

## ON MANNERISM



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I      *Ersatz Thought*

At some point in mid-adolescence, it is suddenly chic to be intelligent. Until then, usually, it hasn't been. But at about sixteen, the adolescent, torn between anxiety for the future and immediate satisfaction, compromises on anxiety for the immediate future. Which is to say, college. It may not be chic to stay in college but it is poignant to be rejected. And so the atrophied adolescent brain is urgently spotlighted, and the manner, if not the substance, of intelligence either sought or simulated.

When I was growing up, the word we used was "smart." It was used to suggest social retardation; it was somehow the opposite of sexy. And then, suddenly, it was everything desirable. I was unusually alert to such vicissitudes because these judgments shaped my non-existent social life. In any case, I watched my peers begin to look at me (and others like me) more closely: it is a problem, when one has avoided intellectual matters, to somehow apprehend them quickly. I passed for intelligent not because my thinking was actually assessed but because my appearance was assessed. For the adolescent, intelligence, like everything else, was a matter of style; it was communicated in two ways, through affect and focus. A certain bearing, a certain gloomy inwardness, would do. But principally, the issue was focus: it was no good to be intelligent about the wrong (for example, the too pragmatic) matters; one had to be intelligent about intelligent matters, which is to say, one had to be visibly preoccupied with subjects already dignified; ideally, one was having thoughts already thought (so that they had made it to the trot, the answer book).

It is interesting, in a grim way, to see how brilliantly these behaviors survive into later life, how cleverly they adapt. A whole literature is being fashioned under our eyes, rather along these same lines.

Central to this art is appearance: less crucial to think than to appear to think, to be beheld thinking. Important, crucial, to be beheld. Crucial, therefore, to be actively thinking (or appearing to think) uninterruptedly, to behave, in regard to one's thought, like the actress who never leaves her house without full makeup. And thought itself is defined here along

deeply conservative lines despite contradictory assertion. One has to be thinking about the great subjects of the time, which is to say the subjects whose merit and distinction and propriety are no longer open to doubt. One can appear (one is expected to appear) to be querying, to be turning around and examining the idea, but this little dance is a dance of appeasement, designed to silence any feeling that one's thinking is pat. The querying and dancing are meticulously ritualized, practiced in a defined stylistic field. To be outside that field, to turn the gaze from the determined philosophic toward, say, the comic is to be outside the essential category: the artist who thinks. This means that certain brilliantly intellectual writers are not treated as intellectual writers because they don't observe the correct forms: their poetry may be deeply learned and sophisticated, informed by quite radical rethinking of philosophic issues, but if the style of the poems is too lively, too grammatically clear, if it is not, on the surface, difficult, it does not conform to established definitions of intellectual daring.

Let me define the stipulations of such daring, in the present moment.

But first, a historical fragment, a digression: early in the century, Pound, poet of the unsurpassable ear, declared war on the iamb. What followed, and indeed surrounded this act, was a period of enormous and profound linguistic discovery, not all of it directly related to Pound's imperative, but all of it in some manner a shucking of constraints, all confident authority and easy bravura, as though the past were being dared to stop this inspired future. And certain of the tastes of the present moment can be traced to what we now call the Moderns, with that ominous upper case, principally our bias toward the incomplete, a taste that seems to treat the grammatical sentence as Pound treated the iamb: a soporific, a constriction, dangerously automatic and therefore unexamined.

Let me dispose of the analogy, introduced to suggest the manner in which the present moment (so fastidiously studying itself being itself) glorifies its preferences. The grammatical sentence is not the iamb. The latter, as a fixed rhythmic unit, is not elastic: one iamb more closely resembles another iamb than does one sentence resemble all other sentences. Iambic pentameter can be hummed (poets often hear rhythmic structures before they hear words); a stanza of sentences can't be, or can't be before it exists. The sentence deploys emphasis to create readings complementary to, or at variance with, the logical. It works magically, electrically, with principles of lineation; its reaches, in combination with the ways in which and points at which the line breaks, create profound dramas: all by itself, the sentence is the bible and talmudic commentary. If the sentence is to be forfeited, incompleteness must be able to match, augment, its

resources, must infuse the poem (or fiction) with equivalent depth or variety. And the same demand must be answered by related tactics: non-sequitur, for example

The gesture, the protest aren't in themselves dangerous. Merely: their fertility has been miscalculated.

Contemporary poetry affords two main types of incomplete sentences: the aborted whole and the sentence with gaps. In each case, the non-existent, the unspoken, becomes a focus; ideally, a whirling concentration of questions. A kind of scale (in the realm of intention) is suggested: language has faltered (language, which has done so well for so many centuries), overwhelmed by the poet's urgencies or by the magnitude of the subject or by the impossible and unprecedented complexity of the present moment. What's curious is how quickly this gesture turns rote, how little (apparently) there is to explore here. Certainly, on the level of grammar the strategies of incompleteness seem to be limited: repetition, accumulation, invocation of the void through ellipsis, dash, etc. The problem is that though the void is great the effect of its being invoked is narrow. So the ambience of incompleteness becomes (after the first rush) peculiarly static. The charged moment is always charged in the same way: hovering, tentative, incipient. For variety, the poet must depend exclusively on duration. The uniquely extended dense fragments to which this aesthetic tends begin to seem like swimmers competing to see how long they can stay under the water without breathing: unlike, say, high diving, this makes dull watching.

A more just comparison might be the *bel canto* line. More just and, philosophically, more accurate: how long can one linger in, elaborate, the moment, as though the length of the sojourn had direct relation to the depth of the exploration. Which is not, in fact, true. Great *bel canto* comments, through embellishment and elaboration, on musical structure; seductive and powerful poetry has been written along the lines I'm describing. But so has a quite terrifying rush of very bad, and very self-congratulatory, poetry. Too often the gesture becomes, like the swimmers underwater, a breathing trick; the idea behind it never develops. Its failure to do so suggests the extent to which such gestures are willed or constructed, despite the regularity with which this art suggests a psychological, as well as epistemological, imperative.

The dilemma can be put another way. The sentence suggests variety through its concreteness, its presentness, through meaning (or being). It initiates and organizes fields of associations which (in the manner of the void) may continue to circulate indefinitely, notwithstanding the sentence's definite (and presumably inert) closure. In the fragment, on the

other hand, variety is suggested through non-being, through unspecified (because not articulate) meaning, or through deliberate non-meaning. The paradox is that the named generates far more complex and powerful associations than does the unnamed.

The unfinished alludes to the infinite which it refuses to abridge or describe. It can hardly afford to do either. The infinite no longer answers to that term if it acquires limits or characteristics. The absence of both, the sense of the perpetually becoming, is conceived as a source of energy, also a fit subject for intellectual speculation. The problem is that there is nothing to say once the subject has been raised. Variety rests in the means by which the infinite (or the void, the vacuum) is summoned and the intensity with which its presence is recognized. The void itself, the tremulous incipience of the ellipsis notwithstanding, has a strangely burgher-like stolidity.

*Non sequitur* seems to me a more complicated maneuver. Or, more precisely, more various. Whereas the abyss of the unwritten, however conceptually alluring, seems oddly shallow, and ultimately simplifying, reductive, *non sequitur* in many of its forms complicates. It is lively, volatile, skirmishing, suggesting (at its best) simultaneity or multiplicity, loosing a flurry of questions. It is a system of tangents, not the open cornucopia of the *ah*. In its variousness, it seems earthly, whereas the lacuna is recalcitrantly soulful, alternating predictably between the intended-profound and the intended-elevated.

These unlike strategies do, sometimes, coexist (though not with marked frequency, as far as I can tell). More likely, they reflect differing temperaments, and their common basis in, dislike for, or discontent with completion may be misleading.

*Non sequitur* has, I think, two primary (and quite different) uses. The first, to which I will return, is true non-relation; the second, more dramatic or psychological use, makes of *non sequitur* a code, and of the poem a diagram of systematic evasion. The mind skids from one thing to the next, anecdote to epiphany, with no visible or logical thread connecting its movement. The task of the reader, in poems of this sort, resembles the task of the psychoanalyst: listen closely enough to narrate the gaps, the unsaid, the center around which the said whirls, from and to which it departs and returns. The said, in this usage, is a shield; as the poem develops, the reader begins to piece together the deleted material: to the degree that the evasions and digressions compel in their resourcefulness (to the degree that the mind generating them interests us) the unsaid intensifies and quivers. And—the essential point—becomes increasingly specific. As in a murder inquiry: more and more possible subjects are ruled out. In this movement

from the general to the implied specific, dramatic *non sequitur* differs markedly from the void and its invocations. The difficulty is duration: how long can we pay attention to non sequitur, attention focused enough to break the code? That there needs to be duration is plain: pattern is at the heart of the tactic and pattern isn't established in two lines.

Implicit in this poetry is the role of the other, the concept (however intentionally distorted) of dialogue, or at least response. The mind of the speaker is far too purposeful to seem playful or darting (in the manner of Frank O'Hara); rather it ricochets, glancing off particulars, touching on them and veering wildly away, alternating between excitement (frenzy) and anxiety (or sense of peril). The poems of ten move as though their speakers were being pursued. As indeed they are, with the reader playing the role of the pursuer. The intensity of this sort of art arises from the conflicted desires it manifests: the speaker here wants not to be caught; at the same time, wants to be stopped. Or, to put another way, wishes simultaneously to flee and to be apprehended (in both senses).

Always another is present or implicated: a force, a danger; sometimes too, a hope of rescue.

Not all *non sequitur* is this sort of diagram. To treat a poem of calculated non-relation as though it were a code is to sentimentalize it. Sentimentalize because, in poems of this second type, the only binding rationale one can devise is so vague, so inclusive, so elastic as to be banal. That this is the case intends to direct reading away from such psychological probing (since it inevitably makes the poem more superficial, not deeper). *Non sequitur* is not, in these poems, burning revelation begging to be understood. Nor is it a private system of logic.

What, then, is it? Deep objection to the templates, the pattern making impulses, the glib correspondences. I think *non sequitur*, in this use, has two major sources: delight in mobility and profound intellectual contempt for easy emotion (one might speculate that, in this branch of the aesthetic, emotion is by definition easy). I spoke earlier of O'Hara: his poems seem to me to belong to that group founded on delight. The poems have the liveliness of good talk; they are animated by the wish to be diverted, amused; their abundance reflects O'Hara's gift for and readiness in finding such pleasure in the world, a pleasure imitated for, offered to, the reader. This isn't simply preference of the temporal over the eternal, the momentary and fleeting over the fixed. This is, rather, an art in which the eternal has ceased to exist except as an analog for human memory. In its place we have joy: a mind impressionable, malicious, curious, nervously and eagerly taking in unrelated bits of data. Whereas poems of psychological preoccupation assimilate (seeking in data

resemblance or weight), O'Hara simply notes; he records not to infer relation but to feed on variety, the genial spaciousness of formlessness. Ideally a poem of this type is a replica of life, but a modest replica: it makes life (of the quotidian variety) infinitely entertaining, sweetly or sadly pointless and infinitely rich (notwithstanding little patches of boredom). Because life is never called upon (for the sake of art) to make some sort of point, the reader is afforded a world utterly free of earnest moralizing, free of the elephantine heroic. And in O'Hara's work, at least, bravado and carelessness for grandeur come to seem a kind of philosophic statement, an effortless (apparently) preference for the material and present over the non-material divine (which is inevitably also the speculative). As in the talk which, to me, such art resembles and prizes, this poetry is never bland, never general, always deeply idiosyncratic: in its essence, therefore, not a leaden policy concerning the irreplaceable present moment but rather the present moment itself, unadorned, and not idealized out of its being.

But most contemporary practice seems to me to depart from this sort of pleasure, to propose alternatives for *non sequitur* that are neither code nor conversation; these alternatives are not in themselves necessarily problematic, but their inherent opacities and elusiveness accommodate intellectual fraud. A model for the difference might be the difference between O'Hara and Ashbery, a shifting of interest from the moment to the idea of the moment, from speech to abstraction of speech, from the dinner table to the philosopher's study (hence, from the companionable to the absorbed solitary), from the palpable to the disembodied. It can be pulled off, this gesture; its dangers, however, resemble those of the abyss. Like the abyss, it has a tendency to flatter the reader, who projects himself, by invitation, into the unintelligible, and reads in what he chooses.

The danger, I think, begins in an extension, apparently logical. What is, in O'Hara, the evanescent concreteness of present time mutates into something seemingly larger: the poet comes first to be included in that evanescence and then, easily, to be the center of it.

As the aesthetic has developed, philosophical profundity (or what stands on the page as proof of it) is that which is most removed from the psychological, that realm in which the plight of self, of individual human consciousness, is most explicit. Fueling this move away from the psychological is an inescapable awareness, the awareness that drives much of our art, and has for some time: the self is limited, a construct, not a fate. But it does not follow that to excise the self is to annex limitlessness. In its most common manifestations (those most remote from the poles represented by Eliot and O'Hara) *non sequitur* resembles the strategies of grammatical omission in its prizing of the non-existent (in this case, tone

or point of view), its complacent notion that, if the highest art is without agenda, the shortest route to it is the eradication of sustained individuality, that hot-bed of agenda, as it might be revealed through language-as-voice, language saturated in self.

Mind, in these poems, systematically refuses to impose or infer meaning. An admirable and promising intention with a curious result: the action of refusing meaning (i.e., the substance or body of the poem) is unvaried, regardless of particulars.

It is eerie to watch this art develop; to see, on one hand, its immense security as to its scale and groundbreaking importance, and, on the other, the dazzling ease of its fabrication, once the principal tropes are in place. And to see the rigorously incoherent claim for itself the stature of thought.

We have made of the infinite a topic. But there isn't, it turns out, much to say about it. Which leaves only the style of the saying. A fact that makes the strategies under discussion, these attempts to enlarge the poem's formal and ideological scope, oddly poignant: style of saying hardly leaves behind the self.

Certainly the art of incompleteness makes that self startlingly present. The silenced abandon of the gasp or dash, the dramatized insufficiency of self, of language, the premonition of or visitation by immanence: in these homages to the void, the void's majesty is reflected in the resourcefulness and intensity with which the poet is overwhelmed.

The aspect of infinity meant to be invoked is grandeur. Whereas in advanced *non sequitur*, infinity is enacted as fatigue: though form is not apparent, and will never become apparent, energy does not cease. Nor does anything appear to generate it: not, certainly, the trajectories of search that inform earlier shape-riddled verse, not even any atmosphere of the unappeasable. *Non sequitur*, in this use, is not driven; it is the idleness of the alert brain, repose not among its options. The problem to the reader is that the experience of reading a stanza is not different from the experience of reading forty stanzas. With the result that, endless activity notwithstanding, our impression is stasis (a reaction not to energy but to repetitiousness).

What the recreated void ignores or disdains is the obvious literalness of the page, its palpability, its four sides. (Technology, I suppose, may eliminate this problem, but the disposition to ignore the obvious seems likely, then, to manifest itself in some other way: what is at issue is the prevailing of will over nature.) Thought, at the moment, rails against limits (which, in very concrete ways, it simultaneously overlooks). Limits seem somehow dull, politically aligned with fetters and chains, spiritually aligned with a too terrestrial imagination. The poet who allies himself

with the abyss intends to acquire its mystery and scope. What this loses for poetry, potentially, is genuine earthly ignorance and its attendant craving to be relieved of ignorance, salient properties of the human mind; this ignorance and this craving, when conjoined to do their utmost with the world as presented, can more persuasively allude to the void, the that-which-is-missing, and more profoundly represent the drama of human insufficiency than can most stylistic gestures.

As for endlessness versus closure: read Milton's sonnet on his blindness, with its cycle of instigating actions. The poem, you will see, never ends, only begins again: "When I consider..." For proof, set it in the past, changing the verbs. Then, indeed, it ends. And yet it is, as Milton wrote it, in its turning and turning, a closed form.

I came to this subject because I am, myself, drawn to the unfinished, to sentences that falter. I dislike poems that feel too complete, the seal too tight; I dislike being herded into certainty. And I have sought and admired (and tried to write) poems in which questions outnumber answers.

But this question remains: how much looseness, or omission, or non-relation, is exciting? And when do these devices become problematic or, worse, mannered? My preference for the not-perfectly-coherent makes it particularly troubling to observe the degree to which lacunae and the improbable transitions of *non sequitur* have come to seem less thrilling than they used to seem. And I am somewhat more alert to the fact that, in practice, one tends to infuse these gaps with coloration and intensity not actually present. Nor does it satisfy me to imagine a reader equally enthusiastic in his projections, because that diffuseness of response is at odds with what I want of art: helplessness, the sense of the poem as overwhelming directive.

And yet, and yet. The fervent approbation that continues to greet poems of the sort described here reflects a sense, building in both poets and serious readers, that form is in danger of atrophy or stagnation. I mean here not simply the closed, certain forms of sonnet and sestina, but form in the largest sense, as a shape made by perception: shape conferred, sometimes, but always, ultimately, shape that makes thought visible or comprehensible. Our too-eager welcoming of the facile experimental, the derivative experimental (if that is not an oxymoron), suggests that a gulf has been widening between the world as it has been perceived in poems (mysteriously ready to yield insight) and the world as we live it. As feelings about being change, whether that change is willed or not, the stately and noble sounds of concluded perception, all the well-made boxes, seem in their solidity weirdly nostalgic. If Ashbery appears to be for so many readers the poet of the time, it may be because he is (as O'Hara wasn't



particularly) alert to, absorbed by, the problems raised in this discrepancy, and because (unlike Eliot, who aspired to be annexed by the sublime) he is willing to disappear, to dissolve in the void—or, more accurately, to exist in particles, piecemeal: not, “voice” as we know it, but strands of consciousness woven through the densely incomprehensible.

As a nation, we identify ourselves with, pride ourselves on, discovery. And so are ready, always, to anticipate, to make assumptions: to experience setting out as arrival, to mistake ceremonious announcement of entrapment for escape from entrapment, to conflate the reiteration of dilemma with creation of a new thing.

I prize (as writers are prone to prizing) instinct, guesswork, nerve. But it may be that certain forms and choices need to be reviewed more closely than others, particularly those forms in which theory and intention displace scrutiny. I think we should question these choices a bit more, in the cold dawn.

## 2 *American Narcissism*

That the story of Narcissus has proposed itself as focus of contemporary meditation owes something to its concerns and something to its nature: like much contemporary fiction, it is all psychology, no narrative. Impossible to film. As a static image, it encourages projections of the kind narrative limits or interrupts. As an image concerned with the self's engagement with the self, it falls quite naturally in line with one of our century's engrossing discoveries, psychoanalysis. Further, it adopts and extends Romanticism's attentiveness to the soul, or the inward.

The soul, here, is entirely hostage to the body. In Ovid's telling, the beautiful cold boy whom love never moves, sees in the pond what others see, the depth of the water compensating for the superficiality of the reflection. His punishment is to suffer what has been suffered in his name: he also falls in love, his love as conscious and as doomed as Echo's. He knows what he's looking at: “Alas! I am myself the boy I see. I know it... I am on fire with love for my own self.” He endures, until grief claims him, the knowledge of his passion's impossibility.

Still, this is for Narcissus the discovery of love, of feeling. Yet within the strict parabolic shape of the story, an end, a constriction as well as a beginning. Echo, spurned, is deprived of her body; Narcissus loses his life. Although the punishment devised by Nemesis initiates lucid apprehension, it is the sense of constriction, the dead-endness of the myth, I have in mind in my use of terminology derived from the tale. That, not the birth of knowledge. Narcissism, in what follows, means to suggest

transfixed infatuation, that overwhelmed awe that admits no secondary response.

The allure of the self, in this image, is fortified by the self's perpetual elusiveness: "Only a little water keeps us apart; my love... desires to be reached..." When Narcissus bends forward toward his image, the image manifests corresponding ardor. And the meticulousness of the correspondence illuminates the impossibility of the hunger: the self cannot be the object of its own exclusive desire. Narcissus never leaves the pool; he pines away "consumed by hidden fire."

Romanticism began as a corrective to a more abstract, potentially sterile practice. Its insistence on the personal was, for the most part, eager, open, innocent. It made the soul an object of proper study. Study, but not, interestingly, narcissistic homage. The Romantic poet tended to seek release from limitation: through nature, through love, through timeless art. And the Romantic imagination, projected onto the myth of Narcissus, more naturally mirrors Echo, the pursuer—than Narcissus himself. The static, transfixed quality seems utterly lacking.

That quality has emerged in our century, a curious hybrid of Romanticism and psychiatry, a mutation cooler, with notable exceptions, than either Keats or Freud. Every period has its manners, its signatures, and, by extension, its limitations and blindness. And it is particularly difficult, from the inside, to recognize such characteristics: omnipresence makes them invisible. If they are noticed at all, they are taken as marks of progress; the limitations we have been trained to see as limitations are no longer evident.

Contemporary literature is, to a marked degree, a literature of the self examining its responses. Focus varies; likewise (obviously) talent. The focus can be political (as in Forché's best work), or moral/psychological, as memorably practiced by Bidart and McMichael. Or it can be aesthetic, as in the work of Strand. These categories are not pure: they are introduced to sketch in a territory. And similar examples exist in prose, beginning with James's elaborate scrutinies. The self, this sense, was the nineteenth century's discovery, an object, for a time, of rich curiosity, its structure, its responses, endlessly absorbing. And as long as it was watched in this spirit of curiosity and openness, it functioned as an other; the art arising from such openness is an art of inquiry, not conclusion, dynamic rather than static.

Narcissistic practice, no matter what ruse it appropriates, no matter what ostensible subject, is static, in that its position I the self is fixed: it expects, moreover, that the world will enter into its obsession. A first, an easy assumption would be that such practice derives, in the United States

certainly, from Whitman's exhibitionism and bravura.

I think otherwise. Whitman's gesture, the exemplary self, differs profoundly from the insular, superior self posited by Narcissus. Like a child playing "Simon Says", Whitman demands to be followed. Or replicated, a brilliant compensation (possibly) for procreative limitation. Underlying narcissism is a tacit hierarchy: the only visible other is the self. Whereas the sweep of Whitman's categories and generalizations (like the casting call of an epic director: seven beautiful men, four pregnant women), while hardly convincing as portraiture, in its democratic stubbornness dissolves hierarchy. The marvel of Whitman is his inspired conviction regarding the elasticity of the form-his sense of what a line could be, what a poem could be. The lines themselves, their very shapes and sounds, their intent to include (think how they resist enjambment) their copiousness, are at odds with narcissism's restricted gaze. Narcissus's plight arises from his disdain for others, for those whose love he neither returned nor honored. His fate is punishment, not accident: Nemesis's deft response. And whether or not Whitman moves us, it is hard to make a case for such disdain: he never contrasts his own responses to the responses of others; in a fundamental sense, he never cultivates the reader's addictions to his interventions. What he celebrates in himself is what is average, common (and in all likelihood he was amazed at such characteristics, as the eccentric is always amazed to discover himself like others in some respect, or as the hypochondriac marvels at his body's simulation of normal healthy response).

Nor do the two qualities that correspond, in our art, to Narcissus's beauty have any place in Whitman's work. Contemporary art prizes the fastidious aesthetic response; it also places high value on the exposure of the secret. And in the latter sense it has, I believe, an antecedent or stimulus not in Whitman but in Dickinson, though she is, herself, never guilty of narcissism's superficiality and self-aggrandizement. Her periodic hermetic coyness is like a spinster's sad stab at grooming: an attempt to attract love. But Dickinson introduces a type of veiled disclosure that will found whole schools of poetry, disclosure so charged, so encoded, so intent on limited selective revelation, as to privilege the reader. Dickinson isn't narcissistic because the other postulated by the poems cannot, in its function, become an aspect of the self, though this is exactly, I believe, what happens later.

It is important, here, to distinguish between narcissism and exhibitionism. When narcissistic reverie converts to public form (as in literature), something like exhibitionism results. Like, but not an exact copy of. Literary narcissism, in its exclusive ardor, often suggests obliviousness: it sees no particular difference between private reverie and public display, so

devoid of independent reality is the world. The world, it is assumed, will duplicate the narcissist's fascination with himself, since what else could possibly be of equal interest? In the sense of this opacity, narcissism is inviolable. Whereas exhibitionism solicits interest, narcissism presumes it. (In this soliciting of interest, the exhibitionist is capable of being wounded, which is to say, changed.)

If Dickinson does not, for all her secrecies, take secret pleasure in the production of her intensities, if her need for confidence, her unvarying need to be heard, make it impossible for her to preempt the role of the other, the obvious questions remain as to the origins of these habits, the model for the poetry that prizes its own perception. Narcissism, as a literary gesture, cannot be utterly new. But it does seem that the unmemorable work of other periods was bad in other ways: wooden, sententious, sentimental. The eye was not, I think, quite so explicitly trained on the self. This is not to say the cure for narcissism is the outward gaze. First, it loses for poetry terrain. Second, social agenda, concerns outside the specific self, are not in themselves protection: one of the more appalling forms of narcissism is the appropriation or annexing of a real other (as opposed to preempting the role of the hypothetical other or confidante). Whole nations, whole torn civilizations turn out to be waiting to be given voice: what occurs, in such work, isn't the poet seeing the world but rather the poet projecting himself outward so that he returns to us on the page, in costume and in multiple.

If it is difficult to say when exactly the habits that evolve into narcissism began, it is surprisingly easy to say when they begin to seem rife. By the mid-Seventies, poets looking inward have begun, simultaneously, to watch themselves looking inward; the poet splits, regularly, into two figures (though not, as in true detachment, two perspectives); the dominant pronoun, the pronoun guaranteed to confer stylish distance, is no longer the intimate, collusive first person of, say, Eliot, or the tightrope-walking first person of Plath; the dominant pronoun is "you" the elegant everyman of the French "on" perhaps, but refocused. Mark Strand made this move his signature (though he had, from the beginning, defenses against what came to be its dangers). What begins to characterize American poetry around this period is a voyeuristic relation to the self. If our present taste for the divulging of the carefully guarded secret can be traced to Dickinson, our equally common preoccupation with the perceptive self, our taste for the pronoun that encourages or supports such preoccupation, is rooted in other literatures, in Rilke's tendency to elegize the present, for example, to infuse the moment with all the characteristics of remote time. And the figure of the speaker, viewed through this lens, separates from the voice of the

poet. Perhaps Rilke is ill-served by his translations; nevertheless, most of the American poets profoundly influenced by his art read him in translation. And the influence does not vary, though the translations do.

Rilke's impact, which shows no sign of abating, owes in part to the confluence, in his work, of what would be major aesthetic preoccupations. With the possible exception of religious poetry, which treats the "I" as an abyss, a hunger, by turns patient and insatiable, but always waiting, always dependent, Rilke's was the first significant body of work to elaborate an aesthetic that would come to be called female. In place of the will or appetite imposing itself on the world, or (as in Keats) the soul seeking, Rilke postulated a void, an absence into which the world flooded. The self was entirely reactive, so intensely so as to be exhausted by what, to a less scrupulous sensibility, would hardly be noticed. Out of such helpless receptivity, such contempt for the initiating will, he carved a kind of poem, a kind of *pacing* utterly unique—a pacing that simulates, in its sudden stops and starts, the irregular rhythms of outside stimuli, a tree, a sunset, a human face, washing against, assaulting the soul. These poems seemed the opposite of sonnets even when they were sonnets, in that they ended open, their vastness the vastness of limitless vacancy. And yet, interestingly, the human world (insofar as it is represented as being in conflict with the self, or other than the self) is largely absent. For the world, we have memories, ghosts, signs, in which the poet sees a past or imminent self. The selflessness, the receptivity, which are, formally, the inventions of this art, are, if one reads closely, slightly tainted by an overriding impression of the autocratic or controlling. The poet lets in what allows his projections, or cannot impede them, but he calls this *other*.

No matter whose English version I read, I cannot rid myself of the impression, in "Requiem", that this is neither a meditation on a specific human life nor a poem of mourning: I keep thinking it suits Rilke exactly that Paula Becker died; dead she is his creature, a mirror of, or adjunct of, the self. (By way of comparison, think of W. C. Williams' English grandmother, all vigorous distinctness, a being plainly not the poet nor, for that matter, implicit in the reader.) Rilke doesn't mean to be looking outward in this way. The present, with its huge cast of living creatures, was of limited use to his art. His subject was longing, his natural tone lament: he required those separations that precede or guarantee longing. And part of his genius was his perception of the way we transform what is at hand into something sufficiently remote, immaterial, to be recreated as the focus of longing. That the world is transient suffices; the present, treated in this manner, immediately becomes the past and the living other is, to a striking degree, erased in being memorialized.

When the poet says, in Stephen Mitchell's translation, "if you are still here with me", I cannot help but feel that Paula Becker is far more eagerly admitted into the poet's soul dead than she would have been alive: alive she was volatile, unreliable, separate in her will. Nor am I persuaded by "in this one man I accuse: all men", by the ready identification of the poet with the woman now conveniently absent. It is too easy to identify with what cannot, in behavior, repudiate identification. And when Rilke, in the famous lines, urges, "we need in love to practice only this:/letting each other go. For holding on/comes easily; we do not need to learn it", I cannot help but believe that, for Rilke, letting go was in fact remarkably easy, that holding on, whatever might force engagement with an unmanageable other, was alien. Rilke tends to reserve his most passionate admiration for two states: death and childhood, in each case a mirror, an icon of purity, a blankness onto which the self can be projected. To the extent that self is formed in opposition to the world, the self disappears. The seduction of this poetry is in part that nothing is not the self. If Rilke's aim is to divest himself of the earthly, the temporal, the aim of this desire is not, as in Eliot, union with a higher other (Eliot craves the immutable but there is in his work none of Rilke's hungering after either death or childish innocence): the aim, in Rilke, seems to be reunion with a deeper self, and Rilke's astonishing images (which survive in English, in all translations I have ever read) and his hypnotic music both offer metaphors for this reunion. Great art. But art in which the seeds of far more superficial reunions are visible. For me, Rilke is at his greatest in short forms that contain his rhapsodic yearnings; the longer poems, like "Requiem", always seem oddly masturbatory, the poet constantly fanning himself into exaltations and excitements.

Rilke's other major insight was the extent to which the present could be treated as a subject for elegy. The future had begun to disappear, and would continue—terrifyingly—to do so. The old postulates and images, both heaven and the ongoing physical earth, were giving way: erosion made a natural metaphor. Rilke saw, among other things, the ways in which erosion touched even the present, in that all figures for continuity and trajectory began to seem false. Looked at in the absence of a future, the present began to unravel, as though such dissolution were in fact a form of contagion. Rilke's vocation for mourning (as a tonal gesture rather than as immediate human response) instinctively maps out a spiritual terrain never before visible or audible, never before necessary. He made an art which placed the self, actually or emblematically, at the center of lost time (the moment, the instant, just past); once the self is convincingly lost—as, by definition, it is in a present so elegized—it becomes the beloved. Airbrushed, a creation of the poet's will.

Are there, objectively (if such a term is possible), benign and dangerous influences? If there are, I believe that good influences, or wholesome influences, generate variety and energy. Rilke's genius, echoing in other minds, degenerates rapidly into mannerism, rue like Spanish moss hung over the landscape. His genius was tone: in the absence of what must be (since it survives in translation) lexical and tonal brilliance (matched, curiously, in English most closely by Dickinson), his luminous meditations become solipsistic hymns of preening disappointment. Whereas the poetry stimulated by Williams retains, even when conspicuously lesser, interest and substance.

We cannot choose our influences: these are rooted in those responses we cannot (and would not wish to) control. But we can recognize the grip of unproductive influence as we recognize dangerous seductions. And we can study those strategies that seem to discourage entrapment, specifically (in regard to narcissism) detachment, and humor.

It isn't difficult to conceive of modesty as a check on narcissism. The poet represents his concerns as local, domestic, filled with the noises and distractions of actual life. The key is that these concerns are not immediately transformed into metaphors large spiritual (or political) matter. Nor are they pretexts for philosophical meditation. When the occasion is a ruse or pretext, we know it instantly: we feel, instantly, the poet's true agenda. The ostensible occasion is, therefore, doubly slighted, subordinated to what is held to be of larger import. Modesty is not the dutiful mention of the daily. If transformations of its plainspoken materials occur, they occur so subtly, so impermanently, we cannot be sure what has transpired. And, as a rule, they don't occur at the poem's end. The problem with true modesty is that it may remain forever in the realm of anecdote. If Jane Kenyon's lesser poems suffer in this way, the body of her work provides rare examples of something else: steady interaction with the literal seems, to Kenyon, the source of insight. But insight does not permanently transfigure earth. The earth, and the poet, stay stubbornly accurate, still in the process of being formed. The speaker isn't looking for reflection, but for wisdom, which reposes in the outward. Because the world is never transformed, and because it consistently prompts vision, we are persuaded of both reality and its necessity.

Kenyon's passivity may derive from Rilke; her permeability, which is more genuine, does not. Rilke claims for himself the attributes of non-being, space flooded by impressions (hence the identification with the female). But in fact he monitors quite assiduously what floods in. Kenyon is less dramatic, not the site of a flood. Her world is small, anyone's world: a dog, a garden. Friends coming and going, neighbors. And her husband,

the events of a life. Nor do the poems ever culminate in that tiresome *Now I see* of transfigured experience. If the dog and the garden are not changed permanently by perception, to what end, for what reason, are they watched so carefully? They are watched, I think, because for Kenyon they are all potentially teachers. Her modesty is the modesty of the good student, who sees how shortsighted it would be to cut herself off from resources. But there is nothing here of the cloying sycophant. In this system. Everything teaches, but not everyone is capable of learning.

Modesty checks narcissism by deflecting attention from the self. It has a native suspicion of the apocalyptic, a distaste for both the podium and the stage, all of which dispose it (tonally and literally) to the matter-of-fact. Detachment and humor operate in another way: though different in their advantages and effects, each works because each implicitly posits alternative, or conflicting, views.

Detachment splits the speaker from the self that acts in the world. Nor is self simply multiplied; the separation prompts debate. The acting self here is Everyman in the Darwinian sense: perverse, intent on domination or control. Or, alternatively, ruled by atavistic need. Detachment, by divorcing this self from the meditative speaker, diminishes the identification on which narcissism depends. That odd person doing those incomprehensible things is hardly the lucid person who speaks. I am thinking of C. K. Williams' dazzling anatomies of jealousy. They are utterly remote from narcissism's stupor not simply because they refuse self-love but because they refuse all fixed attitudes toward the self (systematic self-hatred is a familiar pole of narcissistic absorption). In Williams' art, truth and beauty are displaced by a hunger to contain as many alternatives as possible. Opposites are not reconciled; the point is to entertain them simultaneously and, in so doing, comprehend increasingly complex realities. And the poems have more other hands than a Hindu god. (The static has no place in Williams.) It may be possible to say that for Williams it is not enough to be possessed—one must also be interested. Narcissus at the pond saw self-evident and sufficient fact: an image that stopped (or started) even *his* undeveloped heart. When tears blurred the image, he felt the terror of loss. The static has no place in Williams, nor does detachment permit narcissistic bonding. The self is too wily, too contradictory, too mobile, to produce stable reflection.

Curiously, these contemporary methods of retaining focus on the self, or on the soul, while protecting against the dead—endedness of narcissism, often occur in pairs or trios—modesty does not obviate humor, nor does detachment. Mark Strand's ironies, evident from the first, seem a species of detachment, but what has reliably checked his early taste for the



static has been his developing humor. Meanwhile, imitations of his early work have swelled the archives of the narcissistic, imitations that manage to duplicate (to some extent) the wry, languid poses while entirely missing the poems' intellectual subtlety. Strand seemed, on the surface, a breeze to copy: he has always played with poses (taunting the reader faintly), always sounded, as he chose, the limpid and stately chords of rue. But as his work has evolved, the humor incipient in the early poems (which imitation, in its zeal to simulate manner, largely overlooked) has developed into a wildly supple instrument. Who would have thought "wild" in connection with Strand? But the sections of *Dark Harbor* turn on a dime, the ravishing-ecstatic displaced by the laugh-out-loud funny. Strand's malicious tenderness is apparent in the early poetry, but, so too are other dispositions. This is not to say he has turned himself into a comedian. But the development of what is flexible in his work, as opposed to the reiterating of the stationary beautiful, has, allowed him a range the early poems didn't predict. He was, in the beginning, the quintessential poet of Rilkean lost time: always, tonally, his work suggested the regret of late middle age. In actual middle age, he has discovered a range of notes memorably wider.

Like detachment, humor divides perception. But detachment is entirely preoccupied with the self, bent on understanding the self: it recognizes that the outside world is perceived through a lens; its aim is to understand, as fully as possible, the manner in which a specific lens distorts; it wishes, likewise, to see the ways in which such distortion has impact on the world. The temperament of humor seems to me less specifically inquiring, more social (or worldly) than scientific. The split it presumes is the division between the self that feels and the world that interprets: it recognizes, in all transactions, the gap between individual sensation and appearance; it sees, for example, that its genuine suffering may look, from the outside, trivial. In its ability to postulate an outside, a reality larger than though not eclipsing the self, it generates vast tonal possibilities and, ideally, sophistication of insight. Its danger lies in its tendency to treat the no-longer pivotal self as a static, marginal construct: it can, in heavy hands, by deliberately impoverishing the self, create worlds as stationary as Rilke's. The great humorists never fail to see, and sympathize with, the soul's longings and confusions: for humor to work as a great instrument, the earnest soul must adequately balance the easier-to-imitate appearance of its foolishness.

Narcissus into the water is paralyzed by passion and regret; like Rilke, he loves and mourns simultaneously. He is trying to love a temporal image as one would love an eternal image. Because he cannot move, he explores fairly quickly all the ramifications of his situation; he reaches the end of insight. Which has never stopped writers from writing.

Nor, in a way, should it. Henry James was among the first to note, and dramatize, the relation between American independence and American narrowness. It is a great inheritance, that independence: the presumption, and energy, and stubborn self-sufficiency—these are all tools any artist will need, over time. But the vanity that attends these gifts, the sense that no one else is necessary, that the self is of limitless interest, makes American writers particularly prone to any version of the narcissistic. Our journals are full of these poems, poems in which secrets are disclosed with athletic avidity, and now, more regularly, poems of ravishing perception, poems at once formulaic and incoherent: formulaic because all worldly event directly sponsors a net of associations and memories, in which the poet's learning and humanity are offered up like prize essays in grade school; and incoherent because, though the poems go on at great length, the overall impression is that there is no plausible self generating them. This is not to argue that all poems must accumulate into a self-portrait, or an account or an emotional state. The problem of this art is that it lacks meaning, vision, direction. Which is to say, lacking self, it lacks context. And in the absence of context, fragments, no matter how independently beautiful, grow rapidly tedious: they do not automatically constitute an insight regarding the arbitrary.

The effect of such poems is that they disappear or evaporate, like the famous effect (benefit, in some sense) of a Chinese dinner. Except it is no benefit for the poem to disappear. A strange hopefulness communicates itself in this work, born of a profound despair, the hope that, in another mind if not one's own, these images will indeed cohere, that a self will, in that other mind, materialize; the hope that if one has enough memories, enough responses, one exists. Rilke's voids and vacuums are, as paradigms, seductive and misleading: always an agenda underlies them. But ours is a poetry in which narcissism achieves its most terrifying definition: it is not an extension of the self but a substitute for the self, as though the lifeless mirror had somehow survived the famished boy. Everything outside the self has become the self; the longer the gesture fails, the more determined the poet becomes. The world, in such poems, is like the image Narcissus gave his heart to. "The thing you are seeing does not exist", Ovid tells him, "only turn aside and you will lose what you love."

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## DICKINSON'S GRANDCHILDREN



*Charles Simic*

To get a true sense of what American poetry is, one has to read an awful of it. I did in 1992 when I edited *The Best American Poetry* anthology. I began pessimistically, but after reading hundreds of literary magazines, big and small during the course of a year, I found enough good poems, poems eminently worth reading. As you'd expect, there was plenty of awful to mediocre verse, but that's not unusual of any literature in any given period.

A more interesting issue is how to characterize this poetry? Is there such a thing as a typical American poem in 1990s? Yes, there is and it can be described this way: the voice is personal, the mode is narrative and the literary school it pledges allegiance to is realism. Retelling of something that happened to oneself is almost invariably the subject. Imagination and its various products; figures of speech, baroque diction, irony and wit are employed—if at all—very cautiously. Most younger American poets today subscribe to a kind of solipsism. The belief that Emerson, Whitman, Frost, Williams, Pound and even Lowell held in their different ways, that America itself is our true subject, seems to be on the way out for the time being. There are so many of Emily Dickinson's children and grandchildren now, one has to remind oneself that even in mid 1950s, when I started out as a poet, she was hardly read.

## GIVING THE DAY ITS DUE



*Samuel Menashe*

Of late, that old man's expression "in my day" surfaces when I look back at my life. In my day I knew of no poetry workshop except for one in Iowa—not that I ever thought of attending it. After World War II I was in Paris under the G.I. Bill. I had been an infantryman in France, Belgium—the Battle of the Bulge—and Germany. At twenty-