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TEXT review

‘Where it ends is where it starts’: Tracing the beginning through the end in the language of Mann and Mossammaparast

review by Madhupriya Roy Chowdhury



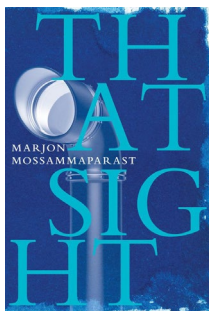
Rachel Mann

A Kingdom of Love

Carcenet, Manchester 2019

ISBN: 978 1 784108 57 1

Pb 72pp GBP8.99



Marjon Mossammaparast

That Sight

Cordite Publishing, Carlton South VIC 2018

ISBN: 9780648056881

Pb 79pp AUD20.00

Every act of creation is first an act of destruction
—Pablo Picasso (in Rosseau 2014: 17)

For both Mann and Mossammaparast, a post-structuralist approach of thought embodiment is evident as they try and break away from the patriarchal construct of language. Mann's ontological reflections in her poems seem to be an attempt to strip spiritual and religious practices of their associations with 'maleness'; God is seen as an intimate spiritual experience of the woman:

Why should I not have lovers too?
Which is to say, when no one else
Comes near, God will have to do. (Mann 10)

Propositions of Cixous and Kristeva for *écriture féminine* are recalled through the suggestive imagery in the following lines:

We learn the world, the first world
Of love and drool and sweet milk
Through lips. (Mann 6)

The search for a unique form of writing is tacitly expressed through Mann's ontological statements, repetition of words, and different voices:

I am wracked by assertions:
God is *not* a name,
God is Love, God is, God *is*. (Mann 11)

An attendant pours tea, hands me bacon
In a roll. South, south, deeper into territory,
'*This is England*', who can spot my fakery? (Mann 28)

Mossammaparast's quest is overt, stated through the use of caesura bars, gaps between clusters of text, overlapping words, cancelled words and unfinished words which explore the nature of being: 'Nature is full of ~~Beauty~~, Truth, Awfulness, ~~Calm~~.' (Mossammaparast 53), are symbolic of representation: tossing the reader into the ebb and flow of the sea to rest on the enchantment of words in *That Sight* – 'inbred | intuit | in | involuntary' (Mossammaparast 71) and creating skate marks on slippery ground signifying a non - linear narrative movement in 'Act I – At the dove and Olive' of 'Wordsworth Wonders' which is written in the layout of a play:

In their dreams

I will be \ skating // skating \ skating // \\\ my silent figure 8s
On Rydal Water, splishing splashing, wearing a hat.

// \ \ // \ \ // \ \ //

\ \ // \

Charlotte is on the moss slipping and slipping. (Mossammaparast 52)

Language is rendered a patriarchal medium:

women are hanged with hyphens,
strapped with adjectives, quietly like the countdown of a bomb. (Mossammaparast 35)

The use of foreign language serves to suspend the reader into foreign domains of representation, projecting the reader into the lacuna of obstructed comprehension by breaking away from the conventional monolingual and predictable character of a text:

Yet to find one's final form,
Surely that's the meaning

Of *spes contra spem*? (Mann 17)

٤ بابا آب نداد.

(Mossammaparast 9)

Along with the scriptural essence of their poetry built through the allusions to theological texts and Greek myths, the notions of creation of language, dictates of inscription, the act of writing and deconstruction are worked into mythical motifs giving the texts a dynamic character, as they move from the genesis of thought to the death of the author becoming a metaphor of that process, and operate interchangeably between the concepts of the traditional God and Barthes' theory of the 'Author – God' (Barthes nd). A sequence of the creative process can be traced as follows:

The birth of thought:

He dreams of milk and drool,
Of bitter birth, brush of prayer on lips – (Mann 9)

The effort to formulate language, the understanding of phonology, morphology and syntax:

Before holy or righteous, before the Law,
Before sound was distilled (so many crossings-out)
Into *bet, aleph, niqqud*, before all that: Song.

Oh, to taste fricatives – damp from lip and palate –
Dental trills, the Spirit chewed by teeth,
Ejected from lungs, an offering. (Mann 8)

The realization of the shifting nature of reality, of signs, signifier and signified:

I'm an infant, I don't know what things are called. (Mossammaparast 12)

Knowledge of association, the cognitive process of assimilation, the idea of art imitating nature:

Trick is to associate the names with something you see in reality,
not woman. (Mossammaparast 49)

The effort to give shape to thought, selection of appropriate words:

I try to form prayer's capital word
On my tongue. O sweet imagination
Give it shape enough! *Love!* (Mann 4)

The act of writing and representation:

Oh, that my words were now written!
Oh, that they were printed in a book!
That they were graven with an iron pen
And lead, for ever in the rock! (Mann 31)

The conceived work of art given shape and form, the published book:

Children's stories in Farsi commence with the refrain
There was one, there wasn't one
Apart from God, there was no-one
akin to that first line of fairytales, *Once upon a time*. (Mossammaparast 10)

Questioning the author's intended meaning, understanding and conceptualizing the narrative in terms of personal experience:

But what is God
if not the question of transposition? (Mossammaparast 57)

The act of deconstruction:

I take God apart like an artform. (Mossammaparast 3)

The death of the author, the loss of original meaning, reader response, the birth of new and shifting interpretations of the book or written words:

but the book is nowhere on Google nor in my hands.
It has fallen through a gap between the internet and God (Mossammaparast 10)

An example of intertextuality is seen in the influence of Wittgenstein's philosophy of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 2001): words borrowed by both writers to formulate the ethereal nature of existence mirrored through the structure of their compositions:

If the world is all that is the case,
If it is the totality of facts, not of things,
What then of prayer? (Mann 12)

*The right hand and the left hand are in fact congruent.
It is irrelevant that they cannot be made to coincide.* (Mossammaparast 30)

The Biblical allusions, the concepts of God and spirituality are evoked through and interwoven with organic imagery and the representation of the body – a feature instrumental in making their poetry loyal to the tropes of ecofeminism; the female body merges with nature and earth: 'The tree is the woman lifting her song, blossoms the heart of a woman' (Mossammaparast 35), the woman and the country acquire aspects of a caring and nurturing mother – 'Australia is a big mother.' (Mossammaparast 14), 'Mamucium: breast place, mother, Eve' (Mann 29), woman and land is exploited by men:

It was good enough for explorers,
Thrusting flags into virgin land.
For Adam too. (Mann 55)

Rachel Carson's love for the environment and knowledge of the origins of life forms is shared by both Mann and Mossammaparast and demonstrated in their poems through descriptions of different ecosystems: 'Coral can't be solitary' (Mossammaparast 47) and a variety of animals: 'the otter the doe the spotted giraffe' (Mossammaparast 72); which when framed with in their experiences act as a distancing technique for the reader and subtly triggers an urgency to actively preserve the environment:

All life was water once.
Perhaps I'll travel home,
relearn the trick of gills, fin and scale. (Mann 56)

Climates change longitudinally. The Kalahari expands.
Cows belch in simulation as earth digests into seas,
off the coast of California. (Mossammaparast 6)

Time progresses from beginning through end in a circular motion, being born from expiry; it is a connatural phenomenon of the universe, sometimes standing still: 'there is no sunrise or sunset, there is only our rotation.' (Mossammaparast 40) and sometimes sweeping the pasts, presents and futures of the earth along with it:

We've come to measure

The distance between here and there, past and now
From wood to village, time as geography –
Days measured in inches, months in yards gained,

a decade in how long it took to plot the remains,
the ploughman surveys the field's chalk and bone
harvest. (Mann 35)

In this city the end is in the beginning, the sun in the split atom. (Mossammaparast 35)

The mention of various places and the imaginative re-creation of landscapes appeal to the senses of the readers and fix their minds in familiar and unfamiliar settings. The places are connected with the sensations of their historical pasts; the present and the past exist together in the memories of the land with a desire for justice and resurrection:

Vast digital boards blaze,
Sheffield, Stockport, Staines,
So many destinations,

Is this Europe? Wartime?
Bags dragged, whole lives. (Mann 48)

Here is London's working man under the shadow of Nelson,
who crowds in from all over the world, like you,
in this (really quite perverse) scramble for our fountain
perennially flowing, which is the Empire
alive (underneath) with all her billions, jewels
(and whatever does not glow immediately to the eye),
The perfect loot of lost worlds lost again! –
still carrying the sense from perfume to piss. (Mossammaparast 33)

However, the reading of their poetry is not complete without the consideration of the perspectives of autobiography and memory. The sense of culpability in 'Accept my body as transgression' (Mann 13), the reference to Biblical characters with a history of disobedience such as David and Jonah, the recollection of Persephone and Ezekiel symbolic of suffering innocents and mentions of hospitals and disease must be read in the light of Mann's record of her personal experiences in *Dazzling Darkness: Gender, Sexuality, Illness and God* (Mann 2012). Similarly, for Mossammaparast, the experience of being a refugee forms the understanding of the earth and mother as synonymous: 'Her mother was pressed between the

Persian carpet and the roof' (Mossammaparast 28). It is also important to note her travel experiences and the portraits of the American professor, the mother, the grandmother, Nasrin, Rosaria and Frank which seem to be products of memory and imagination and look at them from the standpoint of Mossammaparast's life.

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