

SOUND AND SENSE TAKE FLIGHT

a review by
Lorraine Hale Robinson

Jeffery Beam. *Spectral Pegasus / Dark Movements*. Paintings by Clive Hicks-Jenkins. Kin Press, 2019.

Spectral Pegasus / Dark Movements is a rich collection of poetry, visual art, and music that transcends customary boundaries between aesthetic disciplines. In addition to the poetry by Jeffery Beam and the art by Clive Hicks-Jenkins, the volume includes introductory headnotes from the writings of Lindsay Clarke and Joseph Campbell, a preface by Jeffery Beam, and essays by Sarah Parvin, Mary-Anne Constantine, and Claire Pickard; biographies of Beam, Welsh artist Hicks-Jenkins, Constantine, Parvin, Pickard, and singer/song writer Mary Rocap; and a CD featuring Beam and Rocap. Designed by J.C. Mlozanowski, *Spectral Pegasus / Dark Movements* embraces the complementary art forms of painting, literature, and music.

The volume traces Beam's hero's Campbellian journey and examines the complex pilgrimage toward expanded self- and other-knowing. In some poems, Beam enlarges the reading experience with quotations from other writers (among them William Blake, Rainier Maria Rilke, and William Butler Yeats). The book is organized with images on verso pages and the related poems' texts beginning on the recto page. The association of the book's visual art with the printed texts of Beam's poems is strongly reminiscent of graphic fantasy novels that connect conventional literary elements and images. Visually, the handsome volume has generous white space around the book's images and texts, inviting the

reader to pause and fill in the blanks of meaning.

To appreciate this artistic compendium, it helps to know that the artist Hicks-Jenkins's father was deeply affected by the Welsh winter folk tradition of the *Mari Lwyd* (grey mare). Taken from house to house on the evenings between Christmas and Twelfth Night, the *Mari Lwyd* (the mare's "skull" bedecked with streamers and greenery) accompanies mummers who seek admittance to houses they visit each year. Related to other traditions of Twelfth Night "misrule," the beast creates chaos – and in the case of Hicks-Jenkins's father – a shatteringly haunting and lasting fear.

The Beam/Hicks-Jenkins collaboration is the result of a densely layered process that combines visual art, theater, and literature in an almost Biblical catalogue of "begats" of inspiration, evidence of an exciting, synergistic relationship among the diverse art forms of Erato, Terpsichore, and Apollodorus. Early in the twenty-first century, prompted by this *Mari Lwyd* tradition and by his father's intense response to it, Clive Hicks-Jenkins exhibited a series of drawings entitled "The Mare's Tale." Those drawings led to a multimedia presentation, the Jordan Morley maquette (based on drawings inspired by and of dancer Morley), the *Dark Movements* Toy Theater, and eventually to Hicks-Jenkins's "Dark Movements" exhibition of paintings that became a par-

ticular stimulus for North Carolina poet Jeffery Beam. Clearly one of Beam's muses is Hicks-Jenkins's visual art, and there is a palpable synergy between the images and the facing textsabetting an aggregate effect much larger than the sum of each individual element.

Hicks-Jenkins presents paintings of various imaginary maquettes, the visual components of which he deconstructs, distorts, reconfigures, and reassembles. The artist plays with images of almost mechanistic, stylized flowers, and the various paintings (or parts of them) accompany the Clarke and Campbell introductory texts, the author's headnote, the title page, and the poem "Birth." The toy theater image that accompanies the first poem, "Spectral Pegasus," is deconstructed and reconstructed, and components of this painting are modified and kaleidoscopically reassembled throughout the volume until the iconic visual elements emerge newly reconfigured in the image accompanying the final poem, "Dark Movements," creating a powerful sense of the circularity of time.

Hicks-Jenkins's toy theaters remind us that all the world's a stage, and the maquette pictured alongside "Spectral Pegasus" is the stage where Beam begins. The skeletal horse; the contorted proscenium; the mishapen castle, houses, and viaduct are a visual introduction to many of the collection's themes. And it is *in* and *about* this "theater of wants and needs" (in

"Dark Movements") that the poet will write so compellingly.

Hicks-Jenkins sometimes paints in muted browns and greys and white, and there is a sense of "skiagraphia," particularly in the image accompanying the poem "Region of Shrouds" with its delicate grey shadings. But in much of the artwork in the volume, Hicks-Jenkins paints in powerful blues and reds, a visual contrast that arrests the viewer's eye and draws the reader more deeply into both the image and its related text. The painter incorporates vivid red tulips, often associated with perfect love (as in Persian folk tradition) and, more significantly, with rebirth. But there is a kind of bitter irony here: many of Hicks-Jenkins's dynamic images invoke Wales, with its historical ties to coal mining. The contorted physical structures depicted in the paintings are representative both of a societal macrosom losing hold of its historic source of eco-

nommic stability and of a personal microcosm in the terrifying and permanently unsettling memories of the artist's father.

In the poems, Beam expands on the visual artist's leitmotifs and engenders new ones. Rooted in Western and Eastern traditions, Beam situates himself alongside other writers whose literary journeys bring them face to face with the "big" questions. Like Campbell's hero, Beam's poetic persona undergoes physical and psychological trials. Beam is both at the center of his writing and distanced from it: space is simultaneously "called Distance and Here" (in "The Quickening"), and the observer/participant reflexively pronounces, "I am the dream dreaming itself" (in "Birth").

Beam's word-play is varied and felicitous. Adapting Psalms 139:1, Beam gives the reader "Lwyd you searched and knew me" (in "Veil"). Echoing John Milton's epic, Beam writes "Mak-ing Death forget himself and



ABOVE *Birth* by Clive Hicks-Jenkins

Art by Clive Hicks-Jenkins © 2015, as published in *Spectral Pegasus / Dark Movements* © Jeffery Beam, Kin Press, 2019.

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JEFFERY BEAM is the author of numerous poetry collections. Until his retirement in 2011, the poet spent thirty-five years as a botanical librarian at UNC Chapel Hill. Read his poetry in *NCLR* 1995, 1996, and 1997.

CLIVE HICKS-JENKINS is a Welsh artist who started his career in the London theatre industry, but moved back to Wales in the 1980s to pursue his painting. His work has inspired everything from puppet shows to original music, and poetry.

sing / Paradise regained" (in "Pegasus"). A modern "makar," Beam deploys a vigorous matrix of literary devices: alliteration, natural and aureate diction, and refrain-like repetitions. Beam creates a roundedness to the entire poetry sequence, beginning with "Spectral Pegasus," the first poem and the first part of the volume's title, and concluding with "Dark Movements," the final poem and the latter part of the volume's title.

Of the book's sixteen poems, five have equine-related titles. And the book's title invokes the classical winged white horse. In Celtic tradition, horses have been viewed as good luck "charms"; white horses have been regarded as sacred; and, whether aerial or not, horses have presented human beings with opportunities for greatly enlarged mobility. Beam treats his spectral Pegasus as a spirit animal, both companion and vehicle to other loci. But the horse also represents sexual prowess, and Beam's equine allusions bring a powerful and direct eroticism to his poetry. Arising from the "theater of [human] wants [and] needs," boundaries are blurred among the human, the animal, and the mythical: "always comes the beast" ("Dark Movements"; emphasis added) reminds us that "clear boundaries" between different entities may not be so clear and may even re-emerge circularly as union.

Beam's clever, layered puns play with appositives as well as sound. In "Spectral Pegasus," for example, "I rode that Night



Mare" and "Jockey me into other eternities." In "I Turn the Corner of My Dream: Jordan Morley Maquette," the poetic persona speaks first to the reader, "stitching you in Time," and then allies the reader with the poetic voice: "The Lord-Maker stitching us in Time" (emphasis added). To read Beam is to hear resonations of the Aeolian harp of English-language poetic tradition.

Beam looks at and writes about both the "obverse" and the "reverse" of his myriad themes and archetypes exploiting the tension of contradiction. In Beam's art, neither boundaries nor size are necessarily limitations: infinity can be contained in the infinitesimal (a theme echoing Tennyson's "Flower in the Crannied Wall"). Ever-widening circles of time and space (referenced in the William Blake headnote to Beam's poem "Flowering Skin" and secondarily via the Blake headnote in "I live my life in widening circles") start at a tiny point – within the

center of a flower – and expand outward to eternity. With his apt and elegant "I germinate" in "Meeting the Centaur: Horseman," Beam again subtly reiterates the idea that the small can expand and grow. Beam's writing creates a permeable scrim, allowing the reader to shift seamlessly between meanings and tantalizing the reader to consider whether verges are even real. In "Flowering Skin," Beam refers to "Skin's illusory boundary"; in "Meeting the Centaur: Horseman," he implies a "spatial synchronicity," asking, "Are you terrestrial or real or both." Beam writes about self-perceived human limitations, quoting Blake in "Pegasus," where the mental and physical prisons that people construct for themselves are Beam's personal "mind-forged manacles" to be crushed.

Beam's poetry omits conventional punctuation. Rather he uses varying line length, casing, italics, and occasional exclamation

marks to add emphasis and to shift and sharpen the reader's focus. The general absence of punctuation allows ideas to pass freely from line to line and stimulates the reader's imaginative participation in the creation of meaning. Like Blake, Beam reaches deep into the tension of juxtaposed "opposites" and propels movement forward. Beam asserts in "Pegasus" that "without contraries is no progression."

Building on the idea of contraries is the catalog of pairings that Beam presents: spectral horse/dark movements, life/death, seeming/actuality, waking/sleeping or dreaming, emptiness/fullness, and human/animal – the latter specifically what Mary-Anne Constantine calls the "erotic proximities of man and beast."¹ Images double, redouble, and shift shapes. Beam's concepts of time and space are numinously bent, contracted, and conflated. In "The Quickening," "that which is . . . never becomes" and "that which always becomes . . . never is." Like Allen Ginsberg's "total animal soup of time,"² in "Birth," Beam pushes the reader into shifting "time zones" of past, present, and future – "I am Again and Then and Was and Ever" – and forces the contemplation that the fact of birth implies the inevitable and concomitant fact of death: "The starborn's heart to genesis aroused / For deathless death the end of time and sleep" ("Dark Movements"). But the twenty-first century humanistic "consolatio" that Beam offers us is that "Every funeral

prophesies resurrection" and that "Liberty and Love" make "Death forget himself and sing" ("Pegasus"). Beam's frequent use of the image of death as related to coitus is situated firmly in the long tradition of love poetry (especially that of the English Renaissance). The voice in Beam's "Region of Shrouds" erotically demands, "Make me equine erect," and in "Spectral Pegasus," the "man-pole" shivers "into ribbons."

The realities of modern Wales pervade "Flowering Skin" with the poem's direct references to "coal-belching chimney[s] and sinister-steep wobbling roofs" and the traumatic memories of the artist's father. But following the exorcism of traumatic memories, there is consolation and "wild beauty": "No skull on a stick but majestic / Broken free." Even in the face of terrible memories, there is the possibility of resolution, salvation.

Beam "sings" of this triumph over fear and memory in "Pale Horse," which is presented as a printed poem and sung by Beam and singer/musician Mary Rocab on the accompanying CD. "Pale Horse" revisits the idea that division is "an earthly dreaming" and that nature is "The Truth beyond all seeming." Described by Beam (on the CD sleeve) as a "new 'antique' ballad," the song is largely in the Aeolian mode with its haunting use of the sub-tonic on the first half of the tune. Then, at the end of each stanza, Rocab alters the sub-tonic to become a leading tone (a sound quite literally on the precipice of

melodic resolution), creating a more definitive resolution for the listener, and one that occurs in the traditional folk ballad canon.

Beam misses the mark on occasion when he overdoes the alliteration: "scissory scissors" and "stringless susurrant sinew" ("I Turn the Corner of My Dream") or bends language to a point of excessive contortion: "Let me descend sleep into you" ("Pegasus"). And there is some editing inconsistency – for example the variant spellings of Monserrat Pratt and later Prat. But Beam achieves literary artistry in many more places, and his deft, nuanced diction makes the reading of the printed page a pleasure and the hearing of the readings on the accompanying CD a bonus: "And the wounds / the wounds / into April's May have ruby ridden" ("Flowering Skin"); "Manes of Ardor Manes of Memory" ("Veil"); "ancient as the sea's sweet syllables whispering the yew" ("Drift"); and my personal favorite, "the parapet of my previous life / The brief before" ("The Citadel"). Beam's "sounds," as well as his "sense" demonstrate a formidable ear for the music of poetry.

We all live on the narrow precipice of the past, Beam's "brief before." In the time of COVID, we are, perhaps, also on the narrow precipice of the present. As we pursue our own journeys into the future, *Spectral Pegasus / Dark Movements* by Jeffery Beam, with art by Clive Hicks-Jenkins, is a volume to take along and savor. ■

ABOVE *Pegasus* by Clive Hicks-Jenkins

¹ Quoted from Constantine's essay, "Dark Movements: Clive Hicks-Jenkins and the Return of the Mari Lwyd," included in this volume (78).

² Allen Ginsburg, "Howl," *Howl, and Other Poems* (City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956) 79.