

NO WASTE. MANY LANDS.

Richard Berengarten. *Selected Writings of Richard Berengarten, vols. 1-5: For the Living, The Manager, The Blue Butterfly, In a Time of Drought, Under Balkan Light*. Cambridge: Salt, 2008.

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The work of Richard Berengarten will already be familiar to some readers of the *Notre Dame Review*. Under the name of Richard Burns he has published, during the last four decades, a large, and still growing, body of original, independent and, in so many ways, *unexpected* poetry.¹ His first volume, *The Easter Rising, 1967*, appeared in 1968. Since then, Berengarten has published more than 20 books, displaying a range of subject matter and technical mastery that many poets writing today would be hard put to equal.

With the publication of these five tastefully-presented hardback editions of his recent work by Salt, one of the most productive and influential poetry publishers in the UK, Richard Burns has chosen to repossess the family name of his father, the cellist and saxophonist Alexander Berengarten. It must be more than a simple coincidence (Do “simple coincidences” even exist for poets?) that the decision to return to his original family name came with his 65th birthday and accompanies the appearance of this new series, which is in effect a “retrospective exhibition” of his accomplishment to date.

The first four of these books had already been published in paperback: *The Manager* by Elliot & Thompson in 2001, *In a Time of Drought* by Shoestring Press in 2006, *For the Living* and *The Blue Butterfly* by Salt, in 2004 and 2006, respectively. *Under Balkan Light* appears for the first time here and completes Berengarten’s *Balkan Trilogy* (whose first two volumes are *The Blue Butterfly* and *In a Time of Drought*), a complex and profound celebration of the cultures and history of that crucial area of eastern Europe.

Because he has travelled widely, and lived in several countries, and absorbed from those experiences a great deal of the material that informs his poetry, Berengarten cannot easily be dropped into the potentially restrictive categories of English or British poet. His interests and concerns, the influences and traditions he works from, are broader and more varied. And this reluctance to conform to received expectations is surely one of the reasons for the relative paucity of critical attention he has received in the United Kingdom. *For the Living* contains a selection of longer poems and poem

sequences written in Greece, Italy, England and former Yugoslavia between 1965 and 2000, and is therefore an excellent sampling of that rich variety that is, in my opinion, one of Berengarten's deepest strengths. For those who may be acquainted with the 2004 edition, this new version of the selection offers a few notable differences. Three poems have been removed. "The Ballad of the Seagull" and "Wayside Shrine" are included in *The Blue Butterfly*; and one of this reviewer's favorites, "The Voice in the Garden," has now found its definitive home in *Under Balkan Light*.

In compensation, two previously uncollected poems have been added: "The Offense of Poetry" (written and published in 1973) and "Day Estate" (written during the 80s and unpublished until now). The former, a delicate, abstract evocation of the mercurial interplay between consciousness and perception, is influenced, according to Berengarten's notes at the end of the book, by the writings of Martin Buber and Heraclitus. The latter, in Berengarten's own words, is a "twelve-part set of variations on the Canonical Hours, composed in honour of Margaret Thatcher and published nearly thirty years later [...] in recognition of the enduring legacy of Thatcherian conservatism, which is still apparently considered fit for purpose throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" (222).

Some of the other significant pieces included in *For the Living* are the long, open-field contemplation on the origins of poetry, *Avebury* (1971); "Angels" (1974-6), a richly fanciful allegory on human destructiveness and the (possibly evolutionary) pathways of vital transformation; "The Rose of Sharon" (1972-3), a tightly-structured "Mandala-poem" reflecting on "the feminine aspect of the divine presence in the Kabbalah"; the narrow, trunk-like, 365-line-long, downward-growing *Tree* (1978-9); "Against the Day" (1987), an intricately-interwoven sequence of 18 nonce-form stanzas, each composed of 5 couplets, that was written for Berengarten's daughter on her eighteenth birthday and is a commentary on Jan Vermeer's little-known painting, *The Guitar Player* (which supposedly depicts the painter's daughter); and *Croft Woods* (1998-9), a literal walk through the imaginary woods where the speaker perceives that the emergence of poetry from perception, through feeling and into coherent thought and language is a natural, organic process of growth.

And, as impressive as this partial selection from the book may be, even more impressive, for my money, is the 13-poem sequence *Black Light* (first published in 1982). This small book is a brilliant response to—and imaginative collaboration with—the Greek poet George Seferis, in particular his long poem *The Thrush* and his journal entries for the year of its completion, 1946. Stylistically, the sequence is a *tour de force*, exhibiting much deftness

with forms ranging from the villanelle to the prose poem. And while each one of these poems is preceded by and deeply resonates with a passage from Seferis, *Black Light* is more than an interesting case of intertextuality. Above and beyond the complicated posthumous “exchange” between a Greek and an English poet, and the multi-layered play of reflections and echoes and subtle transmutations between the Greek and English languages, apart from its profound vision of the blackness that Seferis perceived at the core of that burning Hellenic light, these poems vividly capture the very particular sensual qualities of the life of Greece that those who have been lucky enough to experience will immediately identify with.

The longest of Berengarten’s poem sequences, which he worked on from 1978 to 2000, is *The Manager*. This ambitious narrative is, among other things, Berengarten’s “post-modern” response to the fragmented Modernist aesthetic of Pound and Eliot and might have been subtitled “He do the police in different different voices.” As Berengarten puts it in his *Postscript*, the poem consists

of one hundred sections and three buffer pieces. It is written in a form that I call the *verse-paragraph*. This is related to the *verset* of French poetry, and is used in other European literatures as well. [...] I believe it to be a prosodic unit of great strength and flexibility, well suited both to the cadences and varied registers of modern English and to the particular demands made by a long poem. (161)

Over the course of those 103 relatively connected (or disconnected) sections, we are given a cornucopia of speech-acts, images and ideas—more than enough information to piece together the life and times of a London-based, middle-management executive (Charles Bruno, aka *Homo aspirans*, Incipient man, aka Adam Kadmon) who, as the narrative develops, is forced to invest his whole existential capital in relearning how to “manage” life—that is, how to love—in a spiritual wasteland.

In 1961, Samuel Beckett famously declared: “To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.” Beckett himself had carried out that task through the gradually disintegrating form of his *Trilogy*. Forty years on, *The Manager* moves in the opposite direction, through disintegration and towards reintegration. Berengarten uses the constantly repeated, determined form of the verse-paragraph to resist the mess of modern urban life. He not only “channels” that mess through the form; the form, in a sense, disciplines (or manages) its content.

Our Modernist predecessors invented a whole rag-and-bone shop of fragmented forms to embody a conviction that the world at the beginning of the 20th century had already begun to fall apart. They seem from the

standpoint of the beginning of the 21st century to have been right. Now is the time to try to put it together again. The story-line of *The Manager* may be fragmentary, but the story-line's vehicle is not. To echo the title of one of Robert Frost's sonnets, this is Berengarten's "one step backward taken"—from flux and disorder toward order and meaning—and offers the reader a model and an opportunity to construct something more than Frost's "momentary stay against confusion."

This new edition of the poem, apart from some alterations in the ordering of the sections, contains a considerably longer and more detailed list of the author's Notes on contents, sources and references, as well as a new "Editor's Preface" (written by Chris Hamilton-Emery, the dynamic "manager" of Salt), that provides an informative description of the publishing history of the poem and an overview of critical responses to it from 1980 to the present.

The third of this five-volume set, *The Blue Butterfly*, is also the first part of Berengarten's *Balkan Trilogy*. As its "Editorial Note" explains, "The book's twin points of departure are a massacre that took place in Šumarice, outside of Kragujevac in October 1941, and an encounter with a blue butterfly at the same location in May 1985. The poems are laced into their contexts by documents, photography, a postscript, and endnotes which provide references and dates and places of composition" (xiii).

Berengarten worked on this extraordinary collection of poems for around 20 years, from its first inception on 25 May, 1985, when the butterfly "came to rest on the forefinger of [his] left hand—that is, [his] writing hand" (123) until its final publication by Salt in 2006. Over the course of those two decades, the book formed itself into a complex structure: seven sections, each composed of seven poems. A number of attempts have already been made to explain the significance of this structure (which also appears in *In a Time of Drought*) and many more will certainly follow in the years to come.² But whatever the reasons for it may be, this close attention to structure also serves to underscore the importance of form in everything Berengarten writes. Among all the other things it accomplishes, this collection is another technical *tour de force*. From the "found poems" adapted from authentic German military communiqués in "Two Documents" in Section 1 ("The Blue Butterfly") to the seven villanelles that make up Section 2, "The Death of Children," and the seven sonnets of Section 3, "Seven Wreathes," to the regularly-rhyming quatrains in poems like "The Shadow Well" and "Ballad of the Seagull" (in Section 4, "Seven Songs of the Dead") to the modified *terza rima* of "Diagonal" (in Section 5, "Seven Statements of Survivors") to the free-verse forms used in Section 6, "Flight of the Imago," to

the short, three-line stanzas Berengarten developed to mimic the structure of Chinese hexagrams (in various poems of Section 7, “Seven Blessings”)—the technical mastery demonstrated here is both exhilarating and sobering (exhilarating in the context of the humdrum, free-verse, personal anecdotes that so often pass for poetry these days, and sobering for those who write them).

And yet, even more worth noting, the display of forms is not ostentatious. In almost every case, the technique doesn’t intrude between the reader and the content; it participates with the sense and delivers it efficiently. Because the sense (which is also the *direction*) of this book is of utmost importance. It is probably unfashionable among the competing cliques and coteries of the poetry-game today, but Berengarten refuses to put on a cynical pose, to descend into bitterness or to yield to despair. *The Blue Butterfly* is a poetic condemnation of all-too-human inhumanity and a moving commemoration of the suffering and nobility of the almost 3,000 victims of the Kragujevac massacre. But as its section titles indicate, it also does more. This book witnesses, commemorates, laments and, whether fashionable or not, affirms and blesses.

The same can be said of *In a Time of Drought*, which shares the 7-section/7-poem structure of *The Blue Butterfly*. Here though, each poem consists of four rhyming couplets, with a chorus that varies from section to section between 2, 3 and 4 lines. Because of their musicality, their conspicuous use of rhyme and the ease with which they read, these short poems may initially appear to be simplistic, sing-song jingles; but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, as the prose postscript, “Arijana’s Thread,” points out, this book is constructed on a solid cultural foundation: the pan-Balkan rain-making ceremonies whose principal figure is the rain maiden known as *Dodola* or *Peperuda*. In this specific context, the book’s lilting, apparently infantile rhythms—which are based on both English and Balkan folk-jingles—turn out to be perfectly appropriate.

In addition, the compendium of detailed information in the glossary and notes reveals the thoughtful care with which these poems have been woven with garlands of the plant life of the region and enable the reader to appreciate how the myriad historical and cultural references throughout the book gather irrevocably toward the cataclysm of destruction and death of modern warfare. But like *The Blue Butterfly*, *In a Time of Drought* insists on affirmation and revival. The dynamic tension between the playfulness and childhood innocence suggested by the tone of these poems and the “adult” horrors of war and death to which they lead becomes one of the book’s key elements.

Berengarten lived in what used to be Yugoslavia for three years, from 1987 to 1991. These were key years in which that tense federation of states was beginning to break apart in a series of violent conflicts. His love of the people and deep knowledge of the culture of the Balkans, forged during that period and expanded through many later visits and lasting personal contacts, are the motivating factors for *The Balkan Trilogy*.

Its third volume, *Under Balkan Light*, is a diverse collection of poems giving a much more personal response to his experiences there. It also consists of seven sections, although the number of poems in each one varies from one (the sprawling “Do vidjenja Danitsé”) to twenty-one (in Section 4, “The Voice in the Garden”).

Berengarten’s deep familiarity with the geography and history of the Balkans is powerfully illuminated in “Do vidjenja Danitsé” (Goodby Balkan Belle), which gives the book a firecracker of an opening. This 12-page, free-verse narrative poem (with an additional 7 pages of notes) is, in a certain sense, reminiscent of Whitman; it, too, “sings” the land and its people. Through an imaginary female protagonist who personifies the region, this poem re-presents the geography of the area—literally embedding 77 Balkan place-names within the left-hand side of the text—and retells its history from earliest legends up until the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

The other high point, for me, of *Under Balkan Light*, is section 5, a suite of 17 poems entitled “On the Death of Ivan V. Lalić.” Berengarten and Lalić (1931-96) became very close friends; and Berengarten’s comments on their friendship in his Postscript are pertinent to these poems:

To me Ivan was a kind of wise and knowledgeable older brother. In our conversations, ideas triggered fast, and we often thought of the same things at the same time and finished each other’s sentences. I learned an enormous amount from him. His poems have not only called me. They have resonated for me as tuning instruments for my own. (140)

What makes these poems so striking is not only the quality of their deeply-felt and complicated emotional response to the irrefutable fact of death. One of the central concerns of Berengarten’s poetry has always been one of the central concerns that set Western culture off, something like two and a half centuries ago, into the subversive course toward Romanticism: the need to redefine—or to re-conceive—our understanding of the mystery of death and the relationship between the living and the dead. These poems might be read as a kind of culmination of that movement. If Berengarten “collaborates” with Seferis in the writing of *Black Light*, he goes even further here. These poems reach into the silence of death toward the source of that

lost, responding voice; and in an intimate act of communion, become both yearning question and reply. If the irrefutable facts can be refuted, this is the only way it will ever be done.

This ongoing series of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings* may be a kind of retrospective (and at the age of 65, he deserves one), but not one, as often happens, that signals a summation and an ending. Berengarten continues working on a project called *Manual*, a collection of poems (all having two 5-line stanzas) that celebrate human hands and what we do with them. He has now published three small booklets of twenty poems each through the Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop in New Zealand. Two more of these will round off the total number of poems to 100. He is also working on a book based on the *I Ching*, the Chinese *Book of Changes*, that is to contain 384 poems (a total obtained by multiplying the *I Ching*'s 64 hexagrams by each one's six variant interpretations).

A prolific output, impressive mastery of forms, sweeping breadth of subject matter, depth of both intelligence and feeling, these are the components of a significant poetic accomplishment. Richard Berengarten is, in the opinion of this writer, a unique case among contemporary British poets. The publication of these five volumes should help to make a wider audience aware of this so unlikely, yet manifest and fascinating body of poetry and to confirm Berengarten's status as a major contemporary poet writing in the English language.

NOTES

1. Burns' essay "With Peter Russell in Venice, 1965-1966" appeared in *Notre Dame Review*, 4 and excerpts from *The Manager* in Issue 7. More recently, "Three Poems in Memory of Ivan V. Lalić" were published in issue 26.

2. See essays by Andrew Frisardi, John Lucas, Aleksandar Petrov and Slobodan Rakitić in Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick & Catherine Byfield (eds), *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten* (Cambridge: Salt, forthcoming). At least partially in response to that speculation, Berengarten himself offers his own suggestion in a note on the number seven which has been added for the second edition (138-9).