

H. L. Hix

Take You a Course, Get You a Place

Art, all art, ... is a foreign city, and we deceive ourselves when we think it familiar.

(Jeanette Winterson)

The woman beside me this morning had a large freckle inside her left ear. Not that we were intimate in the way you might think first; merely near each other in the crush at rush hour on the metro. That she wore her hair pulled back revealed her ear. Her dress signaled purpose: sleek glasses, silk blouse, slender attaché. She seemed not to notice me noticing her. If, as I suspect, she rides to work at this time each day, many before me must have noticed this freckle. Like me, others must have lost sight of it, and of her, in the station, never to see it again.

At the time the ear-freckled stranger and I left that train, more people animated the station we stepped into than live in the town I call home. Maybe more than in my state. I live in Laramie, home of the only university in the least populous state in the union, Wyoming. The university is halfway across town from my house, so it takes me almost twenty minutes to walk to work. I'm on a metro today because UW has a faculty exchange with Shanghai University, so I'm here in China for three weeks, to give six lectures on the subject of American poetry. Of the two substantives, "lecture" seems less to the point than "exchange": immersion in this context has highlighted my assumptions in such a way, and to such a degree, that surely I am learning more than my students about American poetry.

My time here interrupts a writing project that has me reconsidering my understanding of poetry and my ways of

valuing it, but because my hosts asked for recognizable figures — citing Robert Frost as their example — I've structured things in a predictable, even retro, fashion: lecture one, Whitman and Dickinson; two, the modernists; three, African-American poetry; four, Frost; five, Bishop; six, contemporaries. Not the platonic form of poetry in America, but a version I permit myself with the excuse that, in fifteen hours of instructional time, no structure would be whole or perfect.

I began the first lecture with a contrast. For all its changes in dynasties, I observed (in a sweeping and surely indefensible generalization that exhausted my knowledge of the matter), Chinese history has been continuous in the sense that the majority in what we now know as the nation of China would trace their lineage to peoples who occupied this same region forty centuries ago or farther. U.S. history, in contrast, is defined, I said, by a rupture, in which groups from another continent arrived about 500 years ago, and displaced the peoples who had occupied the region since the ice age. Soon enough, the newcomers imported, in large numbers, persons from yet another continent. So that today the majority of citizens in what we now call the U.S.A. would trace their lineage to peoples from across the sea. The fact of the rupture, I asserted, leads the occupiersto preoccupation with two problems: to justify their claim to the land, and to assert as independent their identity in relation to those who stayed on the continent from which they came, or to those who stole them from their continent of origin. Keeping those preoccupations in mind, I promised my patient auditors, would help make sense of American verse.

And indeed it does so. Even though I'd been winging it — I'd prepared, yes, a small anthology beforehand, but my digest of world history was just making up shit at the last minute — seeing history through this observation did highlight features I'd missed before in poems with which I had thought myself familiar. So in that first lecture, I began to

see, for instance, Whitman's love of the word "destined" as combining both of the rationalizations I had claimed that "we" so urgently pursue, as when, in "Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood," he calls on the "Brain of the New World" to "recast poems, churches, art," because the Old World brain is dead, and "Its poems, churches, arts, unwitting to themselves, [were] destined with reference to thee." So it is destiny that we fulfil (and in fulfilling replace) the old world, and destiny that we do so here, that any impediments to our poems, churches, and art be just that: impediments, to be overcome or, if need be, eradicated. Impediments all, be they bison or Pawnee, passenger pigeon or Sioux.

My learning, though, was not to come from my own invention of undefended pronouncements to apply to the poems; instead it was to come from the starkness with which, in so different a context, premises that can stay tacit at home announce themselves. This became clear early in the first lecture. In my anthology, I had offered first "The Chambered Nautilus," as a way to show what Whitman and Dickinson were reacting against. I pointed out the regularity of meter, in preparation for listening to Whitman's more flexible metric. The blank expressions of the students alerted me to my own stupidity: I was speaking of accentual meter to an audience whose first language is tonal. As difficult as it is for me to hear the variations in tone on which meaning in Mandarin is based, so difficult must it be for them, native speakers of Chinese, to hear accentual meter in English. So accustomed had I grown to arguing that regularity of meter is a faulty ideal, that I'd forgotten that meter's having any role at all is accidental, not essential, wholly contingent on the language in which a poem is composed, by no means necessary or universal.

I have kept proposing dubious hypotheses. Of Frost, for instance, I decided — on the bus to class — to declare him interested in home, in having us look again at what feels

familiar. I will contrast him, on this count, to Bishop, calling him a public poet because his starting with the familiar invites everyone in, and her (next lecture) a poet's poet because her starting with the unfamiliar selects for her a smaller audience from the start. Frost's poems, I declared for a verity, take us to a familiar place, but orient us differently toward it. He situates his poems in New England because that is "home" to America, the familiar place, in contrast to the "frontier," the "wild west," which to this day stands for the strange and unfamiliar.

I continue, though, to be brought up short. This afternoon's on Frost was my fifth lecture. The students have shown the elaborate courtesy I had been led to expect: at the end of each lecture, they applaud; they listen attentively, whether or not I am making sense; and they hold questions for after class, never interrupting me. Except once. Today, as we discussed (read: as I pontificated on) "The Road Not Taken," I drew on the board a picture of a stick Frost standing at a Y in the road. I explained that stick Frost knows nothing about what is at the end of either road. In this way (I went on, growing more pompous and absurd), stick Frost stands for all of us, at each decision point. We don't know if choosing law school will make us rich, or film school make us famous. We decide based on all-too-limited information, and must take what follows. So stick Frost knows only that a lot of feet before his own have ventured one of the roads, few the other. He follows the few. It was at this point that the prior strict decorum was breached. A young woman raised her hand. I almost forgot to call on her, so surprised was I. Her puzzlement showed on her face: "Why would he do that?" Good question, and one to which any answer will make more sense if you have internalized a culture that regards the frontier as a place of opportunity, inhabited by an other who possesses none of the rights one must accord to those who inhabit home, a culture accustomed to a concept

of destiny that resembles Whitman's.

Plenty for me to think about when I return to my writing project at home. Meanwhile, between lectures I am seeing fragments of Shanghai. Though a visit to the Yu Yuan a day or two ago has soured me on seeing what "ought" to be seen: any sense of tranquility in that place has been overwhelmed by shops and vendors. God keep me from amassing trinkets. Of my trip to Shanghai, let me remember not the Yu Yuan but that woman's freckle. For my lectures I hope I shall be shriven, as I hope to be provoked by their flaws to reconsideration of their subject.