



NOV 11, 2009

a petite ukelele

ROBERT P. BAIRD

The other day I received a copy of my friend Andrew Zawacki's new book *Petals of Zero Petals of One* in the mail. The book, and the email that preceded it, got me wondering about the last time I saw Andrew, and I realized that it must have been a few years back, in Paris. I was living in Bologna at the time, and I'd flown over to France to visit some friends and to spend a few days hanging out with Stephen Rodefer. (Stephen and I had traded approximately one hundred and sixty-two thousand emails in the course of editing his "Age in its Cage" essay for *Chicago Review*, but we'd never met in person.)

For our first meeting, Stephen suggested that we find each other at a celebration for Etel Adnan that was taking place near the Luxembourg Gardens. I got to the event late, right at the end of Adnan's reading, and took a seat near the back. A tall woman in a white dress stood up to read when Adnan finished, and her meditation was good enough that I knew it couldn't be just anybody. Somehow I'd noticed that the guy a few seats over was taking notes in English, and when there was a break in the program I asked him who the woman was. "Cole Swensen," he said, and when he looked up I saw that it was Andrew. I knew him from Chicago, where we'd met through his future collaborator and taken a class on mysticism together. There in Paris we traded quick, surprised greetings, and then the celebration picked up again with a simultaneous reading of Adnan's work in Japanese and French. (This would be topped a little later by a performance in Arabic, English, French, and Japanese.)

After the reading, Andrew introduced me to Stephen, who presented the very picture of bohemian deshabelle. He wore a beaten leather jacket with a rhinestone 'SR' pin and polka-dot pajama bottoms for pants. In place of handkerchiefs, three paper napkins—red, yellow, and blue—flared from his jacket pocket. Round-eyed tortoise-shell glasses straddled his purplish nose, and the triangle of beard at his chin matched his sideburns' shade of gray. His cheeks were ruddy; he looked a little like Elton John.

I was wearing dark jeans and a linen jacket I'd bought earlier in the day, a pinstriped number with the kind of high lapel that my brief time in Italy had taught me to love. After we shook hands, Stephen looked me up and down like we were distant relatives who hadn't met for years. He was plainly disappointed. "You're more elegant than I expected. I guess that's Chicago."

"No," I said, instantly abashed. "Just me trying to play the European." (For the record: I am many things, but elegant is not one of them.)

The three of us chatted for a while, and then Andrew left to talk to someone else. We found our way to Adnan, and Stephen told her that I was working on Dante. She said she had a book on him that was worth my seeing, and that we should come by her apartment the next day. We agreed enthusiastically. On our way out of the reception, Stephen took a box of wine from one of the tables and half hid it under the flap of his jacket. "We might need this," he said, and indeed we did.

Just three years later, that day and the two that followed it already seem impossibly stylized, an extravagant cartoon of literary life in the capital of Europe. Stephen took me to the Closserie des Lilas, where a host of approving waiters nodded us toward the brass plaques that marked the favorite perches of Beckett, Hemingway, and Sartre. We went to Shakespeare and Co. and listened to the British manager recite a hilarious précis of the book he planned to write about Gertrude Stein's *Pétainisme*. We visited Adnan at her apartment, where she showed us the Dante book and some art by Man Ray. She suggested coffee at an outdoor cafe nearby, and for several hours we laughed to stories about Djuna Barnes and Robert Wilson.

On the last night of my stay, we went to an evening reading by Bernard Heidsieck, Steve McCaffery, and Karen Mac Cormack. The event was at Point Ephémère, a tall, open concrete venue on the heartbreaking Canal Saint-Martin. I saw Andrew again while waiting in line for a Heineken. In the course of our conversation he told me that his dissertation was taking longer than expected because he'd promised himself that poetry would always be his first priority. In the weeks to come (and sometimes still) this would cause me much consternation, for it seemed at once absolutely the right thing to do and absolutely the opposite of anything I was doing.

Heidsieck's performance was good enough to make McCaffery and Mac Cormack sound like amateurs, but they didn't seem to mind. After the show, Stephen and I attached ourselves to the post-performance dinner group that included, among others, two American avant-garde types. It was not our party, and one of the two made it clear that he did not appreciate our interloping. Fortunately for me, however, Stephen is not someone easily persuaded by others' discomfort, especially when the discomfort in question is one of his own making. We stayed.


Though each side feinted more than once toward open war, the hostilities remained latent for most of the meal, giving me the chance to wonder at how nearly the conversational style of Stephen's antagonist matched the dense theoretical impaction of his prose. The other poet had a free and easy sense of humor, but she also had the unfortunate habit of interrupting her stories with heavy-handed ideological commentaries, as if she needed to regularly remind herself not to be charming. The highlight of the evening, a moment made for the academic comedy I hope I'll never debase myself to write, came after Stephen suggested that the poets put their son in touch with an acquaintance of his, someone he described as "a Wordsworth scholar who's basically a Derridean." "Oh, our son is an *activist*," one of the poets said in full earnest. "I don't think he'd go for a Derridean."

All of this is to say (though I could forgive you for hardly believing it) that Andrew Zawacki is a real poet, and a good poet, and that you should buy his new book *Petals of Zero Petals of One*. Here's a bit from the terrific first poem "Georgia," the winner of the 1913 Prize:

you're blizkrieg Georgia
 don't 'lady' me Georgia
 I've got theremin lacing the bloodstream George
 and a spinning roulette for a ticker George
 a 16.6% chance
 You're a bitch Georgia
 a drill bit
 by me I mean third-person plural Georgia

a lake effect Georgia
all haggardlike Georgia
a hangman Georgia
a hanged man Georgia
here's a lullaby Georgia
with geraniums Georgia
there there Georgia
no there there Georgia


3 Responses

1.  Kent Johnson says:
November 11, 2009 (Edit)

Um, Bobby, those "avant-garde" expat Yank poets whom you don't name...


No fair!

Reply

2.  Robert P. Baird says:
November 11, 2009 (Edit)

Sorry, Kent. I come to praise, not to bury.

Reply

3.  Michael Hansen says:
November 12, 2009 (Edit)

I have no such colorful tale, but I do have an audio file of Andrew reading "Georgia" in NYC a few years back if you want it, Mr. Baird. Lovely poem. Lovely guy, too.

Reply

Leave a Reply

[NB: The authors of *digital emunction* make no representation to objectivity or impartiality, but we use the *Propaganda* category to mark particularly egregious conflicts of interest.]

Powered by WP exec PHP.