

*Surface Tension*, Derek Beaulieu (Coach House Books)

I have several Derek Beaulieu books on my poetry shelves; his work fascinates and intrigues me, but I still don't feel I know how to read them (or perhaps the term is process them). Concrete poetry is an established genre and I am happy to put Beaulieu into that lineage, I'm also happy with poetry that uses the visual as a guiding or organizing principle, and poetry that doesn't prioritise content or narrative or epiphany.

Yet, Beaulieu's poems are beyond that. Often constructed from Letraset rub-down lettering, they are visual patterns and constructs, sometimes in sequences, sometimes seemingly treated even more (or made differently): "*Calcite Gours 1-19*", published and given away by rob mclennan back in 2004, and my introduction to Beaulieu's work, contains a 'suite of poems' which are circular-ish explosions of ink, reminiscent of star clusters. They are as seductive and engaging as the night sky, too.

That book is also dedicated to the memory of Bob Cobbing, which offers another lineage to place Beaulieu's work into, that of improvisation and sound poetry, hand-in-hand with the farther reaches of experimental poetry. Beaulieu states that the work 'is an attempt at engaging with the materiality of language; treating the construction of poetry as a physical task', going on to reference 'painterly/gesture based movements and modes of construction influenced by abstract expressionism', to be considered as 'an examination of mark making'.

*Surface Tension* is much more clearly made of letter forms, not only prompting the question 'where on earth does the author find Letraset in the 21st century?' but also offering a way in to the work through variation, change and mutation: the work in each sequence is clearly related and shares source material as it slides, disforms and reconfigures itself. My favourite sequence is 'Dendrochronology', which swiftly develops from a curvy conglomeration of letters into enlarged topographies of black and whites forms, reminiscent of rock strata or map details.

The book is also interesting for the poetics on offer, presented as prose between the series of poems. The first of these offers several interesting ideas and facts: that 'Surface Tension creates landscapes from the remnants of advertising' (which made me feel less guilty about my landscape comparison); and that '[t]hese reflections and distortions work to keep concrete current, in flow, a fluidity refusing to solidify around power.'

This idea of fluidity as a tactic to resist power is an interesting one, and Beaulieu builds on it in a later text where he states 'that the usages of language in poetry of the traditional type are not keeping pace with live processes of language and rapid methods of communication at work in the contemporary world', and also reminds us that '[w]riting is not *about* something, it is the something itself.'

Even if we want to argue with that notion, perhaps saying we want a poem to be about something as well as being something, we must be aware of those 'live

processes of language and rapid methods of communication', perhaps even the idea of society, nature, knowledge and matter itself in flux. I am reminded of Helen Vendler's statement in *The Given and the Made*, when discussing the early work of Jorie Graham, that:

'The instabilities of matter must now be assumed by the self; and so any poem spoken in the voice of the material self must be an unstable poem, constantly engaged in linguistic processes of approximation.'

Beaulieu's way of dealing with the unstable and approximate is to create 'poems that refuse linearity in favour of the momentary', poetry that 'move[s] past declarations of emotion into a form more indicative of how readers process language'. To resist modern culture, advertising and the transient by producing poetry that works in the same way is an odd form of engagement, but it is an intriguing approach, and serves as a provocation and reminder that '[e]motions and ideas are not physical materials', and that poems 'are not rarified jewels carefully chiselled for a bespoke audience.'

Beaulieu prefers poetry to be constructed with 'nuts and bolts, factory made, shifting from use to use', thinks that '[l]iterature is not craftsmanship but an industrial process', and states '[t]he contemporary poem is an understanding of juxtapositions': all admirable responses to and rebuttals of the egotistical, lyrical hangovers and shaggy dog narratives we find in so much contemporary poetry.

Once we realise it is okay to just enjoy Beaulieu's poems for what they are, in the moment, a weight lifts and we no longer have to worry about content and understanding, can find our own way of engaging with these original and distinct poems. We should also be aware that how we read and what we read, changes. Jacques Derrida perhaps says it best, in 'Living On / Border Lines':

'unreadability does not arrest reading, does not leave it paralysed in the face of an opaque surface: rather, it starts reading and writing and translating moving again. The unreadable is not the opposite of the readable, but rather the ridge that also gives it momentum, movement, sets it in motion.'

In *Surface Tension* Derek Beaulieu continues to set all sorts of things in motion, extending and refining the possibilities of poetry.

Rupert Loydell

(876 words)