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All the new thinking is about loss. In this it resembles all the old thinking.

—Robert Hass, “Meditation at Lagunitas”

if it makes you happy
it can’t be that bad
but if it makes you happy
then why the hell are you so
sad

—Sheryl Crow

H

as success spoiled queer theory? No. But we’re in an odd place with it. It’s like somebody who was expected (who half expected herself) to be a teenage suicide
waking up to find herself middle aged, reasonably solvent, and apparently envied by others; or like someone who was diagnosed with AIDS in the eighties and is still walking around. It’s awfully good to be alive; but rather disappointing to
find out that the world has meanwhile been going on with its business more or less as usual—
consumer capitalism, racist wars, world hunger, nothing good on TV... To be sure, the queer
welcome in Bushworld remains tenuous, and we have to resist the temptation to smugly celebrate
our success—since not everyone shares it, and it could vanish quicker than you can say “assimilated
European Jewry between the wars.” But we should also resist the temptation to romantically exaggerate
the dangers, which are currently lived mostly by those who are poor, young, sexually marginal,
unlucky. It feels indecent to be depressed when “we have come so far”; but it also feels indecent (and
impossible) not to be.

Heather Love’s Feeling Backward is among the best of a recent spate of books that attempt to speak
to this situation, as it manifests itself both in academia and in the wider political world.
“Backwardness,” Love explains,

means many things here: shyness, ambiva-

lence, failure, melancholia, loneliness, regres-
sion, victimhood, heartbreak, antimodernism,
immaturity, self-hatred, despair, shame. I
describe backwardness both as a queer histori-

cal structure of feeling and as a model for queer historiography.

Thus, her title refers to a wide range of texts and contexts: Walter Pater’s diffuse, pre-identitarian erotics; Willa Cather’s antimodernist ethic of

friendship; Radclyffe Hall’s failure to anticipate the liberationist agendas of lesbian feminism; and activists mobilizing around “queer shame” who
parade with placards reading, “Depressed? It might be political.” Love opposes the tendency of some critics to exclude the most negative texts of our history on the
grounds of bad ideology as well as that of others to reinterpret and “save” them in a way that
minimizes or erases their power. But while she

analyzes attempts either to criticize queer cultures of the past for failing to meet our standards for “positive images” or to redeem them by
assimilating them to our more sophisticated agendas, she is nevertheless engaged in the search for
a “usable past” and in questions about how “we” should use it (whoever “we” may be, but
never mind).

She does a beautiful job of articulating the problem:

A central paradox of any transformative criticism is that its dreams for the future are
found on a history of suffering, stigma, and

violence. Oppositional criticism opposes not only existing structures of power but also the
very history that gives it meaning.... Critics

find themselves in an odd position: we are not
sure if we should explore the link between

homosexuality and loss or set about proving
that it does not exist.

Her own project manages neither to bury queer
melancholia nor to praise it; and she is gently
critical of the recent “turn to ‘affect’” within queer literary studies. She is helpfully critical as well of the tendency to romanticize the margins.

The meaning of modernist transgression—of
crossing the line—depends to a great extent on

which way you are headed: it is one thing to
light out for the Territory and quite another
ting to live there.

Considered as a theoretical polemic, Feeling

Backward is a tour de force, both incisive and

moving. Considered as a work of literary

scholarship, it is somewhat less satisfying, if only

because it refers to a mere handful of texts, which
have often been discussed before, and does not

stay with any of them long enough to say much. (By
literary scholarship, I don’t mean anything
especially pedantic, merely the implicit claim of

any book of literary or cultural criticism that “I can
help you understand X better than you could just by

reading or watching it on your own.”) After the
ambitious set-up of a double introduction, the payoff in terms of deepening and broadening our understanding of the texts is frustratingly small; and many works whose relevance seems obvious
are missing.

At its core, this is a book about three lesbian
writers—Willie Cather, Radclyffe Hall, and Sylvia
Townsend Warner—who refused to tell happy
progress stories or project identitarian utopias and who therefore struggled to make sense of queer
lives and narratives. The result, as far as she

agrees, is instructive. It took me a while to see

that, though, because Love makes so many sweeping
claims and in unexpected ways and contexts or topics (including the now-obligatory genuflection
for Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history,” who states at the beginning of the piece while being hurled into
the future.)

The strongest chapter is called “Spoiled Identity: Radclyffe Hall’s Unwanted Being.” Basically, Love
argues that hating the Well of Loneliness is a bit like
shooting the messenger who brings the bad news.

To be queer is still, on some level, to be an outsider;
but without the comforting fantasy of a better life
with the other Others somewhere over the rainbow,
or a transformed world where people couldn’t treat
“us” like that. For one thing, there is no “us”; and
for another, “reverse discourse”—“we” claim
identity they taught me to despise,” as the title of
Michelle Cliff’s 1980 memoir put it—has a way of
bucking back. Hall’s lesbian protagonist, Stephen
Gordon, doesn’t want to identify with the sad queer
in Alee’s bar who reminds her of a hunted fox,

cornered and desperate—she cops to who she calls
her “ma nera”—and we don’t want to identify with
Stephen, either. But god, we’d better, because it’s

not like we don’t have a little Stephen in us. The

Well may still be so sad because it is still so true: as

Nora in Djuna Barnes’ Nightwood realizes to her

confusion, the worst moments of real life tend
strangely to resemble the trite clichés of melodrama.

This is the painful sore Heather Love keeps
touching when she points out that gay pride did
not put an end to gay shame, and that analyzing
trauma does not (and in a way should not) do away with
trauma’s effects.

Surely, though, a full account of lesbian

modernist melancholia would require a reading of

Nightwood, which would have made it possible to

speak about different kinds of sadness and
belatedness, and perhaps about different sorts of

readers who would be differently moved by them,

and different traditions or strands to which they

have given rise, as Carolyn Allen has discussed in

Following Djuna (1996). Multiple divergent strands,

and complex identifications and disidentifications,
might actually be something to celebrate, since not
every lesbian is the Lesbian Reader, let alone the

Queer Reader, or “us.”

But a fully historicized account in that sense is

not what Love means by “history.” Her weakest
chapter is on Pater, whose sadness she reads as an
“allegory” of his own historical positioning just

before homosexuality became a social category—

a positioning he of course could not know. Her
intention, she says, is to “draw... a link between his
easectricities of failure and his experience of bearing a

marginalized sexual identity.” This may be right,

but she simply doesn’t bring forward enough about

Pater to ground her interpretation. I ended up

wondering, do all these writers really belong

Women’s Review of Books
together, and if so, why? I also think that to discuss the relationship between women and men, without saying anything about how “structures of feeling” may differ because of power differences, occludes something pretty important.

Also missing is any discussion of anger, the transformative moment between shame and pride. Judith Butler has argued convincingly that melancholy appears when desire is blocked, but we also know that depression appears when anger is blocked. Might anger be blocked in the present moment not only because it isn’t nice, or tenable, but also because it feels dishonest to continue protesting when “we” are better off than we were, while others are less well off than “we” are now?

I agree with Love that “the turn to affect” has gone too far, making it impossible to see the past on its own terms. Instead, we ask greedily, “What does this book, this writer, say to me?” “To us.” Of course, it’s always easier to spot someone else’s “wounded attachments” than to let go of your own. The attachment of an older generation felt to an idealized past or an imagined future community may have been replaced by identification with a present-day, equally imaginary, cutting-edge “we,” labeled “queer theory.” One reason to be clear about your own attachments is so you can see around them to what is actually on the page. This is Love’s argument, in sections such as “Against Identification,” “Against Consolation,” and “The Politics of Refusal”—but she doesn’t entirely act on it in her own critical practice. For instance, she cites “the historiographic method of Michel Foucault” as “exemplary in its resistance to the temptations of identification and mirroring.” I agree, but draw a different lesson. Rather than either praising or delegitimating Foucault’s call for a “return to the archive,” perhaps we should actually go there, not in search of ourselves, but in search of something different: the concrete variety of experience. In other words, I’m suggesting that we conceive of the “archive” not metaphorically but literally, as in, the dinger part of the library, where our colleagues from the history department are still finding unopened boxes.

Ironically, Feeling Backward is itself marked by the need for “progress” that academic institutions impose on intellectual life. Queer theory may be facing the identity crisis academic feminism went through somewhat earlier: the transition from a loose and roving band of autodidacts to a canon, turf, the need to show gratitude to your elders (and awareness of what they have written)—while still claiming a new “turn” to something or another every fifteen minutes. Thus Love finds herself arguing that “we” have paid inadequate attention to queer melancholy, even as she cites the many critics who have explored the theme. Which brings us back to the opening question: is queer theory any longer a transformative or oppositional criticism? Literary studies has been transformed. Queer criticism has fully arrived, and being included as insiders on the basis of our outsider credibility results in an impossible dance. Rather than jostle for position on an ever-shrinking margin, asking earnestly “How do we situate ourselves?” perhaps a better question is, “What can we see from here?”

Where did I read this: “The best cure for depression is to learn something new.”

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\text{FIELD NOTES}
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\[Betrayals of the Heart\]

By Robin Becker

There is no Truth and Reconciliation Commission for betrayals of the heart. There is only time—and art.

We are betrayed only by those closest to us—partners, beloved friends, family—those in whom we place our trust. Who do we become after that trust has foundered? How do we travel forward? These questions have always occupied writers and continue to do so. In her most recent collection, Rift (2008), poet Barbara Helgott Hyett takes as her starting point the end of a long marriage. From that site, the speakers in these poems explore art, biblical and historical narratives, literature, and myth to excvate and transform psychic trauma. One of Hyett’s strategies involves examining betrayal from several points of view. For example, a twenty-line poem titled “Mrs. Noah” anticipates a twenty-line poem titled “Noah,” which appears eight poems later. Nameless in the Torah, Noah’s wife, as re-imagined by Hyett, “prays to the animals/ in their untidy rooms.” At the close of the poem, we see her trying to make sense of her predicament:

She has filled every bowl to overflowing, as if rain were a blessing, as if the name she has forgotten remembers her.

Genesis recounts that on the 301st day of the great flood, the dove returned with an olive branch, signaling to Noah the approach of land. In Hyett’s recast “Noah,” the speaker has this to say:

By the time the dove returned he didn’t want it, pitched it over, rowed on. He’ll make a sweet story to cover this, which is so often the case when a man loses heart.

The 124-line title poem “Rift” again examines betrayal from various perspectives. In each of six sections, people find themselves in extremis in the subway beneath the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001; in a war zone among the dead; at the scene of a fatal car accident; before a brutal police encounter. Hyett offers no easy palliatives. Instead, she concludes the poem with a new origin myth, one that ends on a vision of how we will appear to those who come after us:

“\text{When Science discovers the matter, we’ll be found, half-swimming, half-wallowing at the juncture; clumsy, vestigial, the apparatus of a God-forsaken plan.}

An eleven-poem sonnet sequence, Apollo and Daphne, originates in Hyett’s study of Bernini’s great marble sculpture of the same name in Rome’s Galleria Borghese, and in the Greek myth as conveyed in Hellenistic and Roman stories. Among eleven points of view Hyett imagines Apollo, Bernini, The Chisel, Daphne, Tour Guide, and Laurel. “River God” demonstrates Daphne’s betrayal by her father. Here’s the poem in its entirety:

I saw the overtaking, the sun’s sweating pursuit. I could have swept her from earth mildly, flesh of my flesh, saved by cloudburst, or the violence of sudden snow. But I struck my only daughter mute, made leaves shoot from her fingers, roots alarm the nail beds of her toes. Bark swallowed her sweet skin whole. She was born elemental. I made her stand, then, unmoving, insensate in the old-growth forest. I planted her. I made my daughter strong.

While individual poems argue for single “realities,” the ekphrastic sequence, in its response to another art form, locates betrayal in a more complex aggregate—prismatic, shifting, partial. What old grief does the river god avenge by making Daphne a laurel tree? I admire Hyett’s sweep here, tackling the story in marble and myth. Once Daphne transforms, the speaker in “The Laurel” proclaims “If love arrives, I don’t need it. / All of my needs are green.” Through Hyett’s declaration, Daphne reclaims some measure of the freedom and independence she’s lost.

The poems in Rift reach beyond the self to construct and wreck meaning from the destabilizing experience of betrayal. Hyett describes the natural world in