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Valery Oisteanu: The Last Man Standing of Modern American Poetry

by Tetsuya Taguchi

It is not overstated to say that modern American poetry began to thrive after World War II. Until then, American poets had been overshadowed by their British and other European peers, especially modernists such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Elliot and Marianne Moore. Later the Beats got into the spotlight, flirting with commercial media outlets to propel the entertainmentization of literature/poetry. Their major contribution was to promote the enjoyment of poetry in a more casual manner. It is hard to talk about the Beats since there are so many misunderstandings relating to them. However, it's clear that they provided an environment of "participatory performance," as cultural anthropology studies would call it, for the new readers of new poetry. This was a brand new mode of literary experience, compared to the way the older modernists were appreciated in classroom discussion. Unlike a splashy formal event with an audience of more than 1,000, the Beats carried out intimate but festive gatherings of 10 to 20 people as well as doing collaborations with Jazz musicians.

It was Kenneth Rexroth who claimed that poetry was, in essence, "broadcasting." As the masses learned how to read and write through education, taking literacy from the exclusive province of the elitist class, younger poets became more diverse racially, sexually and geographically. Under such circumstances, readers were for the first time able to select the ones that best suited his/her mentality or sensitivity.

It's much easier to talk about Valery Oisteanu if this historical flow is well understood. Although the successful democratization of poetry in America clearly forged diversity, at the same time it gave rise to the evaluation of works by judging if their particular value system was shared among other poets. This made it harder for poets who challenged preexisting language and expressions to fully reveal their spirit and soul. Then we have Valery, who was born in the old Soviet Union in 1943, received his education in Rumania and then, at his earliest opportunity, moved to New York City in 1973. The city has long been attracting gifted poets. It is not a coincidence that New Directions Publishing, founded by James Laughlin and which specialized in groundbreaking poetry, was established here.

By the early 1970s, New York was bristling with experimental art scenes that became well known even in Japan by way of giants like Allen Ginsberg and Andy Warhol, as well as more idiosyncratic work by Ira Cohen, with his Mylar photography, and Angus MacLise, a member of the Velvet Underground. To varied extents all were righteous successors to the Western tradition of wide-ranging cultural studies stemming from Aristotle, leading to these poets to ever-expanding explorations of art, world music, mysticism and esoteric Indian religions.

They participated in various spiritual experiments in order to capture not only a new form of expression but also new meanings of creation that go beyond the literal meanings of language. Valery is one of them, and perhaps the last surviving one at that. In 2019, he finally came to Japan with his wife Ruth, and we met each other at a hotel near Torimaru Dori in Kyoto. We found that we shared a kindred spirit, and I had the chance to listen to him tell about his life from birth to exile and beyond, along with his deeply considered ideas on Dadaism and Surrealism. He told me that he had recently visited his old haunts in Rumania to promote a translation of his new collection of poetry, written in English, called "Anarchy for a Rainy Day," first published in New York in 2015.

Along with fresh insights into mutual friends such as the aforementioned Ginsberg, Warhol and Cohen, he crystalized the idea that artistic vision and commercial success rarely co-exist and more often lead to tragedy.

If you read "Anarchy for a Rainy Day," you'll understand how the poet treats New York as if it were his lover. What follows is my translation of one poem, titled: Exquisite corpse remembered & dismembered.