

Arrondissements

DOUGLAS OLIVER was born in 1937, of Scottish parents, and grew up in Bournemouth. He worked for many years as a journalist, notably in Cambridge, Paris, and Coventry, before attending the University of Essex in the 70s. He subsequently lived in Brightlingsea, Paris, New York, and again Paris, usually working as a university lecturer. He was the author of numerous books of poetry and prose, including *Oppo Hectic*, *The Harmless Building*, *In the Cave of Suicession*, *The Diagram Poems*, *The Infant and the Pearl*, *Kind*, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, *Penniless Politics*, *Three Variations on the Theme of Harm*, *The Scarlet Cabinet* (with Alice Notley), *Selected Poems*, and *A Salvo for Africa*. He died in Paris in 2000.

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DOUGLAS OLIVER



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Editor's Note

Shortly before he fell ill with cancer, Doug decided to make a single manuscript of *The Shattered Crystal*, *China Blue*, and *The Video House of Fame*. Since he was hurrying to complete *Whisper Louise*, his final book, he didn't have time to see to the last details of the present manuscript. He left no indication as to its overall title; there were still decisions to be made as to the final choices for *The Shattered Crystal*; and he apparently wanted to include a preface taking off from his preface to the selection of poems, called "from *Arrondissements*," which appeared in *etruscan reader viii* (edited by Nicholas Johnson).

I feel I have no choice but to call the book *Arrondissements*, though the project Doug referred to as *Arrondissements* also includes *A Salvo For Africa*, published by Bloodaxe, and *Whisper Louise*, a double biography, in prose, of himself and Louise Michel, as yet unpublished.

I have also decided to include the poem "Well of Sorrows in Purple Tinctures," since it is an important poem and fits into no other context. It is a natural lead-in to *The Shattered Crystal* and to the present volume. Doug seems to have envisioned a collection of individual poems as part of the whole, but "Well of Sorrows" is the only one I'm certain of as belonging.

Also included, below, is the preface from *etruscan reader viii*, outlining the *Arrondissements* project.

As for the selection of poems in *The Shattered Crystal*, I've opted for the most inclusive presentation offered among his papers.

ALICE NOTLEY

Preface

A poet of modern Paris has to write about more than the river mists fogging the Pont Mirabeau while Apollinaire's river flows beneath.

As in any major capital these days, whole districts of my adopted city have dense concentrations of individual nationalities; to name them would be to name much of the world. In my own district, straddling the 9th and 10th arrondissements, it's the Jews and North Africans; in the Goutte d'Or (19th) the francophone Africans; in the 13th and 19th the Chinese, Vietnamese, and other Asians; Americans are everywhere; Brits and other West Europeans crowd into metros; White Russians have been long-established and the collapse of East Europe has brought in waves of new immigrants and gipsy beggars too; the Indians and Pakistanis have a restaurant alley; there's an Australian pub and several Irish ones while Haitians and other francophone Caribbeans and Latin Americans have their own cultural centre. And there's the French. . . .

For those in love with the myth of Paris as the Gallic City of Lights, cultural centre of the world, there's poignancy in these changes, as the National Front has not been slow to realise. But for a poet, it's as if this excitably-proud city has at last reached its maturity.

More than mid-way through my life I have begun writing *Arrondissements*, a series of books or long sequences in poetry and prose, designed to reflect the world at large through the prism of Paris. I investigate these arrondissements until an idea comes for a piece of writing suggested by the nature of the district. What follows is a sampling so far:

'Well of Sorrows in Purple Tinctures' is set in the Grands Boulevards of the 2nd arrondissement. It is part of collection called *Miscellaneous Poems from Arrondissements*.

Whisper Louise (in-progress) began at the site of a 19th century ball-room in the 20th arrondissement. The book centres on my own memoirs and those of Louise Michel, so-called 'Red Virgin' of the Paris Commune, the short-lived city rebellion of 1871. (Théophile Ferré was her platonic love, a hard-line revolutionary executed by firing squad.)

The Shattered Crystal is a sequence of meditations on the poetry of Heinrich Heine, Paul Celan, and, a little, Sully Prudhomme, all of

whom had connections with my own district, Faubourg Poissonnière-Montorgueil (10th leading towards the 2nd).

China Blue is a shorter sequence on the Chinese/Vietnamese/Thai/Cambodian/Laotian diaspora of the 13th and 19th.

The Video House of Fame takes wing from the video arcades of the 2nd and 4th arrondissements

A Salvo for Africa (published by Bloodaxe) is a book reflecting from a purely European perspective on the future of Africa; the theme was suggested by explorations in the 18th and 19th arrondissements.

Since I have little control over the process by which these books come to life, I deliberately refuse to decide in advance what genre to adopt – whether more broadly accessible or more tightly experimental, whether located in self or more decenteredly. This can easily be misunderstood. I have abandoned none of the avant-garde's long fought-for positions, nor its current interest in verbal density and texture, nor my loyalty to its practitioners. But the avant-garde is always, in hindsight, a genre. The *Arrondissements* project keeps obliging me to cross stylistic borders. Our minds, after all, have many genres of activity, and the genres of life found in a great city surpass our mere individuality to an extent that no one approach to writing can match.

DOUGLAS OLIVER

Well of Sorrows in Purple Tinctures

These thoughts in purple knots of cloud
dash down false lightning flashes like
neon signs above the glistening
Grands Boulevards, illuminating streetwise
melodramas not without beauty when
the will grows weary of the nightlong life
and you go walking.

I keep returning to Paris from scenes of death;
each time a problem with the plumbing
lets out the teary waters.

Plumber came to plumb my flat
on the rue des Messageries just now,
disjointed the pipes behind the bath tiles,
refilled the ancient well of sorrows
dried up since the baroque years,
drenched Boehringer's ceiling down below,
his concert office closed at Pentecost.
A frog with immense white limbs
swims in the well.

And I'm walking with a gospel tune in mind
which Eddie sent over from the States.
Says life's a burden you can lay down.

Lay my-ah
burden down, go walking
go walking on the other side
of the Grands Boulevards;
neon silently barks at a pigeon
sends it up in flurries like a bat;
let it rest. See my-ah
dressed in his golf leathers
father there,
see my-ah

dressed in white hair
mother there,
see my-ah
dressed in her Pentecost
sister there,
see my-ah
dressed in stained feathers
baby son there.
No side on the other side.

See my father falling on the fairway
of his life. Light goes out,
but darkness won't descend
on featureless houses,
absence of mood,
golf course grass greying and serious,
the whack gone out of the game,
the blood gone out of the brain,
trees coming alive with night
but not releasing it.
No passion yet in this childhood of a thought.
Past time's a heron once
in the course pond:
straw leg dislocated in water clear to the bottom.

A lot is loaded down, settled for good.
But who's uneasy there no more?
Who's in trouble there no more?

See my mother lay her head,
flakes of soap on a transparent pillow
an empty memory fringed with lace
(the snow fell
on such a resting place),
an elderly woman lies down there
dressed in her last cardigan,
in her coma,
the watery pillow whirls with lights

and heart-beat oscillograph blips.
I will her soul to go if it wants to.
“Please go, wherever you are.”
It flurries upwards like a white bat.
Who took the soap flakes packet,
let the flakes float down?
I was thinking of Jean Cocteau.

Emotions stagger forwards
in these distracted counsels.
I turn my head:
a gate had fallen away in her face.
And I continue walking.

See my sister; when her mouth was
morphine-dry, God sent saliva,
so she could sing her valediction hymn.
My-ah burden down.
Her belief a fixed acquittal
in the *cause célèbre* of our lives,
and I had thoughts on another side
of my mind. Mine the pale legs
like a huge white frog, went swimming
off Grenada’s Grande Anse jetty
in the Caribbean Sea. Journalists floated
round about; it was thunderous
night above truffled green waters
welling onto beach of palm shadows.
Dressed in stained leathers,
a bat flew low on the wave, up
sidelong through a lightning flash
and I was hot shit in that flash romance.
Back in Surrey there
saw my sister who revealed her face
brimming with mysterious fortune,
the face of one who justly assumed
in her dying that she’d earned a heaven.
Something very God-like rose within her;

she was immeasurably superior to me then,
interrupted the purpled lightning.
Bade me goodbye from her armchair;
I withdrew with a curious grimace.

A lot is loaded down now, I say,
halfway become my nature.
And I go walking on the boulevards,
bail à céder, soldes,
a price is no price unless a sale price;
my elbows are itchier than in the old days,
each time in Paris I'm more settled in habit,
a journeyman of innocence:
behold this Faustian innocent
shedding deaths of others
as he goes walking.

See my baby lay his head on a down pillow,
pigeons flurrying on the boulevards.
Lay my bird in down.
Well, Tom's long in his coffin, inside his altar,
in some cathedral I've made for him
lit by summer photographic flashes.
I scarcely dare cross those cracked flags.
Why do I see instead the electric figure
of a black abbot
flitting along the galleries like a bat
and into high doors?
You'll never know where he'll appear next
in these galleries of my unbelief.
I don't know where the abbot is now,
for I'm casting the deaths of others
like disjointed stones into the cathedral well.

I continue walking towards what remains.
The trail I have left is the trail left behind.
On this, my third time of living in Paris,
I know these memories as

the mere same endroits;
the voice that used to speak for me is still there,
but I'm learning to speak over it, catching
it up like an under-air
on the Grands Boulevards,
pigeons high against empurpling clouds.

The Shattered Crystal

