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A Rumba for Rothko and Other Poems

by

Dennis O'Connell

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A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts

in

Department of English

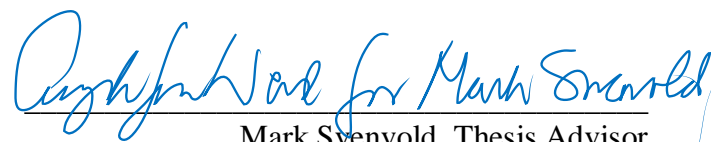
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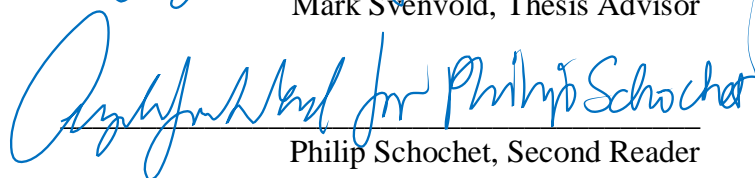
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Approved by:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Corylund Nord for Mark Svenvold".

Mark Svenvold, Thesis Advisor

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Corylund Nord for Philip Schochet".

Philip Schochet, Second Reader

Introduction

Throughout the last few years, I have been examining the role that objects play within my poetic production. My hope was to notice my own interaction with objects more precisely and to pursue poetic questions (and philosophical implications about subjectivity and objectivity) that have been asked before by modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams. These two writers in particular had their own reasons for pursuing, through their writing, basic questions about representation of the world in art and language. Stein's program, modeled after her contemporaries Picasso and Braque, was to offer a fractal, or fragmented sort of representation of the world. Her cubist-inspired presentation in language of portraits of people, for instance, offered in language what the cubists were doing in the visual realm—"objects" of inquiry were shown from multiple perspectives, all at once. Stein does this by iteration and re-iteration, with slight variants, of words and phrases—so that we taste the slight changes of meaning with each variation, as with this passage from Stein's "Complete Portrait of Picasso":

Presently.
 Exactly as they do.
 First exactly.
 Exactly as they do too.
 First exactly.
 And first exactly.
 Exactly as they do.
 And first exactly and exactly.
 And do they do.
 At first exactly and first exactly and do they do.
 The first exactly.
 At first exactly.
 First as exactly.
 At first as exactly.
 Presently.

What one notices, first of all, is Stein's send-up of logic and conclusion-making, with each "exactly" phrase pointing, actually, to in-exactitude, by virtue of each iterative correction and re-formulation. We see the "cubist effect" in full display as well, with each slight change in phrasing offering a slightly new glance at the purported object of inquiry (Picasso), in the same way that Picasso's fragmentation of the visual frame in his cubist work offers the viewer multiple "meanings" or viewings or perspectives all at once. This is, of course, a famous instance of aesthetic distortion whose goal and target is not so much the object of inquiry (Picasso) as it is the subject who is doing the viewing (Stein). We see this preoccupation with "seeing," or the subjective rendering of seeing in many other modernists of the time—Wallace Stevens' "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," for instance, being one of the most celebrated, but also Williams' simple studies of the observable world—"the Red Wheel Barrow" comes to mind. But Stein's brand of revolutionary aesthetics made more (and greater hay) of flipping objects and subjects. Most of the purported objects of inquiry in *Tender Buttons*, we note, become, in Stein's hands, occasions for a radical display of subjectivity. The point of doing this arrives out of her own historical context—the Great War threw nearly everything that had been taken as "a given" in philosophical, political, religious, and economic terms into question and became the singular occasion for extreme experiments from such aesthetic revolutionaries. Seen from the perspective of the 21st century, however, I viewed Stein's experiment as a noble but unsustainable venture. Yet I wanted to find my own way of asking similar questions about subjectivity and objectivity—and I wanted to base those questions in my own historical context—a context in which basic questions of reality—of extreme subjectivity, of virtual reality, of a culture distracted by its devices, of the digitalization of everything, of the fleeting nature of actual, physical things, the radical disconnect between poetic production and actual world events

(a proliferation of small wars, for instance)—these trends in my own time suggested opportunities to extend Stein’s experiment in my own way.

Williams attempted to achieve the same result as Stein by only writing objectively with the intent not to imitate nature. He was working with the immediate impressions of things and objects as a way of addressing the “local aesthetic” or what he called the “local details,” which is the “local” sense of a consciousness perceiving what it sees and experiences. We can see an example of this by looking at a passage from Williams’ poem, “Paterson: Book I”:

–Say it, no ideas but in things–
 nothing but the blank faces of the houses
 and cylindrical trees
 bent, forked by preconception and accident–
 split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained–
 secret–into the body of the light!

Instead of “imitating” nature, this passage reveals Williams’ larger aesthetic aim is to write poems that try to “act like nature,” and grow into something else, something completely different from the natural world, something artificial—the locus of this force is on the printed page and the “object” status of the work of art is set against a backdrop of white space—the empty space surrounding the poem. Williams’ object poems, therefore, are fully committed to the visual realm. He took his concept to the extreme by writing very long pieces in which the focus is completely around the poem being the “thing” or object.

While Williams’ efforts were, in effect, a glorious experiment, and, as with most experiments, they failed in important ways. First, he was clearly too extreme in his procedures and in his dedication to objectivity. Williams’ commitment to “no ideas but in things,” for instance, which we might call the objectivist axiom, created havoc with his lifelong ambition to write a long poem, for instance a poem that could, in fact, contain ideas and a sense of narrative

while still hewing to the aesthetic foundation that a poem should, itself, be an object, a thing on the page. I did not want to copy his form of long drawn out poetry but instead focus on this very idea that the poem itself is an object.

Long after Stein's and Williams' experiments with objects during the twenties and thirties, Mark Rothko began working with abstract painting by using color fields of paint on canvas that, when viewed for a few minutes, will change color in the mind of the viewer. It is this experience you have while viewing Rothko's art that truly shows his work with object and subject. I stared at several Rothko paintings where after some time the colors started to blend into a single color. The colors of paint on the canvas are not themselves changing, but they are prompting powerful changes within the mind of the viewer. Thus, the painting becomes completed within the subjective experience of the viewer, making his paintings incomplete without the viewer. What links Rothko's art to Williams and Stein is his total commitment to being different than nature; it is an act of intervention, like Williams wanted his poems to be and like Stein wanted her work to be. It is not holding a mirror up to nature but it is, instead, acting like nature— being creative like nature is creative.

Amid these aesthetic giants, I wanted to find a middle ground, one that allowed for a certain amount of subjective interiority at first sight while at the same time foregrounding objects and objecthood as a whole (poems as objects). I started by keeping an "objects" journal, which consisted of a list of objects and object interactions that I came across everyday. The journal allowed me to meditate on the object, as an object on the page before I began to construct a poem about my meditations. I wanted to be more conscious of how my relationship with particular objects would evolve and because I wanted my poems to be objects produced from my meditations on these evolving objects. This was a process to help map out each of my poems. I

noted how often I would view something objective, such as a disc flying through the air, along with noting the subjective, such as the feeling of nostalgia from my childhood when watching a disc fly through the air. These notations included me free writing (without structure) about the objects and object interactions. The page would look scribbled but it helped me collect and formulate each of my meditations.

First, I discovered that every object triggers a subjective narrative within it (nostalgia, emotions etc.), as according to Stein; second, I discovered that even without a subjective narrative, the reader or viewer can input his/her own emotion and feelings naturally by which making the text or art an object, as according to Williams; and third I discovered that I could use Rothko's paintings by discussing his method of subjective art and the objective viewing to find this new middle way into and around the subject object question.

At first I seemed to merely imitate Stein's procedure--many of my initial poems starting off as just subjective pieces about objects. The collection was not yet viewed at whole, as a single object. For example, the poem "portrait" was originally titled "a rock" and it simply described a rock as being part of the earth, noting, "a piece/of the puzzle./With edges,/this is gravel poetry./One line at a time,/word by word,/a mountain moves." This poem which started out as a meditation on an object (a rock) evolved into a meditation more closely aligned with the aesthetic procedures of Rothko's painting. Under this new sense of what the "rock" poem might be, I revised the poem to engage two different senses of time: the human scale and the geological scale, the first tiny, the second immense. By conflating these two senses of scale, I hoped to achieve a kind of comic or cosmic irony of the sort that I sometimes discern in Rothko's painting. At the end of the revised version, a rock poses for a portrait: "a rock,/pauses for its moment." From the perspective of geological time, the rock's sense of a "moment" is immense.

Many lifetimes, on the human scale, comprise the rock's "moment." To my thinking, Rothko is working to create a similar sort of disruption in our sense of time: he is painting in a medium and a style (abstract expressionism) that is fully of and surrounded by its own historic moment, and yet he creates these "time-bound" objects that also seem to refute a human reckoning of time. His bands and fields of color refuse temporal signatures, and, like the rock in my poem, achieve a sense of the eternal. Just as a rock can last forever, the same goes for a Rothko painting hanging up on a wall. They are made of different materials, but they evoke the eternal. Through the revision of this poem and the others, I learned that the poems and paintings at whole are objects. It is not so much that a rock is a physical object, it is the metaphor (narration) of the rock being compared to a Rothko painting hanging on a wall, which is the object. Many of my poems contain a kind of "musing self," an often whimsical sense of an inner voice, one that might well be stuck in an older aesthetic of "representational expectation," one that seeks a narrative, one that craves a subjective sense of inner life. I added this in order to show the contrast and tension between this traditional sense of self and the modernist extremes of Rothko, where one finds no trace of self-absorption, self-dramatization—nothing of this sort exists in Rothko. I wanted my poems to contain both the age-old yearning for self-representation and the bracing, modernist refutation of that need.

The Poems

A painter's revision, 1950

We started new, a new land

*By flat rejection of it. Against
the flow; of things. The atomic age
had a thing for, shall we say, starting over, i.e., --to
smithereens, as it were. How to follow,*

*without renouncing, the masters? Dive
to the root surreal, become the color,
drench yourself, pilgrims, in this
crumbling--monstrous and picturesque.*

Portrait

It's just a rock,

a piece
of the puzzle.

With edges,
gravel poetry.

One line at a time,
word by word,
a mountain moves.

Cut smooth to touch.
Rocks, naturally,
are hard. Poetry is harder,

and pointing, some say,
like a slab.

Then there's the rock's interior,
a rainbow of crystals
reflects sun rays
from a bay window,

against a row of books.
The stretch of time's raw material,

a rock, here on the wall,
pauses for its moment.

Rothko's Grass

A field stretches for miles, a full, lush green
sway in a gentle breeze—softly
in the distance, there's a shady spot
within the hush
of an oak tree dropping leaves blankly
over the ground, a comfortable plot.

My pillow floats up in the sky
I stretch my arms, bird songs
flutter around, the moss underneath
my body as soft as a dove
I close my eyes to the bright sun above.

Violet, Green and Red

My house in the fifties.
This is not just a bunch
of holographic trees. Trees;
Green grass, behind the driveway
and playset. A friendly neighborhood
with brightly lit streetlights.

Fireflies during the summer months.
And sometimes, the sky
violet in the evening. In the fall,
Red leaves cover the porch.

I think of painting.

Seagram (four seasons) Murals

Which season is this?

A brown square, with a red border.

A scene of

reds and browns, falling from the
large oak tree. A dark shade of a season.

Raked into piles and burned. Your scent
in my beard.

White Cloud over Purple

White vapor,
silent trampling,
across the sky.

An occasional clash, or
stomping, in their
summer migration.

Herd never moved west, the tribes
explained, for fear of the winds.
Sky poachers. Ivory hunters

await them. Once
in sight, winds split them up

into hail, like chunks
of tusks flung onto the ground.

Desert Resolution

Keep walking the sign said.

If I wandered away,
scampered, down
back alleyways with
no lighting,

I would sleep
underneath the fire
escape. With my
back against a
brick wall.

And remember
the path I found
in the desert. It
was paved.

But if again I came to a
village,
with cows,
sheep and horses
in the street,

and again I sat and drank
a cup of mint tea,
the steam clearing
my senses—

then when I saw
your sign in the
distance—red,
as if it said “Stop,”
in Arabic,

I would (this time, friend)
stop and wait for you.

Blue, Green, and Brown

in the river Thames.
Below the minimum
degree.

There does not seem
to be a single freezer in
all of the city. Cocktail
penguins all black and white.
They skate along the bank.

With every sip,
icicles pop, rip
their chapped lips.

Friendly critique

Is *objective; use of words*.

Honestly hun, throw them in the fire.

Well, select the best poems first.

A Box

Corrugated board, folded into fours.
Like my "house" by the ocean but also
a carrier of bell peppers?

No, just a cardboard box; inside
Gertrude Stein's, *Tender Buttons*.
*A large box is handily made
of what is necessary to replace
any substance,*
She writes. To hold any substance;
capacity. Do not overfill.
Otherwise, contents will spill;

Long Dress Deployment

Pieces of fabric stitched together;
by hand? No, machine.
A line of machinery.
They slaved away to make this dress.
Whose bows are attached with a thin,
thread. Easily taken off.

*Where is the serene length?
O, a line distinguishes it. A line
just distinguishes it.*

Take it off.
The bows? No,
the dress.

No. 13 (White, Red, on Yellow)

My Erotic Petticoat;
four button pattern,
a square. Your dots (black)
are symmetrical

and, therefore, normal.

And when we are aligned,
well, I'm no expert
unless it's your buttons
we're talking about; what were we
talking about? What were we?

I think it was the color we were riding on

Yes: a bright or light yellow
and many-times, rosy red
color that lingered, that we came upon.

e.g.,

that I loved the way I love
the smell of leather in darkness,
like the way a rough hide formed around
an ornate shape that can't be said
or fit into a slot,
or (gently) slid into its respective
hole, O, *shallow rose on red*
take me now, like some long-unwavering
shadow.

O, How we Disappear

As the warnings go out.
They're calling for a wintery mix: rain and snow.
They're asking us not to take chances, and so,
I bring out the heavy artillery.

Fur, for as if a blizzard,

and feel the silk slide along my fingers;
the way pockets swallow hands for safe keeping.

Scene: Black in Deep Red

She squirmed in her wet jeans.

Smelled like
rotting pages of books;
the humid air stuck.

Flawless stitching, though.
Couldn't be ripped, useful,

like the fabric stretched over her mouth
or protruding hip-bones.

Her dress, with frills and lace,
tossed onto the ground.

An Apology for “[Untitled]”

It’s left up interpretation; Landscape.
No title? (black on grey)
I’m thinking. Dark space, moon walk.

These colors did not mix for me.
A clear separation of light and dark.
Just a stroll across the lunar surface,
maybe grab a rock or two. But I
don’t think that was his intention.

A metaphor, then? Strip,
back the paint and view the naked,
canvas. Smooth, white cloth stretched
over a wood frame.

It’s all untitled from this point.

Another Rothko Gallery (Fire, Arson)

Victorian era soot bath—chimney stacks;
a match strikes the paper
underneath a crevice filled with
paint chippings, vintage wood stain

porch light candle—knife fight;
cobble-stones along the mile
where the fire reached
a frozen pond, hard winter

black powder pillow case—ashy rain;
fell from the sky
a splinter of metal
upon an old stump, tree clock

hard wood floor—sleeping willow;
ivy arms tickle round ground
while spinning on top
and turning in space, ceiling fan

chilly breeze musical—wind chime;
steps leading to ruins of a city
filled with singed secrets,
blowing winds, bonfire smells.

Rothko's Pompeii

A fog over the city,
or smoke.

A whistling,
creeps through the cracks.

I'm tracking
my way,
to the underground.

A soggy mist,
the smell.
Tinges the nostrils

like the burning of embers.
It's soot.
Day light dims,

ash,
sprinkles down
upon the dead.

For Rothko

Brown, mucky sand.
Long tails and scales; and
a catch:

Green, vegetation; Sea lettuce,
mermaid's salad. She's watching
her fishy figure.

Then, blue; water. Waves crash against your
fragile boat. Over-spill into the sea. Sinking to
the bottom;

as your brush forgets its hand.

Number 61 (1953)

Your sails fly without restraint;
white sheets and,
ropes tied tight.

Rain beats heavily
against the deck;
no light on the horizon,
just a waving sea.

I wave back; not to be rude, as
water fills the deck.
In all that,
you caught me.

Drowning is said to be the worst
way to die. But your suffocating
grip left me with no choice.

You bitch

Black on Maroon

I'm hidden, inside a tiny box.
There are walls of concrete,
with steel reinforcements.

So much for a good night's sleep.
In the distance, sounds

of a war—they're just blowing off steam,
sad to say.

Then a streak of lightning arrives,
from the wise angel school.

Gotcha! Says the pilot.
High up in the clouds,
Dropping the payload below,

in which I'm just a speck of dust
in a crosshair.

Four Darks in Red

As if from an amputee joke book (Brochure).

A prosthetic arm—50% off;
hand not included.

I still feel my missing leg. The familiar tug and pull
of muscles and ligaments; twitching past the cauterized
joint. Still there, not there.

(Boom; Crack; Split

I was a soldier, inside a trench.

I dug it out myself.

The enemy in the distance,
their flag high, a dark green.

When the grenade went off. *Red* stained the dirt wall.)

I stare at my amputee options.

Number 14

Color of sound.

Whistle a tune, or bang on a drum.
Both bring attention; you're such an attention whore.
Blasting your music, or just making noise?
All notes equal music. A love note,
is your ballad. The screeching sound is deafening.

Beat— beat, boo, bum.

Sound; the sound a car makes when peeling out.
I can hear a cat's meow; the doorbell just rang.
Elephant beaten with candy and little pops
and chews all bolts and reckless reckless rats...
Why not a simple string instrument?

Yes, it's all just noise.

No.9 (Dark over Light Earth)

A fountain in front
of an old church.
Inside, a massive ceiling.

Birds perched on the
old wooden beams.

A tomb of a saint,
with a sign reading:
*Make a donation and I will
pray for you.*

Next to the sign,
a box of candles.
There are none lit.

I have no matches.

I place an unlit
candle next to the tomb

and place some change
into the coin slot.

It's ok, the coins say,
with a little noise
for
a dead saint to hear.

Elegy for Rothko

This cliff with jagged edges,
how it slices me in two.
Like fresh tuna upon a fillet knife.

Nobody hears the dread in the distance, say,
“Come, join me in heaven.”

I remember the funeral,
his body, within the casket.
This vehicle, casket, body, will not depart.
We're empty casing,
used cocoons once hung,
split, beneath the tree.
What he left behind.

My foot inches closer to
a windy push, that's all.

I sit at the edge, dangle feet.
The clouds seem close.
Their shapes move east.

My feet sway, hitting the rocks with every kick.
I'm a kid, sitting on a chair that's too big.