

(or anti-literary) afterlife. *Ring of Bone's* textual record gives way to archived audio recordings; his scores give way to his own ghostly voice, technologically preserved and reanimated; his voice gives way to his reader's voice, his breath and body to my own. In ways that he perhaps could not quite predict, Welch has become a multimedia poet. Somewhere between the book and the audio archive, his *Collected Poems* almost dissolves into collective life itself.

Patrick Morrissey

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Frederick Seidel, *Nice Weather*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. 112pp. \$24

Who's afraid of Frederick Seidel? All of his critics, apparently. The "most frightening American poet ever," says Calvin Bedient. "Frederick Seidel is a ghoul," says Michael Robbins. Adam Kirsch thinks his poetry as scary as a nightmare. Michael Hofmann calls him a "cannibal." These are terms of praise, from critics who think Seidel one of our best living poets. It is notable, however, that the epithets used to describe Seidel sound like an advertisement for the latest Hollywood horror film. In a recent review of the Jeff Koons Retrospective at the Whitney, Jed Perl comments on "the S&M of the contemporary art world," which assumes that whatever shocks and disgusts must, *ipso facto*, be good. But, he rightly points out, "not all unease is equal." Frederick Seidel is the Jeff Koons of contemporary American poetry, with "the swagger of a macho buffoon," in Perl's words, scaring his readers into admiration.

But what has happened to the carnivore, the cannibal, the bogeyman, and above all, the phallus-man that for decades have combined to form Seidel's signature poetic persona and the hallmark of his poetic style? In his latest book *Nice Weather* (2012), most of the poems are as bland as the kind of small talk the title suggests. Here's the title poem in its entirety:

This is what it's like at the end of the day.
But soon the day will go away.
Sunlight preoccupies the cross street.
It and night soon will meet.
Meanwhile, there is Central Park.
Now the park is getting dark.

Okay. This is Cheez Whiz Robert Frost. But if it is true, as Randall Jarrell said, that "any poet has written enough bad poetry to scare away anybody," then Seidel has to be judged on the best lines and the best poems of his career, where his "macho buffoon" persona first began to take shape and scare critics

even more than his worst lines. Seidel's recently published *Poems, 1959–2009* (2010), which gathered together almost all of the poetry he has ever published, contains some of the most vital work in American poetry in the last fifty years. It takes us back to the provocatively titled *Final Solutions* (1963), Seidel's debut and portentous *succès de scandale* that caused the judges of the first Helen Burlin Memorial Award to resign in protest over sponsors who refused Seidel the prize due to fears of libel. More importantly, Seidel's collected poems takes us back to *Sunrise* (1980), his second collection, and its impressive title poem, which contains some of the best verse Seidel—or any poet of the past half century—has written. The critical consensus of late dismisses his first two books as knock-off Robert Lowell, or worse. Eliot Weinberger, one of the few critics who have had anything at all to say about “Sunrise,” claimed that it's an incomprehensible imitation of John Ashbery. Certainly, there is something of Ashbery's polished surrealism in the poem, but the voice and rhetoric are decidedly Seidel's own. Their signature is an arch persona that is not only hyper-masculine but also ultra-bourgeois, a sort of twisted Byronic hero, which Seidel has constructed (or has become) over the years in order, ironically, to *épater-le-bourgeois*.

If one reads “Sunrise” with care, the basic outlines, if not every image and line, become perfectly clear. Here's the scenario: the poet is lying in bed as the sun rises, lapsing into a few dreams (the bed will moonlight as a psychoanalyst's couch and a hospital bed in which a quadriplegic boy has surgery); he has just turned forty in February, but it is now Easter and soon to be the National Bicentennial (Seidel was born in February, 1936; “Sunrise” takes place in April, 1976). This event constitutes a major occasion for the poet to take stock of his life, his country, his (ir)religion, and to face the full power (and lure) of nihilism. “Not to be born is obviously best of all,” a paraphrase of Sophocles, is the title of the poem immediately following “Sunrise,” but the theme is opened in the poem itself, with a specific twentieth-century twist:

When you are little, a knee of your knickers torn,
The freshness of rain about to fall is what
It would be like not to have been born.
Believe. Believed they were lined up to take showers
Dies illa, that April, which brought May flowers.
Safer than the time before the baby
Crawls is the time before he smiles, maybe.
Stalin's merry moustache, magnetic, malignant,
Crawls slowly over a leaf which cannot move.

The first sentence is one that continues to haunt Seidel, as it continues to haunt me. It returns, *mutatis mutandis*, several times in *The Cosmos Poems* (2003),

and in “Barbados,” which Michael Robbins rightly says is the best poem in a later volume, *Ooga-Booga* (2006):

Literally the most expensive hotel in the world
Is the smell of rain about to fall.
It does the opposite, a grove of lemon trees.
I isn't anything.
It is the hooks of rain
Hovering with their sweets inches off the ground.
I is the spiders marching through the air.
The lines dangle the bait
The ground will bite.
Your wife is as white as vinegar, pure aristo privilege.
The excellent smell of rain before it falls overpowers
The last aristocrats on earth before the asteroid.
I sense your disdain, darling.
I share it.

And again, in the final stanza of the poem: “And there we were, / The cane toads and the smell of rain about to fall.” Recycled lines like this, Seidel’s personal clichés, have attracted the attention of his critics, but for the wrong reasons. Robbins likes these lines from *Ooga-Booga*, but instead of recalling their origin for us in “Sunrise,” which would challenge his reasons for echoing Weinberger’s dismissal of the book, he suggests Pound’s *Cantos*, quoting Canto 83: “the clouds over Taishan / When some of the rain has fallen / and half remains yet to fall.” Maybe Seidel had this in mind, too, but I doubt it. No, “Barbados” is a variation on the theme of “Sunrise,” the resonance with the older poem lending it much of its power. The smell of the rain about to fall, in all of its many repetitions in his work, is a figure of the lure that nihilism has for the Seidel persona, imbricated with the wasting away of America since the 1960s. (Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Kennedys recur in Seidel’s poems as often as the rain about to fall). But the pathos that the lines have in their original context is increasingly lost in his later poems, as if to affirm the triumph of nihilism in their hollow, mechanical repetition.

“Sunrise” ultimately affirmed life, despite the Holocaust, despite the innocence lost with the fall of Camelot, despite all the senseless suffering, despite full recognition that the universe doesn’t give a shit about us:

Organizations of gravity and light,
Supremely mass disappears and reappears
In an incomprehensible -1 of might.
Sat up at last, the quadriplegic boy

Feels beyond pain, feels beyond joy—
Still, stately as the Christ of Resurrection.
I wake beneath my hypnopompic erection,
Forty stanzas, forty Easters of life,
And smile, eyes full of tears, shaking with rage.

The “hypnopompic erection” is, in some ways, Seidel’s version of Whitmanian virility—partly induced by the narcotic of sleep, it is an erection nonetheless. But it is also perhaps the essential feature of his Byronic persona, which puts the “pomp” in “hypnopompic.” These days, however, his penis is in bad shape:

It took a shirt of Nessus wrapped around my penis
To get rid of the crabs.
The burning ointment got lovingly applied by Babs—
Penis burned at the stake by Venus!

That is from “Baudelaire,” one of the best poems in *Nice Weather*, which begins, appropriately enough:

I walk on water in my poems, using the lily pads
Of the sidewalk homeless as stepping-stones.
I’d stop to talk, but they don’t have cell phones.
Their alcoholic faces come in various plaids.

These lines are excellent, and maliciously witty, issuing from an arch and ironic stance of urbane privilege to shock the bourgeoisie. But he soon embraces the art of sinking:

His hands are in the basin washing, crashing.
His brain is on a boardwalk walking.
Her bigs don’t stop stalking.
The mirror is asking for a thrashing.

I’m standing at a sideboard carving a wild duck I shot a lot.
My bullfrog croaks.
My unit smokes.
My Mumbai is hot. My Bali spits snot. I’ve shot what I’ve got.

This is self-consciously bathetic, of course. It is even possible that Seidel is playing Hazlitt to his own Byron. (Hazlitt memorably characterized Byron’s tendency toward bathos in *Don Juan*: “A classical intoxication is followed by the splashing of soda-water, by frothy effusions of ordinary bile.

After the lightning and the hurricane, we are introduced to the interior of the cabin and the contents of the wash-hand basins. The solemn hero of tragedy plays Scrub in the farce.”) But here Seidel is not artfully or subversively bathetic like Byron or Frank O’Hara or James Schuyler—or like Frederick Seidel can be. Even the extreme parataxis of these lines feeds into a superficial rather than a subversive bathos by partaking of a cultural fad already fully exploited by the semioticians of advertising: *Real. Comfortable. Jeans.*

Nice Weather typifies much of Seidel’s post-9/11 verse. A central conceit of “Baudelaire” is really just a simple literalizing of the token liberal guilt that believes our chickens have now come home to roost: “A terrorist in his underwear, / Shaving in the steam, wipes the bathroom mirror clearer.” In our complicity through banal domesticity and blind consumerism, we are all terrorists. But the theme has grown stale, the thrill is gone. *Nice Weather* suffers from rampant inbreeding, the diminishing returns of blasé self-cloning. Seidel exists now not by sympathy, or antipathy, but by apathy, whether his subjects are political crises or penchants. Marinetti claimed that “a roaring automobile is more beautiful than the Nike of Samothrace.” In “Sunrise,” Seidel gave us Futurism on speed, one-upping Marinetti:

Being walked and warmed up, they roared like lions on leashes.
The smell of castor oil. Snarl suck-suck-suck waaah
A racing motorcycle running through
The gears, on song; the ithyphallic faired
Shape of speed waaah an Italian’s glans-bared
Rosso di competizione...

His ridiculously expensive motorcycles have been roaring through his poems ever since. “Beautiful things that go fast have enchanted me,” he writes in “Lisbon,” but even Seidel is getting sick of it, thinking “it’s time to leave Jack Kennedy and my motorcycles behind.” Amen. But the alternative is a bit droll: “I face a yawning lion shaving in my mirror in the morning, roaring, / And there’s my grandchild standing in the doorway, adoring— / Many teeth to brush, a beard to shave!” The sharp asteism has dulled into domesticated cynicism.

Seidel seems to have arrived, perhaps because of 9/11, at the nihilistic conclusion of the young ladies in Věra Chytilová’s film *Daisies*: “If everything’s spoiled, we’ll be spoiled, too.” And hence, apparently, our poetry must be spoiled. Seidel’s best poetry was insistently, disturbingly, thrillingly, alive. Now—I’m afraid—he’s just a scary, finely tuned machine. Kind of like one of his Ducati bikes.

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