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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “inseparable from the poignant awareness of its, and our, mortality.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

FINDING AGAIN THE WORLD

A recollection of poet Howard Nemerov.

By Eleanor Wilner

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A perennial problem with our poetry is that the journals, understandably, publish primarily the living, and some of our finest poets can easily get mislaid. A few of their poems may turn up in anthologies, but they disappear from the larger world of attention, something which creates at times the illusion that there are vanishingly few poets of the first water between the great Modernists and the poets now in circulation.

As I venture this return, a memory unfolds: the seventies, a college lounge, Howard Nemerov an avuncular guest poet chatting informally with students—I can’t quite see him, there is a blur of light around him coming in from the sunlit windows of the past, but I can hear him talking: the subject was an argument he’d had with Allen Ginsberg, which had to do with how language finds its way, and in what shape, onto the page—the hyper-Whitmanian sprawl and spill of Ginsberg versus Nemerov’s more measured, poised, and reticent lines. Nemerov recapitulated for the students an argument he’d had with Ginsberg, in which each had said with utter conviction of the other’s prosody: “That’s not how the mind works!”

Two bulls in one pasture—and plenty of grass for both (though Nemerov preferred alcohol). Truth be told, he was as great an enemy of convention, complacency, war, and prevailing consumer values as Ginsberg, and turns an elegant blank verse, a razor-edged irony, and metaphoric brilliance into weapons against “old violence petrifying where it stood.” The brutal follies of US policy in the Vietnam war era (only outdone by those of the present regime) found their searing indictment in his mocking “Great Society” poems in *The Blue Swallows* (1967).

An enemy of every kind of vanity and pretension, both in his acerbic wit (describing a poet crossing Walt Whitman bridge: “Fame is the spur, he figured; given a Ford/Foundation Fellowship, he’d buy a Ford”) and in the deeper currents of his meditative voice, his verse offers the kind of mastery that restores proportion by demanding self-forgetfulness. In “Maestria” (1960), long after history’s worst has been done, its rationalizations rusted like old machinery:

There remains
A singular lucidity and sweetness, a way
Of relating the light and the shade,
The light spilling from fountains, the shade
Shaken among the leaves.

* * *

strangely,
Rising sometimes from hatred and wrong,
The song sings itself out to the end,
And like a running stream which purifies itself
It leaves behind the mortality of its maker,
Who has the skill of his art, and a trembling hand.

This I was mad for as a young reader, when, as I now realize, I had scarcely begun to understand it. But it was the longing for art’s particular kind of mastery—not to mention “lucidity and sweetness,” even in shorter supply now than back then—a mastery that drives toward excellence, not reputation or rewards. A mastery based, paradoxically, as I was to learn, on relinquishment of will. It’s there in his closing lines: the vast difference in scale between the song and “its maker,” and the awe that the insignificant self experiences, imaged in that “trembling hand.”

It is this lyrical self-effacement, combined with such discernment, that drew me to him—the transparency of a perceiving self not trying to get the world’s attention, but using all his faculties in order to see and hear better the world speak of itself. As he says, ending his sixties poem, “The Blue Swallows”:

O swallows, swallows, poems are not
The point. Finding again the world,
That is the point, where loveliness
Adorns intelligible things
Because the mind’s eye lit the sun.

Of poetry, Nemerov wrote, its “tradition, ideally, has to do with reaching the beginning, so that, of many young poets who begin with literature, a few old ones may end up with nature.” Which requires, of course, that art speak of its own vanishing. One of my favorite Nemerov poems, “Writing,” which I wish I could quote in its entirety, likens writing to skaters,

scoring their white
records in ice. Being intelligible,
these winding ways with their audacities
and delicate hesitations, they become
miraculous, so intimately, out there
at the pen's point or brush's tip, do world
and spirit wed.

His lovely figure, grace recording its own passage on ice, is not unlike his own reserve, the measured movement of musing mind, one armored against its own depths. But an imaginative mind is one in dialogue with its contradictions, so the counterforces appear in the poem and finally overwhelm the figure, as if to reprove its elegance and the writer's impertinent play for permanence:

Not only must the skaters soon go home;
also the hard inscription of their skates
is scored across the open water, which long
remembers nothing, neither wind nor wake.

That those lines about the eventual obliteration of our writing should be themselves so memorable is one of the great charms of this poem, for, while I have forgotten so much over the years, these lines have stayed with me—poetry's enduring power inseparable from the poignant awareness of its, and our, mortality.

Eleanor Wilner's most recent books are *The Girl with Bees in Her Hair* (2004) and *Reversing the Spell: New and Selected Poems* (1998), both from Copper Canyon Press. This article first appeared in *Poetry* magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Howard Nemerov, and his poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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