"Close to Religious Aspirations": Notes on John Haines's Poetry

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> It is in the nature of every poetical work that stands midway between two cultural epochs that it is bound to be concerned with the search for a new faith. . . . Whenever poetry draws close to religious aspirations, it seizes on mythological concepts, and it does so not by intention but because this is in the nature of things.
>
> —Marked by John Haines in his copy of Hermann Broch's The Spell (1940)

Strict adherents of the poststructuralist persuasion in contemporary American literature, who revel in absence, erasure, infinite verbal play, representations of power, formal pyrotechnics, hybrid genres, thematic emphasis on race, class, gender, nationhood, and/or texts devoid of realistic signifiers (in which Nature, for example, is seen as merely another ideological construction), might not find much beyond its stark, unsentimental tone and escape from the bourgeois self to interest them in the poetry of John Haines. If volume eight of the new *Cambridge History of American Literature, Poetry and Criticism, 1940–1995* (1996) can be considered an accurate sign of the state of re-

cent academic discourse, then the diminished status of all kinds of poetry, but especially nature poetry, in these fractious times is already an established fact. Robert von Hallberg's survey of poetry is 248 pages, only forty pages longer than the survey of literary criticism and theory by Evan Carton and Gerald Graff. Perhaps more to the point, in the 894-page *Columbia History of American Poetry* (1993), John Elder's chapter, "Nature's Refrain in American Poetry," covers twenty pages (with no mention of Haines). In the current encyclopedia of post-World War II writing, John Haines seems to have been erased by the new millenialists, and the art he has practiced for more than fifty years has been reduced to little more than a dying body in need of this or that radical transplant or transfusion (Shetley 191). But as George Steiner reminds us in *Real Presences* (1986), "*anything can be said about anything,*" and such cultural orientations all boil down finally to "*a politics of taste*" (7)—Haines's included.

In becoming an outsider, Haines has not entirely been an innocent or unwitting victim. Indeed, in his caustic review of Paul Hoover's Norton anthology *Postmodern American Poetry* (1994), he shows the degree to which he strenuously opposes consideration of the poem as a language "object" and is suspicious of the "gibberish" of a "poetry cut off from normal discourse and apparently content to speak to itself alone" ("Turning" 69). Haines's distaste for solipsism, narcissism, and what he has repeatedly called the "narrow" postmodern stance in poetry is a sign, at one level, of his conservative temperament and opens him to charges of antidiluvianism and reactionary nostalgia from the hyper-chic critical left. Haines, a writer highly suspicious of intellectual specialization, especially the "professionalization of Letters" (Cooperman 49), has continued to act in the untrendiest of ways by preferring isolation over community, self-sufficiency over networking, nature over society, calling over careerism, propensity for belief over nihilism, intellectual amplitude over narrowness, character over personality, and poetry or memoir over fiction or drama. If these are the moves of an unreconstituted individualist, destined to situate himself in a marginal relationship to cultural centers, they are also moves which have been forged from a deep set of personal convictions, a po-

etics of independence:

> But poetry is not in any useful sense a profession, and it is certainly not a competition, no matter what the behavior of individual poets might at times seem to indicate. It is something else: a complication of reality, a questioning of values and appearances, subversive to the extent that it asks necessary questions; a surrender, a dedication, as well as being at certain times and in certain instances a sacrifice—in which situation all questions as to career and professionalism become irrelevant. ("Formal" 65)

Haines's traditional sensibility represents a way of expressing the world that strikes a balance between culture and nature, between visible and invisible aspects of reality. As he noted in a lecture, his spiritual predilections, including his environmental consciousness, which is born of his resolute belief that "there is no life apart from Nature," provide a pathway to considerations of his own art and a kind of matrix for understanding his often sacral view of poetry. Haines's poems can be said to issue from that linked centrality of his total ecological/aesthetic/spiritual life, what he has called an integrated "place of conviction" ("Roots" 85), an arena of experiential relatedness. "If you believe that there is no spiritual value in the world," he told Matthew Cooperman in 1996, "that things are mere objects, and there can be no barrier to the penetration of the 'secrets' of nature, and to the exploitation of so-called 'resources,' then, in a real sense, the world is reduced to prose, and poetry becomes impossible. I think we must keep alive that sense of the ultimate mystery, or what can only be called sacred—sacred because it is finally beyond explication and beyond possession" (117).

Haines has never become part of America's "canonical master narrative," as Alan Golding names it in *From Outlaw to Classic* (1995, xiv), but not to read Haines is the new historical apologists' loss, for his life's work in poetry is a sustained effort at entering, however briefly and lyrically, and against huge odds, a condition of "belief" concerning the world outside the ego. Beginning with his first book, born of

his formative Alaskan homesteading experience, *Winter News* (1966), with its dreamlike opening invocation to his muse, the night-hunting Great Horned Owl, and extending all the way through "Night," the concluding poem in his recent collected volume, *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer* (1996), his body of work, his total imaginative output, is consistently enlivened by his own individual version of pragmatic "theory." This is his own informing agenda, so to speak, circulating around several intricately conducted figures that create a reasonably coherent, cumulative force in his work. These include but are not limited to the divided self, the myth journey, the role of wilderness, the power of place/region, the intersection of nature and culture, the political consciousness, and the deep prominence of the iconic image—all of which take on the properties of ideas (Haines has more than once bemoaned contemporary poetry's "lack of ideas").

His poem "The Weaver" captures "one of those moments," Haines says, "in which it is possible to feel that something deep and essential in existence, eternal and unchanging, is somehow contained, illuminated, held briefly; an insight not to be explained or deciphered, a moment of pure being" (*Owl* 134). In a rare (for Haines, that is) but nonetheless symbolic domestic action, the central image of the artist figure creates a resonant new order out of quotidian chaos:

> And her batten comes down,
> softly beating the threads,
> a sound that goes and comes again,
> weaving this house and the dusk
> into one seamless, deepening cloth. (Owl 132)

To speak of Haines's religiousness, then, is not to speak of an exact creed, a specific orthodoxy, or the importation of an institutional set of values. Of these he has generally been skeptical, as in an early poem, "The End of the Summer":

> Let the inhuman, drab machines
> patrol the road that leads nowhere,

> and the men with Bibles
> and speeches come to the door,
> asking directions—
> we will turn them all away
> and be alone. (Owl 31)

To speak of his religiousness is, rather, to speak of something far more lenient in its implication (even when the reference is overtly religious, as in "Christmas, 1962," in which Christ figures only as an "astonished refugee" giving the "strange unshackled / gift of himself" [*Owl* 36]). More likely, to begin to understand the religious spirit in Haines's work is to see moments of illumination or insight arising from, or enacting a communion with, a "spirit of place, a presence asking to be expressed" ("Writer" 19). It is the kind of situation evoked in "The Sound of Animals in the Night," where he writes, "we come and go by the flare / of campfires, full of ghosts / with huge, wounded hearts" (*Owl* 26), or "Listening in October," where outside the house, in "towering darkness," "There are silences so deep / you can hear / the journeys of the soul / enormous footsteps / downward in a freezing earth" (*Owl* 35). Drawing on the austere Alaskan landscape and its sublime distances, this poem creates a sense of both awe and awesomeness, which becomes its own proper intuitive response to the moment, its own awareness of invisibles, given its dramatic time and place.

In these poems, Haines wishes to reach a level of "authentic" communication, which uncovers "the significant shapes that lie behind appearances"; indeed, he sees the writer's function as one of initiating his audience to a world "beyond the private self" ("Writer" 19–20). Thus, Haines's sense of morality is not so much associated with the value-laden and normative properties of good and bad, reflected in the human social community, but with the implicit and necessary gravity of the private artistic quest, the unstinting "commitment" to the ethical writerly life, by which, quoting from Words-worth, he claims, "we see into the life of things" (*Owl* 4). In "Rain Country," one of his recent longer meditative poems, Haines writes of this private morality, this inflected sense of witnessing, in which an era's soul history can be

glimpsed:

> Shadows blur in the rain,
> they are whispering straw
> and talking leaves.
>
> I see what does not exist,
> hear voices that cannot speak
> through the packed
> earth that fills them. (Owl 192)

The passion of Haines's quest, then, the intricately traced figure in his poetic tapestry, is animated and quickened—if not directly informed—by a persistent apprehension of dark sources, mythic gestures, natural mysteries, shadowy presences, and, in short, intimations of othernesses in their myriad guises and forms. "You are here," he writes in a 1976 poem, "Alive in the World," "alive in this place, / touching with sight / things that are smoke tomorrow" (*Owl* 175). "It's important to keep in mind," he claimed to Robert Hedin in a 1989 *Northwest Review* interview, that

> Life itself casts a shadow, literally and symbolically . . . very old human adventures—presentiments, imaginings, spiritual journeys—are in one way or another continually being re-enacted, even when, as is the case most of the time, appearances are deceiving and the meaning is kept from us. Only perhaps when the immediate and the temporal disappears, is put aside for a moment, do those other shapes become visible, and the true significance . . . is revealed to us. ("Interview" 228)

Haines's participation in and enactment of the "myth-journey of humankind" ("Hole" 70), in which he metaphorically embodies the quester's role and sees beyond a temporal framework to the larger issue or form, is deeply personal, deeply felt, but not necessarily autobiographical in a narrowly confessional way. Efforts to make Haines into a contemporary shaman—all magical purpose and mystical effects—appear misguided because they undercut first of all the profoundly skeptical tone of much of his writing and second the aesthetic

dimension of his speakerly role and voice. It is important to make this person/poet distinction, for like Emily Dickinson, who felt obligated to remind Thomas Higginson, "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person" (Johnson 412), so too, in his 1975 essay "The Hole in the Bucket," Haines has issued this qualification regarding the poet's "task": "to invest the 'I' of the poem with significance beyond the ordinary, to make of one's own predicament a universal case. Or to say it another way, it is to allow something besides the self to occupy the poem, to matter as much as the self" (67).

To push beyond the "inadequate art" of a personality-driven poetry is to see something larger than the self in the view at hand, to push toward the center of the "time-ghost in things" ("Interview" 228–29), the universal experience (whether psychological, political, or ecological), with its aura of tantalization. Haines accomplishes this in "Into the Glacier," where the speaker moves "Deeper and deeper, / a luminous blackness opening / like the wings of a raven— / as though a heavy wind / were rising through all the houses / we ever lived in" (*Owl* 37); or in "The Fossil," where the speaker moves toward a residue of mystery:

> Sometimes in our sleep
> this grey, carnivorous shadow
> comes drifting and feeding,
> like the toothed smile
> at the lips of living men.
>
> A lighted spine lashing
> uphill in the evening traffic,
> home to the clay beds
> where night after night
> the heart's wide nets are cast. (Owl 174)

Perhaps even more to the point, Haines's speaker is willing to brave the center's infinite questions, which is for him the way to enter imaginatively the original condition of things, as in the lovely poem "To Live

among Children":

> To live among children,
> to listen, an ear to their trouble;
> the voices, demanding or gentle,
> small hands plucking
> the threads of a sleeve:
>
> ask to be told once more
> a story repeated by the shadows
> looming at cribside.
>
> And what had those shadows to say—
> vague and nodding,
> dense with the mystery always
> towering in the distance?
>
> That little has changed
> since that hour we too listened
> to a voice speaking in the oak leaves.
> And think of the answers we give:
>
> Why the continents drift,
> what wind carves the rock
> into cities, or blows the people
> on their polar journies;
>
> what legendary shoulder continues
> to hold up the sky,
> or why the mountain train
> never seems to end.
> All of our history come to that moment
> when we look
> at a shadow flying past:
>
> What bird, what beast was that? (Owl 101–02)

The fleeting moment, the "mysterious prompting" as Henry Taylor calls its many manifestations (16), constitutes some loci of Haines's spiritual attention, his visionary orientation. To live among those questions generated by such experiences is itself a way of being and a kind of understanding that our life on earth must accommodate "an intuition of some greater, larger design in existence" (Haines Lecture). The shadowed distance, the winged image, the traces of a prior life within and without draw Haines's eye time and time again, not toward nihilistic erasure or emptiness alone, but toward a kind of humble faith and earned wisdom, such as that contained in the lesson of the Cumean Sibyl, who, Haines writes, "in responding to questions, wrote her answers upon leaves that quickly blew away and were lost." This "great symbolic" story, he adds, never ages: "The artist, the poet, the thinker, and indeed all of us in one way or another, are, it seems to me, in eternal search of those lost leaves and the answers written upon them. The study of nature is a part of that search, as is the study of art, or literature and language; a pursuit of the truth as we have known it in the past and are compelled to recover" ("The Nature of Art" 14). This tension between compulsion and humility can be seen in "Yeti":

> In this world we think we know,
> something will always
> be hidden, whether a fern-rib
> traced in the oldest rock,
>
> or a force behind our face,
> like the pulse of a reptile,
> dim and electric, (Owl 109)

or again in "The Eye in the Rock," one of Haines's signature Montana landscape poems, where on "A high rock face above Flathead Lake," the speaker discovers a painted aboriginal eye, which in a characteristically Hainesian paradox, both sees and is seen:

> Over the lake water comes this light
> that has not changed,
> the air we have always known . . .
>
> They who believed that stone,
> water and wind might be quickened
> with a spirit like their own,
> painted this eye that the rock might see. (Owl 163)

Haines's poetry and his conception of the poet's office clearly hark back to an old, established aesthetic, a traditional lingusitic emphasis and expressive sensibility of the kind frequently associated with Romanticism and its varied descendents, as Don Bogen has noted (59). But invoking this canonical lineage should not instantly give the impression that Haines is merely another literary dinosaur, hopelessly out of step with his own times. Rather, it is preferable to think of him as a maverick poet, less out of step with his times than energetically working in that grand Western American literary tradition of hewing against the grain. In his introduction to Graywolf Press's 1993 reprint of Edwin Muir's *The Estate of Poetry*, Haines writes in a self-revealing way: "Poetry for men like Muir and Jeffers, as it was for Wordsworth and for Yeats, had in the end little to do with celebrity and professional cheek, and everything to do with an attitude that, as Muir well knew, lies close to the religious experience. Those for whom poetry is more than a career will know what I mean by this" (Introduction iii). Without pressing the category too far toward priestly exclusivity or elitist privilege, Haines is proposing a kind of bardic function, which emphasizes "poetry's traditional high purpose," its sense of calling, spiritual questing and seeing, or serious "vocation" (Lecture). Part of that inheritance is his sense of the abiding "closeness of word and thing," which has been "central" in his writing, as he claimed recently in a symposium with Kathleen Norris, Donald Hall, E. Ethelbert Miller, and others on "Writers and Their Faith" (qtd. in Lythgoe 7). To speak of "this essential connection" between nature and language

reveals a Romantic stance more closely associated with attitudes about art, philosophy, psychology, and being consonant with the earlier writers Haines has repeatedly praised (Wordsworth, Emerson, Jeffers, Williams, Muir, and Broch, for instance) than with his thoroughgoing avant-garde or experimental contemporaries, such as John Ashbery, whose *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992) Haines lambasted in *The Hudson Review* for its capitulation to superficial impressions, and for its jazzy, television- and media-inspired contemporaneity, its flat, depthless surface. The art of collage, Haines crankily suggests—to put the best face possible on Ashbery's project—still signals the utter lack of a "search for which an entire life must be risked" ("In and Out" 40).

Risking life, of course, has long been Haines's habit, and it seems an essential aspect of the lifelong "myth-journey." It is not only his youthful gambit in trekking off to Alaska in 1947 to build his homestead off Richardson Highway outside Fairbanks that is relevant here, or his decision—not totally self-willed—to stay out of the permanent academic loop (with its privileges and entitlements, perquisites and prizes), but the fact that his poems are often thematically uncompromising, tonally austere, and stylistically spare, and gain their special quality of voice and authority from the immediate presence of threatening situations. In the dramatic "Horns," for example, the speaker encounters a rutting bull moose, at once Darwinian threat and totemic beast:

> I fell asleep in an old white tent.
> The October moon rose,
> and down a wide, frozen stream
> the moose came roaring,
> hoarse with rage and desire.
>
> I awoke and stood in the cold
> as he slowly circled the camp.
> His horns exploded in the brush
> with dry trees cracking
> and falling; his nostrils flared
> as swollen-necked, smelling

of challenge, he stalked by me. (Owl 16)

Wary of uncomplicated transcendental, paradisiacal views, Haines's poems acquire their special tinge of sadness and knowledge from a nervous, edgy sense of psychological risk, denial, and skepticism that is imminent in his poetical landscape and in the choices his speaker(s) make and are made to make. In his otherwise quirky and often cranky Western Writers Series monograph on Haines, Peter Wild rightly says that he "willingly assumes the hazard" (32). One wrong move of the hand, we think, and even Haines's long sought-for center, that elusive core (even without exact answers), dissolves, as in "On Banner Dome" where he writes, once again, of the elusive power of place:

The sunlight is never warm
in such a place; to sleep there
is to dream that the ropes
that hold you to earth are letting go,
and around the straining tent
of your life there prowls and sniffs
a fallen black star who overturns
stones and devours the dead. (Owl 57)

The search for spirit, the voice that is great within us and our world, whatever we choose to call it, however, is among the predominant elements in Haines's work. In a revealing essay, "Within the Words: An Apprenticeship," Haines clearly marks his position as one called toward writing, despite its traps, snares, and pitfalls:

> I believe, against most current thought and practice, that poetry is neither a profession nor a career, nor can it in any genuine sense be understood as a choice, but comes as it were, to the chosen, as a gift or, it may sometimes be, an affliction. In the true instance it becomes an obsession, something that cannot be refused. If this is not the case, then in all honesty I believe that it would be better to have done some more practical and humanly useful thing in life. (3)

In this statement, part justification and part manifesto, Haines lays out the nature of his calling, which he considers a special focus, a powerful lens, that has allowed him to see and to speak obsessively—but clearly, forcefully, and unsentimentally—about present events not only in the natural world (for which, perhaps, he is best known as a poet and memoir writer), but also in the political and social world, especially in several chilling poems from *The Stone Harp* (1971), such as "Tar" or "A Dream of the Police," that strike resonant, prophetic chords at this late stage in our history. And at times, the natural and political intersect, as in section XIII of "In the Forest without Leaves," when the speaker laments wholesale environmental degradation, embodied in the thoughtless destruction of the "tree of life," for which there is "no one left to tell / of your heartwood / peeled down to a seed of ash, / your crowned solitude / crushed to a smoldering knot" (*Owl* 234). In addition, Haines's preoccupation with originations also has allowed him to turn back to other sources, intimations, and awarenesses—not mystical, but mythic in their dreamlike dimension and portent. "To the extent that it was possible for me," he says in "The Writer as Alaskan," "I entered the original mystery of things, the great past out of which we came" (9), so that one sees throughout his poetry certain creatures, events, things, and people acting as psychic markers, signposts, totems, or "pathway icons," as they are called in Priya Mookerjee's book on icons of India, which Haines has recently quoted as an example of an older, unified art method ("On a Certain" 121). In the interest of tallying our current spiritual, cultural, linguistic diminution, Haines concludes his essay "Within the Words" this way:

> We have lost much of the ancient material of poetry, nearly the whole of its mythological background with all of its natural and supernatural transformations and embodiments—dragons and demons, metamorphic types, and so forth. That we can no longer look into the night sky and see there gods and heroes, whole con-

> stellations of beast and actors, means that the world as imagination has been reduced in scope and value. It is in part the mission of poetry to keep these and all related things alive, to renew their character and their meaning, and in so doing keep alive the language we speak to ourselves and to others, and keep fresh also the heart and the spirit from which the words must come. (15)

Reading this statement one thinks of his poem "The Head on the Table" in which the speaker muses over an ancient bison head "cushioned on the museum table" and elevates it from its taxonomic fate in the "gloom of the catalogues" by considering this symbolic perspective:

> The ear thinned down to a clay shell,
>
> listening with the deep presence
> of matter that does not die,
> while the whole journey of beasts on earth
> files without a sound
> into the gloom of the catalogues.
>
> The far tundra lying still,
> transparent under glass and steel.
> Evening of the explorer's lamp,
> the wick turned down
> in its clear fountain of oil.
>
> In the shadow made there,
> a rough blue tongue passes over teeth
> stained by thirty thousand years
> of swamp water and peat. (Owl 165)

In an arresting recent essay Bonnie Costello suggests that "Fic-tions of nature as a primal Other or even a numinous presence are receding as poets turn to the indissoluble mixture of gray and green in which we live" (571). Though Haines is not mentioned in her essay, his po-

etry, in one respect, meets Costello's challenge of the "'diminished'" or vanishing "'thing'" by treading a very fine line between ultimacy and the here and now. Keeping the related things alive and energizing matter through vision and language that does not die are part of Haines's "elegiac" mission (*Owl* 3). Haines's sustained effort is "to renew the alphabet, the grammar of speech and thought . . . so that something of the heart-healing beauty and mystery can still be felt" ("John" 190). For Haines the recovery of such "wilderness" is not merely physical and topographical (or ecological, for that matter), but is instead defined as "a condition that lives in the universe" ("Sun" 52). Haines's awareness of sacred qualities occurs in an otherwise fallen life, Nature's otherwise "blind face," where the relative insignificance of individual humans in the cosmic scheme of things is painfully, perhaps tragically, apparent:

> One might say the rise of nature writing in recent years signifies a return of spiritual content, or the search for it, were it not for the fact that too much 'nature' writing tends to focus on the person, or the personality, of the writer—tends to become another expression of narcissism that is an obvious characteristic of contemporary society. Or, to put the matter yet another way: in the absence of the gods many things tend to become disproportionately important. (qtd. in Lythgoe 8–9)

Articulating an awareness of what Ihan Hassan calls "the harsh claims of spirit on our existence" is both necessary and honest (25), because it befits the teacherly role Haines envisions as being among the poet's duties.

Carrying the news of loss is not Haines's sole purpose, of course, for he does not traffic in the slick commerce of nostalgia (though he does keenly feel changes in cultural epochs). His attempt is "to reconcile what are two separate and yet inseparable histories, Nature and Culture. To the extent that we can do this, the 'world' makes sense to us and can be lived in," he claims in "On a Certain Atten-tion to the World" (127). That is, Haines reaches toward a "real presence" which

not only underwrites his whole poetics but joins world and mind (Steiner 20). He recognizes the breach that exists between those forces, and he journeys into it in poem after poem. The particular tension Haines achieves in his best poems comes from his inability to heal the rift, suggesting instead only a possible route for eventual belief, a tentative shape for the right habit of heart and mind. This conundrum, this paradox, motivates several long meditative series poems, including "In the Forest without Leaves," "Days of Edward Hopper," and especially "Meditation on a Skull Carved in Crystal." This latter poem (prefaced by a quotation from Martin Buber—"After is the wrong word. It is an entirely different dimension. Time and space are crystallizations out of God. At the last hour all will be revealed.") traces a mournful search, a soulful bereavement into what might sustain one in the face of death, "the last confusion" (*Owl* 189). Not for nothing John Elder writes that the "poet's task in an age of global catastrophe is one of creative grieving" (726).

What saves one—or almost saves one—in such vast bleakness, what keeps driving Haines's poetry—even aesthetically in so far as such grace is ever possible—are those momentary apprehensions, glimpses, coexistences with a sacramental dimension. Like Herman Broch's quotation at the beginning of this essay (which Haines told me in a 1994 letter "is right on the money" regarding poetry's religious sensibility), a quotation from nineteenth-century Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt's *Reflections on History* (1944) is a telling epigraph for *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer*: "[T]here remains with us the feeling that all poetry and all intellectual life were once the handmaids of the holy, and have passed through the temple" (148). If poetry has fallen away from its primary, originating condition in the lives of most people and in the lexicon of many historicizing postmodern critics, use of this epigraph is a delicious irony, for at the very least it highlights the paradoxes of his own resolute life-long search: "Life, art, and religion are one," he says emphatically ("On a Certain" 122). Perhaps the best way to think of Haines's religious spirit, then, is to see it as a record of those moments when an animated awareness of a larger, nonmaterial presence intrudes, or becomes tangible, within the field of his experi-

ence. These are Haines's own versions of theologian Rudolph Otto's numinousness (Studebaker 97). In Haines's turn toward the mythic, sacral dimension of experience, where resonances are struck up in the imagination of the receptive listener/watcher, the world can be transformed at any moment, and a pathway opened to another order of existence. "I stood there in the moonlight," he says in "Horns," "and the darkness and silence / surged back, flowing around me, / full of a wild enchantment, / as though a god had spoken" (*Owl* 17).

In Haines's best work such liminal and boundary moments are not expressed in the elevated rhetoric and privileged epiphany of the typical Romantic nature lyric but instead are often muted, intimated, and understated (not an unusual angle of repose given the deceptive plainness of Haines's poetical style). The implications, however, seem clear—God, if that eminence can be given a name, can appear at any time, as in Section V of another Montana poem, "News from the Glacier": "West of Logan Pass," where a group of mountain goats "came down, / out of the cliffs above us," except for "one old billy / who stood alone on the ridge, / his beard in the wind, / watching the watchers" (*Owl* 170). The isolated moment is a product of what Haines has called a kind of "veneration," as if within such objects and creatures, seen rapturously, "something of the impenetrable mystery might be sensed and named, and before which one might be, not designing or dominating, but quietly attentive" ("On a Certain" 120).

There is a huge, abiding lesson here. Despite what many of his supporters have wished, it is perhaps a good thing that John Haines has not yet become part of America's "official verse culture" (Rasula 466–67). While Haines's prayerful bearing might not suit the most theoretical of today's literary critics and cultural tastemakers, it might, however, go a long way, especially for the attentive and sympathetic reader, toward pointing a way out of the current dilemma surrounding the death of poetry, the end of nature, and the loss of crucial spirit and private belief. As Haines writes in "You and I and the World,"

> There is a form that exists, independent of our will and in-

> vention, and one need not believe in either God or Plato to acknowledge a truth in this claim. To the extent that a poem corresponds in some degree to this living, timeless, but never more than partly revealed form, the poem will justify itself and outlive its moment of conception. We will call it apt, or fitting, or beautiful, like a house to be lived in. (83)

Kevin Walzer rightly claims that Haines's poetry "reminds us that, however tenuously our proper connection to the world may be, we have not completely forgotten it"; that "the realization is fleeting is only a reminder of how important it is—and how significant is Haines's work as a poet" (81). There is strength to be drawn from Walzer's revealing appreciation and a kind of cautionary wisdom regarding Haines's achievement. As Steiner observes, "We must read" then, always and already, "*as if*" (18).

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