

TWO FRIENDS

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I Lyric of Disaster / Disaster of Lyric

Norman Finkelstein. *Track: A Poem*. Shearsman Books, 2012.

[First, a caveat: Finkelstein is an old and dear friend, and he and I have been in conversation about the long poem that forms the subject of this review almost since its inception. Indeed, in the “Statements for *Track*” that he has appended to this new, one volume edition of the poem (it was originally published in three volumes between 1999 and 2005), he alludes to some of our discussions. I think I can serve as an honest broker, however, because, while I have great admiration for Finkelstein’s work (he is the author of seven previous volumes of poetry and of five volumes of critical prose), and while the poem has exerted a certain fascination on me, I continue to feel, even after many re-readings, a fair amount of ambivalence about it. *Track* is a courageous, ambitious, and in some respects important poem, but to what extent it succeeds in taking us beyond the impasse it confronts is a difficult question—one that I shall try at least to explore and put into perspective. End of caveat.]

“*Track* is the lyric of disaster, the disaster of lyric,” writes Finkelstein in his “Statements for *Track*” (303). This assertion is clarified by the poem’s title, much as the title is clarified by the assertion; for if, among many other possibilities, the track of the poem’s title leads ineluctably to the death camps, then the assertion partly alludes to Adorno’s famous pronouncement of 1949 that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Adorno did not actually specify *lyric* poetry, but his pronouncement is often quoted as if he had, because he was clearly associating poetry with the “lyrical” values of beauty and refinement, and asserting that continuing to pursue such values as if nothing had happened was barbaric. And if, for Adorno, the disaster of the Shoah ruptured the fabric of civilized life, putting all humanistic values and ideals into question, including traditional aesthetic ones, then it would also, in Finkelstein’s phrase, have constituted the disaster of lyric—especially if the lyric is construed (as it all too often is by American poets and critics) as an unmediated expression of the self. As Adorno was himself aware, his pronouncement is markedly one-sided. In his great essay of 1957, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” he writes: “The universality of the lyric’s substance...

is social in nature. Only one who hears the voice of humankind in the poem's solitude can understand what the poem is saying." Here, Auschwitz does not enter into the discussion because lyric is being conceived not as an exercise in narcissism but as "the voice of humankind"; it is only if the lyric is viewed as an unmediated expression of the self that the problem of "bad faith" becomes relevant. In recent years, the Language Poets have taken a sledgehammer to lyric subjectivity, to the ubiquitous "lyric poetry" of creative writing workshops. Their critique is understandable and to a certain extent justified, but the question is whether in substituting "language" (i.e. some sort of autonomous process) for a debased conception of lyric subjectivity they are not simply reenacting the *enantiadromia* (Jung's term for the violent oscillation between opposed principles or positions) that is characteristic of American poetry generally.

There is, of course, a middle ground between the Language Poets and the various confessional tendencies that remain dominant in contemporary American poetry: it was articulated by Mallarmé in his great essay *Crise de vers* (1886) when he wrote: "The pure work [of poetry] implies the disappearance of the poet as speaker, who cedes the initiative to the words themselves...." The impact of Mallarmé on the avant-garde, especially on its American adherents, has come mainly through his revolutionary free-verse poem of 1897, *Un coup de dés* (which, as it happens, is among other things a confrontation with disaster), but Mallarmé was above all a lyric poet in the classical sense, and in the statement from *Crise de vers* he takes it for granted that ceding the initiative to the words themselves is made possible by verse—that is, by the exigencies of meter and rhyme.

Be this as it may, the "disaster of lyric" to which Finkelstein refers is multi-determined. One of its tracks (and hence one of the tracks leading to *Track*) is history, considered as a series of disasters. But there is also the history of poetry to consider. Beginning in the eighteenth century, prose swallows up all of the other poetic genres until, by a certain point, only the lyric remains; but then, with the advent of modernism, lyric poetry begins to undergo a series of crises of its own. The movement toward free verse coincides with a tendency toward fragmentation, not only because after World War 1 the culture is increasingly perceived as being in ruins but, in the absence of meter and rhyme, because poetry needs to distinguish itself from prose in order to ensure its continued existence and pursue its course as poetry. This is a Faustian bargain, however, for while the reliance on fragmentation allows gifted poets to achieve a certain kind of ghostly lyricism—a "lyric of disaster," in Finkelstein's phrase—it further narrows the scope of poetry and takes its revenge in various other ways.

Paradoxically, it is from the standpoint of fragmentation and of the fragment, of a lyric of disaster that confronts not only disaster in general but the disaster of lyric as well, that Finkelstein attempts to construct a long poem—and indeed, in this single-volume edition, *Track* stretches to more than three hundred pages. The poem is unified—insofar as a poem that confronts ruin and the impossibility of unity can be unified—by two factors: first, by the sense of loss with which it is pervaded and which makes it, from beginning to end, one long elegy, and, secondly, by the various “recombinatory” procedures through which its material is largely generated. As Nathaniel Mackey writes on the back cover, *Track* “undertakes a voyage beset by recombinatory duress.” This may sound like nonsense, but in fact it isn’t—or not entirely. Finkelstein’s material is generated partly by puns, rhymes, and other figures that keep combining in a variety of ways. The figures are continually refigured, the combinations recombined, and thus the process may be said to be “recombinatory.” But what is truly fundamental to Finkelstein’s project, giving the poetry of *Track* its peculiar texture and the ghostly lyricism it is sometimes able to achieve, is that the sense of sadness and loss pervading the poem is not linked to any *specific* events or disasters, or indeed to anything in particular. Thus, while Finkelstein’s project is certainly inflected by Language Poetry, there is a sense in which it hearkens back to the methods of the Symbolists.

One of my favorite moments in *Track* occurs in the first of the poem’s three sections, “Forest.” This moment (or poem, or lyric, or fragment) strikes me as typical of what Finkelstein is saying and doing, and also of what he is able to achieve in this mode:

Founder or finder
you among the many
traced to the city
you among the lost

You among the last
voices from Paradise
founder founder
whispers the finder. (62)

What do we make of these lines? It might seem that I have taken them out of context, but in fact there is none: the poem offers us scarcely any contextual markers, and in effect we are on our own. There is a city, perhaps an ancient one, but we aren’t told; perhaps it was *founded* by some mythical or legendary figure, but he, like all the other inhabitants, is now lost. The

“finder,” who may or may not belong to a later time than the “founder,” is himself “among the many / traced to the city,” but in some unspecified way: it may be that he came upon or *found* the city in a physical sense, just as the “founder” *founded* it, but he could also be a scholar who is studying it; in any event, he too is, or will be, “among the lost.” It is clear that, from a linguistic point of view, the “founder” and “finder” are generated by each other—that is, by a purely linguistic procedure tantamount to rhyme—and the same can be said about the connection that is then drawn between the words “lost” and “last,” a connection that generates the second quatrain. The parallel that leaps across the quatrains between “you among the lost” and “You among the last” is eloquently expressed, but it is immediately undercut by the irony of enjambment, as a result of which “last,” in addition to modifying the unmentioned people of the city, also modifies the “voices from Paradise” of the next line. What voices from Paradise? We aren’t told, but the implication is that the lost city is being connected to Paradise, perhaps because we tend to conceive of the past nostalgically as a paradise.

In the first six lines, there is no speaker other than the poet or lyric-I, but the last two lines of the poem are *whispered* by the “finder.” Is this “finder” the same as the one in the opening quatrain or is he the poet himself? Has the “finder” (of the city? or of the founder?) stepped beyond the threshold of his own time and merged with the poet, who, in his invention or discovery, has become a “finder” in his own right, or has the poet stepped into the time-frame of his contemplation? And finally, is the “finder” at the end of the second quatrain invoking the “founder” in the quatrain’s penultimate line, or is “founder” in that line a verb? The absence of punctuation would seem to indicate that the ambiguity is deliberate and that both interpretations are valid. If so, the “finder,” whoever he may be, is invoking the “founder,” but also reflecting on the fact that all things *founder*, fall into ruin or disaster.

As I noted, the terms “founder” and “finder,” “lost” and “last,” are generated linguistically by one another. But what is crucial is that in this case they are also generated *thematically*. These symbolic concepts are part of a poetic constellation which, though it is not linked to anything specific in the world, is poetically meaningful in and of itself. (This is what makes the poem’s technique akin to that employed by the French Symbolists.) The poem is not referential, but it is also not cut off from meaning. It would be a mistake to consider it vague, for its intention is not to refer to anything in particular but rather to arrive at a clarity and precision of another kind—and this its rhythm forcefully conveys. This is genuine poetry.

In our correspondence on the *Track* project, I mentioned to Finkelstein

that I wished he had put more of his own immediate experience into the poem, and he alludes to this observation in his “Statements” (305). Let me take the opportunity to say that I now think this criticism was completely wrong-headed. Insofar as the poem has weaknesses, they have nothing to do with the lack of contextual markers or with the lyric distance the poet establishes. The problem is rather that the moments of lyric intensity, such as the “Founder or finder” passage I have just discussed, are interspersed with too many weaker passages in which the poet’s inspiration flags. The fault has to do with the American ambition (an ambition amounting almost to a mania sometimes) to attempt a long poem when neither the conceptual nor the technical basis for one really exists. Under the aegis of American capitalist print culture—and I think this tendency has only been exacerbated by the advent of the Internet—the unit of value has long been the book rather than the individual poem (as it should be), and so poets have been under an unnatural compunction to think in terms of books and to write more and more—when more is obviously less where poetry is concerned. So, I wish that Finkelstein had conceived of *Track* not as a single poem but rather as a sequence of lyrics, in which case it might have been easier for him to weed out the lesser material. As the poem now stands, it accumulates but does not really develop. Its gestures are endlessly repeated, and between the extraordinary moments there is a fair amount of stasis and marking time.

As I have suggested, in order for the “recombinatory” procedures to be persuasive, they have to be mirrored by a conception (what Emerson called a “metre-making argument); they cannot simply give rise to an arbitrary one; language and theme must be mutually generative for poetry of this kind (or indeed any kind) to be successful. This does not always happen, however. The following variations from “Columns,” the second section of the poem, provide an example of the problem implicit in the poem’s method:

Why acquiesce
to all that is demanded?

Why demand
that all acquiesce?

#

It is a history
of demands and acquiescence

A history of repetitions
which constitute a life.

The sense of fatalism conveyed by the initial question, and also by the last four lines, is certainly genuine; but the second question (“Why demand / that all acquiesce?”) seems generated merely by the technique of reversal. Granted that the question makes sense, but the problem it poses is not one that the poet happens to be grappling with: *he* is not the one who would be making such a demand, in any event, and so the question seems gratuitous. If the issue of sincerity arises, it has nothing to do with the “experiencing subject,” which is an extraneous concern, but rather with the artistic process, with the poet’s shaping of his material. Of course, if poetry is nothing more than a “recombinatory” game, then the issue of artistic sincerity is irrelevant; in that case, however, poetry itself, as an art form, is itself irrelevant.

Courageous as it is, *Track* is a product of its time—as all poems of course are. Inflected (and, to a certain extent, infected) by the formalistic procedures of Language Poetry, it fails to distinguish—even to itself—when it has something important to say and when it doesn’t, when it is on the right track and when it has gone off the rails, and so brilliant passages often lie cheek by jowl with duller ones. It has many of the faults of the contemporary avant-garde: it is too self-regarding and mannered, and, because poets nowadays “lead their lives / Among poets” (despite George Oppen’s admonition), it is sometimes pitched to too narrow and easily satisfied an audience. Nevertheless, it possesses a philosophical intelligence and a largeness of scope that are exceedingly rare. And most importantly, it contains passages of great beauty, passages in which the attempt to confront the “disaster of lyric” through a “lyric of disaster” offers us a momentary glimpse of transcendence.

II

Paul Bray, Mental Traveler

Paul Bray. *Terrible Woods: Poems 1965-2008*. Dos Madres Press, 2008.

Nobody writes like Paul Bray. “I emerge from a swamp in a seersucker suit,” he announces in a poem entitled “Uganda,” “proclaiming the majesty of the Absolute” (26). Bray was a solitary genius, a *poète maudit*, and though this book comes armed with blurbs from Harold Bloom, Paul Auster, and Angus Fletcher, when he died in November 2011 at the age of 60 he was almost entirely unknown. Prior to this comprehensive and handsomely produced volume, he had published only two chapbooks of poems during his

lifetime, *Ingens Sylva* (Chroma Press, 1986) and *Things Past and Things to Come* (Dos Madres, 2006), and very little poetry in literary magazines. During the last decade of his life, he worked (when he was able to work) as a night guard on a horse ranch in Santa Fe. He had done a Ph.D. at the City University of New York Graduate Center, with a dissertation on *Finnegans Wake*, and when Allen Mandelbaum (who was my mentor as well as one of Bray's at the Graduate Center, and who, in a sad irony, died the month before Bray) first showed me his poems, I was astonished, indeed bowled over by them. I entered into correspondence with Bray and helped him edit the collection, and, as a gesture of gratitude, he dedicated it to me. So, what follows is really more of an appreciation than a review. Bray is a poet who has now vanished, and those who admire his work have an obligation to get the news out. And if not now, when?

Bray has enormous range and extraordinary technical mastery. He writes in a variety of forms, in rhyme and meter as easily as in free verse, and though he never sounds like anyone other than himself, he seems to have read everyone and everything. Blake and Poe are among his most important influences, but there are many others, from Rimbaud (Bray could be considered our American Rimbaud) to Bob Dylan (Bray was the lyricist and lead vocalist for a rock group called "Brains in Heaven"). Like Blake, Bray is what Harold Bloom would call a literalist of the imagination, and I think Bloom is correct in terming him a Gnostic. At the same time, there is a kind of zaniness to Bray's sensibility that produces virtuoso flights of linguistic exuberance and extravagance. Though many of his poems are in an "American Gothic" vein, the book concludes with a poem entitled "What Are Poets For," a marvelous dialogue between Heidegger and Celan.

Terrible Woods is mainly constructed thematically rather than chronologically, and to give the reader something of a sense of Bray's range I would like to contrast the poems contained in section xvii, subtitled "Into the Gnostic" (which plays on the title of the Van Morrison song, "Into the Mystic"), with those contained in section xviii, "The Croons." The two poems included in "Into the Gnostic," "Crawlspac" and "The Hiding Place," are in a free verse so impassioned that the spontaneity of the utterance requires no other shape. Here are the opening lines of the first stanza of "Crawl-space":

Up the secret places of the stairs to the attic where you wait
 for me, your countenance old but young again
 as when the rain first fell You
 who shut up the sea with doors A vine am I
 draw back the bolt I am going in now

and when I see you will you recognize your long
 lost playmate Will you
 have marked the date and kept the time and place?
 of our reunion planned so long ago? (95)

There is an expressivity and a beauty of phrasing here that strike me as completely authentic and, though partly deriving from Whitman, of a kind that is exceedingly rare in contemporary American poetry. ("You who shut up the sea with doors" sounds like something out of Job, and "A vine am I" like something out of the Song of Songs.) There is a double pathos in these lines. On the one hand, the indelible quality of the memory signifies to the poet that the experience continues to exist in the present and is extended into the future; yet at the same time, there is the unavoidable reality of loss. The erotic vision is of such intensity that it verges on what legitimately could be termed mysticism. In the concluding lines of "The Hiding Place," Bray's use of archaism is spontaneous, unstudied, and completely earned:

I am thou and thou art I.
 In all things am I dispersed.
 In gathering me thou gatherest thyself. (96)

These lines may or may not be taken from an old translation of a passage from the Hindu scriptures; they sound as if they were; but the point is that, in any case, they fit seamlessly into the poem.

"The Croons" of section xviii present another side of Bray. These witty, sometimes uproariously funny poems are dazzling in their range of reference and their verbal fireworks. They frequently give the impression of being about to fly off into chaos, but they always remain firmly in control, and this is a mark of Bray's brilliant poetic technique. The form of "The Croons" seems to be one that Bray himself invented or at least discovered; at least I don't recall having encountered it elsewhere. Each one contains seven quatrains plus a final, unconnected line, and each quatrain has a rhyme scheme of *a/a/b/a*, with the *b*-rhyme of the previous quatrain becoming the *a*-rhyme of the next one, and the last, unconnected line rhyming with the *b*-rhyme of the final quatrain. The rhythm of "The Croons" is mainly anapestic, and this contributes to their rollicking quality.

"Croon #5" begins as follows:

The Greenwich Village of the day was always ablaze
 with posters of dancers and bootleg soirees,
 mermaids in bright red tam o' shanters
 in candlelit cellars of cigarette haze.

And it concludes:

an unmitigated

Gaul coolly pierced with his white eye the snoods
of all interlocutors cruelly kangarooed
into the blast-path of his gaze, thus one Black
Mountaineer staggering under a ton of platitudes

re projective verse, the breath, the first thought intact,
ideas in things, open form: stale slapjack
that was already boring in 1922
Paris. By now it's old hat for a fact.

I honestly hate to be the one to inform you. (103)

Call it *Schadenfreude*, if you like, but I find the image of that Black Mountaineer, staggering under the weight of his platitudes, rather consoling – and I am equally amused by the brilliant enjambment that divides “1922” from “Paris.”

My favorite among “The Croons,” however, is the one devoted to Rimbaud. What most American poets of the Counterculture who were influenced by Rimbaud during the ‘sixties took from the French poet was his rebelliousness and his intensity, but what Bray took in addition was Rimbaud’s mastery of and control over form. Here in its entirety is “Croon #28”:

On the banks of the Meuse you sat watching the sound
of the water. Your sorrow was wide and profound.
You were used to clouts and slaps and to being
reminded you were only a child. Renowned

as a monster of erudition, for seeing
the milky sea and forever fleeing
Madame Rimbaud and her harsh routine
for the doorways of Paris. Your hopes of freeing

the city were dashed. The contrast between
the innocent face and the fierce, obscene
language the drunken husbands there
in the local café found funny. So mean

to sappy Verlaine sobbing into your hair.
In Belgium through empires of luminous air

the meteors spoke and the buffaloes. Then
in the barn you released one last scream of despair.

Later when, strangely, you put down the pen
and, oddly, did not pick it up again,
crossing the Alps on foot headfirst,
you burrowed through snow like a mole and when

the nightmare road to Herer was traversed
in greenish water, in dead lakes immersed,
volcanic mountains rose sheer. Your tongue
told of angels of wood through its curtains of thirst.

Now teenagers love you and songs are sung
about you by rock stars and even among
the hosts of larvae and the slaves of fact
a poem like this one is sometimes flung.

And why not? Arthur, you were one class act. (126)

Bray at his wildest makes everyone else sound tame. The following passage from “Yoga in Westchester” (which, though not one of “The Croons,” retains their form) is an example:

For fear of being Ur-ed
the creature steps lightly lest the endlessly deferred
word that the pseudohuman nun wants to carry
through forests of pig-bristles, viscid, disinterred,

and throaty is uttered in a bonkers charivari
that forces Artaud to commit hara kiri.
The thorn-scratched zombie in the big straw hat
with his hand-tusk in caviar in black Caligari

cloak and the hieroglyphic moves down pat
gets the spelling of apophrades right off the vampire-bat,
sleeping all night in the mumbling bones
and rising at daybreak with zigzag cravat

spinning on his neck. Well, I took out some loans,
saying Hey Wallace Stevens lend me slick trombones,
and I knocked at the door of Davy Jones's locker,
saying Listen Hart Crane can you spare three thrones?

And they both said Man you must be off your rocker. (139-40).

Just as Bob Dylan had Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot fighting in the captain's tower, so Bray brings "high culture" into conjunction with popular culture; he evokes Derrida, Artaud, Bloom, Stevens, and Crane in these lines, but heaps everything together demotically in a "bonkers charivari." In the process, he gets not only the spelling of "apophrades" right but much about America as well. America, as Bray's poems indicate, is not a melting pot; the metaphor is wrong. It contains multitudes, but nothing is ever dissolved; on the contrary, the incongruities and dissonances remain ever-present.

The sheer delight that Bray takes in the craft of verse leads him sometimes to undertake bold experiments that are like nothing else in American poetry. In "Glyphs from Beyond," for example, a sequence of three sonnets that brings together Bray's interests in mystical exploration and science, the language of scholarly discourse is utterly transformed by the poet's brilliant deployment of rhyme and meter. The first section is entitled "Alien Alphabet":

His technique of mystical exploration involved
projecting his consciousness into blank, embryonic
sectors of the matrix until waiting was resolved
by a sense of something moving along the tectonic
vectors of the grid where the paradigm shifts
into third and a whole world is lurking in the plasmic
halo that shimmers on the leaves and glyphs.
He adjusted the trodes and allowed the orgasmic
waves to wash over the sands behind his face
and the photisms changed into the green of the mantra
and he asked the bright beings who linger in that place
of the emblematic meaning of the giant sriyantra-
crop circle found in the Maryland field.

What was its genesis? What had it concealed? (293)

This works so well, it seems to me, because of the extraordinary use of enjambment, especially on feminine rhymes (e.g. "embryonic / sectors" and "tectonic / vectors," which also makes use of internal rhyme) and because the meter is accentual but not syllabic: the anapestic rhythm coincides with four strong beats per line, but extra syllables are allowed, and these contribute to the continual sense of flowing over that produces a river of sound. Indeed, the first thirteen lines contain only two sentences. Here is how I would scan the first two lines: "His technique of *mystical exploration involved / projecting his consciousness into blank embryonic...*" The first line has thirteen syllables; the second, fourteen. One could argue that Bray is making use of a pentameter rather than a tetrameter line, but there are some

lines that cannot be scanned as having five feet (e.g. “*crop circle found in the Maryland field*”), and, in any event, the metrical ambiguity, resulting partly from the alternation of triple and duple meters, seems an aspect of what Bray is doing in the poem. The play of meter against rhythm (where rhythm is a third term that comes between meter and prose) is another aspect of the confrontation between poetry and prose discourse – which is to say, between poetry and the prosaic – and this in turn is a figure for the confrontation between the mundane and the esoteric that Bray is working with in terms of the poem’s content.

The second section of “Glyphs from Beyond,” “Flattened Plants,” strikes me as even more of a *tour de force* than the first one:

The sriyantra, they told him, is a glyph for the descent
of spirit into matter and though all of these formations
are orchestrated by devas – those particular plants were bent
by Shakti herself; it was one of her creations.

Abhinavagupta’s Paratrisika-Vivarana
informs us that Devi is derived from the root
‘*div*’ which means “to sport” and that the highest *jnana*
(what we in the West call the Absolute)
is of Shakti the Devi’s incorrigible play.

In the West she’s called Lilith, derived from the Sanskrit
‘*lila*’: the love-play of Krishna. Today
the consensus among linguists would be that the transit
involved in this highly improbable folk-
etymology must be some cryptic joke. (293)

I marvel at line 5 (“Abhinavagupta’s Paratrisika-Vivarana”), at the way “Vivarana” rhymes with “*jnana*,” at the parenthetical explanation of “*jnana*” that follows (with its play of iambs against anapests: “what *we* in the West call the *Absolute*”), and at the way the second quatrain is enjambled, so to speak, by the fact that the period falls after line 9 rather than line 8. The mysteries that Bray discerns on the level of the content are played out on the level of the form. The writing here is very unusual and, to my mind, extraordinary.

Not everything in the collection is of equal quality. I don’t particularly care for the free-verse “American Frontispieces” of section XIV, for example, which take up about thirty pages, or for some of the narrative poems in free verse. But the “Poems of Marvelous Adventure” of section XIII (dedicated to John Ashbery, of all people, on whose work Bray has contributed an essay)—poems that retell *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, some of the Baron Munchausen stories (Bray loves the figure of hyperbole), *The Wizard*

of Oz (in its film and novel versions), *Peter Pan*, and *King Kong* – are marvelous indeed.

There is much to ponder and much to be moved by in *Terrible Woods*, and one hopes that there are manuscripts sitting in Bray's drawer that will soon be brought to light. Goodbye, dead poet! When we read poems of yours such as "Maura" (148), "The Harem in the Attic" (162-63), and "Ingens Sylva" (131-37), "the good old halcyon days when people / were not such haters of Life and Pleasure" (128) seem to return to us and to be with us still. Paul, you were one class act.