

1983

Review of "The Incognito Lounge and Other Poems" by Robert Miklitsch

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Recommended Citation

Miklitsch, Robert. "Review of "The Incognito Lounge and Other Poems" by Robert Miklitsch." *The Iowa Review* 13.3 (1982): 246-250. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2969>

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Review · Robert Miklitsch

The Incognito Lounge and Other Poems. Denis Johnson. New York: Random House, 1982. 79 pp. \$5.95.

“Surrealism” is one of the catchwords of this century which, like “wit” in the seventeenth, has been used so often and in such widely differing contexts as to have retained only a vaguely pejorative meaning. Though it was first used by Apollinaire (in a subsidiary and not entirely serious manner), it is usually associated with its most polemical spokesman and publicizer, Andre Breton, and later practitioners in French poetry such as Aragon, Char, Desnos, Eluard and Peret and, in painting, Dali, Tanguy, Ernst, Delvaux, Miro and Magritte. In some sense, it is a product of a unique historical climate: in Europe after the Great War, there was still a solidified bourgeoisie to rebel against and, for Breton at least, surrealism was an instrument for social change, a revolutionary force. In the recent past, though, it has also been used—much too loosely I should emphasize—to designate a certain style of American poetry fashionable in the sixties and seventies, one that sought to undermine that Eliotic-inspired, New Critical tradition and its emphasis on rationality and self-consciousness. It can be seen at work, for instance, in Bly’s aesthetic of the “deep image,” a later diluted version of which became known as “barnyard surrealism,” and in the New York School, whose poets (O’Hara, Ashbery and Schuyler, to name three) were widely read in and influenced by French surrealism.

Polemics aside, however, it seems to me that, in terms of the artist—whether poet or painter—it is most useful to speak of surrealism as an attitude or sensibility: in other words, it presupposes that one has a novel, if not revolutionary, apprehension of the world. In this sense, it is something you are born with, *not* something you can learn. A surrealist work, in turn, should involve what the Russian Formalists called a “making strange” and produce an effect of “defamiliarization,” an estrangement of the familiar. I rehearse all this because there are readers of American poetry who have despaired of finding a genuine surrealism in the dross that has passed for it over the years; I think I can safely say, however, that they need look no farther than Denis Johnson. When I first came across his work in a recent “anniversary” issue of *Antaeus*, I

immediately thought: *this is the real stuff*. Though the issue was not short on good, and in some cases even excellent poems, “The Incognito Lounge” was the only one that I returned to with the obsessive regularity that I associate with the excitement of hearing a new voice, one that twists tradition in such a way as to *seem* wholly independent of it.

Now, having read and re-read *The Incognito Lounge and Other Poems*, which was chosen by Mark Strand for the National Poetry Series, I would be less than honest if I did not begin by admitting that the book is not as original or as consistently surprising as the title poem led me to believe. Like every poet, especially young ones, Denis Johnson owes a debt or two to his precursors, not least to Strand himself (obvious in Johnson’s recourse to “the story of our lives”). And if he cannot be accused of being a poseur in the annoying way that Breton and Dali and even, say, Ashbery can be (the last another influence on Johnson), a number of poems are unfinished, technically speaking (e.g. “From a Berkeley Notebook”). And yet, given these caveats (not, I might add, unusual ones for a first book), I am still struck by how *extraordinary* Johnson can on occasion be. Coleridge said that some poets make the extraordinary ordinary (he was thinking of Wordsworth), and some make the ordinary extraordinary. Johnson, like Coleridge, belongs in the second category.

Here is the first stanza or “strophe” of the title, and premiere, poem of *The Incognito Lounge*:

The manager lady of this
apartment dwelling has a face
like a baseball with glasses on and pathetically
repeats herself. The man next door
has a dog with a face that talks
of stupidity to the night, the swimming pool
has an empty, empty face.
My neighbor has his underwear on
tonight, standing among the parking spaces
advising his friend never to show
his face around here again.
I go everywhere with my eyes closed and two
eyeballs painted on my face. There is a woman
across the court with no face at all.

Clearly, this is not the kind of verse which relies for its effects on acoustics in general or metrics in particular or, for that matter, rhyme and enjambment (the rhyming, mostly internal and off, is minimal and only the breaks in line two and twelve carry any real poetic charge). What the above passage obviously does rely on is the obsessive image: in this case, one of the most intimate and seemingly familiar of images, the human face. Though surrealism has frequently been understood as the immediate juxtaposition of the quotidian and the strange, this is a static, derivative version of its true subject and *modus operandi*: metamorphosis. The latter, more profound form is evident in Johnson's metaphoric and metonymic variations on the image of the human face which, in his hands, suffers a number of sea changes. To be more precise (and mechanical), there is an initial substitution of the inanimate for the animate ("a face/like a baseball with glasses on"), a reversal of that process ("the swimming pool/has an empty, empty face"), a repetition and displacement of the initial image ("I go everywhere with my eyes closed and two/eyeballs painted on my face") and, finally, a "negative" or *effacement* of it ("a woman/across the court with no face at all"). A fantastic world this, one both frightening and fascinating where nothing is what it seems because nothing stays the same, because everything is always changing into everything else.

Johnson's protean, surrealist poetics may be too painterly (i.e. merely decorative) for some—in the way that some painting is criticized for being too "literary"—but the concluding strophe of "The Incognito Lounge" should dispel any doubts as to the authenticity of his vision:

Maybe you permit yourself to find
it beautiful on this bus as it wafts
like a dirigible toward suburbia
over a continent of saloons,
over the robot desert that now turns
purple and comes slowly through the dust.
This is the moment you'll seek
the words for over the imitation
and actual wood of successive
tabletops indefatigably,
when you watched a baby child
catch a bee against the tinted glass
and were married to a deep
comprehension and terror.

In the concluding lines above, the speaker experiences a moment of identification and regression that cannot be attributed to “painterly” contrivances or *trompe l’oeil*, coming as it does out of that “deep comprehension and terror” which is one of the continual sources of poetry.

I should note here that in order to suggest some of the pleasures and surprises of “The Incognito Lounge,” I have not done complete justice to it, having quoted only two (the beginning and end) of its nine strophes. This is not to say that its fragments form some kind of “whole” or totality; on the contrary, its individual parts are connected only by the speaker’s compelling voice and the episodic history he presents, scene by scene, like technicolor slides of a foreign country we have read about but never seen. Johnson’s imagination, however, seems peculiarly suited to this kind of poem, one composed of seemingly self-contained anecdotes that, put together, produce a skewed but strangely satisfying story.

I have dwelled on “The Incognito Lounge,” at the expense of the rest of the book, because it is a representative, even exemplary, poem of its kind. As I have said, though, not all of *The Incognito Lounge* is as fine as the title poem. Johnson seems to be one of those poets who has to be struck by lightning to write, an occupational hazard of sorts which may account for the uneven and sometimes disturbingly unfinished quality of his work. But when the power is on, in such poems as “Heat,” “Enough,” “At the Olympic Peninsula,” “Ten Months After Turning Thirty,” and “The Flames,” it can be a galvanizing experience. Another such poem is “The Circus,” the whole of which I would like to quote in order to suggest, in conclusion, an aspect of Johnson’s poetic personality that can get lost amidst the surrealist pyrotechnics:

I passed a helicopter
crashed in the street today,
where stunned and suddenly grief-torn
passers-by tried to explain
over and over, a hundred ways, what
had happened. Some cried over the pilot,
others stole money from his wallet—
I heard the one responsible for his death
claiming the pilot didn’t need it any more,
and whether he spoke of the pilot’s
money or his life wasn’t clear.

The scene had a subaqueous timbre
that I recognize now as a light
that shines in the dreams I have when I sleep
on my back and wake up half-drowned.
However I tried to circumnavigate
this circus of fire and mourning—
the machine burst ajar like a bug,
the corpse a lunch pail
left open and silly music coming out—
I couldn't seem to find a way
that didn't lead straight to the heart of the trouble
and involve me forever in their grief.

Though this poem has its share of startling images (I am especially fond of “the machine burst ajar like a bug,” another metaphoric transfer from inanimate to animate), at its heart is the speaker's troubling, sometimes involuntary, involvement in the commonplace grief of other people, all the waitresses and bus drivers, drunks and refugees and school truants who people Hopper's paintings. Surrealism may be Johnson's privileged view of things and what makes his work seem so distinct in the context of contemporary American poetry, but that work would be nothing without his sympathetic imagination. The result is poems that speak to the neglected, shadow sides of our selves, that illuminate, like the neon light on the cover of the book, the prosaic world in which men and women go doggedly about their dark lives of desperation.