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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “the shadow she casts will be long.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

METAPHYSICAL COMFORTS

Jennifer Moxley’s new book of poems, *Clampdown*, confronts the domestic with a disclosing eye.

By Ange Mlinko

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Clampdown, by Jennifer Moxley. Flood Editions, \$14.95.

In 1996, when Jennifer Moxley’s first book, *Imagination Verses*, was published to underground acclaim, the prevailing story was that, like the return of the repressed, the personal lyric had been reborn from the chance encounter of a girl genius and a violently anti-lyrical avant-garde. *Imagination Verses* was almost old-fashioned—full of love poems and soliloquies. But Moxley’s ear was decidedly trained by writers outside the mainstream anthologies: not Elizabeth Bishop or Sylvia Plath but experimental small-press poets like Bernadette Mayer and Rae Armantrout.

Now some may see Moxley as a harbinger of the big poetic trend of the 2000s, sometimes known as “lyric postmodernism” or “hybrid poetics.” This is a genre that has embraced the subjective “I” while rejecting the confessional voice; at the same time, it has appropriated the house style of the avant-garde, acute fracture and abstraction, while shedding its political baggage. What serves as content, finally, is language that speaks itself, an oracle mediating between poet and world, individual and history. It’s the very definition of poetry set out by Theodor Adorno in his 1957 essay “On Lyric Poetry and Society.” We are concerned, he said, “not with the poet as a private person, not with his psychology or his so-called social perspective, but with the poem as a philosophical sundial telling the time of history.”

Moxley knows her Adorno. The follow-up to *Imagination Verses* was a chapbook called *Wrong Life*, a title cribbed from Adorno’s famous aperçu: “Wrong life cannot be lived

rightly.” Much of Moxley’s work can be read in the light of this damning little sentence and the chapter it punctuates in *Minima Moralia*, “Refuge for the Homeless.” Moxley’s ethical anxieties emanate from a central unease, unease at home, and ripple out to touch nation, earth and cosmos. But unlike the legions of poets who now adopt (and inevitably flatten) an Adornian mode of lyric, Moxley does not sublimate her psychology and social perspective.

Clampdown, her new collection of poems, is startlingly particular, privacy-shattering and abject. It isn’t postmodern or experimental or hybrid, and parts of it aren’t even very lyrical—often she tones down her flights of gorgeous language to speak precisely and discursively, as if face to face with an interlocutor. Never uncontrolled, never artless and never not in command of rhetoric, Moxley has written a book that could be available to a wide readership. Her expressive clarity, however, lures us into a universe of such self-doubt and self-cancellations that we find ourselves again, dialectically, in the company of Adorno: “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.” From “The Price of Silence”:

It is suffocating beneath this vinyl window,
in whose fake glued-on mullions we see a cross.
But it doesn’t mean anything. No word
can be uttered or kept in store to chant us
out of losing. The whir of the washing machine
as it pours detergent down the sewer pipes,
chlorine rising up from the drains. The compact
fluorescent bulb in the gooseneck lamp
with a broken spring neither mutters
nor sputters playfully. Things don’t speak
our distance. The phone, though loud, tinny,
and insistent, cannot, it seems, be found.
We oppress in a way we cannot pay for
in any direct or meaningful way. All is fake.

Why should we awake?

Clampdown takes its title from a song on the Clash’s *London Calling* (“When we’re working for the clampdown/We will teach our twisted speech/To the young believers”). Its doubt-ridden angst, though, is more neoliberal-era Radiohead than post-punk Clash. This is not party music for the Revolution; it’s part “Karma Police,” part “The Bends,” Thom Yorke elegiacally singing “I wish it were the sixties/I wish we could be happy.” “The Price of Silence,” like other poems in the book—“Mother Night,” “These Yearly Returns,” “Friday Night, Candles Out”—puts Moxley’s comfortable home and habits on display in a ritual of self-mockery and pathos.

For the past fifty years, confessional poetry has permitted us the luxury of oversharing—mostly about our sex lives and our parents—in a sentimental gesture ultimately meant to reconcile and heal. Free verse has been confessional poetry’s de facto medium. A supple artifice in the hands of William Carlos Williams or Gregory Corso or Sylvia Plath, free

verse has degenerated over the years into a style of no style, a sort of broken vernacular prose, as if language could be as transparent as a glass pane, the better to signal one's sincerity and truthfulness. The resulting poem substitutes personality for art, supposedly sounding "natural" or "speechlike."

The arc of Moxley's work—from *Often Capital*, written while she was in her early 20s, through *Imagination Verses*, *The Sense Record*, *The Line* and finally *Clampdown*—works heroically against the obstacle of "natural" voice. On a first reading, Moxley sounds utterly disconcerting, as if she were writing to you on the heels of a marathon session of retyping the poems of William Wordsworth or Thomas Hardy. From "The Yield":

A thumb of silvery fur ensnared
my visual stupor: it was a mouse
scooting across the perilous ground
that lay between the rustic lean-tos
of brittle nut-brown maple leaves.
Image-gripped, but how to name it,
this will to live in little things?
Upon such monumental nerve
we build and break our wage.

The net effect of Moxley's strange style has often been to foreground the sexiness of language and the poet, but their awkwardness too; it's a style that cultivates and explores the notion of wrong life. For to write in one's "natural" speaking voice already presupposes eloquence and fluency, and fluency presupposes ease. Moxley is definitely not at ease, either in her body or this country or century. She is in the wrong life, which cannot be written rightly. Thus she reconstructs another language—both yearning and alienated. In *Clampdown* it is a language in which she can confess her doubt and despair about the "chlorine rising up from the drains," the fluorescent bulbs, the nylon bedspreads of the middle-class bedroom, the fake plastic trees. Moxley's unmasking of American bounty as actual impoverishment thus has a lyric equivalent: the unmasking of the usual seductions and blandishments of the poem as an upmarket ad for metaphysical comforts. That she sets her personal theater against the backdrop of the world stage may seem like a grandiose gesture, but it is a necessary one. The figure she cuts is as erect and austere as a gnomon; the shadow she casts will be long.

Ange Mlinko is the recipient of the 2009 Randall Jarrell Award in Poetry Criticism. Her latest book of poems is *Starred Wire*. This article first appeared in *The Nation*.

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