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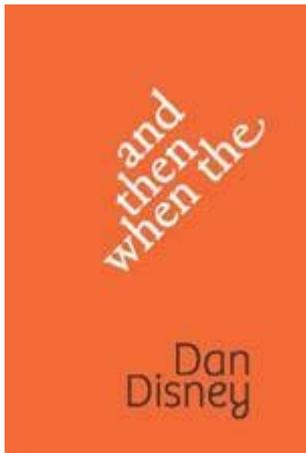
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TEXT review

Hunting cannibals: Dan Disney's *and then when the*

review by Cassandra Atherton



Dan Disney
and then when the
John Leonard Press, St Kilda 2011
ISBN 9780980852325
Pb 60pp AUD24.95

'How to Hunt March Hare' points to the Carrollian nature of Dan Disney's debut collection of poetry, *and then when the*. The poem begins and ends with the following lines:

Take a gun (unloaded) to the hole one moonless night. Call your closest taxidermy friends and tell them to stay at home. Take a portable fence on which to sit. If making noise do so politely. Wait.

...

Annunciate loudly 'come up with your hands out!' and have the orchestra undertake an overture. Listen for the rustling of abstraction beneath you. Rant as though there was a moon tonight. Load the gun with a paper sheet. Wait.

Pull out a cigarette. Keep waiting. Grab more beer. Looks like everyone here is in for the long haul.

The poem's title is expressed horizontally, but the poem, itself, is rotated ninety degrees to the right, so that the words reach vertically down the page. The reader has two choices: either to physically rotate

the book so that the poem is horizontal, or to orient his/her eyes and read from right to left and down the page.

Heidegger's phenomenological assessment of Kant and his theories of concealment are also referenced throughout Disney's collection in an explosion of postulations. Therefore, the physical orientation of the poem and the way it is read is perhaps a nod to Heidegger and the way in which he was influenced by Eastern philosophical thought, The Kyoto School. The positioning of 'How to Hunt a March Hare' is also reminiscent of John Barth's postmodern opening to *Lost in the Funhouse* where the 'Frame-Tale' is written vertically on different sides of the one page in order for it to be cut out by the reader and made into a Möbius strip. This is the kind of wit and intellectual play that features in Disney's poetry.

The Elmer Fudd-like narrator appears to be as mad as a March hare, despite purporting to be hunting one. At first, he 'puts an (unloaded) gun to the rabbit hole' (16), only later, 'load(ing) the gun with a paper sheet' (16). In this way, the blank page becomes a weapon and the anxiety of the blank page is ready to explode into the darkness. The vertical alignment stretches the poem down the rabbit hole and tilts the reader's expectations so that he/she is encouraged to accompany the words down the rabbit hole as they slip down the page. Like all clever leporidae, the rabbit is victorious in the end, as after waiting half the night, the narrator concedes that he is 'in for the long haul' (16). Certainly, the questions about poetry and philosophy that Disney poses in this collection have been debated for centuries, and like the hares, are very unlikely to be pinned down in one night, or in one poetry collection.

Like Carroll, Disney explores language in incredibly clever word games. Indeed, the illogicality of language, and the relationship between sense, and nonsense, is highlighted in a series of Disney's poems that try to make sense of the world and the connection between poetry and philosophy. Whereas Carroll's armoury is composed of mathematics, Disney prefers philosophy. The line, '... never come to thoughts. They come to us' (36), not only references Heidegger's quotation, 'We never come to thoughts./They come to us./That is the proper hour of/discourse. Discourse cheers us to/ companionable reflection (36)', but invokes Heidegger's oeuvre in the epigraph: 'Heidegger *Poetry, Language, Thought*' (36). This points to the way in which Disney uses the language of philosophy and couples it with the patois of everyday language to explore the 'neighbouring' of poetry and thinking. In the following poem, Ern Malley, Buddha and William Wordsworth appear alongside a Neanderthal in boats, reminiscent of Wordsworth's 'spots of time' and his experience of the sublime. The surreal moment with which this poem opens, where a trapdoor allows the reader to see the inner workings of the brain, is wonderfully Archimedean. This is the only other 'rotated' poem in the collection:

A trapdoor has been opened in the head. Inside, historical figurines are rowing, spectred
 and quaffing logos at the feet of mountains. See here! among them Ern Malley's shape,
 toasting Plato and the Elysian mosquito swamps... Up – and-coming nature poet W Wordsworth, seasick
 as usual, peers over the prow and moans, "Maybe there's a force at work
 Wordsworth thinks, a force that can open heads to screw ideas
 into place.

The 'Up-and-coming nature poet', W Wordsworth and the way in which he is seasick in Disney's poem, references both Wordsworth's voyage to Germany in 1798 and his manifesto of English Romantic criticism in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. In this way, Disney aims to speak in 'the real language of men', which Wordsworth identifies as

‘more permanent and more philosophical’ (Wordsworth 1979: 5). Disney’s character W Wordsworth muses that, ‘maybe there’s a force that can open heads to screw in ideas’ (36). It is a wonderfully surreal moment which, when it is twinned with the Satrean epigraph to Disney’s book: ‘... how strongly things exist today’, suggests that the collection turns on its appeal to permanence and ‘repeated experience’ (36), only to find it all transitory.

In a series of cannibalistic or perhaps Tiddalickian moments, Disney consumes the work of an array of writers, artists and philosophers and purges them on the page in a brilliant series of intertexts. Indeed, many of Disney’s poems use epigraphs, forging poetic relationships between himself and Wallace Stevens, Barnett Newman, John Brack, Anne Carson, Umberto Eco, Immanuel Kant, Orhan Pamuk, Michel Houellebecq, Plotinus, Mary Shelley, Buddha, Horace, Primo Levi, Martin Heidegger and Gianluca Lena. Other poems reference Kurt Vonnegut, Jorie Graham, Siddhartha Gautama, Wittgenstein and Herman Hesse. The eclecticism of Disney’s choices is exhilarating and makes reading *and then when the* like spotting the ‘Who’s who’ in the Arts. This consumption is referenced in the hilarious ‘Ecce Hombres’:

A thing eats a thing
and is eaten
by another thing. This thing
not lasting long, is eaten
by a further thing
the further thing eaten by something
again, eaten
soon after
by something else....

This thing is
eaten by another thing called Craig.
Craig
though perhaps never believing in
the unstoppable nature of destiny
is also eaten. (17)

This modern take on ‘There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly’ is also a nod to Stoker’s zoophagous character, Renfield, a madman obsessed with consuming life. Disney’s poem on the survival of the fittest concludes with Craig, the only named ‘thing’, being eaten by an unnamed thing. Craig is no *Übermensch* and thus is consumed, perhaps by existentialism.

The title of Disney’s collection of poetry, *and then when the*, is wonderfully curious. It begins and ends in the middle of something, without identifying exactly what that something is. In this way, Disney speaks to the modern world; we are always in the middle of something and our thoughts are often interrupted. Disney’s brilliant collection of poetry is the force that ‘opens [readers’] heads to screw in ideas’ (36).

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[Return to Contents Page](#)

[Return to Home Page](#)

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