

KARLA KELSEY

"what is the prison of this great bullet."  
On Sandra Miller's *oriflamme*.

*oriflamme*. by Sandra Miller. Boise, ID: Ahsakta Press, 2005.

*oriflamme*. is a large-format book with an immediately striking cover. Upon first impression the book appears to be hand-made, a tactile affair complete with stab binding done in thick black thread. The cover gives the impression of collage—a roughly cut red heart appears to be fashioned of cloth. A wooden button appears to be sewn or glued in the middle of the heart, attaching it to the golden parchment-looking paper of the cover. Above the heart the title, *oriflamme*, and the author's name, Sandra Miller, are written in black. To the left of the heart "1916 r." is printed, giving us a date and a place. However, upon touching the book and looking at it closely one feels the non-parchment-like, glossy continuous surface of the cover, notes that the book is not bound with black thread—the lines of "black thread" turn out to be printed on the cover—and sees that the multi-textured collage is an image of collage, not multi-textured in itself. This cover-as-image intrigues: what does it mean to have a book cover that imitates, but is not in actuality, collage? What does the fact that one has to physically engage with the cover to discover its true nature say about the poems inside? What does the translation of one medium, collage, into another, glossy image, do to the experience of the cover?

The experience of reading this book invites such questioning throughout, for while *oriflamme*. yields narrative threads and a very particular sense of the work's speaker, the book thwarts synthesis, summary, linearity, and closure. For example, the titles of the poems often work musically ("[bediamond tinsel black black]") and figuratively ("what is the prison of this great bullet.") rather than descriptively of particular embedded meaning. This invites readers to read titles as parts of poems and/or the book as a long poem interspersed with mini-poem-titles. In addition, the poems themselves often make use of the entirety of their out-sized pages, scattering clusters of words across the field as many banners, or, oriflammes. Whether we are to read such works from right to left, from top to bottom, or in a number of other

ways is a choice left up to us. The array of possibilities presented by these structural and formal aspects inspires questioning and engagement in the tradition of the most intriguing experimental works.

However, as is true with all good and truly experimental writing, *oriflamme* does not just wear its experimentation as a fashion. *oriflamme* comes out of a unique investment in the concerns of Russian Futurism and does fresh and important things with the Futurists' interest in the material sounds of words and language's capacity (and incapacity) to express emotion. The book's involvement in the Russian Futurist project begins with its cover and moves throughout the work. A note about the cover printed on the copyright page tells us that it is a near reproduction of the Russian Futurist artist Olga Roznova's collage cover of the first transrational book, *Transrational Boog*, a collaboration between Alexei Kruchenykh and Aliagrov (Roman Jakobson). Created in 1915, Roznova's collage is stamped with a time and place—Russia, 1916, "so as," the note tells us, "to always be in the future." As the cover is modeled after Roznova's cover, but is not quite the same (the materials differ, the title differs, the author differs, the relation to time and place differs, the contents encased by the cover differ), this Russian Futurist text and its attendant poetic, *zaum*, is essential to *oriflamme*, even as the book moves beyond transrational writing into an articulation of its own.

The concept of *zaum* (*za* = beyond or trans, *um* = mind, sense, rationality), coined by Kruchenykh and theorized by both himself and Khlebnikov, embodies these Futurists' dream of a new universal language founded on the fundamental units of sound embedded in each word. The vision of this universal language is one of sound sequences free of historical and social idioms and constituting a series of universal truths communicated by a direct cry that surpasses all cultural constructs.<sup>1</sup> Along with breaking words into sound units, *zaum*'s tactics include breaking up traditional grammatical structures, invention via neologism, and associative movement based on sound and illogical combinations of words. Although *oriflamme* is not simply a transrational text translated over to the twenty-first century, these tactics prevail throughout Miller's book and provide useful tools for entering this most unique text, allowing us to see the work's heritage and appreciate the

---

1. For more on *zaum* and its various formulations see Brian Reed, "Locating *Zaum*: Mnatsakanova on Khlebnikov," *Jacket 27* (2005). <http://jacketmagazine.com/27/reed.html>.

crucial ways in which *oriflamme*. departs from *zaum*'s ahistorical dream. For example, "But here at, here at *Quidam*" begins thusly:

a solar fact  
easterer elenctic  
ripes  
what is green

arrowy precity  
to not  
stulty  
else

boneal hits  
petty petit  
caligula  
ula  
so apt

The isolated sound unit "ula," echoed off of "caligula" and highlighted on its own line, speaks to this work's transrational heritage of singular units of sound, as does the concentration on sound born of the stuttering neologisms "easterer," "elenctic," "stulty," and "boneal." As near nonsense words, what appears to us first are the sonic materials that make them up—the creation of sense, if it happens, happens later. In addition, the /i/ sound echoing off of "arrowy," "precity," "stulty," "petty," and "petit" isolates and accentuates a sound-pattern rather than a rational pattern of sense. Furthering the disruption of rational sense, syntax is in play throughout, most overtly in the torque of "ripe" to "ripes," the adjective turned to an invented verb. Along with these elements, the typography of the piece as a whole and the absence of regular grammar or complete imagery and narrative draw attention to the word as a unit of sound, the lines and stanzas as awkward yet beautiful stones rolled around in the mouth and pushed out—"stulty," "boneal," "apt"—through the lips.

Within these elements we can see where this work both most deeply engages in, and departs from, the tenants of transrational writing. In addition, this engagement and departure is fundamental to understanding how very different the energy behind Miller's project is from much of the experimental writing we see today, which comes out of neighboring, but different, concerns of the L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E tradi-

tion. Behind the quest for an ahistorical language made manifest in the transrational "direct cry" is an attempt to answer the question of how to directly express emotion in language. In Kruchenykh's manifesto, "Declaration of the Word as Such," he theorizes that "thought and speech cannot keep up with the emotions of someone in a state of inspiration." To this long-recognized problem of how to get emotion into language, Kruchenykh proposes the following solution: "therefore the artist is free to express himself not only in the common language (concepts), but also in a personal one (the creator is an individual), as well as in a language which does not have any meaning (not frozen), a transrational language."<sup>2</sup> Here the impulse towards transrational language accentuates the importance of emotional experience and utterance. This is where Miller's project departs from that of many other contemporary experimental projects as her work both extends the transrational project by delving into the emotional, and veers away from it by refusing to work towards the ahistorical.

Given the fact that Miller uses Roznova's cover design, a historical artifact, she begins the book, from the cover inward, by directly engaging with a historical moment. Furthermore, indicative of other poems in the book, this small excerpt works with a complex web of cultural and historical references, both on the surface and embedded in neologisms. Overtly, there is Caligula, the terrible Roman tyrant famous for his cruelty. Inside of "elentic" we get the Welsh mythological figure of Elen, a heroine who built highways across her country so that soldiers could more easily defend it. In addition, we have "easterer," unpacking to "Easter" with all of its implicit death, resurrection, history, and mythology. The term also unpacks to direction—"more East"—which has philosophical and political implications. This small web resonates throughout the rest of the poem (the later lines "where he can sport/ catapull/ brio/ &/ ken" resonate with Caligula and with the forces Elen's soldiers must fend off) and throughout other moments in the book (the term "easter" and its variants frequently appear). In addition, here in the passage's neologisms we might find mirrors to the questions provoked by the cover-as-image-of-a-cover. At first glance, each neologism is packed, glossy, impenetrable. "elentic." "stulty." Crack the surface. Work with the words, with the sounds. stulty. sultry. stilted. slutty. sulky. As with the cover, the word both is what it appears to be

---

2. Aleksei Kruchenykh, "Declaration of the Word as Such," trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, in *Imagining Language: An Anthology*, ed. Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

and is not. As it is with personal and historical events, both cover and word become through interaction, and this text refuses to allow them to settle in one place. And, in the title of the piece, we have a location, "Quidam," which is both the classical Latin term for the concept, both precise and indeterminate, of "a certain one/thing" and a reference to a Cirque du Soleil (echoed in "a solar fact") show based around the imaginings of a young girl, Zoé, who dreams up the whimsical world of Quidam to comfort her in the face of her parents' painful neglect.

This reference to the Cirque du Soleil show illustrates the way in which Miller extends the transrationalist project of emotional expression beyond the "direct cry" of sound articulated so well throughout the assonance, consonance, stutterings, rhythms, spacing, punctuation, and neologisms of *oriflamme*. For while the book is not in any way a didactic or narrative text, it allows for overt expression of emotion and threads of a story to rise to the surface. Mirroring the despair of the young girl dreaming of Quidam is the book's "poems for nurse" sequence. For example, the beginning of "poems for nurse. (3)" provides the book's most overt articulation of emotion:

helpless daddy make it  
sadder the song so i can  
sod my sod with you

i am being beaten  
but it is beaten day  
didn't i see you beat him  
& didn't i see him  
didn't i i i i i  
him

Here physical and emotional violence is rendered by transparent statement (the speaker tells us point-blank that "i am being beaten") and by working with physical aspects of language (the repetition of the "i's," the limited, repetitive vocabulary). The power of this moment carries through the book, coloring and carrying over to moments that are less overt in terms of emotional statement, but use the page, punctuation, and sound of language to create and convey emotional experience. Such moments include, from "stretti, blunt rusti.," "poverty in carts/ what was snow/ my little cup/ ported triste wynde," and from "what is the prison of this great bullet.," "there was a disaster of the voice. all easter./ sun helped. so did pink risen. enter phosphor.// hard song of oh."

In these hard songs of oh we encounter feeling as knotted, tender, and torn as the emotion found in a poet like Sylvia Plath, whose work also hinges on sound but includes, at least at this point in time, tragic biography and labels of confession—two “meaning”-making mechanisms that *oriflamme*. does not engage with. In addition to this already remarkable feat of emotional encounter, *oriflamme*. offers its readers a poetry of radical openness (which heretofore seems to have been considered basically irreconcilable with poetry of emotion), allowing the reader freedom to breathe and think, to feel and experience the essential bonds between language, emotion, and utterance.