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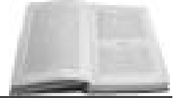
Outsiders Looking In



Ewing Campbell

LONG ODDS: STORIES

Gordon Weaver

University of Missouri Press
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Readers who haven't found any Zog in their fiction since Donald Barthelme's *The King* (1990) might want to settle down with Gordon Weaver's ninth story collection, *Long Odds*. It opens with Zog's attempt to correct the world, one person at a time, by means of his miming critiques. A futile business, that. Readers will find that three features often mark these eleven stories: one is the author's reliance on a distinctive vernacular style to carry the narrative load, another is the fallibility of his narrators, and a third is the alienation of his protagonists. The first depends on diction, broken syntax, a stylized grammar; the second on subtle irony; and the last on characters who work against their strongest desires either by failing to act when the opportunity occurs or by acting in a way that undermines their best interests.

Take the last feature, alienation, and consider Zog because he represents an archetype—not of the artist, as he claims, but of the characters who people Weaver's stories, individuals who would rather be good than passionate or intimate with others. "I consider myself an archetype of the artist," Zog announces, overstating his station in life, but it is a skeptical reader who doubts Zog's dedication to the mime's art: "All this I do, and more, complex and subtle, in but a single instant stopped in time, held for as long as you like, suggesting an otherwise incalculable past, an undreamed, unlimited future, as precise as my audience's imagination, as universal in implication as all humanity's sad, comic history." Sounds like a well-formed definition of the gestalt in which the absent but implicit line connects. We can believe this mime bearing Ahmed Bey Zogu's

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sovereign name could be hired by a haberdasher to pose in his display window, that his performance would attract and conquer crowds, along with an admiring Miss Jankowski, and increase profits at the store.

But all the while, a conflict between his account of the events and his claims remains dormant until a moment of pique stirs Zog to lose his aesthetic distance. Passing judgment on the mere appearance of a man in the crowd—a flickering of the eyes indicating amorality—Zog strikes a pose of the man straining at stool. Fundamental humor in the service of satire goes back to a time before Chaucer and Boccaccio. Rabelais gave his name to it. Honoré Daumier went to jail for depicting Louis Philippe enthroned on a commode. It is a convention and the surest sign of contempt, but is it art? Or is it, rather, the confounding of ethics and aesthetics? In attempting the answer we might remember Flaubert's remark to Louise Colet in a similar circumstance: "You have made Art an outlet for passions, a kind of chamberpot…It smells of hate!" (9-10 January 1854). And the year before: "Do not imagine you can exorcise what oppresses you in life by giving vent to it in art" (25 November 1853).

When Zog shifts his emphasis from "suggesting an otherwise incalculable past, an undreamed, unlimited future," to focusing on flaws, he becomes a satirist, a category of human always disappointed in the world, and with the shift in emphasis comes a shift in execution. Where once his art suggested, he now resorts to flaunting his virtuosity and, finally, to alienating others by robbing them of their dignity, and ends up alone. So too Luthi, who is abandoned by Ed Stein, his interior companion in "Ed Stein, Ed Stein, Speak

to Me!" And the narrator of "Viewed from Lanta & Wally's," who as outsider looking in represents the major figures of this collection. His harsh judgment of others and proprietary attitude finally get him banned from the diner he frequents and leaves him isolated from the greater world. Two forces vie in the story: the narrator's interpretation and the author's clever undercutting of the narrator's take on matters.

Weaver reminds us there are articles of faith that lend themselves to fiction. One is the conviction that we truly know ourselves or those we trust, a conviction likely to set us up for disillusionment. In most initiation stories, someone learns something unsettling about oneself, the world, a trusted person, and "Long Odds" is no exception to the tradition. Kleczka, having an unlikely run in games of chance and feeling pleased with himself when things are going well, wins one too many games, prompting a sore loser to bring him down a notch with an unsettling revelation about his wife. As this new knowledge raises the question of how our protagonist will deal with it, three responses might occur: he could handle it poorly, it might baffle him, or Kleczka could respond with grace under pressure. The tacit expectation of such narratives, though not always the case, is that characters learn to temper excessive ideals to become persons better prepared to face the real world. So it seems with Kleczka, whose distress is as poignant as his response is subdued.

A rare kind of initiation story inverts the tradition of terrible revelation and permits the discovery of unexpected good. Writers who succeed with this form often undercut the potential for sentimentality by creating individuals who don't grasp the implications but sense that something significant has happened. This is Weaver's strategy in "Without Spot or Wrinkle," summed up by the closing words, "I drove on, trying to decide what exactly I felt, but that eluded me." When Kenneth Mullins travels to Mississippi for his estranged brother's funeral, he disapproves, can't imagine that his brother, Roddy, might have found happiness in the Deep South with his African American wife and their community.

"It was like stepping out of the world," he reports, "into some dingy, shabby, skewed approximation of any world I knew, walking into one I might only half-remember from a bad dream dreamed a long time ago." Influenced by attitudes shaped in South Boston, Mullins suffers while myriad details fill out each moment and quotidian events take on the quality of high drama. Try as much as he might, he can't make sense of his brother until a neighbor shares the stump elixir Roddy made in life. At that point a change sweeps through him and he can at last accept that his "brother was dead and buried in the tiny cemetery of The Church Without Spot or Wrinkle." He could "believe this was a good time and place to be": "I do not think I felt drunk, just a deep, total easing of body and mind, a fine sense of exhausted peace that came of his strong stump whiskey, the view of fields and woods, a tangible cooling of the air as the sky sprouted high, boiling clouds, a perceptible dimming of the harsh light."

If "Long Odds" and "Without Spot or Wrinkle" make a binary pair as initiation stories with opposite results, so do the first story, "Mannequin," and the last, "Imagining the Structure of Free Space on Pioneer Road." The narrator of the last story attempts to imagine total darkness with no reference point, the Free Space of blindness, while putting together a light display for Christmas. Driven on by the faith that it is the right thing to do in the face of his wife's disapproval, he could not have foreseen the tactile effects of the glowing lights on his blind daughter or his wife's final blessing in a moment of tender intimacy, but that is the outcome. "Imagining the Structure of Free Space on Pioneer Road" is Weaver's refutation of one-dimensional darkness. It is an affirmation that the sun also rises.

Ewing Campbell's most recent novel is Madonna, Maleva.