

The private utopias of Norman Rush

Interior designs

THOMAS MEANEY

Norman Rush

SUBTLE BODIES

256pp. Granta Books. £14.99.

978 1 84708 780 5

US: Knopf. \$26.95. 978 1 4000 4250 0

Few American novelists today contend with “History” writ large. Born in 1933, the same year as Philip Roth and Cormac McCarthy, Norman Rush belongs to the generation of writers that does. Among them, he was the most affected by the political radicalism of the 1930s and 60s. Aged seventeen he wrote a manifesto, “Papers Against the State”; at eighteen he served a prison sentence for refusing the Korean War draft. His early stories and poems reimagined “little-known events in the tragic history of the democratic Left”. But his mature fiction is shot through with utopian yearnings, which it both gently satirizes and forthrightly explores. He has set his three major works (*Whites*, 1986; *Mating*, 1991; *Mortals*, 2003) in post-Cold-War Botswana, where the country figures as a comic *force majeure* in his characters’ attempts to remake the world.

Utopia has stirred in Rush’s fiction from the beginning. In an early story, “Riding” (1973), three men gather away from their wives near a swamp pit on Cape Cod in the summer of 1967. The news of ghetto risings in Newark and Detroit fills them with “inexplicable positive feeling” and “relief at having been politically inert during the last few years”. They are convinced the riots will provoke a poorly conceived right-wing response by the US government. The three of them will join in solidarity with black people and be sent off to camps. Millions will be drawn leftward by their collective oppression: “It would be logical for this latecomer mass to undertake underground support activities for the families of the first wave of resisters”.

Rush’s point seems clear enough: here is the self-indulgent, jerry-rigged dialectic of white American liberals who believe they will be cosmically rewarded for their lack of political engagement. The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends conveniently. Yet Rush does not leave it at that. When the three men return to their wives later that evening, they carry new affection and affinity (“sex was predictable”). Alongside the satire, the sense takes shape that our private lives are essential to our grander political hopes. To further this suggestion, Rush has, over the years, hewn an argot all of his own, equal parts colloquial and baroque. His sentences are dazzling traps that ensnare consciousness in mid-sprint, catching what Ralph Waldo Emerson called our “fine inward irradiations”.

Subtle Bodies is Rush’s first novel set in America. The style is more honed; the senten-



“Olana”, the Catskills

ces more domesticated; the form almost unnaturally compressed. The story tells of forty-eight-year-old Ned, a manager of a fair trade cooperative in Berkeley, who, in 2003, hurries east when he learns about the death of his college friend Douglas in a lawnmower accident. “Le grand Douglas” was the ringleader of Ned’s gang in college – a group of “clowns manqué” – which was, in its way, a utopia of friends:

They had been aiming, all of them, at the sublime of work, the sublime of love, the sublime of deeply comprehending the world. It had been essential not to be a fool in any of those departments.

Now the friends have collected on Douglas’s fortress-like estate in the Catskills, where they take cover from a media frenzy. Douglas was a celebrity in Europe, famous for unmasking great literary forgeries (a faked letter about Captain Dreyfus, botched love diaries by Milan Kundera). He seems also to have had ties to the world of covert intelligence. But Ned is more interested in what Douglas was than what he has become. It was Douglas who lifted Ned up after the death of his father and made the pranksters look at their lives as works of blazing significance. All of the friends have fallen short of this ideal, except

perhaps for Ned, whose new young wife, Nina, thinks of him as a “sort of Jesus, a secular Jesus, of course, not that Ned would tolerate the description”. Ned must perform two tasks over the weekend. The first is to deliver a eulogy for Douglas. The second is to get the group to sign a petition against the impending invasion of Iraq, which, along with the mass protest he is planning in San Francisco, he is convinced will make George W. Bush reconsider his options.

Subtle Bodies looks set to be a meditation on friendship, much as *Mating* dealt with romantic beginnings and *Mortals* with marriage. But following Nina’s unexpected arrival at the estate much of the novel retreads familiar matrimonial ground. Rush is a great writer on love, in particular on the ways two lovers colonize each others’ consciousness. Nina has come to see Ned because she is ovulating and they are trying for a child. But she is also suspicious of the gang of friends, and worried about Ned’s vulnerability. In Nina, Rush seems to be giving us another of his strong, clever women, but there is something strikingly obtuse about her. She spies many things that elude Ned, but fails to appreciate Douglas’s part in Ned’s becoming who he is. The resentment she feels towards the

exclusivity of Douglas’s cabal seems out of proportion to her emotional intelligence. Does she not realize that the “ghostly survivals” of their college humour have migrated profitably into her own marriage?

The novel is full of well-observed light comedy. Ned is proud of “carrying the rucksack of an army that had never fought a war”, just as he is proud of his “thick, shaggy limb of urine”. Vacillating about the proper etiquette when confronted with a man covered in tattoos, he opts for treating them “like wallpaper”. But for a novel this short, the intrigues are frustratingly diffuse, and they circle like dead moons around the main star of Douglas. This is a country-house comedy desperately sheepish about fulfilling any of the dramatic collisions such a set-up promises. The revelation of an unexpected affair, details of former wives and boyfriends, run-ins with the European press all pale in comparison to anecdotes from the college years.

As for Ned’s two missions: he masters the eulogy, making a simple tribute, with Boswell as his source. But this sincerity only seems to provoke cynicism and evasion from his old comrades. Even Nina gets the chance to condescend: “One thing she knew and Ned did not, was that there is no permanent friendship between men, among men”.

The political element in this novel is what makes it most perplexing. The old head of the gang, Douglas has lived out his last years in a fortress, shutting the world out. And Ned has organized a massive protest that invites everyone in:

He felt drunk with gratitude and the conviction of victory. He thought, You can’t control everything . . . But this we can control. There would be no war. In part because of them there would be no war in Iraq. A few new people had come onto the overhang and he was going to shake hands with them, too. There would be no war. He thought, No war, No invasion, No.

These lines take us back to a historical precipice; for a moment Rush is able to make us wonder: “What is the collective capable of?” *Subtle Bodies* flickers with the possibility of a utopian politics rooted in love and friendship, much as the Greeks believed that eros could bind the private and public spheres. But Rush’s utopia, in the end, always seems irreducibly spousal. Marriage remains his avant-garde.

THE EDWIN MELLEN PRESS

**How Habits of Culture Shape
Our Rational Thinking:
A Comparison of Classical Greece
and Ancient China**

by
Professor John Warden
978-0-7734-4503-1

Publish your scholarly book with Mellen
peer reviewed / no subsidies

www.mellenpress.com