"Legitimate Criticism"

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Don Anderson. *Real Opinions: Polemical and Popular Writings*. McPhee Gribble, 1992, 225 pp. ISBN 0 86914 276 3

Hot Copy (1986), the first collection of Don Anderson's literary journalism, contained short review-essays on postmodern writing, a longer coda on the crisis in the humanities and three formal academic studies respectively of Frank Moorhouse, Christina Stead and Patrick White, footnotes and all. Their surprising inclusion was consistent with Anderson's insistence, argued at length in his introduction, that "there is a coherence to [my] career and to this book; that neither is made up of unconnected atoms of reviews and essays, but that there is a structure to both," and this in turn was part of the collection's larger mission to affirm that it is possible and feasible in an institutionalised age to be both reviewer and academic, both journalist and intellectual, to speak to the two audiences at once.

In retrospect, *Hot Copy* probably protests its case too much. Its ten-page introduction concentrates the reader's attention on the size of the schism the book wants to heal. The amount of effort which goes into the denial only reminds one how great the divide is. Several reviewers either missed or were unimpressed by the claim of coherence and recorded a feeling (sad, but probably inevitable) that the academic articles were out of place.

There is no such divide in *Real Opinions*. This collection commits itself unambiguously to "popular and polemic writing". In part Anderson can maintain this commitment and broaden his focus from reviews alone because his five-year-old column in the *Sydney Morning Herald* frees him to engage with issues of contemporary moment without the obligation to attach his thoughts to a recent publication: thus, alongside the fixed stars Barthes, Beckett, James, Joyce, Moorhouse, Swift and White, the motifs of this collection include the Rushdie affair, Leo Schofield's unhappy lobster and Ken Methold's no less unhappy "Letter from Mt Isa".

This relative freedom of movement enables *Real Opinions* to be the undivided whole that *Hot Copy* could not quite reach. It contains a relative handful of reviews, many of which lead directly to the issues that dominate the volume: the importance of literature (above all, of the novel), the difference between literary expression and discourse in the world, and the need to understand what the novel as a form does (and, as important, does not) have to say. Anderson's sense of the fundamentally *restrained* nature of literary expression is crucial to the way he reads, and — since his writing is his reading

given voice — to everything he has to say. Following Northrop Frye, he describes literature as "discourse in the subjunctive mood"; he might have cited Roland Barthes, who refers to literature as "discourse without a first person", or Michel Foucault, who writes of "a language which has no other law than that of affirming — in opposition to all other forms of discourse — its own precipitous existence". All of these remarks indicate that literary language differs from all other forms of discourse, that it is *always* radically open to metaphor and irony, never exactly or entirely says what it means, nor means what it says. It never speaks for itself. No matter how realist, as Anderson's exemplary readings of Christina Stead make crystal clear, literature is written in metaphor.

This sense of the *literariness* of literature is fundamental to Anderson's work: it grounds his ability to defend Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* against those who would ignore its narrative subtleties and complex framings to object to its more notorious passages in miserable, distortive isolation. More recently — too recently for inclusion in this collection — it has led him to a much-needed celebration of the brilliant metaphors of Helen Garner's *Cosmo Cosmolino* against readers who take the text as evidence that the writer has developed a reality problem. As Ellis has said, "a lot of writing is big leaps of the imagination and not diary scribbles that get published": Anderson is not alone among literary journalists in his insistence on this point, but he is in the subtle minority.

His awareness of the *play* of a literary text — the movements of that ambivalent, unclosable space between its metaphors and what they might suggest — inspires a certain playfulness in his own way of proceeding. He is an incorrigible punster, partly for fun and partly because the pun does in a trick, with some measure of style (on a good day), what much commentary tries to explicate at tedious length. The pun is the perfect weapon for the columnist who is held to 800 words.

Pleasure in play is also behind a form of divertissement Anderson has made his own, in which a given subject is explored by wandering through its literary manifestations. In their early attempts, these experiments in tour-de-force read a little like a literary columnist's answer to a wet day, but in the two examples reprinted here, on modesty and on the millennium, the method has come to fruition. As these essays approach their conclusions, the form itself plays a part in what is said, and in affirming what has been done. Reading them is like sitting in at a forum where the great writers hold forth on their topic for the day (without hesitation, repetition or deviation), or like entering a "mind in the marvels and miseries of its makings" (Emerson, via Anderson), a mind which is itself a republic of voices. Pondering them adds new frames to the pleasure.

If the Anderson mind is a republic of voices, it is unshakeably liberal democratic. *Real Opinions* begins in defence of the role and the rights of the critic, and approaches its end by defending freedom of speech. (Of *speech*, not of "expression".) These affirmations — which are really one — are at the core of *Real Opinions*, and are what makes it polemic now. They are made not, as one might expect, in the face of the charges of the Festival of Light brigade, but

against figures Anderson considers "one's peers, one's friends, ... those who were on the same sides of the barricades a quarter of a century ago," who now have become advocates of censorship and shutdown. They are made also against the turn of literary theory in the 1980s, which has moved away from literature as a central interest (for fully articulated conceptual and ideological reasons), towards interest in the articulation of theory. Rosalind Krauss's 1985 observation that "Barthes and Derrida are the writers, not the critics, that students now read", haunts this volume like an intimation of apocalypse.

Anderson's disquiet at Krauss's observation may surprise some who know his earlier work. As a teacher and as a supervisor of graduate students (one of whom was your reviewer), he was a key figure in the introduction of postmodernism and poststructuralism to the University of Sydney in the '80s, a keen advocate that students and teachers should indeed read Barthes and Derrida, and the rest. He has not changed his position: Barthes and Derrida remain as suggestive and illuminating in his work as ever (see the deployment of Barthes' *The Rustle of Language* in his update on the crisis in the humanities). The difference between Anderson's embrace of Barthes and Derrida and the situation Krauss describes is that Barthes and Derrida are not the writers that Barthes and Derrida read. Barthes takes us to Racine, Michelet, Sade, Balzac and many more, while Derrida almost force-feeds us on Rousseau, Genet, Sollers *et al.* The danger emerges when their work, or their reputation, is embraced by impressionable and immature readers and turned into doctrine; when the *literary* nature of such writing is forgotten, and trope becomes trap. (See "The Simulacrum: The Illiterate in Pursuit of the Indecipherable", in *Hot Copy.*)

The crucial value here, as elsewhere, is the affirmation of the literariness of literature in the face of the desire for ideological certainty. For Anderson, the play in the dialogic form of the novel is a political play, it *is* the play of liberal democratic politics. What frustrates the immature and the impatient (as it frustrated Stalin) is that the politics of literature is always a negative politics, a politics of "negative liberty", in Isaiah Berlin's phrase, never a program. The National Organisation of Women might organise a hot line for American women to phone in and listen to offending passages of *American Psycho* so that they can lodge complaints, but prominent Australian women writers have spoken in its defence; the Ayatollah might impose a *fatwah* on Rushdie after having had a 20-page excerpt of his novel read to him, but others see that *The Satanic Verses* means no insult to the prophet; some argue that *The Silence of the Lambs* glamorises a sex killer, others describe it as "a profoundly feminist movie". Which leads ... where? To uncertainty, which is part of the point, and to this:

> Where such difference about individual novels is not merely possible but actual, we had better be very careful about what we suggest censoring. This is even more strongly the case where the literary form which begets such difference is itself the paradigm of difference.

For all its elusiveness, this is a politics to be valued, especially when the urge to censor, to control, is again rearing its head. Discussing censorship, Anderson quotes the following from Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel:*

> As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the Novel, the image and model of that world.

Anderson adds "That, I make so bold as to suggest, is the world which we inhabit, and the novel is its appropriate form." It is certainly the world Anderson inhabits, but I am less sure about most of the rest of us. I doubt the staying power of the idea of reality which underpins this account, and so justifies the novel. Dominant modes of representation are not merely "appropriate" to reality, they have the power to determine what reality can be. Increasingly, the world we inhabit is the world of television, and in time TV will make the world appropriate to its capacity to see. When social reality consists of people watching television, how does television reflect that reality? Who wants to watch people watching TV? In such circumstances, reality must be provided, and the provision is always "appropriate". For a devastating account of the way this can work, see Don DeLillo's *White Noise.*

I am not unaware of the irony. Though the novel may no longer be the "appropriate" form for our times, and the study of literature may be dismissed as "quaint" by an allegedly serious intellectual (McKenzie Wark in the latest *Meanjin*), a commitment to the genuine, lasting and complex illuminations it can provide is no less necessary than ever it was. These come from reading literature not as a historical or biographical record, nor as a typology of the real, nor as a set of moral directions — but from reading it *in its literariness*, in its radically ironic, metaphoric, inexhaustible being. Or non-being.

To come to understand that, and to understand it better, we need our literature departments. And for others to come to know it, we need humanities academics in accessible places, in accessible language. *Real Opinions* is an important book, and a promising one. It is a quantum leap from *Hot Copy,* and to judge by some of Anderson's latest work, the full complexity of his understanding is still forming, still expanding. I look forward to Volume Three.