

Jennifer Goodman and the language of air

Artists have always struggled to depict disturbances. As in music, whose flurry of notes is expected to resolve upon a melody or descend through convoluted scales upon a keynote, painters and sculptors have long created images of trouble, the fray or *melée*; but the tumult of all action-scenes, if it is understood to be heroic, must be suitably ennobled and decorous, somewhat symmetrical and therefore paradoxically settled. The figures may demonstrate admirable vigour that contributes energy to the composition; but they also show a certain poise that allows the artwork as a whole to avoid the chaos inherent in the violence that it depicts.

Jennifer Goodman, whose art is controlled and harmonious, was stimulated to create the paintings for the exhibition *To a love so deep* by such a paradox. The cue was a beautiful work by Katsushika Hokusai, *Yejiri Station, Province of Suruga*, c. 1832, also known as *Travellers caught in a sudden breeze at Eljiri*, whose imaginative depiction of papers whisked into the wind was subsequently reinterpreted in the monumental photographic homage by Jeff Wall, *A sudden gust of wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993.

The sudden gust in both works is somehow unseasonable, because we look upon the peaceful landscape as if there is no disturbance. Wind, of course, is episodic: it springs up from an unknown source (which we now know intellectually as pressure) and buffets what was previously peaceful. For the Homeric Greeks, the various storms that tear ships apart are sent by the gods: they are quintessentially dramatic, wild, whipped up on purpose for destruction.¹ As weather events can be devastating, it is natural to impute the changes to a divine intention, unforeseen but not inexplicable. For the Homeric bards, what seems to be chaotic and capricious may thus be a reflexion of divine order. But the poet Hesiod, writing at a similar date, distinguishes between the mighty winds like Notus and Boreas, which are of divine origin (θεόφιν γενεή) and a

¹ See for example storm (θύελλα), *Iliad* 6. 346, 23.366, *Odyssey* 4.515, 5.317, 5.419, 7.275, 10.48, 12.288, 12.409 etc; and the similar expression for tempest (ἄελλα), *Iliad* 2.293, 13.334, *Odyssey* 3.283, 5.292, 5.304; cf. other terms for tempest (for example καταίγις) in later texts, e.g. the *Septuagint*

great benefit to mortals, and other gusts or random winds (μαψαῦραι) that blow upon the sea aimlessly, inspiring a wicked tempest (κακῆ θύϊουσιν ἄλλη) that scatters ships and destroys sailors.² These unpredictable gusts have long been recognized as uncanny, as if departing from the divine order of nature itself.

Goodman also respects the aesthetic gods in abstracting the gusts. Her works are based on a balance of biomorphic forms that echo one another in gentle tonal bands, so that the one can almost be interpreted as the shadow of another. This suggestion of shadow yields a sense of dimensionality, almost as if the ribbons and planes are actors in space that are borne by the air and shift over one another's rise. They are not shadows but more an agreement in the billows. Her pictures leave few clues—they are as inscrutable as the source of a gust—and yet I sense that Goodman's mind is steeped in a quest for origins as much as for abstraction. What else accounts for the archaic atmospheric titles like *Welkin*? Or the names of Greek derivation, *Aster*, *Elysian Fields*, *Alabaster* or the Latin *Nox*? There would have been more common English vocabulary but it would not have drawn us to speculate about the wellspring of intuition and consciousness that lies in the development of language.

One other clue to observe is also surely the title of the exhibition as a whole, *To a love so deep*. It reminds me of the way that the winds entered late medieval literature as a metaphor of amorous turmoil. In the thrall of love, the Italian poet Petrarch, for instance, imagines his circumstance as a terrible storm such as Pharaoh unleashed in persecuting the Jews.³ In another song he appeals to the virgin who is stable in eternity as a star upon the tempestuous sea: may she give a thought to the terrible storm in which he finds himself alone and rudderless and close to his final groan.⁴ Petrarch's own bedroom was once a safe haven from the grave daytime tempests that he used to disguise from the light for shame;⁵ and like a tired sailor raising his head in the night

² *Theogony* 869–877

³ 'terribil procella, / qual Pharaone in perseguir li hebrei.' *Canzone* 206

⁴ 'pon' mente in che terribile procella / i' mi ritrovo sol, senza governo, / et ò già da vicin l' ultime strida.' *Canzone* 366

⁵ 'O cameretta che già fosti un porto / a le gravi tempeste mie diurne, / fonte se' or di lagrime nocturne, / che 'l dí celate per vergogna porto.' *Canzone* 234

against the force of the winds to navigate according to two stars, so Petrarch in the tempest of love looks to the two eyes that are the sign of his solace.⁶

But in the same way that Goodman does not confine the gust to a single episode through her abstraction she also does not specify what kind of love is inspired by the sudden movement of air, other than that it is deep. In the end, the swooning rhythms of her pictures testify to an emotional engagement with air-in-movement that has no precision because it is voluptuously breathtaking and ineffable. In the same way that the sudden gust seems to animate the air with fluxing energies, Goodman's abstractions reflect the reciprocities of air that bunches up and unleashes itself in waves, as if coming in clutches or groups, with a solidarity confessed in the renaissance term for a gust as a group of wind (*groppo di vento*).⁷ These heavings of an invisible togetherness may have a message of love because we love to inhale every breath when we become conscious of the air; and if there is a love beyond this physiological harmony with the element, it is perhaps of a cosmic or planetary kind, of which Shakespeare might also have said: 'Methought the billows spoke and told me of it; / The winds did sing it to me'.⁸

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⁶ 'Come a forza di vènti / stanco nocchier di notte alza la testa / a' duo lumi ch' à sempre il nostro polo, / così ne la tempesta / ch' i' sostengo d' Amor, gli occhi lucenti / sono il mio segno e 'l mio conforto solo.' *Canzone 73*

⁷ Boccaccio, *Decameron* 2.4, Boiardo, *Orlando innamorato* 1.1.76.6, 2.31.19.6, 3.4.6.1–4. See the analysis in Robert Nelson, *A history of inspiration*, Routledge, London 2022, in the chapter 'Group'

⁸ *The tempest* 3.3