

The Immaculate Perception, by Christopher Dewdney, Anansi, 1986, 127 pp.

This book will surely enhance Dewdney's reputation as the most problematical poet in Canadian writing. Part of this "problem" surfaces because Dewdney is the most mimetic of poets, yet readers have trouble with his brand of mimesis. Dewdney does not attempt to *imitate* the physical workings of the external world (what classical writers used to refer to as "reality"), nor is he overly concerned with setting a mirror up to the psychological structures of the mind (since Romanticism, and later Freud, the most popular ploy). Rather, his mimesis is simultaneously much larger and much smaller. In *Predators of the Adoration* Dewdney talks about the large picture, how that book is "the voice of the land and the creatures themselves . . . for whom I am merely a scribe." In *The Immaculate Perception* he talks about the smaller picture, how mind creates itself:

The sense of self, human consciousness, is like a virtual image: it exists solely by relation to an observer. Its singular disposition is determined by the observer hypothetically observing himself or herself in the act of self-observation. This is the double enclosure of self-consciousness.

Self-observation can exist only ideally, as a kind of privileged shadow-boxing. Existence in any mode other than the virtual would expose the inherent paradox on which the whole show is based.

The Immaculate Perception is, among many other things, an examination of thinking, and the minute movements of grey matter that enable us to think. It attempts to set a mirror up to that intangible activity: the way imagination and memory and language engender themselves and us. It is concerned not only with mimesis, but also with the beginnings of mimesis—how imitation first bursts into life.

To adapt the title of a recent Raymond Carver book, perhaps what Dewdney is concerned with is "what we think about when we think about thinking." Dewdney brings us closer to "consciousness embracing its own materiality" and to the reverse notion—"matter mimicking mind"—than we may be prepared for. At times, a chunk of Dewdney prose can be as numbing, for the uninitiated, as a few sentences from the average scientific article:

Successful paravisual flooding would represent a breakthrough of noetic localization, the direct excitation of the cortex contrary to the normal associative pathways of the brain. It would be in effect a metaviolation of consciousness, a second order of noetic mind operating within the physical substratum of the iconic mind. As such it would represent a profound synesthesia, akin to the direct electric stimulation of the exposed cortex.

Alright, what's the purpose of such stuff? As that television grandmother might say: where's the poetry? Is writing like this meant only to be confrontational? Or is Dewdney mimicking, in our minds, exactly what he's interested in: the flooding of information

into the brain, the simultaneous pathways that knowledge can run, the stimulation of the brain exposed to a new network of "thinking"?

Or perhaps we should start with an easier question: is Dewdney just having fun at the reader's expense? I don't think so. As he once said in an interview: "I came from such a rarefied type of environment. My taxonomy, my lexicon, was not very similar to that of most other people." If he's not just having neuro-fun, then what is he doing in this recent collection? Despite the book's arcane, often forbidding tone, it is an essential tool (Dewdney might say prosthesis) in helping to determine what he is on to and up to. Here is Dewdney on that most slippery of devices, language:

The evolution of language, inextricably bound with the evolution of our consciousness as a species, has diverged from its parallel status and taken on a life of its own. Language is virtually an independent intelligence utilizing humans as neural components in a vast and inconceivable sentence.

The living language exists symbiotically with the human "host."

And here he is on that most tactile of dreams, love:

You will see everything as an occasion, all objects will become events, a rock or planet merely occupying a location & volume for a period of time. You will be able to apprehend the entire being of the men and women you meet. If you look into their eyes you will see everything they have done and who they are. And some eyes will appear like fractured glass, impervious to your gaze. And others will be sensual ports on beings you will instantly love.

These passages are as unaccommodatingly subjective and frustratingly objective as poetry gets.

Dewdney writes about all the old "themes": nature, religion, love. Yet he does so in an entirely new way—as though these things are nothing more than manifestations of physical activity in the brain, and nothing less than the world compressed into our pocket. For Dewdney, "miracles" are at hand. The mind's daily perceptions are "immaculate." "Nature is the divine technology." He talks about the world—and its strange permutations—as though it is the most familiar thing imaginable. We get discourses on vice-grips, Swiss Army Knives, pets, and legal language—all informed by a quirky, disarmingly compassionate voice:

A pet is a detachable tactile surface which can be "disowned" as having "a will of its own." This frees the animal to act as an intermediary tactile surface effecting social transactions between humans.

And for those who think Dewdney is continually convoluted, he's often ready with a simpler idea: "Love is an exquisite loneliness"; "Communication is a string of incredible coincidences"; "A dime will serve as a screwdriver"; "The height of intelligence is the ability to disappear, to get out of the way." Dewdney gives us nothing other than the mysterious world we already know, nothing different from the immaculate and common perceptions we all live and dream by.

—Peter O'Brien