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The Real Thing

by Nathalie F. Anderson

I first met Daniel Hoffman on the page. As a grad student down south, immured in my carrel, I too often found myself walled in by literary criticism that seemed written to be musty, and literary theory that seemed written to be cryptic. But Dan's books weren't like that: *Barbarous Knowledge* and *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* told their urgent stories complicatedly, grippingly. This was literary history that investigated, literary biography that speculated, literary criticism that illuminated, and all of it — above all — engaging. Although I was reading these books for their content, of course, I appreciated too the personality of the author that was everywhere evident in their pages: his intelligence, his perceptiveness, his sympathetic humanity, his wit. I remember pausing in my headlong rush through *Poe* to think, "This is work worth doing. This is the real thing."

It's significant, then, that when I consider Dan's own poetry, I think most focally of a passage from the start of *Brotherly Love*:

Is it real, this life
That you are living, is it
Real?

Whether through history or through personal recollection, Dan's work often offers us narratives of the "real," but complicated by that characteristic challenge. What version of events can claim to be true? What currents flow intermingling through what we take to be a simple stream of happenstance or consciousness? What heights transcend or depths intensify the everyday unattended moment? If, as T.S. Eliot puts it, "human kind / cannot bear very much reality," what is it that keeps us — in Wallace Stevens' phrase — "coming back and coming back / To the real"? And what distinguishes the "real" from the "Real"? Dan's poetry appreciates always the materiality of the world we live in, but pushes us towards the larger questions, the ethical questions, the philosophical questions.

Because I knew Dan before I knew him, so to speak, meeting him in the flesh was all the more daunting, like opening the door to a one-on-one Ph.D. oral exam — all that wit, all that erudition, all that rich experience of the world of letters, all that brilliantly incisive discernment trained on you. I've never left a conversation with him without feeling that my eyes have been opened to some fresh insight or to some convolution of thought or to some revealing
circumstance. Dan lives the intellectual life so fully that it’s difficult not to feel humbled in his company, yet he shares that life so comprehensively and so generously that you leave him energized, grateful for all he offers.

But when I say "he" — as anyone who knows Dan will understand — I really mean "they": Daniel Hoffman and Elizabeth McFarland went everywhere together, and shared a like intelligence, a similar aesthetic, a honed ethical awareness, that trenchant wit. After her death, which shocked us all, I was moved and complimented when Dan asked me to present her work with him in readings at Swarthmore College and at the Rosenbach Museum and Library. My favorite line of hers is still "She always wanted her kisses back," because to want something back implies a demand not only for goods returned, but also for reciprocity: if she's not kissed back, she'll take back those kisses! That she and Dan found that reciprocity, that mutuality, was obvious to all who saw them together. It's hard to imagine companions more superbly matched.

Among my favorites of Dan's poem's, then — despite his widely recognized allegiance to poetic tradition — is "Words," where (he says) he's giving up rhythm and rhyme for the "gutreaction poem / of the soul's discovering," "poems that are themselves the / sound of your / slip rustling and the / scent that laces / the air you wear" — poems that we know speak of and to his love. "Goodby, words," he concludes; "They / do become you," and that knowing wink — the words that flatter the wearer, the words that create what they describe, the words that home in on their source and reason, the words that know just what they love and live for — explain the speaker's sudden reticence, his decision to let the said be said: "I've / no more to say." Yes, this truly is the real real thing.