

GEORDIE MILLER

NEOLIBERAL RUPTURE/RAPTURE

REVIEW ESSAY

TO THE BARRICADES. BY STEPHEN COLLIS.
VANCOUVER: TALONBOOKS, 2013.

THIS POEM. BY ADEENA KARASICK.
VANCOUVER: TALONBOOKS, 2012.

ZEPPELIN. BY BLAISE MORITZ.
GIBSONS, BC: NIGHTWOOD, 2013.

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

—W.H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” (1940)

“POETRY WILL MAKE something happen,” proclaims Stephen Collis in *To the Barricades* (109). Of course, when Auden declared that “poetry makes nothing happen” in his 1940 elegy for Yeats, he was celebrating its inutility (142); three recently published volumes of Canadian poetry—Collis’ *To the Barricades*, Adeena Karasick’s *This Poem*, and Blaise Moritz’s *Zeppelein*—valorize their medium’s ability to explicitly challenge contemporary grammars and ideologies, whether of liberal capitalism (Collis), information technology (Karasick), or crisis narratives (Mortiz).

Collis is clearest about the utopian interventions poetry can make, at one point describing his “aesthetics [as] political” (115). He is also the most self-conscious when it comes to the thorny issue of the relationship between art and politics, asking “[d]oes the poem barricade us from a world of ‘doing things,’ postponing action?” (144). It may seem like a strange question, given that the vast majority of people are neither poring over poesy nor taking

to the streets. Rather than develop this glibly cynical neither/nor—one that can shade towards hollow self-congratulation (“*no one* reads poetry, except for me!”) or apathy (“what is this action actually going to accomplish?”)—I will critique the political potential of each poet’s investment in an aesthetic of rupture. All three express the unreality of systemic change. I want to consider whether such expression suffices as a form of resistance in/to our neoliberal moment.

An online essay by Collis, “Of Blackberries and the Poetic Commons,” defines the neoliberal imperative of enclosure that these three collections oppose. Every exchange—familial, biological, cultural, social, and so on—becomes monetized. He posits that poetry and blackberries are exceptions to the market’s rule because they are “marginal, fringe, ignored by investment, sprouting in the gaps profitability and privatization leave everywhere” (7). Both can be grasped as “*common property*,” images for imagining the end of privatization’s reign (6, emphasis in original). Poetry is sold, sure, but it can also be redistributed in an unrestrained, egalitarian fashion. Revolution (equality of access), rupture (freedom from capital), and the aesthetic (poetry) positively coalesce for Collis. By contrast, I deploy “aesthetic of rupture” as a critical term, referring to the dominant tendency to confuse the representation of revolution with its realization. Revolutionary desire acts as a palatable substitute for revolutionary activity precisely because the former effectively disavows its immanence. How so? A quotation from Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s slim *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (2012) encapsulates the dominant mood: “Only an act of language can give us the ability to see and to create a new human condition, where we now only see barbarism and violence” (157). This sentiment is undoubtedly music to the ears of theorists, not to mention poets, eager to legitimate their art as a radical act. These words are miles away from the mundaneness of successful revolutions, such as rural literacy programs and the (re-)allocation of natural resources, setting aside the fact that these revolutions are themselves sometimes “barbaric and violen[t],” monstrous even.

Moritz’s “Movie Monster” makes light of fetishizations of rupture, ventriloquizing the advice given to the human actor playing the titular character in the original *Godzilla* (1954): “*You must erase this world if you are to build your own*” (51, emphasis in original). “Got it. Roll ‘em, and I’ll start smashing,” the actor responds (51). The (re-)construction is comically deferred in these, the poem’s final lines. Elsewhere Moritz writes of how

“[w]e cast about / for words to fit our tune” (87). To actualize his ruptive “tune,” Moritz “casts about” in popular culture, which he often conflates with populism. For example, modern Iranian cinema is portrayed as “after the revolution,” where “after” could connote either a goal or a time period (25). Which one is it? Does popular culture foment rupture or are its representations belated (and therefore innocuous)?

Collis identifies three “principles” that are informed by rupture. These three principles are useful for conceptualizing his poetics, along with those of Karasick and Moritz (143). The first (from Robert Duncan), highlights the hope for “boundlessness” that emerges in the building of “pages or boundaries or walls” (143). Accordingly, Collis erects boundaries between his poems; they are discrete units of meaning which, when collected together, document an apparently limitless set of connections across time, for instance between the Paris Commune of 1871 and Vancouver’s Occupy contingent. The barricade is an ideal image for the limit/limitless corollary, insofar as it simultaneously recalls the immensity of the practical obstacles (those that required barricades to be established in the first place) and the proliferation of demands to be free from the merely possible.

Whereas Collis collapses time, Karasick collapses any imagined space between social media newspeak and poetic diction. She “ransack[s] / new lexicons, idioms, textual environments,” delivering a confident assemblage of assonance, alliteration, and puns (93). Her long poem is couched as an ironic countering of the micro-narratives of Facebook, Twitter, and various other dispensers of “post-literary ... language” (71). *This Poem* therefore walks a fine line between recoding such language and rehearsing its assumptions, particularly the assumption that anything as outmoded as sincerity or conviction could have political purchase. It becomes difficult to discern, exactly, what “[e]mbrac[ing] a world of inflected dissection, prismatic commodities in the eros of subversion” would entail (n.p.). But it sure sounds flarf.

Moritz works best when he allows himself to be as expansive as his conceit, an airship from which we glimpse his idiosyncratic poems. The highlight of *Zeppelin* is “AM Nocturne,” an extended lament for the digitization of sound media. The speaker renders the displacement of AM radio as portending other epochal shifts with which we may ultimately be unable to keep pace. He launches into a nostalgic *kuntslerpoème* about an airwave education with the ominous opener, “I forsee an extinction coming” (59). “Extinction” is the outermost limit, and Moritz addresses our boundless

capacity to ignore this endpoint in the poem that picks up where “AM Nocture” leaves off, “Death Drive”: “We don’t fear the end, we fear / that we see no end: no shape / to our story” (72). Inundated with narratives of crisis, melting ice caps and global food shortages, we cannot make them cohere; consequently, the true meaning of crisis arrives after it is too late for us. To give some “shape to our story,” *Zeppelin* adopts the technique of montage, arranging the poems as found objects (parts) which we encounter as a whole from our airship seats.

Collis invokes montage as his second principle. Quoting from Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* (1940), Collis asserts that “montage” involves “citing without quotation marks” (quoted on 143). Karasick revels in this textual landscape, a place where the unstated assumptions of Master Narratives (Man, Truth, History) are exposed. The “Rules of Textual Etiquette: A Gentlewoman’s Guide” mocks any fidelity to stable signifiers, to the belief that “each letter is an honored guest / And must be made to feel dignified” (75, emphasis in original). *This Poem* detaches each word from its conventional association and re-encodes it as in montage, where viewers are at a remove from the original. Proudly “hedging its debts” and “casting its debt wider,” *This Poem* wagers that revealing the constraints of technocultural discourse might undo them (27, 51). For Collis, collage reflects a vision of history that, unlike in Karasick, does not take the politics of rupture for granted. In the urgent “Come the Revolution,” Collis summons snippets from a Zapatista document in an incantatory attack on the “fucked up and bullshit” status quo (110). Throughout *To the Barricades*, voices assemble in a chorus designed to drown out the oppressors, located at the state-capitalist nexus.

My use of musical lexicon is slightly misleading, because photography provides the third principle that unifies the collections. This principle is borrowed from Jacques Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2006). According to Rancière, “[s]uitable political art would ensure ... the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused ... by that which resists signification” (quoted in Collis 143). In “Notes on the Photographic Image” (*Radical Philosophy* 156 [July/August 2009]: 8-15), Rancière argues that photography is ideally suited to this task. Analyzing a Walker Evans photograph from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), he claims that its “aesthetic quality ... stems from a perfect equilibrium, a perfect indecision between the two forms of beauty that Kant distinguished: beauty adherent to the form adapted to its

function, and the free beauty of the finality without end” (13). Photography “functions” to capture a moment in an unfolding scene, which can accommodate the unforeseen. In this sense, photography is commensurate with the supplemental politics of Rancière and Collis. The supplement are the voiceless, those whom are not counted. If political action is about bringing these people into discourse, photography provides one such mechanism. Hence the attention to cameras and the presence of visuals from protests in *To the Barricades*, and the use of photography in Moritz and Karasick. *Zeppelin* embarks from “[a]n old photo of the Zeppelin that Goodyear flew out of Akron” in the 1920s and 1930s (9, emphasis in original), and *This Poem* includes colourful screen printed slides of text by Blaine Spiegel that resemble those on-screen boxes of letters used to verify your identity. All three poets turn to the visual medium in order to suggest that the longed-for and long overdue rupture might come once we have altered how we picture this world.

If the poetry of Collis, Karasick, and Moritz enraptures us, it is because we are beholden to the idea that politics is a way of being, of expressing the new within the coordinates of the given. Collis concludes “Come the Revolution” with an acknowledgment that “reading this poem still won’t be the same / as storming a bank or a parliament” (110). Exactly. But then he continues, “you may yet be reading this poem / to a group of people with whom you will presently / be storming a bank or a parliament” (110). Or not. All the talk of breaking free from the hegemony of capital, technology, and current crises obscures the fact that speaking about these issues (via rupture) is not the same as thinking against them. Thinking against them means deposing Auden’s sense of poetry’s autonomy once and for all; until then, he remains right. Poetry “survives, / a way of happening, a mouth” (142). As such, nothing keeps happening to change.