

Divine Blue Light (for John Coltrane), Will Alexander (City Lights)

Like saxophonist John Coltrane, who this book is dedicated to, Will Alexander improvises his way through noise and chaos to explore the furthest reaches of his source material and thought process. And sometimes, although I love the late music of Coltrane, I can't but help be reminded of Miles Davis' retort in response to Coltrane's extended soloing: 'Why don't you try taking the horn out of your mouth?'

The contradiction is that the lengthier poems here are the most successful, as they catch the reader up in extended riffs of 'Language / as scaled erisma / as amplification that burns' with energy, confusion and the ghost of incantatory poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Gil Scott Heron or The Last Poets whilst also drawing on the bewildering radical politics and mysticism of black artists such as Sun Ra, Anthony Braxton and Amiri Baraka.

Shorter poems, such as 'Under Corporate Worship, reproduced here in its entirety, don't cut it for me:

Sunday
being elliptically feigned
tautological circumference

There's not enough of it for it to establish a sound pattern or concept. The long works are often even more abstract (I hesitate to use that word, because of course, words always carry meaning[s], even when they are decontextualised or syntax is disrupted) but over a few pages one can start to grasp at 'poetic current / not as inordinate savagery / but as refined alchemical emblem' which works towards 'mystical commencement'.

Alexander's strength, beyond a clear freewheeling delight in language itself, is to reinvent or at least discuss spirituality by combining the vocabularies and ideas of cartography, science, nature and rhizomics, signs and symbols:

I come not to ascribe or assassinate trans-regulation or intent
but to subsist by vibration
by hollow or vibrational design

[...]

therefore
I articulate through fog

with the aim 'to burn away the drought within thinking'.

It is a strange read, that mostly I can only start to apprehend; these are poems that grasp at enlightenment and imagery outside my experience or imagination. What is 'expanded helipause'? What is the meaning or symbolism of 'suns appearing above suns / ignited via the blue fragmentation that is grace'? Does the poet really partake in the 'Phantom Inter-Dimensional Activity' which is the title of one of his texts?

Sun Ra's Arkestra would often dress in sci-fi versions of Egyptian robes, and appropriate both gospel and mystical texts and tunes within their music; their leader himself claimed to have been born on Jupiter before travelling through time and space to Earth. Many critics argued then and now that this was a kind of diversion tactic: critics and audiences were so busy being mystified by the weirdness of the visuals and the music that they forgot the band were Afro-Americans intent on fighting racism and injustice.

This mix of race, technology, and metaphysics is often known as Afrofuturism. Alexander's mix of mystical aspiration and ability to 'blaze as spectral reasoning' sits squarely in this lineage, 'being praxis that magically emanates and heightens the zero field'. It is a challenging and exciting read

that insists on startling & consequential contour
so higher emptiness concurs
not unlike a rhetoric that swarms with declivitous capacity
having an explosively strange assessment of itself

This is poetry as thought, as visionary experience, as stormy epiphany and epiphanic storm, 'where power evinces the limitless / the arcane appellation of itself', in 'realms where the mind fails to match itself'. It is a generous, bewildering outpouring of language and ideas, an echo of possibilities, explanations and declamation: raw, militant, energising poetry, 'perhaps a deafening colloquy by quarrel'.

Rupert Loydell

(611 words)