

Thick Poetry: Soho after dark

Scarification

Two wounded narcissists floating down Dean Street
Overshadowed by a bruised sky that rains twilight stars
Wetting their hair
Scarring the ground
Tearing the fabric of the sky
-
A tattered chiffon shroud
Their only protection against the oncoming storm
Pounding its beat
(Malicious tyrant)
Smiling on the iniquity of their embrace

Morphia

Becalmed
A thirsty sailor
On a whisky sea

Drink me till your lips bleed
The ocean whispered
Come drown in me

Morpheus stood on deck
And stared into his love
Broken glass on a frozen lake in the summer breeze

Laudanum sleep

Brought Auden's revolting succubus

But his eyes were open

His soul was closed

And his eyes were borscht

Devil moonrise played across time bleached beard

And the sea laughed at him

Perfume

I step out

Into the thick air

Lond'n at night

So cold it burns my lungs

And then

A silent deafening scream

As my brain convulses at the scent

Expensive smoke from a lazy Galoise

Fragrances my lungs

And my clothes

Breath fogs in the thick air

And the man in the cream mac

Disappears into the ether

A wraith dissolving into the fog

Twilight falls fast

The fog turns the colour of sloe,

Then houndstooth grey

Then midnight black

I step into a taxi

And leave

...

Last night it rained

So I stood under a street lamp

And smoked

And my friend burnt out

And the street lamp went out

And I stood in the dark

And I coughed

And the street lamp came back on

Progress

The rake passed

And passed on

The illusion of understanding

Into your eyes

Yet they were mirrors to him

Licentious fop

Nihilistic cad

Puritanical libertine

Traced his crimson nails

Through velvet garden

To the goldmine in the trees

Diamonds still sparkle in the gloom

But breathe

And they will blow out

As candles gutter

Before the long shadows gather

And consume

Well...you loved him for that one moment

'why are men such beasts darling?'

The city wakes

You looked old this morning
Like you aged 34 years in the time I'd been asleep
Then you stir and it passes
21 again

Mumbled concatenation
Will follow
Tabula rasa of a windswept mind
Sets an empty breakfast table
With ebony idols and old teeth
And we drink orange juice
Off a yellowed piano
And share the last slice of toast

The morning is soft
And wet leaves plaster the cold ground
Turning it molten gold
Bleeding with autumnal tears
The wind makes the trees cry
And we stand in their fall

We kiss
you say good bye
And I walk away
A mere shipwreck

Ethnographic Statement

Soho is an area of London, bound by the A40 to the North, Chinatown to the South, Charing Cross road to the East and Regent Street to the West, with many of London's most esteemed tailoring houses lying beyond this Western border on Savile Row. In Soho, tailors offer the same handmade quality but with their own idiosyncrasies. Sir Tom Baker bring a punk flavour to his tailoring with zips, studs and skull buttons, Mark Powell blends gangster chic with mod and neo-Edwardian influences, and Chris Kerr nonchalantly dresses many of the titans of the music and film industry. Soho has always been about entertainment of one form or another, and the historical sex industry centred around Brewer Street is no exception – with the neon-lit sex shops adding to the cultural milieu.

The first four poems incorporate snatches of overheard conversation and clippings of song lyrics that streamed out of pubs and bars into Soho's night time streets. In this way they are partly a bricolage drawing on element of Dada but ultimately attempt to phenomenologically evoke the atmosphere (following Ingold, 2015: 73-78) of London's Soho after dark. I frame this creative ethnographic praxis as a kind of thick poetry, building on Geertz's (1973) concept of thick description, but also Deger's (2016) notion of 'thick photography'. This poetic style intentionally juxtaposes an author's voice who, at time, inhabits the characters he observes, with shifting interpretations of the language used. This intellectually embraces Wittgenstein's (2009) notion of *Sprachspiel* to accentuate the problem of interpretation when dealing with snatches of overheard conversation and new ethnographic informants.

Following Maréchal and Linstead (2010) these five poems seek to capture the moment being witnessed – linguistic photographs of a sort. They are not metropoems, following Jouet (2000), but do take inspiration from the urgency given to witnessing an individual moment in the field and needing to capture it. It is apt that Linstead (2022: 111) draws comparison between the smartphone camera and the poem, as well as how the process of a quick snap versus a carefully composed image changes both the outcome and the intellectual and artistic meaning of the finished object – particularly when trying to capture something quickly. This speaks to the simultaneous visual ethnographic work that was conducted alongside writing these poems (see Bluteau, 2021, 2022) throughout the period of fieldwork, and demonstrates how moving beyond ethnographic prose allows us to 'see...differently' (Linstead, 2022: 102).

References

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