

LOOKING FOR DRAGON SMOKE

I.

In ancient times, in the “time of inspiration,” the poet flew from one world to another, “riding on dragons,” as the Chinese said. Isaiah rode on those dragons, so did Li Po and Pindar. They dragged behind them long tails of dragon smoke. Some of that dragon smoke still boils out of *Beowulf*. The *Beowulf* poet holds tight to Danish soil, or leaps after Grendel into the sea.

This dragon smoke means that a leap has taken place in the poem. In many ancient works of art we notice a long floating leap at the center of the work. That leap can be described as a leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known. In the epic of Gilgamesh, which takes place in a settled society, psychic forces suddenly create Enkidu, “the hairy man,” as a companion for Gilgamesh, who is becoming too successful. The reader has to leap back and forth between the white man, “Gilgamesh,” and the “hairy man.” In *The Odyssey* the travelers visit a Great Mother island, dominated by the Circe-Mother, and are turned into pigs. They make the leap in an instant. In all art derived from Great Mother mysteries, the leap to the unknown part of the mind lies in the very center of the work. The strength of “classical art” has much more to do with this leap than with the order that the poets developed to contain, and, partially, to disguise it.

As Christian civilization took hold, and the power of the spiritual patriarchies deepened, this leap occurred less and less often

in Western literature. Obviously the ethical ideas of Christianity inhibit it. From the start Christianity has been against the leap. Christian ethics always embodied a move against the “animal instincts”; Christian thought, especially Paul’s thought, builds a firm distinction between spiritual energy and animal energy, a distinction so sharp it became symbolized by black and white. White became associated with the conscious and black with the unconscious. Christianity taught its poets—we are among them—to leap *away* from the unconscious, not *toward* it.

The intellectual Western mind accepted the symbolism of white and black, and far from trying to unite both in a circle, as the Chinese did, tried to get “apartheid.” In the process, some weird definitions of words developed.

If a European avoided the animal instincts and consistently leaped away from the unconscious, he was said to be living in a state of “innocence.” Children were thought to be “innocent” because it was believed they had no sexual, that is, animal, instincts. Eighteenth-century translators like Pope and Dryden forced Greek and Roman literature to be their allies in their leap away from animality, and they translated Homer as if he too were “innocent.” To Christian Europeans, impulses open to the sexual instincts or animal instincts indicated a fallen state, a state of “experience.”

Blake thought the whole nomenclature insane, the precise reverse of the truth. He wrote *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* about that. In that book he reversed the poles. He maintained that living open to animal instincts was precisely “innocence”; children were innocent exactly because they moved back and forth between the known and unknown minds with a minimum of fear. To write well, you must “become like little children.” Blake, discussing “experience,” declared that to be afraid of a leap into

the unconscious is actually to be in a state of “experience.” (We are all experienced in that fear.) The state of “experience” is characterized by blocked love-energy, boredom, envy, and joylessness. Another characteristic is a pedestrian movement of the mind; possibly constant fear makes the mind move slowly. Blake could see that after eighteen hundred years of no-leaping, joy was disappearing, poetry was dying, “the languid strings do scarcely move! The sound is forced, the notes are few.” A nurse in the state of “experience,” obsessed with a fear of animal blackness (a fear which increased after the whites took Africa), calls the children in from play as soon as the light falls:

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And whisp’rings are in the dale,
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.
Then come home, my children,
the sun is gone down

And the dews of night arise;
Your spring and your day are wasted in play
And your winter and night in disguise.

The nurse in “The Songs of Innocence” also calls the children in. But she is not in a state of “experience,” and when the children say:

“No, no, let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep;
Besides in the sky the little birds fly
And the hills are all cover’d with sheep.”

She replies:

“Well, well, go and play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed.”
The little ones leaped and shouted and laugh’d
And all the hills echoed.

She enjoys their shouts. They leap about on the grass playing, as an “innocent man” leaps about inside his psyche.

My idea, then, is that a great work of art often has at its center a long floating leap, around which the work of art in ancient times used to gather itself like steel shavings around the magnet. But a work of art does not necessarily have at its center a single long floating leap. The work can have many leaps, perhaps shorter. The real joy of poetry is to experience this leaping inside a poem. A poet who is “leaping” makes a jump from an object soaked in unconscious substance to an object or idea soaked in conscious psychic substance. What is marvelous is to see this leaping return in poetry of this century.

So far the leaps tend to be fairly short. In “Nothing but Death” Neruda leaps from death to the whiteness of flour, then to notary publics, and he continues to make leap after leap. We often feel elation reading Neruda because he follows some arc of association which corresponds to the inner life of the objects; so that anyone sensitive to the inner life of objects can ride with him. The links are not private, but somehow bound into nature.

Thought of in terms of language, then, leaping is the ability to associate fast. In a great ancient or modern poem, the considerable distance between the associations, the distance the spark has to leap, gives the lines their bottomless feeling, their space, and the speed of the association increases the excitement of the poetry.

2.

Sometime in the thirteenth century poetry in Europe began to show a distinct decline in the ability to associate powerfully. There are individual exceptions, but the circle of worlds pulled into the poem by association dwindles after Chaucer and Langland; their work is already a decline from the *Beowulf* poet. By the eighteenth century, the dwindling had become a psychic disaster. Freedom of association had become drastically curtailed. The word “sylvan” by some psychic railway line leads directly to “nymph,” to “lawns,” to “dancing,” so to “reason,” to music, spheres, heavenly order, etc. They’re all stops on some railroad. There are very few images of the Snake, or the Dragon, or the Great Mother, and if mention is made the Great Mother leads to no other images, but rather to words suggesting paralysis or death. As Pope said, “The proper study of mankind is man.”

The loss of associative freedom showed itself in form as well as in content. In content the poet’s thought plodded through the poem, line after line, like a man being escorted through a prison. The “form” was a corridor, full of opening and closing doors. The rhymed lines opened at just the right moment, and closed again behind the visitors.

By the eighteenth century the European intellectual was no longer interested in imagination really. He was trying to develop the “masculine” mental powers he sensed Socrates stood for—a demythologized intelligence, that moves in a straight line made of tiny bright links, an intelligence dominated by linked facts rather than “irrational” feelings. The European intellectual succeeded in developing that rationalist intelligence and it was to prove useful. Industry needed it to guide a locomotive through

a huge freight yard, or to guide a spaceship back from the moon through the “reentry corridor.”

Nevertheless, this careful routing of psychic energy, first done in obedience to Christian ethics, and later in obedience to commercial needs, had a crippling effect upon the psychic life. The process amounted to an inhibiting of psychic flight, and as Blake saw, once the child had finished European schools, he was incapable of flight. He lived the rest of his life with “single vision and Newton’s sleep.”

Blake took the first step: he abducted the thought of poetry and took it off to some obscure psychic woods. Those woods were real woods, occult ceremonies took place in them, as they had in ancient woods. In Germany, Novalis and Hölderlin abducted a child, also, and raised it deep in the forest. All over Europe energy in poetry began to come more and more from the unconscious, from the black side of the intelligence. Freud pointed out that the dream still retained the fantastic freedom of association known to us before only from ancient art. By the end of the nineteenth century, both the poem and the dream had been set free: they were no longer part of the effort to develop Socratic intelligence. The poets then began to devote their lives to deepening the range of association in the poem, and increasing the speed of association.

It is this movement that has given such fantastic energy and excitement to “modern poetry” in all European countries. The movement has been partly successful; after only a hundred years of effort, some of the psychic ability to fly has been restored. I will concentrate here on leaping poetry, and try to give some examples of it.



FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA



Landscape with Two Graves
and an Assyrian Hound

Friend,
get up so you can hear the Assyrian hound howling.
The three nymphs of cancer are up and dancing,
my son.
They brought along mountains of red sealing-wax
and some rough sheets that cancer slept on last night.
The neck of the horse had an eye
and the moon was up in a sky so cold
she had to rip up her own mound of Venus
and drown the ancient cemeteries in blood and ashes.

Friend,
wake up, for the hills are still not breathing,
and the grass in my heart has gone off somewhere.
It does not matter if you are full of sea-water.
I loved a child for a long time
who had a tiny feather on his tongue
and we lived a hundred years inside a knife.
Wake up. Say nothing. Listen. Sit up a little.
The howling
is a long and purple tongue leaving behind
ants of terror and lilies that make you drunk.

It's coming now near your stone. Don't stretch out your roots!
Nearer. It's moaning. Do not cry in your sleep, my friend.

My friend, get up
so you can hear the Assyrian
hound howling.

TRANSLATED BY ROBERT BLY

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA



Pequeño poema infinito

Equivocar el camino
es llegar a la nieve
y llegar a la nieve
es paecer durante veinte siglos las hierbas de los cementerios.

Equivocar el camino
es llegar a la mujer,
la mujer que no teme la luz,
la mujer que mata dos gallos en un segundo,
la luz que no teme a los gallos
y los gallos que no saben cantar sobre la nieve.

Pero si la nieve se equivoca de corazón
puede llegar el viento Austro
y como el aire no hace caso de los gemidos
tendremos que paecer otra vez las hierbas de los cementerios.
Yo vi dos dolorosas espigas de cera
que enterraban un paisaje de volcanes
y vi dos niños locos que empujaban llorando las pupilas de un
asesino.

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA



Little Infinite Poem

To take the wrong road
is to arrive at the snow
and to arrive at the snow
is to get down on all fours for twenty centuries and eat the
grasses of the cemeteries.

To take the wrong road
is to arrive at woman,
woman who isn't afraid of light,
woman who kills two roosters in one second,
light which isn't afraid of roosters,
and roosters who don't know how to sing on top of the snow.

But if the snow took the wrong heart
the southern wind could very well arrive,
and since the air cares nothing for groans
we will have to get down on all fours again and eat the grasses
of the cemeteries.

I saw two mournful wheat heads made of wax
burying a countryside of volcanoes;
and I saw two insane little boys who wept as they leaned on a
murderer's eyeballs.

Pero el dos no ha sido nunca un número
porque es una angustia y su sombra
porque es la guitarra donde el amor se desespera,
porque es la demostración de otro infinito que no es suyo
y es las murallas del muerto
y el castigo de la nueva resurrección sin finales.

Los muertos odian el número dos
pero el número dos adormece a las mujeres
y como la mujer teme la luz
la luz tiembla delante de los gallos
y los gallos sólo saben volar sobre la nieve
tendremos que pacer sin descanso las hierbas de los cementerios.

But two, that is not a number!
All it is is an agony and its shadow,
it's only the guitar where love feels its discouragement,
it's only the demonstration of something else's infinity,
a castle raised around a dead man,
and the scourging of the new resurrection that will never end.

Dead people hate the number two,
but the number two makes women drop off to sleep,
and since women are afraid of light
light shudders when it has to face the roosters,
and since all roosters know is how to fly over the snow
we will have to get down on all fours and eat the grasses of the
cemeteries forever.

TRANSLATED BY ROBERT BLY