

Unassuming Legislators

Notes on Rakosi's Prose

Carl Rakosi has a reputation as an epigrammist. Burton Hatlen, in an essay appended to his *Collected Prose* (1983), credits him with the reinvention of the epigram. The dust-jacket of the Library of America volume that includes him adds to the charge-sheet "aphoristic wit". But the opening of "Day Book" introduces a figure remote from the kinetic grace of aphorism. "Something or another", writes Rakosi, "I had written, 'would agitate the Byzantine'". Hieratic, mute, like the Virgin Mary handing Justinian his city on a plate, the Byzantine should be poetic, but is unassimilable by poetry. Perhaps even hostile to it. "So I laid him out in prose for the intellect to dispose of".

Hatlen's "critical postscript" resolves the paradox of the (Jewish, left-wing) Objectivists' admiration for (anti-Semitic, authoritarian) Pound. Like most such resolutions it ends up excusing Pound's Fascism without accounting for the fascination his (and other) poetry exerts, without trying to even. In part, Rakosi's prose is concerned to account for just that fascination.

"The dark vibrancy which sends shivers down the spine is grounded in a referent from the real world". What a precise definition of allegory, that radical-conservative mode which gives us so many examples of a readerly dilemma: the beloved work of art which endorses deplorable politics!

Poets must be attuned to the socio-political consequences of their metaphors. "Rhetoric is regarded merely as a way of speaking. But there is a person using it and that person should be held account-

able for its consequences". But also: "No subject matter has sent more poets to the graveyard than social injustice. The trouble with it is that it enters the imagination not through fresh, primary experience but only after it has passed through the conscience and makes a pact with it on its fixed, binding terms". It is the pact that is detrimental, not conscience itself. A troubled conscience is as real an experience as any you might care to name; the collaboration of imagination with conscience, though, opens the way to culpable self-righteousness: "And if one weeps inwardly over the inability of poetry to do more, some of those tears are due to the poet's realization that his ego extends so far ahead of his craft".

Because poetry is useless to change the world for the better, poets must take responsibility for their metaphors.

That is, if poetry were able to do more, its results would be available for judgement on the same terms as actions. Because it cannot, and they are not, the poet's vigilance is all she or he has against the hieratic and violent seductions of art. Style might be, as Yeats thought, the artistic analogue to morality in active life, but we can't tell, because there is no point at which they verifiably intersect. No art is liberating, none liberal.

Rakosi on Yeats, in a fragment headed "MODES AGAINST AN IRRESISTIBLE ADVERSARY":

"The Passive; the sweetness of fragility; the tear just short of a whimper; the song, Yeats".

Rakosi disposes of "influence" in a controlled explosion: "some young poets do obviously become great ones, and others don't, and it is not because of influence. And there is no comfort for any of them. How, then, did I get sucked into this pedantry?" The notion of poetic influence is a great comforter of pedants; as is that of an art which frees us.

But nihilism is a further seduction, not a solution. Rakosi imagines the modernist artist as a:

new Prometheus... not chained to a rocky promontory but to a hallucination that here is nothing real, that the universe is limitless and bare, held together by rigor, the imagination random and automatic... above all, unpeopled. In short, the media have taken the place of personal experience and the vulture eating his bowels is depersonalization.

Nonetheless, Prometheus remains incorrigibly romantic. The proof is that he has succeeded in making this landscape look fascinating.

In this allegory what is Hephæstus? What Kratos? What Bia?

There's no certain good in being absorbed by a work of art. In a piece called "The Ordeal of Moses", Rakosi reflects on the image of Moses on Julius II's tomb, a portrait of the pope. "Of course, in a way, [Michelangelo] was paying a great compliment to the Jews... Compliments are all right but Jews are wary of being ingested by them". Absorption, for the individual as well as the nation, is seldom other than consumption and ingestion. Ancient Jewish poetry records a time before polysemy, before metaphor devoured us: "How lucky for the Old Testament poets that ancient Hebrew had so few words and, in particular, so few adverbs, adjectives, and abstract nouns. The world was not yet self and the language, therefore, did not need ambiguity and qualification".

Rakosi does not counter the dangers of metaphor with a high mind and a po-face. With gloriously humane illogicality, he makes figures for it. In "The Ordeal of Moses" the figure is a reproduction of Michelangelo's Moses, "bronze, discreet", dedicated to the memory of a forgotten serviceman, next to the lavatory in a synagogue corridor. The ghastly hilarious coda to the piece could be illustrated by R. Crumb: the (female) Chairman of the Arts Committee blaring "I never know what's meant when people say a work of art is Jewish. Do you?"

"Individuality remains avant-garde", writes Rakosi in "Day Book". If the reverse is also true—that the avant-garde remains

individual—then it becomes incumbent upon poets to evade their evangelical disciples and exegetes. But at all costs? Even at the cost of political reaction?

Unfashionably exercised by the difference between prose and poetry, Rakosi is honest about poets' snobbery. "I keep telling myself that it makes no sense whatever to feel that poetry is superior to prose, but it's no use", he writes, glossing his honesty with a fine foxy disingenuousness.

Rakosi's sly optimism is just what non-Americans need to understand a nation which we are perpetually on the point of giving up on. "American idea: if God is anything like man, He must have tender feelings towards us, we are so minute, so vulnerable, yet so gutsy and so probing".

The closing fragment of "Day Book" is a list of proverbs entitled "Poetics from Chelm". Rakosi notes: "In Yiddish folk humor Chelm was a city of half-wits whose absurdities were so preposterous that the listener laughed and instantly felt more kindly towards his own". Chelm is the academy in familiar caricature. Its maxims include: "There is no higher authority than theory". "Its medium is poetry's best subject matter". "Substance is no longer decisive. For every poem now there are a dozen exegetes to supply it". "Poems keep getting smaller and smaller not because they have less to say but because they have become more rigorous". "On the other hand, the more impenetrable a poem is, the greater". "In today's world the only viable reality is to pretend to be playing a game".

But it is the last eight words of Rakosi's gloss to which we should attend: "and instantly felt more kindly towards his own". What are those absurdities that the greater idiocies of Chelm cause the listener to regard so indulgently? The elevated status Rakosi awards "direct experience" presents itself as one candidate, the simplicity with which he defines, or re-defines, the "object" in Objectivism another.

And the citizens of Chelm, like all the holy fools in world folklore (how interesting that where most cultures have a lone, individualistic silly sage, the Jews have a community of them) speak above the heads of those who are comforted by their foolishness, to articulate a credo: "We are the unacknowledged legislators of the world but we mustn't let it go to our heads".
