The Factory and Beyond

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A review of LAST WORDS by Antler (Ballantine Books, NY: 1986) $4.95. Reviewed by klipschutz.

> Who will remember Continental Can Company
> was the foremost aluminum polluter on earth!
> The five billion bacteria in a teaspoon of soil!
> The million earthworms per acre!
> What bug! What fish! What frog! What snake! What bird!
> What baluchitherium or pteranodon!
> What paleolithic man!
> How can I apologize to primeval shorelines cluttered with
> beercans!
> –from "Factory"

To William Blake, factories were "dark satanic mills." The priest-kings of capitalism chose to ignore the disparagements of the eccentric English engraver and the Industrial Revolution spawned the technological Triumph of the West. The United States, as the Firesign Theater put it, decided to "invite immigrants over and make cars."

By now the U.S. has made plenty of cars, and lots of everything else. But, publicly, we chose to call attention not to manufacturing but to marketing–it requires cleverness and hand-shakes and you can do it wearing a suit. In our national mythology, Vulcan at his forge has been replaced by the Willy Lomans and Lee Iacoccas. Our televisions show a nation of go-getters getting over, with marketing the key to everything from romance to finance to eternal salvation. But behind all the hype is still the Product, and whether it's an after-shave, a briefcase or a Moral Majority membership card, the chances are it comes from a factory.

"Factory" is also the title of a poem, a 1600-line song of praise to Bad Attitude on behalf of all the men and women who spend their lives inside factories while Madison Avenue transmutes their sweat and boredom into The Economy. An epic poem is a poem containing history, and history is the poem written by Time with our blood. "Factory" is history with the blood still wet.

Originally published in 1980 in the City Lights Pocket Press series and hailed by critics and poets –notably Alien Ginsbergas a major achievement, the poem now appears in a full-length volume, Last Words, by a poet who goes by the name of Antler. Antler was raised in and around Milwaukee, where (the poem opens):

> The machines waited for me.
> Waited for me to be born and grow young,
> For the totempoles of my personality to be carved,
> and the slow pyramid of days
> To rise around me, to be robbed and forgotten,

They waited where I would come to be,
a point of earth,
The green machines of the factory,
the noise of the miraculous machines of the factory,
Waited for me to laugh so many times,
to fall asleep and rise awake so many times,
to see as a child all the people I did not want to be

Written in the 'Whitmanic line'–long, sometimes prosy, free-verse lines of mostly spoken-style American language, meant to be read aloud–the rhythms of the poem's 13 sections rise and fall like music.

In the mid-1800's, Walt Whitman had great hopes for America. It would have been nice if he was right, but he wasn't. Antler updates Whitman, fusing the roles of prophet and witness with social protest in a voice that calls to mind vintage Ginsberg. Yet the voice is Antler's own–less Old Testament and more Midwestern working-class than Ginsberg: something like "Howl" and The Grapes of Wrath mixed together.

By turns ecstatic, furious, resigned, punning, informative, vengeful, paranoid, plotting, plodding and delirious, the poem's cycles remind me of the inner life of a workday at any job that occupies the body and leaves the mind to its own devices. Every fear, hope, scheme, dream and despair known to humankind can run through a mind in one eight-hour day.

Antler exhaustively portrays these moods and mood swings. How did I get here, he asks:

All the times walking to school and back,
All the times playing sick to stay home and have fun,
All the summers of my summer vacations,
I never once thought I'd live to sacrifice my dwindling
fleshbloom
packaging the finishing touches on America's decay
The all-powerful faceless Ultimate Bosses:
And the first shift can't wait to go home,
And the second shift can't wait to go home,
And the third shift can't wait for the millions
of alarmclocks to begin ringing
As I struggle with iron in my face,
Hooked fish played back and forth to work
by unseen fisherman on unseen shore
The end-of-the-day aches:
His feet feel like nursing homes for wheelchairs
The lives not lived while working:
Everywhere I could be and everything ! could be doing right

now–
Feeling the butt of a cosmic joke.
Is this death's way of greeting me
at the beginning of a great career!

Antler makes it abundantly clear that he has better things to do than make cans for Continental Can Company. But there is more going on in this poem than a personal protest against the raw deal of wage slavery. Just like office work, factory work is not only unfulfilling and boring, but destructive. Somehow we find ourselves daily digging our own–and the planet's–graves in subtle ways that refuse to remain subtle:

Before, I said–"There will always be room in my brain
for the universe. "
Before, I said–"My soul will never be bludgeoned
by the need to make money!"
Before, I said–"i will never cringe under the crack
of the slavedriver's whip!"
Now my job is to murder the oceans!
Now my job is to poison the air!
Now my job is to chop down every tree! · · ·
I spend eight hours a day crucifying saviors!
I spend eight hours a day executing Lorcas!

"Factory" is encyclopaedic and fun. We learn the history of the can, the number of cans used in the world each year, that children who worked 12 hours in factories fell asleep with food in their mouths, how the poem itself came to be written, and why the poet has taken the name Antler. There are dizzying lists of all the products produced in factories, and towards the end of the poem the reader is even accused of looking ahead to see how many pages are left. The poem is prayer, incantation, confession, expose, curse and document. It bears witness to our rage and gives the cage of despair a good hard shake.

Many people associate poetry with Culture, and you know how much we all like Culture when it's capitalized. Pablo Neruda sought an "impure poetry." Kenneth Patchen, who didn't see this world as a benign place, prescribed "a sort of garbage pail you could throw anything into," to dispel poetry's image as pretty, precious and rhymey. Antler has thrown everything in and come out with an impure masterpiece.

Antler offers no readymade answers, any more than Processed World does. But, like Processed World, he asks the right questions with humor and humanity and, pushing an important subject to the snapping point, breaks through in revelation.

LAST WORDS

"Factory" was written between 1970 and 1974. The remaining 63 poems in Last Words span the years 1967–1983, from the poet's early twenties to his late thirties.

I remember thinking after first reading "Factory," "What does this guy do for an encore?" In the sense that every writer writes the same book over and over, he does variations on a theme. Antler's theme is the holiness of all life and the illegitimacy of any authority that denies this holiness.

This is a tall order, and some of the poems are more successful than others. Their length ranges from four lines to seven pages. One section, 'Reworking Work,' expands on the issues presented in "Factory." "Dream Job Offer" is a playful fantasy of a job as a mattress tester in a department store window and includes the lines:

> Only those who enjoy sleeping need apply.
> No bedwetters, wetdreamers, sleeptalkers,
> sleepwalkers, teethgrinders,
> buzz-saw snorers, or those who
> wake up in a cold sweat screaming
> will be hired.

The poem seems to me a sophomoric joke, not particularly original, but carried out so well and unself-consciously that it works. It's not profound, but relentless, obsessive. At its best, Antler's exuberant relentlessness becomes profound.

Antler presents himself as a modern primitive, a mescaline visionary, a flower-sniffing backpacker; yet he knows not only what's going on in the world, but in his profession: the poetry world. He knows there has been a swing in the direction of aestheticism and experimental language-oriented poetry. In "Your Poetry's No Good Because It Tries to Convey a Message." his response is blunt:

> Tell it to Jews hanging from meathooks,
> Tell it to Wilfred Owen's exploded face,
> Tell it to James Wright's cancerous cut-out tongue
> Tell it to Victor Jara's hands chopped off
> in Santiago Stadium,
> Tell it to all the ears, breasts, cocks and balls
> cut off in every war ...
> Tell it to 52 million children under 15
> working in factories in Southeast Asia...
> Tell it to the $100 million it cost to kill
> each soldier in World War II...

There is a stridency to his potent vision that is sometimes difficult to take. As with every book, every movie, there comes the moment when the work ends and we are thrust back into our own lives where nothing is simple: Where to from here?

These poems do not answer that question. They do give voice to things I've heard expressed countless times in countless ways: the technopeasants are restless. Antler

speaks for hedonists, anarchists and brash believers everywhere when, in "Why No 'Poet Wanted' in Want Ad Column," he talks back to the smug pragmatists and well-adjusted compromisers:

> Especially when you invoke a marijuana blowjob religion,
> Especially when you place Solitude Wilderness Vision Quest
> above all the Works of Man.
> They want you to get a job you don't like
> and have to be working full-time
> so you can't write anymore.
> They want you to confess
> your poetry is full of shit.
> Somehow your writing
> threatens them.
> Besides, Christ already said it all–
> So don't bother trying to say
> something new that's true.
> What are the words of a

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