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Book Reviews: Stephen Berg's *Shaving* and Marie Harris' *Weasel in the Turkey Pen*

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Stephen Berg, *Shaving.* Marshfield, MA: Four Way Books, 1998. Paper: $12.95. Cloth $23.95

Marie Harris, *Weasel in the Turkey Pen.* Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose Press, 1993. Paper: $10.00

Shaving, Stephen Berg's new collection of prose poems, introduces us to a quizzical, self-critical mind, one whose best poetic work springs from a reflection on the restlessness of imagination and the dignity of suffering. In the opening poem, "Legacy"—one of many poems preoccupied with the disappointments and pains of family relations—Berg writes: "It doesn't even matter who we are, all three of us, sitting in the living room of a house in a city—a sick old dying man, a woman, a younger man—arguing over what the sick one wants to leave, to whom, after he's dead." The younger man turns out to be the son, "half-nuts from the sickness and the craziness, from how this moment resurrects an entire family history by condensing it, a primal myth, without imagery from the past, into one room, one time, forever." Berg's insistence on the necessity to translate personal experience into myth sets the tone for a book in which a sense of parable-like universality seems to co-exist (and interact) with a quasi-confessional, subjectivist drive towards self-affirmation. More specifically, the main theme of Berg's prose poetry appears to be the appropriation of personal history through memory and the recognition that we are, to paraphrase Mr. Compson in *The Sound and the Fury,* the sum of our past selves and misfortunes. As Berg's persona comments, "the identities of the people do not matter, as the years pass, in the mind, it all becomes the person in whose mind it lives." This, he argues elsewhere, is the only true definition of immortality as "the T flares into non-existence—gone into others and objects."

The strong philosophical strain in Berg's prose poetry is linked with a desire to create a metaphysics of everyday life liable to suggest a way out of potentially crippling experiences towards the renewed sense of self of an emotionally integrated adult. With its emphasis on the primacy of individual choice and personal responsibility, Berg's poetic voice is often remorse-ridden, haunted by a desire to understand where his pain is coming from. In "Metaphysical Exercise I," Berg writes: "Everything is politics, and nothing is; everything is the family; everything is delicacy, detail, perception." In "Hell," he comments: "Nobody punishes anyone but himself these days of our godlessness, our lack of faith." In Berg's existentialist poetics, meaning is indeed irremediably man-made: there is no essence or absolute, either within or beyond us. Man (for this is an eminently male-oriented, deeply masculine book) thus feels thrust back upon his own frustrations and limitations and no longer seeks significance in religion, or even culture, but in the human mind itself. More often than not, Berg's poetic self seeks protection from "the enemy world"—the world of frustrated ambitions, family tensions, and various kinds of psychological damage and suffering—by taking refuge in an awareness of his ontological aloneness, embarking on a quest for his guiltless, pre-Oedipal being which,

according to the narrator in "Self-Portrait at Six" "lets you act without even a hint of sensing others watch you, judge you, worry about you, so that desire and action fuse."

Despite its strong autobiographical content, one is left with the feeling that the purpose of *Shaving* is less to write autobiography as to reflect upon the ways biography can be used to redefine the self in its relationship to its past and present experiences. The emphasis, in other words, is on the fissure between the writing and the written self as well as between the perceiving and the perceived "I"—hence the numerous mirror scenes scattered throughout the collections in such poems as "Shaving" or "The Weave," in which Berg's persona "remembers looking into a mirror once, not knowing who [he] was, the face in the glass seemed not to be [his] face, disconnected from any knowledge of whose it was, the way a word can lose its meaning if you repeat it enough times, or an object seem uncanny if you keep staring at it." Building upon L. P. Hartley's dictum that "the past is a different country," and projecting his intellect and emotions into his former selves in an effort to express "the T behind the infinite realm of selves the T is," Berg writes a kind of semi-autobiographical writing which is deeply aware of its own methodological and rhetorical limitations as well as of the necessity to attend to the Heraclitean movements of consciousness ("Mind like smoke, Heraclitus says, less mass than anything, always in motion, and only movement can know movement").

Berg is undoubtedly an erudite, internationally-minded poet (he has translated Miklós Radnóti's *Clouded Sky* and has written variations on the work of Anna Akhmatova), and references to Dante, Vallejo, Sartre, Lowell, Auden, Conrad, Rimbaud and others abound in the collection. Some of these intertextual leads, however, are insufficiently developed, and Berg occasionally seems to indulge in meaningless name-dropping—this impression is reinforced by the presence of several typos and grammatical mistakes in the epigraph to the book (from Dante's *Purgatorio)* and in the French quotes from Rimbaud's "Conte" (in the poem entitled "Music"). Such carelessness may indicate that the author has only a second-hand knowledge of the original works; at any rate, the book would have benefited from some stricter editing.

This being said, Stephen Berg is a truly original, passionate and remarkably inventive poet at his best and quite unlike any other American prose poet— it is a tribute to his furious, irrepressible celebration of life that his poetry never suffers from diffuseness or flatness of tone. On the level of form, Berg writes long, uninterrupted poems-paragraphs organized around a "singleness of purpose" which he sees as the privilege of the Tudor lyric "organized to perfect an argument by coiling it tight around a single image, theme or idea"— the central dramatic idea in "Metaphysical Exercise II," for example, is the paradoxical dialectics of awareness and self-forgetfulness and its possible extension into "a moment of emptiness [when] life seems to accomplish itself simply by being." In other masterpieces, such as "A Woman," "The Gaze" or "Self-Portrait at Six," Berg takes on the Romantic poet's role, which is to meditate on love, beauty, death and eternity and their transformation into art.

There are times when Berg's poems become more topical, less engaged in philosophical digressions around the politics of family, and begin to grapple with other aspects and periods of his life as well as the specific social and cultural context in which his vocation as a poet and an editor developed. In "Break," Berg's description of his years at Perm State begins by underscoring the sense of global psychological crisis that followed WWII (Berg enters college in 1952, "7'/2 years after the Bomb," which marks "the start of a new undoing and reseeing of morality that's still harrowing us though it can't transcend our lust for war and money") and proceeds to examine the nature of his friendship with a fellow student with whom he did "the usual things:" "started a literary magazine, went to a whorehouse on the campus for one shot, visited New York a lot, dated together, drank, listened to jazz, read and talked about books." Ten years later, Berg creates, with retrospective irony, what amounts to a caricature of the 1960s counterculture hero, as his old friend is now "working for a publisher, [has] shifted from Preppie snottiness to humble left-wing anti-Johnson anti-middleclass anti-any thing-US A, started to wear Army-Navy surplus khaki jackets and fatigues, read everything by Beckett, attend[s] marches, edit[s] only political books." Similar themes are explored in "Laing," which relates Berg's encounter with R. D. Laing, the founder of antipsychiatry, whose "cold intricate nearly intolerable dissection of relationships" somehow fails to help him in his quest for what he describes elsewhere as a "redefinition for the bare incurable self." What emerges from Laing's writing is a tragic sense of man's helplessness and vulnerability ("We are acting parts in a play we have never read and never seen, whose plot we don't know, whose existence we can glimpse, but whose beginning and end are beyond our present imagination and conception")—Heidegger's description of human existence as "throwness-into-being" comes to mind as an expression of the ontological aloneness of individuals who are unable to establish meaningful relationships with things or persons outside themselves. In other poems, personal relationships and chance encounters become a springboard for the exploration of major historical traumas, as in "Cages and Houses," in which a "fat, smiling, legless" Vietnam veteran finds solace in the belief that "anything sad or tragic [can be] made beautiful, instructive, necessary."

By the time we reach "All I Can Say," the very last poem of the collection, the poet's unrelenting efforts to gain a better understanding of the source of human suffering have metamorphosed into a more restrained longing for a "breathing" space where thought can eventually "[exhaust] itself." The poem ends with a description of Vermeer's famous painting, "Mistress and Maid," in which "a young woman sits at a table or desk . . . toward a maid who's handing her a letter"—although the "luminous gray wall" and the "window [filling] the left edge of the painting" seem to refer to "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window" rather than to the later painting, in which the scene is set against a dark background. Seeing in Vermeer's quiet, dignified bourgeois interiors a visual counterpart to his poetic project, Berg concludes that the wall "seems one solid yet absolutely ephemeral plane the viewer or the woman could pass

through without the least effort . . . a zone of grace and silence, a holiness of pure color, safe, air and unconcerned, endlessly itself, the place where we look for in ourselves as the source of faith, the always accessible otherness that is not personal or even human."

If Berg uses the prose poem form as a tool for self-exploration and a means of expressing the pains and agonies of the "naked" self, one of the chief merits of Marie Harris's *Weasel in the Turkey Pen* is that it reintroduces some social credibility and psychological depth into the "well-made" Surrealist or "fabulist" prose poem made famous by Russell Edson, David Ignatow, Michael Benedikt and others. While Harris's indebtedness to the Surrealists is most apparent in such pieces as "Tent Circus" and "S. Dali in Montréal," maybe the nearest painterly correlative to "The Bedroom" or "Tammy Bakker's Left Eyelash" is not Dali but the Pop Art collages of Robert Hamilton or the collage-boxes of Joseph Cornell (recently celebrated by Charles Simic in *Dime-Store Alchemy),* which make similar use of juxtaposition techniques in their attempts to defamiliarize everyday objects and found materials:

> The bed has a chronic list. The side on which no one sleeps is strewn with empty envelopes and among them notepapers, pink overdue notices, stained appointment cards dating back months, church newsletters. Near the telephone with its tortured cord is a coverless phone book and two gaping handbags. At the foot of the bed, a yellowing girdle, twisted pairs of pantyhose, a neat stack of blouses with their yard sale tags hanging from tiny gold safety pins. One hospital-issue foam slipper. A housecoat. A plastic cosmetic case with a broken zipper spilling capless lipsticks, stale powder, dulled eyebrow pencils.
>
> ("The Bedroom")

Like many other post-war prose poets, Harris seems to have found in the prose poem a flexible medium that allows the writer not only to play with different genres (including the travelogue, the dreamscape, the landscape poem, the narrative fragment or simply the list) and combine antipodal modes and registers, but also to account for the jazzy, syncopated cadences of modern life. The result is a kind of writing which is eminently playful and whimsical, jazzy and conversational, full of "local color" and tragicomical twists. In "Airborne," for example, Harris describes what happens in a parking lot "just a few spaces from 'The Tent: where brotherhood is more than just a word! ' where Christian bikers (beautiful bellies, glowing tattoos, vests embroidered with "Riding for the Son") man a table of free apples, homemade chocolate chip cookies and hand-lettered pamphlets about Jesus. There, a group of clean-cut young men are filling helium balloons one by one to make a single enormous balloon which is being tied to the bound wrists of a naked inflated woman-doll." Such prose poetry is typical of the "debunking" gestures one often en-

counters in the prose poems of Simic or Ignatow. It is also representative of Harris's taste for the tall-talish, the flamboyant, the burlesque, a feature most apparent in such pieces as "Tent Circus" or "S. Dali in Montréal."

But Harris's wit almost always operates within a context of meditative seriousness and lyric intimacy, as in "'And Then The Windows Failed,'" in which the I-persona, overwhelmed by a grief that ha[s] no reassuring ritual," proceeds to gather "cloudy images and fram[es] their blue-gray patterns in the windows above [her] head," or in "Diviner," in which a water diviner is called upon to find "the severed limbs of women beside an interstate, wives with bruises on their faces, fathers who have betrayed daughters, videotapers of kidnapped children, wilding boys." There is also a certain "revisionist" strain in Harris's collection, one which leads her to rewrite classic texts and familiar myths. In "The Fifth Day," for example, she describes a world in which "birds inhabited the skies and the ocean swarmed There was," the poem continues, "one morning, abrupt and brilliant, a long sigh of day exhaling into gray evening, and one night of starry krill. On this the fifth day the whales composed all their songs as they broke the skin of the sea with their black backs and drank from the cold broth, sounding and surfacing, fluke and brushy plume." The poem ends with the suggestion that the songs of the whales continue to remind us of this state of prelapsarian grace by recalling "even now, the hours before dominion."

Although the poems in the last section of the book seem almost invariably personal, Harris creates dramatic tableaux in many different modes and around many different themes which include sexual politics ("Mary Cassatt at the Diner," "Trial Separation"), the metaphorical power of physical laws ("Physics One"), the correspondences between outer and inner landscapes ("Deep Winter," "Patient, February") and the sacred and the profane meanings of motherhood ("Tableaux," "Mother On a Northern Background, With Children"). Throughout the volume, Harris's prose poetry remains rooted in the observation of what Maxine Kumin calls "authentic, unadorned detail." But in the details we see the broader human concerns that enable us to recognize larger issues, and the humor, grace and urbanity in *Weasel* is consistently played out against a background suggestive of a desire for transcendence and the recognition that "each of us turns in the dream of flying, of flight" ("Generation").

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