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John Logan: A Retrospective

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JOHN LOGAN: A RETROSPECTIVE


With the publication of Only the Dreamer Can Change the Dream and The Bridge of Change, we have once more in print a substantial body of work by one of this country's most valuable poets. John Logan's opus of nine books thus far, including the Selected Poems, represents a formidable and sustaining accomplishment. Only the Dreamer Can Change the Dream pulls together the most significant poetry from Logan's previous major collections: Cycle for Mother Cabrini (1955), Ghosts of the Heart (1960), Spring of the Thief (1963), The Zigzag Walk (1969), and The Anonymous Lover (1973). The Bridge of Change contains new poems and also the long poem, Poem in Progress, previously available as a chapbook.

Among contemporary poets Logan's path has been singular. His work, musically compelling as Yeats, Frost, or Thomas, has found its own form in syllabic verse. Logan's ear is profound. He has been the contemporary to work most successfully in sound. At the height of his powers, his music is symphonic:

Peering, stunned
Drearied, hung
over and James
through waves of spray
I feel somewhat
panicky;
weird, about my sweat
rushing body
For where do we and our vapors end?
Where does the bath begin?

Strange to be able to see through the steam
(but satisfying to the point of calm,
like the vision of the perfect, new born)
for the first time
the whole,
beautiful body of a friend.
(Poem: Tears, Spray, and Steam — part 1)

In a recent conversation, Logan told me that when he started out in poetry his background was in biology and physics, not literature. He did not become interested in writing until he translated Rilke in connection with work on a Ph.D. in Philosophy, which he did not complete, at Georgetown University. Working on Rilke changed his life. Besides being interested in the sound of Rilke's poems in German—their internal and external rhyming and their metrics—Logan loved the disturbing imagery and the way Rilke "saved his thunder for the end of the poem." Two poems included in those selected from Spring of the Thief, "Song On the Dread of a Child Spring" and "Lament in Spring," Logan directly attributes to Rilke's influence. He also published "Homage to Rilke," mostly an assemblage of translations, in The Zigzag Walk.

Logan learned to write poetry using an iambic pentameter line largely because of translating Rilke; his first major poem, "Cycle for Mother Cabrini," was revised from iambic pentameter to a three-stress line before it was published in Poetry in 1953. He continued to write in the three-stress line through Ghosts of the Heart, and did not work in anything resembling free-verse until the last poem of that book, "A Trip to Four or Five Towns," which he dedicated to James Wright. That poem, one of his most significant and also one of his personal favorites, marks the beginning of his mature work:

continued page 2
Though in "free-verse," the poem is resoundingly musical. Having studied piano and having always been interested in classical music, it was natural for Logan to become engaged in the music of his poems. Although he had read Frost and Yeats, he told me he did not feel particularly influenced by them. Rather, he discovered his musical effects pretty much on his own.

Photography yielded the many intensely visualized poems based on mimesis. Logan's earlier poems are striking for their mythic narratives. Often he found himself writing about artists who were having trouble with their mothers. In "On the Death of the Poet's Mother Thirty-three Years Later," included in Ghosts of the Heart, for the first time he faces his own adult experience in a poem: "My mother died because of the iambic rhythms, he invented a thirteen syllable line for "Mono-logue for the Son of Saul" and "To a Young Poet Who Fled," and a nine syllable line for "On Reading Camus in Early March ..."

In Spring of the Thief, Logan abandoned the accentual verse he had been using, derived from Gerard Manly Hopkins, and embarked on a new Jewish literary journal, is beginning triannual publication. and is seeking subscriptions ($10 per year, sample issue $4), and submissions. The magazine was also one of the first to introduce the work of a great number of younger poets; Marvin Bell, Roger Alpon, Dennis Schmitz, Bill Knott, Naomi Lazzard, and Jon Anderson among them. The magazine was also one of the first to introduce the idea of combining poetry and photography. Logan's interest in photography yielded the many intensely visualized poems based on the photographs by Siskin. The Siskind photograph on the cover of the Selected Poems not only appeared on the cover of the first issue of Choice, but was the subject of Logan's first Siskind inspired poem:

Glove of Aaron Siskind
I feel your canvas touch
flecked with lead spots of paint
upon the cold point of my heart.

This picture is a fact.
I feel it is a thing.

Siskind had cut out of my quivering chest—
out of my huge, furred stomach.
It is a fact. It is a face
in the mirror I no longer watch;
and its light flecks have not the glint of tears
I have never seen
out of the tender, bald knuckles of my eyes.

(On a Photograph by Aaron Siskind — part 4)

A practicing Catholic when he wrote Spring of the Thief, Logan shortly thereafter broke away from the Church, and breaking away he began to think of poetry itself as religious in character, a notion he had learned from Dylan Thomas; the resurrection promises the bringing back to life the lost parts of yourself, your childhood and your memories, and leaving you with a "momentary peace," a kind of freedom from anxiety where your problems are worked out in the poem—"a natural form of grace." The poems in The Zigzag Walk and The Anonymous Lover seek that kind of absolution.

Some of the poems in The Zigzag Walk find absolution in landscape, a visit to Point Lobos or walking to Partington Cove at Big Sur with his sons. Others from that book find absolution in mourning the death of Keats and of Cummings; they along with "Elegy for Dylan Thomas" published in The Bridge of Change are perhaps as fine a group of elegies as any contemporary poet has done. Logan is at his best when he is able to merge his private griefs into a larger, common grief:

you wanted to know that other world
while you were still alive
All poets do. All men. All gods
Inside a woman we search for the lost wealth
of our self. Marcel says.

Some Information
Bob Kaufman's The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956-1978, recently published by New Directions, is being translated into Dutch by Simon Vinkenoog, and will be published in the Netherlands with an introduction by Ira Cohen. Ron Silliman's 5-page magazine, Tottle's, (c/o Central City Hospitality House, 146 Leavenworth, S.F., CA 94102) has once again surfaced. Inquiries of all sorts are encouraged, with future issues to appear "from time to time". This issue focuses on Steve Benson's work.

A new series of hardbound poetry is being edited by Robert Peters. Six books a year will be published by Scarecrow Press, with the intention of creating an overview of traditional and experimental contemporary poetry available to libraries, schools and general bookstores who could subscribe to the series. To be eligible, the poet must have published three or more books previously. To suggest your work or someone else's, write to Robert Peters at P.O. Box 656, Metuchen, NJ 08840.

A new poetry reading series will begin at the Noe Valley Ministry on Sunday evenings in October. Poets who perform with dancers, musicians or mimes are encouraged to contact Diane Frank, c/o Noe Valley Poetry, 1021 Sanchez St., San Francisco, CA 94114, to arrange a possible reading. Include poems, SASE, and phone number. An anthology of poems read at the Sacred Grounds open mike from 1978 to now is being assembled for a fall '81 publication date. Send no more than five poems to David Frankel, 359 - 30th St., San Francisco, CA 94131, if you've been one of the readers.

AGADA, a new Jewish literary journal, is beginning triannual publication, and is seeking subscriptions ($10 per year, sample issue $4), and submissions. Meiseh, other fiction, poetry, translations, essays and graphics are welcome. Write AGADA, 2020 Essex St., Berkeley, CA 94703.

Corrections: The "Poets for Gay Freedom" review in the July Flash incorrectly described the Aaron Shurin/Diane Di Prima reading as the main Gay Freedom Week reading. Mainstream Exiles also sponsored four excellent readings in connection with Gay Freedom Week, which we in no way intended to slight. Also, Oboe magazine (Wilderness Press, 495 Ellis St., Suite 1156, San Francisco, CA 94102) has not folded as the Flash reported. In fact, grants, and "an unusual infusion of subscriptions" has, by popular demand, forced the publication of Oboe #5, due late this year.

Finally, for you summer travelers: a destination. Bisbee, Arizona, just south of Tucson, is having a poetry festival August 21-23. Their 3rd annual, it will be held despite funding problems. Cochise Fine Arts, a local non-profit, has funded it in the past, but has run out this year, leaving the festival organizers to make do with personal loans, small grants from the NEA, Arizona Arts Council, and local newspapers. Six poets are scheduled to read, perform and hold workshops at the Bisbee Poetry Festival: Helen Adam, Amiri Baraka, Ted Berrigan, William Ever son, Jackson MacLow, and Alice Nolley. The BFP press release reads like a cultural document: "As usual, the old-guard . . ."

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And some find absolution in guilt:

The poems in The Anonymous Lover have a deepened engagement with both music and narrative. Here Logan uses a "scattered" line, the lines scattered on a musical principle—each line broken according to their musical relationship to the previous or succeeding line, or both. The attempt is to exploit the internal music, to make the internal rhymes external. This in some way enables him to draw out the image:

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At Rihana you stand

where Kamemehena shed

the blood of young Hawaiian men

in thankful sacrifice

some few of his battles

flies won. (He was

turned on to blood

by Captain Coke—

who was torn apart—

and he showed

that of the later ministers

of Christ.)

The stones of the heiau

are the horrible black

of that

dried blood.

( Poem for My Friend Peter at Rihana)

In The Bridge of Change, Logan has returned to his conventional eight and thirteen syllable lines—a practice he says originates with the fact that when counting by hand, you always end up on the middle finger. The centerpiece of this book is "Poem in Progress," an extraordinary account of his ambiguous and painful relationship to his family. The book also contains some lovely, almost corny poems, full of love for his children, describing ordinary events, poems in which he can almost reconcile his life or at least feel at ease with:

We grin and he winds up the roll

Then Stephen frowns and mutters. "Shit. Something wrong with it?" And we find

the damn thing didn't work quite right.

None of the photos will come out.

We pause for half a minute and

then we laugh; all that instruction

posing at elaborate ease,

and "cheese." We turn toward the car,

our thoughts a bit reflective.

(A Day in the Sun)

Somehow, despite their suffering, it is their compassion and discipline which has kept Logan's poems vital and intact. He has not strayed into the purely confessional, nor exonerated himself with irony. He does nothing to trivialize his subjects. The body of his work is brave and coherent, reflecting the strength of the human soul. As a man he must live despite all he suffers with, although he can't quite accustom himself to that:

There is something grotesque growing in me I cannot tell.

It has been waxing, burgeoning, for a long time. It weighs me down like the chains of the man of Lahore who began collecting links on his naked body until he crawled around the town carrying the last thirteen years of his life six-hundred-seventy pounds. Each link or each lump in me is an offense against love.

(Believe it)

Yet, that the majestic music still wells up in him is a simple, dazzling fact.

— Alan Soldofsky

The Dream

The war, enormous head bowed beside the hollow tree
I cannot describe the bird that hovered by that head.

What was that luminescence springing suddenly from earth
that seemed to arc between the bird's neck and the tree's root?

It echoed (or was echoed by) the eyes in the head,

which led my self into them before they slowly closed.

— John Logan

Let Them Eat Verse

Lawrence Ferlinghetti called them "poetry tasters...a reunion of tearoom ladies, an international sewing circle." To Todd Lawson the 400 (minus a few) "delegates" to the Fifth World Congress of Poets were "an interesting coalition of people from all over the world who have a common bond: poetry, peace through brotherhood and all that business."

I went to one banquet and interviewed half a dozen visitors from as many lands (39 countries were represented during the July 6-10 meeting in the posh St. Francis Hotel on Union Square).

This brief sampling piqued my curiosity. Average age: 63.

Average occupation: University teacher. Average income: Upper middle class or wealthy. Average politics: Neutral or conservative. Average literary status: Unknown or vanity press.

A fairly full schedule of workshops, panel discussions, tours and banquets and even some readings kept the visitors occupied. Lawson attended four days worth and told the Flash that "none of the poets were much alike, except that they all seemed to be older and there was a bent toward the academic. They were rather conservative except for a handful from Russia, Red China, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. I noticed that those from the communist countries were rather pointedly ignored by the rest of the delegates...."

One most certainly could not ignore the Fifth Congress (previous sessions held in Manila/1969, Taipei/1973, Baltimore/1976 and Seoul/1979). San Franciscans with a strong interest in verse were told by the daily press that "Poets From Near and Far" were "raising their voices" here, that it was a truly international gathering and that it probably represented poetic state-of-the-art throughout the world in this decade. Yet few major poets from abroad actually attended and such American luminaries as Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder and Kenneth Rexroth declined invitations.

(Largest "delegation" of 12 poets came from Kuomintang-controlled Taiwan. Next!—25—came from the military dictatorship of South Korea. These groups, and more than 20 from India, were the only large, government-sponsored contingents.)

Cost of the event included a $100 registration fee, transportation from the homeland ($2000 for a round-trip ticket from India), food and expenses, a hotel bill at the St. Francis which averaged between $32.50 and $50 per night per person.

"We spent about $50,000 doing this Congress," said Fifth Congress Chairman Rosemary Wilkinson. "About $40,000 came from registrations and we've had to raise $10,000 from other sources, including one $3,000 donation from an Eastern foundation. We received no government money."

(Listed as co-sponsors in the Congress program are the Ina Coolbrith Circle and the "Sino-American Culture Research Institute" of San Francisco which was to be controlled by local Chinese businessmen including an official of the famous Golden Dragon Restaurant that hosted a free banquet for the visitors on July 8.)

("It was a strange crowd," commented Lawson. "They had this pie-in-the-sky attitude that everything in the world is wonderful and there's no evil out there, very over-optimistic. I had a little woman at one banquet barking in my ear telling me how wonderful peace was and her husband and the world and how she had one home in Florida and one in New York. She had simply no concept of struggle. No, it was not a typical group of poets at all.

Press coverage of the event was a bit spotty. Only two major "media organizations" attended most sessions, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. Both are official U.S. government agencies.

Ms. Wilkinson was very distressed by her inability to provide "scholarships" for poor poets but has high hopes that the Sixth Congress (set for Madrid in 1983) will be much better financed.

— John Bryan