

Review of TAHL

By

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“Tahl” (2nd printing, University of Arizona Poetry Center, 2002) is a long poem by Jeremy Ingalls that many will find difficult and, in some sections, incomprehensible. Whether it should be classified as an epic is open to debate. If an epic poem is supposed to depict the rise, development, conflicts and eventual success or defeat of a hero battling malevolent, cosmic or political forces, then, to me, “Tahl” is not an epic. If it does not meet epic qualifications, then what is this rambling 619 page poem about?

To put the matter concisely Tahl is a semi-mythical person, who comes from an unnamed eastern fishing community, is orphaned at a young age, and loses his brother and best friend Julian with whom he was intellectually and spiritually attuned. Tahl’s, taciturnity, his short gnomic answers, and his aloof appearance attract a group of people whom he refers to as a “gang”. This gang multiplies as Tahl matures. Members are responsive to Tahl’s moods and desires, so much so that they spend most of their time speculating about what Tahl is going to do next. Since the actions and thoughts of the various persons are based on political and military actions in the world in which they find themselves or from whatever history and philosophy they can derive from the places in which they happen to be—New England, Egypt, Israel, Athens, Austria, Spain, London, Arizona—the poem sweeps from the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) to military events in Poland and France and, in Europe, stops at the Siege in Stalingrad (1942-1943) and, in Asia, with civilian pilots delivering supplies and military support to the Chinese who had retreated from Japanese invaders to Yunnan province (1941-1942).

While in Spain, Tahl supported anti-fascist forces, supposedly as a member of the Lincoln Brigade. Since he had somehow acquired expertise as a pilot some of his actions took place in the air, others on the ground. When it became clear that Franco was going to win, Tahl left Spain and either he or his friends visited or settled in Arizona and Maine. These peregrinations lead up to the birth and death of Tahl’s son by way of his liason and possibly marriage to a woman called Allison, who, because of her musical name, is the source of many rhymes and assonances. Tahl when he is not thinking about the meaning of the universe, the existence of God, or the inhumanity of man wants to be a composer who will be recognized for his talent. He meets with discouragement in this later pursuit and this combined with his grief over the earlier death of Julian and of his son Gamaliel culminates in a meditation on the meaning of death.

The first stages of the great European war have broken out. Sections deal with its progress and deplore its devastations. Though still an aspiring musician Tahl is drawn into the conflict for personal reasons. He realizes the continuity and futility of all wars and their deceptions—some of his biting remarks point to duplicities during the American Revolution (1775-1783). Tahl is ambivalent about the American Civil War (1861-1865)

as he adored President Lincoln and approved the causes for which the Union fought yet he appreciated the magnanimity of General Robert E. Lee. It is the pull of China, however, that draws Tahl back into World War II. Allison goes with him. Being civilians, they join the Flying Tigers, an American Volunteer Group in the Chinese Air Force. Aside from his wish to help victims of war, particularly children, the Chinese attraction has much to do with past myths that have excited Tahl's imagination. The myth of the good-luck animals—the phoenix and the unicorn—that appeared in a garden before the Chinese Emperor Huang-ti (c. 259-209 BC) gets special attention, however Ingalls cites only one of the many variations regarding this propitious meeting. Also, the strange pentatonic scale of Chinese music inspired Tahl to put its devices into his own compositions. While Ingalls is vague about the catastrophe, it appears that Tahl and Alison died in China.

In the last section of the poem the remaining members of Tahl's "gang" reminisce about their displaced leader and participate in or comment on performances of his music. There are some intriguing references to the works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Stravinsky and others that to be understood require knowledge of these composers. Comments about the "Credo" from Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis" are especially moving. But Tahl's oratorios—if that is what they are—take most of the space. There is much talk about modes, motifs, octaves and minor and minor keys that to the ears of non-musicians equate to cacophony.

At this late reading date, it appears that the purpose of the poem is not to show the powers of poetry as a lyrical and narrative structure but instead to show the propulsive and ingenious powers of music. There is a picturesque glimpse of a cathedral rising from the sea, which is derived from a piece by Debussy. Interpreters Iris, Elsa, Stephanie, Alfred and George discover in this specimen of impressionistic composition religious sentiments that Debussy may not have shared. These linguistic transpositions are not disturbing. What does disturb, however, is the attempt to translate music into a rhetorical language in which a series of capitalized letters simulate climaxes: IT IS NOT ENOUGH/BEYOND PAIN/IT IS NOT ENOUGH/BEYOND QUESTION/IT IS NOT ENOUGH/IT IS NOT ENOUGH/IT IS ENOUGH/THAT GOD IS LOVE. It's like maestro Leonard Bernstein telling his young listeners what music is all about after which he plays examples. Only, in this case, spectators must supply examples. In this context "listeners" is a misleading word. What is curious about the words from the oratorios is that they are paraphrased from the New Testament and deal with the passion and crucifixion of Jesus Christ with a liberal dashes of metaphysical speculation about God being the light that permeates everything and also the One that unites all phenomena, including death, which, in these oratorios, is not death as the resurrection of human beings and their union with Jesus in heaven is indisputable.

To me, the best thing in the poem is the description of the horrors of war in Spain which rival the fearsome emotions in Picasso's "Guernica". The anguish experienced by the victims of Sodom and Gomorrah, who incurred Yahweh's wrath, also ironically and rebelliously evoked character Tahl's and author Ingalls' sympathy.

I think that many of the ideas that were percolating in the poet's head got away from her. Nonetheless, "Tahl" is a stirring poem that appeals more to literati than to plebian readers. There are passages where Ingalls forgot her books and went to the source—which is not what is beyond the glass darkly (as St. Paul puts it), but objects around her. Readers feel the tangibility of the natural world in its blood, carrion and stench; they sense the enormous toil that took place in the construction of monuments for the dead in ancient Egypt; they marvel at the kindness of Changing Woman in Navajo myth, and they glimpse briefly the hazards of fishing off New England's seacoast. Sometime before he died Tahl indicated he intended to write music for the tribute to fishermen lost at sea that is held annually in Gloucester He did not, however, follow through. Acting as Ingalls' vehicle rather than on their own Tahl and accessory characters promise release after death in a heaven that diminishes the teeming worlds of nature and of beauty in which they have lived—the shadowy, seasonal and ebullient land and ocean of Dionysus, Persephone, Orpheus, and Odysseus.

As a coda at the end of the poem Ingalls includes stanzas about a unicorn which is in the tradition of French symbolist poetry. It is intricately constructed and short and has allegorical meanings which fit in with the rest of the poem only if the allusion to the Emperor Huang-ti and the phoenix and the unicorn, previously mentioned, is remembered. The unicorn is a good-luck symbol from China and from the Western middle ages of a one-horned animal who, in the west, has uncanny skill in finding virgins. If the whole poem can be considered a musical opus with a wide range—like the Western, Hindu, Chinese, African, Mayan, and Navajo synthesis that Tahl wanted to create—it is uplifting at the poem's close to put oneself in the company of the unicorn in a sheltered garden where all is serene and peaceful and where the prospect of smooth sailing and happy landings is held up before us.

NOTE: Jeremy Ingalls was my English teacher in 1940 during my sophomore year at Gloucester High School.

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