

DISTANT MUSIC AND A QUANTUM POETICS

Mark Halperin. *Falling Through the Music*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Henry Hart. *Background Radiation*. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2007.

James Walton

In “Music,” the last poem in his *Time as Distance* (2001), Mark Halperin speaks of “fashionable” city girls seeking in a concert hall temporary release from the nagging miseries of their immediate setting:

Music can lift them away,
though they cannot stay where it takes them,
as the sunset will not keep the lovely trees,
silhouettes now, from fading into a darkness
it seemed to forestall, which may have been
or played a part in its consuming beauty.

Here and elsewhere in the present volume it’s music that serves as a fragile web or veil that separates us for a time from the darkness. In “At the Concert” (which gives the book its title) the “spaces” that open in a Bach composition launch the speaker’s mind on a descent into the underworld: “All I can’t hear gives me trouble now, as the dead do, falling through the music.” Halperin’s dead have not gone away: “they’re all still here, but very quiet” (“Standouts”). They impersonate the living, “that we might live among them/ as among hopes and inexpressible desires” (“Among the Dead”).

In “Rembrandt’s *Prodigal Son*,” this slender collection’s undoubted masterpiece, “music—not sound, but/ rendered emotion” figures as analogue to the paradoxical merger of distance and intimacy presented by a heavily layered scene of father-atonement, set off against a haunted void. The speaker stands before the painting in its actual setting, the Hermitage at St. Petersburg, where “clouds and the glare and sheen of oil” obscure a “looming” presence unaccounted for in the Prodigal story—“a dim face floating/ like a prisoner.” The viewer’s response to this specter echoes King Lear’s in another famous scene of atonement: “There. There.” But in Halperin’s Rembrandt the faint figure is no departing spirit;— we are permitted to see it instead as the projection of the spectator in Rembrandt’s picture, or of the reader in Halperin’s text:

There. An image buried

in the upper left-hand darkness resolves a moment—
a face in this world—or have we entered shadows?

At last the speaker turns to address us directly, or himself, turning away:

You could be turning your eyes
from an intimacy you find embarrassing
to witness or leaving for one of your own.

The Rembrandt poem provides the most complete model of Halperin's procedure in forming a connection with distant things. A silent chord supplies the resolution:

 how the simple
grows complex as if evading ear

and understanding, to lodge at last
in memory where all layers meld.

There is an elegant tact in all such connections. In the prose poem "Pop" the author's fragile link to an East European refugee of his childhood is formed by the music of a name: "Chernowitz, city on the River Bug, Cernauti, city with the changing name, Chernivts of five languages, Cernauti cleansed by Nazis, Soviets, Rumanians, Chernivtsi, like Pop, irrecoverable."

The prose "poems" are really little essays, sketches that fall through the music to an uncertain ground. Most are about the poet's atavistic returns to Russia, "full of connecting alleys" that lead to "the contradiction joined in who I am" ("Returns"). In *Time as Distance* the Jewish side of Halperin's lineage led him to pursue "A Legend of Moses" through the vagaries of Midrash: "Even in the mind's fields,/ events leave trails, and trails wander/ hill and dale as we do." The tellers of the Biblical story "must select this from that and keep us/ following, until we think we see how one turn connects/ or echoes another to forehadow that symmetry/ and balance so pleasantly soothing we give it place/ and time in our world too." But in keeping with Halperin's skepticism the poem won't settle for a mere soothing pleasure. The "pieces" of the legend don't "meet flush":

 In a tree,
this would be where the disease started, in armor,
the point to aim an arrow or ax at. In assaults
on ourselves, it marks a crack; doubt wedges an entrance
where hunger infiltrates the story.

“How,” the poem asks, “did we get from there to here?”—the question implicit in all of Halperin’s travels. Like the earlier volume, *Falling Through the Music* concerns itself with the mind’s accommodation of “gaps” in time. Both personal and historical memory limit the past’s liabilities. To the old man in “Retirement” memories “mesh, crosshatch, fuse. As one pries/ free another falters”; “Apprised/ they’re not needed, they gracefully retire.” The gaps in every tale are indispensable to the teller. On the theme of “slow decay” in “Venetian Sonnets,” the poet observes how “syllables/ replace experience”: “We comfort/ the past by reconstructing it.” Only in the memory of his father do connections fail entirely. The poem is prose: “His distance remained as if it were all that could be saved” (“Growing Up”).

First-time readers of Halperin, like the present reviewer, will return to his work again and again, not for that tritely celebrated Marianne Moore effect but for the benefits of a disciplined imagination, a mature and rigorous skepticism, a breadth of experience that by making modest claims for itself, yields much.

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My mirror is detached
From the cluster of mirrors

Paul Éluard, *Poésie Ininterrompue* (trans. Mary Ann Caws)

The works of Henry Hart include a biography of James Dickey (2000), critical studies of Geoffrey Hill (1985), Seamus Heaney (1992), and Robert Lowell (1995), and two previous volumes of poetry, *The Ghost Ship* (1990) and *The Rooster Mask* (1998). None of these will quite prepare the reader for the poems in the present collection that are responsible for its title. A hint might be found in the title piece from *The Ghost Ship*—“Beware of words/ kindling fires in the starless dark”—a warning promptly ignored at the end of the next poem: “My words/ flare through the roof/ into a heaven of sparks.” The suggestion is that poetry follows an impulse to fill vacancies, to disguise the void with figures like Donne’s “lovely glorious nothing” (“Air and Angels”) or the foreshortened *putti* in a vaulted Baroque ceiling or the ghosts that inhabit the uninhabited houses of Victorian fiction. Another space-filler was the metaphysical conceit, in which “the most heterogeneous ideas,” Samuel Johnson complained, were “yoked by violence together.” Using better examples than Johnson’s, T. S. Eliot in “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921) praised a passage of Donne’s for making connections “not implicit” in the given figure, “but forced upon it by the poet.” (“When a poet’s mind

is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience.”) The conditions of modern civilization, Eliot declared, required poets to be “*difficult*”—“more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.” By citing Jean Epstein’s *La Poésie d’aujourd’hui* (published the same year as his own essay) and illustrating his point with a passage from Jules Laforgue, Eliot brought his readers, together with the “school of Donne,” to the threshold of the surrealist movement, where the *image* is composed of widely separated elements, parts whose violent coupling produces the energy that destroys to create; where fictions are mingled with “the most fearful realities” (Paul Éluard), where the things that meet are “metamorphosed” (Robert Desnos); where poetic figures act as counterpoint to the void (René Char). A good illustration of what Mary Ann Caws has called “surrealist baroque” occurs in a passage of Desnos’ that converts “the moaning of the wind in the chimney” into “the songs of invisible archangels” then dissolves synaesthetically into the “shadows.”

Surrealists, following André Breton’s first manifesto (1924), sought their *discordia concors* at a (putatively) deeper level than Eliot’s “mechanism of sensibility”—in dreams and hallucinations (or their simulacra), in the unconscious, or freely-associating, mind. Such *heimlich* undertakings aside, the new look of Henry Hart’s work can be attributed to his adoption of the surrealist procedures mentioned here.

Hart’s voids consist, variously, in “a permanent snowfield,” “porous” air, “plains and forests/ full of aporias,” a “voice in the cloud” that “hardly says a word,” wind that “types invisible letters on the window,” the “night’s emptiness,” the “silent heavens,” the “godless sea,” a “*tabula rasa*” (to which “Grace” reduces the visions of an old Puritan sibyl.) Into these spaces Hart projects imagery, visual and auditory, that at once opposes their vacancy and draws attention to it. “Autobiography of Silence” arrives at his alternative to a sense of “the starless dark” as “the only solution”:

The night carving hieroglyphs of frost had a different answer.
 So did the sun that erased each page of my window in the morning.
 So did the wind that muttered: *Scrape the gold splinters from your eyes,*
see what you can see and get to work.

A typical attack on the void occurs in “Love Letters” (read “poems”). On a dream-visit to an unnamed (but guessable) southern military college located on part of American history’s scarred landscape, the poet opens his eyes and sees:

Stars congregated with cross-bows over the city's walls. Orion
fiddled with his sword, then tipped his helmet to catch a meteor.

All that remains is to improve upon the already mythologized spectacle:

I wanted to paint the planets a darker shade of blue,
To wear the dark like Orion the night I wrote my final letter.

In his use of classical myth Hart descends the scale from theogony to popular astronomy, even astrology, then reanimates the mythic figures. “Black Spark” opens with a dream in which “Venus and Mars/ wander into the bedroom to scribble horoscopes / on the mirror.” When dream yields to hypnagogic sleep, photographs on the bureau speak to the subject in a forgotten language that he seems to recover in contemplating the picture of an uncle standing on a rooftop agape at the constellations of Draco and Hercules, to which the poem (obliquely) restores the mythic narrative of the hero’s poisoning of the dragon. In the end the old man descends to earth with a cup of—poison?—and instructs the speaker in the weeding of a garden. A prodigy of compression, “Black Spark” provides a vertical model of Hart’s universe.

Apart from such mythy projections, Hart’s skies are striated by “power lines.” In “The First Mental Hospital in America” a priest prays to the sparks emitted by one of these conductors of energy transmitted here not from earthbound installations but from cosmic microwaves, successors to those Baroque *putti* and airy angels, the Victorian ghost and the modernist fantasia of the unconscious. “Background radiation” stands for the force that brings light, heat, and damage to everything in Hart’s world. Quantum physics, in short, offers the strongest clue to Hart’s revised poetics, a system derived from “cosmic microwave background radiation.” (For a cosmically challenged reviewer, a Wikipedia definition of “CMB” will do: “a nearly uniform glow that fills the sky in the microwave part of the spectrum; stars, galaxies and other objects of interest in radio astronomy stand out against this background”). The language of modern physics appears in “Hearth,” where the speaker regrets the lack of a Christian Neoplatonist (Pseudo-Dionysius) to discover signs in the empty air, then urges the reader to “surf the horizon/ for the dark photon spinning at the sky’s center.” Photons (carriers of electromagnetic energy) are pervasive, but at low energy they nearly vanish—become “dark.” For Hart’s speaker, the mere particle represents a new ordering principle whose hour, in Yeatsian phrase, has come round at last. Therefore,

If you don’t find it, trust me, it’s still there,

ready to warble a lullaby or tell you the one story
that kept melting and freezing each time

teachers recited it in Sunday school, the one
that always warmed you like a meteor
or the reddish aura around the word *hearth*
on your walks through the city lit by snow.

This stunning conclusion moves us swiftly from post-Enlightenment anomie to the atavistic reconstruction of myth (echoing Graves's "one story only") to conventional piety but comes to rest on the cold, irradiated earth. The passage might recall William Blake's rapid transition from a rejection of the material order to its apotheosis:

The Atoms of Democritus
And Newton's Particles of light
Are Sands upon the Red sea shore
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.

"And every sand becomes a gem/ Reflected in the beams divine."

It's not the demystification but the debasement of the physical world that troubles Hart's vision. The first poem in the volume follows a disenchanting pilgrim's progress through the ruins of history. Early along another journey is thrown off course by a "history" that has resolved itself into "trashy images, . . . recyclable" (*pace* Vico)—prophets with horoscopes, millenarians with poodles, a president distributing bromides, self-mutilating teen-agers ("Rowing to the Island").

"The Sublime"—theme of Hart's study of Lowell—is here enacted under a carnival tent. One of his personae consults an astrologer and a Tarot-dealer for answers that leave him out in the cold ("The Consolations of Astrology"). "Epic Descent" sinks to the level of a séance mediated by a "drunken palm-reader" that brings him into contact not with his dead father but with generations of fathers "chanting hymns to a black sun that never rose." Other ghostly voices pollute the air of "Into the Tunnel," where the poet himself, stuck in traffic on the way to a radio interview, finds himself tuned in to a shrill evangelist, a theme park promoter, a talk-show barker. In "Mirrors and Sunfish" CMB comes down to earth as "light therapy" and "healing magnets." A similar descent occurs in "Mobile of Demons" where the constellations are invisible, the heavens silent, and Shelley's "white radiance" is emitted by "the headlights on a milkman's van."

Hart's assessment of contemporary culture goes far beyond its dim lights and deviant energies. In "Burning the Men" a case of juvenile mischief

is imposed like a transparency upon a pair of ritual murders. The poem is addressed to a suicide, apparently the Italian immigrant farmer, tormented by failure and haunted by memories of World War II, who in the narrator's childhood predicted a nuclear catastrophe. At the conclusion of "Building the Bomb Shelter" the old man's imagination of disaster has passed to the boy:

When I clicked a flashlight, the sky exploded.
 Outside my window the snow was radiant,
 drifting like ash over the obliterated world.

In "Naval Weapons Station" he speaks to the same (?) suicide's son as if to himself—the artist-as Daedalus, plotting to contain the principle of destruction:

Your idea was to build a labyrinth from nothing
 but starlight, to lose yourself

with only a frayed storyline to find your way back.

 I wanted to tell you that the Minotaur was a will o' the wisp
 squatting over spent fuel rods and dirty bombs.

These reflections give way to the vision of a nuclear storm: "Cars flew through bank windows./ Oaks tore up pipes, power lines sizzling in their crowns."

Personal vision finds its way into the nightmare of history when the atrocity that we have shorthanded into "9-11" crashes into a bitter, soap operatic telephone quarrel. The conversation ends, and suddenly

I was a ghost muttering at the sky as I ran
 through canyons of ash, scraps of paper
 swirling like snow that would never land. ("September Song")

In dealing with this event's sequel (or *non sequitur*), the bombing of Baghdad, Hart assumes an animal's perspective, taking sides with the life instinct against the rhetoric of death. "Through a Donkey's Eye" begins with one of the poet's recurrent apocalyptic visions:

I didn't want to go but something stronger than me
 uncoiling through the desert carried me away
 the way I carried shadows and constellations

on my eye toward the city that was no longer a city
 but a series of concussions orange flares black mushrooms
 sparks arcing toward the moon that was also an eye
 only colder and whiter and more accustomed
 to this cratering than I

Why did I keep feeling
 the metal lump that branded my hide on the bridge
 the cool splash taking in my body
 that was no longer my body
 the gold lights zipping and unzipping the sky

The casualty of Operation Enduring Freedom has foreseen its own death but sees no end to the destruction. An exploding sky has served yet again only as the shadow or type of the catastrophe that tempts Hart's imagination. His version of the Last Things consists chiefly in a Second Coming of the first. In "Memories of the Observatory and Planetarium" a schoolgirl at the telescope asks *his* question: "*Like why/ is there anything and not just nothing?*" The field trip is interrupted by the "sonic flash of the Big Bang," which "cleared the air of bickering, then of everyone."

Hart's interest in the New England and Virginia colonies and in his own family history yields no glimpse of a Golden Age but rather a record of civilizations and their discontents. Part II of *Background Radiation* consists mainly in passages of family history that will prove familiar to readers of *The Ghost Ship* and *The Rooster Mask*. After those volumes appeared Hart provided a helpful background narrative in the *Sewanee Review* (Summer, 2007). The poems themselves constitute a broken narrative of great power and elegance. The poet's great-grandfather was a missionary/ entrepreneur/ explorer in China and Mongolia from the 1890s to the 1930s. His principal source of episodes from a missionary childhood is his grandmother's memory. The grim highlights of her account show the effect upon a young family of the xenophobic, superstitious fury of the Boxer Rebellion:

They blame the drought stunting the millet
 on Jesus. They say missionaries cut nipples

off babies and stow them on gunboats;
 English railroads are iron centipedes

eating their poppies;
 God is the rust that drips
 from telegraph wires and poisons their soil. ("The Boxer Rebellion")

The family flees to safety across the Gobi desert. In two of the poems the grandmother's present is a New England winter, her past represented by old photographs. Past and present alternate in her consciousness and the reader's, then merge:

Today, snow drifts like sand
on the lawns. Wind blows caravans
of husks beneath the birdfeeder.

I ride through the desert
as before, piecing the stars into prayers
in a different language. ("The Long March")

Amid the scenes of terror an especially fine touch appears after the father has smuggled his young daughters out of danger in a coffin, representing them as victims of smallpox. When their hiding place is opened it's the *moon* that trembles "like an eyelid" ("Escape From the Chengsin Mission").

"Family History" in Hart's work can be extended to include the trials of the American colonies. The principal event of his New England poems is the rising of a coalition of native tribes against the Puritan settlers known as King Phillip's War—like the Boxer Rebellion, a collision of cultures, or modal encounter, but in the earlier case a violence bound up with the formation of the national character. The American present goes unhaunted by the horrors of 1665-68 but not the poet himself, who listens for the sound of grieving Algonquins in the power lines, of children calling for their mothers in the rushing water ("Peskeompskut Falls"). Hart's approach is archeological. The traces of a survivor lie buried in a farmer's field, a swamp, the snow ("Mary Rowlandson's Captivity").

Hart has earned praise for the breadth and richness of his poems' transactions with history. In his approach to that theme in *Background Radiation* he confines himself mainly to the kind of demystified "Epic Descent" described in the opening poem of Part III. From this depth he emerges with a powerful ambivalence toward the Life Force. Two poems from this section parse this mixed emotion exactly. In "Robert Frost in the Great Dismal Swamp" Hart acts as shadow to the young poet, giving an account of his deliverance from suicide by the appearance of an ambiguous light in the darkness. The poem concludes with a prophecy allegorizing a poet's life's work as the inscription of figures upon blank space: "*For the rest of your life you will sketch a map/ of the Dismal Swamp on permanent snow.*"

The other face of survival among Hart's Virginia poems is presented by a member of the Jamestown colony caught in the famine of 1609-10. "The

Cannibal” describes how he butchered and ate his pregnant wife, having buried the fetus in the icy river. Like the Frost poem, this one ends with a kind of vision:

He asked the fire’s ash: *How else
could I build God’s paradise
in this frozen swamp? How else
could our divided bodies be one?*

Taken together, the two endings sharply illustrate the ambiguity of inspiration, whose vagaries Hart examines critically in certain metapoetic reflections on his own work. The warning against words, for example, in *The Ghost Ship* takes concrete form in *The Rooster Mask*, where mere poems about King Phillip’s War are tacitly compared to crude dioramas. The turn toward surrealism in *Background Radiation* calls for more rigorous questioning. The poet’s persona in “Self-Portrait as a Cowbird” is a roost parasite (like the cuckoo), singing from a “frayed power line,” using old or others’ words—“black seeds from last year’s cones”—to express his eccentric vision; obliged to represent tactile (or imaginary) space on the flat surface of a borrowed (and mutilated) text: “The valley’s hayfields were pages/ torn from a Renaissance book of utopias.”

The narcissism of self-portraiture is registered where the bird, a brown-headed specimen of its kind, cowed like a Franciscan friar, sees thunderheads “building a monastery around the sun.” But in fact all such tropes, seeming to span vast distances, prove to be no more than forms of self-reference: “Could the whole world be a mirror?” The mirror, inescapable, is elsewhere shattered, its pieces distributed among other poems. In “Mirrors and Sunfish,” a love letter, it falls from the sky like “space junk,” landing with crashed planes beneath Hart’s ubiquitous power lines. The poet-as-lover seeks something “beyond mirrors” that might “stun” him “into clarity and song.” He finds nothing transcendent but meets with objects that reflect something other than himself:

In our pond, sunfish went about their business.
Like tossed coins, they flashed the sun back to the sun,
never gave my vague face a second look.

“Inquisition” subjects the poet, for his extravagant conceits, to the judgment of such arbiters of conventional or practical reality as a minister, a bishop, a mathematician, a surgeon, a dentist (!). His heresy has consisted in positing immense gaps between the sign and the thing signified, indica-

tive rather of an exploding than an expanding universe whose First Cause or principle of creation and destruction has figured in *Background Radiation* as the Big Bang. For his final punishment the poet/ heretic is locked in a cage with pythons, issuing in what seems a valedictory silence:

Because he had nothing to say to the snakes
 he watched his breath slip through the bars.
 crawl like an invisible tongue past guards,
 touch everything in its path for the last time.

This conclusion is no ending. "Initiation" is the last poem of Part III, the book's penultimate section. The last of Part II expresses a similar resolution, suggesting that the silence in question is only the enigmatic silence of the text: "O to be smoke from an oracle, writing prophecies in air,/ a leaf shivering with a riddle no one could answer!" ("Autobiography of Silence")

Hart's silent oracles invite the readers' collaboration in the approach to an enigma. By attending more closely to the riddle than to the lucid "song," the present account might well have drifted off course. The audience to *Background Radiation* will find themselves sufficiently rewarded if they take up the challenge presented to another explorer by the wilderness in *Heart of Darkness*: "Come and find out."