

# Five Problems with Reviewing Matt Hart

written by Guest Contributor | December 2, 2016



*Radiant Action* by Matt Hart  
h\_ngm\_n books, 2016  
164 pages – [h\\_ngm\\_n](#) / [Amazon](#)

*Radiant Companion* by Matt Hart  
Monster House Press, 2016  
140 pages – [Monster House](#) / [Amazon](#)

1.

The personal disclosure and nostalgia problem.

Remember when we were in New Orleans, and I was very tired, and Matt told me don't worry about taking the only bed, he'd once spent a legendary stretch—four hundred days, let's say—sleeping on a porch, and, being very tired, I took the bed and thought, "But that qualifies you to *not* do it again, to have *earned* this bed." But he stayed awake, and I recalled that this is a quality of Matt's, and maybe a key to his poetics, that he stays up, he doesn't rest on past triumph: the other time I met him, in Iowa City, ten years earlier, when he stayed where I was housesitting, I was very tired, and Matt not only stayed up longer but tucked me in with his first full-length collection, *Who's Who Vivid* (Slope, 2005). Of course I stayed up to read it. "I know nothing anymore and can only love," reads its epigraph, from Apollinaire. Forget reviews. That epigraph of affectionate epistemology could serve as summary and response and blurb to Hart's poetry, especially to his two latest books, the co-released *Radiant Action* and *Radiant Companion*.

Before reading them, one who has not forgotten reviews entirely might return to *Who's Who Vivid* to see if its other elements extend the epigraph's variety of meta-criticism. It works with the first poem, at least. "I was in a fix," the poem begins. "I was sloshing with joy." What a fix to be in! Hart's poetry invites rhapsody more than analysis: so to explore those lines, let's think of a fixer, as in a casino or a fight; let's think of the fixed gears

of a cruising bike; of the silent film hero who gets into fixes but is not fixed there, neither stuck nor solved. Is there a difference between having a solution and being stuck? Maybe not, Hart's poems suggest; we should prefer to be unsolved, unfixed, holding steady at a slosh.

So, though I've only met Hart those two times, I'm not a dispassionate critic. But my history with him has helped me understand a key quality of his poetry: though Hart is famed, or should be, for his voluble, volatile style of performance, this style is more moving than that of a cut-rate roarer because it's often at odds with the poems, which are shot through with moments of calm, of reflective quietness, of interruptions that don't interject but seem to wait for reply. They're like the songs one keeps singing, softer now, after the baby is asleep. Hart knows this: "Anybody who's ever seen me read / poems in public," he writes in *Radiant Action*, "knows I don't shout all my work—sometimes / we can hear a pin drop." Permit me further rhapsody: in Hart's poetry, that pin drops like a record player's needle and a grenade's pin and a bobby pin holding back my curls, in case I feel the need to puke, and something a whole lotta angels are dancing about. My problem of personal disclosure and nostalgia is that, having heard Hart shake many pins loose from their cushions, I'm already saying "yes" when he asks, with Whitman in more than mind, "If I tell you a secret, will you keep it Will you / pocket this minute and promise not to spill it?"

2.

The everyday problem.

But this doesn't mean I love all of Hart's work equally; I didn't begin the new collections, for instance, knowing I'd wish to call *Radiant Action* his opus, a further arrival, a declaration from which new strands of Hart's poetry might ripple and flare. The book's tender humor, which is decidedly unpretentious, might make one quick to explode a potentially preening term like *opus*, perhaps by asking if its plural should be *octopuses* or *oboes* or *ouroboros*. Like Schuyler's longer poems "Hymn to Life" and "The Morning of the Poem," *Radiant Action* drifts through the work of days. The book, and my enthusiasm, can bear noting that some of this drift is fairly quotidian. So is much of Wordsworth, and this is a Wordsworthian epic? That's one view. Someone else might say that *Radiant Action* is committed to recording a process of expansive composition; that it favors the everyday, as an ethics, over the artifice of trying to craft, like, immortal verses. But I think those views ignore that Hart is not a poet of documentary *écriture* as much as one of collage, of peristaltic absorption of linguistic matter. When his poems feel more prosaic, or predictable, it typically gives a sense of one with scissors trimming a startling image from a magazine, and then presenting it alongside the scraps. Without such inclusivity, a collage-based approach can feel disjointed, as it flits among discrete bits; but Hart situated them, and, like a good cook, cares for th scraps. In the passage below, the opening phrases, which one might find frustratingly partial and gestural, mark time, until a moment of self-awareness sparks a more developed thought, in part through Hart's recognition of the risk that the opening phrases carry a "flat

sameness::

The difference between noise  
and meaningful noise      The difference  
between noise and what's meaningful

        And the flat sameness of all of it,  
generation to generation, disruption to eruption  
I pay better attention when I'm distracted  
from the thesis, than when I'm distracted  
from expression

Like Ted Berrigan, who might be Hart's closest forebear, Hart has an apt ear for aphorism, so even when his poems recall the fractured short-hand of a singer with a melody in mind but the exact words a scream away, the short-hand often shapes memorable propositions. In the lines above, for instance, his notion about types of distraction could seed an advanced thinking about poetic language—that it deviates from argument, toward expression—and about a continuous work like *Radiant Action*. The passage's stammering into premise recalls Stevens, and, like much in Hart's work, it refutes those who'd call this style skitteringly oblique or interested only in its materials, not its message. If anything, Hart's poetry can seem too invested in declaring its intent, in earnest pronouncements that bring to mind the pop punk and ziney scenes with which he's been affiliated, messages that are unabashed in their joy and energy and faith in poetry's joy and energy. Kickstarter idea: donate if you think such statements should be airdropped into the parking lots of rural high schools. I'd pitch in, though, because I no longer spend my days in such a high school, I sometimes think these pronouncements are implied and embodied by the poems, and affirmed by the fact of the book in my hands, so they don't need to be announced. Others can talk about how these statements help Hart build and rebuild a world his poems live in, and about how they relate to cliché, or to Ashbery, since they can veer toward conventional have-it-both-ways statements like "life could always be better/worse" and notational truisms like "togetherness is meaningful." But I wouldn't belabor this quibble, because the work so often is closer to the proverbial pamphlets Blake might make than to choruses one can sing along with after barely hearing. Hart's aware of these dynamics, of the interplay between the proverbial and the prosaic, between action and utterance. "Anything worth saying can be rendered / as an aphorism, might itself be an aphorism," he notes, and, in noting it in those terms, proves it.

3.

The structural and excess problem or problems.



d) it all concludes with a kind of epiphany, which, not being simplistic, also opens up more possibility (here, about the nature of metaphor, and love, and thus about the poem itself)

Dudes, I'm not criticizing this poetry for its relationship to rhetorical patterns that have been well-worn for good reasons. Rather, I'm noting that, in Hart's poetry, elements of "excess" or "fragment" or "experiment" often play about the houses of classical structures, and part of the pleasure is seeing the unruly retinue suddenly arrange itself in proportions that artists have been wise to find and re-find for ages. Because of the sociology of certain small press scenes, people might associate Hart's work with the kind of neo-surrealism that was fashionable in some circles ten or fifteen years ago—a poetry of small skits, declarative non-sequiturs, nonchalant whimsy, indie rock shrugs—because both types of poetry can seem refreshingly casual, hip as a quinoa cupcake with two mustaches sipping an IPA. But Hart's poetry is more concerned with "some deep hum over the water" than in a puppet show of easy metamorphoses; this comes through, formally, in a dialectic that runs between the seat on the see-saw marked BURST and the one marked STRUCTURE.

4.

The happy problem.

Who are the poets of happiness, and what are their names? Hart is one of them. It's a harder tone to catch than Poetic Ache, in part because it requires tilts toward silliness and a willingness to write in some of the more conventional ways I critique above (think of Keats, at a peak of happiness, blubbering "more happy love, more happy happy love!"—at the height of feeling, his worst writing; but how happy I feel, chanting that phrase, and how much I'd give to be in a state where I felt my tongue flourish into that babble). In these books, Hart pursues and presents visions of happiness—complicated by mortality and friendship and the limits and sufficiency of desire—through declarations both bold and relentless. "I would do better to show you my face / Happiness is written where I write this," he writes, lovingly, and I draw a smile in the margin. I admire, particularly, Hart's presentation of domestic stuff that many poets would either elaborate into Big Theater of Meaningful Meaning or leave out. Not Hart. Here's parenthood, beautifully: "Suddenly, Agnes wants to learn to play / guitar, but only because she's grounded / for sassing the stars." And marriage, its prosody chalked in sweetness and fact: "I woke up with Melanie beside me, as I have / most mornings for a sonnet's worth of years."

With the self-awareness about writing that is characteristic of *Radiant Action*, Hart wonders if this domestic focus is sufficient, if its sweetness is too telling, and he admits his doubt:

It's all

the telling not showing and the hapless

distracted, superficial and repetitive

which makes me sound like I have

an azalea stuck between my teeth

Oh, what beautiful work, poet, beautiful rescue! To end a passage that worries about writing lackluster poetry with a resolutely lustrous reference to *the sound of an azalea between the teeth!* Apollinaire would climb on your shoulders in pleasure.

5.

The Romance problem.

I mean it with the biggest "R." Especially in *Radiant Companion*, which contains poems that feel more contained, one sees Hart's relation to a Romantic sensibility, and especially to the Romantic ode, which often considers a topic through shifting moods, treating each as a primary metaphysics; think of how Keats trusts each momentary flush and swoon as a cosmos. Although people might talk about Hart's work as a post-modern assemblage of anthemic roughage, its temperament is closer to that of Coleridge than of Clark Coolidge, and it makes you realize—though I suspect Hart is too kind to make or care for these comparisons—that many contemporary poets of super-sensitive posture work a small furrow of emotion (a furrow that's usually located squarely on their own brow), rather than rocketing among impressions and affections. In contrast, in a passage like the following from *Radiant Companion*, Hart clusters intent images that, through their juxtaposition, help the sketchier moments seem moving, not slight:

And the universe unblooms

its scurrilous blouse, so to scramble itself with myself and yourself

Purple leaves          Reactivity          A violent blue wind

but the spell is incomplete          Wing-smash of centrifuge

Torso-scribbled lemon juice          What's written says,

Absence, or

Light pours over shadows, like heavy-duty butter cream

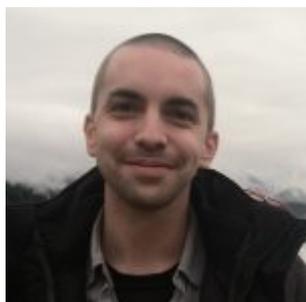
Again, one has the sense of some phrases keeping time by pulling at the clue of a lawnmower's chain until the engine catches. Is "Reactivity" the same kind of unit as "A violent blue wind?" No, and so a reader is reoriented phrase by phrase, in figuring out how each item comments or responds; this is Romantic ode logic, condensed to the strophe, not just the stanza, a coherent mosaic made of irregular tiles, bottle caps and gum, an enormous chunk of pyramid, a wig that can work in the mix. The collage is held by orienting

gravity—in this case, by the poem, through its mix of matter, building a kind of landscape, which feels at once (true to Romantic nature) interior and exterior. It's no more "fractured" or "fragmented" (and no less "surreal," I'd argue) than the chains of images you can see in Keats. The poem ends in a seasonal epiphany that could suit any month; let it. It combines mythic, domestic, and ruminative modes:

O monster so close  
you're inside us already      Hollering at taxis, a little crooked  
for our love      Rhinos, weasels, demi-gods, moss  
Little girl with bloody nose      Event Horizon cluttered  
with a billion starry skulls      Winter comes early  
when the one who whistles calls

Do you know that Jack Gilbert poem that says, "What we feel the most has / no name but amber, archers, cinnamon, horses, and birds"? Despite how repulsive I find some of Gilbert's love poetry, and how silly I find some of his romantic poses, I'm among the poets who, while not writing much like Gilbert at all, adore some of his lines, and I've heard it claimed that the phrase "amber, archers, cinnamon, horses, and birds" can serve as an answer to any honest query. A good game, but let's instead try it with Hart's "Rhinos, weasels, demi-gods, moss," an earthier, more beastly parade. Who should make sure they read Hart's new collections? Rhinos, weasels, demi-gods, moss! What might we look forward to in what Hart does next, with the hope that he keeps writing with excess and humor and Romance and generous personal implication for many years? Rhinos, weasels, demi-gods, moss! Who knows nothing anymore and can only love! Rhinos, weasels, demi-gods, moss!

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**Zach Savich** was born in Michigan in 1982 and grew up in Olympia, Washington. He received degrees from the Universities of Washington, Iowa, and Massachusetts. His work has received the Iowa Poetry Prize, the Colorado Prize for Poetry, the Cleveland State University Poetry Center's Open Award, and other honors. His most recent books are the poetry collection *The Orchard Green and Every Color* (Omnidawn) and a memoir about cancer, teaching, poetic friendship, *Diving Makes the Water Deep* (Rescue Press).. He teaches in the BFA Program for Creative Writing at the University of the Arts, in Philadelphia.