NORMAN FINKELSTEIN

Balancing Act

An Algebra, by Don Bogen. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

In his introduction to John Taggart's *Dodeka* (1979), Robert Duncan observes that "Number, for John Taggart, is the threshold of the world-dance. The poem is not, then, conventional; the numbers it follows are changing and telling in their changes." The play of Pythagorean number magic and seriality, which so fascinates poets such as Duncan and Taggart, comes to mind when reading Don Bogen's *An Algebra*. Bogen's book is perfectly symmetrical, and could also have been titled *Dodeka.* It consists of two parts; each part contains twelve poems. The poems are either short lyrics (let's designate these as "a") or medium-length sequences consisting of several units (we'll call these sequences "b"). The order for each part is: a, b, b, a, a, a, a, a, a, b, b, a. The title poem, which is the penultimate poem in the volume, ends as follows:

> An algebra,
> its shifting equivalents:
> numbers with their stated values,
> and letters, italicized, interchangeable
> rippling in the balance pans.
>
> The trick is
> that nothing's lost.
>
> A magical innocence.
> This operation sets the bones
> to reunite the broken parts.

In these lines, Bogen turns etymology into lyricism. According to the OED, the Arabic *al-jebr* means to integrate, reunite, or restore, and refers both to algebraic computation and to the mending of bone fractures; the word's first appearances in English refer to medicine rather

than mathematics, though the mathematical meaning follows soon after. *An Algebra* is both a verbal balancing act in which "nothing's lost" and a quest to restore "magical innocence"—magical, because it can exist only in the poem, no matter how carefully the poet searches for its signs in the world. If not Duncan's "threshold of the world-dance," then the work here at least points to the possibility that we can still conceive of the dance in the algebraic balance of the poem.

The "operation" that Bogen undertakes in this book has some precedents in his earlier work. In the past, he has been a poet of the personal, expressive voice, of carefully wrought aesthetic encounters, and of historical observation. He has tended toward individual lyrics and meditative set pieces, but his meticulous, focused craft has always been in tension with a curious intelligence that inevitably seeks to range. The title poem of his second volume, *The Known World* (1997), is an ambitious forty-page phantasmagoria of the 19th century, a great collage of "wholesale transformation" in the social, political and industrial realms, a multi-voiced sequential dream of the epoch bringing itself into and out of existence. "The Machines," a shorter sequence that concludes *Luster* (2003), the volume preceding *An Algebra,* is a more personal engagement with the totality of artifice and technology that makes modern life. "The huge constructions flatter us / because they're intelligible," Bogen observes; furthermore, "The accuracy of these machines consoles—hence the search for ever more exact / measurements. . . ." Intelligibility and consolation: the mind and the heart. It makes sense that Bogen's next step would be toward the abstraction of the algebraic equation, toward principles that would give not only the poem, but the book in its entirety, a more exact power of measurement.

But this is not to say that he has abandoned either his intellectual fascination with the concrete detail of the object world or the quiet expressivity that makes him such a sympathetic writer. If anything, the abstraction which governs this new book actually intensifies, energizes his best qualities. *An Algebra* opens with "Run" (mainly the noun, as in going for a run, but with hints of the imperative verb form too). A collection of poems has to start strong, and in this piece, the poet launches himself into his book with compelling dynamism and grace. Consisting of five five-line stanzas, it is a poem of powerfully willed movement that sacrifices no significant detail, a poem of the eye as well as the breath and the legs. Here are the last two stanzas:

Wanted to slow but would not stop
Wanted to come back some different way
Yellow lamp glow of other lives
Old parking lots, the closed-off stories of cars
Dreamed up over and over

Wanted nothing known, all to be imagined
Glint of winter sunlight off windows
Late streets empty, echoes muffled on brick
Feared solitude but wanted the loop larger
Wanted everything breath could hold

The poet as runner pushes himself forward, "all to be imagined"; the poem's desire, as expressed in the driving repetition of the word "wanted," is "everything breath could hold."

Writing with this degree of energy needs the balance of the algebraic structure, for not only can it move with great speed, it can transform itself with protean ease, as in the first of Bogen's sequences, "Proteus." In the myth, the sea god Proteus can reveal prophetic truths, but one must hold fast to him as he transforms himself from one fearsome shape to another. Bogen's poem is a set of changes that are also equivalences (metaphor, the poet's stock-in-trade), often introduced by the word "As:"

As: a child's toy,
its intricate language of joints and swivels,
creature within creature:
the robot

a wolf on silver feet,
in his boxy jaw
the tiny half-robotic
head of a man
who will drive the car.

The toy, of course, is a *transformer,* and so is the poem: it transforms itself continuously, but in the end equals itself, pointing back to the imagination which perceives its elements and gives it shape:

A boy, a lion, wild boar,
snake no one will touch
holds the changes.

Dream he is a sea god,
                                        and he is.
Dream he is a stone, a bull, no,
a tree

            rippling over
the waves' quick light, he is
shape always becoming, he is a flame
and the stream that drowns it.

One of Bogen's most impressive qualities as a poet is that he is equally adept at what we might call the poem of process as he is at the poem of observation. The former is kinetic, calling to mind Olson's injunction from "Projective Verse": "in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!" Setting aside Maximus's bombast, it is an idea that remains crucial to modern poetics. Conversely, the latter, the poem of observation, harkens back to Zukofsky and "An Objective": "Writing occurs which is the detail, not the mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist." If sequences such as "Proteus" represent Bogen's working the process poem, then "Edge" is a poem of observation of which that most rigorous Objectivist would approve. Here is the entire text:

The edge is something you can't see across
Burnt-out refineries on the rim of a winter city
Trainyards, coal piles, empty pre-fab warehouses
No people but a clutter of abandonment
Against a straight blank sky
Fixed now, pointed toward abstraction, the scene waits
You stare at what you've made and keep seeing more
White space mirrors a mind of ice
Snow only suggests the distances and threats

This is not the occasion to rehearse the problematics of the Objectivist poem, nor would I make the case for Bogen as in any way a

self-conscious heir of the Objectivist tradition. Be that as it may, if, as poets such as Zukofsky and Oppen variously argue, Objectivist poetics involves a test, a verbal determination of the relation between subject and object, the viewer and the thing that is viewed, then "Edge" may be considered an instance of the Objectivist poem. The "you" here is both the poet and the reader; the "clutter of abandonment" presents an ethical challenge to all of us. The ruined industrial landscape, the scene with which we are confronted, is literally what we have made as a society as well as what each of us makes as we stare, the eye on the objects giving way to the mind's abstraction. There lies the danger, "the distances and threats," and the "mind of ice" reminds us of another modernist tradition, that of Stevens and his snow man, the "mind of winter." The poem gives us the circumstances of judgment, but not the judgment itself, and in this sense, it is truly named, for Bogen leads us right to the edge.

Even at his toughest (and "Edge" is one tough poem), Bogen is a remarkably even-handed poet and, as I mentioned earlier, a deeply sympathetic one. "Flowers," the last poem in the first section of the book, is a finely detailed reminiscence of a family stay in England. Like "Run," at the beginning of the first section, it is written in five five-line stanzas, but the pace of the poem is much more leisurely. The poet brings home "glad blue iris, bright carnation / Bouncing on top of the laundry basket" to "The wife pleased, arranging / The schoolgirl's glee when she came home / The baby reaching up toward them / As he would toward the rising of the sun." The apparent ease with which Bogen gives us family and flowers in the domestic interior is neither naïve nor sentimental; "brought home," the flowers are rather a "gesture with the clean wash / A curve of color marking Wednesdays." The gestural self-consciousness is almost painterly (I think, for instance, of Bonnard's interiors), and I wonder how close Bogen comes to a pun when he writes of "The little square of family then / A frame around the table at dusk."

When Bogen meditates on the marriage that is at the heart of this family, the result is "A Language," one of the most moving and apposite of his sequences. Here, we find "Thirty years swept open," and as is appropriate to a poem oriented to temporal process rather than spatial perception, we are led to think of music rather than painting. As Bogen puts it, "This music of scenes / we shuttle between us, / ever more interwoven / as measures blur over time." Yet in the interweaving of this music, there is nothing blurry about the specific scenes, and in the following lines, sound and sight play their parts with equal effect:

Eyes too
            undress—
that pale look they take on
with your glasses off.

A thin blue
fragile, almost violet
in the moon shell,
pink
      lip at the rim,
softened pupil that can't read
my too-close face.

Study me now,
focus the dark.
                      Eyes
when my tongue speaks you are slits.

The restrained but palpable eroticism of these lines indicates a rare intelligence, one that is not put on hold when the poet turns to physical passion. Donne, in "Elegy XX. To His Mistress Going to Bed," becomes a pedagogical lover. Bogen, updating the conceit, follows suit with his punning "softened pupil that can't read / my too-close face." This pupil—eye and student both—is called upon to "Study me now, / focus the dark." It's quite a lesson.

Conscious, perhaps, of his pedagogical bent, Bogen ends *An Algebra* with a poem that calls his elaborate enterprise into question, and yet brings the volume to a perfect conclusion. The poem, in three seven-line stanzas (Bogen seems to favor odd numbered stanzas), is called "Could Not Speak." It deals with an apparently mute worker in a ceramics factory. He paints tiles, "Nine different scenes: trees on cliffs, vineyards, estates / Permanent, unreachable under the glaze." The phrase "Could not speak but . . . ," which recurs like a refrain, reminds us that poetry is but one form of making, and that its mimetic power is equaled in other fields of endeavor. Indeed, there is something uncanny, something weirdly sublime about this worker, who "In fall made crèche figures, painted them / Simplified folds of the swaddling / Two dots for eyes, lips one red stroke / God after God after God." God makes man out of the clay, and now, it would seem,

man returns the favor. The power of creativity is balanced at the end of Bogen's grand equation; in the final lines it subsumes itself, leaving us to contemplate the whole: "Could not speak but was everywhere / Maker of what is made."