. But both live by those ancient

verities, and each expects to die by them. When it is Tripitaka's turn to die, like Chance he makes no fuss:

He feels too the ancient  
vigor flow  
From the cold navel into thigh  
and armpit.  
And if his tree should not have  
fructed, nor  
The saintly promise of his birth  
be kept,  
And if his mother's sacrifice  
be vain,  
And if his first command be but  
a feint  
To draw the enemy from  
greater prizes;  
Yet like those breeds of peony  
or peach,  
Or flowering cherry or the  
bitter plum,  
Those beauties hybridized by  
cruel arts  
To be infertile while they feed  
the soul,  
He will now blossom into  
deathly spring,  
The barren glory of a  
pointless end.

This is part of a battle scene—and novels have no battle scenes like it, for prose simply cannot handle what Turner is up to.

Turner has written (and published) prose fiction. He knows how that form works, and knows that it is not capable of lifting the half-mythological, half-science fiction banner he wants to float. His earlier attempts at verse epic do not entirely wrench free of prose molds: there are prosaic moments in his 1985 *The New World*. But there are magnificent moments, too, anticipating *Genesis*:

This has become a tale of  
sicknesses.  
Consider, though, that in the  
act of increase  
All creatures are most naked  
to decay;  
Corruption riots in the spawn  
and milk  
And branched tubules of  
fertility.  
All of these lesions of the  
commonplace,  
All the torn folk that die into  
these lines,

Are necessary to the  
immortal spasm  
By which the new world will  
come into being.

The ideas and even the words of science are raised to new heights in this poem. They take on a literary glow that no contemporary poet has ever achieved: in this respect too Turner's achievement is unique.

For *Genesis* is an ecological poem, a science fiction epic built on a solid scientific foundation. James Lovelock, the biologist who wrote *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, has coauthored *The Greening of Mars*, a sober, factfilled analysis, cited in Turner's prefatory remarks, of how the red planet might be brought to life. Turner takes these and other equally informed speculations and transforms them into an epic of risk-taking and adventure, of faith and betrayal, of noble visions and ignoble deeds. It has often been noted that true narrative purity, in our time, seems far easier to find in the pages of perfectly ordinary science fiction novels than in the contemporary works of literature that critics praise and students are obliged to read. The reason, plainly, is that science fiction is in fact concerned with exactly such timeless basics. Contemporary "meta-fiction" has put aside these concerns for what it thinks more important ones. But it is Frederick Turner who is right:

If I could read the pattern's  
meaning, read  
The light-swift scribble of Your  
fractal line  
Whose denser filling of Your  
inexhaustible  
Interstices constitutes being  
in time,  
I'd be among those heroes  
that I sing.

A century ago, Anton Rubenstein mocked Joseph Haydn, saying that he should now be called Grandpa rather than Papa Haydn. But mere modernity is empty: Haydn strove for "truth," and lived humbly no matter how grand others may have thought him. His music remains equally timeless, while Rubenstein's has been deservedly forgotten. People will be reading, and enjoying, and profiting from *Genesis* long after the last meta-fictionist has perished from the earth. ◇

# A Prince of Our Disorder

by Arthur M. Eckstein

"Very few care for beauty; but anyone can be interested in gossip."

—C.S. Lewis

## The Hermit of 69th Street

by Jerzy Kosinski

New York: Seaver Books (Henry Holt & Co.); \$19.95

In 1982 *The Village Voice* published an article accusing the famous Polish émigré writer Jerzy Kosinski of being a fraud. The authors (Geoffrey Stokes and Eliot Fremont-Smith) argued that Kosinski's novels had all received extensive and unacknowledged "help" from various editorial assistants; that Kosinski's most famous novel, *The Painted Bird* (1965), had probably been published under false pretenses, at a time when Kosinski could not even write English; and that Kosinski's earliest books, hostile nonfiction accounts of life in the Soviet Union, had perhaps been written for him by agents of the CIA. The thesis of Stokes and Fremont-Smith was that once *The Painted Bird* became a big literary success, Kosinski became permanently "trapped" in the public persona of a writer—and a writer in English, to boot—and that he was thereafter forced to publish more novels (with necessary professional help) in order to maintain the basically fraudulent image he had acquired. It is not clear why this story should ever have received any credence. Though the article was termed "meticulously researched" (if fundamentally misguided) by *The Washington Post* as late as this year, it was, in fact, based on the word of witnesses who suddenly reneged on crucial testimony, or later angrily claimed to have been misquoted or misinterpreted, and on rumors planted in the US by the Polish secret police (as *The New York Times* has shown) as far back as the 1960's. Moreover, the very idea that someone would feel so "trapped" in the public persona of a

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writer as then to go on to write *seven* more novels was improbable on its face. This is especially true considering the severe risks of *exposure* Kosinski would have faced each and every time he published, if he were actually using the fraudulent method of composition (via "assistants") which *The Village Voice* claimed.

The *Village Voice* scandal was just one of those bizarre occurrences that have marked Jerzy Kosinski's life. Sometimes his luck has been good: he missed being murdered by the Manson Gang at Sharon Tate's house in 1969 because his luggage got lost on the plane from Paris to New York; and as a child, of course, he missed being murdered by the Nazis. But sometimes his luck has been bad, as in the sudden death (by stroke) of his beloved first wife, Mary Weir—or here, with *The Village Voice*. No wonder that in *Being There* (1970) he named one of his heroes "Chance"! Nevertheless, the

*Village Voice* scandal damaged Kosinski's reputation, at least momentarily. No matter how unfair the original article, how flimsy its evidence, or how transparently political the motives of the authors (who clearly believed that only CIA stooges could want to write books attacking communism), it was impossible for Kosinski completely to defend himself.

*The Hermit of 69th Street* is, in more ways than one, Kosinski's revenge. The new novel is massive, brilliant, often bitter. The last half centers on a fictionalized version of the scandal and its impact. The stand-ins for Stokes and Fremont-Smith are, naturally, treated in an entertainingly savage way: as smug Stalinoid-Nazi literary goons. And the notorious "editorial assistants" are transformed into representatives of a high-priced call-girl service—whose performances with Kosinski's hero, the hapless and basically innocent writer "Kosky," give him little satisfaction indeed. Conversely, Kosinski evolves a hilarious (but frighteningly self-punitive) fantasy in which Kosky, because of the scandal, fails to sell even a *single* copy of his new novel anywhere in the world—and loses his beautiful New York apartment as well.

But that is the book only at one level, the level of the plot. Kosinski has taken on *The Village Voice* and its accusations about his inability to write English by filling every page of *The Hermit of 69th Street* with multiple puns, assonance, onomatopoeia—linguistic fireworks of all sorts. Kosinski was always a stylist: avant-garde, plain, baroque, romantic, depending on his mood. But here he reveals himself as a true—even arrogant—master of sophisticated and elegant English expression.

And there is yet another level on which Kosinski satirizes the charges concerning his authorial originality: he throws in every possible source for