

Gargle and Spit

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Daybook from Sheep Meadow: The Notebooks of Tallis Martinson, by Peter Dimock, Deep Vellum.

I AM NOT a practiced reviewer of fiction, but maybe that's a lucky defect when it comes to Peter Dimock's third novel, *Daybook from Sheep Meadow: The Notebooks of Tallis Martinson*. I can imagine the kind of reviewer who would describe this novel as "experimental," admiring the genre mixing, the cat-and-mouse game of displaced consciousness, document juxtaposed against character analysis against first-person narration against another type of document—say, Daniel Somer's suicide note (which testifies to the deep moral and physical injury he sustained as an Iraq war veteran), or a timeline chronicling the ugliest moments of our Iraq invasion and occupation, or a sonnet by Shakespeare, or the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam's thoughts on Dante and the poet's role in history as a transformer of consciousness, or excerpts from Theodore Weld's 1836 book of antislavery testimony. I can also imagine such a reviewer commenting on Dimock's penchant for clashing points of view—the way it oscillates between Tallis Martinson's often raw, lyrically voiced notebook entries and the clipped professorial voice of Tallis's twin brother, the book's ostensible "editor," Christopher Renfro Martinson. In Tallis's notebook entries that Christopher has culled, he denotes his own observations about Tallis and his notebook by referring to himself as CRM.

Christopher's restrained formality in using all three of his initials suggests someone constricted by academic convention. But it also seems like an act of modesty, even love—a pained and painful decorum in reluctantly revealing that his widely respected historian brother has suffered a kind of breakdown, retreated into silence, and has committed himself to a psychiatric hospital. Now, it's fallen to CRM to do his best by his debilitated brother and bring into the world a

selection of Tallis's diary entries, which Christopher annotates with a series of glosses and autobiographical musings in order to explain more fully the context of Tallis's otherwise fragmented perceptions. Supplemented by Christopher's commentary, the distillation of Tallis's notebooks forms the "experimental" novel that we readers now hold in our hands.

As to what the "experiment" is experimenting with, our reviewer might say something like the depredations of empire, "the forever war" of competing presidents, imams, dictators, mullahs, excellencies, premiers—or in Seamus Heaney's words, "shites thinking they're the be-all and the end-all." As to what the shites have perpetrated, our reviewer could provide you with a comprehensive list: the historical hangover of slavery, American exceptionalism as updated Manifest Destiny, neoliberal capitalism's market-driven logic that demands more and more consumption even as it concentrates capital into fewer and fewer hands—the kind of logic that the Swedish poet, Tomas Tranströmer, characterizes as "money, always money creeping into people's pockets—always the wrong people— / ultimatums piled on ultimatums, / bloody-mouthed flowers whose sweat reminds us of oncoming war." And our reviewer might further point out how our profligate technomastery demands ever more sophisticated military hardware and weapons systems, and that undergirding the whole messy, ingenious, and scary enterprise is a Hail-Mary-bombs-away-fuck-all ethos of finding plausible-sounding legalities and precedents to explain away torture, the use of drones, and what Dimock in an author's note calls "empire's exterminatory exploitation of Earth's limited resources."

If that was where Dimock ended up, I can imagine an impatient reader saying, What's the big deal? All these angsty, tricky-tricky gyres and peregrinations so that you can live without blood on your hands? Get over yourself and deal with it. But Dimock doesn't stop there: in fact that's only the beginning. He goes much further than our impatient reader is probably willing, or even equipped, to go. More, much more is at stake in this novel than the contradictions that inhere

in the lies and evasions we struggle to make our peace with. It's as if the book's formal ingenuity, the genre-bending, now-you-see-it-now-you-don't use of persona, is a half-despairing, half-hopeful, last-ditch ontological maneuver. The concatenation of all the novel's various voices is nothing less than Dimock's attempt to forge a way of seeing that, to quote Borges, can "recover a past or prefigure a future."

Only in Dimock's case the conjunction would be "and," not "or." Dimock's desire to create a new epistemology not based on a theology of winners and losers, saved and damned, dominators and dominated, has obsessed him throughout two previous novels, and the *Daybook* shares their concerns. Dimock is out to make a full assessment of the history of empire—and the cost of that assessment underwrites Tallis's fatally riven sensibility. CRM's desire to salvage from his brother's wrecked consciousness a new relationship to the history of empire bespeaks just how intensely CRM and Tallis impinge on Dimock's moral imagination. So intensely at times that the text seems to achieve a weird autonomy from Dimock, as if the diffused consciousness of the author can only be experienced through the plurality of voices that the novel is hospitable to. CRM's attempt to bring his brother back from his mutism is akin to Dimock's restless search for voices other than his own that can reattune Tallis to the cacophonous nature of ordinary life—what Seamus Heaney calls "the music of what happens."

So call his book an experiment into, and with, consciousness. With all that in mind, our reviewer might feel compelled to expatiate on the self-consciousness that goes into the writing of a book that purports to be CRM's selection of Tallis's daybook entries, as well as CRM's own reflections on his attempt to master what he calls his brother's method—a sort of secular, home-brewed version of Ignatian spiritual exercises in which you attempt to achieve, by meditating on a particular set of texts in a set order, a way of living in history in which you aren't compromised or complicit with Tallis's now-destroyed faith "in the underlying democratic narrative of his nation's continuity." According to CRM, Tallis feels like a dupe and a criminal after he bungles his congressional testimony against the use of drones because of

his sudden loss of faith in language—the language of his own academic pother, which is also the language of historical and legal precedent, of the professional policy makers, think tankers, and the whole coterie of professional spinners who find ways to justify or extenuate torture, war, and all the other brutal accommodations ordinary people make with the social order they inhabit, connive at, resist, coexist with—and in Tallis’s case, are seduced, rewarded, and then destroyed by.

Eesh, says our impatient reader. Who cares about the destruction of some talking head’s academic preeminence, his descent into incoherence, his desire to inhabit cloud-cuckoo-land? But again, the destruction of Tallis’s psychic integrity isn’t so much the subject of this novel, as it is the hope of its regeneration. And that’s where a reviewer and a reader like me comes in; a reader/reviewer who feels that both Tallis and CRM are my secret sharers: I, too, am an identical twin; I, too, am ten minutes younger than my brother (the same as CRM is to Tallis); I, too, like Dimock, have been obsessed for the last twenty years with the exercise of state power abroad.

I know, I know—Tallis and Christopher are characters in a novel. But I have no interest in rehearsing the old arguments about the differences between art and life. Suffice it to say that the novel ignores the neat distinction between aesthetics and the discordant unruliness of Freud’s conviction that “Life as we find it is too hard for us.” Psychoanalysis aside, the mordant truth of this statement fuels this book’s refusal to make “well-rounded characters” and the like. Why bother with all the naturalistic rigmarole when your fundamental impulses are visionary, driving you to imagine a counterreality, one that takes a full reckoning of a world of military hardware and ever-more-sensitive guidance systems, but also envisions a world that goes beyond the zero sum of politics as war by other means? And then there is the novel’s stringent brevity—barely 140 pages in a modest trim size. Rather than laboriously painting in every tree, rock, and pebble, he shares Borges’s sly conviction that it’s better to pretend that a five-hundred-page novel already exists (in this case, multiple diary entries boiled down to a distillate), and then to offer up “a summary, a commentary.”

By the same token, his sense of the inadequacy of psychological realism has led him to a documentarian's way of presenting societal injustices, marshaling testimony from many different sources and then juxtaposing them in ways suggestive of psychological contradictions and complexities. It's as if a quotation from Levinas, following an admission by CRM's dying mother that she did nothing to protect the young daughters of a family friend from being raped by their own father, is for Dimock a more effective way to protest such an act than to render the scene in all its gory, naturalistic detail. This method of suggesting a whole granular history of complex motives, but doing it in a few strokes, is typical of *Daybook*. When it comes to long narrative set pieces designed to give you "the scene" in its entirety, Dimock prefers to allude to an event or state of mind, and then distill it into a motif to be laid against other motifs. For Dimock, I suspect that psychological realism feels a little rigged, as if the writer is trying to move the reader from A to Z, along a trail of bread crumbs leading out of the bewitched cannibal forest into the clearing of understanding. But the conflicting sources in this book, juxtaposed one against the next, call into question whether such a clearing can even exist—and even if it did, wouldn't it just be what Robert Frost said the purpose of a poem was, to be "a momentary stay against confusion"?⁹ At any rate, Dimock's extensive use of quotation from other sources gives the book a heightened sense of factuality, almost the air of transcribed testimony.

The fact is, rather than fiction, this book feels like a confession—it's as if Tallis and Christopher are two halves of a very close alter-ego for our author—a kind of lyric doppelgänger that reminds me of W. G. Sebald's oddly personal personae in which it becomes difficult, and after a time irrelevant, to tell what is mask and what face. The conventions of autobiography, of memoir, of private journal, of spiritual daybook, are all invoked, cycled through, remixed over and over. But maybe because I'm a poet, I find none of these verbal gestures "experimental" or even particularly genre bending: anyone who's read _____ (fill in your favorite modernist poet) comes to take such procedures for what they are: another way of writing, of trying to

find a form. So yes, questions about genre mixing and hybridity seem like interesting rabbit holes to go down, but for me they are pretty much beside the point.

So what is the point? As Robert Lowell once said, the problem with criticism is that it makes points. But let me take a stab at it: There is an anguish in this novel that feels, as I said earlier, like a last-ditch ontological maneuver, the kind of maneuver that wants to rise above history; or at least history as Tacitus might have envisioned it—the utterly desolating peace that follows in the wake of a missile strike, leaving nothing but rubble and scorched earth. Which is the reason Dimock’s novel is such an irritant, a salutary one to be sure, to the understandable desire to find some kind of practical accommodation to the problems CRM and Tallis confront. But the novel won’t let us alone. I remember a poet friend of mine once saying of another poet’s work, *There are enough real problems without making them up*—meaning, I imagine, that living in the world is hard enough without having to envision a new one. But suppose that daily life were to become intolerable unless there was the potential of another, better world in the offing? What if, like CRM and Tallis, you were so finely attuned to history’s processes that you felt them with all the intensity of George Eliot’s famous description of day-to-day life: “it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.” Well, in Dimock’s case, I suspect that that roar sounds more like the engine of a Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II fighter jet, the most advanced—and most costly at 1.5 trillion dollars—“weapon platform” (as it is called in the trade) ever made.

And now suppose that the roar is omnipresent. . . and suddenly the scope and ambition of this novel become clear. Despite our desire to shut out the roar, it gets louder year after year. Dimock hears it, and he wants us to hear it, too; and once we have heard it, to face up to what it means. In a way what Dimock is dramatizing with rare grace and fierce integrity is Dostoyevsky’s hazardous conviction that “As soon as you make yourself responsible in all sincerity for everything

and for everyone, you will see at once that this is really so, and that you are in fact to blame for everyone and for all things.” Dimock may also be responding to a refinement of Dostoyevsky’s sense of responsibility as expressed by Hannah Arendt: “For many years now we have met Germans who declare that they are ashamed of being Germans. I have often felt tempted to answer that I am ashamed of being human.” Arendt goes on to suggest that as human beings grow to know more and more about their “evil potentialities,” they recoil more and more from the idea of a common humanity, instinctively sensing that such an idea “implies a general responsibility for all crimes committed by men and that nations share the onus of evil committed by all others.” This dilemma is what torments CRM/Tallis/Dimock. I get the feeling of a man living in extremis, at the edge of tortuously frayed nerves. The daybook entries shift violently between an almost messianic desire to live a life of complete spiritual and economic reciprocity, and the unruly, helpless, often brutalizing facts of parental abuse/neglect and state-sanctioned violence. The whiplashing back and forth between moments of ecstatic realization and soul-destroying self-abasement is what gives this book its unique flavor of psychic ravishment and devastation.

Dimock is concerned with how his characters can maintain a sense of their own coherence as human beings when at every moment the society they live in violates human rights on a massive scale, mainly through the instrument of endless, ubiquitous war. For me, over the last twenty years, I’ve seen as a journalist the effects of highly specific wars on ordinary, often extremely poor people—people who have no running water except what they can hand pump from a borehole and carry back in jerricans to huts or tents or tent-huts often cunningly built out of scrounged materials; people who have no reliable access to electricity and whose only tenuous link to the so-called outside world is a rudimentary “internet café” in which one or two ancient computers are kept running by swapped out, ingeniously recycled parts; people who, because of their stateless condition, have very few civil rights and virtually no place, and no way to make a place, in the

society in which they find themselves—Palestinians, Somalis, Oromo, Congolese, and other “refugee” populations spread across the Middle East and East Africa.

Where Dimock’s and my obsession overlap is with the phenomenon of war. If you write about displaced people, you’re almost always writing about a place where there is a war, has been a war, will be a war. You’re writing about a place where there’s almost no infrastructure protecting them from famine, climate change, and all the various forms of state-sanctioned violence—violence that so haunts Tallis’s congressional testimony that his personality dissolves in the acid bath of his own complicity.

Of course, complicity as a theme in novels is one thing, but complicity in the suffering of actual human beings is another. Dropping the mask of the reviewer for a moment, in what ways are Dimock or I or any other human being who feels implicated in such problems complicit? In our cars and consumer comforts? In how easily suffering turns to spectacle? But I wonder if complicity, or the various forms of liberal guilt that alienated cases like Tallis’s seem to represent, is the root of the problem. Could it be that the real culprit, the nasty little secret that afflicts Tallis and CRM and Dimock and me, is the penchant to moralize, to fall into abstractions, to want to play the expert, the witness, to pretend to represent the suffering of others while pushing them into the background? Isn’t that part of the reason why Tallis lapses into silence? Alienated from his professional world of hearings and legal definitions, unable to credit any longer his own web of well-meant abstractions, his act of revolt against all his previous identifications is to develop a meditative method in which he’s able to create an alternative world—a world where, to quote Yeats, he can “hold in a single thought reality and justice.”

But who or what would be the instrument of that justice? Suppose for a moment that in a corner of Tallis’s mind there appeared the embodiment of that justice in the form of skinny Patrice from Burundi, who wears his green beret at a rakish angle, and has to keep hitching up his Amisom (African Union Mission in Somalia) uniform’s baggy trousers as he mans a machine gun mounted on an armored

vehicle patrolling the streets of Mogadishu, ostensibly to protect civilians from an Islamic militia, al-Shabaab, and keep the peace. (When I asked Patrice why he'd joined Amisom, he said, only half joking, that he wanted to have a future, and in order to have a future, he needed to eat.)

Or let's say that Dublin-born Andy came crashing into Dimock's novel, a jovial, self-ironic chain-smoker of Marlboro Reds, a Blue Helmet peacekeeper who daydreams about leave time to Beirut as he keeps watch over the Golan Heights on the Syrian side of the border. At first glance, it would appear that Andy and Patrice inhabit wildly different ethical universes from CRM and Tallis. You might say that Dimock's novel views war from a distance, as a geopolitical fever dream that eventually renders Martinson mute, whereas Andy and Patrice are dreaming a radically different kind of dream—one in which the fifty-caliber slugs fired by both Patrice's and Andy's machine guns pockmark a blast wall with fist-sized holes.

Dimock's relation to the problem of war, at least as it's expressed in this novel, is the psychic cost of state violence to his two brothers. Andy's and Patrice's stake in the problem is more the material cost to the people who are on the receiving end of that violence. The Martinson brothers function at a remove from the people that Andy and Patrice are sworn to protect, but then so do I and so do all journalists unless they come out of the community itself. But Dimock provides what a journalist like me can't: a brilliantly conceived schema of how human personality can splinter and break apart when war, the intoxication of war as well as its horrors, becomes all-encompassing, all-consuming, as a metaphysical experience.

Dimock's channeling of Emmanuel Levinas's conviction that only when "Morality will oppose politics in history" will the "eschatology of messianic peace . . . superpose itself upon the ontology of war" is the novel's wound, its long-shot hope, and its defiant *cri de coeur*. It is the basis of Martinson's spiritual agon when his testimony against drones fails to stop their ever-more-widespread deployment. But not so fast: the eschatology of what? And what, anyway, does ontology of war mean? That is, in terms that Andy or Patrice might understand.

I might say to them something like, Well, if the end times were figured not as a war for the souls of humankind, if morality was no longer taken to be a titanic struggle between good and evil, but was aligned instead with peace and equity so that war and struggle might wither away as a societal response, then peace would come as a savior and replace war. There'd be no need for the peace that passeth understanding because we'd finally embrace peace as our most longed for common good. In a pig's arse, I can hear Andy reply. And Patrice might not think I was completely mad, but he would certainly think the *mzungu* journalist was a little off. Well, politics and philosophy aren't the same disciplines, I might mumble, foolishly, defensively.

But I would be wrong, because in Dimock's novel, politics and philosophy are inseparable—and Levinas of all people understood this. Because of his experiences in the POW camp he was imprisoned in (he fought against the Nazis for the French), and because his mother-in-law was deported east and never heard from again, while his brothers and father were both murdered by the SS, Levinas knew right to the bone the limits of philosophy, and the necessity of politics. If we grant Levinas his high-wire rhetoric, what comes clear is how Tallis's testimony before a senate subcommittee isn't a fool's game, or a fool's alibi for committing atrocities, but is on a continuum with what Andy and Patrice are trying to do inside the paradoxical demand that they be peacekeepers through the use of violence.

The presidents and excellencies who both order and are controlled by that violence like to separate themselves from the helpless ones who suffer it—the so-called refugees I write about. I say “so-called” out of respect for a Somali woman whose husband had been dragged out of their home and into the street where he was shot in the back of the head by a rival clan. Through an interpreter, she told me that she wanted to spit out the word, refugee, every time she said it, because it made her feel “smaller” than other people. At the same time, she acknowledged the coveted status of being officially designated a refugee in a place like Kenya: to have refugee status meant that your kids could go to school for free, that if you lived in a camp like Dadaab, you'd receive rations, a plot of ground, some

jerricans and utensils, a ground sheet and whatever cast-off WFP food sacks you could scrounge in order to build yourself a home. So even though her story is grounded in the body's necessities, she, too, is part of the web of abstraction that extends from Tallis's hearing chamber to Andy's and Patrice's peacekeeping efforts to the intake interviews and fingerprinting and overall camp processing that the Somali woman had to go through in order to keep from starving.

So rather than seeing Tallis and CRM as separate from Andy, Patrice, and the Somali woman (I withhold her name so as not to potentially endanger her), I prefer to view them on a continuum. And though I don't know if Dimock would agree, I wonder if his book isn't his way of trying to make that continuum real, a way past all philosophical dualities toward an impersonal passion for a universal sense of responsibility—one that cuts across all our identities, our unique circumstances, peeves, hatreds, private and public loves. He wants to do more than condemn others or "bear witness."

Could it be that his formal ingenuity is an expression of a despairing mind—a mind that in Thom Gunn's beautiful phrase wants "to bypass the self like love"? A mind desiring a way of seeing that goes beyond the self-involved politicking of daily life and arrives at the heart of a politics that transcends any individual? Some may find that quaint, unhip, unreal, privileged, cut off from life at ground zero. But Dimock takes ideas seriously in a way that most of us don't. *Daybook* is emphatically not playing with ideas, much less is it a novel of ideas. Instead, its author is in pursuit of the "deep, true, inner form" that Hugo von Hofmannsthal posits in his quasicontessional short story, "The Letter of Lord Chandos"—a form that penetrates and dissolves subject matter, "creating at once both dream and reality." Only in Dimock's case, the dream has turned as nightmarish as the reality.

Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, writing to Francis Bacon about the complete breakdown of his faith in words, dreams of "thinking in a medium more immediate, more liquid, more glowing than words. It, too, forms whirlpools, but of a sort that do not seem to lead, as the whirlpools of language, into the abyss, but into myself and into the deepest womb of peace." Only in Dimock's novel, there is no womb

to hide in, no peace, except for the meditational method that Tallis Martinson has devised for himself, a method that seeks to incorporate an ecstatic intuition into the bruised and broken body of our world. But consonant with that method is his faith in what Osip Mandelstam called “the infinite raw material of poetic sound—which is inappropriately offered to culture as proper, which is ever distrustful and offensive to culture because of its suspiciousness, and which spits culture out like water used for gargling.” For all its unabashed literary and philosophical sophistication, *The Daybook of Tallis Martinson* spits in the face of culture and attempts to wake it up.