A Bit of What We Need

by

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Review of:
Harvey Stanbrough, Intimations of the Shapes of Things
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Harvey Stanbrough's latest collection of poems is a welcome addition to the growing body of New Formalist verse. His three previous books--one of which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in Letters--revealed a poet of solid talent and technical skills. This most recent volume, Intimations of the Shapes of Things, does not disappoint. It contains forty-three poems on a variety of themes, and in very different tones, but all of them show a sure hand.

The book is divided into two sections, "The Shapes of Things" and "A Nutshell History of Man," corresponding roughly to the external natural world and the world of human consciousness. And yet this would be too simple a description of Stanbrough's book, for all of his poems are marked by an insistent human presence, even when they seem to deal with purely physical objects and phenomena. For instance, he writes poems on a bear, a beech tree, ants, the summer sky, the moon, and the stars. I tend to be on guard when I see titles like that, for a focus on "Nature" (with the inevitable capital N) is one of the warning signs that you are in the minefield of lyric-mode rhapsodizing. There is nothing more nauseating than vaporous effusions by a tree-hugging eco-freak going on about the wonders of our environment. But I was delighted by these particular poems of Stanbrough, for he never once deals with nature in isolation, but only as a backdrop or context for human concerns. Nature in itself is voiceless and meaningless; it only has importance when we as conscious human agents respond to it. The ancient Greeks knew this; I only wish the Sierra Club did.

Let me give some examples. Stanbrough's poem "The Bear" is about two foolhardy hikers who try rousing a bear from sleep. The poem really concerns their stupidity and ultimate cowardice, not the bear--the sleeping threat that he presents is symbolic of the unconscious, impersonal danger

that surrounds all human activity, whether wise or foolish. Another poem, "Closeup of a Beech Tree," skillfully conflates the image of an autumnally browning beech with that of an old man nearing death. It's a perfect memento mori poem--an austere and reticent ten lines do the job completely. The poem "Ants" is a concise commentary on the mutual predation of all living things, animal or insect or human--and is also a sardonic observation on naive utopian hopes for peace and harmony in the world. "One Evening Beneath the Summer Sky" ponders the mystery of infinite worlds, and what that means for our lonely, isolated earth and the poetic voice that emerges from it. But my favorite is a particularly fine poem entitled "On a Clear Night, the Moon," wherein the moon moves over the world to look down, impassively and indifferently, on scenarios of raw sex, love, marriage vows, and divorce, as if all of them were silly charades in the light of larger cosmic rhythms. Stanbrough's poem makes it clear why human concerns in time and space were once called "sublunary." Environmentalist jerks obsessed by greenhouse gases and the ozone layer don't write poems like this. These are the work of someone who knows, as Pope knew, that the proper study of mankind is man.

The second section of Stanbrough's book leaves nature for more specifically human situations and themes: music, TV, poetry, homes, driving, and social classes, to name a few. In a poem entitled "To 60 Minutes, Concerning the May 24, 1998 Show" he attacks the brainless media spinmeisters who have debased and degraded art in this country by insisting that it serve some vapid social purpose approved by an audience of TV viewers. It's a powerful piece, written with a gutsiness that is very uncommon among the timeserving conformists who now dominate New Formalism. I cheered out loud when Stanbrough spoke of the insufferable "60 Minutes" news team with "your insolent cameras and your faux-naif," and when he distinguished between a real artist and the media creeps who feed upon him:

> his job is clear conveyance of the thoughts;
> yours is desecration of the words.

Now that's the kind of straight talk that our movement needs, and if we had more poets of this kidney perhaps New Formalism wouldn't be seen as a movement of nostalgic old ladies and politically correct academics.

Similarly bracing is the poem "During a Lecture," where the speaker ponders the question "Why do you write?" from a member of his audience. He formulates an unspoken answer in six blistering tercets, part of which I quote:

I write to call those former ones to arms,
incite the poor to stand and fight and give

their foes a Cadillac suppository,
drive their smug self-righteous grillwork up
their asses 'til their eyes can blink high-beam...

This isn't the sort of milquetoast treacle-and-cream you're going to hear at a West Chester reading. There's real anger in those lines, not just an urge to network.

Another poem, "Road Rage," describes in absolutely unflinching clinical detail the death of a squirrel run over by a vehicle on a highway. The poem is just as wrenching as the anatomical derangement that it presents, and it is light years distant, in its unsparing rigor, from the cutesy-poo Disneyfication of small cuddly animals now standard for most Americans. The poem packs one hell of a punch in twelve lines--I had to get up and pour myself a brandy after reading it.

According to his biographical note, Stanbrough spent twenty-one years in the Marine Corps. I can well believe that. Poems like these have Leatherneck written all over them. They evince a masculinity and toughness that are in desperately short supply in our overly feminized poetry world. Precisely for that reason, Intimations of the Shapes of Things will probably not be popular--too many epicene readers will object that these poems don't provide the nice warm glow of vague moral uplift that one gets from a Unitarian sermon or a sensitivity seminar. For that is what a great deal of American poetry is today: optimistic uplift, inspirational piety, morals in meter. Stanbrough makes it clear that real poetry is a lot more threatening than that--and for this reason he will be shunned.

If Stanbrough has one fault, it is his tendency in some poems to adopt the attitude of posturing high seriousness that is our deadliest legacy from Matthew Arnold and the early modernists. Poems like "The Amateurs' Questions" and "Consent?" are the worst offenders in this respect. They speak in a stilted, ritual-heavy style that suggests the worst sort of lyrical pomposity. If Stanbrough has an Achilles' heel, it is his habit of falling into a tone of hieratic solemnity. I'm not singling him out in this regard; lyric-mode rhapsodizing is the commonest and most debilitating poetic disease of our time.

Today, the lyric mode is like poison gas on a World War I battlefield--it lingers in every corner, a lethal threat even when

unrecognized. We are choking on the lyric mode, with its overblown emotionalism, its hyperbolic utterance, its sub rosa preachiness, and its sheer tasteless self-importance. Seven out of ten lyric practitioners today write what I call the Poetry of Portentous Hush: a kind of incantatory hocus-pocus that says "My poem is a high and holy moment of great seriousness that I, the bard, am deigning to share with you. Listen reverently!" This insufferably hieratic attitude, which infects thousands of contemporary poets and poetic wannabes, is the real reason why ninety-eight percent of the public simply flip the page when they see a printed poem.

The notion that poets are "bards" (a stupid, quasi-religious term that ought to be banned) is part of the problem. It gives poets the hubristic sense that they have something special to say, or in Shelley's absurd formulation, that they are the "legislators of mankind." But the plain fact is that poets don't have anything special to say. We simply say things better than other people. Our emotional experiences aren't any different from or more significant than those of inarticulate folk. If you as a poet think otherwise, you are also part of the problem.

A poet merely makes better verbal artifacts than a non-poet does, in the same way that a professional photographer is likely to take better pictures than your Aunt Martha will with her little Instamatic. To me this is obvious, but I'm amazed at how many people don't see it. A poet here in New York recently said to me "If you have deep feelings, you have the capacity for poetry." I didn't follow up, but I wondered privately how he could have come to such a palpably illogical conclusion. Everyone has deep feelings--it's part of being human. But not everyone has the capacity to handle language skillfully. Deep feelings will not create beautiful verbal artifacts, any more than a desire to dance will make you a ballerina.

One of the reasons the lyric mode is nearly universal today is that its amorphousness and ethereality help sustain this illusion that feeling will spontaneously give birth to poetry. And the ubiquity of the lyric mode then serves to reinforce the popular notion that poets write exclusively in this manner. Consider: when the average person hears the word poet, he immediately thinks "spouter of vague generalities and obscure emotional brooding." In short, the average person now reflexively associates the word poet with a practitioner of the lyric mode. He never thinks of a poet

as a philosopher, metaphysician, epigrammatist, satirist, epic-maker, dramatist, panegyrist, polemicist, calumniator, historian, caricaturist, or any of the other legitimate possibilities that the word would have implied two hundred years ago. No--today the poet always is a lyric-spouting Percy Dovetonsils, with a flower in his lapel and his heart on his sleeve. Make no mistake: this has been one of the biggest publicity disasters for poetry since the Oscar Wilde case. In music, a comparable situation would be if the general public thought only of Arnold Schonberg and John Cage when they heard the word "composer."

What Stanbrough needs to do (and he certainly can do it, without question) is to escape for a little while from the lyric mode. The highly intellectual nature and syntactical complexity of many of his poems (and I mean that as a compliment) show that he is not constitutionally bound to the Poetry of Portentous Hush. He can write in ways that give primacy to objective statement, logical argumentation, emotionally cool description, or the sheer cold-blooded cussedness that makes the reader scream in pain or gloat in Schadenfreude. Modern poetry, both formalist and non-formalist, is begging for this sort of insouciantly kick-ass verse, and Stanbrough, on the evidence of the poems I've described above, could provide it in spades. I realize that Howard Nemerov was a powerful and cherished influence for Stanbrough. But frankly, he should put Nemerov aside and start writing more like a Marine.

There are a few things in Stanbrough's verse I could do without, such as his annoying tic of using etc. to substitute for real language in some lines (I noted five instances of this habit). Surely a poet of his ability doesn't need to fill up metrical feet in that sort of offhand manner. Composition teachers spend years breaking undergraduates of the etc. habit in prose; there's even less justification for it in poetry which, as an art of verbal exactitude, should express itself precisely in every respect. He also occasionally uses the ampersand instead of the word and, a silly affectation popularized by Ezra Pound, and which for some reason still fascinates too many poets. Moreover, Stanbrough's iambic pentameter is sometimes too loose for my taste--but this is a peculiar tic of my own, since most contemporary formalists use a range of substitutions that I personally dislike. A line with a lot of slack in it seems to be de rigueur these days.

However, these are only minor objections--Stanbrough's book as a whole is an admirable collection of competent poetry. My only hope for him (though Stanbrough might well think it a curse) is that he become a bit more consciously oppositional and argumentative, that he use his tongue as a lash as well as a lyre. If he were to do so, he could help in the great Augean labor of the twenty-first century: to clear away from contemporary poetry the politically correct niceties, the hearts-and-flowers whining, the feminist goody-goodism, and the solipsistic emotionalizing that now render it trivial and ridiculous. It will be a big job. But I'm reminded that the Marines don't just say Semper Fi--they also say Can do.

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