H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Hollander. *Tesserae: And Other Poems.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. $12.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-679-76200-3.

John Hollander. *Selected Poetry.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-41931-0.

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Published on H-Amstdy (October, 1995)

In these two volumes John Hollander looks before and after, presenting in *Selected Poetry* his considered sense of his career and in *Tesserae* suggesting some of the new turns his poetic interests are taking. Together the two volumes form an intense meditation on the power and capacities of poetry as an act of thought and as an inquiry into the ends and significance of feeling.

My pulse at midnight–something as if said, As if to have the heart put to the head The question no one, without lying, can Answer affirmatively: Are you dead?

Nobody could have written this stanza from the title poem of *Tesserae* but John Hollander, and the delicate sadness one hears under its restless wit, not belying the wit so much as sharpening it, is one of Hollander's characteristic notes. One may take the remark that no one can answer the question "Are you dead?" with a "yes" as a kind of philosopher's jest (as if to say "There's nobody in here but us dead chickens"). The finicky coolness of "Answer affirmatively," in particular, treats its subject with a self-conscious intellectual distance one can imagine some readers becoming impatient with: this scene of anxious wakefulness seemed to have been set for something other than an academic conundrum. But isn't this clinging to an academic phrase part of the pathos of the poem–the edgy defensiveness which marks out this scene as something other than yet one more commonplace nocturnal memento mori? Hollander would come at it this way, just as Shakespeare's clown would with a joke ("Exit Burbage"). And beneath the philosopher's jest is the realization that this scene represents in dramatic form the real meaning of a central moment of philosophy, the Cartesian cogito, ergo sum: as long as I am in fear of death I must not be dead. When I think this thought, the poet seems to say, I hold death before me, and I hold it at bay, aware at once of its power over me, and the power I momentarily hold over it.

Each tessera, a Rubaiyat-stanza whose four lines (tessera, like ruba'i, derives from a word meaning "four") answer the four corners of those ivory tiles the Romans used as a tally or as identification, can stand alone, but each, also like tiles, can be seen in patterns with the others. When Hollander published a selection from this poem in *Raritan*, for instance, he presented them in slightly rearranged groups under thematic titles. Here they appear in four untitled parts, each the vertebral column of one of the books four sections. There are 144 of them in all, giving the poem that same kind of mad numerological symmetry as *Spectral Emanations* (with its factorial 7 lines), or *Powers of Thirteen* (with its 169 poems composed of 13 lines of 13 syllables each).

Hollander inherits from Omar Khayyam both a rich sense of physical pleasure and a sense of how appreciation modulates into a dark reflection upon finitude and loss:

Past sorrows–those our present joys embrace In gentle mastery–will not displace The present sorrows for past joys, which meet Half in shadow, face-to-averted face.

Occasionally this modulation sharpens into a shock of mortality which is charged with sexual mystery, entrancing the speaker despite himself:

A shriek, from somewhere in the August night Pierces me, of some animal in fright Or in the cruel and warm embrace of death That cries out just as fiercely in delight.

Sometimes erotic recollection descends into bitterness, which in turn is held in check but not fully mastered by manic hilarity:

Make up a sad old joke: "I wonder who's Kissing her now?" Her Now? Inside her shoes? Her shirt? Her pants? Her bonnet? Where's her Now? Next to her Then, Fool! You had all the clues.

The reader who dismisses this as cleverness, as what

Hollander derisively refers to as "complication for complication's sake," simply misses the pain of the joke: these are lines about how little cleverness can recoup from the death of love, laceratingly candid lines.

The *tesserae* that most stay with me reach past the attempt to maintain control either with wit, or with the strong closure that indicates a mastered perception, even a perception of loss, and arrive at a melancholy acceptance with is not quite surrender:

Being no longer made of flax or cotton, Pages we've written on will soon be rotten, Just as our gesturing hands will wear away, Just as our tones of voice will be forgotten.

This calm sadness, subsiding into wisdom, strikes me as Hollander's undersong. It is not merely a reflection of his sense of general cultural decline, nor even of his sense of personal mortality, so much as it is an awareness of the tears of things, an anxious awkward tenderness about life, a wounded hopefulness which the poet is supposed to know better than to entertain but which somehow survives everything he knows.

Tesserae and Other Poems offers many traditional Hollander pleasures. "An Old Counting-Game" uses a child's counting-out rhyme (in which one repeats, echoes, and rhymes with a number) to mediate between simplicity and Talmudic depth:

What's all this fuss about 1? One? Once you are dead, Eternity's begun

Hollander also harnesses children's forms to dark speculation in "The See-Saw," which, using a Mother Goose rhyme to reflect upon Hegel's ludicrous notion that riding a see-saw will somehow cure lunatics of their fixed ideas, runs through a whirl of tormenting sexual obsessions and arrives at mystery:

I watch the light by which I see Saw away at my wooden head, Living or dead? I haven't been told and I'll never be.

Who is it calls us home from play? That nurse of darkness with Nothing to say. One last up and down. And then Never again.

Lest I paint too dark a picture of this book, I point out that it is brightened by many examples of Hollander's light-handed intellectual satire. The sonnet "Making Nothing Happen," for instance, turns Auden's line about poetry into the occasion of a Gnostic myth, in which Nothing becomes the name of a dark Something which takes the place of the chaotic "universal blanc-/Mange":

She said, Let there be night and there was night, Intensest night, within which Nothing might Be seen emerging from its ruined tomb.

"Early Inscription" mischievously collates imaginary commentaries on the phrase EIDLLA EW [DNA?-] NROBLA ERAEW (Niemand's translation: we are all born and we all die), tracing hilarious controversies from the early disputes of Nimmerwahr and Schwarzweiss through many of the current critical fashions (one of the commentators claiming that "It is a slippery slope from boasting of the ultimate human knowledge to asserting, vilely, mankind's hegemony over the 'garden of creation."')

A *Selected Poetry* is an author's autobiography, his attempt to sort out what seems to have mattered over the years and to connect his several ventures into one coherent story. When a poet makes such a volume he must, like the anthologist, expect to be taken to task for his "shocking omissions." (How could he not? Only perhaps by adding new poems not in fact from the volumes to which he assigns them but somehow implicit in those poems!) It is curious what Hollander does leave out: all of the poems from *Types of Shape*, all of the verse from *In Time and Place*, and everything from *Reflections on Espionage.* When Hollander left the last-mentioned out of his last selected poems, he argued that it was unexcerptable, but surely a prose gloss such as he used to provide when he read from that volume would make excerpts intelligible, and surely they are charming enough to be worth the risk. *Powers of Thirteen*, to my mind not only Hollander's most inventive volume but also his deepest, appears here in its entirety, as does all of his major sequence "Spectral Emanations." As an introduction to Hollander's poetry *Selected Poetry* is unmatched, although the publication of *The Tesserae* renders it already obsolete as an intellectual biography.

How few of the steps recorded in this book turn out to be false ones, how little time, over the decades, has John Hollander spent trying on the current style or retuning his poetic voice. Most of Hollander's characteristic concerns and virtues–his interest in Wittgenstein and in the power and limits of poetic language, his erudition that second thoughts show to be more than playful (as when he says, of a late August day on the Lido, that "Europe, Europe is over, but they lie here still,/ While the wind, increasing,/ Sands teeth, sands eyes, sands taste, sands everything"), his prodigious technical skill, his interest in ekphrasis as a branch of ethical and metaphysical investigation–all of these show amply even in *A Crackling of Thorns*, which Auden picked as the Yale Younger

Poets volume from 1958. Some poems in that volume, such as "The Great Bear" or "The Lady's Maid's Song," would not have seemed out of place even in *The Tesserae*. It is striking not only how strongly Hollander's career is unified by his exploration of the many branches of one big problem (what is the relationship between particular poetic forms and the characteristic truths they are able to disclose), but also how often the arguments critics make about his poetry are already issues argued out in the poetry itself.

Consider for instance the oft repeated exclamation: "But all this is just poetry about poetry! I wanted to hear poetry about life!" Tempting as it is to respond to this with an argument ad hominem, Hollander's own response in *Powers of Thirteen* is delicate, ruefully comic, and more candid even than the answer Sidney makes to the same charge in *Astrophil and Stella*:

When, aping the literary love, his eye filled With one star, I at eighteen tried rhyming into bed A tall, dark girl named Barbara, now dead, everyone Had an earful of my earnest conceits, studious Wit, and half-concealments of the way I'd hoped we'd end Up; and the more contrived my rhyming became, the more It meant about desire this the ear-filled ones could not Understand. I marvelled, dazed, at what was done by less Textual souls for fun; I hoped to, like the girl-shy Yeats, pass through the tenderest of gates, and discharge with A mighty spasm in her deep, romantic chasm. The truth was that, though she and I rhymed a few times, my Young words on their paper sheet had far more joy than we.

Impatience with poetry about poetry is a form of impatience with poetry qua poetry: "Cut out the fancy stuff and speak the truth" is a way of putting certain kinds of truth out of reach, analogous to the vainglorious pseudo-candor that knows that love is just sex (and sex is just biology) or that truth is just power (and power is just economics). It is (to use another figure from *Powers of Thirteen*) to cast down the old statue of General Whatsisface (who probably did have it coming) only to set in its place another statue, "The Scoffer, all sincerity, cast/ Hugely in bronze by means of the usual lost wax." One of the reasons one writes in verse at all is that the discipline of form forces one closer to the living motions of one's thought, yielding perceptions one might not otherwise have stumbled upon–it isn't that the sonnets impose upon us sonnet thoughts; it's that finding our own way of solving a sonnet problem gives us a better sense of what is our own about that way, makes us think through our thoughts with a keener intelligence. Form, as Stephen Cushman remarks, is trope. A thought plainly blurted out is less of a thought.

Hollander's concerns are intensely particular, which is why his poetry is full of object lessons about form, about metrics, about enjambment, about how to retain an easy and conversational tone–the tone of someone thinking aloud (as J.D. McClatchy puts it)–even when solving a technical problem of mad arbitrariness. (How many poets love acrostics as Hollander does? Who else would write a thirteen line poem about the U.S. flag in which not only do the rhyme words rhyme with "red" and "white" in the same pattern as in the stripes of the flag, but in which also rhymes on "blue" mark out the blue canton in the upper left corner!) This concern with verse particulars is partly a consequence of skepticism about grand theory in poetry–which Hollander gently parodies in his mock-high-romantic "Mount Blank." Hollander marks out the boundaries of poetry empirically, each poem a kind of formal test, rather than through the development of a fully rigorous theory of poetry, as Stevens attempts. He has Wittgenstein's faithfulness to the particulars, not Kant's sweep.

This particularity (and perhaps an embarrassment about things that need saying in a loud voice) makes Hollander appear to be a poet of fancy more than a poet of imagination, but the kind of power one calls imaginative often marks Hollander's poetry in ways that a more direct poetry would falsify. Hear it for instance in this meditation on being an American poet, a belated heir to a poetic tradition which made him but which he cannot quite make his own, and which he also cannot fully renew: ubi sunt is the dwelling place of one kind of the sublime:

We ramble along up-hill through the woods, following No path but knowing our direction generally, And letting fall what may we come up against the worn Fact that all this green is second growth–reaches of wall Knew-high keep appearing among low moments of leaf; Clearings, lit aslant, are strewn across old foundations, This is of course New England now and even the brook, Whose amplified whisper off on the right is as firm A guide as any assured blue line on a roadmap, Can never run clear of certain stones, those older forms Of ascription of meaning to its murmuring, as We hear it hum, O, I may come and I may go, but… Half-ruined in the white noise of its splashing water. ("One of Our Walks" from *Powers of Thirteen*)

As imagination slips into Hollander's poetry, disguised as fancy, so, in a strange inversion of the usual practice, other persons speak through Hollander's poetry, disguised as himself. The ability to acknowledge the living presence of other minds, to step outside of one's

own needs and plans at least so far as to conceive of others as ends rather than means is the central moral challenge of art, which so often imagines persons in strictly conventional or strategic ways. Spenser parodied how the sonneteers devoted themselves to a beloved who was merely a projection of their own wishes and needs by documenting the mischief caused by an artificial woman, false Florimell, whose lips really are rose-petals, whose hair really is made of gold-wires, and so on. The "You" whom Hollander so frequently addresses (and who is the poet's interlocutor throughout *Powers of Thirteen*) is quite frankly his own imagination. But, strangely, the easy back-and-forth, the intimacy and continual change of the game between I and You, grants "You" a kind of reality that seems far removed from vulgar wish-fulfillment.

Let's call it quits: I never long for you any more.
But the matter of your voice low in the late lamplight
My heart minded over for so long, the substance of Your
morning shadow dancing on the floor as you dressed,
The evening shadow of your body's depth, stand here
Demanding some ceremony now. Some fuss. Let's call
It quits. Addressing what I've just said, you reply then
Cheerily, "Hi, Quits!" We giggle and have done for now
With lying, not against half-truths so much, but telling
Tales against the other–falsehood–halves of whatever
We really mean by saying what we feel. "Hi, Quits!"
"Quits" Like all his clan of feelings grumbles, not at the
joke, But rather at having been given a name at all. ("The Resolution," from *Powers of Thirteen*)

Now perhaps sometimes Hollander has simply reversed the sonneteer's procedure, addressing a person in disguise as a fantasy rather than a fantasy in disguise as a person. But mostly what I think he has done is to burst through the false distinction between projection and acknowledgment, not by showing in the stale poststructuralist way that acknowledgment is really only rhetorical, only an elaborate self-deceit about what is finally only projection (or a creation of "the male gaze"), but by showing that the unpredictability, the variegation of relatedness and distance, the intense vitality which is characteristic of imagination at its best, teaches us how to love others in their own endless changing forms of relatedness and separateness. That we love others to the extent that they resemble the projections of our imagination need not trouble us if our imaginations are worth anything, since respect for the imagination and respect for the beloved illuminate each other, and work in identical ways, neither quite reduced to the other. This is one of the things that Stevens may have meant when his "more harassing master" told him that the theory of poetry is the theory of life. Certainly the endless imaginative restlessness of Hollander's poetry is not only about love but of it.

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Citation: John Burt. Review of Hollander, John, *Tesserae: And Other Poems* and Hollander, John, *Selected Poetry*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. October, 1995.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=200

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