Barometric Readings (William Heyen, Geoffrey Hill, William Matthews, Ben Howard, Brian Swann, Reginald Gibbons, and others)

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Poets evoke climates unconsciously or consciously. Sometimes a body of poems comes together fortuitously. No one planned it, yet it has a novel character and is complete. Sometimes that character is the result of an editor’s prestidigitation, but every now and then a poet sets out to fashion his own atmosphere. It is an enormous risk. William Heyen has taken that risk and succeeded. Long Island Light must be compared to Lowell’s Life Studies, for it combines autobiographical lyrics with a prose memoir. Lowell brought his practical life into focus with Life Studies; Heyen is unwilling to clarify his early life, preferring to fluctuate between dream and fact, both in the poems that constitute sections I and III of his collection and in the prose memoir which is its central element.

Like Lowell’s memoir, Heyen’s is a gloss upon the surrounding poems. The emotional sources of his poems are obvious: “Some aestheticians believe,” Heyen says, “that the lyric impulse begins with a crisis, a deep and long-lasting hurt, an experience that takes on dimensions of the traumatic: if anything, the girl—I have not seen her, except in dreams, for more than fifteen years—and the land, to which I
return once or twice a year." The memoir is haunting—sometimes so much so that it drowns the lyric force of the poems that derive from it. There are powerful, understated segments—the story of Heyen's teacher Richard Purdum who committed suicide, the account of the wild cats that terrorized his childhood neighborhood, the detailed reflections upon the changes in Smithtown Township on Long Island which resolve themselves into yet more detailed observations upon the natural life the poet knew there. For example: "The Japanese beetle, its back a myriad of metallic sheens, when it feasts on a grape leaf seems not to destroy but to uncover the leaf's hidden form and beauty, Michelangelo chipping away excess stone. The beetle leaves behind the leaf's white tracery of veins, or, to change the image, its skeleton. Our grape arbor after one onslaught of beetles fifteen years ago was white, unearthly, ghostly. From a distance it seemed the whorl of a great spider.

I have said that Heyen's poems fluctuate between dream and fact; actually the two blend and toy. The opening poem illustrates this quality.

The Nesconset Crickets

Either the crickets stopped,
or I fell asleep as they kept on.

But sometimes I'd count their song
all night, when I couldn't sleep,
or dreamed I couldn't sleep, or dreamed
from under grass that I helped them sing.

The poems are not all personal recollection and private dream, but include historical evocations, such as "The Pigeons" and "A Tour on the Prairies." They range from the powerful to the banal, for Heyen seems not to have exercised a strong, dispassionate editorial eye. Still, the collection as a whole is rich and evocative. Heyen has created a climate in which his poems—even the weakest of them—can survive.

Heyen's world is rich in detail—repeated detail, it is true—but pungent detail nonetheless. His dreams do not fully merge with his nostalgia, but they are earthy, memorable dreams. Geoffrey Hill has taken a different road altogether. He does not want a climate in which everyone breathes comfortably. His atmosphere is rarefied. If you can last there for any length of time, you sense its exhilaration. His is less a personal nostalgia than a cultural evocation. Taking what he pleases from a varied heritage, he fashions a world that is cryptically elegant—
a world in which explicit meaning means less than the lapidary manner in which it is expressed.

At a conference on modern literature at Michigan State University last October, R. K. Meiners referred to Hill's most recent collection, *Tenebrae*, as a book of nuances and gestures, and described Hill's poetic intent as a questioning of the word by the word, a questioning of the value of the gesture that language makes in the act of poetry. Hill, who participated in the conference, admitted that, for him, writing poetry was a fearsome effort in which he was always aware of language's menace, but through which he strove for "the simplicity that lies on the other side of difficulty."

A first reading might leave a reader feeling that there is little more than highly-wrought difficulty in Hill's poems, but Hill is a poet to be read more than once. His poems are like hard candies that are hard all the way through. Feeling is more important than clear ideas in Hill's poems, for they are accumulated intensities of evocation. They are like Pre-Raphaelite poems compressed. "A Pre-Raphaelite Notebook" is an appropriate example.

Primroses; salutations; the miry skull
of a half-eaten ram; viscous wounds in earth
opening. What seraphs are afoot.

Gold seraph to gold worm in the pierced slime:
greetings. Advent of power-in-grace. The power
of flies distracts the working of our souls.

Earth's abundance. The God-ejected Word
resorts to flesh, procures carrion, satisfies
its white hunger. Salvation's travesty

a deathless metaphor: the stale head
sauced in original blood; the little feast
foaming with cries of rapture and despair.

"The Pentecost Castle" is a collection of short, evocative lyrics prompted by Spanish poetry, but still demonstrating a lean Pre-Raphaelitism as in this example:

Down in the orchard
I met my death
under the briar rose
I lie slain
I was going
to gather flowers
my love waited
among the trees
down in the orchard
I met my death
under the briar rose
I lie slain

Like Hill's earlier poems in Mercian Hymns and King Log (poems published as Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom: Poems 1952-1971 in the States), the poems in Tenebrae suggest a shadowy, antagonistic voice that seems to speak against the poems themselves just out of hearing. It is a troubling effect richly evident in the opening section of "Tenebrae."

Requite this angel whose
flushed and thirsting face
stoops to the sacrifice
out of which it arose.
This is the lord Eros
of grief who pities
no one; it is
Lazarus with his sores.

The opening stanza of "The Laurel Axe" is another example.

Autumn resumes the land, ruffles the woods
with smoky wings, entangles them. Trees shine
out from their leaves, rocks mildew to moss-green;
the avenues are spread with brittle floods.

Autumn illogically ruffles and entangles the land with immaterial wings. Against this blurry entanglement, trees shine. Meanwhile, opposed to the soft green mildew of the rocks we expect to be hard, is the brittleness of floods that should be soft and flowing. The language of the poem contradicts itself into a rich adulteration.

Hill's poems, though appearing to be accretions of brief, intensified sensations, are truly complete objects. Heyen's, much looser and relaxed, also have a completeness that owes something to the uniformity of the climate he creates for them. By contrast, William Matthews and Ben Howard bring their apparently casual poems to life with brief passages of great energy, even fierceness. The intensity of the parts inspirits poems that seem to abnegate intensity. "Talking to the
Moon" is an example from Matthews' Rising and Falling. It is a meditation on the uses people put language to and states the poet's craving for words to be food for all to eat. But the poem ends:

The words I want
are sewing my body to sleep,
the no news that is good news, blood
tying and untying its knots.

It is a vivid conclusion that asserts the meaning of inexpressiveness—the meaning that has hidden throughout behind the desire to speak. The poem cures the passion to utter with the antidote of useful silence.

Language itself is a common theme in Matthews' poetry. In "Spring Snow," which opens the volume, he says, "And here comes the snow, a language / in which no word is ever repeated, / love is impossible, and remorse...." Snow is associated here and in other poems with dissolution. Again and again language resolves itself to silence. At the end of this poem death is "a profusion / of detail, a last gossip, character / passed wholly into fate and fate / in flecks, like dust, like flour, like snow."

Ben Howard's Father of Waters: Poems 1965-1976 is similarly alive with pictures clinching poems to life that otherwise are lullingly musical. The first poem of the book, "Noon," is an example. After musing on the resemblance between long, distorting morning shadows and the way the mind trails behind the thing it desires, Howard adds:

Yet one looks out
in an early morning hour such as this one,
watching a sparkling grackle land
upon a roof, and one imagines noon,
when every object clarifies itself
in sunlight, void of mind and shadow,
and is itself alone, a thick
beak, or iridescent wing.

The vividness of the picture makes the point about desired clarity that the poem yearns toward.

Some poems about natural objects and creatures are little more than collections of these pictures, either direct or metaphorical. "Wild Turkey in the Rain" opens with these lines—"His wattle drips like tallow down / his neck. His head, a wet / shaft of ash, protrudes / above the reeds." In other poems, the forceful images are nodes of meaning; one of my favorites is "Orion's Crossing." As the blind giant steps into the water, the "sea is like a cold / Iron around his ankle";

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moving into deep water, he “feels the weight / Of his body rise and leave him / Like the memory of a dream in the early morning.” Sometimes, as in “Break,” Howard aims at no more than capturing a scene with details and then including one highlight to set off the whole. This method does not always work. Occasionally a poem does not come to life despite its elegant meters and sharp images. Occasionally a poem is overburdened with details that no highlight vivifies. But most of these poems succeed, and, taken together, establish a climate of their own—not because of what they have to say, but because of the way they insist on saying it.

Howard’s poems about natural objects and creatures capture a feeling for their private qualities. Although Jon Swan is described as a nature poet, the weakness of A Door to the Forest is precisely the inability to let what is beyond the self be itself, despite the human need to express that unlikeness in words. “People and Bats” is an example. They don’t mix, Swan says, “These light mice / that have learned to fly / at the price / of being blinded for life wake / an old fear.” He gives examples and then continues:

Night
brings them flapping out of hiding
like bad dreams. Like fear.
Like this fear
that far overhead, beyond
the known sky,
something blind
and unmanned
we cannot see or stop
already drones or is silently gliding.

This is fearfulness concocted at a desk. There is no supporting climate congealing here nor in most of the poems in Swan’s collection. I do not mean to say that these are bad poems. The last three poems of Part One—“Mab,” “The Return,” and “Taking the Plunge”—appeal to me. But they do not capture me. Swan’s poems too often lack the trick of transforming statement to event. The opening poem of the collection is short enough to use as an example.

The Social Contract

God knows why you should pick on me
to save your soul from dissolution here.
But I have seen your forward grin become
a signal of distress as you attempt
to fathom what I, a stranger, make of you.

I shall, accordingly, provide a smile
which you may take to mean that we have met
and that I do, indeed, recall your face;
while I, in turn, interpret your relief
to mean that I am someone in your eyes.

The poem renders with an apt flatness the vacuity of some kinds of social encounters. But with no picture, no metrical electricity, the poem cannot detach itself by weary irony from the mood it describes. The poem talks, but it does not evoke.

Swan, though not thrilling, has some power to overcome his talkiness, but the urge to prose is a novocaine to R. A. D. Ford's poems in *Holes in Space*. Ford apparently wishes to convey a flat, grey, stoical attitude in his stark little poems. There is a conscious effort at a uniform tone, manner, atmosphere; but the images and meters deaden their subjects without conveying a sense of stoical endurance. The language in "Ubiety," the first poem of the collection, is as flat as its main image.

I am in a definite place
At a definite time. And
The geography and the weather
Are of singular unimportance.

Voices, sounds, ideas
Fix a real country, without
Emigration. Its boundaries
Are clear, its mythology known.

The future is laid out flat
Like mercator's projection.
It has a basis in truth but in fact
Its distortions are predictable.

"Holes in Space" has more life, but it is a squirming, unintended life.

Look, I see holes in space,
And a tenderness
Polished with silence.

A bird singing like an
Organ at vespers
Supplies the counterpoint.
Your eyes become empty
With dreaming
And I can see space between them.

It is difficult for me to conceive of a bird's song resembling an organ as it might be played at vespers, and the space between the subject's eyes strikes me as bordering dangerously upon the comic. Sometimes Ford can gain his effect by restraint, creating a healthy tension by what is not said, as in "The Volcano," or by conveying a sense of casualness appropriate to his subject, as in "For Pasternak." For the most part, however, the prosiness and inexactness of images smother what vitality was in these poems.

Theodore and Renée Weiss must have had vitality in mind when selecting the five collections of poems in the first volume of their Quarterly Review of Literature poetry series. Beyond their common vitality, each section achieves a climate of its own, generally attributable to manner rather than subject, though many of the poems reveal a taste for location—a rendering of emotion as an attribute of place, very much in the manner of Heyen's Long Island Light. Brian Swann's Living Time is set in Italy and Greece. His poems are not elaborately designed but resemble those sketches that gifted nineteenth-century travellers used to toss off with watercolors or pen and ink. He wears his talent loosely, like a cloak. Many of his poems are like Ben Howard's "Break": pictures vivified by one or two highlights, but steeped in a fostered atmosphere of place. "How It All Starts" begins with this precise bit—"In the cold lane a tom shivers his scent against the wall." In "Santa Maria in Trastevere," image, meter, and sound combine to confer life upon an apparently rambling report.

When we wake it is dusk.
We walk in the piazza under a sky
Tiepolo-blue in smears behind clouds
that suddenly thunder. Lightning
chases down sidestreets. People run ahead
screaming.

Like Howard, Swann is often content merely to assemble appealing details to create poems with visual vitality as in "Hens," "A Village in Messina," or "Jenkins." He has abandoned pretension in these poems and has thereby achieved a grace and amiability that invite you back in a way that sterner poems do not.

M. Slotznick says, in the "Afterword" to Industrial Stuff, that he "hoped that colloquial rhythms can be made eloquent, and colloquial themes made to link us to other times and cultures as well as to
ourselves.” Coming after Swann’s poems, Slotznick’s seem precisely that kind of good-hearted pretentious effort that misses its mark by striving too earnestly to swell minor achievements into a uniform ‘statement’—a sort of faked intellectual climate. I admire some of the isolated successes in diction and rhythm, but, on the whole, these poems strike me as too often strained, too often overdone.

E. G. Burrows, perhaps because his effort is a modest one, succeeds with his radio play, Properties: A Play for Voices, which dramatizes the conflicts arising out of the marriage between Fanny Kemble and Pierce Butler in what may be called an oblique dialogue, with Kemble’s comments in verse and Butler’s in prose. There is little here that is memorable, but it is all adept and pleasing.

At first glance, Reginald Gibbons’ poems in Roofs, Voices, Roads might appear to resemble those of Heyen or Swann, but they are different—closer to Heyen than Swann if one had to draw likenesses. Gibbons has a related ability to capture a sense of place and mood with casually constructed poems illuminated by one or two vivid images. Here is the fourth segment of “Dusk.”

Reflection on the living room window glass
has put the potted ivy & geranium out in the street.
A man strolls through them with his dog.

His chest is in flames.
What a relief to see the fire of loneliness
there too, breaking
from another man’s heart!

Other poems have this sharp, painfully surprising accuracy of image. “These Simple Things” begins as a painterly still-life that turns to implied agony. “This Life” is a muted photograph of loneliness.

Gibbons has the gift of vividness, but he does not strike so consistently and to so good an effect as Heyen and Swann. He does not so uniformly build up an ambience for his poems that persuades the reader to relate one poem to another even when the subjects, tones, and methods beg him to do so. Still, this is a good collection of poems by a writer who is apparently just beginning to find the manner that will satisfy him.

David Galler has long known the manner that satisfies him, and he says so several times in Third Poems: 1965–78. This manner is thoroughly traditional in technique—a regular but sophisticated meter, rhyme, clear narrative, and direct discourse. He skillfully makes his points about the nature of restraint (for art and life) in the blank
verse of "The Escape of Icarus" and about the complexities of love attraction in the rhymed "Kalypso." His best manner is captured most effectively perhaps in "In Praise of Life."

I found more comfort, cousins, in self-pity
Than in the world, which constantly fell short
Of expectations, and found I would resort
Unconsciously to pride, having a witty
Self-disgust about it; oh, I'd say:
"Look! I can handle any mess that comes,
Be it with mask, directly, or all thumbs—
There's nothing here I wanted anyway."

But now that I am nearer to the end,
I'd like to make a better show than this.
I think I owe it to myself to rage,
And to forgive—to say the world can bend
Me like the rest, and yet holds much I'd miss.
Let me grow old inside this open cage.

Galler and Hill are different from the other poets discussed here, for they are satisfied to work their startlingly unlike bearings out with inherited instruments. The others, unwilling to stop there, depend more upon details than structures for their effects, and seek a presiding tone or manner—what I have called a climate—which, for those who achieve it, replaces the poetic decorum that buoyed the efforts of much earlier poets. This sustaining tone is more evident these days in unstructured poetry; thus Galler, the most traditional poet, has the least distinctive climate, yet Hill, who is equally formal in Tenebrae, has the most intense. A sense of personal atmosphere can be emphasized and exhibited to advantage by judicious editorial selection, but it must exist first in the poet's initial approach to his work. The finest collections here succeed largely because they possess this quality rendered to good effect.

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