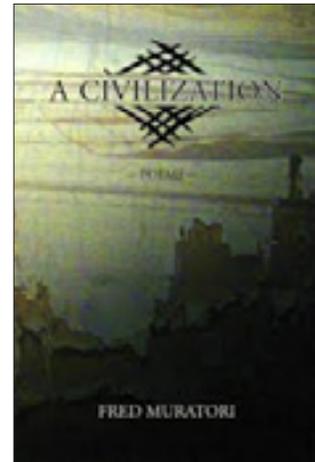


A Civilization
Poems by Fred Muratori
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Review by Dennis Daly

Projecting a civilization on the outside world entails nerve, self-awareness, and a sense of political architecture. Then artistry must follow. As readers wander through *A Civilization*, Fred Muratori's cityscape of towered poesy, marveling at this imagined culture's vertical totems, they cannot fail to glimpse essential moments of coming timelessness and feel the surge and ebb of creation's pride. Both the glory of Babel and ruin of successive empires coexist in this recursive collection.

The introductory poem, part 1 of the thirty-five part title poem, *A Civilization*, engenders all that follows. In the beginning there was the word, specifically "nobility." Without order, logic, or even good, individuals claim high-minded authority and begin a new world. It sounds to me much like what a poet does. The hand of God or the megalomania of man? Muratori's piece opens this way,

*Nobility asserts
and not without
an audience, through
applause bedecks
the mind, dares not
take hand. Given
scent, the people
follow: example
and another.
Soon, the code
morality assembles.
Lives stride
to mean.*

A life-principle captures all with the sovereignty of words in part 3 of *A Civilization*. The "word" has force and makes things happen. Contradiction grows organically out genetic memory and reestablishes itself in the midst of ruin. In other words the civilization falls to seed, which, in turn, nourishes rebirth. The poet says,

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*A principle
grows flesh,
grows tongue,
lashes force. All
in this again,
all differently,
uproar of difference,
not learning,
not again,
not differently.*

Civilizations build systems of humanity that constrict humanity. Only a constant synthesis keeps them workable. Laws, codes, and encyclicals translate themselves from one's essence to objectivity, always losing precious flesh of detail. Rhythm dominates all. Part XV clarifies this with a caveat against false passivity. Here's the poet's caveat,

*Even the jobless
have routines,
and above us all
the weather
and the constellations.
So it's not our fault.
We cannot fight
the influence
though we might, in folly,
resign ourselves too soon.*

Part XVII examines a civilization's progression into war and the necessary literature which those upheavals beget. One need only think of Troy or Agincourt to understand the importance of a literature of elucidation and exculpation. Consider the heart of this poetic section,

*Transgression
meets with will
and poets fleece
the dead for ways
to tell the seen,
imagined seen.
Text becomes
cornerstone,
throwaway lines
etched mottoes.
Broadwords crash
syllabically
and literatures
begin.*

The rawness of life forever threatens us and the animal instincts that we have inherited to cope with that rawness are undermined by the niceties and civilities of our constructed Babylons. We conjure these worlds into being as artists and poets and minor gods are wont to do. Our human

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nature we camouflage from each other and contain aggression's release until our muscles begin to wither and our dreams fade to the nothingness that pre-existed memory. In part XX Muratori's construct of mankind utters polite protestations to no avail. Office culture saps the life from once lively souls. Consciousness evaporates into meaninglessness, leaving the stage to the actors who portray a robotic future. The poet laments the soul's condition and the body's growing irrelevance,

*Its cracking voice
is lost in the ayes
and back slaps.
It's what you went
to school to please
and now it thinks
it own your life.
You know less
and less as time
dims your past,
and damn you're proud
of this ignorance,
the erosion of before,
your presence itself
unbecoming.*

Muratori negotiates a *raison d'être* in part XXII. Language crosses the divide between the savage and the preciousness of our created worlds. He suggests that redefining humanity may just work, as inexplicable as that seems to many pedestrians. Man reaches an apotheosis of sorts as his brave new world takes hold. Muratori details his vision,

*So little and so late
in our history
but long in coming
and still some
not included. Well...
Whole lifetimes flinch
with purpose:
the etching of a name
on paper, the spread
of genes like pebbles
on the vast pain of us.*

Among the handful of other poems that follow *Civilization* in this collection, Muratori's piece entitled *Alternate Reading* is my favorite. The poet here manages a neat little metaphor on inspiration and the poetic process that bowls one over with its simple power. The words of composition submerge the poet's ego and take on a life of their own. Muratori outdoes himself. His spare and effortless phrasing turns magical with recursive implications. Listen,

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*fishtails
schooling off*

*a Doppler-like
gradation into
unintended else
submersion just
below the page*

*I call and say
come quick
you'll never guess
but it's too late
Now you have to*

Life is what happens while God is away on his fishing trip or so this poet would have one believe in his collection's last poem aptly entitled *Afterward*. Consciousness and free will take center stage. But in the midst of all the mess and music we, unaccountably, keep on vanishing. Muratori explicates this version of musical chairs,

*Keep chairs
in motion
while the bodies
hold still.
Each time the
music stops,
a body disappears
until the room
quiets for good*

The nerve of this guy! Muratori builds his towers of civilization, aping divinity and demanding poetic answers. Read this collection with certain amazement, but watch out for rogue lightning strikes.