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Literary

Opcit at Large: The Adventures of Ibn Opcit, Book II
John Barr
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John Barr, writer of epic poems or poetic epics (the poetry-illiterate may not draw a distinction), has returned with Book II of The Adventures of Ibn Opcit. This second volume, *Opcit at Large*, mires our eponymous poet-hero in more than a few existential pickles. Play or poem, *Opcit at Large* demands that its reader revisit its engaging monologues many times over.

It all starts in hell with "The Afterdammit." There, two souls encounter their appointed demon. Luckily for them this demon is not necessarily there to torture them for their sins. Before the souls are redeployed to earth to take up new, subsequent lives, the three explore notions of existence and humanism: Indeed, being separated from corporeal life offers "that rare moment when a man is defined / not by circumstance but by himself alone … / he can become as great, as gracious or grotesque / as he is able."

Barr's language offers a heady, brain-twisting ride. While doing "the silly slant," one soul was castrated by a sushi knife: "One quick stroke and he held Leviticus aloft; / like a mad postmaster he canceled everything in sight." The other died via bus: "The canonical black I wore was mistaken / by the driver for the entrance to an underpass."

The next segment, "Opcit en Afrique," takes place in "Africa's newest republic," led by an Idi Amin-type (named Idi Nakumbo). There is also a US VP and a CNN reporter (cum Opcit love-interest). Opcit is a rebellious tongue wagging in the wings in the "People's Republic of Usurpia." Meanwhile, the leaders talk outrageous shop about money and geopolitics. Their dialogue becomes a not-so-surreal commentary on the ways of the world.

In "The Last Cosmonaut," Opcit finds himself aloft in a Soviet spacecraft around the time that the USSR has been dissolved back on Earth. His appointed duty? To wax poetic:

Into the little electronic frying pan
Of your Dictaphone pour the ingredients of your day.
Make of your journals a collection agency.

A page a day of pungencies, that's all we ask.

Those enamored of clever turns of phrase will enjoy *Opcit at Large*. The stories are surreal, existential landscapes that beg a second read. Barr is a wizard at wordplay, leaving the reader to sometimes slog, sometimes trip through his dialogue. If sometimes the cleverness of Barr's lines seem to outweigh the meaning, then we are only reminded that this is poetry, after all, and that we are meant to respond with feeling.

John Barr has published a total of eight collections of poetry. He has taught in the graduate writing program of Sarah Lawrence College and is Board President Emeritus of the Poetry Society of America.

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