

1988

Ann Lauterbach: An Advance

Scott Ferguson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Scott. "Ann Lauterbach: An Advance." *The Iowa Review* 18.3 (1988): 157-162. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3684>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Ann Lauterbach: An Advance · *Scott Ferguson*

WHATEVER ELSE Ann Lauterbach's poetry may be, it is not "emotion recollected in tranquility": the title of her latest collection, *Before Recollection* (Princeton University Press, 1987), hints, in its way, at Wordsworth's famous definition. In the Wordsworthian poem, the moment of writing, of "tranquility," is privileged: the poet is presumed to stand momentarily outside the tumult of experience, to be able freely to cast back his intelligence over a given course of events and to interpret their meaning. The poem is a kind of coda to the experience which generates it. It is a poetry which betrays, formally, a faith in the power of "recollection" and the vehicle of this faith is the narrative of which the poem is constructed.

Lauterbach takes aim explicitly at the primacy of this mode. Using such poets as Ashbery as a model, her poetry does not attempt so much to look back on, interpret and codify experience as it does to give a picture of what, in the mind, experience is like as it happens, in the present moment, "before recollection." When the speaker of one of her poems returns to a place from which she has been severed by time, it is not merely to reminisce, to attempt through the usual sort of musing narrative to recapture the past, but rather to reflect on the inadequacy of reminiscence, as in "Bridgehampton 1950, 1980," in the book's first section, "Naming the House":

Garden, hedge, pool,
Planned to guard the old line, define
And compose the imagination's brown capacity.
Our extent is more than memory
Or the text of a poem willed to the wall
Although our tenacious forebears whisper
Collections, passed from father to son to son
While mother prunes.

Here the object of remembrance, a town whose relation to the speaker is not made clear but which, for whatever reason, sets in motion a chain of

Before Recollection. Ann Lauterbach. Princeton University Press, 1987. 72 pp. paper, \$8.50.

unpleasant associations, curiously mirrors the hopelessness, in the poet's view, of the aesthetic from which she is trying to liberate herself. The personal and the aesthetic concern become indistinguishable: the speaker resists the claims of "recollection" because they threaten to entrap her in a past which was male-dominated, constricting; the poet rejects the mode of narrative reminiscence which would ally her, formally, to the "collections, passed from father to son to son." The self, Lauterbach appears to be telling us, cannot be made to cohere through a formulaic "now" vs. "then," and in the haunting, dream-like mutations of these poems, this becomes, fascinatingly, a kind of political realization as well.

Because the language of these poems attempts to approximate more exactly our actual state of unease and confusion, they are, in interviewers' language, "oblique" and "difficult." Our sense of inhabiting a place, of being located within a specific situation, is disturbed: on first reading, we scarcely know where we are. We only gradually come to accept the non-locations of the poems as places in their own right; interior fields of obscurity, as it were, from whose vantage points the idea itself of place can be examined. It is the *process* of naming the place which is exposed to view, as in "Naming the House":

. . . I think . . . of how women, toward evening,
Watch as the buoyant dim slowly depletes
Terrain, and frees the illuminated house
So we begin to move about, reaching for potholders
And lids, while all the while noting
That the metaphor of the house is ours to keep
And the dark exterior only another room
Waiting for its literature.
She dallies now in plots
But feels a longing for dispersal,
For things all to succumb to the night's snow
Omitting and omitting. She has this attention:
To the reticent world enforced by the sensual
And her curiosity, a form of anticipation,
Knowing the failure of things to null and knowing, too,
The joy of naming it this, and this is mine.

Here the discomfort, the sense of having no place, dissolves before the joy of naming the psychic habitation of the poem. Place, like memory, becomes a phenomenon of language rather than of actuality.

In the second section of the book, "As Far As the Eye Can See," the subject is that of the visible world, and more particularly, the art of painting. She is certainly one of the most original and insightful of our poets who habitually "write off" of paintings, and yet these poems are so diligently non-descriptive and rely so little on an easy, direct referentiality that it is almost impossible to paraphrase them. They deal, in so far as such a thing is possible in the spare mechanism of language, with what it is possible to see through representation. She takes seriously the changes which have been wrought in the way we see through painting and she has a tragic sense of the world's no longer simply being "out there," projected familiarly and comprehensibly in art. In "Mimetic" she says:

Pavese said sentiment, in art, is accuracy,
But the poem would not stretch
To phrase the red cliffs, the seizure of place.
You see the world as self. For us, she
Is world, enduring, veracity of was
Being what is. We cannot look
At what we love without failure,
The failure of the world to reflect itself.

If, in many of Lauterbach's poems, we feel plunged chaotically into the open-ended, ambiguous world of experience "before recollection," in lines such as these, with something like a sharp intake of breath, we recognize this poet's clarity of vision: she is a competent geographer, anything but lost in the relatively unknown terrain she has chosen as her own.

Perhaps the most consummately achieved and complex of the poems treating the visible is "Graffiti." In this lovely, delicately cadenced poem it is a question of the visual representation of language: the complexity of the poem arises from the fact that a piece of graffiti (if it is legible to us) is at the same time a visual and a linguistic sign, proposing both plastic and conceptual value. In view of Lauterbach's intimacy with visual art, one can't help feeling that graffiti, if it were poetry, would be the kind of poetry toward which her own work aspires. An element of chance also

comes into play, as the scrawled words are, presumably, come upon randomly:

Callow and *amorphous*, not gods
But adjectives flung at the sun
Lovingly, touching our skulls lovingly.
This is not a desert.
This is a place where a pedestrian stops,
Thinking the face in the window is an owl's.
The face in the window is a Renaissance Youth
Eternally snivelling under a green umbrella.
Across the street, it is written DRUNK DOOM
In large bold, short-circuiting the STIFLED,
DROWSY, UNIMPASSIONED GRIEF I remember in London.
Much of London I don't recall, although names
Sail back to me on small craft, like plunder.
Loss of names is one kind of leakage
But there is another: the actual scale
Breezing along in daring episodes,
Most of it escaping utterance, falling
Back into the temple housing *callow* and *amorphous*
As well as *enchanted*, and there waits
To be spirited toward us, away from the unrecovered.

I am not certain I understand what “the actual scale” is, and I feel incapable of elucidating in particular the spell this poem casts. What principle determines what we are able to recover, what is “spirited toward us,” as opposed to that which falls away, “escaping utterance”? This is Proustian territory, but she reminds us also of Rimbaud in the rapt attention paid to the nimbus of specific words; to their quality as vehicles of Mystery.

Eros and dream are the subjects of the book's third section, “Psyche's Dream.” Here, with a humor that is at once sly and tumultuous, the erotic is made to intervene in our seemingly most humdrum daily thoughts and activities, that area of life from which sex is typically fenced out:

. . . Every now and then, a stray day
Finds its way to the surface of our unguarded desires
And we couple with it, wrecking all precedent, gaining ground.

Lines such as these speak for themselves. In places, however, the dream-reality strikes us as *too* unmediated:

No longer enchantment but slowed or slowly held
Nocturnes hummed through the arch of ceremony.
There are lunar variations and lovers,
Now and then, limber enough.
They do not talk in night air. For days
I am elevated among them, suffering variation . . .

Someone, we feel, must bear the responsibility of being in charge of such stuff; otherwise we're too much in the position of the psychoanalyst who faces the raw material of a dream the dreamer of which has disappeared, leaving no clues as to its origin or context.

If, however, these poems occasionally stray from sense, their prosodic grace redeems them. This grace is lost only in a few of the lines of the book's final section, "A Simple Service." Here the sumptuous and exact syntactical music of poems such as "Graffiti" is abandoned in favor of briefer notations. The effect can be slight, as in these lines from "Sacred Weather":

As I lay in the sky
A small blade opened the night.

The pines have turned.
Now yellowish pinnacles
Rain newly matte footing
As if all our sun had fallen to mangers.

As I lie in the night
A small star opens the sky.

But at other times an inscrutable, fascinating order seems densely packed into the short lines:

Exposure is a ubiquitous curfew
Under three nights of hunter's moon
Beamed onto this:
A hoodlum misfit expert stalking.

In the poem which could serve as Lauterbach's *ars poetica*, "Before Recollection," the poet states more or less explicitly her aesthetic credo: "Here we begin: not to let purposes transcend making." Like the abstract painters she so much admires, Lauterbach is concerned (almost uniquely, it seems to me, in contemporary American poetry) with the work of art as an autonomous structure, absorbedly tracing its own gesture. Surely, this is an advance. At the same time, the poems are saved from mere avant-gardism by their complexity and their driven lyricism: Lauterbach parts company with Ashbery in refusing irony. Hopefully, in greater numbers, we will catch up with her advances and grant her the recognition she deserves.