Hölderlin's Tower

Once by the Neckar
I stood next to Hölderlin's Tower
there like a Greek myth
as an example

& fed the swans.

Pitch a tent among stones
and practice your recitations
in the cistern of the muses.

Crises?
Caught balling?
Fled Frankfürt
Flipped.

Uh oh: "alternate depression
and nervous irritability"

Knew Greek
translated *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*
and nine odes of Pindar

bonk bonk

to Tübingen in the
summer of 1807
harmlessly bonk

Lived in the Tower till
permaGaia June 7, 1843.

Friedrich Friedrich
stay in your Tower

The good folk of Tübingen
still mention your sadness

They point to your house
as if you were still there
even though it's been a century more
since your lungs pulled in air

Gontard may have felt he was balling his wife
May have caught them kissing, smoky with strife

There were angry words, and the poet was fired
And life wended onward, hopeless and mired

Hölderlin, Hölderlin kiss your love in quickness
Now and then, quick meetings, as if eros were a sickness

Did they fuck? Nothing in ink has survived
It doesn't matter much now, just sorrow contrived

More and more crazy, in loveless ups and downs
Looking for tutoring jobs in poetless towns

Till he learned Susette died from measles one summer
And all of the future was the moan of a mummer

He wended even more be-bonked, aft' he lost his Susette
He wandered back to Tübingen with naught but regret

When a well-to-do cabinet maker named Ernst Zimmer
Who was reading his novel *Hyperion*, gave him a glimmer

Invited him to dwell in that tall yellow Tower
Food, solace and comradeship, for poetry's flower

Sometimes he was out, sometimes in
Sometimes the Universe has a clownface grin

Writhing in sadness, 'spersed with gladness
For when a person truly knows, they call it madness

Look at the world
So caustic and cruel
poet v. poet, drool for a duel

It's tempting to hide
away from such fuel

A few lines when calm enough
and the seas not so rough

Sometimes I pray
for an endless hour

living in the upper
of Hölderlin's tower

I'd stroll from the yellow
in my snowtime scarf
with crumbs for the swans
from the Crazy Man's wharf

6-19-08

E.S. didn’t read the essay below until after he completed his
poem, “Hölderlin’s Tower.”

from net, 6-17-08
http://paulhooverpoetry.blogspot.com/2005/11/discretion-and-wonder-hlderlin-and.html

Paul Hoover's Poetry Blog

This site is for posting poems, essays about poetry, and thoughts about the art. Francis Picabia: "What I like least about others is myself." W.G. Sebald: "The greater the distance, the clearer the view."

Monday, November 28, 2005

Discretion and Wonder: Hölderlin and the Postmodern Lyric

Wonder is central to religion, poetry, science, mathematics, mythology, tourism, and everyday life. It is necessary to the experience of love, in which two ordinary people are transformed into heroes of touch, taste, and glance—a transubstantiation of flesh and spirit. With wonder comes surrender to things greater or stranger than oneself. Hölderlin’s relation to the gods was one of wonder and awe, as he observed thunderstorms or the powerful rivers of Swabia—the Rhine, Danube, and Neckar—nosing powerfully into their banks. Wonder requires the abandonment of reason and the acceptance of the overwhelming mystery of things—for example, the mind-boggling physics of black holes—but has no connection with irony and doubt; its companions are discovery, amazement, fear, and, by way of the grotesque, disgust. The life story of the mass murderer Jeffrey Dahmer fills us with wonder about the limits of the monstrous and the human. Wonder believes and fears. Excessive in everything, it demands all of our attention.

There is no such thing as a nonchalant state of wonder, except possibly on television, where noisy sensationalism collapses everything to the banal. Wonder, like poetry, is related to silence. It is short-lived but long remembered. Television subdues wonder through repetition and its innate inability to confer silence on a scene. A rare exception was the finale of CBS Sunday Morning Show, when Charles Kuralt and Charles Osgood, masters of the avuncular and sacred tone, invited us to watch snow fall in the Sierras, a turtle lumbering toward the sea, or wind whipping the scarce grasses of the Black Hills. Usually accompanied by ambient sound such as bird cries and wind buffeting the microphone, such “silence” reminds us of the real, that realm of experience in which you realize (1) you’re a living part of time and space and (2) nothing is ordinary and also everything is. Wonders appear as a raw originals, something we haven’t experienced before. Receiving the shock of the new, we either destroy its difference or accommodate ourselves to it, as commonly happens with new forms of art, new people in our society, or simply someone who disagrees with us. Deleuze wrote, “Difference must leave its cave and cease to be a monster” (29).

Accommodation to the strange immediately domesticates it. Wonders do cease. They become the wonderful then the everyday.

In poetry, wonder is often attended by apostrophe (O, Love; O, Fire), which assassinates wonder at the moment it names it. Wonder quickly flees its own coronation. In the experience of wonder, the fewer words the better, "Look at that!" or "Oh!" A doe and two fawns have stepped out of the woods and gaze straight at us. There's nothing trite or sentimental to the scene, not in the least. Astonishing animals, they are made real once again, appear as if for the first time.

Thomas Traherne's poem "Wonder" begins:

How like an Angel came I down!
How bright are all Things here!
When first among his Works I did appear
O how their GLORY did me Crown?
The world resembled his Eternitie,
In which my soul did walk;
And evry Thing that I did see,
Did with me talk.

Traherne was a neo-platonist and pre-romantic, who saw the world as bathed in the light of pre-existence and wonder. All things visible speak to us as signs ("did with me talk"). The newborn child sees the world with shrewd but innocent eyes. Because everything is new, unspoiled, and strange to him or her, it is wonderful. Later in the poem, the faces of people are seen to "shine" because made holy by wonder. Innocence and openness make wonder possible. Wonder is first the state of readiness to make itself possible. As Heidegger comments, in an essay on Rilke's concept of the Open, "the venture sets free what is ventured" (Heidegger 102).

Wonder can exist apart from language. Because it is largely a matter of seeing, it can be maintained privately, between your eyes and those clouds casting shadows on the side of a mountain. Five minutes later, the cloud-mountain-shadow condition has dissipated into a non-event. Like Cartier-Bresson's "critical moment" of photography, wonder comes and goes quickly.

Language can generate wonder. This is the attraction of poets like Shakespeare, Dickinson, Vallejo, and Yeats. But brilliant phrasing is nothing without the grip of truth. It's the shadow without the mountain.

Terror is wonder that lies close to Fate. Pitiless and inexorable, it's the swan striking Leda, the lion body with the head of a man that "slouches toward Bethlehem to be born." The more monstrous the person, the more he or she inspires wonder. This is where morality and wonder part company. We love the gods' cruelty, awesome strength, and indifference, without which they could not be gods. We admire Albert Schweitzer and Martin Luther King, but Hannibal Lector and Milton's Satan stir amazement. Adolph Hitler. Jack

the Ripper. Angelina Jolie making out with her brother. Byron snatching Shelley's heart from the funeral fire and making his skull into a drinking cup; indeed, Byron doing anything.

The domestic side of wonder is related to admiration—admiratio in Latin—and therefore iconography, the beautiful (rather than the terrible) made visible. Here we find the world of poetic symbols and household gods that offer salvation or momentary salvific. It's why we go to museums and create Wunderkammern of wombat bones. The dashboard Jesus, aging photo of John F. Kennedy, plaster Beethoven on the grand piano, and shelf of your most valued books are "signs and wonders," talismans, spiritual décor—everyday acknowledgement of our pride and wonder. Juan Ramon Jiménez aimed critical jibes at Ortega y Gasset because he had spied a cheaply produced Venus de Milo, cast in plaster, on top of Gasset's piano (Bly 95). Emerson was astonished when he saw a filled chamber pot under a bed in the room Whitman shared with his brother. Such signs are too near the surface of social life to produce wonder of the greater kind, like the cosmos or the concept of creation. The kitsch art of Jeff Koons is admiratio as social wonder. In its excess of beauty it encourages us to love and scorn equally.

In contemporary culture, celebrities and heroes inspire wonder: Marilyn Monroe, Kurt Cobain, and Princess Diana. Such heroes give us beauty and an early death. They experience transformation for us, living beautifully and rarely on our behalf, which is why we want to tear them to pieces. They are our living dolls.

Michael Jackson's image-icon has ranged from sprightly child singer, to twitching gloved idol, to a self-minstrelsy of race and sex change, to today's "misunderstood" lover of children, transfigured by narcissism, surgery, decay, and age. The Snow White Michael consults his mirror to see which of his selves is prettiest of all and, sadly, discovers he is none of them. His face alone provokes wonder. In it we see the ironies of Blake's vision, extremes of innocence and experience represented by the spiritually disfigured Urizen and Thel.

Wonder lives in excess, with heroes, myths, and gods, those who kill their fathers, sleep with their mothers, and turn into trees. Odysseus throws off his disguise and, with a swineherd at his side, ruthlessly cuts down his wife's suitors. Knowing his own weaknesses, he ties himself to the mast so that he will not act on hearing the Sirens' song. Caution and bold action lie within him in exact measure. Therefore, his tale is finally one of domestic wonder, of learning to live a good, noble, and faithful life.

The experience of domestic wonder is expressed in Wallace Stevens' "The Man on the Dump": "the janitor's poems / Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears, / The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box / From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea." All lies on the dump of the everyday awaiting the "purifying change" of imagination by which they become wonder.

Wonder will not be forced. You cannot "pull / the day to pieces and cry" in a meaningless poetic rhetoric, "stanza my stone." The wonder of ordinary things is what Stevens calls "the the," the thing itself. Wonder cannot be packed into a thing or forcefully wrung from

it. It arrives as itself, in an act of attention.

Wonder cannot be willed, but it can be discovered, or happened upon, as when Galileo lifted his telescope to the stars and realized Earth was not the center of the universe. In 1686, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle created a bestseller, Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds, based on that discovery. In 1600, however, the philosopher Giordano Bruno was muzzled and burned at the stake for the same speculation.

Surrealism focused on the wonders of the unconscious—first of all, that one exists; second, that it gives us our true selves through dreams and psychic automatism. The last great carnival ride of the metaphysical, Surrealism was doomed by its willful search for the "absolute." Indeterminacy teaches another lesson: the power of weakness, avoidance, and lyrical distance to "knit" wonder from rifts of consciousness.

The most difficult thing to conceive of, the ultimate wonder, is the world itself. World means more than earth. World is what mysticism calls the All, world upon world, in its endlessness. To express the world's complexity, we resort to paradox and tautology: I am that I am, the thing as such, "the world worlds," (Heidegger), "that the self should find itself" (Schelling).

For the German poet Hölderlin, the world was a source of wonder because the gods were still present in it. It was wonder, too, when they begin their slow departure. Both their presence and absence were important to his poetry, which ultimately was to foreshadow modernist fragmentation and postmodern dispersion. Here is an early poem, which, like many of his works, was to prove prophetic of his own fate:

To the Fates (An die Parzen)

Give me just one summer, stark sisters,
One more autumn to ripen my song.
Then I'll gladly die, my heart filled
With that sweet music.

The soul, which never had its godly rights
In life, won't find peace either.
When just once the sacred lies down
In my heart, the poem will find perfection.

Then I will welcome the world
Of silence and shadows and happily leave
My song behind—once you've lived
Like the gods, what else is there?

In July, 1802, his mental health threatened by an arduous walking trip to Bourdeaux and the decline of his fortunes as a poet and private tutor, Hölderlin received a letter informing him of the death of his married lover, Susette Gontard, from measles. This news encouraged a downward spiral leading to his complete breakdown and hospitalization in the

Autenrieth Clinic notorious for its brutal mask. Treatments lasted for months and proved unsuccessful. Luckily, Ernst Zimmer, a successful cabinet-maker and carpenter who admired Hölderlin's poetic novel Hyperion, convinced authorities to release Hölderlin to his care. Given three years to live by doctors, he thrived in the Zimmer household, taking daily walks, writing poetry, and greeting occasional guests. But he never recovered from his mental illness. His last poems, written in a comparatively naïve style on the subject largely of the seasons, were frequently signed "Scardanelli" and given fictitious dates ranging from "March 24, 1671" to "March 9, 1940." When he was presented with a copy of his Selected Poems in 1826, he said that he remembered having written some of them but fiercely denied that their author was named Hölderlin. Having outlived Zimmer, to whom he wrote several poems, and now cared for by Zimmer's daughter, he died on June 7, 1843.

Thus half of the great poet's life was spent in mental illness and seclusion. It was a life of "shipwreck," as he described in a letter. It was also, most sensationally, the life of a Romantic poet who, seeing the shadows of the departing gods, suffered the terrors of love and his own mind. As he writes in "To the Germans":

Silent now, the hall has long

Been empty, poor visionary; yearning dims your eye,
And nameless you slumber,
With no one to weep or remember.

To many, his fate will seem parallel to that of Empedocles, the subject of his play of the same title. Possessing the spiritual hero's lack of moderation, he grows strongest at the moment he dissolves in the fire. Such an assessment also applies to Hölderlin's poetry. While his production in the period 1797-1803 was powerful and important, it was with the rifts and aporia of the fragments (1804-1807), that Hölderlin took on his full stature. Especially important in presaging modern and postmodern discontinuity are works like "In the Forest," "Beginning at the Abyss," and "Columbus." A romantic interpretation might be that, having suspended social restraint and the prohibitions of reason, the poet began to speak not to the gods but among them. By daring to go to source—Quelle (fountainhead or origin) or Abgrund (abyss)—he brought about his own dissolution. But in another sense he was going home. As Heidegger notes, the original meaning of Abgrund was "the soil and ground toward which, because it is undermost, a thing tends toward" (1971, 90). It is primordial grounding, from which we emerge and to which we return. Hölderlin's poems of this period bring to mind the title of an earlier poem, "The River in Chains." The poet-as-agonist seeks to break the chains of syntax and logic and acquire his full share of indeterminacy, or "freedom." But to go beyond social and linguistic boundaries is also to enter the territory of madness, as we see in the lives of Christopher Smart, John Clare, and Antonin Artaud. The casual modernist, on the other hand, may select this freedom for aesthetic purposes. After Mallarmé and Gertrude Stein, a post-symbolist style of the flood stage is ready and waiting.

Even when he was deemed to be insane, Hölderlin maintained discretion and balance as

a maker. In “And to experience the life . . . ”, for instance:

Their lives
As fresh as pearls, children play near the shapes
Of their teachers, or of corpses, or the soft, drunken
Cries of swallows as they circle the crowns
Of towers.

Such dark beauty is entirely accurate, as is the extraordinarily precise dream-like observation, “Hunters’ gunshots / Whisper toward the sea.” We also find proto-surrealist imagery in his early poems, such as “Brevity”:

The earth is cold, and the bird of night
Flies down, so close you cover your eyes.

By “discretion,” we mean the tempering aspects of imagination, such as adjustments of tone, rhythm, and word choice. It is art because it is wild and also seeks moderation and shape. In an essay on “As when on holiday . . . ”, Heidegger comments: “[In] the shaking of Chaos, which offers no support, the terror of the immediate, which frustrates every intrusion, the holy is transformed, through the quietness of the protected poet, into the mildness of the mediated and mediating word” (1981, 92). Language is temperate by its nature and begins to harness and make productive the energies of the inchoate. In this context, it’s important to remember the significance of the poet’s frequently used word “holy,” which in Old English meant “free from injury, whole, hale,” therefore in a meaningful sense “whole.” The holy is mystically the All, a unity so powerful it’s difficult to comprehend. To go to the source is to enter the fountainhead of all being. The English word “quell” means to well out, like water, or to kill, slaughter, or suppress. Concepts like Chaos, Quelle, and the One are frightening because they lie beyond reason and explanation. But for Hölderlin, they were entirely generative. To be alive is to be shaken by the storm.

Hölderlin’s poems are haunted from the beginning of his productive period and weighted with a personal sense of forboding. His rarely translated poem “Bitte,” addresses hope’s absence:

Where are you? I’ve lived little, but already
My evening breathes cold, and silently, like the shadows,
I am already here and already, without a song,
My terrified heart sleeps in my breast.

In the great fragment, “In the Forest,” man is bereft even of the comforts of meaning:

He is homeless.
No sign
Binds.
Not ever

A glass to contain him.

When no sign binds, meaning comes in flood. In a seizure of naming comparable to The Waste Land ("Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal"), Hölderlin takes us on a haunting descent through difference where the river is in Cappadoccia, a monumental place beautiful in absence:

and Innocent interrupted the lecture
and named it the Nursery of French Bishops
Aloisia Sigea differentia vitae
urbanae et rusticae Thermidon
a river in Cappadoccia Val-
telino Schonberg Scotus Shonberg Tenerife

While the poet's syntax is here much deformed and points toward radical modernist experiment, the lines of "In the Forest" immediately to follow are among the most lyrical he produced:

When the vineyard is in flames
And looks black as coal
In Autumn, because
The reeds of life breathe fire
In shadows of the vines,
How pretty when the soul unfolds
And also our brief lives

The long poem pulses with artistic counterpoint, with textural and tonal adjustment, for, in all of Hölderlin's work, the poetic persona is that of one who demands meaning, whole or shredded. When no sign binds, meaning would seem impossible. But language, no matter how scattered or indeterminate, immediately restores discretion and precision. Artaud's obscenity in late poems like "Artaud the Mômo" could not be more precise. So it is not a world empty of meaning that speaks in Hölderlin but rather the precariousness of consciousness. In "Sung beneath the Alps," the poet's dilemma is presented in dramatic terms:

To be alone with the gods, and when
The light passes over, and wind and flood, and
When time hurries to its place, you have a steady
Eye for them;

Nothing is holier that I know and want,
As long as the flood doesn't take me, like
The willows, well cared for, sleeping as I must
On the waves;

He who holds divine things in his heart
Will gladly stay home, however, and I'll be free,
As long as needed, to translate and sing
In the tongues of heaven.

Sleeping on the waves (cf. Frank O'Hara's "Sleeping on the Wing") is a perfect emblem for the dangers of the visionary mode. In "The Poet's Courage," the striving to mean is compared with a weakening swimmer struggling in a strong current. The poet must inevitably drown in his own consciousness. Only the gods can save him, but, as the poem "Patmos" reminds us, "The god / Is near and difficult to grasp." We can have powerful intimations of the gods, but we can never face them directly. Their glare would blind us. So, like Perseus viewing Medusa in the mirror of his shield, we use the medium of language. Heidegger puts it this way: "The poet himself stands between the former—the gods—and the latter—the people. He is the one who has been cast out—out into that between, between gods and men" (1981, 64). The gods speak in flood—that is, as the world—and the poet replicates its fullness and distance. Far more confusions attend to being in the middle, but this is where poets must stand, listening both for what is coming and what is passing. The 20th century American poet Jack Spicer expressed his own stereophony as: "The poet takes too many messages."

In our own time, with the growing acceptance of compositional dispersion, it's possible to conceive of a new realism, one that rejects easy unities for the suggestiveness of the fragment. Because unity is perceived as ideological on behalf of hegemony, lyric intimacy is now achieved through discretion and distance. "Language realism" elides the full mosaic to a few suggestive points. The reader then completes the portrait by drawing from point to point. Because it constellates across distance, the post-Mallarméan lyric prizes distance and difference. The space between lines becomes, therefore, a major part of the lyric condition. Freedom across blank space represents both process and yearning, the striving of the poem to sing despite its riddled-through construction. As Calderesque mobiles of attractively balanced words, dispersive poems are airy and intentional. They have worked to be elusive; they want to be pretty; and they are breathless with discontinuity and empty space. Because such poems are usually part of a longer series, and each part is designed to refer only lightly to its neighbors, each page of the series is a poem in itself.

One of the creators of the serial poem, Jack Spicer compares the form to turning lights on and off in a series of dark rooms. Peter Gizzi comments, "A true serial poem moves forward without looking back . . . . Serial composition is the practice of writing in units that are somehow related without creating a totalizing structure for them. Their connection is purely poetic" (50). Serial poetry is also a way of avoiding closure, emphasizing the process of writing rather than the lapidary poem, the sinuous and ongoing relations of things without thematic boundaries. Here's a page from Cole Swensen's Oh, published in 2000:

lung and fusion

built and arched the rib

it all immured

and remained. Maimed
cathedral of trees
an elemental claim on the nature of
return
has been
and she
sealed. What din in the trees. What steel leaves.

This is a beautiful postmodern lyric poem. It has daring, discretion, delay, dispersion, and intimacy. It strikes the full note of resolution ("What din in the trees. What steel leaves") within the serial frame of irresolution and interruptiveness. The open remains open, which gives permission, in an age of criticism and irony, for the firm presence of "the din in the trees." The line "What steel leaves" is playfully ambiguous, owing to the double leaving of "leaves." The self-consciousness of such word play, its tendency rarely to refer outward, is one of language poetry's liabilities. However, Swensen's work is never travesty for its own sake. Her mood is investigative and plaintive.

In his preface to "A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance," Mallarmé set out a program suitable for postmodernism, writing that the "blanks" in his poem:

assume an importance, striking first: versification required them like a surrounding silence. . . . I don't transgress against this system, but simply disperse it. The paper intervenes every time an image on its own ceases or retires within the page, accepting the succession of others. . . . The text imposes itself in various places, near or far from the latent guiding thread, according to what seems to be the probable sense. . . . The fiction will come to the surface and rapidly dissipate as the writing shifts about, around the fragmentary halts of the sentence. . . . Everything happens by shortcut, hypothetically; story telling is avoided. Add to that: that from this naked use of thought, retreating, prolonging, fleeing, or from its very design, there results for the person reading it aloud, a musical score.

(Mallarmé 53)

We have not strayed from the subject of wonder. Galileo and Kepler informed us of the plurality of worlds and, by dismissing the idea of an earth-centered cosmos, created the circumstances in which we write our lyric poetry. They introduced space, distance, and a foretaste of relativism and indeterminacy.

The empty space in Hölderlin's fragments was not purposeful. It comes to us, like Sappho's fragments, as an accident of history. He was mentally ill. But from the time he was a friendless boy at Maulbrunn Seminary, to the day Goethe and Schiller rejected his invitation to contribute to a magazine he was founding, he was a figure of great loneliness:

The poets' faces are also sad,
They seem to be alone, but they're always

Having a premonition, as Nature does when she rests.

("As when on holiday . . .")

In his last poems, a new temperament ensues, no longer agonistic. Because he is beyond defeat, he no longer feels its inevitability. The mysteries of god, nature, and consciousness are now viewed with sweetness, directness, and simplicity:

How unquiet it is by the gray wall,
Where a tree hangs over, laden with ripeness,
With black, dewy fruit, leaves full of sadness,
But the fruit is plentiful, the tree heavy and full.

There, in the church, it's dark and quiet,
And on this night the altar is also bare,
Though pretty things still lie within it;
But in the summer, crickets sing in the field.

When someone hears the minister talking,
Surrounded by a group of friends who've
Come to be with the dead one— how rare
This life, what a spirit; piety never ends.

("The Churchyard")

A watershed between the agonistic and the quiescent appears in fragments like "Sibyl." After "God's weather passes over," the poems have an attitude of calm even though Hölderlin, as a member of Zimmer's household, had little. The concluding lines of the fragment are: "seeking the familiar the poor sailor / looks to the stars." In one reading of those lines, mystery is accepted as the actual: stars in the sky. The struggle for wonder has passed. In another reading, the familiar is never home, and the poor sailor must search for it in the most distant places. Like the poet, the sailor is "between" and must negotiate between new wonders and old terrors. As Heidegger writes, this mortal witness "comes to know the marks that the abyss remarks. For the poet, these are the traces of the fugitive gods." (1971, 91) In the trace, we see the relationship between Hölderlin's departing gods and postmodernism's installation of white noise in the blank space of the page. This "open" is the primordial ground from which words rise and to which they return. Postmodernism's worship of the open lies between the All and the game of making. In Kabbalism, the number zero is far more generative than the number one.

In his essay "Reflection," Hölderlin foreshadows Keats' 1817 statement of negative capability and late romanticism's theme of indeterminacy:

Overall, he [the poet] must accustom himself not to try to attain within individual moments the totality that he strives for and to bear the momentarily incomplete; it must be

to his delight that he surpass himself from one moment to the next to the degree and in the manner required by the subject matter, until in the end the principal tone of his totality succeeds.

(Kaplan 46)

This tolerance for the "momentarily incomplete" compares with Keats' call for poets to be "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Kaplan & Anderson, 305). The writing of poetry, from romanticism to the postmodern present, works toward the unfinishing of a work. The lyric poem is not abandoned, as Valéry recommended, but strategically incompleted when its mystery and empty spaces are fully established.

The truest poetry is not social but existential. It allows for mystery and wonder as forms of knowledge. The unknowable is the deepest source of our interest in the world. Beneath the observable world, a starker world lies out of reach and veiled, but suggestible through language.

The Age of Discovery in Europe was also the Age of Wonder. In newfound lands, the explorers discovered inhabitants with vastly different cultures. Lodged within such wonder is fear and, in seeing the aliens as the non-human, the inevitability of their subjugation. In his account "The Discouerie of Morum Bega," John Verazanus (Verazanno) wrote of his encounter with a people in the area near the present-day Hudson River, in 1524:

Now I will briefly declare to your maiestie their life and manners, as farre as wee coulde haue notice thereof: These people goe altogeather naked, except only that they couer their priuate partes with certain skinnes of beastes like vnto Marterns, which they fasten vnto a narrowe girdle made of grasse, verye artificially wrought, hanged about with tailes of diuers other beastes, which rounde about their bodies hang dangling downe to their knees. Some of them weare garlandes of byrdes feathers. The people are of colour russet, and not much vnlike the Saracens, their hayre blacke, thicke, and not very long, which they tye togeather in a knot behinde, and weare it like a taile. They are wel featured in their limbs, of meane [middle or medium] stature, and commonly somewhat bigger than we, brode breasted, strong armes, their legges and other partes of their bodie well fashioned, and they are disfigured in nothing, sauing that they haue somewhat brode visages, and yet not all of them.

(Hakluyt 57)

Verazanus views the Norumbega—early New Yorkers—generously here. They are neither the utterly familiar nor the completely strange. "Wel featured in their limbs," they are "disfigured in nothing" (not monstrous). Their main features of difference are nakedness and thick black hair, which represent the exotic and Edenic.

Encountering a different tribe, however, Verazanus' men steal a baby from an old woman to take back to France and would have taken a beautiful young woman had she not protest-

ed so loudly and the ship been too far away (Hakluyt 61). The child is seized as a museum piece, ready for installation despite its status as a living thing.

Poems are drawn by wonder, but depend upon truth. They don't seize the baby because it will please the king, who paid the costs of the exploration and wants something in return, if not gold. Poems insist on wonder at its noblest, as the grip of the real. Anything less is a collectible trinket for our Wunderkammern, a museum of cultural displacement, surrealism, and fancies of the marvelous, where amusement is tinged with scorn and soon replaced by dust. Uprooted from its ground, it loses its character. The real, on the other hand, remains new. Discretion understands the rule of distance, the value of the passing but lasting glance.

(Presented at University of Colorado, October 28, 2005, at the invitation of the Council on Humanities in the Arts, which asked for a lecture on the theme of "The Powers of Wonder.")

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posted by Paul Hoover @ 8:19 AM 2 comments

2 Comments:

At 7:38 AM, Martin said...

Also sprach Martin Heidegger. Hmmm. Actually, for example, the German word Abgrund means nothing of the sort - as is common with Heidegger's fancy etymologies - but the place where the ground falls away (abstürzt). [Kluge: Etymologisches Wörterbuch]

Holy came to mean "whole, hale", but the word (holy/heilig) ultimately derives both in German and English from the meaning "belonging to [God]", thus the derivative senses of healthy and complete.

When using mythology to support one's points it's a good idea to get it right: it was Perseus and not Theseus who held the shield in which he could see Medusa's reflection.

The translation of "An die Parzen" is generally poor (is it yours?), but these lines in the second stanza have been massacred:

"Doch ist mir einst das Heilge, das am

Herzen mir liegt, das Gedicht, gelungen" means "But when I finally succeed in the sacred thing that is nearest to my heart, the poem" - the sacred just refuses to lie down, here as elsewhere!

At 10:18 PM, Paul Hoover said...

Dear Martin: Thanks for noting the Perseus error. I've corrected it. Why so aggressive about the other matters?

Post a Comment

About Me

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