

BOOK REVIEW

THE LANGUAGE OF EXTRAORDINARY OCCASIONS

The End of This Side by John Clarke with an intro by Ed Sanders. Black Book Number Four, Spring 1979. J. Garmhausen, editor, 121 N. Enterprise, Bowling Green, Ohio 43402. Design: George Mattingly/Typesetting: Alan Bernheimer. Four Dollars.

I read this book in two contexts: American poetry as of this distinct and peculiar moment, and English poetry since Wordsworth. Ed Sanders' intro takes up the book in its archaic aspect, and I leave you, Rootdrinkers, the pleasure of that prose and its purpose.

During the past year I've been increasingly aware of a new wind blowing the fine direction of time in American poetry. I had been waiting for it. When Charles Olson and Jack Kerouac left us, the blank, political days commenced; the "Contemporary" period was over and "Post-Modernism" became the ugly, literary byword for the post-mortem effects. But that is over now, thanks to a series of books which have sprung up like berry bushes on burned ground. "Antechamber" by Michael McClure, Robert Creeley's *Later, Hello, La Jolla* by Edward Dorn and, most recently, *The End of This Side* by John Clarke all articulate a new energy, a zero point energy, fresh and full of possibility.

"A simple way of looking at the problem is by seeing what happens when we confine a single particle into a space of diameter l . We now know that the particle is somewhere inside this box but the uncertainty principle does not allow us to find out exactly where it is at a given time. Anywhere in the box there is a finite probability of encountering the particle and this probability is given by the de Broglie wave, which for instance, tells us that we have a better chance of meeting it in the center than at a given place near the wall. This comes to the same as saying that, in a manner which is undetermined in detail, the particle vibrates inside the box, visiting any part of it at some time. Moreover, it can be seen from our equation that, if l is made smaller, i.e. if the particle is confined into a smaller box, its energy will become larger and it must vibrate more violently, the same thing will happen if m is made smaller, i.e. if a lighter particle is placed in the box.

"The vibration of the particle by virtue of the fact that it may occupy any part of the box is therefore a direct consequence of indeterminacy. This energy which the particle *must* have, simply because a certain space is allowed for its motion, is its zero point energy." (K. Mendelsohn, *The Quest for Absolute Zero*.)

In the recent poetry by McClure, Dorn, and Creeley, the particle has been made smaller; they have lightened up. But Clarke has gone the other route and confined his energy to the sonnet form. *The End of This Side* presents a series of fifty such sonnets, each one a sentence fitted into fourteen lines of various rhythmic construction. The Renaissance conventions of the well-known sonneteers have been (for the most part) replaced by the syntactic conventions of projective verse, an improvisatory method that allows maximum play within the structure. The result is a poetry of enormous charge; rich, complex, and novel. The advantages of Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* (to my mind the lyric momentum of the Contemporary period) and Berrigan's great sonnet sequence of 1964 (*The Sonnets*) have not been lost. But Clarke has done something further by closing his form or, as his teacher Blake said of the drawings of Thomas Heath Malkin: "They are all firm, determinate outline, or identical form." Here is an instance:

XVARNAH

All reduced to a drop of meaning
protected from premature fellowship
almost exclusively by jazz playing
at the end of the twentieth century
refusing neo-capitalism's coagulation
in doubt of the coming of the Paraclete
in the twenty-first immunizing the mass
from mental disease of aesthetic materialism
keeping everyone in chasms of despair of
ever having their Whitmanic shirt parted,
for when language fails cultural entropy
falls back into its Paleolithic gradient of
evolution where again only Dogs who will
collaborate with the system can survive.

Perhaps my analogy with recent particle physics becomes more meaningful when you actually confront one of these sonnets. "Anywhere in the box there is a finite probability of encountering the particle..." which has been energized by a particular context in language.

II

Which brings me to the title of this review, and to my concern with Clarke's sonnets in a larger history of English poetry. For you will notice at once an unfamiliar quality in Clarke's language which might seem referential only. But this issue is larger than that of reference or a vocabulary which serves it. For in America we have been held by an essentially Wordsworthian notion about the language of poetry, that it be common or ordinary and that is elevate what is widely shared. Robert Frost is, of course, the great exemplar of such a language. In this region at least, his work is widely known and loved. Furthermore it has struck me that the poetry I encounter in most public places derives from Frost, though it may be less skillful or adapted to a particular intellectual milieu.

In reading over "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads", however, I found a passage which anticipates what is happening in *The End of This Side*. "It is indeed true, that the language of the earliest Poets was felt to differ materially from ordinary language, because it was the language of extraordinary occasions; but it was really spoken by men, language which the Poet himself had uttered when he had been affected by the events which he described, or which he had heard uttered by those around him. To this language it is probably that metre of some sort or other was early superadded. This separated the genuine language of Poetry still further from common life, so that whoever read or heard the poems of these earliest Poets felt himself moved by causes manifestly different from those which acted upon him in real life."

The problematic phrase in this passage is "real life" and what we have taken that to be since the reality of the imagination has been dismissed by the simple-minded materialism of our degraded sciences. Our best poets of this precious moment, and Clarke is one of them, keep a language current which insists upon and proves another reality. These sonnets we enter and live in the New World America was hoped to be, a world of art (in Blake's meaning) that redeems rather than demeans the material creation. This is the new wind I welcome in American poetry, even if few hearts quicken to the change in climate. I know that inside the walls of this city, the *res publica* of extraordinary occasions, love begins again.

— Albert Glover

