

December 11, 2007
the recantation of hans denck

flee the fizz
and easy exchange,
flee, heretic. before they
hire you, stake you
the mortgage of a flipped
coin: some days
it's nothing more than a road
through cities
backlit by shame,
hollywood facades, freeways
slippery with sex, flee
past pill popper suburbs and the
desert's plastic edge,
flee
beyond the negative, where
they can't scan the scent:
wear paranoia
like a pair of shades,
cold and blue: but
spit out the lies –
they are real.

running second class. my
ancestors did it first, with
the integrity of screwed
tongues, hammered bones,
young flesh
offered to the butcher.

while i linger on.

the radical anabaptist reformers of the sixteenth century are often regarded as anticipating modern ideals. this perspective may simply reflect contemporary egotism. with their practical mysticism, their aversion to both secular and clerical authority, they were as much a return to medieval reformist communalism. prophets of the past.

the life of hans denck is elliptical, contradictory, inexplicable. beyond words.

he's born around 1500. works for printers in basel, immerses himself, body and soul, in the mystical texts he proofreads.

in nürnberg, he associates with "godless painters," students of albrecht dürer. the scriptures, says denck, are a precious gift, but nothing when compared to the word of the living heart.

he's exiled, is a fugitive for the brief remainder of his life. this is, perhaps, his young and secret desire.

denck resurfaces during the peasants' rebellion of 1525, an event so traumatizing that luther quickly aligns himself with principalities and powers. denck stands with the oppressed. "let no one look to the mighty in this world, let him turn to the despised and lowly."

but it is his deep, his breathing mercy that draws enemies. nothing is abandoned, he says, god's children are not forgotten, all creation will be redeemed.

in his rapture of falling night, empire is no more.

the citizens of this world can't live without boundaries. hans denck is driven from town to town. st. gall, strasbourg, worms. in 1527 he attends the martyrs' synod in augsburg, so named because of the subsequent reprisals. apocalyptic visions sometimes dominate the debate. denck's quiet tolerance draws peripheral attention.

several months later, the plague takes him.

his final writings are officially published as a recantation, but their ambiguity does not serve his tormentors well. they affirm his conviction that ritual and authority are secondary – or, perhaps, simply uninteresting. in the end, hans denck has neither friend nor enemy.

god gives sleep to those he loves.

the crocodile syllogism is a commonplace
of the medieval era. a scholar's
sleight of hand. a peasant's
weariness. "i will return

your child," says the crocodile to the mother,
"if you predict correctly what i will do."

if the mother says, "you will return my
child," she is wrong.

if the mother says, "you will not return
my child," she is correct.

a bedtime story for little hans.

born circa 1500. a life
that baffles historians.

his parents are deeply religious,
train him [on this

stormy winter afternoon, nothing
to understand, wind's concave
belly, rainblast from the
west's billowing dementia, in
this absent time, apocalypse
backwards, and soon
solstice, our shortest day,
the negative hour, and
where am i reaching? bent
bone, cupped hands, into
the centuries' void, to
cobblestone and banner, surplice
and stained glass, furrow,
pitchfork, haystack, warm loaves
and red wine, a prince's
mince, a mother's cry, a
devil grey in the details,
the unknowable story, reaching
into the cloak of a ghost, on our
shortest day i'll be
nothing, like history, like
the thumbscrew and pyre, like these
condescending words] his parents

train him as a scholar. hans
learns latin, greek, hebrew
at the university of ingolstadt.
master of words, he never
learns a trade.

humanist and mystic. young man
leaving home in search of work,
perhaps as a tutor.

lover of words.

of *the* word.

helpless.

they say: the priests are drunk on goathead wine.

they say: the princes are epicures of smoking flesh.

they say: we will not baptize children
to furfoot incantation.

they say: we will not swear oaths
to the fuckers of swords.

they say:
this world is a syphilitic whore.
this world is a six-horned beast.
this world is a cannibal monk.
this world is the emperor's shit.

they say: we will live together,
free.

their enemies call them *schwärmer*.
schwärmer: enthusiast, eccentric, visionary, ecstatic,
fanatic.

their enemies call them anabaptist.
anabaptist: rebaptizer, traitor.

and somewhere, sometime, in history's
hiatus, hans denck is drawn to
rebaptizers and traitors.

they're young, intransigent
as the young must be, innocent
to the death, they've lost hope
for old age, will perish to
tongs, water, fire, to the
crucifix and the cassock's curse,
do you hear the midnight slither,
hans, do you feel the cold
stare, do you smell the carrion
of its banquet halls, run, hans,
hide, it's hunting for a
merciful heart, its scales
span the circling stars, the
empire's too enormous, my friend,
find the place between

[as i, between
medieval and future
rumour, between
windstorm and autumn
flame, between
tongue and word]

flee, heretic

the wanderings begin. augsburg, donauwörth. denck seems incapable of holding down a job. in 1522 he's in regensburg, unemployed and despondent. and attracted, this odd humanist drifter, to the emergent anabaptism there.

in 1523 he travels to basel, hotbed of dissent. for a time he works in a printinghouse, corrects scholarly and mystical texts, edits a greek grammar. he also attends lectures at the university, engages in discussion with the renowned erasmus –

[who
calls prince and priest
fools, who
curses the cult of
war, who can barely
restrain a violent
rage, but keeps one foot
in the church,
who seeks...]

in basel, a close friend of dürer –

[who
etches apocalypse, who
depicts the galloping
nightmare, horse upon
skull, who
shocks the aristocratic world,
but keeps one foot
in the palace, who
seeks a sanctuary...]

– a close friend of dürer recommends him for headmaster of the st. sebaldu school in nürnberg, free imperial city, centre of renaissance and reform. denck receives the appointment in 1524. he is married. he's affable, makes friends easily, yet a borderless freedom troubles his soul. denck associates with students of dürer, who are placed on trial for heresy. the city council summons him to defend himself, hans denck, this amiable, indulgent young scholar –

[who
seeks a sanctuary
between, who is
indecisive, unclear, is it
fear, hans, or love, or
an old grey sloth,
but the beast's sniffed you out,
hans, the
empire has chosen –]

in his absence, the choice is made.

denck's oral defence is aborted by city council, and he explains himself, ambiguously, in writing. it is the first of numerous documents he will author during his brief lifespan.

i read many books [he writes] *,boasted of having
the faith*, raised to the faithfulness of words, to the syllogism
of prosperity, to the logic that confines you, peasant, and the
holy writ of power, inherited, signed, contracted, from generation
to generation, each boot, brick, crumb, each scar, each drop of sweat,
each foot sunk in the mire of dawn, listed, abstracted, defined
in the book, *i read many books, i understand nothing, sin
is whatever rebels against god, in truth,
nothing,*
no thing in the throneroom, no thing at the altar, not
sceptre nor mitre, judge nor general, nor the law conceived
in history's virgin womb, nor the beast itself, the jaws
that clamp the child, never, oh father beast, oh mother,
you're not mine, you are
nothing,
and these tears, these orphan children, *and if i should today
declare i believe, tomorrow i may be
a liar*, helpless, you and i, wherever the spirit
drives us, baptism without a name, love buried
too deep for words, having without having,
being without being, *wherever the spirit drives me,
there shall i go, there i shall flee.*

the council renders judgement.

hans denck proved to be so skillful that we considered it to be useless to argue with him orally.

he discards scripture as if it were useless just because not everyone understands it.

he maintains that god alone gives faith. he insists on calling his faith no faith until it is entirely perfect.

he should swear an oath to submit himself to leave the city, be ten miles away before nightfall, and for all his life long not come any nearer to this city than that. otherwise, he will be sought out and punished bodily.

denck is shocked by the sudden verdict. he hasn't even completed his written defence.

he arranges for his wife and child, leaves nürnberg with a few personal effects. from this day on, he will be an exile.

vagrant in our empire of nothing.

how can we forgive, when the
fable has no moral, this tale
from a slave in silken
chains? today you might be
a babe among beasts, a novice
befriended by thieves, little lamb,
who made thee? you slip
past the guards, child
in sheep's clothing, no passport required
of the meek and mild, and a rickety
ramp into the slaughterhouse. or

you might lower your horns, charge
through the gates, gore
the sentries clenching
butcher knives. you snort
blood, bull in an army's
china shop. we
face each other on the slippery floor
of the abattoir.
neither of us understands.
or could you be

common as a housefly,
buzz over dungheaps, make
for the crack in the window,
wait for the breeze? unfold
transparent wings, and
fly? past a soldier's clumsy slap,
past beasts queued
for slaughter. into
multifaceted light, ride the wind, beyond
webs glittering with lust.

by late 1525 denck is tutoring greek and latin in augsburg, and is again under attack. *honourable gentlemen*, he pleads, *do not lend an ear to idle accusations against me.*

his defence is vague and evasive. his enemies describe him as tall, modest, friendly, and cunning beyond words.

by this time he is committed [very likely] to anabaptism, but seems troubled by its intransigence. because

deep in denck's light-stricken heart, no one can be an enemy.

the rustle of robe on
bone. the courtly swagger
in the confessional. the
treaty signed with an
iron gauntlet. the marriage
of cross and crimson
glass. together we know
hell. *in a perverse
heart, everything is
perverted.* scripture on
an ivory hilt. together

we know heaven. the
needle, the muddy plough.
black bread broken.
the spin of the wheel,
a cup of milk, a child, a mother's
hushed warning. *the word
is with you before you
seek it.* whispered prayers
behind an oak door. *if
love excludes anyone,
it is mockery.*

in the desert, hell is flat.
moses' people are bored, the manna is stale.
wilderness has an infinite horizon.
to the common, to the unelected,
the word is given before asking, to labourers
calloused with the ordinary, and they
rise to ecstasy, rave
visions of joy. "moses," demand the delegation,
"stop them" –
"but are you mad?" he replies,
"what joy if all my people were prophets."

it is the year of the peasant rebellion.

peasant demands are moderate, but after several violent incidents luther cries for punishment, sensing a threat to the social order he's so determinedly built. "stab, strike, slay the robbing and murdering hordes!"

among the peasant leaders
is thomas müntzer, early *schwärmer*, fanatic,
ecstatic [now
is the time, god's
only and beloved
elect, attack,
attack, while the fire
is hot, you will become
free and god alone
will be your master].

the armies join battle at frankenhausen.
six thousand peasants are cut down.
the princes' side incurs six casualties.
müntzer is captured, tortured, and executed.

in the victors' history books, this is known
as The Peasants' War.

luther has crossed to the winning side.
in the long term, his legacy is a new protestant ethic,
the rise of capitalism and the nation
state [in my deepening
night, the flicker of
stock on a worldwide
web, yesterday's storm
at a profit]. in the short term,
the persecution of anabaptists expands mercilessly.

they dance and jump in the fire, view the glistening sword with fearless hearts, speak and preach to the people with smiles on their faces; they sing psalms and other songs until their souls have departed, they die with joy, as if they were in happy company. – bishop johannes fabri, persecutor of anabaptists.

they sear her tongue
so she won't preach from
a burning pulpit. they
shatter her clay body with
hammer and tongs. they watch
satan whisper in her ear. it's
not a matter of courage: the city
of this world is a dungheap, naked
lords on thrones of shit.

on a bright morning she's trundled
to the town square. the lilies
are in bloom. women hawk onions
in the market, children
play tag, burghers eat pastry,
gawk and gossip. fire
makes love to her, the city flares.
i have chosen you.
the flames go cold.

her tormentors return to hearth
and family, waste away
with the disease
of freedom.

and so hans denck, hans of the inner
 light, of the broken bottle, the wine
 spilled over the spirit, yes, hans the anabaptist,
 ecstatic, furtive meetings, glory of the hushed
 candle, the wary knock, scripture's
 secret fever, and no, alone
 and withdrawn, hans not yet and
 perhaps was and shall be
 anabaptist, in our sun's eclipse
 no friends, no enemies [while conferring
 with balthasar hubmaier, who
 organizes a kingdom of believers
 in nicolsburg, defends god with scholarship
 and sword, recants under torture, re-
 believes, pleads, will you not hear
 my loyal reason, dies on the pyre] no,
 uneasy and restrained, sealed
 with splendour [while befriending even
 hans hut, rebaptizing him, this hans of the
 outer light, comedian of the tragic,
 preacher with a pale yellow moustache,
 hans hut of the peasants' rebellion,
 apocalypse, justice for the elect,
 you are the 144,000, he cries, you wear
 the sign of the cross, and through disaster
 stubbornly believes, the end
 will yet come, we will reign, the
 rich shall smoulder in jehovah's
 fist, but apocalypses come and go,
 and hut is arrested by hubmaier
 himself, escapes, is
 rearrested, this time by prince
 and monk, dies in the smoke
 of a bungled escape attempt,
 his followers vanishing,
 jehovah's divine joke] and
 hans of the inner light, friend
 to all and to none, where
 does your kingdom tarry? we are
 wind, in our rugged valley's void,
 we are joy, and the untellable story, the
 pure, the poor who are always
 with us, the powerful who'll
 never dare, distant hoofbeats of
 our winter armageddon, and a
 springtime that never was, and

always shall be

*he came so still
where his mother was
like dew in april
that falleth on the grass*

*he came so still
to his mother's bower
like dew in april
that falleth on the flower*

the exhausting pattern of denck's life continues. his anabaptist associations are regarded as subversive, and he's banished once again.

denck travels to strasbourg, where he meets with well-known anabaptist michael sattler.

typically their relationship is strained. because

[no peace, argues sattler, a believer can have no relationship with the world. the world is damned. apocalypse is near. sattler, educated and a master theologian, will defend himself with dignity and courage at his heresy trial in 1527. he is burned at the stake, and his wife drowned. previous to that, however, in february of the same year, he drafts the anabaptist schleithem confession.

baptism shall we give to all those who have been taught repentance. hereby is excluded all infant baptism, the greatest and first abomination of the pope. all those who desire to break the one bread in remembrance of the broken body of christ must beforehand be united in the one body of christ. all those who lie in evil have no part in the good.

everything which has not been united with our god in christ is nothing but an abomination. by this are meant all popish and repopish works and idolatry, gatherings, church attendance, winehouses, guarantees and commitments of unbelief. the sword is an ordering of god outside the perfection of christ. it does not befit a christian to be a magistrate. their houses and dwelling remains in this world, that of the christians is in heaven.

all swearing of oaths is forbidden. your speech shall be yea, yea; and nay, nay; for what is more than that comes of evil.

we have been united to stand fast, separated from the world in all that we do and leave undone.

above all, we're suspicious. sniffing
out the reek of the kingdom's
decay. behind the altar, a piper
bound in black. a peasant marked
with sacred blood. an inquisitor
formalizing the auto-da-fé
of the easy life. between
birth and death, between jehovah's
muscular arms: speak
with a fox's tongue, say nothing
that could give you away.

don't trust the priest, he's selling
shares in paradise. the lawyer,
whose advice will escort you
to the rack. or the teacher, syllogizing
children to the logic of the
pyre. the merchant, rich on the trade
of martyrs' bones. the politician,
gleaming with a gargoyle eye. downtown,
aristocrats slather each other with
wine and oil, pump
nuclear engines. anabaptists,
trust no one.

jesus wanders a desert criss-
crossed by freeways, meets with
the bossman. worldweary embrace.
shake hands, sit and negotiate. dry
riverbed, thorns of dawn, the
wail of sirens.

and the wandering continues,
denck is banished on
christmas day: is it
the devil with his
tumescent tongue, is it
the angel coughing up
the phlegm of pity,
or perhaps the heretic
swimming a river of
fire, or the monk who
can't hold back the domed
silence, or the peasant
quoting the catechism
of harrowed soil, is it the woman
who's calmed the tempest
in her belly for too
long, or the crone
hunched over that final
ashen word, or the
child shrieking the joy
of a new green world, or
the fool draining the
goblet of innocent
blood – but you can't
hold your tongue, hans, you
don't respect the peace,
the lamb within
speaking the syllable
of taboo, and the
turret should topple,
the rose window
shatter, but
no, this day's
a reflection of the last,
and the same dust
blown through old city
gates, the same
mouldy curse, the
same farewell in
a darkening archway,
the same empire
rising from nothing,
over and over, a pierced
and thorny circle, and
the wandering continues,
denck is banished

on christmas day: is it
the devil with his
tumescant tongue, is it
the angel...

banished from strasbourg on the holiest, darkest day.

he wanders through bergzabern, landau, worms.

the crocodile takes the child.
 takes the mother. is
 the mother. devours
 its own tail, nothing consuming
 nothing.

the more a man resists, the more unrest it causes him

over and over, star-wound in the
 night, longest holiest night,
 rumours of birth, a fanged
 sceptre, and what rough beast
 in slouching streets, panicked
 orders, slaughter of the infants,
 eclipse upon shepherds, over
 and over, in hell each step
 is infinite –

in our time love has been extinguished in nearly all people

in this deepest night, ravished
 night, vermin in herod's bones,
 plagues of velvet and shit and oath,
 the obese confession, death's
 drooling banquet, maggots
 constellations guiding wise men,
 a distant gallop, a scythed
 starving guardsman –

the lover denies all force, must flee the ranks of power

my friend, my holy child,
 in our empire you're
 homeless, flee, heretic, to
 the centre, the still point,
 in the vast coil of the
 beast, where gold rusts
 they can't hunt you out,
 where crowns sprout thorns –

and the lover denies the self as if it no longer existed

where the sword's blunt,
 where the edict withers in an
 ancient egyptian sarcophagus,
 where you are nothing,
 banished, fugitive,
 in holiest, darkest night

in worms denck translates the old testament with the aid of jewish scholars. he's banished even from this hotbed of reform. the zürich council issues warnings that hans denck is an "arch-anabaptist."

in 1527 he's in augsburg, where he attends the martyrs' synod. his kind, weary voice is a counter to the ecstasies of hans hut.

and driven on. to nürnberg, ulm.

he has reached a breaking point.

to basel, and the home of a friend. he writes to the prominent reformer oecolampadius for help: *i have lived so much in exile that i wish, god willing, i could have permanent and secure residence somewhere. with strangers that is not possible, for i am unable to do almost any kind of work. with friends, it is impossible because of their suspicion that i favour sects and create perverse dogmas.*

oecolampadius accepts denck's appeal, but perhaps sensing a small victory, demands a formal confession of belief.

denck complies.

[and dies of the plague.]

two years later, oecolampadius publishes the confession as *hans denck's recantation*.

gelassenheit:

the anabaptist ideal, and denck's longing:

yielding, surrender, withdrawal, defencelessness.

in our absence.

a drop of darkness.

as though he doesn't exist.

for those stone-old people, the crocodile
was god. and i

thought we were at peace, my love,
i thought we were at ease,
but i've smelled the belly's crawl
upon the walls of the city.

come home, it's
time for rest.

the recantation of hans denck:

he's exhausted: *exile*
is hard, really difficult for me.

living in terror: *because*
of my faintheartedness,
i fear men greatly.

willing to discard belief
like last summer's dream:
the name itself
is not worth quarrelling about.

[the hovering of solstice
as the year turns to look. my soul
on the rack between mountain
and sea. this pause, bittersweet,
are we arriving, are we leaving,
brother, we can't find
the words.]

sunken city, dying man. [and
i] and i too would withdraw
everything. if i might
stand at the plague bed,
warm your fingers. if
i might speak the name. a
window's final rattle,
the subsiding storm...
words can't endure.

absence.
according to the medieval church,
zero

is heresy.

the door shuts on an oval chamber...
and he sleeps.

*he who surrenders
is truly free.* death
by plague, on the longest
and holiest of nights. the
angel of wrath sucked into
the lungs of the beast.

thy will is nothing.

defenceless.

in the morning was fresh rain,
wind in your hair, fog
snagged on cedar boughs,
a crow's harsh mercy. words
can't endure.
but *the word*.

spirit, written without pen or paper.

too naive, too foolish, for an empire's
elegant script. no more words. rise
and fall. no more questions. *never
cause another to suffer.* yes,
it's that simple. recantation
of the king's pardon, of the beast's
lullaby. emerging
from the kingdom's coils, walking lightly
through the broad gates of dawn...

there's always the official version:
in middle ages hooded with
winter: priest swinging censers
under spires of heaven,
peasants wading through furrows
fertile with the dead: and who's
born here, satin-skinned prince
of god, or calloused carpenter:
in a vale of ice, on this
shortest day? a pope decrees
that this oldest time shall be
christmas: the official version:
burghers kneeling as a golden cross
trundles muddy streets:

yet the beauty of essential things:
a stall, a dung heap, steaming cattle,
white-washed walls, shepherds
gossiping around a manger, and
men from the opulent east
sharing cheese and bread:

as the north wind howls
through the bones of bethlehem, a broken
sickle in icy fields, a single frozen
star above: as earth draws
a dark breath, shivers
simple redemption, begins
her long spiral back
to the face of god: