

Two Poems · *Laurence Goldstein*

THE SILENT MOVIE THEATER *in memoriam*

I

In my Southland were many shrines:
a *Shrine Auditorium* where fez-pated
salesmen on climacteric binge
nodded in velvet seats, never heeded
the mumbo-jumbo of their leading men;
or the *Angelus Temple* where Aimee,
hyped Magdalene of Echo Park,
broad-cast her Foursquare Gospel
so loud and lurid even Jews tuned her in;
whatever restuccoed or whitewashed
soul food diner new-placarded *Praise God*
where a preacher could shriek and
wreak his Baptist will on the unredeemed—
there was latter-day Mission Los Angeles.

I never forget thee, Zion, but
revisit thee all summers of my middle-age.
Fairfax, avenue of oral delights:
hot tongue on rye at Canter's deli,
poppyseed rolls tart as the spit-
and-argue aphorisms of Little Israel;
at Television City, talking heads
still bite their time, time on their side,
and Farmers Market cries—*Kosher Pickles!*
Ripe Cantaloupes!—tamped in the brain for life.

Hollywood lies where seedy traffic
found and fostered it, “a kind of Athens”
or “ivory ghetto,” survivors called it.
Punk shops and gay nightclubs
mark the stations west toward Fairfax
where this obsolete Theater sags,
this white irrelevant cloister
closed like an iris, the boards up,
showcases grimed where stars once beamed,
the very dirt graffitied with harsh words
Lillian Gish never put her lips around,
the two-sheets of Chaplin torn,
cashier’s box sealed with masking tape.
Reopening date: never in history.

II

Two keepers quiet as the wooden seats
took my obol, motioned me toward
the warm room of never more than twelve,
lone youth in love with antiquity,
almost a ghost myself, but made American
by the dumb makeshift of archaic life.
I sat at the pitted screen, an early reader
impatient with titles, a seer no friend
would follow to that sanctuary
forty years off-road from where it’s at.

Fell of darkness, no usher, no Exit sign

First, the ensemble furor of the clowns,
a naughty child's balletic tit for tat;
sea-devils dismasting galliots or brigs;
No Man's Land, a frenzied masque of boys
running pell-mell to Kingdom Come;
and most alluring, those sultry lovers
eye-locked in absolute trance.
How the old-timers of my congregation
wriggled forward, kids at penny matinees,
watching Gilbert ogle Garbo,
Valentino inflame Banky with a glance!
In other epics, the soul was a character too,
Judith of Bethulia, say, or
Romola, whose otherworldly sister
in her untainted habit
was ever my afterimage of angelic light.

III

Sound persuades us to be real.
Love words when lying at peace,
banter, apology, selfish command—
all speech acts leash us like pets.
In even the most automated
tentative silences of our lives
a single word sets the dial,
puts us irresistibly in sync.
And for all our sentences, death
comes due, finger to his lips,
in the midst of holiday or sex,
a period not eight decades of eloquence
will stir from its uninflected place.

IV

Twilight, August, near-gridlock
where Melrose carries old world idioms
further east of Fairfax, by channels
more fluent than Jordan or the sea.
Pick any strange kid, and call him
son and heir, too late for silent film.
White shirt, black yarmulke,
pressed wool pants and laced-up shoes;
at a synagogue door he pauses,
stayed by the Scriptures' demands
or a street cry: "Jesus, look out!"

leans forward, and exits on a wipe

enters a house of cedar and fir
carved with open flowers and palms.
The Torah unrolls its white expanse,
its mute backward recitative—
characters more fatal than nitrate's
even now expiring as you read.
Hieroglyphs must have interpreters;
mine were the mute Davids and Delilahs
in the ruined warehouse of visual aids.
All those apparitions from 1925,
those cartoons of the passionate life,
I summon here for this pre-bar mitzvah boy.

Those moving murals of Jerusalem
were blessed, this I believe, and
no less if Talkies outlived them.
Some day it happens. An ambush.
“How now brown cow” is spoken into a mike;
wired for radio, a Jew sings “Mammy,” tells
my teenage parents, “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.”
On me too the stylus of movie prattle
has incised whatever speech I share;
more actor than author, I playback
phrases in circulation on screen and off.
I wish *these* words, helpless if well-meant
could make my dreamstore flicker again;
once a week its grand period pantomimes
graced a city clamorous to be loved;
now they have closed their destinies,
Kol Nidre come upon their last temple,
a common repossession, like the Lord’s.