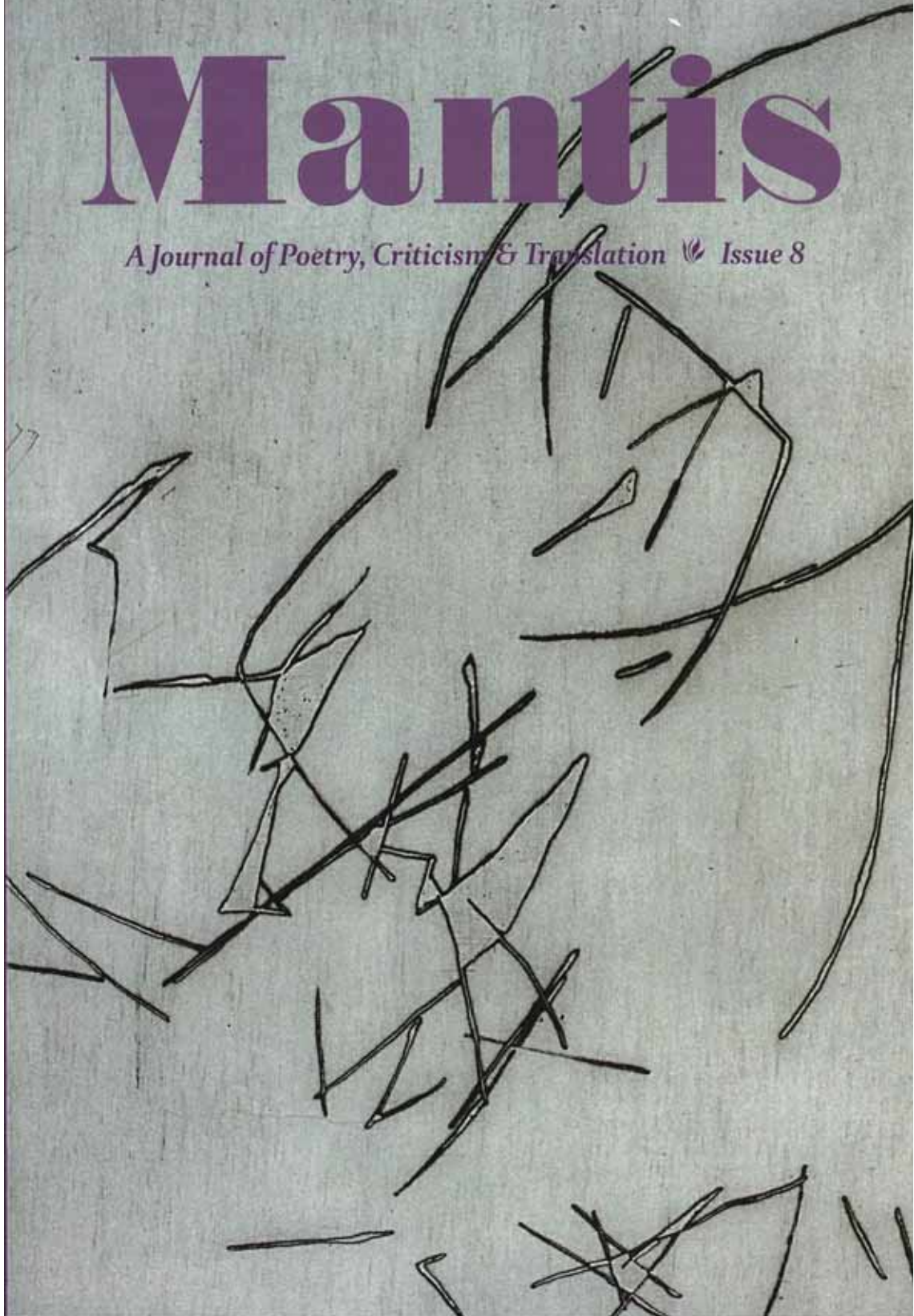


# Mantis

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#### DERANGEMENT SYNDROME:

#### 4 FROM THE (NORTH) AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE

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Rachel Zolf, *Human Resources*, Coach House Books, 2007, 96pp. \$16.95 CAD.

Dan Machlin, *Dear Body*, Ugly Duckling Press, 2007, 85pp. \$15.00

Rod Smith, *Deed*, University of Iowa Press, 2007, 94pp. \$16.00

Michael Scharf, *For Kid Rock/Total Freedom*, Spectacular Books, 2007, 96pp. \$15.00

Where are the avant-gardes of yesteryear? One central member of the 1970s *Language* movement, a movement informed (at least in retrospect) by French post-structuralism and perhaps the last unambiguous American avant-garde, considers the term D.O.A., and his binary for poetry of the 21st century, aligning uncasily with the cooked-and-raw of the century past, makes room only for the "post-avant." The term has caught on, and at least one press for the heirs to *Language* has it on the masthead.

To accept the label "post-avant" as more than a marketing device, though, is to accept that the notion of the avant-garde has ossified into a style, or, less sympathetically, a disjunction of quirks just as Ezra Pound saw his Imagism devolve into the "Amygism" of Amy Lowell. Quirks in the former case come readily to mind: sentence fragments, distorted syntax, theory-heavy left-wing politics, prosy rhythms.

Since authors today are largely unwilling to declare themselves for (or against) the notion of the avant-garde, the usual trademarks of school and coterie that simplify criticism and shoulder some of the burden of organizing are now missing, or at least "on leave." Meanwhile, the few trademarks that do appear ("New Sincerity," "flarf") are coined more for ironic purchase on a marketing strategy.

Yet there is a something that unites the disparate books under review here; something beyond both style and paraphrase; something, just as importantly, beyond the "confessional" categories of race, class, and sex. The avant-garde still exists—but now as guerrilla action. Perhaps Fukuyama was right, and history is indeed coming to a close; the contemporary avant-garde poem is not in advance of an army but rather a pocket of resistance aware of its impermanence.

A way in to how much things have changed since Verlaine and Rimbaud, is Rachel Zolf's *Human Resources*:

Jabes the atheist says Jews can't help writing about God. Nor can we help writing about being Jewish<sup>Q709</sup> homemaker retard from e spam of ruth toe. Even if it's just one drop or half your blood. Everything comes down to 'special treatment,' 'energetic liquidation,' *arbeit macht* the power of jargon and excremental<sup>Q34842</sup> provident hyperdocument assault. Perfect dehumanization then nothing<sup>G11</sup> aye crosshairs + true vision without end. Except the word 'Jew.' Say it sixty sixty six ty million million i'm the million mazda man six million mazda times will not exhaust meaning.

Zolf's work is an exhalation: one constrained not by the speaker's diaphragm, as in a sigh, but by the outside world, as by a breathalyzer or a hospital diagnostic. Lines begin with a voice attached but soon dissipate—into nonsense, cliché, entrepreneur-speak, disjunctive histories. Reading Zolf in her prose blocks provides a paraphrase-resistant experience of lifting the bell jar on human speech.

Onto the rhythms of this deflation Zolf imposes not only the competing dictions of the *Harvard Business Review* (which provides her epigraph) and automated responses to internet queries, but also word-numbering systems such as a New Agey mash-up of Hebrew Numerology, the "Gematria of Nothing" (G), and "online Zeitgeist" search rankings (Q) rendered through pervasive superscripts.

Zolf is not a mystic: the poem evacuates into a void, perhaps, but one, to use her words, of the hyperdocument. In contrast to most of the fragment-crunching of the last forty years, what is new in her work is how the increasing distance of her lines from human speech conveys a sense not of meaninglessness and ironic puncturing of "human pretense," but instead of a wrench by a hostile, inhuman mind. This violence goes right down to the book's jarring syllables; Zolf's prosody is accentual-syllabic and not, in contrast to most work today, sprung. Her lines pitter-patter like ball-bearings on tin. They are not flung in the wide democratic rhythms of Walt Whitman, the usual touchstone for socially-engaged verse of steam trains and Mazdas:

Does the unreadable drive the reader from consuming to producing, or all the 66 what good time is death bells and whistles of the ineffable? Despite *les soixante-huitiards* (like us, born that uppity year), poetic Jewish coverage + pregnant 3984 language isn't revolutionary enough. Ensnared in the academy pleasuring in the beautiful excess of the unshackled referent, poetry can't stock food banks, warm bodies or stop genocide from affecting my RSP. Ultimately you'll be the funnel here at the brink, should we brief you and brainstorm, transgress the Markov chain before game over?

The hostility that deforms Zolf's breath is hardly unfamiliar; what underlies it are the two rhetorics of power in contemporary American capitalism. On the one hand, the celebratory rhetoric of entrepreneurs who exhort you to "warm up your mental motor and find your Big Idea." And on the other its negative pair, the rhetoric of the mortgage default letter, the automated debt collection, the credit score report analysis.

The power of capitalism's *words* to deform the subject, to draft it into bureaucratic service, has been a theme for the American artist since the beginning of Modernism itself. Although for many decades it was considered impolite to bring it up in artistic company, today the taboo is broken: jargonizing executives and customer service representatives are confronted on television and in the movies as narrative devices and punchlines.

But to say Zolf similarly "confronts" is to confuse the matter. It is better to say that she acts it out. Zolf believes in the "I" of the lyric and in its value. This is in direct contrast to previous movements who viewed it with, at best, suspicion—part of the fiction of industrialization itself. Yet Zolf is not a Romantic; her speakers are, when identifiable, more often than not the very ones who have created the structures that batter them:

The armpit hole in Sarah Smith's benefits program will have to be frozen.

It really needs to be crisper, without changing the essence of infinite unwashed letters.

With only bland octopus and stainfulness left over, I'd better move the goal posts.

We want to use gibberish that reflects today's too-wide-open white page velcroed to the hip.

She fashions her line in the midst of a language-machine that, as it mirrors in a fantastic sense the workings-on of capitalism, produces a theater of cruelty for the speaker. Less a tactician with a novel technique, her work is—to take a line from the anarchist thought that pervaded the avant-garde of the 19th century—a kind of inverse propaganda-of-the-deed where the decreation of the voice is repeated unto death.

After Zolf, what? Perhaps it is Dan Machlin's book *Dear Body*, which functions in part as an edifying compilation of clichés from the past thirty years of experimental poetry, of the above-mentioned "post-avant." From the epistolary conceit of the bulk of the poems to the title itself, Machlin hits on a set of ideas—about "the body" as site of desire, as site of the feminine, as absent partner—that are sufficiently familiar that they now appear in "middle term" writers such as Jorie Graham.

Where Zolf allows her voice to deform passively, Machlin is a catalog of activity. Where Zolf's voice is churned by too-close alien subjects, Machlin is constructed from the start as lonely, an effeminate watcher from the window of an empty room:

If this is the year of clarity, it is the year of the priest's death. I must kill him to become him—a cluster bomb of a man—tiny beautiful droplets of a child's leg blown to nothingness.

I have word clusters to give you—prayers hung from flowering trees in Japanese panel painting.

Suppose if this is snow, I am never with you. We were in this house see and living our separate lives but never meeting.

Fresh from Zolf, the first iteration of Machlin is a sophisticated naïf, a speaker whose voice does not expect to encounter resistance. Languid, his long lines unspool rather than fragment; seen as a two dimensional surface Machlin's work has a "breathing mode," the expanding and contracting rhythms of lines under a human's control.

His speaker is recognizably Romantic Man, and the legitimacy of such an avatism is a recognizable choice in our reading culture. In the production of comic books about superheroes, the staff writers sometimes find radical narrative decisions—the killing-off of Spiderman's Auntie



May, say—has left them with an increasingly unappealing story. Thus was born the tradition of the story “reboot,” and poetry has its reboots as well. Objectivism is a Modernist reboot, and it is tempting to read Machlin’s “clean” performance of longing in a similar fashion at the end of a series of increasingly abstracted performances of the subject.

To do so, however, would be to ignore the lingering edges of the surfaces Machlin, along with American culture at large, has as yet failed to smooth into invisibility. In “Letter of Intent,” for example, the Brahmin Freudianism of the confessional poets is sanded down by Machlin’s patient lines to the quantified cognitive-behavioural therapy of the H.M.O. Where Sylvia Plath in “Daddy” dug back to Moses and monotheism, Machlin worries about the “undermin[ing] of intimacy,” the need “to experience closeness,” the effect of “unhealthy” silence.

The point is not Machlin’s uncritical performance of a dissipated American idiom, but rather the fact that he assembles over a dozen of such ersatz monuments to previous modes. The assembly gains its intelligence not from an elaboration of received form, as in Zolf, but from the ornamental way they are juxtaposed in an aural equivalent of picture-planes. In “Letter of Critique,” for example, one can read the logorrhea of the rejected letter-to-the-editor or internet correspondent:

Your critique of our correspondence as some sort of proto-self rejecting urgency of the world and all outward responsibilities, ignores many households with only one person, millions who seek new forms and patterns so we are not collectively digressing. I was saying this over a glass of wine ignoring your condemnation based on the inevitability of my behavior (or as you might put it “pre-programmed characteristics”). I myself have surfed the old forms tried living with humans written poems about your incredible eyes for instance and the fourth eye that enters at dusk or when meditating on in-betweens laughing at nothing in particular.

The running-over of these sentences—without line-breaks we breathe on the speaker’s behalf—form a kind of elegy-by-demonstration for the reading of Walt Whitman as a celebrator of the “democratic voice.” Meanwhile, in “Defining Letter,” Machlin’s list of orphaned dictionary definitions functions as a phone-book version of *The Waste Land*,

an Oulipo without irony. The graveyard roll call goes on, but “without irony” is perhaps the tag-line of Machlin’s work in *Dear Body*, where the unanchored nature of sincerity, the way in which it can be pled for in a diverse set of dialects, is made into a form of pathos.

Zolf and Machlin, it might be said, are poets in the guises of language technicians—Zolf with her twitchy electrocutions, and Machlin with his bolt-togethers—but neither is particularly concerned with the continuity of poetic tradition any more than Microsoft is with a vacuum tube. To see how the avant-garde does engage with poetry historical, we can turn instead to Rod Smith’s work, which begins thus:

the egret says  
the house, it is something to eat or sunlight, the egret  
thinks, the house, it wills, is a subcanvas I can scribble, the  
egret moves  
or is awake, loving the familiar solution of loving this explains  
the egret to the egret in the house  
to the house & sunlight, we become intelligible because the  
egret says elliptical,  
in beckettland or geography, in small mammals & planets  
no egret never not says elliptical, no elliptical egret mechanism  
well under a love, today, or today,  
does not increase elliptical, covered stand of egret  
then,  
the sunflower freezing in the egret’s reason  
is spilling nutria, is an idea  
&  
affiliative, monthly, in egret pajamas, lolling, to  
merge with the sunflower, frozen in not freezing, but flashing.

Like the Shakespeare fanatics who introduced the starling to Central Park in 1890, there are plenty of writers who populate their poems not only with the remaining flowers and animals of suburbia, but also with the increasingly distant symbolic systems they used to inhabit in the Old World. Smith’s egret, on the other hand, essentially parachutes in, unencumbered, to the surrounding syntax.

It’s the Mad Libs moment, the casual refusal of inheritance, that puts Smith in the *avant garde*, or at least in radio contact with the kind of spontaneous action that characterizes Zolf and Machlin. With Smith’s acknowledgment of distance from the common languages—of sincerity,

of meaning—that have animated poetry, however, comes not a distortion of the subject, but rather its creation.

Smith's sound is lyrical to the point of being conservative: alliteration and a pleasure in the patterned syllable form an even aural landscape for the work. It is in the syntax that the new takes places, in increasingly opaque language that Smith uses to reanimate what might be called the Dickensian subject: "Fall to this / that it come again / of the need to be given close."

There is little reader address in *Deed* and no rhetorical modulation from a flat proposing; instead, a kind of patient sameness of construction prevails. "Spider Poems," from the middle section of the work, engages the reader by asking her to enter the lyric mind as an equal. Like Dickinson, one doesn't read Smith, let alone *bear* or *overhear* him, but instead *thinks with*. Neither charming nor bullying, Smith's words are meant for someone else but quite indifferent to finding him.

And like Dickinson, Smith's forms are not citational: his work does not have the violence of a literary hijacking or a wresting of control. Take "The Given", from the third section:

### The Given

clarity, & calm assonant  
asphyxiation

It is a shunned soft  
out-cut

eclipse decrease

*There's no way out  
by my death or consciousness*

lying on the frivolous ground  
wearing frivolous gowns  
babbling about wands and pucks  
inside the musculature hush

Tones and attitudes come and go with the speed of introspection; assertion flows into despair and thence to somber play without stage-direction or, as the musicians might say, dynamic markings. Assonance almost to the point of near-rhyme but not in a parodic or dance-hall form: we remain sealed in Smith's mind, unable to point beyond it, required to pace with its lines, its boundaries.

A certain amount has been made of Smith's scattered political remarks, and in particular, the final poem, "pour le CGT", which ends "Therefore we must // Overthrow the government." But Smith's observations of politics plays much the same role as Dickinson's observations of the weather: a kind of hall within which mind, mediated, re-encounters itself. One imagines these lines said not from a balcony, but into a mirror.

To get the full dose of political engagement that for many defines the avant-garde, you can turn to Michael Scharf. And turn, and turn, because, excepting a brief prologue, the first forty-four pages of *For Kid Rock/ Total Freedom* are, first, a list of years between 1914 and 1989, and, second, an alphabetical list of corporations, political groups, and non-profit organizations.

The lists mean something self-evident to Scharf but not to us. Yet, the possibility that these obsessive catalogs would be opaque to the reader doesn't seem to occur to him. There's thus a childlike quality to their presentation and the final section of the book—a telegraphic account of staging a three-person protest outside the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art—rounds out the feeling that Scharf's speaker, as an adult, is not "all there" despite the learned quotations from Hegel and Schiller.

It's a complicated move when, for example, Scharf adopts the preening exactitude of the precocious child: "The paper ring is slightly absorptive, / and I don't want my leg-skin to have to tax / its resources resisting organisms after rising." Who talks like this? And why? The involution of the voice is the flip side of a Blakean simplicity; the little black child in a fussier, middle-class mood. Given how this voice dominates much of the work, it takes time to realize that Scharf is really more of a body-hopper in the style of the science fiction epigraphs he sometimes chooses to start his sections.

Scharf has met Leviathan and he is us: much of Scharf's speaking occurs, ironized, through the infantilized voices of bureaucrats and politicians. Scharf's voices turn and ponder themselves, as in this from section three:

Since the issues are pressing,  
there is an undeniable journalistic element,  
and since there has been  
plenty of straight reporting,

and internal monographization for those whose bodies are actually involved, the relative aestheticization, and, *mutatis mutandis*, the appropriation of these issues may be permissible.

Scharf's voices are reduced to a faith in the power of a language they imperfectly command. The petulant helplessness of such a voice reproduces: not only in that of the child—the bulk of the line-broken work—but first in that of the crank, listing dates from Wikipedia articles, and last in that of the scolding protester, holding up, in the journalistic finale, signs that say “Free Markets DESTROY history / people and their arts.”

Despite the great differences in tone and voice between Scharf and Zolf, Machlin and Smith, they share a conception of the poem as something that exists between the lines of a larger, more powerful story. None think it possible to overcome the dominant voices on the radio and in the magazines; their reluctance to attempt such a challenge reads not as timidity but as responsible awe at a system that can so deform every attempt to speak.

Compared to Scharf, Machlin at first seems less radical, less deserving of the ambiguous laurel of avant-garde. Dipping in at random to Machlin's book one can miss the extent to which his poems, moment to moment, play out a kind of distant irony. Yet just as Scharf might be seen as repeatedly pressing the same button and hoping for a new event, Machlin's almost encyclopedic use of 20th century poetic modes is of a similar type, a kind of random, helpless double-clicking across the field. Smith—perhaps because of his mastery of sonic techniques that previous decades considered a *sine qua non* for the poet—reads almost like the late convert; his position in this decentered movement almost a tragic accident, his speakers accidental martyrs. It is Zolf's work that is perhaps the most radical, the most provocative of the avant-gardists here: on the boundary between poem and life one feels the battering viscerally, in the very rhythms of the work.

Jaime Luis Huenún, *Port Trakl*, translated by Daniel Borzutzky, Action Books, 2008. 80 pp. \$14.00. Reviewed by Amy Grosbeck.

Jaime Luis Huenún's spare *Port Trakl*, translated from the Spanish with an appropriately light touch by Daniel Borzutzky, invokes an imaginary maritime town of indigenous Chile, where “poets come to die,” the weather repeats itself endlessly, and a deep, passively-borne alienation permeates the heavy minutes. *Port Trakl* is a port without finite location, an anti-destination with which Huenún depicts an ennui particular to the post-“development” outposts of 20th century globalization.

Responsible readers will follow the port's name to Georg Trakl, the Austrian poet who, fighting his own depression and tasked with the care of horribly injured men as a WWI medic, committed suicide at the age of 27. Trakl's early work is known for its almost extra-temporal domestic scenes, in which the only action might be the setting of the sun or the stilling of birdsong. The alienation in Trakl's poetry develops from this silence and absence of change.

Trakl's later work depicts the violent destruction of his long- and markedly-domesticated European landscape. Huenún portrays, by contrast, the formlessness of a postcolonial world half-assembled, where “[s]olitude had forever cured us / of all fear / and from any destiny”. Trakl's environs are rich with trees, ponds, ducks, crops; Huenún's world is as sterile as a sand beach, populated by waves, wind, and clouds. *Port Trakl*'s despair is not the despair of war and destruction, but the despair of resourcelessness, of the absence of work or goods, of half-built hotels and wharves abandoned to the weather, a despair of the “Third World,” of human lives as incomplete as the civic infrastructure. Yet European influence is irrevocable, as elemental as the hours: night comes, in one poem, not through the slow darkening of the natural world, as in Trakl's work, but “through a poem by Trakl / stored in her memory”.

There is an archaic tone to *Port Trakl*. Not overt archaic usage, but an absence of contemporary references, and a prevalence of the language of ships and marine travel:

I returned to Port Trakl through the worst  
paths in the ocean.  
Weakened by salt from the storm, my eyes  
were my only cargo.