

David Lehman: On "They Dream Only of America"

? Shoptaw?s allegorical interpretation of "They Dream Only of America" is a bit like the symbol-hunting of the New Criticism at its most exasperating. It is not that the interpretation is wrong: it is that the poem gives rise to any number of competing narratives, which the reader may be prompted to provide. The poem can be read less tendentiously and less fancifully as an allegory about growing up; as in a particularly eerie kind of fairy tale, there is an emphasis on clues and signs, only here the horror of imprisonment is matched by that of the promised liberation. But I prefer to read the poem as precisely a truncated narrative lacking a key, a dream that haunts the waking person because it exists only in fragments whose relation to one another remains mysterious. The strangeness of the adverb in the line,

"please," he asked willingly,

is not easily explained and that is one of its virtues. And if one notices that

"This honey is delicious

Though it burns the throat"

is metaphorically a taste of brandy, and if one learns that this was something Martory said in all innocence at breakfast one morning, one still has not explained the effect of trembling significance these lines achieve.

From David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 157-158.

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