

"THE PLAIN SENSE OF THINGS":
GÖRAN PRINTZ-PÅHLSON'S VERNACULAR MODERNISM

Göran Printz-Påhlson. *Letters of Blood, and Other Works in English*. Ed. Robert Archambeau. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012.

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In *The Elsewhere Community*, a series of radio talks delivered in 1998 for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the critic Hugh Kenner described 20th-century literary modernism as follows: "Two sorts of writers dominated it: Irishmen, often self-exiled, and Americans who lived abroad." According to Kenner, expatriation even shaped William Carlos Williams, who was "defiant in not living abroad" and who fashioned instead a "homemade world" out of the environs of Rutherford, New Jersey:¹

The Poet

Oh Paterson! Oh married man!
 He is the city of cheap hotels and private
 entrances . . . of taxis at the door, the car
 standing in the rain hour after hour
 by the roadhouse entrance.²

Meanwhile, someone looking at things from a European perspective would cite the Dadaists in Zürich, Thomas Mann in Los Angeles, Paul Celan and Edmund Jabès in Paris, not to mention the creation of this country's first Comparative Literature Program at the University of Iowa in the 1940s by the Viennese exile René Wellek. And then there are poets and translators like Pierre Joris (b. Strasbourg, 1946), who want to extend this itinerant modernism into a *Nomad Poetics* that "will cross languages, not just translate, but write in all or any of them. If Pound, Joyce & others have shown the way, it is essential now to push this matter further, again, not as 'collage' but as a material flux of language matter, moving in & out of semantic & non-semantic spaces, moving around & through the features accreting as a poem, a lingo-cubism that is no longer an 'explosante fixe' as Breton defined the poem, but an 'explosante mouvante.'"³

It seems to me that people (like me) know very little about Scandinavian modernism, but this volume of writings by the Swedish poet, translator, and critic Göran Printz-Påhlson (1931-2006) may help to improve matters. Printz-Påhlson was certainly at home in the "elsewhere community." He studied for a doctorate at Lund University in Sweden, then

taught at Berkeley and Harvard before settling in England at Clare Hall, Cambridge, in 1964, where he taught in a department devoted to the study of Scandinavian, Russian, and Finno-Ugrian languages. And *Letters of Blood* offers a nice example of “nomad poetry” because it contains verse that Printz-Påhlson himself composed in English rather than translations from his poems in Swedish.⁴ Of course, his poetry is perhaps not as *materialized* as Joris’s poetics would stipulate. Rather it is closer to Kenner’s conception of “modernism,” which (on the model of Williams and Marianne Moore) is characterized by a “return...to simple words placed in a natural order” (*Elsewhere*, p. 36), that is, a poetry made of everyday speech (about everyday life, sometimes tilted toward the comic or absurd) rather than “verbovoco-visual” experiments in typography and sound.⁵ Here are the opening lines of Printz-Påhlson’s “The Longest-Running Show on Television,” with its prosody of lineated prose:

The longest-running show on television
 Is the one in which the moderator is also the chairman of
 The board of your company.
 He is half-asleep most of the time, and you can never understand
 His jokes. Surely he has gone mad.
 Most of the discussion seems to be about the proper way
 Of conducting the proceedings, but it is hard to know for sure
 As the languages are Tamil, Basque or Arawak,
 But never a language you can understand (p. 150).

It is worth remarking that, although he was at hand in the poetry community at Cambridge, Printz-Påhlson’s work is very different from that of the “Cambridge Poets” of this same period, particularly the poetry of J. H. Prynne.⁶ Consider what happens to the order of “plain words” in these lines from Prynne’s recent poem in prose, *Kazoo Dreamboats; or, On What There Is*:

Along the corridor of near frequency I saw willing and discrete the season not
 yet for sorrow advanced, nearby not yet even so inference to claim. On the plate
 in soft season to rise hungry semi-apt for supplement will to set affirm this wit
 at will for passion, reflex acutely, I saw it amount in plenteous access burning by
 folly markers right to the crest.⁷

Recall Joris’s “material flux of language matter,” and imagine a Heraclitean flux in which “what there is,” is moving every which way, scattering words as it goes.

Compare this flux to Printz-Påhlson’s poem in prose, “Sir Charles Bab-

bage Returns to Trinity College”:

No man can add an inch to his height, says the Bible. Yet once I saw the detective Vidocq change his height by circa an inch and a half. It has always been my experience that one ought to maintain the greatest accuracy even in small things (p. 163).

One could usefully place these lines against the background of Printz-Påhlson’s essay, “Surface and Accident: John Ashbery” (1985), in which he approaches Ashbery’s famously recondite poetry from the standpoint, not of a literary critic, but of a translator faced with the question, “How do you convey to the Swedish reader what it is like to be in Warren, Ohio?” (p. 128). Readings of Ashbery by Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler are all very well, but for the translator questions of idiom are weightier than those of meaning: “Literal translation was in most cases out of the question: one had to find the conversational flow of the language and make adjustments as one went along” (p. 129). For the paradox of Ashbery’s verse is that it captures the sound of a plain man speaking in plain words, but its way of proceeding follows Gertrude Stein: “Beginning again and again is a natural thing, even when there is a series.”⁸ Here are the opening lines of Ashbery’s “The Skaters,” for which Printz-Påhlson seems to have had a particular affection:

These decibels
 Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound
 Into which being enters, and is apart.
 Their colors on a warm February day
 Make for masses of inertia, and hips
 Prod out of the violet-seeming into a new kind
 Of demand that stumps the absolute because not new
 In the sense of the next one in an infinite series
 But, as it were, preexisting or pre-seeming in
 Such a way as to contest funnily with the unexpectedness
 And somehow push us all into perdition.⁹

Arguably (in fact, uncontroversially) the “open form” of these lines is a distinctive feature of modernism in poetry from Pound and Williams through Paul Zukofsky and the “Objectivists” to the poets of Ashbery’s generation and beyond, although Printz-Påhlson himself might draw the line at Charles Bernstein’s social heteroglossia: “I try to derail trains of thought as much as follow them,” Bernstein says of his poetry; “what you get is a mix of different types of language pieced together as in a mosaic—very ‘poetic’ diction next to something that sounds overheard, intimate address next to

philosophical imperatives, plus a mix of would-be proverbs, slogans, jingles, nursery rhymes, songs.”¹⁰ For Bernstein, the center of everyday speech is fugitive, and its horizon expands exponentially according to a principle of non-exclusion.

Still, Printz-Påhlson’s frequent word-and-horseplay makes it plain that, quite as much as Ashbery or Bernstein, he is a comic modernist when he puts his pen to it, as in “Three Baroque Arias from *Gradiva*,” which begins by turning Greek tragedy on its ear:

Such milky mildness shines forth only from the mouth of an archaic
goddess
Such living limbs can, stonebound, shimmer only in the telescope of history
reversed
Such eloquent temples can be taciturn only in terracotta colored face
against a freer firmament.
Freer than Medea of Pompeii in motherpain, in motherpride against
sirocco-mutilated skies,
triumphant,
Her sorcerer’s wand pressed against an empty uterus,
Prouder than Prospero who gelded his own weapon of desire, denying
All his children the common act of freedom, the killing of the old king (p. 168).

Or perhaps you’d prefer some slapstick literary history:

8. That’s All, Folks!

With apologies to Myles na Gopaleen

When falling on bad times financially, which frequently happened, Keats and Chapman were wont to help out in the kitchen of a well-known Tottenham Court Road inn, called “The House of the Rising Sun.” One day, when arriving at the establishment just before tea-time they were surprised to find the chef, a sturdy German lad in a terribly agitated state over his dinner preparations. “Look here, fellows,” he hailed them, “I have mislaid yesterdays remains of *nasi goreng*; be sports and try to find them for me: I cannot leave the parboiling of the rollmops unattended, as you doubtless perceive.” They gladly complied, looking everywhere for the missing victuals. Finally, in despair, Keats exclaimed, not without emotion: “Indeed, I know where the ‘House of the Rising Sun’ is situated, but where, oh where is the ‘Rice of the Sousing Hun?’” Overcome by the enormity of this utterance, Chapman reeled backwards and fell into a trough of Friesien coleslaw, where he was granted a speedy and merciful release from the shackles of human existence. Thus ended a beautiful friendship (p. 203).

Myles na Gopaleen (or Miles na gCopaleen) is one of the *noms de plume* of the Irish writer and parodist, Brian O’Nolan, more commonly known as

Flann O'Brien, author of, among other comic fictions, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), a novel composed on the principle that the "modern novel should largely be a work of reference" whose "characters...should be interchangeable with one another."¹¹ Thus Printz-Påhlson's Keats, looking elsewhere than into Chapman's Homer, overturns his forebear with a lethal pun.¹² One could without much effort read this poem as Printz-Påhlson's poke at Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. For its part, *nasi goreng* is a popular Indonesian dish, made of fried rice and perhaps pieces of chicken, fish, or what-you-will. Miles na gCopaleen would have called it, along with Printz-Påhlson's poem, a "Mulligan Stew" (with apologies to Gilbert Sorrentino).¹³

Meanwhile in his lectures and essays Printz-Påhlson exhibits a generally analytic frame of mind, which is to say one that is critical of the terms and concepts that were circulating in literary study during the time of his arrival in the English-speaking world—roughly when the New Critics (John Crowe Ransom and Yvor Winters in particular) were on the wane and European theory was advancing in the form of linguistics, semiotics, Prague Structuralism, and French readings of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Of principal interest, given what has been said so far about his own poetry in English, is Printz-Påhlson's inquiry into what he calls, in a series of lectures devoted to "The Words of the Tribe" (1984), "linguistic primitivism," a term that covers a number of efforts to rescue poetry from the conventions of "poeticalness." On this point Printz-Påhlson favors Wordsworth's "rustic" version of "vernacular primitivism" to the more artificial forms associated with Pound's impersonations (from Old English to "ol' Ez") and the early Eliot's literary mimicry ("He do the police in different voices."). Unfortunately, W. C. Williams seems to have remained outside Printz-Påhlson's perspective, but the idea of "a language that is colloquial, contemporary, and non-archaising" (p. 13) is very close to Williams's notion that poetry must be rooted in speech that is local and contingent. In *Kora in Hell* (1922), for example, Williams put both Pound and Eliot to one side in favor of what he calls "the language of the day":

That which is heard from the lips of those to whom we are talking in our day's-affairs mingles with what we see in the streets everywhere about us as it mingles also with our imaginations. By this chemistry is fabricated a language of the day which shifts and reveals its meaning as clouds drift and turn in the sky and sometimes send down rain or snow or hail. This is the language to which few ears are tuned.... [Poets] of old would translate this hidden language into a kind of replica of the speech of the world with certain distinctions of rhyme and meter to show that it was not really that speech. Nowadays the elements of that language are set down as heard, and the imagination of the listener and of the poet are left free to mingle in the dance.¹⁴

Language *set down as heard*, as if poetry were a matter of finding one's "ear" and not, as the workshop motto has it, one's "voice."

As Printz-Påhlson argues in another lecture, "Linguistic Reductionism in Poetry Criticism," it follows from this emphasis on the singularity of the vernacular that efforts to reduce poetry and its language to concepts and theories should be approached with considerable caution, admirable as some of these efforts might be—he has in mind Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry*, with its notion of an internal connection between poetry and, among other things, jokes and riddles.¹⁵ Likewise, in a lecture on "The Material Word," Printz-Påhlson questions the reduction of poetic language to any of its physical properties, starting with Mallarmé's typological ideal of a *Grande Œuvre*, which Jorge Luis Borges re-imagined as a vast library whose volumes "register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols," including the review you're reading now.¹⁶ Interestingly, Printz-Påhlson seems to prefer (as much as anything) the "materialist" conception of language one finds in *The German Ideology* of Marx and Engels, with its thesis that "neither thoughts nor language form a realm of their own, that they are only *manifestations* of actual life" (p. 43).

There are also engaging pages in this volume that examine the critical limitations of such venerable concepts as metaphor and irony, and even the notion that poetry is concrete like an image or unparaphrasable in virtue of its semantic density ("Style, Metaphor, Irony, and Meaning" [1967-68]). Printz-Påhlson seems wary of aligning himself conceptually with any position, citing instead the kind of paradoxes that one finds in the later Wallace Stevens:

We seek
 The poem of pure reality, untouched
 By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
 Straight to the transfixing object, to the object
 At the exactest point at which it is itself,
 Transfixing by being purely what it is,
 A view of New Haven, say....¹⁷

Indeed, the essay, "Realism as Negation" (1977), gives us as good a view as any of Printz-Påhlson's terminological skepticism. The essay offers a short history of "realism" since Goethe and Schiller wrestled with one another over the term, which inevitably comes up short against world's "contingency," or more exactly the "impenetrable, viscous nature of phenomena" (p. 73). Printz-Påhlson mentions in passing Hegel's dialectic of negation in which the Spirit makes sense of things by annihilating their singularity and

replacing them with concepts—a species of murder, as Maurice Blanchot once called it, by which the novel, among other forms of signification, asserts the mind’s luminous hold over reality. In “Literature and the Right to Death” (1949), Blanchot wrote:

If one looks at it in a certain way, literature has two slopes. One side of literature is turned toward the movement of negation by which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated....

But there is another side to literature. Literature is a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown, free, and silent existence; literature is their innocence and forbidden presence, it is the being which protests against revelation, it is the defiance of what does not want to take place. In this way...it allies itself with the reality of language, it makes language into matter without contour, content without form, a force that is capricious and impersonal and says nothing, reveals nothing, simply announces—through its refusal to say anything—that it comes from the night and will return to the night.¹⁸

Printz-Påhlson would almost certainly have kept a safe distance from Blanchot’s thinking, as if it were just another example of French nihilism, but in fact Blanchot’s effort is to ally poetry (he refers particularly to Francis Ponge’s poetic effort to let things be mere things) “with the strangeness of that existence which...does not fit into any category” (*Work of Fire*, p. 340). And this seems coherent with what looks to be the moral of Printz-Påhlson’s literary essays: “Groping for exactness we come up with the absurd. May that also be a warning to the literary critic—in that his misprisions of the complexities of terms may easily obfuscate the obvious” (p. 77). At least this would help to explain Printz-Påhlson’s praise of Kierkegaard as a poet, by which he has in mind Kierkegaard’s anti-Hegelian resistance to the reduction of things to their concepts: “Kierkegaard’s skepticism [toward categories and distinctions] always provides a philosophical point of departure, as does his down-to-earth humour, his shield and protection against the mists and miasmas of [the] philosophizing Copenhagen of his day” (p. 118).

In any event, given his attachment to plain-speaking and his impatience with the obscurities that follow from Mallarmé’s modernist dictum—“My dear Degas, one does not make poetry with ideas, but with words.”¹⁹—Printz-Påhlson’s poetics seems to me basically Aristotelian in its orientation: a work of art should never abandon its “aboutness.” In his essay on “The Canon of Modernism: A Note on Abstraction in the Poetry of Erik Lindegren” (1979), Printz-Påhlson reads Lindegren’s poem about the flight of Icarus as an allegory of the modernist desire for “pure poetry”:

Now he is rising alone, in a sky without clouds,
 in a space empty of birds in the din of the aircraft...
 rising toward a clearer and clearer sun,
 turning gradually cooler, turning cold,
 and upward towards the spring of his blood, soul's cataract:
 a prisoner in a whistling life,
 a seabubble's journey toward the looming magnetic air:
 and the vortex of signs, born of the springtide, raging of azure,
 crumbling walls, and drunkenly the call of the other side:
 Reality fallen

Without reality born!²⁰

In contrast to W. H. Auden's famous "Musée de Beaux Arts," in which Icarus's splashdown passes unnoticed amidst the Brueghelian events and activities of everyday life—one cannot help thinking of Alexander Pope's satirical *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, on how to write bad verse—Lindgren's poem celebrates (in Printz-Påhlson's words) "the exalted ataraxia of the protagonist himself. The very fall is in defiance of the law of gravity: it is a *fall* upwards, toward empty space, leaving the contingent things of this world almost contemptuously behind" (pp. 97-98). Printz-Påhlson never goes so far as to side explicitly with Auden against his fellow countryman, but he concludes his essay by citing a poem of Lindgren's that, on the model of *poésie pure*, "seems to be moving its symbols at random within a confined space where no references to public or personal experiences are possible. It could evidently go on forever" (p. 105)—"explosante mouvante" with a vengeance.

As a counterstatement, Printz-Påhlson has his own *ars poetica* entitled "Comedians," about a little girl who learns to swim without inflatable supports, but who suddenly grows self-reflexive, as if sinking into a piece of bad poetry. Let me conclude by citing the poem's concluding lines:

'Soon I can swim without wings,'
 she thinks to herself, 'soon I can fly without air,
 without rhythm, without metaphors... Wait a minute,'
 she says to herself, indignant (she is that kind of girl)
 'I am being used as a metaphor now. Well I never...'
 But she is wrong. The poem, if it is any good at all
 is never about writing poetry: but rather about
 making jokes, or love; or deceit; once again she (in
 spite of her perky independence of mind) and the reader
 have together been led up that proverbial old
 garden path. But in that case, consider a boy
 on the first day of spring when the day has just stopped,
 playing marbles up that old garden path,
 water-logged still by the rains.... (p. 172)

In other words, as Samuel Beckett said in his coda to *Watt*: “no symbols where none intended.”²¹ A boy playing marbles is just a boy playing marbles, rather the way a red wheelbarrow is worth a poem just for being itself.

NOTES

1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 72. See also Kenner, *A Homemade World: American Modernist Writers* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975). Kenner was born in Canada but lived in the United States from 1948 until his death in 2003. He never gave up his Canadian citizenship.
2. (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 183.
3. *A Nomadic Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p. 38.
4. An exception is “Joe Hill in Prison” (p. 165), trans. Richard B. Vowles.
5. See Gerald L. Bruns, *The Material of Poetry: Sketches Toward a Philosophical Poetics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); and *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, Brian McHale (London: Routledge, 2012).
6. See *A Various Art*, ed. Anthony Crozier and Tim Longville (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1987); and Andrew Duncan, “‘Such that commonly each’: *A Various Art* and the Cambridge Leisure Center,” *Jacket* 20, December 2002.
7. (Cambridge: Critical Documents, 2011), p. 5.
8. “Composition as Explanation,” *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 516.
9. *Rivers and Mountains* (New York: Ecco Press, 1977), p. 34
10. “An Interview with Manuel Brito,” *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 25-26.
11. (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 33.
12. The dirty truth is that Printz-Påhlson has filched his Keats wholesale from *The Various Lives of Keats and Chapman* (London: Palladin, 1990), a collection of vignettes about the absurd adventures of Keats and Chapman that O’Nolan/O’Brien wrote in 1978 under the name of Miles na gCopaleen. Not surprisingly the book is filled with perhaps the worst puns anyone has ever composed.
13. See Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), a novel of plagiarism dedicated to Brian O’Nolan.
14. *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 59.
15. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). See *Letters of Blood*, pp. 27-28.
16. See Borges, “The Library at Babel,” *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Daniel A. Yates and James E. Erby (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 51-58.
17. “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” *Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 471. Cited by Printz-Påhlson (p. 65)—with what looks for all the world like a Freudian misprint: “‘We seek/The poem of pure reality, untouched/By hope or deviation....’”
18. See Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death” (1949), trans. Lydia Davis, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 330.

For the record, Blanchot's "night" is a region of freedom from the dialectic that would render all things transparent before the powerful illuminations of Hegelian Spirit.

19. Cited by Paul Valéry, "Poetry and Abstract Thought," *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 62.

20. Trans. John Matthias and Göran Printz-Påhlson (cited, p. 97).

21. (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 254.