

Magarian's Poetic Beasts

Baret Magarian is an Anglo-Armenian poet and writer, born in London, now resident in Italy, in Florence. An idealistic and charismatic author with a growing following of admirers, appreciated for his brilliant public readings, he has published poems and works of fiction in magazines and with independent publishers, both in English and in Italian translation.

His novel *The Fabrications*, published in the United States, was hailed by *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *The New Statesman* as a work of considerable literary value. A collection of his short stories, *Melting Point*, which confront with daring virtuosity many kinds of short fiction, was brought out by the Italian publishing house Quarup. He recently published a bilingual edition of his poetry with the Roman publisher Ensemble—*Scherzando con tutte le mie bestie preferite*—which displays the full flowering of his poetic voice and the range of his poetic interests. The book was enthusiastically acclaimed by *Corriere Fiorentino*, and the Italian critic Simone Innocenti and the British novelist Jonathan Coe have both compared Magarian to great masters of 20th-century literature. Some of his texts have been successfully adapted for the theatre. He is also active as an amateur painter and pianist-composer.

His multi-faceted production revolves around some common characteristics: the unshakeable conviction that literature plays an ethical role in society, the irreverent re-reading of literary forms and genres, and the sometimes painful analysis of the weaknesses and the distortions of social life.

Poetry, within Magarian's wider and markedly eclectic output, plays a central and tangential role at the same time. Central because for him poetry is the most extreme form of writing and literary militancy, tangential because it touches and influences other forms of artistic expression, contaminating them without being incorporated, remaining eminently lyrical and, in a sense, elitist. Poetry is a pure and niche genre, which stands apart, untouched by fashions and trends.

The key to Magarian's poetic enquiry lies in his tireless work of extension, as he forces and breaks language. The verses are often emotional, emphatic, and declamatory, and sometimes they rise up, aspiring to the memorable, to the epigrammatic, to

the *citation célèbre* (the openings and the closures often embody an admirable underlining, as for example in “Now and Beyond”: “Even though the old planet might be about to implode / We still have to bake bread, earn a crust, grow old,” *Scherzando* 28). The syntax and vocabulary often seem to be on the verge of a break, of a distortion, of a dramatic turn. Magarian bends English to his expressive needs, trying to blend a high, polished, hyper-literary diction, with a mode that is more urban, disenchanting, and sardonic (and we realize that, given this style, the language cannot be other than English, the author’s mother tongue, in spite of his long residency in Italy).

Magarian is unafraid of risk-taking. Many of his poems remain vertiginously poised between the sublime and the pathetic, between the prosaic and the imaginative, between the lyrical and the grotesque, between the sermon and invective, in a deliberate challenge to the reader’s expectations; these are often rutilant and generous poems of a Whitmanesque stamp (see for example the accumulation of images in an almost Brueghelian poem like “The Eternal Unmistakable Celebration of the Now”), which do not utilize a poetic art that is minimalist or distilled, but draw upon a palette of strong colors, sometimes unpleasant, contrasting and jarring. Poems that, although inspired—often by quoting—the great English romantics, do not pursue harmony and mythmaking, but reveal meanness and barbarism, daily injustices and wars between the poor.

Perhaps the most remarkable quality that emerges from Magarian’s poetry is that of surprise: a regenerating sense of freshness that draws on irregularity, on bizarre juxtapositions, on bold conceptual articulations that amaze the reader. Here we often have an extravagant and unprecedented language that acts as an antidote to a tired, banal, faded language:

When we first tasted cider
 The burning tears of unrequited love
 An altercation on a wintry street
 A paycheck stamped with a forgotten name

But the future, oh the great white shark
 Ready to bite and reduce us to bloody viscera
 (“Straits of Time” 60)

At the risk of appearing speculative, one cannot help but notice how the two ethnic-cultural components of the author—the

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sophisticated English eccentric and the melancholic visionary Armenian—are blended, giving birth to his personal and distinctive voice.

In tune with this modulated and polyphonic language, with the continuous experimentation of tones and registers, Magarian dons different masks: the voice is clearly close to his ideas, intentions and personality, but at the same time he eschews the idea of identifying himself completely with the narrator of the poems, insisting on an infinite kaleidoscope of possible variants of the self, from the sweetest and most romantic, to the most corrosive, scatological and irreverent.

Magarian sometimes also applies a certain prophetic and fabular quality to his poetry, in which the magical and crystallized world of the imagination contrasts with a grim and insidious, trivial contemporary reality, in which heroism is impossible and the values of the past are gone:

No more Walter Raleighs, no more Byronic supermen
Reaching for the stars and covering puddles with capes

Where are all the great men? The men with vision?
The great statesmen?
("In and Out of the Jazz Basket" 82)

Many of the texts have an intrinsic civil force, ruled by a charge of denunciation, a sincere *pietas* for the oppressed (see the beautiful "So lovely the eyes of the beggar girl" 96), which never seems obvious, but is always cleverly transfigured by the game of lyrical variations, by the mantra of repetitions and anaphoric riffs:

That England has fled my friend
Has been Tescoed off
Crucified by the label the label The label
The Alpha and Omega of Car Parks. . .

The tip, the tipping point, the old friend,
The toad
The toad
The toad
The greasy smell you can not shift
("In and Out of the Jazz Basket" 80)

In other cases the poems appear as pure and crystalline lyric episodes, moments suspended in time, immune to the corrupting influence of the contemporary: “because you are made of light / you could illuminate / a barn, a shrine, a field of grass” (“All Rivers and Lakes” 26). Or in the sequence “If you came to me” (130-36) three poems addressed to a thaumaturgical, redemptive embodiment of “otherness” (woman, angel or goddess?) through whose nocturnal visits the narrator can perhaps finally learn to be reconciled with the world and society at large.

This sequence forms the heart of the current selection of Magarian’s verse, as included in this volume. The “If you came to me” sequence is notable for expressing a romanticism which is hesitant, tentative; it draws upon motifs and images whose roots lie both in the earth and in the metaphysical, or in metaphysical aspirations. We see the same dark/light polarities in “The Sigh” and in the final poem “Untitled” which offers the reader a labyrinth of meanings, half-meanings, reflections, mirrored images and ambiguous moments poised between salvation and damnation, the tightening noose of time and liberation from it. This final poem is especially recalcitrant and difficult to interpret, but it seems to be an attempt to capture the scan of a human life and its conflicting, contrasting ages, all pivoted by the idea of time’s movement and cessation, coupled with the contaminating and merciful effects of memory. Memory for Magarian is Janus-faced: its very existence is proof of loss, for one cannot remember that which is still ongoing; and yet memory is also an antidote for the poison of oblivion, of cessation, of non-being: “Old age and middle age skewered and healed by memory” (“Untitled” 88) One might also note in the poem “Can I stay with you” a similar insistence on contrasts, on violent oscillations between destruction and comfort, solace and the “war zone”—the poem utilizes the most stripped, simple, bare language and yet also the most elaborate, spun out and written lines—and this accounts for its striking, otherworldly atmosphere. These are the kinds of contrasts that we often encounter in Magarian’s verse. A yearning for a romantic oneness that is undone by a cynical admission of failure; a poetic grandeur that undermines itself, a self-willed linguistic sabotaging.

Other common themes of Magarian’s poetry include a bountiful love of nature, a nature often violated by greedy and foolish human beings, almost echoing the Wordsworthian lament: *What men has made to men*: “The ice caps are

commencing their elegiac farewell / A homeless man beds down in his street hell / Soon existence itself will be downloadable. . .” (“Now and Beyond” 28). Or the opposition to technology, the lack of a sense of history, the frivolity of ‘social’ communications that, in the opinion of the author, replace the authenticity and depth of interpersonal dialogue with a fake and standardized codification. Often the tone becomes desperate and apocalyptic (“The River is Rising,” “White Baptism,” etc.). However, at times in the bloody descriptions à la grand guignol, Magarian doesn’t detach enough from caricature in the vein of George Grosz, which—as in some of his prose works—deforms and emphasizes what he wants to denounce.

What is certain, however, is that for the author poetry represents life as fiction cannot do. In a sense, poetry is purer, more essential, more integral. One can aspire to live “poetically,” as it were, to be poets in everyday life, and this implies a sort of synthesis of everything, an all-encompassing radicality, an active and dynamic sensitivity, a Blakeian will based on visions and epiphanies: “Literature’s great rallying call, it’s the mercury river rising, / Just a moment, a blinking, and we’ve chartered the / Transition from innocence to experience” (“Mercury River” 84), though this kind of “poetic living” becomes more and more difficult in the modern world, and the poet and his pleas are mostly ignored, or swallowed up in the excess of information.

Writers, as Magarian likes to say, should be like children. Spontaneous and innocent, they should discover the world as if for the first time: “I’ve learned from children in their haystacked bliss” (“If you came to me. 3” 134). And discovering the world, to note with disappointment that so much is wrong, that the king is naked, and that men stubbornly walk the wrong pathways (see the apologue “The Way of Life”). And then the poet, like an irreverent but empathetic picaro, proud of his marginality, raises his voice, in an enterprise that has something colossal about it, an unrealistic and anachronistic task doomed to failure. A task that appears to us now as urgent as at no other time, even if remains unattainable.

WORKS CITED

Magarian, Baret. *Scherzando con tutte le mie bestie preferite*.
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