

"On Henning" Review of A Swift Passage by Peter Anastas in HOUSE ORGAN, No 87, Summer 2014

Peter Anastas

Especially

A cab driver tells me that nine out of ten people behave rudely, especially in the morning. Think huff, or evil-eye, or at least grumble. I practice yoga beside eighty-two year old Nancy. Rigorous. Just what I needed she says. A man's heart grows a new artery to feed blood into the other chambers. At home, my love's watching a basketball game and I'm writing in my journal. When I'm writing, he keeps talking. When he plays his guitar, I keep talking. Then the police swoop in, hornet like: "Yo! You, come here. Get against the wall."

Barbara Henning

On Henning

Book Review: *A Swift Passage*, by Barbara Henning, Niantic, CT: Quale Press, 2013, \$16

"There is simply ourselves," Charles Olson insisted in his 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference lecture, "and where we are has a particularity which we'd better use because that's about all we got... the literal essence and exactitude of your own. I mean the streets you live on, or the clothes you wear, or the color of your own hair." (*Causal Mythology*, Four Seasons Foundation, 1969)

Barbara Henning cites Olson as one of her inspirations.

Therefore, it's understandable that *A Swift Passage*, her important new collection of poems and stories, would enact the psychogeography proposed by Olson in his Berkeley lecture:

"Peddling along, I look down at my blue socks, one higher than the other. No city money for street repair this year, but instead an incredible pattern of intersecting cracks and potholes." ("Third Street Tucson")

"All I need is one little room and a mat to sleep on. A good blanket. Water, we need some water. And a little burner, a cup and a plate. And some vegetables and fruits. That's all, Barbara. That's all." ("Little Green Rooms")

"And here I am this morning on my knees in Jean's flower garden in St. Clair Shores. Michigan, scraping old paint off a cement swordfish and then painting it white up to the snout where no water shoots out any more." ("Lake St. Claire")

"An old woman crosses Eleventh Street, pushing a walker on wheels. Shrunken with her frame bent forward, wearing little heels and a tweedy old coat—she stops for a moment and lifts up her foot to kick some stone or dirt off the wheel." ("Second Avenue")

"Bike over to Chinatown to buy a wedding gift. Downhill Avenue A to Third Street, uphill to Broadway and then downtown downhill, the clouds hiding the sun, sometimes for many days." ("Single on a Stem")

"In a café on First Avenue, Julie Patton and I eat gazpacho and then we ramble through the park, standing in the dark under an ancient elm tree." ("Humidity")

"On highway 23, heading north toward the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. It's raining beautiful rain, pine trees, deciduous, now pine, now foggy, and the little trailers and trucks leave a trail behind them of smoke and water, the wipers going back and forth, pretty continual the rain today, but a lightness in the northern sky." ("Off Highway 23")

"Allen's ashes are buried somewhere on the back slope of Nelson Creek, a tributary from the Chocolate River. After a couple of big storms with trees collapsing, the creek now has two branches divide disconnect bifurcate." ("Nelson Creek")

"After you pass Orchard Restaurant, turn right on Sandling. Straight up you'll see a clearing and an old brown broken-down barn." ("Turn Right")

I quote from poems and short stories, which Henning says comprise "a blend of fiction and autobiography," some originating as "vignettes" from her journals, excerpted and woven together, "the way time and space were woven," in a process she calls "sequential quilting."

Peter Anastas

Her inspired collection also includes two full length stories, "Hegira," and "The Dinner," which expand on themes explored in the poems and shorter prose, while maintaining the same autobiographical tensions that underpin her incandescent road novel, *Thirty Miles to Rosebud* (BlazeVOX, 2009). The specificity of the places described, the encounters and insights experienced in them, the sense both of motion through the country, from the Lower East Side of New York to Michigan's Upper Peninsula, from Tucson, Arizona to Mexico City ("Sometimes it seems as if you are caught in the drift—And yet everything every act is impregnated with possibility fragility runaround sidestepping"), and meditative stasis ("It makes me want to crawl inside my tent and just lie still and listen to the rain"), combine to give the book its verbal and contextual richness.

In her concluding "Notes on This Collection" Henning speaks of traveling "through love and space," and this is perhaps the clearest and most accurate articulation of her purpose in having composed and collected these shimmering pieces. The love is not only of places intensely inhabited or thoughtfully traversed, it is of people—former partners and lovers, her children, friends kept and lost—longingly remembered and vividly described, yet without sentimentality. Rather, the emotion is a function of the specificity. Places for Henning are not merely names on roadmaps but histories which enfold us in them: "The water on earth and in our animal human bodies plants lands air is the same water that was here when the dinosaurs were lumbering water sound earth ether moving reassembling to destroy re story call forth again *om nama shivaya...*"

At bottom, what Henning suggests is an ecology: "Water flows from the Colorado River to the Gulf of California and Tucson gardens overflow downpour perennial springs irrigation tree-lined rivulet monsoon riverbed barren run dry Stein says that the work of man is not in harmony with the landscape, it opposes it and it is just that that is the basis of cubism." And this stunning book, in its form and content, is itself a reflection and a demonstration of that cubism, while also reminding us of Olson's further insistence in his Berkeley lecture that the earth remains "the geography of our being."

Kenneth Warren

from *The Emperor's New Code  
Dionysus in the Polis*

Vincent Ferrini is an amniotic poet whose love for the numinous mother liquefies the polis. Born with the Sun in Cancer, on June 24, 1913, in Saugus, Massachusetts, Ferrini dignifies Luna. Inasmuch as the 'loco' motion of the womb must be iconicized in a leaky opus, Ferrini's first will and final testament is located in an undifferentiated water world of primal symbiosis that can be fathomed in *The Pleroma*, his last book, published in 2008, a few months after he died: "My first experience of Pleroma, the knowing, came when I inhabited my Mother's womb for nine months; and I was sensing everything that was going on in her mind and her feelings" (1). Enscenced in Pleroma, then, Ferrini's "knowing" is relational and subjective rather than logical and objective. With a palpating sense of the emotional body, Ferrini is always touching upon "the madness inherent in the womb of the mother" (143), which is the feral side of creation perceived by Walter Otto in *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* (1965/1981).

Writ large in Ferrini's "universewomb" (1) is Dionysus, the god of madness, moisture, poetry, semen, wine, and women whose images ground emotions in a biological, natural, and sacred fecundity. The epiphany of Dionysus is the epiphany of the divine child carrying in never-ending process a unifying principle within the human psyche, which by nature projects onto the polis "the madness inherent in the womb of the mother." From *No Smoke* (1941/1999) to *Know Fish* (1979), from *Five Plays* (1959) to *Panacea* (2005), from *The Hiding One* (1973) to *Hermit of the Clouds* (1988), from *The Community of Self* (1986) to *The Pleroma* (2008), all these back-to-the-womb Dionysian dissolutions figure emotionally into Ferrini's participation with the archetype of divine madness that transforms an individual into a collective.

"The madness which is called Dionysus is no sickness, no debility in life, but a companion of life at its healthiest. It is the tumult which erupts from its innermost recesses when they mature and force their way to the surface" (143), declares Otto. Under the mask of