

NOTES ON TEACHING CLASSICAL TRADITION AND MODERN POETRY

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It was the teaching of Classical Mythology, as a typical general education course, that inspired me to start reading modern poetry with an eye to finding fresh examples of the classical tradition - the awareness and understanding of the classical tradition being one of the principal reasons for teaching such a course in the first place. The tradition, however, is overwhelming in its size, and for that reason I decided at one point to concentrate on contemporary poetry only, roughly defined as that written after the Second World War.

The persistent presence of myth and mythical patterns¹ in modern poetry is one of the most obvious signs of the continuation of classical tradition. But myth is by no means the only such sign. A good deal of poetic repertory, especially in regards to the origin, nature and function of poetry in general, goes back to the traditional *topoi* scattered throughout Greek and Roman literature. The traditional themes such as the poet as prophet, entertainer/athlete, or healer; the poet as craftsman or laborer (farmer, baker, gardener, fisherman, etc.); his poems as his children; the lazy poet; his choice of life, that is, the life of action or the life of contemplation; the poet in exile; the poet saying farewell to his poems; the feigned modesty of the poet; the jealousy of his peers; the chain of remembrance; the truth and lies in poetry; the moral responsibility of the poet; the proper language of poetry; poetry and painting; inspiration vs. literary skill; whether poetry is creation, or rather imitation; whether the goal of poetry is to give pleasure or to educate; the incessant chattering, and alternately, the silence of the poets, etc. - all of these topics are still well represented in contemporary poetry.

Classical tradition often affects the formal side of modern poetry too, and the modern poet does not shy away from such traditional set pieces such as *ecphrasis*, *catalogue*, *adynaton*, Homeric simile, and the like, not to mention the more obvious poetic forms such as the ode (sapphics and alcaics included), elegy, epic (even on contemporary events), epigram, epithalamium, etc., all the way down to the bizarre form of *technopaegnia*.²

Finally, there are also poems fashioned *after* someone - such as, after Ovid,³ after Horace, after Catullus, after Martial, after someone from the Greek Anthology. They can be treated as a separate category, although they often involve ancient myth; undoubtedly, they too bear witness to the fact that ancient poetry can still inspire the desire for direct emulation.

Still, the question remains: why classical tradition at all, and why classical myth in the present day and age? Also, from which sources exactly is myth filtering into modern poetry? Considering the sources, the answer is fairly obvious: it is the traditional classics, such as Homer (rather than Vergil⁴), Hesiod, Ovid, the tragedians, Plato.⁵ As to the why, the answer is not that simple. On the one hand, the modern poet is aware - as countless poets before him all the way back to Homer -- that myth is a convenient source of material for allusion, allegory, metaphor, reference, example, and similar figures of style. On the other hand, however, the poet may not be interested in high-brow allusion, he may be looking for something simpler perhaps, something like - a good story to tell.

As an example of retelling of an ancient story let us consider Hayden Carruth's version of the celebrated Homeric Hymn to Hermes.⁶ When reading it we easily recognize the plot, the main characters and the overall setting -- although all of these seem to be of secondary importance only. What the poet is really interested in is the language in which to tell the story. Thus he creates a whole new language for this purpose. The newly created language is a wild mixture of standard English, poetic language, slang and jazz idioms, all skillfully blended together in order to provide an illusion of - authenticity. Surely, every element of that language is authentic in *some* context, but the mixture as such is definitely artificial. However, the overall effect is one of authenticity. In other words, Carruth is attempting what Homer and his fellow bards had once done, that is, creating a mixture of dialects for the sake of a particular poetic genre. Back then, it was the epic poetry; today it is called - the *Homeric blues*.⁷

The "Little Old Funky Homeric Blues for Herm" speaks of a prodigiously precocious child, born to a single mother called Maybelline, in the heart of Harlem, who on the first day of his life invents a new instrument, the tenor saxophone; steals a brand-new red Jag belonging to a professional musician called Apollonio; figures out, all by himself, the "man's sacrificial relationship to fate"; works out a plan on how to get "status" ("it's like powerful, like being on top, but with class, no sweat, see") for himself and his Ma; meets his dad who lives somewhere "up Sugar Hill"; and is finally pronounced the "Prince of Thieves" by his own skeptical mother Maybelline:

"you going to be a rat just like them, little prince...
and the very best name they ever going
to call you is Psychopompos..."
"Shit," said homunculus Herm.

From the rich narrative texture of the Homeric Hymn Hayden Carruth has selected one theme for special emphasis. It is the theme of innovation in music and the social/cultural implications of such innovation. Hermes' lyre becomes the tenor saxophone, while the 'new style'⁸ Greek dance music translates into jazz. The substitution works very well. But inevitably some of the elements of the old story get lost in the retelling. For instance, missing are the various religious attributes of Hermes, his bargaining with Apollo in the process of which their respective domains are defined, as well as the tongue-in-cheek sophistry of Hermes (his defense speech in the Hymn is based on the argument: it is not *likely* that I could have done it, therefore, I did not do it). On the other hand, the poet gives some prominence to an element that is not emphasized in the Hymn itself (but is often found in artistic representations) - the phallic nature of the god. The cryptic allusion to "man's sacrificial relationship to fate" refers to the child Herm's discovery of sex.

All in all, the modern version of the story is almost as delightful as the old one. Throughout the poem the child Herm is described with the help of epithets such as: heisty, hardnose, hero, horrid, hectic, hippocrene, hoodoo, hieratic, holy, hijacker, handy, heretical, haunted, haywire, hispid, hilarious, homunculus. The list in itself shows clearly the nature of this language, created for a single purpose, and yet vibrant and alive as a 'real' language.

A different example of transformation of an ancient story can be found in "The Birth of Arachne" by James Schevill⁹. The poem starts off as a simple retelling, but ends up as something quite different.

Schevill begins his story of Arachne by introducing the main characters, as Ovid himself could have done. They are Idmon, a dyer in purple, and his daughter Arachne, weaver of fine fabrics and tapestry, both of Colophon in Lydia. Next we hear that Arachne is:

no burning beauty,
plain as burlap used for bagging...

The fact that she is so plain looking makes her "bureaucratic" father, a "master of specialization", clearly uncomfortable, or at least worried for her future. Thus he undertakes to train her in the "art for art's sake". But, alas, impelled by his ambition, he pushes her too far and demands that she challenge the gods themselves, specifically the goddess Athene. The goddess is introduced as

Goddess of Female Arts and Industries,
Athene, the machine mistress,
Also, Presiding Goddess of Athens, a gavel rapper—
Sprung full-brained from Zeus's head
With all of her father's intellectual glare—
No specialist but a brainwoman,
Critic of beauty,
Analyst,
Down with the weaving fingers of intuition!

From this introduction it is not difficult to see whose side the poet is *not* on: he is definitely not on the side of this proud intellectual goddess whose hate and spite will eventually bring about the death of "art for art's sake" -- that is, of art as a spontaneous outpouring of the human spirit. Neither is the poet on the side of the "bureaucratic" father. Is he then on Arachne's side, trying to plead her cause? He may be, although he does not seem to give her unqualified support either.

After the heavily biased introduction the poet skips directly to the very end of the competition:

And Arachne wove like a devilfish,
Her long fingers sucking at the threads,
Unconscious of the Goddess behind her...
And Athene tore,
Tore the blazing tapestry to tatters.

Both the father and the girl are dumbfounded by such fury and hatred. Arachne ends up hanging herself and being changed into a spider, while the goddess "froze in man the fear of tiny fur". The particulars of the contest, so highly symbolic in Ovid, are not even mentioned, and one gets the impression that the girl is the only one who is actually weaving, while the goddess is only watching, seething with anger and groundless hatred. Thus, what had begun as a retelling of a well known story turned into a full-fledged allegory: the allegory concerning art in general, the relationship between the artist and his sponsors and critics, the opposition of professional art to a single minded individual effort, and the 'innate' fear of art in the general public.

This kind of reference to myth, where the emphasis is less on the actual story line, and more on allegorical interpretation, seems to be prevalent today -- as it probably was in older poetry too. A poet like Peter Meinke, for instance, will not make even the slightest attempt to tell the story of Prometheus.¹⁰ His "Prometheus 1990" is a brief, ironic reassessment of what the end of the 20th century - the age of Sigmund Freud -- might think of the ancient culture hero. The verdict:

Prometheus was a pyromaniac, born to a doting mother and an authoritarian father, unable to control himself, although perfectly aware of what the final outcome of his obsession would be ("flames ringing the Himalayas"). But aside from the obvious irony, Meinke's interpretation is in fact consistent with ancient opinion concerning Prometheus. Like the Greeks themselves, who were not sure whether they should extol him as a culture hero (Aeschylus), or blame him for man's fall from grace and for the ills of civilization (Hesiod), Peter Meinke too has ambivalent feelings. He takes into consideration not only the ancient accounts, but also the subsequent tradition about Prometheus:

I *am* some kind of weird he thinks liking flames
 more than people *Giver of Wisdom*
Romantic Rebel *Supreme Trickster* as if
 I could be anything else! Unchained
 I'd light more fires yes
 and chase the howling engines!

But having no other wise thoughts to add to the puzzle, the poet ends his account on a conciliatory note:

And yet the fire warms around it children
huddle:singing

In other words, he settles for the ancient truism: the good is always mixed with the bad. Therefore, some irrational actions may have beneficial consequences, a villain may become a hero, and no one can ever be sure wherein the truth lies...

But regardless of whether he tells the whole story, a part of it, or only his own thoughts inspired by the story, the modern poet typically combines the ancient elements with contemporary themes and concerns. For instance, he may use the mythological setting while speaking to us about class, race and gender (R. Hayden, R. Dove, E. Jong, C. Kizer)¹¹. Or, about alienation in general (P. Blackburn),¹² disfunctional families, teenage rebellion, failed marriages, and the like (L. Glück, D. Finkel, L. Pastan, K. Pollitt).¹³ Then again, he may be speaking about the melting pot and the conflicts of cultures (G. Stern, L. Simpson),¹⁴ or mass entertainment and crass consumerism (D. Wagoner).¹⁵ Or, about the wars recently fought and the slow healing process in their aftermath (W. Meredith, A. Dugan, P. Mariani).¹⁶ Or, about evolution (D. Laing),¹⁷ ecology (S. Mitchell),¹⁸ science fiction (A. Goldbarth),¹⁹ intellectualism and scholarly pursuits (H. Nemerov).²⁰ And the list goes on - for seemingly there is no modern thought or theme that could not fit into the framework of ancient myth.

Thus, the transformations of ancient thought and wisdom seem to continue unabated - but for how much longer? Some poets do not believe the process will go on for ever. Kenneth Rexroth is one of them:²¹ should we believe him? We will let you decide it for yourselves.

N O T E S

¹ By mythical patterns I mean such combinations of narrative elements as would suggest a well known story, but without mentioning names or giving any specific details. For instance, wherever one comes across the combined motif of *music-love-death*, one inevitably remembers Orpheus and Eurydice. In L. Ferlinghetti, "In Golden Gate Park that day", in *A Coney Island of the Mind* (New York, 1958), the absence of love, the silence of music, the failure of the two people to look into each other's eyes

and the man's falling asleep in the end, all suggest a modern anti-Orpheus, as it were.

² Some examples: G. Garrett, "Virtuosity" [ecphrasis], in *For a Bitter Season: New and Selected Poems* (Columbia, MO 1967); W. Meredith, "Homeric Simile", in *Earth Walk: New and Selected Poems* (New York, 1970); T. Steele, "Sapphics Against Anger", in *Sapphics Against Anger & Other Poems* (New York, 1986); E. Sanders, *1968: A History in Verse* (Santa Rosa, CA, 1997); E. Jong, "The Eggplant Epithalamion", in *Half-Lives* (New York 1973). The grand master of modern *technopaegnon* (the poem in the shape of an object) is John Hollander: his virtuosity rivals anything that has come down to us in Greek Anthology. See: J. Hollander, "Swan and Shadow", in *Spectral Emanations: New and Selected Poems* (New York, 1978).

3. E.g.: *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses*, ed. M. Hofmann and J. Lasdun (New York, 1995).

⁴ Concerning Vergil, W. H. Auden in his "Secondary Epic" (*Collected Poems*, ed. E. Mendelson, New York 1976) says the following:

No, Virgil, no:
Not even the first of the Romans can learn
His Roman history in the future tense,
Not even to serve your political turn;
Hindsight as foresight makes no sense...
No, Virgil, no:
Behind your verse so masterfully made
We hear the weeping of a Muse betrayed.

⁵ In addition to primary sources, some secondary works, such as compilations, textbooks, encyclopedias and the like, are undoubtedly significant too. Ed Sanders begins one of his poems by stating: "It was impossible for one to read C. Kerényi's *Eleusis* and George Mylonas's *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* without falling in love with with Demeter..." ("Holy Was Demeter Walking Th' Corn Furrow", in *Thirsting for Peace in a Raging Century*, Minneapolis, MN 1987). One text in particular stands out as a popular source of mythological material: Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*. As an example of how it has found its way into poetic imagination, see: A. Goldbarth, "The Psychonaut Sonnets: Jones", in *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*, ed. P. Dacey and D. Jauss (New York, 1986).

⁶ H. Carruth, "A Little Old Funky Homeric Blues for Herm", in *Collected Shorter Poems 1946-1991* (Port Townsend, Wash., 1992).
[Text available on this web site under: **Homeric Hymns**]

⁷ Another example of the same genre: W. Logan, "Blues for Penelope", in *Anthology of Magazine Verse and Yearbook of American Poetry*, ed. A. F. Pater (Palm Springs, CA 1997).

8. "This beautiful music I hear, whose like has never been sounded
by any mortal man, or immortal who dwells on Olympus,
what sort of music is this?" - says Apollo to young Hermes in the Homeric Hymn (transl. H.M. Howe).

⁹ J.Schevill, "The Birth of Arachne, the Spider", in *Ambiguous Dancers of Fame: Collected Poems 1945-1985* (Athens, OH, 1987).

[Text available on this web site under: **Ovid**]

¹⁰ P.Meinke, "Prometheus 1990", in *Scars* (Pittsburgh and London, 1996).

[Text available on this web site under: **Hesiod**]

¹¹ R.Hayden, "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home", in *Collected Poems*, ed. F. Glaysher (New York and London, 1985);

R.Dove, "Nigger Song: An Odyssey", in *Selected Poems* (New York, 1993);

E.Jong, "Alcestis on the Poetry Circuit", in *Half-Lives* (New York, 1973);

C.Kizer, "Hera, Hung from the Sky", in *Mermaids in the Basement: Poems for Women by Carolyn Kizer* (Port Townsend, Wash., 1984).

¹² P.Blackburn, "Brooklyn Narcissus", in *The Collected Poems of Paul Blackburn*, ed. E. Jarolim (New York, 1985).

¹³ L.Glück, "Telemachus' Confession", in *Meadowlands* (Hopewell, NJ, 1996);

D.Finkel, "Oedipus at San Francisco", in *Simeon* (New York, 1964);

L.Pastan, "You Are Odysseus", in *Aspects of Eve* (New York, 1975);

K.Pollitt, "Penelope Writes", in *Antarctic Traveller* (New York, 1982).

¹⁴ G.Stern, "If you Forget the Germans", in *Lucky Life* (Boston, 1977);

L.Simpson, "The Psyche of Riverside Drive", in *Searching for the Ox* (New York, 1976).

¹⁵ D.Wagoner, "Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi", in *Collected Poems 1956-76* (Bloomington, IN, 1976).

¹⁶ W.Meredith (above, n. 2);

A.Dugan, "Stentor and Mourning", in *New and Collected Poems 1961-1983* (New York, 1983);

P.Mariani, "Ulysses Weeps", in *Prime Mover. Poems 1981-1985* (New York, 1985).

¹⁷ D.B.Laing, "Eros Out of the Sea", in *The Collected Poems of Dilys Laing* (Cleveland, 1967).

¹⁸ S.Mitchell, "Cassandra", in *Parables and Portraits* (New York, 1990).

¹⁹ A.Goldbarth (above, n. 5).

²⁰ H.Nemerov, "To a Scholar in the Stacks", in *The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov* (Chicago and London, 1977).

²¹ K.Rexroth, "Vitamins and Roughage", in *The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York, 1966).

[Text available on this web site under: **Epilogue**]
