

by DAVID SHAPIRO

ON POETRY AND CRITICISM

In my life and practice, there has been an insistent blurring between the notions of poetry and not poetry and not not poetry. This blurring became constant in me after very early (1962?) readings of Borges, where he specifically teases us concerning the discursive and the non-discursive.

It made me skeptical of most positivist theory to see Wittgenstein, for example, as later Derrida, teasing the very idea of the idea, so that finally the joke in Cambridge was that Wittgenstein had come down to his last contribution: whistling. Finally, it was my pride in the New York School, so-called, that it had contributed almost no criticism but that the poems of Ashbery, for example, were already critique ("Skaters" and "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" being good examples). When Kenneth Koch liked a description of mine of peonies, he went further and called it: good art criticism.

I met Meyer Schapiro and thought of him as a surrealist and his digressions were abysses. He did, as he said, believe in the truth, but his own truth was always passionate, sensuous and skeptical with all. I wanted to call the book *To an Idea: A Book of Criticism*. My poetry is not ejaculatory, it is not the poetry of the personal, it is not without, I hope, a constant theoretical collision. I have written many volumes about artists, say, but each one has been written to be both beautiful and true, at the same time. This is why one might add my work is scorned in my lyrics as too lyrical or critical and my critiques are also deposed as too lyrical (or too theoretical). To me this question is as vital as any question. I have subscribed to the Lucretian ambition: to explain everything within a poem, but with the minimal attitude of confidence. I would like to be known, like Ashbery, or other bards, for dislocating the usual differentiation between prose and poetry, and between criticism and poetry. If poetry is not an essayistic compaction along the lines of Hejduk's visionary masques and architectural structures, then what is it? And for those not obsessed by the critiques of Artaud, for example, who are they? And if not in this terrible century, when?

SONG FOR CHAIM

If one saves a butterfly, has one saved the world?

Rabbi says: If one saves one butterfly, even with long wings,
one butterfly that has fallen into water, it may be said
"He has saved the whole world."

If one saves a motley moth, is it the same?

Rabbi: It is valid. If one saves a dirty monkey from a flame,
for example, it is as the saying is: He or she has saved the whole world.
It is valid for all creatures, and not more so for the creatures who know
how to recite the blessings. It is always valid, even on the Sabbath.
It is said: The creatures of the sky are owned by no one, like the land.

If one saves the Book from being destroyed, is it also saving a world?

Rabbi, God forbid, yes, saving the book from the fire,
saving the book or books from the fire, is known to be comparable.
He who saves a book and he
writes a holy book, it should be said,
They have saved the whole world like a book.

If one saves a rose, one rose,
from the garden of your dead Teacher,
is it still appropriate to think
She has saved the world.

The Rabbi was silent and seemed troubled. He replied:

If the house of the great teacher is in ruins,

and the garden is a scandal, and one saves
one rose from his garden it is said even
of one rose: it is like saving the world.
It is also said the rose will grow as large as the world.

from BODY OF PRAYER

PSALM

Lord, I am not too happy.
I am not looking too high.
I am not wasting my time
 on the marvelous, too marvelous for me
my mind is like that quiet child.

Israel, you must hope
now and always.

THE DEAD WILL NOT PRAISE YOU

for Cantor Berele Chagy

My grandfather emerges
in a synagogue
with familiar accents
unlike his noble voice
a pudgy little man
sweet tenor coloratura flautando
He marches down the aisle
with a blue white crown
Women ask questions

and they are charmed
and he is beloved
like etymology
Is my mother in attendance
or is she dead?
What are questions now?
Are the dead permitted: to
sing? Is he serious?
Are the dead permitted
to return and sing?

WILD PSALM

for Michael Govrin

In another world, listening to a Yemenite dump
Dreaming of Jerusalem our popular flesh,
A sleeper whose name is a triple pun
A language where skin would be light.
It all sounds like the king's first love.
But in this world we sit to translate.
God splits and the blind man's reference
Ends like the war ever so quite.
As we forget the grammar we are of red clay, an idiot.
The supplicants approach, on the field of untranslatable force.
Simone says nothing but: Poetry
More difficult than mathematics, as I warned you.
And the old poets, and the books appear themselves,
Holiness in Sin, that enraged Gershom—the doubled books:
And the body's words. Blessed is He who created the creation.
Blessed are they who created the blessing.

WALTER BENJAMIN: A LOST POEM

after a dream

In a lost essay on poetry, Walter Benjamin had written, *I was born into a rich, perhaps too rich and too comfortable existence in Berlin. Each time my family saw soot in the air we wanted to move to another vacation spot. Poetry today withholds too much. What does it withhold. At any rate, eclecticism, Prkofiev...* The most Brechtian poem of Benjamin has almost been forgotten. It was published under the title *David*, with a section of a door knob as a slightly Duchampian topographic oddity. I found the proofs, rare as the Redon for *A Throw of the Dice*, in a bookstore. The poem was fairly simple:

David or King David
How
did you
done
your door

Unfortunately, many of Benjamin's remarks on poetry were now simple scratches on the cover of the book, effaced like the infamous magic writing pad and indecipherable as hidden love (as opposed to open rebuke). Some of his lost short stories appear in this volume. Scholem said, There was nothing like being alone with Walter Benjamin. *It made one want to read.* The source of that remark is also lost.

SARCOPHAGUS FOR THE SILENCE OF GOD

for John Hejduk and Picard

Sarcophagus for the still small voice.

Sarcophagus for the marriage of truth and troth

Sarcophagus for the mother of the hypocritical poet

Sarcophagus for the lava of speech

The incline of music

Sarcophagus for the materials for the messiah without melancholy

Sarcophagus for the misidentified corpse of the architect

Sarcophagus for the flower beyond flowers

Sarcophagus for the suicidal architect for the hand on the edge

Sarcophagus for the powerless computer for the traditional book

Sarcophagus for the one fairy tale

Sarcophagus for the future tense and for the subjunctive in the
gloom

of the miracle for Thomas Hardy's ox-cart man

Sarcophagus for the twins of frozen speech and for the luminous
sounds of the surface

Sarcophagus for the slave of writing crying help in all

languages for wild sound for the twins of frozen speech

Sarcophagus for the mistranslators