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BOOK REVIEW

KNOWING AND NOT: On the Poetry of Mind

Parallel Play

by Stephen Burt

Graywolf Press, 2006, 88 pp., \$14, paper

The Quick

by Katrina Roberts

University of Washington, 2005, 107 pp., \$17.95, paper

After

by Jane Hirshfield

HarperCollins, 2006, 93 pp., \$23.95, cloth

Riding Westward

by Carl Phillips

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006, 53 pp., \$22, cloth

What is the use of intellect in poetry? I mean the opposite of the gut-level, guided-by-the-gods, always lucky instinct that all artists learn to trust at some point in the creative process. *Inspiration, the Unconscious, Serendipity* – call it what you will, it is nothing that can be taught in any workshop. Craft, which can be learned, depends on instinct, but also on rational intelligence, an awareness of what choices are possible in a form, of what has been achieved by others, of what needs to be done. Intellect, as I am using the term, includes intelligence but is something broader and more abstract: it involves premeditation, thoughtfulness, accurate and broad allusion, knowledgeable rendering of the world, and a good vocabulary. It appeals to more than the emotions or even the aesthetic sense. It is the mind at work in the poem and before the poem.

If this sounds strange, it may be because it runs counter to a main current of American poetic dogma. Aren't we all taught that poetry that makes much demand on

our intelligence is elitist, or at least too exhausting to be pleasurable? And isn't the audience supposed to be pleased? As for language, the persistent ideal, descended from Whitman, is that our poetry should embody "the American voice," a speech capable of touching the ear and heart of every citizen, capable of uniting, or even creating, an America in which everybody is a poet. By some standards, that Whitmanian dream seems to have been realized. Never have more Americans gathered to make and share poems, often assembling them by "recipe." No one requires a poetic IQ test or a degree for this, any more than for baking cookies. Quite rightly: the poems give pleasure, the cookies are eaten. Just as our culture has a built-in anti-intellectualism, so our poetry has an inherited populist stance which defines it at its core. It is, or ought to be, for consumption by everyone, like the movies in their golden age. That this may further drive down the stock of more demanding work, poetry charged with language that involves intellectual effort rather than immediate response, is rarely considered.

The cognitive philosopher Daniel Dennett, who theorizes that ideas have an evolutionary life of their own, has argued in *Consciousness Explained* (1991) that the way poetic creativity works is akin to the way language works for any speaker: "It is no news that some of what we say we say primarily because we like the way it sounds." He cites comments by Patricia Hampl and E. M. Forster to make a general case for "a *discovery* of self-interpretation," meaning as a retroactive, rather than "intimate and privileged advance insight." This sounds like what we teach about the usefulness of revision. Meaning, we say, is not imposed, but found.

Contemporary poets tend to deny that meaning comes from the mind, wanting, at least since Bly and the sixties (when Bob Dylan rediscovered the surrealists and

symbolists for popular culture), to be in touch with a “deeper” or truer source than Western rationalism. What this means in practice was probably never better expressed than in a well-known essay by Richard Hugo from his book, *The Triggering Town*:

Make the subject of the next sentence different from the subject of the sentence you just put down. Depend on rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together. It is impossible to write meaningless sequences. In the world of imagination, all things belong. If you take that on faith, you may be foolish, but foolish like a trout.

(“Writing off the Subject”)

“Foolish like a trout”? Poets, everyone knows, prefer imagination to logic. It’s their job. And they certainly prefer the physical to the mental. Stephen Dunn, who loves to play dumb, but whose poems (like Frost’s before him) are entirely made of thinking, ends “Not the Occult” with these teasing, very American lines:

. . . I love the local and the crude
somehow made beautiful, all the traces
of how it got that way erased.
And I love the corporeal body itself,
designed to fail,
and the mind, the helpless mind,
so often impelled to think about it.

No, we generally don’t expect much from intellect in poems. We don’t trust intellect—and it isn’t much fun, especially in an era of performance, when entertainment rather than challenge dominates the arts. If we must have it at all, then, like Dunn, we sneak it in, masquerading as something else. The modernists, who at their best produced dazzling work, confused and bothered many people with its seeming complexity, which often was a radical simplicity. They were accused of aloofness and obscurity, and still are. Stevens, for one, shows us that a knowledge of art and philosophy, and even a big vocabulary, are not incompatible with creativity and play. But for all his enduring (and often unacknowledged) influence, Stevens is understood to be an exception, a man apart,

as in a famous line from Berryman's elegy to him, "Dream Song 219": "brilliant, he seethe; / better than us; less wide."

Who wouldn't rather be the class clown than the geek?

One danger with coming on too smart is the one we learned in school: you can fail to make any friends. In some settings, even being too articulate is worth a punch in the mouth. Better to adopt Whitman's *I-am-you-and-you-are-me* stance, deceptive as it may be, cajoling or charming the reader into receptivity and fellow-feeling the way a stand-up comic may start an act, baring the soul to laughter.

Go the other way and risk the ridiculousness of not being heard because nobody wants to try. A related risk, that of being judged irrelevant to human progress, is one Milosz wrote about in his war-time letters from occupied Poland, published in translation last year under the title, *Legends of Modernity*. Surveying the wreck of Europe, he writes to Jerzy Andrzejewski:

Intellectualism can also be the name for a certain stance toward life, a certain fondness for observation that is understood as an end in itself, a certain monastic regime of mental exercises. An intellectual is interested first of all in the bonds between phenomena; he delights in plunging into that garden filled with fantastic flowers; he seeks relationships, classifies them, shouts *eureka* when he succeeds in making some new and striking connection. He is less concerned with ultimate results; it's the activity itself that he is passionate about. Curiosity replaces all other passions in him. He looks at society, at man, as a vast test tube: he doesn't worry about what man *ought* to be like; his entire ambition is to discover what he *is*.

Many poets now seem caught between two voids: to write as an activist, a healer of the depredations of capitalism (but has anyone read a political poem recently that was not written for the already-convinced?), or to write as an entertainer, using the demotic the way a performer slips in and out of costume, assuming a pop-culture self that juggles truths like a set of shiny balls. A third way (ironically, offered by the academy) is to

abandon any notion of truth, or even of making sense. (As Derrida might argue, it just isn't what language does.)

Yet there are still poets of intellect who use the mind as a chief source of poetic power, who make their language an instrument as precise and, if need be, difficult as it has to be to render complexity. These are poets who risk seeming aloof or ridiculous in order to seek truth, even to attempt to define it, whether it be the truth of the world or of their own experience. Or, as is usually the case, one entwined within the other.

Stephen Burt's second book, *Parallel Play*, reveals a poet smart enough to know the price of such truth-telling:

Flaunting your useless knowledge has failed you again,
though it was all they had taught you. Worse yet,
Those self-demotions had always worked
In emergencies before; now they seemed about
To succumb to a Coriolis-cum-Peter
Principle: each fact sinks
Until you have to dredge it up and get
Away with it before it can start to trouble
The ruffled surface of the dream you share.

So once again, they've run you out of
Town on a toy train. It all seems pleasant:
These clapboard shrubs and candybox pastels
Part where the heathers wave back at us. Do they know?

These lines, the opening of "Like A Wreck," the book's second poem, are written in a clear diction and syntax, yet they make few concessions. For instance, the "Coriolis-cum-Peter Principle" reference runs across three lines and is clearly important to the development of the poem's "story." Yet it presumes a reader (if it presumes one at all) familiar with both the partly parodic axiom of management theory that, in organizations, one rises to the level of one's incompetence, as well as with the scientific principle of the

atmospheric force by which, due to a change in pressure, air is moved to the right in the Northern hemisphere and to the left in the Southern, giving rise to a lot of urban mythology about water swirling in toilet bowls, etc.

I have elaborated this reference not because Burt wants his reader to engage in research, but because it's the kind of reference he makes: pop-culture, yes, but not necessarily easy. "Coriolis-cum-Peter Principle" has the density of wit of John Donne in his time, but—and here's the point—if the reader fails to identify both of the dual references, these lines risk producing no meaning, only readerly frustration. Something of this sort is what T. S. Eliot risked when he wrote "The Waste Land," thinking he was unsettling the professors, but confusing much of the poetry-reading public as well, and bequeathing the masses whole new ways to make fun of poetry and poets. Eliot's great poem shows the mind at work, the structuring intelligence, but coupled to a powerfully sensuous and fiercely rhythmic sensibility. (Why not use it all if you've got it?)

Parallel Play is not "The Waste Land," nor does it try to be, yet it enters as fearlessly its own territory of mind: the waste land of childhood, adolescence, and young manhood in America, refined through a sensibility which, like Eliot's own, is at once personal, cultural, classical, and mythic. "Canal Park Drive" is one example of how these strains come together with sensuous particularity (the poem is quoted in its entirety):

Here we are in Duluth. They have remade
The strenuous, swept edges of the largest
Body of fresh water in the world
So we would come and visit, and we
Did: above our heads
Some bradycardic boxcars pull
Their taconite over trestles, then over
And underneath the shadow of the bluff . . .

To ask the kids (So do you hate it here?)

Or question the slow clouds (Where would you go?)
Would show the same broad hopes, and would betray
Us (Where could all the girders lead?)
As is we meant to offer something else.

Refreshment, strong air, onions frying, hops,
A brand-new stage recumbent on a pier
Where brand-new wheelchair ramps describe floodwalls.
Fresh waters plane the middle distances
Like seminal regrets,
Are interrupted by one buoy, one boat;
Gulls shift, declaim and moralize, and these
First lineaments of rain
Simply continue, as if testing old
Adages on the origin of us,
Propelled as we are by whispers, and whispered hints
That there is some place we would rather be.

In this remarkable poem, emblematic of Burt's style, deadpan description masks cultural critique in a manner reminiscent of early Eliot. The language is clear, the voice conversational and intimate, the scene portrayed in sharp, accessible detail. It's not necessary for the reader to have a Thesaurus or Dictionary at hand (aren't we lucky they're on our computers now?), but it helps to have a vocabulary that encompasses "bradycardic" (a slow heartbeat) as well as "taconite," "recumbent," "seminal," "lineaments," and "adages"—not difficult, surely, but sadly beyond what we can presume for the "average" high school or even college graduate nowadays (though they might have constituted part of the eighth grade vocabulary generations ago), and no longer to be found in daily newspapers. But what to do with the poem's one-word epigraph: "ultra-oligotrophic"? Even with a Dictionary, learning that this adjective refers to the way algae grow slowly in low-nutrient salt is of little help, though perhaps it characterizes the poem's scene. The fact that it is italicized and in quotation marks removes it to the realm

of personal reference (unlike Eliot's use of Dante). But the poem does not depend on hermetic knowledge, but on subtle, sure internal movement.

The poem's effect is as much based on the sequence of parenthetical questions asked *sotto voce* in its middle stanza, which create a counterpoint to the seeming complacency, a sort of undertow tugging us somewhere else, into deeper waters. The result is cumulative as a wave, culminating in the final simile, which, in a sudden, breathtaking twist, lifts the carefully composed time-present into a vision of the "all time" of eternity and the "no time" of human fulfillment.

Time is really Burt's true subject, and he handles it as dispassionately as Eliot did, with fluid free verse which often, like that of the other poet he most calls to mind (Robert Lowell), might be reassembled into firm iambic pentameter:

If our
business with
the world
fails,
we'll end

up here:
expansively
dilapidated
Weathersfield, Maine
somewhere the train shoots through.
(“The Whiskery Towns”)

Burt's titles are filled with jaunty pop culture references: “Help With Your Plant Questions,” “Scenes from Next Week's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” “Frightening Garden Tools (Invade Your Dream).” Some have the personal, time-and-place specific lilt of Frank O'Hara: “Amaretto Sour (Drag Night at the Nines),” “After Monica's Party,” “Philadelphia”; others are inspired by works of art, modernist and post-mod style (paintings by Richter, Kline, Diebenkorn, Christine Willcox). Many of these poems have

experience in order to deepen and make resonant its significance. That's one of the best uses of, and reasons for, art to exist at all.

“Brief History of North American Youth,” comprising seven poems, each eight lines long, shows another hand from this magician's deck of difficult cards. The sequence recapitulates in a punctuation-less rush the giddy, fragmentary, and unsettling rites of passage indicated by the sociological title – feminine-coded passivity (“I will sew and read all the time I am not going out / anywhere but intend to stay home all the time / Resolved not to talk about myself or my feelings”) balanced by the seemingly masculine-aggressive:

Who learned the rope trick who learned to get back on defense
who learned to race through the transition to handle some world
as if it were one ball to take two steps
before it leaves the hand spectators crush
and shout together standing up to exclaim
taut echo chamber painted wordless space
for relays or derision or a fall
we will know who we are once we have won

This may be Burt at his most Ashbery-like, but a careful endnote reveals that the style here isn't merely imitative, post-mod pastiche, but a true melding, drawn, stanza by stanza, from a variety of sources (including, for the italicized lines above, female voices in nineteenth century diaries). The last section refers to a D.C.-area rock band, Rites of Spring: “asking what did they give up to get here and how long ago / do you miss it at all does it suit you did it then”

Structure gives the poem as a whole a haunting dignity beyond the familiar, often-whiny sense of loss emanating from those who would remain eternally adolescent. As in certain memorable poems by Phillip Larkin, another poet of intellect, there's an odd

sense of genuine regret, some state of unified being that's only to be known by its absence.

The underlying somberness of *Parallel Play* is a sign of the company this poet aspires to; art, as Yeats tells us, may be, at its most serious, "gay," but it is never trivial nor trivializing. Neither is Burt, even at his most playful. And there's a lot of play here, not the least of which is word play, for instance, a thirty-line poem, "Paysage Morlisé," in which every line ends with the word "place" (a key thematic in the book) or a witty variation of it: "replace," "date and place," "displays," "place-/holders," "plac-/ate" etc.

The concept of play befits the book's title, which employs a child development term for the activity engaged in by children under two when placed side by side with toys (in other words, before Lacan's "mirror stage" seduces them into the self-estrangement that is language). To a casual observer, the subjects may appear to be toddlers playing together, but they are not really interacting; rather, each is the center of his/her separate world.

This could be taken as a description of the poet's relationship to his reader. Only, *Parallel Play* is a knowledgeable and dexterous book, and Burt's is a very knowing art. Instead of being fooled or played-on, the reader is well rewarded for playing along.

The Quick, by Katrina Roberts, offers another antidote to pointless post-modernism or the merely mundane. One thing these very different books have in common is the felt necessity for endnotes. Burt has selected twelve poems, Roberts no less than seventeen, for explanatory notes on sources and contexts.

Does this herald a new scholasticism, wherein poetry is becoming an extension of academic research? Fortunately, the answer (here, anyway) is no; the reader will find that consulting the apparatus is not necessary for appreciating a single poem in either book. In both, the poems are fully in control of their own meanings. On the other hand, the more you understand mythology, cultural references, and, yes, vocabulary, the more you will be equipped to get from this large volume. Roberts is a supremely articulate poet, and she isn't afraid of her own strengths. Like Burt, she can be perfectly in control of shifting tone and gesture:

Which gestures are simple? Not the wave's.
Not the waking at five again in separate skins

despite our attempts at erasure. What bleeds
without effort up, staining the dark in reverse?

Everything races as the wet hearts of rabbits—
inside, unseen. Doves crack open the morning

– round syllables and the rest spills out.
You blink. My gaze along your cheek.

Hushed and tense, we lean toward each other.
Hearing things mostly unsaid,

answering with silence. Holding the single note
of morning. Gathering our dreams and wits

around us like felt. We slip out, night wild cats
braiding out ankles, one and one, as water

rushes the tap, floods the pot, comes to tick
on heat. Everything shrinking or swelling.

We move together through still dark rooms.
Blinds clatter up with our pulling. Every act

filled with effort and consequence. Patience or
hope. Every small thing out there diving for

twigs. You reach out so this moment breaks
into our next. We are riptide and we are surf.

What makes this lyric particularly good is not only its wonderful music (the orchestration of the opening “s” and long “e” and “a” sounds becoming hushed “h’s” in the middle, then the liquid “l’s” and short “i’s” and “u’s” at the end), but something else, too: what the poem actually *says*. It is remarkable precisely because the subject is, in one way, so familiar: an *aubade*, a morning song, a celebration of natural life, of erotic awakening. It is remarkable too because of the mind at work in it, the connections made, the near clichés turned into vivid leaps and lacunae, bringing us unexpected awareness of the small and transitory.

And, of course, this is exactly what the first line asks: “Which gestures are simple?” A loaded question, interrogating the whole notion of simplicity. (Did a poem of this sort ever start with so abstract a question?) In its oblique and declaratory way, the poem answers. The “riptide” and “surf” of the last line are not just images plugged in for sensuous or mystical effect; they are the culmination of an investigation into a state of being, one we have probably all experienced, but not precisely framed in this way. The poem works by a sort of segmented defamiliarization of the “simple.” The reductive physical act (“you blink”) is counter-pointed by metaphysical insight (“Every act // filled with effort and consequence “). The smallest inflections of syntax matter: consider how the subordinating adverb and possessive pronoun function in the line, “You reach out *so* this moment breaks / into *our* next” (italics added). By a series of such subtle moves, the poem recreates an impenetrable mystery, helps us rediscover something about ourselves and how we fit into the world, strange and celebratory.

The unexpected Italian title is part of this. *Sfumato*: the art history term used to indicate the subtle gradation of color and tone in a painting, opens a space between itself and the body of the unfolding, present-tense poem. It is a space only mind can fill, because mind created it.

I have made so much out of what is one of the shortest and, in truth, most accessible of the book's poems because it illustrates how Roberts' way of thinking and looking complicates what she sees and thinks. When she draws her subject directly from the stuff of nature, the result may seem, line by line, as linear and accessible as that of any purely descriptive poet:

. . . their human eyes, forward-gazing
in their round faces, they turned toward sound

to catch it in feather discs, their hearing tuned beyond
human imagining . . . and then they were gone, like

mist dissipating in the lowlands

But the act of transcribing nature is complicated by the presence of the knower, of the mind not content to stand transparent before the objects of its knowledge, but actively involved in what it knows, understanding, as well, the limits of its knowledge:

. . . an eye trained
toward their going might, squinting, distinguish
signs of intention written by pinions . . .
...
And we told ourselves
all water eventually finds the sea—our coming, their
going—so synchronous: this was simply something

we wanted, more than knowing, wholly to believe.
("Estuary")

At other times, she can be overtly complicated, daring the reader with a spate of challenging titles and almost Gnostic opening lines:

Water, wanting. He and I, we were driving
two ways: one . . .

(“Self-Portrait as Flint, Dust, an Egg-Blue Truck, Memory of
Arson & Signs”)

. . . has not been
blown

headlong by whiff and twinge
of winter’s surgery: open-housed, many

(“Dizzy with the Glow of What Might Dehisce”)

Whether honored, there are integers of rain, tears, time;
whether honored, arms pointing in two directions

(“Furculae”)

This poet has many voices. Incongruity and the fusing of opposites are two of her prime methods. The effect can be dizzying: “Coleman Hawkins doing *that thing* // with his sax: high / and lonely as a kestrel / twirls on thermals, sorting / files of sound” (“One or Two Things Sacred to Sorrow”). Among the memorable poems are those that show Roberts at her most emotionally jarring, as in the simply titled, “University,” with its suggestion of adolescent trauma wedded to an image that might come from a child’s book of fables (poem quoted in full):

The cow with a window in her side
tromps in mud around an Idaho barn
or,
the cow with the pane
near her ribs, nibbles tender green shoots
then chews and chews and chews.

What they see course through . . .
food, food
what can it teach them?

What I want to know is how
rage, how sadness looks, or envy or
shame, eating its

way down into me,
clouding my view of everything.

Don't look at me, I want to scream.
Don't look at me.

The story behind this gripping lyric, with its almost Plath-ian withheld scream, remains intentionally obscure.

Roberts has perfected a style of fragmentation that haunts us with the possibility of a larger whole. Seeing this way means seeing beyond nature, seeing more than is offered to external sight. Such inner vision is signaled in the opening of “Diplopia” (whose title means the condition of double-vision): “Then I dreamed of more; I saw through fog.” The poem ends at the point where the fundamental distinction internal/external loses its binary power: “. . . even I have begun to lose sight / of where my body starts and where it ends.” She is also accomplished in the longer poem, imbued by her very conscious craft with stately shape and elegant, full lines. In “Woman Holding a Balance,” her version of Browning-esque interior monologue, the speaker contemplates and brings life to a painting which may represent Vermeer’s pregnant wife (who was also his model):

That I too might stand calmly weighing where I’ve been with what will come.
Hands: left poised to press gently a major chord below middle C,
braided notes unheard but by her; right raised as though to lift a brimming cup

The poem sustains these six and seven beat lines over twenty-eight, carefully shaped stanzas, offering a nuanced meditation on a woman’s growing body, a wife and mother’s fate, all that, differently gendered, lies beyond the artist’s vision and control. His line, “Banish all, the artist says, let mind dance / as pale light does on pearls; the sun has found a way to ignite the gilt” is countered by hers: “How brief time is, she thinks” The poet-speaker, pregnant herself and emotionally vulnerable, gains

strength from her own reading of the imagined woman before her: “In not looking / toward me, she urged me to turn into myself as never before. How could I not grow / to love my growing body then?”

This is complicated stuff, and at moments it might seem too consciously elaborate, or even a bit archaic. Unquestionably, she is fearless in her ambition. Whatever her chosen mode, Roberts is an adept of form, of tone, of poetry as song, and song as meditation. Remarkable, how little strain these poems show across so many variations. There’s more than a touch of the librettist at work. Roberts is a potent impersonator. She doesn’t just cite myths, she brings them to life from within, full of sensuous detail and spoken voice that, somehow, speak her own concerns as well as those of her supra-human protagonists. In several poems, she gives voice to the female half of mythic couples, including “Dryope to Amphissos,” “Io to Zeus,” and the formidable Ceridwen, Goddess of Inspiration and of Earth, a Welsh Demeter who gives birth to a male child she intends to kill but is unable to because he proves too beautiful:

. . . after, when I saw what I had done – the leather bag, a coracle of hide, afloat –
I cried out, “*Wait!*”
To no avail. *Did you hear?* Hidden within, swaddled
in blue linen . . . I suppose
you were too small to turn the craft back anyway. Wind whipped so fiercely
across Cardigan Bay it looked
as though at any moment you’d overturn. I felt I’d flubbed it then.
But you endured . . .
 (“Ceridwen to Taliesin”)

Handled in so operatic a way, such a subject risks melodrama or, worse, parody. Fortunately, one of Roberts’s gifts is to bring such distant matter close to us, to make it rub our bones. She does so by bringing it close to herself, re-animating it, infusing the received story with her own, most pressing concerns.

“Maleus, Incus, Stapes” (with its title untranslated until the fourth line) is an example of the way Roberts’s mind operates to structure and distance emotional material spoken in her own voice. The poem is addressed to the poet’s unborn son. The ostensible subject is the development of the foetus; the subtext, however, is the anxiety of waiting for a hoped-for healthy birth. The whole is rendered in terms of the poet’s love of music and of poetry; the result is a delicate, lyric weaving of all of these:

Six months *in utero*
my boy’s bones begin in middle ear
to harden so sound can conduct:
hammer, anvil, stirrup—
the three smallest of bones though names conjure
bulk and heft (metaphors
make miracles visible)
thought’s farriers; a word’s trickle or timpanic
blow means bones to strike,
taut membranes struck
and that which gently cups beneath to let
language gallop—so sense
though not yet his, may be
conveyed. Heartbeats like hooves. I whisper, “*Listen!*”
symphonic we’re waiting for you.”

The book’s central section, “Cantata,” is comprised of ten numbered poems (averaging approximately thirty lines each) that chart the course of the poet’s own pregnancy. They do so in a physical and immediate way, pulling no punches, prettying nothing. From the first, these are intentionally hard-edged, unsentimental, refusing romanticization: “I woke cramping, a buzzing, clamping in my head, / a clotting below—hollow, tippy, ache of glands, nose dripping. / . . . An open round / thirst for scalding milk shot through with sweet almond.” And later in the sequence: “I wake pre-dawn to wetness; / sticky on palms, in hall light-bright red. *NO*”

Vertiginous, painful, at times almost desperate, “Cantata” catches the fragments of a consciousness rising and falling in waves, pulling as if against the sea of the body that tugs it back to a remorselessly physical destiny. The mind fights for its place, not to succumb to, nor to overcome, nature, but to achieve faith in its necessary outcome, a future tense. Part of the strength of this sometimes harrowing sequence comes from its diary-like honesty:

Sharp poking (*fingers?*) against my pelvic
floor. All depth and length. We’ve got walls to paint, boards
to strip! *He’s kick-kick-kicking.* How will my body
open as it must?

The sequence achieves a surprising dignity through the accomplishment of its form, shaping and containing the urgency of self-expression. As the title promises, “Cantata” is a polished musical composition; it realizes at once both dictionary definitions of the term indicating either sacred choral music or secular verse drama set to music. There is even a formal “Prelude” and a “Postlude: *Madrigal*,” the latter signifying a song with several parts, traditionally contrapuntal. (Could there be a more hopeful definition of family?)

The poems in *The Quick* are a rich exploration of all that pertains to time; they are filled with flowing movement, with transitions, with music, and, most of all, with body—a woman’s body changing from past to present to unknown future, from solitude to relationship, from youthful tentativeness to adult confidence, from pregnancy to birth. To think of this as the archetypal fate 70s-style feminists set themselves to demolish (and largely did) would be entirely to miss the point of the combination of deeply informed intelligence and emotional courage that distinguishes this book. Katrina Roberts is a daring and skillful poet, one who refuses to diminish her intellect for the sake of a reader; at the same time, she is a woman strong enough to embrace her art and her

family as choices rather than roles. She knows that poetry and motherhood don't constitute an "either-or," that to give strength is to gain it. "Cantata" ends with this address to her newborn son:

Hereafter, there will always be two directions
within me: mine and yours; warp and weft. Ours
are auspicious signs; I choose to read them this way.
Here with you, solid as a warm loaf in my arms,
I know you will grow strong enough
to leave me when you can. Each day is yours.

This is poetry charged with mind, mind made flesh by words.

A discussion of what I have called "the poetry of mind" can't end without briefly acknowledging two recent books by two poets who may be considered, in different ways, among its best contemporary practitioners. Jane Hirshfield's *After*, her sixth collection, shows her at the top of her form. In her 1997 book, *Entering the Mind of Poetry*, she gave us two competing descriptions of the poet's mind. The first essay, "The Mind of Concentration," urges writers to find their own contemplative path, including "Immersion in art itself." She quotes approvingly the poet Adam Zagajewski's prescription: "Poems from poems, songs / from songs, paintings from paintings." On the necessity of coolness, she writes:

At such moments, there may be some strong emotion present—a feeling of joy or even grief—but as often, in deep concentration, the self disappears. We seem to fall utterly into the object of our attention, or else vanish into attentiveness itself.

Such austere quietude befits the Zen discipline Hirshfield has long practiced.

By contrast, a later essay in the same book, "Poetry and the Mind of Indirection," extends the notion that art is a way of knowledge into something hot and flowing, even dangerous:

the cognitive tropes particular to poetry are as aboriginal as its music—not illustration, nor ornamentation of abstract thought, but central devices for ordering the plenitude of being. Western culture, utilitarian by long practice and desire, believes in “cold facts,” and such thinking brings its gifts. But the mind’s primary knowing is hot, as fluid and protean as the changing magma of the earth.

This may sound more like a primitivism Eliot would have admired than it does Zen-like reduction.

Her new book displays, as Robert Bly notes on the back cover, “something subtle and new.” Hirshfield’s dual awareness in *After* may be characterized by Stevens’s famous line about perceiving “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Poem after poem in the book reveals a sharp perception of specific natural elements and human objects, as in her previous work, but also something more, a mind not fulfilled either by its meditation or its focused perception. This mind is active in the ending of “The Woodpecker Keeps Returning”:

But where is the female he drums for? Where?

I ask this, who am myself the ruined siding,
the handsome red-capped bird, the missing mate.

The meditative mind in *After* is expansive, questioning; it reaches well beyond the concentrated present and into an uncertain future (poem quoted in its entirety):

I imagine myself in time looking back on myself
this self, this morning,
drinking her coffee on the first day of a new year
and once again almost unable to move her pen through the iron air.
Perplexed by my life as Midas was in his world of sudden metal,
surprised that it was not as he’d expected, what he had asked.
And that other self, who watches me from the distance of decades,
what will she say? Will she look at me with hatred or with compassion,
I whose choices made her what she will be?
(“I Imagine Myself in Time”)

The poems here are short, chiseled into a substance that is itself understood as transient. That substance is language. The book is punctuated by a series of what are subtitled “Assays,” an old term for probing analyses; here what is probed is language itself, as if the poet is driven to test the staying power of her chosen medium, even of her chosen title:

Before disappears.
After transforms into others.
“And”—that strong rock—stays standing.

Undevourable *thus* of connection. Even death spits it back.
(“‘And’: An Assay”)

Certainly there’s a hard edge to the darkness here, something truly unsettling:

Easy to wish the rat well, now it is gone,
I who have stared at the trap for years,
refusing the clear necessity, the dream command.
(“The Refusal”)

The note of negation in *After* seems to affirm, rather than deny, the inescapable, transforming power of time. There is a new note of pain, an un-Zenlike confession of the motive for writing:

This morning, waking to unaccustomed calmness,
I write these words to stay in that silent, unfevered existence,
to delay the other words that are waiting.
(“I Write These Words to Delay”)

After is the coolly clarifying work of a mind honed down, not to the essence of reality, but to its own fundamental obsessions, paradoxes, and fears. It takes us to an elemental place from which there is no escape, not even in the words that brought us there.

For many years now, there has been no closer or more careful assayer of language than Carl Phillips, who, in a succession of fine books, has probed language – its syntax,

grammar, mood — without ever finding a solid place in which to fix the tent of Meaning. Phillips's art is preeminently one of temporality and tempo, of language unfolding at its own pace in time. It is also an art concerned with the way humans inhabit language, concurrent with, but also, in our desires, apart from it, alienated from its ceaseless formulations, its accumulation of densities and ambiguities and patterned connections that frustrate our longing for wholeness and love.

Riding Westward, Phillips's slim new collection, features on its cover a reproduction of a sixteenth century watercolor by Durer, "Wing of a Blue Roller." This image, a single wing – without body, without head – seems to represent language as Phillips knows it, a medium that inadequately fulfills the promises it makes: Truth, self-identity, and human interconnectedness. The poems in the book concern themes identified with this poet: the fallaciousness of language, the inescapability of memory, the errors and illusoriness of love, and, especially, here, the pain of betrayal. *Riding Westward* traces in Phillips' unique, elliptical manner, the failure of a relationship, a failure the speaker is driven to revisit like a priest performing exorcism on himself. The "whole story," always elusive, is most fully rendered in the ironically titled, "Shall Want For Nothing," which recapitulates in third person the broken relationship as if its failure were the result of an inevitable failure of communication, and communication itself only an X-rated version of Burt's "parallel play":

They'd confused pleasure with the making of pleasure,
the way others mistake exactness of composition for
perfection, and call it art. They'd missed the difference
between self-reflection and penetration, into the self—
past that—they'd mixed it up. The sex between them:
it was like watching two people step together from a vast
forest into a small wood –

...

Each saw in the other the broken
version of what he'd hoped, once, to find. Each saw in
himself the diminished version of the man he had been
that the other had broken. They believed this, though
neither had said so, or would, ever.

The latter part of the poem seems to invoke the Durer on the book's cover, only one of
many bird images prevalent throughout the book:

And the belief, as
usual, had been enough, had come to that place where
what we'd rather not have to believe gets transformed
into hard truth before settling neatly among those harder
truths that, in turn,
shape the bearer of them, as feathers
give to wings a shape neither false nor true.

The retrospective interrogation does nothing to fix blame, or even to clarify cause and
effect. Belief hardens into truth, which in turn softens into paradox and continual
estrangement.

Phillips, in spite of himself, is magisterial in the way his ordinary language
conveys a philosophical density with surety and grace. His style is like no one
else's. His poems are complicated not so much by vocabulary or diction, but by the
accretion of a series of subordinate clauses, each of which qualifies what has been said,
slows the duration of what is being said, and, in the process of saying, defers the
satisfaction of any conclusion, all the while providing aesthetic pleasure that derives from
how well the poet performs his task of deferral. In the process, edges blur, identities
become uncertain, inner landscapes waver and transform into other, stranger landscapes:
"I was nowhere I'd been before, / despite parts I recognized" ("Plumage").

Phillips's method is to parse the failure of intimacy with unrelenting intelligence,
focusing his closest attention on the points of breakdown, although, of course, he is never

able to pinpoint or remedy them. Always, it is language that promises some explanation, some answer, but always it is language, including the speaker's own, that fails him. As if in endless regression, painful questions turn back on themselves; a tentative answer provides only a momentary respite before it, too, yields to further questioning:

What is it you meant to say? What had
I said?

And the snow fell to the same as usual
transfigurational effect, making the world seem
not the world, very briefly, and then what it
always is again: just the world—changed,
changeable.

What happens, I think, is we betray
ourselves first—our better selves, I'd have said once—
and the others after, as if that made knowing
what to call it somehow easier, meaning less
unkind.

Why give it a name? What makes me
want to?

(“The Messenger”)

All there is to hope for is the final, exquisite gesture of letting-go that forms the
conclusion of the title poem, which is also the last poem in the book:

the singer turning this
and that way, as if watching the song itself
—the words to the song—leave him, as he
lets each go, the wind carrying most of it,
some of the words, falling, settling into
instead that larger darkness, where the smaller

darknesses that our lives were lie softly down.

(“Riding Westward”)

The final paradox may be this: that the language Phillips thinks fails him carries us all on
its wings.