

Publisher Cuts to 'Judas Jon'

The Firebird Press's decision that the theme of its first anthology would be 'Resurgence' put me into something of a dilemma.

The only poems current with me that would fit the bill were 'The Queen of Sheba's Pool', written in a traditional English form that effectively had expired by the fifteenth century and might baffle non-specialist readers and one of the narrative poems I was working on for *Crossings: Five Poems Written in Georgia*.

This latter was 'Judas Jon', a complicated work then comprising 12,000 words and projected to become 15,000. After I presented it to the publishers it became obvious that it was far too long; nonetheless, it was accepted—providing I cut it down to a triptych, with each part being 1,000 words long. I agreed, though in the end, for the sake of sense, 4,500 words in total were accepted, with a division into four parts.

In many ways I was glad to be forced to cut back to the roots of the material: it allowed me to remind myself of the original intentions of the poem—capturing modern lived religious experience, emphasizing forgiveness in an unforgiving age—and if 'Judas Jon' ever appears in a longer form it will have benefited from this process of excision and be stronger for it.

I thought, however, aficionados of the poetical process might be interested in the poem's republication form and a sampling of the cut passages.

Since I wrote it in Tbilisi in 2018 the first section—'The Betrayal'—has hardly changed and is reproduced in its entirety in the anthology. Its role is of an emotional touchstone, making it necessary for Mandeville to undergo spiritual metamorphosis. I could have used relationship problems—in every case the catalyst in my models, and in my experience too—for the protagonist, but this was simply how it fell.

The second section in the original—'Into the Zone'—takes its cues from sci-fi horror, specifically from the Brothers Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic*, which was filmed by Andrei Tarkovsky as *Stalker* and led to the videogame of the same name. The novel is about a forbidden and dangerous zone in the (Canadian, in the book, Russian, in the film) countryside, apparently created by an extra-terrestrial visit, where time and geography shift and outlaws known as stalkers live by finding 'artefacts' or by taking visitors to the zone's centre. This is the location, it is said, of an orb (in the book) or a room (in the film) that fulfils one's innermost desire. The longer 'Judas Jon' features a kind of Greek chorus of ballads based on the story, two of which are reproduced below:

Poet

*He took his brother into the Zone
Where time runs haphazard, topography drifts,
Promising never to leave him alone
Between orientations and continuum shifts.*

*All went fine till the Meatgrinder,
A tunnel whose warps pitched and tossed,
Where he blinked for a second as pathfinder,
Then looked again: his brother was lost.*

*At the Zone's very centre a room could be found,
Said to grant what one's heart really wished;
He entered here and with no pause or sound
Knelt, begged life for a brother so cherished.*

*When Poet got home he opened the door,
Expecting his brother to meet him;
A letter instead lay there on the floor
With the following message to greet him:*

*'Congratulations! We've been trying to call—
Perhaps you could soon get in touch.
You've won twelve million on Multiball—
The first time it's paid out so much!'*

*He folds the page, now stashed in his coat,
Then burns all his verse in the fire,
Sharpens a knife and slashes his throat:
His inmost, truest, desire.*

Monkey and Grandpa

*The father of the stalker Red
Was buried in the Zone,
Until the Visit raised the dead
And sent him to his home.*

*He banged gnarled fists upon the door,
So Red might soon appear;
Red opened it, but nothing saw
That caused a moment's fear;*

*Not even eyes all hollowed out
But somehow still with sight;
And not the earth-damp smell throughout
That palled that dreadful night.*

*Said Red, 'Come in and take your seat,
Let's drink to Cabbagetown!'*

*He poured the vodka, clear and neat,
Raised glass and drank it down.*

*He looked to Father for reply
As time beat out so slow;
Once thirteen minutes had ticked by
Dad raised his, said, 'Cheerio!'*

*Monkey was Red's only child,
No longer of this earth:
Stealthy, mad and furry-wild,
She'd changed a lot since birth.*

*Red's wife Guta went to bed,
The father downstairs still,
But soon she woke in fevered dread
To screams that iced a chill.*

*All night long the silence tore
With sounds to shred the bone,
As Monkey shrieked with open maw
In tongues learnt from the Zone.*

*They echoed round the parlour,
Cracked plaster on the walls;
And now she cried to Grandfather
In other-worldly calls.*

*Grandpa stirred, took up her cry,
Intensified the tone
Which spoke of visits from the sky
And terrors of the Zone.*

*They howled enough to shake the moon
And move the heavenly spheres,
Descanting earth's primaeval groan
And naming nameless fears.*

'Guta' in this version is the name of the Child of the Streets/Stars in the published poem.

The third part—'Sphere and Crucible'—features Mandeville's temptation, much extended as Judas Jon offers him a choice of modern popular poetic styles to write in, which are reproduced. The Judas Jon within this author is still tempting me to utilize the oeuvre created for this purpose, preferably on social media, and for that reason won't be otherwise accessible—at least until I think better of it.

There is also an increasing focus on the mechanics of Mandeville's—for want of a better word—*gnosis*. These passages, continued at length in the next section were rightly cut and belong in a later work.

In the fourth part—'The Revelation'—the tempter threatens that if his offers are not taken up Mandeville the poet will only be able to write the following:

I never had my time in the sun

*I never had my time in the sun:
I could have followed the river's run
To have finished all I had left undone
I never had my time in the sun:
Too old I am to be a contender,
Instead, a fraud, an old pretender,
Impotent, with nothing to render
No winning rote, let alone splendour
I never had my time in the sun.
No words for loving, nothing tender
In the very last days of return to sender
Worn-down words from a worn-out blender,
The body's old, my duty's undone:
I never had my time in the sun.*

*I never had my time in the sun,
Striving all hours at work forlorn,
Sleeping exhausted and waking at dawn,
Often wishing I'd never been born,
I never had my time in the sun:
At long last the muse has flown
From downcast thought and aching bone;
I bite my nails by a silent phone,
Aspiration a primal moan
A once glowing heart turned to stone
The last friend dead and all alone.
I never had my time in the sun.*

That is the last straw for Mandeville in the longer version and, at last recognizing the voice as that of Juda Jon, allows Guta to lead him to the room which fulfils one's innermost desire and precipitates his epiphany.

The final part of the original, which would in any case have had to be cut because it contradicted the theme, is entitled 'Selected Sermons the Reverend David Mandeville, Founder of the Church of Now and Beyond'. I replaced the section instead with the bottle-throwing scene, taken from the practice of a founder of a church I met in Norfolk. The idea was to have a kind of decaying orbit,

philosophically and poetically, of sermons, as Mandeville's church declines from its initial success and his poetry—never the best—becomes increasingly rambling, repetitive and desperate, with a recognizably re-emergent voice of Judas Jon steering Mandeville's mind to fatuous worldliness:

Excerpts from On Blame and Condemnation as Manifestations of Self

...And that, my friends, is the history,
As near to truth as my poor words allow.
I know you've heard it all before,
But sometimes precious corners of the seam
That went before unnoticed
Are exposed to one's surprise
By the relighting of the miner's lamp [...]

[...] Friends, you know always I took this part:
Speak like children, direct from the heart.
Control your thought and the mountains will move
By butterfly wings or pebbles in sand
And you control your life, regain your love,
Find all your bridges spanned [...]

I often suspected that holy St Paul
Intellectualized faith, so all
That follows I'd forgive if you call
Unnecessary, but anyway
The following might assist you one day
If ever you're caught in the rain all alone
And facing with fear that perilous Zone.
Thoughts of suspicion, of enmity, pride,
Block out the light, delay justice beside.
In this dumbed-down age where we've all become
Judge, jury and hangman, every bum
Claims moral high ground and dares
To call out all sins—*apart from theirs* [...]

[...] It's always been part of the original fall
That our tarantula hearts seek revenge
In the clamour of justice for all,
Where we crave to be tyrants who avenge,
Unable to improve but simply to banish;
Unable to forgive what we cannot punish.
Injustice—believed in—pushes justice aside:
To witness true justice we simply abide
In faith that such fairness is ever served
In consequence doers have truly deserved.

So you'd let evil happen, I hear you cry.
Well, probably not—I wouldn't pass by—
What I'm saying now is the point of this verse:
The less faith you have the more things get worse.
Complain you lack justice? So justice can't be:
Injustice will stalk your paths doggedly.

I don't stand here to talk of religion--
Believe it, friends, that's not my pigeon,
Since it's crafted from what's been left behind
Like puzzling artefacts stalkers can find:
Golden crosses, fonts and windows stained,
Virgin statues, icons, chalices drained;
Censers, lecterns, hymn books and all
Create faith's bulwarks, propping its wall.
And these words too, which brought you here,
You, my good friends, beset with doubt and fear,
They can only serve as a hand-me-down,
Traces of visitors long ago flown
To a place that we suppose is very far,
Little suspecting how close they still are.
Yet words strongly differ from artefacts:
Used accurately they expose the acts
Which lie behind what religion has lost,
Though such revelation comes with the cost
That the hearer must do what the words demand:
Mould the bricks and mix the cement and sand,
Then lay the foundation and make it your own,
The heart's proper haven, the spirit's true home.

All can be changed at the level of thought
Which controls both the word and the deed,
Out of which the world around us is brought,
And happiness too, free satisfaction of need.
Stop right here at thought's own spring
And pause, pause for a goodly long time;
Eternity hangs here as if on a string
And faith is in its prime.

The wise among us do not wish to have foes
But the wisdom instead to purify those
Thoughts that deny we are from one mind:
The selfless person is all humankind.
Once our own angles cease as factors
Angels are revealed as benefactors

And only rank fools usurp life as actors.
The heart that condemns is like the *film noir*
Whose denouement leads us back to the star,
Since, unawares, the lead plays a game
Of being a victim while he is to blame:
The unravelled crime is in his own name [...]

[...] The proverb's still valid: truth starts at home,
A painful cure for the modern syndrome.
The battle's inside; no foes lurk without;
Overcome them with faith, or aid them with doubt.
Let's stop our self-harming: expel self instead.
Verse has long turned to tract. I'll put it to bed
Lest once more this Judas accesses the heart
And what was gained is allowed to depart,
And the stalker's family howl once more
Their bleak desolation from floor to floor.

For the last time, friends, then this on the shelf—
One devil exists: the only foe, Self!

Excerpts from **On Emergency Efforts to Defend our Church**

[...] Now I know what you've witnessed on TV,
And all the tall stories they've told about me,
Of meetings and sojourns that just couldn't be,
In fictitious accusation.
Their source, I believe, came from the Press
Through hacks who've created a lot of distress
For much of this congregation,
Once-faithful members whom once I did bless
In holy celebration.

But thanks to you this will be fought
Right up to this country's highest court
In the best defence that can be sought
Through your generous donation.
With an army of angels right at our side
We'll give these malicious folk a ride
Beyond their imagination.
Those young women who testified—
You all know how much they have lied—
Now face God's condemnation.

I told you before how much I hate spies—

Gossips and snoopers we rightly despise—
But sometimes one simply must compromise—
Or at least come to some kind of deal—
With worldly expectation.
And while it's not quite what I wanted to feel,
It's only short-term adaptation;
Thus for the sake of our holy foundation
I have issued this appeal.

So those who have offered to follow these pests,
Note down activities, interests,
Make sure above all that none of them rests
Until we know who our enemies are;
Follow on Twitter, on Instagram,
On Facebook, on foot and by car,
Find them in train, in plane or in caravan,
Let them know how your beloved Church can
Defend its interests from both near and afar.

We'll keep shoulder to shoulder, never disband
For I know in my heart how firmly you stand
In seeing our God in a mere grain of sand,
The one true principle of our creed,
And know the rest as mere deviation—
Artefact hunts for a stalker's greed
Leading to ultimate devastation
Of those who neglect the true adoration
That provides for every need [...]

It's clear that should the longer version ever be restored a more succinct Sermons section is necessary, together with an Epilogue from Mandeville considering, at its end, the achievements and failures of his life, on which I am currently working.

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