

HERE IS ONE HAND AND HERE IS ANOTHER

Richard Berengarten. *Manual*. Shearsman Books, 2014.

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Manual is the sixth volume of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings*. It consists of one hundred small poems each with two stanzas and each stanza with five lines. In this way, the poetic form reflects two hands and five fingers. We are reminded of the British philosopher G. E. Moore holding up his hands and stating, "Here is one hand and here is another; therefore at least two external objects exist; therefore an external world exists." Similarly, in *Manual*, Berengarten begins with bedrock certainties and uses them as leaping off points for a poetic and everyday imagination.

There is little doubt that Berengarten is a master of form. The first five volumes of his *Selected Writings* include stunning long poems such as "Do vidjenja Danitse," which is a farewell to the former Yugoslavia, as well as short lyrics, book-length sequences, and everything in between. What is remarkable, however, about this collection is that Berengarten uses a simple ten-line form to balance and bring together varied and seemingly divergent topics. In *Manual*, he describes imaginary worlds, childhood games, mountain climbing, aging and death, playdough and the Paleolithic Venus of Dolní Věstonice, all with an eye towards collage. Despite its highly structured framework—the one hundred poems are even further divided up into five sequences of twenty—the numerological patterning of the collection is largely imperceptible to the reader. This does not, however, diminish its importance. Berengarten has discovered that it is second nature for us to count out things on our fingers, regardless of whether they are items on a grocery list or the lines of a poem.

It is this impressive variety of subject matter all held together by the ineffable pleasure of counting that makes *Manual* one of Berengarten's best collections to date. Take for example the second sequence, "Holding the Darkness," which was originally published as a chapbook in 2007. The second poem in this sequence begins:

The sun took the boy by the throat
The sun put his hands on the boy and throttled him
and out of the sun climbed a man
down the sun's own red and purple threads
because it was evening

Here we are in the world of César Vallejo and Vasko Popa, where the force of poetic voice and the precision of image override logic. Juxtaposed alongside this mythic landscape, however, is the very real and historic narrative of two mountain climbers climbing the Lagginhorn in the Pennine Alps:

He had one snow axe but he needed two.
He called his friend roped twenty feet below
Do we go on? Reply: *Of course we do.*
Using his right hand fingers as an axe-head
he stabbed them at the snow to get a hold.

The elasticity and durability of the form to hold these different topics in tandem makes *Manual*, from a poetics perspective, highly impressive. The constellation of narrative, lyric, anecdote, and theory also makes it highly enjoyable to read. This sequence of the “second twenty” concludes with the lines “You have come from a country where poetry // is so trammelled up in clever elegance / that only opacity is praised and prized.” *Manual*, on the other hand, is both intellectual and accessible. As with his larger *oeuvre*, Berengarten writes against the Prynian tradition in British poetry of allusion and obfuscation.

Instead, Berengarten’s understanding of poetic tradition, is similar to that of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado who writes, “Toda la imaginería / que no ha brotado del río / barata bisutería” (All of the imagery / that has not sprung from the river— / call it poor trinketry.) In other words, if the imagery of poetry is going to strike the reader it must emerge out of the riverbed, out of a collective tradition. In *Manual*, Berengarten draws on the resources of tradition, from classical myth to the memories of childhood:

Look at this wall now Here is a piggy
and here a dog with floppy ears
and here a man’s face with a big nose
and here his mouth opening very wide
and here a bear and here a lion

The caesurae become the places for the shadows we make with our hands, inviting the reader to remember how to make a pig or a bear. Through this childhood game, we remember what our hands can make, and also take notice of our hands as such. Because we very rarely think of our hands as separate from the rest of us, the result is somewhat unnerving and uncanny. It is like the frontispiece of *Manual*—the black and white photo of Berengarten’s hand beside the Venus of Dolní Věstonice. Nevertheless, by drawing attention to our hands as such, Berengarten, like Moore, Wittgenstein, and

Anscombe, is approaching an epistemological limit that flickers in and out of consciousness and establishes certainty.

The final poem in *Manual* is a frame-piece that parallels a similar piece at the start of book. So the collection contains two extra poems, reminding us that this project unfolded over the last thirty-five years and is still ongoing. The final poem is an elegy for Berengarten's mother, Rosalind Burns, to whom the book is dedicated. Like the shadows on the walls we make with our hands, this poem calls our attention to the gestures we unconsciously inherit from our parents and how those gestures are a form of memory. The elegy echoes Beckett's *Worstward Ho*, where he writes, "The child hand raised to reach the holding hand. Hold the old holding hand. Hold and be held." Berengarten's *Manual* urges us to recognize the human element in the things that we do, which in Berengarten's case is writing poetry:

Curious how suddenly, Rosalind,
out of a buried remembering,
I find you in those gestures
I used to see you making, which
now, without my reckoning,

bloom again out of my own hands,
as though yours, tenacious roots,
had grown grains of your own
ways of doing and achieving things,
deviously, through and into mine.