PYTHAGORAS IN LOVE BY LEE SLONIMSKY

Reviewed by Oke Mbachu

Pythagoras in Love, Lee Slonimsky's second book of poems, is a collection of sonnets written from the viewpoint of Pythagoras, the famed mathematician known most for his theorem. The book is thematically divided into five sections and follows Pythagoras as he observes the natural world from a poetic and mathematical perspective, merging the two to song. In the hands of a lesser-skilled poet, this approach (of entirely sonnets, most of them math-based) might be doomed to monotony, but that is not the case here, as Slonimsky exhibits sure command and creativity over the 46 poems included in the volume. The sonnets range from the more traditional forms (Shakespearean, Petrarchan, etc.) to contemporary treatments that include innovative line breaks ("A Study in Flight", for example, actually resembles flying with its airiness, spacing, breaks and indentations) and meter ("The Concert" is refreshingly written in iambic trimeter). The sonnet form is also fitting for these poems due to its adherence to structure, and its numerical precision (Pythagoras would have appreciated this).

Wasting no time in baptizing and engaging the reader, the first two lines of the first poem in the book—"The Last Digit of Pi"— show the merging of poetic image with mathematical principles: "Bisected by a tree, the sun's gold light/ draws angles on the glass skin of the pond." It goes on to make the declaration that is the essential theme of this poem, and the following ones, that "this world's the weave of math, the art of Pi." The Pythagorean theorem also finds its way into a poem—"The Word of Birds" suggests that Pythagoras got his epiphany from nature: "a crow cries 'caw' in threes, then fours and fives—/ not long now till he squares…" This notion of nature as teacher is also evident in other poems, such as "At the Pond" ("the water studies eagerly, the sun/ contributes knowledge"), "A Crow's Point of View" ("his new academy, a woodland path") and others. This collection of reflective poetry makes it clear that mathematics is inherent in our natural surroundings, that essentially all knowledge is derived from nature.

While Pythagoras' passion for geometry is evident, it could be that the book's title refers to a love that is tri-fold: that of nature, of mathematics, and of a woman who is mentioned in several of the poems. It should be noted that Pythagoras is not used as merely a prop to drive the math-aspect of this work; his real-life situations were infused into the poems, making them all the more substantial and heartfelt (for example "The Loneliness of Exile"—both a section title and a poem title—relates to his real-life excursion into exile around the age of 30). Beyond merely the observational and the interpretable, some of the poems possess an emotional reality that is almost tangible, enough to make Pythagoras (who, in some of the poems, is love-sick and lonely due to his separation from his aforementioned lover) doubt his math and proclaim "but math is empty." …But he comes around.

There are numerous standout poems in this volume, and within these poems live stellar, remarkable lines (the first four lines of "Mystery," for example, are simply beautiful). These poems combine the artistic, historical, mathematical and metaphysical into a cohesive whole. The idea that there is "truth in numbers" resonates, and the poem "Watching, Day and Night" ponders just how far numbers can reach: "Perhaps dividing thirteen into seven/ lies just beyond the starsplit door to heaven." This collection of poems is unique, and deserving of reader exploration.

Pythagoras in Love is available through Orchises Press.