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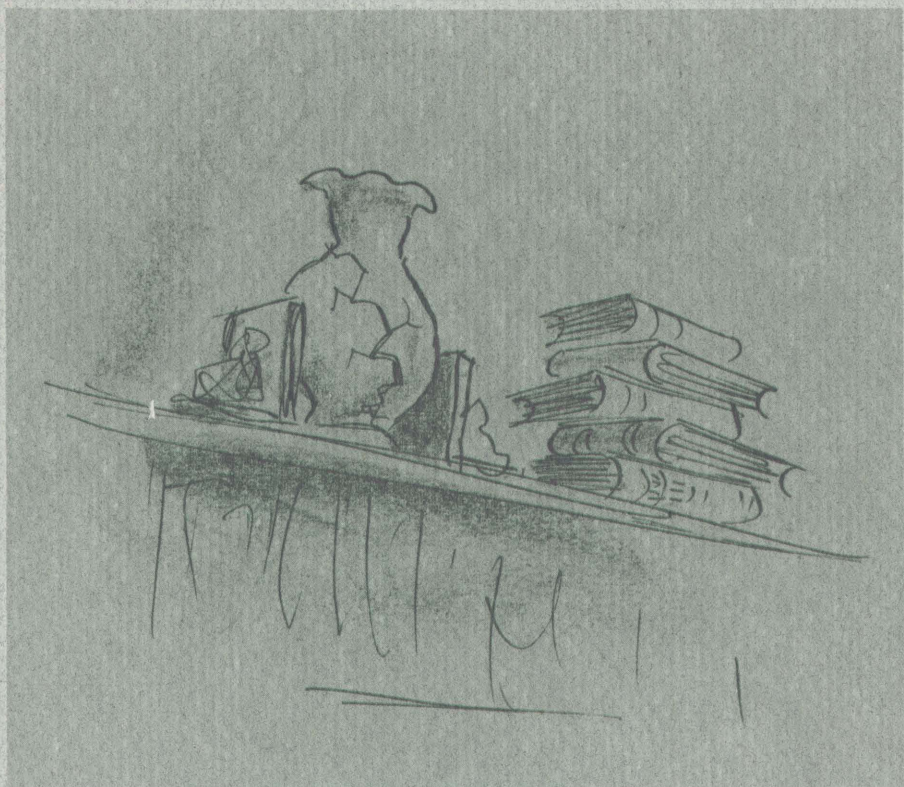
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Delmore Schwartz: Two Lost Poems

BY ROBERT PHILLIPS*

Upon the death of Delmore Schwartz (1913–1966), his first literary executor, Dwight Macdonald, arranged for the majority of his papers to be deposited at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. However, Syracuse University, where Schwartz taught in the English Department for several years before his death, holds a few very interesting Schwartz manuscripts in its collections. In June 1985 Mark F. Weimer, Rare Book Librarian at the George Arents Research Library, wrote to me from Syracuse concerning two manuscript poems which had drawn his attention: “My predecessor purchased these poems and others in the late 1960s from the autograph dealer Charles Hamilton. All the poems in this lot were typescripts, apparently published either in [Schwartz’s 1959] *Summer Knowledge*¹ or in your 1979 collection [*Last and Lost Poems of Delmore Schwartz*],² except the enclosed.”

The enclosures were photographic copies of two manuscript poems by Schwartz written one on each side of a 3-ring notebook sheet of paper. I recognized the handwriting as Schwartz’s immediately. The poem entitled “Poem for Jacques Maritain and Leon Trotzky” [sic] was dated 6 December 1934. Undoubtedly, the other, “Poem to Johann Sebastian Bach”, which appeared on the recto of the sheet, had been composed near that time as well.

* Robert Phillips is the literary executor of the Estate of Delmore Schwartz. In the spring of 1986 *New Directions* will be bringing out his collection of Schwartz’s comic essays under the title *Kilroy’s Carnival*. Mr. Phillips, who received his B.A. (1960) and M.A. (1962) degrees from Syracuse University, is also a critic, a poet, and a fiction writer on his own account.

1. Delmore Schwartz, *Summer Knowledge: New and Selected Poems 1938–1958* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

2. Delmore Schwartz, *Last and Lost Poems*, ed. by Robert Phillips (New York: Vanguard, 1979).



The young Delmore Schwartz (Photo: Sam Chambliss).

This recto poem carries a dedication, "For Julian". The dedicatee might well have been Julian Sawyer, a high school classmate and New York friend to whom Schwartz had written a series of long and fascinating letters during his freshman year at the University of Wisconsin (1931–32). At the time of the composition of these poems, however, Schwartz was attending Washington Square College of New York University, where he had transferred for financial reasons, and was living at home once again.

Schwartz was only two days short of his twenty-first birthday when he wrote "Poem to Johann Sebastian Bach". While the poem is more opaque than his mature work, it is a remarkable production for someone so young and offers the additional interest of having been re-worked and published twenty-five years later in *Summer Knowledge*. A comparison of the two versions is instructive for the study of the development of Schwartz's eventual control over thought and rhyme.

The original poem of the Syracuse manuscript reads:

Poem to Johann Sebastian Bach
For Julian 12/6/34

Out of the watercolored windows, when you look,
Each is but each, and plain to see, not deep:
So does the neat print in an actual book,
Marching as if to true conclusion, keep
The illimitable blue immensely overhead
And the night, night of the living and the dead.

Brother and brother, of one Father,
Near and clear and far,
How indeed we mistake each other.
Despair, and fear, and care.

I drive in an auto all night long to reach
That place where all wheels grip no place and cease,
I never end the turning world, the breach
Where no spring is, nor winter is, but peace:
The only absolute stillness is the frieze
Of the escalator where the damned crowds rise.

Brother and brother, of one Father,
Near, and clear, and far,
How, afterward, we will know each other.
Beware, and share, and care.

The lines are irregular, often iambic pentameter, with a rhyme scheme of (a) (b) (a) (b) (c) (c), (d) (e) (d) (e), (f) (g) (f) (g) (h) (h), (d) (e) (d) (e). One sees the young Schwartz already involved in words and word play.

In the published revision, the twenty lines have been reduced to

twelve. The title has been changed to “Out of the Watercolored Window, When You Look”, eliminating the tenuous relationship between the narrator and Bach. (The link between Schwartz’s titles and the subsequent poems is often puzzling.) The apostrophes to a “brother” are gone as well. The rhyme scheme has been retained, but almost invariably Schwartz has substituted less expected, more interesting words: “deep” becomes “steep”, “keep” becomes “reap”, “breach” becomes “speech”, and “rise” becomes “disease”.

In the original, Schwartz devotes four lines to describing the narrator’s destination, a peaceful, quiet place reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s “still point of the turning world”. In the revision, the trip takes but two lines and is expressed with great originality:

I drive in an auto all night long to reach
The apple which has sewed the sunlight up: . . .

The “place where all wheels grip no place” has been discarded in favor of the fresher image of an “apple which has sewed the sunlight up”. Overall, the more compact published version is the superior one. It gives evidence that contrary to common opinion, Schwartz was strongly in command of his materials during the time when he was selecting and rewriting for his last collection. Here is the final revision:

Out of the Watercolored Window, When You Look

When from the watercolored window idly you look
Each is but each and clear to see, not steep:
So does the neat print in an actual book
Marching as if to true conclusion, reap
The illimitable blue immensely overhead,
The night of the living and the day of the dead.

I drive in an auto all night long to reach
The apple which has sewed the sunlight up:
My simple self is nothing by the speech
Pleading for the overflow of that great cup,
The darkened body, the mind still as a frieze:
All else is merely means as complex as disease!

(Reprinted with permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.)

In both versions, Schwartz expresses a theme that was to concern him all his career—spiritual isolation in the modern world, and his longing for unity and communion with that world. I myself regret that he substituted “complex as disease”—despite its improved rhyme—for the more graphic, even Dantesque, “escalator where the damned crowds rise”. He was undoubtedly correct in dropping the “Brother and brother” chorus, which ends the original poem anticlimactically.

In the Bach poem, as in the one on its reverse side, a typical Schwartz strategy is employed. He first establishes a scene of action, and an anonymous observer who is at once attached and detached from it. The observer/narrator attempts to encompass the event with his ironic and knowledgeable consciousness. The poem to Bach begins with a window view of “the illimitable blue immense overhead”. For Schwartz, blue signified that which was beyond sensual experience, perhaps the Deity. Mechanical objects—an automobile, an escalator—represent the quotidian world he wished to escape. Yet the narrator does not achieve “the turning world, the breach / Where no spring is, nor winter is, but peace”. As in his well-known poem, “Socrates’ Ghost Must Haunt Me Now”, the blue sky is forever unattainable. He concluded that poem:

Socrates stands by me stockstill,
Teaching hope to my flickering will,
Pointing to the sky’s inexorable blue
—Old Noumenon, come true, come true!

The other unpublished Syracuse poem, entitled “Poem for Jacques Maritain and Leon Trotzky”, is in itself perhaps the more interesting of the two. The year before it was written, Schwartz had attended a seminar in contemporary philosophy with Sidney Hook at N.Y.U. From James Atlas’s biography of Delmore Schwartz we know that Schwartz read Hook’s *From Hegel to Marx*, which saw Marx’s arguments as “the poetry of passion”.³ Schwartz evidently was more interested in Marx as a determinist who fashioned an intellectual system than as an ideological radical. His own political allegiance lay with Trotsky, whose *Literature and Revolution* was one of Schwartz’s *vade mecum*s.

3. James Atlas, *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977).

Religion was another strong interest of the undergraduate Schwartz. At Wisconsin he was introduced to the work of Maritain and became fascinated (according to Atlas) by the aesthetic component of Catholicism. We know that portions of text in his copy of Maritain's *Trois Réformateurs* were underscored and that he quoted the French Catholic's ideas in letters to both Allen Tate and John Berryman.⁴

Once again, in this "Poem for Jacques Maritain and Leon Trotzky", Schwartz establishes a scene of action and an observer for it. This time the narrator looks out his window at the night and addresses his musings to a Marxist. Through reference to Gentile history and world literature, they take on a universal relevance. Replacing the color blue, Schwartz gives the poem symbolic weight with images of starlight and snow. Snow, as noted by Alfred Kazin, Richard McDougall, and other critics, recurs throughout Schwartz's stories and poems; snow represented the transformed, purer other world to which he aspired. Indeed, his first extended poem, written when he was seventeen, was called "Having Snow".

In the early sonnet to Maritain and Trotsky, the stars still the mechanical energy of the everyday world, and the snow represents a joy to be dreamed of. The harsh reality of the city is contrasted with a vision of private happiness, and, as occurs frequently in his poetry, the morning is a symbol of rebirth. Hope, the savior from despair, another theme prominent in the work of Schwartz, figures prominently.

In theme and symbol, "Poem for Jacques Maritain and Leon Trotzky" resembles another of his early sonnets, "O City, City", in which he juxtaposed a mechanical, deadly city with a dream of life and love. The subway of "O City, City" is associated with spiritual anguish expressed in the octet; in the sestet, the whiteness of a bed summons the familiar yearning for purity. Again, Schwartz is seeking the source of his ideal world. From where will it come?

Whence, if ever, shall come the actuality
Of a voice speaking the mind's knowing,
The sunlight bright on the green windowshade,
And the self articulate, affectionate, and flowing,

4. These have been published in my edition of his correspondence. See *Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, ed. by Robert Phillips (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1984).

Ease, warmth, light, the utter showing,
When in the white bed all things are made.

In the Maritain/Trotsky poem, traffic replaces the subway, and the whiteness of the moon replaces that of the bed. The effect is the same. Technically, this poem is a combination of the Shakespearian and Miltonic sonnets. The rhyme scheme is (a) (b) (b) (a), (c) (d) (d) (c), (e) (f) (e) (f) (g) (g). It is two quatrains followed by a divided sestet, which itself concludes with a clinching, hammer-blow couplet. The poem illustrates Schwartz's love of puns ("gentle" becomes "Gentile"), his penchant for literary allusion (as in his reference to Tiresias), his lifelong fascination with photographic film (the image of the newsreel), and his unexpected use of language (for example: the looked for "more than morning" becomes "more than meaning").

Poem for Jacques Maritain and Leon Trotsky

The Gentile night and the white stars in congress
Still the traffic's racked energy;
And the hurdy-gurdy newsreel of memory
Flashes the past in its stilted sadness,

Standing on what brink then? By my room's window,
Thinking of the sources of situation
—Of the people's confrontation
When they see themselves dirty in another's shadow!

O Marxist drunk at the teats of Tiresias,
Is night still close to morning? Will the morning
Once more from rumorous darkness release us?

Tonight is more than night and more than meaning.
Stars are the buds of morning, do you know?
Look, in the West, at the white moon dreaming of snow.