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“What Mirrors Are For”
Approx. 1,800 Words

What Mirrors Are For

It’s autumn as I write this. Not officially, perhaps. But the fact is it’s “in the air.” A crispness. A flowing-on into the absence of flow. And a little distance ahead in time, winds are already awash with cliché-colored leaves. Some people are not cheered by all this. I think of Hopkins’s poor Margaret, who grieved over Goldengrove unleaving. But there are others, myself among them, for whom autumn is a bright surrender. Folks whose hearts are lightened by the lucid, tender blue of autumnal skies.

Odd, isn’t it. How we can wax lyrical — *personally* lyrical — over the utterly inhuman cycles of nature. Think of Wordsworth.

On the other hand, think of the boy at the end of Mary McCarthy’s *Birds of America*, to whom Immanuel Kant appears in a dream. As the demonically rational philosopher bends over the sleeping boy, he whispers, “Nature is dead, *mein kind*.”

I mention all this to lay groundwork for talking about a Colorado poet who has suffered from too much attention. Attention of the wrong kind, that is. I’m thinking of William Zaranka,

who in many quarters is known only for his fine editorial work, which has so far resulted in three weighty volumes — *The Brand-X Anthology of Poetry*, *The Brand-X Anthology of Fiction*, and *Literature in Briefs* — collecting parodies of great, near-great, and not so hot famous writers. Zaranka’s own satirical contributions to these books are considerable and not to be sneezed at. What should be sneezed at is the almost total neglect that has greeted the publication of his first serious book, *A Mirror Driven Through Nature*.

Ahtchoo!

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I’m risking humor here because Zaranka risks it in his best serious work. No one sneezes in *A Mirror Driven Through Nature*, of course (Such crudity is available only to criticism.) Instead, its humor springs from a profound tension between the poet’s experience of his inner life and his experience of the world “out there.” It’s the Wordsworthian vision of a humanly meaningful Nature versus McCarthy’s vision of a meaningless nature, and the double vision that results when the two co-exist in one individual is what makes William Zaranka’s poetry so intriguing. In fact, its’ more than intriguing: it’s characteristic of our mentality — yours and mine, dear reader — as we stand here near the end of the 20th century.

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I’m going to take the liberty of quoting the title poem of Zaranka’s book entire. We all deserve it.

It’s six feet by six feet, the mirror
 I help hoist into a pick up,
 Delivering it because he’s paid cash for it
 Out of my house to his house.

Leering, he promises to hand it up over his bed.
 I slip as we prop and angle the mirror
 On furniture pads, tilting my house on its porch,
 Upending the neighbors who sit watching
 A cat claw for balance on solid ground.

He drives in the cab of his truck,
 I sit on the deck in the back, wind flicking
 My hair in the great mirror now being driven
 Out of the city, which seems to be shrinking
 Into a tighter and tighter bundle of bricks,
 It’s skyline being replaced gradually by sky,
 Blue sky, and so many parachutists hung up
 In tree tops they seem to be clouds.

The world is more pleasing on its ear,
 In motion, and reversed, as now the superhighway
 Forks off like the thumb of a hitch-hiker
 And the road turns to dirt;

now all nature is waltzed

On the shocks of the truck, and the hayfield cows
 that have gathered in the mirror
 Are rocked as they chew, or buck like horses
 When a pothole bounces the truck.

Which is to say

The disposition of the mirror
 Is a form of power over nature, while saying so
 Is an ignoring of certain terrible
 Natural certainties,

like the tow-head

Squinting now through the crotch of his slingshot
 At a magpie—or is it at my mirror?

A moment will tell, for either the magpie
Will rise checkered out of its pecked cow carcass,
Or it will shatter and fall into a thousand
Magpies.

But neither happens.

We are almost there,
And I begin to wonder, what kind of a man
Bolts a mirror over his bed?
Will the mirror stay up? Will the ceiling?
What about the man's mistress? Imagine
Her scared blue eyes staring up
Into the heaven of his pumping ass —
And his eyes,
All pupil, staring back
Into hers from the oval of his hand mirror . . .
Seeing it for the first time from *that* angle,
How could she not regret it all,
Even the bastard children?

I'm sicker than he is, I think, imagining
Things like that, as already the pick up
Honks its horn, six children rush
Pell-mell out of a whitewashed farmhouse,
Scattering six chickens, and a soap-faced woman skips
From the slanting porch cradling twins
In her arms—
or are they magnolia blossoms
Gathered into pillowcases?

These fell while you was away,” she says
To her husband squinting at her as she snaps
Two fistfuls of cambric at the sky.
And instantly the air is awash with blossoms,
Chickens, children, kite tails, sunmotes—

And I believe whatever the mirror reflects
Is true, and whatever is not
May be the mirror be made lovely
Though never true,

being

Half in love with this world, half
With a vision of it.

The many excellences here—precise imagery, deft reversals of syntax and perspective, surprising but *right* metaphors, a pervasive wit, the subtle pains taken to make a music that matches emotion—are characteristic of the poems in *A Mirror Driven Through Nature*. I could go on and on about them. But that kind of stuff is for book reviews.

Right now, I’m interested in ideas.

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What is the mirror?

Consciousness? Mind? Imagination?

Whatever we call it, we *know* what it is. And we know what it means, as Shakespeare says, “to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature.” But, unlike Shakespeare, we no longer believe that the mirror can show nature “her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time of his form and pressure.” We are more apt to worry, like the speaker in this poem, that the mirror gives access to perversity: the “lover” holding up a hand-mirror to watch in the larger mirror his own pumping ass. This is a grim parody of self-knowledge. The study of man become voyeurism.

The speaker in Zaranka’s poem is appalled, then realizes it’s actually his own vision: “I’m sicker than he is.” But what does “sick” mean? The mirror is just a mirror. And yet it’s the

“disposition” of the mirror that matters; the disposition that is, in itself, “a form of power over nature.”

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I sense that your mind is wandering.

Perhaps you’re not disposed to talk about mirrors. Maybe you think this is all “criticism.” You never liked symbols anyway. You’d rather have the facts.

And yet our most rigorous fact-finder, modern Physics tells us that the closer we come to the real structures of nature, the more our notions of “fact” fail us. There are even those who suggest that nothing is real but the perceiver’s mind. And the fact is, many of the world’s leaders and an unhealthy percentage of its general population behave as if this were so: troops are “advisers;” military maneuvers a few miles off someone else’s coast are “not intended as a threat;” passenger jets are spy planes.

In other words, we increasingly act as if we believe McCarthy’s Kant — that nature *is* dead, and that nothing matters but the mirror in our own heads.

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Zaranka insists on a reality outside us, a world that can be reflected truly. He also insists on the mirror's imperfect disposition, which may yield untrue images that have the saving grace of being lovely.

This vision of consciousness or mind or imagination doesn't banish flux, but does give us a basis for *trusting* flux. What we are, in other words, may not be finally real, but it clearly partakes of reality.

And more. Since poetry pursues the Real *passionately*, it stands in basic opposition to the analytical attitude we've inherited from modern science. It seeks to cure us by giving our mirror a new disposition based on our own desire to be cured. The name Zaranka gives this new disposition is “love,” which is perfectly accurate.

Goodbye Kant. Hello Wordsworth!

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There is “a new image of the world, still timidly developing,” says Milosz, “the one in which the miraculous has a legitimate place.” That's why the poetry of our time that matters says it's okay to wax lyrical about nature; the best even asserts that it's healthy, suggesting that failure to love the inhuman world alienates us as well from the human.

In the work of William Zaranka and others of his generation, we're beginning to find not only nature, but human nature, portrayed with intimacy and affection and irony that does not exclude the poet. We are, as readers, no longer under attack. More and more we discover our

everyday lives heightened and made beautiful in language we recognize, so that we feel encouraged to fall half in love with what we are, half with a vision of it.

After all, isn't that what mirrors are for?