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The Passion of Dave McGimpsey

by Nick Mount

Average world TV viewing figures rose slightly, to three hours and three minutes per day.... North America as a region watches the most TV, adding an extra three minutes on 2003 to total an average four hours 28 minutes viewing per day.

—BBC News World Edition, *12 April 2005*

It is fortunate that someone tracks just how much television we watch, because future historians would never know it from reading our literature, looking at our art, or even, oddly, by watching our television. Most of the population spends a quarter of its waking hours doing something that is largely absent from most of the ways that population imagines itself. The wink-wink of postmodern exceptions like *The Simpsons* (which begins in front of the TV) or a Mark Leyner story (which stays there) only proves the rule, their irony depending as it always has on lighting the chasm between the said and the seen—literally, in this case. Sure, we do other things whose appearance in the arts is disproportionate to their appearance in our lives: we defecate, cut our toenails, and wash dishes less often in art than in life, and ponder flowers and injustice more. But minute for minute, nothing is so conspicuous by its absence as the time spent with TV.

David McGimpsey has devoted his art to this part of our lives that most art pretends does not exist. Born and raised in Ville d'Anjou, a predominately French, once working-class suburb in Montreal's east end, educated in universities in Lennoxville, Montreal, and Halifax, tutored by TV, tabloids, and travel, McGimpsey has consistently turned his attention as a journalist, scholar, and poet to so-called popular culture: television, most often, but also professional athletes, pop singers and porn stars, breakfast cereals and fast food. Past or present, most poets make poetry out of already poetical materials, subjects like history, nature, or language that come pre-primed with a coat of *gravitas*. McGimpsey follows a different poetic tradition, one first urged by Charles Baudelaire in popular culture's infancy. Like others in this minority tradition (Lynn Crosbie in Canada, for instance, or Joe Wenderoth in the States), McGimpsey makes poetry from the apparently *un*poetical, from everyday materials like the four hours a day we spend with TV.

McGimpsey shares more than a birth-date with a recent outcrop of this minority tradition, what David Foster Wallace has called "a certain subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction" (49). Wallace argues that while the founders of postmodern American fiction used popular culture as literary referents or symbols, today's postmodern writers set their stories and characters fully *inside* the world of popular culture. For the postmodernists of the 1960s and 70s, pop was a signpost; for their inheritors in Wallace's generation, it's the whole road. Born after 1950, this is a generation who grew up with TV, who have never known a time without TV, and who have been—not surprisingly—deeply influenced by TV. A few, a very few (try to remember just how small a "subgenre" of postmodernism really is) of their writers show that influence in their subjects and methods.

Wallace notoriously complained that his generation of TV-trained postmodernists responds to the slick ironies of televisual culture with more slick ironies, self-conscious fictions for a self-conscious world that Wallace sees dead-ending in parody, cynicism, a jaded coolness that says nothing because it risks nothing. It is exactly here that McGimpsey departs from most of his contemporaries in the TV generation. Like them, McGimpsey tells stories set fully inside popular culture (for him, inside culture, period). But unlike them, he doesn't revel in the ironies of that culture or of his move inside. At heart, his explorations of popular culture are more sincere than ironic, more sentimental than cynical. McGimpsey takes popular culture seriously: in his work, the trash is sometimes treasure and sometimes toxic, but always deeply felt. In this crucial difference from most of his peers he is closer to the *anti*-rebels Wallace predicts at the end of his essay, the generation who might dare to leave the safety of irony, who might be "willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how *banal*'" (81). McGimpsey's poems offer a glimpse of what that anti-rebellion might look like.

Because of his willingness to take the popular seriously, McGimpsey's poetry depicts a culture at odds with its usual separation into high and low. In his world, high and low culture are not rivals. Culture is not even high or low: it is just culture, what he calls "the real culture I live in, where Keats and J-Lo both have their say" ("Musing"). The hallmark of McGimpsey's explorations of this expanded terrain is his attraction to the victims of culture's messy divorce, to affections ignored by one parent and disdained by the other. McGimpsey writes in a losing form about losers: poems that scrape the bottom of the pop-culture barrel. Poetry's disappearance from the academy has been greatly exaggerated,[1] but poetry today

certainly does not thrive *outside* the academy. Poetry and TV are not equals in McGimpsey's world because they are both winners: they are equals because they are both underdogs, one as absent from the lives of the many as the other is from the arts of the few.

A cultural loser by profession and taste, McGimpsey's poetic alter ego is as aware of the irrelevance of poetry to the daily world as he is of its irrelevance to poetry. But he cannot help himself: he is drawn irresistibly, even fatally, to his stubborn, sincere passions. McGimpsey has a reputation as a humorous poet, and so he is. But like Dostoevsky's underground man, he jokes through clenched teeth. The real ethos of McGimpsey's work is comedy's other face, the face of tragedy. In the overlooked pastimes of modern culture he finds the sadness of its stories and his own sad story of a man who cannot say no to his cultural appetites, who will feed his "maudlin faith / in hamburgers & poetry" even if that faith pulls him down with it.[2]

I

At times, McGimpsey gives in to satire. Sometimes his target is high culture: an art gallery gift shop crammed with Monet agenda planners, Monet cup warmers, Monet umbrellas, even a Monet wine, all to celebrate the tour of "three Giverny paintings / the master painted when he was, I believe, / legally blind" (*HV* 24). Or a shot from Halifax at bourgeois Toronto's leading literary voice: "Once, the snow was so deep, / you almost couldn't hear Margaret Atwood" (*LC* 96). Sometimes popular culture comes under fire: the self-evident horror of "What if God Was Wilford Brimley?" (*DB* 22-23), or "Nice at Any Price," which suggests pop culture's bottom line by rhyming B-list celebrities with consumer products: "Liberace tamagotchi," "Linda Tripp's licorice whip," and "Ginger Lynn Allen's home pregnancy challenge," among others (*HV* 5).

But whether aimed high or low, satire unleavened by sympathy is uncommon in McGimpsey's poetry, and even the apparent exceptions lose their bite after careful reading. Once past the slap of the title, Wilford Brimley seems a better supreme deity than most:

> On the seventh day he'd loosen his suspenders.
>
> He'd see the lakeshore ripples in daylight
> colored by the surrounding maple trees
> And he'd be happy with what he's done for a while.
> (*DB* 22)

The one cultural segment McGimpsey consistently regards with a satirical eye is popular culture promoted to bourgeois respectability. "Vili Fualaau à Paris," for instance, erases the moral difference between middle-class women swooning over Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic* and Mary Kay Letourneau, the Washington teacher convicted in 1997 for raping her grade-school student, while "Ancient Rock Mythology" wonders how to defend a taste for Alice Cooper against the liberal canonization of Simon and Garfunkel and John Lennon (*HV* 47, 6, 10). McGimpsey's favorite target of this kind is the sanitization of baseball as a metaphor for America, a subject that he also explored in his monograph *Imagining Baseball*, winner of the Popular Culture Association's Ray and Pat Browne Award in 2000. In "Babe Ruth in Love," for example, the cancer-stricken athlete uses his famous bat to destroy a Midwest cornfield and along with it baseball's most cherished myths, from the national game of "Casey at the Bat" to the pastoralism of *Field of Dreams*:

> "Fuck Iowa!" he says
> "Fuck the cornfields, & the green blades of grass,
> fuck the Mighty Casey & his Mudville saps,
> fuck Frank Capra & the white sugar ulcer
> given to me and this godamned game."
>
> (*LC* 52)

In his baseball poems McGimpsey aims miles from Malamud, from Kinsella, from Bowering, from a long list of high- and middlebrow North American writers who have turned the game into myth, magic, religion, a metaphor for postmodernism, into pretty much everything but a goddamned game.

McGimpsey's quarrel with the appropriation of popular culture by high culture stems from a root conviction that the high-low division is more about maintaining class differences than deciding aesthetic differences. Motivated by taste more than agenda, his poems disturb this divide by repeatedly mixing the two cultures, with initially jarring but ultimately clarifying results. In McGimpsey's world, Vili Fualaau quotes Baudelaire, Frank Sinatra sings Leonard Cohen, and Dom DiMaggio's brother shares a stanza with Sylvia Plath's father (*HV* 47, 21; *DB* 68). His poems include a Quincy autopsy modelled on a Milton elegy, a eulogy for Gilligan's Skipper inspired by Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, and a meditation on poetic immortality that's a drunker version of a Keats sonnet.[3] And so on. For McGimpsey, high and low culture are equals, but equals in the sense that

they possess as much potential to be significant and moving as they do to be trivial and dull:

> Pursuing graduate degrees may well be
> the most useless thing I've ever done.
> This, keeping in mind,
> I've seen Supertramp twice.
> ("Dr. Tubby," *HV* 42)

This cultural levelling occurs even in the ostensibly satiric poems. In "O Coconut," Margaret Atwood competes for the speaker's attention with lap dances and bologna (*LC* 96). "Museum Sweet" satirizes high culture at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, but also targets the Coca-Cola museum in Atlanta: they are both "sweet" museums, different confections for different classes (*HV* 24-26). Its clearest example is a poem in his second book, *Dogboy*, that simply lists brands of coffee together with literary terms; its most powerful is a poem in the same book in which the poet-speaker leaves a fast-food burger, a "still warm prayer," on Yeats's grave, an image that neatly sums McGimpsey's underdog aesthetic (113).

McGimpsey has said he is not interested in trying to bridge the gap between low and high culture, only in enjoying his explorations of all culture ("Musing"). For him as a poet to assert the importance of the popular would, after all, risk the same appropriation of the popular for high ends that he satirizes in self-justifying baby-boomers and baseball apologists. And yet his poems do invest popular culture with the individual and social meaningfulness we grant automatically to high culture. (What saves him from his own critique is that he finds these meanings in popular culture that high culture has shown little interest in assimilating: in Deep Purple, not Dylan; *Family Matters*, not *Twin Peaks*.) In the prose poem "Letter to *TV Guide*," for instance, an unemployed, separated father writes the magazine not about TV, but about his marriage, his mortality, his happiness: "I just want to ask about those mornings, the ones where the grey sticks to the windows, when the ankles can't bear the pressure of the carpet, and when all your clothes scratch like straw" (*DB* 94-95). The letter draws its humour and its pathos from its author taking the magazine's title literally, as a *guide*, a therapist, Virgil to a couch-bound Dante. It's a joke that's not a joke, a joke through clenched teeth.

"Ancient Rock Mythology" provides I assume a more directly autobiographical example of the importance of popular culture. Each poem in this hard-rock quartet reflects on the role of popular music in the speaker's adolescence. The first, "Alice Cooper at Thermopylae," takes its title, of

course, from the defence of the pass at Thermopylae by Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans in 480 BC, an event of mythic significance for Greece and so the West. The other half of the poem's reference base is Alice Cooper's *School's Out*, a 1972 album that as the poem recalls came wrapped in women's underwear: twelve inches of Alice, stuffed in a pair of panties. *School's Out* was loud, crude, and very popular with teenage boys—on all counts, a long way from Thermopylae. But unburdened by historical or cultural distance, the poem's speaker understands that Alice was to him what Leonidas was to the Greeks, the hero who held back the world.

> A plastic stereo by luck of a birthday;
> locked in the room, volume creeping up,
> bangs on the door, battering, "Turn that down!
> Turn that down! I can't hear myself think!"
> *Never.* And, in a way, that door was never opened,
> and the records spun my lonesomeness,
> staring at walls —
> bare (but black lighted).
>
> (*HV* 6-7)

More openly than most of McGimpsey's poems, "Ancient Rock Mythology" suggests the mythic significance of popular culture, to the speaker and his society. Alice Cooper's ascent to cultural relevance does not come at the cost of Leonidas's demotion to history: they are equivalent, different in time and place but not experientially. What the poem ultimately asserts is the potential equality of our encounters with high and low culture, a correspondence driven home when its speaker draws his loneliness from Thomas Hardy's knight in search of King Arthur in "When I Set Out for Lyonnesse."[4]

A self-confessed TV junkie, McGimpsey knows better than most the peculiar colour of TV crap. But he also knows that its stories can and do move millions. The key to his aesthetic is that it knows both these things at once, a difficult balance noted by Jason Camlot in a review of McGimpsey's first book, *Lardcake*: "This is the challenge that McGimpsey takes upon himself: to write effectively about the sentimental glue that holds our prime-time world together without succumbing to saccharinity, but without denying the sweetness of saccharin, either" (par. 9). McGimpsey himself describes his approach as "parody in reverse":

> I take something that seems slight and beneath contempt (a sitcom, a tabloid tale) and rather than expose them to high-brow ridicule, I try to adduce some sympathetic core in those things—to assure that the heights of comedy and tragedy are also found in the worlds beyond Professor Boring's desk. ("Musing")

Because the method depends on sympathy for a world most readers of poetry have little sympathy for, McGimpsey's poems are easily misread as satire or celebration,[5] when they are actually neither. They are serious jokes, absurd premises that expose real truths. In "Darrin's Affair," the *Bewitched* protagonist admits to an affair with his secretary because although Samantha can become any woman with a twitch of her nose, "what's the use if you're not willing to risk / everything in a 2 a.m. something gone wrong" (*LC* 31). It's a joke: a fictional husband brought to life to complain about a fantasy wife. But the poem takes the joke seriously, aiming not for the fantasy but for the desperation beneath it. That's how McGimpsey's poems work: they try to see *into* a world that most other poetry, most other art, claims to see *through*, and by doing so reveal the comedies and tragedies of a part of our culture we give so much time and so little thought.

II

In his 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life," Charles Baudelaire set himself against the dominant art of his time, an art that insisted that to be beautiful, to be *art*, a painting of a contemporary subject had to represent its subject not as contemporary but as timeless: paint a soldier in Napoleon's army, fine, but paint him wearing clothes of the Renaissance. Baudelaire was a Romantic: he thought half of art was its universal, timeless ideas. But he was also a Modern, maybe the first Modern, for whom the other half of art was the present, the ephemeral circumstances of everyday life. His exemplary modern artist, the magazine illustrator Constantin Guys, does not paint heroes from the past like Leonidas the Spartan: he paints soldiers, prostitutes, idling dandies, families in the park, the patrons of a café. He registers changes in fashion, cosmetics, society, even exaggerates them, all in an attempt to capture the beauty of the now.

That Baudelarian injunction to redeem the everyday, to find meaning and aesthetic pleasure in the world of change, drives McGimpsey's poetry. This is a poetry that takes its materials not from the already poetical but from sitcoms and tabloids, popular music and baseball games. It sees beauty in tiki bars, burger stands, and tourist traps. McGimpsey is not a

Romantic like Baudelaire: his universals are cultural, not transcendental. But, like Baudelaire and his heirs, McGimpsey writes poems that combine the timeless *and* the timely, old human predicaments played out on sitcom sets. "Museum Sweet," especially, re-enacts Baudelaire's argument against an art that values only the timeless. The poem's quarrel with the Museum of Fine Arts and the World of Coca-Cola is not that Monet umbrellas or Coke memorabilia are inherently bad art, or the redundant complaint that the Museum has commercialized Monet and Coca-Cola commercialized Coca-Cola. In Baudelaire's terms, the objection is really that the cultural authority of the Monet exhibit and the guided nostalgia of the Coca-Cola museum are both a kind of aesthetic laziness: that it is easier for the patrons of both to worship established ideas of beauty than to find the beauty of their own time. Against all that, the speaker looks away from the museums themselves to the common design of the Museum's gift shop and Coke's tasting room, objects of satire and delight, at the same time. For McGimpsey, as for Baudelaire, art can and should represent familiar ideas, but it should find them in a particular present rather than a universalized past.

As Nick LoLordo has pointed out, McGimpsey's well-travelled speaker also resembles Baudelaire's modern artist in his best known role as the *flâneur*, the urban spectator. But in this comparison, the differences are more revealing than the similarities. Like Baudelaire himself, the Baudelarian *flâneur* mingled his enthusiasm for an emerging mass culture with a thinly veiled longing for the declining aristocratic past, a nostalgia evident in his affinities with and special artistic interest in the dandy, the "last spark of heroism amid decadence" (Baudelaire 28). McGimpsey's *flâneur* has nothing in common with the dandy, or with his aristocratic tastes. He is more a poet of the embattled American middle class, of its icons, diversions, and epiphanies, of what he calls "the prosaic aspects of our culture" ("Sweet Poetry" 167). As LoLordo recognizes, his *flâneur* is less like Baudelaire's and more like his loafing American cousin, the Whitman of "Song of Myself." At heart McGimpsey shares Whitman's core American attitude, his resistance to European class privilege and the search instead for a common denominator, for the key to the American dream of unity in diversity. His is a poetic of the mall, not the café.

Whitman found that common denominator in his own imagination, in the conceit of holding all the contradictions of America inside the poet's capacious mind. Since the first poem in his first book, McGimpsey has found it instead in the products and experiences of consumer society. The burger-stands that dot McGimpsey's poems and dominate his third book *Hamburger Valley, California* are the aesthetic descendants of Baude-

laire's parks and cafés but their political opposites, belly-fillers for the middle many rather than time-fillers for the leisurely few. LoLordo notes the aptness of the hamburger to McGimpsey's democratic aesthetic, calling it "the perfect American abstraction produced through the process of grinding down distinctions" (314). And so it is, but McGimpsey seems less interested in the burger as an abstraction of American democracy than as its actual common denominator, not a symbol but a socio-economic fact: "my hamburger / my *pax americana* / *our* hamburger" (*HV* 88). McGimpsey's poems suggest the mythic significance of popular culture, but they ground themselves in the real, in unifying cultural experiences instead of unifying (and already poetical) national myths: in the hours with TV, the malls, the diets, the arena sports and concerts. *Hamburger Valley*, especially, suggests that America's common denominator is not a political ideal but a fast food—or that the political ideal *is* a fast food, that *e pluribus unum* realizes itself over burgers. The guiding joke of *Hamburger Valley* is this: You want unity in diversity? No problem. Would you like fries with that?

Like all McGimpsey's jokes, this one is serious. To him, "*our* hamburger" is evidence and metonymy of North American cultural unity, part of a continental identity that includes other widely shared experiences like watching TV. The lowly hamburger is neither a transcendentally authorized universal in Baudelaire's Romantic sense nor a constitutionally guaranteed political universal like the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But in the post-transcendental, post-political society of late capitalism, the burger is more concretely universal than either of these, wanted by more and accessible to more. "Billions and Billions Served," as the sign has said since they stopped counting.

Of course, that sign also says the underside of a cultural unity based on consumer choice is corporate hegemony. This is not news. In his uncompleted work from the 1930s on Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin argued that capitalism destroyed the *flâneur* soon after his birth, diverting him from the streets of Paris to its new department stores and changing him from a stroller into a shopper (54). In McGimpsey's America, that diversion has only grown stronger. On his way home from California in *Hamburger Valley*,

> all the rumblings of escape are equalized:
> Upper Peninsula pasties, Big Mac;
> Texas brisket, Big Mac;
> Philly cheesesteaks, Big Mac;
> Nebraskan runzas, Big Mac;

Manhattan pastrami, Big Mac;
Sheboygan brats, Big Mac;
Rhode Island jonnycakes, Big Mac;
Maryland softshells, Big Mac….
(96)

The epistrophic list records regional foods from Michigan's pasties to Montreal's poutine, all followed and "equalized" by the ubiquitous Big Mac: unity in diversity, courtesy of McDonald's Corporation. Ultimately, the Big Mac means the end of these differences and, as Benjamin predicted, of this *flâneur*: the list ends with "death too / my bad (my Big Mac)," with the Big Mac as another kind of equalizer (97). But in the meantime, the sameness and omnipresence of the Big Mac and other corporate burgers is part of their statistically established appeal, to America as to McGimpsey's speaker. As Benjamin put it, "The intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers" (55). Or as McGimpsey says in "God Bless Los Angeles,"

I swear to Ben Cartwright and Bob McAdoo
to Bruce Lee, Gene Simmons, and Mr. T too,
I'll have the
In-N-Out Quarter Pound Big King
Classic Bravestar Duo
Western Gigantic Brazier Denny's Slider
Chief Mega Double
Big Shef Super Shef Gino Giant
Mongo Whata Justa
DeLuxe Whopper Hi-Boy Royale Bazooka
BigMac Swisstop
Mexi Moomoo Piggiestyle BigBoy
Alpine-Peaked Colossal
Dreem-Land Boom-Boom Double-Double
Dandy High-Life Grampa
Rollie Cheesestuffed Flamekissed Castletop
Superstar Jack-in-the Box
Quickie Lums Butterslicked Charbox
Homestyle Sizzler
Cowtown Triplelayered BBQ Chilislopped
Maxibeef Tower
Great Big Chunkchunk Kahuna Elvis Stomper
All Dressed Root n' Toot

Fat One.

(*HV* 79)

More sincere than satiric, these lists and others like them in McGimpsey's work are his versions of Baudelaire's exaggerations of the everyday, of Whitman's sprawling catalogues and Benjamin's intoxicating commodities. In them is the diversity and the unity of modern America, the particular commodity and the universal experience of consumption.

The other distinguishing difference between McGimpsey's and Baudelaire's *flâneur* is this: Baudelaire's ideal *flâneur* strolls the modern city to become "one flesh with the crowd," to "set up house in the heart of the multitude." McGimpsey's speakers cannot do that. They are not at home in the crowd, they are outside it, distanced from it. Their distance does not stem from the Romantic individualism that kept Baudelaire's own poet-speaker from ever fully becoming the "non-I" he defined as the modern artist (9). Nor does it originate in the guarded sense of cultural superiority that kept another student of Baudelaire's example of making poetry from the unpoetical, the young T.S. Eliot, from ever confusing himself with the carbuncular masses. As much as they might want to, McGimpsey's speakers fundamentally do not fit in, from the lonely teenager hiding from "good people who listened to 'Feelin' Groovy'" to the middle-aged, overweight poet of "The Inaugural Poem of the Los Angeles Subway System" (*HV* 6, 30-38). The only thing more perverse than a subway in Los Angeles is a poem about a subway in Los Angeles: this entire poem is about not belonging, about a poet in a city that cares even less for poetry than it does for public transit. It's not just being a poet that makes McGimpsey out of place in these popular-culture settings. It's also, and especially here, in pop's Olympus, that he looks little like its tanned, implanted, botoxed cast. Baudelaire's *flâneur* becomes one with the crowd the better to observe it; McGimpsey takes a "NOTE TO SELF" to "*try to fit in*" and "*stop staring*" (31, 32).

Since his first book McGimpsey has been attracted to the losers of popular culture, to people derailed, killed, or just ignored by the culture that created them. He has written about celebrity train-wrecks like Shannen Doherty and Michael Jackson, about casualties of their own fame like the fat Elvis or the murdered Selena, about shadowed siblings of the famous like Roger Clinton, Dom DiMaggio, and Gummo Marx. Though presented as happenstance, it's completely in character that the only celebrity he meets on his tour of LA is "Sandra Bullock's 'sister,' / the one the camera likes less" (*HV* 33).

But of all McGimpsey's losers, the biggest loser is himself. From the "flunked-up flunky of a flunk" high-school student to the adult poet who rewrites his Montreal precursor's famous line "Let us compare mythologies" as the deliberately stumbling "Let us compare worthlessnesses" (*HV* 17, 31), McGimpsey's speaker repeatedly and brutally dwells on his own considerable flaws. The entire second section of *Dogboy*, thirty-one poems, is an onslaught of lyrics by an overweight, depressed, self-hating failure that takes confessional poetry to a new low, poems like "Obladioblahatemylife," "I Am Produce-Boy," and the right-to-the-point "Congratulations, Loser" in which he loses jobs, friends, girlfriends, hair, his dignity, everything but weight. As its first poem admits, this is a loser among losers, a loser's loser:

> When I got to my self-esteem workshop
> the group-leader was sitting there in the dark
> eating Oreos, and he looked up and said "I guess
> you'll be wanting some of these—eh, tubby?"
> ("Chubby Chased," *DB* 31)

This litany of failures is what keeps McGimpsey's speaker away from the crowd, and one reason he's so drawn to TV: because TV allows this ill-fitting *flâneur* to gaze on the popular without being of it, without being confronted in person by "the miles of dental floss / that stand between you and Shania Twain" (*HV* 36).

McGimpsey's exaggerated attention to the weight of his speaker in poems about the exaggerated consumption of popular culture suggests that these extra pounds should be read in a register other than the confessional. Like the pop-culture casualties to whom he is most attracted, this speaker shows the effects of the culture that created him, for him as for some of them on his body. But his story is not a simple critique of a too fattening popular culture: it is a more nuanced and an older story than that, a tragedy about a man brought down by the things he most desires.

This story is, I suspect, to be continued,[6] but we already know how it ends. Titled after and modelled on Milton's pastoral elegy for a drowned classmate and lesser poet, McGimpsey's "Quincy on *Lycidas*" is a lengthy dramatic monologue in which the eponymous TV coroner addresses his assistant Sam about his current case, a drowning victim. Like its source, McGimpsey's audacious rewrite is a meditation on poetic posterity through the vehicle of a writer's death. The key difference is that McGimpsey takes the place of Lycidas, appearing in the poem not as its speaker but as its corpse, a depressed greeting-card poet whom Quincy calls "Tubby"

(*DB* 90). The poem turns as an autopsy must on the manner of death, whether accident, suicide, or murder. Its first clue is the contents of the deceased's stomach:

> Tell me, Sam, why a man who knew he was going
> on a sea cruise would eat so much on shore?
> Pink's chili dogs, Pollo Loco chicken legs,
> Trader Vic's Mongolian ribs, Cassel's burgers,
> Phillipe's french dip sandwiches, Central Market tacos—
> the man went on a binge
> that would shock Richard Simmons.
> Why would he do that? What was so wrong
> he'd take all that extra weight up the gangway?
>
> (89)

Quincy also discovers a note hidden deep in the corpse's ear, a note that appears, oddly, to be a suicide note by a murder victim, someone who mentions an anchor tied to his foot, chum in his pockets, and a captain who whispered "the love boat stops here," but who seems to have sunk for his own reasons:

> i shouldn't complain—i'm a bandit
> and i am lucky to have learned to spell "happiness"
> correctly once in my stupid life.
> the dolphins tumble to the ocean floor
> unable to breath through new toxins
> which have crusted the top of the sea—
> the lobsters welcome us as derelicts
> weighed to the very bottom by our maudlin faith
> in hamburgers & poetry.
>
> (90-91)

After reading this note, Quincy arrives at "one absolute certainty," delivered in the poem's last line: "Sam, he was murdered" (91, 92). But as anyone who remembers *Quincy, M.E.* knows, that's a joke—Quincy was absolutely certain all his cases were homicides. Ultimately the note like the medical evidence remains inconclusive on the perpetrator of this death, on the question of *blame*. The cause, though, is clear in both: death by cultural consumption. This bloated Lycidas died from his own appetite for "hamburgers & poetry," from the mismatched passions that made him homeless in both of the cultures he could rightfully call home.

McGimpsey's derelict speaker is a poet who has outlived poetry, a consumer with nothing left to consume. He is the hamburger's biggest victim because he is its biggest customer, a man who could say more truthfully than Whitman that "All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine, / I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there."[7] And from these voracious appetites there is, as he knows, "no getting away" (*HV* 99). As Quincy's autopsy reveals in *Dogboy* and the future corpse lets slip in the final pages of *Hamburger Valley*, death is just a Big Mac away:

> The weekends have piled up, Wimpy,
> And I am, Jughead, just another cartoon face.
> The great strand of burgers:
> each sandwich like the last,
> each sandwich like the next,
> following me into my ready grave
> hip by hip.
>
> (102)

Baudelaire's and Whitman's nineteenth-century *flâneurs* approached modern culture with the wonder of a child. McGimpsey's has seen it all before, every episode of every sitcom, every burger in every diner. But for all his experience and all his knowledge, he cannot say no to his cultural cravings. As he says, "I am dying for just a bit more" (*HV* 73). Estranged from both high and low culture, from even his own pleasure and wonder, this weary *flâneur* is finally only at home with the very passions that weigh him down, the hamburgers and poetry that are both his reason for living and his reason for dying.

Although occasionally called "Dave" and even "McGimpsey," this dying speaker is not David McGimpsey the living poet. McGimpsey shares most of his speaker's enthusiasms and provides all his knowledge, but his speaker is a fiction. Actually, because no public facts limit its possibilities, the character "Dave McGimpsey" is more fictional than the fictional speakers he sometimes uses, like Darrin Stephens or Dr. Quincy. Nor is this character limited by private facts. As McGimpsey said in a 2004 interview, "Maybe the confessional model is where I start—like the confessionals I use the specific truths of my actual life—except, in my case, I tell lies" ("Musing").

This fictional departure from his confessional model signals the larger ambitions of McGimpsey's poetry. Unlike his insatiable speaker, McGimpsey preserves a critical detachment from his pop-culture affections, a distance he says comes in part from his art-form: "Poetry can't

make you popular, so you couldn't ask for a better vantage to contemplate the popular" ("Sweet Poetry" 168). In his first two books he often found that distance behind the mask of the dramatic monologue, but in his more recent work he has moved away from monologues by existing characters to monologues by a much exaggerated version of himself, a development that suggests a transition from the particulars of history to the universals of fiction. To Nick LoLordo, the speaker of *Hamburger Valley* is a kind of representative American consumer: "For all his outsize desires, a Whitmanesque absorptive power is denied the poet: no larger than anyone else, he is not dying for us but alongside us" (319). But those desires are too outsized to be average. McGimpsey's speaker has ballooned into something a great deal larger than his original or his reader: from an exaggerated diet of the everyday, he has become more than the everyday, a super-sized figure of mythical proportions. The phrase he uses of himself in the last poem in *Hamburger Valley*, "just another cartoon face," implies both this everyday cause and its larger-than-life result, the average and the iconic, an everyman who became a super-loser.

In an interview after his first book, McGimpsey said he was interested in "the archetype of the fallen king, the Elvis myth" (McInnes). That interest shows itself in the celebrities to whom he is drawn but most of all in his own fallen speaker, his royal appetites, his exile from his cultural homelands, his death by water. The note Quincy finds in the corpse's ear is signed "*r(egis)*": a Latin nod to the original Lycidas, Edward *King*, but also and more important to the corpse's archetypal identity. With this identity in mind, it's tempting to read the passion of Dave McGimpsey allegorically, to see this bloated, dying, uncommon denominator as a martyr for our consumer society, or, with Benjamin, as the voice of the commodity itself. I think these readings are there to be found, but only if they are understood as stories of pleasure as well as suffering, of attraction as well as its consequences. As McGimpsey says, "It is, in the end, not really about hamburgers or rock shows, but about the fate of the individual's poetic voice, an idea completely within the tradition of English poetry" ("Musing").

III

Traditional it may be, but McGimpsey's poetry is a hard sell to traditional audiences. Keats goes over well enough, but since and partly because of T.S. Eliot the approved poetic attitude toward J-Lo is disdain.[8] McGimpsey can be a tough sell even to readers unschooled in poetic tradition: my stu-

dents generally see Eliot's allusions to centuries-old Roman poets as more note-worthy than McGimpsey's allusions to decades-old American rock stars, or for that matter than Eliot's to popular songs of his day. Besides the cultural prejudice, the obvious danger of writing about popular culture is that it dates: which is why most readers skip the second book of the *Iliad*, and why most of my students don't get Liberace jokes and have a hard time appreciating the tragic side of *Bewitched*.

McGimpsey is an especially uneasy fit in Canadian poetry. The problem is only superficially his untypical and for many readers un-Canadian subject matter, his Jack Klugmans instead of jack pines, ancient rock stars instead of ancient rocks. More fundamentally, McGimpsey reverses the oldest tradition in Canadian humour. As Andrew Clark has argued, Canadian comedy has long had a rural streak, a genus Clark calls *comedicus hickus supremus* that runs from *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* through *Spring Thaw* and Charlie Farquharson to *Trailer Park Boys* and *Corner Gas*. McGimpsey shares the populist tastes of this rural tradition, but his wit, medium, education, and many of his influences are cosmopolitan. And therein lies the problem: the hick can be sincere in his affections for schlock, but the cosmopolitan is supposed to parody the hick's affections, to laugh knowingly at Shakespeare becoming fodder for ragtime. That Canadian tastes run exactly the opposite way—that, as Clark notes, *Corner Gas*'s highest per-capita ratings actually come from cosmopolitan Toronto—does not matter, because decorum trumps demographics. It does matter to McGimpsey, though, because he is caught between cultures, a cosmopolitan who expresses affection for a world the elite officially disdains, in a form everyone but the elite actually ignores.

McGimpsey's solution to these problems is the same as Baudelaire's: he ignores them. He has said repeatedly that he is not interested in trying to popularize poetry, and that he does not worry about high culture not taking him seriously: "a man who has written a 20-page poem about hamburgers can't reasonably complain he's not taken seriously" ("Musing"). Or as Baudelaire put it in 1863, "I am perfectly happy for those whose owlish gravity prevents them from seeking Beauty in its most minute manifestations to laugh at these reflections of mine and to accuse them of a childish self-importance" (34). Due respect to both, but I don't believe either, not fully. I think they take their hamburgers and cosmetics very seriously, and hope others will do the same. Most do not, of course. By treating sincerely what most of us treat ironically if at all, McGimpsey risks the disapproval of his time just as much as Baudelaire did his.

91

McGimpsey's earlier poems tend to follow the traditional structure of a joke, a serious setup punctured by a comic conclusion. Many of his more recent poems reverse this conventional structure. "Alanis Glossettes," for instance, begins and continues with a series of jokes inspired by Alanis Morissette songs:

> *You live, you learn*; you graduate, you suck—
> but you still get some pretty nice stuff:
> a suspicious insurance plan, a terrarium
> full of exotic, slow-moving, stinging desert things.

But in the poem's last quatrain, the jokes turn serious:

> *You oughta know* that I pray everyday
> for the best the sandwich-making world has to offer,
> for I dream that God may take some time from setting fires,
> and the scorpion's tail, unfurled, won't snag at our mouths.
> (*HV* 43)

As in a joke, the reader has been conned, set up, but for a serious rather than a comic turn, a twist that reveals the poem's high-culture structural model, the English sonnet. And as in a joke or a Shakespearean sonnet, the punch line forces a new understanding of the setup. At the end of a joke, we see the apparently serious in a comic light; at the end of a McGimpsey poem, we see the apparently comic in a serious light.

That serious inversion of the comical is I think at the heart of McGimpsey's poetry, a recently visible formal equivalent of his dedication to finding the meaningful in the trivial. Just as McGimpsey sometimes gives in to satire, at times he also gives in to comedy, to laughter for its own redemptive sake. But more often than not, his poems are comic in Beckett's sense that laughter and tears come to the same thing in the end, that lurking behind every joke is the sting of the scorpion's tail. Because of his popular passions, and because critics from Aristotle to the Academy Awards have trained the West to think of comedy as a lesser mode than tragedy, it can be hard to feel that sting, to take McGimpsey's jokes seriously. But comedy is a serious business, and McGimpsey takes it seriously, whether his own or a sitcom's. By looking into rather than through our everyday amusements he shows the poetry of our time, its heartbreaking as well as its laughable dimensions, none more so than those of his own tragically amused poetic self.

Notes

Thanks to Jared Bland, Bernadette Mount, and Malcolm Woodland for their careful readings of this essay in various stages. I have since added new errors.

1 See for instance Bruce R. Smith's Introduction to *PMLA*'s January 2005 special issue on poetry, especially page 10, and contributor Avital Ronell, who argues that in today's academy, poetry is "largely without shelter, without a recognizable address. It is as if the eviction notice served by Plato were finally enforceable" (17).

2 McGimpsey, *Dogboy* 91. McGimpsey's poetry books are abbreviated in subsequent citations as *DB* (*Dogboy*), *LC* (Lardcake), and *HV* (*Hamburger Valley, California*).

3 "Quincy on *Lycidas*," *DB* 85-92; "In Memoriam: A.H. Jr.," *LC* 43-50; and "Pudgy *Pathetique*," *LC* 86, which rewrites Keats's "When I have fears that I may cease to be."

4 McGimpsey's "and the records spun my lonesomeness" echoes a line in Hardy's opening stanza: "When I set out for Lyonnesse, / A hundred miles away, / The rime was on the spray, / And starlight lit my lonesomeness…." Noted in Acknowledgements, *HV*.

5 As for instance the conservative *Books in Canada* regularly has: see associate editor Carmine Starnino's review of *Lardcake*, collected in his *A Lover's Quarrel*, and Robert Moore's review of *Hamburger Valley*.

6 This essay was written before the publication of McGimpsey's *Sitcom* by Coach House Books in the fall of 2007.

7 Whitman lines 831-32; qtd. in LoLordo 319.

8 In a recent installment in the ongoing reinvention of a pop-friendly, made-in-America modernism, David E. Chinitz argues that Eliot was far more receptive to popular culture than his critics have allowed him to be, that the elitist "Eliot we have inherited is the Eliot who has always been needed by his readers" (16). I doubt Eliot's elitism needed any help, but in any case the difference between what he stood for and what critics made him stand for does not change the outcome.

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