

**A Memorial to Hyam Plutzik (July 13, 1911-January 8, 1962)**

Robert Hinman

Delivered February 16, 1962

Temple B'rith Kodesh

Rochester, New York

He saw the red osier dogwood as winter lightning, vital energy poised in silent flame,

In the naked and forlorn season  
When snow is winner....

...in the still red branches  
The stubborn, unflinching fire of that time,

he saw the burning bush that was not consumed, he heard the voice that broke the grip of darkness on the face of the waters. He did not flinch before, or even repudiate, the entropic vision of his Scythian philosopher, the vision of Lord Snow as ultimate master, "Under his coat completing his last reduction" ("A Philosopher on a Mountain in Scythia"). But his own vision extended beyond the "wound that matter makes in space," beyond the quenching of Lord Fire.

He would

...not believe the horror at the door, the snow-white worm  
Gnawing at the edges of the mind,  
The hissing tree when the sleet falls.

When the red osier dogwood flared motionlessly against the snow, he was certain of the return of

...all the families  
Whom the sun fathers, in the cauldron of his mercy.  
(from "Because the Red Osier Dogwood")

The man himself was as much winter sentinel as is the osier of his poem. From any winter landscape, literal or spiritual, he emerged in sharp outline. However bleak that landscape, the man, by his staunch integrity, by his very existence, defied the encroaching ice. For an instant the powerful brow suggested his unyielding confrontation of the pitiless matter-of-fact. Momentarily one was conscious of the stout fibers resisting the destructive cold. Then he smiled and spoke, and one knew that—just as bright wings would flutter leaves on branches that had seemed bare ruined choirs, so had the man seemed fleetingly grim only because he relentlessly shielded warmth, gentleness, and love from whatever chill threatened to extinguish them.

And the poems match the man. They are committed to conserving the spark in the polar crystal. If their exterior resembles the crystal concreted to diamond, that is only because such hardness is necessary to contain the feeling that coruscates within. They are stripped to essentials because no syllable must be wasted in the struggle of meaning with vacuity. Each tightly closed image, like a seed, must enfold in potential the burgeoning tree, so that the pattern of burgeoning shall not be lost. Bare and taut of form, spare and tough of line, his lyrics, when first encountered, are as stark as branches on a grey horizon. But the blossoms and the leaves and the fruit are implicit, just as he knew them to be in the tight synopses of every true artist, even the greatest, when he wrote “Winter, Never Mind Where.”

The illusion is one of flatness: the sky  
Has no depth, is a sheet of tin  
Upon which the blackened branches and twigs  
Are corroded, burnt in  
By a strong acid:

Hang there, outside the squares of pane—  
Work of a gruff but extraordinary artist,  
Who has done good things in pastels too,  
In summer scenes, leaf-stuff  
And the placid

Nuances of snow.  
Since, as we know,  
Genius is superior to praise or blame,  
He will not mind if I suggest:  
“Fewer cold subjects please (they do not please!).  
Really, your leafy stuff, Sir, is best.”

He found the “leafy stuff” too precious for prodigality. But to husband beauty is to cherish and preserve it, not to spurn it, or the life it gives flesh to. And that life, undefeated, resilient, is in his verse, however somber, as he saw life in Connecticut November’s naked earth.

O she is tired  
With too much bearing,  
Too little sparing  
In young days.

But she is young.  
You will discover  
She waits a lover;  
That they but drowse:

The passionate limbs  
And the eager mouth.  
She is the south  
Awaiting the sun.

(“Connecticut November”)

That life, appearing so often in his verse as strictly controlled but intense passion, appears also as zest, ebullience, even gaiety, for gaiety is one manifestation of that vitality he saw perpetually threatened and perpetually renewed. Such gaiety rollicks as it mocks and challenges stuffy solemnity in his drinking song celebrating Henry the Eighth, who “Each year...spiced his marriage muddle / By trade-in for a newer model.”

And what a most amusing story, O!  
When he met up with Queen Victoria!

There she was quietly mumbling a benison  
With a couple of friends and Alfred Tennyson,

When who should hail this pious foursome  
But old King Henry and a wholesome.

(Do read the gist of their conversation  
In last week’s issue of *The Nation*.)

Up tankards then for old King Harry!

Bad he was, but he was merry!  
 (“Drinking Song”)

He wept with Rabbis Elazer and Jochanan for beauty perished, but his grief did not paralyze a sense of fun that saw an “Absurd Cycle” in ontogeny’s recapitulation of phylogeny.

The wombed thing  
 First like a fish  
 Will become a man  
 And make a wish

For a peck of apples,  
 A pint of dream,  
 And a leaping fish  
 In a stream.

Nor did grief incapacitate the wit that could jauntily reduce devouring time to “The Bug with a Nose like an Awl.”

Abednego and Cicero  
 Were brought down by this monster  
 Who does the like to lark or crow,  
 To pundit and to punster;

Who toppled to his doom  
 The namesake of Big Boulder.  
 It perches now in this room  
 Honing its blade on your shoulder.

But, although the serenity that incorporates, even permits, gaiety and wit was certainly his, gaiety is not, in his poetry, his invariable, or even prevailing mood. The spirit of such a poet is the spirit of wholeness, of harmony, not vitiated, but rather ennobled by—as it ennobles—his basically tragic view of life. It is a spirit aware of joy rendered poignant by an undercurrent of sorrow, joy that can revel in the sweat of toil, “make a blessing of Adam’s curse,” without ignoring that it *was* and is a curse, without blinking at the desperate self-knowledge accompanying it, a self-knowledge he probed deeply even so early as his writing “Death at *The Purple Rim*,” the self-knowledge of the “wise lost ape.” That self-knowledge is his subject, as it

is man's. It is what Horatio principally discovers as he searches for the meaning of Hamlet's existence.

Hyam Plutzik knew that in our world brightness has fallen from the air, that the once-luminous myths have shrunken away: Phoebus and his steeds have become "inanimate forces / and a minor star."

And Zephyrus eke,  
Vulcan or Thor,  
Are all together  
Weather, weather,  
And nothing more.  
Useless as Greek.

Yet the apparently restricted poetic horizons did not stifle him, nor did the new immensities terrify. He readily accepted as the poet's sphere

Loneliest, latest,  
The greatest, greatest,  
The occult heart  
Of the talking beast.  
(“He Inspects His Armory”)

For although the deepest knowledge of that heart is awareness of a man's tragic destiny, from the language of that heart alone can come any triumph over such destiny. It is the image-making, symbolizing power that has transcended, not only bestiality, but blankness itself. Man has no power over the inexorable process of the suns. But the talking beast, who alone of all creatures can be aware of eternity, can also mitigate its terrors, for he can fill its emptiness, or a corner of its emptiness, at least for a little while. Or rather, Hyam Plutzik says, if the talker is a poet, he brings the eternal to life, forces it up into human consciousness from beneath the endless snow. “There may be little or much beyond the grave,” but what belongs only to eternity has no existence to those who dwell within time. Therefore, the poet is not an eternizer. He does not lift mutable objects into eternity; to do that would be to cause them to disappear from mortal consciousness. He draws them back from eternity, sets the eternal free in an image, so that it may be known.

Beyond the image of the willow

There is a willow no man knows  
Or watches with corruptible eyes.

Deep in a field where no man goes  
Nor bird flies  
The willow fronts an empty road.

The bird hovers in other skies:  
World where only these wings exist.

And elsewhere, alone, upon an abyss,  
The man is marching down a road.

As the rays of the sun are drawn together  
By a curved glass and rekindled to fire  
So, to the poppies of life and death,  
So does desire  
Draw them and bend them and bind them so,  
So the noise of the wings can at last be heard  
And the willow-image do grace to a bird  
And the ghost on the roadway give them word  
Not for forever, only a day.

(“The Importance of Poetry, or the Coming Forth of  
Eternity into Time”)

Thus the poet guards life, asserts it, creates it, indeed, as Horatio finds that each separate imagination has created his own Hamlet, though none a Hamlet so much alive as has the poetic Horatio, who speaks in the poem for Hyam Plutzik. The wider and more powerful the imagination, the larger the universe that is brought into the stream of time. To accept time, to refuse to be lost in eternity, is to accept tragedy, but it is also to affirm life, to affirm that the osier will flower season after season. So long as a voice speaks the “Requiem for Edward Carrigh,” no man can disappear into the infinite cold.

The sudden translation to the bottom of the hill,  
To be with the dull stones and the sterile earth  
After the bitter climbing of forty-four years.

You who postponed the quiet amenities,  
The lazy conversation after lunch,  
The cigarette in mid-afternoon, the daydream  
When a certain wind came to your window

Out of that young, beautiful sea, the Atlantic.

Night. Nighttime in the earth.  
The body settles patiently into eternity.  
Time moves, yes, but like glacial ice.  
The tireless eyes stare out of the sky, answering nothing,  
And the silence is august and terrible.

While we were lost in our petty commerce  
Of coming and going (that day a barking dog annoyed us,  
A buzzing insect, a lagging clock)  
You suddenly left your house, your city and your country,  
Traveling in the night, few knowing,  
To fight with a dark archangel in the desert.

Already there is no one to call to.  
The body of Edward is not Edward,  
Nor the ashes of Gregory Gregory.  
Alexander is no longer Alexander in the earth.

Nothing can be done but something can be said at least.

As tragic and elegiac poet, Hyam Plutzik sought to make the will of God prevail, for he used the power of words to insist that what his *fiat* touched should not languish in the eternity of Chaos and Old Night.