

## The Red Gaze

Reviewed by Ann Vickery

*The Red Gaze*

Barbara Guest

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*The Red Gaze* suggests perception awash with light and moreover, given red's fiery symbolism, awash with warmth, passion, and life. Even in title, Guest disrupts our expectations. One expects to look at something red; for the object or figure to be red. Yet Guest emphasizes that the *act* of looking itself is colored. The twist of title immediately foregrounds the dynamic relation between subject and object. Not only does Guest's title address the visual, but also the textual with its playful aural slippage between "red" and "read". Words themselves are given texture and depth—functioning for Guest in ways that are analogous to the function of color for a painter. To enter Guest's poetry is an experience of intense sensuousness (dealing with affective and aesthetic dimensions) as well as being a philosophical (cognitive) pursuit; do not expect to be led through some linear narrative with confined walls and rooms with clearly marked entry and exit points. For Guest the act of reading is all about letting go: an intuitive rather than rational passage toward the discovery of meaning. The focus is on the process, whether it be the act of looking or the act of reading. As she declares in 'The Beautiful Voyage', "[G]o inside the poem itself and *be in the dark* at the beginning of the journey". Rather than the poem being a fixed structure demarcating the space between self and other, Guest endeavours to undo such boundaries so that, as the opening line suggests, "Hands are touching". As the first poem continues, "I am not detached".

For Guest, the poem is always a communication with the reader (reaching outward) but also an engagement with its own dense cultural history (reaching inward). This is a history informed by the worlds of literature and art, and their respective traditions. Toward the end of *The Red Gaze*, Guest refers to "[e]choes of other poems" (43) and "[o]ther pieces of literature" (44) and indeed, there is a focus

on revisiting the past and investigating its impact on the modern psyche. The architectural design of the past also continues to inform poetic structures today. As she notes in *Forces of Imagination*, “Allow yourself to find the archaic in a poem... The poem needs the archaic to support it//a piece of the past/”(“Allow Yourself,” 93) and “Think of the past as the modern poem runs along beside you” (‘Wounded Joy,’ 102). In ‘Composition’, Guest declares:

Lo, from the outside a poem is with us, of another composition.  
Travelled from an antique place.  
Writing, narrow and sparse, pungent as the lemon tree.(47)

It is no coincidence then that *The Red Gaze* opens with a poem entitled ‘Nostalgia’. Guest writes of “Castles perched on a cliff / Filled with pears and magic”, of losing “the doves of Milan”, and of being “freer than in Rome” (3). Lyric poetry of the new America is not a Whitmanic song of myself but still saturated by Old Europe; it is a medieval tradition containing stock elements such as castle walls, the poet-knight, and his muse. Yet, as illustrated by the final line of ‘Nostalgia’, “A part of the tower/beckons to us”; this tradition exists in ruins (4). Its pull over the present-day self is fading. It has become museal. Elsewhere, there is a “[p]iece of tapestry, an empty banquet hall where birds now nest (‘An Afternoon in Jeopardy,’ 5). The form of *The Red Gaze* mirrors this disintegration, with poems appearing in fragmentary form. Language itself is in mourning for a lost wholeness: “The alphabet is full of sorrow” (5). Wandering through Guest’s pages, the reader feels language’s hollowness as “words collapse around us” (16). All that is left is either silence or a faint trace signalled by shadows or echoes not heard clearly. The relationship Guest creates between the reader and this old Europe with its used rhetoric *is* one of distance and detachment.

Poems signal to the memorial rather than a living cultural memory: “Beneath shadow of shadows of Columbus the Navigator. Waving farewell”, Guest writes, and “Lo, on the river a monument passes by” (10). For those in the present, there is no enthusiasm to explore. As the “disappointed generation”, “the seas disappoint us, also” (16). There is a sense that they have become too prescribed, “lined with laboratories and formula” (16). Against this indifference, Guest plots an alternative trajectory. She argues for the need of an “alteration of time” (14), a “new orientation”

(16), even a “new tongue” (36) in order to recapture the mysterious. Just how new this orientation is can be debated, as she demands “a romantic departure” (14). In ‘Composition’ the last line concludes optimistically, “Our lives are composed with magic and euphony” (47).

In ‘Modernism’, Guest notes that the dreamer “has dipped his pen into magic ink and cleared / the ordinary from the room” (22). The modernism of apathy and routine, of T.S. Eliot’s endless coffee cups and silver spoons is evoked as a moment of the past: “We too, have heard the midnight chime and reached for our silver spoon”. However, for Guest, “Restless leaf modifies his poem” (22). “Leaf” here deliberately converges the materiality of the page with the vitality of nature. The means of reaching textual epiphany is life, emblemized in nature. In ‘The Voice of the Poem’, Guest notes that the poet’s weapon is “nature or the green point, the green eye of vision... Nature is a quick entry into lyricism, because for one thing it is so eloquent” (*Forces*, 92). And in ‘A Reason for Poetics’, she declares, “Ideally, a poem will be both mysterious (driftwood of the unconscious) and organic” (*Forces*, 20). Her poem, ‘Composition’, focuses on the pungency of the lemon tree; ‘Nostalgia’ joins pears with magic. Birds too are a constant present in the volume: there are doves, magpies, and robins with their symbolic loadings of flight and return, nesting and collecting.

The intriguing element is how nature is not immediately accessible in Guest’s poems but always mediated by representation. And this is perhaps the difference from a straight return to Romanticism. Her poem ‘Loneliness’, for example, evokes and disrupts the traditional courtly scene with its set pieces of the maiden, a tower, and river. As the maiden rides on her palfrey, “[b]ouquets fall from her green hair” (9). Such an image is startlingly surreal, upsetting the reader’s expectations while playing around with a rhetoric that typifies femininity through floral motifs. In Guest’s poem, the maiden’s green hair is aligned with the “green of the meadow”. She is part of the pastoral scene but merely “[s]hadows on grass” (9). There is a sense of isolation too, as she is silenced by the “heaviness of literature” which imprisons her as muse. Guest’s final line, “Lo, on the river a monument passes by” recalls the Tennysonian tradition in which the lady is entrapped, reminding us that she, too, is “a monument” (10). Throughout *The Red Gaze* is a juxtaposition of enclosure and openness, room and sky.

Such subject matter is not new to Guest: it is apparent as far back as *Poems: The Location of Things, Archaics, The Open Skies* (1962) where Guest investigates the solitude and fatalism of suburban, contemporary womanhood through her ancient predecessors. The setting of ruins and the centrality of color is evident in poems like ‘Heroic Stages’, which begins:

I had thought you were disappearing  
under the desperate monuments of sand  
I discovered you were leaning on grass  
which after green is noble

[...]

If ever after Valhalla should proclaim  
a string of knights (usually seen wandering)  
this grey silent space would be orchestrated  
for their maneuvers. [...] (Rpt. in *Moving Borders*, 29)

‘Heroic Stages’ is dedicated to Grace Hartigan and the first readers of many of Guest’s early poems were close female friends from the art world. *The Red Gaze* is, in part, a homage to Hans Hofmann who taught and inspired so many of Guest’s contemporaries, including Nell Blaine, Robert DeNiro, Helen Frankenthaler, Jane Freilicher, and Joan Mitchell. Heavily influenced by Cubism and Fauvism, Hofmann was the first teacher to bring the concepts of European modernism across to the United States and in so doing was instrumental in the emergence of Abstract Expressionism.

Hofmann’s poetics coincide with Guest’s in several key respects. He declares, “To sense the invisible and to be able to create it—that is art”. In the context of Hofmann’s philosophy the artist’s creativity is all but inseparable from that of nature; he is “an agent in whose mind nature is transformed into a new creation”. Scientists deal with experiences that occur “repeatedly in the same manner” whereas “creation cannot live on repetitious experience because life is in every instant always new” (Seitz, 15). So whereas the scientist analyses intellectually, the artist does so emotionally. In the mind of the artist, “dreams and reality are united” (Seitz, 15). Whereas the Old Masters conceived of the picture with its enclosing shape and flat surface as a receptacle, Hofmann as with other modernists sought to erase this

distinction and make the picture as such coincide with the physical, literal self. Guest takes the same approach to the poem.

Central to Hofmann's poetics is the role of color. For Hofmann, painting is no more than "forming with color" (Seitz, 46). Rather than form dictating color, it was color that brings out the form. Color shapes and contrasts were what gave primary meaning to a picture, not the line. For Guest too, it is the plasticity of the word and its relationship to the other words on a page that generate meaning rather than its function as a signifier. While light creates the color in nature, in a painting it is the other way round for Hofmann: "Color creates light" (Seitz, 46). Furthermore, color produces a psychological phenomenon, stimulating particular moods in the viewer. A mood is generated from the *relation between* the various elements in a painting. (Seitz, 50) Furthermore, he asserts that a color interval is analogous to a thought-fragment in the creative process. (Seitz, 50)

The longest poem in *The Red Gaze* is entitled simply 'Hans Hofmann' and is where the title for the volume originates. The poem's opening dramatizes the divide between picture and reality:

She remembers	bridges over the gorge
a rocky landscape.	Heaviness in the white (37)

Yet this separation between self and page ends as Guest declares her allegiance to his philosophy of "[s]tructure and sensation" (37), of "[l]istening in an atmosphere of color" (38):

To invoke the unseen, to unmask it. Reality in a glass  
of water. The mirror reveals heartstrings of reality. (39)

Hofmann was continually working from nature. Red, Guest says, reminds him of "the red of maple leaves" and his students, in preparing for class, see "A deep red gaze through maple leaves" (40). Yet, this too is the remaining red on his palette. In 'Vignettes', the poem following 'Hans Hofmann', Guest contrasts the red gaze with "Return of the white chandelier" (42). Not only a decorative excess of Western civilization (an object of grandeur in fitting with a European court scene), the white chandelier also represents artificial light as opposed to the primal and vivid light of

Hofmann's red. In 'Echoes', which follows after 'Vignettes', the "white chandelier" appears again (an echo itself). Here, she writes of "the air free of misdemeanour, at rest in the inns of our fathers" (43). Hofmann's radicalism is contrasted with the laws of the fathers, although Guest's teasing phrase aurally evokes the phrase, "sins of our fathers", and puts the house (or the form) of the Old Masters under pressure.

For Guest, the past remains, even if spectrally or in pieces, in the present. The distance of time cannot detach it from one's hand. At the same time, however, the poem can still introduce the new. Guest ends the volume with a quote from Theodor Adorno: "In each genuine art work something appears that did not exist before" (*n.pag.*). It is significant that Guest divides *The Red Gaze* into two sections. The first strikes a predominant note of mourning and loss whereas the second seems more optimistically weighted toward magic and independence. For Guest, these are necessary twin elements of a poetics, and within each lies the echoes or trace of the other.

### **Coda**

The cover of *The Red Gaze* features a collage by Guest herself and is emblematic of Hofmann's focus on blocks of color. It emphasizes both the layering that occurs in the volume (as poems echo to one another, or call and listen), as well as the meaning to be gained by texture and shape than simply line (that is, materiality informing the content). Guest's publisher, Wesleyan University Press, has produced a particularly handsome book with creamy thick pages and terracotta insets, which give a sense of earthiness and warmth than the red of maple leaves. There is generosity with space and the font for the poems' titles is reminiscent of the font used in Guest's much earlier books. This latter attention to detail reinforces the volume's stress on the past and is one of the reasons why Wesleyan University Press remains one of the world's foremost publishers of poetry.

### **Works Cited**

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