

A Retrospective Sketch

I first came to Austin, Texas, for the academic year 1961–62. When I came back in 1966, not knowing I would stay there, I was already thirty-nine years old. I did know that ties with Europe could not be cut; that I would carry Englishness uneasily around with me in the great primordial spaces of Texas; and that this was a foreign world to live and work in, such as I had long hankered after. The University accommodated prodigious people. Then, hello, I met my fate in the person of Ann Clark of South Dakota. To her I owe not only many poems and stories, but also the pleasure of travel and sojourn in Mexico, France, Berlin, Prague, Budapest, Italy... We parted company in 1984, and my travels in Turkey have been hearteningly celibate... With friends at that time, I mean of the Sixties and Seventies, in Germany and France, writers or otherwise, I have not lost touch. Not for nothing is one a metaphysician.

Now for my English education. I attended “prep” and “public” schools; eventually, at Felsted (evacuated to rural Herefordshire during the war) I settled into Latin, Greek, Ancient History, French, and English. My father, an organist, born into an indigent family with eighteenth-century Irish origins, had been since 1930 a much-loved teacher of music at the University of Cambridge, a city bristling with old bookshops. So at fifteen I was already a nestling antiquarian. But then three and a half years in the R.A.F. (1944–48) purged some of that easy reclusiveness out of me. At Merton College, Oxford (1948–52), I studied German and French. Friends, who later earned great distinction for their learning—Richard Freeborn, Rodney Needham, Guy Davenport—saw in me, I suspect, a bookworm with an increasing ache to become a butterfly. Hence my eager researches, while teaching at King’s College, London, into the Levantine and worldwide symbolism of Paradise mountains, but also into Dada and Expressionism (1955–65).

Early on, the poems (1943–50) of Lawrence Durrell, together with tempestuous Rimbaud (soon supplemented by Joyce), need not have had a noxious influence on my first scribbles, but they did. Yet Durrell’s

luminous heraldry, his Mediterranean glow, are models I won't repudiate. Then soon enough, too, the gravity, severity, the measuredness of St. John Perse, Eliot, Seferis, and Cavafy, attracted me powerfully. For all their rootedness in tradition, their poems have no trace of scripted or pre-scripted writing; and all the writers I admired are masters of tone. I realize that this will sound naive: but "originality," rare as it is desirable, usually seems unwilling, pristine, as if involuntary. However hard you work at preparing it, the "word as such," fully singular, is as unbidden as the real lyric.

Vaguely I was intending to write poems such as had never been written before. I say "vaguely" because I doubted that any such poem could be consciously intended: besides, the outcome of intention might be the poem that should never again be perpetrated. Even then, the vague intention has never left me. Hadn't Beethoven written quartets in confidence that such music had never been heard before? And Picasso had painted the unseen, as well as images, images with antecedents only his imagination could have dissolved and metamorphosed. On such issues any poet could test his aesthetic imagination, but also exhaust his moral nerve. I had political fantasies, but spent my outraged sense of justice and liberty (inside the horror of the Bomb) on subverting convention, exploding cliché, in an effort to extract from English rare phonetic spins, startling bits of sense. I was enthralled by the abstruse. How shackled they seemed, the "Angry Young Men," invoking Arnold Bennett (not so, by any means, the Aldermaston marchers). Among Russian and Polish poets at that time, some endured the worst disfavor for being "formalists," that is, dangerous torchbearers of imagination, sensibility, and dissent. I owed some understanding of that fractured situation mostly to Günter Kunert, whom I would visit in East Berlin. Johannes Bobrowski also spoke to me most amiably, for hours on end; and I visited Peter Huchel in his Potsdam exile. To work as a GDR writer you had to be granted a sort of license. If the grossly Philistine thought-police withdrew that, no potatoes. Dread was the huge worm in Karl Marx's apple.

While teaching in London I helped to make the new German writing of the Fifties and Sixties accessible to British and American readers. I wrote reviews, gave radio talks. This work opened up the tasks of translating, which I've elsewhere pursued, off and on, ever since.

My friendship with Michael Hamburger began soon after I ar-

rived in London after two and a half years in Zürich (1952–55). I recall also with pleasure John Willett (who was galvanizing the *TLS*), Donald Hall, John Wain, Jonathan Williams, and R.B. Kitaj (almost a neighbor for a time), as itinerant activists during those years. A number of us used to meet at noon on Tuesdays at the Salisbury Arms: quite unlike Mallarmé's *mardis*, those Tuesdays. Another friend was Edwin Mullins, the art critic. Frequently I met with the painter Cecil Collins, whose visionary pictures I'd known since earlier days in Cambridge. Yet another friend was Erich Fried, the Austrian refugee poet, who worked at Bush House, thus opposite King's College, on the Strand. Erich was enormously political. He trudged about with six hundred poems in his aged briefcase: copies were always dispatched to Canada, in case an H-Bomb went off in Europe. The times were more scary than stirring. We had Makarios and Grivas in Cyprus, the Profumo Affair, the Berlin Wall (1961), the Cuba Crisis, Kennedy's assassination. We responded asymmetrically with The Rolling Stones, with Twiggy, Christine Keeler, with The Beatles, the Albert Hall Poetry Event, and some other massively attended readings, too (pretexts for swarming). That "we," foregoing, is rhetorical: "I" withdrew.

Busy as I was with old and new German writing, not to mention teaching, I seldom had occasion to read new books of poetry. An eager-beaver rising literary man with "Eng. Lit." behind and abreast of every novelty I certainly was not. I did take to Geoffrey Hill's *For the Unfallen*. Sidney Graham was silent, I think, at that time. Much of the new poetry I did sample seemed cerebral, or purple, or pedestrian, or strident. Larkin's work I liked for its precision and succinctness, not for its parochial grouchiness. Sinew and fresh air, free from the formal influence of Hardy or Robert Graves, I did find in several American poets, and in some varieties of Concrete Poetry (mainly German). I admired Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, but not the sprawl of his new and narcissistic work. I took to Gary Snyder's action poems, to W.C. Williams, to Creeley (for his tensions, which cancelled gesticulation), also to Donald Hall's crisp work of that time. I re-read Pound, rather than exasperating my wits with Olson. Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore I also read: both were rare then, yet I did not read them searchingly.

In *Torse 3* (1962), I was stretching my linguistic limbs in opposite directions as far as I could, toward the mythic ("Male Torso") and the

momentary. In *Nonsequences* (1965), which included some poems written in Texas, I floated a series of gestures that were debonair enough, some with a political urgency that startled me, others oneiric. Critics found my work now unrewardingly “obscure,” perhaps because of my discontinuities, the bizarre “anti-representational” touches, the inconstant imagery, the ruptures (never violent) in the syntax. Or perhaps because the models in their background were “pre-modernist,” suave, and British? Liberation, or just the airing, of the word, phrase, sentence—the attempt to singularize—occasioned more perplexity, or odium, than delight. Dissatisfied by daily words, I burrowed into crypts.

Yet while earning some sneers I was, I now suppose, becoming a figure in an international network of “alternative” poets (Anselm Hollo stood much taller). In London I’d met Ernst Jandl. For their audacity and ingenuity I greatly admired his vocal texts. I was briefly noticed in the USSR at one time as a concrete poet myself, though my games in that area were negligible: one evening I had instructed Andrej Voznesensky in the art, with due reference to suppressed Russian fore-runners of opto-phonetic poetry, such as Kruchenykh, and of shamanic incantation, namely Velimir Khlebnikov, so he’d inferred that I actually did what I only knew about. I also came to know Miodrag Pavlovic, whose poems I read in German and French; thanks to him, Mirko Magarasevic translated in 1973 some of my work into Serbo-Croatian. Mirko’s writing nook was a tiny luminous place in a vast townhouse crammed with menacing ancestral furniture: Serbia in a nutshell.

And since then? Gnostic (rather than agonistic or dialectical) as some poems of mine might seem, I slowly learned to curb an urge to let fly with vagary and with conjecture. I had to loop imagining (in a lyric voice) back into things instantaneously perceived, photons, which, being there, irreducibly corporeal, have become in their transformation most elusive. A poem, itself an act of inquiry.

My impulse was always lyrical rather than cognitive, my gnosis seldom steadfast enough to shape, in the brave old English style, an “argument.” Yet I did risk my hand, or voice, at longer poems: “Pavlovic Variations,” “Anasphere,” “Razzmatazz,” and later “A Huapango for Junius Avitus,” “Fishing Boats at Assos,” and “The Redbird Hexagon.” Not one of these is thematic. Yet you might say that the more recent

ones are “about” their expanding scenes—an ancient city associated with Aristotle, a bird half-seen, then wholly heard. Even then, the “aesthetic” is tensed against historical havoc in a suggestive faceting, rather than in a discourse. On a smaller scale entirely, “La Morena” is not *about* loving a woman, “Ballad of the Putrefaction” is not *about* corruption. The former is an erotic incantation conjuring up, crazily enough, a haunting archetype; the latter, written during a nocturnal frenzy in Berlin) is a self-referential narrative with elements from alchemy, sex, and street fighting.

For eighteen years after September 1966 I lived in the country outside Austin: I rented and then bought a cabin close to the lake, with an easement to swim from. That was one patch of earth (apart from a valley in Cornwall and a northwest aspect of Mont Ventoux) to which I formed a deep attachment. Though born in Cornwall, I am not a Celt. I left Truro when only a few weeks old, so Cornish traditions of piracy, smuggling, “wrecking,” and tin-mining had no time to imprint themselves on me. Camping holidays in the peacetime (1936–39) might have repaired the deficit.

Joking apart: atavism rages around the globe, century after century. An atavistic complex that brutalizes the imaginal must be sharply distinguished from the lucid, purgatorial, underworld fathomings of, say, Eliot, Rilke, Joyce, or David Jones. Hell breaks loose when the Tiger parts company with the Lamb, when tracks to the brink of sacred time are expunged, when revered ancient objects serve no more to check our siphoning evils up from time’s cloacal depth. In *Serpentine* (1985) and some later poems I was asking about this, asking as one among the millions submerged in an epoch during which intelligent ideals were diabolically warped. Ignazio Silone’s words summed up the process: “The nihilist cult of power and success has become universal... Each group or institution cries out in defense of an ideal, but on the way identifies with it, places above all ideals its own interests... Fascism in its various forms meant the taking over of power by nihilism” (1963).

Since 1984 I’ve occupied a two-room apartment in an older neighborhood of Austin; Carolina wrens, cardinals, doves and sparrows, the blue jay, the crow, and the mockingbird enjoy this terrain also. I hear the traffic and through the branches of an immense pecan tree, when they are bare, I can discern a distant downtown silhouette. The

street is short and has no outlet. Colossal illuminated buildings, when I walk home at night, might be a phantom of Oz.

Now in retirement I am intrigued by two apparently radical morphogonic impulses in poetry: symmetry and memory. No wonder their operations come under scrutiny in neuroscience.

March–April 2003