

Peter Baker: On "At the Well"

Such a textual event is presented in Blackburn's poem "At the Well" (299-301). Whereas Edith Jarolim, in her editor's introduction, claims that the poem presents an encounter with, and rejection of, "atavistic impulses" (xxxix), I want to argue that the poem's atavism engages (as the etymology of atavism suggests) the thematics of time, without however necessitating any kind of judgment of whether or not the poet's persona is engaged in a spiritual progression or journey. I first encountered this poem in a somewhat nonstandard college class. The teacher, who was not really the teacher, passed out to the two students a xerox from the small-press printing of Blackburn's *Three Dreams and an Old Poem* (Buffalo, 1970). I carried this xerox of the poem around with me for several months, and I remember thinking that its material form was so ephemeral that I should memorize the poem before I lost it. I did lose the single page version and it was more than ten years before I saw the poem in print again. "At the Well" became for me part of my memory material, an entirely aural/oral text, even part of my "interiority." And yet it is not at all typical of Blackburn's oeuvre. The poem begins:

Here we are, see? in this village, maybe a camp middle of desert, the Maghreb,
desert below Marrakesh standing in the street simply.

Outskirts of the camp at the edge of town, these riders on camels or
horses, but riders, tribesmen, sitting there on their horses.

They are mute. They are hirsute,
they are not able to speak. If they
could the sound would be guttural.
They cannot speak. They want
something.

The poem's opening presents an oneiric landscape, in a language both colloquial and yet strangely charged. In the no-time of the dream, the riders are an image about which the poet/dreamer knows some important things. Their desire as the Lacanian scenario would have it is the same as the desire of the dreamer. The dreamer's desire is of, or for, the other. And yet, "They have had their tongues cut out" (300). The mute horsemen appeal silently to the poet/dreamer to provide the words they are unable to produce. The violence of the tongues cut out provides an eerie presage to Blackburn's later, fatal disease, esophageal cancer, as well as a tie-in with Freud's personally and medically-motivated concern with speech and orality.

In the middle of the poem, what is perhaps an echo of T. S. Eliot is given typically Blackburnian projective spacing:

L e t u s g o t o g e t h e r

across the desert toward the cities, let us terrify the towns, the villages, disappear among bazaars, sell our camels, pierce our ears, for- get that we are mute and drive the princes out, take all the slave-girls for ourselves? What can I offer them.

Here the speaker's pronoun merges with the riders who have appeared in the space of the dream, in the desert. In some ways this merger resembles the choice of Beats associates William Burroughs and Paul Bowles, who took up extended residence in North Africa. The wild abandon also moves into the actual excesses of the sixties generation, often more imagined than real. The speaker continues to ruminate on what the riders want from him ("Who are these wild men?") and, by logical extension, on what kind of soul work he is doing in his own wild man persona. I agree with Jarolim that the end of the poem provides a kind of spiritual rest, in a thorough move toward closure:

I want to see my own skin at the
life's edge, at the life-giving water. I
want to rise from the pool, mount
my camel and be among the living, the other side of this village,

Come gentlemen, wheel your mounts about. There is nothing here.

"There is nothing here," not because there could have been something, and that something has been rejected or removed, but because the only thing "given" by the poem is time, the time in which the spiritual work of the poem takes place. And in order for this interior work to take place there must be a kind of "radical forgetting," following Derrida, a forgetting that moves beyond even such moments as forgiveness and pardon, rendering moot in some sense the speaker's spiritual journey. Though somewhat atypical of Blackburn, this poem shares a link with the two short poems examined previously in giving time for the reflection necessary for soul work (which is yet not work in the sense that it takes place outside the economic sphere of use-value and exchange-value). Following the logic of this analysis, atavism could no more be rejected than it could be embraced, in that it is "forgotten" rather than weighed or judged. The poem's stance "out of time" allows for the "gift" to be given and instantly forgotten.

From "Blackburn's Gift." SAGETRIEB 12.1

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Criticism Target:

Paul Blackburn [2]

Author:

Peter Baker [3]

Poem:

At the Well ^[4]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/peter-baker-well>

Links

[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/paul-blackburn>

[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/peter-baker>

[4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/well>