Marie Buck
Portrait of Doom
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REVIEWED BY DAVID W. PRITCHARD

Marie Buck's *Portrait of Doom* intervenes into a host of conversations about poetics and politics, which for better or worse all take up the antinomies furnished by Language poetry for the critique of representation in poetry. Buck takes these antinomies—the opposition between lyric and experimental poetry, for instance, or that between a quietist and a vanguardist poetic community—and refuses them any ontological status, casting them instead as representational choices above all else. It's a powerful estrangement, one that throws into relief not only the difficulty of talking about political poetry, but the striking continuity between, say, the polemics from *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and the so-called poetics of witness that displaces rather than contends with all the difficulty involved in narrating political commitment in art.

To put it another way: Marie Buck doesn't think poetry is "praxis," even though it does have political things to do and say. She also seems deeply suspicious of certain dissimulations of poetic and political immediacy. In this she closely resembles Jack Spicer, whom I don't want to dwell on too much, but whose poetics inform *Portrait of Doom* in a significant way. The legacy of the older poet stands or falls on the way he rejected poetry's ability to change the world, which he associated with the kinds of direct statements one finds in Beat poetry that he often lampooned. Buck is a bit kinder to politics, and a good deal more hopeful about them; even so, she takes from Spicer a critical skepticism about politics, and from this she sets out to refuse any poetics that would seek to assuage its own guilt by making claims for itself that just aren't true. The Spicerian vision is dim, but has a kernel of truth to it: naming immiseration on a global scale doesn't combat it, it

only affirms that "people are starving," and when you know that, what do you know?

Buck does not only take a tone from Spicer. Her poems repeatedly invoke what Spicer called the poetics of dictation, which insists on the poet's inextricability from commodity society by locating the source of language and of poetry *outside* of the poet. In Spicer the figure for this is the radio; Buck prefers the computer, which importantly metonymizes *the internet*. The language of these technologies cuts across any easy sense of the autonomy of a poem's speaker we might want to find. Thus this passage from "Scope of Emotions":

> and debt my biggest concern
> and I learned how to make out
> and I learned how to draw
> and I learned how to tie a tie
> and I learned how to lose weight
> and I learned how to ask a girl out
> and I learned how to add fractions
> and I learned how to age a steak
> and I learned how to hardboil an egg
> and I learned how to lucid dream
> in my own dark vision
> alphabetizing in Word
> I learned how to kiss myself without pain,
> inside the kill site I kissed and kissed
> all of my oceans' dead and wounded,
> brilliantly executed, several kinds of touch
> in the warmth of the freshly deceased. (47-8)

The litany of things the speaker learned how to do brings to mind the way search engines predict our queries and suggest popular searches to us before we've finished typing out what we want to search. Whether or not these are

actual search engine queries is immaterial: the point is that the form comes from elsewhere, from *outside* the poet, who must then arrange or organize the language accordingly. But computers have ways to do this arranging for us, too; Buck's word processor does the work for her, or so she says, since the list doesn't seem organized "alphabetically" in any meaningful way (except that the queries beginning with "a" are all together, but there's three of them, and ask-add-age is not an alphabetical arrangement of those three words).

So far this redaction of "dictation" is quite literal, but Buck does not content herself with drawing language from the internet. She modifies and remediates it when she writes that "I learned how to kiss myself without pain," a phrase I googled, and which Google suggested I didn't actually mean to Google. "Did you mean *how* to kill *myself without pain*?" asked the search engine. Grisly, sure, but interesting as far as the poetry's concerned. Buck has switched things around, intervened in the language of the internet-outside and made clear that what appears at first blush to be a critique of the short, discursive lyric poem ends up extending the possibility of lyric, emphasizing its ability to include parataxis and disjunction as part of the feelingful utterance that it mounts and formalizes.

The pun on "execute" here seems decisive: it means to put into effect and oftentimes appears as a way of describing computers running processes. It also means to put to death in an authorized, perhaps state-sanctioned way. Both of these meanings are at play in this stanza, in ways that make clear that computers themselves are predicated on death. They are dead labor, they are, in a sense, someone else's death sentence, in ways that are not just a figure for exploitation. People died to make this computer. But this is not to say Buck aestheticizes violence to antagonize her reader, or—perhaps even worse—to confess her own complicity, to express her guilt as a way of letting herself off the hook. Like Spicer, she resents intonations of political purity or moral exemption. I have quoted from the end of "Scope of Emotions"; the poem preceding these stanzas offers a ludic version of a

poetics of self-loathing and self-flagellation, in which the poet "die[s] early in the splendid and serene light" and has the "immediate reaction [...] Hell has a new resident." She writes,

> I could've been chopped up and fed to a herd of pigs,
> I don't know,
> I think I could've been thrown from the back of an aircraft carrier.
> They could've hung my body like the body of a fascist
> losing control of myself [...] (47)

Buck does not derive a moral sentiment from these gruesome descriptions. She carries them to a tasteless conclusion—if I am going to benefit from the exploitation of others I'm just as bad as Mussolini—and doesn't flinch as she turns this into the self-deprecation of "losing control of myself," which compares the violence of the images to the flailing of a hanged and dying body. It's as much Plath as Spicer; it makes it possible, in fact, to think Plath and Spicer in the same thought, as part of the same story of North American poetry. So much for anti-expressivism *and* expressivism, terms that no longer quite seem to work to frame a debate about what political work poetry does.

And even if poetry is not praxis, it *does* political work. The line that links the dangling fascist bodies to the Google search pastiche/collage is "and debt my biggest concern": in terms of this poem certainly a pun on "death," a deflation of lyric's historical association with ruminations about the finitude of human life; but at the same time "debt" announces a different sort of relationship to "learning," one mediated by institutions. For what learning, today, is possible without debt? It's not that Buck's book stands or falls on the fact that she is a PhD candidate, but she includes this fact of a highly contingent access to institutions as a mediation, something that affects how she constructs her poems and that she does not attempt to suppress. Again, in this use of "debt" the link between the suffering of others and the conditions that make possible something like matriculation in a university

materialize: Buck can't just wish (or write) away the fact that she benefits from violence and death. She doesn't try to; she includes it in her poems, such that the fact that people are starving is not something we have to take a moral position on but rather a *fact* of the world in which this poetry happens. It is neither true nor false, good nor bad; it simply *happens*, it is.

In calling exploitation and the internet "facts," I don't mean that Buck views them as things that are here to stay. If anything, the poetics of collage and appropriation—techniques I would want to group under the larger heading of parataxis—register the contingency of these things, allowing Buck to intervene into them in ways that underscore the possibility that they might be transformed. Read in this way, Buck's frequent descriptions of mutilated or malfunctioning bodies sound a bathetic Utopian note. The possibility for the body to be hacked up or reconfigured in space and time—as a matter of mutilation or as a matter of its orientation toward other bodies, which here frequently are the bodies of the police or of financiers and bankers—can be taken as an allegory for the possible bringing-together of multiple bodies under such conditions, a collective organization of some kind that makes possible a direct antagonism against those who have a serious stake in the continuation of exploitation, of mutilation.

In other words, the gaps that parataxis instantiates into the poems—the elided transitions between moments, the leaps from thing to thing—allow us to take stock of a human activity, some minimal agency that has to do both with the making of the poems (Buck is responsible for the disjunctions, not the Outside) and with their political energy. It's not so much that *Portrait of Doom* naively "believes" in the promise of human activity, but rather that Buck chooses to construct the book from a standpoint that importantly takes that activity into consideration: a representational, rather than an ontological, choice. This is the point at which she departs from Spicer, who is nothing if not invested in the possibility of doing ontological work with poetry. Buck comes closer to the anti-ontology of the Objectivists, but in a way that preserves something of a Spicerian skepticism, a desire to "stay loose"

as he says in his lectures, that undermines many of the presuppositions of the debates on poetics in our current conjuncture. *Portrait of Doom* doesn't try to change the world, and in this it is all the more committed to the importance of changing the world. For Marie Buck leaves off at the point where the only possible solution to the problems traced in her poems is the negation of the world that occasions those problems. This point—where poetics can only state the urgency of political praxis, rather than stand in for it—seems as urgent a place as any for a renewed conversation about the relationship between politics and aesthetics to begin.