

Odysseus Unbound

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James Buchan's new novel is, like so many ghost stories, also a love story - not a romance, but a story about love. It's a crossover that has always been popular, presumably because the idea of ghosts is in part a product of love, and also because ghosts and love, in its most sublime sense, inhabit the same world - one where time does not exert an absolute force. *The Gate of Air* is set in such a world.

A novel without absolute time requires another structuring device, and Buchan's choice for this serves the initial purpose well. *The Gate of Air* joins the massed ranks of stories that parallel Homer's *Odyssey*, and so the post-9/11 present and Western literature's Big Bang collapse into one another. As an interpretation of *The Odyssey*, it is brilliant - in tune with the idea that many of the most sophisticated readings of the poem have shared: that reaching Penelope in Ithaca cannot stop or satisfy the hero or the world.

The correspondences are overt, but all are subverted or inverted, and this includes, at times, the narrative sequence. Our hero here does not return to his homestead to find it occupied; he arrives for the first time and buys it. He has never met his Penelope, and she is already married to another suitor. His Eumaeus is not quite "the loyal swineherd" but an obtuse handyman: "[He] imagined that for John in all dealings with Londoners, armed or unarmed, the local man must prevail." And his dog, who here retains the name Argos, is not the aged wreck of *The Odyssey* but arrives as a puppy.

Argos ("The dog looked at him as if to say: Whatever it is, I'll help with it") is a major player in this version, as a line from the Koran on the dedication page promises: "They say there were three of them, and their dog made it four." Argos's moment in *The Odyssey* when he recognises his long-absent master and in that instant exhales his last breath is a weird and wonderful one that is, for the modern reader taught by Kevin Costner films to associate dog-love with crass sentimentality, all too easily passed over. The first dog in Western storytelling has something to tell us about love and time and memory, and Buchan knows what that is.

As for the protagonist, "Jim Smith, as he called himself" - he isn't really a character. Buchan does not describe what he looks like, and his words and actions don't expose a particular personality but rather a series of moods. He has an incredible history that spans the globe and includes nearly dying in a suicide bomb blast in Baghdad, but none of that seems to matter. He is Odysseus, the eternal soul of man: traveller, teacher, master, soldier, student, slave, asshole. The ghost that comes to haunt him, that of a great beauty from the 1960s, a hippy who married for money, is the eternal soul of woman.

The Gate of Air is a novel in which none of the characters makes clear sense and almost all details are

treated as in some way irrelevant. The description is at times beautiful, at others pedestrian. It is occasionally funny and occasionally appears to have tried and failed to be so. If this is indeed all deliberate, then it is so ambitious that it could never have been a complete success. But the effect is powerful nevertheless: the thin veil of time is lifted, the swirling souls beneath are glimpsed. It is not at all the "fireside spine--chiller" advertised on the dust-jacket; it is more profoundly strange and disturbing than that.

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