

BEVERLY DAHLEN / A Reading: Beginning with George Stanley's "Feeling Out"

I met George Stanley when we were both in our 30s and we are now in our 70s, so we've been friends for nearly 50 years. It seems a long time when put that way. Yes, half a century. But we've barely seen one another in all those years because George moved to Vancouver in '71 and I stayed here in San Francisco. We've visited one another occasionally. He's returned to his hometown; I've made a trip [I think not more than one or two] to Vancouver. We've corresponded, though not so much lately. [George refers to our correspondence as "desultory;" that was the note on his last Christmas card. We do always send one another Christmas cards.]

Our first meeting was sometime in the mid-'60s in the office of the Poetry Center at San Francisco State. He had come back to school to take a Master's degree. I was working in the Poetry Center at the time and I recognized him because he was already an established poet in San Francisco. Had he given a reading for the Poetry Center by then? Our readings were held in the Gallery Lounge in those days. It was a simple wooden building on the campus, set up with folding chairs, a reading stand, a mic. We recorded the audio; there was no video at the time. George did read there. Yes, it was in October of '67. [Thanks to the folks at the Poetry Center for looking that up.]

George and I became friends in those days when he was at school. We'd walk down from the old Humanities Building to have lunch in the cafeteria. That was in the time before the famous controversial Moshe Safdie Student Union was built, now named in honor of Cesar Chavez. Our old cafeteria was big, noisy and served lousy food. But we ate and chatted and got to know one another.

I felt intimidated by his knowledge, his wit. He had gone to school with the Jesuits, and so had a first-class education. And I had only a public school background and had been raised Protestant to boot. Not only Protestant, but fundamentalist. George had [I think still has] contempt for Protestantism. Somewhere he refers to Vancouver, his adopted hometown, as "Proddy." But George and I didn't talk about religion much. Our friendship would probably not have survived religious arguments. I was certainly in no position to defend Protestantism [though I think there's much to say in its defense] because I couldn't have held my own in a debate. He had a ready

answer for every point; that's what a good Catholic education will give you.

George did respect my ability as a reader, however, and began bringing his poems into the office to show me. The first poem I remember seeing was "Feeling Out." It was written over several days, perhaps a week: a serial poem. Whether it was "dictated" I don't know, but Jack Spicer had been George's mentor and it seems to have been taken for granted that a single poem could be written as a series of shorter entries. The first part ended with the lines:

I have to tell you, darling,
I don't take this cheap world. (*A Tall, Serious Girl* 92)

Those lines were a clue to what would follow. It was a poem of rejection, not just of the "cheap world," but of the threatening world, the demanding world:

I can
keep you out,
with my chin.
I can keep you out
with my mind. (93)

It was also trying to understand the ways in which the mind rejected the world, how the mind becomes defensive, and in the final parts how the rejection could be reversed. The metaphors were "rock" and "desert" [the "Deadly Desert of Reason"] and later "thaw" and "ripple" and "flood." It is a poem I admire for its honesty, for its analysis. It enacts the literal sense of "analysis," the Greek root of which means "to dissolve it." The flood at the end reveals "the dead rock" which underlies it. Yes, a revelation, but hardly an epiphany. It's a poem that is also uncertain of itself, its metaphors. It questions everything. And this openness to the question, to uncertainties, this willingness to include blank stuttering incomprehension and doubt in the poem continues in George's work. It is an open process and it's there for the reader to see. And I saw that in the poetry, at least, there were no ready answers.

Let me begin again with the poem's title: "feeling out" can be read in the sense it is most often understood, as an attempt to assess a situation, especially a relationship where some delicacy is involved. But "feeling out" can also be read as "feeling outside," bringing one's feelings to the surface instead of burying them. The poem seems to confront a sort of dichotomy between feeling and intellect, a false dichotomy which the poem attempts to overcome: "It's all me."

Among much else that is remarkable in this poem is a passage, from the section “The Ripple,” in which a prediction is made:

Twenty years in the future I was sitting on the edge of my bed
in a hotel room in Montreal, examining my hands.

The passage continues with some detail of the scene and then:

It was all me. There had never been
any other. Had been no one else. Faces, what dreams, I laughed
or remained silent because they
laughed or remained silent. And now not they. Me
on the bed, and it
hanging off there
with no mind of its own
world (96–97)

A mindless cock, the “it,” the part of “me” that is not “me,” somehow not of this world, or in some other world.

The hilarious [and painful] sequel to this poem is “Ripple + 26” (1996):

26, not 20. Years. In the future. I’m sitting on the edge of my bed in a hotel
room in Montreal, yes, but not examining my hands, the spots of age are there,
yes, but I have no wish to examine any part of me...

I imagined... this moment, 20, only it’s 26, years, to ratify (whatever that means,
turn into a rat, I guess) some notion I had of me (& the rat’s loose now, behind the
boards). (209)

And this goes on, punning and rambling for two and a half pages. I don’t mean it’s not a serious poem. It dives in, trying to reconnect with the memories of the events of the original poem, or to refocus the memories, to make sense of them in the present. “And then the Tao came back, I wrote then” (210). But that’s not quite accurate. “Scared went away, found the Tao again” is the earlier text, and in it finding the Tao is an active quest (96).

Finding the Tao, the way, a way to proceed. Taking the next step into an unknown world. What does it mean, this Tao? What can it have meant to George?

Things proliferate,
And each again returns to its root.

Returning to the root is called equilibrium. (*Daodejing*)

Being thrown off balance by the proliferation of events around one, and finding that “equilibrium” again. That’s something like what happens in the poem.

But in “Ripple + 26” the commentary on the passage is nearly a send-up of the original:

I don’t want to deny what the guy 26 years back said—he said “It’s all me”—it was all him—sure, the world has no mind—no one mind—there is no “world”—now that’s a fact—or the lack of a fact.

It seems to me that this is a poem that wants to remain open,

(o false note of closure – thanks, sd the rat, I have lots to say, & I’m driving (there is no rat) (210)

and sort the “real” from some idea or projection of the “real.” But it [the poet? the poem?] also wants completion, an ending that is finally a place, as it was in the earlier poem:

... And it is there and I can step up
into it and use it again It is new (“The Ripple” 95)

And the final lines of “Ripple + 26”:

... wanting to disappear, of course, but be here, if it takes all night, if it takes 26, 47, 62 years to put lust for power behind me. (211)

These are mysterious lines: to want to disappear [to die?] and to want to put an end to the “lust for power.” All would end with one’s death, but how would one put the “lust for power” behind otherwise? Is it a matter of will? Or a matter of pronouns:

It doesn’t matter where you start or where you end, you’re you (I’m you), not me, there is no rat. (209)

This “you” in the first place, the “you” that is really “myself” creates a kind of unity, at least linguistically. “You” and “I” are one. And perhaps this is a kind of binding that is precursor to a sense of compassion and so defeats “lust for power.” But the fictitious rat is there [not there] nibbling away at the edges after all, the loathsome animal undermining our sense of our own civilized selves.

I smell a rat. That rat that is rejected, denied. Does the cock which is not part of this world [not there] become a rat? The aggressive rat might have been a weapon, a stick, as in the poem of that title:

My father stole my cock from me.
He did it with a look.
He tried to put it back
many, many times.

...

a look, a word, a smile.
And all this while
I have used this stick,
this weapon,
to replace the loss.

Now I know it is not
a sexual organ,
and I lay it down. (112)

Rat, stick, weapon:

Here are lines from the earlier "Feeling Out":

And what is inside or outside I don't know. Inside, I was told,
was sin-side. And outside became pout-side. Well, what
difference does it make? Those—what are those things?
Nests, did you call them? I tap them with my stick. The clouds
Yeah, just the clouds. (94)

"The clouds": all becomes misty, hidden. But one glimpses the teaching that makes all thought, all interiority, all the insides of our bodies sinful. No wonder outside was "pout-side." What else could it be? What was left to the child but a sense of alienation from his own body and the confusions induced by that idea? Still, one survives, lives into adulthood and learns to tolerate, somehow, the parental disapprobation.

The figure of the father returns in a later poem called "In Ireland":

My father appeared to me, or rather,
appeared in me...
Appeared in me, shoulder in my shoulders,
lips in my lips, in that attitude
of resignation that marked his old age. (220)

[It is uncanny the way our parents appear in us, willy-nilly. I once wrote “I will always resemble my father as a young boy” but as I age I see his aged face in my own.]

His anger, in childhood,
had propelled me outward,
to seek a world where to be what he was not,
whatever that might be, might be wanted— (220)

But it is in the book’s closing poem, “Veracruz,” that an incredibly complex “family romance” is woven. In the classic Freudian sense of the term, the child’s fantasy is that his parents had adopted him, but that his birth parents were high-born, even royalty. In “Veracruz” the fantastic wish is that his father “had married / not my mother, but her brother, whom he truly loved.” In this myth, the father [magically changed, “like Tiresias” into a woman] becomes the mother of a girl, “a tall, serious girl.” Eventually this girl [Georgia?] gives birth to a son—“the boy I love” (222).

It’s a spellbinding poem, deeply narcissistic, mirroring desires which seem to reflect one another infinitely. Fantasizing the rearrangement of given familial relationships, the poem suggests a whole range of changes and so questions of identity, place and purpose are all opened to reinterpretation, or even reinvention. And the “boy I love” would not only be one’s son but one’s lover, a shocking and forbidden fantasy.

This is a poem that rings changes on many of the major classic myths: Oedipus, Narcissus, Eros and Psyche. It interrogates identity and one’s place in the order of family and history. It unsettles almost everything it finds there. It is truly a subtle magic, and a poem that leaves me, by this ending, wordless.

Works Cited

Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation. New York: Ames and Hall, 2003.

Stanley, George. *A Tall, Serious Girl: Selected Poems*. Jamestown, RI: Qua Books, 2003.