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A RUNNING RIVER OR A SLOUGH OF DESPOND?

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To decide to what extent the individual items of a magazine build up to a total expression, one can possibly best pick out some of the smaller pieces for close scrutiny and then compare them to the rest in a more general way. That this might reflect a rather arbitrary viewpoint is unavoidable.

One of the shorter poems of Keith Russell is 'There Was Always Water' (No. 1, p. 3):

There was always water
always the lie of the daughter
that is that she could re-birth,
that what can be held back,
when released, thus transformed, 5
the mother now become younger
that thus she keeps sacred the virginity
not of hers, but of his birth.
She holds the bond of necessity.
Ah! but whoes is the water? 10
Whoes the desire to drink?
And so it is not released at all
and her who feels its loss,
who pushes closer to his blood
and would have him die secret. 15
Now he knows!

The subject seems to be an incestuous desire of a mother for her son. The symbol of water (apart from numerous possibilities) seems to imply mostly the slaking of the thirst, based on its use in lines 10 and 11, that is, the fulfilment of desire. What the rebirth entails which would keep the relation from being incestuous ("keeps sacred the virginity . . . of his birth") is not quite clear, possibly a vicarious experience by identification with her daughter-in-law (unless the daughter refers to a blood-relative, implying a brother-and-sister incest as well).

The poem itself is concerned with the frustration and tension of the situation. What makes it work? The frustration is firstly brought to the reader by the puzzle of the content, forcing him to concentrate on who is who. For instance, the introduction of "his birth" comes rather as a shock after the mention of the "lie of the daughter"; it poses a puzzle. Another

frustration is the use of apparently inconsistent grammar. It is not done in an obvious way, and it is the more unsettling for its insidious influence. For instance, in lines 4, 5 and 6 it is not clear what the subject is for "thus transformed," because the lack of a verb prevents the forming of a principal clause to give shape to the accumulation of phrases and clauses. Consequently "transformed" works back to "that what can be held back" as well as forward to "the mother now become younger" and with equal uncertainty. Then "become" itself (rather than "becomes" with the mother as the subject) introduces a wishful note, like a reminiscence of the old subjunctive mood, or an uncompleted "would become." In line 13 the use of the objective pronoun "her" for a subject, "her who feels . . .," makes it uncertain whether she is the doer, or whether it is done to her. Each of these instances has its own particular effect, but together they also work together to bring some mental confusion to the reader by undermining subtly his faith in the structure of his language. This is not the same world of language as he knows.

Other frustrations of convention add their mite. The spelling "whoes" fuses the ideas of "whose" with "woes," but our faith in spelling being less settled than our faith in the structure of language, this has far less emotional impact. The promise of rhyme (water-daughter) is not fulfilled, neither is that of half-rhyme (virginity-necessity), but there is hardly enough of it to set up an expectancy. Then after the vague threat of frustration and confusion, the poem at last becomes explicit with the darkness of the deathwish emerging in the last lines.

The poem seems to show most of the elements of the 'grotesque' as Wolfgang Kayser has defined it in his study of this art form.¹ It shows alienation from the normal world²; its world is one of different norms in moral and linguistic regions. It causes a tension between that which the reader holds to be right and what is accepted in the poem.

But is there another aspect of the grotesque in the poem, the one Mr Kayser calls "an attempt to provoke and subdue the demoniac aspects of the world" (p. 188)? Mr Kayser points out that part of the impact of unnatural, alienating forms of art lies in its evoking subconscious fears of the supernatural, and by either comic effects (the absurd is also an important ingredient of many grotesque art forms), or in another way resolves these fears. Certainly in the poem there is a certain resolution of the confusion with the expression of the deathwish at the end. But in spite of that, in spite of the confusion, unnaturalness and sense of death, the poem never seems to evoke a sense of supernatural evil. It is content to concentrate on the sordid aspects of unnatural obsession. Its viewpoint is still firmly in this world, even though on a very low plane, with the contorted vision caused by this bias toward 'real life.'

This holds true for many items in the two issues. There is a nearly obsessive preoccupation with incest, sex without love, deathwishes, mental derangement and other negative aspects of this earthly life. These are often expressed by deliberately broken conventions, though not in all cases done

as skilfully as in the example of Mr Russell. Sometimes there is nothing more radical than the pointless omission of capitals, with no stronger emotional effect than a slight irritation at the childishness of it: surely any honest reading would reveal that this is merely substituting one convention for another: either you start your sentences with capitals or you don't. Of more impact is the total absence of punctuation as in 'her' by Denis Gallagher, which reduces the poem to a formless mass of words (No. 2, p. 15). However he has not been able to be entirely consistent. (If that was his aim; if he wanted to express anything particular with it, it became lost in the confusion.) He had to use capitals for the "American Playboy," to indicate that he meant the magazine rather than this particular species of American. After all, that is what punctuation is for, to help a writer shape his work so that a reader will understand what he means.

Suzanne Witlock, in her short story (No. 2, pp. 17-19), shows more understanding of the ways in which punctuation, and an unconventional use of it, may work for us. Her omission of capitals not only has a point, but I believe it is the only solution for the problem she faced. The story is a portrayal of a woman's growing mental derangement, and the sentence structure shows the progressive disorientation. Using the omission of capitals in conjunction with very short and abrupt punctuation, Miss Witlock managed to convey at once a lack of structure in the thought process as well as the accompanying fragmentation. To illustrate this and the way it integrates with the subject and its presentation, I'll quote some of the frequent obsessions with disorientation in time which worry the woman:

i have forgotten [the day]. [the days.] time is a long stick.chopped at both ends towards the centre. the days have fallen off.

And a little bit further down, we find the following:

ive forgotten what day. only time. it will always be yesterday. and always tomorrow. so elusive (p. 18).

This is just an example of the excellent reproduction of mental derangement and its anguish of losing grip on reality. Out of the context of the magazine it would probably have even more impact, for the very mass of negatively orientated material has a dulling effect on the reader, rather than strengthening the emotional weight.

For the total effect is not one of social protest. It would need a moral standard to achieve that, something to measure how far society has sunk. There is as little evidence of a moral standard in the magazine as there is of a supernatural awareness. There is just this emphasis on sordidness, as if wanting to portray 'real life' in a world gone wrong. But it has no rousing effect and becomes a wallowing in the dirt of the Slough of Despond. And this portraying of a world 'unmade' has an unsettling, 'un-making' influence which seems to wither any will for creation and forming. No wonder then that some of the lesser creative talents succumbed to this influence and thought that an accumulation of dirt would automatically constitute art.

'Schlinki's Dairy' (No. 2, p. 21) is one of those, and Gerard Lee seems to have thought that the repulsive details were enough and needed no such thing as unification, verity and attention to relative effects. Though that last accusation is probably not strictly true. There must be some contextual effects for innocent details like masticating cows to become dirty. There is not even anything inherently dirty in their droppings. The dirt is purely in the eye of the beholder. There is no warm fragrance in Mr Lee's point of view. He begins by depreciating the superficial view of country life by the tourist with his standardised illusions. But his 'real life' view, which he proceeds to expand then is at least as false. Falser, for the obscene, non-adhering and repulsive details which he scraped together are only, and obviously, concocted for effect, not verity, nor psychological insight. They are therefore the falsifications of an artificial attitude, in contrast to the superficial naive ignorance of the view he professes to put straight. This is no 'real life' view. This is not even a view of a world gone wrong. This is nothing more exciting than the sick projection of a point of view gone wrong.

This, I think, is the main effect of this collection of short stories and poems. Not all of them (as, for instance, Suzanne Witlock's story) would carry this message if taken on their own, but the total impact of the different items influencing each other is the feeling of a point of view gone wrong. It alienates and repulses the reader, rather than making him feel concerned either about the issues or the poetry.

There is one exception, however, one poem which has enough creative force to place it outside the morass. Colin Campbell's 'Siren' (No. 1, pp. 14-16) is very much concerned with a world gone wrong. It expresses a preoccupation which is alive in Western society today, the haunting question 'Where did we go wrong?' And it is expressed in a way which haunts and entices the reader. It is too long for detailed treatment, but a few details will show some of its merits.

The confused bewilderment which is at the back of our uncertainty when we consider the wrong direction of our civilisation is expressed in the first lines, though their impact becomes clearer on re-reading:

there is no temptation, only the road taken
winding down into the valley,
there is no wrong turn on the road
winding down into the valley (p. 14).

The inevitable downward way, expressed by the meaning of the words, is emphasized by the repetition of the second line and the subtle use of rhythm and line length. The dip in "valley" and the shortening of the third line in comparison to the first all work together.

The poem is structured in different movements, each expressing its particular concern in its form and rhythm. The second movement is concerned with the siren song and becomes both more lyrical and hypnotic with the repetition of words and rhythm working together to achieve an effect of singing enchantment:

a singer and no song, there is no song
we hear a singer, there is no song
only the steady tramp, there is a song
we see no singer. . . (p. 14).

What a blessing that a singing rhythm is apparently not entirely placed under taboo in modern poetry!

Some of the movements have a simple poetic quality which is reminiscent of Eliot. For instance, the 'temptation' of the kingfisher:

krrrich, krrrer, kerree
 come down to me
krrrich, krrrer, kerree
 come, down to me
krrrich, krrrer, kerree
 come

 do not fear the web spun from tree to rock
 the spider feeds on the bee
 come down to me . . . (p. 15).

The sudden variety after the expectation set up by the repeated lines introduces at the same time the more threatening imagery which becomes more prevalent as the poem (and the road) progresses. The variety is not a breaking of the expectation, however. The endrhyme, internally repeated in "tree," ties it firmly into place. The siren song is repeatedly recalled in a more confused echo of its original haunting version, but at no stage does it break into disorder, nor is there any sign that the vision of the "valley without floor" is accepted as the normal state of affairs, even though the road is inevitable. The poem does suggest, though never states, that our point of view might have been wrong, that the temptation might have been the not listening to the songs, not deviating from the road, but tramping on and kicking our mules. This is expressed partly by the difference in tone of the different movements, and partly by the wishful uncertainty at the end:

. . . we passed a song
there was no singer or song
we could not halt
our mules were tired and frightened, we kicked . . . (p. 16).

This is the sort of poem which invites re-reading, and which rewards this re-reading with the disclosure of new patterns in the "shadows on the wall," new possibilities and creative impulses. This is the positive expression of the 'world gone wrong' theme. It states its belief in positive aspects by its very use of poetic techniques which appeal to positive senses in the reader. It is not its social didacticism which raises it to the level of pure poetry but its poetic expression of a concern in and by the reader. Too much modern poetry is directed toward alienating the reader. The result is simply that poetry is not read anymore, because it is not rewarding to read it. If it neither enriches the reader with some additional understanding, nor pleases his senses, but only gives him a slap in the face, what can you ex-

pect? Not many people are addicted to such treatment. Without a concern for communication, literature can become a barren academic puzzle with a dirty joke for solution. It is a trend which started, I think, with James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and which seems to me to evoke more creative barrenness than fecundity. It needs a true emotional involvement of the poet with the world, with people, to breathe life into his poetry, not an artificial parading of self.

There is, on the whole, enough craftsmanship evident in the collections of *Riverrun*, and this includes its excellent black-and-white illustrations. What is lacking is the spark, such as is shown in "Siren." Without this spark *Riverrun* will be at best a muddy trickle, not a current.

NOTES

¹ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (India University Press, 1963).

² *Ibid.*, p. 184.