

REVIEWS

Eliot Weinberger, *An Elemental Thing*. New York: New Directions, 2007. 192pp. \$16.95

In a recent essay for the *New York Review of Books*, Eliot Weinberger wrote, “One always knew exactly what [Susan] Sontag was saying, even if one didn’t think it was true.” It would be imprecise to suggest that the sentence is vintage Weinberger, since vintage Weinberger more often looks like this—“Robert Bly is a windbag, a sentimentalist, a slob in the language”—or this—“Daryl Hine took America’s most successful and prestigious poetry magazine and drove it to ruin.” But that sentence, which so capably gives with the left hand even as it takes with the right, does adequately capture the two sides of Weinberger’s critical persona. Weinberger loves and hates in fair measure, and the equilibrium he struck early on between celebration and condemnation has long made even his vituperations seem credible.

Weinberger’s essay is a masterpiece of critical back-and-forth, far from the *nihil nisi bonum* you’d expect for one of the *NYRB*’s most distinguished alumnae. But there’s justice here: Sontag wrote a similar piece on the passing of Paul Goodman, another *NYRB* mainstay. And judging from the two essays, what Goodman was for Sontag is roughly what Sontag is for Weinberger: not the ideal, but the example to be studied and then surpassed. In her essay Sontag says that Goodman was the critic she was reading at seventeen, and I imagine the same was true for Weinberger vis-à-vis Sontag: that at seventeen this precocious man of letters (who would publish his first translations of Octavio Paz just two years later) could scarcely have ignored *Against Interpretation*, which was published that year and was, in his words, “surely the best-known book of cultural criticism of its time.”

Despite the various enthusiasms of the three critics, there are similarities among them worthy of note. All three wrote widely, on subjects political and literary, foreign and domestic. For this breadth all three suffered what Sontag called the “terrible, mean American resentment toward a writer who tries to do many things.” Sontag and Weinberger share even more. He detects in her work the “sign of a certain insecurity, as though she still needed to prove

that she had arrived and that she was the best informed in the room.” That same arriviste arrogance, however, is no stranger to Weinberger’s own writing. Nor is he the only one with a well-placed backhand. Sontag, too, liked the art of qualified praise: “[Goodman] was capable of writing sentences of a wonderful purity of style and verbal felicity, and also capable of writing so sloppily and clumsily that one imagined he must be doing it on purpose.”

The most obvious difference between Sontag and Weinberger is her celebrity, of which he makes much in his essay. He calls her “that unimaginable thing, a celebrity literary critic”—a pardonable hyperbole, for as Weinberger knows, the celebrity literary critic predates Dr. Johnson. Less pardonable is his we’ve-been-here-before diminishment of Sontag’s accomplishments, as when he calls the “structuralist analytic overkill” of “Notes on Camp” “something new in the US, though the French had been doing it for years.” It takes more than a passport stamp for an idea to flourish in a new cultural setting, and even if importing foreign ideas were the whole of Sontag’s achievement it would be an important one—of the kind, it should be said, that Weinberger has advocated for years.

But “Camp” is more than Barthes in blue jeans: it’s a brilliant and original analysis of a phenomenon that had not been considered, let alone analyzed, since Oscar Wilde. Nor do I agree that the essay has dated badly. It’s true that “the word ‘camp’...has long since reverted to its summer leisure connotations.” But when I read, in Sontag, that “Camp sees everything in quotation marks,” or that “the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves,” or that “the traditional means for going beyond straight seriousness—irony, satire—seem feeble today, inadequate to the culturally oversaturated medium in which contemporary sensibility is schooled,” I hear something true about the world in which we live.

The tang of Weinberger’s judgments, like the bitterness left by some of his descriptions (“the mini-skirted babe in the frumpy Upper West Side crowd”) is especially distasteful after reading Sontag’s wistful encomium to Goodman, a man she admits she disliked. But the source of Weinberger’s grudge is not hard to divine, for Sontag eclipsed her example in a way that Weinberger hasn’t managed. The fame that attended her whole career, which visited Goodman’s after the publication of *Growing Up Absurd*, has touched Weinberger’s in only a modest way. Fame is usually delinquent and often erring, but it is a mistake to believe that it is always undeserved. That for once celebrity wasn’t wasted on the talentless might be a fact worthy of quiet praise or considered silence, but it doesn’t call for mocking disdain.

To admit that Weinberger’s bitterness is misdirected is not to say that it is unjustified. He has every right to Goodman’s complaint that “he was not famous enough, not read enough, not appreciated enough.” For years Wein-

berger has been one of the reigning consuls of American literary-intellectual culture, which would be a fine thing if “American literary-intellectual culture” existed as something other than a figment spooked into being by chance or by controversy. He has put in the equivalent of several lifetimes’ work on behalf of the literature he loves, and in any other country his collective efforts would have already earned him a place in the literary firmament. (In one it already has: Mexico awarded him its highest honor for non-citizens in 2000.) He has sustained a lifelong struggle against the congenital American indifference to foreign literatures, translating Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges, Vicente Huidobro, and Bei Dao. He’s founded magazines (*Montemora*), edited them (*Sulfur*), and assembled anthologies (of American and Classical Chinese poetry). His literary reviews and political commentary are marked by wit, energy, and the iron-clad confidence of the autodidact.

Despite his achievements, however, the attention Weinberger has attracted at home has been occasional, limited, and far from uniformly positive. He provoked a flurry of interest after outing the nonexistence of Araki Yasusada and a small storm with the publication of *Innovators and Outsiders*, his anthology of contemporary poetry. But by and large it has been easier for him to make the pages of the *New York Times* for sparring with Jonathan Galassi or Bruce Bawer than it has for writing, editing, or translating books. When his edition of Borges’s *Selected Nonfictions* won the NBCC award, most people (including the publisher) cheered Borges and ignored the fact that Weinberger had assembled it from scratch, including many pieces that were previously uncollected anywhere, let alone in English.

The work that has brought Weinberger more attention than any other is 2005’s “What I Heard about Iraq,” a 10,000-word prose poem first published in the *London Review of Books* and later collected in *What Happened Here: Bush Chronicles*. The piece collected two years of lies, truths, and propaganda about the Iraq war. (Example: “I heard the vice president say: ‘I really do believe we will be greeted as liberators.’ // I heard Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi foreign minister, say: ‘American soldiers will not be received by flowers. They will be received by bullets.’”) Not surprisingly “What I Heard about Iraq” made its greatest mark abroad. It became the centerpiece of festivals and protests and, in the hands of Simon Levy, was turned into a prize-winning play.

Unlike Sontag and Goodman, who wrote novels, and unlike his heroes Rexroth and Reznikoff, who wrote poems, Weinberger’s creative and critical work belong to the same genre: the essay. His latest book, *An Elemental Thing*, develops across an entire collection a style of essay that showed up only infrequently in his earlier collections *Works on Paper*, *Outside Stories*, and *Karmic Traces*. Completely absent here is the vitriolic intensity of 1996’s *Written Reaction*. The tone of these essays is instead quiet and impersonal,

their prose is crafted, and their subjects are often erudite to the point of obscurity. Several (“Ice,” for example) could qualify as meditative; others have the flavor of an experiment (“Lacandons”); at least one even reads like a joke (“Abu al-Anbas’ Donkey”). And though some of the essays bear formal affinities with the pieces in *What Happened Here*, the essays of *An Elemental Thing* are only remotely political.

Not a few of the essays in this book might be mistaken for prose poems, such as “Stars”:

The stars: what are they? They are chunks of ice reflecting the sun; they are lights afloat in the waters beyond the transparent dome; they are nails nailed to the sky; they are holes in the great curtain between us and the sea of light; they are holes in the hard shell that protects us from the inferno beyond.

But Weinberger insists that he writes essays, not poems. (Evan S. Connell made a similar claim about his masterly *Notes from a Bottle Found at the Beach at Carmel*; I expect their insistence has more to do with what they think a poem should be than it does with any empirical reckoning of what gets published as poetry.) In an interview with Kent Johnson, Weinberger explains his attraction to the genre in Malthusian terms:

These days, amidst an overpopulation of everything, there are, as far as I know, only two writers doing anything interesting or new with the essay form: Guy Davenport and Susan Howe. I can’t understand this at all, as the essay seems to me to have unlimited potential.

The essays in this new book generally work single themes, ringing successive changes on an image, idea, object, or name to create the equivalent of a set of musical variations. An essay called “Changs” gives capsule biographies of twenty-nine men who share the name. “Lacandons” is an anaphoric catalogue of dream interpretations from Chiapas (nearly every line begins, “If you dream...”). “The Vortex,” first published in this magazine, traces the image of the vortex in Anglo-American modernism and back to its sources in India, China, Mexico, the Bible, and ancient Greece. Not all the themes are self-contained: Chinese history, evidently one of Weinberger’s earliest passions, suffuses *An Elemental Thing*, and wrens, who get their own piece near the beginning, appropriately flit in and out of several other essays later on.

In *An Elemental Thing* Weinberger rarely reaches for a metaphor, deploying none of the rhetorical dazzle that characterized his notes for *Sulfur*. He writes with the austerity of legend or myth. “In the villages around Tirupati, the nights were spent telling stories.” “The hand is a mandala.” “Its walls closed behind them and have never opened since.” Even when writing of

himself he lets the astounding fact do the work of astounding nouns, verbs, or adjectives: "A teenager, I was hitchhiking across that sunless desert, and for hours the only living thing I saw was a shirtless man in a loincloth carrying an enormous wooden cross."

This plain style tempts us to believe Weinberger when he says (as he has elsewhere) that "everything I write is easy to read." But it is a temptation we should resist, for what makes these essays compelling is less their style than what their style seeks to restrain. Nearly all are stalked by one manner of irony or another, irony that threatens to disturb the essays' surface calm. For example, Weinberger is surely winking when, in this book of spare sentences, he quotes Hsiao Kang (in "Wind and Bone"): "To cultivate the self one must be prudent and sober. But in writing one should be wanton and untrammelled." Or when, in "Spring," he quotes an instruction given to Chinese craftsmen: "Make no object that will, with its skillful artifice, unsettle the mind."

An Elemental Thing is a *wunderkammer* of oddities rescued from the neglected corners of intellectual history; like Borges, Weinberger has a fascination for the details of cosmologies that might strike others as esoteric. (I can only speculate, having once spent an afternoon sketching the relations of the sixty-odd deities of the Valentinian heresy.) Taoism is more than *yin* and *yang*; it is also

the Three Energies, the Three Irrational Powers, the Five Elements, the Five Tones, the Six Rectors, the Eight Trigrams and Sixty-Four Hexagrams of the *I Ching*, the Nine Palaces and the Nine Halls, the Ten Stems, the Twelve Branches.

The Mandaean, an ancient Middle Eastern sect that lived (both geographically and doctrinally) in the interstices of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, come in for similar treatment:

They say the Christians have secret rites where they worship a female donkey with three legs.

They dislike the Zoroastrians, who sleep with their mothers and sisters, and eat the dead, who take vows of silence, and abort their babies.

They call Muhammad the "son of the butcher," and believe that he is Mars, the planet of violence, and the lord of the end of time. They say that he "propagates a shout that is not a shout."

They say that Socrates was a Mandaean.

Weinberger's taste runs to extravagant similarities: Catherine of Siena and the Aztecs, Liu Tsung-yüan and André Malraux, Wyndham Lewis and the Mevlevi Sufis. But despite his interest in coincidence, Weinberger's real

subject is change. (Time, its agent, is thus the elemental thing of the title.) Temporal change—history, when it enters language—is what links tigers and rhinoceri, Empedocles and Louis-Auguste Blanqui. Change is the implicit subject of the suite of essays named for the seasons, which describe the customs of an ancient Chinese court, and the explicit subject of “Where the Kaluli Live,” which ends, “In the Bosavi language, the word for ‘tomorrow’ is the same as the word for ‘yesterday.’ The word no longer applies to Kaluli society.”

Several registers of change—natural, historical, personal—find their maximum imbrication and poignancy in the preface to *An Elemental Thing*, where Weinberger describes an Aztec ceremony that was both a ritual of renewal and a preparation for the apocalypse. Performed every fifty-two years, it was something most people saw only once in their lifetimes.

On that day all fires were extinguished.... Old clothes, the images of gods kept in the house, the hearthstones on which cooking pots were kept, mats, pestles, and grindstones were cast into lakes and rivers.

The ritual reached its climax with the sacrifice of a prisoner bound to a flat stone by a piece of wood. The prisoner was forced to watch as a priest set fire to the wood with a spinning bow. When the fire caught, the prisoner’s beating heart was cut out of his chest and set in the fire to be consumed. The fire spread to bundles of logs tied to his limbs, and

as the bonfire became visible, the people slashed their ears and the ears of their children, scattering blood toward the flames. Messengers carried torches from the Hill of the Star to the principal temples, and from there to the palaces, and from the palaces, street by street, house by house, until the whole city was lit again. All night, relay runners carried the new fire throughout the empire.

The preface is dated 6 February 2001. It is the only piece in the book with a date, an anomaly whose significance, like that of the fifty-two-year cycle, is explained by Weinberger’s birthdate: 6 February 1949. By linking the story’s calendar to his own, Weinberger places himself at the center of a book concerned with the renewal of the age, making himself priest, prisoner, and messenger of the fire that is *An Elemental Thing*.

Robert P. Baird

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