Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Paradox of Official Verse Culture

Robert Wood · Wednesday, May 27th, 2015

I assume, like most people, I read what I think I will like and I very rarely venture outside of it. Occasionally, if I am reviewing something for a publication, I read beyond my comfort zone. This habit is not a case of belief needing to be re-affirmed, but the acknowledgment that there is so much to read in the first place that one should start with things one likes. I am, though, often surprised and impressed. I certainly was when I read and reviewed Bonny Cassidy's *Final Theory* for new publication *Writ*.

To rewind, a history of painting since the camera in 200 words or less: When photography came along, painting had to change. The aim was no longer 'true' representation. Painting began, slowly, to embrace abstraction, from Van Gogh to Pollock. Very few painters working today in something that could be called a realist tradition can be said to be important institutionally. Realist painting, especially of ships, still life, chairs, is confined, for the most part, to hobbyists, craft fairs, fetes, markets and perhaps the odd populist portrait prize. I am not denying there is artistic skill, technical ability, involved in this, but if Vermeer came along today we would no longer be in awe. The Chinese village of Dafen attests to this. This is because the world has changed and art, including poetry, changes along with it.

Detractors will say this idea of Vermeer forgets history and I would welcome such a criticism, precisely because it provides an opportunity for critique. One could imagine people saying, 'Vermeer is Vermeer, if he was born now he would still be a genius.' Such a view is anti-historical precisely because it neglects the historical conditions in which art is produced and that we are not dealing with Vermeer as a spirit, but with his artefacts of production – namely his paintings. Painting has changed since Vermeer, and so too has poetry. But one could be forgiven for thinking that poetry has not kept pace with painting. Works like Geoffrey Lehmann's *Poems* lends credence to Byron Gysin's idea that poetry is fifty years behind painting, if not a little bit more. Perhaps the most noticeable parallel to draw with Lehmann is the Antipodean group who staged a single exhibition in August 1959 at the Victorian Artists' Society in Melbourne. Similarly, Lehmann's work is situated against post-modern, international, abstraction, what Andrew Reimer called 'patterns of utterance'. It is the work of a conservative mind.

The remarkable institutional resilience of poetry like Lehmann's, which structurally approximates realist painting, is striking in this regard. The poets working in this manner, which we could describe in various ways as similar to lyric or conservative verse, can't all be Chuck Close. Official verse culture is well and truly behind painting. With Lehmann we are not even dealing with Rover Thomas or Brett Whitely, let alone someone more contemporary. This frame depletes our

emotional energy so that by the time we finish this book we are relieved it is over. The ritual of turning these pages is not one we will pass through again.

This poetry is striking not only because it seems so dated, but also because it seems so unoriginal, paradoxically more uncreative than conceptual poets who publish now with an eye for unoriginality. Kenneth Goldsmith, in advocating an uncreative writing that simply reframes everyday language, like *Day*, his monumental copying of an edition of the *New York Times*, might have looked instead to lyric realism. With these poets, one finds a sort of uncreative writing in the form of adept technical skill in crafting poems that are obviously outdated, rather than creativity itself. Immanuel Kant suggested that genius was 'a talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition consisting of a skill for something that can be learned by following some rule or other'. Those who judge official verse culture, the sort of prize winning staple of big publishing houses, will kindly praise a work for its consistency, its wordplay, its voice and its technical ability.

We would also do well to remember that every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism. So what then is the barbarism on display in official verse culture? The barbarism here is one of absence if anything – there is nothing that could suggest a relation outside a select few to whom this work speaks. I see nothing problematic in this, but in glossing over its very specific positionality it cannot lay claim to a universal merit, let alone address the matters of this heart, which is often the purview of such writing.

If Poetry is in crisis, its radical wing is Poetry's poetry. There is a radical tradition that continually needs to defend itself against attacks of 'obscurity,' 'isolation,' 'difficulty,' 'profound silliness,' all of which are advanced by critics who have patent disregard for the historical conversation and conventions of movements such as concrete, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and conceptual poetry, to cite only three. People invested in a radical tradition should I think continue to highlight the central paradox of official verse culture. The paradox is that in trying so hard to be 'authentic' and 'true' and 'original' and 'distinctive of voice,' we are met with work that is so indistinguishable from its peers as to be uncreative.

Critics of this paradox may say, 'I can tell a Lehmann or an Armitage from anyone else and your palate is simply too unsophisticated to recognise the difference. Who doesn't know the difference between a sauvignon blanc and a chenin blanc?' But the difference I am talking about, the vast ecosystem of poetry, is not only the difference between whites, but perhaps even between painting and performance art. The desire to construct a voice and then have variations on a theme seems to me to be a predominant and outdated mode indicative of official verse culture. Originality, that sought after Enlightenment quality, that barometer of genius, has been forsaken for safe, unrewarding, boring verse that is ultimately either too self-mimetic or not self-mimetic enough.

Perhaps one should aim to be self-anthologising in a manner that highlights eclecticism rather than a semblance of consistency. As Wallace Stevens said, every poem is an experiment, and so we should embrace that sorts of failings as part of the process, not as things to be hidden while we try to have small modulations around our core. What I am suggesting is not simply that one refuse a style where one stays within it hoping to be recognisable, and hence reify the author function and propose a certain type of liberalism, but that one experiment in poetry in all its various forms and view it not as emotional self-expression, but as the research and development wing of critique. With official verse culture we see no experiments, we see no Higgs-Boson moment, ironically we see no art.

Top image: A detail from Vermeer's The Milkmaid, 1658

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