Americans' Anger / Poetry / Trump / Furies

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> "I've got a family to feed, a neighborhood to defend."
> "I've got a family to feed, a principle to defend."
> "I've got a family to feed, my honor to defend."
> — H. L. Hix, *American Anger*

These lines taken from separate poems in the first section—"Aggression Cues"—of H. L. Hix's recent poetry collection, *American Anger*, can serve as elements of a mantra for the entire book. The voice behind the statements speak to the sense of threat perceived by many. Beyond their jobs at stake, they abstract their personal vulnerability to a widening circle of community, values, and integrity. Those threatened feel a need to strike back at the people—e.g., immigrants—and forces—e.g., the economic-political system—they believe are undermining their lives. The section ends with this couplet:

> As when one citizen, perceiving aggression
> from another, behaves aggressively in return.

Some may believe that anger in America originated with the candidacy of Donald J. Trump—what with his podium exhortations to throw the bum out or beat up protesters. But Trump merely tapped into a tendency boiling beneath the surface of our national mentality for many years. His candidacy, of course, exacerbated it, expanded its range, and even gave it legitimacy for millions. Anger erupted and he won his party's nomination. Was that his strategy or just an accident of timing? Was he a candidate with the right message at the right time? Note that his message of not just an American phenomena. Millions in the United Kingdom voted for Brexit. Right-wing parties in many European countries exploit economic insecurities, the possible danger of ISIL, thousand of immigrants, and fear of the looming Other.

But Hix in *American* Anger concentrates on the American manifestations of such ire in poems that capture visceral aspects of this violent urge but also explore causes and the nature of anger itself. Most commentators offer a socio-economic analyses of that anger, finding its source in the frustrations of a cohort of middle-aged blue collar white males whose jobs have disappeared, whose income has shrunk, who feel displaced and threatened by people of color, who blame outsourcing and immigration, who conflate their feelings of lost personal power with lost national prestige and threats of terrorism. But there are also

angry woman, even beyond the wives of the men, and angry people making a decent living. They crave a hero who will fight back to restore all that they have lost. A self-proclaimed winner who will make them winners again.

They can't acknowledge that the remedies proposed are simplistic: build a wall, round up and deport millions, seal off borders, reject immigrants, bring back well-paying jobs, let other countries pay their way and stop adding to our national debt. But primarily, kick ass. It feels so good.

As much as many actions of the angry manifest as destructive and self-destructive, the motivations behind the hostile shouts, tee shirts, posters, and bumper stickers reveal a deep sense of threat to their employment, their children's futures, their values, and the core of their lives. They want to strike out because they feel themselves powerless, and they actually are, overwhelmed by social and economic forces far beyond their control. But how to protest against abstractions? Carrying a placard that says, "Ban Robotics" is far less tangible and personified than one that says of Hillary Clinton, "Lock Her Up!" Yet the angry have some justification for their frustrations, their conclusions that nobody cares about their immediate plights and their futures. They are the losers in a changing world, and they know and resent it.

In recent years I've been fortunate to spend hours in the company of H. L. Hix and enjoy his friendship. In all that time I've never seen him angry. In fact, he's usually amused and bemused, happily carrying someone's baby in his arms, brilliant when giving a talk or reading his poems and reciting those of others from memory. *American Anger* demonstrates his profound capacity to empathize with people whose lives are so different from his own. I consider this collection important because it speaks so well, and through poetry, to a matter than has become so central in American culture and politics. "Behind every great man there's a fury. Better chafed than sorry," Hix writes.

> Better the pistol you know than the pistol you don't
> Better hate than anger.
> — "Aggression Cue 2: A hand slammed on a table"

Although the book's title and the poems throughout use and reuse the word "anger," Hix implies that "hate" and "fury" are more appropriate words for the state of mind of the millions and for their need to strike out at all those they blame for their unhappy conditions. The American Psychological Association describes a continuum of anger, from the acceptable to the extreme:

> Anger is a completely normal, usually healthy, human emotion. But when it gets out of control and turns destructive, it can lead to problems—problems at work, in your personal relationships, and in the overall quality of your life. And it can make you feel as though you're at the mercy of an unpredictable and powerful emotion.

In "Compromised Sonnet: Compromising Rationalization," Hix writes:

> A violent man, like a ministry of defense,
> will justify his violence with some version of
> *I had to. I was provoked beyond endurance.*

(Note that the italics in this passage and others quoted appeared in the originals.)

Hix's poems penetrate the mentality of the out-of-control, capturing the idiom of the furious, but also contemplating the nature of anger through the theories of philosophers and psychologists. He, too, relates individual anger to national militaristic anger, the justifications behind wars.

> How may we aptly designate the discrepancy between
> Our claim to collective sainthood—"one nation under god"—
> and our assignment of others to an "axis of evil"?
> By calling it *American anger*.
> "Preamble: Nomination Anthem"

Rather than attempting to explain American anger, Hix illustrates and often dramatizes its multiple manifestations. He does cite the theories of others directly and indirectly, as evidenced in an 18-page listing of works cited, such as books by Barbara Ehrenreich, Richard Hofstadter, and Martha Nussbaum, though mainly authors whose names are new to me. Ultimately, Hix sees anger as a complex set of reactions and behaviors arising from a wide set of circumstances, as in:

> *But what you're describing is fear. People lash out when they're* afraid.
> *Groups lash out when group members perceive the group or themselves*
> *as threatened. (And this perception need not be acknowledged: a white*
> *supremacist's unwillingness to* admit *feeling threatened by blacks*
> *doesn't mean he doesn't feel threatened.*) Yes, of course,
> anger is fear. But no more than it is violence,
> greed, lust, despair, hatred, prejudice, need, ignorance,
> victimization, hunger, helplessness, hopelessness, aggressions.
> You're saying fear might *cause* anger,
> and it might be assuaged by it;
> I'm saying anger is subsumed by fear, is but
> One aspect or manifestation of it.
> "Anger related to fear:"

While the collection offers multiple variations on a theme, the poems—divided into eight discrete sections—are far from redundant, instead rich in their inventiveness, their variations of rhetoric, their ironic connections, their rhythmic catalogues, but ultimately in the perceptiveness of their insights.

One of Hix's most profound insights is found in the collection's section titled "Erinyeneutics," a compound word that Hix created. He is linking hermeneutics and fury by substituting for the messenger god Hermes the Erinyes—also known as the Furies, the goddesses of vengeance. The poems in this section serve as commentaries on and reversals of the Furies' exhortations. The great majority are Hix's translations of, primarily, ancient Greek poems, along with a few Roman, French, and Spanish poems. They exhort readers to control anger, with lines such as:

> Outrage, nurtured to full ripeness, bears
> a crop of folly and a harvest of tears
>
> Yield your anger, permit yourself change.
>
> You would rebut your rage, if you understood.
>
> Like bodies seen through fog, faults seen through anger look larger. Let one who
> is hungry have food, but let one who would chastise have for it no hunger of thirst.

(Note that the sources are not identified until the book's final pages, in a separate listing called "Attributions." The lines are from text by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, and others. The titles given the full excerpts are Hix's.)

Unfortunately, the wisdom of the ancient Greeks has been lost on many who are now themselves lost in the raging passions of American anger. Imagine what would happen to someone who stood up and quoted these lines at certain political rallies. The rallying are seething with despair at their social impotence because their lives and work have counted for nothing, while others have gotten so rich. More and more, social and political commentators admit that these people are justified in their realizations that they have been left out and left behind. The system must find ways to address their lives and their legitimate needs. If nothing is done to alleviate their dilemmas, the danger is a social explosion.

Hix portrays a number of scenarios of the potential outcomes in the final section of the collection, "Lost Wax." He does this though a series of invented narratives exemplifying human rage. The book's final poem, "What is it to be *overcome* with anger?" relates the memory of a fictional first-person narrator. He was in the third grade, and his father took him to a minor-league baseball game. The boy had to pee, but, unfamiliar with a stadium's men's room, walked past the line of waiting men straight to the urinal. A man in a tie and jacket, smiling, tapped his shoulder to tell him about the protocol of the line. The boy's father went wild, "Don't you / fuckin ever fuckin touch my fuckin son." Then he beat the man, punching him again and again until pulled off by others. When someone says, "cop," the boy's father grabs his son and runs to his car, speeding away. As the son starts crying, the father backhands the boy's nose with a knuckle and makes it bleed. "Men don't cry," he says,

"and men don't let themselves get pushed around." His final words before the silent drive home are, "Time you learn to fight back." That's American anger, the Furies unleashed.

An immediate reaction to this poem might be condemnation of the father, a man capable of beating a stranger for an imagined slight to his son, in large measure because that man is of a status that allows him to wear a tie and jacket, implying that the father resents his own lower social and economic class. "I've got a family to defend." Yet, rather than excusing the father, it's possible to understand him and perhaps even view him with a form of empathy. Yes, lock him up, but also give him help.

American Anger is both disturbing and illuminating. It's doubtful that those who manifest the anger will buy or read Hix's poems. Those of us who do should realize that we are not looking at a freak show but rather at people in pain.

Works Cited

American Psychological Association, **Controlling anger before it controls you**, blogpost consulted October 2016.

Hix, H.L. *American Anger: An Evidentiary*. Etruscan Press, 2016.