

## Book Reviews

Men and Masculinities  
Volume X Number X  
Month XXXX xx-xx  
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Newman, Richard Jeffrey. (2006). *The Silence of Men*.  
Fort Lee, NJ: CavanKerry Press, Ltd.

DOI: 10.1177/1097184X07304807

There is an old Italian saying, “Le parole sono femmine, e i fatti sono maschi,” words belong to women and actions to men. This philosophy resurfaces every now and then in popular culture, most recently through the character Tony Soprano, who asks his psychiatrist, “Whatever happened to Gary Cooper, the strong, silent type?” This notion of manly silence has dominated popular portrayals of men for a long time so that one’s masculinity gets questioned whenever a man speaks out about how he feels. But for centuries there have been men who have spoken out about their feelings through poetry. Why hasn’t the poet made it into the minds of those who expect men to live in certain silences?

Recently there have been a number of developments that have brought the focus of some attention to the poetry written by men who explore meanings of masculinity in contemporary society. There are organizations and even websites (<http://www.menweb.org/poetpage.html> and <http://www.menstuff.org/issues/byissue/poetry.html>) devoted to such poetry. The question we need to ask is what is it about this contemporary poetry that separates it from all those poems written by men in the past? In looking at much of this work, we can identify a strong self-consciousness about the male experience that more often than not is brought to the poems by the new thinking about masculinity influenced by feminist theory and practice and by new developments in the field of masculinities studies. But some of the better work by today’s male poets on the subject of masculinity seems to transcend the sociological focus that such theory often incites and allows us to approach it more from an aesthetic perspective. Such is the poetry of Richard Jeffrey Newman.

Newman’s first book-length collection, *The Silence of Men*, explores the space between old-fashioned male silence and contemporary male sound and presents poems that force us to rethink the place of poetry in masculinity studies. Newman’s poems represent some of the best approaches to exploring the tension between insensitivity and sensitivity through art, and show us what happens when a feeling man grapples with the problems of being a man today.

In the “Foreword,” veteran poet Yusef Komunyakaa outlines what we can expect in this book. “His poetry dares us, as men, as human beings, to share what we have experienced and imagined—the good and the bad. He seems to be saying that dialogue is what makes each of us whole. Not in a gush, but through a meaningful language that embraces art” (p. xiv). There certainly is a great deal of dialogue in Newman’s poetry, but to his credit it never comes off as forced or preachy. Most of it happens between writer and reader as Newman challenges the reader’s passivity.

What separates Newman’s poetry from the personal, formless rants that too often appear as poems today is his attention to the craft. Newman knows that poetic art is

about choosing the right words and presenting them in interesting breaths. His lines are taut no matter whether the poem is a lyric or narrative—no excess or wasted words here.

The silences he confronts surround the concepts of sex, religion, and acts of self- and other-realization. The collection opens with “What I Carry with Me,” that sets the tone of the volume and lets us know right away that the while the truth may have hurt in the past, recalling it can inspire in the present. This autobiographical *terza rima* is composed of clean lines and clear thoughts that are poignant in spite of the punches he pulls as he uses poetry instead of his fists to process childhood experiences that have shaped the way he’s behaved.

Scattered throughout the collection are sensuous lyrical poems about lust, seduction, and love. “To the Woman at the Bar” explores an imagined encounter that turns strangers into lovers, showing the fantasy that results from a simple flirtation. “After Saying Goodbye to You Three Times in Three Days” recounts the chemistry between two lovers: “this carefully careless brush / of fingers on thighs / is all we allow ourselves / italics for words we each hope / the other hears as / Take me!” (p. 54). “Coitus Interruptus” transcends a sexual act interrupted by police action outside a couple’s apartment, and moves into other times in the speaker’s life when his focus was shattered by outsiders crashing into his life. The celebration of sex is carefully rendered to exhibit the joy of physical encounter in the poem “Light”; the poet renews the act through lines like: “and then I was water, a river / washing the night from your flesh / as I cradled your body rising in me / till you were clean, glowing” (p. 20). “Like Wet Clay on a Wheel” is a brilliant little poem that reminds us that in the act of watching others, we often see ourselves.

The collection is punctuated with the accounts of Holocaust survivors and victims that the poet has based on interviews. “Yossi’s Story” is about one whose mother recounts how he survived the Holocaust only to be shot by Arab terrorists in Jerusalem. Others include “Rachel’s Story,” “Ibrahim’s Story,” and “Sarah’s Story,” and together they make for a memorial of sorts out of the life and death stories of others. By trapping these lives in his poems, he helps us to hear the speakers in new ways.

Some of the poems focus on family relationships over time. In “What There Is for Me to Hold to” the poet uses personal history to connect a particular experience to a universal legacy, and takes a stand to make changes. Recounting “God’s command to Abraham / to go” he writes: “In my family, / the men also leave / Or they die, I will no longer / prepare to be next” (p. 65).

Violence, a seemingly natural extension of men’s attempts control their lives and the lives of those who surround them, becomes a pathetic act that strengthens the victim’s resolve to not replicate the abuse received. This, we see, is the value of breaking that traditional manly sound barrier.

Newman works in a variety of forms, but what seems to stand out in this collection are the narratives that bring personal stories out for public scrutiny. The relived horror of primal scenes is striking, yet, in the form of the poem strangely soothing. There is

something about the fact that such an experience made it into art might just mean the victim is dealing with it. He achieves this sometimes through humor that comes when he connects scientific terms to personal experiences, as in the poem “Wormholes.” A wormhole is a term from physics about connecting “widely separated regions of space-time” (p. 21). The only thing light about the poem seems to be the title, but as you get drawn into the poem, expecting scientific objectivity, you are led into a personal tale of a stepfather abusing a stepchild and the mother’s denial of it all.

Just how close the author is to the poetic personae we’ll never know, but we can’t help but feel there’s not much difference. The magic of this work is that who wrote the poem doesn’t matter while we’re reading it. If the stories of these poems don’t get you then their artistry will. *The Silence of Men* is a strong debut for a poet, and a brave work of art by a man for all, especially us men who grew up under the watch of those strong, silent ones.

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