

Dan Disney, *and then when the*. Sydney: John Leonard Press, 2011. 60 pp. ISBN 978-0-9808523-25.

Disney's debut collection of poetry comprises twenty poems, many of which decry the state of our dehumanisation due to (post)modernisation. Marrying a Huxleyan ideology with Baudrillard's apocalyptic view of humankind's increasing loss of connection with what is real, Disney's poems are unsurprisingly, often laced with bitter humour and cynicism. Take for example, the following poem, "reality is a sound, you have to tune in to":

thus we are
gigantic. We outgrow nearly ourselves
Did you not hear? *Sb-sh-sh!* The alarum of bells
the calibration of psyche
Go thither into fields of GE Pigs
and robotniks
and when you do go (close door) into that outward
try to leave quietly...
everything's full of the quivers

The first four lines suggest a kind of homogenous mentality that (post)modern ideology imposes upon "ourselves," rendering us one "gigantic," unthinking herd of "GE Pigs" or "robotniks." As a result, our primary function is to heed the "alarum of bells" – a tuneless cacophony of sound devoid of meaning – that has succeeded in recalibrating our psyches. It is this state of being that French thinker Jean Baudrillard calls a simulacrum, and the space within which we inhabit, simulacral. Here, reality and fantasy have blurred into a single whole, resulting in "us" becoming largely cardboard-like effigies without any identities. Here, "ourselves" are recognised only through surface markers: the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the levels of fanciness reflected in our business-cards, and so on. Identity is no longer premised on any interiority. This menacing quality of the (post)modern existence is often so subtle and pervasive that inhabitants of the simulacra are not even aware of their condition. In another poem, "here superman keeps his robots," the term "simulacrum" is directly introduced, aptly followed by the final three lines:

Scratch, Play.
... Wake up. Stay awhile. Dystopians
we seem so real

Finally, in “and pour a torrent of light into our dark world,” the empty sound that pervades this unreal existence – the “*sb-sb-sb*” noise to which we dance – is again evoked. Accompanying this “requiem” are the familiar laments about the “manmade days” that characterise the postmodern, and the fact that we are nothing more than machines that perform according to “standard operating procedures.” Tellingly, all three poems abruptly end without a full-stop. This, in my view, implies a perpetual state of endless of irreality from which there is no escape. Even if, as intimated by the first poem, we choose to “leave quietly,” we are merely venturing into another replication of the simulacra. Not only is the simulacra without boundaries, it is capable of saturating every dimension of contemporary life. Several of Disney’s poems capture this eternal nightmare through the Chinese-box motif, most palpably in “Illogos.” Here are the first five lines:

It all began with me trying to open a small wooden box
From the inside. This was a quiet place and windless too
Though I left it nonetheless, kicking my way through
into a slightly larger wooden box. Here
things were filled with a quietness and not much wind.¹

The rest of the poem will continue to recount the persona’s attempt to break out of a box, only to find himself in still another quiet and windless box – an endeavour that does not cease even after a week later. Indeed, the image of a continuous cycle of repetitive, uneventful and meaningless acts that Disney views as characteristic of the postmodern condition will be deployed in poems such as “Ecce Hombres” and ““These things I’ve seen,’ said the silhouette.” The latter reinforces the point of our fundamental loss of reality with its suggestion of a performance in a play. Moreover, that the poem opens and closes with brackets further consolidates the sad fact of our lives as being cut off from what is meaningful and really “real.”

While I am sympathetic to Disney’s view, and subscribe (to a point) to his astute insights into technology and commodity culture’s (the twin faces of capitalism) dehumanisation of men and women, I am also somewhat uncomfortable with this position for several reasons. First, such a view largely ignores the possibility of retaining something “essential” that makes us who/what we are despite the increasing simulation of reality. Disney’s poems summarily plot the modern human being as nothing more than a machine greased by capitalism: our identities are, as Marx would have it, nothing more than surplus labour (carefully merged with our consumerist desires in the

¹ It is possible that this poem is written in reference to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s concept of the prison-house of language.

postmodern space), who exists only to ensure the smooth running of this regulating ideology. As a result of collapsing the real and the fantastical into each other, every aspect of the human within the simulacra is nothing more than seamless and homogenous continuum: “work church home slaughterhouse” (“How to see inside machines”) are really one and the same but cleverly camouflaged as different to dupe us into believing that we are each unique, that we have choices, and that we matter. Many scholars have declared Baudrillard’s perspective apocalyptic and ultimately hopeless, and in my view, Disney’s poems reiterate precisely such a stance as well. My intention here is not to criticise Disney’s insistence on the gradual loss of identity marker and boundaries of self (because so much of our identity has become infiltrated by the mechanism of capitalism), but his refusal to consider that reality is not as dire as his poems often make the human condition out to be.

Which brings me to my next point: if the simulacra is indeed so pervasive and totalising, then it would be impossible for anyone to ever know that we are trapped in it in the first place. That Disney (and Baudrillard) can decry this postmodern deception suggests that we are not all victims of false consciousness, and that there are some (many) of us who are able to see through the fantastic nature of our contemporary “reality.” Related to the point just made is the third problem I have with Disney’s work. Often, I find that discontentment against the postmodern condition is often voiced by the privileged. Individuals who have enjoyed what the simulacra has to offer, but who are now bored with it, often invariably become its principle dissenters. These individuals, moreover, are frequently members of a certain group – educated, metropolitan and middle-class. Disney betrays his (possibly now past) solidarity with this group not only in the collection’s first two poems – in which the personas are a philosophy student waiting for a lecture to begin and a guest at a dinner party (with wine served), respectively – but also the titles of several poems, which are fragments of lines drawn from the poet’s extensive reading of philosophy (Heidegger, Eco, Kant) and what many would consider “high-brow” literature (Levi, Hesse, Pamuk, the poet Anne Carson). The complaint against the irreality of our modern lives are rarely issued by the poor, the hungry and the oppressed, for whom the luxuries promised by (post)modernism is also a fantasy, but one whose nature is very distinct from that which Disney and Baudrillard disparage. For while the postmodern dissenters’ rant concerns the illusory quality of existence *because they have already experienced it* and found it wanting, the poor and oppressed have no opportunity to even enjoy such an illusion.

Finally, Disney’s poems also seem to promote a binaristic standpoint that pits the postmodern, simulacral cityscape against the pastoral countryside, with the implication that true reality can still be found in the latter. Compare, for instance, the linked poem “Smalltown etudes” and “Collins Street, 5 pm.”

While the first represents a series of picturesque vignettes composed using slow-paced rhythm (the predominance of plosives effectively slows down the tempo when the poem is read aloud) to suggest a bucolic world untainted by modernity, and thus preserving its old-time beauty and its connection with history, the latter is written in single lines or couplets that melt images into one another, blurring these images into chaos. This not only suggests the rapid pace of city life (or the simulacral space), but the erasure of distinctions to the point that everything and everyone has merged into a confused mass. For me, not only is such a neat division between modern/city/unreal and premodern/country/real uncritical, it actually goes against postmodernism's injunction to be suspicious of any systems of thought, especially those premised on a binary logic.

It is for the above reasons that my appraisal of Disney's collection is, at best, ambivalent. I am genuinely impressed by his ability to transpose his familiarity with postmodern ontology into poetry, and am constantly surprised by the risks he takes with some of his pieces (for example, using a different page layout for some of them) in order to prevent the reader from adopting complacency when reading his work. Nevertheless, I feel that Disney's poems are often insensitive to the everyday realities (of which the simulacra is only one proposed type) around him because, I suspect, of the privileges with which the poet has lived and of which he now has grown tired. Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that writers should not write what they want or feel, or that they should not espouse their personal views about humanity. But an espousal that fails to pay heed to the fact that what one sees as poison may be life-saving meat to millions of people smacks, at least in my view, of callousness.

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