

"The To Sound": On Eric Baus

Eric Baus. *The To Sound*. Florence, Mass.: Verse Press, 2002.

Eric Baus's graceful first book *The To Sound* is less a collection of discrete poems than it is a single lyric subdivided into parts and chapters. In that sense, meaning accrues throughout the book, is made and found between poems as often as and more completely than it is within a single given unit. To skip passages therefore would be as perilous to its comprehension as would be skipping the whole of part three to *Crime and Punishment*, despite the fact that *The To Sound* allows for unsystematic reading. Of course, what constitutes comprehension of Baus's poem(s) and Dostoevsky's novel differs, since, for starters, the architecture of the first is achieved primarily through lyrical methods and materials while the scaffolding and bricks of the second are decisively narrative in nature, and since comprehension of either book will vary in accordance with what each and every reader (and over time) specifically brings to the table, communication a process occurring in "the space between magnets," as suggested by the sub-title of the book's first section.

This interdependency between poems seems consistent with *The To Sound*'s primary obsessions concerning communication or thought, and potential truths derivative thereof, as always existing in the space between at least two entities, and likewise with the book's title, which directly and indirectly (via homophone) addresses that space (the "to" or "two" sound). Here, individual poems speak to one another in a variety of ways, and it is primarily by virtue of this feature that Baus succeeds in re-creating for the reader something akin to that winking interim where exchange takes place. As you might expect, *The To Sound* ventures headfirst into the theoretical, but its occasionally knotty exploration is honest; that is, one finds not a thoughtless regurgitation of inherited stylistic and conceptual hoo-hah—the sort of incognito conventionalism disingenuously posed as "innovative writing" so commonly beheld—but inclinations, stylistic and otherwise, that seem to arise from a communicative necessity so stringent in its available resources that Baus's choices frequently come across as inevitable and rarely, if ever, contrived.

Even Baus's most apparent influences, Lyn Hejinian and Nathaniel Mackey, do not hover over the work to claim it for themselves but serve instead as the ancestral fodder essential to the birth of any new thing. Certainly Hejinian's *My Life* and Mackey's epistolary novels are in conversation with *The To Sound*, yet such an observation serves only to extend Baus's own line of reasoning regarding the metaphysics of communication/thought. From Hejinian, Baus has learned how potent the cumulative effects may be of a repeated phrase within a long lyrical work, namely how "nothing works the same way twice" due to context and how the echo of a phrase can lend a formal coherence to dissociative contexts even as the phrase itself is re-envisioned (17). (Compare, for example *My Life's* repeated "we who love to be astonished" with *The To Sound's* reconstituted "crack this grounded star" (45) and "star this ground for cracking" (59).)

Baus's indebtedness to Mackey, however, is a little more complex. Well over half of the poems in *The To Sound* are epistolary prose addressed to either a numinous collective of birds or a mysterious sister. Like Mackey's inexplicable "angel of dust" addressee, these recipients are equally posited as intimately familiar and completely unknowable, and help highlight other similar but less obvious paradoxes within the text. For example, how may the indefinite come to be defined—a contradiction in terms but a question with which Baus seems nevertheless very much occupied. (Now would be the time to recall the preposition dictionaries regularly employ when defining infinitive verbs and then re-think the book's title.) And since we're already on the subject of slippage, and therefore back to Mackey, notice here the related conundrum commonly found within individual words themselves, their tendency toward excess definition (the "too" sound). Take for example this typically intricate sentence from *The To Sound* whose resonance hinges upon oppositional meanings of the word "tell":

"If typing is talking with a single sound, I can always tell when you're thinking of the sun" (24).

The slippage between tell₁ (to know) and tell₂ (to say in order to make known) underscores the clairvoyant role the poet must play and, again, the paradoxical nature of the world in which he must play it. Fortunately for Baus, playfulness always finds its purpose just as it does in Mackey's work; both use these extra-signifying instances as multifaceted building blocks for their larger projects and prove, in the process, just how adhesive is that mortar we call syntax in the construction of meaning.

Yet for all Baus's theoretical depth, his is not a flat academic poet-

ics of ideas. Nor is his poetry an exercise in excessive dexterity. Rather, his is a heartfelt attempt to communicate at the most intimate level, and any obfuscation is the by-product of an excessive intimacy rather than an aloof ascetism. By way of example, in a couple different passages of Proust's *Swann's Way*, the supplemental meanings a lover finds attached to certain words (whose secret capacity for evoking the beloved through a series of associations is known only to the lover), and the very privacy of such meanings, serve as a source of both anguish and ecstasy for Proust's characters, while the text itself makes external, and thus public, comprehensible, the internal logic of and final arrival at those words' private significance. Baus's *The To Sound* evinces a similar potential for the solitary word to evoke *at the same time* not only its sometimes contradicting proper definitions (as seen above), its myriad connotations, its etymological implications, even its sonic subtexts, but also and often a personal, private association for which the speaker alternately relishes and must apologize. Yet like Proust, Baus leads us by the hand through the dizzying realm of signification, along "the border between prism and mirror," so that in the end, we are allowed more than a glimpse of the migrations of the mind, the heart, and their private productions of meaning; his poetry is one that never loses sight of the humble origin of our grandest whys: the solitary soul forced to call out to everyone and everything outside, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." It is this Blakean voice that particularly distinguishes Baus from the faux vanguard. Reading *The To Sound*, one easily recognizes a true poet, a physicist whose experiments are a part of a larger pursuit rather than a stagnant end in and of themselves.