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Charles Fort's *Darvil: A Series of Prose Poems* and Linda Smukler's *Normal Sex*

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Charles Fort. *Darvil, A Series of Prose Poems.* Launnburg, North Carolina: St. Andrews Press, 1993. 58 pp. $8.95
Linda Smukler. *Normal Sex.* Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1994. 84 pp. $8.95

OTHER: Existing besides, or distinct from, that already mentioned or implied; not this, not the same, different in identity.
- *The Oxford English Dictionary.*

Who, or what, is the Other? For the homeowner, is it the homeless? For the driver of the Lexus, is it the pedestrian or the Ford owner? For the white man, is it the black man? For the heterosexual, is it the homosexual? For the I, is it *If?* or *Thou?*

The poems of Linda Smukler, a lesbian who writes about being a lesbian, and those of Charles Fort, an African-American who writes about being an African-American, confront the reader with the Other. Through their fierce, polished work, we learn what it is like to be Other. But interestingly, the poets seem also to be confronting their other selves, for both have adopted a very specific persona in their respective collections, intensifying as well as mystifying the process of discovery. Within each book, we get inside two skins, as it were, watching the writers looking at themselves.

In Linda Smukler's collection, *Normal Sex*, the very first poem identifies "The Monkey Boy," through whom Smukler "engages the imaginative life of a girlchild...wearing the gender identity of a boy." The poems are about being a lesbian, about being sexually abused, about trying out identities, about the torturous route to self-actualization, about being the Other in a culture that punishes otherness. These poems are full of painful experiences told in a language so fine-tuned and controlled that I break into a cold sweat whenever I re-read some of them. One of the earliest poems, for example, describes a father molesting his daughter.

> He touched me and the shivery circle came around my head he touched me and my eyes went out out pretty girl out he touched me and my belly skin got small my back skin crawled away he touched me black hair he touched me and I couldn't breathe if I sucked the air the ants would come back to my ribs I'd turn inside out and shrivel up....

As she lives through the horror, the speaker also describes a song in her ears, a "low auouu like a hundred cows." The father leaves the bed finally: "there was wind outside I heard it as the cows died in my ears." The innocence of the images fuse into a childish knowingness of the incident, and both reader and writer are confronted with a shame almost beyond the ability of language to contain it.

The second section, "Tales of a Lost Boyhood," opens with another childhood horror. The Monkey Boy's name is now Sylvia and she loves the ballet. Upstairs, two women, Sandy and Elva, "lived like they were married." Elva invites Sylvia to go up whenever she likes, but Sylvia's mother wants her to "stay away from those girls." On this occasion, Sylvia disobeys because Elva has promised her brownies and new ballet slippers. "I'm gonna be a ballet dancer,' Sylvia says. 'I'll put on these shoes and they'll make me like air and I'll fly.'" But, while Sylvia is visiting, Elva's lover Sandy comes in drunk and belligerent, and she discloses to the young Sylvia what self-hatred really means.

> "I asked you," Sandy says, "you ever seen a woman before?" Sylvia can't answer. Her head hurts and she's crying. Elva's screaming, "You bitch! Let me go —this child—!" Sandy won't let her finish. She holds Elva's arms with one of her hands and rips open her blouse with the other...[she] pushes Elva forward and unsnaps the bra. It falls around her shoulders. Sandy jerks Elva back up so she faces Sylvia again. "There," Sandy says, cupping Elva's breast for the girl to see. "Pretty, ain't it?" Sandy pinches the nipple red. Elva is pale.... "See it?" Sandy asks as she pinches the nipple harder. "See what happens? Yours'll stand up too one of these days." ...Sandy grabs in between Elva's legs and pulls away the underwear. It's brown and hairy. Elva's making another noise. Elva! Sylvia wants to scream. "You'll be that way too," Sandy's voice rushes across the room. "Just wait."

When Elva screams at Sylvia to get out, Sylvia leaves her slippers behind.

The other poems of this middle section describe the progress the girlchild makes as she plays with other children, learns to masturbate, is sexually assaulted by a grandfather, pretends to be a boy, fantasizes about having a penis, until in the final section, "Normal Sex," she has become an adult with a variety of lesbian lovers, and with a variety of identities. The title poem, "Normal Sex," explores one such identity.

> I'm a housewife every day   or lounger   birdwatcher   a
> domestic with an apron who places a bowl of fruit on the
> table in this perfectly chandeliered hall   ...and it's not to say
> that sometimes I hate you for this life but mostly I love you
> and it's not your doing anyway   it's what I was brought up
> with white sinks and clean counters but I've also seen the
> other side the shit in the hole and your finger in mine

Is this the norm, then, seen through the eyes of the Other? In "Out," the speaker explores the question in this fashion: "I could go out tonight and pick up a man a thin gay man about my height who just might hold me until the morning and rub my back to let me feel his solid hands because like me he has forgotten what the other sex really felt like..." But perhaps the question is resolved in the final poem, "Go Back."

> Go back now to that boy taken by that girl   ...come come
> now now through the boy through the fingernail dirt back to
> the girl underneath it all and the comecome nownow sunk
> and drowned in the great green pond

All of which suggests to me that ultimately, we ourselves are, in some part, the Other.

Charles Fort similarly explores the Other through the use of an elaborate persona. "Darvil," he notes, is a "composite of devil and evil," but he gives him a noble lineage: "direct descendent *of Leo Africanus."* All of the poems explore Darvil's experiences, but the speaker's voice is...whose? Early in the collection, the speaker admits that Darvil's birth was "intentional and well-crafted," and that Darvil "trained early to become a wordsmith." I can only surmise from this that Fort is examining himself as Other through the mask of Darvil, for Darvil is described as a young mulatto boy whose eyes and hair are "the color of America," but who is outside its culture, despite his being an honor student, or joining the Coast Guard, or getting married in California, and despite the plethora of images from American Culture: Chatty Kathy dolls, Dorothy's ruby slippers, Scarlet O'Hara, country clubs, cub scout packs, the Blues.

Skewering cultural icons is Darvil's forte. How else does the Other deal with being on the outside? "Rose turns to give Mayhem a final message. *You can't touch me now. The rules of commandment are broken. You just couldn't separate love and power. We are living in a cave.* Rose leaves behind Mayhem who now stands in his highest form, covering his face with a Goodhousekeeping towel." The poem "Darvil Meets James Brown in Harlem and New Orleans" ends with this exorbitant polyphony of American sounds: "Mississippi Queen floats on a red river midnight saxophone, like a full moon carousel of bourbon and beer baroque goat ribs alligator pie mardi gras mambo street car lizard smokes a cuban cigar five minutes to show time ain't no potatoes like blackberry jam."

In deconstructing the great patchwork quilt that is American culture, Fort undermines any notion of the Other while understanding all too well the reality of it. His poems are jazzy riffs through Fourth of July bombast, Native American lore, Afro-Caribbean rhythms, and the detritus of a post-war materialism. And his comedy is Swiftian; he is most brutally funny when he is angriest, as when he defrocks the many ministers of his college education in my favorite poem of the collection, "Darvil Meets His College Professors":

> Darvil entered Biloxi University and majored in English....In college he learned a few details from a few professors. One was pleasant. She wrote and presented papers to the World Court on the great literature of women and ethnic writers. One Mr. Computer. His mouth clicked like his IBM. One a Freshman essay. He directed the English faculty into the realm of rubrics and dictated methodology like processed cheese. One ex-chairperson-woman-southern-slaveowner-broad. She gathered gold dust on summer excursions. Buffalo Bob rides her saddle again....One a man without words or sex. Old World pomp and saddle soap. Creative writing. Journalism. No longer his domain. Never his domain....One a Black Professor. He is *Pleased* to be with the department....

I'm not sure I didn't see myself somewhere on this acutely observed list. Fort's righteous indignation is pagan and untram-meled, but it is also rooted in a continuity of sorts. But that continuity is constantly at war with the Other. That Fort sees it from behind the mask of Darvil implies that direct experience is: misleading? subjective? self-negating?

The great Anglo-Irish poet W.B. Yeats developed a complex theory of the mask, asserting that the masks allowed the poet to say things he or she would not be able to say otherwise. The mask is the means by which the poet can "discover the self." And Jungean psychologists have argued the importance of role-playing in shaping and developing the personality. Hence, the rhetorical strategy of the mask allows Smukler and Fort a degree of self-definition, or self-discovery. As an aesthetic strategy, the mask also gives them a detachment that allows them to shape the experience into something whole. This is especially desirable in their cases, for both Smukler and Fort deal with explosive emotional issues here, and it is only through their careful artifice that we are able to get a fix on them.

The masks adopted by Smukler and Fort, however, reinforce our identification with the speaker; we are both the Other and one who confronts the Other. Through Smukler's persona of the Monkey Boy, we relive the role-playing, which is only part discovery and also part survival mechanism. Through Darvil, we can both appreciate and castigate that which makes Darvil possible. And Fort chooses to make Darvil a personification of evil because to perceive the Other is to perceive evil. Smukler similarly posits that the girlchild has been made the source of her own shame, her own self-hatred.

Charles Simic in his poem "Totemism" writes, "Every art is about the longing of One for the Other. Orphans that we are, we make our sibling kin out of anything we can find. The labor of art is the slow and painful metamorphosis of the One into the Other." I have tried very hard not to present these poets as "African-American" or "Lesbian," although that is in part what they are. But their work moves far beyond those narrow labels. Their labor is universal in its implications, and their longing is altogether human. In a review of her new novel *(Called Out, NY Times Book Review,* June 19, 1994. p.7), A.G. Mojtabai is quoted as saying, "[The] Balkanization of literature disturbs me. There's black literature, there's gay and lesbian literature and women's literature, and it keeps on dividing. My feeling is that literature is a human enterprise, a bridging enterprise, and one of the reasons I care so much about it is that it attempts to bring news of how it feels to live in someone else's skin." The works of Linda Smukler and Charles Fort are eloquent, if painful, testimony to that ideal.

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