THIS IS HEYEN SPEAKING

By Philip Brady

In "This Is Yeats Speaking," Charles Olson amps his fury against the mandarins who caged Ezra Pound by stealing Ben Bulben's thunder. Magisterial as Olson was—six foot eight, not counting ghostly mantle—he hardly lacked brass; yet he styled his plea for Pound's release in the voice of Pound's patron. I love that essay, as I love Pound's own febrile allegiances—all but the last. In the postwar years of penitence granted to him by the intercession of friends living and dead, he evanesced to Italy, site of his most troubling entanglements. I picture him—the shock of white hair inches above his ormolu table—scribbling letters late into the night while his secretary, Desmond O'Grady, slipped in with cups of tea, hovering awhile, the way Ezra perhaps once hovered, clerking for Yeats. Pound hardly slept in those Italian years, seldom smiled.

WILLIAM HEYEN

This faint echo of history I overheard thirty years ago in a snug on Western Road in Cork, eavesdropping as O'Grady held forth over a crescent of small whiskies. And late last night I basked in that whiskey-tinted memory when novelist Robert Mooney phoned me to read Seamus Heaney's latest contribution to the *New York Review of Books,* a poem about a Boston fireman. This had us chortling for the way it wedges old allegiances deep into the grain, describing the eponymous "Helmet" as "headgear / Of the tribe, as O'Grady called it," thus celebrating not only an Irish-American firefighter, but a slight *Selected Poems* that evanesced soon after its release from Gallery Publishing for £3.60, clothbound, in 1979. In the recitation's afterglow I reminded Bob how my late father, an Irish-American NYPD detective, would, post-whiskies, urge me to introduce myself to Seamus, since my grandmother is a Heaney from that parish. How easy to feel sometimes that we are all eavesdropping on familial echoes.

I don't need to whisper across spectral borders to conjure William Heyen; his living voice is vibrantly its own. Yet I borrow his name, and invoke his towering presence, not just to praise work that grows in stature as it's shadow-fed, but to affirm an engagement that grips from before and beyond. Recently, Heyen has published two books of poems, *Shoah Train* and *The Rope,* and though they are both extraordinary in different ways, they are webbed in allegiances to history, to earth, to Turtle Island, to Long Island, to childhood, and to books and their making.

Let's start with the least first: despite a distinguished career, Heyen has chosen for his newest books two smallish publishers, Etruscan Press and Mammoth Books. I say "the least allegiance," but for Heyen the making of books is no casual concern. His own extensive collection, gathered over forty years, has been ceded to the University of Rochester, where it graces the climate-controlled "Heyen Room." His recent essay "Shredding," published in *Eclipse*, reveals his devotion to the book as a made thing, expressing dismay at BOA's intended cost-saving practice of destroying overstocked titles. His poetry on Crazy Horse, the Gulf War, Ecology, the British Royals, and the Holocaust has scythed through world history, and, as for the books themselves, he nurtures each leaf with a gardener's touch, declaring, "I just want them to exist." He posts them one by one—these beautiful objects—from his cabin at the back of his property in Brockport, New York, and I can picture him this morning, "surrounded by wild rose, honeysuckle, and red osier bushes," writing to say that he's sent *Shoah Train* "as far away as to Merwin under his Maui palms, to Zimmer under Wisconsin oaks and maples, to Bob Morgan along the Ithaca ravines of beech & ash."

What a morning, to receive by mail such a book! What affirmation that the nourishing word is "under your bootsoles" or beneath what cousin Seamus's "Helmet" calls "the crest," where you can almost taste "Tinctures of sweat and hair oil / . . . the withered sponge and shock-absorbing webs" that provide our connective tissue to the dead.

Some might dismiss my praise of *Shoah Train* on the grounds that, with the nocturnal Mooney, I run Etruscan Press. For them, I stretch beyond my gangly height to say, "This is Heyen speaking." Mooney and I, and Steve Oristaglio (if only you had known such bankers, Ezra), believe that thus we speak our mind, amplified, in the work we admire. When we decided to organize that sentiment into a nonprofit literary press, brainstorming a board of advisors who wore the headgear of the tribe, Bill Heyen was prime. On the morning of September 12, 2001, he reminded us why; he phoned us from Brockport with the idea to galvanize the energies of the American imagination into a response to the tragedy of the previous day, attempting what Pound finally confessed he had failed to do—make it cohere. From Heyen's labor—not merely of love but of anger and disgust and need and shock—emerged *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond,* offering poetry and prose from 127 writers.

Easy now to point to the lacquered crest of the elegant hardcover edition, to celebrate the tribal achievement, but in the weeks following 9/11, as Heyen circulated invitations to contribute to a book without antecedent from an unknown press, the prospects were less sanguine. To find detractors I don't need to cite, as Heyen does in both his introduction and later in *Shoah Train,* Theodor Adorno's famous declaration that "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric." I merely recall one response to "The Dragonfly," a poem Heyen e-mailed to friends on September 11 and that I spread (too widely!) on September 12. "This is not a time for self-aggrandizement," wrote one Listserv recipient, "but for silent resolve. Shut the fuck up." This virulence hints at how unbridgeable is the rift between those who see poetic engagement in world events as "self-aggrandizement," and, on the other hand, those whose balance between self and other is precarious, mediated by resonating, sometimes terrifying echoes.

In *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond,* contributor Bruce Bond posits the quandary that underlies, I believe, Heyen's most recent books. "The challenge of all politically charged art," writes Bond, "is for the authority of the work to reside not merely in the given situation, charged as it is by ready-made pathos, but in the quality of spontaneous imaginative participation in that situation, what calls us to drag the newsreel to the recesses of the unconscious, to

wed a passionate authenticity with expressive freedom." Bond releases the energy latent in that oxymoron, "political art," by splitting it, wedging in the word "charged"—in which I hear an echo of "responsibility," the kind Yeats traced to dreams. Because such art does not parse us as individuals facing specific crises, it is not a call to action; but by the same stroke, the "charge" deflects the bromide that "poetry makes nothing happen," since it plumbs recesses where William Stafford's "justice," invoked by Heyen in the 9/11 intro, "will take millions of intricate moves."

Such intricate justice requires, I believe, what Heyen calls, in an interview published in *Artful Dodge,* "a joyful equilibrium." It demands the negative capability to balance the ambition necessary to conceive responses to September 11, the Holocaust, or the fate of the planet, with the self-effacement to bookmark each slender volume of poems with a handwritten note, while empathizing with the readers in the house where it will be received. Without such equilibrium, we know where ambition leads—to a cage in Pisa. This is the question that politically charged art is charged with: how not to participate in "identity politics," as it is commonly defined, but rather, how to speak with an individual voice resonant with echoes. How can we be both "crest" and "shock-absorbing webs"?

Here is one such echo, from a poem in *Shoah Train,* "Testimonies, 1946":

> The German said for two people
> to fill a railroad car with coal
> and for two people to lie on the floor
> and be covered. When they were covered
>
> he laughed at us and ordered us
> not to dig them up, they should
> swim up by themselves, and if they cannot
> they can just stay there.

Entering these words on a screen, I find myself momentarily adrift between worlds, as if by transcribing I participate more fully in the testimony. Although I've read the poem many times, I hear now for the first time, for instance, how the act of witnessing is authenticated by idiom and inflection, and how the poem is lineated to unshoulder "floor" on the doubled "covered," and "ordered"; while "should" slaps up against "cannot." Even in reporting, Heyen remains uncomfortably aware of his, and our, complicity.

Yet, while noting the features of such a powerful poetic statement, I know that such crafted testimonies by themselves may not distinguish *Shoah Train* from many other contemporary books of poetry on the Holocaust, books that proffer witness in absentia, such as Stephen Herz's *Whatever You Can Carry: Poems of the Holocaust;* Micheal O'Siadhail's *The Gossamer Wall: Poems in Witness to the Holocaust*; and Lyn Lifshin's *Blue Tattoo*. Individually, perhaps such poems would not justify the unearthing and caging of these words in stanzas. But *Shoah Train* mediates a more complex set of relationships, based not only on individual witnesses, but on the connections that thrum beneath, engulfing voices, poet, and reader.

Shoah Train is Heyen's third full-length collection on the Holocaust; his second, *Erika* (Vanguard, 1984) was a much-expanded edition of *The Swastika Poems*, released in 1977. Like *Erika, Shoah Train* bears testimony to Heyen's German ancestors, his Long Island childhood, and his place as an American and a world citizen in the post–World War II era—concerns and presences that echo in the voices of witnesses, Nazis, ancestors, and dream figures who people these sequences.

In *Shoah Train*'s "Dedication, 1939," Heyen's grandfather, a German World War I POW, receives a kiss on the cheek from Hitler. In "Chimney," his father, an immigrant who "smoked three packs a day and hid behind his smoke," offers a fiercely iambic, punctuation-stripped version of Adorno's Auschwitz dictum, "He didn't want to hear it what's the use." The father—no, not *the* father but *William Heyen's* father—is invoked not to accuse or to ridicule, but as a presence to contend with: "He'd raise his hand, & threaten, but not hit." Such an indelible presence shifts and broadens affinities—as Heyen himself, like a necromancer, conjures his own presence in a poem called "Almond":

> "*Herr Professor Doktor Heyen,*
> *meine Name ist Maria Mandel,*
> *SS Auschwitz.* I place myself here
> in your imaginings by free will.

Whose "free will," I wonder. The poet addressed? Maria Mandel's? Or is the poet invoking the specter of the SS guard? All partake in a violent reconfiguration of identities. In "Fugue for *Kristallnacht*," Heyen traces the fault lines beneath a survivor's memories with his painstakingly accurate transcription: "Who will live / will die," she says. In "The Bear," Heyen lilts an eerie lullaby:

> Was alone, was carrying her bear with her.
> Was alone, was carrying her bear with her.
> Was alone, was carrying her bear with her.
> Bear to counsel, comfort, & protect her.

This poem recalls Randall Jarrell's "Protocols," while "Easter Morning" is shaped like George Herbert's devotional "Easter Wings," which demands of the Christian God, "Where is Your center / that is nowhere?" Like Jerome Rothenberg's *Khurban,* to which I see kinship, *Shoah Train* works "in the center that is nowhere," braiding sound, idiom, thought, and poetic tradition to accomplish the joining Bond speaks of, between "a passionate authenticity" and "expressive freedom."

Here, a further intricate move becomes necessary. To speak in the voice of victims may risk usurpation; but what of that far more difficult task: articulating evil, without repudiating our shared condition, or surrendering to the axiom that even Hitler was human, an insight that neutralizes poetry's prerogative to curse. The order of curse I'm talking about here is, like praise, a kind of charm, invoking forces beyond or beneath our ken, as Heyen does in "Ars Poetica":

> I said to my friend
> I like writing
> in the crematoria,
> I mean cafeteria.
> That aberrant word
> had surfaced
> by way of sound
> & the same rhythm.

In malformed words (crematoria / cafeteria), in compacted phrases (who will live / will die), and in fricative slaps (should / cannot), forces beyond the infinite fraction (I wrote faction) of our separate individuality engage. Heyen calls these powers "wildness."

That such wildness has risks can be seen in Heyen's essay "Unwilled Chaos," published in *Writing and the Holocaust* in 1988. About *Erika*'s "Poem Touching the Gestapo," Heyen writes, "I have been afraid of my poem, but I have trusted it, in part, because I have not quite understood it. Whoever [my speaker] is, he has taken Gestapo visions inside himself and gone wild with them." Heyen's speaker—his speakers, his selfhood, his ancestors, his enemies, his shadow—all blend in a wildness to which he fully commits fearful resources.

The problems of writing poems about the Holocaust, or about any single historical event, have less to do with usurpation of a single voice than with the depth and authenticity of poetic commitments. As Etheridge Knight says, "When the IRA sends JUST ONE, just one soldier / to fight with say the American Indians, then I'll believe them." Ultimately, our ancestors cannot nourish until they pass through us. Fathers, cousins, organizations, presses, ideologies, and nations—those shadow cathedrals—coalescing in echoes, rhythms, sounds.

In this way, consequently, I partake more fully in *Shoah Train* because of *The Rope,* a book concerning the environment, composed by Heyen over the same years that he was writing *Shoah Train*. Like his earlier books on the environment, *Long Island Light* and *Pterodactyl Rose, The Rope* may seem at first to be tethered to a subject; but its sequences—like the concluding long poem, "Annuli," which delves into the poet's awakening to the natural world after his childhood encounter with Eastern painted and box turtles—range far. Located at the end of the millennium,

facing the extinction of our and many other species, *The Rope* also effaces time and distance, folding a vast history into eight lines. For instance, Thoreau, JFK, Yankee Stadium, and helicopters are all whorled within "insects / in whose intestines our Milky Way is one of countless / clusters in the eye of Time."

The maples, cherry blossoms, mute swans, ozone, tar balls, municipal incinerators, and yellow jackets, which proliferate in *The Rope,* shimmer in the ghostly figures from *Shoah Train.* Both books—like all of Heyen's poetry—echo in "that center that is nowhere" where no holocaust, no ecology, no history, no event is not invested with inclusivity of the particular. Perhaps this can be shown most clearly by comparing two passages; the first is from *The Rope*'s "Transcendentalism":

> Early May, under a white oak, I broke open an acorn
> the squirrels missed. Already, its meat was filaments
> of mossy fibers within which struggled larvae
> of insects unknown to me

I sense here . . . not a correspondence—nothing that linear—rather, a kinship with "Elegy" from *Shoah Train*, which cites Primo Levi's poem "Wooden Heart," and concludes by asking a question:

> but did the tree, *does* it still in living memory
> reach down into the covenant that every May
> bursts with these red-streaked white blossoms?

In these entwining roots, outrage at the Holocaust is tinged with despair at the coarsening of the atmosphere—each particle and universe partaking in "a joyful equilibrium" so that no poem calcifies or bloats. This is the project ("move it on, instanter, citizen," says Olson in his own twang). We abide in wildness: we move in and with and through it, fully engaged, yet separate, right down to cell and syllable.

Perhaps this is what finally confounded Pound in Pisa when he wrote, "I cannot make it cohere." Perhaps he could no longer make himself cohere, could no longer bring his enormous intellectual faculties to bear on the disparities of scale his cantos and his life contended with. It was no failure of talent or will or design. Maybe he could no longer balance the great with the small, as he had so brilliantly throughout his life—revisioning the history of China, then rummaging in the closet to send Joyce a second-hand pair of boots.

No, I burden him unfairly, *il miglior fabbro,* to judge now. This I hear, distinctly, but not directly, from Dante's lips.

PHILIP BRADY edited the poetry selection published in this issue.

THE POEM THAT CHANGED AMERICA

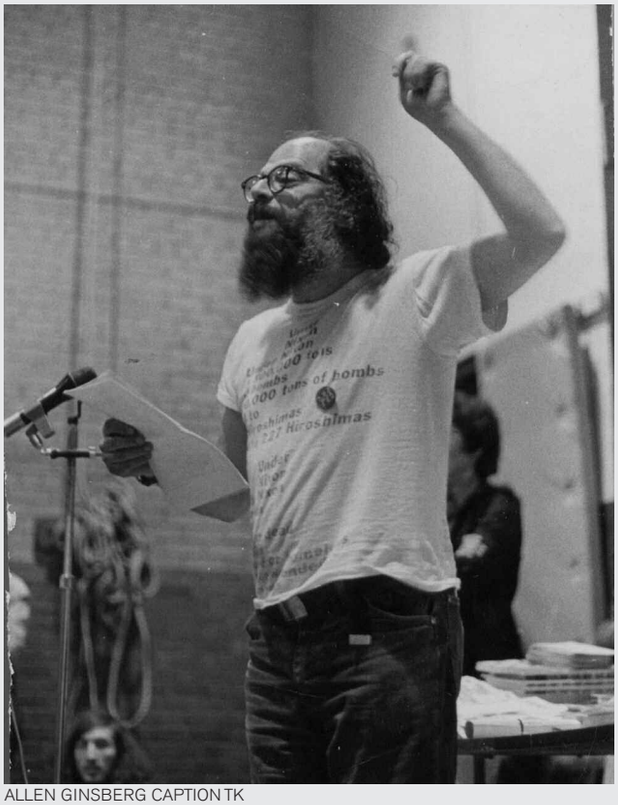
Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"

By Jason Shinder

"What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls restrained by decorum."
—Walt Whitman

Fifty years ago, City Lights, a small San Francisco paperback bookstore cofounded by magazine publisher Rick Martin and the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, published Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems.* With its trademark black-and-white cover, it was the fourth volume in the City Lights Pocket Poets Series. It cost seventy-five cents.

It's an anniversary worth noting: the book has sold more than a million copies, and its signature poem, "Howl," has been translated into two dozen languages and is anthologized in high school and standard anthologies worldwide as a literary classic. Although the book was published fifty years ago this October, readers and commentators from all over the world are beginning to weigh in on the poem's remarkable influence.



ALLEN GINSBERG CAPTION TK

Celebrated by many writers at the time of its publication, including Jack Kerouac, Denise Levertov, and William Carlos Williams (and dismissed by many critics, including Lionel Trilling and Mark Van Doren), the poem gained national recognition when it became the focus of proceedings brought against it by the San Francisco Juvenile Department for obscenity in 1957. Although the presiding Judge Horn dismissed the charges by quoting the motto, "evil to him who thinks evil," the trial was the beginning of one of the most public and influential journeys of any single American poem. The trial, and the publicity it garnered, helped confirm the poem's literary and social significance. It also helped to root the poem's opening line (one of the most famous lines of poetry in world literature) in our collective consciousness:

> I saw the best minds of my generation
> destroyed by madness, starving
> hysterical naked

This line, and the poem's four sections that follow, are Whitman's call in the midst of the crowd. Ginsberg's call first descends into a nightmare world in which the "best minds" are destroyed. He then indicts those elements ("Moloch the loveless!"; "Moloch the heavy judger of men!") that destroy the best qualities of human nature, and afterward offers the possibility of imperfect fulfillment in the search of friendship and love ("I am with you Carl Solomon."). The call of the poet ends with the declaration that in spite of, and because of, what is lost, everything is/must be holy: "Holy the super-natural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!"

The poem, along with several other literary achievements at the time, including Diane di Prima's *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind,* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, inspired the worldwide literary, cultural, and political movement that became known as the Beat Generation. The form-breaking social and cultural power of "Howl" created more, however, than a collective,