

BILL FREIND

On the Recent Works of Coolidge, Mayer, and Johnson

Clark Coolidge and Bernadette Mayer, *The Cave*. Princeton, NJ: Adventures in Poetry, 2009.

Kent Johnson, *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*. Exeter, UK: Shearsman Books, 2008.

Bernadette Mayer occupies a somewhat anomalous position in contemporary North American poetry. On the one hand, her influence is unmistakable. As co-editor (with Vito Acconci) of *0 to 9* in the 1960s, she helped to publish a wide range of the most innovative artists and writers of the time. In the now-legendary workshops she led at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in the 1970s, her students included Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, and Nick Piombino. She continues to publish regularly and, judging by the work in many post-avant journals, she continues to influence a substantial number of younger writers. Yet Mayer has yet to receive the acclaim that she deserves, a fact that is demonstrated by the number of her manuscripts, especially from the 1970s, that have remained unpublished.

Slowly, those manuscripts are starting to see the light of day. *What's Your Idea of a Good Time?*, a collaboration with Bill Berkson, was published in 2006, more than two decades after it was finished. Now, Adventures in Poetry has released *The Cave*, a collaboration with Clark Coolidge written between 1972 and 1978. The occasion of the poem was an apparently less-than-overwhelming trip to Eldon's Cave in western Massachusetts. According to Marcella Durand's interesting and helpful introduction, Mayer never actually entered the cave: as Durand writes, "at the cave's entrance, she got her period—a heavy one. She says that at that moment it seemed 'absolutely terrifying to go in the cave.'"

That seems like an odd detail, but much of the collaboration plays on it: there are references to and riffs on flows, periods, writing itself. Durand notes that Coolidge and Mayer seem to reworking Wordsworth's "spots of time," and Eldon's cave becomes a kind of

parodic Mont Blanc, "an empty mountain deep underground." On its most basic level, a cave is an absence, since it is a space or gap in rock, and the fact that Mayer never entered the cave at all makes it doubly absent. Yet that absence is exactly what leads to the creation of the poem: as they write, "[y]ou can't get away with nothing in an empty mountain" and, "A cave is a total body of thought." In other words, the absence demands a big response. After seeing Mont Blanc, Wordsworth claimed to have

. . . griev'd
To have a soulless image on the eye
Which had usurp'd upon a living thought
That never more could be (*Prelude* VI 452-55).

Coolidge and Mayer sidestep that problem, since their collaboration essentially creates the cave. And that's the real pleasure of their poem: Coolidge and Mayer riff energetically and imaginatively, often taking a single word (e.g., canoe, flow, alphabet, dome) and reworking it as if it were a musical theme. Unlike music, however, it's often difficult to tell who's speaking, especially in the "dialogues" the two invent between Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Samuel Beckett and Floyd Collins, the famous cave explorer. If caves are spaces to inhabit, so, Coolidge and Mayer suggest, are other people.

The Cave seems to trail off at the end, which is perhaps understandable since Coolidge and Mayer had worked on it for nearly six years. After Coolidge (or, at least, Mayer writing under Coolidge's name) asks "Can't we ever end it?" the two write

Let's just stop, but still we'll have to wait
For something proves the next lost thing to last
Like caves words leave a hollow in our past
We bet on hopes our absence sets in state.

Like Byron's *Don Juan*, *The Cave* doesn't so much end as stop, which given the improvisatory nature seems somehow appropriate: such a wide-ranging improvisation works against any neat conclusion. With its spontaneous and even anarchic energy, *The Cave* is an absolute delight.

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The title of Kent Johnson's *Homage to the Last Avant Garde* alludes to David Lehman's *The Last Avant Garde*, a study of the Big Four of the New York School, i.e., John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler. Johnson includes poems to Kenneth Koch and the NY School as a whole (as well as an epigraph from Frank O'Hara and a jacket blurb from David Shapiro), but the book is actually a kind of selected poems, which Johnson has divided into sections that are supposed to be "for" some of the more famous, now defunct, American journals: *The Evergreen Review*, *Angel Hair*, "C," *Trobar*, *Locus Solus*, *The World*.

One of the main subjects of Johnson's poetry is poetry itself—not just the poems, but the construction (or non-construction) of careers, the carping and self-promotion, the commitment to art and the desire for recognition, and the intersections and gaps between poetry and politics. In the twenty-second entry in "33 Rules for Poets 23 and Under," Johnson suggests:

Write political poems. But remember: The politics you are likely protesting are present, structurally, inside poetry, its texts and institutions. Write political poems with a vengeance.

That double bind is at the heart of Johnson's work: a belief that poetry at best "makes nothing happen" and at worst is compromised by the same power structures it would challenge. At the same time, for Johnson poetry remains deeply necessary. The former idea certainly comes through in his poem "The Best American Poetry." The poem begins with the speaker on a hill, surrounded by "rutting rams and heated ewes," when he hears yodeling, then says:

Why, it's my old pals from grad school, James Tate and Dean Young! They lie fornenst, on either side of me, face-up, hands locked behind their heads, under the puffy, cotton-ball clouds. I plunge my tongue to their bare-stript breasts.

Baa-a! says James.

B-aaa! says Dean.

And then we laugh, and James rolls a bone the size of a cigar. We lean and loafe at our ease, playing the dozens with non-syllogistic sentences, so the paragraph becomes a unit of quantitye, not logick or argumente. Nay, we do not think whom we souse with spray.

The allusions and parodies come fast and furious: Walt Whitman, Ron Silliman, MFA programs, the career construction and consolidation that occurs in the annual publication of *The Best American Poetry*, and (most importantly), the New York School which influenced Tate, Young, and Johnson himself. Later in the poem, John Ashbery, who Johnson describes (fictively) as "our teacher from grad school" approaches the trio and points "like Lenin" to a fire down the hill which, it turns out, is at the house of Lyn Hejinian. (The cover of *Homage* features a very similar illustration of Lenin.) They sit and watch the fire, making no attempt to put it out. The poem is a sharp and very funny critique of the distanced and/or slyly ironic tone that comes to prominence in some strands of the NY School and which (according to Johnson) he, Tate and Young imitate like sheep. The poem concludes

Aha! Russell Edson sits there, hunched like a gnome, gripping the reins, screaming something like Go horse Go!

In his pocket is his heart. It is *The Best American Poetry*.

Reworking the famous conclusion to Frank O'Hara's "A Step Away from Them," Johnson replaces Pierre Reverdy's *Poems* with *The Best American Poetry*, of which David Lehman is the series editor. The fact that he is also the author of *The Last Avant Garde* seems to suggest that the iconoclastic spirit of O'Hara, et. al., has been replaced by the annual compendium of who's in and who's out in the poetry world. The fact that Russell Edson is one of the least careerist poets in America makes the line funnier and more hyperbolic.

But Johnson also follows his own advice to "write political poems with a vengeance" and "Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz, Or: " 'Get the Hood Back On'" is without question the most powerful political poem I've read in a very long time. The first five sections feature members of the U.S. Army introducing themselves to the men they would torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. For instance:

Welcome, Kamil, I'm an American girl, nineteen, pregnant, my Dad is an alcoholic, but my Mother is in recovery, with her own Daycare, and I'll be taking it over after the Army, I've always wanted to have my own business, and I'm going to expand beyond just one location, I'm not thinking small. And since I believe it is always important to say what one means and not beat around the bush, I want you to know something: I'm going to hold a pistol to your head and tell you to jack-off,

while you recite the Koran as fast as you can, you heathen,
Hell-bound fuck, and then I'm going to look at the camera
with a cigarette dangling from my sultry, teenage lips, giving
the thumbs up. By the time you get to MI, you'll be softened
up, and you'll tell us where the missing evil Baathists are.

The poem is overwhelming but Johnson resists an easy demonization: if the photographs from Abu Ghraib became so familiar that the torturers slid into a kind of cartoonish surface, these are more nuanced. The speakers seem like real people, introducing themselves with a stereotypical (or caricatured) American affability, only to abruptly switch to a catalogue of atrocities. But the poem doesn't let writers off either: it introduces an American poet who at the age of "twenty-ish, early to mid-thirtyish, fortyish to seventyish," clearly represents nearly all contemporary American poets. After stressing his or her (or their) political liberalism and cultural sensitivity, this poet says

And because nothing is simple in this world, and because no one gets out unscathed, I'm going to just be completely candid with you: I'm going to box your ears with two big books of poems, one of them experimental and the other more plain speech-like, both of them hardbound and by leading academic presses, and I'm going to do it until your brain swells to the size of a basketball and you die like the fucking lion for real. You'll never make it to MI because that's the breaks; poetry is hard, and people go up in flames for lack of it everyday. . . . I want you to take this self-righteous poem, soak it in this bedpan of crude oil, and shove it down your pleading, screaming throat.

Now, get the hood back on.

If the atrocities in Iraq (and all over the world) demand a response, Johnson recognizes that that can too easily slide into a type of pseudo-consolation in which poets imagine themselves to be outside or above the systems of power they critique. Instead, Johnson suggests that political poets are in some ways worse than irrelevant to the victims of atrocities. Their reliance on those victims for their art places them in a position that is metaphorically analogous to that of a torturer's relationship to his or her victim. Which, of course, didn't stop him from writing the poem. Yes, it's hyperbolic, but Johnson's provocation is not an end in itself. Instead, he repeatedly challenges our most basic assumptions about what poetry can (and cannot) do.