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At The Katarina Kyrka
i. m. Anna Lindh (1957 – 2003)

Here is where folk find you now, high above the city,
in this secluded place of moist, well-tended gardens
and the overarching shade of ancient trees.

Curving pathways, gentle drifts of lawn, draw visitors
to you who stand thoughtfully for long moments until,
having touched your granite slab, they move away,

while subdued teenagers, faced with the simple golden
letters of your name and each day's carpet of flowers,
such harsh beauty, listen silently as teachers struggle

to explain. People live around you in comfortable
apartments, craftsmen make jewellery in tiny workshops,
there's a busy school outside the gates and your church

still does its quiet good work. When we discovered you,
one sunny day in mid-September, the sprinklers were on,
the first leaves had already begun to fall, two house-proud

gardeners were working patiently and an old black cat,
untroubled by the sudden annihilation of your bright star,
lay basking on the warm stone of a nearby family tomb.

- Ken Head

distance

it's the same here as home: a yellow sun, single
moon, everything falls down, and down only. the locals
eat food, use words for things, point at what they
find funny. they are easily frightened, not knowing
when they'll get born, or drop off the tree.

this house they keep me in is a cunning replica of
ours. your double comes in to feed me, stroke my hair.
her motherly weeping doesn't fool: those tears aren't real water.
vigilance: these impostors won't convince me they
are my family, that this is home and not some secret exile.

the post returns duplicates of my weekly letters to
you. i'm not deceived. i know my words pierce through
this mirror world, back to my real home.
they hug me sometimes, but I remain cold, waiting to get back.

- Colm O'Shea

Fergus Falls

Part One

Fergus Falls in memory an ache toward the human
toward Madeline playing cello in black and Judith
who would not wait at eighteen and Elle at thirty-four
I had hurt and taken to talk-therapy next to a
dry park in afternoon heat

the human meant women then
and in the town was beauty of a round lake and the elms
and the Otter Tail but an old man my dad died on its
edge in summer too who had let me use even rename
the hidden patchy woods farm he owned and I ached toward
the history he meant

when I dreamed black oak or black-oak
groves of Minnesota into poem I had Fergus
Falls in memory an ache toward the romantic
not yet come to a view that would wipe the romance of being
humanity out would see it as conflagration and
the planet's dried-up end

in the meantime which is all I
have however I want to walk in Fergus again and
imagine what a Celt wordman would have made of the name
of it what chance a one more oak-grove dream might have hoping
that the head of the Red Branch kings be on his feet in May

- Rodney Nelson

Other Time Around

No one in the redone old apartment
building would have known me and I knew no
one there but a sort of memory had
remained in the brick

 the yellow brick's own
not mine I mean that noted me walking
past in a later winter and looking
at a third-story window behind which
not much had happened

 yet if I had stayed
I might have died on wine in that window
view of train station and hospital

 two
 points of departure

I would have had to
remise what I had been until that day
to the bricks' keeping

 would they have known the
grayer man on the avenue now
 where

nobody did or would have wanted to
know me and I did not know anyone
or want to was the kind of kind hometown
to have but something unredone in the
old apartment building took note of me
on my way

 wincd
 had not expected this

- Rodney Nelson

Poetry Review

Talking to the Dead by Elaine Feinstein

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Someone once wrote that the most important feature for poetry to have was honesty. Forget how skilfully they wrote or how jazzy the metaphor. If there was no truth in what was being said, it would be worthless as rubbish. Fortunately, the same cannot be said for Elaine Feinstein's latest collection, *Talking to the Dead*.

This is an incredibly tender collection of poems dedicated to her late husband, Arnold Feinstein. Rooted in the world of the everyday, her poems are filled with touching images such as 'I still remember/your warm back as we slept like spoons together' ('Widow's Necklace') and 'Hold my hand, you said. I feel/I won't die while you are here' ('Hands').

These moments of tenderness are contrasted neatly with poems that have a bitter aniseed taste to them. The poem 'Folk Song', for instance, a recollection of when her husband offered books instead of rent money, has the ending 'Twenty years later you were still telling the story/ as a bitter sign of how little I knew you'.

If there is one criticism that I have of Elaine Feinstein, it is that she sticks too rigidly to the conventions of form. Throughout the collection, we have rhyming couplets, quatrains, sestets and the odd sonnet. There is very little excitement happening in this area and it would have been nice to see her breaking with tradition.

But she has produced a work of tenderness and feeling rooted in the everyday and almost everyone will find something they can relate to in her poetry. That connection is something that I believe is very special and Elaine Feinstein must be commended for having it.

- Christian Ward

Notes towards an essay on Poetry

Some general thoughts on poetry served up in bite sized chunks. In this part I will discuss briefly various poetic devices using paradox as an overriding interpretative focus. In the next part I will examine more recent and more experimental poems.

Introduction

Poetry and Paradox

A paradox is a statement that appears illogical or contradictory or even absurd at first, which provokes us into seeking another sense or context in which it could be true, and on closer inspection may actually point to an underlying truth. The Oxford Dictionary of English gives the following definition: ‘a seemingly absurd or contradictory statement or proposition which when investigated may prove to be well-founded or true.’ The word entered English in the 16th century when it meant a statement contrary to accepted opinion.

In his seminal essay from the 1940s, ‘The Language of Paradox’, Cleanth Brooks opens with some bald statements about the importance of paradox in interpreting poetry: ‘the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox.’ Brooks then worries that he overstates the case. He goes on to demonstrate how Wordsworth and Donne base some of their work on paradoxical situations, the implication being that this is the case for much poetry. Brooks does not overstate the case. Indeed it is possible to argue that paradox is at the heart of all poetry.

Paradoxical thinking sometimes takes you round in circles. Take, for example, the statement “I always lie”. If this is true, then the person saying it is lying. Therefore it can’t be true. Yet it is still true. Can a statement be true and false?

You can find paradoxical statements in every day use, such as, ‘Less is more’ or the sarcastic comment, ‘Deep down he's really very shallow’. When I discussed the idea of paradox with a group of students they suggested that the September 11th attack on New York was a paradoxical event, since it seemed unbelievable, but was, of course, true.

My favourite example of paradox is an event that happened in 1982 when the Northern Ireland football team played Spain in the football World Cup. Northern Ireland, the minnows of the competition, managed to

defeat the hosts, and one of the top ranked teams in the world. As he left the field, the Northern Ireland captain, Martin O'Neil, was asked how he felt about the game. He responded by saying that it was a paradox. Now, not only was the score line so unexpected as to seem unbelievable, but the fact that a footballer had the vocabulary to express himself in such terms may also appear paradoxical.

Emily Dickinson's poem 'My Life Closed Twice Before its Close' contains a paradox in the title. The poem goes on:

My life closed twice before its close
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me. . .

This statement is paradoxical in that there are separate meanings for the words 'closed' and 'close'. Paradox often plays on multiple meanings. Dickinson has had experiences in her life which she feels to be equivalent to life's true closing, death itself.

So paradox is a way of explaining things that either seem to make no sense initially and then reveal an underlying meaning, or something that seems to be unbelievable but turns out to be true. It can be found in news events, in sporting events, in everyday speech and, of course in literature.

As well as illustrating a truth, paradox concentrates the reader's attention on what is being said, on the words themselves, through the initial shock of an apparently nonsensical statement. This is an important device in the hands of a poet.

During his discussion of Wordsworth's 'Composed on Westminster Bridge' Brooks suggests that the poem gets its 'power' from the 'paradoxical situation out of which the poem arises.' This, in itself, is clearly unsatisfactory. Two poems about the same subject or the same paradoxical situation can be of varying quality, depending on how the poets have treated the topic. The 'power' as Brooks calls it, lies in how the poet has captured the 'paradoxical situation' or in how the poet has created what Larkin calls the 'verbal device'. Brooks' mistake is in distinguishing too readily the 'paradoxical situation' from the 'verbal device'. In other words he has wrenched open a gap between form and content. In doing so he may have played down the importance of paradox.

Marks on the Page

One of the ways in which poetry differs from prose is that poetry manages to disrupt expectations on many different levels. We use language most of the time to get a message across or to gain information. If I send a memo it will have a date, my name, an addressee and a message. I will use discursive prose for these exchanges. What is important here is getting across a message. Once that happens the memo can be discarded, its job is done. If I stand before a class and attempt to explain the importance of paradox in poetry, the idea in my head is translated into prose and conveyed to the students who will, one hopes, get the gist of my meaning and will, more than likely, forget the actual words I used. The discursive prose has achieved what we might call its functionality.

Poetry, on the other hand, calls attention to itself as words on the page. The message, if we can say that there is one, is much more problematic. When we read a poem the words themselves say look at me! We take much more notice of the words. Part of our interpretation involves paying close attention to the kinds of words used and the position of the words on the line and on the page. This might be called the materiality of language.

One definition of poetry is 'memorable words'. We do not discard the poem after reading. We often go back and re-read. The words remain, insistent, waiting to be rediscovered and reinterpreted. How a poet achieves this, or how the words do this, is worth looking at closely.

Metaphor

Poetry creates paradox through the use of metaphor and metaphor, by its very nature is paradoxical. Aristotle wrote that metaphor is about finding the similar in the dissimilar and the dissimilar in the similar. Metaphor involves the insistence that one thing is another thing. This appears to be an absurdity. Imagine a poem that begins 'The woman is a rose.' On the face of it this is nonsensical. Clearly what is implied is that the person shares some of the qualities of the flower. The metaphor (etymologically 'to carry across') as a linguistic device, relies on the transference of qualities. It also saves a lot of time and words. The rose may be beautiful, brightly coloured, fragile and fragrant. These are among the qualities which are transferred, or carried over, to the woman.

Already a paradox has been created. 'The woman is a rose' appears, superficially at least, to be a nonsensical statement. One thing cannot be itself and another thing at the same time. Look a little closer, develop our interpretation and we find that the metaphor is a kind of short hand. The rose remains intact. The woman does too. Both have, however, been altered, or our impressions of both have been altered by the fact that these two things have been placed together, or juxtaposed.

We can take our metaphor even further. Perhaps the rose is on a stem that contains thorns. So we could say that beneath this beautiful, fragile and fragrant exterior there lurks potential danger, pain even. All this from five words and from a rather trite metaphor at that. But the principle remains the same for all metaphors. Put simply, metaphor is at the heart of much poetry and it is a kind of short hand that describes things through a paradoxical comparison.

Rhythm

Up until the twentieth century it was considered almost essential for a poem to be written in a regular rhythm. When we read traditional poems today they often seem quite stilted because of their de dum de dum de dum rhythm. When you look or listen closely you find that all speech has rhythm. In fact the sentence you are reading has a rhythm and it is generally de dum de dum de dum. This is, of course, known as iambic and is considered the most common rhythm in English poetry, mainly because it is the most common in the English language. Poetry focuses on this. As with other devices, poetry takes something that is found often in everyday language and zooms in on it, singles it out and through repetition makes it an important aspect of the form. You might even say that it fetishizes rhythm.

That excessive focus on the iambic rhythm creates a stylised form of language which, when we look or listen more carefully, actually jars with the situation being dealt with. Take for example, the famous poem by Donne, 'The Flea' which begins,

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is...

Here we have a common situation, a courtship, a plea for reciprocated feelings. Yet it is spoken in the iambic rhythm which at once marks it out as poetry. Part of the poem's 'power' as Brooks would call it, lies in the ability to capture a complex chat up line in the stylized language and

rhythm of traditional poetry. This tension between the ordinary and the highly ornamental is at the heart of Donne's paradoxical poems. The complex rhythms into which he manages to wrestle conversational language is an essential element of this process and applies to many other poets.

Rhyme

As every schoolboy knows rhyme, like rhythm, is a leftover from the oral beginnings of poetry when it had to be learnt by heart and recited rather than read on a page. Rhyme operates through comparison. Take for example, Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush'.

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.

The end of line three chimes with the echo of 'gate'. There is an implicit comparison going on in our minds as we read. In the same way we compare the word 'leant' with the word 'I' in the first line and we decide that the second word is stressed more and so, depending on what else is in the line, may well be an iambic foot. So too we compare the last words of each line and listen out for the similarities.

In poetry we are forever turning back. We listen out for the sounds that remind us of something we've already heard, the 'ay' sound, for example and, whether consciously or unconsciously, we tie together the sound of the end of line 2 and the end of line 4. Incidentally, metaphor also makes us turn back. We do a double take several times in this verse. In line 4, for example, we might ask how the day can have a 'weakening eye' and we might answer to our quizzical selves that it conjures up the idea of a person's eyes tiring and about to close at the end of a long day. That's even before we take into account the dregs of winter in the previous line.

Rhyme also, to a certain extent, takes some of the responsibility for writing the poem away from the poet. Once he has used the word 'gate' to end line 1, the possibilities for the last word of line 3 are drastically reduced. This, in turn, limits the rest of the line and also the arrangement of line 4.

Add to this the fact that the line should fit with the iambic rhythm begun in line one and the poet's freedom is limited, perhaps a welcome scenario for a poet facing a largely blank page and waiting for 'inspiration'.

Today rhyme is generally frowned upon. It often adds a frivolous tone to a poem. It is seen as too obviously poetic, almost as if the poem is trying too hard to sound like poetry. T. S. Eliot, nearly a hundred years ago, played with this aspect of rhyme and gave a poem that was in many ways very serious, a lighter tone:

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?

It is fair to say that most poems written in the past fifty years or so avoid rhyme. When it is used, it is often in a sly, tongue-in-cheek manner. Paul Muldoon, for example, stretches the range of words that can be considered rhymes. He rhymes 'English' with 'language' or 'foot to' with 'future'. Ralph Waldo Emerson called rhyme 'a splendid architecture to bridge the impassable', in other words, an artificial structure laid upon the chaos of the subject matter.

Traditionally rhyme, like rhythm was another device that helped the poet to mould what are often very disordered events and ideas into the structures of poetic form. Today, if rhyme is used at all, it is like the pop song created with highly polished production, but employing a sample of the crackling from an old vinyl record. It is there to place itself consciously in the tradition of the older recordings. Paradoxically, in doing so, it insists upon its distance from that tradition.

Disrupting Expectations

In the same way that a first line of a poem sets up expectations as to how the rest of the poem will be written, so all the poems that have been written in the past set up expectations about how poems can be written today. Rhyme has fallen into disuse and perhaps disrepute. A strong rhythm would make a poem seem overly poetical. Most poetry from the second half of the 20th century has stayed close to the rhythms of conversational language. Poems continue to use other traditional devices such as metaphors as a staple device, enriching them with up to date references.

There are many poems where the poet consciously goes against the expectations we have of what a poem should be like or challenges the conventions. Take, for example, Tony Harrison's poem, 'Heredity':

How you became a poet's a mystery!
Wherever did you get your talent from?

I say: I had two uncles, Joe and Harry-
one was a stammerer, the other dumb.

Not only does Harrison go against our expectations about poetry, albeit within a strong regular rhythm, but in this poem he employs a paradoxical idea powerfully. The conventional view is to associate poetry with eloquence and a certain facility with language. The speaker's uncles, who inspired him to become a poet, appear to represent the opposite. This might appear nonsensical until we consider that poetry involves a concern for the careful, precise use of the language, something that might have been brought home by his uncles' struggles to enunciate which perhaps only add more value to that scrupulous regard for words that is required of the poet. As Harrison put it in an interview, 'I was aware of a hunger for articulation.'

Harrison's poem challenges stereotypical ideas of what a poet should be like and to some extent, what a poem should be like. Other poets have done this with equal success, working against or alluding to, the conventions that have been set up over hundreds of years and which today may seem outmoded or to be utilized only as a reference to the tradition, or what had gone before. It is that tradition that the poem belongs to and at the same time cannot afford to simply regurgitate.

- Stephen Brown

Notes on Contributors

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Christian Ward Christian Ward is a 27 year old London based poet whose poetry has appeared in numerous journals such as The Poetry Kit, Iota, Other Poetry, Ottawa Arts Review.