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REVIEWS

MONA ELAINE ADILMAN, *Candles in the Dark: Poems New and Selected*. Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1990. Paper. Pp. 96. \$12.95.

Mona Adilman's final volume of poetry is a pleasing and influential summary of her life's work, which included a perpetual fight for social and environmental improvements, for the aged and the vulnerable, for human and animal rights, and against political self-interest. Adilman (1924-91), described by critics as Montreal's "poet *engagé*" and "a writer of international sensibility," is important in Canadian poetry for her unique focus on contemporary conditions expressed in fine poetry. In addition to her four collections of poetry, her work appeared widely in magazines and anthologies, and she created musical comedies, satirical revues, and a ballet.

This final work has four sections beginning with "Neon Flowers," which contains a variety of important themes including the hopes and disappointments of immigrant women ("Full-Time Employment") who can find only menial work such as caring with warmth and affection for "decaying bodies" in nursing homes. Oscar Peterson is celebrated ("Oscar Peterson and the Lady"), Montreal's pollution problem, "lace rain with acid," is attacked ("Montréal"), and its local colour is praised, "Ah, but a bagel factory / smells like heaven," ("The Bagel Factory"). Adilman's satire punctures political and economic self-interest and indifference toward the sick and the aged ("Uncle Sam"), and pretensions and illusions are pricked when the flirtatious wife "is giving the crooner the eye, / looking a good thirty years younger / since her last face-lift" ("Triple Play"). The mental and physical pain of aging is presented with passion and sympathy: "Oh God, I die / to wake and know my body sweet and young again" ("The Geriatric Years"). The twenty-two poems in this section express compassion, anger, and humour.

Section two, "The Stalking," eight poems on abuse to animals, the environment, earth, and consequently the human race, is ironic, sarcastic, and deeply sincere. The poet's generous concern about our present and future natural resources artistically reveals controlled frustration. The poems are a convincing plea for conservation of

bpNICHOL, *gifts: The Martyrology Book(s) 7 &*. Toronto, Ontario: Coach House Press, 1991. Paper. Pp. 304. \$19.95.

Gifts: The Martyrology Book(s) 7 & is immediate in its engagement of a high level of word activity. The lower-case "g" on the front cover sets off typographical movement in the word "gIFTS" so that we are first faced with the thought-rhyme residue of an intervention (IF, SHIFT(S), FITS, etc.) and the distinct echo of the value of a single letter, a dotted "g," reminiscent of bpNichol's favourite "h," concrete and literal throughout his writing life. Then there's open-ended double and extending plural of "Book(s) 7 &" in the subtitle. The end-papers are the solid alphabetic run-on listing of lexical saints bleeding out to the edges and inviting the particularity of possible readings (St Asis, St Eady, St Oic, all of them). The book is a finger-joint thick and as the pages flick by we get a brief taste of orthography, typography, cartoons, concrete poems, lined text, drawings, xerographics, and so forth. Pasted on the inside back cover is a sleeve containing a sheaf of unbound pages, the first of which reads: "These poems are to be 'interleaved into the final bound copy of *Martyr 7 &*.'—bpnichol." I slip the five poems randomly between the pages of the volume, anticipating and savouring those future moments when they'll reappear at the turn of a page. Two half-title pages follow a page of significant quotes; the first reads "gifts" with the "g" as one of those old-fashioned typewriter concrete letters made up of 6's, 8's, 9's, g's, o's and dots and looking as if it's been printed from a mimeograph stencil. The second half-title page has the same "g," slightly smaller, but this time as the first letter of the word "given." The title page itself lists the contents of *Book(s) 7 &* as "ASSUMPTIONS (A COUNTING Bk VII—1984 to 1988), ST. ANZAS: basis/bases (The Martyrology Bk (10)g—1985 to 1988), MONOTONES (1967 to 1972), SCRAPTURES (1965 to 1972) etc. et al." The page continues moving the eye into an acrostic on "bpnichol" that reads vertically (bass note / plunk it / neither the / i nor the / can / hold you / old definitions change as / language rearranges all the nouns and names you."

I back into this volume of *The Martyrology* much like I've done with the other volumes published by Coach House Press over the years. The text is expansive, a life-long ongoing "long poem" full of language play and singing, humour and biotext, wailing back and forth across the country for twenty-five years, until his death in 1988. But the poem is a very open text, and it is easy, in fact usefully so, to read *within* the text, flipping around at random, opening or fingering the pages

wherever.

Irene Niechoda has an afterword at the back of the book, and that is one of the first things to go to, in that she was responsible for collating Nichol's papers after his untimely death and so was able to provide the final editing for the production. Her short explanatory essay is helpful in understanding the book-composition Nichol used to generate the potency of his long poem. She explains his curious numbering system and how the contents dovetail as part of his own preparation for publication: "The possibility that he himself might not see the manuscript through to book form had clearly occurred to him."

Since *The Martyrology* has always been an open-ended text, growing and shifting in poetic awareness with the "i" of the poem, the book (any of them) invites a particularization of attention. So the eye, in this instance, is drawn first, probably, to the range of visual typography, cartoon, and page glyphs scattered through the collation. I say "collation" in the sense of a compositional assemblage of parts, sections salvaged from what could otherwise be discrete sequences. For example, the middle of the book opens naturally to an order of "Scriptures: 6th Sequence" followed by "Monograms—Genealogy—Grammarology" followed by "Scriptures: Last Sequence" followed by "Scriptures: 17th Sequence" followed by "Monotones LXII" followed by "The Hill Songs of Saint Orm" followed by the May 7, 1987 entry from "Assumptions" and so on. These parts, in other words, are retreaded here within another order, a larger life-perspective order. So

when you have nothing
you have nothing

when everything you that you had is gone
you have what you always had

if everything you wanted was here
you'd have nothing ("The Hill Songs of Saint Orm")

leads to the entry from "Assumptions":

the waste of my words & works. the worth.
a balance. something to be said for history.
everything dissolves in time ...
our bodies, our sounds, words, this page, even as you read,
even as your vision, your life—uneven, even—fades, fade.

That is, seriality is possible. But, more so, intervented. This is a self-conscious poetic strategy necessary as a resistance to the tyranny of the lineal, the impossibility of the logic of the labyrinth (an image Nichol poses at the opening of Book 5). In fact it is the multiple that *The Martyrology* engages as Nichol threads his way through his own textual maze. So chunks of text are recomposed and juxtaposed as a way of sustaining ongoing possibility between self and world. What is evident, then, is the plan of a mind, poetry as thinking, poetry as trying, testing. The large handwritten "VRUUM—BRRRUM" in one section resonates forward and backward to whatever possibilities of "reading" in other sections, but remains, above all, just that, a possibility. "i think in ink" we read from him in "Inchoate Road" (Book 6).

What I find engaging in such writing is the spectrum of potentiality, of energy and the attention and openness to an intelligence. And I mean by that term the verb, "to intellect," because resident here is the movement of intellection, discovery, choice, and change. For example, the powerful poem "Slip" (from *Assumptions*) turns up between "An Interlude in which Saint Ranglehold Addresses Anyone Who'll Listen" and "Scriptures: 2nd Sequence—Alternate Take 3 (ending only)." "Slip" is an incisive articulation of exactly the kind of thinking-writing about language that so much of Nichol's poetry explores.

*charges explode . a . surface . FRAGMENT . some-
where . language only or, language as an image of
language . a surface . F-RAGMENT . surface . a clue
(Like this exclamation mark!) of the violence done to you
. somewhere . a . surface . somewhere . FR-AGMENT
. i that is a many . surface . FRA-GMENT . a . surface*

I think it was Philip Whalen who said, in the early sixties, "a poem is a graph of the mind moving." Nichol, and most of my generation of writers from the west coast, have always been interested in the register of language as thinking. So a poem like "Slip" makes a lot of sense as a text that consciously measures the synapses of language/mind. (A few years ago Nichol and I were driving from Weyburn to Saskatoon and he smoked a cigar and read to me through his constantly-shifting hip pain. He read "Slip." He said the dots or periods should notate, for performance or otherwise, the sound of something explosive, percussive, hands clapping, whatever. I have performed it with a hammer and a two-by-four). This is an interactive measure and therefore generative.

In other words, mind—to word—to thought—to other words—to idea—to more words—to sense—to syllable—to image—to letter—to intuition—to phrase—to connection—to phoneme, and so forth. Combinations.

Though this poetics of the potent is full of power, that power does not reside in a position of authority and imposition. Rather, the dynamics shifts through a range of play and invention in order to continually posit possibility, unpredictability, "negative capability," and, dramatically, necessity. In one of the maze-glyph cartoons of "Scriptures: Lost Sequence" we find expressed a fundamental compulsion addressed to one of the main protagonists of *The Martyrology*, "st reat":

oh my eyes are falling below the levels i speak to you on
and i have come here to some sort of crossing i would
understand the better saint reat were you here to guide
me but you are not here and taunt me across the impos-
sible distances of my syntax telling me i am without hope
of reaching you as tho to try even were an impossibility
an impossibility does not exist saint reat no only you are
the sometimes impossible dream of my youth of my pass-
ing years you are the words that will not flow from me
but become lost in the wake of your passing on your
passion or my passion for you and are discarded there
fall like nothing else into the traps of your metaphors
and similes you will not believe me that i see below all
the levels ... oh saint reat i cannot be still but must
follow you forever down whatever road you would lead
me and i know you will lead me can i but find the lan-
guage there

And looking for the right language is, essentially, the fuel for *The Martyrology*. "What is necessary in order to understand is a TOTAL ASSAULT" we read on one page of collaged type. The aggression is more a compulsive propulsion, an explosion forth into language (and Life and Death and Memory and Family, anything that might provide a lead to the next move, and the next passage/way).

Consequently this "continuing" poem gathers to itself an accumulation of energy, a substantial mass palpable by its continually moving parts. So *Book(s) 7 &* yields a tangible construct, a book composition that gains momentum by its increasing density. (The book is not pagi-

nated but there must be about 300 pages.) I'm so sure of this feeling of size and possibility here that I can open the book at random to substantiate that organic *deja vu*. In one of the *Assumptions* Nichol writes through the reflective "you" at 31,000 feet between Toronto and Vancouver on November 13, 1986:

a certain relation you assumes
 shipped back & forth between this & that
 this world of cloud & possible saints
 heaven as you has always imagined it
 that pain there, that love, world
 you must return to, pass thru another
 gate another time, always here
 between worlds, points of view
 changing because you changes too, me or i, assumptions of
 what i knows of i's self
 this or that me
 cumulative accumulation of
 i's dentity, the world's, and how i knows of it
 knows to have this sky, that colour,
 you

I happened to come across a very short review of the book (by Stella Stocker in *Orbis* 80/81) that found it "banal ... and pretentious." The reviewer closes, however, by saying, "It ... should be considered as a whole." That *is* the point—the whole.

But then, within the whole, I chance upon one of the five interleaved "bp:if" poems he left scattered among the clouds of text and the poignancy of particularity hits with atom-like spinal impact:

sacrum

say

the whole thing ends

say

you're frightened

of the whole thing

ending

say

cheese