

AMERICAN
WOMEN POETS
IN THE
21ST CENTURY

WHERE LYRIC MEETS LANGUAGE

EDITED BY

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AND

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The goal is to illuminate the source of poetry and illness, to light the witch. The complexity is one's ability to take an impossible situation and compensate for it. The image is, what a symbol is.

It's still about body and language, but at the symbolic level. The content is not transcendence, but concretion of the informed substance of language, trying to rely less on metaphor, sound, or image.

Narrative opposes transcendence.

The feeling is to keep the energy and experience of the poem as intense as my stomach turning over, seeing Count Panza's Rothkos in L.A. How a dark density is implicated by language and generates language, a dark wafer or paper in the abdomen, that is the source of my language.

You could make a poem that would be the function of the symbol, how it separates from what it originally represented, to function on its own, an internalized symbol for the dark origin that is separate from the real origin.

It's mourning, an expression of movement of the grief layers in my abdomen.

NOTES FOR THE RETIRED ARCHITECT

To make a structure that is not question or subject dependent.¹

To make something, a kind of object, that as it changes or falls apart or increases in its parts offers no glue as to what its state or form of nature was at any previous time.

Different ways of applying paint so the language becomes somewhat unclear. If you do everything from one position, with consistency, then everything can be referred to that. You understand the deviation from the point to which everything refers. But if you don't have a point to which these things refer, then you get a different situation, which is unclear.

The area was defined as a vacuum situated in the center of the town, but separated from it as an unknown terrain consisting of sidings, railway sheds, warehouse allotments, and patches of ground where nature had taken over.

Communication itself that is the fluid, continuous exchange of information had been replaced by an isolated aimless, irrational emergence of unilateral utterances of the will of the building sponsors.

Might this decorative thinking then be the architectonic thinking of the future?

When we have an idea in mind, the territory delimited by the idea is blurred. It fades into something quite open.

There are reasons of course for repeated discontinuity, ignored advice, successive work ignored, misrepresented, disqualified, and often debased.

It's hard to make a good building program when status has a style.

By Correspondence

Over the course of a few weeks in March and April 2000, Berssenbrugge responded to a series of written questions about writing plays, her collaborations with visual artists and theater companies, the importance of her Chinese heritage, the apparent change in her style with *Empathy*, and her compositional method.—Linda Voris

LETTER ONE

Plays, as well as dance collaborations and artist's books were all ways to take a break from solitary writing.

My first play, *One, Two Cups*, the most literary, was directed by Frank Chin, who was seminal for Asian-American theatre and awareness. It was an imaginary dialog with his wife Kathleen Chang, a performance artist who was the only person I'd ever known who came from the same place as myself. So, in these ways, it was collaborative. In 1996, she burned herself alive as a protest for peace.

The collaborative space is larger and more fertile for me than writing alone. There are concrete problems to solve and these become an experiential ground for formal developments. I make a space out of many conversations with my collaborator from which I can then respond.

The play *Kindness* (1994) was animistic, a collaboration with the artist, my husband Richard Tuttle; the composer, Tan Dun; and Shi Zhen Chen, the great singer and director who recently brought *Peony Pavilion* to Lincoln Center from China. *Hiddenness* (1987) with Richard Tuttle and *Endocrinology* (1997) with Kiki Smith were artist's books that turned into lasting dialogues. All were subordinate to writing poems.

LETTER TWO

Friends suggested my work to Richard because of our similar temperaments. He'd been asked to participate in a series of artist-writer collaborations published by the Whitney Museum Library Fellows. He'd been looking for a poet for some time, but was unaware of the poetry published by small presses. We started with long conversations, walking, eating, going to the Metropolitan Museum, Shalako at Zuni. He went to China, etc.

He gave me sketches, which were abstract. I used them as the ground or medium for a preliminary poem that incorporated notes from our conversations. I adjusted the poem as the book developed formally. I participated in the dialog of production, a detailed and logistically difficult process, because there were so many people involved.

The breakthrough came in the layout of text. This involved placing stanzas on the page in a floating space, not within regular page margins. Opening the space of the page, even across the gutter, had the effect of making light pour out, which also happened in the paper making. The incised plane of letterpress printing and the float of the color of the hand-stamping resulted in an "illuminated" manuscript, with lights combined. There's an indigo blue cover, which I realize now is like night. It's wonderful to have real light pour out when you open a book.

LETTER THREE

Rena Rosenwasser of Kelsey Street Press asked for a collaboration for her series. When I mentioned Kiki Smith, it happened that she knew her well. Kiki came to New Mexico, where I live, her first trip there, and we started talking. I was intrigued by the pathos of implied narrative in her images and was hoping to learn from her a vital, "sentimental" narrative for my writing.

Kiki, on the other hand, had just ended a love affair and proposed to turn black organs white, inside the body. Asked about the collaborative process, Kiki says, "It was great. Mei-mei asked me questions, and I cried."

LETTER FOUR

Instead of story, Kiki gave me relatively abstract monographs of endocrine organs. I constructed a poem from our conversations, her work, medical text books, experiences of space in the body and concepts of Western space. The design of the book came fast and casually with scissors, in a café.

She decided on a Nepalese paper that is tough and transparent like skin, showing pages underneath. The blue images, like veins or the color of blue

that goes invisible when photographed. Text in strips of typing paper were cut and pasted in the same space as the images, making language the opaque, substantial element.

High standards were set for the production of the artist's book: silkscreen, lithograph, hand-set type by master craftspeople reproduced handwritings, cardboard prints, typewriter, adding the societal layer of the great tradition of U.L.A.E. books. The final book is a rather misty, transitive vessel expressing the continuum between material and immaterial (endocrine molecule, translucency), including death. Then Kelsey Street Press constructed a "facsimile" at a reasonable price. For mysterious reasons, each layer of reproduction added energy, so in many ways Kelsey Street's "cheap" edition is the more vital.

Kiki's strips of text have enabled me to break free from stanzas, ever since.

LETTER FIVE

"Fog" (in *Empathy*, 1997), which predates the artist's books, was produced as the last of a series of productions in the early '80s with the Morita Dance Company, directed by Theodora Yoshikami. This was in conjunction with Basement Workshop, a pioneering Asian-American cultural center in NYC.

Yoshikami proposed each production as a state of water. "Mizu" (water) grew out of a Japanese folktale. "Alakanak Break-up" (ice) from my years in Alaska, a kind of shamanistic compaction. "Fog" from Wittgenstein, as densities between human beings.

My voice reading text was the music, also taiko drummers, a great contrast. The text evolved parallel to choreography, out of discussion and observing rehearsals, and formally, from the pressure of deadlines and that the dancers moved. I learned to treat things (representations), which I was still taking from life, as something physical that could be cut and pasted, using red from a real bowl for red on snow, with no bowl, and so forth. The clarity comes from having been read aloud dozens of times in rehearsal, also having developed as an oral text, close to song. The published texts shed some of the original repetitions.

LETTER SIX

I can answer this more concisely, because of its not being a social process. The influences that contributed to the "more abstract" style of *Empathy* are:

1. Conversations with James Sherry, the founder of Segue Foundation, and through Segue, exposure to Language poets, when they were beginning

- and the texts that influenced them, including twentieth-century French philosophy.
2. Increasing involvement with experiencing and thinking about contemporary art: performance, visual, and music, in NYC in the '70s and early '80s.
 3. My collaborations with choreographers Theodora Yoshikami and Blondell Cummings and with Richard Tuttle.
 4. John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror."

To answer your question about what was continuous with early work, I kept an experiential, physical sense of landscape, personal emotion, commitment to beauty, commitment to the sentence, a Chinese sense of nature-plus-thinking, and a politically based resistance to any given form or authority.

LETTER SEVEN

I like to think about Kathleen Chang, so tomorrow I'll answer. I meant we both came from families of idealists in Beijing, who had been educated in the United States to "reform" China, but were then set adrift by Mao's revolution.

LETTER EIGHT

Having been born in Beijing is central to my work—my first memories, my first language, and my mother. Also, in general, the sense of being from somewhere else. I believe changing my language to English at the age of nine months, experiencing the relativity of language, was formative to my becoming a poet. That no thing is one thing. There's a world and language that I have and that's lost, which could be generalized. Also, innately, a tradition or template for a poetry of nature and philosophy.

Being nonwhite (and half Chinese), marginalized, is an insecure and at the same time a dynamic situation. You have to identify yourself, and there's no set point of view. It gave me access to the wonderful cosmopolitanism of the multicultural movement of the '70s, my first escape from the mainstream. On the other hand, because my mother was from an educated class where poetry was valued, I escaped the sense of marginalization about poetry itself that so many American poets seem to internalize.

I also identify with my mother's and my grandmother's feminism, which seemed immediate to me, perhaps because of matriarchal character that is part of Chinese culture.

LETTER NINE

As for compositional method, I can't concentrate, so I think of an idea for a poem and just hold it in mind. I'm thinking a matrix of the idea, emotion, scene. I gather quotes from disparate selected books, cultural criticism, philosophy, Buddhism, and daily life, a few hundred notes. I cut them out and lay them out as a map of the area of the poem on a big table, plus pictures. Then over a few intense days, I write a very rough first draft, which I edit for a long time. At first I appropriated the quotes, but recently they've become more and more transformed. The whole process is very loose, to keep unconscious, and then I clarify later.

LETTER TEN

In recent work, I've been reacting against the "beauty" in *Four Year Old Girl* (1998), and I've been trying for "banal narrative." No stanzas. Minor key. Emotion is direct, but deflated, so it seems indirect. The persona seems direct, but is fictional. De-emphasizing sound and structure. The title of the manuscript is *Nest*. *The Retired Architect* is from this group.

The poem I'm writing now is about hearing separate from hearer, as if spatial, the way compassion can be spatial. Things are going so fast, reading and even hearing seem slow and I want to think about that for a while, about the prevailing mode of the visual image and the effect on poetry. Then, I want to stop writing for as long as I can.

Notes begin on page 90.

A "SENSITIVE EMPIRICISM"

Berssenbrugge's *Phenomenological Investigations*

Linda Voris

And just as there are no words for the surface, that is,
No words to say what it really is, that it is not
Superficial but a visible core, then there is
No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience.

—John Ashbery, from "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"

I am committed to beauty. I am committed to the sentence.

—Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

DRAMATIZING A bit to get started, one could say that Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's experimental writing begins with her book *Empathy*, published by Station Hill Press in 1989. Looking back over the course of her work beginning with *Fish Souls* and *Summits Move with the Tide*, both published in 1974, one can trace a line of recurrent properties now associated with Berssenbrugge's poetry: delicate, naturalist observation, patience and great tolerance for ambiguity, a reluctance to summarize emotion, and scenic imagination. What *has* changed is Berssenbrugge's style, her invention of a long, capacious line, and this, as they say, has made all the difference in transforming work that might have continued in an expressive, lyrical tradition into an experimental poetics.² Each of Berssenbrugge's books since *Empathy—Sphericity* (1993), *Endocrinology* (1997), and *Four Year Old Girl* (1998)—actively, painstakingly interrogates the very linguistic and phenomenological grounds of expressive poetry.

With her expansive, metastatic line, Berssenbrugge has developed a method to strain the boundaries established by perceptual operations and repeated in lyrical conventions. *Empathy* and subsequent collections can be said to question the premises of the poems of the earlier books by interrogating the assumptions of representational poetry, particularly with regard to how the world is positioned to convey affective states metaphorically.

With scientific vigor, Berssenbrugge's books of the last decade explore each of the Kantian principles of perception—time, space, and causality—as these pertain to and partially determine affective life and as aspects in perception of the sublime. Proceeding by means of a "sensitive empiricism," Berssenbrugge continually disrupts narrative and rhetorical representations

that simplify experience by insistently tracing the myriad and minute ways in which the phenomenal world enters experience.

In place of expressive lyricism, Berssenbrugge has increasingly allowed molecular and biological models of intracellular communication to inform her interrogative structures. Recent research in biotechnology has focused on complex, intracellular communication such as that of tiny efflux pumps within bacterial cells that eject toxic substances from the cell, or the vectors that convey genes into the nuclei of cells. Like these models for intracellular signaling mechanisms, Berssenbrugge has refined methods by which spatial or temporal perceptions described in the poem operate as metadiscursive signaling mechanisms rather than as conventional, metaphorical vehicles.

What this poetics is not is yet another variation on Language poetry or poetic experimentation that stages the nontransparency of language. Berssenbrugge's writing is compositional in method, accreting observations, contingent possibilities, and contradictions that seem to materialize by stretching ever outwards, much like Tatlin's compositions built out from the corners of a room. Yet, unlike so much of contemporary experimental poetry, her poetry is not significantly influenced by Stein. In place of the desire to confound and splinter reference by foregrounding the materiality of language through punning, refractive linguistic surfaces, Berssenbrugge employs a densely layered referentiality in an attempt to explore the linguistic and emotional exchanges involved in phenomenological experience. That is, her interest in the transparency or nontransparency of language is inseparably bound to her investigation of the transparency of utilitarian perceptual habits, in particular the tendency to regard space as merely the location in which events occur. The poem becomes a site in which this transparency of the world can be obstructed and examined, as can be seen in this passage from "The Carmelites":

Apple trees bloom haphazard in the field around the nunnery.

The atmosphere in daylight poses questions about passing light more difficult than those

the ordinary person in nature, for whom the horizon and amount of light define the limits of intensity,

has long since dissolved into a sense of spaciousness for things to take place.³

While avant-garde practices have often combined the demotic with a declamatory tone (Stein claimed that Picasso had the necessary courage to make "art ugly"), Berssenbrugge has had the courage in a modern/post-modern context to write a body of poetry that is beautiful and that engages aesthetic questions. While her work participates in the experimental tradition that seeks to transform poetry into a site of investigation rather than

one of lyrical assertion, her poetry bears few traces of popular culture and no aural pyrotechnics. Instead, her long lines create an impersonal, meditative vista that is the verbal equivalent of valuing stillness and silence.

Berssenbrugge's first book, *Summits Move with the Tide*, which appeared in 1974, is a collection of short, spare lyrics evoking spirits of place or person in a wide geographical range that includes Greece, New Mexico, Nepal, and New York. Thematically, the poems convey a sense of awe for the natural world and the Romantic wish to find transcendence in nature. When the poems are not quietly ecstatic, they often express equanimity in the face of personal dissolution into the landscape. Reminiscent of the work of Latin American poets such as Mistral and Vallejo, and the Deep Image school of North American poets such as Robert Bly and James Wright influenced by them, these poems assume that heightened affinity to landscape corresponds to greater self-awareness and spirituality.

In the poem "Snow Mountains," Berssenbrugge shifts between material and spiritual realms with Imagist deftness, glimpsing movement in a mountain through a bird's flight:

A bird flies up from the mountain
larger than the mountain
and down
heart on the mountain
wings
two brown glaciers
of feathers melting⁴

This compression of images (reminiscent of H.D.'s confounding of waves and grasses in "Oread") splits apart in the masterful stagings of reversible metonymic elements of her later work. So also will Berssenbrugge's early assumptions about the unity of physical and spiritual realms and the capacity of the poem to stage Baudelarian correspondences be complicated by a Lacanian scrutiny of "our first misrecognition of unity" in poems such as "The Swan" (*Empathy*, 60). Though Berssenbrugge will later revise her conception of the correspondence between landscapes and internal states in terms predicated upon the coincidences of perception, and on an analysis of desire and narrative structure, the later poetry nonetheless depends upon meticulous observation, her tremendous drive "to look again and then look" (*Empathy*, 61). The relation between the demands and limits of sensory perception and the wish for transcendence that she appears to take for granted in her early work becomes one of the critical areas of interrogation

in later work. The Romantic traces we might cite in the elegiac or ecstatic responsiveness to place are destined to become Coleridge's scientific and metaphysical explorations, not Wordsworth's hymns.

To the contemporary reader, these early travel poems annotated with place and year—*Bhanda, Nepal '70*—may be off-putting in their seemingly unreflective catalog of cultural beliefs and practices, where, for example, the speaker adopts the basketweaver's voice in "Hopi Basketweaver Song." The poems from these roving residencies appear to stem from a Whitmanesque naïve belief in the capacity of immersion to bring about knowledge of the other. "I want to already know what the old know," Berssenbrugge writes, then adds, "I want to be the man and the woman/and the child and the elder" (*Summits*, 33). From this poetry in which it was possible for the speaker to assert what she wants directly, Berssenbrugge has developed a method to continually examine the grounds for knowledge, the desire for knowledge, and the means to this end. The poem "March Wind" from this early volume foretells important aspects of her future method:

We peer with restless focus
at a drop of pondwater of blood
something that can only be seen
in infinite slender sections. (*Summits*, 48)

We find this attentiveness to isolated sections next in an image of striated light in the title poem of *The Heat Bird*, where the speaker seems relieved to discover the indifferent, systemic operations that mark time beyond her personal preoccupations:

Narrow cracks between the boards cast
a rain of parallel bright lines across the rafters
which seemed precise and gay in the ghost town
They were outside its time, though with each change in sun
they changed a little in angle and length, systematically
They were outside the carnage of my collaborative seductions⁵

At this point in Berssenbrugge's work, however, images such as this one that depict an awareness of the sublime are drawn in contrast to the constraints of personal desire, and, as such, develop limited resonance. For the most part, the poems of *The Heat Bird* are not memorable, either as expressive lyrics or as experimental forms in the lyric. The speaker's flatly stated ambition in the opening poem—"Never mind if he calls, the places you get/through inwardness take time"—reminds us that strategies of self-protection can license narcissistic expansiveness (*Heat Bird*, 13). That

is, like many of the lyrical volumes written in the 1980s, these poems chart the personal development required to lead the life that in turn makes possible these poems of close observation and self-examination. Patient efforts to withdraw and view the world with an "innocent eye" only implicate the viewer more firmly as the recipient of unique insights: "All this time/she was trying to recede until things would resemble/each other. . ." (*Heat Bird*, 20).

The poems are most effective when they connect present landscapes, scenes from daily experience lived with village intensity in New Mexico, or descriptions of Spruce Island, with memories of the speaker's grandparents, much like the wandering dog of "Pack Rat Sieve" who crosses boundaries indiscriminately. There "sieve" refers as much to the selective method of the poem, linking seemingly arbitrary scenes, as it does to individual images of the poem, the fascination with junk and the "packrat houses/on an ore heap, sparking with foil" (*Heat Bird*, 25). But perhaps it is the very sieve-like selectivity of these poems, the self-reflective tendency to gauge observations against a "longing locus," that narrows their interest and, finally, compares unfavorably to the accretive, compositional method of Berssenbrugge's recent work. Still, these poems stage some of the philosophical desires of the later work, the wish to see formal structures themselves—"This is what I am always trying to do, make/the air into its form" (*Heat Bird*, 14)—or to see the immutable flashing in the mutable:

Only when you see completely through it can
a mass of swifts on the far ridge like a sunspot
or King Lumber smoke become sieved gold from a river
You see their yellow breasts, then each yellow breast (*Heat Bird*, 14)

Ultimately, however, the intensity and critical implications of these images is derailed by hermetic narrative fragments and by recourse to logic that develops conclusions outside the terms of the poems. For now, the speaker of the poems voices a valid critique that will not be true of the later work—"I too easily give up the meaning of the picture."⁶

II

With the emergence of *Empathy* in 1989 comes a marked change in Berssenbrugge's use of space: formally, in her creation of a discursive space in long poems of long lines, and thematically, in her focus on space as a dimension of human relations mediated by language and the unconscious. Berssenbrugge is one of a generation of poets for whom Ashbery's style

was influential, but not absorbing; one thinks of Ann Lauterbach encountering *Three Poems*, finding that a poem could be *that*. Likewise, for Berssenbrugge, one imagines that the encounter with *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* may have illustrated the rewards of permitting the poem to accrue sufficient mass to become self-reflexive, contradictory, ruminative. With hindsight, we can say that on her own terms and in a highly individual manner, Berssenbrugge has articulated the kind of phenomenological investigation that Ashbery dreamed of in *Three Poems*:

The facts of history have been too well rehearsed (I'm speaking needless to say not of written history but the oral kind that goes on in you without your having to do anything about it) to require further elucidation here. But the other, unrelated happenings that form a kind of sequence of fantastic reflections as they succeed each other at a pace and according to an inner necessity of their own—these, I say, have hardly ever been looked at from a vantage point other than the historian's and an arcane historian's at that. The living aspect of these obscure phenomena has never to my knowledge been examined from a point of view like the painter's: in the round, bathed in a sufficient flow of overhead light, with "all its imperfections on its head" and yet without prejudice of the exaggerations either of the anatomist or the eulogist: quietly, in short, and I hope succinctly.⁷

Empathy is a collection of poems preoccupied with the relation of affect to space. Berssenbrugge may have chosen this pairing because empathy is colloquially construed as a problem or question of space, that is, the distance between persons, or the emotional capacity of a person construed as internal space or receptivity. Now, in place of direct reports of subjective experience, Berssenbrugge is disinclined to use the self or the personal as the measure of experiential effects. Instead, she begins with impressions of the phenomenal world and carefully traces a set of views, or entryways, onto this realm, proceeding with extreme resistance to consolidating forms of emotion and perception. The saturation of the poem in elements of sensory perception implies that the developing ideas proceed from these fragments as they enter into compositional relation. Thematically, this means that one cannot think of empathy except through the imaginative acts that create space and with which space is apprehended. The spatial constellation of this aspect of human relations engages particular formal coordinates, including external and internal boundaries, the sense of limit or of expansiveness, the apprehension of movement or stasis, and the axis of concentration versus distraction.

Often in these poems there is a preliminary impulse to provide a figurative place for the scenes unfolding, an abstraction that may or may not become concrete as the poem proceeds. "Texas," for example, begins:

I used the table as a reference and just did things from there in register, to play a form of feeling out to the end . . .

And in "The Star Field," the constellation of points in the night sky evokes a field that can be imaginatively scanned as surface or entered through the spatial dimensions of planes and passages:

Placing our emotion on a field, I said, became a nucleus of space, defined by a rain of light and indeterminate contours of a landscape, like the photograph of an explosion, and gave the travel of your gaze into it, or on me, imaginative weight of the passage along a gulf of space or a series of aluminum poles. (*Empathy*, 27)

The opening poems of the book recurrently describe a passageway, entrance, or courtyard delimiting a space only to indicate unlimited expanses. In "Chinese Space," for example, a poem that begins with entry into a courtyard, we learn that the architectural design of these visually busy spaces is to saturate the viewer and actively form her experiential expectations.

First there is the gate from the street, then some flowers inside the wall, then the inner, roofed gate. It is a very plain wall, without expressionistic means,

such as contrasting light on paving stones inside the courtyard to the calligraphed foundation stones.

My grandfather called this the facade or Baroque experience, rendering a courtyard transparent.

The eye expecting to confront static space experiences a lavish range of optical events,

such as crickets in Ming jars, their syncopation like the right, then left, then right progress

into the house, an experience that cannot be sustained in consciousness, because

your movement itself binds passing time, more than entering directs it. (*Empathy*, 29)

The saturation of visual/spatial effects described here is a property of Berssenbrugge's new style, and we can take this account of a highly crafted artifice as an analog for her method generally. "There is a craft at work/to reconcile emotion in a purely speculative ambiance," she tells us in "Duration of Water," a poem that uses the image of theater with "hundreds of painted scenes combining and recombining/in order to exaggerate situations of joy or pain on stage" (*Empathy*, 26). Simulating these choreographed effects, Berssenbrugge uses what she has called a "sentence format."⁸ Berssenbrugge has explained, "Up to the middle of the *Four Year*

Old Girl, I had been committed to the sentence, an arbitrary commitment. But these sentences were arranged in stanzas. Then around the time of writing the *Four Year Old Girl* title poem and *Endocrinology* (which were written close to one another in time), I found my present format which is: Each sentence is a line. If the sentence is long, then the line runs over, as you can see."⁹

When the line is a sentence the logic of the poems depends more upon incremental, metonymic comparisons and on declarative assertions, rather than on the symbolic substitutions or equations more often associated with metaphor and simile. Berssenbrugge is fully aware that these long lines often exceed a reader's capacity, and in an interview with Laura Moriarty years ago she revealed her intentions: "[U]p until now and even with the *Heat Bird* I've really been trying to create an experience in the reader in which they are changed but they can't reiterate what happened or how it happened. So a long line helps me in doing that because you can't grasp the whole line in your mind."¹⁰

By elaborating and sustaining a heightened experience of space, Berssenbrugge suggests that the phenomenological world and our imaginative elaboration of it make profound and telling impressions upon us, and that these experiences, in turn, influence states of self, memory, ideation, and the unconscious in subtle ways that do not depend upon our efforts at containment. The description of the Baroque quality of the courtyard in the poem "Chinese Space," like Berssenbrugge's writing method generally, creates sufficient density to delay our entry or passage through the poem. She claims that the experiential demands of temporal properties—such as the summation of movement through space into an idea or an experience of duration—prevail over fleeting spatial impressions of entry and passage. We need to know more about these phenomenological events, but to do so requires that we attend to spatial dimensions of experience lest these are diminished by the "binding" forces of unity and continuity that temporality constructs.

In a sense, *Empathy* begins again and again in the multiple entrances to courtyards of the opening poems. There is a visit to Tan Tien, "a park, now," in a poem by that name, and yet another courtyard, this time in a Carmelite monastery, where "Apple trees bloom haphazard in the field around the nunnery" (*Empathy*, 14, 35). The figure of the courtyard circumscribes space, presenting entry as repetition magnified by ritual. As such, the wish for order or controlled presentation is brought to bear against the open-ended nature of composition that admits coincidence, chance, partial views, fragments, stray thoughts. The tension Berssenbrugge explores becomes apparent in the poem "The Margin," in which expanse is associated with the infinite, with indifference to human

concerns, and, ultimately, with the sublime, whereas the margin is where perspective gathers and movement appears. In these poems we are immersed in sensual, spatial qualities of heft, depth, limit, shadow, distance, and passage, all the attributes we construe of objects or bounded fields:

The way a peach-colored
amaryllis can cut up the space of a room, depending on how he places it in the
room, an environment erodes.
An invisible plane of air is almost undetectable to touch as you walk down into
the canyon,
laden with hue. (*Empathy*, 36)

Berssenbrugge creates a scenic landscape, generally in the present tense or with minimal chronological, in which she can investigate how this sensual panorama is changed by perspective, complicated by affect, and implicated in various abstract questions. In a poem such as "Recitative," the fragmentation of continuity and duration into discrete units allows for an investigation of the formal relation of desire and linguistic structures. In this poem, the voice of someone recounting her experience on the telephone, disembodied and "insistently formal," is crossed with an account of Egypt in the third millennium B.C. where, Berssenbrugge tells us, speech acts were construed as discrete rather than continuous: "speech was spoken like an arrangement of stars, / an orderly procession of luminous beings. . . ." (*Empathy*, 34). This allusion prompts the speaker to think of language in two senses, either as the combination of discrete units or as a flow, and *this*, in turn, leads her to propose that desire is similarly double: "it seemed that love was a spiritual exercise in physical form" (*Empathy*, 34).

With the emphasis on spatial dimension, she recognizes that desire, if it is doubled by representation, might also be separated from the concept of presence, so that desire might not always be linked to expression. In the poem, this insight is accomplished by the diagonal band of light that cuts across the scene of the telephone conversation, splitting it between spaces delineated by light and shadow. "Half their conversation is in shadow, so they speak in and out of a diagonal wedge of light" (*Empathy*, 34). This attention to light creates a formal space, a stage for movement "in and out," which then makes it possible for the speaker to question whether desire need be construed as a matter of presence and absence. To the varied representations of desire, Berssenbrugge adds the imaginative pressures of odd phenomenological experiences rendered abstract, "a standard of grace in the corridor of the day." And, like the courtyards of other poems, the estuary that emerges serves as a formal figure for silence, for attention to the intervals between beats.

For me, it seemed that love was a spiritual exercise in physical form, and the diagonal was glints off an inferred line of sun lingering, as spring synchronized with the double space of her desire and her desire for their presence
to be hieratic, not wholly expressive, a standard of grace in the corridor of a
day,

with narcissus. If it is through counting that speech is connected to time,
then crossing an inferred estuary of this conversation is a rest in music.
(*Empathy*, 34)

In a way that resists paraphrase, precisely because it is fundamental to the poems, silence is instrumentally connected to the fields or apartments of space. This is evident in the still, quiet renditions of the many courtyards of *Empathy*, and also in Berssenbrugge's repeated use of the camera as analog. In the poem "The Carmelites," the camera serves as a figure for memory or desire construed as a "device," as if empathy were a matter of emotional exposure. We can understand Berssenbrugge's interest in the camera as a device that captures the very compositional elements she has under investigation—time, light, and speed. Here she asks that we hold the lens open longer until we can see the conditions for the event, silence and the immanence of the landscape, that taken together are "the interval//of the exposure" (*Empathy*, 35).

Spatial dimensions of the phenomenological realm may be thought to gesture toward the sublime because these properties are mute; space does not speak its content. The figures of the flowering apple trees, "passing light," and the "stasis of the doorway" serve as potent, luminous emblems of changing capacity—immanence or permanence—precisely because they are not emblems, but aspects of our immersion in the world that we must encounter in order to imagine transcendence or the sublime.¹¹ And, importantly for Berssenbrugge, these luminous spaces are cavities in which silence might collect.

Apple trees bloom haphazard in the field around the nunnery.
The atmosphere in daylight poses questions about passing light more
difficult than those
the ordinary person in nature, for whom the horizon and amount of light
define the limits of intensity,
has long since dissolved into a sense of spaciousness for things to take
place.

As he or she begins to walk among the trees, each tree would be part of a
ceiling consisting
of so many sunk or hollowed out compartments for the silence. For me,
the blossoms became numerous edges of the volume of each tree, soft, or a
missing part

in its openness, the way an exposed nest is upturned that should be concealed in leaves, or your voice that is so emotionally distant. (*Empathy*, 35)

Berssenbrugge associates this "interval/of the exposure" with the sublime and implies that we can choose this over the expressed of the event. That is, unlike the space of the courtyard in which we are acted upon, with the image of the camera Berssenbrugge depicts our response to phenomenological experience, and to the sublime as an active realm in which we must choose to see and to compose.

Now, the sublime is the interval of the exposure, the way silence once signified but no longer signifies the limits of discourse, sabotaging instructive strategies of the film and the garden, in which we are audience or the wall. Not as in a Chinese garden. (*Empathy*, 35)

Emotionally, or with regard to self-exposure, the implication is that the representation of events must not displace the constructed, partial nature of the event itself. In the poem "Empathy," Berssenbrugge draws this danger as a contrast between desire represented and displaced in song, and her image for the contingent, changing aspects of desire—"a time-lapse photograph of lightning, in proportion/to each moment you are looking." (*Empathy*, 58). Where the representation of desire and self-knowledge is at stake in Berssenbrugge's marvelous compositional strategies, we find the force of the book's title:

In the same way the song must never be allowed to threaten the presentation of what takes place in the song, so that she may try to develop empathy for what she really wants to happen to her, instead of desire being the song. (*Empathy*, 58)

Claiming for Berssenbrugge an "anti-representational model of emotion," Charles Altieri has traced how the poems of *Empathy* imagine spaces for intimacy that infinitely complicate the epistemes involved in lyrical representation of emotion.

Like Lacan, Berssenbrugge wants to challenge the essentially visual, pictorial ways that we now take as central to imagining closeness with other people. For her, the visual confines feelings to an essentially "mystical" mode in which we are constantly drawing inferences from particulars. In the place of that model she envisions a "conjectural" model of feeling. Conjecture differs from interpretation because it is an ongoing process of constant mobile ad-

justments, not a synthetic building of hypotheses by combining sets of signs in accord with received vocabularies for what counts as expressivity. So, with Lacan, she stresses the ways that efforts at representation and self-representation seem to elicit intimacy, but in fact block access to many dimensions of the psyches that might enable intense closeness between people. In fact the ideals of representation are as frustrating as they are seductive. The basic role of representation is to provide a stable object promising to assuage anxieties over what we actually desire and how we want to be understood. But suppose that both our desires and our intelligibility to others cannot be fully realized within such stabilities. If that is so, then we purchase self-confidence at the cost of entering self-protective illusion.¹²

But Berssenbrugge is a careful theoretician, and so she admits that the anti-synthetic impulse that underpins her "conjectural" mode has its limits, namely that we may become stranded in measured intervals, unable to extend and link perceptions together. The very methods we use to establish clarity within intervals, because these depend at least in part on comparing one set of ideas or memories with another, involve us in a series of approximations, for example, "our methods of comparing densities between human beings" (*Empathy*, 48). Therefore, midway through a book that strives for precision and clarity about the relation of affect to space, Berssenbrugge introduces a fog. This apparition is meant to convey "the power to make the space continue beyond the single perception" (*Empathy*, 50) and to suggest the ambiguity that may be necessary for belief states, memory, and intense feeling.

Beautiful, unrepeatable, fleeting impressions can be framed only within the contradicting ambition of her consciousness to acquire impressions and to retain her feeling, a way of repeating a dream. (*Empathy*, 42)

The poem "Fog" simultaneously develops two related analogies for the sense of "seeking by feeling," that of the fog and "whirling galaxies" that suspend stars and gases. The fog renders Berssenbrugge's discussion of visibility more subtle still; that is, by staging scenes in which a person is present, but not visible, she introduces the force of belief states that might otherwise be obscured, and recasts the subject of empathy yet again as a matter of "the problem of the appearance of another person" (*Empathy*, 48). Having analyzed the ways in which phenomenological properties and abstractions become objects of thought, Berssenbrugge now addresses the formless nature of the relations between two persons in which boundaries are revealed as arbitrary conventions, and suggests that these might be rendered by vibrant, idiosyncratic associations.

In any serious interaction between them, not knowing your way about extends to the essence of what is between them. What can appear emotional is caused by the emission of energy out of her body, which you feel, but there is also such a thing as "feeling something as luminous,"

thinking of him as the color of polished silver or nickel, or a scratch in these metals. (*Empathy*, 46)

Berssenbrugge makes evident that articulating a "complex of intervals" depends upon highly subjective, "foggy" in-between states; in practice, focus is the product of movement between intervals and is therefore complicated by amorphous narrative qualities, dream states, the pull of energy, and the stickiness of memory. Quoting Wittgenstein, she begins:

The fog of the way we feel our way into this focus, seeking by feeling, lies in the indefiniteness of the concept of continuing focus, or distance and closeness. (*Empathy*, 48)

The lack of clarity or the dissolution of boundaries may be disarming, but it may also be necessary to animate our experience of spatial and interpersonal expanses in which events can be experienced as real and felt to contain relevant meaning.

Therefore, we appreciate the fog, as the power to make the space continue beyond the single perception, into raw material or youth of the body, like a body of light. (*Empathy*, 50)

While in *Empathy* fog provides an extended analog for the wish to dissolve into darkness or the unlimited, in her next two books, *Sphericity* (1993) and *Endocrinology* (1997), Berssenbrugge suggests that flooding the body with light might test the limits of the self, thereby making it possible to apprehend aspects of being and of the sublime. The poems of these collections stage an illuminated view of the interior of the body, of the unseen, biological apparatus that operates systematically and without need of representation. This realm allows Berssenbrugge to pose a nonrepresentational epistemology at the hormonal and cellular level, a complex signaling system continually at work, unobserved and with a bent toward chaos, "a structural need to become disorganized."¹³

Written during her pregnancy, *Sphericity* examines the relation of a person's awareness of the body's interior to her perception of space and time. It is an importantly compositional and collaborative work in which each of

the elements in composition—space, surfaces, light, time, frame, sequence, and scale—is evaluated for its contribution to creativity and a sense of "inner voice." The poems are exquisite studies of how two things are related by means of perceptual sequencing, scale, or the imposition of arbitrary frames to determine a third. But the speaker is skeptical of comparison and its conclusions, "[t]he illusion of meaning of the third dimension."¹⁴ Instead, she seems intent on sustaining the moment of apprehension of compositional space just as it is about to be creatively explored or imaginatively filled, and this relational apprehension is one she joins to awareness of the physical spaces of the body.

Two particles that make a continuum or ideal, in how the space between them relates to a third event, as how clouds against a windowpane admit space that continues to a cloud on the mountain, a sheath of a space of feeling in material sheaths of her body for a perceived order, depend on your having felt the relation. (*Sphericity*, 10)

To explore the spaces around objects and the energy associated with their perception ("the oscillation of spaces/or volumes of energy"), Berssenbrugge distinguishes between "expressive energy, the content of your consciousness," which is bound up with containment, and "symbolic energy," which is a force like light or sound emitted at the boundaries of things and in the body (*Sphericity*, 17). In the poem "Size," she depicts light falling on objects as a figure for "translucency" and for the perceptual stance we might adopt if we began to think of the body as responsive, a body in exchanges with other bodies of space and light.

Stones were chosen so impact of water on them makes acoustic harmony, the way the song of a bird, like light, gains character from what it touches in the world, and who is there to see or hear it. Sound refers to a depth of feeling, or exchanges for feeling. Our transparency guarantees the exchange, so she connects frequencies during the time she listens as a science or song: the transparent sound of water as it strikes a stone, to water in the color of a petal, in skin, and innumerable points at the edge of a petal like sound intervals. (*Sphericity*, 15)

"You listen as you know,"¹⁵ Stein wrote, and for Berssenbrugge as well, the pull of content makes its appeal along lines of experience, memory, and knowledge. But these change, transformed by our capacity to realize our

abstractions or ideation as further compositional elements: "Emphasizing not only the ground upon which her movement builds, but matter it forms, the idea/of movement is material, also" (*Sphericity*, 25). That is, as much as possible Bessenbrugge attempts a metaphysical experiment of reversing the hierarchy in which consciousness or "state of mind" is the medium that grasps objects, or "states of being." This medium is limited by arbitrary perceptual determinants such as ordinal sequencing, graduated lines of color, size, or magnitude and might be superseded if we could only subject abstractions of our consciousness to the same generative compositional force with which we transform objects.

This we might do, Bessenbrugge suggests in the title poem, if we distinguish operationally between objects as apprehended and these images as they become representations in and of our consciousness. In "Sphericity," this distinction is accomplished through a delicate exchange of repeated images and their symbolic resonance. The horizon, "an apricot seam," "the surface of the earth," and a "one way membrane" are images that might be considered apart from their representation as images, as in the phrase "the image of an apricot band of light in my memory" (*Sphericity*, 28). With "sensitive empiricism," Bessenbrugge insists on distinguishing between the realm of apprehension in which objects *qua* objects appear (determined by signature features of our interest) and that of representation in which the "same" images become implicated in the content of consciousness¹⁶:

On the horizon,
an apricot seam is not the content of a concept of you. Knowing this light,
like knowing home,
is not a content, but seeing it is a content of my consciousness. If it's an
image, it
can have content, i.e., telling something to me, or if you were telling the
content of your dream. (*Sphericity*, 27)

The finished poems of *Sphericity* were illustrated by the artist Richard Tuttle, and, for her part, Bessenbrugge seems to have had in mind the artist's relational use of space and color, "a new language in accidental spaces between objects" (*Sphericity*, 10). In effect, she treats narrative and descriptive elements as equivalent terms rather than representational counters. Tuttle's drawings on facing pages respond to the abstract titles of the poems with a recurrent fernlike shape also suggestive of a cog or reticulated edge that curves and seems to turn as the book progresses. Handwritten notes at the margin beneath the drawings indicate color by name and intensity as though in reference to an artist's color wheel, "Perm Yellow 15%" and "White 85%" (*Sphericity*, 18). Shapes that seem both naturalist

and mechanical, together with their coded colors, correspond to the speaker's wish to use color indexically as an equivalence or correspondence that is not a representation or replacement.

A wren in grapes reminding her of the woman, is how color belongs
inseparably to your consciousness of her,
without being the consciousness. Gold on a wing bears the illusion of the
content of a symbolic dimension. (*Sphericity*, 12)

Here beauty emerges as an analytical activity, an integral part of the compositional process, rather than an object of aesthetic study. In Bessenbrugge's next book, *Endocrinology*, her preoccupation with the relation of language and beauty is situated within an emotional axis of the fear of having and the fear of losing. Another collaboration with an artist, this time Kiki Smith, the book is a strikingly original visual and verbal exploration of the interior landscape of the human body. Various organs, including the lungs, kidneys, and fallopian tubes, appear to float in the flat spaces of the dappled blue and tan page. The fenestration of blood vessels and star-shaped cells, pointed with nodes, isolated on the page elicit naturalist or vegetable associations. Bessenbrugge carries over her investigation of light as an agent and analog for transparency, having learned that within the body various chemical reactions actually produce light: "Shortly after phagocytosing material, leucocytes increase their oxygen consumption and chemically produce light" (*Endocrinology*, 8).

But whereas the dissolution of boundaries in previous books was useful to explore intimacy and to understand the correspondence of the self with the world, in this long poem Bessenbrugge seems troubled by the possibility that shared circulation communicates damage and preoccupied with the pressing forces of systemic entropy. "If the mother is diabetic, the fetus becomes her mother's endocrine system./ This occurs in all animals whose circulations are linked" (*Endocrinology*, 9). The body, which Bessenbrugge has heretofore quietly relied upon in her phenomenological investigations, appears to have a rich and intense willfulness of its own: "Because she's in a body, it makes decisions" (*Endocrinology*, 6). Emotions are controlled in part by hormonal levels that rise and fall according to the chemical reactions that follow on the release of hormones into intracellular space.

So, the aspect of consciousness that seemed purposeful in *Sphericity*—"Her time is the center of increasing disorder, an arrow in the space" (26)—now seems afloat in interstitial fluid, suspended in intracellular space or in capillary networks. But even within this increasingly defamiliarized realm, Bessenbrugge asserts the illuminating force of concentra-

tion, this time by means of imagining a block of light traveling within the body. "She concentrates on manipulating her organs to pull the white square of light precisely into the niche" (*Endocrinology*, 16). These lighted spaces correspond to white squares cut out of the page background on which are printed the lines of the poem, isolated words ("thread," "glory"), or, in places, left conspicuously blank. In this way, Berssenbrugge and Smith have collaborated to signal visually a correspondence between linguistic signification that depends upon space and difference and the communicative spaces of the body across which chemical signaling takes place. But how these systems relate is ultimately left for the reader to decide, and the anxious tone of the poem is somewhat dissipated by the active choices one must make to chart various readings of the text.

III

The poems of Berssenbrugge's most recent book, *Four Year Old Girl* (1999), extend the study of the spatial dimension of sensory experience she began with *Empathy*. Once again, Berssenbrugge investigates the unspoken correspondence between affect and the experience of spatial modalities such as size, contrast, fit, and space emptied and occupied. Here the preoccupation with space that dominates poems in the first section of the book makes particular claims on the operations of memory, and perhaps occasions a spatial model of memory based on parallelism.¹⁷ The unremitting focus on spatial properties allows Berssenbrugge to formulate and advance a question central to *Empathy* as well, namely, how one might allow the self *transience*, although it is to some degree composed by these spatial, sensory encounters, and so also permit a transcendental world. From outset, the first poem "Irides" proposes:

In a world which transcends the confines of her transient being, she can reach and bring existences within the compass of her life, without annulling their transcendence.¹⁸

These poems express the desire to sustain an enlivening sense of a transient self and to preserve what Berssenbrugge calls the "implied promise" we may locate in the world despite efforts of the mind and poem to contain this abstract force. What are the forms of composition and of memory this desire requires?

The poems of the first section compose a serial study that draws a parallel between the self in its phenomenological exchanges with the world, and

the transcendence of the world we may experience as a habit of living with "invisible entities" or the expansiveness associated with the sublime.

For a still moment, we see the world as implicit promise, something human that leaves the body at death and goes off on its own. The more wispy the mind, as at the edge of the greenness of a dogwood blossom, the more fit to catch sight of such an invisible entity as "parallel," its distinct substance capable of having all mountains thought away and still being around. (*Four*, 12)

Composed generally of four to five sections that can be imagined as free-standing screens or as panels, each joined to the next, the poems repeat and mirror the "same" images in new positions. The poems themselves are obsessed with screens—transparencies, opaqueness, frames, intervals, and spacing. Berssenbrugge presents the "interaction between an ethereal object and an organism," partly as a matter of fit—as though we are significantly primed for visual and spatial experiences because we are constitutive participants—and partly as interactions shaped by forms of representation.

The "wispy mind" emerging in these poems keeps many forms discrete and parallel: the world of appearances, the subjectively experienced world of appearances, and the forms for this experience. This parallelism of the world and the subjective observer is what makes things seem real or not, but it does not dictate the form of the experience. One retains the concept for "parallel" even after experience of a particular instance, such as the horizon line "parallel to" the mountain, fades. As a corollary, Berssenbrugge speculates that a person might be thought to fill or evacuate his or her subjective forms as if these too were stable abstractions like the concept of parallelism. "The music stops. The dancer spills across his form and moves to the edge of the floor in silence" (*Four*, 14).

Because perceptual apprehension and the sense of self are separate and parallel, we can't know the forms for experience a priori. Memory is another of these undecided and unstable visitations, "an experience that needs to be communicated." In a sentence that is exhilarating because it disjoins the "lock and key" pairing of form and content, Berssenbrugge insists on the discrete, parallel existence of each:

No one can describe the relation between an experience that needs to be communicated and the form of that communication. It lies next to its form

separating her, like proximity to death, the way a wild animal automatically lies next to its form. (*Four*, 15)

This parallelism comes about in the poems through meticulous attention to spatial properties of perception and through the repetition of images with variation. Nested and shifting vehicle/tenor positions emphasize the elision possible between referential image and the image used in representation. For example, the recurrent images of irises in multiple sections of the poem by that title are first introduced in an image for transparent overlay and initiate a series of mimetic regressions continued by the recurrence of the image in subsequent sections:

Her image of you, a transparency on her desire, is like a contact print of irises on film.

Their shallow space implies expansion within it of irises and shadows against a blue wall. (*Four*, 11)

Here, the compression of the irises as flowers and as an image for transparency creates the space implied by the superimposition of planes. In a later section of the poem, the iris shadows on a wall convey transparency, now in an expanded image for the spatial perception of interval:

The transparency of a leaf against the size it will attain along any vector of the stem, like iris shadows on a wall, has the fluidity of a veil,

not opaque size, nor relative fluidity, as of a green petal to a crimson petal, a child turned wrong inside her. (*Four*, 13)

The oscillation of the "same" image used differently in this and other poems implies the shifting correspondence between objects of sight, visual habits, and the ideational and emotional structures that follow on these habits. The doubling of reference to the object and to its functional or perceptual operations displays the flexibility and imaginative force of these minute interactions. Through the repetition of images, Berssenbruggé suggests the subtle formation of these ways of seeing over time, and, simultaneously, imparts the capriciousness of the process. She makes this explicit in the poem "Pollen":

Pollen condenses to mottled light on the ground. Assuming the sense of an activity links to the frame of its experience, weakness in the framing process makes our senses vulnerable. (*Four*, 45)

Through this attention to space, Berssenbruggé describes a sensory fold in which world and person are commensurate in certain attributes—a fold

reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's concept of "flesh," whereby he gives an account of the reciprocity between the seer and the visible. He first describes this reciprocity as though the body were "a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things, and otherwise what sees them and touches them," and then corrects his analogy: "There are not in it two leaves or two layers; fundamentally it is neither thing seen only nor seer only, it is Visibility sometimes wandering and sometimes reassembled."¹⁹ This entails narcissistic attention, but also responsive reception, a sense of being regarded as an object in the world: "the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things."²⁰ This "coiling over of the visible upon the visible" that entails the "generality of the sensible" and the "anonymity" of the self adheres to a sense of location and is generative of facticity—for Merleau-Ponty, it is what makes facts have meaning.

Likewise, for Berssenbruggé, the transcendence of the world does not imply its noncommunication. According to her, the "implicit promise" we may feel from the world comes about because something human has split off and wanders in the world. And, although representation is necessarily implicated in the transmission and comprehension of experience, Berssenbruggé insists (often through the image of proportional spacing of leaves or our odd awareness of the size that the leaves will attain) that the ineffable is not a symbol *for* or *of* something else. Instead, she struggles to make these two lines of experience parallel—the ineffable and the sensuous experience of the world—and to keep them from collapsing together. This is not an easy task because of the practice of reference.

To formally express ethereal existence, a relation like reference picks out an entity in the world,

such as her. Tulips bloom, lighthouse of pleats. The feeling there's something ineffable it's like

to have the person, you can't learn from a sentence about her, is deep or empty. It feels like expectation,

space of rocks beyond the island, marked by graceful lamps on points of land like a stage set,

avoiding the rocks, your relation to time in the future or to other people, like a budded tree. (*Four*, 23)

The trick to sustaining both the transient self and the transcendental world seems to be to regard feeling as both apparition and as a way of thinking about appearances, shifting between description (which seeks to make things appear) and enactment (which shows the work performed by these ideas). To this end, Berssenbruggé suggests that we identify precisely what the referent is in representation—meaning or the structure for meaning.

"The dream represents a meaning to me. Then, it's a structure that shelters the meaning" (Four, 23).

And so we return to the interplay between structure, matters of fit and location, and to sequences that trigger a cascade of events. This interplay of spatial realization (fit) and sequence makes certain requirements on what we mean by memory. To draw the operations of memory out from an internal structure into the frames of the world, we may need to regard our memories as impersonal "ineffable entities," not so dissimilar for being "ours" than the invisible entities that occupy the world.

Memory, imagined as something more like anticipation, being primed in readiness, rather than a nostalgic, internal narrative, might be useful as a means of bridging the unknown and experiences more familiar. This would be a way of picturing memory without borders and apart from the set of tropes commonly associated with memory: inclusive/exclusive, real/false, layered/singular, narrative/visual, contained/containing. The spatial focus of Berssenbrugge's book opens up further possibilities for conceptualizing memory (and forgetting) that turn on other tropes, most notably, parallelism/interpenetration, the possible and the impossible, and that inherently acknowledge memory as incorporating aspects of representation and loss. Therefore, memory cannot ever operate simply as the recovery from experiences of loss. In her fascination with bioscience, Berssenbrugge traces the gap endemic to memory to the genetic level as the difference always obtaining between genotype and phenotype:

A child catches hold of this phylogenetic experience, where her own experience fails. She fills in gaps in individual truth with historic truth, so a lack is not missing. (Four, 36)

I want to close this discussion with some brief observations about the title poem, "The Four Year Old Girl," about which one can safely say that non-alignment, the threat involved in the strategy of parallelism, is realized genetically. Reading the book for the first time, one discovers a startling correspondence between poems of the first section, whose ambition is to encompass the sensual experience of spatial dimension, and those of the second section, in which the "infinite expansion" seemingly promised in this enterprise is tragically foreshortened in the account of a person who suffers from symptoms associated with a genetic disorder, including the gradual loss of sight. But, the rather clinical description in "The Four Year Old Girl" is not an invitation for pity, since, in the recounting, the speaker recognizes the

limitations iatrogenic to apprehension itself: "In all comprehension, there's an error, forgetting the creativity of material in its nascent form" (Four, 56).

But to come back to misalignment. The speaker of the poem carefully begins by noting the difference between genotype and phenotype (between genetic structural instructions and their expression) that obtains because these are not perfect subsets. There is a gap between the two that allows for parallel worlds (within the self and between mother and daughter) captured in the line, "The mother's genotype makes a parallel reality to her reality, now" (Four, 54), and that permits error in the ribosomal transcription process: "A fragile site recombines misaligned genes of the repeated sequence" (Four, 51). This is most of section four of the poem:

4

Her skull is large and soft to the touch. The thoracic cavity small, limbs short, deformed and vertebrae flattened.

All the bones are undermineralized.

Bluish light surrounds her.

This theme concerns her status, since she doesn't place her inheritance in a position of subjectivity, but of an object.

Her X-ray teems with energy, but locked outside material.

One creates a mouse model of human disease by disrupting a normal mouse gene *in vitro*, then

injecting the mutated gene into host embryos.

DNA integrated into the mouse genome is expressed and transmitted to progeny.

Like touch, one cell can initiate therapy. (Four, 54)

Arguably, with the X-ray image we revisit the image of irises on contact print. The poem describes human recombinant therapy, a treatment for congenital growth deficiency and other disorders of enzyme or protein deficiency, whereby synthetic proteins are produced by genes *in vitro* and then administered. Research on *in vivo* gene therapy, the direct transmission of genes into cells of the body, stimulates protein expression by using the body's own physiology. These treatments may replace defective genes with functional ones but does not yet correct the lack or error in the original instructions, the gene itself. It is impossible to resist the analogy that genetic encoding of bases operates like language, reliant for signification on difference. Indeed, Stanley Cohen and Herb Boyer, who discovered human recombinant DNA in the 1970s, did so in part by treating nucleic sequences as palindromes, which led to their insight to recombine complementary plasmids. This is signification with real physical consequences:

Reducing a parent to the universality of signifier produces serene detachment in her, abstract as an electron micrograph of protein-deplete human metaphase DNA. Its materiality is a teltransport of signified protoplasm across lineage or time, avid, muscular and compact, as if pervasive, attached to her, *in* a particular matriarchy of natural disaster, in which the luminosity of a fetal sonogram becomes clairvoyant. (*Four*, 57)

In this cellular model of misalignment, memory is impersonal, a language endlessly repeating nucleic sequences. As Berssenbrugge comments: "She's inspired to change the genotype, because the cell's memory outlives the cell" (*Four*, 50). Referring back to the paradigm of the earlier poems, the transcendence of the world exceeds the limitations of its appearances to us. Although the stakes are higher, this poem continues the bid for a transient self in a transcendental world—subjectivity that admits the alterity of the world. These are the poem's closing lines:

The love has no quantity or value, but only lasts a length of time, different time, across which unfolds her singularity without compromising life as a whole. (*Four*, 57)

While I have focused on the operational changes memory undergoes in this collection, in this and other books Berssenbrugge's compositional method transforms the affective and perceptual elements drawn into composition. With *Four Year Old Girl*, Berssenbrugge advances her vision for engagement in both realms, the sensory world and the sublime, by articulating the method of perceptual and compositional equivalence she began in *Empathy* and *Sphericity*. That is, the minute phenomenological determinants of affect, the association of a person with color, or imaginings of the body's interior carefully traced in the earlier books here becomes a fully articulated schema of perceptual movement (including memory and belief states) in a world configured as immanent. Though it will seem a departure to some readers, *Four Year Old Girl* picks up where the last line of *Sphericity* leaves off: "Phenomenology of the space depends on the concrete value of its boundary, /not where she stops, but an opacity from which to extend her presence" (*Sphericity*, 42).

NOTES

1. Notes for "The Retired Architect" were appropriated from Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Gerhard Mack, Chogyam Trungpa, and Richard Tuttle.

2. There are, of course, multiple entrances to Berssenbrugge's complex and demanding work. I have reviewed the course of her career with respect to the phenomenological investigations her intricate compositional strategies stage; the critical importance of her Chinese heritage, her collaborations with visual artists, her plays and her theater work, including collaborations with the Morita Dance Company, are only a few among many other significant avenues that warrant further discussion.

3. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, *Empathy* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1989), 35. All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

4. Berssenbrugge, *Summits Move with the Tide* (New York: The Greenfield Review Press, 1982), 19. All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

5. Berssenbrugge, *The Heat Bird* (Providence: Burning Deck, 1983), 60. All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

6. Given space considerations, my discussion of Berssenbrugge's early work omits the books *Random Possession* (1979) and *Packrat Sieve* (1983), some poems of which are reprinted in *The Heat Bird*. The discussion of Berssenbrugge's collections of the 1980s omits *Hiddenness* with Richard Tuttle (1987).

7. John Ashbery, *Three Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 56.

8. Eileen Tabios, *Black Lightning: Poetry-In-Progress* (New York: Asian American Writers Workshop, 1998), 139.

9. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, unpublished correspondence with author, April 2000. 10. Interview with Laura Moriarty, *The American Poetry Archive News*, San Francisco State University, 5(1) (Spring 1988): 6.

11. Kathleen Fraser finds this struggle to evidence the sublime in Berssenbrugge's work in earlier poems. "It is her most profound dilemma: to find a way of giving voice to that which cannot be spoken of, beneath the historical, the categorical, the identifiable. To catch the unspeakable, just as it reveals itself. . . ." Kathleen Fraser, "Overheard," *Poetics Journal* 4 (May 1984): 102.

12. Charles Altieri, "Intimacy as Lyric Ideal," in *We Who Love To Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*, ed. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001). Also, at stake for Altieri is whether Berssenbrugge's experiments with the "language of the lyric" might be considered a challenge to the binary posed between lyrical and experimental writing in current critical reception. This is a critical insight well worth repeating: "Finally, I hope that elaborating Berssenbrugge's experiments will help us oppose what I see as an imaginatively crippling binary opposition that dominates contemporary academic criticism. There any emphasis on emotion in contemporary lyric poetry is seen as trapped within the reactionary egocentricity of an enervated romanticism. Experiment then has to be positioned on the other pole. . . . Yet this binary simply does not hold for many of the most interesting contemporary poets who consider their work a radical departure from dominant contemporary styles" (n.p.).

13. Berssenbrugge, with Kiki Smith, *Endocrinology* (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1997), 7. All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

14. Berssenbrugge, *Sphericity* (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1993), 11.

15. Gertrude Stein, "Potraits and Repetition," in *Lectures in America* (1935; repr. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 169.

16. This difference is, of course, impossible to partial out from properties of language on which it depends. Leslie Scalapino sees the long line of the poems branching through the text as a line of continuous "relation" that allows Berssenbrugge to test the hypothesis that writing and seeing (the combined forces of the artistic collaboration) are different perceptual orders. "Berssenbrugge's writing is drawing relations continually, on a hypothesis that writing is other than, a different faculty from, vision. *Sphericity* subjects the comparison itself (Tuttle's seeing/perspective and Berssenbrugge's language) to comparison. The 'comparison itself' is Berssenbrugge's long line of the poems, which, as a measure/shape that extends throughout the text, is as if there were one infinite line of 'relation' that constitutes the 'event horizon' of *Sphericity*." Leslie Scalapino, *The Public World/Syntactically Impermanence* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 61. It bears noting that lines of "seeing/perspective" and "language" are instrumental in Berssenbrugge's work generally and cannot be readily distinguished. Moreover, the lines of comparison and communication established in *Sphericity* seem to also refer inward, tracing the speaker's awareness of changes to her sense of interiority: "The horizon/represented a passage in time and light, a one way membrane she thinks is the edge of a shadow, /like a medical procedure into her body" (*Sphericity*, 26).

17. As I hope to make evident, *Four Year Old Girl* introduces spatial models for affect and memory that Berssenbrugge borrows from the language of bioscience and biotechnology. According to Eileen Tabios (*Black Lightning*, 134), Berssenbrugge has cited the following as references for the book: *Genetics in Medicine* (M. Thompson, Roderick McInnes, Huntington Willis); *Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller); *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller); *Buddha Nature* (Thrangru Rinpoche); *Theory of Religion* (Georges Baraille).

18. Berssenbrugge, *Four Year Old Girl* (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1998), 11. All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

19. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 137-38.
20. *Ibid.*, 139.

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