

Zhang Er's *Sight Progress*

Translated by Zhang Er and Rachel Levitsky. New York: Pleasure Boat Studios: A Literary Press, 2006. ISBN 1929355289.

Sight Progress is an "in-between-er," not quite a full-length book, but longer than the typical chapbook. It contains 29 prose pieces, some very short, and none longer than about a page-and-a-half. Given the speed and quickness with which these pieces work, we might call Zhang Er's form the "prose lyric" and get away with it. When I say "lyric" here, I am thinking of one of our contemporary ideas about Romantic form: that preferring the short, fast, uncalculated, often sentimental description of what Zhang Er calls here the "enhanced perception," that rapid merging with natural symbology (and, not quite so often, the natural world itself) that transports the solitary maker into reverie, or a kind of ecstasy, or quite often, into a poem. Zhang Er's model is not just the lyric poem, though, for her primary form here is the note, the quick, scribbled, prosy prose of the naturalist or the scientist, the student,

the observer, someone who carries a notebook and uses it, the always-other who often feels, as Zhang Er puts it, separated from the world of phenomena as if by a "film of glass." The note-taker who feels the separation but is compelled, anyway, just to write down what happens, because the noting itself seems, somehow, urgent, or clarifying, or maybe magical.

Is the note, however often lyrical in nature, a form of art? Zhang Er struggles with this question, often quite explicitly, throughout the book, and never quite gains an answer. The lyrics themselves often suffer from their apparent genesis as notes: they are sometimes awkward, often obscure, plain, and seemingly superficial. But in her best pieces—I include here "Cleaning the Impossible," where the bloodied carcass of a fish works as a delicate and subtle locus of association, "Swimming Forward," "Musée Rodin," "The Pretty Men of Rome," a delicious meditation on male beauty and power, and, perhaps especially, "The Magician's Hat"—she does attain something quite beyond simple notation, "that mystical atmo-

sphere... (where)... her space quickly expands, overflows in a flash."

Maybe this is all that we can ask from a poet these days. As Zhang Er puts it, we are all too often trapped away from art, or even ordinary joy, by the "sticky emotions and the unavoidable mediocrity of everyday life." "Live attentively," she says, "there's no deeper moral to the story." Maybe. Maybe not.

*

Sight Progress, by the way, is a beautifully made little book, with original cover art, well-cut pages, and nicely textured paper. It is a joy to hold in the hand. In this day, when everything related to literature is, as it seems, cheapened, I must commend Pleasure Boat Studios for choosing to make not merely a book, but a treat for the hand and the eye.

—Joe Ahearn

• • •

Sawako Nakayasu's
*nothing fictional but the
accuracy or arrangement
[she]*

Sawako Nakayasu. Florence, MA: Quale Press, 2005. ISBN 0974450367.

My advice?—do judge this book by its stunning cover: an image of juxtaposition having both comic and sad overtones. Dotted with rain, a shiny red teapot bobs along some outdoor body of water that flows reflecting glimpses of a non-specific fusion of pewter sky with its turbulence. The paradox is that the teapot does not contain the water but instead has been contained, overtaken by what should be its contents. Normative expectations of content and container are thus overturned—the inside has taken over the outside. There is some fun in perceiving this. Yet, given more particularity of context—and not unlike the semiotic slippery relations of language to meaning—the image can also be said to implicate not delight but some sadly disturbing events, especially

given a U.S. context of the recent disastrous flooding of New Orleans. This image reminded me, then, that there must have been many such floating teapots decontextualized or severed from significance, from life as lived in communally agreed upon meaning. This is also like the inherent sadness of language, that however much we try, it remains inadequate to its purpose and our hopes, that what it signifies is lack, absence. The same thing gendering does, as concept and as employed linguistically.

Even so, the same problematic may be most opportune for artful poetics, in that poetics can be made to foreground the need to question, to cut through the "layers of explanation simply to get to the real questions" (28) as one entry in this book asserts, while another highlights the contradictions of gendering in a westernized urban setting populated by blithe but unaware joggers. Although not readily apparent, the specific problem is one of being gendered female: "... somewhere not far at all... everyone, men and women, yes, you, can run topless in the streets" (35). A "some-

where" that does not exist in western culture unless fraught by allegations of pornographic representation.

The cover image is especially apt to the astute, probative rhetorical dynamics and effects of this apparently happy-go-lucky book, where the main character "gets shiny for someone—falls upon a lark...landing on small cheers" (2). It is nonetheless a systematically probative, significantly critical work of prose poetry, which finds many ways to turn matters from inside to outside and vice versa, by questioning, and giving to the acts of naming and the notions of gender a sharp, thorough-going, dialectical examination. The result is often delightfully comic in the fabulist way, yet also hovers over an acceptance of the uncertainties, even the sadnesses, of inadequacy in terms of language as a way of knowing and being. Sawako Nakayasu's book questions, then, an old problem in new ways, that of relations between gendering, naming as objectifying another, self-naming, and over all, how to narrate these as an ongoing problematic without dictating solution for

its subject(s). To do so would be to repeat the same mistake, as the tradition in feminist poetics, from Cixous to Retallack points out. Put more specifically to this text, one entry in *nothing fictional but the accuracy of arrangement* (she indicates figuratively and via pronoun usage, that there is "no here inside this his old used box with her name still on it hey" (55). Implicated is a history of male-centered discourse and attendant rhetorical-interpretive tradition that have named and effectively boxed-in what is—materially—"here": a female, a "she." Accordingly, Nakayasu's book sets out to explore and discover what, after all, this state of being such a female might be and entail.

It would be most difficult *not* to see the "box" as alluding to Holly Iglesias' *Boxing Inside the Box* (Quale, 2004), an incisive feminist critique of theories about the symptomatic gender-biased trajectory of the genre of prose poetry (cf. Ellen McGrath Smith's review of Iglesias' book in *Sentence* 3, 2005). Sawako Nakayasu's book ingeniously takes up the problem of the narratological problem-

atic, and no less the material walls of the "box," as it were. The book's title asserts, once and only once—if not also once and for all—something of an all-encompassing yet fractally diversified subject: "(she)." Every entry in the sixty-three pages of poetry begins with an action-verb whose implied subject is the enigmatic persona "(she)" of the book's title. Readers must therefore supply the subject via continually repeating, or hold in consciousness in some other way, this highly specific, gendered subject of the narrative. Thus, "(she)" is both continually present and forever an absence, an awareness and a lack, so that in a poetic way this figure comprises fruitful contradiction. That is the way "(she)" retains presence.

In such a predicament, I find it especially useful, and even grammatically touching (if such a sentiment is possible!), that the narratological "(she)" is not enclosed with the expected *pair* of parentheses, but is left open-ended to be a one or to choose to select the other end of pairing off, or not. That is, in an adept gesture to feminist, or to more gen-

der-free thinking, this “(she)” begins with the hug of an implied enclosure, one parenthesis, and then moves forward—linguistically in the linear formation of the word—but does not terminate as enclosure. The subversion is both delightful and frightening: the world is open(ed, then, by all that is implied in this one small linear progression of a nominative part of speech. And what if one, even one who identifies self with the female gender, doesn’t want to be continually named or renamed principally and perpetually by gender? Although open-ended, this “(she)” business, can also become a little frightening. In fact, isn’t naming always a little frightening? Who wants to be named, to be categorized and catalogued as an other by someone else? Isn’t it our mission to name ourselves and then, to progress to conquering the world?

Linearity in naming and most everything else ends with the brief linguistic and grammatical encounter with “(she). Linearity, then, ends in a remarkable refusal to accept residence in the “box.” Rather, we find a Kristeva-like imaginary full of myriad

acrobatics, deft turnings, fluid semiosis. What seems or is expected to be inside is over and over revealed to be outside, turned inside-out:

(she) is given entrance to a new residence, replete with instructions on locking the door from the inside out and inside again, so as not to get followed in by the burglar, said burglar whose high inclination for entry, unforced or no, drives her promptly out the next morning to the safety of the street (34)

So then: life is chaotic, and narrative traditionally a means of creating order. The Stevens-like sea necessitates a culling of song at its thresholds. But especially with prose forms we are habituated to a narrowly defined order—reading in a linear progression, building meaning rather than in, say, the more fluid yet no less orderly act of weaving threads together to create an on-going whole. In modernism and in feminist writing are abundant, innovative, variations away from the linear, or step-by-step way of structuring text or book—ways that are meant to challenge readers

to think about the limited narrowness, if not the entirely dictatorial, effects of linearity. Sawako Nakayasu’s book surprised me by subtly yet profoundly taking this notion much further. *nothing fictional but the accuracy or arrangement* (*she* is so fluidly *non-constructed* that to read it is to perform an action: literally, reading it is to weave through the differing entries, moving in any direction any time, from front to back, back to front—in all, moving virtually from any point and structuring one chooses.

Now, that is a freeing gesture, one reasserting textural relations, since it places the text in its literal origins, with the terms of material creation: TEXT-ure, yet not by a narrowly limited means. More meaningfully, the sense of text-ure in this book results not only from the writer’s intentional, scrupulous attention to, as the book’s title says, “accuracy or arrangement,” but from the fact that it invites readerly intervention in the creation of and connection to how meaning is made. Like the book’s open-ended subject, “(she),” the reader (or readers)—rather than passively sit-

ting back to let the text build a distant significance—is put to the test, so “turns out with a refractive personality,” which then “addresses a letter to the chaos” (40). Thus, the act of narrating the “letter” can be understood to settle rather than to distance the “chaos.” Readers participate in this act of textuality, weaving, or to put it more accurately—interweaving—a cornucopia of open-ended meanings and associations that in effect question and rearrange the understanding of any quest for meaning itself. And so, here, particularly the meanings of exclusivity in being gendered: a woman.

The textual effect is as Michel de Certeau says of the effect of naming in motion, which for him, was intriguing by the act of walking in the city:

[T]hese names make themselves available to the diverse meanings given them by passers-by...these words operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearing away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermi-

nation [is enabled through] semantic rarefaction.... They insinuate into the functionalist and historical order of movement (104-105).²

What adds utmost significance to Sawako Nakayasu's interwoven entries about being a "she" are the lovely-quirky, figural threads that have become a hallmark of her writing. In this book there are several interesting figures repeated. Most prominent in my reading—it is all about readerly choices—were those of the body, specifically the way the shoulder takes on the significance, even the—to pun a bit—heft of a another character, performing throughout the text within the delightful ambiguity between being a noun or a verb, and sometimes both at once. There are also several dialectical considerations about the frightening yet also liberating act of falling. These dovetail interestingly with one of lyric poetry's old standbys: bittersweet observations about love. This prismatic conjunction is of interest because it showcases the thorn of narrative perspectives: who is speaking? The narra-

tor is obsessively focused on defining the subject, "(she," and in so doing, once again surprises by implicating the act of lyric-poetic-narration itself. Yet the narrator can only be implied, and in the perspective of omniscient or even of first person omniscience—decidedly one of hegemony, much as the male-centered history that developed narratological renderings. It is, then, still an open question as to how to escape such.

This text is a form of cataloguing of its subject, "(she," who is many personae. This is made clear both by the text (it ends alluding to such: "(she keeps a catalog...") and by the publisher's description, which explains that the book "catalogs women moving through the world... [in their] mundane activities" of everyday life. While reading, thus interweaving, I had to wonder if there is not also another, equally productive configuration for this phenomenon. Certainly the book represents an act of cataloging. Yet, not only of multiple women in multiply discrete bodies/locations/functions, but also—to turn that concept inside-out—an act of

cataloguing the multifaceted wholly embodied persona: that of woman in differing spaces across time, indeed, perhaps of one woman in the course of life. That facility of spatializing, of recognizing the axis and alternative points of relation regarding bodies in space and time is absolutely delightful about this book and its "(she," in ways that can be understood as shared variously by all bodies. In that regard, not always with delight but certainly within what is theorized as an imaginary—in fact, that is the point of Kristeva's notion of the imaginary. To negotiate such in material life, narratologically and materially, well, that is the crux where questions and understandings of the act of turning the dynamics of power relations inside-outside comes in handy, no? Yes: and that is what this book does.

¹One irony of writing about this text is that in order to conventionally cite it, one would proceed to enclose the "(she" in brackets, and document it by page number, even though quite intentionally the author leaves the subject un-enclosed with an open parenthetical and has not numbered the pages. Rather than enclose the subject in brackets, I'm italicizing it so to preserve more of the original's sense, which seems so important to the poetry and its thematics. I did apply page numbers, however,

so that readers can more readily locate the quoted passages.

²Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," *The Practice of Everyday Life* trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 104-105.

—Chris Murray

...