

Logos
by Gil Fagiani
Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2015.
Paper, 168 pages; \$20

review by George Held

A Blanquito in El Logos

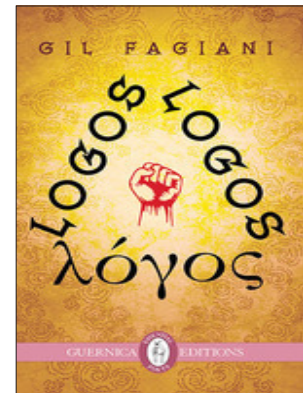
As the iconic Bronx poet Angelo Verga writes, the work of Gil Fagiani evades "the squishy swamp of dead personal lyrics that is contemporary American poetry." And he does this by creating a hard-nosed style that is based on close observation of intense personal experience as a dope addict in recovery and a veteran administrator in the therapeutic community (TC). While the details of his experience are rendered in a no-holds-barred naturalism, Fagiani believes in self-improvement, unlike the victims in, say, Zola or Dreiser.

These naturalist novelists are apropos of Fagiani because, like them, he is a miner of the literary gold of the sewers as well as an engaging storyteller. While his characters might sink to the depths of addiction, with vomit running out their nostrils, they still might rebel against their mentors and their habit and redeem themselves by going straight.

In effect, *Logos*, which is the name of the Bronx TC where the author found himself and then found himself, is a memoir mostly in verse, the personal recollection of the fourteen months in 1969-1971 when Fagiani was in residence there. This period roughly coincides with the time he became a junkie and desperately committed himself to *Logos*, and having risen in its leadership ranks, then left it in rebellion.

Why verse, one might ask. As a social worker in Spanish Harlem in 1966 at 21, Fagiani writes in the introduction, he learned to love the poetry of street speech and then turned to it when he became a poet, in such books as *A Blanquito in El Barrio* (2009) and *Serfs of Psychiatry* (2012). *Logos* is in many ways the culmination of his seven earlier works. It is organized into four sections, each of which relates a phase of his *Logos* months and bears the title of a key poem. Thus, the first section is called "SHOOTING DOPE WITH TROTSKY," after a poem of the same name, which first appeared in *A Blanquito in El Barrio*, and covers the years in which a privileged white suburban teenager got hooked on dope. But another key poem here is "Withdrawal," an ironic, punning title that signifies both Fagiani's withdrawal from straight society and the often-elusive kicking of the drug habit. This poem also contains the vital admission "I'm a junkie."

The second part of *Logos* is called "WHITE UNCLE TOM" and narrates Fagiani's entering into the Bronx TC. The poem "White Uncle Tom" crucially describes his reaching the depths of addiction and prostrating himself before the priesthood of *Logos*. But another, equally crucial poem is "The Great Him," an introduction to the chief administrator (and abuser) of the TC. This man got as far under Fagiani's skin as a heroin needle, and with as telling results. In "The Great Him" the poet gives great force to his contempt through a series of twenty two- and three-line stanzas all



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beginning with "After he ..." and exposing the leader's inconsistencies: "After he forfeited a scholarship to Yale / for burglarizing drug stores." All of these fragments lack a main clause on the consequences The Great Him might have suffered, the implication being that he was able to con the system with impunity.

In the third section, "SIDING WITH THE ENEMY," Fagiani recounts a period of questioning the rituals of Logos and the capability of its leadership, especially The Great Him. The poet is especially critical of actions by which the staff "violated a resident's dignity," as he writes in the introduction. Fagiani's humane character leads him to criticize and then reject the humiliating and traumatic techniques the Logos staff used to reform or coerce its charges. As the poem "Siding with the Enemy" reveals, Fagiani remains an Italian among the predominantly black and Hispanic residents at Logos who thus associate him with the enemy, the bystanders in an Italian neighborhood who threaten a boisterous group of Logos people marching in "their" streets. Also of great importance is "Last Day," which recounts the final showdown between the poet and the leader on the occasion when this Fagiani leaves Logos. "You lying sack of shit," he retorts when the leader chides him about taking more from Logos than he's given. The last line of the poem and the section, "I hug my brothers and sisters," signals both love and farewell.

The spirit of a fragile freedom underlies part four, "A SINGLE SPARK," a phrase from the title of Mao Tse-tung's pamphlet *A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire*. When a spark occurs in the poem of this name, an anecdote about the junkie Johnny Ace, it starts a fire in the room, ending in the slapstick removal of a smoking sofa to the sidewalk. An equally critical poem in this post-Logos section is "A Doper's Lament," the final poem in this volume. "I miss the simple life," it begins, referring to the compulsive life of the addict, then offers a list of its alluring aspects, ending with "The single standard: / dyno dope trumps / status and class." This cautionary poem applies widely, to anyone leaving a standardized life, in the military, the priesthood, the academy, for a seemingly freer one. All such "resurrections" contain the seeds of relapse, the alluring fruits of the old, rigid, life of imposed discipline. How much harder, and braver, a life of self-discipline can be is underscored by "The Great Him III," in which the former Logos leader suffers a relapse and begs admission into a TC run by a former Logos resident.

So all hail Gil Fagiani, who both kicked the narcotics habit, through the help of Logos, and took up an addiction of sorts in the logosphere, writing poetry. Logos joins the other Fagiani poetry books on my shelf, and surely won't be the last one there. And it's a good book to begin your own acquaintance with this compelling writer.