

REG JOHANSON / “Who Marks the Changes?": George Stanley at The End/The Beginning.

Jeff Derksen argues that neoliberal globalization¹ is a cultural as well as a political and economic dynamic:

In an ironic twist, neoliberalism invokes the most rigid base-superstructure argument: from the economic, the social and cultural will come—the present may be painful, but it is necessary to clear the economic routes for a level global playing field with great access to diversity and difference. Give up your present to have a future in our image! The end of history, the end of geography, the end of socialism, the end of the welfare state... and many other ideological narrative closures have been levered by neoliberalism in the name of restructuring the present. And the end of this metanarrative... leaves us with the radical continuous present of neoliberalism. (“Poetry” 8, emphasis added).

Imagined to have triumphed in the dialectical war with socialism, neoliberalism is set up as the resolution of historical struggles for justice and equality. The neoliberal facts, however, are quite different from the neoliberal dream. Derksen draws on Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff’s analysis of the “experiential” dimension of neoliberalism’s contradictions, which are “absorbed into the private soul.” By “private soul” and “experiential,” I take Derksen to mean the affective quality of neoliberalism’s reach into ordinary life—its stimulation and frustration of desire, its production of anxiety and uncertainty, and its privatization of these affects as the failures or pathologies of individuals. It can appear, as Derksen says, “as a biopolitics that, once assimilated, seeps from your bones to your soul” (*Annihilated* 19). Derksen cites Wendy Brown to this effect:

Neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy

1 The terms “neoliberalism” and “globalization,” when used together as “neoliberal globalization,” refer to an economic ideology of privatization, disinvestment in social welfare programs, deregulation of financial and other markets, and the elimination of trade subsidies, among other initiatives aimed at developing a “free market.” This ideology is extended globally sometimes through the voluntary adoption of neoliberal economic principles but most often through the mechanism of debt: in order to qualify for loans from the IMF (International Monetary Fund), World Bank, and other “development” banks, states (mostly from the global south, the former third world) must carry out “structural readjustment programs” to bring their economies into line with neoliberal principles.

to practices of empire. Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy: it involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and action*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player. (Brown qtd. in Derksen *Annihilated* 30)

The experience of this dissemination and extension of market values, by this account, touches whatever is deepest, most intimate, in our lives: neoliberalism calls upon us to show our “worth,” our “value,” to justify our lives according to the logic that everything (must) register, ultimately, in the market that is the final expression of freedom. George Stanley expresses this ideological demand in a paraphrase of the corporate media: “[The newspapers tell us] / how stupid [we] are not to understand / [our] true nature. ‘Born to compete, boys.’ / (‘Born to Lose’ [we say]). ‘It’s not just / the bondholders have you by the short hairs, / it’s your attitude’” (“Abner” *At Andy’s* 9).

I appreciate Derksen’s analysis of the “deep” implications of neoliberalism for the way that it can help us understand George Stanley’s *fin de siècle* poetry. Three of Stanley’s books—*Gentle Northern Summer* (1995), *At Andy’s* (2000), and *Vancouver: A Poem* (2008)—spanning the nineties and the first decade of the twenty-first century, reflect an experience of neoliberalism’s “restructuring” of political/social/economic/personal worlds as it plays out, most specifically, in richly-detailed topographies (at multiple “scales”²) of Vancouver and north-central British Columbia. *Gentle Northern Summer* (*GNS*) is a book of despair, marking the loss of cities, family, economies, political conviction, and history. It represents the new world order of capital, despairs of it, recoils from it, yet Stanley eventually finds a poetic form that allows him to *persist* against the “narrative closures” neoliberal ideology has attempted to impose.

GNS begins in the landscapes of the resource economy of north-central British Columbia, in which the real money flows away: “The cash goes to Vancouver (by computer)” (“Gentle Northern Summer” 7), while “4000 miles east... New York bankers / coming out the glass doors of their Park Avenue / ziggurats [do not] see any coal dust... in the edited texture of events their eyes pick up” (“Gentle” 4). Stanley represents the effect on the local community and ecology of global economic interests as the work of “aliens”:

2 Jeff Derksen uses the concept of “scales” to analyze the implications and effects of neoliberal globalization at various sites: the global, local, nation-state, corporation, individual. Neoliberal globalization is not merely a global phenomena, is not only about the transformation of local spaces, is not merely about the changes at the level of the nation-state; its impacts are not restricted to the corporation nor to the individual, but operate simultaneously, and unevenly, at all of these locations.

the clearcuts that hang over us
(like swaths made by the teeth of aliens)
are not part of the views we appropriate,
they are external,
the scraped
slopes evidence value
racked up somewhere, some big account
haul it out
and then we'll go mining and the ranch houses
stay put, tame trees on the lawn, on the crimeless streets. ("Gentle" 4)

The "aliens," come and gone with impunity, leave behind real estate, malls, and the credit economy. The horizon of the imagination, and the trajectory of the new economy, are neatly expressed in the lines "boys go in [to the mill], / workers come out / with credit cards—neat!" ("Terrace '87" 13). Stanley cites a capsule history of this end-of-history moment from "Vivian Pedersen, long-time resident of the Bulkley Valley": " 'Each time', Vivian said, / 'people got moved out of the way, / Indians, then farmers, then came the mill / & mine, & now (swinging her arm wildly) that mall, / that none of them know what's happening to them' ("Gentle" 6). Stanley asks, "who counts / the changes?" ("Gentle" 6).

From north-central BC, *GNS* moves south to the cities of the west coast, revealing the consistency and homogeneity of the effects of neoliberal globalization: Seattle is another locale transformed by its incorporation into the global economy:

Who did this to Seattle? Wiped out the street life,
the bars & greasy spoons on 1st avenue & Pike
that fed Ft. Lewis soldiers in the Korean War
& us in the sixties?
... That grizzled vomit had to go.
They wanted a tasteful place to live their deaths.
They rebuilt quick, condos, afraid
those Ft. Lewis soldiers might come back,
climb up out of the excavations, snake past
the darkened construction fences. In the guise
of street kids. They did. ("Death Thing" 46)

In this interrogation of "who" is the agent of these changes, I hear the "aliens" of the poem above, descending from some global elsewhere to make a generic ahistorical "revitalized" urban space, which means nothing but the increased privatization of that space, a privatization visible in the presence of private security guards patrolling

retail and construction zones. Here Stanley marks the way in which neoliberalism is a class project, as Derksen, following David Harvey, argues, simultaneously and unevenly upscaling urban space and producing “street kids.”

Like Seattle, for Stanley, “San Francisco’s Gone” too, and because San Francisco is Stanley’s hometown the loss is more personal. In “San Jose Poem” which, paired with “San Francisco’s Gone,” mourns and pays tribute to family and its deep weave into the lost city, Stanley marks the changes: “walk up Almaden / past the offshore banks / (the orchards burnt and dozed when electronics came) / think of recent Santa Clara grads hoping to retain the software concession / steal the yup trade from Mountain View, fill the new / Civic Center with suits, music, beds of flowers, & / sprinklers!” (39). Here the old agricultural economy of California has given way to the high-tech industries that in many ways define contemporary capitalism in the global north. In “Civic Center” we hear the irony of a new conception of the public: these “civic” centers will soon bear the names of their corporate sponsors—the Staples Center, Rogers Arena (formerly GM Place), the Air Canada Center, etc. For Stanley San Jose has become a necropolis, as has the poetry that remembers it: “These people are still alive and live on St. Elizabeth’s drive in San Jose (& they are dead & live in this poem, with the often repetitive movements of the dead” (39).

In the “private soul” of the poet, these transformations constitute a profound rupture with history. Stanley experiences the globalized urban spaces as “tasteful places to live... death”—the eternal present of the supposed end of history. In “My New Past,” Stanley claims:

further and further on, but less & less
tied to what went before,
I seem to be journeying. The image is
sand. Peripherally haunted by its random sculpture, unmoving but shifted
under changing skies. Every morning
I wake to a blank, then deduce the separation. I used to go,
1968, 1970, 1971, 1974, 1976...
My new past never happened, is not available for edification. (9–10)

This image of drift, of movement determined at random and without any apparent causality, is echoed by the image of flow in “Raft,” in which “Huck and Jim,” “close at the center, one facing upstream, trying not to remember, feels the pressure of the other’s shoulders, facing down, remembering...” (42). Derksen argues that the

cultural “achievement” of neoliberalism has been to make strategic political and economic action seem natural and inevitable, and to make struggles against this contemporary “common sense” seem anachronistic. Stanley’s image of “drifting” and “flowing,” without agency, figures this condition. Remembering seems to be a trap for the poet, a death to be struggled against. In “Raft” it is Jim, who is looking forward, who is the “precious one,” not the Huck of the poem, who can only remember. The ability to “look forward,” for Stanley, will require a new form for his poetry, which I discuss below.

Stanley locates the cutting-loose from the moorings of history in two poems, “The Berlin Wall” and “The Set.” In the latter, Stanley remembers a time (“’72”) when “we were a part of history” (48). “Do you miss all that?” he asks, “that sense there was a world and meaning outside your mind?” (49). The despair of this situation is openly confessed in “The Berlin Wall.” Though the “beginning” of the neoliberal phase of capital has been pegged at differing moments and places, the fall of the Berlin Wall was the moment when George Bush Sr. announced the notorious “New World Order” of American unilateral interventionism and of a world almost completely dominated by neoliberal economics. Sensing the highly ambivalent politics of the moment, Stanley asks, “Why, now that it’s breached, broken, does it cause / such consternation in me?” (51). The poem develops the answer:

The past is a prison I long for, the past is a holding pen,
the past is eternity because I did not die then.
Now youth breaks out of Kreuzberg and Wedding, out of Pankow
on the east side (side no longer), flows unchecked
across the border, smashes the rest of the broken wall even,
to widen the space
& something in my old heart
wants to stop it, wants to retain
the orderly street, the fading State
offices, gilt-scrolled windows, resembling
banking rooms, that defined my ordinary
middle aged eternity, my stroll, wants to
put the Wall back....
the old must learn that history
is not their house. They must learn, like the young,
to live by their wits. (52–53)

The line “to live by their wits” perfectly captures the precariousness of life under

neoliberalism, a precariousness that is “free” in a sense similar to that Marx gave the word in his analysis of enclosures—“free” *from* the social programs and services that were due to the poor citizen in the so-called “welfare state,” and free *to* sell one’s body, time, and mind in a newly de-regulated, low-tax, high-turnover marketplace. It is not, obviously, a matter of preferring state socialism to neoliberal capitalism, simply that the freedom the breakers of the Berlin Wall got was not the freedom they imagined. Derksen cites Žižek on the distinction between “formal” and “actual” freedom: “‘formal’ freedom is the freedom of choice *within* the coordinates of the existing power relations, while ‘actual’ freedom designates the site of an intervention which undermines these very coordinates” (Žižek qtd. in Derksen “Poetry” 8). Stanley depicts “youth” acting out their actual freedom against the old State, only to break free into the merely formal freedom of the neoliberal post-state. The “old heart” (or “private soul”) senses that the prison of the past and its eternity has been swapped out for a new eternity, the living death of condo ownership in gentrified “tasteful” neighbourhoods, threatened periodically by “street kids.” The “heart,” the “private soul,” had been deeply invested (I hear the irony) in these spaces of the “State,” as they were constituted by the Cold War, by the New Deal, by the bourgeois ideal of the Citizen in Public Space and the class order it implied and which also contested it. In the New World Order of neoliberal globalization, “heart” becomes “wits”—and as Derksen argues, a new “structure of feeling” emerges, one which privileges the calculation of competitive advantages over what appear to be merely sentimental attachments to places and history.

In “The City” the youth that are celebrated in “The Berlin Wall” become fearsome. These are the “street kids” of the poem cited above. Disinherited from the entitlements of the past that gave their elders pensions and careers, they have become contemptuous: “[the street kids] read your thoughts— / how can you live, only caring about money? / how can you live, not caring about caring? / how can you walk by, carefree, thinking / about cars, jewelry, / your mutual funds, security?” (109). Stanley sympathizes with this contempt for the marketized subjectivities of “the suits” which “stride back and forth & get paid for their faces” (110), for he is also contemptuous of them, and their mantra “compete, compute, consume” (109). History having “ended,” Stanley washes up on the shores of a “virtual reality” social world. Encounters with “another” (“not the Other I learned to love in graduate school”) are not encounters

with responsible citizens, but with privatized, “virtual” individuals, unmindful of space, or for whom space is no longer regarded as shared and public: “Another umbrella bumps by me in the rain / touching off a murderous rage... Excuse me, he says, but not politely, / more as if he thought me an imbecile, who didn’t know / this was a public street” (“Virtual Reality” 103). Though Stanley is the one who is accused of not knowing he is in a “public street,” his anger is directed at the lack of civility of “some asshole (from the suburbs),” who, by virtue of being from that non- or anti-city space, has no *civitas*, who has imported his bridge-and-tunnel sense of spatial entitlement into the (formerly) democratic space of the *polis*. Stanley’s “familiar idyllic despair” (“Virtual Reality” 103) is the affect of having lost the battle for a certain form of “public” state, economy, and space, and of having acquired the sad ability to “delete all this” (“Virtual Reality” 103).

Having “marked the changes” wrought by neoliberalism, by the end of the book, Stanley seeks the “consolation of philosophy,” which it seems is cold comfort. Having failed to change the world, to apply Marx’s formula, Stanley is resigned to describing it. The final poem of *GNS*, “The Young Monks Understand Eternity Better,” is part of a cycle of poems about “the abbey” and the “young monks” who inhabit it, from the perspective of Stanley’s alter ego, the “old fox.” From this location of monastic retreat, Stanley observes “the young monks” “playing with their dogs, repairing their bikes. / For them sunlight is sun, not a phenomenon, / & rain rain— / they seem to have bodies / between their minds and the outside world” (118). “The old fox” admires the “eternity” in which they live. For the young monks, “language is trash,” “it has no reality... the young monks ride their mountainbikes / & rollerblade / & ski / in a world forever unnamed” (119). In contrast, the old fox knows

the sunlight to be insubstantial,
a visitation of energy
of the universe, an accidental, phantom universe
that is in fact no more than is signified
by the words *sunlight* and *universe*
in the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Rorty et al
& that having deprived the world thus of any reality
we put language on a pedestal, a plinth. (119–120)

In “Wittgenstein, Rorty, et al” Stanley finds a philosophical explanation for the social catastrophe around him—by this account, we live in a world of mediatized

representations, of virtualities, a flat-screen, mediated world of *games* which the young monks seem to inhabit unselfconsciously and without anxiety. Stanley represents them as experiencing the history-less world joyfully, without the burdens of historical responsibility. But in Stanley's terms this is a negative liberation, the pleasure of Žižek's formal freedom in which there is nothing left to fight for, in which one is freed from the responsibility of seeking justice, since, as Derksen says, in the rhetoric of neoliberalism, justice is the natural, if always deferred, outcome of the neoliberal order. The figure of the poet here is of one who "knows better" but has been rendered irrelevant, since it is the sensual body, and not the historicizing mind, that is privileged now.

Formally, Stanley's poetry adapts to this flat world of phenomena in *At Andy's* and *Vancouver: A Poem* by becoming more disjunctive and fast-switching as it attempts to mark the movements of mind and thought. It becomes a record of perception in which the task of poetry has changed: "what's wrong is somehow I think there's something to write *about*, instead of just writing" ("*At Andy's*" *At Andy's* 37). Stanley has written "about" a world that is gone and "about" the forces that "deleted" it. Now the form of his poetry will merge with its content: the darts, shifts, illusions, speed, and information of consciousness itself. The "point" becomes to hold on, to not disappear completely in the midst of losses and transformation that erase the locations that once defined him:

Now it's different. Watch the puck for *dear life*. The puck is life—
like a word, in conversation, the huge surrounding fucked reality—
sense of your own body, hunched, & the city, doomed—a terror—
where to fall would be to escape it, but you can't fall, you're
doomed, sentenced. ("*The Puck*" *At Andy's*)

In fact, this new style is inaugurated in *gns* in the poem "Terrace Landscapes." Here Stanley's work begins a process of triangulation between mind, world, and body. Where does the mind end and the world begin? These lines from "Terrace Landscapes" are a good example of the problem:

Someone, say H (this is the way it always starts—how else can it start?) it starts with H. H. is a person completely unknown, except that the color of his skin is known (well, his gender is known) & the color of his eyes, his waist size, the shape of his ears—& then the way H walks, that is not like anyone else walks, exactly, is it?... there are many things about H that are known—many more that could be known—but the person, H, is not known.... is the world H lives in the world H knows?" (70)

Is the world George Stanley lives in the world he knows? “Terrace Landscapes,” Stanley writes, “landscapes of heart and mind—my heart & mind—mine only?” Here Stanley tries to start from the beginning. In a social/political/economic/affective landscape in which nothing can any longer be taken for granted, in which very few assumptions or experiences can be understood as “shared” (though in the quote above Stanley problematically takes “gender” for granted), Stanley tries to work his way into knowledge through phenomenological description, assuming as little as possible.

If so much is changing so fast, if the soul has become privatized, to whom is the poet speaking? What is the world he or she can depend upon to be shared by, or recognizable to “the” audience? The Canada, Terrace, Vancouver, Prince George, San Francisco, or the justice, history, and economy that the poet knew has become a matter of conjecture. Its reality as a shared experience can be no longer assumed. The very idea of sharing can be no longer assumed. Following the trajectory of this style in later books, Stanley is beginning again, attempting to “mark the changes” at the scale of thought and perception. Stanley’s work at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century is an exemplary, if despairing, “experiential” account of the passing of one global order and the emergence of another. It is this “heart” in Stanley’s work—vulnerable, confused, mourning, mistaking, starting over—that I respect. History, of course, did not end—writing and resistance and resistance-writing continue.

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George Stanley, Western Front, Vancouver, 1981
a benefit reading for MacLeod's Books after the fire
Stanley Archive, Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University