

TEARING AT THE VEIL

SOME THOUGHTS ON DONOVAN'S DEVOTIONS

MICHAEL CROSS

That Thom Donovan enjoys intensely devoted readers, despite the plainly criminal fact that his work remains difficult to find, provides an important approach to his poetics. Those in proximity to his person and practice (his person *as* practice), in regional communities such as Buffalo, New York, and San Francisco, read his writing with inestimable interest, and recognize immediately that engaging with Donovan is implicitly acknowledging *community as practice* – a fact made tangible by his few *distributed* works, which, to date, amount to two collaborations: the meditative short text, *Tears Are These Veils*, in collaboration with collage artist Abby Walton, and *Mantle*, a long poem written with Kyle Schlesinger (after George Oppen). As such, Donovan's writing asks to be read as polyphonic *response* to collective aesthetical investigation, even when his voice is ostensibly alone (though it rarely is, as his poetry nearly always doubles *as* *dedication*). Each line is a renewed engagement, a *flicker*, a *splitting*, in the sense that the poem gauges the temperature of his thinking *with/for others*, and as such tunes the *pitch* of engagement as variously extensive and infinitely progressive.

I'd attribute Donovan's reticence to "conquer" the publishing establishment to an ethics of *approach*. He does not so much *occupy* textual engagement as outline an aperture one *could* inhabit, as I imagine Levinas might as poet, only to reject this spectral architecture for another *possible* room, another possible mode of engagement. As such, I experience Donovan's writing as a kind of *divining*, a responsive intimacy that refuses to differentiate joy from mourning, *interiority* from *exteriority*. The result is reminiscent of Gordon Matta Clark's architectural excavations, in which interior intimacy opens to exterior gaze (and *visa versa*). Donovan accordingly strikes holes in the partitions of affect – investigating refraction, repetition, reflection by insisting (in the words of Carl Andre) that "a thing is a hole in the thing it is not." In fact, I read *all* of Donovan's work as devotional texts, prayers that leave tears in their objects of devotion, loosening, overlapping, developing an intimate proximity *other than* quotidian collage, quotation, and montage. These are devotions to mentors, devotions to colleagues, sites of homage to visual art, minimalist music, and cinema, especially to the flicker films of Tony Conrad, the visual tableaux of Sergei Paradjanov, the conceptual apparatus of Robert Smithson. These voices, coupled with an interest in the poetry of John Taggart, where the loop *produces* a splitting or flicker, creates the *ta'wil* of the bardo site, where possibility refuses to exhaust itself in act, but *resurrects* to a place of potential. His homage occludes and occults only to *wash out* in a crystallization he might call, after Benjamin, *white eschatology*.

He writes in *Tears are These Veils*,

In incidents
How blessed the difference

The difference open-air makes
Vision is a disagreement
Focus has with itself
We are not these walls anyway
For which shadows are cast
These cuts of trees & cut water
Mourning when attention wasn't
Of unreal things
Their misshapen joy in a refracted beam

In this lyric missive, Donovan applies the lens of Objectivist detail to the shape of *concept*, so that sight, sound, and intellection (liquid, solid, gas), stand in the kind of equilibrium Zukofsky privileged with the gift of his late imagination, where to “understand” is to “under-stand,” and compound composition retains its complexity by insisting on its naked *simplicity* (in whole and part). I think of Donovan as one part Robert Smithson, one part George Oppen, or, better, the love child of Ad Reinhardt and Charles Reznikoff (however gruesome that sounds!) – a *shmoosh* of conceptual art and objectivist sensibility that retains simplicity and accuracy of detail by challenging “simplicity,” “accuracy,” and “detail” in conceptual terms *with* conceptual rigor.

In his recent publication, *Into Bride (Army of Roses)*, which couples Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* with a meditation on female suicide bombers, Donovan executes this practice by formally alternating between the conceptual apparatus of *suiciding* and the intimacy of a lyric voice *undertaking*. He's best, however, when the conceptual-lyrical blurs the dividing line between thought and song (interior and exterior):

Disjunctively a paradise in clearer shades
Clear Light of vows what veiled accomplice
trials of mesh what mirror felt to face salvation inside *in*

And later,

Eternity (no One) is yet Divine not the staircase yet “you” would ascend the ledge &
fail to fall to descend a fatal ladder creative of Any unawaking

More than any writer of my generation (with whom I am acquainted), Thom Donovan is a writer of *ideas*, a poet I might, in good conscious, call *experimental*. Rather than satisfy himself with our generation's desire for parataxis, “surprise,” irony (in other words, what often *passes* as experiment), Donovan challenges his writing to truly *engage* with the secret collusion between “concept” and “image:” *visually sonic thought*. I see in his poetry the “new lyric” presaged by the *New Coast*, but what's genuinely *new* is a “lyric” model that refuses to foreclose “musical intimacy” in “immediacy” or “transparency.”

Donovan's *Into Bride (Army of Roses)* is printed in its entirety in O Books' recent anthology, *War and Peace 3*, and his collaboration with Kyle Schlesinger, *Mantle*, is available in Schlesinger's new volume, *Hello Helicopter* (BlazeVox). A Donovan primer would begin with his long out of print collaboration *Tears Are These Veils*, which can be read on his weblog, *Wild Horses of Fire* (whof.blogspot.com).