"With My Mind Set on Freedom"

The Life and Works of John Beecher

By

Foster Dickson

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DEDICATION

There's altogether too much thinking and theorizing and criticizing in the world. I'm burning to do – to think and act for myself – to set out on the tremendous task of writing for myself. I wish all the philosophy and sociology and pedagogy could be blown to the moon. One good, live man walking around on two feet is worth a whole philosophical library . . .

— John Beecher, in a letter to his father, May 25, 1927 (aged 23).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

INTRODUCTION

John Beecher was a poet of the people in form, content, audience, and lifestyle, and this fact of the man and his work led to a decline in status after his death in 1980. Beecher's carefully crafted verse often employed a common diction and narrative style that any literate person could read and understand. His subject matter often included the plight of the poor, deplorable episodes of injustice, and events he witnessed personally as a conscientious social protestor, a sociologist, and a journalist. As would be easily inferred from these facts, Beecher's audience was more popular than critical, more working-class than upper crust; he more often received reviews in general readership magazines or newspapers than in literary and scholarly journals. To a great extent during his life, but definitely since his death, those scholars, editors, publishers, and reference book writers in the literary establishment have let John Beecher fade into obscurity with little fanfare. This loss is a tragedy for American literature and a disgrace to the canon of American poetry.

In March 2007, while already working on this thesis, I attended the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) conference in Atlanta. Among the numerous panel discussions and forums held during the three-day gathering of mostly university-employed creative writing professionals, one panel was "Forgotten Southern Poets," which listed John Beecher in the description. Admittedly, I was curious about who would discuss Beecher, since I believed that

I was almost the only person doing any work on Beecher's legacy (other than editor Steven Ford Brown), having interviewed the poet's fourth wife and widow, Barbara, in 2005 and having contacted numerous people who knew him. When I arrived early to the panel, I was anxious and nervous. I received the handouts about the discussion . . . and John Beecher was not listed on the program. I waited for the talk to begin. It did, and a succession of speakers discussed a variety of poets, including Jim Wayne Miller, but no one discussed John Beecher. During the panel, no one even explained why Beecher was in the description but not discussed. Maybe Beecher truly has been "forgotten."

The lesson of that anecdote is how literary gatekeepers choose whose work survives and whose does not. Some well-meaning person put John Beecher on the agenda for that conference, but for some reason a presentation about his work never occurred. Today, John Beecher is largely neglected. He does not appear in most major literary reference works. Though his poems were included often in poetry anthologies during the 1970s, Beecher's poems rarely appear in current textbooks or anthologies. As such, his poetry is seldom taught in high school or college American literature courses. Major non-profit foundations that support poetry as an art form – The Academy of American Poets and the Poetry Foundation, among them – neglect the man and his work entirely. Publishing houses that had issued his works had put all of them out of print, until Alabama-based NewSouth Books published <u>One More River to Cross</u>, a volume of selected poems by Beecher, in 2003, almost three decades after the publication of his <u>Collected Poems</u> in 1974. If literary professionals do not bring the work to the

reading public, certain writers disappear from the public consciousness and become "forgotten" or "lost." This should never have happened to John Beecher, a man whose verse described the painful and trying years of the Great Depression, the battles of the labor movements, and the ugliness of racial violence; a man whose poetry volume And I Will Be Heard was reviewed favorably in Time magazine in 1940, a man who did not stop writing and publishing poetry even while blacklisted in the 1950s, a man who contributed to The Nation, The New Republic, and the New York Post, and a man whose incredible energy resulted in an admirable body of work in not only poetry, but also in sociology, journalism, printing, and teaching.

Though largely absent from reference collections, and only very briefly summarized when present there, John Beecher's biography is as vibrant and complex as the man himself. The two most substantial biographical works on John Beecher are: "A Sense of All This Land: John Beecher's Life and Poetry: An Overview," a master's thesis completed in 1979 at Hardin-Simmons University (Texas) by Elizabeth Murray Walker and Do What The Spirit Say Do, a doctoral dissertation completed in 1985 at the University of North Dakota by James Helten. Both works were completed and accepted by their respective universities, but neither work led to any book-length publication. (To my knowledge, only one journal article ever came from either of their works: Helten's "Bound Apprentice to a Stubborn Art," published in 1990 in Alabama English.) Walker's thesis may be the only lengthy scholarly work done on John Beecher during his lifetime; welcomed into his home, she conducted interviews with the Beechers, and was

given access to their ample personal archives. Her resulting thesis provides little more than "an overview" and accomplishes little in terms of literary criticism. A few years later, James Helten acknowledged in his 1985 work, which he began in 1982, that Beecher was a difficult subject because the literary world had not embraced the poet, therefore few formalized reference materials could be found. Helten's dissertation was a much more in-depth analysis of Beecher's poetry, chronologically analyzing his life and poetry, side by side. Helten's work has been preserved for distribution by UMI, while Walker's thesis remains in the special collections of Hardin-Simmons University.

Another difficulty in researching John Beecher's life is his personal papers. Through a series of personality conflicts and professional battles, his papers have been moved more than once and are now held in three different universities: the University of Illinois, the University of Texas, and the University of North Carolina. However, in 1973, the Microfilming Corporation of America produced The John Beecher Papers, 1899-1972, containing 14 reels of microfilm of his personal papers; one brochure boasts: "Almost every scrap of writing he's ever done." The Microfilming Corporation of America has gone out of business, leaving The John Beecher Papers held at a rare few libraries and no longer for sale.

Because there is no published biography of John Beecher, very little information about him in reference works, and no nearby archive of his personal papers, the biography I have presented here relies on the work of Helten and Walker, on an interview I conducted in 2005 with Barbara Beecher, and on

drawing conclusions from other information contained in a variety of sources, like newspaper articles. I did rely heavily on the works of Helten for the facts of Beecher's early life. I also relied on both works as bases for comparison for my judgments in piecing together bits of information. Biographical facts of his adulthood have also been put together largely through his highly autobiographical writings – Beecher began writing his autobiography, but did not complete it; it remains unpublished – through his journalism, which is of course dated and filed, and through news articles about him. Although this approach has presented unique challenges, it has been necessary, rather than relying solely on Beecher's own words.

As for John Beecher's poetry, it has survived through an eclectic network of supporters, admirers, and collectors. The emergence of Internet bookselling and auctions has made his work available again in a completely new way. Men who in their youth knew Beecher in Birmingham at the end of his life – Randall Williams, editor-in-chief of NewSouth Books, and poetry editor Steven Ford Brown – have worked to return Beecher's poetry to the reading public. (Currently, Brown is arranging a series of panel discussions about John Beecher and his great-aunt, Harriet Beecher Stowe, at various locations, including Montgomery, Birmingham, Boston, and Paris.) In other cases, the digital revolution in information technologies has brought small collections privately held in university libraries into the full view of the public. This thesis seeks to bring as much of this information as possible together and make a case for John Beecher's

rightful inclusion in twentieth-century American literary history and for his reintroduction to the people his poetry seeks as readers.

PART I: BIOGRAPHY

II: EARLY LIFE

John Henry Newman Beecher was born January 22, 1904, in New York City to Leonard Thurlow Beecher and his wife, Isabel (neé Garghill) Beecher. Leonard Beecher was a successful businessman in the iron and steel industry, and Isabel Beecher was a "strikingly beautiful" (Helten 14) college literature professor, lecturer and speaker. Named for John Henry Cardinal Newman, a Catholic cardinal and theologian who Leonard Beecher admired, John was an only child and as such had plenty of his parents' attention.

The Beecher family left New York City to move to Birmingham in 1906. Leonard Beecher's job with Tennessee Coal & Iron took him and his young family to the Southern boomtown. The industry in which his father worked and the place to which the family moved would play a significant role in the man and the writer that John Beecher would become.

Young John Beecher showed an early aptitude in the classroom, partially because of his father's regimented and disciplinary method of helping the boy with schoolwork. From this accelerated academic path, the boy learned to have a sturdy work ethic and never to quit a difficult task. John Beecher advanced through grades at an accelerated pace, and he graduated from high school at age fourteen.

After graduating from high school, John Beecher was left in a sort of educational limbo. He planned to attend Virginia Military Institute (VMI), a

choice he made based on his experiences in summer military camps, and this opportunity was afforded him through a personal, social connection of his parents. However, his age prevented him from going directly to VMI because cadets there must be at least seventeen years of age. While waiting to enter VMI, the fourteen-year-old briefly attended Notre Dame University (a special favor granted to his mother by a different Birmingham society acquaintance) then began working in the iron and steel works of Birmingham, Alabama. Despite his wealthy upbringing he did not take on a life of leisure for the next several years. During this period, John Beecher had experiences that changed his life. He burned his legs severely when the glass bottom fell out of a nitric acid container he was carrying, and, more importantly, he witnessed the harsh working conditions of the men for whom this was life-long work.

Through a personal connection of his parents, Beecher was admitted early to VMI at fifteen years old, as the youngest cadet ever. The teenager immediately despised the hazing that was inflicted on first-year cadets, and he did everything he could not to participate. Beecher quickly grew tired of the hazing and the environment at VMI. He completed his first year but did not want to return for a second.

When John Beecher returned for his second year at VMI, the school's administration had forbidden the hazing of younger cadets. However, Beecher's three new roommates continued hazing new recruits. He and his roommates were soon called before a disciplinary committee and kicked out of school, despite the fact that Beecher had not taken part in the hazing. This matter of Beecher's non-

participation was addressed, and he was reinstated. However, he was so unhappy at VMI that he ran away to New York City, planning to get a job and live there. When he was found by his parents, the teenager was so intent on not returning to VMI that he snuck away, bought sulfuric acid at a pharmacy, poured it on his feet, and put his shoes and socks on for the trip back. When he arrived at VMI, his feet were horribly burned, which left him in the infirmary for an extended period of time. Begrudgingly, his embarrassed mother Isabel accepted her son's will this time.

At this point in his life, Beecher was sixteen years old and working again in the steel mills. Regarding this period, James Helten wrote: "The early 1920s in the mills were a time of twelve-hour shifts, six days and seven nights turn and turn about. Worker safety, compensation for injuries, and retirement pensions were largely unheard of. Labor was drawn from the poor and uneducated classes of whites and blacks considered to be disposable human beings" (Helten 28-29). In this environment, Beecher supposedly wrote his first poem, quite spontaneously and with little fanfare. He wrote, in All Brave Sailors in a section headed "1920": "It was about three o'clock in the morning and I could have gone home and got some night-time sleep for a change. Instead I went into the mill office, grabbed a sheaf of yellow paper, and started to write. I didn't know what: there was just something that had to get said" (Helten 51-52).

The next several years saw Beecher in and out of college, studying and learning about a variety of subjects. In 1921, he attended Cornell University to study engineering, but while there he met and studied under writing professor

William Strunk, Jr., the now-famous co-author of the Elements of Style. Beecher also met Carl Sandburg while at Cornell and reportedly "received the encouragement of the established poet" (Helten 30). Beecher's primary interest was shifting from the steel industry to writing and literature. By 1923, he dropped out of Cornell rather than give up writing to focus on the career that his father expected him to undertake. He returned to Birmingham, and during the 1924-1925 school year, he attended correspondence classes through the University of Alabama.

In the summer of 1925, John Beecher and his mother both attended Middlebury College's School of English in Breadloaf, Vermont, where he fully engaged himself in studying writing and exploring the concept of being a poet. For Beecher, this was a seminal period in his development as a poet. He was actively thinking about what qualities make a good poet. He found a mentor in one professor, Sidney Cox, who helped him learn about writing and who even showed his poetry to Robert Frost, who reportedly was impressed. Most importantly, Beecher's first poem, "Big Boy," was accepted for publication in The Bookman; though Harriet Monroe, founder of Poetry, offered to publish the poem if Beecher revised it significantly, he refused. In his personal life, John Beecher also was wooing (through letters) the woman who would become his first wife, Virginia Donovan. It is here that James Helten closes his first chapter in Beecher's life, at a point when the young poet has assured himself of what he will do with his life: write poetry and fight against injustice.

What is important to remark upon at this time is the amount and level of training and experience that John Beecher had gained. Beecher had had the education that would help him understand both form and content in writing, literature, and particularly poetry. First, he had received top-notch literary training, from such teachers as Strunk and Cox, in *how* to write. He had worked with tight formal structures, as well. These facts show, as do his early poems, that he *understood* poetry, rhythm, form, narrative, and other literary techniques, and used them effectively. Second, poetry is about human experience, and John Beecher had experienced plenty: isolation, condemnation, a regimented military lifestyle, severe physical injuries, and hard physical labor. He had witnessed, as a result of that labor, how poor, working people lived and are treated. At twenty-one years of age in 1925, John Beecher had his base of literary knowledge, his poetic abilities recognized by established literary figures, and his subject matter well defined in personal experience.

Upon returning to Birmingham in August 1925, Beecher spent his time in four activities: working in the mills, working on his poetry, finishing a college degree, and seeing Virginia Donovan. Through a strange twist of fate, the young man had a painful experience at the mill, which oddly further helped him to develop as a poet. While carrying heavy beams with another man, Beecher tried to carry one by himself and dislocated his knee. He was sent to the mill's doctor, who did not know that the young man was Leonard Beecher's son, and the doctor sent him back to work. While continuing his work, Beecher's leg collapsed under him again, and he dropped the heavy beam on the injured leg. By the time he

walked home that night, his broken and dislocated leg was extremely swollen and obviously damaged. His injury taught him firsthand how injured workers are treated. His lengthy recovery period allowed him to focus on his poetry and his studies, rather than working in the mills, a privilege that he knew was not available to other workers. By taking the one course through correspondence that he lacked to having a degree, Beecher received an A.B. from the University of Alabama in January 1926. He was also "reserving one night a week for courting Virginia" (Helten 53). After spending intense energy on his poetry, and now having finished his undergraduate degree, he was encouraged by his mother to go to Harvard.

The next three years of John Beecher's life marked a difficult period in his development. In February 1926, John Beecher entered Harvard University for the spring semester, but he disliked it immensely. Beecher's disdain for Harvard came from his opinion that it was too competitive, rather than cooperative and supportive as he thought literary circles should be, and that the professors were only interested in bringing in students who would accept and emulate their professors' every word and idea. Ever the stubborn nonconformist, John Beecher could not accept such terms. During this year, Beecher also attempted writing fiction, at the urging of editor John Farrar (of Doran Publishing and The Bookman, which published "Big Boy") and because the young man saw that poetry could not provide the financial income that fiction could. He came home for the summer and married Virginia Donovan in the early fall, while his mother was away in Europe. He then returned to Harvard with his new wife for the fall

semester. By the end of 1926, his mentor Sidney Cox had helped him get a one-term teaching job at Dartmouth University, and Beecher accepted it, glad to leave Harvard behind. Beecher taught at Dartmouth during the spring semester of 1927 and spent a lot of time with Cox.

By the next fall, John Beecher and his new wife embarked on an extended trip to Europe, financed by his wealthy family. Seeing that their son, at twenty-three years old, was unhappy and floundering, Leonard and Isabel Beecher sent the young couple on a long honeymoon so John could get himself in order. This year-and-a-half long trip through England, France, and Italy was to serve as Beecher's literary inspiration period, a time in which he was expected to choose a European university to attend, to write and study poetry, and to work on worthwhile literary projects. The events of this period served to influence John Beecher's life in two meaningful ways. First, Beecher was unable to follow up "Big Boy" with subsequent publications, as he had expected he would. He had thought that his life as a poet was about to take off, which did not happen. During the trip, as his mother was submitting his poems on his behalf, he received a steady stream of rejections. Second, Beecher did not latch onto any specific European university, though he did take a course in French literature at the University of Poitiers and another in French civilization at the University of Paris. During the trip, Beecher composed a number of formal poems, including sonnets and ballads, but none of the poems received any acclaim or publication offers. As the excursion wound down, and Virginia became pregnant in the fall of 1928, John Beecher was returning to America with a different vision of himself. He

began to see himself as something of a failure, but more importantly as an outsider from the literary community. He accepted that his poetry likely would not gain him the positive attention from the literary establishment. And so he came home with a new understanding of himself and his work, after an extended literary apprenticeship to conventional and formal verse techniques and structures. Beecher recognized that, for him, seeking the favor of literary professionals was pointless for him. He wrote to his parents in September 1928: "No rebuffs are going to stop me, and if the world doesn't want it, I shall circulate manuscripts among my friends. Why I should be so hot to get approval of the world, I don't know . . . I shall cross poetry off my list as a means to earning money or to landing myself a place" (Helten 100).

Beecher returned from Europe with his new wife, worked again as a metallurgist and continued writing. After his efforts in Europe at writing traditional verse forms and even some children's poetry," Report to the Stockholders," a marked shift from his traditionally structured "Big Boy" and from his formal "European Poems," would be Beecher's next literary success. His retreat from formalized writing styles helped him return to common diction and working-class subjects. "Report to the Stockholders" broke Beecher's bad luck streak when it was published in New Masses in 1933, although the poem was compiled out of unused parts of other poems that were recombined into one (Helten 122-123). The New Masses was a Marxist magazine published during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and this placement also foreshadows Beecher's future as

a poet: nontraditional style, populist subjects, and appearances in non-literary politically leftist publications.

For the book Hard Times, Beecher told interviewer Studs Terkel: "In the fall of 1929, I left my job as a metallurgist on the open hearth to teach at the University of Wisconsin. For Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College [sic]" (Terkel 320). Meiklejohn was an academic administrator and advocate whose work centered on free speech issues. While there, Beecher was an instructor and graduate student with what appears to be a fair amount of responsibility. In the chapter "The Athens-America Curriculum," in his 1932 book, The Experimental College, Meiklejohn wrote:

> On April 27, each student is requested to report at the college office his choice of one of the following groups:
>
> I. Political and Economic Institutions (Mr. Koch)
>
> II. Art (Mr. Agard)
>
> III. Literature (Mr. Beecher)
>
> IV. Religion (Mr. Havighurst)
>
> V. Science (Mr Havighurst)
>
> VI. Philosophy (Mr. Powell) (Meiklejohn 81)

Working for a man such as Meiklejohn, who believed in the correlation between education, public morality, and action, seems an apt fit for John Beecher, who was in his mid- to late-twenties and searching for a new version of himself. Jim Helten assessed it this way: "Through his steel work and poetry composition he was discovering a suitable cause for protest, the plight of the common mill

worker. Under Meiklejohn he would discover within himself the impetus necessary to transform conviction into social action" (Helten 116).

III: A SHIFT IN FOCUS

After returning from what was supposed to be his literary apprenticeship in Europe, and after completing a master's degree in English and teaching in Wisconsin, John Beecher spent more than half of the 1930s working in the field of sociology: first as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina and then as a programs administrator for the federal government's relief programs all over the Southeast. The entry on Beecher in Auburn University's Internet database on Alabama literary subjects, "This Goodly Land," states the following:

> [Beecher] completed an MA in English at the University of Wisconsin in 1930, and, in 1933, began graduate studies in sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. From 1934 through 1942, Beecher worked for various New Deal government agencies.

Comparatively, Frank Adams' article, "A Political Poet," published in a 1981 issue of Southern Exposure, the magazine of the Institute for Southern Studies, which is located in North Carolina, explains the period this way:

> He [Beecher] left the mills to join Dr. Alexander Meiklejohn's famed, but short-lived, Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in Madison as an English instructor. He taught there four years, earned a master's degree and sharpened his inherent civil libertarian's

> instincts at the side of Meiklejohn, already a noted dissenter.
>
> Beecher landed in Chapel [H]ill next, helping Howard W. Odum at the University of North Carolina compile his influential Southern Regions of the United States. In 1934, Beecher was asked to study sharecroppers' organizations. (Adams)

These short versions of the events of the early 1930s in John Beecher's life encapsulate his work at the time. The fusion of literary writing with social justice subject matter, which he began with the poem "Big Boy," and which seems to have been derailed by the efforts to make him into a more traditional literary writer, worked its way back into his writing during the early 1930s. He was also teaching and studying English, which continued to hone his literary knowledge and skill, while shifting his focus to social justice by working with Meiklejohn in Wisconsin, then pursuing sociology and Southern studies in North Carolina.

Beecher said, in Studs Terkel's interview with him for Hard Times: "For eight years, starting in '34, I worked as a field administrator all over the South, with white and black, rural people, coal miners, steel workers, textile workers, a fertilizer plant people [sic], turpentine camp workers, and sharecroppers" (320). Later in the same passage, he continues, describing his work in the mid- and late-1930s:

> As an administrator, I worked with Rex Tugwell's rural resettlement programs. [...] Actually this program, of

> which I was a charter employee, wasn't as radical as I would have liked it to be.
>
> It was a stop-gap, dealing with rural problems. Grants-in-aid, to small farmers, so they could hold on and continue to produce crops. I managed a group of five of these communities.
>
> I switched to the migratory labor camps. I set one up in Florida for migratory farm workers, who at the time were poor blacks, displaced sharecroppers from Georgia and Alabama. Also displaced whites who had been, largely, packing-house workers. (321)

In a section "1934" within the chapter "Where I Belong" in All Brave Sailors, Beecher wrote about working as an administrator of relief programs in South Carolina, as well. He wrote, ironically, that his supervisor was glad he was from Alabama because people from Alabama knew "how to handle Negroes" (56). Of course, the administrators and the locals were displeased with Beecher's sympathy toward the black workers. He wrote, in these passages, that he was ordered at one point to withhold all relief to the black workers who were not picking strawberries fast enough; he refused to do that because he found that the workers were living in deplorable conditions. No matter where Beecher went, he threw caution to the wind and stood up for decent treatment of human beings.

In 1935, Beecher's "The Share-Cropper's Union in Alabama," a substantial and heavily researched work of sociological journalism, appeared in

Social Forces magazine, which was based at the University of North Carolina. The article, originally a 1934 "term paper [...] for Guy Johnson's course on the Negro" (Johnson 139) when Beecher was a "graduate student in sociology" (214), describes and analyzes bi-racial unionization efforts in rural eastern Alabama in 1931 and 1932. The result of the union's work there was a violent clash between black sharecroppers, who had grown tired of being mistreated, and local white law enforcement officials, who were upholding the cause of indignant white landowners that saw their white and black tenants working together to gain better conditions. Many of Beecher's sources listed in the article were communist publications like the Daily Worker and the American Negro, as well as daily newspapers like the Birmingham Age-Herald and the Birmingham Post. Beecher sums up his study of the clashes by charging the ridiculousness of sensational newspaper articles that ran at the time in the Birmingham Post claiming that the events foreshadowed a coming race war, and he ends the article by discussing the effects of the violence on the Share-Croppers' Union: overall membership was up, but there were still "over 70,000 unorganized Negro tenants, not to speak of nearly 90,000 white tenants in the state of Alabama alone" (Beecher, Social Forces 132). This story was, for Beecher, not only the subject of a sociological article, but it served as the basis for one of his more famous poems, "In Egypt Land."

Beecher also worked with Harold W. Odum on Southern Regions of the United States, a seminal work on the American South. In a 1955 article about Odum (who had died in 1954), Social Forces magazine explains:

> In Southern Regions of the United States, 1936, Odum achieved the synthesis of his mature thought in regional theory, Southern development, and a cultural-statistical approach to the analysis of regional divergence and national integration. For a work of such size and complexity the public's reception was little short of amazing. It became a basic book in courses and seminars, had an important impact on policy and thought, went through four printings and had books, commentaries, and pamphlets written about it [...] Odum's work went further than interpreting the South to the Nation and the Nation to the South. It pointed to one possible integration of social science; it projected trends of development for the South; and it cried aloud for implementation in social action and social planning. (Vance and Jocher 207)

Harold Odum played an important role in Beecher's consciousness, in the same way that Alexander Meiklejohn had. Odum's work was progressive and focused on action: he had founded both the sociological School of Public Welfare and the journal Social Forces at the University of North Carolina in the mid-1920s. Odum's work focused heavily on studying poor whites *and blacks* in the South and on using sociology to improve their lives. Beecher's contributions to the project were primarily in discussions of the Birmingham iron, steel, and coal industries (Odum 351, 627).

Beecher spent the late-1930s still working as a field administrator. He "served as state director for the Florida migratory camps back in 1939-1940" (Wesley 7). In a 1968 article in the Boca Raton News, he recalled his earlier work in Florida, where he was responsible for building the hospital for black people in the area and for giving a report on his work in Washington, D.C., in 1939, an experience that provided some material for the poem, "Here I Stand."

As the 1940s dawned, America emerged from the Depression, and John Beecher's work as a New Deal administrator was winding down. A new enemy had shown itself: fascism. In 1939, while Beecher was working in Florida, Hitler's German army had invaded Poland. America entered World War II in late 1941, and John Beecher began working for the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), a government agency created by Executive Order 8802 in 1941 to make sure that there were no discriminatory hiring practices (mainly against ethnic minorities) within companies that were producing goods for the war effort. Jim Helten wrote that Beecher worked for FEPC into 1943. However, the latest documentation that I found of his work with the FEPC is a report he turned in on March 7, 1942, which details widespread discriminatory hiring and training practices all over the South; a reference to the report appears in the endnotes of A Different Day: African-American Struggles For Justice in Rural Louisiana: 1900-1970. Beecher wrote about the FEPC (mainly about its failures) in an article, "8802 Blues," in the February 22, 1943 issue of the New Republic, which inclines me to believe that he had either already quit or was about to leave the job at that time.

The early 1940s also saw Beecher have some new successes as a poet. In 1940, New York-based publishing house Twice A Year Press published And I Will Be Heard: Two Talks to the American People. The book was reviewed favorably in Time magazine, which stated: "John Beecher, who last spring found himself so burned up about current doings, that he had to let off his steam in a free-verse pamphlet. [sic] Privately printed, not copyrighted, and with no rights reserved, it is written in the great American tradition of plain speech, is fittingly titled 'And I Will Be Heard'" ("Poetry"). The poetry in the volume is a historical narrative about Beecher's ancestry, followed by blasting indictments of major twentieth-century figures including Henry Ford, John Lewis, and Adolf Hitler. The next year, 1941, Twice A Year Press issued Here I Stand, a volume that contains only the fifteen-part title poem that dreamily narrates Beecher's difficulties while standing up for what he believes is right. It sold for $1.50 retail for one of 400 numbered copies, or $2.50 for one of 100 signed and numbered copies. The plain white cover with plain black sans-serif font boasts blurbs from Max Lerner, editor of The Nation and later New York Post columnist; Carl Carmer, author of Stars Fell on Alabama; and Louis Untermeyer, a notable writer and critic with leftist leanings.

As World War II raged on into 1943, Beecher left the FEPC and volunteered for the Navy's new branch, the Merchant Marines, and for the USS Booker T. Washington, the Navy's first ship with a fully integrated crew. He was thirty-eight years old and married with four children; there was probably no risk he was going to be drafted. One article from 1959 suggests that he found out

about the USS Booker T. Washington while he was working as a reporter for the New York Post after leaving the FEPC (Megargee); if this is correct, then he left the FEPC and volunteered for the Navy in 1943, with a brief stint at the Post in between.

Beecher wrote about his experiences in All Brave Sailors: The Story of the USS Booker T. Washington, published by L.B. Fischer in 1945. The memoir is as bold as John Beecher's other writings; the characters are archetypally larger than life, like the black Captain whose righteousness is unsurpassed and whose leadership is unquestioned. In the book, Beecher writes about giving a speech in 1943, when he read a poem entitled "After Eighty Years" on the eightieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, and "[i]t gives all the rest of the reasons which brought me up to the gangway of the SS Booker T. Washington a few months later" (58). The poem, which follows as the next chapter in the book, describes the hypocrisy in fighting a war against fascists while repressing the rights of working people who were building ships for that war effort. Beecher believed in the righteous causes of fighting the Nazis, of working on a ship with an integrated crew, and of defending the rights of working people.

By the end of World War II in 1945, Beecher's professional life was going fairly well, a far cry from the young man who was giving up on the writing life fifteen years before. (However, he was 41 years old and his marriage was on the rocks.) He was veteran who had also worked with New Deal programs. He had graduate-level education in English and sociology, and his list of publications was growing.

During the period after the war, from 1945-1948, Beecher led a tumultuous existence. On the positive side, All Brave Sailors was published in 1945, and Beecher went to work for the United Nations Relief and Resettlement Agency, helping displaced Europeans, work similar to his New Deal assignments in the South. On the not-so-positive side, he had an extramarital affair while working for the UN, and subsequently got a divorce from Virginia (and left his four children) to marry Lydia Robertson, the woman he had fallen in love with, in 1946. He became involved again in writing and journalism, working as an editor for The National Institute on Social Relations and also being commissioned to write a history of farm labor in Minnesota; unfortunately, the state's governor who commissioned him was unhappy with the result and did not accept the final product, which eventually became the book, Tomorrow Is A Day. Finally, in 1948, Illinois College awarded Beecher an honorary doctorate for his writing and sociology work, and soon after he was hired to teach at San Francisco State College (Helten 187-192).

The next stage in Beecher's life, at the end of the 1940s, was very significant. In 1949, the California state legislature passed the Levering Loyalty Act, requiring a sworn oath from all public employees that they had not taken part in any anti-government activities, i.e. communist, and that they would report anyone who had or still did. While teaching at San Francisco State, Beecher was required to sign such a loyalty oath, and he refused because he believed that his service to his country, in his social work and in the military, had proven his

loyalty. Beecher lost his job and was blacklisted. The California Supreme Court did not overturn the Levering Act and subsequent legislation until 1967.

IV: A HARD ROAD

For John Beecher, the 1950s were cruel and full of impact. He was blacklisted and fired from his teaching job. However, that circumstance led him to developments in his life as a poet and writer. Had Beecher not been blacklisted, he might not have become a printer, and also could not have re-entered American life during the pivotal 1960s as a mythic American hero, a Henry David Thoreau figure for a new era.

John Beecher had believed that his service to his country – as a relief programs administrator in the 1930s, as a veteran of World War II – was proof enough of his loyalty. However, his service to his country was not enough to save him from the consequences of refusing to sign a loyalty oath. Beecher tried to find work after being fired from San Francisco State, but he faced many closed doors, even from friends, who did not want the problems associated with hiring a blacklisted person.

During the early 1950s, Beecher suffered not only blacklisting but other personal problems, as well. He and his second wife Lydia divorced in 1951, and he quickly married one of his former students from San Francisco State College. The couple attempted expatriation, living in Mexico for a very short time, before returning to America. They divorced in 1953. Lucky for John Beecher, his family had money. His parents bought him a ranch in California, where Beecher

attempted farming and raising sheep and chickens. Despondent about the course of his life, Beecher even considered following his Catholic faith into a monastic life, but decided against it (Helten 195).

Never one to give up, Beecher also went on the offensive against the system that he saw as unjust. He had an article published in the June 30, 1951 issue of The Nation, entitled "California: There She Goes!" In it, he elaborates the rise of the loyalty oath legislation from a government report on "civil defense," as well as California's compliance with the federal government's will by creating real legislation out of a proposal. In the second part of the article, Beecher details the insidious nature of the California bill's vague wording, which could describe almost any action deemed unacceptable, including the faculty and student opposition to it at San Francisco State and other California colleges and universities. The article ends with Beecher's scathing foreshadowing that Americans must organize against this injustice, as the labor movement had, or else the country would spiral down into fascism, a heinous evil defeated in Europe only a few years earlier.

After a few tough years in California, attempting and failing at both ranching and marriage, John Beecher met Barbara Scholtz in San Francisco when the two lived in apartments with an adjoining bathroom. Born in 1925, Scholtz was thirty years old when she met John Beecher, who was then 51. By the time they met, John Beecher had been blacklisted for five years and had been married and divorced three times already. The couple met on July 16, 1955, and married exactly one month later, on August 16, in Carson City, Nevada.

With his new wife who was a painter and woodcut carver, John Beecher founded Ramparts Press. A 1962 article in American Book Collector tells a very short version of the press's story: "Ramparts Press had its origins in Oakland, California, in 1956; and over the years since, the Beechers have printed books in San Francisco, on a ranch in Sebastopol, California, and in Jerome, Arizona" (Weygand). That last move would be made in 1958.

In 1956, the Beechers' press (at this time based out of Oakland, California) published his poetry book, Land of the Free. (To put the work in historical terms, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was running full steam in 1956; the Civil Rights movement had begun.) In a review of the book in Phylon: Literature of Race and Culture, a journal based out of Atlanta University, Nina Champney Alba of Tuskegee Institute wrote that it was "a beautiful portfolio of poems, handsomely printed, exquisite in format. Beyond this, there is little beauty" (Champney 303). She goes on to comment on the cover image – "the United States in chains" – and make clear that while she agrees with Beecher's message entirely, "the recital of mere facts is not poetic" (304). Soon after, in early 1957, Phylon again addressed Land of the Free in an article titled: "A Long Hard Look at the Ghetto: A Critical Summary of Literature by and about Negroes in 1956." Critic John Lash was no kinder than Alba had been, writing that Beecher "carried to excess" the noble ideas of "racial protest," but "it [the book] has neither the essential virility nor the intellectual and imaginative power which probes beneath anger and sorrow" (Lash 20). Land of the Free appears never to have been reprinted and is not currently available, even through used and rare

booksellers, as many of his works are. Strangely, in the 1975 bibliographic reference work, Black American Writers, the entry on John Beecher (who was not black) only lists one book: Land of the Free. Published in the midst of Beecher's blacklisted years, it is not surprising that Alba found the poems to be simply a "bitter diatribe" (303) and that Lash saw it as a mere "statement of indignation" (20). One positive commentary about the book came from John W. Caughey, a noted historian fired from UCLA in 1950 for refusing to sign a loyalty oath, who praised the work's honesty in Frontier magazine.

John and Barbara Beecher moved to Arizona in 1958, bringing the press with them. The Verde Independent newspaper ran an article on July 31, 1958, entitled "Poet-Publisher Moves Press To Jerome." In the summer of 1959, Beecher gave a speech to Arizona librarians, referring to the "productions of Ramparts Press in Jerome" and saying, "My wife and I started printing more or less by accident in California three years ago, encouraged by some friends who, as the phrase goes, were 'fine printers'" ("An Arizona Printer Speaks Up"). Beecher said in the speech that he and Barbara moved to Jerome, Arizona, after seeing the area in 1957 while traveling from New York to San Francisco. About the press's output, he said, "So far we have attempted only poetry which we have printed in small, handset editions, illustrated with block prints executed mostly by my wife, and bound in soft covers" ("An Arizona Printer Speaks Up"). The Arizona Republic also ran a short feature on the Beechers and their press in February 1959 (Megargee).

As the 1950s ended and the 1960s began, John Beecher was living in Arizona, printing poems under the banners of Ramparts Press, publishing a quarterly literary magazine called Morning Star, and teaching English at Arizona State University (Joquel 3). Beecher wrote in "Poetry for Survival," his introduction to Collected Poems: "I got off the blacklist in only nine years" (Beecher, Collected Poems xvi). It is unclear how he got off of blacklisted status. At ASU, Beecher met activist John Salter, Jr. (later known as Hunter Bear and also as Hunter Gray), a student and union organizer who would become another of Beecher's most ardent long-term supporters; the poem "One More River to Cross" is dedicated to Salter. As a sad note to end the 1950s, Leonard T. Beecher, the poet's father, died in 1959 at the age of 92.

In the early 1960s, Beecher was staying busy. Ramparts Press issued a 400-copy run of In Egypt Land in 1960 and a 400-copy run of Phantom City, "a book of poems by Beecher about the old West," in 1961, and the press had a forthcoming 300-copy run of a poetry book called The Iron Years (Weygand). He took part in at least one San Francisco to Moscow Walk for Peace, a pacifist movement seeking multinational disarmament, in the early 1960s. (Two articles ran in 1961 – one in the Tempe Daily News in January, "ASU Prof Joins With Marchers," and another in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in March, "Pacifists Walk for Peace" – chronicling Beecher's participation that year, but a 1968 article in the Boca Raton News recalls the year as 1962 (Wesley 7).)

Around the same time, in 1962, Beecher sold a plot of land north of San Francisco to Lou Gottlieb, a member of the folk music group the Limeliters, and

Bud Reynolds for a commune they planned to create: "Bud and I [Lou] went up there, looked the place over, met the owner John Beecher and I said, 'This is it!' I had the cash and put a down payment on it right then and there. Beecher, a well-known poet, wanted out because he was in tough financial trouble" ("Chapter 23"). This story of the sale is verified by "John Beecher Sells to 'Limeliter' Gottlieb" in the Sebastopol Times newspaper on October 11, 1962. According to Barbara Beecher, John's son Leonard arranged the meeting and the deal.

In 1963, Beecher was leaving Arizona State and moving to California. A flyer promotes a May 18, 1963, reading by the "Distinguished Poet" at Arizona State, while another program from the fall of that year, a memorial to the four girls killed in Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in September, has him listed as "Poet-in-Residence, Santa Clara University." He was also about to go on to do some of his most famous writing, covering the Civil Rights movement. As the Civil Rights movement was heating up, Beecher had found his next cause, after being involved in labor struggles in the 1930s, the war against fascism in the 1940s, and the fight against McCarthyism in the 1950s. By the time Beecher headed to the South to write about the movement, some of the student sit-ins, the Freedom Riders' cross-country trek, and the bombings in Birmingham had already occurred.

The mid-1960s were a productive but difficult period for Beecher. Though he was basically free of his blacklisted status, his radical persona found him work but often caused him problems. The turbulence of the social upheaval suited his temperament, but those fighting the powers-that-be and standing up for the new

social movement were not left unscathed. Beecher was writing for newspapers and magazines, including the San Francisco Chronicle, The New Republic, and also Ramparts, for which he had been made an editor. The former two publications are still in print and have been continuously; the latter, Ramparts, a politically leftist, Catholic magazine with a strong national circulation, was published from 1962-1975. Beecher may have had connections to the magazine through the magazine's founder who had worked for the San Francisco Chronicle.

In a January 1966 letter to poet Thomas Merton, typed on Ramparts letterhead and addressed from New Orleans, Beecher describes his activities during the mid-1960s. He wrote: "The summer and fall of 1964, we spent in the South, making our headquarters here in New Orleans" (Beecher, letter to Thomas Merton). The summer of 1964 had been dubbed Freedom Summer, and many voter registration activities were going on, especially in Mississippi. Beecher filed at least nine articles about injustices in New Orleans for the San Francisco Chronicle from August to October 1964. During this period, he and Barbara also got to know the Jaffe family, the proprietors of the legendary French Quarter jazz club Preservation Hall and the subjects of "A Little Night Music," one of Beecher's articles in The Nation published in the October 26, 1964 issue. The article describes a situation in New Orleans where a party at a jazz club was raided and seventy-three people arrested on trumped up charges for the purpose of harassing those who were there.

On December 4, 1964, the small New Orleans newspaper, the Vieux Carré Courier, ran a front-page article about Beecher called "How to knock heads in

deep Delta country," which explains Beecher's angering of the local Catholic church with an article he wrote and published in Ramparts called "Magnolia Ghetto." The Vieux Carré Courier goes on to relate that Beecher was at that time the poet-in-residence at Santa Clara University, a journalist with the San Francisco Chronicle, and a man who was not rattled at all by upsetting people. In one letter to Merton, Beecher nonchalantly recalled the Ramparts article, noting that it concerned the "Church's failure to implement the racial policies proclaimed by Archbishop Rummel," (Beecher, letter to Thomas Merton) who had called for the total integration of Catholic schools.

Though John Beecher was working steadily as a journalist during this period, his poetry career was ramping back up, too. In 1962, the politically minded (leftist/liberal) publishing house Monthly Review Press published Report to the Stockholders & Other Poems, 1932-1962. Beecher had a poem included in Walter Lowenfels' 1964 anthology, Poets of Today: A New American Anthology, which also contained the work of Bob Dylan, Thomas McGrath, and Joel Oppenheimer, as well as Beat poets Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, and Gary Snyder. Lowenfels was a famed liberal and highly political writer, poet and editor, and this inclusion was a good feather in Beecher's cap. Also in 1964, Goosetree Press in Lanham, Maryland, published Undesirables, a "pamphlet" of some of Beecher's poems.

When John Beecher returned to Santa Clara University from New Orleans in early 1965, he was as popular with the students as he was unpopular with the administration. He wrote, in one of his letters to Merton: "When I returned [to

Santa Clara University] for the quarter commencing on January 3, 1965, I found it almost impossible to function because of official sabotage of my courses" (Beecher, letter to Thomas to Merton). According to his side of the story, Beecher was given lower-level courses to teach (with the exception of one creative writing course), was overloaded with students, and was refused a teaching assistant to help with the heavy workload. Thus, he resigned, effective March 1965, at the end of the quarter. He also sued the university and "received an out of court settlement and a public apology" (Beecher, letter to Thomas to Merton), after alerting the media about his suspicions; the school's administration took the bait and spoke against Beecher publicly.

For his next move, Beecher went to Montgomery, Alabama, for the Selma-to-Montgomery March. In a 1966 letter, Beecher sardonically wrote:

> I flew down for the Selma-Montgomery March and had the honor of being called a Communist by Governor George Wallace on a national TV program. He identified me as 'John Beecher, editor of the militantly pro-Communist publication, Ramparts. [...] Ed Keating [editor of Ramparts] immediately announced a suit against Wallace which later he withdrew upon advice that he couldn't win. (Beecher, letter to Thomas to Merton)

Beecher's statements are confirmed by two news articles that ran at the time: "John Beecher Gets to Sue Alabama Governor" in the San Jose Mercury on

March 31, 1965, and "Ramparts takes Wallace to Court" in the National Catholic Reporter on April 7, 1965.

Studs Terkel recalls Beecher's presence at the march in his 2002 foreword to One More River to Cross:

> I'm caught by a remembrance of my first encounter with him. It was in 1965, during the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march. That memorable evening, after the historic walk, a number of us gathered in Montgomery at the home of Clifford and Virginia Durr. [...] Another guest bearing a remarkable resemblance to a fiery Walt Whitman, with an orotund bass-baritone voice, was John Beecher. I had no idea he was a poet. He was covering the historic march as a stringer for the San Francisco Chronicle. (Terkel, "Introduction" 13)

Terkel goes on to describe George Wallace's tirade against the march, complete with name-calling, and a telephone call informing the group that Detroit housewife and march volunteer Viola Liuzzo had been murdered:

> Beecher immediately phoned Joe Smitherman, the mayor of Selma. I still hear his fury booming forth: he would not be stonewalled by any political hack. Nor by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. He wanted the truth now. [...] The last I saw of John Beecher that night was his racing toward the red

> roadster he had rented and speeding off, in search of the damn truth. (Terkel, "Introduction" 14)

John Beecher chose to stay in Alabama after the Selma-to-Montgomery March was over. He attended the trials of the killers of Viola Liuzzo and of Episcopal priest Jonathon Daniels, and "was pointed out by Art Hanes, the Klansmen's attorney and former mayor of Birmingham, as a 'well-known Communist' [...] As many cameras were pointed at me as at the Klan defendants [...] I was lucky to escape assassination I suppose" (Beecher, letter to Merton). To elaborate the enormity of Beecher's predicament, Art Hanes, a former mayor of Birmingham elected in 1961, had worked alongside the notoriously violent Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene "Bull" Connor, had closed city parks to keep black people out, and was the lawyer who defended these Ku Klux Klansmen as well as James Earl Ray, the killer of Martin Luther King, Jr. Being pointed out publicly by Art Hanes as an enemy would have been something to take very seriously.

Beecher's writings also showed his bravery as a man. "If You Are A Negro" describes what Beecher found as a journalist in McComb, Mississippi in the mid-1960s. Originally published in Ramparts in May 1965 and reproduced in Reporting Civil Rights: Part Two, the piece is indicative of his Civil Rights journalism from the period. The article is divided into six parts, each narrating the situation of one black person who lives in or near McComb, and who either took part in Civil Rights activities or was merely accused of it. Part one, "The Colonel's Issue," tells the story of Sister Celestine McComb Ashley, a black

preacher's wife and descendant of the town's white founder, in which he explains that she enjoys none of the rights or privileges of her aristocratic family name. Part two, "The Price of Cotton," deals with a black plumber's assistant named James Cotton who was fired from his job after twenty years because he insisted that he was not related to some other African Americans named Cotton who were viewed as agitators by local whites for working on Civil Rights causes. Part three, "Uppity," explains how local African-American businessman Fred Bates was put out of business for supporting his community against the interest of whites. Part four, "Names, Dates, and Places," relays how a local black man was falsely accused, then beaten and tortured, in order to get details about local organizing, about which he knew nothing. Part five, "Give Me Liberty," details the difficulties of Alma Jackson, a widow and mother of ten, who was kidnapped, beaten, and run out of town because she had a close relationship with her white "Yankee" employer. Finally, part six, "Mama Quin," closes the article with the story of a black café owner who is put out of business and discredited by locals officials because she served both white and black patrons. This is a good example of the type of fearless journalism that John Beecher was doing in the mid-1960s, traveling personally to areas where violence and social upheaval were occurring to ferret out the true stories of people being treated unfairly.

The Beechers ended 1965 on a brighter note. In his January 1966 letter to Thomas Merton, John Beecher explains that he and Barbara were "received back into the Catholic Church and renewed our marriage vows at the Basilica of St. Louis here in New Orleans" (Beecher, letter to Thomas Merton), on December

21, 1965. In another letter to Merton, dated March 17, 1966, Beecher also relates that his primary reason for corresponding was to let Merton know that "we were back in the Church, and very happy to be there" (Beecher, letter to Thomas Merton). He finalizes that second letter by listing a Birmingham, Alabama, address for use after March 31, 1966.

If John Beecher had not done enough to be a controversial figure in Alabama (or in the entire South), his next move would enhance that reputation. The Beechers planned to move back to Birmingham for John to teach at Miles College, a historically black college. In 1966, when John Beecher made the move, Alabama was in the midst of an ugly and historic fight over the desegregation of schools that lasted from 1963 until 1968, when segregationists finally lost for good. In his second letter to Merton, Beecher called Miles College: "a Negro institution which is currently the most vital center of learning in the entire South, or seems so to me" (Beecher, letter to Thomas Merton). He gave no explanation of why he believed that to be the case. As a side note, the Red Mountain Edition of To Live and Die in Dixie was published during this time; Beecher's author biography states that he is "presently a Visiting Professor at Miles College, a Negro Institution" (Beecher, To Live and Die in Dixie jacket).

Returning to Birmingham was not without risk. The early 1960s were a violent period in Birmingham, and Beecher had no way of knowing that those types of events would not continue with the same intensity. In 1961, some of the Freedom Riders had been beaten severely by police and local citizens. In 1963, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church had been bombed, killing four young girls

inside. Beecher was returning to Birmingham in 1966, having just been identified as a Communist by both George Wallace and Art Hanes, and he was going there to be a white teacher at a black college in the midst of the state's school desegregation fight. Furthermore, in May 1966, The Nation published his article, "A Sword in the Heart of Dixie," in which he alleges that Alabama voting officials intentionally under-prepared for drastically increased black voting numbers, effectively disenfranchising them with long waits in lines, and that federal officials did little to fix it. Lucky for the Beechers, "Bull" Connor, who ordered many of the violent police actions against Civil Rights workers, was no longer the police chief in Birmingham, and the city was trying to make over its image in the wake of those violent times.

V: RECOGNITION AT LAST

As the rollercoaster of the 1960s wore on, Beecher won many battles: personal, political, and literary. In December 1967, the California Supreme Court repealed the Levering Loyalty Act, the California legislation that brought about his being blacklisted. However, he would not be reinstated officially to his job at San Francisco State for another ten years, in 1977. Personally and politically, this court decision vindicated Beecher, proving he had been right all along that the oaths were wrong, although he had been "off the blacklist" since 1959 (Beecher, Collected Poems xvi).

Following that triumph in California in 1967, a major mark of appreciation for John Beecher's career as a poet emerged in 1968: the publication (in paperback) of Hear the Wind Blow: Poems of Protest & Prophecy, a volume of selected poems put out by New York-based, politically-minded International Publishers. The book begins with an introduction by noted critic Maxwell Geismar, who contrasts Beecher's raging poems with T. S. Eliot's stuffy ones and who proclaims Beecher to be one of a very few truly vibrant poets. Hear the Wind Blow contains poems from most of Beecher's poetic career to that point, but some poems, like "Big Boy," were not included. The front cover is two-color, black and red, using the Palatino font that John and Barbara Beecher had used on their self-publications, and it sports a picture of John Beecher pensively looking on, wearing a Western-style suit and bolo tie. Soon after, Alexander Laing discussed

Beecher and Hear the Wind Blow in his 1969 Nation article, "The Politics of Poetry," featuring him alongside Gwendolyn Brooks, Kenneth Burke, and Walter Lowenfels as examples of good political poetry. Among other reviews, the Catholic publication, The Way, also gave the book positive press in its March 1969 issue. (The placement of these reviews is important in showing that Beecher's work was often given attention by general readership publications, but seldom in literary journals.)

In his "Acknowledgments" in Hear the Wind Blow, Beecher catalogs the literary journal and magazine publications for his poems.

> Prior to book publication, most had appeared in various journals here and abroad: Attack (Tokyo), Brand X, Coastlines, Commonweal, Continuum, Fellowship, Folio, Impetus, Literary Art Press, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Moscow), Mainstream, The Minority of One, Monthly Review, Morning Star Quartos, National Guardian, *New Hestia* (Athens), Negro Digest, New Masses, New York Post, The New Republic, New York Times, Omnibus, Poems & Pictures, renaissance, Rights, *Siempre*! (Mexico City), Social Digest, *Tachydromos Egyptos* (Alexandria), The Texas Quarterly, Twice A Year, Way, and The Western Poet. (5)

The list proves interesting due to the type of some of the publications listed: political magazines, general readership newspapers, and Catholic-interest

magazines, in addition to some standard literary magazines. No date is available for when Hear the Wind Blow was put out of print, but according to current International Publishers' employee Betty Smith, when they began to use ISBNs in 1972, the book was not issued a number, which means that the book was either sold out or out of print by then.

A turbulent year in American history, 1968 was a year of varied experiences for John Beecher. That year, he returned to Florida in January, where he re-visited the migratory workers' camps that he had administrated in the late 1930s. In one news article of the period, Beecher endorsed the Black Power movement and its violent methods, commenting, "When peaceful demonstrations don't work, there will be violent demonstrations. Violence is part of our tradition as a nation" (Jones 8). He also spent some time giving readings and promoting Hear the Wind Blow. Also that year, folksinger Pete Seeger recounts that Beecher called him from Duke University, where Beecher had "a job as a consultant of some sort" (Seeger 482), to come to Durham, North Carolina, where several hundred students were demanding that the university's president "resign from the all-white country club, that he bargain collectively with Negro Employee' union, and several other things," (482) all in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. As the protests grew, Beecher called Seeger to come down there and help lead the student protests. Seeger wrote: "I sang a few songs. John Beecher read some of his powerful free-verse from his book To Live and Die in Dixie. A well-dressed older man, president of the union of Negro maintenance employees, gave a short speech" (482).

This was far from an isolated incident in Beecher's life in the late 1960s as the anti-war movement built its momentum. By 1969, John and Barbara Beecher were living in Massachusetts, and he was teaching at North Shore Community College. Even though Beecher was sixty-five years old, he was holding strong to his fiery ways! The front page of the October 16, 1969, issue of the Beverly Times shows a full-color picture of a Salem State College student protest against the war in Vietnam with John and Barbara Beecher proudly in the midst of the group. The article relays, "Poet John Beecher, poet-in-residence, read a number of his anti-war poems" (Dorfsman 1).

Though the social turmoil of the 1960s was dying down as the 1970s began, John Beecher's life and career as a poet seemed to be improving constantly (partially due to his constant social and political activism, which drew him attention). In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, Birmingham-based Red Mountain Editions was reissuing Beecher's out-of-print poetry books, including To Live and Die in Dixie and Report to the Stockholders & Other Poems. He taught during the interim term at St. John's University in January 1970. He was also giving readings all over the country, in places such as St. John's University, a Catholic university in Queens, New York; Xavier University, a Catholic university in Cincinnati, Ohio; Manchester College, a liberal arts college in Indiana; Fairleigh-Dickinson University, a liberal arts university in New Jersey; and Calvin College, a Christian liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Also, in 1973, the Microfilming Corporation of America issued fourteen reels of

microfilm of Beecher's personal papers, entitled The John Beecher Papers: 1899-1972.

Another major milestone came for John Beecher in 1974 when Macmillan published Collected Poems, 1924-1974. The hardcover book contains almost three hundred pages of poetry, arranged in chronological sections. Collected Poems received reviews in daily newspapers all over America. In the first pages of the book, in his "Acknowledgments," Beecher lists the magazines in which some of the poems were published, adding ones that he did not list in Hear the Wind Blow: "The Bookman, Foxfire, Latitudes, The New Mexico Review, North Shore, PM, Twice A Year, and The South Florida Review" (Beecher, Collected Poems). He also writes there that the collection contains almost all of his poetry, except for "highly personal poetry" and some "apprentice work" from his early days writing poetry (Beecher, Collected Poems). Ever the social and political poet, his introductory remarks are entitled "Poetry for Survival"; there he recounts his friendship with a Russian prisoner-of-war after World War II, comparing his friend's plight as a POW with his own struggles with being blacklisted, reminding the reader that "poetry can save your life" (Beecher, Collected Poems xv).

Though his health was failing, the mid-1970s were good years for Beecher. Birmingham mayor, George G. Seibels, Jr., named May 1, 1974, to be John Beecher Day with a festival in his honor was held on that day. Beecher was enjoying the success of Collected Poems, while reviews of the book were coming steadily. He was reading poetry all over the country: for example, at the Portland (Oregon) Poetry Festival in August; the Unitarian Church in Reading,

Massachusetts, in September; and Laney College in Oakland, California, in December. For the 1976-1977 year, he was awarded a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). A front-page article in July 1976 in the Yancey Journal, the newspaper of Burnsville, North Carolina, where the Beechers were living, relates that Beecher "views his 'Collected Poems' as the capstone of his career" ("Beecher's Poems Widely Acclaimed").

As another matter of personal triumph, in 1977 John Beecher was reinstated to his teaching job at San Francisco State, and despite poor health he returned briefly to accept. The California state legislature had ordered that all employees terminated for refusing to sign a loyalty oath during the McCarthy era be given their jobs back. To illustrate the extent to which Beecher was *reinstated* is shown in a 1999 San Francisco State University press release about the school's 100th anniversary:

> As the '50s unfolded, many of its programs and teachers rose to national prominence. [...] and major writers such as John Beecher, [...] gave the college the prestige of their names and achievements (Polidora).

San Francisco State seems to have forgotten that Beecher was pushed out in 1950, that they excommunicated him, that he spent much of the 1950s as an exile within his own country, and that they did not reinstate him until the late 1970s.

When he was reinstated to his old job by San Francisco State in 1977, Beecher stated his reason for refusing to sign the oath: "The only way you can prove your loyalty to a person or an institution is by your actions" (Levitt 15). He

recalled in "The Outcast Vindicated," an article in the Oakland Tribune at the time of his return, that he had worked for the New Deal and volunteered for World War II, and that should have been enough to prove his loyalty to his country. Beyond that, he said, "I didn't feel I had to sign a loyalty oath to prove anything. It was an attempt to intimidate people because of the whole general atmosphere of the country . . . the kind of creeping thought control which later became known as McCarthyism" (Levitt 15). The photo accompanying this article shows a clean-shaven John Beecher in 1950 on a speaking platform in front of a sizeable crowd, and behind him is a sign that reads: "IF WE SELL FREEDOM FOR SECURITY WE SHALL LOSE BOTH!"

With his life already improving professionally, John Beecher's poetry was included in several anthologies published in the late 1970s. An excerpt from the poem, "To Alexander Meiklejohn," was included in 1977's The Gift Outright: America to Her Poets. The poems, "To Live and Die In Dixie" and "A Humble Petition to the President of Harvard," were included in 1979's Contemporary Southern Poetry. Also, an excerpt from "To Live and Die in Dixie" and the full poem, "Aztec Figurine," were included in A Geography of Poets, published in 1979.

On April 5, 1979, Birmingham mayor David Vann declared the next day, April 6, to be another "John Beecher Day" (Vann). In the proclamation, Vann noted, "John Beecher is an illustrious native son of Birmingham and has been throughout his long life a champion for human rights and a spokesman for the conscience of the people" (Vann). He continued, "For over fifty years, Beecher

has championed the ideals of the American Dream against the ills of oppression and indifference" (Vann). As the poet's health waned, his hometown paid homage to him a second time.

However, everything was not grand at the end of Beecher's life. In 1979, he wrote an article entitled "No Suppression Here?" that was published in Phantasm magazine; his article charged that Macmillan was intentionally thwarting the sales possibilities of Collected Poems. A summary of the article by the former publisher of Ramparts states: "Poet activist John Beecher tells how Macmillan avoids advertising his book Collected Poems, 1924-1974, tells the author untruths about promoting it, and won't meet with the author after it's published" (Heidelberg Graphics). Beecher may have been correct about Macmillan, considering that in 1974, its fourth edition of its three-thousand-page two-volume Literary History of the United States contained no mention of him at all.[1]

John Beecher died on May 11, 1980, in San Francisco. Even as his health failed, his career and notoriety soared. Right before he died, in January 1980, First Lady Mrs. Rosalynn Carter invited twenty-one poets to read their work at the White House, and John Beecher was one of them (UPI); unfortunately, he was unable to attend the reception due to his illness. Around the time of his death, tribute pieces in daily newspapers in cities where he lived or taught were

[1] When I called Macmillan in late 2007 to procure the date the book was put out of print, no one I talked to could find any record of the book ever having existed, even when given the ISBN. After making several contacts at Macmillan, no one could pinpoint the date the book was put out of print. Those records have been digitized, and books that went out of print prior to the changeover were not put "in the system." I was told repeatedly by each person that neither the title, author, nor the ISBN were "in the system." This is an odd circumstance considering Collected Poems is listed on many bookselling websites.

common. One such article that ran in the San Francisco Examiner on January 14, 1980, was titled "A life-long habit of radicalism"; in his typically fiery and unforgiving manner, Beecher is quoted attacking old foes from his past. Ironically, he is quoted at the article's end saying, "People are writing books about me now, studying my work. There's very little chance I'll be forgotten" (Friedman 1).

PART II: WHAT WENT WRONG?

VI: DECLINE AND VIRTUAL DISAPPEARANCE

During his later years, in the 1970s, John Beecher was an accomplished and celebrated poet and writer. His papers were collected in the John Beecher Papers, and his poems were available in Collected Poems. He had been awarded an NEA Fellowship and had enjoyed two John Beecher Days. After spending the late 1970s battling health problems but still giving readings, the seventy-six-year-old poet died in May 1980, after seeing his life and career cast in gold for posterity, with all of the benchmarks one would expect.

However, after peaking in 1974 with the publication of Collected Poems, the ensuing years were not kind to John Beecher's legacy. Hear the Wind Blow was put out of print by International Publishers prior to their first use of the ISBN in 1972. Macmillan Publishing put his Collected Poems out of print. The Microfilming Corporation of America had gone out of business in 1977, effectively ending sales of the John Beecher Papers. Furthermore, Red Mountain Editions of his books are also out of print.

What happened in the 1980s and 1990s to cause Beecher's decline in status? One possible, feasible explanation lies in the ways of the bookselling world. The shelf life of the average book is not very long, as readers typically want bookstores to stock new titles; in the 1980s, before giant bookselling chain stores or Internet booksellers, books were sold by independently owned stores

with relatively low square-footage. Unless a book had substantial and sustained sales or was a classic, it was common for books and writers to disappear.

Another possible explanation falls within the literary world. Book publishing, literary magazine publishing, teaching, editing, curriculum writing and arts program administrating are all done by highly trained literary professionals, often with high levels of education than many (or most) readers. Consequently, the reading public and educators receive their pool of possible materials from the works and programs created by these highly trained literary professionals— the same group that never really embraced John Beecher's work in a meaningful way, which partially led to his career as the socially conscious writer that he was. His abandonment of the literati in the late 1920s affected his writing career and publishing opportunities, but he could not have foreseen how that decision would affect his literary legacy in the late twentieth century.

The "professionalization of poetry" (Alpaugh 17) is well-documented phenomenon. Though the first Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing was offered by the University of Iowa in 1936, there was an explosion of these MFA programs from the 1970s to the 1990s. The Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) provides this graph on its website showing the exponential growth of "Degree-Conferring Programs in Creative Writing:"

Table 3 *Number of Degree-Conferring Programs in Creative Writing 1975-2004*

YEAR	AA	BA/BS MINOR	BA/BFA MAJOR	MA	MFA	PHD	DA	TOTAL
2004	10	318	86	154	109	42	1	720
2002	8	283	70	151	99	41	1	653
1998	8	318	12	143	83	29	1	586
1996	6	298	12	134	74	28	2	548
1994	6	287	10	139	64	29	3	532
1992	6	274	9	137	55	27	3	505
1984	4	155	10	99	31	20	5	320
1975	0	24	3	32	15	5	1	80

As the reader can see, the total number of creative writing programs increased four-fold in the ten years after Collected Poems was released, shooting up from 80 programs to 320. That 1975 number had increased nine-fold by 2004 (the year after One More River to Cross was released), growing to 720 creative writing programs on the university level. This exponential growth has to led what many in the literary industry have called the "professionalization of poetry," creating a class of MFA graduates who are taught within its system, who adhere to a *status quo*, and who populate existing and newly-created creative writing and editing jobs. John Beecher is not recognized by these groups as a legitimate figure in American poetry[2], as evidenced by his almost total exclusion from all activities conducted by the modern poetry professionals . . . and his legacy has grown dimmer.

To some extent, John Beecher did foresee this outcome. His entire career as a writer was marred by his outsider status, in politics and in literature. Though his Collected Poems was published in 1974, by the time of his death, he began to

[2] In our interview and subsequent telephone conversations, Barbara Beecher has made constant reference to the fact that Beecher knew the literary establishment never accepted him, despite his works having good sales, and being published and positively reviewed fairly often.

understand that all that glitters is not gold. In Phantasm (1979), Beecher outlined the specifics of his case against Macmillan Publishing. He claimed that he was told that the book would have 6,000 copies printed – an astronomical figure for a book of poetry, he admits – but only 3,500 copies were printed. Beecher also claims that the industry-standard book review publication Publisher's Weekly was never sent a review copy, and that publications that were quoted on book jacket, like Time and The Nation, were not slated to receive complimentary copies. (Somehow The Nation did receive a copy, since it ran a review of the book in its February 8, 1975 issue.) Beecher goes on to charge that Macmillan sales reps were instructed not to bother pushing the book to bookstores and that his editor, who formerly had been very accommodating, would no longer meet with him after he began to ask questions about the publicity effort. Beecher titled the article in his usual insinuating manner, "No Suppression Here?"

There is room for a conspiracy theory about why John Beecher is not included in mainstream literary works, but there are also perfectly rational explanations, though a Beecher fan might not like them. Quite a few literary professionals share the opinion of John Beecher that he simply wrote poetry that was not very good. In "The Politics of Poetry," published in 1969 in The Nation, Alexander Laing reviews four books by political poets – Hear the Wind Blow among them – and offers other possible explanations:

> Pressures that keep Pete Seeger and Joan Baez a little off center in the great American spotlight would work more definitely against Beecher because he is relentlessly harsh,

> never an entertainer. But if this was a dominant factor was abetted by other preoccupations of mid-century criticism: a symbolism insulated from external reality and the deep plunge into the self. (Laing 26-27)

Subsequently, some perfectly reasonable explanations for Beecher's exclusion are that some people do not believe that his poetry has merit, and that after spending his entire career outside the literary mainstream for reasons of content, Beecher has not suddenly and miraculously gained entry into it after his death. However, there seems to be more to it than simple neglect, as evidenced by the extent to which Beecher is omitted, seemingly signaling that he is not just "forgotten," but intentionally left out.

VII: CURRENT NEGLECT AND EXCLUSION

Despite a multiculturalist surge in expanding the concept of acceptable American literature, John Beecher is still either excluded from or barely mentioned in the mainstream of American poetry. As evidence of this exclusion, anyone may look to major institutional programs, reference works, and anthologies. John Beecher's poetry was *not* included in the following major initiatives: the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) Poetry Out Loud program, which utilizes memorization and recitations to encourage the awareness and enjoyment of poetry in high school students; Billy Collins' "Poetry 180" program with two subsequent anthologies of the same name, which were created by the then-US Poet Laureate to include a daily poetry reading in American high schools; the Academy of American Poets' (AAP) "Poets.org" website, which boasts "a million visitors each month, making it the most popular site about poetry on the web" (Poets.org); and the immensely wealthy Poetry Foundation's online "Poetry Tool," an internet research database for poets and poetry. All four major non-profit institutions – the NEA, the Library of Congress (via its Poet Laureate), the Academy of American Poets, and the Poetry Foundation – all omit John Beecher completely in their poetry programs intended for mass audiences. Furthermore, John Beecher is neglected entirely from the following major reference works and series: the Scribner Authors series, the Twayne Authors series, and the Dictionary of Literary Biography, all but one of the digital

databases produced by reference work giant, Thomson Gale Research; the eighty-eight-volume Poetry Criticism: Excerpts of Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature and the two-volume Major Twentieth Century Writers: A Selection of Sketches from Contemporary Authors, both published by Thomson Gale Research; The Oxford Companion to American Literature, published by Oxford University Press; Literary History of the United States, published by Macmillan; Reference Guide to American Literature and Contemporary Poets, both books published by another major reference work publisher, St. James Press. Finally, as for the omission of his poems, John Beecher's poetry is *not* included in the following major anthologies: Twentieth Century American Poetry, which boasts of including "over 180 poets"; American Poetry of the Twentieth Century in the Longman Literature in English series; the Library of America's American Poetry of the Twentieth Century, which even includes some blues singers; Fifty Years of American Poetry: Anniversary Volume for the American Academy of Poets, which includes 147 American poets; The Harvard Book of American Poetry, which was published by the press of a university that Beecher attended; and 1965's This Land is Mine: An Anthology of American Verse, which boasts "Poetry That Makes History Live," a book that seemingly would fit Beecher's style and substance.

Leaving this poet out of so many anthologies and reference works, a poet whose work is so comprehensible to many types of readers and was so popular with many people, makes little sense. Furthermore, some of the editorial decisions do not make sense; Beecher was excluded from the Library of America's poetry

volume, while singers Johnny Mercer, Woody Guthrie, and Lightning Hopkins were included; likewise, Thomson Gale excludes him from Poetry Criticism but focuses on his work as a poet in the Contemporary Literary Criticism entry.

On the brighter side, John Beecher is not entirely denied literary recognition by all critics, scholars, and editors. In other works published by Thomson Gale Research, the Contemporary Authors (CA) digital database contains one entry on Beecher's life and work, and the 241-volume Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC) series has one entry in volume six that spans just over one single page. (These decisions by Thomson Gale editors are difficult to reconcile with his exclusion from the Poetry Criticism series, since most of both of the CA and CLC entries mainly deal with him *as a poet*.) The University of Illinois' "Modern American Poetry" (MAPS) website contains a substantial entry on John Beecher, a logical inclusion considering that Beecher's personal papers are held there, that his forefathers helped found the institution, and that editor and University of Illinois professor Cary Nelson is one of Beecher's avid supporters. The Alabama Center for the Book includes an entry on John Beecher in its "This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape" website. In a strange twist, Beecher was included in the two-volume bibliography, Black American Writers, published by Scarecrow Press in 1975, but it only lists the 1956 self-published volume of poetry, Land of the Free. (Again, a strange editorial decision, considering Collected Poems was at the time more substantial and more accessible.) More recently, LSU Press published Southern Writers: A New Biographical Dictionary in 2006, and John Beecher does have an entry in it. As

for his poetry being included in anthologies, Beecher's poems do appear in Poets of Today: A New American Anthology (International Publishers, 1964/1974), The Gift Outright: America to Her Poets (Greenwillow Press, 1977), Contemporary Poetry of North Carolina (John F. Blair, 1977), Contemporary Southern Poetry (Louisiana State University Press, 1979), and A Geography of Poets (Bantam, 1979) — though all of those anthologies are now out of print, except Contemporary Poetry of North Carolina — and more recently in Ralph Hammond's Alabama Poets: A Contemporary Anthology (Livingston University Press, 1990), in Cary Nelson's Oxford Anthology of Modern American Poetry (Oxford University Press, 2000) and in Steven Ford Brown and David Rigsbee's Invited Guest: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Southern Poetry (University of Virginia Press, 2001) — both of those more recent books remain in print. Very recently, editors Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy included the poems "Beaufort Tides" and "Report to the Stockholders" in their American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology (Oxford University Press, 2006) in the section "Revolt, Repression, and Cultural Formations: 1900-1929," but the latter poem is misdated as 1924. As a side note about Beecher's inclusion in anthologies, when Edward Field produced A New Geography of Poets in 1992 to follow the earlier 1979 anthology, Beecher was omitted; I wrote to Field to ask about this omission, and he responded: "I believe that Beecher was dead by the time we did the second Geography, and we were only including living poets, as in the first. I always admired him as a man who stuck by what he believed. And his poetry reflected

that" [3] (Field). Being included in anthologies is especially important to a poet's legacy because those books are used as gifts and textbooks.

Furthermore, John Beecher's broader cultural legacy is respected by a broad range of people and has been preserved piecemeal in other less academic works. Studs Terkel's seminal oral history collection about the Great Depression, Hard Times, contains an interview with Beecher. The Library of America has included one of Beecher's journalistic works, "If You Are A Negro," in its Reporting Civil Rights, Volume Two, and LOA lists five of his works of journalism on its accompanying website. Interviews with and commentary about Beecher exist online at the websites of activist Hunter Gray (a.k.a. John Salter, Jr.) and of the 1960s hippy theater group, The Diggers.[4] Beecher is often referenced in historical and sociological studies on race, poverty, and the South, because of his years as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) and FEPC programs administrator. Editor Steven Ford Brown, Beecher's champion, not only edited One More River to Cross, he included a short tribute to Beecher in his thicket literary magazine of Alabama writers. There are also CDs available for sale and MP3s available for download from Beecher's Report to the Stockholder & Other Poems LP (Smithsonian Folkways Records, 1977).

John Beecher found greater success with general readership newspapers and with politically liberal periodicals than he did with the literati. So, it is no surprise that the literary establishment has not embraced the man or his work in the decades since his death, but the omission of Beecher's biography and poetry

[3] The capitalization in his response was corrected for reproduction. No words or punctuation were changed.
[4] The Diggers were more than just a theater group. They also ran a free food bank and had other community-oriented projects in and around San Francisco, California.

seems disproportionate. Although Beecher regarded himself as "a poet first" (Beecher, Collected Poems jacket), there are no indications that he pandered to the literary establishment for acceptance. By all accounts, John Beecher was most interested in reaching *readers*— of all education levels, socio-economic classes, and races. His publication history in magazines like The Nation and The New Republic, compared to his absence from established literary magazines, exemplify this preference.

Critical responses have been mixed. Early in Beecher's career, poet William Carlos Williams wrote a letter to Twice A Year Press, after he had received and read And I Will Be Heard, praising Beecher as "a man who speaks for the conscience of the people" and remarking on his poetry:

> From this side of poetic structure his style is rather lean – which is, of course, as he intends it. [...] It's [sic] force comes from the acuity of the vision and the sharpness of the statement, the freshness of the phrasing, the paragraphing for effect in the best sense, the firmness of the sentences. (Walker 88)

On the contrary, critic Marjorie Perloff's scathing attack in 1976 on Beecher's poetry, "Tradition and the Individual Talent: A Review," a review of three poetry books (one of them, Beecher's Collected Poems) in Auburn University's Southern Humanities Review, states: "Beecher's verse, however, is not poetry at all" (Perloff 272). Her quasi-polite argument infers that writing on noble subjects and breaking lines does not make for poetry and that the language of poetry should be

inherently different from ordinary language, so Beecher's poems should not be called poetry. She does go on to write that "Here I Stand" is to her "Beecher's best poem" (273), but she quickly notes that he still is not a very good poet. However, Robert Merideth's 1976 review of Collected Poems, "Homage to a Subversive: Notes Toward Explaining John Beecher" in American Poetry Review, is one of very few articles – a rare positive one – *about* Beecher in a literary journal. (Interestingly, APR did not run a review of Beecher's book until the May/June 1976 issue, almost two years after its release.) Merideth writes,

> All the same, especially taken as a whole, it is powerful, highly controlled writing which reveals and identifies with a class and world unfamiliar to most readers of contemporary poetry [...] [A]s a poet he thinks of himself primarily as public and political, as prophet more than simple single self. (Merideth 45)

John Beecher's poetry is not difficult to defend, except to ears that are not willing to listen. John Beecher's disdain for high-minded and exclusive practices extended to literary professionals, e.g. his teachers at Harvard. Apparently, this disdain has been reciprocal; the literati either dislike or ignore John Beecher's writing. For instance, in her review of Collected Poems, Marjorie Perloff seemed to pick as her example, out of dozens of poems, one that would not suit her tastes. Beecher's politics, methods, and subject matter cost him many things, including a certain degree of posterity. Unfortunately, scholars who have begun works on Beecher have not been able to finish them; Jim Helten fell ill before editing the

Autobiography or writing a book, and Robert Merideth wrote, in his introductory remarks to "Homage to a Subversive," that he wrote his review as skeletal outline for a book, knowing he would never have time to write it.

Through neglect and exclusion by academic publishers of reference works and textbooks and through complete exclusion from modern foundational programs trying to reach high schools students with poetry, Beecher has not reached new generations of young people, a group that previously had been some of his most ardent fans. John Beecher's uncompromising rebelliousness and demand for honesty and justice won him many young supporters, especially as a college professor in the 1960s and 1970s. However, as the new class of literary professionals has emerged from the colleges and universities to fill editorial and teaching positions, Beecher's poetry has been left out in the cold, whether for reasons of style or content, or because students were never introduced to his work. Speaking for myself: after spending four years to earn a bachelor's degree in English, a year of post-graduate study, and now two years on a master's degree with an emphasis in English, I have never read a John Beecher poem in a class, even having attended secondary and post-secondary schools in his home state of Alabama.

John Beecher's legacy as a poet suffers now because of neglect in the 1980s and 1990s. Today's BA, BFA, and MFA English and creative writing graduates may wonder why their students do not seem to like poetry, when the poetry that has flourished has been technical and difficult for untrained readers. (The poetry is not so difficult for the teacher, who has plenty of training.) Consider that a typical

college graduate of 2008 was born around 1986, well after Beecher's fading away. Even older students who are finishing graduate work now, in their thirties, were born in the 1970s, and probably never had access to Beecher's work.

One question deserves attention. Why was John Beecher not accepted in the first place?

VIII: ABSENCE FROM THE CANON

The idea of the "canon" is a collective one, consisting of a seeming consensus held by anthologists, editors, scholars, textbook writers, curriculum writers, non-profit institutions, and reference publishers. No one person or institution is the proprietor of the canon, as for instance the Columbia School of Journalism is the sole entity that awards the Pulitzer Prize. Everyone seems to agree that the canon consists of authors and their works that are "canonical," while other authors and their works remain "non-canonical" for any of a number of reasons. Unfortunately, the literary establishment has relegated John Beecher to a place either outside of the canon or on its fringes. The concept itself requires examination first, so I ask three questions: what is "the canon?"; what constitutes "acceptable" poetry?; and is poetry, by definition, a form or function? These inquiries will help to establish that John Beecher has as much right as any poet to be included in the canon of American poetry.

The term "canon" has many definitions, primarily rooted in ecclesiastical organizational structure. The Oxford English Dictionary's pertinent (non-ecclesiastical) definitions include: "3c. a standard of judgment; a criterion," and "9. [a period or era serving as] a basis for chronology" (OED 335). So, the canon is a basis by which literary scholars define what is acceptable, and what is not. Two problems exist with this notion: first, the idea that American literary works may be judged by a single set of criteria runs contrary to any American ideal of a

"melting pot"; moreover, what are the criteria and who gets to decide? For instance, some poets are esteemed for excellence in formal structures, e.g. Richard Wilbur or Robert Frost, while others are esteemed for working outside of formal structures, e.g. Nikki Giovanni or E. E. Cummings. If there are technical criteria for inclusion, would those criteria be formal excellence, readability, innovation, popularity, expressiveness, or possibly skill in nuance? There are poets who are valued for any of these assets. Beyond that, do poets decide what makes good poetry, or do scholars and critics decide? Taking another approach, if the latter OED definition (#9) is more relevant, then chronology is the criteria, meaning that it would matter less about style and more about where a poet fits into the timeline. Or is the canon just a concept that allows a small, select group to choose what is included or excluded?

This last idea is not new. John Beecher himself saw literary elitism at Harvard when he attended classes there in the mid-1920s. In a more modern example, in a 1987 article in the Women's Review of Books, Kathleen Aguero and Marie Harris discuss the process of editing their book, A Gift of Tongues: Critical Challenges in Contemporary American Poetry, a collection of essays that deal with the issue of an exclusive "Poetry Mafia." Aguero and Harris wrote that John Beecher was one of the poets who faces this problem of elitism and exclusivity. Yet, to his detriment, for reasons of space, Beecher did not make it into their book either (Aguero and Harris 29).

Conceptions of what constitutes *acceptable* poetry vary widely, usually depending on the poet's or critic's personal perspective and interests. By most

critical accounts, Walt Whitman's 19th-century sprawling verse with its egalitarian subjects defined a new American poetry, separating itself from its European predecessors, and was at the time deemed unacceptable, even obscene. About two decades after Whitman's death in 1892, a new poetry emerged in the burgeoning twentieth century, an image-driven poetry by the Modernists. The conservative New Critics soon reacted to these innovators and proclaimed that formal verse was superior, while advocating academic "close readings" and rejecting biographical criticism. The ideas of the Modernists and the New Critics then dominated discussions of poetry for the next three decades: the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, during the first half of Beecher's career as a poet. Here, John Beecher steps onto the scene in 1925, wedged between two sets of warring intellectuals: the image-driven *avant-garde* and the formalist academics, more like Whitman than either of these newer groups; though he leaned slightly toward formal verse in his earliest days. (Critics acknowledge the Harlem Renaissance, as well, during the 1920s and early 1930s, but Beecher was neither African-American nor living in Harlem.) Furthermore, to divorce Beecher's verse from his biography is impossible because he wrote almost completely from personal experiences and observations. Chronologically and ideologically, Beecher was more socially minded, putting him outside the two mainstreams of American poetry: Modernism and New Criticism. (He thought less about "pure poetry" than he did about writing poetry that would affect people.) Later, when two new movements emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, the Beat Generation and the Confessional poets, John Beecher did not fit into those either. He was much older than the poets in

these two groups, and he was blacklisted when the Beats and Confessionals emerged with Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" in 1955 and Robert Lowell's Life Studies in 1959, respectively. John Beecher fell in the cracks between two literary bulwarks, academic formalism and a rising *avant-garde*, but thankfully he found his audience among a general readership, especially liberals. In his introduction to Hear the Wind Blow, Maxwell Geismar praised Beecher by stating that he was a refreshing change "after a long period when poetry was no longer trying to speak to anybody but the poetic elite – or shall we say clique?" (Geismar 6) and also commented that T. S. Eliot and Robert Lowell had "dominated" poetry's forefront too long.

Returning to the inquiry about the nature of the canon in order to regard Beecher's status, the final question of the three remains: is poetry more of a function or more of a form? Is a poem deemed *good* or *bad* based on what it does, or how it does it? Certainly, the answer could be: both, but I argue that the former is more important, as did John Beecher. Though he was well educated in literature, he expressed chagrin for academics and literary critics throughout his life. For Beecher, a poet's emphasis should be writing to accomplish something (its effect), more than to create a specimen for explication in a literature classroom.

In his 2005 study of creative writing as a discipline, Creative Writing and the New Humanities, Paul Dawson writes against the New Critics' text-centered critical approach and for an approach that that includes the author's biography:

> 'for a literary work cannot be studied as though it were a hermetic and self-sufficient whole' (274). Nor can a poetics centered around an author's individual style sufficiently apprehend the dialogic nature of literature. The author is not a craftsman who employs an ideologically neutral and formalistically pure language to express a unified personal vision or to master the objective world. Instead, writers represent within the literary work a range of extra-literary languages which organize social relations. (209)

According to Dawson, literature achieves excellence within the ideology and society that surround and encompass the writer as a human being, not in a vacuum where these concerns are irrelevant or untapped. John Beecher's poetry exemplifies Dawson's comment: Beecher's poetry uses the language of common people, of union organizing, and of egalitarian social protest, with an outward-looking social ideology, a feature which does not automatically entitle it to greatness, but which does freely exercise the essential humanity that readers expect from poetry: *make me* feel *something*. John Beecher's poetry makes the reader feel disgust at injustice and ashamed for not doing more to stop it. Beecher's poetry is revered for *what it does*.

Finally, an American poetical canon must have respect for diversity, the trait that has defined the nation. Critics cannot divorce the heterogeneous nature of America from its poetry. Therefore, an American poetical canon must have room not only for many races, but for many stylistic concerns, as well, including

political dissent, a very real aspect of American life. The canon must have room for those who fit cleanly into "movements" *and those who do not*. Using the language of multiculturalism, poets like Beecher should not be seen as the "Other" that threatens the established view of what poetry is; instead, including diverse poetics, like including diverse poets, serves to enhance, not threaten the rich tradition of American literature.

After being left out for stylistic reasons or chronological reasons in defining movements, John Beecher seems to have been left out by multicultural critics in the late 1980s and 1990s who sought to present a more diverse sampling of writers in anthologies. In 1993, in a special issue of The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association on "Cultural Diversity," critic and anthology editor Cary Nelson (who included Beecher is his own Oxford anthology) wrote, "Anthologies are, in a significant way, representations of the wider social text, figurations of the body politic; their compilation and use is thus fraught with social and political meaning and responsibility" (Nelson 47). He reminds literary professionals that one goal of multiculturalism is to have the readings reflect the cultural fabric outside the classroom. The goal is not simply to provide, as Nelson writes, a plethora of watered down examples of writers of many racial backgrounds, but to provide a literature that also reflects many viewpoints, including social and political dissent, anger, and resentment. Nelson suggests that some writers get left out of anthologies because some editors do not want to open the Pandora's Box of righteous indignation or anger as legitimate topics for classroom discussion. If John Beecher missed the tide that swept more writers

into anthologies, it may be that his topics are too controversial, or maybe that, for instance, feminists were not championing male writers and African-American scholars were not championing white writers, etc. This "old dead white guy" somehow got left out when the doors were swung wide open in the effort to include more diversity in literary studies that resulted in the inclusion of more Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, immigrants, women, et al. This seems to be exemplified by the opening statements in the chapter, "The Diversity of American Poetry," in the Columbia Literary History of the United States:

> The modern American poetry we are most likely to encounter—the poetry most regularly anthologized, taught, reprinted, read, and written about—is the poetry of a limited number of figures that many people now consider to the major poets of the period [...] Yet the processes by which these poets have been elevated and others marginalized or forgotten are increasingly being scrutinized or challenged. [...] The purpose of this chapter is to recover some of that diversity, as well as some of the social and literary context that is often ignored when we produce literary histories that are at once more narrowly literary and focused on the major figures of the canon. (Elliott 913)

John Beecher is not mentioned in that chapter, nor in the book at all.

Two factors have held John Beecher out of the canon, but two other factors require his inclusion. First, Beecher's fringe status rests on the fact that he

does not fit into a neat compartment with others of a group or movement, other than writers lumped together as "proletarian literature"; that has held him out of the canon, and leads to the second reason. Second, Beecher's uncompromising voice has criticized the inequalities perpetrated by established institutions like corporations, universities, and the government – most of which are run by socially conservative, wealthy people that do not support subversive ideas – and that has held him out of the canon. However, the quality and validity of his poetry and the reality of his existence, no matter who tries to ignore or deny it, are why he deserves to be, as editor Emory Elliott put it, "regularly anthologized, taught, reprinted, read, and written about" (914).

So why should John Beecher's poetry be included in the canon of American poetry? Beecher not only was a capable poet whose works ranged from traditional treatments of intellectual subjects in poems like "Conformity Means Death," which pays homage to philosopher Bertrand Russell, to working-class epics that were read powerfully in front of mass audiences. This latter type of poem is what John Beecher is known for, and it is what incited the loathing of critics like Marjorie Perloff. The truth is that Beecher was never writing for them anyway.

In "Caste, Class, and Canon" published in A Gift of Tongues: Critical Challenges in Contemporary American Poetry, critic Paul Lauter writes about classist assumptions on which literary criticism are based, and his theories apply to Beecher's situation (being similar to Robert Merideth's assessments) within the canon. Lauter wrote that modern formalist literary criticism, rooted in the ideals

of the New Critics, is based on middle-class and upper-class notions of dominant capitalist white culture, which subsequently excludes not only the notions and styles of sub-dominant groups, e.g. non-whites or women, but also the art of the working and poor classes. Accordingly, Lauter wrote that, for bourgeois classes, art production is a personal leisure activity performed to please the self; however, art production among the working classes is designed to promote unity, which is the only force they have against their powerlessness within the capitalistic system, and to question the status quo. Thus, bourgeois artists tend to produce more aesthetic, less utilitarian works, while working-class artists tend to produce works that are more utilitarian, like work songs. Consequently, the bourgeois ideas of the formalist New Critics cannot be applied to working class-minded art, like John Beecher's poetry which was not meant to serve his own desire to leisure-time pleasure but to speak communally about the social ills that need to be faced for the good of everyone.

As a capable poet, John Beecher did what must be done to produce good poetry: he matched the form and the content to produce an intended effect: to make working-class statements about inequality. The importance of achieving this combination is elaborated over and over by poets writing about writing poetry. Beecher brought his subject to his reader in a form that was appropriate to that subject. He did not utilize elitist or bourgeois forms in his poems that discussed injustices against minorities and the working class. In her seminal essay, "Some Notes on Organic Form," poet Denise Levertov describes this process of matching form and content by "letting the experience lead him through

the world of the poem" with "precision of language" and "intuitive interaction between all the elements involved" (9). Likewise, in Charles Olson's essay, "Projective Verse," he writes, "Form is never more than extension of content," (175) and "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by the way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" (174). John Beecher had both experience and energy in his life and his poetry, and his poems' forms matched his content and reached readers.

With respect to his forms, John Beecher believed that poetry is an art form meant to be read out loud, and this is especially evident in his longer poems with widely varying line lengths that break at natural breaths. Barbara Beecher relayed several times that her late husband read all of his poems out loud during the writing of them, because he intended them to be read out loud. Jack Spicer, in his essay "On Spoken Poetry," agrees:

> The truth is that pure poetry bores everybody. It is even a bore to the poet. The only real contribution of the New Critics is that they have demonstrated this so well. They have taken poetry (already removed from its main source of interest—the human voice) and have completed the job of denuding it from any remaining connection with person, place and time. What is left is proudly exhibited in their essays— the dull horror of naked, pure poetry. [...] Poetry demands a human voice to sing it and demands an audience to hear it. (258-259)

In "Reflections on Narrative Poetry," Louis Simpson elaborates the need for narrative poetry as a means of making connections: "Everyone has feelings—indeed it is impossible not to feel. But we need to understand one another" (245). These four poets – Levertov, Olson, Spicer, and Simpson, all writing on their ideas about poetry – unwittingly defend the work of John Beecher: form and content must mesh; poetry is meant to be a human experience, not an ideal; and it must connect with people to be validated.

PART III: AN OVERVIEW OF JOHN BEECHER'S POETRY

IX: THE POETRY

Though he wrote many poems in his life, a selection of John Beecher's poems – indicative examples of his work as a poet – suffice to prove his worth: from the 1920s, "Big Boy" and "Report to the Stockholders"; from the 1930s, "Fire by Night," "Ensley, Alabama 1932," "Beaufort Tides," "Appalachian Landscape," "News Item," and "Like Judas, Wasn't It?"; from the 1940s,"In Egypt Land," "Josiah Turnbull Took No Part in Politics," "And I Will Be Heard: Two Talks with the American People," and "Here I Stand"; from the 1950s, "Reflections of a Man Who Once Stood Up for Freedom" and "Just Peanuts"; and from the 1960s, "Homage to A Subversive," "To Live and Die in Dixie," and "One More River to Cross." These seventeen poems, representative works spanning five decades, show John Beecher as a capable and artistic poet whose socially conscious scenes and narratives depict American life as witnessed by a keen literary mind, a social protestor, and a master of irony and understatement in some poems and of pure blunt force in others.

By all accounts, John Beecher was a careful and exacting poet (and writer) who pored over his poems, read them out loud, wrote drafts and revised, and had solid literary training, including literary studies at Cornell University, Harvard University, Middlebury College in Vermont, and the University of Poitiers. Barbara Beecher repeatedly states her late husband always said, "No matter what, get it right," and this mantra applied to both fact-checking his journalism and his

excessively thorough self-explications and revisions of poems to be sure that everything was exactly as it should be.

My approach here is to give equal time to both long and short poems, through some explications and some descriptions. Due to length limitations, I have provided close readings of shorter poems like "Big Boy" and "Fire By Night," but more descriptive explanations of longer poems, like "In Egypt Land" and "Here I Stand," to highlight the breadth of Beecher's poetry, its range of styles, and its literary qualities.

The 1920s through the Early 1930s

John Beecher's first published poem, "Big Boy," came out in 1925 in The Bookman. Beecher was twenty-one years old, attending summer school in Vermont, and nearing his first marriage. (To put the poem's date in poetic-chronological terms: Alain Locke's anthology of the Harlem Renaissance, The New Negro, and T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Hollow Men," were both published in 1925; Imagist poet-critic Amy Lowell died that year, as well. At this time, Western culture's understanding of poetry was changing dramatically. To put the poem in larger historical terms, the Progressive Era in America was coming to an end about this time.) The regular rhyme and repetition of "Big Boy" make it one of Beecher's few early, traditionally formal poems to be published. However, Beecher's use of irony – the stark contrast of literal and figurative meanings – emerges here and defines him as a new voice through his often-used poetic technique of criticizing by describing. The poem's speaker is a worker in the

smelting plants who is mocking a young man or boy who is obviously dismayed about the work and is thinking about quitting it.

> Can't stand the work?
>
> Back sore, shovel handles cuts like a knife?
>
> How can you shirk?
>
> You got to eat, ain't you, in this dirty life?
>
> Damn, snap to, you, buck up.
>
> Make the best of it, big boy! (Beecher, Collected Poems 8)

The speaker patronizingly advises the character "Big Boy" to tough it out, though the reader never understands what advantage there is in doing so— only that there is the very real choice of work or starve. The irony of the statements made here also extend to Beecher's biography: though he decided against a career in engineering or metallurgy, which would have kept him in this industry, he never left it in his heart, reverting back to the steel and iron mills time and time again for periodic work and for his poetry. Beecher understood fully why any young man would want to leave that life and move on to something else, and he also clearly understood that for most workers there was nothing else.

In later books, "Big Boy" appeared in the section "Poems 1924-1940" in Collected Poems, in the section "Poems 1924-1940" in One More River to Cross, but it was not included in Hear the Wind Blow. No matter if a critic's predispositions were to seek form, content, or effect as the justification of a poem's worth, "Big Boy" has all three. The poem is structured along five six-line stanzas that follow a ABABCD rhyme scheme, with each of the sixth lines ending

in the belittling euphemism "big boy." The lines in the poem are of varying lengths and do not follow a regular syllabic pattern. The unifying principle of the poem's structure is the repetition, in each stanza, of the speaker's sarcastic examples of the toughness of being a mill worker. The content, the imagistic piling on of the realities of the work, while degrading "big boy" for not just accepting it, creates the effect of pity in the reader. Assuming that "big boy" is a young man and that the speaker is an older man, the five stanzas portray the hopelessness of embracing this life as a mill worker; unfortunately, for many young men – uneducated, unskilled – there is no other option. In Beecher's next successful poem, the possible outcomes for a man in the mill are catalogued.

"Report to the Stockholders" is a nine-part, 79-line poem published in 1933 in The New Masses, but written earlier, after a period of attempting a typical literary life that resulted in a dry spell of not being published. (To put this poem in chronological context, it was published in the thick of the Great Depression, the year after Franklin Roosevelt was elected.) The poem is included in the section "1932-1940:Whose America?" in Hear the Wind Blow, in "Poems, 1924-1940" in Collected Poems, in "Poems, 1924-1940" in One More River to Cross, in the monograph Report to the Stockholders & Other Poems, 1932-1962, and in Cary Nelson's Oxford Anthology of Modern American Poetry; in the case of Beecher's own books, the poem appears first in each collection. "Report to the Stockholders" provides nine scenes of mill life as though these scenes were being reported to a group of investors; however, the piling-on of unfortunate situations and ensuing injustices has the reverse effect of what one would expect from

delivering a very *satisfying* report to a group of investors. The effective criticizing-by-describing technique creates the ironic tone (where the literal and figurative meanings are opposite), which again portrays the harsh conditions of mill life as degrading and demoralizing to the workers, leaving the reader *dissatisfied* with what he or she hears/reads.

The nine scenes in the poem depict the following scenarios: a man who falls out of a crane to his death, workers who watch an unrealistic film about a mill worker who marries the executive's daughter, a man who burns his foot off when he spills molten metal on it, a worker doing hard and repetitive work, an African-American man who loses his leg and is given a job carrying a sign about safety, a worker who argues about being laid off and is arrested, a man who works at the hearth until blind so the boss lets him do easier work, a worker who gets sick and tries to go on working but gets sicker, and the negative silence after a mill closes. Each scene/part has a harshness all its own, but added together they hold a force that is greater than the sum of their parts. Adding to that, Beecher ends the poem by reminding the reader that, even with the cruel conditions, what would be worse if the men ended up unemployed.

Poetically, John Beecher's use of technique is very subtle here. Unlike the sarcastic usage of "big boy" in the earlier poem, and unlike the usage of people's proper names in later poems, the poet here uses "he" and/or a job title to refer to all of his characters in the narrative. No one has a name, and therefore these men could be Everyman. The poem's structure is built on the progression from the first eight scenes, heightening tension each time, only to culminate in an anticlimax:

silence. Beecher uses alliterative sound, rather than rhyme, as his primary poetic technique: "his head hit," "brains bubbling out," or "a sandwich on him with safety slogans." There is also repetition commingled, as in the repeated use of "and" to begin lines in sections I, II, III, IV, and VII; six of the twelve lines in section I begin with the word "and," as do two of the eight lines in section II, three of the six lines in section III, all the middle six lines of the ten-line section IV, and all five middle lines of the nine-line section VII. The word "and" works connecting the narratives facts, rather than using standards punctuation – a technique more often used in speaking than writing – making the poem a strong one for reading out loud.

However, it is Beecher's use of understatement in the poem that gives it a raw power to match its raw form, by portraying man's inhumanity to man. In section I, after describing the crane operator who fell to his death after working at the job for twenty years, the safety clerk calls it "carelessness," says he should have known better, and tells the superintendent: "he'd ought to fix that guardrail" (Beecher, Collected Poems 3); the dead man is reduced to meaninglessness when the safety clerk's verdict is "carelessness." In section III, a man's foot is burned off when the molten metal burns through the ladle; the goodness of the workers is portrayed when each man gives the little that he can to a collection for the injured worker, but their motive for giving is spelled out: "because there's no telling when" (3)— what Beecher leaves off for the reader to infer is: it might be me next time. Section V brings on the first mention of African-Americans, and the

black man fares no better than his white counterparts: the man's leg is cut off in an accident with a train.

> the superintendent saw what an ad
> the Negro would make with his peg leg
> so he hung a sandwich on him
> with safety slogans
> and he told the Negro just to keep walking (4)

This circumstance is especially humiliating: to lose a leg and be given a job walking back and forth. In section VIII, a man carries half-ton loads of metal "before the cut in his belly was healed," and "he thought he had to eat / but he found out / he was wrong" (5); Beecher's implication is that the hard-working, forthright man went back to work before he was healthy enough, in order to pay his medical bill and support his family, but it ended up killing him. Finally, in section IX, John Beecher lays on the ultimate quandary: even with all of this unfairness, cruelty, death, and hard labor, being out of a job is worse: "but when the plant shuts down / you can't sleep for the quiet," implying that the unemployed workers' worries keep them awake at night worse than the noise ever could have. John Beecher never once says, in this poem, 'This isn't right!" and he does not have to, because the reader understands that to be the case. The poet uses subtlety to produce a message that is anything but subtle.

"Fire by Night" is a short, six-line poem about homeless African Americans who are burned alive in a church. The poem was included in the section "1932-1940: Whose America?" in Hear the Wind Blow and in the section

"Poems, 1924-1940" in Collected Poems, but it was left out of One More River to Cross. Though Beecher withholds any overt passage of judgment against the perpetrators – in the poem, he does not even make a proposal about their identity – he does once again plant the seeds for the reader to get his point.

Beecher starts the poem with an alliterative description of a horrific scene: "the burnt black bodies." From this immediate introduction of the scene, the reader does not know if the bodies are black by race or black by fire, but he soon finds out:

> when the burnt black bodies of the homeless
> were found in the embers of the Negro church
> into which they had crept to sleep on the floor
>
> (Beecher, Collected Poems 19)

In the early twentieth century, even homeless people – the poet does not clarify whether men or women – would never have slept in a "Negro" church and moreover "on the floor" had they been white. Likewise, being burned alive inside a building insinuates a few facts: either the victims were barred inside and could not get out, or they were too afraid to come out and face whoever had done this. Either way, the cruelty of the perpetrators is made clear. In two lines consisting of seventeen words, John Beecher fits all this information. Lynchings have not been common events for decades, but they were a more common practice in the 1920s and 1930s in the South, and those readers would have had a greater cultural basis for knowing these things.

As the poem continues, Beecher lays out his not-so-subtle indictment against society: "the wails of the people traveled down the cold wind / and reached the ears of the rich on the mountain" (Beecher, Collected Poems 19). Here, Beecher used more alliterations to create his music, in the absence a technique like rhyme, by the repetition of the 'd' sound in line four, and the similar sounds in "reached" and "ears," and "reached" and "rich." His word choice also creates a ghastly image of "wails" that are carried by a "cold wind," and they are carried up to the people who, metaphorically, socially, and literally, live *above* these dead African Americans. Once again, Beecher has loaded a short two lines with poetic technique and meaning.

In his final line of "Fire by Night," John Beecher leaves the reader with a foreshadowing: "like a distant whistle of a fast coming train" (19). Trains have long been folk-culture symbols (especially in blues, folk, country, and gospel music) for an arrival of something, and the whistle is the call that signals its nearness. However, for Beecher, that arrival is upon us through his description that the whistle can be heard and that the train is moving rapidly.

"Fire by Night" is a short and intense poem filled with symbolism, insinuation, and powerful imagery. Beecher uses the poem to appeal to our better nature, asking the reader to hold the eternal value of human life above the cultural value of racism. Beecher took the material for this poem from a real incident during his time working with the Red Cross in Birmingham in the early 1930s. The "rich on the mountain" indicates the wealthier neighborhoods are set on higher geographic elevations, like Mountainbrook in Birmingham.

The Mid-1930s through the Early 1940s

"Ensley, Alabama: 1932" is a twenty-four-line poem about a mill that closes. However, the reader does not know that the mill has closed until the final lines of the poem. This poem effectively parallels the final section of "Report to the Stockholders," because in that poem the reader gets the sense that life in the mills is bad, but when the mill closes the situation is worse. "Ensley, Alabama: 1932" was included in the section "1932-1940: Whose America?" in Hear the Wind Blow, in the sections titled "Poems, 1924-1940" in Collected Poems and in One More River to Cross, and in the section "II: To Live and Die in Dixie" of the Red Mountain Edition of To Live and Die in Dixie.

Ensley, Alabama is a real place, a few miles west of Birmingham, and east of Fairfield, site of the famed Fairfield Works, a project of Tennessee Coal & Iron (TCI) and later U.S. Steel. (John Beecher's father was an executive for both companies and though his poetry did cause a rift, it did not divide them in any significant way.) The year 1932 falls into a period during the heyday of that area's industrialization, beginning in the late 1800s, when residents were being encouraged to leave Ensley and move to Fairfield (then called Corey) to live in new, company-built housing. Some residents refused and continued to live in the shadows of the mill.

Beecher's poem describes the shutdown of a mill, which seems permanent. The opening line states, "The mills are down," and after a heavily descriptive explanation that once-booming functions have now stopped, the final

lines close with "now mills and men are down" (Beecher, Collected Poems 18-19). Given John Beecher's preoccupation with workers' rights during the 1930s, as exemplified by poems like "Report to the Stockholders" and "Like Judas, Wasn't It?" and by his later work with the FEPC, it is highly unlikely that he is simply describing a temporary shut down, for maintenance or some similar circumstance.

The poetic techniques that drive the poem are its imagery, irregular rhyme, onomatopoeia, and alliteration. The images in the poem build on the theme of loss: smoke stacks that no longer smoke, tracks that rust, furnaces that are now "desolate tubes" (21), and other pieces of machinery that now "are quiet" (21). In the latter third of the poem, it is night and the glow of molten metal is no longer there. Beecher uses short, stunted lines to reach his anticlimax: "are seen / no more" (18), with finality in his last line: "now mills and men are down." Since the poem began with the line, "The mills are down," he ends the poem with the human element, telling the reader that this loss is more than an end to these sights and sounds; there are real human consequences yet to be faced: unemployment causing men to be unable to feed their families, and attempts to find other work causing the break-up of communities. Within the poem Beecher uses sound to bring out the imagery even more, with alliterative phrases like "Smeared red," "smokeless and stark in the sun," and "iron run"; with an irregular rhyme scheme: like "rust" and "dust" ending lines five and six, "fume" and "loom" ending lines three and eight, "tubes" and "cubes" ending lines nine and eleven, and "steam" and "gleam" ending lines fifteen and seventeen; and with instances of

onomatopoeia in words like "shorn," "Smeared," "hummed," "airblast," "roar," and "steam." (18-19). The sounds in the poem's words, which build the imagery, while the poem progresses to its message, cause "Ensley, Alabama: 1932" to be an effective poem. However, this was not his only poem that uses inanimate objects to reinforce a tragic human situation.

Both complex and haunting, the four-stanza poem "Beaufort Tides" enmeshes a Southern beach scene (Beaufort, South Carolina) with images of slavery and a question of the future of America. Utilizing an irregular rhyme scheme and a weaving of natural coastal imagery with violent images of bondage, Beecher shows the two faces of the South: natural beauty and a deplorable socio-economic structure based on an immoral system of human degradation. The poem appears in all three of Beecher's collections as well as in Cary Nelson's Modern American Poetry anthology.

Built on a structure of regular six-line stanzas interspersed with irregular end rhyme, "Beaufort Tides" begins with Beecher's literal description and metaphorical assessment: "Low tide" (Beecher, Collected Poems 20). Stanza one portrays a beach scene of "scavenging gulls" at a time long gone from when "slavers ride," long before the "Rotting hulls" (20). In this first stanza, within lines of varying lengths, he rhymes "tide" and "ride" at the ends of lines one and four, and "gulls and "hulls" at the ends of lines two and five, but does not rhyme at the ends of lines three and six – "mud" and "shore" – breaking his regular pattern. Stanza two travels back into the past to describe a high tide and the arrival of a slave ship, where "bond and free, / the one in hope of leading the other in

fear" made it onto the shore. Again, Beecher uses irregularity, rhyming the end of words of lines two and five and lines four and six, bearing no resemblance to the pattern built in stanza one. Stanza three foreshadows later emancipation when the poet reminds the reader: "Not only tide / but time and blood / can turn, can ebb and flow" (20); the stanza ends with the enslaver afraid of the rising slave. In this stanza, no end words rhyme within, but some end words rhyme with end words from previous stanzas, e.g. "jubilee" in stanza three with "free" and "destiny" in stanza two. The final stanza begins on a strong note with the one-word line, "Now," followed by two short rhyming lines: "no shout / rings out" (20-21). Once the poet has the reader's attention, he gives a grim assessment: "Neither hopes. Both fear. / What future tide will free / these captives of their history?" (21) After ending on another rhyming couplet, we learn the sad fact of the poem: the slaves have been freed, but now life is not good for either group. In asking what will change to improve this situation, Beecher ends the poem with an archetypal image that he has used throughout: the tide, which symbolizes nature's cycles as well as a foreshadowing of something coming.

"Appalachian Landscape" is John Beecher's description of rural poverty in the Appalachian Mountains. The poems appears in the section "1932-1940: Whose America?" in Hear the Wind Blow, in Section II of Report to the Stockholders & Other Poems, 1932-1962, in the sections "Poems, 1924-1940" in Collected Poems and in One More River to Cross, and in Cary Nelson's Modern American Poetry anthology. Unlike some of his other poems, irony and

understatement are not present in this poem; the pathetic nature of the lifestyle and land described are splayed open in immediate and direct language.

Structured in two five-line stanzas that begin with a broken parallelism – "Sick and scrawny" (Beecher, Collected Poems 22) begins line one of stanza one and "Scrawny and sick" (22) begins line one of stanza two – the description is sympathetic and the word choice is heavily alliterative. The lines hover around ten syllables, with little variation and without end rhyme, making the poem nearly blank verse. The use of alliteration is marked feature of the poem: "sick and scrawny" and "lies the land" in line one, and "forest" and "fertility" in line two, and so on through the poem. However, it is the imagery that draws the reader's attention: the once-rich land from which all value and resources have been extracted, in soil, in timber, in coal, and in the pitiable people who still reside there: "on the stoops of their shacks, / Idle, dejected" are left "crawling / About their irremediable fields or plodding / Unwashed homewards from their failing mines" (22). Though the people are working, and working hard in fields and mines, theirs is a lost cause.

Moving from lost causes to valiant efforts, the poem, "News Item," details Beecher's angry feelings about corporate reactions to unionization. Beecher begins by letting his reader know that the speaker (this time, presumably Beecher himself) was not there personally, i.e both the title, "News Item," and the first line: "I see in the paper this morning." Beecher takes on the Everyman persona by being nothing more than a man reading the newspaper, like many men all over America. The poet creates a complex scene in the poem by interweaving four

facets: first, the story of "a guy named John House," who is beaten up for union organizing in Gadsden, Alabama, with a back-story that the union president had suffered a similar beating in years prior; second, the United States' war against Hitler's Germany; third, an unscrupulous corporation, Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, which is building a plant to fulfill a government contract for that war; and fourth, Beecher's often-used villains: corrupt law enforcement agents. Again, Beecher's poem oozes irony: our nation is fighting a massive war on another continent, making it too busy to defend the same ideals at home and too busy to know that it is consorting with a corporation acting undemocratically.

The events described in this poem are well documented. In the early 1930s, the United Rubber Workers, a division of the CIO, organized workers in the recently built Goodyear plant. The corporation made efforts to stop the workers from organizing, and that effort came to a head in 1936 when union president Sherman Dalrymple was publicly beaten by "company thugs—with law enforcement officers looking on–as he attempted to conduct a union meeting " ("United Rubber..."). This overt and often violent retaliation against union organizers by Goodyear continued until 1943 when a contract was reached and the union's presence there became official.

John Beecher wrote "News Item" during that violent period between 1936 and 1943. The poem is included in "1932-1940: Whose America?" in Hear the Wind Blow, in "Poems, 1941-1944" in Collected Poems, in "Poems, 1941-1944" in One More River to Cross, and in section II of Report to the Stockholders & Other Poems. "News Item" is one of Beecher's earliest poems to take on the

directness and style that mark his later work. Beecher's lines first criticize the situation, calling out company officers and local sheriffs as corrupt conspirators of the violent menaces:

> The Police Chief is "investigating"
>
> and I have a pretty good idea what that will amount to.
>
> (Beecher, Collected Poems 87)

The poem then offers a solution, suggesting that the US Government use its Army forces in nearby Anniston to defend the American workers' rights to organize peaceably, naming specific locations and people's names: "Etowah," "Goodyear Rubber," and "John House" (87-88). Beecher also invokes a tactic that he uses often in his narrative poems, stating that people do not know about the situation, but they ought to and he is now telling them. This poem also marks his departure from smaller-scale, image-driven characterizations – like individual workers he knew or saw in the steel mills – and into topics of a larger scale, as in the broader labor struggle of "Like Judas, Wasn't It?" and in the Southern labor and racial issues of "In Egypt Land." Though "News Item" is not Beecher's best poetry, it does mark his move into a different type of poetry.

The Early 1940s

John Beecher wrote the long poem, "Like Judas, Wasn't It?", in 1940 based on a personal experience in 1932, "after listening to John L. Lewis's indorsement [sic] of Wendell Wilkie" (Beecher, PM). The poem appears in the sections titled "Poems, 1924-1940" in both Collected Poems and One More River

to Cross, but it does not appear in Hear in the Wind Blow. Taking up five pages in the Collected Poems and six pages in One More River to Cross, "Like Judas, Wasn't It?" spans 180 lines.

In the poem, Beecher criticizes John Lewis, a labor leader who was president of the United Mine Workers and a founder of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and likens him to a con artist selling patent medicines and to Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus Christ to the Romans. For Beecher, Lewis is leading the workers down a primrose path to nowhere. "Like Judas, Wasn't It?" also created another opportunity for Beecher when he met Mo Asch, president of Folkways Records, who recorded him reading this poem (Place).

John Beecher uses the poem, "Like Judas, Wasn't It?" to speak directly to John Lewis about his chagrin at the labor leader's actions:

> John Lewis
>
> you don't know who I am
>
> but I've known you
>
> for a long, long time (Beecher, Collected Poems 23)

The poem continues as though Beecher is giving Lewis a piece of his mind. The short lines introductory lines give way to widely varied line lengths, quite obviously breaking at natural breaths. Beecher's style here is a sharp contrast from the imagistic style of "Fire by Night"; here, the places and characters are named and very specific historical facts provided, like "In 1932 / a guy named Sam Insull" (24), and "and on the 25th day of October, 1940, / they got it" (27). After a long poem that derides the trickster Lewis, Beecher ends with an

insinuation that Lewis could not face those he claims to lead; after relaying the disappointment of the men in the union hall listening to Lewis on the radio, he ends the poem with these lines:

> God, if I ever speak to people
> and their faces change like those faces changed
> I'll go out and hang myself— like Judas, wasn't it?
> John Lewis
> if you could have seen those faces
> when you got through . . . (27)

In terms of style, this poem is emblematic of the type of Beecher poem that Marjorie Perloff rejects, but that Paul Lauter and Robert Merideth describe: a communal poem meant to be shared for the utilitarian purpose of uniting working people, not for the purposes of self-satisfaction during leisure time or for aesthetic "pure poetry." While applying traditional literary analysis to his earlier poems – ones written closer to his own formal literary writing – makes sense, this one (and "News Item" like it) is made of different metal. Beecher's purpose was not to please literary critics or to find space for his poem in a literary journal that these union members would not read. This poem was created to speak to working people about an issue in their lives, and as such it succeeds.

"Like Judas, Wasn't It?" and "News Item" represent one of Beecher's stylistic and topical patterns: the longer, epic-styled narrative (almost sermon-like) poems that take a progressive approach to social issues. In earlier poems, Beecher had portrayed mill workers with imagery describing mill life, but without

giving the men names. These poems of the later 1930s and 1940s move to a more personal quality – naming John House in "News Item" or Sam Insull in "Like Judas, Wasn't It?" – while also reaching out further into society to ordinary people. Where Beecher astutely portrays the iniquity of the labor struggles in those earlier poems, these two and the next one – also written about an event that occurred in 1932 – utilize a less formal literary style to reach those people involved not only in labor issues, but also in racial struggles.

"In Egypt Land" is a long[5] four-part poem describing a violent biracial union rebellion in eastern Alabama in 1932. John Beecher had written a scholarly article about the events for Social Forces magazine in 1934 while he was doing graduate work in sociology at the University of North Carolina. (The poem later led Harvard student Theodore Rosengarten to seek out one of the characters, Nate Shaw, who was called Ned Cobb in the poem, in the 1960s and record Shaw's story in All God's Dangers, which won a National Book Award in 1974.) The poem, "In Egypt Land," constitutes its own section in Collected Poems, in One More River to Cross, and in Hear the Wind Blow.

Beecher opens the poem with a method that he used often during the period: a simple opening stanza stating clearly the poem's time, place, and situation; in lines one through three, he begins:

> It was Alabama, 1932
> but the spring came
> same as it always had. (Beecher, Collected Poems 35)

[5] The poem takes about 20 pages in each of Beecher's books.

He uses a similar type of opening in "Like Judas, Wasn't It?" and in "Here I Stand." In this poem, Beecher does two things next: he sets up the irony and he loads the poem down with imagery to set the scene, all natural and positive. Lines four and five state, "A man just couldn't help believing / this would be a good year for him"; (35) this ironic statement sets up the poem's narrative because the events of this story are not a "good year" for the characters. Next, Beecher lays on natural imagery: "redbud and dogwood everywhere in bloom / and the peachtree blossoming / [...] it looked new again / [...] the red clay shining with wet / under the sun" (35). The poem begins on a very positive note, and it seems as though a pastoral tale will ensue.

The second and third stanzas of the poem set up for the reader what the situation is for the main character, Cliff James, though he is not named yet. Cliff James is a black sharecropper who has done well for himself and "Years ago / thought he bought this land" (Beecher 35). This detail is important, and Beecher elaborates on it more clearly in the Social Forces article. The main character in the poem had purchased a plot of land in the 1920s, but because he had little or no comprehension of how mortgages and interest rates work, he did not understand that the monthly interest exceeded his monthly payments, so he was actually deeper in debt with each passing month. When the poet informs his reader toward the end of the second stanza that "Mr Parker could come drive them off the place any day / if he took a notion / and the law would back him" (35), he sets up the pitiable situation of Cliff James. Common sense told the man that he should own the land by now, and he truly did not understand the injustice of the situation or

how it happened. Beecher ends the third stanza by foreshadowing what will come: "No / that was one thing Mr. Parker would never get a hold of / not that shotgun . . ." (36).

Part I continues with the rest of the set up for the story. In the recent past, union officials have arrived and worked to organize both the white and black sharecroppers together to arrange better conditions. The meeting described takes place in a church, its congregation singing the hymn, "Go Down, Moses," which asks "to let my people go" (37). Poetically, Beecher weaves in dialogue written in dialect and repetition to drive home the point that these people who are being treated unfairly need this union:

> what's got room for colored folks and white
>
> what's got room for all the folks
>
> that ain't got no land
>
> that ain't got no stock
>
> that ain't got no something to eat half the year
>
> that ain't got no shoes
>
> that raises all the cotton
>
> but can't get none to wear
>
> 'cept old patchedy overhauls and floursack dresses. (37)

In the poem, an African-American woman educated at Tuskegee told how she had escaped this poverty and how this union could help them, too. Beecher writes out a call-and-response dialogue within a sermon about remedies for the injustice right before the "High Sheriff" bursts in with local lawmen to beat and arrest the

people in attendance. In the final lines of Part I, the reader learns a black man named Ralph Gray had been posted on the road to the church to be a lookout for whites "with just his single barrel" (39); he had shot at the car to stop them from coming, but he was killed: "Ralph Gray died / but the people in the church / all got away alive" (39).

Part II brings Cliff James more fully into focus and sets the scene as summertime, informing the reader in the first line: "The crop was laid by" (39). Once again, in the second stanza of Part II, Beecher uses an ironic type of foreshadowing to build the tension in his narrative: "Cliff James couldn't remember ever making a better crop / on that old red land" (39). However, it had taken going even deeper into debt to do it, and "Come settling time this fall / Mr Parker was going to get every last thing / every dime of the cotton money / the corn / the mules / the cattle / and the law would back him" (40). As Part II continues, Beecher brings in the rest of the cast of characters, the black sharecroppers nearby who will side with Cliff against the law and the white sharecroppers who are just as bad off as their black counterparts. By the end of Part II, we see the reality of Cliff James's situation – "Things looked worse than they ever had on all the time of his life" (42) – and the union might be the saving grace. However, Beecher ends Part II with Cliff James "looking over his ripened cotton" at "the thunderhead" that is "bringing storm . . ." (42). By the end of Part II, the reader understands the dire scenario and the violence that is coming.

Part III, which occurs right before Christmas, begins with Cliff James throwing down the gauntlet.

"You"

Cliff James said

"nor the High Sheriff

nor all his deputies

is gonna git them mules."

The head deputy put the writ of attachment back in his pocket

then his hand went to the butt of his pistol

but he didn't pull it. (42)

James, a black sharecropper in Alabama, has told a white Sheriff's deputy that there is no way that anyone is going to take his property away from him. The deputy's answer is swift and certain:

"I'm going to get the High Sheriff and help"

he said

"and come back and kill you all in a pile." (42-43)

Years of mistreatment, animosity, and abuse have culminated in this moment. At Cliff James's home, Ned Cobb debates with him about what to do next, and they decide he should go get the other black farmers to help. They decide that there is no need to call on the white farmers: "this was something you couldn't expect white folks to get in on / even white folks in your Union" (43). As the other black men come to Cliff James' house to face off with the lawmen, an act they know will probably mean all of their deaths, Cliff James sends his family away, knowing that he will never see them again but knowing that he must do this. In the next stanza, the white mob arrives, but without the High Sheriff, and "there

were forty men in Cliff James cabin / all armed" (44). The white men have no idea they are facing such odds. They call Cliff James out of the house, and Ned Cobb goes out with him.

> and Cliff called out to the Laws
> "I's ready to listen white folks."
> "This is what we got to say nigger!"
> and the head deputy whipped out his pistol
> The first shot got Ned
> and the next two got Cliff in the back
> as he was dragging Ned to the cabin. (45)

The shooting begins, and several of the black farmers are shot or have run away to help their own families who they know will be sought out in retribution. As Part III ends, one white man is also shot, as they get back to the car and get away.

Part IV of "In Egypt Land" deals with the aftermath of shootout. Cliff James has escaped, even after being shot in the back. Every black man involved in the shootout is either dead, arrested or hiding. Beecher builds further sympathy for his characters, who are hard-working farmers, by relating:

> In a couple of days it was going to be Christmas
> yes Christmas
> and nobody belonging to Cliff James
> was going to get a thing
> not so much as an orange or a candy stick
> for the littlest boy.

What kind of a Christmas was that
when a man didn't have a few nickels
to get his children some oranges and candy sticks
what kind of a Christmas and what kind of a country anyway
when you made ten bales of cotton
five thousands pounds of cotton
with your own hands
and your wife's hands
and your children's hands (47)

As the poem ends, the readers find out that Cliff James had wandered through the woods for two days, finding that no one he met would help him or house him. After two nights of sleeping in the woods with bullets in his back, Cliff James reached the hospital in Tuskegee, where he sought treatment.

"In Egypt Land" ends with the following epigrammatic prose paragraph that describes Cliff James' eventual fate:

The Sheriff removed Cliff James from the hospital to the county jail on December 22. A mob gathered to lynch the prisoner on Christmas day. For protection he was taken to jail in Montgomery. Here Cliff James died on the stone floor of his cell, December 27, 1932. (48)

Beecher concludes with the interesting details that a white mob sought to lynch James on the day celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, and that James was moved for his "protection." The historical truth of the matter, detailed in Beecher's article

in Social Forces, was that the hospital in Tuskegee was one of the main places that law enforcement was looking for the wanted men and that the hospital staff willingly gave Cliff James up to them. Beecher leaves that traitorous act out of the poem.

John Beecher accomplishes three things with the poem, "In Egypt Land." First, it may be his best and most effective poem that turns history into poetry. The imagery builds a very compelling scene; the characters are well developed; the story is intriguing; and he uses foreshadowing and irony well. Second, he uses his long narrative style very effectively, breaking lines at natural breaths and using dialect nearly to perfection. Third, Beecher uses poetry as a tool for understanding the poorest working people; it would be difficult to read this poem and not see the injustice in it. This type of poem was typical of his work from the late 1930s and early 1940s, bringing morality into poetry while churning out his own personal vision of the way things ought to be,

"Josiah Turnbull Took No Part in Politics" is a poem about a hypocrite who thinks with his wallet, not with his morals. The poem appears in "III: 1941-1944: Their Blood Cries Out" in Hear the Wind Blow, in both sections titled "Poems, 1941-1944" in Collected Poems and in One More River to Cross, and in "III: Bestride the Narrow World" in the Red Mountain Edition of To Live and Die in Dixie. The character Josiah Turnbull is symbolic of selfishness and treachery, and indicative in Beecher's poem of the type of person who stays of messy socio-political situations and rationalizes that non-participation to himself. For Beecher,

who never took the easy way out when times got tough, this type of person would be an unforgivable coward.

The poem is told in third-person omniscient narration and begins with no hint as to the time frame of the poem – the American Revolution – but only a description of the character and scene, but one rich in symbolism. The reader learns that the quasi-historical Josiah Turnbull is quite glad to stay out of "politics" inside his "snug Philadelphia parlor/ while the blizzard swirled" (Beecher, Collected Poems 132). The setting is symbolic of the main character's safety even while situated within the storm of the American Revolution. In the second stanza, the character is developed further: a well-educated man who reads Roman history and philosophy and who believes that "we have fallen on evil days" (132) when people need to stay out of public affairs. However, in the third stanza, the narrator relays that a "redcoat Major" comes in and goes to his room in Turnbull's home, which is all right with him because the British soldier pays "in gold" (132). The poem has reach a turning point, with Beecher once again using irony to betray his point: Josiah Turnbull *does* take part in politics. After a few lines of putting down the "Continentals," Turnbull's real face is shown: "that very day" (133) Josiah Turnbull had made a deal with the British to deliver foodstuffs to them. Stanza five elaborates that Turnbull's main obstacle is the "risk always / that the starving Continentals" will ambush him and steal all of it. Beecher closes the poem by coming full circle to really show how hypocritical this character is, when he reminds himself that he is "comfortably reflecting / that he took no part in politics" (133).

The strength of this poem lies in its narration and irony, rather than poetic techniques like sound devices. The nuanced storytelling builds a portrait of a man who enjoys the fruits of being an American but refuses to support its cause. Considering that the poem was written during the early years of World War II, a parallel can be drawn between Josiah Turnbull of the late 1700s and people like him in the 1940s, people who lie even to themselves in order to avoid suffering or hardship. Also, as a historical note on Beecher's family, he was particularly proud that one of his ancestors had made rifles for the "Continentals" to fight the British, so for the poet, a traitor like Josiah Turnbull would be especially unbearable, like an American who might side with Hitler.

John Beecher's two long poems that were published as books by Twice A Year Press mark a brief foray back into poetry during the late 1930s and early 1940s. As his work with resettlement programs was ending, his work with the FEPC was beginning, and World War II was starting, it seems an odd time in his professional life to delve back into poetry, but he clearly had a lot on his mind.

The long poem, "And I Will Be Heard: Two Talks to the American People," was also originally published in 1940 as a monograph from Twice A Year Press. The little book enjoyed a letter of praise from William Carlos Williams and a positive review in Time magazine. The poem was included later in both Collected Poems and One More River To Cross as its own section, but it was left out of Hear the Wind Blow. "And I Will Be Heard" is divided into two parts: the title section, consisting of some discussion of the abolition movement, Beecher's own family history, and some criticism of major American figures like

Henry Ford and John Lewis; and "Think It Over, America!" in which he proceeds to catalog various injustices that he thinks people ought to know about. This long poem leans more heavily toward the style of "In Egypt Land" or "Like Judas, Wasn't It?" than its follow-up, "Here I Stand."

To open the poem, John Beecher invokes American history with a discussion of William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist and founder of The Liberator newspaper. (Readers not steeped in Garrison's history should know that the quote, "And I will be heard" comes from a famous editorial by him.) The narrative in the poem immediately takes off, with widely varying line lengths and a plain-spoken, sermon-like style, into a history lesson and tirade about multiple injustices perpetrated against Garrison for speaking up against what he believed was wrong. This explanation continues for eighty-seven lines in six stanzas of varying lengths.

The personal part of the poem begins next with the opening lines of the seventh stanza:

> My name is John Beecher
> and I am writing this piece
> mainly about what goes on inside of me
> and what I am thinking on May 22, 1940
>
> (Beecher, Collected Poems 53)

It would be difficult to find a passage of poetry more plainly stated. Beecher takes a somewhat sarcastic tone, with tinges of anger and indignation showing through. As he tells the reader first about his anti-authoritarian motives then about his long

family history, he includes other rebels like his descendant John Beecher who first came to America and helped found Connecticut, abolitionist preacher Lyman Ward Beecher, his daughter Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin, and her brother Henry Ward Beecher. Part I closes with an explanation of the poet's paternal grandparents and father, before ending with a seven-line stanza about Edward Everett Hale's "A Man Without A Country," which seems somewhat out of place.

Part Two of "And I Will He Heard" launches into a full-on tirade about Henry Ford, the automotive tycoon; Charles Lindbergh, the aviator; William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper tycoon; John Lewis and Bill Green, two labor leaders; Communist party leader Earl Browder; congressman Martin Dies, head of the House Un-American Activities committee; and finally, Adolf Hitler. In much the same vein as the poem, "Like Judas, Wasn't It?," Beecher writes as though he is speaking directly to each person. Beecher's antagonistic words for Henry Ford center on the idea that Ford should not let himself believe that his money and high position make him any better than the workers who earned it all for him. As for Charles Lindbergh, Beecher has a warning about coming back from England "trying to make politics out of it" (65) by talking about Hitler after accepting a medal from Nazi leader and aviator Hermann Goering. Beecher also wants to let William Randolph Heart know, "I stopped reading your lousy newspapers" (65), because Hearst lives in a palatial mansion and calls himself "a disciple of Christ" (66) while people suffer tremendously during the Great Depression. Labor leaders John Lewis and Bill Green get the once over for allowing corruption within the

union that is supposed to serve working people, not "racketeers" (66). Beecher also takes Communist party leader Earl Browder to task: "They put you in jail for traveling under a fake passport / and you belong there / [...] / When Mr Stalin said jump you jumped" (67). Next, Beecher criticizes Martin Dies of HUAC for his choice of who to go after, before he focuses on Adolf Hitler, whose German army was terrorizing Europe. The section ends with a warning to Hitler:

> Yes we Americans
> we the people of new world
> will take over
> the empire
> you tried to found
> but your idea
> was death
> and ours is life
> [...]
> because humanity
> will join us. (69)

Beecher seemed to know, more than a year and a half before Pearl Harbor, that the United States would enter World War II as the great saviors.

Part two of the poem, "Think It Over America," begins by reminding the readers – in case, they forgot – "This is John Beecher talking to you" (70). This second part of the poem is itself broken into four parts. Part I is Beecher's rant about the New Deal ending because some people said that the nation could not

afford to continue its programs. "I say / we can't afford to stop a single thing" (71), Beecher writes, as he goes into an explanation of how the common working man – "Take some guy / named Bashinsky or Tomburello or Schmidt or maybe Murphy" (71) – is less interested in fighting fascism in Europe than in having a decent life right here in America. Part II begins with a strangely surreal prose-poem about the murder of a paralyzed black man named Willie Hall, followed by poetry comparing the injustice against Hall in America to the injustice Hitler was perpetrating against the Jews. Part III tells the story of Venezuelan teenager that Beecher met on a train, on "May 21, 1940" (77), the day before the date given in the beginning of the two-part poem; the young man had been prevented from reading his poem, "The Drill," about Standard Oil's activities in Venezuela. Beecher and the boy get in a discussion about injustice, Simon Bolivar, the Monroe Doctrine and American history that focuses on how ordinary people often get tread on. Part IV sums it all up:

> Now I am going to come to the point
> Maybe some of you don't see yet
> how this piece adds up (78)

He recounts how injustice against common people is happening all over the world, from the working "guy" in America to Latin America to fascist Germany. Beecher's solution comes in the poem's last lines:

> they have got to let the people rule
> FOR NOBODY
> CAN BUY

THE PEOPLE. (83)

At the end of the Depression, "And I Will Be Heard" was a successful product. Its subject matter was relevant, balancing the labor concerns of the Depression with the coming war against Hitler, while combining the two into one common purpose. The poem would have been easy to understand, but still full of skillful nuance.

The lengthy fifteen-part poem, "Here I Stand," is a dreamy and Modernistic foray through many aspects of the poet's life, focusing on his idea that America stupidly rejects the efforts of its best thinkers and workers. Originally published as a one-poem monograph in 1941 while Beecher was still working as a government programs administrator, "Here I Stand" takes up twenty-six pages in Collected Poems and thirty pages in One More River to Cross. Like many of Beecher's poems, its title is an explicit and appropriate description of the subject matter, though stylistically it moves away from the common-language style of "In Egypt Land" and "And I Will Be Heard." Essentially a poem about Beecher himself being a man who is fully alive and who refuses to accept complacency, "Here I Stand" weaves through multiple experiences, conversations, and scenes of conflict.

"Here I Stand" begins with the four lines:

Starting from Alabama

on September 8, 1941

I came North

to find out what was going on.

(Beecher, Collected Poems 94)

This clear and concise opening sequence sets the tone for a poem that wanders, both in style and content, through the turmoil the poet faces in dealing with the government and journalists, searching for a job, and exploring ideas of artistic integrity. Section one has the poet taking a train out of the South, narrating what is on his mind, making assertions that he has worked for "eight years" on making life in the South better, but he believes that his work has meant little. The opening section also holds the line that may be Beecher's most famous quotation: "strength is a matter of the made-up mind" (95). Beecher has made up his mind to take his conscience to Washington, D.C., to fight for what he believes in most: fighting for the rights of American workers.

Subsequent sections involve a variety of scenarios. Sections II and III introduce the reader to two men that Beecher encounters. The first man, "the drunk in the washroom" (97), is a job foreman on a government project whose methods make no sense to him and he has come to say so. The man also rails that the war is not necessary, that all that needs to be done is:

just kill about twelve of them Germans

the right twelve

and it'd all be over.

You oughtn't go against

the working sort of people

no time

no where. (97)

The second man, "the man with a month for a name" (96), is one of Beecher's former students, as well as an unemployed writer who cannot find a publisher for his book. Beecher does not let the reader know specifically what the man's book is about, but does say, "We need a book on that" (99). The second man, "december," is a pitiful sort of character, as lost as Beecher in the massive government system he is trying to work within, but he seems to lack the strength that Beecher has. In Section IV, Beecher faces the bureaucracy of the federal government. The man he is talking to is a "friend" (99), but he does not have good things to say.

"John" he said "we can only use 60 per cent of you in the

government

and you want to give 120 (99)

Beecher begins to get some straight answers when his friend tells him that he is "too creative for the government" (100). After accepting that he is "Not Wanted" (100), the poet breaks into a strange sidetrack that moves from harping on the phrase "too creative" to the concept of a "Seed" (101) and finally resting in a surreal scene of vague sexuality and natural imagery.

Sections V, VI, and VII continue this dreamy, disjointed narrative by exploring situations that involve artists, their exploitation, and what is accepted and acceptable. In section V, Beecher once again meets "the man with a month for name" (102) who, like him, has given up and is leaving on his same train. The

lines in which Beecher explains the man's situation, he changes stylistically into long prose-poem lines:

> He has lost his job in Washington, a relief job that played
> out and though hundreds are being hired every day
> he somehow cannot be used anymore.
> and his wife has lost her job also for belonging to
> something she had a right to belong to according to
> the precious charter of American liberties but in
> order to defend these the better the authorities are
> finding it expedient to abridge them in certain
> instances. (102)[6]

In sections VI and VII, Beecher holds a surreal discussion about the gatekeepers of the art world, breaking into imagery of caged animals ready to strike, and then a man tells him,

> "they've turned art into a whorehouse" he said
> "not a real whorehouse but a pseudo whorehouse
> if it were a real one that would be different
> that would be all right.
> But here in America
> they buy and sell the artist
> then they don't use him. (104-105)

The man continues:

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[6] Some lines in this poem have a hanging indent. They are reproduced here with the same hanging indents that appear in Collected Poems.

> "You never know" he said "The pressure is terrible. America corrupts her best and puts them to no use. A few stand out against it. Only a few." (105)

The two sections parallel Beecher's discussion of his experiences with the bureaucracy of the federal government; he is metaphorically likening himself to caged beasts who would strike if they could, and "the man on the couch" (105), who Beecher decides by the section's end is a conflicted hypocrite, is the character whose statements add credence to Beecher's government friend who told him that they could not "use" him.

Section VIII is a very short, four-line sidebar. Beecher proposes that he could just give up the whole thing and "join the Canadian army" (106). This would mean him leaving his wife and children, but "the ravens" (106) would take care of them.

Sections IX and X step away from overt political statements into a more subtle type of commentary. Beecher dances with a woman and tells her about instances in his youth when people had shot at him. They dance to classical music and listen to "the man who was born to be a bishop" (107) talk about the war, stating that he thinks the Germans and Russians ought to just kill each other off for "submitting to bad leadership" (107). The section ends with "this woman from Kansas" (108) telling him that she would like to move to South Africa because "it's so free" (108). Section X describes a movie involving the Red Army and the home of "Chaikovsky [sic]" (108) where the poet ends by sympathizing with the "peasant" (109) actors: "I salute you / race humaine [sic]" (109).

Sections XI through XV involve scenes with the poet and his wife, Virginia. Section XI gives a glimpse into their very personal lives, repeating the phrase "ever virgin" (110-112) and including a vacation to a secluded cabin and his wife being upset "when the milk would not come the last time" (111) for their fourth child. Section XII tells the story of a man in New York who will not rent them a room because he believes they are "adulterers" (113); they are pleased that they seem so in love, having been together "for sixteen years" (113). Section XIII contains a whimsical story about some men on the subway who have been fishing and who show the expectant riders their catch: "a huge and well-clawed crab" which "sends salt and unwashed air through all the car" (114). Section XIV deals with an altercation with a belligerent drunk on the subway, where Beecher stands up to the bully when other men will not protect the women with them; as a result of his actions, he ends up facing off with the drunk and with the other on-lookers for threatening to beat up someone so pathetic:

> and the appeaser comes over to us
> "You better move on" he says
> "he's drunk and you can't do anything with him
> he'll heckle you as long as you stand here."
>
> "Let him heckle" I say " but he'd better do his heckling
> from
> where he is."

"If I were you" the appeaser says "I'd move on."

"I'm not moving" I say.

Section XV closes the poem with the words of a man who advises Beecher and his wife to get out of New York City; "this town is corrupt" (117), he tells them. After all of these imagistic romps, Beecher ends with "Here I stand/John Beecher on the block/sound of wind and limb and fully formed/fit to bear the burden of my time/until my spine cracks under the weight// Do I hear any bids?" (118)

"Here I Stand" is one of John Beecher's more complex poems. It is laden with sound devices, imagery, and stylistic changes for emphasis. In Section XI, one line about "plainclothes bishop" (107) states that he "excathedrates with a corpulent catch at the close of each breath" (107). In describing two oncoming headlights on a rural road and presupposing who might be in the car, Beecher writes that it may be two satisfied young lovers heading home "the commemorative handkerchief dropped by the roadside / and the consummation by finger" (110). Although less successful in gaining attention and praise than "And I Will Be Heard," this poem is much more artfully crafted, fuller with symbolism, and much more rooted in a Modernistic literary style.

The Dry Spell of the Late1940s and Early 1950s

It is important here to make some remarks about John Beecher's career and life with respect to his poetry. All three of his collections – Hear the Wind Blow, Collected Poems and One More River To Cross, all arranged chronologically – leave out the years from 1945 to 1954. All three books contain

sections that include poems from 1941-1944 then move to 1955 as the start date for the next section. During this period, it seems that Beecher had virtually stepped away from poetry, instead working in other non-literary areas and writing some nonfiction and journalism. During the mid-1940, he wrote published All Brave Sailors and wrote what would later become the history book, Tomorrow Is A Day; by the late 1940s, he was teaching sociology at San Francisco State; and from 1950 until 1955 (when he married Barbara) he was working as a rancher and trying to get by. Many of his poems from the period of 1955 to the early 1960s typically explore the bitterness in his personal life during the 1950s, due to McCarthyism, blacklisting, and public paranoia. These poems of the late 1950s, like "Screened" about an outspoken sailor who was reduced to homelessness by McCarthyism, and "To Alexander Mieklejohn" about his old mentor at Wisconsin, continue the trend of incorporating his personal experiences and observations into his subject matter.

The Mid- to Late 1950s

"Reflections of a Man Who Once Stood Up for Freedom" plainly describes the effects of being blacklisted on the poet's life. Unlike his other fiery, aggressive, ironic poems, this one is sad and somber. It is included in the section "1955-1959: An Air That Kills" in Hear the Wind Blow, in the section "Poems, 1955-1960" in Collected Poems, and in Section III of Report to the Stockholders & Other Poems, but it does not appear in One More River to Cross. Beecher uses this poem to list the hardships that have befallen him since being blacklisted, as well as to wax philosophic about whether his insistent stand against injustice was

worth it. The poem has no stanza breaks, nor widely varying line lengths that had marked other powerful works of this period; instead it has a fairly regular structure with unrhymed lines that hover around eight syllables each.

The poem begins with a question that Beecher may have been asking to his reader, but more probably it is a rhetorical question to himself: I'd say that gesture cost enough / but who can reckon up these things?" (Beecher, Collected Poems 169) He also foreshadows what basically did happen in his life much later, supposing that it would be near the end of his life or after it when being blacklisted would be resolved for good; he was not reinstated at San Francisco State until 1977, three years before his death. The poem continues, evoking dark, apocalyptic imagery to describe the pervading "atmosphere" (169) of paranoia. However, he counters with his own assessment that "The world is indivisible / and so is freedom" (169). What follows his metaphor of comparing weather patterns to social patterns is his exoneration-of-self, which lasts only for a moment in the poem.

> [...] Well you might say
> that it was my supreme misfortune
> to recognize what kind of storm
> was bearing down upon us. I sought
> to warn the rest of you, for which
> no thanks to me. The Jeremiah
> role is rarely popular. (169)

In this poem, the reader is allowed to learn to just how unpopular it can be to play "the Jeremiah role." Beecher is vilified and unable to find work; his children have dropped out of college and become shiftless; and "their mother" (170) rejects him as well, after being "so close for more than twenty years!" (170) (This must be a reference to Virginia, from whom he was already divorced by the time he was blacklisted.) After his attempts at justifying himself earlier in the poem, Beecher ends by trying to answer the question that he asked in the first two lines.

> I really don't know why I threw
> my life away for principle.
> It seems an empty thing from here
> shoveling behind these cows. (170)

In order to analyze this poem, a reader must look to both formalist criticism and biographical criticism. He uses a regular structure into which he builds a traditional question-and-answer mode, similar to the technique used in a sonnet. He also incorporates metaphors, like the storm, and sound devices like alliteration, e.g. "Force and fraud" (169). Finally he closes the poem with his punch line, letting the reader know that this philosophical and intelligent speaker has been reduced to shoveling cow dung. This poem is worthy of remark, not only because it elaborates Beecher's "reflections" on being blacklisted, but also because, in the midst of long narrative poems like "In Egypt Land" and "Just Peanuts," we can see that he was still practicing more traditional poetry as well.

Returning to social themes, "Just Peanuts" tells the story of a communal farm near Americus, Georgia, where residents peacefully and simply achieved

racial unity and equality, but locals responded with severe violence against them for it. The violence against *Koinonia* farm was well documented; among other writers who described the situation, preacher-activist-writer Will D. Campbell wrote about it in an article, "Where There's So Much Smoke: Thirty-Caliber Violence at Koinonia," for Sojourners magazine in 1979:

> [...] smokehouses had been dynamited and their gasoline pumps punctured with high powered rifles. The buildings had been riddled during the night with machine guns using tracer bullets, and some of the children playing volleyball at dusk had been fired on from passing automobiles, the pellets raining about them like summer hailstones. (Campbell)

Though Campbell's article came years after Beecher's poem, the descriptions are basically the same. Beecher's poem focuses on the hypocritical nature of some Southerners who perpetrate acts of cruelty in the name of the Christian faith, claiming that race-mixing is un-Christian.

"Just Peanuts" was included in Section III of the 1971 Red Mountain Edition of Report to the Stockholders & Other Poems, 1932-1962, in the section "Poems, 1955-1960" in Collected Poems, and in the section "Poems 1961-1974" in One More River to Cross, but it was not included in Hear in the Wind Blow. These editorial inconsistencies make the poem somewhat hard to date exactly. Koinonia's own website provides the history this way:

> Through the 1950s and early 60s, Koinonia remained a witness to nonviolence and racial equality as its members withstood firebombs, bullets, KKK rallies, death threats, property damage, excommunication from churches, and economic boycotts. (Koinonia)

The violence about which Beecher was writing appears to be from this period, but, understanding his propensity to poetically enhance stories (as in "In Egypt Land"), the poem's subject could be an amalgam of the incidents within that general situation.

In the poem, Beecher uses a strong narrative voice and the repetition of the phrase "their Christian neighbors" to highlight the hypocrisy of the Sumter County locals. The poem opens with Beecher's standard stylistic device of stating the setting: "Down in Georgia / [...] / near the town of Americus / [...] / there is a farm / called Koinonia / meaning 'community'" (Beecher, Collected Poems 189). The poet relies on his narrative voice in the poem rather than a piling on of literary devices, giving the background that the reader will need in the first three stanzas. Koinonia is an established farm, and its residents have "built it up / from just about nothing" (190) in the fifteen years they have been there. However, this situation is not so simple, and the third stanza elaborates:

> These people are all religious
> calling themselves Christians
> like their neighbors
> and some of them are even preachers

but because they took Negroes in

and treated them as brothers

their Christian neighbors got some dynamite (190)

Stanzas four and five detail the local reactions, some violent and others subtle, to the integrated farm. Some citizens of Americus – "white citizens of Americus / real 100 per cent Americans that is" (190) – used the dynamite and shotguns indiscriminately at them. Furthermore, the poet relates that other forms of intimidation were used, like seeing to it that their insurance was cancelled and that no one bought their products.

Beecher begins to interject his own commentary in stanza six, before wrapping up the poem with one final anecdote in stanzas seven and eight. The lines in stanza six help the reader see why a man like Beecher would like them enough to write about them.

You would think the people of Koinonia

would quit and all go away

but they haven't

and they don't

They work all day

stand watches all night

and pray for their Christian neighbors (191)

Then, if the violence against them had not been enough to evoke sympathy from the reader, Beecher gives us the story of "two women" and a "little boy / aged

nine" (191) from the commune who "try to buy peanuts [for seeds] up and down Georgia" (191). They are turned away everywhere they go, including:

> One place a man cursed these women out
> for "dirty niggerloving whores"
> and yelled to raise a mob (191)

Beecher ends the poem, saying that all they wanted was "just peanuts . . ." (191). Representative of Beecher's ironic manner, the search for seed peanuts, of course, represents a larger cultural struggle between the nonconformist and ignorance in society.

"Just Peanuts" is bears some similarities to "In Egypt Land," which also dealt with localized violence against a racial integration situation, though "Just Peanuts" is much shorter – seventy-four lines divided into eight stanzas – and elaborates less on the finer details. However, Beecher uses much the same tactics in both poems: protagonists who are just trying to earn a decent living, antagonists who commit vicious and violent assaults against them, providing a setting immediately, and ending with an anticlimax punctuated with an ellipsis. Both poems rely heavily on imagery and narrative, rather than other poetic techniques like sound devices or regular rhythm.

The 1960s

Much more traditional in its form, "Homage to A Subversive" bears the inscription "For H.D.T." — Henry David Thoreau, a man who was a lot like John Beecher: complex, sometimes confusing, always uncompromising, and firmly

resolute. The poem is the first in the section, "Poems, 1961-1974" in Collected Poems, marking it is as one written as he emerged from being blacklisted. The poem also appears as the prologue in Hear the Wind Blow but was left out of One More River To Cross. More traditionally formed, the poem evokes the symbolism of this American rebel, even quoting him three times in a twenty-six-line poem.

Written in unrhymed lines of ten syllables each – blank verse, essentially – the poem is divided into two thirteen-line stanzas. Beecher opens the poem with the statement: "Soon, Henry David, wind will fill the land / saluting your centenary" (Beecher, Collected Poems 229). Because this poem opens the section, "Poems 1961-1974," and because the one-hundredth anniversary of Thoreau's death would be 1962, it is feasible to date the poem as 1961. The poem uses a high poetic diction in its exaltation of this nonconformist American writer and thinker. Beecher spends the first stanza using two quotes from Thoreau to belittle Harvard University and institutionalized religion. He spends the second stanza berating people who claim to like Thoreau but who submit to authority without questioning it nonetheless. Beecher finalizes with a mocking admonition and a quote from Thoreau himself:

> [...] Come back! They'll turn you in. "How
> should a man behave toward this government
> today? I answer, that he cannot without
> disgrace associate himself with it." (229)

Though a comparison of details of their lives and their fights with authority may be debated, a comparison of substance of each man's character could not. It is no

surprise that Beecher would pen a poem celebrating an American historical figure like Thoreau in 1961, as McCarthyism was ending and the Civil Rights movement was beginning.

"To Live and Die in Dixie" returns Beecher to the stylistic tool of piling on images to create a mosaic effect. Something like "Report to the Stockholders," this poem is also nine mini-narratives, each portraying a different scene of life (and death) in the racist South. One by one, Beecher describes nine scenes: he and his youthful friends throwing rocks at black people, his family's black maid having a stroke during a luncheon his mother was holding, his family's black male servant quitting them to go work for himself but having his hopes dashed, the leased-out black convicts working and singing near his school, his neighbor shooting at him and his friends thinking they were black people causing problems, neo-Confederates parading and white boys raping black girls, his trying to make his black maid salute the flag while she worked on the July 4th holiday, a prominent local citizen shooting a black chicken thief, and a local black idiot-savant artist getting lynched by a mob looking for another man.

This poem (or some sections of it) was published not in only Beecher's books, but also in anthologies. It was, of course, the title poem within To Live and Die in Dixie & Other Poems, as well as being included in its entirety in the section "V: 1961-1965: Woke Up This Morning" in Hear the Wind Blow, in the sections both titled "Poems, 1961-1974" in Collected Poems and in One More River To Cross, in 1979's Contemporary Southern Poetry: An Anthology. Sections II, III, VI, VII, and IX of the poem were included in A Geography of

Poets; interestingly, editor Edward Field excluded both sections – I and V – that contain the word "nigger."

Much like the Modernists, Beecher's poetic technique in the poem is piling on of imagery in each scene to achieve an evocation of sympathy. In Section I, Beecher begins with a self-indictment, testifying about his own past with "Our gang" who were "chucking flints" at "kids from niggertown" (Beecher, Collected Poems 241); it was "More fun than birds" because "Birds / were too hard to hit" (241-242). This little story provides an Everyman quality, implying for the reader that lots of kids in the South do the same thing. Section II continues a discussion of racial insensitivity during the poet's youth, when their black cook "had her stroke," and "It put a damper on my mother's luncheon" (242); the ladies soon recovered, though, having "shrieks of laughter" and "fresh peach ice cream" (242). Section III tells the story of Beecher's family's servant Rob who would "play piano for me / real barrelhouse" (242); Rob quit working for the family to "paper houses on his own," (242) but he was sabotaged by "white men. After his truck's engine was destroyed,

> He came back to work for us
> but I can't seem to remember
> him whistling much again (242-243)

Section IV also deals with race and the poet's youth, but is not so specifically accusatory about the injustice; black convicts are working near his school with "a tobacco-chewing white man over them / shotgun at the ready" (243). In something of a twist, the anecdote continues by stating vaguely that

I found a convict's filed off chain once in the woods

and took it home

and hid it (243)

He seems to be implying that he helped a convict to escape, in some way or other. Section V shows a white man, "Mr. Holcomb," shooting at young Beecher and his friends with a .45 caliber pistol when they are playing pranks on Halloween; he only shot at them because "he took us for nigger boys" (243). Section VI begins as a scene of a foolish but harmless parade of neo-Confederates, but it quickly shifts to a detailed account of how white boys kidnap and rape black girls: "and make them do / what they said all colored girls / likes doing / no matter how much / they fought back and screamed" (244). Section VII returns to Beecher's home as he tries to force their black cook Corinne to salute the American flag on the Fourth of July – "Salute this Flag! It made you free!" (244) – but she refuses.

Sections VIII and XI wind up the poem with scenes of death, bringing full circle his title: "To Live *and Die* [italics mine] in Dixie." In Section VIII, "Old Major Suggs," a former segregationist candidate for police chief, shoots and kills a black man – "caught both barrels in his face / point-blank" (245) – for stealing his chickens. Finally, in a cruel twist of fate, a black man named Spurgeon is killed:

when a mob came tearing around the corner

after another black man

but they made Spurgeon do (245).

The way Beecher describes Spurgeon, a "primitive" self-taught artist who may have even been slightly mentally retarded, provides the finale of a parade of injustices: a lynch mob that kills a weak-minded, though creative person who was minding his own business.

The poem, "To Live and Die in Dixie," evoked an Old South at a new time. Beecher was born in 1904 and was raised during the 1910s and 1920s, which was a heyday of the Ku Klux Klan, and these scenes portray a time when inequality was rampant and perfectly acceptable. The poem, which was written during the latter stages of Beecher's life, acknowledges how much American, and particularly Southern life had changed, even though the 1960s and even the 1970s were not exactly Edenic.

Finally, the poem, "One More River to Cross," uses the extended metaphor of a river to state the idea that, culturally, we still have more obstacles to surmount. Beecher once more reaches back into American history for his basis for comparison to the events of modern times. In the poem, which was dedicated "For John L. Salter, Jr." and is dated "Summer, 1963," Beecher compares the actions of the abolitionist John Brown to the Civil Rights activist Salter. "One More River To Cross" appears in the sections "Poems 1961-1974" of Collected Poems and the volume of the same name, and in the section "Woke Up This Morning: 1961-1965" of Hear The Wind Blow.

A two stanza poem, "One More River To Cross" opens the first stanza with a very positive image from American history, but one which quickly turns negative: a quotation from Thomas Jefferson's about beauty of "the passage of the

Patowmac through the Blue Ridge" (Beecher, Collected Poems 249) and juxtaposing it with a lynching there in 1859. Beecher then ties in the fact that Stonewall Jackson was a witness to that lynching, with a quote about John Brown. The second stanza begins with the word "Now" effectively bringing the discussion of out the mid-1800s and into the 1960s.

> I have been seeing your picture in the papers
> your head anointed with mustard and ketchup
> at the lunch counter sit-in
> hoodlums rubbing salts in the cuts where they slugged you
> of the police flailing you with clubs
> blood sopping your shirt
> but pure downright peace on your face
> making a new kind of history (250)

As the second stanza continues, everything gets tied together. John Brown, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln all come to bear on the murder of Medgar Evers (251). Jeffersonian ideals about liberty are twisted into pronunciations of "States' Rights" (251). To the cowardly perpetrators Beecher gives the adage, "God Sees the Truth, But Waits" (251). The poem ends with Beecher bringing out the names of famous rivers that Americans have crossed, e.g. the Mississippi, and with the reminder: "it's been a long road" (251) that has already crossed other (metaphorical) rivers.

Once again, John Beecher has reverted to history, imagery, and common diction in this poem to make a prophetic, sermon-like statement. Easily dubbed a

forecast for the mid-1960s, "One More River to Cross" was written right before the Freedom Summer of 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Selma-to-Montgomery March 1965, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These events and subsequent pieces of legislation solidified the end of Jim Crow.

Summation

John Beecher's poetry is well crafted with literary techniques that any poetry critic or reader would expect from American free verse. His poetry does not deserve the dismissive comments of critic Marjorie Perloff who wrote, responding to nine lines excerpted from the poem, "News Item": "Beecher cannot properly be called a 'poet.' [...] There is no structuring of any sort here, whether imagistic, prosodic, syntactic, or verbal, no process of selection from the welter of words which constitutes ordinary speech" (Perloff 272). Her remark, based on one passage that she chose, does not describe his body of work. Furthermore, Perloff's high-minded idea that poetic diction has to be different from everyday speech flies in the face of Walt Whitman's egalitarian idea that there is poetry in the commonplace. Beecher was also not a one-dimensional poet; if Perloff had chosen a passage from a poem like "Conformity Means Death," written in homage to philosopher Bertrand Russell, she would have found very tight, recognizable structuring and the high poetic diction she sought.

X: CONCLUSION

Poetry like John Beecher's is exactly the type of popular, didactic, clearly stated verse that could appeal to many readers in mainstream American culture. Except for possible personal issues with his radical leftist political views – ones shared by such canonical poets as Carl Sandburg and Langston Hughes – there is no good reason for John Beecher's poems to be regarded by anyone as unacceptable, and no reason for him to have faded away. In a 1974 review of Collected Poems in the Chicago Tribune, reviewer Harry Mark Petrakis wrote:

> Limited numbers of people read poetry; fewer buy it. Yet from our poets, looking into the darkness to discern those things that are not visible in daylight, come visions and perspective and, sometimes, the faith that we must have to meet the new day.
>
> Among this distinguished company, John Beecher must take his place. (Petrakis)

One troubling aspect of John Beecher's fading-away relates to the aforementioned AWP graph detailing the explosion of creative writing programs since the mid-1970s. This exponential growth began about the same time as the publication of Beecher's Collected Poems and had taken off by the time of his death. As the all-important MFA degree has become as important credential in poetry's subculture, John Beecher's absence from this inner circle – an absence

that had lasted his whole career, beginning before MFA programs existed – contributed heavily to his decline. This argument is not to claim that there was (or is) some vast conspiracy against John Beecher (or other poets like him) in the back rooms of English and creative writing faculty offices, but that the choices made in those faculty offices – about textbooks and syllabi – do determine whose works get "in" or are left "out." Generally, Beecher was not friendly with upper-level literary groups; he was quoted in a 1980 San Francisco Examiner article as saying about the Ph.D. degree: "It's given for being a parasite on other writers. The degree should be abolished. It's like studying Bach and Beethoven from scores but never hearing the music" (Freidman 1). Admittedly, it is a somewhat paradoxical to expect that a group of people (university-level academics) for whom one has utter contempt would work to preserve one's legacy.

However, Beecher is not alone in his ideals about poetry. In her 1995 book about her successful "Poetry for the People" educational program, the late poet June Jordan echoes John Beecher's own ideas about honesty in poetry:

> You cannot write lies and write good poetry. Deceit, abstraction, euphemism: any of these will doom a poem to the realm of "baffling" or "forgettable" or worse. Good poetry requires precision: if you do not attempt to say, accurately, truthfully, what you feel or see or need, then how will you achieve precision? [...] Poetry is a political action undertaken for the sake of information, the faith, the exorcism, and the lyrical invention, that telling the truth

> makes possible. Poetry means taking control of the language of your life. [...] I hope that folks throughout the U.S.A. would consider the creation of poems as a foundation for true community: a fearless democratic society.

Jordan's program at the University of California-Berkeley and her above statement both stand in stark contrast to the highly public lamentations about poetry's decline in American popular culture in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first centuries. Her comments also echo Paul Lauter's idea that a literature for everyone will be fundamentally community-oriented, not self-centered.

As creative writing programs churn out poets of their own *status quo*, poets like John Beecher (and June Jordan) offer readers something different: poetry that speaks to people, whether they have an advanced degree in literary studies or not. John Beecher produced the type of poetry that Lauter describes as works of community building, not works of personal leisure. The trend in poetry that began with the New Critics and continues with the "professionalization of poetry," has led to the near-loss of some poetic voices and the solidification of poetry as an art form for a highly educated audience, like classical music or the opera. This is not to say that currently acceptable poets are not *good* poets, but that they are not the *only* poets.

John Beecher has a place in the canon of American literature and poetry: in the anthologies and textbooks, in the multi-volume reference series, and on

bookstore shelves. At a time when the declining status of poetry in mainstream American life is well documented and often discussed, the exclusion of poetic voices that speak to common people is not the answer to the dilemma. John Beecher is precisely the type of poet who could ingratiate some members of an indifferent public and bring some of those readers back into the fold of poetry. This one man's poetry is not the magic bullet that will save poetry as an art form, but much of his poetry *is* a more accessible, more community-oriented variety that could reach a type of reader not being reached currently. The necessary step that must be made is his infusion into textbooks, reference works, and institutional programs, which will allow today's students (and tomorrow's readers) to re-discover his work; into anthologies, which will allow modern readers to re-discover his work; and into the fray of literary scholarship to overcome the notion that John Beecher did not write poetry with merit.

With his populist political stance, his common diction, and his intriguing life story, John Beecher is the type of writer that people have read widely in the past and would read again. Despite very rare support from poetry scholars, John Beecher's poetry was bought and read for decades by a general readership. His 1974 Collected Poems was reviewed in daily newspapers all over America and not through a few syndicated reviews being circulated by the wire services; the book was reviewed separately over and over in 1974 and 1975 in such national magazines as Choice, The Christian Science Monitor, Time, The New Republic, The Nation, and Commonweal, and such newspapers as The Capital Times (Madison, WI), The Indianapolis News, The Chicago Tribune, The Columbus

Evening Dispatch (OH), The Milwaukee Journal, The Register (New Haven, CT), The Sacramento Bee, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, The Seattle Times, The Buffalo Evening News, The Times-Dispatch (Richmond, VA), The Courier-Journal & Times (Louisville, KY), The Anniston Star (AL), The Charlotte Observer (NC), The Alabama Journal (Montgomery), the Birmingham News (AL), The News and Observer (Raleigh, NC), The Oregon Journal (Portland), The Greensboro Daily News (NC), and the San Francisco Examiner. The only two reviews of Collected Poems in literary or scholarly journals were both published in the summer of 1976, two years later: one was a denouncement of Beecher's poetry, and the other a defense of it. Certainly, other poets' books have received the same treatment, but maybe they have not been "forgotten" in the same way that John Beecher has been.

The importance of this acceptance into *literary* culture is that the literary establishment as a whole is the gatekeeper of what ordinary people have access to read. If publishing houses do not put out an author's work, public access to that author's work is severely limited. If anthologists and textbook editors do not include an author's work, an educator's ability to teach that writer to students is hindered. If teachers do not offer an author's work, the likelihood that students will discover that author's work on their own is slim (especially in a time of new media like cell phones, YouTube, and FaceBook). *All* of these factors have come into play in the decline of John Beecher as an American poet. He has been cut off from the reading public (who were his core of support) by the literati who never

seemed to have accepted his poetry as valid and acceptable for inclusion in the canon. This needs to change.

John Beecher has been recognized in numerous ways as an important American poet. The literary critic and editor Louis Untermeyer, writing to Beecher in 1966, having received a copy of To Live and Die in Dixie, praised Beecher and compared the book to Edgar Lee Masters's Spoon River Anthology. Folk singer Pete Seeger praised Beecher's poetry highly. Poet Williams Carlos Williams said of Beecher: "This is a man who speaks from the conscience of the people" (Walker 88). The John Beecher Papers was marketed directly to educators for inclusion in classrooms. New York-based Macmillan Publishing issued Beecher's Collected Poems with a substantial print run. The mayor and city council of Birmingham gave Beecher the key to the city and held a festival in his honor. Beecher received a coveted NEA Literature Fellowship in 1976. Famed folk music collector and Folkways Records founder, Mo Asch, recorded and issued Report to the Stockholders, an album of Beecher reading his poetry, in 1977. He was even invited to the White House to read his poetry. But somehow all of the appreciation of his work was short-lived. His rise, which seemed to begin the mid-1960s and continued until his death in 1980, was followed by an almost immediate decline.

However, all appreciation of John Beecher is not gone. One review of One More River to Cross, which appeared in the Texas Observer in January 2004, includes the following commentary, which sounds amazingly familiar to the regular praise afforded him in the 1970s:

> Beecher's poems are rambling, sometimes loosely framed narratives, but his passion condenses suddenly in an image, a line, a detail that makes the poem feel a crushing moment in a play [...] We have forgotten how powerful labor realism can be in a country in which factories and unskilled working life have been obscured [...] John Beecher brings it all back in lurid detail, in stark language that will not let you drift or close the book. (Christensen)

This review is indicative of a more modern response, which is at once correct but unfortunate. John Beecher tends to be praised constantly for his uncompromising, brutal honesty and righteous indignation about the rights of downtrodden people – an assessment of his work that is completely correct – although the quality of his verse is often overlooked, or in some cases questioned or completely denied. Another review, this one on the Southern Scribe website, states:

> Beecher's work as a whole, especially as it is collected and presented by Steven Ford Brown, is nonetheless a vital voice in the history of poetry in that it perhaps represents poetry in what some could argue is its purest form: voice. These poems are all if nothing else, the voice of John Beecher, unfiltered and unfettered, even by the very words that serve as an unintentional restraint to other poets. The historical, political and poetic significance of his work and life secures this poet's place in time. (Johnson)

These two reviews and others like them tend to focus on the function and not so much the form. The reviews, mostly in general audience publications, not literary journals, tend more often to discuss John Beecher's effectiveness in addressing his subjects, and less often his poetic technique. However, most do agree that his poetry has a place on readers' bookshelves and that it has merit and literary value.

Must poetry be well written in order for it to have such a strong impact? The answer is: Yes. If it were not well-written poetry, Beecher's treatment of his chosen subject matter would appear trite, sentimental, obvious, or forced, which his poems are not. Skilled craftsmen, including poets, make their task look easy, which it often is not. John Beecher's poetry appears simple, because he laboriously undertook the work of being sure that it does. It is that subtlety that also makes John Beecher a great poet, and it is his greatness as a poet that earns him the right to recognition as such.

XI: AFTERWORD

Two decades after John Beecher's death, in 2001, I became an employee at NewSouth Books, a small publishing house in Montgomery, Alabama, during the period that One More River to Cross was being compiled and edited by Steven Ford Brown, the man who had been largely responsible for organizing John Beecher Day. I heard talk around the office of "the Beecher book," a project I was not working on personally, until one day when editor-in-chief Randall Williams charged in and asked, "Where's Ben?" (Ben Beard was his assistant editor.) I answered, "He's at lunch," which Ben was. Randall then thrust some paper at me and ordered, "Type this in, and put it in the Beecher folder," before striding away. The paper he handed me contained the poem, "Just Peanuts." I dutifully typed the poem into a word processing document and saved it in the work folder for the forthcoming John Beecher poetry book. At that moment, John Beecher's poetry entered my consciousness. I have described it to people that John Beecher reached up and grabbed me by the throat that day, and he has never let go.

In 2003, I was still working at NewSouth Books when One More River to Cross was released. I made the advance review copies with my own hands, at that time being the production manager in charge of the company's small in-house bookbindery. By the time of its release, I had read the entire book cover to cover, captivated by this utterly honest, populist verse that enunciated the concerns of the working classes.

In late 2003, I left NewSouth Books to take a job as a teacher, but I stayed in touched with my old co-workers. Knowing my newfound fondness for Beecher's poetry, Randall Williams told me about plans for 2004 to hold a centennial celebration for John Beecher, just after what would have been his 100th birthday. At a small gathering at a hilltop Unitarian church in Birmingham, we honored this poet for his commitment to social justice and for his unique personality. A variety of fans and former friends, including Steven Ford Brown, spoke about personal experiences with Beecher and what his work had meant to them. Unfortunately, Beecher's widow Barbara was ill and could not make the trip from her home in North Carolina. The centennial event was further justification to me that this poet was a great one and that his legacy had not been adequately cemented.

In 2005, while searching for materials on the Internet about John Beecher, I happened across some of his poetry broadsides, the ones he and Barbara had done together on their own printing presses, for sale on eBay. After winning the auction, I received an e-mail notification to send payment to Barbara Beecher at a North Carolina address. His widow, with the help of a local young woman in their small North Carolina town, was selling surplus works from her own stockpiles on eBay. With my payment, I included a letter explaining my fondness for her late husband's poetry, my research on him for a possible book, and my desire to interview her if she was willing. One Saturday morning, not long after mailing my letter and check, Barbara Beecher called me on the telephone to say that she would be pleased to talk to me whenever I could. (Mrs. Beecher welcomed me

with the same gusto that Elizabeth Murray Walker had been received in the late 1970s, though the standing of Beecher's poetic career was very different in 1979 than in 2005.) In the summer of 2005, I made the trek to Burnsville, North Carolina, to spend a day or two with this woman who had married John Beecher in 1955 and stood by him during his best and worst days: through being blacklisted in the 1950s, through the turbulent 1960s, and through his failing health in the 1970s. This devoted widow, an artist in her own right, opened her self, her memories, and her archives to me, and has kept them open ever since.

A substantial work on John Beecher should have come years ago, and it almost did. James Helten, who wrote his 1985 dissertation on Beecher, accepted the tasks of writing a large-scale academic biography of the poet and editing a possible publication of Beecher's voluminous unfinished autobiography. Sadly, ill health debilitated Jim Helten, and he was unable to complete the task.

As I write this in 2007 and 2008, John Beecher's legacy holds steady as a minor poet, respected journalist, and social protestor, and his loved ones and closest admirers are not able to do much to change it. Barbara Beecher is 83 years old, still living in Burnsville. James Helten is ill and bed-ridden in North Carolina, as well. Ever the tireless worker on his own behalf, Beecher himself passed away almost twenty-eight years ago and many people who knew him are scattered all over the country. Among his most famous supporters who are still living, Pete Seeger and Studs Terkel are also of advanced age. According to Barbara Beecher, with whom he had no children, all but one of his children have passed away.

Today, other than scant representation here and there, John Beecher has all but disappeared. I am now working to change that.

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* A Note on the bibliography: In some cases, pages numbers are not listed at the end of entries for some publications, mostly newspaper articles and reviews. In those cases, the photocopies I obtained of reviews and articles contained no indication of a page number.