

“Inquiring into the symbolic dildo I strap on every day”: A Review of Rob Budde’s *Declining America* (Book Thug, 2009)

By Reg Johanson

The 2010 Winter Olympics is a site – up north we recognize a land management issue when we see one – “Indices”

What the war for the word comes down to is massive transfers of energy that haven’t been indexed haven’t sold stocks haven’t been named yet in the consumer guidebook – “My American Movie”

The title of Rob Budde’s *Declining America* references not only the waning of an empire, but also the refusal of its discourses – spectacular, repressive, and spatial. Scenes, displacements / prostheses (including writing), traumas, and indices of value are the sites of refusal, recombinant and language-centered poetics the method. Straight off, I want to say how much I appreciate that Budde’s analysis is not tainted with the okey-dokey, Tragically-Hip sentimental nationalism that often comes out when “America” is discussed in Canadian literature. My next book, post-Olympics, will be entitled *Declining Canada*.

The poem “My American Movie: After Jean Baudrillard’s *America*” is a “screening” of the discourses of America, filtered (strained?) through Baudrillard’s *America*. In a series of “Scenes”, Budde’s prose poem reproduces the speed and the slickness (“so smooth, so symmetrical” [12]) of the simulacra, managed so that “the veep won’t discern anything wrong [...] the sidewalk won’t digress into any sort of attractive chaos or orgy or outlandish protest”(12). The speed of these representations is an “inebriation”(9), an unpleasant one that registers the discomfort of knowing that despite assurances to the contrary you are, simultaneously, totally out of control and totally inside it. But don’t worry about it, have some more.

Budde’s scenes flash by, braiding together the “narratives” and “myths” of America, so that we can see the seeing, comprehend the narrative of the narratives of death, “a hyperreality generated electronically to soften the blow (a hero dying)”(11) and “how unnecessary living is when you have cravings and distraction”(14). It’s a woozy, nauseating experience. Budde consumes so we don’t have to, marks what’s going into the social body as it is constituted by the simulacra. It makes us unwell: “that bratwurst kind of satisfaction”(12), “orange fanta”(8), “unsaturated fats”(12), “lemon chicken wedges”(12), “freedom like a slab of ham”(18), “the great diverted overfed”(18), “numbed with opium”(16). It reminds me of Christmas day, going to the movies at a multiplex on Edmonton’s south side (Millwoods, the ghetto)—diverted, overfed, too warm, sitting through a half-hour of commercials before another half-hour of coming attractions—to watch a 3-D film about indigenous people defeating the mining

companies, on another planet. The confinement of the page / the confinement of the screen, the frame of the page / the screen, the multiplex.

But unlike Baudrillard, for whom “this is all there is the moebius strip of representations”(8), Budde doesn’t keep himself in the dark about the *hard* “technologies of power”, the way discourse ends up on the body. The poems of “My American Movie” explore the imaginal, aesthetic rationale for the all-to-real torture routines documented in the poem “Kubark.”

Budde tells us that “in 1997, KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation (1963) was declassified under the Freedom of Information Act. ‘KUBARK’ is a found poem that manipulates / reveals that CIA text”(105). Budde’s rewriting of this text reveals what the CIA thinks of us (“us”: subjects / objects of state (police) power, and as such potential victims of torture). How the CIA imagines what will work on us and what won’t, their tactical estimate of our strengths and weaknesses.

One tactic used by the CIA, it seems, is to induce “regression”, a tactic based on the presumed “stature and importance of a parental figure – the basis for guilt reactions”(77). Regression is designed to induce a feeling of dependency and helplessness in the victim, which is both produced and relieved by the torturer-as-parent. It’s useful to know that we are vulnerable to torture, according to the experts, to the extent to which we have internalized the authority of the state-as-parentⁱ, which has the power to shame and redeem, to “discipline and punish.”

Budde also brings out the circumstances under which torturers fail: KUBARK repeatedly warns against inducing “a defensive apathy from which it is hard to arouse [the victim]”(77). Apparently, “ ‘dulled, apathetic, depressed’ and apathy can be a very effective defence for the victim”(80). Note to self! Also: “neurotic and psychotic subjects are either comparatively unaffected or show decreases in anxiety”(81). Budde reveals the torture-state as a world of inversions, in which conditions that are judged pathological (apathy, neurosis, psychosis) protect the victim, while socially-approved characteristics (respect for authority) make the victim vulnerable. Budde’s analysis of KUBARK makes me “love my symptoms” again, allows me to read my failures and refusals as a “democratic” citizen-subject as signs of strength and resistance. The poem “KUBARK” is a manual we can use against the manual, when our turn in the torture chamber comes.

In “Software Tracks”, Budde continues his investigation of pathology-as-resistance by decomposing sentences under the following headings: “Seizure”, “anorexia”, “lesion”, “bruise”, “bodiless”, “stitch”, “cavity”, “coma”, “depression”, “arrogance”, “apathy”, “rash”, “nausea”, “hiccup”, “gag”, “tattoo”, “scab”, “diabetes”, “blush”, “lung cancer”, “panic”, “obesity”, “hypochondria”, “aphasia”(50-74). Language (the sentence) is broken up in order to see “all angles at once—the impossible ogle”(63). But here Budde rejects “symptom” in favour of “reaction”:

A long time coming the blindness being the reaction not the symptom you thought it was a justification but then the realizations tend to be from the visceral versus the algebraic formula, though the opposition is less likely than an accident or wrong turn in thinking; that’s it, the map has been forged from birth and now the

correlation comes clean, shot through with foreboding, and up comes father, there all the time, and it is the beginning of sentencelessness this necessary purgation or purgation without reservation but always a reaction not the symptom and records fail. [...] Like tracking without a prey—traces tending to end in the cerebral muskeg. Whole nouns burnt up in the aftermath. Anarchy is easy. Campaigning for revelation not re-erection. Or a wrong turn. With and out – it's that easy. A use for and, the sense of something more, the will to spit it out, with witnesses. [...] Stand back. Let the subjunctive relieve the pressure [...]. (62-3)

“Reaction” suggests a condition brought out by an encounter with toxicity, an acute condition, as opposed to “symptom”, which has the sense of a manifestation of a more chronic illness. A poetics, and a form, of “purgation”, “spit[ting] it out, “reliev[ing] the pressure.”

Declining America finds some practical uses for poetry, some value in poetic practices. But the poem “Indices” is a more skeptical measure of “poetic value” against other indexes of value, emptying out qualitative and quantitative criteria and discourse.

Budde acknowledges the futility of poetry: “poetic value (*diagnoses*) is repetitive motion disorder; the way a habit becomes habit or inhibited / by a turn”(86); “Auden: ‘poetry makes nothing happen’”(86); “poetic value is the freedom to be ineffectual”(87); “poetry is not the taking-up of arms; poetry is next to nothing; I would die of poetry”(95). However, in lines which resonate (“poetic value is a resonance energy transfer”[101]) against the “Kubark” poem, Budde does find a meaningful register for poetry’s value: “poetic value is the value of having a name for the source of terror” / “poetic value is questioning the name for the source of terror”(86-7). But this only leads him back to the ambiguity of reading itself: “poetic value is knowing that if my kids can read this, they can read the signs that might try to harm them”(98).

While Budde questions poetic value at the scale of the political and social, he also looks at it in the economy of the literary milieu: “after the reading we can haggle over the value of this book the ‘value’ will be determined by that brief and awkward exchange”(89). Here Budde precisely registers the saddest and most deflating moment in the circulation of poetry. Poetry is not, as we hear so often, a “gift economy.” A true gift economy would undermine all the careful rationales of funding that Canadian arts bureaucracies have invested so much energy in promoting. The lie of the “gift economy” has recently been exposed in the recent round of cuts to arts funding in British Columbia, during which we heard a lot from arts bureaucracies about how “valuable” their art was to the non-gift, commodity economy. (I leave aside as unrepeatable the moralizing about how important art is in “civilizing” and “citizenship”). Budde exposes the political economy of poetry in a different register by locating Marx’s analysis of the commodity inside the structure of the “poetry reading”:

Once again, at a poetry reading, we have both an opposition and a unity. We have an opposition because the relative use value form and the equivalent exchange form are exactly the opposite of each other and form two opposed, contradictory poles. We have unity because each pole is a partial expression of the simple form

of exchange-value as a whole. Together they are ‘mutually dependent and inseparable’ but, ultimately, paradoxical. (94)

The terms “opposition” and “unity” highlight the social relations constituted by the poetry reading and the funding apparatus behind it. “Opposition” and “unity”, in the context of the recent Olympic games in Vancouver, also have a slightly different political register: Olympics organizers made Olympics arts funding contingent on an agreement that performers would not voice any sort of “opposition” to the games. In this context, “unity” means collaboration with the corporate-nationalist (ie fascist) agenda. Post-Olympics, it will be interesting to see how writers respond to the “paradox” of the “opposition and unity” in literary commodities that revealed itself during the games. Will we be able to occupy the space – the exchange – of the “poetry reading” in the same way, or has there been a decisive rupture in “value”? Will “oppositional” texts be recuperated into the “unity”, the “big tent”, of the poetry-exchange? Thanks to Rob Budde for providing one possible frame through which to understand the struggles to come.

ⁱ See the *Counterpunch* article by Dr. Bryant Welch on the complicity of psychologists and their professional organization, The American Psychological Association (APA), with military torturers: “Military psychologists colluded with the Justice Department to help CIA operatives circumvent the legal prohibitions against torture. Under the Justice Department definition of torture, if a detainee was sent to a psychologist for a mental health evaluation prior to interrogation it was *per se* evidence that the interrogator had no *legal intent* to torture the detainee because the referral “demonstrated concern” for the welfare of the detainee. Most remarkably of all, this whole process occurred under a protective “ethical” seal from the American Psychological Association (APA), psychologists’ largest national organization. The APA governance repeatedly rejected calls from its membership for APA to join other health organizations in declaring participation in Bush detention center interrogations unethical.”
(<http://www.counterpunch.org/welch06172009.html>)

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