RSA 15-16 (2004-2005)

MASSIMO BACIGALUPO

A Note on Mary Jo Salter's America

Poetry in America today seems to serve a different function than elsewhere. It is not about the individual's unique visions or about the foregrounding of language, but it communicates and describes everyday events and notations, in the same way as a short story does, but in more compact form. Poetry sits comfortably with the other genres, is not dressed up differently, and the magazine reader is not changing wavelength when she passes from story to essay to poem. They all have their function or they wouldn't be there. Even such a notorious anti-realist as John Ashbery sits happily in the middle-brow pages of the *New Yorker,* as in the issue of 7 November 2005, which includes an acute and sympathetic 12-page "profile" of him (by Larissa MacFarquhar), as well as three new poems. I quote a few lines from "Thrill of Romance":

> Everyone's solitude (and resultant promiscuity)
> perfumed the byways of villages we had thought civilized.
> I saw you waiting for a streetcar and pressed forward.
> Alas, you were only a child in armor. Now when ribald toasts
> sail round a table too fair laid out — why, the consequences
> are only dust, disease and old age. Pleasant memories
> are only just that...

Even the *cadavre exquis* method of the Surrealists has been normalized in the American climate — it now records the outrage of the everyday. It is this shared solidity of purpose, and shared attitude of naive relaxation, that makes the American poem welcome among actualities, fictions and reflections, and available to a large readership. The reader herself will be both attentive and easy-going, and will pick up a line here and there to savor. "Pleasant memories are only just that..."

Mary Jo Salter is a good example of this workmanlike attitude, since her poems directly address the everyday of life as many of us live it today:

family, travel, a party, an evening spent watching a movie. A distinguished lecturer at Mount Holyoke, Salter is the author of a formidable essay on Emily Dickinson's puns *(Yale Review* 79.2: 188-221), and is extremely form-conscious, but this is no obstacle to her sensitive and quietly passionate notation. We know that the example of the seventeenth-century poets and divines is still with us in the placid hills of New England, and Salter has learned from writers like Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and Amy Clampitt — all of them to some extent formalists, but only in the sense that they were artists of the line, painters in words and stanzas: they saw poetry as a serious game with which to capture their sense of things, diligently and creatively. (Sylvia Plath, a quotation from whom opens this issue of *RSA* devoted to concepts of space, was no less fastidious a poet-etcher, and made good use of the techniques she had taught herself and of her much-consulted *Thesaurus* when she discovered her scalding subject matter in the final years of her short life.)

The three unpublished poems that Mary Jo Salter has generously allowed readers of *RSA* to preview are perfect examples of her themes and style, and confirm her secure mastery. The beautiful "Wake-Up Call" is a reflection on the snows of yesteryear which however looks forward with quiet purpose to the snows of tomorrow. It is about the process of discovering, losing and remembering, and does not hesitate to recall some of the most intimate (and common) personal experiences (like breast-feeding a child). Salter noted about this lovely poem: "I wonder whether my conscious use of the cliche of Venice-as-essence-of-beauty will just seem old hat to Italian readers. But indeed I woke up (in America) from a dream in which I heard the water slapping a boat in Venice. I haven't been there in years!" Again, we have a person reflecting on Henry James's *observed life,* just as Bishop does for example in her famous "Questions of Travel." She muses, and comes to a conclusion which is like a lay prayer. As for the form, this poem does not seem to rhyme its tercets, except for the two lines before the last, and appears to be mostly in trochaic pentameters, which leads to an unusually high number of feminine endings. But this is only to keep the rhythm going — an old, classic rhythm, for a vision both modern and timeless. (By the

way, a "lucky stiff' is a colloquialism for "a lucky bastard.")

The third poem, "Aurora Borealis," turns to a subject already explored with unsurpassable results by Dickinson and Wallace Stevens. Salter tells us that the poem "is set in the northern part of Washington State, where the northern lights (or aurora borealis) are quite common — as they were when we lived in Iceland. I don't think I could ever get used to them, though." Dickinson compared the auroras to a flower. Salter uses the conceit that they are like a shaft of light with which somebody is looking for something on the dark planet. The rays of light behave strangely, so if we were the searchers at what point would we "make the leap" — decide that we have found what we sought? Salter here uses quatrains with identical end-rhymes to create a stitching pattern: it is an artificial construct to reproduce or answer intelligently the natural world at its most magnificent and remote. Again it is the observed life, the mind that questions and creates analogies and patterns.

"Musical Chair" brings us with its narrative blank verse back to the suburban everyday world where we swim in pools and watch children play at a party, in the cherished Wordsworthian tradition. Here the observer is available to experience, and she draws into her painting the clouds reflected in the pool, the canoes that have made waves in the quiet water, the interplay of the old and young. Adults and children playing Musical Chairs. The world seems to be there to be described, since it's continuously changing under our eyes. Even the chairs "as variously faulty as our bodies" that are lined up for the game. The narrator here is a "we," a collective consciousness. Or just the way we would report a Sunday get-together to friends — and note that the little one, Pete, behaved rather determinedly about not relinquishing his chair. This puts the game in the perspective of intimations of mortality. Comes everyone's turn to be left out, and Pete will likely be the last survivor, but anyhow he won't take any chances and doesn't even get up when the music starts again... (The final line echoes — unconsciously? — the close of a less reassuring New England poem, Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour.")

This is a perfect example of the workmanlike essay-story-poem, but of course it communicates its impressions and intimations as only a poem

could do, and that is why it is happily "installed among the kitchen ware" (as Whitman would have liked). The uniqueness of relaxed formal control and attitude corresponds to the uniqueness of the world observed: the peculiarities of American life, as recorded by some of its major artists. The colors and sensual forms of O'Keeffe's South-West, the ominous Victorian buildings of Hopper's New England, the lyricism of the Wyeths and Fairfield Porter. Art in America is ideally part of everyday life, and it offers a world in which it is rewarding to be engaged.