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What Happens, Really: Alan Gilbert's *The Treatment of Monuments*

The Treatment of Monuments, by Alan Gilbert. Ann Arbor, Michigan: SplitLevel Texts, 2012.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Weather Service glossary of terms, the definition of "Heat Index" is as follows:

The Heat Index (HI) or the "Apparent Temperature" is an accurate measure of how hot it really feels when the Relative Humidity (RH) is added to the actual air temperature.

There's an interesting tension that arises if you look at the way the definition speaks to both "accurate measure" and "how hot it really feels." Clearly there's data to collect and measure, and if our instruments are well calibrated, we may very well call our measurements accurate. How hot it really feels presents a problem of sorts, namely, regarding how quickly the word "really" can shift from the standard OED definition: "In reality; in a real manner; in fact, actually," to one that speaks to a subjective state, a state in which despite what the weather gauges say, this is how it really feels.

The heat index, I think, is a compelling example of the fluidity with which "the actual" shifts to and from subject and object, and of the precarious nature of the physical evidence, the maths, the equations, and the countless other benchmarks by which we name, prescribe to, and hammer away at the world. The descriptor "really," is a good example of the commonplace nature of that vexing relationship between subject and the world. What are we really to think of what it was that we felt on that August afternoon? Have we the necessary tools to do any better than our own perception, or better than the science? How else ought we to organize the world? Are any of these the right question?

The first section of Alan Gilbert's second book of poems, *The Treatment of Monuments*, is entitled "The Relative Heat Index," and

in that section we find the speaker embroiled in that very uncertainty. Comprised of twenty-three numbered, untitled poems, essentially in free verse, the first section finds the speaker navigating what amounts to a state of perpetual, yet disjointed, near compulsive observation, rooted in the attempt to track down some sense of a center, a concrete source for what the speaker seems to see as the slow decay of the world around us. This decay represents a book-long motif, and its measurement, observation, and authentication provides a tonal clarity made all the more troublesome within the context of the ambiguities fostered by the subject and the surrounding world.

Take for instance, a sequence from an early poem:

Both the cows and the pasture are engineered for efficiency.

The camera attaches to the gun turret

just as looking at a light
doesn't always reveal its source

or its substitute for memory

I found the hair dryer's design practical, ergonomic. (10)

The first three concrete images—engineered livestock and crops, the gun and the camera, and then the ergonomic hairdryer—in one sense, couldn't be more different, and that difference resonates in an immediate, physical way: they are random; each disappears quickly as the lines move from farm to, battlefield, to bathroom, without any discernable path. The images also all speak to a sense of efficacy and increased productivity, right down to the fact that the ergonomic principles that go into the design and manufacture of the hair dryer probably can be found in elements of battlefield technology or farm processes. That the turret finds its way into the bathroom, and vice versa hints at malevolence embodied by modern technology and consumer products that lend itself to the overall sense of the breakdown or decay of civilization.

What grows in significance as the book goes on though is the idea expressed by the lines: "The camera attaches to the gun turret / just as looking at a light / doesn't always reveal its source". First and foremost, the image of the camera attached to the gun turret speak to that malevolence perhaps best of all: both are ubiquitous representatives of modern technology and civilization, both are designed to point out-

ward and, in their own way, take the world to task. The concreteness in this sequence acts as a center not only for a discussion of technology, efficacy, and the way the images relate to one another, but also for the perpetuation of that tension between subject and the world. After all, what better way to create tension than with a camera or a gun?

With all that in mind, we must pay close and constant attention to what follows: the notion that the source may remain hidden, even when its output is readily visible and in the case of light itself makes clearer everything in its field of influence. Setting aside the variations of light one can encounter (e.g. low light, ultraviolet light, light so strong it blinds the viewer) the essence of these lines remains clear, the source is elusive, even in the best of circumstances. Elusiveness despite apparent clarity lends us a vital insight into the reality of these poems, and consequently the speaker's state of mind. There is a kind of clarity here, one that speaks to the ways in which we can read the lines above as signs of some not too distant impending doom. Images like the camera and the gun turret speak to that. But then, how can we be sure? The speaker's relentless observation and recording of the ceaseless influx of data may be clear, but are we close to the source? What's really happening?

Questioning the worth or pointing to the absurdities of modern technology or rampant consumerism isn't necessarily a novel conceit. But that isn't nearly the most interesting element of these poems. The overabundance of these images and the relentlessness of the speaker's "message," however, are compelling.

Early in "Relative Heat Index," we're thrown into another dilemma for the speaker, another variation on the speaker's lack of certainty and the elusiveness of the center: "Words / jostle and blur on the page / The fire is not cleansing," the speaker says. And

It overloads the circuits,
their fissures, and other
rooms to roam

On a feedback tundra. (10)

Language will never be entirely sufficient for the speaker, for many reasons, and the speaker realizes this, and even incorporates those weaknesses into his documenting of the world. Even as language functions as the tool by which he records the great influx of data. The fire that overloads the circuits seems to speak to the relentlessness of it all and what feels like the speaker's compulsion to record it. This is an early instance that feeds into the speaker's growing suspicion

of poetry itself. This suspicion is puzzling and difficult to place. In one sense, it can be read as simply part of the data stream. But they also act as strange moments of clarity, especially as the information in these poems becomes more harried and incongruous. Then there are moments when such statements occupy some sort of mid-space, when it becomes difficult to discern where or why such an idea might enter the conversation.

With that in mind, it becomes easier to see that the poems in this book take on a new and deserved richness if we subsume the desire to read them simply as cultural critique. Sure, This "feedback tundra" is, in one sense firmly lodged in the kind of "white noise" critique of modern American culture, one that asserts that the individual is overwhelmed to the point of emptiness and passivity by vapid entertainment, propaganda, and ideological vitriol.

But it seems to me that something more interesting is happening. Neither raving nor commentary, perhaps these poems speak to something more complex, confounding, and maybe even a little sad.

As the book progresses, this tundra looks less like the modern technological and consumer landscape, and more one of the speaker's own making. Maybe we're not looking at societal decay, as much as we're looking at the decay of the relationship between the individual and society.

Take for instance, these lines from poem later in that section:

An athlete appears on a cereal box placed
in a television show made into a movie
with a soundtrack by a singer who wears
the athlete's jersey in a video

I read about the athlete, ate the cereal,
watched the television show, missed
the movie, heard the song, didn't buy
the CD but checked out the video

Poetry is not entirely unhappy
with its debasement.

The window's wide-screen projection
folded itself into an endless swollen summer.
Green sparks squirt where chips of time scatter.

There are good reasons to be suspicious of beauty. (16)

While the first stanza provides a very clear schematic for consumption, the second stanza, which chronicles the speaker's navigation of that schematic, stands in stark contrast. The speaker's missteps in the second stanza signal a break from the otherwise fluid system presented in the first. This break from what seems like the established flow of events, or material relationships, would represent a more straightforward narrative of an individual's refusal to adhere to a hermetically sealed system that could very well be corrupt and at the very least manipulative. But what is the nature of poetry's debasement in all this? And what then allows it some happiness?

I'm not entirely sure there's a clear answer, except that the following images are indeed beautiful, both drawing out, or creating elements of the natural world out of manmade constructions: an "endless swollen summer" out of a wide-screen, "green sparks," which recalls ball-lighting and other more ethereal environmental phenomena from "chips of time." The speaker names these as reasons to be suspicious of beauty, as if the images that oppose the manmade world are in some way broken. But does this give us an idea of the source of that debasement—perhaps, if we imagine poetry in the context of these lines as a place to communicate certain things and not others. If poetry is both debased by the speaker's interruption, but also happy, then we might consider this to be a moment in which the poem is looking to communicate something else, regardless of the immediate damage.

I don't know. But it does give us some idea of the forces at work in these poems. There is a constant overturning of perception in these poems. At times, the world seems broken and suspect, and other times it is the mode with which the speaker attempts to make the world mean comes undone. Other times, it seems as if the data stream makes a meaning all its own, that the speaker is removed from the world, despite having a voice in it. This toppling and re-toppling of perspective is an interesting sensation, especially when we notice how dependent it is on the image and the various combinations of the image. And in a very real sense, the image, and their rapid exchange dominates the book.

For example, the second section, entitled "More Morphine" is a single poem, roughly twenty pages long, written in blocky, stanzas of anywhere from nine to eleven lines long. The effect mirrors the long languid heartbeats of a morphine high, or the equally slow droplets forming, elongating then falling into solution from an IV drip.

"More Morphine" is a narrative of sorts, free associative in nature, somewhere between dream-state and unguided tour, wherein the speakers draws us through a series of towns, hotels, airports, all

fuzzy, if you will, nameless and dislocated, yet with an abundance of detail Consider the push and pull of that tension, without location, yet at the center of a whorl of minutia, detail, absurd relationships, mixed with disjointed imagery, copious references and call-outs to modern technology, entertainment, and so forth.

For instance:

All we wanted for dinner was taco salad
And the chance to relax after a long day at work, as the pilot
shuts down the Plutonium-fueled rockets for a Martian
happy hour rendezvous. After all, isn't better to be respected
than respectable? A doghouse rests in a cage placed within
a fenced backyard where sweaty evangelists roll over
microphones.

Each constellation has an alternate name, an alternate fable
and an alternate configuration of the stars. Every cruise ship toilet
backed up once, forcing the passengers to wear rubber gloves
to the buffet or captain's table, with drinks mixing anything
alcoholic and free. (42)

One of the defining elements of this passage, as with the section before it, and the sections after, is the steady exchange, on the part of the speaker, of one image for the next, one scenario for the next, one internal logical or illogical move for the next. That said, the overall exchange or movement between image and value raises the question as to whether we're seeing what the speaker can't help but see or that which the speaker has some control over.

This becomes a difficult question in that the exceptionally random sequence here suggests a lack of control as much as any stylized or poetic control over the subject matter. I think it too simplistic and perhaps counter-productive to rely too much on the effects morphine such as the section title suggests, though. An important question arises from the relationship between these long arrangements of random, disjointed lines because of the insistence of the speaker that poetry cannot handle the workload. The idea, though not as frequently asserted as in the first section, persists:

History is also not a rush for the exits where steeples and minarets punctuate the rooftops. Heat shimmers off sticky asphalt next to a foreclosed livestock auction corral. Lightning flashes against wet grout and low clearance ahead, ignored by a driver asleep at the wheel in silk underwear bunching to the right.

The robbery transpired in real time, as opposed to the vitrine in which Bob Marley's soccer cleats are enshrined. Where poetry tries to swallow it whole, it jams the printer in translation. (43)

I think this is an important moment, and an important question, not least of all because this book speaks to, and in a sense assumes, at least on the surface, not only the decline of the world we live in, but also to the failure of the book's chosen medium to understand it all. If the tool fails us, then exactly how sure can we be of all this? Where is the flaw with the process such that it cannot account for the actuality of the situation? Or, what is the nature of the material by which it necessarily avoids decoding? It seems at times as if the speaker asks too much of poetry. Why burden the poem with what it cannot handle? Is that even the right question?

The speaker tells us, in "More Morphine" that "Images repeat again and again, though the messages / are difficult to discern . . ." Agreed. The third section, "Pretty Words Made a Fool of Me," is another long poem, comprised of 170 tercets, with no line over ten syllables. If section two was some kind of languid, drug induced dream, the speaker has woken up in "Pretty Words" and panics to find everything essentially the same, if not, more chaotic, more baffling:

A crowd of witnesses gathers
in front of a wall covered
with mayonnaise to which no

picture stays affixed for long,
but is another stone added
to a burnt cairn. Pink tanks

find camouflage beneath piles
of prom dresses as the
wallflowers are wall papered

with three kinds of meats. (53)

It strikes me as if we have to start thinking about what can be done with the information pouring in, rather than what one wants or hopes to do. Because the information here comes to us unrelentingly; it is strange, and frustratingly seamless. And making meaning is a struggle, the walls covered in mayonnaise a mere twenty syllables away from pink tanks and prom dresses followed by wallflowers wallpapered in "three kinds of meats" attest to that.

But there seems to be something else going on. "Pretty Words" is revealing more and more of the peculiar helplessness of the speaker. Take for instance one of the rare moments in which the speaker finds a space in the otherwise unrelenting torrent of information:

Duck and cover won't save us;
neither will a god. Hairy-knuckled
tribes push hard on the throttle

and raze villages in Dolby sound
and Bose speakers. Poetry's voice
is broken; don't fix it. Can I tell

you about our specials? Tonight
we have a fruit salad on paper plates
in a slow line of fingerprinting—

facts sliding into fictions, fictions
sliding into facts. Here comes another
set of commercials. I gotta get paid

in hair and food clogging Babylon's
drain. (57)

This shift from the dominant, free associative, image after image sensibility to the voice of the speaker urgently reflecting on the place of poetry within this particular world is jarring, if only for the way the world quashes it so quickly. "Poetry's voice is broken" echoes the lines we see emerge on the subject in the previous two sections. But the order "don't fix it," attached by semi-colon and eliminating the initial claim, feels, well, somehow darker than say poetry being "not entirely unhappy with its debasement." By this point, it seems like what we've experienced in the last two sections is the birth of an entirely different subject for decay: the poem. This quick move, from what could be the beginning of a more fully analytical statement, to a much more primal, basic order, suggests to me that the poem has taken on its own agency, and in doing so, has taken upon itself to cut the speaker off, quell the fears of, who? The reader? And change the subject entirely: "Can I tell / you about our specials?"

I'm reminded of a moment in Jean Baudrillard's travelogue, *America*, in which he ruminates on what he calls "Astral America." "Astral America," he writes "[is] the lyrical nature of pure circulation. As against the melancholy of European analysis." The distinction Bau-

drillard draws here is based on many things, but at this moment, he's alluding to the vastness of America, its open spaces, its skies, and the colossal infrastructure necessary to travel the country, especially the desert, as opposed to the cramped and huddled European experience he's used to. But also, to this idea of the centrality, which is lost to Europe through what he seems to suggest are layers of cultural manifestations, as opposed to the centrality of America, which is brought on by, ironically "the latest fast-food outlet, the most banal suburb, the blandest of the giant American cars or the most insignificant cartoon strip majorette . . ." What's more, he says, a bit cynically, "This is the only country which gives you the opportunity to be so brutally naïve: things, faces, skies, deserts are expected to be simply what they are. This is the land of the 'just as it is.'"

Setting aside the naivety, because I believe he is exceptionally cynical on this point, I hear echoes of the "just as it is" in the way the images, and with them the disjointed, sometime absurd associations, the unspoken, hidden logics, the outright staccato pace, all work to overwhelm the voice of the speaker. This is a vast, new landscape slowly pushing the speaker into position with the other information circulating through the lines and stanzas.

There is a wonderful moment, at the very end of the last poem, in which the form of the poem changes just a bit. Two lines begin at the end very end of the line's length, presenting a slight tremor in the otherwise steady poems:

There it goes

Watch it fade away with nowhere to go.

The

zookeeper's glass eye rolled into the monkey
cage, where backs and bellies bend around
flags of soldered straw (90)

I do not want to rest on this simple observation, nor necessarily claim some amazing revelation, or even rebirth via this last "effort" in the last lines of the last poem. This book invites the reader to assess and reassess a great deal of the work being done by reader, speaker, and poem, not only here but elsewhere. This book speaks to a multitude of circumstances that I have yet to consider. I would be at fault to point to my narrow view as evidence of the vastness of the landscape, yet before us is laid out a world. And still yet, there does seem to be a newness to this small moment, at the very end of the book, even as the look of it echoes the poems in "Heat Index," at the beginning of the struggle; it invites new breath where the lines should otherwise end.