

Recall This Book 55
May '21
David Ferry, Roger Reeves, and the Underworld (EF)

Elizabeth Ferry:

From Brandeis University, welcome to *Recall This Book*, right now being recorded in Lexington, Massachusetts, it's my very great pleasure to introduce you to a conversation with two poets. The poet David Ferry and the poet Roger Reeves. David Ferry, who is a relation of mine, I'll start out by saying, is the Sophie Chantal Hart Emeritus Professor at Wellesley College. He is translator of numerous things, including the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Odes of Horace*, *The Epistles* and *Georgics* of Virgil and Vigil's *Aeneid*, as well as several of his own books, including *Bewilderment*, which won the National Book Award for Poetry in 2012.

Roger Reeves earned his PhD from the University of Texas at Austin, where he's currently a professor and is the author of *King Me* by Copper Canyon Press from 2013, winner of the Larry Levis Reading Prize, the PEN/Oakland-Josephine Miles Literary Award and numerous other awards. His second book, *Collection of Poetry*, is forthcoming. Roger, forthcoming or already arrived?

Roger Reeves:

March 2022.

Elizabeth Ferry:

All right, will be in the world as of March 2022 from WW Norton. This episode really comes out of a series of conversations that these two poets have been having and that I've had the good fortune to have with them, on the topic of the underworld and the underworld in their poetry. What we'd like to do today is hear from their poetry and then a little bit about some of the lines, some of the presences of underworlds within the poems themselves and we'll see where that takes us. Okay. Without further ado, we're going to start with David Ferry. He's going to read a selection from Book Six of the *Aeneid*.

David Ferry:

Thanks, Elizabeth and hi Roger.

Roger Reeves:

Hey David.

David Ferry:

I want to start with a passage from Virgil's Aeneid. It's a passage where Aeneas is entering the underworld seeking the shade of his father, Anchises, in order to have Anchises tell him what is going to happen in the adventure and mission of founding Rome to replace the Troy they have lost. He's entering the underworld with his Sibyl and he's scared to death about what's going to happen. I think that fright is in all the measures of what I'm just going to read.

David Ferry:

You Gods who rule the kingdoms of the spirits
You tongueless shades, you Phlegethon and Chaos!
You silent, spreading regions of the dark!
By the favor of the gods may I, unharmed,
Be teller of the things that I have heard,
And what is wrapped in the darkness here below!

The verse is iambic pentameter with many anapestic variations.

In the lonely gloom of night, two figures walk
Through the empty rooms of Dis's empty kingdom
As if upon a path beneath the uncertain
Meager light of moon, almost not there.
At a time when Jupiter has hidden the sky
In darkness and black night has taken away
From all things all the colors that they had.
Just at the innermost end of the entrance court,
Just at the place where Orcus' jaws are open,
there's Grief. There's unrelenting Cares, where they
Have placed their beds. There's ashen faced Disease,
Sad Age, there's Fear, there's Hunger, begetter of crime.
There's Death and his brother Sleep and guilty Desires.

On the other side of the open door,
There's War, dealer of death. And there the iron
Cells of the furies and insane Discord with
bloody ribbons in her snaky hair.
In the midst, there is an enormous shadowy elm tree,
Spreading its arms and false dreams, clinging under
Every single leaf of its foliage,
So men say, and also many forms
Of monstrous creatures, centaurs stabled at
The thresholds there, and biform Scyllas and
Briareus, hundred-handed, fifty-headed
And the striding, hissing beast of Learnean and,
The Chimaera breathing fire, and Harpies, Gorgons
And he, the three bodied shade, Aeneas trembling,
Terrified at the sight, unsheathes his sword
And turns its edge against them and he would,
Had not his sage companion told him that these
Were bodiless, empty images of life,
Have slashed at the fleeing shadows with his sword.

David Ferry:

In a way, it's like in these lines a description of just nighttime. Jupiter hides. For us at night time the underworld itself seeps into our dreams and is there. He's descending into hell, yes, literally and rightly, but also he's descending in the way that nighttime comes and he encounters the whole conditions of vulnerable human life at that age, grief, cares, hunger, destitution, the failures of individuals and of societies, and so on. As I hear it in the lines, "There is grief." Then it says, as if they're looking at another place, "There is unrelenting cares where they have placed their beds. There is ashen faced disease." With each there, it's them experiencing yet another image and so on too. Virgil's opportunity to talk about Aeneas' knowledge that the culture that he's trying to replace with the culture of Rome, of the culture that followed Troy, was a place full of cares, full of death, full of age, full of desires. Rome is going to be

like that too. It makes the desire to found the great culture of Rome know about itself already and its vulnerability.

Roger Reeves:

It's so interesting because when I hear this particular moment in this section, in section six, I can't help think about how the Lyric tradition comes out of this moment, this sort of moment with that deictic there. That sort of deictic-ness. I'm thinking about Jonathan Culler's Theory of the Lyric and other things I've read about how the epic, there are moments that we can think about the lyric tradition. The epic was the, that was like legit poetry. Right? The lyric was kind of like this bastard, to the side form that wasn't really a form yet. To me, there's this moment where that listing that occurs, that cataloging, the cataloging feels for me to be quite, it sort of feels like a departure. Even though it's describing what they're seeing, it sort of takes over and almost itself becomes-

Elizabeth Ferry:

You mean the cataloging of grief and hunger and-

Roger Reeves:

Disease. It almost overwhelms the poem. It becomes this thing. It's a list, it's part of what they're seeing but it also has this sort of, something else is occurring, and the type of singing of that type of grief that to me feels very lyric, feels like, *oh this is the harbinger to the lyric* and to the possibility of the lyric utterance.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Okay. Well the, "There's grief and there's this" it's very theatrical, right? It's kind of like setting the stage.

Roger Reeves:

Well it reminds me of Dante in that moment in *The Inferno*. I see this, it's funny because I see it in Dante, I see it in Virgil and I even see it in hip-hop, which is this moment where the speaker, the poet is like, okay I'm a poet, I'm letting you all know, and I've been called to do this great thing. I've been called to reveal. I think about when Dante, he sees the poets, the dead poets, and they're like "You are one like us, come over here." And he's like *oh, I'm a great poet*. He in that moment sort of puts himself in the realm of the great poets. So

there's a way in which it's like in hip-hop when rappers will be like, "I'm the best." Right?

Elizabeth Ferry:

I think that genealogy, Roger, you're tracing is great though with the kind of ... It's almost like I've got the mic now, right?

Roger Reeves:

Exactly, exactly.

Elizabeth Ferry:

So dad, would you like to now read "Resemblance"?

David Ferry:

Sure. Let me go to it. This is a poem of mine from my book *Bewilderment*. Wait a minute. The poem is called "Resemblance." It comes from a really uncanny experience I had with my family. My father's family had a burial plot in a cemetery in West Orange, New Jersey. I grew up in Maplewood nearby. I went down after the death of my parents to take their ashes down to this graveyard and give them an honorable burial there. Then I badly needed to go get lunch and get a drink and recover from that sad experience. I went into a restaurant nearby on Central Avenue and there, I swear to god, there sitting at a table with some other figures was what looked identically like my father. He was sitting with some other people. People remark on this kind of experience of resemblance, especially when you're thinking of your dead beloveds or your dead relatives and so on.

It was my father in that restaurant
on Central Avenue in Orange, New Jersey
where I stopped for lunch and a drink, after coming away
from visiting, after many years had passed,
the place to which I'd brought my father's ashes
and the ashes of my mother, and where my father's
grandparents, parents, brothers had been buried,
and others of the family, all together.

The atmosphere was smoky and
there was a vague struggling transaction going on between
the bright daylight of the busy street outside,
and the somewhat dirty light of the unwashed ceiling globes
of the restaurant I was in.

He was having lunch. I couldn't see what he was having
but he seemed to be eating, maybe without
noticing whatever it was he may have been eating.

He seemed to be listening to a conversation
with two or three others—Shades of the Dead,
come back from where they were to when they went away?
Or maybe those others weren't speaking at all? Maybe
it was a dumb show, put on for my benefit?

It was the eerie persistence of his not
seeming to notice that I was there
watching him from my table across the room.

It was also the sense of his being included
in the conversation around him and yet not.

Though this in life had been familiar to me,
no great change from what had been there before,
even in my sense that I, across the room,
was excluded, which went along with my sense of him
when he was alive, that he often didn't feel
included in the scene and talk around him
and his isolation itself excluded others.

Where were we in that restaurant that day?

Had I gone down into the world of the dead?

Were those other people really Shades of the Dead?

We expect that if they came back they would come back

to impart some knowledge of what it was they had learned.
Or if this was indeed, Down There, then they
down there would reveal to us who visit them
in a purified language some truth in our condition
of being alive we are unable to know.
Their tongues are ashes when they'd speak to us.

Unable to know is a condition I've lived in
all my life. A poverty of imagination
about the life of another human being.
This is, I think, the case with everyone.
Is it because there's a silence that we
are, all of us, *forbidden to cross*, not only
the silence that divides the dead from the living
but, antecedent to that, is it the silence
there is between the living and the living,
unable to reach across that silence through
the baffling light there always is between us?
Among the living, the body can do so sometimes,
but the mind, constricted, is inhibited by ancestral
knowledge of final separation holds back,
unable to complete what it wanted to say.

What is your name that I can call you by?

Virgil said when Eurydice died again,
“there was still so much to say” that had not been said
even before her first death from which he had vainly
attempted with his singing, to rescue her.

That is what, in the other passage, I think from the Aeneid, that he goes down
into the underworld to find out what it's like down there. It's not a special

instance. He finds the conditions of a culture, that age, fear, war, wasting away, and so on. This is also the great accomplishment of the culture he's endeavoring to preserve in the *Aeneid* and going to Rome.

Roger Reeves:

And there's a corollary in your poem in that same way in that you have the dead come back and you say "We expect that if they came back, they would come back to impart some knowledge of what it was they had learned." Right? But they're just eating. I find this such a defamiliarization of the way we think of the dead entering in a poem. They're just eating. They're just doing some regular, banal ... They don't do that. In some ways, they are telling us something in that moment.

David Ferry:

They are, they may be, but it may just be there we are. We are what we used to be. The line that in some ways I find central to the poem is "Their tongues are ashes when they speak to us." That, in a way, goes back to another poem I translated, a poem of Catullus when he went to visit the grave of his brother in Asia Minor and he says "Seeking to speak to ashes that cannot speak."

Roger Reeves:

It's also interesting to trace the tongues from the first poem, because the shades were tongueless in the first poem, right? The gods. But these, the dead here, the departed here, they do have, but their tongues are ashes. So we're always in the state of moving towards sort of an absented tongue, an absented speech. So it's so interesting because I was like mapping the tongues and mapping sort of what's happening in terms of speech. It's only really the living that speak in that way.

Elizabeth Ferry:

That actually connects to, I mean I can't figure out why I find the words *Virgil said* so important. But I think, especially when it's *Virgil said* there was still so much to say. So Virgil said that things could not be said. But I think the *Aeneid* gets at this question of, you talked, Dad, about our culture, our human culture, and its, you may find this too strong, but its inadequacy and yet its kind of maybe heroism or just sort of the saying, the poetry as kind of doing this, planting this little flag or doing what it can against this inadequacy or to kind of mark this inadequacy.

David Ferry:

Virgil said, there was a great moment in the poem, because he dared to go down to the underworld and what he found down there was us with our limitations. It's not just Virgil that said this but the prior poet, the father of all poets in some ways, Orpheus and Eurydice.

Roger Reeves:

Yeah that makes me want to read this poem that I sent to you for today. I feel like I should read this poem right now. In this poem, I'm imagining two sort of mythological worlds, the world of Grendel and Beowulf and the world of Orpheus and Eurydice, that they're living, there's this sort of space in which they're all together.

So this is called

Grendel's Mother

[poem not transcribed]

Roger Reeves:

David Ferry:

That's so beautiful. That's so beautiful. Of course it's partly because it's memorializing a terrible event. It's talking about it without any self-pride in a sense that so often poems that memorialize great events that in some way or another the culture is trying to learn to be sharing in some way or another.

Roger Reeves:

Yeah.

David Ferry:

But that, that ending of the poem, that ceremonious ending of the poem is so earned by it. Thank you. I just-

Roger Reeves:

Yeah I was thinking, I've been really thinking about Grendel a lot and Beowulf, partly because I read ... Toni Morrison has a great essay on how evil has a

mother but never has a father. I kept thinking about obviously George Floyd and for some reason I just feel, I'll say, I just think that Grendel was probably an African. I think Grendel, his mother, were probably Africans that lived in Scandinavia on the outside of some village in real life. This is how they were remembered. There's a way in which Grendel's mother is my mother. I think that she is the Black mother and she doesn't get to speak. I was thinking about George Floyd calling his mother from heaven down. To me, it's all the afterlife. I think that last line is really wild because that last line is of course a mother would want everything, any types of hunger, but not the hunger of heaven, which is the hunger of death. Right? Like I want my child to have everything but that.

We always think of heaven as solace but I'm sure mothers want their children to live. I just think of Grendel's mother as like, yeah, I think of her a lot. I think of my mother a lot.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Because you have another poem about Grendel that also seems to be about what you're saying, about this kind of ... That Grendel is called to the hall of the, I won't have the language right, but he's called to the hall where these great songs, heroic songs and epics, he's kind of called. He has to be the monster.

Roger Reeves:

Yes.

Elizabeth Ferry:

He can't, there's no way that he can be in the story without being ... When I was hearing that last line, I wondered whether, that she doesn't want heaven because heaven is the heaven of these song cycles.

Roger Reeves:

Yeah. One of the things that our conversations have taught me, David, is how ancient our struggles are. Our hungers, our desires. They're in every epic. They're in every ... There's a way in which, for me, you helped me, in our conversations touch that part of me that I think is hard to touch in our current moment, partly because I feel like we're in such a solipsistic era that we're not ... When Trump was elected, I turned back actually to people like Manning Marable and W.E.B. DuBois and I started reading Gilgamesh again, particularly

during the pandemic, because I felt like that sort of ... Gilgamesh's inability to deal with Enkidu's death and how much that grief was just so overwhelming was what I was feeling and I know what Americans were feeling during COVID. These deaths are overwhelming. It was only when I would read, I would read it every morning for that first month of the pandemic, I just kept reading Gilgamesh and your translation because there was a way in which Gilgamesh was us, was me. He's just overwhelmed. One of the things that I think your poems do so well is they're simultaneously present and contemporary and then they're also ancient. They're being both. They're in joint with the time and out of joint with it.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah. Sort of it's like ancient but also right there.

Roger Reeves:

This conversation is also making me think of your Arthur Gold poems, those conversations that are happening in the Arthur Gold poems in *Bewilderment*. Particularly, it's the one, I think it's called ... "Arthur Gold, Rome December 1973."

Actually what's funny is I was reading that last night in preparation for our discussion and it sent me into like a little poem. It sent me into thinking about repetition and all the different ways that repetition is participating in departure, in arrival. I wonder if you might talk a little bit about that. I wrote something I might share with you. I'm not sure. It's so new and fresh, the paint is super wet on it. But I wrote it thinking about our conversation today and your work in that. That also is in the underworld.

David Ferry:

The ways that those figures, his wife, mother, her mother, her aunt, whatever, are like three Fates. When they get on the bus and they don't know what's going to happen. They don't know Arthur had a daughter, a wonderful person, who was eight years old when he died. He was only 53 years old. But he sees the children outside the bus lights and it's if they're in the lights of the bus, it's as if they were having a party full of balloons and lights, like a celebration, a simple celebration of life, in a sense, that isn't taking place that way. It's their own fate. So when that heaven sent bus driver, when they're stepping out of the darkness in some place where they don't know where they were going but they step out and he says "The only thing that's necessary is corragio."

Roger Reeves:

Yep. I'll read my wet paint. I'm not quite sure what the title will be. It might be the first line and it borrows heavily from the Arthur Gold poem I was just referring to as well as from the *Aeneid* Book Six. It's playing into that register.

[poem not transcribed]

David Ferry:

I wish I had that poem to put besides Arthur's poem. Thank you so much.

Roger Reeves:

Thank you David. David, your work is just ... I told my partner that I could respond to your poems for a lifetime. I could respond to you, I could spend the rest of my life just reading your poems and responding, just thinking alongside you. It's one of those things that I would have never imagined that I would find a friend like you and that your poems would open the world to me and open me to my own poems. **Thank you for thinking of me without knowing you were thinking of me.**

David Ferry:

Well mutual what you're saying. Oh gosh. That word, destination, like a bus's destination. Where's it going? It's such a big word.

Roger Reeves:

Also I realize that maybe the thing is that the dead aren't asking us to think about destination as much as they're asking us to think that it's not over. I was thinking about how my father, that death may be the sign of needing to be born, that spirit needs to be born again. The death is the future. The death is calling to the future as opposed to it stopping the present. That's why I say or my father, the child begging to be born. Maybe his death is him begging to be born. What happens if that is the actual thing, that that's actually what death is. So that's why it's a celebration. I think about in the Black church I grew up in it was supposed to be a celebration, but it was a celebration because you were going to go to heaven. What if it's a celebration because it's actually allowing for this other thing to occur that is just as big. Yeah, I don't know, I've just been thinking about that. I think because my father died right as my first child was born, it just seemed like such an interesting moment, an exchange. Yeah. I don't know. Just thinking.

But you make me think these things.

I have these thoughts because of your poems. It's just one of those things where it's a door. Your poems are such great doors and they open and allow people so much possibility because you offer up, like we can do all of this in a poem. I love the Arthur Gold poems because they're literary criticism with line break. That takes it back to the idea that everything can happen in poetic verse. There's nothing that sits outside the poem.

David Ferry:

God bless.

Elizabeth Ferry:

So well, I just want to thank you both for being here today and for having this conversation and letting me have it with you and listening to it, listening to your words.

Roger Reeves:

Thank you, thank you so much David. Thank you Elizabeth.