Segue

online literary journal

Sean Howard
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Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round via email. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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Author Notes

Sean Howard is the author of two collections of poetry, Local Calls (Cape Breton University Press, 2009) and Incitement (Gaspereau Press, 2011). His work has been published in numerous Canadian magazines, as well as Illuminations (USA) and The Rialto (UK). His Shadowgraphs Project is currently being supported by a Creative Writing Grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. Sean is an adjunct professor of political science at Cape Breton University, researching nuclear disarmament issues and the political history of twentieth century physics.

About the Work

Since 2006, I have been working on a project to convert each Nobel physics lecture delivered in the twentieth century—some 150 addresses, all but one of them by men!—into a “shadowgraph,” a poetic X-ray or exposé of hidden themes, latent or repressed symbols, unconscious images, etc.

The name of the project is taken from the citation for the first Prize, awarded to Wilhelm Röntgen of Germany in 1901 for his (accidental) discovery of X-rays: “Now, when a foreign body impermeable to X-rays, e.g. a bullet or a needle, has entered these tissues its location can be determined by illuminating the appropriate part of the body with X-rays and taking a shadowgraph of it on a photographic plate, whereupon the impenetrable body is immediately detected.”

As I explained at a public reading (Cape Breton University, November 2007), “the unsubverted prose of the lectures constitutes, for me, an ‘impenetrable body’: a solid wall of confidence in the capacity of modern western science to penetrate to the inner sanctum of nature and, in the inexorable process, deliver infinite progress and prosperity to humanity. But there is a terrible dark side to this enlightenment—a hidden or inner shadow that I think can be shown, its plots exposed, on the ‘poetic graphs’ resulting from a radical rereading.

The main technique deployed is a variant of the dada-inspired “cut-up” method pioneered most prominently by Brion Gysin and William Burroughs in the 1950s. I call the approach, which I first developed about fifteen years ago, “downlining”: copying the text onto a series of ten-word by ten-word grids, then reading the words downwards, exploring, reflecting and elaborating on the (often shocking; frequently hilarious; occasionally grotesque) images produced or suggested. The basic idea, as I noted in my presentation, is that when you “cut-up” or scramble a text, any text, you “transform it, release its bound poetic energy: you split—for peaceful, if creatively explosive, purposes—apparently dead, and deceptively solid, ‘atoms’ of meaning, symbol and sound.”

In 1997, the British poetry magazine Envoi published some of my early experiments in “downlining.” The editor asked for a short explanatory note, in which I wrote: “The following poems…aim to generate ‘meaningful coincidences’, or incidents, between different parts of a text (or between texts). The premise is that language can be taken out of its ‘natural’ or habitual, awoken state and put into a dreamlike state (something like the shift from the classical to the quantum physical world); and that that state can be monitored, and engaged with.”

On average, each shadowgraph takes around twelve hours to write: three or four to read the lecture and transcribe it onto the grids; eight or nine to uncover, work with, reflect on, amplify, select and edit the results. The easiest part of the process is pocketing the wonderful free
gifts sometimes offered by the re-juxtaposed words; the hardest part is forcing yourself to accept, to both witness and trust, the dream-logic involved, to neither force the issue nor impose a pre-emptive or reductive interpretation (as can sometimes happen in science itself).

I was particularly pleased, and peculiarly affected, by shadowgraph 69, a “poetic plate” illuminating the interior of Donald Glaser’s 1960 lecture “Elementary Particles and Bubble Chambers.” Glaser, inventor of the bubble chamber method of tracking particles released in atomic collisions, was only thirty-four when he received the Prize, and his lecture is full of youthful, infectious enthusiasm. Yet he also talks about peering into “ovens with windows” with no inkling, seemingly, of the broader, darker connotation of the phrase as image: the glimpse the words give into other chambers, where other experiments were conducted, particles destroyed.

In the early nineteenth century the English poet Charles Lamb wrote: “The true poet dreams being awake. He is not possessed by his subject.” To judge by the Nobel lectures, scientists very often are possessed by theirs; they cannot always see the shadow they cast. It takes a kind of dream to do that; and in our scientific-technological—our sometimes sleepwalking—age, poetry can be just that, a kind of cultural dreaming.

Sean Howard on the Web

www.zafusy.org/poetry/seanhoward

stonestone.unbc.ca/issues/authors/howard.html