

Between Water and Song

New Poets for the Twenty-First Century

Edited by
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THE DEEP PULSE OF THE SPIRIT:
THE NEED FOR DEPTH AT THE BEGINNING
OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

These two depths: the vertical holds the zenith and the nadir;
the other, this one, the horizontal, stretches to the four un-
boundaries.

—Juan Ramón Jiménez

Now I a fourfold vision see,
And a fourfold vision is given to me.

—William Blake

In William Blake's *The Four Zoas*, the primal man, Albion, represents Man before the Fall, and/or each of us in a state of sleep or unawakened consciousness. In such a state the four fundamental aspects of man have been thrown off balance. These are represented in Blake's cosmology by the Four Zoas: Urizen, *rationality*; Luvah, *emotion*; Tharmas, *sensation*; and Urthona, *intuition or imagination*. Jim Watt

tells us, “Though they are present in each of us, they are also uniquely and individually unbalanced—and a considerable effort is required to bring them into balance.” He continues, “The Zoas . . . will assist us in that recovery and recreation of one another and reality which Blake calls the building of Jerusalem.” In that process, I would say we begin to acknowledge vertical energy and allow the depths to open, transforming the flatness of mundane reality into genuine profundity and opening ourselves to a more soulful, more spiritual existence. Then we will no longer be dealing with exhausted elements of the horizontal, that energy-less vacuum in which we find ourselves, and in which “most American poets resemble blind men moving gingerly along the ground from tree to tree, from house to house, feeling each thing for a long time, and then calling out ‘House!’ when we already know it is a house.” This is Robert Bly, who, along with Roberto Juarroz, is the greatest proponent of vertical energy in poetry. The vertical then is perhaps best characterized by example, just as Lorca’s *duende* is best described as “a struggle, not a thought.” Albanian poet Luljeta Lleshanaku’s “The Bed” is such an example. It begins,

My bed, a temple
where murmurs of a stifled prayer press
against my palate.

Frozen genitalia
buried fruit, imperfect fruit
clean green leaves stretching out beneath the blankets

to reach you, your warmth
dew on the skin of a morning dream.

As she leaps from the image of the bed as temple to the buried, imperfect fruit of genitalia, to the skin of a morning dream, we are jarred from sleep and for a moment discover the sacredness of the world we live in. In other words, where we truly are.

Jung adopted these four elements of the horizontal and vertical realms as the four basic psychological functions by which we apprehend and evaluate our experiences. Marie-Louise von Franz, discussing these four functions in her *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, says, “The more you have developed and obtained the use of more conscious functions, the better and the more colorful your interpretation will be.” She continues, “It is an *art* which has to be practiced (italics mine).” Now, at the dawn of a new century, too many young people are sleepwalking and are oblivious to the world around them. We are desperate for poetry that is alive and wild, but at the same time provides us something to hold on to which we have only halfway accomplished with horizontal thought.

A graduate student in a creative writing program said recently that we shouldn’t read anyone before the previous generation of poets because their poems don’t include cell phones and iPods and thus have nothing to say to the modern poet. Many young poets are looking only to the poets of their own generation or teachers in their respective MFA programs, rather than, say, Li Po, Sappho, Mistral, or Machado. We are experiencing what I call “American Idol Syndrome.” An aspiring singer tells the audience that her influences include Mariah Carey, Pink, or Hannah Montana rather than Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, or Kirsten Flagstad. I am reminded of what Denise Levertov says in her essay “Great Possessions,”

Much of what is currently acclaimed, in poetry as well as in prose, does not go beyond the most devitalized ordinary speech. Like the bleached dead wheat of which so much American bread is made (supposedly “enriched” by returning to the worthless flour a small fraction of the life that was once in it) such poems bloat us but do not nourish.

What’s ignored is a deeper connection with the inner, or spiritual, life. Too many poets stay on the dry surface while volleying back and

forth between the *rational* and the *emotional*. They do not honor the vertical energy that is necessary for a deeper, more soulful and spiritual life experience. Vertical awareness, then, must include *sensation* and *intuition* or *imagination*, “a movement down,” as Bly says, “into earthly body, dirt, appetite, gross desire, death; and a movement toward sunlight, time, fulfillment, lily blossoms, purity, narcissus flowers, beauty, opening...” There is a desperate need for vertical awareness in poetry today. Our culture has become flatter and more superficial and horizontal than ever before.

But we must be careful and not think that we can exist solely in the vertical realm. Good poets are careful not to hastily leave the earth or the body; they resist effortless transcendence where New Age abstractions and thoughts of bliss and harmony result in egotistical self-absorption. Kevin Goodan, who was raised in Montana, fought forest fires for many years and lived on a farm in western Massachusetts, is very close to the soil, potato plants, thistles, fresh dung, and the earthly body. He says, “The Lord is a place / to dig down into” (“August”). Goodan is an expert at vertical awareness. He is always listening, paying attention, to the world around him, which may be all we are asked to do. In “Theories of Implication” he notes, “It begins in the leaves, / a hush that precedes all weather.”

Maurice Manning, from Kentucky, also meditates on God, but here through the voice of Daniel Boone. Notice his attention to things of the natural world. Here he considers a god “who lives in the shadow / between two rocks and sleeps on moss, content / with the smallness of his task; the god who bends / rivers, the god who flecks the breast of a hawk...” (“On God”). His third collection *Bucolics*, a collection of psalms, or as the book jacket declares, “love songs to creation,” is about as close to the mystical experience as a contemporary poet could hope to get. But notice how he doesn’t simply give in to transcendence. Notice how he seeks it through soil and flesh. Notice the detail. Notice how he addresses God.

When I first started thinking about these ideas I wanted to use the term spiritual, but was afraid that it would leave out the depths

of the soul and conjure up religious or new-agey abstractions. So I turned to two of my spiritual fathers, Antonio Machado and Rainer Maria Rilke. Machado says, “The substance of poetry does not lie in the sound value of the word, nor in its color, nor in the metric line, nor in the complex sensations, but in the deep pulse of the spirit...” It is in this manner I wish to use the term. For me, depth of spirit is the substance of poetry and is not an optional or decorative item like rhyme or assonance. In this way poetry is alive, organic, pulsing. “How many readers today, how many poets, consider poetry as a spiritual practice?” Stephen Mitchell asks in his introduction to Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*, “But when we take it seriously enough, the poem becomes transparent, becomes the world illuminated.” Rilke says in *Letters to a Young Poet*, “Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write.” He also says, “A work of art is good if it has risen out of necessity.”

Are poets necessary? Joseph Campbell says, “Artists share the calling, according to their disciplines and crafts, to cast the new images of mythology. That is, they provide the contemporary metaphors that allow us to realize the transcendent, infinite, and abundant nature of being as it is.” Poets who resist the “deep pulse of the spirit” will cast images that do the opposite. Their poems will provide scant metaphors, if they provide any at all. Muriel Rukeyser warns, “If we do not go deep, if we live and write half-way, there are obscurity, vulgarity, the slang of fashion, and several kinds of death.”

We need substance—poetry that will acknowledge the things of this world and the space between things. Here is the opening of Joshua Poteat’s “Documenting the Birds: Office Park” from his collection *Ornithologies*:

If this is what we become
then let me turn into light now while the spaces
between the leaves have enough room to hold me.

If we acknowledge the soul, poetry will arouse the bottom-dwelling creatures we have suppressed with rational thought. Maria Melendez has a message for the horizontal thinker:

Know this, all humanists:

under the pure, lifeless
surface of the Sea
of Thought swims a great

gray whale, scarred
and barnacled, carrying
a calf, a great gray whale

about to breach.

Melendez isn't about to suggest that what comes from the depths is going to be pretty. We are not entering safe territory. It is the darkness we must descend into before attaining the spiritual. The term spirituality should not be thought of as a method of escape from earthly life. We need to make a clear distinction between spirit and soul. Poets who exist only in the vertical realm are as imbalanced as those on the horizontal plane; most are treading furiously to keep their heads in the spiritual realm and tend to avoid the depths of the soul.

Melendez understands the danger of trying to stay only in the vertical realm. She knows that Campbell's mandate is necessary but that it is a heavy load to carry. If we are willing to go into the depths we must have something—myth, ritual—to keep the energy contained. Melendez would agree with Ted Hughes:

When wise men know how to create rituals and dogma,
the energy can be contained. When the old rituals and
dogma lost credit and disintegrated, and no new ones
have been formed, the energy cannot be contained, and

so its effect is destructive.... That is why force of any kind frightens our rationalist, humanist style of outlook.... If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control—rituals, the machinery of religion.

I don't want to pigeonhole poetry into a category or school of thought. I fear that this introduction is already starting to sound too technical, lacking the energy it portrays. It is starting to sound like tenets of "The New Sincerity," which emphasizes human connection over the irony, disconnection and lofty cynicism of postmodernism. Although sincerity isn't a bad idea, "The New Sincerity" is a "school" of thought, which is why I welcome any throwing off of a system. The Trickster is always trotting around the edge of town ready to do that. Sherwin Bitsui is a young poet from White Cone, Arizona. He is Diné of the Bitter Water People, born for the Manygoats People. Trickster energy runs throughout his poems. He says of the Trickster,

He was there—
before the rising action rose to meet this acre cornered by
thirst,
before birds swallowed bathwater and exploded in
midsentence,
before the nameless
began sipping the blood of ravens from the sun's knotted
atlas.

When Trickster energy is not allowed to enter we fall into banality and apathy. Lewis Hyde tells us, "The road that trickster travels is a spirit road as well as a road in fact. He is the adept who can move between heaven and earth, and between the living and the dead." This is vertical awareness.

Reinvigorated in recent issues of *Poetry* and *American Poetry Review** is the age-old polarity that claims poetry should either be horizontal or vertical. But as we have seen, the result of polar opposites can only be tension, unless there is a unifying element. This is where the artist comes in. "All writers should be obliged to scrutinize the idiots of both persuasions, left and right," Adam Zagajewski, one of our greatest advocates for ardor, real soul in the arts and the spiritual life, says "The poet is a born centrist; his parliament is elsewhere." So if we begin to apprehend this vertical energy we will be doing poetry's true work, writing from this "parliament of elsewhere," leaving the flatness for a more genuine and dynamic life of the soul. In an earlier essay Zagajewski suggests, "Poetic imagination creates rather than comes to know reality." The artist must ask, What sort of reality are we creating?

The severe drought caused by Language poetry and the tedium and irony of the postmodernists are certainly contributing to the ruin. My father went into a bookstore and asked for a recommendation. The salesperson handed him a book by a young, "up-and-coming" poet. My father, one of the most well read people I know, said that he simply couldn't figure out what she was talking about in her poems. Neither could I. He said he got the feeling he wasn't welcome into "the club." What is in these poems for the reader? Who should poems be written for anyway? Pablo Neruda says, "Poetry has lost its ties with the reader. . . . It has to get him back. . . . It has to walk in the darkness and encounter the heart of man, the eyes of woman, the stranger in the street, those who at twilight or in the middle of the starry night feel the need for at least one line of poetry."

The idea of this anthology is not to be all-inclusive. We felt that the reader would get a better idea of the poet's body of work if we were to include more poems than are typically found in an anthology. Each of these poets was born after 1960 (young by poet standards). They are simply the most intriguing poets writing today. I am especially indebted to Valzhyna Mort and Mira Rosenthal for their countless hours discussing and arguing the merits of such poetry,

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*I have in mind essays by Tony Hoagland [*Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment* (March 2006)] and John Barr [*American Poetry in the New Century* (September 2006)] in *Poetry* and Dana Levin [*The Heroics of Style: A Study in Three Parts, Part Three* (March/April 2006)] in *APR* and the letters in response to those essays.

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