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On Andrew Joron

The Cry at Zero: Selected Prose by Andrew Joron. Denver, CO: Counterpath, 2007.

Anyone seriously interested in poetry's role in the early 21st Century and frustrated by its dominant direction or seeming lack of potential must read *The Cry at Zero*. "What good is poetry at a time like this?" asks the opening sentence. Andrew Joron has, more clearly and convincingly than any of his peers, articulated a poetics of imagination and mystery grounded in a pragmatic scientific materialism. His background in and passion for scientific inquiry provides a deep well for understanding language as a system in ways not often understood by poets. He is greatly indebted to Surrealism and remains a dedicated practitioner. Successfully navigating some of its trickier waters, Joron gives fresh vitality and critical weight to Surrealism, or in current practice, "Neo-Surrealism" by the application of his understanding of scientific research.

With the same rigor and intensity of André Breton, Joron investigates the capacity of systems to exceed themselves, applying research in complexity theory to the system of language in order to locate the "emergence" of the "abyssal," the "Word beyond meaning":

Recent studies of complex systems (from which the concept of emergence is derived) appear to confirm the surrealist insight into the poetic-revolutionary nature of reality. Investigations have shown that systems comprised of a large number of elements far from equilibrium are prone to beautiful convulsions called "phase transitions." In this process, chance associations within the system, after reaching a critical point, undergo spontaneous self-organization. At this point, the Novum—an unexpected, unprecedented superaddition to reality—emerges.

This passage appears in the first essay of the book "The Emergency," a kind of cornerstone for the rest, and is the backbone of Joron's poetics.

He goes on to articulate this Neo-Surrealist poetics throughout the rest of the book, elaborating upon and applying it to a variety of subjects (often the work of other poets), through a clear-eyed and optimistic political perspective driven by his belief in the power of emergence to effect change.

And like Breton, Joron's insistence on the material nature of language gives his ideas the power of practical application in a world where "*Empire is opposed by Swarm.*" In the 1920s, the Surrealists aligned themselves with the Communist Party because, as Helena Lewis points out in *The Politics of Surrealism*,

Their conviction that there was no true dichotomy between dream and reality was a vital part of their philosophy for, as they insisted when they joined the Communist Party, there is no inherent conflict between Surrealism and Marxist theory, since Surrealism was also materialist, with its belief in *one* reality.

Joron too is a materialist; he turns to science to explain the emergence of abyssal language and in doing so delineates a model for resistance derived from occurrences in the world. The book is, therefore, full of references to world events that provide evidence for the phenomenon of spontaneous revolt or change, of events that exceed themselves: the events of 9/11 and the resulting U.S. reactions, "Chechen resistance to the Russian army and the Direct Action Network's operations in the anti-World Trade Organization 'Battle of Seattle'" and the Columbia space shuttle disaster, an event read here as an "ominous sky-sign [which] delivers a further blow to the nation's confidence and its resolve to make war."

In "Terror Conduction," Joron reconciles the "Orders" of Robert Duncan—who said that the orders of the world would not disintegrate in the face of man's evil—with Bataille's "Disorders," where man's evil will, indeed, precipitate collapse and applies the theory of "dissipative structures," structures poised between chaos and order, to show how "systems of emergence must maintain themselves in a state of disequilibrium, or emergency" to remain open. Stasis cannot embody disruption and, therefore, only a poetry where "meaning exceeds its limits and becomes, at best, a mode of 'terror conduction'" can provide the poetics of astonishment, "a negation more primary than doubt" or "the seed of all resistance." Joron's emphasis on the parts' influence upon, even surpassing of, the whole, rather than the unifying oneness of a

larger system can be unsettling. Personally, I have trouble envisioning a system that is not encompassed by a larger one (ad infinitum) and want to believe that the universe is, as Gary Snyder has called it, "one vast breathing body." I find comfort in Duncan's belief that

Phases of meaning in the soul may be like phases of the moon, and, though rationalists may contend against the imagination, all men may be one, for they have their source out of the same earth, mothered in one ocean and fathered in the light and heat of one sun that is not tranquil but rages between its energy that is a disorder seeking higher intensities and its fate or dream of perfection that is an order where all light, heat, being, movement, meaning and form, are consumed toward the cold.

But I find myself convinced by Joron's arguments for disequilibrium over stasis. At what level one resolves the dichotomy of oneness and otherness, the all-containing whole and the eruption within it, is less important to Joron than understanding the dynamics of systems that are, after all, in flux. And the possibilities for emergence seem more applicable to language in the contemporary world (and more optimistic) than the potentially nullifying resolution of disorder.

Joron declares his allegiance to the Romantic tradition, significantly identifying Surrealism as a post-Romantic tradition. He calls to task the synthesis of Language poetry and the New York School for privileging poetic epistemology over poetic ontology. "Skepticism," he says "replaces enthusiasm; and poetic practice, once proclaimed to be a force of nature by the Romantics, is (re)socialized as a means to criticize *what is* rather than to create *what is not*." The former is stasis, the later the revolutionizing potential of the imagination. Like Duncan, Joron would have us look deeper than the field of social relations, toward a lament, toward "the imperative of lyric—as the *ekstasis* of lament—[which] is not to preserve suffering in a reified crystal, but instead to *move with suffering*, to trace its cry against its own condition as a movement toward something other than itself: Utopia . . ." He does, however, return to Language poetry, saying that it has made an invaluable contribution, though "the defeat of ideological strategies of unity and closure . . ." has to be seen as "a preliminary step, a preparatory stage, not . . . as an end in itself." And he holds fast to his conviction that much of the world, which "remakes itself in the throes of convulsive beauty" is beyond words. The epistemological is contextualized by the ontological.

One feels and hopes with Joron that Utopia is actually achievable

and not so far away after all. And like his Romantic predecessors, the means of its achievement lie in the imagination. But, contrary to the Romantics, Joron claims that imagination is not to be possessed. In discussing the poetry of Will Alexander, he says that "the energy of the imagination has not yet been harnessed (as it would be in Romanticism) to the goals of bourgeois subjectivization. It can never be a matter of 'possessing' this imagination, but only (as in the communalistic spirit of *voudou*) of being possessed by it." Through engagement with imagination's potential, "a poetic 'vortex' is generated semantically by paradox, syntactically by reflexivity, and sonically by echoic interference: *of air of air of air of error.*" In a poetics like this, one finds hope in the anticipation of the unanticipated; indeed, if there is a trace of "faith" in his poetics, it can be found here. Joron's belief in the liberating power of this vortex is communicated with a zeal that would seem religious at times if it were not so carefully crafted and supported by such a wide range of knowledge, from the ideas of Nobel-winning scientists and chaos theoreticians to Kant and Heraclitus. Absent is the "magical thinking" of early Anarchists, who hoped for a spontaneous outburst or eruption without a clear understanding of its workings. Joron fills the gaps in this thinking by providing the mechanisms, understood through scientific, not political, theory.

The Cry at Zero: Selected Prose lives up to its byline in that all of the writing here is prose. But while Joron's lined poetry is absent from this volume, prose poems are interspersed between the essays and serve as object lessons for the poetics. One hears in them "the grieving vowel" and senses the "abyssal" presence; the poems demonstrate the efficacy of a poetics that claims a powerful place for poetry in our time; simply put, they are examples of possibility. The poems demonstrate the self-exceeding potential of his poetics. Joron's poetry, despite its sometimes cosmic overtones, does not leave us cold. Rather, Heraclitian fire burns through it, warming us, consoling us, illuminating the way.