

GUIDE TO KULCHUR

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Bob Perelman's *Primer* (This, 1981) brought Perelman's early work to a pointedly mannered culmination. Concise, witty, allusive to a wide range of literary works, heavily dependent on stark, imagistic metaphors (all the while railing against these very qualities), the poems in *Primer* were neo-classical in the time-honored sense of Pound's Confucian dictum, "MAKE IT NEW". Perelman's next collection, *To the Reader* (Tuumba #49, 1984), announced a marked change in direction. This change was twofold; firstly, the range of cultural and current-event reference in the later book was much broader than Perelman had theretofore attempted; secondly, his interest in this material was explicitly political. A burlesque of public discourse, *To the Reader's* thesis was that war, commerce, and patriarchy are the products of a furiously misspent sexuality:

Picture (see, control, dominate) a
Phallocentric lawyer dominating a Snickers, Milky
Way or Mars Bar
On Market Street in the spermy light
Of day. "I couldn't care less"
I'm not going to get off his case
Until the subject, a 10 foot tall ogre
Sitting at the conference table, changes nature.
Unknowable, domineering, ravening, question-begging,
life-
Destroying, tune-mongering calliope...

Given objects of scorn, Perelman's wit had become an enraged irony, an assault on sensibility bringing to light a social code both puritanical and vulgar. And though the politics may have been received, not to mention uncharitable, the force of the writing was undeniable, a suitably Brechtian expose of the grosser excesses of bourgeois life.

To the Reader questioned the legitimacy of the irrationally rulebound society that defines and maintains our culture, but implicitly privileged culture's "top end", if only by leaving art out of the attack. Happily, Perelman's newest collection, *The First World*, makes this contradiction its central theme. To wit, a head-on confrontation with "The Art Machine" —Duchamp, Bach, literary theory, Sophocles,

even Pinocchio— everything that smooths over the brutal acts of what Allen Ginsberg once called (misogynistically, but with psycho-sexual implications similar to those emphasized in Perelman’s work) “the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar”. Unlike *To the Reader*, *The First World* proclaims complicity, singing in its chains like the sea:

The fact that this
 didn’t exist a minute ago...
 as I stare back
 at my hand
 Slave if the master narrative, master
 of the slave phrase, hearing
 in burst instants, the semi-breakable
 containers, intimate noises.

The ending there, echoing the big bang to come even as it conveys the fragility of human life, gives marvelous expression to something that Lucy Lippard has also noted recently, namely that “artists seeking immortality in the nuclear age must confront the notion that there may be no posterity”.¹ Yet the overall impression here is of hopelessness, with the clever inside/outside use of the word “master” describing an escape-proof powerlessness.

It’s a commonplace to say private desires and public acts are inextricably related. Perelman takes this a step further by asserting that art, which embodies this relation, is as debased as the society that produces it. Art appreciation, then, makes us partners in a crime:

At present the Miracle-Anus of the Central Core
 is shitting bricks of slaves matted with plans
 for medical complexes, which is where the sick people
 should go
 and die if need be, to keep the plot lines pure
 thus cutting off misreading at the source.

In *The First World*, everything, no matter how horrible or sublime, becomes a pop cultural fact. Thus, the arm’s race is a “ratings war with Russia” and Afghanistan, “that solemn trysting place of the advanced ascetic journalist”. Language itself Perelman refers to as “that’s ports page of being”.

Perelman is funniest when taking on the entertainment industry, most poignant when discussing writing or literature. In “Cliff Notes”, the book’s first poem, he blames all human suffering on t.v. and then remembers, “It can’t be the knob’s fault because this is back before knobs”. In “Let’s Say”, on the other hand, the book, personified, and the person, objectified, become nearly indistinguishable. The result is one of *The First World’s* few moments of empathy:

though rebelling against the unseemly orderliness even free verse requires. Yet I hesitate to say that Perelman is embracing an “anti-aesthetic” or writing “anti-art”. Dada gestures and the like are attempts to take art outside the bounds of decency; *The First World* situates itself squarely within the bounds of bourgeois indecency. Moreover, the mixed metaphors and other “imperfections” that crop up throughout quite obviously serve the purposes of the argument —with a writer as technically capable as Perelman, “looseness” would seem to function as a sign of anxiousness and anger, i.e., sincerity, feigned or real one cannot tell.

The closest parallel I can think of to Perelman’s recent work is Edward Dorn’s *Hello La Jolla*. There, Dorn adopted the slick style of an A.M. disc jockey and used it to launch an attack on the rapidity and hypocrisy of life in Southern California. Another precedent would be Bertolt Brecht, who wrote some 50 years ago of his opera *Mahagonny*, “*its content is pleasure*”:

Fun, in other words, not only as form but as subject-matter. At least, enjoyment was meant to be the object of inquiry even if the inquiry was intended to be an object of enjoyment. Enjoyment here appears in its current historical role: as merchandise.⁴

For Brecht, opera was a “culinary” form, its effectiveness as a pedagogical tool compromised by the very fantasy elements that had secured its popularity. Brecht’s solution was ruthlessness. And in ruthlessness, Perelman too has found some answers.

Notes:

1. Lucy Lippard, “First Strike for Peace” in *Heresies* #20, 1985.
2. Ezra Pound, “For a New Paideuma” in *Selected Prose 1909-1965*.
3. Bob Perelman, “Good & Bad/Good & Evil: Pound, Celine and Fascism” in *Poetics Journal* #6, 1986.
4. Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theater is an Epic Theater” in *Brecht on Theater*.

Two recent collections by Perelman, *Face Value* (Roof, 1988) and *Captive Audience* (The Figures, 1988), continue the work begun in *The First World* and *To the Reader*.