Time & Reality

Penelope Rosemont

2013

a review of

None of This Is Real by Miranda Mellis, Sidebrow Books, San Francisco, 2012, 115 pp., $18, sidebrow.net.

Leonora Carrington, the great surrealist creator of paintings and stories, is quoted as saying, "The duty of the right eye is to plunge into the telescope, whereas the left eye interrogates the microscope."

Seldom do we find this range of mental experience in writing. But here it is in Miranda Mellis's *None of This Is Real*–part story, part philosophical treatise–beautifully told and masterfully achieved. This fine book contains multitudes of colorful permutations, ever-changing panoramas, magical chance encounters, lucid geographies of the mental experience that underpins the archeology of our identity, our dreams, our everyday life.

The collection begins with the short piece, "Face," in which the teller transcribes her uncontrollable mutability of expression: "… [F]ace moving involuntarily, twitching, leering… truly a person may become an abyss: I felt it happening to me. My visage became a kaleidoscopic mask; people weren't sure what they were looking at. I could not translate. I felt non-existence encroaching."

These evocative thoughts serve as an introduction to the main story, "None of This Is Real." We begin with a character called "O" and his adventures in everyday life, beginning with a visit to see his mother, Sonia. But who is "O"?

This "O" contains his own despair; he dreams of a vast construction site…

"[H]e is the only one who realizes that the whole work site is merely a facade," that what they do is meaningless, building and destroying pointlessly.

We learn about "O"'s disconcerting visit to that palace of commodities, the Mall, and that his mother has presented him with a pillow she made; on it she has embroidered "Life's too Mysterious; Don't take it Serious."

He visits a therapist who offers "customized stability" through "Path to a Position," that is, somatic realism. He recalls wanting to live out his mother's fantasies of him as a great student, and he writes a novel.

Indeed, he had intended to write "an unprecedented, encyclopedic, world-historical novel." But there were so many distractions: "… new techniques in climate change, adaptations, urban agriculture, toxic waste mitigation, soil retention, foreclosure opportunism, oil spill cleanup, sex, and water filtration were considered more pressing than literary innovation. Climate change in particular gave him nightmares."

If he were to describe the novel, it would have been: "post- political, social-realist…a transnational literary, neoteric, polyphonic *Salt of the Earth* or a revamped, reflexive, more rounded *Life in the Iron Mills*, complicatedly dramatizing individual stories behind global struggles to reclaim life's basic necessities which, down to genetic material, were being increasingly privatized…"

"O" has a filing system and has kept a file of "unbearable correspondences," objective chances in the surrealist meaning of the term, which have confounded his sense of reality. What reality?

"What was the good of imagining reality? And if there is no such thing as time in progress, why keep recapitulating more falsehoods in the form of chronologies…Knowledge came and went like tides…Time moved like water."

"O" works in a library. In an especially insightful and humorous passage, a part of the story I particularly loved, because of my fascination with the ideas of William James, "O" is drawn to the self-help section of his library. (I'm fond of these books because you either find some useful information or at the minimum, a good laugh.)

There he discovers "astonishingly the brightly colored titles blaring words like Shame and Anger across the stacks. Occult, illness, dying, sex, and relationships…One night he found it in disarray, as though someone had had a paroxysm in the sex and relationship section."

Among the self-help books, the theme that was "especially prevalent was the argument that reality was a product of individual will." In his attempts to piece together an acceptable reality, "O" visits a fortune teller, a doctor at a free clinic, and a zoo elephant. Layers of images provoke further images; the words have a hypnotic magic that is close to musical.

In the story, "The Coffee Jockey," a woman considers that "she was of no use to the world but she found the world very useful indeed. Without the world, she thought, what would I have to look at?"

In "Triple Feature," we consider the movies. The piece reminds us that the mind loves to play, rove through time, and experiment with unrestrained passions: "Her favorites were set in distant places and times. Long-haired barbarians killed monsters and raped women while gods rode on clouds…wore hardly any clothing, at most chain mail bras, scandals snaking up their shapely calves and diaphanous veils…Zenobia chained to a rock, kidnapped by an enormous lizard."

"Transformer" gives us several keys to earlier mysteries. "…[I]n the old world, a woman asked her daughter to set fire to the woods with her mind." Millis tells us that, "We live into the future via the shape of a word or letter which becomes the geography–imaginary at first–of our destination." Is this a clue to the identity of "O"?

We began with a character named "O" on a visit to see his mother. "O" has multiple associations and already my mind rushes off. I recall the Story of O by Pauline Reage (Anne Desclos) still unexcelled as a tale of pleasure through absolute sexual submission, but this "O," Millis's character, is masculine…but is our self, still.

Then, I remember "O" for Orlando, the tale well-loved by me as a teenager written by Virginia Woolf, of the character whose sex changes through each of his historical incarnations. Or, maybe "O" is for the cipher or zero, the numeral invented by Leonardo Fibonacci in 1202.

Who is "O"? I think of openness, orbit, ontology; I think of Ocean, of Orion, of Orchids, of the Oneness of oscillating obsessions of Orion's orchard of orgasmic orchids. The mind is such a strange place.

What this fine book, full of the secrets of our subterranean existence, has done is disassemble us into small pieces and then reconstruct us as characters with x-ray vision. History, memory, in their protean mutability, is one of my concerns as is the liberation of our dreams and the reconstruction of daily life with the inspiration of surrealism.

In this book, the Mechanics of the Universe collide with personal historical forces and with Archimedes, we ask, "only give me a place to stand and I will move the Earth."

But one of the most provocative of all the statements, I think, is the woman's advice to her daughter in the story, "Transformer," "… [A]fter all it is your choice what you do in life, will you set fire to the wood, the world, with your mind." "Do or do not. There is no try."

Penelope Rosemont met with Andre Breton and the Paris surrealist group in 1965–66. She edited *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*. Her latest book is a memoir, *Dreams & Everyday Life: Andre Breton, Surrealism, Rebel Worker, sds & the Seven Cities of Cibola*, Charles H. Kerr, publisher.

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