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Jon Davis' *Scrimmage Of Appetite*

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Jon Davis. *Scrimmage of Appetite*. Akron, OH: The University of Akron Press, 1995. 102 pp.

According to one view, a writer's mission is to ask questions, not to answer them. The more difficult and painful the existence, the more relevant this axiom seems to be. It is not surprising that Edmond Jabès, the well-known French poet whose work dwells on Jewish experience and the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, entitled one of his collections *The Book of Questions*. For we live in a century that contains more dark matter than light, and the task of the poet may no longer be to create beautiful objects, but to lead a relentless and unflinching interrogation of history—even if the interrogation fails to produce answers, but instead yields more questions and a deeper despair.

In his book of poems and prose poems, *Scrimmage of Appetite*, Jon Davis is alternately haunted, chastened, and appalled by the past—his own and America's. In one of the central prose poems in the book, "The Bait," Davis meditates on his brother's death after eleven years have passed:

An attempt, one might say, to come to terms with his death as if there were somewhere to come to, as if there were terms. But there is nowhere to come to; there are no terms. Just this spewing of words, this gesture neither therapy nor catharsis nor hopelessness nor consolation. Not elegy but a small crumb. An offering.

To Davis, poetry is a modest but valiant attempt to create wholeness; even when words fail to return what is lost, the poem seeks understanding and healing. The collection as a whole embodies the impossible task of staring down history (El Salvador, South Africa, the L.A. Riots, Vietnam) while remaining open to the pleasures of nature. To accomplish this task, Davis adopts a dual persona. At times he is the poet of solitary epiphanies: "Once, I was driving in Vermont and a hawk hung briefly over the hood of my car. It was beautiful—the hawk, the road, the sunlight after clouds. I have written about that hawk, about seeing that hawk [. . .]." Yet he also writes as a historical observer: "And weren't you always moved by the poignant damage? The child clutching at the woman's dress while the soldiers march through the bomb-torn village." Indeed, Davis is unusually ambitious in his efforts to combine "art" and "scope," to marry the delicate vision of a lyricist to the more common postmodern voice of the detached, ironic, but frequently bitter witness. Davis struggles to make this uneasy alliance work, a struggle that is reflected in the formal boundaries that mark the collection, which is evenly divided between free verse and prose poems. Several of the free verse poems ("In the Sleep of Reason," "In Privacy," and others) are long-lined incantations in the tradition of Whitman, though considerably darker and less buoyant in their overall effect than Whitman's poems. In contrast, the prose poems mix straightforward addresses ("In college I took a course in the philosophy of

science”) and notational strings of imagery (“Kept sliding back down. Poster, papers, incense. Stoned and adrift on the water bed. Wine in a paper bag.”)

Although Davis’s subject matter is consistent across forms, the directness and earthiness of the prose poem—its ability to keep from inflating itself—works to his advantage. For Davis’s grasp occasionally exceeds his reach; he strains to make the grand philosophical statement, resulting in repeated attempts to define “Americans,” “the twentieth century” and “history.” Like most poets, Davis wants to write important poems. Unlike many, however, Davis wants to reach an audience. He admits, “I don’t want to be alone in my seeing.” This loneliness is accentuated in the prose poems, where Davis is most successful in exploring the past as a personal inheritance as well as a common bond. The drama in Davis’s work rises out of his willingness to adopt a conversational tone, addressing the reader as he addresses himself. And the range of his questioning is impressive. In “Turtle: An Eccentric Ode,” he poses the overarching question that recurs throughout the book: “What if the past is inescapable?” In “The Bait,” he confronts his own poetic motives: “But why am I telling you this? Because I want you to love me?” In “The Sixties: Two Scenes,” Davis recounts the desperate appeal of a sixties survivor: “Hendrix, he’d whisper to the spinning record, what do you want from us?” In “The Wheel of Appetite,” he queries nature itself: “What do the birds mean, huddled in the eaves as the wind stretches its story over the yard?” Davis’s fierce questioning gives *Scrimmage of Appetite* an intellectual and moral urgency that is lacking in much recent American poetry. His poetic stance is closer to that of witness-poets such as Zbigniew Herbert and Czeslaw Milosz, whose work merges the lyric impulse into a disciplined examination of European (more specifically, Polish) history.

Davis also bears a resemblance to Rilke, whose *Duino Elegies* begins with the famous question, “If I cried out / who would hear me up there / among the angelic orders?” Although Davis is not a religious poet, he shares Rilke’s quest for union; in both cases, the quest results in arresting shifts of voice, even within the space of a single poem, between first person singular (I), first person plural (We), second person (You) and third person (He). The result is a range of utterance that is alternately self-disclosing, prophetic, accusatory, and detached. Finally, however, Davis dispenses with the boundaries between pronouns not because he believes in transcendence, but because he seeks an awareness that only multiple points of view can provide. At this point in history, such an awareness is partial, momentary, and far from glorious. Davis concedes the limitations of human ambition in “Café,” which ends with the author and a friend staring into their cups, then raising their heads to survey the world:

We watched people passing through the streetlight’s haze
to enter the all-night bookstore across the street. Out of what
murky depths they kept coming to be touched by such blurred,
inadequate light.

In Davis's view, humans are lost and the world is nearly lost, a situation that is suggested by many of the poem's titles ("The Year 2000," "Oblivion's Mouth," "A Letter to the Future"). Davis positions himself as an end-of-the-millennium poet. His major theme, of which individual poems are more or less bleak, more or less tender variations, is that we live in a state of desperation, searching for meaning wherever we can find it. He concludes that people nowadays "live by a kind of corrupt economy, turning to sex the way a dying plant turns its last energies to producing a single flower." Our common desire is to find pleasure as quickly as possible. It is a post-Romantic world, in which the guiding voice is not "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may," but "Get laid." It is also a post-Cartesian world, for our existence is no longer led by thinking, but by "the wheel of appetite [spinning] like a gyroscope in our groins." Davis presents this appetite as part of human nature, neither inherently good nor inherently evil. In America, however, the wheel spins too quickly, creating exaggerated desires and a singular inability to distinguish nature from artifice. We have evolved "From the first apple to the glittering Porsche." Our freedom has "inadvertently liberated us for cable TV, / The National Enquirer, amusement parks, lottery tickets, / and Madonna." We have achieved a life of "ease and continual delight." But Davis is too much the witness to overlook the real horrors of the American dream, and too much the poet to believe in this artificial grace. Indeed, as the title of the book implies, we have yet to enter a world that is meaningful and true. We are still trapped in the practice session, the "scrimmage," where members of the same team fight it out against themselves, but cannot escape sadness or loneliness. In the end, Davis is a tragic poet. He offers no salvation, no hope that our appetites will one day give meaning rather than take it away. Our only redemption is in the work of a disciplined memory. Thus, Davis's statement in "Fish Magic" serves as the guiding spirit of the collection: "Death wants its skeletons revealed."

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