

Poems for John Coltrane

Robert Knox

2023

a review of

Divine Blue Light: for John Coltrane by Will Alexander. City Light Books, 2022

Will Alexander's latest poems, collected in *Divine Blue Light: for John Coltrane*, "remain (in the author's own prefatory words) parallels to nanograms as dazzling wattage."

A nanogram, a billionth of a gram, is light on its feet, and the poet is asking the reader to be similarly nimble in responding to his lines, images, and appropriations of vocabulary from the sciences, mathematics, and non-Western dialects.

A Pulitzer Prize finalist for a previous collection, Alexander's new book is described by his publisher City Lights Books as "a kinetic explosion of language that emanates from the intersection between surrealism and afro-futurism where (Black poet) Césaire meets Sun Ra."

If you heard Sun Ra's Arkestra perform his experimental, sometimes cacophonous music live, you probably never will forget the experience. In comparison, saxophonist John Coltrane, one of jazz's most influential players who died in 1967, is nearly a crossover figure. For instance, many jazz enthusiasts love his appropriation of Rogers and Hammerstein's classic title track on the LP, "My Favorite Things," but the Coltrane to whom Alexander's cosmic ray-gun word-blasts are dedicated is more likely the free jazz inspired, star-climber of 1963's "Ascension."

What I am implying is there is nothing conventional about these poems. It's hard to go more than a line or two without encountering a challenge to the reader's (any reader's) vocabulary, and most stanzas will send you at least once on a Google search.

If you believe that poetry "should be accessible to all readers," a standard articulated by some poets, this is not the book for you. If you're up for a challenge, you'll find a worthy one in *Divine Blue Light*. Taking the book in short bites, a few pages at each session, may make for a better experience.

Let's start at the beginning, with one of the collection's major poems, "Condoned to Disappearance: for Fernando Pessoa." The Lisbon poet who wrote in the early decades of the 20th century, but published almost nothing in his own lifetime, created scores of heteronyms for his imaginary poets who wrote in different styles and voices.

His journal-like manuscript, titled "The Book of Disquiet," describes an existence tailored to his preference for solitude, "inertia and withdrawal." In "Condoned," however, Alexander finds the beauty and integrity in what appear to most as Pessoa's self-defeating choices:

"flowing from various forms rife with altering
your personality
human microbial filtration
as anonymous fantasmic shift of various lingual maturation
being high art as cinder
as itinerant breathing codes that range from susurrant of inaudible deafening"

As Pessoa did away with personality in his own life, only to create a multitude of voices in his verse, Alexander does away with capitals and punctuation and familiar standards of syntax, spelling and vocabulary. You can

see the attraction. Translating, in the lines above, a conventionally valued concept, “personality,” into microscopic components suggested by the phrase “human microbial filtration,” Alexander’s verse turns “high art” to “cinder.”

The poem is full of striking images. Pessoa’s fictional identities are not competitors, the poet tells us, but voices “that glisten in themselves/ because you understood that the void continued to blaze...”

Alexander may be suggesting here an image for his own poem: a “void’ that continues to blaze.” Because its subject is clearly the eccentric and, to Alexander, courageous life choice of a known literary figure, readers may find this poem, as I did, among the more easily accessible in this volume. Pessoa invents new selves. Alexander invents new meanings, and in some cases, new words.

In a later poem, “Language: Replete with Transformative Monsters,” we are faced at once with “Language/ as scaled erisma,” a word that defeats me, and yet the poem, as it unwinds itself in chemical chains of metaphor, is irresistible:

“as amplification that burns
& activates its own meter or principle
That blazes via written skill or utterance
& sonically blinds with its own display...”

Alexander frequently uses the word “as” to suggest a kind of comparison, similar to the more commonly found “like” in ordinary language, but these poems are all about unlikely comparisons. I read “as” in this volume to mean “as in the manner of.” A poem that addresses the nature of language does so almost entirely by showing its protean characteristics, its range of possibilities. As a writer, an obsessive user of language, this approach entrances me. One thing to be said in favor of Alexander’s poetry is that you will not mistake it for prose.

Working your way through a four or five-page poem in *Divine Blue Light* can prove more rewarding than a whole book by more conventional poets. In a long poem dedicated to Coltrane—the creative divinity invoked at various points in this volume—titled “Divine Blue Light: Sudden Ungraspable Nomadics,” the verse consists of strings of ineffable comparisons opened by the word “as.” In fact, the pursuit of the ineffable might be a way to describe the missional quality of these poems. Here we have the “divine blue light” of Coltrane’s music or, perhaps, inspiration, poetically characterized

“as quantum
as perpetual
as Inter-Dimensional Kindling”
Later in the poem, in lines addressed directly to “Trane,” we read:
“it was your sonic grammar that climbed
& now registers as sonic echo far beyond gregarious misnomer
Not as a dazed mercurial haunting
Or as plague
Or as sound that roams as superstitious poltergeist
But as anthem of itself
As profoundly philosophical altering of itself.”

I’ve never read anybody write about music this way, as if the words themselves came, in fact, from inside the sound. At the poem’s end, the poet raises the idea of “symbols” suggested by the music’s “sonic grammar.” Not as “Quotidien measurement,” Alexander writes:

“but as suns that extend & measure themselves
Never confined to the testament that is reason...
But as the highest drama that specifies complexity...”

Anyone looking for that kind of linguistic drama will find it in Will Alexander’s most recent collection of poetry. If anarchism in literature involves breaking down conventions of thought and expression and exploring new ways for words and ideas to rub shoulders, set off sparks, and make beautiful music together, then Alexander may be its prophet.

Robert Knox is a fiction writer, poet, and *Boston Globe* correspondent. He is a contributing editor for the online poetry journal Verse-Virtual, on which his poems appear regularly. They have also appeared in journals such as *Unlikely Stories*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *New Verse News*, and *The Eunoia Review*. His poetry chapbook, *Gardeners*

Do It With Their Hands Dirty, was nominated for a Massachusetts Best Book award. His collection of linked short stories, *House Stories*, was published by Adelaide Books last year.

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Fifth Estate #413, Spring, 2023

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