

THE WOLGAMOT INTERSTICE

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649735211

The Wolgamot Interstice by D. C. Hope

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D. C. HOPE

**THE WOLGAMOT
INTERSTICE**



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edited by
D. C. Hope

a book from the

BURNING DECK, publishers

Ann Arbor * Detroit
1961

874-1000
#771

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How to Swallow an Aardvark and Other Movements

I do not know how many have noticed that the Wolgamot Society is dying. An eminent authority on Aleister Crowley has recently consulted the *I Ching* to find out if Wolgamot himself is still living; by his uncertain interpretation of that ambiguous oracle, John Barton is alive, but in decline. /// The organization's outward history began in May, 1959, when it sponsored a reading—a little illegally—at the University of Michigan. Three poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, posters announced, would read their own poems, answer questions, and even present a new verse play with jazz accompaniment. If the poets had been real, it would have been a more interesting evening than that campus is used to, and the hall filled up with local beats and curious students. I suppose there were psychology majors thinking of it as a field trip and doubtless some English grads trying their best to react like Mrs. Trilling. Anyway, it was a most unacademic looking mob, since the front rows (and the floor, and the window sills) were taken by uncombed—some unshod—girls and men in motorcycle jackets. The very few instructors who came (I didn't see any professors) sat in the back. /// The three poets gave the audience no chance to apply the usual clichés. Felicia Borden ("the most authentic woman voice of the late school"—the poster attributed this to Henry Miller) took off her trench coat to show a black sheath with sequins. Ronald Whalen, a negro—some said a Hindu—spoke softly with beautiful articulation, *man's* or *like it's*. There was a notable lack of beard. /// A prominent Aristotelian with tenure introduced the poets by reading thumbnail biographies. Miss Borden had been awarded a fellowship by the American Academy of something or other—and turned it down. Applause. Kenneth Kant, the third poet, had been arrested in San Francisco for petty larceny and narcotics violation. Grand applause. Nine months in a federal prison, he went to Japan and turned Zen monk in Yoshiwara, returned to write an autobiography: *The Wordless Walls*—to be published next week. /// As far as I know, Felicia Borden's poems are now lost. This is a pity, since they are the only examples I can recall of an interesting genre, the automatic translation. To make an automatic translation, the poet simply reads the original poem (in this case, appropriately, by the Alsatian Dadaist, Hans Arp) quickly, just enough to get a first impression; then writes an English poem as fast as possible—preferably without thinking.

Several of the lines

turned out remarkably apt. A poem originally starting,

Sind wir noch unterwegs?

began, in Felicia Borden's reading,

Are we still on the Road?

but I forget the rest.

Felicia, incidentally, was the best liked poet of the evening, at least for the more sober patrons. Her figure certainly had something to do with it, but more than one undergraduate girl was impressed by how profoundly serious she obviously was. Kenneth Kant was as obviously not serious, and some of those same arbiters decided he was just "exploiting the movement."

Kant's poems sounded as if written by a bad poet on short notice. As a matter of fact, they were written by an excellent poet on the verge of alcoholic stupor. One is printed in this volume. Another demanded politely of John Crowe Ransom that he ram his textures up his structures and had as refrain,

Yap! Yap!

Crap in your lap!

The audience ate it up. They wanted that one over.

The evening moved in two contrary directions: the audience, at least the front half, liked the performance more and more; the performers got more and more outrageous, occasionally insulting. Someone in the audience insisted the beats must have been influenced by John Barton Wolgamot. Another claimed it was a generation that knew him not. Whalen and Kant began quarreling over the same subtlety and had to be recalled by the moderator.

I must admit not all the questions from the house were completely extemporaneous, but the best of them were. A local character, apparently leading up to a question, started describing his large collection of latrine scribblings, but was interrupted by Kant's "I probably wrote some of them." Such inquires as "What are you escaping from?" and "What are you escaping to?" were clearly meant to ask "What can we escape from/to?" The nearly stated, the barely concealed question constantly in the air was, "Why do we have to go to San Francisco to be beat; why can't we be beat right here in Ann Arbor, Michigan?"

But the final degradation—of the audience because it swallowed it; of the Wolgamot Society because it did not manage to predict how much an enlightened

crowd will swallow; of the beat generation for making an outlandish parody seem likely—was the world premiere of Ronald Whalen's play, *The Quivering Aardvark and the Jelly of Love*. Three casts (I say to their credit) agreed to do the play, then looked at the script and backed out. The parts were finally acted by two of the poets and several incredibly loyal Wolgamotians.

The Quivering Aardvark . . . etc. was actually based on the final scene of *Francesca da Rimini* by George Henry Boker, a nineteenth century American Shakespeare-imitator and one of the worst playwrights who ever lived. The plot is a little different: Boker's Francesca has, as usual, been unfaithful with her ugly husband's handsome brother Paolo—originally played by Otis Skinner; the husband, Lanciotto, kills the happy pair in blank verse. In the Whalen version, a lovely dopefiend named Prudence falls for a square called T. S. and both are murdered by the hero-hipster Lance. Some of the more appropriate lines from *Francesca* are left intact:

- Can howling make this sight more terrible?
but most are somewhat changed. Boker's Francesca cries,
Thou canst foresake me, then,
To spare thyself a little bashful pain?
Paolo, dost thou know what 't for me,
A woman—nay, a dame of highest rank—
To lose my purity? . . .
- Whalen's T. S.: Can you, then flush me down the drain
Just to spare yourself a little bashful pain?
Prudence, don't you know what it is for me,
A man, I mean a man of the hariest type,
To be un-cherry? . . .
- And Lanciotto: . . . what a craven has thy guilt
Transformed thee to! Why, I have seen the time
When thou'dst have struck at heaven for such a thing!
- Lance: Pru, Pru, Pru! What a cruddy coward has your crime
Transformed you to? Why man, I've seen the time
When you'd have cold-cocked Kerouac!
- Boker's Dost thou see
Yon bloated spider—hideous as myself—
Climbing aloft, to reach that wavering twig?
When he has touched it, one of us must die.