

The ten thousand words

Launch of Barry Hill's *Four Lines East*, Whitmore Press 2009

By Alan Loney, at Collected Works Bookshop, 18 December 2009

In a sense, this book is a disguise, or a set of disguises. It is a journey or part of a journey disguised as an object. It is a travelogue disguised as a list of questions. It is an unresolved narrative disguised as a book of poems. It is a four-line gatha disguised as a wind-blown flurry of ten thousand words. It is the unperceivable heart of things disguised as a set of perceptions. It is a trace of a westerner's thirst for stillness and enlightenment disguised, as Walt Whitman puts it in this book's first of two epigraphs, as "The East – What a subject for a poem!"

The East of course during the 1960s and 1970s haunted a number of painters, poets, scholars and others, as if the East was newly understood as a kind of missing half, something that westerners needed to incorporate in order to become whole in a fragmenting & fracturing West, particularly after the devastation of world war two and the continuing collapse of christianity as a moral binding force in the culture. Countless people joined ashrams in India and zendos in Japan, and the United States sprouted the largest number of Zen and Buddhist centres outside Asia.

More recently, as we know, the reverse energy, Chinese & Japanese artists and writers who have incorporated western notions of art and its technologies into their Asian traditions, have returned the European gaze in ways that seem often more radical and unpredictable than in those of the Europeans who first incorporated 'the East' into their daily lives.

From the earlier translations of Chinese texts by Ezra Pound, Richard Wilhelm, James Legge, the essay 'On the Chinese written character' by Ernest Fenellosa, and the ground-breaking work on Japanese culture & Zen by D T Suzuki, an entire translation industry has developed in which basic texts like the *I Ching*, *Tao te Ching*, the Heart and Diamond Sutras, *Blue Cliff Records*, and authors like Chuang Tzu, Hui Neng, Bodhidharma, Hui Hai, Huang Po, Dogen, and the Layman P'ang are now, most of them, available in multiple translations.

Since the incorporations of Pound, and the Chinese Poems of Arthur Waley we now have the work of Gary Snyder, Kenneth Rexroth, Alan Watts, Burton Watson, John Blofeld, Christmas Humphries, Thomas Cleary, Red Pine, W S Merwin, Lewis Hyde, Yunte Huang and others.

I'm sorry to trot out all these apparently isolated names, some of which may be unfamiliar, but it seems to me the shortest possible hint of the sheer breadth of the context in which Barry Hill's poetry in *Four Lines East* finds its most intimate connection and location.

When his other books are taken into account, the Poundian precedent is more fulsome (a few earlier poems are titled 'Canto'), as Italy *and* the East. But unlike Pound's Italy & Mussolini, Hill's Italy is that of Antonio Gramsci, and unlike Pound's China, Hill's East tends to be Japan. He visits Japan, if visit is the word, for it is not tourism – no tourist looks as closely or as fiercely as Hill does. He returns to particular sites & temples that move, nourish and challenge him all at once. He meets & befriends Burton Watson, translator of Chuang Tzu, Saigyō, Lao Tzu, Du Fu, of the Lotus Sutra and the Vimalakirti Sutra, of other Chinese & Japanese poetry. Barry's connection with the East is concrete, down to earth, perceptive, engaged with its place, people, time and traditions, and is personal.

Characteristic of Chinese & Japanese narratives about occasions of enlightenment or satori is that they are centred, irrevocably, around the personal. A personal that is not that of an ego, the self-centred self that pits itself against others, but as agent. An agent which is simply the life-long persistence of the body, the one and only place in which enlightenment can strike.

The traditional Asian narratives have a standard recurring structure which goes something like this: *I went there, I met this person, these things were said, these things happened, a mind was or was not awakened, then I went somewhere else, I met this person, these words were said, these things happened, and so on.* The stories are autobiographical, each is a memoir, a personal register of the journey in the expressible toward the inexpressible. The stories then act like models for how any neophyte might undertake their own journey. *Four Lines East* is a westerner's fragmentary, personal accounting of perceptual quests and questions along a traditionally eastern path.

The quality of the personal in these poems can be gauged by noting there are very few occasions in them where the word 'I' appears. For the most part, the poet's addressee is the self, located in a 'you' who is the poet to whom the poem's tale is being told thru the self as agent. It's a way of not only telling the tale, recounting the event, but of observing the tale's telling in the writing, as if a specific distance is required to deal with such an intimacy of address, as he writes:

you could not not pause
in this your new realm of taking pause –

The poet is as watchful in the work as the experienced meditator is, for what happens of itself when one is otherwise counting breaths or simply having something else on one's mind, like this:

Himalayan fire

As you casually entered the gompa –
Travel weary, a meagre warmth in you
Too much mist in the lungs
The winter sun hit the sutras.

The mountain light, having raised the black frost
Shafted the night wind south
Raided the cave
Struck the west wall.

The ten thousand leaves slept in their boxes.
Their hundred thousand sounds
Were wrapped in saffron.
The scrolls were as separate as toffees.

Then, with the wall as good as on fire
And every box glowing like an old coal
You could hear the seed syllables
Crackling away inside you.

Late last year, American poet Charles Bernstein, thinking among other things about an ethics of perception, wrote a poem titled 'If you say something, see something'. It's a nice reversal of a sign that's everywhere in the New York subway urging folks to report on dubious events they see, unattended luggage, drug-taking, anyone being physically mistreated and so on: 'If you see something, say something', don't in other words let it happen by doing nothing. Bernstein's clever switch, while not discounting the wisdom of the original message, could easily be seen as a touchstone for the concreteness of Barry's vision, a vision not determined by mysterious goings-on inside an impenetrable mind, but a vision shaped by

looking, listening, thinking, feeling and acting in a world no agent has the capacity to control.

As he puts it:

The reward of so saying is the leaf that falls
on a crystal day – nothing more.

The worldliness, the material quest for clarity in these poems, is exhibited beautifully in the poem 'Rain in Kyoto':

These doves, they add to the smoke of Hiei-san.
That mist in their throats, their slow deep music.

Water off wide eaves heals the mind –
wakes you before dawn, dove-tuned.

Water off wide eaves returns to the earth happily –
fat splashes on pebbles in lovely runnels.

A surge plays on- and off-key, mainly on.
A gurgling wins over words, almost pings

dances down, pocks stone, hums, plucks
little hollows from time like flames.

You soften and sleep, soften and fall back to sleep.
The waking happens in reservoirs of temples.

The memoir that is *Four Lines East* is diaristic, in a rhythm that shuttles back & forth between poetry & prose, between formal line endings, those curt recognitions that the end of the line is our entire poetic enterprise, and the endless exposition of a prose that never ends. It is a rhythm that flits between the dual pressures of searching & dwelling, self & world, the line & the turn, the figure & the ground, the traceable journey & the interminable indeterminable arrival.

The second of the two epigraphs to this book is from the Diamond Sutra and reads, in the translation of Red Pine:

Thus far, the Buddha has asked no more of us
than to keep in mind a single four line gatha.

Like the Japanese haiku, the gatha is a short poem and attempts, as Canadian poet Jan Zwicky says of all lyric poetry, to encompass the whole in a single gesture. It is of course impossible, but the attempt is no more or less than the required work of a lifetime.

Barry Hill's *Four Lines East* is, not only a thoughtful register of an indeterminate location along a lifetime's journey, but also about the sheer impossibility of setting about writing such an exemplary text, even if you do, perhaps especially if you do, 'hear the seed syllables / Crackling away inside you'. It is a great pleasure for me to declare this book launched.