

# Long Paddock

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*Thempark* by Michael Farrell (BookThug, Toronto, 2010)

“And Counting”<sup>1</sup>

Of all the forms that deploy themselves through language, the one that has the most in common with contemporary art is poetry. It is a commonplace of contemporary art practice and criticism that one of its problems is the difficulty of circumscribing its territory. Art can be anything; then again, not everything is art.<sup>2</sup> Art is art when it is produced by an artist; art is art when we fail to recognize it as such. For the French philosopher, Alain Badiou, ‘the creation of a new possibility is today the great function of art.’<sup>3</sup> This is not as easy as it sounds. For one thing, there’s a real distinction between realizing a possibility and creating one. As Slavoj Žižek points out, if ‘everything is possible ... *nothing at all* is really possible ... we cannot *really* change anything, since we are basically condemned to live in the world the way it is.’<sup>4</sup> Likewise, for Badiou, ‘If you think all is possible ... your conviction in the world is finished, the world is something closed.’<sup>5</sup>

Michael Farrell’s *thempark* wrestles explicitly with this difficulty, from the second stanza of the opening poem – ‘there is no homosexual milieu that i know of, / so im a parasite’ – through to the closing credits of the acknowledgements – ‘Written using John Ashbery’s *Where Shall I Wander* and *Hotel Lautréamont* as templates.’ It is true that there’s no homosexual milieu. Another way of thinking this might be to say that its all milieu and what is there to say about milieu but everything? All desire, from Freud through to Lacan and on to Badiou, proceeds metonymically. Desire is possible. Indeed, as with art, the possibilities are (sometimes disturbingly) endless. True love on the other hand is, well, impossible. This seems like a controversial assertion until you remember that, for Badiou *et al*, sex is the primary obscurity and whether or not one is sexed male or female is neither biologically nor socially determinable: ‘when one loves, it has nothing to do with sex.’<sup>6</sup>

So, when I say that the poems that comprise Farrell’s *thempark* seem to proceed through the deliberate excoriation of the possible to an icy apprehension of the impossible what I mean is that it would be a mistake to think of this insistently experimental poet as belonging to some mythical *avant garde* just as it would be a mistake to think of his work as belonging to a conservative poetic milieu. Farrell’s use of Ashbery strikes me as a clear example of how this works. All of the poems in *thempark* track the line length and word count of Ashbery’s two key works. What at first seems like genuflectory homage turns out to be insistent deposition, bearing all the hallmarks of Mallarméan indifference. In this, I think, Farrell has more in common with Lautréamont than he does Ashbery.

The Comte de Lautréamont was the 19<sup>th</sup> century French poet whose influential *Les Chants de Maldoror* caused Alain Badiou to rank him alongside Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel as a majestic example of an exponent of mathematics in the grand style. Badiou likens Lautréamont to Mallarmé and links his love of the ‘icy discipline

and power of eternal survival' of mathematics to Plato for whom number is 'what brings about 'a complete upheaval in thinking [and] erases approximation and becoming to make way for being as such, as well as its truth.'<sup>7</sup> For Badiou, Lautréamont effects 'a denaturing of man, a transmigration of his essence, a positive becoming-monster.' His insistent ontological deregulations situate him as 'a figure who straddles the margin between philosophy and the poem'.<sup>8</sup>

Farrell takes from Ashbery – as Ashbery takes from *Lautréamont* – a love of the non-sequitur that is 'as beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella!'"<sup>9</sup> When considered alongside Farrell's parasitic devouring of the Ashbery 'template', Ashbery's own use of *Lautréamont* seems relatively humanistic. For instance, I'd be surprised if Ashbery were to follow *Lautréamont* to 'blindfold his eyes while you rip his quivering flesh', 'slit the flesh at the points joining the lips' or 'feed confidently on the adolescent's tears and blood'.<sup>10</sup> Yet Farrell ventures forth unafraid, albeit in a cute muppetty sort of way – 'trailing a stubby finger down the stripes of berts front like its scissors hunting for a nipple'.<sup>11</sup> Cole Swensen thinks of the Ashbery/ *Lautréamont* connection in terms of internal and external exile and homelessness – 'the self that walks out on the self until it runs out of land'.<sup>12</sup> We can see this preoccupation, too, in *Where Shall I Wander*: 'We drove downtown to see our neighbors. None of them were home.'<sup>13</sup> This is the dissemination of the signifier – one thing leads to another. I think of Farrell's preoccupation with Ashbery as being a preoccupation with excision or, at least, a longing for it. Appropriating the formal strategies of a beloved forerunner is one way of arranging this, although you may have to do it more than once.

The longing is also explicated in the poems themselves. "tit for tat" details a gruesome and yet seemingly enjoyable sex scene between 'bert' and 'ernie' (*that* 'bert' and 'ernie'):

' ... there's got  
to be less out there than this,  
muppets who dont get to kiss, loaded, racking up timeshares  
the metre running for joy.' (10)

Lack – or the lack of it – is a prevailing theme. In "nephews", its left to the camera strap to supply the lack, 'viewer lack'. Meanwhile, 'Will bert always route his selfpity through / ironys lonely spacey levels?' The irony of irony is that it already knows everything. This is why love and irony just don't mix. Love causes a new way of being that changes everything about a situation. As such, it relies on the impossible chance encounter. If we could see love coming, we'd never be taken unaware. Conversely, if we already know everything, what happens to the creation of a new possibility for art – 'Where are the tapestries?'

'Every angel is terrifying' and Farrell's muppets are even scarier than that. In her essay on feminine structure and other jouissance, Suzanne Barnard thinks of angels as 'the possibility of a certain being beyond the faultline of sexual difference'.<sup>14</sup> Jacques Lacan thinks of smiling muppet-angels as being doped to the eyeballs: 'If the angel has such a stupid smile, that is because it is up to its ears in the supreme signifier.'<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that the signifier founds the symbolic dimension, its function is 'nevertheless to talk nonsense, play the fool'. Like an angel high on signification,

Ernie ‘can’t take his grin off.’ Badiou thinks of poets as not necessarily cognizant of the new possibilities they might create for philosophy – ‘the poem is simply incapable of a genuinely philosophical self-awareness.’<sup>16</sup> Still, it is frequently extraordinary to witness Farrell the auto-philosopher at work. To this end, he seems – in this poem and in the collection as a whole – to envisage a way out for grinning angels.

Lacan suggests that for an angel to ‘find itself on dry land would do it some good – perhaps it wouldn’t smile anymore.’ Dry land, for Ernie, might be somewhere out of reach of the ‘cable golddigger films’ that structure all of his thought. One might even honeymoon there, ‘in alicia springs not during the wet season’ (“a parody of you & me”) or, if extra fortunate, escape it to wear green and take gold for the lucky country. In fact, “former detainees take gold” is, for me, the best and most wounding poem in the collection. Here, Farrell sets up a series of dizzying conflation that sees incarceration, nationalism, human rights, commerce, religion and poetry all jostling for position on the dais. Former detainees are ‘a teatowel / wrung for its tear shaped cash’:

‘how, do you feel to be living they  
were asked, they didnt answer, it was all in  
the eyes dont look. They were happy

the vision was over, & all  
the other wouldbe democracies off the track.

The victory we’ve arrived just that little bit too late to enjoy is helped along by the ‘aussie conditions’ and the ‘democratic’ wind and as unlikely as a medal-wearing detainee or a nation-nourished refugee. It’s almost as impossible as the possibility of poetry:

Minister wobbles thinking of their lucky country trajectory.  
they were rejoicing on the dais & looking forward  
to a whole chicken wiping their hands on immigration papers.  
Being replaced, by other winners, other winners like clouds

& weetbix. Some old lifestyler keeps smiling at them.  
the ambiguity their english had flourished, against all  
odds the odds against poetry but taken by  
surprise by their future hungry winner feelings.

In *The Culture of Calamity*, Kevin Rozario writes about the pleasure of spectacle in relation to Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*:

Amusement park rides or suspense movies ... trick us into a pleasure response by involving us emotionally in (simulated) harrowing events while shielding us from actual risks.<sup>17</sup>

When I think of *themparks* I think of angels bearing messages of pure annunciation, trumpet and fanfare without the slightest signification. Love hurts. To paraphrase Woody Allen, ‘If it doesn’t hurt, you’re not doing it right.’ Something has to be let go, sacrificed, severed. Of course, severance is also one of Ashbery’s preoccupations

and he performs it with considerable majesty:

There is nothing to do except observe the horizon,  
the only one, that seems to want to sever itself  
from the passing sky.

This kind of thing is hard to live up to and a convincing rejoinder to those critics who would like to think of Ashbery as engaged in an ‘impermeable surrealism’ in which ‘words may be written, but can’t mean.’<sup>18</sup> It is in the supposed unity of love that we encounter the painful truth of separation – there really is no commonality between the poetic self and the beloved antecedent. Love illuminates the rift between truth and knowledge and all we can do is remain faithful, conduct experiments, maintain the rift, forestall the loveless flood of milieu. In the penultimate poem, “then ben”

came in, “wearing a ham puppet,”  
ripe for horsdoeuvres ridicule. i watched closely.

[...]

on the footpath, our shouts competing with those of the homeless.

you expected some boredom not too much,  
you expected a message on the wings of  
a dove but to be delirious looks like prejudice.

[...]

the books you-will laugh, if i ask  
you out into the windsor night.

But funnily, you dont.

I think of *them* angels stepping foot on dry land the silly smiles wiped off their beautiful faces and I think ‘If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.’<sup>19</sup> The final poem, “say...” extemporises silence:

You alluded to local songs translated into english,  
But the marching band didnt strike them up & play  
We decaffeinated in silence, taking points off the town.

[...]

... we didn’t read much there  
adjusted a cloud. By the fire, “language, that great mystery.”

Farrell’s fidelity to Ashbery is routed neither through the ironies of Bert’s ‘lonely spacey levels’ nor detained in Ernie’s irremovable grin. Rather, the younger poet’s disjunctive love of the elder is perhaps best exemplified through his relation to the

Count, 'Number-loving distant relative of Count Dracula.' Likes: Counting anything and everything. Favourite Activity: Counting!

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<sup>1</sup> "And Counting" in John Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander: New Poems*. (New York: Ecco, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> My understanding of the vicissitudes of contemporary art practice is indebted hereto Justin Clemens' "Myth, Abjection, Otherness: Contemporary Australian Art."

<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art." (*Lacanian Ink*. 23. Fall 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Zizek, "Introduction," *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art."

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W Norton & Company, 1998). 20.

<sup>7</sup> Alain Badiou, Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, *Theoretical Writings* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004). 11.

<sup>8</sup> Badiou, Brassier and Toscano, *Theoretical Writings*. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror (and the Complete Works of the Comte De Lautréamont)*, trans. Alexis Lykiard (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Lautréamont, *Maldoror (and the Complete Works of the Comte De Lautréamont)*.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Farrell, *thempark* (Toronto: BookThug, 2010). 10.

<sup>12</sup> Cole Swensen, "Besides, of Bedouins: Hotel Lautreamont (1992)" (*Conjunctions* 49. Fall 2007).

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<sup>13</sup> "Ignorance of the Law is No Excuse" in Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander: New Poems*.

<sup>14</sup> Suzanne Barnard, "Tongues of Angels: Feminine Structure and Other Jouissance," *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany: State university of New York press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). 200.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (University of Chicago Press, 2007). 5.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Everett, "Blue Snow and Green Cream: 'Hotel Lautreamont'" (*The Independent Saturday*, 20 February 1993).

<sup>19</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Real of Sexual Difference," *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany: State University of New York press, 2002). 60. Žižek quotes here from the letter of St Paul to the Corinthians.