

Furious Song: Seven Notable Poetry Books of 2006
by Steve Evans

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Books discussed in this review:

Berrigan, Ted. *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*. Ed. Alice Notley, with Anselm Berrigan and Edmund Berrigan. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005. 749pp. \$50, jacketed cloth.

Notley, Alice. *Grave of Light: New and Selected Poems, 1970-2005*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2006. 364pp. US\$29.95, jacketed cloth.

Waldrop, Rosmarie. *Curves to the Apple*. New York: New Directions, 2006. 196pp. US\$16.95, paper.

Mackey, Nathaniel. *Splay Anthem*. New York: New Directions, 2006. 126pp. US\$15.95, paper.

Creeley, Robert. *On Earth*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2006. 89pp. \$US21.95, jacketed cloth.

Willis, Elizabeth. *Meteoric Flowers*. Middletown: Wesleyan, 2006. 79pp. US\$22.95, jacketed cloth.

Young, Stephanie, ed. *Bay Poetics*. Cambridge, MA: Faux, 2006. 498pp. US\$29.00, paper.

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The most monumental tome recently to arrive on the US poetry scene, and the one most likely to be holding our attention a decade hence, is *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, published in a sumptuous edition by the University of California Press late in the fall of 2005. A solid two inches thick, wrapped in a bright white jacket, with a glowing yellow crayon-work by George Schneeman on the cover, and a page design customized to Berrigan's open-field compositions, like the early and in many ways definitive "Tambourine Life," the book offers an opportunity to consider anew a writer of startling ingenuity and wit whose legacy should not be reduced to the clichés of his initial reception (the early success of the *Sonnets*, the hero worship he both practiced and hoped to receive, the self-destructive lifestyle of Pepsi and pills, the sometimes impossibly imposing personality, by turns sweet and savage). Berrigan 's is an art of

sprezzatura, of the animated utterance that somehow holds its charge, and its capacity to surprise, even after conversion to the cold black-and-white of the printed page. His wit owes more to Duchamp (via Warhol) than drawing-room comedy (the genre beloved of Berrigan's friend and hero Frank O'Hara), depending as it does on cunning frame shifts, self-referentiality (and self-parody), and the juxtaposition of discrepant lexical registers rather than the fiction of gapless and faultless powers of saying the perfect thing at just the right time, every time. Berrigan, like William Carlos Williams before him, finds in the brokenness of American speech an occasion for lyric amplitude. The closing lines of his stunning auto-elegiac poem "Red Shift" capture the stance perfectly: "Alone & crowded, unhappy fate, nevertheless, / I slip softly into the air / The world's furious song flows through my costume."

The poet Alice Notley married Ted Berrigan in 1972 and lived with him, first in Chicago, and then in Manhattan, until his early death (he was only 49) in 1983. Working with their sons, Anselm and Edmund Berrigan, both of whom have grown up to be poets as well, Notley painstakingly edited and arranged *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, composed a discerning and convivial introduction to it, supplied more than fifty-pages of often revelatory and humorous annotations, and added a "glossary of names" that should help neophytes navigate the social and artistic universe in which Berrigan's gregarious poems move. Such a self-effacing labor of love might have eclipsed another writer, at least for a spell, but less than a year after California published the Berrigan book, Wesleyan University Press has delivered, in hardcover with a spectacular cover collage by the poet, a 365-page compendium of Notley's work to date, *Grave of Light: New and Selected Poems, 1970-2005*. This essential volume effectively restores to print the best of Notley's early work, all of which first appeared in small-press editions that have long since become collector's items, allowing it to be reread in light of the path breaking book-length poems that brought Notley a new level of renown toward the turn of the millennium, *The Descent of Alette* (1996), *Mysteries of Small Houses* (1998), and *Disobedience* (2001), all with Penguin, and all intelligently excerpted from here. The latter seventy-five pages of *Grave of Light* are of particular interest for the glimpse they offer of Notley's most recent work, including the almost unbearably-rapid synaptic firings of the "Reason and Other Women" series (which includes the volume's title poem), the furious anti-war screeds of "Alma, or the Dead Women" (available in its entirety from the excellent Granary imprint), and the previously unpublished "Songs and Stories of the Ghouls" (which alternates between dense prose passages and more porous stanzaic structures). Whereas her immediate peers in the second- and third-generation New York School accept the premises of secularism, and find

ample occasion to praise this-worldly pleasures, Notley's poetry—quietly at first, without restraint of late—chafes at the constraints of quotidian reality and tears at the fabric of socially-constructed identity. Death-driven, ghost-haunted, exasperated by the trivial charades behind which the human species (or at least the males dominant therein) hides its apparently inexpugnable will-to-extinction, hers is a disobedient poetics comparable in urgency and vision to that of William Blake, her dedication to the recovery of radical transcendence matched only by her intense attention to the linguistic means by which her, and our, escape must be conjured.

Rosmarie Waldrop eschews the vatic role of the poet that Notley seems increasingly drawn to, being by temperament and historical experience (as a German born into the fascist era) distrustful of it, but she shares an intense occupation with language as a medium that transcends individual consciousness and destines us to dialogue as a condition of existence. *Curves to the Apple*, published by New Directions in September 2006, gathers for the first time under one cover the three volumes of Waldrop's exquisite, and reputation making, trilogy, *The Reproduction of Profiles* (1987), *Lawn of Excluded Middle* (1993), and *Reluctant Gravities* (1999). Taken as an ensemble, with the six-year intervals between volumes now reduced to a few blank pages within the new edition, these prose poetic sequences link together to form an intricate and elegant network, the principle of coherence for which can be found in Ezra Pound's postulate, cited in Waldrop's introduction, of "a center around which, not a box within which." An empty center, to be sure. Waldrop proposes poetry as a form of "gap gardening," of sounding the Cagean silence for all that stirs and whirs and rustles inside of it. She is also a surpassingly subtle collagist, among the first (though she took a cue in this regard from Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's book, *The Heat Bird*, published by Waldrop's Burning Deck press in 1983) to notice the poetic uses to which Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings could be put (in *Curves to the Apple* the philosopher's words interweave with samples from Kafka and Robert Musil as well as the physicist A.S. Eddington and other sources). But it isn't just for the high-modernist techniques here on virtuoso display that one returns to this sequence. It is, rather, for the dramatic working through, by turns satirical and sweet, tense and tender, of the relationship between an "I" (understood to be female) and a "you" (understood to be male) that unfolds over the course of nearly two hundred pages of implicit and explicit "conversation." As a note to the original edition of *Lawn of Excluded Middle* asserts, "The gravity of love encompasses ambivalence." The gravity that governs the apple's fall is not ultimately, according to Waldrop, a tragic force, as of original sin; in her secular *commedia* of sexual difference, "the body, jubilant to meet its double, bites into the apple"

("Meditation on Awakening"). The trick of seeing double carries its risks, but the taste of skin on tongue is too delicious to forego.

Speaking of seeing double: until recently, Nathaniel Mackey thought he was working on two long serial poems, one derived from his study of Dogon funeral rites, called "Song of the Andoumboulou," and another titled after and taking off from jazz trumpeter Don Cherry's "Mu" records (album length duos with the drummer Ed Blackwell, like Cherry a member of Ornette Coleman's quartet when the records were released in 1969). Twenty years into the composition process, the two strands began to braid together, their distinct edges to fray, their nub ("the crux or central point of a matter," as the dictionary says) to seem a shared one ("worn to a nub" is a great, possibly untranslatable phrase, indicating erosion to the point of barest commonality or, to employ the assonance of which Mackey is a master, a "spent essence"). In *Splay Anthem*, published by New Directions in May of 2006, the poet names his projects "two and the same, each the other's understudy. Each is the other, each is both, announcedly so in this book by way of number, in earlier books not so announcedly so. By turns visibly and invisibly present, each is the other's twin or contagion, each entwines the other's crabbed advance. They have done so, unannouncedly, from the beginning, shadowed each other from the outset, having a number of things in common, most obviously music" (ix). Music is central theme in all of Mackey's writings, from *Four For Trane* (1978) and the brilliant epistolary fiction *Bedouin Hornbook* (1986) to the present, but in addition to making music an object of staggeringly-encyclopedic referential reach, Mackey has evolved a signature prosody that is instantly recognizable as his own. His heavily enjambed lines, his proclivity for syntactical inversion, his insistent use of alliteration, especially to yoke together noun pairs, his practice of what Robert Duncan, drawing on his correspondence with Ezra Pound, called "tone leading of vowels," an amped up form of assonance nowhere more audible than in Mackey's current practice, all combine to create a sonic environment of a richness and complexity unrivalled in American writing since the days of the early *Cantos*. Indeed, it's hard not to think of the "void air taking pelt" passage of Canto II in reading a transformation scene like the one that begins "Sound and Sentience," with its basis in the Muni bird myth of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea: "Scales what would once have been / skin... Feathers what would once / have been cloth... There that / claiming heaven raised hell, fraught / sublimity, exits ever more to / come... // A drum's head it was we walked on, / beats parsed by our ghost feet, / protoghost feet our feet had / become. It was a dream of beaten / earth, / beaten air, beaked extravagance, / birds we'd eventually be...." (86).

In the Kaluli myth of the Muni bird (familiar to Mackey through ethnomusicologist Steven Feld's important book *Sound and Sentiment*), Mackey sees a parable of the emergence of poetic speech in the breakdown of "social sustenance": denied food by his kin, a young boy transforms into a bird, his cry becoming the origin of poetry and music. It is a theme familiar to readers of Robert Creeley, whose frequent invocation of a "visionary company of love" (the allusion is to Hart Crane's late poem, "The Broken Tower") served at once to lament the perversely persistent human habits of exclusion and scapegoating and to propose, with deceptive simplicity, a community where there is "Room for one and all / around the gathering ball, / to hold the sacred thread, / to hold and wind and pull. // Sit in the common term. / All hands now move as one. / The work continues on. / The task is never done" ("The Ball"). *On Earth*, the slim but essential volume that brings Creeley's prolific and field-defining career to a close, collects the thirty-three poems he wrote in the months, lucid and productive ones, before his death from lung disease in late-March of 2005 and appends a moving and insightful essay, "Reflections on Whitman in Age," a reminder of how exact and encompassing (and immune to academic jargon) Creeley's critical intelligence remained to the very end. With the imminent arrival, also from the University of California, of the two volumes of Creeley's *Collected Poems* (fifteen hundred pages in all, covering the periods 1945-1975 and 1975-2005 respectively), this small book recording the poet's last impressions while "on earth" risks being overlooked. That would be a shame, for all the pleasures of "late Creeley" are here: the considered renunciation of the conspicuous enjambment that made him famous in favor of end-stopped, and often end-rhymed, lines; the remembrances of friends like John Wieners and Paul Blackburn; the unsentimental account of old age ("It's no fun, no victory, no reward, no direction," as he puts it in the Whitman essay); not to mention the aching valentines to his wife Penelope, tender additions to a body of work that from the start, and to the end, announced itself "for love."

Elizabeth Willis conceived the poems in her fourth full-length collection, the first to be published by Wesleyan University Press, as a conversation with Erasmus Darwin's 1791 work *The Botanic Garden*, four very long cantos crammed with rhymed couplets in iambic pentameter examining and exulting in the splendors of life, vegetative and otherwise: "In their unwieldy asymmetries and their sudden leaps between botany, political and aesthetic history, technology, and pastoral romance," Willis writes, "this work of the late Enlightenment seemed an eerily apt model for riding out the inter-discursive noise of the early twenty-first century." The prose poems Willis extracts from her encounter with Darwin (the grandfather of the more famous Charles, whose theory of evolution is not wholly unindebted to his

visionary ancestor's versifying) are as condensed and finely-honed as his are expansive and digressive. Willis borrows her titles from Darwin, but her taut, exquisitely-paced sentences are built of lexical materials that range from the archaic to the futuristic. Consider "Ancient Subterranean Fires," a typical poem from late in the book: "When I crossed the road, I burned with the heat of its traffic. Time as movement, a government of rushes. All those itching satellites, blind among the dreaming guns. A bee in its lace is the author of something. Easy work is out there, just beyond the mines. A cab into heroic legend, the first of its kind. To look back on gasoline as hoof and leaf. A moving eye, scrolling through the weeds. Just another carnivore frozen at the spring. As dirty as heaven, a skeleton key." The commas here function as line-breaks would in verse, giving pause, permitting juxtaposition to work its extradiscursive magic; in the two sentences—the fourth and the ninth—that unfold without such an internal pause, the straightforward syntax stands out by contrast, lending ballast to a grim declaration like "Just another carnivore frozen at the spring." The subject matter is treated obliquely, as though seen by a "moving eye, scrolling through the weeds": a future "to look back" from is being conjured up, though one might find it difficult to consider its polluted skies ("As dirty as heaven") and "skeleton keys" with untroubled anticipation. A similar tone of muted apocalypse stirs throughout the poems that make up *Meteoric Flowers*, a whisper of extinction that, once heard, complicates the undeniable beauty of their surfaces, their skillful rhythmical turns, their lush vocabulary.

The poetry anthology is a form too little dared with of late. Though bookstore shelves teem with them, today's anthologies have about as much charm as the increasingly-interchangeable prisons, hospitals, schools, and malls (with chain bookstores) that define contemporary American social space. They are bleakly institutional, and few who visit their alphabetically-, chronologically-, or thematically-arranged pages really believe the canonizing hype emblazoned on their covers. *Bay Poetics*, edited by the young poet Stephanie Young (her first book, *Telling the Future Off*, was published in 2005), is something else altogether: an assemblage that radiates the kind of warm, intimate ambience of a compilation cd or mix-tape made for one friend by another. That the assemblage extends to five-hundred pages, and features the work of 110 writers currently (or until recently) living in the San Francisco Bay area, might seem to argue against such an intimacy of scale, but somehow Young pulls it off, tending to her segues with consummate sensitivity (her sense of the elective affinities between particular writers guides her placement of one poet next to another) and effecting a balance—which must have cost countless hours to achieve—of generation, genre, and gender that is truly admirable.

Established writers like Kevin Killian (the scene stalwart to whom Young devotes the most pages), Nathaniel Mackey, Leslie Scalapino, Joanne Kyger, and Bob Glück appear next to newcomers like Alli Warren, Judith Goldman, Rodney Koeneké, and Cedar Sigo; the mix of poetry, prose poetry, and poetic essay (the "poetics" of the title is loosely employed: there is little Roman Jakobson, or for that matter Aristotle, would recognize as belonging to the genre, though one senses that Gertrude Stein, or Emerson, or Robert Creeley would feel at home) is stimulating; and the Bay Area's thriving traditions of feminism, queer identity, and sexual openness are well represented without being exploited as niche-market gimmicks. Not every page is equally compelling—there are wearisome notes of period and regional style audible throughout the collection—but on the whole *Bay Poetics* offers an invigorating snapshot of a poetry scene without equal (not even in New York) in the US today. Those looking for what remains affirmable in a country whose political leadership seems bent only on destruction would do well to start with the "visionary company" assembled in *Bay Poetics*.

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