Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Tony Magistrale: Three Poems

Tony Magistrale · Wednesday, May 28th, 2014

Tony Magistrale is Professor of English at the University of Vermont. His most recent collection of poems, *ENTANGLEMENTS*, was published in 2013 by Fomite Press.

All poems are premiering on Cultural Weekly.

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Milan

Because she sent out so many mixed messages, it's remarkable how deeply she ended up affecting me. Tourists, those who choose not to circumvent her completely, even natives who labor in her shops and office buildings, call her a dirty whore, and to her face; an old bitch gone in the teeth, as Pound snarled more than a century ago. And like a whore, they appreciate her value only in terms of generating money—but that's their loss, abandoning her for places more refined: north to Switzerland or the quaint little house in the suburbs. Scary and sometimes mean, she takes a cruel pleasure out of intimidating the naïve and unworldly, those lacking a thirst for adventure; if safety and comfort remain your primary considerations in a relationship, you would be well to look elsewhere. I came to Milan when I was 29, and susceptibly unjaded. All my life I'd lived in Disney World. Milan was my final rite of passage into adulthood. I'd been on an exclusive diet of compliant cheerleaders and pretty country rubes wearing pastel skirts. Milan was the first woman to show up for a date who was smarter and savvier than me, smoldering under heavy makeup and killer heels, chain-smoking her way through a multilingual dinner, and then pulling me into dark alleys for drunken French kissing. I hated her for a long time before I realized I was in love with her—vampiric and unapologetic, she could punish with impunity, as in the used clusters of bloodied heroin needles I found discarded each morning curbside outside my apartment building. But because I stuck around long enough, she taught me things I never would have learned some place else: that glamour could lurk beneath a black veil of dust—and that while you may be young only once, the memory of a beautiful woman, and the city where she resides, remains immutable to age.

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Madame Bovary in L.A.

"Where could she have learned such depravities, so deep
and so dissembled that they were almost incorporeal?"

—Gustave Flaubert

Slave to love, a century too early
To join the Kardashians or headline her own celebrity
TV series, but cued into sex as currency:
What good is beauty if you can’t profit from it?

Amid breathless kisses in winter mist, surreptitious
Liaisons in French hotels, always the restive urge
To smack someone—husband, lover, creditors, daughter.
Scandalous behavior that shocked the perimeters of being

Female—Flaubert fantasied about her as a mistress
But how long could he have put up with her?
Shopping for supper buzzed on illicit sex,
Unapologetically enthralled by the magnificent

Appearances of things. Troubled trophy-wife,
Disgruntled diva whose appetite to consume
Dwarfed husband’s efforts to constrain. Should have
Been born a Material Girl in L.A.,

Indulging expensive fits of luxury during trips
To Neiman Marcus & Saks, swiping plastic talismans
With manicured fingers as items disappear from racks,
A sad smile creasing her meticulously made up face.

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In Praise of Muses

i.
She wondered, *why would anyone want to be a Muse?*
What kind of satisfaction is there

servicing someone else’s flame? I tried to
explain in terms she would likely

appreciate. It’s about wielding power,
ultimate control over the production line.

She responded, *birthing is so overrated.*
It’s unappreciated toil and sacrifice and pain;

no woman is ever sufficiently warned.
And, in the end, the child leaves,

leaving you more alone than before.
This is often true, I acknowledged,

both of children and Muses, what matters most

is what they leave behind. Who knew

better than Keats, whose Muse gave birth
in sadness to children of memory and loss,

but children also of exceptional beauty
who still dance on the dust of their parents' graves.

ii.
Amidst the great bundled burden that January bears
you arrive
like a delivery of Florida hot house flowers

& my frozen black & white world
cracks open in the heat of your shining surfaces.

It is as if I have been granted
sudden entrance into the sequestered garden
of a great painter's studio—Matisse might do
nicely—where the painter & I privately
tour together one May morning his bright canvases,

admiring the spring violets, the reds & blues
on various panels lining his walls.

I am aware
you have just spent hours alone
working with your own brushes & paint
to prepare yourself for our meeting.
I see mirrored in
your smoky-lidded eyes & berry-stained smile

your own pleasure & skills

at transforming yourself into such a spectacular canvas,
more beautiful than any I can recall.

I am, in turn, possessed of no better compliment,
no more profound a gesture of appreciation,
than the compulsion to pull

your dazzling face
into intimate contact with mine,

kissing the contours of your deeply
ornamented eyes, cheeks, and mouth

until both of us are smeared with color,
like the happy palette of Matisse himself,

who created new beauty from everything he destroyed.

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