

Modern Love: Songs, Thomas Meyer.
(Verge Books: Chicago, 2018.).

Why Thomas Meyer isn't more widely read, praised, studied--there is no adequate answer. He should be (all three); one can only hope later ages will one day be forced into embarrassment for their forebears and try to make up for it. Syntax, diction, tone, image, rhythm: this is a poet at the height of his art, and he's been there for decades.¹

For forty years he ran with Jonathan Williams the liveliest press (big or small) in the country, the Jargon Society, publisher of Charles Olson, Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker, Robert Duncan, Paul Metcalf, and Robert Creeley (among others).² During that time he published several essential books under the Jargon imprint: 1982's *Sappho's Raft* and the collected *At Dusk Iridescent* (1999), most notably, the latter a "Gathering of Poems" from 1972-97 running 257 beautifully-set pages.³ 2004 saw his long poem *Coromandel* (Skanky Possum)⁴, and 2005 the publication of his translation of the *daode jing* (Flood Editions), both works of a master. Since Williams' death he's, if anything, been more prolific, beginning with 2011's *Kintsugi* (Flood)⁵, written-through the terminal stages of Williams' final illness. 2012 saw his translation, published by punctum, of *Beowulf*, resurrected from a decades-old manuscript that runs the gamut of Modernist translation strategies, a glyph-wild epic more interesting and delightful than any other translation of the poem you'll come across. In 2013, BlazeVox presented his version of the *I Ching*. *Essay Stanzas* emerged in 2014 from the Song Cave. Lunar Chandelier Collective gave us his *Porcelain Pillow* in 2016. Now, 2018, we have *Modern Love: Songs*, published by Verge Books.

Simply put: the man's on fire. Take some notice. This latest book is not a bad place to start.

¹ I am thinking of Hugh Kenner's uses of these words in his *Art of Poetry*. As well, Nathaniel Mackey's sense of the "multisidedness" of poetic possibility enters ("Sight-Specific, Sound-Specific..." in *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*, p.229).

² For a full checklist see: <http://jacketmagazine.com/38/jw-jargon-soc-check.shtml>.

³ For an insightful appreciation of the latter, see Peter O'Leary's review in *Chicago Review*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2000), pp. 166-170. *Sappho's Raft* was, incidentally, the first book of Meyer's that "set me off"--go there and you will find a master of syntax unmatched by any living poet (at least: as far as I've come to). See also Jim Cory's review of *Iridescent*: <http://www.oysterboyreview.org/archived/13/CoryJ-Meyer.html>.

⁴ For a review of *Coromandel*, see: <http://www.oysterboyreview.org/issue/19/reviews/NeedD-Meyer.html>.

⁵ For a review of *Kintsugi*, see: <http://www.thevolta.org/fridayfeature-kintsugi.html>. O'Leary references Meyer's essay, "On Being Neglected"--which clarifies his own attitude toward his sense of public recognition.

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Modern Love: Songs is described rightly by its publisher as “rewriting Dante’s *Vita Nuova* for a new age.” Meyer’s Beatrice was found in Michael Joseph Watt, now his husband, to whom he’s dedicated both *Porcelain Pillow* and *Modern Love* (as well as earlier poems in *Essay Stanzas* and two as far back as “Venetian Epigrams” and “Forestry, or the Exhaustion of Possibility,” both long poems appearing in *At Dusk Iridescent*). The two met while Jonathan Williams was still living, though their romance began in earnest only several years after his death.

With *Kintsugi*, Meyer wrote an “elegy for Jonathan Williams, his partner of nearly four decades, a text written in and through the very death it mourned--like a parallel text to that dying.”⁶ It is, as Zukofsky has it in “A”-11, a “Song [to] raise grief to music.” Page 29:

Nowhere to go. Nowhere to come from.
That most extreme of isolations. The moment itself.

Now I weep for what? Can I even admit
these tears? What is gone? What to come?

Page 44:

Something that was
isn’t.

The book ends with a section, one page in length, called *Nepenthe*, the name of the drug Helen puts in the wine-cups of Menelaus and Telemachus to cast off their sorrows over the losses in the period following the Trojan catastrophe--Telemachus’ loss of a father; Menelaus over his comrades in battle and his brother Agamenmon. The epigraph given beneath the section’s title is a quote from Eric Hobsbawn: “No doubt there were prophets in Pompeii who warned of the dangers of living under volcanoes, but it is doubtful whether even the pessimists among them actually expected the total and definitive obliteration of the city.”

⁶ From Robert Kelly’s preface to the book, pp.xi-x.

Obliteration: a lover's death. The aftermath thereof.

In the third section of Dante's *Vita Nuova*, he is visited in his room by fiery presence, the "Lord of Terrible Aspect," the apocalyptic deliverer of his life's fated path: I am your Master; behold your heart, eaten by your Beloved. Thenceforth the New Life commences--a calling binding thralldom and release so perfectly that the thought of deviation from the summons is unthinkable, its intensity surpassing mortal, mundane decision.

This is the entity Meyer encountered. The questions, "What is gone? What to come?," themselves obliterated. "Abandoned / by who I was. Thank God!": "Romance makes it so."⁷ And as the poet has it in *Kintsugi: Uncertainty has no place in romance*.

In *Modern Love* the city's been rebuilt. The time for nepenthe has passed--the *new life* has arrived.

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The canzones, ballatas, and sonnets of Dante's *Vita Nuova* hover behind / alongside / above / in all the songs in Meyer's book. Each one, or nearly so, has a root in Dante's words. Page 18's "Walking along the road ..." emerges from Dante's "Cavalcando l'atr'ier per un cammino ..." Page 28's "Thinking how frail life is ..." from "Mentr'io pensava la mia frale vita ..." Page 47's "Every thought I have dies / when I look at you ..." from "Ciò che m'incontra ne la mente more / Quand'i' vegno a veder voi ..." And so on. One could make a strict analytical dissection à la Kenner's masterful unpacking of Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* in *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*.⁸ But what was requisite explanation for the blockheads in 1951 is not, or should not be, in 2018. Zukofsky, Christopher Logue, Bunting's "Overdrafts" have, among others, filled the interim. Meyer is working out of a tradition that takes translation as a given in poetic composition. As he responded in an interview with Patrick Morrissey for the *Chicago Review*,⁹ "Translation has been probably my most important activity as a poet. It has taught, refreshed, and rescued me."

⁷ *Modern Love*, p.54.

⁸ See pp.148-9.

⁹ Vol. 59, No. 3 (Summer / Autumn 2015), pp. 115-128.

My sense is that a feeling for the quality of the affection is the key to a reading of this (and all of his) work--how Meyer's transformed Dante's work. Which perhaps starts best by looking at the key prose section (III) of the *Nuova*, and what Meyer's done with it.

Dante's scene is one of high rhetoric, articulating the revelation at hand while at the same time keeping to the brittle, human response the poet has in response to a daimonic force so intensely present it verges into the Terrible. Retiring to his room, overtaken, almost intoxicated by the experience of his Beloved's words, the poet falls into a "sweet sleep . . . , and a marvelous vision appeared to me. I seemed to see a cloud the color of fire in my room and in that cloud a lordly man, frightening to behold, yet apparently marvelously filled with joy. He said many things of which I understood only a few; among them was, "I am your Master." It seemed to me that in his arms lay nude except for a scanty, crimson cloth, a sleeping figure. Looking at it intently, I realized that it was the lady of the blessed greeting, the lady who earlier in the day had favored me with her greeting. In one of his hands he held a fiery object, and he seemed to say these words: "Behold your heart." After spending a short while with me, he seemed to awake the sleeping one, and through the power of his art made her eat this glowing object in his hand."¹⁰

What Meyer does with this is typical, classic of his style: homely, straightforward, lacking all haughtiness or pretense that, say, an Angel should need an aureolic cloud of fire to present itself, the poet lays it out clean:

By the summer of 2011 I'd abandoned my running routine, having pushed myself to the point of a completely unreliable left leg, which was prone to giving out from under me upon the least amount of sudden exertion. Instead, walks or hikes along the logging trails across the road in the woods. From June to August that year, directly in my path, there were three venomous snakes whose habitat is western North Carolina. The timber rattler, the copperhead, the coral snake. While making the heart race, these seemed like auspicious occasions, omens in fact.

In a somewhat autodidactic, slap-dash, quasi-Jungian way they seemed to announce an impending event. Snake representing something coming from the unconscious, poisonous snake something powerful, a pharmakon. Not just poison, but its remedy and scapegoat as well.

¹⁰ Translation by Mark Musa (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1957), pp.4-5.

No yearning for relationship beyond friends and internet sex remained in me. The solidarity of a single life provided me great pleasure. Though my heart kept a cautious, vigilant watch, ruling nothing out.

During this same season there began to manifest on occasion a domestic presence that might've at first been recognized as a ghost. Fleet, corner of the eye movement. Someone just leaving the room? A keen sense of someone in the house. No, it wasn't a guest, sleep erased, now startling me awake in the middle of the night. I wasn't the only person who noticed this phenomenon. Three or four visitors over the summer commented upon it.

Certainly it wasn't Jonathan's revenant. His profound disbelief in any afterlife made all trace of him vanish upon his death, material or psychic. An experience that left me breathless. But by September I had a hunch this wasn't a ghost from the past, but something announcing itself, something impending, a person. Time and space remixing to manifest place and sequence.

Now, yes. Within a month, out of the blue I sent you an e-mail using an address that a few years earlier had bounced back my message undelivered. We hadn't been in touch for six or so years, even then tentatively. But there it was, a reply!

And yet the almost non-chalant--*Look at this: it happened*--conceals an ominousness worthy of Duncan. What we have here is not simple. We've entered Duncan's household wherein "all the paraphernalia of our existence shed the twitterings of value and reappear as heraldic devices."¹¹ Herald: envoy; messenger--Angel. And the root of the word *herald* is "war": a Lord of Terrible Aspect, one bringing sword and fire as the combine of thrall and liberation becomes, as Meyer puts it later in his book, Love's "regime," a condition "initially ... seem[ing] severe but now feel[ing] like silk // to my heart."¹² All of these stirring undercurrents are masked, beautifully, by a poet who, in called the *daode jing*--a text so cloaked in the mysteries of abstraction of many translators over the years--"table talk": Bunting and Jonathan Williams, two men telling each other, in conversational, non-canonical language, what they knew over whiskey. Honesty and simplicity foremost, rather than piety or complication."¹³

¹¹ Duncan, *Letters*, "At Home."

¹² Page 51.

¹³ *daode jing*, p.106.

This key, *incipit* passage pervades the whole of the book. Examine any song made out of one of Dante's and this fact will be immediately evident. One example: the Poet's encounter with Love walking on a road (page 18 in *Modern Love*, section IX in the *Nuova*). Here's Dante:

*Cavalcando l'atr'ier per un cammino,
Penoso de l'andar che mi sgradia,
Trovai Amore in mezzo de la via
In abito leggier di peregrino.
Ne la sembianza mi pareva meschino,
Come avesse perduta signoria;
E sospirando pensoso venia,
Per non veder la gente, a capo chino.
Quando mi vide, mi chiamò per nome,
E disse: "Io vegno di lontana parte,
Ov'era lo tuo cor per mio volere;
E recolo a servir novo piacere".
Allora presi di lui sì gran parte
Ch'elli disparve, e non m'accorsi come.¹⁴*

Meyer's version:

Walking along the road
the other day, not paying
much attention, I ran into
Love wearing a tee-shirt
and jeans. He looked awful.
Like something bad had
just happened. Dazed,

¹⁴ Musa's translation: "As I rode out one day not long ago / By narrow roads, and heavy with the thought / Of what compelled my going, I met Love / In pilgrim's rags coming the other way. / All his appearance seemed to speak such grief / As kings might feel upon the loss of crown; / And ever sighing, bent with thought, he came, / His eyes averted from all passers-by. / Yet as we met he called to me by name / And said to me, "I come from that far land, / Where I had sent your heart to serve my will; / I bring it back to court a new delight." / And then so much of him was fused with me, / He vanished from my sight, I know not how."

he raised his head, saw me,
called my name, said:
“I’m just back from a place far
away. Look, I have your heart
and bring it back to you. Yours now,
a whole new world of pleasure!”
He disappeared. Not sure how.

Meyer has excised, condensed, added a commoner’s tender detail to Love (“a tee-shirt / and jeans”), and inserted a familiarity with the god he’s crossed path with absent in the original. Both versions are beautiful; but there is a difference--what neuroscientist Gerald Edelman might have called the *qualia*. That “suchness” *absolutely particular* to each experience, perception, emotion.

Examine the rest of Meyer’s book and these tender *qualia* will be indelibly abundant.

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Presence

The *domestic presence* quoted above in the excerpt from Meyer’s encounter with Dante’s “cloud the color of fire,” in which “a lordly man, frightening to behold” appears with the News recalls a persistent concern--or point of poetic belief--sustained for decades.

At the beginning of *At Dusk Iridescent*, Meyer gives this note:

“Poetry is that Art, that branch of magic & cabalistic root that celebrates *presence* or simply *there*. Pointed to, referred to & indicated away from the speaker, other than, in that language remains the initial phenomenon of the poet. Poetry begins in *the*, that quick almost silent signal of presence.

...

Poetry celebrates not only presence but the multiplicity of presence & the infinite possibilities of *there*. The poem has the power of location, it is a place--an actual (not metaphorical!) spacial event of language which begins in the mouth & lungs & moves outward into time, the mind, the body. There it starts, flirts, catches the imagination with abstraction & the ear with concrete patterns, shifts & comes back changing the abstract into the concrete.”

Even in *Kintsugi*, a poem almost any other poet would have consigned to a grieving absence, attendance to the presence of things is prime.

Every page in *Modern Love* carries out this magic.

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Song

Apart from all else it is, this book is a search for the definition of *song*. But its search is done not through explanation or argument but through the enactment of the very thing it seeks definition of. Pound, Zukofsky, Olson, H.D., Mackey, Ronald Johnson have all done the same for *epos*. The ancients furnace beneath their arts, seething into a dilatory wildness even as a primal essence embers in the hearth out of which the dance their fire makes summons. Tom’s *songs* enact the same art in relation to *aidos*, *carmen*, *chanson*, *Lied*.

The opening page is a puzzle:

“Recitative is speaking. Song is repeating.”

The elaboration of this puzzle makes up most of the prose sections of the book’s prosimetrum.

On this point, I leave it to the reader. Repeated readings reward.

Get to it.