

Book Review: *The Angle of Sharpest Ascending*, by Frances Payne Adler
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To Sew of the Cloth of Despair Something Visible: *

Poems inspire reflections on the era we are in and what it could mean.

I have been riveted by a book of poems by poet Ingrid Wendt, *The Angle of Sharpest Ascending*, (WordTech Editions, 2004). Reading Wendt's book was like standing on a chair in a room of mirrored walls. The images began spilling over into my dreams, images traveling the lives of writer and reader, of two poets, one Jewish-American, one German-American.

Angle is a courageous, luminous book, and an especially important one in these repressive times. "What voices of the past have we not chosen?" Wendt asks. "...Every past a silence to be spoken." ("Coda: Rune," 65) And break silence she does, using questions as the architecture of her collection.

On a Fullbright Fellowship to Frankfurt in 1994-95, Wendt began questioning the German part of her ancestry after years of "rejecting the German language," and avoiding, for decades, this part of her heritage. "How dare I write this poem?" Wendt asks at one point in her "Questions of Mercy" poem. The question is a one-line stanza, solitary and resonating on its own page. And Wendt begins to "live the questions," as Rilke has said, as in:

"...My father's parents were German.
My mother's were German. Who can bear to belong

to a country, a whole generation whose fathers, whose mothers,
oneself with the whole world agrees
were wrong?

...Atone, atone, who can ever atone?" ("Questions of Mercy, 9" 79)

Her voice, throughout, is this raw, this honest.

In four long poems, Wendt witnesses how she builds, “seed by/syllable,/image by sound” ways she has carried history within her. As she says in her introduction, she was “born in the last year of the second world war to parents who had grown up speaking German with their families in Michigan and Chile, but who did not speak it in our Illinois home. I did not, until adolescence,” she says, “begin to wonder why. ‘We didn’t want you using German words at school,’ my mother once said. That was it. The issue was closed. But something unspoken, something troubling, stayed with me, waiting to be someday acknowledged and understood. Something involving Germany’s role in the second World War, which never, in my memory, was mentioned all the years I was living at home...” (13)

Wendt explores how the German language inhabits her, from examining “the structure of language reflecting all of its inner

assumptions: German
American, my
own feet the points of a compass
straddling oceans...” (“Overture, I” 52)

to images of climbing under the covers of her mother’s bed as a child and her mother asking in German, “Bist du/ein gutes M%odchen?” (Are you a good girl?) (“Learning the Mother Tongue,” 47) to learning to lie about the origin of her name,
“And here is my betrayal, my shame.

Last summer in Norway, nearly
everyone I met was delighted: ‘Ingrid,
that’s a Norwegian name!’

‘Yes,’ at first I said, ‘it is.
but really, I’m German, I’m named for
Ingeborg, my German-Chilean cousin.’

‘Yes,’ I learned
to say. ‘Ingrid is
a Norwegian name.’” (“Questions of Mercy, 5,” 75)

Wendt travels to and lives and teaches in Germany. She examines her own inner silences, and she must also decipher the external silences, the spoken/unspoken words she hears from friends, family, and colleagues. For example, the “unmarked rectangles of brass,” at a monastery courtyard about which friends were “vague.” As she says in “Questions of Mercy, 7” “Kloster Arnsburg: unmarked, the graves of 88 massacred/we

didn't know lay right beneath the green of the courtyard." She later finds out that these were, as she says in parentheses, the graves of ("Panzer factory prison workers, in transit to Buchenwald – just ahead/of the Allies, the end of the war, the fleeing Gestapo./It was simpler to shoot them.") (77)

She learns to rely upon the visible/invisible messages of her body: rage at friends who betrayed her by not telling her the truth; guilt, when she learns it; and continued mourning, as the poems come.

"...Where is our footing? All (for example)
these Munich parkways, so wide! (I say) compared to Frankfurt.
Such airy, green spaces in front of the arch!

Yes that's where good King Ludwig ordered whole neighborhoods leveled (she tells me). This green: it covers the concrete where Hitler made speeches, held rallies, it's one of the first places books were burned." (From "Overture, 8," 59)

"What other absence dares sit on my heart?" Wendt asks. ("Questions of Mercy, 2," 71) And she witnesses the stories of middle-aged Germans – strangers, friends, family – about their fathers,

Fathers whose names must not be spoken
Fathers we don't know how to mourn
Fathers who may not be in Heaven
Fathers who didn't come home... ("Questions of Mercy, 4," 74)

As she says in her introduction,
"One recurring theme was the shock of learning, in later childhood, the full extent of what their country had done, and the fear that soldier fathers, who had been killed or had returned from being prisoners of war, might have done unspeakable things. Grandparents had sent these fathers to war, had been members of the Nazi party, or at the least, had not stopped horrors from happening. Pain, grief, shame – for country, for family – have still not gone away, and have been experienced by virtually everyone born in Germany during and shortly after the war..."
("Introduction," 15)

Wendt attempts, through poetry, to come to terms with shame, with guilt; to embody it, its angles and corners and physical shape: how does it live within memory, within the body? How to transform shame to forgiveness, grief to hope, pain to love? She reaches beyond words and collaborates with German and Jewish artists in an interdisciplinary art

exhibition – poetry, sculpture, and photography – to build physical representations of their related heritages and complex feelings. “To plant, to build, to sew of the cloth of despair something visible...” (“Memory/Memorial,” 92)

The poems/sculptures take physical shape: “...What shape do we give to the horror, what form/Silence between the paving stones of these stanzas: this is for you...” (“Memory/Memorial,” 95)

“Mountains
Of eyeglass rims,
Mountains of shoes,
Ovens, train tracks, rusted
Where once they were used but
No one place where those who seek
Can light a candle, no gravestone, no shrine
To mark the exact place of death that will never be
Known, body never found, as waves cover those drowned
At sea. Footsteps, heartbeats: these spaces between are for you.”
- (“Memory/Memorial,” 94)

And,

“You to whom a government gave blankets riddled with smallpox
You whom radiation ravaged, whose fatherland won’t remember
You for whom the midnight knock on the door will echo forever
You for whom the syllables Tiananmen, Kent State, still smolder...”

(“Memory/Memorial,” 95)

Part of the evolution of the poet is Wendt’s awareness of herself as architect of possibility. She writes not only to inform, but also to provide herself and the reader with a bridge to the present. “I...believe in the importance – for the future of our country, our world – of trying to understand how perpetrators of violence can do violence to themselves, can be victims of wrong teaching, of mass hysteria, of propaganda. To recognize that evil can be taught...”

(“Intro,” 16)

And one mother of a German friend challenges her (and the reader) to face our complicity in our own country’s killings. “And how in your country do you still/ignore the American Indian question,” she asks. (“Questions of Mercy, 9,” 9) “Am I, as an American,” asks Wendt in her introduction, “more immune than my German friends, colleagues, and extended family, to inherited guilt and shame? Or is my country simply better at forgetting? Am I not living in a country that enjoys the bounties of a land that was taken -- at horrible

human cost, and not too long ago – from those who lived here before me?” (17) Wendt lives in Oregon where “40 different tribal nations, with over 20 distinct languages, (were) all but erased by systematic genocide.”

Wendt’s poems inspire reflections on our past, on the era we are in, and what it could mean. For example, Amnesty International has named the Bush regime’s prisons “a gulag.” Abu Gharib, Guantanamo Bay – what we are hearing goes on inside, and elsewhere in our name. Wendt gives us a glimpse of the shape of the shame we, our children, and grandchildren may (will?) one day live with. She talks about an exhibit in NYC’s Jewish Museum, “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art,” that explored psyches of perpetrators and used images in the Nazi “propaganda machine” – images which she says, “bear unsettling resemblance... to images by which we in America are every day surrounded, and to whose presence most of us are blind.” (“Intro,” 17)

As a Jew who lost family to pogroms and the Holocaust, questions have run like veins through my life: what did the townspeople in Europe do or not do to stop Nazi atrocities, and why? And, what am I doing or not doing to stop Bush’s gulag, in all of its many forms, and why? I am/we are inside this neo-Orwellian moment. What we are doing as a country – what will it mean to our children, grandchildren?

Live the questions, Rilke said. Wendt lives hers throughout the collection, carrying readers inside them:

“And when the loss is not ours alone, when natural laws are turned
Upside down and all the words for *disaster* clang endlessly on
The tongue – what chorus could possibly grow from that
Sound? What song?...” (“Memory/Memorial,” 93)

This is an important book, by a poet writing from deep maturity, listening to the “meter of (her) body” (“Suite for the Spirit’s Geometry,” 54), and bringing us blueprints for transformation:

“ Does hope ever come from moments of stasis
Where do both sides of the slash converge
The angle of sharpest ascending... (Memory/Memorial,” 96)

(*Title from “Memory/Memorial,” 95)

Frances Payne Adler is the author of five books: two poetry collections, *The Making of a Matriot* (Red Hen Press, 2003) and *Raising The Tents* (Calyx Books, 1993); and three collaborative poetry-photography books and exhibitions with photographer Kira Carrillo Corser. Adler's poems and prose have appeared in *Poetry International*, *Women's Review of Books*, *The Progressive*, *Bridges*, *Ms. Magazine*, and *Calyx*, among others. Her awards include a California State Senate Award for Artistic and Social Collaboration, and a National Endowment for the Arts regional award. Adler is the founder and director of the Creative Writing and Social Action Program at California State University Monterey Bay.