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Downwind from Gettysburg

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

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Downwind from Gettysburg

Abstract
Go find a copy of I Sing the Body Electric, Ray Bradbury’s collection of short stories from which this chunk comes. Check it out of the library. Go buy it, you won’t regret it.

Bradbury, in his short story, tells the tale of a man whose obsession is to bring the dead to life. Phipps wishes to make a film about Gettysburg, the film outlined in the passage above. A boy on his father’s shoulders translates the Gettysburg Address from it’s wind-borne course. [excerpt]

Keywords
Bradbury, Fiction, Gettysburg Address, Meanings, Remembrance Day, Rudy, Science Fiction

Disciplines
Cultural History | History | Social History | United States History

Comments
Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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I have always wanted to do a film on Gettysburg and the vast crowd there and far away out at the edge of that sun-drowsed impatient lost thick crowd, a farmer and his son trying so hard to hear, not hearing, trying to catch the wind-blown words from the tall speaker there on the distant stand, that gaunt man in the stovepipe hat who now takes off his hat, looks in it as to his soul rummaged there on scribbled letterbacks and begins to speak."

"And this farmer, in order to get his son up out of the crush, why, he hefts the boy up to sit upon his shoulders. There the boy, nine years old, a frail encumbrance, becomes ears to the man, for the man indeed cannot hear nor see but only guess what the President is speaking far across a sea of people there..."
at Gettysburg and the President’s voice is high and drifts now clear, now gone, seized and dispersed by
contesting breeze and wind. And there have been too many speakers before him and the crowd all
crumpled wool and sweat, all mindless stockyard squirm and jostled elbow, and the farmer talks up to his
son on his shoulders in a yearning whisper: What? What’s he say? And the boy, tilting his head, leaning
his peach-fuzz ear to the wind, replies.”

-Downwind from Gettysburg, Ray Bradbury

What is this if not interpretation? Go find a copy of I Sing the Body Electric, Ray Bradbury’s collection of
short stories from which this chunk comes. Check it out of the library. Go buy it, you won’t regret it.

Bradbury, in his short story, tells the tale of a man whose obsession is to bring the dead to life. Phipps
wishes to make a film about Gettysburg, the film outlined in the passage above. A boy on his father’s
shoulders translates the Gettysburg Address from it's wind-borne course.

Phipps never gets to resurrect the dead on film. What he does do is bring a robotic Lincoln back to life,
with oil coursing through his metallic veins.

And this is what we do too. Freeman Tilden made the astute observation decades ago. "Interpretation is
an art," he wrote, "which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or
architectural."

And in his short story, Bradbury is doing nothing more than revealing a great moral, philosophical and
historical truth through art. He is speaking of the human soul. He is interpreting the real past and the
imagined future, he is interpreting his mystical make-believe characters and our flesh-and-blood selves,
all simultaneously.

Bradbury's father and son never existed. And yet, their story speaks truth that even the best of historians
can't truly access. It is fiction that tells an historical truth.

Bradbury resurrects the dead through his art, not with a robot or celluloid, but with the word. In the end,
we only need the word. And it is through that means, the power of our language, that we raise the dead
every day.