

THE MAGICAL MACHINES OF METTE MOESTRUP

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Mette Moestrup translated by Katrine Øgaard Jensen. *To the Most Beautiful*. co•im•press, 2024.

Is Beauty an engine of discord, a spark to an ego-driven fight for whatever notion of “the most Beautiful” we hold in our most individualized hearts? Or is Beauty like metaphysical honey, an imaginal substance/space of free-floating oneness and benign collectivity? Or is it Janus-faced, a quality that can either break us up into cold, fist-clenched separateness or lead us into warmer union, depending on how we respond to its flames? The story of Eris, goddess of schism, and her Apple of Discord, would seem to suggest that beauty is interwoven with strife. In the myth, Eris, who has not been invited to the wedding party of Peleus and Thetis, decides to stir up trouble. She throws an apple inscribed with the words “to the most beautiful” into the gathering, and three goddesses argue over who should have it, thereby starting a string of events that will lead to Troy being destroyed, and its citizens killed or captured. Beauty, the myth implies, especially when related to the notion of “the most,” is infused with contest and combat. But is the myth really so simple? Is Beauty so reductive? Is Eris truly the villain here, and not the gods and kings who bring about the Trojan War?

In her book *To the Most Beautiful*, the Danish poet Mette Moestrup approaches this myth, and these questions, forthrightly. At the opening, the poet writes, “What is / Beautiful, / More Beautiful, / Most Beautiful? / I think about it for 13 nights.” What follows is a structurally baroque and lyrically heterogeneous meditation that approaches this theme with varying voices (occult, essayistic, experimental, associative) and lenses (mythic, scientific, ritualistic, philosophical). And the work’s highly polymorphic attributes are arguably the point. As the book gathers towards the end, Beauty increasingly becomes not a matter of “the most,” but the many.

Moestrup’s *To the Most Beautiful* includes nine sections, each one focused on a different Greek Muse, and with a stated theme. For example, the section on Erato is titled “There Are 13 Hearts in a Deck of Cards.” Additionally, the book uses recurrent phrases/images throughout (pyramid shapes, for instance), so that no poem or section seems singular but instead part of a larger web. As Katrine Øgaard Jensen, the translator, writes in her insightful introduction, Moestrup is “an enthusiast of poetic systems, which she refers to as ‘magical machines,’” and the book itself contains “both

obvious and hidden structures.”

As the phrase “magical machines” suggests, the system-building in *To the Most Beautiful* is less in the Conceptualist vein and more in a Blakean one, where intuitions and intensities are more important than intellectual methodology. As such, the work brings to mind books by other poets fascinated by large-scale poetic structures, like Alice Notley’s *The Descent of Alette* and CAConrad’s *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon: New (Soma)tics*.

One of the first sections in Moestrup’s collection is devoted to “Terpsichore—Choral Singing, Choral Dancing.” What follows is a vision of honeyed excess and paradisaical collectivity (“The Honey Hexagons”). The “we” in these first meditations are bee-like in their joy of the amber fusion. They/we “worshipped honey / bathed in honey / enjoyed the honey stream.” This would seem to be one possibility of Beauty. Here, Beauty is not strife nor competition, but a pagan-permeated communism (“we with honeydripping tongues / we with flowerdance and queen”). Play, sun, “nectarscented sweetness” and “unruly excess”: these are the beatific opening notes from which the other mediations will emerge.

Why does this honey-sweet center not hold? Why does this oceanic manifestation of Beauty give way to combative forms of Beauty? The next section, focused on Urania and titled “The Eris Variations,” delves into this issue. The style changes, the letters now being in all-caps, suggest urgency and anxiety. We meet two Eris’ here: the goddess and the dwarf planet, and neither can be separated out from another (“ERIS WITH BLACK WINGS, BLACK TRESSES / ERIS IN ELLIPTIC ORBIT”). And just as the goddess throws the Apple of Discord into the wedding party, the dwarf planet causes heated debate about the very definition of “planet.” Both the divine Eris and the astronomical Eris are mischief-makers, unsettling the status quo.

In this section, we also see here what will become a recurring motif: the poet’s reworking of the Eris story itself. In this subversive version, strife pre-exists Eris’ thrown apple. After all, Eris has been excluded from this party, and the fellowship she destroys “DEPENDS ON EXCLUSION.” The poet adds, “THEY CALL HER WARMONGER— / THEIR CLOSED PARTY IS A CAMFOULAGED WAR.” Just as the conventional telling of the Eris myth neglects to emphasize the insular, privileged nature of this godly wedding party, the conventional rendition also fails to stress the myth’s restrictive notion of Beauty (“the most”). Moestrup’s Eris explodes both of these closed systems.

To the Most Beautiful is a radically polyphonic work, and along with the exploration of the Eris story detailed above, the book contains protean

multitudes that ripple out from the recurring Eris theme. There are interpretations of Sappho and Rilke, thoughts on the Cold War from the Generation X perspective, a ritual, moving mediations on what histories (both social and personal) we should celebrate and what we should damn. And through it all, the exclusionary fellowship of the Greek gods is undermined by Eris' apple, suggesting that only through Eris' form of discord might we reach the "nectarscented" socialism articulated in the first pages. The last stanza of "YOU THINK YOU'RE PICKING APPLES" reads "hear & understand / a redistribution / of everything is / inevitable / & / already in motion." Part 21st century grimoire and part 4th wall-breaking experimental epic, Moestrup's book is both an argument for and a demonstration of a revolutionary, mercurial vision of Beauty.