

Conscious Allegory



Statement of Poetic Research

My first real awakening to the poetic pursuit that has filled the last ten years of my writing life occurred outside of my graduate work, outside of any class. I picked up a copy of Thomas Hariot's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. Certainly, the language triggered in my ear a visceral reaction to an unexpected music, foreign and familiar at once. But what struck me most in reading this first book describing the world known as America was the simple but difficult fact of witnessing a text in direct relation to that which was unknown. For the first time I began to understand that the work of poetry is not only a concern with the beautiful, and the complexities therein, but is also epistemological. Hariot's language describes what it also feared: wilderness and bewilderment. The catalog of resources became not simply a store of colonial enticement, but became for me the nervous and emotional categorization of a new world whose deeper resources lurked more darkly in the woods. The language hesitated in front of the very thing it

named; it changed the way I thought about poetry.

It also resulted in a series of poems, "Harriot's Round," which mimicked that language, put that older tongue into the poem's speaking voice. I began to sense that a mode of language opened up a mode of perception, and in ways to me still quite miraculous, to learn to sing in that language isn't simply the post-modern gesture of appropriation, but more fundamentally, is the ongoing availability to see and think with eyes other than one's own. My poems began to be populated: Mary Rowlandson, Samuel Sewall, William Byrd II, Thomas Morton, Edward Taylor, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jones Very, just to name a few. A poem didn't just open for me the fact of the historical. The poem became the unexpected ground in which history could be entered, could be brought into proximity, not to consider objectively the facts, but the opposite, to confound them back into experience.

This poem, "Conscious Allegory," comes directly out of my recent teaching of John Keats and Emily Dickinson. When asked who she read by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson, in part, replies: "You inquire my Books—For Poets—I have Keats— . . ." I became curious, to put it mildly, to discover in what ways Dickinson's reading of Keats could be felt within her own work. Such a question feels as if it should be the stuff of an essay, but I didn't want to discover the connection so as to explain the connection.; I wasn't seeking an argument or a conclusion; I wanted to discover the thick of that influence, and the only honest way I know to do that is to attempt to write a poem. Such a poem, in a strange way, seems to write itself. That is, I guess, the poem puts itself into conversation with the work that engenders it, and does so by including within itself the words or work it wants to enter into. Poetry is paradoxical in just this way (or in this way among many ways): if poetry wants to forge a path through the woods, it must first create the forest; if poetry wants to bridge a gap, it must create the distance it crosses. The reader familiar with Keats and Dickinson will note dozens of overlaps—from Keats's editing of *Endymion*'s typesetting to his definition of negative capability, from Dickinson's shock at her friends' marrying themselves away to her Master Letters. The effort isn't conclusion; the hope is complicity. What end does it come to? Well, in the poem, none at all. It begins where it ends in part to put into question the space the poem opens within itself. I don't mean the formal effort to be coy, though I see it can be accused of that. I mean to posit the poem in the curious reality the imagination opens, seeing that the work of imagination is one of the complex links forged between Keats and Dickinson. Imagination creates a world that exists by not existing—but it's not that simple. There is no world but this one to imagine. And so imagination as a poetic act calls into question the ways in which beauty, desire, thought interact to posit the world as real. That's no answer, I know. I hope it is a question.

Conscious Allegory

The first line of this poem ends right here.

The comma should be at *soberly*,
The next comma should follow *quietly*,
As I will demonstrate. Soberly, quietly,
He wrote down the first line of his poem:
The first line of this poem ends right here.

Beauty kept obliterating consideration
As the sun scathes the daisies at noon.
I mean, consideration kept wanting
Obliteration to arrive, as if I might say,
By example, the word *matrimonially*.
Some petals are for *love me*, and some

Speak more desperately other
Imperatives. Hands, cover my wounds.
But I have no hands, only these petals of
This poem's second line concerning grammar
Is dry and without tone not on accident.
This poem circumvents that wandering

That happens against its own limit as if
By chance, but in this poem there are no
Accidents, no discoveries to be made,
No Cortez, no starry ken, no mask
By which I mean to say, no Magellan.
I have no petals, only these eyes that ask

What is All? A syllable
That threatens to explode.
Ask a volcano, What is beautiful?
The smoke says what isn't told.
But I digress as does the cloth
Of a transparent dress

When a woman suddenly turns
And turns again in a kind of indecision
The fabric follows late behind
The body making a choice.
How many doors in the absolute dark
Are open, and how many closed?

The rhetorical question never arrives
Dressed "in white." I only put it on
Around my head to distract you
As when a child points up into the air
And says, The ash is falling, the ash is
Falling, and then I am the empty streets,

All of them empty, of Pompeii.
I don't mean to embarrass you
With my shy ways. I sit down
At one table almost each day,

A sober, quiet, method or way
To return to the first point, a period

That tells the breath to end
Because the music has ended.
I don't need to wear a mask
To pretend the woman is naked
Underneath her dress. Poor daisy knows:
The first line of this poem ends here.