

“other i’s to see thru”

Douglas Barbour. *Lyric / Anti-Lyric: essays on contemporary poetry*. Edmonton: NeWest, 2001. 276 pp.

“[T]he poetry always outdistances the theory” (118), Douglas Barbour comforts puzzled readers of bp Nichol’s *The Martyrology*, thereby revealing a limitation of his own collection of essays, *Lyric / Anti-Lyric: essays on contemporary poetry*. Perhaps because Barbour is himself a poet, in this volume he sets out in pursuit of something that he does not really want to catch. Specifically, the object of his search is the protean poetic “I,” the lyrical self that over the last century has repudiated itself, as modernism has yielded to postmodernism through rituals of self-denial and self-dispersal that Barbour, for the most part, welcomes. Because contemporary poetry requires “other i’s to see through,” in Nichol’s phrase (117), identifying a stable poetic presence would be to miss the point that there is no point-no punctual self from which lyrics flow. Everything about poetry that Barbour cherishes-indeterminacy, illogicality, ambiguity, unpredictability-ensures that it cannot be captured in a critical discourse temperamentally out of step with its object. Northrop Frye once observed that criticism helps us to learn *about* literature, but “at no point is there any direct learning of literature itself” (Frye 11), because it engages a different order of experience. What we know is poetics, which is intelligible and systematic, not poetry, which is inexhaustible. For Barbour, too, criticism is a plot against Proteus that is doomed to fail, but the failure of theory is the triumph of creative vitality. Knowing is never commensurate with being, and he is still enough of a formalist, as he confesses in his Preface, to believe that a poem should not mean but be. Casual remarks about a commonly accepted judgement of Phyllis Webb (“so the critics tell us,” 111) and about Sharon Thesen (“the poet knows better than the essayist here,” 199) hint that he does not want to spend too much time in the critical camp. Accordingly, he concludes the book by confessing, “If I began by wanting to explain, to myself at any rate, how [Susan] Howe’s poetry works, I end with feeling that such explanation is by the way. Her ‘mysteries’ . . . are their own reason to be” (258).

Nevertheless, over the last fifteen years he has written the thirteen critical essays collected here, all dealing with anti-lyrical

strains in contemporary poetry. The easiest way for poets to resist lyrical self-indulgence—often associated loosely with romanticism, or with its excesses to rely on other poetic forms, whether dramatic, narrative, choral, documentary or serial. Although Barbour does acknowledge these styles, which are too spacious for the domineering “I” to dominate, he is more interested in how the lyric is turned against itself through “anti-lyric lyricism” (12). How can poets sing without relying on their own voices, or without singing at all? Traditional lyrics are evocative: they call forth the melodious voice of an isolated speaker, expressing his or her deepest feelings in a symbolic setting that mirrors the singer’s mood. To undermine these deeply entrenched conventions requires an attack on many fronts. Music, voice, presence, isolation, profundity, expression and mood must all be rejected, or better yet, engaged briefly so as to be renounced in a disruptive display that becomes the poem’s chief interest. Margaret Atwood’s “This is a Photograph of Me,” is a test case: look at me, its speaker proclaims, I’m not there. As Barbour reminds us, the personal pronoun “I” is a shifter—a grammatical marker with no fixed address—and modern poets have encouraged it to keep shifting by composing, in Robin Blaser’s words, “a wilderness of meaning in which the I of the poet is not the centre but a returning and disappearing note” (17). Similarly Barbour says of E.D. Blodgett’s difficult music:

Because we cannot identify the I, the you, or the we of these poems with any certainty, all is cast into doubt, or, more accurately, into chance. There is a voice, there is an utterance, a special tone, but the poem directs its energies beyond lyric to something more complex and satisfying than the simple expression of personal emotion. Yet the feeling of love is present throughout. (142)

Personal emotion need not be simple in texture or expression, but Barbour is not always clear about what he finds more satisfying, or what other kinds of satisfaction contemporary poetry affords, although his own pleasure in reading is never in doubt. The history of twentieth-century poetics can be read as a series of attacks on the overweening ego, conducted under the banner of modernist impersonality, avant-garde affront, social responsibility, ideological critique, dehumanisation, minimalism, objectivism, feminism, performativity, and so on. From these attacks emerge those defining moments of modern crisis when the self is publicly chastised: the

eclipse of the hero, the divided self, masculinity under stress, patriarchal and imperialist bravado, colonial eccentricities, the shaming of Descartes. All of these approaches draw strength from a firm moral impulse, although their ethical basis is not always made explicit, and consequently the interdependence of aesthetics and ethics is a corollary of Barbour's intriguing subject. The deconstruction of the self is always an act of penance: "Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down," commanded Ezra Pound, who could never quite subdue the commanding "I."

Barbour's interests are more limited, although their limitation is also their strength. He is less concerned with exploring the historical or philosophical ramifications of his subject than in analysing its rhetorical play in the subtle works to which, as a fellow poet, he is well attuned, writing from within the poems as a sensitive participant rather than as a detached theorist. He is engrossed by the feel of the poems, and he feels acutely, especially when a difficult simplicity delivers a touch of the mystical. Evocation becomes provocation, for instance in a challenging "serial bricolage of the love lyric" by the New Zealand poet, Michele Leggot: "This is both jarring and strangely pleasurable, as it invites each reader into a collaborative and open representation" (229). A pleasantly-jarring, jarringly-pleasant effect, which simultaneously invites and rebuffs collaboration, is exactly the mixed response that Barbour loves. And love is not too strong a word, since he clearly loves poetry. He devotes much of each essay to close readings of selected passages, following the vagaries of a poem's "unpredictable 'i'" (108) by adapting his own style of appreciation until it imitates the poem's idiom. What he offers is not interpretation, and certainly not prediction, but a re-staging of the pleasure of reading. If a "duplicitous unwillingness to guarantee anything . . . is one of the basic signs of a contemporary poetry" (186), then what business has the critic in offering any guarantees? For instance:

There is nowhere in this sentence to stand, one of the words it so artfully demolishes in its incessant repetitions. But then, it's about the way sounds, let alone complete words, slip from our grasp, even in the attempt to speak a love of country, to say its name. We read this snaky sentence with a wry delight, following its twists and turns with pleasure but feeling meaning slide away with every turn of a line. And as we watch a sentence defoliate through carefully crafted rhyth-

mic lines, we hear a lyric querulously turned against itself, another version of lyric / anti-lyric. (138)

This is admirably written and illustrates Barbour's fine poetic instincts, which he needs when faced with difficult poets who make few concessions to their readers. As well as Nichol and Blodgett, he studies Anne Wilkinson, Eli Mandel, John Thompson, Phyllis Webb, Roy Kiyooka, Sharon Thesen and Susan Howe, as well as several Australian and New Zealand anthologies from which he recommends Allen Curnow, C.K. Stead, Jenny Bornholdt, Bill Manhire, Dinah Hawken and Michele Leggott. While there are threads linking these diverse authors, they are never more than threads. Individually the essays are often insightful and engaging, but they never claim to combine in a coherent study of poetic subjectivity. Consequently, this collection, in which the whole is smaller than the sum of its parts, raises some enticing questions that it leaves unanswered. When the poetic "I" is dispelled, does its authority revert to the writer who, like Nichol, turns into an oracle? What happens to emotion when it ceases to be personal? How can poetry become more objective by following the logic of the imagination? Where does the confessional mode fit into anti-lyrical tradition? What happens lyrically, rhetorically or culturally when form and convention are torn apart, for instance when a "terribly strict and conventional form" such as the Persian ghazal turns into an "open and questioning one in English" (105)? What is the reward for poetic humility?

Work Cited

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. New York: Atheneum, 1966.

Jon Kertzer