

# Defiant and Alone :

## The Poetry of Lindley Williams Hubbell

David Burleigh

The dustjacket of Lindley Williams Hubbell's first book of poems to appear in Japan describes the author as 'English by ancestry, American by birth and Japanese by nationality.' That volume, which was called *Atlantic Triptych*, appeared in 1971, though it was by no means the author's first collection. As if to explain this mystery, Hubbell published a brief and witty *Autobiography*, consisting of an 'Autobiography in Fifty Sentences' and a few additional poems, in pamphlet form the same year.

Lindley Williams Hubbell was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1901, the second of three children. His family had lived there for ten generations, descended from Puritans who left England in the seventeenth century. The original emigrants had set out from a place near Stratford during the lifetime of William Shakespeare. Hubbell himself has written three books on Shakespeare since coming to Japan, and remarks in his autobiography 'I read Shakespeare every day.'

As a young man, Hubbell was educated entirely by private tutors after the second year of High School, and never attended university. In this way he learnt Greek and Latin, and began his reading in the classics. A polyglot aunt taught him French, Italian and German, which provided him with access to modern literature. His subsequent travels included six months spent in Puerto Rico, and a year in Italy. In 1925 he began to work for the New York Public Library, and this continued until 1946,

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when he was invited to return to Hartford to teach at a new college being opened there. For the next seven years he taught poetry and drama at the Randall School in Hartford, and during this time some of his own versions of classic Greek drama were brought to performance.

In 1953, Hubbell received an unexpected invitation to come to Japan as a visiting professor. He accepted with alacrity, took leave of absence from the Randall School, and made the long journey out by train and ship. He has never returned to America since then. Instead, having decided that he liked Japan, he extended his contract at Doshisha University in Kyoto, and stayed on there until he reached retiring age in 1970. After that he continued teaching at Mukogawa University in Kobe, from 1970-84. Prolonging his stay was made easier by the fact that he took Japanese nationality in 1960, in order not to have to leave. His Japanese name is Hayashi Shuseki (林秋石).<sup>1</sup>

The several volumes of poetry that Hubbell published in America are no longer available except in libraries, and publication of his work there, except for a collection of new poems that appeared in 1965, more or less ended when he came to Japan.<sup>2</sup> His first publications in Japan, however, were not poetry but prose, consisting in part at least of redactions of lectures that he had given during his many years of teaching. Two collections of miscellaneous writings have cast the net wider in gathering together Hubbell's essays on music, drama and poetry, both Japanese and Western. But his most reprinted work is his scholarly study of the Shakespeare Apocrypha.<sup>3</sup> Most of these books, all of which are worth reading, appeared before 1971, the year when Hubbell's poetry began to reappear from a small private press in Kobe.<sup>4</sup>

The first volume to appear, *Atlantic Triptych*, consisted of a long poetic sequence which Hubbell had begun a number of years before while living

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in America and only finished in Japan. In form it closely resembled a work he had published earlier, called *Long Island Triptych*, and the two have since been issued together in one volume.<sup>5</sup> Both are divided, as the titles suggest, into three sections, and each of these sections contains ten poems. The poems that open each section of *Long Island Triptych* evoke life in the environs of New York, where the poet was living when he wrote it. The state of the American continent before European immigration is described, and the condition of the world in pre-history. These general descriptions are interspersed with more discursive poems on the purposes of human life, and our failure to achieve them. The poet argues each issue with himself, yet concludes:

The discursive faculty is a fool and a maker of fools:

Shakespeare is a barbarian, Whitman a slob,

Jean-Christophe sentimental slush, etc.

It loves nothing, it understands nothing,

it knows nothing.

It is in hell because it does not know it is in hell.

The impatience with stupidity and ignorance revealed in these lines reminds the reader of the irascible Ezra Pound. The second half of the stanza has a different tone:

Hell is the absence of suffering.

Incapacity for suffering is damnation.

Indifference to suffering is death.

Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary,

To sweeten my imagination.

(Part One, IV)

The lambasting has changed into what is almost liturgy, and has thus

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become more redolent of the work of T. S. Eliot. These faint echoes, and the final interpolation of a line from Shakespeare,<sup>6</sup> make it clear that the method is Modernist. Changes of register and tone are evident throughout the whole composition, but some of the shorter poems are self-sufficient in their lyric grace:

The room was grey before I slept  
And white before I woke.  
There were no human eyes that wept,  
No human voice that spoke.

The sparrows sang their morning song,  
The factory whistles blew.  
I had grown wiser all night long  
And ten years older too.

(Two, VI)

These particular verses are worthy of Emily Dickinson. The conclusion to the whole sequence, quintessential Hubbell in its clarity, is confident and almost optimistic:

The voice of the ocean will be the same,  
year in and year out  
The stars will not alter their appearance  
in the night sky.  
The heart is stronger than anything that  
can happen to it.

(Three, X)

Whatever confidence and optimism the poet then had about the future of the human race has been noticeably eroded in *Atlantic Triptych*, the second sequence. Though similar in structure to the earlier triptych, no particular place is evoked this time. The first section opens:

AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM

Who spread the sea

On all sides of the land...

(Part One, I)

It is of course in the sea that life began, and the connecting images here are of God moving, or Christ walking, upon water, and of the marine life below. As before, longer poems are interspersed with brief lyrics. The former delineate high points in natural evolution and the various flowerings of artistic culture, where the latter describe minor instances of senseless cruelty. In the roll-call of evolutionary achievement, however, an elegiac tone sometimes now appears:

The Christian religion and the beautiful  
Culture of Greece and Rome were both revealed  
Within three years to Poland, the clear human  
Way of thinking, and the darker perilous way  
Of love, both of them obviously being designed  
For something more than a beast. We have not learned  
Either, as we shamble into our last age. (One, V)

This poem is composed in an extended form of the French *sestina*, and is made up of eighteen twelve-line stanzas in which the lines end with the same twelve words in a rotating order, and an envoy in which all of them are deployed in only six lines. The choice of words for the line-endings—'beautiful,' 'human,' 'designed,' 'learned,' etc—is itself revealing, for these words are central to the poet's thought. Indeed, 'design' is a key-word throughout his work, indicating both its method and its subject. Other poems in the sequence are composed in *terza rima*, the form that the Italian poet Dante used, and both these difficult verse-forms are handled with remarkable skill. The prosodic variation contained within the

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sequence as a whole represents a singular technical achievement. As in the previous triptych, the poet makes use of several different tones, effecting transformations according to the content of what he has to say. The last section begins by enumerating the forms of life on earth:

... These became fish,  
Amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, primates,  
Apes, hominids, and man, the first creature  
To whom it was given to decide his own future,  
And he chose to die. (Three, I)

The next poem tersely depicts an act of cruelty:

When Bertrice Lundquist  
Was a little girl  
She had a cat  
Called Pussy Gray.  
She threw it downstairs  
With such violence  
That it was spattered with blood  
Like a Mexican pietà.  
I loved that old cat,  
She said. (Three, II)

The final couplet expresses humour as well as bafflement. In a later poem in the same section, however, the poet's vision becomes almost apocalyptic. Rock, lucidly evoked for its mystical indifference and calm in the first triptych, is no longer a thing of beauty:

For this city is full of rock,

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The streets are made of it, the pavements and the  
buildings,

But it is no longer living,

It is ground into the fabric

Of a civilization

Dying of an unclean disease

Like an old nag half gone with the bots. (Three, VIII)

These lines bring the reader an involuntary reminder of Ezra Pound,<sup>7</sup> Hubbell's acknowledged master. Hubbell concludes the sequence with a quotation from a Cretan amphora:

A HOUSE WITH WINDOWS

OF THE AUGURING BIRDS. (Three, X)

This is cryptic and mysterious but not, perhaps, entirely without hope. It is also the nearest that this most Apollonian of poets comes to being visionary.

Although Hubbell's triptychs represent a late flowering of poetry in the Modernist style, there are ways in which his work differs from the great figures associated with that movement. He does not, for example, make any use of personae in his writing so that, while he may compose in different tones and voices, these are all effectively his own. Nowhere does Hubbell create an imaginary voice or character, a dilatory Prufrock or exquisite Mauberley, but always retains his own essentially lucid manner. This becomes increasingly apparent in subsequent collections, where he has dropped the Modernist method almost entirely, and restricted himself to writing shorter poems. These poems take up stray reflections on the persistent themes of the poet's early work, evoke and comment on the past, and include a number of brief lyrics, a few of which are written

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in the Japanese style. There is a nice symmetry to the fact that Hubbell came by chance to settle in a land which provided the Modernists with so much inspiration. The poems in these late collections are undated, and are mingled with a number of poems reprinted from early publications.

*Walking Through Namba* is the second of three booklength collections that have succeeded the longer triptychs,<sup>8</sup> and which incidentally contains an attractive group of poems about animals and plants. There is one short piece entitled 'Musical Instruments':

The organ in Convention Hall  
at Atlantic City  
has 32, 882 pipes,  
1,233 stops,  
and 7 keyboards.

The *ichi-gen-kin*  
has one string.

That is why  
I do not believe  
in progress.

The idea that technological development inevitably produces improvement is gently and concisely mocked. One of the casualties of the twentieth century has been the Victorian belief in progress, especially of the material kind. Hubbell himself exemplifies that disenchantment, descended as he is from Puritans who sought a better life and freedom in America, which he in turn has finally deserted. All this lies behind the comment made in the spare lines of this short poem. Other poems in the later



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books make similar observations, which are expressed with beautiful precision and a perfect sense of timing. These marginalia serve to amplify the poet's early work. His use of irony is course unusual for an American writer.

Hubbell shows the same detached, objective and ironic attitude to himself, and to old age, as in this verse from 'De Senectute':

When I was young and derogate  
My lineaments were adequate,  
But now that I have learned to conster  
I find myself become a monster.

This poem occurs in an earlier book entitled *Climbing to Monfumo*. But it is another poem from the same book in which the poet seems to settle the long struggle and debate with himself that commenced when he was young. Its title, 'Terza Rima,' is unspecific. It begins:

Run from love and hate  
As from the tettered plague.  
Take pride for your mate.  
  
Set your heel on the egg  
Of passion lest it hatch  
A snake, a rat, a pig

The rhyme scheme is a mixture of full rhymes—'hate/mate'—and slant thymes — 'plague/egg/pig' — and this unobtrusive pattern allows full strength to what the short lines actually say. There are only four verses, the last of which ends:

Man should live as he dies,  
Defiant and alone.

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There are other poems on related themes in this and other books, but none of them reaches such a memorable closure.

The poet, then, who re-emerged in his adopted land with a new volume of verse and an explanatory autobiography at the age of seventy has continued to engage in fruitful exploration of his chosen themes. The philosophical and religious matters which his writing broaches are sustained by considerable learning. And yet the epigraph to his most recent book, *The First Architect*, shows a quest unended. It is called simply 'At 80':

I know many things,  
but not what I would most  
like to know.

The autobiographical element has expanded to become one of the most interesting features of this later work, since the poet's life encompasses the entire history of the twentieth century. An avid theatre-goer as a young man, Hubbell is one of the few people who can still remember seeing legendary figures like Sarah Bernhardt and Nijinsky on the stage. He also maintained a substantial correspondence for many years with Gertrude Stein,<sup>9</sup> who in turn was well acquainted with the other great artists of her day, though Hubbell and Stein never actually met.

It is difficult to see why Hubbell's work has not attracted more critical attention, and made its way into anthologies and the consciousness of the general reader. As a late Modernist, he is to some extent disadvantaged in an age which considers itself Postmodernist, or even post-Postmodernist.<sup>10</sup> Again, although Hubbell has been witness to the events of the twentieth century, he has not been centrally involved in them, but has lived the reclusive life of a man of letters. Absence from America has led to some neglect of his reputation there, added to the fact that he

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has never given public readings of his work. Yet any perusal of the later poems shows a poet who has continued to write with freshness and precision. Indeed, there is arguably a greater self-awareness and sense of personal beneficence to be found in the later writing. If Hubbell has been left behind by Modernism, he has also left it behind, and learnt to compose more sparsely than before. The last poem of his last collection is entitled 'Waka':

I am not a person.  
I am a succession of persons  
Held together by memory.  
  
When the string breaks,  
The beads are scattered.

It is intellect that has always sustained the poet's quest, and it is the short lyric in which his thinking finds its best expression.

It would be misleading to suggest that Hubbell's life and work have not engendered influence or admiration. The translator and poet Hiroaki Sato was among those who benefited from Hubbell's years of teaching. Timothy Harris, a scholar and critic resident in Tokyo, has noted the 'chaste diction and rhythmic subtlety' of Hubbell's poetry, which he describes as 'intelligent, humorous and humane.'<sup>11</sup> The British poet James Kirkup has noted the 'almost translucent clarity' of Hubbell's work and said that he is 'easily the most important modern American poet to come to these shores.'<sup>12</sup> After living for nearly two decades in Kobe, Lindley Hubbell has recently returned to his former home, Kyoto. He has always been held in high esteem by a small number of discriminating readers and devoted friends. Surely it is time for his writing to become more widely known and read.

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### Notes

1. The biographical information given here is based on an interview that DB conducted with LWH for the *Mainichi Daily News*. A two-part article on LWH appeared in that paper on June 23 & 30, 1986.
2. LWH's main US publications are: *Dark Pavilion* (Yale University Press, 1927); *The Tracing of a Portal* (Yale, 1931); *Winter-Burning* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1938); *The Ninth Continent* (Alan Swallow, 1947); *The Birth of the Diatom* (Banyan Press, 1949); *Seventy Poems* (Swallow, 1965).
3. Prose titles include: *Lectures on Shakespeare* (Nan'un-do, 1958); *Shakespeare and Classic Drama* (Nan'un-do, 1962); *A Note on the Shakespeare Apocrypha* (Yamashina Press, 1966); *Miscellany* (Nan'un-do, 1972); *A Second Miscellany* (Ikuta Press, 1975).
4. All the books of poetry mentioned in this essay, and some translations which are not dealt with here, but most of which are still in print, were issued by The Ikuta Press, 5-3, 1-chome Sumiyoshi-Yamate, Higashinada-ku, Kobe 658.
5. *Double Triptych* (1974).
6. *King Lear*, IV, Scene VI, 129-30.
7. Compare these lines from 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,' Part V:  
There died a myriad,  
And of the best, among them,  
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,  
For a botched civilization
8. These are: *Climbing to Monfumo* (1977); *Walking Through Namba* (1978); *The First Architect* (1982).
9. LWH's letters to and from Gertrude Stein are now held in the library of Yale University. He is sometimes mentioned in books about her, and his poem 'A Letter to Gertrude Stein,' first published in 1930, is reprinted in *A Gertrude Stein Companion*, ed. Bruce Kellner (Greenwood Press, 1988).
10. It is possible that LWH may have been overshadowed by that other Hartford poet, Wallace Stevens, who first appeared in print a little earlier.
11. These remarks are contained in a review of LWH's *Studies in English Literature* (Yamaguchi Shoten, 1982), a substantial book of essays which is now unfortunately out of print. Harris particularly praises LWH's essays on the English lyric. See *Asahi Evening News*, Dec. 29, 1982.
12. These remarks were made in a review of *Anthology 85/86*, one of a series of poetry anthologies issued, first annually and then biennially, by The Ikuta Press since 1972. See *Asahi Evening News*, Jan. 9, 1987.