

"The Process of Wisdom: *Stereopticon*" by Pamela Harrison
Amazon Review by Carl P. Rosenstock, October 13, 2008

In a recent book, the neuropsychologist Elkonon Goldberg posited that the distinction between the right brain and the left brain is actually between processing new experiences (right brain), and incorporating the new into past experience (left brain). And as we age, there appears to be a shift from greater activity in the right brain to greater activity in the left brain. That is, from a physiological standpoint, the brain moves from learning new cognitive skills, to consolidating and condensing new information into what we already know. This shift, Goldberg believes, is the physiological nature of wisdom.

I know neuropsychology seems like an odd place to begin a book review, but I've been thinking about this matter of "wisdom" since I first cracked Pamela Harrison's *Stereopticon* open. Despite my habitual mistrust of words such as "honesty," "knowledge," and "wisdom," it is, in fact, the nature of wisdom I want to examine. While the blurbs for this book note the "knowledge" and unique "wisdom" in Harrison's poems, as I went through poem after poem, I was more struck by their cumulative effect—wisdom not as a quality, but as a process; not simply a noun, but a verb as well.

The first poem, "Singular View,"—a sinuous single sentence winding its way through three stanzas, limns the simplest of grounds: language as the sculptor of experience.

Because we are the flower
of some family...

because context is everything...
because it shapes our connections, rules
the grammar we must wrestle to enlarge;

and wherever it binds...
...there our words
echo the contours of our being ...
to make a singular view— not beautiful but true.

I've stripped the poem here of its specifics (the "relatives bearing cakes and pickles"; "the ashtrays overflow"; "our hairlines recede")—those details that give the poem a particular face—to highlight how it insinuates itself into anyone.

If the first poem is the general laced with specifics, the next poem, the title poem, is the specific laced with the general. In effect, it elucidates why the poet began with the note of language as determinant.

I grew up in a house where what was said
was so different from what was felt
it made me wall-eyed to strong a meaning

between the two. Sometimes my eyes crossed,
and I groped all day through double vision...

...
It's my nature to prefer an ugly truth
to delusion. The right word tunes my sense
like a telescopic sight: even face to face

...all that had been furtive
or confused resolves on the cross hairs
of some deep delight.

From here, the volume traverses terrain both familiar ("High school summers, I kept Dad's clinic rooms..." —"Literature and Life") and foreign ("Half a degree above the Equator/ we bunk in a lab where three deep freezers/ keep Kaposi sarcoma tissue cold..."—"At Home in Our Ignorance As in a Canopy of Trees'), culminating in the luminous "So, Caravaggio" that seems to draw the book full circle; and yet bodies something deeper. In the great works of Caravaggio, the background is a thick black. As the figures cross the plane of the painting, they seem to emerge from the shadows, moving toward light. In this way, they seem to reach out from the canvas. So too, out of such emptiness, words emerge.

The table is cleared,
and I am waiting
for what comes.

Cup and plate,
fork and spoon,
one by one

you have removed
every last legacy,
every tarnished ideal

until there is nothing
but bare wood
and my clasped hands.

I will sit at the table
and open my ears
to the silence,

get comfortable
with it, as its guest, until
this emptiness overflows.

A light hangs low
over the table,
centering the room.

All that's inessential
falls from view. For now,

the bare table,
my ready hands,
a narrow arc of light,
the bounding dark.

In English, “wisdom” is a noun—something someone can earn or own. But the word conveys no sense of how one comes by it. According to the dictionary, a “stereopticon” is a device designed to make “one image dissolve into another,” creating the magical effect of a three-dimensional view. An apt metaphor for a process that might be termed “wisdom,” and for what this poet has accomplished. As Harrison says in one poem (all the while doubting the value of such an effort),

you’ll have to bend low
to enter there, scratch and claw,
dirty your clothes and nails...

...No one
will listen or care when you
offer such abysmal stuff—
just ordinary clods and rocks.

Still, as this poet reminds us, “...you must // do all the lost, invisible work/ no one counts when they see flowers.”