

David Antin's Wondrous
 X-Ray Machine:
*Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on
 Art and Literature 1966-2005*



Hank Lazer

It doesn't take much insight to observe that the kind of art you get from the fundamental axiom depends upon how you define the medium and its proper elements and operations.
 (201)

David Antin came to Tuscaloosa in 1989 to give a talk-poem. He stayed at my house, and the first night he arrived, we stayed up talking, and I gave him a couple of (unpublished) manuscripts of mine to look over: a poetry manuscript (of approximately 200 pages) and a collection of essays (of two to three hundred pages). Early the next morning, at around 6:30 a.m. over a pot of coffee, David was discussing the two manuscripts in some detail and giving me advice on how to get the manuscripts into print. It took me quite a few years to understand how he had been able to do that.



At long last, we have *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature 1966-2005*, a substantial collection of Antin's art and

literature writings. *Radical Coherency* confirms Antin's reputation as a brilliant writer/thinker about modern art and literature—a reputation that has depended for many years on anecdotes and hard to find essays, reviews, and interviews. The new collection also confirms Antin's scathing intelligence. Though his writing on the visual arts (and performance and conceptual art) is superb, in this essay/review I will concentrate primarily on Antin's writing about literature.

What I am calling David Antin's Wondrous X-Ray Machine is his capacity to analyze a complex artistic terrain by zeroing in on a fundamental axiom or one key defining element. For example, in discussing Modernism, Antin says,

First, I would like to suggest that Modernism is definable in terms of a single fundamental axiom: that it is necessary to begin from a radical act of definition or redefinition of the domain of the elements and the operations of the art or of art itself. (219)

With a stunning mathematical precision, Antin is able to arrive at several issues or questions crucial to our understanding of the fundamental impulses, products, and concerns of twentieth-century (and twenty-first century) art and literature:

1. What is poetry, and what is a poet?
2. What are the underlying assumptions of a given artist's work?
3. What are/were the essential features of Modernism?
4. What are the possibilities for narrative?
5. Where/what is the present?

If we begin with the fifth of these topics, it might be easy or natural to assume that the artistic present is easy to know simply because we are alive now and our sensibility or consciousness would be presumed to be contemporary, right? Not really. Mostly, what we know is a nostalgicized present based on already understood, somewhat caricatured, and delimited versions of a recently completed

wave of artistic development. (*Radical Coherency* demonstrates that Antin, perhaps better than anyone else, understood the contemporary visual/literary arts of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, as an engaged critic and artist fully participatory in those times.) In an early talk-poem, Antin proposed that the artist is someone who sticks his foot out in the aisle and thus disturbs and alters the flow of the traffic. As a critic, Antin undermines our habitual comfort with a seemingly sensible set of contemporary artistic assumptions. He pushes us to experience and acknowledge the fundamental mystical strangeness (if not unknowability) of the present:

There is something quite arbitrary in the history of art as in the history of all social institutions; but to the degree that this arbitrariness is the shape of the space we inhabit, it looks logical, even matter-of-course, to all of our contemporaries, which is how we know that they are our contemporaries. But at some point in the future it is also what makes us suddenly bizarre to our successors and nearly incomprehensible. Things that must have been logically compelling: Greek temple architecture, Roman rhetoric, Abstract art, seem suddenly insane. (45)

Like Stein in her lecture “Composition as Explanation,” Antin has a keen feeling for the rapidity of axiomatic change—what Stein calls the sudden shift from outlaw to classic, or from the irritating to the beautiful. Antin imagines the next phase in that process where the classic or the beautiful then becomes something strangely and suddenly of the past.

In Antin’s most important and challenging essay, “Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in Modern American Poetry” (written and published in 1972), Antin thinks about what it means to be contemporary: “the truly contemporary artists of our time are known primarily to a community consisting of themselves. In a sense, it is this capacity of the contemporary artist to recognize his contemporaries that is the essential feature of his contemporaneity” (162).

Antin, with a radiological precision and insight, recognized (better, more clearly, and more fully) who his poetic contemporaries were and were *not* as he wrote about modern American poetry. He saw,

more clearly, with greater certainty, and with a caustic intelligence, the betrayal of American poetic Modernism in the sedate assimilation of Pound, Eliot, et al by the poets represented in the Pack, Hall, and Simpson anthology, poets (all affected by Auden, Yeats, and Dylan Thomas) such as Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, W. D. Snodgrass, and Robert Lowell. Antin saw this lineage as representing a “succession of poetic practices which inevitably move further and further from the origination styles to the point at which the initiating impulses have lost all their energy” (165). The result that Antin sees is an achievement that amounts to “the gift of versified platitude” (165). As for the vaunted intelligence and the cultural range of Lowell and Co., Antin’s judgment is clear:

It is cocktail-party intellectual history. In defense of Lowell, the poet, one may say that it has the singular advantage of appealing to a coherent group that is not interested in history or fact or poetry, but in its own conversation—the literary community of the *New York Review of Books*. (174)

Antin’s close reading of Lowell leads Antin to conclude that Lowell “always manages to get as much grade-school history into a poem as he can” (175).

Antin’s most intense critique is reserved for the emergence of irony and metrical regularity as the delimiting axioms of the dominant forms of American poetry in the fifties and sixties, a strand of poetry that had lost touch with the energizing and generative impulses of Modernism. The reducing of poetry to a performance of “irony” was, from Antin’s perspective, a disaster which would “reduce the idea of complex poems to an idea of ironic poems, which is to reduce the complex ‘hyperspace’ of modernist collage (Pound, Williams, Olson, Zukofsky) to the nearly trivial, single-dimensional ironic and moral space of Eliot, Tate, Lowell, and so on. This is the reason for not recognizing Olson. It was the same reason for not recognizing Zukofsky. They do not occupy a trivial moral space” (182-183). As for metrical regularity—“the pathetic hope of a virgin for an experienced lover whose competence (detachment) is sufficient to lead her to an orgasm, and all to be achieved by mere maintenance of a regular rhythm” (180)—Antin is dumbfounded: “The great importance attributed to something so trivial as regularization of

syllable accent by such relatively intelligent people as Tate, Ransom, and Eliot is so remarkable that it deserves an essay of itself.” For Eliot, Antin notes, “the image of meter is for him an image of some moral order (a tradition)” (180), and “the idea of a metrics as a ‘moral’ or ‘ideal’ traditional order against which the ‘emotional’ human impulses of a poet continually struggle in the form of his real speech is a transparently trivial paradigm” (183).

Witty as Antin’s critique of Auden/Lowell poetry gang’s axiomatic devotion to metrical regularity, historical awareness, and knowledge of tradition turns out to be, Antin’s greater contribution is to locate a single fundamental axiom for (a valid and ongoing) Modernism: the principle of collage. Antin claims that “*The Waste Land* and the *Cantos* are based on the principle of collage, the dramatic juxtaposition of disparate materials without commitment to explicit syntactical relations between the elements” (169). Antin’s wondrous x-ray of Modernism—the clarifying effects of his advancement of the collage axiom—make the essay “Modernism and...” and the follow up interview “Some Questions about Modernism” watershed thinking in our understanding of twentieth century American poetry. The essay and interview are still provocative, insightful, and demonstrate an energy and intelligence almost completely absent from contemporary poetics and critical discourse. There are two fundamental aspects to Antin’s radical re-thinking of American poetry through an examination of collage. The first is to offer an axiom that opens the field of possibilities:

The return of collage Modernism in the fifties had both semantic and musical implications. If it meant a return to the semantic complexities of normal human discourse in the full “hyperspace” of real language, it also meant an end to the ideal of hurdy-gurdy music, finishing off once and for all the dime-store eloquence of Yeats and the general-store eloquence of Frost, along with the mechanical organ of Dylan Thomas, as anything more than shabby operatic genres that might be referred to out of nostalgia or an equivocal taste for falseness and corrupted styles. (184)

Second, Antin identifies a wide range of poets (exploring the active ingredients of a still happening Modernism) emerging in the

sixties, and thus he gives us a sense of what energies, impulses, and experiments sustain us today:

If there were perhaps twenty or thirty strong poets among the Black Mountain, Beat poets and the first generation of the New York school, it is probable that the number of impressive poets to appear in the sixties is more than double that. For those of us who came into the arena of poetry at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties, the Beat, the Black Mountain poets; the New York poets represented an “opening of the field.” They had swept away the deadwood, the main obstacle to the career of poetry; and they offered a great claim for the meaning of poetry: that phenomenological reality is discovered and constructed by poets. (195)

Antin’s x-ray of Modernism alters the foundations as well: “By now we have had to add to the fundamental figures Gertrude Stein and John Cage, both of whom seem much more significant poets and minds than either Pound or Williams” (196). Antin’s Modernism x-ray brings the accomplishment of Stein into focus:

Gertrude Stein is probably the only thoroughly Modernist poet we had. Joyce is a Wagnerian soup, and, like Pound and Eliot, is so bogged down with English schoolbook “high cultural” baggage that you have to struggle to disentangle his Modernism from the surrounding bric-a-brac. ... But then she [Stein] was the writer in English with the deepest interest in language, the only one with an interest in language as language. I know almost everyone will object to this, but I’ve never understood why anybody thought Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, or Williams were innovators in language. Essentially all of their interest was concentrated at the level of rhetoric. (199, 203)

At the heart, then, of Antin’s thinking is a new axiom for poetry, i.e., that poetry is the language art:

As far as I’m concerned there is the language art. That’s poetry. All of it. There are then genres within it. Like “narration.”

And there's a subform of narration. Called "fiction." And a subform of that called "the novel," a narrational form with an enveloping commitment to a certain notion of "reality," constructed out of commonsense intuitions about character and objects, and social and psychological events, and probability. That's not "prose." The idea of "prose" is only an additional prop for a novel. "Prose" is the name for a kind of notational style. It's a way of making language look responsible. (215)

If poetry=the language art is the fundamental equation for Antin, there is also a finite set of variables that operate within the equation:

In the broadest sense poetry is the language art and by even the simplest of linguistic breakdowns language encompasses a phonology, a morphology, a semantics and a pragmatics—a sound system, a system of word formation, a grammatical organization, a lexicon, and a system of human language-related practices. (324)

For Antin, the poetry x-ray reveals fundamental affinities with the activity of philosophy:

Taking a hint from Wittgenstein, we should really ask whether or not there is only one language game that is poetry, or whether poetry, which is an ancient supergenre, may not consist of an indefinitely large family of language games that like human families can always admit new members by intermarriage and adoption and admit a language game that overlaps the language game of information transmission. If Socrates was a poet, Wittgenstein is a poet. (323)

For, as he reiterates in the talk-poem "the death of the hired man," Antin himself is fundamentally poet, albeit a poet committed to an exploration of the philosophical resources of the vernacular (when the vernacular is linked to an open-ended heuristics rather than a limited caricature of the capacity of "speech"):

if robert

lowell is a poet i dont want to be a poet if robert frost was a poet i dont
 want to be a poet if socrates was a poet i'll consider it (273)

This linkage of philosophy, poetry, thinking, and talking becomes most explicit when Antin writes about Wittgenstein:

All of *Philosophical Investigations* can be said to consist of a thinking-while-writing that was in all likelihood based on Wittgenstein's own thinking-while-talking. For whatever else Wittgenstein may have been, he was an improvising, talking philosopher, whether he was talking to colleagues and friends in colloquia, or to students in lectures, or to himself when he was writing. His lectures were legendary ... and they "were given without preparation and without notes." (320-321)

In an observation that applies equally well to Antin himself, he suggests,

If Wittgenstein is a language poet, he is working at language in [a] somewhat different way than a poet like Robert Creeley, with whom he appears to have real affinities. They are both in a certain sense improvisational experimentalists with a mix of distrust of conventional language use and a commitment to a knowledge that can be mined from the vernacular. (320)

The writing of "Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in Modern American Poetry" served several functions: it gave us a compelling understanding of Modernism's continued pertinence (if only we could disentangle American poetry from the timid versification of Auden, Lowell, & Co.); it both demonstrated the complexity of locating the artistic present while hazarding an account of what new directions were emerging in the 1960s; and it also coincided with Antin's own self-questioning and re-directing of his work as a poet:

... I was gradually growing exasperated with text-generated performance in my own poetry readings. As a poet I was looking for a poetry of thinking. But in a poetry reading the

thinking is already over. For the poet it's all in the past tense. ... So the issues of improvisation became a major concern for me. And narrative. Or rather, a kind of narrative that was braided together with argument. By 1972 [the same year as the writing/publication of "Modernism and Postmodernism"] I was finding my way to my "talk poems"—verbal improvisations that spun narratives out of arguments and arguments out of narratives. I had been looking for a poetry of thinking and what I found was a poetry of talking, because talking was as close as I could come to thinking. (11)

While I have suggested that an early result of Antin's wondrous x-ray machine was the identification of the centrality of collage for Modernism (in literature and in the visual arts), Antin's own restlessness and awareness of the hazards of cultural (and commercial) assimilation of any technique led him to change directions—in his own work as a poet, and in his awareness of which contemporary art and artists were of pertinence:

... in the early 1970s... it became apparent to me and a number of other writers and artists that abstraction and collage, the Modernist alternatives to representation, had also become exhausted, perhaps through their success in advertising in magazines and on television. But for whatever reason, by the beginning of the 1970s both abstraction and collage appeared even more hopeless as signifiers of human experience and seemed reduced to conventionalized signifiers of style. (258)

In his identification of poetry as the language art and as a super-genre (i.e., a genre which includes other genres as subsets), Antin nonetheless—in his development of the talk poem and in his critical writing collected in *Radical Coherency*—develops a version of genre that depends for its health and survival on a perpetual process of inquiry, a study of ossifying features, and the introduction of new elements:

Apparently definition is no more useful for the notion of a genre than it is for the notion of a family. Seen from this viewpoint the viability of a genre is based on survival, and the

indispensable property of a surviving family is a continuing ability to take in new members who bring fresh genetic material into the old reservoir. So the viability of a genre may depend fairly heavily on an avant-garde activity that has often been seen as threatening its very existence, but is more accurately seen as opening its present to its past and to its future. (255)

I am struck, of course, by the timeliness of Antin's thoughts about the health of a genre as advice that applies as well to this perilous time in America's own history. But what I hope is equally obvious is that I am struck by the sheer brilliance of Antin's thinking throughout *Radical Coherency*. When the gatekeepers of American poetry finally open the door and offer Antin a place at the table, the meal, the conversation, the family, and the genre will all be considerably enriched.