

THE UNIVERSE IN A HOLOGRAM

Paul Pines. *Divine Madness*. Marsh Hawk Press, 2012.

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Shamanic voices have spoken from soapboxes in the Hyde Park of American poetry since the time of Whitman. Think of Allen Ginsberg's chants, Robert Bly's masked personae, or Jerome Rothenberg's mystical *gematria*. To the written corpus of that visionary company we might add Paul Pines's *Divine Madness*, an empathic scattering to the music of the spheres that seems to sound simultaneously from both the deepest interior of human consciousness and the farthest reach of the celestial dome. Embracing the pursuit of a "source / veiled in a cloud / of unknowing," this book-length series of spare, probing meditations raises unabashedly spiritual concerns in a particularly spirited time.

Though the title evokes the Hellenic varieties of *theia mania* described in Plato's *Phaedrus* (prophesy, delirium, poetic inspiration), in Pines's metaphysics "divine madness" implies a broader form of reception, an attunement to elusive if nonetheless extant frequencies of comprehension that trigger a divergence, in behavior or in thought, from whatever is commonly assumed as the known, predictable reality. It's a sensibility closely paralleling that of William Bronk, who also wrote of indefinable intimations

that seem not to have the habit of reality.... They come from beyond our skin like approaches to us, like messages; and we respond, trembling and shaking, or vibrating in tune as though we were instruments a music were played on and we arch and turn to have the contact closer. Our responses are presences that tower around us, seemingly solid as stone. (from "Copan: Unwillingness, the Unwilled")

Like Bronk, Pines finds inspiration among the mysterious tombs and inscriptions of the Mayans, but he expands his search far beyond in both time and space, touching on significant moments in history, science, and religion, assembling along the way a personal *Who's Who* of those who bore "the crushing loneliness / of a new idea" or who felt "touched by / the consciousness / of the gods / in men," a charmed roster that includes Vulcan, Aristotle, Da Vinci, Columbus, John Winthrop, Thomas Paine, Van Gogh, and Heisenberg. Even Leonard Bernstein falls under the influence as he "hears music / beneath the music" while conducting (or channeling) Beethoven's 7th.

The poet's emphasis on figures who in some way were compelled to energize the scientific, social, or political thought of their times into alternative paths of action may explain the lack of poets among his complement of nonconformists, and certainly one could argue persuasively for the admission of Susan B. Anthony, Virginia Woolf, and Marie Curie, among other female iconoclasts, to what is clearly and consciously a men's club. But then the ancient civilization at Palenque, the Athenian Academy, Massachusetts Bay Colony, the deck of the Santa Maria, were literally men's worlds, and Pines appears to suggest that a void in the construction of male identity, a spiritual emptiness ("the desert is a man's landscape"), drives the (largely Western) project of exploration and acquisition, the search for what is necessary but necessarily unknowable:

we are driven
to fill ourselves
like hollow gourds
with water
 grain
 wine

as if to eliminate

the emptiness
into which we pour
our grief

In examining the nature of this absence, Pines draws analogies between abandoned sons (e.g., Telemachus) and the deist concept of an Absent One—a god or god-like entity whose withdrawal has left humankind with an "unfathered destiny" or who, "afraid of so much power / in the hands of so / much hunger," has jealously submerged "a gift / of sight beyond time / and space" so deeply within the brain that some are driven by an unconscious quest for modes of living and understanding far removed from those their normative societies would approve, as if something in the design of human sensibility had gone awry and needed correction by a divine intervention that—rather than descending from above—would emerge from within.

Reading the Book of Nature on a sensory level remains critical to rational apprehension of the physical universe, just as it was for Aristotle, but for Pines nature is

a book best read
by the inner eye

that connects us
to the other in
ourselves

The outer world reflects human perception back on itself (“that wilderness / in which we meet // ourselves / in search of ourselves”) in a paradoxically reciprocal relationship that may well be endless, particularly as the connection between subject and object grows more and more indistinct. *Divine Madness* teems with such contradictions and paradoxes, but they seem hard-won through the process of rigorous thought, not simply gratuitous or clever. Again evoking the spirit of William Bronk, Pines recognizes the difficulty of even defining a real world against which human experience could be measured, proposing that the “gods” who conceal our secrets are self-denying inventions:

We create our world
but hide the knowledge of it
from ourselves
 for whom
 it is meant

In using the present tense of *create*, the poet regards both human consciousness and the physical universe as Promethean and continually self-renewing, shifting the very foundations of our perceptions as we attempt “to navigate / the world as it forms around us.”

Readers who grow impatient with ambiguity should be advised that *Divine Madness* is a Möbius strip of unresolved differences, a will-o'-the-wisp of alluring images and insights leading, as it must, to recurrent aporia (“the universe / a hologram / nested in / a hologram”), but in its airy, complex architecture, striking if frugally dispensed imagery, and unexpected intimacies, Pines’s thoughtful enterprise mirrors the winding, seductive search for abstract truth itself. Certain repeated phrases (“ourselves / in search of ourselves”) serve as threads to conceptually bind each individual poem to all the others so that the effect is something like that of a lyrical, theological discourse uninhibited by doctrine and tempered with healthy doses of spontaneous revision, uncertainty, and self-doubt.

The concluding poem, the only one written in first person singular, may be the most enigmatic of all. Whether it addresses us in the voice of an external God or (more probably) the collective interior voice of humankind, the effect is poignant, laden with an absolute, if ironic, loneliness: “*I who have spoken the world / Find myself with no one / To talk to.*” How appropri-

ate, too, that such a voice would choose to speak through poetry, a medium in which both the sayable and unsayable are equally important, and equally audible.

Informed by deep reading in history, theology, myth, and philosophy — and visually complemented by several stunning 17th century engravings — *Divine Madness* never seems impersonal or hieratic, nor does it compromise the pure humanity of desire and mixed blessing of existence (“We love what we bear”). If contemporary poetry still holds a place for serious works of theological lyricism, Paul Pines has staked a worthy claim to it.