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Introduction

Passages/Paysages

Aldon L. Nielsen and I first met at LeMans, France, on the occasion of the international conference “Poets and Publishers: Circulating Avant-Garde Poetry (1945-2010)” held at Université du Maine, October 14-16, 2010. It took us very little to reckon that we were sharing U.S. poet friends. I suppose poetry and friendship get along quite well, both constituted by the fine fiber of an intensified way of experiencing forms of legacy. In that particular time France was on a repeated series of dramatic strikes, and trains were extremely chance-like. The possibility of getting stuck at LeMans, in addition to the specific topic of the conference, made a surreptitious look circulate among participants, Aldon talk’s being titled “Kid Creole and His Beau-Cocoanauts: Lloyd Addison’s Astro-Black Infinities.”

However, the interpretive line that I would like to follow in introducing Aldon L. Nielsen’s seven unpublished poems does not unravel through anecdotes. The path that I’m following, rather, is literally a track, as these incipital lines from “Cecil’s Train Set – for C. S. Giscombe” (unpublished 1) confirm: “In at last night from / Chicago / Lining red-eyed track / Smothered clack / Of post prairie ties // Ribboned cross / Sleepless eyes / Out the window what hard / Highways / To bypass.” In exchanging a few e-mails about his unpublished poems, Aldon wrote: “This poem is for my poet friend C. S. Giscombe, the only American poet I know who, in addition to being a Professor in an English Department, holds a license to operate a train. Giscombe has always been fascinated with travel and with trains.”¹ Reading the poem one finds, he continues, “internal references ... to the radical changes that time has brought to the towns of the American mid-west. The allusion to time coming across the prairies is remembering the

fact that towns stretching westward in America each had their own time until the coming of the trains. The train schedules required a common time that all could keep."² In the poem, the two fundamental coordinates of time and space emerging are typically apprehended through movement. In a sort of call-and-answer pattern, they build up a relationship with each other, and the intermingling of their internal rhythm enhances mutual dynamism, even where there is apparent stasis: "The cows remained indifferent / As the clouds came home," Nielsen says in another poem ("Nielsen Extruder," *Mixage* 52) – the slow time characterizing the cows' indifference is counterpointed by the fast approaching floating movement of the clouds coming home. There is always a (time-giving) passage in a (space-embracing) landscape behind Nielsen's poetic scene. This coupling, in turn, constitutes the texture of life, in his view: "I was inside / What seemed to be a long time" ("Nielsen Extruder," *Mixage* 55). The poet shows, aiming at a sort of deconstructed form of wisdom, how the spatial physicality of his temporal existence creates one way "to learn to live with ourselves" ("Nielsen Extruder," *Mixage* 54); and again: "One makes a life no more than a poem / Of secrets / And therefore fills with openings any obscure passage" ("Translation From The Rubric," *Stepping Razor* 35). As he puts it, there is a spatial-temporal connection engrained in his poetical compositions. "I like to think of all my poetry occupying the same imaginative time-space continuum,"³ and the nexus between the two dimensions of time and space is often explicitly represented by language, or, alternatively, by metalinguistic allusions: "Bridge passage / To switch / That trains us / To read that lost / Phrase" ("Cecil's Train Set – for C. S. Giscombe"). Language is vehicle, language moves, language discovers: "A man used his language to know the world he'd discovered" ("Translation From The Rubric," *Stepping Razor* 35). Returning to "Cecil's Train Set": "The last lines celebrate the fact that Giscombe carried his bicycle on a train to Canada so that he could explore the Pacific Northwest."⁴ The notion of exploration here hinted at once again echoes Nielsen's image of "The man [who] used his language to discover the world anew" ("Translation From The Rubric," *Stepping Razor* 35).

In the poem "Untitled" (unpublished 2), in one of his imaginative peregrinations, Nielsen conjoins family with friends. Dedicated to his own

father and the poet George Oppen – both wounded in the Battle for the Bulge during World War II – “this poem is a lyric meditation on their experiences and on our debts to that generation.”⁵ “My father’s lung / Concussed / Nebraska air / Rushed to the front / Punched out of Belgian mud / Was it the same / Shelling shook / Oppen / Shook me / Loose / It was not this sky / Wounded them / . . .” The broken line and the panting rhythm of the fragmented and elliptical syntax, well reproduce the shock of war and the physical traumas it causes, the bodily – as well as soul’s – mutilation. This leads to almost ineffable pain, and the rags of life significantly remain “eerily precarious” (“Untitled,” unpublished 2).

A return to safe ground back home is represented by the third unpublished poem here presented, “from KANSAS,” where the poet deals with some of the themes about the American mid-west, also treated in previous writings:

This is the second of a pair of sequences written while on extended visits to the places named, the other sequence being ‘from Ghana.’ . . . Kansas was a major battleground in the disputes over slavery that led up to America’s brutal Civil War, but many of the allusions are far more contemporary. The section headed ‘Frank,’ for example, celebrates the odd appearance of Kansas in the writing of Frank Zappa for the first album by the Mothers of Invention.⁶

Here another leading motif of Nielsen’s compositions appears: the explicit reference to music. In this case, rock music, even though in many other poetical and critical works the connection is primarily with jazz and Afro-American rhythms, as we will show in a few lines. Another artistic thread adds to the plot: “The avant-garde film maker Stan Brakhage, mentioned in one stanza, was from Kansas, and lived for a time in an orphanage there.”⁷ The journey through that land cinematically encapsulates a remembrance and a projection, both stretching along a multilayered synaesthetic dimension of simultaneous experiences:

The next-to-the-last stanza recounts an eerie experience when my wife and I were walking past a music store in Kansas and caught sight of a large painting of Gil Scott-Heron, the poet and song writer who recorded ‘The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.’ Scott-Heron, who had been one of my teachers in col-

lege, had just died a few months before, and a painting of his face was about the last thing we expected to encounter in Kansas that summer.⁸

I couldn't agree more with Will Alexander when he says that "The poetry of Aldon Nielsen is marked by rare insight, which penetrates the invisible moments of our daily peregrinations" (backcover, *Stepping Razor*). It is not surprising that the newly issued book of poems by Nielsen is titled *A Brand New Beggar*, and that a new edition of his prose poem *Evacuation Routes* of 1992 is published anew. Movement again, peregrinations, escapes.

Languagescape

If "from KANSAS" deploys horizontally, the unpublished poem "Geotropism" (unpublished 7) displays verticality. With its reference "to the downward growth of plant roots" the poet envisages a parallel to the "trope" element in composition. I mentioned earlier the texture of metalinguistic terms and rhetorical devices engrained in Nielsen's poetic fabric. The following list of phrases is taken from *Mixage* (2005): "vanished *tongues*," "dwarf *morphemes*" (52), "My mother was all in *similes*" (57); "Supple *Meant*," "*Epistemological* Hesitation," and "*Mixophobia*" (italics mine), for instance, are titles of poems from the said book; *Mantic Semantic*, instead, is the title of Nielsen's 2011 collection, published by Hank's Original Loose Gravel Press, Lawrence, Kansas. The poem "Second Person" – included in *Mantic Semantic* – hinges on metalinguistic references: "If I come to *speak* in your *name* / ... / If I come to your *name* with no knowledge / Of what is *intended* there / If I enter that space which fills the *mouths* of others / When they *speak* of you / That space which so seldom surrounds your own / Guarded *tongue* / Will it be to say one of those *sentences* / That has insisted upon itself through history / Repeating itself into *language* after *language* / Like some *stuttering* fool who cannot / Make himself *understood* /" (all italics mine). "Impenetrable Jargon," in the same collection, rotates around anagrams, compounds and blendings, alternating vowel presence and substitution, morphemic deconstruction and incremental repetitions, alliterations and

assonances, cutting across diverse languages and historical eras, with lines which, in reiterated tercet pattern, exquisitely pave their way through the edification of a sonorous ambience: “golf / gulf / guelph // men / menace / menses // lam / laminate / lamb // chancy / chump / chanteuse // . . . // infer / in fur / infernal // voile / viola / voila.” The poem “Geotropism” is, according to Nielsen, “ultimately about the faith of language.”⁹ The Creeleyan credo that we are saved through words finds here an intimately bouncing resonance.

“The music is all there”

At the basis of Nielsen’s poems musicality lies, or rather, music rules and rolls. One just needs to read his poems aloud – and give a quick look at his series of poetry readings available in the internet, one interesting link, for example, <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Nielsen.php#St-Marks> – to find evidence of that.¹⁰ Musical allusions pervade his critical works on African-American literature, too, as *Black Chant* (1997) and *Integral Music* (2004) confirm. It is primarily in these two books that Nielsen shows his lifelong commitment to the cause of African-American poetry, dedicating his keen and profound reading to poets such as Russell Atkins, Stephen Jonas, Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman, and Jayne Cortez. In “Capillary Currents: Jane Cortez” (an essay which we first read in the groundbreaking book *We Who Love to Be Astonished. Experimental Women’s Writing and Performance Poetics*, edited by Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue), the initial words literally recite: “The music is all there.” And the text continues: “By the time that the ear falls prey to the groove, the music is already multiplying, leveling monuments to expectation and erecting newer castles in the air; a layering with open work areas dangerously unguarded. This is not at all unusual these days, and never was. Still, each generation hears ellipses” (Nielsen, “Capillary Currents: Jayne Cortez,” *Integral Music* 174-193). The essay is constellated by musical punctuations: “a harmonic whirl ensues” (175), “already-in-progress jazz poem” (175), “tradition of call and response” (175), “The performance is a response to the poem, an example of what musicians do with poetry. The poem is a prior

response to jazz, example of what a poet does with music” (175). Nielsen envisages “intricate and vigorous Yoruba and Carabalí rhythms” (177) which, in an intriguing “cultural syncretism” (175), infuse Latin suggestions “into American jazz idioms” (177), conjuring up to a “reinvigorated pulse” (178). The way Nielsen talks criticism is the way he conceives of poetry. We could approach his own poems with a similar musical tension, because “The music is all there.”

“Small Song” (unpublished 4), Nielsen says,

in addition to being a little lyric about mortality, is another tribute to Brakhage and through him to other artists. Brakhage was particularly taken with the passage in Ezra Pound’s ‘Salutation the Second’ that begins ‘Go, little naked and impudent songs.’ One of Brakhage’s many poet friends was Robert Kelly, author of *Songs I-XXX*. Kelly writes in a note to that book: ‘Brakhage once told me that the notion of calling his adamantine 8-mm films *Songs* came to him from me. The name returned to me as exact title for these experiments in the extended lyric.’ The name returned to me, too, for this experiment in compressed lyric.¹¹

“Smaller Still” (unpublished 5) “is, then, even more compressed” (ibidem). “The irony is all there,” we could paraphrase in a sort of call and response critical dialogue with Aldon’s own words.

Finally, “Seven Series” (unpublished 6), dedicated to Bob Perelman, is “another such experiment in compression, so compressed that the seventh in the series doesn’t exist.” With the reference to Wernicke’s area, in the poem, once again there emerges Nielsen’s keen attunement to the wonder of language, his t(h)rust in it.

Notes

¹ Personal communication from the author, September 17, 2012.

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ See also <http://heatstrings.blogspot.com/>; <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/nielsen/>; Evacuation Routes: <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/nielsen/routes.html>.

¹¹ Personal communication from the author, September 17, 2012.

Works cited

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