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SOME TEXTURAL RIFFS

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“bent in think mittens useless as news”
—David Meltzer

I’m not aware of other poets practicing language as language in quite similar fashion to Edmund Berrigan, Jeff Karl Butler, and John Coletti. With quacky determinism each turns increasingly away from writing line by line, in some syntactical sense, towards a rather word-by-word sonic jumpiness (think of the beans); image, let alone meaning, is at points directly challenged. As Berrigan attests in an on-line interview with *Here Comes Everybody*, “I work on a word-to-word basis, and prefer collage to philosophy.” A sort of musical affinity which defies common conversational currency becomes immediately apparent. Don Byrd’s remarks on Clark Coolidge in *Stations #5: A Symposium On Clark Coolidge* approach the matter:

Our words come together too readily in patterns which have found their authority in simple power: the power which public figures have by their access to the language-forming media; by the power of the advertising dollar to transform habits of the most basic kinds of language use; and, I suspect most insidiously, the power from which other poets have shaped the language to a fierce rightness.

However, the poets under discussion don’t fully align with Coolidge’s inclinations. Each has come of age in the three decades since Byrd’s writing and Coolidge has moved into the role of being a fore-figure to their work. At the very least, his own work has been “in the air” if not at hand for each to advance upon as they will and certainly there’s little interest in repeating what’s come before.

The bop prosody pointing towards near-complete abstraction in much of Coolidge has a somewhat hesitating presence in the work of these poets, musical inclinations being a shared endeavor. Coolidge is well known as an avid drummer and jazz enthusiast. His interest in drumming transfers itself into the writing, hitting resonant beats where language, as such, has no grounds and exists in and of its own occurrence, propelling itself as if forever. Berrigan and Butler have shown interest in the guitar and composition of lyrics, for Berrigan in the strain of folk song funk, and for Butler a murgence of ballad meeting free jazz out in the land of far out. Berrigan, as *I Feel Tractor*, has released a cd and plays live shows while Butler has explored forming a band, *The Clinks*, going as far as to recruit members, amplifying toy instruments, writing several sets of lyrics, and setting down some initial track recordings in his basement. Coolidge oftener than not drums for his own benefit, while Berrigan and Butler pursue music as performance, relying heavily upon the writing of lyrics—each of their

practical abilities on an instrument, the guitar, is proficient at best (I hope neither of them hears this as disparagement.) Coletti for his part, to the best of my knowledge, has parried any musical practice. However, the sounds words make beyond meaning or connotation run through his poems and he joins Berrigan and Butler in rollicking snap and sense extraction word by word, dazzling up the page with chunks of new lore embedding “story” throughout, albeit if at first unrecognizably, anew.

Language is musical at its roots. Poetry born entirely out, or at the primary beckoning, of “meaning” —look no farther than the product of standard MFA production mills of the 1980s—misses the joy of this fact. Word is thing. Things clunk. As Basil Bunting writes in a letter to Alan Neame in 1951, “I do not see why people should want to ‘understand’ everything in a poem” and Bunting as much as Coolidge is a ready-mate to these poets. Words sing and song is for the birds. That is all any poet may hope to match up to: the unintelligibility that is quite intelligible as one walks down the street and hears song rising out from the branches & eaves above. Or, to put it conversationally, as in Jean-Luc Goddard’s *La Chinoise*: “to talk to each other as if words were sounds and matter.” To be reminded of what is at peril in every moment of being.

There is architecture behind it all. By way of a withholding bit of intensity, resistant wit undergirds the poems with abiding patience. Surprisingly, there is no hurry. These poems indulge within completely separate space of their own making. As if saying, “go on out and do your own bit, we’ll stay here doing our own thing.” Cool as that sounds is as cool as the page gets. These poets have taken a well measured look about, soaked up the social along with the aesthetic, gained some ground and taken it from there. This is contemporary territory of singular creation. Not myth-making and without grand self-embellishment, each follows his own sense of the matter arriving at a dialogue of consensus. To my own ear, it’s as if hearing similar conversations in different parts of a large room during a party and eager to hear more of what each is saying I pursue them, wishing to bring them together. The possibilities of engagement entice.

Basil Bunting notes in his lecture, “The Codex,” speaking of work by early scribes, “... the letters are rarely alike; you’ll find C made in one line in half-a-dozen ways. And so on. And every letter was drawn with much preliminary cogitation, much considering how its shape would affect the shapes of the letters on the page.” Bunting’s emphasis upon the physicality of the letters as “drawn” is especially relevant to preoccupations of these poets. Such is the grounding sought by the poems. The title of one of Coletti’s latest collections, *Physical Kind*, states it plainly. Bunting goes on to say, “That is the way you’ve got to write poetry, you know: every word has got to be thought of with all that care.” Whatever words won’t do words do in these poems. Both pressure and depth, come again. Action of thought language turns against. Chalk it up to over-spirited will or possible excess, but not lassitude. Each of these poets bears down upon their poems with Bunting’s clarity of focus and a willingness to resist Byrd’s “habits of the most basic kind of language use” while simultaneously spinning such “habits” to further challenge any “authority.” These poets write above all for pleasure and freedom opposed to the mechanizing cultural doom which engulfs daily life with ever threatening gloom. The ear seeks change as rapidly as the eye adjusts and thought thuds right along. Ring in the poems of tomorrow.