

## Bewilderment

by Fanny Howe

What I have been thinking about, lately, is bewilderment as a way of entering the day as much as the work.

Bewilderment as a poetics and an ethics.

I have learned about this state of mind from the characters in my fiction--women and children, and even the occasional man, who rushed backwards and forwards within an irreconcilable set of imperatives. What sent them running was a double bind established in childhood, or a sudden confrontation with evil in the world--that is, in themselves--when they were older, yet unprepared. This is necessity at its worst. These characters remained as uncertain in the end as they were in the beginning, though both author and reader could place them within a pattern of causalities.

Within the book they were unable to handle the complexities of the world, or the shock of making a difference. In fact, to make a difference was to be inherently compromised. And for me the shape and form of their stories changed in response to the perplexities of their situations.

Increasingly my stories joined my poems in their methods of sequencing and counting. I would have to say that something like the wave and the particle theories troubled the poetics of my pages: how can two people be in two places simultaneously and is there any relationship between imagination and character?

There is a muslim prayer that says, "Lord, increase my bewilderment," and this prayer is also mine and the strange Whoever who goes under the name of "I" in my poems--and under multiple names in my fiction--where error, errancy and bewilderment are the main forces that signal a story.

A signal does not necessarily mean that you want to be located or described. It can mean that you want to be known as Unlocatable and Hidden. This contradiction can drive the "I" in the lyrical poem into a series of techniques that are the reverse of the usual narrative movements around courage, discipline, conquest, and fame.

Weakness, fluidity, concealment, and solitude find their usual place in the dream world, where the sleeping witness finally feels safe enough to lie down in mystery. These qualities are not the stuff of stories of initiation and success.

But it is to that model that I return as a writer involved in the problem of sequencing events and thoughts--because in the roundness of dreaming there is an acknowledgement of the beauty of plot, but a greater consciousness of randomness and uncertainty as the basic stock in which it is brewed.

There is literally no way to express actions occurring simultaneously.

If I, for instance, want to tell you that a man I loved, who died, said he loved me on a curbstone in the snow, but this occurred in time after he died, and before he died, and will occur again in the future, I can't say it grammatically.

You would think I was talking about a ghost, or a hallucination, or a dream, when in fact, I was trying to convey the experience of a certain event as scattered, and non-sequential.

I can keep UN-saying what I said, and amending it, but I can't escape the given logic of the original proposition, the sentence which insists on tenses and words like "later" and "before".

And it is with this language problem that bewilderment begins to form, for me, more than an attitude--but an actual approach, a way--to resolve the unresolvable.

In the Dictionary, to bewilder is "to cause to lose one's sense of where one is."

The wilderness as metaphor is in this case not evocative enough because causing a complete failure in the magnet, the compass, the scale, the stars and the movement of the rivers is more than getting lost in the woods.

Bewilderment is an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability. It cracks open the dialectic and sees myriads all at once.

The old debate over beauty--between absolute and relative--is ruined by this experience of being completely lost by choice! Between God and No-God, between Way Out Far and Way Inside--while they are vacillating wildly, there is no fixed position.

Bewilderment circumnambulates, believing that at the center of errant or circular movement, is the axis of reality.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May  
and summer's lease hath all too short a date.

For poets, the obliquity of a bewildered poetry is its own theme.

The circumnambulation takes form as alliteration, repetition, rhyme.

Q--the Quidam, the unknown one--or I, is turning in a circle and keeps passing herself on her way around, her former self, her later self, and the trace of this passage is marked by a rhyme, a coded message for "I have been here before, I will return".

The same sound splays the sound-waves into a polyvalence, a daisy. A bloom is not a parade.

A big error comes when you believe that a form, name or position in which the subject is viewed is the only way that the subject can be viewed. That is called "binding" and it leads directly to painful contradiction and clashes.

No monolithic answers that are not soon disproved are allowed into a bewildered poetry or life.

According to a Kabbalistic rabbi, in the Messianic age people will no longer quarrel with others but only with themselves.

This is what poets are doing already.

For myself, a poem emerges by itself, like something developing in a dark place.

First I receive the impression of a time period as an experience of pure language, glimpses of actions, emotions and weathers. I jot down whatever comes through--in a rush of words.

Then I begin to see what is being said and to see it as it unfolds, as if from afar and sometimes I actually stand at a distance from the words that are there.

Spotting word-associations and what their sounds suggest and prove about the "point" of this emergent poem forces me to remove my body from the action; to let the words write the words.

Letting the lines cohere on their own volition is crucial.

Literally it is like watching someone else take form in the dark and I am weirdly disassociated from the action, an observer, a voyeur, though all the objects in the room, and the body, are familiar, are even "mine".

My biggest risk comes when I begin to tamper with the act, when I must restrain myself from intervening in an aggressive way.

During this phase, I might put the jottings away for days, weeks, even a few months.

I carry them around, I peek at them, and I sometimes intervene ahead of time.

This is when I can't watch certain of the words just fall and get kicked aside. I must salvage them because I have what amounts to faith in the fact that they will contribute to an as-yet unknown meaning.

In so many senses making these spiral, or serial poems, is very close to dream-construction, where we collect pieces of most and emotionally charged moments and see how they interact, outside of the usual story-like narrative.

But this is not a plan or an experiment. It is simply the way my poems come into existence and carry something out of my stories that is having a problem taking form there.

This is, I think, my experience of non-sequential, but intensely connected, time-periods and the way they impact on each other, but lead nowhere.

This is what gives them their spiraling effect within the serial form.

And ultimately I see the whole body of work as existing all but untitled and without beginning or end, an explosion of parts, the quotidian smeared.

In the meantime each little stanza expresses my infatuation with the sentence; and each stanza is a sentence where the parts and phrases are packed and shaped to bring out the best in them.

Like the disassociated stanzas in poems by Ibn Arabi, or Hafiz, I see my poems as being composed of queer sentences with lots of space, a dreamlike narrative, and a hidden meaning, so to speak, in that it is hidden from me.

The actual theological meaning of the word "salvation" is meaning.

To seek salvation is to seek a sense of meaning to the world, one's life.

And so somehow the business of bringing these poems to light is part of a salvific urge.

Not gnostic--in the sense of seeing humanity as cast down, unwanted, unloved, duped, expelled, tested and misunderstood--and not fearing that only a few are chosen to be loved by God or history--I am a victim of constantly shifting positions, with every one of those positions stunned by bewilderment--is it here, is it here, is it there?--and by the desire to shuck the awful attributes of my own personality. To toss the drek.

The illuminati used flagellation, levitation and starvation as a method of accounting for the power of the invisible world over their lives. Public suffering and scars gave the evidence of hidden miseries which had begun to require daylight..

The poet uses words to do the same. From the lashes of whip and ink the secrets become common, rather than signs of individual genius.

After all, the point of art is to show people that life is worth living by showing that it isn't.

Bio: Fanny Howe's most recent book is Nod from Sun and Moon. One Crossed Out was published last year by Graywolf Press. This talk is excerpted from a longer version presented 9/25/98 on the Poetics & Readings Series, sponsored by Small Press Traffic at New College, San Francisco.