

POETRY MEDIA SERVICE

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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “who’s not published a second book until he’s 75.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

## BEYOND THE CULT OF YOUTH

An interview with Brian Culhane, winner of the 2007 Emily Dickinson First Book Award for a poet over the age of 50.

By Tim Appelo

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Tim Appelo: Your poetry is grounded in the classics. On your way to writing about that subject, did you go through other distinct literary phases?

Brian Culhane: A Miltonic one in my 20s. His sonnets led me to write early poems that were gnomic and dense. One falls under the spell of these great presences. I wrote a long poem called “The Bridge” in allusive, crabbed lines on a metropolitan theme and handed it to my roommate. He said, “Didn’t Hart Crane write a long poem called ‘The Bridge?’” Stanley Kunitz was my thesis advisor. He’d scrawl on a poem, “This is Lowell. The worst of Lowell.” I also had the good fortune to have James Wright as my teacher: a puffy face and slit eyes and big thick glasses—a minatory presence, even though he was a gentle man. I’d written an exam on a typical Wright question: “It has been said that poetry is no better than push-pin. Explain.” Wright was quoting Jeremy Bentham, who argued that both poetry and push-pin, a child’s game kind of like the modern pick-up sticks, are equally valuable if they produce the same degree of pleasure. On my exam, Wright wrote, “Cool-hane, no one will ever take your ideas seriously until you learn how to spell.” I’d gone to Manhattan private schools when they didn’t teach spelling.

TA: “The King’s Question” refers to Croesus, who (Herodotus says) asked the oracle at Delphi what would happen if he invaded Persia. The oracle said he’d destroy a great empire—only he didn’t realize it’d be his own, not Persia. But in your poem, Croesus’s question is lost; we don’t know what it was. Why?

BC: The past throws out to us lifelines, messages. What is left out is interesting. The poem imagines that we didn't ever hear that story, and that would make sense—Sophoclean dramas were all lost, except for a handful. Why did I change what we know from Herodotus's story of Croesus? Most of his history is taken from oral tradition, which can easily change in the retelling. Maybe Herodotus got the story wrong. Was that really the question Croesus had in mind? Is that what we would ask the oracle in our own lives? How many questions do we have in us, great ones?

Today, we're not writing questions and sticking them into the wall at Delphi anymore. In the Manhattan neighborhood I grew up in, the correlative for the priestess talking with the vatic utterances was the psychotherapist.

TA: I love that the shrink is knitting.

BC: That brings up Clotho.

TA: One of the Three Fates of Greek mythology, spinning the threads of life. Spinning your fate. Your fate seems to have been spun by libraries.

BC: I like libraries, and tend to do my best research when I'm not researching. I spent years in a library researching a dissertation on the epic. Once in a while I'd simply wander the library and pluck a volume, and become inspired—it was one of those aleatory combinations of time, place, and book. All first lines are accidents.

TA: Many of your poems read like a scholar's reverie. You write in "Library":

That fable  
Of an infinitely circular Library of Babel  
Borges saw as self-referential: nooks  
Corridors, dead ends, twisting stairwells:  
Bibliographic cargo cults and infidels.

You go on to compare libraries in this poem to the supernatural cargo cults formed by remote Pacific islanders awed by World War II GIs dropping crates full of wonders from afar.

BC: I'm misconstruing, comically from one perspective, tragically from another. What we cast off, what washed ashore because of the wars we fought with machines, these people could make no sense of. I'm also alluding to the coming tide of change, which the islanders can't do anything about.

TA: How old or new is the work in your book?

BC: "Estrangement in Athens" is my first published poem, which makes it about 30 years old. About a quarter of the poems were written in the last four years. I'm happy that no

book came to fruition until now. The book is a lot better for being winnowed. There's a pressure on poets to publish too early.

TA: Now that you've done this, does that change your practice?

BC: No. The muse is an intermittent visitor. If I could speed up the process, I would. Maybe when I'm 75 there'll be another prize—for the second book of a poet who's not published a second book until he's 75.

Tim Appelo has been an editor at Amazon.com and a contributor to the *Washington Post* and the Timeses of New York, LA, and Seattle. This article first appeared on [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org). Learn more about Brian Culhane, and his poetry, at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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