

PASSAGING IS HIS ANCHORAGE

Red Strawberry Leaf: Selected Poems, 1994-2001. John Peck. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

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Reading John Peck's most recent selection of poems, *Red Strawberry Leaf* (2005), roused memories of my first real lesson in poetry, from Mrs. Feldschuh of Brooklyn Technical High School, who taught that encountering a poem is like entering worlds not your own. In the case of John Peck, whose uncompromising career has brought him to a place far from the centers of contemporary poetic practice, the sense of reading your way into other worlds is strong and palpable. Peck's work is situated on a high plateau resting on two, at first glance distant, foundations. One is theology. Peck is a religious poet. Behind each of his poems are the questions of Gauguin's famous Polynesian painting: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Peck looks for the answers to these questions in theology, an inescapably bookish and not infrequently arcane affair. *Red Strawberry Leaf*, for example, opens with three obscure epigraphs, one from Ecclesiastes, one attributed to the dying Thomas Aquinas, and one from the Flower Ornament Sutra. What binds these quotations is the premise of the Flower Ornament Sutra, which, if you are unfamiliar with it, reveals a cosmos of infinite interpenetration of things, suggested by the image of a world text in which each word consists of the phenomena that make up the world; the text is vast as the cosmos but every atom contains the text ("To see a world in a grain of sand."). *Red Strawberry Leaf* is the culmination, mature and assured, of a lifetime devoted to crafting a discipline and a form capable of conveying this dizzying notion ("World is one action," Peck writes in "Single Wing," "and where is the measure for it?")

In addition to theology, Peck's work also draws on the great oral literatures, especially the Greek. In oral cultures, language does things we have long ago shifted to other powers: it brings the rain, it stops the rain; it heals the sick, it wounds enemies. It speaks to the living in the presence of not exactly the dead as much as the legends of the tribe (a word that shows up often in Peck's poems). As the American Indian writer N. Scott Momaday has pointed out (Momaday, like Peck, is a Stanford writer and student of Yvor Winters), in the oral tradition stories are possessed by the person, have to be memorized and thus become part, literally, of the body. Print allows us to store words, to leave them and then when we need them to retrieve

them once more. In the oral tradition there is no distinction between words and flesh: words are of the body and produced, as voice, by the body. Print culture obscures these qualities of words. Peck's precise vocabulary, which often sends his reader (and certainly *this* reader) to the dictionary, is one feature of his prophetic ministry, of his aiming to make sacred once more that which our contemporary world has obscured. Having lost the visceral *elan* of language, we can only be brought to awareness by being thrust back into unfamiliarity, to be made novices and divested of our dulled but voluble sophistication. Similarly, the world of the oral tradition, like the world of theology, is regulated by, and profoundly responsive to, natural rhythms and patterns, which are also obscured by contemporary technological culture. When you can turn up the heat to keep warm in the cold, or buy strawberries year round, your sense of cold and strawberries gets dulled; pattern is obscured; nature recedes—and with it, meaning. Or that meaning of which Peck's word-world is composed, and without which the sacralization of experience—the goal of Peck's poetic quest?—is unattainable.

Peck's journey—the dominant metaphor of his writing—occurs necessarily within our post-World War II history: but it occurs in the presence of history full stop and in the company of historians and other makers of poetry. In "Transmission Lines," a poem addressed to "E.G.B., visiting after ten years in 2001," the poet recalls Robert McNamara being attacked on the ferry to Martha's Vineyard, an incident which he recounts in a kind of simultaneity of narrative—

And this time Laios was recognized at the crossroads,
the father who in his panic had deep-sixed—
so he thought—an abomination, his deadly child.
Yet this time not even his own boy: a stranger, blank
confronter: so many sons...

Peck is not happy about our time (are *you*?) but he accepts his role in it, with a curious mix of humility and grandness. He says to E.G.B.:

And now, friend, your visitation.
Your Pindar, your Mithraic converts to Paul,
your Homer, hanging back with you at ten paces,
are curious—a little—to see what I'll do.

Those looking on, and to whom Peck usually looks for example, are many and various, ranging from great figures of art and history to John Peck aged six. For the most part this looking is not about figuring out what's right or about whether one measures up or about what to do or even about *how* to

do things—all core aspects of initiation—but about vision. I mean that Peck is not interested in himself or the Great as persons; his theology is not about getting into heaven but about Being. In a beautiful, complex, revealing poem in the second part of *Red Strawberry Leaf*, titled “Anangke,” the young Peck, aged six, is taken by his mother up the belltower of Riverside Church, overlooking the Hudson near Columbia University in Manhattan. Anangke is the primal goddess of Necessity. She has no parent or maker but appears at the moment of creation, wrapped in the coils of her complement and mate, Kronos, the god of Time. Between them these two split matter into the order of the universe. They are what must be and what can be (fate and history). They reign way above the poor little gods we spend so much time worrying about; they ARE and cannot Not Be. The young Peck is stunned by the bells, experiencing but not understanding—of course—what’s happening. The mature poet can clarify what the boy could not grasp—for example, what the boy “felt as fear” the man can “decode as wonder.” Caught in the belltower in the resonance of overwhelming sound, Peck instructs his younger self, is not to be “above things, really, but entirely within them.” What is the lesson of the poet’s recollection of this moment in time? He tells his younger self: “And you have been the thing struck into sound”—which is a good answer to Gaugin’s question, What are we?

As “Anangke” demonstrates—and Peck shows us over and over—there isn’t anything to be done about Being. There is, rather, the question of one’s readiness: each moment we are suffused with light, sound, vibrations that we do not see, we do not hear, we do not feel. The discipline of awareness can however be like a cell-phone: a mechanical tuning-in to a very restricted wave length. That’s the danger of our time. Peck wants something else, as he tells us in “Rhyiming with Davie’s Sonnet in Mandelshtam’s Hope for the Best”:

Bottom-dwellers, crawdads, we’re not to fly
too far...yet so we must come of age, not with
fire but silt. For now sky rides in the earth,
its dizzying reaches—quarriers of marble
open a way, the worm’s jaws are a-zing
with nebulae and the cycles, up the scarp
of a tiny peak within crawls my double, whirls
misting him; through them, valleys, orchards in
bloom, winking lakes with pike to be hooked and netted....

Peck accepts the price Anangke has exacted for his reverence for this vision. Uncompromising, a man living in our heedless time, he is fated to

write on the margins of contemporary literary practice. At best, after all, a poet like Peck, writing in the prophetic or Bardic tradition, the declamatory tradition of Blake, Whitman, and Pound, is an isolated, unappreciated, misunderstood, and not infrequently maligned voice. People don't want to hear, have lost the disciplines needed to hear, what he has to say. Peck has some of Blake's and Pound's anger at the boobocracy, and probably not enough of Whitman's lustful *jouissance*. But joyful or not, Blake, Whitman, Pound...did not live with much in the bank, each was courted by madness, and whatever the number of their disciples, the room was not overly full at their deaths. Peck can count his blessings. He is admirably sane. He doesn't have to etch his books himself or publish them at home or write his own reviews. He has readers. That he doesn't have more readers, let the record show, is our fault.