

Pomegranate juice

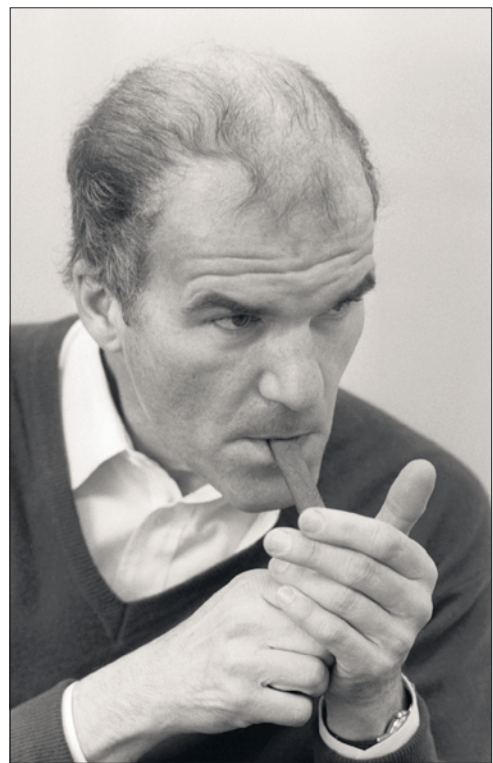
BARRY SCHWABSKY

Harry Mathews

THE NEW TOURISM

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d'inerité sonore"). Thus, the book's opening poem, "Butter and Eggs", is to all appearances a series of five descriptions of ways to cook eggs, followed by instructions for making the clarified butter recommended for use in the first section; you could use these as recipes, though they are far more detailed than cookbook recipes usually are. If you want to read them as little allegories for the artificial process of turning words into poems, that's your privilege. The poet doesn't insist on it, and only the fact that it would be so odd to make a deadpan "didactic poem" (as it is subtitled) about something as mundane as the proper use of dairy products suggests that some unspoken subtext must be present. But this ulterior meaning is no more visible in the poem than are the milk solids that have been skimmed off the clear oil from the butter that henceforth "will not turn rancid and, heated to high temperatures, / never brown or burn; it is the word 'blessing' clarified". Never has



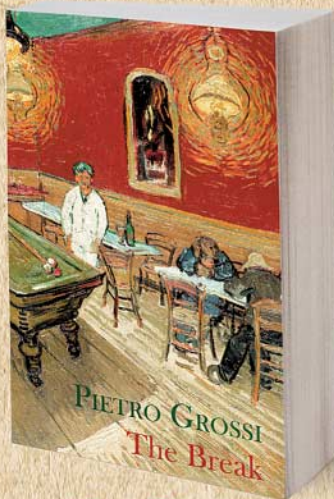
a plea for *poésie pure*, if that's what this is, been sealed in such a deliberately unpoetic and impure container. The effect is unnerving. In Mathews's poetry, limpidity and enigma become synonymous.

It is easy to forget, reading Harry Mathews's first collection of poetry in nearly twenty years, that he is now eighty years old. More than ever, his writing is imbued with a childlike sense of wonder at both language and the world it can conjure, though always tinged with poignancy, with the transience of both words and things. Mathews is perhaps better known as a novelist (*My Life in CIA*, 2005; *The Journalist*, 1994) than as a poet, and his poetry likes to become as proselike as possible, though *The New Tourism* only includes a single prose poem. His favourite tool is not metaphor, which (however vivid) always abstracts from reality, but rather description, as precise but also as minute as possible. Not that his poems are entirely free from obscurity, but always because of an excess of concreteness rather than through the presence of any vagueness or high-flown rhetoric. He is expert at constructing long, sinuous sentences that at any given moment seem entirely literal in their import yet wind up at such an unexpected distance from where they started that the very structure of the sentence seems to take on figurative force – a sort of syntactic metalepsis. At the same time, Mathews (who is one of the few non-French members of OULIPO) in common with his fellow Oulipians loves to set himself unlikely formal challenges, for instance writing a sestina in which one of the six repeated words is "pomegranate"; it's true, as he writes at the beginning of that poem, "Waiting for Dusk", that "Whoever in the span of his life is confronted by the word 'pomegranate' / will experience a mixture of feelings" – at least if one is a poet trying to imagine how to use the word seven times in thirty-nine lines or a reader facing the prospect of seeing whether the poet can pull it off.

Mathews's surprising, sometimes congenially bumpy solutions to such technical problems may give the reader the illusion of encountering a sort of motorized toy made of words that, once the poet has set it up, winds through a series of turns mechanically, with no further need of authorial intervention. Nothing could be further from the truth, of course: the effectiveness of Mathews's verse is dependent entirely on the word-by-word or phrase-by-phrase choices that, like his large-scale formal tactics, often smack of the arbitrary or illogical yet leave a strong aftertaste of sense. In "Waiting for Dusk" the speaker meets up with a friend who suddenly "puts on his mask, made of mirror- / like chromed metal"; a few stanzas later Simon "has taken off his mask; it has left on his face / a stripe or two like accidental marks of his real pain but that in a face spell / nothing but themselves". At first one wonders whether this inexplicable mask (in a poem whose other details are quite naturalistic) isn't a sort of Martian description of some ordinary object – maybe a motorcycle helmet; but eventually one accepts that in this poem, friends sometimes wear mirrored masks.

Not for nothing has Mathews titled one poem "Ptyx", after Mallarmé's famous nonce-word of undisclosed significance, a "curio of sonorous vacancy" ("aboli bibelot

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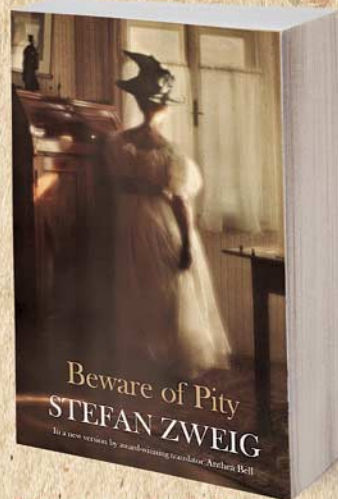


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