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James Wilson, *Three Bridges*, paperback, 143 pages, Miami: Neverland Publishing, 2014. ISBN: 978-0988829060; £7.95.

Reviewed by

Mike Freeman
(Freelance, UK)

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The epigraph for James Wilson's *Three Bridges* is from Byron's *The Giaour*:

Though on Al-Sirat's arch I stood,
Which totters o'er the fiery flood,
With Paradise within my view ...

This is the mythic bridge, narrower than a spider's thread, over which you have to pick your way to enter an Islamic Paradise. A secular and less arcane epigraph might have been taken from the luminous *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* where Yeats points to the human condition as being in love with what vanishes, then asks what more can be said.

The novella is about what more there may be to say. Its trajectory is a sequence of searches—in triptych form with a coda—for what vanishes, for the transient and evanescent, the indeterminate and enigmatic. Insofar as there's a story it consists of a narrator's meetings with a trio of friends who tell him about the mistakes and regrets in their personal relationships. But he's not their confessor and they don't expect absolution from him. Rather, he ruminates on their ruminations, chewing their cud and his. The narrator, himself a vulnerable participant in what he describes, takes us through a series of conversations as they all try to recall and recover and re-think key moments and losses in their lives. Each of the three principal figures in dialogue with the narrator is associated with one of the three bridges. As it is the river that the bridges have in common, so it is the nameless narrator that the three characters have in common, three-in-one like some Trinitarian unity, but there are no doctrines or reassurances on offer.

The eponymous three bridges—after that nod to Al-Sirat's—are specifically Blackfriars, London and Southwark, with other local references such as the crowds

flowing over Westminster Bridge in *The Waste Land's* 'unreal city'. The topography provides the novella with its rhetorical *topoi* that in turn provide the central trope, but an open-ended trope where the reader can draw in his own allusions, such as the broken bridge in Dante's *Inferno*. These bridges are actual enough, marking the locations where the dialogue takes place, but they also signal the narrator's concern to bridge the gap across the alterities, the broken relationships. Given the characters' attempts to step into the same river of time twice, perhaps Heraclitus too hovers round the bridges. The scene is London, but the bridges of Sydney or the Tyne could be a site for the same problems and regrets of broken relationships with time lost and chances wasted. As well as Yeats, then, Empson's villanelle 'Missing Dates' hovers where the ills and waste remain and kill.

The London-ness is pressed home by the lengthy sequence of photographs of metropolitan sites. The sites and photographs are so insistent that the publisher's promotion has invoked Iain Sinclair and W. G. Sebald, though James Wilson himself might decently decline the honour. The novella does edge modestly into Sinclair's working of the territory and history: a palimpsest of the city that matches the palimpsest of the conversations, recollections laid over recollections. The quasi-Sebald photographs are more problematic. The narrator suggests that he is the photographer (46), as it also becomes clear that he's very interested in bridges, their history and their construction. The photographs intervene irregularly in the text, sometimes taking a double spread of pages, more often inserted in a paragraph as a fraction of a page, and often enough triggered by just a word or phrase in the text. It might be said they give an objectivity to the impressionistic subjectivities of the characters meeting at such-and-such a place, but the images themselves are grainy—deliberately, rather than a publisher's economies?—and often shot from expressionistic angles, rather as anamorphic analogies to the actual reference points. One image is a photograph of a page of a notebook that looks like—but it's too small to decipher—a worksheet with emendations (121). Perhaps it's a draft of this novel? Generally, the images don't seem necessary or sufficient unless, that is, the characteristics of the photographs are meant to represent the attitudes—the points of view, attitudinally as well as visually—of the narrator-as-character. That would add a further dimension to the work: the author has gone out to shoot actual photographs in a style that he imagines the narrator would have taken them. But this is all becoming dark matter, matter for the dark room. To complement the still-camera shots, there's a scatter of intriguing film references: Lang's *Metropolis*, in tune with the expressionistic imagery, and Barzage's *Liliom*, the watcher-watched from *Rear Window*, lined up with *RoboCop* and *Space Invaders* to dispel any sense that this is a scenario of mere late-bourgeois flâneurs ambling along the Embankment. Cinematically the whole movement of the work resembles a montage, a cross-cutting of characters, close-ups pulling out from deep-focus shots, dissolves and fades: 'I have never quite been able to fathom how people fade in and fade out of one's life' (79).

It will be thought I've said very little about the narrative events and the characters, about *Three Bridges* as a piece of fiction. The reason—perhaps the problem—is that from the very title page it is positioned as an artefact. The full title reads: *Three Bridges . . . A novella-in-triptych*, and between title and sub-title there is

a small reproduction of an architect's drawing of Southwark Bridge, later printed page-size to preface the Southwark Bridge panel of the triptych. And like those beneath ecclesiastical triptychs we're given a set of predella panels, visually sharp descriptions, dreams, reflections, underpinning the main sequence, such as the scene by Three Cranes Walk (119–121) of the cormorant struggling to catch and keep an eel, like the narrator trying to keep his catch and cache of recollections. Then to add to the bridge-titles given to each section of the novella, each section is subtitled: *Some time, Later, Later still*, and then the coda *When*. Presumably, these are sat-navs through the shifts and self-questioning of the main text, but if anything they over-schematise what is essentially an engaging and intriguing short fiction.

It is as though the author doesn't quite trust his tale or his reader. Perhaps, too, he doesn't trust his editor, whose interventions would have helped. However, the editor would have faced the classic dilemma with this sort of fiction: some of the writing which would have the editor reaching for his pen or the delete key might all along be intended as precisely appropriate to the narrator's character and style of thinking. The narrator-character might be, by nature, a recidivist ruminant, a word-spinner with a touch of self-dramatising, and so the author would insist that the style was deliberative and mimetic. The problem then reaches the reader: whether irritation with the style is to be laid at the door of the character-narrator, as part of the intended reader-response, or with the author and his editor. *Caveat emptor*.

Take as one example, the recurring cumulative package: 'chipped and cracked and lichen-covered' (2); 'weaving, waltzing, strutting' (5); 'hurts, frustrations, vulnerabilities' (74); 'five, six, even seven' (80); 'passions and interests, hates and favours' (91). Or the over-wrought images such as 'in which the dim light reflecting off his wedding ring seeming to bathe his entire expression in what I can only describe as reassurance' (102), or 'a force of destruction that would hollow me out from the inside and then pinch my empty carapace until it shattered, like a discarded half of a pistachio shell, toyed with by the strong brute fingers of a bored and implacable being' (58), or—referring to the central themes of loss and longing—'those backdrops upon which bloodstains and salt tears have dried, leaving in their wakes visible and at times all-too visceral presences that can never be washed away, only varnished and sealed in forever' (31).

Three Bridges amounts to a meditation on—to adopt the author's fondness for ensembles of epithets—relationships, regrets, recollections, and the conclusion that they can never deliver a 'definitive finishing line' (the last line of the book). The circles of hell are invoked (36) and, *pace* Heaney (2006), these are the District and Circle lines of the characters' own undergrounds. The narrator is a Dantesque Virgil accompanying these lost souls through their circles, but where he's also a lost soul himself. Canto XXI of the *Inferno* opens with:

On we walked from bridge to bridge,
Talking of things my Comedy can't tell you,
Until we gained another arch's summit . . .

Wilson's narrator walks by his bridges and he does dare to tell and re-tell, but there are no summits on offer and the only arch is that glimpse of Al-Sirat's at the start.

Work Cited

Heaney, Seamus. 2006. *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber)

Note on Contributor

Mike Freeman taught literature in higher and extra-mural education, then worked on the editorial team at Carcanet Press and *PN Review*, and is now freelance and an unreconstructed socialist.

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