

Howard Nemerov, Nature Poet

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People think of Howard Nemerov as a wry commentator on the human condition, an ironist who sees, in Helen Vendler's words, "the permanence of change, the vices of virtue, the evanescence of solidities, and the errors of truth." This view is not inaccurate. But to read Nemerov across a long span of his life, as Daniel Anderson's *Selected Poems* enables us to do, is to be impressed, or re-impressed, by Nemerov's continued visceral response to the *things* of the world, and in particular to natural objects – rocks, trees, birds, flowers, rain and snow. Many of his poems, though they might be suffused with reflections and regret, begin as simple descriptions and evolve into something more complex by way of the writer's response to his surroundings.

Here, for example, are the first seven lines of "A Spell before Winter":

*After the red leaf and the gold have gone,
Brought down by the wind, then by hammering rain
Bruised and discolored, when October's flame
Goes blue to guttering in the cusp, this land
Sinks deeper into silence, darker into shade.
There is a knowledge in the look of things,
The old hills hunch before the north wind blows.*

The first four lines are pure description, though they employ simple, almost conventional metaphor ("hammering rain") and then a more complex metaphor in the lines about October's flame. The fifth line is also descriptive, though edged with a mood. Only in the last two lines of the passage does human feeling clearly enter, when the hills are almost anthropomorphized. The speaker of the poem appears at last in the second section ("Now I can see certain simplicities ...") – but even here unqualified description persists in "The running water and the standing stone, / The yellow haze of the willow and the black / Smoke of the elm." The poem achieves its power mostly from the cumulative weight of these emotionally tinged snapshots, and from the rhetorical repetition, at the end, of lines 6 and 7, now with a slight variation:

*A knowledge glimmers in the sleep of things:
The old hills hunch before the north wind blows.*

What is the nature of this "knowledge"? The reader can only surmise.

There is irony in the title of this essay, of course, for among serious poets the label "nature poet" is a pejorative. No one was more aware of this second-class status than Nemerov himself, who gently burlesqued the stereotype in "Elegy for a Nature Poet." In that poem the poor man dies after catching a "catarrh" in the autumn rains, where he has walked, "too rapt / In contemplation to recall that brains / Like his should not be kept too long uncapped." The nature poet views nature as a book to be opened, a source of stories with morals:

*Nothing too great, nothing too trivial
For him; from mountain range to humble vermin
He could extract the hidden parable –
If need be, crack the stone to get the sermon.*

Usually when a writer derides a figure, he does so to stress, often from an interior necessity, that the figure has nothing in common with himself. It is evident that Nemerov scorns the comfortable and simplifying moralistic style that we might associate with a “nature poet.” But that scorn raises a critical question: if Nemerov’s own poems get their impetus from the natural world – and it is undeniable that many of them do – what is the connection between the motivating event or scene and the poem’s intellectual and emotional content?

This is a question, fundamental to the creative act, that can well obsess a poet. Two of Stevens’ greatest poems – “The Snow Man” and “The Idea of Order at Key West” – wrestle with it. And one of Nemerov’s most interesting poems, “The Loon’s Cry,” records his own struggle with the problem. “The Loon’s Cry” is a longish poem of thirteen seven-line stanzas. It begins with the speaker in the midst of a landscape:

*On a cold evening, summer almost gone,
I walked alone down where the railroad bridge
Divides the river from the estuary.*

He avows his independence of the possible meanings in the setting sun and rising moon – “two poised immensities / Which offered to be weighed in either hand”:

*But I could think only, Red sun, white moon,
This is a natural beauty, it is not
Theology. For I had fallen from
The symbolized world, where I in earlier days
Found mysteries of meaning, form, and fate
Signed on the sky ...*

If formerly he might have been tainted with the intellectual vices of the nature poet, now, he says, he has stripped himself of them, and nature is for him only a collection of things.

Just at that moment, he hears the loon’s cry, “a savage cry” of “laughter and desolation on the river.” And in those descriptive words we approach the crux of the problem. “Savage” can mean simply “wild,” but its associations go far beyond that. “Laughter” and “desolation” evoke human emotions almost unavoidable in response to the loon’s call. By an act of will the observer can shun those qualities

*– yet when I heard him cry
Again, his voice seemed emptied of that sense
Or any other ...*

– and can achieve, if only for a moment, a valueless response to the world as if he were Adam in paradise (though even an Adam or an infant would likely feel wonder). It is a strenuous intellec-

tual exercise that allows one to shun “the forms of things, / Their doctrines, which decayed” and to become like the moon, emptied of life, able only to “orbit this world in envy and late love.”

And now the loon cries again – or perhaps it is the whistle of a train, “changing the signals on the bridge, the bright / Rubies and emeralds” – in other words a human artifact capable of introducing and modifying meaning. With that ambiguity, the poem ends.

If, as Stevens says, man is the intelligence of his soil, Nemerov in this poem resists being that intelligence (as Stevens too at times strove not to be). “I simplified still more, and thought that now / We’d traded all those mysteries for things.” But he is called to contemplation again by the loon’s cry – and the attempt to see the world stripped of implication founders on the intrinsic character of the perceiving eye, which cannot stop making associations.

A writer can describe the things of the natural world with taste, subtlety, discretion, and a resolve not to push his associations overmuch. Or he can do otherwise. But he cannot purge the world of associations – his own or others’ – because his only means of seeing is through his own brain, which is helplessly bound to its experience, associations, and a complex shared history of culture recorded in every word of his language. *Snake. Lamb. Birdsong.* Such seemingly basic words can never be cleansed of their history.

Within these inevitable limitations Nemerov’s poems trace a remarkable consistency of response to natural surroundings, and they do so while maintaining a recognizable tone of voice. Only occasionally in a late poem like “Firelight in Sunlight” does one get a sense of a writer trying to emulate his own best pieces. The poet with a distinctive voice hears it always in his head. It is productive. It enables him to sound like himself even before he has something to say. The danger, of course, is that the tone can become formulaic, able to gobble up any content – and no content. But if it is a good tone, a good formula, the poet will now and then rise to it. Nemerov often did.

Sometimes, however, a reader does come away from a poem with the feeling that an interpretation or a broader association with a physical setting has been pushed too hard. “Summer Elegy” presents a catalog, in pentameter couplets, of the season’s winding down:

*The little lantern bugs have doused their fires,
The swallows sit in rows along the wires.
Berry and grape appear among the flowers
Tangled against the wall in secret bowers ...*

– and then, perhaps feeling that these lines of perfunctory description need more justification, Nemerov adds a moral:

*We reach the place unripe, and made to know,
As with a sudden knowledge that we go
Away forever, all hope of return
Cut off ...*

Leaving aside the uncharacteristically awkward syntax (“know, / As with a sudden knowledge”), this passage contains no element of revelation. It would have been better to leave the descriptive passage uncommented, to stand or fall on its merits.

That is what Nemerov does in a quietly brilliant poem called “Monet,” which sets a simple scene: the poet and his family, unable to get into a crowded museum to see a Monet exhibition, have driven off to a nearby pond, where they walked for a hour. The poem describes the pond and its environs with sensuousness and clarity:

*... flowering waterlilies
Lifting three feet above their floating pads
Huge yellow flowers heavy on bending stems
In various phases of array and disarray
Of petals packed, unfolded, opening to show
The meaty orange centers that become,
When the ruined flags fall away, green shower heads
Spilling their wealth of seed at summer’s end ...*

There is no need to point a moral here. The meaning of the poem is inherent in every detail. The scene contains the elements of familiar Monet paintings, and the description of the scene holds up to nature the mirror of words, as Monet himself held up the mirror of canvas and paint.

We do not readily think of Nemerov as a poet of linguistic ingenuity, a player with words. Yet he was often quietly inventive, and his wordplay, when he indulged it, could carry strong emotional import. “Wintering,” another nature poem, one might say, describes the effect of the earth’s circumsolar revolution on the quality and height of sunlight. The light in winter is compared to the light in May as both are seen through a prism of glass hung in the kitchen:

*To swing advantage from the sun’s long swing
Low through the darkness and the burning cold
Until, sweet chariot, he brings us up
Again, poking the crocus through the snow
Again, and once more turns might into may.*

The triple meanings of “might” and “may” come like a warm affirmation of renewing power. But of course we have also heard the strains of “Swing low, sweet chariot” through the pentameter lines, and we may have completed that chorus in our heads: “coming for to carry me home” and remembered that the spiritual expressed longing for the release of death. Delight in renewal and longing for oblivion – both are essential parts of the poem, and of Nemerov’s constitution.

Despite Nemerov’s lighthearted remark, in a poem about being on a prize jury, that “sentencing’s beyond me,” it is clearly his forte. He often writes a line whose ending seems to coincide with the end of a sentence – only to follow it with another line that carries the sentence forward into a further and sometimes different sense, as in “Guide to the Ruins.” I quote the first stanza.

*One lives by commerce, said the guide.
One sells the available thing, time
And again: the ruins, the temple grove,
The gods with their noses knocked off.
One profits by the view.*

It is hard to avoid taking the first two lines as a complete sentence: one sells time. The remainder of the stanza compels us to revise that reading: it is the ruins that are being sold. But of course it is also time. The ruins are a stand-in for time. And the “one” who profits by the view is the guide or the tourist – each in his own way.

The three following stanzas elaborate that point. The vulgar paint that flakes off the statues leaves “the color of time, / The unimpassioned grey which is / Not now in commodious demand.” It is not the self that is sold: “One sells always time” – so the reader’s first impression was clearly not misprision at all but a fleeting glimpse of the complete idea, now elaborated and given resonance.

As this poem demonstrates, not all Nemerov’s successful work derives from a response to nature. And yet a high proportion of the poems do begin in the natural world. By way of summing up, we might enumerate the ways in which art can relate to nature, and distinguish among them.

Most simply, a poem or essay might take a natural scene to illustrate a concept or a moral statement. This approach is primitive, and Nemerov as a rule shuns it.

A bit more elaborately, a writer can treat nature as a substitute for religion; that is, he can use a natural description to evoke religious feeling. Since, on the evidence of the poems, Nemerov does not see the world in religious terms, he generally avoids this approach as well.

Or nature can offer a motive, a jumping-off point, for a creative act. The creative act may be description, as in the Monet poem, or extrapolation, as in “Wintering,” where human feelings about death and renewal are derived from natural cycles but have their own complexity and ambiguity. In Nemerov’s poetry, nature in this role is clearly a generating force, a way of getting a poem started, and an anchor grounding it in verifiable fact.

And a last observation: These poems, written over a lifetime spanning the turbulent anti-formal revolutions in all the arts, including poetry, are superb examples of craft. Without flashing formal pyrotechnics, they display a dexterous and confident control of the verse line, playing it against syntax and against rime when rime is used. Because of this solidity of construction (as well as their judicious blend of rational and emotional content), most of the poems collected in this book show little or no sign of age, though some go back half a century. Nor are they likely to age in the foreseeable future. If Howard Nemerov did not often strike a chord as close to the people’s soul as did Frost, or as resonant with the professoriate as did Stevens, he nevertheless continues to pierce the hearts not just of other poets, but of all readers who, respecting ambiguity, weigh their words carefully.