

Kill the Poets: anti-verse. Kenneth J. Harvey.

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Volume 16, numéro 1, spring 2000

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds16_1rv04

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Coleman, V. (2000). Compte rendu de [*Kill the Poets: anti-verse.* Kenneth J. Harvey.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 16(1), 94–97.

Kill the Poets: anti-verse. Kenneth J. Harvey. Toronto: Exile Editions, 98 p., softcover, 1995, \$14.95, ISBN 1-55096-042-3.

VICTOR COLEMAN

IN A RECENT INTERVIEW in the Newfoundland semi-annual *TickleAce*, Kenneth Harvey reveals his attitude toward contemporary poetry: "I want poetry to be accessible, not an elitist preoccupation. The poetry that is taught teaches people to hate it. I understand that poetry is meant to develop an eloquent visionary part of the brain and that it might be painful to a great many people. But if poetry was more accessible and if young people, for instance, identified with some poetry initially, then the chances of opening that area of the brain, of slipping in and expanding it, would be much greater than if we thrust all the heavyweight poets on them upfront and shut that area down even more."

This quote betrays the author's ignorance of poetic practice and smacks of an underlying desire for some kind of mind control. Eugenics, anyone? So it's hard to see Harvey's own engagement with (anti-)poetry as being anything but idle dabbling.

He sets himself up as an anti-poet writing anti-verse; he is the vicious opposition to the namby-pamby, limp-wristed, pompous elitists, who perpetrate their dull formalist constructs or their allusion-laden patent obscurities on an unsuspecting, gullible readership. Harvey's answer to all this?

Kill the poets 2
poetry
serves the hungry dogs
of deprivation
howling
for a solid chunk
of aesthetic scrap
to sink
their incisors into
to hump
like a bitch
that struggles to hit
the high note
but will
never really come
beyond
the ravenous revelations
(the cut-out creations)
that the poet/dog/god
props up

What he seems to be missing here is the sheer joy — or horror — of language. I assume he gets this in his fiction (I've only encountered a little). I wonder if he's ever read the great Chilean poet, Nicanor Parra, whose anti-poetry was first published in English translation by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights in the Sixties. Parra:

What is an antipoet
A dealer in urns and coffins?
A general doubting himself?
A priest who believes in nothing?
*[***]*
A revolutionary of the living room?
A petit-bourgeois?
A charlatan?
A god?
An innocent?

Harvey:

A Brief Statement of Denial
They were never
lovers
they were only

*ice-cubes
seized together
because
the temperature
was right*

It's not just because I'm insulted by Harvey's attitude that he can do this better than those poofters in Toronto; it's that he probably actually believes it and will carry on ignoring poetry until something startling wakes him up. One shudders to think what some poor aspiring poet would take away from a meeting with *this* writer-in-residence.

*poet 4
poet's an animal
flashes his incisors
to prove the point
bites down
punctuation
laughs and tears
into the poem
again
says your name
but sounds different
while
he eats you*

*sounds like:
"push three fingers
up your cunt,
feel-arousal's-rush-
shimmy-the-firing-
zap-zaps-in-your-spine"
but could not be,
could never utter such a
thing,
he being
poet
(all bad lines
the profs nod through
while poet lover slips
fingers into
the hole
he's made
for you)*

*"all together now class,
repeat after me..."*

Looks like poetry. Even looks like anti-poetry. And I guess you could say it is accessible, even marketable. Hell, why not put it on t-shirts?