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On Matthew Cooperman

Daze by Matthew Cooperman. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Salt Publishing, 2006.

In her essay "Bewilderment," Fanny Howe, noting the inadequacy of its literal meaning, defines bewilderment as "an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability." Such a state, where one is able to glean from Keatsian uncertainty and doubt a generative yet paradoxical sense of what it means to be lost, is the fertile ground upon which Matthew Cooperman has built *Daze*, his second collection of poems. When one is dazzled, bewildered, enchanted, or in any other way pushed from one's normal engagement with the world, the subtext inevitably includes time, hence the ubiquity of such clichés as "my life flashed before my eyes" and "it felt like time stood still." The title of this collection is a triple pun embodying this notion; one hears the words *daze*, *days*, and *day's*—a state of being, an accumulation, and a possession. Here, an extended and ominous duration is given to Howe's definition. It is as though the title asks several interlocking questions. What comes after bewilderment? How might one contain it? Is it that one is contained by it?

Structurally, the book performs this complex uncertainty. One is given divisions that are threaded through by various serial poems and sequences. This makes for a somewhat dizzying reading experience, as one is forced out of expectations and familiarity only to be plunged right back in. Many of these sequences sneak up on the reader, surreptitiously announcing themselves with the repetition of their visual forms. For example, there is a set of seven poems, deployed at various intervals within the book, that share a stanzaic pattern in which the first and final stanzas are right-justified, while the central, second stanza is left-justified. Because the book is over 100 pages, these repetitions are subtle, and even uncanny; they *daze*. However, there are two sequences that more brazenly announce themselves as such, and address the *days* and *day's* of the triple pun.

Irregularly appearing throughout the book is a series of short poems that each take for their titles a different month of the year. Intriguingly,

these appear not in the expected calendrical order, but, like one memory triggering another as an example of the argument against linearity, nonetheless anchor the book to its investigation of time, of *days*. Much of the work here is dense, in that it often interrogates the propositional nature of subject matter and speaker position, positing narratives only to undercut them as examples of larger, philosophical concerns. Unlike the environmental work of Ashbery's long poems or the accumulative parataxis of Silliman's sequences, one has to work attentively along with the text, which is as exhilarating as it is exhausting. Because of this, the twelve appearances of these poems feel like a pause, a mental refueling, one which in its brevity allows for consideration not only of the particular poem in front of one but also of all that had come before. These poems are both markers of and monuments to the passage of time. And yet, they too have in their concision the stuff of reference and reconcilability collapsing enchantment. Here is "december" in its entirety:

Festivities are sewn in
a joyous nog, which is to say you
were almost here. Even the thought
is a gift

to be written down. Soon
the office party, herringbones
and whitefish, trawl . . .

Lost, the scent of.
You will always be blue
to my see.

One might read this poem as addressed to an absent lover, wherein the "thought" that one was "almost here" at this festive, yet perfunctory "office party" becomes the "gift" of recognition that one does, after all, have this lover elsewhere. And this recognition of "the scent of" absence is pervasive; the final pun turning the blue of the sea into that of the "see" and thus a testament to the "you" being forever present, being everywhere the speaker looks. And yet, one might also read the "you" as the reader, and the poem as addressing the inevitable impossibility of representing empirical experience. "[Y]ou / were almost here" because you can never fully participate in the poem without the mediation of the poet, which itself can never completely render things as

they were. This is one of the strengths of Cooperman's poetry. Instead of opting for complete ambiguity or for an elliptical recasting of narrative, he constructs poems that work on multiple levels, with multiple readings, poems that willfully dance around their subjects without moving too far away. In doing so, his work brings into harmony the famous divide expounded within the prologue to Williams's *Kora in Hell*, wherein Williams argues for a poetry of imaginative flux as against Stevens's call for one of fixed position. Cooperman's is both. "I want to be descriptive," he writes, "some looking / toward and away I do each day."

The third version of the title's pun (the *day's*) is enacted in a series of interspersed poems that address the possessive: "Day's News"; "Day's Fan"; a second "Day's News"; "Day's Chaco"; "Day's Kinsey"; and "Day's Flavas." Appearing early on in the collection, the twin poems titled "Day's News" both consist of dual prose paragraphs, a further pairing.

It is within these funhouse mirror poems that Cooperman employs a more campy sense of pun, double entendre, and humorous allusion. Whether taking on Duchamp ("In advance of a broken heart, my love thus arrives with a shiny snow shovel.") or making a mashup of language poetry and the late grunge craze ("There's a fresh cone hanging from the American tree. It smells like teen spirit improved anew."), these sequences opt for a jagged, clanking prose, which jettisons the otherwise exploratory, philosophical and ruminative tone of the book; however, these poems are nonetheless able to address issues of textual authority and expectation; perhaps even more successfully so as they're unconcerned about announcing their intentions.

While *Daze* delivers numerous interlocking forms and inventive substructures, it is at its most engaging when it allows one to simply stumble upon them, as though the discovery of a light switch might bring the realization that one was, after all, walking along in the dark. Such is the case with the serial poem "Channel Town," which begins with what seems to be an innocuous narrative that quickly breaks down and reforms as one progresses through its seven pages. As Cooperman explains in a note at the book's end, the work "is an exercise in mutation and erosion, written (initially) over an eight-month period in 1998/99 in Provincetown, MA, while listening to NPR (and the Balkan war). It was subsequently revised (eroded?) by yet another war." The arts are, as Williams argued, a part of war, not a diversion from it. Cooperman's sequence uses the detritus of reportage to show the mutability of language, of narrative and event, and therefore the ease with which

such things can be recast as fodder for any kind of argument and action (read: weapons of mass destruction). That the poem works outside of the confines of such a reading, which is to say that it's as aesthetically interesting as it is ethically engaging, is tantamount to the success of the book as a whole. One moves through the unexpected corridors of *Daze* not to derange the senses but to sense the world's derangement—the first and indeed most difficult step toward change.