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The Mechanics of Submission
Phil Tabakow

by Charles F. Angell

Phil Tabakow occupies the office adjacent to mine; we talk often, mostly in prose, about office politics, the joys of teaching, his kids and mine, the usual. I’ve heard Phil read his poems on more than one occasion and watched over the past several months as he’s prepared his new collection for publication, but only since its appearance this past March have I had the chance to engage with Phil’s work as a reader. Reading Phil’s collection, I couldn’t help recalling James Lee Burke’s remark about one of his characters: “his mind was a neighborhood he didn’t want to walk around alone.” I mentioned this wise-crack to Phil who quickly recalled for me the first premise of reading and teaching literature: “Don’t confuse a poem’s speaker with its author.”

Still, the reader can’t help but wonder about this disjunction when reading the title poem of Phil’s collection. The Mechanics of Submission pits “magazine needs” for inoffensive and innocuous —“no overtly philosophical, fuzzily pontificating,” etc.—poetry submissions against “my muse,”—an insatiably vulvaic concentration/camp matron from a postwar/German art film, dimly recalled.—This muse “jackboots” the poet into submitting to her unarticulated landscapes where magazine poetry editors, themselves moralistic jackbooters, refuse to travel. Indeed, these timid poetry editors are descendants (let’s hope not progenitors) of “H. Schwartz, Head Architect,” the speaker of “Addendum to the Final Plan,” the poem immediately preceding “The Mechanics of Submission.” Here, in language entirely sanitized, the Schwartz persona delineates how by adhering to the revised rules operators can improve the “overall efficiency” of the concentration camp death chambers. Paradoxically, the poet’s muse, the “seig-heiling, fascist woman warrior,” compels the poet into linguistic acts of subversion that expose and defy the complacent morality and terrible amorality of editors and operators. The poet must submit to linguistic explorations of an inchoate landscape.

Phil’s “Two Interstates Converged” uses a familiar highway landscape to suggest that pain avoided may in the end be more painful than pain confronted. The poem begins “two interstates converged near some suburban sprawl,” a witty and obvious echo of Frost’s familiar “two roads diverged in a yellow wood.” For Phil’s speaker, the choice lies between taking the interstate south to comfort a friend dying of melanoma or traveling north to visit “a woman I’d known twenty years before.” Frost’s “yellow wood” becomes a “blanket of yellow smog.” The speaker travels north into the smog instead of south and “clearing skies” but realizes that at some future point “I’ll probably be telling this with a guilty shrug/to some high-priced shrink.” Guilt replaces conscience.

“I took the road less travelled by/and never saw my friend again.” The speaker by his act submits himself to a featureless and sprawling landscape.

By happy coincidence I was reading Mary Karr’s essay “Against Decoration” where she decries contemporary poets’ tendency to obscure the particular features of any felt experience with formal decoration of metaphor and language. Karr quotes lines from Wallace Stevens’ “Esthetique du Mal” in which

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world, to feel that one’s desire
Is too difficult to tell from despair. Perhaps,
After Death, the non-physical people, in paradise,
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
The green corn gleaming and experience
The minor of what we feel. . . .

For Karr Stevens’ “non-physical people” “looked down and envi ed in me the very passions that caused me difficulty.” For me they provide a palimpsest for Phil’s “Sex After Death” where “It doesn’t exist./ “That’s why it’s so good,”/say the dead, “so good!” Like Stevens’ “non-physical people,” the dead in “Sex After Death” have sex “always at the tips of their tongues/or nibbling at their toes.” They live in “parallel universes without feeling” where “The living are unable to fathom/such states of ecstasy./ And the dead know it.” The poem articulates the inability of the living to understand states of ecstasy in themselves or imagine that such states might exist among the dead. The poem then imbues the dead with knowledge about states of ecstasy on which they are unable to act. Parallel universes know but cannot touch one another.

Phil Tabakow’s The Mechanics of Submission offers numerous delights of the sort encountered in the few poems I’ve mentioned. Just as in “Ars Poetica” the sun ignites the coppered/rooftops on the Kentucky shore,/ and transforms decrepit old Covington/into the long sought for city of God,” so The Mechanics of Submission illuminates an all too familiar moral, emotional, and spiritual landscape in which none of us want to walk around alone.

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