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Lapse Americana by Benjamin Myers (review)

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(Review)

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that all people would eventually find their home and their perfection in union with God, but that all animals would too; he almost stridently asserts this belief in many of his sermons, theological essays, and even some of his novels. A more typically quasi-Calvinist British Victorian Christian, living under the shadow of eternal damnation—if not his own, quite possibly that of people he cared about, and most certainly that of the majority of the human race—might well find childlike carelessness both irresponsible and inappropriate to one’s existential situation. But MacDonald’s deep conviction that “All shall be well”—eventually, for *everyone*—surely underlay his ability to recommend the grave levity of a child at play as the disposition most suited to the realities of human life.

Minor criticism aside, this text is a valuable and unique contribution to MacDonald scholarship and is worth being read by anyone seriously interested in the import of MacDonald’s fairytales.

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Benjamin Myers. *Lapse Americana*. New York: New York Quarterly Books, 2013. Pp. xvi + 120. \$14.95. ISBN 978-1-935520-71-9

After the success of his first book, *Elegy for Trains*, which won the 2011 Oklahoma Book Award for Poetry, Benjamin Myers released his layered and richly evocative second book, *Lapse Americana*. Comprised of 71 poems, and divided into four sections, the book carries readers to places where the past (personal, cultural, historical) mingles with the present. Or one might better say that in Myers’s poetry, the past *haunts* the present. Just as the past impacts the present world of the poems, many poems interact with the subject of death, whether taking it as the core subject, or making a passing reference to it. As the title also implies, the idea of “loss” (in its various manifestations) winds its way through Myers’s poems.

Lapse Americana establishes one of its other core subjects via the epigraphs of the “Prelude,” the epigraphs deriving from, respectively, the *Edda* and the book of Ecclesiastes. The former quotation points to “two ravens perched on Odin’s shoulder [. . .]. They are called Thought and Memory” (xiii). The latter, however, finds Solomon claiming that “There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after” (xiii). Following these companion statements, the poem “Spook House,” the sole poem in the “Prelude” section, recounts the speaker’s memory of visiting a county-fair ride called *Dante’s Inferno*. Myers develops the narrative of that memory and its larger significance in the book, and concludes with the speaker preparing for what is to come: “two black doors swung open/as we watched our

friends/before us disappear around a dark curve” (xvi). As readers move along the ride of the book, traveling from section to section, they encounter poems rich in intertextuality, with references to classical poets, to Shakespeare, even to Pascal in the ten-section epistolary poem, “Notes from a Time Traveler,” in which Pascal is the ostensible author. The more localized subject matter ranges from divorce, to farm work, to historical events, to domestic and familial scenes, to rural decline, to war, to incidents from the speaker’s past, and even to the land itself. Even as Myers explores these subjects, the poems resonate with the larger ideas of remembrance, loss, the past, and death.

While the collection possesses a thematic heaviness and darkness, Myers occasionally adds levity, such as in the poem “Class Outside,” which explores the frequent request of college students to have a session outdoors. The speaker declares in the opening lines that “It will never be as good as students think/it will be” (102), while later, the speaker observes that “half the class is gone/when a girl in white shorts walks by” (102). Surely, readers can identify with some version of this experience. The levity that Myers brings often involves the more personal. For instance, the speaker of “My Teeth” compares his teeth to “a small congregation/of drunks” (99), the poem replete with various usages of figurative language that take a seemingly mundane title and expand upon it in surprising and refreshing ways. Perhaps one of the collection’s more darkly humorous poems, “Mannequins,” begins with a first stanza that, interestingly, shortens with each successive line: “All our most incessant mythology suggests/they are on the move/when we aren’t/looking” (68). The double reading of the last three lines implies (before the one-word last line) that the mannequins move but “we” don’t, and the addendum “looking” adds a layer of the ominous, something the book’s poems frequently do.

The idea of interpersonal relations (in various contexts) surfaces throughout *Lapse Americana*, and in particular, the poems explore elements of the familial. This idea of connection between family members, between parent and child, occurs at the end of the poem “With My Daughter at the County Fair.” The speaker/father watches his daughter riding a “midway” pirate ship (echoes of “Spook House”) “waving to me from the arch’s top, // riding the imaginary swell,/while I stand in the invisible sea,/waving back” (66). A tender and intimate moment from the past is recounted in “The Other,” the speaker studying his wife nursing their son, and noting how “his head laid on her arm like a little farm/in the bend of a river” (67). There is a sense of connection in both of these examples, but they also acknowledge that these connections are only for a time. This notion of time is brought to the forefront in “On My Thirty-Fifth Birthday.” Since birthdays are often when one takes stock of one’s life, the speaker reflects upon aging and the presence (and later, *absence*) of his father, as well as with the fact that he himself is mortal. The poem’s final scene consists of the speaker peering through a screen door while the father “lingers/at the edge of dark line of trees,/waving for me to follow” (40). Past, present, and future are collapsing into a moment.

For this reviewer, poetic structure is a subject of continual interest, and Myers is a fan of unrhymed couplets, with at least nine of the poems utilizing this structure. In this form, his lines stretch languorously across the page, as in "Hauling Hay" and "Sometimes I Dream of the Analog World," among others. One can even find a sonnet, as well as poems in quatrains incorporating meter and end-rhyme. Perhaps, though, one of the most compelling elements of his poetry's structural tendencies is the movement toward a short, emphatic ending. In almost one quarter of the poems, Myers modifies the stanzaic pattern of the poem, instead offering a shorter final stanza (in contrast to the previous stanzas in the poem). At times, a poem concludes with even a *single line*. For example, "City Dump" describes men cleaning out the last junk from their pick-ups, and ends with images of spring, highlighting the moment where in the midst of the junk "a cardinal/is calling from beyond the chain-link fence,/and it is spring, // and the men are dancing" (20). The poem "None of This" explores (through the "you" who is an eight-year-old boy) the notions of creation, noting how "You have not read/Milton yet or Hesiod or Genesis" (43). The couplet structure varies at the end in a way that draws attention to the idea of creation: "She is drinking coffee. It is early. There are more/birds in the tree above you. It is not yet // hot. None of this is nothing" (43). Another powerful example involves an extended metaphor where a trend of divorces is likened to the practice of "clear cutting," and the speaker and his wife "walk among the desolate stumps,/side-by side: where Adam lost his rib, // here, our bodies barely touching" (71). Lastly, the final poem before the "Coda" section, "In the Graveyard I Meet Another Jogger," reinforces the book's emphasis on death, as well as on time: "There is room. I'll meet you here again. // May it be many years from now" (108). While some readers could potentially view these structural moves as being too manipulative or too "clever," for this reader the departure from the prior form causes only an increase of genuine emphasis and emotional power.

Aristotle famously tied a poet's ability to his skill with metaphor, and *Lapse Americana* is replete with figurative language that surprises us while also being consistent with the tone and subject matter of the poem. Myers's ability with figurative language is surely one of the hallmarks of the collection, and one of the most distinguishing characteristics of his work. In "Mysterious God," he describes roadkill as "an archipelago/of carnage down the highway" (80). "Memorial Day" already refers to the current War on Terror, and the buffalo (and its slaughter and lack of presence in current-day Oklahoma) function as a parallel to what is taking place overseas: "garbage trucks/nod their way up the sleepy blocks/like a small herd of buffalo" (78). Continuing with the notions of violence and stunning figurative language, the final couplet of "Agincourt" reads, "What can I say to those others, no different than me, really,/filing off into Afghanistan, like letters mailed to God?" (23). In contrast, and as an example of a tonally lighter poem that utilizes figurative language, "French Press" finds its speaker perceiving that "Very much like watching the ocean's curve/for the whale to surface,/is watching the kettle for steam" (96). This is a striking comparison when one considers the way the whale

exhalations are the sudden condensation, the idea of anticipation being key. Later, drawing on an image reminiscent of prayer, “the empty cup waits/like folded hands” (96). Myers’s startling and often beautiful leaps of language provide much delight and pleasure for readers.

Within “Good Friday at the Alamo,” with its weaving together of history and the speaker’s Holy Week visit to the title site, many of the book’s subjects, its structural and poetic elements, and its broader concerns coalesce. Readers encounter the details of the famous site as “the rubber flip-flops of tourists make a sound/ of polite applause for the dead” (77), while the speaker posits that Davy Crocket’s gun is “like the tibia of Mary Magdalene at Toulon” (77). With the poem’s movement from the particular details of the speaker’s experience to those beyond himself he states, “Somewhere outside of time we all cry out/from the dark of our mouths, *Crucify Him!*” (77). There is movement beyond the personal which culminates with the speaker’s passionate request, “Oh, tour guide, tell them we have a history/of violence. Tell them we have a history // of need” (77). The use of the collective “we” shows that as readers we are also implicated, and here Myers serves as the poetic and prophetic voice announcing our need.

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Luke Hankins, (ed.). ***Poems of Devotion: An Anthology of Recent Poets.*** Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012. Pp. xxviii + 208. \$24.70. ISBN 978-1-61097-712-8.

Luke Hankins has assembled a rich, varied anthology of devotional poetry, most of which was written between 1950 and the present, including 77 poets, the vast majority of the poems originally in English, with translations as well from French, Polish, Magyar (Hungarian), Dutch, and Hebrew. Hankins’s introductory essay, “The Poem as Devotional Practice: The Lasting Model of the 17th-century Poets,” asserts the importance of “poetry as a means of meditating” (xvi), reminding us that “the composition of a poem can itself be an act of devotion” (xvii). The central argument of Anthony Low’s *Love’s Architecture: Devotional Modes in Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, Hankins argues, transcends the study’s period and geography of focus: devotional poetry at its most powerful is often exploratory, an “agonia,” a “wrestling with God,” and not rhetorical or theatrical posturing in language to achieve a foregone conclusion (xviii–xix). We readers cannot know, of course, or verify the inner states of poets who write the poems we read; Cristina Malcolmson, for example, in her study of George Herbert refers to the “sincerity effect,” the way in which Herbert’s poems achieve the *appearance* of sincerity and the genuine: true art, after all, is often in a work’s seeming artlessness. God alone sees hearts fully.