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A review of three volumes from the “*To*” poetry series.

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Should bilingual editions always be preferred when publishing poetry by authors writing in a foreign language? Poet-translator-publisher Emmanuel Hocquard (1940-2019) did not think so. He contended that poetry in translation ought to be regarded as a contribution to the current poetry in the target language. Under the editorship of Juliette Valéry, the *Format Américain* series that Hocquard himself had been instrumental in creating, stuck to that agenda through its existence (1993-2006).

Three other book series dedicated to making American poetry available to French readers have answered the question raised above in a different way: José Corti’s well-established *Série américaine* publishes poetry in translation exclusively; the thriving *Collection américaine* at *joca seria*, occasionally chooses the bilingual format; since 2013, the regrettably less visible *To* at Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre has followed the courageous course of making nearly every one of the twenty-odd works they have published available as separate volumes in their original English or French version, and their translations into English or French, respectively. A further defining innovation of *To* worthy of notice is that, to be eligible for publication in the series, a work should be previously unpublished in either language. What better way of *really* promoting and fostering the broad casting of poetic seeds to Transatlantic winds?

What follows is a long overdue review of three of the series’ English-language titles.

Lee Ann BROWN, *Other Archer*, 2015

In a self-written blurb for the book’s back cover, the author rightly describes the volume as “an expanded occasional poem”. It should be said for a preliminary here that this is a well-signposted book, with an abundance of ‘arrows’ pleasantly guiding the reader. Lee Ann Brown chose to precede the poems with a short foreword summarizing the main point of each of the book’s five parts. Each part itself is preceded by a page focusing the reader’s attention on the following content, either explicitly or indirectly through the use of one or several epigraphs.

The title page of Section Three, “The Wondrous Field,” thus bears the following ‘warning’ as to what is to be expected: “Pre and Postpartum Document/ for & *with*//Miranda Lee Reality Torn/Infinite Infant Ever Expansive” (57). More guidance comes from the editor of the series, Christophe Lamiot Enos, a poet in his own right, who, in a celebratory postface, considers the merits of Brown’s attempt. More points worth noting include the fine photograph of mother and child on the cover, the reader-oriented statement of intention, also found in the afore-mentioned blurb, a short author’s biography, and a list of her publications.

Are all these necessary? I believe so, as they greatly serve the brave purpose of bringing very contemporary American poetry to a French readership, which is another hallmark of this series. No indication is superfluous when some poems do not have an easy point of entry. “Ecstatic occasions Everyday,” the poet writes (34). But there are hierarchies among these occasions. The main occasions of this occasional poetry are the birth of the author’s child (a girl), the progress towards it, and what follows it. Those successive periods take up two whole sections of the volume.¹ Two other well-identifiable occasions dealt with by Brown are the 9-

¹ Eleni Sikelianos’s *Body Clock* (2008) – translated by Béatrice Trotignon and published by *joca seria* as *L’Horloge au corps* in 2022 – makes a perfect companion to much of the material in Lee Ann Brown’s *Other Archer*.

11 terrorist attacks, in “Sore Rose,” *Other Archer*’s second section, and her visit to post-Katrina New Orleans, in “Arc Hive,” the final section.

A fresh nod to elder poets is always appreciated: Lee Ann Brown embraces this tradition successfully, as a poet aware that “A forcefield grows stronger/ The more people cross into it” (158). Whitman is summoned on several occasions. A reading of his “A Woman Waits for Me” at her wedding gives the author the opportunity for one such nod (“Peachoid”, 53); “What Is the Grass?” (163) reads as a 2K footnote to section 6 of “Song of Myself.” “Today’s Blake Session” brings together a fine group of friendly poet figures (Whitman, Blake, Ginsberg, Sanders) and discloses how Lee Ann “made the Whitmanic transmission to the girl poets” (54-56). “Arrows” (47) points to Sylvia Plath as a predecessor of great significance to Brown, who explains how she made sure she slept in a bed that Sylvia Plath had slept in.

The ability to bring an amused but not condescending smile to the reader’s face is something not all poets can manage. Brown does, as when she begs Jennifer Moxley – hailed as “Mother” – for a moment’s relief from Marxist intransigence (“Aubade”, 29) or when she recreates a chance encounter on the street of “Reality” (one of her daughter’s names) with “Destiny,” another baby. Her baby’s birth has made “art// and life seem even more enmeshed” (“8th Month Couplets”, 94). Allowing space for self-reflexive moments to think about what exactly is at stake when putting words to paper as a poet is another welcome bow to the poetic tradition which Brown takes: “Why do we write? To relate the stories of the night dark/ of fire and how to keep it going/ or start it anew from flint and tender/ dragged back to the cave from a lightning-struck bush? //Fair fire language came about to give us the upper hand/ or at least band us together/ around the storied night.” (“Synthesis”, 112-113).

All books of poetry worthy of that name should arrest the reader’s attention at some point and get them thinking or, even better, reciting aloud the line(s) they have just read. *Other Archer* also met this criterion for me. “Beauty Supply” (on the practice of including everything in poetry), “Miranda Is Two” (on a young child’s ‘rise’ to language, 123-126), “Recollected Conversation With Barbara” and “Aftermath Blues” (powerful post-Katrina documentary poetry, 171-176), and “Be Like A Bird” (on a moment of perfect mother and child happiness) would all make it onto this reader’s list of favourites. The book’s fourth section, anthologizing Miranda’s verbal and narrative creations at different stages, verges on self-indulgence (see for instance “I Love Mommy Alot²”, 136-137), and detracts from the otherwise favourable impression left by the book. Some poems in *Other Archer* which make abundant use of daily Americana (brand names, entertainment products, journalists) are also unlikely to stand the test of time. Fortunately, as we hopefully suggested, many others in *Other Archer* will.

Norman FISCHER, *On a Train at Night*, 2018.

On a train at night, you don’t see much of the landscape. Glimpses of what’s out there are all you can catch, which perhaps accounts for the many obscurities in Norman Fischer’s verse?³ Here is a book one should read as one translates it. Delve into it, and you will unearth all its riches. Skim through it, and you may be tempted to dismiss it, lay it aside or maybe throw it away, when sense eludes you excessively, line after line. A rich variety of angry characterizations may then come to your mind: self-indulgence, intentional obscurity, ciphered language, elitist stuff for the initiated, and so forth.

² *Sic.*

³ All quotations (but one) from this book come as footnotes for the reader should feel free to regard them as optional.

And yet the book opens on a promising prologue discussing Genesis, no less, and, more specifically the plausibility of it having taken place as an act of God's speech and the exact way in which it may have unfolded. The authority of different rabbis through history is invoked, but the conclusion arrived at – which resonates through the book – is that all this striving after exact chronology is useless, even downright damaging, a serious sin, the poet's view being that "creation lies in wait." The "Prologue" places the book both under the sign of a long tradition of Jewish mysticism with its passionate attention to language down to the individual letters of the alphabet and loosens its ties to this tradition from the outset so that the navigation that follows can be freely conducted.

Unsurprisingly, while the lay-out of the "Prologue" looks like verses in a sacred book, that form is abandoned in the rest of *On a Train at Night*. What remains from the Jewish attention to single letters is the alphabetical order in which the prose poems comprising the book are arranged. (Not until you reach the final poem, with its tour-de-force-like concentration of words starting with the letter "z," does this choice make more than superficial sense.)

One page after the other, this reviewer's copy of *On a Train at Night* shows an alternation of lines underlined for their 'truth'⁴ or 'insight' or 'beauty' value, and of ones – sometimes within the same poem – flanked by an irritated question-mark in the left-hand margin. No doubt, and this has been our experience, the share of passages marked for their worth increases at each new reading, but it seems no less certain that too many (in our view) lines are bound to remain irremediably obscure, which plays into the hands of the detractors of poetry.⁵

In his partisan and ultimately convincing postface, series editor Christophe Lamiot Enos urges the French reader to shed their blinkers and accept that poetry and meditation may go well together, that spiritual exercises may result in poetry and vice-versa. Point taken. Surely, anyone with an inkling of what meditation involves and calls for knows how hard it always is to extirpate oneself from the daily dross, how much effort it takes to stop the hurtling train of inner logorrhea: reaching clarity is always a momentary achievement. May we then see the book's entries as the results of exercises that not always succeeded in getting anywhere, that sometimes briefly got somewhere but then lost the 'thread,' and only rarely felt like a walk in a park bathed by the most beautiful light⁶? All the 'obscurities' left throughout the poems would then be as many signs of the poet's honesty, confessing: 'look, this is as far as I got today.'⁷

Writing this makes me feel like a poor sleeper who tosses and turns in their bed, constantly looking for the best position of the body to find rest. *On a Train at Night* does that to me. Where do I stand exactly? There is no leaving this book aside without scruples. It stays with you. You do not want to concede, you go back to grapple with the text one more time, smile and wince in turn, flip through the pages, become arrested by lines you highlighted,

⁴ Of the experiential kind, as in: "Weird hours slide on/ Only one pulls in exactly on time, boards fortunately, / Rides out as far as it can go/ And disembarks where you are, gone before you arrived—" (102).

⁵ Every reader has their own gauge of obscurity; so I chose not to include any example of what I regard as baffling all attempts at understanding, but I trust that the book is 'rich' enough in obscurities for everyone to come up with their own examples.

⁶ "On the street where I live/ The quiet inside each sound/ Insinuated itself into the opening that things pass through—" (107-108).

⁷ "In search of clawholds to make sense where none will stick" (22); "But in this boat or train driven by the mercy of others/ Rocked by the world's lurching without destination in transit/ Despite desperately desiring arrival/ The endless nonarrival prevails/ The tipsy sway bump and canter/ Wears the nerves thin" (91).

warm up to the book again, but here comes another succession of stumbling-blocks, you put the book down, like the passenger on a train at night, only to pick it up a moment later...

Like other books in the *To* series I had a chance to read, this one does not leave you cold, and that certainly is a major asset. Themes that the poet engaged in meditation returns to are often philosophical and include: the evil of separative thinking,⁸ the delusion/illusions of identity and the wish to broaden its definition,⁹ approaches to ‘emptiness,’ (a word never encountered in the book), but a theme variously present through to “zero,” “notness,”¹⁰ “unbeing,” erasure and so forth.

Poetic meditation/ meditative poetry also affords new insights into things of everyday life: the dark material world of economic injustice¹¹, environmental damage¹², war, capital punishment, death, violent individuals¹³ and the illuminated sphere of human love or of contemplation of the beauty of nature¹⁴. The book is rich in insightful instances of paronomasia¹⁵ and wordings felicitous enough to be regarded as aphorisms.¹⁶ As pointed out by Lamiot Enos, metapoetic considerations abound,¹⁷ inviting readers (and poets) to step outside familiar bounds of poetic discourse.¹⁸ To speak of *On a Train at Night* as containing an *ars poetica* seems a little exaggerated but not totally untrue.

Hank LAZER, *Poems That Look Just Like Poems*, 2019

There are poetry books you immediately feel like making a gift of to someone ‘in general’ (or in particular) simply because these books have entered your life the moment you read them. Such was the case with me on closing Hank Lazer’s *Poems That Look Just Like Poems*.

Poems can require vastly unequal amounts of time and effort for their digestion: some get readers to deploy the energy of a four-stomached creature, others will melt on the tongue. It should immediately be added that the length of time for processing a poem is never in direct proportion to its merits. Let the proof of the pudding be in the eating: just grab Hank Lazer’s second book in the “To” poetry series and (re)experience the pleasure of devouring a book of poetry from cover to cover!

⁸ “You shall describe nothing/ You shall explain nothing/ All explanation depiction coherence significance/ Is control/ Is blasphemy” (17); “Every zero shatters the frameworks of philosophical logics, every/ non- and un- and a-/ Collapses its divisions—you / me provides diversion, little lives/ sliding by/ Easy as pi/ No evil but the evil that divides” (37).

⁹ “Simple fact of my not being no matter what another but still as/ ever the one I was/ Swimming the permanent dream of self as neck at end of rope/ tethered to my inventions/ This dance needs its dancer” (43).

¹⁰ “Herewith a housefly rubs its face against the panes—nothing/ to write about/ Really nothing/ To speak of/ Details swallowed in world”. And the next poem starts like this: “Hole in original world—disturbed—stutters—flashing in and/ out of being—” (45, 46).

¹¹ “Hail hail the other in the weeds small and unseen/ Hail the debt owed the maligned poor upon whose shoes the/ world has ever walked/ To purchase its musical wealth beyond the justice barriers” (69).

¹² “Redistributed planetary water where was snow in winter now/ there’s fire in summer” (44).

¹³ See the portrait of one, starting: “Killer dog in small town” (55-56).

¹⁴ “Newt’s slow side to side waddle in pathmud intent to shoot/ clear of scrutinizing fox” (60).

¹⁵ “simile for a smile” (72); “Order or ardor—/ Adore the passion of today” (68).

¹⁶ “You can’t dismiss a people’s bud/ Like produce you don’t want in the bodega” (80-81); “what’s/ not the case can stop you in your/ tracks/ More than what is” (54).

¹⁷ “Breathing you invisible poem/ Whose cloud-sound follows me” (96).

¹⁸ “Let’s go outside and drop metaphors for a moment/ These things I’m determined to say fill available space” (104).

Like the Lee Ann Brown volume, this one comes with a postscript in the form of a conversation with the author, conducted by series editor Christophe Lamiot Enos. And it is a hands-on experience of the poetry to which the reader is invited: an overall but also detailed survey of his oeuvre and writing ‘method(s)’ by Lazer is followed by an exchange of views between poet and critic on specific poems making up a possible *ars poetica*: what better companion to the poetry? Such pedagogic efforts promote the cause of poetry most effectively and should be praised, not laughed down.

The critic must refrain from overquoting Lazer’s poetry. The carefully assembled book (*not* a haphazard collection by any means) is indeed a rich “*instrument spirituel*” (Mallarmé’s words quoted by Lazer): a lot of poems, of lines, are meditations by themselves and ideal seeds for further poetic and spiritual exploration. Most poems are laid out as thin pillars of words stretching down the page. They tend to come as one sentence; when they come as fragments or as assemblages of fragments, each one of those can stand by itself. Most of them read quickly, should be read in one breath, but then comes the realization: what you have just ingested in one gulp was delicious and so subtle.

Steeped in at least two spiritual traditions (Zen Buddhism and Judaism), the author does not shirk metaphysical questions (“That Brought Us Here,” 21; “Or To Think It,” 71). Being (as in *Time and Being*) is a natural topic to him (Is,” 34; “Simple,” 72-73). He is at ease with the ‘invisible’ (“Seeing,” 38; “The Picture of Being,” 69-70; “Who,” 114), pays it due attention (“Bright Light,” 39-40), but regards our preoccupation with it as a mere distinctive feature of our species which does not justify any sense of entitlement (“Limit,” 78-79; “Among,” 111; “And Yet,” 117-118). The close observation of birds’ behaviour outside the poet’s window testifies to his alertness to the natural world (“Real Time,” 67-68). Like fieldnotes or a naturalist’s diary, all the poems end with their date of writing. Time *is* of the essence of Lazer’s poetry, “teasing/ time into visibility” (115). But he never becomes maudlin when he deals with the consequences of its passing: old age, disease, and death. The tenor of the verse feels just the right blend of the appropriate gravity and a light touch.

As far as philosophers are concerned, Lazer mentions reading Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger at the time he wrote the pieces gathered in *Poems That Look Just Like Poems*. Should we wish for directions to imagine a soundtrack to his poetry, the poems provide some: we should turn to jazz and John Cage (“The Return,” 36; “When,” 76-77). But no such nods as in Lee Ann Brown’s *Other Archer* to poets who may have inspired him. The matter may be irrelevant, so we shall keep our guessing short. There is certainly a Beat fluidity to the poems. Robert Creeley also comes to mind, whenever fluidity turns gnomic. I’ll add Dickinson to this intentionally reductive list, for the clarity in Hazer’s ‘definition poems’ such as “Integrity,” (28), or the perfect “Clanking” (110) which, I have resisted long enough, I’ll end quoting in full as an ideal finishing piece to characterize Lazer’s consummate sense of the line break, and his talent for writing deceptively simple poems which perform what they are about, when form does what the content says:

my vision is not
the child’s
song of innocence
nor is it the one
of wonder my vision
is the insistent
voice of hypothesis
what if what if
& a song
given over to

what is
for which I give
gratitude
in this vision
most of the thinking
is nothing but thanking
the clanking of a
language
released from its chains
(11/23/14)

To is a beautiful and spare title for a poetry series the originality of which, to repeat ourselves, should be praised ... unsparingly. May these concluding words reach its publishers, urging them to spare no efforts to ensure for it a better distribution and availability.