

SAILING TO OBLIVION BY RICHARD MOORE

Reviewed by Lee Slonimsky (oceanequity@earthlink.net)

In Arthur Mortensen's original and compelling novel-in-verse vision of the future, *A Disciple After The Fact* (Kaba Press, 2003), he refers to the work of Richard Moore, which has survived: "Moore, slashing with icy wit against/A bothered world already past its prime." Mortensen thus echoes—or anticipates—X. J. Kennedy's observation in his cogent introduction to Moore's latest book, *Sailing to Oblivion* (\$12.95 from Light Quarterly Imprints, www.lightquarterly.com): "...here is work too brilliant, nasty and enjoyable to disappear; and...its author is headed for immortality."

Indeed, the reasons why Moore's work could and should be preserved in a future no likelier to make poetry central than our own technology-and-prose-saturated one has, are embodied in his "light verse," which is both utterly comical and profoundly serious.

Moore's past body of work should need no introduction. But for those who have been excluded from it by the prejudice in American poetry against form, (which goes back to modernism's rebellion against "tradition," while modernism itself adhered to some of our more questionable traditions, like elitism and self-willed superiority in art), he's the much acclaimed author of the sonnet sequence *Word from the Hills*, a groundbreaking work in what may ultimately be viewed as the sonnet revival of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, *Empires*, one of the great achievements in the history of characterization in poetry (its voices including those of Aaron Burr, Jay Gould, Archimedes, and Cleopatra), and numerous other works of distinction.

If one tried to summarize Moore's views on broad issues like life's meaning, or the possibilities for immortality—and Moore is fearless and sometimes wondrous in the dimensions of the issues he tackles in *Sailing's* poems—"Twenty Syllables For Posterity" comes to mind: "Since all we can do in this life is lose/at last, come, let's drift down old age in booze." But his poems can only be superficially explored through quotes and/or summary; the gift they provide us is the priceless one of musically crafted wit with stinging barbs attached, barbs from well-considered reflection that encourage a reader to contemplate critically diverse subjects ranging from the foibles of academia (in the title poem), to the difficulty and sometime hypocrisy of religious faith ("A Reply to Saint Paul"), to the often overlooked brutality of nature ("Song of a Link in the Food Chain"), to the twin mysteries of opposition to euthanasia, and Ernest Hemingway's reputation, here linked for the first time ("The Way Out").

"A Classical Interlude," seventeen deliciously pointed poems midbook, hilariously yet soberingly vindicates X. J. Kennedy's description of Moore as "one of our few true classicists." In one of them, the memorable "The Classy Cool Outlook," (the title perhaps spinning off from *The Classical Outlook, Journal of the American Classical League*, which has published no fewer than twenty of *Sailing's* poems), Moore describes a "friendship" with death that is a blackly humorous variation on literary antecedents like

Melville's Queequeg sleeping in his coffin, or monks reputedly sleeping in theirs in Joyce's "The Dead." The symbolic subtleties of its first stanza show a patient craftsman at work; references to Lucretius's "cold and inert...atoms," and "ice for dessert," suggest a nonbeliever's afterlife, the nonexistence promised by science. Whether served up with detachment by Lucretius or a much later wild passion by Whitman, whirling atoms do not satisfy the traditional quest for an afterlife. But for this poet, though a likelihood of ending in atoms amidst ice may elicit despair, it also brings "a strange cold comfort." That's because Moore's highest value, certainly higher than conforming to tradition or momentary comfort, is his idea of the truth.

Like any art of quality, these poems, which so often transcend the "light verse" that is their surface form, have to be deeply savored to be fully appreciated. I encourage all readers to read *Sailing to Oblivion* once, and then again. The pleasures of laughter await you, but also the example of a deeply intelligent and learned man confronting history, the human condition, and himself.

[*Editor's Note:* copies of *Sailing To Oblivion* are available from *Light Quarterly*. Checks (drawn on a U.S. bank) should be made out to Light Quarterly, P.O. Box 7500, Chicago, IL 60680 (\$12.95 Post Paid), and the book is also available by charge (toll-free, VISA/MC, 1-800-285-4448).]

"Review of *Sailing to Oblivion* by Richard Moore" © 2005 by Lee Slonimsky