

"I see my breath, the snowing light" WINTER PILGRIM

By Morgan Gibson Word Press/Light and Dust Books, 1993.

A reader's response by Richard Evanoff

The great thing about the reader-response approach to criticism is that it allows readers to interact intuitively with a poem. The author doesn't have sole control over the meaning of a text. Instead of focusing exclusively on exegesis — the process of trying to determine what the writer or the poem is "actually trying to say" — the reader-response approach also permits isogesis, i.e., the reading of meanings into a text. The reader is as much the creator of the poem as the author is. Put simply, the author is no longer the sole author—ity.

Morgan Gibson's "I see my breath, the snowing light" begins with an awkward stumbling, snowshoeing "to the brook and back thumping along in semblance of a poem." Some illusions are so pervasive that one is not even aware of living inside them. Suddenly we become aware that we are not as graceful as we had imagined. We are stumbling, falling fallen. We are less a poem that is unfinished than one that has never been started.

The second section of the poem shows the poet going out "to gaze at stars." The desire to transcend oneself is itself an illusion. The transcendent is already immanent. The light of the stars has already come "bright into (us)." But, not realizing this, we seek to soar above the world with the stars, "to drift gladly among them" in a "mind cloud" of illusion. We are tired of the many, and seek consolation in "the One...beyond me far." But the One is pure abstraction. The question "How can I drift / beyond stars?" is only intelligible to one who has not yet realized that beyond the stars is Nothing, capital N, an Einsteinian time and space yet to be created.

A deeper awareness is achieved in the third section of Gibson's poem where we are able to see our "breath, the snowing

light" and to hear the breathing of (our minds)." The mountain is a mountain again. We sit, we breathe, we enjoy the contemplative—active experience of being/becoming—in—the—world. The only danger is that we will become so self-absorbed in our ability to create the universe we live in that we will lose that very ability. We will run at the mouth too far" till our breathing (falls) apart." The beacon on a hill that can't stop bragging about its own en—light—enment.

But when we wake "from pieces in a show of light" we realize that we are not "one self" but fragments. Piecing these fragments together and combining them in novel ways is a never-ending task. Those who shy away from this task remain nothing more than broken pieces, hating the light because it simply illuminates how broken they really are. The challenge is to be in tune with one's own breathing, with the multiplicity of life both within oneself and in the world without, to dare "to dance again / to songs (we) watch in snowy air." Note that the songs are not heard but seen. It's not breathe both in and out, it is the breath we see, the snowing light.

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