

The Deconstructive Lyric

by Paul Ramsey

"Poetry is certainly something more than good sense, but it must be good sense . . . just as a palace is more than a house, but it must be a house."

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge



Selected Poems II: Poems Selected & New 1976-1986

by Margaret Atwood

New York and Boston: Houghton Mifflin; 158 pp., \$16.95 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper)

Don't Look Back

by Dabney Stuart

Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press; 64 pp.

Margaret Atwood writes in her poem "Mushrooms":

Here is the handful
of shadow I have brought back
to you,
this decay, this hope,
this mouth-
ful of dirt, this poetry.

Also in *Selected Poems II*, in "Five Poems for Grandmothers": "I make this charm / from nothing but paper; which is good / for exactly nothing." And in "Two-Headed Poems": "This is not a debate / but a duet / with two deaf singers."

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Then, one might think, each singer may rejoice in his own singing, however much he mangles the tune, however inept the words, since he does not hear a thing. The singers hear nothing, mean little, and sing long. Some of the singers, with Heideggerian fervor, really mean nothing. Really, if there were a really. As Atwood puts it in "Notes Toward a Poem That Can Never Be Written": "this is the place that will finally defeat you / where the word *why* shrivels and empties / itself. This is famine."

Yes, it is, and an abundant famine, where many poets of our time starve, hallucinate, and insist on their hallucination of starvation.

The subject is despair, including the despair of any genuine knowledge or understanding whatever, the form unbuckled, the verse prose. The suffering entailed is often quite genuine, and I wish to speak charitably, but the aesthetic and moral and philosophical consequences are nonetheless to be justly deplored.

The historical causes and influences are long, sufficiently complex, and deficiently Romantic. The Romantics taught self-expression, the power of the self, the boundlessness of the self; the contemporary bearers of such tidings

write of the collapse and fragmentation of self. Dabney Stuart in "Casting" in his book *Don't Look Back* (the book would not exist if it obeyed its title), writes "teach me to brew / my life . . . / and conjure, and construe / . . . lost selves . . . / to love." I wish a good poet well; the lines are far from the exaltations of Romantic egoism. Wordsworth's "The Prelude," the search for a unified self and self-understanding, is the paradigm for much of contemporary poetry, though without Wordsworth's self-confidence and mastery of blank verse. The search becomes search without any real hope or even intent of arrival.

The Romantics taught freedom from "rules" and from genres, and exalted the shaping power of imagination, the human power that grandly perceives or maybe *creates* the beauty and excellence of its vision. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." "Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?"

Many modern poems vacillate between the grandeur of imagination and its falseness or uncertainty; many others deny the grandeur or any hope: a resultant rule is to write in the one genre, the deconstructive, nonverse lyric.

Kant taught that the mind consti-

tutes reality, and he also sharply divided (on some days—Kant is a very elusive thinker) subject and object; and students of such teaching began to brood, “Suppose the mind gets it wrong? How on earth would we know? And isn’t all value really subjective? Which is to say not really true?” (Kant taught that beauty is absolutely subjective and absolutely universal, but these students did not heed or buy that.) And isn’t language of the Subject? How then can it really deal with the Object? And, besides, language is culturally derived, not objectively permanent, so isn’t truth relative to different cultures, hence not really true? And so on.

A historical study—which this essay is mostly not—should certainly mention some other influences: Schopenhauer’s redacting of Kant in Schopenhauer’s view that the Noumenon, the really real, that which is not mere appearance, is Will; Hume’s Fork—tuned from Kant’s Subject and Object—dividing Fact and Value and fathering positivism; Nietzsche’s radical skepticism, with his “whirling falsehood” all discourse reaches for; Wallace Stevens, with his poetic genius consumed by the subject of poetics, perpetually searching for and despairing of arriving at what might be a genuine poetry.

In any event, the deconstructive theories and practices are among us, so much so that theory for many means only *such* theory. Texts are about their own non-aboutness, and what gives the reader “infinite play” gives the reader no freedom whatever to interpret, since there can be no interpretation of evidence, no reason to choose one reading over another. Romantic freedom once more, as in the determinism and progressivism of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” and in various forms of volitionism from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on, becomes a psychological trap—the will is free to will whatever it wills to will, and has no grounds whatever, to do so. Will frets self, gnaws it away. Self stutters, doubts its viability or being; will wills on. And form is suspect. Or absent.

In *Selected Poems II* Margaret Atwood writes exclusively nonverse. This term is offered, descriptively, to mean “prose, which is not metrical verse or free verse, lineated by the author rather than the margin.” This

assumes that there is metrical verse, that there is genuine free verse, and that one can discriminate between those and nonverse. Metrical verse indisputably exists; genuine free verse is harder to define or identify with precision, but I can give some examples: the King James translation of the Psalms, Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed,” Theodore Roethke’s “North American Sequence,” Wallace Stevens’s “Domination of Black,” H.D.’s “Orchard,” and William Carlos Williams’s “Metric Figure” are beautifully verse. Atwood’s work in this book, with the exception of a few passages, is simply prose, if often skillful prose.

Good writing can be done in nonverse, but a power is missing, and the lack matters.

Nonverse is very plainly compatible with the deconstructive lyric: the verse is de-constructed, that is, absent. Not all nonverse is deconstructive in theme or treatment; and some deconstructive lyrics—in which the impossibility of good poetry is presumed and in some ways exemplified—are in metrical verse, for instance Wallace Stevens’s “The Comedian as the Letter C.”

Negation is very much part of poetry. Pain, regret, shame, confusion, self-doubt, not excluding doubts of the power of poetry, have been always with us; tragedy is a chief form, not without reason. And poets love to flirt with the edges of language. Samuel Johnson wrote of Dryden, “He delighted to tread upon the brink of meaning, where light and darkness begin to mingle . . . [to] hover over the edge of unideal vacancy.”

Still, the deconstructive lyric is very much of our modern age. And Atwood is an extreme case: her medium is nonverse, her themes overwhelmingly negative, her concern with the limits and failures—the non-being-ness—of poetry recurrent and self-undercutting. There are moments of tenderness, particularly in her lovely “Five Poems for Grandmothers,” and some poetry for a daughter, but such moments are few and atypical.

She is also self-consciously feminist and thereby in a way political, but the nihilism outbids the politics. Her poem “Notes Toward a Poem That Can Never Be Written,” which is, as the Stevensian title suggests, one of the

most deconstructive of her poems, is dedicated to Carolyn Forché, and thus can be seen as nihilism opposing communism, if only because it finally opposes all meaningful human action.

Her political techniques are often crude and brutal and simple: the accumulation of examples of dire suffering (usually of women) to “prove” we are not told what, though there are hints and insinuations—the horridness of man, the futility of hope, the falsity of Christianity, the need for women to unite (the last is surprisingly rare).

Thus, in “Christmas Carols,” the following examples are offered against Christianity and in contempt for the Virgin Mary: a woman thirty times raped and pregnant who committed suicide, a woman who died in an abortion, a woman who killed herself attempting a self-abortion, all the newborn children killed by their mothers in the 19th century, foxes eating their young. The conclusion of the poem is atypically, and not very convincingly, positive, looking toward “the day / when every child is a holy birth.” The poem achieves a cruel power, and a sense of desperate suffering, but is logically opaque, incapable of distinctions. What of women, for instance, who refused to have abortions, because they already believed that childbirth is holy?



Mostly she makes her case by examples, but occasionally she argues, as in the following graceful and touching sentence (also in “Notes”): “The facts of this world seen clearly / are seen through tears; / why tell me then / there is something wrong with my eyes?”

A good argument, up to a point, and Vergil would agree, the *lacrimae rerum*, the tears of things, being a living part of many good poems. Tears, literally and as synecdoche or metaphor, are a just response to the world. But it is wrong to say that tears are the only just response to the world, or to say that the justness of tears makes action and caring and bravery and joy meaningless.

Dabney Stuart, in his very fine book *Don’t Look Back*, writes in verse and nonverse, and deals with some deconstructive themes. The poems of-

ten explore self, the brokenness and elusiveness of self, the attempts to discover and reconcile; they also explore other matters and use other methods. The book, then, is in part deconstructive. For one of his poems defines, with clarity and suggestiveness, a major philosophical cause of deconstructive verse; and another poem (more strictly a section of a poem) is, in vivid free verse, a beautiful example of the deconstructive lyric. Here is the first poem I'm talking about, "Plowing It Under."

How is the darkness dark,
 or the light, light?
 And how do we see by either
 the hand
 Raised, or held out? When we
 give, do we uncage
 Reasons for a new life,
 or ride again
 Instinct, that tired horse,
 back to his stall?
 Does
 Everything tend by nature
 toward the dumb fork
 that says to us *One way*
or the other?

Hard questions, if you take
 them seriously.
 Only a fool ignores them,
 or a clod.
 Do we bring form to the world,
 or does the world
 Guide us through its maze?
 How will you know
 Even if you find the true color,
 and your hand
 Settles perfectly on its body,
 which is which?

The poem is about the inescapability of the Kantian trap, whether Stuart has Kant specifically in mind or not. The mind constitutes experience, and therefore cannot possibly know whether it knows anything correctly, or knows anything to be true.

How is the darkness dark, or the light, light? That is, do we perceive, truly, darkness and light; or do we create by our perceptual apparatus darkness and light? We must choose which, yet have no way to tell which. Is our experience trustworthy or not? Does it grant us truth—any truth at all?

After several reformulations, which raise some other lively questions, the poem succinctly asks, "Do we bring

form to the world, or does the world / Guide us through the maze?" The remainder of the poem even more elegantly poses the question.

The poem states a problem with great energy, clarity, and elegance, a central problem from which much of the modern skepticism derives. The poem about the question also begs the question, by the definiteness of its inconclusiveness. Is it really a tie? If we can know that the issue of skepticism and verity is a tie, or rationally believe that it is a tie, then there is knowledge and it is not a tie. At least the argument and anxieties cut deep, near the most basic structure and nature of our thinking.

The poem is nonverse, though it gives a strong impression of metricality. Thus we have a rational, clear, and eloquent poem—in nonverse—on a question crucial in the history of modernism and modern skepticism, a poem strongly suggesting that the skeptic is right: that there is no ground for decision. Is this, then, a deconstructive lyric? In theme and nonverse, yes; in form, ordonnance, rationality, and clarity of language, no.

Section 5 of "Casting" is highly successful short-line free verse.

If it's a dream
 only a person from the dream
 can wake me.

No
 one else is there.

I
 hold the monofilament
 at the lure's eye
 suspended. A light
 breaks upon it
 a fine shower of gold.
 Dazzled

I
 bend closer, my hand
 misguiding, missing
 such a simple act,
 threading
 the bait's eye.

I
 continue to
 fail
 seemingly forever
 bowed
 toward the shimmering
 brightness

blurred—so close,
 now so many times

my mouth is
 littered with hooks.

This section is, treated as a complete poem, a very good poem, one of the best deconstructive lyrics I know.

The uncertainty; the sense of being interlocked within a lock to which the key is also locked, therein or elsewhere; the vivid near-solipsism in presence of a world that dazzles rather than enlightens—all are deconstructive modes. But while the poem is about confusion and obscurity, it is itself strangely lucid.

The image, the extended allegorical image, is of fishing, and the seeker becomes the sought. You can roughly paraphrase the poem so: a fisherman fishes in a sea or lake brilliant with light and with light's excitement and confusion, and in the search to escape from the self-locked dream, from which you are awakened only by someone in the dream, which is a dream of solipsism almost or at least of dire separateness from what you—dream-you, colloquial-you, solipsistic you, reader and poet, if you are listening, you—would understand. What you try to understand flashes and vanishes and excites, and you find that hooks litter your mouth.

It is confusion, if various, but confusedly various, and thus, as a poetic subject, in an unconfused sense monotonously one. It is also a highly limited subject, the blind spot in the eye asserting wrongly that it is the essence of the eye, and it is a subject that fails the central poetic duty of just expression and understanding of human motivation. In this poem the "failure" is paradoxical, since the poem very well expresses and understands what it is like to be confused. Stuart has done such negation about as well as it is apt to be done by anyone since Hopkins.

Still, casting is not casting unless you actually intend to land a fish. Questioning is, by its nature and definition and history, not really questioning unless you are *really* and *truly* seeking answers. To do that requires care, thought, distinctions, hope, yes, and faith.

A bumper sticker asserts, with unquestioning fervor, "To Question Is the Answer."

I question that answer.



Burned but Never Consumed

by Arthur Eckstein

The Burning Bush: Anti-Semitism and World History

by Barnett Litvinoff
New York: E.P. Dutton;
457 pp., \$22.50

The first writer known to have made the outrageous accusation of ritual cannibalism against the Jews was a pagan Greek named Apion. But it was the Christians who established prejudice against and hatred for Jews as a fixture of Western civilization. The Christians' animus against the Jews derived from the idea that "the Jews" had rejected and betrayed Jesus of Nazareth, engineering the Crucifixion. This was a charge originating in the embittered early relations between what were essentially two closely-intertwined religious communities (indeed, for at least a generation and perhaps a bit more the Christians were seen—and saw themselves—as merely one sect within Judaism; the definitive break only occurred after A.D. 70). Litvinoff in fact does not do as much as he could in discussing the complicated issues surrounding the Trial of Jesus. He might have pointed out that the Sanhedrin were hated collaborators with the Roman provincial administration (which could appoint—and dismiss—its membership); that Pontius Pilate was only the first of a very long line of tough Roman officials who saw the representatives of Christianity (rightly!) as trouble-makers; and that even in the Gospel of John it is merely the High Priests and their flacks, not the Jewish populace as a whole, who are violently opposed to Jesus (see John 19:6). But Litvinoff does vividly point out the paradox of Christians consistently persecuting the ethnic group into which the Savior had been born: thus when the Rabbi Solomon Halevi was baptized in Spain in 1391 he adopted the name Pablo de Santa Maria because, as a member of

the Levite clan, he claimed direct and literal descent from the family of the Holy Virgin.

Still, under the Christian governments of Europe down to the French Revolution, Jews were despised and penalized basically for what they did not believe, not for what they were. This meant that Jews could save themselves from persecution (which involved anything from extra taxation to mass expulsion to death via pogrom) by the simple act of converting publicly to Christianity. Many did precisely that. Meanwhile, certain popes sought to restrain the most virulent outbreaks of popular anti-Jewish hysteria. Hence Clement VI in 1348 dismissed as ludicrous the accusation that the Jews were spreading the Black Plague by poisoning Christian wells: he pointed out in a special decree that many Jews were dying of the Plague, while at the same time the Plague was spreading through countries uninhabited by Jews.

The Enlightenment of the 18th century went a long way toward defusing Christian hostility toward Jews on the basis of religion. (The same was true of Jewish hostility toward Christians: Litvinoff, ever balanced in his presentation, minces no words about this.) By the 1780's the government of Louis XVI was organizing a literary competition on the subject "How to Make the Jews Happier [!] and More Useful in France." In Germany in this same period the emblematic figure was the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (grandfather of the composer). As an associate of the poet Gotthold Lessing, the real founder of German humanism, Mendelssohn proved the power of Jewish intellect once released from the bonds of the Christian-imposed ghetto. Mendelssohn is one of Litvinoff's heroes, and understandably so.

The 19th century was even better. In Western Europe the Jews were emancipated from the social penalties they had endured for hundreds of years, and were allowed to enter the mainstream of society for the first time. The impact of their arrival—in every field from commerce to political science to art and

literature—was enormous. Yet the 19th century also witnessed the rise of pseudoscientific racist nationalism, a threat to the Jews far more deadly than Christian persecution or distaste. Racist nationalism, like its contemporary, radical communism, was in fact a desperate attempt to recapture the primeval sense of community that was being pitilessly torn asunder in the 19th century by capitalism, the greatest engine of social change and individual freedom. And with both racist nationalism and radical communism, the fevered search for primeval unity (of "nation" or "class") led inevitably to the massacre of those designated as "outside the family."

Hence the 19th century—"the Century of Progress"—paved the way, for the Jews, to the Holocaust. Nor did assimilation help. For now the problem was not, as earlier, what the Jews did not believe, or what they wore, or the way they spoke: it was what the Jews ineradicably *were*, namely (in racist eyes) "an inferior breed of Asiatics . . . condemned from birth" who threatened to infect the "purity" of the various European communities. Litvinoff carefully (and rightly) distinguishes medieval Christian anti-Semitism from this new form, for from this new form there could be no escape; any Jew—a poet, a scientist, a war hero, a totally assimilated descendant of a convert to Christianity—remained a "virus" that had to be expunged.

Europe, both medieval and modern, thus turned out to be a nightmare for the Jews. Nor has the post-Holocaust return to the Middle East, the refounding of the Land of Israel, turned out to be more than a qualified success at best, according to Litvinoff. There, the initial political-military problem of threatened destruction and genocide at the hands of the Arabs has been, for the moment, surmounted. But it has been replaced by a hideously ironic moral problem: Jewish control, by right of conquest, over a huge non-Jewish population that remains fundamentally hostile. This has already led to calls from some quarters for the