

2000

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Recommended Citation

Thomas, Max W.. "Mighty Lines." *The Iowa Review* 30.2 (2000): 169-175. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5301>

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Max W. Thomas

MIGHTY LINES

But know you not that creatures wanting sense
By nature have a mutual appetence,
And wanting organs to advance a step,
Moved by love's force, unto each other leap?
Much more in subjects having intellect
Some hidden influence breeds like effect.
—Christopher Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*

Mutual appetence, intelligence, hidden influence: perhaps Marlowe has been waiting all this time for some pastoral heirs. But it's not just subject matter or diction in Phillips' *Pastoral* and Shepherd's *Wrong* that make me think of Marlowe. Instead it's the fact that they follow the less obvious, and rarely followed, footsteps of erotic redefinition that Marlowe left behind.

I find it hard to imagine why, with those gorgeous translations of the *Amores* and the true perversity of *Hero and Leander*, Marlowe is remembered primarily as the author of a catchy little ditty, rather than as a subtle theorist of desire. Sure, Marlowe writes about passion, and sex, notoriously—indeed, Marlowe is often discussed as the queer poet *ne plus ultra* of the Renaissance. His queerness, I would submit, is not an element of any homoeroticism in the texts, however: after all, male desire for men, particularly boys, is an entirely *normal* state of affairs in Renaissance pastoral poetry, as in the Roman models from which it draws. Marlowe's queerness, rather, lies in his subversion of still-current models of pleasure and desire which emphasize either the economic connotations of seed-spending or the Petrarchan model of desire as a function of lack. Marlowe's model of desire is of the infinite brink: *Hero and Leander* keep thinking they've exhausted themselves only to find even more pleasant things to do to each other; even Neptune finds pleasure, rather than Petrarchan woe, in *Leander's* unattainability.

Pastoral, by Carl Phillips. Graywolf Press, 1999, \$14.00. *Wrong*, by Reginald Shepherd. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999, \$12.95.

Phillips and Shepherd both write about sex too, beautifully, perversely, arousingly, lyrically, bluntly, frequently. That's part of the genius of Phillips' title and collection: he writes a poetry in which sex between men is the ordinary, even classical, state of affairs, one in which it is entirely more remarkable to think about a stag in the woods than an erection. And both of them announce themselves in their titles as mounting a full-frontal embrace of that which is denigrated. Phillips quotes from *Lamentations* "Let him put his mouth in the dust—there may yet be hope"; Shepherd from Beckett (our modern master of lamentation): "All I know is what words know, and the dead things . . . Wrong, very rightly wrong," making certain that we get both the sense of abjection and the sense of liberation that accompanies the mouthing of dust, dead things, words.

They share with Marlowe an attraction to the abject, and an impulse to transvalue abject desire, yes. But even more crucially, they share with Marlowe a recognition that such transvaluation is a matter of form and genre, of *poetics* in the largest sense, even more than of sexual acts. Where inexpert hands and mouths proffer an uncritical preference for the underbelly, the results mostly make "us"—fellow travelers and staid normals alike—cringe at self-revelation of unpleasant habits. The potential in pastoral is to take the "simple" swain's song, make it melodious, and yet also give it an edge. The best Elizabethan straight pastoral (Sidney, Drayton) manages to critique even as it warbles in hendecasyllables. And the best Elizabethan queer pastoral is of course Marlowe's, where the shepherds and sheep are not just under-ground but under water, literally in the mouth of Neptune, in those famously mighty pentameter lines.

Both Shepherd and Phillips, I think, succeed, in such a direction, for what they attend to is not a particular sexual practice, but rather the very poetics that gives that practice meaningful shape. They accomplish a nuancing not just of attention but of lineation and lineage, too: they bear with them the richness, and some of the troubled perversity, of work that carries itself so well as to resist critique, and so risks instead appearing immaculate, even as its concerns are as maculate, and as hard, as it gets. That, of course, is the problem of pastoral. Its often self-deprecating amorousness ("it's only love, after all") yokes together *sprezzatura* (a virtuoso denial of virtuosity) with earnestness ("it's love, after all"), and dares you to see its polished surface as the thing itself.

Desire An Sich

The thing itself, in both of these books, is part of the stake: where it is located, how we apprehend it. For Shepherd, an encounter, any encounter perhaps, is made visible at the expense of certain knowledge. Time and light may be the metiers of the encounter, but they are stand-ins; each destination is not the place but an inclination:

The soul absents itself into a stranger's
several bodies, distracted
by opacity, each man a destination
to other men. The width of a moment

contains them, sustains them at the site
of sight, the charm of unmotivated appearance
in his first meetings with light.
("This History of His Body")

Or, in a beautiful twisting together of revenge fantasy (you'll-be-sorry-when-I'm-gone) and sexual fantasy (no-one-will-ever-love-you-like-I-do), "Also Love You" imagines the true element of love to be in the future. "I think of you when I am dead, the way rocks/think of earthworms," the poem begins, and proceeds to catalogue a hyper-anthropomorphic fidelity of the earth and everything on it: "I'll be the things/left behind for you, I'll be much kinder/then." The speaker here alternates between "will" as a measure of his state to come and as a trope of the legacy he leaves to the beloved, but what remains in flux between those senses of the word is the very *thing* that constitutes Eros: whether it is tangibly a feature of desire, or something proffered to the object of desire.

In the process here, and in many poems, Shepherd revisits a model of desire as lack, suggesting that the question may not be one of lack or plenitude, but of leaving a mark on the object of your desire. In a witty reformulation of Anne Carson's reformulation of Sappho's *glukopikron* (sweetbitter), "Eros is bitter, and bitterly proud" ("About a Boy"). Eros, cupid-like, seems to hover somewhere behind the encounter, impelling it but not *of it*. "Poor Eros. His arms are broken off/at the shoulder, his eyes have worn/shut." So too, the observer/desirer in these poems has a curious relation to his desire: feeling it, but not quite generating it. Men appear and disappear; the sun appears and disappears; snow changes; "blue meets blue . . . sky/meets the

sky”: encounters all, but particularly in the first three of the four sections of the book, the events seem to occur without regard for the observer, the desirer, the body marked by them.

Phillips, too, models desire, and not through lack. Here, it’s more a matter of repetition, as in “The Fountain”:

Crests.
And Falls.
We’re here, again.

We’re

at the beach.
You’re where you’ve
been, the water.

You leave the water.

The water leaves your body like what knows
it can afford to, at last.

Individual words and sounds establish, through both audible and conceptual rhyming, a quasi-sexual pulse, followed by something like satiation, but not satiation itself: “Routinely the sea,/unbuckling, out-/swells the frame it will/
/return to, be/held restively/by” (“All Art . . .”). Only in this landscape does the sea, normally so contained in its bed, go cruising, unbuckling itself. So often an image of what-is-longed-for, here the sea itself longs, not to be filled but to overflow. Even the motif of post-mortem desire cannot be still, but still hungers: “his body was//his body, already bringing me/gifts from a dead world: that last morning/ . . . / . . . So many relics,/without the power of// so many relics” (“Portage”). Or, later in the same poem, doves (“unswallowable,” not the tuneful birds of lyric but the peaceable reminders of the lamentations now over but not unfelt), metonymize the problem of repetition and identity “once, twice,” “visibly//themselves,” “forever stuck inside/their excellent, downed throats.” Series, tautology, geometric impossibility (that down stays up in the throat; that down migrates from outside to inside) serve to figure forth desire as a kind of polyvalent reliquary, something that achieves its force by virtue of revisitation. The thing itself is not found, not encountered, not sustained: it seems to be that which interposes itself, for both of these poets, in the moment of apprehension and experiential vertigo.

Elemental Might

There's a lot of weather in these poems. Plenty of seas and seasons; of meadows, lakes, vistas; of places. Woods and the woods' shadows. Dusks, moons. Phillips, in particular, produces pastoral settings for nearly philosophical poems: there are even occasional deer (although the old puns on hart/heart, chased/chaste, are left largely latent). This is only to be expected of a book entitled *Pastoral*, of course, but "it's desire again, passing/us by, souveniring us with/gospel the grass turned/choir, leans into" ("The Truth"). Even the line breaks suggest how fraught this field is, how now that the shouting is all over there is only the barely audible grass to hearken toward. Like the crepuscular and chiaroscuric places in these poems, the nearly mute pastoral does not yield itself up to allegory easily, resists shouting. Moreover, in "Retreat":

Come spring, then summer, the boats
that come instead will be for finding
pleasure because, simply, it's findable
here, and still free, even if, just now,
who will say so? Nobody's here.

It's the appeal of the forgotten place, the meadow out of season, that lets attention *attune* the mind and the body, throughout *Pastoral*.

Wrong takes a different, similarly subtle, nearly alchemical tack. Plotted or not, there's a nearly elemental progression through the sections of the book: Water, Wind, Earth, respectively, become the leitmotifs for parts 1, 2, and 3. Sometimes their forms are distorted (blood for water, kiss for air, maps for earth), and no section is without the others (water and maps, particularly, pervade the book) but the atomism is detectable, even flaunted—"I've been asked to write about vampires,/so I will write of the lake and its three winds: gust, gale, and blast" ("Vampires"). Elsewhere, it's a faint pattern, and one that, fortunately, doesn't dominate any single poem or section, but rather one that whispers, as does Phillips' grass, that there's something primordial lurking here.

They lose their sainthood there
to birds they hear of, then
they hear: the mutilated stories of gods, branches
broken off or left unfinished, attributes

sheared off to sheer description, reasons
slurred to wind-surge blurring leaves.
All power and no substance, hardened
into profile and other approximations

of a man. The world has resisted thought
so long, the youth of trees concealed.
("The History of His Body")

The world is the world, but it bears in it the forces of the elements and the traces of gods. Only by looking aslant, by looking "wrong," by transvaluing the almost archaic qualities of poetry's Orphic mysteries, does the full texture of these poems, Phillips' and Shepherds' both, fully shine. That is why literal accounts of the events of these poems seem to me to be beside the point: the poems stick to event just enough to point toward this alchemical shadow world, where correspondence matters almost more than object-hood, where signs are not symbols but spurs:

The gods are far,
we're told. Maybe. I do not
call the gods gone, nor
call it force, for—I swayed
easy, as

will a field,
unto fire. . . .

("And Fitful Memories of Pan," part IV, "Dropped Flute")

Fire, of course, is the missing element above. And it's missing, at least in its blatant form, in these poems, too. What is there instead is *light*: "lucid// distortion" (Shepherd, "Motive"), "invisible//curves on the air/to mark what was let go" (Phillips, "Unbeautiful"). In several tremendous poems of light, particularly Shepherd's "Kneeling Self Portrait," and "Brightens," and in Phillips' "Study, Between Colors" and "Animal," there is a constant and persistent attention to the ways that light is both a source of radiation and something reflected, that which makes sight, and insight, possible, both in the moments of its brightness and in its dusk. Shepherd refers to "a prism/or this unrequited reticence" ("Lens"), and this paradoxical quality of exposing all without any self-disclosure is what seems to constitute the motive force turn-

ing the world that the desiring speakers in these poems inhabit. In the conditional, not the muscular, sense, these are *might-y* lines.

Lines

Although I've discussed them in rather close quarters, and although they share similar concerns, the poems are unmistakable. Phillips moves toward a sparser and sparser line, and a cascade of repeated phrases, words, and sounds, often with attenuated grammar: "Less the shadow/than you a stag, sudden, through it./Less the stag breaking cover than//the antlers, with which/crowned" ("Hymn"), often with layered consciousnesses: "let me./As snow upon,/into any vale,/that vale—//we have been/places, times—/where has always lain/historically//temptation . . ." ("Lay Me Down"). These short lines have an unerring sense of the line break, using syntax against sense against breath to build undisclosed connections. Such breaks stitch together what might otherwise be stock devices of "hesitation" or "fragmentation."

Shepherd, on the other hand, prefers a more traditionally phrasal line, and the rhythm of thought, as of sub-vocalization, in these poems is achieved in longer units: the stanza or the strophe, rather than the line-break. Not strictly metered, the lines nevertheless often bear about the duration of a pentameter line. In "Some Maps," Shepherd turns accentual on us, approximating the alliteration, caesura, and double-beat half-lines of Anglo-Saxon prosody and diction ("A scree heaped on the steep of it/Was rubble, ruin, rubbish-heap and history/The underneath unearthed.") Where Phillips seems to seek a line attuned to a mode of thought, Shepherd seems to be plumbing the possibilities of an inherited line, "to open these locked doors of language" ("Crepuscular").

The Pastoral Condition

Phillips and Shepherd, despite their differences in strategy, in mode, and in effect, seek out a model of desire which neither celebrates the transgressive uncritically nor subsumes it to dominant paradigms, which is serious without being earnest. Earnestness is no longer really poetry's long suit, if it ever was. Yet earnestness is just what these poems remind us we clamor for. We want our icing, and our cake too, and we don't want either to be good for us. In the process, they begin a reinvention of that queerest of literary forms, the pastoral Eclogue. Perhaps we're ready for pastoral again.