



ROBERT HASS

TWENTIETH
CENTURY
PLEASURES

PROSE ON POETRY

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**TWENTIETH
CENTURY
PLEASURES**

Prose on Poetry /

Robert Hass

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Twentieth Century Pleasures

Lowell's Graveyard

It's probably a hopeless matter, writing about favorite poems. I came across "The Lost Son," "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" and "Howl" at about the same time. Some of the lines are still married in my head and they still have talismanic power: *snail, snail, glister me forward; Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated; this is the end of running on the waves*. I see now that they are all three lost son poems, but at the time I didn't see much of anything. I heard, and it was the incantatory power of the poems that moved me. Enchantment, literally. I wandered around San Francisco demolishing the twentieth century by mumbling to myself, *blue-lunged combers lumbered to the kill* and managed to mix up Roethke's *ordnung! ordnung! papa's coming* with the Lord who survived the rainbow of his will.

You can analyze the music of poetry but it's difficult to conduct an argument about its value, especially when it's gotten into the blood. It becomes autobiography there. The other night in a pub in Cambridgeshire (named The Prince Regent and built just before the regency in the year when the first man who tried to organize a craft union among weavers was whipped, drawn, quartered and disemboweled in a public ceremony in London) the subject of favorite poems came up and a mild-looking man who taught high school geology treated us to this:

For it's Din! Din! Din!
 You limpin' lump o' brick dust, Gunga Din!
 Though I've belted you and flayed you,
 By the livin' Gawd that made you,
 You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!

And he began to talk about his father's library in a summer cottage in Devon. I thought of how my older brother had loved that poem, how we had taken turns reading Vachel Lindsay and Kipling aloud on summer nights in California, in our upstairs room that looked out on a dusty fig orchard and grapevines spilling over the wooden fence.

Poems take place in your life, or some of them do, like the day your younger sister arrives and replaces you as the bon enfant in the bosom of the family; or the day the trucks came and the men began to tear up the wooden sidewalks and the cobblestone gutters outside your house and laid down new cement curbs and asphalt streets. We put paper bags on our feet to walk back and forth across the road which glistened with hot oil. That was just after the war. The town was about to become a suburb in the postwar boom. The fig orchard went just after the old road. I must have been six. Robert Lowell had just published in the *Partisan Review* a first version of "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket."

Thinking about this a long time later made me realize that "The Quaker Graveyard" is not a political poem. I had assumed that it was, that its rage against the war and Puritan will and the Quakers of Nantucket who financed the butchery of whales was an attack on American capitalism. But a political criticism of any social order implies both that a saner one can be imagined and the hope or conviction that it can be achieved. I had by then begun to have a way of describing such an order, got out of a melange of Paul Goodman, Camus and *To the Finland Station*, but what lay behind it was an imagination of early

childhood, dusty fig leaves and sun and fields of wild fennel. Nostalgia locates desire in the past where it suffers no active conflict and can be yearned toward pleasantly. History is the antidote to this. When I saw that my paradise was Lowell's hell, I was forced to see that it was not a place in time I was thinking of, but a place in imagination. The fury of conflict is in "The Quaker Graveyard" but I went back to the poem looking for the vision of an alternative world. There is none. There's grief and moral rage but the poem imagines the whole of human life as sterile violence:

All you recovered from Poseidon died
With you, my cousin, and the harrowed brine
Is fruitless on the blue beard of the god . . .

and it identifies finally with the inhuman justice of God:

You could cut the brakish waters with a knife
Here in Nantucket, and cast up the time
When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime
And breathed into his face the breath of life,
And blue-lunged combers lumbered to the kill.
The Lord survives the rainbow of his will.

There are no choices in this history of the experiment of evolution and so there can be no politics. "The Lost Son," all inward animal alertness and numbed panic, contains the possibility of a social order by imagining return. And "Howl" wants to imagine a fifth international of angels.

It struck me then that the poem was closer in sensibility to someone like Robinson Jeffers than to most of the poets whom I had come to associate with Lowell. Both poets are forced to step outside the human process and claim the vision of some imperturbable godhead in which the long violence of human history looks small. But in "The Quaker Graveyard" it is important to say that is the position the poem *finally* arrives at be-

cause it is a poem of process, and of anguish. Warren Winslow drowns, the Quakers drown, the wounded whale churns in an imagination of suffering and violence which it is the imperative of the poem to find release from, and each successive section of the poem is an attempt to discover a way out. When I was beginning to read poetry to learn what it was and what it could be, this seemed the originality of the poem and its greatness.

And it's still hard for me to dissociate it from the excitement of that first reading. The poem leapt off the page. Its music, its fury and grief, haunted me:

where the bones
Cry out in the long night for the hurt beast
Bobbing by Ahab's whaleboats in the East

By that time Lowell was writing in the later, more influential style, then controversial, now egregious orthodoxy:

These are the tranquilized fifties
and I am forty . . .

But I didn't know that, and I still find myself blinking incredulously when I read—in almost anything written about the poetry—that those early poems “clearly reflect the dictates of the new criticism,” while the later ones are “less consciously wrought and extremely intimate.” This is the view in which it is “more intimate” and “less conscious” to say “my mind's not right” than to imagine the moment when

The death-lance churns into the sanctuary, tears
The gun-blue swingle, heaving like a flail,
And hacks the coiling life out . . .

which is to get things appallingly wrong.

Years later I heard a part of this judgment echoed in a curious way. I was listening to Yvor Winters, just before his death, lecturing on George Herbert. He was talking about Herbert's enjambments and, in one of his rare excursions into the present, he said in a bass grumble, "Young Lowell has got a bad enjambment which he got from Allen Tate who probably got it from Herbert." I thought of "The Quaker Graveyard":

Light

Flashed from his matted head and marble feet

Seagulls blink their heavy lids

Seaward

It lit up the poem all over again. Lowell had just published this in one of the fashionable journals:

Only man thinning out his kind
sounds through the Sabbath noon, the blind
swipe of the pruner and his knife
busy about the tree of life . . .

Non est species, but plenty of *decor*. I'm still not sure what I think about these lines. There is enormous, ironic skill in the octosyllabic couplets, and terrible self-laceration in their poise. It is probably great writing in the sense that the state of mind couldn't be rendered more exactly. But I wondered about the state of mind and said a small prayer to the small gods—hilarity and carnality—that I could escape it. The writer, among other things, is getting a certain magisterial pleasure from seeming to be outside the picture. The writer of these lines is in it:

And rips the sperm-whale's midriff into rags,
 Gobbets of blubber spill to wind and weather,
 Sailor, and gulls go round the stoven timbers
 Where the morning stars sing out together . . .

.

It is possible, I suppose, to object to the brilliance of the writing. Charles Olson is said to have complained that Lowell lacquered each of his poems and hung it in a museum. But this judgment, like the "confessional" revolution envisaged by the professoriat, seems to be based on the sociology of Kenyon College or the fact of meter or Lowell's early models, on everything but a reading of the poems. Finish in poetry is, as Olson insisted, a question of form following function. "The Quaker Graveyard" is brilliantly written, and in a decade of amazing poetry: the *Pisan Cantos*, the first books of *Paterson*, *Four Quartets*, HD's *War Trilogy*, Stevens' "Credences of Summer," Roethke's "The Lost Son." But its brilliance seems neither dictated nor wrought; it is headlong, furious, and casual. There are moments that hover near grandiloquence—"Ask for no Orphean lute . . ." but they didn't bother me then and don't much now.

Everything about the sound of the poem seemed gorgeous on first reading. "A brakish reach of shoal off . . ." sounded like an impossible Russian word, sluggish and turbulent; the Indian-Yankee "Madaket" bit it off with wonderful abruptness. I still like to say it:

A brakish reach of shoal off Madaket, —

In the second line, the oddness of the sound, which is a substitution in the third foot, has a slightly startling effect:

The sea was still breaking violently . . .

The rhythm breaks “breaking,” makes a violence out of slackness in a way that I had never seen before, and it was clearly intended because *still* is an extra syllable:

The sea was still breaking violently and night

From here to the end of the stanza, the energy of the poem allows no rest—

Had steamed into our North Atlantic fleet,
When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,
He grappled at the net
With the coiled hurdling muscles of his thighs:

I loved the nervous restlessness of the rhyming, the way you accept “net” as the rhyme for “fleet” and “Madaket,” then get the off-rhyme “light,” so that when you arrive at “feet” it is hardly an arrival and you are pushed toward “net” again. It’s like a man shooting at a target with such random desperation that the hits count for no more than the misses. This effect, together with “young Lowell’s bad enjambment,” transmute an acquired skill into articulate rage. And the colon after “thighs” is not a rest; it insists on the forward hurtle of the lines:

The corpse was bloodless . . .

Warren Winslow or not, it has always seemed to me that Lowell himself was the drowned sailor, just as Roethke is the lost son. Otherwise the sudden moments of direct address make no sense:

Sailor, will your sword

Whistle and fall and sink into the fat?