# STANZA AS SAFEROOM: ON CYRUS CONSOLE'S *THE WAYFARER*

***Alex Tretbar***

> *The Wayfarer*, by Cyrus Console,
> Omindawn, 2024.

The cover of Cyrus Console's latest collection *The Wayfarer* features the contemporary artist Corey Antis's reimagination of Hieronymus Bosch's cryptic "wayfarer" figure, who appears in both *The Haywain Triptych* and what is known as "the Rotterdam tondo," a triptych whose center panel disappeared after the triptych was fragmented and parceled out across centuries of trade among European royalties. The Rotterdam tondo's figure is depicted in two halves on the backs of the two side panels, so that the figure is bisected, only ever whole when the painting is closed off from the world. As Lynn F. Jacob notes, "Bosch's construction of the exterior creates a tension that heightens this sense of conflict by creating a unity that will be broken when the wings of the triptych are opened and the body of the wayfarer splits in two."[1] Critics cannot seem to agree about this figure's motivations, sense of direction, or facial expression. A fool of some kind, with their ashplant they lazily fend off a small and vicious dog wearing a spiked collar. In the background a man pisses on the wall of a troubled house, and in the middle ground alongside the wayfarer is a closed gate (which, uselessly, stands

1. Jacobs, Lynn F. "The Triptychs of Hieronymus Bosch." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 4 (2000): 1009–41.

alone without fencing) from beyond which a bull and a corvidae glower.

At first glance Antis's present-day wayfarer seems more determined, poised as though for battle. But, like its predecessors, this wayfarer bats at their tormentor distractedly, and if you hold the book close enough to your eyes you see that the wayfarer's smile is strange, abbreviated, approaching a noble and stupid confidence.

In the book's first poem, "The Wayfarer," we encounter a speaker who tells us

> I was the father of two
> Young children when I started
> Plans for a long walk that became
> Shelter in my mind where I
> Arranged my things or chose
> Among unlimited potential routes
> Land and sky parting like
> Content in a trance I could
> Move west through

This is a constructed inner space where reality is parted like the content of the Rotterdam tondo. The wayfarer of the lost triptych and the wayfarer of Console's collection both navigate vanished or speculative landscapes, landscapes in the process of being destroyed or created, landscapes that exist in principle but have somehow been dislocated. Landscapes caught up in their own enactment.

Eight more Spenserian stanzas follow this opening to the book's title poem, adding up to 81 lines in total—nine squared. In *Jacket2* David Hadbawnik argues that the form of Console's 2011 collection *The Odicy* (specifically its loosely deployed iambic pentameter and rigid stanzaic structure) feels incidental,

arbitrary, without meaning.[2] But perhaps that is Console's point, in *The Odicy* and in this new collection, for the severe, variable, and often seemingly arbitrary stanza lengths in *The Wayfarer* connote a restless grasping after forms commensurate to our ever-expanding moment of dissolution and fragmentation, to the collapse of public and private histories into one another, and to the flotsam of cultural artifacts studding it all.

"Charlie Brown" is a poem of three colossal twenty-line stanzas; "Polar Express" is nine twelve-line stanzas; in "Curious George" we find 21 sestets, and through the course of the book we begin to sense that all of these repetitively boxy stanzas are modular but self-reliant—little Hadron colliders trying to work things out on their own:

> Maybe this stanza or one like it
> Had power to compel change
> In the body and breath of some
> Liable fraction of enthusiasts
> Inducing that condition it named
> And the name of it was yawning

This stanza references the poet, yes, but it is also *self*-aware, an entity pulsing in the text. It speculates on its own behalf. The stanza, boring but not lacking agency, induces a yawn in its prospective reader (and chronicles that induction). It changes the reader's body. And who says poetry makes nothing happen?

One of the surface-level throughlines that binds *The Wayfarer* together is a series of moments in which the speaker consumes or interacts with media and forms of entertainment with his son—*Polar Express*, *Peanuts*, *Curious George*, a cartoon character

2. Hadbawnik, David. "The Way We Tend to Compose, or Hear, Poetry These Days: A Review of 'The Odicy.'" Jacket2. https://jacket2.org:443/reviews/way-we-tend-compose-or-hear-poetry-these-days.

Tretbar (Review).indd 226 7/16/25 12:14 PM

at the Union Station Planetarium—but these moments are somehow refracted, fragmented, distorted, freighted with histories that re-exert themselves violently in the present. This speaker, the book's wayfarer, charts a perilous path through the text, through a culture that, despite appearances, is hostile toward his child. Like Bosch's wayfarer, with his poetic gaze Console's speaker navigates a tough and bisected world.

The act of poiesis itself is important to this book, but so is hermeneutics. In "Old Yeller" the speaker introduces his son to the 1956 children's novel of the same name, only to "[regret] reading [it] / Aloud once the stern / Father shot a Comanche // Man in the yard in the text / Just ahead of my voice / So I kept it from you / Picking up a few lines / Down the page. . . " The speaker is able to scan ahead in the text of *Old Yeller*, wayfaring in search of potential harm, presciently detecting violence and choosing to elide it for the sake of his son. In *The Wayfarer*, reading is as creative an act as writing, so much so that they might even be the same thing.

*Old Yeller* is forwarded as a kind of prefiguration of the unimaginably cruel world that awaits his son in the future, and this is representative of the larger grim pattern of *The Wayfarer*. In "Laxness," the speaker "[tries] to remember the landscape / Was bleak and the suffering relentless," apt descriptors for the book's prevailing texture. The North Pole becomes an object lesson on surveillance capitalism and the illusion of American meritocracy; Pippi Longstocking teaches us that "money is a gas whose pressure / Is the average velocity of coins and it suffices / To rigidify structures of increasing complexity and scale"; and Curious George states that "Life is full of cool hidden threats." These fictions are meant to soothe and instruct, but baked into them are violence and control, irresolvable contradictions that the speaker cannot help but attempt to negotiate. With rigid,

majusculated stanzas entirely devoid of punctuation, Console's dogged speaker imbues the entropic world with a wobbly order.

Bosch's enigmatic wanderer "[h]as been called, among other things, the Prodigal Son, the Wayfarer, a fool, a peddler, Saturn, a personification of melancholy, a man endangered by the sin of sloth, a drunkard, and Everyman, the Christian pilgrim."[3] Console's book is likewise multidimensional, protean from page to page, hopeful in spite of certain cataclysm, meandering but never without rigor. The landscape of *The Wayfarer* is bleak and its suffering relentless, but Console seems to insist that poetry is composed of "Tunnels and other voids / In which fear was / First reliably contained," as though stanzas might function as quarantines or saferooms, repositories for terror. Console's speaker is simply laying down fence and brickwork, in search of a stanza large enough and strong enough to shield us from destruction.

3. Tuttle, Virginia G. "Bosch's Image of Poverty." The Art Bulletin 63, no. 1 (1981): 88–95.