

A Note on the Novels of David Meltzer

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I admit I'm a sucker for a good pornographic novel, especially if that novel was written by a poet for money. *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969) by Diana di Prima comes to mind, as does Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928), and, what might be my favorites of the genre, *The Eleven Thousand Rods* (1907) and *The Adventures of a Young Don Juan* (1911) by Apollinaire. I say *might*, however, because there is one poet whose pornographic fiction may top my list, or at least share co-equal billing with Apollinaire's: David Meltzer. Between 1968 and 1970, at almost monthly intervals, under the influence, he once told me, of speed, Meltzer wrote no less than 10 such novels: 1968's *The Agency*, *The Agent*, and *How Many Blocks in the Pile?* (known as *The Agency Trilogy*, and republished as such in 1994), and *Orf* (reissued in 1993); 1969's *The Martyr* and the quartet of novels known as the *Brain-Plant* series (*Lovely*, *Healer*, *Out*, and *Glue Factory*); and 1970's *Star*. These were followed, in the wake of the '90s reissues, by a brand-new one, *Under* (1995), very much in keeping with its predecessors. Aside from this latter volume, all were published by Essex House (or, in the case of *Star*, its sub-imprint Brandon House), an outfit run, he said, by Jewish gangsters in L.A. and best known as the original publishers of Charles Bukowski's *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (1968).

Meltzer wrote his novels under the banner of what he called "Agit-smut," using the low, disposable genre of pornography as a means to critique contemporary society. It's probably no accident that this spate of novel writing began in the cataclysmic year of 1968, when the world was on fire with various student-led protest movements. The U.S. alone was roiled by the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., and ongoing protest for civil rights and against the Vietnam War. At 31, Meltzer was the youngest of the poets published in the seminal *New American Poetry* (1960), and the best-equipped to make the transition from the jazz-oriented Beat Generation to the rock-oriented hippie counterculture, leading his own psychedelic rock band, Serpent Power. As he would later tell me, he was disgusted and angry with American culture, and his Agit-smut writings were his way of lashing out. They were also reasonably well-paying for an unemployed poet who was married with kids; he said the publisher

paid him \$1000 a novel, which was certainly more than most of his writing projects were bringing in at the time.

Of the original 10, the sci-fi-themed *Brain Plant* novels are perhaps the least memorable; they should have been a trilogy, he told me, but naturally this would have meant \$1000 less, so he stretched it to four. His personal favorite was *The Martyr*, probably the least pornographic of the bunch, largely concerned with a family thrown into disarray after the son is paralyzed from a fall. There are possibly some veiled autobiographical elements to this tale, concerning his parents' dysfunctional relationship and his own relationship with his sister. In my mind, I tend to group *Orf* and *Star* as a pair, the former concerning a rock musician, the latter a Hollywood actor, with Meltzer exploiting his experience of both milieux to great effect.

But the best of the bunch, by my way of thinking, is *The Agency Trilogy*. To me these books represent a high achievement in the art of the novel, portraying a world whose parameters are wholly uncertain, and doing so with a light, almost flippant touch born of pornography's renunciation of artistic ambition. The pornographic novel is a naturally permissive genre; provided there are cocks and cunts aplenty, an author can get away with a lot. So Meltzer dispenses with any exposition and drops the reader into a world like our own but slightly off, a slightly futuristic dystopia that's also very 1968. The world it depicts is obviously, at times scathingly satirical but this clear intent is wedded to an extreme uncertainty regarding the relationship among the various groups of characters that eventually collide.

The trilogy's premise is difficult to articulate; UK crime writer Maxim Jakubowski characterized the titular Agency as "an all-seeing, well-organized, self-sufficient sexual underground that secretly controls America, if not the world," and this is near enough the mark, I think, but it's necessarily a surmise of unarticulated aspects of the novel's depicted world. The Agency's relation to, for example, the American government is ambiguous. Sometimes they seem like adversaries, while at others the Agency seems like a project or department of the government, or indeed the government itself. Is the Agency truly an underground phenomenon, or is it a COINTELPRO-like authoritarian imposition on the underground from above? Is anyone the good guy here? It's never fully clear.

Whenever I need to quickly cite a passage from Meltzer's novels to demonstrate their merits, I turn to the second chapter of the second novel, *The Agent*. In *The Agent*, a straight-laced undercover operative given the name Kane White is undergoing training for his vaguely defined mission penetrating the sexual underworld that exists in the novel. Being a virgin, he needs to learn how to have sex, leading to the following passage, which opens chapter two:

Helpless.

She kisses me on my lips. My lips remain sealed. She pushes her tongue thru my lips. My teeth remain firmly clamped. She pushes her tongue harder, as if knocking on a door. Then she presses her body against mine. My mouth opens. Her tongue pushes in. I want to faint in horror. If this unsanitary filthiness is considered to be love, then I'll remain a virgin until eternity.

Some female karate or judo. I don't know how it happens. But she takes my hand and places it on one of her naked breasts.

Helpless.

Can I describe the incredible outrage and shock of her living flesh? It is soft and warm and, at the same time, pliant and firm. The palm of my hand is burned with the hot boring of her hard nipple.

"Kiss it," she says in a whisper.

I try to tell her that it's impossible. I can't put my mouth on it. The nipple sticks out on the breast circle like a small missile. Her tawny flesh shines in the dim light of the Commander-in-Chief's office.

This to me is one of the great comic passages of twentieth century literature. (It goes on at some length, but this will suffice for our purpose.) It's a pornographic scene drawn in the negative, a blow by blow description of sex emphasizing horror rather than ecstasy. Part of its humor undoubtedly stems from its use of the very same clichéd descriptors an ordinary pornographic scene would use; you could probably drop the fifth paragraph ("Can I describe...") unaltered into scores of erotic novels where the protagonist is having a good time. It's as if Meltzer has isolated certain features of erotic writing and places them under the light of something other than pleasure to see how they behave. But the real masterstroke here is the second paragraph, as tightly constructed as a poem with its opening, Beckett-like self-negations ("She kisses me on my lips. My lips remain sealed," etc.). This is followed by a magnificently bad simile, for I think

it's impossible to imagine pushing a tongue against someone else's teeth as at all like knocking on a door. Its sheer unfitness lends the simile audacity; it's so obviously wrong to equate pushing and knocking physically that there could only be some greater metaphysical rightness that made it make sense. The understatement of her roundabout victory—his mouth finally opens through the shock of her pressing her body against his—and the unmaning of the otherwise hypermasculine agent as he “want[s] to faint from horror” are the crowning achievements here, evidence of a casual virtuosity in prose born of his more characteristic work within the rigors of poetry.

Is David Meltzer a great novelist? I don't know that it makes sense to say that, as the novel was such a small concern in his vast oeuvre, despite the fact that he wrote 11 of them. I don't think he was much concerned with the novel as a form. Yet he wrote at least one great trilogy of novels, and even the lesser examples remain of interest. I told him once *The Agency Trilogy* reminded me of Beckett's trilogy and he laughed at me, but I still feel this way. By his refusal to treat it with any sort of seriousness, writing exclusively within the low genre of pornography, he was able to bend the novel to his own peculiar poetic genius. His novels are great, not because he was a great novelist but because he was a great poet.