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The Poem as Myth

AMERICA A PROPHECY, A NEW READING OF AMERICAN POETRY FROM PRE-COLUMBIAN TIMES TO THE PRESENT, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and George Quasha. New York: Random House, 1974. Pp. 603. \$12.95, hb.

America A Prophecy proves Shelley's thesis that poetry "subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things." In this uncommon anthology Mayan myths, Black sermons, Shaker happenings, turn-of-the-century light shows, blues, and lectures by John Cage are only a small sample of what Jerome Rothenberg and George Quasha mean when they say the domain of poetry has been extended to include "virtually any use of language." Although this is a rather extravagant concept, the book itself is more orderly and traditional than so far-ranging a definition would suggest, for recognized poets make up at least half of the book. The uniqueness of the anthology lies not so much in its exceptional contents as in the editors' ability to see relationships in ostensibly unrelated things.

Rothenberg's and Quasha's credentials are impeccable. They are both serious poets. They have worked at translations and edited other anthologies. Quasha founded *Stony Brook* and Rothenberg co-edits the first magazine devoted exclusively to ethnopoeitics, *Alcheringa*. They view their anthology as a map, a guide to unknown terrain, and they say American poetry is just that—a vast region of which we're not yet fully conscious.

The title of the anthology is taken from Blake's poem, *America, a Prophecy*. It is an ingenious choice, for just as Blake celebrates America's separation from the Prince of Albion, so the editors suggest the time is at hand for American poetry to assume its own identity and to depend less on its English antecedents. There is no intention here of minimizing the debt we owe to English literature, which is huge; there is only the plea to look a bit farther.

While few of us have experienced directly the more exotic rites and rituals that appear in *Prophecy*, they are in the air we Americans breathe. They are our national myths, our collective unconscious. They are roadsigns in the search for our wellsprings.

In "Beginnings," the first section of *Prophecy*, we see immediately with what success the poems have been juxtaposed. First, we have the Mayan legend of creation:

This is the first account, the first narrative. There was neither man, nor animal, birds, fishes, crabs, trees, stones.
The surface of the earth had not appeared. There was only the calm sea and the great expanse of the sky.
There was nothing brought together, nothing which could make a noise, nor anything which might move, or tremble, or could make noise in the sky.
There was nothing standing; only the calm water, the placid sea, alone and tranquil. Nothing existed.

Then without skipping a beat Robinson Jeffers' "The Great Explosion":

Peace in our time was never one of God's promises; but back and forth, die and live, burn and be damned,
The great heart, beating, pumping into our arteries His terrible life.
He is beautiful beyond belief.
And we God's apes—or tragic children—share in the beauty.
We see it above our torment, that's what life's for.

Here, too, is Ezra Pound's beguiling "The Child's Guide to Knowledge" with its catechetical treatment of God, fawns, nymphs, demons, and genii. Gertrude Stein coexists with the Iroquois and Delaware Indians. Allen Ginsberg and Walt Whitman are comfortable together. More surprising in this context are Bryant and Emerson until you remember, as Borges in his splendidly succinct *An Introduction to American Literature* reminds us, that transcendentalism has its roots in "Hindu pantheism, neoplatonic speculations, the Persian mystics, the visionary theology of Swedenborg, German idealism, and the writings of Coleridge and Carlyle."

In "Rites and Namings" the relationship of language to ceremonials is explored. We find Whitman's "Words," Corso's "Food," and Cotton Mather's "Stones." The four-letter poems are here, the New Orleans street cries, and E. E. Cummings, who has always seemed to me more whimsical than ironic, teams up well with an ingenuous Aztec definition of an owl.

"Losses" mourns the compromises America has made with her ideals. There is a selection from William Carlos Williams' epic masterpiece *Paterson*. Leroi Jone's "Black Dada Nihilismus" is as threatening as ever. Diane Wakoski's "The Ice Eagle" is fine here, but Archibald MacLeish is at a disadvantage in his polemical poems, and better to have included the matchless "You, Andrew Marvell" in the section on "Beginnings."

Lines by Emily Dickinson characterize one of the most satisfying portions in the anthology, "Magic and Vision": "But Magic—hath an Element / Like Deity—to keep—." Dickinson makes several appearances in the book, but she is especially at home in this section. Perhaps more than any poet since Blake, she had access to mystical inner resources that could transform the small into the great, or as she put it: "The Bees— became as Butterflies—The Butterflies— as Swans—."

Stephen Crane's eerie poem about the "whispering, whispering snakes" is here and Roethke's beautiful frenzy "Unfold, Unfold":

By snails, by leaps of frog, I came here, spirit.
Tell me, body without skin, does a fish sweat?
I can't crawl back through those veins,
I ache for another choice.
The cliffs! The cliffs! They fling me back.
Eternity howls in the last crags,
The field is no longer simple:
It's a soul's crossing time.
The dead speak noise . . .

One of our most consistent mystics, Anais Nin, is represented with a quote from "The House of Incest." In her diary she once recorded the complaint of a friend, "I have lived too long with people who did not believe in magic and so I have lost my power." Rothenberg and Quasha evidently still believe.

We owe the anthology a debt of gratitude for refurbishing a number of poets, particularly those who were passed over in the 1930's and 40's by what the editors describe as "a sharp turn against 'modernism.'" Harry Crosby, a favorite of Ezra Pound, is one of these precursive poets. The following is an excerpt from *Assassin*, published by Crosby's Black Sun Press in 1929, the year Crosby committed suicide.

I exchange eyes with the Mad Queen

the mirror crashes against my face and bursts into
a thousand suns
all over the city flags crackle and bang
fog horns scream in the harbor
the wind hurricanes through the window
and I begin to dance the dance of the Kurd Shepherds . . .

. . . I am the harbinger of a
New Sun World
I bring the Seed of a
New Copulation
I proclaim the Mad Queen

I stamp out vast empires
I crush palaces in my rigid
hands
I harden my heart against
churches

I blot out cemeteries
I feed the people with
stinging nettles
I resurrect madness
I thrust my naked sword
between the ribs of the world
I murder the world!

I could go on listing the varied contents (even a cartoon from Krazy Kat and a snippet of Hiawatha are included), but the question is, "what does it all add up to?" These poems are, perhaps, a projection of the eternal ideas. They are the "collective images," the "mythological motifs" suggested by Jung when he wrote in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:

. . . day after day we live far beyond our consciousness; without our knowledge, the life of the unconscious is also going on within us. The more critical reason dominates, the more impoverished life becomes; but the more of the unconscious, and the more of myth we are capable of making conscious, the more of life we integrate.

America A Prophecy is not a haphazard throwing together of the cultist and the far-out, nor is it a piece of anti-intellectualism. Just as Jung reached mysticism by way of his formidable scholarship, this anthology teaches poetic innocence with a great deal of literary sophistication.

GLORIA WHELAN