

# **NOTES & REVIEWS**

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**TAPIOCA WILL BE DADA OR WILL NOT BE**

(Prose for John Olson's *Dada Budapest*)

Dear reader,

See, there's a gold box containing a stillborn opera. I ask you to *picture it*. Excuse me, in fact it is John Olson who is asking you to do that, but we will get to that, too. For now, just stop, sit still (if you wish) and picture the box. It is gold. Now go beyond that, picture opening the box, *seeing* (or feeling, for that matter) what's inside. Do you hear it? It's an opera. Or maybe not, maybe you can hear nothing. For how does a stillborn opera sound? What would that sound like. It sounds stillborn, I would guess. But now it is pictured, and it might smell. It might smell of stillborn. It might smell of Vienna (the city dearest to John Olson, if I'm not mistaken, after Paris). It might smell like glitter or sawdust up your nostrils. It might sound like glockenspiel (remember, reader, the opera is inside the gold box). Now, why am I asking you to do this? Well, all of this is important to me for at least two reasons (there may be more, let me see). Picturing must be crucial, for the author himself asks us to do exactly that; but I am trying to make a point that picturing is as important as hearing, touching, smelling. Even tasting would do. What? An image. And by extension, a poem.

Another reason why this is important to me is that, as John Olson is quick enough to point out, this gold box with a stillborn opera in it "would delight Joseph Cornell." It is not that it takes Cornell to delight in these poems (though it – all true poetry, in fact – does require genuine *involvement*) but it is still crucial to me that Olson is never negligent, always happy to bring in the others of significance, to furnish these rooms / spaces know as poems (and what strange rooms / spaces, they, the *prose* poems: their essence – or rather form – an oxymoron) with the company. Because he *has* the company. What I hear stated and restated again and again is that Olson is "unlike anyone else." Which is fine with me, sure enough. But I think it important to suggest, here, that for all his outlandishness and uniqueness, he is also a poet who belongs, with all the seriousness, the responsibility that this *belonging* may imply, to a certain company of poets. That this company itself is scattered, outlandish or unique, does not make it less of a company. And I don't think anyone has been more insistent on this point than the poet in question himself. After all, that *dada* in the title of the book isn't there for nothing.

Of course, the *company of poets* has had its most vital expression in the American poetry of the past century, but the constellation Olson, at least for this reader, goes way beyond that. Still, we could take a second to quickly sketch the American part of it: among the major poets and companies of “the New American” (to have it in the vein of Donald Allen), surprisingly enough, I think John Olson is least related to another Olson, that is, of course, Charles. This may be just me, but I can imagine John Olson frowning slightly at the megalomaniac ambition, grandiose posture of his “surnamesake.” His company would be more goofy, madcap and zany, that goes from Gertrud Stein (Stein, especially, of *Tender Buttons*) down to that New York flaneur, Frank O’Hara (which in itself is a crooked line). Another elective affinity seems to be the Beats (watch out for the marvelous appearance of Ginsberg in *Dada Budapest*). Among his multiple merits, John Olson should be credited among the few who have had a meaningful reading of Michael McClure. There’s Jackson Mac Low, that wizard of chance, in there. Finally, there is the maverick American surrealist Philip Lamantia, whom, it seems, Olson has personally known and loved. And then, again, by extension, there is an interesting subterranean flow in American poetry, which relates him to the other conjurers and visionaries of the word, such as Andrew Joron or Will Alexander.

But I mentioned Surrealism, and Dada, so yes, the company is indeed wide-ranging and international. I don’t think I’ve discussed this with John Olson and am not sure what he’d make of it, but in fact (and most dearly to me) I have found his friends and allies in the most peculiar places. Much Olson in Lewis Carroll, not so much the Carroll of *Alice* (though why not) as his syllogisms (“No ostrich lives on mince pies”, “No heavy fish can dance a minuet” – that is Carroll speaking, at his most Olsonesque). I even found him in Wittgenstein’s mad investigations (it, too, is important that, who’d have suspected!, Olson is possibly the most philosophical of our poets – he brings it back home). Most of all, I think of Olson when reading those sad and funny tricksters like Robert Walser, Walser of the *Mikrogramme*. All of which shows that this thing I try to define here as *Olsonesque* are not so much the schools and traditions, but the singularities (and what companies can these form!), those radical coyote at mad tea party of the mind. Finally, as the book announces from the very beginning, there is a “Radical Tapioca”, and the way I understand it, it has something to do with what James Schuyler so generously (he only half-seemed to be too cool and mocking) revealed to us: “Or to put it another way: Rrose Selavy speaking out in Robert Motherwell’s great Dada document anthology has more to do with poetry written by the poets I know than that Empress of Tapioca, The White Goddess,” which, as you see, brings us back to Dada (companies, traditions, even in the least expected places...) And allow me to stop at that.

And still, that quote from Schuyler is especially telling for me, in the context of John Olson. Because, indeed, what to make of the whole poetry affair today? Some days (most days) the old Adorno dictum seems to creep up the spine of any conscientious poet. Am I allowed? Can I be doing this? One way to respond to the increasingly unthinkable could be to stop, quit, state, like Artaud did, “that it is time for a writer to close shop, and to leave the written letter for the letter.” A vow of silence, as Bob Kaufman is said to have taken, at his own point of the unthinkable *in extremis*. And no apologies in Olson’s poetry, but I doubt he has not thought about what I am trying to get at here.

But some of us still hope that there is another way around (into) it. That there is also the *radical Tapioca* which could still be a positive and desiring machine, full of play and energy, full of good old outsider / trickster stuff all poetry is at times said to have come from. And that is where John Olson’s at. That’s what he seems to me to be saying when he urges us, again and again, to picture, to hear, to smell, to taste. To *feel* the thing. To stop and pick it up. Yes, it does require genuine, relentless involvement. Claiming, again and again, that the whole thing is more than a gratuitous or frivolous loony affair. Way more. “The poet works at the frontier of nonsense,” he tells us. That’s where one can be serious about poetry in the world which has become unthinkable. That’s where the “Mind is Indigo” *despite* all the “Probabilities of Gray”.

All of this said, I wanted to add that during the months I have owned *Dada Budapest*, I have gotten a habit of letting this husky book lay somewhere in sight when friends were around. The title is so seductive, the artwork so loony, that someone would always be tempted to pick it up and randomly leaf through the pages. This way, I have experienced the joy of witnessing the puzzlement or bewilderment or delight or all of these: yet another one confronted with the magic of Olson’s prose poem. And if you are afraid of the 400-page books of poetry, you can do just that, have it around, pick here and there at first until it picks you up and carries you along. Maybe try begin with reading just a piece or two in a day. Slow flow till you can swim fast enough. Or you may want, like me, to go all the way through it, and what would help there is making up the series that strike you as underlying the composition. There are the series of “poetics”, of “ars poetica”, the series of “ontologies”, the series, say, of encounters and addressings (Olson conversing with the dead Ginsberg, Olson receiving the letter from an apparently immortal Arthur Rimbaud, Olson recounting his relationship with Gregory Samsa). For *Dada Budapest* is an intricately woven book, like that other glorious 400-page book of poems, Robert Kelly’s *The Loom*, it ties and unties a knot to and from another, picks up a story and drops it, waiting for it to reemerge again, disappear again.

“Like bees dancing, he says.”

And that is what I have been getting at the whole time: let this book be around, in the plain sight and at the hand's reach, for if our race does somehow survive this age of the unthinkable, men of future will pick it up, this Moby Dick of prose poetry, and see that despite all our idiocy, mediocrity and constant pure evil, we too have had our share of serious, meaningful dada buddha fun.

## The Music Of Incongruity

*Preserving Fire: Selected Prose*, by Philip Lamantia

Seattle/New York: Wave Books, 2018. 165 pages.

Reviewed by John Olson

Anyone familiar with Dylan's "Desolation Row" will recognize the lines "Across the street they've nailed the curtains, they're getting ready for the feast / The Phantom of the Opera in the perfect image of a priest." That's Philip. Philip Lamantia. "Image of a priest" is snatched from Kerouac's *Desolation Angels*, in which he bases a character named David D'Angeli on Lamantia who he describes multifariously as "gliding like an Arab, grinning, with a beautiful French girl called Yvette on his arm and O my he's like some elegant hero of Proust, The Priest, if Cody is the Preacher David is the Priest...of all of us David is the most beautiful man, he has perfect features, like Tyrone Power, yet more subtle and esoteric...he's a dazzling St. Augustine figure of past evils dedicated to the Vision of the Cross...and after communion here he comes down the aisle with the host melting underneath his tongue, eyes piously yet somehow humorously or at least engagingly lowered, hands clasped, for all the ladies to see, the perfect image of a priest."

Kerouac and Lamantia were close. The similarities are pertinent. Comparing them highlights fascinating parallels, but more dramatically accents some illuminating diversions. Both had a substratum of Catholicism that was as conflicted as it was palliative. Both sought enlightenment and sovereignty of mind. Both had great reverence for the life-affirming felicities of Eros, the fantastic juxtapositions that emerge from an unrestricted flow of association, the fusion of art and life, old-timey radio shows like *Boston Blackie* and *The Shadow* and the tumultuous locomotives of desire. Both had a strong appetite for the exotic, the transcendent, the sublime. Both had an acute religiosity, both had the soft distant eyes of the hermit, the monk, the ascetic. Both were inebriates of the universe, redwood forests, the stench of ancient estuaries and old hotel rooms whose crumpled pillows rested worn heads full of epiphanies and illuminations.

Both were devoted to writing – to a life of writing – writing as a sacred activity, as route to illumination, a pilgrimage of the pen seeking the radiant darkness of the midnight sun, the transmuted metals of the alchemists, the quintessence in all things, the soul, the numen, the divine power that pervades the life of this planet and all the stars and errant comets of the universe.

If Proust and Celine were the guardian deities in Kerouac's viaticum, Lamantia's was André Breton and Edgar Allan Poe. Where Kerouac found emergence and voice in a poeticized prose, Lamantia was more purely a poet. For years I carried around with me a notion that at some point in their conversations they had argued about surrealism. Kerouac argued for gritty realism. Lamantia argued for oneiric splendor. The most likely source for that debate is in my head. I asked Lamantia about it once and he could not remember such an instance.

Doesn't matter. Here is what is truly astonishing: while attending James Denman Junior High School in San Francisco in 1942, Lamantia – at age 15 - discovered surrealism at a Dali retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Art. "Within weeks," he states in an interview with David Meltzer, James Brook, and Marina Lazzara in November, 1998, "I had read everything available on Surrealism that I could get from the public library." He began writing immediately and within a short time had produced enough work to submit to VVV, whose editor happened to be André Breton. Breton accepted three of Lamantia's poems and requested a letter clarifying his relation to surrealism. Lamantia complied, and that letter is included in this amazing collection of prose from a poet whose relation to surrealism was as profound as it was galvanizing.

Amazing because while the outlay of Lamantia's work is in poetry, he could write an elegant, lucid prose suffused with the "primal spark" of "palpitant activity that magnetizes the illimitable resources of the arbitrary – a risk-laden region from which the exigent action of unprecedented verbal encounters relates to the refusal of previously known paths of association." The goal is to find unknown – exotic, foreign, undiscovered – paths of association, the Heraclitian plane of "hidden harmonies." This is more easily accomplished in poetry, which is Lamantia's primary arena, but the ability to give descriptive force to concepts refractory to the rigors of Logos is a stunning attainment.

Lamantia had an encyclopedic mind and anyone who enjoyed a conversation with him is aware of his ability to mesmerize with his range of knowledge and passion for the anomalies and marvels that exist in the funny nooks and corners of existence, the same flair for the marvelous and strange that we find in Poe. Harness that Pegasean energy to the draft horse that is prose and you've got a lovely hybrid of clarity and the arcane, the illuminative and the transmundane.

Surrealism is about chance encounters. Strange alliances, discordant combinations, surprising juxtapositions. It favors abrupt, brilliant combinations of phenomena that are

independent of a mechanical, rational universe. Because the universe isn't rational: the universe is insanely huge and full of marvels that exceed the analysis and categorization of logic. As Isidore Ducasse (the mysterious young Uruguayan-born man who created the nom de plume Le Comte de Lautréamont) stated in his bizarre, incandescent collection of prose poetry *Les Chants de Maldoror*: "...as the fortuitous encounter on a dissecting-table of a sewing machine and an umbrella!"

This collection has two very strong assets: a well-researched and comprehensive introduction by Garrett Caples and a bibliography with helpful, detailed notes by Steve Fama.

Lamantia was an intense, complicated, often conflicted human being. Tracking his trajectory isn't an easy task, but Caples provides an abundantly detailed mapping of Lamantia's affections and disaffections, allegiances and abdications. We discover that, despite being a manifest prodigy publishing in avant-garde periodicals at age 15, he confided to Caples on more than one occasion that he regretted the lack of a more formal education. Caples compares his modest prose output to that of Mallarmé, and like Mallarmé, "some of Lamantia's prose has an occasional quality, the composition of a given piece dictated by circumstance."

Several of these circumstances were the draft, still in effect after WWII. Lamantia wrote two remarkably eloquent letters pleading for conscientious objector status. The first, dated December 3, 1945, is a mind-bogglingly eloquent statement of what is manifestly a sincere and passionate censure of war and an exhortation for what sounds like a gnostic orientation toward the inherent sacredness of life. "I assert," Lamantia proclaims, "that from the intellect man derives his imperfection, his hate, his will to coerce others, to torture and to make war. It is not through the intellect that an individual becomes free, but through a spiritual understanding of the purpose of life, which arises from a physical, non-intellectual communion with the world." He then quotes the seventeenth century Christian mystic Thomas Traherne: "You never enjoy the world aright till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars."

The dignity conferred on the draft board by the eloquence, thoughtful tone and philosophy of this letter is stunning. I would've loved to see their reaction. Lamantia was granted CO status, though this would be challenged again with the build-up to the Korean war in 1949. Lamantia writes another letter, equally eloquent, but more abrupt and adversarial; this one shows, as Caples describes it, Lamantia's "disgust with the increasing conservatism of American society at the dawn of the 50's" and "makes his refusal to enter military service all the more brusque and dismissive."

Caples reveals that Lamantia became disillusioned with surrealism in the late forties and began participating in Kenneth Rexroth's Wednesday night Libertarian Circle meetings, which also included Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder and Madeline Gleason. The chief intent of these meetings was political, to discuss radical theory and history in the endeavor to invigorate new life into the radical movements of the first half of the twentieth century. Topics would include the Andalusian Agricultural Communes, the Kronstadt revolt, Bakunin, Kropotkin, the Anarchist Woman's movement, pretty much everything from Marx to Malatesta. There would also be literary readings. This would be the seminal nucleus of the San Francisco Renaissance, also known affectionately as the bear-shit-in-the-woods poetry. This involvement brought about a more politically aggressive stance in Lamantia and caused a troubling and conflicted shift from his surrealist roots. The Zen immediacies of Whalen and the lumber camps and rugged outdoorsy quality of Snyder were full of gusto and clarity and would impact the development of any poet, much less one whose instincts run more toward the crepuscular frontiers between the visible and invisible.

The 50s were a purgatory for Lamantia. He would endure a spiritual crisis during this period and burn much of his unpublished writing in 1960. In 1950, he would begin an on-again, off-again struggle with heroin addiction. In 1955 he would convert to Catholicism, but there would be, as with so many other things explored and embraced by a restless spirit, conflicts with orthodoxy. Lamantia, Caples is quick to state, "was heretical never for the sake of it, but only when driven by spiritual necessity." Lamantia wouldn't move back into surrealism until 1965, a move made apparent in an essay titled "Notes Towards a Poetics of Weir," specifically a letter addressed to Bob Hawley, publisher of Oyez Press, who would be bringing out a collection of Lamantia's early surrealist writing in 1966 to be titled *Touch of the Marvelous*.

A weir is one of two things: a fence or enclosure set in a waterway for taking fish, or a dam in a stream or river to raise the water level or divert its flow. Lamantia gives it a more mystical evocation and aligns it with his writing practice, using terms such as "flow of images" and "sluiceways" to conjure the functioning of a weir in a context of trance and automatist writing. "...the essential vitality of this manner of writing," Lamantia states,

is due to a general synthesis of feeling & ideas which profoundly directed the aforementioned "method" and this I entertained & pursued as a conscious aim, the effects of which established a *rhythm of incongruous imagery*, a

prosodic mystique, so no matter to what formal arrangement I subjected the flow of images afterwards, if I remained faithful to the primary condition of releasing the imagers from a heightened state of trance, through the sluiceways of “contradiction” and incongruity, the possibility existed and still exists of making a significant kind of Revelation. Though the orthodox surrealist definition & practice associated this with a revelation of the Unconscious and generally conceded to characterize states of dream, hallucination, fantastic/juxtaposition, etc., I find more interest in recognizing a far/wider meaning & value than the now/academic categories – Freudian or Jungian – to the degree that such poetry & its attendant prosody does *reveal* through *the music of incongruity* & imagery of the non-rational, vital “rapports” of a direct, intuitional comprehension of Reality – beyond “logical-rationalist” or common-sense appearances – otherwise unrepresented except in the vaguest “mystical” or didactic descriptions which often fail miserably because they are founded on a process of making common/sense logical statement of human experience & understanding which is ultimately non-rational, connected, as it is, to a *source and cause* which is beyond linguistic definition or presentation!

This is a magnificent statement. It says so much, reveals so much, not just about Lamantia’s approach to writing poetry but to the depth and currents in which we attempt to connect with forces beyond the range of our five senses. Where is the weir for these supernal currents but in the words we gather and put down on paper to catch these luminous bodies.

In 1970, at age 43, Lamantia makes a strong statement. “Statement For Contemporary Poets Of The English Language” is an understatement. “I consider myself essentially a surrealist, but as Breton qualified this, it is *not* a school, but a way of life.” The magnitude of conviction here is so firm it gives me a glad feeling. All those internal conflicts of the 50s and early 60s have culminated in a credence of Being, being with a capital ‘B.’ Surrealism is not just a literary and art movement but a way of being and interacting with the world. This is a short piece of prose – three sentences in all - but it has a Blakean aura about it, a titanium sureness on the side of the imaginary, the transcendent. “I understand the act of poetry,” he continues, “as the maximum volatile expression of Imagination, a *central power*, relating all levels of conscious and unconscious thought and being. I believe in poetry as a means of unqualified individual liberation. I believe in the poetry of primal melody and the revelation of the mysteries of cosmic being.”

Several years later, in 1973, Lamantia makes another short but powerful piece, this one a little more personal, colorfully titled “Vital Conflagrations.” “It’s true that I don’t know how to really live,” he begins, “I have never completely gotten the hang of life, even though the “red phase” of the “Great Work” – radiating a splendor signifying, for some of us, all that *perfects* the gifts of the Marvelous for humanity – haunts the blackening thought of the absence of a certain social oxygen within present-day life.” This piece fascinates me. There continues a growing confirmation for the powers of poetry, but the admission that living in the everyday world – the world of industry and commerce, real estate and routine, the dead zone of the philistines – is difficult reminds me of Baudelaire’s poem about the albatross, that ocean-going bird with the immense wingspan that flies huge distances with endurance and grace, but stopping for a rest on the deck of a ship is tormented and teased by the crew for its awkwardness on the ground, on the mundanity of plank and nail.

The rest of the piece is exhilarating for its poetic prose, its fulfilling dynamism of redemptive liberation. “For it is only in sight of the most extravagant utopias,” he continues, “and only by absolute confidence in the surpassing fire love shall not fail to collectively materialize in the carbonization of the libertines of liberty, that I dream of the living emancipation, kindled from a *preserving fire* of which the surpassing conflagration is the permanent, generating agent.” “Red phase,” “Great Work,” “surpassing fire” and “preserving fire” all sound like alchemical terms. In alchemy, the Great Work is the process of working with the *Prima materia* (one can think of this in terms of daily, mercenary, pedestrian life or the chaos of base matter, roiling gases and that stupid joke called a job) and converting it to the Philosopher’s Stone, an alchemical substance for turning base metals into gold. Here, poetry is the equivalent of this stone, which is also conceived as the elixir of life; It is in the conflagration of words that the everyday lead of existence is turned into the radiant, preserving fire of poetry.