

SAMPLER

CANTILENA

ALSO BY JOHN PECK

- Shagbark* (Bobbs-Merrill, New York, 1972)
The Broken Blockhouse Wall (David P. Godine, Boston, 1979)
Poems and Translations of Hi-Lö (Carcenet Press, Manchester, 1991, &
Sheep Meadow Press, Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY, 1993)
Argura (Carcenet Press, Manchester, 1993)
Selva Morale (Carcenet Press, Manchester, 1995)
M and Other Poems (Triquarterly Books, Evanston, IL, 1996)
Collected Shorter Poems 1966–1996 (Carcenet Press, Manchester, 1999, &
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Red Strawberry Leaf: Selected Poems 1994–2001 (University of Chicago Press,
Chicago, 2005)
Contradance (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011)
I Came, I Saw – Eight Poems (Shearsman Books, Bristol, 2012)

TRANSLATIONS

- Euripides: *Orestes* (with Frank Nisetich, Oxford University Press, New York /
Oxford, 1995)
C.G. Jung: *Liber Novus / The Red Book* (with Sonu Shamdasani and Mark
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John Peck



CANTILENA

SAMPLER

one book in four spans



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Baldung Grien, 'Der behexte Stallknecht' [*The Bewitched Groom*], ca. 1544.

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In the Designer are all the cogwheels that control the movements of the Harrow, and this machinery is regulated according to the inscription demanded by the sentence... Of course the script can't be a simple one; it's not supposed to kill a man straight off, but only after an interval of, on an average, twelve hours... When it finishes the first draft of the inscription on the man's back, the layer of cotton wool begins to roll and slowly turns the body over, to give the Harrow fresh space for writing... It keeps on writing deeper and deeper for the whole twelve hours... How quiet he grows at just about the sixth hour! Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow itself. Nothing more happens than that the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds.

—Franz Kafka, 'In der Strafkolonie,'
translated by Willa and Edwin Muir

N a b a t!

— 'The Alarm Bell'
(4th movement, 11th Symphony, Dmitri Shostakovitch)

SAMPLER

Falling In

—A Foreword to John Peck's *Cantilena*—

1.

John Peck relates a story about the artist James Turrell, innovator of 'inner-light' installations and the massive, decades-long desert observatory project at Arizona's Roden Crater. During one of Turrell's museum shows, two visitors to the darkened rooms mistook the projected corner-cube of blue light for a reliably solid wall, leaned on it, and promptly fell inside the piece. While such an experience may sound intriguing to those of us frustrated by material form's inadequacy in the face of experience, the visitors were not amused. Each filed a lawsuit against the artist.

Under-read, underrated, and without the mainstream attention focused on Turrell, John Peck need not fear legal retribution for the risks posed by his long poem, *Cantilena*. However, Peck's magnum opus, a serial work in the recent tradition of Geoffrey Hill and Jay Wright, and harkening back to the medieval sequences of Remy de Gourmont, contains the same surface enchantments, animating vitalities, and fathomless depths that surely bewitched the Turrell gazers. "Now that I have let it go, / it can touch me—the many gone, / their ozone margin of departure." *Cantilena* is a poem about falling in, and learning to fall in deeper.

Plunging into equivocations with Peck's personal ghosts, above all his father Clarence (whose engineering work in the heat-treatment of steel alloys contributed secretly to the Manhattan Project), the book also falls into a sustained, skeptical dialogue with the "familiar compound ghosts" of Western culture. Shostakovich, Marsden Hartley, Thoreau, Karl Barth, Oscar Milosz—these are names culled from the poem's first fifteen cantos. "It becomes clear/ that my thoughts have not been mine, ever," Peck writes. But this echo of Jung's *Red Book* amounts to more than an acknowledgment of intellectual indebtedness. An unpublished essay by Peck on aspects of the poem notes the harmonic between this perpetual in-falling and the notes struck in both German and English usage.

When one asks, “Can you think of anything we can do?” it runs, *Fällt uns etwas ein, was wir tun könnten?* The English phrasing is naively activist where the German allows for the fact that in-fall happens: *Einfallen* signals the psychological facts straightaway, the *Einfall* being a strange notion or lucky hunch, but also the routine occurrence of thinking. The Wintersian critique of radical associationism in poetics, although now mostly ignored, remains indispensable. Yet so also does the Aristotelian account of root breath *ψυκῆ* (*anima* and *soul*), as the pooled potentials of “inner touch” that ground sensing and phantasy alike. Neurology goes on revamping this account without entirely junking it. And so in English, *it occurs* to me—that is, runs in front of me, crosses my path; or else it strikes me, that is, hits, grazes, grooves into, or rubs up against me, because ‘I’ am the field into which *it* falls; such is the common reality of experience.

One of the great pleasures of *Cantilena* is feeling this reality ramify in a way that, for all the poem’s learnedness, is primarily physical. Fleshed out in contours of syntax and bursts of raw lyricism, Peck’s verse is precise even when abstract: “judgment/ remaining life to convicted wonder.”

2.

Thematically, *Cantilena* appropriates subjects familiar to the Modernist long poem: recent European and American history, art making, political corruption and the question of individual complicity, and the bearing of classical and religious heritages on the present. *Cantilena* is also one of our only major long poems so far to consistently engage climate change. Yet, for this reader at least, the work’s chief power comes not from the positions it stakes out on these topics, but rather from its performance of a kind of imaginative magic—what Peck calls “undersensing.” This “undersensing” is carried out in three distinct arenas: historical vignettes, personal remembrances, and synchronicities snatched from a lifetime of reading. It is no exaggeration to say that the poem treats the dead, in Henry Vaughan’s words, as “alive and busie.” These stand-offs with ghosts inform the flux of the speaker’s self, often caught between curiosity and terror: “Though they only stand there, they came many miles, / and though you wait, you’ll be the first to move.”

Each of the four books or “spans” proceeds, in High Modernist fashion, by juxtaposition. The speaker’s archetypal vision of lightning sheathing a tower—“the windows blown out / but mortar holding its shaking length”—jumps to an anecdote of the 16th-century goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini as a child, witnessing a salamander “cavorting/ in the core-blue coals.” A canto beginning with Herakles and Alkestis, “veiled in toils,” transforms by the end into a lament for a World Trade Center survivor, her “muteness” wrapped in a “grit stole.” As in dreamwork or a Poundian ideogram, meaning is to be stumbled upon and must be pieced together.

The word “undersense” comes from Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, and Peck infuses it with heavy doses of his own idiosyncratic gnosticism and Renaissance alchemy (books two and three of the poem take their titles from this field). Poetry becomes a way of feeling through, feeling beneath. When Peck writes about a Pittsburgh lecture hall in which both he and his father spoke, forty years apart, or about a New England landscape still vibrant with the Shakers’ “regimental/ abandon,” this “undersensing” alters our relationship with the past, or, better yet, newly reveals it. “The crack thus worked open pours out what is.” Watching these cracks emerge throughout the poem is often thrilling, and yet the charge is inescapably moral. Imagine a pair of lenses, like movie glasses, that allow you to perceive history along with still emerging reality in 3-D, with all five senses, its horrors and joys arising from the sidewalk you stand on, the air you breathe.

If *Cantilena* is often about this paradoxical plunge into alertness, “falling as being pulled, / dragged as breaking surface and gulping flame,” it also demands that readers plunge into it, undaunted. As with Hill and Wright (and the master who stands behind all three poets, Ezra Pound), Peck’s combination of linguistic density and historical allusions proves demanding. Such is the wager for what Peck calls “the potentials of sensing with the whole organism.” And just as one lovely turn in the poem remarks on a “foretime of the eye before it judges,” so too does our apprehension of *Cantilena* come in stages. The poem’s first canto acknowledges those “fit disturbers whom the mind loathes / yet down through its girderwork / of unrealized ends may crave.” From this inaugural disturbance—which may also represent the moment of poetic vocation—to a constant jostling between loathing and craving, political

dirge and lyric rapture, *Cantilena* enacts discoveries of its own of mood and tone. “Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing,” avows Basil Bunting, another abiding influence on Peck, towards the end of his long poem, *Briggflatts*.

If the speaker/traveler in *Cantilena* had plotted out his route beforehand, he would forego the poem’s principle of receptivity, its acknowledgment of language’s strange but compelling mutuality: “salmon after their stream climb/ in a deep eddy holding,/ stippled missiles/ long as an arm: I carry my load/ and if I bear it then it will carry me.” One wonders, at times, how the poem ever came to a stop. Yet in fact Peck does halt it—restarting the poem with its last and longest span, *The Bewitched Groom*, by addressing a goddess of beginnings on a beach at low tide:

Inizia—

withholdings, curses, all their damnable protest
under my breath seeking some absconder
Hell! bits of smooth glass in the shatterfield
of the beach splayed wide by ebb,
choice marzipan spat out by process,
gleaming in your allowing
ease: no further, no deeper need I burrow
to find your donation.

All resistance slides
in runnels out to the shine, placid seepings
of release.

Zero disc in the wind rolling
hints of itself, the key ring at your girdle
hourly undoing prisoners’ bindings
and ting-tings through the running lights of a freighter
in the bay’s roadstead, miles out into a patience
assured of the wharf’s hug and unloading.

Never

late the meeting—punctual even down
the corridor of crime, as the ripe pear confides,
as the shower flouncing from cloud swag announces,
On time :

my hand is the work of millennia

and thus too its work, yet in thanks becomes only what,
lifting and valving into the unmeasured,
I give you, rebeginner of grasps and pourings.

You visited? You abandoned? You are always here.

This *I*, jostled by Jung's Wotanic "disturbers" in the poem's first canto, returns here as devotee, able to let things fall out in due time.

3.

Jung in Pittsburgh, Hölderlin in West Hartford, Mandelstam in Princeton at midnight: Peck's poem leaves no shortage of compound ghosts to tantalize us. Likewise, depth psychology (after leaving academia, Peck has practiced Jungian analysis since 1993), Native American mythology, and Hindu theology all provide points of entry to the poem. One crucial canto even has a soccer referee undergo a Poundian metamorphosis into a player (perhaps a stand-in for the writer himself becoming a helpless participant): "No wonder that no side wants him on their team." But for a poem so invested in performing and revealing what it senses, physicality remains crucial. Even at his most discursive, Peck always prioritizes sound. His teacher Donald Davie once wrote that poetry's job was to turn ideas into sensation; in *Cantilena* language snaps and shifts, involving the reader in its "singly entranced yet/ mutually/ entangled" predicament. In that respect, the poem's comprehensive *Einfall* is the sounding of its discourse.

One of Peck's early poems, 'Vestibule,' describes a husband and wife calling to each other from different floors of a house. For the man, the woman's voice conjures up "another room we entered once together, / Catching our breath:" the room for self-recollection used by Shakers for spiritual preparation after fieldwork. Longing resolves itself, this early poem suggests, not in direct communication, but in patches of peace granted by cultural inheritance and mutual curiosity. Likewise, for all its recondite and unflinching excavation, *Cantilena* feels its way towards the same momentary resolutions. "As a hull enters / a berg's wake or a whale's, that spreading calm / after large passage, / its muted draw

silkenly forgiving / micro-seethings across the dark total. / One follows.”
One falls in, deeper and deeper in this remarkable work, to see what’s
really there.

Nate Klug

SAMPLER

One

CEDARS
SAMPLER
OF
LIBAN

sluicing roots

SAMPLER

My paper-covered half-pillar
near the door to hold letters, in shutter-louved
storm light sinks deeper away, as if
to retreat from that not-yet tipped
beaker where powers fizz, eldest primes,
fit disturbers whom the mind loathes
yet down through its girderwork
of unrealized ends may crave. Thus taking these in
I give *I* no assent. The bear
through valleys of my ancestors, crooner
to the loners, hulked as the slant warbler
of trailbreak, a furry sun ululant—
as Odin, cloud on cloud
fertile and urgent, hung on
the tree nine days and nights, until from his sweat
the oozing runes jelled and roots knuckled
tumescent toward the showering undersky
of earth's want: unaccountable
helmsman, gang-builder out of black cumulus,
tuner of cedars and sirocco
and the oak architraves of the Teutoburg,
who littered the Kalkriese
with Latin iron and fertilizing bone—
again you are here, all unsent for.

Not from Pleiku but Sumer's garden
 where through millennia arbors extend the house
 blossom by blade into space, for a fifth year
 unstopably piled the uncouncted. Melville, Higginson,
 Duyckinck, Emerson: how should one imagine
 briefing them, movers of Young America, Mazzini
 and Słowacki's cousins, on these redcoat wars?
 Orchards from origin, each tree a willed effort—from
 their years of smash one glimpse here makes selvage.
 In front of Marsden Hartley's *Mount Ktaadn*
 a twelve-year-old surrenders her arms at her sides,
 filaments siphoning the unseen
 at intermission from the out-takes of death.
 The bulk dark of it shoulders fires into space
 neither as spangle nor aura but the bloom of itself.
 Her lips part: she does not hear them pounding,
 strewing their beachheads, the great simplifiers.
 The mineral ages are only as wide as she is, they are going
 on into her, who will thrust yowls from her belly
 and cup leaf-pale hands in a hospice.
 Nothing can stop this, nothing makes any of it
 either plunge on or hold back. Going in or rising,
 going on in or lifting out of it: mountain, sun.

Dressage! a red-brown door bulges and rips
 the sun's torpid delay, then muzzle and foreleg,
 roan kick and a mane percolating
 through fence and hill, a cloud cliff sheared
 by sternum and belly: Poussin's mount and rider
 sprung from their barn are the least of it. Wiry
 glory half blurry, fascists spurring the wishists,
 twinging knot of the two ways. How do we stand it?
 There it goes—assertion leaping past argument,
 lungs sucking a hot chaw of teeth, seeing caught
 at the boil, raw fight afloat there
 past policy, out-churning advance.
 Yet at stand, at bend, sagged from shoulders
 slotting down the neck's fringed pour, breakout
 mauls grass all at maze, archived with oats,
 bone sheathing the fat of the wind now, blood hairy,
 the eye a black pin through plush.
 No innocent, the soul broods in dinged hayey
 dolor past nightfall, hurls men its enemies at the horizon,
 sublimes its contract past praise into stamina: *Love evil!*
 Clatters toward cumulus and trots back
 trailing a dust cloud of the dead
 baptized but clamoring, their omertà
 trembling the window wall in nude daylight.

My station café early, the same faces,
 but the threads run back now to their points of departure,
 tug on this one for love:
 there sat the defeated successful man,
 through the Arau tunnel at dawn
 from the branch line where Barth labored on Romans—
 the Nazibahn. His table a flotation device,
 publicly private, his thread trailing from some gray lake
 whose glow seeped, pearl against pall,
 from sadness an improbable, possible bliss.
 The acetylene of young Barth's Paul had burrowed in,
the whole cosmos groans to be set free, loosed from miasmas,
to take on glory as we are destined, beyond our pain, to know glory.
 The glazed full thing hung there, gray over pearl,
 my illuminated solid. There, weird away.
 Cold mist. And mist smell. Paul's vision was not my vision,
 but it had been. Paul's version
 accelerates the whole, as hummingly
 as a big electric
 retreats free of load,
 warm from its run, picking up speed
 while still in the Bahnhof, past strings
 of cars being made up, past window cliffs
 as massively as those tons shoot keening into the blaze.

Caustic, both-ways Thoreau sauntered into the word-glade
 after his lost hound, horse, and dove, returning
 as the lone drinker. And then he got down
 on his tummy to watch the queen ant
 lift from her city's vent
 and rose to bless Brown's bowie knife at the lecture,
 that steel thence to Kansas. What's with this bachelor katabasis,
 this Underground Man? Holed up in Ar-kansas
 the Titan-II crews chew on dry rations
 but now the repair team drops a wrench three stories
 through the fuel tank. Green cloud over klaxons, that was Damascus.
 To be down in it with the thing it is not, together,
 the migrant thing it is meant to become: being many is singular,
 while singling out the way is manifold.
 Singling the way out, though: that is the masterpiece.
 Only those moves that are necessary, and only
 by staying with them did they find their way back,
 not three critters but ten men in gas masks. Yet in the first act a rifle
 hangs above the fireplace. No one mentions it. It will speak.
 I tell my gang down there,
 take no phantasm plainly. Turn over
 the upended bug, suck on your siloed almond.
 Hermes has stranded us in our loud kitchen.
 Off it goes, six-legged and with feelers for eyes.

Ferragosto vacuums the centro storico
 to a stage set across which huge Fellini
 in morose hurry zigs by and squeezes
 into a telephone booth. That glimpse stands
 memento mori now, the calls Collect, accepted.
Yin in the bedrock ideograms
 is reed-shaded zero for a crane's brood
 on the north banks of rivers, south-facing slopes.
 Or the hut for a kid king hard on his father's death.
 But prodigal? I abandoned in another country
 all the handholds other men would have held fast.
 Heat-ripple climbed the open window
 over an alley aimed at Via del Governo Vecchio,
 warren of the vanished bureaucracy
 Rome narrowed to that five-story slice
 through unpeopled August
 melting the frame's sunny null. Between then and now
 streams now, reeds tower through vacancy,
 shark sheen rotting the foot of each swaying flute
 though the pot I shattered gave space back to space.
 On the ledge, one bowl, ample enough
 to rinse a newborn. Old yin stands as nursery
 for a bawling, dripping alloy
 stringy, pink, laced with strontium, ...