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**From the Selected Works of Michael Theune**

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## Andrew Joron's <em>Fathom</em>

Michael Theune, *Illinois Wesleyan University*

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**NEW! Review of Andrew Joron's *Fathom***

*Fathom* by Andrew Joron. Black Square Editions, \$12.95.

Review by Michael Theune

Andrew Joron's *Fathom* opens by asking "What good is poetry at a time like this?" This question launches Joron's prose essay, "The Emergency," a striking manifesto that calls on poetry to be responsible to the world and attempts to define what, in fact, poetry should be and do in our own destitute time and place, not only in an America post-9/11, but in an America in the midst of its own illegitimate actions. In these dark times, Joron sees clearly through the veil of waving flags the United States' terrible foreign policies, including a military retaliation in Afghanistan that, at the time of Joron's writing, had killed at least as many innocent civilians as had the 9/11 attacks. But in this awfulness, Joron, holding the hope that Holderlin and Heidegger had before him, that "where the danger is, there also is the salvation," anticipates a new event: "A kind of topological fold or failure (called a 'catastrophe' in mathematics) precedes the emergence--constitutes the emergency--of the New." He prophesizes a new Word, a "Word that opens a solar eye in the middle of the Night." Insisting that "the words of a poet must come together with those of others struggling for peace and justice," Joron asks the poet to provide the voice, the cry, of lamentation, the voice of a "*deep blues*," "in a word, the uncanny reflection of an unfinished world."

"The Emergency" is necessary, timely writing, and the poetry it demands will be some of the most vital writing of our day--if it gets written. It is not written in the four sections of *Fathom* that follow "The Emergency." The largely abstract, philosophical, speculative poems in those sections are too cerebral for our bloody world. Joron's poems, in fact, make little reference to the reality, the law, politics, economics, religion, of our time. Instead, they mostly look to the past, to poetic and intellectual predecessors, including Joron's own work in his previous book, *The Removes*, published in 1999, two years before 9/11, and read more as commentary than as cry.

*Fathom's* third section, "Constellations for Theremin," for example, employs parallel instances of image use in the poetry of Yvan Goll and Paul Celan, the material for a long-defunct charge of plagiarism against Celan, as Joron's prose preface to the section makes clear, "the antennas of an imaginary theremin," that "electronic lyre of the Russian Revolution." According to Joron, the "etheric waves" produced by these antennas then pour over and energize the writing that follows. But the writing that follows each set of parallel usage--six abstractly-imaged and aphoristic fragments, two of which are quotations taken directly from the work of Celan and Goll--contains mostly dry assertions of willed mysteries: "Pictures of ancient noise, hieratic news. Suggesting hair, birds, & the blue banners of the invisible," "The burn of whiteness/witness. The book a scene of heavy curtains, wind-inhabited," "If there is a word that marks the place where language was born, it is 'you.'" Almost completely missing here is the visceral quality of so much important poetry. Nowhere is there outrageous blasphemy packed into killer lines like Celan's "Pray, Lord, pray to us, we are near." Nowhere is an image so meaty or gorgeous that one would have to, and want to, sink one's teeth into it, that would force one to have to, as Celan demanded, listen one's way in with one's mouth.

Named after a Dada poem-cycle by Richard Huelsenbeck, *Fathom's* final section, a series of alternating prayers and "blasts," is called "Fantastic

Prayers," but the writing in the section is anything but fantastic. Unlike Joron's earlier, more image-filled work in science-fiction poetry, and even unlike Huelsenbeck's phantasmagoric prayers, with their violent and megalomaniac shtick--clear in lines like "I am the meteorite dropping out of the nipples of the moon," and "Unexpectedly my head dropped onto my butt / Tarammtata rammta"--Joron's fantastic prayers read like cerebral exercises, and the "blasts" that accompany the prayers sound a particularly exhausted, exhausting note. One blast begins: "MOUND TO SOUND: DER MUND. // MINED / MIND / MOANED. // MOANED / MONAD." Another begins: "DARK MARKER / THE MAKER. // NEVER THE NERVE / OF ARRIVAL. // NERVE / TO CURVE TO CARVE."

Such structural procedures are used throughout *Fathom*; its poems are replete with this method of proceeding, running on lines such as "The pilot knows / That the plot is missing its / Eye" and endless plays on pairings such as "told" and "toll," "missing" and "massing," "think" and "thing," "singing" and "singeing," and "cloud" and "crowd"--a particular connection Joron also employs in "hand that crumbles," a poem in *The Removes*. This echoing occurs, as well, among many other poems within *Fathom*. One "Constellation for Theremin" ends with a reference to "fantastic prayer." Another constellation begins with the words, "Mazed interior," the title of a later poem. Through such methods, Joron makes his book seem crystalline, or else the product of self-similar, fractal reproduction, and he seems conscious of this, including signs of his awareness in his text; in "Mazed Interior," Joron states, "A mazed interior. Self-similar aisles of isles, pouring / form from form." However, the result of such reflection is a sense of feeling lost rather than amazed. This feeling is especially palpable when one of *Fathom's* few notes of protest--"a free word says death or, better, death / To the president"--is immediately overcome by the text's more abstract fallback thinking: "Imagine the spoken, O's / Spokes convergent on no center. No place / Is polis / but there are violins preceding violence."

Reflective, sequined sequences, conglomerations, and constellations, Joron's poems never really are allowed to accumulate, and so they can never enact the almost miraculous "phenomenon of emergence" that Joron describes in his prose essay as "a chance combination of preexisting elements result[ing] in something totally unexpected." Though Joron connects his work, through reference, to all manner of great twentieth-century thinkers--Adorno, Bataille, Benjamin, Breton, Wittgenstein--and their thought, *Fathom* is too much homage to, and not enough embodiment of, such powerful, transgressive thinking. Too enthralled by predecessors, Joron cribs too much from them and depends too much on their strength rather than speaking to the world now, as it is, its critical and vital, timely and emergent word, a word for which it is time it were time.