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THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN HOWARD NEMEROV'S "THE PAINTER DREAMING IN THE SCHOLAR'S HOUSE"

Miriam Marty Clark

Despite his long, interesting career and despite the variety and complexity of his work, Howard Nemerov has received little attention in recent studies of contemporary poetry. Critics and literary historians have tended to peg him as a conventional poet of the 1950s and 60s, notable chiefly for his wit, his formality, his reasoned, even neoclassical, stanzas and to see him as a marginal figure in twentieth-century poetry, although he is well-known outside the university and the department of English.

"Howard Nemerov has perfected the poem as an instrument for exercising brilliance of wit," Laurence Lieberman observes in a typical review of *The Blue Swallows* (1967), "In his meditations, a rational, even-tempered consciousness is always securely at the controls" (225-26). Lieberman's review is a favorable one and his remarks are meant to praise; still, if recent commentators like Robert Pinsky, Jonathan Holden, Charles Altieri, and Mary Kinzie (one of Nemerov's most acute and sympathetic critics) are right, the postmodern period is marked by a movement away from intellectual abstraction and the kind of reasoned, lyrical discourse Lieberman finds in Nemerov's book.

In fact, Nemerov is never—at mid-career or late—less than the discursive, philosophical poet portrayed by Lieberman. But as Helen Vendler points out in her review of *Collected Poems*, "Nemerov has struggled increasingly, in the course of his life, with his philosophical instincts, urging his poetry into moods that will accommodate fact and dream as well as wisdom" (176). In that struggle, as in his reckoning with his Romantic inheritance and with what Pinsky identifies as a late modernist dissatisfaction with the "conventional nature of words as a medium for the particulars of experience" (12), Nemerov is a more important figure than recent books on the poetry of the 1970s and 80s suggest. It is to that struggle I would like to turn, not to argue (as Pinsky and Kinzie already have) for the recovery of discourse in contemporary poetry or even for the rehabilitation of Howard Nemerov but to explore more fully what I take to be a powerful working out in some of Nemerov's poems of the very dissatisfactions Pinsky marks as late modern and contemporary and to take note of the significant influence on Nemerov's work of English philosopher and philologist Owen Barfield.

It will be worth repeating here that despite the well-known neoclassical elements of his verse, both early and late, there is a potent, sometimes also rather eccentric, strain of Romanticism in Nemerov's work. A student and friend of Kenneth Burke, he has written on Emerson as well as on Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake and Shelley. He has also written often on Barfield, whom he has called, "possibly the clearest and most searching thinker of the present time" (F 56). While Barfield's history of consciousness seems at first too Christocentric for "an old Jew whose main

belief is in the joke," (as Nemerov has called himself), it proves central to Nemerov's own thinking on the matters of mind, world, and word. In an essay on Barfield he remarks, importantly, that, "In the situation of poetry at present, in the United States, it appears as though one after another outbreak of 'modernism' which regards itself specifically as anti-romantic presently reveals that it is but another variation on superficial aspects of the Romantic movement, while something submerged and unfinished about that movement remains largely untouched" (R 65).

Barfield's theory, which takes up those "submerged and unfinished" elements of Romanticism and which proves to be a defining influence on Nemerov, is shared with Ernst Cassirer and at many points with Goethe, Schelling, Coleridge, and others. Human consciousness, Barfield argues, has evolved over time—not, as the early anthropologists would have it, "from an initial condition of blank darkness toward wider and wider awareness of a pre-existent outer world," but rather,

a growing and an increasingly clear and self-determined focus of inner human experience from a dreamlike state of virtual identity with the *life* of the body and of its environment. Self-consciousness emerged from mere consciousness. It was only in the course of this process that the world of "objective" nature, which we now observe around us, came into being. Man did not start on his career as a self-conscious being in the form of a mindless or thoughtless unit, confronting a separate, unintelligible objective world very like our own, about which he then proceeded to invent all manner of myths. He was not an onlooker, learning to make a less and less hopelessly inaccurate mental copy. He has had to wrestle his subjectivity out of the world of his experience by polarizing that world gradually into a duality. . . . He did not *start* as an onlooker; the development of language enabled him to become one. (R 17)

Among the most important features, for Nemerov, of Barfield's work is his treatment of images and the imagination. As primitive engagement with the phenomenal world—an engagement Barfield calls "original participation" and describes most fully in his book *Saving the Appearances*—gives way to self-consciousness, human beings find themselves in a meaningless and chaotic world. Only by acts of imagination can meaning be rediscovered and participation restored. "Henceforth, the life of the image is to be drawn from within," Barfield writes of the state he calls "final participation":

The life of the image is to be none other than the life of the imagination. And it is of the very nature of imagination that it cannot be *inculcated*. There must be first of all the voluntary stirring from within. It must be, not indeed self-created but certainly self-willed, or else—it is not imagination at all. (S 179)

These ideas turn up often in Nemerov's longer lyrics and several of the strongest poems in his middle volumes (those published between the mid-fifties and the mid-

seventies) describe an evolution very much like the one Barfield posits. The speaker of "The Loon's Cry," (C 158-61) for example, envies "those past ages of the world / When, as I thought, the energy in things / Shone through their shapes." Original participation gone, he lives in world which has become nothing more than a stage, in which mysteries have been traded "for things." His is a desolate, exhausted world, the Johannine wilderness between original and final participation, until he feels an imaginative stirring within, becomes Adam in paradise, namer-of and knower and final participant. "For signatures / In all things are, which leave us not alone," he finds, "Even in the thought of death, and may by arts / Contemplative be found and named again."

Again in "The Blue Swallows" (C 397-98) an act of imagination redeems the world from meaninglessness and the speaker from despair. Standing on a bridge over a millstream, he watches some darting swallows and tries to "weave up relation's spindrift web" but finds only emptiness and unreality in a world after original participation and particularly after "That villainous William of Occam." Occam's Nominalism, which Nemerov has remarked on elsewhere, is here destructive, nearly disabling. The more "awake" the speaker becomes, and the more self-conscious, the fewer connections there seem to be between the mind and nature; finally there are not even reflections on the water. But in the end, in his longing, he turns to the visionary ratio which is the basis for all of Barfield's thinking about the the mind and the world: the mind is to thought as the eye is to light. "O swallows, swallows," the speaker cries,

poems are not
The point. Finding again the world,
That is the point, where loveliness
Adorns intelligible things
Because the mind's eye lit the sun.

Final participation and the redemption of the image from meaninglessness by the imagination is most fully considered in "The Painter Dreaming in the Scholar's House" (C 432-36). There Barfield's ideas inform and suffuse what is at once a memorable elegy for painters Paul Klee and Paul Terence Feeley and a brilliant discourse on the life of mind and the evolution of consciousness.

"Today an artist cannot rely on the life inherent in the object he imitates," Barfield remarks in *Saving the Appearances*, "anymore than a poet can rely on the life inherent in the words he uses. He has to draw the life forth from within himself" (129). Nemerov begins his poem with a similar observation: "The painter's eye follows relation out. / His work is not to paint the visible, / He says, it is to render visible." Later he adds, perhaps taking issue with the imagists, "He is the painter of the human mind / Finding and faithfully reflecting the mindfulness / That is in things, and not the things themselves." Unlike the speakers of the two earlier poems, the painter does not despair. Out of the world of sense and abstraction he "spins / Relation out, he weaves its fabric up / So that it speaks darkly, as music does / Singing the secret history of the mind."

In that "secret history," final participation looks deceptively like original participation with its primitive, non-representational images:

And hence the careless crowd deludes itself
By likening his hieroglyphic signs
And secret alphabets to the drawing of a child.
That likeness is significant the other side
Of what they see, for his simplicities
Are not the first ones, but the furthest ones,
Final refinements of his thought made visible.

In the second section, the poet himself sings “the secret history of the mind,” making the artist and his work “an allegory of the mind / At genesis.” First there is the void and then the simultaneous evolution of the mind and the material world. “Against this flat abyss, this groundless ground / Of zero thickness stretched against the cold,” Nemerov writes of the void and of the burlap sack which is the artist’s representation of the void, “Material worlds arise.” Paradoxically, among the world’s materials are those out of which which the artist creates the world—“the colored earths / And oil of plants that imitate the light.” “They imitate the light that is in thought,” Nemerov reminds us, turning back to Barfield’s telling ratio, “For the mind relates to thinking as the eye / Relates to light.”

In this double allegory—poem and painting—of the double genesis of mind and world, the world “Already is a language” which the painter can speak, “According to his grammar of the ground,” the earths and oils. “It is archaic speech, that has not yet / Divided out its cadences in words,” Nemerov writes,

It is a language for the oldest spells
About how some thoughts rose into the mind
While others, stranger still, sleep in the world.

Though archaic, undivided, that speech has in it the beginnings of division and of man’s evolution out of original participation. In his essay “Poetry and Painting,” Nemerov envisions a primitive world in which “the shapes and substances of the earth rose up and assumed a mental and a spiritual quality, conferring upon the mind that brought them forth a thrilling if somewhat frightening power of detachment from the world as viewed by the prehuman mind, or at least the mind that was before these things were” (F 98).

As those thoughts rise into the mind, colors take on images and images color:

So grows the garden green, the sun vermilion.
He sees the rose flame up and fade and fall
And be the same rose still, the radiant in red.
He paints his language, and his language is
The theory of what the painter thinks.

From this vision—a very challenging vision—of original participation, of the radical unity of mind and world, thought and language, Nemerov turns in section three toward final participation. In Barfield’s history, the loss of original participation means a complete change in worldview. Space becomes a void, history becomes progressive rather than cyclical, the painter gains perspective, something he did not have in the days when he wore the phenomenal world like a garment. “He stands where the eternity of thought / Opens upon perspective time and space,” Nemerov

writes of his painter. But already by his imaginative powers and his will the painter participates in nature in a new way. He "attends," "sees," "views," "meditates," "follows through." By doing so, he is able to see (in language which recalls Rilke as well as Barfield) "death and birth / Together,"

a single energy
Momentarily manifest in every form,
As in the tree the growing of the tree
Exploding from the seed not more nor less
Than from the void condensing down and in,
Summoning sun and rain.

Without envy for past ages, he finds in his art both a metaphoric and a metonymic power. "He sees / How things must be continuous with themselves," Nemerov writes, "As with whole worlds that they themselves are not, / In order that they may be so transformed." And again, without envy, he stands witness to the whole evolution of consciousness toward the final participation which takes place for him in the act of painting. "He watches mind become incarnate," Nemerov writes at the end of the section, "then / He paints the tree."

At this point the painter is the very figure of that "awakened clarity of retrospect" which Barfield sees as a feature of final participation. Clarity and insight are Nemerov's themes, too, in the last and most elegaic section of the poem. "That there should be much goodness in the world," he writes,

Much kindness and intelligence, candor and charm,
And that it all goes down in the dust after a while,
This is a subject for the steadiest meditations

Of the heart and mind, as for the tears
That clarify the eye toward charity.

So may it be to all of us, that at some times
In this bad time when faith in study seems to fail
And when impatience in the street and still despair at home

Divide the mind to rule it, there shall some comfort come
From the remembrance of so deep and clear a life as his

Significantly, it is not until this last section that he calls Klee by name or speaks of *his* life, of *his* mind rather than of *the* mind. For Barfield, and here for Nemerov, the evolution of consciousness is also a process of individuation. "The elimination of original participation," Barfield argues, "involves a contraction of human consciousness from periphery to centre—a contraction from the cosmos of wisdom to something like a purely brain activity—but by the same token it involves an *awakening*. For we wake out of universal—into self—consciousness" (S 182). Only in final participation do Klee's imaginative and meditative powers become fully his own; only after the emergence from the "collective conscious" could he be admired, as Nemerov admires him, "for the wholeness of his mind." Still, in a gesture which circles appropriately back to the poem's first section and which recalls not only that

vital ratio of Barfield's but also the similarity of final participation to original, Nemerov remarks that the dream the painter dreams in the scholar's house—a dream which is “an emblem to us of the life of thought”—is, “The same dream that then flared before intelligence / When light first went forth looking for the eye.”

Noting that “The Painter Dreaming in the Scholar's House” was read at the inauguration of the president of Boston College in 1968, Ross Labrie remarks that the poem, “has the amplitude of a formal public statement” (132). At this point it's very useful to remember the public aspect of a poem which is in many ways so difficult. The painter does not dream in the wildwood; the mind's secret history *can* be sung in a language we know; the long relations between dream and reason are matters for thought and for discourse.

In his book, *Self and sensibility in contemporary American poetry*—a book which makes no mention of Nemerov—Charles Altieri observes that “the dream of figuring forth a sense of source, of what we understand ourselves as standing on in our motion and emotion, remains alive. If we are dismantling reason's stage, some poets at least are trying to read through our constant sense of duplicity a wholly other dream of ultimate grounds.” Altieri goes on to mention John Ashbery's meditations and Adrienne Rich's radical oppositions but comments finally that, “Even these poets rarely produce a contemplative site adequate to all the duplicities our language and our world continually impose upon us” (30).

But Nemerov's “dream of figuring forth a sense of source” is a powerful one, too little discussed in the criticism of this decade and the last. And the scholar's house, with its rooms and its dreams, proves a habitable place, a contemplative site where language and the world might be reckoned with.

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