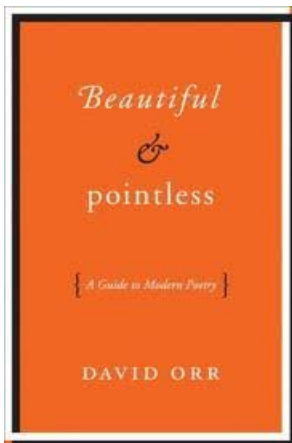


# A Night Ride With the Conservative Poetry Enforcers

by Con Chapman

*There are maybe five conservative American poets, not one of whom  
can safely show his face at a writing conference for fear of being  
angrily doused with herbal tea.*

*David Orr, Beautiful & Pointless*



It's Friday night, and the sky is cloudless and moonless. I'm cruising the streets of White River Junction, Vermont, with my posse; T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, e.e. cummings and Wallace Stevens. We've got our gang colors on--tweed sport coats--because we're out for retribution. Eliot was making a posthumous appearance at the Bread Stone Writer's Conference the night before, hovering like a brooding omnipresence over a panel discussion on De-Privileging the Dead White Male, when the head of the low-residency poetry program at the University of Vermont-Quechee campus tossed some green tea and honey on his ghostly apparition. Forget what you've

heard about the incorporeality of the afterlife; T-Dawg, as he is known fondly among us, has first degree burns on his hands to show for the gross incivility he was subjected to.



*"You pointin' that green tea at me, maggot?"*

"Can we stop at Dairy Queen?" Stevens says from the seat beside me--typical for the Emperor of Ice Cream.

"Yes if you're going to get something to drink," I say. "No if you want a sundae. You know they give you the runs."

"how come stevens always gets to ride shotgun?" cummings asks from the back seat.

"Because his reputation is the highest at this point," I reply, trying to broker a peace. "It's not my call--talk to the critics."



*Stevens: "I could really go for a Heath Bar Blizzard sundae right now."*

cummings rolls down his window and flips his cigarette out--a minor act of rebellion against the excesses of the environmental movement.

"You jerk," Frost says. "Just because you're a registered Republican doesn't mean you can be a pig."

"I live in Cambridge, Mass.," Cummings says, momentarily drawing himself up from his normal lower-case orthographic state. "Littering is an inalienable right when you live in the city."



*e.e. cummings: "excuse me for smoking."*

I pull my car over to the side of the road outside the Writer's Center, and we sit in silence as we wait for the poet who will be our random victim to walk out.

"Did everyone bring a beverage to toss?" I ask. Great poets tend to be world-class wool-gatherers, forgetting even the most important details of a night time terror ride.

"I brought a bottle of cider that I made myself," Frost says. Good old Bob--marginalized as a conservative during his life, he soldiered on until he got his day in the sun at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy, that tax-cutting imperialist who accused *Richard Nixon* of being weak on defense!



*"Something there is that doesn't love a tax . . ."*

"I brought my martini shaker," Eliot says. "Can I have a sip?"

"It's up to you," I say. "I'd think you'd want to keep your martini dry until you saw the whites of a liberal poet's eyes."

"You didn't stop at Dairy Queen," Stevens says with a dream-like voice. "No root beer float."

"Give him a Gatorade, would you?" I say to the guys in the back, and Frost reaches into my red and white Coleman cooler, the one I've been using since I was introduced to Schlitz Malt Liquor on the night shift at an ice plant when I was fifteen.

Frost hands one forward to his poetic rival, and Stevens jumps a bit when the chilled plastic bottle is placed in his hands. "A frosty cold one from Frost," he says with a thin little smile after he's recovered. I note that he doesn't say thank you; that's Stevens for you, an imperial sense of entitlement.

We had argued over when and how we would retaliate for the indignity that Eliot suffered at the hands of his poetic inferior. We debated whether we should respond in kind with a searing hot beverage, but decided we would take the high road. Liberal poets may scar their competitors with coffee and tea, but we would repay them with an olive branch; cold drinks at worst, lukewarm liquids preferred. We don't have to throw stuff to make a point; we use our words, as our mothers told us to long ago.

cummings--as he is wont to do--is the only one to push the envelope. he's brought along two four-packs of single serving wine bottles, one white and one red, and from the malevolent look on his face my guess is he's going to twist the cap on the cabernet first in order to inflict the maximum amount of damage to some poor poetaster's affected Mexican peasant shirt.



"Why do they hate us?" Stevens asks no one in particular.

"Because you're better than them," I say, "and because you undermine their belief that a poem must conform to a rigid view of the way the world ought to be, instead of the way it is."

"Jonathan Livingston Seagull crap," Stevens says, again as if he's talking in his sleep.

"On the nosey," I say.

cummings shushes me as he sees a man in a Greek fisherman's cap stumble down the stairs and then out onto the lawn. Frost clears his throat, and I can feel a poem coming on.

*He's in his cups as he descends  
the stairs that lead to the conference  
where within I have no friends  
and that has made all the difference.*

The three poets in the back slip quietly out the street-side door and take their places underneath some overgrown rhododendrons, the kind Virginia Woolf compared to overfed suburban stockbrokers.



*Woolf: "I loaned my Black & Decker hedgetrimmer to Marianne Moore, and now she won't give it back."*

The poet is humming to himself as he comes down the drive; I believe I detect the strains of Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water,"

which would make him just about my age if he's recalling the monster guitar hits of his youth--SOTW is ranked #12 on Q magazine's list of 100 Greatest Guitar Tracks.

"Smoke--on the wa-ter/Fire in the skies," the guy sings, and not too well. I see Frost, Cummings and Eliot exchange glances, then pounce on him.



*Fuckin' poetry, man.*

"What the . . ." I hear the guy say before Eliot succeeds in stuffing some Lilly Pulitzer cocktail napkins in his mouth.

*Tres festive!*



The trio of nefarious verse-slingers drags the guy to the car where they stuff him in the back seat between Frost and Eliot--the "bitch" seat. Cummings starts to get in the front, but Stevens stops him.

"I have not relinquished my shotgun rights!" he says in a prissy tone.

"come on, wally!" cummings exclaims. We're all getting a bit exasperated at the old man's hyper-formalism.

Stevens ignores him, gets out and waits for cummings to "ride the stick." Thankfully, my car has an automatic tranny on the column, so it's not so bad.

"Where are you taking me?" the poet--and I used the word advisedly, since I recognize him--asks. It is Bendall Plourde, a refugee from a Master of Fine Arts program who claimed "printer's error" when his amateurish attempt at a sonnet in a student newspaper drew derisive letters to the editor. Since I was the outside union typesetter for the paper I threatened to take out a full-page advertisement showing his original copy, with its mistakes of grammar, spelling, usage, syntax, mixed metaphors and pathetic fallacies--not to pile on or anything. I was prevailed upon not to place the ad for a sum in the high three figures--counting the decimal point, of course. Printer's error my ass.

We drive for awhile and once we're out in the country again Eliot removes the napkins from Plourde's mouth and, without missing a beat, throws a martini in his face.

"What'd you do that for?"

"I might ask you and your *bien pensant* colleagues the same thing, since I was doused with hot green tea at last night's session."

"Well you deserved it, you who said that liberalism was 'a worm eating itself into the traditions of our society.'"

"You dispute that?"

"Sure. All good poets are liberals--right?"

It's cummings' turn to chime in. "good lord, man--wherever did you get that idea?"

"From David Orr."

"who's that?"

"Just the poetry critic of the New York Times."

"He doesn't know his ass from his elbow," Frost says dismissively as he looks out the window at a field lying fallow, trying to wring a poem out of it. The guy never stops working!



"Orr is to Lionel Trilling as a snow cone is to the Matterhorn," Stevens intones with a voice of authority.

"Who's Lionel Trilling?" Plourde asks, genuinely mystified.

"The *ur*-liberal literary critic of the twentieth century," I say. "Author of *The Liberal Imagination*, who famously said 'liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition' of our time."

"So--that just supports what I said," Plourde says. "Ouch," he cries as Frost administers "Indian sunburn" to his right arm.

*"Oh no--not Indian sunburn!"*

"*Au contraire*," Eliot says. "Over and over again Trilling found that the poets he admired the most, the writers he thought would endure, including Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats . . ."

"Yeats?" Plourde says with a note of betrayal in his voice--you can tell that one stung.

"Yes, Yeats," Eliot continues, "Mann, Kafka, Rilke, Gide, Hemingway, Coleridge, Kipling, Faulkner and my esteemed colleagues in this car--to all of them 'liberal ideology has been at best a matter of indifference,' if they weren't suspicious or even overtly hostile to it."

We didn't need any napkins to shut the guy up after *that* Honor Roll of Scribblers.

"Say it . . . say it ain't so!" he says finally, tears welling up in his eyes.

"I'd like to--for your sake--but I can't," Eliot continues. "Trilling thought you needed to be a part of the traditions of the west in order to effectively perceive and express the social distinctions we lump together under the rubric . . ."

"What's a rubric?"



### *1978 AMC Rubric*

"A subcompact manufactured by American Motors in the sixties," Frost says. I'm pretty sure he's kidding.

" . . . of class," Eliot says. He gives Plourde a Cheshire-cat smile, and at this point everybody chucks their drinks at the guy. Justice prevails.

"Still," Plourde says as he tries to wipe the cheap cabernet off his favorite shirt, "Orr's right about one thing."

"What?" Frost asks.

"He said there weren't five conservative poets, and there's only four of you."

"How about our driver?" Eliot asks. I am *so* flattered!

"Him?" Plourde asks, snorting with contempt to think that the former printer's devil who took him down so many years ago in Worcester, Mass. would ever rise so high.

"Are you saying he's not a conservative?" Frost asks.

"No," Plourde replies, making a great show of his umbrage. "I'm saying he's not a poet."

