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Sarah Lawall

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David Kopf, *The World Historian as Poet*. Foreword by Jane Colville Betts. St. Cloud, Minnesota: North Star Press, 2006.

In this book of evocative personal verse, historian David Kopf has ventured into a new medium to illuminate aspects of historical meaning that are not, he feels, accessible through traditional scholarship. It is not the first time that Kopf has turned to creative writing to explore alternate views. In a novel, *Scratches on the Mind of Kali* (1995), he described the intertwined political ideologies of South Asia during the 1971 war between India and Pakistan. His historian's style has evolved from more traditional historiography to new modes of expression, just as his historical perspective has broadened from a specialized focus on modern Indian history in *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (1969) to a comparative approach that includes broader studies of Asian civilization, studies of genocide and total war in the twentieth century, and--underlying them all--the interactions of world history. Through all these changes, the mission is historical:

in this volume, for example, poetry is seen not as an end in itself but as a tool to “transcend the often rigid confines of objective methodology and historiography, thus liberating and enlightening our perspective about crucial ideas on the meaning of historical events” (viii). It is reasonable to ask how this transcendence is achieved, and how it brings about a fuller sense of history.

These poems are conceived throughout as smaller, “succinct” renderings of longer journal entries with their remembered scenes and ideas, or as poetic condensations of more extended prose arguments. Kopf is explicit about his transformation of an initial “long-winded impressionable narrative” into a more “compact, precise expression of the idea intended” (9) or “a more succinct expression of the main thought” (11). “This succinct expression of an idea is how I came to define the poetry I was writing,” he adds (9). For longer, more meditative poems, he describes his procedure as “amassing data, writing historical prose, then altering the expression to render it more compact and precise but without changing the meaning” (87). Poetry, thus, is the rendering of an extended “idea” or “main thought” in more compact and striking form. Kopf’s chosen form is free verse with short lines and a preponderance of images--a modern style stemming in America from early twentieth-century Imagism--and he mentions being influenced in 1950 by William Carlos Williams (19). His use of imagery contrasts significantly, however, with the Imagists’ succinct, impersonal evocations of external reality. (Contrast Ezra Pound’s complete description of a subway station: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough.”) Although Kopf offers a number of striking individual images, their function is generally to provide a setting for short narrative scenes that convey a personalized “main thought.”

Such scenes differ in focus, but they all filter historical reality through private memories and associations. Kopf supplies geographic settings that reflect his global travels, and he dates each title as if a journal entry, whether “The Man Who Chased Sunsets with His Camera, 1971,” “Episode on the Bangladeshi Riviera, 1976,” “On Turning Fifty, 1980,” or “Icelandic Images, 1997.” Each poem has a short prose preface that situates the scene and often interprets the text. In the retrospective “April in Paris, 1963,” the preface notes that “since we change historically as everything else does, each return to Paris reveals some aspect of the change” (59). Images in “Iran, 1963” (“Black gold / has built / a city of bourgeois palaces... the Shah / physician of his people”) follow an explanation that “this poem constitutes my effort at integrating a historic vision of Iran, both Islamic and classical, with a renaissance view of its future as imbibing the modernistic spirit but without losing its cultural identity” (56). Prophetic vision (“The glories / of ancient Persia / may well be / Iran’s guide / to a new identity”) (58) may not always be realized, but there is more at stake than success or failure. The scene itself expresses contemporary cultural currents (including the onlooker’s perspective), and survives as one of many world views to be accessed in a multidimensional history. Such a history is Kopf’s goal: he sees poetry as “a valid dimension in our deepening study of world history” (viii) and he contributes to it autobiographical poems set in diverse cultural contexts. In short, the “world historian as poet” is also, even primarily, the poet as world historian.

The volume is organized in four sections, each with its own chronology: “Catalogue of Impressionable Experiences” (7-40), “Cultural Insights and Images” (41-79), “World History and the Philosophy of Life” (81-109), and “The Romantic Lover and His Conversion to the Church of Eros” (111-139). Although themes overlap between sections, there is a general

movement from localized impressions to more meditative accounts and subsequently to broader perspectives on life, culture and erotic love. Autobiography and history are fused: Kopf's depictions of people and places are colored by his own insights and judgment, and the poems describing his individual development are linked to various travel sites ("Thoughts of Death and Dying on a Rhone River Cruise, 2003"; "A Promenade with My Love in a Bangladeshi Jungle, 1975") and cultural influences ("Reverence for the Divine Woman as a Multi-Faceted Goddess, 1979"; "Maya Leads Me By the Nose, 1987"). As both historian and autobiographer, he is intrigued by the changes in his point of view. The preface to "Globalization in Southeast Asia, 1962 (1963)" contrasts "how much I appreciated the process then as against my present attitude" (47)--his present attitude being displayed in numerous poems including "Mazatlan, 2001" ("The greatest casualty / is the Mexican culture /... in this Disneyland / of globalization") (77) and "Milan in the Age of Globalization, 2003" ("avenues and alleys / littered / with plastic garbage") (75). These descriptions are not so much "occasional" poems as conscious attempts to convey historical significance, an intention Kopf makes clear in the preface to "Taj Mahal: Visit to a Martyr's Tomb, 1980." Although he had visited the monument before, he says, "I never thought about a poetic effort to assess it historically, until after the visit with my son and daughter" (71).

Kopf's dismay at the progress of modern globalization is fueled by respect for nineteenth-century Orientalist scholars, whose historical research served to "rescue civilization / from the black hole / of oblivion" ("Orientalism, 1969") (90). Sir William Jones's linguistic discoveries made him "India's Petrarch" ("Sir William Jones and the Positive Side of British Colonialism, 1967") (88), and the golden age of Angkor was "lost completely until the French period of

colonial rule” (“Angkor and Humanity’s Fate Written on the Sands of Penang, 1971) (91). The modern era has no such giants; worse, it is the graveyard of nineteenth-century ideas. In “An Obscure Obituary Notice: Our Century as a Burial Ground, 1999), Kopf asks “Ought we not plant / a flower of reverence / in honor of / nineteenth-century genius... ?” (104). The twentieth century offers instead “The Educational Impact of Auschwitz, 2004” and “War and Genocide Across the Border in Bangladesh, 1971”; the future brings only polluted air and colorless leaves that “drift helplessly / in the sterile winds / of ‘progress’” (“Looking Ahead to an Afternoon in the Global Year, 2050 A.D.) (109). It is a somber picture, suggesting that history is on a downward path and the heights of civilization whose recovery Kopf celebrates in “Orientalism” will not be seen again. Some consolation may be found in mystic philosophy, such as the Upanishads he recommends to his son (“Sharing with Walter the Wisdom of the Upanishads, 2002”). Among later poems, “Thoughts of Death and Dying on a Rhone River Cruise, 2003” and “Reaction to Those Dying Around Me, 2005” muse openly about cyclical patterns of existence, or about human mortality and the illusions of worldliness.

Erotic love is a similar consolation, its rapture celebrated in religious terms from the prayed-for “joyful deliverance” in “Havana, 1949 B.C. [Before Castro]” (16) to his conversion to the church of Eros. The women he loves are divine, godlike: “You, loving creature, / are my woman / partaking in godliness / and giving meaning / to existence” (“Confessions of an Eighteen-Year-Old Romantic, 1948”) (115). Poems in the last section cover a series of relationships with women from Kopf’s loss of virginity in 1948 (“First Poem of Loving Encounters with Susan, 1948”) to the penultimate “My Chinese Woman of the World, 2004.” Throughout, love exists as an antidote to despair in “From Bangladesh to Bennington

(Paradise Regained), 1975,” where the “transcendence / of warped and senseless existence / as two mystics embrace” (120) contrasts with the chill weather and political misery of the outside world. (The poet’s lover comes from Bennington; they are currently in Bangladesh, where a military coup that year had assassinated the president and imprisoned his ministers.) A similar disjunction of inner and outer worlds exists in “The Church of Eros, 1975,” whose invitation to rapture (“Dearest, / fear not / being consumed / by love”) is prefaced by a prose description of the unstable political situation. The poet’s concluding advice to his beloved is to “Take heart / in the mansion of eros, / which is / the true church / of life everlasting” (122).

There is an odd, yet familiar angle to this poetry about love. Throughout, the voice is that of an historian assessing his own and others’ experience. Kopf is sympathetic to women, both individually and culturally: he considers Shah Jahan’s wife a martyr for having given birth fourteen times in fifteen years and asks a hypothetical Islamic woman “Are you imprisoned, dear lady, / in a tower / of social decadence?” (“Muslim Woman, 1975”) (126). Yet his manner of speech also reveals personal preoccupations: he imagines the shah’s wife restored by white marble to the “state of unmolested virgin” (“Taj Mahal...”) (71) (compare his “Falling in love / restores my virginity” [“Love and Virginity, 2001”] [134]). No matter how intimate the occasion, the loved one exists at a distance, described and interpreted through the poet’s eyes and needs. “In your eyes / I see also / mirrored / the spiritual passion / of the Lord Krishna,” he remarks in “A Promenade with My Love in a Bangladeshi Jungle, 1975” (123), and later those same eyes “search out / the hidden aesthetic / underlying / the mysterious forces / of nature” (124). This erotic rapture is not the shared intimacy described by, for example, the French poet Paul Éluard when--separated from his lover--he doesn’t

know “which one of us is absent.” In “A Promenade with My Love,” the poet dominates all imagery, and he employs a curiously one-sided metaphor for sensual love: “All mount / the mare of pleasure” (123). Perhaps it is appropriate that the last poem in “The Romantic Lover and His Conversion to the Church of Eros” does not address a living woman but is an “Ode to the Blue and White Football Jersey, 2004” and the way it “became a multi-purpose / wrap-a-round / for a wandering academic” (139).

The World Historian as Poet offers a series of insights and impressions stemming from Kopf’s global travels and meditations on life and culture. Poetry and fiction, he suggests, ask us to think differently about human experience; they propose alternate views of history that are unavailable through objective research. It is not clear, however, that poetic form by itself fills that role. In this volume, the alternate world views are rendered not through poetic techniques but primarily through an autobiographical format that imposes its own priorities and vision. They might be compared to the photographs taken by nineteenth-century travelers in Africa and India who recorded scenes of contemporary life and, in so doing, represented also their own views and cultural conventions. The “world historian as poet” is inescapably part of history, and his poems depict, on a larger scale, himself as part of the whole pattern.

Sarah Lawall