Essays on the Peripheries

Peter Valente

Published by Punctum Books

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84312

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2924558

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
On Barbara Barg’s *Obeying the Chemicals*

*Is Not the speed of Light the speed of Darkness?*

Published in 1984 by Hard Press and now long out of print, Barbara Barg’s chapbook, *Obeying the Chemicals*, is a powerhouse of feminist energy, whose central emotions veer from unrelieved anger to gentleness and vulnerability. There is a longing for not exactly love, but ecstasy, a feeling that transcends the common romantic notions of love: “I could say I love you / but that’s a childish idea / (feelings are no mystery until we try to phrase them) / I’m simply ecstatic being with you like / and ecstasy is all I want.” Love doesn’t have a chance under Capitalism. In the long poem, “Fucking Bench,” the bench becomes, through repetition of the phrase, “fucking bench,” a kind of symbol of the bare essentials, a simple “fucking” bench, in the big city, and with a “fucking” tree opposite it, and the sunlight that falls on it, as if any of that really mattered in light of the world’s problems; the poet is just able to rest a while on this “fucking” bench, thank you, where maybe the homeless sleep, instead of a fancy couch, in an upper west side condo. That’s Capitalism; real love doesn’t have a chance.

But anger suddenly gives way to sadness and existential fear:

Oh fucking anxiety infecting my timid plans like ugly water spots on glasses!
Shit.
Will I not cease loving the flesh and being afraid of sufferings?
Thank fucking God I had on my shades or I couldn’t have sat
On that fucking bench with tears rolling down my cheeks
And memory calling me home and turning me away from home
And turning me away from home.

There’s the pull of safety, a home, a familiar place, but the poet resists that thought; comfort might ease her anxiety or fear, but at what price? The fire of the poem. She must “obey the chemicals” which, while suggesting the influence of drugs, that cause one to abandon rational, bourgeois, thought, also suggests the mysterious directives that a poet follows, despite the pain of living in the world. Finally, it suggests the daemonic voice that blasphemes in the poem.

Her suffering has its origin in religious ideas that she was taught as a child, ideas that cause fear of the body, and which the “blasphemy” of this poem seeks to exorcise. Barg writes,

I say to myself all the time I say:
*Cease from your evil lusts and desires pale one*
*and avoid empty and worldly chatter on godless courses and salacious myths*
*outwardly very charming*
*but intrinsically germinated from vile minds and the devil’s ugliness.*

She undergoes a series of emotional ups and downs in her relationships, from shame to guilt to a feeling of danger, and these emotions manifest as a physical pain: her beautiful, blacks boots suddenly hurt her toes. She thanks the “unambitious Gnostics” for the “pretentious” thought that “The kingdom of death belongs to those who put themselves to death.” In a way, it’s a provocative thought she accepts: “Then I liked that thought.” In his essay
on Poe, Baudelaire writes, “Amongst the large number of the *Rights of Man*, which the nineteenth century, in its wisdom, so often enumerates with complacency, two quite important ones have been forgotten, namely our right to contradict ourselves, and our right to quit this life.” Barg continues, “Then I felt compassion / Then I felt mature and able to achieve deep levels of human understanding / Then I grew greatly angered at C for helping me / pay no attention to the loveliness and beauty of the world / whether it be beautiful food or clothing, or a cell / or an outwardly seductive book.” She continues in her rage,

Then I thought: O bullshit Babe

*The defilement of the Law belongs to the Light.*

Fucking inner life, fucking C and his ferocious saintliness.

She attacks the idea of a God and the divine light; the blasphemy at the heart of this poem radiates its infernal light in all its seductive glory. She directs her fury at “Saintliness” and the “inner life,” the life that centers the gaze inward in order to find the light of truth, the truth that denies the flesh, and subjects the body to constant inner surveillance. Instead, she will “empty my brain of all the crudhead and annoying chatter — / in a brand new red dress baby / with some emerald green and purple maybe somewhere on it / or a little orange / because to me, these are the earth tones.” She is Jezebel, Medusa, Mary Magdalene, the Eternal Temptress, a female trickster; her domain is the earth, the material world: not the heavens, not the life of the spirit, the divine light, but the natural world. In *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard writes,

This separation from Nature under the sign of the principle of production is fully realized by the capitalist system of political economy, but obviously it does not emerge with political economy. The separation is rooted in the great Judeo-Christian dissociation of the soul and Nature. God created man in his image and created Nature for man’s use.
And furthermore, she quotes sacred scripture: “Whosoever shall find the interpretations of these scriptures shall not experience death!” To which she responds, “Ha! Fucking idiots will believe anything that stinks of immortality.” She sees the idea of immortality as just another trick of the Judeo-Christian doctrine, one that keeps people living in fear, placing their faith in the unknown, and giving them a little false hope to combat the real suffering in the world. But sexuality makes us the most vulnerable, especially with someone we have a crush on. Love prompts us to come clean about our emotions: “I felt humanly vulnerable spilling my guts so.” But then the vulnerability passes, then “a tear fell,” then a realization,

the reason fucking pain in fucking person not on fucking bench nay
not even in fucking park is beastcause
two people cannot be in love and live together always intensely in love
I mean isolatedly living in intense rapturous lust — killing love I mean
inseparable love I mean two fucking people when world is so insist
I mean cannot keep up this high fidelity for more than say 5 years.

In the nineties they used to say you shouldn’t stay at a job for more than five years; it gets stale after that; advance to a higher position where there is more money and prestige. Love doesn’t stand a chance under Capitalism.

The poem concludes on an emotional high point which transcends the pain of any individual, and the blasphemies uttered are transformed into an urgent prayer of genuine compassion and hope. It is worth quoting this passage in full so none of the energy is lost:

I want to be flying bird
and not dwell on D.’s attraction to my psychodrama
so I think I send and then I send
every thought each to a different place
and I myself fly up into the fucking tree
and then I’m god and these particular pains are no gods’
faults.
These particular pain are nothing to blame.
I have pain. C has pain. Probably even D has pain.
I bet A has pain & E has pain.
My mother knows from pain and my father too.
My brother used to suffer enormous pain but he converted
to Hebrew Christianity and feels none of it now he reports
in his tense little voice.
I bet you can’t really escape pain if you’re human at fucking
all.
I bet everyone reeks of fucking pain.
I bet every fucking mammal that walks erect on two feet
and buries its dead
is scarred by something horrible and continuously menac-
ing.
And it isn’t my intention to divorce myself from the masses
and identify my responsibility with self-interest or
the interests of a small group.
I just want to have some fun like the next guy.
And I bet I do
Goddamnit
seek the fucking night of the living night again.
Look out Jerusalem! Look out Islam!
Fucking pleasure and imagination’s flesh
Fucking mythological life
Fucking pulse and opportunity
Fucking celebration of human life again
Fucking pulse and opportunity opportunity
Fucking pulse Fucking pulse

Some of Barg’s concerns in this poem, such as the problem of
pain and suffering in the world, the desire for a mythology that
would address women’s real issues, the celebration of life in the
essays on the peripheries

face of difficulty, the freedom to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh without guilt or shame are developed in the next poem, “The Outline of Birthday,” where they are seen in Gnostic terms, as an essential problem with the way mankind and the world was created, revealing a fault at the origin; this is explored in full in the transgressive final prose poem “Jihad,” where Barg rewrites the male-centric, origin story.

The “Outline of Birthday” takes the form of an adult addressing a younger person on his birthday. But Barg subverts the literary conceit of the father addressing the young man before he enters the world. Barg’s “Birthday” poem is also concerned with the birth of mankind and it is darker than any postcard birthday poem. She writes, “Happy birthday even though / the age of mammals culminated / in ice / and hardship / and ‘man,’ … and now inside our growing brains is the increasing chill of our intelligence. Want to fuck? Want? Want to be kind to each other? … we deserve nothing but the best / of all possible worlds.”

Against the increasing dominance of a cold “intellectual” theorizing about the world and language, present most vividly in the Academy, Barg responds with a desire to explore the body, to indulge in the pleasures of sexuality, instead of pursuing the false pleasure in knowledge, which seeks truth but only finds provisional solutions for the deepest of the world’s problems. So pain, guilt, and shame are a result of the way the world was conceived, at the origin, the way it was constructed after the Cosmic Egg cracked. There is a problem, even, with the way the body was conceived of. At the origin something went terribly wrong. In “Jihad,” the final poem in the chapbook, Barg dissects the problem and shows us where we went wrong. Love doesn’t stand a chance under Capitalism, but then, according to Barg, this is the least of our problems when we consider the world in mythological and religious terms, the world conceived of by man.

In the first line of “Jihad,” Barg sketches the main subject of her essay-poem: “1. Woman-Desire-Love-Slut-Goddess-Light-Raw.” We are no longer in a male space. Indeed, the Rabbi Sime-
on is mocked during his discussion of the origin of the world. The Rabbi says,

If the Holy One, the Loneliest Number, had not created a spirit you understand of good don't you see of good, created a spirit of good that that emanates from the active light (Gladdness!) and a spirit of, well, I hate to use the term because of its moral implication, but well uh evil that emanates from the passive light or darkness (Not being Glad).

The character, Little Bornio, described by Barg as a she or it, thus potentially androgynous, responds to the Rabbi,

What the fffuck,....Passive light or darkness? You old fart-hearts! You dried up old tight-asses, you cuntphobic Cossacks!

The Rabbi continues:

... ahum, uh there, un mental, uh growth and spiritual development and of course progress; and therefore was he/himself created dual, as we are informed in the Zohar, dual in nature, that is like sort of like flesh = bad, and spirit = Not bad.

So the story goes: the active light (male) is distinguished from the passive light or darkness (female); darkness = void = hole = vagina. Furthermore, the flesh (the earth) is bad but the spirit (the heavens) is good. This formulation of religious thought has haunted the world ever since the birth of Judeo-Christian thought. There is the central problem with the creation story. For Barg, the cosmic unity separated into a duality which associated Man with the Light of Reason containing an active spirit, and the Female, who had a passive spirit, under the rule of the Irrational. Thus, the female is a demonic figure, a witch. But in this poem, Barg is imagining the world before the Cosmic Egg split and everything went wrong. The lady in a red dress would say,
I need the darkness again I need it so dark open eyes don’t rest on any objects open eyes go straight out to outland. I’m circling, circling my own self again. Not much weight of me floating in darkness. I’m weightless and sweetly chimed, weightless and circling, lifting the eyes of my head coming around again, circling round is also my ears again buzzzzzed and again yy-essssssss.

Another character in the poem, Ludwig, a homosexual,

raised his well-scrubbed hand and then his other well-scrubbed hand and asked the Rabbi, “Would it be conceivable for someone to see as black everything that we see as white, and vice versa?”

“No,” replied the Rabbi Simeon, “but you can make number 2.”

Life is multiplication just as each new life from naturally various billions.
(Nancy Reagan and I are opposite sexes)
The world applauds.

The poet is against the Rabbi’s insistence on maintaining the duality; she emphasizes the difference between people, which is only increased when there are more people in the world; no two people are the same; furthermore the gender roles of male and female are fluid: “Nancy Reagan and I are opposite sexes.” The poet as transsexual writes,

And spake the mighty Goddess and they said: Let she/it who seeks continue seeking till she/it finds, and when she/it will be astonished, and when she/it becomes astonished, let her kill (or at least trash) this pretense of The Immovable Species, and she/he might yea might she/he come to know this hundred-mindedness, thousand-heartedness.

Instead of two, a million, billions, trillions … Barg’s vision here is of a world of elaborate variety, where the desires of men,
woman, and LGBT people, are so numerous so as not to be confined or codified by tradition or convention. In this way, Barg’s poem is relevant today, where LGBT people, because of their use of gender pronouns, are waging a battle against a world that is increasingly turning toward the Right. When the “Creative Logos” speaking from “The Holy One” “(later known as the Holy One times Three after the biggest hoax ever perpetrated by the enshrinement of poetic diction, that is The Fucking Word, Old and New)” concluded speaking, the angels Aza and Azael reprimanded God, claiming that there was no reason to create “Thy/man Law” knowing that he would sin (female) with the “passive-light/woman called darkness/woman.” Borneo erupts in anger at this kind of thinking: “You old bearded shiteyes, scholars of idiocies, you fucking fabricators of fornication terrors … You can’t even look upon your own hard-ons without being scared the fuck to death you pissheads.” Borneo is not buying the claims of the Creative Logos. She/it sees this as a repressive force generated by a male-centric vision of the origin myth. As an alternative to this myth, Barg invokes the myth of the “Goddess/Slut.” She writes,

A Goddess/Slut behaves in accordance with Her/Her divine nature and the Human laws of sexual morality, physical gravity and the comings and goings of the 5th avenue bus do not apply here.

The final lesson: Reject and Rejoice. Barg writes,

We do have a few minutes before the vacuum of eternity sucks us bone and soul out of the vibrant egg. Is myth-zone through space of time/mind a pressure of specific density and pulsation? Am I a woodcutter. Is Not the speed of Light the speed of Darkness? Am I a perfect example why people shouldn’t have kids? Is everyday?

Are you happy Baby?
In “Jihad” Barg rewrites the creation myth in terms of female desire and imagines a time before the Cosmic Egg split. She envisions a reversal of the terms, Female / Active, Male/Passive. She embraces the darkness of primal and irrational desires, not the shining light of absolute truth. In this she overturns the Creative Logos: “That which we cannot speak of we must point to screaming.” What we cannot speak of belongs to the irrational subconscious, the vast ocean that threatens to engulf the man-made structures. Instead of rational, Apollonian form, in language, she gives voice to the “scream”; this is the voice of blasphemy which infects the language; it obeys the chthonic; it is in league with Thanatos as much as it desires to express the ecstatic pleasures of the flesh, Eros; knowledge of our own mortality lends an urgency to all our acts. Our happiness should not be contingent on ephemeral joys but on a more genuine and lasting happiness about our own selves, and our bodies, without any guilt or shame. *Obeying the Chemicals* is a fierce and intelligent book whose raw energy should be savored by anyone interested not only in poetry but in honest writing of the highest order.

**Works Cited**
