

NEW POETRY MOVEMENT SWEEPS THE LITERARY WORLD

G.S. Payne investigates a new poetical phenomenon coming out of Boston, Mass.

(Boston) Not, perhaps, since the early days of the so-called New York School of poetry have we seen a movement such as what is now coming out of the lower streets of Boston. The Boston Poetical Movement is what future literature historians might well refer to it as. I humbly offer the name here in the hopes the trend might get its deserved acclaim. Just as we had Ashbery, O'Hara, Koch, Schuyler, and Guest as the collective face of the New York School, we are now witnessing poetry history-in-the-making with names like Haasch, Matusek, Shear, and Meissner. Mark the names well. Genius is rare in our times.

The roots go back at least seven years, with influences converging from the now-famous "Summer of Verse" in Cambridge, where a young Vito Heppner first uttered his "Doves are Falling Towards the Ceiling," a double-quatrained villanelle in triple-syllabic hexameter with line breaks randomly chosen based on the rolling of three dice. It was a stroke of brilliance not easily outdone. Except that it was. Nobody need be reminded of Harlin Haasch's triple-quatrained number which followed, and which had the crowd on its feet before the first quatrain was even done echoing off the venerable walls of Pappy's Seafood Hut, where most of the action took place on those hot August nights.

From there the movement snowballed. Haasch self-published his early Boston Poetical poems, invigorating a sleeping, and mostly drunken, Arlo Meissner, whose career had gone almost completely under with the mistaken publication of his Words from My Mother's Goldfish (Tillbury House, 1994), a manuscript his dim-witted half-brother had written for school, and which had gotten sent to the publishers by mistake in a tragic envelope mix-up. Meissner was still trying to live down the infamous collection, including such ditties as "My Dog has Four Paws," a three-

hundred line poem written in alternating red and blue crayon. When Meissner read Haasch's poems, something stirred inside, and he once again put pen to paper.

What followed were a symphony of poems, all in the new Boston Poetical style, and not just from Meissner. Others jumped in from around the area. At coffee shops and taverns from Quincy to Woburn, the members of the new movement were inspiring and motivating each other. Late nights and into the early mornings, at Rudolpho Matusek's brownstone, could be heard the strong, oft-inebriated voices of the founders of this new poetry form (much to the dismay on Mrs. Matusek who would cite those late nights in the divorce proceedings one year later). And when certain poems eventually found their way into mainstream literary magazines such as *Poetry* (Alabaster Shear's "Heaven in the Toilet"), *The Atlantic Monthly* (Meissner's own "Rolaid's, Rolaid's, Rolaid's"), and even *The New Yorker* (Haasch's first and fourth versions of "Animal in the Hot Tub"), the movement had finally found some legs.

For those unacquainted with the form, perhaps a short primer is in order. Essentially a poem in the Boston Poetical form is two parts Ginsburg and seven parts Plath. Add in conjoining sprigs of Lowell and Bishop, and a dash of Galway Kinnell and you're halfway there. Poems are typically seven to seventy-seven lines long, with each poem's length in lines evenly divisible by seven. Each line must be a minimum of five, but no more than twelve metric feet (or thirteen diphthongs), with iambic patterns the preferred style, although enjambments and end-stops (heartily encouraged) often makes this preference moot. Rhyme is considered gauche, unless one rhymes a dactyl (or double-dactyl) with an anapest, in which case it's applauded, so long as the rhyme takes place between the sixth and eighth lines, or, failing that, is simply placed in the poem's title. In performing the poems publically, it's considered proper to remain completely silent and motionless for three to four minutes before beginning the poem, all the while keeping one's eyes fixed on the emergency door at the rear of the venue (if there is one).

Subject matter is strictly oblique post post-modern. It's the taking of existential, alto-nihilism and turning it on its head, then putting it back again, but on its side, instead of in standard vertical form. Consequently the focus of the poems is always coming at you from the inside out, resting, first, above the commonplace, and then darting back again before your eyes like a drunken, frenzied mosquito defying the risk of the metaphorical fly swatter of linguistic expression, and with a dash of *p'trole lampant* for good measure. If one, in other words, can imagine Satre (perhaps more precisely Kierkegaard) being read aloud by Eliot (Pound) with one hand covering his mouth and the other waving (waving) contemptuously, as one dismissing the radicalism of those *qui n'ont pas d'id'es*, as the French are fond of saying, then I think one can get a true sense of what's being revealed here.

I suspect we'll be hearing a lot more from these "wizards of words" (*The New Yorker's* apt description) in the months and years to come. Form can be fickle. It's hard now to even remember the so-called "Phlegm-ism" movement from Cleveland in the early eighties, a movement that was supposed to change the face (and hands) of poetry but, instead, found itself rotting in a vacant heap by the river, ultimately to be carried away by the city's sanitation department. But something tells me this is different. Boston Poetics just might be here to stay.

—G.S. Payne

