

anthropomorphic vision through which an animal vision is supposed; no matter how close we get we'll always be looking through a darkly translucent window of experience. And yet *Turnpikes* moves through this articulation and mixture of languages usually confined to one division or the other - language created and defined by division - in a way that makes our distinctions seem frivolous, pointless, deeply questionable, troubling and interesting. It's a portrait of the ways to describe a companion, and of tenderness, a direct result of our inability to bridge an almost non-existent sympathetic void. "Sensation speaks to sentience, is almost understood."²³ It feels true.

Abbodies

by nicky melville (Sad Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Greg Thomas

The recurring refrain of *Abbodies* - "knowing me | knowing EU | there is nothing | we can do" - should reassure any concerned readers who have followed nicky melville's work from the typographical puns and one-word poems of *Selections and Dissections* (2010) that he is still, at heart, a gag man. This, despite dropping the hyphenated *-e* at the end of his first name, in grown-up-thirdalbum *style-e*. Spotting this reminded me of how I always felt a little betrayed as a teenage indie fan when the bands I liked stopped using the same logo on all of their album covers (Idlewild post-*100 Broken Windows* was a particularly bitter blow). Their music could no longer be pigeonholed in the same way, the gesture seemed to imply: the band had outgrown the need for fans like me, who wanted to fit their music into crass generic categories. It generally just meant they'd turned their guitars down. The bands you later realised were really interesting never had logos in the first place.

Anyway, I'm not having a go at nick-e (ha). In fact, the point I'm skirting around is that there seems to have been a genuine development in the formal and thematic content of his poetry since the more overtly poppy, concretey content of his first few collections. Whereas previously a line like the one I opened with might have constituted a whole poem, it now forms part of a dense fabric of pop and highcultural quotation, interspersed with first-person confession and reportage, that sits surprisingly comfortably in the category of modernist long-form poetry; even if melville's main intertextual source is the ABBA back catalogue. The most obvious generic reference point is the North-American post-concrete tradition running from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E to Conceptual Writing, but at times the pared-back documentary style and extensive use of quotation even reminded me of an objectivist such as Charles Reznikoff, the faux-naïve doggerel of Lorine Niedecker.

23. *Turnpikes*, p.6

A single sequence spread across an unpaginated square booklet, the first few pages of the poem offer an indirect explanation of the composition process, which in turn provides some enlightening context for the general air of multilayered complexity. The whole piece, we learn from a footnote on the inside title-page, was initially devised as a “part-homage to Néstor Perlongher’s *Corpses*, translated by Will Rowe, which contains the refrain ‘there are corpses.’” This homage survives, partly in the form of another of melville’s reworked refrains, “there is a body on the line,” but his ‘bodies’ poem in its initial guise was never completed:

so then the other night
 I realised I couldn’t do
 the ‘Bodies’ poem
 but maybe I could
 put it together with my ‘ABBA’ poem
 but I couldn’t remember what it was called

the ‘Corpses’ homage was called
 ‘there is a body on the line’
 and
 just next to it
 in the folder
 adjacently
 as CB might say²⁴
 was my ‘ABBA’ poem
 ‘This is not about the Brexit’

The next few stanzas tackle the broader issue of the author’s “weird [...] ABBA fixation,” which seems to mean “something else | to do with relationships [...] bodies on the line.” It also recounts a series of spooky “co incidences,” synergies between ABBA lyrics and bits of recently-encountered cultural detritus or biographical events which seem to convince the author that the band’s collected lyrical output is functioning as a kind of magical index or astrological chart configuring the narrative of his life. With the poet presumably convinced of the cultural and potentially metaphysical significance of his ABBA poem, the two half-finished poems are spliced into one. Hence “ABBA” and “Bodies” are rammed together to form the title.

This might partly explain why the voice of the poem – if that’s the right term – seems so nuanced, in a particular way I haven’t previously associated with melville’s work. Rather than the lyric ‘I’ simply being evacuated, as in some of his earlier visuallinguistic work, or explicitly present in polemical or irreverent guise, as in some of his Tippex erasures of Rabbin Burns, say, the mode of address seems suspended somewhere between a voice that speaks to

24. CB for Charles Bernstein, says nicky via email.

us directly from the page and the hand of the collagist, arranging transcribed fragments of speech or poetry in such a way as to make the poem a primarily visual and textual entity. Indeed, the impression of an accumulation associated fragments – an archly modernist conceit – comes across throughout.

Part of the effect of this is to imply a certain sardonic or cool-handed detachment from the emotional content of the first-person language deployed within those fragments. So the *I* who says “I was sick and tired | of everything | when I called you last | night from Glasgow” is not quite the same *I* who chops up that line and arranges it on the page (this self-distancing is also what allows the first *I* to get away with appalling puns like “knowing me knowing EU”). Except that it also *is*, of course, and it’s that double evasion which allows this work to occasionally be quite directly and disarmingly biographical, in a way that doesn’t seem cloying (though perhaps not in this case, as I’ve just realised that “I was sick and tired of everything when I called you last night” is another ABBA lyric: authorial responsibility is doubly deferred in this case, then, at the same time as the confessional content is owned through the insertion of “Glasgow,” a city from which Benny is unlikely to have called Anni-Frid, or whatever).

Making the reader *aware* of the compositional process as Melville does, meanwhile, turns that cutting and splicing process into one of the poem’s themes, as well as an enabling formal device. In this sense it plays into the whole issue of breakages and connections – break-ups that bind you to something by drawing you away from it – which provides a kind of meta-thematic key to the sequence. The book seems to be partly about the break-up of a romantic relationship:

somewhere deep
inside you
must know
I love you
r body is on the line

I don’t want
to talk
if it makes you feel
bad
sad
about things
we’ve gone through
you were in my arms
a body on the line

These are, in fact, lyrics from ‘The Winner Takes It All,’ customised through minor acts of erasure and reworking; and the same song yields another set of lines – “the judges will decide | the likes of me abide” – which points to

the second key separation at the centre of the poem. In its new context, that is, this couplet, like most of the sequence, drips with sardonic allusiveness to Brexit, an issue itself spoken about in the popular press in the cutesy language of divorce bills and break-ups. On top of which, the larger global-political climate – divisive, us-and-them nationalist politics, grand talk of breaking away, standing alone – always seems somewhere in the author’s line of sight:

building me a fence
building them a wall
building me a home
thinking I’d be strong there
is a body on the line

The ability to suspend the reader’s focus between these multiple points of reference, often within single verses or lines, by shuffling them back and forth along that meta-thematic trajectory, is one of the real strengths of the piece, testament to a compositional adroitness which belies the throwaway delivery.

A related thematic cluster centres on the figure of the alien – illegal or extra-terrestrial – a subject for which ABBA lyrics and album-titles again serve as a kind of leitmotif:

Arrival

an ABBA album
from 1976

and a film
about alien visitors
40 years later
starring Amy Adams
takes my breath away
as Louisesees the future

coincidence?

[...]

The Visitors

ABBA’s last album
from 1981
title track’s a belter

my mum and dad used to
play it in the car

when I was wee

2 years later
an American TV programme started
called *V*
starring Marc Singer
of *Beastmaster* fame
about an invasion
of aliens reptiles
disguised as humans
V is for visitors

coincidence?
I think not

Of course these are fairly paltry coincidences. The butt of the joke here is really the conspiratorial poet and his ABBA fixation. Nonetheless the (non) coincidences pile up across the sequence: one of melville's Twitter followers claims "he's attempting | 2 evolve in 2 | the best [he] can be | fore leaving planet Earth"; junk mail is received advertising an "Alien camera"; the pdf of the poet's last publication *Alert State is Heightened* is returned by his publisher titled *alienstate.pdf*; his dad used to tell him "he was actually an alien, | and would remove his mask when I was 18 | and show me his spaceship | which he kept in the woods", et cetera. There is a yawning geopolitical subtext to this the alien motif, to do with migration, dispossession, itinerancy, the refusal of refuge, and so on. But to bring the topic back round to the poem as form, the fact that words like "alien" and "break-up" can have so many layered connotations is testament to indicates an expressive tone and thematic range that transcends the straightforwardly didactic, and: a composition process that overlays multiple voices, source materials and modes of address, such that competing claims are placed on the value of single terms and phrases.

In other words, just as the confessional content is nuanced by the collage form, so too is the polemical, in a way which strengthens rather than weakens its grip on the reader, political and topical content manifesting themselves with a sustaining subtlety. At the same time, many of the poem's most affecting passages, in both senses just referred to, emerge from within the first-person narrative, through simple, almost documentary-style observational detail:

under ground
in tunnels
on railway slats
beside WH Smith's
Tie Rack
and Subway

there is a body on the line

What comes across in these lines, which seem like impressionistic sketches of homelessness on the streets of Edinburgh, is some sense of the essential facticity or arbitrariness, the potential abjection, but also the inherent value and right to recognition of any and all human experience. The tone is deeply humane, in a way which counterbalances other lines which might otherwise seem political in a slightly glib or fatuous way:

Theresa may but will
put millions of bodies on the line
they already have
fucking cuts

This counterbalancing works both ways, of course. The bodies outside Subway are not there by chance, but as the collateral victims of Tory domestic policy since 2010.

On that note, it is the scale of the injustices confronted which largely seems to generate the poem's anger. As Melville puts it:

a body is on the line
on every tack
from here
or there
to him fucked too

Still, there can occasionally be a slightly brittle quality to this kind of post-Tom Leonard demotic voice, a barely muted (masculine) aggression and sentimentality, using class-based and nationalist politics as a cover, which tends to beg various questions about the kinds of othering at work in the poet's own identity politics: the vague Anglophobia and *take-back-control* aspects of some Scottish-nationalist cant, et cetera. Of course, Melville is miles from being a main offender in this regard. Indeed, it's salutary to see that kind of voice turn on itself at times: "& if you don't get that | joke | or other national | istic references | then you don't pass | the citizen test || Scottish jokes | for | Scottish folks." But for me the "fucking cuts" aspect of his register, vital as it is to the overall tone, and nuanced as it is by that tone, could be muted a little further, especially as one of this poem's central themes is the politics of scapegoating. Thinking at a drier, formal level, the tension between first-person narrative and collage form sometimes results in odd jumps of focus, whereby rather than seeming carried along by acts of free association – thoughts flying off at a tangent – the sequence is pushed forward by arbitrary thematic shifts. Just once or twice, I could imagine old word documents being copied and pasted into new ones a little too clearly. Fucking cuts.

Really, though, these are minor gripes. *Abodies* is a formally

accomplished, moving, funny and politically vital sequence, which shows a post-concrete poet expanding his formal and thematic range in exciting ways. The shift from nick-e to nicky seems, on reflection, entirely justified.