

POETRY IN
REVIEW



G E O R G E B R A D L E Y

Books of verse are the ultimate niche market: each its own. We are told that more books of poetry are being published at present than ever before, but how many of them are read by more than the author's intimates? One issue is the diffuse and incurious nature of today's audience. Lovers of poetry seem content with tunnel vision. Poetry has become a fragmented enterprise, divided into smaller and smaller constituencies, and achieving any sort of perspective on the merits of poets outside one's immediate circle is rarely a priority. Given the essentially provincial mentality that attends the art form's reception, it might seem a tall order to ask American readers to focus their attention on a poet born and raised in England. All the same, it's worth a try. Some poets do leap the Atlantic, and when they do such border-crossers often deserve our study. Their way with language can tell us something about our own, and their alien perspective can illuminate our native concerns. One poet who has made the transition is James Lasdun,

Bluestone: New and Selected Poems, by James Lasdun (*Farrar, Straus and Giroux*, 176 pp., \$16 paper)
The Swimmer: Poems, by John Koethe (*Farrar, Straus and Giroux*, 96 pp., \$23)

whose volume containing new and selected poems has recently been issued by a major publishing house in New York and thus invites notice.

Perhaps the simplest way to acquire a literary presence on both sides of the Atlantic is to spend a significant part of one's life in both places, which is what Lasdun has done. He was born in London, and the first steps in his literary career were taken there, as a reader will hear immediately upon beginning this book. The poet has lived in the States for many years now – indeed, as with T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, whether he is to be classified as English or American is open to debate – but the earliest poems in the present volume were written and first published in England. They are the author's compositions most foreign to an American ear, and the selection made among them serves to emphasize the fact that he started on his way situated at the opposite end of the rhetorical scale from, say, William Carlos Williams. The youthful poems Lasdun has chosen to reprint are highly wrought, with a diction dense enough to require multiple readings, and their formal arrangements might be described as protective measures.

Earth in her own shadow like a cat in heat
lures down the gods; you catch a musk,
the brandied scent of Sekhmet on the frost,
a whiff of naphtha in the lamp-bronzed dusk,
iced gutters crackling underfoot.

This wintery stanza introduces a poem called “Vanishing Points,” which will be concerned with the lightning flash of artistic inspiration and the ghostly presence of such stimulus inherent in any true object of art. That is, it's a poem about poetry and the rapidly arriving yet alarmingly evanescent ideas that go into it, themes much in evidence in what was an already highly accomplished first book appropriately titled *A Jump Start*. The ostentatiously resistant façade of “Vanishing Points” (Sekhmet is an ancient Egyptian goddess who threatened to destroy the human race) and adroitly handled nods to the history of English poetry (“lamp-bronzed dusk” calls to mind the kennings of Anglo-Saxon verse) may be found also in the handful of other poems Lasdun has distilled from that volume. The young poet did make verse that is more straightforward – one such poem not in the new book

is an extended narrative written in seductive couplets comparing an irretrievably stained evening gown to the swift collapse of a love affair – but easy engagement is not what Lasdun has come to value in his early production. A book containing both new and old work is by definition retrospective in part, and the overview allows a reader to see what an author thinks his or her artistic development has been. Guarded posture, polished surface, and unmistakable compositional skill are where this poet chooses to have begun.

The nature of poetry is a subject Lasdun has returned to consistently, but it is at last a secondary concern. What his verse is most about is the notion of belonging and the sense of being excluded. Simply put, this is a poet who has always and everywhere felt himself to be alien. He started as a writer in a literary center, he attended excellent schools, he has taught at Ivy League universities, he has been published by top-quality presses, he has received critical and even popular attention . . . no matter; at its deepest level James Lasdun's remains an outsider's art.

Part of this continual worry about fitting in is perhaps to be ascribed to temperament – the speaker in Lasdun's poetry is possessed of a sensibility unaccepting of acceptance – but part of it might be explained by the uneasy social setting the poet was born into and the cultural dislocations his transoceanic life has entailed. One piece of the puzzle is Lasdun's schoolboy status as a child of Jewish ancestry in a politely anti-Semitic England.

“We're not English” went the family saying.
 What were we then? We'd lopped
 our branch off from the family tree:
 anglophone Russian-German apostate Jews
 mouthing Anglican hymns at church
 till we renounced that too . . .

We see that Lasdun's forebears departed two faiths and at least two countries before the bloodline arrived at their secularized and auto-exiled descendant. Apostasy, both religious and political, is his inheritance, and it has evidently made for an angst that the poet (or at least his literary persona) has carried with him across an ocean and throughout a career. To be an apostate is to inhabit a sort of limbo, a no-man's-land where one is at once estranged from the old faith and distrusted by the new, and the outline of that

difficult terrain may be glimpsed in the background of many of Lasdun's poems. In one, actually called "The Apostate," it forms the foreground, too. He has put his words into the mouth of another, a converted Jew who feels many eyes upon her as she partakes of the consecrated host in an Anglican church, but it's not hard to believe Lasdun is in some degree permitting the self-conscious communicant to speak for him as well.

. . . she felt their looks as an unclothing;
 a difficult, necessary dream
 of intimate exposure to a crowd
 flaying her strangeness from her till she stood
 naked, at once their victim and one of them.

The woman here is agonizingly aware of being different, and she feels the notice others take of her peculiarity as a merciless intrusion, a sort of scopic intromission. A consciousness so anxious of recognition will be everywhere on edge, and Lasdun's poems often exhibit that sort of discomfort. Whether he writes in his own voice or that of another, his speakers are typically insecure, alert to possible disparagement and pained by suspicions of their own inadequacy.

The bruised and wary psyche that is the soul of Lasdun's verse is further discomfited by the circumstance of being an English native living in America and a city boy in the country, and among his most entertaining and insightful poems are those in which his own sensibility comes up against that of the "locals" in upstate New York. In fact, one of the rewards of reading through this new volume is the opportunity it affords to follow Lasdun's expatriate anxieties and accommodations across many years. We can watch him as he first suffers the heartache of absent love and forsaken locale, then as he confronts the alien culture, makes what are initially only somewhat successful attempts to find a place within it, and at last feels sufficiently at home to anatomize its class divisions and choose sides. Over the course of three decades and four books, he adapts. He learns how to cope with serious winter, he learns how to handle outdoor equipment, he learns about the economic and psychological distances that separate the country club set in one town from the blue-collar workers who live hard by in another. In a poem written midway through this educational

process, we accompany him to a hardware store to meet a sales clerk who assumes a Brit will inevitably need a little prodding to become versed in country things.

British, right? I nod. The question here
puts my guard up, like *Are you Jewish?* did
in England where it meant *so you're a yid*,
at least to my hypersensitive ear,

as *British* here means – but I'm being paranoid.

The poem, which is dedicated to a fellow transplanted Englishman, is called “Returning the Gift” and is taken from Lasdun’s third book, *Landscape with Chainsaw*. The gift in question is just such a saw, and it is the formidably efficient instrument the poet will use to clear space amid the Yankee thickets and windfalls in which he has immersed himself. Nature as he finds it in upstate New York is not Wordsworthian, and it is not the sort of place one wanders through in order to be healed. Instead it has a Frostean menace. Frost is a poet Lasdun alludes to often – anyone writing about rural settings anywhere near New England is likely to bring Frost to mind on occasion, but Lasdun does so on frequent occasions – and one notices many of Frost’s favorite totems in his work: woodpiles and birch trees, pastures and meadows, stone walls. Lasdun also makes use of Frost’s patented stratagem of describing a homestead task and thereby describing the making of art. In Frost, it’s picking apples or mending wall; in Lasdun it’s laying a stone edge to a garden:

to send a flickering pulse along the border
so that it seems to ripple round each bed
with an unstonelike, liquid grace:
“the best stones in the best possible order”
or some such half-remembered rule in mind,
as if it mattered, making some old stones
say or be anything but stone, stone, stone;
as if these paths might serve some purpose
aside from making nothing happen; as if
their lapidary line might lead me somewhere –
inward, onward, upward, anywhere

other than merely back where I began,
wondering where I've been, and what I've done.

The parallels with Frost are evident, and the parallels with constructing a poem are plain enough, too. If the lines laid out here are not quite so lapidary as to be Miltonic, still Lasdun has taken great care in arranging what is at once a limitation and a way forward. As the undertaking proceeds, what began as a border becomes a path – that is, a place to set foot after metrical foot – and yet where this ordering of elements will take him the poet does not know. He's very good at his work. He's not sure what it's all for. This statement of purposelessness is hard to assess, and it's not clear that the poet means us to take it literally. But if it's more than an adopted attitude lending Horatian ambiguity to a lyric ending, well, there's a good deal of that going around these days, and more on that later.

Lasdun is a sly wordsmith, and he is fond of the teasing quality a good poem often exhibits. For example, the quotation included in the passage above is in fact not an old adage about stonework but rather an echo of Coleridge's definition of poetry ("the best words in the best order"), whereas the direct allusion that comes soon after carries no quotation marks to tip us off. "For poetry makes nothing happen," wrote Auden in his elegy for Yeats, a poem written just as its author was in the process of moving to America. Auden, too, is one of Lasdun's tutelary spirits and is a writer Lasdun has modeled himself upon. Lasdun, like Auden, is a poet of wit and learning, a poet similarly steeped in the English literary tradition who has likewise elected to pursue a career in the United States. (Come to think of it, Frost could be called a bicultural poet as well. Although regarded now as a quintessentially American voice, he went to England as a young man, and his first book was published there.) Among the new poems in this "New and Selected" there is one called simply "Mr. W. H." where Lasdun makes his claim explicit, detailing the "mite of collateral evidence / connecting me to Wystan." Lasdun tells us that he and Auden attended the same secondary school, and that they both felt abandoned there by their parents and gained the sense of repressed shame they would go on to exploit for artistic purposes,

and he suggests that he is like Auden in having developed a loathing for the institutions and ethos that shaped him.

It is with Auden in mind that we should interpret the title Lasdun has given his “New and Selected Poems.” It seems likely that Lasdun means *Bluestone* to be read in conjunction with Auden’s “In Praise of Limestone.” That poem is one Auden composed around the time of his move to this side of the ocean, and it exhibits great nostalgia for England’s topography. Limestone is water soluble, and England has plenty of water to offer, and in the subterranean channels and shapely landscape that result Auden finds an analogy to the hidden processes and formal constructions of art. Bluestone, by contrast, is a much tougher substance. The name has been given to a variety of lithic deposits around the world, but where Lasdun lives it means a sort of sandstone, a dense sedimentary rock that was used in the nineteenth century for the sidewalks of New York City. Where it is found in abundance it makes for a landscape very different from the English countryside, which is Lasdun’s point in telling us about it. Just as Auden in speaking of limestone describes a place he has with mixed feelings departed, so Lasdun’s portrayal of a bluestone terrain describes the place he has with some reservation elected.

I didn’t think I’d like it but I did,
 inexplicably, this neither soothing
 nor somehow uplifting landscape
 of wooded bluestone crags crannied
 by hollows and gullies, where nothing
 human ever quite flourishes or quite
 abandons – as it doubtless should – hope.

Arriving at these crags and gullies he may have felt he was entering a circle of Dante’s hell (*Lasciate ogne speranza . . .*), but he says he has come to feel at home there nonetheless. And in fact, the new poems in this “New and Selected” do seem the work of a mind more at ease with itself than previously. In them we observe the poet as he goes about his everyday, middle-aged, American life: skating on the village pond, hosting a cookout, stacking firewood, struggling to tend a garden invaded by bittersweet (the kudzu of our northern states), discussing politics and the invasions under-

taken by the U.S. military. While he has not entirely left his angst behind – there is an extended poem in the new section about his sessions with an analyst – his recent work feels more relaxed, and it is a tad less formal, too. Lasdun will never become a Beat poet or a New York School poet, nor would he wish to, but over time his diction has moved in the direction of American speech, and the sensibility of his verse has migrated this way, too. He retains the sharp eye of the non-native, but he has gained the insight of the longtime resident, and his verse offers the peculiar wisdom afforded by that combination. James Lasdun's poetry seems to me to be some of the most interesting now being written in this country, and one only regrets that he has not produced more of it. There have, of course, been very good poets who have written relatively little. Eliot and Elizabeth Bishop come to mind. Lasdun, however, has written a lot, just not a lot of poetry. The author of two novels, three collections of short stories, and a book of autobiographical nonfiction, as well as a writer of film scripts and travel guides, he appears to have at some juncture decided to concentrate his efforts on prose. He has found success in so doing, and given the considerable attention awarded to him in that genre and the general lack of attention currently awarded to poetry, if he has devoted less time to verse than he might have it's hard to blame him. In any case, the selection of his poems we now have in hand is a fine one, and we must content ourselves with what we can get.

An author who does write lots of poetry is John Koethe, who has just published *The Swimmer*, his tenth volume. Not only has Koethe written many poems, but the poems he writes are large, or at least wide. Lasdun likes to shape his verse into careful stanzas, and frequently his line does not arrive at ten syllables. Koethe writes in stanzas much less often, and his lines are sometimes as long as the page will allow. The timbre of their respective poems is very different, too. Lasdun's voice exhibits both British and American inflections, and part of the pleasure to be had in his work is listening for the tension between the two. Koethe's voice is utterly casual and entirely familiar. He sounds like the guy sitting next to you in an airport bar, assuming that the guy sitting next to you happens to be both a poet and a philosophy professor. Lasdun and

Koethe differ also in their sense of place, and they use landscape to very different ends. For the one, topos exists as metaphor, for the other it is a reliable trigger of memory. Lasdun has moved from limestone to bluestone and found an ocean of otherness between them. Koethe's interior geography is defined by four poles: Milwaukee, New York City, San Diego, and Henrietta, Texas. It's hard to imagine a more American map than that.

Recollections of these places, most of them scenes of his childhood and youth, are the springboard for the rumination that is the stuff of Koethe's verse. There is a famous exchange between Frost and Stevens that has a bearing on Koethe's way with a poem.

"The trouble with you, Robert, is you write about things."

"The trouble with you, Wallace, is you write about bric-a-brac."

This conversation is perhaps too good to be true, but whether or not it actually took place, the repartee does serve to illustrate what are fundamentally opposite approaches to composition. If Lasdun is the Frostean, a poet who wants an activity or object for his occasion, Koethe is the Stevensian. His poems begin at whatever point his thoughts have come to when he sits down to his desk (nothing's that easy, of course, but the poet is careful to give this impression), and they continue until they have reached the empty place where thinking gives up for the time being. Koethe's poetry is the record of the growth, or perhaps simply the oscillation, of the poet's mind.

"Growth of a Poet's Mind" is Wordsworth's subtitle for *The Prelude*, and to read Koethe's verse in terms of the Romantic project of healing what we might now call psychological injury is one way to get a handle on it. I recall once telling an editor that if William Wordsworth had woken up one day divorced and at loose ends and living in Milwaukee, he might have written poems like John Koethe's:

. . . living patiently, without atonement or regret,
 In the eternity of the plain moments, the nest of care
 – Until suddenly, all alone, the mind is lifted upward into
 Light and air and the nothingness of the sky,
 Held there in that vacant, circumstantial blue until,
 In the vehemence of a landscape where the colors all
 disappear,
 The quiet absolution of the spirit quickens into fact . . .

Those lines about the plain yet transcendent moments available in contemplation are from “The Late Wisconsin Spring,” the title poem of the early volume in which Koethe’s poetry fully came into its own. He revisits the Wisconsin spring in the new book in a ruefully nostalgic poem called “Early April in the Country.” It’s the same time of year, but not the same time of life, and for all the landscape is similar, transcendence is no longer on the menu. Instead, the poet’s gentle, indulgent, and withal unsparing eye beholds a scene where ambition has drained and the mind is approaching its terminus.

“We Poets in our youth begin in gladness,” and while it
didn’t

Feel too much like gladness at the time, it saw me
through . . .

. . . I’ve shored it against the day

When consciousness flickers out and everything goes on . . .

. . . reading and rereading

My old and not-so-old, my grand and not-so-grand poems.

They flowed, they had too many words, they were

Driven by a “madness to explain” that feels quaint now,

As though there were nothing to explain anymore.

There are all sorts of allusions here, to Wordsworth obviously, and to John Ashbery, but also to Eugenio Montale’s “*Piccolo testamento*” and Stevens’s “As You Leave the Room,” both of them poems in which an author reviews his past and attempts to sum up his accomplishment. Koethe has reached that stage, too. In poem after poem we see him looking back over his life, thinking about the future of poetry, worrying about the future of his own poetry, suspecting it has small chance of posthumous acclaim, deciding posterity itself may be an outmoded concept, deciding not to worry about any of it too much. The volume that results is one of ruthless honesty. It is an extended anagnorisis of melancholy self-recognition, and yet somehow it doesn’t feel as dispiriting as one might expect. On the contrary, *The Swimmer* is almost cheerful in its frank admissions.

It’s just more language, and it disappears.

Sometimes it touches on the truth, now and then

It sings, but for the most part meanders on
 Like a country road, leading not to some horror
 But to the stupefying banality at the heart of things.

“*Lacrimae rerum*,” wrote Virgil. “Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears,” wrote Wordsworth. But here banality has been substituted for tears, because the author does not see life as sufficiently significant to qualify for tragedy, and hence it’s axiomatic that there’s no crying in a Koethe poem. If he is like Wordsworth in that he knows human experience is not a matter of upward trajectory, he is unlike Wordsworth in that he does not try to hide this fact from himself and is not distressed by his inability to do so. As a corollary, it can be said that whereas Wordsworth is apprehensive regarding the mental stasis that can lead to self-perception, Koethe is in love with it. The speaker in a John Koethe poem is never skittish about a pause for thought. He courts the reflective moment, he revels in it, he finds it comforting. He has made his peace with the mind’s essential sadness, and if the sadness does not rise to the level of misery, still he asks the reader to keep him company. And here is another reason why Koethe’s embrace of melancholia does not feel depressing: he is a convivial poet. Far from constituting a protective shell, the surface of his poetry is inviting. The content of his poems can be convivial, too. There are a great many recollected cocktail parties in his work, and his poems are studded with old friends and the things they said and did. He tells us his desperate truths about the human condition with a warm smile and a clink of the glass.

The scraps of conversation and the accounts of other’s escapades found in Koethe’s work are often taken from his time spent in and around New York – he was a student at Columbia and has returned to the city on frequent visits ever since – and the cast of characters by now evokes the art scene of a bygone era. Koethe has one foot, or at least a few toes, in what must be called the camp of the New York School, and his readers will meet many of the poets and painters who were prominent in the city during the 1960s: Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, Larry Rivers, Robert Dash, Kenneth Koch, and lots more. Koethe has by now become a prominent poet himself (although prominence in poetry is not what it once was . . . more on this later), but in those days he was a peripheral

character, a fact that adds one more layer of self-awareness to a poem in the new book named for another member of the group: Dorothy Dean, “a minor figure in the Warhol / And New Yorker worlds.” We are told that Koethe and Dean met each other at “a party in a loft / Somewhere downtown” and kept in fitful touch thereafter.

. . . We carried on a desultory correspondence
 For a few years . . .
 It didn't amount to anything, yet that's where time is
 measured –
 At the intersections of your life with someone else's . . .
 . . . You set out with a promise and a wish,
 And live with them until the wish and its fulfillment start to
 seem routine
 And the anecdotes begin, the moments that become life stories,
 Like that evening over forty years ago I spent with Dorothy
 Dean.

Moments that evolve into anecdotes are not exactly visionary spots of time, and to begin with a wish and arrive at routine is not quite to begin in gladness and come to mad despondency, but such is the arc of the poet's lifework as it appears to him now. Or so he says. Koethe's self-deprecating confessions are disarming, but they are a dissemblance, too. There is considerably more determination and intent in his poems than he lets on. For example, he knows he has sometimes been accused of writing rambling poems, and he pretends to agree with that assessment (“They flowed, they had too many words”), whereas in fact he has most often used his river of words to purpose and with precision. One constant in Koethe's poetry, in this book as in all his books, is his ability to embed pithy lines of aphoristic quality into the stream of his conversational verse. The apothegms are all the more striking for the foil of relaxed lines around them, and they are one of the things that make his poems memorable.

There's no such thing as a completely wasted life . . .

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. . . if you want to know what something is, ignore what
 people say about it . . .

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The world never ends – what ends are explanations of the way it is.

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Poetry is stylized indifference . . .

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I used to like being young, and I still do.

If the last of these excerpts is not quite an apothegm, it is catchy nevertheless and certainly funny, particularly given the poet's mature sum of years and nostalgic preoccupations. As time has gone by, Koethe has admitted an increasing amount of humor into his poetry, and there's a lot of it in his new work. There didn't used to be. His early poems were good-humored without being humorous, but that has changed. Maybe his new amusement is due to the wry perspective of advancing age. Humor is often the response of the powerless, the last resort of the doomed, and all of us are powerless with respect to the passage of time. Koethe is not given to melodrama, and no one in *The Swimmer* faces anything so immediate as summary execution (well, there is a cat that takes its final trip to the vet) or lies in a hospital with a terminal illness (the speaker is more likely to be sitting in an armchair with music on the stereo and a martini in hand), but there is gallows humor to be found in his stylized indifference even so. Gallows humor depends for its effect on an ironic detachment from the grisly matter at hand, and Koethe's book has plenty of that. It is philosophical in the face of extinction, his, ours, and its own.

Philosophical in the layman's sense, it should be added. Koethe is a professional in such matters, a professor emeritus of philosophy who has published in that field as well. He has said that he finds no connection between his poetry and his philosophical writing, but if the one has little to do with the other in technical terms, the two pursuits surely overlap in terms of sensibility. Moreover, there exists a strain of abstraction in American poetry that can only be called philosophical, at least as the amateur understands the word. A number of our major poets, John Ashbery and Wallace Stevens most obviously, have shown an abiding interest in existential investigations openly announced as such, and they have been fascinated by the mechanics of thought, by the mind's ability to

perceive or create what it takes or mistakes for reality. Both Stevens and Ashbery have had an enormous impact on American poetry, with the result that the impulse to meditative abstraction is by now so deeply ingrained in our verse as to be almost a genetic component of the art.

Genetic or not, it is an impulse Koethe shares. His verse is by no means so dense as that of Stevens or Ashbery, but it is equally as philosophical in that it gives us a consciousness in relentless contemplation of itself. It is philosophical also, by any definition, in that there are poems in the new book which discuss the thought of Bergson and Kierkegaard at some length. And it is philosophical as well in that even Koethe's anecdotal material can sound like cognitive theory:

I remember one time when the feeling of my own existence
 faltered,
 About a year after I'd settled in Milwaukee. I was in a
 Kmart
 Parking lot – a local version of the paving stones of Venice –
 And I couldn't understand why I was there or what had
 brought me there.
 I fell into a mild depression that persisted for a year or so
 And dissipated, leaving me as I am, and as I've been for
 forty years.

The poet knows himself, and his degree of self-awareness is impressive, but as this passage illustrates, so much concern for one's own state of mind can be debilitating. There is a danger that thoughts revolved obsessively might lose the name of action, and looking through Koethe's work a reader may now and then long for a little Frosteian occasion. *Stop thinking so much*, one is sometimes tempted to say to the speaker of these musings; *Get up and get out, go pick some apples, go edge a garden, you'll feel better*. But the poet has anticipated this response, and although he recognizes that the advice is sensible, he finds it both inadequate to his situation and impossible to follow:

... "Lift your head, look out the window" –
 Standard exhortations to forget about yourself and breathe,
 And I agree with all of them, and still I don't know what to
 do.

For a poet so concerned with his own consciousness, the object of poetry is the farthest reach of thought, and so it is that the poems in this book regularly conclude by bumping up against extinction. As I mentioned, *The Swimmer* is a book full of gallows humor, and an acute awareness of the author's end is everywhere in it, and herein lies another danger: the foreseen extinction of the mind that thinks threatens to undermine the very concept of meaning. "That is the trouble with stories – / They need to come to a conclusion and to have a point, / Whereas the point of growing old is that it doesn't have one." The prospect of one's demise can erode the construct that is artistic invention, and it may whittle away at the perceived complications that are grist to the mill of analytical assessment. Death is the great leveler. The word *intricate* used to be Koethe's signature, an emblematic term found in almost any poem he wrote, but it appears nowhere in this book. In *The Swimmer*, the mind keeps asking questions, but the stark answer keeps getting simpler.

I still know what I know, although it matters not at all: I labor
 over it,
 And yet it's written in a different idiom, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying – what? It can't be nothing, though it might as well
 be
 If it can't be rendered in the language of the stars. I want to
 Speak to something far away, beyond the confines of the page,
 But it won't listen, and to everything I say it answers No.

In spite of such passages, I don't think Koethe is fully ready to accept this grand negation. He has too much still to say. If the poet's progress toward death is openly a subject of *The Swimmer*, his resistance to the process is the covert theme. This can even be detected in his book's typically low-key title. The title references a John Cheever story in which a man arrives at the recognition of having aged, and such a tale is certainly appropriate to the poet's stated concerns. But there may be another allusion here at a deeper level: to the swimmer in "The Sleepers," Whitman's visionary threnody. Whitman's swimmer is a courageous striver fighting against the sea that will inevitably drown him. Koethe's calm and avowedly resigned poems insist he isn't bothering to struggle

against the ebb tide of oblivion, but nobody writes as much as he does on such matters without exerting a great deal of effort. He says he has given up caring very much about the life he has led or the end that awaits him, but his companionable, perceptive, and compelling new book says otherwise. The “fear of death . . . energizes everything,” he writes at one point, and clearly it has done so for him. Brooding, surmising, recollecting and confiding, his new poems resist silence. They are not the testament of a mind in capitulation.

If the “oh well” tone of Koethe’s work is not actually the result of his ceasing to care a great deal about his work, is it merely a nonchalant pose? It is true that his poetry has some features in common with the New York School, and a basic tenet of that school is that serious subject matter is to be treated in a throwaway manner. But one of the things that distinguishes Koethe from poets like Ashbery and O’Hara is that he has never been a flippant author. I suspect that the shoulder shrug of resignation displayed in *The Swimmer* is due not just to an awareness of his own aging but also to a conviction that poetry as he has known it is in decline. I began this review by speaking of the niche-market audience a book of poems can expect nowadays, and of course Koethe knows of this, too. He sees that in the course of his lifetime, poetry has become less and less important, if not to him then certainly to society at large. Our poets are no longer cultural icons like Frost or intellectual arbiters like Eliot or highbrow mascots like Marianne Moore, and by any measure to be a well-known American poet in 2016 is to be much less well known than one would have been fifty years ago. More and more people seem to be writing poetry, but fewer and fewer seem to be reading it, and there is small appetite now for perusing the long shelf that once constituted poetry’s foundation. As a consequence, poetry’s audience has fallen to pieces, and one of the melancholy recognitions Koethe has come to is that he has passed his days engaged in a pursuit few others will take any interest in. He says repeatedly and explicitly that no one cares enough about the poetry of the moment to pay it serious attention, and that no one cares enough about the poetry of the past to give it more than a moment’s thought.

Poetry . . . when people
Argued about it and it mattered.

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No one believes in beauty anymore . . .

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Immortality isn't what it used to be . . .

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Writing for posterity? Posterity isn't interested
Unless you are, because instead of a quaint immortality,
It offers merely intermittent moments of attention

Earlier, I noted a James Lasdun poem in which the speaker wonders to what use his skill as a versifier is put. And as I mentioned, Lasdun is a highly capable poet who has elected to write poetry sparingly. Any author must make an assessment of his or her talent and expend maximum effort in the area where the greatest opportunities lie, but if poets so gifted as Lasdun and Koethe in fact see contemporary American poetry as having become essentially a sideshow, that is a sorrowful state of affairs. How has the legacy of Whitman and Dickinson and so many others arrived at this? One tells oneself that language is what makes us human, and that a well-made poem – the best words in the best order – is language at its most complex. As humanity still increases, how then can poetry dwindle? One tells oneself that if the art form looks to be in crisis now, this is not unusual: it has seemed beleaguered often, and essays in its defense have been written in almost every era. One tells oneself that poetry regularly appears ill but never gives up the ghost. That's what one tells oneself. The high quality of these new books by James Lasdun and John Koethe helps one to believe it.