

BOOK REVIEWS

ated genre leaves us familiarly at the maw of the abyss. In the absence of a telos *what is known* is gleaned by what is missing—error—roundabout knowledges, forgoing the usual (literary, familial) “bloody lineage” (17), “for antecedence...renders us residual” (40–41). Moreover, N. exposes the gulf between *la famille* (family) and *la fa ille* (fault line, flaw, rift), “between which a letter comes to be absent” (22). The cipher [m] later reiterates in an alliterative section: m for “miroir most male...mastadon...mislead” (99) but even as it’s reiterated, even as it’s striven for “[t]he letter would indicate: too great a distance” (39). Rather than language calling a thing into being, for N. a thing’s articulation becomes its demise: “[b]y saying JE...we fulfill its finality” (36), we disappear the self.

There was some question as to what pronoun to apply to Cahun, or N. for that matter—ultimately N. uses *(s)he* and *her*: “All this time we are seated—(s)he is in fact standing—Claude Cahun and I, so to speak, across from one another,” and in a footnote:

She, when referring to Cahun, or to myself, might just as easily be *he*, splitting (apart) the binary with annulling reversal. For when the two *correspond*, here, disappear, when their /s touch, I like to think that one and the same turn into some other, nameless, name. I keep to *her* for the sake of unconquancy. (27)

On the photograph of “l’auteurs,” N. writes “the resemblance is troubling” (27), and the anxiety around physical correspondence engenders a “dread verging on madness” (27), since in the crossfire of looking “the transposition of features muddles what of each of us would otherwise be distinct” (45).

The book is a self-translation from the original *L’absence au lieu* (Claude Cahun et le livre inouvert) (Nota Bene, 2007), and maintains many of its frenchisms: *relation*, *liason*, *correspondence*, melodically balanced with frank anglo-saxonisms such as the verb *read-write*. But to describe as N. does the work as *l’entre-genre*, between categories,

languages, is perhaps more fair than to call it macaronic. It is certainly a hybrid, actions and selves are melded “so as to denature” (14) the concept of origin. Language literally attacks the body, “inculcates a denatured, fraudulent, morbid gait” (24).

Beyond this multi-valenced, hybrid body, the purported binary between reader and writer is also dissolved, or the reader is projected onto the frame, implicated in the project or problem of self-dissolution, which N. describes as “a battering invective, to make you guarantor of this JE, call you to witness, implicate you, at last, in my own affliction” (47). And “[e]choing Bataille, I have already said so: *to resemble oneself is to disappear*” (59). What then is to become of the self if N. is there/not there, resembling? Notice that it is (Nathalie) that is in the parenthetical, although “Nathanaël does not exist either, it is well documented...” (64)—despite the extensive cross-referencing of N.’s own earlier works, self-quotation within in a work that is itself a self-translation.

Absence Where As seems to be an exercise in functional aporia (a, not+ *poros*, passage—impassible)—the thing continually put off, like Tristram Shandy or Godot: “[t]hat *the book*, the one I would reach for as much as the one I would write, *puts me off*” (13, emphases mine), ultimately concluding “*Je veux l’intraduisible*” / “*I want what no language holds*” (75). N.’s book is a fascinating set of inquiries toward an epistemology of the self whose horizon is continually vanishing, its worldly hermeticism troubled by a hellish awareness of the present as the only (haunted) reality. Littorally. The self with its attendant selves, and beyond them Cahun, whose absence-presence is painful fodder for this philosophy, like Rosalind saying to Celia “thou and I am one.”

Julian T. Brolaski is the author of *gowanus atropolis*, forthcoming from Ugly Duckling Presse this fall.

The Spoonlight Institute
Alan Bernheimer
(Adventures in Poetry/
Zephyr Press, 2009)

REVIEW BY BILL MOHR

The imagination is often regarded as a facilitating trajectory of human consciousness in which an observer can partially identify with some unexpected exchange between disparate elements of spatial chronology. Alan Bernheimer’s poems seem more interested in defining imaginative language as instances in which a reader should look askance at any potentially sustainable narrative; the rapidity with which a reader needs to adjust to his alternative propositions can be disconcerting if one still retains a lingering, if camouflaged, nostalgia for a comfort zone of discourse padded by empathy. Fortunately, even for readers such as myself who still find it difficult to restrain from excessive emotional involvement in a poem, Bernheimer manages to taunt the absurdity of reliable knowledge with a deftness that makes his frequently elusive references appealing and enjoyable rather than puzzling or irritating.

Of all the poets associated with the first contingent of Language writing, Bernheimer seems the most stoic, although his deadpan humor keeps his stoicism marvelously buoyant. It would be a mistake, however, to assign some kind of flippant nihilism to his poems. If social arrangements in the world as it is found are almost obsequiously unstable in their palpable tangency, then Bernheimer counters with a delectable skein of parodic consequences. Few poets can so quickly puncture the pretense of social arrangements to any claim of enduring legitimacy.

The provocative logic of these poems is especially ebullient in a poem such as “A Cannibal Finds a Fork in the Road.” One can read it any number of ways; it is, on one level, the best parody of Frost’s meditation on free will and fate produced in the past century. The pun on “fork” in the title is the first hint of the poem’s savory humor:

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He is lying or telling the truth
He know the missionaries will lie

The village lies to the left and the right
The fork is in his mind
The missionary is already on the fork

Even the road is gone

In the first of a half-dozen end-stopped lines, Bernheimer invokes a well-known "brain-teaser." Within a gauntlet of a mere five additional lines, Bernheimer has skewered imperialist stereotypes buttressing the mind-body dualism of such language games and suggested an alternative outcome of action-based resistance.

From his earliest poems, Bernheimer shows an almost all-encompassing dexterity in scooping up disparate contingencies of this planet's evolution. "One monkey don't start the show" is the farewell line of the book's

title poem, echoing a circularity that surfaces throughout the book. In "Amarillo," for instance, "the last dinosaur turns back / for a blink at the gingko" as if some lumbering final integer of flesh-interred willpower several eons ago was the first to experience recombinant nostalgia. Rarely has existential humor seemed so droll.

Impermanence is the major theme of every enjambment; if the destabilization of sentences has become the primary goal of free verse in post-World War II American poetry, few poets can unsettle the reader with such a high degree of grim playfulness. Enjambment is only part of the choreography, however; "Piece of Cake," for instance, has a vigorous *pas de deux* with a subtle chiasmus. "Mouse traps and ping pong balls," the poem begins, and if the implicit "clicks" do not accompany the reader's forward motion, then the wit of "longevity"[s] pressure on the rest of the poem will be utterly lost.

In noting how quickly Bernheimer gives any proposed social arrangement its comeuppance, one shouldn't regard his sardonic reflections on the impingements of social necessity as insincere or undeserving of our ironic affection. We may indeed have been down roads similar to the ones he is on before he pauses at a provisional destination, but Bernheimer's metaphors have a tensile quality that reminds us of how much we overlooked while passing through the first time. The drive home after reading each of these poems is more rewarding than anyone could have prepared us for. Don't be surprised, in fact, if you don't recognize your own front door.


I've got to have results
to hide the details under
and remember every time

like stations of the cross
The rabbit always thinks
it is fascinating the anaconda

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but what is the good
of making mistakes
if you don't use them

to distinguish former glory
from sunrise in a rear view mirror
or a bad day at the office

("As You May Know")

In a review this brief, one of Bernheimer's most appealing qualities is hard to address in an adequate fashion. His variety of strategies ranges from minimalism to the prose poem, and while the tonal control of his eclectic diction remains consistent over the several decades during which these poems were written, it is precisely his formal variety that I find especially attractive and invigorating. The one-word-per-line distribution of "Zoom" seems to be a parallel to the work of Kit Robinson, who in turn most likely was influenced by W.C. Williams's "The Locust Tree in Flower." One might suspect that maximizing the enjambment through such compression might reduce this poem's playfulness, but Bernheimer is every bit as adept as Robinson in keeping an hypnotic slow boil going.

"Inside Cheese," a prose poem consisting of three sentences in which two long ones sandwich the brief one in between, is a pell-mell tour of transmogrifying molecules; indeed, to read Bernheimer's poems is to be reminded in a very subtle manner that the Copernican poetics of mainstream poetry is perhaps the major delusion that enables the banality of so much contemporary poetry to pass under the guise of "accessibility."

In addition to the poems, Bernheimer has included a short play at the end of *The Spoonlight Institute*. The decision of where to place Bernheimer's short play in the book might well have been one of the trickier decisions about its table of contents. The play could be considered a prose poem meant through its recital to gain the plastic traction of minimalist theater. With seven characters, none with more than a first name, "Particle Arms" has a relatively large cast compared to most plays embedded in the avant-garde theater between 1960 and 1985. One of the characters, "Bunker," has a slightly grouchy quality that is

more endearing than one might expect from a character who perhaps is meant to invoke the "bunker mentality" of a famous television character of the period. "Particle Arms" does not seem to have been performed since its initial staging in San Francisco almost thirty years ago. If it has retained its freshness, it is in large part because its dialogue shares with Bernheimer's poems a constant sense of the unexpected.

What we don't know
is what you are about to say

("Portrait of a Man")

Bill Mohr's most recent collection of poems is *Bittersweet Kaleidoscope* (If Publications, 2006).

A Mouth In California Graham Foust (Flood Editions, 2009)

REVIEWED BY DOUGLAS PICCINNINI

In Graham Foust's fourth full-length collection, *A Mouth In California*, his penchant for precisely tuned and detuned musical speech builds on the efforts of his previous volumes and yet, *A Mouth In California* avoids the stylistic trappings of self parody. Instead, Foust's willful, playful regard for making work, which both leads and misleads a reader's senses, prevails. The result is a book of poems that at times seems to constrict the windpipe only to be concealed by the poet's forethought to then provide the fresh arrest that returns with its release. Reading *A Mouth In California*, to borrow a phrase from Foust, the reader "arrive[s] as if at a picture, pinched / into a syntax we grope for and map."

What's satisfying about these poems, beyond Foust's ability to knife out shards of language, is in the same sum of this sonic residue, which has the great capacity to linger in mind and mouth. Like a handful of song lyrics one occasionally sings to him or herself throughout the day, the poems in *A Mouth In California* have an eerie staying power. The poet's ability to sour sounds within the line offer a tactile experience to the work. After

reading and rereading this book many times, I still find myself repeating the coupling of "basic yard" from "Real Job," a poem, early on in this collection, which seems to underscore Foust's project.

To think to leave a place forever, wherever you are.

To then head back through the gate, your basic yard.

To lay off the day's controls and keep your suit on like a scar.

To then improvise restraint behind an open, broken door.

And,

To feel that every possible shape's been made.

To then crush a cup of water.

To crush another cup of water.

To then work the human room.

The closing lines of "Real Job" express a typical artist's frustration: to feel that everything has been done. Fitting, however, is the destructive image of crushing a cup of water, which perhaps mimes the way sound clamps out the mouth's wet through speech. Additionally, in this frustration is a call to action as the speaker resolves "[t]o then work the human room" and navigate the space(s) of language.

The poet maps this acoustic geography in what the speaker of these poems often refers to as the "room"—the stanza: as meaning navigates by sound and sound, meaning. This task is perhaps best summed up as the book begins with "The Sun Also Fizzles":

What's this place, between
geography and evening? The sun
also bludgeons; a car has three wheels;
and what's the wrong way to break
that brick of truth back into music?

And,

Swallowed whole, a songbird might
could claw back through the hawk—
or so I've thought.

The choosing of a word
might be its use, the only poem.