

# Being there

New Yorker Walter Holland has been recording—in poetry—his impressions, from their beginnings, of the AIDS years

by Steven Riel

## A Journal of the Plague Years:

Poems 1979—1992,

by Walter Holland.

Magic City Press, paper, \$9.95.

The AIDS pandemic permeates the entirety of Walter Holland's "A Journal of the Plague Years." No matter where in the foreground the poet focuses, neither he nor the reader loses sight of the reality of AIDS. Even in poems describing travels in Europe, we find Holland unable to simply enjoy the architectural splendors of the past:

From the fountain of Cibeles the water  
sprays—  
the spent silver of Conquistadors, the piss of  
Austrian  
princesses, the waste of reactors.

The poet cannot think like a stereotypically superficial American tourist in Europe; his perceptions seem to be profoundly altered by the fact that everything has been turned upside down by AIDS back in the United States. The images of loss and unalterable change that he finds in Europe, while not what he was looking for, speak volumes for what he has left behind in New York:

The Retiro is green, its esplanade a wide  
landscape...  
We know its nobility. We assess its shadows  
much  
as a Velázquez painting, seeking the face of  
saints,

the lost gaze of faith. But the saints are  
dead...

Even the poet's relationship to history has been altered: history is no longer dependable:

...the mountains rise before us like tiles of  
Moorish  
blue whose unbroken pattern professes a  
constancy  
history can no longer promise.

In "Aphrodisias," my favorite of Holland's travel poems, the speaker wonders what he can truly know about past life at the archaeological site, or even at the modern village existing above the site before excavations began:

Was the radiance of those white stones any  
indication  
for what really had been there and what had  
lived or  
was it the false illusion of beauty—a guise  
the past had given  
to the brief untenable present.

### Making the connection

The speaker's mind immediately turns to his own, personal past, referring, it seems, to the years before AIDS:

...The flat paths that left us tracing and re  
tracing  
our way made me think of earlier years,  
joyfully unheeded.  
Stone propped on stone, beauty in pieces  
artfully scattered,  
never to be rebuilt, yet mythologized, like

the warm and perfect day.

Holland's European musings about historicity relate directly to his task back home, where he attempts to recapture the pre-plague worlds of Fire Island, gay bars, etc., and to memorialize those friends and lovers he has lost to the disease. The poetry he must write is historical; the two realities he must compare and contrast are those of the past and the present. AIDS has split his life into two distinct epochs. Holland wants to avoid mythologizing both.

(Interestingly, blocks of stone in ancient ruins also figure centrally in Paul Monette's inspiration for his book "Love Alone: 18 elegies for Rog." More on comparing Monette's work with Holland's later.)

My favorite poems by Holland fall into two broad categories. The first and largest category is of carefully constructed poems which, possessed of Neo-Platonic aesthetic virtues, produce their effects through balanced variations on a theme, imagery pattern or metaphor. Although at times their patterns are subtle, careful examination reveals how soundly they are constructed. "Good Friday" serves as an excellent example of this type of Holland poem. Images of whiteness and light flash through the poem's narrative at regular intervals, culminating in the final, sacred memory of the speaker's now-dead friend carrying a vase of white lilies.

The poem contains a second pattern: a methodical unveiling of the many layers of memory which press on the single moment which has occasioned the poem. Bit by bit,

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we learn how he speaker's past activities ("[l]ast Easter," "[a] winter ago," "the summer before," and "a decade ago") echo within and alter the present moment. Holland's concern with the dismantled modern village above the archaeological site in "Aphrodisias" is relevant here: like Proust, he is acutely aware of the many layers created by time in one location and in one person's life.

### Craft's submergence

The other category of my favorite poems by Holland is as aesthetically pleasing as the first, but is more passionate, so that the reader does not predominately admire the craft—the craft is consumed, transcended. "Stations of the Cross," my favorite poem in the book, similarly operates by means of  
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## Walter Holland

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theme and variation, but each variation creates much more than pleasing symmetry, for it thrusts us deeper into the passion of PWAs, and into the hell of the speaker who witnesses their suffering:

It was passion, you see, played  
out. He was young  
and his brow had never felt thorns  
though he was marked by silence  
marked in the temple's strange open space,  
where the feast took place  
where the wine stained him,  
unwilling host.

In this poem, Holland skillfully constructs an incredibly suggestive echo chamber of metaphors; he seems to have found exactly the right way of sounding Christianity's notes while mostly keeping his own commentary out of the poem, allowing all the echoes to resonate on their own. Even the poem's quietest observations are devastatingly sad in their accurate details (which work on both the literal and the metaphoric levels):

Neither angry nor redeemed we watched  
your mother in her black dress,  
black halo that spread  
like a spot on the skin;  
or like a wound across the chest...

This poem, one of Holland's most perfectly realized, deserves to be widely anthologized and read.

I could not help comparing Holland's poetry about AIDS to Paul Monette's, Thom Gunn's ("The Man With Night Sweats"); and Ron Schreiber's ("John"); its difference from Monette's is most striking. Even when

Holland's poems are very angry ("Night Before the March 1989") or abysmally sad ("Saint Marks Place, Sunday 1989" or "The Wedding"), one could not characterize his voice as a scream. (It is telling that some of Holland's attempts in this book's "Public/Access" section to raise his voice fail). One often senses an artistic distance in Holland's poems, perhaps a bit of Wordsworthian "emotion recollected in tranquillity." I certainly would not compare the texture of Holland's diction to Hemingway's, but the two writers share a penchant for understated reportage. Monette, by contrast, writes like a hysterical (and virtuosic) diva pulling out all the stops. We are swept along by his flood of emotions and memories; even when he is telling us about the past, we feel its immediacy. In "Love Alone," Monette rarely takes us out of the present by using the words "I remember"; Holland uses them many times.

My only criticism of "A Journal of the Plague Years" is that about a third of the poems should have been left out, because they do not meet the standard of Holland's best work. Several of the travel poems contain only flat reportage, the heightened quality of their final lines attempting to give closure to something that never happened. Some of the linguistic experiments in the "Public/Access" section never truly gel into poems. Those stumbles aside, Holland has captured with a fine and steady brush a gay man's experience during the AIDS crisis. ▼

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