

Introduction

Dreamwork is a collection of poems that bravely embraces history – personal, family, generational, national, and transnational. It traverses distant times and places, visits with the present, and carries forward into time. With much sensitivity and with no bias, Hart pays homage to antiquity, the classical, the modern, and the postmodern. This collection is a journey through time, a meditation on ruins and change, a serious undermining of temporal “facts,” and a subtle defamiliarization of what we refer to as “history.” “Call this settling with the Indians,” Hart writes, in Poem 11:

They surrounded the marsh
And in the hush of night
Killed the guards, with stealth

Crept in and lit the dwellings
 And shot woman and child
 As they ran out asleep

Philosophical observations on everyday and historical events and the engines behind them — such as human greed, thirst for power, war, tyranny, and the universal desire for justice and democracy — are the substance of many poems in this collection, and they speak to Hart's profound look at life and his unsentimental nostalgia for a reality that dwells in dreams. Hart succinctly draws the situation for us in the following lines from Poem 75:

... Peace and stillness
 may be the image of our sleep
 but be the freehold of our peace.

The poems also tackle the nature of knowledge and the irrefutable bond between wisdom and imagination. Imagination crystallizes in poetry, which is to Hart the purest form of language just as mathematics is the purest form of science:

There is a gap in my head the dentist found
 Not sure what it is, he took x-rays.

One of my friends went to the dentist
 And died weeks later of what they discovered.

Poets are animists and dream
 The is between word and world....

Poem 96

A similar relationship exists between reality and
 dreams as seen in the opening lines of Poem 51:

The utopia of dreams denies
 A doggerel we take as lies

 A willow hangs over the stream
 And is not abstract green.

One can almost hear the lyric voice in these poems
 asking about the importance of dreams and the
 value of poetry. The speaker in Hart's poetry seems
 to ask, What is the point of having a head without
 a heart?

Unlike the narrators in Dante's *Divine Comedy*,
 and despite their literary merit, many other assuming
 works of the same nature, the persona in *Dreamwork*
 does not land on any celestial terrain in his quest to
 define wisdom. The only certainty the speaker in
 these poems seems to be aware of is the undeniable

link that exists between imagination, dreams, poetry, and wisdom.

This certainty journeys to a metatextual level upon which the speaker — reminiscent of the poet's Romantic predecessors — is heard to ruminate on the figure of the poet and the nature of his vocation. Many years ago, Percy Bysshe Shelley called people's attention to the importance of poetry and deemed poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Centuries later, echoing Shelley, Hart describes the life of a poem in a possible world where dreams have become words:

Something futile: crafting
 A poem, translating a dream

 Into words. The possible world
 Takes hold

 In unseen roots.
 Poem 52

The probing into the nature of poetry culminates in Poem 73, where the speaker announces the inevitability of poetry in the face of those who would deny it:

This poem — like prose
verse — tense, terse, loose

A little like dreams
builds a logic

That despite
the rain will come.

Last but not least, I should note that despite its dreamlike quality, *Dreamwork*, much like Hart's previous poetry, is deeply rooted in landscape. Place and time are equally important to Hart. The juxtaposition of historic places with the more recent and contemporary settings in this collection is in line with the continuity of thoughts that have preoccupied man and woman then and now, and they speak to the exuberance of the motifs in these poems, which have been conceived mostly on trains connecting cities in the northeastern United States.

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