

Not Alone in My Dancing

*Essays and
Reviews*

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Press

For Makaiya

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Introduction

A scholar friend once remarked to me that he had talked with James Merrill just before his death and heard him say that one of his chief regrets was that the poetry, much honored, had in fact received such scant critical attention. By critical attention, Merrill meant the deeper, contemporary engagement with those who were privileged (or cursed) to be reviewed by poet-critics like Jarrell, Dickey, or Bogan, whose praises and maledictions acquired authority from passionate, sensitive, and sustained involvement.

This is a model I find congenial. The late Allen Grossman, who, despite his weakness for gnarly prose, never lacked for these qualities. He found that talking about poetry becomes more suggestively a model of interpersonal experience—for “conversation,” in the all-purpose parlance of the moment, than of analysis. In fact, the conversation initiated by philosopher Michael Oakshott in his seminal essay (“The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind”)—and the conversation to which Grossman’s work subscribes—bears little resemblance to the casual give-and-take of daily verbal exchange. As popularized by Richard Rorty and others, this conversation resounds with a serious, implied collaboration that all by itself outpaces the grim requirements for outcomes. Process, in other words, outweighs product; improvisation replaces what is rote. *Conversation* becomes a term reflecting pragmatism’s avoidance of absolutes, and it implies one of the chief articles of belief derived from the rise of Theory, namely that words are always in play—there is no end to what we could say. Hence show-stoppers and “totalizing discourses” played a bad support role in either the spread of fabrication or the promotion of actual meaninglessness, aligning themselves on the

wrong side not only of history, but of the truth, insofar as the truth was something that could—*contra* Yeats—be known. Conversation about poetry enacts the intersubjective play that poems ideally bring, modeling how people should interact. Thus poetry, with its improvisations arising from form—and by extension, culture—is inherently, if not manifestly, moral. Talk about poetry is an image of the best kind of human life: aware, interested, careful, passionate, generous.

When I began to work in poetry, unproblematic first-person poems had free rein. This was so whether one descended from Eliot and Yeats, by way of Roethke, or by Pound by way of the Beats and the Black Mountain poets. There were exceptions: followers of Olson and Duncan, for instance, struck east-coasters like myself as rather tired of the subjective “I” poetry and as wanting to extend their poetic selves into myth. But we never forgot—and they never denied—the personal origins of their verse. By the time I had my first job in the early 1970s, the grip of this kind of poetry was beginning to give way to newer strains: neo-formalism, narrative poetry, and most threateningly, the “poetics of indeterminacy,” in Marjorie Perloff’s clinical phrase. It was said that the new poetics had been cleared for takeoff by bearded technicians who knew more about the theoretical underpinnings of poetry than you or I did. I had seen these experts at work, and I had two simultaneous impressions: first, that abstract knowledge had little to do with the feel of poetry, and second, that the theoretical underpinnings were appropriations from the works of philosophers above and beyond the critics who engaged them. I moreover couldn’t resist the conviction that technical mastery wasn’t the same as real mastery. It took the poem away from the lover and left it at the feet of the lab technician. Couldn’t the same be said of those trained during the regime of the New Criticism, where my kind got its education? Of course it could: criticism has frequently slipped into the lab to ball up its muscle and increase its jargon. But such technical savvy as the New Critics developed and passed on retained a sense of poetry’s moment, of its centrality in the literary ecosphere, as an image of a multivalent, ideal use of language. When I realized the extent of the implied claim that theory stood on the shoulders of philosophers, I also sensed the implied

conspiracy: there was theory and philosophy lined in opposition to the claims of poetry, especially those claims that relied on poetry's musty prestige. It seemed to me, on the contrary, that poets and philosophers—of the wide-ranging, Continental sort especially—had more in common than those same philosophers did with their supposed avatars, the parvenu critics.

It seemed to me then—and to a large extent it still does—that a philosophical mind is more friendly toward poetry than a theoretical mind. Poets as dissimilar as the late Hayden Carruth, John Koethe, Troy Jollimore, Russell Edson, and Jorie Graham lend support to this notion. I began reviewing because of a complaint similar to Merrill's, that there was too little attention devoted to critical engagement with contemporary poetry. Happily, in the years since Merrill's death, the state of poetry reviewing has changed—for the better, and a generation of young, well-trained and ideologically-savvy (and wary) critics has appeared. The appearance coincides roughly with the rapid acceptance of online literary magazines. I myself decided early on that, poetry being finally metaphysical, it mattered little whether it manifested itself as print or pixels. Many of my colleagues evince a bibliophilia that verges on a fetish: they are all about the feel of the manufactured book, and indeed it is just this love grandfathered in from an earlier ethos to recent decades that has helped raise the production values of small presses. This love notwithstanding (and I share it), I long ago assented to the metaphysical tilt of poetry: regardless of its skin and the materiality of its packaging and delivery, it's essentially language at home in the memory and the heart, not just the chilly bed of the page.

With that in mind, I first published poems online in *The Cortland Review*, a virtual lit-mag that featured audio files of poets reading their work. This was back in the '90s, when having a CD accompany a book was a big deal, and nobody seemed to know how or where the internet and literature might converge. One thing was for sure: academics were already busily moving their work to the web, leveraging its ease and ubiquity for projects fertilized by the Age of Theory. Literati were slower to follow, but the last few years has seen a sea-change in acceptance of online literary start-ups and online versions

of established printed journals. When I began reviewing poetry for *TCR*, I hoped for the larger audience that the web promised. Now, some years down the road, what began in journeyman fashion has grown by inertial force alone into a survey. It is not in any way comprehensive or sweeping (except in my generalizations). There are poets I wish I had the opportunity to include here but for one reason or another, could not. But despite the more or less random selection, these poets' works do give us a picture of common concerns, both communal and subjective. There is, for instance, in most cases, a sense that the personal is the reversible coat of the social, construed as political, sociological, or mythical. There is the sense that experimentation has a less unsettling role to play than it did for previous generations. Perhaps it is simply that experimentation no longer has quite the *épater les bourgeois* quality. Even hardcore poets of discontinuity, those who used to be lumped together as "language poets" (after the fashioners of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*) make nice with their more conservative compeers, passing out prizes, amiably blogging, sitting on panels and boards. There is the sense too that confession, washed in the blood of materialism, survives as a proud subjectivity that would not be out of place coming from the pen of Tsvetaeva or Akhmatova, poets who fed their nation when the self was made fugitive by the State. And that means that authenticity is making a comeback, as if, having survived the scrutiny of deflationary critics, it made sense for the singular lyric voice to add its testimony to, and for the soul to witness, the mill of history. I consider these essays and reviews to be acknowledgments of that premise, namely that subjectivity enables the real chronicle: the feel of what it is like.

Since I first thought of doing this collection in 2012, seven of the poets, from the some fifty under discussion here, have passed away. Six of these—Kurt Brown, Jane Cooper, Claudia Emerson, Philip Levine, Margaret Raab and C. K. Williams—were aware of the remarks I applied to their work, now published here. Indeed, the initial publication in each case elicited a response or a series of exchanges—of appreciation, gentle correction, and general, always cordial, reply. The sixth, Carolyn Kizer, had already moved into cog-

native darkness by the time her death caught up with her in 2014. She was the first person I ever observed draw a blue pencil from her bag and get to work on someone else's poem. The stern eye and faultless ear were the mirror of her love for poetry. She thought that poetry was the greatest achievement in the world, and writing about these poets over the years, living with their words, attending their fashionings, as well as their failures, I know well what she means.

Betty Adcock's *Slantwise*

The title of course directs us to Dickinson's truth, also to the truth that to be slant is somehow to repose, diagonally, in wisdom. There is in fact so much mojo in the title of her latest collection that we are lathered up with poetic goodness before we even venture into the first poem. Betty Adcock has been writing an agreeable brand of poetry for years and has built a fan base that would make a Republican candidate sit up and beg for buttermilk. In *Slantwise*, she doesn't disappoint. Her poetry is accessible and carefully rendered, and that accessibility begins in part with her subjects: family, origins, place—the tangible durables. For Adcock, these are the massy keys that open up the Mystery. I remember something Martin Amis said about Saul Bellow, i.e., that he wrote surpassingly because he quite simply had the talent to see an inch or two below the surface where other writers found their sightlines returning a blank. Permit me to draw this strange comparison between Adcock and Saul Bellow on the same grounds: she works the surfaces to yield another depth, where insight becomes vision. This was Miss Bishop's great talent, and Adcock shares some of that DNA—although not the habit of producing poems as presentation pieces.

Slantwise takes off with a masterful poem (that is indeed not subsequently surpassed). It begins with a pine needle:

one
needle falling through green
shade, through warp and shimmer of
September sometimes,
end over end will

turn as if marking the passing
 air with form, circumference
 as of time's real motion or
 the approximation of, say,
 a face.

We have all seen this twisting, dancing slow-motion descent in the movies, of leaf or snowflake, the touchdown that accompanies the sudden realism that gravity is a thing. I am reminded of the delicate tracery of A. R. Ammons, who also tried to maneuver space through voice and who also was obsessed with form. That pine needle, of course, is a compass bearing witness to opposite directions it can't bother to overcome or reconcile:

being only
 a downed, straitened angel,
 pin and linear argument,
 line of prophecy flattened letterless
 whose browning measure
beneath notice
 points both ways at once . . .

Even in its ambivalence, it is the "little" text, ancestor of her poem, that "could shine the way / scripture shines." Bloom used to make a big deal of Ammons' poems as operas of Romantic ideas derived from the solicitation of natural fact (and the misprision of ancestral voices). Adcock's poem is no less a performance whose aim is to find prophetic song in natural theology, though elegy, with its old values, is still the mode:

barn swallow

hawk-snatched from the sky, redtail
 gone, gone by.

If you think the poem is headed in another direction, after its nervous reaction before the hourglass, then you've been keeping up. As is the case with many of the poems here concerned with loss, elegy—that *modus operandi* at absence's crater—is always, finally, personal (and hence requires persons). Adcock meanwhile hears another

kind of silence waiting to surround “[t]his present chainsaw-battered/earth.” I don’t wish to make heavy weather from this or to suggest that Adcock has gone cosmic. The fact is, she rarely strays from the bandwidth that makes up her Muse’s comfort zone, and when you think about it, that can be a good thing. In her case it ensures not only compatibility, but consistency. With their classical ears tuned to the plow’s drag and their eyes scanning the sky’s dignified monotony, southern poets have always been eco-poets *avant le lettre*. The poet who writes, as Adcock does in “Why White Southern Poets Write the Way We Do,” that “a mist can sit in a pasture /like a cloud in a basket” requires little retro-fitting with respect to addressing the plight of habitat. In “1932,” she returns to personal origins and the issue of identity with a poem that re-members the parents whose convergent relationship she was in no position to observe, being not yet born, and their sad discontinuity, when her mother died young: “There’s nothing / I know except that he lost her, and I lost them both.” Strange to say, she has the story, but it’s all based on rules of plausibility, thanks to a kindly friend, who is part custodian, part interlocutor:

One of the family that boarded my mother
has told me this story: all that I have
of their early knowing one another.

Despite the brevity of the time allotted them, her parents are the dance, and she—the poet—the point of that dance, insofar as dances can be said by means of the human laser-dot to have a point (and the question is by no means academic, as it goes to the heart of identity, as Yeats, Eliot, and busloads of poets will attest).

The deer have run from a foreign thing.
There’s no automobile out this late.
The horned owl complains and does not stay
where they and their lantern are dancing.

Well, for sure, nothing runs like a deer, and the “foreign thing” from which this one bounds is as much the sculpted presentiment of loss, as of the loss itself. Given only clues to which she is, perforce, second-hand in her honoring, a connector of dots, she nonetheless

knows and concludes that “it is enough” to know the minimum. Even from the scant hearsay, she is able to construct images that remain forever meaningful, even if they may be false to minute fact. At once the straight-up victim of history and the timeless pair choreographing their roles, they are true to the love whose object she construes, reveling in her own inadvertent complicity in being alive at all:

I hear them hum

along with a scratchy saccharine tune
 from that poverty-ridden American year,
 and she turns and turns in the arms of my father . . .

If such sticks are no bar to the solidity of memory’s house, then our truck with time’s backward abysm is seriously on a roll. Taking the other tack—that forgetting achieves special provenance in love—becomes the subject of “No Elegy in November,” my favorite poem in this collection:

They will not turn, the dead,
 from their ashen lace or outward-facing
 stone. Having fled along the route
 all planetary matter takes, they race—
 like light for creation—

invincibly away.

Notice how that editor-unfriendly adverb, “invincibly,” steps forward to make the image, and how “turn” almost but doesn’t quite remember “return”—as indeed they do neither. Forgetting, too, becomes love’s *ne plus ultra* because it takes on the sacrificial nature by which love enables the person to escape the ego’s prison. The poem stands precisely in the place of the loved one, and no elegy and elegy are thereby reconciled:

Unkindling utterly, you will not turn
 nor send your wildfire spirit back to speak.
 You’ll not forgive, nor longer wish, nor see
 how you have left the rest of us to burn.

Notice here how the knowing use of the conventional imagery of burning yields “unkind” to hide in plain sight of “unkindling,” meanwhile pointing to its assonance partner, “utterly.” To leave—to absent oneself through death—feels at first like a special existential unkindness to the survivors, but time will change this too, collapse all into the poem and into the final word “burn.” The point, both obvious and mysterious at once, is that only the living “burn,” that living is itself burning. The mystery lies with the thought, a thought that follows hard upon the silence gathering after the final period, that only the living know poetry and that poetry itself reconciles the inert symbol with its burning authors.

It is hardly surprising that Adcock takes special care to marshal and deploy just the right words. You sense, reading *Slantwise*, that this is a poet who scans every word like a quality-control expert training a beady eye on the neutral bric-a-brac of parts of speech coming down the conveyor belt, supplied first by literature, then by colloquial conversants. It is of course of the essence of middle-brow conventionality to remark approvingly on the “connoisseurship” of certain wordsmiths, but if verbal connoisseurship were the end-all, it would be no different than any other fetish. In fact, as we know from “1932” and from “Seeing Josephine,” about a visit with the poet’s childhood “caretaker/playmate”—“Black Josephine, twelve years old when I was five”—words generate their own reality. And although no less a wordsmith than Eliot warned us that words don’t stay in place, we see that in some sense we don’t want them to. Their very slippage is part and parcel of the reality they describe:

my grandmother’s whispers, fifty years gone,
 overheard once and meaningless then: *Moll’s cabin*
 she said, naming *terrible* and *shame*, naming
 my grandfather’s nephew *not gone*
till after-sun-up. Those syllables
 rolling away, lodged blue in the morning—
 glory vine around the well, reddening
 on the tomato plants, a dark weave
 in the cock’s crow and the lovely trill
 of the peach orchard’s mockingbird—,
 all strung now on frailest memory.

Who Stopped Making Quilts” connect us to the artistic impulse. In this poem, the paradox of any creation—from the “garbage” (Akhmatova’s term) from which poems emerge, to the snippets (often stolen) from which quilts are stitched—lies in its seeming lack of predetermination:

I gathered figured fabrics and splashes
of single color, vivid sparks
the world threw off. I filled my days
with baskets of the past, small thievings,
taking part in life by taking part
of it to make it art.

And in the end, the made thing in the sum of its accidents is like “a flock of winging birds caught fast / in the blinding net of likeness and these words.” That emphasis on the likeness of things, that search for harmony, belies the arbitrary nature of its origins. It is a vision that still moves the imagination, although poems of disaster—of the *unlikeness* of things—also must figure their disfigurements (I am thinking here of poems about 9/11 and the Space Shuttle explosion in this volume) into what is still a pattern. Betty Adcock’s new volume takes up such issues without showing the sweat marks of heavy lifting. But that is what it means to be graceful, to have an art that speaks to the felt and to the thought that describes the feeling, then to the words that describe the thought. It’s what Wittgenstein meant when he said he wanted thought to be a ladder we climbed and then afterward, satisfied that there was no remainder unaccounted for, we would pull the ladder up after us.