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The Elements of Style

IT MAY BE IMPOSSIBLE TO SAY THERE IS AN IDENTIFIABLE period style in contemporary American poetry. Perhaps all that can be said is that most poets in this country continue to be uncomfortable when engaging traditional English verse and prefer to disguise it, if they engage it at all. An emphasis on lyric expression at the expense of narrative is also a widely shared characteristic in the poetry of our period. But the closest anyone can come to defining our period style might be to say that it is lyric free verse, as it has been for the past forty years or more. That really is not enough to define a period style, but it is more than one might think. When a poet like those under review here has worked to develop an individual style, there is a marked contrast between the period style and what he or she has wrought. Our period style of lyric free verse is the ground out of which the poets here have toiled to create an expression or way of expressing that will set them apart, if not from others like them, at least from each other. They have the period style in common, but the subjects of their poetry and their own genealogy as poets, along with the deliberate activity of making poems in the first place, have allowed each to speak with an identifiable voice. I used to think the term “voice” to describe a poet’s unique style was too much of a contemporary buzzword, and therefore not useful or descriptive. I used to think “style” would do. But if a poet is developing at a time when a period style is so firmly established and tends to encourage an undifferentiated voice, as it will tend to do, then it is not cant to describe the unique expression of a poet, when he or she achieves that uniqueness, as being his or her voice. Once we encounter real individuality in a poet, the term becomes useful and descriptive.

In his first two collections of poetry, *Leaving Saturn* and *Hoops*, Major Jackson showed himself to be in thrall to a dense, allusive rhetoric, constantly seeking to follow a narrative thread. The result was always a rich mix of contemporary and classical reference, as you find in the poetry of Melvin Tolson, and sharp appraisal of urban life, with an eye like Gwendolyn Brooks’s. And though I never thought I would say such a thing, the attachment to narrative, to telling a clear story, kept his language in check. It helped the poet toward a clarity that he would just manage to attain, but the poems were hobbled. They wanted to take flight into a more inventive realm.

With his third book,¹ Major Jackson has slipped the surly bonds of

¹ HOLDING COMPANY, by *Major Jackson*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. \$24.95.

narrative and given freedom to his lyric voice. At the same time, he has achieved a compression otherwise missing from his earlier work. He has done this in a series of ten-line poems, which resemble nothing so much as curtal sonnets. The book's epigraph from Robert Lowell's sonnet about T. S. Eliot, first published in *Notebook*, then revised ultimately for *History*, is not the only acknowledgement of Lowell's influence. Lowell, too, found in his unrhymed, quasi-blank verse sonnets a release into lyricism and pursuit of the memorable and penetrating line, while risking obscurity. The other epigraph is from Pier Paolo Pasolini's long poem "Plan of Future Works," in which the Italian poet and filmmaker seemed to embrace the ambiguity of his own life as represented in his poetry: "*neither the sign nor the existing thing matters.*" That looks like permission simply to let the language have its way, to let 'er rip, clarity be damned.

I gave the bathtub purity and honor, and the sky
noctilucous clouds, and the kingfisher his implacable
devotees. I gave salt & pepper the table, and the fist
its wish for bloom, and the net, knotholes of emptiness.
I gave the loaf its slope of integrity, the countertop
belief in the horizon, and mud its defeated boots.
I gave morning triumphant songs which consume my pen,
and death its grief which is like a midsummer thunderclap.
But I did not give her my tomblike woe though it trembled
from my white bones and shook the walls of our home.

The title of this, the second poem in the volume, is "Creationism." I can't tell you why, but I can guess that it has to do with the poet's acknowledgement of his own powers as a maker, a creator. The name "Creationism," for the pseudo-science which is meant to counter evolution, has been appropriated. It keeps its connotation—it can't lose it—but the poem gives it a new denotation. In this way, the word is yanked from its narrative, and the poet gives us something close to pure lyric expression, the kind which Hart Crane, one of Robert Lowell's own models, sought and achieved.

Hart Crane's voice, which at times in his poetry seemed almost to transcend clarity, is echoed in many of the poems in *Holding Company*. In fact, considering the literal meaning of the title, it is invested in the style Major Jackson has created for himself. And Crane is surely part of the company these poems are keeping. I hear the echo in the second half of "Narcissus":

How many hours have I spent crushing mangrove leaves,
turning my face to the unbearable grandeur of this heat-soaked
sky? When I spun around, I felt filled with birds.
Still, I returned, wallowing in the brothels of myself.
I thought of my life, caressing more ruins.

There is no doubt in my mind or ear that the poetry Major Jackson

offers us in *Holding Company* —unashamedly lyrical, in flight from narrative, layered with allusion and homage—sounds different from any other being written today.

Reading Dorothy Barresi's new book,² I was reminded of something that happened not long ago to an old friend from college who lives in Los Angeles. One morning she awoke to find that her car had been firebombed. She happened to live next door to a zoologist who had been targeted by a radical animal rights group. They had meant to firebomb her neighbor's car. When it was publicized that these fanatics had attacked the wrong person, they insisted on their website that the authorities were lying. "Strange days," as another Angeleno once sang.

With Barresi's book we return to narrative as a structural integument for the lyric, but it is a jagged narrative and a broken lyric, a style she has put together to express life as a deracinated Yankee in Los Angeles, where she finds even the month of January, wintry where she hails from, disturbingly "charming."

At first the poems feel like high octane editorials, replete with ironic and absurd juxtapositions that a columnist like Gail Collins or Maureen Dowd might notice and flourish.

The anti-vivisectionists pass the disciples
of the internal bath
in the hallways of the Marriott conference facility.
"American Fanatics"

I even found myself, at first, thinking that I knew more than a few deracinated Angelenos who would gladly trade places with her from their exiles east of the Rockies. And yet I am also aware, living where I do in Nashville, Tennessee, that there are many from Los Angeles who have fled here to escape the scary place my hometown has become, as it has for my friend who made the mistake of living next door to the zoologist.

Dorothy Barresi did not invent L.A. gothic—that is a creation of detective writers from Raymond Chandler to James Ellroy—but she has found her niche in the genre and extended its potential. As in all gothic, violence begins at home, or as she shows in "The Backyard," which is "A way to keep us in our place. / A way to say, *not-neighbor*, by half":

But blood tracks of the half-thing
(Yorkshire terrier)
torn dragged from Mrs. Yamamoto's yard this morning
into my rough marigold patch:
evidences: three paws, a prised ribcage, and one small drizzle-lump of fur
where the rhinestone collar must have been

² AMERICAN FANATICS, by *Dorothy Barresi*. University of Pittsburgh Press. \$14.95p.

Coyotes are a threat to outdoor pets in most American cities these days, but there is a strong suspicion that they originated out West, which includes California and L.A. So these poems are littered with corpses, like “the dead man in the *Times* / who went uncollected for months / in bushes along the 101 Freeway.” They sometimes seem like shooting scripts for the David Lynch of *Mulholland Drive*, but they emerge with a genuine pathos he abandoned long ago. When the poet says quietly, “for Christ’s good sake, / don’t leave me here alone,” one can hear that urgent plea penetrating the glamour of the gothic.

Los Angeles and its milieu are not the only settings for these anxious, edgy pleas for a humane life. “Don’t Leave Me This Way” (the title enunciates the overall tone of the book) begins “This is a song for the pimps of Akron, Ohio / in their fly plaids, orange fantastic maxi coats and / platform shoes” and continues with an unsentimental portrait of sexual awakening as the poet, remembering herself as a teenager, “trailing my dirty fingers / along broken factory walls” hears herself beckoned, “*Hey girlie, hey co-ed,*” and responds, blushing, “I knew how lonely I was, and how long / I had been that lonely.” Still like many of the poems, this depiction of urban degradation turns into a jeremiad:

There is a song of the industry of lost men & stupid girls
in crapped-out cities
driving blindly into obscene ridiculous decades.

The final poem, “How’s the World Treating You?” (another title that captures the book’s mood), is subtitled “January, twenty years in California.” The occasion, however, appears to be the death of the poet’s mother, a devout Christian, who used to advise, “Offer it up’ . . . / Of any suffering, short or long.” The contrast of January in Los Angeles and January back East, where the poet grew up and where her mother presumably has died, provides the underlying paradox of these poems:

I’m fifty; I’m tired of tiptoeing around God.
Stepping on the scale each morning
to weigh my case for salvation bartered and lost by night.

It’s almost always spring here.

Yes, and suffering is always harder in the spring, especially in a month like January in L.A., “which has no business being charming” with its camellias, bougainvilleas, and “the plainest white rose in my backyard / is over-bearing.” That rose, like the marigolds in “The Backyard,” could just as easily be dappled with a slaughtered pet’s blood. Barresi has found a style in L.A. gothic that allows her to express an anguish that is anything but glamorous.

Unlike Jackson and Barresi, who appear to have invented a new style for their poetry in their latest books, Robert Wrigley has long written a poem which is identifiably his own: sound-rich, naturalistically accurate, verging on traditional verse form, faithful to country matters, particularly of the West, with a sense that the moral inheres in the subject without having to be stated as such. In his poetry there is more of Robert Penn Warren than Robert Frost, but with a range in subject from the minor to the major, from the insignificant to the grand, which both poets achieved. The title of his new book³ might seem too much of a claim at being a national anthem, until we discover its source in the book's epigraph: "'*This is a beautiful country.*.'"—John Brown, seated on his coffin, as he rode to the gallows, December 2, 1859."

That contrast between the apparently sentimental and actually historical is present in the many tours de force which the book includes. "County" turns through many resonant names and violent necessities of country life, yet concludes that the place which includes them all is "home." "Exxon" depicts a man with a prosthetic arm, no doubt acquired due to combat in Iraq, pumping gas:

Study the artificial arm, its array of hex-
head setscrews, its titanium armatures and axes,
its silicone skins from light pink to dark brown.
Here is this, from the company's catalog: "The upper
and lower forearm tubes are secured
to a four-position, manually locked elbow mechanism."
And this, from God himself, having slain the man's family,
saying to Job, *Or hast thou an arm like God?*

The title poem, "Beautiful Country," also in this expansive mode, suggests that being stoned is a kind of ultimate consciousness in America. Finally, the problematic "American Fear" riffs on many phobias, from the fear of gravity and the fear of flowers to the more familiar homophobia and xenophobia, while following from Robert Frost's "The Gift Outright." Frost's poem, made famous by his recitation of it at John F. Kennedy's inauguration, implies that the American continent had no history until Europeans claimed it and even states as a fact that until we came, the continent was "unstoried, unenhanced." Wrigley's poem draws, however, from the conclusion of Frost's, that America, "beautiful, fearful, / and fearsome," has yet to reach its potential. Frost's poem ends, "Such as she was, such as she would become." Wrigley corrects this to "such as it might yet, someday, become." Wrigley thoroughly investigates American fear in his poem, but he leaves alone the troubling Eurocentrism and American exceptionalism at the heart of Frost's poem.

Still, these are big poems which an admirer of Robert Wrigley's poetry, and I am one, may enjoy being dazzled by: their intention is to

³ BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY, by *Robert Wrigley*. Penguin. \$18.00p.

amaze. In this book, however, I find I prefer the shorter, more lyrical poems, often in regular stanzas, with subtly implied rhyme schemes. In these poems he turns his superb eye for natural detail on his subjects, mostly animals. In “After a Rainstorm,” he describes two horses, “a Morgan and a Quarter,” which have been “spotted around their rumps” by raindrops and “thus made / Appaloosas, the ancestral horses of this place.” Because the poet lives among animals, these poems are also mostly unsentimental and remind us of the difference between the human and the animal. The last two stanzas of “After a Rainstorm” go on to describe the effect of a night rain on the horses:

Maybe because it is night, they are nervous,
 or maybe because they too sense
 what they have become, they seem
 to be waiting for me to say something

to whatever ancient spirits might still abide here,
 that they might awaken from this strange dream,
 in which there are fences and stables and a man
 who doesn't know a single word they understand.

When I read the poetry of Carl Dennis I can't help but experience the feeling—surely unfair to both poets—that if John Ashbery cared about making sense, he might sound like this. The sadness and lonely melancholy, which so many readers claim exist at the heart of Ashbery's poems, is clearly present in the poetry of Carl Dennis, and no less in this,⁴ his eleventh collection and his third since his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Practical Gods*. The title *Callings* may refer to vocations, and the book includes poems about the owner of a wine store, a school secretary, a teacher, a former seaman on his way to a reunion of shipmates, a roofer, a realtor, a motel keeper, and of course the poet himself, witness to these other callings, usually just emerging from a solitary dinner at a Chinese buffet or listening to a seatmate on a train to Florida. Dennis always manages to make it clear that there is nothing glamorous about these people or himself. When he does venture into the mind of a visionary, it is of a prophet who has chosen to keep his knowledge that “the world is destined to end at midnight” to himself, for the sake of all the people who are busily engaged in living.

Though silent, I'm rooting for them to let the day
 Expand to include the days to be denied them,
 Just as I'm rooting for the woman across the hall
 From the friend's apartment, who's learning
 To play the viola from scratch. Good for her
 If she finds an hour a day for practice despite
 The extra hours required at the insurance firm
 As tax day approaches, and the usual work
 Of tending two teenage sons alone.

“Silent Prophet”

⁴ CALLINGS, by Carl Dennis. Penguin. \$18.00p.

Another poet might have left alone the image of the woman learning to play the viola. Dennis enters the banality of existence as if it were an Aladdin's cave, and the result is a plain-style poem rich with feeling.

So apparently plain is the quiet voice of this remarkable poet that it is hard to describe the effect. As if to anticipate my theme here—the way a poet creates a personal style—Dennis writes in “Style”:

It's a leap of faith to believe you'll find it
On your evening walk when even its name
Keeps to the shadows. Still, your prospects,
However limited, ought to improve
If you make adjustments in your style of walking.
No more shuffling, eyes on the ground,
As if you're convinced luck is against you.

I know that William Stafford also explored these forms of limitation, but his quiet affirmations of their value were invariably chipper. Dennis understands that even the acceptance of limitation is itself limiting (Stafford found it liberating) and concludes “Style” with one line of self-help sentimentality, followed by two of unsentimental insight:

Learn to take pleasure in the effort itself,
And you won't be sorry if you can't step back
Far enough from your handiwork to see it whole.

It has taken me a long time to renew my appreciation of the beauties of minimalism. The appropriation of it by the practitioners of the Language Poetry crowd put me off as do some who have been associated with the New Formalism. Lately I have had my stubborn resistance set aside by the excellence and originality of Jean Valentine's poetry. The art of nuance, spare phrasing, glancing or absent punctuation will speak, but only if they point to profound emotional states and not to their own self-delight as stylistic flourishes. Minimalism which can be found in the first Modern practitioners of free verse, from Stephen Crane to William Carlos Williams, was originally a hard-won escape from self-consciousness and artificiality. As it is practiced mostly these days, it is the most self-conscious and artificial style going. The poem that began to change my mind is Jean Valentine's sequence “Lucy,” a meditation on the fossil remains of a female hominid discovered over thirty-five years ago in Ethiopia and considered at the time to be the oldest human ancestor. That sequence is included in Valentine's latest book⁵; and though there are many individual poems in the book which are valuable additions to her work, “Lucy” deserves special consideration as a masterpiece of her style. Its very subject, a few fossilized bones that evoke an entire life and its world, is a perfect one for Valentine's

⁵ BREAK THE GLASS, by *Jean Valentine*. Copper Canyon. \$22.00.

poetry. Lucy's minimalism is engaged by Valentine's, and the result is breathtaking. Here is all of the second poem in the sequence:

Lucy
my saxifrage that splits the rocks
 wildgood
 mother
 you fill my center-hole
 with bliss
 No one is so tender in her scream
 Wants me so much
 Not just, but brings me to be Is
 when I am close to death
 and close to life

The spider
 in her web three days
 dead on the window Lucy

The allusion to Williams' lines from "A Sort of Song"—"Saxifrage is my flower that splits / the rocks"—is one of the most moving acknowledgments of a predecessor I have encountered in a contemporary poem. And since allusion in its economy is itself a form of minimalism, wherever it occurs, the aptness of the trope is made all the more powerful when we remember that Lucy, in the poem, is both the flower and the rock or fossil which the flower splits. I am of course moved by the poet's personal identification with the figure, but something else happens when the poem turns to the image of the spider "in her web three days / dead." Minimalism, like Valentine's, can make fragments in juxtaposition speak. This has been true since the early twentieth-century experiments of Pound, in his translations and in his *Cantos*. Valentine's minimalism grows out of that strain of Modernism, and not Gertrude Stein's. I find the end of Valentine's sequence for Lucy more moving than I can say:

How did you pray, Lucy?
 You *were* prayer . . .

Skeleton Woman,
 in down
 over around

The Lucy sequence (just now I have remembered Wordsworth's small perfect lyrics for the fictional character he called Lucy) is not the only pleasure in *Break the Glass*, but it is the most successful. I was drawn

especially to those poems like “Then Abraham,” “Eurydice who guides,” and “Diana” which remind me that the parents of modern poetry, like H.D. and Ezra Pound, wished to refresh the old stories by telling them in a new way, by making them new. Jean Valentine keeps that tradition alive, as the epigraph to her book from the American Modernist Lorine Niedecker suggests: “a pencil // for a wing-bone.”

So I end with a complete poem, which I read as an homage to Pound, author of “Near Perigord,” and Eliot of “Ash Wednesday,” but also to her most distant progenitor, Stephen Crane, in its use of the fabulous and its cunning sense of repetition. This is her poem “The Leopard”:

Like a leopard on a shield, the space leopard
lay down beside the basket,
and slowly I threw all the papers in.
I was glad to throw them in.

Every coldness ever breathed
had left its trace elements inside me;
the oldest mother god’s most silent love
had left its trace: her
cave paintings black and gold
& red in the caves of my body.

In the end,
I laid them all down there at the leopard’s feet,
I was glad to lay them down.

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