

Tony's World
Barry Wallenstein
Birch Brook Press, 2009

For John Berryman, writing poetry ‘enables the poet gradually, again and again, to become almost another man.’ Berryman, of course, was no stranger to the lyrical alter ego – the Henry of his *Dream Songs* both was and wasn’t Berryman himself. Similarly, Tony – the protagonist of Barry Wallenstein’s superb new collection – is a complex construct, both the author himself and someone else entirely, all of us, perhaps, or no one in particular. Tony is part hipster, part hustler, part self-hater, part self-infatuated, part cynic, part romantic – he is wholly compelling and his voice comes alive on the page. At once urban prophet and holy fool, Tony is deliciously defiant and defiantly himself.

Wallenstein’s poems are snappy and sometimes light, but subtle and nuanced and full of echoes and allusions, memory and pain. At first glance, these poems appear to be improvisational, associational, but closer inspection reveals them to be anything but. Wallenstein’s verse is formally rigorous, but in a manner that feels effortless – his poems read so fluidly (and are such fun to read) that it is easy to overlook their considerable craft. The conflict between formal discipline and controlled chaos, structure and substance, texture and tone, complements the rift between poet and speaker, speaker and reader, ego and id. Wallenstein’s verse can be simultaneously cryptic, caustic, candid, and disarmingly raw. His best poems are powered by an incantatory groove, amplified by conceits that are as poignant as they are witty and deft. For Tony is nothing if not vulnerable, and that vulnerability infiltrates even his most upbeat poems.

Tony is agreeably disagreeable, and his resistance to easy interpretation – to classification, conciliation, common sense – intensifies his textured and tenacious inner life. Past his prime – ‘a dull toad ... in a left-over stew’ – and out of place in a city he knows all too well, his memories could well be the dreams of a man sleepwalking through everyday experience. Tony’s psychic landscape has its physical parallel in Wallenstein’s own Manhattan, a city of contradiction, crisis, and constant change, every bit as difficult to decipher as Tony himself. Everything here is fractured, at once foreign and familiar, etched with nostalgia.

‘Little Bestiary,’ in which Tony encounters a snake, is a canny adaptation of D.H. Lawrence’s ‘Snake,’ and feels like an Aesop’s fable filtered through a blues song. ‘Tony the Trader’ examines that most enigmatic of activities – creativity, the writing process – and reads like an urban version of Ted Hughes’ ‘The Thought-Fox.’ Here, Tony stumbles into inspiration, with a kind of lazy grace:

He settles in – shoeless and sure,
empties his pockets and takes a bow
but before latching the window
he reaches out and pulls in a cloud
the size of a cup,
tips it back
and drinks a yard beyond his mother’s wishes.

The poems about Tony’s parents are some of the finest in the collection. ‘Tony to His Mother,’ for example, includes this invocation:

Mother, if you can see me,
imagine a well-carpeted iceberg,
thick enough for an eight-day week.
And I’m alone on it
in a very comfortable chair –
a Morris design.
And we’re drifting out to sea,
the berg, its luxuries and me.

This stanza makes apparent many of Wallenstein’s skills: a commanding, unforced, authentic voice; a sharp wit and unexpected turn of phrase; a gentle, even restrained, sense of sadness and loss; a strange blend of boisterousness and resignation; the almost reflexive movement between the abstract and the exact.

In Tony’s world, lightness and happiness (creative, erotic, or otherwise) are levelled by moments of despair:

nuclear mountains in the suburbs,

waves of poison overflowing
his stash; even his charm obscured
by the images, cold and funny
as Death.

Thus, life's loveliest moments (perhaps exemplified by the character of Sally, and the ladies 'on the east corner of Vine Street') are undone by the knowledge that out there somewhere (whether it be on the east corner of Vine Street or further afield) lurks Death, in the shape of 'Mister Stealth.'

Tony's World can be experienced as the lyrical biography of an irrepressible – perhaps even unknowable – character, but its poems also operate singularly, independently, and the book has a cumulative power when read from end to end. Tony remembers and reflects, elaborates, exaggerates, and invents. Wallenstein seems to understand that the most honest narrators are the unreliable kind. One assumes that many of these poems are enriched by autobiographical aspects, but Wallenstein is never imprisoned by the confessional form. Wallenstein seems to understand And yet Wallenstein's affection for his creation – for Tony is both his son and his twin – is clear in every verse. One wonders if Wallenstein's response to this charge would recall Berryman's protestation that 'Henry is accused of being me and I am accused of being Henry and I deny it and nobody believes me.'

Just as there are similarities between Berryman and Henry, so Wallenstein shares some of Berryman's gifts: the structural formality counterbalanced with a compelling restlessness; the manner in which daily experience is refracted through a lens of absurdity and intemperance; the relentless pathos; the tempering of self-indulgence and idleness is with something close to existential panic; the inspired zigs and zags, grace notes and sly jokes; the peremptory serve-and-return delivery of set-ups and punchlines. Here, for example, is Berryman in *The Dream Songs*:

Henry rested, possessed of many pills
& gin & whiskey. He put up his feet
& switched on Schubert.
His tranquility lasted five minutes.

And here is Wallenstein in *Tony's World*:

Tony reads the news
smokes a joint
bites his lip, spins
and goes out to see the stylist
to have his hair turned red.

Many of the poems in *Tony's World* have been performed publicly by Wallenstein, often accompanied by jazz musicians. (I had the good fortune to attend one such performance in a Bleecker Street bar in 2005. It was a particularly wet December evening, a week or two before Christmas, endless rain and traffic and subway strikes, and I had the sense of stepping out of my comfort zone and into Tony's world.) Wallenstein has also performed in London, Dublin, Prague, Paris, Nice, Lagos, and Cape Town. Whether one reads Wallenstein's verse, attends his performances, or hears one of his recordings, one cannot deny that Tony is an indelible creation and an exciting addition to contemporary American poetry. *Tony's World* is worth visiting – indeed, it is worth returning to again and again.

Reviewed by Roy Robbins in *New Contrast*

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Tony's World
by Barry Wallenstein

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Reviewed by Steve Koenig

Tony is an everyman with a blade up his sleeve, but he's no Mack The Knife. He's dedicated to his parents, but he's a gadabout, often in unsavory places. His pondering his world is what makes him more than a cad.

Barry Wallenstein has woven together some fifty of his Tony poems, many previously published in magazines and his previous volumes but all revamped, for one richly satisfying world to get lost in. Slowly peel past the cover illustration, Janet Aulisio's woodcut of a young man peering beyond your eye, trapped within a cage, the world open beyond his

shoulder. You've entered *Tony's World*, a place where you're in the real world yet in a place of retreat and contemplation. Tony's world is a place for self-reflection.

Get into "Tony's Head":

nuclear mountains in the suburbs,
waves of poison overflowing
his stash; even his charm, obscured
by the images, cold and funny
as Death.

"Tony To His Creator" reveals Tony's coping mechanisms:

...toss him in water
he'll swim—knock him down—
he'll take a nap

The collection at hand is peppered with characters with names like Squeaky The Tailor, Iris O'Fay, Katherine The Blood, Mister Stealth, Novocain Mary. They frequent the Hotel Bye'N'Bye and the Hotel Splendide. And then there's Tony. Neither as caricatured as one of Runyon's creations, nor simple as Langston's Semple, Tony is complicated; more of a hipster, not a slacker ("Tony—you're a slick/sick mutha-hubba"), yet you could be forgiven for calling him *louche*.

The larger share of *Tony's World* is told in third person. The narrator, who is Wallenstein and not Wallenstein, Tony and not Tony, introduces Tony to us in prose ("Tony Talks About Himself"), appealing to the reader:

"When some of my stories emerge as less than clear, I imagine my author bumping his head on the way to the keypad and offering apologies of anyone willing to listen."

Wallenstein's skill with implication is seen in the subtle sexual smile as "Tony Answers A Cowboy's Proposal":

I can be had
but not just for the reaching
...
no matter how careful the hand,
no matter how solid the table.

Or in "That Was Then; Now Is Paid For":

Novocain Mary, lately out of stir,
balances on a bed's edge
and ponders the ways to rise
...
In the bath sometimes, Mary encouraged a toy boat
to float in her direction.

This is the strength of these poems: the meaning is for you to intuit, only the flavor is given. Tony's stories are rife with possibilities and many of them take your breath away, as in "Tony's Preferences":

Myself, I prefer the brothel
on the east corner of Vine Street
over all the others
and for the ordinary reasons—the rose tints,
the skirts generally,
the scented space and tact of the staff—
how magically they appear with favors
and then disappear fast,
the breeze that comes off an evening
as sweetly as Suzie, Suzie from the alley,
slips out of very little and is delicate,
and then, best of all, she's not delicate
& hills
yes, fresh as plump and the valleys
and the comfort comes home
in this place--years away from certainties
and the lustings after war.

In "Tony The Trader," "he stacks his goods with soft precision." Wallenstein does this with his words, eschewing verbal pyrotechnics. Rarely, some phrases sound awkward: "Why do you look so sad my friend/ you lady..." but in the whole, words flow easily in their own cadence, natural as fresh air.

Although Wallenstein is often tagged a jazz poet, likely because he frequently works with musicians and his works have a natural rhythm, I'd sooner label him post-Beat, as in "Tony The Trader":

he reaches out and pulls in a cloud
the size of a cup,
tips it back
and drinks a yard beyond his mother's wishes.

A three-part sequence of the Tony poems appears on Wallenstein's excellent compact disc, *Tony's Blues* (Cadence Jazz Records CJR 1124, cadencebuilding.com), my current favorite of his many recordings. [Poet Vernon Frazer's review in AllAboutJazz.com](http://AllAboutJazz.com) notes that "*Tony searches for a sense of himself, only to find his presence...illusory... While Tony's concerns are personal, Wallenstein's extend into the social...But the difference between Tony's personal and Wallenstein's social concerns isn't so clear-cut.*" I'd venture to say that Tony's concerns are interpersonal, and his search for a stronger sense of how he fits into it all.

As you read *Tony's World*, and these poems play over as easily as if you put a favorite record album on repeat mode, you think about survival and existence, as in "Tony Surviving":

The exertion goes on.
He wonders if the jokers on the outside
are any more threatening
than those muckabouts in the inside.

Mention should be made about the physical book. The type was set in metal, and as you hold the book and scan the lines, your fingers trace over the texture of each poem's mark within the vellum paper. It makes *Tony's World* a multisensory experience.

Steve Koenig is a poet, journalist, educator, activist, and editor of AcousticLevitation.org : *A Journal of Arts, Music and Culture*. His collaborations with improvising musicians and Mexican painters will be published in book form and on disc in early 2011.