

The Gothic Guest

Andrew Joron

Barbara Guest lived a relatively long life for a poet—she died last year at the age of 85—and what’s even more unusual, the force of Guest’s imagination grew more powerful as she grew older. Guest’s later work increasingly moves within spaces of the mysterious and the uncanny, allowing elements of the gothic and the surreal, which had always been latent in her poetry, to become manifest. In the last quarter of her life, Guest transformed the lyric into an instrument for perceiving and conceiving being as something that can never be reconciled to itself. Guest’s poetry thereby joins a lineage of modernist attempts to use lyric as a means of constellating difference—a lineage that runs from Breton’s definition (derived from Reverdy) of the poetic image as an encounter between distant realities to Benjamin’s and Adorno’s related attempt to formulate a “dialectical image” or, as Adorno called it, a “constellation” that could hold contradictory meanings in suspension without the imposition of a totalizing closure.

Indeed, Guest’s decidedly gothic engagement with Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* is one of the most striking and original features of her late work. I’d like to begin my discussion of the constellation of the gothic, the surreal, and Adornian critical theory in Guest’s late work by citing Robert Kaufman’s article “A Future for Modernism,” which appeared in the *American Poetry Review* in the summer of 2000. Here, Kaufman argues that lyric harmony has become impossible under the conditions of capitalism, and that all that a lyric poet can do is to “sing the apparent impossibility of song.” In other words, the modernist poem out-maneuvers social dissonance on the level of form, and produces song out of the very stuff of dissonance itself. In this way, according to Kaufman, the lyric opens up new possibilities of social critique.

As Kaufman explains, “The poet begins with something like an attempt to sing, but does so haltingly, fragmentarily... yet the poet also or thereby seeks to reconjure beauty while simultaneously representing the unprecedented complexity—and in all too many cases,

the horror—of really existing society.” Kaufman then says, explicitly, “Barbara Guest’s poetry is experimentally modern and Modernist in this Benjaminian-Adornian sense.”

Following Adorno, Kaufman understands lyric as providing the form for a critique of social relations; yet I’d like to propose, in counterpoint to this neo-Marxist line of analysis, that Guest ultimately offers not a critique of social being but a critique of being as such, a lyric registration of the impossibility of existence itself. Guest once remarked to me in conversation, “poets are chained to the impossible.” Perhaps Kaufman’s essay about her work was in the back of her mind, but for me her remark carried an existential weight. In this remark, the chain linking poetry to the impossible seems to be made of something stronger than social relations. And this existential register of the impossible bears some affinity to the thought of the renegade surrealist Georges Bataille. In Bataille’s book entitled *The Impossible*, poetry is defined as an evocation of the impossible, “an impossible to which we accede,” in Bataille’s words, “only by forgetting the truth” of all socially useful values. For Bataille and for Guest as well, the Impossible issues its own music and mystery in advance of the social.

The emphasis that falls on reality in Guest’s work is the emphasis of the impossible, the sense that not just social reality, but existence itself presents an impossible figure, a figure with too many sides to see around or to comprehend “realistically.” For example, in the very first lines of Guest’s poem, “An Emphasis Falls on Reality,” the impossible is immediately asserted: “”Cloud fields change into furniture / furniture metamorphizes into fields / an emphasis falls on reality.”

Now the manifestation of the impossible as a fact of existence, if it is authentically and auratically presented as it is in Guest’s work, is always accompanied by a *frisson*, the feeling of the uncanny. And I would argue that Guest’s later work is increasingly pervaded by the uncanny, by a sense that being alive is at the same time being out of place—a perhaps terrifying perception to which Guest as poet responds by arranging things, arranging words, perfectly out of place, a response that is a kind of defensive rapture.

The two literary traditions that have mobilized the uncanny, that have placed the uncanny in the service of the poetic transformation of language, are the Gothic tradition and surrealism. And it is not hard to find the influence of these traditions of the uncanny in the poetry of Guest; they are present throughout her oeuvre but become distinctly stronger in the later work.

When Guest stands up and declares, at a lecture given at a New York gallery in the mid-eighties, “I grew up under the shadow of surrealism,” a gothic declaration if there ever was one, she inaugurates the period of her late work, an amazingly productive and most deeply original period that extends from the publication of *Fair Realism* in 1989 up to her final collection, *The Red Gaze*, in 2005. And I would argue that what makes this phase of Guest’s writing so productive and so original is her engagement with an increasing sense of the existential impossible, the strengthening of her sense of writing as an admission of the uncanny, accompanied by a gathering of the shadows of the gothic and the surreal in her work.

To say that these influences became more prominent in Guest’s work is in no way to imply that Guest subordinated her practice to them, however. Instead, Guest’s reception of the gothic and surreal involved a radical revision of their form and substance, allowing these hauntings from the literary past to energize but not take over Guest’s own unique approach to and evocation of the impossibility of, the uncanniness of existence.

For the remainder of my talk I’d like to look at some of the ways in which the gothic and the surreal are staged in Guest’s late work, and how a synthesis of these forms leads to the emergence of a new form, which might be called “the Guestian gothic.” At this point, it’s useful to remember that the gothic genre itself emerges in the late eighteenth century as an extension of, and revival of, the medieval romance genre of the knight who undertakes a quest on behalf of a maiden in distress. The gothic revival gave this romance tradition a darker turn by playing medievalism against modernity, and conjuring up the spirits of everything that had been repressed by bourgeois Enlightenment culture: the

supernatural, the irrational, mystery and madness and existential terror. And in this way the gothic genre functioned as a social critique much in the same that Kaufman sees the modernist lyric functioning, as a way of opening up the blind spots of establishment culture.

In the gothic novel, the atmosphere of mystery is all-important; in the same way, Guest often insisted in conversation during her late period that the purpose of the poem was to evoke mystery; this for her became the central aesthetic category of this phase of her practice. And it's not hard to discover, perusing the pages of this late work, an all-pervasive atmosphere of mystery; indeed, the poems are often stocked with medieval props and situations derived directly from the gothic genre.

A paradigmatic work in this respect is the poem "Dissonance Royal Traveller," which appears in Guest's collection *Defensive Rapture*, which itself is a very gothic title. The book also contains a poem entitled "Otranto," a direct reference to Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, which is considered to be the first and most archetypal gothic novel. But I want to focus on "Dissonance Royal Traveller," in part because of the way in which Guest's late aesthetics spills out of the poem's very title. In this poem, which is also a meditation on music, "sound opens sound" (which I take to be an assertion of aesthetic autonomy); "*something like images are here / opening up avenues to view a dome / a distant clang reaches the edifice.*" And so, for Guest, what is immediately found in sound is "something like images," not actual images but only their spectral apparition; and even sound arrives as something imbued with otherness, as "a distant clang reaches the edifice," the edifice being a synonym in gothic literature for the castle in which the gothic heroine is traditionally imprisoned. The strange music that moves through the poem with "an aroma of scarlet" is eventually identified as "dissonance": for "dissonance may abandon *miserere* / on bruised knee hasten to the idol." Now *miserere* traditionally refers to a psalm of penitence, especially one that has been set to music; here the music of dissonance abandons a penitential imprisonment, a fallen state, and hastens, though bruised, onward to the idol, a figure that stands in for and potentially falsifies divinity. That is, dissonance, once emancipated, is poetically broadcast toward divinity, or perhaps

toward the unknown, but may only arrive at its false representation. The poem ends on note that is characteristic of the late work of Guest, a synthesis of fear and elation: “in the stops between terror / the moon aflame on its plaza.” Now “stops” can mean both the stations of a journey or a pilgrimage but also the knobs used for regulating pitch in a church organ. In the intervals between terror, then, along “avenues” or lines of perspective “opened up” by a dissonant music, we are witness to an uncanny spectacle: upon a plaza (a word cognate with classical architecture), “the moon [is] aflame,” perhaps reddened by eclipse, a portent of apocalypse. In this poem, the impossible, in the soul-shaking, existential sense of Bataille, certainly issues in song that is no longer merely beautiful but sublime. And of course poem’s architectural references, the music-haunted avenues and domes and plazas, are redolent not only of gothic literature but also surrealism, as exemplified in the settings of De Chirico and Paul Delvaux.

In this poem, dissonance is personified as a royal traveller. Now “dissonance” is a key word in Adorno’s aesthetic theory; and it’s well known that Guest often dipped into the pages of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* for stimulation and perhaps consolation. In fact, the period of Guest’s engagement with the writings of Benjamin and Adorno coincide with what I am calling her late gothic phase. Adorno defines “dissonance” in *Aesthetic Theory* as “the truth about harmony.” “Harmony,” Adorno says, “presents something as actually reconciled which is not.” For Guest, the truth of non-reconciliation reflects not only the relation between art and society, but also, as I am arguing, the nature of reality itself. Poetic reality for Guest, as for the surrealists, consists in an evocation of the mystery of unreconciled being. This mysterious “dissonance” is a “royal traveller,” a gothic knight who travels, just as the knight on the chessboard does, in nonlinear leaps, sideways across the imprisoning squares of conventional discourse. “Dissonance Royal Traveller” is a phrase that could stand as a slogan for the aesthetics of Guest’s late work: disharmony personified as a figure of the romance-quest.

The modernism of Guest’s reception of, and transmutation of the gothic relies not only on her reading of Adorno, which, as I’ve said, is coextensive with the resurgence of gothic mystery in the late work, but also on the surrealism whose shadow always infiltrated

Guest's thought and practice, and never more so than during this late period. The surrealists, of course, hailed the gothic genre as a precursor to their own quest for everything disturbingly mysterious and marvellous. Tristan Tzara, writing in 1934 in the periodical *Surrealism in Service of the Revolution*, affirmed the surrealist value of the gothic novel with its "love of ghosts, witchcraft, occultism, magic, vice, dreams, madness, passions, true or invented folklore, mythology (even mystifications), social or other utopias, real or imaginary voyages, bric-a-brac, marvels..." And André Breton, in an essay written in 1937, cites Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* specifically as a surrealist work, saying that his own Surrealist Manifesto "reads as though I had only paraphrased and generalized the affirmations contained" in Walpole's account of the writing of *Otranto*.

Breton valued *Otranto* not only for its sense of mystery and the marvelous but because it was composed partly by dream-transcription. Now the conventional idea is that dream-transcription and automatic writing lies at the heart of the surrealist method. And Guest's own practice would seem to have little in common with automatic writing; for one thing, she was a ferocious reviser; sometimes I think that the poetic act for Guest consisted not of inspiration alone but of erasing and replacing an original inspiration by means of an almost ecstatic doubt. But even for the surrealists, "pure psychic automatism" was only a temporary tool, a means to the greater end of pure psychic disequilibrium, which could be achieved by any means possible. Such disequilibrium comes about when the artificial walls that separate dream and waking, life and death, are broken down, and distant realities come into uncanny juxtaposition. This, as Breton declared in *The Communicating Vessels*, is "the highest task to which poetry can aspire," and it is to this task that I believe Guest's late work aspires.

Benjamin referred to the juxtaposition of distant realities in the surrealist image as a profane illumination (as opposed to a religious illumination or epiphany). As Susan Buck-Morss points out in her book *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, Louis Aragon's study of Paris, *Paris Peasant*, using surrealist techniques of collage and collision, was a direct inspiration for Benjamin's *Passages* project. Buck-Morss calls the surrealist image

the “prototype” for Benjamin’s notion of the “dialectical image,” a notion that Adorno then picked up and reworked into the idea of an historical “constellation.” As Buck-Morss observes, Adorno’s “constellations are not unlike hieroglyphs, uniting the perceptual and the conceptual.” And Margaret Cohen, in her book about Benjamin entitled *Profane Illumination*, goes so far as to call Benjamin’s surrealist-influenced method “Gothic Marxism.”

Guest’s late work, then, seems to me infused by, and to achieve a synthesis of, these elements of the gothic, the surreal, and critical theory. Guest’s late poems are shimmering Adornian constellations uniting the perceptual and the conceptual, in which uncanny, sometimes jarring or humorous, but ultimately mysterious alignments of meaning occur. The tendency is toward the sublime, yet in Guest’s late work the ridiculous and the sublime can often go arm in arm, revolving in a kind of stately surrealist waltz.

In the last few years of her life, Guest began to identify herself, both at public readings and in private conversation, as a surrealist. At the “Audacious Imagination” tribute to her life and work held at Berkeley in 2003, Guest announced that she was “now writing surrealist poems,” adding “Though I came to surrealism late, it’s better late than never.” She then proceeded to give a reading of one of her greatest last poems, “Nostalgia of the Infinite” (a reference to De Chirico’s painting of the same title).

Guest subsequently shortened this title to one word: “Nostalgia.” Indeed, there was something of nostalgia in Guest’s late engagement with surrealism. If it’s true that in old age we return to our roots, Guest seems to have retraced her own literary roots here, going deeper than the aesthetics of the New York School and Abstract Expressionism to arrive at their surrealist sources.

The working title of her last book, *The Red Gaze*, had been, in the initial drafts, *Surrealism and Other Poems*. This subtitle was eventually dropped. A poem in the book, at first entitled “She Honors De Chirico,” was retitled, significantly enough, “Loneliness,” indicating perhaps the withdrawal of an enabling presence. Surrealism had

become once more a shadow. Nonetheless, both in its process of composition and in its structure, *The Red Gaze* recapitulates the history of surrealism's development into Abstract Expressionism, as its evocations move from De Chirico to the artist Hans Hoffmann—and so recaptures the New York art scene of the fifties in which Guest experienced her emergence as a poet.

And so, this book, which was published and brought to her bedside as she lay dying, was really about her own birth. Yet even after the completion of *The Red Gaze*, Guest continued to be haunted by her surrealist sources. Her final poem, “Hotel Comfort,” left unfinished at the time of her stroke in 2005, makes repeated and explicit reference to surrealism (as a source of comfort, perhaps?). These are, in effect, Guest's last words as a poet:

These Surrealist moments cherished each roof a long time.

In the thickened weather of Surrealism the cathedral is across the street.

“Hotel Comfort”, Barbara Guest