on Hymn to the Western World

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I. Introduction

Some thoughts on work leading up to
Hymn to the Western World

Abstraction and the rejection of abstraction

During my years of undergraduate study in Richmond at Virginia Commonwealth University I worked in a style that could safely be called “abstraction”. I became an “abstract painter”, attentive to the work of a wide range of practitioners in this somewhat vague but academically convenient category, by 1980 a tradition several generations old. I was attracted to the so-called “painterly”, and this shows in the few paintings remaining from that time. It is not my intention to go into detail concerning my work and thinking from this period, but to briefly mention my growing misgivings with and final decision to abandon this method, in fact a decision to stop making visual art altogether at the time. I began to question the intense introspection while concentrated in this method of working, the quasi-religious, ritualistic gestures. When looking at and discussing completed works with others, many of which came from different backgrounds, musical, literary, and (perish the thought) “lay”, even in conversation with other painters, it became clear that their was a troubling gap or disconnection between my experience with and relationship to the doing of the work and what remained as the “finished” piece. I began to feel as if engaged in a kind of pinchbeck spirituality, self-indulgent (even for an artist), and aloof. This is not meant to be a polemic against abstract painting, or advocacy of any particular course to art-making outside of abstraction, however it was a course I could no longer pursue with any conviction. I started my education in Catholic school. By the end of the second grade I was a confirmed atheist. This was somewhat like losing religion for the second time.
Looking back: drawing and history

I began to experiment with painting again in 1993, roughly eight years after leaving undergraduate school. An ill-fated resumption of work with abstract imagery quickly gave way to the beginning of a series of paintings/ drawings of the human form, a series that in a sense culminates in Hymn to the Western World. At the time I was reading history, more specifically historical and literary works of Antiquity, scholarly works by Peter Brown, Ramsey MacMullen, and many others, ancient works such as Seutonius’ Lives of the Caesars, Tacitus’ Annals, Petronius’ Satyricon, Latin erotic poetry, the poetry of Prudentius, religious works dealing with the teachings of Origen, early eastern Christianity, Gnosticism, and so on. In relation to the beginnings of figurative work I want to point out The Desert a City by Derwas Chitty, the Apophthegmata Patrum, and Men Possessed by God by Jacques Lacarriere as being important sourcebooks. What concerned me, especially at this time but also now, is the idea of the body as a kind of vector-field or vector-point, the apparatus by which we experience and measure the world. Also of interest is the much-remarked throughout history division of body and “spirit”, or the verbal center and the other senses of the body (without here going into the role of language, which I am interested in but not prepared to do), and the suspicion of or unease with the fleshly, traceable back (at least) to sentiments expressed in the Orphic or Pythagorean soma-sema¹ analogy. The Greeks had a beautiful way of expressing this, saying that we are imprisoned behind the “hedge of the teeth”. Particular to the early figurative works was a concern with punishment of the body, more exactly self-mortification. These were portraits of Maron, Thalelaeus, Pachon. I continued working on the figures, occasionally returning to literary/historical models, but more frequently (and also through literary/historical models) attempting in a sense to project some corporeal self outward onto the page, as well as, and more importantly, a quality of being in the carapace, not as an essence, but rather a series of homunculi, all different but all residuary to the source; drawing the body, like I said in an earlier statement, from the inside out.
As I worked on this series of drawings and paintings of the human body these past nine years, I found myself moving in and pulling from a more catholic range of sources and interests, in the narrative of history, literature, and my own past, for example a renewed willingness to engage the exaggerated, intensely worked, somewhat clumsy, graphic mode of expression that came so naturally to me from the days of incessant drawing as a youth, hitherto repressed as being untoward, ugly, even wrong. It was now easier to use humor, to be more direct, corrosive, blunt, but also make imagery that could be quite serious. There was a wider range to work with, while also an acceptance of limits. For me the work is of the utmost importance, but important only up to a point. I am one to go along with the idea that life always overtakes art.

II. Hymn to the Western World

Hymn to the Western World began with the central figure surmounted by the banderole with a text from Seneca’s *Questiones Naturales*. At the time I was continuing work which consisted of individual figures isolated on a fairly flat, chalky, somewhat inhospitable ground, usually a pale blue. A number of these figures are grouped together as “Supplicants”, Supplicant no. 8, the Flying Supplicant, The Lonely Supplicant, and so on. The central figure in Hymn to the Western World began as The Dancing Supplicant. The loose grouping or naming of these figures as “Supplicants” is a referent to the idea of “man” or the human being as powerless, or in a state of powerlessness or subjugation, whether by an agency from without, the inertia of sloth or accidie, or the anxious paralysis of aporia. Supplication more obviously brings to mind God or some other benefactor or advocate and as such places the human being or the supplicant figure on the other side of intercession, incapable of meaningful action themselves, yet pleading, beseeching for action on their behalf. Of course, implicit in the work is the absence, silence, or indifference of any such benefactor. These figure studies in part came out of thinking about the non-potential for meaningful action, the inability to act, the condition of being unable to act, whether in futility, disempowerment, or the refusal to act. I have in
the past called the paintings imperfect representations of an anti-human ideal. Cicero writes, “Omnium animantium formam vincit hominus figura”, the form of man surpasses that of every living creature. These paintings and drawings could be seen to argue very nearly the opposite. I’m hoping, among other things, to cast a glance in the direction of the ideals of Humanism and the Enlightenment, particularly regarding the progress and preeminence of our species in the cosmos and in the world, a glance clouded by doubt, if not ridicule and derisive laughter.

In any event, the next figure I completed was the kneeling male figure in profile that would eventually end up at the far right of the figure group. Up to this point these figure studies had been conceived as separate pieces, and it wasn’t until I began to look at these two works together that I started to think about a large-scale work containing multiple figures. Until 2000-1, the first year of graduate study in Chapel Hill, works containing multiple figures had been relatively rare. During this first academic year I completed several projects involving multiple figure groups- The Spirit of Competition, Babies, and Little Monsters. Hymn to the Western World would eventually expand into a group of five large figures, three surmounted by sky panels, flanked on either side by two maps of the world. This, like earlier work, draws upon historical references in literature and painting. The banderoles ornamenting the figures to the far left and right bear fragments of texts from The Daily Round by the Christian Latin poet Prudentius. Prudentius Aurelius Clemens, born in 348, most likely in Spain (as was Seneca), lived and worked during the late period of the Roman Empire. It is possible that he made a pilgrimage to the Holy City of Rome, and I like to think that he may have still been alive when Rome was sacked in the early fifth century. His writing loudly sings the praises of the triumphs of Christ in the heavens and here on earth, as the ascendant faith and now official religion of the mighty Roman Empire. Some of the stylistic features of this literature that make it attractive to me, as well as apposite to Hymn to the Western World, include the intensity, the highly graphic nature of the imagery, as well as the presence, beneath an overly wrought gloss of exaltation, of terrifying fear. More particular to Hymn to the Western World is the inclusion of texts from The Daily Round, specifically a fragment from a
Hymn for the Morning Hours, to the far right, and a fragment from a Hymn for the Evening, to the far left, as one way of expressing a cycle, a beginning and ending.

Seneca lived from c. 3 or 4 B.C. until 65 A.D. His life ran a course of extremes, from the highest civic esteem, to eight years of ignominious exile, a return to power and influence, then finally ending in suicide. He was the tutor of the infamous Nero, who would eventually bring about his end. The dates given by history indicate that he breathed and walked on the surface of the earth at the same time as Christ. The central texts by Seneca are roughly translated as follows. The upper text, “omnia in idem profundum cadunt”, reads in English as “everything falls into the same pit”, or, more poetically, “everything falls into the same dark absence.” The text in the central banderole, “si cadendum est, cadam orbe concusso” reads as “if I must fall, let me fall with the world in pieces.” Again we have an expression of a cycle, more exactly the end of a cycle, or ending. The choice of the verb form “cadere”, cadam, cadendum, cadunt, to fall, is important and I hope obvious for a number of reasons.

I’d like to take a moment to say a couple of things about the group of figures before moving on to the maps. I mentioned above the use of an empty, fairly flat ground with which, as here, I surround the figures. It is an exceedingly empty space, the vacuum that contains corruptible bodies, carrying with it a connotation of Horror Vacui, the fear of empty spaces, emphatically expressed in Gothic art. It can be likened to the “extracorporeal” space described by Johan Huizinga, as in the space in Periclean paintings, what he calls a “premodern” conception of space, reduced to a flat, opaque, aesthetically negative surface. Enclosed within this space are bodies. I am always somewhat surprised to see how the nudity of the figures tends to dominate much of the response to the work. I render the figure as naked as possible, often to the point of hairlessness. For me this is simply the only way to draw or paint the body. I’m not interested in clothes. And, to briefly return to prayer, clearly referred to by the kneeling figures and the texts that surround them, prayer and supplication as described by Zola, “that incessant flood of prayer..., the endless supplication..., [is]it not after all but a puerile lullaby, a debasement of all one’s energies?” I don’t know.
The figure group is flanked on the upper left and right by two maps of the world. I became interested in the Noachid or tripartite maps of the Middle Ages after reading *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* by John Block Friedman. These two maps are influenced by this text, medieval maps, and images from illustrated Medieval Alexander-Books. Tripartite or “T/O” maps are oriented north to south horizontally from left to right, east to west vertically from top to bottom. The central body of water is the Mediterranean, and Jerusalem is the center of the world. The T/O refers to the division of the circular shape of the world into three continents by two lines in the shape of a T, with Asia on top, Europe to the left, and Africa to the right. This division of the world is part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, coming from the account of Noah dividing up the world after the flood and giving one part to each of his three sons: “Jaseph received Europe, Shem received Asia, and Ham Africa.”

Friedman describes these maps as being more visual works of art and expressions of contemporary cosmology and theology than objects of utility. The left map most directly incorporates what Friedman refers to as the Plinian monstrous races, a variety of races or creatures cataloged, invented, and transformed in literature and imagery throughout history, in maps, in the romanticized biography of Alexander known as *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and the Latin historical-romance *De rebus gestis Alexandri Magni* and the many derivations that followed, in early travel literature such as *Mandeville’s Travels*, encyclopedias, and so on. These monstrous races were confined to the far south, in Africa, and to the Far East behind the Brass Wall of Alexander, the unclean tribes of Gog and Magog, apostates banished behind the Caucasus by Alexander the Great. In other words, the other, or the monster, real and invented, is consigned by the Western imagination to the periphery of the world, far away from Mediterranean Europe, from the Holy City of Jerusalem. Race and proximity are already intrinsic to conceptions of the monstrous, the other, and hierarchies of human value.

Throughout history we see the different forms, the Crusades, colonization, the bizarre justifications for slavery based on the identification of the African people as the progeny
of Ham, Noah’s reprobate son, argued into the nineteenth century, wedded to science as another malformation of the nineteenth century, the eugenics movement, popular in America, Britain, and the continent, most notoriously taking shape in Nazi Germany as The Final Solution, even perhaps inverted in the contemporary phenomena that Jonathan Dollimore calls difference fetishism. It is difficult to not make some connection between the large, emaciated figure to the immediate right of center and the Holocaust or genocide. In fact I was reading literature written by survivors of the Holocaust and Soviet gulag system while I was working on this figure. I call it the Grinning Supplicant, or the Musselmann Supplicant. This was the slang term in the German run camps for the ones with little, really no chance for survival, the “goners”. The irony is no less intense today. Musselmann is German for Muslim.

The left map, at least partially, makes use of a somewhat more literal visual referencing, is more diagrammatic. The map to the right is a pullulating, a kind of mid-grade mass hysteria, perhaps the imagination loosed. The maps refer back to two works from the first year of study, the left to The Spirit of Competition, the right to Little Monsters, in their scale, and their touch. This is deliberate, a way of making mention of the larger body of graduate school work in the final Thesis piece. It is also a minor point, and I mention it only in passing. What is more important is the idea of using multiple styles, or at least variations in a style, this time in a single piece. I experimented a bit with this last year, but from project to project. Using a sound metaphor, the central figure group is silent, the left map quiet, the right one loud. The right map is the feeling expressed by a cannibal interviewed by Sherry, replying to a question as to whether he ate human flesh: “Ah! I wish I could eat everybody on earth.”

It is perhaps unconscionable, or at least in bad taste, to mention humor in connection with some of the material being discussed. Is the dark side of human nature funny? Is the end of the world something to laugh about? I think one of many possible human responses to the horrible is laughter, fascination, even delight, especially when at the expense of another, particularly an enemy. We can become so exhausted that this is all that is left. I think it was Nietzsche who said, “When sufferings reach such a pitch that our whole
inward being cracks and creaks like an overloaded cart, they ought to cease being ridiculous...but no! Laughter accompanies tears to the end, to exhaustion, to the point where it is impossible to shed any more of them- not at all! It still rings and resounds at a point where the tongue grows dumb and lamentation itself dies away. 

The figures are, although highly wrought, and partly by being worked into a state of tight compression, or stiffness, especially the middle group, somewhat crude and cartoon-like. Visually, they are highly cared for, but also degraded. A wide range of response is welcomed, the laughter of black humor, sadness, discomfort, pathos, even the frisson associated with cinematic, B-grade horror.

Huizinga describes the art of the late Middle Ages as "an unstable equilibrium between the sentimental and mockery"\textsuperscript{7}, and I think Hymn to the Western World willingly gives in to both of these. It is, like some of Schnittke’s music, a "humorous/grotesque parody of... themes from the past"\textsuperscript{8}. The three central figures could possibly be seen as a kind of Trinity, patriarchal deities, suggested by scale and frontal orientation, as the figures at each end, in profile, look back to the earliest European portraiture, to the first paintings of real people as subjects, or the first man and woman. I am interested in the possibility of open interpretation, multiple interpretations, polysemy. Clarity is not a primary concern, and there is no advocacy, no "message". As a famous French philosopher has said, I am more interested in problems, not solutions.\textsuperscript{9} Hymn to the Western World is a monument to the "decomposition of religious thought through the imagination."\textsuperscript{10} It is a kind of orison, a "puerile lullaby" for the end of things, the end of the world we have made, looking forward to the end, but also remembering.
III. Postscript: works in sound

I’d like to finish with a few words about the sound projects I’ve worked on here in Chapel Hill. In the time leading up to graduate study I had been involved in composing, performing, and recording musical compositions, both notated and entirely improvised. The first of the four pieces written here is 4/7/7/4, a deconstruction of Pachelbel’s Canon for two clarinets and two cellos. In this piece, the two clarinets read from the same series of randomly selected notes from the Canon. The two cellos do the same from a second series assembled the same way (literally drawing the cut-up, individual notes from a hat one at a time). One cello and one clarinet read the music as notated, basically as a series of half notes and half note rests, in a uniform dynamic range. The second cello and clarinet play the same series simultaneously without the rhythmic or dynamic restrictions, with more interpretive freedom. There are actual quotes from the Canon interspersed, played by each group the same way. Interestingly, in the recorded version there is a fluctuating overlap, as is to be expected, but all the instruments finish at about the same time.

The second piece is a group of ten melodies called The Magnus Notebook. The same method used in an earlier work, The Hammond Notebook: 85 melodies for Hammond organ and guitar, was repeated here, but with a Magnus toy organ with fifteen keys in place of the Hammond. The organ music is improvised, and the melodies brought into relief by doubling the notes on guitar.

The third piece I want to mention is an as yet untitled work for eleven open strings, using three electric guitars, set into vibration by five magnets, or “E-bows”, presented in Graduate Seminar as well as the open critiques. This piece makes use of a table of possible combinations of notes, taken from and arranged according to a sequence of seven Greek modes, transposed into tunings maintaining intervals down to semi-tones. The table allows for various combinations of up to five simultaneous notes to be sounded on the three instruments as the performer moves through the composition. The ringing
note combinations can at times be accompanied by samples, either the percussion
obligato from Cage’s Ryoanji, or choral excerpts from Stockhausen’s Atmen Gibt das
Leben.

The final piece, which I am presently working on, is a “sound and picture opera” based
on the life of Daniel Paul Schreber, the famous psychological subject and author of
Memoirs of my Nervous Illness, a kind of Schreber family slide show with musical
accompaniment. This work is a combination of four layers, the “Schreber formula”, a
pitch-pipe and cello, and also throughout by the “Schreber Chorus” consisting of the
strings of two guitars continuously sounded by E-bows; cello with loop; samples which
include the sound of a chain, children, and Wagner’s Seigfried; and projected images,
largely illustrations from Kallipadie, written by Paul Schreber’s father, Moritz, published
in 1858, an instructional book about the proper upbringing and education of children.

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1 Soma=sema; the body is a tomb.
2 Emile Zola, Lourdes (New York: Prometheus, 2000).
3 John Block Friedman, The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought (New York:
4 see Jonathan Dollimore, Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture (London:
Routledge, 2001)
6 I think this quote comes from Nietzsche, but I am not certain. It could be Schopenhauer.
I include it because it is a very good description of the kind of laughter under discussion.
I feel that the source is not of the utmost importance in this context. I recorded the quote
in a notebook some years ago, without any mention of the source. I apologize for my
shoddy scholarship.
7 Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (New York: Dover, 1999).
8 from a conversation with Rolf Haglund in the liner notes to Chamber Music (Sweden:
9 Michel Foucault; see Martin Jay, Downcast Eyes (Berkeley and Los Angeles:
10 Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages.
Appendix a.

Hymn to the Western World
Latin to English translations

Omnia in idem profundum cadunt

Everything falls into the same pit, or
Everything falls into the same dark absence

Si cadendum est, cadam orbe concusso

If I must fall, let me fall with the world in pieces

Nox et tenebrae et nubila, confusa mundi et turbida, lux intrat, albescit polus, Christus venit, discedite. caligo terrae scinditur percussa solis spiculo, rebusque iam color redit vultu nitentis sideris. sic nostra obscuritas...

Night and darkness and clouds, all the world’s perplexed disorder, be gone. The dawn comes in, the sky is lightening, Christ is coming. Earth’s blackness is split asunder by the stroke of the sun’s dart, and now the world resumes its color under the glance of his shining orb. So presently will the darkness in us...

quietis hora, blandus sopor vicissim fessos relaxat artus. mens aestuans procellis, curisque sauciata, totis bibit medullis obliviale pocum. serpit pe...

the hour of rest comes again; caressing slumber in its turn relaxes our tired limbs. The mind storm-tossed and careworn drinks deep of the cup of forgetfulness. Oblivion steals over all the body...
Appendix b.

Works in sound

1. 4/7/7/4
   a deconstruction of Pachelbel’s Canon for two clarinets and two cellos

2. The Magnus Notebook
   ten melodies for toy organ and guitar

3. untitled for eleven open strings