

## Barbara Guest: Revery and Apparition

Elizabeth Robinson

"Friend of the static hour  
I take your hand across the borders."  
from "Direction"

In 1998, Barbara Guest delivered a talk, "A Reverie on the Making of a Poem," at Naropa University. That piece, simultaneously poetics statement and poem, was published in Lisa Birman and Anne Waldman's *Civil Disobediences*, but has not to my knowledge appeared elsewhere. This paper will explore the possibility that Guest, in this piece, exemplified a process that characterizes her poetry and poetics as a whole. One could say, using Guest's own words, that she wants to "encourage the mystery,"<sup>1</sup> and that she does so by conjuring "as apparition, majestic in evocativeness."<sup>2</sup> I propose that Guest understood poetry as a site where invisible, inaudible presences exist, and that these presences could be indicated by her use of open space and erasure, and through the movement that her poems employ, both as subject and as visual transit across the page, particularly as these movements transgress boundary or surface.

That Guest's poetry works by way of haunting is, indeed, something that she herself addressed:

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.

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<sup>1</sup> Guest, Barbara, in an interview with Catherine Wagner. See [www.asu.edu/piper/wcenter/how2journal/current/workbook/bg\\_wagner.html](http://www.asu.edu/piper/wcenter/how2journal/current/workbook/bg_wagner.html)

<sup>2</sup> Guest, Barbara, from "An Emphasis Falls on Reality" in *Selected Poems*, 1995, Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, p. 123.

But there's something that you leave off saying and there's something that still remains of that left-off thought.<sup>3</sup>

What is *not* said or depicted is ever at work, exerting its phantom presence on the poetry. I quote from Rob Kaufman who notes in modern poetry as a whole and Guest's poetry in particular "the sense that the very categories of subject and object seem disconcertingly to have been erased well before they can be elegantly transmuted, via *poesis*, into each other."<sup>4</sup> It therefore seems apt that Guest calls her statement "A Reverie," because it employs the reverie's rubbed-off boundaries to create an elusive, invisible, yet very much animated space. Through paradox and fragmentation, Guest can reverse one gesture into another, blurring subject and object. Often her poems pass *through* boundaries or surfaces, blending dimensions that "subsist[. . .] in layered zone," so as to form "a mysterious mesh."<sup>5</sup> Guest uses the ambiguity and illogical logic of reverie, teasing out glimpses of what is otherwise too fleeting or contrary to show itself. Guest's use of erasure and open space in her poems indicates a stealthy attention to the modernist sense that "points define a periphery," yet for her, the 'points,' too, are unstable, the pulse of a skittish presence. Kauffman describes Guest's as "an architecture at once monumental and ghostly, seemingly held in place by the vibration of phrase-blocks one against another".<sup>6</sup> Those vibrations are constitutive of the poetry. That is, Barbara Guest is a diviner of movement, assimilating the ghost's circumspect and indirect moves.

Guest begins her "Reverie" with energetically, with struggle, the need to "*pull in the composition physical*—" Guest portrays the making of a poem as having something of an erotic violence--wrestling, surprise, secret and disclosure:

*and attacked by dizziness of atmosphere!*

In the attack of suspense; a masterful

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<sup>3</sup> See the Barbara Guest interview with Catherine Wagner.

<sup>4</sup> Kaufman, Robert, "A Future for Modernism: Barbara Guest's Recent Poetry" in *American Poetry Review*, @9:4, July/August 2000, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Guest, from "The Surface as Object" in *Selected Poems*, p. 157.

<sup>6</sup> Kaufman, "A Future for Modernism," p. 12.

development of plot and erasure

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Startling these maneuvers!

of idea and erasure<sup>7</sup>

The word "attack" appears three times, and the words "maneuver" and "fist" show up two times each. These are powerful, graphic word choices, especially given the overall brevity of the text. Guest writes very assertively, "attacking" head-on issues of the poet's authority and, yes, domination, over the poem. declaring that the attack must be "masterful;" "knuckle on the hand/illustrates itself tames" with "*muscular control*." The "poet in charge" will even resort to "destructiveness" and her maneuvers result in " a *force majeure to shred the atmosphere/ this fist imprint almost/observable!*"<sup>8</sup>

The emphatic, imperative quality of this piece may be somewhat surprising to Guest's readers who tend to comment foremost on the elliptical grace of her images and lyricism. Yet the reader will also have noticed that "erasure" appears twice in the sections quoted above. It is in the paradox and slippage of this piece that one locates what is more deeply revealing of Guest's poetics, what the poet describes as "a contradictory tug phantom-like-/upon the environs of the poem-." <sup>9</sup> Phantom elements operate unstrategically (that is, they evade the rather martial "maneuvering" enjoined elsewhere) and countermand the purposiveness of "plot" with their "erasure."

Erasure and invisibility, in this "Reverie" have the quality of a natural force, though force is likely the wrong word here. Rather, presences visit the poem, having the agency to bear darkness and lift darkness, until "gradually the page lightens,/ the invisible heaviness lifted itself."<sup>10</sup> Erasure, Guest's elliptical phrasing suggests, is a crucial alternative to conventional representation, to that world which makes "solid objects

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<sup>7</sup> Guest, Barbara, "Reverie on the Making of a Poem" in *Civil Disobediences*, edited by Anne Waldman and Lisa Birman, 2004, Coffeehouse Press: Minneapolis, MN, pp. 369 and 375.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., see pages 371 and 374.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 367.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 368.

merciless/"<sup>11</sup> It's as though the material world, which must be negotiated with careful tactics, were only one form of reality, a brutal form that is to be defied from a wily margin. Hence, Guest describes her writing by saying, "I didn't want to elaborate. I only wanted to make a kind of structure. And on that structure I hung a few words."<sup>12</sup> The words then serve as a kind of elucidating surface on an otherwise invisible shape or presence. The erased or invisible presence is no less potent than what is more clearly manifest. Guest seems to be exploring this when she writes:

mood

what else can poem perform in its arena

of possibilities

the phantom of possible ideas<sup>13</sup>

Here again the reader encounters the poem as a site, an "arena" or a "domain" and in that arena Guest constructs a dwelling for the poem. She does this almost reluctantly; Guest prefers "a blissful discontinuity" which orders "this estrangement of each" to create a poetry whose epistemology maps a mostly gestural cosmos. As she said to Catherine Wagner, "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."<sup>14</sup>

A basic structuring principal of Guest's poetry is the negotiation of the relationship between a more readily discernible "something" and that "something else." In her "Reverie" Guest urges that struggle is "necessary—but not to let go/risk" and "do not hurry poem//but take chances//motion, movement in poem."<sup>15</sup> Thus the job of the poet is to juggle these dimensions, these layers—working a fine oscillation between something and something else that will conjoin the two entities even as it marks them out as delicately discrete. The poet must stay in motion because in such an ephemeral dwelling as the poem, it is motion that structures space and gives information about area and boundaries.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Catherine Wagner.

<sup>13</sup> Guest, "Reverie on the Making of a Poem," p. 373.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Catherine Wagner.

<sup>15</sup> Guest, "Reverie on the Making of a Poem," p. 372.

In Catherine Wagner's interview with Barbara Guest, there's a fascinating exchange that begins to get at this issue of boundary and permeability:

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. [Sound familiar?] 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.<sup>16</sup>

This complex exchange suggests to me that Guest was employing poems to arrange and traverse many levels of interiority, and that the shape of the poem might easily shift so that what at one level was its exterior could suddenly collapse from surface to interior. The tensions that arise from these juxtapositions and overlaps keep the poem in motion, *or* keep the reader moving through the poem (*there's* a useful confusion of subject and object!) so that the texture of each to each achieves a rather volatile fluctuation through which perception itself is made possible.

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<sup>16</sup> See my first citation for the url at which the complete interview can be found.

The final section of the "Reverie" helps clarify how the poem must take risks if it is to be true to its aim, its desire for free movement in the liminal space that Guest refers to as surface:

not to lose sight of the ideas, and movement they must meet

not to tell all possible choices in the poem<sup>17</sup>

Ideas are not static; the fact that they move and they meet shows the intersection of one interior with another. In the strain that inheres in such ephemeral space, it is necessary to move rapidly, between one border and another; to do so is a means of registering, catching a glimpse, of the in and the out, the real and another of its versions. So when Guest says "not to tell all possible choices in the poem," she is *not* instructing other poets to be coyly secretive. Rather, she understands the world of the poem as a site in which all elements can't be apprehended immediately or, possibly, ever. Indeed, the poem may reveal multiple dimensions which sometimes conflict, or witness to revelation by their own silent, tellingly irrational attentiveness. Thus, to settle into one site or perspective is to effect its dissolution, mirage-like, along with any alternatives.

One other formal element in the "Reverie" will demonstrate what I am talking about and demonstrates Guest's, "architecturalism in constantly decomposing and recomposing song-movement."<sup>18</sup> Firstly, all text on each page of the piece is placed only the upper third of the page. Each of the nine pages is, then, more than half blank. Secondly, on each page, there is a horizontal line that separates the upper section of text from the lower. Having arranged the page in this way is both characteristic and canny of Guest. The reader must immediately decide how to read: horizontally from upper text to upper text, and lower text to lower text, or vertically from upper to lower. This foregrounds the importance of motion in Guest's work: it is as though she is compelling the reader to move through space and thereby perceive presences we could not always apprehend in our stillness. This is, for example, the way one cannot feel air and skin as colliding surfaces unless one moves within and against them. In the same way that the "Reverie" compels the reader into motion down and across the page, the horizontal bar

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<sup>17</sup> Guest, "Reverie on the Making of a Poem," p. 375.

<sup>18</sup> Kaufman, "A Future for Modernism," p. 13.

presents a strangely graphic surface on or over which the reader's eye bounces. What does this line demarcate? The contradictory impulses that percolate in this reverie are never so tidily separated. From section to section, Guest freely mixes her ideas; recall a section from the "Reverie" that I quoted earlier:

do not hurry poem

but take chances

motion, movement in poem<sup>19</sup>

Guest ends the page, revealingly, with motion. Motion transcends agency or passivity in Guest's work: motion is a mode of perception, of knowing. Motion permits one to grope through cloud and reverie, trying to palpate the ephemeral space between subject and object.

This is why the horizontal across these pages is so very illuminating of Guest's poetics. Moving, the eye is crossing over a surface into another terrain. In Guest's poetry, any sense of "reality" is vexed and shifting. When Guest declares with a showy exclamation point, "this fist its imprint almost/observable!"<sup>20</sup> she seems to be poking fun: the fist's import is that it makes (almost!) an imprint. Into what? Into surface. The horizontal line that moves across the pages of the "Reverie" constitutes a similar surface. "Surface," a term that appears surprisingly often in Guest's writing; surface *is* the ghost, the apparition, or the apparitional space.

Usually, surface would seem to demarcate boundary, even a sort of epistemological solid ground on which the poem can stand, except that Guest never employs surface in that way. Surface in her writing is always permeable, cloudlike—(and note that there are plenty of clouds in her writing too). It exists not to thwart movement or to separate one plane from another, but to help the agent of the poem (whatever or whomever it may be) to understand, to perceive, movement from one site to the next. The silver humidity of the cloud lingers on one's skin after the passage. That way surface carries over from one site or margin to the next, a sort of beautiful pollution: a haunting.

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<sup>19</sup> Guest, "Reverie on the Making of a Poem," p. 372.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

Perhaps the courage and originality of Barbara Guest's poetry lies in the way she was willing to effect a kind of self-erasure, becoming the porous surface through which image and lyric, absence and presence, would move, "into an arena of sound/the aroma continue as a cloud of invisibility shelters////ghost exiting."<sup>21</sup> Her poetry registers for us what otherwise would not be transcribed: a shimmer, a fragrance, the almost observable imprint of a fist.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 373.