

MOIRA, MYTHOLOGY, AND THE ART OF LISTENING ACROSS GAPS

John Peck. *Countradance*, University of Chicago Press, 2012. *I Came, I Saw: Eight Poems*, Shearsman Books, 2012.

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Do we live our lives in an anteroom, waiting to go together to a larger room, or is it rather that we come home, awash in Eros, and find only empty signifiers of the beloved's presence, and call out softly, and notice a shoe all the more delicate for lying empty, so that emptiness is changed, is imbued with desire, such that desire in emptiness seems itself changed, and then in her absence we call, and that call establishes the relation between the place where the call is heard and the higher place, from which comes a response? If that might be so, then this early poem by Peck, "Vestibule," lays out exactly our situation, in which at some point we crave the transformation of carnal desire into spiritual love:

All day our paths had crossed, I'd missed you twice
Or three times—then, had come home tired to find
Your sweater on the couch, your shoes kicked off,
The coffee still warm in your waiting cup—
And lightly called your name, only to hear it
Measure the silences; then felt my eyes
Stray back across the sweater's rich abandon,
The shoes more delicate for lying empty,
The porcelain zero of the cup—but then you called,
Upstairs and far away. Your voice brought back
Another room we entered once together,
Catching our breath—bare benches where the Shakers
Sat quiet after field work and prepared
To go together to the larger room.

Shagbark (1972)

What is a memory for the couple is a future for the poet, perhaps for the reader as well, a further step on the spiritual ladder, an ascetic, communal ideal in which erotic desire becomes a spiritual force that is also a judgment on history. This poem of calling—of hearing a call, answering a call, and entering a place beyond where we are—a place evoked not without anxiety (is that larger room merely death?): this type of poem recurrently turns up in Peck, who is both an historian of American spiritual longing and one of

its singers. To discuss Peck purely as the consummate craftsman he is turns the face of critical attention from the reality he is bent on exploring. But neither the ironies of history and their finely rendered specifics, nor even the poet's own disclaimers, should distract us from the transcendent order he has repeatedly evoked, which lend historical specifics their meaning.

Decades after "Vestibule," in *M and Other Poems* (1996), Peck provides a far darker meditation on the call of the beyond, which furthers the drama of Gnostic awakening proposed in "Vestibule," executed here under the aegis of the negative theology of Meister Eckhart, the medieval mystic who lends the book its epigraph: "The soul must lead itself to execution." This execution is not final oblivion but a widening-out, the dying before dying gently rehearsed in the early poem.

WOODS BURIAL

At the rapids father and boy pitch in a young birch
laid out by winter.

It is the March of mud roads and triggered hearts.
That boy leaps as the limber corpse
hurtles a chute, his father chuckles.

If they really knew what history is,
even though they're in it up to their necks,
they'd feel it, the tug, the cold tilt, They'd stand, shiver.

But how much smarter is that? And how am I better?
It is that log I've got to be,
shot straight, unstuck from the banks,
sluicing my wood-lice through the white gates,
hurtling home.

M and Other Poems, p. 1

The earthly bonds depicted here differ notably from those examined in "Vestibule." They are filial rather than erotic, solitary rather than communal. It's not the great room here we are headed for, but the unknowable beyond, the radiant and unknowing dark to which the soul aspires. Though we are in history up to our necks, the poem tells us, there is a way out. In "Woods Burial" we also see a cameo of a central later concern, the relation of father and son, through which Peck will fashion in his most recent work a vast meditation on his historical moment. We need not plumb Jung's *Red Book* (Peck is one of its three translators) to sense that this clearing away of dead trees occurs in the vale of soul-making. Peck's version of history,

whatever era he might chose to depict with his formidable skill at recreating temporal vistas, is never far, or so it seems in the light of his recent work, from the complexities of conscience that arise between the generations of fathers and sons, especially sons coming of age between World War Two and Vietnam. Both wars and their respective generations are powerfully evoked in Peck's two most recent books, *Contradance* and *I Came. I Saw*, which turn continuously around of the theme of ancestral guilt and expiation, a theme set out in his 2005 volume, *Red Strawberry Leaf*, which contains an elegy for his father, Clarence Erwin Peck, who, as we will see, leaves the poet a vexed legacy and a specific vantage on the Atomic Age:

...for he, who could have taught
or gone to the top, chose neither so that he might invent
from within the jell and spurt in alloyed iron's lattices.

Finding no vessel for his heat, he secretes one.

Builds vessels that will treat the metal that will jacket
world-weapon, that will sheathe the ticking abomination.

Red Strawberry Leaf, p.80

With a deepening sense of both the call of the beyond in history and of filial love, it is no surprise, when Peck takes up the impacts of nuclearism in *Contradance*, that the Shakers we met in "Vestibule," with their traditions of asceticism, handicrafts, and song, cede their place to their more worldly minded and politically involved kin the Quakers, with their pacifism, acts of conscience, and apocalyptic dreams. In "Society of Friends" we are again in a waiting room, and up to our necks in history, this time to hear from survivors:

Oak benches in the meetinghouse parked swept wings in tight formation,
strategic bombers mothballed in the Mohave, around the aisle left
clear for George Fox's dreams of quakes and volcanoes...

Quakers and No-Nuke grayhairs, with cloud piling tremorless midday, faced
two *hibakusha* waiting to testify through their bespectacled translator.

Contradance, p. 12

Khoya Kia, spokesperson for survivors of Hiroshima, is of course there to speak against militarism and nuclear weapons, but also to set before us the matter of ancestral guilt and atonement. In these books the so-called greatest generation could almost be specters out of Hawthorne. While "Society

of Friends” conveys hunger for clarity and delight in imagining a world in which justice has found a place, it is also a snapshot of the modern liberal conscience—its protests, reparations, extraditions, and world tribunals—framed by a closing Japanese diminuendo: “That night in the grass, the unmown cosmos, October fireflies left their lights on for the last time, low far lanterns.” These two recent books rehearse the full complexity of one generation assessing and passing judgment upon its predecessor. Peck’s father, it would seem, has been rendered ritually impure due to his role in the making of the atomic bomb, and to the technology of modern war that developed from it. The father reminds us, as he most certainly does the son, that no American can wander free of what used to be commonly denounced as the “military industrial complex.” Throughout the highly burnished surfaces and lyric depths of these poems, while a line is drawn from American wars from then until now, Peck does not hector us about it. He simply devotes his gifts to elucidating a diffuse culture of moral opposition and protest, which can find as its spokespersons even the most abject: from the near-anonymous in prisons to the nearly-everywhere medicated. *Contradance* offers a string of such witnesses to what is wrong with how we live now: the descendants of Baudelaire’s Paris in a federal penitentiary reading group, or a terminally-ill, once-suicidal vet (“wounds kept open as ways/for the unknowing”), or the once-elegant, now-drifting Old Mary, her face oddly reminiscent of Marla Ruzicka’s in Iraq, hustling at truck stops:

Like us she is a quadrumane fetus fitted with the sex of Cleopatra
and a thief’s chromed cunning, all shrouding the will to respectability
in the land of the twice-mortgaged bed.

“Duchess,” *Contradance*, p.40

Or the troll at a trash compactor, who went to Harvard, had a breakdown in the army, and quotes Rilke in German: this chorus of the criminal, the medicated, and the dysfunctional sharpens the question of how we understand our moral obligations amidst our militarism—not, however, in rote fashion, as these brief samples of the language indicate. The best-known figure taken up in this line is that icon of moral resistance from the Vietnam era, Philip Berrigan, addressed on the occasion of his sentencing in 1997 for vandalizing an Aegis destroyer at the Bath, Maine Iron works. Berrigan, who served in the Second World War and pursued antiwar and anti-nuke activism till his death in 2002, epitomizes the historical epoch spanned by these two books. His life makes explicit the continuum that runs from the Second World War through Vietnam, the Balkans, the first Iraq war, to the present (Berrigan’s particular later focus was depleted uranium ammunition,

responsible for many Iraqi deaths as well as Gulf-War Syndrome). A former priest goes to jail against those very forces which the poet's father made possible! The ritual and biblical symbolism of the Plowshares protests, while of course featuring in Peck's treatment, were means to another end in the actions themselves. This is not protest poetry, nor even political poetry as one usually meets it. The expiation of guilt, and the deep relation of poetry to ritual practice, lead Peck to complicate his relation to Berrigan's protest, calling to mind his own childhood dream of taking up one branch of the family trade even as he dovetails it with sabotage:

Actually to board her?
 whose forging my boyhood fantasy riveted then rode
 squally into swells,
 seam-welded and double-hulled at the urging
 of millennia—...

I am brash bone at grips with handrails corkscrewing
 to the engine room, I am the bucket
 of brains luminescing over the screens, I am the hand
 with hammer and red splatter
 unable to disarm it but covenanting
 with beginnings and with the end—

though in fact I have not done this....

"On the Sentencing of Philip Berrigan,
 Portland Maine, 1997" *I Came, I Saw*, p. 54

This poem suggests that guilt may be endlessly fertile, expiating itself by explicating itself, offering itself up while creating a world in its own shape. So, our ancestors have pre-paved the apocalypse? So, the Cold War split the world and revealed, in the dualist mythology of that historical moment, evil ubiquitously at work? Our poet, equal parts ironist, mystic historian, and celebrant of the natural world, though driven to configure a dualistic moral universe, does not settle for any easy parsing of the damned from the saved. His father's own role in making the Bomb—in perspective a minor role—as it were reminds him, here, that what he himself has *not* done brings him his real matter. Thus the actual confrontations in the poem, although morally tight or nuclear, console precisely by virtue of that big squeeze: no classic tale of moral contagion from the fathers, no refrains about shared guilt for living an American life.

Aristotle's grown-up, *spoudaios*,
 tracking *nous* beyond the names while present, urgent,

searching, in our day though not only ours,
 not to stand apart but to sweat in darkly joyous
 turnabout: sucking it up, drenched while drained, dripping
 with the dew of the first hours.

“On the Sentencing...,” p.55

While an incipient division of the world into opposing forces unifies the moral vision in this recent work, Peck’s fastidious attention to particulars, the ethos of his image making and the complexity of neck-deep history in his hands, pull in multivalent ironies, which still allow for the warmth of the human bond. One such irony, then, is filial: a man whose craft called on him to shape the postwar world is permitted, by a quite different craft, to be seen as a man apart from his metier. A telluric magic links father and son. They are both, after all, craftsmen, alchemists of sorts, shapers of worlds, precisionists in a world of immense forces—and, it should be added, they are prodigious Joycean pissers:

The Project

Manhattan Project: Dad smelted sheaths for The Thing.

His part in all that has not yet settled in me—
 straightforward in the living of professional
 momentum and its unknowns, over against
 the fact and fate of first use. His gift to me,
 however, from near the piers one June night
 at a cut-out along the West Side after the war,
 met simplest need with his mute fellowship—
 going down from the car to the mile-wide river, unzipping,
 and letting fly together, grinning at vastness,
 we framed a simple stand-off, shielded by
 the eternal barrier, toward his open-hearths:
 alchemical pre-gold streaming from us into
 wave-chop set alight by Jersey burning.

Contradance, p.29

Peck has followed his father’s ghost, who provokes a complex poetics of identity and ethics. In the extraordinary poem “Book of the Dead? We Have No Book of the Dead,” Peck turns from what we commonly call the personal to the overtly mythic, invoking the whole genre of ancient and modern manuals for dying and accounts of the soul’s journey and its judgment. The question posed by the title plays upon one of the deepest and most enduring of modernity’s dreams, the coherence and wisdom of ancient belief systems. In this poem Peck reframes the analysis of Protestant conscience he has been pursuing through these two books, reminding us that the overtly Protestant

and mystical materials examined here must answer in some way to prior narratives. Once again, a father-son pair appears, but this time in order to bring an extravagant satire of transcendental longing up against a seasoned and bald-faced justification of human innocence before divine judgment. In this irony, the devastations of atomic fission are overtly presented as the offence for which we deny responsibility, but only at first. In fact, the heart of the poem is its double examination of denial. Our initial sense, and the customary ethical one, is that we have done well to do without the old Egyptian eschatology, which inscribes in its afterlife scenario the blatant permission to deny wrongdoings of every kind. And it would seem that the poem's swift tour of recent history is not about to let deniers off the hook. Yet the poem finally asks us to allow for exactly that proviso and its distinctly human moral realism. Again: the saved and the damned? Well, the saved are damnable, and savingly so. This balancing act around denial, and also around the very dualism which I have noted elsewhere, is what makes the poem unusual, and perhaps unusually helpful. A modern amateur balloonist, suited up in Victorian togs—evoking both the re-enactor crowd and an Enlightenment adventurer—casts loose to drift above an earth of nuclear explosions and war-crimes, as if in the soul's last flight to judgment. It ends:

From the third outrider of an unnumbered sun, lifting
 as diving—this, too, the human may arrange and patent
 if it has sat to its task, lived its dual nature,
 for though sandbag conscience will lift with it, gray ballast,
 all has been readied by sandy Egyptian sagacity
 to deny complicity. For it is human to say,
No, I have never sinned, no, not, bare-faced to the powers.

Contradance, p.76

Of course these matters of ethics and imagination touch Peck's other father as well, that is, the defamed one among his poetic fathers, Ezra Pound. In the title poem of *I Came I Saw*, once again the simpler, polemical view of complicity in moral catastrophe is not to the point. If the son to both of these fathers scores a *duo concertante* for himself—for antiphony structures all but one movement in this long suite—then expiation is at least bitonal, or two-keyed, throughout. The difficult, redemptive task here, by explicit nomination, becomes Shostakovitch-like: both burdened and exuberant. The longest poem Peck has published, it is a massive and masterful response to the literary, historical, and personal issues already touched upon, while opening up history in an unexpected direction. I take the poem to be a direct response to perhaps the most problematic of twentieth-century poetic

texts, *The Pisan Cantos*, a text that could be said to confront all postwar American poets of grand ambition: Olson, Berryman, Oppen, Ginsberg, Baraka, Duncan, and Rich, among others. Such postwar writers of course have understood that they must take only what is useful from *The Cantos* and step around the rest. In “I Came I Saw,” Peck plunges back into the the Second World War, which conducted Pound to his fate, but into a part of that era which Pound and American poetry have left largely unexplored, the siege of Stalin’s Russia. For Peck—as for several historians—the Russians defeated the Nazis, not the Americans. Again, his father appears as a tutelary guide to this landscape of the dead, having been sent to Russia as an advisor before the Cold-War deep freeze set in:

but in 1947 they had only one steel plant that could fuse
 hot rolled sheets with structural steels
 and then we are bobbing in the great river, *storia history Geschichte*
 for mere logic and know-how do not forge fate
 and so they flew Peck over to Magnitogorsk
 thus to see grid-joints in a grain of sand
 to prep them on that high temperature marriage
 and palm eternity in the asbestos hour

I Came I Saw p.75

Later in the poem, the two fathers are explicitly aligned: “A packing crate for Ezra in the cage at Pisa / a card table in our upstairs back room for C.E.” (p.102).

Recalling “Woods Burial,” where father and son pitch dead trees into the river, here we see, as in that earlier poem, the poet and his father, or two of his fathers, linked by their labors. The earlier poem marks a warm moment, the son jumping and the father chuckling, as well as the cold tug of the river, which seems at once history and the ecstatic path of the soul’s exit. In “I Came. I Saw” Peck renders the cold tug of history through an extended associative flow whose final movement approaches “the last hour of the night” (“desert as lake perhaps and going by the numbers” [p.112]) and lends voice to certain of the illustrious dead. “I Came I Saw” may well be that earlier river, now enlarged and drawing the dead home. In any event, in this poem Peck has stretched his tonal range to an associative conversational style that nonetheless retains the knack of swift and efficient narration. It is a paratactic fugue, in a modernist mode, of the historical, the personal, and the mythic. And, we might add, the contemporary, since the military technology that Peck’s father played a bit-part in developing now dominates the world. This poem lets one read the fingerprints of the fathers all over the

Iraq and Afghanistan wars of the sons—begun, after all, over a few rumored nuclear rods and their casings, late editions from the genius engineer’s workshop. These two books deepen and complicate the transcendental longing that has pulled at this poet throughout his career. That is, they intensify the moral force in the call of the beyond. In telling one story of how the modern world came to be, they present an array of activists, artists, and witnesses who work to redeem it, though all of them remain on guard against the charms of piety: as the title poem of *Contradance* puts it, “We are not / allowed to observe our own holiness.” Rather it is the extraordinary fineness of intelligence and heart at work in these poems, their music, and their sensuous and exact images, their scrupulous conscience, that can win for their readers what is so difficult, a vision of art and life bound together by both justice and love.