

Review of *Swimming Home*, by Vincent Katz  
(New York: Nightboat Books, 2015). 117 pp, paper

Review by Phillip Barron

In “Sidewalk Poem,” the final poem in *Swimming Home*, the speaker observes

Could be a time for poetry,  
but outside, not in  
not on the inside looking out but rather  
on the outside        on the outside looking,  
sensing the air, rain, drops, sidewalk,  
damp cover, delicate, reflection,  
in puddles, crimson, magenta, yellow, white, peppermint  
not to go back, but present, no we,  
just everyone at the moment, in the rain of this city

Later in the poem, “They may not think poetry’s important / but I know it is important.” At various points in the poem, the speaker notes it is September, then October, then December, then January, then “trees in leaf.” It is dusk, then the “morning hour of walking dogs,” and later the speaker says “it would be rude to argue with poetry, this evening.” The poetry invoked in this poem is as restless as the light through which the speaker walks and the time that is constantly in play.

But, the appearance of the word “eternal” in the second half of this meta-poem gives a clue as to how to read the shifting meanings of poetry and time. For the peripatetic speaker, the metropolitan images of “sharp light morning edifices,” the “church where we heard that musician once,” the return in the final stanza of that “Church where the musician played,” and the “recovery of distance” all conjure a sense of compressed or dense time. This dense time is accessible only when the speaker is “on my own on the street / then I can write any way I can.” Time becomes poetry itself.

After a reading in San Francisco, I asked Katz about the significance of using the term “poetry” repeatedly throughout “Sidewalk Poem.” He answered, “poetry is about making, as much as any hand skill like carpentry or welding, but the craft of poetry is not respected.” For Charles Reznikoff and Federico Garcia Lorca, walking the streets of

New York was integral to the act of writing poetry. The craft of poetry contains not only those moments when pen smears ink on paper or keyboard presses pixel on screen. Making poetry is more sensuous and active than the still, quiet moments that writing requires.

The craft of poetry, for Katz, involves observing otherwise unnoticed details which become the images around which his poems take shape. It includes giving weight to some moments rather than others, not extraordinary moments, but the ephemeral everydayness. It also includes the call of “stranded personalities, summoned cops, chewing walkers,” “buildings line up in light,” “pigeons flying in circles,” “coffee in a paper cup,” and the response of the poet who shapes images with language. These are the sensuous interactions that require being alone, the focus of *Swimming Home*. The aloneness of poetry, the aloneness that life imposes on us. Katz’s volume is a poetic exploration of the existential singularity with which we face the world.

Albert Camus described the absurd as the clash of the rational mind and the arational, indifferent universe. In the poem “Luis,” Katz brings post-modernism’s self-awareness and self-referentiality to the angst of mortality brought on by the absurd. He asks

Is it right to think?  
Is it right to write?  
Writing is always, only, a surrogate,  
and feels false.  
False, anyway, to the loss,  
but true somehow to the need.  
What is the need?  
For it is not the need to mark anything,  
though that would be amusingly appropriate.  
I am afraid of the relentlessness of time.

And in the third verse of the long poem “Barge,” the poet’s need to understand who he is—what he is doing and why he does what he does—returns with greater precision.

I don’t know why I’m doing anything  
Well, that’s not entirely true  
I do know I’m doing things that are

not entirely for myself  
That is giving me some kind of ballast  
Am I putting God in front of me?  
I don't believe in God, but I'm putting  
something in front of me  
It's the idea that I myself am  
not that significant, even to myself  
It's quite liberating, really...

But this doesn't relieve me  
of the idea that I might need  
actually to know what I'm doing  
and why

“Barge” takes up most of the book's second section. It began as a collaboration with the artist Jim Dine, and Katz says that the poem's formal variety within the long poem reflects Dine's experiments with form. A note in the book's acknowledgements explains that “Barge” was originally published as a chapbook along with a drawing by Dine.

“Nobody has time any more,” the fifteenth section of Barge begins. “Not because we're older and busier/It has to do with the political environment/Which is based on preventing people/From having time to think.” The barge—the relentlessness of time and the inevitability of death—produces anxiety, and “if the barge will take us over/All I care for is poetry.” Again, Katz circles in on the power of poetry to off-set the mundane.

The riverine context of “Barge” links to the preceding poem, the poem from which the book gets its title. “Swimming Home” comprises ten pages of prose poetry, the first page of which is the act of swimming itself. “Head down under, swish and light that couples, daylight, and the stretch of arms, push, a turn, swishing, gulp, but fresh in the continued turn of your body through space.” In water, we are confronted with the aloneness that defines existence. Submersed in water, sounds are muffled. Water floods nostrils and forces any swimmer to breathe deliberately. By imposing our bodies on us in a way that terrestrial life does not, swimming forces attention. *Swimming Home* poses the question how to take the heightened awareness from swimming into the world of sidewalks and pedestrians.

Poetry is how to bring the afferent nature of swimming to the everyday. Poetry is a means of conducting ideas forward, conducting life forward even when there is no means of knowing whether forward is better than any other direction.

In one of the book's more epigrammatic poems, "For My Friend, Richard," Katz writes this simply.

It has seemed like a moving towards  
But in the end it is simply moving  
Continuing and swimming ahead  
Just some more rocks and shallows

At one and the same time, poetry poses both problem and solution. It is the expression of anxiety and the embodiment of the aimlessness with which poetry makes peace.

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