

## FIVE FOR SIXFOLD

### A CLASSICAL EDUCATION

At fifteen I traveled to Greece  
with an unruly growth of schoolboys,  
fracturing the Classical peace  
of the place with our noise.

Ignoring us, the bleached and broken  
bones of old Greek temples told  
of humanity's ancient need to aspire  
to the status of sunlight and stone.

Back at Eton, College Chapel,  
that anthem of youth, strutted imperiously  
in its uniform of stone,  
stained glass, transparent truth,

proof of our ability to mold  
materials to our needs, to construct a sublime  
Tower of Light, where even Time,  
tamed by ritual, knows its place.

The morning sun, the benevolent face  
of God, glowed on us with apparent warmth,  
through colored glass, which all the while  
was weeping imperceptibly.

When we pretend to permanence,  
here comes Heraclitus, to bite us.  
Sunlight fades, silence passes.  
Schoolboys live forever.

## TRANSLATION

Every year a language dies  
and with it a way of looking at the world.  
More than a species, we have lost  
an entire universe.

Everything we see is colored  
by a lens of language, heavy  
with the weight of those before  
who saw and spoke it into being.

Avicenna, ibn Sina,  
translating his own ideas  
from his native Persian  
into the language of the Q'ran,

found he'd made a new philosophy  
like making ice into water -  
that there was no change  
in substance is immaterial.

People say that poetry  
is what gets lost in translation.  
Plato said that poetry  
*is* translation. Both are right.

## BOOK OF NUMBERS

*Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.*

Wallace Stevens, *The Man on the Dump*

### I

Creeds and the doctrines they enumerate  
are found in every religious community.  
Adherence to these brings the promise  
of salvation or at least impunity.

Of the dozens of such creeds  
all claiming that they represent  
the only and exclusive way to God  
a maximum of one could actually be right.

Statistically, you'd be more likely  
to encounter truth in some snide  
tweet by President Trump. Like Trump,  
doctrines and creeds by their very nature, divide.

### II

In some communities, a two-dimensional  
Derrida-like approach to sacred texts  
can lead to an obsession with numerology,  
Pythagorean in its scope and complexity.

In milder manifestations, it shows itself  
in endless lists: "the" ten commandments  
or the seven deadly sins. Even Buddhists  
have their Eightfold Path, their Five Hindrances.

One night, in meditation class, I found myself  
reflecting on the way religions love  
to cling to words like torpor, accidie  
and sloth, as if they'd been handed down

from the ancient Sumerian or Sanskrit.  
And is the Five fixed? What happens if we contract  
a new sin or Hindrance, like being distracted  
by the numbers themselves? Do the five become six?

Or is there a process of promotion and relegation  
like soccer leagues as when poor Hestia  
lost her place to Bacchus in the Twelve Olympians  
or Matthias came on as substitute for Judas.

(back then you couldn't field a team with just eleven.)  
My mind, which should have been still,  
in contemplation of the Five, against my will  
was now at sixes and sevens.

### III

Bad things come in threes. Then there's the Trinity,  
the idea of a three-person'd God,  
except they're not persons but hypostases,  
a word which doesn't quite translate.

Gregory of Nazianzen, whose idea it was,  
described his doctrine as a "mystery,"  
another word, which doesn't quite translate.  
The Doctrine soon became an excuse

for Christians to murder one another  
in numbers which outpaced the persecutions  
of the Roman Emperors, and today  
it divides the (three) Peoples of the Book.

All books have critics. What they say  
becomes religion. Dry age replaces youth,  
metaphor and poetry misunderstood:  
Son of God, This is my Body, I am the Truth.

As it's often said, or should be said:  
when the literal butts heads against the figurative,  
the literal wins, but only  
because it has the harder head.

## TWO DOGMAS OF EMPIRICISM

### A Lesson in the Power of Philosophy

I was having coffee with the DC representative of a big consumer group, trying to explain to him their advocacy of an APR-based rate cap was sheer idiocy. It harmed the poorest consumers disproportionately: it was inherently discriminatory.

He seemed to think I was lying. He wasn't biting or buying, so I had another go.

"Isn't it your mission To help the poor? Then drop the caps! Low rate loans cost more than the reverse. I know it's counter-intuitive, like telling the Inquisition that the earth goes round the sun, but it's also true. Don't be a flat-earther. History won't be kind to you – it's like being an Obama birther!"

Still no action. Nothing gained. He was a lawyer, of course, trained to counter, not to give, at any cost, even when his argument was lost.

He was glancing at his watch, mumbling something about a lunch appointment... Thinking back to what I'd read about him, on a hunch, I tried a different tack. "What was your major in college?" "Philosophy." "Really? So was mine. Do you remember an article, Two Dogmas of Empiricism, by Professor Quine?"

He didn't but his cynicism

if not quite ended, was at least temporarily suspended.  
It was worth a shout.  
“Why? What was it about?”

“People used to say that there were two kinds of true statement, analytic and synthetic. An analytic truth was true in all possible worlds. Examples were the Laws of Euclid and the Laws of God. Synthetic truths, on the other hand, were merely contingent, like saying “This mug is on the table.” Now it’s true. And now it isn’t. This sort of truth is obviously unstable.

I studied his face.  
“Are you following me so far?” He nodded.  
“Carry on,” he prodded.

“Well, a man called Riemann showed that in space parallel lines do meet, thus refuting one of Euclid’s Laws and creating Riemannian Geometry, which paved the way for Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity.

The implications were shocking. Quine proposed that there was no such thing as analytic truth. Instead, there was one huge field of statements that were true: those on the edge were most contingent, joining and leaving the field every moment, while those in the middle never moved, until the contrary was proved.

It would take a powerful wave to shake the field up to the point that peace could only be achieved, and some stability retrieved, by changing one of these more central truths. But every now and then it has to happen.”

“So, absolute truth is absolute crap and

the Laws of Religion  
are all contingent.

I get it," he said. "But what  
does it have to do with rate caps?"  
"I think, perhaps,

you already know. All along  
your group has proclaimed a doctrine  
in a way which is quasi-religious.  
It brings donations in –  
it's popular, prestigious.  
But all the evidence is showing you it's wrong.  
APRs are a function of the size  
and length of a loan. That means that no  
rate could be fair for all loan sizes.  
Simple logic. Second, the surprise is

there's an inverse relationship between cost and rate.  
That means a rate cap kills the loans  
that cost the least, the only loans  
that poor consumers can afford."  
The prize pugilist was staggering now:  
I wanted him floored.

"Open your eyes. The only way  
to restore stability to the field  
is to abandon the dogma  
you believed was analytic."

The next day he emailed  
me to say he'd bought  
the book. I told him  
I looked forward to his thoughts.  
"Any day," he promised. "Any day."

Instead, next time I made it up to town,  
he'd left the organization altogether.  
Presumably, lacking the ability  
to change their policy on his own,  
he'd had to leave to restore  
his own stability.  
I even felt a bit remorseful, since before  
his life had meaning, had a mission  
as an honored member of the Inquisition.  
Then, one day, on the road to Damascus,

Pentheus encountered Philosophy  
and everything that was clear  
was suddenly cloudy,  
and all that had been comfortably dark as night  
was now blindingly bright.



## MAKING CONNECTIONS

1

Flying over Dallas  
in the darkness, I can see  
the circuit board beneath me  
of a massive organism  
I am not a part of.

But the pilot has his orders  
and we're going down.

2

I'm on another plane,  
just boarded.  
Through my window I can see  
the luggage being loaded,  
tossed onto a moving belt  
by a god, who seeing me  
observing him,  
is uncharacteristically careful  
with the next bag  
or two.

3

We sit in our seats,  
staring straight ahead,  
or fiddling with our phones.

The door of the plane is still open.  
We aren't going anywhere.

Someone coughs.  
A straggler bustles in, relieved,  
and buckles up.

The luggage racks are full already,  
so they carry his bag away.  
He shrugs and says, "It's true.  
You can't take it with you."

Time has stopped  
for refueling  
or for maintenance.

Everyone has faith  
that somebody's in charge  
and we'll soon be out of here.