

PHILLY TALKS
#1
30 & 31 October, 1997

LAURA MORIARTY

Reading:
30 Oct., 5p.m.

DAVID BROMIGE

Reading:
31 Oct., 4p.m.
Panel
to follow

“Philly Talks” is a dialogue with contemporary poets. This, its newsletter, will feature responses by two poets, each to the other’s poetry; it will be available on-line and in hard copy at least one week prior to the event. “Philly Talks,” the event, will present both a reading by the poets and a panel discussion. The panel format is an invitation to extend the conversation together. All events, free and open to the public, take place at:

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Laura Moriarty

David Bromige’s Zone of Code

Having been, in reading various books by David Bromige, possessed by the line “Descent into David Bromige’s Monty Python poetics...,” having then posted the line to David and received a corroborative reply (“I always felt insta-rec around the Python show”), and having, further, been haunted by the idea that there was a potential Philly connection in there somewhere, I decided to rewatch ex-Python Terry Gilliam’s movie *12 Monkeys* before writing about Bromige’s book *A Cast of Tens* (Avec, 1994). This will be the last time (but one) I allow myself to use the word “haunted” in these notes. The word too easily fits the situation in which we find ourselves as readers of Bromige’s *Tens* and viewers of Gilliam’s movie: – Haunted by connotations, by clues, by the past or future depending where you find yourself – by meaning existing at all, by what is real, by the implications of what in the *Monkeys* is called the Permanent Emergency Code.

Desperation City, or Deportation City,
followed by a zone of code,/some precedent.
They and all over./

(from “Prose Intermission: Still To Start,”
A Cast of Tens, p. 66)

The counted structure (lines are clustered into stanzas and other arrangements by ten: 3-3 3-1, 1-2-3-1-1 etc.) and mixture of meanings in *Tens* is like the mixture of times in the movies, both the subject/object of the whole project and a gimmick, a convention that carries us forward, while the writer (director) does what he needs to do. We are intrigued, distracted, confused and in suspense. We can’t wait for the music.

The movie is of course easier. It is after all made for a mass audience. (Gilliam claims not to have seen Chris Marker’s film *La Jetée* on which screenwriters David and Janet Peoples base his movie.) *A Cast of Tens* resists easy meaning. Like *La Jetée*, Bromige’s book reveals itself gradually, over repeated readings. It not only holds up to but demands such scrutiny The particular pleasure of *Tens* is not only in this demand, which it shares with much other contemporary writing, but in the counted movement and shape of the work and in the information, pleasure and wisdom to be had marching with Bromige through his *Tens*.

The introduction is good. (I enjoy the current tendency of poets to have them. The intros are often useful, telling works in themselves.) Bromige begins “Rather than wisdom texts, expressive witness, or formal nonsense (though these modes in pieces obtain here), these poems are constructed to be specula” (“Authors Note,” *A Cast of Tens*). So we are informed that we are to have it (at least) both ways – that there will be wisdom etc. but that what we will gain from it will be splayed out against the operating table (Bromige evoked J. Alfred Prufrock to me in another post about this book) like a patient etherised.¹ I We will be invited, in fact required, to speculate.

And then we begin counting. In reading the work I am aware of the tens but then I forget. (Not unlike traditional sitting meditation in which breaths are counted. Same number. Same problem.) Wandering away from the meaning or finding the meaning for a moment suspended, I am attracted back to the tens as if to a plot. Reading becomes the daily life of the mind staring into the book.

Provide an example, it will be

but as to the what...

Your forensic novel, Watson

was erotic. Drove himself
to the hospital, demonstrating
the good sense in a state of shock

(from “Another Refusal To Mourn,” *A Cast of Tens*, p. 17)

Perseverance is the only choice here. One goes to the next line seeking a solution to the mystery suggested by the word “Watson” and finds the off-rhyme of erotic and forensic. The musicality. The n’s and c’s. The connection of forensic with mourning, of mourning with shock, of forensic with shock. (Association with death, medicine, the c’s, the harsh lack of n in shock.) It is necessary for the reader to live in the details if she is to proceed in the reading with a satisfied mind. The lines are evocative, sounded. They trade these qualities for the reader’s patience with their nonlinearity. They offer up the structure of their countedness in place of the traditional (meaning false) structure of the little story or emotion. It is not a new strategy in writing, but Bromige does it very well here.

But back to Monty Python. There is an interrogation of reality implicit in the absurd, pun-driven, ribald, slapstick antics of the MP’s

that is also present in DB’s work. (Bromige pointed out to me that he “riffed on ‘M-P’ during [his] Langton St. res in ’84... Merleau-Ponty, Michael Palmer, Michael Polanyi, Monty Python...”²) The reality questioned is the one created by the language in and around us. Humor often proceeds by means of puns, homonyms, misunderstandings etc and achieves its effect through timing and a sort of razzle-dazzle. There is a thrill in Bromige’s work in watching him sacrifice ten centuries of upright British prosody for a single pun.

It’s a cloud
It’s a plane
It’s seafog, stranger
Though apparently cloud
It’s a clod

(from “Come To Where It Sits,” *A Cast of Tens*, p. 51)

Tens is less ribald than some of David’s work (does one’s posts to the Poetics list³ constitute a work?). *A Cast of Tens* is more mysterious and evocative than witty. The structure of tens isn’t so much artful as it is inevitable. There are only so many ways you can mix it up working with the tens. Having a limit is like running out of time. That is where the *12 Monkeys* come in. It’s not so much the mad Brad Pitt I’m making a connection with here as the time-addled, tragic Bruce Willis.

[...] He liked to hear her talk
about now. ‘Aimlessly’
taking dictation from the city
streets until stopped short by
what quickly proved more of the same
that this one (however) spoke her
name
... bonfire smoke that ‘follows’ one

for there is the wind
and here is a place

to be smoked. ‘I will do nothing
I do not believe in’ –
‘marbling’ of Milky way or foliage

(from “Come To Where It Sits,” *A Cast of Tens*, pp. 53-4)

Here there is a very light touch in the use of words to suggest a milieu, an emotion, a narrative or finally to use them simply to show off the structure in which they are framed.

Gilliam's movie transforms ordinary stuff – TV, radio, animals, Philadelphia, into a mythic sci fi. Chris Marker's movie recontextualizes love and time by its use of stills. *La Jetée* is a movie about movement through time with only one movement in it. With its connotative slippage elegantly organized into tens, Bromige's book allows us the option of these movements and transformations as well as any others we are able to bring to the text. ("If you are as a reader indifferent, they will prove an indifferent read..." ["Author's Note," *A Cast of Tens*, n.p.] And if not you will have a pleasurable new take each time through.

The last lines in the last poem could refer both to movies and to the experience of the book:

What the frame allows to form
 fire does to water in the hermetic
 cylinder of philosophy's history
 seeking for some norm
 So proud to remember
 The words and the deeds
 Facing it alone
 And to worry the word *deed*
 Waves and clouds are provided
 Enter the x of economics
 Exit into slices of bleakness
 Of which there are three
 – an infinity of blindingness
 Divine since various
 (from "Commencement Exercise," *A
 Cast of Tens*, p. 90)

12 October 1997

Editor's Notes

¹ Opening lines to T.S. Eliot's 1917 poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

Let us go then, you and I,
 When the evening is spread out
 Against the sky
 Like a patient etherised upon a
 Table [...]

² Bromige's workshop at New Langton Arts, July 10-14, 1984, is described by Michael Anderson, a workshop participant, in the David Bromige

issue of *The Difficulties*, ed. Tom Beckett, vol. 3, no. 1, 1987, pp. 95-106.

³ The Poetics listserve is produced by the Electronic Poetry Center, State University of New York at Buffalo:
<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/poetics>.

David Bromige

Symmetry (Avec, 1996) by Laura Moriarty Seen Thru its Cover & 3 of its Poems

First I notice the cover pic: one door open one door shut. Each defining the other's condition. I am reminded of something crucially important, an idea of how language works, a binary system that establishes meaning.

I find I'm thinking of all the big opposites that need one another in order to maintain approximation to life – open/shut, dark/light, death/life, sense/nonsense, age/youth, good/evil. "They know nothing in not knowing that day and night are one." (invented or recalled? Heraclitus?)

This is what poetry is to do: to be a moebius strip that shows us how opposites are joined, are the one thing. I think hmm *Symmetry*, balance, balance takes two.

Take Five: A Pun = Marriage = Poetry. In a pun, two things (at least) are jostling for the same space.

Let me look at the poems. Ten minute talk? Pick three. I'll take the poems on pp 10, 22, and 33: my birthdate.

But there is no poem on p.10. I'll take p.11, then:

THE MUSE

The familiar paraphernalia

Forced into the role of silent
 collaborator

The psyche at stake

We are in business together

The buildings melt into the sky

You sing to distract me

Your reason is not mine

Is mine

–You & me are (un)balancing this poem. Treat the lines as syntactic units somewhat untouched by what precedes & follows, the poem ends with contradiction. Break the syntax within the penultimate line, to derive “Your reason is” together with “not mine is mine”, or try “Your reason is not,” “Mine is mine”. All responses liable in A “me/you” face off. This poem doesn’t meld these, but holds them distinct (as can be) in suspension. Suspends flow, provides residue (see epigraph to book : Marcel Duchamp, from *The Green Box*, “The right and the left are obtained by letting trail behind you a tinge of *the persistence of the situation*. This symmetrical fashioning of the *situation distributed* on each side of the vertical axis is of practical value (as right different from left) only as a residue of experiences on fixed exterior points.”)

If somewhere somehow “Your reason is not mine” cannot be apprehended, we as a species are lost. If somewhere somehow “Your reason is mine” cannot be apprehended, we as a species are lost.

“The familiar paraphernalia” is an attractive phrase. It is also tellingly placed (first line of entire book) & must encourage dozens of referents to stand forth. The poetic tradition, for starters. The poet’s body, for another. I like the tough-guy diction of “We are in business together” used metaphorically of Psyche & non-Psyche. More literally, we all do find ourselves there, struck in business, where the buildings reach the sky & vanish into their own misplacement of humanity, scorn of history, which must repay the compliment (to be symmetrical about it).

Singing is a distraction but for good or ill. This is a lyric but also an anti-lyric. (what got called, quel horreur, the “analytic lyric”...did a poet coin that unwieldiness?!) This line could even be a command. We persons different from one another know odd melodies (unheard?), odd to the Other, that is, novel & attractive. “I like you.” But not as like as all that. Your reason is not, & mine is, well, mine. Sing heavily, Muse.

Who utters a poem – the poet, or the tradition? Or the language, or... ?

THAT EXPLODE TOGETHER

It gets worse It gets better
 The words seem to shrink
 He writes about his experience
 I write about mine
 Song lyrics on her lips
 Make the same sound
 The automatic movements were the

ones
 Isolated like notes
 I tell everything in plain words
 Thinking against the action
 The body changes what is said
 I also write in zeroes
 The flexibility is exact
 He reads as if the words were his
 He treats the book like an accordion
 She belongs to El Diablo he sings
 Over and over they agree
 He tears it apart a capella
 Her nerves are numbered like stars
 Too distant to record

A lot here, so I can’t in ten minutes take up all of it, so I’ll take up what strikes me as less obvious. That there is in resistance a symmetry, for instance; push & push back. (A pun, a marriage, a poem). At the end, we are close we are terribly distant, terribly close. We have a chart referred to of her nervous system, but then it is a stargram of galaxies hundreds of light years away. And indeed, one feels close only to feel distant, they make one another what they are, Close and Distant. And add Agreement/Disagreement, Sympathetic Reading/ Insupportable Misappropriation.

Its, a dynamite mix. Was it explosive for you, too? Did the flat world turn round? A line I find attractive is “The flexibility is exact”. To be exact, in this world of fixed yet shifting positions, one would have to be flexible.

Notes? We run on automatic between decisions; notes are like the unconscious of a melody, the melody of consciousness. When you are conscious, your song is sweet to me; you deliver it as if for my ears alone; but who wrote the damn thing? Why *those* notes & not others, who scripted your person, that it is so obdurately other than me?

On p 33, I find a prose poem that is one in apparently a series of such. no title.

The leafy tangerines are the lucky ones. A stem example of excess. An hourglass with many chambers and an unlimited supply of sand. A woman’s breast. Is that what you imagined? Or is this more like it?

– Such an hourglass would be self-cancelling. “You are going to live forever.” “Ok, in that case, I’ll write manyana.” Eternity at mother’s tit. Only this time, we’ll *know* it. What I notice first here is how the poet almost steps thru the poem

& out of it & into my face. What could that “this” refer to?

The poem itself, or either one of the poet's breasts (named “That” & “This”). In this world where leafy = lucky, and example = excess, superfluity provides indecision, with its demands to “make up” one's mind.

Will note that an hourglass occurs in one other poem (at least) in this book : A BRIEF MEETING. Which tells us that a brief meeting “may have replaced the missing cardinal virtue of prudence.” And, in its second prose para, the poem goes on :

He carried an hourglass instead of a lantern. This mistake dates back to the fifteenth century when a woman put an hourglass by her bed and stopped her caresses when it ran out.

– About when did modern time replace the light? Caresses chopped short, as in the renting of a sexual partner. The language, vocab, stems, the author tells me (not specifically of this poem, but of the book), often from works on heraldry, where symmetry plays a big part. Surely the misrepresentation picked up by later authorities & perpetuated is “found” by Moriarty in such a text but in the context of poetry speaks of the present & the history of the present.

Next para we are told “There is no difference between that man and his background.”

But then, fourth & final para, in toto : “He reads like a woman.”

Upon this riddle I am still meditating.

+++++

Shopping-around footnotes:

p. 54,

THERE IS NO

Lack of harmony

Between form and meaning

Symmetry

– Here the title, oddly, doesn't matter. Relieved of having to matter, it says a lot. It says what it would say if it were syntax, the first part of a sentence, but it also & more tellingly says, “well, you know, there is ‘No’...” So an extension of

this thought is: if one says 'No' to harmony, there remains, where form & meaning are concerned, *symmetry*. I.e., disharmony is also in symmetry. And my sense of the word 'symmetry' gets further stretched, as thruout this book.

p. 30 : (from an untitled 15 -line poem) :

We wouldn't be adversaries
If you weren't on my side.

– A pun a marriage a poem. And the marriage of writer and reader. Reader wants something from writer, something s/he may not get. Together, we make the poem, struggling to get the other to yield meaning.

– Leap of faith: symmetry/cemetery.

I write to open, not to close (db here). Its a ginger job as in 'gingerly', and sorry if i trampled on your meanings, dear reader. One of the number of aspects I value in Moriarty's poetry is the calculation of latitude with longitude where the former is open and the latter is unarguable. There are many versions I audition. These are tales I tell but am not told. Where the Confessional poet shuts me out with his plaint – the supposed specificity of his woe, joy – Moriarty invites me in. These are notes left by me in her visitors-book. Go on for longer, go into more detail, and I don't leave enough space for others to inscribe their own responses to Moriarty Manor. But its okay, I think, to urge you to go there, & to say a couple things as to why.

October 16, 1997

don't miss

**PHILLY TALKS
#2**

**ANDREW LEVY
&
JACSON MAC LOW**

4 & 5 November, 1997