

GIDEONS WAKE

The Suburban Ecstasies. Seth Abramson. Denver: Ghost Road Press. 2009.

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By his own account, Seth Abramson's first volume of poetry was designed as a monomyth, the term lifted by Joseph Campbell from *Finnegans Wake* to describe a pattern that emerges from the secular, eclectic study of primal narratives. The pattern, of course, is heroic, founded upon a sequence of exile and return, separation and reunion, death and resurrection. The comparative approach places its practitioner on the margins of belief, analytical, deconstructive, perhaps nostalgic, accepting (after Yeats in a different connection) its greatness with its violence. Abramson names his *anti*-hero Gideon after one of Israel's deliverers and introduces him with the credentials of another, Moses in the bulrushes. As a youth Gideon sprouts the horns, not of the iconic Moses but of a stag-god, the Celtic (or wiccan) Cernunnos, and "not/ demonic" or the product of some supernatural agency but only "the *residue* of enchantment"—a phrase that might serve as Abramson's name for poetry.

In *The Satanic Verses* Salman Rushdie pronounced on the equivocal, or essentially poetic, character of myth: "Once upon a time—it *was and was not so*—as the old stories used to say, *it happened and it never did.*" The claim seems contradicted by Abramson's strange assertion: "Once—say not, *upon a time, say it was so.*" The difference can be resolved by an observation on the constitutive power of *saying*, which makes a thing *so*, as at the beginning of Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*—"So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by..."—which, quoth Heaney, "obliterates all previous discourse and narrative" and calls "immediate attention" to the story as thing-in-itself. Abramson's disjunct narrative, in turn, is counterpointed with reflections on its real existence as writing. The poem's first "epic" descent takes Gideon to the depths of a city awash in darkness—"inked with a quill." What follows, briefly, is Abramson's Nighttown, the drug of choice not alcohol but angel dust. The perception of a pattern in Gideon's "quest" leads to an illusory "glimpse of hells." Other harrowers of hell, heroic or divine, with whose fortunes Gideon is mock-epically identified, include the Sumerian Enki, Orpheus, and Jesus Christ, in which connection he figures as a "brilliant counterfeit." His death as Orpheus is "somehow.../ less than literal": "it never happened."

"GIDEON AT SCHOOL" opens with the line "*Suddenly the words*

were everywhere.” The education seems to begin in a primordial state, where “opposites are” before “words are.” Words then appear in the form of a seeming prophecy written in cursive on a wing behind a glittering shop window that makes the vision “momentarily celestial.” But “It wasn’t a transcendent moment,” and the prophecy says “nothing anyone could tell.” Yet “Still the words were everywhere,” and this phase of Gideon’s development ends with a suggestion of apocalypse deferred. For the “spiritual” phase a manual is provided for the construction of a kind of *trompe l’œil* universe or cosmic magic lantern show: “Place schematic at rear of opulent/ translucent/ screen” so that it cannot “be seen to have been working.” Its authority must be perceived as “*a priori*,” yet flawed, for “Provision of mystery favors/ occasional malfunction.” Optical illusion here stands in for language.

Gideon’s mentor Aarif (Knowledgeable) “loves the pretty eternity of a metaphor” and responds, like the poem itself, “more to myths/ than bankers,/ more to Greeks and East Indians/ than Americans.” Under cover as an “Art Fair,” the poem reserves its “best parts” for those with red hands and a better principle/ than charity.” Abramson’s Fair, like Bunyan’s and Thackeray’s, serves as a type of civilization and a reflection of its designer, “who stumbles from the dust of morning/ to the wild work of night,/ who is merely the rubble of the earth/ and the darkened stage other men stand upon/ while, with all the grace of an acting troupe,/ they proceed to their point of origin/ or forget their lines altogether.”

In this “HISTORY OF THE FAIRGROUNDS” Abramson pauses like Prufrock over streets that follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent and, like *The Waste Land*, over low-class conversations in “the same waterfront bars/ the same jackknifing alleyways/ the same sort of men have always frequented,/ talking revolution or counter-revolution/ over thinning beer;...// scattering their own wishes beneath a vainglory/ of dragonflies.” The image of ephemeral insect-life carries over into the poem’s attack on “goods-merchants” who “give off always an *apparent* course,/ never a *true* one—” and “thrill merchants, also, in gilded carriages,/ accompanied by charming grotesqueries, / who have that same love of self/ as mites in a boneyard.”

The underworlds to which Abramson’s poem descends, like those of Dryden and Pope, Balzac and Dickens, Pound and Joyce, all the way to (say) Rushdie and DeLillo, exist in time and space. His earthbound, infernal history touches on wars and bloodbaths ancient, modern, and contemporary, at least by place-name, from the Tenochtitlan massacre (Mexico, 1520) to the Patanni insurrection (Thailand, current).

For a devil to preside over the killing field Abramson borrows again

from *The Satanic Verses*, omitting to mention that Neechayvala, Rushdie's "Guy from Underneath," is the other half of Ooparvala, the "Fellow Upstairs," a duality that identifies the creator as source of good and evil, fullness and emptiness. A reader might complete the picture by recalling the poem's early reference to primal, nameless "opposites."

The pull of a vacuum against a distinctly terrestrial "higher" power figures largely in Abramson's record of a struggle with language. Though we hear Gideon's voice in scarcely half the poems, the sage Aarif addresses him the end as surrogate for the author, mimicking the "fits and jump-starts/ of emergency language" to which Gideon himself has drawn attention:

your words would have to be designed—
 importuned—
 to *fit*. They are not
 so inclined, and knock about, instead,
 in misdirection and misuse, dog-eared
 by a comma or dashed
 to incoherence—

Aarif then turns from Gideon to the reading audience to issue a strange disclaimer: "the language you find here is not/ *after my friend Gideon!* he is *not* the rule that alights to this letter,/ he exerts none of his laws upon it, is owed nothing/ by me." A reference in this segment to Gideon's "boxed effects" suggests that the obfuscation of authorship has occurred after his death and final waking. In conclusion, Aarif (or the Masked Poet?) declares that the "crippl[ing]" language criticized here has robbed Gideon of everything except his (somehow) "noblest self."

If there is a veiled external reference in all this it might pertain to the fact that several of the poems in *The Suburban Ecstasies* appeared elsewhere and were retro-fitted (or not) to suit Gideon's case. The authentically personal, even confessional voice that comes through in many of them emerges undisguised in "A PUBLIC DEFENDER'S NOTEBOOK" where a parenthesized refrain, "(which is a crime)," attaches itself to the charges against the speaker's clients and to his own disconnection from them. Here the Gidonesque blanks and stammers contribute to one of the most affecting passages in the book:

You think your ears might bleed
 from out their drums—
 you think it possible to have heard
 at thirty-one
enough

and be done with that sense at least—
 your tongue, too,
 for saying we *can only do so much*,

this many times,
 this many times, this many times—
 and your nose, because sweat has a smell
 and dirt has a smell and of course booze
 has a smell like desperation
 and a '91 Caprice behind a black tree line
 beside the road,
 in which a man repeats the words
 I should be dead I should be dead
 (which is— which is—)

In a merger of apparent fact with fiction Abramson's lawyer defends Gideon, charged with an unexplained theft, who has heard a cellmate's confession of murder, prompting an expression of the poet's abiding sense of the limitations of poetry: "A dead boy is too much cargo/ for a single page to bear." Even the ghostly victim resists the conventions of funeral verse, providing a key (one of many) to an approach to genre that leaves, as reported earlier, a *residue* of enchantment. The romance, for example, of Gideon and Aviva (Spring) undergoes repeated separations and only a transient "RE-UNION," descending to the *surreal* and the *raw* real. Their sexual relations are "not fantastic" but "OK" because "he's fucking/ in *love*. He loves her." It's not their union but the distance between them that inspires the broken narrative's only lyric flight (sharply elided here to sidestep its side trips):

 whatever it is you know,
 tell me.
 Of all the spaces a crow cannot occupy
 when it is out being a crow
 for a universe needing crows—
 whatever you think,
 if they are sad or silent or diminished
 spaces,
 explain it....
 Of the way you warm my arms
 when they scour and pale
 In the wet of April,
 when we join the crows in dispelling
 the mystery of winter, if that touch is
 compassion and the place it is found
 love,

.....
 sing it please sing it and wherever I am
 I will hear it.

As for the “higher” forms, Abramson announces, half way through his book, the death of Emerson’s ideal poet, the “*eternal man*” or “storyteller as communal cathexis,” and near the end describes the metamorphoses of his own elusive allegory into an “anecdote” or “joke”: “*A man walks into a bar...*” By a further transformation the bar turns into Hell, the barman into Hades, the “man” into Orpheus or Jesus, who finds at the end of his descent “that there is not just nothing for him to find/ here, but *really* nothing, as in nothing coming,/ nothing going,/ nothing even that kills itself to root deeply/ and later grow as, again, nothing.”

This final descent hints at the book’s connection to the subgenre of poetry named in its title (*unhelpfully* taken from the title of Abramson’s blog). Several examples of “ecstatic” verse by the Sufi poets Rumi (1207-1273) and Hafiz or Hafez (1315-1390) present versions of “a man walks into a bar” in which drunkenness means spiritual fullness and the barkeep (in Hafiz) figures as a Zoroastrian teacher warning his customer against the narrowness of orthodoxy. The transformation of Gideon’s bar follows a recent account of Rumi’s tavern: “a kind of glorious hell that human beings enjoy and suffer and then push off from in their search for truth.” The withering, in turn, of Gideon’s history into “nothing,” seems to echo a modern translation of Rumi: “My story/ gets told in various ways: a romance,/ a dirty joke, a war, a vacancy” (trans. Coleman Barks).

The titles of thirteen poems in Abramson’s collection begin with “Ecstasy.” The subtitles include Instruction (an empty prophet’s), Salvation, Pain, War, Violence, Heaven, Labor, Commerce, Chaos, Devil, Religion, Freedom, Suicide. The naming of the volume’s last poem repeats the title of the whole: “THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GIDEON (THE SUBURBAN ECSTASIES).” “Suburban” should refer us to the modifications of ecstasy performed by a poet of our time and place who has confessed in an interview to a “middle-class yearning for a sense of well-being”—the residue, once again, of enchantment.

The audience will wonder at the claim that Gideon “writes like a dervish.” The aim of Sufi ecstasy is to affirm the unity of Being. Walt Whitman, enrolled in a recently expanded class of ecstasies, claims no more than the unity of the species, thoroughly naturalizing the mystical doctrine in a passage cited in *The Suburban Ecstasies*: “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (“Song of Myself”). Abramson, for his part, finds World and Self in pieces. Heroic themes are rerouted: Separation from the

beloved ends in the lover's "REPLACEMENT," father-atonement in "EULOGY" for the victim of a jailhouse riot. War and violence issue in a vast, apocalyptic choir, *not* singing:

the same music
that made the world made its wars, its worship,
and that moment
 when all its couplings were climbing
and the clavichord of all their lungs
broke, and broke
 to the music of a billion voices, sighing.

One might hear in this passage a secular revision of Dryden's apocalypse:

*As from the power of sacred lays
The spheres began to move,
.....
So, when the last and dreadful hour
This crumbling pageant shall devour,
The trumpet shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die,
And music shall untune the sky.* ("A Song for Saint Cecilia's Day")

Shards of intertext (real or imagined) are consistent with the design of a shattered monomyth. Abramson repeats the first and last lines of the "ecstatic" George Herbert's "Sin's Round" ("sorry I am"); Eliot's "lidless eyes" (*The Waste Land*); "empty air (twice), which resounds from *Aeneid* XII, through Pound's "Mauberly" and *The Satanic Verses*, to a heavy metal band called Flotsam and Jetsam. A passage on war adopts the meter—and erases the content—of the Victorian music-hall fight song that served as source of the term "jingoism." These fragments he has shored against the ruins of—"now allegories, now ecstasies, now epics."

In the last of *The Suburban Ecstasies* Gideon, dead and awakened, invokes the *Bhagavad Purana*, in which Krishna, dancing, vanishes before the girl who thinks he dances with her alone. The episode acts as prologue to his declaration of faith, or hope, in a "pedestrian god" who wills the living "to move as he wills them/ to love, who would rather they be together/ than in pieces."

The task for the reviewer of this ambitious and demanding work has consisted in assembling the parts most accessible (to him) into a simulacrum or shadow of the whole. It remains for future commentators to provide a more detailed account of its way of challenging the limits of genre or

mode—epic, allegorical, even “ecstatic”—and to fill the gaps that Abramson intended to be filled. His achievement deserves such attention.