

Mary Jo Bang. *Elegy*.

St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2007.

There's no mistaking the somber tenor of Bang's new volume of poems. The title is *Elegy*; the dedication is "For Michael Donner Van Hook, January 17, 1967—June 21, 2004," and the first page of the first poem, "A Sonata for Four Hands," offers the reader these stark lines:

I say Come Back and you do
Not do what I want.

If you skip reading the book flaps (the flaps will tell you that Ms. Bang has lost her son), you'll understand gradually that the speaker's grown child has died, and that her inability to comprehend the circumstances of his passing—as well as the vast abstractions of *death* and *never again*—has found its grounding in the poems. It seems clear that Bang, in her anguish, did not know *how not to write* these poems. She was teaching herself about the nature of grief.

This a poetry that both embodies and enacts the numbing impossibility of understanding and the ongoing nature of Bang's suffering. The human experience of loss is, of course, not new, but these poems wear the hard, startling edge of inconsolable sorrow the way a blade wears its own honed edge: the grief is *of* the person. It is not merely something extra added on. Always the consummate artist, Bang gives us nothing sentimental, nothing clichéd. The poems are naked and spiky with pain.

Bang's short poem "Ode to History" appears to fill in her story:

Had she not lain on that bed with a boy
All those years ago, where would they be, she wondered.
She and the child that wouldn't have been but was now
No more. She would know nothing
Of mothering. She would know nothing
Of death. She would know nothing
Of love. The three things she'd been given

To remember. Wake me up, please, she said,
 When this life is over. Look at her—It's as if
 The windows of night have been sewn to her eyes.

It's a little masterpiece of a poem, unexcerptable; a little room that—for just an instant—seems almost to contain her pain in its closing image.

Though the poems are emotionally raw, there is nothing raw about the art. "We Took Our Places" puts forth this amazing, dreamlike trope:

The snake of time was spending itself
 Like an arrow in motion, aimed at a bale of hay,
 Each bale a bad day.

And then the poem's closure:

Someone shook her
 Awake and she rose and went on.

How do you write about uncontainable grief? This is exquisitely controlled writing about a loss so deep that containment cannot even be an issue. Nothing makes it bearable. Not even writing. Not even brilliant lines like these can shake off the mantle of such inadequacy. And we are made to feel her dilemma; every line is bone-hard. She has taken on, almost completely, the mannerism of the capitalized left margin, a contract with formality, a nod to control, to containment: the effort to hold down and understand the impossibility of the return she would wish for.

There are small instances where the aptitude for a dark humor evident in Bang's earlier books, here tinged with bitterness, shows through. In "A Sonata for Four Hands, II," she says,

She was clearly a member
 Of the fiasco survivor's club
 The living often belong to.

But it's a very small handful of brief-like-lightning cracks.

Before the tragedy that preceded *Elegy*, Bang's work often pivoted on dark-humored moments like that. In *Louise in Love*, her delicious and

devious poem "Captivity" begins:

Those birds will eat anything—
the carcass subsumed in death, the heart convulsing
in laughter. So this is how it ends, a dart in the eye
of Ifdom. The duck grows
up to be a pillow, the table takes the tree
out for a talk . . .

I say this here because though *Elegy* is pain rendered exquisitely un-exquisite, the larger body of her work has so much to offer the reader who might hesitate to enter the anguish of *Elegy*. In her previous four books, the serious lightness of Bang's darkish sensibility outweighed the darkness.

It will be interesting to see how Bang's work takes shape after *Elegy*. "There is no pretending to know," she says later in the book, "What crawls out of the mind lying quiet / By itself in the snow of the grave grass." I have a feeling and a hope that we will find out, in time, through more of her beautiful and difficult singing.

Renée Ashley

Charles Baxter. *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot*.
 Donald Revell. *The Art of Attention: A Poet's Eye*.
 St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2007.

"*The Art of* series is a new line of books reinvigorating the practice of craft and criticism. Each book will be a brief, witty, and useful exploration of fiction, nonfiction, or poetry by a writer impassioned by a singular craft issue. *The Art of* volumes will provide a series of sustained examination of key, but sometimes neglected, aspects of creative writing by some of contemporary literature's finest practitioners."

Introduction to *The Art of* SERIES, edited by Charles Baxter

The first two books in this great little series edited by Charles Baxter—Baxter's own *The Art of Subtext* and Donald Revell's *The Art of Attention*—bode well for readers who seek accomplished, but accessible and articulate reading on the topics of the writer's craft no matter their genre of focus.

If Baxter's *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot* doesn't become a model text, I'll be very surprised—and disappointed in the reading-about-writing world. Baxter's a veteran literary writer—he's written four novels, four volumes of short stories, one volume of essays, and a volume of poetry; and he's edited four books. This first book of the series treats the topic of subtext with both humor and elegance. And as the book accretes meaning, the reader is drawn in as though she were reading one of Baxter's novels: She can't wait to find out what he'll say—and how he'll say it.

In his introduction he states:

This brief book examines those elements that propel readers beyond the plot of a novel or short story into the realm of what haunts the imagination: the implied, the half-visible, and the unspoken. . . . to discuss subtexts at first appears to be a hopelessly contradictory mission. It's like saying, 'I am about to show you how to show the unseen.' Or: 'I wish to demonstrate how to think about the unthinkable.'

There's no bravado here, no I-know-this-and-you-don't attitude. No exclusional academic rhetoric. Baxter is excited about subtext and its intricacies, and the crystalline observations that follow in the book make compulsive

reading for those of us to whom the concept of *means more than it says* is critical. Who does not want his or her creative work to “haunt the imagination”?

Later in the book, Baxter reinvests the old show-not-tell saw with energy and the clearest of points: “It is not that actions speak louder than words; they speak *instead* of words.” And later: “A certain kind of story does not depend so much on what the characters say they want as what they actually want but can’t own up to.” He’s talking about that second layer, the depth that, as he says, is the “pile-up of emotions that resists easy articulation.” (Oh, what I would give to see more young writers get past that “easy articulation”!)

I’m recommending the first section, “The Art of Staging,” to my poetry students—it’s a brilliant little thirty-one page mini-essay on meaning more than you say, on compression, a vital issue that most students, young and old, neophyte and old hand, need to be aware of. And I’m recommending the entire book to everyone I know who writes or just reads seriously. I know no one who has thought this issue through as clearly as Baxter has. Even for those of us who think we have the proverbial handle on the subject, Baxter will have something valuable to offer.

Subtext is an invisible current that runs through the human character. Baxter is here, now, to help writers learn to embody that current in our literary characters and for readers to recognize the craft and beauty and depth of what they’re reading. Baxter uses both classics and contemporary literature to draw his points; the “Books referred to and recommended” section at the back will be, for a great many readers, worth the price of the book.

In *The Art of Attention: A Poet’s Eye*, Donald Revell—author of ten volumes of poetry, four volumes of translation (Rimbaud and Apollinaire), as well as a volume of prose—assumes a volatile, opinionated, yet surprisingly agreeable voice. The book cover embodies his tone iconographically: The title is in block caps, the i of “attention” is an exclamation point—ATTENT!ON.

Revell knows, it’s clear, that he’s arguing for a very specific kind of poetry in a world in which the schools of poetry are fighting for space and recognition. His is a convincing stance—not for the exclusion of the other schools, but for the inclusion of this school, what I’d call his School of

Absolute Attention.

Revell argues that “poetry is a form of attention, itself the consequence of attention” and he believes that *shared* attention across time—the poet attended to what the reader now attends to—is the source of both the artistic richness and the spiritual richness of poems. He argues for “vivid presentations, events as may be called, in Dame Julian of Norwich’s word, ‘showings.’” “The poet’s trajectory is an eyebeam, not an outline. It is a visual sequence,” he states. “I am speaking of intimacy,” he says,

which is an occasion of attention. It is the intimacy of poetry that makes our art such a beautiful recourse from the disgrace and manipulations of public speech, of empty rhetoric. A poem that begins to see and then continues seeing is not deceived, nor is it deceptive. It never strays, neither into habit nor abstraction.

His is a generous vision of goodwill and participation, of visual activity and acuity that leads to the exclusion of “[p]roud mind, which loves to impose itself between appearance and reality.” “[S]uch imposition,” he says, “lies at the core of all bad poems . . .” He goes on,

The art of poetry is not about the acquisition of wiles or the deployment of strategies. Beginning in the senses, imagination senses farther, senses more.

He’s talking about Blake, he’s talking about Goethe:

Again the poetry of attention is not metaphysical; it succeeds by faith alone. The opened eye will see, and light will shape the materials given freely to a poet. What need for invention? As it turns out, craft is to poetry what invention is to the imagination—not antithetical, but needless.

His Scholiums #1—On Piety, #2—On Nonaggression, #3—“Who made the eyes but I?” make his playing field clear. “Anywhere you look, it’s a love poem,” he says. “The eye provides.” He is calling for peace.

To see the sovereignty of what is seen is, quietly, really to worship. And to articulate such worship in a poem Wages Peace. So a quiet poem,

then, as William Carlos Williams's 'The Red Wheelbarrow' *must* be, among so many other things, a prayer and a call for peace.

"The open eye," Revell says near the end of the book, "is naked and Edenic." And, still, he gives me what I ask for: Yes, he says, "There is poetry outside of Eden too." And in the section near the end of the book in which he examines some of his own poems in the light of what he has espoused throughout the earlier pages of *The Art of Attention* he admits to having written "outside of Eden" himself. I love the faith and courage of his exploration and the humanness of his change.

He isn't saying that what he argues for is all there is. He's saying it's all we need. And I appreciate his saying so.

I like Revell *and* his book. I like the way he irritates me into articulating my own position. I like the way the book pleases me, soothes me, then baits me and pisses me off. *The Art of Attention: A Poet's Eye* is a book I will return to time and time again—to find further clarification of Revell's aesthetic. And of my own.

Revell's is a far less decorous book than Baxter's, a more personal book in that way, a book to engage with, and to argue with. Surely he wants us to. He knows his "poetic is neither method nor craft; it is [his] way of being in the world." And that's something I would never argue with.

These are books informed by intelligence, insight, and, yes, attention. They're shaped by deep understanding and what I can only assume has been a long road to articulation. They're neither *Cliff Notes* for beginner writers, nor are they crib sheets for quick comprehension or facile chatter for department soirees. They're vessels for observation, personality, and insight. And I eagerly look forward to the coming volumes in the series. With the Baxter and the Revell to go by, I expect lively, varied, and engaging erudition along with singular personalities with which to engage. They'll be, I'm pretty sure, smart books by smart writers, and smart readers will rejoice to have them.

Renée Ashley