

“Value the Intermediate Splendor”

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What will become major concerns of Hyam Plutzik’s lyric poetry are set out in the beautiful final stanza of his excellent and affecting World War II poem, “Bomber Base” (from *Aspects of Proteus*):

*You remember that the faces changed often at the tables,
That you talked to them, that they had many dreams,
That they were you yourself with a different number.
Probably, they would not have been very happy—
The world being as it is—but they were young.*

For me, these lines encapsulate a great deal of what is at the center of Plutzik’s poetry—those fundamental paradoxes which establish poetry itself as both necessary and elusive. First of all, there is the seeming paradox of the singularity of any individual (the changing “faces,” the “many dreams”) alongside the fact that the poet cannot be differentiated from the rest of humanity (“they were yourself with a different number”). And then there is the paradox of life’s extraordinary value (“but they were young”) despite its inevitable disappointment and pain, (“Probably they would not have been very happy— / The world being as it is”). For Plutzik, poetry must always perform this very balancing act—between idealization of the self, of the world—and reality between “the many dreams” and “the world being as it is.”

Even in his masterwork, the book-length poem *Horatio*—a poem, on the one hand, of failure and disappointment, which devotes much of its energy to a clear demonstration of the post-Hamlet Horatio’s inability to rise to the occasion of the hero Hamlet’s final request that he “tell my story”—there is nonetheless a significant poetic thrill. While the poem explores instance after instance of Horatio’s failed telling—which is to say, his failure to make his hearers understand the story as he would have them understand it—it is when the failed teller Horatio himself becomes a listener that he finally experiences a kind of success. Sitting with shepherds

at a bonfire, Horatio hears a very elaborate telling of the amplified story of “Ambleth.” However inaccurate, however mangled, however wildly elaborated, the story with which Horatio has been entrusted has somehow been transformed into the stuff of myth, the stuff of call-and-response, of oft-repeated ritual. Horatio even hears about himself in the telling of Ambleth’s story, though his name has been altered to “Honorio.” And even though everyone laughs in Horatio’s face as he says, “I myself was this Honorio”—his claim is nonetheless still made, still valid. He was indeed this Honorio. Through his efforts, the story with which he was entrusted has somehow become legendary. The incorrect name “Honorio” makes clear that, even if Horatio has not succeeded in making the truth of the story known, his efforts have indeed been worthy of “honor.” And his emphatic claim to his position, “I myself,” suggests his desire to acknowledge his role, his pride in his position regardless of his failure to achieve what he set out to achieve. The shepherd’s telling is the result of his telling. He may not have succeeded as he hoped to succeed, but he hasn’t failed.

Telling is, after all, a fraught enterprise in a world best understood through paradox. How one tells, how one produces a poem, under these circumstances is really a major—perhaps the major—subject of Plutzik’s work. From the very outset, the early poem, “Divisibility,” Plutzik’s subject is the problem inherent in his very enterprise:

The liminary nature of a wall
Is partial only, to keep out dogs and insects,
Contain the furniture, exclude the rain.

But space flies through it like a mad commuter.
Rooms are thus always strange, as if you entered
Another by error in the same hotel,

And saw incredulous no known landmarks,
The bed moved, new luggage on the floor,
And a window staring at you from the wrong corner.

And desire goes through a wall as wild geese
Pass and cry over reedy waters. Memory
knows no walls. They are elementary limits.

Only a fool would cut the sea with a knife,
Or say to a wind: Exceed this line at your peril.

The only containable things are ordinary; indeed, even keeping out rain seems to be suspect. The walls' only effect is to alienate, to keep the speaker himself away from everyone else. What matters—"desire, memory"—can't be contained. And these are, after all, rooms—the English translation of the Italian word stanzas. Plutzik's rooms—his stanzas—are alien to him, unrecognizable; what matters won't inhere, won't stay. Indeed, what matters is what, by definition, can't be limited by the likes of him. The best he can do is "Pass and cry" like the wild geese, like desire. But then, there's a partial turnaround in the final couplet, which moves from lamenting the limitations of the poet's stanzas to celebrating limitlessness itself.... It's as if the real poets are the sea and the wind.... And since what's finally at stake is a "line"—an even smaller unit of a poem than a stanza or room—it's almost as if Plutzik, fool that he is, is challenging the wind to come up with a better line than "his"—the poem both declares its limitations and challenges them. After all: "Exceed this line at your peril" is the poem's last word—Plutzik, however foolishly, can be heard to challenge the wind to improve upon his poetic "line." And even if the implication is that Plutzik must surely lose, there is a lyric excitement in the challenge.

In Plutzik's poems, acknowledged limitation—"the world as it is"—is still no reason to abandon one's "many dreams." Indeed, perhaps it's that limitation itself which is the catalyst to poetry. It doesn't really matter how the poet deals with the impossible, only that, one way or another, he takes it on. In "The Chinaman and the Florentine," he gives us two supremely celebrated poets:

This man for forty years studied a leaf;
This man, the scattered leaves of the universe.

This man lies in the earth at Ch'ang-hsi;
This, in a crypt at the crossroads in Ravenna.

We have Dante—buried, in exile, at Ravenna, and—allowing for changes in the last half century of English spelling of Chinese place names, Tu Fu, who died in a place now called "Ch'ang sha." The opposition of their iconic enterprises—both involving leaves or pages—suggests that neither is exhaustive or absolute. In their opposite ways, each approached the unknowable, the inexhaustible. Each devoted a life to poetry and was buried; it's as if living and producing poetry were one and the same.

This same conflation of poetry and life itself seems to be made in the poem “To Those who Look Out of the Window.”

To those who look out of the window at the night
 This passing moment, within the bounds of our city:
 We are not many, standing in the dark by the window,
 With the cool and starlit air brushing the face
 And our eyes hungry for the light-givers,
 The luminous ones, brightening the reaches of the sky.
 Of them our neighbors, the thousands and the thousands,
 Under all the rooftrees in the obscure streets and alleys,
 Let us not be reminiscent or piteous,
 If, in the coils of the serpent sleep long since,
 All unresisting they have become earthen.
 —But feel the brush of the wind on the face, the bath
 Of the light, the torment of beauty deep in the throat;
 And strive, in secret, this brotherhood so small,
 To climb the stairway out of the dust a moment
 Before the lying down to sleep and the surrender.

This poem’s openness to a variety of meanings finally fuses those meanings. The speaker could be discussing the sleepless or the living; the “thousands and thousands” that “have become earthen” could be the dead or those who are satisfied with earth, whose “eyes” aren’t “hungry for the light-givers.” But whether “this passing moment” is life itself, or a restless moment in the dark by a window, that struggle to get beyond, to “strive... / To climb the stairway out of the dust a moment”—out of one’s human limitations as well as one’s mortality—becomes a kind of triumph in itself, simply in its opposition to “lying down to sleep and surrender.”

The very desire to struggle against mortality—to produce art, produce a poem—is a kind of victory for “this small brotherhood”—this artistic striving, this reaching beyond dust and earth is in itself a thing of value, even if one must sleep and surrender at the last.

The stars here are profoundly inspiring, but in many other poems, Plutzik establishes them as unattainable. Indeed, their very durability renders them suspect. In “Patterns of Earth,” Plutzik is clearly skeptical of their power. Only what doesn’t last is prized.

Now the new grass is vivid with dandelions
 As last night the ancient sky was constellated.

And the Scorpion, the Dog, Perseus, and Hercules
 Are less than the gold children of my field.

Whom I will name quickly, for their time is flying:
The Butcher, the Baker, and the Candlestickmaker.

They will be gone in a fortnight, fluff upon the wind,
And the bullies of the sky will resume their mastery.

Plutzik makes fun of his poetic powers even as he exults in them: even though he can't come up with better names than those from a convenient nursery rhyme,—and the line he quotes, significantly, is followed by “turn them out or throw them out knaves all three—they are still “the gold children of my field.” It's their very temporariness, their future as “fluff on the wind” that makes them “vivid,” as opposed to the “ancient sky” which is given the strange adjectival verb “constellated” which for all the world, in this, after all, somewhat jokey poem, sounds a bit like “constipated.” The fleeting dandelions free up the artists, while the eternal stars block him up, with their bullying “mastery.” Similarly, in his poem “The Geese,” Plutzik suggests that we “value...intermediate splendor.” One wonders if the “miscellaneous screaming that comes from nowhere” and “Raises the eyes at last to the moonward flying / Squadron of wild-geese arcing the spatial cold” isn't on one level a comment, again, on his own poetry, which to him, perhaps, seems “miscellaneous,” shrill, to “come from nowhere.” But it does “raise the eyes” to a beautiful sight. And in a world where “There is no force stronger / (In the sweep of that monomaniac passion, time) / Than the will toward destiny, which is death”, it does a service. As the poet urges at the poem's end, “value the intermediate splendor of birds.” As he has now twice likened himself, as poet, to geese (before we had the geese who “pass and cry”)—“the intermediate splendor of birds” could refer to his own poetry, for all its “shrillness.”

If Plutzik is an imperfect artist, he's in good company. Plutzik suggests, in the closest thing to a psalm that he produces, that God himself—genius though he is—could use a little editing:

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.”
(from “Winter, Never Mind Where”)

But of course, those cold subjects prevail. And, in Plutzik's final, uncollected poems, the fleeting life, the death become his own. There's a new urgency in the poem's even before his

own death is their subject. “The Belated Birds Having Taken Their Leave” begins once again with the poet settling for something small and fleeting in the place of stars. This time, it’s not dandelions, but snowflakes.

The belated birds having taken their leave, suppose
This instant or two of barely falling lakes,
Each of a certain splendor the time of our stars.

Once again, it’s “intermediate splendor” that Plutzik is “valuing.” “Our stars” are not *the* stars, but they too, possess “a certain splendor.” There’s always a qualifier to the splendor to which Plutzik claims access. And, once again, the great pleasure is also fleeting:

The glee on the upturned faces. Imagine
Arms raised on a hill to catch at Vega,
“That one I call Antares, and—”
“Why do you cry?”

“This snowflake died before I could give it a name.”

Here the joke of butcher, baker, and candlestickmaker is replaced by the wistful and understated acknowledgement of the fundamental impossibility of the poet’s task; his subject is so fleeting, so short-lived that it can’t be captured in poetry, can’t be “named.” Both the namer and the named are diminished in this failure. Whereas the named dandelions in the poem “Patterns” are “fluff on the wind” in a short time, the snowflake never gets its moment in poetry. And the stars, which here as in “Patterns” represent an unapproachable eternal, are not merely “bullies” but turn deadly when the fleetingness of human life is at issue. Here is “Cancer and Nova:”

The star exploding in the body;
The creeping thing, growing in the brain or the bone;
The hectic cannibal, the obscene mouth.

The mouths along the meridian sought him,
Soft as moths, many a moon and sun,
Until one
In a pale fleeing dream caught him.

Waking, he did not know himself undone,
Nor walking, smiling, reading that the news was good,
The star exploding in his blood.

As in the other poems, there is a lack of awareness of the coming disaster, but here, of course, the stakes are higher, the loss incalculable.

But Plutzik will, eventually, make his poetic peace—however sad—with even this loss, in his wonderful poem “An Agadah of Hyam Ben Samuel.” Hyam Ben Samuel is Plutzik’s religious name, the name with which he would have been called to the Torah and named in any important Jewish cemetery, a marriage or indeed a funeral. Hyam Ben Samuel is the name on his gravestone. Though he was a secular Jew, Plutzik was the son of a Rabbi; in crucial discourse, Hyam Ben Samuel was his name. An agadah is a brief tale, meant to explore or explain the inexplicable in the Torah or in life itself:

Once there was a match in the days when matches could speak
That complained: “Why should I be hurt?
The surface of the match box is unnecessarily rough.
I question the justice of the universe.
Why cannot I and my friends
Live in our match box in comfort and amity?
Is fire necessary?”

At which a gigantic voice cried out in the workshop:
“Both the beauty and the utility of a match
Are in their burning.”

If we were to ignore the poem’s title, we might see this as yet another poem on the appeal of the fleeting. But of course the fact that the life in question is his own—not the dandelion’s, not the snowflake’s—gives the poem a unique pathos. And if the poem, in its quiet way, rails against God and his “gigantic voice,” against the unnecessary roughness of the universe, the poet himself does not, finally, disagree with God’s harsh statement. He too has always found the greatest beauty (and, for the poet, “utility”) in what will wind up as ash. There’s a new intensity here: one doesn’t simply value the intermediate splendor which has now become that brief moment between birth and death; but one must “burn” with it, one must be that “intermediate splendor.” Like the men whose faces disappeared from the table at the bomber base, he too, “the world being as it is,” escaped, in dying, a certain amount a pain and disappointment. But nonetheless, like them, he too was “very young.”