

## Review · *Peter Filkins*

*Inside the Onion.* Howard Nemerov.  
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Howard Nemerov is a poet who has spent the better part of four decades saying exactly what he means in much the same manner, but with ever increasing facility and awareness. His central subject matter has always been the equations of thought coupled with a close, at times reverent, study of Nature, Art, and their respective mirrorings. What has kept him from being known as just another nature poet is not only his refusal to shy away from the deft handling of intricate abstractions, but also the acuteness of his wit. It is a deep and varied intelligence which can switch from the elaborateness of a poem about playing the Bach inventions to such quick takes as "The Death of God" (*Gnomes & Occasions*, 1973):

The celebration came chanting "God is dead!"  
And all as one the nations bowed the head  
Thanksgiving; knowing not how shrewdly the rod  
Would bite the back in the kingdom of the dead God.

At times such sharpness has led the work into a patch of thorny cynicism which, when bogged down in the clutches of the banal, can make it seem clever or cranky. *Inside the Onion* suffers from this flaw more than any other of Nemerov's books. It is frustrating, somewhat reactionary, and a disappointment in comparison to what has come before, but never because of its craft.

But let's begin by taking a closer look at the poem just mentioned, "Playing the Inventions" from *The Western Approaches* of 1975. Not only does it display Nemerov's technical abilities at their most adept, but it also reveals the distinct pattern of thought reflecting upon itself that is the most characteristic point of the poet's work. In fact, the first section serves as much as a commentary on the structure of Nemerov's mind as it does on the sublime inventions of Bach:

The merest nub of a notion, nothing more  
Than a scale, a shake, a broken chord, will do

For openers; originality  
Is immaterial, it is not the tune  
But the turns it takes you through, the winding ways  
Where both sides and the roof and floor are mirrors  
With some device that will reflect in time  
As mirrors do in space, so that each voice  
Says over what the others say, because  
Consideration should precede consent;  
And only being uninformative  
Will be the highest reach of wisdom known  
In the perfect courtesy of music, where  
The question answers only to itself  
And the completed round excludes the world.

Nemerov being a master of syntax, the manner in which these lines reshape and reinvent their own impetus is the poet's true homage to the music. Nor is it any accident that "mirrors" should appear twice in such close proximity, almost as if the words themselves are meant to reflect each other. Nemerov is always interested much more in the consequences surrounding a thought or object than he is in the thing itself, thus accounting for the oblique architecture of so many of his poems. But it is an architecture complete with foundation and blueprint, one that allows the poem to rock on the stones of its own making without allowing the tower to topple. Given the staccato intro of "a scale, a shake, a broken chord, . . . for openers," the poem immediately sets itself to the music, following "the winding ways" to their own desired end. Though we are assured that all takes place between "roof and floor," it is not long before we leave the physical behind, floating instead on the ephemeral waves of voices overlapping one another, yet always based on the harmonic agreement that "Consideration should precede consent." This is the only moral we are meant to divine from either the poem or the music, and it is a mark of Nemerov's patient wisdom that he lets it slip out so easily. For what he is really after is that "perfect courtesy of music," a stance independent of moral or edict, and one where "The question answers only to itself/ And the completed round excludes the world."

Throughout his career Nemerov has shuffled an array of about four different poems. Most frequent is the variation of a poem written in mid

or late autumn while musing upon the passage of time, the first scent of snow in the air. "Sunday at the End of Summer" from his third book, *The Salt Garden*, sets the standard for many of them:

Last night the cold wind and the rain blew  
Hard from the west, all night, until the creek  
Flooded, tearing the end of a wooden bridge  
Down to hang, trembling, in the violent water.

This morning, with the weather still in rage,  
I watched the workmen already at repairs.  
Some hundred of us came around to watch,  
With collars turned against the rain and wind.

Down the wild water, where men stood to the knees,  
We saw come flooding hollyhock and vine,  
Sunflowers tall and broken, thorny bramble  
And pale lilies cracked along the stalk.

Ours was the Sunday's perfect idleness  
To watch those others working; who fought, swore,  
Being threshed at hip and thigh, against that trash  
Of pale wild flowers and their drifting legs.

In such moments the poet seems to be looking through a window at the speed of life passing him by. Here it is the accuracy of his description, the sorting out of "hollyhock and vine, sunflowers, thorny bramble, pale lilies," which sets him apart. The broader admission that "Ours was the Sunday's perfect idleness/to watch those others working" unites the speaker with the collective group, but only through a contrived avowal. It's the darker irony of the last line which introduces the mirror reflecting inward, those "drifting legs" obviously belonging as much to the workmen as they do to the flowers. Nemerov's skill in drafting the scene is the use of that vague, anonymous "some hundred" which, if it seems a bit profuse earlier, now strikes home as being the real jetsam washed away by the flood. While his calculated identification with the crowd of onlookers is the vehicle for the poem's meditation on his pale existence, it is the ease

of his stance, the manner in which everyday events shed light on life's transience, that draw us into the poem and the chill waters running through it.

Nemerov is often at his best when dealing with such sentiments. It is also in *The Salt Garden* that he began to write another type of poem which has become one of his trademarks. Ranging between 50 and 100 lines or more, most of them are written in a loose form of blank verse and deal with some aspect of Nature and the relation of thought to it. "The Pond" is one of the first and best examples of this grouping. Others include "Deep Woods," "The Goose Fish," "The Loon's Cry," "Brainstorm," "To Lu Chi," "The Mud Turtle," and "The Blue Swallows." Though somewhat shorter, the last demonstrates the poet's finesse at handling large abstractions drawn from a very limited natural scene. Immediately the action of the swallows is linked to the mind's effort to interpret them:

Across the millstream below the bridge  
Seven blue swallows divide the air  
In shapes invisible and evanescent,  
Kaleidoscopic beyond the mind's  
Or memory's power to keep them there.

As if desperate to find a tag with which to label them, Nemerov turns to bookishness, quoting, "'History is where the tensions were,'/'Form is the diagram of forces.'" But the epigrams, the equations, just won't suffice. Not even "Seeing the swallows' tails as nibs/Dipped in invisible ink, writing. . . ." The speaker knows his abstractions to be only a wistful need of his own as he admits:

Poor mind, what would you have them write?  
Some cabalistic history  
Whose authorship you might ascribe  
To God? to Nature? Ah, poor ghost,  
You've capitalized your Self enough.

Such an avowal is what so often saves Nemerov from becoming just another naive worshiper of Nature. By taking himself and his own selfish concerns out of the observed scene, he liberates the reality focused upon, as

well as the mind attempting to contain it. This is also what makes him so believable as a poet; he hardly ever makes the mistake of abusing his own subject matter by attempting to possess it. Instead he allows the world to rest secure in its liveliness, knowing that our own fictions must remain the limited means by which we are able to secure our relation to it. In fact, throughout most of these patient musings, the relinquishment is the whole point of the poem. By letting things go, giving himself and the world a little slack, he's able to open up to a broader statement without sounding preachy. It's one that you always feel he has had in the back of his mind from the very beginning:

O swallows, swallows, poems are not  
The point. Finding again the world,  
That is the point, where loveliness  
Adorns intelligible things  
Because the mind's eye lit the sun.

Note, however, that this stops short of recommending that we all lay down our pens and run off to the woods. There is passion in Nemerov's work, but it is a deeply learned one. It may be the mind's eye that lights the sun, but this doesn't mean that it must burn with the same intensity. Rather, its function is to see clearly, delineating both shadow and light such that the mind can attain its sharpest focus.

Nemerov's intelligence, however, is also the source of his biting wit. From the very beginning the counterbalance to the plumb line of his thought has been an almost Catullian talent for the acerbic thrust. His tendency towards such wry pronouncements peaked with his 1973 book, *Gnomes & Occasions*, where we find tidbits like "On Getting Out of Vietnam":

Theseus, if he did destroy the Minotaur  
(it's hard to say, that may have been a myth),  
Was careful not to close the labyrinth.  
So After kept on looking like Before:  
Back home in Athens still the elders sent  
Their quota of kids to Knossos, confident  
They would find something to die of, and for.

Versatility is again the key to Nemerov's being able to jot off as many of these as he does without striking the same note over and over. Turning from politics, he's capable of rendering something much lighter such as "Mystery Story":

Formal as minuet or sonnet,  
It zeroes in on the guilty one;  
But by the time I'm told who done it,  
I can't remember what he done.

Or something as private as "The Common Wisdom" from *The Western Approaches*:

Their marriage is a good one. In our eyes  
What makes a marriage *good*? Well, that the tether  
Fray but not break, and that they stay together.  
One should be watching while the other dies.

At times, however, such epigrams have fallen victim to the clever and the glib. Despite the dark playfulness lying beneath the best of them, one has the feeling that in recent years there have been just too many and that after a while the sting begins to lessen. *Inside the Onion* suffers from this a great deal; the poet is not only vulnerable to the charge of smugness and complacency, but works such as "Death of the Virgin" even border on the embarrassing:

All during school we studied her. Life's joys  
Are common to all men, but not the same  
For each of us; maybe a thousand boys  
Jerked themselves off while muttering her name.

The craftsmanship remains as sharp as ever, the handling of meter as deft and transparent, but it is the subject matter which lets the reader down. Take for instance the poem, "Imprecated on a Postal Clerk":

Nor rain nor snow nor gloom of night  
Can stay this surly civil servant safe

Behind the counter from imposing his  
Confusion, slothful rudeness and delay  
Upon the simplest procedures of exchange.

May he bring his children up on Grade-B milk,  
Continue less intelligent than lint,  
Bid thirteen spades in No-Trump out of greed,  
And have real trouble finding his own ass  
With both hands and a mirror and a torch.

Just another slow day at the PO? Certainly it would be wonderful to have such a retort in hand when we finally reach the head of the line; but beyond this, what? At whose expense comes the humor and to whose advantage? Without the tragedies of war or death lurking beneath a finely honed sardonic wit, such left-handed scribblings come off as frustrated attempts to rewrite the ways of the world instead of the wry whisper they could be.

These are only two of the poems from the book, but they represent the main strains of many. On the one hand, a sort of sidelong glance at the human comedy of sex and obsession from the perspective of old age, on the other, an out-of-sorts crankiness with the task of getting through the day to day. "This My Modest Art" is interesting for the manner in which it illustrates how things go wrong throughout the book. Quoting one of his own lines from his earlier work, Nemerov attempts to revive a stance he proved so capable at in the past, but the present and his reaction to it win out:

*This my modest art* is what I said  
In early days and now assert again  
Against the age and its ever-affected  
Apocalyptic, its fancy ladies and gents  
who see the World's end in so clear a light  
That they regard high-minded suicide,  
Pretended still if not accomplished yet,  
As more than Dresden, Tokyo, and the rest . . .

and so on until we reach the rather grim, deadpan ending:

Maybe we kill only because we die,  
And if we didn't die we might not kill;  
But it's not what you'd bet real money on.

The problem with these curtain lines is not their politics, but their jadedness. When one thinks back to the expansiveness of "O swallows, swallows, poems are not/The point," such generalities pale by comparison. Despite the assertion of modesty, Nemerov falls victim to the same soapboxing which he argues against. True, he tries to yank away the pedestal with the last line, but there's something set up about the whole piece which works against its own better concerns.

This is not to say that there are no bright spots in the book; it's just that there are too many shadows. Unlike *Sentences*, Nemerov's last collection four years ago, *Inside the Onion* lacks the cohesive movement from the malignity of the everyday to the sublime transparencies of poems such as "The Makers" and "By Al Lebowitz's Pool." Instead, the book rambles around on a search for its own structure. This happens as well in poems themselves. Even the title piece, though akin to the poet's talent for eliciting permutations of the abstract from the concrete, seems to strain for its effects:

Slicing the sphere in planes you map inside  
The secret sections filled up with forms  
That gave us mind, free-hand symmetries  
Perfecting for us the beautiful inexact. . . .

Into this setting steps the Mad Housewife, "her crispen crystalline / Arithmetic raveled and riddled in Time," and one can't help feeling that it is overdone, something gone off balance in the weight of the mind performing its fictive act. Poems such as "To Alice Out of Reach," "At the Tomb of the Unknown Celebrity," "A Sprig of Dill," and "The Blind Man at the Museum" are much more deeply felt evocations, serious attempts to come to terms with approaching death and the failures of this life leading up to it. In "Alice" the poet tells us:

Eternity may be too big a word  
For any of us to take upon the tongue



(Sermons are silent twixt this line and next),  
But that is what we have always in mind  
When we say helplessly, caught in the social fact  
That makes our truest feelings hypocrites,  
Such standard things as “sorrow,” “loss,” “regret,”  
And “Never again in this defaulting world, Alice,  
Or our waning lives, to see you more  
Or hear your voice though saying nothing more  
Remarkable or blessed than ‘hello.’”

One wishes that the rest of the book could strike such a reverberant chord.

There is one poem in the collection which, for me, outshines all the others and is an example of where Nemerov’s best work has led. “Fish Swimming Amid Falling Flowers” is about a painting attributed to the northern Sung painter Liu Ts’ai on display in the St. Louis Art Museum. The first of its two stanzas gives a description of the painting and its making:

On a ground of pale gold water of watered silk  
The painter of a thousand years ago  
Angled his wrist so rapidly and right  
The hairs of the brush bent in obedience  
To do the swerve and diagonal of these fish  
Swimming in space, in water, on watered silk,  
And stippled in the detail of their scales,  
The pale translucency of tail and fin,  
And dotted at the brush’s very tip  
The falling petals and the petals fallen,  
And scattered a few lotus and lily pads  
Across the surface of the watered silk  
Whose weave obedient took all this in,  
The surface petal-flat, the flash beneath  
The golden water of the watered silk.

Again the ease with which Nemerov describes the patterning as well as the thing being patterned is remarkable. Notice that nowhere in the poem are we told that it is a work by a Chinese painter. But could it be by any

other? The tone exactly right, the suppleness of hand with which Nemerov renders the description mirrors *obediently* and never falls short. The entire poem consists of one sentence unfolding out of itself, while the connecting “ands” anchor the syntax and provide for the smooth progression of its content and thought. However, there are more surprises:

So that a thousand years of the world away  
On this millennially distant shore of time  
The visitor to the museum may stare  
Bemused down through the glass hermetic seal  
At the silken scroll still only half unrolled  
Past centuries invisible as air  
To where the timeless, ageless fish still swim,  
And read the typescript on the card beside  
That says “Fish Swimming Amid Falling Flowers”  
A thousand years ago, and seeing agree  
That carp did always swim, and always will,  
In just that way, with just that lightning sweep  
Of eye wrist brush across the yielding silk  
Stretched tight with surface tension as the pool  
Of pale gold water, pale gold watered silk.

If you were to drop a bead of water onto this poem, I’m convinced that it would roll off as if from that same tightly stretched silk. Nemerov’s own telling comment attached to the footnote on Liu Ts’ai reads: “Between life and art there are differences, but only ones you would expect; ink is thicker than water, not by much.” Though it is better that he saved his editorializing for a footnote, the comment hits home. No matter how many times I come back to this poem, I still float between the two worlds, never touching down. The work is a mirror and window at once. The poet is careful to point out in the footnote that he has checked on the carp swimming in a Japanese garden in St. Louis and that, indeed, the painter got it right. But the reader doesn’t have such empirical evidence at hand, nor do we need it. The poem is about Art, that synecdoche of memory and time which, in the accuracy of its reflection, provides the open portal between any two ages.

Few American poets have been able to draw as deep a relation between

the big three—Nature, Time, and Art—and make it stick. Nemerov has always concerned himself with the function of art in society, as well as the consequences it holds for the observer and the observed. But what sets him apart from the pitfalls of the academic aesthete is the versatility he has always made use of in spinning the web of relation. From a strongly moralist position in his early work he has gradually developed a broader stance which allows events of the everyday to take on a degree of significance equal to the weight of mind brought to bear upon them. This not only sets up the world as a mirror for the constructions of thought but also gives credence to the fact that the mind must not divorce itself from reality, but rather return again and again to the world to find the well point of its own elaborate inventions. One may be tempted to criticize Nemerov for never quite possessing enough of the briskness of physical things, but this is simply not his goal. Instead he has always been much more concerned with those same “surface tensions” found in the “Fish Swimming Amid Falling Flowers.” The vector of thought journeying out, the inflections of the real pressing in, the poem is what occurs at the collision point in between, where the tapestry of the real and the imagined is brought to life as one, neither side holding sway over the other.

It is disappointing, then, that *Inside the Onion* falls short of so many of the other ten collections, but this is no excuse for writing them off. It is always useful to have a poetry of thought and meditation which is so clearly evocative of the world here and now, for the first section from the long poem “Runes” (*New Poems*, 1960) tells us:

This is about the stillness in moving things,  
In running water, also in the sleep  
Of winter seeds, where time to come has tensed  
Itself, enciphering a script so fine  
Only the hourglass can magnify it, only  
The years unfold its sentence from the root.

That Howard Nemerov has so often hit upon such stillness in his poems is a gift which more readers should take the time to get to know. It is a poetry of patience, one consisting of a deceptive ease; but through its own intricate geometry, it is also one that provides for the valid and distinct pleasures of the mind.