Review: "konkretion" by Marion May Campbell

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Abstract
Campbell’s novella, konkretion, follows an elderly ex-communist, Monique Piquet, through Paris, as she meets up with a former student who has published a book about German political activists, Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin, who were former and founding members of the Red Army Faction (RAF). The book offers a segueing and poetic re-examination of Meinhof, who died in suspicious circumstances in prison in 1976, and her fellow conspirators.

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**Catherine Cole reviews *konkretion* by Marion May Campbell**

*konkretion*

by Marion May Campbell

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Reviewed by CATHERINE COLE

Campbell’s novella, *konkretion*, follows an elderly ex-communist, Monique Piquet, through Paris, as she meets up with a former student who has published a book about German political activists, Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin, who were former and founding members of the Red Army Faction (RAF). The book offers a segueing and poetic re-examination of Meinhof, who died in suspicious circumstances in prison in 1976, and her fellow conspirators.

These were heady and dangerous times, politically and artistically, and Campbell weaves the political and the artistic threads dexterously as she asserts these connections. The book is full of references to Baader and Bacon, Celan and Barthes as well as Ensslin and Meinhof, their political convictions working within and in opposition to the key philosophies of the times. What makes Campbell’s book so interesting is the way in which she leads Monique Piquet – and the reader with her – through a mix of memory and reflection, on past times, past trips, the seduction of extreme politics, especially for the young, and the older woman’s reacquaintance with that seduction.

*konkretion* is not an easy book – nor should it be – but its style makes for a difficult read at times. There’s no strong narrative flow to allow an easy dipping in or out, or a linear narrative offering a long and languorous read. Rather, *konkretion* challenges the reader to move back and forth, to pause and remember, or to look people up if necessary for an understanding of the text. Campbell doesn’t want lazy or ill-informed readers, I suspect, and to enter the novel requires a commitment to one’s own reflections and, where necessary, education.

The book’s greatest strength for this reader, at least, rests in its disquieting and challenging poetics. Take for example: ‘In the theatre, the gloom is thick and slow as suet, glutinous on eyeballs, eyeballs out on sticks already, in fact.’ Her words challenge the reader to declaim, loudly, as the long quote below also suggests. There’s a poetics too which is graphic in its intensity: ‘a dark-haired woman, her face pillow-propped, looks straight at the viewer, while the lover’s head rises over the horizon of her shoulders.’ The voice is strong, if at times perplexing, and perhaps that’s why the book is such an interesting read. One is always challenged by Monique’s point of view and her relationship with history. Campbell poses questions about terrorism, about aging and place, answering them through an exploration of ideas and the ways in which they’ve formed and reformed in her character’s mind over the years.

They wanted to sample and spin and mix all their scripts in the disassembly of nation. They asked us to put our stethoscopes to these pleasure texts and to mark the harmonics, the syncopations, the intoxicating buzz, the polyrhythmic pulsing there. Oh and we did, we loosened up to the friction of textual bodies and pulverized subjectivities. We were rehearsing a way beyond war, beyond capital, beyond strutting sovereign subjects. *Remember Babel*, our opponents sneered, *as if all that babble wasn’t war to start with*. Well, we said yes, maybe, but only in the sense that fascistic thought wants to impose the One over the many. We pointed to our friend Luce (lips-all-over) Irigaray composing her ludic mimicry on male philosophers. (pp19-20)
There is much to discover along the way. For example, we meet the Romanian/French poet, Paul Celan, and enjoy his work briefly. Other poets add to this narrative and *konkretion* should be read with a mind open to meeting old favourites and new ones – to reassessing one’s youthful passions with the slower pleasures of increasing age.

That Campbell’s poetics walk hand in hand with politics provides a binary between the familiar and the new, the cruel and the creative, politics and art – and the differences and similarities between them which challenge and destabilize the reader, while kindling understanding and offering them much to think about.

It is easy for a contemporary reader to believe that terrorism began on September 11. Our news seems to encourage this view, so Campbell’s younger readers might be surprised to know just how potent – and romantic – the narrative of protest was in the 1960s and 1970s. Protest about the Vietnam war or the bourgeois establishment which spawned the Paris revolution of 1968 and the student protest movements in the USA, Europe and Australia, had a darker side in the terrorist activities of groups such as the Red Army Faction. It’s hard to imagine the sheer determination and commitment of groups such as the IRA, the Red Brigade, and the RAF who were responsible for bombings and assassinations in a range of cities. At that time visiting a shop or bar in any English or European city could be fraught with danger. Campbell takes the reader back to those anxious times by locating the reflective Piquet in a place where a great deal happened in art, politics, philosophy. But Piquet is now an older woman as she walks around Paris, but despite this her present is immediate, poetic, clever and perplexing – and the reader walks with her, dipping in and out of a troubled past.

*Konkretion* is a complex examination of these ideas – it’s very much of its times but also very much of now.

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