

Mark Scroggins' Vast Machine

Mark Scroggins, *Pressure Dressing*, MadHat Press, 2018, ISBN 978-941196-81-6, \$19.95

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Full disclosure: Mark Scroggins is an old friend and literary comerado. He has written about my work on a number of occasions; he also dedicated his book *Intricate Thicket* to me and Eric Murphy Selinger. This is the first time I have written about his poetry.

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In order to fully appreciate Mark Scroggins' accomplishment in *Pressure Dressing*, it may be helpful to consider his stance in his previous volume, *Red Arcadia*, which could be describe as a skeptical, as opposed to an exuberant or affirmative, postmodernism. Arguably, postmodernism is always already skeptical—skeptical of its motives, skeptical of its conventions, skeptical of its speaking subject, and above all, skeptical of its language. But Scroggins' skepticism in *Red Arcadia* is skeptical of postmodern skepticism itself, and the worldview it ostensibly has to offer. As he writes in the revealingly titled “Of Systems Subject, Political, and Private”:

We make our own reality. We speak
a goodly frame, and the squamous facts
conform themselves thereto. At least that's
the official line. The end of history,
triumphal apotheosis of the behemoth
Capital, has been momentarily postponed.¹

“From the Modernism that you want,” David Antin famously quipped, “you get the Postmodernism you deserve.” Here, the modernism to which Scroggins looks back (one

¹ Mark Scroggins, *Red Arcadia* (Bristol, UK: Shearsman Books, 2012), 47.

hears it in the first three lines) is that of Wallace Stevens, his heroic, world-making faith in the sovereign imagination, and the stately syntax that results. What happens in Scroggins' case, however, is a turn to a corrosive, self-devouring irony ("At least that's / the official line"), representing not only a suspicion of all meta-narratives, but a suspicion of that suspicion. From the heroic modernism he wants (there's a wonderful poem in *Red Arcadia* that is actually called "Captain Modernism") comes the postmodernism that he gives us here.

But before we drift off too far into the misty realms of cultural theory, let me note that in regard to the *utterance* of the poem, its declamatory power, "The tides of affect / wash out and in, vary / their formal intensities / with the dates of quotidian / consumption" ("Lazarus").² Listening to Scroggins' syntax, where the "tides of affect" continually resound, we sense a self which, against its better judgment, refuses to dematerialize in a typically postmodern fashion, even in the face of "quotidian / consumption"—which is why, I suppose, that Capital's "triumphal apotheosis has been momentarily postponed," and why the poet's "Arcadia," however ironically depicted, is still heroically "Red." Fast forward to *Pressure Dressing*: the wound to the self is even more gaping and painful, and the "formal intensities" of affect are still very much at issue, though the answers the poet may have found in the ensuing years lead to a significantly different set of poetic resolutions.

This may not appear to be the case initially. The delightful "The Heights and the Grange" riffs on Bronte with Ashberian glee, employing long, easygoing lines, pronomial shifts, promiscuous vocabulary ("ha-ha," "gormless"), and crepuscular imagery to

² *Red Arcadia*, 54.

achieve a typical postmodern insouciance, the kind of tone and attitude toward momentary experience which Ashbery perfects in poems like “As One Put Drunk Into the Packet Boat” or “Vetiver.” “For my part,” writes Scroggins,

I wanted a simpler ending, one more conventionally “happy”—
a wedding even, though I know you snort
with a kind of superior contempt at these things.
It was time for dinner anyway, light dishes
for a warm July evening, asparagus and trout,
perhaps, and of course a salad.... (8)

This is “quotidian consumption” indeed, or as Scroggins puts it later in the poem, “the *seeing* requisite to paint / a landscape, or rather, to *frame* it rightly...” By the end (and we can see it coming), we are told that this is

All behind glass,
the vast incline of the lawn. We can’t see Catherine, Linton,
or even the gormless Hareton; perhaps they’re behind
the ha-ha, fumbling at each other’s drawers in the gloaming. (9)

But Scroggins is determined to—indeed, given his perspicacity, he cannot help but—make things more complicated. Even when writing in the same mode, as in the aptly named “Office Routines,” we get the distinct sense that the whole toolkit of postmodern techniques needs to be retired, as expressed through what some sophisticated readers might regard as the entirely retrograde use of symbolism:

...We are told the new interface
is more “natural,” “easier,” more “intuitive,”
like picking up a stick and scrawling
the Tetragrammaton in the sand at the beach,
or falling off a log. Disorienting enough
to be working with a thermostat, adjusting
the speed of one’s reflexes to some ideal
mean, shivering and sweating by turns, and
listening for the cries from the intercom
that will summon us doubleplusquick out
of our homey cubicles. (14)

This “new interface” (postmodernism replacing modernism?) only seems capable of reiterating what Scroggins tells us happened back in “the old days,” with “correspondences maintained / between the planets and the viscera,” before “everything / keyed itself to one digital counter.” This is why “The bell buzzes for us all,” (Donne by way of Hemingway), “and calls us to the traps and objects / of somebody else’s world” (Wilbur’s “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World”). The result, finally, is nothing but “Voicemail / and instant messages, football scores, / stock reports, half price clearances, fore- / closure sales and forced enclosures” (15).

What to do? In another familiar scenario, Scroggins addresses the poem itself, a move that comes close to addressing the muse. “What Do You Mean, I Asked the Poem,” (the first line serves as the title too); “Who / are you to ask, it replied, touching // my cheek with a human hand” (32). The frustrating dialogue proceeds from there, with the seductive poem (part organism, part machine) repeatedly putting the poet in his place, until, he tells us, “the poem had nodded off” and he “lay full-length on the grass beside, / moistened by the poem’s breath, acrid, hot.” This erotically charged moment, hinting of danger and transgression, reminds me of Whitman’s encounter with his soul in section five of “Song of Myself”: “I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning, / How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn’d over upon me, / And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart...” Perhaps if one hopes to dispense with postmodern skepticism, the poet must become reacquainted with the self, or the soul—a meeting that can only be conducted with an full awareness not only of the dangers of ironic distance, but of overheated affect as well.

In wrestling with this problem, Scroggins turns to a different precursor, Geoffrey Hill. In Hill's later work (I am thinking of such books as *The Triumph of Love* and *Speech! Speech!*), we find a dense, highly allusive style and an irascible persona which moves restlessly between intimate reflection and rebarbative social commentary. Scroggins opens himself up to the spirit of Hill in terms of form, tone, and frequently, subject matter. The result is the title sequence of *Pressure Dressing*, a fifty-page tour-de-force consisting of 100 unnumbered ten-line stanzas, two per page, with one situated at the top, the other at the bottom, resulting in significant white space between. This produces a strange feeling of simultaneous density and spaciousness, and the reader's eye is tempted to move across the top of each two-page spread before going to the bottom. But there is also the temptation, as is the case of so many recent serial poems, to begin at any point and read the stanzas in any order, recognizing the autonomy but also the relatedness of the individual units, which could therefore be understood as monads, endlessly reflecting each others' content. Most readers, I suppose, will resist this temptation and move through the poem in a conventional fashion. But what I am pointing to here on a formal level is analogous to the poem's ongoing articulation of life as lived, Scroggins' *expression* of the self which is simultaneously an *investigation* of the self, the poet and his poem positioned as both the subject and object of utterance. Or as we are told near the end of the series,

The day is beaten out of us, the day
begins before we're ready. Cats
to be fed, checks written and sealed
and send off with stamps. A machine
so vast we can't see, imagine
even the obscure and poorly-
lighted corner where we work
and live, by turns. The turning

numbers, marking day, night
when man's work. (77)

“I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night comes, when no man can work” (John 9:4), from which comes the hymn “Work, for the Night is Coming,” based on a poem by Annie Louise Walker.³ Despite Scroggins’ secular worldview, his vast machine—the poem as it is written, the life as it is lived—turns out to be both an act of devotion and a spiritual trial. Again, shades of Hill: “I had expected an apotheosis by / now, *Aufhebung* into the cloud, / *level up, happy ending* at the very least” (62). Sorry, no such luck—*Pressure Dressing* is a catalogue of unfulfilled desires, a compact *education sentimentale* in which spiritual striving is ironically deflated even as everyday life appears to be shot through with absurd visionary potential: “*Oh shit* I said as I began / to talk and heard myself, *it's / the voice from the whirlwind / again*” (48). Raised in the Church of Christ, Scroggins finds himself irresistibly drawn to theological categories, and they haunt his poetry even if he longs to jettison them: “Reprieval—redemption—atonement— / all those big balloon words we used / to feel upon our pulses, they sound / like phrases from a faded legal brief” (52). Contemporary skepticism—and the indeterminacy of much modern poetry—erodes his faith, though he also wishes the process of erosion could somehow be reversed. As he ruefully declares,

No *yesses* or *nos*. Asked to answer,
the god's mouthpiece speaks
in koans, parables, or tricky
cantos. Happier far the believer
with a firm, untranslated
text in hand. The Vulgate's
no longer legible to me,
all the Good News
has somehow soured
in my smoky mouth. (58)

³ The poet helped me out with this allusion.

In the end, Scroggins understands that as “Social animals, we huddle together / for the warmth, dew and drizzle / beading on our coats, thick and / scanty. The machinery keeps us alive / only so long” (66). We become “Tourist / to our own long drawn-out / vanishing, snap photos and post / sunny comments as we fade / into big data” (63).

Taking a lesson from Freud, diagnostician of discontent, the poet wonders

So when, as we trudge forward, does
neurotic misery finally become *ordinary*
unhappiness? And what did I
 really mean when I said what I
 thought I meant? The text
 of scripture is plain enough,
 if translated, but the interpretations
 are without limits. No bounds
 to your reading, no end
 to your compulsion to repeat. (59)

In texts such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and “The Uncanny,” Freud tells us that a repetition compulsion is a sure sign of the death drive at work. But the compulsion to repeat is simultaneously an attempt to *master* the death drive, and it is here that it may actually work to the poet’s advantage. One of our best critics of modern poetry, Scroggins knows that the interminable process of interpretation, the ceaseless repetition that constitutes the reader’s return to the text, applies to the writing of the poem as well. We return to the tasks of reading and writing in order to defer the closure of the poem, the closure of mortality. As Scroggins notes—repeatedly—the serial poem in particular is driven by a repetition compulsion; the poet finds himself “Repeating one unit, bit of / melody, after another, redoubled / and stacked, shelved in a kind / of reverberant, humming silence” (54). “Do it again,” he cries, seeking, perhaps masochistically,

Pleasure
 in repetition, even as it

changes. How many times
 have I heard that song, that turn
 of phrase? The wholly new
 is wholly alien. I don't like
 the word *totality* any more
 than you do, but it's the only
 word that describes it right—
 what I can't grasp, that is. (48)

To be sure, the totality, sometimes inimical, sometimes merely alien, cannot be grasped because we are inside of it; such is the seemingly overwhelming power of the machine. In a certain respect, we must give ourselves over to that power, so that, dialectically, it can become our own. Thus, the poem reaches beyond itself, and in doing so inspires its continued making:

The breath, the in and
 out, the threading repetition,
 carefully shaping melody over
 the barely contained excitement
 of drums and bass—ambition,
 vision, cathedral rising
 from murky slopping depths,
 arches and pillared carvings
 of noise, perception, melody, pulsed
 heat and stammered song. (82)

This magnificent stanza, which reminds me as much of Ronald Johnson's late style in *The Shrubberies* as it does Hill, gives testimony to Scroggins' faith in the creative imagination, however soured he may rightly be on the external circumstances which inspire him. Turned inside out, the vast machine that consumes us becomes a rock and roll cathedral of "stammered song." "It eats us all," Scroggins declares in the last lines of *Pressure Dressing*,

those gears and
 wheels, concatenated struts,
 organs, levers, flesh, pulleys.
 Measure the days, hours, the pounds

and ounces—counted off against some
great clockwork machine behind
it all, measuring it all. She turns
in the dark, the last moments
before dawn begins to soften
the black. Warmth pulsing, ticking. (84)

In the end, somewhere in the machinery, part earthly, part divine, the poet finds the
“pulsing, ticking” of love.