REVIEW:

Jon Anderson, IN SEPIA *(U. of Pittsburgh Press)*
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WHILE READING JON ANDERSON'S *IN SEPIA*, I WAS REMINDED of Marlowe's statement in *HEART OF DARKNESS*: "Droll thing life is — that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself — that comes too late — a crop of unextinguishable regrets." But in *IN SEPIA*, even self-knowledge is too much to hope for, because we are unable to transcend our own subjectivity, the obstacle of self. Consciousness, instead of offering self-knowledge, offers only self-consciousness, the doubleness and self-separation of a self aware only of itself. "But you can't come down from yourself;/ you wouldn't if you could," the narrator says in "Refusals." In "A Bridge in Fog," he says, "When I came to myself,/ I was divided within myself." And in "The Inner Gate," "I realized I would remember/ Only my conception, not the act."

Time, which Anderson sees as an irrevocable procession toward dissolution, fragmentation and death, creates the impossibility of self-knowledge, identity, or relation to the world. The only constant is contingency; it becomes impossible to pinpoint anything: to identify is to dissolve. Speaking of death in "Rosebud," he says, "Or it's just a way of living/ Gone, like our own, every moment." And in "Stories," "So much/ The same measure, or passing of time,/ Where we dissolve." Any attempt to measure time, to know oneself in time, exists only as an illusion of the mind, of memory:

> So he is counting the days, the years, back toward
> A serious initial thought: that he was *here,*
> Was *someone,* . . .
>
> ("Counting the Days")

And Anderson believes this self-consciousness an *a priori* condition of existence from which we cannot escape:

> That failure I had long before surmised,
> Which was a destiny born
> Of self-consciousness, assured itself.
>
> ("The Inner Gate")

Or, put another way, given our understanding that we move *in time* toward death, we cannot dismiss our consciousness of *ourselves*: "When I live again, I'll put myself aside." If we could become timeless, if we could put aside both choosing and consciousness, only then could we transcend the self.

Anderson's consciousness of contingency and death leads him to the despair of desiring "a single, terrible event,/ the passage from which would measure time." But since measuring time is impossible, since life is not "a series of static events," and it is impossible to "hold on" to time, everything else moves toward dissolution, toward the abyss of self-obsession, of self-enclosure: relationships with others, desire, the process of art itself.

In "A Commitment," a poem dedicated to a man whose wife just left him, Anderson says: "I think now of those friends: I/ let them go. Really, only for the ease/ Of letting go." And later, in the same poem, "Thus friendship/ Like the moon, releases its pull/ & we slide back into ourselves." The belief that one can share one's life with others is delusion, a vanity based upon longing rather than what is real.

> A woman of delicate bearing gives me
> Her hand, & friends
> Are so enclosed within my reasoning
> I am occasionally them.
>
> ("In Autumn")

Love, the most intimate kind of sharing, represents a closure of self, rather than an opening, a revealing: "Or ourselves choose love, a kind/ Of concealment/ So private we can hardly speak." Passion is only "the error that fascinates;" it is "not love, but care." Ultimately, "Those other lives./ hers, everyone's, yours,/ Are reserved, even from themselves." The world without true desire becomes full of boredom, nothingness: "The days are interchangeable,"

everything becomes as valueless as everything else. "If I had a wish, I swear/ I wouldn't know what to spend it on." Our desires only confuse death, love and loneliness: the desire to desire is itself perverse, it is "the worm in the human heart," and it is hard and it is empty.

In Anderson's world, subjectivity rules: our inability to transcend the body ("I sat, not thoughtful/ Lost in the body awhile") creates a world where no one can move from self to other, where desire is transformed into an impossible longing, for union which cannot be met, "Ambiguous yearnings/ For the absolute." In fact, longing becomes the only constant in a world full of contingency: "Over the bodies of my constant departure/ Into my constant longing." "Whatever I do/ I am always leaving." This longing, this ambiguous journey searching for self-integration, a place in the world where one can live with oneself, is also a journey toward death, toward dissolution. "Though I long to be no one . . . " And there is always the doubleness of being and not being, the spectre of self-alienation. "*So here I am homeless at home & half/ Gratified to be anywhere.*" And once again, this desire cannot be met by the reality of the world. "Whatever I want I can outwalk."

Anderson sees art as artifice, writing poetry as mere sublimation: since desire cannot be fulfilled, poetry takes its place: "Out of my longing/ I had invented this particular city." Writing becomes a way of perpetuating the disease of selfhood; instead of providing a way of sharing, it becomes a means of enclosing and self-obsession. "So you end up speechless, writing it down./ That tapping all night is yourself." Poetry becomes just "talking about things" not a passion, a thing in itself. So a statement which at first appears glib, "The secret of poetry is cruelty," applies both to the poet and his relationship with others, since the demands of the work create the vulnerability of self-inflicted pain, and since the poet must sacrifice others for the work itself. The cruelty of poetry is in its revealing the knowledge of self-entrapment without providing the writer with a means of transforming it, just as consciousness reveals self-division without providing a means of creating self-integration.

Anderson's knowledge leads him to a desire for simplicity, for paring down, for eliminating the useless knowledge of the self. This

desire for simplicity is for the most part futile, since it exists only in memory, somewhere in the historical and personal past. The natural world, the objective world, which formerly offered salvation and affirmation of existence, "Is mostly passed now." Trees are lifeless, "vaguely parallel strips of slate," "whispering flat as water." What consciousness has brought, what civilization has wrought, is complexity, confusion, loss of identity. In "Rosebud," we find the Indians are just like everyone else. Only in photographs, in time held still, *in sepia,* do we have a sense of what we have lost in time, in the dark, elusive joy of the past.

But Anderson's knowledge also leads him to compassion, the realization that we finally do share something, if only the same illusions, the same longings:

> Though the stories they lived
> Were not the same,
> Many were distracted into love,
> Slept, & woke alone, awhile serene.
>
> ("Years")

And we all share the same hopelessness, the same condition: as the narrator says in the title poem: "He was reading a story so hopeless,/ so starless, we all belonged." "We who have changed, I have/ no hope of change, must now love/the passage of time;" we must learn to live with this condition, accept it. We can only move "from judgment to compassion."

It is this bond of being trapped in the same enclosure, the mortal and declining body, which ironically allows Anderson to retain his humanity, saying, "I will try to hold back some harshness./ Nor judge myself continually, or any man."

Needless to say, Jon Anderson's IN SEPIA is an immensely powerful, deeply moving book of poems. The voice is authoritative, the intelligence is overpowering, the vision, in spite of our resistance, is at once convincing, threatening, and thoroughly frightening. And Anderson's sense of craft, his unrelenting melancholy rhythms, his strangeness of diction and syntax, his ability to embody abstraction, is almost unparalleled in contemporary poetry; he unites feeling and form so well, that ironically enough, he has totally shared his inability to share, he has revealed his compassion for others and created

a book which is truly full of universal concerns. IN SEPIA is a book which is not only engaging to read, but to think about again and again. In short, this is a major accomplishment from a major writer, and I cannot recommend it highly enough.

— IRA SADOFF