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This Attraction to a Window: On Brigitte Byrd

Fence above the Sea by Brigitte Byrd. Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, 2005.

One of the epigraphs to Brigitte Byrd's *Fence above the Sea* is from H el ene Cixous and reads, ". . . she doesn't defend herself against these unknown women whom she's surprised at becoming, but derives pleasure from this gift of alterability." The epigraph locates Byrd's innovative use of the lyric "I." The speaker in the first section of the book, "Requiem Series," for instance, is the speaker throughout the five other sections of the book, yet nonetheless she moves back and forth throughout the eight prose poems identifying herself as both "I" and as "she" or "the daughter." In other sections, the speaker remains more consistent, her alterability located not in the confusion of syntactical subject but in the gesture of self-recognition, as in the poem, "Chained to Char." Self-recognition is also recognition of the other, and it is engendered by loss, as the first section of the book suggests. The speaker's father has died, and in this loss she shifts through her own presence, the presence of the family she has started, and her grief. For instance, in "Chained to Char," Byrd plays with the simultaneity of losing a parent and negotiating the life of the self:

She thinks of writing a living will when a mystic masseur warms her forehead with lighted fingers. It is the first time and she wants her tongue on her skin. Each extreme keeps its extreme nature. A darker thought is a sign of vanity. There is a spider in her heart and she feels its burning through her flesh. She reads that no absence cannot be replaced and she lifts the sheet to find her body.

I want to suggest that while Byrd draws widely from Rilke to Stein to Duras, by using Cixous to open her book she implicates the speaker's negotiation of the loss of a parent in an important way. This is not to say that Byrd is personalizing a Lacanian drama—in which the self develops through the coming to language—but she is certainly calling

to mind the reciprocity between parent and child in a way that is similar to Lacan. And when she evokes Cixous, she suggests both a breaking with the Father and a retrieval of what is lost in the law of syntax. In the poem, "She Looks as Usual," Byrd writes, "She thinks she fucks the father when she fucks her and the mother and the others and all of them think that and look. At me and her maybe more maybe when she comes and dies with them." "She" blends into "me," and we can pull out phrases like "she fucks her and the mother . . ." as units of speech that puzzle into other units of speech as seamlessly, as in the lines ". . . and the mother and the others all of them think that and look."

Terms like "the daughter" and "I" that thread through the book converge in a similar way. The speaker is the daughter in the first part of the book; later "the daughter" clearly refers to the speaker's own daughter. But there are many moments in the poetry in which the speaker and her daughter are conflated for the reader. This is perhaps how Byrd can challenge lyric conventions while at the same time retaining sincerity; in other words, there is something at stake in the poetry in the way that it insists on the deeply personal nature of the lyric tradition but also defends against constructing maps of subjectivity. Further, as Byrd's epigraphs from Rilke and Cixous suggest that the speaker will resist defending herself from alterability or the "unintelligible, alien and heavy" (after Rilke), the poetry demands that the reader also resist defense.

This resistance does not occur only in Byrd's use of "I." The speaker also moves swiftly between French phrases and direct allusions to film and poetry. She enacts a geographical movement in which at one moment we move from America to Paris to St. Petersburg. I would argue that on one hand this movement speaks to the displacement that the speaker experiences as she tests pronouns and points of view. It also speaks to Byrd's ability to draw from her influences without fashioning the poetry into a testament to the writer's cosmopolitanism. There is nothing here that suggests that the reader recognize primarily the writer's erudition. The tone is perhaps responsible for this as in the following lines from "Extreme Injury":

It is winter in the house when she knows he is trapped under the frozen ground. From the edge of a chair she caresses his hand covered with freckles his brain frosted with reds and browns of hemorrhage yellows of necrosis. She reads *les dons font les esclaves comme les fouets font les chiens* after watching *La Pianiste* and that is something to think about while she is cold on the couch with the cats.

The poetry is staid and somber. It is quiet and diligent about its reckoning without making grand conclusions or relying on sentimentality in its allusions or in its description of time and place.

In fact, it is because of their resistance to conclusions, finally, that the prose poems especially do so well. In this way, the prose poems are more successful than the lineated poems although the lineated poems—there are four in all—present interesting language play and importantly interrupt the visual structure of the book. In general, the Western prose form presents a rhetorical logic in both paragraph and sentence units, in which readers expect accumulation and conclusion, i.e., each sentence in the paragraph provides reasons for an assertion. Byrd's prose poems instruct the reader how to read them: not far into the book, we realize that her sentences challenge the logic of the sentence as a unit of speech. For instance, the first poem of the collection begins with the lines, "The father is a breath. This is not a mistake it is." The second sentence here seems to contain in one unit a statement and a refutation of the statement. In "(Cassis)," logical statements beginning with "if" are not preceded by "then" and questions do not end in question marks: "If I dance are you dancing. *Je ne veux pas dormir*. If there is a ritual is this a tongue clicking. *J'ai peur de tomber dans les vaps*. Is this performance when his chest fills with requiem is this body art. There is always a sister in the train."

Byrd is not trying to create a chaos or to disorient the reader. And while the first section of her book is especially reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*, this is not so much because she is trying to emulate the internality or the unconscious but because she focuses on moments and attempts declarative statements, as well as the emergence and repetition of images in the middle of flux. There the reader can take pleasure in the loss of gravity that Byrd creates and sustains through the careful negotiation of the lyric speaker and form.