

Geoffrey G. O'Brien

CYAN IDEAS

Now he has mastered two languages, question and answer
—Walter Benjamin

A poet of leave-taking has always to restart:

. . . . Monday and everything's beginning again

As one arrangement of the world ends, poet and reader return to the reviving possibilities of disorder:

. . . . Monday and everything's beginning again,
or closed. See how in the morning the city shakes

Nothing is decided. That arrangement of sound and sign which sometimes we call a poem is at once a dismantling of all other arrangements in the space of reading and an invitation to remember them, the satellites (cf. "*St. matthew and the angel*") of the experience—contiguous poems and lives, other cities and towns:

. . . . Monday and everything's beginning again,
or closed. See how in the morning the city shakes
out the suburbs and arranges them for a lap rug.

All we know is it's morning and the principality is stretching its petals into history's half-life austerity. The poem of leave-taking honors that passage over either the mooring or the starting out, a moment over the story. It shuttles forwards and back across ironies of lineation until even its shouts are aimless:

Madonna anno domini, Joshua Clover. Louisiana State Press, \$19.95, \$11.95 (paper)

. . . . Monday and everything's beginning again,
or closed. See how in the morning the city shakes
out the suburbs and arranges them for a lap rug.
See, see, beyond them where the fall fields begin
to fission: it is a chronicle of winter,
but it is not winter yet!

Part boredom, part *Bartleby's* preferring *not to*, the poem "watches" the why of history overtake and strangle its ideas of order. You can't tell, but they are turning blue:

. . . . Monday and everything's beginning again,
or closed. See how in the morning the city shakes
out the suburbs and arranges them for a lap rug.
See, see, beyond them where the fall fields begin
to fission: it is a chronicle of winter,
but it is not winter yet! Flowers everywhere though
not in the way we would have wanted it,

Saturated by velleities of the season, ready to resume beginning, no view is sufficiently intended or lasting (cf. "Map of the city"—"about the New World, they were saying,/ it became destroyed"). How is this different from any other poem? It's a question of tone, of final tone, of how the voice will spend its tonic capital:

. . . . Monday and everything's beginning again,
or closed. See how in the morning the city shakes
out the suburbs and arranges them for a lap rug.
See, see, beyond them where the fall fields begin
to fission: it is a chronicle of winter,
but it is not winter yet! Flowers everywhere though
not in the way we would have wanted it,
had we been there, nor have we since returned.

So goes the non-end of Joshua Clover's "Je m'appelle Felix et je suis joyeux . . ." wherever it is going, a decision which takes forever to make. To

what exactly has he said hello and to what is the poet saying goodbye? Thank you for asking. Another poem from *Madonna anno domini*, “Unset,” begins:

The day bloomed outward
from the bedclothes of the sun
like a detonation, like
the lifetime’s work of the eye

And in “Radiant city” L.A. riot fires become “1700 infrared/ poppies blooming in the over-/ head footage of south central.” This is “the poppy vision,” vision as flower and bomb, a point unloading its narcissistic centrality in order to absorb the spreading carnage of city-planning. Like the series of days and nights, vision must be unset, must be nothing and see everything (cf. Marx). Only to be reset next day, gone and parergon, inevitably useful. But how to keep the bloom on the rose when reporting sightings? The palindrome may be as close as language comes to flowering, short of going back to calligrammes. If we take the palindrome as a form of restarting *in medias res*, then departing in either direction along the horizon of reading—le différence vive-ing back and forth on the closed highway of a sentence—the book’s title (cf. *Madonna anno domini*) begins to buzz like a reasonable bee about its contents: what will Madonna and the Lord spell for each other across the year?

We asked this question most relevantly and intently around the time of Guercino (c. 1640s) and in the late 1980s, but it hasn’t really lost much force. Madonna and the Lord, like any two terms brought into contact, make consensual text. In other words, video did not quite kill the Song of Songs and history must be seen as neither a series of ends nor beginnings, but, from within the nonplussed and curiously affectless vantage of Clover’s painted Felix Pissarro, seen as at least a two-way passage, if not a whirlwind of entrances or a spinning bicycle wheel. “Either way,” as the poet writes in “A day in town,” “we have been set in motion.” A palindrome is delicious and deliciously tormenting because it ends less than a straightforward sentence does, and yet it ends twice as often.

Speaking of punctuation, for awhile it seems we will never have an end in a Clover piece, each reader forced to be or not to be the period to the poem. But fortunately, this poet isn’t loyal to fidelity of even the grammatical sort. Here’s a list, in order of appearance, of the punctuation or lack thereof with which each of the forty poems in the book has trouble having an end:

none, quotation marks, none, none, none, comma, none, none, quotation marks, period, ellipsis, none, exclamation mark, dash (of Dickinson), dash, none, none, none, none, question mark, dash, period, dash, question mark, none, none, none, none, dash, none, quotation marks, period, period, period, period, period, period, none, period, period.

The unendingness gradually acquires a semi-final punctuation, marks of stop-page becoming increasingly frequent—though the ordering poet has remembered his beginning style of “nones” throughout the book—until finally periods start appearing. They dominate *Madonna anno domini*’s closing poems incompletely. I find it remarkable how Clover, though he is a fan of repetition, eschews repeating a form. In terms of punctuation there is no consistent sense of pulling out the stops and no standard reliance on the will to linearity lurking in the period. The poet seems to be arguing with breath that you can only repeat the experience of Form by not repeating forms. Inspiration is the mother of Necessity. Consequently, very few of the poems resemble each other on the page—Clover’s use of Michael Palmer’s now classically calm one-line stanzas knocks up against erratically stitched or regular strategies of indentation; everybody’s block stanza makes the scene, competing with unlineated prose pieces; “Dead sea scroll” is unceremoniously dumped on its side; tercets and quatrains run elegantly on—formal fauna rioting in Clover’s flora. The poems’ punctuating maneuvers recompose their necessary dance of formal uneasiness, or of a poisonous yet healthy uncertainty. Thus is Pound’s chestnut roasted merrily over an open fear—make it newly old, I am nothing and must be everything, everything aging ripely into the blank.

To crack that nut a little further, it is safe to say that in *Madonna anno domini* usage determines the new. And unlike the emphatic variety Clover demands in his poems’ looks and their set of grammatical arrests, the poet is comfortable with re-being himself when it comes to a felicitous phrase or a felicitous phrase. The poems are salted with recurring terms; often the poet has placed such poems adjacently in order to recurse all the louder. “Helicopters busy not really looking” appears in “A portrait of the empire as a young boy” as well as in the next poem, “Radiant city”; “a house where all were good” is built in the end of “Remarks on the word *lucrative*” only to be recalled into the beginning of the next poem, “Zealous.” Farther afield, “Fear, comma,

The Great” struts the stage in “Bathtub panopticon” and then iterates as “Fear, the Great” later on in “Analysis of bathtub panopticon, or hybrids of indexes and cosmologies”—these two are, happily, perversely, not next to each other; “compressed meditation” blooms in “Royal” and in “*St. matthew and the angel*”; and so on. Even the name Felix, like happiness, is hard to hold onto; it passes from patronymic (Maria Felix) to Pissarro. Each new context makes a paraphrase of the last, the words literally coming alongside and then through their local history of citation, again and again. These are some specific refrains from *Madonna anno domini*’s general song. As the poet puts it himself at the end of “The map room,” “these are my greatest hits” (cf. everyone, even the Sex Pistols).

This practice of auto-plagiarism? breathing? reflection? not only transpires the book (cf. the word “blue,” appearing 58 times, not counting its colorful synonyms), but is the merciless engine of perhaps the best poem ever written about a box of chocolate—“Ibarra.” Here the recurrence of one word drives the poem onward and, what else would it be?, the word is “exhaustion.” An excerpt from the anaphoric labyrinth:

A red-&-sulfur box stacked & sent forth by the packers-of-crates in Jalisco, near the coast one country to the south, half-watched children dusted with dirt & vacant excellence between the warehouses, chalked-on graffiti, exhaustion. At evening, carmine slash over the water, smell of corn flour & lime, exhaustion. An eight-sided box, one side facing the accidental cobalt of the Pacific, opposite face to the range where the country behind us recedes toward beginning, another side facing you reading with your back to the box, plane & suture of skin across the spine, spline-curve of shoulderblade, too tired to move much—: such is repetition among the unsaved, exhaustion. . . .

In a poem about an eight-sided box the same word for fatigue deploys untiringly seven times. Seven exhaustions, seven sides of a box of which the eighth side is the reader’s gathering of those verbal occasions into “Ibarra”’s final, exhausted persistence of nothing:

. . . . These then are
the answers of travel: when we got to the West we were no longer
interested in the voyage West—

The eighth side of exhaustion is that powerful boredom of the consumer. The box of thinking must reproduce its openness. From that tired coastal position, the poet's sensibility grows sick of reading westerly and reviews direction. In California Clover sees an America "where/ the country behind us recedes toward beginning"—the nation-state as palindrome, read East against the historical motion of empire. It's a politically decent desire, to throw manifest destiny back on itself, but the finest politics here is Clover's ethics of looking. America's two coasts as two beginnings moving toward each other—that's real, physically correlated, humility—the end of this poem demonstrates within one compelling point of view the inevitability of other vantages. It's a humility that dwells deep in Clover's persistent vision, as his point of view *on* vision. It must be unset. Is it any surprise then that the next poem is called "A portrait of the empire as a young boy," or that the title is also the opening line of the poem, or that the poem ends with the suspicion that resurrection is a daily occurrence, a recurrence of day? Arbitrary center of an infinitely extensive palindrome, the day does go to bed in the West when its work is done, but its work is never done, it always wakes to answer more travel (cf. Bishop's "Questions of Travel").

Speaking of exhaustion, look at the end of the book (you should already have it in your hands, if not, stop "here"—go get it, then come back). Perhaps Clover's best and most ambitious, certainly longest and most deferring, poem, "Je m'appelle Felix et je suis joyeux . . ." was never published in a magazine. Unlike the other journaled poems in this collection, "Felix" had an unspotted conception. I guess it made editors cranky. It enters this book freshly at its end, ready to have an open history of purchase and re-reading. So of course Clover can't end there, can't culminate his utterance quite yet—it's the penultimate poem. There is a last *almost* after this long one, the pseudo-pantoum "Jack's boat."

I say "pseudo" because the poem's resemblance to that form is both undeniable and deceptive. We think of the pantoum, shrouded in a musical history of French mumbling (by way of Malay), as a mnemonic song, in which the mind moves back as it proceeds through the poem's thinking. The thrillingly inhuman (cf. human) requirements of the form tend to privilege rhythms of repetition over and against the trumped-up category we call sense. It's a form concerned to remind us, loudly, often, of its form—that's the content. Clover rearranges this classic imbrication in which a line refrains from disappearing across quatrains. Instead

JACK'S BOAT

April is the seduction of the world, and yet
Language is the whirlpool. Which tears up the tree and throws it
Aside? The king's daughter now
Plays, but seriousness. . . . In the occupation of the imagination
The lachrymose sky gushed indirectly no more:
The Thief of Sighs had been there!
The tree consumes the same place as the imagination
But is not, burning in itself and green, that thing.
But is not, burning in itself and green, that *thing*
The tree consumes the same place as the imagination
The Thief of Sighs had been? There
The lachrymose sky gushed indirectly. "No more
Play but seriousness in the occupation of the imagination"
Sighed the king's daughter. Now,
Languisher, the whirlpool which tears up the tree and throws it.
April is the seduction of the world. And yet.

—the poem proceeds to its middle and then begins that middle again, progressing downward on extending lines into its origin, a last poem dramatizing the *alpha* and . . . the *alpha*, no *omega* in sight. Every line's end rhymes with its future self. The whole line rhymes faithfully with itself and each time its rhythm is fatefully exacted. The scheme is everywhere. Each line appears twice in the pantoumic democracy, but an unbroken block has replaced the sinuous quatrains we would expect, wovenness has become symmetry. The distance between an utterance and its second self, an implied center of expectation, is what shifts down the page here, rather than the unsettling recontextualizations of line we expect from pantoum structure. The book's formal variety ends squarely within the eccentric, consumptive tradition of novelty. While Clover has retained a traditional pantoum's musical fight against disappearance, a battle humming hottestly here at the doubled center, he has exchanged music's math for math's measure, making distance sound. Earlier in *Madonna anno domini*, in the aforementioned poem about the L.A. riots called "Radiant city," the poet has described flowers, and the city for which

they stand, as “igniting outward from a/ central *place*.” There, as now in “Jack’s boat,” the pressure is back on the sepal of *place* and the palindrome blooms outward from somewhere to mind, or the poem asks for new terms: *palinoux*, or *pantadrome*. Or is it a villanelle you’re thinking of. . . .

“Jack’s boat” stands, among other things, as a final formal take on the book’s title, on the introduction of the new—Madonna Ciccone inside the Virgin Mary—the new which turns up again later as already old, which looks ahead and back at itself, looking for what was, where it used to be, where it will be. Between the first poem’s big bang of inception—Kaboom!—and the last poem’s bang of faintness lies choice after fitful choice, reorientation and reoccidantation, and still it is not a full enough between, the mind is never satisfied, never, still the poet wants to “See, see” beyond any static instance of vision. Yes, no poem in this book detains an answer. “Ibarra” is one of only two poems in the collection in which a form of the word “answer” appears—there, where it is exhausted (the other instance occurs in “Felix,” where there’s a question that “doesn’t get answered”). “Jack’s boat” (cf. Jacques’ Derrida, burning ships) is the last poem and yet it ends “And yet.” Such is this poet’s unsatisfied love affair with the limit. After the final yes a yet. Should every poem end with these words? Don’t answer.

I hope that eventually we have a rich coursing of books from this poet, so that a reader may enter anywhere, read in any direction, and continue to be stunned by the persistence of nothing (cf. “. . . where the fall fields begin/ to fission”) only the perfect goods of an honest poem and an honest book provide. Walter Benjamin would respond to this architecture. He has already passed through it. I loved the book and look forward to reading it. But, as “Felix” begins, “What is it? And where has one put it?” A reader of a poet of leave-taking has always to restart