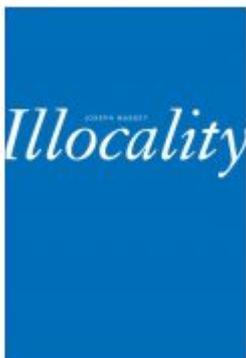


A New New England: Joseph Massey's 'Illocality'

written by Guest Contributor | July 5, 2016



Illocality by Joseph Massey
Wave Books, 2016
120 pages – [Wave](#) / [Amazon](#)

Is *Illocality* perhaps a tad less magisterially poised than Joseph Massey's last book, 2014's *To Keep Time*? Not surprising: that volume capped a trilogy focused on a locale familiar to the poet – Humboldt County, California – and had the feel of an encompassing backwards glance. *Illocality* opens a new investigation of a new environment: the Pioneer Valley specifically, and New England in general. It carries a telling charge of translocation, of being unsettled.

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Transit, indeed, is a theme – both temporal (the book takes us through a year, summer through spring – a sort of voyeur's, not Shepherdes, calendar) and spatial. One key sequence, "An Interim," is the result of a cross-country bus journey, increased mobility urging the observer toward a longer, more hurrying line:

Fields midfreeze flash past

At a red light an embankment filled with mud
fills my peripheral vision–picking up speed

the shine of a signpost washes it out

At increased velocity, notation and perception merge – though with no loss of precision, either of music or expression:

In motion the mind
burrows, wordless

before the next sentence unravels
bent by sun as it cuts through traffic

Burrowing, perhaps, to emerge more eloquent later. . . .

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In the opening poem, "Parse," Massey conjures reality from only a few scraps of scattered sense data – a "volley of / seasonal beacons." He stops on a motto: "We think / ourselves here." The play on words bears teasing out: either a) we believe ourselves to be here, present, but are deluded (perhaps because "What's seen / is dreamed"), or b) we have to actively 'think' ourselves here in order to be present at all. A key question for Massey: is there a difference?

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'World.' The word appears frequently throughout Massey's poetry: one senses he thinks it rather as Heidegger did or, more recently, Badiou does: not as totalizing actuality but as conventional conceptual framework, something to be questioned. Thus: "The world is real / in its absence of a world." Thus: "A world erased: / a world arranged."

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Increasingly one suspects, behind the philosophy, a mysticism: "Even shade as it erases / radiates." (Actually, Wittgenstein got there first, as Massey's notes in his notes: "There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.") The implicit play of what is 'void' and what is 'real,' a constant in Massey's work, seems less and less a source of existential angst here and more a question of plain awareness, even ecstasy.

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Massey is a connoisseur of shit. It features, one way or another, in each of his books to date. The latest installment:

Winter-chipped sidewalk
annotated by grass clippings

and bird shit
white as paint

("Take Place")

It makes sense: nothing escapes his gaze, however abject. How else to prove it?

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At this point in his 'career,' four books in, it should be apparent Massey has one of the sharpest ears in contemporary American poetry (sorry, Clark Coolidge, et al.):

In the indent of
a day: wagging
 ferns modulate
glass table glow

 gnats needle
light's surface
 a texture
warmth conjures

("Yard (Three Angles)")

Form and content short-circuit here: the passage asks us to slow down and just *luxuriate*, in sound, a 'warmth' conjured from nothing more than the abrasion and flow of syllables. . . .

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Ambivalence concerning the exact jurisdiction of the observing self is Massey's natural stance, but sharper issues do intrude, an increased awareness of the precariousness of 'bare life':

In overgrown brush
a nameless animal's
short-circuited shriek.

("Take Place")

Massey is always precise – philosophical – about how such darker intimations of mortality and existential confusions derive from, and provoke, perception:

To walk into it–

breathe the frequencies
that knot the air, another

animal baffled
to be an animal.

("Turned")

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As "An Interim" shows, Massey's sense of the longer lyric sequence is evolving, moving away from his earlier model (discrete series of brilliant but essentially separate objects) to something new (specific units with more differentiated purpose and momentum). The three sequences that anchor *Illocality* are impressively distinct. "Take Place" dramatises acclimatization, again depicting it as required vocal recreation from scratch: "A palette stammers / to assemble the landscape." That said, the not-typically-allusive Massey manages to update the whole Williamsesque tradition with "No ideas / but in parking lots." *Still* "no one to drive the car" (apparently). "An Interim" is varied within itself, ranging from the

long lines and quick recordings mentioned above to shorter lines and more philosophic ruminations, finding in travel another access-point to a mystical perspective: "That anything isn't / That anything *is*." "Thaw Compass," with its epigrammatic quatrains, represents the book's most concerted effort to 'see – New Englandly' in the spirit of a Dickinson or a Creeley (the book's title comes from a Dickinson poem), even if the density of sound-compression often suggests a more wiseass, wiseacre Louis Zukofsky:

paper birch backdrops
yellow willow metronome
stratocumulus muffles sun
the yard's the only news on

("Turned")

*

At the other end of the spectrum, "The Span," a sequence in memory of land artist Nancy Holt, ends with the most minimal lyric/fragment Massey has produced to date:

Broken glass horizon

Even in this apparent balance of immediate particulars and enticing potentiality one detects a faint trace of bias: the trochaic rhythm and capitalized "B" put subtle extra emphasis on the first half of the 'equation' – Massey can't help but prefer the imminent specific, that which is right there in front of him. . . .

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In summary: if you aren't reading Joseph Massey, you should be. Itself a fresh start, this new book is a good place to begin. Most poets' body of work presents a worldview. His is a world.

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