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Small Press Review

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The Small Press Platters

Jonathan Williams' *Jargon* must be one of the oldest presses publishing good poetry since the 50's—Denise Levertov, yes; Charles Olson, yes—but if Williams is a Black Mountaineer, he will not hold himself to Black Mountain poets only. Who would expect that Jonathan Williams would print Peter Yates, Thomas A. Clark—or Peyton Houston? The author of *Argument of Idea* is seventy, about to retire as executive of a conglomerate, and published his first poem in 1936. Williams has published two earlier books by Houston, to no great clash of critical cymbals, but Williams is unconcerned with Pulitzers and breakeven points. He is concerned with his poets and continues, indomitably, to publish them.

Houston is a poet (a little like William Bronk, a little like C.H. Sisson in England) who consolidates the work of the modernist generation, who does not innovate or expand or react but refines. Or does he merely imitate? When we speak of refiners or consolidators, the candidates who follow the innovators, we always run into this question (which raises theoretical matters I would rather avoid just now; we seldom attack Henry Vaughan for cloning George Herbert). Reading Houston's titles we may be reminded of another businessman-poet: "Difficulties of the Conchologist," "Old Man Considering It," "The Observation of Angels"; inspecting his diction we meet late Eliot, Moore, Stevens again; hearing rhythm and line breaks we hear an ancestry.

We also meet a *mind*. Using some of the manners of a great generation, Houston meditates for himself, and becomes conspicuous for thought, arguments of idea, in a poetic climate that finds small use for intelligence.

Difficulties of the Conchologist

Sometimes I collect shells
on the shore: they are finely
made and occasionally very
beautiful, but the inhabitant is not

there, and why did the whelk
involve himself in such spirals? All my life
I have been trying to collect some
coherent notion of the world just to
set up somewhere and look at. It is
extremely elusive but I encounter evidence
that something has been there—shells it has
left, empty seed-pods, abandoned chrysalis
cases, what has been constructed and
elaborated and discarded. These tell me
that (theoretically at least) there has been
such a one with certain architectural
tendencies, volutes and whorls, curious
and original symmetries, an
exact and exquisite sense of proportion. But the
creature is not there. If it were, would we
perhaps not find it, like the whelk, merely an
omnivorous and rapacious
mollusc of sorts? But if so,
why should its shell be itself so
beautiful?

I admire it when a poem (like Pound's "The Return") moves among the different realms with such aplomb. We must never ask what the poem's shape symbolizes: we may think instead of three examples which *fit* the shape.

Another fine old small press is *Unicorn*, which has published for some years out of Greensboro, North Carolina. *Unicorn* is Teo Savory and Alan Brilliant, and the editors have published fiction, translation, and American poetry. A recent flyer reproduces the covers from anthologies of modern Arab poets, poets from Nicaragua, a first book by Julia Older, and John Balaban's new collection, *Blue Mountain*—a beautifully made book designed by Savory and bound by Brilliant. (It is not redundant to observe that a small press makes beautiful books. Some are ugly as Doubleday—if not so badly made.) Balaban's first book was *After Our War*, the Lamont in 1974, and largely constructed out of Viet Nam. This poet seems to me to suffer from a conflict of dictions. Often his language appears . . . oh, stuffy or bookish, as in:

One wishes they might always dally there
Lost in the music of woodland thoughts . . .

which approaches corn as it approaches pentameter. I think the stiffness comes from a good place—from the love of literature—but it smells of the library. The other side of the conflict is the moment's idiom:

The guy picked me up north of Santa Fe
where the red hills, dotted with piñon,
looped down from the Divide . . .

These lines come from a poem which can accept, later, a phrase like “Brave little fucker,” which I prefer to “woodland thoughts.” But the idiom-poem, without the ear of a Creeley, so often fills with gopher-holes. The word “dotted” is a half-literary half-metaphor, comparing the landscape to something graphic and two-dimensional which can have dots on it—like curtains or newsprint or skirts. It is careless through the gesture of speech, as the other extreme is careless through the gesture of literature.

The conflict seems resolved in something like the title poem:

I think of you over in Buffalo Creek valley
where Blue Mountain opens at Waggoner's Gap.
Your stone house crumbles like crystallized ginger
and pheasant hens drag tails in alfalfa
as amorous cocks call from hill to hill.
I think of the cold house at the end of the muddy lane,
the pot-bellied stove, your narrow cot, your clothes line
closet, your plants and easel, and poems
scattered about as if you were a Chinese master, who,
in a contemplation, had slipped into the wrong century.
Staring out over a cornfield from your house,
you sip a brew of sassafras and ginger.
Blue Mountain shudders and shakes off its haze.

There are other qualities that please me in John Balaban—friendship, for instance.

I mean in these pages to behave not so much like a literary critic as like a disc jockey looking over the new releases: “. . . and here's a new label from the Pacific Northwest . . .” We all know that books of poetry do not get noticed enough. But we think that, if we mention them, we ought to have something Important To Say, or to review them into their

eternal slot. Well, I mean to rattle on about things I enjoy (and some I don't enjoy enough), to quote, to make observations, and then (after one side of one platter) to move on some place else. There are poems I'm happy to *show*, about which I find little to *tell*. If we keep silent until we feel ourselves sufficiently profound we will mostly keep silent. It is better, I think, to pick some books from the pile and point them at readers than it is to do nothing at all.

So here's a new label from the Pacific Northwest—only it's not so new—from *Copper Canyon* in Port Townsend, Washington, where Sam Hamill and Tree Swenson make elegant books of poems and teach fine printing to apprentices at an arts organization called Centrum on the grounds of an old fort. All over the country, small presses grow and thrive, seeds from this Tree and Sam.

A Suitable Church is Jim Heynen's sixth book from a small press, the last one (from *Graywolf*, also in Port Townsend) a collection of small tales in prose called *The Man Who Kept Cigars in His Cap*. (The small prose tale becomes a genre, essentially narrative rather than lyric and therefore different from most prose poems; I think of Howard Norman's translations from the Cree and Paulé Barton; I think of Russell Edson.) *A Suitable Church* is poetry, although a few poems might have done better with paragraphing. Heynen's best is beautiful, like this passage from "Morning Chores":

Still the residing light
for us who have lived among animals
is like a religion that stands
when the old church crumbles.
For to have moved with the beasts who know
more than reason or law
but who accept the sun in the morning
and the hands that feed them
is to have been the voice in a song
that no one is singing . . .

Sometimes I think Heynen publishes poems which could use more work, or which carry too little import to make a poem. But read "Rock Valley, Iowa," which begins:

We farm boys came in droves

to the blinking red
on the water tower. That
wicked little town had girls
in tight pink jeans and smiles
too radiant to be pure, all
waiting at the roller rink,
who shivered when they heard
our muscles roll in our levis
as we eased from our polished black cars.

and ends, after the farm boys fail to pick up the girls,

Next morning in the cowbarn
we didn't forget our failure,
but while our forearms rippled, milking,
and the tame cows chewed their cuds,
we found a sly kind of patience
and gathered many secrets in our palms
that someone somewhere someday
would be glad to learn about.

Many poems here derive from an Iowa farm childhood (others depart entirely, like the fine "Airports") and many speak of matters not special to Iowa, like erotic love, but with imagery derived from some deep psychic Iowa farmplace.

The Barn

It is like entering a barn,
coming close to you
as to a warm object
in a sheltered place,
like a farmer with cold hands
to the heat of a steady flank.
The secrets which throb
in the steaming walls of a barn
are like our love
out of control
skittering through hay

harmless and filled
with unobserved joy.

I smile now
as I smile at motorists
who speed past barns pointing
Look! Look!
to the silhouettes at sunset.
The fools who see civilization
outlined in old barns
but who have never entered a cave
or heard their secrets echo
between rafters of a barn!

I think we are building a barn
or the reason for barns:
the black sow
half-hidden behind your skirt,
the quiet grunting
goddess of pleasure,
this renewable haven
of straw and unrefined musk.

Two others not to miss: “Stopping To Change a Tire” and “Along Lake Michigan, U.S. 2.” When Heynen is right he is powerful, serious, moral, and true.

There are two other excellent presses in Port Townsend, Washington. If we suffer from too much to read and judge—with the result that good work goes unnoticed—we also suffer from geographical dispersion and sectional bigotry. It’s a big country, and it has no literary capital, though the East considers itself such. If the theater has suffered from New York’s hegemony, and the regional theater only begins to provide an alternative, our poetry suffers also from the dominance of New York (and Boston) publishers—a distortion that small presses begin to rectify.

I say “poetry suffers”—and I’m not sure what I mean. Some American poets suffer the provinciality that derives from isolation; others suffer the false comforts of a complacency—New York, Boston, San Francisco, Iowa City—that derives from a concentration of poets, with that destructive obverse of competitiveness which is mutual praise. I am sure that

the critical consensus suffers from the Eastern hegemony. Taste is always a fool—and its contemporary foolishness is Eastern provinciality. National reviews, when they exist, issue from the Atlantic coast, Boston to Virginia. What do Ehrenpreis and Vendler know of poetry in California, Texas, Seattle, and Ohio? The Eastern assumption (which few admit to) holds that nothing is happening very far from New York City.

Wouldn't it make life easier, if the good poets were few in number and all attended the same parties? The Eastern shortlist (as indicated in the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Yorker*, . . .) is lazy, feckless, and without literary taste. Sectional bigotry is as rampant in this country as racism. The adjective "Midwestern" can raise a laugh—as in "Midwestern mystics" or "cornbelt metaphysicals"—and "Southern" is a diminutive. If this sort of thing is not so nasty as racism, it is bad enough. The South is probably the worst treated, but the Midwest gets it from both coasts, and California is almost as complacent as Boston-New York. It is astonishing to notice the number of times you find sectional stereotypes used to dismiss or to condescend to writers.

And in the Pacific Northwest I am not sure people worry much about Irvin Ehrenpreis' opinions . . . but I'm not sure *that's* so good either. Ehrenpreis' taste is limited to the point of suffocation but he is hardly stupid. If the Northwest (for instance) chooses to ignore the East, it is as self-shackled as the East is. The trouble with emphasis on region is that you may emphasize the province instead—and suddenly it can become important to be the best poet in western Massachusetts or the whole of New Hampshire. (To get a laugh in the East, I could have written "west Texas" and "the whole of Mississippi.") Small pools make small fish. To make poetry as big as the country, we need a regional concreteness and a universal criticism—but criticism as ever lags far behind poetry. For that matter, reading poems lags behind writing them. How many critics in this country *try* to keep up with what is printed? Six? (I doubt it.) And how many try to keep up with what's printed that's not of their own style or school—what a review in *Sulfur* wonderfully calls "exogamous reading"? Two and a half, I'd say offhand.

On with the books:

Graywolf Press in Port Townsend does Tess Gallagher—and it is a small press that sells like a middling-to-large press, reprinting, selling tens of thousands—and did Jim Heynen's *Cigars*, and now does Linda Gregg's *Too Bright To See*. As many have noticed, she is a good new one, with a first book she has been reticent to publish (I wish more of us were

reticent) and with a quality rarer than ever: the tone or edge of style which gets called “voice.” I find it hard to name the components of language that she isolates, though her characteristic grammar is part of it: she has a way of stringing together incomplete sentences so that the movement imitates a hesitant, diffident, relentless approach to the resting place. Here is a poem (with only one such sentence) that *sounds* like Linda Gregg:

A Game Called Fear

The young cows run in the sound of the river
making a noise on the grass
clumsy but full of gaiety. Not like the water.
There is the sound of birds in the white air.
The road is wet with rain,
the trees still and quiet.
The young cows are not afraid, I can tell you.
They stop and look together in one direction,
then run to the other end of the field
as if they were playing a game called fear.
The sky is silent and the river is loud
this time of year.

That “I can tell you” is Linda Gregg. More important is her indirection, her going awry at the end—which in fact makes the poem’s point, opening up the real fear which the poem did its best to keep quiet.

As I look forward to more of her, I feel one hesitation in my forward-looking: manner can easily become mannerism, and a voice can seem to animate the ventriloquist’s dummy. Like everyone—or almost everyone—she will need to alter in order to remain good.

The third small press in Port Townsend (maybe there are six by now) is the newest, called *Dragon Gate*, with a new book by Laura Jensen that I have not read, and Henry Carlile’s second book, *Running Lights*, that I’ve read with considerable pleasure. The first poem Carlile prints is “Flying”:

Sometimes late at night dozing over a book,
the fire low and the wind high outside,
I hear above the moan in the wires

the lonely motor of a small plane,
and I wonder who's up there or if,
through the overcast, he sees our lights
and can find his way safely down the blue runway.

I have been there once or twice hunched over red
instruments, intent on some horizon
at an unfelt altitude.
How slowly the night passed beneath my wings!
Yet the airspeed indicator read one hundred and two.
One of those lights down there was home,
small, indistinguishable in the darkness, and someone
pointing: "The star that moves—that's your father."

When a poet is lucky there is something indestructible in the structure of the lyric, plot or fable, so right that it almost looks easy to write. You cannot make up a fable: you cannot work through to it by the application of skill; you have to wait for it and then pray that you be adequate to it. Carlile has this luck and shows this patience many times in *Running Lights*. The pleasure of reading these poems is not spectacular, nor does it reside in an unusual voice. In fact, Carlile's handicap is that in style, subject matter, and structure he resembles many other poets of this time. So he tends to be inconspicuous. And bad drives out good when prevalent modes desensitize us to exemplary poems that partake of the mode. I had overlooked Carlile in the magazines, and only find him when I read through his book, where I find poems like "The Dream of Execution"—to name one more—that I am glad I did not miss.

And now for something, as Monty Python used to put it, *completely different*: Eastern, unprecedented, and prose. Published by Rowan Tree Press of Boston, *Against Our Vanishing* subtitles itself "Winter Conversations with Allen Grossman on the Theory and the Practice of Poetry Conducted and Edited by Mark Halliday." The book takes the familiar dialogue-shape of the interview as invented by the *Paris Review*, but it is a whole book, it is edited and arranged into topical chapters, and it is more conversation than interview. Usually it is appropriate that an interviewer remain faceless, never to twist speeches into the appearance of questions. Mark Halliday is not faceless but neither is he pretentious or presumptuous. Clearly he admires Grossman and intends to learn by questioning him; Grossman in his turn respects Halliday: they converse on a level.

Allen Grossman published two small press books before New Directions brought out *The Woman on the Bridge over the Chicago River*. Soon they will publish *Of the Great House*. The title poem, which is Grossman's best work, is subject of discussion in this volume. I admired his work years back—but there is no doubt that the latest is the best. Grossman displays a wonderful seriousness, almost a ponderousness in his poems. When he writes an essay his prose becomes impenetrable, so that the form of *Against Our Vanishing* is especially useful. We have his ideas deployed more or less in the demotic, and arranged under section-titles like "Where Are We Now in the History of Poetry?" the more personal "The Development of a Poet Who Started Out in the Fifties," the central topic of "Voice," and finally a section on the new long poem.

Maybe you must admire Grossman's poems before you can read this book. It is not a dialogue in which the poet wishes to show himself witty and charming. (The vogue of the interview coincides with the poetics of Narcissism.) This prose lacks ellipses, lacks ums and ahs; it is conversation that wishes to be as intelligent as it can be. Here is Grossman:

. . . these conversations are different from any essay that either I or you might write. There is a substantial truth in discussing the business of poetry in a form so intimate to poetry as conversation, since poetry is a particular kind of discourse, referenced like conversation to the situation in a world of a speaker. Poetry has about it the contingency, the inherent qualification which arises when we view speech as a function of a concrete situation in being. There is an inherent skepticism in poetic discourse which we enter into and affirm when we try to bring poetry to mind in conversations which exact of us that we say what we can say, rather than what we *should* say.

Grossman's poems make me think of two poets enormously unlike him—and even more hugely unlike each other: Geoffrey Hill and Frank Bidart. If you are acquainted with these poets, you ought to take a look at the one poet in the universe who could remind you of both at the same moment.

Remaining in Boston, let us examine a book from the middle-sized press of *David Godine*. I think the middle-sized publisher may hold us together for the next twenty years—the outfit small enough to avoid the

cruel overhead (cruel or stupid?) of New York City; large enough to advertise and distribute. If New York needs to sell twelve thousand copies to break even, even fashionable poets will remain charity cases. But there are university presses and middle-sized presses that break even at three thousand copies and make money at seven or eight . . . *New Directions* is the largest of the middle-sized, maybe *Graywolf* the smallest (middle-sized in terms of its distribution); maybe *North Point Press* in California—which I overlook in this quick survey—is right now the best of all.

Last year *Godine* published its fourth series of chapbooks. (To declare interest: I printed a chapbook in the second series.) All these books have been elegantly made and this series is the handsomest of all—beautifully bound, printed, and handsomely jacketed—triumphs of the art of book-making. Unfortunately, editorial taste has sometimes been shaky, and a number of *Godine* chapbooks should never have achieved printed form—much less the craftsmanship of this bookmaking. The fourth series is the best, and best of this group is a first book by William Logan (*Graywolf* did an earlier pamphlet) called *Sad Faced Men*. Poem after poem, Logan writes like an angel—an elegant, literary angel, precise and musical. While most (best and worst) American poets continue to explore the diction that cats and dogs can read, a minority begins again to practice the old precisions. (Brad Leithauser, with a new book from a big publisher, is such another; Katha Pollitt also.) In Logan's poems no epithet seems fortuitous; everything marches to an appropriately solemn beat of literary endeavor.

Death cannot touch this music.
Terrible, inviolate as the sulphur sky,
Mastered in the throats of small-hearted thrushes,
These notes, cast down the dark corridor
As sparks cast down to ignite tinder,
Burn into the hearing.

How long has it been since anyone dared to use “inviolate”? Once it was the word no poetry book would be without, the “dark” or “tiny” of its day.

In Logan is no gesture of carelessness, no vulnerability, no dead metaphors or casual line breaks. Of course the danger is that shape and sound, the love of formality and resolution, may make a hollow shape

finally as useless as mere gushing. There are moments in this book when Logan succumbs to the temptation of the mellifluous surface, the *merely* gorgeous. But he can *write*—which is oddly enough not an assertion we comfortably make about some good contemporaries, who at their best blunder or power themselves through—and Logan is young, and it is all up to him. Here is an example of this controlled and accomplished work:

Medusae

Each night, on the rocky edge of sleep,
I feel you shudder against me,
Already slipping underwater
Where the first tentacles of dreams,
The evanescent jellyfish, brush
Against you.

I dream of a wide sea
Where thousands of medusae
Float silently, each marking the currents
With its transparent grace.

I dream of you
Transparent, your brain encased
In its clear shell, undulant,
Veined with pink, an umbrella-shape
That has risen and opened inside you.
Its tentacles trail down your spine
And wave in a shifting light.

I wake to the cold, trying to overcome
The liquid distance of the objects
In the room: the chair, the table,
The door. Your warmth spreads beside me.
I see your black hair a snaky tangle
On the pillow, and your features,
Familiar and composed.

And on the other hand: David Budbill, author of *The Chain Saw Dance* and *From Down to the Village*, has published with the *Countryman Press*

in Vermont his version of the Second Shepherd's Play, *Pulp Cutters' Nativity*. (The *Countryman Press* is also responsible for a gorgeous edition of Denise Levertov's pig poems.) Budbill's contemporary shepherds are Vermont lumberjacks, his stolen sheep a purloined chainsaw, his idiom sometimes dialect. He cares nothing for the literary, as I would call it, but makes literature all the same, out of the materials of common life and common speech. Nothing dazzles. Nothing sings like a robin or spreads its tail like a peacock. Budbill usually writes narrative, out of observation and compassion, and with a superb and natural sense of the dramatic. Therefore no quotes shorter than six pages give the reader a notion of his quality. This book, handsomely illustrated by Lois Eby, reads well not in excerpts but as a whole—and it will play even better than it reads.

The *Countryman Press* is another inbetween; it is neither the poetry press in the garage nor Simon and Schuster with shaggy petrochemicals underfoot. The university presses are also in-between. Wesleyan's poetry series, started I think at the urging of Richard Wilbur, made the first heavy commitment to publishing poems. Then: Pitt, Illinois, LSU, Georgia . . . Good poets get started in these places. From Wesleyan alone came Louis Simpson, James Wright, Robert Bly, John Ashbery, James Dickey, Charles Wright . . . One press that has been doing well seems less known than others, Carnegie-Mellon under the editorship of Gerald Costanzo. They've made three books by Stephen Dunn, two each by Jay Meek and Paula Rankin, and books by Michael Dennis Browne, Philip Dow, Philip Dacy, Vern Rutsala, Rita Dove, McKeel McBride, Kim Stafford, C.L. Hanzlicek . . . and just now a second book by Elizabeth Libbey.

It must be ten years since I first read her work. She gets more intriguing all the time, I think because she allows herself to be more complicated, beginning with a sinuous texture of syntax:

Having spent all day hollowing out my bones,
thinking I hear every dog's bark
rise into a scream just behind my shoulder blade,
I come home, force myself
into a chair, force again this discipline,
the one patience
articulate of love, care, this dance I do
to keep myself from taking things apart

I can't make whole. Positioning
in a thought, what the spine knows: there's no
letting go.

Syntax mimics the mind's way of discovering things, and long sentences with subordinate clauses indicate relationships by position and conjunction. Syntax is more explicit than line breaks—and of course it can interrelate with line breaks as in lines seven through nine above, where the continuousness of the sentence makes for surprise. Libbey's syntax continually nudges and mimics thought and feeling. It's not easy, like the cat-dog syntax so prevalent—which is really Easy Listenin', because its simplicity is the product of a hundred-thousand poetry readings to the unsubtle ears of twenty-year-olds—but whoever said it was supposed to be easy? Here's a whole small poem:

Deja Vú

From the mulberry limb, I stared down
into my brother's face
as if, gazing at water expecting myself, I gazed
on someone else.
"Jump," he offers, arms rising toward me
like the arms of one drowning.
But how could I, slung motionless, thin-aired,
trying to lower myself by eye
a leaf at a time, a house floor by floor,
be a purple splash of grackles attacking the lawn,
save him, I
who don't jump, but ride
the slight swell of breeze forever?
"Jump," I breathe, as the mulberry carries me off, my
arms falling toward my brother like water
closing over.

Elizabeth Libbey constructs a surface of the greatest refinement. Maybe she has not yet found subjects ambitious enough to suit her surface.

Another ambitious poet, and a well-kept secret, is Edward Sanders, aka Ed, who is best-remembered I suppose as leader of The Fugs, the porno-rock group dedicated alike to peace and fornication, in those years

when dope and group-sex were weapons against Johnson and Nixon. Sanders was famous for his neologisms, famous for a parody *Daily News* with banner headline: POET TED BERRIGAN TEACHES PARROT TO SCARF COCK, the news expanded in the Leonard Lyons column later. Proprietor of the Peace Eye Bookstore in the East Village, publisher and pirate, he seemed to dedicate his life to being bad-d-d-d, with a boy's prankishness and without ever smiling. Then this man from Kansas who came to New York to study classics wrote a prose book about the Manson family; then he invented Investigative Poetics to promote muck-raking in verse, celebrating "The Z.D. (Zola/Diderot) Generation." And all along he has continued to publish in small, almost private editions poems that are innovative, funny, intelligent and often very moving—though I am not sure that anybody has noticed.

There's a new collection out of Santa Barbara (in a series of stapled and mimeographed pamphlets called *Am Here/Immediate Editions* including a gathering of some of the best poems Robert Creeley has ever written, *Mother's Voice*, and a book of Tom Clark's about California, *The Rodent Who Came to Dinner*, positively neo-classic in satire, invective, and wit) in which Sanders translates from the Greek by a unique method: he writes out the Greek script, then offers words of translation and commentary in the margin—circled and hooked with arrows to the Greek words—so that you read it *out of* the original, with a sense of the visual shape and word-order of the original; reading and looking, the reader seems to make his own translation, as if he were consulting a dictionary with a classicist whispering in his ear: "*That* word goes with *that* word; Greek is an inflected language, by the way . . ." The translation becomes a visual event, not only verbal.

In other poems, Sanders uses little drawings and hieroglyphs when they serve him; and on the other hand he writes songs. If he exhibits a persistent, cultivated eccentricity (archaisms, elisions that cannot elide) there is also a moving simplicity and a clear intelligence:

My boat was overturned
It was hard
to set it right

When part of me
loved the waterfall
and part the land

and:

You were the one I loved
watching the solar barge
on tenth street

We stood to gaze at the heavens
to watch for the sunboat's oar
over tenth street . . .

I could weep I could moan forever
for the wrongs that I have done
on tenth street . . .

Here are some lines about old Matisse making his cut-outs:

The scissors were his scepter
The cutting
was as the prow of a barque
to sail him away.

What a mixed universe the small press is—from the printer's joy of Walter Hamady's *Perishable Press*, to the mimeoed 8 by 11's out of St. Mark's or Santa Barbara. If we add the low-overhead in-betweens like wonderful *North Point*, *New Directions*, and the university presses, we can discover a huge network of publication available to American poets. And not only in publishing contemporary verse; the small-press universe includes even innovative literary history, like the wonderful *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, an anthology of the response to Whitman since 1855, edited by Perlman, Folsom, and Campion, published in Minneapolis by *Holy Cow! Press*. Only one thing unites all these endeavors, and that is the generous work of hundreds of people, thousands of labor-hours donated to furthering the art.

(Do not, please, think me terminally naive—for I recognize that the city of poetry, if not quite as corrupt as Boston, thrives with bribes, conflict of interest, and self-service. Grants, blurbs, tenure, publication, readings—where money and jobs gather, corruption will found a sea-port. ((Of course it remains true that anyone who is *really* interested in money, who spends time writing or publishing poetry, is certifiably

insane.)) Corruption creeps in on little catty feet, usually fattened by self-deception, and most frequently in the form of barter: a reading begets a recommendation; acceptance of a pamphlet begets a reading. All poet-entrepreneurs should spend at least one-tenth of their waking hours scrutinizing their own motives; the skepticism we commonly apply to other people will often uncover abuses closer to home.

(Which is not to detract from my earlier praise for a wide generosity! Many small publishers succeed in self-scrutiny and remain disinterested. And others, who succumb to temptation on occasion, for the most part serve other people—which it is our duty on earth to do.)

There are many sorts of poetry being written in America. I have dealt mainly with representatives of what is roughly my own sort—biomorphic, expressionistic. Like most of us, I am least incompetent when I attend to my own kind of thing. But most of us rarely venture forth, even to glance at books or magazines that take us to other places—what *Sulfur* called “exogamous reading.” That magazine, for instance, represents especially Clayton Eshleman’s Olsonism, which connects with Jerome Rothenberg and Robert Kelly. Elsewhere there are other kinds of Olsonite, there are sound-text poets and visual poets and avant-garde poets of numerous persuasions. Most of them are absolutely and totally unread, never even sampled, by the leading critics and book reviewers of our day.

One (large, loose, energetic, ill-named) gathering of contemporary poets is the “language poets,” writers who concentrate on the medium not as ink on paper (like visual poets) nor as noises (like sound-text poets) but as linguistic phenomena. From New York has come the magazine $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews. (Both editors have published recent collections of their poems with *Roof*: Bernstein’s *Controlling Interests*; Andrews’ *Wobbling*.) In San Francisco and Berkeley there is another concentration of these poets, with magazines like *Talks*, *This*, and *The Poetics Journal*; and especially with the excellent small press called *Tuumba*, edited by Lyn Hejinian. These poets and writers include Bob Perelman, Ron Silliman, Clark Coolidge, Carla Harryman, David Bromige . . . For several years I have been reading the magazines and books—aware of energy and ferment, but unable to make judgment. . . .

Nor am I now. But familiarity seems to help, because I begin to prefer some books to others. Barrett Watten, critic and poet, recently published *Complete Thought* as the thirty-eighth of *Tuumba*’s pamphlets. Maybe it

can provide a place to start. With these poets, it seems to me that methods or order or organization take primacy over expression or statement; or maybe it would be more sensible to claim that these poets express order and state it. Surely in the old pairing we would call them constructivist rather than expressionist—heading back not to Franz Marc or Picasso but to Mondrian and Malevitch. Here are the first six parts of the title poem, which goes on to the number fifty.

I
The world is complete.
Books demand limits.

II
Things fall down to create drama.
The materials are proof.

III
Daylight accumulates in photos.
Bright hands substitute for sun.

IV
Crumbling supports undermine houses.
Connoisseurs locate stress.

V
Work breaks down to devices.
All features present.

VI
Necessary commonplaces form a word.
The elements of art are fixed.

Of course there is statement here, but maybe the strongest statement resides in the rigor of the two-by-two formality of the simple sentences.

Many people have recently predicted a return to form—reacting to the amorphous shapes of much contemporary work. Maybe we will discover new forms not in metrics but elsewhere—a form that is grammatical for example, or that organizes by linguistic elements, by repetition, by word or by clause count. There are more bones potential to the poem's body than the bones of iambic.

Here are four sections of Watten's "Artifacts," in the form of a series of apothegms, in which the subject is the demonstration:

XVI

You understand this perfectly, but can not translate it into anything else.

The front and the back of the face may be shown simultaneously.

But he never wasted a word. But the object is to install a relation of which the object is the awakening consciousness.

Here watertightness is tested in a water tunnel.

He searched out the spectacular incidents of life in America and arranged them into neat episodic shockers.

Cars engulf the leading man. Action is replaced by typography.

Each object is reduced to the (gigantism of the) individual noun, so that the world *is* shifted by the order in which words occur.

He broke the radio silence. The arrow had sped to its mark.

XVII

Cars encounter the lifting arm. Art redecorates topography.

It is May Day. Crowds of people look through fields of rocks and bottles.

A chain of hands in succession places rocks and bottles on the table.

In the distance appears the fog of individual lights. From the frozen point of the word, everything lurches into perspective.

The ungrateful serpent returns to captivity. I finish growing by farting away.

Several figures sit behind the table. Terror (tension) is on all sides.

Buy several extension cords of moderate length.

Then one starts to speak: "Now I am going to tell you everything about myself." And the result is beauty!

XVIII

This is the language of oppression. Science is carrying a torch for results.

Their variation is no variation. No variation could be the desire for meaning in germ.

Climates, seasons, sounds, colors, darkness, light, the elements, food, noise, silence, movement, repose.

Fumes rise, sirens start up. The structures become woozy and collapse.

The end of the composition is not envisaged by the composer.

"But not all expressions are intended as metaphors." X rejects computer games as part of his world.

Neon lights spell out a repetitious sound pattern: "A B / A B / A B / A B," etc.

Here the world is fragmented and meanings collide.

XIX

Here is the point where poetic architecture becomes only this surface.

By random methods subtract important elements: isolate lines which give the impression of depth.

This new referential inversion, a condition of the industrial age, is everywhere—built upon habit.

A personal life wishes representative blasts repeated everywhere on a vast scale.

By random methods combine elements. Past intentions are revealed by token of present souvenirs.

Theme and variations are to the proliferation of devices as American speech rhythms are to total literary democracy.

Everything says something to someone. Here you are invited into the claustrophobic space of pure mental glyphs.

But this is unreal! We don't live life like this—but merely think that we do!

for Ron Silliman

If I required myself to be able to elucidate whatever crossed my attention, I would be unable to play you this side. I recognize the play of an intelligence, a work of wit in the old sense, that focuses my attention and keeps me close. But I do not know quite what to make of it. . . . It could come only from a small press . . .