



UNIVERSITY OF  
SAN FRANCISCO

Gleeson Library |  
Geschke Center

August 2014

# Instructive Alchemies [Reviews of Philip Levine, Daniel Hoffman, George Keithley, J. Michael Yates, Annie Dillard]

John R. Reed

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview>

## Recommended Citation

Reed, John R. (2014) "Instructive Alchemies [Reviews of Philip Levine, Daniel Hoffman, George Keithley, J. Michael Yates, Annie Dillard]," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 1, Article 21.

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol1/iss1/21>

For more information, please contact [southern@usfca.edu](mailto:southern@usfca.edu).

## *Instructive Alchemies*

- 1933 by Philip Levine. New York: Atheneum, 1974. Pp. 68. \$3.95, pb.
- THE CENTER OF ATTENTION by Daniel Hoffman. New York: Random House, 1974. Pp. 77. \$6.00, hb.
- SONG IN A STRANGE LAND by George Keithley. New York: George Braziller, 1974. Pp. 114. \$2.95, pb.
- NOTHING SPEAKS FOR THE BLUE MORAINES by J. Michael Yates. Delta, B.C.: The Sono Nis Press, 1973. Pp. 175. \$13.50, hb.
- TICKETS FOR A PRAYER WHEEL by Annie Dillard. Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1974. Pp. 127. \$6.00, hb.

Some poets reach out for large schemes to contain the separate articulations of individual poems; others are content to focus their emotions upon separable compositions that achieve unity only through their own personalities. The volumes of poetry under review here cover a wide range in this respect. George Keithley attempts a grand pattern related to the structures of Whitman or Crane. Philip Levine's poetry, while equally large in its attempt to contain a historical progression, is mainly personal. The poems of J. Michael Yates present a subjective unity that has nothing to do with history, but leaps from internal landscape to the broad mystery of space and time. Daniel Hoffman's latest volume of poetry indicates a continued movement away from any overriding personal or historical scheme toward a dependence upon artificial structures to create what emotional unity does not automatically provide. And Annie Dillard seems quite content to offer brilliant pictures with no particular scheme. I do not want to suggest that large patterns are necessarily preferable to the isolated illumination of individual poems. Larger patterns only indicate a greater hunger for order and may even jeopardize the intensity of individual poems. Consequently, I do not intend to approach these recent collections of poems with an eye to their unity as coherent works, but the desire for unity, I think, remains an important issue for the poets themselves, and I will return to that point later.

Philip Levine's new book, *1933* (1974), represents the accomplishment of an aim that Levine has been concerned with since his first book of poems, *On the Edge* (1963). The poems in that collection were formal and controlled. "Mad Day" was musical and irreverent. The rhymed and metrically regular form of the poem intensified its stern perception of

existence. Equally regular in form, "The Drunkard" was a forceful fantasy poem, and "Sierra Kid" was a skillful fable presented in a simple narrative form. This first volume also contained the powerful "Green Thumb," describing a predictable human dilemma with tough, ironic language. Referring to a fear of being trapped into marriage by an unexpected pregnancy, the persona says: "I cursed the vows / That cattle make to grass when cattle browse," a powerful summary metaphor of man's casual and thoughtless self-indulgence. More personal yet is the powerful, if not entirely successful, "Passing Out," describing a frightening medical experience.

These themes, and familiar Detroit settings, recur in 1933, but after several intervening volumes, with a new kind of force. The poems of *Not This Pig* (1968), for example, seemed more labored than those in *On the Edge*. They gave the impression of a poet self-consciously adrift, straining for an intensity that the subjects of his poems would not support, as in "The Rats" or "Who Are You?" In "Everlasting Sunday," the excitement of language seemed to fade as the desire for the impact of real events increased, but the effort toward this new intensity did not entirely succeed. There is certainly good poetry in "Silent in America," as when Levine writes: "Let me have / the courage to love / as fictions live, proud, careless, / unwilling to die." But when this poem is compared to the earlier "Passing Out" or the later "I Am Always," the medical atmosphere seems inflated.

In *Red Dust* (1971), Levine seemed to vacillate between poems too abstract in their references to evoke a visceral response, like "Here," and poems loaded with strong scenes and impressions but imperfectly realized, such as "In the New Sun." Self-indulgent poems like "Where We Live Now" and "Sadness of Lemons," while occasionally strong, were too pretentious to be convincing. The usual Detroit equipment appeared in "Pockets" and "Wife of a Foundry Worker," but it was flat and detached.

The movement from formal poetry through abstract and inflated poems to gritty and particular works seemed complete in *They Feed, They Lion* (1972). "The Cutting Edge" is reminiscent of Plath's "Cut," starting with a physical event and extending to a perception of the individual's relationship to an incomprehensible natural world. "Breath," too, is a consistent and powerful personal statement. But the weaknesses of the previous volumes surface in "Children's Crusade" or "Thistles," where good impressions are lost in extravagant or incomplete fabrics. In short, Levine did not seem to be interested in finished poems in *They Feed, They Lion*, but was content to say what he wished to say and then stop. Sometimes this method produced powerful poems, but more often only a few good passages emerged from otherwise fragmentary poems.

The poems of 1933 escape this incomplete effect. They share a common tone, a recapturing of moods that are persuasively part of a single informing personality. Incidents, scenes, and characters from Levine's past take on a greater power than in earlier volumes. It is as though the harsh black and white snapshots of former books have been re-issued as soft sepia portraits. Levine has recovered the intensity of language that characterized his first book, but without the formal structures that seemed necessary then. The images in 1933 are strong and simple. A woman is described as a "Beautiful Polish daughter with hands as round and white as buns" ("Grandmother in Heaven"). And scenes are created with forceful economy, as in one of the volume's best poems, "I Am Always," where Levine describes his virile father drying himself in the bathroom.

He stands before the mirror  
running the thick white towel  
between his legs, and then dries  
carefully the long root  
half hidden in hair. Black tufts  
sprout under the arms, black  
crosses the chest, and a shadow  
cuts across the hard belly.

What was crudely put in "The Wife of the Foundry Worker" now becomes the subtler, more tantalizing "The Poem Circling Hamtramck, Michigan All Night In Search Of You." Poem after poem captures more or less successfully a small incident from a characteristic past. Now and then there is a tough summary of an entire mood, as in "Harvest," which has, for me, a resemblance to Lowell's "Skunk Hour."

Snow grays by  
the back fence, mice  
blacken under leaves  
rabbits freeze  
on the runways and the lights  
come on. Money is all,  
we say. The cat steps out  
the back door into the night,  
her pockets empty,  
and breathes the rich harvest  
of the alleys.

To my mind, the suggestion of insidious failure in Levine's "Letters For The Dead" echoes Lowell's "For The Union Dead" when he describes the industrial dead-level of modern urban life.

All night  
rain in the still river  
off the loading docks at Wyandotte  
locked wheels  
blind eyes of cars  
the scattered intestines of purses  
a pale carp  
warped on its side

they bump slowly underwater

It is, perhaps, this long poem that sums up what Levine is trying to do with this best collection since *On the Edge*. He says of the dead he now remembers:

I wakened  
read the paper  
  
and thought of you one by one  
and tried to hold your faces  
in my eyes  
  
tried to say  
something to each of you  
of what it is  
without you

He succeeds in the telling, for the strain of earlier poems is gone, and the conviction of real incidents is not lost in fragmentary poems, but unites with a sparse narrative manner and sharp images to produce moving and evocative poems.

Daniel Hoffman's first volume of poems, *An Armada of Thirty Whales* (1954), was, like Levine's, largely formal in manner and characterized by an excitement of language. This skillfulness carried over to poems like the playfully formal "In Cytherea," of *A Little Geste* (1960), though other poems in that volume had a dry and even old-fashioned flavor, especially in their syntactical patterns. And, although "Lay of Maid Marian" and "Will Scarlet" were good poems, the use of the Robin

Hood legend to organize a group of poems was an early sign of a tendency to depend upon an external structure to support poetic experiment. In *The City of Satisfactions* (1963), Hoffman began to employ a fabular device which could be self-conscious in "A New Birth," artificial and absurdist in "The Line," and almost allegorical in the title poem of the collection. In poems of this kind, Hoffman seemed to be reaching for some structure beyond personal experience—as broad as myth but not so clearly defined—which would transcend private impressions while retaining the intensity of private emotion. Ironically, some of the most effective poems in this collection were poems of direct observation, such as "Climbing Katahdin," "Gestures," and "Sometown."

*Striking the Stones* (1968) was a change in direction. Now most of the poems were looser in structure, sparser and more economical in language. They became grittier, with more images and settings drawn from urban industrialism. The fabular poems continued, as with "The Companion," "Last Arrival," and "He Was the First," but they were mainly abstract in character, except for "The Hero," which is appropriately Yeatsian in tone. In general, Hoffman's diction had become less pointed, less forceful and original than in earlier poems, but it was evident that he was looking for a new manner, and *Broken Laws* (1970), his next book of poems, showed that he was gaining command of that manner. There was a smoother movement in loosely structured poems such as "A Trip," "A Special Train," and "A Victor." "Measures for G.C." conveyed believable personal emotion, while "Filling the Forms" was a skillful piece of significant fun. "Aubade" was a brief, visually keen success, and "I am the Sun" had the complete quality often found in accomplished minor Victorian poets. But the tendency to use an abstract scheme to support individual poems remained evident, appearing in this book as a series of 'characters' such as "A Prophet," "A Natural Philosopher," "A Historian," and so forth.

It is abstract, objective poetry of this kind that is dangerously prominent in Hoffman's latest book, *The Center of Attention* (1974), which contains groups of poems with titles such as "Stone," "Wind," "Fire," "Waves," "Tree," "Shrew," "Raven," "Boar," and "Mackerel." Some of these are strong first-person presentations of attributes associated with elements or objects. "Wind," for example, begins:

I keep moving  
Because nowhere  
Is enough for me—

And "Rats" has the vigour, movement and point of a folk tale. It is one of my favorite poems in the collection. But, in general, these abstract sub-

jects suggest a flagging poetic energy. Some of them, like "Brainwaves," are flat and prosey, and others, like "Stone" and "Path," come dangerously near to children's verse.

What Hoffman wants to do is suggested in the opening lines of one of his more successful poems, "Eagles."

When things are creatures and the creatures speak  
We can lose, for a moment, the desolation  
Of our being

Imperfect images of an indifferent god.  
If we listen to our fellows then,  
If we heed them,

The brotherhood that links the stars in one  
Communion with the feathery dust of earth  
And with the dead

Is ours.

But the attempt to achieve simplicity, to establish a center upon which the attention can focus rewardingly, overshoots its mark. The brotherhood does not always come off. Some of these poems with abstract subjects are uncomfortably cute. "Mackerel" begins: "He's one in a million," and "Shrew" starts out cute and then turns harsh, like a minor Victorian getting nasty.

There are other poems that meet experience more directly. "The Translator's Party" is a straightforward, tough account of a human event that moves vigorously to a climax, but the title poem, "The Center of Attention," about a potential suicide poised to leap from a bridge, lacks this fascination, though the subject would appear more dramatic. The conclusion lacks force largely because many of the observations in the poem border on the banal. One feels the account might just as well have been in prose. Yet other poems do not seem fully drawn together. "The Princess Casamassima" runs in two tonalities—the chat of the classroom and the chant of Yeats—that do not coincide. In some of the poems this sense of incompleteness suggests that the works are not finished poems, but drafts. "Vows," for example, seems to need a further intensifying revision, though the Hoffman virtues surface in the final stanzas.

Some of these 'draft poems' succeed, as does "Runner," which also exploits the familiar fabular method. The narrative is general, nearly mythic, but it is given force through a controlled narrative. And perhaps the fable method works best in "The Poem," where the poem becomes a

kind of heroic last survivor, achieving its purpose after traversing its necessary wasteland.

It is my impression that *The Center of Attention* will eventually be seen as a transitional collection, suffering the consequences of a poetic search that began with *Striking the Stones*. It is a collection of poems that reveals a need for some larger organizing purpose in which individual poems can become vital parts. But that larger purpose remains slightly beyond the poet's grasp. Artificial schemes of elements, animals, objects, directions do not meet the need. What seems to be required is a crucial human event from which will follow a series of emotionally associated expressions. Perhaps, like Levine, he should turn and face his own living dead. It is as though Hoffman has himself not resolved the ambivalence of "The Center of Attention" and has focussed upon objects and ideas peripheral to the true center of his poetic ambitions. His poetic abilities are not in doubt, but there is some question, I feel, about Hoffman's method of marshalling those powers.

Just the opposite seems to be the case with George Keithley, whose *The Donner Party* (1972) was such a compellingly successful narrative sequence. There, the total story supported the vigorous parts of the poem to such an extent that the entranced reader never questioned local details. The same cannot be said for *Song in a Strange Land* (1974), which, though a good volume, is not so strong as *The Donner Party* because the organizing structure of this recent book is not firm enough to carry the individual poems, which are uneven in quality.

My three favorite poems in this collection are all detached, commanding pictures. "A Photo by Brady" captures the mood and tone of the frontier subjects of Mathew Brady's early photographic art. The language is highly evocative without being pretentious and the form of the poem is regular—a modified ottava rima stanza. "How Crazy Horse Was Killed" is a first-person narrative that describes the dramatic circumstances surrounding the murder of the famous Indian chief, and "Geese Going North" is a forceful natural picture as well as a telling image of the human desire for freedom and peace that ends with these lines:

At rest on the water, wide wings withdrawn,  
they float over the lake in its last light,  
blue pool of the soul that deepens with the night.

There are many other fine poems in this volume, but oddly enough the most personal in tone—as in the section entitled "Early Life"—are the least successful. Indian poems, such as "He Is Burning" or "Morning Star Man," are more moving. Keithley is able to imagine other persons and



other times with the emotional strength of personal experience and is able to convey the sense of an encompassing structure in a way that Hoffman seems to want and that Levine is, in his own way, beginning to manage. But Keithley's actual poem-by-poem technical skill does not match these others'. There are clumsy poems like "Speech of the Dead Pilot's Spirit," and simplistic songs like "A Song for Salt Lake," and there are heavy poems that want to be downright realistic and yet portentous like "The Red Bluff Rodeo." However, this is a strong volume of poetry not because it offers fully polished verse, but because it transmits an authentic emotional force. The poems make you believe what the author tells you in his preface when he says: "I think our struggle over the land is not a history of events but an evolving emotional life."

If Keithley's book is unified by an overarching purpose and emotional intensity, J. Michael Yates's *Nothing Speaks for the Blue Moraines* (new and selected poems, 1973) achieves its unity through a concentration and economy of subject matter and method. Verse poems are scarcely distinguishable from the prose poems included from *The Great Bear Lake Meditations*. Yates's images press upon the imagination as heavily as his themes, for they are mainly spatial, suggesting weight and mass, the kinds of images one might expect from an acute, nearly blind person of extraordinary sensibility. A poem like "Whale" imaginatively suggests the *feel* of one's struggle with anxiety.

When the darkness appears just a little darker  
Than it should, go liquid, it is only  
The whale rising. The biggest beast is not  
Unexpected; the instant of arrival is surprising.  
Go liquid. Get darker than the dark.

When, unexpectedly, the largest darkness  
Is rising darker than all darkness should,  
The ice floe is breaking up instead  
Of merely melting. Swallow the water.  
The whale is smaller than water. Swallow.

Many of the poems are so clearly technical experiments that they smell of light machine oil. Yet even the clearly contrived poems can work, as "Reversal" does.

The shadow  
Of a bird  
Settled an instant  
On the transparent twig  
Behind her eyes.

Then flew.

Now  
All my journeys  
Begin at their destinations.

I shall  
Climb this violet mountain  
From its snow-summit down.

Though Yates's poems are often obscure, some of that obscurity can be overcome by recognizing a few of the permanent landmarks of his poetic territory. One of his principal subjects is human consciousness itself—its development and its relationship to matter, but more specifically to such abstract ideas as Time and Space. Man's consciousness has evolved from brute unconsciousness giving him a dubious advantage over animals, for it leaves him conscious as well of the nothingness at his center. When Yates writes: "I'm the nothing who dreams the something with whom the world dreams itself in contract [sic]," he is condensing this very impression.

In order to convey this sense of inner nothingness, which consists paradoxically of a plethora of impulses, Yates creates a sort of subjective correlative. "Geese arise in my inside skies when the wolf-pack gathers in my groin," he says, or again, "The wolves pulled him down from inside, then ate skinward." Fundamental for understanding this subjective correlative is the prose poem "I Am Alive," which concludes: "After the thaw, I appeared with these alluvial lines some call a face. My name is Nothing; I contain all time and all space." Another excellent prose poem, "The Pistol," not only carries out the entire fable of an internal population, but through its statement of the possibility of suicide as a human option touches upon another prominent theme of *Blue Moraines*, pessimism. A philosophical gloom dampens the excitement of language, which rarely takes off, but only sparks and glistens. Lines like the following are common in the poems from *Canticle for Electronic Music*:

Everything begins anywhere—ends somewhere exactly.

Space and time divide one another.

Nothing everythings. Destruction creates.

Every descent is uphill at bottom.

After all, Yates's poems are intriguing, sometimes funny, though never entirely satisfying. It is like eating snow—you want to bite and it quenches your thirst instead. Perhaps a few last quotations will indicate the evasive quality of this writing. In the last composition of the book, Yates writes "Whatever I did to be, / Let that be a lesson to me" and ends the volume: "It is / The wind that does not blow, I'm waiting for."

If Yates gives the impression of a poet unified under the abstract pressure of time and space, resolving his empty center into atomistically explosive observations, Annie Dillard is more like a comet letting its flashy dust fall where it may. *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (1974), her first collection of poems, has a cocky gentleness. Fine poems such as "Feast Days," "The Shape of the Air" and "The Dominion of Trees" reveal a vivacious picture-making ability, but the neat phrases that sit so well beside one another sometimes do not appear very comfortable in the larger frame of whole poems. Many of Dillard's poems suggest in their stumbling deftness an intermittent cornucopia. The title poem takes me nowhere at all, yet it sports vivid little passages along its difficult length, like this:

I met him on the flat space  
in the brain—  
thin bones strewn  
in a box, like lace.

There is a real mixture of quality in these poems from the banal "Eleanor at the Office," to the child-like "Tan from the Sun," to the pretentiously casual "Some Questions and Answers about Natural History." But what is evident throughout is a sprightly, lively mind and an enviable command of imagery, as my favorite poem in this collection, "The Shape of the Air," amply demonstrates.

These books offer an opportunity to generalize about many features of the craft, but I would like to return to one idea—that of unity. Appearing separately in journals, Daniel Hoffman's poems would probably satisfy a reader more than those of the other poets represented here; but whereas Levine's collected poems coalesce and reinforce themselves through unified tone, technique and subject matter, Hoffman's do not. Levine has caught an emotional consistency that Keithley shares, though Keithley is not so uniform a technician as the other two. Yates also has this consistency and exploits it by limiting his intellectual armory. Annie

Dillard, the newest and least unified of these writers, does not seem to want the unity the others crave. One value of collecting poems into books is that they then have the opportunity of performing an instructive alchemy upon one another. Here a volume of probable gold turns to lead, there mercury coalesces to pure silver. If this process is instructive for readers who have known some of the poems piecemeal, it is far more valuable for the poets themselves, still laboring at their magic tables.

JOHN R. REED