

# see-to-see

## **On First Looking into Bromige's Humor, or: Is it Humour?**

*if wants to be the same as is:*  
*Essential Poems of David Bromige*  
by David Bromige, edited by Jack Krick, Bob Perelman, and Ron Silliman (New Star, 2018)

Reviewed by Ted Byrne

"There's nothing funny/about me," David Bromige says in "A Sense of Humor's Soliloquy" (*American Testament*). It seems that we can only find ways to define Bromige there where he is not. He slips out from under any definitive terms, including those that he applies to himself and his work. He says, "the most/frightening thing about/being unsure of/who I really am/is that somebody/out there will/tell me" (*American Testament*). But he never quite escapes the dilemma. That he is a humourist, as I would like to claim, is proven by the evidence of laughter. The laughter is participatory. It ranges from unknowing chuckles, often delayed, to the wisdom of immediate, uncontrollable guffaws. When it backfires, it backfires on him as well. In humour, such moments invariably give pleasure, even, or principally, when they govern pain. Consider, for

example, the horror underlying these lines from the American humourist S.J. Perelman's critique of the culture industry ("Strictly from Hunger"):

The violet hush of twilight was descending over Los Angeles as my hostess, Violet Hush, headed toward Hollywood. In the distance the glow of huge piles of burning motion-picture scripts lit up the sky. The crisp tang of frying writers and directors whetted my appetite. How good it was to be alive, inhaling deep lungfuls of carbon monoxide. Suddenly our powerful Gatti-Cazazza slid to a stop in the traffic.

Then compare these lines from Bromige's *Red Hats*:

And an upper limit, song: A suit of pants that bears a dipstick's traces; a picture postcard of the John in Macy's. Child Rolande to the back door came. Surely good Mrs. Murphy shall follow me not into Thames Station.

Humour, or *Witz*, "the umbilical cord of *parole*," as Bromige says, after Lacan, is the outerwear of a humour, a cast of mind—one that opens itself to the unconscious, to the eruption of error within the confines of intention, not through the loosening of attention, but through the rigours of a

plan. Or so he says. But then sometimes Bromige visibly and deliberately breaks the very rules he's adopted or devised. This might be called "tight corners and what's around them."

The writing practices he employs are vast: from wiseacre apothegms to carefully constructed aphorisms à la Rochefoucauld or Adorno, from absolute nonsense to elegant lyric, from parody to "sincere" personal narrative, all undermined by the underminer, or *Niederschrift*—"underwriting" or the "nether side" of speech, as he fruitfully (mis)translates it. A list could not exhaust them and these strategies or modes don't obey a chronology. Bromige is already a crowd in his appropriately titled first book, *The Gathering*, as he is in the last, *Indictable Suborners*. The first book establishes a "polysubjected writing" (his term), in such a manner that, from there on in, truth and lies have the same fictional status. Take a look at the portraits that accompany many of his books, for example the photograph at the back of the book *Desire*, and the one taken years later on the cover of *if wants to be the same as is*.<sup>1</sup> His trademark white shirt and tie, and the charming smile that says, "I am lying." And this is not irony, unless, as he says, "unless / a white shirt and tie / are irony" (*American Testament*). Or, in a more complex moment, "Irony, the name

for the gap between ideology and reality, finds itself anathematized, telling through its suppression a truth about the present" (*Indictable Suborners*). Or,

To read my poetry as ironized is to read only halfway into it. It is to stop short of the requisite further step, which is to overcome one's timidity in the face of an apparent irony and take the risk that the phrase, line, sentence, piece has more than irony to offer; the reader is called on to feel this experience through, and this is deliberate: the convictions we arrive at in triumphing over misgiving are the only ones that will last...<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps a better figure than irony would be the Brechtian procedure called "interruption," as Bromige indicates in *The Difficulties* interview. This term is developed by Walter Benjamin in "What is Epic Theater," where the interruption of the domesticated, the quotidian, the expected, functions to distance the audience (the reader) from identification. The actor stepping out of character, for example, to reflect on his role, as Bromige so often does.

It's unfortunate that New Star could not publish a complete Bromige—it would have taken a second massive volume. The problem of selection is something that Bromige confronted more than once,

1 *if wants to be the same as is: Essential Poems of David Bromige*, edited by Jack Krick, Bob Perelman, and Ron Silliman, New Star Books, 2018, 582 pp.

2 *The Difficulties*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1987, *David Bromige Issue*, 1987. This, along with Meredith Quartermain's "Irony's Eyes (David Bromige)," in the online journal *Golden Handcuffs Review*, and the essays by George Bowering, Bob Perelman, and Ron Silliman that frame *if wants to be the same as is*, provides a good introduction to Bromige's work.

including the selection *Ten Years in the Making*, published by New Star forty-five years ago. In the book *Desire*,<sup>3</sup> he found a wonderful solution to the problem—he not only made minor, but strategic, revisions to every poem, as has often been pointed out, but he also radically re-ordered them, achronologically, so as to construct a new book, complete in itself. The fact that *if wants to be the same as is* is arranged in the standard chronological format would be troubling if it did not, thereby, have the virtue of demonstrating the consistency of Bromige’s “inconsistency,” his polysubjected writing, and not, as one expects of such collections, his “development.” Without this demonstration, the wonder of what *Desire* accomplished would not be so evident. This new selection, which should probably be subtitled, as is indicated on the back cover, “The Poetry of the Essential David Bromige,” accomplishes even more than that—it also puts back into print whole books difficult, and in one case impossible, to find: most significantly, *My Poetry*, *P-E-A-C-E*, *Red Hats* and, *American Testament*—the latter never before available in its entirety. This must have been one of the principles of selection.

Other important books have been much reduced, and necessarily diminished by the reduction—but most of these books can be found on library shelves or are available at an affordable price. A substantial taste of any one of these books, as provided in this collection, should leave a reader

feeling unfulfilled and anxious to read the books as originally constructed. Each book is integral, has integrity. *Desire* is a good example. *Threads* (1970) perhaps a better one. What is missing in the selection from *Threads* is its *essential* structure. It is built around at least three interruptions, three pieces that step out of the frame and reflect upon the book. These make visible certain reference points that often do not surface so evidently in his writing, which for the most part enacts (philosophical) thought rather than appealing to its authority. First, “From Home So Far,” a humorous, but rigorously clinical, dream analysis. (“Stop making those phrases,” his mother says, “you’ll get stuck that way...”). Then “At the Labyrinth,” which consists almost entirely of a long citation from Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*, and takes the place of a missing poem (“the poem I need but lack here,” the one that contains the necessary “threads”), and speaks directly to Bromige’s poetics:

For just as, owing to the ultimately tacit character of all our knowledge, we remain ever unable to say all that we know, so also, in view of the tacit character of meaning, we can never quite know what is implied in what we say.

Bromige then cites a passage, in German, from Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics*, only then to home in on the “intense pleasure” he experiences from its prosody, taking liberty with the German words that attract him, while the words

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3 *Desire: Selected Poems 1963-1987*, Black Sparrow Press, 1988.

that, perhaps, most define his project are not remarked on: “what for?—where to?—and what then?” Finally, two translations of Rimbaud, accompanied by a “Note on Translation.” By any measure, these are strong, faithful translations, committing only minor, but forgivable, infidelities, even though he takes care to suggest that they are not translations, but rather “versions” effected by their “being made mine.” He gives himself the last word on this point some thirty years later: “The translator, having weighed the conflicting demands of his task, remembered the word ‘version’ and relieved his sigh of a heave” (*Indictable Suborners*).

In his introduction to the book, George Bowering says, “The title of the present volume is my favorite when it comes to name double-takes.” *Double-takes* is an understatement. I’m still puzzling over the question posed by the title *if wants to be the same as is*. Here’s one answer: “To be/disputes the premise/to remain its living/disputant” (*American Testament*).

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***Refuse: CanLit in Ruins* co-edited by Hannah McGregor, Julie Rak, & Erin Wunker (Book\*hug, 2018)**

Reviewed by Amber Dawn

On November 15, 2018, *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins* launched to standing-room-only attendance at SFU’s Harbour Centre. Overflowing attendees perched along the conference room windowsill and

bottlenecked around the catering tables. There was donation jar for the Galloway Suit Defense Fund (a crowdfund to raise legal fees for some of the twenty people author Steven Galloway has filed defamation lawsuits against) and an ornately iced cake that read “More cake, fewer dumpster fires.” While the room was exceptionally full and the cake delicious, this launch was not billed as a game-changer; more so it was a gathering of writers, scholars, publishing and art professionals (many of whom are featured in *Refuse*) who have been critically discussing and creating notable changes within the state of Canadian literature for some time.

The Vancouver launch echoed a central tenet that editors Hanna McGregor, Julie Rak, and Erin Wunker make clear in their introduction: the recent rupture events that have garnered media attention are not new, but an extension of “long standing problems in CanLit related to racism, colonialism, sexism, the literary star system, and economic privilege.” The widely-discussed firing of Galloway from his position as chair of the Creative Writing Program at UBC over allegation of misconduct, and other events that also occurred between 2015 to 2017 over Joseph Boyden’s ancestry and Hal Niedzvieki’s “appropriation prize,” are raised several times throughout this collection of essays, poems, and conversations. And each contributor reiterates that recent abuses of institutional power, appropriation of voice, etc., are not a break from the so-called progressive and even placid history of CanLit—rather, they are indicative of a consistently problematic structure with our literary industry. To

quote the editors, “Something’s rotten in the (nation-)state of CanLit.”

“Refuse” is a homograph, and aptly the collection is divided into three sections that reflect different meanings of the word. “Part One: Refusal” creates context: how is CanLit being defined and discussed; what do the recent rupture events mean; and how might these events be viewed from multiple angles? “Part Two: Refuse” considers refuse as junk or garbage, and broadly interacts with the image of CanLit as a raging dumpster fire—a popular metaphor coined by authors Alicia Elliott and Jen Sookfong Lee. “Part Three: Re/Fuse” turns decidedly towards generative possibilities, and how intersectional writers and allied literary arts professionals might re-fuse or re-make space—safer, more inclusive, and more equitable spaces in the academy and the writing and publishing sector.

Looking at *Refuse* as a whole, readers can expect not only critical responses to CanLit, but also evocative and varied expressions of response. Keith Maillard’s lyrical essay “Burn,” Sonnet l’Abbé’s erasure poems “Sonnet’s Shakespeare,” and Kai Cheng Thom’s narrative free verse “refuse: a trans girl writer’s story” are only a few stand-out contributions, in which dynamic written forms invite us to more closely consider the contents. *Refuse* speaks up against long-standing problems in CanLit, and just as keenly, it speaks to the vastness of our cultural, intersectional, and aesthetic literary communities. This anthology is fundamental reading for anyone interested in past, present, and future change-makers in CanLit.

***Anarchists in the Academy:  
Machines and Free Readers in  
Experimental Poetry*  
by Dani Spinosa (University of  
Alberta Press, 2018)**

Reviewed by Michael Roberson

“Bring on the hyperlinks”: To extend the strategies, sentiments, and goals of Dani Spinosa’s *Anarchists in the Academy: Machines and Free Readers in Experimental Poetry*, (I) will be “quoting” and **bolding**: print-based gestures to the “rhizomatic linking” that “directs to other texts...and...generate[s]” a conversation in and of the (digital) commons—the open source. In kind, (I) open my source and render her text accessible via my own. Like the authors in her well-organized and well-researched dissertation-cum-monograph, (I) aim to relinquish a measurable degree of authorial and authoritative control, effectively bracketing myself and enabling her text to run. Gedit?

In four chapters, each dealing with four distinct poetic projects, Spinosa executes a faceted program for a theory of the poetic experiment and for a theory of **postanarchist criticism**. The four facets include **artifice**, **openness**, **chance**, and **politics**. Moving chronologically from the 1970s to the contemporary moment, she discusses a range of writers including (but not limited to) John Cage and bpNichol, Erín Moure and Harryette Mullen, Vanessa Place and Darren Wershler, as well as Andy Campbell and Mez Breese. Spinosa considers how these

authors utilize and complicate **procedural**, **machinic**, **conceptual**, and **digital** methods of composition, and she examines how these writers engage artifice, openness, chance, and politics to affect the power dynamic between author and reader. Spinosa validates those projects that recalibrate this dynamic in favour of a **liberated and empowered readership** and that do not necessarily efface the subjectivity of the author him- or her- or themselves. “Experimental, illegible texts,” Spinosa writes, “produce in readers a commonality, a community based on the ethical, political dimensions of reading and engaging with the formally experimental text.” According to Spinosa, “**illegible**,” “**noisy**,” and “**ex-static**” texts operate as “momentary insurgencies,” providing a kind of model, analogue, or metaphor for activist practices. “postanarchism” serves as a “theory of activism that offers the means to incorporate the processes of reading and writing experimental poetry into the realm of activist practice.” On the one hand, experimental texts themselves function as “**performative analog[ies]** of an **anarchic, free community**” in the ways that such texts defy the “organizing, ruling, and inhibiting effects” of discursive structures: “affiliation rather than filiation.” On the other hand, experimental texts produce “anarchic, free communit[ies]” in the ways that such texts entail a “communal attention to language” by virtue of their capacity for multiple and indefinite readings: “Instead of quantitative meaning, qualitative intensity.”

Rather than recommend or refute, (I) will briefly consider questions raised by

Spinosa’s discussion of experimental work in political, ethical, and epistemological terms. First, Spinosa describes experimental work as “**not explicitly political**.” So, how much farther does postanarchist literary theory, as Spinosa conceives it, or digital literature, in general, push us in the need to reflect and respect subjectivity and identity politics in experimental work, while also continuing to empower the agency of readers? Moreover, does digital literature expand the reading constituency or make experimental work that much more accessible to an already existing readership—a readership familiar with Language Writing, for example? Second, Spinosa gestures toward an **ethics of postanarchism** in her use of **relationality** and **responsibility** to account for how readers engage the experimental text. So, with Spinosa’s desire to transcend the vanguardist notions that typically accompany the experimental, and with her desire to defuse the passive-aggressive relationship that comes with reading all literature, let alone experimental literature, does Spinosa’s study point to the need for a fuller ethical account of the experimental, and the avant garde? Third, Spinosa identifies one of the benefits of digital literature as “**distributed cognition**” in which digital projects can exploit “new pathways of communication among different kinds of knowledge.” Do “new cognitive engagements” suggest that poetry can (re-)enter the knowledge game, and become not only a model for research, but a locus of knowledge itself, at a time when the **commons** are both imperative and in peril?

***My Heart Is a Rose Manhattan* by Nikki Reimer (Talonbooks, 2019)**

Reviewed by Adam Seelig

**THE ROOT OF DISCORD IS HEART**

When i  
distil a rose Manhattan  
i  
end up  
in a Calgary  
more  
woman than  
man  
made thank hair  
of  
dog that  
“capitalism might be late  
but my period  
she’s right on  
time”  
to  
woke me drinking  
the sting of grief  
there still  
while  
i’m  
still  
here after hours  
and  
the others  
my brother  
is gone



**Mantis by David Dowker  
(CHAX, 2018)**

Reviewed by Scott Jackshaw

Dowker's poetry sticks to the mouth. It thickens "slag bulk/consonant/but not/annealed" on the tongue. An erasure of Clark Coolidge's *The Maintains*, it attends to its materiality in a play between space and sonics. Its language is organic substance sounding out its body, so that, when read aloud, it convenes viscous formations over the blanked space of a source text.

Charles Bernstein understands *The Maintains* to be a "word mine of language" and later an "excavation."<sup>1</sup> Here, Coolidge's attention to language's materiality is not an attention to its environment, but rather to its extraction. Words get used up. *Mantis* gestures otherwise toward the relational in language poetry. It gathers carefully from Coolidge in what Dowker calls a "gloss from the given harmonics"—not a hermeneutic of fracking, but a marginal poetry of gleaning. Dowker's work exceeds but does not explode its roots. Its insistence on non-extractive interaction is a collaboration with permeable resources of texture and sound, the "erasure/basis/principally/porous ore." It makes Coolidge sensual. It archives a touching between texts. It imagines the possibility of erasure as generative and hyper-relational.

Some words disappear to make others more visible. The poetry that results means only in relation to its antecedent, having

"only/past/telling the whole/valence." Even Coolidge's page numbers remain.

*Mantis* needs these remainders, even as it attends to their constraints, though its focus on the politics of the material is sometimes undone at the limits of its material relations. The fact of erasure is an attention to a prior text, even in the act of undoing, so that Dowker's efforts alternatively reify and refigure the resource extractions of Coolidge's work. However, in this fraught dynamic, Dowker seeks out a tactile pleasure in Coolidge's textual body. This pleasure is overwhelming, restless, and radical in its gestures toward a languaging of relations.

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**Duets by Ted Byrne  
(Talonbooks, 2018)**

Reviewed by Alessandra Capperdoni

That such a gem is Ted Byrne's creation is hardly surprising. Byrne is a Vancouver-based poet-scholar who has dedicated himself to the study of the work of Henri Meschonnic on poetics and translation theory for a long time, and the traces of his long commitment to this study are well visible. *Duets* is a translation from French and Italian of sonnets by Louise Labé and Guido Cavalcanti, poets at the centre of the poetic scene of their respective times—early modern Lyon and late medieval Florence. But the appellative "translation" reveals all the complexities of this work and the complexity of thinking about the translation

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1 Bernstein, Charles. "Maintaining Space: Clark Coolidge's Early Work." *Electronic Poetry Center*, University of Pennsylvania, 2011.



of poetry itself. At stake here is not the time-old Latin-derived saying *traduttore traditore* (the translator is both a betrayer and the one who carries you across linguistic geographies or world borders). That much we know and we also know that this is at stake in every translation of poetry. But in the spirit of Meschonnic's theorization of poetry and translation, Byrne takes up the task of translating "ethically." A poem is an ethical act. A translation is also an ethical act. It is not the translation of fixed-form poems because the poems that Byrne translates are already transformations of "forms of life" and producers of subjectivity. The true betrayal of Labé and Cavalcanti would be the reading of Byrne's work in order to find identity, equivalence, or communication, that is, *meaning* rather than *rhythm* and *sense* of language: "If to translate a poem we translate form, we are not translating a poem, but a representation of poetry, linguistically and poetically false."<sup>1</sup>

Louise Labé's poems are the focus of the first four sections of Byrne's book. In the first section, "Sonnets: Louise Labé," her sonnets (two quatrains and two tercets) are translated into nine-line poems of different forms (primarily 3+3+3 or 2+2+2+3), a poetic of constraint of sorts. But the translator-poet also intervenes into the form of the poetic series with translational reflections on the spirit of Labé's poetry: two unnumbered sonnets are added to sonnet 6 and 11, taking up the potentiality of reading Labé's writing "as" theory of language through the eyes of Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva. This

is also an appropriate move to illuminate Labé's strikingly feminist poetics. The second section, "The Rilke Versions," based on Rainer Maria Rilke's translation of Labé, questions the stance of "augmentation" and "diminishment" of the act of translation. Reading this section alongside the first (both sections are based on the same originals) places translation in the realm of possibilities rather than comparisons of value or equivalence: it is a field of correspondences that does not reduce the infinite to a totality (the "better" work) and opens up possibilities of subjectivities in the reading of the poem. This concern is even more evident in the collaboration section with Kim Minkus, "from 19/19," revolving around Labé's sonnet 19 on Diane and Actaeon, as well as in "Pendant," the following fourth section.

Attempting to fix Byrne's work within the confines of a genre (or a trade) would be futile. These poems are simultaneously translations, recreations, transcreations, research acts, or conversations with the "original" poets (Labé and Cavalcanti) but also with the many poets with whom they were in dialogue in their own time (Olivier de Magny, Maurice Scève, or Dante Alighieri) as well as the poet-readers who have in turn translated them throughout centuries. The translation of Cavalcanti's sonnets in the final section of the book, "Sonnets: Cavalcanti," speaks to Ezra Pound's own translations. A close reader of the modernist poet, Byrne was consciously or unconsciously influenced by Pound's poetics of translation. Not only did Pound

1 Meschonnic, Henri. *Ethics and Politics of Translating*. Trans. Pier-Pascale Boulanger. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2007.

establish the text of Cavalcanti that Byrne used for these translations, but Byrne's very early translations of Cavalcanti were written in the 1970s in the margins of Pound's own translations, thus forging a dialogue, echo, and literary exercise. We may wonder about this double layer—translating the original alongside *another's* translation—but only in order to realize that reading and writing do always pass through the language of the Other (Lacan is yet another interlocutor with Byrne's translations). Pound's language, then, enters Byrne's work yet it refuses subservience. So does the translator's work to either original and to Pound. The poet-translator intervenes in the powerful discourse of Love with remarks about language use, style, and grammar that illuminate the spirit of Cavalcanti's philosophy. If the translator is

the one who traverses world borders, we may then ask, how many worlds are being “carried across” in Byrne's text?

It is only appropriate that the poets who created and rearticulated a discourse of Love (eros, carnality, vision, speech, as well as the philosophical space of poetic love) are translated into a language that asks the reader to bring the body and sensorial faculties to the experience of listening—movement, rhythm, syntax, and prosody. The act of love does not reside in the idea (the *eidos*) of poetry but in the bodily texture of poetry itself. Unwriting writing—that is, the illusion of the representation of language—Byrne's translations are a poetic gift asking the reader to consider how the translation of poetry can only be faithful to one command: transform our thinking of language.

Evan Lee: Fugazi

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responded)

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#### IMAGE

Evan Lee, test images for  
*Fugazi*, 2015. Courtesy of  
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