

Manual



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Selected Writings 6

RICHARD BERENGARTEN was born in London in 1943, into a family of musicians. He has lived in Italy, Greece, the USA and former Yugoslavia. His perspectives as a poet combine English, French, Mediterranean, Jewish, Slavic, American and Oriental influences.

Under the name RICHARD BURNS, he has published more than 25 books. In the 1970s, he founded and ran the international Cambridge Poetry Festival. In the UK he has received the Eric Gregory Award, the Wingate-Jewish Quarterly Award for Poetry, the Keats Poetry Prize, and the Yeats Club Prize. In Serbia, he has received the international Morava Charter Poetry Prize and the Great Lesson Award, and in Macedonia, the Manada Prize. He has been Writer-in-Residence at the international Eliot-Dante Colloquium in Florence, Arts Council Writer-in-Residence at the Victoria Centre in Gravesend, Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge, and a Royal Literary Fund Project Fellow. He has been Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Notre Dame and British Council Lecturer in Belgrade, first at the Centre for Foreign Languages and then at the Philological Faculty. He is a Fellow of the English Association, a Bye-Fellow at Downing College, Cambridge, and Praeceptor at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. His poems have been translated into more than 90 languages.



Manual

the first hundred

RICHARD BERENGARTEN

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Editorial Note

Manual, the sixth volume in the ongoing series of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings*, is an ambitious work-in-progress, a single poem, whose central theme is human hands.

This present collation is divided into five sequences and subdivided into one hundred small poems, with two frame-pieces at the start and end. Numerological patterning, an articulated feature of much of Berengarten's writing, occurs in each poem's formal structure: ten lines, ten fingers; two stanzas, two hands.

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*In memory of
my mother
Rosalind Burns
(1911-1968)*

As for me, I interpret hands neither from the body nor from the mind. The mind rules over the hand; hand rules over mind. The gesture that makes nothing, the gesture with no tomorrow, provokes and defines only the state of consciousness. The creative gesture exercises a continuous influence over the inner life. The hand wrenches the sense of touch away from its merely receptive passivity and organizes it for experiment and action. It teaches man to conquer space, weight, density and quantity. Because it fashions a new world, it leaves its imprint everywhere upon it. It struggles with the very substance it metamorphoses and with the very form it transfigures.

HENRI FOCILLON

From an upright posture I look down at my hands on the piano keyboard during play with a look that's hardly a look at all. But standing back, I find that I proceed through and in a terrain nexus, doing singings with my fingers, so to speak, a single voice at the tips of the fingers, going for each next note in sayings just now and just then, just this soft and just this hard, just here and just there, with definiteness of aim throughout, taking my fingers to places, so to speak, and being guided, so to speak. I sing with my fingers, so to speak, and only so to speak, for there's a new being, my body, and it is this being (here too so to speak) that sings.

DAVID SUDNOW

Frame-piece 1

Once mind taught hands, but these hands lead
and chiral choral song begins.
It's not eyes but his hands that read
these passing notes at super-speed
body-voice integrates and spins.

Melodies fly on fingers' wings –
sounds yet unheard and unexplored
his whole (so-to-speak) body sings –
What cool flights! What meanderings!
What stings on strings in every chord!

Manual

the first twenty

The hand that is nowhere, that is the true home.

The Secret of the Golden Flower

1

Here is a girl with her fists in her eyes and here
another with a thumb in her mouth and here yet another
with head sunk deep in the bowl of her hands
as if they had all been deafened in a catastrophe
stilled and frozen in stone

Their gleaming skins are pearly under the moon
their foreheads have been branded by starlight
or perhaps lashed by the tail of a comet
their tunics are slightly soiled and torn and
their hands will never pick up a comb again

2

These hands touch things that are not things at all
memories dreams absolutions victories reflections
these hands also repeatedly pick such things up
responsibilities disadvantages obligations loyalties
take them on take them up refuse to let them go

Regardless of disputation dismissal attack and
despite ageing and gnawings of doubt and pain
these hands are capable of latching and indeed clinging
on stubbornly to certain things that are not things at all
that nevertheless can seem more important than life

Notice the statue's hands how caringly
he tucked and folded chisel into marble
to free those moulded fingers from the rock
that would have locked them still and undiscovered
in solid dark like prehistoric bones

had not his own hands risen and in patience
spoken to stone by touch and by their probing
subtle persuasion coaxed those perfect fingers
out of their sheaths and for surrounding stone
substituted charged air and vision and history

These numb and empty hands hanging beside me
have been arrested by providence
Time has told them their time is nearly up
they have been cuffed on either side
by death's invisible officers

They would like to thread a needle
but can't pick up anything
they can't even pluck a string
trembling at the edges of empty pockets
they fumble for non-existent keys

These skilled hands descend from hawk-eyed
 flint-shapers spear-hurlers and master-archers
 who possessed the most accurate and unfaltering aim
 the manifold talents of these hands came down also from
 the most gifted of cunning and calculating craftswomen

mat and basket weavers and bone-needle workers
 spinners and embroiderers and tapestry makers
 collectors and breeders of grasses and tenders of gardens
 preparers of dishes and drinks for ceremonies
 brewers of analgesics and soporifics

Despite warnings from the other side of evening
 from the reverse aspect of whatever season this is
 from backs of unpolished windows
 from whatever shape has been left by rotten fruit
 from spaces unformulated and unregistered by words

these hands keep turning and re-turning
 pages in a single book with no back cover
 keep shuffling and reshuffling this pack of
 uncounted and uncountable perfections you
 might name *miracles glories eyeblinks*

But these hands cannot bring back the dead
 who might have had more time
 who should not have gone when they did
 whose voices keep clamouring
 even though they're dumb

from the mirror the lake the sky
 from the coin the city the rose
 from the book the photo the portrait
 from the other side of everything
 let us back in give us another chance

Through these articulate wrists are channelled whispers
 from the cool remnant hum of the universe's beginnings
 like very distant drums like bats' wing-beats
 eight carpals five metacarpals fourteen phalanges
 eight ghosts five tigers lesser palaces

On these receptive palms stars have coded their densities
 and in subcutaneous tissue pencilled cloudy destinies
 on these fingers orbiting planets have printed circuits
 engraining tips with furrows and ridges like tree-rings
 like galaxies spiralling like uncurling fern fronds