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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “every new work is worth buying the day it appears on the shelves.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

### A MIND IN ACTION

Frank Bidart’s poetry embodies its thought process.

By Michael Robbins

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**Watching the Spring Festival**, by Frank Bidart. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$25.00.

“When the body got too discomposed, / I’d just jack off, letting it fall on her . . .”: for some reason, I haven’t seen Frank Bidart’s mind-of-a-serial-killer poem “Herbert White” used to promote National Poetry Month. Bidart has spent the last three decades forging a distinctive and bizarre art, less confessionalist than shock therapist, that privileges “subject matter” over Modernism’s legacy of stylistic affronts. In a useful interview with Mark Halliday included in *In the Western Night: Collected Poems 1965–1990*, Bidart contends that a poem is not only a display of Aristotelian mimesis but an action in itself, an idea he expresses at the formal level by presenting his poems in a typographical frenzy of almost Futurist sheen. The poem is “a mind in action”:

I had to learn how to use the materials of a poem to think. I said to myself that my poems must seem to embody not merely “thought,” but necessary thought. And *necessary* thought (rather than mere rumination, ratiocination) expresses or acknowledges what has resisted thought, what has forced or irritated it into being.

A cerebral poetry, then, that endlessly seeks a demystifying uncoupling of thought from what passes for thought in a culture that (as the poem “Advice to the Players” in Bidart’s last book, *Star Dust*, has it) “does not understand how central making itself is as manifestation and mirror of the self, fundamental as eating or sleeping.”

Like Robert Hass and Jack Gilbert, Frank Bidart is a sparse poet with a taxing measure of workmanship, having published only seven books between 1973 and 2005. The poems can at times seem too labored over, too tautly vigilant of superfluous words, but they constitute one of the most painstakingly articulated and syntactically astute studies of emotional life ever undertaken in American letters. Best of all is 2005's *Star Dust*, which contains many of the most elegant lyrics of Bidart's career as well as "The Third Hour of the Night," the most recent section of a poem begun in 1990 that has rightly struck many readers as one of American poetry's enduring productions. "Third Hour" proposes the argument that absorbs Bidart's later poetry:

After sex & metaphysics,—  
... what?

What you have made.

And now Bidart has made *Watching the Spring Festival*, his first collection composed solely of shorter lyrics, in which making provides not consolation but illusion of meaning in the no longer theoretical light of mortality:

You believe not in words but in words in  
lines, which disdaining the right margin

*Out of ceaseless motion in edgeless space*

Inside time make the snake made out of  
time pulse without cease electric in space

*Like the invisible seasons*

Though the body is its  
genesis, a poem is the vision of a process

*Out of ceaseless motion in edgeless space*

Carved in space, vision your poor eye's single  
armor against winter spring summer fall

—From "Winter Spring Summer Fall"

Though this book largely eschews the idiosyncratic punctuation and typography of Bidart's earlier work, his mastery of enjambment here is precision-tooled. Line breaks defer semantic resolution as syntax clots with possibility:

How those now dead used the word love bewildered  
and disgusted the boy who resolved he

would not reassure the world he felt  
love until he understood love

Resolve that too soon crumbled when he found  
within his chest

something intolerable for which the word  
because no other word was right

must be love  
must be love

Love craved and despised and necessary  
the Great American Songbook said explained our fate

—From “Valentine”

Bidart’s snaky syntax forces the mind to double back and revise, mirroring and impelling the action of thought. Formally, it resembles nothing so much as the examples Noam Chomsky comes up with to illustrate the mind’s ability to make sense of complex referential relations: “The horse raced past the barn fell.” Like Chomsky, Bidart revels in the creative and literally infinite potentialities of language use.

With no long poem for Bidart to magic, the new collection is a bit slighter than *Star Dust* and 1997’s *Desire*. The centerpiece, a 10-page meditation on the Russian ballerina Galina Ulanova’s performance of Adolphe Adam’s *Giselle*—“*Ulanova came to Pomona California in // 1957 as light projected on a screen // to make me early in college see what art is*”—is the sole typically Bidartian amalgam of verse and prose set to heated italics. But no less than its predecessors, *Watching the Spring Festival* forces and irritates us into thought. Bidart is one of those rare artists, like Sonic Youth or John Ashbery, whose every new work is worth buying the day it appears on the shelves.

Michael Robbins is a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago. His poems and reviews have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Chicago Review*, and other publications. This article first appeared in *Poetry* magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Frank Bidart, and his poetry, at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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