

*No Surplus of Courage*

**The Poetry of Roger Farr and Reg Johanson**

Reviewed by Greg Placonouris

Who would want to disturb norms of recognition

With stock poetic devices that only remind you  
All about the airwaves circulating with such  
Nonchalance in the traffic as it moves along  
Kits beach across the vast network of exchanges  
(Corporeal and corporate the market guru says  
Terror marks the rise and fall of stocks the lingo  
Of the free fall into the maelstrom of fortune's arms (63)

--from "There Are Some Days" by Roy Miki  
*There* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2006)

Roger Farr's *Surplus* (2006) and Reg Johanson's *Courage, My Love* (2006) are evidence that poetry still has a startling ability to disturb and provoke. Farr and Johanson are both English instructors at Capilano University in North Vancouver and both have been associated with the Kootney School of Writing (KSW). Farr and Johanson (along with Aaron Vidaver) make up the membership of the *Pacific Institute for Language and Literacy Studies*--this triumvirate recently co-published a book with texts by Farr and Johanson, and a collection of photographs by Vidaver. Despite their similarities, differences in terms of form, content and ideology gave me cause for concern in reviewing the two books as a pair: are these volumes really that similar? Aren't there strong stylistic differences between Johanson's *Courage, My Love* and Farr's *Surplus*? Do the poets and the poems share interests? Why review Farr and Johanson's books together anyway?

Leaving the fruitless question of "Why do anything at all?" aside (for the time being), reflections on the question of coupling (figuratively) Farr and Johanson brought forth the many reasons to do so: Farr and Johanson were both educated at Simon Fraser University, both were members of the KSW collective and both poets have read at Kootney School readings. Also, both Farr and Johanson are interested in oppositional poetry, as well as the importance of language in struggles for social change. Notably, *Surplus* and *Courage, My Love* were both published by LINEbooks, part of a simultaneous release of four books by British Columbia poets.

Despite considerable intertextual and interpersonal connections, after reading and re-reading their respective volumes, one has the sense that Johanson and Farr remain in solidarity with each other, despite the important differences between them. Significantly, these two poets complicate (and at times bury) individual difference in elaborate bricolages of quotations, minor jokes, media releases, US Army policy statements and propaganda, grocery store prices, references to sociology, puns, arcane citations, newspaper articles, delusions, confessions, hallucinations, and the odd list. To my mind, the use of found poetry, political texts and events, in addition to self-criticism of their own tendency to rely on reference and quotation, “thickens” the work of Farr and Johanson--and creates the kind of *caesura* that fascinated Paul de Man.

That said, both Roger Farr and Reg Johanson, explicitly and implicitly, seem to espouse a materialist conception of literature in which power and knowledge (as they have been since Nietzsche) are inextricably linked; this provides great material for their poetry. Like Michel Foucault, they are concerned with the manner in which language (and the systems of thought it produces) serve to control and rationalize various kinds of inequity and authoritarianism. Rather than a sunny (and respectful) plain-language world of sonnets and bonnets, Farr and Johanson's poetry reveals the curious Janus-face of the English language as a means of communication, *as well as*, a constitutive product of social psychology (especially in relation to Louis Althusser's notion of “interpellation”), class (how materialism literally produces “things” called words, hence, social structures) and the various ways that gender (perhaps influenced by Judith Butler) is constructed and functions: Farr eloquently protests the subjugation of women in English-language society in his poetry; Johanson parodies a number of English tropes as he archly articulates some of the contemporary paradoxes of masculinity.

In addition to their shared concern with the tension between power and knowledge, Farr and Johanson are interested in the effects and products of the mass media--in both *Surplus* (Farr) and *Courage, My Love* (Johanson) the mass media are shown to be radically heterogeneous forces in Canadian, American and European society. However, neither Farr nor Johanson bow before the mere appearance of “pluralism” and “polyphony”. Instead, in a manner seemingly influenced by Raymond Williams and Noam Chomsky, for both Farr and Johanson, the mass media (particularly television and print media) signify the ability of the wealthy (and powerful) members of the dominant ideology to use communication techniques in order to “manufacture consent” and (as George Orwell warned) to use language to control and imprison, rather than to liberate and enlighten. Farr and Johanson (arguably) suggest that poetry offers a means of resistance to the worrying aspects of power in contemporary society.

Farr elegantly critiques both capitalism, neo-liberalism and the ability of the state to market these elitist constructs:

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. (9)

Similarly, but with more sarcasm, Johanson writes:

Radical democracy means subsidized housing for intellectuals.

After you're done with the symbolic order can we go  
go outside and vandalize newspaper boxes?

Who is the David Frum of CanLit?

What will we do when there are no more Liberals?

Faith-based political science. (63)

In the excellent “New Country” Johanson includes a list of “Concerts” (44) he has seen between 1978 and 2001. The list begins with the lovable but apolitical (at best) “10CC” (44) and ends with the British singer and activist, “Billy Bragg”. (44) To my mind, the inclusion of these sorts of (possibly) impenetrable signifiers increases possibilities for the reception of Johanson's poetry.

In terms of a poetic strategy, Johanson constructs linguistic models to represent post-modernism as (in Frederick Jameson's words) *the logic of late capitalism*. Johanson then circumvents his seemingly terminal linguistic models through parataxis: inseminating subjectivity (by way of reference and quotation) into his newly constructed *prison houses of language* (to ride that Jameson train). For example in “Chips” (the first of *Courage's* five sections) a student loan officer forcefully tries to argue with an unnamed person (a former student, now a teacher, possibly Johanson) over a student loan debt. Johanson as agitprop pop rebel is soon plunged (in the following poem, “Citizen's Arrest”) into a “cast” (a pall?) of characters (somewhat reminiscent of the twisted outlaws, nova mob agents and liquefactionists in the routines of William Burroughs), including: “*Bob Fran, a retired army officer*” (27) “*Jane Rang*” (28) who has begun “*a new business called Jane Rang's reality*” (28), “*Paul Regan, bookkeeper of the Hampton Co.*” (29)--as well as Chuck Berry (28), “*Mr Vice-President*” (29), “*Harry Swag*” (30) “*Janet Smothers*” (31), “*Dick Burns*” (31), “*Ol' Dominant*” (32), “*Crystal Bell*” (33), and then, abruptly-- “*Colin*” (37) --a tip of the hat to Colin Smith, an influential poet and long time associate (as it were) of the Kootney School of Writing. Like Smith, Johanson

parodies and memorializes the self as a construction of the words of others (*la langue*), threaded through the subjective experiential type-writing (to misuse a notion of Timothy Leary's) of subjective existence (*la parole*). Thus, in Johanson the personal becomes political, which becomes material for poetry: something to be celebrated as well as contested.

Similarly, in Roger Farr's "XIX", (one of the thirty-five sonnets which make up the first of *Surplus's* three parts), while describing an Allen Ginsberg-like visit to a local *Safeway*, Farr includes the fact that he spent "...3.38 on mozzarella cheese, \$1.04 on Mackintosh Apples/\$2.29 on fresh basil, \$1.10 on hot-house tomatoes." (27) The inclusion of these at once totally impersonal, yet highly idiosyncratic signifiers (as constituents for poetry) humanizes the signs themselves--in a sense, Farr manages to liberate dollars and cents from the tyranny of their materialist significations. Price notwithstanding, who wouldn't want to have a (very) modest picnic--while reading some significant poetry? *Everyman I go with thee...*

However, as Fred Wah points out in his poetics statement concerning his long poem, "The Dendrite Map" (published in Sharon Thesen's second edition of *The New Long Poem Anthology*) poets and critics might have concerns about the way that "paradigmatically, thought and language can become suffixed in a kind of avalanche of word-scare that settles out further down the slope." (493) Thankfully, Farr and Johanson (and this reader, it is to be hoped) manage to escape being buried by an avalanche of sociological references, political events, and the inclusion of a number (especially in Johanson) of wicked puns and other word play.

As I conclude my discussion I must point out that I have regrettably left a number of stones unturned in my (thwarted) discussion of the poetry of Roger Farr and Reg Johanson. For instance, there is the important matter of the difference in attention to the subject of form--Farr's writing (especially in his "35 Sonnets") investigates formalist concerns, while mining previous literary forms, much more consciously than Johanson's work does. At times the condensation of accumulated literary history in *Surplus* becomes painful--it is a marvel to experience the manner in which Farr raises the rhetoric of his sonnets to a fever pitch--and then manages to soothe with erudite and humane observations on contemporary life.

I have neglected to discuss the importance of prosody in *Courage, My Love* as well as the relationship (on the level of the sentence) that Johanson's writing has with writers as diverse as Baudelaire and Susan Sontag--as well as the manner in which Johanson troubles the customary distinction between poetry and prose. In so doing, *Courage, My Love* (as does *Surplus*, with the inclusion of prose in what are ostensibly sonnets) references and contests the textual debates between structuralists and post-structuralists, traditionalists and deconstructionists.

To address the matter far too briefly, I would argue that Farr's poetry uses form to

deconstruct formalist concerns, while Johanson's poetry deftly manages to elide any and all definitions of form.

I have left (to an unspecified later date) ruminations about the role of humour (often caustic, sometimes black, sometimes highly oblique) in the work of Farr and Johanson. In addition, I have not even begun to account for their shared concerns with (local and international) history, cultural memory, colonialism, imperialism and increasingly bureaucratic nation-states. Not to mention the influence of Aaron Vidaver and Dorothy Trujillo-Lusk on both parties.

I will conclude with the (easy) observation that much more more scholarship needs to take place before we can be said to have anything resembling comprehension of these two important writers. "The local", as George Bowering says, "is eternal"--Roger Farr and Reg Johanson are two vital contemporary voices--their subversive and compassionate localized texts confront the "eternal" *verities* of poetry: what are poets for, who decides what is considered beautiful, how much does a meal cost, and who goes hungry?

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