

European Relations

By George Fitzpatrick

Book Review:

New European Poets, edited by
Wayne Miller and Kevin Prufer.
Graywolf Press, 2008.



In addition to the usual summer enjoyments (ice cream, loafing by the lake), I had the pleasure this year of entertaining visitors from abroad, old friends from Switzerland and cousins from Spain. It was fun to catch up; chatting with my European companions reminded me that there is a whole world “over there.” I fed hungrily on the energy and perspectives brought by my guests, and suddenly, poignantly, I wished I could see more of them. I love their smiles and frowns. Really, I love their anger—it is so strange!—as well as their humor, so carefully constructed in near-perfect English. It has been too long since my last visit to Europe, and they chided me for it: “You will forget something!”

New European Poets rose to the top of my summer reading list as soon as I saw it. It would feed my hunger for new ideas, new poems, new energy and perspectives, and at the same time, I hoped, it would help me remember my friends.

According to editors Wayne Miller and Kevin Prufer, the purpose of *New European Poets* is to put us back in communication with a Europe we have turned away from—politically, culturally and, of course, poetically—and to catch sight of its poetic development in recent decades. The book assumes, rightly, I think, that American poetry readers are out of touch with Europe and need to reconnect. While the editors do not intend the anthology to be fully comprehensive (it’s big, though, representing 43 countries and 290 poets), they hope to inspire more translation and even possibly to uncover the next Miłosz, Akhmatova, or García Lorca.

General editors Miller and Pruffer had the aid of 22 regional editors and a large choir of translators, including some stars—John Ashbery, Marilyn Hacker, Charles Simic, Franz Wright, and young Valzhyna Mort—satisfying our American love of celebrities. Represented poets are of current stock, limited to those who published their first book after 1970; thus many of the poems are new translations into English, and many of the poets are here published for the first time in the United States. Organized as a “tour of Europe,” starting on the Iberian peninsula and wandering more or less counterclockwise around the continent to end in the UK and Ireland, the book tends to group language families and to define regions with cultural and historical affinities (or antipathies, sometimes). The arrangement, along with the multitude of contributors, translators and editors, succeeds in creating a sense of broadness, representing the great sweep of European poetry and poetics.

Though I wouldn't call it “exhilarating” or “kaleidoscopic,” as the jacket and introduction gush—the poems are new, not alien—the book is enjoyable and energetic. The poems are certainly very good, and there is plenty of variety. One of my favorites is an untitled piece by Victar Shalkevich (Belarus): “I want to tell you what speaks to me most— // My little neighbor, the son of village drunkards,” a bright boy who writes poetry every night. The boy may not be one of the greats, “but I tell you,” Shalkevich says, “we will hear of him one day!” On that, the poet concludes with touching generosity and hope, dwelling on thoughts of the boy, and so ends, “the difficult evening / in our immeasurable Belarus.” It reminds me of Rilke, as does “City of the Missing” by Rui Pires Cabral (Portugal):

There were lots of times I didn't love Lisbon,
didn't know how to love her at dusk
on a work day, when she was used up,
slow and dirty, and
the deep-set sorrow of the world,
my first and most
precocious intuition, traveled,
lights on, in the almost empty buses.

These poems are forlorn, like Rilke's blowing leaves on a lonely night, but not sentimental.

While some of the poems explore patriotic or national concerns, many others are personal, such as "The Riverbed" by Vona Groarke (Republic of Ireland) in which we hear the voice of a drowned lover:

. . . I have silverweed, speedwell, rue,
 where once I had his arms beneath me.
 His body may come as his body has gone—
 and the marl will close over again.

Where are your silverweed, your speedwell now?
 They have all gone under the water.
 Where is your face in the river now?
 Drifting upstream to the moon.

This is beautiful, rhythmic, sad. Still other poems are metaphysical—"Being came like a kiss from a stun gun" (Cornelius Jakhelln, Norway)—or funny, such as "Takeaway" by Valérie Rouzeau (France) in which axel grease "Follows you everywhere even to bed / Ruins your life." And there is the droll title by Jozef Urban (Slovakia): "I Blow My Nose Inartistically." Then the anger. I don't mean cursing and swearing, which pepper the book only lightly, but the sudden, surreal outburst: "In the church's slaughterhouses / we are transformed / into vultures" (Anise Koltz, Luxembourg). The metaphor, the casual certainty of the declaration, and the intellectual venom fascinate me—and keep me turning pages. Reading *New European Poets* is like discovering a dozen new literary journals, all of high standard, among which lurk, possibly, the next great poets of Europe.

For my own part, as a poet, I am happy to have found some interesting new reading, more poetic possibilities, and a bigger world. I'll find a way to bring *New European Poets* into the classroom with me. I think it is needed there. In the meantime, I'll make a more private, personal use of the book, remembering my relations in, and relation to, Europe.