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## The Great Day: Poems 1962-1983, by John Taglibue

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John Tagliabue, *The Great Day: Poems 1962-1983*. Plainfield, Indiana: Alembic Press, 1984. 156 pp. \$14 hard cover; \$7 paperback.

Review by Michael Sweeney

Though the vast majority of the poems in John Tagliabue's *The Great Day* are irrepressibly joyous in mood, his satiric "Chi ha scorpeto l'America?" comes as close as any to capturing the poet's sensibility:

This guy kept talking about death in his essay in documentation  
 as if he knew what it was all about,  
 he had it footnoted and bibliographed and then a  
 sophomore girl  
 chimed in and wrote with correct punctuation  
 about nada and more nada which added up to the great drama  
 of nada, he said it was everywhere  
 and she said it was everywhere he looked, but you know  
 when they began to have a feeling for each other  
 and some months later she had a baby  
 they weren't going to call it Nada Anymore  
 but George Washington Columbo.

I find these lines among Tagliabue's most hard-edged and winning: in them we see his scorn for what he views as fashionable poses of despair (in his Introduction he speaks of "those vacuous Pinter characters" staging their emptiness) as well as what John Ciardi describes as his daring "to exult in the simplicity of first things," and his "compulsive talent to make them new." Indeed, when reading *The Great Day* one is immediately aware of the great influence Whitman has had on the poet; for that reason, even though Tagliabue's work is both learned and allusive, it is overall very accessible. Because he embraces so much of Whitman's generosity of spirit and openness of form, because he is, like the "Walt Whitman" of *Leaves of Grass*, "on the streets . . . forever walking / in search of the newness of the poem that is in any person" ("I want to know who you are, New

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Poet”), Tagliabue may even convince dour existentialists that if they look hard enough, anything — or even “nothing” — will yield some sustenance, a new beginning.

In this generous selection, which represents over twenty years of the poet’s work, we can trace Tagliabue rendering the surprise and newness of things great and small, examining subjects private and public. There are a number of poems in sequence: on the Apollo moon landing, on the suicide of a Bates College colleague during the late 1960s turbulence on and off campus, even on vegetables. Of these, his “Sequence: Poems in Praise of My Father” is particularly affecting. Winding backwards and forwards in time, from the ambulance racing the poet’s father to the hospital for the last time, to the ship carrying the family from Italy to New York; from the poet as a boy being swung to the edge of the sea spray by his father on a vacation in Maine, to his watering the grass at the edge of his father’s restaurant in New Jersey (the last lines of which are cited below), these poems have a quiet, cumulative power. Engaging honestly in sentiment, they avoid sentimentality; when the poet recalls that

later on I would read and celebrate Whitman;  
now I was content  
and generous and cavorting and your Eternal Assistant  
sprinkling the  
living land and its dreams and skies

he is entirely disarming, pointing us toward thoughts that lie indeed too deep for tears.

There is a profusion of such vibrant, fertile imagery in *The Great Day*. Tagliabue, furthermore, shows a puckish curiosity in the interrelationships between words. Though occasionally Tagliabue’s word play is distracting (“the scent of the rose is sent to us when necessary”) and at times borders on the frivolous (“the vine divine,” and “lettuce does not let us alone” from his vegetable sequence, to me the slightest poems in the volume), in many cases the apparently casual insertion of a word will reverberate throughout a poem,

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sending an almost electrical charge through his lines and peeling off successive layers of meaning. For example, in the last stanza of "The Gracious Heroine Helps the Dance become Free"

Romeo on the balcony,  
The green winged Gabriel by the rose;  
I am beckoned by your Courtesy

"courtesy" demands to be taken on many levels: as politeness, generosity, acquiescence, and, in its root sense, as a curtsey — in a poem that begins "To choose / one word or choose another word," all of these meanings extend the poem's range. Similarly, when we realize that "sumptuous," in the lines "We come to Sumptuous thoughts, Brahms, Wallace Stevens / Connoisseur of Symphonies and Splendors" ("She comes with her arms full of lilacs and fugues proceed"), is to be taken as meaning both "luxurously fine, splendid, superb" and "entailing great expense, as from fine craftsmanship," we can see how it ties together the separate themes of Eden, the Eternal Now, summer, and the ceremony of Commencement (for Bates students and for everyone) that have been twining their way around the specific poem. As Tagliabue writes in his Introduction, whether a poem comes alive or not "all depends on the context, how one color or word is *related* to another color or word . . . all this comes out . . . *in the phrasing* in the one long sentence that amounts to the precise and ineffable poem." Technically, the best of Tagliabue's work has a seamless quality to it, and for all of the Whitmanic overtones, the "I" does not intrude upon the emotion or situation or idea that is the stimulus for the individual poem.

In fact, the poems in the latter part of the volume especially, while never losing their distinct voice, bring such intense scrutiny on their subjects that the poet's presence nearly dissolves, leaving us with the work itself, whose effect Ciardi likens to "common daylight corruscating through a prism." Continually gazing at the cosmos, Tagliabue feels that

there is more to find, and we fragile universe show up  
as we can; it is this hinter land, this transition land  
of hints and ever renewed tokens of taste  
and instinct that acknowledges the tale of the comet or the  
migrations of salmon or the repeated  
annual moon instructed manual of the gigantic turtles;  
another god is deposited on the sand, and when it  
speaks to the ear of the muse of the poem  
centuries before it is written it says this is not all, this  
is not all, this is not the end.  
(“Under the brim of my shaking straw hat”)

Such lines succeed, according to X.J. Kennedy, in capturing “the exactness and fine sensibility of Oriental poetry.” Contemplative in the best sense, these images take hold: because they are so precisely rendered, they are infinitely suggestive.

In a writer whose individual poems all form part of the one great book he is writing, it may be unfair to single out individual poems for praise, but in addition to those I’ve cited some particular favorites of mine are “America Complicated With Integrity: Homage to Muriel” and “The Separation of the Divine Body.” The first is a moving tribute “where in the glare of this machine place / with the ferocity of blandness, pollution, steel, trains and cars” Tagliabue urges us to “look at Muriel Rukeyser,” whose poems are a counterweight to the despairing songs of Kafka, Hart Crane, and John Berryman (whose “385 dream songs are pieces of ice” in the gray water where he, like Crane before him, ended his life). Ours may be a dark age, but Rukeyser’s poems “have collected our hope and power, to walk with / her and them makes us see bold incorrigible / indivisible Whitman ahead.” (The last line break is a masterful stroke.) The second poem named above, which deals with Tagliabue’s hilarious adventure with a white moccasin snake “poisonous they say as all get out” and some equally venomous Florida matrons, gives us the poet at the top of his playful, satiric form. To me it suffers only in comparison with D.H. Lawrence’s “Snake,” which it resembles in subject matter and theme. In “Snake” it is the poet himself who drives away the creature, denying all of its dark, vital energy; only after the deed is done does

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he realize what is lacking in himself, that he has a "pettiness" to expiate. In "The Separation of the Divine Body" it is the women in "a brand new car like a shined up / dead husband" who scream at Tagliabue to "run over it with your goddam car." In the context of the poem, these lines are rib-splitting, but one is left with the impression that the women are too easy targets, and that Lawrence's poem cuts closer to the bone.

Yet when one thinks of the poets over the last twenty five years whose work was concerned increasingly with dark, painful personal revelations — John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath come to mind — and whose lives ended, without any exaggeration, "In despondency and madness," it is encouraging to read a body of poetry on the scale of *The Great Day*, one whose vision is buoyant, complex, and coherent. If as Tagliabue states "the act of writing may be a celebration for those of us in need of a holiday in a bleak world," his poems are continual engagements against bleakness, written with the conviction that nature is never entirely spent, that "the poem / is born out of the rhythmic sea / like a dolphin" again and again.