

So far a Sebald-inspired melancholia fits nicely with this city of the dead and traumatized. Hunt, however, doesn't want to linger in this world. He'd rather pile oddity upon oddity. The critic James Wood has dubbed this narrative strategy "hysterical realism": the tendency to treat a novel as a "perpetual motion machine." Wood faults contemporary novelists such as David Foster Wallace and Zadie Smith for constructing narratives stuffed with oddities and "characterized by a fear of silence." *The Exquisite* fits this bill. Hunt, though, has the added difficulty of making his willed weirdness work with a melancholic tone that promises something more than surface strangeness.

A mock-murder service is not strange enough: the group has to be composed of rejects from a Coney Island sideshow. Two of the fake killers are twins; they're also contortionists who perfectly synchronize their mock murders. Similar details, tossed out one after another, do little more than sit on the surface of the story.

The willed weirdness of *The Exquisite* is a shame because the novel so deftly handles the aftermath of 9/11. *The Rings of Saturn* succeeds because its "quietly patterned and heavily mediated observation" makes the odd and weird feel intimate and familiar. Hunt's novel wants to do something similar, but any intimacy is buried beneath an avalanche of oddities. Like Sebald, Hunt evokes a world in which the relationship between past and present is neither stable nor reducible to a single perspective. But the hysterical realism of *The Exquisite* ends up obscuring exactly what Sebald's work reveals: that part of the contemporary world where the tragedy of yesterday is no longer distinguishable from the tragedy of today.

P. Genesis Durica

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Kevin Connolly, *Drift*. Toronto: Anansi, 2005. 85pp. \$13.95

Ten pages into *Drift*, Kevin Connolly's third book of poems, I suddenly thought of these lines from the beginning of Whitman's "Song of Myself":

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

Reading the book, I kept going back to these lines, thinking of them as a friendly key to *Drift*. Not that the book requires a key, it's really quite clear and direct—but it seemed like the kind of thing Connolly would encourage, that is, inviting one more guest to the party. No big deal, there's plenty of room and half a crate of booze to go around.

But Whitman doesn't want to drink. He's happy with his buzz, a buzz

from realizing over and over again that he contains multitudes. Connolly, on the other hand, isn't sure. Maybe he will get pissed. Maybe he'll take it easy tonight. He thinks it through in the opening poem, "About a Poem":

*Time for another gimlet, I'm thinking, though it's true
they're going down way too easy, what with all
that crème de menthe, or whatever it is puts the
gee whiz into that particular gin fizz.*

One more, Mr. Connolly? Not sure. He's also not so sure that the individual can contain multitudes, or that the individual should aspire to such a filled condition. He's not even sure what the individual is. In "Ten Cents a Dance," one of the most rollicking and compelling poems in the book, he explains his doubts (and, in the process, un-explains his self):

I was unlike a pack of dollar-store batteries;
unlike the subway stuttering, incoherent.
I was unlike a woman chasing a fleeing schnauzer,
unlike a shadow on the butcher's window.

I was unlike a bird, not that bird...the pretty one...
unlike an old joke grown warm in the telling.
I was unlike the milkman, stopped visiting years ago.
I was unlike anything I remotely dreamt of being—

Every item listed in this poem strives to exist vibrantly, to assert its unique spirit; everything is modified to a freshly sharpened edge, everything has a Quality. Yes, the world is full of beautiful images! But the individual, while he sees all the items, is unlike them: the "I" is the only item without a Quality.

But if the individual can't be qualified, what about the collective? Throughout much of the book, Connolly attempts to tell us what "we" are like, as he does here at the end of "Inside George Steiner":

No weak physics in this, how we crowd our throats,
fill ourselves in emptying out, human spigots.
What else could we mean when we say this, this life
or boat, surf or passage, this *this*, this *is*, is difficult?
And isn't that just like us, to force such questions?

This is what *we* do, and Connolly's gulping rhythms suggest that we persistently change what we do with each swallow and subsequent breath.

So who are we? How to categorize the collective? Are we talking about the collective of all collectives (everyone, the whole human race) or some local collective (Toronto, Moscow, Virginia Beach)? Maybe we are just talking

about poets (and who cares about *them?*). Among those in attendance are John Ashbery, John Berryman, Darrell Gray, Paul Muldoon, Wallace Stevens, James Tate, and David Berman (whose name is also affixed to a blurb you must see to believe). So maybe this book can be filed in that oft-mentioned, notorious, and nefarious section, Books That Prove Poets Only Write to and about Other Poets—the section that *Poetry* is currently on a campaign to exterminate, bless its heart.

But then what to do about Ashton Kutcher, who shows up in “Death by Scansion”? There’s quite a cast of characters inside *Drift*, from various strata of the cultural wreckage. And not just poets or television hosts or bandleaders (Nelson Riddle stops by for “Calmnesses”): even the folks you pass by on a stupefied stroll through the internet video emporium, as in “VI *Tall Ships*,” the last section of “Sestina”:

We’ll all get our curtain call, though few have what
you’d really call an act: Guy at the Coke Dispenser,
Babe Serving Thin-Crust Pizza, Dude Selling Charity

Coupon Booklets; Girl Removing Dead Mexican Jumping Beans
and Replacing Them with Live Jumping Beans.

Connolly comes to a rather grim conclusion in this catalogue of everyone’s fifteen minutes: “In the end, we’re all bores: / space-filler, errant name tags, plates cleared from the buffet. / Golfers strewn like sailboats over the pitiless greens.” It’s as if Eliot’s *Waste Land* and Whitman’s “Open Road” have become one and the same—a frightening, schizophrenic prospect, the result of a world in which if *we* are all famous, no one is.

Whitman established his individuality by incorporating multitudes. Connolly, on the other hand, lives in a world where it’s nearly impossible to be an individual. Everyone represents everyone else—everything reflects everything, every day another building made of mirrors goes up—and everyone, rather than containing multitudes, has become contained by multitudes.

Accordingly, Connolly can only write about his participation in a multitude that he can neither comprehend nor transcend:

Push hard enough and just about anything
will push right back—sun and shade, yard
birds, wire fence, compost bucket, dirty ball,
that sweet scent under the leaves and shit.

But by claiming that if you “push hard enough... just about anything will push right back,” Connolly offers a glint of hope. In *Drift*, questions beget more questions and nullifications beget more nullifications, but the possibility re-

mains that some questions will eventually beget answers, some nullifications affirmations. Connolly holds hard to the hope that any day now we will find clarity in “that sweet scent under the leaves and shit.” The distillation would intoxicate Connolly, but he shall not let it.

Joshua Baldwin

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J.H. Prynne, *To Pollen*. London: Barque, 2006. 26pp. \$8

The following is the second chapter of an unfolding critical novella on current British poetry, to be entitled Corroded by Symbolisme: An Anti-Review of Twelve British Poets, Being Also a True Account of Dark and Mysterious Events Surrounding a Famous Poem Supposedly Written by Frank O’Hara. The next two chapters will be released in subsequent issues of this magazine.

The reader of the previous section of this serial review (see CR 53:1) will recall that in 2004 I had the pleasure to spend a pleasurable afternoon in Cambridge, England, chatting with J.H. Prynne’s former student, the poet-critic Andrew Duncan, concerning some fabulous texts from his (then yet unpublished) bookum, *Savage Survivals: amid modern suavity*.

And so it was in 2005 that I returned to Cambridge, this time to speak on a panel concerning translation, its truths, fictions, and myths. I was with Kevin Nolan and the great poets Nicomedes Suarez-Arauz of Bolivia and Franz Josef Czernin of Austria. We were talking about forgery and fable in poetry, having tea and scones at a delightful little shop by the Cam, near the old brydge in St. John’s. As luck would have it, Keston Sutherland and Peter Riley walked in, accompanied by the legendary avant-garde poet and Cambridge don, J.H. Prynne.

Oh, Jeremy, exclaimed Kevin, I thought you were in China!

No, no, I leave tomorrow, said Jeremy. I’m back here on Thursday, then I return to Beijing on Saturday. Then I’m back here on Wednesday, and then I’m in Shanghai on the following Sunday. Then I’m back here on Friday for examinations, then Hong Kong five days following. This whole Great Leap Forward thing is really getting quite exhausting.

This made everyone laugh merrily, and small talk ensued. By and by, Prynne and I settled into chit-chat about our Marxist-Leninist backgrounds, and we seemed to hit it offum, as we say in the US, even though he had been a Maoist and I had been a Trotskyistye. Around 11 AM I said I was going to head on back to Trinity to meet Astrid Lampe and Forrest Gander and Tom Raworth for lunch, and J.H. Prynne said, Well let me accompany you back, to which I said, Sure, thank you very much, and so he did, leaving Keston