

The Natural Light in Mary Buchinger's new book of Poetry, Aerialist

Review by Michael Todd Steffen

TO BE OR NOT TO BE REFERENTIAL and scholarly about one's poetry, that may be one frequent question "in the air," what with the Internet and all of the world's information at our fingertips and at the mercy of our cut and paste tools, about how we bring the language of others' writing into our own writing. The Modernist critic Hugh Kenner wrote somewhere that writing is mostly quoting. This was one of the points the major Modernists like Pound, Joyce and Eliot were making by using direct quotes in their texts from world class authors, from the Book of Ecclesiastes and Virgil to Flaubert and Baudelaire. Pound and Joyce left their works largely without annotation for the harvest of careful readers and scholars. More doubtful about how public his references were, Eliot wrote the famous notes to *The Waste Land*, which (instead of putting matters to rest about the references in his poem) only inspired more scholarly debate.



Mary Buchinger's new book of poems is wonderfully titled *Aerialist* (ISBN 13:978-0-692-34196-6 Gold Wake Press, Boston, 2015) and one immediate feature of it is the evocation of major authors like Virginia Woolf, Borges, Proust, Calvino as well as of artistic oeuvres and objets, Titian's "The Rape or Rapture of Europa," Brueghel's "The Fall of Icarus" (via Auden's poem "Musée de Beaux Arts) and even a "Magnificat" which "describes the sculpture PixCell-Elk#2 by Kohei Nawa" (c.f. reference notes in the back pages of the book).

My first impression was that the quotes loomed over the poems. They were too ponderous for the appreciably local and modest themes treated in Buchinger's poetry. But this impression changed as

I spent more time with the book, allowing the more reticent, metaphysical suggestions in the poems

to emerge. The quotes began to amplify and resonate. I like the passage from Borges's *A New Refutation of Time* too much not to share it again:

Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.

If we get what Borges is saying, Buchinger's poetry burns at a light perhaps closer to equal with the real world's light. There is less "unfortunately" to be admitted between the poems in *Aerialist* and the world

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

outside our windows. Yet the poems by Buchinger still have the charm and punch to furrow our brows with pleasure and concern. Her meanings are at times drawn so vividly as to become physical or spatial rather than rational. Her metaphors do what art does best, putting us in the embodiment of an epiphany or special meaning. What was it to be a child in the comfort of home?

Childhood, that nest

*of gathered, broken sticks,
bark half-peeled, magic wands, lightning rods.*

the slight and airy edges of this messy assembly

*so close to heaven and all its wishing stars, a fall, so far.
(page 20)*

The narrative arc of the book as a whole makes a lot of sense and offers congruities. In the opening poem "a bird flies all pink pink air"-nothing more precise than "a bird" and in the brief glimpse with a series of verbs-"touches, enters and is lost"-the poem's one noun vanishes from sight like Wallace Stevens' blackbird, evoking the wake of an appearance rather than the appearance itself. Did we see this bird or not? Was it even there? This is an overture, a real attention-grabber. To make the thing disappear before we have a clear look at it.

With a sense of symmetry and satisfaction we come to the final poem to find animals in more vivid definition, in a setting more stabilized, though this is still our mortal world of triumphs and perils:

On the river's edge

*geese float like speckled seeds.
Later, they will sprout wings, leave
the naked frogs tumbling in the current.*

*The geese sip air and water alike, press against
the liquids, they too feel the ice
in the upper sky. (page 107)*

For T.S. Eliot, Between the conception And creation Falls the shadow. For Buchinger there fall a hundred more pages of sustaining variety, always the melodic, slightly playful intonations and earnest moments, questions and silences, an aerialist getting up on a train to use the hand straps for a brief twirl and saut, jewelry purchased from a Middle Easterner, the suggestion of an illness, more birds, the kids. The world is real, the poet is. Mary Buchinger.