Denied the Work of Natural Generation

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Reading the work of Karl Kirchwey feels like getting to spend quality time with a resurrected Modernist. With its tight structure and deft language woven on a loom of history and mythology, the poetry maintains the kind of gravity and allusive depth T. S. Eliot dreamed of. It is as if Kirchwey spilled a bit of Frazier, Faulkner, Joyce, and H.D. and let it run joyously through the veins of his imagination.

Mount Lebanon is the latest Kirchwey volume. Its title references New Lebanon, New York, the site of the Mount Lebanon Shaker Society and center of the Shaker movement beginning in the late eighteenth century. Haunted by the paradoxes associated with Shakerism that both glorified and doomed it, Kirchwey uses the place of Mount Lebanon to explore a layering of spaces and themes that accesses vast time and situation. In fact, the eponymous poem serves its role well, as “Mount Lebanon” encapsulates the issues that occupy Kirchwey: the causes of an extinction of a culture, the forgetting of that culture, and the resurrection of it through art that is equated with new flowering.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, “Spirit-Land,” literally considers spirits/ghosts in a present-day landscape. The most obvious ghosts are those of the Shakers, and Kirchwey draws a contrast between their carefully constructed spaces and the current waste-land of interstate highways, used car lots, and fields of Coke cans that has replaced them. But those are not all: Kirchwey also cites such individuals as the Visigoth king Alaric—who dictated that he be buried with his treasure and the Busento River diverted to obscure the burial place—to show the irrecoverability of history. Also running through the poems in the first section (and beyond) is a focus on the death of the poet’s mother; her ghost broods over the book as surely as those of the Shakers.

The second section bears the title “Fleshing Off,” the Shakers’ word for sex. As Kirchwey writes in “Mount Lebanon,”

It angered me, such willful paradox:

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that male and female might, loving, subsist
as one in God, yet be denied the work
of natural generation, for the spark
of earthly love, what they called "fleshing off;"
they impatiently and contemptuously dismissed.

Given the above passage, the reader might expect the second section to be a reveling in carnal pleasure, but Kirchwey is after bigger game. He ponders, in an impressively nuanced way, not just the grandness of sexuality but also the other rich things lost when procreation is removed from life experience. "A Glass of Water" and "Barnegat Light" are tender poems about the emotions the poet feels in connection with his daughter, capturing heartbreakingly quiet moments of pride and love for a child—her leaving behind a glass of water on the breakfast table to go out and play, her complaining "I'm afraid in my legs" (51) when walking up the 217 stairs of a lighthouse on a family outing. Likewise "Blue" talks wittily about the poet's son dying his hair that color, and "September" remembers a picnic at Valley Forge, a poignant other setting full of a different kind of iconic significance but evoked against the endearing banality of a family event.

"In the Garden" is the title for the volume's final section, and its underlying theme is a Whitmanian rebirth/continuance of the past. The catalog of flowers is impressive in these poems, and their emblematic purpose seems clear enough. But another part of Kirchwey's garden are Classical statues that represent the traces of past cultures: here the Classical elements that appear throughout the book become even more prominent, their presence representing the abstract concept of survival. This is a quiet kind of survival and at times an oddly postmodern one that rankles with the more negative connotation of postmodernity in the first section of the book. In "Crape Myrtle," for example, the poet has bought a copy of the Dying Gaul statue for his garden from a library sale: purchased as such, the monument brings ancient Rome into present-day America, the statue depicting the preservation of a soldier's life on the cusp of extinction, the copy of a copy (of a Greek original) removed from a repository of writing, an archive (a secret, in the Derridean sense) and placed in a location of flowering life. The poem also references a bust of Julius Caesar exhumed from the Rhône River, the conqueror of Gaul surviving his vindictive beheading and burial. Such emblems of survival befit the quiet stamina of the Shakers themselves—their survival in memory and in the objects they crafted if not in actuality—Kirchwey's book being a monument to the survival of that memory, that ghost.

This quietness is the overall strength of the book. Although Kirchwey explores more graphic images of Vietnam and war generally in the final section (elements that may strike the reader as being abrupt and their relevance strained), the poems in Mount Lebanon are not demonstrative. They are the works of a poet dedicated to the strength of craft, to the idea that patient talented work produces poems of high worth based on their integrity as crafted items. Whether the poems proceed in a complex rhyme scheme or ramble outside the confines of traditional structures, they always present in the full polish of careful crafting. In terms of image patterns and thematic layers, Kirchwey takes no less care, holding multiple moments and places in an impressively even palimpsestual fabric reaching from the classical to the present.

Again, this latter technique is a hallmark of Kirchwey's writing, as his mytho-historical sense consistently shows the significance of Western culture's foundational images in the present moment. Although he evokes Christian elements and a significant strain of Eastern religious language and imagery runs through the poems, his dedication to keeping the book relentlessly pagan is impressive. This focus appears not only in his original poetry but also in appropriate translations, such as that of Rimbaud's "Faun's Head." At one point, Kirchwey flirts with an iconic Christian moment in the lines, "He cursed the fig when he passed it the first time, because he was hungry and it bore nothing for him" (68) from "Epigrams on the Fig" but insists that the "he" refers to Hephaestus instead of Christ. One gets the sense that the Classical world is very alive for Kirchwey (perhaps being the Andrew Heiskell Arts Director at the American Academy in Rome helps), and that aliveness quickens the present moment and, by extension, his poetry.

These poems have evocative power, but again their real strength lies in their craft and their allusion. With this book the reader gets an array of well-turned beauties, and reading them brings the kind of satisfaction such crafting offers.