

Erin Moure, *O Resplendor*, Anansi, 2010

Chris Hutchinson, *Other People's Lives*, Brick Books, 2009

Resplendor can mean 'brilliance' or 'radiance.' It can mean 'lustre' or 'glitter.' 'Glory' or 'glimpse.' Then there is the 'O.' 'O' as in 'Oh' as in 'Oh!' as in 'ô.' 'O' as in the fictional character O.A. or the real-life Oana Avasilichioaei. 'O' as in the open mouth, the pin on the map. O where the itch is. O where it hurts. O as in the little fence it makes around the vast, blue sky on the cover. 'O.,' the fictional E.M. writes toward the end (the beginning?) of *O Resplendor*, 'if only I could detain time.'

To settle on one reading of even the title is in a sense buying into the false promise of the completed circle. *O Resplendor* is, at its most basic, a collaborative project: by the real-life poet and translator Erin Moure, via her heteronym from previous books, Elise Sampedrín; fictional characters O. and E.M.; the work of poets Paul Celan and Nichita Stănescu, whose words appear in translation (often in translations of translations); and translator/poet Oana Avasilichioaei. So context, author and even idiom are tenuous. The fences always have holes. That passages from Derrida's *Work on Mourning* recur throughout the book is itself a kind of collapsible earmark—the deconstructionist's words reappearing as a directive voice throughout the book. Yet the Derrida passages Moure, Sampedrín et al. quote do provide a vernacular with which one can begin to talk about some of the charge and experience of reading *O Resplendor*:

'I told myself the following, which I feel with singular acuteness and intensity: if this interiorization is not possible, if it cannot—and this is the unbearable paradox of fidelity—be completed, it would not be because of a limit, a border that cannot be crossed, a frontier that encloses a given space, organizing finitude into an inside and outside homogeneous with one another, symmetrical and commensurable. It would be, rather, because of another organization of space and of visibility, of the gazing and the gazed upon.'

'[Another] organization of space and of visibility' seems as good a way as any to describe a book that defies category: somehow lyric poetry, letters, a mystery novel and a work of translation all at once. The 11 prose sections, or 'Crónicas,' provide a narrative smokescreen where E.M., E.S. and O's communications—via letter, anecdote, the aforementioned quotes—are presented with enough semi-answered questions, world-traversing, and unfulfilled longing to keep even the most linear-minded reader interested. Maps are evoked. So are other texts that may provide clues, what the last section calls 'Documents for Further Inquiry.' Who wrote this book? That's an adequate enough question to go on. How does one mourn? That's another.

Moure mentioned in a recent interview with the *National Post* that she thought *O Resplendor* would make a good movie, and I think she's right. As in any good mystery, no one is supposed to be trusted, not even E.M. The circle will never be closed. Yet, 'We constantly, giddingly, mangle each other's languages, but in mangling them we enter them, we see each other fully, we acknowledge and thus open the possible, entirely, *as such*.'

What becomes possible in Moure's work is plurality on the level not just of voice and language but also of capital-'O' human experiences like pain, suffering and love. *O Resplendor* contains poems called 'Doubled Elegy' and 'Tripled Elegy.' Various poems repeat images of seeds and cattle. A poem called 'Self-Portrait' is retouched as three structurally and imaginatively similar, but conceptually different, poems called 'Self-Portent,' 'Self-Portrayal' and 'Selfish Portrait.'

Interestingly, most of these experiments occur in a traditionally elegiac mode, wherein the 'I' or '1' reckons with the singular absence of the author's mother, M.I.M. As much as *O Resplendor* tells a story, it is also a 'book of grief' that someone like Elise Sampedrin would 'open only randomly, to disturb myself...' This random disturbance is described beautifully in 'The Unseizable Elegy':

Here every parting alerts us in the plurality of *you*,
seeded as one, in the hourglass:
where, in every parting, at once
there is the clamour of the fall and,
above it, a twice-fallen silence.

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The disturbance hits its sharpest focus in the suite of poems called 'Map of Calgary,' wherein the poem's speaker notes, 'Each day I touch my own face and hear the/flag.' The sequence ends with a ghostly pale footnote that somewhat contextualizes the loss: 'To be so technical that all emotion is abraded, and so clear that the poem is utterly obscure. As a map is. And as each map contains a mistake to identify its maker, so here too.' M.I.M.'s death is the most autobiographical of circles the collection tries to close, the personal loss and singular absence that make these polyvocal, polylingual pages *Erin Moure's* book.

It is in embracing the impossibility of closure (or detainment) that Moure invites reader, writer, fictional characters, deceased poets, heteronyms, philosophers, genres, epochs and countries to trample the grass in the yard together, where '[t]heir hooves are hot and wet, and their sides/are breathing,' where the only adequate response to the impossible is to make a brilliant noise that sounds like joy one day, sorrow the next. Heady, heartbreaking, visionary—the words to

describe *O Resplendor* come one after the other, from their spiritual home in the mouth.

Other People's Lives, the second collection of poetry by Chris Hutchinson, reaches toward the capital-'O' Other with a world-weary skepticism. This skepticism is rooted in what first appears as an almost terminal and impermeable sense of the self, where the common lot is the condition of stones on the river bed, what the poem 'English Bay' describes as 'the anonymous busts of others/like me.' Gravel paths, sidewalks, moonstones, 'Old Testament Stone,' 'rocks in the beguiled/jeweller's head,' 'Serving spoon/or funhouse mirror,' 'the sky's cast iron lid'—Hutchinson's poems almost invariably run into mineral surfaces so hard they threaten to halt the poems' agile and imaginative leaps.

This penchant for running toward the impenetrable could be what the poem 'American Still Life'—which features jewels, marbles, gravel and pupils 'like a ding/in the windshield of the soul!'—calls 'the most/sadistic of...obsessions.' It's a sadism Hutchinson equates explicitly with preciousness, another word that resonates throughout *Other People's Lives*. As the poems appraise lived experience, they are mindful of the talismanic quality of the personal, 'precious as the small, intricate, unworkable objects/bequeathed to us in dreams.' They also seem fearful of the solipsistic, affected qualities associated with the word.

Admittedly, when hitting their proverbial walls, some of the poems have trouble recovering from the blow. Then the words of friends arrive, not warmly, but as a kind of currency: 'all spit and polish.' Or we encounter other people, like the artist in the poem 'Art,' who is described as having a 'calmness/turned to stone,//...more/secret in himself,//more alone.'

More exciting are the many poems that shake the impact off and spiral out dizzily toward the next metaphor, the next image. The poem 'Cross-Eyed' ends with the couplet, 'If description belongs to the surface of things—/how the mind swerves, disbelieving.' In the secular and self-conscious landscape of this book, I read this disbelief as an act of faith that enables the best poems to wear down their own descriptive surfaces. The poem 'No Such Address II' greets wind, street, rain, etc., with a 'Hello' that can seem open-armed, semi-detached, or full-blown ironic depending on one's mood or inclinations. The poem 'swerves' enough to accommodate different readings—'Each breath re-addressed/at the intersection of each breath'—while at the same time retaining the 'shivering [romanticism]' that is the hallmark of Hutchinson's style to date. It's in this swerving that Hutchinson hits his highest notes. 'Continual' opens:



Kaleidescopic, refreshingly variable, you
transmute like energy, like water ever-circulating
as mist, river, monsoon, tears—
this attempt to evolve and increase, old enemy
of atavism, as always, from here on in
pressing forwards, first erotically into then
fully beyond tomorrow...

The poem then continues to ride its own making through crossing guards, tombs, bad credit and other roadblocks, affirming the tenet put forth in the poem's epigraph: that energy cannot be created or destroyed; it simply changes form. In this vein, it's interesting to note that while approaching the self/other divide from an entirely different aesthetic angle, *Other People's Lives* yearns to close many of the same gaps as *O Resplendor*. Moure's book just seems more in love with the impossibility of doing so.

Sometimes, as in 'No Address II' or 'Continual,' this form-changing seems to occur mid-air. In other poems Hutchinson's metaphoric and imaginative activity has almost physically altered the surface of things. The reader is left with 'traceries of smoke rising/from the lips of the jackhammer squads' and pockmarks—'Locals bathe//where the wound opens.'

Hutchinson experiments with varying line lengths, with palindromes, with sonnets. His hand is deft—the form never begs for attention. Even the 20-sonnet sequence that closes the book, 'Cross-Sections,' reads less like an attempt at virtuosity and more like a poet who has found a comfortable 14-line chair to sit down in and '[scheme]/ways to continue, safe within and darkly through/an immaterial sublime.' Which isn't to say there's any safety or throughway to be found in this book. What Hutchinson has in abundance is an energy and talent willing to go to the end of his obsessions. One hopes he has the stamina to sustain these multiple blows of self-consciousness that are part and parcel of the desire to greet strangers 'in our estrangement' (a phrase from one of Moure's epigraphs). Moure's 'Defrocked Ending' finishes with the speaker 'aching/or loquacious,/veering closer, mug up, leaning into the punch.' Hutchinson, too, seems willing to stick his neck out.