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2004

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Publication Details

Hawke, J. "Lord slaughter." *Jacket Literary Internet Journal* 26 (2004).

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Abstract

John Hawke reviews *In the Year of Our Lord Slaughter's Children* by Philip Hammial 80pp. Island Press 0909771 66 9

Keywords

lord, slaughter

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

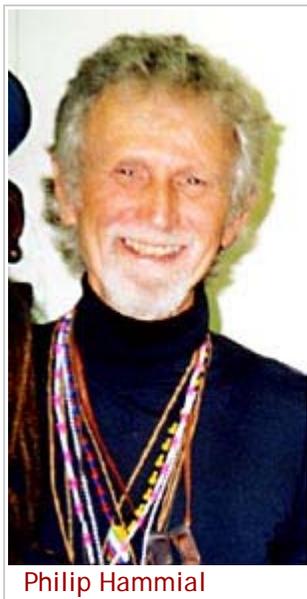
Publication Details

Hawke, J. "Lord slaughter." *Jacket Literary Internet Journal* 26 (2004).

Lord Slaughter

Australian poetry may have at last caught up with the experimental techniques of Philip Hammial — who has now published sixteen books over a thirty-year period — and his work deserves a place at the front of any future anthology of local language-based writing as a significant precursor and major practitioner. He can be viewed as a forerunner in the same way as groundbreaking US poets of an older generation, such as Jackson Mac Low and Clark Coolidge, were reevaluated in relation to their successors. And it would be

possible to utilise the theories of current poetics to offer a generalised definition of Hammial's aleatory and often surreal word-games, especially the play of signifiers evident in his earliest work. Robert Gray demonstrates his celebrated gift for simile in likening the typical early Hammial poem to 'a line in a successful abstract painting, one which represents nothing and yet has all the conviction, rigorousness and vitality of a natural line' — and this is a useful guiding definition for a poetry of pure signification (one which the contemporary cross-influences of Khlebnikov and Kandinsky would seem to justify). There is, however, a steady development towards an engagement with the politics of representation in Hammial's more recent poetry — culminating in the current volume, *In the Year of Our Lord Slaughter's Children*, which contains some of his most successful and committed work to date. These complementary energies are also evident in Hammial's approach to form, where the dispersive movement of the collage technique is countered by a centripetal incantatory mode. It is this latter movement which guarantees even the most oblique performance: while the voice of much recent language-based poetry can sound as prosaic as a dull philosophy lecture, Hammial always sings on the page (again, like Coolidge and Mac Low, where musical elements predominate).



Philip Hammial

A collected edition of work often published in very limited print-runs is needed to fully evaluate Hammial's progress: this would document a stream of volumes of increasing intensity and formal complexity, and would certainly be a remarkable book. However, in positioning Hammial's writing — which has never fitted easily within local anthologies — it is perhaps most useful to consider him alongside the US poets of his generation. The Michigan-born Hammial arrived in Australia in the 1970s, and it is evident from the ferocious strength of his earliest work — examples of which are included in John Tranter's *New Australian Poetry* (1979) — that he was already possessed of a fully-formed experimental approach. More specifically, his writing bears similarities to that of other American poets born around the 1930s — such as Rothenberg, Economou, and probably also Russell Edson — who in the early-1960s used the term 'Deep Image' to describe their practice. These poets sought models from outside the Anglo-American tradition, whether 'formalist' or Poundian: this

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included an interest not only in the European avant-gardes, but also an enthusiasm for Dadaist and Surrealist sources, such as primitivism (the 'ethnopoetics' movement) and Art Brut practitioners such as Wolffli. These latter influences are clearly evident in Hammial's own work: shamanism is a recurrent thematic motif, apparently reinforced through his extensive travels in places like Ladakh; and he is the co-founder, with Anthony Mannix, of the Australian Collection of Outsider Art.

Beyond this, the acceptance of a European avant-garde influence also involves an alternative approach to Modernist poetics, especially as it has been understood and incorporated within Australian poetry. The Modernist technique can be variously defined as one of collage, montage, simultaneism, ideogrammic method, or parataxis. In Anglo-American literature this gives us *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and the postwar Poundian tradition. However, it is important to distinguish the open-field ideogrammic method of English-language Modernism (from Eliot and Pound to the projective verse of Olsen and Ginsberg) from the juxtapositional approach of the Europeans. This takes its cue from Reverdy's theory of the image, and leads directly to the startling collage-complexes of Surrealist automatism employed by Philip Hammial (for whom the recognition of death is described as being 'hit like a hammer hits a bell become snow'). Unlike the former, automatic writing practices are not bound by any empirical allegiance to the world of 'things' (Williams, Objectivism): language is signficatory and auto-generative — a function of, or model for, the unconscious itself. This technique provides the source for the imagery of the great French and Spanish-language poetries of the twentieth-century, and is at the core of a Symbolist-Surrealist continuum that reaches from Lautreamont and Rimbaud through to Desnos, Vallejo and Michaux. These were the writers that US poets of the 1960s were discovering, and Rothenberg and Joris' recent anthology (1995) is an excellent summation of the reorganization of the Modernist canon this entailed for poets of their generation. This difference of approach is perhaps also the reason why Hammial's poetry seems so distinctive when compared with that of other Australian poets of the 1970s attempting a local adaptation of Modernist forms.

There are also links between automatism and the magical practices of indigenous ritual — to which Breton in particular was increasingly drawn: the symbol-making task of the poet becomes a kind of shamanic incantation (like the costumed Ball transforming himself into a 'magical bishop'). While Breton is always careful to distance himself from 'the insane metaphysical implications' of automatism, the undertones of a pseudo-magian alchemy of the word persist throughout avant-garde practice — whether this is experienced via recourse to a terminology of Freudian repression, or through the direct citation of ritual practices such as Haitian voodoo. Breton and Pierre Mabille were amongst those writers and artists directly drawn to this aspect of Haitian culture in the 1940s. *In the Year of Our Lord Slaughter's Children* cites similar West African rituals as a kind of metaphorical ground to indicate the aspiration of the poet toward a secondary order of reality, the sacred otherworld of 'super-nature' (Breton via Nerval). These influences are also evident through an interest in the art of schizophrenia, and *Nadja* is a key text through which to explore the contradictory implications of Breton's statement that 'insanity can be viewed as a repository of mental health'.

When Hammial directly employs the 'demons' of Outsider artist Anthony Mannix as emissaries of this anti-rational otherworld, these are not simply textual signs generated by verbal play. They are embodiments of the Surrealist view that the empirical world is itself subject to transgression — in the same

way as Hannah Weiner's mediumistic texts, the manifestations of similarly archetypal 'spirit-guides', indicate realities other than those describable in conventional denotative language. (The 'beyond-sense' of Zaum emerged simultaneously with Ouspensky's 'fourth dimension' and the 'inner klang' of Kandinskian spiritualism.) But a concern with forms of complicity is also central to Hammial's current work: the exoticism of voodoo is countered by an acute sociopolitical awareness of the realities of contemporary Africa; and in 'Grand Guignol' he provides his own version of the problems of exploring mental illness originally raised by Breton:

...how Philip of Detroit
 as *conniveur* saw fit to exploit the madness
 of those in his charge in poems whose adolescent
 exuberance was put to shame by *The totemic dance*
of all things insignificant, the title of a drawing
 by Anthony Mannix whose madness, unlike P.
 of D's is authentic, a response in kind to the Age
 of Agent Orange, an adventure that began
 with Evangeline on the Bridge of Sighs
 at the end of which a celestial sphinx snuffed
 our candles with a sigh, her hear no see no speak no
 monkey of a solicitor husband ensconced
 in his counting house while helicopters
 napalmed, correction, vertically
 enveloped villages in Viet Nam.

The engaged public voice of these recent works is a significant achievement at a time when poets seem to be struggling to come to terms with the daily horrors of the world around them ("A Horrible Sonnet" (1994) concludes with the Mannix quote, 'horror is my honeybunch'). But this engagement is also natural to the sources Hammial inherits: it implicitly defines the politics of poetic form in avant-garde movements from Berlin Dada to Surrealism in the Service of the Revolution, and stale oppositions of formalism and 'commitment' are no longer relevant here. *In the Year of Our Lord Slaughter's Children* moves beyond what Hammial himself describes as an 'obfuscated structurality' ("Jacques") to present a recognisable traveller's view of contemporary Africa, a place made so 'fantastic' to Western readers — through wars, massacres, and poverty — that it is unreported and unimaginable. Hammial the Surrealist is therefore the perfect guide to provide this version of what 'you'll never read in the papers / and wouldn't believe if you did' ("Detour").

Hammial has developed a formidable range of techniques for generating a complex variety of poetic forms. His early work frequently echoes Michaux's use of anaphorae: détourned maxims and taxonomies extend in serial proliferation. There is also an apparent attentiveness to dream, though these are never simply transcriptions but are worked over relentlessly for significance. In later writings they modulate into fables, culminating in the brilliant Kafkaesque miniatures of *With One Skin Less* (1994). The metamorphoses generated by Hammial's programmatic forms are apparently infinite; similar processual techniques were explored in Bernadette Mayer's workshops attended by many prominent contemporary poets in the 1970s. Here is a typical extract from the earlier poem "Hollywood Hotel":

...If Molly says
 that she'll smother your much with your such she probably
 will. I won't. Low
 for high, I couldn't

if I wanted to. Stage frights

tender genders with their fishing
 fortuitously trussed. If Charlotte says
 that she'll lick your cage until it's clean she probably
 will. I won't. Switch
 for hit, I couldn't
 if I wanted to. Stage frights

come easy to the fore but they do insist
 that the rowers must pay. If Sarah says
 that she'll leave you out in the rain she probably
 will, I won't. Wet
 for dry, I couldn't
 if I wanted to...

A number of Hammial's current poems provide helpful explanations of their own mechanisms, the reflexive exchanges between language and representation from which they are structured. "Canada" takes its cue from the term 'damaged goods': this leads to the ideogrammic juxtaposition of a 'damaged bride' with a description of the 1978 invasion of Kabul. These erotic and political violations coincide, since 'in quantum theory both possibilities can exist / together'. To this instance of objective chance is added a 'mythical element', a framework of interpretation, in the maddening figure of Pan, whose cloven feet — now revealed as the unifying motif of the poem — also offer the possibility of bucolic escape from a world of violations. Simultaneism is also explicit in "At the Movies", where a descent in a Cairo elevator leads (via gondolas) from the sewers of Paris and the refuse-heaps of Manila, to a scene from Polanski, an untouchables' carriage in Varanasi, and finally to a honeymoon in a Chicago brothel. The cinematic virtuality of these montaged scenes is emphasised: the film we are led to is *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut*.

Unifying these transformations is the voice of a world-weary chronicler of low-life ("Junkies who spank make a difference" is one memorable opening line), or at times that of a brothel-creeping sailor unravelling the immortal story of his own misspent youth. This speaker is also, and primarily, figured as a mediator between realities: while on one side, 'séance ectoplasm is spilling over into everyday life', on the other is 'this world / with its sum total of human bodies? Yuk, thanks all the same' ("Soft Targets"). It is the role of shaman or mystic, usually interpreted in Western culture as madness: "Lucy" describes the sufferings of a Leonora Carrington figure, 'Lucy of Lune', the madwoman as hysterical saint, sent on a 'crusade' to 'destroy the infidel on his own turf' (both Nadja and Carrington in *Down Below* are linked to Joan of Arc). For Hammial, as for his Surrealist predecessors, the mediating ceremonies of voodoo provide the perfect metaphor for this existence between two realms ('Everybody voodoo...if you aren't already', a priest intones in "Albert Anastasia"). Ogun is invoked directly in "Black Hand" — but there are also dangers here, and "Process" warns of 'inappropriate invocation — ancestral spirits amok'. These fetishes and incantations culminate in the extraordinary "Yao", which establishes parallels between voodoo sacrifice and a ritual of torture that recalls us abruptly to the realities of contemporary Africa, the cover photograph of Charles Taylor's boy-soldiers. This is parataxis in the service of social documentation, and worth quoting at length in illustration of Hammial's current practice of engaged experimentalism:

Mouth on red alert.
 In formaldehyde, black and withered: an oracle's tongue.

On a tray: monkeys and medicine.
Around a bed, intensive care, giving comfort:
The hideous creatures of pethidine.
In a bottom drawer, just in case: chains, leather cuffs, dog collars.
Agree to a concatenation? — never.
Inseparable: the iguana and the woman's leg.
While we watch: insert the rubber mouthpiece.
Heavy breathing: voice it over.
Undecided: who will service who, & with what.
This ringer is dead.
Of one hundred hungers, one appeased.
Over broken glass: something to crawl for.
As beef it slid across the floor.
Hot property, her buttocks branded: A/ 2 H/ 3.
Convulsions are considered, & rejected.
How many more mockeries should we expect?
Stay tuned for a sham Easter.
As the horse is small he carries it on his head, under a white cloth.
Ancestral presence, show your face!
Lathered up by a barber: a sacrificial throat.
Poured slowly from a small black teapot: three litres of blood.

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