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# Transcending the Apocalyptic of the Present Avant-Garde: A Review of Dave Brinks's *The Secret Brain: Selected Poems 1995–2012*

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## *Transcending the Apocalyptic of the Present Avant-Garde*

A Review of Dave Brinks's *The Secret Brain: Selected Poems 1995–2012*

Dave Brinks writes like Andrei Codrescu, except without the coruscating cynicism. He is like Anselm Hollo, but missing the jokiness. He resembles Bernadette Mayer but devours more light. He is Blakean, with the same oscillation between innocence and experience, yet his is a new optimistic rhetoric for an age all too familiar with apocalypse. He is an experimentalist, a visionary, a postmodernist—but he doesn't easily fit into any particular school. He is no naive believer in what is dismissed among avant-garde circles as the "lyric I," but he hasn't given up on bold subjectivity either. He sounds like a surrealist, but he isn't cold-blooded in assessing objective reality, especially when his emotions play out in the glimmering landscape of New Orleans.

Like the best poets, he borrows from different schools and styles, but he's not an adherent to any of them. He may once have been a student of Codrescu's, but he's long since transcended the teachings of the Balkan master, finding his own voice, which is like no one else's in the country.

I greeted his long poem *Caveat Onus* (2009) ecstatically when it came out, calling it one of the most durable serial poems of our time. When I looked at the book again recently, my initial assessment felt right on the mark. In 2012, Black Widow Press, the publisher of *Caveat Onus*, brought out *The Secret Brain: Selected Poems 1995–2012*, and what a deserved accolade it is, introducing us to the full range of Brinks's poetics, rewarding at every turn, repaying repeated readings. As with Wallace Stevens or Frank O'Hara, one keeps returning to the same poem as though to a complete stranger, never outreaching its contours. This protean fullness is a function of the poet coming at us with all the richness and delight of his vision, a mark of his generosity.

Brinks's principle of organization appears more or less chronological, though he does seem to begin with newer poems, then settle into his earlier poems before ending with his most recent work. The sections don't bear the titles of his published books but have more mysti-

cal labels, as in the first section, *The Light on Earth Street*, which is divided into:

- I. *The Crooked Beak of Heaven*, Op. 52, Kên
- II. *The Emerald City or The Tornado*, Op. 56, Lü
- III. *Rivers Flowing Backwards*, Op. 43, Kuai
- IV. *At Hand's Length*, Op. 8, Pi
- V. *Drawing Sound*, Op. 40, Hsieh

The difference between the earlier and later poems is greater amplitude, a progressively poignant vision. In Brinks's case, the occult is handmaiden to a poetics of resilience, of personal fortitude in the face of collective pressures. Mystical design is not escape for him, but a form of social discovery. Language—spoken and unspoken—coheres in an aesthetics of sensual intelligence.

Consider the poem “*Erurunti Sacamona*” from the first section, which ends: “yet iffier aspirants / like *Zebrina Hollyhock* / or *Pacific Beauty Calendula* / are popular with butterflies / and make great heirlooms / while some holdouts / aver as in yesteryear / if there is a utopia, it's New Orleans during / the predawn hours of *Mardi Gras Day sittin' / on the bayo* singin' *Jockamo Fee Nah Nay*.” The last four words, Brinks tells us in a footnote, translate as “*Eat My Drawers*.” Brinks explains the title of the poem as a *Mardi Gras* phrase, a blend of “*Yoruban, Haitian, French and Tchoupic origins*,” indicating appreciation for a woman.

The influences and sources are diverse, the writing sensuous, yet this is just one component. Restraint is the balancing pole. Where a poet given to making thinly connected associative leaps might go on endlessly, not knowing where to stop or stopping arbitrarily, such is not the case with “*Starting from Mud (for Anselm Hollo)*”:

O urban kid savoir sojourner  
starting from mud  
long before daylight & grafitto  
it's a one-shot deal  
a little moustache and a little goatee  
slip out of the mouth  
into an elegant sacrilege of sound  
there's also the question of stuffed goats  
and Elvis Presley  
yes it's important

to know everything  
just to see the stars approaching earth  
almost transparent  
like the word “kelp”  
and to my great distraction  
knee-deep in a musical grass

This poem leaves you wanting more, unlike the recent trend in associative/leaping/disjunctive poems that don't seem to have honest endings. How do we understand the above poem? Surely not as epiphany. Surely not as personal growth. It is a note on the poetic sensibility, realizing its simultaneous transience and permanence, and it is this exquisite balance that often lends Brinks's poems their air of freedom.

He's never shy about his influences—one of the biggest, judging by the frequency of appearance in this book, being Bernadette Mayer. Hollo is a big influence too, yet Brinks's poems, like “Starting from Mud,” seem more grounded somehow (in the lovely mud), less liable to slip into abstractions from nowhere. To oscillate between innocence and experience is to recapitulate the opposition between utopia and dystopia, yet what Brinks seems to gather from his major influences is resistance to such severe categorizations.

Brinks must be one of the most extroverted, outgoing, social poets writing today, a stark contrast to the maudlin narcissism of so much American poetry. In his declarations of love and affection, Brinks finds an idiom removed from the many depravities of self-absorption. Particularly in the middle sections of the book, there is some astounding love poetry dedicated to his (former) wife Megan Burns, one of which, “Duet in Tall Grass,” concludes: “I'm from the land of wrong animals / you're an ancient waiting to happen / in tall grass,” and another of which, “As Stars Are,” goes like this:

as stars are like the movies a gala occasion  
all day and what fun to know their names  
The Whale Nebula is Mina's favorite  
even so where else is one to go singing  
animal songs all those radio waves blazing suns  
I wonder if the whales ever think about us?  
“that song tastes like pineapple” “that's funny”  
Mina says, and it is, the season of delight  
beneath the glistening earth whose sheen  
deepens inside the windows, I reach

for one which is traveling in two directions  
and to you for having given birth to a butterfly  
under the Botticellian trees, and to an alphabet  
sung nightly which is never dark

This is beautiful, and it is an example of what I mean by Brinks's Blakean vision of innocence (Mina is Brinks's eldest child). Brinks is never hesitant to express love, and he does this without resorting to cheap epiphany or turning the vision back on himself. His focus remains outside himself, austere attentive to others' sensual reality.

Here's another example of the visionary in Brinks, from "The Thorn of Crowns":

a kind of music that changes  
your mood entirely

a sound that sounds *the end of the world*  
and breaks your leg at the neck

I climbed up on a rock in the middle of the ocean  
and watched the laws of hot stars adream with  
creamy pajama eyes

and all the hours of evenings & centuries  
leaving their shell

a last-minute future unfolded its wings  
too suddenly beautiful

Brinks seems to be resorting to a kind of pastoral for a ruminative urban setting, yet he is no sociological illiterate. Consider the poem "In Lieu of Flowers," part of which reads:

o  
O  
earth  
accept this body which  
was taken out of your body  
this concrete jangle  
of swamprock  
this love-emptied arabesque

hemorrhaging  
flesh bells  
over Jackson Square

the sunset climbs down  
into a triple moon      streetlamps  
splinter into worlds  
plunge deep  
into the holes of my eyes.

In the dialectic between the first stanza and the second, the poet is disputing his own centrality. When he concludes the poem with “this poem is walking barefoot / as a sign of piety / over a broken glass slipper,” it might well be a summation of Brinks’s outgoing, very aware but never selfish aesthetic.

These poems are religious in the broadest sense of the word, aware of transcendent dimensions, refusing to bring the world down to the level of the base human, as in “Easter in New Orleans,” which includes lines like:

I do not hail from a city of angels  
and I am never going back

\* \* \*

I sit at the river’s edge  
like the mind of a shark

scraps of words float by  
like tumorous catfish

rain-plotted clouds pound ordinary sweet  
canticles outside the Saint Louis Cathedral

all christs hang in museums behind  
a curtain or beneath thick plate glass

Indeed, spirituality has been mummified, separated from daily human reality, but Brinks seems to go around saturated with the ability to perceive the extraordinary illuminating the ordinary. This quality is perhaps best apparent in the prose poems later in the book, in the

section *The Fuschine of the Vine*, where, for example, he begins “Shaking the Kaleidoscope” with “I never noticed the moon in the window until you started living here.” Here’s another poem, “The Private Zoo,” from the same section:

this story has a certainty like supper. if you’re gong  
to sleep-in through the rain, ask the fingers that feed  
you for long arms. dogs have no human response to  
weeds that grow out of your head and don’t fall off.  
their point is to swallow. or how one might imagine  
a conversation like *A Clockwork Orange* without the  
violins.

I think the contrast between this poem and the sheaves of ego-generated mechanical poems commonly seen today is amazing. Observation doesn’t all end up becoming about himself, as in debased lyric poetry, yet unlike language poetry there remains plenty of room for the observing self to grow and learn. Brinks writes poetry that incrementally captures his surrounding reality, bit by bit, yet one never gets the feeling that he’s performing stunts to make us think he knows more than he does.

The next poem in this section, “The Revolving Air (for Robert Creeley),” is also surrealistic without being in love with morbidity for its own sake. The prose poems in the section *The Garden of Lilith* are, if anything, even better, such as “Thinking in Miniature”:

this is a poem about potting soil. one of those sunsets  
that looks like the stuff that comes out of a genie’s  
lamp after you make it shine. I feel like a spiny cater-  
pillar on a playground and it’s beautiful inside. some  
of the tiniest maps begin with a low whisper on the  
edge of a dark wood.

It is a lesser skill to join discordant elements for their own sake, but the higher skill is to create a new tone or attitude toward the world out of the dissonance. The cosmopolis emerges from Brinks’s poetry as both vulnerable to and immune from poetry’s objectification. The soul emerges from these poems untainted by glory or humility, as in “Behind the Ailanthus,” one of a set of more lyrical poems toward the end, which Brinks concludes with, “I am the look on the face of a man / whose only regret is the setting sun.”

Brinks likes to collaborate; some of his most expansive poems are toward the end in the A Pot of Lips section, where he collaborates with Codrescu, Hollo, Daniel Finnigan, Thaddeus Conti, Ed Sanders, Simon Pettet, Peter Gizzi, Paul Chasse, and others. Part of “The Kingdom of Expulsion,” written with Codrescu, reads:

Daniel & I dumping the clutch in Jackson Square  
The radio singing lidded Billie Holiday eyes  
And I feel like pulling a shiv from my boot  
& screaming something incomprehensible  
Some sort of reverse miracle  
That would transform the St. Louis Cathedral  
Into a giant masturbating pelican  
So the birds can reclaim their kingdom of expulsion

Brinks always seems to be writing about a kingdom from which no one has been expelled. Reading *The Secret Brain* makes us question why the expression of love embarrasses us so. Why does poetic feeling mortify us? Why can't we be generous and alive to our chosen vocation? Why must it be secret from ourselves? These thorny questions already have their answer in all our esoteric minds.

Codrescu writes in the introduction to *The Secret Brain* that “to hear the best of the new and old poets who have made the American avant-garde a living body, the secret is that you must now come to New Orleans.” Brinks has been personally responsible for the lion's share of this community-building for more than twenty years, as Codrescu notes, with the inescapable impression at his performance venues of “*something live going on.*” At the Gold Mine Saloon in particular, the audience feels that “none of it [poetry]... [is] in any way a *cover.*” Precisely the same interpretation applies to the substantial body of work in *The Secret Brain*: none of it is in any way subterfuge or simulation; it is some of the most intellectually honest poetry today, acquired by a lifetime of vigorous participation in active history embodied in the unique city of New Orleans.

Brinks's poetry shows that the avant-garde need not be cold, game-playing, reclusive, mechanical, merely refurbished and accessorized; it can still be genuinely cosmopolitan and outward-looking in the way that academic postmodern poetry has recently had a difficult time doing. It is only fitting that in the summer of 2011, Brinks discovered a treasure trove of archives in New Orleans's Bywater neighborhood consisting of letters, manuscripts, photographs, artworks, and jazz

recordings, a major discovery that promises to contribute to a substantial reassessment of New Orleans's contribution to the evolution of postwar American poetry. *The Secret Brain* demonstrates throughout that Brinks's work is an organic part of this living tradition, in the intersection of the various art forms uniquely expressive of New Orleans's sensibility.

In "Ever, To Be Sure (for Joe Phillips)," writing in Newport, Rhode Island, Brinks sends this message to his city of origin: "I am the syllabary / markings / of an underwater common / merganser / homing his / ABC's / under the spell of fireflies / the surrogate of the sun is on its way / to the eatery / of Burnt Dreams." He concludes this transcendent poem with "revision is to suicide what tarzan is / to ecology." The peculiar warmth implied in this affirmation of vigorous experience perfectly sums up Brinks's commitment to an emotionally vigorous avant-garde countering the twenty-first century's various apocalypses of the imagination.