

JOSH BARKAN'S *BLIND SPEED*

Josh Barkan. *Blind Speed*. Northwestern University Press. 2008.

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The protagonist of Josh Barkan's first novel is a distinctively postmodern antihero—culturally shell shocked, marginally intelligent, precociously incapable, obsessively introspective, emotionally boxed out, hapless, white, and, as if that weren't sufficient, fat and ugly in the bargain. Mr. Barkan cites Saul Bellow in his acknowledgements, and indeed his principal character hovers somewhere between Bellow's *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*. The pace of failure in Paul Berger's life is such that he seems to be like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming semi. His stasis makes the ordinary world swoosh toward him at *Blind Speed*, conveniently the novel's title.

Paul is not simply a Slowski, he is a monument to what psychologists call *inadequacy*. Paul's story is a pilgrim's progress through the slough of despond, to say nothing of a slew of parodic swipes at American culture, to a last second, presumably salvific, epiphany. In the beginning Paul is unable to come to terms with the word. An instructor at a conspicuously unnamed community college, his writer's block is preventing him from starting, let alone completing, his book on something like Conspiracy-Theories-Sexual-Dysfunction-the-Porn-Industry-Gun-Collecting-Feelings-of-Inadequacy-*vis-à-vis*-the-Search-for-Nirvana-in-American-Culture. This block, understandable though it may be, will not only cost Paul his job and marriage but will precipitate a sequence of events at least as improbable as the subject of his book.

The first chapter establishes the prevailing esprit. Paul and Zoe, his fiancée, are enroute to their wedding caterers. Paul, a history buff, pulls off at Concord to see the reenactment of the shot heard round the world. His first blunder is to park the front wheels of his car—'Careful of the flowers,' Zoe says—in the red, white and blue flower bed planted by the DAR. Next he wanders off, ignoring Zoe's hints to stay with her (this will signify), recollects the recent occasion when his supercilious department chair told him it was too late to publish so he must perish, encounters his older brother, a prominent Harvard civil rights lawyer, in an open air press conference denouncing "the rotten stench in Washington"—"True, Paul thought, but what about your own crimes?" (a fortissimo signifier)—and declaring his candidacy for Congress. Apparently Paul's brother Cyrus is not only criminal but likewise not so discrete as one might expect a public

figure to be, for Paul is somehow aware that Cyrus “liked to eat barbecued chicken, then have prostitutes suck the sauce off his fingers before going down on him” among other intimate peculiarities (this too will signify). Cyrus commandeers Paul into his limo, lectures him about publishing and offers to intervene with Paul’s reappointment, which Paul declines. Paul, now aware of his tardiness from Zoe—“He had been late for most things in his life”—jumps from the limo to find her as the battle of Old North Bridge commences with a comedic glitch too complex to explain. Suffice it to say that a Colonial musket’s ramrod is accidentally discharged like a rocket and zings directly to Zoe, penetrating her pelvis. Since this is parody Zoe needn’t meet her maker (but the pertinence of parenthetical signifiers remains). The chapter concludes with an image of Paul—“he paddled as hard as he could to reach her”—that stamps him Grade A Sad Sack.

Meanwhile, some years earlier enroute to Iowa City (Barkan is an Iowa Writers’ Workshop graduate) Paul accidentally discovered the Rashna Retreat, a meditation center run by a Varanasi guru who called himself Buffalo Man, and that is where he met Zoe. Though skeptical, Paul consents to have Buffalo Man read his palm, and thereby hangs the tale. BM, as I shall designate him, tells Paul that he will meet his future romantic partner (Zoe) at the Retreat, that he “will leave” one brother (Cyrus) and a second “will leave you” (Andrew, an astronaut who dies on 9/11 at the Pentagon, another signifier), that his romance will not last, and that he will die in his forties. For reasons that are not altogether clear but to which I shall return, Paul takes BM’s palmistry forecast seriously as prophecy of his fate. Understandably morose, he staggers through an adjacent cornfield to its edge overlooking I-80, where he contemplates his fate and has revelations—“Every animal...lives only to avoid death” and “Everyone makes his journey to death alone”—and epiphany number one involving “the balance between the good speed and the bad” and the first of two appearances by the aforementioned deer (first paragraph), which adroitly evades imminent mortality via the (presumably bad) speed of the semis roaring along I 80.

Paul stiffens BM and the Rashna Retreat for the price of his room, board, yoga lessons, palmistry, to say nothing of BM’s parting admonition “that it will all come to pass unless you purify yourself,” and drives off to his problematic future. Accordingly, he can’t shake the feeling that his future is in the hands of BM’s prophecy, and it begins to look that way. His brother Andrew is killed, and Zoe does weary of the whiney static of his writer’s block, which he attributes to his anxiety about the fatal prophecy. To save his job and his romance Paul adopts a bold strategem. He hires a ghost writer (“The Modern Cyrano,” a blunt signifier) to write an article for him;

that is, he becomes a plagiarist. As this project is enroute to its predictable failure, Zoe's recuperation and the wedding advance toward further absurdity, featuring a crazed survivalist dropping out of a tree as the priest (preoccupied with moving the ceremony along so that he might have time for a few holes of golf) intones the oldest comedic cue in cinema history—"speak now or forever hold..."—to accuse Zoe of infidelity. It is a moment where the wedding scene in "The Graduate" meets "Dr. Strangelove." Later, by way of punctuating how infidelity in the service of pop psyche therapeutics works, Zoe lifts Paul from nuptial chaos to sexual transcendence. Still, two paragraphs later Paul can't take yes for an answer and concludes he's lost Zoe and moved that much closer to realizing BM's prophecy.

While it appears that nothing more can befall the hapless schlep, the plot has another trick or two up its sleeve. Suddenly (though the attentive reader will recall Cyrus' suspect character and be prepared for this turn of events) Paul is kidnapped by his brother Cyrus. That is, Cyrus hires an aspiring film maker from NYU film school and his crew to dress up like eco-terrorists and kidnap Paul and demand Cyrus, the political candidate, submit to their ecological program or Paul gets it, which of course Cyrus won't do so that his constituency can see he's not a liberal eco-wimp or terrorist appeaser. All of this is being filmed, of course, as an eco-politics documentary. Essentially the film crew of "eco-terrorists" is the gang that couldn't shoot straight, and Paul discovers that this is another of Cyrus's frauds. But, opportunities notwithstanding, he declines escaping, goes along with the charade, develops a kind of bond with the film maker, and continues stewing about his failure to do anything in life. Meanwhile Zoe has evicted him from their apartment in frustration, his plagiarism project with Cyrano has failed, he's lost his teaching job, and he has in effect connived with his crooked brother Cyrus to help get him elected. What's left but to expose Cyrus' fraud, which he and the film maker (who Cyrus has declined to pay, another signifier) collude to do. This is Boston, so Paul dresses as a "Native American" to confront Cyrus at a news conference, fires six shots into the ceiling from his pistola, and denounces Cyrus' perfidy before being tackled by security guards. Paul intends this to be, like the Boston Tea Party, a liberating act of choice, "demanding his freedom" (an anemic signifier). But once again Paul comes up with egg on his face. His expose' is regarded as the ravings of a man driven mad by his kidnapping.

Three of BM's four prophetic points having been realized in the loss of his two brothers and his wife, Paul, now 35, decides to return to BM's Iowa retreat to take up the fourth "curse," his own death at forty. As it turns out, Zoe has squared accounts with the retreat and even paid for this meet-

ing with BM in order for Paul “to resolve his problems.” The benevolent offstage agency of Zoe would seem to remove some of Paul’s freight for the reader, but not for Paul. Appropriating a discarded shawl, he girds his loins with a “kind of red cloth diaper” and descends into BM’s Kiva Hut. BM gives a plausible pop psych explanation for his dysfunctions, dating from the moment when Paul became “a wounded adult... [realizing] That you were just like everyone else in this world. That you were a mere mortal. The quest for fame gives hopes of immortality...and when you lost that... you were confronted with the shortness of life that all of us face on earth.” Paul, it seems, must “purify” himself not only of his desire for immortality but also for “fame and sexual prowess and the need to be loved and for the lazy happiness...symbolized by a drug-induced stupor.” This causal analysis apparently derives from a brief early side bar of the narrative, when Paul was in a rock group that had a marginal success as a warm-up act but realized it wasn’t good enough for a future. The purgative requires, says BM, “an overstimulation of sex, drugs, and rock and roll.”

In the “Decontamination Chamber” Paul goes to battle against his desires buck naked, sporting a kendo mask and sword of bamboo strips tied together with condoms. Though it has not been a preoccupation previously, he now nervously scrutinizes his penis—“medium to small...more of an average penis, he thought,” and recounts all the size and adequacy anxieties ever documented by, say, the Kinsey Institute. He is surrounded by 189 TV screens (“...as revealed by Guru Satyajit...a holy number of purification.”) all showing one porn script after another, symbolic of the “pollution” he is fighting. His material opponent is one Jennifer Rashnaji, also naked and armed with a kendo sword. She displays her open vagina—“the holy grail of sexuality,” says the narrator—and attacks Paul’s penis. The menace makes him *act* for the second time in 277 pages (the first time 20 pages earlier, his unsuccessful Boston Tea Party), and he and the Rashnaji thrust and parry for half an hour, and then it stops, the first phase of, yes, “a twelve step decontamination process.” But, notwithstanding his vague sense of Rashnaji’s sex appeal, Paul has had enough. At last he figures out that BM’s “wisdom” is commonplace—“Basic words about abnegation and celibacy and turning away from the feelings of inadequacy that he felt because of a lifetime of media saturated culture”—but although he “already knew all that” it has never helped. Poor guy: what now?

Foregoing the next eleven steps he wanders into the cornfield once again...and receives another epiphany. The deer (cf. paragraphs 1 and 4 above) has apparently been waiting, and this time raises the ante. Instead of evading mortality the deer now leads Paul to the center of I-80—“the

center of the blind speed of the highway as it rushed toward the Pacific”—where he faces the traffic honking and swerving around him (the deer had the good sense to move out of harm’s way) unflinchingly. “This is how blind speed is overcome,” he realizes, “It was necessary to take risks to overcome failure.” If that seems a bit anticlimactic, especially after his epic battle with “the holy pussy,” there is a grace note in conclusion, “*Since the problem is from within*, he thought, *I must change myself.*”

The reader will detect a certain tonal skepticism in my survey of the plot. The plot’s conclusion about risk, change and self is not really persuasive. While these and other of its themes, such as love, fate and consciousness, are certainly timeless, they are by virtue of that somewhat long in the tooth, and here they seem to bring us not so much to truth as to truism. But all the while I was reading I had the sense that Barkan was up to something other than the plot. His narrative manner frequently suggested that Barkan was as skeptical of his plot as I was. Narrative self consciousness is obligatory these days, and in itself imposes skepticism. For example, when Paul is “liberated” by the eco-terrorists Barkan arbitrarily has him be smuggled into Cyrus’ election victory party by a cadre of Pakistanis through an institutional kitchen apparently so he can evoke the Bobby Kennedy assassination and ironies of post 9-11 security measures; Paul’s escort says, “Given the current high-level, code-red antiterrorist standard of this building—ever since the Democratic convention this summer [2004]—it seemed the only way. It’s crazy, I know, but it takes a Pakistani food worker to break legally into the system.”

Such devices provide a parodic tonal energy of contemporaneity that accompanies the narrative without exactly informing it, so that one detects the author’s chuckle behind the narrative. In this instance Barkan foregrounds the chuckle by inserting a parenthetical note in his own voice, “If it seems like I’m picking on the Democrats, just imagine what a field day I could have had if I’d made the Republicans the sponsors of the ecoterrorist kidnapers,” and goes on to explicate the matter. And some pages later he ends the chapter with another paragraph in his own voice, a “Coda” in which he describes the “spectacle” of “the day Michael Jackson was acquitted of getting a young boy drunk and sexually molesting him.” Its function is to somehow validate Paul’s psychic paralysis in the spectacle of Cyrus’ election victory party, in terms of narrative, and to document the author’s thematic authenticity in social terms. Barkan’s description of what is in effect Michael Jackson’s victory party constitutes a social parody complementing the fictive parody. At the same time, however, it upstages the narrative by making it a footnote to reality rather than an imaginative engagement of

it. This narrative quizzicalness is compounded by a postscript following the coda, where Barkan notes that the Boston Tea Party perpetrators dressed as Mohawks, “who lived nowhere near Boston but rather in the Great Lakes region of New York, where they were members of the five nation Iroquois Confederacy.” Paul of course got up as a Sioux, geographically farther out of synch, so the postscript is an obvious compromise of him and possibly a poke at America’s ignorance of its own history. But one wonders if that rather small satiric light is worth the candle of selfconsciousness.

This sort of sometimes puzzling play is a distinct aspect of Barkan’s style. It happens often enough that it seems conceptual, but the reader doesn’t quite know what to do with it. Barkan’s frequent parenthetical comments, which come in the voice of a narrator/author hybrid, can be informative—“(the date of this chapter is 1998)”—or distracting. For example, as the reader is introduced to the Rashna Retreat the parenthetical interlocutor tells the reader that its Guru “called himself Buffalo Man. (He’d chosen the name in sympathy for the Black Hawk Indians who had lived in Iowa before they were eradicated.)” It’s not clear why the reader is teased with so conspicuous a historical error (There were no “Black Hawk Indians”; Black Hawk was a notorious war chief of the Sac Indian tribe). Possibly it is to cue us to Buffalo Man’s guruish fraudulence but why so coyly cast such trivia in an authorial aside? Or, again, one wonders about the narrative function of imaging the guru’s followers absurdly (“...they moved their arms with one palm saluting the sky and then the other like go-go dancers trying to hail a cab to heaven”) and counterpointing with stereotypical romanticism (“And Buffalo Man’s arms spread slowly, slowly, so slowly they barely seemed to move; yet slowly they opened wider and wider into the sky above like a lotus exposing its delicate yet resilient petals”). These devices place the whole narrative apparatus in the shadow of an indiscriminate skepticism, which in itself may characterize the age but doesn’t work so well as an aesthetic habit. Paul himself responds to an elaborated analogy by BM, “If ever there was a strained metaphor, this was it.” It’s a shoe that fits Barkan’s narrative and invests it with an attitude that undermines the larger framework of Barkan’s plot. Paul’s fate, for instance, is yoked with an academic publish or perish mandate at “B_____ Community College,” though anyone with even the vaguest sense of academic culture knows that community colleges do not employ that mandate. Insofar as this has a satirical function it is mildly amusing, but ultimately it reduces the satire to parody and the parody to silliness. Similarly with the parodic treatment of the Rashna Retreat and its guru. At least since the sixties the word *guru* has been the punch line to manifold jokes. Put that together with an authorial skepticism deconstruct-

ing narrative credibility even as it progresses and one has to wonder why one should take BM's prophecy of Paul's fate seriously enough even for credible satire. It becomes one long shaggy guru story in which various motifs—love, fraternity, fate, failure, politics, etc.--make cameo appearances, somewhat like *Saturday Night Live*, and then dissipate into the ether of skepticism.

Barkan's m.o. revives an ongoing aesthetic question about the prospects for a contemporary rapprochement between fiction and reality. Tom Perrotta's cover blurb cites *metafiction* as one touchstone for the novel, presumably for its play with narrative and reality. Perhaps *surfiction* is a better fit because its practitioners, for example Raymond Federman, tend to ironize both narrative and reality to the end of making skepticism not simply an attitude but a metaphysics, i.e. comprehensively indiscriminate. At its most indulgent surfiction tends to induce a cartoonish allegory where even the remotest connection between fiction and reality is naïve at best. Here, when Paul dismisses BM's philosophy, as noted, and says he is caught in spirals of inadequacy "because of a lifetime of a media saturated culture" the truism punctuates a cartoonish guru motif that renders character, plot, narrative and narrator superfluous: that is, we don't need this narrative to get to that conclusion. It doesn't make us question reality or fiction or their pavanne; it just renders the issue irrelevant. Having said all that, I can also say that Barkan puts on a pretty good show, in the way that *Beyond the Fringe* puts on a good show. When it parodies Shakespeare, I don't question its critical validity, I just have some amusement at Shakespeare's expense, who can afford it. With Barkan there are times when I do question his validity, but there are also times when the question is moot, and at those times I have my amusement at the expense of reality and/or narrative. If Shakespeare can survive centuries of parody surely reality can do as much. And narrative too will no doubt take care of itself.