

PERCEPTION AND THE VISUAL LYRIC

Wayne Miller. *Only the Senses Sleep*. Western Michigan Press, 2006; Katie Peterson. *This One Tree*. Western Michigan Press, 2006.

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Part of Western Michigan University's *New Issues* series, first books by Wayne Miller and Katie Peterson both concern themselves with the textures of place, exploring through modes of sensory attention how the self and world encounter both place and being. Each poet resides clearly within the intimate space of lyric, while offering poems lustrous in reading external surroundings like narrative structures. In *Only the Senses Sleep* and *This One Tree*, Miller and Peterson, respectively, reveal the silent gaps within those structures and the indirect gestures that illuminate them. Miller's work with the visual becomes a way of telling and even discovering narrative, and claiming for observation a key role in deciphering meaning—or the lack of it—in all that surrounds us. For Peterson, poetry traverses the process of making and resisting narrative, tracing the glimmers of language escaping the selves and stories enclosed by the lexicons of unreflective usage.

Wayne Miller's *Only the Senses Sleep* opens with "Self-Portrait in a Blank Room," a poem that announces the book's interest in intimacy and interiors, containment and alienation, and a disorienting sense of displacement in tension with the grounding work of memory. The title itself is suggestive, of course, and the first line immediately descends into a darkness of physical/psychic place: "This pictureless room feels submerged, / as if I'm living at the bottom of a diving well" (13). The poem moves through ghostly memories that begin to inhabit the room, the speaker remembering various moments of blank rooms in his life. Exhibiting the stylistic qualities pursued in much of the volume, the poem's regular pattern of lineation and stanza length moves through nineteen boxy three-line stanzas to arrive at the final line: "I believed the room couldn't remain without me," set off on a single line (15). Perhaps I read too much into this first poem, but the sense of containment and incremental unveiling of detail encouraged by the regular stanzaic form finally seems not be about the poem or the room that is the ostensible subject of the poem, but about the "I," which claims that nothing else has substance "without me." Although a lyric move that potentially can reveal new perspectives on inner and outer worlds, the privileging of the "I" in too many of Miller's poems gets in the way, especially when it interrupts an exquisitely honed photographic eye and an intimacy accrued

through small details and image-based lines that, at their best, suggest the visual world as itself inherently, deeply poetic. “After Macado,” for example, begins by surveying a series of small, almost still life arrangements that build through the first four short stanzas; the poem then shifts to I-centered stanzas that carry more than half the length of the poem to its end:

The mugs in the kitchen
cradle their cupped air, the faucet
holds back its release of water,

though I can make out an occasional
wet stamp against the porcelain.

Out on the balcony, the leaves
tremble as the upstairs watering
silently threads down the vines;

in the street café, the plates lift
like flattened bells from the tables.

I’m learning to release the world from the straps and float it
in the lit pools of its own surfaces.

I’m learning to lie hear beside it,
to allow its breath against my neck...(32)

And et-cetera, with multiple references tumbling through the remaining stanzas to “me,” “my body,” and what “I’m learning,” with barely a foothold in the exterior world that invites us so intriguingly and quietly into the poem. Moreover, it’s an exterior world that, in this volume’s strongest poems, communicates more fully than the self-referential lyric *I* manages to do in its insistently interruptive appearances throughout the volume. The eye of the *I* is necessary to these inherently lyrical poems and needn’t be extinguished—just toned down and demanding less attention.

Indeed, in creating interiors of subtle textures and the painterly restraint of a precisionist, or in turning to the urban streets of a “city of the smallest narratives,” Miller activates rich emotional structures that forego conventional lyric structures of self-revelation and narrative structures of plot, while suggesting another access to or layer of the story at hand and the consciousness underlying it (“My Apartment as a Diorama,” 46). In all of his poems, a story lurks, and it is all the more satisfying when we don’t get the details but feel the weight and pull of the story’s silences and marginalized moments. A good example of these qualities might be found in “—Buttons,”

the final section of “Preservation Triptyche,” which begins:

The jar of buttons on his mother’s vanity,
every size and shape,

like swollen grains of sand. Years
collected from the shirts of his family,—

stored there like washed-out faces
in a shoebox of photographs. (18)

Miller’s attention to small detail and his restrained concision combine with surprising but non-showy metaphors to quietly move us, as in an earlier section of the same poem, “—Clothespins”:

Now the pins clasp the lines
like notes on a drooping staff—
a handwritten score of her memory.
When she wakes,

the sentences will come back to her,
the sentences hanging there
without the words. (17)

In “Ice Storm,” the clear-eyed rendering of “split heartwood glossed with ice” mounts a short series of quick, metaphoric foci: “young leaves like shriveled hands/ wearing glass gloves”; “basketball hoops hang like chandeliers/ saplings have been dipped in clear wax,/ cars are nailed fast to their driveways // with crystalline spikes” (50). The cropping and framing that attends these imagistic moments suggests the medium of photography, not merely in attaining a representational verisimilitude (which is not what the poems necessarily strive for), but in caressing the glimmering unnoticed detail. Other poems complicate the lens-like clarity with a shadowy sense of photographs half processed, or, more precisely, in *the process of coming to* full development. This evocation of a process of coming into vision enriches a poem like “Empty Warehouse”:

....The windows
are time-lacquered with dust, the lights
unable to buzz into light.

Imagine the timeclock’s hands
still in motion—not frozen
beneath the cracked glass—,

Imagine them crossing each other,
 entangling the hours to be stored away
 like yarn, as the hours

with or without record
 entangle us. Nothing's here
 but the possibility emptiness provides. (51)

Often, Miller is drawn to visual art as an occasion for poetry, and the volume includes ekphrastic responses to the photographers Stieglitz and Atget, and to the painter Pollock. Not surprisingly, the two photographers are known for their commitment to photography as an art, a medium through which the artist's subjective vision could be rendered. At the same time, the record of rural and urban scenes that both artists produced underlies a technology of documentation that, rhetorically at least, was often in tension with the professed role of the artist behind the camera. There's something of that tension in Miller's poems of ekphrasis, and its effectiveness cuts two ways, depending on the degree to which the poem seeks to explain the significance of its "vision." For example, in "From the Window—'291'", "Night has dropped its black gelatin / onto New York City," and "a clothesline / across the alley is a string of syllables," both lovely re-presentations of the night in Stieglitz's photograph, enriching his visual details (to my mind) with a subtle suggestiveness that is then thwarted (again, to my mind) by the prosaic amplification of the clothesline image: it is "a conversation between neighbors." This is a small moment of editorial intrusion, which, like the floating "I" in too many of the poems, interrupts a line of vision with the speaker's insistence that we refocus on his reading, mindset, or experience. The poem ends with what I take to be a tribute to the lives lost in that city's terrorist attacks, lines carrying that string of clothesline syllables way past the forced metaphor of conversation:

....In this thick
 snow-mute silence, you can hear echoes

of people as they disappear
 from these towers of our cohabitation,
 from the light they're flooded with. (29)

Miller's poems, in their most powerful but quiet moments, insist on these cross-currents of light and silence, vision and being.

The responsibility of attentive vision consumes the work of Katie Peterson. She chooses to end *This One Tree* with an *ars poetica* of sorts, as "Leg-

end” reminds her readers of a directive her entire volume asserts:

No one can pay attention for you.
 No one can ask the questions you ask
 How to ask. (94)

How to pay attention and how to ask the questions develop as two major impulses in this volume, embracing a range of poetic encounters with the natural world that, at the same time, lead us into encounters with language itself. Peterson’s frame of reference depends heavily on natural elements, seasonal cycles, and the “wild symmetry” she encourages her reader to “Be on the lookout for” in the world. However, things are not always what they seem or following what should “naturally” be happening. The first poem insists, three times, that we must be “on the lookout,” we must discern and question “What must be unseen” (“Air” 15). Throughout the remaining poems, an assertion of poetic voice and narrative structure coincides with—collides with—unremitting skepticism about such textual devices, as if they are no more dependable than the nature they try to convey. Moreover, the lyric “I” comes under suspicion as a possible culprit—how can the “I” use language without skewering the world it seeks to relate? In “You Asked,” the speaker confesses, “I began to tell you something and began/ by telling you something else,” admitting doubt about her own ability to say “what I have been trying to say” (66, 67).

Throughout the volume, a physicality of language and image initially seem to promise a potential coherence will emerge from the poetry’s groundedness in the visceral world; nonetheless, that coherence remains an expectation thwarted at its very foundation—much in the mode of Gertrude Stein’s admonition to “act as if there is no use in a center.” De-centered, Peterson’s poetry evokes a lyric sensibility while deferring and displacing narratives and voices that seem constantly in the process of emptying themselves. Not as formally radical as poetry associated with contemporary avant-garde clusters, or with Stein, Peterson’s work nonetheless shares an exploratory unlayering of the processes and operations of language itself. In part, this quality involves the restrained use of the “I,” coupled with a calling-attention-to the customary operations of the lyric I: “The brief interruption of who I am / interrupts and punctuates the day,” muses the character of Adam as he desires to be individualized from the world around him. Indeed, except for poems that gesture toward dramatic monologue (such as this one, from a sequence of poems on Adam and Eve that itself disorients the authoritative narrative), the “I” seems to be purposely cast as almost inconsequential.

Amidst a poetry intensely visual, if only in quick referential gestures, Peterson's attention to the natural world interweaves with an attention to language. In part, this is a matter of sound qualities. The first section of the book, in particular, develops a series of condensed, short-lined poems that strip away language while foregrounding a heavily accented and alliterative prosody. Almost echoing the stresses and sounds of Old English prosody, these poems resist the full sentence and often play with grammatical functions:

This scattered removal:
 leaves dried dry,
 brief corners turned,
 still interruptions.
 Liftings. Upwardsnesses.
 Those earlyfallen,
 where have they gone?
 None on the groundswell
 of freshdirted root.
 None on the lawn, lying.
 Trunk still so dark.
 Branches spindles.
 Care at the base.
 Care not fresh love.
 Clock in the distance,
 Face in these branches,
 how sounds grow long,
 lessen the hours
 that go on—
 The quarters of hours.
 Taken away. ("Song" 17)

One-word sentences, questions, and repetition, along with a pronounced spondaic patterning, remind one (again) of Stein, although without the radical refusal of logical grammar that the earlier poet modeled. Nonetheless, Steinian moments seep in, as in a later section of poems, most of which are repeatedly entitled "Tree," evoking Stein's linguistic concept of *insistence* rather than *repetition*. For Stein, the re-occurrence of words is not mere repetition, which suggests sameness, but is an operation of insistence, or the different encounter we experience each time we come to a word, by virtue of differing contexts or orderings, and even the experience of having encountered the word before. Thus, the word is never the same with each new arrival at it. In one of many poems entitled "Song," forms of "winter" are repeated as noun, gerund, verb—recalling, perhaps, a bit of

Wallace Stevens in its first two stanzas:

It wintered in you. It did.
 Wintering. There was no cure
 for it, it wintered.
 You are a cider press,
 you kept it as long as you could.

But then it wintered,
 and then it was dead.
 Under the whitewashed apple
 tree you wrote your name:
 again: your name was winter: (86)

Peterson's work is full of repeated words and phrases, whether within individual poems, titles, or the volume as a whole, and particularly in the concise and disciplined economy of her lines, repetitions suggest *insistence* as a linguistic structuring of reality. Not often, but on occasion, lines will echo Stein's syntactic resistance and grammatical play more overtly: "Where the trees arranged themselves / In the electric backlit last act blue like tangled wires" ("Aubade of the Tree", 55).

Often, in Peterson, there is a sense of nature off-kilter and, relatedly, of time and experience having no inherent order. These poems don't suggest chaos, exactly, but a kind of swerving from the linear narratives through which we frame our lives in the processes of memory or hindsight. Combined with a Dickinsonian pull toward indirection—to tell truth slantwise—an oddly acute vision of the natural world, especially, often reveals it to be full of off-timed, out-of-sync processes. Such vision translates into renderings of human experience, often through truncated line rhythms and/or swerving conjunctions, as in "The World":

No one took care of it: it wintered.
 Then you wake up, someone gives you whatever,
 whatever, pink trees in your head,
 silence, silence is the shape of your head.

You wake. The yard. A distinct world.
 Not wintering, no. Shoes left out.
 Someone approaches, his shyness
 like a more forthright self beside his self.

Like winter, a constant motif in this volume, Peterson's poems often seem involved in a process of stripping away the finish of syntax, line, stanza,

lyric, narrative, voice—to “unfinish”. Her final poem, “Legend,” evokes this process as part of the artistic process, both of the young novice nun who is the subject of the poem and is painting a fresco of the Virgin Mary in 1844, and her own poetic process:

She lights no candle. If she paints
it is by ear and by all slim lights
through cracks from doors outside.
There is moon enough to live by.
At your beck she unfinishes you again.

While difficult to extrapolate from a single poem, this process of working toward the “unfinish” lingers with me in thinking about the volume as a whole. Precise language that deliberately doesn’t give us information; careful arrangements of words that, nonetheless, suggest a language that can’t be ordered; a pull toward language or lexicon as a location, whether pure or constantly mediated; an unknotting of how language is attached to concepts: these are some of the untangle, strange, and lovely qualities of a book obsessed with a “look of life unable to sit still” (“Legend” 98).