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In vernacular terms, poetry is a serious business (when it's not a joke). For most people, poetry should be tonally elevated, lyrical, and in touch with the numinous (all reasons why it can so easily slip into the realm of the joke). Plenty of professional poets think of poetry as a serious business, too, writing poetry that is tonally elevated, lyrical, and in touch with the numinous. But plenty of others are impatient with the idea that poetry must be 'serious'. The New York school of poetry (Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, et al.) brilliantly rejected the idea that poetry should be a solemn discourse, a rejection sometimes explicitly thematised in their work. O'Hara in his famous, ironic manifesto, 'Personism' (1959), asked of poetry: 'how then can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what? For death? Why hurry them along? Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears)'.

Closer to home, the 'Generation of '68', in the 1970s, was a loose confederacy of Australian poets willing to 'fool around'. Not surprisingly, many of the 68ers - most famously John Forbes - looked to the New York school as an alternative to the putatively academic, Anglocentric poetry of the time. Of course, it has generally been more common to present the Generation of '68 as (unduly) political, polemical, and factional. But this view is an out-dated one, and ignores the fact that poets such as Laurie Duggan, Pam Brown, and John Tranter are profoundly entertaining poets, however much their work might be characterised at times as 'difficult'. Indeed, their work illustrates the fact that the distinction between 'entertainment' and 'poetry' is a facile, even philistine, one, reliant on a spurious notion of what is 'proper' to poetry.
engages in its own brief polemic on contemporary poetry, as we will see). In his ‘occasional’ poetics – primarily seen in his epistolary poems – Bolton evokes O’Hara’s spontaneity, wit, and intersubjective address. We see this especially in ‘Poem (“I do a drawing…””), which even has an O’Haraesque title. Beginning as an account of the poet drawing a picture of Jimmy Rushing (Count Basie’s singer), the poem unexpectedly veers to the plangent (another O’Haraesque effect) with its account of the poet’s father and his violence.

But Bolton is, of course, not merely a pale reflection of O’Hara, and while he references other New Yorkers, such as James Schuyler, the poets he most resembles are his friends Laurie Duggan and Pam Brown, whose poetics are similarly personal but not sentimental, and who are similarly ‘documentary’ in style without a false sense of disinterestedness. The three poets are profoundly interested in the way in which experience is always placed. It’s no surprise, then, that the three have not only collaborated (in the chapbook Let’s Get Lost, 2005), but that their collaboration was largely concerned with place. Bolton’s work, like Duggan’s and Brown’s, is also replete with cultural references. In Sly Mongoose those references range from his friends and colleagues – including Duggan and Brown – to the Ramones, Miles Davis, Roberto Bolaño, Lee Marvin, Kingswood Country, and anything else that takes Bolton’s fancy. In this respect, Bolton’s poems are ‘postmodern’ in their intertextuality, as in their lack of interest in generic limits, but so what? What is important is that Bolton fashions the endless flow of sensation and ideas, and his use of poetry as a mode of cultural criticism, into something ‘compelling’, at least for some of us.

A key feature that makes Bolton compelling for me is that he is funny. A superb example of this is ‘Guillaume Apollinaire’, which features the father of surrealism and begins with an epigraph by David Malouf who, in critic mode, apparently asserted that Bolton ‘amply repays his debt to O’Hara and through him to Apollinaire’:

In the park, as I stroll along, I see a man who looks like Apollinaire – that head shaped like a pear, a garlic, with a small drawing of him by Picasso, wherein
Bolton is not afraid of the bizarre either, as seen in 'Outdoor Pig-keeping, 1954 & My Other Books on Pigs', which comically refers to Bolton's homonymic namesake, a pig expert.

He thanks me for fully repaying my debt to him 'after all these years'. When, he asks, will John Forbes pay? I mean fully, he says, when I look at a loss for an answer.

Another link between comedy and cultural reference can be seen in 'Art History', a kind of mock lecture that illustrates the falseness of any model of art (or its history) that appears to be neutral or comprehensive. In the 'cosy, rather battered coat', which is the poet's sense of art history, 'whole periods are truncated, / take disproportionately / less time or space / than they needed in real life'. This model of art history is a complex (and comic) index of the relationship between the personal and the cultural.

To call Bolton a comic poet, however, is to over-simplify things. Bolton's comedy is underscored by an elegiac sensibility (another feature he shares with Duggan and Brown), something apparent in the collection's first poem, '2:30', a meditation on aging and death and the secret links - again - between the personal and the cultural. The poem - with its serio-comic connection between Marvell's image of 'Time's winged chariot' (obliquely referenced in the poem's dedication) and the 'Public Service clock' behind the poet's back - both mobilises and satirises long-standing elegiac motifs.

In 'Brisbane Letter to Gabe', Bolton offers a theory of the poetic, even as he appears at his most 'unpoetic'. Ostensibly an account of Bolton's attendance of the Brisbane Writers Festival, the poem also offers an intervention in contemporary poetics. On the new 'wave' of poets, Bolton writes that they look 'awful':

highly skilled –
formal, 'poetic', indirect – well mannered.
'Nice' – yet 'deep' –
satisfying someone's desire
for poetry as solace, as retreat from life,
as old-world wisdom,
buffed & burnished & mysterious.
This is, of course, partly satirical as well as a negative statement of Bolton’s own poetics (one with which I have considerable sympathy). Even without such a statement, though, it is clear that Bolton’s own poetry is not interested in being a ‘retreat from life’, consolatory, or concerned with wisdom. Instead, *Sly Mongoose* repeatedly draws attention to the rich and complex exigencies of ‘life’.

But Bolton is not simply a chronicler of the day-to-day and of cultural politics. As suggested by his Apollinaire poem, Bolton can be marvellously surreal, as seen in ‘Exotic Things’, a sequence of surreal poems, each section of which the blurb tells us is ‘structured around a buried pun or near-pun’. Bolton is not afraid of the bizarre either, as seen in ‘The Beaver’s Poem’, a poem written from a beaver’s perspective, and the slightly ‘proceduralist’ poems towards the end of the collection, such as ‘Outdoor Pig-keeping, 1954 & My Other Books on Pigs’, which comically refers to Bolton’s homonymic namesake, a pig expert.

Surrealism is something that Bolton shares with joanne burns, a poet less loquacious than Bolton, but equally engaged with the world and its strangeness. Burns’s overtly surrealist poems show a deft ability to charge the everyday with the marvellous, as per ‘classical’ surrealism’s project. In ‘left’, for instance,

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there was no time left
for the picnic of lost socks
it was a century too late for
those glasses of water who
thought they had changed the
world the inner bedlamp glowing
like a capricious worm in the reverie
scrapbook;
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Burns’s typical elision of punctuation adds to the poem’s ambiguity, even as it suggests the hidden connection between things.

Such a hidden connection is a special concern of burns’s, especially those connections between objects and words. In particular, burns is attracted to the hidden
Burns’s interest in ontology and religion is a decidedly postmodern one, in which divinity stands for the ultimate (lost) image of (lost) signification. Habitual word play, including neologism and multilingual puns, both of which are seen in the section humorously entitled ‘koannes’ (a mixture of ‘koan’ — a Buddhist exercise that can only be understood through intuition — and ‘joanne’). The book’s eponymous section deals with clichés, which are, of course, dead metaphors, another form of polysemy, while other poems meditate on a word and the various things it connotes. ‘Rung’, for instance, ranges from the stepladder ‘behind the bathroom door’ to ladder imagery in literature, religion and visual art, and the poet’s own ‘ladder of memory’. Burns highlights the transcendence traditionally implicit in such imagery by ending the sequence with an image of descending a ladder to find insight.

As this suggests, Burns’s interest in ontology and religion is a decidedly postmodern one, in which divinity stands for the ultimate (lost) image of (lost) signification. Such an interest can be seen in the references to various divinities (such as Ganesha, the Hindu god), religious imagery generally (such as angels), and the poet’s own Catholic childhood. All of these elements come together in the sequence on saints, ‘soft hoods of saints’. Burns concentrates on how the representation of sainthood has operated as ‘a part of / celebrity’, a celebrity that is mobilised for various social effects. But Burns’s sequence is not, to evoke that word associated with both religion and poetry, unduly solemn. In part, its humour arises from the way that the representation of saints can’t be disassociated from kitsch: ‘what holds / me to this page is the image of a golden plate suspended / in the air outside the window its bright aura spreading out / above the trees and the long winding road like theophanic / margarine or a mid-twentieth century ufo’. Burns’s humour is anti-sentimental, drawing attention to the monstrous nature of sainthood: ‘you like to stroke the smoothness of their ethery cloaked limbs with your thoughts, why not imagine them as spiritual pets’.

As Martin Duwell points out in his review of Amphora on his Australian Poetry Review website, the collection appears to move from the conversational to the deeply surreal, via the linguistic play of the book’s
offer the night as a figure for the irrational and obscure—
‘night falls like dawn / a tongue shimmers in its polished
garden / you touch it as it flees’ (‘shed’) — and poems
that find the uncanny in the everyday (where of course
it always is): ‘the veins of / domestic beatitudes open
to a spring / shower and the cowskin rug cooing / like
global pathology and those floral bruises’ (‘harvest’).

Polysemy, language’s instability, is both an indica-
tion of the ‘fallen’ nature of the world, and the very thing
that makes poetry possible. As such, the multiplicity at the
heart of burns’s poetry, as well as the different variety one
can find in Bolton’s, could stand as a warning against
too narrow conception of what poetry is. Poetry, like
language itself, is multiplex and to insist otherwise risks
impoverishing it. But that sounds too solemn for words.
Perhaps what Bolton and burns offer more potently is a
poetry of playfulness, with play defined by the psycho-
analyst DW Winnicott as the opposite not of work, but
of compliance.