

JOHN HOLLANDER: Selected Poetry. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. ix, 338 p.

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Poetry is marginalized like nothing else literary, and this is in spite of there being many more “poets” in the United States than any other sort of wordsmith: few of these poets are published by major presses, and fewer still find themselves blinking in the (admittedly meager) limelight novelists, short story writers, and even popular historians are regularly exposed to.

John Hollander seems to be something of an exception to this general neglect. Here is someone whose first book of poems (1958), was chosen by W.H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets, who has steadily published books of poetry and criticism (not to mention appearances in anthologies) ever since, who has won the Bollingen Prize (1983), and who has had ample opportunity to teach up-and-coming others his craft at Connecticut College, Yale, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY.

High praise from the American Zeitgeist (for poetry, anyway: he isn't mobbed in public or consistently stalked by disturbed fans, one imagines, but the sort of recognition I described in the last paragraph well suits the sleepy poetic temperament flourishing in Academia today).

But what do we *think* of his *work*? Perhaps unfairly, I go on to largely discuss only one part of his *Selected Poetry*: the complete 1984 *Powers of Thirteen* (p. 13-106) which, apart from two other poems, is the most recent work in the selection.

Sound, traditionally, is the centerpiece of poetry, and we usually credit those we deem great poets with having a “good ear.” Unfortunately, this can (and does) mean many things, not all of them desirable. Once upon a time (and still today in many rather tight circles) it meant the quite narrow ability to juggle the various rhythm and rhyme schemes of traditional verse while at the same time producing a stream of language either natural-sounding enough or stylized enough (in surprising and intricate ways) to prevent, despite the artificial packaging, unintended laughter.

Another not uncommon thing a “good ear” means today is the capacity to mime the ebb and flow of the rhythms of various dialects and speech patterns. But this latter sort of good ear is far more common (one has to say it) among prose writers, such as Salman Rushdie, than among contemporary poets.

Hollander, it must also be said, is no exception: although his poetic practice reverberates with sound effects, this does *not* mean he has a good ear for the timing of quotidian chitchat; indeed, his awful grip on ordinary idioms (I’ll illustrate with examples later) shows the opposite. But Hollander’s work does not reveal an explicit grasp of the techniques of traditional versification either (although the work *implies* mastery in this area). Rather, he fixes on certain rhymic constraints and keeps *Powers of Thirteen* within them.

Suppose, for example, that one wanted to write a poem which sounded (in some highly stylized sense) like a babbling brook. What would be called for? Well, those who have occasion to listen to this sort of thing tell me that the sound is relatively constant: the *overall* impression is monotonous; but this impression disperses if you listen closely and hear instead the small cycles of sound patterns that almost repeat over and over, although never quite the same way (rather like chaotic phenomena, which in fact it’s an example of). It’s hard to actually parse brook

babble into distinct words (unless you're psychotic); but the sentences one can imagine are there are quite long ones. Occasionally, of course, there are surprising and quite unique sputters of sound, but the general effect is repetitive and soothing.

At its best, this kind of thing can be very good. Listen, for example, to “Reading the Brook”:

Patterns of light and flakes of dark breaking all across
The surface of the stream—rhyming words of wave, strophes
Of undulation, echoing of what just had been
Going on upstream a ways—we like to take all these
As matters of surface only, as part of the shaping
Or framing of the banks. But that would make the water
Stagnant and silent, whose face gives no interesting
Access to its depth. Yet when the brook gets to babbling,
Really has something to say for itself, the surface
—Broken, flashing, loud—changes places with what depths there are.
Then what forms on top will have been troped up from below,
And the otherwise soundless and motiveless bottom
Will be constantly noisy with the figures of light. (53, p. 42)

Rather continuous use of alliteration, both in obvious and subtle ways, plays a prominent role in this wet *tour de force*; careful and judicious use of syntax produces the long sentences needed, and internal rhymes as well as assonance provides echoes.

Not any poetry “voice” or emotional range fits the aesthetic choices made here: what’s required (this is practically *a priori*) is a meditative murmur, low-key word-play, subdued imagery (not too surreal, not too brilliantly imaginative), and an emotional presence neither turbulent nor extreme. Another good example is “Our Place”:

The universal great space, stately but ungrounded
Never seems, on star-guarded nights of enormous width,
To be our proper room, wherein we are, but rather
Where we are ever on the brink of being immersed
In what is beyond us and our being in the know.
And yet, on clouded midnights, all that outer black goes
Utterly blank, all the grains of light dissolving in
A mist of the implicit and the occluded; we
Are welcomed into what is a dim, high-ceilinged hall
We might as well be lords of. Impossibilities
Of too much openness having now clearly closed down,
The waters above muddied as if somehow for our
Own good, space retreats and makes way for us, and for room. (25, p. 27)

As a matter of pure sound, Hollander’s work *is* very nearly perfect, and there is no denying that, just as with many brooks, striking and delightful phrases turn up regularly: “a circus of incident,” “Hedged around by denials/Of scene,” “we redeem the barren/Plenitudes of picture,” “halted water,” “A horizon contrived by gray sky and gray water,” “The mess of exile,”

“star-guarded nights of enormous width,” “impure surprise,” “before sweets of doting had soured into doubt,” “privacy of their/Committees,” “assonance in the silent-growing grass,” “The thin journalism of our attachments,” and others.

But despite the admirable singlemindedness with which Hollander executes the aesthetic choices he’s made, *Powers of Thirteen* fails. Let’s see why and how:

What’s important in the solution of any aesthetic puzzle are syncretic effects. From the vantage point of “pure sound” something may be quite fine, and so also from the lonely perspective of sheer content. A pair of rhyming words, one immediately following another, does not *invariably* irritate, nor does scatology. Put them together, however, as Hollander does in the phrase, “flung dung,” and poetic failure results.

Notice the problem isn’t content: “airborne excrement” is far wittier (although this *isn’t* a recommendation that anyone use the phrase in a future poem). An initial diagnosis is that Hollander is so intent upon rhythms, rhyme, and the ebb and flow of sound that he (often) fails to see that the result is stilted, silly or worse. Only someone in love with *mere* sound would let “flung dung” pass, not to mention “automata of actuality,” “ninnies of experience,” or the strikingly awful: “A mighty spasm in her deep romantic chasm.” We *can’t* forgive this last item even though the poet hopes to moot criticism by noting the poem it’s in is about an apparently young Hollander trying to “rhyme” a girl into bed (*however that’s done*).

The same focus on sound (and worse, on *alliteration*, always a *dangerous* tool) leads Hollander to regularly indulge in arch and dull language: “A famous bold parabola propounds its puzzle,” “begrimed as beglittered now,” “lackeying/Layers of lower air,” or “Occasions usurp the false/Fronts of giddy centers on circumferences.” None of this will do.

I offered a singleminded (pathological?) focus on sound effects as the explanation for the awful phrases I regretfully quoted above: but this can't be the whole story. A driver's obsession with getting to a bar will explain why he went through a red light, but poems are not typically constructed the way cars are driven. They are not written "in real time" during a flood of inspiration, and sent during a later calm to the eager publisher. Rather they're slowly prodded and reworked into expressions of talent and genius (and all that). If Hollander's concern with sound so infirms him that he has to overlook other important aspects of poetic language (or any language, for that matter), this must be due to deeper flaws.

An illustration: Diction drops require exquisite taste and timing to execute successfully (almost no one does them well, probably because of inadvertent condescension), and one thing they require, apart from a sense of humor, is an ear, *but* to the strict constraints of ordinary diction: an ability to recognize what sounds (unintendedly) silly because of complex connotative effects (deriving, say, from pop culture), what works or doesn't because of the timing requirements of otherwise suitable words, and when and how one can warp clichés successfully, or twist popular language and slogans to poetic purposes.

Hollander is quite weak on all of this. One winces to hear (or see): "long drink of the milk of amnesia," "Love's wordless sword is mighty as the/Pen is," or "United we stand and shake the chains heard round the world," one is mortified Hollander thinks "My Deadware, widely imitated; blue/Skyware of an amazing lightness; tired/Hopeware that I abandoned for my own/Good reasons; Hereware," (and so on) is either witty, clever, or worth burdening readers with, that a flat joke like "the event of the season:/A clam playing a harmonica or something like/That," requires existence, or that the words "darkly dazzling," should survive the first rewrite merely because of an appealing stutter.

There are some things only an academic would claim are funny, some things only an academic thinks worth trying out in public; this is the only way to explain the poem on page 58 each line of which begins with an “M” (the effect is just what you fear), or the silly Hebrew letter name-game on page 49 (“Poor Al F.,” “Beth,” you get the picture), or Hollander’s awful uses of “Old John Reel,” “Dirty old Dick Dongworth,” “Louise Labia,” “General Whatsisface,” and so forth. When he writes “Sir Roger de Thumpington buggers the chambermaid/Behind the rectory,” I guess he’s trying to be satirical or light-hearted: “bawdy,” is the closest term for this (but does anyone *still alive* find this *funny*?).

No one should think that name games of *every* sort are ruled out; as always, you have to know what you’re doing. Read Amis’ *Money*, then read Hollander, and you’ll see the point.

One last worry: somewhere above I alluded to the possible unfairness of focusing attention primarily on *Powers of Thirteen*. Do the flaws I’ve described percolate throughout *Selected Poetry*?

Very nearly, yes. Like character flaws (which they so closely resemble), flaws in taste usually spread their presence ubiquitously. But *unlike* failures of craft, which actually disappear with effort and good will and the more elusive philosophical and psychological insights writers sometime betray, and which have a way of waxing and ebbing through a writer’s work over time, failures of taste seem ineradicable: what one usually learns to do is simply to *avoid* those literary genres where one’s flaws have opportunity for exposure. Sylvia Plath, for example, had the sort of melodramatic imagination which made for laughable short stories. The bizarre self-righteous rhetoric produced by that very same imagination succeeds very nicely in the monological setting of her poems.

My diagnosis has been a failure of “ear,” in a certain sense, coupled with a failure of taste. But perhaps Hollander’s problem is that he finds himself precariously situated on an important faultline in contemporary poetics. I think there’s something to this idea, and it has the nice implication that Hollander’s failures aren’t merely personal ones: there’s always been an aesthetic clash between what we might call the poetry of sensibility (exemplified by, say, the Romantics, excluding Byron) and the poetry of wit (exemplified by Donne, say). The modernist and postmodernist temperaments are supposed to have made a place for the poetry of wit (consider the belated revival of Donne’s reputation at the hands of Eliot) but in fact twentieth century poetry primarily remains a poetry of sensibility, and *not* wit—as Hollander’s work amply illustrates.

Poetry of wit comes with *real* constraints; for example, it can be “learned”—i.e., as Pope is, but it cannot be academic. Consider the term “pedant”—when used as an insult—and how what “pedants” find funny more often echoes humor than instantiates it. As a matter of sociological fact, there may not actually be *pedants* around any longer—but there are certainly many people, especially among academic poets, with a *pedantic* sense of humor.

The exquisite good taste, common sense, and good timing required of poetry of wit and the profound expression of one’s deepest sensibility, required of poetry of sensibility, operate at stark cross-purposes. Exquisite good taste—let’s admit it—requires a certain amount of insincerity, or glibness, a certain *absence* of emotion—one says what must be said, one says it how it must be said, so the result will be *funny*; expressing one’s sensibility, one’s emotional makeup, on the other hand, very nearly requires stylistic *failures* of certain sorts—depending on the sensibility in question.

Hollander's problem is that, for better (and worse) he is a poet of sensibility aspiring to poetry of wit. The aspiration, to a large extent, is of recent vintage in his career. As we work our way back through Hollander's poetic history, as it is represented in *Selected Poetry*, anyway, we find less that misfires in the way we've heard because Hollander less often attempts effects he can't execute. Occasionally, and alas sometimes for rather long stretches of text, failures of taste show up anyway, especially when he indulges his penchant for pseudo philosophical scholarship or Numerology (but let's not get started on *that*).

Nevertheless, real gems are less sporadic in the earlier work, and the selections from *A Crackling of Thorns*, his very first book, make it clear what Auden liked, and why.