

Total Yang Project

And Other Short Prose

ALSO BY SJ ADAMS:

As the Colonies Collapse

Excruciating Melancholy

It's Only Oblivion

The Longer Roads

Cliff Face by Candlelight

Total Yang Project

And Other Short Prose

SJ Adams



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Printed and bound in Great Britain.

For my mother, Gillian, who also fought.

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Introduction by M. Lawrence Rose

When I was first approached to write this – ‘this’ being, by way of a few thoughts and comments, to contextualise the strange object you have in your hands – I was locked in the straitjacket of my own almighty writer’s block. Having not put pen to paper in nearly half a year and thinking this a relatively quick assignment which may ease my shift back into some kind of creative gear, I accepted it. ‘SJ’ Adams, after all – not how I know him, but I shall maintain the front – is a long-time friend, colleague and professional peer. I am in some sense his more photogenic twin. I grew up with him as a writer, exchanged influences with him as a writer and for some time, I think, outcompeted him as a writer. I shared in some of the more gloaming elements of his life between precocious scholar and budding avant-gardist. I occupied an office with him in the University of Birmingham’s Department of Comparative Literature and continue to speak to him regularly. What’s more, I had read many of the pieces contained in this collection during their gravid phases and possessed an intimate sense of their creative development: who better than I, then, the ill-judged editorial thinking presumably went, to present *Total Yang Project* to the world?

The principal problem in which this suggestion consisted was that SJ himself most radically opposed it. His own idea, thankfully discarded or dissuaded out of him, had in fact been to write a faux Introduction using an invented name (odd, given these stories’ apparent allergy to names and nomination), whose character – for this would indeed have been tantamount to another character – was to have been either a friend or professor of certain literatures or both: the notion was never fully enfolded. Upon its

suggestion I paused an extra beat, hoping to convey the impression that I was giving it due thought (an act of courtesy I cannot imagine his extending in return), before telling him how deeply terrible it was. Certainly it constituted a move that would have befitted the man's impish instincts on and off the page, but it would have been disastrous to the vocal architecture of *TYP*. His hope to juggle just too many tones and registers, I felt – detached assessment and critical profiling; intensely personal biography; alongside his irrepressible urge to write as only he does, and what I knew would be his inability to keep this suppressed for even two or so pages – was misguided in the extreme.

I therefore make no bones about what I offer in these following comments, whatever the editorial decision to call them ends up being, Foreword or Preface or Introduction. I can only say what I think, what I know, and what I think I know.

SJ Adams was an exciting academic, who moved away from the concerns with theoretical syntax in his doctoral monograph, *Taxonomising Syntactic Ambiguity in English*, whilst retaining and refining his focus on the abstracter levels of enquiry this field opened up to him. Ambiguity, he notes in a Preface to the text, 'appealed to me in a kind of pyromaniacal way: I was interested in those areas of expression, those units of meaning, those moments of language use where traditionally conceived instrumentalist or correspondent meaning theories failed.'

He took up this interest in a more radical way with a highly original piece of work, *The Structural Principles of Irony*. The pyromaniac's impulse is scarcely more in evidence than in the seemingly universal phenomenon of irony, he argues, which is itself

a definitionally loose element of linguistically mediated meaning production whose syntactic substructures Adams sought, in a methodological expansion of his doctoral work, to elucidate by means of categorical taxonomisation.

This was followed by his final and most ambitious scholarly work, *Narratology and Metaphysics*, an 800-page volume of multidisciplinary approach which ranges over narrative theory and formal semantics, aspectology and tense grammar, philosophical investigations into ontological and epistemological constructions of time, developments in the study of consciousness and perception, and the physics of relativity, space-time and block universe theory.

The story of its reception is an unusually complicated one. This is most natural for a piece of work spanning so many and such diffuse areas of enquiry, of which the aforementioned are only the most salient examples. Broadly speaking and with the affluence of hindsight, it was reviewed in three major strands. (Adams would later refer to ‘commentators’ devout trinitarianism with respect to my little book.) Some members of ICMER, for example,¹praised its boldness, its breadth of matter and material, its willingness at least to *attempt* to establish new intellectual conversations which seemed to have little in common, much less anything valuable to say to one another. It was evidence of an exceptionally original mind operating heavy intellectual machinery with ease.

Others held that *Narratology and Metaphysics* contained some valuable insights, but typically only insofar as their being ‘accurate recapitulations of the ideas of others.’ Adams provided useful accounts of existing theories and interpretations as they pertain to

¹ Cf. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Multidisciplinary and Empirical Research* (2023), Baughan, C. & Lagaros, A. (eds.), Springer Publishing, Berlin

the respective fields under discussion, and there was some original thought, although not much. According to the above reviewer: ‘[t]he reader would gain as much by reading five or six slimmer books as this significantly larger one; whether that is its principal merit or flaw, I actually remain uncertain.’²

The third strand, unsurprisingly, came in the form of outright calumny. Beyond its broadly sound linguistic merit, it was utterly unilluminating and demonstrated no originality or imagination at all. The work was full of drastically misinformed interpretations of post-structuralist narratologies in particular, with ill-conceived conceptions of Genette, Todorov, de Man and Greimas. The scientific community was no less forthright in their terms. Most, in fact, were baffled by the methodology (or lack thereof) at work: neurobiologists, psychometricians, quantum field theorists (to name but a few) were collectively amazed that he should even try his hand, so to speak, at so many unimaginably complex domains of enquiry. One prominent commentator at the University of Oxford summed up this feeling: ‘Adams’s latest and hopefully final scholarly effort is not a genuine attempt to participate in and add to literary, philosophical or scientific investigation, nor even simply an exercise in satiating appetite for intellectual risk. It is nothing more than a masturbatory and meretricious exercise in verbal self-regard, contributing nothing whatsoever to the sum total of the human mind.’³ (My translation.)

² Stacey, D., ‘An Anti-hermeneutic Theory of Narrative’, *Foundations of Knowledge* 15(6), pp.16-44 (2024), MIT Press

³ Rossi, L., ‘Deve essere su un manicomio: SJ Adams e *Narratology and Metaphysics*’, *Rivista Storica Italiana* 122(6), pp.1009-1062

What followed were several fallow years of extremely limited output. Ensnared between a continuing sense of academic commitment on the one hand and a long-held albeit uncertain ambition towards creative literary work on the other, Adams malingered on both fronts. He was eventually released from his research and teaching duties at Birmingham under circumstances which, despite the present author's best efforts at discovery, remain mysterious. This did not, as one might expect, provide the impetus necessary for Adams to engage fully with his creative impulses and, lacking any other income declarable to the British government, descended outwardly into practical indigence, accompanied by a burgeoning addiction to alcohol, cocaine and varied opioids and benzodiazepines.

Still living in the University town, I several times attended him, tatterdemalion, either sitting on benches with a number of equally life-hewn men and women, in silence if morning, if evening raging drunkenly around his extemporised court like a kind of mad Socrates in a symposium full of panic and slurs, or else walking hastily along sideroads with the apparent determination to be somewhere quickly.

A moment of proleptic pause: this is not a redemption tale. Adams did not 'turn his life around', 'make positive changes' or (still worse) 'accept a higher power'. He did not put to heroic effect some newfound clarity and optimism, and thus bring into sunlit actuality his previously shadow-bedraggled potential as a writer. Readers new to Adams's work and biographically inclined will be disappointed should they expect such a story. The truth is that the majority of Adams's best work – his debut collection of poetry *As the Colonies Collapse* followed in quick succession by the novels

Excruciating Melancholy and *It's Only Oblivion*, the abandoned Pirandellian theatre piece *The Longer Roads* and his second poetry collection *Cliff Face by Candlelight* – was completed long before he was able to rouse himself to even the most basic administrative procedures involved in manuscript submission and publishing. Reality did eventually beckon SJ from his universe of self-annihilation, but only enough to engage some prior contacts at well-reputed publishing houses and, using what is undoubtedly one of the more consistently attested elements of his character, his power to persuade (or to coerce?), obtain a deal from them, the particulars of which are known but generally undiscussed. I do not think it my place to deviate from this norm here.

The work itself – what Adams has described as ‘the agonised and agonising process... of childbirth,’ by which he means, I assume, the initial composition, the self-editorial scythe, the sequencing and arrangement – had all been practically completed during the long days and nights of near-comatosity and, apparently, precise, sensitive, unusual creative thought. Notoriously, the stages involved retention by memory, followed by scrawling on loose leaves of paper, typed and finally saved on the council library’s computer system when he was allowed access to their premises.

After all this, then, you have in front of you Adams’s latest prose work, *Total Yang Project*. Amongst its obsessions are searching, naming, choosing, rejecting, accepting, rethinking, repeating, repeating, repeating, repeating and recursion. My only suggestions, critically speaking, are these: touch it lightly. Inhabit its margins. Make assumptions, be wrong. Take note where details are absent. Try reading it in reverse order. Think what you would do. But most

importantly, touch it lightly. The lighter the touch you apply to this series of increasingly maddening tales, the deeper the resonance it effects.

M. Lawrence Rose
Birmingham, September 2026