# Placing Beside or With

**Vincenz Serrano**

*The Cosmopolitan* by Donna Stonecipher (Coffee House, 2008) is a series of 22 inlays (her term for chapter, which she derived after looking at an exhibit of inlaid furniture and, later on, Joseph Cornell's boxes); each inlay consists of a series of numbered paragraphs. Each paragraph would have either three or four lines. In the middle of the inlay, embedded between parts, is a quotation from what Stonecipher "happened to be reading during the period" of composition.

The form of *The Cosmopolitan*, which may appear to be fixed and regular, like compartments within a box, accommodates various kinds of writing: micronarratives, descriptions, aphorisms, palindromes, puns, observations, lists. The serial mode, furthermore, accounts for disruptions in the flow. In addition, and often within the same paragraph, Stonecipher makes actions and images leap from, and collide with, each another. Consider the first four parts of Inlay 10:

1.
The old musical theater had been turned into a parking garage, but nobody had bothered to remove the ornaments, the gilding, the chandeliers. He parked his green Subaru across from the dark red velvet loges, put the car keys in his pocket, and got out.

2.
The city was turning into a memorial city, with memorials remembering the dead built into the living city like crumblings of original stone in a rebuilt stone cupola, dark squares randomly counterpointing the mass of new light squares, forming the sphere.

3.
She saved a white flower from Goethe's garden in her notebook. She had just seen the first box building built by the Bauhaus, and she knew that the white flower had been built, too, and furthermore by whom. An origami swan stood on the mantel.

4.
Every time a new store opened in the town shopping mall down the road, we all swore we couldn't remember what store had been in that spot before it. But why even try to hide your sadness behind a peacock-feather fan? Say, Able was I ere I saw Elba.

The opening part, with the introduction of setting and character, hints toward narrative; this is disrupted by a description of, and a meditation on, the memorial city. The third part introduces another character and an ironic meditation on artifice. The fourth part brings in the first person plural character "we," takes up the theme of forgetting, and concludes with a palindrome. However, the details introduced—then seemingly abandoned—in the first four parts recur in the latter parts of the inlay. The green Subaru, for instance, floats "very slowly under the bridge" in part 11. This part also has a simile which refers to details mentioned earlier: "Like a park. . .without a white flower built like cupola, without an origami swan without its empire." The motif of amnesia in part 4 is amplified in parts 7 and 8 with sharp observations that—like gnomic wordplay—involve dismantlement, consonance and assonance: "As soon as a building is inhabited, it is dismantled by memory" and "The memorial wants to live forever. But the memorial is mortal. The memorial is amoral." Part 10 takes up the palindromic movement and describes the daytime as "read[ing] into the nighttime, which reads backwards into the daytime." The garden could also be considered forward then backward: it was "an array of white flowers reading into decay reading back into an array of white flowers come spring." The quoted material for this inlay is attributed to Emerson: "The end of the human race will be that it will eventually / die of civilization".

Stonecipher uses strategies of placement and displacement: recurrence results to familiarity, variation brings forth surprise. Composition, as suggested by Michael Palmer in "Notes for Echo Lake 3," is "a placing beside or with." What Stonecipher does is not just to place but to

displace: she positions details at some distance from each other, so that when—and if—they reappear, after some intervening materials and serial breaks, they have the force of the inevitable and the delicacy of surprise, like "the green Subaru [that] floated very slowly under the bridge." An interesting point to consider is the work done by the Cornell-influenced framing device. What prevents the composition from spilling is also what makes the prose poems dynamic: restrictions imposed by seriality and paragraph length, paradoxically, result to writing that is remarkably generative. In *The Cosmopolitan*, limits liberate.

Stonecipher's aesthetic decisions, furthermore, are resonant with current debates in the field of cosmopolitics, where dilemmas may be located in the tension between universality and particularity. Traditional cosmopolitan thought—since its initial formulation by Immanuel Kant—has tended to privilege the universal and be "devot[ed] to the interests of humanity as a whole." Bruce Robbins says that cosmopolitanism can be seen as a critique of the limits enforced by the nation-state: cosmopolitanism staked its claim to "universality by virtue of. . .its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives." However, these all-encompassing and abstract claims to universality are now being challenged. Instead of simply professing allegiance to humanity as a whole, Robbins suggests that cosmopolitanism should also view itself as an "ethos of macro-interdependencies," aware not just of grand abstractions but also of the "inescapabilities and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates." Thus, in contemporary cosmopolitan thought, the traditional desire for detachment is counterpointed with the "reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance," and cosmopolitanism's universal scope constrasts with a emergent insistence to consider the plural and particular.

This detachment from bonds is manifested in Stonecipher's unnamed figures—denoted by "he," "she," "the citizen of the world," "the cosmopolitan," "the exile"—who inhabit the world republic of leisure looking at Raphael madonnas and trompe l'oeil paintings, dreaming of clouds, considering architectural models, and despite staying in apartment blocks, still have thoughts as "turreted as châteaux." Stonecipher's methods of displacements and embeddings may be viewed as linguistic enactments of the constant circulation of human beings in the contemporary period: a kind of movement that, depending on who one is, and on one's points of origin and arrival, may be characterized as either expatriation, exile, immigration, diaspora, or asylum. The figures in *The Cosmopolitan*, for instance, come from locations like Montpellier, Miramar, the Caribbean and Bangalore, and relocate to London, Tokyo, Paris, and L.A.

The inlays in *The Cosmopolitan* are filled with references to acts, places, and objects of sophistication: books of cyanotypes, volumes of Audubon and Bierstadt, Goethe's color theory, architectural drawings, cabinets of wonders. Stonecipher, however, undercuts these emblems of elevation with ironic aphorisms and imagery: nostalgia is "memory decayed to sugar," commerce is "at the origin" even of love and its "little store-bought wings," a character who was a "great adherent of democracy" yet who possibly "harbor[ed] secret totalitarian thoughts."

Furthermore, Stonecipher's ironic sensitivity to objects and places is also seen in her observations of the imbalances and paradoxes of the cosmopolitan condition. What appears to be leisurely activity is suffused with ennui and emptiness. *The Cosmopolitan* abounds with travelers, for instance, who have the option to go to "Geneva, Fez, Malta, Alicante, Berlin, San Francisco, and Luxor" and yet want to go to a place that "holds the greatest promise of annihilation." There are people for whom summer was "but a stage set" on which to "perform [their] summer roles."

Stonecipher's depiction of the cosmopolitan condition is evocative precisely for its irony and fine attention to detail: "The disciple asked the prophet of the postmodern: um, whose displacement exactly did you say you were speaking to? Displacement, embankment: some words have liquid centers, like some chocolates. Each day around the world, more and more villagers leave home to disappear into cities" (Inlay 15). It is this ability to displace the gravitas by deft touches of irony, simile and disjunction—informed by an authorial

intelligence that is neither polemical nor pedantic—that make *The Cosmopolitan* both pleasurable and thought-provoking. Furthermore, it is not just in language where levity and gravitas are dissembled: the inlay structure of *The Cosmopolitan* allows for the plurality of styles and the weights of meanings to be distributed well. To "corset. . .mental splendor," Stonecipher writes in Inlay 4, "into the whalebone of grammar" is "piti[ful]" because of the tightness of restriction. By contrast, in The Cosmopolitan, the structure is regulative yet capacious, the writing modes, tone and content heterogenous yet consistent, and the concerns timely and evocative, prodding us to "translate a little of the profusion in our heads into phrases."

**Assembly**
Saturday, 28 February 2009
I attended a workshop with Peter Fallon last Tuesday. Here are some remarks which I thought were notable.

1. Fallon considers poetry as an assembly: poems are put together. A poet composes a poem: listens to words in his mind's ear, takes note of rhythm and sense. Furthermore, a poem is part of a larger assembly of poems: a poem is takes its place in a book, a book takes its place beside other books. Also, there is a contemporary world to which these poems are related, and a poem takes its place in history.

2. In composing a poem, Fallon asks himself: am I hearing it? Other poets, for instance Ashbery, may be concerned with meaning and image; for Fallon, sound plays as big a part in poetic composition as does meaning.

3. For Fallon, poetry is not a race, and poems come in their own time. Each poet has his or her own pace, and his happens to be slow. He feels that he doesn't have lots of poems and, furthermore, as publisher of Gallery Press, he has given his time to assembling other poets' books.

4. His mission in publishing is to praise the work of the poet: to let the work hold its own place for now and later, amidst the the noise and the hurry of the present.

5. To edit a poem is to enter a poet's world, and to try to make the poem into its best self. There's a negotiation involved, as the poet might resist the editor's suggestions, but for Fallon, the editor apprehends sounds and senses that the poet may be deaf to. Hence, he keeps asking: is there a better word, does the line break work. It becomes even more complex when editing a collection: the editor helps the poet trace the arc of the book, to find out which poems are the cornerstones of the collection. A collection is like a stone wall, he said, there are big and small stones, one has to find out how the poems fit.

6. A place is somewhere to be immersed in. One immerses into the language and the activities of a place and to pay attention to how language is used in that locality. For instance, he knows German and English, and thus, two ways of saying and describing the same thing. Furthermore, there was a kind of language used in the farm, in the university, in the city. Writing is a constant act of making decisions: one was constantly weighing words on the scales.

7. The poet provides enough elaboration of detail to convince the reader to enter the poem. Only when the reader is convinced can he or she come in.

**Vincenz Serrano** is at Manchester University working on Short Walks, a long poem about walking around in Manila.
Source : http://shortwalks.wordpress.com/