

*Tau* by Philip Lamantia and *Journey to the End* by John Hoffman  
Introduction by Garrett Caples  
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A new book of poetry published by City Lights, number 59 in their Pocket Poets Series, presents for the first time a long-lost collection of poems from Philip Lamantia in conjunction with the work of John Hoffman. Edited by Garrett Caples (an accomplished poet from the Bay Area), the collection contains a valuable forward from him, placing the context for both collections within the dynamics of the San Francisco Renaissance. Also present are Caples' introduction to Hoffman and two introductions to Hoffman by Lamantia. This twin collection of poems emends the gap between Lamantia's early verse and his religious conversion and, for the first time, gathers together the surviving poems of Hoffman, whose mysterious disappearance and inexplicable death in Mexico at age 25 elevated him to legendary status within the overlapping circles of Beat Generation and San Francisco Renaissance writers. According to Lamantia (54-55), one of the most famous lines in "Howl" commemorates Hoffman's fabled status: "Angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night."

Caples begins by citing the watershed "Six [sic] Poets at Six Gallery" poetry reading of October 7, 1955, in San Francisco, during which Allen Ginsberg debuted "Howl." But the event was significant for other reasons, particularly because it signaled the emergence of a younger generation of San Francisco poets (including Philip Lamantia) who had been fostered by Kenneth Rexroth. Although, as Caples points out, Lamantia demurred from reading his own poetry that evening, preferring to read the works of John Hoffman who had died in 1952, nevertheless, by the time of the 6 Gallery reading, Lamantia had been a poet for some twelve years, and his work of that period, collected in *Erotic*

*Poems* (1946), established his reputation as an American surrealist.

Lamantia's conversion to Catholicism, however, caused him to regard his subsequent work with jaundiced eye, and he was stopped from suppressing the present volume, *Tau*, only by the appeals of Goldian Nesbit, his first wife (6). While the publication of *Ekstasis* (1959) revealed the new poetics centered upon his religious conversion, the period of the 6 Gallery reading has remained a troubling lacunae for Lamantia's readers. Aside from three poems of *Tau* that were included in *Ekstasis* ("Terror Conduction" and "The Game [Man is in Pain]" also appeared in *The New American Poetry* anthology by Donald Allen), "Tau is the only example of a discrete, book-length manuscript selected and arranged by Lamantia himself, yet remaining unpublished" (6). Caples conjectures that these poems were the very ones that Lamantia declined to read at the 6 Gallery reading (6).

Happily, the publication of *Tau* allows us to read them as they were intended to be read: as a "discrete, book-length" sequence. In fact, the seventeen poems that make up *Tau* may well force a re-evaluation by scholars of Lamantia's evolution as a poet and realign the stars above the Beat Parnassus in the process. In terms of their sheer troping power, the poems are startlingly inventive, achieving their strange ambition with astonishing verve. In fact, it is Lamantia's vatic stance and tone, consistent throughout these poems, that demands admiration. These are a young person's poems, filled with the mystical fervor of someone who believes he is discovering and revealing new worlds. In this sense, his primary influence is closer to Rimbaud's *Illuminations* than to the poets with whom he is most often compared: Breton and Artaud.

Much like another American poet of Sicilian descent, Gregory Corso, Lamantia delights in obsolescent words and neologisms, but unlike Corso, he never deploys them for comedic purposes despite their mutual exuberance in affirming spiritual worlds:

This Eye [. . .]  
Radiates

A Light  
O time pure flowing  
Sun  
    Chariot!  
Riding cantilevered spaces  
    Is seen  
to See  
Interemanations  
Of the flowered spiritscapes. (26-7)

Beyond such neologisms, however, lie Lamantia's systematically surrealist disruptions of conventional syntax and connotation, which form the bedrock of his poetics throughout *Tau*. Here, for example, are lines that illustrate his approach: "On a smiling crevice of street / He cuts, for death, the diamond of her eye" (30). Such consistent exploitation of connotation is placed in service of his hermetic mysticism, yet his mysticism remain inscrutable, as Caples observes: "The poems are deeply mysteriously, doubtlessly drawing on his esoteric researches at the time, and resist immediate interpretation" (13).

However, Lamantia's surrealism is not an oblique criticism of the contemporary world betraying a cynical world-weary stance--indeed, the world here is not one that we can recognize. In this, the poet again most resembles the Rimbaud of the *Illuminations*. One of the wonders of *Tau* is that one never grows impatient with having his or her logical faculties frustrated by surrealist subversions of logical and natural law. Instead, the poems' constant surprise and aesthetic delight never degenerate into lugubrious ambushes of syntax and vaguely personal references.

Much like the gap in Lamantia's poetic record, the publication of John Hoffman's surviving poems fills another important gap in the history of Beat Generation poets. Although a handful of poems included in this collection were published in obscure journals forty years ago, never have all of them been gathered into one edition—many have never been published. Included after Caples's review of Hoffman's life and work are two

introductions written by Lamantia, the first in 1954 and the second in 1959. Both introductions are as remarkable for what they reveal about Lamantia's artistic values and poetics as for his view of what Hoffman wanted to achieve in his poetry. Clearly, both poets were deeply inspired by the visionary work of Rimbaud and Lautréamont, and sought to create a transcendent art that would re-mythologize poetry.

That goal becomes clear from the outset in Hoffman's *Journey to the End*, the title of his collected works. Nature imagery permeates his work in a way that the divide between poet and the natural world is erased. For example, "The Ambiguities" conveys Hoffman's metaphysical symbolism of the natural world; yet for Hoffman, the metaphor is embodied, corporeal, not merely a sign of supernatural investment. The poems reveal a hermetic, visionary world into which modernity never intrudes. These poems might just as well have been written in another century or another country instead of in Menlo Park, North Beach, or Greenwich Village. The feeling that one gets is that Hoffman must have lived outdoors all his life (certainly his spirit did), and that the elements of wind, sun, rain, and sky (and the many portentous birds that populate his poems) spoke to him as the primary forces of a spiritual universe. As one reads through his poetry, it becomes clear why Lamantia and Hoffman became such close friends: their poetic sensibilities were both intent on recovering some form of quasi-religious connection to the phenomenal world.

Aside from the sheer quality of Hoffman's work, the poems gathered in this book are necessary reading for any student of the Beat Generation because they reveal that the Beats' regard for him was not a shallow romanticization of his death, but rather a recognition that a poet of real talent had indeed achieved a poetry of genuinely surreal vision, an "angel-headed hipster" whose poetry had transcended all of the barriers save death that mid-twentieth-century American life had placed in his way.