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*Duende: Poems, 1966–Now* by Quincy Troupe (review)

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dragging themselves here, wailing sacred  
utterances, carrying amulets, fragments,  
recreating old practices, accents binding,  
anchoring within blood song, call & response  
recollections filled with aching madness,  
ghost voices imitating the ocean's syncopated growl,  
rolling now, rising up, spraying riddles, caterwauling,  
emanating hoarsely from formations of spirit crab voices  
climbing toward the surface of salt water, river water,  
on-going symphonic voices roaring ancient secrets,  
swept here through battalions of foaming waves  
swept west carrying enigmas, sacred rituals—

Poet Carol Muske-Dukes notes that Troupe developed his original ways of making language sing early: “Back when Quincy and I taught poetry writing in prisons on Riker’s Island, he was already not ‘first person I’ but ‘eye’ as he appears here in *Duende*, in these blazing, unshackled, resounding poems. In other words, ego is checked by all that is beheld, all that the eye sees, condemns, and celebrates in nonstop enumeration.” Troupe’s musical ear matches his ways of seeing and framing how good and bad coexist in big and little ways, as in this middle stanza in “The Sky Empties Down Ice”:

meanwhile            the sea whispers  
rapture on the other side of time  
pigeons drop slimy  
shit into  
your vanilla ice cream cone

This small incident is a synecdoche for the larger incident in the poem.

The book *Duende* gathers together earlier collections with striking titles—*Snake-Back Solos* (1978), *Skulls along the River* (1984), *Weather Reports* (1991), *Avalanche* (1996), *Choruses* (1999), *Transcircularities* (2002), *The Architecture of Language* (2006), *Errançities* (2012), *Ghost Voices*, and *Seduction* (2019)—and adds new poems. The poem “Duende” is dedicated to García Lorca and Miles Davis and draws doubly on the history of the spoken word and the roots of jazz “vibrating anew in Sketches of Spain, *andante blues*.”

The word *duende* is a contraction for *dueño de casa*, or “master of the house.” In her introduction to *Poet in Spain: Federico García Lorca* (2017), translator Sarah Arvio quotes Lorca saying, “the duende must be waked in the last rooms of the blood. You must toss out the angel and kick out the muse . . . the true struggle is with the duende,” which, she adds, is an “implike indwelling spirit whose presence makes all the difference between artless art and true art.”

Troupe’s words branch and move in directions that sing, swing, sizzle. His poetry honors his St. Louis roots, chosen and blood family, professional sports (he played pro basketball in Europe before returning to the Upper West Side and Harlem), island life in Guadeloupe and Haiti, and the quirks and quandaries of daily life. His poems make jump shots and score, as in the fourteen-liner “Just Think about It,” which begins:

just think about it sometimes all you need do is open  
a door, walk through it perhaps out into open space,  
walk into the world, whether it’s cold, or warm, then go  
whatever direction your mind of errançities takes you,  
go quickly, or slowly, but move resolutely through this moment

and ends:

perhaps the opening will reveal yourself to yourself—revelation—  
perhaps now you might feel different for the rest of your life

This uncapitalized and lightly punctuated poem invites readers to actuate a new mind-set. Is the word *errançities* made up? What does it mean? *Erran* suggests errant or straying from the proper course. Is the end of the word *cities*, or something else? The cedilla under the c could suggest Spanish roots. Influenced by García Lorca? Troupe’s mellow phrasing cajoles us to look outward and inward and to find our true selves.

*Errançities: Poems* was published in 2012, and it shows up in as a title in a poem from that period dedicated to Édouard Glissant that starts:

the mind wanders as a line of poetry taking flight meanders  
in the way birds spreading wings lift into space knowing  
skies are full of surprises like errançities encountering restless  
journeys as in the edgy solos of miles davis or jimi hendrix

This poem is about being in Guadeloupe, about conundrums—knotty mind wanderings that create new spaces to explore. Quincy’s musical word is on Google only as the title of one of his books. The stanza carries readers toward the epiphany at the end.

Troupe’s poems memorialize his brother Timothy, his mother, his wife, the “Old Black Ladies on Bus Stop Corners,” Kobe Bryant, Charles Mingus, Prince, Gabriel García Márquez, and his father. His “A Remembrance for Prince (1958–2016)” opens:

eye met you a couple of times with miles davis,  
you were quiet as a ball of dropped cotton  
hitting a warm, slate floor, though you were alert,  
your 500 watt lightbulb eyes glowing

His “Ode to John Coltrane” is an extended blues riff on the death of Coltrane and on death itself; the poet sneaks in a Dylan Thomas reference in one chorus starting “*Rage rage rage Coltrane!*” One stanza meditates directly on death itself:

Death has no sympathy for the unfinished.  
And genius and greatness? It feels  
not one way or the other.  
It simply comes like the exalted thing that it is:  
Alone, and unescorted into any room—the room perhaps!  
Bringing news of dimensionless wandering.

Troupe offers old and new forms from haiku and sonnets to his Seven-Eleven and other metered and free verse creations. His poems traverse five decades of personal, national, and world histories and offer his take on a range of topics and observations about individuals, including “River Town Packing House Blues,” a rhythmic tale related to the anonymous “John Henry” poem about Big Tom, a killer in a meatpacking plant, and specific artists, musicians, and writers he values, including, in “Searching,” “the poetry that fired the imaginations of Pablo Neruda, Aimé Césaire, César Vallejo, Jean Joseph Rabearivello”; as the poet tells us,

so eye have tried to reinvent through language a music  
laced and stitched with echoes that speak of the past though

anchored in the present and seeking a voice that will evoke  
the future

and it rails against

trump's White

House, needing to see severed bloody heads up on spikes

New inspirations include the poem “Gloster, Mississippi: Tankas & Haikus Suite,” which captures the Gloster project his wife, Margaret Porter Troupe, directs—offering free classes with Danny Glover and other all-stars to the children of Gloster, Mississippi.

Quincy Troupe's life has been filled with history-making moments, including researching and writing the best-selling *Miles: The Autobiography* (1989), which received the American Book Award in 1990, writing the Chris Gardner biography *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), and editing *James Baldwin: The Legacy* (1989). Troupe's long friendships with Miles Davis and James Baldwin also produced *Miles and Me* (2000), a memoir and screenplay, and a 1987 interview with Baldwin that pictures Baldwin's final days and his home in Saint Paul de Vence.

Troupe's poetry career started in the Watts Writers Workshop in Los Angeles—formed in response to the Watts riots of 1965. He edited *Watts Poets: A Book of New Poetry and Essays* (1968). *Giant Talk: An Anthology of Third World Writing* followed in 1975. This was one of the first multicultural anthologies in the United States and perhaps in the world. In 1975, the “canon” in England and America was primarily white and male. Only in 2022 can we look back and see how racist the country and the world was in 1975 outside of our limited integrated music/literature circles.

Early on and up to today, Troupe remains an important leader in resurrecting the oral tradition in poetry and in starting and starring in slam events that were forerunners of hip-hop. He is adept at improvising the spoken word, and on occasion, as YouTube programs show, he alters or riffs on his own poems. His delivery takes spoken word performance to new levels. Importantly, like Allen Ginsberg (whose *Mind Breaths* [1977] I typed at Naropa), Quincy's measured cadences face contemporary dilemmas head-on.

Troupe's papers and those of his father, Quincy Trouppe Sr., an all-star catcher in the Negro Baseball League, are in the Schomburg Center for

Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library. Troupe's honors include a 2010 American Book Award for lifetime achievement. Troupe at his best captures the majesty and beauty of everyday life, as in "My Poems Have Holes Sewn into Them," which closes,

my poems have holes sewn into them  
& they run searching for light at the end  
of tunnels or at the bottom of yawning pits  
or in the broad daylight where  
the words flapping like wings of birds  
fly whispering in absolute silence.

JAN GARDEN CASTRO ([www.jancastro.com](http://www.jancastro.com)) bikes and writes in Brooklyn. A letterpress limited edition of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* with her afterword came out from Suntup in 2022. Castro coedited the (now rare) essay collection *Margaret: Vision and Forms* (SIU Press, 1988).

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### **A COMPLEX SENTENCE**

Marjorie Welsh

Coffee House Press

<https://coffeehousepress.org/products/a-complex-sentence>

128 pages; Print, \$16.95

*Jerry Harp*

For all the complexity of their textures, density of allusion, and open-ended language play, the poems of Marjorie Welsh's new book, *A Complex Sentence*, are also remarkably moving, something not always associated with experimental poetry of this kind. Even though moments of this book make the craggier passages of Pound's *Cantos* read like straightforward lyric, I have also been startled by their ability to move into unexpected depths. This recently happened when I was discussing her poem "Enter" with my creative writing students; here is the ending: