

4-1-2020

The Bridwell Quill. Issues 18-20: Where's the Beef?

Anthony Elia

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.smu.edu/libraries_bridwell_publications

Recommended Citation

Elia, Anthony, "The Bridwell Quill. Issues 18-20: Where's the Beef?" (2020). *Bridwell Library Publications*. 32.

https://scholar.smu.edu/libraries_bridwell_publications/32

This document is brought to you for free and open access by the Bridwell Library at SMU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bridwell Library Publications by an authorized administrator of SMU Scholar. For more information, please visit <http://digitalrepository.smu.edu>.

The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



FEBRUARY–APRIL 2020

Issue 18-20: *Where's the Beef?*

My maternal grandfather liked chocolate, Beethoven, raw steak, and enigmas—probably in that order. Chocolate is obvious. Beethoven is the crank of musical cranks and induces a good occasional brooding for those who need it. Raw steak confounds me, but I've been known to change, especially now that I've spent some time among Brazilians who've taught me the health benefits of undercooked beef. And then enigmas: a good question. My grandfather would toss out *enigmatic* phrases at any moment, like when I would snag the latest copy of a *National Review* from his piles of *National Geographic* and *Foreign Affairs* and he would quip with a famous line from Dante—*Lasciate ogni Speranza, voi ch'entrata...*! (“Abandon ye all hope who enter here!”). All I wanted was to find yet another incomprehensible word that William F. Buckley Jr. jammed into his fustian prose with which to impress my school friends and instead I'd get full-on medieval Tuscan insults!

The enigmas of the present are somewhat perplexing though. Almost nobody would have imagined that we'd end up in the current condition we are in—reflecting on the meaning of our whole planet and the spaces we inhabit. For many of us, we cannot imagine returning to that same world we left just a few months ago, a place where we wandered fearlessly in town squares, shopping malls, and office spaces without masks, anti-bacterial wipes, or hand sanitizers. This whole enterprise has made us reflect upon not just our spaces, but our bodies, and our humanity and survival as a species. All of the language that we use is focused on concerns of *proximity* and how distances between or among people will ultimately affect us. We are gauging our interactions by the spaces we occupy, whether it be quarantining in our homes or apartments or measuring imprecisely the safe lengths by which we can pass other people on the street. The mysteries of this epidemic are in the invisible, in what we *don't see* yet must *believe*. Indeed, I was aware of these impending concerns early in March, when I had already spent months preparing for a trip to Kazan, Russia, where I was

going to be lecturing and participating in a series of seminars. The trip was cancelled within twenty-four hours of my departure. I was agitated by the cancellations at the time, but now realize the importance of what was happening. If I had been allowed to go, I still might have been in the central Volga basin, stranded indefinitely! In 1890, the famed Russian writer Anton Chekov documented his exile to the farthest reaches of Imperial Russia—passing east of the place I was headed—in a work titled *Sakhalin Island*. The namesake of the book is a remote and cold landmass in the north Pacific full of bears and pine trees and, in the nineteenth century, Czarist internment camps. The gelid climes that Chekov describes a hundred and thirty years ago evoke yet another idea of space. Chekov's tales of drunken Siberians, sudden ice flows, and frostbitten digits project stark images of quarantine and isolation. Yes, we are caught in our own little personal spaces, but not in such extremes as Sakhalin. We are neither at the far reaches of the Russian empire, nor untouchable on the French occupied Kerguelen Islands off of Antarctica—the *most extreme* social distance on earth from Dallas (yes, I looked it up!)—which only has three or four flights a year, some fifty resident scientists, and charges \$18,000 to live in a one-room cabin, while you wait for that triannual plane ride.

In rural Sardinia there is a chapel in the town of Nuoro called *Chiesa della Madonna della Solitudine* (often translated simply as “The Church of Solitude”), the final resting place



of Grazia Deledda (left), one of Italy's greatest writers. It is a quiet place on a hill, mostly hidden from tourists. On a literary pilgrimage many years ago, I found the mostly empty town with bright buildings painted with lines from Deledda's novels. I also found the chapel, and yet still got lost. Isolation is often described as being imposed or by accident, while solitude is a choice. So it's not often that you experience both at once as I did in Nuoro. These ideas of *isolation* and

solitude contain the sensibility of the human person being separated from others, kept in a place where all we have is ourselves and our thoughts—as delightful or troubling as that may be! Sitting at home, doing work at a distance, and thinking about how we associate and interact with both our spaces and our colleagues is constant. When I have traveled to places like rural Sardinia or the sparsely populated shores of the Gaspé Peninsula in Northeast Quebec, there is a sense of *being* in those places, but also the essence of the journey to and from those places—each of which crafts the meaning of the experience *in toto*. Our journeys to these natural spaces in contrast with the returns to our work spaces are events of importance that demand our reflection. When Chekov was sent out to Sakhalin Island, the journey out and back was equally evocative and revealing, in a way that our own journeys have been rocky, uncertain, tumultuous, and hopeful. And we often remember the journey more than the destination—as cliché as that may sound. Chekov’s transports may have been more intense than our returning safely to the library and wearing masks, yet our perturbations remain. The descriptions of incessant floods, horses and carriages tumbling into mud flats and swollen rivers, and transport vehicles of iron and wood twisting into mangled mechanical knots is a whole other level of insanity. Not to mention that Chekov even describes the detail of workmen’s breath smelling like putrid onions in the shadows of lanterns, while they fixed his transport carriage somewhere outside of Kozul’ka in Siberia. He knew something was there, he smelled it and felt it, but he did not always *see it*. In some ways, the journey of Chekov more than a century ago is like our own journeys back and forth—things break, are complicated, and sometimes stink, but we keep going forward to a new day, a new world, a new life.

Amid all of this, something got me thinking about the phrase “going back to normal.” Like the world around us, each event, discovery, or nuance changes the way we see and experience the world. This is ever so true in music—we can never go back to “normal,” whatever that may be, just like thinking about the world after people heard Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*, Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*, John Cage’s *4 minutes, 33 seconds*, or Shostakovich’s *Leningrad Symphony*. These things change us and permanently reorient our understanding of sound and space. My grandfather

often spoke of a defining moment in his youth (probably the 1940s), when he went to hear the *Ode to Joy* performed by the New York Philharmonic and Scola Cantorum, after which he floated dozens of blocks through Manhattan entranced—and which the famed music critic Olin Downes declared “the greatest performance in history,”—or so my enigmatic raconteur granddad often claimed. Music can be hypnotic, but also peculiar and abstract, while still life-altering. When someone recently introduced me to Alois Hába (1893–1973), the Czech composer who is best known as a major proponent of *microtonal* music, I was both ecstatic and confused. Much like the situation we are in now, which has forced us to experience the world in a new way, Hába composed and advocated a new way of writing music by employing the *microtonal* increments within traditional tones we hear in music. By breaking apart what we imagined were the elements of musical structure, like tonal quarks and neutrinos, Hába’s music literally made sound bend in our ears—we hear music, but we experience something that was not quite what we *used to hear*. The idea of spaces and proximity *in music* and *in tones* is also part of this change: who would have imagined that such tones *not* social distancing, but actually getting *closer* might create a new world order in music—and very likely our own lives now?

Spaces and proximities are integral parts of our world, especially as we are more aware of them today. And as I like to teach history to my children, these themes became more prominent in how I thought about instruction—beyond the vulgar *Zoomtopias* in which we’re corralled. I usually tell stories to my children about past events and then take them on road trips to visit historical sites. Not long ago I saw the movie *Parkland* about the JFK assassination in Dallas. When my children came to town, I decided to teach them about this and the



people involved. *Let’s take the kids to some cemeteries to see famous dead people!* Is that a common parental activity? Ignoring the peculiarity of taking your kids to see Lee Harvey Oswald’s headstone

in suburban Handley, the activity of having young people engage with physical space to remember history (just like coming to a special collections library to touch and interact with artifacts) is central

to the educational process. Admittedly, I too find myself enthralled by the mysteries of time and space, like comparing my foot with the hundred-million-year-old theropod tracks in Glen Rose, TX, imprinted in a remote geological age in the same physical space as I was standing—like Matthew McConaughey in *Interstellar*. Why do some people



desire to see these spaces, remnants, tracks, or be near famous landmarks, celebrities, or objects? Why do we respond to those experiences

in such a way that is almost mystical and power giving? Why should it matter if we were in the presence of John Wilkes Booth's pistol that shot Lincoln? Why do we find the manuscript letters of Luther or Wesley so laden with a magnetism that borders on the magical and powerful? Neil Armstrong even said he was more excited to stand where Jesus stood in Jerusalem than stepping on the moon! That connection to history, to those people who made and *were* history is part of how we negotiate the spaces of history and of the present. We cannot be near historical personages in real life, but by attending their graves, being close to that tomb, their bodies, we are somehow bending time, breaking the bonds of that continuum, and placing ourselves next to the remains of that personage, thereby empowering our own existence with some contrived imaginings of proximal meaning and power. Is that not strange? As if the visitation of Oswald's grave means anything—the cemetery was empty, there were no visitors. But when we now go to these places, we may think a torrent of thoughts about “what ifs” or “how this affected world history.” Perhaps the moment most shocking for me over the years was visiting the



Truman Presidential Library in Independence, MO, and walking through the empty museum, the exhibits dimly lit, and coming to a small display behind a heavy pane of glass: it was a mid-size envelope or paper with some pencil scratches on it. But these seemingly meaningless words were the orders from Truman releasing the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In any other case, the graphite residue of a pencil upon an envelope might mean “take out the garbage” or “don't forget to get milk,” but here it would eventuate in the burning and murderous destruction of nearly a quarter

million people. What may be the real question is: why do some people react and conjure up these associations when in the presence of objects or people or tombs, while others do not? An enigma? And sometimes, it is in those little moments of seemingly ordinary simplicity and nihilism that you wonder how someone or something without much attention makes you think about the present world—like the graves of accidental assassination documentarian Abraham Zapruder or Henry Manasco Wade, the prosecutor of Jack Ruby and later District Attorney of Dallas County representing the state in *Roe v. Wade*.

And then there's Nick Beef. *Where's the beef?*—you ask. Or rather, *who's the Beef?* We've been talking all along about space, proximity, and even enigmas.



A couple decades ago a curious tomb stone turned up beside Oswald's grave, which read simply “Nick Beef.”

The genealogists and historians shook their collective seborrhic heads, while either giggling or blushing over the famed assassin's new neighbor. It turns out that the *New York Times* uncovered the identity of the owner as Patric Abedin, a New York “nonperforming performance artist” who had purchased the plot when he was eighteen many years before. To this end, though, the oddities of space, proximity, and enigmas are played out even in death—real or pretended.

My beef and Beethoven loving grandfather is buried among kinsfolk in a family plot in NY. My Italian grandfather is in a mausoleum with his family in Paterson, NJ—both in eternal solitude, but not alone and not forgotten. Our earthbound attachments to the land and each other are proximal necessities in life and after. Perhaps the pandemic is not so much an enigma as an opportunity to recognize what we already have, and a reminder that we need to cherish it.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

Anthony J. Elia, Director and J.S. Bridwell Foundation
Endowed Librarian
aelia@smu.edu

