

FIVE NOTES ON AMERICAN POETRY



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I

The quark (de-arked quack out of *Finnegans Wake* made the world “something else than a world.” Lacan said it, seizing the opportunity. “The signifier begins to stuff the signified”, causing it to appear strange. Gertrude Stein is the Einstein of this stuffing. Ein Stein deserves another. The old atom, had been dragged (of course screaming) out of Origin. Muoned and neutrinoed, the new one hiphops like a pingpong ball on quantum foam. The stuffing of everything is the music of bottomStrings: resonant vibration. Resonance: multitudinous stuffing. Recent progeny: Lucie Brock-Broido, Susan Wheeler, Annah Sobelman, Tim Davis, and Brock-Broido’s pupil-clone, Brenda Shaughnessy.

2

On the other hand. The Modernists’ heads revolved high up, on necks as long as the pole that could elevate the Byzantine Emperor’s chair above now-and-forever diminished visiting ambassadors. These talking heads remembered the angel, the bird, the clouds that wander like poets over hills. The post-WWII poets’ heads barely bulb above the trench line of their perceptions; they crouch under the pushed-down horizon of the spectrally named “the subject.” They are like Elizabeth Bishop’s Crusoe, only able to piece together, at best, a “miserable philosophy”, mental counterpart of the miserable dead miniature volcanoes on their—to each her own—existential island.

Bishop was irked at being told there’s “no philosophy at all” in her debut volume, *North and South* (1946). She simply wasn’t “interested”, she said, in “big-scale work” or “myth.” Lowell, Berryman, Plath—it was all *they* could do to keep their heads from falling into the pool of their own blood. “The world is decomposing.” They all said it, their hands to the feedback, the overresonance, of their particularly stricken hearts. It was only Lacan who added, “Thank God.”

3

American poetry, as such, began with two geniuses, only a genius could begin it—cutting the Anglo-nostalgic umbilical tube with impertinence,

impenitence. (A lot of current American poetry is, in this sense, not American, but still English.) Whitman led the way for a transgenerational tribe of Spheric poets (I allude to A. R. Ammons's *The Sphere*), Passage to India poets (T. S. Eliot the first and chief of them; Ginsberg; Merwin), a Brooklyn Bridge Poet, a "Remove the mythologies before they establish clean values" ironist (Pound), a Patterson Bridge poet. Big picture poets. Even Wallace Stevens painted no ordinary evening.

Is the tribe extinct? Are the self-pulse-taking children of Dickinson (Louise Glück, Sharon Olds, Claudia Rankine, Brock-Broido again, Frank Bidart via puppets) the only poets around?

The frame for a Big Picture leans in incongruous Magritte style against the tiny houses and ordinary evenings in Robert Pinsky and Jorie Graham. Pinsky's figured wheel is in fact Eastern, though its whirl sings of the foam (not the Om) under all that panorama of particulars visible in slow motion (*how* slow, the meter says). As for Graham, she tries to picture the Invisible, wanting ever so much to believe in the capital "I". She holds the frame up heroically, doggedly, but not willfully: she really looks, really attends. She more than waits.

Those who place the frame in the approximate positions of old certitudes—God the Unsayable, the Pre-Natal Paradise—are running on the fumes of faith. In Annah Sobelman's *The Tulip Sacrament* we are God's cut flowers, He the snipper and the soil. Larissa Szporluk quarrels in *Dark Sky Question* with a Male God who plucks their rightful feathers and makes pouting piccolos of their bones. Deeper in dialogue with the old faiths, Brenda Hillman's fresh, affecting voice speaks into a Gnostic homemade tin-can Intercom with God (communications so far one-way). Charles Wright's poems flip back and forth between exquisite nature descriptions and fairly-assured anticipations of invisible landscapes ("I hope the island of reeds is as far away as I think it"). Donald Revel has come back from the *puer eternus's* gamboling Hideaway to turn to inner Puritan snows.

What is scarce in all this under- and over-shouting of tragic joy is what Nietzsche called the instinctive attribution of "a deeper meaning and greater value to becoming and development than to what 'is'", to hal-lowed "being." There are suggestions of Dionysian hardihood in Robert Penn Warren (suggestions greatest near his close) and in his heir apparent, Dave Smith. Touches of it in Pinsky.

4

John Ashbery, a name perhaps conspicuously absent from these notes, until now, is still a name to be reckoned with—was the name to be reckoned

with during the 70s and 80s. More ash than berry; more ash in the berry than on it.

Ashbery's is the Big Picture in ashes. Like Beckett's. Ashbery gets back to the old Largeness by looking at its departing backside, feeling quite the ass while doing so. Charmingly. His knowledge isn't cold, "awful", clear, dark, like Bishop's; it's wry, like hers, but deliberately self-distracted by comic-book-level theatrics ("Zounds") and surrealism ("Tonight's / question mark loomed in the agate sky, pointing them toward dewdrops / and madness"). His brilliant work has lately suffered the influence of a lesser poet, James Tate. But an heir has arisen: Joshua Clover (*Madonna anno domini*).

5

There is no conclusion. The jungle of beats goes on. But perhaps this much can be regretted: American poets have slipped from the Whitmanic ecstasy ("Strong is your hold, O mortal flesh! / Strong is your hold, O love!")—but see Sobelman—into canceled bodies (Clover: "you need the body to have a place to hang your head"). The juices (have they dried up? is there so little continuing spunk of instinct?) haven't a clue. Dickinson's doubts, her despairs, prevail, with no one able to recall her extraordinary range of emotion or the cutting power of her every idea, and only two or three her intermittently breakaway sprightliness—her spunk.