

VIOLENT STIMULANTS
OR
WHO'S NOT AFRAID OF EXPERIMENTAL POETRY?



Mac Oliver

FAY ZWICKY, *The Gatekeeper's Wife*. Brandl & Schlesinger Poetry
JOHN FORBES, *Damaged Glamour*. Brandl & Schlesinger Poetry
JOHN ANDERSON, *The Shadow's Keep*. Black Pepper Press
EMMA LEW, *The Wild Reply*. Black Pepper Press
ANDREW SANT, *Album of Domestic Exiles*. Black Pepper Press
MARTIN HARRISON, *The Kangaroo Farm*. Paper Bark Press
LOUIS ARMAND, *Séances*. Twisted Spoon Press
PAM BROWN, *50-50*. Little Esther Books

Two hundred years since the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* there is reason more than ever to thank Wordsworth for the Preface to that work, printed with the 1802 edition. Reviewing eight volumes of poems from Australia, all composed in what one might call “experimental” modes, Wordsworth’s objections to “arbitrary & capricious habits of expression” maintain their immediacy. These poets all indulge in “gaudy and inane phraseology”, dashing off “food for fickle tastes”. In light of Wordsworth’s vision of poetry, their weaknesses reflect an overall lack of purpose. Most of these poets would not agree with him in stating that the “human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants”. But who would not object to the hackneyed predictability of poorly wrought poems? Without exception, for reasons both common to them all and unique to themselves, these volumes are bad poetry. All, with the exception of Forbes’ volume, were printed in 1997. Forbes’ work was published posthumously in 1998. 1998 also saw the death of John Anderson.

Would it be unfair to hold these poets up to the standards Wordsworth set for himself and other poets? Had his legacy not been grossly perverted by Fay Zwicky in her capricious scribbblings, Wordsworth certainly would seem far out of place. Yet Anderson’s work has been linked to Wordsworth’s by past reviewers, and Martin Harrison’s work aspires to seemingly Wordsworthian descriptions of nature, so a distinction must be made.

These poets have all read Beat poetry. Beat poetry, not just an American phenomenon, has been described, rightly, as anti-intellectual, and anti-intellectualism is the worst legacy of the Beats. A primitive instinct for protest, rank-and-file noise from the festive left, and quasi-religious hankerings are also central to Beat poetry, along with a reluctance to engage in conventional syntax. Hanging on to the tired dichotomy of the street poet as opposed to the academic poet, the vanguard versus the conservative, many career advocates of this strain have mindlessly followed the poorest examples left by their famous forebears. By some associational trend of thought, many folks are, then, prepared to call the basest adolescent carplings a variety of “dada-surrealism”. Reading the volumes by Brown, Forbes, Zwicky, Anderson, Lew, Sant and Armand, I am reminded of their American counterpart Ted Berrigan, or the *Up Late* anthology of post modern poetry, itself stemming from the most unfortunate and aggravated glibness of W.C. Williams and Frank O’Hara. The tenets of this writing also include provincialism disguised as international avant-gardism, exaltation of pop culture and kitsch to classical status, and without exception, hardened narcissism.

In her new volume *The Gatekeeper’s Wife*, published by Brandl & Schlesinger, Fay Zwicky falls prey to self-congratulation, and thus allows her vain musings to escape derision. In “Groundswell for Ginsberg”, speaking like a canned Ginsberg, hampered and diluted with nostalgia, without the spiritual zeal, she makes the object of her sentiments the subject of unintentional parody. And, alas, poor Wordsworth, utterly trivialized and ganged up against by the poet, who allows herself to speak for Ginsberg and William Blake, as though they were cronies. I quote at length from this careless, tiresome tribute, built around an absurd polemic, to which no paraphrase could do justice:

Take Wordsworth’s emotion recollected in tranquillity.
I’m feverish with what’s not tranquil, what’s been
settled for. What’s a word’s worth?

Pretending to be selfless mouthpiece, pottering
lake and fen unfurrowed, closed, serene, pitying
luckless leech gatherers, ditch dwellers,

mourning industrial mayhem unstoppable.
Man speaking to men meaning bush-whacker extraordinaire
meaning Himself—which men
had he in mind? Not Blake
or Ginsberg or me for sure.

We don't live in the Lake District
among rural men, rural come to think of it
women, or ballads with a tribal beat.

New York, London, not. Here's serious shortage
of tranquillity enough, a country with as many
souls as Wordsworth's England, 1801.

The literalist's mind is not hard to master. Zwicky offers us an understanding of Wordsworth equivalent to that of the cynical, ideologically penned undergraduate who has heard a great deal about the poet, but has read no more than a sketch and comments from the Norton Anthology. The play on "word's worth" is adolescent. We find no cognitive intensity. What ability, what conjuring know-how must a poet possess and display? According to Wordsworth, and a very long tradition of fine poetry, the ability to conjure up the passions produced by real events, in the minds of men, from his own imagination. In commenting on this intellectual notion, is it not harassment, plain and simple, to harp, retroactively, upon his use of "men" instead of "humans"? We hear many names, and a few slogans, but nothing of ideas. Nor is there intellectual curiosity. Rather, we are faced with shallow myths of celebrity.

A tale told by Harold Bloom may be relevant here. In 1970, the first year of Zwicky's precious decade, Ginsberg came to New Haven for the May Day rally and appeared at Bloom's door. Upon arrival the bard sat down in the lotus position with a small drum in his lap and began beating and chanting Blake's poems. Perhaps it would not have been so bad, says Bloom, had he been able to keep the beat, or hold a note. As Ginsberg mythologized Whitman, so Zwicky mythologizes Ginsberg, "70's Ginsberg, old courage-teacher", or Blake, "We face the night, half-mad with pity". The love is un compelling, the sentiment wooden, the style vapid. Making myths of fame in such a packaged manner is the job of supermarket tabloids, not poems. The conclusion?

The real language of men. Cool.
Men speaking to men and maybe women in a
serious shortage of tranquillity.

Zwicky is not addressing Ginsberg here, she is merely talking to herself, and perhaps a few shop-mates, those she addresses in her series of poems on poetry conferences.

Also from Brandl & Schlesinger comes a posthumous volume by John Forbes entitled *Damaged Glamour*. The foreword by Gig Ryan tells us this collection

expands his preoccupation with positioning contemporary Australia (and the poet himself) both culturally and historically. Sydney, Melbourne, Rome, Cambridge are not only autobiographical references but function as points of intense reflection and insouciant explanation in which the distinctions between high and low culture, past and present, Europe and Australia, are often exposed as contrived and are constantly wittily jettisoned.

Ryan has high praise for Forbes' work, for what "towers above all through in Forbes' work is his dazzling yet precise imagination... where the endless contrast between the classical and contemporary, fuelled with acerbic social and political comment, is always made brilliantly new, uncluttered, stylish and wholly inimitable." This reviewer disagrees, finds the poetry quite cluttered, and wonders who would care to imitate his lack of style. For example, in a poem entitled "Lessons for Young Poets" what we encounter is a kind of insult to intelligence:

it's important to be major
but not to be
too cute about it—I mean
it's the empty future
you want to impress,
not just the people
who'll always be richer
& less talented than you.

Style? The sixth section supplies us with his advice on love:

continually disappoint
the expectations of others,
this way you will come to hate yourself
& they will be charmed by your distress

Uncluttered? Finally, the seventh section offers an envoi:

the rest is technical & you'll
steal it yourself
but just remember
if you take care of the art
 your sister, Life
takes care of the human part.

Wit? Well, there is a rhyme... Other poems include, "Ode to Karl Marx", "Ode to Cultural Studies" and "Ode to Cambridge Poetry", all far stretches from odes; "Muddy Waters Relaxing Between Gigs", more mythologizing and dumbed-down Beat aggrandizement of the "cool" musician; and an experiment in ekphrasis, a poem about the painting on the cover of the volume, "On Tiepolo's Banquet of Cleopatra":

...catch this scene: flash Euro—
trash surveys a sulky round faced
überBabe who's got the lot—what else
could this painting mean, except that
superstars can will their luck, or
just how little raw envy's hidden by
contempt, so words like "Wow! Great
TITS" OR "COMIC OPERA WOP" SUM UP
the observer...

I guess this is what Ryan means by "exposing" the differences between high and low culture as "contrived". Forbes conceals neither his envy, nor his contempt, throughout the course of this ludicrous collection.

In American high schools, creative-writing programmes often encourage an exercise for limbering up, called the "mind dump". It is something close to automatic writing, wherein the student explores his feelings with the pen, brainstorming, writing whatever comes to mind. It serves its purpose, providing a way for the student to get to know himself, stretches the mind, and, possibly, provides raw material for revisions and further developments. And yet, like so many would-be Kerouacs tapping out their speedy lines on a scroll, never to be revised, delivered like perfect eggs from their brief broodings, these half-wit beatniks, particularly Anderson, Brown, Forbes, Lew, Sant, and Zwicky, would elevate their "dumps", lavish with self-satisfaction and dull clichés, or defensive with cynical resentment, to the status of poetry, simply by having them published. We are meant to assume that what has come pouring from the gushing torrents of their haywire founts immediately commands, or should command, radical interest.

Black Pepper Press ("Black Pepper enhances the taste") has printed three new volumes, *Album of Domestic Exiles* by Andrew Sant, *The Shadow's Keep* by John Anderson, and from Emma Lew, *The Wild Reply*. Sant's volume never leaves the mire of vagaries. He fails to convey anything in detail, but merely accumulates prosaic descriptions with a pulse like that of weak prose:

A jasmine spreads its scent into the humid air,
the white flowers whirr like propellers for a few days
and there are more and more, and a clamour of bees
that have sped beyond winter: everything is leaving.

The simile is moronic in its utter lack of originality. His attempt to bring nature to life falls into complacency. The majority of the poems are assembled into similar quatrains, lacking rhythm, only remotely metrical, or written in what John Hollander in *Rhyme's Reason* has called

A kind of free verse
Without any special
Constraints on it except
Those imposed by
The notion... that
The strip the lines
Make as they run
Down the page (the
Familiar strip with the
Jagged
Right-hand edge) not
Be too wide

Those verses of Sant's which are not in arbitrary quatrains are written in this form of verse, as are most of the poems by Lew. No artful intelligence has overseen these self-important jottings; we find little artifice. We encounter in Anderson's work the shaky voice of a dabbler with unclear perceptions drawing out senselessly arbitrary conclusions. No universals are possible in this flat free verse, or the cramped quatrains:

"Shakespeare", "Marlowe", "Raleigh", "Milton",
gray goddamned buildings in the sun.
I'll say, "There's more from where these came",
Coins stalled on each palm like a brand.

There is nothing symbolic, nothing impersonal, only onanism.

From the blurb on *The Wild Reply* we hear that "Reading Emma Lew's poetry is like entering a cinema after the movie has started." This worn out analogy for the senseless, orderless tenets of pastiche is at least descriptive: one has missed the beginning, not because it starts *in medias res*, but because there are very few links, very few reasons why we find what we do. Even when Lew attempts to work on a theme and tie it up with closure, we are

left with assertions impoverished and puerile. For instance, the title poem:

I must not touch fire
Myth fire, adder's fire
Sensual and deaf
The deep, swift fire

Why do I dream?
Flame speaks and sings...

...I have flame and lack nothing
Beast in my footsteps
Light up, burn

The seed and the spark
The first flame of love
There is no fire
But the poems are beautiful

The triteness of this attempted use of myth is below criticism; the conclusion, optimistic. And yet examining this volume next to the work of Anderson, with its aimless, unrewarding monotony of one-line observations and absurd pantoums, the two poets do reveal their kindred spirit.

What is one to make of the one-liners found in Anderson's *The Shadow's Keep*? I sample a few at random:

and what of man? So long as he holds influence the earth
dreads its very own waterbabies

souls are weakening batteries when always in use

I entered my penis today, & shrank like a gem

Why stage an Aristotle of significance?

Why indeed? If Mr. Anderson possessed the sensitivity to nature his posturing pretends upon, then surely we would find more silence, rather than noisy sequences of lines like:

the buddhists bud an involution

but it would do more subtlety than good to put the process at
infinity

it is an impossible question. Don Juan let go of it only to
interfere all the time

Explanation? The pristine, unadulterated gems of his intellect. It must be something like “don’t ask, don’t tell.” *The Shadow’s Keep* ends with a series of pantoums entitled “a zephyric alphabet”. They are pantoums, sure, but of little intellectual or artistic interest, randomly assembled within the arbitrary confines of the form. That is, within the confines of the form if we disregard the confines of syllables per line, for the line lengths vary according to convenience:

Angel pips and squiggle pips of meaning
People in the gallery laugh to see it written on marble

You, the new poem, stalking on your why’s ways
Because this was said to an egg timer, this was said to perfection
People in the gallery laugh to see it written on marble
The beginning tincture of what I wrote

One gets the sense Anderson was under the spell of his own wit, but there is little in that to justify the labours of the reader who would trudge through these random acts of mindlessness.

Almost all of these volumes make the claim that they are valuable as poetry because they are valuable as Australian poetry, as fixtures on the contemporary landscape. And yet one learns from them surprisingly little of interest, about Australia or anything else, unless it is interesting to know that the worst traits of the Black Mountain School and the Beats have turned up there. What antithetical uniqueness is claimed for Australia vanishes in a kind of defeated ambivalence, as though not one of them knows what to make of this uniqueness, could it be carried through words into poetry. One finds very little native delight, and very little concern with universal topics, so that details of landscapes and names of places provide nothing but local colour, accumulating like roadsigns on a highway.

Perhaps the least offensive volume is Martin Harrison’s *Kangaroo Farm*, but inoffensiveness does not imply delight. The poems fail to emerge from behind the banalities of received sentiment and imprecise imagery. Take, for example, the “quatrains” of “Yachts at Scotland Island”:

After a day of Greek references, lunch, and Freudian puns
the mythoi aren’t appropriate to the dapple and sting-rays
any more than to a brain verbalising everlastingly
on its right-side stones and its left-side waters. But, no less,

the TV, modernity's end, the abolition of craft in networks—
all those roadways through intelligent starlit places—
are short meeting places with cartoon characters
hanging in trees, or just the other side of the bay.

I read *Soundsite*, *Leonardo*, *Fanzine* and *MLA*.

Outside, water noise ripples in flickering rosemary bushes.

Inside, the modem chatters in its own drifting sky.

Sometimes it's a frog by a creek. My hand glides with its mouse.

Aside from tired, commonplace armchair philosophy, one may even detect the false note of a fruitless echo of Heaney's "The Forge" in lines ten and eleven. One need go no further after encountering the imbecilic association of the modem, the mouse and the frog. What can one say of his sloppy, sentimental lines clogged with blurry, unconnected images? Perhaps the words of wisdom of a fifth-form history teacher best apply: this work is hopeless, but not serious.

I would like to be able to say that Louis Armand's *Séances*, an earnest but utterly misguided attempt at "international dada/surrealism", somehow works, with its painterly, so-called fugues, but it would not be the truth. And Pam Brown's *50/50*? Sheer hysteria, a blind sexual drive, lacking meditative insight, primitively driven into words. There is no response to a tradition, only a name-dropper's delirium and trivial illiteracy. This is the nadir of experimentalism for its own sake. I quote from "Zennish":

filtering
my babbling
photocopies
I
commence
topiary

Wordsworth suspected it would be pernicious to poetry for the poet to carry on in "a peculiar language, when expressing his feelings for his own gratification, or that of men like himself". He advocated language dutiful, with a purpose to serve, clear to one's fellow men. Sadly enough, these eight poets are speaking only to themselves, and a peculiar few, expressing their feelings for self-gratification.