

“B. G. Imperialiste”?

Agency and Power in the Writings of Barbara Guest

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Royalty, towers, castles, and knights appear frequently in Barbara Guest’s last book *The Red Gaze*, the focus of this talk, and in Guest's earlier books. What is the significance of these manifestations of hierarchical, authoritarian power? In Guest’s writings on poetics, motifs of power seem to express a complicated desire to exert and abandon control over the poem simultaneously. In her poems, they function instead to abstract the imperial from its usual effects. The orders authority figures give in Guest’s poems promote liberty; they are a way of imagining a free space in the poem, which is in turn a free space in the world, an “imagined room,” as one of her poems calls it.

As Ann Vickery has pointed out, the title of *The Red Gaze* puns on “read.” Guest’s last book is a meditation on artistic perception. The “red” gaze is forever colored by the environment it observes—by dawn light, or autumn foliage, or red paint (to name several of the book’s reds). It is also forever “read”: the information it gathers for the brain is guided by what the brain is able or inclined to read. As in Jack Spicer’s formulation, in which the “Martians” who speak through the poet can only create using the furniture with which the room of the poet’s mind is furnished, the artistic gaze is limited by the mind that operates it. How to stretch the mind? How to expand the purview of the gaze? The poem, for Guest, is a venue for this work: a practice that explores the possibilities that open up when hierarchies are defined but play against type. That construction of possibility is part of a poem's purpose, a purpose that might be taken to be political, despite this poet’s resistance to thinking of poetry in such terms.

I'll address this topic in three sections. Power and the Fictive Place addresses the ways objects and characters exert power in Guest's poems. Power and the Creative Process

examines Guest's understanding of poetic practice as a power struggle. The third section, "Instructions" for Poetry, reads a poem from *The Red Gaze*, "Instructions" as an ars poetica that models a paradoxical strategy of Guest's: the command that assumes its subject's submission while insisting on that subject's agency.

Power and the Fictive Place

Guest had a fetish for the medieval. By her own admission, she felt nostalgia for the period, though she said she didn't want to use it "as an escape."¹The motif appears throughout her career: in late books such as *Miniatures* and especially *Quill, Solitary Apparition*, and earlier, as well; in her elegy for James Schuyler, for example, which repeatedly calls the subject of the poem "king." What attracts me to the motif in *The Red Gaze* is its relationship with Guest's understanding of the poem as a "fictive place," a place apart, a place of significant freedom. Objects in Guest's poems frequently enact a fictive agency we do not imagine objects as having in the ordinary world. In a similar reversal, icons of power in the poems in *The Red Gaze* either reject their power or use it to increase or declare a state of liberty in the world of the poem. In both these versions of agency, that of the object and that of the subject, those who do not normally have much power are offered a situation in which a good deal of agency is available to them.

Guest's anti-positivist, anti-rational poems use the so-called pathetic fallacy insistently and intentionally; they are populated almost entirely by objects given unusual agency. The following examples are all from *Red Gaze*: "A burst of leaves announces your presence," "[c]omplications of red enter the leaf," "[t]he world conceals your identity from me," "maple red now splashes the mountain," "leaves restrain," "midnight stirs a coffee cup," a "[r]estless leaf modifies" a poem. That which is seen, gazed upon, is here asserted to have its own intentions, so that the viewer or subject is not the only one who has agency in the object-world of the poem. Thus simply, Guest upends an everyday hierarchy in which objects are ours to enact our intentions upon.

¹ Catherine Wagner, "Freedom, Confinement and Disguise: An Interview with Barbara Guest." *How2*, Volume 2, Issue 4 (Spring–Summer 2006).

The actions of the authority figures in *The Red Gaze* also serve to invert ordinary power-structures. An “emperor/described as a poor man in disguise . . . has cast away his steel to rest beside the maiden.” The emperor gives up his trappings of power and as a result, as the last line of the poem puts it, “Oddness begins.” An alternate reality can take shape in the poem. Throughout *The Red Gaze*, announcements that apparently issue from centers of power offer us increased freedoms: the first poem in the book announces that “Bulletins permit us to be freer than in Rome”; other bulletins “permit us comb, fish of silver”—that is, we are here allowed to enjoy beautiful things. Some other examples of the special favors offered in the world of these poems by the authority figures that inhabit them: “Lo, Royalty . . . placed a hand upon your head.” “Officials at Rome have ended the martyrdom,” “The air free of misdemeanor, [we are] at rest in the inns of our fathers,” “We have built no large hall to labor in./We sleep on small cushions for as long as we wish.////Our lives are composed with magic and euphony.” We are made welcome in these poems to a pastoral pleasance in which we are freed of ordinary duties. The pleasures available in the world these poems conjure are enormous, and inextricable from the permission given us to enjoy them by the authorities that inhabit them. We “marionettes” of ordinary reality can here be “late risers . . . awak[ing] in late morning, bringing [our] hands to the gold tap and drinking its rare waters.” In order to create a fictive heavenly space for the poem, Guest must somehow signify our release from the ordinary, and she does so in part by invoking a faraway historico-social space, the space of the medieval, and then removing its restrictions.

Power and the Creative Process

In a conversation with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Guest said “there's no control over life, and in the imagination you can control a good deal.” (You can, for instance, invite the king into your poem and lay down his sword.) Guest seems here to claim that a turn to art is a turn away from the chaotic toward a realm one can direct—a source of comfort, in good old Freudian *fort-da* fashion. Pleasurable safety, richness, and otium are often announced in Guest’s poems. In her writings on poetics, however, the act of creating the poem is peculiarly violent. Her discussions of writing often invoke the motif of medieval power structures familiar from her poems. The essay “Invisible Architecture” describes

the relationship between poet and poem as a battle for domination in which the poet is opposed by an invisible force. This battle makes the poem. As Guest puts it:

Losing the arrogance of dominion over the poem to an invisible hand, the poet campaigns for a passage over which the poet has control. Yet the unstableness of the poem is important. Also the frequent lapses of control over the poem. The writer only slowly retains power over the poem, physical power, when the poem breaks away from the authority of the invisible architecture.

The poet and the poem's "invisible architecture" are at odds in a kind of battle for dominion over the nation-state of the poem. "The poem is fragile. It needs to reach through the armed vehicle of the poem," declares Guest. Poems contain multiple sources of agency, and these sources are in conflict. "By whom or what agency," Guest asks at the end of "Invisible Architecture," "is the [behavior of the poem] decided?" Not by the poet's, it seems, or not triumphantly: the poet does not win the battle. Guest's essay "Mysteriously Defining the Mysterious: Byzantine Proposals of Poetry" claims that "... the poet slowly dies in his or her poem making sure there are fragments remaining of the empire which created the poem, the empire of the poet's soul." For Guest, the poet ultimately must disappear from the poem, but the trace of her "empire," her attempt to rule the poem, does not: with the poet's dying gasps she ensures that her Roman roads and her damaged battlements remain. As with the kings and officials of *The Red Gaze*, empire remains, but is now neutralized, beneficent, unthreatening; the poem absorbs the poet's battle-tactics into its mysterious architecture.

"Instructions" for Poetry

"Instructions" is a how-to poem about the artistic process. Ironically, it includes no verbs—no action at all—for most of the poem, and refuses the imperative voice—conventional "instruction" language—until the last line. The first line of the poem offers the simplest of announcements: "Mood and Form. Other pieces of literature." We begin writing a poem in a mood, among forms. It would of course be impossible not to begin thus. Perhaps I am sitting down to write in a melancholy or enervated mood; the ceilings are high or the windows are dirty; I've been reading a fashion magazine or a history of the Vietnam War. My poem will unavoidably be inflected by these circumstances. Guest

does not instruct us directly on how to write a poem: instead, she defines for us what instructions for poem-writing consist of. It is the circumstances of a poem that, at its outset, instruct it.

Similarly, the next line, “Emphasis on content,” does not *instruct* us to emphasize content. Rather, it announces a state of affairs: the emphasis is on content, definable here as that which a poem contains. One can write anything that can be written, and the anything one writes will be the content of the poem. Thus the writing of the poem puts an emphasis on what is written. This circular and banal-sounding logic puts the emphasis in the correct place: the poem. When a writer attends to what a poem contains, she emphasizes the place where subject matter, form, action, anything, come into combination to exist together. When we attend to the content of the poem we are attending to what needs attention; what needs attention will come into the poem.

Toward the end of the poem, we arrive finally at action: “Figure moves backward from the door/. . . Figure modified by light.” “Figure” can refer both to the shape of a person and to a poem’s use of metaphor or symbol. Guest thus invokes visual and language arts simultaneously. The artist’s content—the figure his or her work contains—appears here to be in motion of its own accord.

At the climax of the poem, the “instruction” the title of the poem leads us to expect is at last given: “Remove figure from window.” This last line changes the poem’s frame: we no longer observe only the figure in motion; we are now outside the frame of the picture containing the figure, viewing the frame of a scene or system, that contains someone—the artist?—who modifies the scene she portrays. The command also may also address the reader. Because “figure” stands in for poetic tactics, the poem itself can be understood as something that blocks the reader’s view; with its removal, we are ejected from the poem to “gaze” freely. The switch to the imperative allows Guest to reframe the poem as a consideration of artistic and readerly agency.

Yet we still do not know who or what issues the command. The poem is an arena where power is exerted, but the revelation of the origin of agency is still refused to us. The implication is that power is, like signification, not permanently moored to particular subjects; neither is it random; it manifests within particular structures and these structures can be reorganized. The removal of the figure leaves the window clear for the gazer to see out of it, and the poem becomes a place where power is exerted in such a way that a space for observation or action—or simply rest—is cleared.

The imperialist poet who cannot or will not continue to enforce her creative empire can be aligned with the power-figures in Guest's poems that give up power or permit liberty. Both the poem as creative process and the objects in Guest's poems thus have unusual agency. It is as if the exploited are recognized as exploited and set free at the same time. Two questions I cannot yet answer emerge from this reading of Guest: 1) How might Guest's figurings of power systems reverberate against our thinking about power relations in the daily world? 2) How can I reconcile the violence of the metaphors Guest uses to describe writing her poems with the nonviolence of the powers that act in those poems?

For Guest, the poem is a place apart; it is never a direct political tool. But despite the poem's status for Guest as "imagined zone," her poems and poetics permit us to imagine a space in which the powerful and the oppressed exist in a different relation to one another. Hierarchies, the known, are reproduced in a new relation, a relation that (whether or not it is peaceable) enlarges the gaze, the mind's aperture. "Oddness begins," says Guest. "We are ready/for a new orientation."