

Essays

Meandering: Learning Light and Dark from Ted Berrigan by Michael Dylan Welch

It's been more than 40 years since Ted Berrigan died, and for some reason he's been on my mind. His first book, *The Sonnets*, is said to be his high point, in 1964, at age 30. He didn't write haiku (or so I used to think), and mostly his poems were lengthy, after the sonnets. But he had shorter poems too, and that's what interests me when I pick up a copy of *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, edited by Alice Notley, his second wife, and published by the University of California Press in 2005. It's a brick of a book, in hardback, at 750 pages, and I confess that most of it doesn't gel with me. My bias is toward the short poems, not the New York School of surreal and avant-garde, and so I explore the short pieces, not to deeply analyze or contextualize but mostly to share, with intuitive reactions.

I thumb through the pages. I am a third of the way through the book before I find two poems I'd call short:

Matinee

Morning

(ripped out of my mind again!) (187)

As Usual

Take off your hat & coat & give me all your money

I have to buy some pills & I'm flat broke (187)

These pieces begin a set titled "Life of a Man," so we can take them as unfolding vignettes, a few longer poems mixed in.

Presenting the life of a man seems to be a recurring objective in Berrigan's poems, short or otherwise. A note from Notley at the end of the book explains that this sequence is "transliterated from Giuseppe Ungaretti's *Vita di un uomo*" (681), but in his poems Berrigan frequently presented his own life also. Next short one:

Tonight

Winds in the stratosphere
 Apologize to the malcontents
 Downstairs (188)

That's it. What to make of it? Can the wind apologize? In Berrigan's world, yes. And who are the malcontents? Is this life of a man Berrigan's own Chicago story? And might this poem be akin to gendai haiku?

Joy of Shipwrecks

The torpedo was friendly
 it buggered us

 Mayday!

 The climax came later
 In the water
 Near a sea-horse (188)

Avant-garde? Surreal. You can decide. Sexual? Probably. Two more:

After Breakfast

Flame & Fury
The colt and the dolt became outlaws

The automobile slew them (189)

December

Brother and sister departed
With apologies to the mother for intercourse
In their hearts (189)

This world feels cloistered. The poems attempt to let you in, and whether they succeed depends on your own private investigation.

A Reply to the Fragile

If he bites you he's friendly
If it hurts you
Go away
Don't give him a fresh try
Unless you have titties
Like a fast horse (189)

I imagine a snake here, entertaining the conjecture that even a snake could be fragile, but then I'm lost on the titties of a fast horse, abandoned in unmeaning. I suspect that's the point.

Page 216 offers this, to conclude a section of poems:

30

The fucking enemy shows up (216)

“-30-,” of course, is the code newspaper reporters typed at the end of their stories to indicate that there’s nothing more. Despite appearances, this is not a whole poem, and perhaps the other short pieces aren’t either, part of a whole, asking more of us, more of me, than just what *this* lone piece might mean, or make me feel. Nothing’s ever over.

Pages 217 and 218 each have single words: “interstices” (aren’t all poems this?) and “bent” (aren’t all Berrigan’s poems this?). At the end of the book, editor Notley says “These are the first one-word poems published by Ted. The avowed influence is Aram Saroyan, whose book of minimal poems, *Aram Saroyan*, had been published in 1968” (683). Other one-word poems are “slack” (326) and “surface” (344), among others.

Then this poem, which may be an answer of sorts to the question one may ask of Berrigan’s poems (to save space, I’m omitting the blank lines between the lines of text here, and also do so for some other poems):

The Great Genius

The Great Genius is
A man who can do the
Ordinary thing
When everybody
Else is going crazy (220)

Haiku celebrates the ordinary. Is haiku an ordinary thing while everyone else (and everything else) is crazy? Is this the genius of haiku? The genius of poetry is not limited to the short, but often the short limits itself to the ordinary, so when the enemy shows up, we should believe it—and receive any story that the enemy brings. An earlier version of this poem said “Average” instead of “Ordinary” (683).

Telegram

to Jack Kerouac

Bye-Bye Jack.

See you soon.

(237)

Coming and going. Here and now. Always on the road. The ephemeral and inconsequential, like plums eaten from an icebox and nothing less.

Like the single words on pages 217 and 218, quoted earlier, pages 270 and 271 say “& this” on each page. Like the improv artist’s “and,” begging the question of what next after any improvised scene. And this. Every poem adds to the previous. And begs and begets the next.

Berrigan’s *Short Poems* collection starts on page 315, goes for 30 pages. I’ll have to be selective here, choosing from 66 or so poems in this section, but will start with the first one:

Evelyn Waugh’s Prayer

Here I am again.

Show me what to do,

help me to do it.

(317)

I suppose we all pray that prayer, for what we need help with.
 Why would Waugh pray this poem, and why would Berrigan pre-
 sume so? We must, or rather may, fly with such speculation.

Beautiful Poem

for Edward Dorn

“And the nights shall be filled with music
 And the cares that infect the day
 Shall fold up their tents like soldiers
 Gone, O these are soldiers unique to our day!” (323)

Lyricism. The soldiers are metaphors for the day’s cares, taking
 their leave because music has filled the night.

Chair

for Larry Fagin

Blue
 be the sky
 & soft
 the breeze

Today
 offers Gertrude Stein
 a chance
 to burn leaves. (324)

Another poem that feels just beyond my reach, but then I don’t
 want a poem to be too easy to grasp. And yet, being too far out
 of reach can frustrate. The sky is blue, the breeze soft, it’s a day to
 burn leaves, but I suspect these are not literal leaves but tender
 buttons to push.

Here

I go in &
sit down
at this desk. (325)

This is what poets do. Being here, getting the work done. No actual desk required.

Cowboy Song

A woman's love
is like
the morning dew
it's just as apt
to fall on
a radiant horseturd
as on a rose. (328)

No surrealism here. More of an aphorism, with images, shimmering. The rain falls on the just and unjust.

L'oeil

Picasso would be very
intellectual
if he were a fish. (329)

Is this a put-down? If he's not a fish, is he not intellectual? And if he is a fish (why not? he's Picasso), then he's a great intellect. For a fish. "L'oeil" means eye.

**Poem Made after Re-reading
the Wonderful Book of Poetry,
"Air", by Tom Clark, Seven Years
Since He First Sent It to Me**

poem

frogs

mud

February

"in mothballs"

Ah, me!

(330)

The haiku poet in me thinks of Bashō at the mention of frogs.
Can't help it. This feels like a private message to Tom Clark.
What is its public clarity? Berrigan presumably does not care.

Scene of Life at the Capitol

Anne reads her Troubadour poem
to the radiant black & white
& brown bodies & face
of the lady inmates
of the Colorado State Pen,
22 July, 1978, gorgeous summer afternoon. (331)

A moment in time. Perhaps that's the strength of the short poem, haiku or otherwise. It's a fact, caught in amber, a scene of life.

Amsterdam

You had gone for a drive in the
country

I was crying in
a Japanese
bar

Now I'm having a coke with you! (333)

Another vignette of time. A day in Amsterdam? Who is the you? It could be you. Why was the poet crying? Was it the poet, or is the "I" a persona? There is a coming together here, the you and I, in Amsterdam, sharing a soda. With Berrigan, more questions than answers. The questions engage.

Laments

So long, Jimi,
Janis, so long.
You both are great.
We love you.

But, O, my babies,
you did it wrong. (337)

Hendrix and Joplin died a few weeks apart in 1970, both at age 27. What did they do wrong? What is "it"? Music? Living? Dying? This is a lament, so it would seem logical to say what they did wrong was simply to die at all.

Tell It Like It Is

Bad Teeth (338)

The bluntness of the image is in this case coloured by the poem's title. Some of these short poems have an immediacy and accessibility to them, perhaps like the notion of *karumi* (lightness) that Bashō aspired to in haiku. It seems wrong to dismiss them as trivial, though, because by their accumulation they tell the story of a life. Poems such as this have a way of embracing truth and reality.

Anselm Hollo

Come to Chicago
Go to the
Aspidistra Bookstore
Buy
THE LAST PURITAN
Stay with us. (340)

This invitation has the matter-of-fact tone of the William Carlos Williams plum poem. It's like a note written on the counter, but in this case perhaps sent on a postcard.

Larceny

The
opposite
of
petty
is
GRAND. (342)

Jokes and wordplay have their place in short poetry. This is neither, but a poem that makes me aware of language, of the words *petty* and *grand* in relation to *larceny*. The poem is a blunt assertion, as it seems all short poems are.

In the House

Sometimes it is quiet throughout the night
And you learn in the morning that
The man in the next room
Died in his sleep

But there is no shortage of applicants
For the room. (345)

This is the sort of clarity I would have published in my old journal *Tundra: The Journal of the Short Poem*. An immediate image or narrative, with echoes. I liked to quote Albert Einstein in promoting the journal: “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.” This, to me, is that.

Flying United

Ladies & Gentlemen,
You will depart
The Aircraft
at the
Terminal Area
to your left.
Thank You for Flying United. (346)

Maybe some of the poems are trivial after all, even while showing a life. But the triviality is elevated by its virtue of being preserved in a poem. The triviality is the point.

Remembered Poem

It is important to keep old hat
in secret closet. (351)

An instruction that leaves me wondering what meaning I could ascribe to old-hatness and secret closets. I have my old metaphorical hats, my secret closets, as do we all.

People of the Future

*People of the future
while you are reading these poems, remember
you didn't write them,
I did.* (429)

This is the preamble to Berrigan's 1977 book *Nothing for You*. Perhaps it's not a poem at all. And yet. Notley's notes refer to this as a "poem" that "obviously serves an indispensable function" (686).

Train Ride

Somebody knows everything so
It doesn't make any difference, what you do
So, do anything you want, it's all right
You can do it. Just do it, right? (473)

The title here lends specificity to the mental speculation. I can see this happening on a train. That idle time of staring out the window as the world passes by can lead you to introspection, to questioning. Then you come up with motivation, not just that you can but that you do. Do anything, yes, but do something.

Love

Missing you
in Air Canada (484)

No poem is an island. This is the third of three “Going to Canada” poems. The first is “Itinerary,” ending with the instruction to go to Canada. The second is “How to Get to Canada,” which says nothing about the method or route. And then comes this third poem, about the flight, although we don’t know which direction the flight is going. Who is the you? Canada? Someone missed in Canada? This, as in all the longer poems too, is Berrigan’s mindscape, the curtain lifted, at least a little, yet still dwelling in mystery.

The Green Sea

Above his head clanged
Turning
And there were no dreams
in this sleep
Over this table. (497)

Clanged what? And what is turning, and why? And what table? What does this have to do with the sea, green or otherwise? What does this mean? Should I presume meaning in any Berrigan poem? Yet here I am, wondering.

Reading Frank O'Hara

Reading Frank O'Hara you
 can't help realizing
you know you can't feel
 any worse than he felt,
so
hell,
 why not be exuberant! (510)

Ecstasy. It's an option one could choose over despair. That's that. Reading about the lives of others can turn you to leading your own life more fully, choosing joy if you can manage it.

Postcard from the Sky

You in love with her
read my poems and wonder
what she sees in you. (521)

Berrigan wrote haiku. Or at least this is a poem in a pattern of 5-7-5 syllables, which some people think makes it a haiku, even if they never have titles in Japanese and aim for numerous other targets not aimed at here. This piece reminds me of E. E. Cummings, who wrote the following words for Elaine Orr, circa 1918–1919:

if you like my poems let them
walk in the evening,a little behind you

then people will say
 “Along this road i saw a princess pass
 on her way to meet her lover(it was
 toward nightfall)with tall and ignorant servants.”

Back to Berrigan:

Blue Galahad
for Jim Carroll

Beauty, I wasn't born
High enough for you: Truth
I served; her knight: Love
In a Cold Climate. (570)

A kind of manifesto here. If Berrigan is the "I" here, he's humbly confessing that he cannot attain beauty, but instead goes for truth, with love in the wings. That love brings warmth to the cold. With each of his poems he expresses his truth, a kind of love.

Salutation

"Listen, you cheap little liar . . ." (570)

Who is Berrigan addressing? The rest of this letter, or the conversation, surely won't go well. But we'd surely all love to hear what comes next, and we are engaged in the way haiku engages readers by leaving something out.

Angst

I had angst. (573)

How is this a poem? How is it not?

To Book-Keepers

The Final Chapters
of the History
of
Modernism are
going to be written
in blood. Yours,
you poor Immigrants! (587)

One has to ask, can the final chapters of Modernism ever be written? And if so, when? When does Modernism end? Could one go insane by always trying to make it new? And why the blood only of immigrants?

Moat Trouble

He was wounded & so
was having
Moat Trouble. (590)

Who is he? Why was he wounded? These questions arise because of the repeatedly private nature of Berrigan's poems. Is he speaking to himself, or to whom? The questions have no ready answers. This is one of a spate of short poems in close proximity (sharing just some of them here). Here's the next one:

Jo-Mama

The St. Mark's Poetry Project
is closed for the summer. But
all over the world, poets
are writing poems. Why? (592)

As if St. Mark's is the center of the poetry universe! Why are they still writing poems? Because it isn't, even if Berrigan was central to its success.

Wantonesse

Heart of my heart
 Fair, & enjoyable
 Harmlessly spooky
 Loving her back (594)

I feel like I have no entry into this poem. Cummings said he was never writing for "mostpeople," and that may be the case for Berrigan here. One is wired for certain poets. Or one is not. Perhaps the lock here has no key. Notley's note at the end says "The poem was written in conjunction with a photo of upstairs neighbor, Megan Williams," who Notley says was a dress designer, the photo showing the deep V on the back of a dress she had made, adding that "This is one example of the way Ted's mind worked in relation to the images on the cards" (711).

Two more miniatures:

Windshield

There is no windshield. (596)

Minnesota

If I didn't feel so
 bad, I'd feel so good! (597)

Perhaps it's the context of these poems that gives them shape, and I dash them off here without that context. The fact that life has no windshield occurs to me, even if we want one. But what does Minnesota have to do with feeling good or bad?

The Heads of the Town

They killed all the whales
 now they're killing all the acorns
 I'm almost the last Rhinoceros
 I guess I'd better kill them. (602)

The title suggests the animals and the acorns are metaphors. A dog-eat-dog world, in politics and beyond.

George's Coronation Address

With Faith we shall be able . . .
 There will be peace on earth . . .
 & Capacious day . . .
 maybe we'll be there, or true.
 Speed the day then. (603)

A desire of peace, so yes, speed the day. Any king could ask for this.

Tompkins Square Park

All my friends in the
 park speak Latin: when
 they see me coming, they
 say, "Valium?" (606)

This park is in Manhattan. It's easy to imagine Berrigan hanging out here, and to imagine that he's poking fun at himself with this poem.

Dresses for Alice

We are the dresses for Alice.
We go on, or off, for solace. (608)

I go down the rabbit hole with this one. We don or doff our masks, our metaphorical clothes, always for comfort and consolation in a mad world.

Ms. Villonelle

What is it all about—this endless
Talking & walking a night away—
Smoking—then sleeping half the day?
Typing a résumé, you say, smilingly. (611)

I'm skipping some other short poems in the vicinity here, but I should also say that I'm skipping far more poems that are longer than shorter. I don't want to give the impression that Berrigan wrote mostly short poems, or even many. Mostly not.

A City Winter

My friends are crazy with grief
& sorrows—their children are born
and their morning lies broken—
& now it's afternoon. (614)

Whatever the source of grief, morning becomes afternoon, inevitably. Birth, death, inevitably.

Christmas Card

O little town of Bethlehem,
Merry Christmas
to Jim
& Rosemary. (615)

Again, how is this a poem? Another note on a counter, a card in the mail, the tripe and wealth of an ordinary life. It's an elevation of the mundane.

4 Metaphysical Poems

"Get a job at the railroad"
"Loan me a few bucks"
"I gotta buy some pills"
"So I can understand John Ashbery" (620)

I'd call this one a poem. Find those pills to understand Ashbery.

Who Was Sylvia?

Queen name
ice sign

was all that remained
of her suicide note. (620)

Poets will immediately think of Sylvia Plath here, but the only note she left said, “Please call Dr. Horder,” the doctor who prescribed her antidepressants. So, who is this Sylvia, if not Plath?

The Pope’s Nose

for Anne Waldman

a nose, heavy, square, & massive;
 large, flesh irrigated with blood;
 a light grave voice; his face
 a long rectangle; pink; poetry
 pours out of it like kool-aid
 at unofficial noon it is crumpled
 like a kleenex:
 here, blow. (624)

A portrait, or caricature. A description, an instruction. I should ask Waldman what she thinks. Notley says that, “This poem plays with Anne Waldman’s poem ‘Paul Eluard’” (715).

Two Serious Ladies

That’s all
 one life needs—
 Two serious ladies. (633)

Really? And who might these two be? One’s mother and one’s wife? Alice Notley, Berrigan’s second wife, wrote this book’s introduction and served as its editor. She calls his poems “deliberate” (15) and “communal” (688) and explains how Berrigan was often attracted to the occasional poem, such as through birthday wishes, invitations, things-to-do lists, or poems about days of the year. Berrigan was not afraid of the quotidian. But

this is not the point here at all. Notley says “The reference is to Jane Bowles’s great novel *Two Serious Ladies*” (716). So maybe the novel is all one needs.

Ambiguity

I am ambiguity.

(for Ed Foster) (641)

Doesn’t this tell the Berrigan story? I take the poem to be talking about himself, but it might be talking about the poet Ed Foster.

Positively Fourth Street

There’s nothing new under the sun, and
There’s nothing new under the rock, either. (643)

The title invokes Bob Dylan’s 1965 song. We can take the poem’s two lines to be a commentary on the song. Yet also not. These words ring true even with no awareness of Dylan. And so we read on, swimming in Berrigan’s poems, or poems by others, aware that many poets seek always to make it new.

Alice Notley’s notes at the end of *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* refer to his poems as being “characterized by a profound density of reference and naming,” adding that the poet’s references are “layered, embedded, and characteristic of both conscious and ‘subconscious’ levels of thought” (665). Explaining everything, Notley says, “would not only be too lengthy—and too contrary to the purposes of poetry—but also impossible” (665). My notes may add nothing, and contravene the purposes of poetry, but I hope they might serve to open the poems at least a little for anyone not already familiar with Berrigan’s poetry.

Indeed, in sharing selected short poems by Berrigan, maybe my impulsive glosses serve as a means of entry into the poet's work (my own entry if not yours).

Ted Berrigan's poems somewhat elude me, not even counting the bulk of his predominantly longer work. But the poet is there, casting light and dark, whether I am aware of him and his work or not. *The Collected Poems* book jacket says Berrigan was "A major force in twentieth-century literature—first and foremost as a poet, but also as an editor and a literary figure," asserting that he "exerted an enormous influence on contemporary poetry." Perhaps it helps to open his poetry to know, as the book jacket says, that "Berrigan was a master of the poetic sequence and also of the poetic collection as a deliberate construction." In this context, perhaps no poem stands alone, but is a rung in a ladder, a thread in a tapestry, part of a larger whole. And yet, with the short poems, we can look closely at each rung, each thread, even if we do not (yet) see the larger picture or climb that ladder to a higher view—or to a more intimate yet expansive view at times akin to haiku. The ordinary and the average have their place and Ted Berrigan, with his shorter poems, seems to celebrate the everyday. I hope this celebration welcomes meandering, yours and mine.