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John Wieners:
'Now Watch the Windows
Open by Themselves.'

Richard Howard

With a characteristic insight of solicitude, Allen Ginsberg has urged John Wieners' readers to seek out this poet in the posture of listeners rather than as readers, even if they confront his "out lines" only on the page. They will find, Mr. Ginsberg asserts in his oddly judicious way—odd for being so public; so literary and yet so intimate—that *The Hotel Wentley Poems* is "the work of a naked flower, a tragic *maudit*, doomed sensibility, absolutely real, no mere self-pity." Mr. Ginsberg is asking, I think, that we attend finally to the poet's *persona* in the original sense of that word, something through which sounds are heard and thus a mask, but only as a megaphone is a mask, to magnify the very self and voice:

And with great fear I inhabit the middle of the night
What wrecks of the mind await me, what drugs
to dull the senses, what little I have left,
what more can be taken away?

That is the voice all right, and what is it we hear when we thus attend to this unpagged pamphlet, published in 1958 by the Auerhahn Press (San Francisco), containing a series of eight poems dated between June 15 and June 22, 1958? We hear—and the poet's attention to language is such that the working of words among themselves has made his competence a control to this end, as when he says:

The sun
also rises on the rooftops
beginning with violet.
I begin in blue knowing what's cool

—we hear the still sad music of depravity.

Yet we are so tired of the costume of depravity that we are likely to miss the real thing when it stands before us ("Down dark and dreary ways," Wieners writes, "line survivors of our expectation"). Mr. Ginsberg himself, who ought to know, tended to mistrust what he evidently took for "mere self-pity." He reports: "when I first received *The Hotel Wentley Poems* I read rapidly and was not struck by

more than a few out lines about pot or fairies. However I by accident taped a reading of those poems, and I have been weeping for Wieners ever since." It is a question, then, of how we listen as well as of what we are listening *to*. And it is hard to shake off the suspicions we have learned, since Byron, to associate with an exhibited diabolism. To make a display of emotions you do not naturally have but think you ought to have because all the best people, in this case all the worst people, have them is the vulgarism we have come to associate with the poetry of depravity since the Paris of Verlaine, the London of the yellow Nineties, the Berlin of the Twenties, and on into cities and decades sufficiently immediate to require, as yet, no chroniclers, though ever since Mr. Ginsberg returned to the East Coast there have been many aspirants for the task. The fact that John Wieners makes so professional a job of being depraved—

. . . woman waiting
with no mouth, waiting
for me to kiss it on.
Who is the young man
who sneaks out through
the black curtain, away
from the bad bed . . .

—is perhaps the result of his entering on that state when he was both old enough and young enough (24) to notice the difference his profession made in the attitude society took toward him. The public price of depravity—loneliness, yet lack of privacy; reflex and mechanical sexual habit, yet lack of love; uncertainty of audience response, yet reliance on impulse so extreme it made Byron remark, apropos of his refusal to revise: "I am like the Tyger. If I miss my first Spring, I go growling back to my Jungle. There is no second"—even costing all this, the public price of depravity is low compared to the private damages it must inflict if it is real, and about which Mr. Wieners is explicit enough:

. . . all connections swept aside,
A life lost to me like outgoing tide.

But the reader has his own problems with depravity, precisely because it is so hard to dissociate the trappings from the trap, to distinguish the counterfeit vices from the true—only God can tell the satanic from the suburban. Still, depravity is always with us, invariably flaunting the same stigmata of sexual heterodoxy, addiction to narcotics and the rejection of middle-class haberdashery all the way down the line (I mean, from haircuts to socks, or rather the absence of both). There is something unassumed about it which will always find a Voice, as Mr. Ginsberg insists, among the poets of a time and a place, despite the charlatans in corruption, the show-offs and the shills in what Emily Dickinson called Consternation's Carnival. For the truly depraved poet is, of course, a moralist; he hates the nature that makes him what he is, and in his anti-Rousseauian way, usually from the center of the City, from "God's concrete," preaches his downward Calvinism to the unawakened:

There are holy orders in life.
I was born to be a priest
defrocked . . .
on Epiphany to make manifest mysteries.

No absinthe-sipper murmuring his Gospels of Evil from a café corner in some memoir by Arthur Symons, no Berlin *Dekadent* limping to his pulpit in the brothels, could be more insistent on his role as unwashed lawgiver to an errant tribe than John Wieners in his little *suite*:

. . . I come to the last defense.

My poems contain no
wilde beestes, no
lady of the lake, music
of the spheres or organ chants.

Only the score of a man's
struggle to stay with
what is his own, what
lies within him to do.

Without which is nothing.
And I come to this
knowing the waste,
leaving the rest up to love

and its twisted faces . . .

The revivalist is talking, as Ginsberg suggested, and we are to listen in ritual silence, letting the preacher break off his own narrative "to seek out on dark highway/that lover who will release me into heaven." The breaking point is perfectly illustrated in the quotation, when love—why?—has "its twisted faces." The poem continues, but the sermon is over—love, love that we left the rest up to, cannot redeem.

■

The supposition that *The Hotel Wentley Poems*, each dated and named—"A Poem for Tea Heads," "A Poem for Early Risers," "A Poem for Cocksuckers," etc.—are intended as the transcription, presumably made *in* the Hotel Wentley, of inspired sermons, is reinforced by John Wieners' second, more voluble group of poems, *Ace of Pentacles*, published in 1964. This book, which with a pamphlet of five poems, *Pressed Wafer*, published in 1967, constitutes Wieners' entire *oeuvre*, is appropriately dedicated to "The Voices," and Rilke himself, who was always claiming in that awful mountebank's way of his to be the instrument of angelic

voices, to be merely receiving *dictation*, thereby disavowing the responsibilities usually associated with authorship, could not have managed a more slippery relation to his works. Like Rilke, Wieners knows what in his poems will be caught on the freakish barbs of his historical identity, and he demands of life the means to transcend such accidents:

Divulge
the secret whereby we may become
stars and glow in the night
with a brightness of our own.

In fact, there is a consistent parallel between Rilke and Wieners, both of whom start young with “stories about God” and end up—this is surely Wieners’ fate—in other people’s houses, listening to “the voices.” The difference, of course, will be suggested by what divides the Castle of Duino from the Hotel Wentley; yet it is important to see these places, discrepant as we know them to be, as spiritual sites, “spots of time” where the genius can possess its man:

I find a pillow to
muffle the sounds I make.
I am engaged in taking away
from God his sound.

and again:

The poem . . .
does not lie to us. We lie under its
law, alive in the glamour of this hour
able to enter into the sacred places . . .

The Hotel Wentley sequence is, like the *Duino Elegies*, a meditation on death, on the conditions within life that have brought the poet to a true and proper vision of death. Like Rilke, Wieners depends heavily on what the painter has discovered to him:

The second afternoon I come
back to the women of Munch.
Models with god over
their shoulders, vampires,
the heads are down and
blood is the water-
color they use to turn on.
The story is not done.
There is one wall
left to walk.

and more directly:

Two monkeys sit there,
one on the right turned towards me, the
other crouched and turned

away. They
have red hair and do not play
with their chains. But sit on a ledge
above Venice? anyway a city with canals
painted by Breughel, I see
them in a mirror when I look for my own face.

Munch and Breughel are the agents of the same revelation Picasso and Rodin had afforded the European poet. "Without image," Wieners says, "we are bereft." He compares his efforts, "scratching for the right words," to those of Paul Klee who "scratched for seven years on smoked glass to develop his line." And indeed, it will be the perfected line that insures the poem, saves it from all the disasters and disorders of a lifetime, the damages of mere perversity:

Let the heart's pain slack off
To that secret place we go to in time
Without rhyme's safety to assure us,
All gift is, that perfect joy.

Under the self-invoked tutelage of Pound ("the old man told us under the tent, Oh put down thy vanity man. You are overrun with ants"), of Olson and of Duncan, with whom he studied at Black Mountain College ("I ain't been able to forget"), Wieners' line will serve against life, that "debris solid enough to erect a wall against."⁸ The line will be the wall, "without rhyme's safety," exposed then to all the terrors of experience:

Woe to those crimes committed from which we
can walk away unharmed.

Though the second book of poems is too much of a rag-bag, stuffed with gnostic snippets like:

Strange with women when
They find out you love men
More than they
Never let you kiss them
On the mouth again

and regressions to "rhyme's safety" like the "Ode on a Common Fountain," which is either student work or the parody of such work:

Here glistening Amphitrite cools each whim.
On you, the forms of love are cast and shod,
But all your soothing, almost breathing pose
sits filled with stone, yet be content. You hymn
The song of life, soft syllables from God.

—even so, let us pull out some of the rags and sew them together; the garment

we thereby produce is a strait-jacket close indeed to Mr. Ginsberg's final response to these poems as a "piece of absolute tragic genius," if we take his first word to mean a fragment, the irresponsible but suggestive part of a whole which is simply not there. What is there is the magnitude of ruins, not of monuments—for which we must go, of course, to Rilke.

■

Depravity means, ultimately, the action or quality of being crooked, hooked—not straight; and when, in the vocabulary of addiction, John Wieners prays for his "lost" lover:

. . . let no ache
screw his face
up in pain, his soul
is so hooked

he is very precisely describing the trope of his being: "There are no connections. And Yet, look how each one of us is hooked." Even so, the self, out of its (waning) organic energies, persists, often with only enough vitality to pray:

Fulfill us
as the sea
fulfills the shore.

And the next entry in this journal of a disintoxicated soul comes to this:

The Dream does not endure.
Despite all travels, what does it come to?
What one knows today will be gone tomorrow.
One reason to write . . .
I see the unknown words written in my brain
before they are set down on paper.

There, along with the dope, the deviation and the dirty clothes, is the genuine Rilkean thrust, the insistence on a vocation, the poet's sacred office:

Oh I have
always seen my life as drama, patterned
after those who met with disaster or doom.
Is my mind being taken away from me?
I have been over the abyss before . . .

Do not think of the future; there is none.
But the formula all great art is made of.
Pain and suffering. Give me the strength
to bear it, to enter those places where the
great animals are caged. And we can live
at peace by their side. A bride to the burden

that no god imposes but knows we have the means
to sustain its force unto the end of our days.

For that it is what we are made for; for that
we are created. Until the dark hours are done.

And we rise again in the dawn.
Infinite particles of the divine sun, now
worshipped in the pitches of the night.

This burden of priesthood, “what aches in the heart and makes each new start less close to the source of desire,” compels the recourse to drugs. “We transplant in vain what cannot blossom,” Wieners says, and in his poem “Cocaine” echoes William Burroughs in the only convincing observation literature has had to make about drugs since Baudelaire:

the Face has ceased to stare
at me with the Rose of the world
but lies furled
in an artificial paradise it is Hell to get into . . .
But it is senseless to try.
One can only take means to reduce misery,
confuse the sensations . . .

And the moralizing, the preaching, the tragic revivalism—revives, a double strand of adjuration: to love, to renounce love. The loathing of the physical self, the symptom of the addict, for all his erotic permissiveness, recurs like a hangover. Knowing that “love is my strength” the poet reaches for it,

my hands claw out
only to draw back from the
blood already running there.

The program fails, there can be no program, we are fallen beings.

The higher one goes
up the angelic ladder
remains the minute bits
and ends of our life:

Seeds there to recur when we
are most unaware.
Old faces, letters crop up again.
Words from our poems

Menace the night.