

WHITE AMERICAN MALE PLAYING IT SAFE: THE GROWING
PHENOMENON OF “THE KIRBY POET”

by Anis Shivani

The Kirby Poet exists only in the present moment. While empire is experiencing its last death blows, he presumes a millennium of untortured imperialism ahead. As art in America plumbs to its lowest depths, he proclaims its widespread dissemination, democratic acceptance, and inherent stability. Because there isn't a revolutionary history for him to contend with, not to mention egalitarian will, he can preach from his academic pulpit, taking the whole world for his audience. He cannot visualize an America different from today's ugly highways, fast-food drive-throughs, private healthcare, and convoluted election primaries, so he doesn't bother. When there is no past and future fundamentally different from the present, an imagination deluded by its chanciest gestures emerges to claim timeless logic. This breed of poet writes for an audience presumably identical to him (or to Billy Collins, Bob Hicok, or Albert Goldbarth, his close cousins). All the exuberant froth of Western civilization—Bacon, Dante, Cervantes, Rembrandt, Voltaire, Sterne, Beethoven, and Darwin—has been brushed off, so that only the characteristic equanimity and superhuman confidence about his own privileged status remain.

Kirby's speech is utterly genial, pleasant, avuncular, demotic, approachable, wholesome, friendly. This is the source of the threat to the art of poetry, his perpetual affability, which wouldn't be the case if he were brooding, melancholy, threatening, elitist, prophetic, Olympian, unlovable, boorish, recondite, detached. Kirby's poetry is the epitome of apparently artless, spontaneous, immature, wishful language, which presents itself to us as though in the process of being thought out. A finished product can only be articulated with great pain in politics or culture, since to do so is to presume superiority over the unformed masses, who have neither time nor inclination to devote single-minded effort to such matters. The artlessness comes packaged in an innocuous smile, even as it sacrifices every value of humane civilization. New media work in one-sided fashion: the barrage of jagged cuts, impromptu stabs at thoughts and notions, comes at us in a unidirectional stream; we do not have input, only the apparent ability to do so, yet we feel joyful as would-be participants. The new media never speak down to us; to do so would be to violate the code of friendliness.

These premises of communication in a communicationless society apply to Kirby's poetry. He has mastered the art of speaking with such rapidity—hence the total absence of any stumbling blocks in diction or rhythm—that the discourse becomes entirely one-way. We are not given any time to think about what Kirby is actually saying. Feeling deluged by the flood of words, we are content to keep our heads above water. The flow of words cannot pause to take stock of its own movement, or it would be compromised. Speed is of the essence, in this madcap accumulation of convenient symbols and signs, whose vitality has never been less real than now. Even as middle-class America vanishes, its status codes must be given timeless validity. Kirby has called his poems “memory poems,” but these aren't memories so much as ideas about the substance of memories: while they have all

the specificity of memories, we always doubt whether the incidents happened. This doubt keeps the whole enterprise an airy, floating, ephemeral one: transcendence is being denied even as its forms are being inscribed.

The House on Boulevard Street is divided into three parts: jejune college hijinks, misadventures of an American in Europe, and spending time with his wife—or as Kirby calls them in his Preface to the book, “the heated restlessness of youth, the mixed blessings of self-imposed exile, and the settled pleasures of home.” Kirby gloats: “For the life of me, I can’t recall a single minute in hell and have passed many a day that comes close to being paradisaal.” Remarking on the uniform appearance of the poems, Kirby says: “All of the poems are marked by fixed-length stanzas and a sawtooth margin, effects intended to help with the sense of what one critic (Peter Klappert, in a 2000 *Southern Review* essay, “The Invention of the Kirby Poem”) calls in these poems ‘the whole motion of the speaker’s psyche: like a pendulum, it swings in one direction with an enthusiasm or passion, momentarily comes to a point of rest, and then swings back the other way.’” In fact, Kirby never strays far from his point of origin, a Midwestern, middle-America death-in-life, which revels in lack of elegance and beauty as credential elements of American selfhood.

In the title poem, his marriage has collapsed, but we don’t know why: does it matter, when he always has the opportunity to play the field, and move on from the debacle to a more wholesome constitution? We will never find out what was incompatible with the first wife, or what is so compatible about the current one (Barbary Hamby, fellow poet and teacher at the same university). He has no hesitation giving out family members’ or lovers’ real names and details; this is not confessionalism, this is only personal anecdote. We are invited to get familiar, but we can never know the first thing about the mind and soul of Kirby. He is in the process of laughing off his failures as a man, and we’re meant to applaud him for his bravado. The white American man must never appear enamored of masculine virtues; this is the only way to maintain empire these days. He must present himself as the most benign of creatures. His first marriage collapses, and what does Kirby do? Not indulge in fantasies of revenge, not go on a fucking spree with younger women, not set himself up as heroic and somehow undeserving of the treatment, as any normal man would, but absurdly quote from Mandeville and digress to when he fantasized about being a beefcake male as a teenager. He speaks of “marriage, betrayal, self-betrayal” (this is pretty much the substance of the first marriage we will get to hear from Kirby), none of which was anything like “the golden world of *As You Like It* / where gentlefolk fleet time carelessly!” Literature is useless because it deals in extremes of emotion. Elias Canetti is not a character in literature, he is a fellow poet, but he is saturated enough by Old Europe’s narcissistic grotesqueries that he is worthless as a model for imitation. As are Shakespeare’s gentle comedies, whose pastoral beatitudes are not for the worldly poet. In his brief odyssey of melancholy, Kirby hasn’t broken a sweat—he simply skips from Elias Canetti the sadist to Elvis Costello the crooner to Bolívar the liberator to Tsvetaeva the dissident and arrives at “the little fox” as the culmination of his intimate cycle. From here on out, nothing but marital bliss is possible (as indeed Kirby will demonstrate in the next two sections of the book). This rapture is the sum of Kirby’s poetry. The Kirby Poet isn’t dominating through any intellectual pyrotechnics: he simply presents conquest by his dull mind as a *fait accompli*. There is no defense being mounted here of any philosophy of life. Something orders of magnitude more descriptive than bourgeois complacency is indicated.

The white American male's tonic self-referentiality is his liberal card these days instead of any ideological commitment: as long as he can speak of himself as sole inhabitant of a world created each day *ex nihilo* for him, he is secure in feeling above the fray of nasty politics. Kirby's poem "I Think Stan Done It" was written in response to the mistitling of his earlier poem "I Think Satan Done It" by the editors of the *Poetry Daily* website who wished to reproduce it. "I Think Satan Done It," a paean to a formative rock-and-roller—"Jerry Lee Lewis is the undead, only cooler"—brandishes Kirby's hip credentials; his poetry is speckled throughout with references to Little Richard, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, and other liberators of the bonded, fifties white man. We don't understand what Lewis's music meant for its times, only that it kicked him into a frenzy of self-appreciation; the music is outside time and history, it borrows from no other form, and its compulsion not to transcend its limitations is what is coolest about it. In "I Think Satan Done It" (the title refers to the singer's exclamation "when an amp goes out") Kirby describes a concert at Florida State University, the closest he is likely to get to Bacchanal frenzy in his lifetime. When a woman whom he asks where she got her "Killer T-shirt" from tries to peel it off for him, he is afraid "Dean Don Foss" of the university will gleefully pounce on this "mis-step."

Kirby yearns to procure a rebellious T-shirt for his wife; marital bliss is the one constant for Kirby, his youthful indiscretions being but necessary preparation to appreciate the omnipresent Barbara. This is not love as we have known it from any romantic literary form; it is not passion or consummation, delirium or engrossment; the wife is like a controlled aspect of the self: ubiquitous and consistently reflective, she is the gloss on the margin, the content of the page, the page number, the spine of the book, the dust jacket, the blurb, the preface, the acknowledgment, if never the heroine of the tome. He must keep mentioning her to remind himself of his own solidity. The Kirby Poet has recently made a fascinating construct out of single-minded monogamy, which apparently outlasts death itself: once the spouse is dead (preferably prematurely, of cancer) the project to memorialize her can begin in earnest (the prematurely dead poetess ideally gives her husband a head-start on the project, by writing of her own impending death in her last months), although of course passion must not rear its head even at this late stage. If she is alive, as Barbara is, she is the one woman who suffices for all of his needs, even his specifically masculine ones. She is not so much soulmate as solipsist's maid.

The substance of "I Think Satan Done It" is Kirby's attempt to convince "an editor at a big-city northern newspaper" to do a piece on Jerry Lee Lewis. Thus he proves with "factual / irrefutability *and* rhetorical power" the ability of Lewis to fire up melancholy Old Europe healers (French hospital workers). His earnestness about the cultural artifacts middle America claims with unthinking pride is as sincere as his love for his wife. As his political contentment is his gift to the world (both old and emerging democracies), so is his collective cultural production a blessing to the troubled men and women of other countries who have not been so lucky as he has been. Rock and roll has its provenance in the agonies of black music in its various forms, and if it has an upbeat tempo, it is really the close counterpart of a pervasive melancholy; its bravado is closely related to pessimism. But Kirby is interested only in the finished product, not where it came from, or if it might have more ambiguous meanings than he can synthesize for an "800 words" piece for a newspaper.

Kirby goes on to equate Jerry Lee Lewis with Shakespeare. Nothing his rock idol does is throwaway, lacking material for reflection. At the end of the poem Kirby must reconcile with Lewis's promiscuity—"Mr. Lewis has married six times"—and the failure in general of rock singers to be role models to the younger generation; if he doesn't address these anomalies, he might be seen as too keenly on the side of the counterculture's transgressions, whereas what he really wants is to borrow the rock-and-roller's mutinous attitude without any of its punch. So Kirby describes Lewis's marrying six times as somehow subordinate to his singing about these failed marriages. Kirby repeats Lewis's defense that he "never claimed to be a role model," while emphasizing that Lewis did exactly what he wanted to in life, and "when it didn't work, he blamed the devil." He wishes Lewis to "have as much fun / in hell as you did getting there," imagining a frenzied auditorium in hell: "you swivel on your stool and look out as though seeing the audience / for the first time and jerk your thumb toward / the back of the auditorium and say, 'Them doors swing both ways.'" So in his aesthetic rock-and-roll has been emptied of political content. It is mere self-expression for Lewis, as poetry is for Kirby. Lewis is evaluated strictly as an individual artist (or rather, the art, in Kirby's conception, flows from the unique constituents of a person's selfhood, and therefore is in no need of explanation or justification), and nothing that doesn't fit into this paradigm is referenced. The poem gives the appearance of being free-flowing, able to synthesize diverse inputs and sources, whereas in fact it is the most claustrophobic, self-enclosed, walled-off artifact imaginable.

But Kirby tops it in "I Think Stan Done It." The threats in his universe are either utterly trivial, reduced to the specificity of zero, or so abstracted, expanded to the scope of the universe, that in either case he has no meaningful sense of the choice between security and liberty. He must either trivialize or exaggerate, in both cases depriving the world's assorted dangers of their solidity. If only Satan were named Stan, the world would be different. Kirby describes the legend on the ceiling of a Gonzaga duke's castle: "*Forse che si, forse che no*," meaning "Maybe yes, maybe no." Some claim this applies to the fortunes of war, others that it refers to love. Kirby is "betting on war." It doesn't make a difference to him, and neither does the exact meaning have any bearing on the eventual outcome, since the Italian forts are all equipped with holes at the tops of the arched gates where the defenders can pour on the attackers boiling oil or candy, take your pick. He then connects this with his own family history: "My parents dealt in both commodities, I think" (love and war? "After-dinner mints" and "rusty nails"?). He recounts a joke about how "Miss Josie called Dr. Tommy 'Earley' whenever / he forgot a car payment or left the milk bottle / in the kitchen sink, Early being the simpleton / of the little farm town she grew up in." We are to imagine the child Kirby and his brother rolling on the floor in laughter as they imagine Dr. Tom as the "drooling half-wit," who while his neighbors ride into town to sell their produce, stands at the courthouse "masturbating with one hand / and picking his nose with the other." Remember that these are "memory poems" as Kirby understands them; but they are so in the sense that history lessons are for our last president. Kirby asks, "What kept them together, my dad and mom? Answer: / nothing. Also, everything, and plenty of both // at the same time."

The climax of the poem is either after-dinner mints or rusty nails, depending on our interpretation. Kirby tells us that "Blaise Pascal said that if people / knew what others said of them, there wouldn't be / four friends in the world." This is how families really work:

“...we don’t have the slightest idea about what we’re doing / yet manage to do it anyway with a kind of / *Così Fan Tutte*-ish unarticulatable grasping at as much // of the truth as we can wrap our lunch hooks / around at any given moment.” This is the substitute for wisdom, steeped in jokes, empty tourism through lands and literature, and hyperventilating (because disguising the loss of expressible masculinity) associationalism, that is supposed to be the payoff for putting up with his childish whimsy. So of course he must end with the joke about the carpenter who shows up at the gates of heaven and when God wants to know why he should be let in, answers that he did raise “this son who’s really, really different.” When Jesus leaps to exclaim “Daddy!” the carpenter stutters, “P-Pinnocchio?” In this poem that started off with an omitted “a” in a previous poem of Kirby’s, we are led through a wild-goose chase: the Freudian implications of verbal slips; stale jokes about prudish English spinsters; a variety of names for the penis; an enigmatic quotation on a ceiling which could mean anything; an empty memory of childhood; and a joke about misunderstanding at heaven’s gates. All of this adds up to nothing, even though tied together by the theme of the intentional misunderstandings we commit in order to allow life to proceed with the least amount of friction. Kirby wants us to believe that it is better to allow the innocent mistake to proceed, to go playfully with the flow and hope that things will work out. There must be a high degree of capitalist redundancy for there to be no consequences to misunderstandings (whether physical or verbal).

Kirby’s primary self-conception is of a verbally charged tourist, walking without feeling any emotion amidst evocative or depressing landscapes, whether in his own country, or in France and Italy, where there is no compulsion to learn even the rudiments of the language, as Kirby teaches in those exotic landscapes, suitable only as backdrops and occasions for merriment. The manifesto poem, “Stairway to Heaven,” elasticizes the term “memory poem” to the point of meaninglessness: “Even the term / *memory poem* isn’t mine, since Byron had used it / for some autobiographical poems of his own.” He also mentions a “review I’d written / of a collection of Hayden Carruth’s essays / called *Reluctantly* in which I’d said, / “these essays...start abruptly and ramble / purposefully over the landscape before concluding / in a way that is both surprising and appropriate.” Yet it is clear that any beginning, middle, and end will yield this result to the poet’s satisfaction.

The kernel of the theme is present in each poem to the degree that it permits coherence of a certain kind—as though paint of a certain color were scattered haphazardly over a floor and walls, to give it a certain false unity. In “Dear Derrida,” it is deconstruction; in “The Fugawi,” identity; in “The Crab Nebula,” teaching; in “The Ghost of Henry James,” gothicism; in “Heat Lightning,” puritanism; in “A Fine Frenzy,” married sex; but these themes are in the nature of faithless promises. Wisdom is clothed in flippancy, indifference to the mighty struggle for virtue and justice: Kirby identifies as his real failings, in “Everything You Do Is Wrong”: “not gloth and sluttomy and the other five / but *my* sins, my tendency to avoid people / at parties if they’re not more important / than I am, for example, for the pleasure I take / in the bad luck of my friends.” The musical, cultural, political, personal, and commercial references are invariably middlebrow: this is to create a degree of friendliness toward the author, to reassure us that he has no airs, no pretences, that he is bedrock middle-America, whom we can trust for his witty parley for the duration of the poem. His treatment of Europe is as a tourist escapade, in the worst senses of the word, but this isn’t surprising, given his distinct otherness toward all forms of creation

not strictly himself. In the last poem, "Borges at the Northside Rotary," he and Barbara get on the wrong train in Paris, and are surprised when "out of the dark / swaggered four Tunisian teenagers," who of course turn out to be friendly and harmless. But the racist presumption is always present, and there is no shame about it; it is simply how he conducts himself in the world.

Kirby's book of essays, *Ultra-Talk: Johnny Cash, The Mafia, Shakespeare, Drum Music, St. Teresa of Avila, And 17 Other Colossal Topics of Conversation* (The University of Georgia Press, 2007), is his prose version of speech without purpose. A number of fertile subjects, particularly those having to do with his touristic forays in Europe, are undertaken, but none is pursued to the point of communication between author and reader. He'll explain to us why Shakespeare is so popular: "the most original of writers is the least original," besides being like Jackson Pollock in his speed. Whitman has been falsely categorized as an "American original, as cosmic loony," when he is better pigeonholed "as dithyrambist, as citizen of the 'old, weird America.'" Emily Dickinson's poetry is displaced sexual frenzy. Touring France, he comes to this conclusion: "With Rabelais and Montaigne as my guides, what I was learning was how willing the French are to embrace opposites: they like to think big, like Rabelais, yet they're as keen to split hairs as Montaigne is." Though he concedes to making sure "to see at least a couple of movies" whenever he is in Paris, he dismisses the European art-film, because the "problem with detailing human nature is that it tends to be unchanging," whereas a "well-turned [Hollywood] plot...is never predictable." Observing growing religiosity everywhere, Kirby stays calm in his bubble of moderation, noting that "Christianity has been an indispensable spur to excellence in science and art" (not hesitating to rely on the racist Charles Murray to buttress his argument), and concluding that "arguing for or against religion, especially on the basis of whether it is good or bad for us, is like arguing for or against automobiles or ice cream or sex." He will pursue Dante and da Vinci's paths, but we get lost on the trail. He remains calm in the middle of exploring NASCAR frenzy at Talladega, Alabama. He empathizes with his son when he is part of the *Big Brother 2* CBS reality television show cast shortly after September 11, concluding, "Ours is a country of many freedoms. The greatest of these is the freedom to be dumb." Take him to the cradle of Western culture, and he will come away with nothing but scraps of his own selfhood retailed back to us, without story, enthusiasm, logic, finitude, romance.

The Kirby Poet has equally defanged the Enlightenment and Romanticism; history is a dead word to him. A man walks around in his past and in other lands and confronts only his banal persona, already represented to him by commercialized art. His guise is always friendly and benign, which makes him a more severe danger to happiness on earth than the dour jackbooted thugs of the past. We want to share a beer with him (as with Bush), but he will kill our imagination (or put us in a camp) with a smile always on his face. He is always a tourist, never a traveler; always desiring a laugh-track, never understanding. He is new: Lowell and Berryman were self-critical, not treading softly against their lost masculinity, let alone deny it as Kirby does. If this type's hegemonic rapture lasts much longer, the planet is doomed.