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Translate This Madness

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ABSTRACT

This review of Paul Watsky's second full collection of poetry, *Walk-Up Music*, by Liane Strauss, addresses the evolution of the themes and preoccupations of his first, from childhood, family, and the persistent presence in our lives of the dead, to our involvement with myth and our place in the natural world, and from the fates of poets to the big themes of power, history, dreams, and baseball.

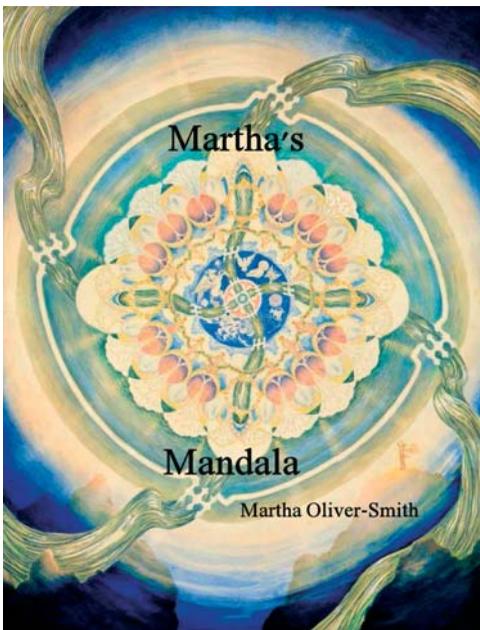
KEY WORDS

baseball, childhood, fall, parenthood, perfect game, poetry, tanka, trust

Translate This Madness

PATRICIA REIS

Review of: Martha Oliver-Smith, *Martha's Mandala: Figures in a Family Circle*, New York: Spuyten-Duyvil, 2015.



One cannot read Martha Oliver-Smith's beautifully illustrated and superbly researched and written account of her grandmother Martha Bacon's life without feeling the ghost of Christiana Morgan hovering in the background. Martha Stringham Bacon was born in 1892 and Morgan, five years later, in 1897. Both women died in 1967. Their lives, and most notably their deaths, differ greatly, but their plunge into the realms of the unconscious and their ability to express what they found there in exquisitely detailed paintings were similar. Martha Oliver-Smith deduces, from the massive written material left by her grandmother, that these two women apparently neither met nor knew about each other. But both women encountered C. G. Jung: Morgan in analysis and Bacon through her husband's association with him. The lives and psyches of both women were greatly affected by Jung. Dark haired and attractive, Morgan served as an erotically inspiring muse for Jung—the artist behind his Visions Seminars. By contrast, Patty Bacon (as she was known within her family) was fair, delicate, shy, and did not fit the classic anima type and was clearly not *femme inspiratrice* material. Although powerfully influenced by Jung's theories, Patty Bacon and her work did not attract Jung's sustained attention and thus she was spared Morgan's more fated and fatal encounter and tragic ending.

Patty Bacon was born into a New Haven family with generations of well-educated men—scientists, engineers, and academics. Her father, Irving Stringham, a noted mathematician, was a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Raised in California and educated at a progressive school for girls, Patty Bacon met her husband, Leonard, while he was teaching literature and composition at Berkeley. As Martha Oliver-Smith writes:

They married in 1912 and began their lives together with every advantage that inherited wealth and education could provide. Although she always considered herself a Californian, Patty and Leonard were transplanted back to Rhode Island after Leonard's parents died. The new family was installed in one of the large houses on the Bacon estate, *The Acorns*, a rambling mansion that had been inhabited by generations of Bacons and was supported by family trust funds. (2015, 11)

Patty Bacon's marriage to Leonard Bacon was a marriage of opposites. Deeply introverted, intelligent, and artistic in nature, Patty Bacon was tasked with the time-consuming and soul-numbing demands of running a large household while attending to all the social obligations her husband relished and she dreaded. Outside of social and household demands, she understood her role as wife and mother in this traditional marriage. She frequently brought her children into aspects of her creative life by dry drawing and writing stories for them. Her more serious psychological and spiritual pursuits, however, were often put on hold in order to meet others' needs. A robust extravert, Leonard loved entertaining in a grand style and was "famous for holding court, reciting poetry and waxing eloquent late into the night while his guests, worn out with fatigue and quantities of alcohol, felt obliged to wait him out" (14). Putting herself in service to her husband and his creative work as writer and poet, Patty Bacon devotedly raised their three daughters and miraculously (or fiercely) snatched time and space in an attic studio to appease her own artistic drive toward which she felt much compulsion and little confidence. The cherished confrontation of opposites that Jung believed necessary for consciousness cannot successfully be transposed onto a traditional marriage without collaborating with the prerogatives of male privilege.

In the early thirties, Virginia Woolf wrote of a certain Victorian phantom, the Angel in the House, an embodiment of the feminine ideal of submissiveness, who stole women's creative aspirations and could drive her mad with domestic distractions. The only recourse, Woolf recommended, was to kill her (1942/1970). Patty Bacon was not made of such stern stuff, however, and her "killer" turned self-destructive.

In 1922, at the age of thirty, Patty Bacon was on a collision course with her creative drive. While working on a piece of fiction, the boundary between daily reality and her vivid imagination was breached by the intrusion of a multitude of benign and malevolent voices that grew louder and louder. In the heart of maternal darkness and despair, voices told her to drown her children, while another small voice warned, "Peril, peril!" Overwhelmed by a "tidal wave" that threatened her sanity, she had a "crack-up," as she would later call it. This terrifying event required five weeks of confinement in a private hospital where she underwent a "rest cure," the standard treatment for neurasthenic women as outlined by the infamous expert on female maladies, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell. She was prohibited any creative activity—no reading, writing, or painting—as Weir Mitchell sternly believed that a woman's creative energy provoked an unhealthy, hyperstimulated mind. In a private room, bound to her bed by tightly wrapped sheets, stripped of stimuli, Patty Bacon spontaneously received her first vision. From her grandmother's notes, Martha Oliver-Smith imagines what her grandmother saw:

A dark chasm like a well seems to be inside of her, miles deep, but she can see the end of it, the faint gleam, not of water, but of moistened earth like garden soil. . . . A clod of earth rolls back to expose the tip of a tight, white bud. The bud grows larger, . . . one

immaculate petal gradually frees
itself . . . then another petal unfurls, and
another until there are four. (2015, 29)

It is this vision that offered Patty Bacon hope. The emergent four-petaled white flower was her consolation, her companion, her North Star, and when she returned to her art, it became the subject of her first mandala. For the rest of her life, she would refer again and again to the healing image offered from the depths of her being.

Subsequent to her breakdown, Patty Bacon's husband, Leonard, suffered his own bout of melancholia and underwent Jungian analysis with Toni Wolff in Zürich. (Martha Oliver-Smith does not believe that Leonard ever understood his descent as having anything to do with his wife's breakdown.) Patty and Leonard's treatment methods could not have been more different. After his "excruciating" sessions with Toni Wolff, Leonard was a frequent participant in post-session gatherings and wrote to his friends, "(It) was a wonderful party. The Jungs, Cary, Toni Wolff, Provot and I . . . went out to Küsnacht and danced all night. Everybody was lit, and Jung was a lively image of Dionysus. It was a sweet party" (2015, 18). Leonard Bacon emerged from his analysis apparently cured. Patty Bacon managed her psychological vulnerabilities by extensive journaling and retreating to her attic studio whenever possible to draw and paint.

In 1936, when Jung was the honored speaker at Harvard, Leonard and Patty Bacon invited Emma and Carl Jung and their entourage to stay at The Acorns, the family estate in Rhode Island. Four years prior to this visit, Patty Bacon had sent Jung a letter with photographs of her Mandala paintings. Jung wrote back inquiring whether she would impart the stories that went with the pictures. Patty Bacon wrote twelve pages explaining in

detail her creative oeuvre, but did not send it. Instead, she sent Jung a "case history" of her mental and spiritual upheaval in an eighty-page manuscript, something she would regret in her later life because she understood it to be too long and probably inappropriate since she was not in a "proper" analysis. Maybe it was a bid for his attention, in which case she never received it. A few months after Jung's death in 1961, she burned the one copy she had kept and hoped that Jung had done the same.

During the Jungs' visit in 1936, Patty Bacon and her husband hosted a formal dinner party along with an exhibition of her paintings. Unlike Christiana Morgan, neither Patty Bacon nor her Mandalas garnered Jung's particular interest. Nor did Patty Bacon, an astute observer and inveterate journal writer, leave any account of Jung's response to her work. Gleaning clues from the few scraps of notes from her grandmother, Martha Oliver-Smith imaginatively re-creates the scene and cast of characters: Emma and Carl Jung are caught in unedifying marital bickering, and Jung makes cursory comments on Patty Bacon's exhibit of Mandalas, but spends more time defending himself against accusations of anti-Semitism.

Three years before the Jungs' visit, Leonard Bacon had won the Pulitzer Prize for his poetry. A man of letters, a literary critic, he was hardly a brilliant poet and certainly not a modern one. In his autobiography, he referred to his wife, not by name, but as "the Lady in Question." It can only be imagined how Patty Bacon felt about the lack of attention from these important and influential men in her life. By all accounts, Patty Bacon wove a self-protective mantle of invisibility around herself, letting the Angel in the House camouflage her considerable intellect and talent, selflessly subsuming her creative drive to oftentimes tiresome and less talented men.

It was not an unusual move for a woman, especially a self-effacing highly intuitive one. The scenario is a familiar one by now. Sometimes a descent into madness is the only way out or through.

Patty Bacon did not incur another bout of madness; outwardly, she devoted her life to her family, while inwardly she remained faithful to her creative endeavors. Jung's psychology had offered her a *raison d'être*, but she was never able to resolve within herself Jung's notions of masculine and feminine, *logos* and *eros*. Following Jung's theories, she attributed her artist to her inner masculine, something she needed to renounce in order to do "what women do"—"what love makes them do" (Oliver-Smith 2015, 117). In her "feminist manifesto" she writes, "I am a feminist who is strongly inclined to the idea that Woman's Place is in the Home" (113).

Reflecting on the depth of her grandmother's conflict and paradox, Oliver-Smith writes the following:

Patty Bacon's mind had plenty of what might have been considered positive "masculine" attributes: she understood advanced mathematics, atomic physics, astronomy and studied the nature of time. All these disciplines require "logos" in order to comprehend them, but she either would not or could not recognize her abilities as either genuine or positive.

She concludes, "Denying one's own nature and abilities is an astonishing and twisted way to have to think about oneself. No wonder she was tormented" (2015, 117).

In 1961, the year Jung died, Patty Bacon was in her early seventies. She wrote "The Friend in the Unconscious," a different kind of manifesto, her interpretation of the vision she was given during her "tidal wave" and her rationale for not fully following it. Although

she admits to something tremendous, she does not elevate herself as a mystic.

I know I am not a mystic, because I chose unhesitatingly to draw back, to seal the opening leading to a way of life that could not be my way, though I believed and never felt the need to say, "help Thou, my unbelief." Secretly, but not secretively, I have tried to make my faulty life an answer to that momentary prayer and a perpetual thanksgiving for the Grace. (2015, 130)

Within a family, it has been often observed, though never proved, that a grandmother's spark of genius can bypass or even oppress her own daughters, but ignite anew in a granddaughter. This seems the case with Patty Bacon and Martha Oliver-Smith. Gifts, however, are not the only things that travel the mother-line. In bringing her grandmother's ideas and art out of the ditch of obscurity where they would otherwise have been consigned, Oliver-Smith relates her own struggle with her grandmother's legacy of a divided life. As the inheritor and the beneficiary of this mixed blessing, Oliver-Smith faced the daunting task of sifting through her grandmother's voluminous journals and artworks in order to understand her grandmother, the historical times in which she lived, and the patterns of self-deprecation that kept her from realizing her full potential as a woman. In *Martha's Mandala*, she vividly brings to life this remarkable woman who was deeply influenced by Jungian thought, for better and for worse, yet who did not become part of the "gang."

In her recent book, *When Women Were Birds: Fifty Four Variations on Voice*, the writer and naturalist Terry Tempest Williams explores the bewildering legacy of her mother's vast collection of journals, all of which were left blank. She asks, "What needs to be counted to have a voice? Courage, Anger, Love. Something

to say and someone to listen” (2012, 44). Patty Bacon possessed courage and love in abundance, and from the many journal excerpts Oliver-Smith quotes in her book, her grandmother brought intelligence, creative drive, and profundity of thought to what she had to say. Yet anger seems missing and appears only in the guise of Patty Bacon’s trenchant and unsparing observations of herself and others. It would take her granddaughter, Martha Oliver-Smith, forty-some years to fulfill the last two of Tempest William’s requirements—the granddaughter’s anger arrives more in the form of pathos as she works to understand the forces that ranged against this rare and complicated grandmother. By doing so, she tells us how these forces shaped her own life struggles, deftly drawing this legacy into contemporary times. As for the last requirement, Martha Oliver-Smith has doubly fulfilled the need for “someone to listen.” In writing this book, she has given us more than her grandmother’s voice, she has also given us her own.

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ABSTRACT

Martha’s Mandala, a biographical memoir, tells the story of Martha Stringham Bacon, a woman whose

struggle to express herself as an artist led to madness. Martha “Patty” Bacon was connected to C. G. Jung, adhered to his theories of the psyche, and emerged from her ordeal by painting mandalas. Her granddaughter, Martha Oliver-Smith, remembers, imagines, and reflects on the life and art of her grandmother as well as her grandfather, poet Leonard Bacon, with whom she spent most of her childhood. The author examines the voices and expectations in her own life grown out of this unique and fertile spiritual heritage.

KEY WORDS

Leonard Bacon, 1887–1954; Martha Stringham Bacon, 1892–1967; C. G. Jung, 1875–1961; Jungian psychology; mandalas

Penelope Dinsmore’s Gift

JANE ZICH

Review of: Penelope Etnier Dinsmore, *The Treasure That Came into the World to Find Its Self*, Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2014.

