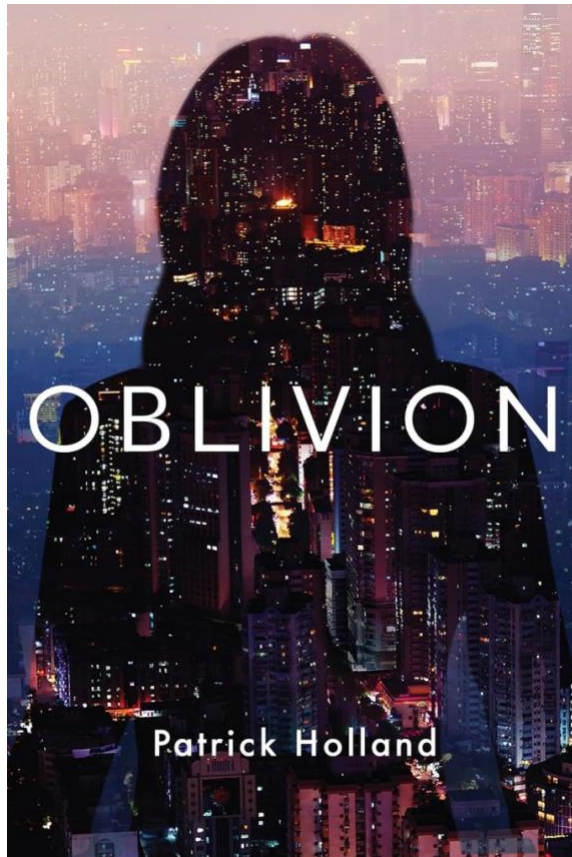


REVIEW

**“How beautiful will be the feet, of
the one who comes to announce
my death to me”: Patrick
Holland’s *Oblivion* as “inchoate
place on the shores of Oblivion
and Mnemosyne”**

by Jason S Polley

Patrick Holland. Oblivion, Transit Lounge, 2024. 242 pgs.



I have no politics.

—Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*

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Sometimes she seemed invisible, like peace.

—Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*

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I have no politics.

—Patrick Holland, *Oblivion*

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Does she bring peace to your house? Everything else is irrelevant.

—Patrick Holland, *Oblivion*

*

Spies lie on white beds in grey towns and wait.

—John le Carré, *The Constant Gardener*

First, I read *Oblivion*, which is Holland's seventh book, in two sittings: a long Thursday afternoon that seemed short, and the following Friday night that was too short. Short because I was mesmerised. And too short because I wanted to remain entranced in that ineffable space, that time-out-of-joint no-place betwixt stupor and clarity, or, to return to *Hamlet* (as Holland occasionally does), "between heaven and earth." So I did what I could to extend the inchoate literary transcendence, or what Holland's unnamed 36-year-old narrator characterises as that "other world at the border of the one I know." I reread Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, the 2002 film having supplanted my recollection of the 1956 novel; I finished De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, which I'd been reading periodically over recent months; and I reread Holland's *Oblivion*, again in but two too-short-seeming sittings.

One of the marks of good fiction, as I discovered early in my BA, is that, besides making everyday non-reading life better (for life is heavier, for life positively drags, when encumbered by a book that one must force oneself to finish, like Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Miller's *Plexus*, Nabokov's *Ada*, Pynchon's *Against the Day*, and Yanagihara's *To Paradise*), good books compel you

to read more and more books, to catch up, as it were, all the while revealing another paradox of fiction. Beyond the affective paradox, i.e., the fact that fiction, though fictional, inspires genuine physiological and emotional responses in readers, is the epistemological one: the more you read, the more you know that you must read more. Ergo, the more you know, the more you realise how much you don't know, the acquisition of knowledge being tantamount to the discovery of evermore bottomless ignorance and unshakable arrogance.

In Patrick Holland's *Oblivion*, we overtly get Ovid, the Bible, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Basho, Blake, and Nguyen Du. Just as we clearly get Dante, Shakespeare, Pascal, Byron, Hugo, Baudelaire, and Crane in *The Quiet American*. And over and above the unmistakable Greene in Holland (Holland himself having informed me, after I told him that he had prompted me to return to *The Honorary Consul* and *The Quiet American*, that *The Quiet American* is one of his favourite novels, one to which he religiously returns biennially), I also found myself reminded of Don DeLillo, of Joan Didion.

Holland's dialogue, not unlike DeLillo's, rings true whilst also being peculiarly realist. DeLillo himself has noted that his fictional dialogue, though intended to capture the true cadence of everyday conversation, often manifests as almost absurdist. Holland's dialogue at times approaches the DeLillovian, but what makes it special, and oft tantalising, is that it sometimes materialises, like the atmosphere of *Oblivion* itself, in the seeming interstices of dialogue and interior monologue as well as in the apertures between dreaming and wakefulness.

Like Holland's opiated (pp. 51, 52, 52, 62, 84, 96, 143, 186, 201, 216) protagonist, who's modelled on both (i) Greene's cynical middle-aged Fowler, who smokes two pipes nightly, and (ii) Greene's idealistic 32-year-old Pyle, who doesn't consume opium, readers of Holland might find themselves feeling that "the iron door that keeps worlds apart had shifted a crack, and the angels who guard it had fallen asleep." Along with Holland's unnamed narrator, who "know[s] most of the cabals throwing up buildings across Asia," and, like "[f]ew people," "can negotiate the red tape of Vietnam," readers find themselves code-mixing English, Vietnamese, Japanese, Mandarin, and Cantonese, half-lost across literal and notional utopias, ones that allusively embrace places encountered, imagined, and dreamed:

*Illyria. Tokyo. Qingdao. Beijing. Brisbane. Budapest. Phnom Penh.
Mnemosyne. Shanghai. Kashgar. Some of these I must have imagined.
Osaka. Eunoë. Esperanta. Hà Nội. Cebu. Ürümqi. Melbourne. Moskvá.
Nanbui. Aksos. Ningxia. Hue. Some of these I must have dreamed. Ninh
Binh. Ordos. Hong Kong. Bangkok, Lideco Bắc 32. Sài Gòn.*

“One of these must be real,” the reflexive, late-in-the-novel paragraph concludes, thus reminiscent of Joan Didion’s *Democracy*, where romantic hero Jack Lovett, island-hopping from Honolulu to Ho Chi Minh to Hong Kong, is everything that the pragmatic James Bond is not, viz., a spy whom we don’t exactly know is a spy.

Certainly, Holland’s narrator does end up “Playing James Bond in Singapore. Gomen’nasai,” so he explains why he had been uncharacteristically incommunicado at the height of a below-board mega land deal with Japanese industrialist (and prospective war tycoon) Nishimura. The narrator finds himself recruited to this intelligence mission, extracting an unknown agent of inexplicit provenance (Chinese? Cambodian? Vietnamese?) from Singapore with a counterfeit Australian passport, by a chance (?) encounter with his superordinate Bill whilst paying a quick, covert visit to the Saigon office (his home office, from which he will resign once he completes the inside deal with Nishimura, being in Beijing). Despite his persistent demurring, the narrator is enlisted by Bill because his “black résumé” specifies that he had previously performed “recon for an organisation pulling underage girls out of brothels and off traffickers.” The narrator’s arrival at Singapore’s Marina Bay Sands and enquiry after the room number of his charge, a “Mr An Tzi (Arthur) Tong,” triggers his assassination, thus imperilling the narrator himself, now under house arrest at the Marina Bay Sands, a prerequisite to being detained by Singapore authorities for questioning and certain detention.

Here another Bond, another agent, one who goes by “Henrick,” and whom the narrator later uncovers is the Cebu-born Malaysian national Safiq Rahim, observes the narrator dumping a passport and phone into the sea. “Henrick” then approaches him and eventually extracts the narrator by night purportedly away from “these political games” to the relative safety of Teluk Kerang, in Peninsular Malaysia, near Senai, from whence the narrator can fly out to Beijing the following morning, this flight scheduled only after “Henrick” returns from another middle-of-the-night

Malacca Straits mission, welcoming a handful of Rohingya refugees who had “emerged from the darkness.”

But these spy plots, in which pondered and performed plots always (i) run cover for and (ii) multiply into other plots, are like a single good book that, once purchased, can cascade decades later into a library of good and lesser books. The intrigue running at the heart of *Oblivion*, not unlike the one upon which all the subterfuge in *The Quiet American* pivots, is romantic obsession, akin to Fowler and Pyle’s mania for Phuong, the Annamese beauty whom the younger, mercenary Pyle appropriates from the older, news correspondent Fowler, before Fowler comes to facilitate Pyle’s execution, allowing Phuong to return to Fowler.

In *Oblivion*, Holland’s narrator is ultimately determined by Tien, a purportedly Vietnamese (“a resonance, and archaisms in her Vietnamese”) hetaera, to whom the narrator divulges his imminent Singapore objective whilst “under the Circean spells of opium” (De Quincey, *Confessions*) in a five-star hotel room in Saigon. Despite having his life endangered by Tien, an agent provocatrice with fellow agents bird-dogging him from the slums below, Tien mesmerises, even redefines, the narrator, and with this, the ethereal or otherworldly or spiritual tenor of the novel *Oblivion* itself, which rotates upon a modernist, almost sacred, centre. Notwithstanding the intoxicating trappings of hip, cynical, demimonde glitz and underworld intrigue, Holland’s world, at its heart, is simple, is religious, is altruistic. His is an ineffable world of angels, of trespass, of love. Of belief. Belief being the only sure place amongst the narcotised placelessness and interchangeability of dream and memory, of heaven and earth. It’s as if, to steal Ladislaw’s confession of love to Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, Holland’s protagonist steels himself to “go on living as a man might do who had seen heaven in a trance” ever after once his eyes alight on Tien.

Lying on white beds in grey Vietnamese towns and airport lounges and waiting, simply waiting, it is the narrator, an Orpheus with minimal promise of ever again seeing his Eurydice, who engineers Tien’s extortionate disappearance and secluded survival. “Anyone can have a woman, a civilian woman,” the narrator, opining his devotion while signalling his financial downfall, reasons, “but at the cost of a life.” He exchanges his own freedom and safety for hers, assuming she will act upon his princely machinations and indeed come in from the cold.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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