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GERALD STERN

A Review of Left Wing of a Bird by Arthur Vogelsang
(Sarabande Books, 2003)

Different critics have seized upon Arthur Vogelsang's work in different ways, but they all seem to emphasize two things, his difficulty and his absolute originality. At least that's the way I read them. As such they, ironically, concentrate on different aspects of the poetry to make their points. It's as if his poems were an impenetrable rock-mass and they are chopping away in various places, all, or each, finding that stone so rare, that schist, that limestone, he or she calls gold. Which is another way of saying that they approach the poems through metaphors of their own.

Ashbery, in a very accurate comment, says that Vogelsang's "good, nasty poems evoke the America of Norman Rockwell as Hieronymus Bosch might have painted it." "Vogelsang's world," he says, is "three-fifths reality and two-fifths dream," but that Vogelsang camouflages the resulting surface. This is to pay attention to the terrible nervousness, almost the panic of his poems, or of the speaker in the poems, or of the man who invents the speaker. One step in the wrong direction, you not only lose the poem, the tone, the mood, but you fall down onto the jagged rocks underneath those limestone gold diggers.

David St. John compares him to O'Hara in his "conversational jauntiness" and "rhythmic energy." He writes about his "breathless drive" to talk about, to explain, our "American madness . . . he startles and shocks us out of our complacency with his searing wit and syntactical gear-shifting." And David Shapiro says: "We have in Vogelsang a poet furious with history but attempting a mad escape." He calls it "the poetics of a panicked or manic Kafka."

Everyone who writes about him goes to elaborate and exuberant length to describe, according to their (his/her) own garp, what he is. More than anything else, these depictions of Vogelsang remind me of the elusive confidence man in Melville's book of the same name, his true American epic, whom Melville describes in one guise or the other, in chapter after chapter, never discovering his *propre* self, if there is such a thing.

But, after all, there is an Arthur Vogelsang, and he does write in a recognizable manner, and he has certain habits, certain strategies, geographic, poetic, intellectual, and there is unified emotional underpinning to his work and there is an absolutely familiar voice, and it has a moral presence and even a message. What I love most about him is his mind, prophetic, wild, loony; and his language, rapturous and ironic. The two work together, indeed they are one—the mind, the language. He is absolutely incapable of used language, stale words, just as he is of familiar thought-processes. There is no dead baggage, no old design.

Let me pick a poem from his new book *Left Wing of a Bird*, published by Sarabande Books. It's on page six, and it's short:

The Gods

Strong strange behavior and strange strong events
He could disappear she could fly
And they did and it thundered too much
A dove with a chain
Hooked a knight
Not outdone a swan pulled a boat
And "slept" with a thin princess
Actually they slept all night
After muscular staccato coitus...
Versus simpler pleasures and steady pain
Gods and their activities are a beautiful artifice
Like a magnifying glass or harmony
Or a successful check-forging scheme
Or letters intercepted to change my opinion of you
I'd like to know a secret and have wealth at the same time
Not separately and I don't want to work for it
If I could I'd swell that grasshopper big enough
For me to ride through the city...
I'd tell everybody, He's okay, he doesn't bite.

Explication du texte, in the old sense, doesn't work. One could attempt a paraphrase but, except for a little hint here and there, it is useless. It is not that Vogelsang is being cryptic or gnomic—it's just that he (his mind, his language) doesn't move in any way that can be converted to prose or given up to summary or reduced to

anything other than itself, the Poem. This is true of much poetry, but it is steadily true of Vogelsang, who is the purest poet I know. Is he saying something about the gods? Absolutely. Is it “Gods” or “gods”? Who knows?—he doesn’t give it away. Are they ancient or modern Gods? You pick! Are these typical god images? No! Yes! Can the poem be about something else altogether? Absolutely. Is it allegorical? A little. Surreal? A little little. Is it terrifying, funny, vernacular-ridden, hinting of myth, traditional, bored with tradition, cute, obscure, playful, desperate, dissembling, blaring, braggartly, original, personal, timely, odd, restless, conversational, rhetorical, eccentric, dualistic? You bet! Is it appropriate for him to ride a grasshopper through the city, instead of, say, a “swollen” ant? Isn’t it a grace-hoper as Joyce described it in the fabulosity of the ant and the grace-hoper, out of Aesop and Spengler? Is Vogelsang or the grasshopper a God? Is it not “each one” as Hopkins says? Is the verse free? Totally. Is Vogelsang not a secular, atheistic, god-unfearing, nebbly, substantiated, undipped Baltimorean? You bet!

I have a feeling (a thought?) that Vogelsang is stretched out over a boiling globe, that he’s trying to enact some control over the chaos he lives in, we live in, that he reflects that chaos in his poems, that he enacts (rather than re-enacts) that chaos, which sometimes seems like the true madness, even the true horror, of existence, certainly current existence, certainly the existence of his imagination. That the language reflects that existence—and is that existence. That it is sometimes terrifying. One commentator—I think Plumly—invokes Juvenal, but Vogelsang, though satirical, is also plaintive and even furtive. He is the chased as well as the chaser (each-each). He is too much linked with the world as it is nor is his the posture of moral grandeur or noble offended distance. It is questionable whether he can indeed create any order or control. I mean create it and yet be honest (true?) to *his* vision of the world. This is the situation for many writers, but who is more embroiled in it than Vogelsang, I don’t know. Political order we’re not talking about. Nor moral, metaphysical, or mathematical. Aesthetic maybe. Or maybe perish the thought, and whose fault is it, his or the world’s? What a question to ask when Louis XIV never existed, nor did Descartes:

Phila.

A lunatic tried to hail a cab
And you for whom a poet's wife
Has washed many a time his come-filled rag, you
Moved to help so the dirty prophet turned
As if speaking to you at dinner and said,

Nothing ever happened
Napoleon an idea
Patterns in the mud
I stepped out of my
Puzzled shadow.

We have pieced it together.
When you go, I want to become something literal
Like a horse on the baby-blue Walt Whitman bridge.

Sometimes his anxiety—the world's—is expressed most coherently, and simply, even if the bigger thought, the poem, that generates the anxiety (as the anxiety generates the poem) is not simple and coherent:

Afraid in a car in a desert
I advise:

Breathe normally folks
Breathe normally son
Breathe normally you all.

“BiCoastal (Sailors of the Air)”

as the same poem—what?—shifts gears and ends with a polite barker out of Saroyan (*Time of Your Life* [“met a man on State Street once, name was Glick, or Blick, or something . . . had to shoot him, didn't like the way he talked to women.”]) or Melville again (“Hear Oh Israel”), or Beckett, always that:

Not sure if sex is a fuel
Or people are an illusion

Or men are simply more rapacious toward their prey
Than women, possibly it is vice versa, but I must say,

Ma'am, I wish you were a terrific extemporaneous speaker,
I wish you were forty-three.
If I could express all my wishes
Without fear of punishment,

And since I can,
As we will not return from here,
Why do I not?

There are shadows in August
And worse ones in September,
Black in arroyos and in kitchens.

In the river bottom, fuck! fine cool
Sand so far from the sea
Times' not up but it will be.

“Bi-Coastal (Sailors of the Air)”

*These nay-sayings are all from one poem if they are nay-sayings:
“Flowers on a Beach.”*

The waves are terrible, their noise is like bombs,
And they are too big for the ocean.

....

I wish I wasn't here,
That there were no thoughts

....

Imagine the chest, the three men,
Inappropriately emphasized
Like uncooked chicken on a plate of water.

....

The wetness where the stems are cut
Is nothing
Or it is... it is...

....

But more likely everything is the same—
Amputation's rudeness, pretty flowers—
Though standing in the pool is quieter

....

While adults weeping in the surf
Is like... like... adults weeping in the surf

....

Baby if it is any consolation the soul makes pictures
Efficiently to the end as well as at birth or as a wily adult
And they are its utterance it has no other.

“Flowers on a Beach”

This neigh is from “Instructions to the Alien.”

... I tried this by myself
For a while and needed help of the sort
I'm about to explain. Help me.

And this is from “Three.”

The thing is, we've got to work hard at helping each other
And never stop, or else what's the point, so I think
You should call her, it would do her some good.
Of course I know there isn't any point ever,
But c'mon.

And “The Writers 2.”

You say, the cities of the East Coast are in a great forest.
You say to me, if you think a ten-year arc put into a three-day
arc
Is anything anybody in their right mind would believe,
You are a special asshole.

When he's not quietly terrifying, or horrifying, us, he is a kind of stand-up, or sit-down in his case, comedian. Listen to this in "Graves in Johnson County."

This is not a tradition in stand-up.
What am I supposed to do,
Come back out and say OK get this, listen up,
. . . here's one more joke?

I can't dance and I can't sing
So I became a poet;

The music is just right.

Arthur grasped the story
Of the country's lost campaign
Against the Rodin piece
On the rich lovers' mausoleum
Depicting a dedicated act of intercourse,
Since stolen of course,
Of course, of course.

Or

I brought you here
To listen to my routine,
To try myself to fall in love
Or secondarily to get laid,
And to introduce you to each other

Or the chilling

This would be seen
By even the weakest of audiences
As a deus ex machina.
Oo-hee-hee and excuse me.
All graves are a deus ex machina

Or

Thank you for the applause.
I was the driver.

All from "Graves in Johnson County"

I should mention that, of all things, Arthur is—like O'Hara—a narrative poet, though maybe parable is the word, since his narratives are really parables, unlike O'Hara—although his narrative is not the "new" narrative (which is, after all, the old) since it is disjointed and, as I say, loony. Every poem illustrates this—you pick one—as every poem illustrates his anger (wrath) and also (even) a kind of contempt—just as it is intimacy, partnership (even love) for the reader, she who, after all, is among those who is (actually) *reading* his poems even studying them, and relishes them, so deserves that wrath, *n'est-ce pas?*

Vogelsang's "friends and acquaintances" are, as I see it, Frank O'Hara (foremost) and John Donne (foremost). Also, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Hemingway, Stein, Baudelaire, Beckett, Yeats, Poe, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Lawrence, Swift, Creeley, Frost, Kenneth Koch, Allen Ginsberg, Barbara Guest, Berryman, and Orlovitz. Though most artists deny (many) such and are variously surprised, pleased, impatient, defensive when they hear or read, such.

I don't know if I admire the "talk" or the elegance in Vogelsang's poems more. He has, in this book, reached a new level of lyric elegance and has become an absolute master at what he does. Were I in charge of the anthologies I would include poem after poems of his. The sounds, the strategies, the huge presence—I can't praise them enough. As far as his final gift to us, it is found, I feel, in his direct moral presence and here he abandons a little his O'Hara and his Donne. He doesn't bespeak the Ten Commandments, nor Solon's code, nor Hammurabi's, but by direction and by indirection he creates a verbal framework; a poetic tablet, the way a poet can, and if he's brave enough, does. I wish there was one short single poem that does this, but it's as much between the lines as not, *n'est-ce pas?* a tablet of the heart, broken and imperfect, as if after a second failed visit on the hill, or a third.