

In Memoriam Thomas F. Bertonneau, 1954-2021

Matthew Schneider

mschneid@highpoint.edu

Tom Bertonneau, my dear friend and prolific *Anthropoetics* contributor, died peacefully on September 21, 2021. I met Tom 35 years ago, during my first year of doctoral study at UCLA, when we shared a teaching assistants' office. We became friends almost immediately, via that alchemy through which people with overlapping interests and complementary sensibilities resonate with each other. Soon we were socializing, and in late February of 1987, Tom asked me to do him a favor over the coming weekend. Weekend favors among graduate students usually involved helping someone move or providing airport drop-offs and pick-ups, but this one was different. Tom's fiancée Susan was president of the French Graduate Students Association, and they were hosting a guest speaker on Saturday, March 7. Worried that the event would be sparsely attended, Tom secured my promise to show up. The speaker? René Girard, who on that Spring afternoon changed my life's intellectual course.

By introducing me to Girard and his thought, Tom therefore played a larger role in my graduate education than many of my professors. Tom and I were eager participants in Eric Gans's first several Generative Anthropology seminars, and presented at the first GA Symposium at UCLA in 1990. Tom also spearheaded the GA session at the 1994 MLA, where we first met Richard Van Oort. Through the next three decades Tom taught at Central Michigan University and the State University of New York at Oswego while publishing books and articles on a wide range of topics with astonishing, even superhuman frequency. Though he never held a tenured faculty position, he was a model academic: interested in everything, relentlessly logical, a generous and challenging teacher, and a patient explicator and courageous defender of the majesty of the Western philosophical, aesthetic, and literary traditions.

If there ever was a polymath, it was Tom. When we first met, I was astonished by his encyclopedic knowledge not only of the classical literary tradition, but also his appreciation of all music genres, from Cajun Zydeco to Ralph Vaughan-Williams. He also seemed to have read every science fiction book ever written, from Wells and Burroughs, through Asimov and Bradbury, to mid-century pulp magazines. He was also a connoisseur of science fiction films, and could discourse authoritatively on all of them, from schlock masterpieces like *Mars Needs Women* to high-concept philosophical epics like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*.

Tom was also an expert on the philosophy and religion of late Antiquity, 19th-century American literature, Nobel Laureate Knut Hamsun, the English novelist and cultural critic Colin Wilson, 19th-century French literature—really, anything he put his mind to.

The quirkiest interest Tom and I shared, though, was in military aircraft, particularly propeller-driven planes of World War II. As a boy, I had built model aircraft kits, and like all children of the 1960s was steeped in admiration for supersonic jets and space flight. In Tom I found a fellow aviation enthusiast; but, as usual, his knowledge dwarfed mine. An especially fond memory I have is of the afternoon Tom and I took his father to the [Planes of Fame Air Museum](#) in Chino, California, where we inspected P-51 Mustangs and Grumman TBF Avengers before clambering through the fuselage of a Boeing B-17. One of Tom's final blog entries at [Orthosphere](#) reviews the history of the Italian Air Force in World War II, which had the distinction of having designed and flown the fastest and most agile military biplane, the Fiat CR42. At first glance, it seems odd that a deep-dyed humanist and aesthete like Tom would be thrilled by flying machines. But he believed that the invention of powered flight was a miracle, born of a marriage between the unique human capacities of imagination and technology, and therefore worthy of awe. He told me once that while hiking alone in the mountains of eastern California, he waved at a passing fighter jet, which dipped its wings in reply. Like a wink from an angel, that pilot's gesture acknowledged, he said, both Tom's individual significance and the skyward gaze of humanity's collective quest for transcendence.

Tom's middle name was Felix—Latin for “happy.” And though he wrote through the last dozen or so years of his life many articles deeply critical of the direction in which higher education was tending (see, for example, [this](#), [this](#), and [this](#)), Tom never lost his sense of humor, and never spiraled into cynicism. Tom was a happy warrior, as well as a gentle and generous friend. That generosity expressed itself in many ways, not least in the voluminous writings that hint at the range and depth of his capacious mind. Like Tom, those writings are fearless, and represent the right way to engage with contemporary intellectual trends that airily dismiss logic, reason, and the hard-won insights into the nature of things that are preserved by the artistic, literary, and philosophical achievements Tom Bertonneau cherished.

Rest in peace, my dear friend. Yours was a life well-lived in the warmth of family and friendship, and you fought valiantly against academic flim-flammery, cant, and the ways in which the current educational establishment is deepening “civilizational twilight.” Let us take from your example increased courage and devotion to preserving and sharing humanity's magnificent accomplishments.