

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAN BEACHY-QUICK

Geoffrey Hilsabeck

Geoffrey Hilsabeck: I thought we might start by dipping into the essay a bit. Early in the essay, you describe what happens to the god when he is “brought down into song”: “The poem itself provides by its lines a ladder the god unwittingly must climb down.” It is a striking image and thought. Would you be willing to elaborate on it? How does it relate to the ideas about wounding and damage raised later in the essay?

Dan Beachy-Quick: That sentence comes from meditating on the nature of invocation — the opening of epic verse, yes, but also the sense I have that hidden within the lyric impulse is a similar invocatory urge. It seems to me that the work of invocation isn't simply that prayer to a higher power/being to guide and give credence to the poem to follow, but that the invocation itself exerts on the power/being invoked a power the god (in this essay's case) is helpless to ignore. A link is forged through language, through expression, between radically different sorts of worlds — that ur-creative world (call it divine or ideal or Nothing or Form) in which the gods keep their intangible but real abode, and our world, this world of perceptibility triggering thought, where to think is to confirm the world that thought in its hubris simultaneously denies, this world of this stuff, the material. I've come to think that much of the ongoing necessity, though a seldom spoken one, is the which in poetry of a certain kind continues to forge this link between these two worlds, to bring them into collision, to force them into a connection in which neither can deny the other, that uneasy relationship between essence and substance, between creating and created. That work is inevitably a wounding one, but the wound here is a kind of link, a sort of threshold work in which absence must be created for presence to step through. Such poetry seeks presence — not simply as some proof of its own belief (indeed, such poetry seems so deeply troubled by its own work as to almost cease in being able to accomplish it, cf. Dickinson, Hopkins, Oppen, Bronk, Howe) but to also call such belief into question. In fact, this may be the hallmark of such work — it is only in the invocation of actual presence that actual doubt can become meaningful.

GH: Much of the essay is taken up with the act of defining — gods, beauty, poetry, and symbols, among other things. In this way, it reminded me of your recent book on Moby Dick, *A Whaler's Dictionary*. Is this activity of defining unique to prose? Is it a fundamental aspect of reading?

DBQ: I think your suggestion here has much merit — there does seem to be an aspect of prose that gives over more to a defining work than occurs in poetry. Perhaps, among the prose-arts, the essay is the one most susceptible to working toward or in definition. Part of what has attracted me so deeply to the essay as a form of inquiry — and this struck me deeply when I first read Emerson and Montaigne — is its overlay with *assay*, that homonymic parallel that points out that an essay is an attempt to see what there is to see, to take account, to weigh and measure, and by working towards not “a definition” but towards defining the parameters of the problem at hand, gives us what we need, through the work of reading the essay, to think about what it thinks about. A good essay works within definition in order to lay bare what we can think about given what there is to think about — it is a deeply ethical form in this way. I don't think an essay defines in order to revel in definition, but defines in order to make common what we have to think about, and so begin the work of thinking that always damages those definitions. An essay seeks an initial certainty so uncertainty can begin. I'm not sure a poem needs to do that; a poem can begin in uncertainty, or even reverse that essayistic order, moving from an initial uncertainty to final certainty. This is but one of the reasons, I think, why a poetry of faith, or a poetry of belief, can be such a powerful lyrical mode, whereas an essay of faith feels somehow as if it is avoiding its work, as if it's afraid to ask those questions with which it must wound itself back into difficulty and wonder.

As to the “fundamental aspect” of reading, I don't know. I don't know what the fundamental aspects of reading are, or even if it has one. That question evokes for me my largest concerns in the work I try to do in poetry and in prose. What is reading? What work do we do when we read? What do we expect of it, from it, in it as an activity? And what does it give us? What work does it do in us, expect of us? I don't know. In some sense, I write to better get a grasp on the way I don't know the answers to these questions.

GH: The essay is in large part an extended meditation on beauty. Is that kind of meditation particularly suited to prose, or do you feel your work in poetry does a similar kind of work?

DBQ: Again, I'm not sure there are distinct divisions for me, but the question is right to hint at the difference you're sensing. It is there for me, too, hazily there, uncertainly so, but there. The essay form for me — and even as it write this sentence, I have to fight the urge to erase it, thinking it not quite true — can accomplish beautifully a thinking-of. Poetry, an activity that feels to me very close to the activity of the essay, and one too that occurs in relation to thinking, feels to me as if it does a thinking-in. By a thinking-of I mean that the essay has in its formal life an ability to ask a question about the world it's considering, for it is not fully of that world. The essay posits a ground of possible judgment, and so contains in its utterance a kind of distance by which it can accomplish its work. A poem thinks-in the world it creates, is always complicit in an inextricable way from the world it utters. It is itself the beauty it considers.

GH: One of the things that is so exciting about your work in prose is the seriousness with which it treats the act of reading. In the opening of *A Whaler's Dictionary*, you write, "The book exists between the author and the reader as a private room where the mind of one consummates meaning with the mind of the other. The pages of a book are those sheets between which two minds enter one another to think the same thoughts." Would it be fair to say that in prose you are a reader responding to a writer, whereas in poetry, you are a writer addressing a reader — or is it not that straight-forward?

DBQ: It is both fair to say what you say, and not quite that straight-forward. Much of my poetic life, and the poetry that comes as a result of that life, are in response to other books, other writers, that I want to consider. These writers though — most recently Proust and Montaigne — I want (when writing poetry) to write *into* rather than to write *about*. A piece of writing, be it essay or be it poem, always feels to me a strange form of conduit. Both equally imply the existence of "you" in a two-fold sense. There is the "you" of that other — maybe book, maybe person, maybe author — whose work somehow requires response from me as a writer and thinker; and then there is the next level of "you," the reader who hopefully will

read this work I'm doing. Such work, the poem about Melville or the essay about him, brings through its form both versions of this "you" together, so that the work becomes this dwelling place, this hut, of mutual consideration, in which one, ideally, doesn't privilege one's own brilliance so much as the brilliance one would attend to, and in doing so, makes common for all involved that thinking the reading process invokes. It is, I think, a strangely humble, humbling work.

GH: You posit Apollo as a figure for the poet, especially the poet "who would write poems which also are a form of vision and pursuit." But I was struck, both in this essay and in *A Whaler's Dictionary*, by the ways in which it was the reader who was engaged in pursuit. How are the identities of poet, essayist, and reader similar? How different? Are they all versions of the same thing? (If there can be lyric poets and lyric essayists, can there be lyric readers, or is that absurd?)

DBQ: I'd love to begin by commenting on the genuine insight of your parenthetical question, and that notion of the "lyric reader." I've never though the thought myself before — though, of course, what seems to be most unique about actual thought is how anonymous it is, how *in common* it is (but more on that later) — but the lyric reader is the reader who sings of what she reads, whose reading becomes a singing. I feel deep kinship with such a notion, as it posits a sense that reading's end isn't knowledge per se, but a kind of knowledge that must undo itself by singing back into uncertainty that which had been known. The non-lyric reader would be one content with containing content — the inevitable worth of the work of reading being what one seems to learn. But the lyric reader understands that the worth of reading isn't some sum-knowledge. Rather, the lyric reader sings back out the world the reading gave her, and in doing so, in expressing and making exterior that world reading gave her, a world now also deeply her own, she offers that world back up to doubt and question. Singing is this offering not of doubt, but to doubt. This is why, in the reading I love the most, the same reading I write about, I do not feel I've learned anything, or gained anything, but feel more profoundly my ignorance, and if I learn anything, I learn how better to take advantage of that ignorance, of learn how to use what it is I don't have, what isn't mine — the book.

And yes, that feels like pursuit to me, and one in which pursuer and pursued are oddly inextricable from one another. The image that comes to mind is a quasi Emersonian one. Perhaps we should work harder to remember that every pursuit occurs on the sphere on which pursuit is possible to occur, and because of the geometry (here a sort of fate) the one who chases is also simultaneously and always chased by that which she chases. Pursuit hides within its trajectory a hidden reciprocity: the pursuer and the pursued aren't exactly one, but each is both.

GH: I'm very anxious to hear some of your thoughts on what you refer to in your essay as "the lyric chord." This essay is filled with moments that I would describe as lyric and whose form seems to betray their lyric nature. I am thinking especially of the anaphoristic ending of the first section, the epigrammatic last paragraph of the third section, and that beautiful (and thrilling) final sentence. Is it fair to call these passages, and the essay generally, lyric? What is "the lyric chord"?

DBQ: The "lyric chord," at the most basic level, is that chord (any chord) played upon the lyre as one sings. But this particular lyre is Apollo's lyre, created and given to him by the infant Hermes, and as such, its music is a more-than-human music, a music of and in the world. Orpheus, too, plays the lyre, and does so to godly effect, in that not only can other humans hear the beauty, but so do the stones and trees, so do the dead. The lyric chord becomes that particular form of music — and this is how I explain to myself the miracle of Orpheus's song — whose vibrating string creates in that which hears it a resonating grace note. This is listening at an atomic level, in which the hearing is akin to Dickinson's "and Being — but an Ear" in her great, great poem 280.

I think you're also picking up on the way the essay as such and the lyric as such seem to be opposed forces. I think that opposition is important — an opposition that creates a necessary tension in the writing, tension perhaps being that strange quality form needs to contain the work that fills it. (Buckminster Fuller has this phrase — "tensegrity" — that seems to capture what I'm trying to say.) One of the things I love most dearly in lyric is its profound resistance to thought — and here I hear Keats's sense of the poetry in the poem as that which "teases us out of thought." The essay, as a form, seems

to promise thought as the end of reading it; lyric seems to promise an un-thinking as its end. The lyric essay, and I do think such a thing exists, and more, hope that it is the type of thing I'm writing, is one that finds in it the strange responsibility to undermine the thinking it's trying to accomplish. It is a work of opposed forces.

GH: In what ways do you see this essay as in keeping with your other work, both in prose and in poetry?

DBQ: Well, I'm not sure "in keeping" is the phrase I'd use, only in that I have a somewhat morbid fear of a needless re-mining of a ground already dug into. That is, I don't want my effort to be a work that seeks to maintain its consistency with what's occurred previously (I feel this most distinctly with my poetry). I've come to think of each given work — poem or essay — not as a place of arrival, but a point of departure. The work unfolds a new vista only possible from that work being done. Work is its own promise in this way — the promise there is more work to be done. I have, because of this, a slight (well, more than slight) fear of reading what I've already written; it is hard for me to read from work already published because, in some way, it disorients me. But, more to the point of your question, this essay is part of a thinking I've been doing for the past two to three years, in which both poems and essays have been attempting to open for me my questions about myth, symbol, initiation, metaphor, and magic. A lot of this work becomes for me a re-consideration of certain basic stories that speak of how poetry came to be poetry: Apollo and Daphne, the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, Caedmon's Hymn, and so on. I think a lot about gods and monsters and the songs that sing them all, and I hope the essay is a consideration of one such song, and is in itself, a thinking that sings.