

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Dan Disney, *either, Orpheus* (UWA Publishing, 2016)

Dan Disney's *either, Orpheus* pays homage to the villanelle with a loose consideration of the form. Similarly, it considers the 'spirit of source texts' ('coda'), as opposed to responding in like to any poet's, philosopher's, or so-called poet-mystic's rigorously articulated philosophies or forms. What Disney attempts instead of such rigor, in form or philosophy, is to 'mobilise those anxieties which dogma would either shackle or conceal' through 'probings' that the poet describes as 'elegiac anthroposcenes' ('coda'). If this description sounds densely philosophical, that is because Disney deals in abstractions, favouring the grandiose, universal, and essential to the quotidian he condemns, the specificity he elides, and the contingencies he abandons in favour of ideals.

Without Disney's explicatory 'coda (in eleven parts)', the reader may struggle to find this dense philosophy in the poems themselves. That is not to say, however, that the poems fall short of their intended purpose. The villanelle functions ideally towards the collection's condemnation of the perfunctory: not only does each poem repeatedly draw the reader's attention to this opprobrium, but the entire collection operates as a single villanelle, with each of its constituent parts painting cubistic planes of the comprehensive image – which perhaps explains Disney's decision not to number the pages or title the poems.

The broader image, or theme, is comprised of the narrator, setting, and philosophy. The first poem draws attention to wilderness, tradition, machinations, and the question of the relationship between the name(s) listed on the bottom of each page and the poem preceding. Here Disney introduces us to the narrator, who 'spent the first years of [his] life in a valley / sitting in wood muttering the occult business of little folktales', immediately aligning himself with Rilke, to whom *either, Orpheus* responds. The narrator's identity – and, in fact, his interpretation of Rilke – is constructed out of otherness: he is *not* what he critiques, and seldom *is* without a contrasting concept or figure by which to construct himself.

The reader's experience will largely depend on the figure(s) with which she identifies. Either she considers herself complicit in Disney's call to 'brighten / the spark of your courage', or she relates to the 'neat little red brick town', or to being 'initiated into the code', which is to say she accepts extant social structures. Heaven forefend the reader attempt to read the collection in its entirety if she would identify with the latter category: those who do not operate with the imperative of challenging the status quo. If she does, what might otherwise be read as an existential yowl into the abyss – or, as Disney describes the text, a 'Eurydicean cry' – could easily be read as a diatribe against the reader. Take the following excerpt:

semi-dressed in sincerity, vulgar biotypes of maverick  
 slaves to visible resemblance, we're a great literature of marvellous  
 copies listening in dull

gravity to the operations of justice  
 dancing amid stockings, a catalogue of diagnoses blundering carbon  
 at non-residents, jerking attentive

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The common (wo)man is a ‘vulgar’ biotype, not so much a person as a poor copy of what would constitute a worthwhile individual. Furthermore, the narrator mocks not only people but the very physical laws that govern their existence: gravity is ‘dull’, uninspired, pococurante; the body’s composition itself blunders, making it a non-resident of the celestial planes to which the narrator appeals.

If the reader is not distracted by indictments of the common person (‘it’s like “hey have a programmatic soul”’), she will be better situated to appreciate that Disney successfully effects in the reader the same affective frustration the narrator expresses. Disney accomplishes this, in part, through his employment of the villanelle – a form that lends its content to a sort of schizophrenic obsession, from a self-ordained outsider’s perspective, with its central theme. Given that this one theme reaches across the entire collection, this effect is made enormous.

While these poems respond to their influencing texts, they also manage to achieve continuity in philosophy that persists despite those texts’ variety. Perhaps one of the best connections between a poem and its cited influence is the fourth in the collection, inspired by John Ashbery:

...you can sample people, look at the nice wine, I have  
many arguments with my analyst but on the whole it’s chatty  
and at the end we say ‘you’re happy?’ then we say  
‘The End’, and sometimes the afternoons go past, resolved

As Ashbery, Disney uses enjambment for the sake of humour, invoking multiple meanings within and between lines. Repetition and conversational diction serve both to emphasize the theme of commonality and to also imbue the poem with a sense of the absurd that brings to mind Ashbery’s spirit, if not his specific employment of distinctive imagery to convey larger concepts.

Disney’s philosophy, the theme of *either, Orpheus*, is condensed into a single stanza in the last poem of ‘hive notes (an interlude)’:

in one-chance city, evenings  
    bounce (then shred), we pop our pills and float collectively  
sane, commuters in line to be  
    fed to openmouthed machines, a lightly-dusted breeze

The philosophy is outrage at acedia – the spiritual listlessness that defines everyone and everything the narrator presumes himself not to be; the setting is an Orwellian dystopia, in the current day, in which the narrator contemplates nothing but misfortune, all-powerful government and structure (‘who knew who’d next be tapped, caused to disappear’); and the narrator himself is the breath between meditations that finds no concrete solution, but instead mourns the Anthropocene.

*either, Orpheus* is organised into prelude, part one, interlude, part two, and coda. The prelude draws attention to society’s forgetfulness – of what, we find out only late in part two. It concludes ‘that nothing at all had changed’, presumably from the dawn of humankind through the Anthropocene. Parts one and two function identically: each presents musings and meditations on the common person’s listlessness and lack of courage; his/her inability to recall the power of love with sufficient force (‘we decided that, after all, agapē wasn’t possible’); and the narrator and his philosophers’ exceptionalism. The poems respond ‘in spirit’ to the poets and philosophers parenthetically affixed to the bottom of each, which is to say the reader is asked to accept that they respond to these writers and their texts – whether or not they do, to what extent,

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and how effectively is ultimately the reader's conclusion to reach. The interlude abandons crediting influencing texts and drives home the notion of groupthink with the symbolic inclusion of bumblebees that subdivide the section's villanelles. Finally, the coda provides the reader with a poetic-prosaic exposition on theme, philosophy, and intent.

The poems' forms reflect the call to courage by flouting tradition: here a poem is left-aligned, here one is constructed as a circuit board. The forms, their content, and the interpretations of source texts emphasize a condemnation of 'habitat and ritual', of 'old aristocracies of thought'. The collection as a whole accomplishes this by, as the individual villanelle, returning time and again to its singular obsession: the spiritual void of any machinery and the role of the 'poet-mystic' in drawing substance out of nothing.

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