

# Forces of Modification: On Barbara Guest's *The Red Gaze*

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By Anthony Hawley

"Nothing is more useless than a poem with a dull sheen that refuses to move, is inert," writes the poet in her essay "Poetry the True Fiction." A survey of her career would demonstrate the lengths to which she has gone to ensure against "inert[ia]." The lengths to which she has refused to coat poems with a calcifying finish. From the expansive lines indicative of works such as *The Blue Stairs*, *Moscow Mansions*, and *Fair Realism* to the increased deployment of spatiality in books like *Defensive Rapture*, *Rocks on a Platter*, and most recently, *The Red Gaze*, she has spent her career upholding a principle of "plasticity" on the page. The poems retain an enticing malleability. Which is not to say poems have no shape. Rather they pulsate on the page. "How splendid when a poem is both prospective and introspective," she writes elsewhere. And this relationship between the "prospective" and "introspective" manifests itself variously, lending the poems their acute dynamism.

## Spatiality

"And doors open into a narrow surprise. / The jingle of crystal follows you everywhere, / even into the whistling corridor." *The Red Gaze* perpetuates a depth of space. So many zones in a single poem. As in, the "door open[ing]," into "surprise;" the kinetic sound of "crystal" against the reverberations in the "corridor." Sound magnifies space. And the page does as well. In *The Red Gaze*, the page enters the poem, itself a zone, promoting an additional dimension. Movements on the page, truncated lines adrift on the page: "Shadows are everywhere.      Oddness begins."

Absence enlarges the scope of poems, enforces passage. From subject to object (but is there a difference?). And back again. Arguably, what the book attends to is unperceived, overlooked space. "In the tower you flew without wings / speaking in other tongues to the imagined room." Increased spatiality furthers the plasticity of the poem—both its three-dimensional quality and the quality that allows it to retain its change in shape after experiencing spatial manipulations. This affects the scene. And the seen.

## Visibility

"I ask you to permit the image / and the alteration of time." *The Red Gaze* begets encompassing vision. A sculptural vision. Vision adept at perceiving and presenting the image as it experiences time. What it makes visible: several present tenses. Commensurate instances. Surfaces colliding. But not subsequently. Actually: "To invoke the unseen, to unmask it. Reality in a glass / of water. The mirror reveals heartstrings of reality." This sort of stanza rejects closure and invites distance. Within-poem distance.

This is the book as sight. As working eye. The book both makes visible and *is* visibility. How it is visibility: "You have entered the narrow zone. / Your portrait etched in glass." How splendid when a book, despite (and in spite of) aberration allows space to enter it, a greater visibility refusing to territorialize.

## Coloration

"and the snow begins. Colorful complications / disturb serenity, causing our eye / to wander over the shaking tree." Hues co-joining. Swatches of color instructing readers how to perceive fractured space. In pieces, in motion. Directive color imbues the poet's work with its nomadic architecture: porous structures secured with tints and shades, and susceptible to elemental change. From the same poem: "Morning began with a concert of white. Blue enters later."

While *The Red Gaze* takes on such lofty preoccupations as time, art, and presence, its porous borders safeguard. Against pretension. Against the weight of such preoccupations. This has to do with color.

What impresses the senses when reading: color bespeaks potential modification. The prospect of revision. Always the poem within the realm of possibility: "Green numbers, a patois we are learning to speak. / Butterflies in the house you told us about." Color adapts and *is* pliability. Were it not for color *The Red Gaze* would not travel as it does. Were it not for "green numbers" the book would not increase one's awareness of the "imagined room." This "patois" betters both poem and reader's chances of infiltration. Or perhaps betters readers' understanding of what infiltrates the poem.



## Presence

“A witness was found for the markings inscribed upside-down.” Presence haunts *The Red Gaze*. And nurtures it. But not presence representing fixedness. No unerring thing. In *The Red Gaze*, departure marks presence: “What we are becomes a memory, the hand may open a secret lock.” Thus, much to readers’ surprise, presence stirs.

Imagination infers the “secret lock.” And now, the immediate vicinity of both the there and not-there. Another presence. The page also attends to this (as with spatiality). Take, for example, this one line, alone in the vast page: “Distance lingers in her hand.” A thing to be held, to be *grasped*. And thus, remarkably, “distance” also a presence. But only so long. Presence trembles. Not as the result of external force; but rather it has work to do—“Corrective light that carried shadow away / to another visibility.” Presence must move towards something.

## Becoming

“In each genuine art work something appears that did not exist before,” writes Theodor Adorno. How strange *The Red Gaze* ends (or rather, stops) with this quotation. The final poem, called “Supposition,” which precedes Adorno’s words: “You are willing / to pass through the center / composed of independent poetics. / To rearrange rhyme, / while you gather its energy.” *The Red Gaze* does not set parameters. But draws constellations. It garners watchfully. Poems appear to have discerned what little they could of a scene, though not insisted upon the scene; appear to have passed “through a center,” though not fashioned a center.

The poet has perhaps built her career by “gather[ing]” “energy.” Energy *has* potential, suggests alteration. “Restless leaf modifies his poem.” Real energy of things in motion. Also energy of unseen (or suggested) dendrites. “Corrective light that carried shadow away / to another visibility.” Attachments relay information between sites, often uninvestigated. Thus, one reads poems in *The Red Gaze* not only as what appears to be but also as what might be. The poems *have* potential: “The form of the poem subsided, it enters another poem.” Always becoming. Temporal and spatial surfaces intersect. And act upon the poem, rendering it agile. This potential energy does not accept finish. The “prospective” and the “likely” factor into this ever-emerging poetics. “We are ready for a new orientation.”