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**Albert Mobilio's *The Geographics*
and Gillian McCain's *Tilt***
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Albert Mobilio. *The Geographics*. West Stockbridge, MA: House of Outside Series/Hard Press, 1995. 83 pp. \$10.00.

Gillian McCain. *Tilt*. West Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press/The Figures, 1996. 84 pp. \$10.00.

At the heart of Albert Mobilio's first full-length collection *The Geographics* is a series of prose poems by the same name. Framed before and after by lineated poems, this sequence is arranged in eighteen "steps" interspersed (every three steps) by a verse "half-step." As the title suggests, the series is rooted in creating a sense of place, which is never static, nor is it ever simply a single place. What seems to be more important are the continual arrivals and departures each piece brings, as well as the layers of place created by memory and its relation. Much like a board game, you literally step through the maze on the table, moving your game-piece so many squares per throw of dice. Or you travel among the twistings and turnings of a mind as adept at describing the "landscape" as it is cunning at inventing it.

The strength of Mobilio's "The Geographics" lies in its remarkable syntactical, imagistic, and metaphorical constructions. Consider the sequence's first paragraph:

And what a cremation that was. Now I can mark my exact place in the etch-a-sketch bible of conclusions. Only then will I be quiet about the lack of shade here. There's always some way of heading off alone to where the cover's good, some way of saying this is not an ordinary way of talking. The exact is often found torn off from the rest with edges sharp enough to cut tolerance from skin. Exact collapses upon itself with the din of a spontaneous chore. That's what I'm doing, stashing the verb *to be* behind a couch and calling it a place to sleep.

Mobilio's prose reflects no ordinary way of writing. From image or metaphor he will launch into true surrealistic (not just some forced imitation, but an uncanny updated echo of Breton's ear for sound and image) linguistic fancy—a passage syntactically logical, convincing, and complex as well as explosively beautiful in its wild progression and leaps:

Antennae lie buried beneath the floor because the reception is better that way. The airwaves brought us crumbs & pocket change but nothing worth diving in for. We learned whoever pounds the rock makes fire, and whoever plows the flame grows their own flaw. Instinct rode us down, skewered our conversation, kept us in our seats. That's why we cannot listen to these unwrapped winds and murmurs.

In this paragraph we move from floor to air to water, earth, and rock, then to

fire—a vortex of “unwrapped winds.”

Mobilio mixes numerous passages of such elaborate and intriguing language with completely linear and literal passages:

After the sex she thought about how she was unavailable next weekend and how tight her schedule was getting. The room was suddenly warm and close. She realized the ceiling fan was set on low but as she stared into the slowly revolving blades she somehow felt cooler. In the courtyard below the window, sounds of an afternoon barbecue had commenced. That, she thought, was the world outside. Its exact and locatable home.

Passages such as these become “exact and locatable” instances in a narrative that relates arrivals and departures in landscapes that spring from childhood memory and from the pain of a failed romance. If there’s a chink in Mobilio’s construction, it’s in how he manages the transitions in modes of discourse between these literal and figurative paragraphs. The lack of integration creates more stumbling at times than stepping. Not making these passages discrete within each piece might be one way to alleviate this jarring. But Mobilio does create scenes with a riveting language, an insistence to reach beyond the ordinary to examine a self that is constantly changing against the backdrop of a seductive, harrowing, and mercurial world:

Aching still, I’m gathered against this soil. I step outside the map she sketched of our physical clutch, and reach back to steady this stride. But the ground itself is launched, and I cannot save my place. That page will have to go unread.

In Gillian McCain’s *Tilt* we are also treated to the idea of movement. In her case, the world that seems to hurtle by us (and us by it). In this first book McCain presents us with more than glimpses of some *thing* in motion—reminiscent, for example, not of a strobe-light photograph of a body with limbs flailing as it falls, but rather a compendium of such shots taken in a mirror with both object and observer in delirious action. Occasionally, the planes of movement intersect and we are greeted with their collisions.

Each piece in *Tilt* contains a single-word object as its title. Of course, there’s the usual array of concepts/objects: self, history, revolution, war, family, memory, life, dream, sex, truth, time, death, love, and work. The scope of these “topics” is wide and appears to be chosen to depict as many of the important capitalized words of the twentieth-century, post-industrialized world as possible. The ambition to grasp, portray, satirize, and dissect on a scale as broad as this is admirable. However, the places where McCain’s vision is particularly illuminative occur when she brings us some unusual suspects from modern civilization, as in the book’s title piece:

The big, big try of the jet getting off the ground. All too soon those mean vocal shakes; too far the original itinerary; soon confusing signals at astonishing speeds, destination moon. The ear focused on the smooth and brutal “I” emptying out, and the thousand fine lines cloaking the obvious: one line only, ten items or less, one mind split over the pros and cons, nine reasons supporting the dignity of exile. Climbing over the city, swinging out above the sea, fragmented only when interrupted by thought.

Moments like these—when the “program” to analyze a bankrupt culture is set aside for determined flashes of what cannot be readily related, dripping with cultural significance or intellectual cliché—provide the most interesting and engaging views of life. The energy spent in debunking or refurbishing the high-brow conceits and cornerstones of civilization don’t yield as much of a “charge” as when McCain lights the fuse to more unexpected moments, situations, or objects.

Given the framework of universe and narrator/observer rushing by each other, McCain oddly chooses to deliver each piece with a very simple syntactic and rhythmic structure. While the piling up of short, direct, and non-complex sentences does echo the pell-mell rush of the universe and narrator, its repetitive use over the six-dozen-plus pieces renders this helter-skelter world dulling at times. This might not seem a great shortcoming if it weren’t coupled with an emotional stance of the narrator/observer which portrays more attitude than emotion itself, creating a two-dimensional representation. But it’s McCain’s occasional explosions of brilliance that give rise to the belief that she could consistently build a three-dimensional representation by playing more with the mix and making the form, approach, and stance less static.

The ultimate horizon of *Tilt*’s ambitious scope makes one expect great things. On the whole, McCain’s wider vision and fearlessness in tackling the “grand scale” holds much promise in the future as can be portended in her piece “Direction”:

In a forest of bending and swaying forms, a girl could not find her way. She camped out on a jagged bluff. She preferred to live in her own little words, but people were everywhere. She had sympathy for the camera that panned aimlessly in the bushes. Finally alone, she bedded down on a knoll of pine cones and dreamed about the goat boy. She wrapped her bag around him and they entered the zone together. He gave her a present: this cone. They ate berries and caught bees in mason jars. For days they lived quietly, counting backwards. Then he said, it’s time for some new faces. She refused to move when he tried to squeeze by. Then she was awake. There was plenty of elbowroom left in her universe, her words. Yet somehow she knew that she wasn’t the only lost girl who believed in ending up where you began.

It's a big universe, full of "elbowroom" where writers, such as McCain, bring us the hope for unexpected gifts.

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