



THE POET AS TITLIST

Brian Henry, *Graft*, New Issues, Western Michigan University, 2003.

Timothy Donnelly, *Twenty-seven Props for a Production of Eine Lebenszeit*, Grove Press, 2003.

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Titles, like forewords, come first but are often the last to be conceived. In particular, titles to books of poems can appear to be afterthoughts or hasty declarations, as when one poem within a collection is singled out to function metonymically for the whole. What is the status of such a poem? Is it the best or most representative? Is it a summa, or perhaps just a catchy word or phrase? It isn't always possible to discern with confidence what the author had in mind, but even if it was an arbitrary choice without deep design, a title takes on a special signifying role for the reader and may well be interpreted in ways the author would find laughable or even alarming. Of course, sometimes it's the reader who laughs or is alarmed, as when Richard Wilbur calls a chapbook *Some Atrocities* or Les Murray comes up with *Subhuman Redneck Poems*. These days, books are seen as constructs and most poets arrange their poems carefully in sequence—though almost no one reads them in order, preferring to skip around instead or “read for the lustres,” as Emerson put it. Despite reading practices, titles, by convention, are taken seriously, and it is tempting to read a collection through the lens of the title. It's a temptation, in fact, I mean to succumb to here, in looking at Brian Henry's new book of poems—even if the lens distorts in magnifying the datum. *Graft*, then, is what we have to consider.

The primary sense of “graft” is to unite two growing things by joining them together, as with the stems of fruit trees or the surgical transplanting of skin. This notion resonates in the book in several ways. First, poems are often graftings from other poems in the complex way poetic influence occurs. In Henry's case this is most obvious in instances when the allusions or borrowings are overt, as in the use of phrases from Charles Tomlinson, August Kleinzahler, Robert Duncan and even Thomas Hardy. (Covert influences can be more difficult to discern but are often more formative of the poetic sensibility.) In another sense, poems can get grafted onto readers, especially when one encounters a writer insidiously congenial or too powerful to resist. One suspects this is something Henry himself might wish, as when he brings us up short in “This Blueness Not All Blue” (the fourth poem of that title), declaring:



*Vacancy matters less than volition
when joining one to another,
my ribs riding your mutinous face to snow.*

It may also be that the poet experiences the writing of a poem as a grafting onto him, which suggests a certain violence in the process, as in the opening of “Voices Like This”:

I resist this beginning and hope it does not last,
I resist it because I have no place at the start.

But the strongest sense of graft in this collection turns upon the sexual image it conjures, where two people join together as if their living tissue might unite them. *Graft*, as a book, is replete with sexuality and at least one reviewer has simply called it a book about sex. But, for Henry, to speak of sex is to speak of the language of the body, bearing in mind that the body is always a particular person in a particular place. Hence, these poems often function as sites of intersection between desire and fulfillment—“The day’s languid tongue pulls the moisture/ of our bodies to the surface./ *You’d better fuck me before the hot*” (“A Distant Architecture”), or its opposite, frustration—“Pursuit in this place is a way of life, as is loss (of what one pursues),/ but what sucks is the time spent en route to what, at last, is no at last” (“Between the River’s Curves”). This is the burden of the title poem, which focuses on a woman “pinching her nipples/ with the other hand below,” who

thinks, perhaps, of the crocus
pushing through the dead
matter of the yard, *as if in offering
or insistence of its virtues
hidden until its moment
arrives, pushing, with it.*

This erotic imagining turns out to be that of her lover who speculates about what she thinks; however, “what he fears/ she thinks is another matter.” That ironic turn, that further and darker suggestion is characteristic of Henry’s writing, which can shift suddenly to images of violence or to tones of caustic regard, as when the model in “Reclined Nude” (another title shared by four poems), says “Lofty ideals are fine for former corporate/ whores... I prefer the grittier way of conducting business.” There may be a suggestion here of another acceptance of “graft,” acting in an illegal or corrupt manner to take advantage of one’s position, but images of decay and desuetude are more



generalized and diffused through the book.

In contrast or counterpoint—or, indeed, conjunction—with this erotic element in *Graft* are two other crucial aspects. First, there is a preponderance of place, as mentioned above, which often brings details of landscape to the fore. Woods, mountains, riverbanks, beaches are often mapped out, but then sometimes the landscape is a human body, as in “In the Midst of the Harshes Winter We Continue Touching With Our Burns,” which begins, “How can I map your body with tenderness,” and goes on to assert that “mapping requires a constant/ violence against specifics.” This mixture of inner and outer realities points to another element, which is a strong tendency to abstract thinking. There is a cognitive strength to Henry’s verse that is one of its most compelling virtues. In “Hybrid Aspects,” for instance, he grafts knowledge onto desire, which yields pain:

The trap of particulars will close faster than that of abstractions.
But its pain, being limited to specifics, is a lesser pain.
This is what any god will tell you. This is what any god wants you to forget.

The effect of such writing is to draw our attention to the attentiveness with which the verse is written. That self-reflexive circularity is supported by the evident care and certainly the talent Henry displays as a poet, for we realize very quickly that this is a poet who knows what he is about, and about whom the reader will want to know more. This may remind us, too, that “graft” has its root in the Latin word for “stylus” (*graphium*), that instrument of writing from which all the exfoliations of literate verse derive. As a titlist, Brian Henry looks like a champion.

The title to Timothy Donnelly’s first collection of poems is also the title to the first poem in the book, but unlike Henry’s spare and singular signifier, *Graft*, Donnelly’s title is a rambunctious dissemination of terms, *Twenty-seven Props for a Production of Eine Lebenszeit*. *Eine Lebenszeit* (“a lifetime”) may sound plausible as an obscure title in dramatic literature, but it is wholly imaginary, “the allegorical rendering of an entire life,” as Richard Howard calls it in his Foreword. Right from the beginning, then, the reader is forewarned that the poems in this book are not likely to be a dry or cool recitation of privileged moments to which we are expected to pay obeisance. Rather, we had better be on the qui vive and watch our backs. As it turns out, these poems are indeed challenging, not least in the way they challenge expectations of discursive sense and generic propriety, attenuated though these expectations may be:





Before you know it, it's always never.
You know I hate it when you whimper, don't you?
Now shut them big ambiguous eyes.

And, continuing to quote from the title poem,

Now shut that cavernous cartoon mouth—
and here's the *sock* to fill it, periwinkle!
You know I hate it when we don't coordinate.

There will, of course, be plenty of readers who will hate this kind of poetry, which doesn't appear to “coordinate” with any of the coordinates of a shared and interpersonal reality. But we live, poetically, in a post-Ashberian world, and this style or idiom has become weirdly familiar. Ashbery is probably the poet most readers will think of in reading Donnelly, but it's probably closer to the truth to say that Ashbery (and certain of his contemporaries) created the condition of possibility for this kind of writing. That's different from simply claiming direct influence and leaving it at that. Donnelly is of a generation for whom this approach is a norm, not a strategy of defamiliarization. As we discover, Donnelly is deeply familiar with our vast cultural inheritance, ranging—in poetry—from Campion to Milton to Keats on up and outwards to an array of European and American figures. It's a wonderful mixture of high culture and high spirits that is anything but elitist, as the dominant tone is demotic and often risible:

Hot ukulele! How do you do?
And you: beamy, beamy.

Indeed, when was the last time a book of poems made you laugh aloud? Here, for instance, is the opening to “Marblehead”:

The first item up for bid: a charming new gazebo.
It's made of wood that smells like wood that smells
like gunpowder. Like everywhere, it is a place to sit.
But this is different. I mean, you can put a cat in there,
and before you know it—catheter. I think I didn't say that right.

At their best, these poems are delightful and bewildering, yielding a pleasurable disorientation and often dropping us down into a surprising profundity. At other times, though, one simply seems lost in a dense forest of words, hacking away at the undergrowth to find a way out. But even then, it's hard not to admire the fecundity and energy of the verse, to wonder just how we





got to where we are:

I have tried and failed. (She has misthought.) *Perhaps I miss the principle or fail to embody it...* —Now, disarmingly quiet on the wide settee, its pigskin stained a true Aegean green, she contemplates a bronze—an Old World nude, dust upon the wing. The judgment? Otiose as a dose of posthumous opium.

But if there are instances of maddening confusion, there is an overbalance of delight, as in “Fanny Fowler’s Poetry and Dioramas Workshop” (which ought to be required reading in all MFA poetry programs) where we encounter “the Belle of Amherst’s hearse” and “wee Robbie Burns in a wind-blown kilt,” as well as,

A twenty-first-century three-dimensional
fastidious faux-naïve mixed-media
expressivist “manifestation” of a cherished
American Renaissance dactylic chestnut
epic in which the words *sickness*, *horror*, and *dread*
each appear exactly once, and in which
the words *empty*, *vacant*, and *mocking*
each appear exactly twice.

This is all very knowing, and only someone who has survived the rigors of a graduate writing program with his sense of humor intact could write such marvelous pastiche. But behind all the seemingly wild energy is a firm control of the verse and its effects. Donnelly is a preternaturally sophisticated poet and his first book accomplishes more than many poets do in a lifetime. We can look forward to what he declares in “The Truer” (the final section of “Three Panels Depending on the Heart”):

I will not give in. I will grow more strange.

