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The Poet Goes for Broke: *Orphic Noise*, by Patrick Pritchett

Patrick Pritchett, *Orphic Noise*, Dos Madres Press, 2017, ISBN 978-1-939929-94-5, \$18.00

There comes a point in the careers of many poets when they confront the figure of Orpheus. In that confrontation, they acknowledge their desire to be a member of his order, but also acknowledge their doubt that such membership is possible. Possible for them, or possible at all? In a certain respect, it means the same thing, which is to say that modern poets wonder if they may still be initiated into the Orphic mysteries. The Orphic poet is the singer of Kosmos; as Gerald L. Bruns puts it, the Orphic poet's "sphere of activity is governed by a mythic or ideal unity of word and being, and whose power extends therefore beyond the formation of a work toward the creation of the world" (1). Furthermore, as Elizabeth Sewell tells us in *The Orphic Voice*, "Orpheus is poetry thinking about itself, and every significant mention of Orpheus by a poet or scientist may bring the working methods a little nearer the surface, make them easier to grasp than they will be when they are bound up with all the other things poets think and write of" (47).

When poets think about Orpheus, when they think fundamentally about what they are and what they do as poets, what happens to their work? How does it change, how does it differ from what comes before in their poems? My answer is simple: they push their poems to the limit under the strain of Orphic anxiety. The poems break and reconstitute themselves in their lyric utterance; they unmake themselves as they are torn apart, like Orpheus himself, and yet, like the Orphic head, they keep singing on their journey to the sea.

Patrick Pritchett's *Orphic Noise* is our most recent testament to modern poetry's Orphic crisis. Among Pritchett's guides are Rilke and Spicer, both of whom embraced the Orphic task of poetic self-reflection, Rilke wholeheartedly and Spicer with a much greater measure of skepticism. It is from Rilke that Pritchett gets his title, which epitomizes the modern Orpheus syndrome: the book's epigraph, from the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, declares "To us just the noise is given." This harsh judgment, however it may dismay the poet, pushes his lyricism to the breaking point. The poet goes for broke. For if the poet is only given to making noise, not song, then what does he have to lose? And as soon as he is resolved to go the limit, he makes an extraordinary discovery, though perhaps he knew it all along:

The real language of the world
is the world, its noise
a form of shelter
radiating signals

untraceable vectors
 wistful ghost
 songs veering away (“Orphic Noise,” 1)

The world speaks itself in its being, and achieves fulfillment, self-sufficiency. If this is the case, then perhaps the poem, Orphic or otherwise, is simply unnecessary. The poet’s Orphic noise is “a form of shelter,” that is, a psychic defense, proving only a “wistful ghost / songs veering away.” Worse yet, it could be that “In a way every poem is a lie. / It says that to say is to be, committing / a kind of perjury against the stars” (“Perjury,” 27). The Orphic poem does not speak the world into being, and any claim that it does is a lie. As Spicer suspects, the world is its own poem, and there is no need of Orpheus or his descendants. This is why Spicer criticizes Orpheus throughout his work, culminating in *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*. Yet it also makes the Orphic syndrome all the more charged with pathos.

When poets become aware of this scenario, it is both painful and liberating, and it is out of this awareness that many of the poems in Pritchett’s new book come. The poem, as Spicer understands, becomes a gratuitous gesture in the face of world’s being, and that is precisely where its value lies. The poem, in effect, becomes its own ghost, its own low ghost, and in its uselessness, it can set its own rules. Strangely, the internal sense of form in such a poem, its pacing, its figures of speech, and above all, its corrosive, self-conscious, deeply moving irony—all of this shifts to the foreground. Here are the last two stanzas of Pritchett’s “Homage to Spicer,” a piece that mimes Spicer’s tone, attitude, and timing to such an extent that for an uncanny instant he reappears:

Or that something happened to the Martians
 and now they trail their ghosts
 everywhere
 through the ash
 of December
 and the mine of lost souls, Eurydice
 all yours for the asking.

Saying hosanna, saying
 eh, not so much.
 Saying, remember this, weirdo

and sing it to bitters.

The beauty of the world is
a page on fire with never. (39)

What does it mean for the poet when Eurydice is “all yours for the asking”? It means that the poem comes to him now with no obligations; the hell into which Orpheus descended is nothing more than a “mine of lost souls,” and he is free to take his bride, no strings attached. Because the “beauty of the world is / a page on fire with never”—because the beauty of the world constitutes an anti-poem, a transcendental *denial* of the Orphic task—the poet can embrace his muse and sing ecstatically, but in the face of that “never,” the song will still only amount to “eh, not so much.” And yet, paradoxically, we find that song not only moving, but of great importance, for in heeding it, we discover that, as Pritchett insists in “We Start Out Empty Daily into the Blue,” “the whole universe / is a seizure of / the impossible // which no ritual / can amend” (7). The poet suffers this “seizure of / the impossible,” enacting the ritual of the poem as a repetition compulsion, meant to ward off but also control the world’s adamant refusal to bend to poetic desire.

This partly explains the abundance of poems in *Orphic Noise* that are either dedicated to fellow poets (Nathaniel Mackey, Susan Howe, Fanny Howe) or in memory of recently deceased poets and musicians (Yves Bonnefoy, Leslie Scalapino, Michael Gizzi, Geoffrey Hill, Mark Strand, Ornette Coleman, Lou Reed). The intensity of the Orphic mode is such that the poet yearns to be reassured that he *can* be part of “the Visionary Company,” however thwarted he feels poetic desire to be. “The Visionary Company” is a phrase from Hart Crane’s “The Broken Tower,” and it becomes the title of Pritchett’s elegy for Allen Grossman, who is not only a magisterial poet of the sublime, but a crucial commentator on Crane and the visionary or prophetic tradition in post-Romantic poetry. Here is the poem in full:

Stars like nails scattered on the pavement
bright litter flung out of Paradise.
Someone said “rain.”
Someone said this rhyme
means pain except that in song
it lifts us & we stand outside time
laved by a light only stars may procure
though it, too, must fade.
Permit me, song, to enter that void

which rising from dust
 assembles a body whose garments
 are made of starlight and nails.
 Except it water the dead
 and make a noise in the grass
 except it enter the marrow
 to relive an ounce of sorrow
 no flung song can rekindle
 the face of the beloved
 or the promise of tomorrow. (50)

The first line and subsequent images of stars and nails allude to Grossman's poem "The Broom," with its line "I have seen the bright nails scattered on the ground" (which is also the title of the book from which the poem originally comes). "The Broom" is a poem about mortality and the transitory nature of human love, especially after "the vestiges of the gods" (174) have been swept away. One of Grossman's overriding concerns throughout his long career is the possibility of transcendental poetry after the gods are, if not entirely swept away, then at least radically diminished in their stature and power. In Pritchett's poem, this matter is represented by "Stars like rain scattered on the pavement / bright litter flung out of Paradise." The stars, signifying transcendence, eternity, the possibility of Paradise, and what Pritchett in his last line calls "the promise of tomorrow," appear to have fallen, leaving the poet with little hope for his song. Nevertheless it is through this song that the poet enters "that void / which rising from dust / assembles a body whose garments / are made of starlight and nails." In this timeless emptiness (what Gnostics call the kenoma), the human being of the poet is reconstituted; song becomes once again possible, and in the utopian promise of tomorrow, "the face of the beloved," like the lost Eurydice, is once again made manifest. Furthermore, the song may "water the dead," who thirst perpetually, and cannot speak without being watered (or, as in the *Odyssey*, fed with blood). This brings us back to the original intent of the poem: not only to restore the lost Eurydice, which enables the poet to sing, but to memorialize the dead (Grossman, in this case) by giving them back an echo of their voice, however briefly.

As should be clear by now, Pritchett's work is suffused with a utopian spirit. Utopian thought tends to be both restorative, insofar as it looks back to a lost Eden or Golden Age, and anticipatory, insofar as it looks forward to a horizon that invites but also denies the possibility of realization. Pritchett considers this situation in "Like a Utopian Ode for November." Meditating upon "the richness of our losses," he tells us that

There is no star to guard against this.
 No shining sigil, no celestial brightness
 not even a rock shadowed by night's halo
 to signify the fissure of
 yearning from true knowing.
 I will go up now into the land of dream
 its blank utopian horizon that bends
 over my desolate wish to suspend
 time and live purely by
 amending its crooked rhyme. (94)

The despair of the Gnostic (Pritchett is also the author of a wonderful collection called *Gnostic Frequencies*) is such that one can never apprehend “the fissure of / yearning from true knowing.” Gnosis means true knowing: inward, personal, experiential, and esoteric. Unable to achieve—or perhaps, to rest secure in—such knowing, especially in a transitory world, with its inexorable advance of time, the poet goes “up now into the land of dream” with its “blank utopian horizon.” To combine gnostic and utopian thought is to produce a volatile admixture indeed. It is tempting to say that in despair of achieving Gnosis, the poet *flees* into dream, *escapes* into a timeless world, and thus avoids a serious engagement (especially in regard to social or political relations) with the external world. But it is all too easy to equate the apparent dream state of utopian possibility with mere escapism or wish fulfillment, especially in regard to poetry. As Ernst Bloch, the Marxist philosopher of utopian thought puts it, “The poetically appropriate waking dream is precisely the *latency* of experience” (160-161). For Bloch, worldly experience always contains within itself, as a sort of latency, the possibility of change, which the poem, as in a dream, reveals. The Freudian notion of the dream’s latent and manifest content fits well here, for the poem’s latent content, as Bloch would have it, is always utopian. Pritchett’s poem ends as follows:

 then erase the protections of
 fragile words and settle for
 drifting mutely through shadows
 the casual subway psalms
 by which we pledge each cracked step
 to the top of the platform in the name

of all the departed and their lonesome shoes
like Kafka's lost prayer books.

Hope irradiates, a recalcitrant virus
swarming out of earth's black corners
This world's matter, its endless dirt,
thirsts for re-ignition. (94-95)

In the subway, the poet is among "the departed and their lonesome shoes," which is to say that he finds himself in the modern city among the masses of ordinary people, yearning, often unconsciously, for a new world. What would it mean to pray for such a world, to open, in Pritchett's amazing phrase, one of "Kafka's lost prayer books," so that the routine horrors that our preeminent gnostic writer of fallen modernity saw and chronicled daily might be miraculously transformed? "Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope — but not for us," Kafka told Max Brod. Pritchett, not quite so grim, envisions hope as "a recalcitrant virus," implying that we are unavoidably infected. His last two lines, a final oxymoronic flourish—"This world's matter, its endless dirt, / thirsts for re-ignition"—reminds me of one of Peter O'Leary's "Seven Tenets of the New Gnosticism":

The New Gnosticism is incendiary; its arson destroys the world's demiurgic powers, whose poetry is marked by torpor, low wattage, and acts of border-policing, condemnation, and control. In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus insists, "I have thrown fire upon the world, and look, I am watching until it blazes." Consonant with the arson of the New Gnosticism is vigilance and witness. If you would set fire to the world, if you would set fire to anything, you are obliged to pay attention to its damage. This attention constitutes a form of worship. Of what? Gnosis of course. Knowledge that withers demiurgic powers and restores logos into mythos. A note on the Demiurge. He is a vicious, jealous, and wrathful being. In this respect, he resembles many poets at the top of their game.

Pritchett, having taken these tenets to heart, knows that if the poet cannot be Orpheus, binding the cosmic orders together, then he must instead bring fire to a fallen world of matter (and low wattage poetry), re-igniting language and renewing hope, thus restoring, as O'Leary would have it, "logos into mythos."

"Could the song begin," prays Pritchett; "Could it re-fold its own design" ("Five Final Poems," 129). Poetry makes and re-makes itself; therein lies its hope, however volatile:

Could the ark consist of the excluded's lost melody.
Could signs be empty and full. Could the blind

walk in green field and the dead rise up and be
happy again. Could I still see you.

The poet's love (like Orpheus's love for Eurydice) always leads him to look back. It is cast in the conditional, like his hope for poetry itself. In *Orphic Noise*, Pritchett gives us that most rare of achievements, poems in which the signs are both empty and full. This is "the excluded's lost melody." Listen.

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