

BECOMING VISIBLE

By Philip Lamantia

City Lights 1981

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Reviewed by Nanos Valaoritis

At the age of fifteen Philip Lamantia wrote poems of such accomplishment in the Surrealist style that he was hailed as the Rimbaud of American Surrealism. First published in the New York Surrealist magazine View, edited by Charles Henri Ford, the other important Surrealist poet in the US, and Parker Tyler, he was noticed by Andre Breton, then living in New York with many other exiled artists and writers in the early forties.

After the return of the exiles to Europe the Surrealist movement in the US lapsed and gave place in the fifties to the Beat movement. In his book Destroyed Works, Lamantia, a native of San Francisco follows this curve, joins in with the Beats, Jack Kerouak, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlingetti, who display a strong Surrealist influence in some of their work, with Rimbaud, Apollinaire, and automatic writing in the background. This exchange of influences remained a permanent feature of the Beat movement when it was joined later by other poets such as Michael McClure, Harold Norse and Bob Kaufman.

This period, as well as the earlier Surrealist work, is reflected in the City Lights Selected Poems, 1969. Then in 1970 appears the collection Blood of the Air, which marks a return to the earlier Surrealist style. In Becoming Visible Lamantia continues and enlarges what he had already achieved with his mature phase of Surrealist expression.

Can one talk of development in Lamantia's work? To a certain

extent yes. The early poems of Touch of the Marvellous, were a beatific and ecstatic vision and use of language. They had the light magical quality of Paul Eluard's verse, also very apparent in the poetry of Charles Henri Ford of the same period. The Beat period seems to correspond to a drop from grace and nightmare emerges in the writing. The last phase draws from both these experiences, often joined in an uneasy partnership, as if the poet hadn't quite made up his mind to celebrate or hurl invective at the world.

These later poems display a kind of baroque convoluted quality, highly articulated, which sets them apart from ordinary lyrical expression. For the admirers of early Lamantia, these make much more difficult reading, yet in a sense the real Lamantia emerges here with his favourite themes. The hagiography of authors such as Fourier, Hegel, Freud, Paracelsus, Bruno, painters like De Chirico, Hermetic philosophy, the Gnostics, Alchemy, figures of myth and history, the fairy Melusine and Gilles de Rais the mediaeval mass murderer, etc. Add to these many Amerindian names of tribes and sites and you will find them all littering the poem Redwood Highway.

For the outsiders of this highly referential internal Surrealist view of the world, a set of notes is provided at the end of the volume

Is this system of writing permissible in poetry? Surrealism has been connected with a great deal of erudition, yet this appears more rarely in poetry with the exception of some of Breton's later work. In Mad Love he had once analysed one of his own poems, The Sunflower, in terms ~~in terms~~ of telepathic and prophetic intuitions. Personally I have nothing against notes. On the contrary I rather like them, because I think they contain a kind of delirious quality of an explanation of an explanation, which a poem already is.

Towards the end of Redwood Highway there is a kind of rhetorical question,

Am I really of the butterfly clan?

which sums up the cross-references involved in the poem. Fourier's Papillone (butterfly) aspect of human nature, in connection with the classificatory totemic Indian tribal associations. In a way Lamantia chains himself to his references as a Prometheus chained to his rock. One has the feeling that if he let go he would either fall or rise out of view,

Lemuria is a shade of pink on green

The myth a hundred years old

Rolling out of the fog to the voices

Found divining the "lost land" in a Wintun grove...

I cannot help making associations with the Waste Land, the Lost Land, being a version of it more likely to appeal to a Surrealist, in his utopian search for a lost Paradise, not unconnected with the existence somewhere of the purgatorial Inferno of modern life,

Night blooms beyond the plague of day..

Cryptomaniacally following

Over the gangrene of the world..

Redwood Highway

Following Lamantia in his labyrinthian path one has the impression of being back in a Poundian world of allusions, fragmented technique, shattered language, coupled sometimes with Eliotian associations,

The anteatery ways I stumble on..

I feel Lamantia is much more an heir of modernism than he would like to think. After all the two branches co-existed once in Rimbaud, Mallarme, Apollinaire, and modernism is not only characterised by classical brevity, but also by redundancy, as in Gertrude Stein.

If for the Surrealists, the imagery dominated over erudite allusion, recent studies have shown that the Surrealist associative technique is a systematic subverter of another language, literary or ordinary,

(see in Michael Riffaterre, La production du Texte, La métaphore
filée dans la poésie Surrealiste etc) and in that sense not as
direct or innocent as all that.

In many of the other poems of this collection one finds imagery
in Lamantia's old style,

Racing out of town
the veined hair swallows the road..

or

the day heaving straw giants
if you can see them..

Bed of Sphinxes

or as in the prose poem Primavera a line shoots out like a falling
star,

I catch hold of a train inside an iris
The neat imagist in Lamantia has not altogether disappeared even
if he has given way to a more abstruse and baroque style,

to crystallize
dialectically
a lattice of tooth marks from the Gnome King's terraplane
arriving with the velocity of squirrel tails
carving tunnels into our radiant osteo-paths..

Bile Nature

On the whole I prefer him when he writes as in Drama Set, with
a kind of sophisticated lyrical simplicity,

Beneath the moss of eyesockets
the tower vanishes into the golden night
spoon of raspberry
chocolate flight

The blooming vitriol of May
kneads autumn's honeysuckle

The city sprung open like a bird cage
becomes a rainbow of mulé feathers
sailing through the jail bars of the earth

Admirable little poem rising far above a mannerism which is sometimes painfully conscious of itself, as expressed in the two lines from Violet Star , showing his ultimate self-awareness,

while I continue to rave
over dissimilar modes..

I think here Lamantia understands himself as a post-modern artist, although he hangs on desperately it seems, to the gossamer threads of the Surrealist myth. The problem of the post-modern poet, writer, artist, is how to weave in, the dissimilar modes inherited from the past into a smooth continuous surface, unified under the umbrella of a single sensibility, or on the other hand, to leave them exposed in their difference by uniting them under a common theme.

Whatever the choice is finally, I believe Becoming Visible, illustrates the difficulty which besets all poets writing in this age, who want to say something that goes beyond their own backyard. Yet the only way to unify, or sew together as Homer would have done it, disparate oral material, is through the uncompromisingly subjective eye, such as these poems call for constantly,

at the grating of the historical jungles..
to the ignition of the levitated glance..

Violet Star

Lamantia, no doubt is still trying to scale the heights and has not given in to the mechanically pedestrian hiding behind an anti-rhetorical stance. Sometimes his discourse remains perilously

suspended in mid-air, inconclusive and almost unintelligible. Yet this is what it takes, I feel, to go up there, even at the risk of occasionally falling into a dark hole. Here is one,

The lure of a skyspeck garners hidden vortical ellipses
by which photons fan out contrary to the normal retinal
gobbling..

Bile Nature

Indeed worthy of Lautreamont denouncing the grandiloquent and landing on the absurd. I love him all the more for this daring to go " where Angels fear to tread".

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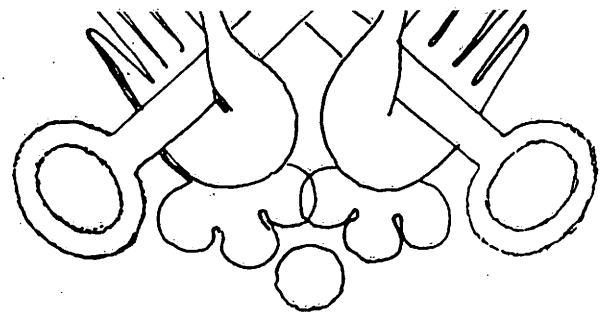
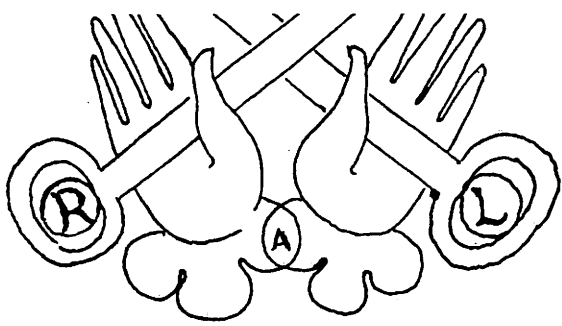
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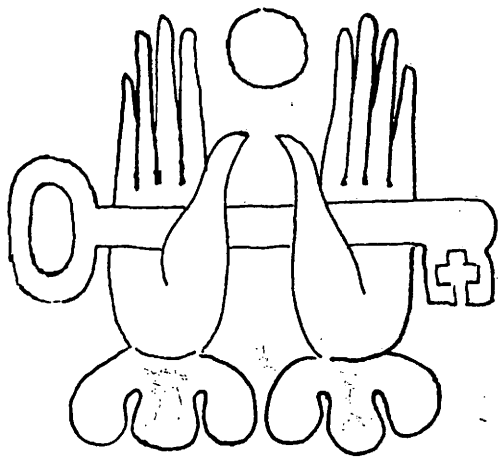
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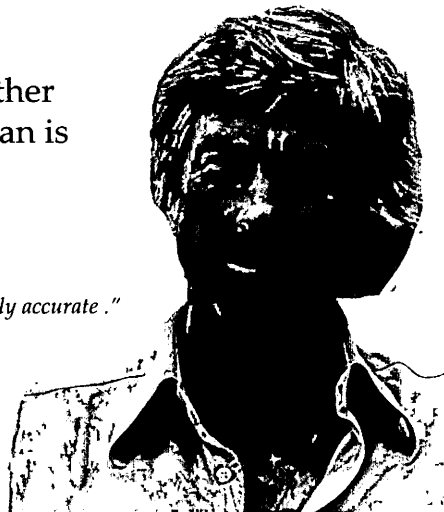
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