

ANDREW KLOBUCAR / *She Who Destroys Light:* Sharon Thesen's *The Good Bacteria* and the Organic Imagination

*Legion are the myths of springtime, more
Legion myths of springtime's cusp with winter.*

Even readers unaccustomed to North Vancouver's peculiar micro-climate, where factors like altitude and the city's proximity to ocean often converge to produce uniquely unstable winter weather patterns, can easily appreciate Thesen's sharply composed couplet (above), concluding "February Morning, North Vancouver." Its tight construction and the poignantly wide array of cultural references informing it expertly link the poem's prosaic, opening image of a suburban parking lot first to Hellenic fertility myths and, as we see above, one of modernism's most significant aesthetic statements on nature and the human imagination. That the line break constructing the couplet can hardly be rendered more abruptly only emphasizes the acute rawness informing the work's overall vision. In deed, especially given contemporary culture's fixation on climate change, "more / legion myths of springtime's cusp with winter;" the near monosyllabic, irregular flow of words do not arrest meaning, so much as they castrate it, suggesting the tenuous surge of a stream just emerging from winter's elements, part ice, part water, neither one season, nor the other.

Even beyond the expected cataclysmic changes in global climate systems, Vancouver's February remains a notoriously unstable time of year—that time where crocuses signal tenuous promises of spring alongside regular bursts of arctic air. Thesen's description of her city during this month is both evocative and exact:

Arched cobras of last year's newborn ferns
& slight undressed crocuses huddle in a bunch by the fence. (48)

In the poem, the crocuses have already appeared, yet still they "huddle" for protection from the constant threat of late frosts. The parking lot itself remains icy—though incompletely so, as the sun competes with the city's lush rain forests for influence. Such are the interstitial moments in both time and language that direct the primary

aesthetic aims of *The Good Bacteria*, consistent with key issues concerning modernity's larger ideologico-historical conflicts with individual human experience and the construction of stable knowledge systems. In this context, the myths of springtime echo first T. S. Eliot's ontological despair in "The Waste Land" over these new, but increasingly relevant discontinuities in western culture and thought, and second William Carlos Williams's more optimistic response to "springtime's cusps" in "Spring and All," published only one year later in 1923. Where, for Eliot, early spring's somewhat fickle attachments to the contrary climates of summer and winter symbolised modernity's capricious rejection of history's hard won intellectual traditions, the same tenuous aspects of western culture invoked qualities of politico-ontological sovereignty in Williams's work.

Both instances of modernity's uniquely indistinct appreciation of human experience appear earliest in the critical and creative experiments of Coleridge, a writer crucial to Thesen's poetics. His best known poetic works excel in connecting moments of epiphany and wisdom with sudden ambiguous shifts in personal perspective or abrupt encounters with the unfamiliar or undefined. The Xanadu of "Kubla Khan," for example, presents a thoroughly terrifying encounter with enlightenment principles as architectural splendour set amidst scenes of violent, natural chaos—an extended meditation, most likely, on the innate aggressiveness and antagonism of the act of creation itself. To compose an image of natural accordance from opposing tensions is not unique to Coleridge's aesthetics, as remains evident in western culture's consistent penchant for binaric symmetry and proportion in thought. However, the traditional post-Socratic emphasis on dialectical examination tends to subordinate the tension of opposing partitions to a higher unified resolution. The process of understanding through opposition may be dynamic; certainly it is chaotic, perhaps violently so, but decision arrives only with the termination of movement.

Coleridge's vision does not seek to resolve its conflicts; rather it heralds the very notion of opposition as a primary force of creation. "To drink of the milk of paradise," Coleridge declares at the end of the poem, to understand the decisive truths of nature and being, invokes a stance of "dread" (albeit "holy"), not delight, for the ultimate insight has arrived only with the parallel loss of any sense of conviction or even certainty. Just as a person feeling a sudden bout of dizziness will look down or away from the world to try to regain some sense of equilibrium between the body and its surroundings, Coleridge's revelation demands the reader to "close [their] eyes," acknowledging

the vision's disquieting imagery. At the same time, Coleridge makes it clear that this loss of equilibrium is fundamental to understanding the overwhelming nature of the world behind such inspirations. The truth of Xanadu arrives before the reader at the expense of "clarity" in the midst of a confusing maelstrom of blurring processes and ongoing tensions. On a more structural level, this hurricane-like image, where caves of ice meet vaporous chasms "measureless to man" signifies well the aesthetics of the modern literary imagination, whereby meaning evolves via the process of semantic relationships breaking down and fragmenting to reveal entirely new arrays of language use. But to obtain this language, to arrive at these images, and presumably the ideas or references behind them, requires first an act of destruction. Perception, Coleridge tells us, must be pulled apart—in other words, uprooted, contrasted and disbelieved—if it is to be understood. Few scientists even today would disagree, noting the similarity between such precepts and basic empiricist-derived theories of knowledge and reasoning. The parallels in themselves are not surprising as both modern scientific methods and romantic aesthetics share roots in late 18th century German philosophies of "organic" learning and knowledge, where concepts of nature as a collection of internally driven forces were deliberately advanced against more traditional mechanistic views of the universe. Schiller's influential 1795 investigation into perception and interpretation as natural, i.e. "organic," processes in their own right introduced terms like "internal necessity" into theories of cognition, as well as poetry. Coleridge's "organicist" aesthetics thus neatly abandons most prior neo-Aristotelian emphases on mimesis and form to re-conceive art as an active, infinitely ongoing investigation into the very foundations of knowledge. It was then, and to some extent remains, a consistently troubling epistemological shift to consider, subordinating, as it does, any preview of fixed concepts of knowledge to ideas of process and change. That said, the paradisiacal "milk" to be gained from these decidedly less ordered views of the natural world reveals an especial value not easily discounted.

Coleridge's triumphantly chaotic, even terrifying, relationship to knowledge pays due respect (as does romanticist culture in general) to the Greek figure of Persephone—so-called "Queen of the Underworld," and tragic daughter of Demeter, the goddess of spring. So powerfully evocative she was in Greek mythology, Hellenic society considered the very mention of her name taboo, opting instead for the decidedly less personal term "Kore" or the maiden. The very name Persephone translates to "she who destroys light." That she inhabited (and, in fact, jointly ruled) the other side of

the river Styx with all the dead might be considered reason enough to fear her, but, in fact, the truly empowering quality of this figure derives, not from her place of reign, but rather her unique relationship to nature as both a force of influence in human life and a particular mode of knowledge. The underworld itself, together with its original ruler, Hades, signified for the Greeks more than just the final destination of the human soul. Its role as repository for the dead bestowed upon it an especial significance as a space of profound knowledge and wisdom. How could one expect less of a place populated by so many different, individual spirits, each one a unique vessel shaped by a lifetime's experience and interaction with the world. One might even consider it the true model of the modern metropolis—a cosmopolitan hive of human achievement, sorrow, failure, and desire drawn from every corner of the known world. To speak to the dead was (somewhat ironically) to commune with the most complete and vital source of life itself. In fact, one might note here that T. S. Eliot actually does the Hellenic underworld a bit of a disservice in works like “Prufrock” and “The Waste Land,” habitually associating the more industrialised and technocratic attributes of urban life with traditional images of Hell. Eliot’s “unreal city” of London, labouring under “brown fog” and colourless crowds of aimless wanderers follows closely Dante’s epic vision of eternal damnation; at the same time, these characteristics bear little resemblance to the underworld of classical Greek culture. Persephone’s residence there endowed her with qualities considered anything but “unreal” or lost amidst faceless crowds - in other words, how the British working class likely appeared to Eliot in the early 20th century. Rather, she remains uniquely dynamic in both a physical and metaphysical sense, embodying the mythological origins of life as a process in and of itself. As Demeter’s daughter by Zeus, she conveys an implicit relationship to notions of fertility, birth and renewal; yet her marriage to Hades simultaneously invokes a contrary affiliation with death, decay and hopelessness. This contradiction dominates their relationship right from their first meeting. Entranced by her beauty, Hades forgoes the conventions of courtship, opting instead to kidnap the young goddess and bring her back to the underground. When Demeter learns of his affront, so great is her pain and anger, the entire world is forced to suffer through an interminable winter. To end her sorrow and restore Greece’s climate, Zeus must order Hades to return Persephone to the world of the living, but not before Hades coerces her into consuming a special fruit associated with the underworld. In some versions of the myth the fruit is a pomegranate, in others, merely its seeds, but in all variations, the

act of consumption irrevocably condemns the goddess to remain with Hades for at least part of the year. To ingest the fruit of the underworld is to forge an unbreakable bond between visitor and place, as if the act of consumption has somehow changed the very nature of the consumer, prohibiting her exit. For Judeo-Christians, the metaphysical risks of ingesting forbidden fruit are hardly unfamiliar; even more importantly, the parallels between the act of consumption and acquiring a kind of illicit knowledge emphasize the same moral dilemma that pervades all experiential knowledge. Comprehending one's surrounding world is never a transparent action; to gain knowledge is, on one level, to exchange ignorance for experience, but at the same time, such a transition cannot occur without a fundamental cognitive and physical transformation.

Even avoiding the obvious sexual parallels that emerge between the loss of innocence and the loss of virginity, several epistemological problems specific to the modern experience of the natural world emerge alongside Persephone's celebrated annual return to the earth's surface. As a result, Persephone's primary role in Greek mythology remains still, compared to many other figures, one of the most difficult to summarize categorically. If anything, her identity conveys first and foremost the fundamental paradox of humanity's material existence, where consciousness is free—in fact, compelled—to learn from birth onward of its own instability, demise, and inevitable negation. Such complexities certainly contribute to the forbidding quality of her name.

Symbolic of life's equal attachment to events of death as well as to birth, the natural continuity, in other words, between decay and growth, Persephone acquired a unique importance within romanticist thought and culture. To understand and value knowledge as the end result of the natural cycle of life in all its inconsistencies and ironies was to attain valuable insights into both experience and imagination (and, of course, any epistemological contradictions therein implied). Hence, as is apparent in Coleridge's poetics, romanticism's innovative appreciation for this mode of learning summons an aesthetics of significant epistemological and cultural import.

The radical aims of this aesthetic response remain significant to the more revisionist margins of modern poetry, including specific progressive streams in contemporary writing, and, as is well demonstrated in much of Thesen's work, Coleridge's transformative perspective proves to be an inspiring framework. The first sections of the title poem literally abduct readers as new Persephones into settings simulta-

neously familiar and threatening. The opening stanzas present Kelowna, the poet's home, part Xanadu, a "twinkling city," one of BC's fast growing metropolitan areas, part underworld,

Car lights were a ribbon along the shape of the bridge.
No one was there: they were all ghosts in coats. (11)

At first, it is certainly Eliot's unreal city. Kelowna's contemporary success as a new urban centre has also placed it perpetually on the edge of disaster; with its phenomenal growth comes the price of deforestation, and consequently the threat of rampaging summer fires. We are in Kelowna in the early 21st century watching the city burn almost seasonally, much as the suburban sprawls of southern California have for the last two decades. The city is twinkling because it is on fire.

No more bloody ghazals! one ghost shouted to another.
In the morning they ate again, and took their penicillin pills.
The penicillin killed the good bacteria as well as the bad.

He could see anything that way on the way to Kamloops.
A known ghost. The trees burned all the way to the sky.
His stomach burned when he took the penicillin. (11)

The accord in imagery and motion emerges through opposition and contrast. Urbanisation brings a strange and ironic primitivism to the culture of Kelowna, reducing the quality of life to a point where anti-bacterial medicines become part of everyday consumption. Just as the technological wonder of the modern suburb both improves and reduces lifestyle choices, the penicillin cannot distinguish between good and bad bacteria. All is obliterated; modernity burns trees and stomachs with the same zeal to build, to produce, to amaze. Yet, more akin to Williams's sense of organic conflict than Eliot's moral vision, Thesen's perspective is constantly shifting. True, the penicillin "killed all the bacteria, good and bad, like death or God. / Though death, being a matter of bacteria, is also life." As Thesen realises, modernity has appropriated many of its supposed opposites, and therein lies its power. It gives us the capacity to domesticate almost any natural setting, yet simultaneously makes

us nomads. One nomad in the poem, the “known ghost,” watching the trees burn, seems less concerned about the loss of land than the loss of information: “He lugged his own laptop; it was easier that way. / On his lap sat the known universe.” We are nomads, yet we have the world in our lap. We have destroyed our cities, only to make them more wondrous.

It’s difficult to imagine a more fitting introduction to Thesen’s latest collection, for the book’s central themes are masterly demonstrated in the five triplets that compose the opening poem. On one level, the collection strives to signify the important loss of good bacteria in our contemporary lives, whether it takes the form of life-long friends (“Weeping Willow,” a cycle of poignant reflections on the death of Angela Bowering) or single, unrepeatable moments of sensual observation (“Relative to History”). It is exactly this loss, however, that is responsible for the “burn” driving modern aesthetics. Most of the poems in *The Good Bacteria* ably penetrate these core issues, often interplaying Coleridgean imagery with specific experiments in voice and line reminiscent of Williams, as we see, for example, “Please Note”:

Please note
The very well-designed Magpie,
Shiapparellis of the sky.

It’s the teal blue that amazes,
That hat. (47)

The Good Bacteria, as a Vancouver book, deliberately reaches into Thesen’s incredibly sensual history of place. Yet, consistent with both Williams’s and Coleridge’s art, the book also accepts this same history’s inevitable transformation through experience: “I for one,” exclaims the poet, in another consideration of season and state of mind, “am glad of these mood lifting changes,” walking “untoward anything” (“How to Stay Sane” 41). Thesen knows only through the toxic capacity of contradiction and chaos is it possible to forge new languages, new perspectives.

Works Cited

Thesen, Sharon. *The Good Bacteria*. Toronto: Anansi, 2006.