



Rivers Into Islands I

An Introduction to the Life and Work of Illinois Poet
John Knoepfle

How to Read a Poem

- Don't reduce poetry to "meaning."
- Poetry and autobiography aren't the same. Try to 'stay in the frame.'
- It's irrelevant to ask "Did this really happen?" Poetry is an act of the imagination.
- Poetry and "self-expression" are not the same.
- There are many tools in poetry, not just rhyme and meter.
- Pay attention to setting, line choices, voice, sound, rhythm, figurative language, allusion, connotation, etymology.
- Read with openness and initial trust in the poet.
- Monitor reactions. What surprises you? What touches you?

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

— By Billy Collins

Why This Course?

- John Knoepfle (1923-2019) was an accomplished, widely published poet
- More than 25 books over 50 years
- Publishers included small presses, but also University of Chicago Press, University of Illinois Press, and Cornell University Press.
- Yet he is less well known and studied than he deserves.
- For example: No author page for him at Poetry Foundation website. Some of his work is out of print.

‘Rivers Into Islands’: More Than a Book Title

- Knoepfle’s first published book of poetry.
- Many small, seemingly casual, even slight poems.
- Yet they have a cumulative force — ‘Like silt/ slow rivers encourage into islands’.
- Knoepfle’s method — to affect a casual stroll through life, observing and making small poems that coalesce into significance.
- Reflected in autobiography, published at age 85.
- ‘I Look Around for My Life’

Islands in the River of Knoepfle's Life

- Born and raised in Cincinnati, youngest of four brothers of a Swiss-Irish family.
- Father traveled the Midwest, selling movie contracts to theaters.
- Mother was Catholic, born in New York's Lower East Side. Father was Lutheran; the children were all raised Catholic.
- Oldest brother Rudi became a Jesuit priest and a classical scholar.

Growing Up in Cincinnati

- Knoepfle remembers taking food to flood victims along the Ohio River during historic flood of 1937.
- Attended Xavier High School in downtown Cincinnati.
- Played football. Big Reds fan. Had a ball signed by Yogi Berra but misplaced it.
- More interested in 'esoteric things' like archeology than in school curriculum. 'I thought I was dumb.'
- Graduated in 1941. Had 'no idea what I wanted to do.'

World War II

- Enrolled at Xavier University in Cincinnati in fall 1941.
- Enlisted in Navy immediately after attack on Pearl Harbor that December.
- Trained as boat officer on landing craft.
- Serious leg injuries at Iwo Jima, result of 'friendly fire.'
- Awarded Purple Heart.
- Earned bachelor's and master's under GI bill at Xavier University, Jesuit institution in Cincinnati.

Down Solomon

Ten days and south from Iwo,
a sea that calm you could have walked it
tiding the rare Solomons.
We knew the dead it held
were our own dead
and gave them silence under Savo.

- Shows some characteristics of K's poetry
 - Understatement.
 - Hyper-local. No explication of place names
 - Conversational, idiomatic tone; creates intimacy by assuming it.
 - Emotional punch

Post-War: Education and Career

- Married Peg Sower in 1956. Married 63 years, until his death in 2019.
- Earned doctorate at St. Louis University, also a Jesuit institution. Dissertation on playwright Christopher Marlowe
- Working in public broadcasting in Cincinnati, recorded interviews with 50+ steamboat river men. Published transcripts at Rivermen of the Inland Waters.
- Devoted life to writing and publishing poetry, including translations from Spanish, Chinese and Hungarian.
- Taught at St. Louis U. and Sangamon State (now U of I-Springfield).

John and Peg



Photo by Angela Aznarte in Illinois Times, May 23, 2019

“Two things that drew them together were their mutual interest in bird watching and the fact that John was then unemployed. In her mind, that meant that he was not part of an oppressive economic system.” — Rev. Martin Woulfe in *Illinois Times*

Personality and Character

- Kind, quiet, modest, seldom talked or wrote about military service.
- Supportive of young writers, including myself.
- Identified with working class, the poor, the “other” in American society.
- Active in Civil Rights movement.
- Taught at East St. Louis extension of Southern Illinois University.
- Lifelong devotion to poetry.
- Married to Peg Sower Knoepfle for 63 years. She died in 2021.

General Characteristics of His Poetry

- Firmly in modernist tradition of Hemingway and W.C. Williams: Spare, unsentimental. Power in what is not said.
- Poet of place — primarily the Midwest, Ohio, Illinois and west into the Plains.
 - Linked with other Midwestern poets, Robert Bly, James Wright. Translated Vallejo with them.
- Poet of voice — Developed his own but also channeled regional speech patterns. Example: *Harpe's head*.
- His forte: short poems that accrete into coherent groups. “Rivers into Islands” describes an artistic method.

**Questions,
Comments?**

Two Early Poems

Church of Rose of Lima, Cincinnati

Harpe's head

Church of Rose of Lima, Cincinnati

It looks from the hill like something
Fra Angelico painted, the red
rectangular lines and the bricked bell
steeped out of time. This church
honors Saint Rose in a city
as spare of Peruvians as miracles.

It floods out whenever the river rises
and has a smell of common water
at the altars, and pilots of tows
on long hauls from Pennsylvania
needle the dark with searching lights
to catch the hour off her clock.

Saint Rose keeps a timid time.
I've heard her bell strike three
as if an afternoon surprised her.
The church itself may well surprise her.
In Lima she has golden altars; Germans
made them wood on the unliturgical river.

But churches anywhere seem rude for her.
This virgin kept a hidden time
and the world could give no wedding ring
to wed her with. Her lover came quick
and killed the Peruvian roses she grew fond of
and the small buds withered in the winter fog.

Once I thought the rococo Christ
had made her a violent dove and held
her trembling in his hand like a bell.
I am not so sure of this today.
She may be undiscoverable, like silt
slow rivers encourage into islands.

From *Rivers Into Islands*
1963, University of Chicago
Press

The Saint

- Rose of Lima, Born Isabel Flores de Oliva in 1586 in Lima, Peru. Died in 1617 (31 years old).
- First person in the Americas to be canonized.
- Led a life of chastity, isolation, severe penance and service to the poor.
- Patron saint of embroidery, gardening, flower cultivation.

The Building

- Built on Ohio River in 1867, by German boat builders who worked nearby.
- Severe, brick exterior, ornate interior, with features of Bavarian rococo style.
- Primarily of and for the working class and poor.
- Flooded more than 60 times. Flood gauge painted on back wall.
- Clock face added to the river side at request of rivermen.



**Church of Rose of Lima,
Cincinnati**

Analysis

- ‘A city as spare of Peruvians as miracles.’
- ‘. . . has a smell of common water at the altars.’
- Pilots ‘needle the dark’ to ‘catch the hour off her clock.’
- Altars of gold, altars of wood
- Her early death.
- ‘Once I thought the rococo Christ had made her a violent dove . . . ‘ ‘ I’m not so sure of this today.’
- Rose an unfortunate, perhaps ‘undiscoverable’ young woman
- her influence felt ‘like silt slow rivers encourage into islands.’

Harpe's head

Harpe's dead.
He twangs hell's gut maybe.
He won't badger cabins
for new widows
or cheat sons of any more fathers.
We left the worthless part of him
fouled in mudflats
south of Redbanks,
but of Harpe's head,
we took that off gentle,
like a quail's is knuckled.
Goddam Harpe,
we spit there in the noon heat,
we'll wrap you up better than pharaoh.
We scooped stone ledges
below a creek bend
for blue cool clay
and thickened his flame of face with that.

It held him firm for Natchez
for some who knew him there,
down Ohio's shoaling
in a sloshed oak bucket.
Senators priced his took head
and cold-bedded women cursed it.
Oh, God, we booted that pumpkin
through Natchez-under-the-hill
until the blue clay cracked
and his withered head
leered at us.
Then we flung him
down a chuckhole full of blowflies
where hogs wallowed in the heat.

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An Anti-Hero

- A retelling of legends about the Harpe cousins, serial killers Micajah and Wiley.
- Active along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in Illinois, Kentucky and Tennessee.
- Said to have murdered more than 40 people, including women and children, over a span of several years in the late 18th century.
- Place names: Redbanks, Ky., and Natchez-Under-the-Hill, Miss., were both notorious for criminal activity.

Analysis

- A ‘persona’ poem — a created character, not the poet, is the speaker of the poem.
- A poem rich with idiomatic expressions
- The speaker has a distinctive ‘voice’ that reveals character.
- An example of Knoepfle’s interest in place as a focus of poetry: A particular region’s history, stories, legends.
- Taps into popular fascination with crime, criminals — Remember Al Capone’s ‘vault.’
- Why is the head displayed, carried to Natchez?

**Questions,
Comments?**