

American BOOK Review

March/April 2008, Volume 29, Number 3

IN THIS ISSUE

Focus: Jazz & Lit

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| Sascha Feinstein | 4 | Introduction to Focus: Dues and Blues |
| Rick Madigan reviews John Sinclair | 5 | Fattening Frogs for Snakes: Delta Sound Suite (Surregional Press) and full moon night (Elik Press) |
| Sean Singer reviews Jayne Cortez | 6 | The Beautiful Book (Bola Press) |
| Allison Joseph reviews Linda Susan Jackson | 6 | What Yellow Sounds Like (Tia Chucha Press) |
| David Rife reviews John Murray | 7 | Jazz Etc. (Flambard Press) |
| Ed Pavlić reviews John Gennari | 8 | Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics (University of Chicago Press) |
| Colin Fleming reviews Ben Ratliff | 9 | Coltrane: The Story of a Sound (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) |

Double Feature: Celebrating National Poetry Month

- | | | |
|---|----|--|
| Anna M. Klobucka reviews Zbigniew Herbert | 10 | The Collected Poems: 1956-1998 (Ecco) |
| Paula Konecny reviews Brenda Coultas | 11 | The Marvelous Bones of Time: Excavations and Explanations (Coffee House Press) |
| Darren Wershler-Henry reviews Ian Monk | 12 | Writings for the Oulipo (Make Now Press) |
| Kostas Myrsiades reviews Titos Patrikios | 13 | The Lions' Gate: Selected Poems of Titos Patrikios (Truman State University Press) |
| Jennifer Grotz reviews Lynnell Edwards | 13 | The Highwayman's Wife (Red Hen Press) |
| Chad Parmenter reviews Jerry Harp and Jan Weissmiller, eds. | 14 | A Poetry Criticism Reader (University of Iowa Press) |
| Laurel Blossom reviews Claudia Carlson | 15 | The Elephant House (Marsh Hawk Press) |
| John Domini reviews W. S. Di Piero | 16 | Chinese Apples: New and Selected Poems (Knopf) |
| Benjamin S. Grossberg reviews Charles North | 17 | Cadenza (Hanging Loose Press) |

Book Reviews

- | | | |
|--|----|---|
| Joyelle McSweeney reviews Selah Saterstrom | 18 | The Meat and Spirit Plan (Coffee House Press) |
| J.D. Smith reviews Dagoberto Gilb, ed. | 19 | Hecho en Tejas: An Anthology of Texas Mexican Literature (University of New Mexico Press) |
| David J. Gunkel reviews Anne Friedberg | 20 | The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft (The MIT Press) |
| Jigna Desai reviews John Kenneth Muir | 21 | Mercy in Her Eyes: The Films of Mira Nair (Applause Books) |
| Christina Milletti reviews Sara Greenslit | 22 | The Blue of Her Body (Starcherone Books) |
| Edward Dautech reviews Lynn Hunt | 22 | Inventing Human Rights: A History (Norton) |
| Robert L. McLaughlin reviews Matthew Sharpe | 23 | Jamestown (Soft Skull Press) |
| Mark C. Smith reviews Maureen Ogle | 25 | Ambitious Brew: The Story of American Beer (Harcourt) |
| Robert B. Liddell reviews Jim Miller | 25 | Drift (University of Oklahoma Press) |
| Paul D'Agostino reviews Anthony Tognazzini | 27 | I Carry A Hammer In My Pocket For Occasions Such As These (BOA Editions) |
| Michael Schumacher reviews Holly George-Warren | 28 | Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry (Oxford University Press) |
| Tiphonie Yanique reviews Chris Abani | 29 | The Virgin of Flames (Penguin) |
| Duane Niatum reviews Aldona Jonaitis | 29 | Art of the Northwest Coast (University of Washington Press) |
| Elmaz Abinader reviews D. H. Melhem | 30 | Stigma and The Cave: Two Novels (Syracuse University Press) |
| Carolyn de la Peña reviews Carol Dawson and Carol Johnston | 31 | House of Plenty: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Luby's Cafeterias (University of Texas Press) |
| Andrew S. Taylor reviews Stephen Duncombe | 32 | Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy (The New Press) |
| José Skinner reviews Roberto Bolaño | 33 | The Savage Detectives (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) |

Departments

- | | | |
|--|----|--|
| Page 2—Jeffrey R. Di Leo | 2 | "Giant Steps" |
| Picketing the Zeitgeist—Alain Arias-Misson | 3 | High Fashion and Spirituality in Venice |
| LineOnLine | 35 | Over the Rainbow? Hardly: Collected Short Seizures (Sun Dog Press), The Segovia Chronicles (Louisiana Literature Press), Peeling the Onion (Harcourt), Redemption Center (Bear Star Press), The Robert Bellah Reader (Duke University Press), Ralph Ellison: A Biography (Knopf), A Passion in the Desert (Wordcraft of Oregon), and Neck Deep and Other Predicaments (Gravwolf Press) |

WRITINGS FOR THE OULIPO

Ian Monk

Make Now Press

<http://www.makenow.org>

66 pages; paper, \$16.50

Writings for the Oulipo is the second of poet/translator Ian Monk's books to be published by Make Now Press (the first being *Family Archaeology and Other Poems*, 2004). The title itself declares that the matter of the book consists of a series of stylistic exercises—poems written according to one or more of the literary constraints developed over the years by the members of the French writing circle Oulipo (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or the Workshop for Potential Literature). Oulipian literature is not only formal but conceptual; it usually relegates narrative content to a secondary role. For those that read poetry to delight in its artifice and in the skill of its practitioners, Oulipian literature can be a very satisfying experience; fans of the confessional lyric, or of epic narrative, though, would be advised to look elsewhere.

The most effective poems in *Writings for the Oulipo* elicit the same uncanny fascination as any complex piece of machinery. Monk has a watchmaker's sensibility and pride in craft, and is at his best when soldering letters into some elegant and improbable new configuration. The question for the reader is whether all of these poems are worth winding up for a second time.

The book's opener, "Homage to Georges Perec," is a seven-page set of six univocalisms—texts that utilize only one vowel in their construction. Later in the book, a related piece, "On G. Adair's A Void," critiques Adair's translation of Perec's *La Disparition* into English, without using the letter "e" (the same constraint—a lipogram—that operates in both the original and the translation). The most satisfying of these univocalisms is "Downtown," a rewriting of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy as a sonnet: "To do or not to do: Gods, how to opt?"

Univocalism is a powerful conceit, but one that has already been utilized to better effect elsewhere. Christian Bök's *Eunoia* (Coach House Books, 2001) is structured around the same univocalic constraint, but extends it over the length of an entire book (full disclosure: I edited *Eunoia*). Comparing the texts in tone and subject produces marked results. Both, for example, end up writing lurid and smutty little stories about a sexual encounter between Alfred Jarry's Ubu and a woman named Lulu.

Monk:

Ur-tush snuffs Lulu's musk

lustful Gurus-cum-Ubus cup Lulu's dugs

Bök:

Ubu cups Lulu's dugs; Ubu rubs

Lulu's buns; thus Lulu must pull Ubu's pud.

Such synchronic echoes abound throughout the two pieces, but are likely the effect of two writers deliberately working with the same limited vocabularies rather than the result of conscious allusion on Monk's part. (As a result of a conversation between the two writers, Bök believes that Monk wrote "Homage to Georges Perec" without knowledge of *Eunoia*'s existence...which is a shame, because it would have been truly entertaining to read Monk attempting to rewrite *Eunoia* at full length.) It's enough to confirm, in a paranoid but nevertheless entertaining fashion, that each vowel has its own distinct personality: the U, ribald and lewd, the I, self-absorbed and romantic, and so on.

As the image of the Enigma machine on the book's cover suggests, there is a considerable element of decoding necessary for the enjoyment of *Writings for the Oulipo*. For those unfamiliar with Oulipian literary forms, it may be helpful to have Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie's *Oulipo Compendium* (Make Now Press, 2005) close at hand while poring over the rest of this book, as there are no notes regarding the structure of the individual pieces.

Monk has a watchmaker's sensibility.

Some, such as "Two Sestanagraminas," can be puzzled out by the uninitiated. A sestina consists of six six-line stanzas followed by a three-line stanza (tercet); moreover, each stanza ends with the same words, used in different combinations each time, and the tercet contains all of these words, usually with two per line. In Monk's sestinas, each line is also an anagram of the others, producing stanzas like the following, from "Immeasurable Distances":

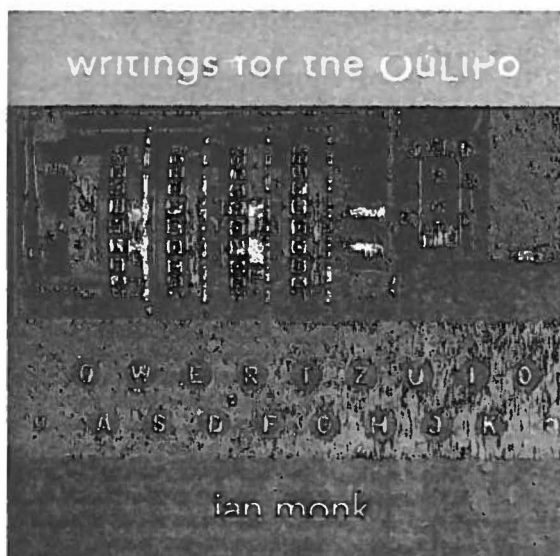
A creed, a sunbeam's limits,
a meal's basic items: under
bars see laminated music,
sad American blues—times,
as slain trim dues, became
a scene's dim sub-material.

Since dab muses' material,
as a cane, dumb-seer limits,
(Laura's mind is set) became
basic e-mail's steam under
bemused canals' air, time's
an Arab steed's mile music.

Other forms, such as that utilized in "The Russian Doll," are specific to the Oulipo. In a Russian Doll poem, each stanza is contained entirely within the stanza that follows it:

to brand
son-a
light which
some black
might tell:
an imp

in this central
ward to brandish
reasonable



delight which casts
handsome black stock
lands' might telling
how an impress
verses this ground

...and so on. Similarly, "Snowballing and Melting" expands and contracts line lengths by a single letter:

I
'll
now
undo
those
facile,
ancient
promises.
Amusement
(ninefold)
beckons.

Oulipian Jacques Roubaud's blurb on the back of the book is well taken. Monk excels when dealing with difficult constraints, but the poems in this collection which utilize simpler constraints often have a slightness about them, reading more like workbook exercises than literature.

Any real reservations I have about *Writings for the Oulipo* stem from the "for" in the book's title. The Oulipo has always been a closed coterie of writers, and Monk, the youngest of its members, exudes more than a little anxiety of influence here. Surely Monk has long since earned all of his avant-garde merit badges and achieved full standing with the other luminaries on Mount Oulipus. Insofar as poetry is "for" anything, these poems could be directed outward rather than being packaged as a mere demonstration of craft. In a society obsessed with security, borderlines, and information control, the practice of constraint-based writing has much political potential that has yet to be tapped.

Darren Wershler-Henry's most recent books are *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting and apostrophe* (with Bill Kennedy). He teaches communication studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario.

Subscribe
today at

<http://americanbookreview.org>