Time Slip
by John Oughton

Reviewed by Michael Greenstein

One is struck by the variety of the poems in Time Slip, John Oughton’s fifth collection of poetry, which combines selections from his first four books, as well as new poems of the past decade. His steady, sure voice captures lyrical and sardonic modes in personal poems as well as historic impersonations, with a mixture of playfulness and serious contemplation.

The first poem in this collection, “History = His Story (Olson),” offers a clue to his method in many of the poems to follow. The poet’s equal sign not only connects “history” to “his story” through auditory imagination (and Oughton’s ear attunes many astonishing sounds), but also points to his fondness for similes, and beyond that to metaphoric equivalences. While his poetry generally eschews end-line punctuation, he does capitalize at the beginning of lines to give a sense of sentence breaks. This rhythmic flow matches his open-ended patterns of thinking – a freedom of thought and expression that in turn challenges the reader into accompanying the writer through lines of verse.

I wake at four in the morning
exact mate and anti-hour to day
twelve hours and twice those years after my start
that far from mothers this far into music

In keeping with the title’s “equal” sign, there is a kind of symmetry in these lines: “exact mate” picks up the long “a” in “wake” and “day,” while “anti-hour” throws the established equilibrium into question. Once we do the mathematical clockwork of twenty-four years, we arrive at a closer sense of life history and existential hangover, but the parallel distances between mothers and music throw the reader off-guard. This
simultaneous clarification and bewilderment is a hallmark of Oughton’s fine poetry, which displays a kind of modernist metaphysical wit.

The musical interlude between night and morning, sleep and awakening, continues into “Hour of the fat jackal whining” – the languorous vowels stretching out the poet’s aural rebirth. The surreal jackal whining and dining on “marvellous garbage” (an oxymoron that prepares for a Shakespearean allusion) contrasts with the poet’s “thirst” in his “clanging” mouth. His cry for water “that far from my first phoneme” picks up the earlier “that far” from mother’s milk. The stanza ends with a resounding “slap” on the baby’s buttocks twenty-four years earlier, another example of time slip and time slap. “Two dozen” Chinese puzzle boxes represent not only the life span from birth to the current birthday, but also the enigma at the heart of Oughton’s poetry.

The second stanza opens with the poet “tapping” in sleep for “tuned skulls,” questioning if “this [is] my own life now or / do I begin at / the end of this phrase?” As the phoneme utterer taps on his keyboard, we begin to see how words or phrases slip into phases, for Oughton’s auditory imagination opens to the interchange of vowels and consonants. Time slip may be a time slap in history or his story of childhood where dreams overtake mother’s milk. Just as the child “turns” within him, so the early poet will “turn / this hour of echoes B side of the disc / B for beginnings.” The poet plays with his alphabet seriously, fully aware of the “turns” and tunes in verse. Oughton’s “(Olson)” story provides a fitting opening for *Time Slip*.

Time slip is also time’s lip, a slip of the tongue in poetic craft, as alternating long and short vowels arrest the reader. The title of Oughton’s first book, *Taking Tree Trains*, has been misread as “Talking Tree Trains” and “Taking Three Trains.” Slippery syntax and sounds of alliteration far from his first phoneme account for those unfinished Chinese puzzle boxes in the process of building and rebuilding.

The second poem, “Trees Two,” is a short lyric whose very title intertwines the imagery shaped in free verse.

Were you a tree
would you bend
sway, drink
know the earth
thru long goes
sail white curves
for all winter
and greet spring
forthcoming with soft
green applause

This act of love is presented as a hypothetical question with only one comma punctuating the entire poem that doesn’t pause until the final applause. Predominantly monosyllabic with frontline rhymes of sway and sail, greet and green, the poem stretches toward the end with “forthcoming,” a climactic transformation and distillation of the seasons. Indeed, many of the poems in *Time Slip* focus on metamorphoses.

“That Line” begins with “I turn my life upside down / nothing falls out,” before launching into a series of similes that reveal the poet’s playfulness or droll seriousness. The upended poet is further inverted in the fine line between “life” and “line.” Despite “No change / in the pockets of this train,” there are always changes, revisions, transformations in the creative process, so that “line” is both railway line and line of poetry, just as train becomes the train of thought. Double entendres are reinforced by similes: “My head bulging / with the alternation of ideas / like a light bulb.” The head of the train and a movie projector merge with the poet’s head, the bulging bulb and similes connecting all three alternating images, “as if a pocket of change lay ahead.”

The second stanza continues the train of thought: “My life hanging by its threaded foot / from the ceiling nothing falls.” The phrase that first appeared at the front of the line now shifts to the end of line: “nothing falls / like a hardwood tree opening” – the simile connecting poet and landscape. “This train projects you expecting me / like a pine resin’s song rising.” The parallel lines of train tracks, lovers, landscapes, and poetry converge in the distance, while seasonal flux remains another constant: “cry salute the crystal fist of winter / from which nothing falls.”

The third stanza concludes the meeting of lovers, lives, lines, landscape, and language. “This train the switch / connects us drifting unverbed until / the poem is ripe.” As in the movie frame in the first stanza and the hardwood tree opening its “valentine spectrum” in the second, the lovers’ arms frame each other in the third. With only a consonant’s difference, life and line interchange in Oughton’s poetry.
“Life in Forest Hill” and “Edville” demonstrate Oughton’s satiric and comic side, while “My Niece Becomes,” “Depression,” “For My Dead Sister,” “Waiting to See My Father,” “For Erinann,” and “Stroke/Oblique” reveal a more sombre side of the poet’s personal family history.

The poems from his third collection, Mata Hari’s Lost Words (also misread as “last” words), showcase the poet’s ventriloquism (much as some of the fine earlier Japanese poems do). “Madrid Tango” portrays Mata Hari dancing in Madrid on New Year’s Eve, 1916.

The tango is perfect seduction
a warm breeze from the shores of Argentina
the perfect dance for all the double agents here
we glide across the floor in pairs
our feet moving smoothly as a snake’s ribs

Oughton captures the spirit, passion, and rhythm of the dance, along with the dialectics of spying during World War I. The simile reminds us of the trenches and no-man’s land where millions were killed in a different danse macabre, and the end of the first stanza also invokes the gas masks outside Madrid’s Palace Hotel: “in the addiction of tango we drop our masks.” In this dance of the dialectic we don and doff masks, spying personae between dancer and dance.

Mata Hari becomes “pure feminine essence” during the dance, no longer interested in spying: “this dance is brandy in our veins / flamenco slowed by South American sun.” At midnight all kiss, “and champagne corks / salute the artillery a few hundred miles away.” Echoes of T.S. Eliot carry through to the end: “although morning dispels the tango like fog.” Tango inspires Oughton to create sensual similes.

“Time Slip” is the longest poem in this collection: akin to Freud’s sense of the uncanny, “time slip” is an outbreak of a past reality into the present. Although the poem opens with “the moment turns: a tumbler / like you, rolling a car over again,” the vast majority of stanzas begin with “(time/slip).” Towards the end, the poet shifts to “(rime/slip),” and concludes: “This poem has not yet begun . . . / this poem has long been over.” Oughton manipulates the hands of the clock between a modernist moment
and a mocking eternity. The self-deprecating voice in “John Gone” deserves a wider audience.

A master of irony and free-verse forms, John Oughton is a joy to read and reread for his dozens of Chinese puzzle boxes.

Michael Greenstein has taught at several universities in Canada and abroad. He is the author of Third Solitudes: Tradition and Discontinuity in Jewish-Canadian Literature and the editor of Contemporary Jewish writing in Canada: An Anthology.

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