

IT MADE NOTHING HAPPEN



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Poems For The Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry. Vol. I: From Fin-de-Siècle to Negritude, Vol. II: From Postwar to Millennium. Eds. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris. University of California Press.

“In the encyclopaedias, no room for Osip Mandelstam”, said Zagajewski, but here at the end of history he turns up on page 390 of volume I. It is 1934 and Mandelstam’s portrait of Stalin is deviating from the official line:

He forges decrees like horseshoes—decrees and decrees:
This one gets it in the balls, that one in the forehead, him right
between the eyes.
Whenever he’s got a victim, he glows like a broadchested
Georgian munching a raspberry.

The way to detect an art fraud is to trust your first impressions, and not to listen to the sophistry of your second, and so with translations; these books have few fakes, and one or two Old Masters, but inevitably the bulk are Sunday afternoon watercolours. Here, the Russian word for “raspberry” also means “the good life” and is slang for “criminal hide-out”, so we are not to suppose only that Stalin is partial to soft fruit. The editorial notes seldom assist such textual points, but instead locate great men on a map of movements:

Unlike the Imagists—& other radical modernists—Mandelstam & the Acmeists worked with inherited formal constraints [...] & yet the poetry at its best broke through those limits & let him “sing” [...]

The notes, whose ampersands are a trying affectation, are essential but lend a sense of watching a variably scripted documentary which has nevertheless turned up rare and valuable archive film. The editors call the mathematician Jacques Roubaud’s first book “ε [epsilon]”—note the learned gloss—when it is actually entitled “ε”, meaning “is an element of”. But they translate from another Roubaud poem hardly seen in

English before. Whatever one feels about their scholarship, the anthology remains an achievement of substance.

In the same weeks as Mandelstam's judicial murder (in a camp near Vladivostok), an oddly similar portrait of a tyrant was written by an Englishman on holiday in Brussels:

He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
And when he cried the little children died in the streets.

"Poetry", he wrote elsewhere, "makes nothing happen", whereas Mandelstam is supposed to have said to his wife Nadezdha that "only in our country is poetry respected: people are even killed because of it." The Englishman is a figure of whom it might with equal justice be said that "unlike the Imagists, he worked with inherited formal constraints, & yet" and so forth: but, in this encyclopaedia, no room for Wystan Hugh Auden. He was not modern. Nor Yeats, MacNeice, Larkin, Hughes or Heaney; Frost, Plath, Lowell or Bishop; not Brodsky, Enzensberger, Holub, Bonnefoy or Zagajewski.

The prolix introduction to volume I confuses two irreconcilable definitions of the modern. "The most interesting works of poetry and art are those that question their own shapes and forms." But only "to change the direction of poetry and art as a necessary condition for changing... human beings". Many modernists had a saloon-bar interest in politics, a few were genuinely committed, but to claim that their "iconoclastic radicalism" drove Europe to extremes is putting the cart before the horse. Stalin was not the creature of Acmeism. The doctrine of these volumes was more concisely put by Hélène Cixous: "The twentieth century, in its violence, has brought about the marriage of poetry and history." One welcomes such exquisite lies from poets, but it leads Rothenberg and Joris to a bald statement that negritude [*sic*] was "the culminating movement", because it accompanied the end of colonialism which is the significance of the two World Wars. But it wasn't, it didn't, it isn't. It is no good stressing négritude ("niggerness") as a world event by removing the accent if you then select only Francophone poets from Martinique and Senegal who all produced a one-issue magazine together in Paris.

This is a recurring theme, because movements are always local to languages and often to cities until they have mostly run their course. Manifestos have small print runs and are repellently self-important to all but "the undersigned" (volume II reprints the "Preamble & Statement for a Council on Counterpoetics" (1989), on "the poetry-and-culture-nexus

over diverse space-and-time” and the crises “ecological, political, ethnic and spiritual” that face us; there are eleven signatories). For instance, the most fruitful line taken by these books is that poetry and visual art are overlapping genres, and that modernism explored this overlap, but only in pre-war Paris or Dadaist Zurich can these claims be fully justified. As turn-of-the-century Vienna shows, a simultaneous revolution in philosophy, music, painting, design, science and architecture can still produce no discernible tremor in poetry. Nevertheless, the editors have selected well and been generous with illustrations to make their point, such as the long rails of artwork from Cendrars’s great *Prose of the Trans-Siberian*. If Picasso, Duchamp, Pasolini and John Cage could not write, while Ponge and Char could not paint, their attempts are still honest, and if unclassifiable then it is the classification that is at fault. Likewise, although the editors exaggerate the extent to which Dadaism has been written out of literary history, it has to be admitted that while everyone has heard of Dada, hardly anyone has tried any. This book will cure your curiosity.

In volume II, the largely European “modern” is succeeded by the largely American “postmodern”, distinguished as being married to social rather than political history. This is no more persuasive, for one thing because the partners are so unequal. *The Female Eunuch* was not written in verse, and although feminism clearly helped to license directly personal poetry by women (Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, for instance), the reverse is barely so at all; nor was Martin Luther King much aided by recognition of Black English Vernacular. Moreover, the tools of social politics are mass participation, dialectic and the example that instructs, but only the first is even an aspiration of postmodernism, and then an unachieved one. Just as experimenting with stanza form had nothing to do with the defeat of fascism, cutting language loose from reference has nothing to do with equal pay for women.

It is this linguistic freedom—to some, a breaking of shackles on truthful expression, to others only the freedom of flesh from being anchored to bones—which is the heart of postmodern poetry, but it is not a surface feature. The indefatigable use of “thru”, “&” and lower case changes nothing and reminds this reader only of Tom Lehrer’s song about folk music by intellectuals, “It sounds more ethnic if it ain’t good English / and it don’t even gotta rhyme”. At the other extreme of profundity, after his first (and easily most-anthologized) collection, Paul Celan became extraordinarily daring in syntax and word-formation, composing enigmatic miniatures with a spectral intensity. Yet Celan’s neologisms—such as “ichten”, the pronoun “ich” made verb—are rooted in Middle High German and intense thought, not the streetwise demotic, and as Michael Hamburger remarks: “If Celan had set out to write hermetic poems, his work would be far less

difficult than it is". Hebrew scholarship and the minutiae of his biography have explicated enough to be sure that in Celan, words still refer to things.

In the genuinely postmodern, words are the thing itself, which can be hard to tell apart from surrealism but is not nonsense. "La terre est bleue comme une orange" (Paul Eluard, modern); "The Moon is the number 18 / is a monstrosity" (Charles Olson, postmodern); but not "Thrippsy pillivinx, inky pinky pobbleboskle abblesquabs" (Edward Lear, drivel). Much of the defining quality of poetry lies in the fragility of the intermittent and the fleeting, and in this genre it is not the scene but the camera's focus which slips in and out; the degree to which language engages some actuality shared by writer and reader. Gary Snyder uses this mist to haunt his distinctively American wilderness, where one bear "down under the cliff" becomes in turn ambiguous, mythical, verbal, literary and at last responsive. Inevitably, though, poems also abound which avoid the issue by being about themselves. "These sentences appear as dry sponges which become saturated with the situation" (Konrad Bayer). Do they?

This is the anthology heroic: two pastel-painted bricks of high-white paper, in which familiar figures mingle with the unjustly overlooked, the parochial and those whose craving for experiment or expression outstripped their artistic talent for conciliating the bizarre into grace. In Gary Larsen's cartoon "The Curse of Mad Scientist's Block", the laboratory blackboard is scribbled with crossed-out, unconvinced plans: "Take a giant robot and attach serrated mandibles to... Inject wolverine DNA into Mr Jones's brain...". Much of volume II is like that. (Emmett Williams, author of "rose is a violin is a codpiece", instructs: "For the letters in the title word... substitute the corresponding words from the alphabet of words. This operation generates line one".) While the civil rights movement was marching, while those troops not in Vietnam opened fire in the campuses and a half-million engineers built a lunar rocket, others drew pictures with their typewriters and threw dice. This has so little contiguity with the work of, say, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara or for that matter Gary Snyder (all anthologized even by what Rothenberg and Joris regard as the "conservative" establishment, i.e., Helen Vendler) that it is not clear they belong together. Still, here is a single book sampling the Vienna Group, Tammuzi, COBRA, Black Mountain, Concrete (not as bad as you think), Beat (worse, except for Ginsberg), Arechi, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Fluxus, OuLiPo—more and more sects, like early Christian heresies. They have their temples (The Jack Kerouac School for Disembodied Poetics of Boulder, Colorado, sticks in the mind) but the millennium would hardly have noticed if they had never existed. That is no reason not to read them, of course, and though Volume I is much the better, both are cheap at the price.