

Two Poems



St. Elizabeth's Allison Porch, 1910

by [Peter Dreyer](#) (March 2022)

The Hopping of the Twig: An Occurrence at St. Elizabeth's Hospital

"Of all the calamities to which humanity is subject, none is so dreadful as insanity."

—Dorothea Dix

Some play golf and some do not!

Oh, how various is the scene

Allowed to Man for his demesne,

That each, no matter what his blows,

May find a poultice for his woes;

—Samuel Hoffenstein

“Ez for Pres!”—Anon. (ca. 1963)

Dilemmas feed the soul, trick cyclists say,

and here in St. Elizabeth’s Chestnut Ward,

by whose maddening walls I, Ez, am now confined,

he lay awake that April 4th—an Easter Sunday,

while Woodrow went out golfing in the snow,

with black golf balls, as he always did when

snow was on the ground. *Lusitania*’s death dive

was just a month or so away—and all that followed that,

as night does day.

There Fiddle sat, then, musing on Jim Cathcart,

who’d fancied himself a reincarnated Bonaparte,

but with no proof, whilst *he*, needless to say,
had *excellent* evidence: the Rolex watch that lay
in the Super's safe—it had been taken away “for
safekeeping” when the police plucked him,
dazed as he was that day, off of G Street (SW)
late in the second Cleveland administration,
and they didn't believe him true president
of the USA—for Grover was, of course, you know,
hip-hip hooray!

Jim Cathcart (that horse's ass), who'd been his fast
friend long years past, having hopped the twig,
he'd followed suit, golf-balling the great conundrum:
how to leave off living, when life fondly looms so big?
That's my own dilemma too, but I'll to Italy first
and hail the last *Fascisti* the straight-armed Roman way
(dismaying thus, of course, Bob Frost, Tom Eliot
. . . and earnest Hemingway).[\[1\]](#)

So was he crazy, thinking himself replaced
by that supposed “double,” imposed on him (by whom?),
and he, the *real Fiddle*, retrograded a hundred years or so
(no,

more, a hundred and twenty-two, I guess, to be precise)
to rot in a blasted age when he had not yet been born?
If so, and I he, I'd be in no doubt who to blame:
the Usurers, whose proper name I daren't utter
—not that I'm afraid of them, but all the same
I'd hate to be locked up till the next damn flutter!
And, yes, sure, Fiddle was mad, a loony nutter,
out of his gourd and at long odds with time,
just as am I, Ezra, ΠΟΙΗΤΗΣ, at loftiest odds
with mine.

Note: On Easter Sunday 1915, a patient who had been found wandering confused and penniless on Capitol Hill in 1896, during the second administration of President Grover Cleveland, died at St. Elizabeth's Hospital after swallowing a golf ball, which choked him (although a ball of the smaller British type). When committed to St. Elizabeth's, it seems, he could not recall his own name, and the admitting physician, a man evidently of a humorous turn of mind, wrote in the register (which I have before me now), "John D. Fiddle(sticks), won't say name." Subsequently, this patient came to be called "old Fiddle" by the hospital residents and staff. Fiddle suffered from the delusion that he was not "himself," but had been replaced by a "body double," and always insisted that he was the rightful president of the United States. His sole friend, one James J. Cathcart, likewise a sufferer from *dementia praecox* (one of several in the asylum who claimed to be Napoleon Bonaparte), had died of acute inanition the day before, perhaps in some degree

motivating Fiddle's (apparent) suicide. Fiddle's sole possession when picked up on G Street (SW) was a wristwatch, inscribed "Rolex"—then still a virtually unknown make, it seems. During his time in St. Elizabeth's, this was kept in my office safe, but it was mislaid after his death, the clerk told me, who also remarked, in a macabre note, that at the time of Fiddle's death, President Woodrow Wilson was playing a round of golf in snow that had fallen in an unexpected storm with black golf balls, as the president habitually did when there was snow on the ground.—Ambrose G. Bierce, Superintendent, St. Elizabeth's Government Hospital for the Insane, Alabama Avenue, Washington, D.C., November 15, 1921.

[\[1\]](#) From 1945 to 1958, Ezra Pound, regarded as one of America's greatest poets, but a rabid antisemite, who called Hitler a saint like Jean d'Arc and broadcast Fascist propaganda from Mussolini's Italy during World War II, was confined in St. Elizabeths (they'd dropped the apostrophe) Hospital, feigning insanity to avoid the penalty for treason. Pound was apparently held in the same ward (and perhaps even in the same bed) that John D. Fiddle had occupied years before. Pound almost immediately returned to Italy after being let go and gave the Fascist salute on arrival there. Frost, Eliot, and Hemingway were among those who had campaigned for his release from the asylum.—Ed.

Time Heals All—or Maybe Not?

But *did* Time condone Paul Claudel[\[1\]](#)

and pardon Kipling's imperial spell?

—Anon. (W. H. Auden?), "On Second Thoughts"[\[2\]](#)

Time that's careless down the ages
of cunning crazies' cut-throat rages
won't pardon Hitler, that we hope,
or slavers with their human cages.

But will she pardon Bernard Shaw
for lying about the Holodomor[\[3\]](#)?
Will she pardon the Woodrow who
coddled the Klan but bitter knew?
Will she pardon Roosevelt
for stringing us on Unca's belt?[\[4\]](#)
Will she pardon J.-P. Sartre
for punting Lutetia under Mao's cart?
Will she pardon Harry S Truman
for A-bombing his fellow humans?
Will she pardon JFK (some things he did were *not* OK)?
Will she pardon George W. Bush
for giving Armageddon so big a boost?
Will she pardon John D. Fiddle
for being such a @#\$&! clueless riddle?

&c., &c.

And *might* she pardon *us* today
for ravaging Gaia in our play?

TIME: You're kidding me, that's plain to see!

Pardoning's never been my thing

–I'm only here to hold the ring.

You'll have to speak to SPACE about
whether there's room to let them out.

[1] On Claudel, see
www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/aug/14/theatre.art.

[2] An apocryphal poem, possibly written as a joke by Alan Ansen, who was Auden's secretary in the late 1940s. On the original source, from which Auden later deleted the lines about Time "pardoning "Claudel and Kipling "for writing well," see
<https://newrepublic.com/article/113208/wh-auden-poems-september-1-1939-and-memory-wb-years>.

[3] Famine in 1932–33 engineered by Stalin that killed millions of Ukrainians.

[4] And Churchill belongs here too along with FDR: see *Stalin's War* by Sean McMeekin (New York: Basic Books, 2021),
<https://amp.theguardian.com/books/2021/apr/06/stalins-war-by-sean-mcmeekin-review-a-revisionist-take-on-the-second-world->

[war](#).

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