

Almost Heaven is Purgatory

by [Carl Nelson](#) (January 2023)



Self-Portrait, Hyman Bloom, 1948

When I read *How Does a Poem Mean?* by Ciardi and Williams years ago, they discussed a poem's "sympathetic contract." That is, how much emotional credibility does the work display? The authors asked the reader to compare two war poems: Yeats' (who never saw combat) poem, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" with Francis Ledwidge's (who died in the trenches of WW1), "Soliloquy." Both concern the glory of battle. Looking at them now, they both seem equally credible, though the latter possibly pulls harder for meaning. Yeats' poem shares meaning from the first line and so needn't strain. Yeats also pens the much better and more memorable lines. However, what most piqued my interest was how little one's apparent experience is needed to form a "sympathetic contract." I am still quite taken with "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," while the other poem barely registers in memory. But then, I've never been in battle, either.

I've been considering lately, that we find ourselves in a cosmos in which bad ideas and false reporting seemingly possess an endless shelf life. Where do they go to die? Apparently nowhere. Zombie narratives continue. Un-dead economic theories still terrorize. Apparently they are immortal just like Twinkies or the Devil himself. Fresh revisions of failed notions regenerate seemingly spontaneously. And a willful, seemingly eternal, suspension of disbelief would seem to run rampant within some neurotic cultural circles. Every year it's Halloween all over again.

I know when a person thinks with their imagination, it's with a very wide credulity mesh. For example, a Facebook friend recently lamented that "some portion of humanity accepts this crap as absolutely representative of reality." He was

referring to [this](#) advertisement he posted from the side of a bottle of mineral water:

After sourcing this incredibly precious electrolyte mineral water from our protected aquifer in remote Northern Queensland, it is put through a three stage kinetic and electromagnetic frequency process and infused between 430-770THz the Frequency of a RAINBOW and chakra tones ranging from 200 to 900 Hz. This trade secret process enlivens the individual molecules, producing a remarkable soft and ultra-hydrating taste, feel and effect. As a result, we believe we have created the world first bottle of RAINBOW, and the most dynamic beverage in the Universe. Raise Your Vibration. FindMyFrequency. Com. Bottled for Fifth Element Beverages Pty Ltd.

My wife just checked their website and they are currently sold out of this water. Still, when in stock, an 80 case pallet of this water is \$3,168.00, presently priced at 45% off at \$1,746.00.

What produces credibility?

The psychological theory of Depressive Realism, states that depressed subjects who feel less control of their lives also report the most accurate views of reality.

It's also interesting that while my wife and I watch a movie about an enormous squid which rises from a Canadian lake to crush fishing boats from a local village—we are stopped short by some small inauthentic thing the sheriff said or did. Our “willful suspension of disbelief” is engaged and disengaged as easily as a clutch, it would seem.

And then there is a belief that humans seek truth, so that if

they continually believe something against all evidence, that in some manner it must be true; that from some perspective this factual apparition is offering something credible which we need to acknowledge.

But there are also measured results which demonstrate that if you repeat something long enough to enough people, they will accept it as true. In other words, the 'truth' may be nothing more than something which has been beaten into our heads. For an entertaining example which is also quite creepy, go [here](#).

Or there is the somewhat related belief that whatever is immortal must carry some truth; that there is a general Darwinian, "Survival of the Fittest," law which covers the truth for both myth and scientific consensus.

The truth can reveal in many ways from a "burning bush" to a physicist's theory, e.g. $E=mc^2$. For example, there is the truth of fact and the truth of metaphor. There is the fact and there is the metaphorical meaning: "the intention to communicate something that is not directly expressed." (Google definition) For example, there is blue the color and there is blue (melancholy) the meaning. And there is also Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) insisting that she is "morally" right, even if her facts are not. And the truth often swims around in this confusion like a fish, especially in the federal swamp.

It might also be true that a priority of humans is to evade the truth, when it aids them, and words are their favorite tool. Or, it could be that the Devil makes better use of the profane than our Lord—the profane being the Devil's home turf and playground. Or it could be that if something is truly evil, it is somehow immortal, with a core that glows with power somewhat like we would propose for the truth. Or, perhaps like a reversible glove, these are two sides of a single truth/lie paradigm. And each individual must choose, according to taste and/or necessity—something like the

Smothers Brothers song, *Hiawatha*:

*Now the fur upon the rabbit has the warm-side, fur-side
inside
and to keep the cold side outside he put the skin-side
inside outside...*

It could just be that we chose to wear either our evil, or the truth, inside or outside.

Gosh, many things could be true.

Purgatory

This is where we labor, till it's decided.
If you were okay with long lines
down here on earth, you'll probably
do well up there in Purgatory.
Don't look at your phone.
Don't get angry or impatient. Think the DMV.
These things can take generations, literally.

So you might take time
to chat up that pretty girl,
or assume an investment. Really,
some of the people here
were pretty good at turning a buck.
Do your research. Pick up a few pointers.
Find out how much you can take with you
and how to launder it.

The human spirit is clever.
And some of the best are here,
playing both sides. Still working the con.
God works with what he has.

It's the only way some are ever going to generate insight.
The Lord goes to war with the army He's got.

So perhaps we'll never exactly nail the truth, but what produces credibility?

It's a pleasure of mine, when I like a song greatly, to look up and read a bit about the songwriter and perhaps, if I'm lucky, a bit about how the song came to be. What is most astonishing is how often the song has been given birth under much more ordinary stars than would seem possible. For example, a favorite song of mine about despair and bad luck, "The Dealer," as sung most movingly by Judy Collins, was written by a struggling Canadian entertainer known by his local TV moniker as the "Singing Dentist" (because of his day job).

It's generally taken as true that when we are debating credibility, at least in artistic circles, that we are also discussing authenticity. And when we argue authenticity, it also needs bear some attributes of the singular experience.

The beautiful country song, "When You Say Nothing At All," was all in a day's work by two professional Nashville songwriters, Paul Overstreet and Don Schlitz. They placed it on the pile before locking up and going home, thinking it was pretty good. A fairly mundane birth for a tune which has been covered by some of Country's best. How singular is an experience punched out by long time journeymen in a day's work?

Then, just this past evening, I settled in to watch a documentary of Creedence Clearwater Revival, the 70s rock band. I was a bit unsettled to find that this was a band formed by school chums from El Cerrito, California in 1959. And further to discover that John Fogerty, the songwriter, had never been to the deep South, the land in which his hit songs from their first hit album, *Bayou Country*, were set. This

beautiful romance of the South evoked the heat, the sluggish drifting and the catfish struggling to a gritty rock and roll beat. We had all just watched the same movies and read the same books is what all that amounted to, it seems.

Then of course there is the tale of the two Jewish songwriters, Robert Wells and Mel Torme, who were sitting around a Las Vegas pool on a sweltering summer's day and penned "The Christmas Song": (The Las Vegas pool part may be apocryphal.)

*Chestnuts roasting on an open fire
Jack Frost nipping at your nose...*

Many West Virginians, across the river from where I live, bemoan their Hillbilly characterization, but "Almost Heaven," taken from the John Denver song, "Take Me Home Country Roads," is pushing hard as the state slogan and has a lot of the Chamber of Commerce chortling along too. To quote their governor, Jim Justice: "I've said it over and over, any frog that's not proud of its own pond isn't much of a frog."

"Take Me Home Country Roads," is the defacto worldwide anthem of West Virginia now, supplanting Hazel Dickens' traditional state anthem, "West Virginia My Home." In fact, the Germans were recently seen on TV giddily singing the de novo anthem on a recently televised football match between the Seahawks and the Buccaneers in Munich, Germany.

Still, the songwriter (Bill Danoff, et al), had never been to West Virginia when he wrote the song, the Shenandoah River is largely in Virginia, and the words West Virginia were initially intended to be Massachusetts, but for this tune the words "West Virginia" sung better.

It's interesting with the history of many songs' birth, that it is often the outsider who captures what the inhabitant struggles to articulate. In this regard I'm reminded of the story of when Bob Dylan visited Woody Guthrie, "That's it. That's the sound (I was after)," Woody exclaimed from his hospital bed after hearing Dylan play. How curious that an ambitious Jewish college dropout from Minnesota would find the sound that a Dustbowl refugee from Oklahoma had been seeking, and then update it into a broadside even more compelling.

*...and Keats's odes are all rooted in the soil of experience,
even if some of the dirt is pretense or invention.
-critic/poet William Logan*

"Ideas come and go, stories stay." the author Nassim Nicholas Taleb further notes. But it would appear, indeed, that the truth and credibility have always flitted in and about them like a fish. So that, nowadays, perhaps...

Most Likely, It Doesn't Matter

*We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed,
our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.
-Edward Bernays in "Propaganda"*

I'd thought I had opinions,
but on reflection,
what I'd thought were opinions
were mostly reactions, fulminations.
Like when someone pokes you with a stick
or hits you on the head with a sharp rock—
that is, posits a provocation—
and you think, "Sh*t!", or get fed up.

Blind reactions are the modern coin of the realm,
generated like bitcoins by admen, terrorists, political
operatives,
all stripes of schemers, and the media in full view.
A zealot can be delivered with certitude
a reasonable man cannot.
My irrational reaction is political currency,
a sort of gold standard redeemable most anywhere
and at all times.

In court, a piece of evidence can be ruled inadmissible
and so prejudicial as to be excluded.
In the media however,
“if it bleeds, it leads.”
So less of import is reported more and more,
I’d guess, because it doesn’t matter.

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Carl Nelson has just finished a book of memoirs and poetry celebrating his current area of Appalachia titled Become Remarkable. To see this and more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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