LETTER & DREAM OF WALTER BENJAMIN

Messiah and geography never coincide.

After the Fall, the only bliss was silenced nature.
It reeked of the sadness of uninscribed creation.

The slow erasure of Torah's black letters,
written Law isolate amidst whiteness.

Paradises of language ought to reign,
celebrations of rising from mute space,

from infinity's ground, all the unknowable names.

*

These, as I strolled, were my contemplations.

Swans were rising from the pond in the park.

And yes, I might have longed instead for vanished reflections, for disappearing ripples left behind.

For now, I am reduced to sending you these eighteen pages that muse on the horrible present—on our politicians, those hastily put up men, who garner for themselves the laurels of the state.

They too have created infinities, blind alleys, endless monuments to iniquities, a multitude of pains for others to bear.

They will outlive their brief immortality and leave a grubby ration of murderous hopes.

So imagine me moving amidst clouds of dust under a mountain of books, not to Palestine but to another of Berlin's forbidding streets.

Wiping clean the unpacked books.

They will sit on their shelves as we await fearful marching in the street, boots stamping over their pages, coarse shouts, frenzied thought…

Impossible for me to write of other topics, mathematics and language or mathematics and Zion.

The only path, these days, my bitter words.

I do recite the litany you imparted to me.

First things: unriddle Kaballah.

Unriddle text.

But the truth is, I found myself reading the despair I find everywhere inscribed in this city.

Messiah and geography never coincide.

*

He climbed a labyrinth,
a labyrinth of stairs,
past other stairways
descending.

He climbed
a labyrinth of stairs,
each step tested
with his foot.

Always tentative,
always hopeful,
while nearby,
other stairs descended.

Breathlessly
he rose,
up to their heights. Chest aching,

thoughts twisting
between his temples,
head pounding
with his blood.

He felt lightheaded,
fearing always
each step
would carry him
into the thinning air.

*

“…and furthermore, the law’s appearance should be the result of the knowledge of good and evil.

…all visible law is law-making violence.

Only the law of God or of the General Strike can undo the violence of this bloody law.”

I am walking, not knowing whether the heart is full.

Not knowing whether the soul is full.

I would like to keep silent.

My eye registers tree, cloud, pavement.

Messiah and geography never coincide.

DIASPORIC POETICS

To begin, this, from the *Zohar*: "Woe to the generation lacking in shepherds, when the sheep stray, knowing no direction."

I started to write poetry in my late twenties. As with much which had preceded in my life, I blundered into poetry, neither a lover of poems nor aware of their transformative power. As I came toward poetic and personal awareness of my Jewishness, paradoxically through my own deepening sense of secularization and then by way of my turning to poetry and philosophy, it was a few articulations *as poems* which kept faith with the sea changes of my life. Scraps of poetry, like philosophical maxims, became my shepherds, my word paths for entering what seemed to be a latent version of myself. One saw the word, words, as having a two-fold power, first to draw one's attention, to cause one to be at an instantaneous remove from the actual dailiness of an activity (this has always been, for me, the subtlest yet least examined meaning of the Book), and, second, to be a haunting. In this latter case, the ghostly powers of words resided, incarnating themselves in one until they were no longer capable of being recognized as mere objects of attention. Via the poem, words were physically incantatory, orders of possession, dilators of consciousness and its apprehensions.

The poets who first nurtured my growth in poetry, I think here of the Jewish Objectivists, of Charles Reznikoff, of George Oppen, Carl Rakosi and Louis Zukofsky, struck me as being married to their aloneness, as to a bride. Little noticed by the public or the academy, they wore the public neglect of their work as prideful badges. These were the poets whose books I carried on my own *hegira*, my wanderings, as I tried to find the forms my words and acts must take and be taken for.

I remember it was Oppen’s words: “Truth also is the pursuit of it...We must talk now. Fear/ is fear. But we abandon one another.” from his poem “Leviathan,” which, when I was beginning to find my way as a poet, pulled me from despair and confusion. Language, these words told me, could be a thrall, a moral animator--this was power and danger-- in the life of one who took words in, of one who was a reader. To reformulate Eliot's famous comment in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," the dead poets are not only "that which we know," but "that which we desire." In this sense, any powerful mastery of words occurred under the signs of or even within the strictures of another's poetry, rather than within the free play of language.

In a sense, to be a supplicant before words, before combinations of words, was to gather two intimacies at once, that of the very things words named, the trees, the rocks, the persons and images, etc. and that of a *renaming*: that construct of the poem which collocated all these names of things and yet held them in some new order and relationship and so constituted a new name. Here, in renaming, tradition and freedom co-existed side by side, forming a continuous juncture which ran directly through the poet. It was this juncture which I felt to be my rootedness in Jewish tradition, and like the living root of a plant which one unearths from the soil to examine closely, there were areas where the cellular structures of the root exchange minerals and nutrients and water with the earth, a boundary membrane where what is dead and what is alive are indistinguishable.

***

Isaac of Acre, the 13th century Spanish Kabbalist, writes: "He who is vouchsafed the entry into the mystery of adhesion to God, *devekuth*, attains to the mystery of equanimity, and he who possesses equanimity attains to loneliness, and from there he comes to the holy Spirit and to prophecy." In this passage, one can identify not only a sacred journey of the soul but also a kind of *poesis*, for to come “to prophecy” means ultimately to come to speech, to poetry, to utter both hope and dread. The loneliness that Isaac of Acre speaks of is thus, to my mind at least, deeply connected not only to the severity and isolation of the spiritual journey but to the often wearying aloneness from which the poetic act seems to spring.

Reznikoff, in particular, was a Jewish *flaneur*, a diminutive figure in dark suit and tie, and yet, an isolato endlessly walking the streets of the city, milling with its crowds or divagating into the suburbanlike precincts of Flatbush and outer Queens but always sensing his apartness. "I am alone--and glad to be alone," he writes in his poem "Autobiography: New York," linking himself both with the diasporic witness of an alienated consciousness and with those moments of the Jewish mystical tradition, as expressed in Isaac of Acre's words above, which acknowledge a fundamental and unbridgeable separation of God and man, but yet allow man to glimpse God, momentarily, as it were. Perhaps Reznikoff espied God on a sidewalk in Brooklyn, espied Him sardonically as kind of modern *deus absconditas:* “This pavement barren/as the mountain/ on which God spoke to Moses--/suddenly in the street/shining against my legs/the bumper of a motor car.” Or possibly Reznikoff experiences the religious moment as truly fleeting like that instant of deep love in Baudelaire's poem when the poet sees and falls rapturously for a woman who passes quickly on the street, is swallowed up by the city, never to be seen again.

Louis Zukofsky too, made the Jew’s peculiar burden of aloneness one of his major themes. In “*A-12,*” that beautiful weave of a father’s love for his son, he asks plaintively, “Where stemmed the Jew among strangers?” And answers himself: “Speech moved to sing/To echo the stranger.” With a kabbalist’s intuition of the power of wordplay and pun, Zukofsky seemed to reinscribe family history, religion, philosophy and the poetic tradition as so many instances of an almost sacred sonic attentiveness. Everywhere in Zukofsky, this attention was manifest as a kind of love both for the objects of his devotion and for the weight and tone of every syllable by which it is rendered. In “A-11,” his prosodic masterpiece of family life, he enunciates his poetics as “our /love to see your love flows into/Us. If Venus lights, your words spin, to/live our desire leads us to honor.” Naturally such care has a religious dimension, a resonance of acting under the eye of God. “There is no one,” his poem’s Rabbi Pinhas says, “who is not every minute/Taught by his soul.”

Zukofsky, in his major prose work, *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, formulates the poetics of Shakespeare and, implicitly, the Objectivists, as “favoring the clear physical eye over the erring brain.” In a poet like Rakosi, such a trust in sensory perception is, as in Zukofsky, a religious imperative. In his poem, “The Vow,” Rakosi proclaims this trust outright: “Matter,/with this look/ I wed thee.” (222) And in his haunting “Associations With A View From The House,” he writes, “It is the great eye,/source of security./Praised be thou, as the Jews say, who have engraved clarity/and delivered us to the mind.” (237)

What I felt from these poets who taught me so much was the power of perception, the happenstance of authorship, the impingement and penetration by the world into our would-be discursiveness, our self-involved chatter.

The gloss of eyes across and over streets, as though the city were made of languages, inscribed in the ages and designs of buildings, in the oddities and samenesses of people one passed... A collection of languages, written and rewritten. From so much utilitarian secularity, one might derive a non-theological theology of language, as if to say: thank Whomever (ironically of course) or whatever has designed this world. For I find new languages daily; I find that not all is written out, and that therefore I too am allowed to speak and write.

Further, there is, in the life of the writer, those moments of being sickened with one's own work, one's very words. At such times, I have risen from my desk and hurled myself out into the city, evicted myself from the precincts of my own logorrhea, partly as break or diversion, but also to be in touch with the languages of others. Thus, to gloss, to go over, as an eye savoring the textures of the world is also to be compelled into utterance, and so to provide interlinears and commentaries.

Commentary, therefore, is first eyes before words, a searchlight of eyes on texts which invoke disturbances and consonances in the reader. Commentary, too, is never synonymous with the text; it always remains apart. And so it stands, in the idealized version of interpretation, in *devekuthic* relation to the text. The commentary adheres to the text, and--whatever its virtues as a text in its own right--never enters into mystical union (one in the other) with it. George Oppen, in his late poems, expressed such adhesions as a kind of poetic radiation. In a poem to Louis Zukfosky, who he regarded as one of his poetic fathers, he identified the poet as a lighthouse turned back on the coast, searching out the edges of the continent, illuminating the particular commonness of Americans, and ultimately of humans, as figures of differentiation, as ways of acknowledging the fundamental conditions of apartness. This recognition of difference, a refusal of sentimental or too easy identifications at the heart of all of Oppen's work, accounts for its probity. Such a voice struck me as embodying not only a full and tested knowledge of our lives, and our way of thought, but also offered us hope that such a knowledge was our ultimate value, a value out of which not only truth but compassion could be found. Oppen, the "meditative singular man", seemed to stand, like the lighthouse image at the center of his poem, on an isolate and prophetic vantage-point in which

...to say what one knows and to
limit oneself to this

knowledge is

loneliness turning and turning

lights

of safety for the coasts (*NCP* 256)

Oppen's entire poetic oeuvre was for me an endless efflorescence, a singular linguistic act of the truth of boundaries and boundedness, not only on the level of nations--where the inability to tolerate aloneness was most destructive in our time--but on the level of the singularity of individuals and on the level of consciousness relating to the non-human world.

**

The Jewishness of the Objectivists was manifest in a variety of ways, in their textual practices, in their love of visible objective fact and, most significantly, in their questioning relationship to a Jewish God and Jewish dogma. On this latter point, I remember the powerful effect of reading and taking in Zukofsky's placing of Spinoza at the center of the early sections of *"A"* and of Reznikoff's skepticism (in his Poem "*Hanukkah*" he writes: "the rebellious Jews/light not one light but eight--/not to see by but to look at."). Equally powerful on my consciousness were the meditations of Rakosi and Oppen on the uncertainty of the theological point-of-view, its transmutation in their work into a phenemonology of near-secular spirituality.

The impact of reading these poets was to reinforce my own question of my relationship to Jewish thought and culture. Briefly, the way had been prepared in some sense by my family history, for it was my grandfather, a rabbi from Bialystok, whose strictness drove my father from his house at age fifteen, making him, at best, an uneasy participant in Jewish life. And my mother was a professed atheist who on the High Holy Days and only at my father's strongest pleadings, went to the Temple.

Most powerfully, it was my growing sense of a kind of diasporic consciousness in these poets, one created by the dis-ease and difficulty with which they approached their heritage and by the cultural and poetic apartness under which they worked. The question of how one's poem relates to one's Jewishness is, for me, deeply inflected by my reading of them. In fact, it was they who led me into a re-engagement with Jewishness and with the philosophical and linguistic aspects of the tradition.

But first, let me be clear: obviously, from the view I have espoused above, there no such stable category as Jewishness. That is, if the commonplace of Jewishness, of Jewish thought and poetry, involves textuality and commentary, it is also true that the poetics of Jewishness involves the undoing of text and comment, that textuality is a kind of traveling away, of departing, of heresy. As Gershom Scholem puts it, an enacting of a "counter-history," or, as I echoed in my own memoir writing, a "counter-memory." I would allow this trope as a very Jewish commonality, one that is best seen as an attempt to unlearn when that which one has learned imprisons like a bondage or a reflex.

The Objectivist poets to whom I am indebted wrote against history's grain, wrote their poems as a kind of counter memory, not out of any desire to reject their pasts, but to find their own specific gravities within more general traditions, to find those stories that belonged to them. For these poet, there was that other diaspora--within the larger diaspora of America and its culture--of their own estrangement from the familiar: their sense of distance from the life around them, their need to give witness to this distance, the need, as Zukofsky put it, “to sing/To echo the stranger.” The texts of America and of American-Jewish life as well as those of the inherited literary traditions of their time were to be revisited in this way. This is what diaspora meant, not alienation, but a need to re-engage the old texts, the old familiars and circumstances. John Taggart, in his brilliant meditation, “Walk-out: Rereading George Oppen” maintains that “Insofar as Oppen’s work may be considered Jewish, it is a differing Jewishness or, to adopt one of Oppen’s own terms, it is an antinomian Jewishness.” The diaspora invokes not rejection but a rethinking, a travelling with tradition in a new, even if oppositional, way.

Thus, if it appears that in the work of the Objectivists, commentary circles back to origins (or let us admit--commentary *does* circle back), for these poets, it does not merely lodge with prior thought but displaces it, though never totally. To be human, to be humane, is necessarily to grow by traceries, to be revisited so that we may visit, so that we may visit our own experience even as we are revisited.

Ineluctably--and perhaps this is where my relation to the Objectivists and my Jewishness intersect--I, too, participate willingly in such a return not only to origins but to the modalities and thoughts of the poets who have shaped my work.

Let me follow the dynamics of such traceries through a poem that I have written, bearing in mind that the poet exegeting his own poem, is involved in a perhaps suspicious act of commentary, trying to account for something not entirely of his own making. Here is the poem:

DIASPORIC CONUNDRUMS

--Call me not Naomi, call me Mara--

And now this man is fatherless
because he had a father,
and Israel is no more.

A line encircles
deserts beyond Jerusalem,
and he who was given a name
has lost the right to silence.

The man had a mother
because he had a mother,
and Israel never was.
Jerusalem, the golden,
city's mirage
shimmers on desert sands.

How could this be real?

Who will raise up
a name like Ruth,
put a name,
like a child, onto the air?

The dead are dead.
This is certain.
This is what was written,
why it was written.
This need not be said.

This poem was written almost unconsciously at first, as though in a haze or fever. A number of things were on my mind, all of which in one way or another entail diasporas: the story of Ruth in the Bible (the poem's epigraph is from *The Book of Ruth*, I,20)), that very post-modern idea that the word is displaced from the object it refers to, that the word *is* exilic, and, as I have written elsewhere, that whatever my religious inclinations, the world has labeled me a Jew (or as Celan puts it, the Jew has nothing which is not borrowed, least of all the name, Jew).

For me, as I'm sure for others, the essence of poetry is naming, naming in the sense that the poem is a name for a thing or state of affairs which did not previously exist. For Oppen, such naming was a "test of sincerity, the moment...when you believe something to be true, and you construct a meaning from those moments of conviction." In this, poetry repeats the Adamic act; it bears the force of original conjunction. Walter Benjamin, for instance, sees the name as a "primordial form of perception in which words possess their own nobility as names." Elsewhere throughout his writing Benjamin suggests that this form of perception does not simply correlate words with the things of the world but creates an immediate and powerful relation between the two, short-circuiting conceptual thought. But what about re-naming or, as I've tried to suggest above, what about when we revisit naming as re-naming? I'm thinking here of what textuality and commentary, at root, actually consist of. The original Adamic field of play can be seen as namelessness, as a silent and unlettered cosmos. But if it ever did exist, this undifferentiated namelessness is no more. It has been replaced in the contemporary consciousness by the totality of Adam's act, by Babel or, as the Kabbalists insist, the world and all its forms are already, albeit secretly, a form of *Torah*, lurking as a written out and inscribed universe hidden behind apparent phenomena. Adam, then, was the first textualist, possibly, by that, the first Jew in the Bible.

But let me refocus on the poem. First, its epigraph, which came into my head and was the seed-phrase of the poem. In the story of *Ruth*, Naomi has suffered an incomprehensible and overwhelming fate. She has lost her husband and sons, and is burdened with two step-daughters. In her anguish, she cries out "Call me not Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." Naomi is here testifying, heart-wrenchingly, to the perceiving function of the name. "I went away full," she exclaims, "and the Lord has brought me back empty." Given her experience, she is no longer a "Naomi," (something pleasant or good), but a "Mara," which is the biblical word for bitterness.

We know that Ruth's conversion, the sense that Judaism is more than a tribal or blood kinship religion, lies at the heart of the story, as well as its foreshadowing of the rise of David. But what most struck me in this instance was Naomi's demand to be called by another name. Name changes are among the most significant phenomena in the bible: Abram to Abraham, one of the most important, as well as Jacob's change of name to Israel after wrestling with the angel.

Naomi's fall into ruin, her changed condition, requires this self-renaming.

Yet another way of looking at Naomi's story might be by way of the notion of sympathetic magic. That is, if we keep in mind Benjamin's phrase concerning naming as a "primordial form of perception," then the experience of Naomi, the bodily and emotional stuff of her coming to bitterness, that is, the non-linguistic or opaque and hidden aspect of her suffering, is revealed to us by her name change. What has happened is neither synonymity nor mere gloss but the transformation of physicality into language. The diasporic journey, as embedded in this exemplary story, is first physical, experiential and, yes, is signaled to the reader by physical means. "Mara" cannot be pronounced as "Naomi."

In this sense, the story of Naomi's name change is a prologue to the rest of the poem. For my poem seeks to address the conundrums of inherited names as fixities and the relation of these fixities to the self, to poetry and to nationalisms and nation-states. Each stanza expresses a linked conundrum. And the conundrums are diasporic, quite simply I hope, because they are written from the viewpoint of someone (me) in the actual diaspora, someone who embraces the diaspora as the condition of his Jewishness and of his poetry. But as well, I've tried to intuit here, as I did in the Objectivists, a sense of the transmigratory aspect of words and names, of naming and re-naming, one which floats or drifts into wandering on the polyvalence of words as though one could send a word towards a meaning it did not begin with, hence disperse it, place it in diasporic motion. Emmanuel Levinas calls Jewishness not a metaphor but a "category of understanding." He suggests what this understanding might be for a poet when he writes: "*Is it certain a true poet occupies a place? Is the poet not that which, in the eminent sense of the term, loses its place, ceases occupation, precisely, and is thus the very opening of space*, neither the transparency nor the emptiness which (no more than night, nor the volume of beings) yet displays the bottomlessness or the excellence, the heaven that in it is possible...” (63)

Levinas’s thought is not concerned with the so-called nomadic tendency of the Jew or of the Jewish poet; rather, it testifies to the dynamics of the word-experience phenomena, to the poet as transmuter of a worked-upon physiology into language, the re-namer. Implicit in this line of thought is that the poet is not perceived as an experimenter with language *per se*, for there is nothing more confident than the experimenter in the laboratory who can objectively manipulate materials (language in this case) in a fanciful manner. On the contrary, Levinas’s poet is anguished and exposed; he “loses place,” “ceases occupation,” that is, does not perform but is performed upon by experience, by adversity, by love and history.

Again, I sense that I am wandering. So let me return to the first stanza which is about the son (“this man”) maturing towards ethicality by moving out from under the father’s name (the conditions of the father’s world and his social realm). The son becomes a refugee or emigrant from the name, which is, basically, a diasporic movement. To put it backwards (which is what conundrums do), the son does not fulfill his own hopes or potentialities while under the father’s name, a name which roots him in place and identity. But he must have a father, he must have a reference point or cause to exist, in order to become fatherless. There is no hope of fatherlessness without there first being a father.

Likewise, and recent history is very clear on this, Israel, as a project of the Jewish people, can become either simply a fixed geographical place and/or the term of an ethical process beyond conception as only a nation-state. Franz Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption* refers to the solution to such a dilemma in the separation of ethics from coercion. Coercion is state business, is about maintenance and fixity. In my mind, the existence of Israel, given the recent, tragic history of Jews, had led to a conflation of hope with unbending rigidity, of self-protection with an overzealous notion of defense, security and opposition to compromise. But Rosenzweig searches for a sense of self-restraint of power, a withholding which he, as with Levinas, is convinced is the Jewish secret of survival and eternity. When the son is fatherless, that is, when he moves out from under the father's name, he also moves out from the idea of fixity, of Israel as fixity. I'm not speaking poetry here as much as I'm suggesting the possibility of an ongoing prophecy.

The conundrum of the second stanza, linked to the first but also autobiographical, is that there is an obligation by having been given a name. If the name represents an authority prior to understanding, it may be questioned--indeed question is required. One of my favorite thinkers on religion, Ludvig Holberg, wrote that if a man learns theology before he learns to be human, he will never become a human being. One could paraphrase: if one learns to be a Jew, or a fundamentalist or an avant-gardist, etc... The received name is dogma incarnate, not experience. Thus, the obligation is to grow, to move out from under the name, and to express that movement as a new understanding. The poet's work can be seen as an undoing or at least testing of the parent's or father's authority, for one who would aspire to poetry, to identify naming as renaming. Naomi-Mara is the paradigm of this poetics.

Now the mother of the third stanza does not give a name to the child; inherited names come by way of the father. This situation is paradoxical. The mother's love is so seductive and all-embracing for the child that to stay within its confines may be to obliterate the possibility of creating an Israel. The idea of redemption for all humans, the Jerusalem of the poem, can only be a mirage unless one accepts discomfort and struggle by foregoing the child's sense of security which the mother represents. And one supposes that this makes the poem even more of a conundrum since we all have mothers and fathers whom we love. We are always living in the dynamics of being placed between their love and compassion and our own strivings. A further conundrum is that since a mother's love does not come by way of a name or authority, it need never be abandoned. The idea of the selflessness of love, often represented as a mother's love, is just that, non-centered and free of coercion. Love and compassion, without name or reference point, are always possible, even when one is renamed. Again, the story of Naomi-Mara is instructive. It is the renamed Naomi that Ruth embraces as her mother.

The fourth and fifth stanzas are questions and admonitions put to myself about the writing of poetry, and, in a personal sense, about self-growth. The name, in the act of renaming, in poetry, is, for me, a kind of seeking. And given the above three stanzas, the fourth one, with its sense of difficulty ("Who will raise up/a name like Ruth, put a name,/like a child, onto the air?"), suggests a wish for courage or means to write, a desire, perhaps a hopelessly wishful one, for the substantiality of naming. The fifth stanza constitutes an injunction to not write like the dead, for "The dead are dead./This is certain./This is what was written...This need not be said." The implicit injunction is to avoid being involved in mere repetition, writing, as it were, under the father's dictates (sometimes mislabeled as tradition). Of course, we must write *to* the dead, but about our present and our hope for the future.

The question put here is how a particular Jewishness informs a poetry--and especially, how it might inform this poem. I hope some of those specifics, those interrelations between prior texts and commentary, the reflections on sources and concerns, are clear. But a deeper question might be how one is informed (if that is the correct word) by Judaism? Though I was born into a Jewish family, I was not raised in a theocratic state (despite the efforts of my stern rabbi-grandfather). What informs me and my poetry has been the path, to some extent self-created, which I have taken through the particularities of the Jewish tradition. These particularities, to borrow from Oppen’s poem above, have been “lighthouses” to me, at times deeply and seductively beckoning, at times warding me off from dangerous rocks and shoals. Equally important, I would acknowledge that there is a powerful sociology of exposure at work in me as in everyone.

Put more generally, one’s writing can been seen here not only as a possible record of what has happened but also as a kind of becoming. For becoming begins in exposures and antecedents: those poets that I read, the life their words would lead me to. This is very much in keeping with the Jewish notion of revelation which begins in overhearing the revelatory nature of the text before one’s eyes, its imports and prophetic hopes. One’s own writing, then, can be looked upon as a kind of commentary on one’s antecedents in much the same way that Talmud and Midrash are commentary on the Torah. That model of commentary (Blake would call it, “not Generation but Re-generation”) is what I always have in mind when writing or when reading. Furthermore, I have a strong suspicion that this modality, as I learned it through the Objectivist poets, is far more than merely my idea of how one approaches the making of a poem. For in truth, we circle out, we are impelled by experience into the diaspora and, lo, we have fathered our own fatherlessness.

****