R’s Boat
by Lisa Robertson

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

In 2004, Nomados Press issued Lisa Robertson’s chapbook titled Rousseau’s Boat, which received wide acclaim. Nothing much was heard from it until now. R’s Boat is Rousseau’s flotilla created from Robertson’s mining of her personal archives. As she states in an interview with Sina Queyras, published on the Harriet blog:

All of the poems in the book are built from my archival gleanings. I went over the entire heap of 60-odd notebooks afresh for each poem, each time from a different point of view, or with a different quest in mind, and sometimes with years having passed in the interim. But with each poem I ended up recomposing the gleanings according to very different principles. The first couple were slightly programmatically composed, then less and less so. The poems were written over about 5 or 6 years, so my priorities shifted. But my simple idea was that I wanted to make an autobiographical book that was not self-referential.

So, how do you go about making a book that is autobiographical while at the same time not being self-referential, given that one seems to imply the other? Again, turning to Robertson’s interview on Harriet:

I borrowed my boat from Rousseau, who describes, in Reveries of a Solitary Walker, floating aimlessly in a lake observing only the flickering of his consciousness in concert with the various patterns of afternoon – light, water, breeze, foliage. He calls this the pleasurable sensation of existing. There is no longer a foreground and a background, but a cognitive continuum. For me the boat became the figure of this lascivious and boundless perceiving. In terms of composition, this meant an entirely pliable handling of perspective. No subject position, but a distribution of subjectivity as equivalently charged at any point.

Although Robertson denies being a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet, she does have an affinity for the sentence:
Much of my earlier work has been testing the internal structure of sentences as wildly psycho-sexual-social units. But here I wanted to find a way to include extremely banal, flat, overwrought and bad sentences, by devising a sequencing movement that could include anything. My thought was not to judge, but to float the disparity of the units in a continuum. I think what happens is that the caesura, the space between, becomes extremely active, more active than the sentences themselves are. This has the effect of making any sentence semantically legible in several registers – the meta-textual, as you point out, may be one of them.

*R’s Boat* will come as a surprise to readers of Robertson’s earlier works inspired by Virgil, such as *Debbie: An Epic* and *The Weather*. With respect to these, she stated in an interview with this reviewer on his show *Speaking of Poets* (available at [http://www.ucpress.edu/blog/?p=2552](http://www.ucpress.edu/blog/?p=2552)) that, while she used to write shorter works, they weren’t satisfying to her so she began to approach “the book as a unit of composition.” She clarified that this was not the writing of a long poem, as the works cited do break down into shorter sections, but that each section contributes to the overall effect of the book as an entity – rather like sections and motifs in a classical composition. However, *R’s Boat* finds her having returned to shorter poems.

The first of the six poems comprising *R’s Boat* is “Face/.” To get a feel for the poetics of “Face/,” two separate quotes will follow in quick succession, the first from page 3:

> A man’s muteness runs through this riot that is my sentence.

I am concerned here with the face and hands and snout.

> All surfaces stream dark circumstances of utterance.

What can I escape?

and the second from page 4:

> I experienced a transitive sensation to the left of my mind.

> I am concerned here with the face and hands and snout.

Was I a plunderer then?

The first thing one notices about these sentences is that they alternate between italic and regular font, as if emanating from different sources, although there is no indication as to what those sources might be – possibly husband and wife, ego and id, conscious and subconscious. Even the
words used do not serve to identify gender. The second thing one notices is that the sentences sit in isolation, not responding to each other and without indication of past, present or future, or any sense of elapsed time. Is this a dinner-party “conversation,” where both “communicants” speak at once and at cross-purposes, with understanding or even listening not a requirement? Is this a husband and wife married far too long? Note that there is repetition, with one “voice” picking up a phrase used by the other after some distance or time has passed.

The sentences in “Of Mechanics in Rousseau’s Thought,” much shorter than in “Face/,” follow a logical sequence of sorts but do not lead anywhere, as this excerpt demonstrates:

The women is itself not a content
It is an unwavering faith in the fictional
Because they don’t exist
This work was made under the auspices of opulence
In incandescent occidental forest
In soft pale-green medium-sized notebook
(“Many Notes Towards an Essay on Girls, Girlhood,” 17)

One senses the presence of feminism in the opening lines, bringing to mind Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex. This excerpt is also reminiscent of Wallace Stevens’s “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction.” The shortness of the lines give a sense of the lyric, but of a lyric disrupted or, as Douglas Barbour would have it, the anti-lyric – particularly when we come to the passage on the notebook.

This pattern of sentences separated by blank lines appears to be the norm until the reader stumbles upon “Palinode” – by definition an ode or song recanting or retracting something in an earlier poem – where Robertson reverts to couplets:

Though my object is history, not neutrality
I am prepared to adhere to neither extreme
That which can no longer be assumed in consciousness becomes insolvent
Because it doesn’t finish I can be present
So I decide to speak of myself, having witnessed sound go out
Fear is not harmful, but illuminates the mouth (71)
Although written in a lyric structure, narrative is what infuses the sentiment, with Robertson again testing the bounds of form. As she says on the last page: “Form is not cruel / This by no means suspends the effects of war” (78).

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, Fiddlehead and The Danforth Review, in the U.S. for Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge and Galatea Revisits, and in Australia for Jacket.

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