

KENT LEWIS / As Above, So Below: Parallax in Sharon Thesen's *The Good Bacteria*

Samuel Johnson once disparaged the poetry of John Donne as “The most heterogeneous ideas . . . yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions.” Two centuries later, T. S. Eliot reappraised the metaphysical poets, admiring their ability to wed image, thought, and feeling in what he termed a “unified sensibility.” Unlike the curmudgeon Johnson, Eliot respected their alchemical blends of hostile elements: wit and passion, sex and spirituality, violence and the holy. Or as Bruno of Nola (who was at one time Donne’s teacher) famously said, “In sublimity, filth; in filth, sublimity.” The metaphysical tendency to think in contradictions disturbs and delights, as cherished cultural oppositions dissolve. And it has a long history, from William Blake (“Excess of sorrow laughs; excess of joy weeps”), to Lenny Bruce (“Every day people are leaving the church and going back to God”). Another poet in this tradition, I would argue, is Sharon Thesen, whose latest collection of poetry, *The Good Bacteria*, exudes a woeful joy.

The collection opens, William S. Burroughs style, with a stark contrast between two unrelated scenarios. In the first, a nameless couple pops “penicillin pills” to battle an infection. In the second situation, a man walks to Kamloops, shortly after the 2003 fires devastated the Okanagan valley. On his way, he passes through the desolate “trees burned all the way to the sky” (11). The juxtaposition contrasts two antagonistic images: the healing qualities of medicine on the one hand; the brittle skeletons of a charred forest, on the other. Throughout the collection, Thesen repeatedly pairs together such opposites. In poem 4, for example, a young couple meets and falls in love at a clinic, brought together over “a terrible insect bite that would not go down” (14).

Tender love, indeed.

Yet from the start, Thesen begins to show her metaphysical stripes, for she emphasizes similarities between these opposites. Consider the first poem again. Although penicillin is a curative, it also plays search and destroy with our internal flora, killing “the good bacteria as well as the bad.” Once within the digestive tract,

it slaughters germs indiscriminately, as blind as “death or God.” Although potentially lifesaving, the antibiotics behave as a small forest fire within the gut. In this manner, Thesen establishes a connection between fire and medicine, noting one man’s stomach “burned when he took the penicillin” (11, emphasis mine). The penicillin benefits us, at the cost of a microorganism holocaust. The Yin is in the Yang, it seems.

And John Donne said something similar on the connection between insect bites and love.

The first poem does not spell out the opposite insight, the consolation that fire is also a form of rebirth and regeneration, although that hackneyed implication is certainly present by proxy (and such saccharine is better left unstated). No, Thesen’s vision is subtler, more complex, and ultimately more interesting. Repeatedly, her poems suggest that all events are concurrently creative and destructive, noble and despicable, ordered and chaotic, and so ultimately ambiguous and amoral. Medicine saves lives by committing a kind of bacterial genocide; fire annihilates entire ecosystems that ultimately benefit from the high nutrient ash (some trees, such as the Bishop Pine, rely on fire in its reproductive cycle). Thesen’s poetic vision follows what Jacques Derrida calls the “logic of the pharmakon”—a transgressional writing that disrupts simplistic binaries. One meaning that Derrida outlines for the pharmakon is particularly relevant to Thesen’s poem: in Greek, the word (which gives us the modern “pharmacy”) means both medicine and toxin; it cures by poisoning.

Thesen’s poems make a similar double gesture, breaking down fundamental contradictions, even ones as basic as the difference between the living and the dead. The first poem reminds us, “death, being a matter of bacteria, is also life.” And so a human corpse is also a microbial buffet. In poem 4, Thesen describes a book, which offers a useful reflection of her own poetic method:

... The book—
a novel—was set in the Arizona desert where no
apparent difference obtained
between life and death, taxidermy came up often
as a metaphor or a simile, a smile

often lurking on its countenance (14)

And if taxidermy is the science of mimicking life, then some living people imitate the dead. I have seen them at the malls, in Conservative Party meetings, watching CNN.

The paradoxical nature of such poetry makes it a bitter pill to swallow, for it will offer no easy answers or comforting truisms. Biotechnology gives us the power to destroy colonies of bacteria, but one carelessly dropped match sends thousands of people scuttling on foot from their lakeside mansions, humanity purged from the gorgeous Okanagan by a sanitizing fire. And above man and nature sits God, who feels no remorse in dispatching us by the billions, bacteria compared to his omnipotence. In this poet's eyes, we are simultaneously Lord and subject, host and guest, colonizer and the colonized, God and the God-damned. In this way, Thesen's project is no less ambitious than Milton's attempt to "justify the ways of God to Man." Unlike Milton, however, Thesen doesn't promise a glorious heaven to offset all our hells. She remains, provocatively, in the flicker.

Thesen's poetics reminds us, *contra logic*, that the microcosm often contains macrocosm. The collection repeatedly draws attention to the way the big is contained by the small (and vice versa). In the opening poem, a man lugs a computer, a burden since the laptop contains "the known universe / When he sat down, the universe sat on his lap." Thanks to wireless Internet (and quantum entanglement), this is more than mere hyperbole. Portable computers do contain a version of the universe (which means the portable contains an image of itself, *mise-en-abyme* style). The technique is reminiscent of William Blake's mystical vision of "a world in a grain of sand."

What is remarkable about Thesen's poetry is the variety of methods she has for inducing this rhapsodic state (a worthy project for any graduate student looking for a thesis topic). There is the good old-fashioned oxymoron and paradox:

"What I do is make gleam / that which already gleams enough." (50)

She regularly reverses the vehicle and tenor in her figures of speech, as she does in poem 5 of the collection, where she describes two passengers in a truck:

A woman with a face of a sheepdog
or a sheepdog with the face of a woman
was sitting beside the driver (12)

Such playful inversions become a rhythm within the poetry:

A stone is a mountain, a mountain a stone (37)

At times the reversals coax out new meanings, as the shifting placement of a word generates multiple meanings.

plain of grass a grass
of prairie plain
as an attitude" (44)

The grass becomes both plain (a field) and plain (in the sense of ordinary), a zeugma which is really quite remarkable (not plain). Such ambiguous syntax helps blur the boundaries between subject and object, the figurative and the literal. Thesen further undermines the rigid distinction between the fact and the fancy, by placing mythic characters in highly realistic settings: riding alongside the sheepdog-woman, the Egyptian God Annubis is taunted "Annubis! annubis, what a heck of a proboscis!" (15); Titania, Queen of the Faeries, ponders politics and calls for "a change in the government" (12). Indeed, Thesen peoples Peachland with ghosts, deities, revenants, monsters, and monster homes, in a way that insists on the presence of the past. Her use of myth and history doesn't aspire to the over-arching modernist allegories of Joyce or Eliot; her vision is more fractured, piecemeal, and tentative.

If there is a danger to metaphysical poetry, it lies in its failure to recognize important differences, and so lose political relevance. Buddhists and Sufis, after all, seem quite comfortable in either democratic or totalitarian states. And George Orwell's slogan from 1984 reads perfectly well as a metaphysical conceit: "WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH." Yet in *The Good Bacteria*, Thesen is able to use her metaphysical chops to make pointed political critiques (perhaps dissolving one last binary between the poet and the propagandist, the mystic and the rabble rouser). An attentive reader will find dozens of political insights in this collection, but I will focus on my favorite poem, "Scenes from the Missing Picture." In it, two divorced women sit in a favorite haunt and notice the absence of a cheesy painting called "The Great Outdoors." They speculate that the painting has been purloined. The canvass begins to take on a double significance,

both as a piece of art (named “The Great Outdoors”) but also as the heartrending loss of wilderness, crown land, and forests, the symbolic Great Outdoors. On at least one level, the following lines attack the neoconservative heist of public lands:

It was obvious “The Great Outdoors” was part
Of a world of crime and deception of gasping proportions....

... “The
Great Outdoors” was just a pawn in a much larger grab for
Hydro and hegemony, and it wasn’t just about forests.
It was water, it was oil, it was natural gas...
... Whole rivers
could be diverted to squeeze themselves over dams
so teenagers could download porn off the net. (64)

This is a hilarious comment for two tipsy divorcees to make about the loss of one tacky painting; it is also a comment on the erosion of the commons and wild spaces. Is Thesen funny? Yes. Is she bemoaning a tragic loss? Yes. Is that a rare and valuable fusion in a poet? Sorry, Dr. Johnson, but yes, yes, oh god, yes.

Works Cited

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