

CRITICISM

VOLUME

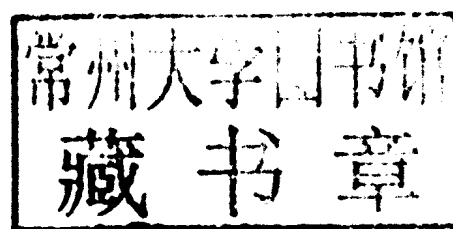
115

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 115

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC), PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by PC supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

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Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *PC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *PC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *PC* volume in which their entry appears.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

1947-

American poet.

INTRODUCTION

An Asian-American experimental poet associated with both the New York School and the Language School, Berssenbrugge produces poetry dealing with cultural identity, the fluidity of boundaries, and the intersection of art and critical theory.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Berssenbrugge was born on October 5, 1947, in Beijing, China, to Robert and Martha Wang Janes, both engineers. The family moved to the United States the following year and Berssenbrugge spent her childhood in Framingham, Massachusetts, where she attended public school. She was educated at Reed College, where she earned a B.A. in 1969, and Columbia University, where she received a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1974. After college, Berssenbrugge moved to rural New Mexico where she still maintains her primary residence. Her work has been influenced by the poets of the New York School, including John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, and Anne Waldman, as well as by the Language poets, particularly Charles Bernstein. She has also been influenced by her many friends in the arts, including Frank Chin, Leslie Marmon Silko, Ishmael Reed, and Susan Bee. Berssenbrugge has taught at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, the Naropa Institute, Brown University, and the University of Cincinnati. She has received a number of literary awards, including National Endowment for the Arts grants in 1976 and 1990, two Before Columbus American Book Awards for *Random Possession* in 1980 and for *The Heat Bird* in 1984, and a PEN West Award in 1990 for *Empathy*. In 1997 she received the Asian American Literary Award from the Asian American Writer's Workshop for *Endocrinology*, and a year later won the Western States Book Award for *Four Year Old Girl*. The 2003 collection *Nest* was honored with a second Asian American Writer's Workshop award. Berssenbrugge cofounded *Tyonyi*, a literary journal, and is a contributing editor to the journal *Conjunctions*. She divides her time between New York and her home in Abiquiu, New Mexico, where she lives with her husband, the artist Richard Tuttle, and their daughter, Martha.

MAJOR WORKS

Berssenbrugge published most of her work through small presses, and a number of her early volumes are now out of print. Her first book of poetry, *Fish Souls*, appeared in 1971, and was followed three years later by *Summits Move with the Tide*, a collection of short lyrics expressing her awe of nature. In 1979, she published the award-winning *Random Possession* and in 1983, *Heat Bird*, featuring a lengthy ten-part title poem. *Empathy* (1989) is considered a classic by many scholars, and is marked by extremely lengthy lines that became characteristic of her work. Both *Sphericity* (1993) and *Endocrinology* (1997) were collaborations with visual artists, the former with Richard Tuttle and the latter with Kiki Smith. One of her most acclaimed works is the 1998 volume, *Four Year Old Girl*, consisting of poems related to one another, most dealing with issues of identity and boundaries. Many of the poems of the collection examine the relationship between mother and child. Her next effort, *Nest* (2003), is marked by "almost diaristic directness and descriptive bluntness," in her treatment of relationships between friends and family members, according to reviewer Michael Scharf (see Further Reading). Berssenbrugge's most recent work of poetry is *I Love Artists: New and Selected Poems* published in 2006, which contains excerpts from some of her earlier work plus four new poems.

In addition to her poetry collections, Berssenbrugge's work has appeared in a number of anthologies, among them *A Geography of Poets*, *Third Woman*, and *The Best American Poetry*, 1988. She has also written a one-act play, *One, Two Cups*, which was first produced at the Basement Workshop in New York in May of 1979, directed by her friend, Frank Chin.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Berssenbrugge's work grapples with weighty philosophical issues, often involving the construction of the self, cultural and political identities, and the instability of boundaries. Mark Rotella (see Further Reading) generally praises her poetry, although he acknowledges that "her taste for abstract inquiry" results in poems that "occasionally resemble logical proofs." Despite that drawback, however, Rotella recommends her poetry to "readers looking to be ravished by the beauty of sound and image and willing to wrestle with some demanding philosophical conundrums." Berssenbrugge herself has

commented on her use of philosophical theories in her work, stating that in preparation for writing a poem, she “like[s] to choose one book of Western, usually French philosophy, and one book of Asian philosophy.”

Berssenbrugge’s poetry is often associated with the experimental work of the Language School of poetry, and Cathy Park Hong notes that Berssenbrugge’s treatment of language as material allies her with the language poets. However, according to Hong, the poet “doesn’t entirely fit into its rubric; with her long, densely compacted lines, she has a manner all her own.” Megan Simpson also acknowledges that Berssenbrugge “shares with the language writers an interest in foregrounding the operations of language itself.” Meanwhile, however, her experimental style differs from theirs in “her emphasis on image, fluidity, and spirituality” and in fact, “her interest in hybrid states and fluid boundaries” aligns her with other Asian American authors. Jeannie Chiu compares Berssenbrugge’s work with that of Myung Mi Kim, contending that both poets employ unconventional forms that combine a focus on language with a response to such contemporary issues as “the dominance of mass media, the coming to light of histories of colonialism, and rapid changes in science and technology that have a profound impact upon the material and cultural conditions of our lives.”

It has been suggested that Berssenbrugge’s interest in science, evident in much of her poetry, is perhaps attributable to her early environment as the child of two engineers. In her interview with Zhou Xiaojing, the poet acknowledges the influence of science, reporting that she is concerned with “the continuum between the material and the immaterial. And atomic and subatomic particles would be one area where this is true, black holes, the speed of light.” Xiaojing suggests that Berssenbrugge’s frequent use of scientific diction is comparable to a similar feature in the poetry of Chinese American Arthur Sze. Simpson reports that Berssenbrugge “makes interesting use of scientific language in her poetry, including such specialized terms as ‘electron micrograph,’ ‘occipital lobe,’ and ‘rhodopsin.’” Linda Voris notes the “scientific rigor” with which Berssenbrugge’s poems “explore each of the Kantian principles of perception, time, space, and causality” and further observes that “in place of expressive lyricism, Berssenbrugge has increasingly allowed molecular and biological models of intracellular communication to inform her interrogative structures.”

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Fish Souls 1971

Summits Move with the Tide 1974

Random Possession 1979

The Heat Bird 1983

Hiddenness [with Richard Tuttle] 1987

Empathy 1989

Mizu 1990

Sphericity [with Richard Tuttle] 1993

Endocrinology [with Kiki Smith] 1997

Four Year Old Girl 1998

Nest 2003

Concordance [with Kiki Smith] 2006

I Love Artists: New and Selected Poems 2006

Other Major Works

One, Two Cups (play) 1979

CRITICISM

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Zhou Xiaojing (interview date spring 2002)

SOURCE: Berssenbrugge, Mei-mei, and Zhou Xiaojing. “Blurring the Borders between Formal and Social Aesthetics: An Interview with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge.” *MELUS* 27, no. 1 (spring 2002): 199-212.

[In the following interview, Berssenbrugge discusses her influences, both literary and cultural, and her poetic technique.]

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge was born in Beijing, China, of a Chinese mother and a Dutch American father. She grew up in Massachusetts. She received her B.A. from Reed College and her MFA from Columbia University. A recipient of numerous awards, including two Before Columbus American Book Awards, she is the author of ten books of poetry. Currently Berssenbrugge is living in Abiquiu, New Mexico, with her husband the sculptor Rich Tuttle and their daughter.

This interview took place on September 21, 2000 at the State University of New York, Buffalo, where Berssenbrugge was invited to give a reading and to have seminars with students of the Poetics Program of the English Department.

[Xiaojing]: *Your Four Year Old Girl won the 1999 Best Book of Poetry from Asian American Writers’ Workshop. How much does this award mean to you? Are you comfortable with the label “Asian American poet”?*

[Berssenbrugge]: I was very pleased with it. I cherish the label "Asian American poet" because I identify with other Americans who come from China, and with other Asian Americans. I was part of the multi-cultural movement that was in the early 1970s. I would say that movement came more from the writers than scholars. It was important that the stories of people's immigrant experience got told. My work was more abstract. But, whenever I fit in, I'm happy.

Could you tell me more about the multi-cultural movement in the early 70s? How did you get involved?

The poet Michael Harper invited me to a conference of multi-cultural writers in Madison, Wisconsin in 1973. I had just finished the graduate program at Columbia, and was ready for new encounters. I met and became friends with Frank Chin, Shawn Wong, Lawson Inada, Simon Ortiz, Al Young, and most importantly Ishmael Reed and Leslie Silko. This was a fervent, pioneering period of asserting and defining multi-cultural writing in America and it was fantastically exciting. In New York at Basement Workshop, I presented my play, "One, Two Cups" directed by Frank Chin, several dance collaborations with the Morita Dance Company, directed by Theodora Yoshikama, and many workshops. I lived for a while in San Francisco, near Frank and his wife Kathleen Chang, who was my friend, a performance artist, a visionary and the subject of my play. I was included in the *Aiiieeeee!* Anthology. Although abstraction, philosophy, and the visual arts began to take more of my attention, many of these friendships continue. Leslie Silko has been a great companion and influence in my work.

I didn't know you were so involved with the Aiiieeeee! group. I love your play, "One, Two Cups." It's very engaging. In what way was Ishmael Reed important to you?

He published my second book, *Random Possession*. He has always been a provocative, sophisticated activist in multiculturalism. His ideas, his own writing, and our many talks together have been important to me.

You wrote something about your Chinese heritage in your early poems such as "Chronology."

I wrote it when I was eighteen.

*It is a wonderful poem. We have a poster copy of the poem in our rare books archive here. The lines are arranged differently from the version collected in your book, **Summits Move with the Tide**. It seems to me that you are returning to your Chinese heritage in your recent work.*

We're all partly what our mothers were, and much of my work in the last ten years has included who my mother was. Then I read this book by Gayatri Spivak,

called *Outside the Teaching Machine*. Her book informs two of my recent poems. Then I added ideas about nomads. And I was struggling with the role of women in the family, and how you can be an artist and deal with the labor of running a family. Ideas about women and powerlessness came together at a time when I was reading works by poor women from other countries. I think being a foreign woman in this country is one example of no power. In a way, I was writing about no power.

In "Nest," you write that being a "foreign woman" is having a home that is not personal.²

Yes. A home is power. I think the immigrant experience is becoming the predominant experience. It's not so powerless as it used to be because people are realizing this.

Are you familiar with Marilyn Chin's poetry? She often writes about the powerlessness of women. And Kimiko Hahn? She also writes a lot about women's experience.

Yes. I know them both and respect their work.

Your poems are much more abstract than theirs even when you are dealing with similar themes, such as mother-daughter relationships. And you use a different set of rhetoric. In "Nest," you refer to "mother-tongue" as a "margin" where travel and dwelling are blurred. You also write that change of mother-tongue is like an immune system.

My mother-tongue and my daughter's mother-tongue are very different. The space between my mother-tongue and my daughter's mother-tongue is the margin.

And an immune system?

I have problems with my own immune system. My body cannot tell what is my body and what's the world. I use the image of the immune system often. Your immune system is your identity. Every little molecule that comes in, your immune system asks "Is this me, is this not me? Is this OK, is this not OK?"

Your use of scientific vocabulary reminds me of Arthur Sze. I wonder to what extent you are still interacting with Arthur. Do you still comment on each other's manuscripts?

We do. Arthur, Phillip Foss, and I were the writing department at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, in the 80s. We had wonderful students. And Phil started a magazine that we all worked on, called *Tyonyi*.

What does this word mean?

It's the name of one of the main *kiva* in Chaco Canyon, the site of ruins of a great civilization in New Mexico.

Native American civilization?

Yes. *Kiva* is the circular building where rituals took place. The three of us talked about our work and it has continued as our lives allow.

In a recent letter to me, Arthur says that although his poetry is very different from yours, both of your work share some "overlapping concerns." What do you think he might mean by those "overlapping concerns"?

He was a philosophy major at Berkeley and lives in New Mexico. I just said to Dennis Tedlock, another New Mexican writer, that you cannot live in New Mexico and not be visually dominant. Our families came from Beijing, and I find that the visual images and philosophical concerns expressed through observations and experience in nature are typical of Chinese poetry. So I think we share common roots and common experience of this incredible beauty.

Arthur seems to have absorbed a lot of Daoism and the aesthetics of classical Chinese poetry in his poems. Part of the reason is that he translates Chinese poetry. I wonder if you, to any extent, have incorporated your Chinese heritage in your work? Do you read Buddhism?

Yes. My mother was nonreligious, but she was more Daoist than anything else. My father is American. I grew up in a suburban town in Massachusetts. I wasn't raised with any explicit Buddhist ideas. As an adult, I became influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and Chogyam Trungpa's writings and teachings. Trungpa influenced so many American poets.

I don't know anything about him.

He was one of the founders of the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, which includes a college of poetry and poetics.

He writes poetry?

He was a high lama. He wrote many wonderful books, such as *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. I read all of them. And people brought me xeroxes of his seminars. I started from there. And also, I stayed in a little village in Nepal in the late 70s.

You wrote some poems about your experience there.

Yes. Then I read any Buddhist texts I could find. When I research for a poem, I like to choose one book of Western, usually French philosophy, and one book of Asian philosophy.

Reading them at the same time?

Yes, at the same time.

Which French philosophers? Feminists?

Yes, and I have great appreciation of Derrida. And I love Deleuze.

What particular aspects of their writings do you like?

I think of Derrida as almost poetic. I think it's the opening up. You have something, an idea that seems normal, and then you can just open it up and get whole vistas of other things by thinking. Then I like the book called *Postcards from Socrates to Plato*, Derrida's novel. It's the usual Derrida going on, but including a love story. By the end, you realize that he's deforming the way language means. He begins to open up a way of language meaning by the words next to each other, and not by words following, just the juxtapositions of word areas that could make new anarchic meaning that isn't linear, but isn't abstract either.

Do you think that has some influence on the composition of your poems? The structure of your poems is not linear. You use juxtapositions of images and ideas like a collage.

I call it collage, but I actually don't like collage much. It's an easy way of explaining, but I'm not actually making fragments; I'm making a unity in which the compositional rules are in the unconscious. The compositional rules are in the unconscious. When you go below the level of consciousness, it doesn't matter if the concrete and abstract are mixed. There are different kinds of rules.

What is the principle of unity in your poetry?

Probably emotional statement.

That's very interesting because your poetry seems more intellectual than emotional. Charles Altieri has written about intimacy in your poetry. He says that "Critique of the expression and communication models leads Berssenbrugge to envision engaging other people by attuning oneself to those features of life suppressed by or displaced by efforts at self-representation" (63). What aspects of life or of the self do you think are suppressed by expressive models of self-representation? I think Altieri is referring to the autobiographical mode. The confessional self.

The fictional self.

You mean the autobiographical self in confessional poetry is actually a fictional construct?

Yes. We're actually very porous. You can make something solid out of something that is not solid.

What do you think is lost in the confessional mode of self-representation?

It can be an effective mode. But I think as a movement, it has lost energy. I mean the second generation of confessional poetry, against which the generation of language-oriented poets rebelled. I think you can have a self, even a cartoon self, like Mickey Mouse, that can be very effective. So I don't think there's anything wrong with self-representation. The confessional movement was accompanied by an American anti-intellectualism that cut people off from too much of what's going on in the world. That aesthetic presented personal experience in a very limiting way, but I still enjoy Robert Lowell, for example.

Yesterday, you mentioned the poetry of John Ashbery and Ezra Pound. How did their work affect you?

The experience of time in their work is not linear. John Ashbery is a great influence on me because of the fabulous richness of his metaphoric and linguistic abilities. Specifically, I thought he could make a kind of simultaneity in his work that interested me. At the end of a poem, it can all rise up to be one time. You can see it as a simultaneous time. For me that opens up all kinds of possibilities of navigating your way in the world, and also the kinds of things you might include in a poem. I like Ezra Pound's language and straightforwardness, and also the complexity of structure in his Cantos.

How about Leslie Marmon Silko? You've been good friends for a long time.

Leslie is a huge influence on my work. We were young together, in our early twenties, living in New Mexico. I grew from our conversations and time together, engaging with life and the various things that happened to us. She's from Laguna Pueblo. You might say the poetics of the culture of Laguna influenced me. The idea of what a story is, what a culture is, what social fabric is, what origins are, what the nature world means, and so on. I mentioned to you yesterday that for a long time, I only read poetry and novels. I refused to read anything expository. My first philosophy book was Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Color*, which Leslie sent me. My entrance into Western philosophy was through a friend from Laguna Pueblo.

Isn't that wonderful? Leslie Silko was also very interested in exploring the possibilities of using different ideas and experiences of time to structure her narratives.

Yes. She studied time theory in South American cultures.

The Mayan notions of time.

And its connection with astronomy.

Do you think your sense of time is influenced by new discoveries in astronomy and other sciences?

One of my themes is the continuum between the material and immaterial. And atomic and subatomic particles would be one area where this is true, black holes, the speed of light.

What kinds of books do you read?

I browse the bookstores. Once or twice a year, I go to the bookstore and look at almost every book and buy anything interesting. I think a place like Buffalo is incredibly rich because people are reading books and they can tell you what they read. As for science books, the artist Kiki Smith told me about the medical texts at Barnes and Noble. I think one of my first biology books came from Leslie [Silko]. She's a collector of books.

In a letter to James Wright, Leslie Silko mentioned that you helped her with her long narrative of the storyteller's escape in her book Storyteller (Silko 52).

Yes.

She also mentioned in another letter to James Wright that you suggested that she should read John Cage's book A Year from Monday because you felt that her idea for structuring Storyteller was similar to Cage's book (Silko 37). Were you in any way influenced by John Cage?

I'm a fan of twentieth-century music. I've heard his music performed and I've read his books. I think John Cage is another cross-fertilization between Western avant-garde ideas and Asian philosophy, like Trungpa. I met him twice. The brilliant purity of his work and the kind of wide-ranging humanity make him a great figure.

You're talking about compassion now in your poetry.

I've been questioning the primacy of art for myself. One can go far in the practice of compassion, farther than in the practice of art. It's also a quality identified with women, and it is an experience that comes into focus as you get older and closer to death.

Speaking of that, I have a sense of grief in "Nest" and "Hearing." Is that grief about the loss of your mother?

I did write about mother, but in these poems, it's all death and all loss. My earlier work dealt with alienation and isolation. Then after I got family, my subject changed.

Do you think your sense of alienation has something to do with your being Eurasian?

Absolutely.

Did you feel torn between conflicting identities?

Images, identities, definitions try to simplify. You feel the pressure of being put in a package of what you are not. Any person in this country who is not white, that is a big part of your experience. And I think it crosses class. I was born in China, and I believe the trauma of going from one language to another has given me a sense of relativity of language that made me a poet. The genetics is complex, as is the point of view. My interest in genetics is related to my sense of the complexity of the self.

It's interesting that you have such strong awareness of the difference of race in this country, but it is not explicit at all in your poetry as it is in other Asian American poets' work.

I am not explicit about anything.

No. I wonder if it is precisely because you have experienced how reductive categorization of people on the basis of race or gender can be, that you deal with identity in terms of genetics?

It's a general reaction against reductive categorization.

In a way, you remind me of Li-Young Lee. He doesn't want to be confined by identity politics. He doesn't like to be defined as only an "Asian American poet" because it suggests lesser than an "American" poet.

I enjoy being defined as "Asian American," since I have not always been included.

Why?

Because my poetry and sensibility appear assimilated.

This has been a big issue with some Asian American writers and critics.

I don't use the rhetoric, and I have a philosophical frame of mind. It seems in the last decade or so non-white women of theoretical inclination come forward.

I like the philosophical aspect of women's poetry. The victim's position can be a limited one for writing.

Yes. It's a strong position, but it's limited. I was talking about audience in class yesterday. I'm trying to think about the audience, which is new to me. I have a formal aesthetic. Now I am thinking of the aesthetics of the social space.

You mentioned the "primacy of art." Are you thinking of the relation of your poetry to society?

My personal commitment to art has always been consuming. As I've grown older, I begin to wonder if there are other commitments. [. . .] So I've let in the idea of audience. Who are you speaking to and what are they hearing? The audience hearing you could be this transcendental figure of compassion. I'm playing with this idea.

Do you think as a result of this, your poetry will become less abstract?

It will be abstract but appear less abstract. I'm trying to give it a more ordinary appearance.

How do you achieve that?

I use more narrative and persona, less technical terminology. For me, the abstract is a matter of mathematics, of proportion. Metaphor is really a matter of proportion, a system of proportion and equivalence.

It seems to me that your use of the vocabulary of science is a new mode of writing poetry. As Charles [Bernstein] says you use Window's codes in your poetry which cannot be opened with DOS.

[Laughs.] It's more abstract. My mother was a mathematician. So was my grandfather.

Many Chinese are good at math.

Good at math and poetry.

Do you read I-Ching? It seems to me that mathematics is a basic component of it. They use variations of combinations of solid and broken bars. It's very digital.

It would be more digital before Confucius edited it.

[. . .] In "Hearing," there is woman speaking, a man hearing her negatively. Are you referring to your parents?

I was thinking about the powerlessness of women.

So, it's about a gender relation.

Gender relations as a way of talking about power.

Do you have much sense of your mother's powerlessness as an immigrant?

When I talk about the daughter, the immigrant women, they are all me.

But you don't use "I."

I don't have an "I."

Are you trying not to write an autobiographical poetry?

No. I would like to try autobiography. But I don't have a succinct character that is "I" to work with.

In one of your poems you write that the "I" is a pronoun, an "index."

Yes, when I think of myself in poetry, it is multifaceted. It's inside and outside. It is more like a force field than an entity. We are not one thing. The scientist Tom White says that our bones are more fluid, constantly changing, than they are solid.

I am fascinated by the way you talk about your experience of space in "Tan Tien."

I love the way the space of Tan Tien, The Temple of Heaven in Beijing, is constructed. I am involved with a nonconceptualized experience of space and time. At the same time I love the archetype of the Temple of Heaven. The conceptual beauty of that architectural plan, which has to do with the celestial universe and the seasons.

That architecture is typically Daoist. Your interest in the experience of space and time also shows in the "Chinese Space." How did you learn about the Chinese aesthetics of space and beliefs about entrance ways? Did your mother tell you about it?

I was born in that house, so part of me knows it. There are things my mother told me, things that are fabricated. I've read about Chinese gardens, their interiority. I put those things together. My grandfather was a reformer, educated at Harvard. He thought you could use Western ideas of progress to improve the terrible situation in China. So there is a funny mixture of things in my mother's house.

Notes

1. "One, Two Cups" is included in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's *Summits Move with the Tide*.
2. "Nest" is one of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's two recent poems ("Hearing" is the other) to be published in *Conjunctions* along with Berssenbrugge's conversation with Charles Bernstein.

Works by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

Fish Souls. Westport: Greenwood, 1971.

Summits Move with the Tide. Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review, 1974.

Random Possession. New York: I. Reed Books, 1979.

The Heat Bird. Providence: Burning Deck, 1983.

Empathy. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1989.

Mizu. Tucson: Chax, 1990.

Nest. Forthcoming from Kelsey Street.

Sphericity. With Richard Tuttle (drawings). Berkeley: Kelsey Street, 1993.

Endocrinology. With Kiki Smith (drawings). Berkeley: Kelsey Street, 1997.

Four Year Old Girl. Berkeley: Kelsey Street, 1998.

Audience. Brooklyn, NY: Belladonna Books/Boog Literature, 2000.

Works Cited

Altieri, Charles. "Intimacy and Experiment in Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's *Empathy*." *We Who Love to be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*. Ed. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters between Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright*. Ed. and intro. Anne Wright. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1986.

Linda Voris (essay date 2002)

SOURCE: Voris, Linda. "A 'Sensitive Empiricism': Berssenbrugge's Phenomenological Investigations." In *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, edited by Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr, pp. 68-93. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.

[In the following essay, Voris provides an overview of Berssenbrugge's work, focusing on the philosophical—and especially the phenomenological—aspects of her poetry.]

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.¹ 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.²

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.

I

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: