

Vintage Weinberger

A review written by Eli Gottlieb for *The Village Voice*, May 1996

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On his own, quietly and steadily well off to the side of the canonical turf wars of the last few years, Eliot Weinberger has been amassing an oeuvre of supple prose writings on the linkages of literature, translation, the visual arts, global politics, and myth which is both of deep diagnostic usefulness at the current moment and provides a jolt of rare literary pleasure into the bargain. Though reminiscent in his intellectual range of writers like Kenneth Rexroth, Edmund Wilson, and the early Sontag (and like them unattached to any university or particular literary camp), Weinberger's distinction as an essayist is his split vision: attuned to the unravelment of Empire all around us, he at the same time focuses unblinkingly on the concrete fact of poetry as it refracts, inscribes, and sublimates that turmoil.

His involvement with poetry is not academic (in fact, he never finished college), but rather instinctual—and lifelong: as editor of the poetry magazine *Montemora*, which ran from 1975 to 1982, and the anthology *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*; as translator of a variety of poets, most notably Octavio Paz (whom he began translating as an adolescent), and through his own passionate readerly involvement in the form. “I’ve read it every day of my life since I was thirteen,” he writes of poetry in his most recent book of prose pieces, *Written Reaction*. “It is, among the man-made artifacts, my primary source of knowledge of the stuff of this world and the next.”

From modernist poetry he has learned, as an essayist, about collage and the need for concision and exactitude. He has taken to heart poetry’s fluid conflicts between the public and the personal, its conflation of the contemporary and the archaic, and its taste for the encyclopedic. Whether the essays deal with the representations of tigers in poetry and popular culture, or Aztec, Mayan, Chinese, or Indian literatures; whether the subject is the history of ethnographic documentary films, myths of Atlantis, George Bush and the war in Panama, or the Nazca lines of Peru poetry remains his acid test for the of a given cultural representation.

For this reason he writes especially well and passionately about the state of poetry today. And his diagnosis is bleak: “It was once a village where the neighbors chatted and feuded. Now American poetry is a little nation of citizens who are unknown to each other, a federation of cantons where the passes are snowed in and the wires are down.”

Many of the essays from the first two books, *Works on Paper* and *Outside Stories*, are not essays as we know them, but rather dismantlements and explorations of the essay form—that spacious genre which literary critic Georg Lukacs once described as belonging to “the ultraviolet” part of the literary spectrum. The opening essay of his first book, *Works on Paper*, is a seemingly endless series of somewhat fantastical observations on India:

In India there is a fish whose skin is so hard that men make their houses out of it.

In India the wise men can produce and quell great winds. For this reason they eat in secret.

Several pages of these citations are presented without commentary, and only at the end do we understand that they're all images drawn from documents extant in the year in which Columbus set sail for India.

As for the prose itself: a word of background. Though his essays can sometimes recall those of Guy Davenport for the meatiness, the free-range internationalist erudition and the taste for the archaic, the prose is written in a controlled low-gear quite unlike Davenport's lexical flashiness, and for those wanting lots of heat and calories in their literary cooking, a bit of a readjustment may be in order.

If you pass through the speed bump of entry to the sentences, however, you'll quickly discover that the register of the prose is the product of a highly disciplined intellect at work, and that the essays are relentlessly honed and nearly entirely free of attitudinizing or cant. Polemics there are in abundance: but one receives the unmistakable impression reading his sentences that he has no brief other than for the quality and literary implications of the work or issue under discussion. He writes, in other words, not as a professor with a territory to defend, but rather as an extremely well read citizen-advocate of literature, bullshit detector firmly in place.

Plus, he's funny. Decrying the current explosion in literary identity politics, he writes "One is only a 'poet' at the end of a long line of qualifiers. Hart Crane is now a gay WASP Ohioan." Poet Robert Bly gets his comeuppance when the flabby Whitmanism of his verse is described as "a forest of exclamation marks, through which the phrase 'I love' runs like an asylum escapee."

In the more extended pieces, Weinberger's intellectual method is often to employ a kind of anthropological field-dig approach, drawing grids through a wealth of carefully researched documentary material and then moving up and down a vertical axis to find unusual connections and felicities along the time line. Much of "Dreams From the Holothurians," a slightly tongue-in-cheek anthology of theories advanced to prove the existence of Atlantis (the mother of all archaic origin myths), is written in long choral lines:

Why does the Quran speak qf the people of Ad who built the City of Pillars and were destroyed for their wickedness?

Why did the Scythians and the Mayans elongate the heads: of their babies? And why were the Pharaohs bald with flat foreheads?

Who were Adam, Adonis, the Persian god Mashab-ad and the Hindu gods the Aditya?

*Why do Norwegian lemmings swim out to sea as though looking
for a land that is no longer there, circle aimlessly and die?*

There are essays in praise, such as those dedicated to the recovery of lost poetic eminences like George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, Kenneth Rexroth, or the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro. And there are his provocative essays on American literary politics—provocative insofar as they call for the abolition of the NEA as a state-funded attempt to buy the silence of writers during the egregious years of Reagan-Bush:

What has happened is that in the literary ecosystem, the natural selection of poets has been thrown off-balance by the elimination of the poets' main predator; money In the past, the exigencies of earning a living had discouraged all but the most committed (or more exact, obsessed), and those who held on were nevertheless forced out into the world as workers, journalists, capitalists, bohemians- all of which, in turn, had nourished the poetry. Now anyone could remain forever on campus in the spring time of adolescent poetry-writing. And the artificially induced explosion of the production of small presses and magazines would insure that everything written would find its publisher, if not its readers.

Of his two previously published essay collections, the second, *Outside Stories*, is probably the more fluid and satisfying. The pieces are more confident, the leaps and swoops and recombinations of the essay form more daring and successfully achieved. *Written Reaction*, his recently published collection, is composed of the *disjecta membra* of a writing life—catalogue essays, reviews, notes, and some extended articles. The pieces are more topical, “occasional,” and often crackle with polemical fire. As in any book composed of occasional writings, there are times when one wishes he went a little further—as when, for example, in an article entitled “God Is Down,” on the computer and literature, he misses a rich chance to delve into the McLuhan-esque aspects of the computer’s impact on literature, the arguments about its flattening of linguistic affect in literary fiction, and its relation to language and skill acquisition. These quibbles aside, *Written Reaction* is a worthy companion to the first two books and, with its articles on East Berlin and contemporary Chinese poets, and important pieces on translation and multiculturalism, rounds out our understanding of the range of Weinberger’s interests and affections.

Amidst the sectarian boom and blast of the current American literary scene, Weinberger’s prose writings provide a radical alternative: essays which sustain themselves exclusively on their range, rigor, and formal ingenuity, while remaining consistently nonaligned. As he himself concludes in the essay, “The Revolution at Saint Mark’s Church,” “I think we have to assert, over and over, that the revolution of the world requires many revolutions of the word, and that poetry does indeed make something happen, no matter how slowly it moves from reader to reader. The revolution will not only be televised, it will be read.”

