

ELIZABETH ROBINSON

It Didn't Need Believing: An Essay on Cole Swensen's *Gravesend*

In his essay "Poetry and Positivism," Robin Blaser objects that "the institutionalization of imaginary forms has become an immobility of foregone conclusions." Blaser enjoins poets to create a poetry that sets aside positivistic assumptions in order to replace them with poetic practices that "compose the representable alongside the nonrepresentable." Cole Swensen's recently published book, *Gravesend*, engages with exactly such a project as she investigates the phenomenon of ghosts. Our contemporary remove from assumptions and beliefs that grounded previous eras is something that Swensen has clearly considered in this book for she alludes extensively to cultural and historical discussions about ghosts. Yet to engage with this kind of historical and philosophical reflection is not a practice of debunking. Rather, it is, as Blaser says, a shift that

involves us in a changed view of ourselves and of the range in recognitions of the other. The imagination of wholeness is being undone and displaced by a poetics which [has] to do with movement and change.

Swensen does not endorse "magic" or the "sublime" in the way that Blaser could more comfortably do. At one point in the manuscript, the author even concedes of ghosts, "I really don't think I believe in ghosts, but."¹ This statement, to my mind a central turn in the book, mediates both belief and unbelief through the syntactically incomplete conjunction of "but" as well as the hedging diction of "I really don't think" (which could more assertively and simply have been written as "I don't believe"). Here and elsewhere in the book,

1. Note that the statement is further mediated as appearing in a section which is ostensibly an interview. Attribution to a single speaker (for instance, the author) is problematic, since the sentence might be variably read as the author's own assertion or something that an interviewee said.

Swensen models a mode of movement, attention, and responsiveness that resists ossifying convictions in favor of what I will call the spirituality of a disrupted knowing. Thus, Swensen's poetics open to an inquiry that suspends belief and disbelief alike; the author responds to "information" and experience that are malleable, evasive, and unconfirmable within a poetry that deliberately erodes our confidence in the line between "being and place" so that we enter the process of "place being time." Such a place is uneasy and uncanny and yet it frames itself for the reader as an open question; the aperture of the inquiry, destabilizing though it may be, is also an opening to hospitality through which we "let the stranger in."

Swensen's characteristic mode of writing—that is, book projects that emphasize what I would call lyric research (covering topics from religious paintings, to hands, to opera, etc.)—would seem to be an unexpected site for consideration of the spiritual. Yet it's exactly the straitened metaphysics of Swensen's approach that seems relevant in providing for alternatives within a contemporary spirituality and a poetry that attains the imaginative suppleness that Blaser urges us to foster. The material of *Gravesend* demonstrates the profound ambiguities of not believing, which is to say that this material marks an irresolute space between the positive poles of belief and unbelief. In affirming that she does not believe, she is not exactly saying that she utterly *disbelieves*; notably, the first phrase of the book is, "I sat on the edge." *Gravesend* functions as a mode of alertness and, above all, responsiveness within a disrupted epistemology. It provides a threshold space.

As Bachelard notes in *The Poetics of Space*, the liminal space of the threshold (modeled imagistically in so many instances throughout *Gravesend*), "the door is an entire cosmos of the Half-open." The author's willingness to open this portal onto a site of speculative uncertainty (through a door, so to speak, left ajar) marks a decided engagement with spirituality that functions in a post-belief manner. I would cite here Robin Blaser's claim that "our poetic context involves relation to an unknown, not a knowledge or method of it." Correspondingly, *Gravesend* reflects philosophically and ethically on the limits of what can be known, and in so doing affirms that individuals and communities both desire and need to persevere in inquiries that will never yield definitive answers.

The way Swensen constructs her inquiry in *Gravesend* is significant. Readers of her previous work will recognize the way she has, here as elsewhere, done extensive research into (for example) the lit-

erature of the ghost story, historical shifts in conception of what a ghost is, and even the etymology of the word "ghost." Tonally, this gives the material a feeling of detachment that (again characteristically) Swensen disrupts through formal interventions and subtle eruptions of affect and commentary. Fragmentation, shifts of attention, and contradiction (even between historical or literary sources) usefully dislocate the sense of objectivity and authority that the quasi-scholarly resources at first seem to establish.

At the same time, this book also marks a shift in Swensen's process, for, interspersed among the poems, the reader finds three sections in which the author has interviewed others, asking:

- ~ Have you ever seen a ghost? Were you afraid?
- ~ How did Gravesend (in the United Kingdom) get its name (this asked of residents of the town)?
- ~ What is a ghost? Do you think you'll ever be one?

This material based on interviews suggests that there are different forms of authority and, correspondingly, different means of upsetting that authority. Importantly, the interviewees are not identified within the text while the interview text itself is sometimes fragmented with interpolations from the author, as when in the first interview section the author asks individuals if they have ever seen a ghost. This vagueness about who the speaker/respondent is contributes greatly to a sense of uncanniness in the text. Bachelard observes that the "phenomenology of the poetic imagination allows us to explore the being of man [sic] considered as the being of a *surface*, of the surface that separates the region of the same from the region of the other." Here, the bounded surfaces are effaced and the reader is haunted by a "not knowing" that compels not so much a suspension of disbelief as something akin to the bewilderment that Fanny Howe describes as the disorientation necessary to meet a poetic text on its own defamiliarized terms. One gets a sense of this in "Going Home," when Swensen asserts that "this story is told in many versions . . . as if a man // slipped on his own name and became a repetition in tongues." The usual points of orientation, the borders that mark as self and an other, have eroded.

Pressing on the interview as a formal trope that permits one to "find out" about a topic, and to partake of the authority of the interviewee, Swensen not only evokes the uncanny, but she is more overtly humorous than I have observed her to be in other books. For, of course, she is asking about a matter for which there can be no

empirical, verifiable evidence and she is attuned to the potentially ridiculous aspect of such conjecture. Further, multiple voices—sometimes roundly, even absurdly—contradicting each other's utterances, set up knowing/knowledge as dialogic, lofted lopsidedly *between* voices or speakers. The reader's suspension between these voices is, arguably, an experience of the supernatural; through them, perception comes at the reader devoid of attributable origin.

Swensen's informal research (conducted in an historic tavern in Gravesend) into the origin of the name "Gravesend" deliberately muddies the water further. This query deviates from the ostensible subject at hand—ghosts—and shows the wildly unreliable nature of any purportedly factual or historical report. Implicit here are the questions: What is history? What about a place makes it susceptible to being named or haunted? Credulity (or incredulity) is revealed as communal and consensual in the hands of Gravesend's populace, even though (the reader quickly discovers) there is no communal consensus to be had in Gravesend.

When Swensen returns to the matter of ghosts in the last third of the book, asking, finally, "What is a ghost?" seemingly objective discourse or epistemology ruptures into material that is freely and compellingly speculative. It is here that the material has earned and achieved a freedom that takes it beyond the question of the verifiable. To employ a cliché, doubt has here become an adjunct of faith. Indeed, no statement of credulity/suspended disbelief is necessary here because "proof" is no longer the point. The acknowledged disruption of knowledge has opened epistemology into a dynamic and buoyant disequilibrium that has its own eros and charge. The very act of inquiry is a beguilement which pulls the participant into its continuous, albeit inconclusive, orbit, where "a gathering mist / is a migration."

Looking closely at the three interview sections is a necessary way of gaining a deeper intimacy with the book.² Due to the fact they are formally distinct from the poems, they impress themselves strongly on the reader's attention, thereby creating compass points around which the poems constellate. These sections serve as an almost architectural element in the book (and this is complemented by Swensen's repeated reliance on such structural images as doors, windows, and

2. The poems are not at all secondary to the interviews but part of a complexly constructed whole; however, because of liminations of space, I will devote extended attention to the interviews which are a distinctive element of the text.

houses) because they force the reader to ask: What is inside and what is outside? Who is speaking? Are the poems distinct and therefore outside the interview? What is the relation of one form to the other and how do the liminal spaces between formal shapes help the reader enter a state of productive wonder?

The initial interview section comes after the manuscript has already established its concerns with twenty pages of poetry. At this juncture, Swensen introduces the following questions: "Have you ever seen a ghost?" and "Were you frightened?" Immediately, her respondents shift the nature of the inquiry. The first reply is "It depends on what you mean / by seen." A few lines on, the respondent adds, "No, it's not that I *didn't* see him; what / I'm calling into question here is the notion of seeing," and still further down the page we get, "Well, yes . . . just glimpses—something out of the corner of my eye, something crossing a room; I didn't exactly see it," and ". . . hmmm . . . *seen*—it's a complex word. What I mean is that I've perceived presences." Swensen amplifies this tension in a dense little paragraph in which she repeats the word "look" almost to the point of making it nonsensical:

And yet, would you have thought it, just *looking* around the room? Would you have thought that over 70% of these people who *look* so untroubled have ever seen anything that they couldn't in any way explain? They don't *look* like it to me. And do they speak of it? And will they if I ask them? And if they do speak of it, will they start to '*look* like it?'" [Italics mine.]

What Swensen does here is not only show the reader that she is asking the wrong question, but underlines this "wrongness" with the parodic repetition of the word "look." On the following page, a voice admits with a sigh that he or she has never seen a ghost but then with a figurative shrug adds, "Who knows? Sometimes I think they're all around us; I mean, so all around us they're simply the background. We don't see air either, or wind. We live in them." The difficulty of response leapfrogs from the poet's ostensibly innocent query to the realization that the question itself is wrong. The further recognition is that what one hopes to perceive and confirm is so pervasive that it transcends perception. This realization clarifies that, amid the omnipresence of ghosts, "a ghost is a form of privacy" and at the same time, due to the inexplicable nature of its presence, a violation of privacy. Thus, the comment "it didn't need believing" is not a form of skepticism but a new form of knowing that relegates conventional definitions of belief

to irrelevance. Suddenly, the intimacy of the subject with the ghost becomes threatening. The ghost breaks down the surface and structure that order knowledge and certainty.

Correspondingly, we often say "haunted houses" in the same breath that we say "ghosts." It's as though the ghost's amorphousness begs for a structure in which it can be held. The elusiveness of the ghost suggests that a supernatural entity is itself lost and, in the process of haunting, needs to return to a familiar site in order to express itself or reclaim form. As I mentioned earlier, Swensen calls upon liminal architectural elements—doors, windows, stairs, and bridges—to show how location itself is an unstable category. On what side of any border does the ghost reside? To what has it "returned," (if, after all, the ghost can ever be said to have returned) when it exists on these "verges"? There is no place to come back to in much the same way that there is no final resting point for any conviction that extends beyond what can be empirically authenticated. Swensen frames the problem of location as something between physical and epistemological worlds when she asks, in the second interview section, how the town came to be named Gravesend. The name, read literally, implies a siteless place: the place where a discrete marker, the grave, has ended. The name can then be read theologically as the location at which death itself has ended. Yet where does death end? Mortality may be the one inevitability that all humans face, but even here there is disagreement: is death a passage or a stopping point? The utter lack of agreement on the origin of the name is an appropriate part of the larger investigation.

Two prelude poems precede the second interview (both called "Gravesend"). In the first of these, Swensen presents several seemingly objective accounts of how the town got its name, in each instance following the explicatory stanza with a negation ("No, London does not go to the sea," "No, he is dead," "They are wrong," "No, a grave is a grievance." This mirrors elements of the first interview in which Swensen shows the wrongheadedness of her query by emphasizing the misdirected word "look." The poem's interruptive contradictions are almost outlandish; they thwart any progress toward the origin of the town's name. The claim that "a grave is a grievance" is to the point here, for the impossibility of any final resting place will halt all inquiry, whether about ghosts or towns.

Throughout the manuscript, Swensen repeatedly employs terms for return and recurrence; this poem models the import of these terms as, six lines from the end of the page, the poem suddenly breaks into first person, saying, "I never returned" before moving into its final stanza:

Gravesend swings back and forth
like a window in the wind. It is named
for the fact that you never returned. It bears
the name of a man who disappeared in plain sight
in the town square on a sunny day.

Note here the curious shifts of pronoun, the first person speaker ("I") who has never returned becomes the "you" who never returned and, finally, the oxymoronic "man who disappeared in plain sight." In this instance, Swensen neatly overturns the concept of a ghost as a haunting, recurring presence, turning it instead into a mortal man who disappears on a sunny day. The formal device of shifting pronouns unsteadies any ready image. The reader cannot settle the boundaries of the poem's protagonist(s) as they come and go, and that's how Swensen enacts a form of haunting. Bachelard has observed, when we try to enter such an image, "we learn to know, in one of its tiny fibres, a becoming of being that is an awareness of the *being's inner disturbance*." This disturbance is additionally evidenced in the way Swensen uses the architectural elements that have come to so define her image bank—in this section, for example, the window that swings back and forth in the wind. The significance of such images is further foregrounded in the next poem, also called "Gravesend." Here, Swensen juxtaposes forms of absence against identifiable structures such as a nave, the "sill of a window or a door," a deadbolt, a door, a hinge, and a bridge. For instance, the nave "is you walking out" where the trees surround "the things left behind" and eerie deadbolt made from thumbs purports to latch "the something that won't // quite shut." The arresting conclusion of this poem states that a grave "is a door laid flat in the earth, worked into a hinge, which articulates a gulf // without being a bridge."

In the interview that follows, the diction changes abruptly. Swensen conducted her interviews in a pub, and her interchanges with the people there are chatty and informal. Once again, the speakers are anonymous and the poet expresses herself both via conventional first person discussion ("I was told I couldn't buy a ticket," or telling someone that she is from San Francisco) and through lyric interruptions. This interview is the longest of the three and digresses in surprising directions, as with a description of press gangs, the town's underground tunnels, and the rumor that Pocahontas died in Gravesend. It commences, however, with a response that marks the tenuousness of all responses to follow:

Why is it called Gravesend? Now that you mention it, that's an interesting question. I've lived here all my life, and I've heard a lot of stories, but I don't know if any of them are true [. . .] it makes me think of engravings and grayscales and all sorts of things to do with printing, but I doubt that has anything to do with the real history—but then history isn't real anyway, is it?

This casually meditative response highlights a key question in the book, namely the unreliable character of history. Beginning the section this way certainly threatens the legitimacy of the interviewing enterprise. In addition, Swensen reprises ideas from her first interview when a pub employee says, "No, I've never seen a ghost, but I've heard one [. . .] Everyone who works here has a different story; we all feel them." Swensen thus undermines her own procedure by quietly reminding the reader of her inapt question about how a ghost might be perceived (apparently not visually) and then by pointing out that historical accounts have no more viability than perceptual experience. In a section that contains some groan-worthy puns (Tillbury—"till bury" as a repository for bodies until they could be interred in Gravesend, or the town as named for its proximity to an apple orchard full of Gravensteins), Swensen essays her own telling pun, "shifted out of light in a way most / unbecoming, it unbecame." The centrality of *unbecoming* is marked as analogous to belief; stories proliferate and, in the process, undo each other. As they dissolve, though, they resurge as "some slight slippage that streamed beneath." That slippage is part of a "rapt commerce in which none of the merchants is seen." The section ends by showing the futility of burying a body in Gravesend, for "as soon as they stick them in the ground, they start to rise." Questions that refuse to be put to bed once and for all, in a sense, resurrect themselves from what the poet elsewhere calls a "spiral grave." A spiral is a fitting metaphor for this intermediary state of being. Like Swensen's emphasis on returns and arrivals, it clarifies that "in being, everything is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent . . . a refrain with endless verses." Unraveling the viability of her questions even while insisting on the process of *asking* means that Swensen's emphasis is really on the un-becoming of knowledge and being, therefore, she can ally with the interviewee who says, "and why not believe it?"

The final interview is the shortest at only one and a half pages, but it is rich with speculation and insight. Swensen asks, "What do you think ghosts are?" and "Do you think you'll ever be one?" The first response is, "I don't know . . . I think they're communication, simply

that; a ghost is simply a connection." The ghost as discrete, stable entity is effaced throughout the responses. Instead, ghosts become phenomena. The fascinating catalogue of responses includes the following: they are "a way to get on with it," a passage through time or a crossroads, "what will not fit within," "an accident," or "a broken window, though the window does not end the room; it only breaks the seal," "that fractional moment of suspension that all laws pass through as they're changing," or "tangled electricity." One provocative comment suggests that a ghost is "a gap between two clarities, a void and as such, it cannot possibly make sense, at which point, we must admit that we are lacking crucial information on our own state." This last description causes the speaker to reflect further that he or she might very well be a ghost right now, "if viewed from another state." Interestingly, this interview section is without the lyric interpolations that are a feature of the other sections. Perhaps this is because Swensen feels no need to comment on or amend the possibilities that her interviewees have posed: they clearly elaborate the ghost as a site of epistemological irresolution. Moreover, this isn't a site of stasis but an active process, "an electrical storm in a jewelry box." Tension abounds, and the definitions clearly include efforts to contain this mysterious phenomenon, this excess that "will not fit within." Here we indeed see an enactment of the mobile, dynamic poetics that Blaser described, one which does implicate us "in a changed view of ourselves and of the range in recognitions of the other." *Gravesend's* remodeling of our understanding of time, presence, and knowing makes clear that our very partiality and lack of mastery are strange assets—apertures to perception that can be sustained through gulfs of apprehension. This is one way of proceeding with poetry as both a spiritual and an ethical project.

Jean-Luc Nancy proposes that those who want a world that is perceptible through the senses and which makes any sort of rational sense "demand of the world that it signify itself as dwelling, haven, habitation, safeguard, intimacy, community . . . as the signifier of a proper and present signified, the signifier of the proper and present as such." In *Gravesend* Swensen finds ways to acknowledge that desire while guiding the reader to a construal of "world" that haunts us gracefully with the impossibility of clear signification. She tells us that a "ghost is a hearing is a calling and every gesture that builds the pressure that then through unknowing becomes in pieced the inner ether so larger grows the mansions and larger grows the wind, undid." The ghost, we realize through her tutelage, is neither present nor absent,

neither local nor transcendent, neither interior nor exterior. The ghost refuses to yield absolute knowledge of itself or its conditions.

It is instead a fertile rumor that helps us respond, as Nancy says, "in the very opening of the abandonment of sense, as the opening of the world." Ghosts and their hauntings force us from the comfortable havens of meaning and knowing that we have clung to. In entertaining the possibility of these indeterminate and intermediary presences, we find the opportunity to interact with the "world" in a more ethically and, yes, spiritually rich manner. Belief, thereby, becomes a suspension that refuses the lure of dialectical resolution. Nancy encourages us to think of this responsiveness as a vibrant openness to experience that circumvents "the appropriation of signification" and can "hold the step of thought suspended over this sense that has already touched us." Belief becomes something other than gullibility or a revised form of mastery. Rather, we might refer to Bachelard who describes something similar:

In that region where being *wants* to be both visible and hidden, the movements of opening and closing are so numerous, so frequently inverted and so charged with hesitation, that we could conclude on the following formula: man [sic] is half-open being.

Swensen offers us the opportunity to use the ghost as a slippery, evocative metaphor, where the ghost "erodes the line between being and place becomes the place of being time." The awareness that emerges through living this "half-open being" shows us that poetry's real value isn't solace which "as if a little / trap door slowly spread through every room." As one of the respondents says, "It's meaningless to ask if ghosts are real—*they have an effect in the world. They work.* Can you say that the fright was real and yet that what caused it was not?" (Italics mine.) By emphasizing the text as a site, centrally, of inquiry (as opposed to acquisition of knowledge), Swensen emphasizes the import of nurturing curiosity amid the limits of what can be known. This is a form of faithfulness. Living "ajar" this way, we may more freely make our own departures and returns, guests in the blurred domicile where "we wash [. . .] our hands // in its liminal spaces."

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