

NATURE'S DISCIPLINE



Christopher Merrill

The wells are drying up where I live in northeastern Connecticut. Another drought has turned lawns into mosaics of brown grass and weeds; ponds are becoming meadows; the dairy farmers cannot irrigate their pastures. The leaves began to fall even before Labor Day—the earliest anyone can remember—and the remaining foliage is anything but brilliant. The tourist industry predicts a dearth of leaf-watchers this fall: another blow to an economy struggling to reorient itself after the loss of its manufacturing base. The only bright spot in the decade-long recession touched off by cuts in defense spending is the local casino. Yet only an hour away salesmen are reporting shortages of yachts and spaces in marinas for those who profited most from the bull market. On the eve of the millennium, fundamentalist Christians are not alone in describing our warming planet in apocalyptic terms.

“Deep calls unto deep”, Emerson wrote in “Nature”, a founding document of American literary history, and this is true of water and words alike. At the end of the American century we might reflect on how deeply the Concord sage’s ideas reverberate through our culture. For depth is what is needed not only in poetry but also in any consideration of the environmental crisis, the largest contributor to which is the United States. My concern here, though, is not with the Green movement, marginalized as it is in our political discourse, but with the links that contemporary American poets are now forging with nature, reshaping our literary tradition. Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Stanley Kunitz, Brewster Ghiselin, Robert Penn Warren, Denise Levertov, Richard Wilbur, Amy Clampitt, David Wagoner, A. R. Ammons, W. S. Merwin, Gary Snyder, Galway Kinnell, Pattiann Rogers—these are the most enduring names of those who have established what Emerson called “an original relation with the universe”, enhancing our view of the wild.

But where to look for new relations to our surroundings? I fear that a number of our poets the natural world with the same single-mindedness as the timber and mining barons who stripped this continent of its glory.

That is, they go into nature for the sole purpose of finding materials useful for their poems; hence a search for an epiphany usually ends with an epiphany. But anchorites and visionaries understand that such discoveries are rooted in humility, spiritual preparation, and grace. In American poetry there are far too many epiphanies to believe that God has bestowed such grace on a people already favored in so many tangible ways. As a friend quips of a prominent nature poet: "Every time she steps outside she has an epiphany. I think she's often faking it." And just as sooner or later Americans will have to reckon with the ecological consequences of their prosperity, so we should beware of a poetry that depends upon facile correspondences between the world outside and the world within. For the language itself recognizes what is vibrant. If readers and critics are blinded by certain epiphanic poets, it is important to remember Hopkins's notion that "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things." In that freshness, that inscape, may lie our salvation.

Such freshness may be found in this poem by Robert Hass, the former Poet Laureate who in addition to writing and translating works tirelessly to save rivers and promote environmental literacy:

SPRING RAIN

Now the rain is falling, freshly, in the intervals between
sunlight,

a Pacific squall started no one knows where, drawn east as
the drifts of warm air make a channel;

it moves its own way, like water or the mind,

and spills this rain passing over. The Sierras will catch it as
last snow flurries before summer, observed only by the
wakened marmots at ten thousand feet,

and we will come across it again as larkspur and penstemon
sprouting along a creek above Sonora Pass next August,

where the snowmelt will have trickled into Dead Man' Creek
and the creek spilled into the Stanislaus and the Stanislaus into
the San Joaquin and the San Joaquin into the slow salt marshes
of the bay.

That's not the end of it: the gray jays of the mountains eat
larkspur seeds which cannot propagate otherwise.
To simulate the process, you have to soak gathered seeds all
night in the acids of coffee

and then score them gently with a very sharp knife before
you plant them in the garden.

You might use what was left of the coffee we drank in Lisa's
kitchen visiting.

There were orange poppies on the table in a clear glass vase,
stained near the bottom to the color of sunrise;

the unstated theme was the blessedness of gathering and the
blessing of dispersal—

it made you glad for beauty like that, casual and intense,
lasting as long as the poppies last.

This poem begins with an ordinary perception—the alternation of rain and sunlight—and what compels attention is the exuberance with which the poet discovers meanings—enduring themes—in his materials. From speculation on the origins of the squall, which may be likened to any creative storm, the poet connects its movement to water and the mind working at what Emily Dickinson might call “White Heat.” If, as Emerson believed, nature is a discipline, then Hass will be tutored by the weather. In his mind's eye he follows the storm into the Sierra Nevada mountain range, where the marmots' surprise at the last snow flurries is matched by the poet's chain of associations—his wakening sense of the meaning back of his mind's movements. Projecting himself into the future, where he and another—his wife?—will be delighted by wildflowers encountered along a creek, he follows the snowmelt watering the larkspur and penstemon into “the slow salt marshes of the bay.”

Why the repetition of the rivers' names? This is a secular psalm, composed in versets, and like the Psalms of David it relies on parallelism—a rhetorical device which, in the words of C. S. Lewis, “is (according to one's point of view) either a wonderful piece of luck or a wise provision of God's, that poetry which was to be turned into all languages should have as its chief formal characteristic one that does not disappear (as mere metre does) in translation.” Surely Hass knows this from his expert translations of Czesław Miłosz's versets. And his unstated theme is everywhere on dis-

play: first, the blessedness of the squall, natural and poetic; of waters gathering in the mountains and in the bay; of clumps of wildflowers; of seeds collected in the wild; of visiting a friend; of poppies; of a sunrise-colored stain; of the poem itself, and then the blessing of dispersal—of rain, snow, snowmelt, rivers, bird droppings, leavetakings. The waters begin to flow in Dead Man's Creek, for the spirit of the poet, like that of nature, is resurrected by spring's advent; by the last lines of the poem there is an intimation of mortality, which focuses our attention on a kind of beauty that, like the prose rhythms of Hass's poem, is "casual and intense"; like life, it will not last long.

POEM



Gary Snyder

ACROPOLIS HILL

Once long ago,
drawn to this hill,
I walked up it,
watched the clouds and the moon,
slept the night.

Dreamed of a grey-eyed girl
on this rocky hill,

no buildings—
then.

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