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The Tower of Diverse Shores

Leonard Schwartz
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These ambitious, playful, ingenious poems are not for everyone. Those who demand that poetry be “accessible,” no matter how clunky and cumbersome the ramps and railings involved, may well retreat from this poet’s vivid but oblique lines. The first piece, “Circe,” invokes “Speech, as multiform and rapid / as the flight of pigeons,’ and announces something of the entire book’s project and procedure as well: “By eyes grazed, grazing objects, / form is nudged from unconscious haunts.”

Schwartz, the author of four books of poems and a collection of essays, also co-edited Primary Trouble: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry. In the introduction to that volume, he writes of the need to “provide an alternate focus, a necessary rethinking, of how our poetry works.” This new collection draws on an American tradition of philosophical, even hermetic poets such as Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, Robert Duncan, and John Ashbery. The results can seem mystifying, but read with awareness of their irony and humor, they offer intriguing glimpses into the luminous layers of experience. “Far Away, June” begins with what seems a romantic nature-lesson (“From palms you learned care, / from poplars reverie”), but soon leaves such platitudes far behind: “Ogling holiness one’s likely to get ordained / while the true orgy is going on in an open hut.”

Like many experimental poets, Schwartz feels the lure of abstraction. The prose poem “Eight Glimpses of Earth” flirts with expository prose in its first section: “The landscape can only be approached by means of what is empty in oneself. I enter it by the headlights of content, then subtract everything from my surroundings that appears to have been illuminated.” The poem proceeds through a series of metaphors that are broken open for examination even as they are offered, cycling repeatedly from the concrete (“Wet tiles, blue vines printed on the shower curtain”) to the general: “Ritual without referent is precisely the goal.’

How much can language do, Schwartz asks; how far can it go toward rendering interior or exterior realities? “After all the most archaic unit is the moon / and language is lit with its reflected fire,” he writes in “Banned In Iran.” “It isn’t the moon I’m after,” the poem insists repeatedly, offering a series of alternatives before, finally and inevitably, confessing “it’s the moon I’m after // It’s the wound in the moon, the woo / in the moon, that womb in the moon …”

Readers in search of plain common sense may want to look elsewhere, but those eager for fresh explorations of the borders of meaning and sense will find much here to delight and instruct.
JEFF GUNDY (April 15, 2003)

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