

PERCIVAL EVERETT
ABSTRAKTION UND EINFÜHLUNG
 BLACK GOAT BOOKS / 2008
 REVIEW BY TIM W. BROWN

Abstraktion und Einfühlung by Percival Everett is the latest offering from Black Goat Books, an imprint of Brooklyn's Akashic Books. Needing an English translation of the intriguing title, specifically "einfühlung," I consulted my German painter friend, Laurentz Thurn, who informed me that it meant "empathy." He additionally steered me to a 1908 book with the same title by German art historian Wilhelm Worringer. Published at the dawn of Modernism, Worringer's book became widely influential among expressionist artists, laying theoretical groundwork for Modernist abstraction in the plastic arts, which he claimed was "the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world." Reading a little Worringer helps in appreciating Everett's book.

Essentially, a three-voice conversation is going on within *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*. Everett reproduces the debate between abstraction and empathy explored by Worringer, who saw an antithetical relationship between abstract or "geometric" art associated with African, Asian, and

Egyptian cultures and classical or "vital" art associated with Ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. The first presents an inner, subjective truth, whereas the second involves an outer or objective truth. Per Worringer, Everett views these opposing artistic poles dialectically, positing a third way that attempts to reconcile the two into one "comprehensive aesthetic system."

Thus, each poem in the collection consists of three sections: a proposition, a discussion, and a coda. The number three permeates the arts symbolically: it occurs repeatedly in myth and literature, ranging from the three-way relationship among Adam, Eve, and the Serpent, to Christianity's Holy Trinity, to Dante's tripartite arrangement of hell, purgatory, and heaven in his *Divine Comedy*. It likewise calls to mind notions of artistic form, for example, triangular composition in classical paintings, the Cubist depictions of Picasso and Braque, and the three-color fields found in Mark Rothko's abstractions. This is neither idle speculation on the reviewer's part nor an accident on the poet's—Everett refers to visual artists throughout *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, including Léger, Duchamp, Cocteau, Manet, Warhol, Gauguin, and Van Gogh, all of whose artworks exhibit the tension between abstraction and realism.

The proposition sections in Everett's poems explore the gulf separating art and meaning. He decries reductive, political interpretations of art: "Painting once again political, left to be gelded, / art discoursing its way back to irrelevance by / word churning / over the possibility, the meaning of the possibility / of stance / rather than the stance itself" ("A Spanish Myth" 25). The discussion sections debate these propositions, grappling with stark, uncomfortable truths. In "Pure Form?"

Everett acknowledges that "Some things can't be said. / Not an inadequacy of language, / but a failure of speaking. / Not a bankruptcy of words, / but a rupture in thought" (49).

The coda sections of *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* attempt to defy language's limitations by repeating earlier lines phonetically, resulting in short snippets that resemble Joycean puns. Thus, "hide along / the edge of this river" becomes "hyde / aling / the hedge / dove / thist / ryeveer" ("Bathers" 33-34). The intention here is two-fold: to emphasize language's pure physicality and diminish its descriptive utility. As in the Garden of Eden, troubling questions about existence are introduced only when a third character enters the picture and stresses the relationship of the first two—arguably to their betterment by making them more fully, if messily, human.

Abstraktion und Einfühlung recalls poetry titles published by James Laughlin's New Directions Publishing. The poems are cerebrally challenging, formally innovative, and awash in white space. Everett's work reminds me specifically of Robert Duncan's, which was heavily influenced by visual arts theories and abstract poetics. As a reflection of Modern aesthetic methodology, the book succeeds admirably. Yet, sometimes, the poems are perhaps too brainy: "A equals A. / X equals X. / f(A) equals f(A)," writes Everett in "The Truth" (17). Such lines neither delight the ear nor warm the soul, no matter how well they may capture the Modern condition.

Tim W. Brown's most recent novel is Walking Man (Bronx River Press, 2008). He serves on the board of the New York Center for Independent Publishing, and he is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.

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