

resistance, and as a result she earns our trust. Rarely does a poem arrive at an emotional conclusion without disruption or stoppage, without directly facing the possibility of being wrong.

Occasionally a book convinces me that what is relevant exceeds my noticing: “A coin / on its / side / speaking up” or an “incessant / trembling bridge / which a tree / is” or “power / boxes...painted / like art.” This is such a book, and it reminds me of what’s possible should I engage my environment with greater alertness and with the openness (which is confidence) to let the world come through as it is.

Leila Wilson

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Jennifer Moxley, *The Line*. Sausalito, CA: Post-Apollo Press, 2007. 56pp. \$15

*The Line* is a marvelous title, and marvelous achievement, not least because it names a volume of prose poems where the title describes the thread of an argument rather than a distinctive formal unit. Moxley is the contemporary American poet who is perhaps least attached to the intricacies of the line in lyric poetry, at least in the sense that she rarely makes supple song-like use of the metrical resources the line offers. One sees in this volume that her awkwardness with the line unit may stem from her fascination with other means of providing the internal density we expect of major lyric poetry. Intricate syntactic variety is her source of rhythm, a source that makes the mind’s powers directly visible and establishes something like a right for the poem to make demands on its readers.

Moxley calls upon several meanings of the line—the most important being “the old words new mind lost time and loves” that extend “backward eternally into the past and forward into the future.” The line evokes Eliot’s tradition without the hierarchy and with a more dynamic sense of what it means to participate in that tradition’s rhizomatic ways. The line is also a life-line, a line in poetry, the line of a thought or argument, the line that divides speculation from the world, and the line that attempts seduction and risks being seduced by its own success.

Staging these various manifestations of the line requires Moxley to break with traditional lyricism, where the actual presence of discrete lines insists on the metrical component and pushes other possible meanings to the background. She musters a substantial positive force from this negative move by retaining a decidedly lyrical intelligence that she sets on different, less narcissistic paths. Probably the most important of these paths consists in how Moxley develops a version of “you” as the fundamental mode of lyric

address. She allows echoes of Whitman's "you" as "other" as well as echoes of Ashbery's "you," which avoids distinguishing between self and other. Moxley, however, uses "you" most powerfully to insist on the self *as* other, or on treating the self as real to the extent that one can maintain awareness of the gulf between what calls to it and what it makes of that calling. In this regard Moxley is closest to the obsessively foregrounded self-consciousness in C.K. Williams, though the distance between "you" and "I" provides more elasticity for the self than Williams deploys. Her "you" refuses any satisfaction in a present that does not examine its own inner divisions.

Almost all of Moxley's poetry grapples with the paradox of sincerity—how can one be accurate about one's situation while concentrating on how one comes across rhetorically as sincere? For other poets, impersonality is one solution to this problem. But for Moxley impersonality is as much or more of a lie than rhetoricized sincerity. Her poems issue from a first-person state that depends on making that first person arrive at a depth of awareness not present in the initial situation. By stressing "you" Moxley can muster all the rhetorical energies of the imaginary ego and bring those energies to focus poetically and existentially on the first person. The speaker is the self trying to find an "I" adequate to the energies that demand addressing the "I" as "you."

Perhaps more importantly, the passions directed toward this "you" demonstrate how much of what is lived in first-person terms in fact arrives from elsewhere, from some otherness capable of entering the world only in the form of address. One can hear the urgency of the call, but because that call cannot be identified with the first person, one cannot be sure whence it emerges. The call might well be issuing from the various locations of "The Line"—from the continuities of tradition and lineage or from the felt dynamic of the line in poetry now transformed into prose. It might also come from the line of an argument the mind is continually conducting with itself. (If Moxley were reborn in the nineteenth century, she might be Matthew Arnold.)

This address to "you" provides powerful and original opportunities for identification on the part of the audience. There is no imposing lyric "I" to fascinate and seduce and inspire unstable partial identifications. Instead, one is asked to identify with a demand that addresses every "I" by inveighing against the consolations of seduction: both seducing and being seduced. This demand can be both more intimate and more abstract than anything a fictive "I" can offer, in large part because the affects most compelling in Moxley's book are those that attach us to states involving the self's relation to itself.

Moxley's syntactic intricacy richly intensifies the effects of her call on the second person. For the ways her sentences call attention to themselves make the work of language more important than any of the possible manipulations

driven by the ego's imaginative investments. The poems have a power that does not need the supplement of the "I" and thus can directly address the self-reflexive aspects of readerly consciousness.

Consider two quite different examples of this power. In the first, the final sentences of "Elsewhere Here" elicit pure identification while retaining second-person aspects of mental energy:

Knowing that this display of mental agility—no passive amniotic reception—is never present in waking life, the agitated pleasure you feel in the exercise has become heartbreakingly seductive. Should you get up? Could the threshold be traversed by other means? Is there a brilliant mode of comprehensiveness your consciousness denies you? Yes. The knowledge that accrues without your knowledge refines the pleasure of alientation, processes undesired stimuli, and the whispered exchange of mysterious data. By closing your eyes you have become a permeable environment: the taunting paradox of all that you know, just out of reach inside your own head.

The first sentence offers a magisterial summary, sustained by elaborate modification of the nouns. Then the "you" enters with short sentences that attempt to locate an adequate position in relation to this "elsewhere." The climax is the pure acceptance of attunement to what cannot be formulated as knowledge. But now that the "you" is positioned, the poem must characterize its way of knowing this not-knowing so that there can be a positive intricately weighted and extended sentence to parallel the negative one with which this passage begins. Finally Moxley raises the stakes by shifting from abstract impersonal statements in the penultimate sentence to the specific and gorgeously extended closing sentence. Here the "you" actively embraces its permeability. It is rewarded by the ability to feel concretely the paradox of knowing being just out of reach. The blend of scope and precision in the chain of intricately connected monosyllables that dominate this last sentence makes it seem that now the voice speaking the poem can in fact speak directly for any "you," so rich is its awareness of distance from the "I."

"Mortal Aurora" provides an example of a very different movement, a movement away from identification toward a more abstract and generalized assertion:

Morning after morning while you lay sweatily wedged between weary physicality and tedious selfhood the punctilious programs of the already dead tromp heavily through your mind. Then the easeful thought occurs to you: "This is only a matter of time." Once a delicious diversion from reason hunger states its case. Oh yes, go feed the little ones, that will snuff out the metaphysical questions. It is my belief that this tedium all started when the elusive present you so longed to possess at last became all that was left.

The first sentence syntactically breaks every rule of creative-writing classes by insisting on the qualifying force of adverbs and adjectives that do not advance the action. These syntactic choices do, however, produce a rhythm of their own—no noun without modification. By delaying the completion of thoughts they create a delicious tension between the swiftness and precision of the mind at work and the state of paralysis or sheer weight that evokes the affective condition of the speaker. The poem then turns to short sentences that reinforce the claims of hunger on the psyche. But hunger's directness cannot have the last word; it is simply too easy to invoke the cult of presence to erase metaphysical questions. The poem resists this conclusion in the last sentence by shifting to a much more formal and distanced tone. The sentence both honors the elusive present in its energetic flow and demonstrates its elusiveness. Meanwhile, a chain of clauses and dense modifications evoke something more than the disillusioned residue of a receding present. This closing syntactic fluidity establishes a demand on poetry to forge more elaborate compromises with metaphysics.

I cannot conclude without pointing out how all this distance from the "I" provides a marvelous contrast to those moments when Moxley's first-person voice makes its feelings manifest. Now, rather than serving primarily as an expression of sincerity, these first-person expressions seek to overcome conflict and therefore activate the kinds of powers that can only be attributed to the first person. Sincerity becomes inseparable from a manifest will to take responsibility for what one is saying, and to enter society as someone capable of offering something that second-person address cannot establish. This is "Before":

It was all promising, and all we thought about was what would happen. Now everything has happened, and all that is left for us to do is a lot of explaining. But there is a hinge up ahead, I can feel it. The entire book, its cumbersome cardboard pages worn on its plastic spiral makeshift binding, is slowly changing its attitude. This angle-shift is imperceptible and fear, never before a problem, is causing some static in the process. The present context is breaking up and there is nothing that can stop it. I have deduced the advent of this shake-up by watching myself slowly abandon the things I once stood for and loved.

What "Before" offers may prove necessary for fully living in the "now."

Charles Altieri

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