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Disch is not a poet of uniform achievement, but his best work shows a range of tone and formal skill unusual in contemporary poetry. He is an accomplished satirist and humorist, but can explore serious subjects with equal skill and finesse; he frequently works in both modes at once. And while he can work skillfully in free verse (more often than not to mock it), his greater accomplishment is the ease and variety of his traditional measures. He is a poet of urbanity and wit, traits that his criticism, collected in *The Castle of Indolence*, also displays. It took time for Disch's reputation to come close to his achievement; like other poets of his generation, such as Ted Kooser, he needed an early, mid-career new and selected poems to simply announce his excellence to a larger audience than the tiny circle of admirers who had sustained his early reputation. But as *Dark Verses and Light* demonstrates, Disch is now in the prime of his work.

Inner and Outer Drama: Frederick Feirstein

Among the Expansive poets, Frederick Feirstein's (born 1940) work may be among the most expansive—in the general sense of that term. His work combines a satirist's worldly eye, a consistent formalism, and a dramatic impulse that seeks out larger forms and sequences. Though his poetry is more notable for its ideas and stories than its formal qualities—Feirstein's work does not dazzle with its musicality—his work's mixture of narrative and discursive elements is singular within the school. His use of the sequence allows him to delve more deeply into his subjects than most poets, and also allows his work to accommodate a wide range of styles, forms and tones.

Feirstein has published seven books: *Survivors* (1975), *Manhattan Carnival* (1981), *Fathering* (1982), *Family History* (1986), *City Life* (1991), *Ending the Twentieth Century* (1995), and *New and Selected Poems* (1998). All feature extended narrative and dramatic sequences that take a sharp look, variously comic and sober, at contemporary culture. This discussion will focus on his two most recent books, *City Life* and *Ending the Twentieth Century*, which contain some of his strongest and most representative work.

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City Life is divided into two sequences, "Larry's Neighborhood" and "The Psychiatrist at the Cocktail Party." The latter is the more interesting, and more complex, of the two. Spoken in the voices of numerous characters, "The Psychiatrist at the Cocktail Party" is a comic soap opera that explores several themes: the troubled relationships of Larry and his fiancée Joyce, and Renee and her husband Meato; the Republican radical chic of Latin American rebellion (the party's guest of honor is the rebel leader of Quistador, a fictional country); and the wry perspective of Ben Struthers, the psychiatrist whose point of view provides the narrative's anchor. The iambic poems, written in a variety of rhyming schemes, shift through a multitude of voices—some are addressed to the psychiatrist, others are spoken by him, and others provide additional perspective and narrative elements.

If the psychiatrist provides the anchoring perspective, the sequence's action revolves around Larry, the host of the cocktail party. This becomes evident in the sequence's opening poem, "Larry Corners the Psychiatrist." In short order, Larry confesses he is having second thoughts about marrying Joyce; that he has an oedipal fascination with women, alternately turned on and repulsed by what he perceives as their resemblance to his mother; and his emerging attraction to Renee, an old college friend married to the wealthy "Meato," who owns a chain of butcher shops. These stanzas capture his neurotic indecisiveness:

I can't believe that I am fidgety

Around Renee, and that the Meat King
Her husband—that fat, that ignorant, that crass
Wholesale butcher is what I really crave,
That somewhere in me I am conjuring
His slipping a long bratwurst up my ass!
I am my mother's not my father's slave!

I was attracted to Renee in school,
Before the Meat King crawled into her bed.
But then I wasn't rich enough, an heir,

Just a Momma's boy, a cheerleader, a fool.
But now, however, I am debonair,
A boy to flirt with, now that my father's dead. (41-42)

Ben is impatient with Larry's angst: "All day I hear my patients
curse their fate,/How psychologically they recreate/Their parents'
tyrannizing them with guilt/Until their penises refuse to tilt" (43).
He advises Larry: "I don't speak glibly when I say rejoice,/Suffer
your neuroses. But marry Joyce" (44). Joyce, however, has her own
ideas. Addressing the psychiatrist later, she notes of his wife:

Where's Mary? I hope she isn't ill. She
Doesn't take much care of your . . . her body. Larry
Is somewhere back there asking someone if
He finally ought to take the plunge and marry.
What do I want to do? Pour me a stiff
Drink and I'll tell you. (49)

Joyce and Larry are not the only ones who seek out Ben's advice.
Meato, the butcher, plans to send Renee to him: "I'm a man of
wealth/Who'll pay what's necessary till this strife/Between us
ends" (52). He observes her dancing with another man—"Look at
what she does to me!" (53)—who encourages her to get even with
her husband: "the way to slap her husband for the shrink—/Sending
he wants to do is piss/Him off right away by taking Larry for a
ride/In Meato's big back-seated Rolls (Un!) Royce" (55).

At this point, the sequence veers away from the love storyline to
discuss other characters, including a Yuppie headhunter (only
metaphorically cannibalistic) "who's forced to work,/Eat, screw and
read *The Wall Street Journal* in one/Room smaller than this living
room" (62); the Guest of Honor, the rebel leader of Quistador; and
Mark Stern, owner of a souvenir business. These serve mainly to ar-
tificate the feel of a cocktail party, but otherwise add little to the
main story, which resumes with Ben—the psychiatrist—making a
move of his own on a willing Joyce:

Let's take my car and fill it up with gas
And sit like teenagers together, ass to ass

And ride, who cares! tonight to Timbuktu.
I'll call my wife and tell her I love you,
And call my service, cancel everyone,
And you'll call Larry, call your mangy son,
And if somebody goes out of his mind . . .
We haven't much time left till we are dead.
Joyce, I'm tired of living in my head.
Get your bag, and leave your keys behind.
Come, help me dig my coat out of your bed.
It's nearly tomorrow now. It's time we fled. (72)

Similarly, Larry decides to put his engagement to Joyce out of its misery by leaving with Renee. He tells Ben, not yet knowing Ben has enticed Joyce:

What will happen to my life
If I give up my values, give up Joyce
And run away to Jersey with *his* wife?
Tell me I have a will. I have a choice,
That she is just my mother in disguise,
That I'm crossing my hands over my cock
Because her looking at me makes it rise,
Puts me in mortal terror of the clock.

She's given me ten minutes to decide,
The whimsical controlling little bitch.
She is the mob, taking me for a ride.
But I am going crazy with this itch!
Tell Joyce, my guest of honor—Honor!—I
Am fighting for my life and had to run,
That I am just an ordinary guy
Who wants the Prom Queen, wants to be twenty-one.
This dread is contagious. What about you?
You're my age, Ben. Stop me from what I'm going to do.
(73-74)

Renee's motives for leaving Meato are less mixed. Meato is lousy in bed:

Didn't he say he's limp
And thinks I'm a slut, impure
For wanting sex? That oaf, that wimp,
That king of everybody's meat
But his—that's why he acts macho,
Wrecking furniture when I cheat.
Big man, grabbing a chair or table,
Or going on t.v. as "Meato,"
The hairy star of late-night cable. (75)

Larry summons Renee to go. Meanwhile, Joyce's son—who acknowledges he's gay—runs off to join the revolution in Quistador, even though the Guest of Honor collapses, drunk (83).

"The Psychiatrist's Epilogue" concludes the sequence in which Ben, the morning after, waxes philosophical on fate:

No matter what religion we profess
—Therapy, politics—we can only guess
Our fates, and then they prove us wrong. The wheel
Of Fortune must hand us a dirty deal.
But in the meantime, let's watch the dust appear
To dance in the sunlight, as I'm standing here,
As last night, another life ago,
We swore that we'd be young and simply go.
But now that seems a gesture we have to make,
Therapeutic, for our soul's or psyche's sake.
You feel the same—to leave or not to leave,
To rock and roll the moment that we grieve,
Or else to find your son and me my wife,
Return to an irrevocably altered life.
What shall we do? says the Mentor to his Joyce.
Be old or young again? What's your choice? (84–85)

This is, in one sense, an anti-climactic conclusion. No deep insight results. In part, however, that is the point of "The Psychiatrist at the Cocktail Party." The sequence is chiefly a satire of the shallow dimensions of contemporary culture, especially of mid-life adults; their evanescent relationships and casual politics. Love comes and

goes; couples switch partners; no one fights for relationships or principles; life is adrift, unsettled. As Feirstein puts it in a critical afterword to *Ending the Twentieth Century*:

The material I found myself drawn to over the past ten years had to do with a phenomenon many of us seemed to be experiencing, especially as we were moving toward middle age—that of deeply valuing our civilization and working for its continuity in an age that seemed to be in a mid-life crisis itself and frivolously divesting itself of its history, values and culture. (52)

What is love? What is worth fighting for? These characters are desperate to keep the energy of their youth and escape the misery of their middle-aged lives, even if they have to destroy everything to do so. But they have really lost, and gained, nothing; everything, and everyone, is interchangeable. As Ben asks Joyce: “Be old or young again? What’s your choice?” That is the satiric point of “The Psychiatrist at the Cocktail Party.” Though the poem is a witty portrait of a particular group of narcissistic, middle-aged urbanites, it is also more broadly applicable.

As Feirstein notes in the afterword to *Ending the Twentieth Century*, his vision of humanity shifted from comedic to tragic as he wrote the poems collected in his most recent volume: “as we moved through the eighties and into the nineties, the public losses we were imposing on ourselves began to feel like the repeated personal losses I’d been suffering” (52). The poems in *Ending the Twentieth Century* take deeply as their subject the end of the century; they consider the century’s history in both personal and political terms. The book, like *City Life*, is divided into two sequences. “Manhattan Elegies and Other Goodbyes,” the first part, moves primarily throughout the local landscapes of New York City. In “Creature of History,” the focus is more historical, with the poems recording Feirstein’s travels through Europe and his meditations on the bloody history of Europe in the twentieth century.

“Manhattan Elegy,” which gives the first sequence its title, is chiefly a walk through memory. The poem is short enough to quote in full:

The past is like a library after dark
 Where we sit on the steps trading stories
 With characters we imagined ourselves to be.
 Neighbors in clothing from our childhood stroll by,
 Unmolested, nodding at us, benevolently.
 One with your father's face tips his fedora.
 You lower your eyes in shame. I look back.
 Someone is sitting at a long table,
 Reading in the moonlight. I must look startled.
 He holds a forefinger to his lips
 As if it is a candle for the dead.
 You tap me on the shoulder and I turn back.
 The street is dangerously empty
 Except for the newsstand lit yellow,
 Where your mother in a nightgown
 Showing beneath her blue coat buys the *Times*,
 A pack of *Kools* and, eyeing us, lights one.
 You race to her, turn a corner. Goodbye.
 I'm frightened, as if I am a foreigner
 In a city under siege. Yet I know
 It is still mid-century. Underground
 Are only subways carrying boisterous
 Party-goers or somber family men
 Working the night shift or harmless bookies
 Respectful of the No Smoking signs.
 I walk to where the newsstand, shut,
 Advertises brand names I'd forgotten.
 I shove my hands into my pockets and whistle
 A song we danced to when we were young.
 I walk on for blocks, until I smell
 Smoke from the burning borough of the Bronx. (7)

The poem, written in blank verse, draws an implicit contrast between the New York City of Feirstein's youth and the similar landscape today. Much has changed. Is it possible to imagine a safe, polite subway in today's New York? Not likely. The poem's affection for the past—the New York of the mid-twentieth-century—risks sentimentality, but stops short through its close scrutiny of the smallest

details of human life in 1950s New York. Indeed, the landscape is positively strange to Feirstein from his adult perspective: "I'm frightened, as if I am a foreigner." In a real sense, he is. Through its specifics of memory, the poem avoids the sentimental generalizations that are always the potential of elegies, especially poems that remember youth.

If "Manhattan Elegy" explores history and the past in personal terms, "Survivor," from the book's second half, shifts the focus to a larger perspective:

Hid from Death, you collapse
Into your father's armchair,
As if in his arms, and ease
Into the timid wisdom of middle age.
You stare at your fruit trees where deer nibble,
At the soft autumn sky, its cirrus clouds
Drifting harmlessly as a child's thoughts,
At your carefully tended perennial garden
And abundant grape arbor and clipped lawn,
Thinking how illusory you are,
How shock weakens and repeated shock exhausts,
And how, despite our knowledge and best intentions,
Death repeatedly commits mayhem,
Private and public, as in the newspaper on your lap
Where Serbs slash breasts of women they've raped,
Burn their children, castrate their husbands . . .
You look away. Over the pine trees, your pine trees,
A hawk lifts a screaming rabbit in its claws,
Spiraling higher and higher into abstraction
Like the numbers of dead in the newspaper
Or the death-toll of your extended family:
Mother, father, sister, uncle, aunts
Who lived with you and had real names,
Who sat laughing with you over pot roast
And potatoes, red wine, and ginger ale
In that mythic kitchen in your childhood home.
Someone else's childhood. You look down at faces

Made of newsprint—shocked faces, grieving faces, accepting faces,
At cities like yours, sane in their architecture,
Efficient and health-conscious, except for the clouds
Of artillery smoke and gigantic Death,
Stepping between office towers, his machete
Real, sharp, relentless, indiscriminate. (49)

This poem is chiefly a meditation on the accidents of birth that lead some people to lives of terror and death, and others to lives of peace and prosperity. Feirstein alludes to some of the century's European conflicts, including the bloodiness in Bosnia; he also alludes to the Holocaust, which has touched his family, though Feirstein himself is American-born. Death strikes, "real, sharp, relentless, indiscriminate," yet it has missed Feirstein, who watches deer nibble the leaves of fruit trees near his lawn, a place as far from the blood of history as one could imagine. The poem's clarity and brisk formalism make its points especially effectively.

Both "Manhattan Elegy" and "Survivor," while fine poems in their own rights, attain additional resonance through their placement in sequences. They both establish and elaborate dimensions of the sequence's themes. The poems are undoubtedly more somber—"serious" is not the appropriate word—than the satire of "The Psychiatrist at the Cocktail Party," reflecting the progressive darkening of Feirstein's vision over the past decade. To Feirstein's credit, he has worked hard to find the appropriate structure to explore his vision in depth. In fact, his work is more compelling, read in length, rather than in small doses. In the book's afterword, he explains the appeal of the sequence mode: "The poetic sequence seemed more flexible and expansive. It allows the poet to expand out from the self, and enables him or her to use a variety of genres—particularly the meditative, lyric and shorter narrative—and to combine them into a drama in which a protagonist journeys through both inner and outer worlds simultaneously" (52).

Ultimately, Feirstein's work is distinctive for the range of its drama and the depth of its vision. He is less a narrative than a dramatic poet, in the sense that story is less important to his poetry

than the portrayal of character and the exploration of ideas. His use of the sequence gives his work its distinctive depth, and the brisk formalism of his poems allows him to develop character and idea with crisp directness.

The Satirist's Eye: R.S. Gwynn

If a satirist is a wounded idealist, one who painfully recognizes the contrast between the world as it is and the world as it should be, then R.S. Gwynn (born 1948) is a satirist's satirist. In several books—*Bearing and Distance* (1977), *The Narcissiad* (1981), *The Drive-In* (1986), *Body Bags* (1990), *The Area Code of God* (1993), and *No Word of Farewell* (1996)—Gwynn looks savagely at the world's follies, mocking them with a sharpness that few contemporary poets display. Yet he is also capable of compassion and humor when he deals with moments when life comes close to what it should be. And Gwynn explores this wide range of subjects and tones in an even wider range of styles: he freely mixes intellectual urbanity with low, even coarse, humor and language; and his work is crisply formal, making use of a variety of metrical and rhyme schemes. As Lisa Russ Spaar notes of Gwynn: "This is a poetry of startling juxtapositions, of slaps in the face, nudges in the ribs, of audacity and even courage" (2). Gwynn's particular combination of strengths makes him almost unique among his generation, and part of a small group of poets of the past three decades.

A short direct example of Gwynn's technique is "Scenes from the Playroom," from his most prominent collection, *The Drive-In*:

Now Lucy with her family of dolls
Disfigures Mother with an emery board,
While Charles, with match and rubbing alcohol,
Readies the struggling cat, for Chuck is bored.
The young ones pour more ink into the water
Through which the latest goldfish gamely swims,
Laughing, pointing at naked, neutered Father.
The toy chest is a Buchenwald of limbs.

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