

Stanley Hopper and Mythopoetics

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From Lines from two poems come to mind on this occasion, both used by Stanley Hopper in a lecture in the mid-sixties. It was part of a lecture series I put together with Joseph Campbell and Rollo May. Later it became part of a book that Joe Campbell edited, called *Myths, Dreams and Religion*. From W. H. Auden's poem, then: "The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning"

*What but tall tales, the luck of verbal playing,
Can trick his lying nature into saying
That love or truth in any serious sense,
Like orthodoxy, is a reticence.*

And from Wallace Stevens' "On the Road Home"

*It was when I said,
"There is no such thing as the truth,"
That the grapes seemed fatter.
The fox ran out of his hole.*

Stanley Hopper was born in Fresno, California in 1907, educated at the University of Southern California and later at Boston University. While he was in Boston, he met Edwin Markham, who had a profound influence on him. It was then that he started to write poetry. He also met Lynn Harold Hough there, who later with Stanley would begin at Drew University the first graduate program in Theology and Literature in the United States. Stanley studied, while in Boston, with Alfred North Whitehead, with Babbitt on romanticism and with F. O. Matthiessen. In Europe he studied in Switzerland with Emil Brunner in theology and in Oxford with Gilbert Murray in the classics. While in England, he met Cleanth Brooks and T. S. Eliot. The three of them talked a great deal about culture in relation to the writing of poetry; and Stanley began an epic poem, which he was at work on, still, the week he died, called *The Book of Enoch*.

It has never been published, though pieces of it appear in his collection of poetry, *Why Persimmons?*

After Stanley's stay in Europe, he returned to work at Drew University in Madison, and it was then that, with Hough, he began the Religion and Literature graduate program. In 1938 he read poetry to the Third Congress of American Poets and on that occasion was made an honorary member of The Browning Society. He was the only American delegate to the First Conference on Religion and the Arts at the Ecumenical Institute in Celigny, Switzerland in 1950. (How far we've come in fifty years!) He chaired the Commission on Literature at the National Council of Churches that Bill Conklin has referred to, and was on that Commission with Amos Wilder, Nathan Scott, Jr., Cleanth Brooks, W. H. Auden and Marianne Moore. During that period 1948-50, he organized a series of lectures at the Jewish Theological Seminary here in New York City, which was later published as a book called *Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature*. In 1960 he gave forty-six TV lectures on "Religion and Literature" for the CBS summer semester, which included an interview with the Dante scholar, Francis Fergusson, and also an interview with W. H. Auden, whom he had known for some time.

In 1967 Stanley Hopper went to Japan; and I have to say -- thinking about what Langdon said about the new being and the centrality of Christ, to Tillich, and the nature of special revelation -- it changed his life. He was sixty years old by then; and when he returned, he did not return to Drew as Dean of the Graduate School, but to Syracuse University as the Bishop Ledden Professor of Religion. The discussions with the Zen Masters of the Kyoto School, particularly about Heidegger, really altered his way of thinking and teaching about religion in a direction we will see in videotape. He was at Syracuse from 1968 until his retirement in 1975, after which he was Visiting Professor at various universities: Minnesota, North Carolina, Emory, Southern California -- and then back at Syracuse.

Let's look, then, at a tape made in 1977, ten years after his stint in Japan. Notice that Stanley's title for the article he refers to is different from the ARC series title I mentioned earlier, *Myths, Dreams and Religion*. Hopper's title was *Myth, Dream, Imagination*, as if there is no religion any longer, post mortem dei, after the death of God, after his trip to Japan -- only imagination, only poetics. And

especially pay attention to his comment about the crisis of mythological consciousness; this is relevant to our theme. Some of you will remember that in 1963 Time published the first issue it had ever published with no picture on the cover. On Easter Monday, the cover was black with three words: IS GOD DEAD? Joseph Campbell, Rollo May and I used to receive invitation after invitation to WNYC and other radio and TV stations during that time of theological ferment, and always the interviewer asked, "What are the myths of a mythless time?" It was assumed that, in some sense of the phrase, God is dead. Then what? I am reminded of, perhaps, the best opening line of a piece of fiction that has ever been written, by Donald Barthelme. A short story called "City Life," begins, "When God died, it put the angels in an awkward position." Stanley is going to talk about that awkwardness in this tape.

[Note: The tape's occasion was an interview by Dan Noel at Drew University. The words that follow are Hopper's {slightly edited} words, as he answered questions by Noel.]

There is a dimension in teaching today whereby we have to learn how to unlearn; and learn how to let the learner learn, instead of giving out information and reinstating traditional perspectives. The breakup of a symbol system, such as we have been experiencing in the West almost since the Renaissance, makes us feel alienated from the world, from reality. We may recognize this as a good thing, a release from repressive commitments. Artists working in all media express this feeling, coming up with fresh perspectives which function as counter myths.

Waiting for Godot, for example, is a charade, a problem thrown at us as a Japanese ko'an that we have to construe to understand. The poet, Wallace Stevens, keenly aware of the loss of supportive myth structures, is concerned with the nature of myth, as if there is something more primordial than the Greek or Roman or Christian projections. So when we speak of that pantheon dropping away, we have to include all of that which developed in the classical world picture. We are now interested in another world picture, and it makes a difference.

When we are moving from countermyth to some new positive myth structure, in between one way of seeing and another way of seeing, there occurs the temptation to the pseudo-myth, the profane myth. That word 'profane' developed as a result of commercial transactions in front of the temple, the fane. When we lose the dimension of the temple, we then tend to pro-fane it with the myths that attend upon business. For example, Mercury is a car, Pegasus is a gasoline, Mazda is an electric light bulb. And less obviously, our obeisance to the term 'fact' functions mythologically, as we unconsciously bow down to it. This is pseudo myth. To go beyond this is very difficult. Stevens is attempting that -- trying to find a fresh way to lay hold on ultimate meaning in such a way that it will be confirmed by deep experience and restore the lost vitality of meaningfulness, to oneself and the world about us. If we lose a world picture, a dualistic way of seeing, with God above and ourselves below, that way of seeing is gone. With the old transcendence gone, we tend to be thrown back on ourselves where we discover a depth within ourselves, and we find that it curiously sustains us, once we have found that relationship. So we tend to move from a transcendent world picture to a picture of what I have called radical immanence.

[Note: Hopper now speaks of two new approaches that can help us gain access to inner depth, the first being depth psychology and dreaming.]

After two or three centuries of discounting the dream -- having lost its value with objective thinking -- we are now recognizing and recovering its extraordinary validity. The ego consciousness has lost contact with other elements of the self, one of these the deep self or unconscious. Being attentive to dream data is one way of reconnecting the ego to the unconscious.

Also, the spontaneous blasting of, perhaps, the unconscious collective psyche of the west

-- or of something in experience, which our own religious tradition has somehow failed to communicate to us -- has led to a very eager interest in certain dimensions of eastern thinking. One reason for this is that we find it difficult to retrieve these dimensions in our own tradition, because of our tendency to reappropriate them -- using the same way of thinking that has already emptied them of their depth and significance. So this move to the east may be a detour whereby, by discovering something there, we might possibly return to our own tradition with a fresh perspective on it, and we might retrieve much of what we seem to have lost. T. S. Eliot in "Ash Wednesday" talks about redeeming the time, and redeeming the unread vision in the higher dream, as though there is something in our tradition, classically, Christianly, Hebraically, that was either misread or was unread; but given the experience of the impoverishment of our symbolic world and our somewhat desperate anxiety, it puts us in a position to look again, to re-envision everything that we have known. So the turn to the east is helpful here.

The first thing that impressed me, studying in Japan, was that Zen philosophers in Kyoto have developed a strategy whereby the ego consciousness can be talked out of, so to speak, its preoccupation with its need to objectify; taught to break up the subjective-objective dichotomizing that characterizes the western mind. They use the strategy of the Zen ko'an as a kind of riddling, aphoristic statement that seems to make no sense; and the function of this is to get me to see that I am the ko'an that has to be solved -- not intellectually, but in living the riddle of life. It turns me toward depth consciousness, or the ground of being. Now that is a western phrase, and we think we are talking about the ultimate, but it is another metaphor. The eastern trick is to break through all these metaphors until we can't resort to another metaphor. We must break through the bottom of the pail and leave the thing open to what they describe as nothingness or the void or what Rilke calls "the openness." It is what the mystics in the west have taught us, some of them extraordinarily well.

Another dimension in Zen recognizes movement in three steps: the great doubt, a meekness about our customary egoist ways of seeing; the great depth, a penetration into the abyss; movement through this brings us to the great wisdom. I've used a similar formula: the step back, so we can see the light under our feet; the step down, which is a movement into the deep self; and through the useful tension between these two, the step through into what they call the great wisdom.

I have said that western theological language has yet to come to terms with the primary imagination. To explain this: When we lose a dualistic world picture, transcendence is not available to us. We are thrust back on ourselves, and we make a discovery that divinity, so to speak, is a presence, that its presences, and if we are open to its presencing, it can presence within us. Take, for example, Meister Eckhart's proposition, "God is nearer to me than I am to myself." It is like that, whether one talks theologically or ontologically. The presencing of being is much the same thing.

But it is something I must not look at. It is not out there. It is something I must experience. Now, there is a danger here: that we commit subjectivism, romantically. People like Wallace Stevens are on the right track when they get us to see that being presences anywhere in anything: anything is mysterious, shot through with the mystery of apogees. My pencil, my book, the plum branch, these things contain in the microcosm what is already present in the macrocosm, and the trick is for me to learn how to be open and receptive to this, so that it moves in and through me. That is why theopoetics would seem to be a more appropriate way of thinking about the ineffable. Theology tends to develop talk about God logically, where the logos is constrained within the model of Aristotelian propositional thinking; whereas theopoetics stresses the poem dimension, the creativity of God, his is-ness, if you wish to theologize it, so that I must move within his own creative nature and must construe him creatively, so that I would become co-creator with God, if you must speak theologically. If I am going to talk about God, I must recognize this

mythopoeic, metaphorical nature of the language I use. Kierkegaard says this. But when we start talking theologically, we lose the poetic.

Rilke knew that poesy is a form of celebration, it is not merely questing. It moves into the depth and through it, so that it reaches the point of wonder, adoration, acceptance, joy. Rilke lived this. Here is a poem , “O Tell Us, Poet” in which he addresses himself as poet and responds :

O tell us poet, what you do

I praise.

But the dark, the deadly, the desperate ways –

How do you endure them, how bear them?

I praise.

But the nameless, anonymous, which no word portrays -- What do you call that, poet, nevertheless?

I praise

From whence is your right, your assumed role assays

To be sincere in each mask?

I praise

And you know the stillness and the passionate blaze

As a star and a storm?

Because I praise

[End of tape. David Miller again]

You noticed how Stanley emphasized that teaching involves unlearning, or letting learn -- especially, since we are so vulnerable to pseudo myths and to the so-called mythology of data and information as being some-thing, as opposed to no-thing (virtual reality, cyber reality) -- nothing. Nothing at all. The poets, Stanley was emphasizing, seem to have some intuitive sense of this, but they put it in a negative or metaphoric form, charade, ko'an, or parable.

The difficulty here is finding a strategy for unlearning. That is hard, because if there are areas of our life, thought, religion, mythology, meaning, psychology and ontology that we have not noticed, how are we going to find them? How do we find things we don't know about in the first place? If you try to find them, you will doubtless do it in the same mode of learning and understanding that has emptied them and occluded them in the first place. You try to find a no-thing as if it were a something. What you find is not nothing, but a negative something. And so that kind of search merely reinstates the problem. The strategy that Stanley talked about is a strategy whereby the ego invents a consciousness that tricks itself out of an objectivizing perspective. It tricks the mind into being open to the nothing, those things that by their very nature are not things -- like love and God and meaning and life and death.

But the problem of being open to the nothing has the same difficulty. You say, "Now I have experienced the nothing." And of course, you haven't experienced that at all. You have experienced a negative something. You are in love with love. You are not in love; there is no eros. So you even have to give up that experience and be open to the bottom of the pail dropping out.

This is a difficult matter, and when it dawns on one, it produces something like Tillich's shock of non-being; in Buddhism, it is the great doubt that precedes great wisdom. This is what one experiences in what Langdon called the deliteralization of myth, when we see that myth doesn't refer to any thing. It refers beyond things. So it cannot have an objectivized referent. Our theologizing, therefore, should be a poetizing. The indirection of poetry is another strategy, like the ko'an, that gets around the problem of objectivization, of literalization.

I am going to read three of Stanley Hopper's poems from his book, *Why Persimmons?*. These three are part of a series he called "Who Is the Poet?" Mystics would say that a poet is not a special kind of person; every person is a special kind of poet. So as you listen, know that the poet is you.

"Who is the poet?"

He

Whose heart is firm
 As desert rock
 A rock on which
 The winds
 Have beat
 A rock from which
 Fresh waters leap
 When Moses strikes
 His rod
 On it.

"Who is the poet?"
 He
 Who knows
 He does not know
 But he can why
 We die to grow
 Or don't to die
 And when
 Between the tusks of time
 Our untranslated visions lie
 Our nothingness
 Is sometimes found
 In rhyme
 And flows
 Like those four waters
 Out of
 Paradise.

"Who is the Poet?"
 He
 Who strides between
 The upper and the nether
 Stones
 Who ventures
 Into caverns where
 The green and fiery monsters
 Sit
 On reddish
 Thrones
 Who
 In the gaping daylight

Knows the logos of
Our discontent
The whited bones
The torrid zones
The agonies
Of what was meant
Who
At the central
Clogged exchange
Sits stupefied
And bears
The time' s verbatim in
His howling phones
Yet:
Listens for
The tempering
Tones.