# Juha Virtanen reviews Joshua Clover

### Joshua Clover – Red Epic

#### (Commune Editions & AK Press, Oakland, CA, 2015. Paperback, 84pp, $16.00, ISBN 9781934639160)

In anticipation of Joshua Clover’s forthcoming book of cultural and critical theory, Of Riot (Verso, 2016), it is perhaps useful to frame this review of Red Epic with some comments Clover makes in his 2012 paper, ‘World-System Riot’:

It is one thing to locate the riot as a form of struggle proper to the era of circulatory capital, but quite another to recognize its political efficacy […] The dismissal of Camden Town looting as an apolitical expression of capital’s imperatives […] will miss this point entirely: given the current condition of capital, the market, the entire marketing situation, will be the place of struggle  […] Those for whom a stagnating or declining wage can no longer acquire the market basket—much less the ever-vaster surplus population beyond the wage—have realized the truth of the age: that a visit to the paymaster, even armed and in company, no longer affords a remedy. For them the action will be elsewhere, more and more intensely. Which is by way of saying: the riots are coming.

(15-16)

For Clover, then, riots—more so than actions such as, say, strikes—are the most immediate, pressing site of struggle in our contemporary moment: no revolutions have ever happened without being preceded by riots, and thus—under the current conditions of capital, where the state (and the police) are near but the economy is far—the streets (and the entire market-place) stand as a legitimate arena for class war. Further, it is important to note that Clover’s analysis of riots departs from King’s famous assertion that they are ‘the language of the unheard’. Instead of considering them simply as a propagandist message or a discourse that intends to garner attention and to persuade, Clover sees riots something more potent and practical; as a phenomenon somewhat akin to a Benjaminian divine violence, where “the presumptions of a functioning and just democratic state—one in which citizens might petition for the redress of grievances—start to collapse” (Clover, 2014). This reading of riots as a practical site of struggle, as opposed to a cultural mode of communication or propaganda, evidently informs certain aspects of Clover’s poetics as well. In his exchange with Keston Sutherland—published in Claudius App 5—Clover summarises his basic position on the relationship between poetry and revolutionary struggle through a succinct syllogism:

1. Poetry has no autonomous existence prior to the material life structured by the capitalist social relation, hence
2. Poetry cannot be brought to the struggle over that relation from some other place, as that place doesn’t exist, hence
3. “Revolutionary poetry arises from struggle; it is the gift that struggle brings us”   
   (Clover, in Clover and Sutherland)

This syllogism also lends itself to the reading of Red Epic, a terrific volume of poetry that is immersed in equal portions of riots, theory, and pop music. This triangulation is first characterised at the beginning of the collection, in ‘My Life in the New Millennium’:

It was true that the more I hated people the more I loved cats.

Then people started to surprise me.

Often this involved fire or Coca-Cola

bottles with petrol which amounts to the same thing.

Once fire is the form of the spectacle the problem

becomes how to set fire to fire.

Some friends were prepared to help with this which

Michael Jackson having died and then Whitney Houston

was the new pop music. Without an understanding

of the world system and the sea as the space of commerce

it is hard to integrate that other

most important fact of our era. Pirates.

(Red Epic, 3)

Clearly, the fire and petrol bombs are metonymic representations of riots; the references to Jackson and Houston allude to pop music; and the ‘understanding of the world system’ gestures towards theory. However, the poem does not simply list these points in a linear sequence: Clover maps out a more specific set of relations between them. Riots are, in fact, the new pop music; moreover, Jackson and Houston are not evoked as ironic quips, but rather as sources of genuine excitement and pleasure. Thus, the poem suggests that riots are currently both popular—in the sense that recent years have seen a lot of them—and that, for Clover, this proliferation is a thrilling and life-affirming prospect. Finally, while the gesture towards theory could implicitly suggest that this ‘understanding of the world system’ might somehow bring about an objective explanation of the current situation, this assumption is subsequently contradicted when the poem ultimately “comes down / to comrades known and elsewhere” (ibid).  In other words, ‘My Life in the New Millennium’ sees poetry as something that ought to arise from the riots and struggles conducted by these known and unknown comrades. It eschews poems that simply gesture towards those struggles from a distant, more speculative position.

The position articulated in ‘My Life in the New Millennium’ forms a crux for the collection as a whole. But although Red Epic is a collection that arises from contemporary struggles, this does not mean that the book consists of riot reportage rendered into poetry. Nor does it imply that Clover’s poems are interested in articulating a poetics—or any kind of performative language—of riots.  Rather, these poems manoeuvre through history, systems of global capital, and sites of resistance in order to consider how we might best fight these struggles—as seen in, for example, the conclusion to ‘Spring Georgic’, which paraphrases Lenin’s assertion that the Paris Commune failed because it did not “seize the fucking banks” (22).  Likewise, these poems are also concerned with issues of commitment and solidarity, as shown in ‘Haecceity’ and ‘Metalipsis for   Uyen Ha’, amongst others. At times, its concerns also extend to the challenges and necessities that these commitments hold for political poetry—perhaps most prevalently in ‘Gilded Age’ and ‘Transistor’, the second part to ‘The Fire Sermon’.

Stylistically, while there are several wry nods towards high modernism, the most obvious formal points of reference for these poems are perhaps Diane Di Prima’s Revolutionary Letters and the work of the New York School, particularly Frank O’Hara.  Yet, it would be erroneous to read these influences as a product of a nostalgic hankering towards the 50s, 60s, or 70s. As the end to ‘Red Epic’ (the first part of ‘Fire Sermon’) states:

                           if Lunch Poems

were the poetry of the future

                it would be all like

                              I communize this I communize that

(11)

Of course, O’Hara’s work did not have such an explicit partisan (in this particular case, communist) programme, as John Ashbery once noted. The implication of Clover’s conditional clause, then, is that Lunch Poems are not the poetry of the future. Although Clover admires O’Hara’s work, he does not idealize it; he understands the pitfalls of uncritically and seamlessly transposing the poetics of Lunch Poems to the current social reality. Instead, O’Hara’s poetics are simply acknowledged as one possible antecedent (amongst Mayakovsky, Sappho, and others) through which Red Epic can reject the bankrupt ideas of Language poetry and Conceptualism, and explore different registers to address Clover’s own contemporary moment.

Likewise, it is worthwhile noting that the unyielding assertions of Red Epic are not unobservant of the full ramifications of their demands. Consider, for example, this excerpt from ‘Questions of the Contemporary’: “[t]he next M.I.A / will be terrible again. / The next Robyn will be / great again” (69). Here, the development of pop music is identified as cyclical; one great album will be accompanied by a disappointing follow-up, or vice versa. Such a movement is roughly analogous with the boom and bust of capitalist economies; therefore, while Clover might liken the thrilling sensations of pop songs to those of riots, he also acknowledges that pop is—inextricably—connected to systemic cycles of accumulation. A similar predicament is also outlined earlier in ‘Gilded Age’:

[…] and finally in the afternoon with pheromonal halos around their bodies the neighbors race out of their apartments and bang into each other on the corner and I want to be honest about how much I love this all of this and its pleasure is my pleasure and its wine is my wine when I can afford it and I am holding this in mind as truth and measure when I say it must be annihilated not as text but really now.

(31)

Clover may love pop music and popular culture, but he also understands that a revolution will ultimately require the destruction of that culture—along with everything else structured by capitalist social relations. The honesty and openness of this ‘truth and measure’ is one of the most moving and exciting aspects of reading Red Epic. As ‘Gilded Age’ goes on to say:

[poetry] must be made from everything

including texts—this is the minimum formula for realism—

but it does not align itself

with texts—it must align itself with work—meaning hatred

of work—it must desire

change so much it is accused of being in love

with annihilation—

must in fact love annihilation—the rest is sophism—

(31-2)

**Sources**

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