

Review: *Fable* by Benito del Pliego and Pedro Nunez (Quantum Prose, 2025)

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The word *fable* comes from the Latin term for a “story,” specifically a fiction, that is, a falsehood or exaggerated account that is intended not merely to entertain but also to offer a moral lesson. Hence, to “fabulate” (in Spanish, *fabular*) means to “make up” a story, to invent a narrative that isn’t, strictly speaking, true, but which, when spoken, and then heard, and then divulged again, may lead toward a memorable moral lesson, a new outlook on life, a behavioral check in a given hypothetical situation. The fable instructs through a medium of falsehood. In the word *fable* we get the entire paradoxical resonance of fictionmaking: what is “made up” or “invented” might very well instruct us on what to do in real-life situations. Fiction casts a magic spell on reality, and stories about talking foxes or laughing donkeys turn out to be closer to the human condition, and to human understanding, than what the relative sophistication of mundane reality provides. As a genre of narrative, the fable only works when its simplicity is minimal enough that it can be identified as a falsehood, but one which is in no competition with the efflorescence of realism; hence the fable’s falsehood is a charming one because it doesn’t pretend to be anything other than itself, a story so pared down, so minimal, that it sinks into our unconscious and remains there like an image whose contents resist easy decipherment.

Benito del Pliego and Pedro Núñez’s *Fable* (Quantum Prose, 2025) is a book of images that are poems and poems that are images, and in each case the poem/image resists easy decipherment. This is because each poem is literally paired with an image whose minimalism resists readability. The poems are rendered austere by the accompanying austerity of the imagery, and the imagery are rendered unsayable by the comparable sayability of the poems. *Fable* is a work whose minimalism creates a doubling effect that keeps us in the space between the textual and the visual, between the sayable and the unsayable, the fabulistic and the truthful, the audible and the silent. To invent a story about reality is to double reality; similarly, to create a falsehood is to multiply the means by which we arrive at a truth, and *Fable* is concerned with this mode of doubling and how we speak the real into existence through fabrication and reproduction.

Fable might be read as two books rather than one, which makes sense, since the book(s) have two authors: del Pliego, who wrote the koan-like poems, and Núñez, whose abstract, emblem-like images border each poem on the opposite page. The first section is titled “Fable,” while the second section is titled “The Voice of Hearing,” which contains a new set of poems and a new set of images that are similarly evocative and enigmatic. In an appendix note, the images are “traced by Pedro Núñez using elements of the Super Tipo Veloz typographic system created by the Catalan printer Joan Trochut” in 1942. Each image is formally abstract, yet dynamic and distinct from the others, especially those which number each poem in the first section, “Fable.” The images in “The Voice of Hearing,” on the other hand, seem to derive from a regularized series of black circles that are inscribed by white-line squiggles that look like the edge or part of a handwritten character or partial design shape; within the uniformity of the black circle, we get the eccentricity of a line or shape, and I imagine this is what sound feels like within

the black hole of the ear, a squiggle of sound that feels like a shape in the hear, the “voice of hearing” itself.

Taken together, we get something like a quadratic formula in the correlation between the two sets of images and poems, and whose results tilt toward the visual, as they do in “Fable,” or the aural, as they do in “The Voice of Hearing”; in each case, we are asked to interpret the text by way of its image, or the image by way of its text, and the composite turns out to be the poem itself, a pseudo-prophetic device that intends to inform us about the karmic present, as in divinatory texts and methods like the I Ching or the Tarot. Indeed, the poems in *Fable* could double as prognostications. In the note titled, “On the Various Methods of Consultation” (also in the appendix), we are informed that there are “many ways to read this book,” but one which the authors recommend is an “oracular one,” in which the reader, as they would with the I Ching for example, would ask the book a question, and then, looking at the images that serve as titles for the poems in the table of contents, select an image (presumably not knowing what poem is attached to the image), and read the poem that is headed by the image as the response to the question the reader poses. We are also encouraged, among the other ways to read the book, to “identify the poems with either the person to whom the poems could be addressed or the person who inspired the poems.” In the poems that comprise “The Voice of Hearing,” each of the twenty-seven images correspond to a letter of the Spanish alphabet (hence explaining the graphical nature of the partial squiggle), and the poems can be chosen at random (again, presumably, as a response to a question posed) or “by associating them with the first letter of someone’s name. In this way, the series would act as an address or telephone book, and each poem would be the message left for the reader by each voice.”

These approaches are remarkable when reading the poems themselves: are the poems functioning as poems apart from their oracular function, or are they strictly functional as poetic devices that only make sense when they are attached to a person, a question, or a thought beyond their formal scope and language? The answer varies based on which section one reads: in “The Voice of Hearing,” I get more of a sense of continuity and, even, a kind of narrative forming in the passage from poem to poem, less like an alphabet and more like a sustained meditation on the nature of thought (which works very much like “the voice of hearing”). For example, one section reads:

Be the voice speaking to your ear; the voice of the voice to which an echo responds. Nothing to fear now that you know who speaks to you.

This is followed by a new poem (accompanied by a new image or “letter of the alphabet”), which reads:

—So that you know it, useless. So you forget the syllabic calculation.

If you don’t understand, you’re either dumb or there’s wax in your ears. Stop pretending and give what’s given.

The dash in the second poem gives us the sense that the language is responding to and following the thought process of the previous poem (“Be the voice... Nothing to fear...”). In other words, the poems in “The Voice of Hearing” can be read consecutively as a long poem split into separate stanzas or sections, similar to Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, which are also focused on an epistemology of the aural and the heard.

The same is less true of “Fable” itself, whose poems do not build up to a continuous narrative but are each entirely distinct in the way the letters of the alphabet are, each one standing apart and alone, but collectively giving us a sense of a method both in its compositional value (as poems) and in their functional value (as oracular insights). Perhaps the oracular force of these poems rings truer, and this is part of their fiction-making fabulism, as for example in the following poem titled “The Manure”:

– Feeding is an obscure thing. Some don’t see it. They say the body is waste and words are trash. But stir the earth and look. Then bring it up to the top.

Nothing separates you from the heights. Immense are the small things.

I selected this poem at random while writing this review, and in its randomness we gain some insight into what the rest of the poems might be doing. What’s important, firstly, is the image that accompanies this poem, which would be hard to describe without actually reproducing it here, but might be described as a rectangular field of deconstructed geometrical lines and abstract typographical figures that are tossed together in a jumble, like a pile of Legos tossed onto the floor. For some reason, this typographical image *does* give me the uncanny sensation of the word “manure,” not actual manure itself, but the *concept* of manure, laid out before us in mere black lines on a white page. The poem that sits across from it on the opposite page speaks to this image of manure (and vice versa), and in their rhetorical convergence we get a similar effect of abstraction that is also, somehow, specific to the concept of manure. Some might not see it (as the poem in fact warns us), but those that do might be said to work in the obscure practice of “feeding”; whether on the poem or on the situation that has brought them to the poem is unclear. But what is clear is that the poem works in relationship to the abstract typographical image, and it’s in their symbiotic relationship that something like an insight might be achieved.

The other poems are like this, ranging from animals like “The Whale” or “The Chameleon,” to inanimate objects and spaces like “The Die” or “The Staircase.” In each case, the language invites interpretation and decipherment, an activity that resembles what I had earlier said about fabulism: a fiction making that corresponds to our real need for interpreting what is set before us. Their respective austerity – the abstract figure, the minimalist, oracular poem – allows for a more capacious interpretation to take place, and it is in this way that del Pliego and Núñez’s *Fable* invites us to read poetry differently, as an activity of augury.