

Clock Tower, Palace of Westminster

Compared to Big Ben
the sky is a bog,
a rug, a smear of cold
oatmeal. Let light
slant like sleet until point
becomes line becomes
the eye's Braille ride
down finial and spire,
the precision of cladding
preparing you for the skylights
and iron tracery, then a cornice
decorated with shields, coherence
counterpointing coherence
even as a puff of black spoors
turns into starlings dissolving
in the mist. Then you can see it,
anybody can, even I could,
even on my first peach fuzz trip
when I wore the same jeans for six weeks
and sat in front of blue watercolors
until I finally had to admit that the
Thames is the color of potato peelings.
After the fire in 1835 Mr. Barry's pencil
was itself a kind of Gothic pre-study
as he sketched out the new tetrahedral spire
which Pugin covered with dormer windows
and round arches filled with open tracery.
Architecture is a prose style:
bell chamber, small orb, ogee tracery.
It all is a monologue which is saying
"gadzooks," and "cads, be gone!"—
all of it just a heliotropic refutation
of balderdash, perfidious secularism,
and the creeping socialism of entropy,

written longhand in Charge of the Light Brigade
 limestone. To design this one Pugin and Barry
 used every cat in the bag and then some—
 sound off, parade ground marchers:
 arch filled with trefoil, orb,
 balustrade, flying buttress,
 pinnacle, spandrel, octahedral shaft
 with billet decoration, copper
 hands, the dial itself glazed
 with pot opal glass, cornice,
 molded corbel, star-shaped
 corner buttress, panel with tracery,
 slender diagonal buttress,
 narrow windows and string course
 with the carved panels
 hinting at the hypodermis,
 reminding you of hidden girder
 and subspandrel, of cement,
 copper wire, fireproof iron sashes,
 strips of green lathing,
 grated ducts, vacuum
 message tubes—a hullabaloo
 of goings from comings and
 gones from wents and all of it
 flange bolted with hexheads
 for a standardized fit.
 The night soil flees the W.C.'s
 down vented lines that run
 like organ pipes through the walls,
 humming, *Rule, Britannia* all the way
 to the sewage works. In the end
 everything rests on wooden friction
 piles; every foundation starts with
 a single pile being driven under
 by the weight of what rises above it.
 Is that why I finally flew home
 and got a job, is that why in 1852,
 the year Charles Barry was knighted,
 August Welby Northmore Pugin
 raved mad in Bedlam, and died?

Charles Hood

Is that why soot black in the rain
Sir Barry's spires of Perpendicular Gothic
now look older than Stonehenge?
The sons of the sepoys are selling
samosas beside the tube-stop as
from the window of a passing mini
some cut from *Disraeli Gears*
is playing on oldies day.
And if acid rain or the IRA
doesn't get it first, Big Ben
will still be bonging the hours
when after the funeral my kids
are looking through a shoebox
and wondering why in the hell
I kept a sheet of toilet paper
from the Imperial War Museum
with "Government Property" on it,
all these stupid bus tickets,
the postcard of St. Paul's,
a dozen blurry brown watercolors,
or a poem about the architecture
of the Clock Tower, west end,
Houses of Parliament,
New Palace of Westminster.