

## TED BYRNE / PS I Adore You

### 1

I thought I'd said pretty much everything I could say about Sharon Thesen's work in a piece I wrote a few years ago. However, that piece ended with a brief, insufficient comment on Frances Boldereff. The comment was prompted by her appearance in *A Pair of Scissors*, where she arrives, "88 years old," with a delphic, almost comic, pronouncement, "affection is a very deep thing." In keeping with my thesis at the time, I posed Boldereff as an emblematic absence in Thesen's later writings, a ghost, wrapped in nostalgia, moving toward death, evoking a richness and a fear. Having begun with the "gap" in "Mean Drunk Poem," I conveniently wrapped up with this shade. But in my haste, perhaps I did someone a disservice.

Boldereff's appearances are fleeting, but not as insubstantial or one dimensional as I made them out to be. In the passage just cited, Thesen is "hungry for words / that give me a home somewhere something / I can belong to some real company," and Boldereff's talk, although a memory, provides such sustenance.

88 years old, "affection is a very deep thing,"  
she said, she had a brooch on, and a manicure

an inoculation against the pretend *agape*  
of notions and scruples, oh for the real

difficulties of desire and faith, the hard  
thinking, the holy smoke of situations.

Boldereff was familiar with the real, and the real difficulties of desire and faith, with hard thinking, and the holy smoke of situations, and love—*agape* and *mania*. Even at 93, she entered a room "ready to find things / not to her liking" ("The Hat"). And this wasn't just crankiness. From her perspective, it was a reasoned expectation in an age of mediocrity.

Some time after I'd written "The Genial Disconnects," Sharon handed me a typescript of her interviews with Boldereff. I don't remember what she said, but it was like, "Here, maybe you can do something with this." It was as if she wanted rid of it. She made a comment about Boldereff's poisonous remarks, her racism, making its usefulness problematic. This is not a minor difficulty, especially as I came to appreciate this woman's talk. She's old, things are slipping from memory, topics elude her, but she's a charmer, a weaver. She keeps returning to certain moments, not in an obsessive way, but in a way that gives her monologue the coherence of sophisticated narrative. The racism is occasional, banal, and familiar, but more than simply unfortunate. It can't be dismissed as something inessential, accidental. It can't be localized and quarantined. It sounds like unexamined blather, but it's hateful nonetheless. It's also consistent with the ideas she expresses in the correspondence.

## 2

Boldereff tells Olson she's not a writer. Yet she wrote a half a dozen books, mostly "Baedekers" to *Finnegans Wake*. She comes close to fulfilling Joyce's own notion of his ideal reader. Except that, in her several tours through *Finnegans Wake*, she also manages to further her own program, and to comment substantially on several other pivots in her alternate history. In these books she refers to herself, not as a writer, but as a reader, a compiler.

She herself had no name. Or, "like a deity," she "had many names and situations sacred to her ups and downs" (Thesen, "A Holy Experiment"). It's almost a convention to call her Frances Boldereff. She was christened Frances Brubaker Motz. Her husbands were Boldereff, Ward, Phipps. Her mother's family name was Reighard. She published under all of these names, as well as Anonymous and—go figure—Thomasine Rose.

She uses all of her names in the correspondence. And in the intimacy of the letters she sometimes signs as daughter, sister, and at least twice as Frances Olson. Olson responds almost in kind, as father, brother, and occasionally as sister, or D

The curious thing about the Olson/Boldereff correspondence, given her ponymity, and her second billing, is that it comes off as Boldereff's book. This results partly from Thesen's introduction, largely devoted to Boldereff, and partly from the fact that she is initially the more prolific correspondent. The introduction also

bolsters her importance by making large claims for her contribution to Olson's work. While this expands Boldereff's reach—not without evidence—it also fixes her within the indefensible frame she constructed for herself.

In the beginning, Boldereff announces Olson's arrival within her sphere as the fulfillment of her role, and of history as she conceives it. No kidding. At the tactically appropriate moment she sends him her writings, which foreshadow his arrival. And she carries this program through to the end: "I believe you are the greatest man alive today in America" (301); "I recognize you as a world hero" (491). But she also nourishes him with ideas as he works up his writings in the context of the correspondence, not just sending her his poems and essays, but drafting them within the letters, crafting them out of the letters. "Projective Verse" and the first *Maximus* poem, for example, seem to begin in this correspondence.

She gives him Samuel Noel Kramer, Edith Porada, Josef Strzygowski. He gives her Jane Ellen Harrison, L.A. Waddell. They share Lawrence. He readjusts his thinking on Whitman, Blake (not Joyce). At times it becomes difficult to see the boundaries between their ideas, especially when it comes to the larger, fundamental Olson constructs, such as the need to get back behind "Hebraism, Christianity, Greekism, and the Renaissance" (Olson letter, 531). But they don't share the same meanings. For her the task is a clearing away of originary guilt: "I would like in other words to take the whole Sumerian-Semitic myth and cast it out. I think that man has to strive for innocence not because he is sinful but because innocence is the real home of the creative being..." (72). Boldereff is an idealist; Olson is a materialist, or at least a Democrat. Her focus is on the future, no golden past, a lineage perhaps, but always a projection forward out of this hell: "darling baby I cannot speak for myself—you must do it for woman and for man and for future" (294). His focus is on the present, America as a new start, with reference to a previous rupture, but with no heavy forward reaching: "the trouble with the whole damn spirit business is, it's a schitz proposition—and proceeds from dividing life up between now, and the hereafter...the magic, the immortality...is HERE, HERE, where time is..." (361).

She's not tethered, as Olson is, by democratic impulses. He has to shove away some of her notions, while embracing and transforming others. This almost describes their relationship. At a personal level, at the level of sexual politics, her future is him, his now is not her. Their meetings, few and far between, are dramatic, and his pull to her is clearly strong and disruptive. But mostly he accepts and works within her

positioning of him (“Women are such ears / to read to...” [351]). Only when pushed to the wall by the intensity of her need, which is for something more than words (309), does he come running. She wants him to realize her program, but she also wants him, in the flesh, in her household. He wants her as well, but he wants her more as a fire source, which he stokes, but then is terrified by the disruption this creates, of his equilibrium, of his household.

### 3

After becoming acquainted with Frances Boldereff, I hate to think of her simply as a problem. The problem she poses *for herself* is one of identity: Who am I? Or, more than that, do I exist, does woman have a soul (22), or must she remain “[s]uspended in non-existence”? (542) The publication of the correspondence gives her a public life, as something more than an episode in Olson’s biography. Much of the research that goes on in the letters is also, eventually, put to use in her works. But her letters are not the atelier of those works, as Olson’s letters are of his. Other than *A Primer of Morals for Medea*, her works come after the conclusion of the affair. In the letters her business is to raise her ideas, and her self, up into his. As much as this is a program, it’s also a project, one that has to include him completely in order to succeed, in spite of her tactical withdrawals from this demand. The impediment is that he takes her program at its word, which of course dooms her project.

This problem, her problem, I’d say she works it out. Although the correspondence ends with a device—we’re left in suspense—we know that the story has a happy ending: she dumps the guy (xvii). What remains is the problem *for us*. In the context of the correspondence, it’s twofold: why would such a “tough female” (314) position herself so thoroughly within this framework of voluntary servitude; and in what way is this framing related to her racism, as it must be?

I think, at the moment, that the only way I can address the second question is to place it in the context of the first. Her internalization of the hatred directed against women, which first becomes a self-loathing, but is then largely superseded by a conscious program, mirrors at least one of the ways that the victim of racism responds. Otherwise, her racism shows no special distinguishing features, even if it appears to be theorized in the notion of the “hebraic,” and would have to be dealt with through an extended examination of racism in general.

The first question has been answered repeatedly. But it's worth repeating, if only for the reason that repeating a story may prevent history from repeating itself. And it's especially worth repeating now, when the gains won by women in the public sector are being undone by privatization, and the private sector is becoming an expanding ghetto of bad jobs.

In spite of the gains of first-wave feminism, and the experience of the wars, which brought more women into the workforce, women of the period did not have the same opportunities as men. More often than not, in the absence of solidarity, the situation of women was interiorised, and women struggled within themselves, finding a compromise, working within imposed, and tacitly accepted, constraints, or finding defeat. Those women who achieved success in male dominated fields did not, for the most part, see themselves as other than exceptions to the rule.

Boldereff had a degree in literature and philosophy from Ann Arbor, was a single working mother, learned and worked in the printing trade where women were not welcome, was an accomplished book designer and, by the time of her correspondence with Olson, had justifiable ambitions to obtain a highly responsible position in one of the large New York publishing houses. In the summer of 1950 her hopes were raised very high, but she lost all of the promising positions to men. "I have been absolutely qualified for each of the 4 jobs," she tells Olson, "and until the [Korean] war situation makes things so very bad that they are forced to take me I know, as I knew before I came—this is the treatment I will receive" (505).

Boldereff's conception of herself, and of woman, her compromise, although heavily intellectualized, is in no way unique. In effect, she accepts the role that has been imposed on women for centuries, which is to say "by nature". It's a role within which, in the imaginary, woman can fully exercise her power... but not exceed it, as Medea did. A role within which woman can be equal, but only within difference. As conflicted as it seems, there is no contradiction between Boldereff's strong statements on women's equality and her adoption of voluntary servitude. But what a monumental struggle she has arriving at this juncture! She embraces a commonplace, but she moves it onto an epic stage, just as a man would do.

She sends Olson her writing fairly early on, before they've met, before the bulk of their correspondence. She is perceptive about this writing. Her 1936 "notebook" is immature, full of "young woman errors" (16). *A Primer of Morals for Medea* is a mature condensation of the earlier text. It's probable that she offers these works to him in

a bid for recognition, but she makes the offering more as explanation. He responds with some annotations, but there's little immediate evidence of his interest. However, these writings set the tone for much of what follows. He brought her notions into himself. As late as August 1950, at the end of the published correspondence, he is saying "the heroic raises itself only on the recognition of [woman], of her as the tragic source of joy" (515).

*A Primer of Morals for Medea*, written in August 1948 (age 43), consists of 30 brief aphorisms, which were composed of a piece, independent of the Michelangelo plates that were chosen to accompany them in their publication. In brief, Boldereff tells Medea that she is a slave to nature, her inescapable enemy, and foretells that she will attempt to escape her lot, exercising a "vehement desire without form," will go through a self-destructive hell, learn to despise her own ability to entrap men, and through its renunciation, arrive at freedom, re-enter the world as a mother, giving without any expectation of recompense, with the knowledge that everything depends on her, but no one will know her name, except for the one who benefits from her indirect relation to all things. Coming through, to this understanding, this contract with oneself, is maturity. (The entire text is included in her letter of March 4 1949 [12].)

Behind this text lies another, secret text written in May 1936 (age 31). Part of this "notebook" is included in the correspondence. It is underwritten by Weininger—and who knows what other monsters of the early twentieth century. She struggles with Weininger, and only partially wins out—she decides that woman does have a soul. Olson, in his annotations to this text, identifies Weininger as "SHIT," and her reference to women's "essential inequality" as "SHIT".

It is clear from the text that her conclusions, however she arrived at them intellectually, resulted from bitter experience: "...woman as a tool, whereby man destroys or saves his own soul. Let no one suppose that I object to this on foolish grounds of 'It ought to have been otherwise'—the fact that it has not been otherwise burns a deep hole in me, that is all" (22).

All of a woman's troubles proceed from the fact that she never admits to herself her fundamental inequality. When I used to torment myself daily with the question, "Why can a woman not create something of the first rate, why are all her



works not great, but full of immense talent only?" I finally was, in a brief moment, brought face to face with the idea that in woman there is no necessity. (27)

The satisfaction of being a mother, of mothering, is so complete, that there is no necessity to attempt to create, and to fail, as a man does over and over.

And she never lets go of these convictions. Of *Finnegans Wake* she says, thirty years later, "it is because of its greatness that it is so imperfect" (*Hermes to His Son Thoth* 40). With Olson she attempts to put them into practice. There is a strategem here. The task she sets for woman is monumental, and it brings her back into primacy—in the imaginary, not in the real. With this she elevates a commonplace—that poorly kept secret that there's a woman behind every great man. In spite of her failure to bring Olson into her household, and in spite of her proclamations of selflessness, she fully inhabits her position as muse. He, of course, abets her in this, even while frustrating her need. Over and over again he rationalizes his inability to join her, temporarily or finally, as an effect of the situation she has constructed. He is in a "white heat" of writing, forty hours a day, and she is the cause of this frenzy, what more could she want? Isn't this the joyicity she speaks of?

i've been brooding since [the previous day's letter], trying to figure out how i could have misled you, and i am forced to think it is precisely at this point of language as reality, as the only reality which a man like me can be said to serve (311)

She responds, assuring him she was "misled by joy":

I accept loving you without any reward of any kind as my privilege  
I hope to see you again but if I do not I shall not consider that you have in any way misled me. (317)

Later, he says that his desire for her, "this belief in what we've got" will last for as long as he lives. At the same time he recognizes that the way he responds to this commitment must seem crazy to her. But, he says, "you do respect that kind of craziness."

It is, he conjectures,

what we have talked about, what you make the ROOT principal, IS freedom, is  
*how love can live.*

And, he says, this requires of her the “maximum of, what did we say, COURAGE?”

And I should guess, that if I have taken up my own ruthlessness, if I have been able to *commit* myself to the fate I think now I was born for, it is because you have proved, you do prove my being, something which was my vision, is my conviction, was what I was born with. (450)

#### 4

Immediately after their first tryst he had written “Epigon” (56), which she nominated as the “only fine love poem in existence” (80). In a sense it’s the only unencumbered love lyric she receives. Over the following four or five months he sends her numerous poems. Then in the spring and early summer of 1950, the letters become a furnace of poem making—poems written to, for, in, around or about Boldereff. They are, often, near lyric, but reach toward something more extended. These include, among others, “In Cold Hell, In Thicket” (347) and the first *Maximus* poem (335). There follows an intense period of research—Harrison, Apollonius of Tyana, Kramer, and Waddell—leading up to “The Gate and the Center,” but leading on to “Human Universe” and The *Maximus* Poems.

“I am strangely moved,” he writes, “...to wonder very deeply if what is ahead is not either some departure from verse making...or some going-ahead with the creative act which in no way resembles what we have known as such...” (486). This move, away from lyric, as I would read it, is expressed in the small, almost-lyric “Of Mathilde”. The poem was sent to Creeley in a letter dated July 22 1950 (Minutes of the Charles Olson Society 18). There is no evidence that it was sent to Boldereff, but it was surgically lifted from a long letter written to her on July 21 (425). In the letter he speaks of her fragrance, “why the smell and the taste of you carried away is always so sweet, so stands in the mind.” “I am sorry, if this comes off poetic,” he says, but “[t]he analysis of love is, poetic...”



((you prove to me, for example, why Cavalcanti and Dante made, as they did, —and there is no question there was a woman behind it—an image, a Beatrice, a Mathilde, to stand, to stand in a phrase *dove sta memora*, to stand (I am against their placing of her, in a *paradiso*—or have been, up to this moment!) as the only proving of love which matters. (428)

The letter, in its address, is another reformulation of the theme outlined above, of the “problem of the poet,” which is to “clear himself of... the terrible tendency [sic] to settle for the vision short of the rottenness particulars involve life in...” (430). The phrase “*dove sta memora*” is taken from the second stanza of Guido Cavalcanti’s “*Donna me prega*.”

In the poem, the fragrance comes to stand thoroughly “in the mind”. The fragrance becomes love itself, that which takes (its) place (“*prende suo stato*”), in that part of the mind where memory is located (“*dove sta memora*”). Olson’s translation: “what cannot be put on (“*e creato ed a sensato nome*”), is raiment spun / of what looks like nothing (“*diaffan dal lume, d’una scuritade*”), is / what stands strong (“*viene e fa dimora*”) / in a man’s mind / is what she gives off, what love / gives off...”

He (Olson) goes on, “but love, what is love but / that only those who obey are fragrant?” I’ll try not to paraphrase. But, just for my purposes here, let’s say he’s still working away at this analysis of love, begun by Guido. Mid point he shifts from Guido to Dante. *Purgatorio*, Canto 28, where the poet, in the earthly paradise, for god’s sake, unleashes his lyric passion, makes a little pastoral, like Guido’s “*In un boschetto trova’ pasturella*.” In this case the un-named lady is already spoken for, loves only God, and Dante can’t, by his own volition, even get near her, let alone repeat Guido’s luck (“to repeat experience is / sensationalism,” Olson says “From which no fragrance cometh / And no web”). She takes him by the hand and leads him to Beatrice, who says (Canto 33), giving her a name, “Geez, Matelda, didn’t you explain anything to this guy!”

Olson too has struggled to get to this point. In the end, Boldereff’s solution was to leave the relationship. Not that it completely ended there, on page 543. But she did seem to get clear of it. Him, maybe not. Olson’s last letter to Boldereff, several months before his death, in its entirety: “My dear sweet Frances – Just in another burst of love for you (they come in such gusts my whole nature at this moment (as I write) bursts on you) / Love / Charles // PS / I adore you” (Collected Letters 421).

## 5

So, I come back to “Mean Drunk Poem” with a different reading now. In my earlier piece, I saw the “gap” as metaphorical, as something threatening, like the precipice Medea hovers over in Boldereff’s first book. But now I think that characterizing the gap as an absence, or a lack, was a misrepresentation, an instance of what the poem mocks. It’s hilarious what she says about “the gap.”

...as Robin teaches  
the gap, from which all things emerge. A left  
handed compliment. Bats, houses of parliament, giants, stones.

All things. Everything. That’s enough to shut you up.

What woman, witness to such Thought, does not feel  
so described & so impotent

she thinks  
she must speak. ‘I will take your linguistic prick & you  
will take my linguistic prick & together we will gap  
this imagined earth together...’

“There’s something / else,” she says, “big & dark, at the edge of what she knows...”  
But she’s not, after all, hovering around the edge of some mystery, or abstract fear,  
she’s hovering around the edge of a concrete threat. She’s been made to feel stupid.  
“Language all her life is a second language, / the first is mute & exists.”

Yes, I get it. It should have been obvious. How could I be so dumb? As if, then, to underline the joke, to drive it home, she capitalizes the word. “I get drunk // to lubricate my brain & all that comes out / of my Gap / is more bloody writing.”

“The Gap is real,” she concludes, “& there is no such thing as / female intelligence. We’re dumber than hell.” And proud of it, one could add. Like my friend, Linda Sperling who, when confronted by the boss with the observation “You look like an intelligent woman,” famously responded, “Don’t make any assumptions, bub.” And the butt of the joke here is Dante, who claimed to think that women could explain love, went to women for their “intelligence of love,” but then just kept right on talking.

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