

November 22, 2001 Washington DC

[To Tim Murphy]

Thanks for sending me the exchanges about “The Feast of Stephen” [on the EratoSphere blog site]. Much serious thought has been given to it, for which I can be nothing but grateful. Both Susan McLean and A.E. Stallings have sound insights into the sources and subject of the poem, which is about “what turns young men into basketball stars, or bullies, or Storm Troopers—and a conclusion that the three have more in common than we might like to think,” as one of them said. The poem’s title is meant to remind a reader of the description in Acts of the Apostles (7:58) of the martyrdom of St. Stephen, at which the Saul who would in time become St. Paul was present as a passive participant. Only the final section of the poem is clearly related to the title and the biblical passage. The first three parts merely lead up to what, at the end, becomes a lynch mob, whether of long ago or of today. I remember being struck by the fact that not a few Renaissance paintings of martyrdoms presented the torturers and executioners as vigorous and athletic young men, hateful in the glee with which they set about their task, but admirable in their physiques and sturdy bearing. I had in mind such paintings as Pollaiuolo’s The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, Luca Signorelli’s Flagellation, and Caravaggio’s The Martyrdom of St. Matthew. It seemed worth meditating on what could lead men into such barbarity. And it seemed that the competitiveness that begins early in comparatively innocent games, encourages youths to attempt to “beat” one another in sports; and it would not be too great a step from that to the administration of real beatings. Everything about domestic propaganda created by the Nazis for home consumption focused on images of nordic Supermen. The second section of the poem is full of puns, jokes that make pleasantries of what is potentially dangerous and sinister, and which appears without disguise in section III. Jokes, as Freud pointed out, are a means of concealing aggression. The seed of all these dangers lies in that “self-love” mentioned in the first section which is indifferent to the condition of others, and which is purely selfish. It is a natural state of infants, and it endures for a while, and some never abandon it, remaining cruel their whole lives. The four parts constitute an account of the evolution of the persecutor.

Once again, I’m grateful for the thought and attention you have given my poem.

[Tony]