

[The following essay was published in 2010, on the now-defunct blog *Digital Emunction*. John Barr resigned from the Poetry Foundation in 2012, after a controversial tenure as its first President. Shortly after the publication of this article, the Poetry Foundation attempted to incarcerate a number of young poets who peacefully gathered at the new \$22 million Foundation headquarters to protest what they felt to be an unjustified use of the \$100 million bequest provided to *Poetry Magazine* by Ruth Lilly, the pharmaceutical heiress. The young poets also passed out leaflets asking why an energy-industry financier who had published a work of unadulterated blackface was the organization's President and leading spokesperson. To this day, American poets, many of them self-identified "progressives" and "anti-racists," flock to the magazine, seeking the cultural gold-dust of its imprimatur. –Kent Johnson]

Blackface and the Poetry Foundation

Kent Johnson

"[John Barr] is in fact an extraordinary man, both a poet of passion and the most delicate workmanship, and a man of the material world, especially the world of finance and diplomacy—where, I dare say, passion and delicate workmanship are also necessities. We, who honor literature, also live in this world [sic]... thus he renders the world good service, including in his poems for sure, good thought, and happiness." [Mary Oliver, from a blurb on the jacket of Grace]

John Barr does indeed appear to be quite a man, widely admired for his financial and interpersonal skills, as Mary Oliver proclaims in the blurb above. There is no reason to doubt that good character and intention have played important roles in his success.

But what I wish to focus on in this post are matters pertaining to some of his writing, especially that found in *Grace: An Epic Poem*, his most recent book of poetry. And it is a bit amazing to me that this book (available now for ten years) appears to have received only two small notices so far: an enthusiastic paragraph in *Library Journal* in 1999, wherein Barr is likened to James Joyce, and a somewhat indifferent squib in [an amusing 2007 New Yorker article](#) about the Poetry Foundation, by Dana Goodyear, wherein it is revealed that the work was "inspired by family sailing trips around the Windwards and the British Virgin Islands," back during the dot-com Bubble years. It could be there are some reviews of the book I haven't seen, of course.

Most readers of *Digital Emunction* will know that Barr, a multimillionaire investment banker, was named President of the Poetry Foundation in 2004, charged with managing *Poetry's* \$100 million gift from Ruth Lilly, the ~~late and~~ eccentric pharmaceutical industry heiress.[1] He has also been, according to biographical information on the web, the President of the Poetry Society of America, Chairman of the Board of Bennington College, member of the board at Yaddo, founder of the country's largest natural gas marketing company, and head of a "prominent investment-banking boutique,"[2] later to become the major broker in the utilities merger craze some years back. He has also, of late, been closely associated with decidedly right-wing political forces. [3]

Well, it is perhaps the most idiosyncratic Poet bio since the aviator-poet Gabriele D'Annunzio's. And the résumé, of course, explains how the Barrs have managed all that fortunate sailing about the Windwards and other locales, where exotic peoples abound.

To make things even more unusual and interesting, perhaps, Barr is also, with *Grace*, the author of what some may judge to be, to put it somewhat euphemistically, the most racially outré work of poetic literature published in the United States since Vachel Lindsay's *The Congo*.

I know the matter of the "Other" is a complicated thing (I've been involved myself in some of those discussions). But it's not my point to engage with any identity theory or postcolonial analysis here, useful though such approaches often are. I'm not going to talk about the different and often complex ways otherness might be channeled, nor about how those channelings might be poetically deployed in ethically and politically worthwhile ways. I'm not going to talk about Lindsay, Stephen Foster, John Berryman, William Styron, or Araki Yasusada, for example, very different and interesting cases, each, I believe. In any discussion that may ensue from this post, I certainly think it would be valuable to consider these and numerous other historical instances for purposes of comparison and contrast. But for now, I'm merely going to make some framing comments, offer a couple of excerpts from Barr's epic-length poem, and (though without in any way hiding my own stance and attitude) let people judge for themselves. Then I'll conclude with a few questions, openly posed. The book is readily available, through Amazon, for those wishing to read more.

Barr, as most readers of this blog will remember, probably made his biggest splash in the poetry world heretofore with an essay in *Poetry* a few years back, titled, grandly enough, "[American Poetry in the New Century](#)." In reprise of themes found in Dana Gioia's now-classic "[Can Poetry Matter?](#)" he excoriates academic poets out of touch with the real "reading public," scolding them for their comfortable and complaisant in-house, hermetic styles—sub-cultural careerists, that is, sadly reduced to writing for each other, composing and theorizing ethereal stuff that "both starves and flourishes on academic subsidies." (The essay, of course, was written before investment boutiques made away and flourished with a few "subsidies" from the public treasury last year, but some of what Barr says about U.S. poetry's escalating ties to the academic Ideological State Apparatus is actually quite accurate, IMHO. An angry response to Barr's polemic, by Steve Evans, can be found [here](#).)

To this self-satisfied state of cloistered affairs, Barr offers in his essay an assertive and elegantly simple solution: Poets should get out more. Like Ernest Hemingway did, he writes, who in 1933 "went on his first safari, hunting big game in East Africa," and who then "took that a step further by seeking out fresh experience in the service of his writing: ambulance driving in the Spanish civil war (Barr no doubt means WWI, in Italy, quite before EH started bagging lions), marlin fishing off Cuba, running with the bulls in Pamplona." He goes on to cite the examples of Wallace Stevens, who "worked as a vice president for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company," and T.S. Eliot, who "worked for a time at Lloyds Bank, then in publishing at Faber and Faber." Barr concludes his list of exemplary poetic cases of "getting out in the world" by saying, "Poetry, like a prayer book in the wind, should be open to all pages at once."

And then he goes on to quote the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott: “To change your language, you must change your life.”

Well, I don’t presume to know how much Mr. Barr has changed his life lately (in all those Board rooms, I think it’s fair to ask, where would he find the time?), but he certainly has changed his *language* in *Grace*.

The book is written in the voice of a “Caribbean” (like Walcott!) gardener, punnily named Ibn Opcit. In a prefatory “Note on the Author” Barr writes, “Opcit was first heard talking in 1988 and was last seen, still talking, in a Soviet spacecraft circling the earth.” (One assumes Opcit, whenever he was first heard talking—was he perchance “discovered,” like the Caribs?—went from gardener to astronaut pretty fast, given that the USSR space program ended in 1991, but no matter, there is such a thing as poetic license... Note: I didn’t find the part about Opcit in space, but that may be in the unpublished sequel Barr claims to have written.)

Barr then goes on to add a “Note on the Language” of the book:

The voices in *Grace* use the freedoms of a Caribbean-like speech to get away with murder. Elizabethan English—Shakespeare’s English—felt free to coin words, to discard the Latinate baggage of prefix and suffix when it got in the way, cheerfully to impress a noun into service as a verb, and to choose sense over syntax, always, should a choice be required. So with this invented dialect, which seeks the energy and economy of dialects in general. As that lovely man Anthony Burgess said, “Black English has the right idea.”

Does “Black English” help one to get away with murder, or does it have the right idea? I don’t know, I guess, but it’s quite impossible, honestly, to tell what the “idea” of this book is, much less what motivated Barr to have the genial Mr. Opcit speaking like this, near the opening, which he goes on to do, for 138 pages:

I de gardener. I keeper de covenant

of de elements wid de Overruth estate.

When de sun busy elsewhere, when de rain miss,

I make up de difference.

Little potash, little phosphor, lime,

I keep de grounds shy of exhaustion.

I do de wormwook wid de pitcherfork,

work in peat, give de humus lungs.
I spread de good news of de compost heap.
I help de heartflops tooth on nitrogen,
de fescue green and deepen, de beds of purple fidget
swell like dey was pregnant...

It is at this point that the earthy Opcit sees something that changes his simple, happy state for the worse, and he relates it thus:

Last week, de afternoon, I finish cuttin'
de doppelganger and hullabaloo, de laurellie
and ballyhoo for de crystal arrangements inside.
I standin' by de window, de big house, waterin'
when did gentlemun arrive. He been here before.
A long drink-o-water name of Flavian Wyoming,
he encounter de Mistess Hepatica Overruth within.
(She spend days on her hair. She just finish a special.)
Now de lady, she love de silver lewd.
It be her point of approach. The gentleman, he know this.
He know her kiss leave marks. He know
she a ballbuster of de first magnitude.
No time for 'Boy!', he treat her like a sudden rug.
Into the bedoir he play Simon Segue.
No frill, no twine, he delectate the lady.
Like he were makin' up a smoke or lickin'

de scupper clean, he doin' grace notes wid his tongue.
He a trencherman to admire. De lady, she pleased
to be his aspic meal, his piece of thunder pie.
She holler "Mon éclair! You One-Shot Kangaroo!"
De gentleman, he produce his prôduce
like a corporate salami, and she hers,
like a surgery scar still angry red wid healing.
Den he settle his equipment in de lady's outback
an' he spud de well. And while his tool down-hole,
I hear de car door slam. And just wen he find de pay zone,
just when he givin' her de salt shot, in walk
de Marquand Flactree de Monback O'Boi Overruth himself.
Quicker den a seven-headed goat snatcher
de Marquand have dat cockpud on his back.
And Marquand, he produce his prôduce,
out of his cane a quite whippy sword.
And like a 'blue' on de fantil, going home—
Spray of scales, fling of guts, two deep strokes,
The oily meat is yours—he filet dat man.

If this bit of Uncle Remus porn-scat by the picturesque Plantation gardener seems a bit off-color, as it were, Mr. Opcit's extended views on marriage and the prickliness of the feminine gender lighten things up a bit, later on in the "epic." (Opcit speaks his tale mostly from the lock-up, where he's unjustly marooned for his innocent witness of the salami-in-the-surgery-scar-and-outback thing):

She a woman who wear her trousers like a veiled threat.

She use a metaphor for coupling to describe her opinion on dat.

She suggest you must have shrink wrap around your head.

“No need,” you say, “to be convivial to de point of pain.

But why have you trained the dog to pee on my side of the bed?”

“You do whatever your glands impel you to do,” she say.

“Well Omni—onni—oni—on,” you say. Now that we have entered

the goddammit phase of this relationship, you ask

why she take marriage as a right to be unreasonable,

why she give de fling of her head to everything you stand for.

And why, after marriage, her brief bloom has flared to fat.

At this point, things become tense, and though noble Opcit at the level of content sounds like any red-blooded male CEO flailing away in the marriage counselor’s office, he never loses his special sense (extension, or not) of form:

You ask if she understand dat de female of de species

(in contrast to de hundredfold female of spiderdom)

is not supposed to be larger than the male?

She loathe and she attack. And, oh, she excoriate your soul.

Armed wid a compatibility stun-gun, she swing,

she hit you wid a biological haymaker.

You respond wid a French bread diatribe.

You say she roly-poly and no fun to screw.

She counter wid a slashing attack

and several verbal uppercuts: You so much ejecta.

You buy de wrong brand of apple juice.

De house is out of dental floss.

She want a divorce. To which you say,

Dis marriage has been routinized.

In the *New Yorker*, Goodyear refers to *Grace* as a “mock epic,” and I guess we’re meant to read such meditations with indulgent smile. In any case, these quotes are lifted, I promise, pretty much at random (I admit to having read the book in this way; there was no other way, for me, to read it). For those seeking it, there is lots more voyeuristic sex where the passages come from, all of it rendered in minstrel *joie de vivre*, liberally peppered, as you’ve seen, with (contrary to Barr’s prefatory claim) rather non-Shakespearean ‘dis’ and ‘dats,’ in just about every clause— and even as Mr. Opcit comes off sometimes sounding like a blackface W.H. Auden making homegrown asides about metaphysics while delivering the Norton Lectures. Indeed, and in all fairness to Barr, not all passages are so “domestic” in nature as the ones above: In much of the book, really, Mr. Opcit acquits himself quite charmingly, full of wit and with much a jaundiced eye turned to the hypocrisies and biases of White neo-plantation culture—not forgetting to hold court, along the way, on The Book of Genesis, evolutionary theory, eccentric sorts of cuisine, and the wild goings-on of Po-Biz culture (including, on page 45, a reference, I believe, to me and the Yasusada controversy!). He can be a perfectly companionable noble savage, so to speak, a naïf with real and native intelligence, the kind that “has the right idea” and cuts through the chaff of civilized hubris to get at the essence of things. And all in “invented,” picturesque dialect that lends the verse a blackened Caribbean spice and flavor.

In the end, the performance is really quite remarkable, and as I said, I am thoroughly surprised that the book seems to have pretty much gone under the radar. Especially these days, you know, when a Wall Street financier is President, in the bardic culture, of the major poetry institution of America, and a poetry-writing man of Mr. Opcit’s approximate color is in the White House, presiding over the bigger culture, one where the Amos ‘n’ Andy reverse lisp has kind of gone out of fashion. Please excuse that stumbling sentence.

Alright, seriously, though. One must give Barr credit for writing such an ambitious work (not too many epics these days) and for stepping out on a limb. And it’s clear that there is a skillful and emphatically against-the-grain author (Barr) at work in the writing. At a textual level it is even arguably something of a “tour de force.”

But one might also be prompted to ask some questions when confronted with a work of this nature. And so, to conclude, as promised, I’ll ask a few, perhaps obvious ones, that jump to mind:

+ Does the language of *Grace* represent a “problem” of presumption that requests discussion?

+ If so, what, more specifically, is the order of this problem? (That's to say, referring back to my mention of other works where issues of otherness and race interpolate reception: Is this problem always-already in play any time a white writer imagines the voice of someone of another race, or are there times when such transference is justified, even ethically required?)

+ If this book is to be judged as representing a problem, is it ethically enough to just say so? I am comfortably sure that nearly everyone involved with the Poetry Foundation (and bless, in the main, its efforts) believes that blackface performance, even when it has been proffered with "benign intent," is an injurious and rightly discredited practice. Is it, or is it not, a relevant concern that a recent practitioner of the form (if that indeed is what *Grace* represents) is the organization's President?

+ Finally, if it is a relevant concern, what of poets who would be paid by such organization, for poems or for blogging, say? Do they have a responsibility, if they feel the problem under discussion is real, to request that the Foundation carry out a change on its Board of Directors? Moreover, should they consider not taking money from the Poetry Foundation until such time that a change is made? Or does a suggestion like this take things too far, raise an impolite issue that is best left unremarked?

There are other questions, of course, but these are a few that occur to me at the moment. I don't claim to have lock-tight responses for all of them.

Oh, and by the way, for what it's worth: The other glowing blurb on the jacket of *Grace* is by Billy Collins, our former Poet Laureate.

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Notes (with credit to Steve Evans, from his above linked article, for some of this information)

1. *The U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky takes credit for selecting Barr as Poetry Foundation President.*
2. *Barr's former company, Dynergy, which he founded-- frequently likened in business columns to Enron--paid out a \$3 million fine for accounting fraud (after Barr left as an executive) and a US Attorney said in a letter, "We have become increasingly concerned that Dynergy's `cooperation' is more apparent than real." Barr's current company is lobbying foreign governments, mostly Spanish speaking countries in the hemisphere, to privatize their natural resources on behalf of his clients.*
3. *John Barr donated the maximum to Rudolph Giuliani in early 2007, a month after Giuliani declared his candidacy. Giuliani's accomplishments as mayor of NYC include a smear campaign against contemporary artists and the Brooklyn Museum that displayed them, along with an attempt to defund the institution. Soon after Barr's donation, Giuliani named as his foreign policy adviser Norman Podhoretz right after he published the book World War III which advocated a global war, and who in a previous life as a literary editor engaged in scurrilous and ad hominem critical attacks against Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac.*

