

THE “WITHERING WHITE ROSE”

Mansions of Irkalla

J. D. Pryce

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Reviewed by John Howard

In his ambitious first collection, J. D. Pryce undertakes an unusual project—a nearly four hundred-page volume consisting of two surprisingly consonant sections: the first a shocking and diverse assortment of original poems, and the second a tasteful selection of translated verse.

Despite the harmony of its sections, *Mansions of Irkalla* is a conflicted and unsettled book. It slips between brief, colorful, erotic lyrics and lengthy narratives that fuse ancient myths with scenes of modern decadence. The collection’s title foreshadows well its poems’ domain: slimy tunnels and grimy stone, flames in “fierce, tumultuous great waves,” a land which has been “shunned by the sun”: in Pryce’s own words, a “wounded, supplicating planet.”

In *Mansions of Irkalla*, Pryce abandons us to this callous landscape, which leaves his reader not only absorbed, but also enjoying its cruelty; it is a desolate yet vivid world colored throughout by preoccupations with bliss, vulnerability, hope, and a grinding anxiety about the future. What is most refreshing about Pryce’s work, of course, is that we as a community share these preoccupations; and in that sense Pryce’s poetry is *our* poetry, and our world is Pryce’s world of dismal yet hopeful and rewarding struggle.

Pryce begins with a prince, “too restless for monastic usages,” embarking on a “cryptic Quest.” *Mansions of Irkalla* proceeds from this epic beginning, wandering with its subject as he traverses abandoned cities and “Royal Portals,” scouring mythical spaces of our race’s imagination until it finds an appropriate scene upon which to direct its attention. From there it offers fresh, if insistent, visions of a hellish land and the beings that inhabit it, obviously reminiscent of the world in which we all must live today.

Pryce, unhesitant to dramatize the “somber world” he concocts,

writes in “A Ballad of Kith and Kin” of demons “whose feral fangs are sharp.” The black creatures maul and devour their victims beyond recognition; Pryce writes that they “weave the gloom/ Into a tapestry of Doom.” Our narrator watches this unfold from the corner of the room, and the reader is again made to experience one of the work’s recurring thematic elements: helplessness. He writes, “Upon us droops their gaze,/ And in the circle we share,/ Where teeth are clenched and eyes wide stare,/ The minutes last for days.” This despair is revisited often in the work, though it is most notable in this poem because of its unusual relationship to its poetic structure. The rhymed ballad form, to which Pryce conforms throughout the piece, is light and celebratory, providing an intriguing contrast to the horror of the poem’s subject matter.

This contrast provides yet another example of the ever-present conflict which generates the rich complexity of *Mansions of Irkalla* and which finds its root in the dualistic conflict between the physical and spiritual worlds: though the physical world that surrounds us is distressing and constantly pushes us toward moral compromise, the spiritual world inspires (and rewards) the best of us—including Pryce—and presses us to seek honor and fulfillment in the quest for our people’s redemption.

Therein lies the essential source of the book’s conflict. In “Sketch,” among the book’s most insightful pieces, and a poem representative of Pryce’s essential project, he writes,

Now lazing languidly, the spent sun
At the day’s decline still decorates
With tattered ribbons red
The old gold threaded robe
That fades on sullen seas;
A lone gull drifts on dimming wings,
Till, *sans merci*, the night
Mops up the strangling glints,
Garroting twilight’s shaded shards
In swift assault.

This piece proclaims the world’s fatigued sun to be setting, a frequent theme in *Mansions of Irkalla*. But while the darkest hours of night have yet to appear, the emergent darkness is stifling by “swift assault” the world’s sparse remaining life and “tattered” light. Pryce further de-

velops this idea in his second stanza:

Soon grimy urchins loiter under street lamps
 In the queue that shepherds them to their regatta,
 Where a mud-rimmed puddle tremulously launches
 Stogie-stumps – those pale, puffed porpoises –
 Which navigate, like master-mariners,
 The reeking reaches of their sultry sea,
 Until the stinking, stifling air
 Is blown away by cooling, cleansing evening rains.

The "grimy" specimens of today, which provide an obvious contrast to the "pallid prince" with whom we begin the book, are contemptibly naïve and lazy. They have washed in with the "sullen sea" which has enveloped the scene, and soon, like "master-mariners," they come to occupy all reaches of the world Pryce has crafted. However, accompanying Pryce's day-cycle metaphor is also the implied promise of a new day's rebirth—following, of course, the "cooling, cleansing" storm:

Now typhoons roar through gushing gutters,
 Bloat to bursting storm-drains' bellies.
 When the welter's waves subside
 They buff the asphalt to a sheen,
 And smear the brake-light's ovoid pools
 Astern the gaudy pimp mobiles.

The storm, which has suddenly turned from an evening rain into a typhoon, embodies a dualism of destruction and repair: it smashes through the streets, leveling the "gaudy" urban infrastructure, but eventually leaves the asphalt buffed "to a sheen." Then Pryce concludes the poem with, "The gauzy moon blinks once, and then goes out . . ." Through this satisfying though somewhat uncharacteristic ambiguity, Pryce leaves his reader to wonder about his prophecy's trajectory: does the moon's "going out" symbolize a final darkness, or simply the reemergence of the sun and a new era of light?

This ambiguous ending epitomizes a principal question of *Mansions of Irkalla*: will our future be characterized by a stifling, dark chaos, or by a cleansing rebirth? Perhaps Pryce's own pessimistic answer can be found in the lines which conclude his original section's final poem,

“Approaching”: “And the weary petals of the white rose/ Swiftly withering away.”¹

The author then proceeds to the translation portion of his book. Pryce does not shy from engaging many of the most celebrated writers from the German and French canons: he renders Hölderlin, Rilke, Hugo, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé into impressive English verse. His choices of poems are what one might expect from a poet who writes with as much epic drama as Pryce: Hölderlin’s “Socrates and Alkibades,” a selection of Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*, and Mallarmé’s “The Tomb of Edgar Poe.” This section of *Mansions of Irkalla*, which spans more than 175 pages, reads much like a Pryce-edited anthology, and the choices certainly inform his own personal style. Pryce is clearly enjoying himself.

He also has fun with the book’s concluding section: a forty-page series of satirical haikus which span the millennia, touching upon many of the geniuses from our race’s past: figures such as Ptolemy, Raphael, Napoleon, and Keats. Yet Pryce, always one for a twist of satire, includes at one point a white genius of yet another kind: Bill Clinton.

Pryce’s melodrama and epic fixations can sometimes become tedious when spanning such an enormous volume. Occasionally it feels like a long rainy night’s taxi ride with Travis Bickle at the wheel. But it would be churlish to fault Pryce for his generosity, for *Mansions of Irkalla* contains many treasures. Regardless of their drear, their spite, and their violence, Pryce’s poems also emit a certain confidence; they inspire readers to join their hero’s fight, to emulate his bravery even in the face of apparently insurmountable trials. Today we could all use such inspiration.

John Howard is the pen name of an American writer and critic.

¹ In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* Irkalla is identified as a place of no return: a “house which no one who enters ever leaves/ on the path that allows no journey back,/ to the house whose residents are deprived of light” (Andrew George trans., 8, 185-7).