

POETIC ANGUISH

A Review Essay by **David Kocka** of

Ron Seitz's *THE MECHANIC OF TEARS*
(Louisville: The Sulgrave Press, 1991): 77 pages * [\$9.95 paperback]

In a recent issue of *Time Magazine* there is an illustration of "The Mechanic" (1920) by the modernist painter Leger with the caption: "Poetic anguish in the face of human technology." Curiously, the latest collection of poetry by Ron Seitz, *The Mechanic of Tears*, shares this sentiment. Admittedly, there have been storm-warnings to his readers that such a book as this loomed on the horizon. Any careful attention to Seitz's previous works (especially sections of *The Gethsemani Poems* and the later collection *Death Eat*) should have prepared one for a continuation of the unique literary odyssey that this author embarked upon some three decades ago with the publication of his first writings. From a major contemporary American poet whose work has been described as "surreal, concrete, minimalistic, experimental, syntactically innovative, tautly lyrical, etc.," this new book should come as no surprise, and as a joy, to his growing audience. Sadly, this may well not be the case.

The Mechanic of Tears represents a quantum leap in Seitz's evolution as an avant garde poet: thus, it is a logical expose of the crisis in the arts in today's culture. Among all his publications, this ambitious and "risky" work is the most revealing and yet most concealed. It is intimately and mystifyingly personal, simultaneously charged with his own unique expression of pain and awe. It is a raw, naked book, dense and intense, as if each syllable were sculpted into being. Seitz is *The Mechanic of Tears*, the voice of creative imagination in crisis. And though his language and tone may often sound disparate and dark to the present literary generation, such an indictment might rest more with the reader. As his recent collection *Death Eat* is not a morbid consumption of us by death but rather the poet's responsive "gift" of consuming death by virtue of the creative act, so too *The Mechanic of Tears* seeks through "sorrowing" to cure the anguish of our time. It is true that Seitz's work celebrates a dark hue, but this darkness has more to do with John of the Cross and his *noche oscura* and Thomas Merton's "dark radiance" than it does with the manifest nihilism which expresses our culture's collective spiritual *malaise*.

The title of this collection appears in a selection from Seitz's *The Gethsemani Poems* (1985), the book opening with the intonation:

the pulse of me	hysterical with breath
turns mute a wheel	
	my dying
no treaty of pain to bargain —	
is it I am	the mechanic of tears

□ **David Kocka** is a sculptor, poet, and writer who lives at Ouroboros Sanctuary in Laconia, Indiana. Two of his bronze sculptures of Thomas Merton appeared on covers of *The Merton Seasonal*. His essay, "A Song of Syllables: Merton an Artist in Art," was in the Winter 1989 issue of *The Merton Seasonal* and "Week of a Visitor in a Stranger's House: A Man without a Season from Merton's Hermitage" was in *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990).

if so —
 this screech of panic trembles things
 &
 I flinch!

From this it might appear that the present work is a lamentation for artists and contemplatives alone. If Joseph Campbell's insight is correct ("It has always been the business of the great seers known to India as *rishis*, in biblical terms as *prophets*, in primitive people as *shamans*, and in our own day as *poets* and *artists*, to perform the ministry of wonder and mystery thus nuancing our world view with the mystical."), then this book serves us all. In the climate of a scientific, or more accurately a technological, mythology, the creative artist has become fringe, not requisite, and has evolved into celebrity rather than celebrant. Either way, as beauty and the beast (*Meat/ the*

beast of history/ hungered), the creative artist is marginalized and alienated, left to serve culture in isolation. From this arena of anguish he is called upon to become a mechanic, a "mechanic of our tears." The *angst* of our time, expressed by its dysfunctionality, autism and addiction, leaves even the creative artist in a fix: "fixers" fixed in stereotypic roles in need of a fix (*a freaked high/ icy fix/ howls/ my page/ its shock syntax*). This is a calculated book. It is designed with deliberation and an exhausting discipline of consciousness. It barely leaves room for unconscious and spontaneous eruptions. Fortunately, however, those spontaneities can never be totally repressed or controlled by the mind. They will erupt — if not in creativity, then in violence or tears.



Léger's *The Mechanic*, 1920: poetic anguish in the face of inhuman technology

The Mechanic of Tears is divided into four autonomous but related sections (MYTHSCAPE, THINK MOTES, EYE ETCH, BLISS WRIT) in which Seitz works out the “mechanics” that comprise the entire book’s subject, theme, and style. He introduces this symphonic structure with the apologetics:

out of some rawtooth
 blind hunger
 to gnaw the bone
 that severs the nerve
 to utter truth
 unaltered
 by shamed remorse —

 this voice
 picks up the toll
 to tell what tale
 needs said —
 amen

Section I (MYTHSCAPE), a fourteen part serial poem, emerges as a mix of images gutted from dysfunctional and broken-down mythologies in our contemporary culture. There is an allusive linkage with other world poets in this effort:

the delirium
 of Trakl
 darkened Parra’s page —
 an earphone
 to the bonemelt
 in Kafka’s key —
 born bleak
 the ploop
 of Basho’s frog —

Joyce is here without mention. MYTHSCAPE is a tight and condensed vision and version of the stages of a spiritual sojourn and quest (*Ulysses*). To misread here (mythmeat; bonemelt; death eat; poembody) is to miss the crucial sentiment coded in a significant poem in the series, “Feast”:

praise the worm
 that eats
 the entrail
 lets loose
 the birds
 of appetite

 caress the geek
 feasting my carrion
 myth meat

Here the poet’s mechanics are revealed, and they must be done so in the light of MYTHSCAPE being written concurrently with Merton’s last major work, the booklength poem *The Geography of Lograire*. No doubt there was mutual influence in their common endeavor, but each has generated his own private vision. It is certain that they share a key image (“the birds of appetite”) from an earlier Merton work. In the “Author’s Note” in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton briefly discusses the carrion motif. Seitz, on the other hand, never discusses. He presents, in raw form, chunks of Bad Meat for nourishment, evoking the ancient Dionysian meal just as truly as

the eucharistic feast. And here a curious carrion spirituality begins to emerge. The poet and his audience are being described, and a crucial paradox is revealed. Is it that we are the birds of appetite, with blind hunger, gnawing on the body of the creative imaginer? Are we the carrion birds who hover, circle, and descend with the idea that there is something to be gained? But the poembody is not to be found. We may circle where we think it to be, but soon we go elsewhere. The poet is aware of his work and our response. And when we have gone, the “nothing,” the *nada*, the *bonemelt*, *myth ash*, and *myth meat* will suddenly appear. It was there all the while, but we scavengers missed it because it was not our kind of prey.

The content of this iceberg-tip minimal outline, MYTHSCAPE, is mostly hidden. But between the mines and around the lean words here, a psycho-spiritual substance is present. This is its Dionysian aspect. It is to the god of death and rebirth, the god of ecstatic joy that we owe the classical Greek theater. The celebration of his resurrection gave birth to comedy. The bemoaning of his death — the singing over the sacrifice of the symbolic goat, the *tragoidia* or goatsong — became tragedy. MYTHSCAPE is a goatsong tragedy, a joyous meat of ecstasy served to a carrion culture whose appetite prefers other prey.

Section II (THINK MOTES), a selection of some forty ultra-minimalistic poems, is presented as particles or specks of poetic vision at once in-process as well as completion. Laconic word-knots, these “motes” blur the mind’s eye and conjure tears. Many of the poems are aphoristic signatures, reduced to the single initial, a colon of identification:

joyous consent:
the eloquent stare
of pure duration

the bridged abyss
of puppet applause:
conjecture

the invisible luggage
of human freight:
asylum

Through squinted eyes of “passionate thinking,” the reader weeps to meet the poetry. Only with opaque vision will these lucid lines appear. Obscure things are only celebrated and seen clearly in obscurity. As in the poem “Other”:

broken voice
lament
carved
to the prow
of neglect

dimmed fingers
fluttering
a face replaced
by born bone cast
disfigured
in fear

a gauze of loss
swaddling
dead desire
in the transparent
contours
of poverty

If we are to allow the poet to serve our sight, we too must endure: *a century of turning the head/ awaiting a shadow to blossom into flame — / the silent discretion of a body/ burning in beauty.*

Section III (EYE ETCH) is the poetic expression/ experience of synesthesia. These poems employ cubist syntax, in that by fragmenting the form, several aspects of the same object are

refracted simultaneously. Much like Braque or Picasso, Seitz's synchronistic grammar exposes reality in its multiplicity, stretching back to the future, seeing with a primal eye the cosmos as a host of dancing Wu Li Masters. Voice and image merge and diverge in a display of visceral energy. The (*pupa*) pupil in our eye is itching, having been etched by the "Vision":

scrolled ghost, clock's old movie
spits trembling Time's belly
rust, eyeball thirst & ticking
lust

awed by the retch alpha
bet, bomb & bald
etch of my meat
soprano

Here the poem is no longer a rendering of the external world, but a world created of words. It is a creative attempt to give voice to the unspeakable vision of individual experience. Seitz fractures the conditioned expectations and associations of language through the distortion and contortion of syntax and diction, through verbal juxtapositions that awaken the reader to a new apprehension and appreciation of words seen and heard once again in their pristine isolation.

He does not ask the reader merely to read or listen to the poem, but to enter into an immediate concrete "participation" with the poet/ his poem (one and the same). The medium of consciousness is language. There is composition, not writing. The reader finds in the text the person composing it. Thus Seitz's frequent use of neologisms, improvisational verbal quirks, so dense and concentrated through synaptic "tics" of associative memory reels, and the inevitable disappearance of context (as commentary) to allow the ascendancy of aural and visual imagery—a "dialogue" of the poet asking and answering in soliloquy:

am I id
iot to air
y im
pulse
jailing me e
lec
tric in
the proph
et
peep

ear click my
magic
etch in ink

I eat the
mystic
ring

Section IV (BLISS WRIT) celebrates the Dionysian ecstasy in the full force of freedom that comes with the release of tears. Here Seitz achieves his primal function as shaman. After having undergone the rite of dismemberment of Orpheus, the poet reconstellates to a new body, finally becoming human. At last Seitz can play with wit-waves of words on the way into silence:

I could counter-
feit a coin
of bliss

suffer no
due
cross

the heavy touch
of this brute
numb kiss

so empty
with
loss

Now absurd ironies and Zen humor echo and mirror other artistic media — the music of Cage, Coltrane, and Glass; the painting of Stella and Reinhardt; the sculpture of Brancusi and Giacometti. In a word, the modernists and post-modernists dance with Seitz in this bliss feast:

may the chaste twist of my wit
prick you its tender intent

Goatsong tragedy has now become *koan* comedy. Seitz's vision is an implosion of experience and thought converging into the gravity force of his voice, much as matter and light converge in a black hole in space. His song ends and enters into silence, as in the final poem:

bled em
ty of an
gel

the pen
drops

from my
stunned

fin
gers

The shock of it causes him to disappear with the poembody, only to reappear in our absence. The reappearance is assured. Whether conscious or unconscious, Seitz's stunned fingers refers to *Finnegan's Wake*.

Finn-awake-again, Seitz will return with a new body of work. And if that work follows the pattern of his poetic journey up to now, it should be a publication of empty pages. And beyond the possible empty book to come, if the mythic strain is sound in him, a feast of rich and lush images awaits us for a banquet. Unless he remains silent, there is simply no other alternative for this poet.

Perhaps the mechanics of *The Mechanic of Tears*, and the tactics and intentions of the repairman, did not suit our tastes. Perhaps this is because our hunger is not dire enough. Or perhaps we remain the scavengers, hovering, circling, and descending in search of another kind of pray.



The Mechanic of Tears is a dangerous and disconcerting book. Its subtleties and wisdom do not easily yield nor lend themselves to our secure and familiar perspective. If obscure at times, the poet is not deliberately so. Seitz is authentic and genuine in his vision, and its expression cannot be more obvious or simple.

His radical approach to traditional American poetry will no doubt shock the aesthetic sensibilities of many. Commanding a technical verbal virtuosity and mastery of diverse poetic forms, he has produced in this book the most stimulating experimental writing in this region since the last works of the late Thomas Merton (*Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*). As was the case with Merton, Seitz's work belongs to a wider, more diverse, international literary movement. And for this very reason, appreciation and recognition in his native country will, in all probability, continue to be minimal.

The Mechanic of Tears, though a voice for all creative artists of this age, is more precisely Ron Seitz's autobiography in short writ. Here we meet the poet on the common ground of vulnerability. Here, in this "endless poembody" we touch the

Body now
 Artaud cruel
 pain Canticle

a bald brink
 witch hiss
 lobotomy

Earth here
 the gaunt step
 Golgotha

a nerve jerk
 Hallelujah
 monk bury

this flesh
 collapse final
 testimony

I AM
 BECOME
 MY POEM