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Rosemarie Waldrop's *Lawn of Excluded Middle*

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Rosmarie Waldrop. *Lawn of Excluded Middle*. Providence: Tender Buttons, 1994. 81 pp.

In Rosmarie Waldrop's *Lawn of Excluded Middle*, the human body—actual and abstract—is stalked by physical, social, and logical law. The ensuing struggle between nature and philosophy is alternately funny and moving. The "lawn" of the book's punning title is both an embarrassment of the logical "law of the excluded middle" and an insistence that language be literally "grounded" in spatial and emotional relation.

With a Blakean sense of the gravitational pull upon a body and the relation of that pull to both the act of writing and the fact of mortality, each poem brims with an entropic understanding resistant to both elegy and lyric. This "lawn" where "full maturity of meaning takes time" is neither a country churchyard nor a splendor in the grass. Though "everything in our universe curves back to the apple," here the fruit is as much Newton's as Eve's. Disappointed with civilization and its static dualities ("Because I refuse to accept the opposition of night and day I must pit other, subtler periodicities against the emptiness of being an adult"), the book insists upon alternative forms of order and ambiguity.

In many ways the book presents a perfect case-study of the prose poem as such. The work it performs aesthetically is distinct from both the lineated music of lyric poetry and the normative accrual of meaning in narrative or persuasive prose. In the two long poems that make up this volume, the unit of composition is the sentence—perhaps what Language poet Ron Silliman would call the "new sentence," an inheritance often traced to Gertrude Stein. But Waldrop's alliances with Language poetry and Wittgensteinian "language games" never pull these poems beyond an implied correspondence to a thinking, feeling, and specifically female "ground" often addressed at a moment of composition:

It takes wrestling with my whole body for words on the tip of my tongue to be found later, disembodied, on paper...even rock, thinning to a reflection that I hope outlasts both the supporting mirror and the slide from sign to scissors.

In the crux of a child's game of paper/scissors/rock is the dilemma of a writer's simultaneously composing and decomposing body between

material and immaterial "proof." A figural logic.

Formally, Waldrop's prose poems read like syllogisms, but their meaning is multiple rather than reductive or elided. These sentences do not lead us methodically to a strictly conceived illumination. Instead, they refer backward and forward within the book, so that the overall effect is that of dreaming. As readers we are often unable to distinguish syntactically an insight from an observation, a quip, an accusation, a foreshadowing, or a rebuttal of what has gone before, since a sentence will often perform, structurally, many of these functions at once. A single dangling modifier finds us guilty in our over-achieving desire to construct meaning at the same time that it reevaluates the role of a partner:

This is an attempt to make up for inner emptiness in the way that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dance with more desperate brio to add a third dimension to their characters.

Throughout the two serial poems of this volume ("Lawn of Excluded Middle" and "The Perplexing Habit of Falling"), Waldrop's syllogistic syntax reassesses its "human condition": the awareness of and failure of desire; the demand for and failure of definition; the mercurial quality of language as it disappears like Narcissus precisely at the moment when one feels its proximity, its imminent touch. Each poem posits two poles, between which meaning composes itself—in the real, waivering *middle* that every polarity *excludes*. Sustaining a Wittgensteinian attraction to the hypothetical, it frets over representation and interpretation:

I worried about the gap between expression and intent, afraid the world might see a fluorescent advertisement where I meant to show a face.

or sight and insight:

My legs were so interlaced with yours I began to think I could never use them on my own again.

Even the book's opening sentence (a direct revision of Wittgenstein) waivers between assertion and doubt:

When I say I believe that women have a soul and that its substance contains two carbon rings the picture in the foreground makes it difficult to find its application back where the corridors get lost in ritual sacrifice and hidden bleeding.

The hypothetical "soul" exists in inescapably physical terms (two carbon rings). But with or without its transcendental sidekick, the body is always a matrix of meaning (ritual sacrifice, hidden bleeding). If women have souls, then their infinitude, their ambiguity, has a container. If not, not. The possibility that this anonymous body has no soul is no obstacle to the poem; it merely evokes wakeful consideration of the uselessness of a soul/body split once one steps outside logic. What one has is one thing. What one represents and how one represents it is, of course, another.

Refusing strict dualities, the book's timing operates according to a calendar distinct from the quotidian, as if articulating the verbal equivalent of the lunar clock and its pull upon our mostly fluid bodies. Occasionally this inverted timing takes the form of an irresistible "bad" joke ("Vitreous. As in humor.") Elsewhere it constitutes a rich double entendre, as in the opening poem, which describes a reading procedure of "penetration," allowing for the model of an absent, unnameable center, an eros of logic.

Throughout, these poems track the relation between reader and meaning: our desire to be lost in it, to give ourselves to it, to inhabit it. Like a painted surface, each poem composes a foreground and background which approach and recede in quick succession, transforming surface to substance. Where these sentences evoke and debunk logical form, they are calmly erotic; where they are abutted by the symbolic they are most violent. One of the book's opening poems describes a second-hand report of a woman's execution. Told with matter-of-fact interest, its tabloid gore is unabsolved by its symbolic, even ritualized, significance.

Thus both hypothetical "text" and real text flicker between latent and overt meaning—between opacity and "penetrability." The book traces dozens of forms of negativity, absence, and separation: the gap between reader and text, between writer and words, between lovers, between known and unknown, unknown and unknowable, what one meant and what one said, what exists but can't be touched, what one sees and what one is blind to. Section 16 of the title poem is a discourse on the double negative as a mysterious form of affirmation whose questions are both rhetorical and serious:

Can I walk in your sleep, in order to defer obedience and assent to my own waking? Or will the weight of error pull me down below the symmetries of the round world? Touching bottom means the water's over your head.

Even in the realm of the hypothetical, our displacement is dire. But in Waldrop's world, the hollowness of the real lends itself to something beyond an absurdist's gleeful refusal of meaning. Carried by the corporeal and heady logic of these poems, one finds oneself at rest in the moment of indecision between "touching bottom" and drowning. It is, finally, no divine edict but a happy coincidence that "the gravity of love is ambivalence."

Elizabeth Willis