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Birthing the Myth of Himself

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Birthing the Myth of Himself

Superlatives become tiresome in the poetry world. I don't think I've ever read a book jacket for a poet which didn't call that writer "one of the best," "one of the most important" writing today. This either is patently untrue most of the time, or we have a lot of important stuff being written. Of course, only four or five hundred people in the world will read it but . . .

Rotten of me to start writing about Clayton Eshleman this way, but you see I really want to say that *Coils* (Black Sparrow Press: Los Angeles, 1973) is a remarkable book of poetry, written by "one of the best poets" I know. A cranky cantankerous fellow who hasn't made too many friends in the poetry world—though I've been reluctant to write this piece because he *is* a good friend of mine. One I'm glad to know, for like this book he can be difficult, outrageous, even embarrassing, yet he is always interesting. *Coils* is a difficult book. Don't try to read it in less than three or four sittings, but it is worth every battling moment. It is a rare book: whole, organic, like a complete life. It is hard to imagine the author having more to say after it's finished. Yet his new poems (some of which have been published as a Black Sparrow pamphlet called *Aux Mortes*) are just as beautiful; different too. Yes, he is a rare writer.

I have read and lived with this book for over a year now, and every time I open it, every time I think about it, the book is richer, stronger, more complete than I thought previously. Most poets have to be read in retrospect in order to see how rich, fine, complex, ambitious and strong they are/were. Rarely does a poet produce one book, other than his collected poems, which is a monolith of power. Yet Eshleman has done it. In one book. *Coils*.

Coils is a document of transformation. Usually that's what a whole body, one's lifetime of poetry, is. The document of the poet's total transformation from person to poet. But *Coils* is such a document. Eshleman begins the book with a prose introduction, speaking of gradual recognition, as a man, of a need for change, for a rebirth. "I knew I had to learn how to become a physical traveller as well as a mental one," he says, and here introduces part of the beautiful and complex paradox of his book. For it is a spiritual/mental journey, the process of transforming himself from a "white Indiana Protestant" into a poet, that *Coils* is about, and yet what this book continues to tell us, over and over, in painful, toiling, agonizing, obsessive language, is that white middle-class (midwestern) American men have been brain-washed, de-sensitized, insulated, manufactured into the antithesis of poetry, and he has to make a journey back through his body to find the female, in

himself, in his mythology, in his mother, his wife, his lovers, in order to uncover the spiritual/mental female in himself, the poetry in himself.

This is a powerful and painful recognition, and part of what makes this book so difficult to read is its honesty. For he is a successful product of his education, totally male in his mind over matter sensibility, and he shows us every portion of the struggle, revealing himself often as clumsy, insensitive, hurting other people, often women, in this search for a whole self. Yet he is relentless with himself too, and somehow there is a nobility that keeps shining through.

I believe this process is the same one Robert Bly tries to chronicle in his Teeth-Mother poem; yet in Bly's poem I do not find any understanding of the female process at all, for he really separates the female from poetry. Bly's shorter nature poems are all more female in their understanding than the Teeth-Mother poem is. But in *Coils* Eshleman really is honestly battling with his education and history, trying to give birth to a new self. Much has been said about the fine poetry of self-discovery women are writing today, and yet *Coils* is the most total and revealing book of self-discovery I have ever read. I keep saying it's not biological, though it starts there. Men can discover themselves too. Perhaps I find *Coils* as touching as I do because it requires enormous humility to say publicly that you either have no self or you do not know yourself or you wish to create, recreate, or discover one. That act of humility is a female act; it allows birth, or rebirth.

Eshleman's physical-spiritual journey has several working metaphors in the poem. He introduces his long project of translating the poetry of the South American poet, Vallejo, saying, "I increasingly had the feeling I was struggling with a man more than with a text," and he goes on to tell us of his deep involvement with the world of William Blake's imagination. During this time, we also find that his physical struggles lead him through Reichian therapy and Scientology, out of a marriage, through many love affairs to a final lasting relationship. He begins by telling of his awareness of a need for change, in that prose introduction, as he creates the landscape of Japan which later turns into the mythical Oriental world of Yorunomado.

"My stomach was the sign to me that I was not damned, and that I was damned as well. I ached in my stomach when I would try to write. . . . The Japanese . . . see the stomach as the center of a person (in contrast to the Western brain and heart). For this reason they have seen disembowelment ("seppuku") as the most noble way to die. I saw my initial work on my Self as disembowelment, a cutting into myself, leading to the birth of Yorunomado whom I envisioned chained to an altar in my solar plexus until the moment of his birth." And later he says, "I know now that in terms of therapeutic value the two years I spent in Reichian therapy enabled me to *alter* my life but also that that altering has not by any means stopped taking

place. . . .” Altering involves sacrifice, for you must give up something you already have to create a new reality. Eshleman sees this act of altering as a religious act, perhaps even one of self-worship, a dizzying concept I think we all shy away from. And yet I do not think any of us could deny that the act of being a poet is one in which we honor our own words enormously. *Coils* is a book that could only be loved by a reader who knows and honors himself. Anyone who is personally dishonest or self-deceiving will find the book frightening and offensive.

And if you don’t like autobiography with your poetry, this book will also make you nervous, for we come to know Barbara, Adrienne, Marie, and Caryl, as well as Blake, Vallejo, and the mythic Yorunomado very well. Yet, I believe one of the 20th century’s strongest contributions to poetry has been the gift of personal mythology. I think that very few poets care to think they are writing their autobiographies, but in some way they are allowing the people in their lives to become mythic or fictional characters; I would risk saying alter egos too, but think that belies the act of myth-making. And we are, yes we are above all, trying to write mythology.

The use of prose passages interspersed along the way to help notate chronology, literal reality, and spiraling ideas, is brilliant. It gives a second dimension to the poet’s voice, which in the verse is often lyric:

—slowly, surely, carp turn
to a crust of biscuit,

. . .
in the dark pool below
slender vermilion carp
motionless

. . .
Like flaming voices the carp
shoot about over mossed olive stones. A foot deep:
Europe shimmering light, a wall with the intensity of heat
waves. (from “Webs of Entry,” p. 11)

Marie,
the trees are walking like lovers in my
spiritual imagination—
beavers come upon the shore, in love
with the wood they greet the mice,
the bees, asters & the daffodils

Marie

the flowers the hills are singing
the hooded gesture of a violet no longer covert
converted bright-purple
the cornflowers sprigs & vines
roll toward the sun their maker
in spiritual harmony my sadness lifts
All is revealed
green & glowing, moist
in the fresh sunfilled heart (from "April Letter,
p. 58)

O give it up it
says, let

that lavender
curtain fringe stand
for you,
let

him stand
for you, let
stand stand

for stand—
& then
you'll be through. (from "The Bloodstone," p. 87)

often passionate:

Reached the point where imagination
became the inverse of this world, there
I took the mirage for real,
the sand as mirage, what I imagined
became real, a giant indian whore
in a stable outside of Ica was
a lick of moisture
& before her the Greek woman
Bloomington 1965 looked like moisture
like bloody drops of hot moisture these moments
fell onto my desert *Do not take them as my image*
my mothering soul was whispering to me,
This desert is Indiana, is your state of mind

*bred of Indiana. What do you see in the cracks
of mirage? I see my penis pushing toward a point of
blindly, drunkenly, when I am alone, when I exist in
red, I see a center opening & opening that I seek
Indiana bred marriage the desert again becomes real
I am back in linear time,
a work of art to make in misery but misery to be concealed
in wit, in blanketing of imagination, each thought a grain The
grain in wood a swirl of thought now decomposing/composing
under my hands This is your Last Judgment the Error to be
consolidated then cast off Your penis is a dragon-tail Take hold
Pull your body out of Indiana (from "Coils," p. 140)*

often childlike in its fury and its pounding I-want-attention attitude:

My language is full of dirt & shit.
Is it too great a thing to imagine
I can conceive myself?

. . .

Now there was something raging
inside me that saw itself
outside me in the spider
in its web between the maple &
persimmon tree in the Okumura
backyard

. . .

What did I *see*? I saw that smashed
self of persimmon
a pile of orange skin
The skin bust, pulp spills out
You are hooked on your own pulp, that's
sick, therefore not art
But I'm in the grip of a force my
body argued back, whose shape
I'm trying to recognize (from "Webs of Entry," pp. 12-13)

The prose passages come like clear mind, the waters of birth, making some ease for the reader who also begins to sensitize himself and struggle for his/her own buried self. One of the most beautiful poems in the book is a prose piece, called "Letter from New Paltz." It comes after the poet has begun to struggle with poetry, with his marriage, with his own body, and finally with the bodies of others. The letter is addressed to Marie, who has seduced him from his Reichian therapy into Scientology, then cruelly re-

jected him, stripping him, leaving him with the female realization that the concept of freedom is a male idea, false and deceiving for it leads to death. "Scientology promises total freedom to the individual—to be totally free is to be dead, and death, living death, is the end product of such a realized promise." In understanding that Marie has been hurt by many men and is solving her problem by now behaving in the cruel way she's previously been treated, the poet begins to understand the repeating parts of himself, the dead parts, those closed to *alterations*.

After you taunted me that morning in Washington Square Park I finally threw my coffee in your face & smacked you; you screamed at me "I knew that was going to happen!" and sadly I heard in that some rock-bottom in you; you knew it was going to happen because you were going to prove it, were going to *make* it happen—for the nth time you had proved men are shits. It is from that certainty that you wrote me the letter you did last week. . . .

And I just rub my head & say it is impossible, that I have lost. It is very quiet here now, the only sound is in the trees, the sky clear gray, a fly buzzing around one of Carolee's paintings. I know that I have lost in a very specific way because there is something powerful in me that would be with you on nearly the same terms I have exposed in this letter. I am split there & looking into that abyss. I must say that, for if I don't there will be a lie in this letter—I could not write this letter to you if I still did not love you & almost desperately want you, want to be with you at any price, and as I am feeling that terror now you are becoming a terrible vision, my vision of woman, my vision of woman as inflicter of pain, how I am magnetized to that stone, how the rails of my past point only to that terminal, & how I must derail myself from that drive that can never as such allow me the pattern I want to work in my art. It may be ok for some, some may choose it, but I see it as an infection. And in that infection a face, a beautiful lure, the kind of face a man says he would kill for—not the face of sexual deadness that also drives men up the wall but the face of inner projection of the social, the face poets have worshipped & adored, the "lady," cool queen of heaven enthroned in the ice palaces of the sky. How decent my mother was compared to this aggregate image that I have modeled!

I cannot pretend to know any less than I know even if pretending less seems to get me more. Last week I blindly wrote that sentence; I understand it now. It is the essence of what I have drawn from our hell.

(from "Letter from New Paltz," pp. 84, 85)

This book of poetry has a kind of authenticity which seems extremely im-

portant to me, as a reader of poetry in a time when it is à la mode to talk of oneself in poems. This book was almost more sculptured than written. It isn't just that it's autobiographically true, for that is an easy kind of authenticity. It is precisely that each confrontation is so struggled for; precisely that the goal itself is so preposterous by normal standards; precisely that the character is no hero but by his own admission an insensitive fraternity boy whose father was an efficiency expert in a slaughterhouse; precisely that he is trying to cast off those parts of himself which in white protestant America would win praise; yes, that one finally has to see this book as a life, a complete organic whole.

Coils is a difficult book to read because there is no superficial way of reading it, just as there is no honest way of *altering* oneself superficially. Even surface changes come from below: that is the message. And the reader himself begins to feel his own transformation as he gets involved with *Coils*, for it does not take more than twenty pages to assure you that you must surrender to the book in order to read it. But it is a seduction rather than an assault. *Coils* is really a long poem, not a collection of poetry. Reading it, I feel that I have witnessed the birth of a major poet.

POEM / DENISE LEVERTOV

Growth of a Poet

I

He picks up crystal buttons from the ocean floor.
Gills of the mind pulse in unfathomed water.

In the infinite dictionary he discovers
gold grains of sand. Each line has its twin
on some shore the other side of the world.

Blind to what he does not yet need,
he feels his way over broken glass
to the one stone that fits his palm.

When he opens his eyes he gives to what he gazes at
the recognition no look ever before granted it.
It becomes a word. Shuddering, it takes wing.

II

*"What is to give light
must endure burning"*
—*Wildgans, quoted by Frankl*