

MERCURY'S TRACKS, FORWARD AND BACK: STRANGE MODES OF MOVING ON (EDITORIAL)

Lisa Samuels's insightful discussion of umbral poetics in the last issue of *PSR* (#38) inspires me to offer an accompanying lens for thinking about poetry. I'm interested in how a look backward can help frame our reception of contemporary poetry, especially by those who work with form and language in exploratory ways. In the following pages, you'll find nonlinear poems that move surprisingly across the page and narrative poems with apparent shifts of focus and direction, formal unpredictability and linguistic complexity. There are poets working in prose, such as Harlee Logan Kelley, Richard Meier, Lydia Gwyn and Laynie Browne; poets thinking in hybrid forms, such as Rusty Morrison, Samantha Schaefer, Daniel Owen and Jordan Dunn; and poets such as Edwin Torres, Brandon Shimoda, Joseph Donahue and others, whose left-justified poems variously unsettle lyric form.

Who from the nineteenth century might help frame such a gathering? There are many candidates, but here I'll focus on Percy Bysshe Shelley and his 1819-1820 free translation of the Homeric "Hymn to Hermes", which he retitled "Hymn to Mercury". The poem tells of the infant god who invents the lyre by killing a tortoise and making its shell into the instrument. Mercury proceeds to steal a herd of cattle from his brother, Apollo, the god of truth and of good, well-ordered speech. That audacious theft is successful because Mercury confounds straightforward notions of forward and backward. Specifically, he devises a way to make the cattle's tracks point in more than one direction, and he disguises his own footprints to the point of apparent illegibility. Apollo, then, can't figure out what happened because he reads the surface only. Finally, after Apollo pleads his case before their father, Jove/Jupiter, the adversaries exchange gifts. Mercury gives the lyre to Apollo. Apollo grants Mercury access to oracular knowledge and the ability to cross freely between the realms of the living and the dead.

I invite readers to consider the above account as an allegory for poetry's ways and meanings and, in that spirit, to view certain poems through the lens of what I call mercurial poetics. If, while translating a classical Greek text over a two-year period, Shelley discovered something essential for himself about poetry, his discovery might help illuminate poems in the present. Unlike earlier translators, Shelley delighted in Mercury's strange interplay of theft and negotiation, disguise and authorship, circuitousness and advancement. Most of all, Shelley's Mercury embodies poetry's multiple ways of moving. Mercurial mobility emerges as a form of knowledge, or as a process of thinking, that begets both making and unmaking. Mercury's "double kind of footsteps

strange”, (l. 455) his steps “most incomprehensible” to Apollo (l. 461), are apt invitations to this issue of *PSR*.

Shelley’s sympathy for the newborn god’s roguery informs such translation choices as “immense” instead of “monstrous” for Mercury’s footprints (l. 460), “craft” instead of “cunning trickery” for his method (l. 86). Notably, his tone and language evince an apprentice-like attention to Mercury’s craft, as when the thief effectively reverses the cattle’s footprints over the sand and disguises his own footprints:

But, being ever mindful of his craft,
Backward and forward drove he them astray,
So that the tracks which seemed before, were aft;
His sandals then he threw to the ocean spray,
And for each foot he wrought a kind of raft
Of tamarisk, and tamarisk-like sprigs,
And bound them in a lump with withy twigs.
And on his feet he tied these sandals light,
The tail of whose wide leaves might not betray
His track [. . .] (ll. 86-95)

When Apollo finds the herd’s apparently reversed tracks and those of Mercury’s improvised sandals (tamarisk branches), the elder god says:

Here are the footsteps of the horned herd
Turned back towards their fields of asphodel; –
But *these* are not the tracks of beast or bird,
[. . .] – sand was never stirred
By man or woman thus! Inexplicable! (ll. 286-90)

Arguing his case before their father, Jove, Apollo acknowledges his failure to contend with the inexplicable: “I never saw his like either in Heaven / Or upon earth for knavery or craft: – / [. . .] / [. . .] / [. . .] / And mere astonishment would make you daft / To see the double kind of footsteps strange / He has impressed wherever he did range.” (ll. 443-50) Apollo continues: “I know not how I can describe in words / Those tracks – he could have gone along the sands / Neither upon his feet nor on his hands; – / He must have had some other stranger mode / Of moving on: [. . .].” (ll. 456-60)

The implications of the encounter between Apollo and Mercury are enormous, not least for the light they shed on Shelley’s emerging notions of lyric agility. Such agility is evident in our own time in the work of poets who share an affinity with Mercury, whose tracks mark a route (variable, unpredictable, more-than-one-thing-at-once) under the surface of legible pathways.

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