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“The Scented Parabola”: Occasions of Cecil Taylor’s Poetry

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It was, in retrospect, an especially inapt introduction. On the occasion in the spring of 2012 of Brooklyn College awarding Cecil Taylor, longtime resident of the borough of Brooklyn, an honorary doctorate of Fine Arts, Taylor’s contributions—introduced with the caveat “Some contend . . .”—were described exclusively in terms of the development of jazz, and with various incongruities, including John Coltrane inexplicably referred to in the introduction as “Johnny.” As Taylor approached the microphone, one might have anticipated his remarks to center on a lifetime in music. And, in a way, they did.

After a brief greeting, Taylor began:

it leans within the scented parabola
of a grey slated rising
palm of dampened mud
impossible to discern
the trigonal or endomorphism
set and the architectural grid [. . .]¹

Seated among the faculty close to the dais, and thus with my back to the thousands of attendees on the quad at Brooklyn College on a late May morning so perfect that I still recall the sunburn on the top of my head, I turned around and saw several thousand mouths to varying degrees agape at the spectacle of this unexpected performance. It seems impossible to overstate how unprepared the crowd was to receive Cecil Taylor’s delivery of his

poetry, and I imagine that I will never again see an audience of that size so mystified—but also concerned. I think that many in attendance experienced it as a flow of malfunctioning speech, as something gone profoundly wrong with this elderly distinguished guest, a commencement speech gone haywire, in which the anticipated mode of reflection on a life and corresponding exhortations to graduates and their families

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Photos of Cecil Taylor by Allen Ginsberg, courtesy Stanford University Libraries/Allen Ginsberg Estate
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“The Scented Parabola” (cont.)

instead gave way without warning to this syntactically ambiguous locution. A listener so inclined might have tried to enter into the poem’s meaning through its most basic material: its word choices, however learned, however daunting—the parabola, the trigonal and endomorphism sets, the architectural grid—terms that seemed to reflect the academic setting with reference to mathematics and engineering. Or the unprepared, unforewarned listener might have appreciated such ornate diction primarily as glittering array, a reception made possible by the sonic beauty of Taylor’s recitation. In a 2004 interview with Taylor by Chris Funkhouser that appeared in *Hambone*, what is intended to be a discussion of poetry turns to Taylor’s interest in dance, architecture, and the work of structural engineers, and one gets the sense that these were among his favorite poets: Nureyev and Calatrava and so on. In the same interview Taylor lays down a dictum, a basic statement of his ethos that seems fundamental to any discussion of intersections between his music and poetry when he remarks, “I never understood how musicians could play music for poets and not read poems. I don’t understand musicians who can play for dancers and not know how to dance.”²

What’s the origin of the parabola’s scent? What manner of fragrance suffuses the poem? The mirrored, u-shaped curve of the geometric figure resonates with the on/off, on/off patterning in the marvelous alternation of four vowels and four consonants, small virtuosic run pitched at the scale of a single word: *parabola*. And yet the mystery of the poem has to do with the “it” with which it begins—the unknown, unnamed entity that “leans within the scented parabola” (bringing to mind a similar kind of “it”-riddle from one of the long list of Taylor’s characteristically beguiling album titles: *It is in the Brewing Luminous*). In the course of this short poem the “it” might best be understood as an animating force, one “established by nature’s limbs” and responsible for “nutrients spread to rise spread to rise spread to rise / to the teeth and rim of leaves,” unspecified force that, in the final line of the poem—reminding us again that this is both poem and riddle—is described as “having no parts of its own.”

That’s one way I can describe Cecil Taylor’s poetry and its occasions: as animating force seeking instantiation, especially in the form of a productive ambush. A sound engineer who assisted Taylor on a concert in Philadelphia in 2006 told me that when Taylor announced that in addition to playing the piano he would be reciting poetry, he chose not to have a vocal microphone positioned at the piano. Instead, Taylor proposed that they should set up several microphones throughout the space; in the end, they created four stations throughout the hall with microphones and taped-up Xeroxes of his poetry manuscripts, including one that was set up backstage—so that Taylor would best be able to surprise the audience when the time came, as he described it, “to poetry them.”

I can also describe Cecil Taylor’s poetry as multimodal event, as scented parabola. Historically these occasions have tended toward the fleeting, the uncollected, and at times marvelously startling: printed poems in small magazines; poems functioning as liner notes on LP jackets (*Unit Structures*, *Spring of Two Blue-Js*, *Dark to Themselves*, etc.), whether reproduced handwritten or typeset either lineated or as prose; as spoken introductions to musical performances, in concert or on record (*In Florescence*); as vocalizations incorporated into musical performances; as complete performances unto themselves (*Chinampas*)—not to mention as interview or album title or enigmatic response to an invitation to speak publicly.

Taylor poetried his audiences in numerous ways while largely keeping aloof of print culture. His is an especially strong counterexample to the idea that the test of a poem is how it functions on the page: that print publication, or more to the point, book publication, is the determining fact, the litmus of quality, one that above all is correlated to—beholden to—a test of time. Research to come into Taylor’s work will help to explain decisions with regard to poetry—but also regarding recordings and other kinds of publications—of what in his lifetime to compile and to put forward, and what to hold back, and why. I’m curious to learn more about his conspicuous reticence with regard to collecting and publishing his poetry in book form, especially in this moment before, one can well assume, his writings are posthumously collected and published, and the experience of his writing as decisive intervention, as rare occurrence, as performance,

“The Scented Parabola” (cont.)

as ambush and event becomes more and more difficult to reconstruct.

I’m of mixed feelings about my own impulse at present to speak of Taylor’s relation to poetry in terms of a refusal to publish or a thwarting of print culture. On the one hand, I’m looking forward to that moment when Taylor’s poetry is collected in one place and one can better survey its breadth or better understand it in terms of its chronology or better align it with the different phases of his career as a musician and composer. And yet until now my experience of Taylor’s poetry has been anything but that of the absence of print publication—it seems a strange way to describe it. I picked up the thread of Taylor’s work in the late 1980s, just in time for the 1990 album *In Florescence*, released in the United States on the major label A&M (the same year that in their Modern Masters Jazz Series they also released titles by Don Cherry and Sun Ra). Three months after Taylor, together with William Parker and Gregg Bendian, recorded this album of short, focused trio performances, he returned to the RCA Studio in New York to memorialize brief, poetic introductions to the majority of the album’s fourteen tracks, and decades later it’s a snap to recall the electric effect of these oblique, uniquely affected wake-up calls. “In the glare of an obsidian blade . . .” is the one that still caroms around in my head.

In Florescence sent me in search of his 1987 album *Chinampas*, the one where his vocalizations and his poetry come to the fore, largely unchallenged. On *Chinampas*, the individual pieces move in beautifully modulated long arcs of sometimes frenetic activity not unlike his solo piano concerts and recordings; they travel from the lowest register of speaking voice to the highest range of squeaking voice, the one that sounds like the most physically wrenching moments of Antonin Artaud’s radio play *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*, the artist—these two artists—less signaling through the flames than forcing air through an increasingly constricted windpipe, pitch ascending all the while, in Taylor’s case the voice leaping sufficiently and uncannily high so as to sound at a handful of especially chilling moments like a panicked child. It bears mention that this artist, who bestowed gems of titles to dozens of musical works, on this album of his poetry uses track lengths as titles—“5’04,” “3’43,” “5’46,” etc.; I understand this to signify that these otherwise untitled performances are mere slices of a continuum, segments, but I also appreciate the gestures as the mark of a master contrarian. Even as *Chinampas* is usually described as Taylor’s one poetry record, his voice is rarely unaccompanied, and Taylor himself contributes interjections and textural beds of timpani, bells, small metal percussion objects, and, in crucial moments and passages, a multitracked doubling of his own voice. Occasionally a word is hammered into the ground through repetition, an obsessive handling or worrying or hectoring interrogation of a single note on the piano, a tremolo, that mocking tone, that perhaps self-mocking tone that ironizes, defamiliarizes—a technique for a favored subject: transformations that occur through natural physical processes, in one of *Chinampas*’s resonant phrases, “one mineral crystallizing into another.”

For the moment, it still makes sense to speak of the occasions of Cecil Taylor’s poetry as those rare occasions, those bubblings up, those four microphones placed around the hall at the University of Pennsylvania’s International House, somehow always in potential. Even after the preparations that were made to poetry the audience that evening in Philadelphia in 2006, Taylor stuck to the piano exclusively, and afterwards apologized to the sound engineer for having forgotten that he had planned to give a recitation, had forgotten that those four microphones stood at the ready. The occasions yet to come of Cecil Taylor’s poetry will have to do with research and recovery, with editors’ efforts, and if the experience of it will be less predicated on surprise or ambush, it’s still likely to make a few mouths gape. These occasions will have to do with printed poems but also all manner of recordings, with wordless vocalizing as well as with verbal brilliance—wit, sonic wit—for which “poetry” seems as much of a stretch, which is to say no more of a stretch than those sometimes ambiguously honorific formulations through which the most distinctive voices in any of a number of fields—designers of clothing, designers of bridges—are hailed, crowned, dubbed, categorized, marginalized as poets.

“The Scented Parabola” (cont.)

Notes

1. Video documentation of Taylor’s recitation can be found online here. The sole appearance that I have been able to discover of this poem in written form is as part of a dossier titled “With Cecil Taylor” containing interview excerpts and unpublished poetry compiled by Zach Layton and published on the website of the Brooklyn venue ISSUE Project Room on the occasion of their presentation with Harlem Stage of two performances by Taylor in 2012. See <https://issueprojectroom.org/news/cecil-taylor>. In personal correspondence, Layton notes that Taylor gave him permission to copy the unpublished poems, and the lineation in the above extract relies on the form in which this poem appears in the ISSUE Project Room website, with several alterations reflecting the video documentation of Taylor’s reading.
2. Chris Funkhouser, “Being Matter Ignited. . . : An Interview with Cecil Taylor,” *Hambone* no. 12 (1995):17–39, <https://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/funkhouser/ceciltaylor.html>.