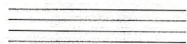


## POETRY IN

## REVIEW



G E O R G E B R A D L E Y

A book I particularly enjoyed is *On the Street of Divine Love*, a volume of new and selected poems by Barbara Hamby, whose work is as voluble and gregarious as Hamilton's is lonely and circumspect. Hamby's poems are good-natured, gossipy, and fun. Long-lined

and regularly running to two or three pages, they are chock-full of all the stuff missing from Hamilton's brief mysteries. She is not interested in what might be happening on a star. Instead, she wants to tell us what music is playing as a young girl resists her boyfriend's eagerness for intercourse, where nuns go to buy their "bulletproof brassieres," what slang is used for "orgasm" in which languages. Hamby takes delight in corralling a profusion of intriguing tidbits within a poem, and her work might be described as the rounding up of scattered thoughts. She attempts to render in verse the near chaos of perception that typifies human consciousness as it careers through a lifetime's worth of unruly accident. That is to say that, like a lot of post-Wordsworthian poetry, her verse is about her own way of thinking, and the inherent problem with such subject matter has always been how to interest others in it. Hamby chooses to hold attention by offering piquant details. This poet seeks the raised eyebrow. She likes the seductive and sensational. Whereas Hamilton is cool and calm and alert to the eternal, Hamby likes to stir things up with buzz words and hot topics. She is attracted to the untrammelled, and she opens this book, a volume that is by definition representative of her career to date, on a Bacchanalian note:

Forget the year, the parties where you drank too much,  
    said what you thought without thinking, danced so hard  
you dislocated your hip, fainted in the kitchen,  
    while Gumbo, your hosts' Jack Russell terrier,  
looked you straight in the eye, bloomed into a boddhisattva,  
    lectured you on the Six Perfections while drunk people  
with melting faces gathered around your shimmering corpse.

She begins by instructing herself to forget, but she goes on to do anything but. If a poet is not interested in investigating the future – and the verse in this book is neither visionary nor prophetic – then her province will necessarily be the past. Accordingly, Hamby's work is constructed out of memories, more precisely out of memories in collision. The speaker of these poems is a highly educated and extremely literate woman who has been deeply imprinted by the cultural free-for-all that has characterized this country ever since the 1960s. As a result, when she looks

back over her life, the high-brow and the low-brow compete non-stop for her attention. Indeed, one is likely to evoke the other. Thus, a mention of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and John Keats quickly leads to Buddy Holly and Otis Redding; Donatello and the Psalms are considered side by side with TV golf tournaments; Godzilla and King Kong roam the same stanzas as Carlo Goldoni. In a Hamby poem, if you encounter the name "Marlowe," it might mean Christopher or it might mean Philip, and if the first, soon the second.

Another poet might be troubled by this riot of incommensurate allusion, and Hamby now and then pretends to despair of it; but she does not dwell long enough over any emotion to sink into true desperation, and she is too breezy to do much more than laugh at herself concerning the referential mash-up that constitutes her train of thought:

... I have a lion's teeth  
and a mockingbird's tongue, 400 million items  
clogging my curio cabinet brain ...

\* \* \*

... I'm way too scarred by pop psychology  
to utter half the nutty things that pop up like weeds  
in the 18th-century garden of my brain.

\* \* \*

Your brain's like 100 million hornets in a Campbell's Soup can ...

\* \* \*

... really your brain is a whirling miasma,  
a rat's nest erected by Jehovah, Rousseau, Dante,  
George Eliot, and Bozo the Clown ...

Filled with references to both pop culture and the literary tradition ("Nietzsche Explains the Übermensch to Lois Lane" runs a typical title), Hamby's verse is precariously balanced between the two, and every now and then it threatens to tip over the edge into confusion. Her compositional method is to back up and tear into a poem and take her readers on a roller-coaster ride. One never knows where a poem is headed because the speaker's engaging and conversational voice shifts in response to memories and

word associations like a ray of light bending around gravitational attraction in Einsteinian space. These poems can go anywhere — new ideas are always bubbling up — and the unpredictability is at once exhilarating and disorienting. Hamby's continual delight in new direction is both a strength and a weakness. Her openness to new possibility allows her to take full advantage of her agile intelligence and magpie's nest of recollection. Then again, a poem that *can* do anything doesn't *have* to do anything. No trajectory is implicit in her beginnings, and thus endings are not her strong suit. She soars high and isn't always sure how to get down. Happily, much of the precariousness turns out to be calculated. The poet likes to play with the idea of losing control, but as poem after poem is handled successfully, one comes to realize that she has had a lot of practice with this kind of crazy flight and is expert at it. By and large, the poems don't crash. The touchdown can be bumpy, but she generally manages to land the plane.

The swerves and frolics in Hamby's work are enormously entertaining, and to further the entertainment, many of her poems are funny. Some of the humor is achieved by means of intentional bathos, an amusing disparity of tone:



... Glory

be to God in the highest. Roll over Rover, let Jimi take over . . .

Some of the humor lies in naughty yet apt observation:

... cameras with lenses the size of a whale's penis . . .

Some of it consists of zinging one-liners:

"Are you going to have a baby?" . . .

"I'd love to, but their heads are so big and my vagina's so small."

As one can see, Hamby does not shy away from anatomical description, and there is quite a lot of talk in her poetry about the body as flesh, about breasts and cup sizes, about skimpy skirts and slinky hips. Part of the pleasure to be found in her work lies in the persistent frisson of its eroticism. Hamby's poems are sexy, and not by accident. Eros is an acknowledged theme. *On the Street of Divine Love* is a title intended to call to mind a lovers' lane, and the cover of the book shows a teenage girl, her legs spread and her prom dress bunched around her waist, who has exploded through

the roof of a parked car into the hot and humid nighttime sky of sexual experience. Yet even though there is a lot of sex in Hamby's poetry, the sex takes place almost entirely in the realm of her imagination. The erotic as it exists in this volume is cheerful, pleasant, and by and large well-behaved, and it is intended as titillation rather than testimony. Sexiness, of course, is always a state of mind, and literary treatments of the erotic typically have little to do with sex as it is actually practiced. Even so, amid all the risqué material, one can't help noticing that the uncomfortable and problematic ways in which sex ruptures and resists the constraints imposed by civilized society in a doomed attempt to control it make little or no appearance. Hamby does mention things like workplace exploitation ("Marilyn Monroe on Harry Cohn's couch"), and she dwells at some length on various types of oral performance ("she'll lick / the sugar right off your doughnut"), but she also speaks of sex using the quaint terminology of vintage pornography (*quim, frigging*). The speaker of these poems gives the impression of being a well-brought-up woman who dreams of activities more daring than she can in fact bring herself to engage in. She is somehow politely explicit, and the net result is an eros you could take home to mother.

The treatment of the erotic in Hamby's work might be compared to a fetching dress worn over a soiled undergarment, and her reluctance to attend to what lies beneath the surface is consonant with the energetic rapidity of her verse. The reader learns to expect that this poet will not pause long over whatever uneasy recognitions might be turned up in her excavations of memory. She keeps moving so as to avert her gaze, and hers are the poetics of diversion in all senses. Hamby is continually drawn on in part because she is continually unsettled. There is an air in her restless work of nastiness deflected, and her chatty loquacity seems a way of talking around or over or through the unpleasant realities of life. Hers is too quick a mind to be unaware of what it is about, and she turns her habit of evasion into subject matter. One of the most interesting and moving pieces in the book is one in which she tries to explain the disturbing aspects of a grown-up film to the eight-year-old nephew with whom she is watching it. Called "Ode on Satan's Power," the poem starts with holiday songs and Christmas cookies and progresses to a glossing over of murder, mass murder,

and even snuff films: "all the things I never want him to see / or even know about in this tawdry world." The poet wishes to protect her nephew from a knowledge of such evils, and she contrasts that hope with the harsher treatment she herself experienced at the hands of a stern mother who threatened her children with "strangulation, being slapped silly, public humiliation, murder, and eternal damnation." Yet whether children are browbeaten or cossèted, they must sooner or later mature into adult understanding, and Hamby shows us how part of the heartbreak of growing up is that one must go through the process all over again in raising the next generation. It's a complex and accomplished poem, one in which the poet's trademark burble is used to express both tenderness and trepidation.

The movie watched in "Ode on Satan's Power" is *Bullitt*, the epitome of hipness in its day and still remembered for the wild ride through the streets of San Francisco that is the granddaddy of all car-chase footage. Hamby is clearly a film enthusiast, and many of the poems in her book contain a swirl of references to the cinema. *Wild Strawberries*, *La Dolce Vita*, *Mogambo*, *Mothra*, *Frankenstein*, the *Mummy*, Orson Welles, Sergei Eisenstein, David Lynch, Burt Lancaster, Clark Gable, Bruce Willis, Grace Kelly, Barbara Stanwyck, Jane Russell, Powell, Bogart, Heston, Ava, Betty, Veronica . . . titles, characters, directors, actors, on and

on and on. Of course, Hamby's own wild rides contain a rush of allusion to virtually every art form, to music and literature and painting and sculpture and mosaics and architecture and so forth. She does not think of films any more frequently than she thinks of, say, nineteenth-century novels. And of course it is part of her project to faithfully record what constitutes her recollection, and so her frame of reference is deliberately inclusive of popular entertainment. She tells us the truth, that if actors come to her mind no more often than authors, neither do they come any less. But leaving aside her individual fund of memories and her particular way of constructing a poem, we can note that she is not alone among contemporary poets in alluding compulsively to film, and reading this book we may be reminded that cinema has by now joined the fine arts to form part of the history of ideas. This was not always the case. The movies have been around for over a century, but for most of that time, a cinematic allusion announced a shrugging off

of serious poetic ambition. Film references were used by the Beats and the New York School poets precisely because they would be registered by readers as the opposite of intellectual. Movies once seemed too ephemeral to constitute material for major literature — films were made from books, not vice versa — but ephemeral or not, their images have nonetheless become so much a part of the way we perceive our lives that avoiding them in a poem would at this point be an artificial exclusion. (I suppose TV shows will be next, though I'm not quite ready for *The Desperate Housewives* to take a place alongside *The Divine Comedy*.)

The array of pop-culture references in Hamby's work combines with its up-tempo sexiness to create a party atmosphere — it's the kind of party where the police will show up at midnight in response to a complaint about loud music — but the rock-'n'-roll Valhalla is more pretend than real. However much the poet may toy with or long for the abandon to be found in Dionysian excess, hers is at its core an Apollonian art. Some of her long and apparently unbuttoned poems turn out to be rhymed, and her preferred form of a long line alternating with an indented not-quite-so-long line perhaps derives ultimately from the elegiacs of classical meter. Moreover, she calls a great many of her poems "odes." "Ode to Skimpy Clothes and August in the Deep South," "Ode to Airheads, Hairdos, Trains to and from Paris," "Ode to Augurs, Ogres, Acorns, and Two or Three Things That Have Been Eating at My Heart Like a Wolverine in a Time of Famine." The Hamby ode is not



Horatian. Horatian odes, being both lyric in their recuperative impulse and reliably formulaic, end with great care. And her odes are not Romantic, either. Romantic odes are meditations and move at a ruminant pace. Hamby soars rather than ponders, and she coopts the word to announce a proposed flight and its point of departure. By *ode* she means "launching pad." Her usage is her own, but her frequent resort to the term is intended to tell us something. It constitutes an insistent invocation of the poetry of the past, and thus her titles embody in themselves her habitual juxtaposition of the occasional with the long view.

If there is a truly untrammelled element in Hamby's verse it is the delight she takes in speech. The truest erotic attraction to be felt in these poems is her love of language. She wants language to

sweep her off her feet, and often enough it obliges. Here is the concluding passage of a poem titled simply "The Word":

For I am empty, I am full, I am certain, I am not,  
for in the beginning there was nothing  
and it was blank and indescribable,  
a wave breaking on the north shore of the soul,  
but as every canyon aches for its sky, I burned for you  
with a fever, with a frenzy,  
I was a woman craving a blaze, a flame,  
a five-alarm fire in my heart, in my bones,  
my hair red as a hibiscus, like a burning bush,  
I was Moses screaming at God,  
filaments of flame eating my eyes,  
my sex, the hard sweet apple of my mouth.

The biblical call to utterance in which flame is touched to the lips has here been extended to other body parts, and the linguistic response is unabashedly akin to sexual climax. Such fiery climax is achieved more than once in Hamby's book: elsewhere she speaks of "words, my very dear friends . . . opening my box of darkness with your tiny, insistent flame." She burns with an enthusiasm for vocabulary of every sort – English, of course, but also German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, even Japanese – and she is quite clear about the charge she finds in the mental arousal that can result from a lexical coupling:

Why do *sex* and *hex* rhyme? What about Tex-Mex? Cerebral cortex?

Why is sex like eating at a Mexican restaurant –  
beans and rice,  
tequila, habañeros – ¡Ay, caramba!

*Caramba*, indeed. I may be eating in the wrong restaurants. But hot or not, the divine love in this book is at heart the love of poetry itself, and to partake of these poems is to share a measure of the poet's devotion.

With its delight in sensuality and in the sensuality of speech above all, with its yoking together of serious and casual concerns, with its steady stream of confidences occasioned by irruptions of

memory, there is a lot to like in Barbara Hamby's verse. Her poetry arrives at unexpected places, in part because her refusal to exclude material due to disparity of tone gives her work great range. Any poet who has room for Handel's *Messiah*, Lil' Kim's "How Many Licks," and Son House's rendition of "John the Revelator" has achieved something worthwhile just in the ground she covers. Hamby's poetry contains a wealth of allusions, and yet she does not talk down to her audience. There are no explanatory notes displayed in an appendix. She respects her readers, and she does them the honor of working hard to amuse them. Her poems are freighted nigh unto bursting and move very fast, and yet Hamby makes very few missteps. (Well, she does use "unexplainable" for "inexplicable" once; but the more exotic negative prefixes are endangered species nowadays, and usage is the final arbiter.) You might come away from *On the Street of Divine Love* thinking its author is not only an excellent poet but would also make an ideal conversationalist over dinner. We can't all wangle the invitation, but we can all read her quick-witted, exuberant, and *molto simpatico* book.