

Cyrus Console, *Brief Under Water*. Providence: Burning Deck, 2008. Michael Gizzi, *New Depths of Deadpan*. Providence: Burning Deck, 2009.

Since its creation in 1961, Burning Deck has generated an unprecedented and immensely influential catalogue of original poetry and translations which stands out as a tribute to the richness and diversity of experimental writing throughout the world – Cyrus Console’s *Brief Under Water* and Michael Gizzi’s *New Depths of Deadpan* are no exceptions and emerge as two major additions to Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop’s already monumental list. In *Brief Under Water*, the connection between prose poetry and prose fiction are immediately established by the presence of a I-narrator whose intricate, labyrinthine ramblings and stutters constantly build and rebuild a dialogue between the narrative and the confessional modes. While the word “brief” would seem to evoke the shortness of the 55 entries of the collection, it also refers to the German word for “letter”: with a couple of exceptions, however, Console’s entries are less akin to letters (“Briefe”) than to journal entries describing the inner life of the narrator and his ill-fated brother. The title of the book is clearly a homophonic translation of Franz Kafka’s “Brief an den Vater” (“Letter to my father”), a forty-odd-page epistolary essay published posthumously and which expresses his extreme sense of loneliness, guilt and alienation. As for the watery element, it is illustrated by numerous aquatic images which culminate in two wonderful seaside poems (“100101” and “100110”) in which the narrator explores the psycho-geographies of dune landscapes (the sense of “effortless homecoming” afforded by the beach recalls J.G. Ballard’s more dystopian stories about “beach fatigue”) while identifying the sand and the “SEA” as “the begetter of these verses”.

On a first reading *Brief Under Water* conveys an urge to escape from a word dominated by an aporia of language (“the pocket dictionary sat on the toilet, defining its words with its words”), on the one hand, and a sense ontological stasis (“neither travel or advancement”), on the other. Such an attempt sometimes comes close to the spirit of Samuel Beckett’s famous “I Can’t Go On, I’ll Go On”, especially when Console’s narrator “fail[s]” - albeit splendidly - to escape from language but remains determined to “go out again”, “collaps[ing] in tree, amid buzzing of flies”, or when he feels literally encumbered with writing and starts to crave for a “psychic refuge” which remains “unimaginably distant and clean”. Despite these inauspicious beginnings, the collection ends on a more positive note when the narrator, finally relieved from his doubts and anxieties, surrenders to the logic of a peculiar, aerial form of transcendental *dérive*. Delineating a gesture of peaceful self-effacement which bears the promise of a dream of flight into a “floating silence” Console aptly brings the book to an elegant and strangely moving conclusion:

Huge, empty, he could not progress but with drifting; *but in a way he has won*. The air, trapped by its own weight, pushed the blimp higher in the sky.

This book contains some of the most distinguished prose poetry written so far in the United States. It is a book I and many other readers are likely to return to, a book whose stylistic virtuosity and intertextual richness never seem gratuitous and serves the cause of recovering a memory whose “episodes bleed from their contours, investing each other with error”. Far from indulging in the metapoetic exercises favored by some representatives of the post-Language school, Console never hesitates to confront and engage with real objects in a way which is informed as much by Kafka and Beckett as by the lessons of contemporary phenomenology. The following excerpt is taken from “110010” (one also thinks of the marvellous post-impressionist sketch “Shade tree / Puzzled over darksome shiftless fruit” in Console’s recent verse sequence “The Olepsy”):

That was more than enough for a lonely blimp, bobbing and weaving in the sky, who never loved nor made love, but who cherished a loving fondness for trees. *To him they were as miniatures, statements of extreme compression and brilliance*, moving not but by dint of supreme effort.

Console does not shirk away from politics either, as suggested by the opening poem of the collection ("There were comets in the air. It was beautiful over Lybia and beautiful over Chernobyl") and by the mysterious titles of the poems, which may or may not refer to the claustrophobic, binary codes "spoken" by computers, while adding to the narrator's fondness for Faulknerian thoughts and images of "motion-in-stasis". Another influence is that of François Villon (Console's narrator is also named François), whose poetry is paraphrased at the beginning of section "1011". Here one of Villon's most famous quatrain - which was written at a time when the 15th century poet had become tired of a life of misery and declared himself ready to be hanged ("I am François, which is my burden / Born in Paris near Pontoise / And from the six-foot of rope / My neck will learn the weight of my ass") - is converted into a mundane prose which nonetheless preserves the tragi-grotesque quality of the original:

It was you idea to name me François; it is my loss. I was born in Pontoise [sic], at the foot of the class. At length my neck learns the weight of my ass.

Characteristically, the historical consciousness which pervades the whole book proceeds by light touches, clear and precise strokes, as in "110101", in which the narrator, caught in a state of option between speech and silence, cites Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and concurs that "this also ... has been one of the dark places of the earth". In a recent review, Leslie Scalapino adds Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Melville to the author's literary influences and, indeed, there is something Bartelby-like about Console's narrator, who readily admits to "know[ing] something like heartbreak, but there our affinities end": "I lack hobbies. I have no houseplants. My bed bides the day in its room in the manner of an only child". Ultimately, Console's "Invention of Solitude" knows no conceptual limits. His synaesthetic ruminations (references to music and painting abound in the collection), "rampant speculation[s]" and *Gedanken-experimenten* eventually lead to a recognition that even the most complex and subtle psychogeometries are useless when it comes to combatting the sense of inertia he is literally *possessed* by. In the absence of a sense of wholeness and fulfilment, *Brief Under Water* provisionally leaves the reader with "a puzzle whose solution has demanded the rejection of many pieces". In another, related poem, the narrator describes his writing project as one which is inspired by painting, deflating the liminal beauty of the Matissean window view into an imaginary "window giving into nothing, lit from without, that casts no image but a frame": "It seems to me that if I understood this light precisely, as in painting, that if I understood this air precisely, as in song, that I could approach those days ahead like presents, that I could shake them, that might divine their contents".

Console's collection is dedicated to Ben Lerner, a poet who "invokes Jay-Z as gracefully as he does the Middle English", as Console recently wrote in a review of *The Lichtenberg Figures*. Console fully lives up to the versatility and unpredictability of Lerner's poetry in its half-serious attempts to emulate "the tradition of modern Hungarian music, that never repeats a thought, only rises, like the brilliant weapons of the forces of good, which would sooner turn to ash than fall back into their assembled crowds". These qualities also apply to Providence-based poet Michael Gizzi's *New Depths of Deadpan*. Gizzi, whose career encompasses more than three decades and ca. twenty books, is also a poet whose language has been inspired by and frequently compared with musical form. Clark Coolidge (himself an

accomplished jazz musician) comments on the brevity of Gizzi's prose poems and points out that:

Length doesn't matter, they are denser than they look. He has even found a way to record some forgotten strains. You get a chance at them only because they lie abandoned here. But as Monk said, It's up to you to pick it up. I wonder at them as I wonder at my own. Who wants to be cured of desire?

It would be a truism to say that the comparison with jazz (Gizzi is also the author of a 2000 collection entitled *Cured in the Going Bebop* which Coolidge's comments directly refer to) invites a reading which insists on the poet's improvisational skills as well as on the reader's participation in the creation of meaning, especially when it comes to bridging the gaps where an absent continuity can be imagined or reconstructed. It is true that some of Gizzi's poems consist in a series of isolated sentences, some of which are so short that they resemble verse lines. But part of the originality of Gizzi's form lies in his use of the enjambement, which interrupts the linear movement of his "prose": the point, as Coolidge's remarks suggests, is to cure the reader of the desire for poetic closure. This aesthetics of rupture is of course less marked than in more extreme (and more habitual) exercises in parataxis and discontinuity. But it is also more rewarding and unpredictable in terms of what the poems convey when they approach the dialectics of breaks, fissures and continuities, beginnings and endings. This is the beginning of "Rilke in Paris":

Once he was a pipe-smoking Turk on a shop sign. Now he's on vacation,

a one-legged man confronting his loss

preserved in spirits. Colors become audible. I'm green says the Turk. We are gold, the spirits reply. His had is dog padling in the avenues.

When he doesn't dream he feels as if he's forgotten to put out the garbage.

Like other related poems in the collection, the dream-like collage "Rilke in Paris" mixes the tragic and the trivial in a way which sometimes recalls Charles Simic's or Keith Waldrop's own peculiar brands of "deadpan" surrealisms. It is also typical of the musical (and frequently humourous) quality afforded by a kind of writing which is perhaps best appreciated when read aloud. The sheer diversity of subjects explored in this collection defeat any attempt to isolate a core-concept to his book, (if there is a guiding thread – or melody - to this book, then it must be "pantonal" as Ornette Coleman would say). Whereas the Surrealist legacy is immediately apparent in such poems as "Rilke in Paris", "Shark-Infected Custard" or "The Laser Printer's Dream", Gizzi is equally at ease with confessional/lyrical pieces ("A Dreadful Claim"), micro-narratives ("In Flat Nevada"), boppy nursery rhymes ("Dig the King"), philosophical vignettes ("Lorelei"; "Shadows of Volition") or discursive pieces about jogging ("Standing and Jogging") or popular culture ("B-Movie About Astrolabes"). (The titles of Gizzi's poems are so unusual and catchy that the Table of Contents can be read as a poem in its own right.)

The least successful poems in this collection are those in which Gizzi veers too much in the direction of facile deflation or self-deprecation, as in "Raging Balls", "The Wizard of Osmosis" or "The Academy of Scissors". There lies the danger of Gizzi's "deadpan" humor, which is poised between surrealism and realism, the abstract and the personal, the comic and

the tragic. This danger lurks, of course, beneath any attempt to develop a poetics which seeks to “translat[e] ideas into things” and vice-versa, thereby running the risk of getting stuck in a “torpor between sleep and walking”. As the title of the collection indicates, Gizzi – a man of many styles - opts for a “deadpan” mode which paradoxically aims at delineating new forms of metaphysical and philosophical depthness. This results in a mixed mode which produces some memorable writing which ranges from the solemn to wistful (“A window replaces a shadow, humming silently a song of the nude among canvasses”, “Car crashes remain the leading cause of information”; “No pedigree but rifraff endowed with pure Franciscan flesh”) while remaining committed to a collage aesthetics which, in the last analysis, stresses the difficulty of reconciling self and world through language (“grammar cracks eggs as best it can”). Be that as it may *New Depths of Deadpan* takes us on a journey through the very fabric of dream and memory and the patchwork of visions that characterizes a singular and distinguished fabulist.

—Michel Delville