

TURN

by Steven Schroeder

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A review by Elizabeth W. Jackson

According to *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, “centrifugal force” corresponds to two actions. First, it is “the force that tends to impel a thing or parts of a thing outward from a center of rotation,” and second, it is “the force that an object moving along a circular path exerts on the body constraining the object and that acts outwardly away from the center of rotation.”

In *Turn*, Steven Schroeder opens with “the way ink thinks,” an ekphrastic poem that verbally traces the circling lines and color of Debby Sou Vai Keng’s cover art. The words turn on meaning and sound to blaze a surprising path outward—one that draws us along ever more encompassing arcs of image and thought. Acting as a prologue, it perfectly introduces us to the concepts and poetic play that follow.

Throughout the first section, “a question Laozi raises,” Schroeder explores two main themes: Daoism-in-nature and its contrast with science and with humans’ attempts to understand and manage the world. The first few poems buoy us with resonant natural images, yet Schroeder word-paints more than beauty. Rather than offer us a comforting and familiar landscape, he complicates it. In “dark radiance” he writes,

when sky is full of moon
white, still, cold in May

black light turns the world
bright ... (1-4)

Then, he reminds us
... ice
lies at the heart of all

this. a touch
in the wind

makes you shudder,
cry, and it is not sadness. (5-10)

As readers, we recognize that this is no perfect world, yet it is more rewarding and meaningful than what we find in the poems written about civilization. There, humans struggle to control their environments. In the poem “fences”: “Wind, not snow, drifts / against fences that slice this / prairie into this side and the other” (1-3) and then “... As long as there is an I / and a fence, there will be / this, that, and the other” (7-9). Schroeder’s sly twists of meaning show us the loneliness of these artificial boundaries, but these humans don’t just categorize, they attempt to understand. Sadly, they’re foiled there as well. Summarizing a Euclidian theory in poetic form, Schroeder writes seemingly exact but obscure lines. By leaving out the punctuation, he ultimately bemuses the reader: “sign is that that that has no part line is that that that has / length no width limits of lines are signs straight line lies / even with signs it contains epiphany...” (“boundaries” 1-3). If we attempt to understand the logic of the poem’s lines—or rely on logic to decipher the larger principles of our natural world — we’ll be stymied. There’s no clear end or beginning in Nature as there is no clear beginning or end to the poem’s sentences.

In the second section of the book, he continues to turn from one theme to another; however, rather than explore the line between Daoist understanding and science, he spirals out, circling to encompass more wide-ranging concerns. Along the way, he references a stunning number of philosophers, famous musicians, and various “well-knowns,” including not only the Daoist Laozi, Linné, and

Euclid but also St. Francis, John Donne, The Bible, The Rolling Stones, Cat Stevens, Thoreau, and Stanley Cavell. The shifts seem jarring at first, especially the frequent allusions to Christianity, which don't appear until halfway through and then at least seven times.

Ironically, this section depicts a world without faith, and it gives us a new landscape. From "Sukkot, Chicago":

This city sleeps, but it does not slow
down for cold. If anybody's talking
about weather, it is only to bow
to it, almost like an impersonal god

that squats on the margin of a grand system. (9-13)

Over and over, Schroeder's urban scenes evoke loneliness. So when the "god" in "meditation on a sermon by John Donne" declares everything good before disappearing from the world, we can only interpret this as a bitter vision, especially with Schroeder's use of the lower case "g." In "in a coffee shop in Amarillo," the poet-narrator seems emotionally nihilistic, not even embracing Buddhism: "the world is nothing / more than webs of words woven / between chance encounters" (2-4). Borrowing lines from a Stones' song:

i try and i try and i
try to embrace
nothing

that is here, say it is
good, say it is very good. (14-18)

Finally, Schroeder cycles back: "god" is now "God," and in this last contemplation of meaning and religion, he closes with: "Turn, turn. Take off your shoes. / Every step you step you step on holy ground" (28-29).

However lovely and powerful the final lines, can we believe them? I felt ambivalent. After having been whizzed past science, religion, the unsettled landscape, civilized city life, and a bevy of

philosophers, I wasn't sure what to think. Perhaps none of us has immutable faith or even a belief in just one guiding principle, but I wanted closure on Schroeder's worldview. So I recalled *Webster's* example of centrifugal force: "A stone whirled on a string exerts centrifugal force on the string," and I wondered: Does the poetic core of *Turn* hold against Schroeder's freewheeling gaze?

I returned to "in a coffee shop in Amarillo." There, I found not guidance but elegant ambiguity—enjambment that forced me to find my own answers.

some god says let there be
and thinks it's good but it is

no such thing. This place

...

that is here, say it is
good, say it is very good. (5-7, 17-18)