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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “the most truthful poems in modern American poetry.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

ARTFUL ARTLESSNESS

John Koethe on Henri Cole’s *Blackbird and Wolf*, winner of the 2009 Lenore Marshall Prize.

By John Koethe

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Blackbird and Wolf, by Henri Cole. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$13.00.

To appreciate what’s so distinctive about Henri Cole’s *Blackbird and Wolf*, it helps to have a sense of his development as a poet, for more than any other I can think of, he has remade himself over the course of a career leading to this, his sixth book. His first two books, *The Marble Queen* and *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge*, were mandarin performances, full of highly polished verse conspicuous for its sheer artfulness, exhibiting a delicacy and a mental and linguistic dexterity somewhat reminiscent of James Merrill. But starting with some of the poems in the 1995 *The Look of Things* and continuing with the harshly direct poems in *The Visible Man* and the equally direct though somewhat mellower poems in *Middle Earth*, Cole developed a style and a sensibility, characterized by a relentless self-examination, almost diametrically opposed to those he began with, and which have reached full fruition in *Blackbird and Wolf*.

The poems in the book are as artful as those of anyone writing, but it’s an artfulness so subtle and skillful that they seem almost artless in their directness and simplicity, as in these lines from “Gravity and Center”:

I’m sorry I cannot say I love you when you say
you love me. The words, like moist fingers,
appear before me full of promise but then run away
to a narrow black room that is always dark,

where they are silent, elegant, like antique gold,
devouring the thing I feel.

The artfulness here reminds me a bit of Elizabeth Bishop in its invisibility (more so than, say, Robert Lowell, in whose work the effort too often shows), though certainly in style and subject matter Cole's work is nothing like Bishop's. The poem concludes with a kind of *ars poetica*:

I don't want words to sever me from reality.
I don't want to need them. I want nothing
to reveal feeling but feeling—as in freedom,
or the knowledge of peace in a realm beyond,
or the sound of water poured into a bowl.

This artful artlessness is not an end in itself, impressive though it is, but works in the service of what I've just indicated I take to be Cole's true subject, the inward subjective self and its problematic relation to the objective external world of things and other people. One might call it confessional poetry, though that term seems increasingly quaint, and I prefer to think of it as autobiographical poetry that uses the raw materials of the poet's life to fuel an intense exploration of the kind of self-consciousness Gerard Manley Hopkins describes when he writes "Nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving, this self being of my own. Nothing explains it or resembles it, except so far as this, that other men to themselves have the same feeling. But this only multiplies the phenomena to be explained so far as they are like and do resemble. But to me there is no resemblance: searching nature I taste self at one tankard, that of my own being."

What is so maddening and mysterious about individual consciousness is that it is utterly commonplace and ordinary and at the same time absolutely unique, as intimated by the passage from Hopkins quoted above or these lines from "Beach Walk":

Later, I saw a boy, aroused and elated, beckoning from a dune.
Like me, he was alone. Something tumbled between us—
not quite emotion. I could see the pink
interior flesh of his eyes. "I got lost. Where am I?"
he asked, like a debt owed to death.

Poetry that puts an emphasis, as Cole's does, on directness and the avoidance of comforting illusions and consolations inevitably raises questions about the relation between poetry and truth. But I think that worries about the truth of the poet's discoveries and revelations are misplaced; what matters, it seems to me, about the thoughts expressed in poetry is not whether they're literally true but whether the poet entertains and inhabits them in a convincing manner and whether the reader can enter into them along with him. Wittgenstein says in a related connection that "the importance of a true confession does not reside in its being a correct and certain report of a process. It resides rather in the special consequences which can be drawn from a confession whose truth is guaranteed by

the special criteria of truthfulness.” Wittgenstein’s meaning is difficult and obscure, but I think it is in something like that sense that Henri Cole’s *Blackbird and Wolf* contains some of the most truthful poems in modern American poetry.

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