

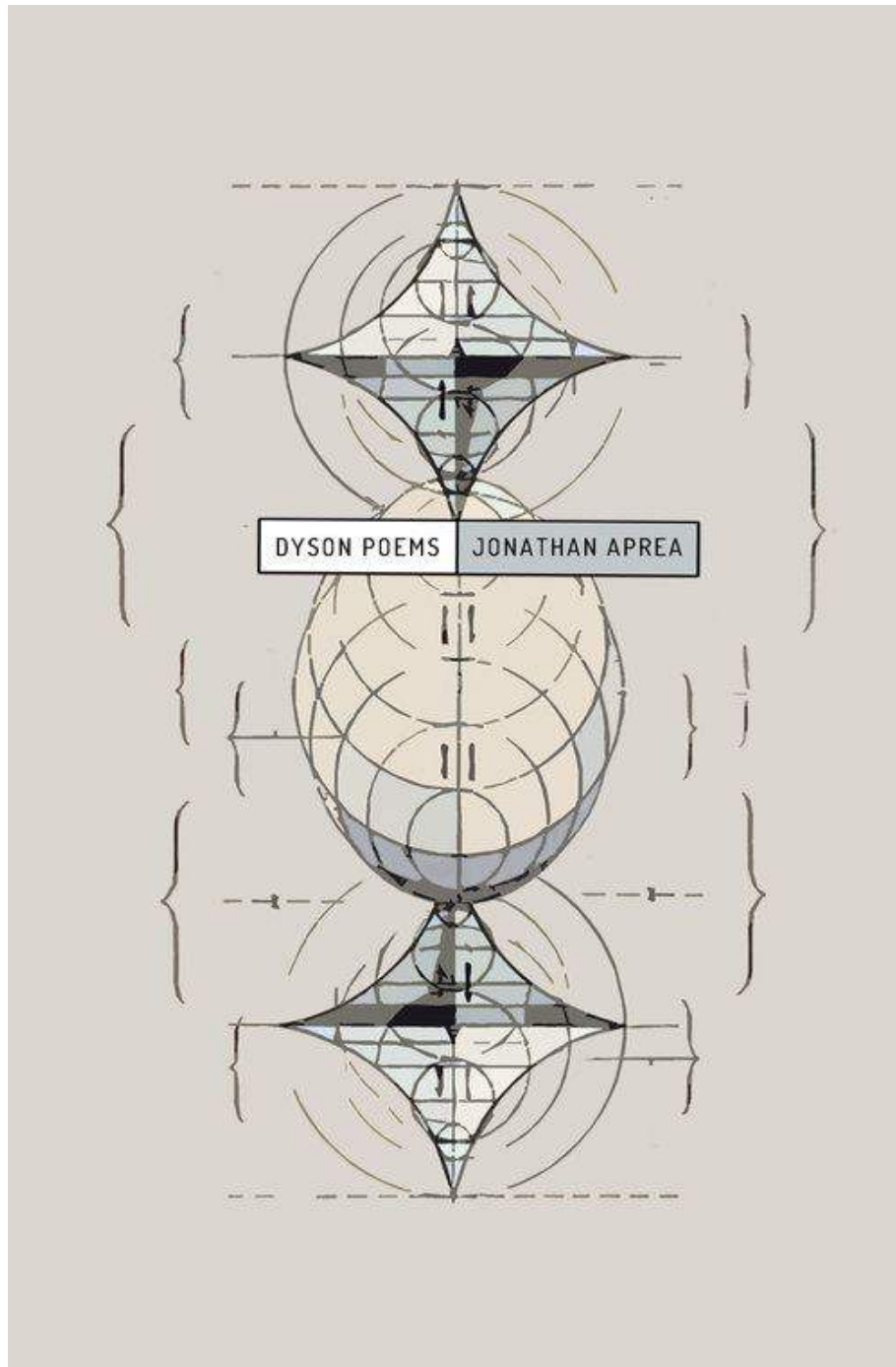


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READER

I Pretend A Decision

An Interview with Jonathan Aprea



By Oscar d'Artois

O: I first met Jonathan Aprea when we were both in our early twenties and figuring out how to be poets in Brooklyn, NY. We probably met at the Mellow Pages Library because that is how I met 99% of the poets I know, but TBQH I am not entirely sure.

He went on to get his MFA in Syracuse, NY, and is currently living in Philadelphia, not NY. Apparently (according to a hot insider tip I obtained via E-Mail) (fans take note), he is moving to Harlem soon. When I attempted to ask him more about this in the interview, he declined to respond, probably because he is a serious artist who did not come here for that petty chit-chat.

Speaking of art, Dyson Poems, his (first) chapbook just came out yesterday from Monster House Press. The poems in it have the kind of quiet, grounded focus that comes from standing in the eye of a cyclonic vacuum cleaner – a silent center from which to begin to parse the frenzy of the external world. I read them on a couch by an open window on a mildly chilly day while listening to music that is probably best described as ‘indie & wistful,’ which is a format that I would recommend reading them in.

Although you’ll probably need to read the rest of the book to get their full effect (hint hint), my favorite lines in the book are probably the last two: “I count my regrets, I pretend a decision: / That all along this was what I ever wanted.” They also seem like as good a starting point as any for this interview.

First off, congrats on having Dyson Poems come out with Monster House! How did you wind up collaborating with them?

JA: Thx! I first heard about Monster House a few years ago when I went to a reading they hosted at Molasses. I remember Bella Bravo reading and I think James Payne and maybe Andrew Weatherhead, I forget who else. I really liked that reading. I'm a big fan of what MHP publishes / does, and the answer to your question is a boring one but I just submitted my chap to them through the normal route, during one of their open reading periods.

Why did you decide (if you did decide) to write a book whose ostensible subject is James Dyson, a man most famous for designing vacuum cleaners?

It became clear to me while researching for this book that there would be a lot I could do, in terms of metaphor, with a vacuum. I felt like I could move with it in many different directions at once, and that was exciting to me. I also began to feel parallels between my own projects as a writer and Dyson's as an industrial designer. A vacuum cleaner is superfluous to me in the same way a poem is superfluous. A vacuum condenses something spread out and atmospheric (dust) into a tangible mass (inside the bin). It collects and reveals dirt the way a poem collects and articulates an idea.

I was impressed by your ability to turn what, based on his wikipedia page, seems like a not especially relatable person ("Georgian estate French home large boat...") into someone who possesses a quiet interiority ("his skin his hair dust debris"). Was that contrast part of what drew you to him?

Dyson's extreme wealth is ridiculous to me, and the idea of humanizing a billionaire with these poems made me uncomfortable, and it still makes me a little uncomfortable. The poems don't deride Dyson directly, nor do they portray him in a positive light, and I was interested in occupying that space, tonally. My goal in using Dyson the person in these poems was to try to unmask the different motives people have for making things and for selling things, and I guess also for cleaning things, and working towards an interiority for that character went hand in hand with those goals.

The epigraph has Dyson talking about how his end product is beautiful not because it is the best solution to a problem but because it is the only possible solution to it. Was there something appealing/liberating to the idea of writing about someone who makes things that have a deterministic, mathematical cause and consequence quality about them, as opposed to writing about art, the purpose of which is often vague a best?

In his own words, Dyson calls himself "an artist who is trying to call himself an engineer," which is a tension that really informed the way I wrote this chapbook. So more than feeling appealing or liberating, the line between Dyson as engineer/capitalist and Dyson as artist/capitalist confused me, but it was a productive confusion. I tried to stay very close to the idea of the vacuum cleaner as a work of art, knowing that such a categorization depends on a thing's context and, as a result of that context, the economy that dictates its worth and application.

I feel like your dream job was “inventor” as a kid. Am I way off?

I was never very interested in inventing things as a kid. I sometimes used to sit on my couch and take old toys and electronics apart, to see what they looked like inside rather than to really figure out how they worked, and it never interested me at all to put them back together again.

Are you a runner? I have an image of you jogging through beach dunes for some reason, and you quote Dyson talking about how he used running to teach himself determination. Was that part of the appeal? Or did I just make that image of you up somehow? Sorry if I am over-conflating you with Dyson or something.

I do like to run, and I grew up near the beach the same way Dyson did. That piece of biographical info was something Dyson included in his autobiography (called *Against the Odds*, btw) and it stuck with me partially for its affinity to my own childhood.

Because there also seems to be something going on here, maybe something that happens in the repeated confrontations with ‘the void,’ about becoming machine-like, or becoming something that is a purely functional part of a whole. At times, this seems almost death-drivey (like in “Triumph of Death” where “You assemble a vehicle and drive it / into its ultimate instant / of malfunctioning”) and at others seems zen in a kind of chilling way (his self-portrait’s “power of affect would be in the perfection / of its design, the drawn out exertions and unrecognized potential / buried and useless underneath its attractive glass enclosure”). But maybe it isn’t chilling – maybe it’s desirable to want to become purely functional in this way? Not entirely sure how to make this a question.

Haha I’m not sure how to formulate an answer either. But I will say this to try to get at what you’re referencing: when I care about another person, and I think we mostly all do this, I begin to become that person in some sense, taking on some of their characteristics, but also feeling an emotion when they feel the emotion and reacting to things as they would, etc. It makes me sad if I think about how they’ll die eventually, and I have anxiety about it, the same way it makes me sad or anxious when I think about how I’ll die eventually. That impermanence is something that they and I both share though, and in a way that’s a comforting idea. But when I love a product, as opposed to a person, I think I might feel the opposite. It makes me feel more permanent, and maybe more functional, and I think less about my impermanence, although logically I know that it’s there. And so as a consumer I position myself repeatedly in relation to a new thing in order to attempt to collapse this dissonance between my sense of permanence and impermanence, and of course I can’t do that, and it feels the opposite of comforting. Purchasing things is one way we have of dealing with mortality, and it’s by now a sort of common trope, and it’s well-explored in the field of psychology, most notably under terror management theory. Cleaning things is another way we deal with it, and making things, of course, is another (so is working a job, a role in which we are asked to be “purely functional”). As far as immortality projects go, Dyson gave his company his own name, and just as British people now use the name Hoover as a verb to signify vacuuming, Dyson once wrote that he hopes this might be done with his own name. “To

dyson the floor.” All of this feels like a roundabout way of saying that death, as it does for so much poetry, factors into this chapbook.

I typed the line “how good... to reveal a thing for the thing” into my browser thinking I might call this interview that. Not sure why I put it in the browser instead of google docs. Anyway, the results that came up were all either about god revealing things to us or guys revealing what they like best during sex. Neither of those things (sex & god) seem to come up all that much, at least not that directly, in these poems. What they do feel like is a way of ‘telling a life’ through a series of recurring images: working in “spiral” patterns, the experience of one’s own limitations, watching a person in the glass window of a train pulling out, avoiding mirrors in order to stay focused on work, unfogging them after a shower to check you still exist. It feels like a prolonged experience of de-realization, or like a life seen through a condensed, hazy mirror. Were you in a particular state of mind when you wrote these, and did you set out wanting them all to have the same feel? Or is this just what life as seen through the eyes of Jonathan Aprea looks & feels like?

Right, I didn’t actually borrow that line from anywhere. The fun part of writing this was to try to make the poems cohere together, thematically, in terms of voice and imagery, etc. A lot of them are kind of strung together by this stuff. That was a central goal for me. I worked on this chapbook for a few years, and so my state of mind shifted during that time, of course, but I did try to inhabit the tone of the book each time I came back to it.

In addition to liking the book itself, I also liked your trailer for it (as well as your video stuff in general). I also thought your website, which I duly stalked, looked a lot cooler than mine does. Aside from poetry, do you do all your own stunts?

I did make that stuff myself. I started making videos about a year and a half ago during a stretch when writing poetry didn’t feel appealing to me anymore. I like working with video because you can’t really use language the same way in a video that you use it in a poem, or at least I can’t. I think it’s very easy to lose a viewer’s interest that way. So for me, making videos is a fun exercise in figuring out how to elicit a similar response in a viewer that a poem elicits, but across time and with imagery.

Do you have anything else in the works or are you #JustChilling?

I’m working on a full-length collection right now. I’d like to try to finish it by July.

Finally, having done this bit of research on Dyson, I now feel more compelled to buy one of his vacuum cleaners, or at least more likely to buy one of his products if I am ever in the market for one. Be honest: was this the purpose of the book?

In a sense, this is the opposite of my purpose for the book, but it isn’t a surprising response. People who know I’ve written these poems usually eventually ask me if I have a Dyson vacuum, and I don’t. I once found the idea of owning one somewhat appealing but now it doesn’t interest me at all. I will say though that it isn’t lost on me that I’ve accidentally entered into a sort of

reciprocal relationship with Dyson the company, in the sense that my chapbook is unintentionally an advertisement for these products, simply by intoning the name, and the products might bring to mind a memory of my poems for anyone familiar with them.



You can now order Dyson Poems from Monster House Press.

Follow Jonathan Aprea on twitter: @jonathanaprea