

The Ambiguities of Disengagement

Richard Evanoff

Review of Scott Watson's *with/in*, published by Bookgirl Press, 3-13-16 Tsurugaya-higashi, Miyagino-ku, Sendai 983 Japan, 1994. 41 pages. ¥700 / US \$7.00.

An Asian critic of Western culture once observed that Westerners "are always getting ready to live." I had a similar feeling reading Scott Watson's new collection of poetry, *with/in*. The poems strike me as being less an actual engagement with life than a getting-ready-to-call-the-whole-thing-off.

The chief problem both for the Asian critic and for me is that language can be used either to illuminate or darken, to link or to distance. Watson's work is by no means obscure. His language is sparse and direct, worth responding to precisely because it is so finely crafted. Watson tips his hat to Cid Corman and Bob Arnold not only in the "Acknowledgments" but throughout the book. Corman and Watson are both concerned with paring their verse down to the bare minimum — not one letter extra — and thereby packing more rather than less meaning into a poem. With Arnold, Watson shares a sense of intimacy, although Arnold's seems more relaxed and assured, Watson's more groping and hesitant.

There is nothing new, of course, in Watson's proclaimed "avoidance of prescribed forms." Writing poetry inevitably involves the creation of new forms — twentieth century poetry is simply more (excessively?) self-consciously aware of this fact. Structure is tyrannical only to those who allow themselves to be imprisoned by it; it can be liberating to those who use it to grow/construct/evolve new imaginations.

As the title implies, Watson has thoroughly mastered the poetic use of prepositions: outward with-ness and inner in-ness conjoined in transcendent with/in-ness. But my reservations are ultimately more with content than with style. Despite the work's apparent aspirations to achieve a Buddhist-like clarity, its ultimate attentions still seem more directed to the finger than the moon.

Togetherness is an implicit theme of the poems, but it comes more in the form of a proposal than a consummated union. The proposition is phrased, moreover, in terms which seem to imply that the poet expects a negative response. Rather than passionately commit himself to the object of his desires — the "other" of language or of life — he detaches himself from it. The deeper the commitment, the deeper the pain of rejection. Ergo, a world view premised on cutting one's losses from the very start.

"Telling," in its entirety:

the sadness suddenly
leaves over
within
all alive
dying
crying it out
talk is dead
shiver in
this morning
fog

If talk is dead, if all that is left is the alienated silence of shivering in the morning fog, why speak, why write, why cry out? When we suddenly see that nothing is within, that all alive is truly dying, then not even sadness remains. We are either at the end or the beginning — and I'm not convinced that Watson really knows which is which. Is the death here a prelude to rebirth or simply a suicide? The void that suddenly makes all things possible or a nihilistic wallowing in the fog of illusion? The building of trust ("a person standing next to words" according to the Japanese ideogram Watson comments on at the beginning of the book) or its betrayal?

What should we make of the tough-it-out advice offered in "Letter to Jon"? Hey man, yeah, the world's a big pain in the ass, but like, if you don't accept it, you see, no pain no gain. Yet Watson encouragingly suggests that without being willing to bear this god-awful burden of existence

we would
never see
ourselves
or anyone else,
which is
the reason
to continue
with our own
death
at hand

Watson's on the right track, I think, in his search for self-awareness and some kind of genuine other-oriented empathy (seeing ourselves and anyone else), but hasn't caught on yet that they don't come so much from putting up with as from letting go of. Don't listen to him, Jon!

In a sort-of-manifesto which concludes the book, Watson suggests that he is seeking an authentic voice, a natural language to counter the "obnoxious" Orwellian mind-control of the mass media "It's just that it stinks and I don't want to smell it." Yet the poet never really considers the possibility of a here-and-now satori, of word made flesh. Rather than re-imagine the world (as poet) and then engage in the sweaty struggle to realize it (as one-who-is-alive), Watson prefers gnostic flight away from the awful stench — to hold his nose rather than roll up sleeves:

Non-participation is my way to unplug the medium so I don't have the message screamed at me — I can't afford to escape to the mountains and don't like the mountains to begin with. This does not attack the system nor attempt to reform; it is just the way my life has moved as it becomes more and more lost — or left — in poems. A poem brings a wall of silence to all we are asked to hear about.

There are at least two types of disengagement: a Gandhian passive resistance bursting with purposeful activity, or what we might now call a Watsonian active non-resistance slouching with aimless passivity. No wonder the poor fellow feels himself more and more lost in his poems. Hence too the real wall and real silence Watson presents his reader with —

no shouting voices, no walls tumbling down here. Accepting things as they are is no longer the flight pad for what happens next, but simply a legitimization of what already is.

Ultimately Watson's poetry affects a kind of Zen anarchism that stands so far outside both system and self that there is no possibility of confronting either. Detachment can mean either stepping back from the door to open it or running away to avoid what's on the other side. Why should the poet conclude that waking up with/in implies finding a(-) gain in isolation:

eyes
shut
open lone-
lier a-
gain

If we can't face our own selves in the mirror, how the hell can we face each other?

Poetic Plethora

(short reviews of journals, broadsides, books)

OVERSEAS PUBLICATIONS

Fiction International

Issue No. 24 focuses on recent Japanese fiction. Four writers are featured: Aramaki Yoshio, Masaki Goro, Masaki Kenzo and Tawada Yoko. Aramaki's two short SF pieces both lean toward the gimmicky with heavy name dropping (Heisenberg, Einstein, Dali) to make the belabored point, all hot-linked to the usual cyberpunk/cybercunt twitchings. Masaki (G.)'s contribution is a morose letter from a cybermutant to an elder brother, all done in a post-nuke gray, November, 2135, with a Rod Serling-ish conte crayon. Although Masaki (K.) maintains a capable style grip in his tale, the