

Unwanted Thoroughness

The Problem of the Many, Timothy Donnelly (198pp, £10.99, Picador)

There is some sort of correlation, it seems to me, between UK mainstream poetry and its presentation of longwinded narratives with an epiphanic ending, what I have previously classed as 'smartarse' poetry in the UK (in a KFS anthology of the same title which I edited), and the US hybrid of narrative and experimental poetry evidenced at its best by the poems of Dean Young and Josh Bell.

Whilst the first of these relies on a reader's emotional empathy, ego and experiences of a similar nature, the other two are more interested in the possibilities of language and storytelling. Dean Young's poems take a walk down the page, moving from topic to topic, image to image, idea to idea, a refreshing surrealism which opens up possibilities of wonder and experience rather than defining and controlling any narrative. In the UK Martin Stannard adopts a similar yet very British approach, filtered through his reading of Ashbery & Koch, with even more bizarre images and cynical humour in the mix, whilst Paul Sutton brings a rare conservative wit to his angry and funny work which often rails at the vague and confused well-meaning liberalism of contemporary poetry.

I guess one of the things which drives much of this poetry is voice. The narrator's voice in these poems (and let's not make the basic mistake of confusing narrator and author of a poem) is a big part of what makes these poems interesting, and that voice is often produced by using collage, quotation, syntactical disruption, surrealism and a subversive imagism. I might refer you to the (not totally successful but nevertheless interesting and worthwhile) *American Hybrid* anthology published by Norton in 2009, where co-editor Cole Swensen argues in her introduction that 'the long-acknowledged "fundamental division" between experimental and traditional is disappearing in American poetry in favour of hybrid approaches that blend trends from accessible lyricism to linguistic exploration.' Hooray!

Voice tends to get tangled up with author, doesn't it? Student writers are often keen to find their own voice rather than realise their voice will be in the mix of whatever they write, that a *narrative* voice will emerge as they learn to write; and that a narrative voice is more important than an authorial one.

Voice is, however, sometimes hard for a reader to adjust to or find. My friend Andy Brown used to sometimes say he could not find any music in my poetry when we workshoped draft poems. I think he meant he couldn't hear the voice I could, even in appropriated theological or scientific phrases. And in a similar way I have struggled to find a music in Timothy Donnelly's new book of poems, *The Problem of the Many*. Published back in September it's been kicking around the house, something I have picked up every few days to try and engage with, failing until recently.

Much of the work feels too long-lined and prosaic, I don't have the breath or pace to read these long lines, and often don't understand what the line breaks are doing. Why, for instance, does the second line break here, in 'Gifted'?:

My breath sounds more like a recording of a breath
than actual breathing, and not a high quality

studio recording

(This isn't by the way a long-lined poem, nor a long poem – of which there are many in this volume.)

So I ended up dipping into not only the book but the poems themselves, gathering images that made me laugh, such as this, the beginning of 'All the Shrimp I Can Eat':

They are swimming away from me at the speed of light
They are telling me this is their preferred way to die

or sections of poems, before they started going on. For instance, I think 'Diet Mountain Dew' has a beautiful first verse that could work as a complete poem, so for a while I treated it as such:

I have built my ship of death
and when a wind kicks up
I'll cut it loose to do its thing
across an unnamed lake of you,
a firefly sent pulsing through
the nonstop estivation of
the verses of our South, who in
its larval phase would feast
on bitter worms and snails, who
emerges from its mud chamber
our planet's most efficient
luminescence, who turns
chemical energy into radian
energy shedding very little heat,
so I will sail the compass of
you pleased with my cold light.

There are another six verses, and the initial delight and simplicity of this love poem or declaration of human life gives way to a history of Mountain Dew, names and dates included, which actually undermines the strangeness and makes the poem *literal* rather than metaphorical or surprising. The poem neuters itself by this thoroughness and historical exploration.

Eventually, of course, one gets used to new voices, and this is indeed what has happened to me. I'm now able to cope with the overlong lines and the expansive storytelling going on here, though all too often I want the narrator to stop talking, or at least take a Dean Youngian digression rather than keep mulling over the same ideas. Maybe I'm just too keen to be entertained and amused, maybe lockdown has reduced my critical capacities? I *so* wanted to

like Donnelly's new book, so much so that I have stuck with it this long, have taken his *The Cloud Corporation* off the shelf to re-read and been worrying about why I don't enjoy this book as much as I thought I would.

The answer is perhaps, staring me in the face, on the back cover, where the blurb claims that 'these richly textured and intellectually capacious poems often seem to attempt nothing less than a circumscription of the totality of human experience.' Phew! No wonder these poems sometimes fail, maybe Donnelly is simply trying too hard? He's certainly situated his work within a literary and social discourse that uses reference points I don't share: sometimes American products and services unknown to me, at others the likes of Nietzsche or Alexander the Great, who I am not familiar with in any depth.

I will continue to keep an eye out for Donnelly's poetry, but for me it is the simpler ideas and poems which resonate the most in this collection. Here is the beginning and end of 'Lapis Lazuli', a stand-out poem:

A finger of light
shed from the North Star
tapped my forehead
as I slept

[...]

It meant one thing
at the time, but
now it means another.

This slippage of meaning is of course how poetry works. There is no reason why poetry should be accessible or simple, and Donnelly's new work is not. For me however, it would benefit from some distillation and refinement of ideas and image, a clarification and focus.

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