PRECISE INSTABILITY

Introducing Joseph Massey

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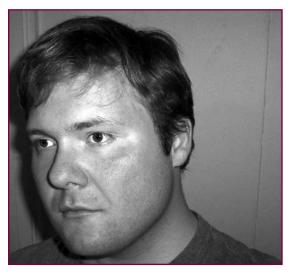
READING JOSEPH MASSEY'S poems makes me remember some things Charles Olson said in "Projective Verse," i.e. that a "poem, must be handled as a series of objects in a field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold* . . . "; and "I am dogmatic, that the head shows in the syllable."; and "It is by their syllables that words juxtapose in beauty." In outward appearance Massey's small, tightly constructed, haikuesque poems couldn't be more different from Olson's. Still, I find them to be perfect illustrations of Olson's assertions. Here is one from Massey's recent chapbook, *Property Line*:

Hummingbird through a vortex of gnats navigates nasturtiums

unraveled over a gravel path.

The connotations of the few nouns, verbs, and adjectives in this small poem tug in two opposed directions. On one side we find "vortex," "navigate," and "path"—words which suggest purpose and concentration. On the other side we find "unraveled" and the cloud of "gnats." These words suggest entropy and randomness. Among these objects of attention an Olsonian tension "holds." The subject-noun of the poem, "hummingbird," occupies a middle ground. We expect a hummingbird's movements to be erratic, flitting, but here the bird is seen as almost comically purposeful and direct, pursuing its ends through an entropic world. Is the poem, like the hummingbird, penetrating determinedly into a world of receding and collapsing phenomena? Is the tension in the poem (in all poems?) between such precision and such unraveling?

There is much to say about the *sound* of this poem and the way the syllables juxtapose. There are the six assonant short "a"s in "gnats," "nasturtiums," "navigates," "unraveled," "gravel," and "path"; the subtle scrambled rhyme in "hummingbird" and "nasturtium," the off-rhyme of "unraveled" and "gravel"; and there's the way stress falls on the first syllable in so many of these words, i.e. "Hummingbird," "vortex," "navigates," "gravel." As Olson says, a "head shows" in the play of (these) syllables indeed.



JOSEPH MASSEY

I find it refreshing and somehow also sobering to observe the way Massey sticks so closely to the perceptual world. Like William Carlos Williams, he challenges us to see the value in putting *things* in words. What *does* depend on that famous red wheel barrow or on these nasturtiums? Is the question retro or is it time to ask again? How do we move from perception to experience, from experience to thought? What sort of "property line" divides one perceptual event from another?

Here is one more poem from Property Line:

Flies, sundried, line the windowsill.

Measure what was summer.

Who ever hears the term "sun-dried" applied to anything but tomatoes, by the way? Now you have. The mind behind this poem observes and measures but doesn't tidy up. The property line dividing summer from autumn is made of dead flies! This line divides the past from the present, ostensibly, but the line itself seems a bit blurred. The words "measure" and "summer" reveal a good bit of overlap, a surprising kinship; they are mirror-twins. Both are two syllable words with stress on the first syllable. They differ mainly in how their consonants, the "m" and the "s," are reversed. This demonstrated interchangeableness is not exactly proper.

the treezo our Hood

We might find a precedent for Massey's poems in Lorine Niedecker's. Like Niedecker, he is a close and unsentimental observer of nature. Like hers, his poems hover between being sound-driven and sight-inspired. Massey's work also reminds me of the early poems of Ron Silliman. Here is a sample from Silliman's first book, *Crow* (Ithaca House, 1971), a book which has long been out of print and which Massey may not have seen:

no

no thing like a vague flower in the concrete

birdshit, the perfect

white, the wide path cut

Get Killed, Go to Jail, Allude

Do I like you? No.

sun up just barely

fuchsia, fuchsia

There are some interesting similarities between this poem and the first Massey poem I quoted. In Sillimans's poem there is a tension established between the vaguely flowering "noth-

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ing" of the first stanza and the specificity of the "fuchsia" at the end which recalls Massey's unraveled nasturtiums, his "vortex of gnats." In both poems an ambivalently depicted, unused (?) "path" exists, not between the objects of attention, but simply as one of them. Silliman's poem is striking for the way it combines a definite, emphatic tone with a syntactic instability. In the opening stanza we can't know whether nothingness flowers in the concrete or, alternatively, whether there is nothing in the

concrete similar to a "vague flower."

Then there is the mixture of precision and instability in this little poem by Massey, recently published in a magazine called *Frame*:

Grease-splotched parking lot a-wash with dawn.

Massey's focus on the object world allows for the smear of one "thing" into another. Clean and dirty meet here, sharing the same spray of color. The words that present these phenomena even share many of the same letters: "lot" appears within "splotched" and "wash" and "dawn" share an "a" and a "w" in reversed position. There is a tension between the poet's notational focus on each word/thing and the tendency of these words and objects to conjoin and mutate.

Massey's poems make the always radical argument that it should be enough (enough pleasure) to *see* the world, to *hear* syllables "juxtapose in beauty."

"no" by Ron Silliman, published in *Crow*, © 1971 by Ron Silliman, used with permission of the author.

POEMS BY JOSEPH MASSEY >



Hill's red tethered edge berries that numbed

your tongue.

Spider web

(windripped) weighted with a wet receipt.

Abandoned Lot

1

Bees inscribe the fog & funnel into plum blossoms

that barb the abandoned lot's chain-link border.

2

Weeds a few feet thick wind-combed

to a concave where last week's rain still evaporates.

3

A silver cellophane bag floats there, repels the sun

punctured past overcast—

POEM BY RAE ARMANTROUT >



scumble

What if I were turned on by seemingly innocent words such as "scumble," "pinky," or "extrapolate?"

What if I maneuvered conversation in the hope that others would pronounce these words?

Perhaps the excitement would come from the way the other person touched them lightly and carelessly with his tongue.

What if "of" were such a hot button?

"Scumble of bushes."

What if there were a hidden pleasure in calling one thing by another's name?