

## REVIEWS

### *apex of the M*, #1-3.

In academic parlance, it is sometimes customary to distinguish between two forms of post-modernism in innovative poetry written in the past few decades. The first is generally Marxist in ideology, and often takes as both method and subject the fragmentation of subject and narrative under late capitalism. Here's a poetry of disjunction, interruption, and contradiction, which presumably takes part in the condition of contemporary society. It's always a "condition," like a virus we all have, but is susceptible to parody and exaggeration in poetic form. If the experience of this discontinuity is often alienating, it may provide a sort of exhilaration as well. The second form of post-modern poetry bears less relation to Marxist ideology, and instead promotes a return to expressivist poetics and romanticism. Traditional forms may be eschewed, but not in favor of discontinuity *per se*; rather, the poet discovers his or her forms in the act of writing itself. Along these lines, structure is not imposed on the world in an act of representation. Instead, the poet finds forms of spiritual synthesis in the world.

Obviously, these two versions of post-modernism, though not exactly compatible, don't delineate clear "camps" in contemporary poetry. John Ashbery, for example, is most often associated with the first sort of post-modernism because of his discontinuities, though his poetry is frequently romantic in tone. Yet in some cases, the sort of distinction I am speaking of gestures towards subtle yet essential differences between contemporary poetries. While higher-profile journals such as *Sulfur* and *Talisman* present a pluralistic yet relatively harmonious front to contemporary experimental poetry, smaller and newer journals often refute this sense of consensus. Such is the case with *apex of the M*, a recent journal published in Buffalo, New York.

Buffalo is perhaps best known, of late, for the community of Language poets which has gathered at SUNY-Buffalo around the Poetics Program, directed by Charles Bernstein. *Apex of the M* has arisen out of this environment, and though its expressivist poetics are not entirely compatible with most avant-garde poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, it has established a dialogue with Language poetry. One point of contention, as co-editor Lew Daly has stated, concerns spiritual conviction: "all sides of the lines dividing the contemporary arena of power in poetry—all sides encompassed by Academic Free Verse/New Formalism on the one hand, and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

Poetry on the other—converge in the denial of spirit.”<sup>1</sup> The argument, it would seem, is not so much political as humanist in its emphasis. One of the immediate forebearers for *apex of the M*’s renewal of romanticism is Robert Duncan. Duncan’s rejection of high modernism’s self-effacement of the artist, his expansiveness, and his eclectic spiritualism set the tone for *apex of the M*. And Duncan anticipates a concise response to the emphasis on the abstracted, material signifier in Language poetry: “...I in no way believe that there is such a thing as ‘just language,’ any more than there is ‘just footprints.’ I mean, it is human life that prints itself everywhere in it and that’s what we read when we’re reading.”<sup>2</sup>

In the three *apex of the M* volumes that have come out so far, the same point is made in editorial manifestos. In the preface to the second volume, entitled “The Contextual Imperative,” the editors proclaim an investment in “a radical transparency of language” as opposed to avant-garde fragmentation: “instead of attempting to dismantle this ruling order at the level of language, poetry must again confront the historical by means of a language of revolution, a language built upon an acknowledgment of context as well as an acknowledgment of others that neither effaces nor assimilates them.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, these editorial statements employ a Marxist rhetoric, and declare a heroic role for poetry in combating economic and political injustice through an emphasis on historical context rather than textuality. If the political imperatives of Language poets may obscure the aesthetic pleasure derived from the free play of their signifiers, a similar anxiety may be occurring here in relation to romanticism. Though broadly spiritual and humanist, much of the poetry in *apex of the M* bears little on politics or history.

Nonetheless, the poetry represented in *apex of the M* is both diverse and impressive, generally bearing out its commitment to “an acknowledgment of others.” So far, the magazine has avoided repeated appearances by its contributors, and thus escaped a narrow identity as a group. Anne Waldman, one of the most established poets yet published in *apex of the M*, is representative of one strand of the journal’s commitment to spirituality. A section of Waldman’s long work *IOVIS*, entitled “Cosmology: *within the mind of the sleeping god*,” appeared in the third number of *apex of the M*. Waldman’s synthesis of Buddhism and Greek pantheism often succumbs to the vague and unrigorous eclecticism of New Age spirituality, yet it sparks

1. Lew Daly, “from Ends Irrespective of (the Limits of) Their Means...” from *A Poetics of Criticism*, ed. Juliana Spahr, Mark Wallace, Kristin Prevallet, Pam Rehm (Buffalo, N.Y.: Leave Books, 1994), p. 190.

2. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 193

3. “The Contextual Imperative,” *apex of the M* #2 (Fall 1994): 5.

some loose, rushing passages of compelling verse. Will Alexander, published in the second number, resembles Waldman in his topical expansiveness and unpunctuated outpouring, though his sheer accretion of verbal pyrotechnics finds no precedent in *IOVIS*. This excerpt from *Asia* (now available from Sun & Moon Press) is in the voice of Buddhist monks who battle on the astral plane against the Chinese invasion of Tibet. Alexander contrasts the spiritual communalism of the monks with the arid communalism of the invaders:

we absolved  
of unstable anathema  
of voices that whisper under covered ponds of crystal  
therefore  
we exist as intensity  
as blank communal bursts  
as climax beyond all rancorous blessing.<sup>4</sup>

By assuming the “we” of the Buddhists’ spiritual community, the voice of *Asia* moves beyond any conventional sense of socially-constituted identity. As in Waldman’s verse, Alexander’s poetry is syncretic and expansive, transcending locality and individual consciousness.

In contrast to such poetry of rhetorical power, *apex of the M* also represents a more restrained form of spiritualism. Pam Rehm, one of the editors of *apex of the M*, writes a poetry of hesitation and doubt which occupies a profoundly interior space. Though superficially dissimilar, Rehm’s poems share with those of Susan Howe a sense of an absent or occluded religious referent. In Howe’s poems such as “The Nonconformist’s Memorial,” this sense is derived from New England Protestantism, which developed a drive towards personal religious expression in conflict with its sense of verbal inadequacy in the face of religious faith. Although Rehm does not, like Howe, explicitly invoke historical precedents, she exhibits a similar sensibility:

Scarcely do we venture  
to admit patience  
without prospect  
but depict ourselves under  
an unspeakable oppression  
Cold and peculiar  
Independent and somewhat suspicious<sup>5</sup>

4. Will Alexander, “from *Asia*,” *apex of the M* #2 (Fall 1994): 61.

5. Pam Rehm, “The Humiliation of the Valley,” *apex of the M* #2 (Fall 1994):35.

Like Howe, Rehm writes in thoughtful, flat lines which avoid the aesthetic immediacy of a poet such as Will Alexander. She generally eschews metaphor, and her craft never precedes her. When Rehm does use a rhetorically complex metaphor, such as in the metaphysical image of “the compass of the moment/reveals an angle of suspense,” she points toward an incomprehensibility beyond herself, rather than her own ability to turn a phrase.<sup>6</sup> As with Edmond Jabés, Rehm is less interested in the genre category of poetry than in writing as a space for questioning. In this sense, Rehm engages a meditative poetic of sincerity which characterizes a fair portion of the work published in *apex of the M*. Her compelling achievement in this mode is evident in *To Give It Up*, which was published last year by Sun & Moon Press, and selected for a National Poetry Series award by Barbara Guest.

Another winner of a National Poetry Series award, Elizabeth Willis, writes in a similar mode of spiritual humility. The first section of “The Human Abstract” was published in the first issue of *apex of the M*, and is now available from Penguin in a book of that title. Willis’s poem begins with a variation on William Blake:

Innocence shags experience and I’ll never grow.  
Experience catches the dove, and I’m lost.<sup>7</sup>

Willis’s sensitive reading of *The Book of Thel* in the third number confirms her familiarity with Blake. Yet such lines are not entirely clarified by their literary references, and remain elusive. Their delicate sentiment, in accretion, virtually constitutes a recuperation of sentimental modernism. The strong emotion of Willis’s poetry often remains abstract, and settles on no objective correlative. More so than Rehm, Willis invokes precedents and influences, such as Blake here, and Herman Melville, Lorine Niedecker, or H.D. elsewhere. In this regard, Willis foregrounds her considerable craft and learning to a greater degree. In “A Maiden,” which appears in *The Human Abstract* but not in *apex of the M*, Willis uses the alphabet as a loose prosodic structure:

What is A maiden,  
Boatswain,  
but a fiery lair  
and teary Citadel.<sup>8</sup>

6. Ibid.

7. Elizabeth Willis, *The Human Abstract* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 63.

8. Ibid., p. 9.

Such a method recalls not only children's books, but many precedents from avant-garde poetry, including Louis Zukofsky's "A-12." Yet its arbitrariness does not result in disruption, or in an overly self-conscious game of literary reference. Rather, Willis uses an innovative prosodic structure as a form on which to stretch a web of delicate emotion. While "A Maiden," like much of Willis's verse, plays on the gender constructions of romance, and puns on romantic diction, its tone is not primarily ironic. Romanticism, in Willis's poem, is recuperated for her own expression of loss.

*Apex of the M* gives us a context in which to read contemporary poets such as Rehm or Willis through a genealogy concerned with "the spirit," which might include poets as diverse as William Blake, Robert Duncan, and Susan Howe. Although spiritual and romantic approaches in contemporary poetry are not unique to *apex of the M*, their proximity in this journal to innovative poetry, and particularly Language poetry, deserves more widespread consideration. Too often contemporary American poetry is thought of as a simple dialectic between "official verse culture" and its opposition. If a hegemony in publishing and academics, and its corresponding avant-gardist response, have told the story of American poetry in the 1970s and 1980s, such a moment is past. In both its stated editorial position, and the variety of poetry it represents, *apex of the M* gives some sense of the plurality of experimental verse now being written.

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**Douglas Messerli, ed. *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry, 1960-1990*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994.**

In a forceful recent essay, Jed Rasula has expressed doubt whether a contemporary anthology could provide a "general map" of recent American verse, one which might oppose the ongoing trend of "catastrophic segregation of poets into anthologies emphasizing their formal affiliations."<sup>1</sup> I'm less skeptical than he, but it's probably true that no general map will appear soon. The best recent anthologies have all been consciously sectarian, drawing poems from what appears, retrospectively, to have been a single aesthetic community, whose most convenient abbreviation remains "the avant-garde."<sup>2</sup>

1. Jed Rasula, "The Empire's New Clothes: Anthologizing American Poetry in the 1990s," *American Literary History* 7:2 (Summer 1995): 265.

2. I think in particular of Eliot Weinberger's *American Poetry since 1950*: