

Post-American Style · Tony Whedon

DURING THE PAST FEW MONTHS in China—the first time I’ve been abroad for an extended period since the mid-seventies—I’ve been reading poetry I first read twenty years ago. Perhaps because I’m in a new environment, I feel more separate than ever before from the reader and writer I was in my youth. The poems I loved then come across differently than when Paul Blackburn’s *The Cities* and Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*, for example, provided a personal reference point for my “European experience.” On returning from Europe after living there for five years in the early seventies, I read Jack Gilbert’s *Monolithos* and Anthony Hecht’s *Venetian Vespers*, and their work enriched my memory of times abroad. While the poems of Blackburn, O’Hara, Gilbert, and Hecht still appeal to me, perhaps because I’m now in China, I’ve grown numb to their poems’ European stage-settings. While their poems have a richness, a footloose, adventurous quality I like, I have the impression their work exploits a locale in which the imagination and libido are on holiday, so to speak.

What’s come after them too often tracks through the same scenes—the Spanish Steps, the Acropolis, the Luxembourg Gardens. And though these poems are technically competent, they feel emotionally removed from the new Europe of guest-workers and Eurodollars—even farther removed from my own experiences in China.

Here’s a poem from Sherod Santos’s new book, *The Southern Reaches*, that exemplifies both the skill and ennui characteristic of much of this new verse:

Empire

(*Luxembourg Gardens*, 1986)

And yet how quickly it all begins
Filling with wet light the circling paths
Fronted by plane trees and pedestaled air:
This Saturday, like a sunken ship hauled
To the surface, its damaged hull traversed
By fish now drying splended by coins

And ore. The children huddle around their
Rented boats, the adults at their novels,
And stone lions leap across the fountain—
Spray to shake the toque in the ungloved hand
To the lily pads dragging the bottom.
And yet it all comes, the peals of laughter,
From the pony carts, steam from the storm grates.
And diesel fumes, and the clouded windows
Of the palace struck blind against the sun,
It all comes and passes, pigeon-winged, up-
Gathered, ephemeral into the air,
Before the mind, before the slow-rolling
Constellations can watermark the glare.

Santos's poem—its tone and setting recalling Rilke's Parisian pieces—feels pre-fabricated to me. All the key props of the European park-poem are evident: the children with their "peals of laughter," the pony carts, the stone lions, the pigeons and lily pads, the coin-filled fountain. Rilke's misty ephemerality, his tentative grasp at a fleeting moment—marked by his use of erasure, by his acute sense of energy inherent in a moment's spaciousness—is neutralized here by Santos's exuberant use of conventional imagery. The poem's key word, in fact, is "ephemeral"; its theme, the transitoriness of human empire when contrasted to the constancy of the universe, is slapped like an afterthought onto the poem's hard-rhyming closure. What saves "Empire" from cliché is Santos's musicality, his mastery of the blank verse line gliding us through the poem's flimsy props. For a moment, I have the hopeful sense that the speaker will disclose he's aware of this flimsiness, that he will see beyond his conventions. But that moment never comes.

I can't help notice the ease with which other traveling fellows move through their landscapes; if there is despair in their poems, it's nurtured by perfect views and tenured futures. And if the poems permit a certain discomfort, it's a luxuriously metaphysical discomfort (an afternoon at Dachau, then back on the train, thank you). While Blackburn's and Gilbert's landscapes were absorbed and experienced as both challenge and threat—Blackburn lived in Provence, translated the provençal poets, taught for a time at the

University of Toulouse; Gilbert lived and wrote for twenty years in Europe and Japan—American poets of the late eighties/early nineties spend shorter stints abroad. Their poems demonstrate affinities for Greek statuary, red slate roof tops; in many respects, their interest in formalism is coupled with a pastoralism reminding me of eighteenth-century neoclassicists.

And just as the eighteenth-century English poet made his obligatory pilgrimage to France and Italy to see the cultural sights, the travel-grant poet of the eighties and nineties treks to Europe for atmosphere and quaintness. Most often he or she's on a second book that will establish a career: many of his or her poems might have been written stateside—such is the sense of disengaged distance affected in much of the work.

I find not much that is exciting in most contemporary travel poems—their subjects and themes are scumbled over with a patina of post-modernist malaise; but I can't deny that work written abroad gives depth and texture to what might be a pallid oeuvre, that there's a need—as there's always been—to move from the provincial and domestic confines of American academic poetry toward something fresh and engaging, and I concede that my concern about subject matter and significant experience skirts the fact that memorable poetry need not be stimulated by novel experience.

I read afternoons in a park when I've finished teaching at Shanghai International Studies University. Honkou Park—commemorating Chinese Modernist poet Lu Xun—is not Luxembourg Garden: footpaths wind in and out of Japanese-style rock gardens; in the grassy open spaces, Shanghai practice T'ai Ch'i and Ch'i Gong while others do aerobics to Taiwan rock 'n' roll pumped from ghetto-blasters.

China hurts.

Since I've arrived I've seen few westerners—almost all tourism stopped after the Beijing massacre.

A pale industrial dust covers the city. The paint factory next to the campus belches lead fumes into our classrooms; sometimes the students cough uncontrollably.

There's no way to describe Shanghai's effect on me, no western poetry through which to interpret the psychic stress of thirty million people crowded into an area the size of Boston.

Since I arrived here, I have been reading Elizabeth Spires's new collection, *Annonciade*. Spires's poems swim up delicately, luxuriantly: with their

iambic cadences, their reverence for a personal past and a shared western history, they make me feel, more intensely, in their meditative way, my own solitude. Spires's poetry manages to distract me from the uncomfortable aspects of life in Shanghai. Some of the poems in *Annonciade* have French and British settings, and provide a means through which to approach the discontinuities and incongruities of living again abroad; there's a seriousness, an intentness of purpose that distinguishes Spires's poems from others about foreign travel.

I'm especially fond of Spires's long title poem, "Annonciade." Written in blank verse, with long, swooping passages that reach effortlessly beyond the range of most poets today, her poem eases into a slow-motion meditation on sickness and death amidst the brilliant light of the Midi; transforming a languid vacationer's vision of the south of France into that of a cancer sanitarium invalid, Spires's poem plays with the promise of spiritual redemption through physical suffering.

At the poem's outset, its speaker paints a washy picture in the pellucid whites and aquatic blues of the côte; then she plunges into a monologue that captures the ironic plight of those who, "ill and ill-disposed . . . now live closest to annunciation." The poem's setting is a sanitarium in Menton, France, where the speaker is by turns lucid and delirious: she addresses us from a place beyond suffering, drifting along life's margins. Her disembodied voice is devoid of earthly expectations and the promise of Christian salvation. And yet it's a voice filled with hope.

I quote in its entirety the first long stanza of "Annonciade":

Morning, and the sounds of the valley float
slowly, like smoke, up the tiered mountain
to our windows. A cock's crow, too early,
sets off a chain of barking dogs and donkeys,
the screams of a peacock, all reassuring
that the world below is awake and waits
to take us back when we are well enough to go.
Here at La Maison de Repos, each day
has the same beginning: alone, the eye opens,
sentient, to a room unchanged by any dream
or nightmare, relieved or disappointed
to be transported back to the waking dream.

An arm throws open a shutter, flooding
the doubting mind with the brilliant
light of the Midi that changes white
shadowed sheets on the crumpled bed
into a still life of desire and absence.
Mountains and blue air and the sea,
faraway waves soundlessly pounding the lit shore,
the horizon blurred, the azure coast,
wash upon wash, bleeding like watercolor:
these things I see as I steady myself
at the window, still wanting to be alive.

In this first section, with its gentle blank verse cadences, Spires establishes her poem's palette. The speaker's powers of observation, sensitized by physical and spiritual dizziness, transport the reader into a stereopticon view of sky and water, its dream-like aural and visual imagery lulling the reader into a false complacency that abruptly ends with the lines: "these things I see as I steady myself / at the window, still wanting to be alive."

The following stanza provides an antithesis to the previous one. Here the speaker's will to live contrasts to the mood of quiet resignation in the sanitarium:

A place at the table is empty, a face
gone forever, but nothing is said
to note the absence of the missing one.
Our silent circle contracts, or grows
larger to accommodate a new arrival
who pauses, uncertain, in the door,
unsure of what will happen next, waiting
to be politely questioned or ignored.

An appropriate antechamber to the sanitarium is the Annonciade, the chapel "on the hill above, / the monastery bells ringing prime, calling / a scattered few to prayers and morning mass." In this third stanza, where the Annonciade is introduced and described, Spires establishes a reverential tone—at first stylistically spare, her language turns baroque and is saturated

with the quiet elegance of belief, a belief that brings to mind the piety of an older generation here in China.

As I read Spire's poem about faith for the faithless, I'm reminded of the Buddhist temples I've visited: most of the sacred places have been restored after the violent "de-construction" of the Cultural Revolution. The temples are now shades of what they'd been; at their gates souvenirs and soft drinks are sold. The faithful—mostly sun-creased peasant women—hum "Amidophu" as they light their joss sticks before effigies of the goddess of mercy, Kwan Yin.

In such places, one senses the old organized religions have been turned over to the infirm, the aged—the province of a nurturing pantheon of female saints and bodhisattvas. In the mid-section of "Annonciade," its speaker spotlights

. . . one old soul
all in black holding her rosary
as she climbs, counting the beds and steps
that take her, one by one, to heaven

and in the following stanza she describes the relics, the crutches deposited at the chapel as signs of cures from the Blessed Virgin. This woman—like those I've seen at Buddhist temples—are reminders of what remains of the old religion, the remnants of the faithful who maintain—to use Joseph Campbell's term—the "Dionysian" traditions.

In this third stanza we watch the old woman ascend the steps into "the cool cavern of the church," watch the "fallen away and sightseers . . . lighting a votive candle for five francs." This section's replete with ecclesiastic imagery that conjures up a past cluttered with the furniture of devotion and belief. The central figure here—

. . . a nameless crusader
lies on a low altar in the crypt,
hands clasped in an attitude of prayer—

embodies with his "warrior soul" the resolved spirit of a more credulous time: he seems more alive than the nameless tourists who view him, at least as animated as the sanitarium patients.

This richly evocative passage, alive with alliteration, with parallel clausal constructions, spills image-laden down the page:

Most visitors cannot stay very long;
they speak in guilty whispers
and move through the church like intruders,
move quickly past the apocryphal
remains of martyrs, splintered fragments
of bone and strands of human hair
in shining jewel-encrusted caskets,
the stoppered crystal vials of blood
and tears, relics handed down for centuries
by the silent monks who lived here once,
who watched the crippled pilgrims come,
kneel down, and pray for a guardian spirit's
intercession, then sometimes rise
and throw away their crutches, favored
by a miracle.

There's something unearthly in this mid-section's hissing sibilants—we read a few lines earlier: “Time's silence surrounds them, held in the steady flame of the Sacred Heart”—but while Spires opens up her language here, she's still dispassionate, removed from her subject. She writes with craft and stateliness, her grand balancing of thematic and linguistic opposites, tempered by a classical reserve, is never permitted to overmaster her poem. That reserve is also kept in check—lest it anesthetize the poem—by her sustained vision of a faith forged by suffering.

At the poem's mid-section, Spires's rhetoric cools with the telegraphic lines:

. . . The old order's gone,
only a few lay caretakers left
to take care of the grounds and sell
postcards of the view to tourists. . . .

There's a delicate downshifting here from the previous section's baroque tone into the poem's middle where the speaker, addressing the reader as a

collective “we”—those “ill and ill-disposed who watch the darkness closing in”—analyzes the nature of suffering with the same precision, minus the ironic pomp, with which she described the deserted chapel: but now the lines shrink from dominant pentameter to approximate tetrameter. A long list of synecdoches, announced by “we are our missing useless parts,” turns us from the holy relics of the past to the spiritual vacuity of the present. Spires’s lengthy clauses and phrases truncate here; her polysyllables reduce to monosyllables.

Reduced to a definition of their illnesses, the sanitarium patients are paradoxically raised up; they are what they aren’t—their “missing useless parts.” When the speaker finally asks, “How can such suffering be chance?” we’re prepared for a further series of questions crowded in the poem’s closing stanza; here the speaker seeks reassurance that there’s something redemptive in suffering—“surely the spirit chooses its affliction”—something that signifies that through her pain she’s become a member of the elect.

The metaphysical theme of “Annonciade” is clearly articulated in this final section as the flies, “traveling / mad circuits are sent from heaven / to reassure us that heaven, too, is imperfect”; here Spires creates her cosmology, connects two imperfect worlds. A further merging of the isolated individual with humanity occurs when the speaker, not content to see her suffering as redemptive for herself only, asks:

. . . Will our suffering
redeem others? Or only ourselves?
Surely in time we will each be blessed
with annunciation. . . .

The poem’s complementary theme of universal redemption develops here as the diction shifts abruptly, becomes, to use Frye’s term, “hieratic”; the speaker envisages herself in the future, rising from a pallet of “rest and recrimination,” and returns, Christ-like, to the world, reborn into flesh, traveling *down* to incarnate a fleshly body, to drink “the good wine and eat the steaming food . . .” to raise her glass among the guests “in a toast to *health, to earth.*”

The inverted syntax here—“then will I take my place among the guests”—contributes to the speaker’s elegiac tone. Hers is an hallucinatory

vision provoked by lonely suffering. Indeed, her presence among the elect at the auberge represents a kind of unearthly visitation, a blending of imperfect earthly and heavenly spheres. Ten lines from the poem's end, as a cock crows and the bells of the Annonciade ring compline, the speaker pauses and declares, "Then all will fall silent." What strikes me about these lines is their aspirance, their stillness, their composure. The orbit of the speaker's day, now come full circle, is mirrored by her brief ghostly incarnation among the living before "I lay me down / on the white pillow cases of the Elect."

The poem ends as prayer, as a kind of agnostic benediction from the speaker to herself. By relinquishing her hold on heaven and earth—the blaze of "the lights of stars and houses coming on" continues the marrying of two worlds—she reconciles these worlds and joins the real and imaginary, the living and the dead, and heaven and earth "in a solitary moment of love. . . ." If the speaker's vision is just the wishful thinking of a fever-induced trance-state, the lines:

. . . Quietly will I sit there,
like a ghost, as the last light
of the setting sun slips through me

show how she's gone past delirium into a pure visualization of the spirit.

Though the faith expressed in this poem is provisional, it's faith, nonetheless. And while the poem's language reflects the speaker's recognition that she's among the chosen, there's no over-reaching for rhetorical effect. The poem's tone is contemplative; it has a luminosity, achieved partly through a constant referral to light—morning light, candlelight, starlight, the lights of the auberge, the house lights below the sanitarium—and partly through Spires's translucent language.

In "Annonciade," Spires creates a language independent of verification by the senses, a noumenal language of the spirit. She does this—despite the inherent orality of the iambic line—by resisting temptations for alliterative word play, for the syntactical pyrotechnics of parallel structure and the periodic sentence she's chosen to employ. Spires's descriptions aim for the same cosmic clarity. Unparticularized, of a general type, the woman in black, the warrior, the concierge, are like stained glass figures, distanced

from us, while illuminated by a numinous light that suffuses the entire poem.

This is Spires's Catholic poem. In the following prose piece opening the second section of *Annonciade*, the speaker admits her inability to address in a poem her Catholic girlhood. Nevertheless, she still can't relinquish—as so many others who've fallen away—Catholicism's hold on the present. She confronts the coldness of hell, a coldness connected “not with fire and flames, but with something cold and unchanging . . . clock-time and eternity.” “Falling Away” is placed deliberately beside “Annonciade” to explain, I believe, her speaker's sense of being caught between this world and the next.

Menton, France, the locale of “Annonciade,” is a suitable nether-place, a kind of waiting room for the spirit. Likewise, in “Profil Perdu,” a lyrical poem immediately preceding “Annonciade,” set in Menton in 1949, each of two lovers traces the other's profile after love-making as the other sleeps. Spires's focus in “Annonciade” on the evanescent quality of earthly pleasure is articulated in “Profil Perdu” with the lines:

. . . Each has fallen

softly back into the body as one
might fall into a dream of high blue

meadows in midsummer, midsummer time
leaving them another hour, two,

before they must make their way,
shivering, down the dew-stained mountain. . . .

The love-making in “Profil Perdu,” is analogous to the speaker's seeking after God in “Annonciade.” However, in “Annonciade” the speaker has no choice but to remain removed from the world below. In “Profil Perdu” Spires captures a momentary ecstasy into which two lovers have entered, as have we and the speaker, “without reflection, / all grief or grievance put aside. . . .” Like the speaker in “Annonciade,” the lovers in the preceding poem have freed themselves from “clock-time” through a devotion to an

other, and, finally, to an idea: in both poems that idea's embodied in earthly form, and is enacted through a "suspension of disbelief." Eventually, "Annonciade"'s speaker and "Profil Perdu"'s lovers must "make their way, / shivering down the dew-stained mountain . . ." but for a privileged moment, a moment given over to absolute faith, each has his and her time in eternity.

Though the problems of Christian redemption are foreign to most modern Chinese, and though the idea of a solitary soul working her way to eternity, as does the speaker in "Annonciade," isn't something my students, for example, fully identify with (for years Chinese have been discouraged from "bourgeois introspection"), I find the speaker's struggle in "Annonciade," her drive for spiritual self-realization, an appropriate analogy for my students' desire—expressed in their papers and class discussion—for a richer inner life.

My students at Shanghai International Studies University—high school teachers who've come from the northern provinces of Xinxiang, Gansu, Liaoning, Jilin, and Ningxia to complete their university educations—are by turns reserved and oddly open with me. After class we eat cold noodles in a crowded student dining hall. Some speak of the hopelessness, the despair they feel: they ask for confirmation of what happened in Beijing, and I tell them that on June fourth western news media broadcast descriptions of troops rolling down Ch'ang An Avenue, of indiscriminant shooting of bystanders, of tanks pulverizing the "Goddess of Freedom" in Tiananmen Square; that, according to several independent reports, more than five thousand were killed in the suppression of the pro-democracy demonstrations.

Despite warnings against speaking with foreigners, many of these students will visit my apartment during the next several months. Most won't talk about politics—they're interested, they say, in learning English, in American poetry.

I'm lucky to have in manuscript Lynda Hull's new book of poems, *Star Ledger*, which along with Spires's work I read to my student visitors.

Spires's and Hull's rich language, their visionary voices—both visions manage at times to be saintly—connect rather than distance me from what's going on here.

Hull was a student of Spires at Johns Hopkins University, and there's a similarity in their styles and themes. But while Spires writes an almost neurasthenically removed poetry that recoils from direct experience, Hull's work is rich with individual portraits of people in the thick of life.

Spires peers at life through stained glass: the people in her poems are of a general type. Her Catholic past colors her poems—they're concerned with absolution, redemption, and apocalypse.

Hull's poems are so fraught by the intensity of the moment, by the harrowing plights of her protagonists, that there's little space in them for metaphysical speculation.

Spires, in her haunting way, *is* metaphysical: she's intent on discovering the ways in which love and suffering bring us into contact with God and an unearthly world.

For Hull—no pun intended—the apocalypse is *now*. Nothing mediates between her speakers' voices and the pain of their private hells.

On first glance, Hull's poems seem to glory in pain, to seek out suffering. Her subjects and themes focus on heroin addiction, alcoholism, and prostitution. She shares with poets C.K. Williams, Steven Dobyns, and Larry Levis a predilection for the long line, the extended phrase. A memory narrator, like Dobyns, Levis, and Williams, Hull distinguishes herself by her obsession with the past, her attempt to reconcile a turbulent past with a more tranquil—yet restive—present. And with these poets, she writes darkly about people on the downside of their careers. But she's more colorful, more imagistic and musical than the poets I've mentioned above, although at times Hull's lushness threatens to swamp her narrative, to overwhelm it with detail.

Lynda Hull has included in her new volume, *Star Ledger*, poems set in Europe. However, they are no more exotic—and socially estranged—than others set in American Chinatowns, state hospitals, and African-American ghettos. Her subject is the demimonde of after-hours clubs and fluorescent-lit diners. But unlike so much recent poetry that exploits—and slums in—these worlds (how many poems in the last ten years have enshrined and entombed “Bird” and “Trane”?), Hull's poems are authenticated by convincing particulars.

Lynda Hull's “Cubism, Barcelona,” the poem I'd like to discuss here, combines images of Barcelona and Boston street life with fragments from

cubist art and Modernist poetry. The poem's speaker is sitting late at night in a room in Barcelona, monologuing herself—while her husband dozes—into a reverie on her past, meditating on the relationship between Art and Life. It's a terribly ambitious poem; at times, Hull's fluency, her hip segues from present to past and incident to art, almost overwhelm the reader: her abrupt time and diction shifts are intended to guide us through a mannerist hall of mirrors, to enclose us visually in a world of shifting planes and elliptical surfaces. She means through her use of razor-sharp transitions, her refractive clausal constructions, to crack the poem's surface into irreconcilable parts; it's both a poem of rounded phrasing and angular transitions, a poem that confronts harmony with dissonance—as much as Modernist music and cubist painting does—through rippling cross-references and half-comic literary allusion:

with all the rooms and galleries I've known, now so wantonly
painting themselves across this room, this night, the way
I extend my hand and the paseo, foreign beyond my fingertips,

dissolves to a familiar catastrophe of facades, the angles
of walls and ceilings opening all the way to the waterfront

where the standard naked lightbulb offers its crude flower
of electricity to blue the dark abundant hair a woman
I could have been is brushing, a torn shade rolled up to see
the bird vendor's cat upon his shoulder. . . .

In "Cubism, Barcelona," the speaker's manic mood swings exhibit the dislocation she feels in facing Barcelona's seamy side and the almost Elizabethan rhetoric, reminiscent in parts of Hart Crane—that consummate cubist in the Kit Marlow mold—crumbles deliberately into spondaic street-talk, into the roughly demotic. There's a labile jaggedness here, a yawning from extreme to extreme; there's also a tendency for the speaker to get ahead of herself, to let her associations swing us into baroque flourishes that distract from the matter at hand; a trend to bowdlerize the reader into dizzy submission. One can't help see her husband—dozing in the same room—as victimized by the speaker's verbal dazzle, and to view ourselves as new victims.

The poem persists in a kind of half-convinced pep talk in which its speaker, caught up in the romance of Barcelona street life, recoils at her own aestheticizing of the self-destructive in herself. We're to believe that "this familiar catastrophe of facades" is something from which the speaker recoils and to which she's attracted; but she is driven to a lush reverie—both repugnant and magnetizing—that appropriates the sight of a drunken sailor ("asleep in his boots," as in Stevens's poem?) teetering in a Barcelona back alley, "courting a queen dolled up in bedsheet and motorcycle chain." In this "drag diva" the speaker finds frightful affinities, "something kicking like this vicious twin inside me," finds "that childhood terror propelling me through funhouses and arcades, mother of strange beauty and faith." The sailor—a correlative for the speaker's confusion:

stagger[s] on the paseo

fisting the air between him and the queen, shouting *je sens, je sens*
but he isn't able to say what he feels any more than I understand

how it is that perspective breaks down, that the buried life
wants out on sleepless nights amidst these coils of citizens,
a carnival dragon snaking, sodden, through the trees above them.

These roughly heptameter lines seem to snake like Hull's sodden dragon, Chaplinesque and lugubrious by turns; their slant rhymes—used consistently throughout the poem—echo the poem's deceptively carnival-like air. The poem's rhetorical strategy is to mirror in form Hull's main theme, a theme found in much post-Modern formalist poetry—that of the inherent kitchiness of high art.

The narrative pattern of "Cubism, Barcelona" is to shift from hotel room images to a Sandburgian view of the street outside, "fog dragging its cat's belly above the yellow spiked leaves . . ." to montage-like flashes of cubist art. In the third stanza she combines these disjunct images into one collage and merges them in a visual pastiche of archetypal motifs:

. . . I'm thinking of Picasso's

early work—an exhibit of childhood notebooks, a *Poetic's*
margins twisting with doves and bulls and harlequins. Your face,

our friends', the sullen milling Spaniards, repeated canvases
of faces dismantled, fractured so as to contain
the planar flux of human expression—boredom to lust
and fear, then rapture and beyond. He was powerless

wasn't he, before all that white space? I mean he had to
fill it in, and I can fill in the blank space of this room

between you and me. . . .

In successive stanzas the speaker charts the territory of the here-and-now
and her past, traces the fault lines of her unconscious, juxtaposing these to
images of cubist art. At the poem's center is the speaker's past; one must
slice through the cubist layering of Barcelona images to get to it, but clearly
memories of down-and-out Boston are what the speaker's struggling with:

But it's only chill rain that gathers in my palm, the empty

terracotta pots flanking the balcony. Rain and the ache
in my hands today, those off-tilt Gaudis queasily spelling
the tilt from port to port any life describes: Boston's damp cold
and we're stuffing rags again in broken windows, that con-
demned

brownstone on harshly passionate—Mr. Lowell—Marlborough
Street,
where our feet skimmed, polished black across the floor,

damp, the tattered hems of trousers. Simply trying like always
to con our way to some new dimension. And weren't we
glamorous?

Oh, calendar pages riffing in the artificial wind
of some off-screen fan, a way to show life passing, the blurred

collage of images we collect to show everything and nothing has changed.

Hull's Boston flashback playfully—derisively—flirts with Robert Lowell's "hardly passionate Marlborough Street"; but before we have time to reflect on this abrupt interpolation, she brilliantly whisks us back to the present with the cheap cinegraphic image of "calendar pages riffing in the artificial wind / of some off-screen fan." The effect of such fast-fades is vertiginous. Despite the plethora of sensory detail, the poem hovers over a void, suggesting that great art is inspired by emptiness: "He was powerless, wasn't he, before all that white space?" and through this maze of garish mind-stuff, the speaker seeks a way out, a relief from the freak show of memory. The room the speaker inhabits has become a gallery in which the "raucous promenade" of images of past and present paint themselves; her slumbering husband, at the poem's closure, dreams "of those curious days / filled with cockatoos and swans . . ." swans introduced in an earlier stanza, "luxurious and shrill by turns," that represent the Janus-faced nature of beauty.

The allusion to swans—I'm reminded of Yeats's swan obsession—is only one of Hull's many oblique references to Modernism. I observe the swans and cockatoos dreamed by the speaker's spouse, and the drunken sailor reminiscent of Stevens—it's apposite that her husband's dreaming Modernist dreams ("dreaming of wet weather"?)—and the "off-tilt" Gaudis, referring, I assume, to Gaudi's madcap cathedral.

Hull pitches these props onto their heads, de-aestheticizes them, by imbuing them with a fiendish power Yeats and Stevens never dreamed of. In a sense, she's turned Modernist conventions inside out, giving the swans back to the wild, investing the drunken sailor of Stevens's poem with the power to destroy himself. In Hull's work the dandyish primping and posing inherited from the pre-Raphaelites by the Modernists is turned upside-down; as these Modernist images—the swans, the cockatoos, the cat-footed fog—come alive for us, we recoil at the havoc they represent for the speaker. But she's aware of their destructive power, and, finally, in the poem's penultimate stanzas, she dismisses them with a vision of rebirth after the night's rain:

Things get pretty extreme, then tomorrow little blades

of grass will run from silver into green
down the esplanade where a waiter places

ashtrays on the corners of tablecloths
to keep them firmly anchored.

Life renews itself, despite the night's vagaries. What keeps the speaker from succumbing to her own worst impulses is a double-barreled vision of hope—"I know that tomorrow is a prayer / that means hope . . ."—and despair: in the final lines, she imagines a future in which:

The drag queen will be hustling, down on her knees
in the subway, a few exotic feathers twisting in the wind.

But it won't be me, Jack. It won't be me.

There's a certainty expressed in these last lines that resembles the certainty Spires's speaker in "Annonciade" has earned. In "Cubism, Barcelona," the speaker's dialectic ends not with a synthesis—or reconciliation—of the seeming disparities between art and experience, but with a kind of stand-off. The drag queen's tattered exoticism is a reminder of the shallowness of sensory experience. "Cubism, Barcelona" doesn't move beyond a fearful rejection of living in the senses, but closes on a note that indicates the speaker has come to know herself through a night of lonely suffering.

Curiously, both Elizabeth Spires and Lynda Hull use rather traditional formal arrangements to project their visions: Spires choosing pentameter and tetrameter lines and Hull fixed stanzaic patterns and hexameter or heptameter lines. But with Spires and Hull you never suspect their formalism is an end in itself. Neither writes the "occasional" travel poem characteristic of so much formalist work, but chooses instead subjects that engage emotionally and intellectually.

Hull and Spires aspire to the metaphysical ideal by attempting leaps from the ground of their poems to realms of the spiritual and imaginative. They choose to build their work through a series of minor recognitions that

provide a dramatization of their speakers' developing consciousness. Both "Annonciade" and "Cubism, Barcelona" are dialectical poems in which the poems' speakers refine suffering into artistic and spiritual truth. Both balance that aesthetic-spiritual struggle with self-doubt and irony: their drive toward self-realization represents the breaking through of a series of psychic barriers—that of mortality for Spires, of aesthetic illusion for Hull. And both make a final accommodation to reality and arrive at a compromise with their expectations. Spires's speaker realizes her immortality is a matter of conjecture, of blind faith—and, while maintaining her faith, she perceives that the shaky foundations of belief are shored up by meditation and prayer. Hull's speaker has also come to terms with illusions—in her case, the illusions of youth; while the lurid attractions of Barcelona street life beguile her, she refuses to give in to their temptations. She counts her blessings.

A Shanghai night in early summer's a reprieve from a pounding heat that begins in late May and remains till October. Straddling the swampy Yangtze delta, Shanghai's a "chicken soup"—as the Chinese say—of boiling clouds and steamy showers. This July Shanghai's in the doldrums: since the campaign against the "six evils" of pornography, rumor-mongering, prostitution, gambling, corruption, and drugs, the commercial spirit of the city's been under a cloud. This same night, in a Moslem restaurant off Sichuan Lu, the manager told me business has come to a standstill; most of his former customers have been carted off to work in the countryside. No one who isn't part of Shanghai's underground economy—or isn't a party cadre—could afford to eat in a restaurant; and yet on the bund, that bustling riverside boulevard of colonial banks and posh hotels from the defunct past, the *wuigars* are still hustling hashish and changing money: as they say, "everything's impossible, and everything's possible in China."

Shanghai isn't Barcelona, but Hull's poem puts much of what I've experienced here—the sense of anomie, fractured images of twentieth-century alienation—in context. I'm riding my bike down Sichuan Bei Lu—eleven o'clock and late night noodle stands appear on street corners, a time when easy-going Shanghainese materialize and a westerner with a Chinese friend won't be stared at: I stop at a *mingtiau* dive, wash down the thick soy-salted noodles with a pot of gritty tea. Across the table a wide-grinning man smiles at me, no small talk intended. Back on my bike,

the night air rippling through my open shirt, caught in the mind's slipstream, past a few luminous melon salesmen, past the high-gated entranceway to Honkou Park, beneath a viaduct, where the lacquery smoke of a paint factory stains the air, past the university gates and down Guangling Yi Lu and its odoriferous market stalls, the mind makes the pain pretty, sweet evocations rise from the perfumed stink of the past.

Later, in my residence on Guangling Yi Lu, as I read over Hull's and Spires's poems, Barcelona and Menton and Shanghai montage into composites of each other; I see how both Elizabeth Spires and Lynda Hull push beyond the thematic and formal confines of contemporary poetry by fusing inner and outer worlds, and I experience in their work a delight in the harmony of opposites—the marriage of the imaginary and mundane in Hull, and the heavenly and the earthly in Spires.

These poets matured in the workshop atmosphere of the seventies and are fluent with Modernism's motifs. In many respects, they represent a shift from post-Modernism into an aesthetic characterized by self-scrutiny and unflinching honesty. What draws me to Spires and Hull is the way they've moved from a contemporary American influence in much of their poetry. This isn't to say they're "global" poets in the political sense. Rather, in their most recent work, Hull and Spires seem poets without a genre with which to identify themselves. Neither at home in their American pasts nor in their momentary European exiles, nor with Modernism or post-Modernism, they seem thrown back on themselves and abide in a style that is *post-American*: Spires exploring the ramifications of faith in an incredulous age, and Hull examining the refractions of memory in the shattered mirror of post-Modernist culture.