Accumulation Strategies: Roger Farr's *Surplus*

Reviewed by Stephen Collis

I have at times (actually most of the time) felt quite dismissive of the sonnet form. For one thing, the sonnet evokes for me an elitist, court culture in which gentleman-poets attempted to out-do one another in "wit," competing for patronage and social position. To write a sonnet in today's world, I'd argue, is on par with the activities of the Society for Creative Anachronism or re-enactments of Civil War battles: it is, quite simply, to fetishize and play-at dead cultures and past glories. Or so I thought. Roger Farr's *Surplus* (LINEbooks 2006)—a long sonnet sequence written and published this decade—has (mostly) convinced me otherwise.

The very portability and continuity of the sonnet—from Sidney and Spenser in the 16th century, through Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Baudelaire in the 19th century, to Ted Berrigan in the 20th—its continued *use value*—marks the sonnet as a collaborative project. Historically, one makes sonnets by reading others' sonnets—thus it is the response genre par excellence. Connectivity is the key: one "understands" a sonnet by its relationship with other sonnets (either the sonnets of other poets the sonnet is a response to—Shakespeare to Spenser, for instance—or other sonnets in the sequence the sonnet in question is a part of—because sonnets have most characteristically been written in sequences). Farr's sonnets are both a departure and a continuation, as he *détournes* the sonnet sequence; where Spenser's "Amoretti" or Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese" explore the many-sidedness of love (the sonnet's chief theme), Farr's are a paean to the resistance to capitalism, from its origins as "primitive accumulation" to its present day globalization.

It is the sonnet's relationship to capitalism that is key in *Surplus*—the crux of the formal contradiction that has mostly left me an anti-sonneteer. On the one hand the sonnet seems pre-eminently closed: its form (always 14 lines, iambic pentameter, a limited set of rhyme schemes) appears to mirror its historical stage (the limited social mobility under totalizing monarchist regimes). It is interesting in this light to note that the sonnet comes into English usage around the time that the enclosure of the English common lands—and thus the "primitive accumulation" of capitalism's opening phase—becomes recognizable (the 16th century). However, as my above comments on the sonnet's "connectivity" and seriality might suggest, the sonnet is also "open" to the extent that its sequences have no necessary limits (Spenser's "Amoretti" includes 89 poems, Berrigan wrote 77, and Shakespeare's top out at 154), and to the extent that other's work in the form is consistently viewed as a common resource for further *poesis*. It might just be possible—in light of Farr's sonnets—to see the historical sonnet as a working out of the dynamics of enclosure: the contesting pressures to privatize (the single sonnet as self-expressive lyric par excellence) and to common (the open sequence and practice of working variations upon others' formal innovations).

Appropriately, Farr's "35 Sonnets" begin with accumulation: "Each day the late-capitalist cache accumulates." The accumulations—primitive and otherwise—of capitalism are mirrored by the accumulation of sonnets in *Surplus*—for 35 pages, the same 14 line blocks of text. But in the two later sections of the book—"Sorry to be Late" and "Secure Channels"—the sonnet form (like late capitalism?) begins to disintegrate and dissolve. In “Sorry to be Late” the 14 line poems are broken into seven couplets, with glaring syntactic ruptures fissuring everywhere. In “Secure Channels,” the book’s final poem, 14 “lines” can still be counted down the page, but they are scattered about a projective field in typically one or two word units; all real sense of the “line” as a unit is gone, and a flood of disconnected details swarms the reader.

Back in “35 Sonnets,” where the accumulations appeared to be proceeding apace, we read:

> Nevertheless, this series can go no
> Further without declaring its intent
> To annul itself as time.

This ironic call to be “annulled…as time” is, I think, related to Marx’s notion that capitalism is impelled to “annihilate space through time”—to turn all human activities into time-based calculations of wage labour, and to erase all spatial barriers to the flow of capital (to, essentially, make capital circulate faster and more freely—for quicker and more consistent returns on investment). As a politics of poetic form, such resistance to temporal dissolution is registered both in the sonnets’ becoming a spatial “field,” by the time we get to “Secure Channels,” as well as the use of the serial form which extends the sonnet in space. Thus *Surplus* can “go no further” without refusing the temporal pressures of the very accumulation it is engaged in.

The contradictions I have located in the sonnet form—that it is both closed and open, an “enclosure” and a “commons”—mirror the same contradictions we find in capitalism—that it erase all spatial borders (annihilating space through time) and, at the same time, that it stake its claim to geographic spatiality (as specific zones to be exploited and unevenly developed). Returning to the first poem in “35 Sonnets,” we see the contradiction set out at the sequence’s point of origin as a tension between “more” and “less”:

> Each day the late-capitalist cache accumulates more
> Data with less hardware, more shoes with fewer
> Factories, more condos with less down, more
> Windows but less air, more leaping but
> Less and less to leap for, or to.

The categories are fairly traditional Marxist ones: as capital accumulates “more,” it does so by leaving workers with “less.” This is the calculation of “surplus value,” which of course hovers blatantly behind Farr’s title. Marx writes, in the *Grundrisse*,

> Capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier …. [I]t is the constant movement to create more of the same. The quantitative boundary of the surplus value appears to it as a mere natural barrier, as a necessity which it constantly tries to violate and beyond which it constantly seeks to go.

The early poems of “35 Sonnets” repeatedly take up the issue of the historical enclosure of the commons, both because it relates to capitalism’s origins and because it is such an excellent image for capitalism's "endless and limitless drive" to eliminate barriers by, paradoxically, making enclosures—a process, as Farr details, that continues today, in accelerated fashion.

> So this is how it begins—
> A simple line, drawn to make a point
> Of entry. And by that act
> "Something" is enclosed. An accumulation
> Is set in motion. Properties, holdings
> Estates of the Real, impenetrable
> In their familiar frames
> (maquiladoras) (coffee plantations) (protest pens)
> Intelligible, but only in an account
> "Written in letters of blood and fire"
> Of the continuity, of the long transition
> Between what was common
> And what is quantifiable
> In the order of signs.

That initial mark that encloses "something" is crucial—for both the poet and the political economist (which Farr clearly is, both, simultaneously, in every instance). David Harvey, writing of the problematics of social change in *Spaces of Hope*, outlines the issue faced by both revolutionaries and poets:

> Closure of any sort contains its own authority because to materialize any one design, no matter how playfully construed, is to foreclose…on the possibility of materializing others.

So once again, in *Surplus*, what "begins" here, with a "simple line, drawn to make a point of entry," is both a recording of the history of capitalist enclosures and the resistance to them—and the long serial poem "35 Sonnets." Taken as paradigmatic of the creative act itself, or as a gesture in a particular tradition of protest poetry, Farr recognizes the dilemma that any move *against power* is itself a deployment *of power*—that to "draw a line" is to enclose "something," and to "set in motion" a process of accumulation. The trick, as he quips elsewhere, is to be "helpful *and* avant-garde." This is where the anarchist-Farr takes over from the Marxist-Farr, quoting Gustav Landauer's comment (in sonnet XXII) that "We are the state, we destroy it by behaving differently." The value of Farr's sonnets—of *Surplus* generally—is their attempt, everywhere, to "behave differently," to realize that to make any sort of mark is to court "authority," but that, at the same time, such authority can also be the authority to change what seems inalterable.

I want to return to Farr's formal play with the sonnet form (though continuing to track the paralleling of poetics and politics the book works so fluidly). The quotation above of sonnet II in its entirety may cause one to wonder if "sonnet" here means nothing more than "a poem of 14 lines." But the poem includes the sonnet's traditional argumentative "turn" or "*volta*," right where it should be—after the octave: the process outlined in the first half of the poem is "Intelligible, *but* only in an account / "Written in letters of blood and fire." The quotation is from

Marx's *Capital*, the chapter on "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation," and refers to the enclosure of the commons by forceful expropriation. Thus a poem that begins almost incidentally, with a "simple line" and the ambiguous enclosure of "something" turns, after the *volta*, into an argument that the seemingly inevitable process is "intelligible" only as a violent and exploitive historical expropriation.

Other poems similarly stage significant *volta's*, as in sonnet X—which is composed entirely of monetary exchanges ("A pula for a peso, a peso for a kroon / A kroon for a dinar, a dinar for a shekel")—which places the "crown jewel" of currencies, the "dollar," at the eighth line (sandwiched between the "euro" and the "pound"). From this point it's all downhill—back to the original "pula" (with, presumably, surplus value extracted in the process). In sonnet XIV (an address to G8 Genoa protest victim Carlo Giuliani)—a poem dripping with the affect of the first person lyric address—the speaker abandons his search for the missing Carlo after the octave: "But you were not there / On that hot street." The poem becomes not a lament for an individual victim so much as one for a world in which capitalism's "Hegemonia" is "encircling the globe."

In terms of the argument (again, both one of poetics and political economy) I see *Surplus* making about the "annihilation" of the spatial, poems XVI and XVII make a striking juxtaposition. The former poses a familiar issue we face under Empire: "There is no / Outside here. Each sector joins another." Capital's urge to expand the market into ever new sectors is reaching its ultimate limit (the entire globe); the ideological wing of this fact is often expressed (enthusiastically) in terms reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher's famous remark that there is "no alternative" to the free market (once the "barrier" of Soviet communism was broken down). Sonnet XVII appears to counter such claims: "Poetry constructs its utopian themes in an obsolete space."

I find this one of the most interesting lines in *Surplus*. Poetry (and especially the sonnet), in this formation, is "obsolete," literally a surplus—a remainder, leftover, vestigial remnant. If rhyme and meter evolved in poetry as mnemonic devices, as is typically supposed, their carryover into the era of print culture is as a remnant and anachronism. Further, poetry as "obsolete space" is a waste—an unimproved (where "improvement," the watchword of the historical enclosures, means both "made better" and "made profitable") domain and forgotten backwater within capital. As poetry became "intellectual property" (in the waves of capitalism converting *everything* into some sort of property), it nevertheless remained a property no one has managed to squeeze any surplus value out of. Poetry is a vacant lot. So while there may be "no outside" to capital, there are abandoned spaces (physical and cultural) within its uneven geographical development.

Farr is holding poetry up as a gap or waste within the body of capital—an "obsolete space" whose improbable persistence enables the construction of "utopian themes." Where "the market prefers narrativity," poetry offers condensation, compression, and fragmentation. Poetry functions as a sort of commons, long after the historical common lands have been enclosed. This literary commons appears in part, in *Surplus*, in the form (typical of the sonnet tradition) of responses to other poets: William Carlos Williams makes his appearance ("So much depends upon…"), as does Rainer Maria Rilke (sonnet XVII is written "after Rilke"). Phyllis Webb—a key influence on Farr's work—makes several appearances, first in sonnet XIX, where her "I am sorry to speak of death again" becomes Farr's "I'm sorry to make of poetry a mockery again," and then again, in sonnet XXX, where Farr gestures towards the same poem (Webb's "Poetics against the Angel of Death"), his "Last night I read Kropotkin" leaping off her "last night Wordsworth's 'Prelude' / suddenly made sense"—and leaping directly into her never-finished "Kropotkin Poems." (Indeed, I'd argue that *Surplus*, as a long poem, is built within the ghostly wreckage of that lost Canadian classic—as I'd like to think some of my own efforts have been. No doubt this is true for other Canadian poets too.)

If poetry is a commons it is so for two main reasons, as far as I can see. First, as a form of "property," it is thoroughly ignored and marginalized within capital (this is not a complaint or a wistful desire to finally get paid for all my surplus literary labour). Second, it seeks everywhere to make connections to other works, either indirectly, though the use of commonly held formal resources (no one has exclusive intellectual property rights to the sonnet), or directly, though responses, allusions, and intertextual ligatures.

There is much more that could be said about this excellent book (for instance, its connection to "protest literature"—one way in here would be through a close reading of "Secure Channels," using Farr's own essay, "Protest Genres and the Pragmatics of Dissent" as a jumping off point). Farr has long been a crucial thinker and poet for many in the Vancouver literary community (and the wider anarchist community). To call this a "first book" isn't very accurate; I, for one, have been reading him for over a decade now. The real pay-off with *Surplus*—why this book matters (and such a book, coming amidst extraordinary new enclosures, neoliberal machinations, and a war without borders or end, could not help but matter)—is the way in which Farr has been able to write simultaneously a book of poetry and of political theory, without one in any way interfering with, or depleting the resources of the other. If "the best lines of this generation are quotations" (yes, another commoning—this time out of Ginsberg), then I can do nothing more appropriate than conclude with a quotation—this one from a recipe for hope:

> The rest is easy—
> Add water, bring to a boil, and simmer.
> Distribute to each, according to need.

Works Cited

Harvey, David. *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*. Trans. Martin Nicolaus. London: Penguin, 1973.

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