
Leonard Neufeldt’s *The Coat Is Thin* is a verse history of the author’s Mennonite ancestors, from their adoption at the Reformation of a communal, pacifist, perfectionist way of life; to their religious persecution in the Netherlands and later migration to Russia under Catherine the Great; to their repression and internal exile by Stalin in the early twentieth century; to their escape to freedom in Canada between the wars. It is also a poetic autobiography, as it records its creator’s own feelings towards this past, as well as toward his memories of growing up in British Columbia, his later experiences as an academic in Texas and Indiana, and his retirement to Washington State. On either count, *The Coat Is Thin* bespeaks Neufeldt’s earnest intellectual engagement with human experience. Along the way, he also stakes out his position on the broader physical and cultural transformation that affected all of these individual lives: the coming of modernity. He refuses either to adopt a nostalgic, romantic, or culturally conservative view of this history, in which it becomes representative of a broader “fall” into modernity; or to create poems in line with the “dominant, Western, liberal narrative of modernity as secularization, the ideological backbone of which is the claim” that European history since the Renaissance is a largely positive, Whiggish tale of the “progressive liberation of individuals from traditional ideas and values,” especially those associated with religion [Brad S. Gregory, “Can We ‘See Things Their Way? Should We Try” in Alister Chapman et al., eds., *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame University Press, 2009)]. Neufeldt instead presents us with a collection of highly nuanced poetic reflections on the process of historical change, on the tenuous nature of the claims of both tradition and the liberal narrative, on the impoverishments that accompany the genuine emancipations of modernity, and on the stubborn refusal of religion to disappear, not least from the margins of this poet’s consciousness.

Neufeldt announces his middle way early on, in a poem set in British Columbia, “Stars West of Williams Lake,” which opens with a quotation from William Stafford’s “Allegiances” (“It is time for all the heroes to go home / if they have any, time for all us common ones / to locate ourselves by the real things we live by”). At first, his description of the night sky in scientific terms (“Thirteen billion years ago stars turned blue, / and many...
stars I see tonight from this cliff house / have no name”) encourages us to read Stafford’s lines as confirming that the heroic, mythic age, like the old cosmology, is over; replaced by the materialist, empirical, rational view that characterizes modernity. Yet Neufeldt’s own physical placement in the scene is more reminiscent of Plato and Milton than a modern astronomer. The house by the lake from which he searches the skies is a lonely philosopher’s retreat, a high tower where he might “outwatch the Bear,” and viewing the cosmos from it brings neither rational satisfaction nor sure understanding of the nature of the universe and our place in it; rather, modernity’s expulsion of the Creator and the concept of a purposive created order has the same effect on Neufeldt here that Darwin and the Higher Criticism had on Matthew Arnold in “Dover Beach,” creating a primitive fear of nature’s otherness and hostility and of the emptiness of things:

And tonight, high above  
the Chilcotin, my back against the door  
of this low cabin still feels the curve of the driver’s  
seat and years of waiting to come here—  
with no one else to explain what is or what  
to expect, the cold spreading like breath past  
fingertips, shivering toward trees  
that touch the stars. And the jolt of howls holding  
long as though they have far to go, and answers  
faint as an echo, slowly: two wolves  
giving themselves away until nothing is left  
but the sky and eyes stalking the night  
like stars.

In the end, neither explanation for the cosmos manages to exclude the other; they both coexist in the poem as they do in Neufeldt’s mind and—he implies—our culture.

A little later in the book, a “Prose Poem for Uncle Petya, AWOL from the White Army, Who Was Allowed to Pray Before Being Shot to Death by Bolshevik Recruiters” culminates by focusing on the equally unsettling persistence of things which also simultaneously seem to fade into insubstantiality: “His eyes, indecisive as decent people’s answers, had taken on that decorative look of the season’s end, and there were no trees anywhere, only his hands and evening blankness gathering endless fields, each absent tree a prayer, each prayer breathing slowly, comforted far from itself,