

P. Inman

Written: 1976-2013

if P then Q, 2014

REVIEWED BY RYAN GATO

When assembling a volume of collected poems, how the work is framed should be as important as what is framed. Such attentive (re)introduction is especially necessary in the case of poet P. Inman, for whom a collected volume could unintentionally reinforce an all-too-persistent tendency among critics to emphasize Inman's methodological and stylistic consistency over and above the innovations within particular poems and the developments between individual books. Thankfully, in large part due to Craig Dworkin's considerable and rigorous introduction, what *Written: 1976-2013* effectively achieves is to give Inman's career the much-needed re-evaluation it deserves.

This is not to say that Inman's work has been simply mischaracterized until now (or even underappreciated). And in terms of style and accompanying poetics, Inman has indeed shown himself committed and unwavering. As Dworkin notes, Marjorie Perloff is not unjustified in typifying elements of Inman's style (namely, its disjunctive syntax and rigorously non-referential use of language) as representative of a certain bygone era in Language writing; nor is Ron Silliman inaccurate when calling attention to this style's persistence across Inman's career. In fact, much of Dworkin's introduction is dedicated to tracing and cataloguing what—intentionally or not—unites the wide range of material that comprises *Written*. Indeed, apart from the work's critical reception, Inman has consistently articulated his poetics as an art of refusal, as an "anti-narrative" counter to traditional narrative modes and strategies. ("Narrative triumphs precisely through the consolidation of isolated detail" he writes in "One to One," his contribution to the influential *Politics of Poetic Form*; "It solidifies. Things all come together

at the end of the episode, denying social atomization by the production of a kind of aesthetic afterlife where things will be made whole again”.¹ Inman has continued to define his poetics more or less in these terms, referring in recent years to his highly punctuated compositions (or “slow writing”) as poetry “under quarantine,” in which language is “too difficult to be seamlessly incorporated.”² This anti-narrative commitment indeed does unite much of the varying work collected here and accounts for the perceived continuity of Inman’s output when considered as a whole. Moreover, practically speaking, a body of poetry whose meaning is derived principally from its formal investigations and structural innovations will understandably yield readings which emphasize how the work re-works itself, and how it continues to negate traditional hermeneutical strategies.

Nonetheless, it has become all too easy to merely recognize Inman’s work for what it refutes, negates and refuses than for what it enables, proposes and explores. We do a disservice to the work’s considerable variation by simply stressing the consistencies to be found, both stylistically at the level of composition and methodologically at the level of poetics. Indeed, the great service of Craig Dworkin’s introduction is that it provides a guiding, non-programmatic framework for how to read the actual *poetry*, of which 700+ pages is collected here. Not that Dworkin shies away from theorizing—at one point he argues not unconvincingly that rather than a product or oeuvre, Inman’s poetry consists of a single, unfolding poem or lifework—but rather than replacing reading with a theory of reading, Dworkin has done the work of reading the work, thus granting the reader a better adjusted view of Inman’s actual development from the early works on through the complex structures of the middle period and into the highly-punctuated minimalist compositions of the present.

Chronologically, then, *Written* begins with a batch of uncollected poems—the very earliest books are excluded, though addressed and contextualized by Dworkin—prior to transitioning to the more recognizable work of *Platin* (1979). The inclusion of the early uncollected poems is especially

important, insofar as they demonstrate the development of Inman's formal and stylistic concerns from the period in which he was actively involved with the D.C. poetry scene of the 1970's, which included such innovative poets as Diane Ward, Lynne Dreyer, Tina Darragh and Bruce Andrews. That is, Inman's style was not born in a vacuum nor simply maintained due to a lack of exposure to other aesthetics. Here is a representative excerpt from *Platin*, a short book of seventeen poems of roughly sonnet length:

well, deafing
plew, names, ilmls, minor
cobble, assist, of, visibles
lottle, briar, "eroica"
hormer, beads
aria, brar
sprill's, locix, mortar, tax
titl, ccells
plam, spittle (-y) , clasp, fews
cent-ats
cork, thoi, prep
olin, rubs
perq, tracted, immathace, atipiques
errit, hist

At first glimpse, readers will certainly recognize hallmark elements of early Language writing, as syntax definitively disrupted is replaced by sound-play: "cobble/lottle", "briar/brar", "locix/tax—" which seemingly steps in where sense departs. Unique to these poems, however, is Inman's signature use of non-words, which are alternately manufactured and spliced/disrupted terms often retaining close proximity to standard words ("locix" is one letter off from "loci", as is the case with "ilmls" ("ills") and "hormer" (perhaps the proper name Homer). Through such attentive dissection and inspection, *Platin* and other early works—*ocker* (1982) and *uneven development* (1984) included—fundamentally concern themselves

with the resistance to (and exploration of) meaning at the level of the signifier, as demonstrated by the proximity of word to non-word, of mere linguistic material to syntactic structure.

From *Think of One* (1986) on through *Red Shift* (1988) and *Criss Cross* (1994), Inman pushes this tension between meaning and non-meaning across a greater variety of forms and structures; as a period of composition, it is significant not for its radical breaks from the early works but for the very real *development* and reworking of their formal implications, even if these implications are felt negatively, as with the detectable reduction of the use of non-standard words in each text. Moreover, this period is important to note insofar as it grounds the minimalist structures and “slow writing” that begins with *Vel* (1995), a transition which may otherwise read as a mere return to the formal concerns of works such as *Platin*.

In *Think of One* for instance, we find a long sequence whose horizontal lines split the page into two competing modules (“nimir”), a double-columned poem (“less of one”) and a sprawling prose piece (“dust bowl”) in which the colon functions as the sole form of punctuation. *Red Shift* similarly consists of three long and distinct works: the sequence “decker,” in which each section (titled pg. 1, pg. 2, etc.) functions as kind of relentless reduction of narrative development (the section pg.2 reads, in its entirety, “eyeds, /dreg, /daint”); this followed by the 25 page title poem “red shift”, composed of stanzas whose individual lines could be read as hyper-compressed poems in their own right (“silos by a stillness/nells from bend, a boil allow/); and finally the much-celebrated “waver,” a restless unpunctuated work whose movement across the page is impossible to adequately excerpt here.

While *Criss Cross* is technically divided up into separate poems, each work bears a stronger relation to one another than either of Inman’s two previous books; when considered in sum, the text functions as a kind of closed system of repeated sounds, words and motifs, demonstrating the kind of “cumulative logic” in a single text that Dworkin charts across Inman’s whole

oeuvre. “Snow,” “white,” “dots,” and “distance” are found throughout, as do terms denoting movement and size. “Smallness,” for example, is particularly important to *Criss Cross*. “smaller,” an uncharacteristically conceptually-minded poem for Inman, gradually reduces across its eight pages into a single utterance: “oipl.” The opening section of “My Drift (*for Bruce Andrews*)” aptly demonstrates the interpretive impasses Inman variously constructs:

“otherwise is that forever.” “a fill of
sentences the ditch of what I mean.”
“the wet hole in stubs.” “a pinochle
as in neutrals.” “what I hear together
beneath how I orient it.” “the spinach
of a book the same only two of it.”
“picture sime.” “awarded grant for
pulling blinds fits of lessening.”
“too cold to write about carrotin.”
“simmon of baptists denominations
stuck to money.” “people knock on
the door leaving so much noise.”
“every of doubt words into distance.”

Here, we’re presented with a dialogue (monologue?) that while resisting context, nonetheless invites the unfolding of a peculiar poetic logic: conceptually, “ditch” is connected to the “wet hole” of line 3. Something the speaker hears is “beneath” the unspecified referent “it” of line 5; and “cold” and “stuck” seem to speak to the experience of being trapped beneath some surface. A similar nexus of like terms is suggested by “neutrals”, “lessening,” “denominations” and “money.” One is tempted to schematize these relations—perhaps the poem dramatizes the relation between absence and presence or quantity and quality—yet while the poem continues on in quotes, these initial themes are not picked up in its subsequent sections. Practically speaking, this may be because “My Drift” is composed

of several unrelated works—a fact that, while omitted by *Written's* formatting, Dworkin notes—but more fundamentally, such a reading requires abstracting from the poem's language in such a way as to deny the poem its singular construction. Indeed, it is arguably the achievement of Inman's work of this period that it remains at once steadfastly answerable to language's materiality while also installing and maintaining across increasingly extensive and complex works the kind of interpretive tension "My Drift" both invites and denies; (a tension that Dworkin rightly points to as the constitutive "balance" to Inman's writing, that which prevents the work from teetering off into utter formalism.)

It is for these very reasons that Inman's development following *Criss Cross* might appear to herald a return to an earlier aesthetic. "Annette", the first poem from *Vel* (1995), opens: "suth. pitted. light. stream./tanned. lemon. (tone. murch)" and indeed would not seem out of place in the earlier books. Rather than a return, however, we find Inman practicing what he terms "slow writing," in which "any unitary word" is "a point of resistance, an interruption in the ongoing transmission."³ The long poem "kilter," with its many contrasting sections of heavily punctuated lines and even words, is characteristic of Inman's attempt to reclaim language not only from its ideologically programmed usage, but from the pace at which it is deployed:

bo.nes. to. a. pause.
his. mid.st. the. lon.ger
he. cont.ained. ball. point arou.
ballp.oint. aro.und. glim.pse
the. hau.nch. in.a lie.

Inman's trajectory up through *per se* (2012) continues to restlessly arrest the reader's attention, while conducting these excursions with increasing economy. Indeed, each word weighed, tended to and given its own space is oftentimes permanently installed in a visual field which alone gives them their meaning (as with poems from *ad infinitum* (2008) such as "roscoe

mittell (nonahh)” or “14 panels for lynne dreyer”). When words do successfully form pronouncements, these sentences are summarily broken down into smaller units, as if without some formal de-familiarization poetry indeed verges on “s,e,l,l,i,n,g,t,h,e,v,o,i,c,e,o,f,t,h,e,b,o,s,s,t,o,t,h,e,p,e,o,p,l,e”. In this tactical turn towards delay and stoppage, we find, “time. occupied.of.its.language”, as Inman states in his poem for Walter Benjamin, “now/time”: that is, a sudden halt and subsequent focusing and reframing of the present, for, indeed, “thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.”⁴

In this way, Inman’s recent work strikingly contrasts with 21st century literary formations such as Flarf and Conceptualism, both of which attempt in their own ways to reclaim language from its instrumental, marketable, Likeable usage. From one perspective, in light of the communicative and cultural upheavals our century has witnessed thus far, Inman’s persistence with a disjunctive, non-referential mode of composition could be read as the gesture of a purist, of an artist unwilling to constructively engage and parse through today’s political and cultural ephemera. Yet at a time when what is avant-garde seems most forcefully embodied by Kenneth Goldsmith’s 1000 Poets Project, Inman’s continued commitment to the careful, calculated transformation of language stands as a welcome provocation, posing as it does its long, laborious work against the free play of appropriative impulse. Indeed, even in his treatment of the word itself, Inman’s trademark non-words strangely contrast with a poetics birthed post-Internet, in which even as harmlessly mediating a function as “Autocorrect” effectively serves to uphold language’s standard and accepted usage. In this sense, *Written* actually points to and clarifies the debates on expression, authenticity and authorship so formative to Flarf’s appropriation of search-engine collages and Conceptualism’s reframing of source materials through displacement: that is, the goal of seizing-hold of the communicative means of production is pursued in Inman’s work through the excavation and working upon of language—a fact made visible even by Inman’s critical reflections, which are not abstract manifestos of aims and intents but tactical documents meant

for practical deployment. (I would suspect it is precisely this persistent, irreducible dialectic between author function and discursive object throughout a seemingly “egoless” body of work that undoubtedly fascinates the Conceptually-oriented Dworkin.)

As such, Inman’s art should not be understood as simply *of* or *against* the times, neither as the mere fulfillment of historical context nor the resistance to it. “All reification is a form of forgetting,” quips Adorno.⁵ This holds true for how we conceive of avant-garde formations as much as it does of careers. Thankfully, with *Written: 1976-2013* we are given not simply the text and its context, in which the work and its world are tidily reconciled, but a genuine engagement with both; indeed, a critical re-reading of what was has been written.

¹ P. Inman, *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. Roof Books, 1990.

² P. Inman, “Notes on Slow Writing”, *Philly Talks* 14

³ Ibid.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Schocken Books, 2007. 263.

⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press, 2002.342-343