BEYOND HISTORY

Campbell McGrath. *XX: Poems for the Twentieth Century*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2016.

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> For a historian and a poet do not differ from each other because the one writes in verse and the other in prose…But they differ in this, that the one speaks of things which have happened, and the other of such as might have happened. Hence, poetry is more philosophic, and more deserving of attention, than history. For poetry speaks more of universals, but history of particulars.
> —Aristotle, *The Poetics*

Campbell McGrath's latest book reminds us why the historical imagination should not be the exclusive province of novelists. Moving in the gaps and animating the personal lineaments of history with a variety of approaches and forms, *XX: Poems for the Twentieth Century* outdoes the poet's previous books in its audacity of scope, subject matter and ultimate ambition. Never a poet of lyric distillation or of any self-limiting formalism, McGrath continues to write in the big-hearted, experimental American tradition of Whitman, Williams and Ginsburg. His best poems in this volume augment his distinctive contribution to the contemporary lyric. As in his "The Bob Hope Poem" in *Spring Comes to Chicago* or "Shopping for Pomegranates at Wal-Mart on New Year's Day," in his previous collection, *In the Kingdom of the Sea Monkeys,* McGrath has demonstrated his talent for capturing the dynamic multicultural panoply of contemporary urban American life—from its lowest consumerist banalities to its grandest spiritual yearnings. With pathos and humor—often in exuberant, long-lined litanies and rhapsodic imagery—McGrath has turned the impossible largeness and diversity of the American experiment into an asset. But his own penchant for expansive wonder and odal celebration is tempered by the critique of postcolonial capitalism he brings to bear on the systemic injustices and murderous depths of the last century. Writing lyrics from the perspectives of significant historical actors and highlighting the simultaneity of disparate events, the book delivers ample moments of meditative awe and comic recognition.

Though the collection's announced design is consciously overreaching, even the poet's inevitable misfires can be fascinating—like watching a trapeze artist fall from his own daring and noble folly. Regardless, this kind of book should be tonic for a poetry world with inclinations toward the in-

trospectively rarified and cultishly insular. By employing a more public voice and a wider spectrum of rhetorical modes of address, and by inscribing large swaths of social and cultural history, McGrath makes a fearless effort to appropriate a larger canvass and more diverse palette for the lyric. What other contemporary poet would risk the grand apostrophe of his "Prologue"?:

> Century of wraiths & indeterminacy.
>
> Century of Silicon, century of oil & isoptopic dust,
> Century of honey & plutonium, o radiant century,
> O eager, anguished, totalitarian century!

As if to model the widest possible array of forms for poetry, among his expressive torrents McGrath intersperses quieter traditional forms (e.g. sonnet, villanelle) as well as playful experiments with concrete poetry, like the following in "Gertrude Stein (1909)":

	I arose	
I arouse	Eye *arros*	I arrows
	I, a rose!	

Postmodern enough not to pose as seer or sage authority, McGrath eschews any overarching theories of history such as Yeats's cyclical gyres or Eliot's notion of a civilization in the throes of cataclysmic disintegration, and instead offers a series of meditations on significant characters and moments. His ninth collection, *XX* marks a new departure for McGrath as he expands his historical subjects beyond his characteristic American locales, suggested even by the titles of earlier books like *American Noise*, *Spring Comes to Chicago* and *Florida Poems*. But while Mao is a central presence and Mandela inspires a poem, McGrath's predominant subjects (e.g. Matisse, Einstein, Goebbels) as well as his critical lenses (e.g. the Frankfurt School) still tend to be Eurocentric; and whether engaging in celebration, playful satire, or radical critique, McGrath's book couldn't be more American in its optimistic resilience and brio.

Weighing in at 222 relatively full, long-lined pages, *XX* dramatically dwarfs the countless thin collections of lyrics that appear annually from poetry presses around the world. So perhaps in McGrath's art of amplitude and reach, the resultant quality is bound to be wildly uneven. The book contains essentially three kinds of poems: 1) those focused around representative historical personalities, 2) those focused on images of time and history or particular historical events, and 3) more personal lyrics grounded

in their historical contexts. Since a "great person" theory of cultural history may be more persuasive than the "great person" theory of political history, McGrath's all-star cast of lyric subjects seems promising. But the range of styles and forms and perspective helps account for the unevenness of these "personality" lyrics assessed as a group. The third person poems tend to be much more effective than the direct first person kind because in writing closer to his own voice, McGrath can harness his gift for imitative merging and rapturous appreciation. For instance, his special flair for popular music and musicians spills over into his "Elvis Presley (1957)" *tour de force*:

> Elvis is on stage snarling and yelping and fucking with them,
> strutting, tomcatting, spitting his gum into the audience,
> Elvis is acting the fool, the bad boy, a punk in a kelly green suit
> and the shoes of a divorce court lawyer
> and the hair of a truck driver and the voice of a hillbilly
> and the swivel of a Beale Street bluesman,
> surly and longing and swaggering and joyous
> as if to erase the centuries of dust and brute labor,
> as if to eviscerate his people's long history of desperation
> and Depression and war and impoverishment,
>
> though not of the soul, surely, for he loves Jesus as a brother,
>
> like a fire, that spirit, like a candle, that devotion,
> that desire, that honey-coated tongue of longing,
>
> what does he want, what does he want

This brief snippet from a dazzling seven page performance— an ironic and absurd litany to a saint of American pop culture— shows how McGrath's joyful anaphoric cataloguing as well as his paratactic accreting of images can paint a novelistic scene with a poet's rousing verbal soundtrack. Emblematic and iconic, but hardly reverential as a figure of high art, Elvis is perfectly fitted to the poet's own brand of free-form democratic meditation. Similarly, "Lee Atwater's Apocalyptic Dream (1991)," in which Elvis again figures prominently as the apotheosis of an hallucinatory American dream, becomes a more successful vehicle for social critique than, say, the persona poems in the epic voice of Mao. McGrath's political vision is much more effectively communicated when he presents it obliquely through evocations of art and popular culture.

In "The Style for Dylan (1965)," McGrath riffs on a series of charged epithets that stalk the protean, just-out-of-reach folk-rock legend and recent

Nobel recipient:

> Adorable Bob, deplorable Bob, not yet mascara-and-fedora Bob, lean
>   and hungry, all cheekbones, fawn and leopard skin,
> ain't got nothing to lose Bob, adrenaline and Benzedrine Bob,
>   hungry and frugal, positively 4th and McDougal Bob,
> wings of Mercury Bob, hermetic and copacetic Bob, poetic Bob in his
>   pointed shoes and bells, glibly Shakespearean,
> high-toned and empyrean, rollicking, frolicsome Bob…

This poem's subject is congruent to its form: a freely-flowing, long-lined, process poem about trying to name the unnamable shape-shifter. Likewise, McGrath's third person renditions of Freud and Conrad, August Sanders, Anna Akhmatova, and Edward Hopper inspire some of the best poems in the book. In his ironic tribute to Henry Ford, McGrath turns his signature technique of cumulative repetition to suggest a quasi-Biblical genealogy:

> comes mass production,
> comes the pace of the century and its mode of transport and its consumerist destiny,
> comes Highland Park, Hamtramck, River Rouge,
> comes the river of ash and coke, river of bitumen, river of liquid
>   capital, river of molten vanadium steel

The poem's driving syntactic and phrasal repetitions capture the ineluctable dynamism and environmental havoc of modern industrial history,

While several of these emblematic personalities merit more than one poem (Woody Guthrie, Matisse, Welles, Frida Kahlo, et al), Picasso and Mao become recurring first person voices, motive figures meant to embody the conflicting tensions of art and politics. Regardless of the aesthetic merit of particular poems, McGrath's premise alone is inspired. Virtual contemporaries, both bold and driven revolutionaries in their respective spheres of influence, both blessed with long careers and a variety of intimate relationships, Picasso and Mao help frame the collection's ground of inquiry, posing western individualism and creative freedom against an ethos of radical collectivism and totalitarian authority. That Mao is one of the volume's rare representatives of politics clarifies McGrath's primary interest in how cultural, aesthetic and intellectual innovation can be evaluated in relation to realpolitik and the empirical evidence of history.

Even so, lifted from the book's grand design, most of his assumed first-person voices fall short as individual poems. Sometimes an attempt to characterize big ideas leads to awkward self-objectification:

> ….
> from this moment my painting is recast
> in the galvanic mold of the modern era.
> Now, at nineteen, I seize my destiny at last.
> ("Picasso (1900)")
>
> As for Spain, as for politics, I have stood mute until Guernica,
> watching from the safety of exile the tragedy of civil war.
> Now with paints and brushes, I march to war.
> ("Guernica")
>
> So the path of Revolution gains clarity
> even as the nature of women continues to elude me.
> ("Mao: On the Long March and Protracted War (1938)")

While no one doubts that Picasso and Mao had huge narcissistic egos and may have been consciously divided from their projected ideal selves, they still should not sound as if they are recapitulating their lives in voiceovers for PBS documentaries. Since these voices do not convey nuanced internal conflicts—what Yeats characterized as a poet's "argument with himself"—a good editor might have suggested rewriting these in a free-indirect style. Instead, Campbell McGrath's voice pops out of Virginia Woolf's ventriloquized mouth:

> This demi-paradise of happy breeding men, these bank vaults, these mews, these lanes of haberdashers and umbrella makers, these gilded motorcars—the petrol smoke of Empire—this small, cold, dismal island

Again in "Matisse: Nice (1923)" the painter begins to speak in a McGrath-like anaphoric riff:

> From the labor of shopkeepers and tradesman, from the loom-toil of village and weavers.
> From grim rectitude, from thrift and vigilance.
> For oyster-shell to crimson and topaz, from ashen bistre to sumptuary light

The first-person poems in the absurd and comic vein, on the other hand, are much more successful than those trying to authenticate the brooding interior monologues of legendary people. "Martha," for instance, speaks in the voice of the last passenger pigeon:

> Once we ruled the roost but now comes the turn of those sly
> scurrying creatures we often laughed at from the safety of our nests.
> Safety? What did we know—we were pigeons!

Paradoxically "Fiber 66: Meet the Latest Miracle Product from DuPont (1927)," written in rhyming sestets, effective satirizes modern devolvement from the natural precisely because it is delivered by a playfully vapid voice:

> Like a dinosaur hatchling at the dawn of the Jurassic
> the world belongs to me—because this is the Age of Plastic.
> Isn't that fantastic?

McGrath is a poet of social and political critique, but his signature trope has never been historical in the way of, say, the dramatic assimilations of Robert Lowell. Still, his historical meditations in *XX* are valuable precisely because they offer a lighter, more buoyant American counterpoint to the gloomy, traumatized eastern European perspective. "Two Poems for Czeslaw Milosz" captures the incongruity of Milosz's dark fatalism emanating from the sunny plenitude of ahistorical California:

> Swans of grass, sun-swollen apricots, pollen-hoard of almonds
> and their bees, their horses grazing orchard rows,
> odor of eucalyptus, blown roses, and resinous vineyard dust.

In the American setting of the poem's first section, pronouns are appropriately absent in rendering a vision of Milosz, this most self-effacing of poets; but in the concluding section, where "the tracks lead to Birkenau," the voice of the American poet and his Polish subject seem to merge:

> we, the unbent, the untortured,
> must bear witness
> to inhumanity wherever it takes root,
>
> in the glyphs and stumble stones,
> the keel strakes and roof tiles,
> the leaf-shudder, the rain spatter,
>
> among archival fragments, tesserae, lost teeth,
> in the candle glow, the tallow reek,
> at the last hush, listening
> for the shovel-fall of earth upon a coffin lid.

This is one of McGrath's most fully inhabited and deeply affecting poems because it eludes the ragged edges of his own methods: that is, the rhetorical distancing of some 3rd person poems and the unconvincing mimicry of some 1st person lyrics.

The directly historical poems in *XX* meditate either on crucial events

or on temporal junctures where a nexus of events can evoke either tragic recognition or comedic wonder. The "event" poems run the gamut from the violent effects of revolution and war—e.g. "Guernica," "Guadalcanal," "Hiroshima," "Easter 1916"—to the inspirations of scientific invention and cultural innovation—e.g. "Apollo," "Dolly," "Voyager I and II," to the many poems on *avant garde* artists and their work. When McGrath eschews Pound's maxim to "Go in fear of abstractions!," and when he tries to encompass the enormity of the events in sweeping declarative generalizations, he tends to deflate their potential for imaginative grandeur, as when his Picasso persona describes the meaning of his own achievement in "Guernica":

> In a century to which devastation has given its true form
> Guernica is an elemental dispensation, a document formed
> in the name of humanity to denounce the nightmare of war.
> Against chaos, against ignorance, against all future war
> a brush moves across the canvas and truth takes the form
> of Leningrad, of Nanking, of Hiroshima, of Guernica.

McGrath's best poems stay closer to the intimate interstices of epic-changing moments. Here, as in "Fernand Braudel: *Civilization and Capitalism (1978)"* he counter-theorizes before demonstrating how poetic images can recover the particular and personal for the people written out of official histories, for those living and working on the ground:

> History is a broken urn, a burrow of field mice,
> toadstools and blue irises and the smell of loam after rain,
> the rough spears of saplings rushing sunward.
> History is seeds and soil. History is survival.

McGrath's temporal juncture or "Clock" poems—"Einstein's Clock," "Easter, 1916." "The Atomic Clock," "The Pulse of the Planet," "Digital Clocks"—are memorably inventive because they *present* history by selecting synchronous facts and images—thus creating a kind of historical and literary cubism. In the province of the more quotidian and domestic, Joyce did something like this in "The Wandering Rocks" chapter of *Ulysses*, where each temporally intersecting event is reconceived in the ironic shadow of another. McGrath's juxtaposing concurrent images also acts like montage in film, where spatial and temporal contiguities create new implications:

> Tsutomo Yamaguchi—the only officially recognized survivor
> of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear explosions—is born.
> Louis Armstrong is driving a coal wagon in New Orleans,

> Margaret Sanger opens the first American birth control clinic.
> Rasputin dies under mysterious circumstances in St. Petersburg;
> the tsar's control is crumbling, Revolution is imminent.
> The Easter Rebellion of the Irish Republican Brotherhood
> fails to inspire a popular uprising and is quickly suppressed;
> ("Easter 1916")

McGrath's intersections of radically dissimilar events or images from different spatial and temporal planes act like historical metaphors, disrupting conventional cause-and-effect narrative logic. In this way, McGrath's "Clock" poems interrogate the instruments and methods that produce historical consciousness. These poems are especially important because they counter-pose the collection's seeming reliance elsewhere on the "great person" theory of cultural and political history. Poems like "The Atomic Clock (1939)" capture paradigmatic shifts in the calibration of time where the significance of individual human endeavor is determined on a new scale:

> In August Einstein
> and Leo Szilard post their urgent request to President Roosevelt
> to develop atomic weapons in advance of the Nazis.
> The Manhattan Project is born; the atomic clock has been wound;
> the future, from now on, will be measured in half-lives.
> Nationalist troops enter Madrid, the Spanish Republic collapses,
> Franco will control the country until his death in 1975.
> The Grapes of Wrath is published, Mein Kampf is published.
> William Butler Yeats dies, Seamus Heaney is born.
> Nylon stockings go on sale, Siam becomes Thailand.
> Hollywood's Golden Age reaches its apogee with
> The Wizard of Oz, Stagecoach & Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.
> Martin Luther King sings with his church choir
> at the Atlanta premiere of Gone With the Wind; he is ten.

The paratactic levelling of events tends to produce a sobering diminution of individual works of culture in the reflected wake of history's march toward the Holocaust and Hiroshima. In the conclusion to this most powerful of the volume's historical mediations, even Walter Benjamin and his cultural theories—so influential in McGrath's own critical vision—are swept up in the tidal undercurrent of the Twentieth Century's irresistible dynamic of self-destruction:

> "Nothing which has ever happened should be regarded as lost
> for history," Benjamin writes as the darkness closes in.
> He, "the last European," will survive the year, but barely,

> contemplating the ruins of the civilization he exalted.
> Hitler invades Poland, Stalin invades Finland,
> Italy invades Albania and King Zog—name like a golem
> from some long-forgotten fable—King Zog flees into exile.
> Every truth, every quotation, every aesthetic certainty,
> every meticulously harvested grain of cultural knowledge
> is torn from Benjamin's grasp by the whirlwind.
> "This storm," he writes, "is what we call progress."

The cumulative effect of the Clock poems tends to subsume all the singular voices in the book within its brooding fatalistic omniscience. But despite the historical evidence of culture's failure to humanize and civilize, despite the overwhelming naturalistic forces arrayed in opposition, artists and cultural innovators remain the book's stubbornly sympathetic heroes—inspiring, consoling and cathartic in their ambitions.

Also, by widening the global, and even the intergalactic, scope of events, as well as lengthening and complicating the temporal perspective from which they are viewed, these timeline poems can also offer comic consolation. Nowhere is that effect more obvious than in "The Pulse of the Planet (1962)," where after delivering a dizzying array of factual events, ranging from an early Beatles audition to the execution of Adolph Eichmann, the poem culminates in the author's birth: "I am born." The ironic self-deprecation epitomizes McGrath's appeal: like Whitman ("I contain multitudes"), his lyric ambition can be enormous, but his seriousness of purpose is carried by, not in spite of, the vulnerabilities and limitations of a single consciousness. McGrath's lyric persona in this way has never been inclined toward the private and inward or confessional. His lyric "I" has always tended to embody a public and social self, a poet-everyman who can almost disappear in the universal consciousness he conjures. Hence, McGrath sets "Digital Clocks (1992)" in the year of his son's birth, creating a comic frame for his own and his family's appearance, both dwarfed by and made commensurate with the most remarkable event of his time:

> Bruno Bettelheim, Jianq Qing, Martha Graham, Dr. Seuss,
> Frank Capra, Ava Gardner and Curtis LeMay are gone.
> On a beautiful spring day in Chicago, Sam McGrath is born
> and history halts in its tracks—no, history remains blind
> to the astonishing arrival of this red-haired infant
> with the deeply wrinkled aspect of a wise and ancient ant,
> but my own life, so profoundly engaged with culture,
> decouples, in that instant, from its onrushing locomotive.
> Time alters. Or I do. let go of the guide rope,
> drop the century's ticker-tape lifeline and drift

> into a still pool beyond the pull of historical circumstance.
> Exhaustion and exultation—what else happened in 1992?
> What were the hit songs, the movies? It's all recoverable,
> the data is in the cloud, we have entered the Information Age,
> but can you turn back a clock that lacks the metaphor of hands?
> What else has been lost with the watchmaker's tools
> if not the idea of time as continuum, time as a coiled spring?

Indeed, the image of "the still pool beyond the pull of historical circumstances," does not just capture McGrath's joyful discovery of an ecstatically personal and familial dimension apart from all historical force and noise, but also the place of his own poetry—an activity that allows a simultaneous escape from and engagement with those larger forces. And even in the Information Age when all data is retrievable, the value of the immediately personal and natural can still take precedence over Art and History:

> A century is a measuring stick,
> a heuristic, but where is the glory in A Love Supreme
> compared with an instant of bird-trilled infant babble?
> Against a scraped knee what matters the tragedy of Verdun?

The poem ends with a personal anecdote about hearing his wife's grandmother's visceral memory of her family escaping a forest fire in a horse-drawn carriage:

> I can still feel it, right now. It's 2016
> but I'm there with Jane and the world she summoned—
> it's 1903, it's 1992. I'm immersed in it, like lava,
> alive in the pulse of it, the gyre and genuflection of it.
> What is memory but the instantiation of time within us?
> What is history but a chorus of ghosts?
> What is the past but that great burning, that forest of ashes,
> the sound of horses running through the darkness?

Campbell McGrath invites his readers to participate fully in his imaginative response to the wonders and horrors of the last century. His transcendent and flawed *XX: Poems for the 20th Century* takes its place among the notable artifacts of our time—where memory and imagination become coda for the data that will survive us.