

To Wake Up Cold in Fact: The Poetry of Leonard Nathan

Leonard Nathan is one of the ten or fifteen most accomplished poets in America today, and yet his books, which should be classics, are largely out of print. Nathan's poetry is conspicuously innovative in significant ways, his poems (though highly sophisticated) are accessible to any literate non-specialist, and yet his achievement has received nowhere near the wide recognition that it deserves (He would be a prime candidate for the Delmore Schwartz award, I think). More puzzling, his publisher, the University of Pittsburgh Press, has dropped him.

As the poet Reg Saner once remarked to me, the average contemporary poetry collection contains perhaps five good poems, and a superior collection may contain nine or ten. The percentage of good poems in the collections of the great modernists is higher: perhaps fifty percent in W.C. Williams, seventy-five percent in Frost and ninety percent in Stevens. In more recent collections, the percentage is about the same: perhaps sixty percent in Stafford's *Stories That Could Be True* and fifty percent in Hugo's *Making Certain It Goes On* (a collection whose style is so highly developed that it soon becomes repetitive to the point of monotony, a parody of itself: the book is far too long.) Judged even by these severe standards, Leonard Nathan's *Carrying On* is impressive—up in the eighty-percent range. *Carrying On* contains seven poems from his first collection, *Glad and Sorry Seasons*, twelve poems from *The Day The Perfect Speakers Left*, six poems out of *The Likeness: Poems Out of India*, thirteen poems out of *Returning Your Call* (the first book in the Princeton University Press Poetry series), twenty poems from *Dear Blood*, twenty-four poems from *Holding Patterns*, and twenty-two "New Poems." Together, the poems comprise a persuasive vision of the world, a vision that would be bleak if not for the fierceness of Nathan's energy and the accuracy of his wit.

Nathan has made his life as a Professor of Rhetoric at the University of California at Berkeley, and in his poems his rhetorical training is clearly (and fortuitously) evident. What most distinguishes them from those of his contemporaries is Nathan's rhetorical calculation: his consciousness of audience. Few of the poems are "lyric" in the sense of featuring a speaker who, as Northrop Frye put it in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, has turned his back to the audience, intending that his inner meditations be "overheard." Nathan generally faces the reader directly. Typical of Nathan's early po-



etic style and its rhetorical tactics would be his elegant “The Loophole” from *The Day*. It begins:

Any contract, tax form, Great Idea,
Existentialist brick wall,
Or even the cloudless air provides
Some saving orifice after all,
Through which, well greased, the lawyer, the statesman,
Or the fattest theologian can squeeze,
As can the executive and editor,
And with an almost obscene ease.

Nathan then, in a move characteristic of him, addresses the audience:

But you're on the proper side, of course.
Some have heard voices from that world—
Distorted, wishful, uttering facts
Terrible in their lack of portent:
Anyone's name (say, John) or acts
Like loving when it seems to open
The ivory gates for you alone,
But closes, after sex is finished,
On something as alien as stone. . . .

Facing “The Loophole” is “The Day the Perfect Speakers Left,” a poem reminiscent of Richard Wilbur’s “Merlin Enthralled.” The Wilbur poem is about the passing of magic (and medieval superstition) from the world, leaving that world merely quaint, the sky “a still and woven blue.” In Nathan’s version, this passing is more explicitly existentialist than Wilbur’s:

It was as though it had begun to rain lightly
On the amazed stillness of birds. . . .
And as though a whole age were going out,
Its head covered, and going out with it
A purpose including stars and stones.

What were their last words
Before the gates shut and small lights
Moved slowly up the hill of dark?

. . . We were to hear the true last names for things,
The utter ode, composing us at last
In the rounding music of our sphere.

The poem’s fifth stanza is reminiscent, in theme and diction, of the ending of Stevens’s “Sunday Morning”:

Their words are hard to say, hard,
To remember when you wake at dawn,
The bare light alerting you to plainness,
Solitude of stones, terror in birds,
Stars drifting off, the feel of huge leave-takings

For which no name, the first or last, consoles.
How can you trust those hints at dusk
Of foreign magnificence?

Just as Nathan's earlier collections, with their wit and their frequent end-rhyming, had reflected the dominant, "late-modernist" style of the times, *Returning Your Call* (1975), reflects the pressure of the dominant confessional style of that literary historical moment. Fortunately, however, (and it is the measure of Nathan's sagacity and stature), Nathan does not, except for the first poem, get sloppy and over-personal. The "you" of *Your Call* is a figure that is at once a lover, Nathan's mother, a muse, and, of course, the reader—the audience of which he is ever conscious. But the opening poem, "Breathing Exercises," is frankly personal, and features the first-person singular pronoun. The poem is panicky-sounding, even a little whining. It begins:

My mother phoning from far off:
How are you? Are you really? Really?

A long dumbness fills with breathing.
How much does she want to know? Really?

I'm fine, fighting, making passes,
Doing my job. Does that sound right?

No, it sounds as if somebody bugged
The phone and I'm talking for the bugger.

Which reminds me: I'm Leonard Nathan whose grandpa
Changed his last name—too Jewish.

The book is structured around the motif of phone calls and letters. The self-pity of the personal "I" is often mitigated with humor, as in "Sorry":

After the fifth beer,
Milwaukee softens, fine snow
Wafting me back to the hotel
Where the warmth of the lobby
Floats me up to my room.

I'm calling long distance now
To say: It's all right, love, after all.
But I am told the number has changed,
Sorry, unlisted—
Well, that sobers Milwaukee.

The dominant feel of the book is of grim, personal crisis—of a man struggling to retain equilibrium in the face of marital crisis and public crisis: the Vietnam war. In the book's best poem, "Washing Socks," he compares himself to Odysseus:

Penelope, old dear, you write
That all that keeps you sane these days
Is washing socks, faded socks,
And add: "For godsake, come on home."

I'm out here having adventures, sleeping
With goddesses, though sometimes I feel
Like a swine. I'm battling giant man-
Eating abstractions. I'm at sea.

There was the island of Romance, the greener
Islands of Marx, of Freud, the misty
Isle of Zen and the volcanic Sartre.
And then there is plain old Ithaca.

You're bending over the tub, hearing
The kids bicker in the background, thinking
Of all the passes you passed up,
All for the owner of these faded socks.

And I will get there soon. War
Takes a long time, abstractions centuries
To escape, . . .
I will come up the beach barefoot,
Grinning, and you'll make me sit right there
And put on those socks, smiling bitterly
Down because they no longer fit.

But for the kids, make the best of it.

“The Penance” is perhaps Nathan’s grimmest poem, linking Nathan’s sense of suffering through a time of personal crisis with his guilt and horror at the spectacle of the Vietnam War. The poem begins by describing a famous piece of T.V. documentary footage:

This is the penance: a recurring dream,
This child running down the road, its mouth
A hole filled up with blackness, its little wings
Two flares of napalm and it runs toward you.

You can’t yet hear its scream but know it’s screaming,
Know if it can reach you, it will try to
Hug you. . . .
Nothing can save you—voting, letters, marches—
So you close your eyes. . . .
Now you hear its scream—a supersonic
Jet-like whine that peels your skin off patch
By patch, and then the face is in your face,
Close as a lover’s, eyes as bleak as bullets.

. . . So this is the penance: a recurring dream
That you’re awake and doing good, loving
The children, saving for their education
And your own retirement—till you close your eyes.

In the final poem of this chapter, “Audit,” Nathan renders a process by which, almost by imaginative will, he places his despair into perspective and can thereby somehow

bear it. Like some of Hugo's poems ("The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir") or Roethke's poems ("The Lost Son"), Nathan renders the process of psychic rebirth out of psychic death, and (as may be inevitable in such poems), like them he envisions this process in terms of nature-imagery.

Listen. Wind hangs in the pine branches.
The year is done. There are certain things against you.
The lull is around the house, waiting.
But moss on the cold side of the bark is with you.
A jackrabbit frozen at the odor of fox is with you,
And a last apple, with a worm in it.

....
On the north side of this thought, the moss is ready
To fend off the wind; or you breathe, and the wind is with you.

When *Returning Your Call* was published, Nathan was fifty-two years old. The grimness of its poems—their raw, unmitigated, open-eyed quality, their sense of seeing more than one wishes to see, of knowing more than one had ever wanted to know—may be characteristic of collections by men in their late forties and early fifties: this sense of the direness of human existence. As men pass through such a season, their poetry changes with them; and they are apt to emerge with a sense of playfulness, able to regard their lives *sub specie aeternitatis*. *Dear Blood* (1980), begins with a Zen-like poem entitled "Gap":

This is the gap
for one butterfly to pass through,
a lucky break in the senseless green.

It's there by the grace of God,
who is I think the absence of a spider
at this particular time and place.

You may think He's the absence only
of leaves now dead or, more incredible yet,
the presence of the one butterfly.

The poem's tone of wonderment and tentative acceptance of "things as they are" is reminiscent of Eliot's "Mariana." In Nathan's poem "Opportunity," we watch him revise the existentialist posture which had so thoroughly informed his earlier work:

We thought we owned the apple
having raised it simply
to bite at our pleasure.

But this worm
found it a sweet way
into its own ripeness.

That was a mouthful
of sour knowledge
for spitting out.

Could there be a higher purpose
that used us both
toward its own ripening?

Ha, say the dark seeds,
ha, and exult
to the core.

In "Family Circle," Nathan again compares his life to that of Odysseus, and concludes by embracing home and domesticity:

When I left Ithaca
for the great action
I was clean-cut. . . .
Well, here I am finally,
beat-up pilgrim to a homely shrine,
my bare rock and old woman
willing glumly to receive what I offer—
a scar and a tall story.

I see my son's eyes lift slyly
from his plate, asking what it was for—
struggle, shipwreck, and such lies.
It was for this, sonny, this:
my eating and your asking.

A good number of the poems in *Dear Blood* are about the art of Rhetoric itself: they are demonstrations of possible relations between author and audience, for example "At the Well":

Does this water
taste of oil to you?

. . . Do these pipes
serving the wrong thirst
reach down to the wrong assumption
so pumping a septic mix
into the pitcher?

. . . Do you feel bad
swallowing that?

They say this numbness
is life adapting to new conditions.

The numb parts of me
believe them.

Holding Patterns (1982), marks a distinct advance in Nathan's poetry and contains some of Nathan's best poems: extended meditations that have a narrative quality and which feature a "He" and a "She." The epistemology of the book is dictated by its

opening poem, “The Understanding,” which begins, “We don’t speak the same language / but by some miracle understand each other. / I hold up a pencil and say pencil / and you say yes, yes, pencil. . . .”

You say perhaps we’re speaking some
third language in a dream and it’s all
illusion. We should pinch each other
to see if it’s true. We pinch. It hurts.
We are nevertheless unconvinced.
We gossip. We abandon talk of the truth.

This becomes habit. . . .

The poem ends: “It doesn’t matter / if it’s not real. Language is just / music to live by anyway.”

Having dismissed the project of trying to talk “the truth,” the book then, in the three longish poems that comprise its heart, presents us characters who are thinking about—talking to themselves about—the issue of “truth.” “Meadow Foam,” a poem which bears interesting similarities to Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West,” begins with an epiphany revealed to a man walking, with his wife, beside the ocean.

The afternoon
hundreds of blackbirds
suddenly sprang up
out of the cedars of the cemetery
he felt, for Christ’s sake,
a vision had been vouchsafed
the wrong man again,

The blackbird-epiphany touches off various memories, reflections, longings—

flagrant visions
that seem to hint of Great Doings
behind the masks of mere light
and shadow, . . .
he stood looking for a word
that would let him be—say, “reconciled,”
spoken with good-humored sadness . . .

“Without thinking” he “turned to the woman beside him,” a woman with “gray hair that hung / in thin bangs across her forehead.” He muses:

there’s your love
for you, the fine art of charity
and tact, of noticing and not
noticing, for example, people,
the world, or little scenes in it

He thinks about death and about his own heart, “the same old faithful pump / fifty-eight years serving it knew / not what, perhaps the vague hunger / they used to call the soul, . . .” His reflections return to the blackbird-epiphany, to

. . . the way common blackbirds crash
into an almost acceptable scene
to distract the comfortably disappointed
from their little faith,
or even simpler, as when she knelt
last Saturday morning by the sea,
knelt at what he hadn't noticed
just at his feet, a white surprise
or wild flower out of its place,
time, maybe even its world,
knelt . . . and . . .
repeated like an unanswerable prayer
for all things that must stand for themselves,
. . . "meadow-foam, oh meadow-foam,
of course," and that would have to do.

This concluding "epiphany," like the famous one in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, is proposing art as religion: "and that would have to do."

The passage just quoted illustrates, in addition to its self-conscious assembling of "epiphanies," an aspect of Nathan's later poetry that, to my mind, is of great significance: the marshalling of an extended, elaborated, almost "Jamesian" sentence-syntax that is not so much a means of adjusting the degrees of assertiveness in a poem's statements as it is a rhetorical method of *inventio*. But "method" is the wrong word. Nathan's sentence-syntax is not mere "technique." It's a principle of poetic form (though I would prefer the word "structure"). To say, as I happen to believe, that the structure of a poem *is* its sentence-syntax, is to risk stating a truism; but such a "truism" is not as obvious as it might first appear: it ignores issues of quality. Of course all poems are made of sentences, therefore all poems presume to exhibit "structure," but how can sentence-structure make the difference between a good poem and bad poem? One of the most significant ways depends on whether the sentence-structure of a given poem feels appropriate to that poem's vision. To view free-verse sentence-structure deployed to its maximum advantage, the reader is invited to read Leonard Nathan's "Table Talk," a free-verse poem of 109 lines that is all one sentence, a sentence so artfully strung out that it seems to imitate the poet's mind itself at work—a mind weighing, measuring, sorting, musing all with "good-humored sadness," while evoking, from the limited third-person point of view, the soul of a middle-aged woman:

She was just about to say,
through the candles and over the wine,
with the oak table and so much else
between them, that distance
was no less a fine invention
than the wheel, but didn't
because his smile was too far off,
so asked softly instead: Are you there?
and knew, though he lifted his glass
to her, he wasn't, but somewhere back

in himself alone with something dearer
to him than any woman now,
what—for modesty—he called
his disappointment, that is, failure,
which these days left her much
to herself to decide just who
she was after all these years
typecast as daughter, wife, mother,
double agent in the lost war
of the sexes, or someone. . . .

Poems like this or like “Holding Patterns,” “Jubilee,” “The Servant of Stars,” “Waiting Room Only” and the other strong poems in *Holding Patterns* are as revolutionary (and as successful) as the early narrative poems of Robert Frost. When I encountered them in journals, they so disturbed me that I ordered *Carrying On* from Pitt Press. The personae in these poems, like the characters in Woody Allen’s serious movies such as *September* or *Interiors*, haunted me with their desires. They seemed to live, like all of us, in the suspense of imminent disappointment. The reader compulsively compares his or her life to their lives. This is precisely their intended effect, their “argument,” but to call such an appeal a rhetorical “tactic” or “method” would demean them. So deeply is their human sympathy embedded in their syntax, their “Holding Patterns,” that it would be more appropriate to speak of “strategy” rather than “tactics.” “Tactics” issue from “technique”: “Strategy” is the result of vision.

It is through such strategic vision that the best poems in the thirty-eight pages of “New Poems” comprising the first chapter of *Carrying On*, likewise, conspire to hurt the reader. Nathan has never stood still as a poet. His work has continually improved. He has continually experimented. He has taken nothing for granted. Perhaps the most appropriate way to close this appreciation might be to tease the reader with the first quarter of Nathan’s “Twin Snakes”:

Always for money, yes and, yes,
to hurt whoever stood there waiting,
to reach away, to hurt him,
and yes, for the looks he got
by winning—cold admiration
in the eyes of women, even
his mother’s—yes, for all that
and something more he couldn’t say
but *was* the night he stood, radiant
with sweat, over a leathery man
he’d put down for the final time
and saw, like a vapor or spirit lifting
up from the smeared and slack stare
of the beaten other, recognition,
a swelling power that filled him
as his own hands filled the gloves
he held high over his head,
the same hands some fool of a writer
had called all flash and blur,

and another, twin snakes, yes,
the crowd chanting “Snake! Snake!”
as the police slowly wedged him back
toward his dressing room through waves
of fingers reaching to touch or snatch
a piece of him or his power,
and yes, after, out there
on the blurred and flashing street,
the girl on his arm, almost sick
with privilege, looking up to moan,
“You a *God!*” and he laughed, ashamed
for her, but knew he was, knew
he could make things be by thinking them,
be here: his ex-wife glittering
with regret, the blonde actress
who loved only the best, and then
the party in the rich hotel
where an old champion came up
and hugged him, whispering in his ear
“I know,” then stepped back, his arms
still wide, his suit too big,
his face gray as a man’s a storm
has passed through or a fatal illness
badly survived.

Next morning,
his own face woke him crying
out its hurt, but the girl slept on
as if she shared the bed with just
another man, and when he opened
the morning papers it was like reading
of someone else . . .

The reader who wishes to know the rest of this poem, to go through the process by which the champion comes down to earth, is advised to buy the book and read pages thirteen through sixteen. Poetry can’t get any better than this. The peak which Nathan’s recent “narrative” poems have achieved places him on the very leading edge of American poetry. These poems, like the recent work of Philip Levine, demonstrates that the capability of American poetry, even at this historical moment in which the personal lyric reigns supreme, is much greater and more various than is generally supposed. It can compete with successfully and at times even surpass the best prose fiction.