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"Male Consciousness Raising / Razing" (Robert Phillips's *The Pregnant Man*)

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THE PREGNANT MAN by Robert Phillips. New York: Doubleday, 1978. Pp. 96. \$4.95, pb.

Most readers will be delighted by the surface wit of *The Pregnant Man*. Robert Phillips is a very entertaining poet and a master of the double-take. Not only are words given double duty in terms of puns, but line breaks do double duty, images and statements recur, and poems have two movements or become new looks at subjects treated first by painters or other writers. Even the epiphanies of this attempt at “male consciousness raising/razing” force new looks. One immediate reaction is laughter in that perceptions that are momentarily disappointing still prove pleasurable (“Nostalgia is not what it used to be”). A second result is a search for resolution and transcendence in the wisdom that comes of dual perspective. Divided into three stages, the search moves from the individual (“Body Icons”) to intersubjectivity (“In Clown Clothes”) to community (“The Sacred and the Suburban”), and more often than the speaker of “Foot Notes,” readers discover that they, too, have “one foot / in the door of the future, / [and] one in the grave.” They must revise their idea of the female as “fecund vessel” in “The Tenant” and, in “The Cultivated Man,” learn to live with an image of the Earth Father. But in doing so, they expand their lives, for challenging socio-sexual myths precedes the greater effort to frame more accurately the truths underlying racial myths; and since challenging does not always imply overturning, in this area serious readings of *The Pregnant Man* are likely to collect.

Phillips comes to the “intra” conflicts of *The Pregnant Man* from the commoner “inter” conflicts of *Inner Weather* (1966). There, in the manner of early Auden, “us” opposed “them” or “you,” and the lines of demarcation followed what Søren Kierkegaard calls “ethical” rather than “aesthetic” choice. One made lifetime rather than momentary decisions because choice seemed always to involve the “either/or” of things “out there,” and the process of choosing implicated the personality, if not the salvation, of the chooser in consequences. Indeed, Auden was to note of Macbeth that the Christian tragic hero becomes the very consequences of his choices. But what if the notion of choice were itself illusory and momentary? If, like myth, ambiguity resided in

articulation and perception, and choices were susceptible to pun and double entendre? What sort of personality would then be framed? "Vital Message" provides one answer. A "message" is vital neither to the sender (who is now without it) nor to the receiver (who thus far has existed without it). A "vital message" is vital only to itself and may, as in this case, also be a message about vitality. What is "vital" to the speaker — heart, watch, soul, attention, friendship, affection, nourishment — is ambiguously perceived because attempts at separated scientific perception wrongly reduce significance to single meanings and render the perceiver somehow transparent. Phillips would prefer extended, "humanistic" multiplicity and visibility.

In registering this preference, Phillips relies — as he does in "Penis Poem" — on distinctions that Carl Jung makes concerning "male" and "female" identity myths. Jung associates the "male" myth with succession and linear history and the "female" myth with simultaneity and natural cycles of return. Yet, as *The Pregnant Man* demonstrates, men, too, think dually, and certainly, readers feel men are healthier psychologically and aesthetically for doing so. Such a feeling may disarm believers of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, for it challenges the "male" power of sublimation by which Freud had society and civilization ordered. But it should delight believers in poetry who have too long tolerated dreary quests for "sincerity" whose only virtues seem to be an exoticism of direct or vicarious victimization. If, as critics like Delmore Schwartz and Randall Jarrell maintained, poetry reflects the tensions of Freudian psychology, these victimizations — including that by the poet — reflect the kinds of fierce suppression Freud associates with order. Like late Auden, Phillips would avoid these tensions by rooting his approach squarely in the joys, exasperations, and opportunities inherent in words, where simultaneity negates Necessity and, hence, ethical sequence. "The Skin Game," for example, elaborates "onion skin" — derma, epidermis, and paper — into a process of imaginative and actual uncoverings and coverings without forcing these actions into some final "male" irony or *discordia concors*. Parataxis will do.

Much as the "Body Icons" section of the volume presents Phillips's most serious challenges to conventional male/female identity myths in the ambiguities of such excellent poems as "Vital Message," "The Head," "Hand Poem," "The Tenant," "The Invisible Man," and "The Married Man," the "In Clown Clothes" section offers conventional postures in its reexaminations of art by Picasso, Giacometti, and Burchfield and its recourse to art/life, inner/outer, and self/other dualities. Ambiguities of language persist in lines like "who have nothing at

all in their nakedness” and themes of inner thinness and difference, but the very partitive nature of intersubjectivity demands real opposites and, hence, choices. The motivation of the section’s best poem “Books” resides not in words like “binding” and “type,” from which movement seems to come, so much as on a duality of “open life” and “closed art” on which the poem ends, reasserting an ability of life to move beyond art. The wisdoms of the third section, “The Sacred and the Suburban,” are similarly less revolutionary. In two of the volume’s finest poems — “Soft and Hard” and “The Stone Crab: A Love Poem,” speakers take up the “lessons” of nature and the stone crab to face setback. In their positive returns to nature and cycle, the poems challenge again conventional successive linear “male” roles that “Transfer of Title,” “Jimmy’s Chicky-Run,” and “Jonah” uphold. Once more, simultaneity and succession do not reliably identify myths of sexual identity so much as reflect society’s needs to handle breakdown. One accepts (simultaneity) or transcends (succession). “The European Scene” negates this choice by rising to that spiritual realm of traditionally wed simultaneities and transcendences.

“The Married Man,” “Soft and Hard,” and “The Stone Crab” must be numbered among the tenderest and best recent love poems, and the volume’s insistence that properly selected words can be precise, enriching, and baffling is a refreshing change from poets who think truthful language need be dull. “Onion skin” does exist as paper and onion. “Mickey Mouse” is a watch and dull routine. A balloon can be said to “moon” outside a window, prompting the poem’s “Gothic” violation of “a virgin / sheaf of paper.” Poetic intelligence exists in seizing these correspondences as much as in getting down Heidegger, Sartre, or Roussel. Poems can proceed from such springboards as well as from the pre-existing molds of pre-packaged thought, end-rhyme, pentameter, quatrain, and sonnet. Yet, Phillips preserves enough echoes of the old to afford easy recognition and allow readers to come away finding multiple meaning and problems in the most ordinary things about them. The volume thus has that characteristic of extending a reader’s perception at the same time it asserts the opacity of the poems’ personae and art’s function not as a mirror but as a means for understanding, accepting, enjoying, and using multiplicity. As such, *The Pregnant Man* will be beneficial to women as well as men — a situation that will doubtlessly also contribute to its being among the year’s most cherished, troubling, and influential books of poetry.

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