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Transitional states: blurring/collision and realisation

Unarmoured Excursions by RICHARD THERRIEN.

Gaspereau Press, 2018 \$24.95

Reviewed by **gillian harding-russell**

In *Unarmoured Excursions*, Richard Therrien offers the reader “essays” in the manner of Montaigne’s *Essaies* that depart from the conventional form in their style and purpose as they seek to intrigue and involve the reader through stream-of-consciousness thoughts and narration between more reasoned argument. Whereas traditional essays follow a logical and usually linear line of reasoning that aims to persuade the reader, testing a central argument against possible counter arguments, Therrien’s writings function more as personal, and often digressive, explorations of daily thoughts that deeply engage the writer. Therrien, who wrote *Sleeping in Tall Grass*, proves himself a poet of some sophistication in his handling of structure and motif, and here in *Unarmoured Excursions* he employs a method not unlike that in his poetry whereby tableaux collide to spark realisation and a network of interrelated images connect across themes and anecdotal discussion in the various pieces.

With the writer’s preoccupation with in-between states—symbolically rendered by a dusk and dawn motif—juxtaposition comes into frequent play as best portraying these transitional states with their particular turns of philosophical inquiry. And it is this representational facet to Therrien’s hybrid form of poetic essay that makes his writing so fascinating and distinguishes it from the purely discursive essay. Rather like a work of art such as a painting or film, *Unarmoured Excursions* is structured with collage that jostles seemingly unrelated subject matter at suggestive proximity. Typically fragments from the speaker’s day are interspersed with excerpts from his reading (often erudite, drawing from Kafka, Borges, etc.) and his thinking about events around him and on the news that are subtly arranged as these private thoughts and inquiries might appear in a particularly polished private journal.

In “Collapsing Time,” the writer happens to be reading, “The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Chinese Brush Painting” in which he learns how a type of pollen from the hai t’eng may be used to produce a “snake-venom yellow,” and is curious to discover how the dangerous colour “adds a touch of freshness” to paintings even though, “if it touches the teeth, they will drop out” or “if one licks it, the tongue will become numb” (92). In the next fragment, we read about a volunteer hospital worker’s experience taking care of a baby that had been slapped on the head, and brain damaged:

And though I am frightened of saying so I know the hand that struck the child, I know it intimately, I see its every detail, I see its slow inexorable fall through space as it’s about to strike the infant’s soft temple, and though I have never battered a child I sit here at my kitchen table, sobbing with the woman in the parking lot, begging forgiveness. (93)

The writer, in identification with the person who committed the crime, brings home to the reader its heinous nature by recounting the cruel incident in identification with the one who commits the crime, going so far as to picture the soft hollow of the baby's fontanelle being struck, and so elicits a sense of our shared human culpability for all such human cruelty. Accordingly, by verbally re-enacting the crime, the "venom" of the writer's words elicits compassion for the child and justified rage against the man who committed the crime in a manner not dissimilar to the role that the poisonous ingredient in the yellow paint freshens the artwork and works to draw a more visceral empathy.

As well as using juxtaposition as a way to trigger recognition and to enter into less familiar mental territory, the writer takes immense care with transitions between pieces of writing, often echoing images from the previous piece as a way to unify the collected writings in an artistic whole. And it is this imagistic repetition and harmony that brings the reader to a state of recurring déjà vu and understanding. For example, the bird image in "Birds of Flight," with the "swift" that never lands during its lifetime in parallel with the legless woman in the wheelchair becomes a flock of birds of indeterminate number in "Yellow." In the latter piece, the narrator overhears the student, Adam, talking about a university lecture to his girlfriend, Angela, about something Jorge Luis Borges had observed:

But he didn't, he couldn't, *count* the birds. So somehow it's about God because only God would know that, how many birds, *exactly*. (39)

Most delightfully, Angela who was previously more worried about her yellow sweater ("yellow," reminding us of the "snake-venom paint," becoming another such recurring motif) that a friend had borrowed to go on a skiing trip for her father's birthday comes to the point of Adam's words, almost in a state of shock, towards the end of the piece, "Like about birds you were saying and everything, who is remembering, the actual number of birds, that part?" did her friend mean "*God god?*" (44). The symbolism marked and almost iconographic, Adam "wipes the palm of his left hand on his jeans" and raises the cup to his lips "though he knows it's empty" (44).

Quite playfully, Therrien in the proceeding piece, "The Avenue" continues with this theme linking absence with a deity as the pedestrian narrator finds himself smiling at words Simone Weil has written when a bystander mistakes the smile as directed at herself:

I'd been smiling more at the seductive purity of Weil's thought than at the old lady who happened to catch my look of bemusement as I chewed over the idea that the divine can only be present in the form of absence. (45)

As well as recurrent images that button down the flaps between pieces, the thematic seams in this way are drawn into an artistic whole.

Most skillfully, thematic overlap and continuity between pieces is apparent in "Walking Upstream" which, in the closing lines, suggests a semi-mystical moment before death ("*birds*

that cry like babies all night long, animals walking backwards . . .) (54) and the title piece, “Unarmoured Excursions” that at one point focuses on a theme of coming back to life. One of the most enigmatic and unforgettable tableaux is that of the narrator’s mother who, drugged and suffering on the verge of death, draws her son’s finger into her mouth, and says “*here, feel*” (57), as if wanting to draw his empathetic involvement or, as it is later observed, to eat as an act of life at the moment of passing. The narrator stands “a boy of fifty standing next to his mother’s bed, not sure what he should say, or do” (57-8).

What makes the essays so readable and full of charm is the narrator who does not fail to show himself with human failings. In the next excerpt, he frivolously takes personally a squirrel’s “manic tail-spasms” as it “eyeball[s]” him, and we come to laugh at the childlike narrator even as we recognize something of his failings in ourselves (58). *Unarmoured Excursions* is a brave ‘excursion,’ not only into a hybrid genre (skirting prose and poetry) but also into psychic territory where the speaker lays bare his humanity in the face of our shared responsibility.

gillian harding-russell is a Regina poet, editor, and book reviewer. In 2016 her poem sequence “Making Sense” placed first in *Exile’s* Gwendolyn MacEwen chapbook competition, and was featured in *Exile ELQ* 42, 1. Her fourth collection of poems, *In Another Air*, released by Radiant Press (2018), was shortlisted for a City of Regina Saskatchewan Book Award. Poems are forthcoming in the anthologies *Sweet Water: Poems for the Watershed*, ed. Yvonne Blomer (Caitlin Press, 2020) and *Resistance*, ed. Sue Goyette (Coteau Books, 2020).