

POETS OF OUR SUFFERING

The Whispering Gallery. William Logan. London: Penguin Books, 2005. *Approximately Paradise*. Floyd Skloot. Dorset, VT: Tupelo Press, 2005.

James Matthew Wilson

William Logan's work has frequently elicited comparison with W.H. Auden and Robert Lowell, and for good reason. In Logan's insightful and salted vision of modern poetry, the two poets stand as the masters, though hardly the representatives, of their age. Auden is our knight errant of poetic form and unbuttoned Horace of public art, Lowell the Caliban of savagely vivid language and, of course, the self-referential persona that reinvents itself as it adapts poetic conventions to present needs. These are the two figures of the recent literary past whom Logan holds up as great and effectively takes as models for his own poetry.

Only Lowell, or rather, only the "confessional" aspect of Lowell (an adjective Logan alternately questions and modifies) strikes him as bequeathing a legacy to contemporary poetry; we are all familiar with the backyard epiphanies and lurid brief narratives that fill out the more coherent if less challenging pages of our literary magazines. It is this aspect that Logan most frequently rejects, in hopes of salvaging the savage and stentorian brilliance of Lowell's language, not only in the early metaphysical poems, but in *For the Union Dead* and the late sonnets as well. This language has haunted Logan's poems since very early in his career. In the burning and clenched poems of *Difficulty* (1983), for example, we hear: "The evening light slaps the orchard floor / where twisting sprinklers hurl their load / through gnarled lines of peaches." If the verbal tensions in this stilled, unpeopled scene intimate violence, the remainder of the poem confirms it with radiating images of the preying of a snake and the deliberate movements of soldiers in a minefield. Personal agony, but especially the torture of our public history, insinuate themselves into every line of Logan's early lyrics as well as those more recent. This gift for the pained expression, for stanzas of bent wire, is Logan's chief inheritance from Lowell.

But *Macbeth in Venice* (2003), Logan's sixth book of poems, allowed the public style of Auden to glimmer forth in unprecedented ways. Divided into four sections that function formally as long poems, *Macbeth* eschews the personal at every turn. Opaque though "The Shorter Aeneid" frequently is, it remains a poem about history, about exile and the displacements of World War II. The more playful "Punchinello in Chains" and "Macbeth in Ven-

ice,” offer hints of Audenesque humor; they show their debts to the English poet even more so in their use of almost medieval tableaux to frame broken but moralized narratives. “Punchinello” reminds one of “Musée de Beaux Arts” mixed with Auden’s sonnet sequences; “Macbeth” is an unmistakable abbreviated pastiche of *The Sea and the Mirror*. Most remarkably, the series of travel poems grouped under “Venetian Hours,” which cry out for a character, for an embodiment of its voice, refuse the request. As in much of Logan’s early work, their language, metered according to an undersea telegraph, and mailed and maimed like the statue “The Massacre of the Holy Innocents” describes, obeys the strictures of the concrete and the objective as it moves from disappointment to decay to terror. The poems in the volume as a whole move with Auden’s zest from fixed forms to open rhymed stanzas, as well as to loose blank verse tercets that Logan has established as his more satisfactory equivalent to Auden’s syllabics.

For this reason, *The Whispering Gallery* appears as something of a departure, although it may better be described as comprising the side of Logan’s work born under the sign of Lowell. The poems in the volume return and return again to private moments of tension between the violence of endings and beginnings, past and future, as the last poem in the volume, “The Old Burying Ground” concludes:

The promises the living swear
betray their long decrease –
the mourner’s lie In Memory Of,
the fraud of Rest in Peace,

where buried on this sacred ground,
in frozen, barren earth,
lie the distant soiled past
and frenzied rage of birth.

Desecration and anger, and worry over their fate and impact in the present guide Logan’s new book in directions that are, initially, more accessible and engaging than the marmoreal mazes of *Macbeth*. Venice has served, and continues to serve, him as an image of opulence and decadence, of sweltering pocket empires whose achievements are slowly sinking into the sea. Similar paradoxes of place appear in “Welcome to Paradise” and other poems, where “paradise” in its Edenic and absolute sense crosses unfortunate paths with “paradise” as the banal name by which we describe the fruitful but rotting and polluted landscapes of Florida: “Passed by rusting cars bearing bored / children, the gator on the peeling billboard // looks down on the

roadside attractions and recommends / they stay shuttered for the winter that never ends.”

These are vivid and ominous poems, and generally are the more so for the presence of an identifiable character, which allows us to understand why such landscapes should educe such language. To a degree often lacking in Logan’s earlier books, the sense of a narrative helpfully intrudes and gives the imagery a meaning that it could only promise or threaten in the past. That said, one is put off by some of the narrated tricks that read like punch-lines but are really unprovoked stabs. After a lengthy description of a self and a world, the speaker in “The Rotting Stars” suddenly confides, “I knew then that my mother was dead. / Yet she wasn’t dead.” This is as perplexing a pair of statements in context as out of it. There are other unearned shocks within.

The frequent successes and occasional failures of the poems that open the book almost seem practice pieces once one reaches the long “Penitence” that occupies the middle third of the volume. Here the figure of suspension between birth and death offers itself as a form for meditation, a theme to be refigured in twenty-six nineteen-line poems written in that same loose pentameter. Each section turns about the persistence of past sins and evils as well as the almost promised oblivion of death and the future; this concept Logan characteristically grounds in the concrete of landscape: “The lake turns a circle through Ptolemy’s spheres, / nested one in another like Dante’s *malebolgia*.” Appropriately the historical turns of sin are primarily public and mortal events that Logan is careful not to absorb into a narcissistic “autodrama.” As, for instance, “Jews,” where, “Death dines with a reservation,”

never too hungry, knowing his next meal will come:
the ash, the dust of unwilling dust.
Years after the war, the towns had lost their synagogues.

No one living remembered where they had been.

No passage could better illustrate the two maxims that echo throughout. The first, “We are responsible / to the sins that gave birth to us.” The second, the hideousness of present and past alike do not result in wisdom but exact further penalties on the defeated through forgetfulness and ignorance: “a century later, / knowing their fate as they could not, as others / will know our fates, though we cannot.” These concerns Logan draws into the circumference of a central persona, thus drawing the poem as a whole closer to the tradition of Lowell’s late sonnets of confession, intimacy and history.

The volume is less an achievement than *Macbeth* primarily because it is

on this one, well-constructed but sometimes tediously worded, long poem that it must be judged. The earlier poems, often good in themselves get lost with the ambition of “Penitence.” The last third of the volume is more varied, and indeed includes several pastiches of Auden that are amusing but remain merely pastiche. “Odalisque” and a handful of raw sexual poems are well executed, but seem more attempts to rework Lowell’s “confessionalism” on Logan’s terms than poems of lasting merit.



Last winter, in a local cafe, I watched a man guide his very old mother, an evident Alzheimer’s victim, to a table by the window steamed with the interior warmth. He went to order at the counter, but had almost immediately to return as she began to cry, lost in the crowded and unfamiliar room. After failing to calm her, he had to lead her back out, back to their car, back to their home, the invisible powers of a disease *as* confining and *more* frightening than any prison walls.

Such a moment epitomizes pathos rather than tragedy, and it takes great skill to respect the suffering of the sick and their families while also grasping and transforming it into a work of art. Floyd Skloot is the first poet I have run across in possession of such powers. Though far too many poets have tried to paste pathos on the page, hoping to overwhelm with raw power and impress with a rather egoistic display of profound feeling, Skloot impresses with an ear attuned to the counterpoint of sentence rhythm, rhyme and meter, and with the true artist’s commitment to making the most private and personal suffering revealable to others through a selfless attention to the vivid scene and dispassionate narrative.

His poems depict artists past the height of their powers, who stand in almost symbolic relation to the literal victims of age and disease. Tragedy, Aristotle tells us, is the failure brought upon a man through a flaw in his otherwise great character. Skloot’s chronicles of pathos depict the human individual (sometimes distinguished by accomplishment, sometimes simply by being family) who is robbed of his rightful powers through what is literally internal, but is external to the soul and therefore feels like an act of violence or confinement. Why, beginning with Yeats, did poets take for theme the “unjust” fastening of the soul to a failing body, including a failing brain? Such a question requires an explanation that transcends poetry. But Skloot’s depictions are startling, because they cast the frustrations of one’s sense of internal imprisonment and failing light in scenes that capture and elevate rather than betray their subjects. Of a senile hospital inmate he writes,

The old man only wants to walk
the hall. He cannot smile. He goes
from locked door to blazing windows
and back, fists clenched, able to talk

Of nothing but his need to get
out. Blind in light, he scowls and turns
back. The dark at the far end turns
out to be a door again, yet

his faith in escape never dies.

The spatial imprisonment compounds that of terminal disease, and Skloot's sense of physical suffering aids him in depicting other kinds of loss. The first poem depicts an actor who cannot play Lear, not because he cannot personify an individual who has suffered great misfortunes, but because he cannot bear a role where he would have to feign insanity – one's mind becomes more precious when one realizes it can be lost as easily as a watch. A dream vision of Gauguin draws the fear of illness and death into the great stakes of lost genius: "He died / at fifty-five, dreaming of food and wine / and I am fifty-five, dreaming of burial / by fruit trees that bear no fruit." "Yeshiva in the Pale, January, 1892" depicts Jews immolated in the middle of their worship by Tzarist soldiers who torch the "old wooden synagogue." A poem recounting Scarlatti's forced piano performance in competition with Handel and before a Cardinal captures the humiliation of all imposed trials. Many poems that other poets would clumsily cast as first-person lyrics, Skloot renders with the restraint of the third-person. When he does introduce himself as a character in the poems, as in the startling poems of "The Alzheimer's Suite," he remains careful to focus on the vivid cast of his mother. Such clear vision is the highest respect art can pay the suffering:

Sometimes she forgets
to swallow. Sometimes she holds a spoonful
of soup in the air and loses herself
in its spiraling steam. In a whirlpool
of confusion she may suddenly sink
in her seat and chew nothing but thin air.
She is fading away. Her eyes grow dark
as she looks at the old man sitting there
claiming to be her son. She slowly shakes
her head, lifts an empty cup and drinks.

There are many poems in this book and they are of uneven quality; even

some of the best poems display a slight mismanagement of meter or rhyme where precision was called for. But these are gripping poems that surpass all others I have seen in an increasingly crowded genre.