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Un-singing the Lyric Hero: A Review of Dan Beachy-Quick's *gentlessness*

gentlessness, by Dan Beachy-Quick. North Adams, Massachusetts:
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Over the past twelve years, Dan Beachy-Quick has produced a richly intertextual body of work consisting of—not counting chapbooks and collaborations—five full-length poetry collections, two works of non-fiction, a novel, and *A Whaler's Dictionary*, his meditation on *Moby Dick*. His sixth full-length collection of poems, *gentlessness*, extends into new directions his concern with the limitations, graces, and transgressions of the lyric. While Eleni Sikelianos writes on the book's back cover that the poems "[move] chaos into song," a reader soon sees that the inverse is also true. By interrogating the lyric's desire to consume, to digest chaos, and to render unity in song, the book stages a struggle inside an "intestinal [mind]" (13); there, *gentlessness* foregrounds the artifice of the lyric in an attempt to neutralize the self-congratulating, heroic imposture to which it is so often tempted. Out of this disdain for what the lyric often gets made into, Beachy-Quick's poems sound a far less innocent and thus far more convincing strain of lyric making.

In the long section entitled "heroisms," the poet announces a "season of / the hero's boredom" and goes on to expose a dialectic of containment and control inherent in both the heroic and lyric orientation (25). Trying to encompass the world in his egotistical sphere, the hero is lampooned relentlessly here: "the jerk / in his journeys // his penis grown so long he loops it through / his belt-loops to keep his pants up / and still it drags behind him // Drawing a line pointing backward / To everything the hero's entered" (23). Here, in what could be an update of Stevens's *Noble Rider*, the phallic potency of (what I am calling) the lyric hero becomes a farce of excess, signaling a legacy of "things entered"—or, in part, things made over and contained in his own applauded image. Later, "The hero laughs as he gropes Wisdom" (26) and asks "for an answer instead of a process"

(27). Wisdom is difficult to come by, but without doubt, the poems in *gentleness* refuse to settle for comforting answers and, through ceaseless subversion and transformation, engage the reader in the absolute thick of process.

In "Puritanisms," the poet faces the opposite difficulty: a diminished speaker "confess[ing] . . . / certainties [he doesn't] feel" (40) and "proud where [he] should feel shame / shameful where [he] should feel pride" (38). The excess of egotistical assertion seen in "heroisms" is here figured as an excess of effacement. Later in the poem, the speaker, exasperated, declares, "okay, I'll be ugly" (43). This is followed with the question, "for how long / have I been establishing these distances / all inside me the poem is this bridge that must / create the distance it crosses" (ibid.). Here, the fear—or truth—is that the poem feeds on its own nullity, leaving the poet myopic, masochistic, and claustrophobic: the final passages contain the phrase "here is me too near myself / to see" (45). Suspended in this way between puritanical emptiness and heroic fullness, the poems in *gentleness* are gnawed upon by their own drives, and the considerable pleasure of reading the book is in observing how the poet's relenting to and refusing of these drives compel him to vary his song.

Throughout the book, the poems struggle with a thought of nullifying vanity: that the page is merely a field upon which to stage the self's achievements (be they ethical, aesthetic, or spiritual). Indeed, fields abound here, but so many of them seem threatened by the self-regarding of heroic and antiheroic enclosures. Again in "heroisms," one reads, "Speaks about himself to experience / Himself in words others gave him . . . / And the field is an audience inside him" (27). Elsewhere, in "overtakelessness": "*Myself* is a word to describe / this field that I cannot see / the end of" (59). And later in the same poem (echoing Williams), the field's exhilarating fertility betrays its own source:

So much depends upon the fact as it
 betrays itself, the green point
mocking its own source, the field
 that is nothing, field that is nowhere,
sound only by the green points breaking
 through themselves to exist, green
points that deny themselves, a point
 being that which has no heart, a line
being breathless length, these green
 points in a line, a line that points away

from me wherever I am me, muttering
what is it to be about something (63)

Here, the interrogated self is torn between subject and object—I and me—and left worried about what it's all "about." Of course, it's often *all about him*—as in, the field surrounds him, it's outside him. But he doesn't hear it that way: his ear is a mirror. Alert to such paradoxes and cruxes, the poems here—in an astonishing variety of ways—resist themselves, as though each has been doubted into being. In one of the book's most declarative statements, Beachy-Quick writes, "these songs are skeptics' songs" (62), and he makes good on this assertion. Through doubt's semantic and syntactic pressures, the poems in *gentlessness* remain wholly awake to what lies on the other side of lyric, beyond the game of center and periphery, containment and dispersal; ultimately, the poems endeavor to open themselves to the nonsong on which song founds as well as unnerves itself: they want to hold if not contain the noise syllables shape sound to avoid.

However, there is much more to the book than just this concern with heroism and its opposite. The musically potent "non-song" is readily apparent in the opening poem's nearly confrontational degree of abstraction. Beginning by declaring "that that what is is an all" (3), the poem "monadisms" arrives at "faith's fatal point" (6) through a series of fractured, minimalist meditations. Here, in an almost "blind" poem, we read, "what is complex is underneath the image / * / it knows more than it shows" (3). Starting here, the book establishes a kind of aesthetic bedrock upon which to construct what follows. As the book unfolds, the poems maintain contact with this foundational void while endeavoring to "[accept] both the void and the atoms" (6). And yet, as shown, a nagging sense of negativity persists here, and even the final poem manages to assert, "Not one object exists in this song / Not even the singer as he sings this song" (97). Maintaining contact with this abstract, potentially nullifying register, the moments in which the book posits something magnanimous and sensuously imagined—and such moments are here in abundance (especially in "romanticisms")—take on a renewed urgency: in place of the aesthetic showboating of the lyric hero, they offer us moments of genuine purity, grace, and exhilaration. Ultimately, *gentlessness* exhibits a renewed, embattled power whose textures of fluency and fracture perform an audit not only on economies of lyric representation, but on poetic tradition itself. The book's craftily ordered sections (monadisms, heroisms, puritanisms, romanticisms) each rehearse a distinct phase of historical self-consciousness, and yet each section easily escapes

being a "period piece" by suggesting the ever-present vitality of these distinct modes of consciousness, responsibility, and articulation.

One of the hallmarks of the book is its reprocessing of traditional alignments between form and ideology. Alongside the sonnets of "romanticisms"—which defy the implied conservatism of their form—there is also a bold use of allusion to and quotation from (among others) Keats, Williams, Rilke, and Pound (one poem here is called "In a Station of the Metro" and plays heavily upon, and against, Pound's dictum against abstraction). One poem simply reverses the stanzaic order of Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" (54) and another restitches one of Keats's most famous lines: "a thing of beauty is a // thing // of beauty is forever // is forever a joy // a joy some thing // it a thing // beauty" (44). The effect of all this is at once transgressive and reanimating, and such tension between wounding and healing, erring and saving, is one of the book's signatures. Ultimately, Beachy-Quick's poetics is vitally at odds with the idea that a form seeks only to preserve, or that the aesthetic is only a realm of unity and drawing-into-presence. As his work reveals, a poem's engagement with form and tradition can manifest as porous, protean, and eager for dispersal and permutation.

And yet alongside this sense of possibility and openness, *gentleness* strikes notes that are much darker, angrier, and, at times, disgusted. There is a pervasive, self-conscious dread animating many of the pieces here. "Puritanisms" is significant for pressing the generalized dis-ease and self-consciousness the book elsewhere evinces—"It's not like being self-aware on the page / Is a new trick" (85)—to a place of abjection: "here is me too near myself / to see" (45); "I want you / about myself to tell me / I'm wrong" (39); "put me in my place / pull me out of myself / put me in // the hole" (40). The book's final poem, "Portrait (After Arcimboldo)," deploys a monotony of sound and diction that underscores the poet's sense of exhaustion with identity: "I made this self all by myself / I drove the nail into the wall by myself / I stained the wood's grain I planed myself / I wrote the book on the shelf I made myself"; "What I am inside of I cannot see that I cannot see / I cannot see inside myself to see" (97). As argued above, it seems the peculiar crux generating this disgust and unease is the suspicion that, no matter what is said, it is possible for one to read nothing but the virtue and skill of the sayer. In light of this, one would likely be right to detect sarcasm in the lines, "in words there is no / difference— / the poem is a hermetic / delight" (52). For the delight these poems afford is deeply troubled by their medium's apparent lack of difference—its hermetic self-enclosure.

One strategy the book poses for addressing—or being addressed by—this crux of the lyric is to radically question the dichotomy of interior and exterior, the boundary of which secures the lyric/heroic subject. Thus, figures of vexed circularity and reflexivity abound, blurring binaries of here/there, this/that, I/You. In “a short treatise on the nature of the gods,” the world is figured in a violent reversal of inner and outer, consumer and consumed: “Every day is a snake that eats its own head / Night is the eyes in the mouth” (9). We see a similar figure appear in “Puritanisms”: “turn the inner outward / but the private part revolts // an hourglass swallows itself / and lets the sand spill out” (43). Admittedly, circularity has been a recurring motif in Beachy-Quick’s poems, many of which have worried through similar figures of self-reflexivity: mirrors, circles, Narcissus; in fact, his previous full-length collection was called *Circle’s Apprentice*. What distinguishes *gentlessness*, however, is the severity with which the poet critiques the lyric poet’s—and his/her readers’—desire to arrive via song at a heroic, self-encircling state of containment. As the poems show us, such a drive for completion and containment will be undone again and again; in the book’s final passages, one reads, “The mind cannot avoid its own dispersal into accident” (99). In place of self-contained identity, and the furtive heroic ego it suggests, *gentlessness* offers a different poetry—one that seeks to reorient the reader’s desire (for belief, for identity, for presence): “Not belief but doubt that confirms // Startle the ground-dwelling dove from her gleaning / Her warning call is not her song, but / Air pushed out from her wing’s frightened beating” (12). Throughout *gentlessness*, the poems explore just this perplexing boundary between song’s intimate pleasures and an individual’s torn, self-emptying cries of warning. For the attuned reader, the result is urgent and astonishing.

It is worth noting that alongside the many canonical poet-heroes mentioned here, the book’s epigraph refers us to two distinct “outsiders”: William Bronk and Ronald Johnson. Indeed, the book draws on both Bronk’s winnowing, abstract precision and Johnson’s protean, jubilant art of semantic and syntactic destruction and reconstruction. More significantly, though, by providing context for the Bronk quote, one can see more clearly much of Beachy-Quick’s project. The epigraph reads, simply, “I sing to praise their song.” On the surface, this sentiment is complicated only by the notion that song has become self-referential; however, in context—it is the final line of the titular poem in Bronk’s *To Praise the Music*—the drive toward praise is much more troubled. Speaking of tree limbs, Bronk’s poem reads, “oh, it is all as if, but as if, yes, / as if they

sang songs, as if they praised. / Oh, I envy them. I know the songs" (143). In just this short passage, the poet's difficulties are manifold: doubt and the will to believe; envy of that which one believes in and loves; assumed knowledge, presumptive praise. Similarly, in Beachy-Quick's *gentleness*, the difficulties are unique to a poet who would praise—who would raise song to a register wherein the aesthetic and the ethical converge. Beachy-Quick has been listening to that register for years now, and this book is his most profound account of what he has heard.