

# Civil War Book Review

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## Davenport's Version

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## Review

Gramm, Kent

Summer 2004

**Gery, John** *Davenport's Version*. Portals Press, \$20.00 ISBN 916620581

Embattled ballad

A lyrical poem of Civil War New Orleans

American poetry has suffered from poets using the lyric for tedious self-indulgence, and from a corresponding lack of formal discipline. John Gery's **Davenport's Version** is an admirable counterattack. His is a 235 page narrative poem written in pentameter lines, taking place in New Orleans in 1862. Its characters are not the poet himself but a mysterious young widow named Bressie LaRouche B beautiful of course; a handsome Confederate colonel named Tresler; Bressie's uncle Bandeaux, who plays the role of pander arranging trysts between Bressie and Tresler; and David Davenport, the narrator, Bressie's lover after Tresler's death, who tries to imagine the story of that previous relationship.

The poem begins with a witty and engaging prose introduction purporting to recount the discovery of an old manuscript by a college professor. From there we enter the poem left by David Davenport, who served with the Union army and was stationed in New Orleans for several years. I'm a casual reader, no historian,

so my memory for details falters.

That's why I am writing this in straight lines,

hoping they will help me to remember

only what's important. What's important?

Stories, music, getting up on time,

details such as what we ate for breakfast

after our first night together, the names.

Poetry does best by making small things  
matter, unknown persons join the living,  
simple gestures otherwise forgotten  
dance like light on water B or does nothing.

Like Prometheus' entrails ripped by vultures  
or the limbs of Hector dragged by horses,  
tales of war are grand stuff in the telling  
more than in the history they come from.

Bodies always end up merely bodies.

My tale has the telling only, nothing  
else, no heroes, no triumphant nations,  
no immortal acts or famous speeches.

Davenport admits that he is a liar, and he is making up what he does not know about Bressie and Tresler -- which comprises most of the "history" he is writing. Nevertheless we are asked to trust him, perhaps in part because he is writing "of fidelity and kindness" and his story is true to human experience. He reflects on what History is: in large part a self-serving imaginary construct.

Davenport is himself self-serving. He presents his earlier, dead rival sometimes in a comic light, occasionally as a weak and buffoonish lover who faints ("THUD!") on the floor during a bedroom scene with Bressie, as the voyeuristic Bandeaux watches behind a partly open door. One must take Davenport's wish to denigrate the handsome and dashing Confederate cavalryman into account; otherwise the tone of the narrative can strike one as disharmonious and confusing. In fact, some of the story's comedy seems out of place or unintentional, as in a few of the rhymed couplets that end each section:

Either you'll be spared or you'll be taken:

Bandeaux found his heart and drove the stake in.

and

Let's inside. What must your friends be up to?

I'll bet they're just dying to interrupt you.

Civil War buffs looking for a story of the capture of New Orleans will be let down. While the sense of time and place is realistic (except for such slips in language as "Focus, Bressie"), the war is nearly always in the muted background. However, Bressie serves as the point of contact between the two sides in the war, and thus also connects the idea of civil war and the -- except for one crucial incident -- distant conflict between two men who do not meet. Both of the men, of course, seem to undervalue the significance of Bressie's marriage; likewise the reader perhaps should not assume that like Scarlett O'Hara, the young woman had married a man who meant nothing to her. Any such assumption would have to come from Davenport. (The "unreliable narrator" is a mainstay of modern fiction, the classic example being Huckleberry Finn, but in this story the reader has very little by way of a reliable frame of reference.)

The first half of the poem is not as effective as the second half. Neither plot nor language is compelling, and the narrator is not as interesting as he thinks himself to be. The poetry itself will receive mixed reactions, in part resulting from the difficult position contemporary poets who write in form find themselves in: they must write so that the form does not obtrude, is nearly invisible, and the language does not strike one as archaic. But to succeed at this, one can write what seems not to be verse at all. The narrative in **Davenport's Version** is natural, readable, and at times prosy enough to make the reader ask, Why write in lines at all? Some sections, such as the following on pp. 118-119, are rhymed but to no lyrical effect: First, he brings his head aloft to reach hers,

drawing his pursed lips across her eyebrow,

eyelid, cheekbone, tracing all her features

until, pausing, both let out a sigh now,

aching to begin in on the kisses --  
hers for his eyes, his for her throat's hollows,  
light and cool to touch, but wet, as mist is --  
prelude to that long hard heat the follows  
when, as they embrace, he lifts her gown,  
parts from her until they're both undressed,  
and in a single shadow lays her down,  
her hand guiding his mouth to her breast,  
his hand on her thigh, which he caresses,  
as against her heart his head she presses.

Rhyming "kisses" with "mist is" has a jarringly comic effect; "wet, as mist is" is also an unnaturally cumbersome phrase. The entire description, however, is penned by a man who is compelled to imagine what he would like to ridicule, so the description is complicated by his own voyeuristic, self-torturing ambiguity. In this same scene, Farragut's Union Navy begins the assault on New Orleans, while thunder and lightning rage -- a set of effects which some readers will find to admirably juxtapose war, lovemaking, the natural world, and human emotion -- and other readers will find to be cliché upon cliché. The realization that Davenport might be composing all this with a kind of postmodern irony will strike some readers as an unacceptable excuse for an ungrounded narrative, while it will delight others.

The first half of the poem suffers from too much of the narrator's talk, but the second half engages the reader in the mystery of Bressie's character, and ends with an intriguing and dramatic conclusion, suggesting certain possibilities but being definitive about none of them. We are left with Davenport's fascination and mystification regarding the woman who seems as doomed as the city she represents.

*The reviewer, Kent Gramm, is a professor of English at Wheaton College (IL), and is the author of Gettysburg: A Meditation on War and Values; November: Lincoln's Elegy at Gettysburg; Somebody's Darling: Essays on the Civil War; and is co-author of Gettysburg: This Hallowed Ground, a book of photographs and poetry.*