

Christopher Middleton | portraits

edited by W. Martin

photo by John Anderson



Introduction

The idea for this special section on Christopher Middleton was born of a conversation with August Kleinzahler following a reading in Chicago a few years ago. We agreed that the lack of wider recognition of Middleton's work was unfortunate and needed to be redressed. This selection of contributions is meant as a step in that direction.

Like that of all of the contributors here, my connection to Middleton is a personal one; he was my teacher for two years at the University of Texas. It was through him that I learned to read Hölderlin, the French and Russian Symbolists, Plato of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, and above all to appreciate the poetic power even of discursive language. Before moving to Austin I knew of him as a translator of German poetry and of the *Andalusian Songs*. Soon after, I read his translations of Robert Walser and of Hölderlin and Mörike as well as the essays collected in *Bolshevism and Art*. Only later did I arrive at his poetry and short prose, books like *Pataxanadu*, *Nonsequences*, *Our Flowers & Nice Bones*, and *In the Mirror of the Eighth King*. Prior to embarking on this project I was predominantly interested in Middleton's prose, excited by its exact and abundant descriptive imagination and charged, constellatory syntax. Reading it now, I am often aware of an image of his handwriting hovering in the back of my mind, as clear, nimble, and steady as his diction, which I remember from photocopied notes he would distribute in class—of an idea he might have had that morning on Mallarmé, for instance, or an exposition of the varying meter of Alcaic or Sapphic stanzas—and which I am always happy to encounter again in his letters. Part of my enthusiasm for the contributions collected here is that they have directed my attention back to Middleton's poetry. There, poised on the threshold of the quotidian and the numinous, reconciling differences between this world and that, is a "gaze exploring all without distress" and a voice impressively alive.

Part tribute, part critical appreciation, this selection comprises a variety of contributions, essays, visual art, poems, and part of an interview, reflecting or inspired by Christopher Middleton. It was not

at all clear at the beginning how these pieces once solicited would land or fit together; but patterns among them can be discerned. Middleton's "Retrospective Sketch," prepared for this issue, provides a definitive introduction to his biography and career. The two prose pieces that follow indicate the development of a contrapuntal *leitmotif* running through his diverse work and thought. The brief "A Feuilleton: Reinventing the Madeleine?," published here for the first time, is a meditation on the "dissynchronized unison" that is a life, and provides as succinct and potent a formulation as any I know of art's meaning for life. The play of heterophony and melody that Middleton describes there returns, external now, in a piece from his 1992 book *The Balcony Tree*, "The Turkish Rooftops," as the shimmering contradiction of "two musics, one dense, one transparent" heard on a visit to the Turkish countryside, and is recast later as the fluctuation of "*effervescence* and *distillation*" in his *Palavers* with Marius Kociejowski, recently published by Shearsman Books in England and excerpts of which are graciously provided here. This consideration of counterpoint is pursued further and in a new direction in two recent poems by Middleton, "Waiting For Harvest Moon" and "The Dead Friends," which travel, at different velocities, a path described in his compelling essay "On The Apotropaic Element in Poetry," which readers can find in *PN Review* 143 (2002). In that essay, among other things Middleton adduces from the aural mimetism of verbal art its potential to avert evil—by which is meant all manner of degradation of the spirit—by freeing the imagination to experience alterity through synthesis. The idea is expressed again in the poem:

No again. A body designs to be all in one.
Ashes are illuminated by Acheron,

For the sounds imply a life inseparable,
A drifting net to trawl the shallows

Which, being lifted in, hauls up the herring.

Here and in the essay Middleton refers to the catchwords of eighteenth-century Spinozism, *Deus sive natura* and "the one and the all," as an earlier manifestation of what he names the apotropaic process. Whether casting for a real toad, a rainbow fish, wrens, or a herring,

the poem becomes through this process a charm to dispel not only the kind of language that, “expletive, / Endorses only, whole hog, our disaster,” but, one hopes, the disaster, too.

Middleton the person absolutely embodies the synthesis he considers, as poet, translator, scholar, teacher, traveler, friend; and the contributions gathered here, from places as far flung as London and Lima, Los Angeles, Istanbul, and Tokyo, testify to the manifold inspiration he continues to be. The essays, inhabiting a space between the poles of criticism and memoir, combine in varying proportions elements of each. These range, on the one side, from Jeremy Hooker’s “Habitation For a Spirit,” an excerpt from a book in progress on poetry and the sacred, to August Kleinzahler’s review essay of *Intimate Chronicles*, which was published originally in *The Threepenny Review* in 1998 and remains especially for American readers an excellent introduction to Middleton’s poetry, to Timothy Harris’s capsule overview of the poet’s career, to Gabriel Levin’s critical sounding-out of the Anatolian imagination of his later work. On the other, memoiristic, side are Thomas Frick’s delightful account of the auspices under which a single work, the co-translated *Andalusian Songs*, came to be published, and Alonso Cueto’s dream-like tribute, “Letter to Christopher.” Between these two poles we find essays that combine critical readings of Middleton’s poetry with personal reflections: Zulfikar Ghose’s memoir of their forty-year friendship from London in the early sixties to Texas today, Marius Kociejowski’s ebullient encomium and study “CM: A Portrait,” and Clifford Endres’s account of traveling with Middleton across the metaphysical terrain of Turkey, a happy interlocutor to Gabriel Levin’s survey of like territory.

Of the artistic contributions, painter Yvonne Jacquette’s aerial images, vivid with the tension between high altitude and precise observation, strike me as being similarly in dialogue with Middleton’s topographic imagination; the pastel “Magic Carpet, Konya Fantasy” was created in direct response to his poem “Domicile.” Keith Waldrop, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Günter Kunert provided poems resonant of their respective artistic friendships with Middleton, which, transcontinental or transatlantic, span “time’s bric-a-brac” for most of the last half-century. The essay “Air, Necessary To Life,” by nineteenth-century French naturalist Jean-Henri Fabre, is a bit of an odd bird in the mix. I happened on the German translation of it one day while brows-

ing in the (now defunct) bookshop of the Brecht-Haus in Berlin. It was published by the Friedenauer Presse as a chapbook with an introduction by Middleton, who had discovered Fabre's original handwritten manuscript with a Paris bookseller and had it transcribed and later published for the first time in France as well. This description of combustion and *deburning* may not be entirely in keeping with the themes attended to elsewhere here; and yet I think it illustrates obliquely the unity of Middleton's own concern for the breathing natural world in which we live and the pneumatic world of the spirit. This superb translation by Michaël Attias is the text's first appearance in English.

A bibliography is included here, and I hope that it will facilitate further discovery of Middleton's work and critical engagement with it. There are several other regions of his career I would like to have surveyed here, primarily his work as one of the great twentieth-century English translators of German poetry, his collaboration and correspondence with Michael Hamburger, and his reception and translation of Robert Walser. I also would like to have included a selection of letters, and not only for their historical value. Middleton is without a doubt one of the last great letter writers in the English language—no small matter in an age when epistolary practice, not to mention its art, has been killed off by e-mail; and a *Collected Letters* would be a delightful read at the very least. (A recent dig in our own archive turned up a remarkable and occasionally amusing exchange from the summer of 1958—before Middleton had ever visited the United States and long before any of us on staff were born—with then editor Irving Rosenthal concerning a never-to-be-published special section on Expressionist German writing.) His papers and correspondence, in any case, are in large measure available for perusal and study at archives in Austin, Leeds, Manchester, and Marburg, among others.

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