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The Consolations of Sorrow: A Review of All the Sad Angels by Jack Grapes

Matthew Hetznecker · Tuesday, March 3rd, 2015



Sometimes the reading of a book begins with the experience of the book itself as an object.

Such was the case with *All the Sad Angels*, a book of poems by Jack Grapes. The book is small and thin, a throwback to [City Lights Pocket Poets Series](#), which began in the Fifties, or the dime store novels found in metal racks near the cash register in the not-so-distant past. The cover of *All the Sad Angels* is beautiful, too, a reproduction of Marc Chagall's "The Circus" that wraps around the book from front to back. There is a woman in tights standing on a horse, an acrobat mid-air. On the back cover, a clown stands in the foreground, as if he's walked up to the camera and peered in. All the figures are a touch indistinct, as if the artist does not wish to impose his view of them, but rather is suggesting we find our own understanding of the painting's subjects. A look inside Grapes's book provides clues to the poet's choice of cover art. The titles suggest that this book is a *Divertimento*, a term that describes a musical genre that is lighthearted; and yes, these poems have a lightness to them, but upon careful reading, they have an emotional intensity that belies the playful language with which most of the poems are written.

The lines are often short, sometimes comprised of only a few words, and have a rhythm and musicality, as if the poet's aim was *sound*, rather than meaning or narrative. As I read some of the poems, I thought of Robert Irwin, an American installation artist who has described his work as a series of aesthetic inquiries. Irwin's desire was that when people viewed his art that there could be the possibility of a reaching beyond their confines of assessment and comprehension. It seems to me that Grapes is attempting something similar, utilizing perception to deepen his understanding of the self in relation to the sights and sounds that pervade his senses. And like Irwin, Grapes immerses himself in a variety of structures, as if he is throwing himself into the unknown in hopes of an experience that leads to growth.

There are both narrative and experimental poems in this volume, though some of the more abstract poems come off as silly and seem not to care how we feel about them:

supposed interior monologue crevasse
we what feggadaboutit Stendhal
eradicated she imagined portals
between thighs in restitution for
100 cents flat pitch raising.
Oblong carcasses of desultory
Himalayas floundering on beach

studies once Cubist now wretched
of the earth a cocky scoundrel
whose equal temperament of system
imbued with patriotism...

(from “She Who Nevermind Tolstoy”)

Perhaps such poems reveal their meaning with multiple readings, but it is just as likely the poet is simply sharing his process with the reader—finding his way to an epiphanal encounter via sound and sensation. The more accessible poems are often philosophical, meditative and solipsistic.

Think of me as
a messenger who lost his way
who wanted
to lose his way
in the mystical
ecstacy of discursive
language only to find
the pen racing
toward love
as if it were a light
and not the bludgeon
of form we've
let it become.

(from “One Kiss”)

Or this, from the more conventionally narrative, “For All This Living”:

They say I'm going
to die, but I can't seem
to wrap my head
around that idea.
I was unable to sleep
and you led me
into the other room.
For all I know,
that was how I died,
you taking my hand
and saying come
with me, and me,
you know, I'll
as they say,
follow you any
where but where
are we going now?
Maybe I died a
a long time ago,
and this is the dream

that I had the other
night when you
were the house.
For all this living,
do I at least get to drink
a glass of wine?
For all this living,
can't someone
give me a wake-up
call when it's time
to go to sleep?
For all this living,
shouldn't I eat
as much love
as I can stomach?

In another poem, “Just like a House,” the poet writes, “I dreamed you were a house./No, that was/another night,/another dream.” These poems’ dream-like quality evokes a sense of uncertainty and sorrow. They are reveries, of sorts, on existential concerns: How do we find meaning in a world without meaning? How do we live with the anguish of such meaninglessness, which leads to what Sartre referred to as “nausea”? Grapes’s answer is: communion with others—our fellow sad angels, who share the ontological sorrow that attends us all.

The circus, then, is the metaphor Grapes uses for the human condition—the high-wire act of daily existence, the juggling of impossible burdens, the clown’s attempt to mask and divert anguish, the circus ring we navigate and investigate and obfuscate as we endlessly circle its borders. It draws us onward, however weary we become. But why go on, the poet asks, echoing Beckett. The poems suggest that the solution to this dilemma is to embrace all of it, including sorrow, in order to connect with oneself and with others. Connection is not only life-affirming, it makes one *feel* alive.

I've made it this far
is all I can manage to say
when they take my card,
examine the information
with a magnifying glass,
assure me that help is on the way.
What about the sorrow, I ask.
The dark armchair shrugs.
You were meant to be happy
it says, frowning, sad,
consoling me.
But what the hell am I supposed
to do without the sorrow?
Romanticism scolded by the critics
got off easier than I did.
Again, the dark armchair shrugs,
says something in French
I'm supposed to understand—
ce tombeau blanchi a la chaos

tres loin sous terre—
 the vast passage of the sea,
 the torrential light,
 the heroism of discovery,
 the coin purses of sorrow
 dying in the rain.

(from “All the Sad Angels”)

Even in the narrative poems, Grapes seems aware of the potential for meta-poetry, commenting on the form within the form. It’s like an endless series of reflections in a fun-house mirror (another circus trope). He enjoys playing with both the reality of experience and the reality of the poem. In “Fisticuffs at Durty Nelly’s,” for instance, we are never certain where the truth leaves off and fiction begins. The stories we tell can shape our lives any way we damn please. When is amnesia chosen, how is uncertainty mixed with memory? In “Fisticuffs,” Grapes declares that everything he’s told us is a lie, but within it are kernels of truth. He’ll make a poem out of those, he tells us, and we are left to either take his word for it, or ponder whether he’s once again toying with reality.

I’m gonna write about this one day.
 I’ll change all the facts, lie about everything,
 pretend I had a great sense of humor,
 pretend I could hit bullseyes
 even when drunk,
 pretend I had a great left hook
 and wasn’t decked by a right cross
 right there in the pub,
 before I’d even made it into the alley.
 I’ll make a good poem
 triumph over the sad life.

After reading numerous books by the poet, it’s easy to believe that the stories told in “Fisticuffs” actually happened, but that Grapes has decided to pretend they didn’t—in other words, the poem he constructed is the pretense, rather than the other way around. Why do this? To make a better poem.

A poem I keep returning to is “Glue,” a mysterious piece that leads us toward Grapes’s sought-after experience of enlightenment:

I am not clarity.
 Some force, the opera
 hat breaks my head
 open and opens the blinds
 and lets the light in.

Reading these poems, we are both watching the circus, and *in* the circus, tilting this way then that on the highwire above the Platonic forms of Poetry. But in both dreams and memory is an acceptance of truth, in whatever form it is revealed. The meta-poetry in *All the Sad Angels* is more pronounced than in Grapes’s earlier work. In the poem “I Didn’t Write This Poem,” he begins by confessing that: “I stole each and every line from another poet.” He is writing about the anxiety of

influence, but rather than fearing the influence of those who went before him, he joins them by claiming that every poet from Homer to Shakespeare, from Dante to Ronsard, from Horace to Yeats actually stole their lines from him. It's payback time, says the poet:

It's break and enter now.
 Lock up your poems
 and throw away the key.
 I'm coming after your poems,
 one line at a time.
 From now on,
 poetry belongs to me.

What spectacular bluster! But isn't that what clowns do? Another of the poem's delights is its resurrection of the *cento*, that Latin form in which all the lines are composed of quotes from other poets. By the end of the poem, we are rooting for such pillage. And why not? What better fate awaits one's lines than to end up in a poem by Jack Gapes?

Gapes's use of the device of meta-poetry is either the substance of a poem, or lurking behind the scenes. In "Zero Sum Game," he writes:

... she is naked
 everything but her arms
 as neither sleeping nor awake
 neither a priori nor experimental
 negating the future
 which comes faster than
 you can read
 this poem faster
 than all the offhand free verse
 you thought would save you.

In "Jessie, My Dog," Gapes laments the passing of his best friend, Jessie, who used to dig up poems and hand them to the poet as they went for their midnight walk. But now,

no more bones,
 no more ship-shape.
 I'm not even sure
 you're reading this poem
 right now.

In "Secret Sauce," Gapes laments the state of poetry. Even the best poets find it useless, he claims, and not as effective as prose, which reaches more readers.

I know some poets
 have made firm declarations
 that they plan to write
 no more poems.
 It's prose or nothing.
 For them, poetry is done, kaput.
 And why not.

Maybe we've had
enough of poetry,
enough of war.
Who in their right mind
would read poetry
unless they were either
a poet,
or a fool.
You're reading this now,
so you're probably both.

Thus Grapes makes one of his characteristic inversions: the wise fool and the foolish poet; if you're reading this poem, he writes, you're probably both. But poetry must answer for its apparent uselessness. In Falstaff's famous speech from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, we could substitute the word *poetry* for *honour* and it would make just as much sense: "Can *poetry* set to a leg? No: Or an arm? No. *Poetry* hath no skill in surgery, then? No." But the next set of lines opens up another inversion: Love, like fire, is transformative, and therefore not as useless as one supposes.

something new arises
from fire
as well as from love.

For all of Grapes's meta-poetic dismissals of poetry's usefulness, he is asserting its elemental strength. There is in poetry that dialectical tension—from those fiery inversions come the synthesis of love. In the next line, Grapes completes his argument: "The heart," he writes, "banks on sorrow in the worst of times."

Sorrow. From the idea that even poets may reach a point where they cast it off because it "hath no skill in surgery," Grapes brings us around to one of the book's core themes: *sorrow*. "The heart," he writes, "banks on sorrow in the worst of times." *Bank* is a verb with many meanings: to "bank" can mean to build a sloping road, as a border, a protective wall. If one banks on sorrow, one uses sorrow as a border, a shield, a boundary. One can also incline oneself laterally, as one banks a plane. One can bank a fire, cover it with ashes to make it burn more slowly. One can also bank *on* something, depend on it. What a paradox, then, suggests the poet: in the worst of times, one banks on sorrow as if it were a consolation. Sorrow, like the ashes of a fire, keeps grief from erupting into flame. The sorrow Grapes invokes in *All the Sad Angels* is ontological: It's the nature of being, the simmer of being human. In the title poem, "All the Sad Angels," the poet stands in line to get his ration of sorrow, but there's none left for him.

They were renewing sorrow.
How could I not go?
....
They assure me that help is on the way.
What about the sorrow, I ask.
The dark armchair shrugs.
You were meant to be happy,
it says, frowning, sad,
consoling me.
But what the hell am I supposed

to do without the sorrow?

Life may be meaningless, but there is consolation in that knowledge. Carrying the idea further, the poet asserts that Poetry is the antidote to existential anguish. In “Water More Water,” Grapes writes:

Everyone wanted
water more water.
But my wound
was enough
to quench their thirst.

In this context, poetry contains the wound, and the wound contains poetry. But the sorrow that comes from such ontological pain leads to compassion. Sorrow and compassion share a similar vibration; though the former is evoked by ennui, and the latter requires some distance from that ennui, both result in communion with others. Thus, in the poem “The Remnant in Babylon,” Grapes invokes the “weeping prophet,” Jeremiah,

who never lost
his compassion
for those whose city
would be destroyed
and chose
to stay instead
with the poor remnant
of his own people.
But here we are,
the remnant in Babylon
standing on our heads,
weeping,
sobbing,
receiving kisses,
out of nowhere,
words as fire,
hammers that shatter rock.

So how can a book that sounds the refrain of sorrow and despair, make us smile? Because the book is full of gratitude and joy. As Grapes writes in “Side Show”: “the heart finds more grief than it can imagine; sorrow piled so high it turns to laughter.” Grapes consistently uses such inversions to respond to life’s absurdity: sad angels and sorrowful clowns; compassionate fools and weeping prophets. Sorrow is the glue that binds us all, and Art rescues us from despair because Art leads to a shared experience of life itself.

In one of the book’s last (and longest narrative) poems, “Lost Illusions,” the paintings his grandmother takes him to see break open the world to the boy, and thus begins the inquiry of a lifetime, and the birth of a poet. Lying in bed at the end of a day spent looking at art, the boy listens to the crickets outside his window and tries

to jolt my brain

into comprehension of something
larger than myself.
If I could just learn the meaning of eyes,
I would discover the meaning of the universe
And what if the universe didn't have a secret?
What if nothing was hidden
or disguised as something else?
What if in that painting by Bruegel,
Census at Bethlehem, all we can do
is witness it helplessly . . .

Though what he saw could not be fully comprehended, the boy in the poem knows that he has been enlarged by the experience of art. As early as the first century B.C., the Roman poet Horace wrote that *ut picturas poesis* — “as is painting so is poetry”—thus the boy resolves to be a poet.

Grapes’s use of inversions leads to a dialectical synthesis of Plato’s ideal forms and Aristotle’s objective reality, Heraclites’s world in constant flux and Parmenides’s idea of permanence as the fundamental character of reality. Thus Grapes connects the dots from early Greek philosophy to Sartre’s existential despair. But like performers in a circus, the poet is full of surprises. In the concluding lines to the final poem in the book, “All Alone Shoe,” Grapes acknowledges that the poems themselves are nothing more than post-circus debris that has ended up on his front lawn. The acrobats are gone, the jugglers nowhere in sight. “There’s clutter everywhere,” he writes: a discarded tennis shoe, an old carburetor, a dark armchair, a magnifying glass, the weeping prophet, his dog Jessie, bottles of glue, a Lone Ranger mask. We’re back to meta-poetry: the clutter is comprised of objects and phrases and even ideas from the poems that precede this one, as if all that debris is evidence of the lived moment. Despite the clutter, the poet, like Beckett’s tramp, goes on.

And I step out of my house
and prepare to run my daily errands,
before the world melts
in my hands
and the sky explodes
on my lips.
I am unable
to teach you anything.
Like a blind man,
I put my hands out
in front of me
and expect everything
and am never disappointed.

As readers, we are anything but disappointed.

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