The olive and the dawn
by Ian Orti

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

_The olive and the dawn_ is a postmodern metafiction offering within its short discontinuous narrative threads all the intricacy of a mystery novel and thriller. From the first scene with the white Samoyed dog bringing his mistress a Stan Smith running shoe containing the remains of a decomposed human foot (no doubt inspired by the Tofino beach incident a few years ago), the novel jumps backwards in time to unravel the story of the “Olive and the Dawn.” Like the omniscient narrators of 18th- and 19th-century novels, the narrator here often intrudes to juxtapose events and hypothetical projections of events across time so as to make the reader conscious of all the inherent ironies. Although “the Olive” is a distinctly literary concoction, the character is real enough to touch and believe in, a prototype rather than a stereotype, vulnerable in his idealism and romanticism but ultimately damaged by his naive trust in “the Dawn” and her various incarnations – as prostitute, nurse, caring bystander, lover and personification of consciousness itself. Just as the “olive” is ripe when blackened by the sun, so perhaps “the Olive” is most essentially himself after having suffered the tender abuse of “the Dawn” and life’s experience. The story is told backwards, a tapestry of symbols in which we may identify the human representatives in their quirky detail, with the seemingly disconnected array of details assembling in their shifting, dreamlike contexts as magic realism.

Images surface and resurface in the course of the novel, one of these the “dark bicycle” that appears on the front cover design. Shy with women but frequently sought out by them for a one-night stand, “the Olive” in one of his incarnations suffers the pain of romanticism, remembering those women most clearly with his eyes shut: “every bead of sweat, every golden calf beneath the lights, every back damp with sweat . . .” (34). So when he stands in the rain and cannot even light a cigarette, he decides to take revenge on God by breaking a commandment and stealing a bicycle. With a twisting of morality that charms (and alarms) the reader with its childlike logic, this character who considers theft in the light of “chivalry” decides that he will never have to lock the bicycle and no one will ever take it:
It would be his, and he would not lock it, not ever and not ever would it get stolen except for that one time, when the would-be thief would look down and see the word ‘trust,’ scratched into the paint in the Olive’s handwriting along the crossbar and grow the one moral fibre that would make him return the bike to the rack from which he took it . . . (38)

To illustrate a theme of depraved innocence, identifying its cause and its result, the author flashes forward to a scene in which “the Olive” runs into a Mercedes Benz while riding this same bicycle. Significantly, he damages his own hand, not the vehicle.

The stolen bicycle motif is continued in the subplot in which tennis player Mary Quinn’s bike is taken while she is with tennis star Stan Smith (whose shoe provides another motif in this canvas of select details). As “the Olive” decides to defy God by stealing the bicycle, Mary considers that seven rather than six masses a week will successfully absolve her of the sin of “the act of making sweet, sweet, oh dreadfully sweet love” to Stan Smith, who himself after all is “the fine work of God.” The narrator here chooses limited omniscience, leaving the lovers behind closed doors (54).

Outside the hotel, in the cool air of country Louth, only the sound of wire cutters can be heard as it bites through the lock of Mary Quinn’s dark bike, and the quiet squeak of the pedals as it is ridden into the night by a good thief. (54)

We may assume that the thief was “the Olive.” We are prepared earlier with hints such as that “the Olive” was a fan of tennis and liked to watch girls playing the game in their short skirts, and the third motif of the decomposed foot that comes up at the end of the novel is likewise here prepared for. But the logic of this novel is dream logic and the plot no water-tight fabrication.

Ultimately, “the Olive” in all his adoration for the “Dawn” and all she represents is undone by love and life, deformed by accidents of Nature and Man as, for instance, when he is beaten up by a woman’s boyfriend after succumbing to her advances. When “the Olive,” having pilfered a bottle of vodka from the hotel, wanders off to freeze in a Montreal park, he is rescued by a beautiful woman who calls the ambulance but whom he, having lost consciousness, never has the pleasure of seeing.

With a primitive logic of emotions and retribution, “the Olive” at the climax of the novel decides to spite God after he claims to have found a “glitch” in His design: only by willfully destroying “God’s creation” and himself can “the Olive” existentially express his free will and
humanity. Although “the Olive” takes a blanket (since he has suffered freezing and exposure in the past), he chooses and plans his own death from madness due to dehydration. Rowing into the ocean in a stolen boat, he knows that he will become thirsty with the exhaustion of rowing and be forced to drink the salt water that will, in turn, dehydrate him and drive him insane. He conjectures that he “would become a living thesis: I destroy myself, therefore, I am and so it must be” (85). A mystical suggestion follows as “the Olive” reaches a state of delirium in which his sense of self becomes blurred:

As the Olive licked his cracked lips, the clouds began to break. Slowly, things started to take shape as the Olive stared deep into the Lord’s eyes until slowly, ever so slowly in a staredown with the very being he set out to destroy, as the toxic levels of sodium in his blood cells slowly depleted what was left of his cells, took their toll on the conduction of nerves and accelerated his heart to breakneck speed, the Olive came to see clearly the one sacred truth that had eluded him all his life until this very moment:

The Olive was God. (87)

This is a final irony, since “the Olive” had earlier professed to hate God. In a romantic anti-hero such as “the Olive,” I see a hero in the tradition of Leonard Cohen’s “beautiful losers” and Ondaatje’s Buddy Bolden, Billy the Kid and the thief Caravaggio in In the Skin of a Lion.

The olive and the dawn is an engaging, energetic read, its themes lively and intriguing in their labyrinthine philosophy and its language witty and with the density of poetry that you can slice through to discover new insights.

Gillian Harding-Russell lives, reviews, edits, teaches and writes in Regina. Her latest collection of poetry is I forgot to tell you (Thistledown Press, 2007).

Buy The olive and the dawn at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):