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Subjective as Objective: The Lyric Poetry of Sharon Thesen

FRED WAH

SHARON THESEN writes lyric poetry. Along with writers like Gerry Gilbert and Barry McKinnon, she has written some of the finest lyric poetry in the west in recent years. While her output has not been large—*Artemis Hates Romance* (1980), *Radio New France Radio* (1981)—the sophistication of her writing indicates a major presence in the lyric. Her poems exude “feeling,” and she has a well-trained and discriminating sense of language. The most useful approach I have found in evaluating her poetry is to try to clarify the notion of “lyric” through the use of a statement which Charles Olson pursued in his seminars in Buffalo in 1965: “the subjective as objective requires correct processing.”

I have never been absolutely sure what Olson meant by that statement, but it has always intrigued me. I think it refers to the “private as public” and the “one and the many.” In Thesen’s poetry certain aspects of the statement start to make sense. The “subjective” is feeling, personal and private emotion, sensation, interior, physiology, and proprioception. The “objective” in this case is the public poem, the song, the lyric. Feeling gets registered in the body by the stomach, pulse, heart, breath, etc. and these sensations are notated in the lyric poem as “cadence,” the “correct processing” through language.

Lyric distinguishes itself from narrative as being primarily cadential. Cadence is the movement of rhythm and harmony towards a close. It is this sense of closure, or rather the avoidance of it, which Robert Kroetsch feels is the basis of the long poem.¹ In any case, the foundation of lyric can be cadence, the phraseology or shape of a statement which usually rises from a beginning and falls to a close. The poem itself can be felt as one large cadence. Shorter phrases, stanzas, and cadences can be determined within the poem. So as well as the elements of the syllable and the line important in all poetry, the lyric objectifies emotion into the basic relationship of the phrase

(1931), another boys' adventure, he confines himself entirely to the island of St. Pierre. After his second London thriller, he wrote *The King of Spain's Daughter* (1934), his final Newfoundland story, and ended his career with *Or Give Me Death!* (1936), an "escape" adventure set in Athens. It cannot be said that any of these volumes brought the author either critical attention or profit. Of the five volumes published by Hodder & Stoughton, press runs of around two thousand copies seldom sold more than fifty per cent of the stock.¹⁶ Only two, *Yo-Ho-Ho!* (1924) and *The Piccadilly Ghost* (1930), attracted publishers in the United States. As for the rest, instead of supporting Spencer materially in his later years, they served only to assist him through the winter absences he required to survive.

NOTES

- ¹ Margaret Duley, "Glimpses into Local Literature," *Atlantic Guardian*, 13 (1956), 25-26. See also Alison Feder, *Margaret Duley: Newfoundland Novelist. A Biographical and Critical Study* (St. John's: Harry Cuff, 1983).
- ² Patrick O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 83-84.
- ³ *Annual Report of the Registrar General of Births, Marriages, and Deaths, for the Year Ended December 31st 1910* (St. John's: Daily News Print, 1911), p. 104.
- ⁴ See *Henderson's Calgary City Directory* (Calgary: Henderson's Directories Alberta, 1919-22).
- ⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. xi.
- ⁶ Beverley Baxter, *Strange Street* (London: Hutchinson, 1935), p. 257.
- ⁷ Arthur Christiansen, *Headlines All My Life* (London: Heineman, 1961), p. 108.
- ⁸ Erle Spencer, *The King of Spain's Daughter* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1934), pp. 40-41.
- ⁹ Undated letter in the possession of Mr. Clyde Douglas of Fortune, Newfoundland, son of Captain Thomas Douglas. I am grateful to Mr. Douglas for permission to quote from this letter.
- ¹⁰ Records of Dottridge Bros., Funeral Directors, London, 1937. I wish

signalled by punctuation but certainly by syntax. The last section is perhaps two but definitely one cadence ending on "flames." These cadences are determined by the poet's recognition of internal motion. The feelings are signalled in the same way that any statement determined by feeling is then actualized by significant breaks and junctures in the syntax. The result is a phrasing or shaping of the language by the "voice," a physical response to an emotional impulse. There is other physiolinguistic evidence in the poem, such as line, pitch, and onset, but I think what is so impressive about Thesen's writing is the clarity of the larger phrase or cadence. The poem is successful because it so cleanly juxtaposes the movement of feeling and the movement of voice.

Thesen's perception of the place is overlaid with her feelings about being in it, and the place becomes imbued with images and sensations from inside the poet. She balances the geography out there with heartography within. "Japanese Movies," the first poem in *Artemis Hates Romance*, illustrates how Thesen uses this balance in her play with phrasing. The poem is "for Prince George" and begins with an aloof descriptive language.

The dreamy-eyed
heading somewhere
with their load of sticks
for fire—

the wholly seminal life—

unless we lead it
leads us
toward what dark wood
where cold Snow Lady waits
with blackened teeth
to cure you
of the fear of life—³

The quotation shows Thesen using the close of the third cadence, "leads us," as a double, with the line also pivoting syntactically on the following phrase. This is a nice change from the prior phrases which are strongly signalled out by the spacing and punctuation. The aloof "we" in this section of the poem shifts in the second half to a closer "you," and the poet's feelings about the place are given a

The Four Lost Ships. London: Hodder & Stoughton, [1931].

Stop Press! London: Hodder & Stoughton, [1932].

The King of Spain's Daughter. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1934.

Or Give Me Death! London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1936.

The poem continues naming qualities and things (“sunbeams,” “windowpanes,” “painful yellow tulips”) and then settles on a metaphysical place.

This pulsing thought
that thinks of things,
how yellow petals of the sun
are metonymy for roses
the bees devour.
That certitude lies
in the never-never place
where no things dwell
among the many things.⁴

It is the “pulsing thought” that is the connection between the subjective and the objective. Pulse and flow, from inside to outside to inside, rhythm, dance, and finally the poem’s own pace of word-picture, line, syllable, cadence.

And how do you feel about being lost? Lost in yourself, lost in the world, lost in love? Such questions are a major kind of cadence which the lyricist can work with. The base from which questions can be asked dwells in the personal conception of being lost or confused. Thesen has a lovely poem which says much of this. It’s called “Being Lost, As Usual.”

Dying, drying, the idea is
something goes away.
Liquid, or heat.
The hard sun in your eyes &
no more tears. Wherever
did it go? Is it lost & writing
sos in the snow.
Is it huddling somewhere
searching the sky, listening
for voices, has it given up.
Listen, I’ve never been lost
in the geography,
only in the map. The roads
fool you or the rivers don’t make sense
& the heights are hard to imagine,
only how fast you breathe

and bobbing skiffs in blessed light,
and quaint little houses
with the good wives knitting.

There is, it seems,

 a new way of believing
what ancestors had believed,
and a roundabout return
to elemental matters.

talk, even,

of exiled poets
scattered all over cities and towns,
waiting out their lyric lives
for a chance to go back there
one more time.

This poem is one of the more recent, and one of the more profound treatments of attitudes towards the outport in Newfoundland writing. These attitudes constitute a central concern of twentieth-century Newfoundland literature — the place itself, and the meaning it has for those who live there. In the poem we are presented with three distinct ways of looking at the cove in which Peggy grows up. The first point of view depicts the outsider within the community. Peggy does not fit in because she lives too much in the world of sentiment and imagination, and the community has no time for these things. The second focuses upon the good old times. The unsentimental people who would not tolerate Peggy's musings now find themselves dreaming nostalgically of the "kind bliss" and "blessed light" that was, of "quaint little houses" and "the good wives knitting." The third considers the outport as an inspiration for writers. It is a variant of the second view but more complex because more self-conscious. The poet talks about his own kind, the writers exiled in cities and towns, but his ironic detachment remains intact as he presents them drawn to the lost world of their ancestors, obsessed with finding a way back through the transforming power of the imagination to a more elemental experience of life.

A monstrosity of boredom.
Jack went up the hill
& Jack fell down the hill
breaking his head on the stones
of the earth.

(AHR, p. 13)

Such lines exhibit careful, polished registration of the movement of language as it is shaped by proprioception, body feeling. Thesen's ability to articulate the movement is an ability to perceive the close relationship between utterance and feeling in the lyric. The poem is more than a heart aching in the head. It is the linear control which can highlight the feeling. It is the particularization of the language by the ear hearing the heave of the heart.

As I pointed out in reference to "Mean Drunk Poem," Thesen's accurate notation of feeling and language extends to larger cadences. In "Jack & Jill," the line "A monstrosity of boredom" takes on the same weight of cadence as the following four lines all together. As we read the poem, each shift of Thesen's awareness and intelligence informs each step of the composition. One line leads to the next, one syntax leads to another: "The stones" to "the earth" to "The moon" to "The not caring." And "mouth," "heart," "head," and "elbow" generate one another as small and large steps (stops) of the cadential progression of the poem.

The stones of the earth
are the petrified heads of women
mouths agape
no sound. The moon
hung fat at the top of the road
dogged my elbow turning downhill,
going home.
The not caring
cowers in front of the fear
of not caring.
My mouth tight with it
fingers
on the steering wheel
greenish under the streetlights.

(AHR, p. 13)

she bathes her "golden-coloured body" in a white china basin and anoints her flesh with olive oil (p. 24).

Mary Immaculate Keilly, in *Cold Pastoral*, is a much more fully realized character than Isabel Pyke, and Margaret Duley's attitude towards the outport in this novel is much more balanced than in *The Eyes of the Gull*. This is evident even in the opening chapters and it is due, I think, to the distance Duley puts between the narrator and her main character. Duley shows here a better understanding of the exigencies of outport life, writing "the fisherfolk knew the sea had a voice, a tongue to lick at their boats, an arm to wrap round one of their own and drag him unblest to his grave."⁴ She shows a better appreciation of the stoicism developed by people who, having to cope day by day with such tragedy, "could mourn, pray and eat at the same time" (p. 9). Mary's unlettered mother, Josephine, is presented sympathetically, unlike Emily Pyke in *The Eyes of the Gull*, while Mary herself is seen to be somewhat prissy: "her nostrils expanded and contracted with the smell of fish and offal. There was a definite expression of disdain on her face" (p. 16).

Mary Immaculate, however, like Isabel Pyke, is at odds with her environment, both physical and social. For her the sea is hostile: "There romance ended and realism began" (p. 7). While her peers are drawn to the landwash, Mary Immaculate turns to the woods:

Their scorn was for her squeamishness.

She had never been known to seek the beach or slit open the belly of a cod.

She liked to run through the woods or rest by the waterfall and watch the white clouds sailing by—things the other children never saw.

Their choice was on the beach, in the fish-rooms, on the stage-heads, catching the cod tossed up from the boats. (p. 7)

From the first, Mary Immaculate is attracted to beautiful things and repelled by blood and guts: "The sea was something to watch, but its offal offended her" (p. 8).

She is set apart in another way by her extraordinary birth in a trap skiff. A legend grows up around the event that she was delivered by the Blessed Virgin herself. And the perilous nature

As a conscious literary choice, then, regionalism is important across Canada now, and the Maritimes are experiencing a rejuvenation because of it. As in previous decades and centuries, regionalism means an understanding of the geography, history, traditions, and people of a given area, as well as a feeling of belonging. More than this today, however, it often means a conscious attempt to balance poetic structure with the exigencies of the environment and/or a metaphoric identification with the landscape. Ironically, this renewed sense of place now can also recognize the poet's social responsibility and be related to the larger questions of the cultural and political identity of the nation as a whole.

—Ann Munton

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