

# BEATING THE ODDS IN BIG SUR

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

*The Territory around Us:  
Collected Literary and Political Journalism, 1982–2015*

By Robert J. Begiebing

Troy, NY: The Troy Bookmakers, 2015

223 pp.

Trade paperback (ISBN 978-1-61468-280-6): USD \$15.00

ePub edition (ISBN 978-1-61468-284-4): USD \$9.99

Kindle edition: USD \$9.99

ROBERT J. BEGIEBING, IN THE PREFACE TO HIS NEW BOOK, *The Territory around Us: Collected Literary and Political Journalism, 1982–2015*, candidly talks about his long career as a writer and the peculiar restrictions that a profession, a family life, and daily obligations impose upon the craft. Academic writing and the necessity of attaining job security at first superseded his ambition to write fiction and to produce commentary on current literary and political trends. While writing profiles of authors for such newspapers as *The New Hampshire Times* and *The Maine Times*, Begiebing became inspired by stories of persistence and dedication, hard work and focus, and eventually began dedicating his time to producing fiction. Begiebing, over the past three decades or so, has written a trilogy of captivating novels dealing with historical New England and a few intrepid female characters often faced with off-kilter events and unpredictable associations. *The Turner Erotica* (2013), his most recent novel exploring similarly-skewed landscape of occurrences and characters, transforms real-life events surrounding J. M. W. Turner, the remarkable nineteenth-century painter, into a speculative wonder. Even his memoir, *A Berkshire Boyhood: Confessions and Reflections of a Baby-Boomer* (2014), uses the narrative foundations of fiction to create not only a rumi-

nation on lost childhood but also a critique of just how modern society's perceived need for safety and comfort is leading us all astray. Literature, his lifelong vocation, gives form to his memories: "Wordsworth became the presiding spirit of my efforts to recapture a lost landscape and childhood," Begiebing writes in the Preface to *Territory*. "D. H. Lawrence became the presiding spirit of my efforts to understand how family relations shaped me" (iii).

Begiebing's fiction and memoir certainly provide insight into his primary concerns as an author and, more important, as a member of the human community, but his new book of essays gives us a more direct expression of his most personal attitudes and concerns. Political essays, the shortest section of the volume, reveal Begiebing's dedication to preserving the environment, his reaction against commercial culture, and generally his spirit of concerned individualism. He encourages a reevaluation of the foundation of conservatism, maintaining that the modern political movement using that name has distorted the tradition. In "Thoreau Comes to the New Hampshire Primary," originally published in *The Portsmouth (NH) Sunday Herald* in 2004, Begiebing rejects "conservatives" who fight for expanding the power and influence of large corporations and fund military strength, with tax dollars, in the wasteful pursuit of voter appeal. "Our present-day models of conservatism," he writes, "are severely diminished and misleading: they give every appearance of being corrupted by wealth and power, of being mired in the 'sect and bigotry' of childish partisanship" (138). He laments the thoughtless exploitation of natural resources for the immediate gratification of the current generation, again supported by self-professed conservatives who conserve nothing of real value, and with the wrong-headed notion that technology will somehow, someday save a plundered planet.

One solution, the author suggests, is to call upon that fellow New Englander and activist Henry David Thoreau to provide a sensible perspective. Selected quotations from Thoreau, in italics, support the essay throughout and become nearly one with Begiebing's own voice. Offered as an alternative, a modest proposal of Swiftian heft, is Begiebing's suggestion that Thoreau should be required reading for every citizen voting in the New Hampshire presidential primary, "a kind of poll tax before voting in their first-in-nation primary." After all, he writes, "Thoreau is one of those true conservatives who have explicitly addressed the properly restrained role of government as well as the dangers of mass culture and economic myopia" (138, 135).

In “By Their Expenditures Ye Shall Know Them,” originally a three-part series in *Art Times* in the late nineties, Begiebing continues his criticism of American politics by lamenting the conservative movement to defund the arts in favor of military build-up, a veiled attempt at censorship that provokes Begiebing’s most caustic tone. “This commentary,” he reflects in an introduction to the essay, “is as close as I ever came to outright Jeremiad, but I hope the reader can indulge an authorial excess in what felt like parlous times” (179). The book’s only illustration is appended to this commentary, a revealing graph showing 1998 government expenditures with over fifty percent of the budget allocated to military concerns. With such convincing evidence of fiscal malfeasance, and with corporations profiting disproportionately from such bad decisions, Begiebing marvels that few rational voices protest. “[H]ave we the public been so brain-washed by the powers that be and by television . . . that we can no longer make the distinction between free political speech and free commercial speech, between our right to think freely and to say what we believe and the commercial corporations’ right to smother us in their blandishments at every conceivable turn?” (191). Finally Begiebing turns to yet another literary figure for understanding: Ray Bradbury, whose 1953 novel *Fahrenheit 451*, a powerful speculation upon the suppression of arts and culture, is recommended as required reading before federal elections. And, significantly, Begiebing notes that Bradbury blamed the timid populace of his novel, and not a looming federal government, for allowing the atrophy of artistic and creative thought. Bradbury’s characters, and perhaps today’s society, live in “that novel’s exquisitely detailed totalitarian culture established upon fear, silence, scapegoating, violent entertainments, mindless consumption, frenetic television, interactive and ‘Walkman’ technologies, citizen acquiescence, and book-burning. Everybody’s wired. Nobody’s reading. Nobody’s thinking” (199). Begiebing’s readers today, about twenty years after publication of his essay and over sixty since Bradbury’s novel, may contemplate the phenomena of streaming media, shrinking libraries, virtual-reality headsets, binge-watching TV, and Pokémon Go as logical yet somehow perverse extensions of that trend.

Environmental concerns are at the forefront in both “Thinking like a Cancer,” originally published in shorter form by a Unitarian Universalist journal, and “Big Sur Days at the Headwaters Retreat,” a memoir recommending solitude and nature as agents renewing the creative spirit. The former essay examines the curious work of two researchers, Dr. John Mack and Donella

Meadows, who have identified consistency among the visions of environmental catastrophe reported by patients under psychological treatment. These visions involve reports of alien abduction and of dire environmental warnings from extraterrestrial beings. "The abductees' revelations are apocalyptic, biblical: images of volcanic eruption, towering and thundering surf, global warfare, toxic heavens, shifting plates, the 'Earth shuddering in anguish, crying, weeping at the stupidity of humans losing contact with the inner soul of their being.'" Mack, in particular, cites the causes of such psychological disturbance as corporate acquisitiveness, economic injustice, ethnonational violence, and, above all, an abject cultural irreverence for sustainability and the environment (147). Begiebing, responding to the unique interpretative power of these visions, sees the solution as a new perspective on commercialization and an emphasis on sustainability and self-examination, a "decommodification" of the world. "We have affirmed only the economics of exploding populations and of proliferating earth-waste," he writes, "of undifferentiated cells, of an entity that produces itself exponentially out of itself, or out of something driving it to so reproduce" (144). A cancer, no less, is consuming not only our world but the individual psyches of its citizens.

The journey to a secluded cabin in the Monterey peninsula, recounted in "Big Sur Days," emerges as Begiebing's personal way of celebrating nature and thus avoiding, if only for a while, the cancerous creep of destructive political actions. In the form of a journal or daybook, the author recounts tough hikes in the forest, conversations with his host, Robert Withrow, and the concerted effort he exerts on his writing. Begiebing not only gains a renewed commitment to his faltering novel but gains unique insight into the meaning of hard work. "At a certain point in such focused labor," he maintains, "you understand once again that the vital exercise of the imagination is one kind of exhalation that is its own excuse and reward, the proper function, the reason for being, of that mysterious organ of the mind" (167). Once again, Begiebing's admiration for creativity, and for the authors and poets he has studied throughout his academic career, infuses the essay.

If Begiebing sounds at times like Wordsworth or Thoreau laced, perhaps, with modern-day metaphysics, that's because this literary heritage so thoroughly influences his thought. Literary journalism, a significant portion of the volume, appears in a separate section apart from the political essays, but in fact a strong political undercurrent pervades even his examination of con-

temporary New England authors and poets. Begiebing's goal, explained in the collection's preface, is to offer readers "a view of transformative moments in the lives of American writers of real accomplishment, all nurtured in one way or another by their time living in New England" (iv). For many of these artists, such moments involve the preservation of natural resources and the maintenance of a healthy community apart from commercial concerns. In 1983's "Sydney Lea: Poet of Natural Facts and Signs," Begiebing identifies a major theme in Lea's work as "the poet's discoveries when he enters the ageless ceremonies and natural cycles of the hunt" (21). And "Beating the Odds with Merle Drown," also from 1983, reveals Drown as a novelist committed, if a bit cautiously, to pastoral village life. "If you grew up in a small town as I did," Drown says, "you have a kind of love-hate relationship with it. . . . I am interested in what happens to individuals within communities" (8). While not directly political in intent, the environmental and social concerns of these artists certainly supports Begiebing's preoccupation with the abuses of multinational corporations and the intrusion into personal life by media and technology.

Curiously, though, Begiebing's essays on the poets Wesley McNair, Baron Wormser, and Lea, along with novelist Drown and the feminist historian Laurel Ulrich, illuminate not so much the imagination and a devotion to things transcendental, but the practical concerns of dedication and downright onerous toil. "It's a hard thing to convince beginning writers that rejection is the norm," Begiebing quotes Lea at one point. "Even if you're good. And persistence is just as important as talent in getting going and getting self-respect, persistence in the sense that you stay at it every day, writing good or bad stuff, learning to do it by doing it" (14). Similarly, Drown's tenacity in maintaining a writing career while fulfilling his daily duties as a high school teacher has not gone unnoticed by other New England intellectuals. As author and journalist Burton Hersch observes, "I admire his energy, concentration, and skill. He has a good sense of what the struggle is, and the struggle makes him stronger" (11).

Begiebing, of course, learned that lesson in a cabin at Big Sur, but Lea's perspective serves as apt reinforcement. Drown, author of *Ploughing up a Snake* (1982), understands the importance of persistence: "I figured out that if I was going to write a novel, I was going to have to sit down every day for a few hours and write" (3).

Ulrich's studies of colonial New England women, examined in "Labors of Their Lives," reveal a comparable spirit of persistence and dedication. Instead of crafting novels and poetry, however, these pioneering women were industrious in response to the necessities of daily existence, demonstrating a unique "frontier heroism" that elevated them above perceived gender roles. "The modern reader is struck above all by the labor of these lives," Begiebing observes. "Pampered, narcissistic products of a global consumer culture, most of us today, men and women, would probably be incapable of accomplishing what these women did in adversity" (27).

Modern readers, too, may wonder what these women could have accomplished artistically given that innate motivation and singular resolve, just as one might wonder how several millennia of great literature was produced without that recent conduit to creative thought, the university writing program. While providing no answer to either impossible question, Begiebing nonetheless surveys the genuine work of important New England poets by contrasting it with the formulaic output generally promoted by institutional writing education. In "To See Clearly as Long as We're Here," a short review of poems by Maine resident Baron Wormser, Begiebing is candid about the current state of poetic expression. "The predictable stuff churning out of the hundreds of writing programs and from program alumni," he writes, ". . . is certainly clever enough. Beyond the smooth yet endless bossa nova, however, the poetry is perhaps remarkable for nothing so much as its lack of depth and memorability" (45). Quoting extensive selections of Wormser's poetry, Begiebing convincingly contrasts a revealing poetry of the soul with our current-day cookie-cutter spasms in meter. Wormser has an innate ability, he says, "to express insights perfectly and memorably" through his poetry, offering readers "little gifts of revelatory precision, of 'the sad wealth inside each moment'" (49). Similar criticism of formulaic expression informs Begiebing's essay on poet Wesley McNair, and again the author celebrates the true poet's courage in developing a voice unaligned with conventional expectations. In "The Territory around Us: Wesley McNair," the essay providing the title for this collection, Begiebing notes that the poet has the singular, genuine, and un-tutored will to write about anything at all, including "television, country people and landscapes, American history, art and artists, comics, gas stations, dumps, fat people, beggars, you name it." He quotes McNair's thoughts on the inappropriateness of poetic deception, the humdrum act of mimicking the public's preconception of the artist. "I re-

ally don't like playing the poet,' McNair says. 'Poetry today has a certain manner to it, kind of ghostly, disembodied. That comes from too much translation, probably, so you get that voice that doesn't seem to belong to the speaker at all'" (38).

Essays about the work of Norman Mailer constitute a separate section of Begiebing's literary journalism, and the development of that unique artistic voice and a courageous, individualistic identity informed with political purpose is the focus of these important articles. Begiebing, a preeminent Mailer scholar and the author of two scholarly books focusing in whole or in part on the author's work, examines important themes in Mailer's fiction and creative nonfiction that understandably align with Begiebing's own sensibilities. Most of these essays were originally published in *The Mailer Review*, so readers of that journal already will be familiar with Begiebing's contribution to Mailer scholarship. "Artistic Maturity in Norman Mailer's Recent Nonfiction," however, originally appeared in a 1982 number of *USA Today*, and despite Begiebing's reflections, in the article preface, about his own authorial immaturity, he offers some perceptive observations on the development of Mailer's voice in *The Executioner's Song* (1979) and *Of Women and Their Elegance* (1980). While Mailer may have problems in these books, isolating his own voice from that of his subjects, Begiebing affirms the committed power of Mailer's intent. "He is still writing books that restore spiritual significance to humanity and nature," Begiebing writes, "that examine the violently conflicting elements of personality, and that search for heroes and heroines of our time" (98).

Begiebing seems to value, in Mailer, the same artistic principles and individual courage he championed in the New England artists covered earlier in the collection. In "Twelfth Round," an interview with Mailer first published in *Harvard Magazine* in 1983, Begiebing prefaces the conversation using the cancer motif, attributed to Mailer, that Begiebing later would use to describe an eventual environmental collapse. Mailer, he maintains, is "nothing if not a disturber of bland uniformity, convention, and complacency—of what he sees as the 'cancer,' the totalitarianism, the spiritual death of our times" (55). That same interview finds Mailer describing *Ancient Evenings* (1983) as "a study of identity," one of Begiebing's main themes in his examination of artistic individuality, and the imagination as "a vast area where military campaigns go on." One might hope, presumably along with Begiebing, that this military, and these campaigns, were funded equally with

the Pentagon's forty-four billion dollar Defense Logistics Agency or the trillion-and-a-half dollar F-35 project.

Mailer's political conscience comes to the forefront in "Castle Mailer," Begiebing's analysis of Mailer's final work of fiction, first appearing in the 2007 issue of *The Mailer Review*. *The Castle in the Forrest* (2007) recounts the remarkable assentation of Adolph Hitler to the dubious position of megalomaniac-in-chief, a conflicted man who genuinely believed he could save the world through a Fascist construct of suppression, destruction, and institutionalized slaughter. In Mailer's flash-bomb imaginative interpretation of historical events, Hitler is coached by one of Satan's lesser demons, D.T., who offers a benign, first-person perspective on his efforts. Begiebing's own campaign against the misdirection of government agencies and the destructive complacency of the masses is reinforced by Mailer's whirlwind narrative, and it is easy to understand why Begiebing has been drawn to Mailer's work throughout the decades. The novel's metaphysical context and emphasis on psychological aberration, contrasted with the mundane details of daily life and political intrigue, align well with Begiebing's interest in the environmentally-catastrophic stories of alien abductees, the importance of art and imagination to human happiness, and the individual's search for identity in a culture seemingly directed by collective corporate interest.

In his review of *Mind of an Outlaw* (2014), a collection of Mailer essays edited by Phillip Sipiora, Begiebing remarks upon the unique insight that the essay form gives us into Mailer's ideas and outlook. "Mailer offers insights on topics of the moment that seem often, if oddly, both timely and timeless. That is, they carry both popular and historical interest; they have potential to stand the test of time that other more commonly acceptable insights expressed in our mass media by commentators inhaling heavily off the zeitgeist do not" (118). Begiebing's own literary and political essays, some of Reagan-era vintage, offer the same access to his most passionate ideals and maintain their significance and relevance even now, in an era of social media charms and big-business spells. Like Merle Drown, Begiebing has overcome the impediments that daily life presents to an author's ambitions, and the hard work and inspiration of that Big Sur retreat so many years ago ultimately led to this volume. The author's long association with Mailer and his works, too, has paid off handsomely, in inspiration, in commitment, and in dedication to the human experience on our planet.