

**ecco echo: andrew
benjamin's 'writing in the still'**

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What are poetry's angels? Andrew Benjamin's collection opens with the poem "The Angel Stayed". Even when, later, it switches to prose, the collection as a whole derives its hesitating gait from this first poem, in its self-correcting insistent attempts to be precise about far-off, uncertain, illuminating presences.

"Were the angels to return?"

"And the other cry? / What sound?"

"Who spoke?"

The reader eavesdrops on these questions raised to the angel — this angel whose

being is configured by (is the corollary of?) the questioning.

So, in this beginning bravely Benjamin takes up the first line of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* — a line something like, "And if I did cry out, who'd hear me among the ranks of angels?" I think maybe Rilke had been reading Balzac's *The Lily of the Valley* when he wrote that. "Does an angel exist somewhere who collects the sighs of sensitive, constantly rejected souls?"¹ In *The Lily of the Valley*, Balzac's angel is not exactly a stand-in for the character's cold mother, who gives no succour; instead, it is a possibility living inside that space the mother's withdrawal has made. Andrew Benjamin's angel is not Balzac's, though it has perhaps inherited that angel's bond with the unanswered question. Nor is it Walter Benjamin's angel of history, wings outspread, forever being blasted back from Paradise. Andrew Benjamin's angel is more like Rilke's: it is not so much watching as watched for; it is not to blame for its indifference. It waits in the place that a question invents, or in those absences (desire, regret ...) which make themselves felt and, in so doing, make "nothing happen" — make it resound with feeling.

Benjamin's poems take their energy from essaying this blankness. On the blank page they configure the space that expectation marks out in thought. For this they use prepositions like markers in an otherwise blank treasure map. Also, these poems configure the space that memory marks out in thought. For this they use conjunctions, markers of the kind of time that works inside one-thing-after-another syntax — this human language raised like a torn white flag at the back of that now time pours through. Yes, here is Bergson, saying:

Matter resolves itself into numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and traveling in every direction like shivers ... this undivided act that your consciousness grasps in the movement that you yourself execute ... farther and farther, and by crossing over each time enormous periods of the internal history of things, quasi-instantaneous views are going to be taken, views this time pictorial, of which the most vivid colors condense an infinity of repetitions

and elementary changes. In just the same way the thousands of successive positions of a runner are contracted into one sole symbolic attitude, which our eye perceives, which art reproduces, and which becomes for everyone the image of a man who runs ...²

This shivering, flickering, vanishing sense of existence is (I think) what Benjamin wants to awaken inside the poem's patterned language: "Something other. / Unvoiced"; "Singing there in the instant". The poem neither invents nor describes a scene. Instead, it seeks out the boundaries of that placeless place which the subjunctive tense opens in the mind: "Were the angels to return?" "What would I have been?" "What would have been seen?" For this, Benjamin strips language back so far that he can wring meaning out of small changes. The words break open: "return" turns into "turn", "caring" into "carrying". The words also change around repeating vowel sounds, such as "sound" and "ground", or, "alone" and "though". "What sound?" writes Benjamin, "Sounding while the angels' / Ground stood — always there, always distancing". The argument is in the assonance: the sound itself summons its ground, the word's dominion. These poems depend also on repeated words, which emphasise Bergson's irreconcilables: time's single instant, and speech's "symbolic attitude". So, the words "instant" and "then" ring through the poem. There is the instant, fixed in the language, and irrecoverable.

It is a risk, to be so bare. It is always part of the interest of this kind of stringency in poetry: it risks portentousness. These poems skirt that risk because of their musicality, and because of their line breaks. These sudden stops bring sound to some brink of expectation. The expectation that rises in the mind is the feeling that Benjamin wants to summon: the fleeting realisation of some lasting elsewhere: infinite possibility, or blank array. Perhaps Novalis stands at the back of this, saying that language — most noticeably the language of poetry — provokes a feeling of incompleteness, which is itself the proof of some "being outside of being that is within being".³ In this vision, poetic language is a kind of mirror in which consciousness, in seeing itself fail to see itself, sees something else: some conceivable elsewhere. In Benjamin's poems, the fragments are placed

to make uncertainties reverberate. That title “The angel stayed”, for instance. Is it intransitive, as in paused, ceased, remained or (obsolete) waited in attendance? Or, transitive, as in waited for, halted the advance of, as in, the angel stayed its sword?

This collection has what could be thought of as a two-way mirror cut through the middle of it. On the one side is poetry, on the other side is prose, and each side can be seen reflected in the other. Turning to prose, this collection composes a scene. “Sitting in the breakfast room in an inexpensive hotel in Tours ...” Here sits a man who is trying to write about art. He is writing about Mantegna’s “Christ in the Garden of Olives”, of Poussin’s “Diogenes” — those great, still paintings, filled with their own untouchable life. He is writing about the feeling of difficulty that arises when he writes about art.

The question took him elsewhere. Writing, for this is what he did, directed him. The question that he continued to ask concerned what was there, there continually pushing at the limits that were encountered (76).

As that echo of “there, there” from the opening poem signals, the angel still figures in this prose part of the book. Sometimes the angel lives at the back of vanishing point perspective; or, is that feeling of life in the artworks, which escapes description. For instance, thinking of how Dürer’s drawing drew on Mantegna’s drawing, the writer finds himself feeling out the presence of another question: “there was always another element one that continued to be at work in the openings that had confronted him in the breakfast room that morning” (82). In the breakfast room that morning, the opening appears in the figure of a woman, a stranger, who, like Aby Warburg’s Nymfa Florentina of the tousled hair, hurries through the scene, “and there was already a cold wind blowing” (78). This damp-haired woman — damp hair being her epithet — escapes from the breakfast into a mirrored lift. Briefly, her face in the mirror meets the writer’s reversed, reflected face —

“Looking at her” is one section heading. At about this point, admittedly, this reader’s feeling for the poetic figure breaks apart. The reader thinks of Wallace Stevens’ essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”. In this, Stevens’ describes the difficulty of altogether yielding to Plato’s image of the human soul as a pair of winged horses and a charioteer, a contraption of ignoble and noble mix.

The truth is that we have scarcely read the passage before we have identified ourselves with the charioteer, have, in fact, taken his place and, driving his winged horses, are traversing the whole heaven. Then suddenly we remember, it may be, that the soul no longer exists and we droop in our flight and at last settle on the solid ground. The figure becomes antiquated and rustic ...⁴

Reading “Looking at her”, the reader has this drooping feeling. Yes, she recognises that this woman with damp hair belongs here: she introduces Warburg’s Nymfa Florentina into the living scene. Warburg himself set up this essay on the Nymfa as a fictive exchange of letters with his friend André Jolles, in which the Nymfa figures as a prompt of desire. For Benjamin’s writer, this damp-haired woman drinking coffee concentrates about herself a sense of possibility, the feeling “that somewhere there had been a secret”. Like Warburg’s hurrying Nymfa, her power to compel depends on her retreat, insofar as it awakens a sense of elsewhere:

Watching her face meant watching this vanishing. If, within him, there was now a stilling, an absence linked to impossibility, and then it was inextricably bound up with the vanishing that had pervaded him as he watched her. (86-87)

Yet here we are in the living scene, and the reader’s sense of this sense of possibility is troubled by the imagined reality of this imaginary woman, escaping into her own life outside the work’s conceptual scheme. The co-option of this woman into the role of muse: that is troubling. “Her looking at it and his looking at her created

a space” (86). Perhaps we do not identify with that him looking at her. Perhaps we stand on some other side of that space.

The result is that we recognize, even if we cannot realise, the feelings of the robust poet clearly and fluently noting the images in his mind... Yet we do not quite yield. We cannot. We do not feel free ...

We recognize it perfectly. We do not realise it. We understand the feeling of it, the feeling, clearly and fluently communicated. Yet we understand it rather than participate in it ...

— Wallace Stevens, “The Noble Rider”

But, then, perhaps that is exactly the point of this effort to place this living figure in the hotel breakfast room — to install some irreducible element, to complicate the relationship between the face in the mirror and the living face? We think of her being outside the scheme he makes, and the transactions of him looking at her looking at it. This goes back to something strange in Aby Warburg’s study of the Nymfa. She is moving. This is seen in her wind-blown garments, her tousled hair. This feeling of movement introduces a sense of life-like, unrepeatable existence into the still picture. The picture is something to be looked at; but, inside that contraption, the nymfa looks elsewhere, and away. She represents some thing representation cannot enclose. Warburg was still thinking about this, years later. These figures, moving as if into their own existence, awaken, he thought a different kind of question — “no longer ‘What does this expression mean?’ but instead: ‘Where is this going?’ The eye performs against the figures an ‘after-movement’”.⁵ Now the watcher is not simply looking, but sensing an elsewhere which the picture itself does not contain, and yet contains the power to awaken in the watcher.

“There there”. Ecco ecco. Echo. Writing in the Still is written inside the kind of space that Narcissus and Echo set up between them. It sets up this echo play between disembodied and embodied desire, embodied and disembodied speech. In this it calls to mind those haunting episodes in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* when

Narcissus and Echo speak to each other. Solitary, strayed, Narcissus said: “Is there any body nie?” and, “straight Echoe answerde: I”.⁶ I, answering, but there is no body — or, only the body of a sound. “And nought is left but voyce and bones: the voyce yet still remaynes ...” (18). That disembodied answer is already hidden inside the words. Is Benjamin’s angel the force that prompts Narcissus still to call out, wondering, or is it whatever gives body to the sound of words? The angel doesn’t answer.

Stilled echoes.

A word. A word.

“Coming Back”

NOTES

1. Peter Bush's translation, *New York Review of Books*, 2024, 8
2. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 1994, 208-209.
3. Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenburg), *Fichte Studies*. Ed. Jane Kneller. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University press, 2003, #2.
4. Wallace Stevens. Princeton Lecture, first published by the Princeton University Press in 1942; republished in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Alfred and Knopf, 1951, 4
5. Aby Warburg, *Viewer and Movement* (1890), translated by Phillipe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement*, Paris (1998) 2012, 93, cited in B. Pascaleva, *The Nude Nymph*, "La Rivista de Engramma", no. 135, aprile/maggio 2016, 47-76
6. See Arthur Golding's 1567 translation, Ovid, *The vi. Booke of P. Ovidius Naso*, entytuled *Metamorphosis*. London: Wylliam Seres, 1567, 70- 71 (3: 356-510).