C2C JOURNAL

IDEAS THAT LEAD

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Fall 2016

The Art of Conservatism

The art of conservatism

One of the best political videos ever made in Canada was "Culture in Danger," a hilarious send-up of the Harper government's arts and culture policy. Posted online during the 2008 federal election, it featured Quebec folksinger Michel Rivard applying for government arts funding from a panel of stuffy unilingual conservative anglophones. The laughs arose mostly from the panel's misunderstanding of the French word "phoque", which means seal. You can imagine what they thought Rivard was saying. So they rejected him, because they were ignorant, pompous, intolerant reactionaries. Just like Stephen Harper!

Like any good political satire, the joke worked because there was a sliver of truth at its heart. Harper's government had cut some arts funding that year, prompting well-orchestrated condemnation from opposition parties and arts groups. Harper, certain as always of the rightness of his cause and his tactics, doubled down in this skirmish with the artsy-fartsies a few days later, saying "ordinary working people" had no sympathy for those they see on TV at a "rich gala all subsidized by taxpayers claiming their subsidies aren't high enough".

Harper won the election but the brawl with the arts clique probably helped prevent him from getting to a majority. And it fed a narrative portraying him as an un-hip, anti-artist, anti-intellectual Philistine that not even his killer garage band performances of Jumpin' Jack Flash and With A Little Help From My Friends could overcome. It didn't help that he religiously adhered to a spartan, dumbed-down messaging strategy that obscured his formidable intelligence and wit, or that he later cozied up to congenital vulgarian Rob Ford, or that he rarely talked publicly about his favourite Canadian books, songs, paintings and movies.

As a result, by the 2015 election Harper was a one-dimensional caricature of a soulless technocrat, a Mackenzie King without the humanizing eccentricities, an enemy of art and science, and quite possibly the evil reptilian kitten-eater the entire *Toronto Star* editorial board believed him to be. So voters turned to his pretty, amiable antithesis, who demonstrated his prodigious humanity every time he opened his mouth, professed a great love for the arts and especially its celebrity accoutrements, and promised to let really smart people make all the "science-based" decisions.

Even those of us who are already nostalgic for reason and dignity in the prime minister's office accept that it's not going to return any time soon unless the next conservative contestant for the job has a more well-rounded persona. And frankly, many of us are embarrassed to be associated with the kind of conservative anti-intellectualism that is now embodied in Donald Trump to such a degree that it makes Stephen Harper and even Rob Ford look almost Aristotelian.

So the fall 2016 edition of the *C2C Journal* is dedicated to the proposition that conservatism is not for the uncurious of mind, black of heart, and barren of soul, but rather for lovers of truth and beauty and the joy of human artistic expression. Our contributors are going to introduce you to some great contemporary art and artists and make the case that for conservatives to compete successfully in the modern political arena, they must be active, passionate competitors in the realm of arts and culture.

This is not to say that conservative political parties and governments should try to outbid progressives in subsidizing the arts. Nothing stifles genuine creativity more effectively than bureaucratic state-ordained curation. Instead, as filmmaker and novelist Brigitte Pellerin contends in the opening essay, there is a huge need – especially in Canada – for private philanthropy to stimulate the production of genuinely good, interesting and influential art.

Other contributors to the fall edition include graphic artist Olivier Ballou, late of the Manning Centre and now head of graphic design for the American Enterprise Institute. He encourages conservatives to be broad-minded about what constitutes good art and to avoid the temptation to use art for propagandizing.

There isn't room here to plug all the other articles in the fall edition but among the highlights are Bob Tarantino's persuasive argument that Guy Gavriel Kay is a truly great Canadian novelist whose stories and themes are redolent of conservative philosophical ideals; Jason Tucker's contention that heavy metal is the purest form of conservative expression in contemporary music; Peter Shawn Taylor's profile of the riotously funny and classics-loving formalist poet A.M. Juster; and Joshua Lieblein's fictional memo from a Canadian publisher responding to a very upsetting manuscript from an aspiring conservative novelist.

Our hope, as always, is that readers will find something new, interesting and entertaining in this edition of *C2C Journal*. And in keeping with our commit to publish "Ideas That Lead" in the service of freedom and democracy, we hope to provide conservative political activists and policy makers with food for thought about the importance of art in communicating their ideas through powerful mediums that are currently dominated by their philosophical opponents.

Paul Bunner is the editor of C2C Journal.

Canadian Journal of Ideas Inc.

Website: www.c2cjournal.ca

Email: editor@c2cjournal.ca

Media Inquiries

Paul Bunner Email: editor@c2cjournal.ca

Editor: Paul Bunner

Associate Editor: Kathleen Welsch

Designer: Dean Smith

Contents – Fall 2016

Canada's ambassador to Italy atones for the sins of colonialism and resource development at the opening of a Canadian art exhibit at the Venice Biennale. (Image: Laurian Ghinitoiu)

Why conservatives should stop worrying and start loving art

by Olivier Ballou

Canada's official entry at this year's prestigious Venice Biennale art exhibition features a wall built with massive sacks of gold ore from an abandoned Canadian mining project in Sardinia – a symbol of Canada's sinister "global resource empire." "Not only do imperial colonial powers redefine territories," says the artwork's manifesto, "they also breed new empires, replaying their cycles of dissemination and domination over and over again." In case anyone missed the point, the opening ceremony featured a member of the Athabasca-Chipewyan First Nation from northern Alberta oilsands country reading a poem denouncing the *Indian Act*. Canada's ambassador to Italy was directed to get down on his hands and knees to watch a short film through a peephole on the ground and get a taste of being subjugated to Canadian mining interests. Some beaver pelts were added for good measure. "It's not a pavilion, it's a counter-pavilion," said the artist, "it's not an exhibition, it's not an installation, it's *an intervention* (italics mine)."

Many conservatives would shrug at this. To them, it's just more evidence the contemporary art world is hopelessly mired in political correctness. It's not even worth a reaction – unless it involves art so offensive or expensive it might be used to criticize public art funding.

But others wonder: "Where are the conservative artists?" If politics emanates from culture, the argument goes, then conservatives should be creating their own content. The art world isn't an ideological monolith, the exclusive domain of the left. Rather, it's a part of the rich experience offered by a free, democratic and prosperous society. Conservatives should never turn their backs on art – including abstract and other non-traditional art. And no matter how incensed they are by left wing propaganda masquerading as art, they should resist the temptation to compete using right-wing agitprop. Art should always be art first, and ideology second.

Bad conservative art is still bad art

As with all aspects of life, Ayn Rand had strong opinions about art. Though she was a big fan of modernist architecture, Rand believed art should be realistic and uphold objective standards of beauty. She even envisioned an art movement called "Romantic Realism," where artists would, like Rand, create "scenes, melodies, and stories to present the essentially heroic character of man." Ironically, her vision was not much different than Soviet-style "Socialist Realist" art, except it celebrated rugged individualism and free markets instead of collective farms. Though Rand's dream didn't come true, her ideas live on in more than a few American artists who have attempted to created conservative-themed art. The results are not promising.

Sentimental, heavy-handed art rarely makes for good art, although it can still be popular, commercially successful, and culturally influential. The self-published first novel *The Shack,* for example, a rather prosaic tale of "evil and redemption"

From a Facebook page dedicated to conservative art: "A Digital Exhibition for Right-Brained Right-Wingers" (Unknown artist)

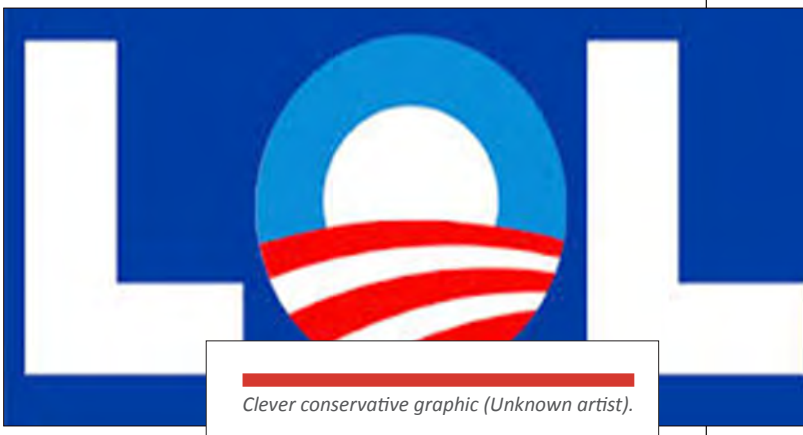
The Empowered Man, by Jon McNaughton.

Employing slightly more subtlety than McNaughton, Second Chance by Nancy A. Lowe uses shell casings that are "illegal to own in Massachusetts" to spell out the Second Amendment in braille.

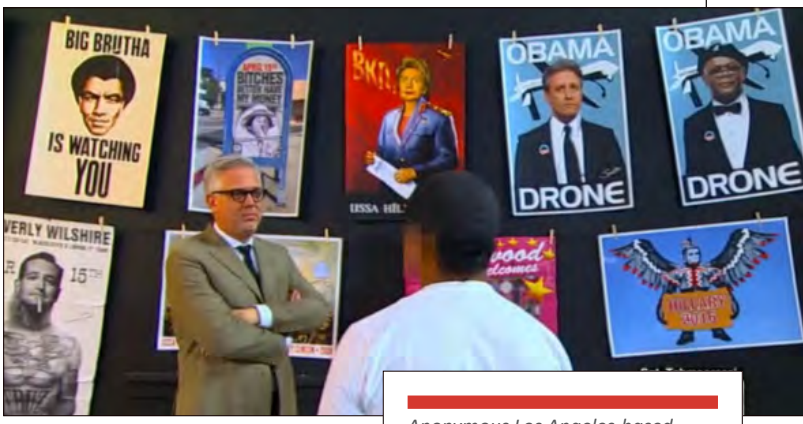
competition for people like me!) the explosion of computer design tools has allowed for the long tail of conservative talent to manifest itself. The movement has had some success in creating effective graphics – especially satirical images that remix symbols from popular culture.

Art is more diverse than you think

It may be that conservative-themed art fails because so much of it is produced in reaction to left-wing art. Out of anger or a misperception that conservatives must fight fire with fire in order to compete for space on gallery walls and prizes in juried competitions, they wind up doing work that is imitative and derivative of that which they despise. "Contemporary art is obsessed with the politics of identity," writes Sohrab Ahmari of the *Wall Street Journal*. "Visit any contemporary gallery, museum or theatre, and chances are the art on offer will be principally concerned with race, gender, sexuality, power and privilege." But that doesn't mean conservative artists should spend all their time and creativity rebutting it. Besides, the idea that left-wing propaganda covers the walls of most contemporary art galleries is an exaggeration.



Clever conservative graphic (Unknown artist).



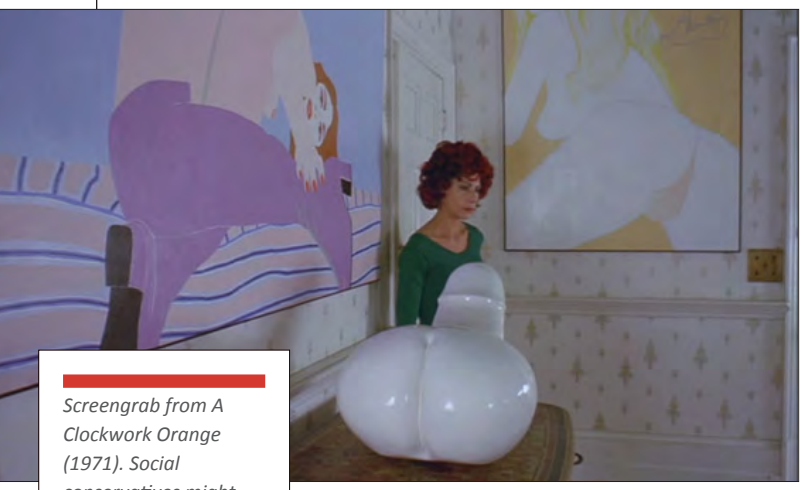
Anonymous Los Angeles-based conservative artist "Sabo" on the Glenn Beck show. Note his poster of a tattooed, smoking Ted Cruz (bottom left), of whom he said: "Ted Cruz, visually, was a little boring, but the way he acts is ... bold." (Image: TheBlaze.com) Sabo's work mimics Shepard Fairey (of Obama "Hope poster" fame) and other street artists.

by Canadian writer William P. Young, has sold millions and is set to be made into a movie. But even within Christian circles, there is debate over whether it is shlock or art or even heresy.

This is not to say that conservative pop art is totally without merit. Though right-wing graphic artists are rare (which means less

Consider, for example, the works from the current Annual Graduate Exhibit at the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD). These are young, downtown Toronto art students – the belly of the urban liberal beast, right?

Among the 83 illustration students, only 21 presented artworks that would meet Ahmari's definition – the most commonly recurring themes being environmentalism and animal rights, as well as economic injustice and female identity. However, the other three-quarters of the students' work cover a wide range of topics: some optimistic (Fail Better "visually explores the idea that failure can become a catalyst for creativity and innovation."), some absurd (What's In A Nickname "is a hypothetical campaign promoting cities based on their nicknames."), and some critical (The Unchivalrous City "depicts the way people behave towards one another in the modern metropolis by comparing their actions to medieval warfare"). Any fair-minded conservative should agree the OCAD grads represent a wide variety of styles and perspectives – whether they like the works or not.



Screengrab from A Clockwork Orange (1971). Social conservatives might take comfort that the dystopian future imagined by filmmaker Stanley Kubrick – including pornographic art displayed unselfconsciously on living room walls – hasn't come to pass. There actually appears to be less nudity in mainstream art than ever.

Abstraction is not the enemy

Conservatives also need to reconsider their conviction that the classical approach to art is superior to other forms. In Charles Murray's 2003 book *Human Accomplishment,* the tale of rapid human advancement comes with a caveat: "It is hard to make a case that the literature, art, and music of today come close to the work of earlier ages," Murray writes, "let alone signify progress."

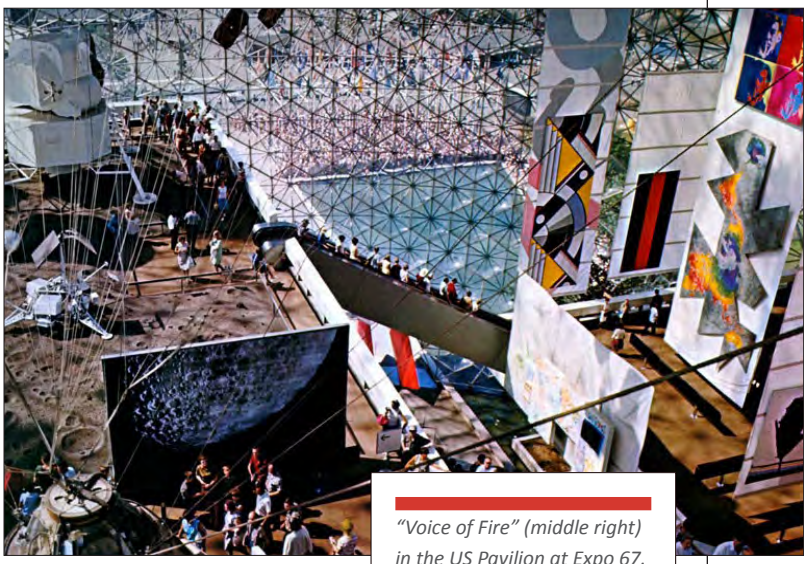
That's the view that prevailed among Canadian conservatives in 1990, when the Reform Party had a field day berating the Mulroney Progressive Conservative government and the National Gallery of Canada for spending $1.8 million on a painting entitled "Voice of Fire" – which essentially consisted of three vertical lines. Little did the Reformers know that Barnett Newman's 1967 piece had played a small role in fighting the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

During the post-war era, abstract paintings took on an increasingly minimalist look, as western artists continued to move away from representation and broke down painting to its essential features: color, lines, texture etc. At the same time, Soviet art stringently enforced a traditional style that espoused communist themes. The contrast was not lost on the CIA, which secretly funded several modern art exhibitions in Europe, part of the war of ideas aimed at promoting American values abroad – including artistic freedom.

The cold-war rivalry was still raging when Expo came to Montreal in the summer of 1967. While both the Soviet and American pavilions showcased their respective countries' space programs, the look and feel was radically different. The Soviets filled their glass rectangle with exhibits that vaunted their economic achievements, while the Americans featured enlarged photographs of Hollywood stars, mechanical rides, and colorful modern art – including Voice of Fire – inside a geodesic dome. In the words of architect Jonathan Massey, the U.S. pavilion "invited visitors to identify with an internationally ascendant American culture."

Aside from recognizing the ideological significance of non-traditional art, I hope conservatives can also give it a chance on a personal level. My views echo those of conservative cultural critic David Gelernter:

"But for myself, the best abstract painting is so powerful and beautiful it commands attention. And my problems with 'true conservative art' don't end there. I have no principled objection, either, to the [art] Establishment's infatuation with 'installations' as opposed to painting. An installation can be profound and sublime – look at the tense-and-perfect poise, the endless whispering depth of the best Zen gardens; the breathtaking silence of Luis Barragan's Mexican courtyards. Nor can I object in principle to the fad for untraditional media... What are renegades like me doing in the conservative movement?"



"Voice of Fire" (middle right) in the US Pavilion at Expo 67. (Image: Jack Masey)

Conservatives are perfectly entitled to criticize publicly funded left-wing art like the Venice Biennale exhibit. But they should keep in mind that artists are essentially

individuals making interesting connections in visual form – a form of "creative destruction." Though one may question the career choices of OCAD students, I encourage conservatives to appreciate their work as the product of a free and prosperous society.

Olivier Ballou is the Director of Graphic Design at the American Enterprise Institute. Prior to this, he was Director of Communications at the Manning Centre. He is the creator of the pro-oilsands art installation "For the Love of Crude" and the short documentary "Flanagan."

The political power of art

by Brigitte Pellerin

Is modern conservatism unfriendly to the arts, or is it the other way around? Either way, they don't get along particularly well. Canadian conservatives may shudder at the very mention. But they should get over it and start telling stories.

It's no use, some may say. Hollywood is a nest of commies, so is the CBC, and don't get us started on the Canada Council for the Arts. All a bunch of lefties who wouldn't spit on conservative artists if they were on fire.

Right?

Shake a conservative awake at 3 am and ask him why there aren't many famous conservative artists and he'll probably tell you it's because they're shunned by the liberal arts clique.

Our brutally awakened insta-pundit would have a point. But it's not the whole answer. I'm here to tell you another – possibly more important – reason why conservative artists aren't being promoted is because they're shunned by the conservative political clique.

And yes, I may well mean you.

I have spent the last two years trying to get conservatives of all stripes to devote more resources (time but especially money) to telling stories and fewer resources to politicking, with considerably less success than I was hoping for. And I'm not asking for the moon.

All I would like is a relatively minor tweak. Say someone gives $200 a year to conservative parties. How about instead they shift, say, $30 or $50 towards artistic pursuits? Imagine if one in four conservative party donors did that, how much more money would there be for artists to develop books, stories, movies, sculptures, paintings, video games, musicals and who knows what-all celebrating human ingenuity, the wholesomeness of family life or doing for small business folks crushed under government paperwork what Upton

Sinclair did for meat factory workers?

Oh, hey. Maybe I'll write that novel, just to see how many people buy it.

Whenever I talk about these things in public, people readily agree that we need to focus more on telling stories and not just abandon the field to liberals. We agree that Hollywood, popular music, TV, you name it, are promoting left-wing views. Heads nod vigorously when I mention the need to fight liberals and Liberals on that cultural battlefield. We all know that culture matters, that – in the late Andrew Breitbart's apt phrase – politics is downstream of culture. And yet…

Conservatives continue to send money faithfully to parties that claim to be conservative, despite their recurrent lack of sustained success in, you know, electoral politics. And no, it won't do to blame outside forces; Conservative parties aren't making themselves appealing and that's the reason they aren't getting elected. But it's also true that voters aren't as receptive as they might be to conservative political ideas because all they're hearing is conservative slogans, and not compelling conservative stories. Where's the support for conservative artists telling Canadians conservative stories that they would actually enjoy hearing or showing them art they would enjoy seeing?

Yes, we have a few think tanks that sponsor essay contests. That's great. We also have video contests here and there. But overwhelmingly these are about policy ideas and themes. Which makes them didactic. And while there is a proper and legitimate place for this sort of thing, they are not stories and will never be as popular with the not-already-converted as outstanding works of fiction can be. Why do I say this? Because didactic non-fiction essays only talk to your head, not your heart, that's why.

Now don't go saying artists are all lefties, that true conservatives don't do that namby-pamby culture stuff. What about the George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? John Wayne movies? Frank Capra movies? Old-time country music (or so my husband tells me)? Heck, even Pixar movies mostly have traditional values.

So why don't we have many more Canadian conservative fictional works, paintings and sculptures celebrating what we hold dear? This question is terribly puzzling to me. Conservatives are supposed to be all about traditions. Christian conservatives, in particular, are supposed to be all about transcending our human existence and reaching out to eternity. We're not supposed to be content with mere material success and not worry about where our souls are going. Yet most conservative politicians, activists and many supporters seem almost exclusively concerned with pocketbook issues, with the exception of some younger ones who display their creativity by putting together memes on social media explaining how much they despise Justin Trudeau.

I submit to you that's the wrong way to go. I do believe we were put on this earth for a purpose that's bigger and more meaningful than tweaking marginal tax rates. Tax rates matter. But they're not the most important thing. And we don't talk about the really important things. Instead we seem to stand for nothing but office. To the extent that we care about public affairs generally, it should be with a view towards making things better for our fellows in all kinds of ways, and not just about kicking those entitled red-tied swines out of office so we can take their place and get our own blue hands on that government booty.

We need to lift our noses from the daily grind and look up towards something bigger. We need to dream, hope, be inspired. We need to rest our eyes on beautiful art, let music fill our souls with joy and take time to ponder the meaning of a sculpture. We need to think about the mysteries and purpose of life on a regular basis. Otherwise we lose touch with the point of it all, and that contributes greatly to making us mightily unsuccessful in politics, too.

We need beauty, love, and magic in our lives, and art is one of the best ways to get it. And we need to be the kind of interesting, creative people that other people will admire and be drawn towards. In short, we need to look and feel happy and reasonably fulfilled, morally and metaphysically speaking. We can't do that without art.

OK, but what constitutes conservative art? I'm so glad you asked, because that is possibly the easiest question of

all. Conservative art is, roughly speaking, anything that's not offensive or aggressively meaningless. That leaves us a lot of room to play, doesn't it?

I was recently in Edmonton at the University of Alberta and saw a mesmerizing piece of public art. The sculpture, which shows a child looking at an adult with an empty middle section, is by an artistic couple who, from the looks of their website, don't strike me as particularly red-meaty. But who cares what their political leanings are? Their art inspires me to reach for a larger meaning and I am happy to claim it as my own. This particular sculpture belongs to a public institution, and as such is a rare example of a government bureaucracy selecting good art. As a rule, privately commissioned art is better because the selection process is based on merit instead of some politically correct checklist. Just compare the glorious sculptures that adorn oil company office towers in Calgary with the ghastly public art that sullies a lot of civic infrastructure in Edmonton. Good on the energy firms and their shareholders for investing in good art. I wish we had more like this all over the place.

Calgarian Stephen Harper once famously suggested that fine arts and their glitzy galas don't resonate with ordinary Canadians, and I'm sure that's true. But most artists aren't the tuxedo-and-tails-at-the-National-Arts-Centre type. They're considerably less well-off than that, and often rely on subsidies or patronage to get by.

True conservatives of course would rather not have public subsidies for the arts, or not very much, so that leaves us with the option of financing artists ourselves. And no, you don't need to be Warren Buffet to be a patron of the arts. Thanks to that little invention called the Internet and websites such as Patreon.com (disclosure: both my husband and I derive income via Patreon), you can be a benefactor to any creator whose work you enjoy for as little as a dollar a month. Not something that's going to break the bank, but at the same time, from the point of view of the artist, when enough people throw in modest amounts, it adds up to something that's mighty useful to tide them over until the next significant commission or book contract.

Are Canadian creators finding financial patrons online? You bet. One big success story is that of Canadaland, a privately funded independent journalism-and-the-arts outfit that's pulling in a little over $10,000 a month that way. They recently started an arts show, The Imposter, that seems popular enough, at least among the people who finance it. Canadaland is not conservative; it presents itself as an apolitical scourge of mainstream corporate media, especially the CBC. Most conservative online media outfits – with the notable exception of Ezra Levant's Rebel Media and my husband John Robson's history documentaries – aren't crowdfunded.

Why not? We're the ones who believe in free markets and private philanthropy, are we not? We should fight this battle with the tools we have, which is our time, appreciation, dollars and internet connections. Each according to their own resources. Forget about trying to reform the Canada Council or the CBC. Personally I'd shut both down (OK, maybe I'd keep CBC radio outside major urban centres, as a genuine public service since very few commercial stations will set up shop in small markets though I'd rather see it, like PBS, be donor-driven too). Some day Canadians may elect a government that will actually turn off the financial spigot to the liberal-elite arts clique (thanks for nothing, Stephen Harper), but until then we should build our own conservative-friendly artistic clique.

It's not just Canadian conservative artists who are starving. Our American cousins aren't doing much better, as FrackNation filmmaker Ann McElhinney explained in a fantastic rant delivered at a Heritage Foundation gathering last year. Her message? Stop putting all our creative energy and money into political ads, don't over-message everything (don't be so didactic), and just focus on telling great stories, because stories are how people find out about the world.

McElhinney pointed out some huge successes the left has had in Hollywood, profoundly influencing public opinion and public policy with eco-propaganda movies like The China Syndrome, Erin Brockovitch and the anti-resource development polemic Avatar. Hollywood tells some right-wing stories too, she added, pointing to movies like American Sniper and television shows like South Park, but they are all-too-rare examples of compelling conservative storytelling.

Sculptures tell stories too. So do paintings, novels, poems, songs and video games. Conservatives need to devote themselves to influencing the culture in all these fields if they ever want to change people's minds

about anything – including who should be in office and to do what.

"Change the world," said McElhinney. "Tell a story. Make someone cry." I'm asking you to do the same. Get together with like-minded citizens, pool your resources, and commission something or find a local artist to sponsor. Even if it's only a small amount. Start somewhere. Anywhere. There is so much work to do it almost doesn't matter where we begin.

Conservatives have the best stories because, as McElhinney also says, we have truth on our side. We have the best outlook on life and on what matters. But we won't win the arguments until we learn to frame them artistically as well as empirically. That's my challenge to you.

Brigitte Pellerin is a writer and filmmaker whose first novel, she hopes, tells a great story.

Free the museums

Regeneration Hall in the Canadian War Museum. (Image: Ian Muttoo)

by Renze Nauta

Theoretically next year's 150th anniversary of Confederation is an opportunity to celebrate Canada's history – a story of economic, cultural and technological development that has made our country one of the most peaceful and prosperous nations on earth. But that would conflict with the contemporary progressive notion that Canada's history was a nightmare of colonialism, environmental destruction, and discrimination. So the federal Liberal government has ordained that the official themes of the sesquicentennial bash will be "diversity and inclusiveness, the environment, youth, and reconciliation with indigenous peoples."

Prior to its defeat in last year's election, the Conservative government had been planning a very different kind of national birthday party. It would have put much more emphasis on celebrating Canadian history, particularly our military history. This was a hallmark of the Harper decade. It never missed an opportunity to mark major military milestones such as the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 and the great battles of the First and Second World Wars. It would have made a big deal about the 250th anniversary of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 2009 except separatist bullies threatened political violence.

The Conservatives also promoted Canadian history by focusing a lot of money and attention on museums and other history repositories such as archives and art galleries. Among other things, they rebranded the Canadian Museum of Civilization as the Canadian Museum of History and refocused its mission accordingly, oversaw the creation of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, and partnered with the Pier 21 Museum in Halifax to give it the status of a national museum. The Tories also tried to move the National Portrait Gallery from Ottawa to an oil company office tower in Calgary, although that plan foundered amid howls of protest from the culturati.

The Trudeau Liberal government is of course making strenuous efforts to roll back, overturn or reverse many of the former government's policy initiatives. So far, however, they have not signalled any comprehensive plan to bury or rewrite Canadian history by emptying the National War Museum of guns or replacing all the exhibits in the Canadian Museum of History with shrines to Trudeau the 1st's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

They may well do so eventually, but in the meantime they should do for Canada's museums what they have proposed to do for our national parks in 2017, which is make admission free. We're still waiting for details on the free parks plan, and you can never be too certain about Liberal campaign promises, but it is a very good idea. And so is eliminating admission fees to our museums and galleries, not just in 2017, but permanently. Just don't tell the Liberals that getting more Canadians to visit museums is fundamentally a conservative idea that would nurture a more conservative culture.

Why museums matter

Much more than interesting places to spend a Saturday afternoon, museums and galleries are the repositories of our national and civilizational heritage. They, along with

libraries and churches, are institutions that make our culture accessible. They give one generation the opportunity to learn from another. Museums and galleries are thus inherently conservative institutions. Individual exhibits may lean to one side or another of the political spectrum, but they all share the common starting point that history is important and that there were meaningful events involving our ancestors. The existence of museums and galleries is a recognition that our society should not focus exclusively on the present and the future, but can learn valuable lessons from the past.

To truly appreciate their importance, however, we need to consider the experience of a museum or gallery from the perspective of the person attending it. The act of visiting a museum represents a choice to spend time experiencing our history and learning about our culture. The very act of walking into a museum – borne of a desire to connect with our past – is therefore the manifestation of a conservative impulse, one that conservatives should wish to encourage.

It would, of course, be wrong to assume that the average Canadian attending a museum is consciously thinking in conservative terms about the relevance of historical problems to modern ones. But that average Canadian is nonetheless entering into a dialogue with the past. Every museum visit represents a strengthening of the relationship between a Canadian and the tradition of his or her ancestors. Conservatives should see this as a good thing.

Museums also help protect us from the rise of a radicalized political culture. Insofar as they remind us that human beings are part of a community of persons, encompassing past, present, and future generations, they can show that we are not atomized individuals living in a void, but that we have responsibilities to each other. Second, museums protect against extreme forms of idealism by telling the story of human experience. This supports the inherently conservative principle that ideas must never be divorced from experience and reminds us of the dangers that can arise when they are.

Certainly there are some who suspect museums are bastions of liberal dogma, but experience does not bear this out. Most display history and culture accurately and fairly. The tendency of conservatives to be suspicious of museums is the result of reacting too much to the particularities of certain exhibits, rather than appreciating the overall function of museums in our society. For example, the Canadian Museum of History provides a critical service in joining the living generations with their ancestors, even though some have argued that Aboriginal history has been over-represented in its exhibits at the expense of other, equally-important aspects of Canadian history. We should not, as the saying goes, fail to see the forest for the trees. While it is important for conservatives to tell their stories, it is even more fundamental to the long-term success of our movement that Canadians strengthen, even in the most general way, their relationship with the tradition of past generations. Museums are allies in raising the importance of our history and tradition in the consciousness of Canadians. We should start treating them as such by eliminating as many barriers as possible to the opportunities for Canadians

The Grand Hall at the Canadian Museum of History, formerly the Canadian Museum of Civilization. (Image: Marie-Louise Deruaz/ Handout)

to be enriched by them.

Little cost for big cultural returns

The first and most obvious barrier that should be eliminated is the admission fee to our national museums. Ranging from $11 to $18 per adult, these fees often exceed the cost of going to a movie. It is not hard to imagine that, when faced with the choice of spending the afternoon perusing the latest exhibit at the Canadian Museum of History or spending it at the movies, that many would choose the latter.

The Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg. (Image: CNW Group)

The museums and galleries in the National Capital Region have made a modest effort to compete with other forms of entertainment by making admission free on Thursday evenings. This tacitly recognizes that admission fees are dissuasive, but waiving them from 5-8 pm on a 'school night' is hardly throwing open the doors. If the museums were serious about providing free access, they could have chosen a weekend afternoon when families are more likely to visit. Furthermore, the fee structures of our museums and galleries also amount to tacit recognition that fees may be dissuasive to certain populations including seniors and students on fixed incomes.

The cost of eliminating general admission fees at our national museums and galleries would be quite modest. According to the most recent annual reports of the Crown corporations responsible for the national galleries and museums, forgone revenue for eliminating general admission fees at all seven of these institutions would total approximately $15 million annually. In fact, admission fees generally form a small portion of the national museums' revenues. For example, the revenues for the corporation that runs the Canadian War Museum and the Canadian Museum of History, including the funding provided by Parliament, were $89 million during fiscal year 2014-15, of which $5.2 million (less than 6 percent) came from admission fees and memberships. The majority of operating revenue came from other sources such as rentals, the boutique, restaurants and parking. At the National Gallery of Canada, admission fees and memberships count for $1.8 million (less than 3 percent) of its total revenues of $63 million. If admission were free we could expect offsetting increases in museum revenues from more patrons spending more money in on-site gift shops and restaurants. Their excellent venues could be further leveraged for special events such as wedding receptions, as is already being done by the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, featuring views of the iconic Halifax Harbour.

One piece of a national history strategy

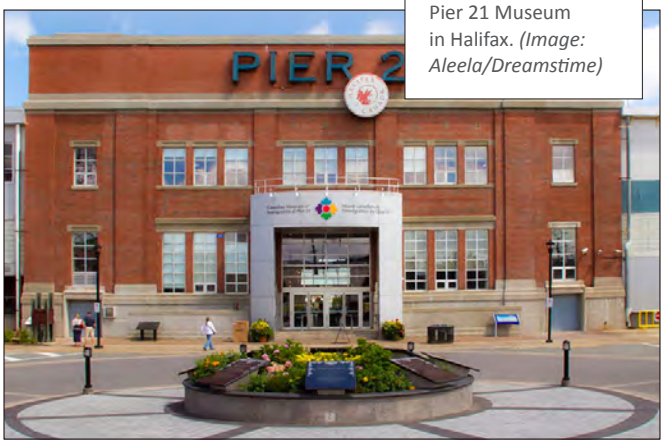
Eliminating admission fees to the national museums and galleries should be but one part of a larger strategy for connecting Canadians with their past. We should also, for example, put more emphasis on history instruction in our school system. Education falls within provincial jurisdiction, of course, but Ottawa could set an example about the national importance of history education with a free museums initiative.

We should not take lightly the criticism that the national museums and galleries are concentrated in Ottawa, apart from the two relatively new ones in Winnipeg and Halifax, and that Canadians outside these centres would benefit less from this proposal than those who reside there. We could hope that provinces and municipalities would follow Ottawa's lead and offer free admission to their many fine museums and galleries too. It is not an uncommon practice in other parts of the world – the Smithsonian Institution in Washington being a prime example. And perhaps the relationships involving travelling exhibits that already exist between the national museums and other Canadian museums could be made even stronger with a view to increasing public access to our national collections.

Ultimately, the case for eliminating admission fees to the national museums and galleries comes down to recognizing that these institutions are places where Canadians

encounter their history, their culture, and their heritage. Moreover, the federal government does not own these things; Canadians do. So we should have unrestricted access to them. Conservatives especially should be champions of museums and galleries, since we desire the same thing: a stronger connection between the past and the present, with an eye to the future. If freeing the museums also predisposes more Canadians to be more receptive to conservative ideas and values, so much the better. Just don't tell the Liberals.

Renze Nauta is an Edmontonian studying at the Dominican University in Ottawa. He is a Conservative activist and previously worked as a staffer in the Harper government.



Pier 21 Museum in Halifax. *(Image: Aleela/Dreamstime)*

(Image: PCLM BBDO/Jamie Standen)

THE RIGHT WAY TO ROCK

by Jason Tucker

Attention all planets of the solar federation.
We have assumed control.

I remember the first time I heard these lyrics on the radio, at the end of Rush's rock anthem *2112*, from the 1976 album of the same name. I wondered what they meant. Radio stations tend to only play the first and final movements of the 20-minute epic, so it wasn't until much later, when I heard the song in its entirety, that the chilling warning it contained became clear.

2112 is the story of a young man living in the intergalactic "Red Star Federation". Its totalitarian rulers control all art, knowledge, and access to information. The hero discovers a guitar – something unseen for generations – and teaches himself to play. Then he presents his discovery to Red Star leaders, hoping they will share his joy about the great potential for beauty and creativity in the music. Instead, they destroy the guitar, dismissing it and the music as "a silly whim" that "doesn't fit the plan." In despair for the lost age before the Federation's rule, when individualism and creativity reigned supreme, driven by the "pure spirit of man," the hero takes his own life. After his martyrdom we hear the Federation's chilling declaration of omnipotence.

It's hard not to see *2112* as a political allegory, an anti-Communist manifesto at the height of the Cold War. But

(Image: tiledwallpaper.com)

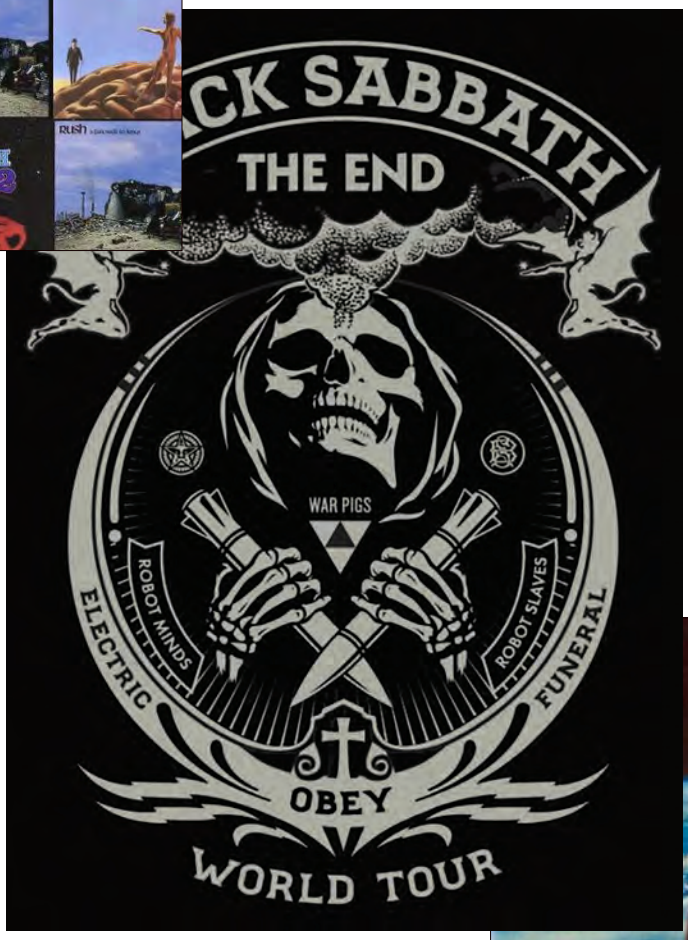
its radical sound, and broad themes of rebellion against tradition and polite society, belongs to the political left. The right stereotypically expresses its devotion to faith, flag, and family through the sentimentalism of country and western, or the family-friendly but otherwise vapid pop music of the 50s and 60s. But there is far more political complexity and diversity in contemporary music than that.

the young Torontonians who wrote it weren't Reagan conservatives, according to Rush guitarist Alex Lifeson. In an interview with Rolling Stone earlier this year for a 40th anniversary feature about the album, Lifeson acknowledged that Ayn Rand was an influence. But he hastened to add that he and his bandmates were not especially political, and in fact were uncomfortable when the media cast them as right wing libertarians.

Still, at the time, rock and roll was intensely political, even if the musicians weren't. It still is. John Lennon's *Give Peace a Chance* was adopted by the 1970s anti-war movement. His heirs are probably still collecting royalties for the treacly Imagine from contemporary peaceniks. U2's soundtrack for the '80s and '90s includes songs protesting Ronald Reagan's foreign policy in Latin America (*Bullet the Blue Sky*) and the Irish Troubles (*Sunday, Bloody Sunday*), and supporting the civil rights movement in the United States (*Pride [In the Name of Love]*). Neil Young has made a career of protesting Vietnam, wars in the Middle East, and most recently, the fossil fuel industry and Monsanto. Anti-war songs, anti-poverty songs, and anti-capitalism songs are common. All of them reference freedom of a kind: freedom from war, freedom from fear, freedom from want, or even, for some punk rockers like MxPx or Blink-182, freedom from responsibility.

But whatever their intentions, with *2112* Rush turned the concept of the protest song on its head and found commercial success. It is also a song about freedom, but specifically freedom to create, to achieve, and most importantly freedom to live one's life without government interference. It's a theme that appears again and again in Rush's work. *Red Barchetta*, from their 1981 release *Moving Pictures*, again presents a fictional world where freedom has been curtailed, but with a happier ending; a young man's joyfully evades "the eyes" in an antique sports car. Juvenile male fantasy? Sure. But it's also an unequivocal rejection of a world in which the individual is viewed as anything less than the prime mover of his own life.

There is a perception that rock music as a genre, with



Lifeson told *Rolling Stone* that he and his bandmates were "liberal". Indeed they were – classically liberal in the philosophical tradition of Burke, Mill and Hayek. What unites them are the values of individualism. Rush was by no means alone among rockers in expressing these values. It was common in the hard rock or progressive rock genre they helped pioneer, along with bands like Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin. And it was even more pronounced in the so-called "heavy metal" sub-genre that evolved out of their work. Well-known acts such as Metallica,

Megadeth, and Judas Priest, along with lesser-known artists with names like Iced Earth and Hammerfall, mostly eschewed the politics of protest in favour of the librettos of liberty.

F.A. Hayek wrote that "independence, self-reliance, and the willingness to bear risks, the readiness to back one's own convictions against a majority, and the willingness to voluntary cooperation with one's neighbours," form the basis for an individualistic society. In other words, freedom to live your life according to your own values, responsibility for your own choices and their consequences, and respect for the freedoms of others are the key values of conservatism – and they're the values at the heart of the heavy metal sub-culture.

Although heavy metal complains (very) loudly about all kinds of things, it is not generally "protest music" in any conventional sense. There are exceptions to be sure – Metallica's anti-war song *Disposable Heroes* or Iron Maiden's *2 Minutes to Midnight* come to mind – but heavy metal doesn't make a habit of asking people (politely or otherwise) to change their beliefs. In other words, it's not preachy like, say, almost everything written by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, and so much of contemporary rap music. To be sure the cover art for Metallica's *Don't Tread on Me* appropriates the Gadsden ensign's coiled rattlesnake from the libertarian movement, but the lyrics – "liberty or death, what we so proudly hail" – are nothing if not a conservative expression of love of country and tradition.

Ronald Reagan knew that freedom must "be fought for, protected, and passed on to the next generation." This responsibility is a foundational value for conservatives, and one that appears regularly in heavy metal music. The band Dragonforce is perhaps best known outside of the metal world as being responsible for writing the hardest song ever put to Guitar Hero. *Through the Fire and Flames*

is certainly that, but its true cultural significance is in its portrayal of the pursuit of freedom as an eternal struggle. Each verse describes a battle, followed by a victory chorus of "we're flying, we're free, we're free before the thunderstorm." It's the same story in *Three Hammers*, which commands listeners to "stand, fight, fight for your lives" so that "our world may be free once again." In *Power and Glory*, the obvious allusion to the Lord's Prayer in the title opens the door to individualist triumphalism in the lyric "free your

own mind… cause no one can stop you from climbing this mountain and reaching the top." In Rush's futuristic dystopia, Metallica's American revolution, or Dragonforce's medieval imagery, the underlying message remains the same. Freedom is the ultimate objective in life, and fighting to get and keep freedom is the noblest of human endeavours.

Most heavy metal bands and fans are not anarchists or nihilists. They get that freedom comes with responsibility. You see this at their concerts in the phenomenon known as the mosh pit. The mosh is a ceremonial war dance where metalheads celebrate freedom and re-enact the struggle for it. It can be a chaotic place, and it can even be violent – but there are rules. If freedom is reflected in the wild, ecstatic dancing, and the fight for it reflected in the pushing, shoving, and body-checking of the dance itself, then the rules of the pit are the glue that holds the whole thing together. Those rules are straightforward. When someone falls to the floor, pull them to their feet; if someone drops something, hold it up for them; if you're on the boundary of the pit, keep the moshers contained; in any encounter with venue staff, be civil. In other words, respect other people, and respect their property.

Ultimately, as political creatures, if we want the freedom to live life according to our values but don't respect the freedom of others to live their life according to theirs, we risk becoming tyrants and undermining our own freedom as much as everyone else's. In the pit, if we don't show respect for our fellows, we risk damage to property, serious injury, and getting barred from future shows at the venue. We can have all the freedom we want, but without respect for the freedom of others, it really doesn't count for much.

The violent iconoclastic imagery of heavy metal – war, death, the satanic underworld, and so on – is undeniably disturbing for many conservatives. However, the values espoused by heavy metal music and the sub-culture surrounding it – the freedom to live according to your own values, a responsibility to protect that freedom, and respect for the freedom of others – are the values of Hayek's "individualist society." In far more ways than they are not, the values of heavy metal are the values of conservatism. Even the modern political battle-cry of the conservative movement, the idea that "smaller government is better government," finds itself echoed in Rush's *2112*. Metalheads and conservatives alike hear the same ominous notes in the words: "Attention all planets of the solar federation… We have assumed control."

Jason Tucker is a recent political science graduate specializing in international relations and public policy.

The fantastic fiction of Guy Gavriel Kay

by Bob Tarantino

North American conservatives often lament the paucity of contemporary literature which they find *simpatico*. Though they might find philosophical congruence in the books of, say, Brad Thor, or the late Tom Clancy, whatever other virtues those works might possess they fall somewhere south of "literature". What distinguishes mere storytelling from literature is normative function: the former entertains whereas the latter exists, in the words of Russell Kirk, "to form the normative consciousness", to be "the expression of the moral imagination … to teach us what it means to be genuinely human". Art should cultivate the ability to discern the good, the true and the beautiful, and so reading literature is as much about undergoing an ethical awakening as it is an exercise in amusement. The uninitiated will be pleased to hear that one of the great writers working in the register of literature today is a Canadian novelist – albeit one whose works usually get slotted on the "fantasy" shelves at their local bookstore.

Guy Gavriel Kay has written one of the most eloquently ethical oeuvres in contemporary Canadian letters. The author of 13 novels, he is an Order of Canada inductee, and winner of the World Fantasy Award. At their best, his works exemplify the essence of literary art as defined by David Whalen writing in *The Imaginative Conservative*: "the intentional experience of beauty through language". This essay advances no claim about Kay's political commitments: he maintains a relatively low public profile (although he is active on Twitter) and provides few clues about his political views. But conservatives seeking literature that exhibits the moral imagination contemplated by Kirk will find it, irrespective of authorial intent, in many of Kay's works.

He first won acclaim with *The Fionavar Tapestry*, a landmark trilogy from the 1980s that was a wine-dark, Arthurian- and Norse-inflected take on mythic fantasy. But the majority of his work over the last quarter century has been what the *Canadian Encyclopedia* calls "fictional alternative versions of the past", or what many have described as "history with a quarter turn to the fantastic". His stories take place in settings obliquely reminiscent of medieval Provence (*A Song*

Guy Gavriel Kay is an Order of Canada inductee, author of 13 novels, including the Sarantine Mosaic *duology, and winner of the World Fantasy Award.*

for Arbonne), Reconquista Spain (*The Lions of al-Rassan*), Justinian Constantinople (*The Sarantine Mosaic*), Saxon England in the face of Viking incursions (*Last Light of the Sun*), Tang and Song dynasty China (*Under Heaven, River of Stars*) and the Renaissance Adriatic coast (*Children of Earth and Sky*). It is these historical fantasies which most fully embody Kay's ethical writings. His preferred approach lies outside the dominant modes of contemporary fantasy: apart from the *Fionavar* triad, he has eschewed both Tolkienesque sagas and sprawling George R. R. Martin-style prose marathons. His compact, spare style finds expression in succinct stand-alone books or, occasionally, linked duologies.

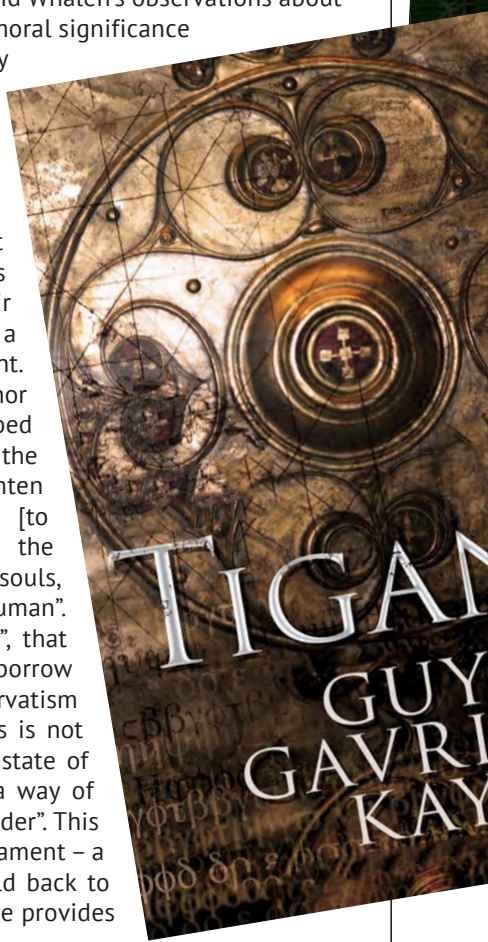
Kay is famed for his extensive research before putting pen to paper, and the worlds and characters he creates seem not so much constructed as simply described: his narrator's voice often feels like a lens on an existing place. Yet whatever the merits of his prose styling, however adept his construction of narratives, what is important for our purposes are the themes which emerge from the tales told. Utilizing settings reminiscent of actual historical periods often assists in discerning those thematic elements – most readers will at least have an intuitive sense of context, allowing for a focus on the latent shades of meaning. That being said, Kay displays no small precision of craft in evoking commonality across centuries and continents. Contemporary verisimilitude is comparatively easy – describe someone grabbing a morning coffee on the morning commute and millions can quickly identify; make a reader catch their breath as they experience the tremulous efforts of a Sarantine mosaicist to render in stone a worthy tribute to his deity Jad … now *that* takes skill.

Inside these vivid worlds, Kay explores how cultural identity is forged in the crucible of conflict; the damage wrought by erasure and forgetting. He examines the capacity of language to mold perceptions of the world; the power and danger inherent in the capacity of metaphor and storytelling to move hearts and minds. He assesses the costs of the negotiations and compromises needed to accommodate violently clashing conceptions of the good. And he measures the weight of grief; the felt need to leave a tangible imprint on the world; the obligation to sacrifice; and the heavy burdens of social expectations and destiny. Kay's characters engage and struggle with all these timeless human experiences and more. His most affecting stories involve characters in liminal circumstances: propelled by ambition, beset by betrayal, and struggling to survive the chaos they encounter when a society's accepted certainties seem to slide under one another like tectonic plates.

These are novels about the importance and impacts of history, about cultural continuation and repercussion, about the continual struggle of the individual to remain whole – about the legacies that individuals leave – in the wake of the relentless pressures of a society's remorseless tides. Kay's writings are suffused with an elegiac tone and the gentle melancholy of farewells. His emotive power is such that readers will empathize with his characters' sorrow for the world they are losing as strongly as they will dread the looming end of the book. The novels, for all their fantasticism, resonate because they reflect the patterns and contain the echoes of humanity's lived experience. Readers see their own world and concerns reflected in Kay's tales – imperfectly, mutedly, but distinctly recognizable.

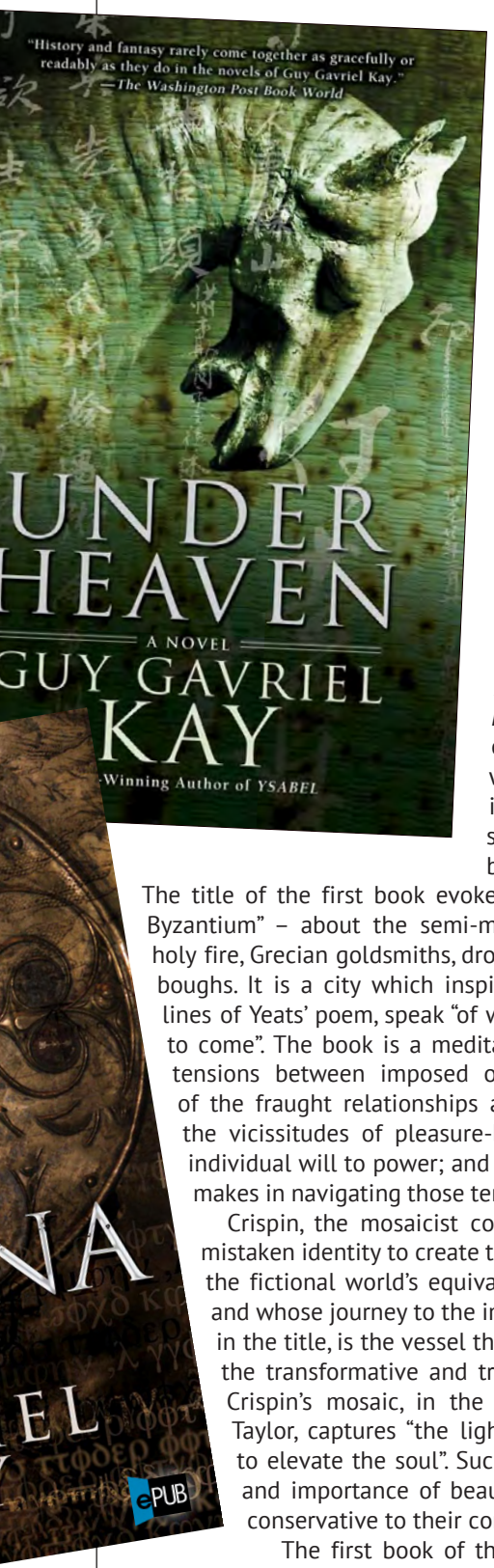
The essence of conservative storytelling

Why might we characterize these works as "conservative"? Because they exemplify art which teaches us what it means to be genuinely human. The stories embody, to borrow from David Whalen's observations about politics and literature, "the moral significance of choices; the inescapability of responsibility; the wisdom and folly of our predilections". At root, Kay's most compelling stories demonstrate the consequences of conduct – the present of his stories is always a product of their past, their future always a function of their present. American conservative author Rod Dreher has described storytelling as bearing the "power to form and enlighten the moral imagination, [to teach] right from wrong, the proper ordering of our souls, and what it means to be human". If there is a Kay "formula", that will serve to define it. To borrow again from Kirk, the conservatism to be found in Kay's stories is not ideological, instead it is "a state of mind, a type of character, a way of looking at the civil social order". This is conservatism as a temperament – a way of recounting the world back to ourselves. The best literature provides



an instructive reflection of our own lives.

Another American conservative writer, James Baresel, has observed that attempts at "conservative" art tend to focus on conveying ideas or messages, often at the expense of the quality of their expression. The "political" elements of great art, and its quality as great art, are usually emergent properties – not reducible to its component parts. So it is with the best of Kay's novels: in addition to relishing the dramatic tension generated by his labyrinthine plots, the attentive reader will experience revelations about the content of human flourishing.



Inspired by Yeats

The Sarantine Mosaic duology, made up of *Sailing to Sarantium* and *Lord Emperors*, is one of Kay's most beloved works and offers a fine illustration of the conservative disposition to be found in his writing. The title of the first book evokes Yeats' poem "Sailing to Byzantium" – about the semi-mythical city which yields holy fire, Grecian goldsmiths, drowsy emperors and golden boughs. It is a city which inspires Kay to, as in the last lines of Yeats' poem, speak "of what is past, or passing, or to come". The book is a meditation on the ever-present tensions between imposed order and organic chaos; of the fraught relationships among religion, myth, art, the vicissitudes of pleasure-besotted crowds and the individual will to power; and how the choices a society makes in navigating those tensions shape a civilization.

Crispin, the mosaicist commissioned in a case of mistaken identity to create the crowning decoration of the fictional world's equivalent of the Hagia Sophia, and whose journey to the imperial capital is reflected in the title, is the vessel through which Kay explores the transformative and transcendent nature of art. Crispin's mosaic, in the words of reviewer Dena Taylor, captures "the light of eternity and uses it to elevate the soul". Such recognition of the truth and importance of beauty marks Kay's stories as conservative to their core.

The first book of the *Sarantine Mosaic* pivots on a scene in which Crispin, travelling on an imperial road to take up his mistaken commission, stops to perform his devotions in a modest old chapel. He looks up at the dome of the chapel to see the traditional religious imagery adorning the ceiling and is struck down, literally falling to the floor, "the power of the image above hammer[ing] into him, driving all strength from his body so that he fell down like a pantomime grotesque". A massive depiction of his god Jad, a figure "absolute and terrifying", rendered in his world's Eastern fashion – not as gentle sun-figure as found in the West – but as "judge … worn, beleaguered warrior in deathly combat". Crispin is rendered insensate before this artwork produced by human reverence, this giant icon which serves as a window onto the divine. What follows in the text is an incredibly sensitive rumination on the nature and universality of godhood, and the spiritual nature of art. This is writing which comprehends ecstatic visions of art and religious devotion and recognizes the exaltation of the human spirit through both. This is not fiction which requires faith on the part of the reader – the atheist, agnostic and devout should all be able to relate to the experiences of Kay's characters.

Part of the story related in the *Sarantine Mosaic* is a subversion of the aphorism *vita brevis ars longa* – life is short, art is long. We discover, in the end, that sometimes works of art are indeed *brevis* in this world whereas the impact of some lives are amazingly *longa* – but the essential truth of the statement nevertheless remains. It is a testament to art as a bulwark against the undertow of history, art as the human exultation *against* history, art as the mark of the human on the face of the implacable divine. However described, that remains ineluctably true. And it is those truths that one learns from literature.

A conservative would say that words strung together count as literature if they illuminate or constitute the good, the true or the beautiful. As Whalen advises, if we don't take the time to find meaning in literature – if we don't find occasion to observe fictional depictions of the good, the true and the beautiful – we may well miss it in our own lives. Guy Gavriel Kay tells stories which are true – not in the veracity of their claims (which are obviously fictional), but true in their consonance with human experience. They are meditative rather than bombastic. They turn on the foundational nature of memory and the continuity of human experience from age to age and land to land. As Kay writes in *Sailing to Sarantium*, in words which avert to the universal truth of human existence, "you moved through time and things were left behind and yet stayed with you." The conscientious reader will learn more about virtue from Kay's delicately fantastic tales than from a dozen philosophical tracts. His stories are not your life. They are nothing like your life. And yet your life – the best version of your life – is to be found in those stories.

Bob Tarantino is a Toronto lawyer and writer.

Not wanted in the village

by Joshua Lieblein

From: Roberta Bride
To: Garrison Mentaliti
Subject: A Book That Must Be Stopped

Dear Garry,

Ever since you hired me as Chief Canadian Content Checker for Conundra House Publishers Canada, I have felt as though I have been living in a fantasy world full of ethereal beauty and constant danger.

Sifting through reams of nature poems trying to distinguish alchemical imagery from that which is merely leaden, navigating tangled webs of fractured family relationships held together by sharp-tongued women of middling to advanced age, trying to determine if a crime novel about a former hockey star and securities trader turned serial killer is believable enough….it's enough to make you feel like Hagar in *The Stone Angel,* trying to keep up your resolve and hold steadfast to your principles though the world may mock you to your face and behind your back.

And are we not the guardians of Canadian fiction, charged with the heavy burden of maintaining quality writing and shunning the vulgar depredations of popular culture? Would Canadian writers even be able to tell their stories without us, or would these fragile northern literary lights be extinguished in the dark chasm of the mass market?

True, we must occasionally supplement our income with government-subsidized (and approved) Canadian history reinterpretations and earnest proto-Marxist economic and environmental manifestoes, but it is all in the service of a higher purpose – the noble task of defining what it means to be Canada.

Yet of late, Garry, I fear my resolve has weakened. The other day, I was browsing through the pile looking for yet another biography of one or more of the Famous Five when I stumbled upon a manuscript by an unknown author that bore the promise a "Great Canadian Novel".

I should never have opened it, as boastful as that title was. What kind of Canadian novel would ever presume to be great? Is it not enough just to have written a Canadian novel? I wondered if this was the work of pompous plutocrat Conrad Black or tarsands apologist Rex Murphy writing under a pseudonym, but there were too few polysyllabic words. I also suspected Mark Steyn, but I couldn't find a single reference to musical theatre or Islamic birthrates, so it couldn't be him.

The setting was a faraway planet in a distant galaxy, where a snow-covered northern kingdom believed itself to be menaced by a powerful confederacy of desert cities to the south. The inhabitants mask their insecurity with drink, self-loathing and smug condescension hidden behind icy masks of politeness. They put much effort into appearing as meek and generic as possible. Looking back, I can see the author's implication – Canada is such a blank slate that you could transport it to another world and lose very little.

But here's the thing, Garry: As horrible as it was, I couldn't put it down. It was like looking at a distorted reflection of my Canadian self-image in a carnival funhouse mirror…and when I finished it my faith in everything I thought I knew and believed about our country was shaken to the core.

Stylistically, every single convention of Canadian fiction was broken – and deliberately so. Maybe that's what kept me reading – anticipation of what would be overthrown next. Instead of a protagonist haunted by her past trauma, we had a hero struggling against forces beyond his control. Even more shocking was that this hero was dealing with unequivocally evil villains instead of something more traditional, like the uncertainty of his beliefs, or the fragility of human relationships. For a time, I wondered if it was a posthumous work of that crusty old francophobe Mordecai Richler.

I hear you asking, what's even remotely Canadian about clearly defined absolutes? Well, that's the most diabolical thing – the novel puts the very idea of what it means to be Canadian on trial. For the villain of the piece is the

culture itself – the vague, restrained and superficial attitudes of the powers that be within the novel's snowy fantasy kingdom. This is a world of dragons and wizards and fantastic technology, which is fine, but none of them are as powerful as the oppressive influence of what the author calls – brace yourself – "The Consensus."

Can you can see where this is leading, even though I didn't? The Consensus is comprised of that fictional nation's leading politicians, artists, journalists and academics, all of whom are in thrall to the memory of an aloof philosopher King and his dim-witted but handsome heir. They gather at secret wilderness retreats where by day they plot to keep the citizenry uninformed and afraid of their unruly neighbours to the south, and by night they engage in wild gender-bending debauchery. It's never clear if they use magic or just the brute force of the state, but they have succeeded in keeping the population ignorant, complacent, and obedient. A glittering facade of egalitarianism barely hides an ugly reality where corrupt guilds loot the treasury, creativity is strangled, and those with talent or unorthodox ideas are subject to public shaming and banishment.

After the hero is exiled to the anarchic dystopia to the south, he uses unregulated communications technologies to foment unrest back home, then takes up with a band of raiders and returns to claim the virtually unarmed kingdom for his own. I confess I was cheering for him, until I realized that this dark fantasy was really an elaborate revenge plot by one of the conservative kooks who was running Canada until our liberation last year. O, irony, where is thy sting? Yet I have come to understand, that much like Tim Horton's pumpkin spiced lattes, we can never truly be rid of them – just as I can now never be rid of the part of myself that succumbed to this subversive literary seduction.

Perhaps I am like Miranda in *The Tempest*, having just discovered a *Brave New World*? For I cannot quiet within myself an unfamiliar desire for greater personal liberty, respite from a life that seems constrained and – dare I say it? – lacking freedom. Secretly I now question whether my taxes are too high, and wonder what it would be like to own a gun. The other day, I even found myself wondering whether Hillary Clinton's personal ethics were worthy of the office of the President!

I'm sure by now you understand why this novel can never be allowed to see the light of day. Canadians will buy it, thinking as I did that it was just another popular fantasy series, and then see themselves in this twisted mirror. People around the world will buy it too, and our international reputation will suffer. They'll know it's about us, even though it's never explicitly said.

You know how the common people take to fanciful things that speak to their basest instincts, their Games of Thrones and Hunger Games. This could spiral into a trilogy, maybe even a movie! And then, instead of publishing proper literature that nobody reads, we will be expected to produce books people actually find interesting! Can you imagine how upset the Giller, Canada Council or Governor-General's literary awards panelists would be with us if we put them in a position where they had to hand out prizes for this kind of dangerous dreck? We would never get invited to an Atwood launch or a PEN cocktail party ever again! We would achieve eternal infamy as the publisher that put out the first successful Canadian novel ever written by a conservative, thereby shattering the timeless truth that they don't *believe* in culture.

Obviously we can't let this happen. Fortunately, the author is an obscure former communications staffer to a junior minister in the Harper government whose only publishing credits are in his hometown weekly newspaper in some godforsaken part of rural Saskatchewan. He appears to be unemployed and broke so he can't afford to sue us. Nevertheless I propose to kiss him off as gently as possible with the draft rejection letter below. With your approval, I'll send it out asap:

Dear Mr. L------

It is with a great deal of regret and more than our usual amount of apologies that we must decline to publish your "Great Canadian Novel" at this time.

We strongly advise you to rework the plot so that the people of your fictional world immigrate to Canada at some point, possibly to escape a loud-mouthed dictator who wishes to build a space wall around his planet. Another possibility would be to have your hero recast as a victim of social injustice, fighting a monster composed entirely of white privilege.

In the meantime, we encourage you to purchase and carefully read Margaret Atwood's newest dystopian novel so that you have a better understanding of what we're looking for. It's not on the shelves yet so we can't reveal too much, but we can tell you it will be set in a fictionalized version of America where *everything* is for sale.

Regards,

T. Roberta Bryde
Chief Canadian Content Checker
Conundra House Publishers
Canada

Joshua Lieblein is a Toronto pharmacist, blogger and political activist whose writing can also be found at The Rebel and Loonie Politics.

(Artists: Oksana Zhelisko/Nicola Lautre)

Conservative arts policy: Not an oxymoron

by Geoff Owen and Leif Malling

Artists are left wing, almost without exception. Most are contemptuous of conservatives. They loathe capitalism, trash tradition and back all the progressive, politically correct causes, from rainforests to electric cars to Obamacare.

In July, Hollywood A-Listers lent their star power to the Democratic National Convention; Katy Perry, Meryl Streep, Susan Sarandon – even Bradley Cooper, star of *American Sniper*! A week earlier, the culturati scoffed at the (former) underwear model and reality TV personalities at the Republican National Convention.

Michael Moore, Margaret Atwood, Neil Young, Sarah Polley, Alec Baldwin, K-OS, Sean Penn, Loco Locass, even Raffi – they all campaign against conservatives.

They hate us. So screw them.

That is exactly the wrong attitude.

From an electoral point of view, ignoring arts and culture or, worse, antagonizing the whole sector, is wrong-headed. Because, while there is no scenario where an arts and culture policy gets a conservative party elected, there is also no scenario where a conservative party gets elected by campaigning against arts and culture or pretending it doesn't exist. Smart arts and culture policy is a necessary condition for political success.

Smart policies and platforms are integral to the success of any party and campaign. For us, smart policies are conservative in principle, achievable in practice and effective in outcome. This is not to say there is a magic bullet of arts policy that will convince Leo Dicaprio and Whoopi Goldberg to switch sides. We do not propose a singular reform that will win elections, or particular program that will endear conservative governments to artists. To be successful, each arts and culture policy should be specific to the level of government (municipal, provincial, federal), the party, the candidate, and the ambient political environment.

But here are five principles to guide the construction of a compelling and successful conservative arts and culture policy: (1) Be Conservative; (2) Be Normal; (3) Be Practical; (4) Be Proud; and (5) Be Electable.

1. Be conservative

Too often, conservatives try to appear softer or more accessible by throwing their principles overboard. The left wedges us on some issue and we oblige them by negotiating against ourselves. In seeking to placate a stakeholder group (i.e. artists) or present a more "enlightened" version of ourselves to voters, we adopt policy that is not conservative. It's inauthentic, it doesn't work, and it undermines our general credibility.

A successful arts and culture policy must be recognizably and coherently conservative. Imagine we were developing policy for another industry. What is the conservative foundation for good policy?

- Always put consumers' interests ahead of producers. Support the market, not the businesses competing within it.

Government's proper role in financial services or manufacturing or shipbuilding is to create a level playing field, free of undue regulation and excessive taxation.

Consumers should be at the top of the pyramid. Conservatives lament that too often government becomes captive to producers' interests. Government policies that favour producers restrict choice and cost consumers money, sometimes twice: both as consumers and taxpayers.

When it comes to arts and culture, the same principle applies: conservative policies should privilege consumers over producers.

Allowing consumers to decide is always better than letting bureaucrats decide. Should government fund visual arts or dramatic arts? Music or theatre? Small town arts festivals or big-city tourist magnets? When should regulators restrict the "content" Canadians consume? Government shouldn't make these choices. They invariably choose wrong. Far better to trust Canadians' tastes and artists' talents by letting the market decide.

This approach won't get producers of arts and culture to vote for conservatives en masse. But consumers will like it. And electorally, the math is pretty clear.

Leftists will court producers (i.e. artists) with richer subsidies, regulations and general crony-capitalism. Conservatives should neither pander to nor denigrate producers, and instead just concentrate on winning consumers.

2. Be normal

So artists don't particularly like us. Let's just make peace with the fact that there will probably never be an Artists-for-Conservatives rally or that no arts group will likely ever give our platform anything higher than a 'D' – no matter what we do.

That's no reason to get ugly about it. Too often we fall into the trap of believing meanness strengthens our conservative bona fides or we offer the toughness appropriate for foreign or law and order policy in cultural policy.

Moreover, consuming arts and culture is what normal people do, even conservatives. They watch TV; go to the theatre; volunteer at the museum; attend Christmas concerts with their family; enroll children in dance classes; host kids' birthdays at clay-making studios; and attend parades – from Caribana to Santa Claus to Pride.

You can be in the culture without being of the culture, as Christians say. Stephen Harper wasn't much of a hockey player but he was a huge fan and historian of the game. He never bought into the lifestyle of sex, drugs and rock 'n roll either, but that didn't stop him from joyfully playing the music of the Beatles and Rolling Stones. These things were eminently "normal" and helped him connect to voters.

Speaking of Harper, during the 2008 campaign he famously said: "I think when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see a gala of a bunch of people at, you know, a rich gala all subsidized by taxpayers claiming their subsidies aren't high enough, when they know those subsidies have actually gone up – I'm not sure that's something that resonates with ordinary people."

> "There is no scenario where a conservative party gets elected by campaigning against arts and culture or pretending it doesn't exist"

Every word of this is true. On the face of it, most "ordinary people" should have agreed with him. But it blew up on him for a couple of reasons. First, it forced a lot of ordinary people to choose between Harper and a lot of writers and artists and actors and musicians that they loved. Second, it made him sound like an uncultured curmudgeon, a miserly, fun-hating facsimile of Mr. Burns.

That's because every voter consumes arts and culture. It is an extraordinary part of our lives. It makes life interesting and fun and compelling. Tax and monetary policy do not add sparkle to normal people's lives. As the left knows very well, arts and culture is a policy opportunity to connect viscerally with voters.

Conservative politicians don't need to throw taxpayers' money at it. They just need to let people know that their daughter takes guitar lessons, that as part of their everyday lives they read novels, go to plays and concerts, display art in their living rooms. Frankly, if they're not doing this stuff, then they probably are the nerdy sociopaths the left says they are, and nobody should vote for them.

3. Be practical

Platforms need policy. A conservative arts and culture platform, the specific campaign commitments, should be practical, accessible and conservative. While this essay does not offer a turnkey platform template, here are some sensible themes:

- Celebrate artists as entrepreneurs. Anybody who can turn a garage into a studio, a pile of scrap metal into a work of art, or produce a musical on a shoestring budget, should be held up as a conservative hero.
- Tilt the balance towards consumers. Give them more control over, for example, the television channels they subscribe to. Insist the CRTC serve consumers' not producers' interests. Support copyright policy that respects consumers, not just producers.
- Cut taxes for artists, possibly by increasing deductions as the Harper government did for tradespersons' tools. Cut taxes for consumers too, perhaps by increasing charitable tax credits for donations to arts and culture. Consider a special capital gains exemption for Canadian art investments.
- Cut regulation and red tape. Avoid censorship like the plague. Weaken union control over wages and working conditions in arts and culture industries. Lower certification standards. Sound techs aren't heart surgeons.
- Celebrate history. Civics, history and preservation of the past are natural conservative themes. If there is one place where conservatives should spend more

Consumers of art attend an event hosted by Artlink Canada, an innovative mobile art business specializing in turning unique spaces into galleries. (Image: Artlink Canada)

money in the name of culture it's on museums, archives, libraries, and galleries that focus on history.

On arts and culture, we do not recommend scrapping all existing funding programs. We recommend finding practical approaches to tilt the balance towards Canadians writ large. We strongly oppose the temptation many conservative platforms fall prey to of matching the spending promises of left-wing parties. Conservatives cannot win an argument about which party will spend the most on producers, and inauthentic promises won't appeal to a group of people who generally don't like us very much. So let's start by being conservative, normal and practical.

4. Be proud

It's important for a party to carry itself confidently with respect to every part of its platform. Conservative candidates need to be proud of their arts and culture platform.

Canadian conservatives have a habit of treating arts policy as a political *terra nullis*, as if we have never been there before, and have no experience upon which to draw.

Actually, conservatives are involved with local and national arts institutions across Canada. They administer, fundraise and volunteer. Conservative policy-makers should actively draw on this expertise. And successive conservative federal and provincial governments have substantially shaped Canadian arts and culture policy.

- Robert Borden's Conservative government passed first National Gallery of Canada Act in 1913. Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government moved the gallery to its current beautiful building in 1988.
- In 1932, the Conservative Government of R.B. Bennett created the CBC (née The Canadian Radio Broadcasting Corporation).
- The Ontario Arts Council was founded in 1963 by the PC government of John Robarts.
- Alberta PC Premier Peter Lougheed did so much for the arts that his era was likened to Camelot in a gushing book by a dean of the provincial arts elite.
- Stephen Harper's Conservative government brought in the Children's Arts Tax Credit – which has been repealed by the Liberals.

So, conservatives have a legacy of support for arts and culture of which they should be proud.

5. Be electable

Given the dearth of electoral successes of late, Canadian conservatism needs to evolve. Part of that evolution can – and should – include thoughtful conservative arts and culture policy. Being electable doesn't mean changing what we believe, it means evolving how we connect with voters.

As hard as it is to believe, there is a political universe wherein conservative ideas appeal to women, new Canadians and urban voters. In the near term, at least, the stench of Donald Trump's vulgarity wafting across the border won't make it any easier for conservatives here to expand that universe.

But that's all the more reason to try, and the principles outlined in this essay can serve as the foundation to making these connections. A successful conservative platform will not advocate zero government involvement in arts and culture; rather it will define a limited, but vigorous, role for government. If voters see principled, accessible, proud conservative ideas and politicians trumpeting their vision for the arts, along with all our unassailable ideas on economics, freedom and democracy, they will respond by electing conservative governments.

In the end, what will we watch, read, listen to and hang on our walls if we write off non-conservative artists? Ian Tyson songs and Clint Eastwood movies – while awesome – would eventually grow stale. Cultural consumption, like cultural policy, that privileges ideological purity over self-fulfillment wouldn't be normal, smart or electable. If we want to start winning elections again we should dare to be artsy, in both our personal and political lives.

Leif Malling is a Toronto-based management consultant and co-founder of Blue Skies Ontario. Geoff Owen is an independent contractor specializing in developing and communicating public policy ideas, particularly in respect of economic policy.

Conservative art? It's complicated

Christina's World by Andrew Wyeth: 'Authentic conservatism.' *(Image: Wind Ranch)*

by Nigel Hannaford

The most expensive words I ever said were "Condo art."

I meant it as a compliment to the superior decorating skills of the woman who would become my wife. Superior, that is, to the commercial hotels I frequented, with their green paint, rosewood furniture, and peppercorn ducks… And those fading prints of Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* in the restaurant, its rich gastronomy contrasting bleakly with the meagre fare upon my plate.

It was the '90s. She had just put the finishing touches on our new place. "Nice condo art," I said.

"Pure bloody kitsch," she heard. And went shopping.

These days, our condo is adorned with a considerable investment in "Nice modern art." We like it. But, as conservatives, we feel a bit conflicted. Can pictures "my kid could have painted" be conservative art?

Our conservative friends say they like it. Even friends who have Thomas Kinkade prints on their walls. And our kids find it encouraging.

So there these pictures hang, and we live with the cognitive dissonance. But, are we enjoying forbidden fruit?

Artistically, the left advocates for revolution and utopia through the *avant garde*, and the abandonment of rules, restraint and often technique. But does that mean conservatives can only express themselves through formalist, traditionalist approaches to art?

One of the better known conservative contemporary artists in the world today is Provo, Utah painter Jon McNaughton. We know he's a conservative because he loudly self-identifies as one. And because conservatives like him, and liberals don't. Steven Colbert has skewered him, as has Rachel Maddow. *New York Magazine* art critic Jerry Saltz described McNaughton's paintings as "bad academic derivative realism", "propaganda art" and "visually dead as a door nail."

McNaughton paints overtly conservative themes and resolutely anti-left subjects. His 2013 piece, *Liberalism is a disease*, depicts two dozen prominent members of America's liberal media and political elite (plus Mitt Romney), quarantined in a "gun-free" zone. (Pure imagination, alas.)

And, he uses the traditional, formal, realist style. In his *One Nation Under God*, the crowd of characters flanking Jesus include recognizable facsimiles of Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Ronald Reagan and many other historical figures amongst a host of generic icons of American culture. In short, the oft-described "artist of the Tea Party" ticks all the conservative boxes, and none of his work leaves any room

for misunderstanding of his political bias.

Some conservatives find McNaughton's dearth of subtlety off-putting, ham-fisted, and even embarrassing to their cause. They prefer the paintings of a conservative artist like Atlanta's Steve Penley. His work is also unmistakably conservative in its choice and treatment of subjects, but his style is modern and abstract. According to a 2015 profile in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Penley's art is much favoured by conservative intellectuals like the late Andrew Brietbart and pollster Frank Luntz, and Republican heavyweights like Senator Ted Cruz and House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy.

McNaughton and Penley are unambiguously conservative, both in their art and their public personas. But the life and work of another American painter, the late Andrew Wyeth, demonstrates that one can be a conservative artist without being obvious and noisy about it.

Like McNaughton, Wyeth was a formalist in a modernist time and thus he endured more than his fair share of critical disapproval. But his work was (and is) widely appreciated and occasionally defended. "In today's scrambled-egg school of art, Wyeth stands out as a wild-eyed radical," observed one critic in 1963. "For the people he paints wear their noses in the usual place, and the weathered barns and bare-limbed trees in his starkly simple landscapes are more real than reality."

Nature's Paradise by Thomas Kinkade: The 'Painter of Light'...and 'kitsch.'

Wyeth's conservatism is subtle, but that is the source of its power. In a comparison of Wyeth and Kinkade published in *The Imaginative Conservative*, author and critic Dwight Longenecker praised Wyeth's unflinching eye for the harsh and heroic realities in American life as "authentic conservatism, in stark contrast with Kinkade's "Christian kitsch" that "communicates everything that is bogus and stereotypical about American conservatism."

Of those four conservative artists, I'm betting only Wyeth will still be selling in a hundred years' time.

There is no small irony in the fact that apart from American conservatives, the other great champions of artistic hyper-realism in the 20th century were the Communist dictatorships of China and the Soviet Union.

In 1932 "Wise Leader and Dear Teacher" Josef Stalin met with favoured Soviet intelligentsia at novelist Maxim Gorky's apartment. The goal of the gathering was to define socialist art. Characteristically, Stalin settled the matter: "To depict our life correctly, he [the artist] cannot fail to observe and point out what is leading towards socialism. So this will be socialist art. It will be Socialist Realism."

Naturally, those present instantly recognized this for the towering insight that it was: Socialist Realism would inspire the masses by merging party and ideology with adoration of "Mother Russia." How could it produce anything other than great art? In practice, of course, it produced little more than vast quantities of propaganda and bore witness to the extinction of human creativity in a totalitarian state.

Oh, there were exceptions. The bucolic abundance of Arkady Plastov's *Collective Farm* remains warm and inviting decades after it was commissioned to cover up the genocidal reality of collectivization. You can't lay that kind of guilt on American social realists like Norman Rockwell – or Jon McNaughton today – although no doubt some progressive essayist has argued that Rockwell was Plastov's equal in burying "the awful truth about American racism, sexism, and imperialism."

Canada was mostly a spectator, or fencesitter if you prefer, to these great 20th century struggles for the soul of art. It has been argued that some members of the Group of Seven, particularly Tom Thomson, expressed fundamentally conservative ideas through their landscapes of the great white north. But progressives might just as easily claim Thomson et al as proto-environmentalists or indigenous voice-appropriators.

With the vast expansion of the welfare state in the late 20th century, Canadian art and artists were effectively socialized, with Soviet-style consequences for the country's overall creative output. Billions of tax dollars invested in "culture" has undoubtedly increased the quantity of Canadian art, but most of it reflects the modernist, progressive, *avant garde* bias of the granting agencies, arts faculties, and bureaucracies that control the money. If there are any Rockwells, McNaughtons, Penleys or Wyeths painting in Canada today, they are likely eking out a living in the

Jon McNaughton's Liberalism is a Disease *(left) and* Obama's Foreign Policy *(below). (Images: JonMcNaughton.com)*

online art market, where quality actually matters.

Despite its widely alleged philistinism, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper did little to disrupt the comfortable world of Canada's subsidized arts cartels. It did, however, erect a couple of monuments in Ottawa that will be snickered at for years by liberals as examples of conservatively-themed art supporting a conservative government narrative.

The first was a monument marking the 2010 centennial of the Royal Canadian Navy. As a historical and military tribute, it was a perfectly conservative artistic initiative. However, the modernist, abstract sculpture overlooking the Ottawa River – a white curved slab topped by a gold ball – left much to the imagination… A sail? The bow of a ship?

At the unveiling, I wondered how many navy veterans would be uncomfortably reminded of an iceberg.

In 2015, the government erected another monument on Parliament Hill, this one marking the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812. It was a conservative artistic trifecta; historical, military and realistic. It supported the government's Defence of Canada narrative, by featuring the united struggle of anglophone, francophone, aboriginal, and female Canadians. (And the monument's cannon pointed south…)

It is unlikely however, that these monuments will long be acknowledged as exclusively conservative art. Like the magnificent War Memorial nearby, they evoke national themes and patriotic sentiments in the hearts of Canadians of all political persuasions.

Canada's preference for the realist style, in most of its Ottawa monuments, is ironic. Aesthetically at least, it suggests we have a greater kinship with the Russians and their Socialist Realist tradition, perhaps best exemplified by the St. Petersburg memorial to the defence of Leningrad, than with our American allies.

After all, the Americans chose to commemorate 9-11 with a modernist installation. The Israelis too, went the abstract route with their Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Tel Aviv.

But so what? Art is a barometer of cultural change. The creative travesty of one century often becomes the precious heritage of the next. As the old leftie playwright George Bernard Shaw said, "All great truths begin as blasphemies."

Thus, when his opera *Tannhauser* opened in 1845, Richard Wagner appealed to a nascent but fervent German nationalism. In a time of undemocratic monarchies within Europe, this was a hugely controversial and revolutionary statement. Indeed, in a letter to his friend Franz Liszt, Wagner confessed to "an enormous desire to commit acts of artistic terrorism."

Given their history, Germans are understandably cautious about radicalism: Many conservatives would agree that all great human tragedies begin as blasphemies.

So, 160 years later, it's a very unrevolutionary crowd that attends Wagner operas at the annual festival he founded in the Bavarian town of Bayreuth. And in 2014, the festival's music director Jonathan Meese was fired for his challenging use of political, social and sexual imagery: This, in a genre where incest is at the core of one of its foundational works.

As for Shaw, his socialist blasphemies of a hundred years ago have also been absorbed into today's orthodoxy: How many conservative editors have thundered: "A government with the policy to rob Peter to pay Paul can be assured of the support of Paul," quite unaware that Shaw said it first. (I know one.)

So maybe conservatives should be a little more broad-minded about what constitutes good art. Must we ban Salvador Dali from our walls because of his youthful dalliance with Communism, his post-war support of Franco,

and his surrealist painting? Perhaps, but what I see in works like his *Temptation of St. Anthony* is a conservative Catholic admonition to resist the temptations of the flesh. Maybe that's not what he intended but what the hell, beauty and political intent belong in the eye of the beholder.

Reagan portrait by Steve Penley: A favourite of U.S. conservatives. (Image: Penleyart.com)

The truth then, is that whenever one attempts to constrain conservative art within a narrow ideological compass of artist, subject matter or style, conservatives inevitably do what they want anyway, in pursuit of style, beauty and truth.

For, if conservatism has one great core value, it is freedom: Freedom in trade, in movement, in association, most certainly in speech and artistic expression.

Conservative buyers of art may lean to traditional forms; artists may choose to cater to that taste. But to believe that conservative art reaches its apex when it is indistinguishable from a photograph is to shut out vast opportunities for artistic expression and appreciation.

Is there any art that conservatives can call uniquely their own? Only this: art that is conservative is art that people buy with their own money.

When the Government of Canada decided in 1989 to buy Barnett Newman's 1967 *Voice of Fire* painting for the National Gallery at a cost of $1.8 million, there was conservative outrage from coast to coast to coast. To many viewers, the giant canvas composed of three vertical coloured lines looked like the two-bit flag for some island tax haven. The populist conservative Reform Party had a field day attacking Brian Mulroney's Red Tory Progressive Conservative government for its bad taste and reckless waste of taxpayers' dollars. And then the National Gallery admitted it had initially hung the painting upside down, thereby proving the expert opinions of some 30 million art critics.

Arkady Plastov's Collective Farm: *Giving realism a bad name.*

As Olivier Ballou notes elsewhere in this magazine, there was a backstory to the painting that should have endeared it to conservatives.

But still. Art that nobody wants to pay for…that can only see the light of day through the agency of state granting agencies and the aesthetes who lobby them…then this art – good or bad, formal or modern – lacks the essential conservative value of free-market exchange.

It might still be art: the Canada Council has swans among its geese. But even the most beautiful bronze of Ronald Reagan shaking hands with Margaret Thatcher, if paid for by taxpayers, could never be classified as conservative art.

Whatever you think of McNaughton's paint-by-numbers conservative propaganda, it sells. Fox News host Sean Hannity paid six figures for a McNaughton depiction of President Obama burning the U.S. Constitution.

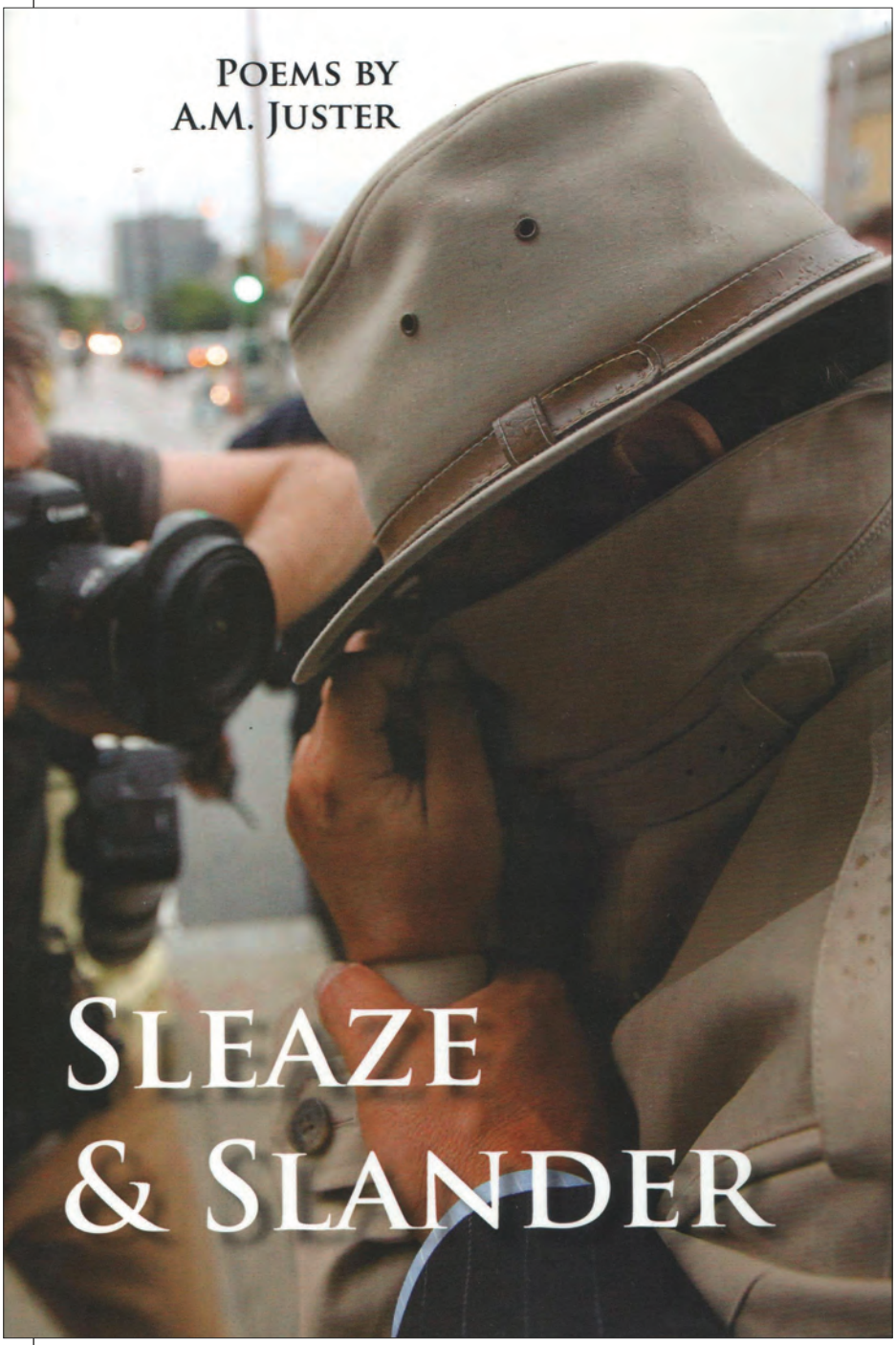
Steven Colbert passed judgement on Hannity's intellect – if not his artistic taste – by calling him a "televised bag of hammers." And many "cool" people echo his scoffing.

But the point is, the exercise of choice in art, in a free market, is about as conservative as art gets.

A bit like our modest collection then, of colourful daubs and swatches purchased from a thoroughly capitalist Calgary dealer, with the fruits of our own enterprise.

"Nice conservative art," we call it. We still don't have the faintest idea what it's meant to be. But that's ok. Because we chose it.

Nigel Hannaford was Manager of Speechwriting in the Office of the Prime Minister, from 2009 to 2015, and before that a long-time member of the Calgary Herald *editorial board. He doesn't know much about art, but knows what he likes.*



At last, a poet worth reading

by Peter Shawn Taylor

We begin with an important public service announcement from the United States:

A Stern Warning to Canada

If you want peace,
withdraw your geese.

What should Canadians make of this alert? On closer inspection it's actually a poem, not an official notice. But it's neither long nor boring. The point is easily grasped. It rhymes. It's topical, knowing and funny. Plus, there's a satirical edge and subtle political undertone that should appeal to readers who've given up on – or were never interested in – the self-absorbed absurdities of formless modernist poetry. Scarcer than a goose-less park, this is contemporary poetry with appeal for the masses.

Our sardonic caution from the south comes courtesy of A.M. Juster, an acclaimed American poet with a fascinating resume and equally intriguing conservative political outlook. He's also not afraid to explain a joke. "The whole notion of aggression from Canada is just inherently funny," he observes in an interview from his home in Belmont, Massachusetts, a bedroom community of Boston. "I don't like geese, but I do like Canadians. We Americans have an almost sentimental view of Canadians; you're like us, but better people," he says slowly and generously. On the other hand, and here the pace quickens a bit, "why are these birds – large rats with feathers really – a federally protected species? They're everywhere, like pigeons, and don't seem to be deserving of any sort of government protection. If you're going to protect something, shouldn't it be a bird that's actually rare?" The poet pauses. "So I guess there's a cranky Republican subterranean undercurrent to that poem." Consider it the first of many hidden meanings.

"A Stern Warning to Canada" is among the numerous delights to be found in Juster's latest book, a collection of new and previously-released comic poetry and translation

covering two decades of work. *Sleaze & Slander*, like the rest of Juster's output, also betrays a crafty right-wing sentiment at odds with most of what passes for poetry on either side of the border. These are poems for the conservative mind.

A highlight of the book is a laugh-out-loud funny "Supreme Court Drinking Song" which imagines the top court on a raucous all-night bender determinedly ignoring the wishes of an elected Congress and the entire democratic process. (Who cares what precedents they found?/Let's buy another round!) As a satire of judge-made law, it accomplishes more in a few lines of verse than any number of earnest editorials decrying judicial interventionism. The same goes for his pithy social observations and epigrams.

Long Strange Trip

The flower children gone to seed
Bake brownies for the PTA
And give to liberals in need.

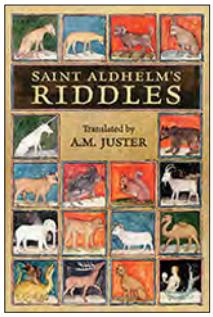
Their ponytails display some gray
And nothing tie-died ever fits
Despite the tofu and sorbet.

Now they are mocked as 'hippie-crits'
By free-range children who refuse
To heed their parents' tired views
On love and peace and endless summer.

What a bummer.

Disclaimer

Despite what's promised when you marry,
actual results may vary.



Sleaze & Slander is a pleasure to read whatever your politics. For conservatives, especially those who might find Ayn Rand's doorstoppers a chore, it offers the additional fillip of a comfortable intellectual harbour to be enjoyed in small, delightful bites. "I'm generally dubious about institutions and the limitations of government, and that's the raw material of political conservatism. It's also pretty good fodder for light verse," says Juster, pointing to Jonathan Swift, the famous 18th century Irish satirist and champion of liberty, as a source of inspiration.

Going back much farther than the 1700s, his book includes a surprisingly wide selection of translations from Ancient Latin and Middle Welsh, offering fresh takes on Roman poets such as Horace and Martial. Another warning to Canada: these translations aren't the ones you slept through in English class.

Sex with Sertorius is anticlimactic;
rapid withdrawal is his typical tactic.
Translated from Martial (38-41 AD to 103 AD)

Every friend of Lycoris has lost her life
Fabianus, he should meet my wife
Translated from Martial

On the Shyster Who Called his Whore "Grace"

If his words could equal his penis,
He'd be known as a legal genius.
He is up half the night
Missing laws he should cite
While joined by his servant of Venus.
Translated from Luxorius (circa 600 AD)

Rather than rendered as one-for-one transpositions from ancient Latin, Juster's humourous translations are filled with anachronistic words and phrases such as 'chintzy,' 'geezer' and 'the family values bill.' This gives modern readers a truer sense of what Martial, a sharp satirist of everyday Roman life, was really conveying to his audience. "I try to reflect the tone and tenor of the originals," he says. "Martial was writing in a low vernacular, so you need to find slangy equivalents to what he was doing, otherwise it'll put you to sleep." As for Luxorius' limerick, it's another of Juster's innovations; that naughty poetic form wasn't invented until the 1800s.

Juster is also capable of powerful sentiment, as this traditional sonnet from an earlier, more serious collection reveals.

Cancer Prayer

Dear Lord,
Please flood her nerves with sedatives
and keep her strong enough to crack a smile
so disbelieving friends and relatives
can temporarily sustain denial.

Please smite that intern in oncology
who craves approval from department heads.

Please ease her urge to vomit, let there be
kind but flirtatious men in nearby beds.

Given her hair, consider amnesty
For sins of vanity; make mirrors vanish.

Surround her with forgiving family
and nurses too numb to cry. Please banish
trite consolations; take her in one swift
and gentle motion as your final gift.

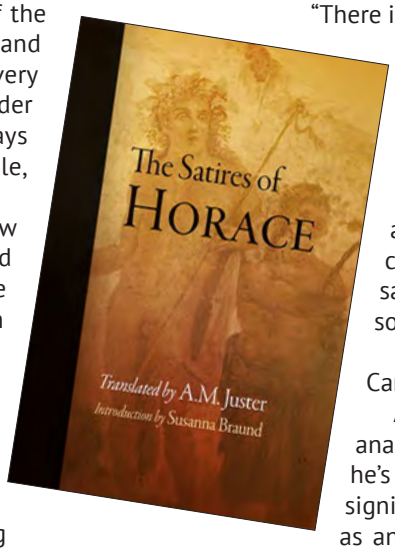
Such masterful skill with traditional poetic form, as well as his obvious love of rhyme, meter and narrative, marks Juster as a prominent member of the New Formalism school of American poetry, a movement in response to the

intensely personal (read: indecipherable) lyric imagism that has dominated modern poetry since the start of the 20th century.

"Modernist poetry has gotten drearier and drearier," laments Juster. Where once poets were celebrated as literary heroes of their age, today the average book lover is hard pressed to name a single extant professional poet. Chief to blame, he observes, is the guild mentality of contemporary poetry. Practitioners have largely retreated to universities, where it's more lucrative to teach others how to also become academic poets rather than write something the public might wish to buy. Relentless demands to 'make it new' have pushed experimental poetry to the extremes of eccentricity.

Readers of *C2C Journal* might recall Juster's byline on an article this summer about the poetic limitations and potential biological hazards of University of Calgary poet Christian Bök, who assigns letters to various amino acids and, by manipulating E. coli cells, produces a petri dish of found poetry. The results, Juster points out, are poems absent of coherent meaning, but containing a "small but non-negligible risk" that may one day mutate into virulent superbugs.

Re-connecting poetry with the reading public, Juster and the New Formalists argue, requires a renewed focus on recognizable narratives and ear-pleasing traditions of rhyme and meter familiar in the works of the old masters, such as Kipling, Tennyson and Shakespeare. "The academy has worked very hard to cut their work off from a broader audience. And I think that's a tragedy," says Juster. "Poetry is a way to educate people, and get them to think about their lives."



Like all counter-revolutions, New Formalism is a conservative act. And like all threatened revolutionaries, the modernists have fought back with teeth bared. Beginning in the 1980s, proponents of free verse claimed to find disturbing parallels between the traditional precepts of New Formalism and the resurgence of conservative values typified by the presidency of Ronald Reagan: both were trying to recapture lost glory by casting back to established values and rejecting Liberal modernity. Beat poet Diane Wakoski assailed a leading New Formalist as "Satan" and further claimed it was downright un-American to write in rhyme. Others fretted about the "literary fascism" of New Formalism's adherence to popular pleasures of narrative, rhyme and meter.

One familiar slander thrown at New Formalists is that they're mere 'greeting card poets' – opting for facile popularity over serious craft. Determined to own the insult, Juster's latest book includes the sly poem "Greeting Card Verse for Offbeat Occasions," which offers responses to some decidedly unHallmark moments, such as being arrested for soliciting a prostitute, giving your dinner guests food poisoning or:

Botched Intimate Tattoo

Your tattoo artist was a jerk
And sloppy in his spelling,
But given where he put his work,
Nobody will be telling.

"I figured if they're going to be call me a Hallmark poet, I might as well write some greeting cards," says Juster, relishing the tussle. His literary criticism is equally pointed; Juster's recent review of a new book by modernist poet Ben Lerner begins with "[this] is the worst book about poetry I have ever read." Another laments the fact that "relentless networking, prolific but generic free verse and safe ideology portrayed as radical courage have lifted a host of mediocre poets into what passes today for literary celebrity."

For Canadians who might wonder, this country missed the drama of politically-inspired 'poetry wars.' It is the untamed wilderness, rather than the neo-conservative implications of rhyme and meter, that still occupies the Canadian poetic mind, as it has since Margaret Atwood and Al Purdy were youngsters. When British poet Alice Oswald was named a Griffin Prize judge earlier this year, *The Globe and Mail* asked her to characterize the state of Canadian poetry: "a bashful attentiveness to the natural world" with "a strain of anxiety about land ownership" was the best she could conjure up.

"There is no school of New Formalism in Canada, and no figure in Canada quite like Juster," says Carmine Starnino, a well-regarded poet, editor at *The Walrus* and contributor to *Partisan*, a Canadian online poetry magazine that features translations, epigrams and other formalist-style poetry. "He is keeping alive the idea of poetry as a forum to discuss contemporary issues with wit and clarity," he says. "Why shouldn't we be able to talk about society in rhyming verse?"

Then again, Juster isn't merely unusual for Canada. He is unusual, period.

A.M. Juster is actually a pseudonym (and anagram) for M.J. Astrue. And as Michael Astrue, he's served four U.S. presidents in a variety of significant political appointments, including as an associate counsel in the Reagan and Bush (Senior) White Houses, later moving to general counsel in the federal Health & Human Services department, and concluding as Commissioner of the Social Security Administration, one of the most senior bureaucratic positions in Washington, from 2007 to 2013. Astrue has also headed three biotech firms, moving back and forth between public service and the business world with apparent ease.

During his time in various Republican administrations and corporate headquarters, Astrue kept his identity as New Formalist renegade Juster a carefully guarded secret. "The literary world is scornful of people who have serious careers," he explains. "And the corporate world just thinks poetry is weird. It seemed like a sensible thing to seal myself off in this way." So he would scribble with a pen at home as Juster,

and lug a briefcase to the office as Astrue.

During his time at the head of the politically-sensitive and perpetually underfunded Social Security behemoth (equivalent to Canada's CPP, Old Age Security and federal disability programs), Astrue kept a low profile on matters both political and poetic, focusing on the technocratic demands of the job such as reducing wait times for disability claimants. "You play the role you are given," he explains. (He didn't, however, completely submerge his literary concerns. A 2007 communique to Social Security staff from head office: "Commissioner Astrue has indicated on several occasions that the word 'impact' should not appear in Social Security Administration correspondence as a verb." The same note explained the difference between affect and effect.)

Yet his day job and the political world eventually ~~impacted~~ had a significant effect on his poetic alter ego. In 2009, the union representing Social Security employees took out a full page ad in the *Baltimore Sun* calling for Astrue's removal, as a Republican appointee at the dawn of Democrat Barack Obama's first term. When that didn't work (he'd been appointed by Congress rather than the White House), the union went looking for a scandal to oust him. "I'd led a pretty clean life," he recalls. "So there wasn't much they could latch onto." In the absence of interns, cocaine or gambling debts, his foes were left with the slimmest of humiliations to reveal: outing Commissioner Michael Astrue as A.M. Juster, New Formalist poet. Devastation did not ensue. "Even though I'd been keen to avoid [the outing] it turned into a good thing for me. It certainly brought a lot more attention to my poetry," he says wryly. "And at work, all of a sudden I was interesting in a way I wasn't before." A 2010 profile in the influential conservative online magazine *First Things* revealed his personal multitudes to a much wider audience.

Astrue remained at Social Security for the full length of his six-year term, and in 2012 was awarded the President's Award from The ARC, a group that advocates on behalf of people with intellectual and development disabilities. He has since retired from Washington and the business world. At 60, constrained by severe rheumatoid arthritis, he concentrates on poetry, criticism and various charitable pursuits.

With Astrue in repose, translation now occupies the bulk of Juster's attention. Last year he released a collection of medieval riddles by Anglo-Saxon bishop Saint Aldhelm, published by the University of Toronto Press. He has also dabbled in translating East African proverbs from the little-known Oromo language. "I assume my original poetry will be ephemeral," he admits. "But I'd like to think some of my translations will make a long-term contribution."

Translation might, in fact, be the most conservative of all literary art forms, revealing as it does the timelessness of the human condition. The two apparently paradoxical components of *Sleaze & Slander* – contemporary satires on such things as judicial activism side-by-side with translations of Martial's ancient epigrams – take on deeper significance when considered as halves of a unified theory of life. Linked in this way, the reader is left with a blinding flash of the obvious: nothing has really changed in the last 2,000 years. Juster's "Disclaimer" and his translation of Martial's epigram about Lycoris and Fabianus are near-identical contemplations on marital discord and the dark humour it inspires. We may set out to make life 'new,' but are relentlessly carried backwards to face the same familiar issues and foibles as our Latin ancestors. Sex, sleaze, even politics repeats on an endless loop. "When you read the literature from the decline of Rome, you start to see parallels to our current political and cultural situation," Juster says, somewhat ominously.

"He recognizes a deep sense of tradition," offers an admiring Paul Mariani, a fellow poet, professor emeritus at Boston College and University of Massachusetts, Amherst and author of the *First Things* article that unveiled Juster/Astrue to a wider audience. "When I read Juster I find a true conservative perspective – what he says today is what Martial and Juvenal and Horace were saying in their day. We still have corruption. We still have slander. We still have the same emotions. It is a reflection of the natural politics and language of the human beast. And," he adds, "it's a little bit chilling."

But what should we make of that limerick about the lawyer's penis? Mariani waits a beat before answering. "Well," he asks, "what else are you going to rhyme with Venus?"

Peter Shawn Taylor is editor-at-large of Maclean's. *He lives in Waterloo.*

Satirical poets through the ages: Juvenal, Martial, Swift and Juster.