

Breaking Spirals: Christine Leclerc's *Counterfeit*

Reviewed by Cris Costa

It might have been the band of cello players covering classic-metal songs during the intermissions, or the soft foggy October evening and the newly built urban-chic event space located in the middle of the cemetery, or maybe it was the actual poetry; but I think I'm safe in claiming that Christine Leclerc's reading of her first poetry collection, *Counterfeit*, at Capilano University Editions' first season launch (Fall 2008) ranks amongst the most compelling readings of free verse I've seen. Leclerc's delivery of the poems deserves a review in and of itself—it was captivating, interesting, affective. And I wasn't the only one who felt that way. Her book had the highest sales of the evening. Still hot off the press (literally), all the copies brought to the launch were sold, and Leclerc (having given away her own copy) left the launch empty handed.

I was worried that my initial enthusiasm for the book would be curbed when I read it, because a good performance can give a lot to a text, but it turned-out to be one of those books that asks you to look again, to see what else there is in and between the lines. The collection is a mix of free verse, prose-poetry, and theatrical scripts, sometimes switching between forms within poems. Not bent on language poetry, feminist or political poetry, or even 'straightforward' free verse—the collection interrogates these things seamlessly. Though they don't conform to any prescriptive aesthetic, the poems flow in an Ashbery-esque fashion with an underlying self-reflexivity that isn't confused with self-absorption. There's also an element of playfulness throughout the text, in some cases gesturing towards *play*. The poems are fun, lighthearted, childlike. When you look closer they reveal a criticality, a turn on the reader and themselves.

The opening poem eases the reader into the text though suggesting what the following pages might hold. A facetious title, "The Stranger Thinks in a Rehearsed Dispersal of Shards," the poem turns the lens from the speaker onto the reader, where the reader is the "stranger" and the location of reflection:

The far away notation,
a tight-lipped nurse.
Pull now for a new liver.

A ballpoint pen fills with lymphatic fluid.

This fall the footsteps sound like leather, antelope-like.

Bring new apples named Pasquale.

Make plans for a new liver.

Make plans for a new antelope.

I threw you in the water, yes.

But only after I heard you say:
I don't know how to swim.

A scalloped distance
 cuts the shore. And antelopes bobbing
 for apples at sea. (9)

Bobbing at sea, the reader is pulled into the production of meaning, swimming through the “rehearsed dispersal of shards”—the lexicon, or poetry—trying to get an apple, with bodies (antelopes) that aren’t designed to swim. Or perhaps, drowning trying to produce meaning for a poem that resists a central reading. Attention to words like “nurse” and “liver,” or the symbolic significance of the sea can potentially suggest a type of intoxication—of what? Is this substance “lymphatic”? And one must also ask: Who is the “you”? You, the reader, or a rhetorical *I*? Perhaps it is *you*, as another character in the narrative. Like Ashbery’s poetry, this was written to resist a central metaphor, to resist an absolute message. As the famous lines of “Paradoxes and Oxymorons” read: “This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level. / Look at it talking to you. You look out the window / Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don’t have it” (Ashbery 3).

Not surprisingly, Leclerc gestures to Ashbery in a tactile way. Intentional or not, her book is the same shape, size, thickness of Ashbery’s *Shadow Train*. It’s even all grey with only a thin black line on the cover. Ashbery’s design is a looping line (a two dimensional image), half of it is buried in a grey substance so that the top half looks like the trimming around a garden. Leclerc goes in for the full-fledged spiral. On the front cover the spiral is double, opened close to the centre, looking like Deleuze and Guattari’s depiction of the circular regime of the signs (*A Thousand Plateaus* 135), where the open center allows for movement within the circular network. On the back-cover the spiral is found in fragments. The poetry in the text functions as a new signifying regime, an “authoritarian,” “passional” regime, where “a sign or packet of signs detaches from the irradiating circular network [already established in/as the symbolic] and sets to work on it’s own account ... as though swept into a narrow, open passage” (121).

So it’s in this vein that Leclerc presents her text, not always directly forcing attention to the text as such, but reexamining all meaning in a surreal account of experience, drawing upon textual gestures already existing, but making them relevant to a 21st century reader.

We just kind of lost touch,
 the world and I.

There was love of cabinetmakers.

Love like flash light in a subway tunnel
 where the train ain’t gonna go no more.

Love of muddy raincoats, love of crimped hair, love of the night monkey,
 love of the shoehorn. Love of flies.

When we talk about some thing or some idea, we often assume
that the “thing” or “idea” has a higher degree of existence than
the “talk about”. (12)

This poem, “Kinds of Love,” places the overindulged/overwrought theme (love) in a superficial montage of contemporary images (i.e. subway tunnels vs the trains of modern literature; stopping the moving train), rearticulating their place in our psyches, in how we read them, while the lineation allows for sub-readings. The indented stanza differs in tone, and functions as a voice that sounds exterior to the poem, as if coming from the margins or a footnote. It implicates the reader as a part of a “we” who shares a mode of thinking, the reader as a subject who operates in a predetermined ideology which the speaker can identify; later extending this idea by omitting words and using underscores in their place, forcing the reader to insert the right word, “tainted _____,” though suggesting it need not be so.

A cultural critique emerges in the poems further into the collection. “The Usher” (16) plays with a cinema setting, and situated in an usher’s pillbox the speaker narrates an encounter with a character who steals an usher’s uniform, and whose gender morphs (remaining undetermined) while drugs are administered. The poem upholds an uncanny, surrealistic atmosphere and a symbolist approach. The words are to be read with multiple significance. The “uniform” reads like a war uniform, and the “pillbox” the small fortresses that machine gun armed soldiers used in war. The androgynous figure’s trials are described: “Withdrawn from jail like a book from a library. Jailed for a beating. This or that beating. Beating his mother’s rapist.” Drawing our attention to text (“book from a library”) and juxtaposing it to a violent event in the setting of a “movie theatre” and the projections therein, the speaker moves from the image of rape to “shimmers . . . in the lamplight” and “I was multiple, in love,” concluding the poem with the evasion of death.

Taking for granted that *unsettling* is a good thing in poetry, the following poem, “Dinner Party,” operates similarly, and plays with the form of the Theatre of the Absurd. With a “Ghost as Choir,” the play satirizes the subject’s reaction to a tragic event—the death of a child in a car accident—using a conversation between characters named Ghost, Pile of Dust, Perfection, and Chaos, who quickly move from discussing the child (over dinner), to a ludicrous conversation about the event seen on television: “A. Who told you? / Q. I saw it on tv. There were people with interests— / Vested interests in the child. / A. There will be no talk of vests here! // Chaos asks: What does a vested interest look like?” (19)

Avoiding slap-you-in-the-face-feminism, the later poems of the collection have a visible feminist edge. It comes out in smart, quick snippets, which are more critical of the ways women perpetuate the gender myth than they are a blaming of the male sex. In “Slideshow” the speaker declares: “I may want a wife and kids, / but it’s you who works in construction” (23), and in “The Role of Synapse, or Fall Collection” (32) the narrator follows the story of a woman who, while shopping, encounters guerilla poets who in turn tell her the world is ending. She doesn’t know what to make of it, so she calls her father’s prostate specialist to confirm this information (35), and upon the confirmation she “wonder[s] if the end of the world was like a permanent mall closure.” And in the following prose-poem/skit-poem, “No Man” (36), a speaker, “I am No Man of No Man’s Land,” addresses power-relations on various scales, in personal relationships,

employer-employee relationships, and power structures linked to capital in a complex, gender-obscured, series of subtitled pieces ending with a meta-theatrical scene. In all three cases, the issue of gender and power are shown as indirectly tied to class and the economy.

There are a couple of poems in the collection that read like fillers, and should have been left out. “I am Breathing” (44) reads like fragments of thought that never made it to poem, or a heavily erased confessional poem, and “Tub of Lard” (48) reeks of confession. They may not be confessional. Throughout the text, Leclerc proves time and again (and quite well in “Barbershop” (26)—a poem about a young boy who is a bit of a simpleton, appearing incapable of learning more, or is made incapable by his mother), that she isn’t hung up on writing confessional poetry. Still, those poems stand out from the rest of the text—they are less mature and would have fared better left in the diary. They aim to evoke some kind of empathy in the reader, but fall flat. “Barbershop,” on the other hand, plays with sound, line and rhythm, changes of voice and form, which comes off particularly well in performance, when Leclerc moved into the character, also miming the small diagram within. Sure enough, that performance translates to the page, and it makes for an interesting and moving read.

The variety of forms in the text makes the collection good for reading in increments. That is to say, because of the aesthetic variations, the book doesn’t lend itself to a long evening reading poetry under a blanket. It’s the kind of collection that you turn to when you need a break. Some of the characters linger with you for a while, follow you around. Though it’s not break your heart, dump your partner and start a revolution poetry, the collection is refreshing, innovative, and fun to read, and it does what it sets out to do. It asks you to think about language in a social context, it asks you to think about poetry and where poetry can take you.

Works Cited:

Ashbery, John. *Shadow Train*. New York: Penguin, 1981.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.

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