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Familiarity and the Foreign: Mayo's Syntactical Games

The Cucumber King of Kėdainiai, by Wendell Mayo. Boulder, Colorado: Subito Press, 2013.

The stories in Wendell Mayo's most recent collection, *The Cucumber King of Kėdainiai*, share the same haunting landscape (post-Soviet Lithuania) and near-mythical tone, yet otherwise remain separate and distinct. In the same manner, the characters hover at the edges of each other for intense moments and yet never connect. It is in these moments—between lovers, husband and wife, teacher and student, even a Lithuanian woman and her American boarder sharing the small space of her flat—that the impossibility of intimacy becomes most clear. Honest connection, human connection, is barred by history; rather than being the source of shared companionship, history is a transparent yet impenetrable boundary. The country's former Soviet self hovers inside these stories like the only lover you've ever known, and though she may have been awful, that awe-inspiring beauty still colonizes your mind and the current frameworks of your heart. How then, can one imagine a new future when the old is so entrenched? And how can one root it out without a new one ready to fill the void?

The narrator of the title story contemplates as much when he states, "I have never much understood the mysteries of the human heart or history—or the odd fixtures of the seventh room" (20). It is in that room that the Cucumber King's father lay sleeping, and even in repose still wears the standard suit of a middle-Party man. Here is a man who, according to the King, was "Once . . . something. But now he is nothing!" (19). The old glories of the regime cannot be tossed aside until new glories are set in place. Yet when the narrator's lover, Valentine, threatens to wake the father, the King smashes his stopwatch against the wall, the new future symbolically aborted. In a parallel gesture, the narrator himself promises never to propose to Valentine again if only she'll stop her singing, and so their relationship echoes the shattering of the watch.

But it is also in the illocutionary act that these mysteries of the human heart reside, or remained trapped. Essentially the characters play a semantic game with each other, where whatever is offered—the symbolic meaning or the literal object—is exactly what is denied. Only the other will ever do. During the tour of his castle, the Cucumber King displays various possessions belonging to his family. When he holds up an old shawl, Valentine replies, "Let me guess . . . your mother" (14). The King replies, "This shawl is not my mother. This shawl is only a sign of my mother's regrets. She is sorry she cannot meet you . . ." (14), and yet he himself cannot reside for long in his own keen understanding of the limits of representation. He goes on, "Flesh and blood, you Americans say, right?" (14), embracing again Magritte's *Treachery of Images*.

It is a game Mayo himself plays with his readers throughout the book. In "Goda" the narrator seamlessly moves from questioning her interrogators, "How dare you ask me . . . could I swear this American walked upright on two legs?" (63) to defending her own character, "I have always been an upright person!" (63). The dual meanings play off each other, necessitate each other, and yet can never be truly rectified, much like the American and Soviet narratives of the post-war era. In "Spider Story" an American teaching English in Lithuania shortly before the removal of the Red Army feels he is some "bleary version" of their Cold War nemesis, and also of himself (48). In a sense he recognizes himself as a symbol, and thus interprets his actions as symbolic, but this also makes those actions inconsequential. To be above the fray is to not impact it at all. Indeed, he eventually realizes his student Vytautus speaks near perfect English already, and all the students' pretended struggles in class were only a game he played for some inexplicable reason. However, it is in the inexplicable where dread can lie—"Chills like cold fingers about the back of my neck press me forward, closer, toward the terrible gap" (62)—and so it makes sense that this game needs to be played constantly. It allows the act of speaking to be a constant process, to create a momentum that keeps things hovering above the dread.

This process is played out on a grand scale between Daughter, Mother, and Grandmother in "Cold Fried Pike," as each pushes forward with her own particular story, interrupting the others, but only to continue where she left off rather than responding to anyone else. Yet these three separate narratives merge to create a forth, and though this triptych provides then four portraits none of them are of any use to the man who comes for dinner, seeking information about his own family. He's too trapped in his American politeness to

interrupt, too caught up in the myth of reliability, too reliant on the coherent cultural narrative of his home country to believe he won't eventually hear a single and useful story. Thus this American visitor misses the lesson in Grandmother's story. She tells of when she was a girl and had to hide from the KGB when they came for her family, and how she heard her father declare he had no daughter. This was obviously to protect her and yet what she took away from that was not a memory of fatherly love, but instead fear: "I worried about people forgetting me" (96). So she tells her story again and again, its accuracy less important than the telling, which becomes the process of speaking herself into existence. Towards the end it is revealed this is not the American's first visit, that he had come before and heard the same things, making his continued quest seem more pathetic or naïve than noble.

Like the stories of the three women, Mayo's collection sends both language and plotlines down their inevitable courses of logic, paths set long ago by the arbitrary but inescapable fallout of the post-war era. The stories return again and again to this space as well, the symbolic iteration of this history, the physical manifestation of its weight. In "Brezhnev's Eyebrows," the struggling artist Grigoryev carries a bag laden with fruit through the city streets to his estranged wife. His arms strain under the burden as he imagines the happier times of his marriage, just after independence when he and his wife huddled in their bare apartment, surviving on rationed heat, water, and food, but loving their newfound freedom. Like in this memory, lack and love become linked throughout Mayo's collection, and the characters bounce back and forth between them.

This weight challenges the myth of the open signifier; our ability to shape meaning to our liking works in inverse proportion to our ties to the past. Grigoryev becomes so fascinated with his wife's portrait of the former General Secretary that he wonders, "Had he spent so much effort seducing Asta with those thick, unforgettable, Bolshevik bushes that he'd nearly seduced himself?" (44). Like the Cucumber King, he is forcing metaphor and reality together, and here, unlike before, they work not as opposing magnets pushing away from each other, but snap together. It is in moments like these that Mayo allows his characters and the readers to approach the mystery of the inexplicable without its attendant dread. The difference is that this approach must originate from the base level and work its way up. Goda puts it succinctly: "Suddenly I adored the translucent mystery there You see, I was no longer upright" (71). She speaks in the end of how "to piss oneself" is a "necessary gesture" (78), to be both

stooped and primal is to duck under both the bureaucratic inanity of her country's history and the syntactical dictates of language, and emerge on the other side where "the angels bade you to sing your song forever. And you never returned home" (107).

If any part of us believes the cliché that "Home is where the heart is" then we are returned again to that ex-lover, the one who erected in our hearts the initial framework from which we are able to understand the songs we may sing. Familiarity and the foreign find equal footing in Mayo's Lithuania, where we are at once home and never comfortable. It is the momentum of the language, the sincere humor and dreadful seriousness of the characters that propels us past any lingering discomfort. Ultimately, it is Mayo's game of thwarted encounters that drives this book, a force that resides in not only the action but also the base level of language. He consistently pushes the literal and the symbolic together until their own magnetism drives them apart, only to make the approach again. We feel the potential abundance of his words and of his settings, and through that the scarcity of the language and land becomes all the more apparent. As the narrator of "Spider Story" asks, "Is there some special syntax, some point of competency at which fresh mortar leaps into brick, fuel into furnaces, orphans into real homes?" (53). *The Cucumber King of Kedainiai* makes you doubt that there is, but also compels you to wish these stories will never stop speaking in the chance that they can make it so.