

Pieces of Air in the Epic

Reviewed by Laura Sims

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Brenda Hillman
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“Something about breathing / The air inside a war,” Hillman remarks lightly, reminding us that we exist inside of just such a suffocating atmosphere (44). Hillman maintains this light touch throughout *Pieces of Air in the Epic*; her ethereal, even breezy voice cajoles us through these deeply serious poems. The book performs an important, multi-level critique: of the current war in Iraq, of war in general, of the unethical behavior of corporations and governments, and of the state of contemporary Western society. She does this, not by bluntly criticizing, but by revealing the myriad connections between realms we like to keep separate: the personal, material, political, and spiritual. Hillman does not exempt the artist from her critique, either; rather, she scrutinizes the artist’s role in contemporary society and asks whether art can be relevant or not. Despite her inability to answer these questions and resolve the issues decisively, she carries on, and this, in itself, is an answer.

The most evident critique is formal; Hillman harnesses the epic (particularly in “Nine Untitled Epyllions”) and uses it against itself. The notion of the “hero,” for instance, is repeatedly debunked; he marches through the epic and “scrapes some breath off his shoes” (46). She indicts this mythical creation for making the space we inhabit claustrophobic; a lone figure is not solely responsible, of course, but the centuries-old glorification of heroes and wars *is*. In the air of the war “there is / a river that would drink water /.../ A fire that would singe flame”

(44). Hillman establishes the unending cycle of war in terms of the recycling of “bad air”: “In the present conflict each fire equals re-used air from the Cold War. Tube of silence / and there is / still a silence under / that—“ (30). The “present conflict” draws on bad air from the past, and the layers of silence in the lines may implicate the acquiescence of the citizenry, which has helped wars roll through the ages.

Hillman’s “speaking out” is not limited to outright critique; it includes her weaving of small, intensely personal fragments throughout the book, such as the following:

Wasn’t sure / ...if what we / heard were birds outside the hospital / or climbs in
her monitor—]

(10)

while he / died, some flecked / mushrooms appeared on / Ashby lawns

(26)

These poems are literally marginalized; they’re short in length, and they appear at the very bottoms of pages, in brackets, as if the speaker were sneaking them in amidst the larger losses and grievances. But she *has* included them, and this alone suggests that this personal matter has a place inside, or alongside, the political framework. Similarly, Hillman’s vision encompasses the everyday world *and* the infinite. In the poem “Altamont Pass,” she sets the scene “outside the white spectacle / of the mind’s blindness,” but then we pass “the summer barbecue kickoff / Near the whiff of lemons” (23). She succeeds again and again in yoking such dissimilar contexts, thereby dissolving the barriers we perceive between worlds. In the last line of the book, the speaker tells us, “when you finally saw the lace-maker’s dress, it was / precise and limitless” (87). This seems an apt metaphor for the book itself—*precise* attention to the material world, and evident respect for the *limitless*, the indefinable, the spiritual. Hillman implies that the material

world and spiritual worlds are inseparable, thus life everywhere is equally sacred, and must be revered.

The narrator's voice enacts this blending of worlds by switching perspectives freely. She sometimes speaks from the perspective of "I," sometimes "we," and more often than not, both at once. In the first poem, for instance, what starts out as a recognizably personal, singular voice, dissolves into a "we" midway through. Yet, even in introducing the "I," Hillman qualifies it: "I went for / centuries not as a / self or feature but / exhaled as a knowing" (3). So the switch to "we" comes as no surprise, as in: "we had crossed the / red forest" (3). But aside from alternating between "I" and "we," and largely favoring "we," Hillman also questions the use of "I" directly, as in "String Theory Sutra":

There are so many types of
"personal" in poetry. The "I" is a needle some find useful, though
the thread, of course, is shadow.
In writing of experience or beauty, a cloth emerges as if made
from a twin existence.
(80)

She seems to suggest, in the above quote, that there can be nothing truly personal in writing poetry, that even the needle of the "I" is shadowed, and the cloth it makes emerges from a "twin existence" (80). The "shadow" and the "twin existence" might be other names for the soul, or the collective unconscious. She is not condemning the use of "I" here, but rather acknowledging that even when we are writing what we believe to be highly personal, we draw on the universal.

The "I" is not the only pronoun in question, however; every pronoun comes under scrutiny, especially the usefully vague "us" and "them," which allow us to align ourselves with

the “good guys” and separate ourselves from the “bad guys”: the criminals, the insane, the genocidal maniacs. Hillman reveals how futile these linguistically constructed divisions are in the following lines: “By *we* you mean *they*...by *they*, / I mean the *internet*...By / *we* I mean *we*” (81). So ultimately, we = we, they *and* the internet, and anything else you’d like to include. One could argue that she contextualizes each pronoun in the individual lines, but this only reveals how slippery these labels are. If their meanings shift with context, how can we confidently rely on them to name and compartmentalize? This throws doubt on our ability to name and compartmentalize at all.

The artist herself is, of course, controlling this meditation on the positioning and use of pronouns, but she also examines the role of the artist in the world, especially in constructing discourse in times of war. *Does* the artist have any power, any voice, in a world that won’t listen, certainly not to art? The answer she gives is a simultaneous “yes” and “no.” The dominant persona, a seamstress, moves through the ages as both a singular figure and one who, like Whitman, “contain[s] multitudes.” The seamstress claims that she “[has] no country,” that she, as an artist, is independent, even rootless, and seemingly free from societal rules that bind others (47). This would, obviously, leave her free to criticize the State, or at least to maintain sovereignty over her creations, one would think. But her artwork speaks to the contrary: “I made a winged / creature, and when they / bring it through each / desert on a flag / of bar codes and minus signs / in poverty of fact / through their present freedom, / it is then my / sweet-beaked creature stands for / nothing” (45). The State has co-opted her work and destroys or reverses her original intentions for it. So her independence, however boldly stated, is limited. Even her raw

material is subject to limitations: “it seems cloth / is a state though / every century changes what / cloth is” (47).

There is one time, however, when she is truly autonomous: when she is making art. She says she is “haunted by the / work,” and *saved* by it, because it forces her to “push the little / bright thing on through—“ (49). The “bright thing” could refer to the needle, of course, an instrument of her craft strongly reminiscent of the pen, but it could also indicate the brightness of spirit she weaves into the cloth. She says, “my needle means / nothing to the State” (51), and the line breaks say it all: “my needle *means*” [my emphasis] shows the needle’s significance, namely the potential it represents. When “nothing to the State” is consigned to the next line, we see that her needle can, indeed, escape some tyranny. The artist has learned to slip through these cracks (with her needle or pen) in order to subvert tyranny. Despite her constraints, she keeps working, which gives her joy, and in giving herself joy she forces light into the world. “Only you provide distinction: / the curved dove back / and fourth vowel bells— / any sounds, actually—which / because they are uneven / call you from suffering—” (47). Hillman, too, has found cracks to slip through; her critique is successful because it exists. That it is skillfully constructed, with all complications intact, and conveyed in beautiful lines by a compelling voice, only adds to her achievement.

Laura Sims’s first book of poetry, *Practice, Restraint*, recipient of the 2005 Fence Books Alberta Prize, was published in November. She was recently awarded a JUSFC / NEA Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship to spend six months in Japan in 2006. She has published two chapbooks: *Bank Book* (Answer Tag Press) and *Paperback Book* (3rd Bed), and her poems have appeared in the journals *First Intensity*, *26*, *How2*, *6X6*, and *3rd Bed*, among others. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin, where she teaches creative writing and composition.