

JOSHUA CLOVER & CHRIS NEALON / Public Transport: George Stanley's Vancouver

JOSHUA: For me there are three long poems astride the twentieth century: “Zone,” by Apollinaire; “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” by Ashbery; *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, the film script by Debord that I am willfully counting as a poem. What conjoins the three? Walking. Exhaustion. The sense of something being over, having escaped irrevocably. They are all Paris poems, as it happens, that exemplary city. Much more to say about that, but, to ask the altogether basic question about Stanley’s book: why is the long poem so profoundly indexed to the city itself? Is this relation as self-evident as it seems? Is it culturally specific? What about the 21st century?

CHRIS: I’m going to wait a bit before tackling that larger question about the long poem and the city, and say that it does seem true that walking matters to *Vancouver*—Stanley’s literally staring at the cracks in the pavement in section 11. I’d venture, though, that taking the bus is even more important to the poem, and that it matters that it’s the bus. Taking the bus links what I think are the two great themes of Stanley’s poems since the ‘80s, class relations and aging. In the poems of these years, he’s always asking himself, what is an old person’s experience of the way the vectors of class shape social life of the city? And he thinks about it on the bus. It’s how the old get around; it’s how the poor get around. And the bus and its riders are always forced to be patient by the higher-velocity traffic around them, the world that’s always leaving the old and the poor behind. In section 8 the poet misses the bus because there’s too much traffic to make it across the street in time, and it makes him cry out in a pissy senior version of Hart Crane’s hopefulness: “O my people, stop driving!”

Stanley is merciless with himself when it comes to these questions. In “The Berlin Wall” (collected in *A Tall, Serious Girl*), he recalls visiting Berlin just 18 months before the Wall came down, and watching its destruction on TV, he realizes that the end of the Cold War is the end of the period that included his youth—that, absurdly, he’s sad the Wall has fallen. He imagines a similar Wall dividing Vancouver, dreams of going through its checkpoints, and briefly fantasizes that permission to cross borders is the mark of a kind of state approval that would include the mandatory respect of the young:

If the young can be kept from knowing their power
(which is the power of time), if they can be made to accept
the reigning system, one memo, one regulation at a time,
with its bullshit rationale, then the old will never die.

Yeats concludes “Among School Children” with a lovely dream of unbruising aesthetic labor that even an old man can still perform; Stanley finishes “The Berlin Wall” like this:

And the old must learn that history
is not their house. They must learn, like the young,
to live by their wits.

JOSHUA: I hope you’ll forgive me for letting that vital insight about the bus carry me back to “Zone” one more time:

Now you walk in Paris alone among the crowd
Herds of bellowing buses hemming you about...

In Apollinaire’s scene, the bus is a prehistoric beast invented by modernity, the world’s brand new antiquity that threatens from without, even as it is a marvel. It competes with the antique, always-renewed interior threat: “Anguish of love parching you within.”

As you say, in *Vancouver* the bus is just the bus: sort of a drag, entirely unmythical. And a class marker; to be on the bus is to be proletarian. It’s like the Los Angeles bus that winds through Beverly Hills bearing, without exception, maids. So inevitably he starts thinking about “the masses” and wondering what’s become of them. “When did they—cease to be? Timothy Garton Ash saw them in Budapest around 1990—just after the Wall fell—they were funny-looking.”

If the fall of the Wall is the loss of his youth, it’s also the loss of the masses. Those two things go together somehow. To be old is to have been effaced even from unchosen solidarities, and this is the greatest loneliness.

There is one trace of magic left to the bus: that magic wherein you can at once be getting somewhere you have to go, and reading *Paterson*. He is reading Williams and being thrown back into himself, via the ongoing testing of the double correspondence: Williams is to Paterson as Stanley is to Vancouver—yes and no. It is in regard to this that he insists, repeatedly: “I am not a man & this is not my city.” I read this in a nearly literal sense, concerning his queerness and the fact that he isn’t a Vancouver native.

But there's also a suppressed [thus]: it is because he's not a man that this can't be his city. His identification with Mr. City will always be imperfect, or false. We could call this his Otherness, but that language doesn't help me much. We could also identify it as another arena in which unchosen solidarities—like that of being of as place, sharing that identification with other people even if you don't love them or know them—are foreclosed. Maybe I have arrived already at the kernel of anguish I find in the poem.

The first time I went to Vancouver, I was warned to avoid “Hastings”—meaning, that strip of Hastings that Stanley first describes on page 4, the city's skid row. And I remember being struck by how clean it was; I thought, you should really come down to Oakland sometime! Still, it's even cleaner now, with cafés and lounges with fancy drinks. It's the spiffiest skid row in the world, though I haven't been to Singapore. The gentrification of this district becomes, in Vancouver, perhaps the leading figure for loss, for how the new is a destruction visited on the old.

CHRIS: That seems exactly right. And he wants very much for human solidarity to be the counter-weight to that destruction. I like your description of Stanley “testing” the correspondence between himself and Williams, Vancouver and Paterson: that testing-protocol is in effect as well when he wonders whether solidarity is possible, a question which keeps reverting to another, whether other peoples' happiness could be his own. Sometimes the test is on the bus, to be sure; sometimes it's in pubs. In one sub-section of part 11, on Vancouver's cross-town 99 bus, he recalls happy people to the left and to the right of him, in the last pub he was in: a deaf family signing enthusiastically back and forth, and, on TV above, a minor Canadian cultural triumph, which he pits against the creative destruction we've been talking about:

Newfoundland Labrador choir
takes first in Spain
all under 16
their plane will ‘touch down’
‘and it'll be Beatlemania’
from one construction site to another

You can hear him thinking, “poor kids...” but at the end of the poem he writes, “I don't care. I care.”

That self-reversal around the question of whether he's capable of feeling social attachment, or whether he's still welcome to try, feels like the driving contradiction

behind his late style, a self-interrupting prose stanza, full of parentheses and dashes, in which he tries, often very movingly, to bring momentary perception in line with history and something like a sense of poetic form:

Watching it go by on the bus, even—that's relativity—I mean watching me go by—
the city. So a catalogue of moments, glimpses—no, just a disconnected (I imagine a
poem about Vancouver in which Vancouver never appears—

I'm tempted, when I read Stanley writing in this mode, to answer your question about the long poem and the city by saying that, in the 20th century, the analogy between the poem and the city is what best gave poets permission to mix registers, jump scales, self-interrupt—both because it's an analogy to a large space, but also because it's a spacious analogy: the city can be like the poem in so many ways. And maybe the most interesting way the analogy works is by doing double duty as an analogy to other poem-city pairings.

At the end of section 11, Stanley provides a redacted translation of Baudelaire's "Foules," on the ecstasies available to the connoisseurs of crowds:

Solitary walker, solitary thinker, he gets drunk
on solidarity. The crowd's embrace is for him a joy
denied forever to the egoist in his walking coffin...

So there's a sense that he's on the bus, dreaming of walking, which gets you in the present tense, and dreaming of other peoples' happiness, to see if it could endure. But it's interesting—he neither develops a Baudelairean irony about the crowd, nor a Whitmanian cosmology of it. He's too interested in its history, in where we've come from. No immersion in the present for its own sake; even forty years ago, he required a *longue durée*:

What blather, '70s
poets quote
the CBC news. Pick up
Braudel

JOSHUA: I think you've made the kind of space/time proposal that I am always taken by: the *longue durée* of epochs, of intersecting and overlapping forces and tendencies, of the impasto of life's dirt piled into cracked strata... that is the space of the city, that becomes visible only by the cross-cut of his traversal. The bus scoring a tranche in

Vancouver. And the long poem, the book-poem, is the conjuncture of this temporal and spatial situation, a phenomenology of reading to capture the whole sense of things. Perhaps that's obvious.

In his great essay on *Paterson*, "The Poetics of Totality," Fredric Jameson (have I mentioned him yet? *Ch-ching!*) suggests that the mid-century general practitioner sort (i.e., Williams) was heir to the gumshoe of Hammett and Chandler, characterized by the ability to enter the interiors of people's homes across the breadth of social classes. It's a brilliant insight, but also tied to an idea that seems a bit nostalgic: "The interior is passing away. Life turns back to become public," wrote the Goncourts in 1860, Baudelaire's greatest year of writing. Stanley's Vancouver has turned its interior out into the streets; even our narrator, who ostensibly has a dwelling, seems dispossessed from any idea of home. History is not your house. And it takes money to go inside, and the interiors that the poor person can buy—the bar, the bus—are provisional at best, and hardly domestic.

And yet this mean public-ation of life is exactly what allows a poet to make that traverse, to encounter the range and the tensions and incommensurable worlds crushing against each other, and to have that be a sustained experience, like the reading. It isn't isolated lyrics, even when he sections them off. *Vancouver* changes! Does anything in Stanley's melancholy change? As you say, he lacks Baudelaire's irony—perhaps another way of saying that there is no sense of refuge even from his position within the poem, Baudelaire's great redoubt. Stanley sinks into the solution of the city even as it torques away from him, even as it tries to vomit out the irritating agents of the old and infirm and poor. He is, in the long afternoon of the poem, still allowed within the gates. This will not last forever. "A territory will keep," he says at the very end, coming to the last page,

until someone has
some other use for it
that will keep us, tracking each one, until
it has no time for us

So who has time, and for whom, and how did they come by it? That seems again like the question of solidarity, but now presented as a two-sided and provisionally awful one. We are all joined by being the playthings of some large and sinister "someone," who finds better and better uses for us until we aren't needed any longer and are then

spat forth from leviathan.

It's tempting for me to end my contribution here with Stanley's parting shot in the Baudelaire-directed poem you cited above:

teach the so-called winners of this world
(if only to bring their stupid pride down a notch)
there's a happiness greater than theirs, and sweeter.
The poet must sometimes laugh at the ones who deplore
his patchy career, chaste life.

But I can't resist this other reflection on time, funny and silly and serrated. And prescient, recalling that the book was finished before the current economic crisis had presented itself:

Daylight saving time ends.
I hope they've stored the daylight
somewhere safe. I hope they've invested it
at the going rate. we'll need it when it comes