

Introduction I

Judith E. Johnson

In workshops on the creative process, I tell the writers and artists who are learning to reach into their creativity that we bring our entire lives to each moment, and that we can indeed make a book out of the enormous weight of feeling that attaches to our experience. The first workshop I taught on this subject, I had the inestimable good fortune to be team-teaching with Harry Staley, whose talent, creativity, scholarship, and ability to pick up any ball whatsoever and run with it, never ceased to astonish me. Actor, Joyce scholar, nurturing teacher to generations of SUNY at Albany students, the most supportive and enlivening of colleagues, Harry Staley is also one of those extraordinary poets who has brought an entire life to a stunning book published late in his career. In our cultural life at this time and place, we have no easy way to recognize striking talent in artists too modest and sometimes too busy to promote their own work. For years audiences in Albany have had the pleasure of hearing Staley perform these powerful and brilliant poems. The lives of poets do not follow predictable patterns. Sometimes it takes a life to make a book. Sometimes it takes the restraint, the hard apprenticeship, the integrity and determination involved in a rigorous quest for perfection to keep from publishing one's work until it has realized its ideal form. In this book, *The Lives of a Shell-Shocked Chaplain*, Harry Staley has given us the result of such a quest, a life of patient and selfless work for the sake of the art. This publication

will enable audiences beyond Staley's immediate surroundings at last to make the acquaintance of a powerful and original poet.

This dazzling narrative and dramatic sequence follows the life of one Charles J. McCaffery from his birth in 1920 to his death in a nursing home in 1987. By the use of this narrative framework, Staley not only enables himself to deal with the rites of passage in the life of an ordinary ethical and decent human being in this nation in this century, but he also enables himself to write a kind of poetic history of the great moments of historical crisis of our time, as seen through the life of an ethical protagonist. Immersed in the historical and cultural detail (films, comedy shows) of our century, McCaffery relives his life as if it had indeed been a film. Service in World War II is the pivotal event in the imaginary McCaffery's life. But through that event, we see refracted the later wars, in particular the war in Vietnam. Because McCaffery is reflecting in his old age upon his entire life, time and history become collapsed, concentrated to one moment of moral choice which is every moment of choice. The compelling vision of these poems is that no event in history happens only in its own time. No decision involves only the elements of that decision. No war is only that war; it carries the common structure and common choices of all wars. And it is this experience, this knowledge that choices that were right in their time may retrospectively and retroactively have been wrong, that drives the protagonist of these poems from shell-shock into that final visionary madness our great cultural myths tell us is also prophetic insanity.

Listen to the fierce rhythms of the opening poem and chant, "Chalk it:" "Chalk it up to chance / to check points to chicken out / to chevrons to chaplains to corpses / chalk the shrewd comedians / chalk Bob Hope and charity." Enjoy the wit, 1920's slang and atmosphere, and formal intricacy of "Noc-turnes (from early films):" "a corpse and several cops/cops and a single corpse / murdered by a christmas gun / complete with gleaming cartridges / for a dollar-forty-nine /at Abraham and Straus . . . / went BLAT, went BLAT-BLAT-BLAT / to register: / one tear in the tux; two holes in the brow; / but never the name of Chuck-the-Avenger, who / always arranged to be known as Pat / when he carried a heater, when he carried a gat."

Encounter McCaffery in his final visionary madness and moral anguish:

“and I believed
whatever weapon pierced my flesh
bullet, shrapnel, sword, or bayonet, renewed
the sacred penetrations that sanctify the world:
 Adam in Paradise
 Cain at the plow
 Mary and her Ghost
 The nails that pinioned Christ
But once in war I came to know
I was outranked by any child
great moonlight bombers slew.”

We are proud to be initiating the SUNY and St. Andrews cooperative publishing venture, “Visions and Prophecies” with this compelling poetic debut. It took a lifetime to write “*The Lives of a Shell-Shocked Chaplain*.” In it Staley brings his entire life to these prophetic poems.