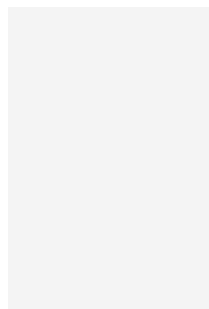


Writing with the Seams Exposed



Oli Hazzard, *Lorem Ipsum* (Prototype) £12
Reviewed by Rowland Bagnall

Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; – they are the life, the soul of reading; – take them out of this book, for instance, you might as well take the book along with them
– Laurence Sterne

It is difficult to know how to adequately review Oli Hazzard's new book, a single, syntactically impeccable sentence of exactly 50,000 words, not least because the text itself seems not to know how to describe itself, an 'essay or zuihitsu or novel or email or monologue or text – *what is it*,' referring to a genre – 'or perhaps anti-genre' – of Japanese prose writing most famous for its loosenesses. Vaguely epistolary, *Lorem Ipsum* – whose title alludes to a randomly-generated placeholder text used commonly in typesetting – makes space for anything and everything, like Mary Poppins's handbag. In a way, I can do no better than to cite Hazzard's own review of Simone Kearney's recent collection, *Days* (2021), which seems to introduce the contours of his own book just as well: 'It registers things as they happen, anticipates events and remembers them, gets distracted by stuff in the room and by the act of composition, and describes this practice of inattention with the intimate, semi-serious, overheard frustration of the diarist.'

Lorem Ipsum's cover shows the blueprint of a Cluedo-style house, hinting at the novel's own expansive architecture. Whether deliberately or not, it is reminiscent of Llanada Villa in California, Sarah Winchester's eccentric, maze-like mansion, added to throughout her life in the hope that she might somehow appease the malevolent spirits of those killed by her husband's famous lever-action rifle. While Hazzard's novel stands firm without any trickery – no false staircases or inaccessible rooms, as in Llanada Villa – the effect of reading *Lorem Ipsum* is akin to wandering the spaces of an unfamiliar building, curious to find out the particulars behind

each door, discovering passageways that lead you back, quite unexpectedly, to rooms you've already explored.

In this way, the novel shares the same *in medias res* quality John Ashbery identifies in the poetry of John Clare, the poet 'already there, talking to you before you've arrived on the scene, telling you about himself, about the things that are closest and dearest to him'. It is a quality – encouraged by the gently permissive and digressive nature of the novel (following 'the Mexican- / waves of [the poet's] mind,' to borrow a phrase from *Between Two Windows* (2012), Hazzard's first collection) – that gestures to the infinite, as if the sentence might happily go on forever, never reaching a conclusion. I'm reminded of an anecdote of Mary Ruefle's, recalling Ashbery reading from 1972's *Three Poems* (50 this year), a book that doesn't seem too far from Hazzard's. '[H]e said it was a lot like watching TV,' remembers Ruefle, as though 'you could open the book anywhere and begin reading, and flip around the book as much as you wanted to.'

Nevertheless, *Lorem Ipsum*'s format as a single, 50,000 word sentence – Hazzard alludes to Vanessa Place's *Dies: A Sentence* (2005) ('which I haven't read and probably won't read, since the idea of reading a fifty-thousand-word sentence written by someone else seems pretty gruelling') and Bohumil Hrabal's *Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age* (1964) as potential referents – suggests an operating system that remains profoundly linear, exploring the parameters of meaning-making within an environment (the text, but also life itself) almost comically prone to digression and distraction. One thinks of Raymond Roussel's 'La Source', with its painstaking, fifty-page description of a spa depicted on a bottle of mineral water, though the digressions of Hazzard's novel are kept neatly in check, never straying too far from the carriageway. With its frequent deviations into the particulars of parenthood (from Peppa Pig to Duplo, triggered literally, at times, by the interruption of Hazzard's children), *Lorem Ipsum* also shares something with the temporal experiments of Bernadette Mayer, as in 1982's *Midwinter Day*, composed in its entirety (so the story goes) on 22 December 1978 at the poet's home in Massachusetts: 'the present writer / At the present time'.

The temporal shiftiness of Hazzard's novel – it's difficult to decide whether his sentence might be speeding up or slowing down (perhaps it's both, or neither) – follows the suite of five procedural poems that comprise his second collection, *Blotter* (2018), in which the formal strategies at work explore a range of timeframes and their measurements. *PROGRESS: REAL AND IMAGINED* (2020), a recent book-length poem from Spam Press (in which a slice of *Lorem Ipsum* appears) is intermittently punctuated by Internet IP addresses, spatiotemporal coordinates of the poem as its being written. With *Lorem Ipsum*, Hazzard succeeds in generating an environment composed entirely of the present tense, guided by 'a gentle, pulsing, roaming form of inattention,' a Pillow Book in live-feed, a 'continuous or prolonged present' in which 'each moment [is] always happening, [...] only fully inhabited or registered by the process of trying to account for it'. Perhaps this explains the impact of the limited-edition A1 poster of the novel, printed as a lorem

ipsum block against a *Clockwork-Orange*-orange background, the whole sentence apparent in a single, comprehensive glance.

What all this time amounts to, more than anything, is a question about selfhood, particularly how selfhood crashes into our ideas about community and collective experience, from family, friendships, and national identity to political protests, acts of terror, and the experiences we share of nature, artworks, memory, and time, even experience itself, ‘the lorem ipsum of our days,’ writes Hazzard, citing Clarice Lispector, ‘the present making an incessant series of demands on our attention, *like a gate that has never stopped opening*’. Hazzard’s is a novel that widens and widens, thoughtful and generous, filling and full, reflecting, with a shrug, a view of ourselves.