

A MAZE OF OPENINGS

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BREAKERS: SELECTED POEMS

Paul Violi

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In the title poem of *The Curious Builder* (1993), reprinted in *Breakers*, Paul Violi indirectly characterizes his own approach to poetry by quoting the Renaissance poet Samuel Daniel:

Like to the curious builder who this year
Pulls down, and alters what he did the last
As if the thing in doing were
more dear
Than being done....

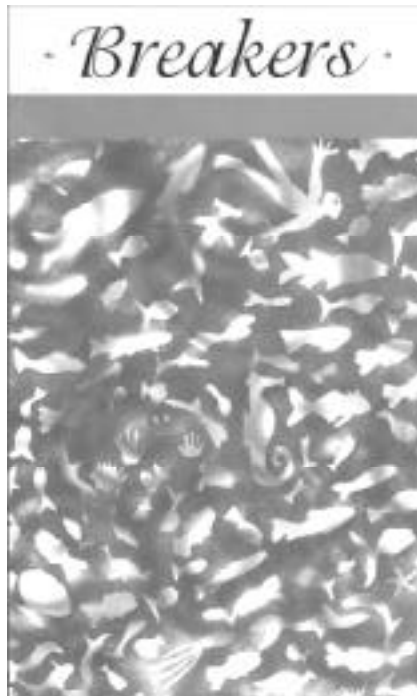
I have not bothered to check whether Violi has altered the poems reprinted in *Breakers*, because a kind of self-alteration operates in each poem as it loops, swerves, twists, accelerates, drifts, sinks, or explodes, according to the whim of Violi's delight in doing. However, rather than following the sequence of the poems as they are arranged in *Breakers*, I read them in chronological order of original publication, starting with "Harmatan" (from the 1977 volume of that title) and ending with "The Hazards of Imagery" (from *Fracas*, 1998). I wanted to see what alterations might have been affected simply by the passage of time. After all, when Samuel Daniel wrote the lines about the "curious builder," "curious" meant "careful, studious, attentive," according to the OED. Today we are more likely to apply the meaning of "somewhat surprising, strange, singular, odd." Both senses

apply to Violi's work.

Violi is probably best known for discovering new forms for poetry in "odd places," as David Lehman observes in *The Last Avant-Garde* (1998) when he locates Violi in the tradition of the New York School. Among the examples in *Breakers*, "The Hazards of Imagery" takes the form of a guide to artworks at more or less fanciful sites: more "At the Tomb of the Improperly Trained Bombardiers," less "At the Cottage of Messer Violi." "Triptych" (from *Splurge*, 1981) takes the form of a television program guide, divided into "Morning," "Afternoon," and "Evening." Closely related to such acts of appropriation is the device of pastiche that leads to the quotation from Samuel Daniel at the end of "The Curious Builder" or from Ezra Pound's translation of Arnaut Daniel at the end of "Little Testament" (from *Likewise*, 1988). As the title suggests, the latter poem also parodies François Villon's lament for the "snows of yesteryear" in *Le grand testament*. Violi's version begins:

...Dead-Eye Dick,
the jubilant realist, where did he go?
And the bouncers
at the Tempus Fugit Funeral Parlor,
who gave them the heave-ho?

The spirit of spoof is so prevalent in Violi's work that it is easy to mistake it for mere game playing. In fact, "Wet Bread and Roasted Pearls" (from *The Curious Builder*) is structured as a series of clues to a crossword puzzle, compounded by the further absurdity that the numbers of the clues "follow ascending and descending Fibonacci progressions," as Violi explains in



a note. But the “maze of blanks” figured by the crossword puzzle reveals serious aesthetic, cultural, even metaphysical implications as Violi’s reader negotiates the maze constructed by the arrangement of poems in *Breakers*. The “curious builder” begins to look like Dedalus, builder of the Labyrinth and patron saint of the modernist artificer. As a postmodern writer, Violi locates his reader “not in a parlous maze/ but a maze of openings”; the formal demand is not to trace a single “correct” path but somehow to follow multiple paths simultaneously. Nevertheless, there is a strong suggestion that Violi finds the materials of his maze in the same “heap of broken images” from which T.S. Eliot fashioned *The Waste Land*. Violi points to that source explicitly in “Wet Bread and Roasted Pearls”:

Once across the city line
riverbank turns to rubble.
Row after row of mounds,
a ransacked graveyard
of mistakes buried under broken images,
brick, busted block, scrap metal,
crumpled sheetrock, tires,
charred planks, sand piles
dumped on lots
glittering with crushed glass.

In the retrospective light provided by such passages in *Breakers*, “Harmatan” reads like Violi’s “Waste Land.” Based on the six months that Violi spent in Nigeria as a surveyor for the Peace Corps, the 49 sections of this poem document the failure of documentation:

Photographs useless after a while,
map not much help either;
the spaces between symbols grow wider....

Those spaces are the blanks that the crossword player of “Wet Bread and Roasted Pearls” is still trying to fill in. The “ransacked graveyard” of that poem turns darker in the shadow of the “grave for symbols” marked by “Harmatan,” particularly when the re-opening of that grave uncovers the senseless violence of history. The period of Violi’s stay in Nigeria, during the opening months of 1967, saw the eruption of tribal warfare that was to culminate in the abortive attempt of the Ibo people to establish the

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separate state of Biafra. From the “mass, unmarked graves” of Ibos that Violi records outside the city of Kano, it is possible to trace a path of violence through the rest of *Breakers*. It runs through the grotesque recreation of the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror as imagined by an insane movie producer in “King Nasty” (from *Likewise*), and leads ironically in “The Hazards of Imagery” to the “plaster deer/ with real bulletholes in them” that stand on the lawn of Messer Violi’s neighbor. The parody of Marianne Moore’s “imaginary gardens with real toads in them” only makes the violence seem more macabre.

A force that Violi sets in opposition to violence can also be traced back to “Harmatan.” It is a kind of materialization of language that begins with the exhaustion of symbolization. As Violi, literally exhausted after a long day on the road, anticipates sleep, he imagines arriving at

...some distant village
where maybe a language is spoken
that uses the same word for well
as for a woman’s eyes, for clarity
drawn from darkness, song from thought.

As the reference to “a woman’s eyes” suggests, this is the language of love, articulated most clearly in two poems set side by side in *Breakers*, “Wet Bread and Roasted Pearls” and “Sputter and Blaze.” The latter poem has not been previously published, as far as I know, and may be the most recent poem in the volume. It presents a fanciful narrative centered on a moment “when words fail”—rather like the return from the hyacinth garden in “The Waste Land”—and leading to an experience of “wide-open listening.” In the poem’s “coda,” Violi translates this experience into terms that sound more autobiographical:

To listen and look at you
and press my face into your hair
a clear and happy senselessness....

Such terms inflect the “senselessness” of Violi’s clowning with the wisdom that the Renaissance associated with the clown. They demand a double reading of this “curious builder” as not only “strange, singular, odd” but also, in the Renaissance sense, “careful, studious, attentive.”

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