

Dance of the Intellect

There is much talk abroad in the land, over the endive and radicchio in places like New York and the Bay Area, about the dumbing and commodification of our literary culture along with the broader culture. The observation is well-taken if not exactly timely. The dumbing part has been going on for quite some time but the commodification—well, that’s positively antique; though it is true that at no time has it progressed so exponentially as is currently the situation. What is true of the society at large and its markets is true for its literature. Even as marginalized an activity as the writing and publishing of poetry is as pegged to the larger social and economic fact as, say, Clinton’s decisions on welfare reform and trade with China, hip-hop at Shaker Heights High, or the criteria for choosing commercial sites for Foot Locker stores.

The manifestations in contemporary poetry, in America at any rate, are predictable and usually hideous. When public television turned its camera and mikes on poetry we were given the Bill Moyers-hosted *Language of Life: poetry as therapy, self-actualization, and complaint*. It was about permission, self-expression, catharsis. Moyers told us that poetry helped him recover from his recent heart attack. Poetry thus becomes utilitarian: a kind of pharmaceutical, an analgesic, invested with the properties of a blood-thinning agent and Prozac.

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The poetry shelves in suburban malls can usually be counted on to stock books by Charles Bukowski, Maya Angelou, and Sharon Olds, who collectively serve the function Mrs. Hemans served a century ago in Victorian England. Ms. Angelou is about something else, equally unspeakable, but it is now tabloid poetry and the trumpery of personality that moves off the shelves; and with software, not people who read, determining inventory and shelf-life: what moves *rules*.

Therefore, the poetic project and ambitions of someone like Christopher Middleton—who, at the age of seventy has recently published his twelfth collection of poetry with a very small press in New York—would seem rather quaint or quixotic or over-the-top, certainly misguided. Clearly, one is not going to find his poetry on the shelves at Borders or Barnes & Noble or almost anywhere else.

In England, where Middleton is from (he has lived and taught in Texas the past thirty years), he has been published by Fulcrum, Carcanet, and Paladin. He is regarded there as an innovative or experimental poet, a modernist. Given Britain's curious relationship to modernism (Larkin: The three Ps—Picasso, Parker, and Pound—made a muck of everything), Middleton is respectfully kissed-off. In the United States, the fashionable and institutionalized avant-garde (what an oxymoron that is) have taken no real notice of him, which is a pity since he is among the most consistently inventive, original, and audacious of the so-called “experimental” or “innovative” poets these past twenty-five years. But both terms are, finally, inappropriate here. Middleton knows very well what he is up to; he is not experimenting. And his methods are not so much innovative as an alert, vigorous synthesis of more than a century of modernist procedures. And despite the chatter to the contrary, modernism's resources have not nearly been exhausted.

Christopher Middleton is best known as a translator from the German, though he has also worked from the Swedish (Lars Gustafsson, a treasure) and Spanish (the poetry of Arab Andalusia). He is the author, as well, of two extraordinary books of essays, chiefly about poetry: *Bolshevism in Art* and *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, both published by Carcanet, the former out of print and nearly impossible to find. He is, in these essays, deeply interested in the primitive roots of poetry and how they find expression in modern poetries. He is, as well, a brilliant explorer of the interrelationships and patternings of

sound, sense, and design. His analysis, for example, of Mallarmé's "Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire" would frighten off wiser men than I from having a go at Middleton's own poetry.

Middleton's poetry will seem difficult and unfamiliar to the American reader accustomed to magazine verse and the work of Creative Writing's more popular personalities. It is aggressively, unapologetically intellectual, often allusive, and is apt to make assumptions about the breadth of the reader's knowledge that are, well, somewhat generous. The difficulties, though, are not the kind one might encounter in the work of Pound, say, or David Jones. They are more often folded into the *logic* of the poem, which can seem baffling, even secret. Middleton is a cultural archaeologist, raising ancient artifacts and finding likenesses. He is often a philosophical poet, in his fascination with time and the phenomenological, by which I mean in the complex ways of perceiving and thinking about how we perceive. He is not anecdotal and certainly not confessional. Poetry, for Middleton, is very much involved in the *act* of retrieving in language the imaginative experience or moment, letting it find its own pulse and exfoliate on the page. It detests "reportage" or "brute discourse"; it wars against "languishing idioms." It is improvisatory.

His immediate influences will not be evident. They seem not to be American at all, at least in the way one might identify Wallace Stevens as a primary influence on Ashbery. They would appear to be an amalgam of modernist European poetics, among the many other literatures with which he is acquainted. He is prodigiously well-read, widely traveled, and deeply knowledgeable about the visual arts and music. It all gets to be rather daunting now and again.

The poetry of Middleton is not easy to categorize, not least of all because no one Middleton poem truly resembles another, much less one book resembling another in style and subject matter. There are, however, certain characteristics of a Middleton poem which, I think, pervade the corpus, and I would like to believe that I could recognize one of his poems in a "blind test."

One of the signature elements, perhaps the central one, in any Middleton poem is its syntax, with its orderings, its presences and absences, its copulae or want of: clauses gone floating off from the main substantive and verb; periodicity; abrupt declarative bursts—subject verb object, bang bang bang. Is this the manner of someone

who spends a great deal of time reading in other languages? Or a James Joyce and C.M. Doughty aficionado? An unreconstructed Latinist? Anyone who has written as knowledgeably and extensively on poetic practice as Middleton will usually provide us with keys to his own work.

The “happening” of the syntax, Middleton writes, is “the moment of epiphany.” He goes on to quote an old Eskimo poet named Orpingelik, of the Netsilik People: “Songs are thoughts that are sung out with breathing when people let themselves be moved by a great force and no longer can be satisfied with ordinary speech.” Middleton goes on to quote Mallarmé, who considered syntax to be “the mobility or principle” of words, “being that part of discourse which is not spoken.” Middleton then says, speaking of poetic syntax in general, that it “is the ‘great force’ that connects the diverse memory-traces which the poem recalls or recollects into a consonance... Even before the poem is read sentence by sentence it can be felt as a structure of speech waves having different lengths: some rolling, some abrupt.”

It is worth looking at an example from *Intimate Chronicles*, Middleton’s most recent book, not only as an exhibit of how Middleton uses syntax to order, regulate, and highlight but because the motif is familiar in Middleton’s work: the exploration of time, *then* as *now*, in a localized historical context.

The gardener in the basilica, he stoops
To cut and lift the grass roots;
Little billhook in his grip he hacks what sprouted
Round the odds and ends at random:
Broken fluted column, writings,
A coffered rose, a marble sun.

While he cuts he whistles.
Same tune, over and over. Headscarf in the wind,
Down his back it flutters. Then he stoops,
As if born bent double. Face down,
He only sees a blur of marble form;
He smells the wild pig smell of grass,
And smelling it he knows the weight of time.

(“The Gardener in the Basilica”)

The poem excavates and transfigures back a couple of millenia or so, then circles back over the next three stanzas. But the action's in the syntax, Jackson, as it so often is in Middleton's poetry. And what is achieved by his mix of inversion, repetition, the elliptical (all amplified by the enjambment) is a foregrounding of particular elements, a raising of our attention by disrupting conventional expectations of flow.

Also, the tempo is lively. For Middleton the rhythmic pulse, though almost never regular, is characteristically very insistent and propulsive, often making use of the front-loaded trochaic and dactylic movement or clustering accents. In this poem, as in almost any of his poems, the vowel and consonant textures and orchestration, even if picked up only half-consciously by the inner reading voice, what Middleton would call *endophonically*, make for a rich patterning of sound. The plosives and liquids in the first strophe are worth taking note of, as well as the contrasting pitch among the vowels they are jacketing.

We might then fairly ask, if a central pleasure, perhaps *the* central pleasure, of Middleton's poetry is the manner in which the nature of the poem, its meaning, inheres in sound, in its sequences, timbres, tonal colorings—in single words, on occasion, or small word groups—what chance does it have of getting through to a tone-deaf poetry reading public, one inured to the rough trade of *Bad Daddy* poems, gimmick poetry, the poetry of humiliating anecdote, or the frozen post-modernist gestures of rote indeterminacy and the effectless fragment? And this is true not simply for Middleton but for the few others whose voicings are as subtle and complex.

Middleton's poems have a tensile, torqued character (his first collection is entitled *Torse 3*) that, along with his improvisatory methods, have a certain kinship with what Harold Rosenberg called the Action Painters (especially de Kooning, Pollock, Kline). Middleton, in his essays, speaks repeatedly of the *act* of bringing the imaginative or psychic moment into the realm of language. From Rosenberg's essay on Action Painting:

the canvas...as an arena in which to act—rather than a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event...in the final effect, whatever be or not be in it, will be a

tension... With regard to the tensions it is capable of setting up in our bodies the medium of any art is an extension of the physical world... the ultimate subject matter of all art is the artist's psychic state or action... The action of the canvas becomes its own representation.

Middleton's oeuvre is filled with poems about paintings and painters, and photography as well. *Intimate Chronicles* includes "A Landscape by Delacroix," "Monet's Weeping Willow," "A Picture Which Magritte Deferred," and a poem called "Musa Paradisiaca," based on a painting by Jean Bouchet. And any number of poems would seem to be meditations on paintings and photography—or, more to the point, the nature of painterly or photographic observations (mobile, shifting, cubist, collage/montage) or subject matter. From "Zagreb 1926":

And while the slanting rays explored
Crannies where the light and shadow blent,
Our funny faces, caught in the globed vase,
And a snippet of our sky gazed back at us,

In its ample curves we contemplated
Birds that flew in flocks around the town,
The roofs of all the houses turning red,
Right aboved a bell tower, now, the sun.

Or "Skaters in the Luxembourg Gardes, 1909":

Black on white, figures astride a frozen pond,
Long shadows travel, forms unfreeze the distance.
A clock on the palace façade has stopped.
It is five to one, or else it is eleven.

Or, one of the prizes in the new book, "On a Photograph of Chekhov":

Ivory handle of the slim umbrella shaft atilt
To birch trunks in the background, has a curve;
Eyesight arching clean across the image
Divines, in the cap's white crown, a twin to it.

Chekhov's brother, meanwhile, props his head—
Summer rain, phenomenally sombre—
On Chekhov's hip; from his blubber mouth
A howl escapes, the sockets of his eyes

Are black, as if he wore, beneath his bowler
Smoked eyeglasses; as if he were, perhaps,
A horror Chekhov carried on his back, and still
The rain comes pouring down...

But the painter Middleton perhaps most resembles, the painter whose *Hat Kopf, Hand, Fuss und Herz* ("Has Head, Hand, Foot and Heart") is on the cover of his *Selected Writings*, is Paul Klee. And on the back cover of Middleton's collection *111 Poems*, Guy Davenport, a writer kindred to Middleton in a number of ways, says of the poet that he is something like the Paul Klee of modern poetry, which is extreme praise, and, I believe, accurate.

There is a playfulness in Middleton's poetry (one of his books is titled *The Lonely Suppers of W.V. Balloon*), but it is a type of play that never approaches the comic. It is a kind of dance of the intellect in language, what Leiris would call "a danced rather than a dressed-up discourse." It is involved with small surprises, phonic and semantic; Klee called it the "primordial realm of psychic improvisation," "the playful sublimation of the realistic," and spoke of that "irrepressible rhythm" even in the most detailed of nature's forms. He is the most musical of painters, and those forms and colorations of his which combine to seem whimsical, danced, are in fact expressions of powerful psychic states, for otherwise those fragile images would not have stayed in our minds, or in our culture, for so long, only gaining strength with the passage of time. It would seem to be Middleton's large ambition to accomplish this in his poetry.

Middleton's most recent collection is uncharacteristically titled *Intimate Chronicles*—uncharacteristic, that is, for this most *invisible* of writers. His "I" is the modernist "I," anonymous as a camera, changeable as a trunkful of masks. Middleton quotes from Mallarmé, in one piece, about the "elocutory disappearance of the poet, ceding the initiative to words." If he were to essay a portrait of his mother, in poetry, one would expect it to be as close to realistic as a Miro or late

Kandinsky to figuration. And yet in his new book there is, in fact, a poem of great emotional force about, if not a mother, then a mothering source called “The Lime Tree,” not quite like anything else of Middleton’s I can recall.

You whose round arms I stroked with feeling
Made presence atmosphere and contact known.

And I wanted not that Englishness;
I wanted deliverance from you so soon,

From the sticky stuff you weltered in,
Leaf, branch, and bole in your shade they dispensed

The glue, the fragrant glue, but your blossoms,
Lady, they did provide the pleasure of tea.

There is a longish poem in the new book called “Ballad of Putrefaction,” which is an extended, very pointed snarl of rage and disgust. Both of these poems serve as a tonic for those who find Middleton rather cool emotionally.

And there is a poem called “Naked Truth” about a cat, his cat:

Waking up in the night I find the cat
Has woken up less than a breath before...

So air in a painting links acrobats or bottles.
So silence walks in the connected fashion of cats.
There are things he knows by his silence;
I would like to speak in his clothes.

This “I” is, I believe, a rare appearance by the actual Christopher Middleton, who also appears on the cover of this new collection in a photograph: a handsome older man with a walking stick, in a dry place, perhaps Texas or Anatolia, with the bare branches of a tree poking into the frame from the left. In this photo and a few of his poems he seems to be giving us an austere but friendly enough hello.