

A Work of Worlds and Words. A Review of Paul Dresman, *In the River of My Sleep*. El sur es América, 2023, 182 pp. ISBN: 978-1736178492.

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Paul Dresman has infused this poetry book with great vistas in which his whole life unfolds in front of our very eyes, presenting and sharing with his readers a lifetime experience that will resonate with them for a long time when thinking about California and the Western seaboard of the United States. The journey begins in Los Angeles, California and finishes in Eugene, Oregon, and it ranges from the nineteen fifties to our very decade in the twenty-first century. From his locus of enunciation, Dresman projects his exploration to China, Mexico, Vietnam, Europe, South America, seeing the Other not only as an equal, but as an extraordinary partner within the geographical and ideological enigmas of our current world rife with disenfranchisement and shallowness.

Dresman endorses Modernist poetry from different authors from the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Ezra Pound, for instance, utilizing German, Spanish, Chinese... He constantly makes reference to other languages and cultures of the world: from “Kai-yu Hsü [...] a bright scholar, professor, poet, translator and literary and political commentator” (111) to “various cantinas around the *mercado*” (133).

Like Rexroth before him, Dresman proposes a collage of classical and popular cultural referents in lines such as: “A Chinese painting of the Song or Ming. / They say, An Author? Like Harry Potter?” (133). He takes seriously the teachings of the main poets of the Modernist tradition, including the interest for poetry and poetic forms in languages other than English. As an expression of the dark side of the fifties and under the influence of Imagist poetry, the Beat generation was also an important referent in Dresman’s work. His keen political consciousness, the acute feeling of society’s wrongdoing, and the intensity of some passages pervade some of Dresman’s texts. The work of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac resonate in them:

I shared an apartment in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, San Francisco in 1967. My room was on the rear of the apartment on the fourth floor [...] I was a student who had applied to become conscientious objector, but I wanted to be a poet, too, so the room often had an air of superficial creativity [...] (85)

We cannot blame him; he was a young adult in San Francisco in 1967. In his powerful voyage in time and space, Dresman alternates narrative and verse poetry, to create a more comprehensive effect on the reader:

Nobody could change the verdict against Wallace Berman. He was guilty of blasphemy, juxtaposing naked ladies and religious icons. It was the Sixth patriarch of Ch’an Buddhism who tore apart the scriptures. Wake up! I was like

Sinead O'Connor ripping a picture of the Pope on Saturday night truly alive
-enlightening! In lightning! Wallace Berman was guilty of high-altitude flying
and a low consensus with preying.

He has been caught on the wing
with angels

and other visions
seen in Semina

his magazine,
‘the seed,’
visions of peyote
of God and Gabriel
trumpeting golden songs,
flying above and ahead. (37)

This approach bring us back to *Paterson* (1948–58) by William Carlos Williams, where Williams also uses this dual form structure, both prose and poetry in the poem “Everybody has roots”, for instance. As we can see, Paul Dresman’s poetry is anchored in the vital US poetic tradition of the twentieth century, enriching himself with its teachings pushing his poems to a new level. One life, all lives.

In *In the River of My Sleep* Dresman navigates, section by section, from his early experiences and insights into a more complex view of metaphysical and sociological insights which delivers alternate views of success and failure. That is how Dresman explores the West Coast and the imperialist outlook of the US in the second half of the twentieth century, with its constant disputes with the rest of the world. Dresman take us from his Beach Boys’ years, when he experienced California in the late fifties and early sixties from his family home, to the world of his adult’s years as he traveled through Asia,

including key dives into Taoist and Zen conceptions to understand life and the “material” world.

In parallel to his life, in his journey, Paul Dresman moves from sunny California in the fifties, to the sixties, with the assassinations of JFK, MLK, Malcolm X, RK, the Vietnam War, Chile’s 9/11 in 1973, Nixon’s Watergate, the CIA Golden Triangle, to rock and roll and disco ecstasies of the eighties. In a similar fashion to William Carlos Williams, Dresman observes and denounces the social struggles of his time, speaking intelligently and emphatically about Mexican servants and fallen Native Americans.

Paul Dresman dabbles in Zen views in his social critique of empire; he speaks sometimes about ornithology and sunsets, he looks at a world that is in the process of undeniable disintegration even as he utters it. A seizure that comes as much from the outside world as from the position of the observing poet, that is also disintegrating as he articulates his memories. His awareness as a young adult takes him to East L.A., where he perceives and articulates with sharp consciousness, the life of the disenfranchised in the “Land of the Free,” for example in “Enforcement”:

A friend went full Chicano, dropped out
into the barrio, blond waterfall, lowered Chevy-
a potent of recognitions ahead -he was light years
in front of the rest of us, his fall
from status was either courageous
or languid acquiescence, bowing down
to the way of water
without resistance.
Maybe he was right.
In the barrio, Jimtown, the shacks sprawled
along the river -maids, gardeners -help
that wasn’t allowed to live inside

Whittier's city limits. Once a week,
Jimtown's denizens
could swim in the city plunge -it was called
"International Day",
But who were the interlopers?
Who were the natives? (43)

This poetic journey encompasses the intimacies of humanity in the development of personal autonomy. The improbable experiences of a child growing up in Los Angeles, at the center of the world of entertainment, gave Dresman a particular perspective, each experience at a time, and it helped him put many dots together, figuring out the other side of American success: discrimination, racism, prejudice, and war. With his manifold observations Dresman walks the path of a university literature professor and as a significant poet of his generation.

The epic journey of *In the River of My Sleep* takes the reader from the beginning of his relationship with the world, through language and early social experiences in Southern California, to his adult professional life as he returns to the world of domestic intimacy, in Eugene, where he taught literature for many years at the English Department at the University of Oregon, where I met him. This book works as a world in itself. It is a self-contained universe where we can find information, poetry, and humanity sewn in a very inspired and conceived way where the formal platform and the meaning thread go hand in hand from the beginning to the end. He opens Pandora's box in L.A. and closes it with a potent lyrical poem dedicated to Chris, his beloved wife, as a meditation on daily life and its future end, let's hear a fragment:

For Chris

We eat peaches packed-in from the valley
go for a walk along the water,
hurl dark pits as far as we can. I grab a stray log
thinking ahead to tonight's fire -how did it ever
get all the way up here (...)
I am falling in love with her all over again, the woman
I brought here forty years ago. (189)

This acknowledgement of love after forty years closes the journey of this chief American poet. We feel the air of his farewell and we get a bit dizzy with it, a bit silent and in awe to see how a human life, after seeing and dialoging with his context curves down to the simple origin of things, to unpretentious daily love as the most profound connection that beings can experience in the mysterious world we involuntarily inhabit.

This poetry collection is relevant for its biographic content and its lucid form. It is also significant for coming to life at a time of great global turmoil and false expectations, the uncertain world we all inhabit. It is definitely a great reading for everyone, from students to poets, and even more, for those of us that had the fortune of meeting and befriending Paul. The mark, the traces that this deep American voice is writing in the sky will remain in the North American literary tradition and will inform generations of poets and readers for years to come.

Works Cited

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