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## Melody Is None: On Joe Wenderoth's *If I Don't Breathe How Do I Sleep*

*If I Don't Breathe How Do I Sleep*, by Joe Wenderoth. Seattle, Washington: Wave Books, 2014.

Joe Wenderoth begins his latest collection, *If I Don't Breathe How Do I Sleep*, with two lines of Emily Dickinson's poem "849":

*The Definition of Melody—is—  
That Definition is none*

It seems to me that how one reads this epigraph hinges on how one reads the word "Definition" in relation to "Melody." As far as I can tell, there seem to be three main contenders:

- 1) Melody has no definition, i.e. it cannot be defined in the dictionary sense.
- 2) Melody lacks "definition": that is, it lacks clarity, "definite" contours, etc.
- 3) "The Definition [of Melody] is none": Melody is *defined* as "none," nil, nothingness, the void.

Though compelling readings can certainly be built out of the boldly contrarian implications of readings 1 and 2 (the word "melody," does, in fact, have a dictionary definition, and that definition in at least some renderings labels "distinctness" or "definition" as one of its defining qualities), reading 3 interests me the most, insofar as it seems to propose a kind of "music of the void." I'm intrigued by what that might mean, what a "music of the void" might be, and in what sense Wenderoth's poems might be making just this kind of (non-)music.

Take, for instance, the book's first poem, a haunting little number titled "SATAN IS REAL":

I know

You know

How to sing

But who taught you

This is strikingly similar, in rhetorical "flavor" if in nothing else, to the proverbial Zen koan: "What did your face look like before your parents were born?" This well-known koan is meant to point to what is in Zen parlance referred to as one's "original face." The "solution" to the koan, insofar as it has a solution, has much to do with "nothingness" conceived in the Zen fashion, the void through which one realizes the "nonduality of subject and object," or, put another way, the void out of which subject and object endlessly emerge and inevitably return. It is a distortion, perhaps, but not a *wild* distortion, to say that, within the parameters of this koan, the void is one's original face, that one's original face "is none."

Another poem in this vein is the cleverly titled: "24 Hour Fitness," which I include below in its entirety:

There is no farmer of the unsubsidized.  
You can't grow yourself.  
There.

For Wenderoth "the unsubsidized" is, among other things, an oddly apt way of denoting "the living." Calling the living the "unsubsidized," of course, figures the living as "negatives" of the dead (the "subsidized"). To be "subsidized," in this sense, is to occupy an originary zero-space: to be dead is to be at the "positive" pole of the life-death duality. Or, put another way: if to be "subsidized" is to be dead, then to be "unsubsidized" is to be undead. In this regard Wenderoth seems to be in accord with Jack Spicer, who in "The Scrollwork on the Casket" famously insists that "it is the living that return to the dead":

Whenever I hammer a nail into the outside of the casket, I can hear someone, on the inside, also hammering a nail. That's the trouble with this burial business; it's hard to know who's on the outside, whether the living bury the dead or the dead bury the living.

"The dead bury the living," Ken said. He pulled his coat tightly around his shoulders and walked a few yards ahead of me. "The dead never return to the living; it is the living that return to the dead. People search out the ghosts they find." (Jack Spicer, "The Scrollwork on the Casket")

Both this poem of Spicer's and these poems of Wenderoth's point to a fundamental uncanniness at the heart of the lyric impulse. Poetic composition has always been figured in terms conducive to this uncanniness, insofar as agency in the act of composition has traditionally been invested in "spooky" extra-personal actors—Homer's Muse or, perhaps more pertinently, Jack Spicer's "Martians." In *If I Don't Breathe How Do I Sleep* Wenderoth provocatively scrambles this traditional Muse-Poet complex and replaces the "daemonic" tutelary-Muse of the classical world with a more straightforwardly "demonic" rendering of the Poet/Poem as Devil, clown, doll, or living puppet.

Take, for instance, the collection's second poem, "ASSEMBLING YOUR CLOWN":

Notice first that your clown is made up almost entirely  
of ligaments, cartilage, bursae, menisci.  
Technically, a clown has only one bone—  
the forehead—  
and that is where your assembly must begin.  
Put the forehead in place—  
which is to say,  
place the forehead on the kitchen table.  
Feel the sadness of the clown's bowed head,  
the willful eyeless despair.  
The rest of the clown should come together easily  
once this sadness has been felt.  
As he begins to take shape, it will be noticed  
that he is clinging desperately to the kitchen table.  
This is absolutely normal.  
Indeed, if it is not difficult to remove your clown  
from the table on which it has been assembled,  
you have probably done something wrong.  
Probably a clown like that is going to disappoint someone.

Here Wenderoth seems to figure the clown as an allegorical figure for the poet/poem, but the allegory's precise dimensions—where the poet ends and the poem begins—are left "undefined." Intriguingly,

the clown's otherwise "boneless" body grows out of the "forehead," which is said to belong to the clown but would also seem to belong to the poet, insofar as the forehead is identified as the source of the "willful eyeless despair" that serves as the seed for the clown-body's growth. It's as if the clown were growing out of a fragment of the poet's death-mask.

The painted smile of the circus clown is an archetypal figure for the creepy/uncanny, and using a clown to allegorize the process of poetic composition further destabilizes the traditional metaphorical terms of this process by trading the "daemonic" (in the classical sense of pertaining to one's tutelary "Genius") qualities of the classical Muse for the more sinister "demonic" qualities of the nightmare figures of contemporary horror: the sentient doll, the living puppet, or the voracious reanimated corpse. As an allegory for poetic composition, Wenderoth's figuration of the poem as Franken-clown bears little resemblance to, say, Eliot's notion of the artist as impersonal "catalyst" for the bloodless chemical "reactions" that create the poem. For Wenderoth, the poem cannibalizes the poet.

Which is not to suggest that in this book the question of who consumes what or what consumes whom is any more clearly "defined" than the question of where the poet ends and the poem begins. The poem "HUMMINGBIRD FEEDER," for instance, describes "a trap / for what you've seen and heard / but never noticed // before which / something / barely rests / feasting." One is tempted here to read the space of the poem as the "trap" for its "content," and the reader as the "something lured." And yet one returns inevitably to two questions: Who feasts here? Upon what, or whom? This feasting "something" might just as easily be either the reader or the poet.

Despite this ambiguity, this particular turn in this particular poem presents what appear to be distinct actors within a nexus of mutual consumption: a trap, a feaster, and a something lured. But Wenderoth later dissolves this ostensible foray into "definition" with the first two lines of the poem "LANGUAGE," which read:

it eats me / sometimes

Here the ouroboros swallows its tail, so to speak. These lines posit a "consumptive"<sup>1</sup> process at the heart of poetic composition, but the

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1. I'm using "consumptive" in the nutritive rather than the tubercular sense, but the resonance with the archetype of the Keatsian consumptive is duly noted and, I think, not without significance.

direction and trajectory of this process is impossible to determine. The poet, himself constituted through language, is devoured by language; the poet eats himself, so to speak. This particular line is another example of a koan-like gesture, insofar as it thoroughly defeats the intelligence while still seeming to "point" quite directly to what one presumes must be the "none" at the heart of "Melody."

A poem even later in the book crystallizes this consumptive metaphor to some extent and returns us to a somewhat more familiar metaphor for what a poem might be. "AN INJURED SHIP" begins with the eminently memorable lines:

meat  
eating  
flowers  
in dreams  
are difficult  
to arrange

This allusion to *Les Fleurs du Mal* marries nicely the "consumptive" motif with the notion of poetic composition as daemonic/demonic. Poems—or words themselves?—are here figured monstrously as Venus flytraps ("traps / for what you've seen and heard // but never noticed") in a Little Shop of Horrors. One gets the sense, however, that these flowers aren't "evil" so much as amorally voracious. All they know is how to eat.<sup>2</sup>

Naturally this poses a problem for the poet. For Wenderoth poems (or the language that constitutes them) "are difficult / to arrange" because they bite (or bite back). This is not unlike Spicer's conception of the poem as a "Counterpunching Radio" and his insistence that "The trouble with comparing a poet to a radio is that radios don't develop scar tissue" (Jack Spicer, "The Sporting Life"). The poet does not leave the poem unscathed.

Nightmarish as all of this sounds, Wenderoth's rending/rendering of the metaphorical terms of poetic composition is not without the occasional gesture towards consolation. "AT THE CRASH SITE" presents

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2. Intriguingly, Wikipedia notes that "comparable statements" expressing the essence of the "original face" koan include: "Look at the flower and the flower also looks," and "Guest and host interchange." For our purposes we might slightly amend the former to something like: "Eat of the flower and the flower also eats."

us with the scene of a recovery crew at the site of what is presumably a plane crash, in which:

special attention / is paid / to nothing

At first glance this "nothing" implies an insouciant absent-mindedness: special attention is called for, but none is paid. But one could also read these lines as instead describing a situation in which "special attention" is genuinely, earnestly applied to the problem of "nothing," a deadly serious attendance to the uncanny "nothing" of death that has now, at the crash site, become utterly impossible to ignore. Special attention *is*, in fact, paid to "nothing," because in this situation there is nothing else to see.

I'll close with a poem from later in the book that, perhaps appropriately, begins, in a sense, with an "epigraph."<sup>3</sup> The poem is called "SINGING COMES CHEAP TO THOSE WHO DO NOT PAY FOR IT," which Wenderoth helpfully labels as coming from Book I of the *Odyssey*. The speaker of the poem concerns himself with both the undeniable similarity and the unbridgeable gulf between his song and a bird's. Here is the relevant passage:

This bird, on the other hand,  
is right here in my living room,  
making the same sounds out of the same air.  
He dares to countenance his equality,  
his capacity *to sing*.  
The song we carry on  
is here  
between us.  
It is quite literally  
the same grave.

Here the speaker is aware of the uncanny gulf that separates these otherwise similar singings. The "song" that man and bird carry on is "between" them, within this gulf, which is "quite literally" a grave

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3. My tentativeness in calling this an epigraph has to do with the fact that, though this looks like an epigraph, it really isn't, strictly speaking. What looks like an "epigraph" actually serves as the poem's title; in that sense, the epigraph has devoured the title to which it is usually subordinated.

they both share, a "none" or "nothing" out of which they have both emerged into the realm of the "unsubsidized." The "Definition of Melody" is, in this sense, "none" for both man and bird, and in a sense this poem provides an answer to the question posed in "SATAN IS REAL": "I know / You know / How to sing / But who taught you." The "grave" of the Void is the source for both songs, and the living return to the dead to sing.