The Obvious Flap
by Gary Barwin and Gregory Betts
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Reviewed by rob mclennan

A Grammatical

which of a grammatical
was tempted, washed empty
an abacus guided by an egg

buttons in less evil
there is no cloth
(the fact be an egg)

attack haiku (44)

It seems as though, for years now, poetry collaborations have been a staple of Canadian experimental writing, from bpNichol and Steve McCaffery’s In England Now That Spring (1979) and Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland’s Double Negative (Gynergy Books, 1988) and Two Women in a Birth (Guernica Editions, 1994), to more recent works, including Douglas Barbour and Sheila Murphy’s Continuations (University of Alberta Press, 2006), Stephen Cain and Jay MillAr’s Double Helix (The Mercury Press, 2006), Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler’s apostrophe (ECW Press, 2006) and update (Snare Books, 2010), Gary Barwin and derek beaulieu’s Fragments of the frog pool (The Mercury Press, 2009) and Oana Avasilichioaei and Erin Mouré’s Expedition of a Chimera (BookThug, 2010), to name only a few. There are plenty of other examples as well, including a collaboration between Patrick Lane and Lorna Crozier, and ongoing collaborations between Kim Maltman and Roo Borson that later included Andy Patton, as well as numerous collaborations engaged by Stuart Ross and jwcurry with various authors. About a decade ago, Stephen Cain even did a series of chapbook-length collaborations with individual authors (the idea being to collect ten collaborations with ten different poets and collect them into a trade collection), including a. rawlings, Christian Bök and Jay MillAr, but I don’t know whatever became of the manuscript.

What is it, exactly, about collaboration that appeals to so many? One argument is simple enough, that a collaborative effort forces all the writers working within the project to step outside of their natural comfort zones, thus broadening the potential scope of their own writing. It’s quite an element of faith, and fearlessness, to deliberately step into the unknown for the sake of broadening one’s art. Hamilton writer, teacher and composer Gary Barwin has, over the years, worked with a number of collaborators on different projects, so his work with Betts is part of an ongoing line, from a novel with Stuart Ross to a poetry book–length work with derek beaulieu and a forthcoming title with Hugh Thomas and Craig Conley, Franzations: The Imaginary Kafka Parables (Anvil Press, 2011), suggesting that he, himself, might be entirely fearless. Given that his own individual work appears at regular intervals, as do works by his collaborator, St. Catharines, Ontario poet, editor and critic Gregory Betts, how would either of them find the time to work on anything, let alone a full-length project? The Obvious Flap is a serious work of play, sound and shapes, working repetitions,
visual poems, fragments, homolinguistic translation, allusion, illusion, breathing (including some heavy breathing), wild puns, bad jokes and a mishmash of voices. The collection appears in structured sections, some of which are meant to be performed, and many have been, according to the acknowledgements, at venues including Ottawa’s AB Series, St. Catharines’ Transmissions, Banff Centre’s In(ter)ventions conference, and at Toronto’s Junction Arts Festival. The section “The Obvious Flap” was also included in their post-publication July 2011 performance as part of the final Scream in High Park in Toronto, which begins with:

It seems likely to me that the page and its article followed by the wind and its news then finally pressed against a bus where I’d sing and in my anthropomorphic understanding seems to operate on a cellphone.

on a circle a cycle
sing in the early
to become, hours, selectric

A single roadside shoe lies down in the black feathers, I don’t know, I admit that a new bus route on the level of logic and reference functions at various times to implode or explode, that is, through their semantic, material, and economic effect on a guy in an inner tube praying.

only a circus
animus maximus
what i write: thank you for your thank you

I think there’s both a thinking component and an almost somatic component to my holiday home welcome. The maid says everything is ready for you to walk under the pillows as if I were a mountaintop and I too could sing a brick, the obvious flap of my mind as I waited for a thousand forgotten wedding invitations.

inking momentarily
the thought of an Ink king
keenly, stepping in. I step in. (51)

In eleven sections, the most obvious element of the collection is play, as the language bounces continuously across the page, and back into itself. Barwin and Betts even work a play on their title, refusing to keep their own lines straight, weaving homolinguistic translations throughout the collection and into the acknowledgments, from “The Oboist’s Flat” to “The Abstemious Flak,” and from “The Oft Bilious Flip” to “The Of Averse Flakes.”

By itself, this would be a more than worthy collection, but as a collaboration, it is even more impressive as a cohesive, coherent text belonging to neither and both, and one can only hope the combined effort of these two writers might continue, and develop. I’m interested to see where they might end up.

This work displays such a high level of intuitive play, bouncing from line to line, it’s impossible to track which author might have composed which line – this being, of course, the entire point. One can only hope that if there are further editions of this collection, it might include a DVD, for readers who weren’t able to catch any of the authors’ performances.
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