

8-2-2017

Barking & Biting: The Poetry of Sina Queyras selected by Erin Wunker

Jenny Kerber
Wilfrid Laurier University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kerber, Jenny (2017) "Barking & Biting: The Poetry of Sina Queyras selected by Erin Wunker," *The Goose*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol16/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

**Lyricism, Conceptualism,
Environmentalism**

Barking & Biting: The Poetry of Sina Queyras selected by **ERIN WUNKER**
Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016
\$18.99

Reviewed by **JENNY KERBER**

Barking & Biting is a recent addition to WLUP's growing Canadian poetry series, in which a well-known poet's work is selected and briefly introduced by another poet or critic. The series has been deliberate in its inclusion of work associated with both the lyric tradition in Canada (think Zwicky, McKay) and with more self-consciously avant-garde or conceptual writing (for instance: McCaffrey, Christakos, Beaulieu). In this volume, selected and introduced by Erin Wunker, readers get to sample the work of a poet who moves with ease between these two worlds. Sina Queyras's afterword to the volume, which takes the form of a self-described "manifesto in progress," articulates a poetics that draws on the strengths of lyricism and conceptualism while eschewing their more dogmatic strains. Ecocritics will be pleased by Queyras's insistence that environmental poetry includes the urban and the theoretical, but also by the fact that her Lyric Conceptualist "is not ready for the merely virtual or textual" (61). The materiality of the world is still crucial for Queyras, and the perceptive poet will seek out its significance as much in mountainsides and parking lots as in sleek downtown galleries. An environmental movement worth its salt must embrace the truth of one of the epigraphs Queyras uses in *Lemon Hound*, drawn from fellow poet

Lisa Robertson: "it is too late to be simple" (23).

Wunker's introduction situates Queyras at the crossroads of several conversations in contemporary poetry. In addition to her efforts at bridge-building between lyric and conceptual movements, Queyras has consistently worked to create more space for women's and other diverse voices in public poetic circles. Drawing on the work of Barbara Godard, Wunker argues that Queyras' interventions in public discourse — which take forms including blog writing, interviews, and of course, poetry — make her an ex-centric, "an interloper who keeps things current, interesting, and deliberately unsettled" (xxii-xiii). This designation is helpful for thinking about Queyras' place within and beyond Canada's literary community. In places, however, I wished that Wunker had more thoroughly grounded her assertions in concrete examples rather than relying on suggestive propositions. See, for instance, the proposal that Queyras' work leads to a "reorientation" of the gender of modernism; this is an idea with merit, but readers less familiar with the work could use a well-chosen illustration to show exactly what such a reorientation might look like, and what they might stand to learn from it. Wunker attends to the details of the poetry much more thoroughly at the end of her introduction, noting, for instance, Queyras' intriguing use of listing techniques, her multiplication of the lyric subject, and her extensive use of prepositions and experiments with syntax. All of these qualities are on fine display in the poems selected from each of Queyras' five volumes, starting with the Montreal-based account of courtship, in *Slip* (2001), and concluding

with Queyras' experimentally elegiac *MxT* (2014).

In early works, such as "Me Victorious," we see Queyras developing the formal block structure and repetitive technique of some of her later works, and thirteen years after publication, the poem's bleak portrait of citizenship remains disturbingly current:

Me victorious over slippages,
over fractures of
wonder, over instances of
compassion. Me only
concerned with
interest rates, credit card limits,
cheap flights to hot
places where the
sun oh, oh sun oh sun shines
twenty-four-seven and
water is
chlorinated, contained in
cement and plastic,
trucked in from places
where other people have to
endure rain. (23-28)

The choice of the pronoun "me," along with the eventual collapse of syntax in the poem, suggests a stubborn childishness that ends up highlighting the disjuncture between the ideologies we want to believe and the deepest parts of ourselves that know better. Fractures and slippages are opportunities for learning, and we skate over them at our peril.

Once readers arrive at the poems selected from *Lemon Hound*, we encounter work that conjures up the spirits of Woolf and Stein. Here, Queyras employs Modernist techniques of linguistic recombination and additive syntax to explore worlds wherein nature is a site of pleasure and endless flux. We also start to see connections between

the treatment of landscape and the treatment of the body (and the female body, in particular): connections that find fuller form in Queyras's subsequent work, *Expressway*. For instance, in Part 4 from *Lemon Hound*'s "On the Scent," we read of women who spend a lot of time expressing themselves via consumerism while remembering "women's book- / stores with only a twinge of regret" (83-84); and yet, these figures' pursuit of a consumerist model of self-care suggests a worrying detachment from what sustains life in the first place: "They embrace titanium. They shed their skin / daily. Others gather it. There are bags of us in a base- / ment. Earth is there too, aluminum, and feather" (88-90). Many of these poems explore the tension between all that modernity brings to our lives — for instance, the long list of daily conveniences or promises of technological connectivity — and the inevitable trade-offs such enjoyments demand.

In the final section, drawn from *MxT* (2014), Queyras experiments with different scientific and technical discourses to tackle the work of mourning. Do feelings follow common patterns that can be plotted, as on a graph? How does one handle the outliers? Can grief's vicissitudes be transmitted to others in comprehensible form? Such questions lead the speaker to confront the limits of philosophy, conceptual thinking, technical language, and even poetry itself to successfully manage the affective rollercoaster ride that is grief. Yet ultimately, Queyras returns to art to make sense of loss. In the book's concluding work, a found poem entitled "Elegy Written in a City Cemetery," the speaker roots through elegy's archives and finds some comfort

in a poetic tradition that grounds contemporary feeling. “All the new thinking / is still about loss,” she concludes, quoting Robert Hass (41-42); poetry, like the matter of which we are made, and like grief itself, does not entirely pass away; instead, it goes through Queyras’s composter and returns, creatively transformed.

Although the excerpted structure of this collection sometimes interrupts the flow of Queyras’s work, which frequently builds through long, interconnected sections, it will also give readers a sense of the diversity of her writing at an affordable price. Overall, this is a welcome introduction to one of the most exciting poets working in Canada today.

JENNY KERBER is Past President of ALECC, and teaches in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University.