

NOTE

Some Younger British Poets

Jow Lindsay is Francis Crot and Helen Bridwell and a dozen pseudonymns I don't know, though one hears his real name pronounced as Joe. Neither he nor his avatars have a glue-for-binding book in the world yet, though the one called Crot has published forty-four pages of a cut-up novel-with-verse that, if it's ever finished, might be titled "The Tragedy of Beyoncé Knowles." It's about Jow and Francis (rumored to be his dog) and also romance in coffee houses, Kafka and prom queens, safe substances, Texas Smudge Rules (for cards), an assassin's bra for bonny breasts, "MEN GET IT TOO," stuff like that. It's called (as if after—though he probably hasn't read it—Dodie Bellamy's great book *Cunt-Ups*) *Cuntomatic*; its sources include books by Adorno, Ballard, Vonnegut, and Broderick, together with the *Boston Bay Chronicles*. It's a little bit funny, as Elton John says, both elegant and raw, pastiche and patchwork, somebody's smart novelistic prose done up and done in: "Payo Vega y Snachez despises the common man," Jow remarked, as the train lulled in the tunnel."

Yt Communication, a DRY press in Hackney, put the pamphlet out, its card covers one-offs assembled by a team of not obviously depraved enthusiasts. Lindsay himself is an editor at Bad Press, which is occasionally a journal and publisher of pamphlets. Now that Barque Press has been around for a few years and its co-editors Keston Sutherland and Andrea Brady, as young as they are, have what passes in these circles for established reputations as poets, Yt Communication and Bad Press, together with Tim Atkins's web-zine *onedit*, are where one can find new writing on the tight little blighted island. I should say that, as the foregoing sentence indicates, it is possible to find some kind of readership, a reputation even, decently quickly in the UK, which has something to do with the size of the place and the way its youth are squeezed through the intestines of an educational system and, if they have a little luck or money, deposited at Cambridge. Yt Communication is run by Sean Bonney, who is not Cambridge-educated or -based, I think, but rather a post-pop-punk-and-the-rest-of-it London poet whose paintings drip pink all over everything and whose poems have an energy London's poetry has missed for a few years, and really now that I think about it more heat than Iain Sinclair's *Lud Heat*. Bad Press is mostly London too at this point, I think, though a few of its tentacles clutch at Cambridge still, and maybe these two worlds are almost one these days. Alternative poetry

communities in the current geopolitical climate cluster like blood before a stroke; everybody knows everybody else, sometimes biblically, and nearly everyone doesn't expect anything, much less publication, and nevertheless sometimes gets it. One of Bonney's "Negative Poetix" manifestos in his fine Yt Communication pamphlet *Document: hexprogress* has it that "ideas that don't become power in liquid form will multiply as land value and finish as cash asbestos in the mouths of freezing moths, understood as academic recuperators of the avant-garde." But what if everybody with a little talent in England did get recuperated? Would it make any difference?

For the time being one has to find Jow Lindsay's poems in Justin Katko's magazine *Plantarchy* or at a site where Lindsay has put up some work. Whatever name signs them, his poems are whirlwinds of lexicons terse and turned, packed with and impacted by rhyme and rhyming. They are intellectually fast and full of the thoughts of youth, as one calls them, love's complaint and Iraq's, the body and bawdy politic. The English lyric tradition tilted at doggerel in tight phrases and stanzas, pseudo-Spenserian archaism up against the demotic of multiple cityscapes and classes irregularly but effectively cut into purportedly more educated if not more eloquent (and no less compact) idioms. Some poems use brackets to bust up words and make more words; others have fun with footnotes and superscript. The work is abject-satirical, faux-literary, and smacked like a hand upside your head, not to mention the poet's. It exudes as it ventriloquizes intelligence and wit. It has some of the playfulness of early Tom Raworth—read back through an English rather than American canon. Here's one poem, which I think one can get only at the website, entire:

Taste Buds

fruit through me in a steep heap in the loo
much glam and glede glent vp bi that flet
& I, *Breasts-for-Knees-Man*, have sawed apart
this giraffe, out of my great love for you,
lacrimatus, very little needing

ratification, the glent's in the grass
and buried in the grave eye, and the strains
of adultery cry somewhat from my sprained
ear, so like leontes I must act fast
before protective swelling endorses

the chamber's right fashionable lay-out,
yu can no get it on de nhs
dey wo an put yu on de waiting list,

gibbel gibbeldy gummy, the pay pouch
turned into my tummy, the unhorses

horse their riders into rocks, not very
much requires voting, a show of hands,
moths unsuccumbed to venus maws that stand
atop awkwardly flailing stems, hairy
and sticky and twice alive, improvements

If the second line is lost on you, google the phrase “glam up.” The line might be paraphrased crudely: “I feel better after a good shit.” Leontes is of *The Winter’s Tale*, “lacrimatus” Latin, Venus a fly-trap, the “nhs” the National Health Service, a gibbel (according to the online *Urban Dictionary*) a sex-crazed male. Call me the absent-minded recuperator. It’s about time Jow Lindsay had a book of these lyrics in the world, even if he isn’t yet 26.

Emily Critchley has at least two chapbooks, *The Dirt Glitch Land Alter Affair* (Arehouse, 2004) and *When I Say I Believe Women...* (Bad Press, 2006). Critchley is working on a PhD at Cambridge, writing about a now senior generation of American women poets including Leslie Scalapino, Bernadette Mayer, and Kathleen Fraser. Scalapino and Fraser read at The Contemporary Women’s Experimental Poetry Festival that Critchley, with Catherine Brown, organized and put on in Cambridge last October. I missed having the chance to hear a few poets there, Helen Macdonald for instance, and had to come back to Ohio to see that Bill Howe (after hosting his own alternative event in Oxford) had treated the poster on my door by scribbling on it “Bring Your Own Experimental Woman.” I thought this was a first-rate event, featuring mostly unpretentious and good writers and critics looking in on and after one another’s work, younger writers in the mix, though Critchley herself did not read her poems. Her first two chapbooks are signature extensions or treatments of the concerns and syntactic and other techniques of the American work she’s been reading and writing about. Both chapbooks feature a little of what I’m tempted to read as mimicry of emphatic statement, as if the speaker were adopting the language of the poem’s implied addressee in order to bring that language up short or to insert moments of silence and resistance within it, interrupting its rhetoric and its certainty. I’m thinking, for instance, of the beginning of “Incident”:

The thrust of your own work denies how you—

Everything I ever learnt that year at once eroded to a—

Lines of taut surface.

Trading it back and forth for sighs while, stuck with the—

stole off your—fair omission?

When no loyalty was at risk
we all tended to lie I guess.

At once—men agreed judging it
popular at the public reckoning, with
erudite tenses we were
all trying to
—us back into the inter-room for

conformity pronounced. Exchanges, yes, muttering
I'll admit something had transformed
below
varying degrees.

Other poems in the first chapbook spread out on the page and still others seem to owe something to the recursive movement of Scalapino's work and thought. Critchley's interrupted and redirected propositions, which suggest intimate arguments, also remind me of some of the work of Mina Loy as it mingles and crosses the conceptual and the erotic—which is to say that the poem does “erudite tenses” well enough but subjects them to a skeptical emotional pressure that seems the product of disappointed experience.

The second chapbook, particularly its first sequence, more consistently features an intimate direct address. A little time among academics and poets concerned with advanced poetics will help one hear the insistence in these poems, which ask of hyper-intellectual Cambridge the locations or nature of a language other than the erudite. Perhaps the most academic gesture in the sequence, if it is meant to be taken straightforwardly, is the afterword that glosses the poems' movements, contexts, and meanings:

From first lust (“Project aMUSEment”), through zenith and tragedy, smut and abortion (the “Dirt” and “glitch[es]” of the title), the collection attempts to trace the inner compulsions of the subject's mind-emotions and/or alterations, combining this with implicit social critique. At points “she” is reduced to a one-dimensional literary mode. At others, “she” is metaphorised away from herself as land, river, and so on (a wry criticism of the possessive tendencies of lovers, especially as manifested in the celebrated Cavalier tradition). Yet throughout, it is difficult to know who to blame or trust for these conveyances. The subject seems at times to will such objectifications, either of her lover (“the raw habit peninsula”) or herself: “now imagine it / thrust / forward into *my* diagram.” It is as if she knows no other world of conceptualization. Consequently, what emerges from out of the made-up / would-be surgically-altered / polluted sex-symbolism, is virtually impossible to recognise, except as a space in which there can

be no more heroines—only a disparate gathering of information-clusters and mutated clichés.

Arguably this is helpful as glosses go, as it begins to indicate some of the ways that this poetry engages the claims of recent feminist discourse. Some of the insistence in the work, the “urgency” that one blurb on the back of Critchley’s more recent chapbook mentions, might have to do with acknowledging the limits of that discourse, not in order to reject it outright but to work it into a shape useful for the poet. As if compelled, this poetry will also be responsive, pushing back against the forces and contexts that would influence it.

Critchley’s more recent collection, most of which can be read in the Spring–Summer 2006 issue of *How2*, is arranged in prose blocks, and has pseudo-epistolary textures; the poems might have started as emails. Immediacy is one of their illusions, in part because of the way that the formal logic—these insistent repetitions it is a struggle to keep them in line—keeps breaking down. Here the text not only seems to mimic and then interrupt the logic of an implied addressee and lover, it also cancels its own logics, either by allowing the proposition to run off track or via the use of small font marginalia dialogically positioned vis-à-vis text in larger font. Some of the small font text is itself erased, which is to say a line is drawn through it. Thus in the poem’s concluding section, “The hostile space around each name beckons,” a final sentence that reads “*When I say / women don’t need men for anything I mean it / not even as a way of joking*” follows a sentence that is footnoted to point to the phrase “~~I wish I could get you out of my head.~~”

One structure Critchley uses in both chapbooks is the sentence that says what her saying will or does mean—“When I say x I mean xy” would half-algebraically represent one kind of statement I’m pointing to, and “When I say x I mean y” would be the other. Identity and difference: these statements, together with other gestures I don’t have time to discuss, help give the writing a bright, brash, if also cerebral affect, whether the discourse is angry, disappointed, or argumentative.

When I say I believe women & men read & write differently I mean that women & men read & write pretty differently. Whether this is biologically ‘essential’ or just straightforward like when you left the toaster burning or because women have a subordinated relationship to power in their guts I don’t know. Is this clear enough for you to follow. I don’t know. When I say we should try not to forget the author, this is because that would be bad manners as well as ridiculous. When I say

there is a centre into which exclusion bends I mean *nothing*. When I hear you ask how much money did you get or how far have you got into your work, something internal plunges for the exit, like puking, it wants to get out—because you’re *still* being hostile (after all these years)—& look toward the charcoaled meats for rescue. There they are still on fire.

One can’t have a clue what that last passage (looking toward the “charcoaled meats for rescue”) is about, which is one way this writing presents itself as intimate. We are obliged to see that the speaker and her addressee know more than we do as the poem moves in and out of propositions, sometimes with a refreshing awkwardness. See, for example, the almost (but not quite) circular logic of this poem’s first statement, or the idea that “just straightforward” is the alternative to “biologically ‘essential,’” or the fact that it is the toaster rather than the toast described as burning. The sentence that ends with “ridiculous” would possibly help identify Critchley as English.

Frances Kruk’s *Clobber* is another Yt Communication chapbook, three short sequences of short poems between stapled pink cardstock. Some of the poems sketch domestic interiors with an occasional hint of aggro in their sharp, clipped phrases. I hear something like the cadences of Harryette Mullen’s *S*PeRM**K*T* in this one, called “dustbunny”:

buckyball beneath the bed. a fleecy oatmeal
of a linty cholesterol. luscious barnacle
clinging rug steak I like electrostatic meat
my particulates. rub against, pick a stick
jab the fluff and flick it back. bunny my
bunny. little tickler.

Kruk’s poems typically resist rising above this kind of sonically dense description and association toward the critique that characterizes Critchley’s poems. Some of them have something of the feel of the modernist lyric fragment:

floss from tooth dissolve
diamonds ancient worrygrains
my belly in the wake of my money
eaten

These poems suggest a promising future, I think; they are alert amid the quotidian struggles of a young person trying to get by in London with not enough cash. Elsewhere we read of “a shit-filled bowl with no plunger in site.”

There are other younger poets who might be mentioned here—the

London-based Canadian Marianne Morris and the London-based American and/or Canadian Kai Fierle Hedrick, two very different poets but published by some of the same presses. There are others.

I'll conclude, though, with a few excerpts from Sean Bonney's *Document: hexprogress*. Bonney is a little older than the poets I've mentioned. He must be about Keston Sutherland's age, I'd guess, early thirties maybe, and he has a Salt book, *Blade Pitch Control Unit* (2005), and a reputation for that work as well as for his energized performances, his assaults on all that is London in the age of Blair. The blurbs on the Salt book offer some idea: "These are poems with a rare urgency and intelligence.... They have a raw quality: manic states inscribed in phrases short enough to catch them" (Ben Watson). "This is a poetry of social refusal in every sense" (Jeff Hilson). The Salt book collects earlier chapbooks and sequences and contains an impressive variety of work; Harry Gilonis without too much exaggeration speaks of "the broadest gamut of any poet I know." Bonney might also be the first poet with so-called avant-garde affiliations since John James whose work might have a chance to reach a popular audience—if a popular audience, or at least a wider audience, is within reach for any poetry these days. For one thing it has eminently quotable passages, e.g. "My hatred of the rich / is non-judgemental, / non-random, an obelisk / to drag across a map / of all the places you visited / the sparks that showered stars." That's from "pop starts on Holloway Road" in the Salt book, a poem fascinated and disgusted by the world "standing outside the Odeon." Bonney seems comfortable with many of the established modes of avant-garde practice, but his poems have enough sustained exposition to really be political. And they want to be political. At the same time varieties of a now more or less familiar collapsed or disjunct syntax are part of his toolkit. The work as a whole, particularly his more traditional lyrics, resonate a little of Villon in their movement between vulnerability and venomous observation. Two passages to conclude with, then, the first a lyric set within a sequence set within the larger collection, the second the opening lines of the one "Negative Poetix" manifesto (there are several) that I quoted earlier:

I am broken
& break but
sometimes am
right &
RAW
insipid monsters
burst me
before I
finally
am

shot right
through the
irrelevant stars.

*

We are now at dot point. Can only lick our way out. us recuperation of avant-garde positions made us point and laugh but in the hotel lobby we were bored and reduced to riot reenactment. Or, as pleasure, being eaten. Snobbery is a constant, reliable and loud. Megaphone. Garter system. 90% is invisible—like you thought you were exempt. As if you didn't exist as radio bands and sealed history, astral and biochemical. Pent-up. But I take it you prefer servitude.

Those of you with a computer and wallet might have a look at the Bad Press website to find the books discussed here and at the Yt Communication blog for news from the press. You could waste time forever.

Keith Tuma

SOME WEB COORDINATES

onedit: <http://www.onedit.net>
Plantarchy: <http://www.plantarchy.us>
Jow Lindsay's poems: <http://members.aol.com/towntrick/yogh/index.html>
How2: <http://www.how2journal.com>
Bad Press: <http://badpress.infinology.net>
Yt Communication Blog: <http://ytcommunication.blogspot.com>