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J. Roger Dane

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The Poetry of Handspring · J. Roger Dane

Vida & Texts

NOW THAT WE HAVE REACHED the year of our Lord 2500 and the missile manufacturers have not yet managed to explode the planet, it seems appropriate to examine some of the diverse schools of poetry which flourished in the land some 500 years ago. Imagism, Objectivism, the Collagists, Petulantism, and Structomodularism are all too well known to require much further comment. However, many of you may not have studied the New Learism School and the verse of its leading figure, Hiram Handspring. The “lyr” (lyre) of Learism is not spelled with an upsilon, but is “l-e-a-r.” Since Handspring was basically a comic poet, he must have taken the name from Edward Lear (1812-1888), the greatest English writer of humorous verse. But critics hostile to Handspring had other theories. Some, who knew his erotic poems, a few of which, in holograph, can be found in the locked cases of the Harris Collection, held that the name should be spelled with two “e”s. Still others, even more hostile, pretended that Handspring knew he was getting dotty and that he chose the name in honor of Shakespeare’s unhappy monarch and his traveling companion.

I first encountered Hiram Handspring’s *oeuvre* when I came to Brown University to work in the archive of the great 20th-century novelist John Hawkes. I had always been intrigued by the character of Sidney Slyter in *The Lime Twig*. Who was this Slyter, apparently the racing columnist of a London newspaper? He is so vivid in the novel, he must surely have been a real person. But two weeks searching in the British Museum Library and the London Records Office did not turn him up. Then, leafing through Hawkes’ correspondence folders, I came on what seemed to be a clue—a curious letter from a man with the improbable name of Hiram Handspring which suggested (Hawkes must have sent him a draft of the typescript) that some transitional passages of explanation between the main sections might make the work more accessible to “the boob reader.” That “boob reader” pulled me up with a jerk. I recalled the epithet from a collection of Ezra Pound’s choleric letters. Could this fellow Handspring have been a friend of Pound’s? If so, since Pound once lived in Kensington, could he have put Handspring onto Slyter? I found no carbon of a letter from Hawkes to Handspring

acknowledging the suggestion, or naming Slyter, and Handspring's later letters turned to other topics. I never identified Slyter. But I had found Handspring. Playing a hunch, because his style was reminiscent of S.J. Perelman, I went to the microfilms of the Harris Collection. And there, *mirabile dictu*, was Handspring—three minuscule books of verse, full of eccentricities that I found amusing.

Handspring seems, indeed, an unlikely name. But my research supports its authenticity. The Handsprings, worthy peasants of Lower Thuringia, where their name was Hundsprunger, came to these shores in 1742, settling in the Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania. Six generations later, in 1914, the poet Hiram was born. Even then, there was no schoolhouse near the ancestral farm, and Hiram, like Lincoln, appears to have been a firelight autodidact, using books loaned him by a kindly rattlesnake-handling preacher of the Dunker sect. In the light of Handspring's mature work, it is important to note that the holy herpetologist was an educated man. He taught the lad some Greek and much Latin and loaned him books of classic poetry which were not entirely religious in character.

Less is known of the poet's middle years, though we find his verses in the microfilms of obscure literary magazines of the period, publications bearing such interesting titles as *Oinck*, *The Floating Bear*, *Fornicate You* and *D.H. Lawrence's Cow*. We know where he died, near Dharamsala in the foothills of the Himalayas, but not the precise year, though it was toward the turn of the century. Handspring's work, as we shall see, moved from social comedy toward the occult and esoteric. In his old age, he became a flakey mystic and he resolved to search for the Third Eye of the Tantric Buddhist lamas. We know that he apprenticed himself to the great guru Raltal Rimpoche, who may or may not have imparted to him the secret syllables of dzogchen, the "pure perfection." Raltal installed Handspring in a cave, urging him to do as many full prostrations as his failing strength allowed, calling out as he did them the words of the Great Mantra, "*Om mani padme hum*," (the jewel at the heart of the lotus). This exertion was too much for the old man, and his body was found in a state of perfectly sanctified preservation by the sherpa who came once a month to bring him his food. Some genealogists of metempsychosis believe that Handspring reincarnated in the baby *Tulku Nhikkim Glu* near Lhasa in Tibet.

So much for Handspring's life. Some of the influences on his work are obvious. From Rimbaud he must have learned his disregard for

logic. From Gertrude Stein the delights of dissociation. From Pound he would have taken subject rhyme, the juxtaposition of incongruities, the use of classical tags and the intermixture of languages, which led to his almost psychotic obsession with macaronics. From Cummings he drew the sentimental timbre of his love poems and a preoccupation with visual fun and games. From W.C. “Billyums” Williams came his care for plain language and concrete images—“*nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu*,” (or as the French naturalist Buffon remarked: “Let us gather facts in order to have ideas.”) From reading Herrick and Rochester he loved metrical rhythm and a good conceit. In Juvenal, Catullus, Cummings, and the North Carolina bard Jonathan Williams he found his models for satire. Above all, he venerated the Latin Elegiac poets: Catullus, Tibullus and Pound’s *doppelgänger*, Sextus Propertius. It was a challenging pantheon. Handspring could emulate but never duplicate. Not half a dozen of his poems can even be compared with the poets whose graves he was robbing. He was a failure, but he tried.

Let us look first at a couple of Handspring’s little comic poems and satiric epigrams:

TERROR

blanched her face when
a literary topic was

introduced into the con-
versation (but she had

such pretty little feet)

ONE OF THE GREAT LINES

of modern poetry came to me
from a girl in my writing

class it went they fucked
without conversation just

that & what’s more to say?

Then the love poems. The *Cynthia Sequence* is a fair example of the way in which sentimentality crippled his work in this genre. Cynthia, of course, was the girlfriend of Sextus Propertius. Handspring borrowed her name to screen that of a girl he knew. So far my research has not identified her. We only know, from his texts, that she was born in Iowa and that they traveled together in Italy. Here is one poem from the *Cynthia Sequence*.

A BAD NIGHT ON THIRD AVENUE

One of my frequent little
deaths jumped on my back
and poisoned in my ear

that you my Cynthia were
last night seen drunk in
the Stork Club with an

advertising man (& what
cuts worse a television
man) and that you left

there with that spreadleg
look smeared on your face
like paint Propertius wait-

ed for you till they closed
up Paddy's Bar & then went
home to hate his bed alone.

In certain of his poems, Handspring attempted to deal with more serious themes. Here are a couple of examples.

SOME OF US COME TO LIVE

inside his Cantos like a pal-
ace ten times larger than Ver-

sailles so many rooms so many
corridors the phalanx of par-

ticulars and those long gal-
leries with their endless vis-
tas of a past that no one else
has seen so well or understood
so well the mirrors that re-
flect into each other making
the rhymes between ideas yes
it is the father's house of
many mansions with its place
for each of places for all.

PERSEPHONE WEARS BLUEJEANS

now but she's the same sweet
girl it's spring again & up
from the underworld she comes
the laurel on her brow bring-
ing the seed that will re-
new the earth and draw all
flowers and plants again to
birth she melts the snow she
calms the sea now all things
grow she is the leafing tree.

Things become more opaque when we come to Handspring's experiments with the interlingual form known as a macaronic. Webster defines a macaronic as "a kind of burlesque composition, in which vernacular words of one or more modern languages are mixed with Latin words . . . also any composition in incongruously mixed languages." Handspring's perhaps original contribution to the macaronic

form was that beyond composing lines in two languages himself he would quote famous lines from other literatures, usually but not always poetry, to create an “echo effect,” as Pound and Eliot often did. Thus, in the first of his macaronics, a poem about love and the sea, he picks up a famous tag from the *Odyssey*, in Greek, about the sea.

TO BE SURE

there are other fish in
the sea but why are the

loveliest fish so often
virtuous o poluphlois-

boios thalasse release
I beseech you strong po-

tions of passionate love
into your winedark waves.

In the second macaronic, Handspring uses lines in Latin from Propertius, following them with Pound's English versions of the same lines.

NO MY DEAR

I'll not wish you the death
you deserve sunt apud infer-

nos tot milia formosorum
there are enough women in

hell quite enough beauti-
ful women but it is not

sufficient my dear to be
as beautiful as you are

despiciat et magnos recte
puella deos and of all

these young women not one
has enquired the cause of

the world so go your way
my dear and I'll go mine.

In his longest macaronic, which appears also to be autobiographical, Handspring begins with the Latin of Catullus' poem to his dead brother, proceeds to an account of his own amatory adventures, which he interlards with theme lines from love songs in Mozart's operas (there is evidence that he actually sang these lines when he recited the poem), with quotations from Gerard de Nerval's poem "El Desdichado" and with the lines from Eliot's "Prufrock" which Eliot took from the Nerval poem. Beyond that, the poem is studded with short echoes from numerous other poets, like nuts and raisins in a fruitcake, causing the contemporary critic, Annie Dillard, to write, "One must approach Handspring's macaronics with a cranberry rake." The effect of all this is, to say the least, confusing, and we must wonder whether modern psychiatric opinion would not hold that Handspring had become afflicted with some form of echolalia.

MULTAS PER GENTES

et multa per aequora vectus
(et multas per vias quoque aereas)
(there being no flugbuggies in the time of Gaius Valerius)
through many lands by shores of many peoples
a life too short sometimes
at times a life too long-seeming
the days of sun and rain and many days of mountain snow
the nights of endless dreaming
my periplum more geographically extended
(in Java the airplane is the god Garuda)
but I learned less not being polumetis
and my paideuma is a mishmash of contradictions
my Circes a list of fictions
Muse help me to sing
of Toodles on the wide beach at Troorak
(her hair so golden and her brain so slack)
of darling Leontina di Rapallo

taking me to her underwater cave
 (J'ai rêvé dans la grotte où nage la sirène
 I have lingered in the chambers of the sea)
 of Dylan's crazy Daphne in the Gargoyle Club in Soho
 (Voi che sapete che cosa è amor . . .
 Sento un affeto pien di desir
 ch'ora è diletto ch'ora è martir)
 of delicate moonlit Delia by the Strait of Juan De Fuca
 of Cynthia whom I helped the gods destroy
 in ogne parte dove mi trae memoria
 of name-is-gone-but-not-her-smile
 there in the jungle near Chichen Itza
 (A ristorar le pene d'un innocente amor)
 of Kyo-San (they had girl caddies on the course at Kamakura)
 (Ma in Ispagna son già mille e tre)
 a list of fictions of beautiful contradictions
 Lord Krishna's lotus and Williams' asphodel
 each one so wonderful so new bringing her particular magic
 risplende ogni sa luce che non morirà mai
 and Restif said there were a thousand women who were always one
 sola et magna (mater)
 Gertrude's Mother of us All
 I penetrate thy temple and thou doest my soul restore
 ineffable thou art the Virgin & the Whore
 I lusted for Tom's Wendy in Kentucky there was guilt
 his sin (if it were sin for him) but surely mine
 a list of fictions of contradictions
 ma basta per oggi il catalogo delle fanciulle
 who cares though I cared everywhere and always
 the sea was not my mother but my mother took me on the sea
 the old Cunarder Mauretania and Bill the sailor
 who showed me how to splice a rope
 and Jack turned green when we were beating through the chop
 above Grenada
 avoid the Indian Ocean you can die of heat
 posh P & O boats are like baking ovens
 the sea the sea cried Xenophon after his weary march
 O mother sea our bodies turn to dust our hearts return to thee
 but it's the air we breathe and now in the air we fly
 what would the many-crafted Odysseus make of that

he never saw as I have seen from the cabin window of the plane
glistening Mont Blanc and holy Kanchenjunga and mystic Fuji
by Isfahan he never saw those traceries
of ancient water tunnels on the desert below
he did not see the million lights of cities in the night
cities now doomed to die
these things he never saw
but what he saw and did will live as long as we

Lie quiet Ezra
lie quiet there in your campo santo on San Michele
in paradisum deducant te angeli
to your city of Dioce to Wagadu to your paradiso terrestre
what I have reft from you I stole for love of you
beloved my master and my friend
my teacher to the end.

So far as we know, Handspring wrote no poetry in his cave in the Himalayas. Thus his last poem would be the one which he gave to his old friend Tasilo Ribischka at their final repast at Hamburger Heaven before his emplanement for Calcutta. Its title, 'Write on My Tomb,' is surely proleptic. Handspring must have known that when he entered the Great Nothingness there would be no place there for balladry and that he would never return to the world we know.

WRITE ON MY TOMB

that all I learned in books
and from the muses I've ta-

ken with me but my rich pos-
sessions I have left behind.

That, of course, Handspring took freely from Crates of Thebes, (*The Greek Anthology*, Book VII, 326):

Ταῦτ' ἔχω ὅσ' ἔμαθον καὶ ἐφρόντισα, καὶ μετὰ Μουσῶν
σέμν' ἐδάην τὰ δὲ πολλὰ καὶ ὄλβια τῷφθοσ ἔμαρψεν.