

sequence are (like) vertebrae gets at the fragility of being on this earth; the being that “lay[s] back on her back, jaguar spine” gives us a lithe metapoetic image of *Jaguar Harmonics*, open to the world.

Notably, in a book teeming with persons, there are only several instances of brains. Waldman uses the rare word “entopic” to describe a “one thousand four hundred cubic centimeter brain” that hosts the “gestation of pliant harmonics.” Entopic evokes the Greek *entopos* (in a place) and *entoptik* (vision from within). Waldman’s image of an “entopic brain” suggests a vision from within that is neither autocatalytic nor solitary but rather a contextualized response to what is without. Whether you’re a jaguar in a jungle or driving your Jag in an urban metropolis, you move as parts of a larger brain—or brane—that encompasses all life existing now and in the future. In *Jaguar Harmonics*, Waldman commits to seeing inwardly and outwardly towards a *poethics* that is a kinetics, too—a theory of movement that incorporates lacunae of stillness and stargazing, like the jaguar. She also commits to hearing harmony as a sort of sonic plenitude filling out the silence it’s founded on: the sound first of the absence of cruelty, then of the relational existence possible in a world where brains communicate beyond the ordinary limits of the human. Cruelty, after all, may be a woefully human invention. The jaguar, for one, isn’t cruel in its predations, moving instead like a sound wave, announcing itself in musical hisses: “whuzzzzzssssshhhhhhhhhist awhoo awhoo.”

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Peter O’Leary, *Phosphorescence of Thought*. Brooklyn: The Cultural Society, 2013. 72pp. \$17

In his 2006 volume *Depth Theology*, Peter O’Leary gave himself the task of poetically attaining what he calls a “religious knowledge of the unconscious.” In *Phosphorescence of Thought*, O’Leary’s fourth collection, the poet continues that project by putting aside the suppressed and exploring the wonder of sentient life, depicting landscapes as if seen from the sovereign confines of some distant sphere. If his shuttling back and forth between a wildlife preserve on the outskirts of Chicago and a roving outpost in outer space seem at first like nonconvergent ends, O’Leary’s magic is in his careful handling of perception. While the speaker vies for a capacious, global perspective, he avoids the impulse to bracket out his own experience of the physical world. Rather he delves more intensely into whatever matter is at hand, more deeply into one fold of its finite manifestation. Interiority for O’Leary thrives amongst the territories, and consciousness manifests itself in the transitory desire for new experience.

So confident was Archimedes in his theory of the lever that he famously declared, “Give me a place to stand, and I shall move the earth.” By the seventeenth century that mythic foothold took on increased significance as the symbolic precedence for Enlightenment impartiality. “Modern natural science,” writes Hannah Arendt, “owes its great triumphs to having looked upon and treated earth-bound nature from a truly universal viewpoint, that is, from an Archimedean standpoint.” In O’Leary’s work, the Archimedean Point turns out to be a kind of Archimedean *pointillism*—a grand vision from an array of “excessive tiny intelligence.” This subject comes by way of the book’s first sentence:

The wren
the mind
allows
to sing
alights
—and flits—
on branches bare
of anything other than the sun’s ceaseless iodine
the woods at dusk flood with
like sutras meditators seep their thoughts in
neurochemicals recall from the galaxy’s
antique axiometry.

Opening with the poem’s recurring songbird muse, O’Leary braids perception with permission, making the wren a given property of the mind, which leads to the central concern of the book: “the mystery of human consciousness.” Line breaks in the above passage compel the momentum of each impending perception: the brief, distilled images of the first lines modulate into a breathless yawp, filled with inverted syntax (“the woods at dusk flood with”) and embedded fragments. In the stark formal contrast that separates the beginning of the sentence from its close, one notices how detail burgeons into a cosmological ecology, and a single thought flows into the galaxy’s “pathic massiveness.”

In the same passage, we see how the movement from one particular wren to the Archimedean axiometry depends upon O’Leary’s revised sense of consciousness. In the book’s afterword, he elaborates,

Consciousness, according to neuroscientists, is epiphenomenal. This means, depending on the story you follow, that when consciousness arose in evolution, it did so as an action corollary to the functions otherwise necessary to the brain.... Consciousness, then, is a kind of overplus of mental meaning, an excessive superfluity.

In some contexts, such an over-the-top claim might accompany a wink from the author, but here the excessive superfluity of “excessive superfluity” is at once self-referential and sincere—a reminder that for O’Leary poetry is at once a means of study and an opportunity to get carried away in the process. Instead of passive acquisition, the poet urges us to see perception as the irrepressible pursuit of connectivity. We can see this again in the opening section of the poem: the wren does not overwhelm the mind, but the mind “allows” it, overwhelming itself with the bird’s “varied tune.” Like a migrating kestrel or a “functional river ecosystem,” consciousness, with its tendency to overwhelm itself with distractions, remains “connected to everything around it.” And part of that everything includes the encroachment of mass culture in the form of “sodden basement garbage” and revelers “partying in the clearings.” Despite the occasional gesture to canned conservationism, the environmental politics of the book departs from popular critiques of consumer culture, and instead chooses to focus its attention on esoteric earth worship.

In later sections, the expansive ecology grows to include an interstellar reenactment of creation’s own creation myth, via O’Leary’s invocation of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit mystic and paleontologist who appears in O’Leary’s *Luminous Epinoia* (2010), and who contributes not only the epigraph but also the title for the current collection. O’Leary narrates the life cycle of existence from “an anatomized sundering of sames” to an “organized whole in the process of fulfillment,” an odyssey and Archimedean sensibility deriving from Teilhard’s theory that human consciousness exists in nature as an incandescence, which en masse produces a psychic brightness that sheathes the planet in a “phosphorescence of thought.” O’Leary articulates his study of Teilhard in profoundly personal ways, reminiscent of Olson’s epic dialogue with Whitehead. In an attempt to rediscover the *noosphere* (Teilhard’s name for incandescent thought), O’Leary simulates a full-scale lunar landing: beyond providing the poet with an opportunity to use expressions like “Ecclesiastical moon dew” and “Metallic moon-roots,” the outlandish exploration invites uncommon insights:

There are no boundaries to what you are seeing.
Halleluiah.
25,000 miles an hour.
You’re the representative of humanity at that point in history.
If there’s anything remorseful about going to the moon, it’s
that you don’t get enough time to spend
around the earth.

As we see, the desire to remove oneself from earth does not result in the ability to master desire. Remorse obtains, and the promise of remote objectivity

comes at the expense of losing one's connection to a spiritual horizon. Even in reaching the best of all possible worlds, the speaker realizes the source of the wish is ultimately more satisfying than its fulfillment. Nostalgia for earth, then, comes from the speaker's regret for achieving objectivity, rather than simply contending with the graceful impossibility of such a desire.

With this in mind, a good summary of *Phosphorescence* could be gained by considering the two terms O'Leary coins for the occasion.

lutrescent (also *lutrescence* and *lutrid*), which combines light with putrescent to suggest light gone rotten. This is supersaturated illumination.... The other coinage is *autochthonous*. This word slots into the center of *autochthonous*, which means "native born" but also "of the earth itself," the Greek word *nomos*, which means law. So: of the earth's own native law.

By a method similar to that of his spiritual revision of psychoanalysis in *Depth Theology*, O'Leary casts *autochthonous* as "an adjective for evolution but evolution as if it were a theology." Taken together these words point to a numinous mural of the mind, rooted in the indigenous earth, and accountable to immanent decay. In the context of the book, these ostentatious terms with their heteroglossic histories realize the poet's repeated appeal to excess. Yet an excessive, ecumenical barrage will not win him favor with readers skeptical of sincerity and autodidactic erudition. His poetry stands in opposition to Language-based experiments premised upon demonstrating the signifier's ability to destabilize the autonomous lyric subject. For O'Leary, the conspicuously elevated register fortifies the power of the speaker's ritual voice, an aspect most evident in the "Make Holy" chant at the center of the book. There, each multisyllabic word that falls to the wayside of everyday speech further personalizes the voice of the poem. In the end, it is this coherent voice that works to foreground the pixelated contours of consciousness. At a distance the many points of reference meld into a shimmering craft of Romantic subjectivity, yet when seen up close they give credence to the offhand reference O'Leary makes at one point to Oppen's shipwreck of the singular. Like Oppen, O'Leary turns to poetry to meditate on the space modern society makes available for the individual. His response is to see the many as amenable to the one and numerosness as the upper limit of quotidian thought and speech. It is this quality that enables the perspective of the poem to shuttle back and forth between the local and the global, displacing the centered subject of the Archimedean Point with a unified array of perceptual detail—the pointillism, as I am urged to call it, that is the book's poetic voice. While the idea of writing in a speakerly style drew the critical ire of avant-gardists two decades ago, O'Leary plots an alternative experimentalism proposing that the speaker's coherent voice can possess the promise of its own numinous dispersion.

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