

## JORIS, JAZZ, AND DEMOCRATIC SYMBOLIC ACTIVISM

Pierre Joris. *Meditations on the Stations of Mansur al-Hallaj*. Chax Press, 2013.

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During the same period I was reading Pierre Joris' new collection of poems, *Meditations on the Stations of Mansur al-Hallaj*, I was also reading *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing* by Michael Magee.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps as the consequence of the serendipitous juxtaposition of these works, I came to focus on the interrelation between Joris' poetry and poetics and jazz as a form of "democratic symbolic activism." More generally, I was drawn towards Joris' relation of music and poetry, which becomes evident in his poetics and the construction of *Meditations*.

### *[Some background on the concept of democratic symbolic activism]*

Democratic symbolic activism is a term that Magee uses to consider Emerson's belief that words and symbols ("cultural signs") serve to shape societal organization, that they can either support a controlling hegemony or collapse it by creating a semiotic disjuncture between cultural signs and societal "reality". In tracing the lineage of democratic symbolic activism from Emerson to Ellison to poets like Frank O'Hara and Amiri Baraka, Magee makes the argument that the musical dynamics of jazz can help inform the balance between individualism and collectivism necessary for a strong, inclusive society.

The metaphor proposes that reality, history, and identity are constructed through signs, and that each individual and cultural group in America contributes through their use and amendment of the primary sign base, the American idiom. In this way, the evolution of language is the ultimate democratic construct. This is the lens through which I read (and reread) *Meditations on the Stations of Mansur al-Hallaj*.

### *[Jazz and Meditations on the Stations of Mansur al-Hallaj]*

In *Meditations*, Joris applies his interest in and knowledge about Sufism to "somehow wanting to ward off, or hold at bay, the utter destruction of

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1. Magee, Michael. *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2004.

the people & the city of Baghdad,” shortly after the US invasion of Iraq. He frames his work around the teachings of the 10<sup>th</sup>-century poet and teacher Mansur al-Hallaj, who lived in modern-day Baghdad. Mansur al-Hallaj was executed in 922 for the crime of proclaiming “I am the truth,” a statement that was proscribed, reserved for god. It’s from this starting point, an instance of a hegemonic protection of the proper use of language in order to maintain and fortify extant structures of dominance, that Joris begins his collection. And it’s also from here that the parallel to democratic symbolic activism begins to form.

In something of an unintentional deformative approach, I started reading the “Postface” of *Meditations on the Stations of Mansur Al-Hallaj* first (“a Something overtakes the Mind” when we read backwards, said Dickinson).<sup>2</sup> I was oddly overjoyed when I read that Joris explains his learning and use of the Stations as follows: “I...started to scour the internet for al-hallaj material & came up with a very basic—*anonymous, as far as I could discover*—list in English & Arabic of forty concepts taken from al-Hallaj’s teachings. Deciding to use the found list as titles for a sequence of forty poems, I started to work...” (emphasis added). Afterwards, he discusses the “problems” of using the found language from the anonymous website, such as the apparent typo that made the word “search” into “serach.” Rather than fixing the words, Joris declares: “Not only have I not corrected the mistakes but I’ve consciously tried to integrate them into the composition of the poem, at least wherever or whenever that felt needed &/or appropriate.” He previously supports this idea by noting: “...it is probably in the fissures between miscounts, recounts, etymologies, misreadings, neologisms, etc. that much of the poetic force of language resides.”

In using found language from the most egalitarian publishing medium in existence, the internet, Joris takes an important step toward forming his poem around a paradoxically decentered (in terms of physical location) idiom, the language of the Web. Further, upon finding an “error” in the language, he takes another democratic step: including the language as it appears and shaping its respective poem around it (“riffing” on each word to create the poem, as Pierre told me, in the manner a jazz musician would improvise on a supporting rhythm). In this way, rather than writing off a particular usage of language as erroneous, he counts its use as a vote toward the next step of an evolving vernacular. But further, we start to get a “jazz-shaped” (to borrow Ellison’s adjective) form to the poem through the use of neologism.

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2. This quote is most famously invoked by Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels in their seminal essay “Deformance and Interpretation,” the topic of which engages directly with the way I began to read *Meditations*.

Joris allows the anonymous speaker on the internet, which comes to symbolize a kind of everyman, to take the lead and offer an improvisation on language. Joris as poet plays the role of his supporting band and crafts the poem (the underpinning rhythm of the song, if you will) around the improvisation, himself improvising and blurring the lines between improvisation and rhythmical grounding, as Ornette Coleman (who Joris includes in his work; more on this later) was wont to do. To borrow a quote from Magee's book, where he quotes jazz critic Gunther Shuller on Coleman: "There is no one soloist, and there are no merely supportive accompanists. Everyone is equal, and in a sense everyone is at all times simultaneously leading (soloing) and supporting (complementing)." This is how Joris' poem functions for me, especially vis-à-vis its grounding in a found list from the Internet. He mediates a dialogic encounter between an evolving idiom and his vision of the poem.

Indeed, Joris has an allusion to Coleman in the poem "18. enumeration (add)" which is a fitting place for it, given that the poem's title could connote a musician enumerating the notes in a tonal/chordal structure. Joris writes, "note to note, note/after note, not a wrong//one among them (there/are no wrong//notes Ornette says)." Coleman referred to his jazz as a "democratic experience" (Magee, p.128), and critics have suggested that his "pieces...could be in any key or no key" (Magee, p.165) (though Magee points out that "Coleman's music is never precisely in no key but...employs shifting tone centers," a more complex order than most had played before him in jazz). Joris goes on, in the same poem, to explicitly relate Coleman's democratic playing style to language: "& I couldn't bring//myself to say there are/no wrong words//it is only the order in which/they come or don't// that can be wrong or/can it? let me count//the nays and the yeas" Here we get a meditation (pun intended) on prescriptivist vs. descriptivist views of language. And he deftly explicates the idea by drawing on Coleman.

I also found there to be a series "jazz-shaped" threads running through the poems, both to bind them together and to suture the reader in. These took the shape of what I might call "musical phrases" of word constellations, words that were often found within close proximity of each other. For example, starting in the first poem, we see a constellation of "desert," "pockets," and "manners" take shape. This juxtaposition creates formal relation of the words that carries throughout the poem. Later, there is a kind of syncopation in the juxtapositions of the words that resists anticipation. In "11. comradeship (rifq)," we see "desert" and "pockets" appear together, but "manners" becomes a syncopation, an unplayed note that we "feel" despite its lack of physical presence. The same thing happens in "23. isolation (in

‘irad),” reinforcing the concept that these words belong together. Finally, in “36. non-acceptance (rafd),” we see “desert” left alone, the last note played in a highly syncopated phrase that highlights the presence of the other words through their lack.

*[The Music of Nomad Poetics]*

From his well-known translations of Celan through his theorization of Nomad Poetics, a reader can feel Joris’ attraction to and engagement with music throughout his work. In a discussion with Al Filreis<sup>3</sup>, Joris recounts that it was the melodic properties of Celan’s “Todesfuge,” set against the harrowing content of the poem, which he first heard while in high school, that drew him to Celan, and, ultimately, to his career as a poet and scholar. The poem is a kind of sonic ekphrasis, where the form of the poem mirrors the contrapuntal form of a fugue, and Joris suggests that one reading of the poem, which is also read as a poem of witness of the Holocaust, could be as a dialogic and dialectical encounter with Bach, who is known for his composition of fugues. So from his beginnings with poetry through his latest work, we can see Joris working to locate poetry within Zukofsky’s famous integral: lower limit: speech, upper limit: music.

In fact, I find myself wondering if Joris’ notion of Nomad Poetics is itself a relation to jazz and improvisation as a model for linguistic innovation and iteration. He makes a very Emersonian comment in his Close Listening conversation with Charles Bernstein<sup>4</sup>, where Joris notes that his poetics seek to breakdown the notion of a mother tongue and that all languages are themselves “dialects and street talk.” He declares that he wants to get away from the idea of purity of language—that “poetry happens in imperfection.” We see this applied directly in *Meditations*, through his fluidity of syntax and unedited use of found language. He notes that the early American modernists drew from a very narrow range of sources, and we can see from his work, drawing from jazz through techno-jargon (“INFOSEC”), that his poetics resists a narrow, specialized range of reference in favor of a more democratic form. And in doing so, he follows in the footsteps of the likes of Emerson and William Carlos Williams (in fact, many of the poems in *Meditations* bear a visual resemblance to some of Williams’ work), toward

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3. Joris, Pierre, and Al Filreis. “The Holocaust Experience in the Poetry of Paul Celan,” 12/3/2013. *PennSound*. <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Joris.php>

4. Joris, Pierre, and Charles Bernstein. “Pierre Joris, in Conversation with Charles Bernstein,” 6/21/2005. *Close Listening* and *PennSound*. <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Joris.php>

democracy, via language.

Joris points out that homogeneity of culture is an illusion, “an alias for hegemony.” *Meditations* works to remediate any attempts toward homogenization of culture by pushing Joris’ *Nomad Poetics* into a new realm, that of a poetics that resists traditional notions of spatiality and locality and draws from the geographically unbounded (transcended?), democratically constructed language of the Web. Joris defines his use of the term “stations” to mean “the pause, the stop-over, the rest, the stay of the wanderer between two moments of movement, two runs, two sites, two places, two states.” *Meditations* itself, as a collection, marks such a transitional point. Joris waited for the US forces to be withdrawn from Iraq before writing the 40<sup>th</sup> and final station, making the collection a gateway between a period that had already been written and future possibility. As such, the collection itself stands as a “jazz-shaped” station, a waypoint between our current historical moment and, hopefully, a democratically constructed language, and therefore reality, of the future, a future where “[e]veryone is equal, and in a sense everyone is at all times simultaneously leading (soloing) and supporting (complementing).”