

DAVID MASON

The Poetry Circus

I HAVE BEEN READING ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER to cheer myself up. He may have been a depressive, but at least he believed in literature. These days it's hard to get anyone to read works of the imagination in any form, and poets, the most desperate and needy of imaginative writers, spend a lot of time trying to get attention. The poetry circus is dominated by windbags and bletherers, with a few charming clowns and pickpockets at the margins. If you buy a ticket to the show, you usually end up disappointed, loping out of the big tent, looking for a good novel or film to take up the slack.

Schopenhauer believed in masterpieces and the viability of poetry that could reach readers everywhere in the stands. To many contemporary minds, this is a contradiction, but as the philosopher said, ". . . nothing is easier than to write so that no one can understand; just as contrarily, nothing is more difficult than to express deep things in such a way that everyone must necessarily grasp them." Surely some kinds of difficulty are better than others. What we too often have in contemporary poetry is not difficulty. It is novelty for the sake of novelty. Style becomes a function of irrelevance, there to get the poet noticed rather than offering the reader a vital gift.

Perhaps this is why Mark Strand seems the representative poet of our time. He has had a major career without ever writing a great poem. The best thing I can say about his new collection, *Man and Camel*, is that its pages are exquisitely designed and printed.¹ The worst is that he has written with complacency. Still, Schopenhauer reminds me that I should judge an author by his best work, not his worst, otherwise criticism degenerates into pettiness. While I think *Man and Camel* characteristically thin, five of its twenty-three poems rise above the rest with a studied ennui not unlike Samuel Beckett's.

The son enters the mother's room
and stands by the bed where the mother lies.
The son believes that she wants to tell him
what he longs to hear—that he is her boy,
always her boy. The son leans down to kiss
the mother's lips, but her lips are cold.

¹ MAN AND CAMEL, by *Mark Strand*. Alfred A. Knopf. \$24.00.

The burial of feelings has begun. The son
touches the mother's hands one last time,
then turns and sees the moon's full face.
An ashen light falls across the floor.
If the moon could speak, what would it say?
If the moon could speak, it would say nothing.

It's not the nihilism of the close that catches me here, but the more vulnerable acknowledgement of that "burial of feelings." In his final sequence Strand writes that "nothing is more real than nothing," which has a chilling ring to it, but I find him more interesting when he admits to an emotional life in spite of that darkness, as he does in "Error," "Black Sea" and "My Name." In contrast, poems like "Cake" and "Man and Camel" never fulfill their premises. They're like fumbled tricks under an empty Big Top.

"Truth is most beautiful undraped," wrote Schopenhauer, "and the impression it makes is deep in proportion as its expression has been simple." I can think of statues for which this is true, but am not sure I would apply it as a universal standard to literature, where self-conscious artifice can be a pleasure. And not all plainness is beautiful. Stephen Dunn's new book occasionally exhibits a style so plain it's like old bread.² His poems too often feel vetted by committee, designed to offer object lessons in a poetry workshop. *That was a poem about my process. Now, here is another poem about my process. My process is precious, don't you think? By the way, have I ever told you about my process?*

He is far better when squarely facing a certain squalor in life—rage and its suppression. Among several poems I admired here were "Where He Found Himself," "The Soul's Agents," "You'd Be Right," and "Everything Else in the World," the latter ending as follows:

All I wanted was a job like a book
so good I'd be finishing it
for the rest of my life.

Had my education failed me?
I felt a hankering for the sublime,
its dangerous subversions
of the daily grind.
Oh I took a dull, well-paying job.
History major? the interviewer said, I think
you might be good at designing brochures.

I was. Which filled me with desire
for almost everything else in the world.

² EVERYTHING ELSE IN THE WORLD, by *Stephen Dunn*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. \$23.95.

Winner of a Pulitzer Prize, Dunn has obviously been successful without demanding much of his readers, especially if those readers are creative writing students. But success is to be argued with, and I wish he would edit himself more rigorously. For example, his poem called “Critics” begins very well:

Listen to their voices, that’s all right,
but do not strain to hear your name.
Their job sometimes is to winnow
and omit. Yours is to go on.

Unfortunately, the poem *does* go on quite unnecessarily, diluting its wisdom and concluding in redundancy. Dunn can be lucid and smart, but on the whole I think he has found too comfortable a style, too seldom reaching for the dangerous subversions of the sublime.

Paul Muldoon is the anti-Dunn—all flash, an amalgam of James Joyce and Ogden Nash. I loved much of his early work but was not alone in wishing he would present himself as a less invulnerable wit. He’s prodigious, to be sure. If you love words, love rhymes, Muldoon’s yer man. If you want a little *Drang* with your *Sturm*, look elsewhere. Still, in a circus that gives us so many trumped-up careers, so many half-crooked barkers, Muldoon cheers me. He’s not half so boring as most of our big guns, largely because nobody else has fun with words quite the way he does. He’s one of the few real clowns in the ring.

Horse Latitudes is my favorite Muldoon volume in years.³ One of its unexpected Muses appears to be Bob Dylan—not the protest singer or the dissenter of lost loves, but the protean maker who spins any thread he can find and doesn’t give a rat’s ass what you sew with it. There’s more song or pseudo-song here than Muldoon has offered in a while. I loved the phrase-play of his sonnetish sequence “The Old Country,” the pure blether of haiku in “90 Instant Messages to Tom Moore.” Here are a few random takes:

Hamilton. Tweeds? Tux?
Baloney? Abalone?
Flux, Tom. Constant flux.

Cough? What’s with the cough?
The balls with which a papaw
tries to palm us off.

A barracuda
is eating a small nurse shark.
Each smiles like a buddha.

³ HORSE LATITUDES, by *Paul Muldoon*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$22.00.

A horse drank the dregs
of the barrel of black rum
and found its sea legs.

The worm that attacks
my large intestine has cut
me a lot of slack.

Well, if you cut Muldoon a bit of slack he can be a lot of fun. Not everything works. Virtually nothing here moves me deeply, and some poems like “Sillyhow Stride” (in spite of some touching lines about his sister) go on longer than they ought. But anyone who can write a pantoum as good as “The Mountain Is Holding Out” and can make the language clang and jangle and jump as Muldoon does in the best of these poems is all right, Jack.

One of the more remarkable books to come across my desk is the second collection by a twenty-year-old poet, England’s Caroline Bird.⁴ At this rate, she is likely to stop writing poetry and disappear on some African gun-running trail before she’s the age Keats was when he died, but I hope she sticks with writing. She has great verbal energy; and if I’ll play the old fart by advocating restraint, I wouldn’t do so if there weren’t real vitality to restrain. Power comes from shaping, and Bird’s lesser poems fail to follow through on clever premises—like lame clowning or stand-up that dies on the stage. “Our Lollipop Lady” is a case in point, a poem that closes with a *Ho-hum* instead of an *Ahhh*.

What attracted me first to this Bird’s book was its title: *Trouble Came to the Turnip*, perhaps a nod to the land of Nod. The title poem itself is Muldoonishly formal, palatable more than suss-able, I would say. Having come for the shape, though, I found one of her more shapeless rants, “This Time Last Week,” to be deeply compelling. Here are two stanzas extracted almost at random to give you a sense of her intelligence:

I want to write.
I want to be respected.
I want to be a respected writer.
I want to meet people who will inspire me
to write letters to them when I am forty
saying ‘Thanks for inspiring me.’
But who are these people
in their ironed shirts and their reading glasses
and their well-funded quests?
Are you kidding me with this?
... .

⁴ TROUBLE CAME TO THE TURNIP, by *Caroline Bird*. Carcanet. £9.95p.

It wasn't that I met some very alarming people
 with horrific backgrounds and unspeakable foregrounds.
 I'm not the daddy's-girl nurse
 limping back from the war with blood on her bonnet
 and no more love for daddy.
 I'm not saying I've seen the ruins of the world
 and now my world is in ruins. . . .

Going on for three more pages, it's a bit of a *Howl* for a new generation, and no doubt a crowd-pleaser when performed, but it's alive in ways that some of our more laurelled bards couldn't dream of being. Two more favorites, "Mope" and "Chaining Bikes to this Girl Is Strictly Prohibited," are among her punchier poems. I'd love to see her bring this kind of fire into a ring, where it could burn productively for many years to come.

Another poet I had never heard of before, John Menaghan, has published one of the best books of 2006.⁵ *She Alone* is a sort of novel in verse or fictional biography, but neither of those terms quite does it justice. It evokes the life of a woman artist in fifty-odd lyrics, each in a different form, each handled with unobtrusive panache. Here is a book in which style and substance harmonize. It is refreshingly devoted not to the poet's career but to another life—and an eloquent one at that. Some poems are expansive, others minimalist, but the book comes closer to the tone and tenor of Beckett (with its unsettling reverberations) than anything by Mark Strand. The following lyric, "What She Wanted," arrives late in the book:

She wanted to paint
 and she has painted
 but too little.

She wanted to wander
 and she has wandered
 but too little.

She wanted to dream
 and she has dreamed
 but too little.

She wanted to love & be loved
 and she has loved & been loved
 but too little.

⁵ SHE ALONE, by *John Menaghan*. Salmon Poetry. Distributed in the U.S. by Dufour Editions, Inc. \$18.95p.

She wanted to live
and she has lived
but too little.

She never wanted to die
yet she has died
little by little.

Published by Salmon Poetry in Ireland and available from Dufour Editions, *She Alone* is poetry with a human center, as smart and affecting as anything else under review here, utterly original without special pleading on behalf of the poet. John Menaghan is the real thing.

H. L. Hix is a friend of mine, but I should attempt to say something about his work because it complicates my reading and my assumptions.⁶ Hix can be as difficult as any poet going, but I do not think he wears his style too superficially. A trained philosopher, he makes style out of rigorous inquiry, and while I cannot pretend to understand everything he writes, I usually find it intriguing.

He began his career with a collection of surprising lyrics called *Perfect Hell*, including one extended poem, "This Particular Eden," that still seems to me among the most beautiful meditations on love I have ever read. That's saying a lot, I know, but Hix develops the beauty of thought and experience into a kind of Old Testament estrangement and elegance. He works by skeptical displacements of phrase but knows a gorgeous line when he hears one. He knows the formal pleasure and the denial of that pleasure; and through his constant questioning of our presumptions, he has become a poet who transcends the various schools with their culling rhetoric.

His book of essays, *As Easy As Lying*, was a rare contribution because it doubted this very rhetoric, the ad campaigns of the loose alliances, and went about its business discovering and appreciating with discernment. Even when I disagree with his judgments I admire his honesty. Some of his best lyrics appeared in *Rational Numbers* and *Surely as Birds Fly*, and these have been followed by two searching collections, *Shadows of Houses* and *Chromatic*, the latter a finalist for the National Book Award. In these books the difficulty will remind some readers of Language Poetry, but Hix is actually able to follow through with his ideas in formal and intellectual terms, while Language Poets usually get off to a roaring start and run out of gas rather quickly. Hix's difficulty warrants attention, I would say, because of his understanding of both poetry and philosophy. It's not about him, per se. It's not *Hey, take a look at this hot career I've got going here*. Even when you feel like shelving him next to Wittgenstein rather than Yeats and Frost, he is more than a sum of ideas. He is a philosopher-poet as Eliot was a philosopher-poet.

⁶ CHROMATIC, by H. L. Hix. Etruscan Press. \$15.95p.

He is also a love poet who appears to know a lot about the trouble that entails. *Chromatic* (a synesthetic title deriving from both visual and auditory modes) begins with the gnomic narrative of an affair, "Remarks on Color," written in vignettes like this:

Boy meets girl, girl smiles.
Boy colors and looks down.

I see music, a colored medium
that darkens its surroundings.

Her bright body the iris,
his dark mind the pupil.

He hears the night as dark,
she hears it as a medium.

His pluralizing technique is saved by honesty about what happens when we love. These recent books are not necessarily what I want or expect from poetry, but they are bracing and often illuminating.

Love means the soul only pivots.
Any name can be erased.

I knew it would before it did.
The visible life conceals others.

Line and color are general truths.
A dark red can be blue too.

What I say of someone else
hues itself true of you.

In the next sequence, "Eighteen Maniacs," Hix uses jazz and scat, sense and nonsense, in a kind of chromatic patterning that, at present, I do not fully understand. Either the sequence fails or I fail, because my attention wanders between the flashes of wit and insight: "If I believed I'd've tried to say plain what I said crooked. If I believed I'd've said what I sung." I can follow this, but I don't always hear a singable music in these numbers. At times I might have preferred a more Muldoonish patter. Someone else might help me with this, but for the time being the sequence leaves me hungry for articulateness.

Finally, "The Well-Tempered Clavier" comprises twenty-four preludes in prose, each followed by a fugue in unpatterned lines, all playing on themes of love and habitation, habit and loss.

we are voices it is our work to send you careening
from consciousness to consciousness like tumbling down a hill
voices do not need motive and cause
one thing following from another is your idea not ours
we speak and you insist on moving your lips
naming all we have given up will take us forever

Chromatic is full of such hauntings, though its challenges will not earn Hix a popular following. Still, this restless, fecund and demanding poet remains, for me, one of the most distinctive writers of our time.

I do not imagine Hix is the sort of poet Schopenhauer had in mind—a “naïve” poet who “need not shrink from showing himself as he is.” But Schopenhauer was trying to get at something about the purest literary style, the way it enlightens more than it disguises, and I think Hix is being truly himself. There is a suffering and loving person involved in all that thinking, a problematic and sometimes joyful life. What I love about Bill Coyle’s first book, winner of The New Criterion Poetry Prize, is the person one discovers in the poems—witty, self-critical, well-traveled, conflicted, playful.⁷ Coyle’s formality never feels like a nerdy straightjacket. Instead, it is simple mastery. He is absolutely on top of his game, giving us a rich perspective, graceful even in doubting. He is easily one of the best poets of his generation (born in 1968). *The God of This World to His Prophet* is a book that is worth every penny of its cost, and I rarely feel that about books of poetry. Some of his surprises are small, as when he says to someone who has died,

Now, as I stand here in the gravel drive
at moonrise, unaccountably alive,
I have the sense that it is we, not you,

who are departing, spun at breakneck speed
through space and time, while you stay where you are—
intimate of dark matter and bright star—
and watch the brilliant, faithless world recede.

Or when, on another occasion, he realizes that the figure of Proserpine out in his yard is really “some nut escaped from the state hospital.” These poems guide us toward what Delmore Schwartz called “fresh sense” and are therefore articles of faith.

Coyle is less interested in making demands on how we read than on offering pleasure, yet there is an irreverent intellectual life here, not only in his translations from the Swedish, but also his theological musings. “The Language of Birds” mixes Darwinian naturalism, Biblical

⁷ THE GOD OF THIS WORLD TO HIS PROPHET, by Bill Coyle. Ivan R. Dee. \$22.50.

revisionism, Norwegian nationalism and a well-remembered Monty Python sketch in a cogent, lovely sequence about, of all things, parrot-hood:

There, in the branches of the Tree of Life
 one parrot, beautiful beyond belief,
 perches and preaches in what is,
 if now incomprehensible to us,
 nevertheless the language of our first
 parents and each succeeding generation
 (though it grew more corrupted over time)
 down to the tower and that divine confusion.

“The Soundman’s Funeral” assembles a life by what is left behind—in this case *sounds*:

We honored his request, playing in lieu
 of hymns or eulogies the sounds he made
 back in the old days, sounds that made
 the most unlikely tales ring true.

A squeal of brakes, a thunderclap, a shot,
 a locomotive’s wail, coyotes crying.
 Some of the guests by then were crying,
 others, lost in the story, not.

Rain on a tin roof, a dog barking, boughs
 groaning in a great wind. We thought of him,
 of all that found its voice through him.
 A door—the front door of a house?—

slammed and we listened as someone descended
 a creaking stairway, opened a car door,
 started the car up, shut the door,
 then drove off. So the story ended.

Or not the story, but that episode,
 to be continued anytime we hear
 one of his trademark noises, hear
 a car pull past us on the road,

say, or a dog bark. Not that he’s not gone,
 but it may help, now that he’s left this life,
 to hear him in the sounds of life,
 which is a show, and must go on.

Other favorites of mine in this remarkable book are “Baltic,” “Requiem for a Returnee” (a translated poem about Milosz), “The Moons of Earth,” and this little piece of charm called “Myself”:

What should I bring? Just yourself, they assure me. Which, granted, is nice but . . .

Jesus. What if I did? How could I live it down?

Give him an hour, he'd be drunk off his ass, critiquing the husband,
openly groping the wife, ruining priceless antiques,
looking for fights with the others, then taking offense when
challenged . . .

Self will be staying at home. Maybe I'll bring a bouquet.

Truth is, what I really want to do is take Coyle's lucid, humane poems and wave them like flags in the poetry circus. This is how it's done, you clowns! It's not about your careers. It's about the world and the poor sots who live in it and sometimes buy the books and actually want to read them. Give them something to take home from the show. Maybe a bouquet, maybe a balloon or a good joke—something they won't forget when they turn on the six o'clock news. Something more than an autographed photo of yourself.