



## The Holy Forms of Mark Jarman

### The Reaper Essays

by Mark Jarman and Robert MacDowell

Story Line Press, 1996

Paperback, 196 pp., \$12.00

### Rebel Angels

edited by Mark Jarman and David Mason

Story Line Press, 1996

Paperback, 280 pp, \$15.00

### Unholy Sonnets

by Mark Jarman

Story Line Press, 2000

Paperback, 83 pp., \$13.95

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## [Jason Schneiderman](#)

### I

Since 1980, when he began publishing his journal *The Reaper*, Mark Jarman has been calling for drastic change in American poetic practice. The eponymous "Reaper," a composite personality of Jarman and Robert McDowell, writes articles, manifestoes, and interviews. Attacking the dominance of confessional, deep-image, and meditative poetry, *The Reaper* flamboyantly lays out a plan for reform. Almost fascistically directive, a 1981 essay entitled "*The Reaper's* Non-Negotiable Demands" included these ten commandments:

1. Take prosody off the hit list.
2. Stop calling formless writing poetry.
3. Accuracy, at all costs.
4. No emotion without narrative.
5. No more meditating on the meditation.
6. No more poems about poetry.
7. No more irresponsibility of expression.
8. Raze the House of Fashion.
9. Dismantle the Office of Translation.
10. Spring open the Jail of the Self.

The Reaper explicates his demands with his sharp tongue firmly in his cheek. Of number 6, the explication reads, "We mean NO MORE POEMS ABOUT POETRY." Other demands have fuller explications, exploring examples of good and bad poetry. *The Reaper* attacks a remarkable number of heavy-hitting poets and critics with a deliciously vicious humor. Louise Glück indulges in "distortions of language that serve to obscure." (23) "The influence of Stevens appears harmful" (27) in the work of Robert Hass. Bly and Merwin translate work to sound like their own. (42) Gregory Orr's work looks more like "poverty" than "poetry." (36) Wallace Stevens writes "bric-a-brac." Jorie Graham, Harold Bloom, John Ashbery, and many others are attacked and dismantled in their various poetic and critical projects.

In one particularly funny essay, The Reaper conducts an interview with Sean Dough and Jean Doh, a set of composite personalities echoing The Reaper's joint persona. Dough and Doh engage in the kind of "navel gazing" that *The Reaper* finds so reprehensible. The humorous image of two poets sitting down with Death for an interview sets the scene for the telling answers of the husband-and-wife team. *The Reaper* attacks the critical establishment through their voices. Jean Doh says:

Why is the critic writing about you in the first place? Because he can't write about himself. That's why I love critics. I love Helen Vendler. I love Harold Bloom. And I'm happy to say they love me, too. In fact, I'll be thrilled to see what *they say* — because they've been silent for some time-about *Bones Through Their Noses* [Doh's most recent book.]

The two poets prattle on self-centeredly throughout the interview.

Jarman and McDowell's joint persona ended when *The Reaper* folded in 1989 after nine years. Premised on the notion that awareness of death is the opposite of and the antidote to self-centered navel gazing, the journal chose its own death date and happily left newsstands of its own volition. Jarman's second critical project, *Rebel Angels* (Story Line Press 1996), is an anthology of the "New Formalists." Jarman explains the term's origin "as a dismissive epithet by critics hostile to the movement." *Formalism* here refers simply to writing in poetic forms, and Jarman admits that the term is "usually thought inadequate even by its adherents." He oddly fails to mention that the term's inadequacy also stems from Formalism's having been an early twentieth-century critical movement spearheaded by Roman Jakobson. One could hardly call oneself a "new deconstructionist" and have no relation to Derrida!

Jarman's anthology *Rebel Angels*, which modestly does not include himself, is a wonderful collection of formal poems and completes as its third leg the formalist anthology triumvirate that also includes *Strong Measures* and *A Formal Feeling Comes*. Some of the poems in *Rebel Angels* are indeed familiar from *Strong Measures*, like Tom Disch's stunning "The Rapist's Villanelle."

Jarman's decision to edit such an anthology hardly contradicts his stance in *The Reaper*: "Obviously, *The Reaper* does not clamor for a return to the heyday of rhyme and meter, the elegant formal poem..." It does call into question *The Reaper's* sincerity. Clearly, Jarman is excited by the elegant formal poem, and that is exactly what he showcases in *Rebel Angels*.

## II

Not surprisingly, Jarman's critical journey has brought him ever closer to classical form. His *Questions for Ecclesiastes* (Story Line Press, 1997) includes a section of twenty "Unholy Sonnets." In his new book, *Unholy Sonnets* (Story Line Press, 2000), he expands the project and produces a brilliant volume. The forty-eight poem sequence actually includes fifty-seven sonnets. (The first poem has four sonnet stanzas, and the last poem has five. There are also italicized and unnumbered poems which precede and follow the sequence.) The sonnets vary in form, but many of them employ vowel rhyme and slant rhyme.

Jarman's unholy sonnets are hardly unholy because they reject God — they don't reject God — but they do formulate a new understanding of Him. Jarman invokes John Donne through his title but rejects the formulaic nature of the metaphysical poet's holy sonnets. Where Donne questions God, questions himself, and then accepts God, Jarman approaches God through the context of human belief. God matters for what he means to humanity, and Jarman's natural landscape is the body and the human.

In the book's most vibrant sonnet, Sonnet 9, Jarman talks about prayer, although God never enters the poem. The sonnet opens,

Someone is always praying as the plane  
Breaks up, and smoke and cold and darkness blow  
Into the cabin...

The poem wends its way through specific and general tragedy:

...Praying as it happens,  
Praying before it happens that it won't.  
Someone was praying that it never happen  
Before the first window on Kristallnacht  
Broke like a wine glass wrapped in bridal linen.

Jarman calls attention to the failure of prayer and the agony of tragedy, but there is no indictment of God. For those of us who don't accept the "cosmic ATM" (ask-and-you-shall-receive) view of prayer, the poem is about the horror of the world, not about God's failure to answer desperate prayers. In the final lines of the sonnet, Jarman marks humanity as his territory, and human perceptions of God overshadow any conception of God Himself.

Jarman structures numerous poems with the clear repetition of Hebrew prayer. For example, Sonnet 12, a couplet sonnet, is structured around an initial line, "God does not..., God is..." followed by a rhyming line. The poem begins in the body:

God does not know, God is what is known.  
For affirmation ask the living bone.

The poem progresses to the larger earth by the third couplet:

God does not judge, God is what is judged.  
Ask rock, ask mountains that the ice has budged.

The conclusion,

God is not creation, God creates.  
Consider things made by our loves and hates,

again grounds Jarman in the human, almost suggesting that God is a creation of our own passionate emotions.

Throughout the second and third sections of *Unholy Sonnets*, Jarman invokes Christ's resurrection in the context of contemporary lives and bodies. Sonnet 20 begins,

One model asks another, 'What do you eat?'  
She means how do you keep your skeleton  
Just underneath your skin

Sonnet 20 also describes people who have experienced the glory of Christ within their bodies:

The kingdom is within you, Tolstoy said  
My Grandfather could put his finger on  
The spot he felt the flame of spirit burn  
And it was not some vague thing in his head

and ends with the couplet,

You, too, can stay as thin as Jesus Christ  
Eating down to the perfume of your wrist.

The juxtaposition of the extremes is delicious. Christ's delirium, the models' anorexia, and his grandfather's religious ecstasy converge into one point of extremity and austerity. The body unifies and contains.

The final unholy sonnet, "The World" (followed by a postscript poem) is actually a five-sonnet crown (a classic crown has seven sonnets). Jarman's formal virtuosity is perhaps the clearest here. Alternating between vowel rhymes (grace/faith) and masculine slant rhymes (this/thus, life/leaf), he constructs five Shakespearean sonnets, the final line of each, sestina-like, beginning the next sonnet. The first line of the first sonnet becomes the line of the last sonnet, although with slight alteration: "The World works for us and we call it grace." becomes "and when the world works for us, we still call it grace." The crown (disguised as a single poem with sonnet stanzas) details our human awe and confusion in confronting the world.

The epilogue poem toes the Christian line in a way that none of the other poems do. Still grounded in the human, Jarman suddenly accepts the divinity of God and the triumph of Jesus over death as gospel truth. The closing couplet,

Today we meet our maker, in a flash  
That turns the ash of yesterday to flesh

rings oddly hollow in the light of the book's previous refusal to allow God to comfort or salve human tragedies. This anomalous sonnet alone can be described as holy, in the most Christian sense of the word--in the sense that both Gerard Manley Hopkins and Donne intended their work to be holy. Perhaps this is why the poem appears at the end, unnumbered and in italics. The poem's beauty remains intact:

Someone is God who had a common name  
That you might give a child or animal

Jarman's poetic muscles are still flexing, but the tone and diction have changed dramatically, although love for what is human still shines through and conquers godly austerity. The triumph of the resurrection becomes the triumph of remaining in one's body.

Ultimately, Jarman's work does not look for answers. It stays within the human and focuses on the body. He locates his subject and unflinchingly turns it over and over, in a form organic to his project. Jarman's style and virtuosity make him one of today's most fascinating and innovative poets. (And whoever thought that sonnets would be innovative?)

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DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY

Finch, Molly, ed. *A Formal Feeling Comes*. Story Line Press, 1994. Paperback, 308 pp., \$15.95.

Dacey, Philip and David Jauss, ed. *Strong Measures*. Pearson, 1986. Out of Print.  
Jarman, Mark. *Questions for Ecclesiastes*. Story Line Press, 1997. Paperback, 100 pp., \$12.95.

#### ALSO OF INTEREST

Jarman, Mark, *Far and Away*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1985.  
\_\_\_\_\_, *Iris*. Brownsville, OR.: Story Line, 1992.  
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\_\_\_\_\_, *The Black Riviera*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990.  
\_\_\_\_\_, *The Rote Walker*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1981.  
\_\_\_\_\_, *Tonight Is the Night of the Prom*. Pittsburgh: Three Rivers, 1974.

#### RELATED WEB SITES:

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