

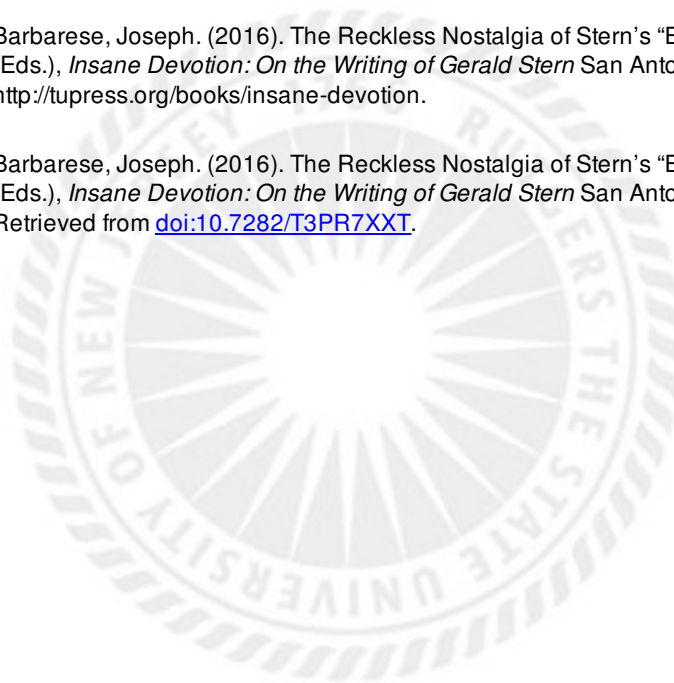
The Reckless Nostalgia of Stern's "Bio" Poems

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Years ago I was reviewing a half-dozen translations of the *Odyssey* and noticed something. The most important word in the invocation is *nostos* or "home," which appears in line 5 and is the root of *nostalgia*. Two lines later, and as part of a connected construction, is the Greek word *atasthaliesin*, or "recklessness." Odysseus, in Fitzgerald's translation, is credited with trying "to bring his shipmates home" but "their own recklessness destroyed them all."¹ Hardly surprising—they just spent ten years on the battlefield, and Odysseus, though the invocation lets him off the hook, is among the most bloody-minded and reckless. The first thing he and his men do upon leaving Troy is to raid innocent Ismaros, a town north of Troy and certainly not on the way home, which was southwest.

What is sort of surprising is that the poem makes their desire for home, their *nostalgia* and their *recklessness* neighbor words, as if nostalgia and recklessness were somehow symmetrical. Nostalgia is good, but theirs is human and thus impure—mixed with recklessness. Yet without recklessness there would be no rescue of Helen, no *periplum*, no 7-year sabbatical with Kalypso, no Kirke, no visit to the Land of the Dead, no Tiresias, no reunion in Hell with bitter Achilles and betrayed Agamemnon, and most important, no touching goodbye to the dead Antikleia. In other words, no fun, and certainly no *Odyssey*. I don't think it's an accident that the poem situates these two words so closely: nostalgia and recklessness are twins of desire. One earns praise, one censure—Gilgamesh, Odysseus (in Homer and Dante), Jonah, and even the pious Aeneas are reckless. Reckless, we leave; out of nostalgia, we return. One makes us long for home, the other for anything but.

¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: FSG, 1998), Book.I:10,11, p 1.

Autobiography probably has to begin in nostalgia, but nostalgia is never pure; this is among the lessons of *The Odyssey*. The impurities make it interesting and guard against sentimentality and sentimental odysseys of the *Homeward Bound* variety, where two shelter dogs and a cat try to make it back to San Francisco. The antidote to sentiment, the manuals say, is usually fact, but fact, like chemotherapy, can kill. It can enervate life-writing. Whatever can “fact” mean when you are writing about yourself, which is the literary equivalent of burglarizing your own house? The answer is the excluded middle of the saving lie. The past has to be retold slantwise because memory can be false and fact polarizes. Now that autobiography has replaced the lusty and healthy fabrications of fiction as a way of getting closer to “reality,” the memoir (or its anxiously rebranded twin, “creative non-fiction”) has become so obnoxiously nostalgic that even adult memoir sounds like young adult fiction. Nostalgia can be poisonous, can produce pious apologies or a pedantic dullness, as the greatest writers have known, and life-writing has never been about reciting facts but about distorting them. The tradition of semi-truthful autobiography goes way back, well beyond poor Rousseau, who always gets the blame, through Dante (the *Divine Comedy* presents itself as visionary autobiography) and the wise Montaigne to St. Augustine. In book two of the *Confessions* the saint denounces his foul past and how, as a youth, he looked for love in all the wrong places and “stank” in the eyes of God. Yet one of the products of that foul past was a child named—go figure!—Adeodatus (“God’s Gift”).² Facts leave a blank page. No writer ever feels nostalgic about a blank page, or if he did, he would leave it blank.

² Gary Wills, *Saint Augustine: A Life*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 22. “Though his son was initially unwanted, Augustine the close observer was bound to be fascinated by this infant forced on his attention, his Godsend (Adeodatus).”

Stern's autobiographical "Bio" poems, which he is still composing, are a backhanding of nostalgia and the perils of memoir. The title alone tells you something: the autobiographical lyric pitched as an exercise in the biographical, which is always conjectural and wracked by guesswork and inexactitude. "Bio III" begins,

I will go down in history without a hotel
for I have been dispersed though what I wanted
was nothing, a box for my mail, a key,
an easy chair and a floor lamp with tufted string,
a coffee shop with access inside and outside
next to the lobby with a red-headed waitress.³

This is about as close to nostalgia as this or any of the poems in the "Bio" series comes—a longing not exactly for "home" but for some temporary lodging, which is home for the permanently displaced. It is not quite homesickness but a recognition that the objects of longing are pretty ordinary. The mailbox and the key, the chair and the floor lamp that, significantly, is remembered as having a "tufted string," are connected syntactically, by apposition, to the word "nothing," itself introduced as an afterthought ("though . . ."). Nostalgia is a composite of objects that never exactly achieve total individuality; so like Hester's Pearl, or in the sense in which we never sleep with just *one* person, in this one "floor lamp" are many floor lamps. We just don't know. The remembered stuff that populates his work is an expression of the sublime, though for Americans the sublime is not natural but manufactured. I am not talking about or invoking the sublime of theory, commerce or psychology, though sublimation is part of the process. One of Stern's insights, which joins him to poets like Ammons and Dugan, is that junk—not daffodils or the meanest flowers that blow—makes us nostalgic: keys, stuffed chairs, floor lamps with *tufted* string—recklessly desired, impulsively bought, recklessly discarded. This is American nostalgia,

³ Gerald Stern, "Bio III," in *In Beauty Bright*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 124.

because for American poets theirs is a “homemade world”—the title of a book by Hugh Kenner. Nostalgia is dissolved back into its basis in the world of the things that fill up the poems. Growing up in Philadelphia, my Tintern Abbey was a vacant lot populated by vagrants, human discards, who warmed their meals in the weeds.

Discards are all over Stern’s work—you would think that is all the poems contain—and started to appear in poems like “Behaving Like a Jew” over thirty years ago. That poem still surprises me—a bitter memorial to a dead opossum that is also, and this is what so surprises me, a condemnation of “the spirit of Lindberg over everything.”⁴ Lindberg, American hero and famous Nazi sympathizer, is not a synecdoche for evil but for something more clownish, mundane and insidious. He represents a rigorously disciplined recklessness that coins terms like “collateral damage” or “best practices,” of which the concentration camps were applications of the latter to solving the problem of the former. We must memorialize the dead opossum to remain human, memorialize without moralizing over all that is evil, from road kill to Nazis to the uninflated acronyms of industry. And it also means remembering the reckless innocence of the driver who ran over the opossum and “the country, the bloodstained/ bumpers, the stiff hairs sticking out of the grilles, / the slimy highways”⁵ of America. Sentimental fiction and autobiography tend to over-particularize, to skip self-indictments and icky details—the blood, the stiff hairs, the beslimed highways, the Lindbergs—that spoil nostalgia. The poem is (no pun intended) a Jeremiad—at heart Stern is a moralist—whose target is Lindberg and nostalgia itself. Nothing is more selective than memory. Nostalgia is impure—my motto is scratch a sentimentalist and find a bully (ever notice how bullies are always nostalgic?)—and the impurity is part of the poetry. For the opossum or the voice raised to mourn it to mean anything at all, the

⁴ Stern. “Behaving Like a Jew,” in *This Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 31.

⁵ Ibid.

impurity has to be acknowledged. That impurity is the ambience that surrounds it, which is this, our America: the poem surrounds its subject without explicitly naming it. The process of remembering the opossum includes a whole history of public grief stretching back to WWII and beyond. The title tells you this, but so does the syntax—line after climactic line (“I am going to be unappeased . . . / I am going to behave like a Jew . . . / I am not going. . .”) laid out like tossed sticks, syntactically disconnected yet pointing in the same direction. ⁶

Or maybe not *tossed* sticks: “for I have been dispersed” is the second line of “Bio III.” To toss something implies a direction and intent, but a *dispersal* implies neither. If you are dispersed you are scattered, leaving you in a situation that may be entirely new. Or it might be a grim reprise of what you have known, which is also, probably, what we will come to know and see all over, or so says the remainder of the poem:

I was waylaid, given what I was, by
2,000 books and a Plymouth station wagon
thirty feet long and easily twelve years old
that I could carry a piano in and park
anywhere I wanted, given the year then.

And I had a bench where I could think it through
when there were two seconds of silence in between
the delivery trucks, before my coffee got cold
and the crumbs on my lip were gobbled up by sparrows
catty-corner from Saint Andrew’s Episcopal
where there is opera music four times a year
and you put clothes on the porch to give to the poor
—if I could compare one life to another—
though what I loved always got in the way. ⁷

I will talk in a moment about how the presence of the simple conjunction “and” in these poems is a decisive technical move. The “and” that begins the last stanza tells you that there is more to “it,” the dispersal and dispersions that are being thought about, the “thinking through”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Stern, “Bio III,” in *In Beauty Bright*, 124.

that accompanies recollection. The last line means that what we remember is supplemented by what “always got in the way.” What got in the way was “what I loved,” and to think of being in love as “dispersal” is beautiful. It makes going down in history *without* a hotel a triumph. No doubt there is a story behind the floor lamp, the red-head, the Plymouth wagon (were Plymouths ever thirty feet long?) and the “2000 books”— a context that clarifies and connects. But context is never itself narrative, and narrative is not always poetry any more than every perfectly symmetrical face is beautiful. Context in these poems yields to mystery, and the mystery has to be preserved because it is a sign of how chaotic memory can be as it scatters and disperses. Even if Stern were to tell me the name of the red-head and the titles of those two-thousand books (and show me a picture of that thirty-foot Plymouth), it would make no difference. What is “reckless” in the person is the constant habit of falling in love, which you can only learn if you are dispersed and can feel only when you are no longer a one but a many. On the other hand, if you are dispersed by constantly falling in love, your particular dispersal is a contraction of, say, the grander synonyms associated with the word—resettlement, removal, ex- or repatriation, or the now worn-out term *diaspora*. A poet’s dispersals are more intimate. They are mini-dispersals that embody the macro. “Among subjective men,” Yeats wrote, “(in all those, that is, who must spin a web out of their own bowels) the victory is an intellectual daily re-creation of all that exterior fate snatches away.”⁸ Dispersal is ongoing and occurs every time he looks at the world, which is the same as looking at oneself, that thing that keeps expanding like gas in space. The style tells you this because style *is* perception in poetry, whether strong or weak.

Since *Lucky Life* (1977) a typical Stern poem does not so much ruminate like Lowell’s or obsess like Berryman’s or Sexton’s inside some personal precinct. It unravels, expands, blows

⁸ Yeats, “Four Years: 1887-1891,” *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (Scribner, 1999), 167.

itself apart, unpeels, dissolves in Whitmanesque jags and eddies. In some ways, this late style reminds me of the outrageous opening of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”—an implosion of prepositions, *from* this and *out of* this and that and the other, twenty some lines racing to earth at different speeds and from different directions and joining up at, or splashing down onto Whitman, our American ground zero. But Stern’s work is really nothing like Whitman’s. His instincts are more anaphorical rather than metaphorical, and his is insistently more declarative, even incantatory, than grand and magical and declamatory. His prosody has more in common with older traditions and with novelists like Hemingway—it relies on coordination and equivalences rather than subordination. It is chatty like great stand-up (which he reveres), jazzily discursive, and the twin not only of his vision but his physical breath; it is a way of talking that passes into writing, the flattened lyrical mode of the American Sublime. In the “Bio” series each poem is given a Roman numeral, but no title, because each is part of a continuing monologue:

And where your rabbi is buried
and how you talked for hours about which cemetery
you’d go to but she died first though decades younger
and though her hill has a pine tree and even catches
the wind, it is your voices that count the most,
that salad of chopped-up lettuce engulfed in tuna
the two of you spent three hours over, the subject
death, and what the Hittite nose was like,
and how Jeremiah will sound when he comes back
and what would he do in Camden or East St. Louis
and could they hear him break another glass bottle
and could they bear his curses perish the day,
the noisy geese in formation too late maybe,
my own steps icy, Thelonious Monk playing
Duke Ellington in the small living room
and underneath that the Unaccompanied Cello,
consideration in the green kitchen and almost
kindness on the dedicated shelf,
entwined pigs and a rooster, if you can stand it.⁹

⁹ Stern, “Bio V,” in *Divine Nothingness* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

This is the conclusion of “Bio V,” which I produce deliberately out of context to demonstrate a point about style. Style is perception: it follows the contours, takes the shape not of one freestanding subject but of how the subject experienced or remembered some one *thing*. We remember all the things that surround and confine some particular thing; we can no more easily think of one isolated thing than we can visualize one object without the space surrounding it (the goal of the Imagist, the Objectivist, and all concretisms). Memory is a mess, and these poems describe the messiness (but only “if you can stand it”). Why must my memory of a girl I loved include a hairy neck and a plain of naked back acne one blanket over? Or of a friend, about to say something profound at lunch, with his mouth open and a single spot of pesto on his tongue? Or of someone I loved and deeply miss lying dead on a gurney, mouth open like a yellow door somebody forgot to close? Syntax is an EEG, tracing the contour of memory, but memory, like the spider in the Whitman poem that keeps throwing out “filament after filament,” usually snatches and grabs everything in the neighborhood. Whitman is a joiner: he constantly seeks to combine elements. Stern wants to keep things distinct because, given his lyric sense, the lyrical memory is solitary confinement. Out of that confinement comes the need to grab and snatch. It is as if the spider that spins the web does not see the web as hanging from everything around it, but believes that everything around it hangs from, literally depends upon, the web—a necessary fiction.

The technical tradition behind the “Bio” series is more narrative than lyrical, closer to prose and oral storytelling. The narrator, excitable, inspired, lets the elements shape the narrative rather than stacking them in an artsy formal series that attract densely figured metaphors—metaphors that slow you down. Artifice retards. The tension between the written sign, which anchors memory, and the outward-bound tug of desire against that anchorage, is exposed. In a

way Stern's practice is the final exhaustion of Romantic practice, and the Romantic poem. James MacFarland, who coined the term *diasparactive*, or "broken in pieces," argued that the height of Romantic poetic achievement was the fragment, and that the Romantic lyric is a self-unraveling, a self-dispersal: the poet tracks the breaking-up, the ejecta, while being himself the source as well as part of the eruption, and the poem (depending on which critic you read) either fails or achieves greatness.¹⁰ Stern's approach in the "Bio" series is a mingling of visionary temperaments, as much Romantic as it is Talmudic, but the diasparactive dominates, and its stylistic marker is the successions of *ands*. Line by line, each is like a boundary stone marking a threshold of nostalgia:

and how Jeremiah will sound when he comes back
and what would he do in Camden or East St. Louis
and could they hear him break another glass bottle
and could they bear his curses perish the day . . .¹¹

To misread this as babble—I get a kick out of imagining how somebody like F.R. Leavis or any New Critic would view this—misses the point: it is *supposed to sound* like babble. So, for that matter, is Pound's

And the days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field mouse
Not shaking the grass.¹²

The syntax is asyndetonic—an ordering that accumulates without measuring or evaluating the whole heap. Is this not how human memory works. The question is not why but *where does it*

¹⁰ Thomas MacFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981), 7 and *seriatim*.

¹¹ Stern, "Bio ?," in *Divine Nothingness*.

¹² Ezra Pound, "[And the days are not full enough]," in *Personae: The Shorter Poems* (New York: New Directions, @ 1926, 1990), 82.

lead? Working backward—since backward and forward are equivocal terms here—this is the opening of “Bio V”:

Keep in mind how callow I was and how
sarcastic walking down that dirt road
with no room in any of my outside pockets
for your left-over straw or the gold leaf you gave me
for high achievement in the art of ridicule. . . .¹³

This is the source of nostalgia, “if you can stand it,” that is, if you can stand avoiding being *merely* nostalgic and remember everything else. The first three words ask you to “Keep in mind” everything that follows; it is a smart opening. It assumes that you and he are in the middle of a conversation or at least that you’re overhearing an ongoing monologue. “Keep in mind,” in other words, the other poems in this group. The end completes but does not explain the beginning. This is what the reading of a poem asks you to do whether you do it or not. I am reminded that one of Stern’s strengths is that he writes *books* of poems rather than just the “good poems” that win Pushcarts and get picked off by anthologies.

There are poems that do not ask you to do this, that demystify themselves, shift the load from the inside to the outside, don’t ask you to keep anything in mind and end all guesswork by sending you to footnotes, the library, or Google. “Dover Beach,” still grace before meals in intro to lit courses, has been much celebrated because it explains itself. It has internal harmony and ironic balance and leaves nothing unglossed. Another scholar-friendly poem is Yeats’s “The Sorrows of Love,” which exists in two versions. He revised it at least once and ruined it. Here is the first, unrevised version:

The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,
The full round moon and the star-laden sky,
And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves,
Had hid away earth's old and weary cry.

¹³ Stern, “Bio V,” in *Divine Nothingness*.

And then you came with those red mournful lips,
And with you came the whole of the world's tears,
And all the trouble of her labouring ships,
And all the trouble of her myriad years.

And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,
The curd-pale moon, the white stars in the sky,
And the loud chaunting of the unquiet leaves,
Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry.¹⁴

All those *ands*, in stanza two, must have struck Yeats, who by this time in his career had grown suspicious of Whitman, as blemishes. So he revised it and turned out the version that exists below. Critical apologists for The Middle Yeats dismissed his Late Romanticism and cringed at how his prosody was swamped by emotion—his grief over Maud Gonne's umpteen rejections of his marriage proposals—instead of being informed by hard information and the mythic method. So they often pick the revised version, version two, for the anthologies:

The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,
The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
And all that famous harmony of leaves,
Had blotted out man's image and his cry.

A girl arose that had red mournful lips
And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,
Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships
And proud as Priam murdered with his peers;

Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,
A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
And all that lamentation of the leaves,
Could but compose man's image and his cry.¹⁵

¹⁴ William Butler Yeats, "The Sorrows of Love," in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt, and Russel K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 119-22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Lots of info! But the cost was over-revision, and (to me) dullness. Yeats, in touch with his inner Matthew Arnold, purged the poem of the simple coordinates, the *and*'s that begin all four lines of quatrain two and that swell the total number of coordinate conjunctions to seven. Greater catastrophe still, he changes the point-of-view (from second to third). The result is a stiffened cadence and wooden syntax that dead-ends at the semi-colon in line eight and that, because it needs to make consecutive, discursive *sense*, throws up the white flag of "Arose," the word that opens the last stanza, which quickly sinks under its own triumphalist diction. All this just to include the references to Odysseus, Helen, and Priam! Version two, corrected for academic consumption, comes with its own tutor. It explains itself, which is bad for poems and deadly in life in general. I am not sure, even, that the second version is really about the *same* Maud Gonne, since it demotes her from "you" to "a girl." The Maud Gonne who was a sexy force of nature circa 1891 was probably better off than the Maud Gonne who is rhetorically re-masked and made a proxy for Helen of Troy twenty years later.

2.

A while back I happened to be in Gerald Stern's kitchen where he asked me to write down the name of a particular book in one of his notepads, a 5" x 8" theme book with white unlined pages. I noticed that on the facing pages was a handwritten draft of a new poem, and that he had turned the pad *sideways* to write it down—he has big squiggly handwriting. And—the memorable thing—each line was preceded by a number in a circle. Intriguing. This was a guide to his typist, of course, but also to something else: these lines had to be broken not just anywhere but at these points, in these places. These were *formal* decisions that had nothing to do with "form" as it is usually understood. Reading Stern's work may give you impression that he is simply loquacious, that you are reading a transcription, concatenated talk chained simply into

lines, chunks, fragments. He is loquacious, but not casually so: even if the syntax is simple (lots of coordinate clauses) the thought-scape is not. Richard Howard once spent a paragraph expounding (in his *Alone With America*) the way Ammons deployed the colon in his earlier poetry, so for a few pages I want to pursue the way Stern uses *and* in his later work.¹⁶ It is rare to see any reader of Stern talking about the work's technique because the poems themselves feel so under-wrought.

Whether or not anybody has ever charged his work with being inaccessible, it is amusing to see how so much of it since 1980 seems never to come to rest on a particular subject, or state it with precision. For a contemporary poet who is not writing in the Ashbery or grapho-maniacal tradition of Lang-Po, this is real chutzpah, and its culmination is *American Sonnets* (2002), the book that followed *Last Blue* (2000). The title asserts that Stern is joining the most venerated formal tradition in the history of Western Lyric, but in the book's fifty nine poems there is no trace of meter or rhyme or octave-sestet divisions or obedience to the fourteen-line limit (the lengths vary). The only trace of the twelfth-century form is conjectural: the sonneteer stages a conversation or argument with himself, which you would expect in a form invented by an Italian lawyer and codified in or enforced by the octave-sestet division. The regimented internal dialogue between, let's say, self and soul, is still present, only reckless and uncontrolled.

"Winter Thirst" is of one of my favorite poems in this book:

I grew up with bituminous in my mouth
and sulfur smelling like rotten eggs and I
first started to cough because my lungs were like cardboard;
and what we called snow was gray with black flecks

¹⁶ Richard Howard, *Alone With America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950*. Enlarged ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1980), pp. 5-6. "Here Ammons has found, or fetched out, besides a functioning arrangement of words on the page, the further device of the colon, which he henceforth wields in its widest application as almost his only mark of punctuation."

that were like glue when it came to snowballs and made
them hard and crusty, though we still ate the snow
anyhow, and as for filth, well, start with
smoke, I carried it with me I know everywhere
and someone sitting beside me in New York or Paris
would know where I came from, we would go in for dinner—red
meat loaf or brown *choucroute*—and he would
guess my hill, and we would talk about soot
and what a dirty neck was like and how
the white collar made a fine line;
and I told him how we pulled heavy wagons
and loaded boxcars every day from five
to one A.M. and how good it was walking
empty-handed to the no. 69 streetcar
and how I dreamed of my bath and how the water
was black and soapy then and what the void
was like and how a candle instructed me.¹⁷

More self-dispersal. The way the poem spreads out from that initial detail is nearly comical—
coal, sulfur, rotten eggs—and when it runs into that semi-colon in line three it feels almost as if it
were taking a mental breath. Then it restarts and or re-establishes itself with the mentions of
snow, filth, smoke. It is possible, by the way—as a friend of mine has—to object to the annoying
way the poem gets to where it goes next, and how “abstractly” it ends. It does not stick
exclusively to its own physicality and circle back to *bituminous* to report what “actually”
happened the way the well-behaved workshop poem should. As I said to my friend, it’s not about
“mining,” at least not the mining of coal. Things get woolier, even more annoying with the
reported or invented conversation between the speaker “and someone sitting beside me in New
York or Paris” through the tenuous connection between *filth* and the *smoke* he carries in his
lungs, which leads to the mention of which “hill” in the hilly city of Pittsburgh the speaker
comes from:

. . . and he would

¹⁷ Stern, “Winter Thirst,” in *American Sonnets* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 11.

guess my hill, and we would talk about soot
and what a dirty neck was like and how
the white collar made a fine line;
and I told him how we pulled heavy wagons
and loaded boxcars every day from five
to one A.M. and how good it was walking
empty-handed to the no. 69 streetcar
and how I dreamed of my bath and how the water
was black and soapy then and what the void
was like and how a candle instructed me.¹⁸

And this and that and the other: playful, excitable, flexible. The subject is not coal or smoke or snow or food (or mining) but coal *and* smoke *and* snow *and* food: the subject is the process of finding what is homey, *heimlich* but not “at home.” It is a kind of detective work, only you don’t always know what you’re looking for, and the crime scene keeps changing. The prosody works hard to get you to the observation about the white collar (notice that the memory is not necessarily the speaker’s: it might be his interlocutor’s) and halts at a second semi-colon (there are two end-stopped lines out of twenty-one total), so that all that prefatory semi-narrative, all that chit-chat around disconnected details, is silenced: “. . . and we would talk about soot / and what a dirty neck was like and how / the white collar made a fine line;. . .” It is as if a judge were bringing the gavel down four times, with four bangs (*white, collar, fine, line*). If I were a conductor and this were a musical score, I would tell the players not to rush through the lines that follow the second semi-colon. The semi-colon is a rest, and the *and*’s are like dotted eighths.

The poem then ends by resolving a whole range of dissonance into a closure that offers no closure: “and how I dreamed of my bath and how the water / was black and soapy then and what the void / was like and how a candle instructed me.” The isolation of the lyric is complete. The candle, the one stuck to the miner’s hat, is also Stevens’ “highest candle” in “The Soliloquy of

¹⁸ Ibid.

the Interior Paramour,” which is itself an allusion to Prophets 20:27 (“The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord”).¹⁹ The closing, like the opening, is conditional and discloses as much as it hides. It is no more about coal (*bituminous*), filth, snow, smoke or bathing than the candle at the end is a “real” candle. The non-physicality of the “physical” once it enters memory is what the poem is about. A detail in a poem is simply one more pointer to some external and distracting thing outside the poem, until it is sublimated in imagination. A fact, Keats said, is not a truth until you love it. In a way, Stern is reminding you of the long fight the Modernists waged against, and mostly lost to, the Romantics. The Romantic knew that things do not need poetry to be things, that a poem engulfed in its own thinghood is not a poem but something else. The physicality of the world is guaranteed to end the poet if the poet ends at the world. Whatever the poet understands, his poem understands that the mine is a “void” and the miner’s “candle” is what enlightens it, or as Emerson wrote in a notebook, that there is only “*I and the Abyss.*”

Williams declared that there should be “no ideas but in things,” but the example of *Paterson* demonstrates that he could not master the tricky demands his mandate lays on the lyric poet. The great cautionary examples of the Romantics, and Keats and Shelley in particular, insist that the lyric must court the physical world but never marry it, and *Paterson*, like that other foundering epic, *The Cantos*, both enter marriages with objectivity and soon mistake facts for realities. It was why Coleridge scolded his friend Wordsworth for equivocating over the meaning of the word “real.” Pound’s *Cantos*, especially, after the first thirty (and with the exception of the *Pisan* group) is one long ellipsis, paralyzed by unassimilated fact, constipated by ideology, and to me (and others) pretty unreadable. Crane, Stevens and the perpetually overlooked D.H.

¹⁹ Wallace Stevens, “The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 524.

Lawrence never forgot that the lyric poet romances the given world but steps out with the imagined one, that “the world imagined is the only good.” *Paterson* has always reminded me of a hoarder’s bedroom or back yard; its incoherence is not the incoherence of, say, *The Bridge*, whose incoherence is more profound, never boring, and erotically intense. Williams’ gatherings of letters and transcribed notes remain just that, unproductively ambiguous piles of stuff, and Pound’s inventories of facts never rise to the higher wisdom, never become sublime because sublimation is what both set out to avoid, though Williams did rediscover it later in life, in the lovely “Asphodel” poems. Pound never rediscovered it.

Stern is re-schooling a particular technique—a version of Modernism’s over-labored “show don’t tell” technique—in some derivative of the Romantic sublime, where beauty and terror, the homely and the unknown, our love of beauty and our need to deface it, intersect. One’s sense is he is doing this consciously. “I created an unassailable Utopia amidst Max Factor the powder” is how he begins his “Bio IV,” to me a commentary on his work over the past fifteen years:

and sang such that I entertained a small living room
full mostly of berouged women in the days of Bobbie Breen,
and played for money nine-ball instead of reading my Kant
offering my substance to suffer by inattention and suffer
again by the final wiping out of the cosmic mirror.²⁰

Plato at length concedes that the ideal city of the *Republic* “is a pattern laid up in Heaven,” and heaven is the soul, or what nowadays we have to call, to evade fundamentalist lunacy, mind or solipsistic memory. Stern’s “unassailable” utopia has room for everybody—including Bobby Breen (“Canadian born actor and singer of the 1930s”: Wikipedia) and pool hustlers. The only “unassailable” Utopia is the subjective one, self-organized out of personality, which is a clutter of small rooms, women who come and go in make-up, unread philosophers, and given that last

²⁰ Gerald Stern, “Bio IV,” in *Divine Nothingness*.

line, which is an uncanny impersonation of the Ginsberg of “Wales Visitation,” other poems. His “Utopia” is the isolating lyric. Our self-organizations end only at death, which is the one limit the poet must recognize, only not in his poems. When he says near the end, “I am / occult, though you’d never know it,” the Platonist admits that his like every utopia is a saving lie. The occult is his area of study; but also, as a thinking subject, he is always occult, always “hidden”—in the poem, in worn clothes, or in the body:

and we do the motion of arms and legs as with a thread-bare
tire the left hand fitting it into place the right hand
holding the bumper-jack a shoulder even
keeping the car upright the smell of dead birds
escaping from the woods my good luck to find
two bricks to keep the car from rolling birdfoot
violets for beauty a gust of wind for love.²¹

“And,” again. The word ends the last line of the penultimate stanza and kick-starts the first line of the last, and then goes away, having set in motion a prosody that shifts from the simple to the complex—from coordinated statements to a piling on of gerunds (or are they present participles?) that crab-walk down the page to conclude in the poem’s most beautiful line. The poem has to keep saying *and* or it will end. It must continue saying it even at the cost of coherence or comprehensibility. Some of the lines, I mean, hardly make empirical sense: “the smell of dead birds/ escaping from the woods” is, like the thirty-foot Plymouth, not a fact but an extravagance. Is it the impression you get whenever you’re changing a tire and holding the wheel up with your shoulder, that you’re smelling dead birds? But you are not really doing that either—the tire-changing is also remembered, i.e. imagined, just like the “smell.”

You can construct a narrative, a story-line, around the details and write your own ending—the poet finds a couple of bricks on the shoulder of the road by a wood and smells something,

²¹ Ibid.

then sees a dead bird, chocks the tires to keep the car from rolling, then notices a couple of violets and feels a gust of wind. . . but probably not, and anyway, so what? The details are there not to educate nostalgia but to confuse it, to stimulate the habit of reckless re-imagination, which is what memory really is. The nostalgic violets anchor you to what is real, physical and beautiful, whereas the wind, which is not only the wind of prophecy but of reckless desire, unmoors you, sends you on to the next thing, and makes you other than what you are.

3.

We were having lunch at a place just up the road, a slow ride from Lambertville with Stern at the wheel. We had lunched there several times and loved every meal. He was asking questions—he is a close questioner and meticulous listener—about our backgrounds and talking about his own, and he interrupted himself to launch into a related anecdote about Ukrainians and “bloodlands,” Baltic Nazis and the slaughter in Belarus during WWII, when he shifted from what we call history into reminiscence. And then he stopped. “I hate nostalgia,” he said. It was the last time we ate there. The owner sold the place. The name may be the same, but the original place no longer exists.

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