

Review of

Barbara Henning, *A Day Like Today* (Mobile, AL: Negative Capability Press, 2015)

by Jim Feast

“Regarding my activities the [Indian teacher said to the narrator], he thinks I should use my creative energies with serious moral intention.”

This sentence from one of Barbara Henning’s novels is useful as an entry point to her new poetry collection, *A Day Like Today*, which attempts to describe the current political and social landscape. The collection is set in 2012 in New York City. The background includes the epidemic of homelessness: “It’s chilly today, I say // to a homeless man. Can I // pay for a cab to take you // to the shelter. I didn’t ask // for your help, he says”; the triumph of the wealthy: “Our education // system can be a powerful mechanism to // for the reproduction of privilege”; ongoing environmental destruction: “Surely, // radioactive ocean water // from the Fukushima Daiichi // nuclear power plant will migrate // around the globe”: and the profound weakness of the left: “Most of Occupy // has gone into retreat.”

Now, concerning the initial proposition, one might wonder, not about her book specifically, but about *American literature in general*, whether it can be composed with serious moral intentions, in that, according to some views, U.S. culture is too isolated from the world for its occupants to have any realistic sense of what is around them (I’m assuming, as does Jameson, who I will discuss in a moment, a link between knowledge of reality and the ability to write morally.). In Henning’s novel, the narrator describes one of her Indian teacher’s views, “He talks a lot about conditioned minds – they are preoccupied with thoughts that are not natural. They can’t see correctly.”

Although he is not talking about Americans, I believe the teacher is making the same sort of argument Jameson does in his essay “Modernism and Imperialism.” In comparing Forster and Joyce, Jameson argues that Forster is the past master of literary style, writing in an exquisitely turned, finely calibrated prose. By contrast, *Joyce has no style*. That doesn’t mean he is stylistically blank, but that the Irish writer never created a finely modulated prose instrument in

the way this was done by, say, Woolf or James or George Eliot. For Joyce, each style evolves for a specific project.

(In passing, one might think of Nietzsche's self-characterization in *Ecce Homo* where he writes, immodestly enough: "I have many stylistic possibilities – the most multifarious art of style that has ever been at the disposal of one man." This puts in the same category as Joyce in that the German had no single style, writing in a completely different manner in, say, *Zarathustra* and *The Genealogy of Morals*.

In this same parentheses, let me quote Henning along the same lines. She writes, "We're in a traffic jam on the LIE // when my lover says, You don't // have any style. You don't even // know what style is. I blink.")

But to return to Jameson, let's look at his explanation for the great difference between these two consummate novelists. The difference depends on social location. Those, like Forster, living in the center of the empire cannot have, cannot afford to have, any knowledge of the underpinnings of their world, which is rooted in the exploitation of other countries, notably India. In Henning's novel, the hero, an American woman is traveling on the railroad, seated across from an Indian. "The young man looks up from his book and says, 'The British built the rail system with our labor.'"

Yes, Forster lived in India as a private secretary, but to understand it and its relationship to his homeland, Jameson argues, he would have to give up his privileged position, which he could not do. A beautiful style, then, is a compromise formation hiding one's inability to see the world. Joyce, being a native in a colony, didn't need a style.

I think a similar argument could be turned too much, *not all*, of current American literature, which also seems divorced from any contact with larger realities. To look at just one field, it would be hard to imagine poetry more small-minded and febrile, from Ashbery on down, than what is currently esteemed in the U.S.

Not all. There's a social position Jameson doesn't consider. What if a writer actually spent long periods in a third world country, say, India, not as a master, living in fancy resorts, but living in Indian neighborhoods, establishing deep ties to Indian people, taking one as a teacher,

and adopting an Indian style of life in a serious manner? Wouldn't this give the author the ability to integrate into her perspective that of the third world and so understand more globally? More pertinently, wouldn't this give her the ability to write with a serious moral intention?

Apparently so. While based in the empire, Henning has spent a long time living simply in India. I think, this confluence is what gives her books a moral authority sorely lacking elsewhere.

I know it's taking me a rather long time to actually discuss her poems, but, even so, there is something else we need to reckon with in order to grasp their inner strength. It's an aspect of her writing that, I feel, is drawing on a central thematic of the Asian worldview: that physical "exercises," such as yoga or tai chi, have and are understood to be shot through with spiritual and ethical dimensions. Stemming from this and other moments in the Eastern view of experience, there is no Western separation of mind/body, but rather an endemic unity of the two.

(I'm no expert on Oriental culture, and am here rendering my own limited view, particularly drawing from eight visits to China, usually to Guangzhou, where every morning you can watch hundreds in the parks doing tai chi.)

So, to look at the texts mentioned, Henning also works from this integrated view so that riding a motor scooter in the novel, and, in the poems, a bike, shows her moving simultaneously along the pavement and on a spiritual plane.

Let me try and illustrate, by looking at a single poem, how she joins Eastern and Western vision into a moral outlook. Or is that too tall of an order?

Let's take "Hand It Over." At first read, it appears to be a series of unlinked fragments. The narrator sees people in Tompkins Square, "In the park a group of Chinese women // practice qi gongq. An older Spanish // speaking couple plays paddle ball, // and three African American men // lift up and muscle around and over // the bars." A guy on the radio says, "The ancient Greeks didn't // see blue or make that distinction." She describes the blue crystal carried in sacs by termites. Then there's a vigorous conclusion.

The freedom and opportunity promised
in the constitution for working people

has been handed over to corporations,
but the hue of blue may grow deeper
with an increase of democratic voters.

Fine, but how does all this add up?

Here's a passage from the novel I've been quoting, *You, Me and the Insects*. The narrator is describing what brought her to make this trip to Asia.

I want to learn to live and die with some kind of understanding ... and coming to India is a way to stop the mindless tasks of everyday life and concentrating on this – yes, this life, everything about it, constantly changing, lost, found, transformed – and nothing you have now, you love now, nothing will be here in the future exactly as it is now, this loved one, this shirt, this dress, this ring, all gone in a heap of change.

Let's read the poem in the perspective of this passage. The fact that nothing lasts balances the political equation. Even while the feckless elite are riding high, their very lack of a sense of history, of an acknowledgement that everything passes, makes them due for destruction. Rather what endures, she suggests, beside the basic beauties of the world, such as its colors, *are long evolved practices*: qi gong, paddle ball, weight lifting. These are the physical practices, which, from her perspective, have profound spiritual implications, those of discipline, fellowship, energy transmission, all of which carry the positive powers of humanity forward.

But I can't stop there, in that, in a way that makes the book complex and intricate, each poem is set in a web of cross connections to other poems in the book. To take one instance, the women are practicing qi gong here, but so, in other poems, is her lover. In "Across My Eyes," she writes, "I hear him // showering. Then he's doing // qi gong by candlelight. // He climbs into our bed, // saying he's sending me qi."

Reading this in relation to the first mentioned poem, we can say, then, that when she describes the Chinese women, she is not looking with a touristic gaze (at exotic Orientals) but an appreciative one, one through which she can both respect their actions, seeing them in context, and tie them into her own project of grasping the connection of Chinese energy flow disciplines to her own yoga.

Moreover, to continue, the weight lifters also have a history. In “In The Basement,” she notes, “Two guys are working out // on the bars even though // it’s frigid cold.” The seriousness of their dedication ties this activity to the other, seemingly more spiritual practices described throughout the poems.

It would be possible to tear out a number of other strands from “Hand It Over” to suggest how they resonate with and deepen the reach of a number of interlinked themes, but let me end by stating that what Henning has taken up is no easy task. I guess, also, it’s not easy to write bracing poetry, but I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about her ability to shift her view of the world so fundamentally, by imbricating some perspectives from India, so that even a person who lives at the center of a world empire, can think and write with a moral trueness.