

MELNICK'S PIN

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*I thought that if I could put it all down, that
would be one way. And the next thought came
to me that to leave all out would be another,
and truer, way.*

John Ashbery, "The New Spirit"

WE UZE double letterz to say watt we mean.

David Melnick, "A Pin's Fee"

These twelve tri-part works, composed originally in 1987 and '88, appear to complete David Melnick's career as a poet. Constructed over a period of roughly 20 years, there are four or six projects in all, depending on how you count the three volumes of *Men in Aida*. Each of Melnick's works can be read as a renegotiation of the materiality of the signifier, a confrontation with the alleged transparency of reference, the misleading notion that words might correspond to things, actions, people and/or events.

In *Eclogs* (Ithaca House, 1972), Melnick employed the devices of late modernism (notably Zukofsky, Duncan and the Ashbery of *The Tennis Court Oath*) to tell a story without in the same act giving it away. The work is depictive but consciously veiled, so that the book finally is not "about" events described in its pages. More accurately, it is about the *feeling tone* of its phrases as they unfurl, sheer affect unfolding in time. Like *A Pin's Fee*, *Eclogs* is a poem of great emotional intensity.

Pcoet's (G.A.W.K, 1975) constructed language —

thoeisu

thoiea

ackorn woi cirtus locqvump

— again reveals the materiality of the signifier as a mask, only this time with language itself lurking underneath the *zaum* text. As a critique of sense, *Pcoet* is closer to Joyce's later prose in its accumulation of linguistic strata than it is to the talking-in-tongues automatic writing of the Russian futurists. Even in the heady

period of language poetry's heroic period of the early 1970s, *Pcoet* proved an extraordinary event, opening a wide realm of possibility to other poets, demonstrating that a work that went far beyond what most readers' considered language could still be writerly, witty and even beautiful.

Men in Aida, a three-part project of which only the first volume has appeared in book form (Tuumba, 1983), is a homophonic translation of *The Iliad*, but with a difference. Where Zukofsky's *Catullus*, the mother of this genre of miming the sound of an alien text, aims at capturing also the basic spirit, if not always the figurative and narrative frames, of its source material, *Men* finds a radically new tale in Homer's phonemes. Thus

Men in Aida's opening stanza —

Men in Aida, they appeal, eh? A day, O Achilles!
Allow men in, emery Achaians. All gay ethic, eh?
Paul asked if tea mousse suck, as Aida, pro, yaps in.
Here on a Tuesday. 'Hell,' Rhea to cake Eunice in.
'Hojo' noisy tap as hideous debt to lay at a bully.
Ex you, day. Tap wrote a 'D,' a stay. Tenor is Sunday.
Atreides stain axe and Ron and ideas 'll kill you.

— is rendered more literally by Michael Reck as:

Sing, Goddess, Achilles' maniac rage:
ruinous thing! it roused a thousand sorrows
and hurled many souls of mighty warriors
to Hades, made their bodies food for dogs
and carrion birds — as Zeus's will foredoomed—
from the time relentless strife came between
Atreus' son, a king, and brave Achilles.

Reck attempts to convey the taut warp of Homer's line by shortening it in English. Melnick's version careens from syllable to syllable, capturing the dance of the phonemes with remarkable exactness — to hear Melnick read the work aloud is an unforgettable experience — but with virtually no interest in the "story" as such. Instead, themes emerge from the syllabic stream that very quickly make apparent that *Men* is, in the most literal sense, a ludic gay utopia:

Ought a Paw tempt ya? Air rib bowl. Lucky beau tea a nay Rae.
Cartoned ale lay. Sand tape a.m. Allah, Paul, a Metaxa.
Urea Tess key you into the lass at ache ace saw.
All as oil mega-night days am is poem math. Offer a suck. I raise.
Team men are new men. Noe Menelaus sort o' coo. No! Pa!
Prose Trojans. Toe nudie met a tray. Pee owed a leg is ace.
Guy dame! Oy gay Roz out owes a fairy say thigh a pay lays.
O ape pee Paula Moe gay sad do sand dame I who yes a guy own.
Ooh men soy pot, eh? Is son echo gay?

Composed just five years later, *A Pin's Fee* could be read as a journal of the plague years, San Francisco during the first full brunt of the AIDS pandemic. Yet that reading leaves us more with context than text. In many ways, *Pin* is a return to *Eclogs*, only this time with language turned not so much inside out as outside in. If *Eclogs*' reticence about hustling on the streets of Paris dictates many of that book's choices, a kind of "leaving out" in Ashbery terms, *Pin* offers the inverse: the baldness of meaning is everywhere stressed.

Each poem is organized around a three-part structure, most often headed "Fable," "Sujet" and "Morale" – the French invoking two additional layers of pun in that last term. The use of French contrasts for the most part with the titles, six of which appear to be direct statements to a former lover. The presentation toys with reader expectations: proposing to work with elements of narrative, character and critique, respectively, but then proceeding – like *Eclogs* – by affect, the emotional tone of the language deployed. Thus, "All These Grooves are Heaven," is a particularly dark and almost ironic piece, the text invoking Melnick's earlier works (and even Greek translator Reck, whose name here puns with "wreck" – "Reckt" – the terminal *t* invoking in the same instance Robert Duncan). In this piece, the only section that cannot be taken as the "moral/morals/morale" of the text is the one so named. Elsewhere, potential topic sentences abound.

The relationship between title and sections is nowhere more clear – nor more challenged – than in the final piece, in which title and text merge into a background over which the section numbers merely hover. Its bleakness is not accidental. Indeed, *Pin* makes manifest what has always been implicit in Melnick's poetry, that what connects signifier to signified, almost like the jolt of electrical current that turns Frankenstein's experiment from a corpse into a living being, is emotion. The project is, as it has been always, how best to scribe emotion? *A Pin's Fee* offers a dark and difficult answer.