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## **A burst of language following a collision with a large piece of furniture...**

Review of online chapbook *Beyond Time* by Robert Gibbons

Robert Gibbons is one of the finest practitioners of prose poetry in the US today. His words flow with speed and grace across white pages or screen spaces, framing the emptiness of their own margins, being larger inside than their boundaries would suggest possible, folding back on themselves and spilling off the margins of the pages. As Charles Simic suggests in the quote I have taken as the title for this review, prose poetry always explodes out of a linguistic collision in the mind of the writer. Poems such as these that are created through the process Derrida has dubbed ‘double invagination’ possess so much energy within their folded boundaries that text alone threatens to be unable to contain it for long. Unfolding such a vagination can in fact also be dangerous both for the author and for the unwary reader, as the chiasmic relations concealed behind the double fold may turn out to be highly charged and potentially explosive.

The burst of language Gibbons creates in his latest suite of texts communicates with us in a rising and falling arc of signification. In these particular poems he seeks to move ‘Beyond Time,’ as the title of the collection suggests. The textual space that he uses up in the effort is minimal and liminal at the same time. The 38 pieces making up the suite, or chapbook, use a mere 4,600 words to evoke multiple spaces and places and to generate a vast historical sweep. Yet the space of the poems is always tangible and concrete – one is tempted to say his poetic space is ‘real’ even on the occasions where it is clear that Gibbons is imagining his settings and locales. The page space that his online publisher, *DeadDrunkDublin, and other Imaginal Spaces* (<http://deadrunkdublin.com/index.html>), has given him shimmers around the few lines each screen contains, while Syrie Kovitz’s luminous photos in black and white occupy the left half of each page, sometimes commenting on the words of the poems, sometimes oddly contrasting with them. Mostly, everything is white, beyond limits of text, image and ultimately space and time.

But let me fold back and begin again. Over the last couple of years I have been in the privileged situation of being the recipient of new poems from Robert via e-mail, at an amazing rate and in an almost constant flow. I therefore have known many of the *Beyond Time* poems ahead of time (of

publication). I also know his previous book of prose poems, *Body of Time*, which is alluded to in the title of the new suite of poems, as a very much live body of work... Last summer I even had the joy of meeting Robert and his wife at a poetry conference in Scotland, an event which took Robert on a new journey of discovery in exotic locations such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Bridge of Allan – places that are breathed life into in some of the pieces in *Beyond Time*. All this is to say that I do not read Robert's poetry innocently (as if any reviewer ever does read a text innocently), but at the same time I do so with the greatest of sympathy, as a man might read dispatches from the frontline from a friend who has been in the campaigns for a long time: with a mixture of anxiety and excitement. In the pieces I recognize Robert himself, his references to life and work in Portland, Maine, to his travels, to his readings, to his wife and muse and special caregiver, Kathleen, as 'real', yet of more general interest than such references would have in a personal letter to me. This reading position is perhaps unique to me and a few other friends of Robert's, but yet there is a candour and openheartedness in Robert's work that invites other readers into an equally giving and generous relationship with his words. We are all seated in Robert's great circle of friendship and community, and enriched thereby.

Similar to the best work of Frank O'Hara, Robert Lowell and Jack Kerouac, Gibbons confesses to us the trials and tribulations of the quotidian, but in doing so he does so much more by pointing to the constant struggle for transcendence – beyond ourselves and our time-bound existence – that we all engage in whether willy-nilly or by design. Robert is a seeker by nature, but one who lets serendipity do its subtle work and one who is unafraid to embrace and celebrate the results thereof. The design that he shapes in his life and texts in turn shapes him and his texts and life. Connection being all, Gibbons has graciously supplied another set of dots that we can study and begin to draw lines between in the small opening manifesto that prefaces the 38 poems. The arc of those poems spans the internal and the eternal, reaching from dream to memory. The connector here is the body as a living carrier of language – language not disembodied, but pulsating, rhythmic, fluid as blood. Gibbons' practice is one of discovery (of trees, birds, books) and of "documenting experience", or as he suggests, of living twice, once in the experience (or the dream thereof), and once again "as intense, or more so" in "the second life of writing". The collection is thus suspended between the four points of the double Derridean chiasmus of dream, remembrance, discovery and writing: the invaginated X marking the spot.

His poetics, never disembodied or vapidly spiritual, suggests the tactile quality of language. Words caress you or may be caressed as bodies do and are. Words are therefore all we have and all we are, but they are never enough: “I’d film words like Godard, if I could, chant like Coltrane, if need be paint a sign like Kline,” Gibbons states. The poems bear this out in their flow of sounds and images referred to, described, alluded to, suggested, created anew. Other great improvisers also waft through the lines and emotions of the poems: Keith Jarrett on piano, O’Hara on museum stationary, Pollock dripping blood and paint on canvas... The burst of language in the prose is violent, flowing with great energy and speed as a molten lava mass from the core – only to end up a suspended, shimmering substance captured on the page or screen, inert, but upon reading, becoming unstuck in time again, speeding into the reader’s mind. “Speed of language counts. Prose speeds.” Gibbons is utterly committed to spontaneity, to the improvisation that knows not where it is going to end “until last tap at keyboard”. Again the spirit of Kerouac and Ginsberg lives on in such statements, as does the bravado of older prose writers such as Hemingway, tossing off great chunks of copy in little time (Gibbons: “I dropped off a couple manuscripts at the post office”(31)).

The arc that rises out of the “Anonymity of Time” (1), reaches an apex in “True Improvisation” (19) and descends into the long coda of “Beyond Time” (36) (with echoes of Proust’s (“old teahead of Time,” as Kerouac once called him) *Time Regained*), “Oracular Time” (37), and the vision in “I Saw Time” (38) takes the reader from the blank beginning line seeing Time as possessing a “grand anonymity”, expressed through absence of name, visible in the mass of “unmarked graves” of the unknown dead, to a final, perhaps not triumphant, but at least hopeful, look at Time beyond Death, peeking out more humanly, with a face perhaps, from “behind Death’s mask”. Time, which at first was an unknown and unknowable quantity (“I have never tried to write about Time”), is at the end of the dreaming and documenting another entity altogether, humanized and embodied: Time “danced in Flux with a body made of ethereal energy” – a friend, a familiar, a presence.

On the ride through the apex (“riding the same elliptical curve, as if sent from an unknown Time” (35)) towards the final gaze at Time “hover[ing] in the East, kindly, without intent” (38) the reader’s sense of gravity and linearity is happily challenged. The references along the way to world and biography as well as to texts, intertexts and fantasy sweep us off our feet, yet simultaneously keep us busy thinking,

reaching for our encyclopaedia or our keyboard, inviting us as true hypertext navigators to download Bill Evans *I Do It for Your Love*, Google Matisse's *The Three O'Clock Sitting*, reference Pietro Aretino's 16<sup>th</sup> century pornography, look up the good ship, *The Polar Adventure*, in the shipping news, etc., etc. All of that we do for Robert, but also for ourselves, for what it's worth, for what we might learn and be the richer for. Again my mind refers me to Kerouac as the last writer whose erudition and drive compelled me to pull down the roadmaps and follow him along every by-way of his ramblings.

But let us not forget that there is another fold, so let us begin again with the body which harbours these longings and desires and for which we really do all these things. The poems describe such longings, urges and fears of departure as can only be found in an old, battered but still desirous, great-hearted body. Not surprising then that the poems are home to a "she" who rapidly – more rapidly than Time – becomes personified and specific as a "Kathleen", named only the one time, but with such a naming that one is not likely to forget: "the all-too-real phenomenon of Kathleen" (10). She permeates all of the poems, though, in her pronominal guise: as a "she" or as part of a "we". Sometimes she speaks, having dreamed a pure transformational fairy-tale of 300 oysters' potential of yielding 300 pearls, sometimes she handles more nurturing tasks: "She saw me off to work filled with coffee & autumnal root soup" (15), and sometimes she is away, but longed for with intensity: "Surely the new house isn't the same without her" (21) (a longing that prompts the poet's preoccupation with Aretino's "how-to manual" – Gibbons' "large piece of furniture" being a bed in this poem). Yet there is more return than departure ("She walked by in that classic summer dress of nothing" (27)), and she is the key to the poet's dreams and joy in every sense: "We counted down the minutes toward the equinox [...], then the seconds, as small as anchovy bones, making that much the most of summer, so that no time at all was lost" (31)

Many of Syrie Kovitz's photographs, accompanying the poems, depict waif-like women, nude or scantily dressed, yet the photos, which are interesting in themselves with their range of ambiguously depicted phantasms, are often out-imaged by Gibbons' texts in terms of substance and dream matter. One might argue that his poems need no photographic counterpoint, being themselves plurivocal, full of contradictions, full of sounds and images. Kovitz's best work in this collection is that which accepts that it is placed in a framing function, and the title image (repeated of course with the title poem (36)) of a mantel shelf, adorned with many menorahs and other Jewish paraphernalia, upon which a Kovitz

waif is seen balancing as well, only her bare feet and white flowing hemline visible, is certainly striking, haunting and beautifully mysterious.

*DeadDrunkDublin* has provided a fitting home for this chapbook sequence, being a worthwhile site that harbours many other fine poetry, prose and multimedia texts in well-designed and aesthetically pleasing and challenging lay-outs. Gibbons' work has previously appeared online in both *Exquisite Corpse* and *The Drunken Boat*, so it's nothing new to him to cavort (with or without Time) in dark and dangerous venues. Even so, the light of poems such as "I Saw Time" ultimately drives away any untoward demons lurking in dreams or memory.

Robert Gibbons is one of the finest practitioners of prose poetry, not just of today, but beyond time.

- *Bent Sørensen,*  
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