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Claire Chi-ah Lyu, *A Sun within a Sun: The Power and Elegance of Poetry*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 2006. 240 pp. ISBN 9780822942771.

Reviewed by Jeanne Minahan McGinn, Curtis Institute of Music

In *A Sun within a Sun: The Power and Elegance of Poetry*, Claire Chi-ah Lyu writes with Janus-like authority as she examines the work of poetry, its *raison d'être*, its power and beauty, and what she calls its "risky construction" (6). In her acknowledgements Lyu poses the question philosophical travelers must ask themselves: *How shall I live?* The book, she explains, grew out of her quest to discover "whether and how we can live in a poetic relationship to the world" (xi).

The neat turn of phrase, "whether and how," characterizes much of the book's honest inquiry, scholarly conviction, and satisfying linguistic and intellectual derring-do. She does not ask whether or not; "not" is not here. Lyu, an associate professor of French at the University of Virginia, surveys the work of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, among other poets, to plot a map, to suggest "whether and how" to live poetically for contemporary readers, writers, teachers and students of poetry. En route, she traverses paths well trod by poets and thinkers including Keats, Blanchot, Rilke, Mary Oliver, Benjamin, Dewey, Deleuze, Calvino, Henry Miller, and Martha Nussbaum. Her translations and close readings, whether of prose or poetry, enrich and enact her premise. Her argument, in retrospect, seems so organically conceived from these writers that one is surprised to acknowledge that the thesis is—well—dangerous and new.

"Whether" we can live in a poetic relationship to the world is the question Lyu considers and posits by looking backward—to myth, the history of science, aesthetics, etymology, and poetry. By looking forward and utilizing literary theory, physics, mathematics, epistemology and, again, poetry, Lyu queries and suggests "how" we can live in a poetic relationship with the world. The answer Lyu constructs serves as a perpetual question (and paradox is the central figure for her work): whether we can live and how we can live in a poetic relationship with the world both require one trait, one goal, and ongoing ontological experiment: risk. A young Heidegger might have called the concept "Being-at-risk," but Lyu is suggesting the act of risking as well: "The true 'expérience' of poetry and criticism," she writes, "is risk and freedom" (118), as she reminds her readers that "*experience and experiment...derive from the Latin *experiri* (*ex + peritus* [peril])" (118). Poetry, she argues, "is the extreme risk of *not* knowing" (118).*

Lyu's book exists, therefore, at the crossroads of the study of poetics and the practice of poetry; the text resonates with the knowledge one may begin to command after long acquaintance with the work of Rilke, Akhmatova, and Dickinson. It is the paradoxical knowledge of unknowing. Like the Roman deity Janus, god of gates and doors, comings and goings, beginnings and endings, passages from winter to spring, and figures of sun and moon, the book reflects and illuminates, tells and foretells. *A Sun within a Sun* provides a portal between the work of poetry and the working of poetry. The voice emanating from the portal whispers to all travelers: *risk*.

Risk as a reader, risk as a writer, risk as one who lives.

The working poet becomes emblematic of humanity in this text. While this notion may prompt recollection of the poetic treatises of Sidney and Shelley (regarding self-fashioning, mimesis, and

the poet's heightened artistic sensibility) Lyu is not arguing for the construction of the poet as the artist/genius charged with the Kandinsky-esque task of elevating the masses (as described in the painter's treatise, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*). On the contrary, she reveals that it is through the experiences of failure, brokenness, and error that true freedom can be forged: "poetry is the clear perception . . . that only 'broken' arms can hold the whole universe" (4). She reasons that poets, and all who would live in a poetic relationship with life, must embrace the necessity of risk and failure, of moving from enclosure to openness; she argues that "to pass not from unknown to known, but the reverse, from known to unknown . . . —that is poetry's way" (119).

To answer the question, whether one can live this way in the world, Lyu begins with important re-readings of the figures of Icarus and Orpheus. She draws upon the arguments of Baudelaire's poems ("Les plaintes d'un Icare" and "Le poème du hachisch") to demonstrate that the moment of failure of these two figures, in their respective quests, is precisely the moment of successful poetic interaction with the world. "Icarus is the figure of the poet who risks sacrificing himself to 'the love of the beautiful,' willing to be 'broken' by and open himself to love and Beauty, and thereby opens—and leaves open—the question of love, Beauty, and risk" (3). Likewise, Orpheus becomes representative of the break from addiction, ennui, and dissipation: "deliverance from addiction is a poetic act par excellence" (9). Whether we can live poetically, therefore, may depend upon the power of poetry and the power of our ability and willingness to risk reading: "poetry is this decision to risk everything. . . . Poetic license in its purest discipline and highest form is freedom, power, and responsibility to create and live in a poetic relationship to the world" (41). Lyu's use of contradiction, reminiscent of Blake's contraries, connects "license" and "discipline," "freedom" and "responsibility." Power works as the fulcrum between the twinned, or twined, concepts. If we live in a poetic relationship with the world we risk all and apprehend all; as Lyu quotes from Rimbaud's *Drunken Boat*, "We know to give our entire life every day" (175). Poetry, for Lyu, becomes sight and insight.

Readings of Mallarmé's "*La dernière mode, gazette du monde et de la famille*" (*The Latest Fashion, Gazette of the World and of the Family*) provide Lyu with an opportunity to extend her inquiry to a poet's non-poetic writing, his "other" writing and his "other" self (especially compelling given Mallarmé's use of female pseudonyms in the *Gazette*). She asks, when considering the relationship between jewelry, fashion, and poetry: "How does poetry relate to the Other it seems to exclude?" (43). Such poets as Langston Hughes, Derek Walcott, and Eavan Boland have asked the same question in other contexts. For example, in Hughes's famous lyric, "I, Too, Sing America," the poet acknowledges the otherness of racial difference and exclusion whether in dining rooms or in the literary canon and, yet, he, too, will "sing America." In *Omeros* and *Domestic Violence*, books of poems written by Walcott and Boland, respectively, the poets juxtapose personal and national journeys that ask, similarly, "How does poetry relate to the Other it seems to exclude?" Such poetic explorations imply the necessity of risk—of being other and of confronting otherness—in a way that echoes Mallarmé's writing and Lyu's project.

Lyu regards Mallarmé's journal writing as a confluence of acts of necessity and play; her reading permits the prose to remain as "other" to the poetic corpus and yet be informed by and engaged with Mallarmé's poesis. Lyu quotes Mallarmé's letter to Paul Verlaine in which he explains, "I had to do work in moments of financial difficulty or to buy ruinous boats . . ." (43). Necessity and play go hand in hand in his explanation of undertaking a spate of journalism. Lyu goes on to

read teasing connections between Mallarmé's initials, "SM," and one of his pseudonyms in the *Gazette*, Miss Satin; "MS" is the inversion of his initials. Miss Satin is presented as a foreign voice entering the pages of the fashion magazine: "*The Latest Fashion* drops from your hands in the end when . . . you see a foreign name and you cry out: 'An English Woman!'" (57). Lyu explains, "Miss Satin presents herself as a spokeswoman for all the 'foreigners' (*étrangères*)" (57); "Miss Satin introduces the foreign other" (58). Lyu's further riddling of motive and motif, with regard to fashion, sailing on "ruinous boats," and Mallarmé's sense of play with his work, shows the reader how "Poetry turns language inside out . . . To Mallarmé, risk is poetry's 'supreme play' (*jeu suprême*)" (72). Lyu finds in Mallarmé and Baudelaire, then, poets who risk opening the self to failure, Otherness, and experimentation.

Meanwhile, to answer the other question, and the Other question, "How do we live in a poetic relationship to the world," Lyu creates an ethics of the elegance and beauty of poetry. Lyu recounts Baudelaire's self-declared "enthusiasm and long patience" (132) for Poe and underscores Poe's influence on Baudelaire's work. For Lyu, Poe "transposes poetics to mathematics" when he argues for poems of the correct length and proportion. She draws connections between Poe's "aesthetic issue of form and content" and how it "corresponds to the law of cause and effect . . . in science and mathematics" (134). From here she uses theoretical physics to anchor her argument for the necessity of lucidity and lightness in poetry. "In mathematics itself, the shortest of competing proofs that demonstrate a theorem is considered superior and, hence, 'elegant'" (134). "Poetry is exact and elegant *use* of language. It strikes us with formed language so that we may become aware of *how* we say what we say, *how* we read what we read, and *how* we live. It raises the question of style and of lifestyle" (147). Elegance is never standardized, but offered as an essential quality of poetic interaction and discovery. Baudelaire's is a "poetics of high elegance in 'Le poème du hachisch' and *Les fleurs du mal*" (136), for Lyu. "In 'Le poème du hachisch', Baudelaire denounces hashish's circle. . . . We are not in 'direct ratio' to life when we are high. Narcotic life is inelegant and in dissonance with 'the universal rhythm and prosody' (*le rythme et la prosodie universels*) [2:334]. Poetry's elegant and precise circle counters hashish's imprecise and blurred circle" (136).

Thus, we learn that the life dulled by narcotics, or addiction, and a reduced capacity to create, is inelegant. We learn, too, that the poetic life is one of courage and openness. "Poetry's purpose is not to make objects, or the world itself, exact and indubitable by eliminating fear; but to produce exactitude in our relationship to the universe *including* fear" (143). Poetry's inclusion of that which one may call Other, as well as the unknown, and of death, is the extreme contradiction, necessity, and risk: "Beauty comes as the experience precisely of both terror . . . and genuineness. Genuine experience and terror go together, because to feel genuinely means to feel our heart opening" (169). Here theories of the sublime, whether gleaned from the poems of Baudelaire or elsewhere, scale new heights and venture onto the precipice of love. The work of contemporary poets Franz Wright and Anne Carson would bear up under similar scrutiny with Lyu's theory of "genuine experience and genuine terror," and the necessity of risking all, in hand. For example, Wright avers in "Progress" of recovery from addiction:

In a way that leaves
a scar, I
no longer wish to love.

. . . I'm still alone with all the world's
beauty and cruelty.
. . . And everything that once was
infinitely far
and unsayable is now
unsayable
and right here in the room.

Likewise, Anne Carson, when writing of her mother's illness in "Her Beckett," confronts loss, love and the unsayable:

Going to visit my mother is like starting in on a piece by Beckett.
. . . Worse
she says when I ask,
even as (was it April?) some high humour grazes her eye—
"we went out rowing on Lake Como"
not quite reaching the lip.
Our love, *that halfmad firebrand*,
races once around the room
whipping everything
and hides again.

These poets, and the poets of whom Lyu writes, experience and risk confronting the unknowable. "Intimacy with the unknown—to love and live the questions of the moment—" Lyu writes, "this 'love's knowledge' is poetic knowledge" (176).

Lyu's argument, however sound, is compelling not just because it is lucid but because it grows, resonates, and resounds with luminous textual interpretation. She demonstrates that to live in a poetic relationship with the world is also to take risks in our poetic relationship with the texts of poems. When Lyu reads "Hymne à la Beauté," her aesthetic pleasure gains ethical power: "Beauty 'pours' (*verser*) out her phenomenal abundance, and the poet turns toward (*vers*) her finally to embrace the 'universe.' *Verser, vers, univers*—poetry's verse and universe" (173). Lyu shows the danger inherent in the poem's relationship to beauty; that hazard becomes life-changing. "When the poet, in Baudelaire's 'Hymne à la Beauté,' suddenly turns into a 'dayfly' in the span of one stanza out of seven, burns into Beauty's flame, and says 'Let us bless this torch!' he learns, at that moment, to 'give [his] entire life.' Poetry emerges in that giving" (175). The poem prompts its own reading. The working of the poem illuminates and becomes part of the work of poetry.

Lyu's book, a lucid and engaging treatment of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, resists easy classification. Is it a poetic treatise, an ethics text, or a new aesthetic theory? Somnambulant scholars may be chastened or encouraged to read that "being present is the first, and the fundamental, responsibility" (184). To read, to engage with the text, Claire Lyu is arguing, is to risk all. Her book posits risk as central to the act of reading, writing, loving and living. "As readers and critics of poetry, are we willing to put the world and our own words at risk in order to create a living scholarship? The risk and choice belong to us, bequeathed by the poet who took

the original risk" (184). In *A Sun within a Sun*, Lyu, like Icarus and the poets he inspired, dares to risk all.