

Freedom, Confinement and Disguise: An Interview with Barbara Guest

Catherine Wagner

I met and interviewed Barbara Guest in Berkeley in November, 1996, when I was a graduate student; Donald Revell, who was my teacher and who knew I loved her work, had asked me to interview her for *Colorado Review*. Barbara would have been about 76. She kindly picked me up at the BART station and took me for a driving tour of Berkeley, where I'd never been. She pointed out the plane trees on campus—I asked to see them because they were mentioned so often in *Quill, Solitary Apparition*, then her most recent book (her *Selected Poems* had come out recently as well).

We turned on the tape recorder when we arrived at her little house in Berkeley. Barbara sat near a wooden spiral staircase in a blue chair that matched her very blue eyes. I was practically shaking with fear during the interview; she was queenly and occasionally (gently) impatient with my questions. She took me out to dinner at an Indian restaurant where I was impressed (I'd been living in Salt Lake City) by paintings of bare-breasted goddesses on the walls. I remember feeling very warm toward her at dinner. I didn't realize at the time that the interview had probably made her nervous, too; her queenliness vanished at dinner and all my fear left me. She told me stories about New York in the fifties and sixties, about her financial struggles and the masculine culture of the time and the artists and writers she'd known; I have a terrible memory for conversation and I wish I'd written everything down afterward. She gossiped happily and asked me questions about my own writing, and her kindness and anecdotes and encouragements: "Oh, you must get in touch with so-and-so! Don't be scared of him, he's very kind"—gave me a sense of a world of poets who supported one another.

When I sent Barbara the transcript to look over, what she returned surprised me: she altered passages and cut the whole from fourteen single-spaced pages down to three. (I was disappointed because I had looked forward to a larger multiple of the five dollars per page *Colorado Review* paid.) The version published in *Colorado Review* (Spring 1997) is more of a Barbara Guest poem than an interview; it's very lovely and its careful obliqueness bears little resemblance to the below, in which I kept pushing her to explain herself and she resisted, at times explicitly. She was a terribly elegant person and poet and an articulate speaker, but she wasn't an elegant explainer: explanations require restrictive linearities that can lead to contradictions when you're talking about something as mysterious as poetry. I think the effort to be linear felt inaccurate to her and irritated her, so she made a poem out of our interview. I hope she wouldn't mind my sharing the original object in its associative and productive messiness.

Barbara Guest: We're talking about "Nebraska." And for some reason, this generation loves that poem. And they always point it out to me. Nobody has ever asked me what it meant or anything like that. I think it would be very difficult to say what it meant. I wish that I had gone on with "Nebraska" and "Illyria," but I didn't develop them, and I should

have, because I'd stumbled across a whole new feature of my landscape, and an extension of my landscape, and I think I was so hesitant because I'd never shown them to anybody and I had no feedback on them. I could have gone on with those poems, in a singular way, because they really carried a whole thread of my writing. So I'm surprised that you start out with "Nebraska."

Cathy Wagner: I guess I brought it up because of the weird way space works in that poem—it keeps transforming, it's like space emerges out of the *word* "Nebraska," it's about writing creating space maybe. I want to talk about the relationship between space and silence in your newer work. In "An Emphasis Falls on Reality" [in *Fair Realism*] you write "Silence is pictorial/where silence is real." John Cage said that as soon as one is present, there is no silence. It seems to me in the quote from "Emphasis" it's implied that silence is never actually heard, as you can't be present for it.

BG: That's really not what is implied there for me. Where silence is real, when it assumes a kind of reality in the context of what you're looking at (now, I'm not talking about the silence of a sentence or the silence of a thought—I'm speaking of actually being aware of silence), then it becomes full of images, and that's what I meant by "pictorial." I used the word "pictorial" because I thought it gave a kind of frame to the images that are in silence. It really wasn't a philosophical idea, as probably Cage's is; it was just that I saw silence. When you have a moment when everything stops, then you begin to see things, they become pictorial. But I didn't think that out before I wrote it.

CW: Especially in *Quill*, it seems pictorial to me, the way the poems look on the page. Are you thinking about representing silence with space in those poems?

BG: I only think about silence when I write about silence. Otherwise I don't plan a silent page. Space on the page is a form of silence, yes—if you want to see it that way you can see it that way—here's a word "the," and down here's a word, twelve spaces down, the word "are"—there's a great silence between them. But it doesn't need to be pointed out. I used this particular space in *Quill* because I wanted to write only certain words that defined what I was writing about. I didn't want to elaborate. I only wanted to make a kind of structure. And on that structure I hung a few words.

I don't know if when poetry takes its own dimensions onto itself, and decides to isolate a line from another so far away, if we're going to have to start thinking about different forms of time, if we're going to see that the poem is situated in a different sense of time. You can indicate this with two lines following very closely upon one another, but I choose, because it's the way I'm thinking now, to isolate sentences that really belong together, words that really belong together. I want them to be isolated because in my mind they're isolated. And it's a rather rigorous thing to do this. This poem was one of the most difficult poems I've ever written, because I was venturing into another territory, and also emotionally it's in a different territory. And it was very stringent. I was able to say exactly what I wanted to say, but I was confined. It doesn't look as if I was confined, because I take up so much space, but I was actually very confined because I had to be had

to be very selective about the words I chose. It looks as if it's freedom but it's not really freedom at all.

There was an intensity in writing *Quill*. I felt that the nominative quality of the poem required that I continue within its frame, within its aisle of thought. I felt a kind of suffocation sometimes in that poem. I felt two extremes. I felt a great freedom, and then a kind of suffocation.

CW: Why suffocation?

BG: Because the poem began to overwhelm me. I'd given it so much freedom and no choice, really, at all—very little choice—and I began to feel I was suffocating from it, and that I was peering out from a word. It was a very strange experience. And after this poem was written, I couldn't truly write in any other way because its spell was still on me. And I notice that I write differently, very differently now. I suppose any time we write a book we are changed—we are, there's no question about that, the book changes us.

CW: You said there was no choice in the writing of that poem . . .

BG: I felt the poems held me rather than my holding them, because of this weird sense of time and space, and I didn't have freedom.

CW: Could you talk about the relationship you see between lines in your work, what happens between them? It sounded like you were saying before that the large space or time between the lines had some sort of effect on what the words could be, or how many words they could be. I'm remembering your lines "Tenderly between the lines/bled the lines . . ."

BG: Yes—there's something between the lines that doesn't need to be said. I also wanted to indicate that you could say anything you liked between those lines, within the subject of the lines themselves. Because there is a lot going on between the lines. You know, spatially there is something going on—I would give you a line such as "Tenderly between the lines" and then you'd find from this line to the next line that something has happened between them that is the definition of something else. That's kind of difficult to explain—I'm not very good at metaphysics—but that's what I mean. "It," this "it" that's there before us, that's either the subject of the poem or the object of the poem, is between the lines. I use the word "bled"—I mean that the lines would have something happen to them.

CW: And when that something happens to them . . .

BG: It encourages the mystery between the lines. You see, I hadn't worked this out, in a way. I hadn't set out in the poem to say, "Now, I'm going to encourage a line to do this to another line." That never entered my head. But I discovered as I wrote that a great deal was happening between those lines, and then I would try in a way to encourage that

mysterious something to come out in the open, and sometimes I would give a little definition to it.

My theory now is that there's always something behind a poem, and it haunts the poem. Poems, if they have any soul, are very haunted, and if they don't have a soul, then they're just straightforward commerce, commercial art. There is a mysterious thing—Coleridge talked about it, and he said that a poem should be both clear and obscure—*clair et obscure*—and I agree with that. As you write more and more, as one does, you become aware more and more of what you haven't said. And you know that you're circumscribed. But there's something that you leave off saying and there's something that still remains of that left-off thought.

CW: I was thinking of your recent poems as being places in themselves. They look like places, just because the spaces are so carefully there. And I want to ask how you conceive of place in your poems. In “Garment” [in *Quill, Solitary Apparition*] you wrote “Moonlit, with armor,” and in that line, are you referring to a place you recall in your mind, a place exterior to the poem, or is that a space you are constructing inside the poem?

BG: There is always a physical place in my poems. There is such a thing as describing—it sounds like a tacky word, but it's not—because in describing a thing you're trying to get its content in the poem. There's a sense of place, and there's a sense of fictive place; there's real and there's fictive space in these poems. And I spoke to you earlier about the plane trees. Now the plane trees go all the way through *Quill*, and they are the presence that's continually there. And sometimes because I saw them in moonlight, the moonlight—the “moonlit”—indicates that space.

CW: Real and fictive places—

BG: All poems are full—well, all my poems, I *hope*, are full of real and fictive places. I certainly wouldn't want to write a poem about a real place, all by itself; that's an answer.

CW: I wanted to ask you about interiors and exteriors. Here's a quote from the beginning of your article in *Ironwood*, “A Reason for Poetics”: “A pull in both directions between the physical reality of a place and the metaphysics of space. This pull will build up a tension within the poem, giving a view of the poem from both the interior and the exterior.” Of course, it's hard to talk about interiors and exteriors in poems, but first of all, to continue the issue of places in poems, when you think about a place that exists outside the poem but is written into a poem, that place is both exterior to the poem and interior to it, right?

BG: Well . . . it could also be the inside and outside of a poem.

CW: OK, and what do you mean?

BG: Well, the inside of a poem is something more metaphysical and the outside is its appearance.

CW: So when you say “a view of the poem from . . . the interior,” you mean the representational aspect of the poem? and the outside would be what the poem literally looks like?

BG: No, I mean the nonrepresentational aspect of the poem.

CW: Oh, I don’t understand.

BG: The interior of its mind.

CW: The interior of the poem’s mind?

BG: That doesn’t sound right, does it? The interior—inside the poem. I was thinking about what you quoted earlier—“pictorial”—what is it now?

CW: From “An Emphasis Falls on Reality”?

BG: Yes, oh—“Silence is pictorial where silence is real.” Well, there are two sides to the poem there, the pictorial side and the real side.

CW: And which is which?

BG: That’s a very good question. Because they share the same space in that place. They share the same silence, they share the same space—[the poem] just turns over and shows the pictorial side, and the other side which is the way it looks. “Pictorial” is a nice word. I really meant it almost as if silence were painted. Meaning that it has a single reality, you know, like it’s a real house, you move in it, you know? But you can’t just say it’s a real place in a poem until it assumes a pictorial value which allows it to have a value of its own. Pictorial means that it shows a pretty face, or a gray face, or whatever, but it makes a picture. Once that comes into being and you can catch sight of silence, then it becomes real.

CW: In some of your older poems, it seems like the place comes through very much through description, however wacky, and in the more recent poems, it might come through more through the way the poems look.

BG: I don’t think the reader should be involved visually with the way the poems look. That was *my* problem. My involvement. I think you can just take the meaning of the lines, and read the lines, and just allow them to float on the page. That was *my* involvement with something else.

CW: What was your involvement with something else?

BG: My involvement was where they lay on the page. The reader’s involvement is to read it, read the words, and there’s a sense of timing in that, for the reader to read it in the

reader's own sense of time. I don't want to make this into a scheme. This is not in any way related to Mallarmé. None of this could have existed with Mallarmé, or one would never have had the courage. Of course it's a long time since he wrote *Coup de dés* and this has nothing to do with *Coup de dés* because he's asking different philosophical questions. It was something he had to do, he had to become I believe more outrageous—he becomes so decorative, and I think he was trying to destroy in some way the sense of decoration, which was an inheritance from that era.

This [what I'm doing] is not the same. It's already done. That part's already done. It's [my writing is] just using one's own method to impose one's own ideas. There's no theory involved. It was just that I felt, and I believe I'm feeling now, that poetry has to appear in another disguise. But that's all my own need. It has nothing to do with what poetry means, you know, because God knows what anyone's poetry means; it means an awful lot. And this is just what I'm doing. Mallarmé was doing it for other reasons, I believe.

CW: What do you think his reasons were, versus yours?

BG: Well, my feeling is that he was fed up with poetry as it was. And I also believe that [he wanted to get rid of] the artifice he'd been surrounded by in his packed, packed poems—they're very packed, and they're very decadent. Which is not a bad word, but I think he wanted to get some air in the place, and also I think it's anger, you know. I think beyond anything it's anger, and righteous anger. What he did do was he gave people the page, and he said "look what you can do on the page." [Actually] I don't think he *gave* it to anybody. I think he said it to himself. But people didn't accept the challenge. And the poem largely exists to all of us in translation, which doesn't *mean* anything. No matter how it's translated it doesn't mean *anything*. It meant a great deal to Mallarmé. What it meant I think was an exercise in extinction. But I'm finding out the opposite. This is not extinction that I want by using these few lines on the page. It's this freedom to create almost in spite of the space an intimacy, because I think you do feel when you get into it that you're very intimate with the poem.

CW: A few minutes ago, you said poetry needs to find a new disguise. I want to ask what you meant by "disguise."

BG: Why the word "disguise." I don't know why the word "disguise." I just—I think I was getting exasperated with so many objects I was putting into my own poems, and so many verbal descriptions and et cetera that I wanted to clear the air. But I got into more than clearing the air. I got into a lot of problems, and I welcomed those problems. I think that the reason Pound wrote as he did was to get rid of density, and I admire that writing very much. It's not like mine—I mean my writing is not like Pound's—but I was tired of density, and I still am.

Modernity, leaving modernity, I'm very sad about that. Because I think that painting had gotten rid of an awful lot. I love constructionism, and cubism, and all those isms. I love the white of the white painting, and I love the use of the empty canvas. That pleases me

aesthetically, and I'm sorry to see it go away. I don't know where it's going, but I do know that since modernity's been with us since the late Middle Ages, I guess it's time for it to go. I think we probably all know now that it's going to be mechanical. It's going to be a piece of machinery attached to some kind of modem, so it's going to be sharing a space, and I don't want to lose space. And modernism developed to a point where it gave us space, and I think that's not going to be filled any more. It's going to be different. But I'm not writing a poem about prophecy or in anger. I'm just saying personally, I regret the end of modernism, because it's what changed me and brought me up.

CW: And do you think what you're doing is modernism?

BG: That's a very good question. Well, as far as poetics are concerned, it's considered modernism in a pejorative way.

CW: I haven't heard that!

BG: Well. I think the word "postmodern" is pejorative. And I don't see a reason for that word at all. You're either modern or you're not. "Postmodernism" indicates a kind of decadence that came into whatever, into this pure form—it's called in an anthology "postmodernism." I don't know what on earth it means. I just don't. We haven't reached postmodernism yet. It's just modernism making its slow way out. It's the end of a whole world of known structure and exploration of structure, and definition of structure, and we have marvelous beginnings in the churches—they're incredible. I don't think we can construct very much else, whatever's to come, but who knows, I'm just a different person, just saying goodbye.

CW: So do you make poems to be beautiful?

BG: Oh, I don't think I'm guilty of that [laughing].

CW: Oh I think you might be.

BG: I think I want beauty to occur, but I don't think it really means a reference to the way a poem can be formed or the way a poem is born.

And again, beauty was a medieval concept, and this medievalism I've been indulging myself in, I think it's a solace. I find there's a tremendous amount of reality—

CW: To medievalism?

BG: Reality itself is related in my mind to medievalism.

CW: Why?

BG: I don't want to use medievalism the way it's been used as an escape, you know, King Arthur and knights and so forth. And I don't want to have that word [medievalism]

attached to me. But it seems to me that I've drawn a lot of comfort from it. The way one thinks of the eighteenth century as the last century in which one could find comfort—it had a surety—well, medievals, they *weren't* sure, they were very modern in that respect. You probably know more about it than I do. I just had that tapestry over there, with the little lambs around—

CW: It's terrific.

BG: It gives me a lot of comfort. It's a harsh life, but somehow there was more hope, or maybe I just know that they had more years, more centuries ahead of them.

But I'm not suggesting that there's anything medieval in *Quill*.

CW: Well, there's armor in it.

BG: Well, that's a word. Don't attach it to me. [Laughter.] And there is a quietism, which you have mentioned.

CW: Yes, why don't you talk about that.

BG: I was thinking about the religion of quietism. I don't really know much about it, but I think it's a beautiful word, and it indicates a settlement, and there's so much that's unsettled and I think that quietism is settling things down. It's a comforting word. It also has a nice spelling—a difficult spelling. You were asking me, "could quietism be a way to talk about the white space?"

CW: Yes, were you thinking of silence when you used the word "quietism"?

BG: I put "quietism" in because it would fill up the space. I don't really want to go into all the operations in this poem and all the bloodletting and the vessels that were opened and the sutures that were put into it, because the poet leaves alone the lines for somebody else to pick up, and probably couldn't add much more to the poetry.

I wanted it all settled down for a minute before it got stirred up again. I put it in the poem just to do that. You know, let's just go there for a second and cool it. And then you proceed.

But to ask a poet what a word means—I think it's kind of—because you just stumble over anything and make it up as you go along.

CW: Oh, speaking of asking you what things mean, sorry, but you have a line in *Quill*, "clean interstices of composition"—and I wanted to ask you why "clean." I thought, is composition not clean, and why not?

BG: That was a visual thing. I think that now you mention it I'd take it out.

CW: Really?

BG: Yes, I think so, I think it's too visual. It should just be "interstices."

Except that when you say just that, when you've stated something, if you put a little word, a dumb little word like "clean" in front of it, you cause people to question it.

CW: Yeah, so it pushes it a little.

BG: I think that poems that have direct meanings—that's a very dull poet, an extremely dull poet, and a person who is writing like he or she sees. That isn't what you're ever writing. You never write what you see. You see it, you just don't write it. You write something else. And there's always something else.

CW: The title *Fair Realism*—how would you say realism is different from writing what you see?

BG: Fair realism is.

But there's no such thing as realism anyway. Well, the "fair" comes from Goethe—something he said about "Stay, thou art so beautiful, thou art so fair." And I love the use of "fair" to mean beautiful. I'm so depressed and bored by the abject realism. Because, you know, an abject realism is a very sad realism, it's given up all its properties. It has so many properties, and then someone comes along and writes about his father.

And anything that is there without anything in back of it—

CW: Anything that is there in the poem without something in back of it?

BG: In the poem. It's just boring. And then people become inventive. And that's worse.

CW: Why?

BG: Well, "inventive" as a pejorative word. I can think of poets, I can think of Iowa poets who are very inventive, and it's just all made up, it's just using invention, fancy. It's not using imagination. And they're very successful. That one in Iowa's very successful. But all she's doing is using invention, and it's not very interesting. It's ego.

There's a struggle between one's ego and the poem. Because the poem really takes you and shakes you. And your ego becomes abject. And I think sometimes the ego comes out in the survival, because its intense need to survive can only last sometimes through technique. And otherwise the poet can't survive. The poem is a wild piece of goods. And it shouldn't be tamed. It's why it's such an exhausting—it's exhausting. Everyone handles this in a different way. Ashbery, his way of handling it—it's a superb technique. And sometimes that's all there is, sometimes when I read it—but *still!* it's worth reading!

CW: And what's your relationship to technique?

BG: I think my technique is getting better. I believe in technique, I believe very strongly in technique. It's a survival method. I think that if you have a very good technique you can survive a lot of bad poems. But that you don't want to have happen either. Frequently a person can have a very good technique and write a very bad poem. Because it's so wonderful to watch technique. And it's rare, it's very rare. There's a lot of artificial technique.

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