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John Hall

“So you don’t tell all your meaning”: two poems by Douglas Oliver

DOUGLAS OLIVER’s first collection of poems came out from Ferry Press¹ in 1969 during the brief period when he was living in Cambridge and working on the *Cambridge Evening News*. It is called *Oppo Hectic*, is about forty pages long and consists of twenty-four separate poems, two of them only seven lines long. At the other end of his writing career, cut short by his death at the age of sixty-two in April 2000, he was working on his ambitious Arrondissements² project, most of which was published posthumously. This was “designed to reflect the world at large through the prism of Paris”.³ That phrase, ‘the world at large’, catches the ambitions. The longest Arrondissements piece is the ‘double memoir’, *Whisper ‘Louise’* (2005), mostly in prose, over four-hundred pages long, and woven through with something of a final testimony that offers autobiographical insight into his poetic purposes.⁴ Others were *A Salvo for Africa* (2000) and *Arrondissements* (2003), which includes a long narrative poem called ‘The Video House of Fame’.

Between *Oppo Hectic* and *Arrondissements* were a number of very significant publications, all of them coherent projects of a certain scale rather than collections of separate poems: *The Harmless Building* (1973), a novel; *In the Cave of Suicession* (1974), an account of a consultation with the ‘oracle’ of a cave in Derbyshire; *The Diagram Poems* (1979), a set of poems, drawings and prose instigated by news-room accounts of Tupamaro guerrilla activity in Uruguay; *The Infant and the Pearl* (1985), a dream-narrative about a Britain transformed by the policies of Margaret

1 This was the press of the poet Andrew Crozier.

2 I shall use Arrondissements (no italics) for the project as a whole and *Arrondissements* (italics) for the 2003 publication of that name.

3 *Arrondissements*, edited by Alice Notley (Great Wilbraham: Salt Publishing, 2003), p. x.

4 See my ‘Ventriloquising Against Harm,’ an extended review of *Whisper ‘Louise’*, *Jacket* 30 (2006) jacketmagazine.com/29/hall-oliver.html [Accessed August 30, 2009].

Thatcher; and *Penniless Politics* (1994), a narrative that imagines a multi-ethnic political movement in New York.⁵

Even though this later work can be readily discussed in terms of its topic and extra-poetic purpose, Oliver was always interested in prosody, the fundamental feature of which, for him, is stress or beat,⁶ as the modality of language that makes poetry “a primordial form of knowing”.⁷ This is both technical and much more than technical, and in Douglas’s view this form of knowing is quite simply necessary for social and political well-being. Where “prosody” is fundamental, “genre and style” were for him contingent, tactical decisions responding to context and purpose.⁸ In Oliver’s case, context could include his sense of political obligation.

There is a tension here familiar to contemporary poets: two kinds of obligation that can feel at odds. In a conviction that poetry is itself invaluable as a modality of thought and knowledge, a poet’s responsibility can be felt primarily to the poem and its means (in analogy, perhaps, with the notion of ‘pure science’). This approach can very evidently irritate and/or intimidate readers, who might also need to be specialists to engage satisfyingly. Without non-specialist readers an “avant-garde”⁹ poet has little chance of directly affecting social, political and economic behaviour. In a distinction that John Keats developed in some of his letters, this tension can be described as between a trust in the “negative capability” of the “chameleon poet” and poems of the “egotistical sublime” with their “palpable design on others”.¹⁰ In the first,

5 *Three Variations on The Theme of Harm: Selected Poetry and Prose* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1990) included the otherwise unpublished ‘The Island That is All the World’, a piece that anticipates *Whisper ‘Louise’* in its autobiographical meditations.

6 Douglas Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) is an extended discussion of this topic, which also appears in, among others: *Three Variations on The Theme of Harm*, p. 57; ‘Three Lilies’, in Denise Riley (ed.), *Poets on Writing: Britain 1970–1991* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 276–281; *Penniless Politics* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe 1994), p. 36.

7 *Whisper ‘Louise’*, p. 162.

8 *Arrondissements*, p. xi.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Most readers will be familiar with Keats’s remarks in various letters, the most quoted

the poet's persona is subsumed into the textual matter of the poem; the second is driven by a purpose beyond the poem and the poet may speak directly though it. Douglas Oliver wanted to be able to work across both poles or to treat them as stylistic options, without risk of betraying poetic thought. *The Infant and the Pearl*, *Penniless Politics* and *Salvo for Africa*, the most explicitly 'political' poems, may be the ones that put this wish to the greatest test, and a different article could compare *Oppo Hectic* with these. Even though I want this polar distinction to be in the air, I don't want to impose it and am more interested here in the continuities. I shall use the methods of close reading as most apt for attention to the poetic particularities of negative capability and restrict myself to two poems, greatly different in length and from each end of his career: 'Sheep Movements', one of the seven-line poems from *Oppo Hectic*, and the long narrative poem from *Arrondissements*, 'The Video House of Fame'. Their differences, and not only in length, elicit different kinds of reading. I shall give them more or less equal attention, despite their differences in length and apparent ambition.

Here is the whole of 'Sheep Movements':¹¹

Sheep movements stream first within sheep
then the whole flock crowds in motion
so you don't tell all your meaning
though much breaks ahead but during
the breath's lifetime a fuller sense
surges forward and there's laughter
some yours

To my ear the poem manages to combine a definite ending with a refusal to stop moving. This unsettledness may have a number of sources. The poem is 'about' movement, and a thrust of active verbs in the present

being the letter to his brothers, 21/12/1817, p. 72; to Reynolds, 3/2/1818, p. 96; and to Woodhouse, 27/10/1818, p. 227–8. Page references to M.B. Forman (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1948).

¹¹ *Oppo Hectic* (London: Ferry Press, 1969), p. 26; *Kind* (London, Lewes, Berkeley: Allardyce, Barnett, 1987), p. 33.

tense accentuates this: “stream ... crowds ... breaks ... surges”. In this posture of present tense, it leans “ahead ... forward”, both spatially and temporally. There is also a doubling of discursive modes, in that the poem is at once imagistic and propositional. It apparently draws on an affective perceptual occasion and looks to represent that occasion: look at these sheep that I saw and now give to you to see. And there seems also to be a set of propositions, perhaps about “sheep movements”, and perhaps also a tracking of movements of psychological and linguistic association, which may evoke some vague sense that analogy is at work. There are people—not just the poet—in the poem, registering a sociality that may be at odds with the convention of a solitary observer giving utterance in tranquil recollection.

In my reading, these are specific sheep in a specific setting. But the absence of an initiating article and then a sequence of logical operators (“first ... then ... so ... through ... but”) also suggest a wish to understand a category or “kind”, and here “movement” is as important as “sheep”. The “so” that starts the third line is the first crux, moving as it does into “you”, in this context grammatically ambiguous as person (you? I? one?), and implying a causal link (“so you”). I hear “you” as stressed, which makes it the more puzzling that I also hear the line without it: “so don’t tell all your meaning”. “Don’t tell” is such a familiar injunction in aspects of social life, and also within the aesthetic whose catch phrase is “Show; don’t tell”. It invokes for me Billie Holiday’s ‘Don’t Explain’¹² or the “Don’t describe” of the horse in Edward Dorn’s *Gunslinger*.¹³ And another poem seems to be playing in the background:

Never pain to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;¹⁴

¹² Lyrics by Billie Holiday with Arthur Herzog, Jr.; sung by Holiday and first recorded in 1944.

¹³ Edward Dorn, *Slinger* (Berkeley: Wingbow Press, 1975).

¹⁴ William Blake, a note-book fragment with deletions and substitutions (e.g. “pain” for “seek”) in *Complete Writings*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 161.

The already unsettled “meaning” is further unsettled by “love”.

I find I am not yet done with this “so”. It too has not settled. It has the inductive force of a “therefore” without the full inductive logic. This leaves it open to a very different operation, that of “just as”, a conjunctive device or frame-switch into analogy or extended metaphor. Far from clumsy, this is assured, nimble-footed. Let me risk literal-mindedness. A movement going on “within sheep” is not directly observable but can be inferred from the movements that are: what instigated this apparently spontaneous collective movement if not interior movements? And meanwhile the poem-movements flock and crowd. A series of three *ms* arrives at *meaning* by way of *movement* and *motion*, where meaning is a movement rather than a fixed truth. And the preliminary movement towards meaning is within, not yet articulated into utterance, and nor can it ever be.

Throughout there is this articulatory phonic movement, this attention to prosody. Variants of *s/sh* sounds do not stop the breath but hiss and shush it through the teeth or against the front palate. Of the eight syllables of the first line five include either one of them and in three cases—“sheep ... stream ... sheep”—combine them with the wide-lipped, long *ee*. These give way in the next line to a flock of stressed open-mouthed *o/orw* sounds of “whole flock crowds ... motion”. These movements are sustained through “so ... don’t ... though” with the closely related “during ... your ... forward ... yours”. Long vowels move.

This little poem explains nothing but offers an intelligence that is inseparable from its shape, its mode of utterance, its economy of means, and it is quite strong enough to survive my laboured commentary.

I am about to jump ahead thirty years or so to ‘The Video House of Fame’. In the thirty years since *Oppo Hectic*, aspects of his poetic ambitions had changed markedly, others had perhaps simply developed or adapted. The early lyric poems are self-sufficient. The author/poet is present to the text through personal pronouns and proper nouns but operates through negative capability, putting language into play but not

appearing to wish to speak over or beyond the text. There are later lyric poems but they are more likely either to belong in thematic sets ('The Shattered Crystal' and 'China Blue', from *Arrondissements*, for example), and include direct authorial comment, or to be shaped as carefully structured narratives, in which some version of the author is present, sometimes exercising the "positive capability"¹⁵ of being the one who speaks and takes a civic as well as poetic responsibility for doing so.¹⁶ In these cases the poet is a figure in the poem, either as the lyric first-person or as a narrator who might or might not be given a proxy or, as in *Penniless Politics*, as a third person ascribed the attributes of Douglas Oliver.¹⁷

It seems to me that three strong and related drives contributed to these changes in his work: the imperatives of mortality, first experienced with the death of his son, Tom; a passionate empathy for the kind of innocence for which Tom, who was a Down's Syndrome child, could stand as type; and a growing anger against a global political economy designed to flourish only at the cost of harm to the innocent and poor. The related obligations, given the calling of poet, were firstly to remember (the dead, the poor, the innocent), and then to find poetic means to engage with the forces—economic, intellectual, cultural—of the present.

Oliver described his method for the *Arrondissements* project as to "investigate these arrondissements until an idea comes to me for a piece of writing suggested by the nature of the district".¹⁸ This is a very loose framing device, not one aimed at producing a systematic portrait or history of city. Instead, the modern city is symptomatic. It can be existential setting ('Well of Sorrows in Purple Tinctures'); it can be read ('China Blue'); it can be read and seen *from* (*A Salvo for Africa*, perhaps "The Video House of Fame"); it can be treated as an archive of significant loss ("The

¹⁵ I don't think Keats himself ever used this formulation, though it is fully implied by "negative capability".

¹⁶ See, for example, 'The Dumb Barter', in *A Salvo for Africa*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000), pp. 9–14

¹⁷ The 'poet of the poem', Will Penniless, is described as "immigrant Anglo-Scots" (17), "a non-franchised alien, a BBC speaking Scotsman / who'd seen a bit of the world" (24).

¹⁸ *Arrondissements*, p. x.

Shattered Crystal'), or of significant political memoir (*Whisper Louise*). 'Video House' is most obviously prefigured in Oliver's work by the early *In the Cave of Suicession*, in which the *poet*¹⁹ enters a Derbyshire cave to consult the resident oracle, and also by his earlier borrowing of the medieval dream convention in *The Infant and the Pearl*. In 'Video House', instead of oracular cave there is the game parlour; instead of oracle, a video game requiring skill, speed and interpretative cunning (or skilled deceit with the help of a "Video Cheats Bible"). Chaucer's early and unfinished *House of Fame* is a source and starting point.²⁰ Oliver replaces the figure of dreamer in search of knowledge with poet figure taking on the 'dream-world' of a prototype video game called *Regender*, which is:

many kinds of game in one. It trains you to perform in all the virtual worlds created by Cody Productions Inc: ®.
(*Arrondissement*, p. 51)

Dream vision is replaced with interactive commodity vision: competing to see, win and know. The framing device is the arcade, the video house itself. The only people in it are the *poet*, for whom this video-game is action-research, the manager, and an arcade-bum, who has to hustle for coins with which to feed the machines. The *poet* plays the game, mostly on his own, but for one episode as a two-player game with the bum. The manager, at home with arcade-bums, is edgy about this other alien figure, with his note book:

He waves at all the luminous screens.
"People taking notes are not part of the concept."
"*Je suis un poete anglais*," I tell him.
"I'm in train of writing a long work here."
He stiffens like a virtualised security guard.
"You should have introduced yourself,"
he leers, and glides away. (p. 96)

19 I shall use *poet* (italics) for the poet-figure presented to us through the text of the poem.
20 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Works*, edited by F.N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 282 ff.

This explanation only keeps the manager at bay for a while. Next time, the *poet* tries this:

Surely money
Gives me the power to play myself. (p. 111)

This, one of the themes of the piece, is more persuasive, and later he buys the manager off. Interpretation is required, at speed, within the terms of the game. Interpretation *of* the game triggers a surcharge and sets up a confusing complexity of 'I's and 'you's, without any assurance that a change in 'level' or of character will provide resolution.

my real life hands me
limited choices in a western adventure
defined by history, fuddled by financiers
and completed with death. I'm trapped
in **REGENDER** same way I'm trapped
by my culture. (p. 130)

As for the title of the game, how are we to take it? The OED gives it as an obsolete term meaning, "To beget again; to make or create afresh; to form anew". A late twentieth-century ear was likely to hear it as something like "to change or refresh sexual identity".²¹ In either sense, the characters in the game are either 'unregendered' or are caricatures of a rhetorical androgyny. Chaucer used the term "gendres" early in *The House of Fame*,²² where the poet professes his ignorance of dream *types*, with their different significances. This is the earlier sense of "kind, sort or class" (OED), cognate with that word that Oliver chose as the title for his 1987 retrospective collection, *Kind*.

²¹ This last is explicitly an interest of Oliver's. See, for example *Whisper 'Louise'*, p. 321.

²² for I certainly
Ne kan hem noght, ne never thinke
To besily my wyt to swinke,
To knowe of hir signifaunce
The gendres

Chaucer, *The Complete Works*, p. 282, lines 14–18.

Regender: to change kind, or to revert to kind. But the game offers nothing in the way of preferred Utopian being, its skilled and stylised violence reminiscent of Oliver's abiding ambivalence about boxing.

Oliver adapts Chaucer's octosyllabic couplets into fast-moving columns, with much less conspicuous prosodic artifice than *The Infant and the Pearl*, with its more stylised source. Typographical devices indicate different narrative layers: boxed text for screen-grabs; (slower) left aligned columns of longer-lined text for narrating the framing events and for reflections on the game and its implications; (fast) inset narrow columns for the 'real-time' account of playing and reacting to the immediacy of play; (slow) *pro forma* format for excerpts from the Cheats Bible. This is all sustained for over a hundred pages.

I have no idea myself how plausible *Regender* is as a video-game and, if it is, how much of its time (mid 1990s?) it now seems. I have no doubt that Oliver spent hours playing as part of his research, and a note at the end of his poem acknowledges "help from such magazines as *Play* [...] and *Edge*, along with their French counterparts, *Joystick* and *CD Consoles*." In the poem, the poet is a relative innocent in this context and seems to want to learn how to play the game in order to learn from it. "You are innocent when you dream", sings Tom Waits²³ and on the whole it is the dreamer's first task to describe the strangeness of the dream in which s/he is helpless to act as either critic or antagonist. Dreamer is a figure of and for negative capability. The innocent game player is almost in the same position, disarmed from ethical judgement by the immediate haptic demands of the game, only later in any kind of position to provide an overarching judgement or interpretation. Later 'dream work' of that kind is deliberately eschewed. This is how the narrative ends:

One thrush on a bough,
slides past; it seems the past
is a set of losses, songs on a
bough in the mind.

23 Tom Waits, *Franks Wild Years* (New York: Island Records, 1987).

You have failed REGENDER

**Do you want to play another
game**

Insert coins now

Dehelmet. Hand my remaining change to my 20 franc friend. “A *toi*,” I say. At the door, I watch the manager watching him as his thin body jerks in the motions of **REGENDER**.

That thrush on a bough is sliding past on the screen of a video game, an elegiac moment of game-failure. The *poet* has just ‘lost’ a game. Of course other senses of loss do come through in the sudden quiet of this register-shift. But all that has ended is the game, which can, with more coins, be replayed. The *poet* is free to go. As he looks back, nothing at all is being ‘regendered’.

The game has its levels and the poem has its too, that correspond with the mode- or frame-shifts, of which the quoted passage contains three. They are not clearly demarcated, but there are *two* levels of the literal: the setting and the game; and within the latter there is a further shifting between absorption in, and direct description of, the playing and moments of tactical pause, consultation, commentary. And there are at least three levels of narrative response: spontaneous reactions to the game almost in the manner of a football commentary in which the commentator is also playing; the interpretation required by the methods of the game; and the broader interpretations prompted by it. And there is, of course, another set of levels of response: those of any reader, exclaiming as s/he goes, interpreting as necessary to make immediate sense, and compiling sense too out of a growing sense of the whole. As a reader I have done all that without being tempted to provide a matching interpretative gestalt.

Even so, I suspect that in time this poem will prompt lengthy interpretations. Given its medieval source and its talk of levels and interpretation, someone might even be tempted to take their cue from the four-fold scholastic levels of allegory.²⁴ After all, one of its manifest themes is the pragmatics and everyday necessity of interpretation, with the risk that interpretation is a net that traps the interpreter who uses it. Judgement, decision about behaviour in the thick of interaction, these are both necessary and helplessly implicated, their grounds always shifting in this text whose author is unafraid to take on cultural violence in its own domains, on its own terms. But on this occasion he withholds a grand Interpretation. The means of 'Sheep Movements' prepared for this and are in no way superseded by it.

²⁴ The literal, the typological (or allegorical), the moral (or tropological), and—highest of all—the anagogical. See, for example, Thomas Seebohm, *Hermeneutics, Method and Methodology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2005), pp. 28–9. As I understand it, the 'typological' in scriptural exegesis identified the way that the Old Testament in any given case anticipated the New. Allowing myself to succumb for a moment, let's say that we have two 'testaments' here, the old of Chaucer and the new of Oliver, and that the one can be mapped on to the other in a double reading not unlike Oliver's device of the 'double memoir' for *Whisper Louise*. In saying that, I should acknowledge that I have said nothing about the word 'fame' in both titles.

Author Info

John Hall's most recent publications are *Thirteen ways of Talking about Performance Writing* (Plymouth College of Art and Design), *The Week's Bad Groan* (Oystercatcher Press) and *Couldn't You?* (Shearsman). Artifice & Candour, an exhibition of his visual work was shown at the Viewpoint Gallery, Plymouth, in March 2009. Website: johnhallpoet.org.uk

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