



Soutine
By Rick Mullin
Dos Madres
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Review by Dennis Daly

Book length narrative poems in rhyme and meter do not clutter the shelves of many poetry aficionados these days and there are good reasons: the audience is non-existent and the skill level requires a technical competence attained by years of writing failed doggerel. Many short formal poems that go sour usually do so because of one or more false notes in an otherwise technically

sound performance. Think of a violin soloist. Longer poems lose it when the technique and the competence become the point and poetic moments become scarcer and scarcer. In my recent readings I can think of only two contemporary verse narrative books that truly soar: Michael Lind's historical epic, *The Alamo*, and Vikram Seth's verse novel, *Golden Gate*. Now I know of three.

Rick Mullin paints you into Soutine chapter after chapter. The pace and detail of the book matches the feverish passion and changing colors of the artist's life. The terza rima works wonderfully, threading you through the densest scenes and functioning as a link to others. Half way through the book, exhausted, I stopped and took a break, read a bunch of other books, and then came back. Intensity sometimes does that

This poem limns the life of Chaim Soutine, but it also does much more. Sections of the author's personal and artistic life are injected into the narrative creating a strange texture. Mullins is additionally an accomplished painter and in a real sense lives the life he writes about. Also central to, and concomitant with, the narrative, art theory and technique seduce the reader into an ever-deepening understanding of the expressionistic art world. A self-portrait of Soutine stares out at you on the front cover, while on a back cover a similarly expressionistic self-portrait of Mullin eyes you suspiciously.

Born in an eastern European shtetl (a small Jewish town), the tenth of eleven children, Soutine's childhood lacked any romance or charm. His parents lived a life of drudgery. Here is Mullin's description of Soutine's father,

*At the end of the road he sees his father
sitting in a window sewing rags
and davening. Factotum to a tailor,
poor as gravel, Soutine's pere reneges
on any promise of Chagall nostalgia*

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*that the shtetl might suggest. He sags
over a pile of scraps in a neuralgia
of repetitive despair...*

Because of his sketch of a village elder he is beaten within an inch of his life by other children egged on by their parents. The incident is so serious that his family receives a settlement payment for his injuries.

His art not appreciated and dangerous, Soutine escapes early, by way of Lithuania, where he attended the Vilna Academy of Fine Arts, and then settled in Paris among fellow Russian Jews in Montparnasse, an artistic community on the left bank. The famous painter, Amedeo Modigliani, becomes his closest friend. Or, more accurately, dies his closest friend; since Modigliani's professional life is a suicide of sorts.

Mullins guides his readers past a multitude of seductive lovers and flamboyant and self-destructive fellow artists, keeping his central focus on Soutine and his work, not an easy task, when dealing with early twentieth century Paris. Like most of his fellow artists Soutine lives hand to mouth, supported by art dealer Leopold Zborowski. That is until Alfred Barnes, a butcher's son, decides to splurge his new found fortune on an art collection and buys sixty of Soutine's paintings. Soutine takes the money and runs, abandoning friends and supporters but he doesn't get far. Mullins is at his best detailing motivation and especially artistic passion. And since real passion envelopes him, there is no exit for Soutine.

Mullins nails the ecstasy of a working artist in his description of Soutine painting a side of beef. The story begins with Soutine bargaining for an entire side of beef, which he somehow maneuvers up a flight of stairs into his apartment. There he hangs the bleeding flesh and begins to paint. Days pass and Soutine, sleepless, would not stop. He paints and paints and paints over again. Mullins versifies it this way,

*in the heat as Soutine layered splay
on splay of tortured meat between
the scratchwork ribs to end the second day.*

*And sunrise found him scraping back the green
he'd laid in semidarkness. Hours passed.
The colors changed. The carcass wore a sheen*

*of viscous rot, its rind a venous blast
of atrophy. It cracked in hieroglyphs
of morbid skin. The painter, slouching, cast*

*his shadow on the sagging monolith.
By 12 o'clock, the neighbors were amassing
in the hall..*

After a while and shouted insults, Soutine replies, "Go away" and then "I paint." When the police are finally called they unaccountably side with Soutine and he continues for three more days and ten full canvasses—a series!

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Henry Miller penned his Tropics upstairs from Soutine and Anais Nin lived just down the hall. These were interesting times and Mullins verse rises to the challenge throughout.

Of course this story does not end happily. The Second World War starts. The Nazis march into Paris. And Soutine leaves Paris and goes into hiding. His artistic obsessions continue unabated.

Ill health plagues Soutine and finally a perforated ulcer kills him in 1943, while being moved from location to location, hidden in a hearse, in hiding from the Gestapo.

Fascinating, exhausting, and an ultimately tragic story.

Splendid poetry.