

MEREDITH QUARTERMAIN / Irony's Rhyme

"Irony: Do not let yourself be governed by it, especially in uncreative moments," Rilke warned in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, seeming to suggest that it might be a bad habit which the poet ought to keep in check. Yet Rilke recognized, as Sharon Thesen has, that irony not only is a rich terrain for poetry but also may be at the core of a poet's sensibility. "In creative moments," Rilke advised,

try to make use of it as one more means of grasping life. Cleanly used, it too is clean, and one need not be ashamed of it; and if you feel you are getting too familiar with it, if you fear this growing intimacy with it, then turn to great and serious objects, before which it becomes small and helpless. Seek the depth of things: thither irony never descends – and when you come thus close to the edge of greatness, test out at the same time whether this ironic attitude springs from a necessity of your nature. For under the influence of serious things either it will fall from you (if it is something fortuitous), or else it will (if it really innately belongs to you) strengthen into a stern instrument and take its place in the series of tools with which you will have to shape your art. (24)

In Greek comedy we find the *eiron*, a clever underdog, who like Socrates maintains a naive dissembling come-on, but who triumphs over the boastful, earnest or confidently unaware *alazon*, an irony designed to correct the foolish ("Irony" *Encyclopedia Princeton*). But this is not the irony that moves Thesen's poetry. Hers is a romantic irony—"ironically"—for she who writes *Artemis Hates Romance*—a clean, deft, witty irony innately hers—a stern instrument in Rilke's sense—in the sense that it is uncompromising, but also a movement of mind of the broadest vision generously holding the daily and light with the most serious of matters.

Language all her life is a second language,
the first is mute and exists. ("Mean Drunk Poem" 19)

In her first collection, *Artemis Hates Romance*, Thesen playfully invokes the huntress Artemis, playfully steps back from her anti-romantic stance (bemusedly writing about hunters piercing the hearts of bears with arrows, then cuddling their dead teddy-bears). She draws a frame around that activity, as though to say that's just one of many ways of this world. René Wellek has written that romantic irony, particularly that defined by the German Romantic Friedrich Schlegel, is the "recognition of the fact that the world in its essence is paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality" (14). "All you have to do is / pick up your daily newspaper," Thesen writes in "Usage," "there they are, / the same old stories." "Dear reader," she warns us, "take heed &/ by the way, / will you marry me?" (48) Here is the sudden shift in tone or sentiment characteristic of romantic irony—the interruption designed to shatter congealing narrative illusion. This irony is not merely a matter of meaning contrary to words, in a joke or sarcastic remark which separates insiders from outsiders, or establishes a correct view of the world. Rather it is a "situational irony" or "observable irony" (Muecke)—a rhyming of events, characters, circumstances or ideas. For example, in the following fragment, non-Christian Indians rhyme with Christmas, poverty with rich dogs on sofas, materialist advertising with the spiritual:

Poor men from India deliver Christmas
flyers up and down the street.
Dogs bark from behind fences
or from a spot on the sofa
with good visibility between the drapes.
The men don't look up. The bright
flyers are glossy in the sun, they speak
of charge cards and microwaves,
nightgowns and jewels. ("The Shroud of Turin," *The Beginning of the Long Dash* 55)

Thesen's poems, as here, often hold eerie weldings of glossy materialism with spiritual or non-material experience. Placing the sanctity of the shroud of Turin beside the sordid daily grind of flyer delivery-men calls into question, in the most compact, ironic and punchy way, both the idealism of material wealth and the idealism of the Christian church.

It doesn't do, however, to try to pin down the nature of irony too far—to understand what is ironic, what is not—for earnest understanding will always be undone again by irony's infinite playfulness (de Man 166-167). Writing about his imaginary child poet/philosopher, Wilhelmine, romantic ironist Friedrich Schlegel comments: "Poetry braids the blossoms of all things into an airy wreath, and so too Wilhelmine names and rhymes together places, times, events, people, playthings, and foods, with everything mixed up in a Romantic confusion" (51). The ironic vision, then, has the widest possible compass. The poet is free to create ironic contrasts from any material at all, rhyming whatever is available to her consciousness—"an activity that demands, besides a wide experience of life and a degree of worldly wisdom, a skill, allied to wit, that involves seeing resemblances, . . . and being alert to connotations and verbal echoes" (Muecke 42).

Thus, in "The Bikers at Lund, July Long Weekend," Thesen rhymes the string of lights at night running up the west coast of the Americas from Tierra del Fuego to Lund BC with bikers' bonfires on the beach and neurotransmitters operating synapses in our nervous systems. "A Tooth in the Cupboard" links crystals in Lush bath bombs, "incisors of titans," with the Rocky Mountains while simultaneously linking sleeping and dreaming to death and space travel (*A Pair of Scissors* 19). In "Clematis Montana Rubus," the rubus rhymes with a red traffic signal. Here she tells "the dog he is a good boy" against a backdrop of post-apocalypse earth where Nazi-like police shine flashlights on faces in cars, city hall is corrupted by gangsters and "nighttime or twilight, plus rain, was all there was" (*A Pair of Scissors* 25).

Romantic irony is characterized by a "curious special feeling of paradox, of the ambivalent and the ambiguous, of the impossible made actual, of a double contradictory reality" and by a sense of liberation and comedy (Muecke 45-46). This "Open Irony" reflects an open-ended view of reality and is echoed in open-form poetics which enters a field of interplay held free of absolute meanings or definitions. "Closed Irony . . . points to the 'reality' that definitively unmask the appearance" and is "characterized emotionally by feelings of superiority, freedom and amusement and symbolically as looking down from a position of superior power or knowledge" (Muecke 46-47). Romantic irony, on the other hand, does not seek to establish norms; it is "ethically indeterminate by virtue of the self-reflexiveness and synthetic balancing it enjoins" ("Irony" *Encyclopedia Toronto*). Romantic irony "is a way of writing designed to leave open the question of what the literal meaning might signify: there is a per-

petual deferment of significance”; it is a way of “saying something . . . that activates not one but an endless series of subversive interpretations” (Muecke 31).

The shrubbery might be a disguise,

a wall may speak. Falling Elvises may puncture
the night sky, their bodies outlined in flashing
lightbulbs. (“On First Watching ‘Honeymoon in Vegas,’” *Aurora* 58)

Many of Thesen’s most powerful poems access this open field through the surreal structure of dreams or dreamlike inventions. “The Parrot” describes a bird escaped from its cage who meets wild crows in the fir trees and tries out her limited vocabulary. The parrot “prayed & sang”; then after one night out, it flies back to applauding humans, “the undisputed champion / of the air.”

The vet said it was
a bit like the cave scene
in *A Passage to India*—something
to do with language, the dark &
existence. Stupendous!
the parrot kept saying for years
after & the crows invented a red dream. (*The Pangs of Sunday* 107)

The poem is filled with the eerie feeling, the “double contradictory reality,” of the human as parrot, uttering its limited vocabulary in the face of an infinite and wild universe, where humans, earnest and confidently unaware, applaud their tiny ventures—language and utterance itself forever caught in this paradox, forever finding itself undoing its own earnestness.

She always has the feeling she is translating into
Broken english. (“Mean Drunk Poem,” *Artemis Hates Romance* 19)

Thesen also builds irony through the surreal and dreamlike in “Biography of a Woman.” “She was so intelligent,” the piece begins, noting that “she could . . . hear / the

coughing of flies" (*Aurora* 25). The poem then narrates the life of a heroine whose suitors were swans, a heroine who had to sort through tons of millet and so on, a "she" who is a fantastic concatenation of all the myths of womanhood. Thesen highlights the ridiculousness of these notions while at the same time acknowledging how actual women, who lose car keys, must struggle inside them.

Snipping and collaging in dreamlike crosscuts, "A Pair of Scissors" imagines an encounter with Mrs. Dalloway's Mr. Walsh who is morphed into a gardener and also the poet's hairdresser who in turn thinks of himself as a gypsy. The poems in this 20-poem series playfully, gypsy-like ("Suit jackets worn in the back of a truck" [30]), recontextualize phrases or images from other poems, creating multiple ironic shifts, overtones and resonances. The "real" (apparently a sojourn in a rural woodsy setting) is haunted by the borrowing from Woolf's fiction, by the myths of Persephone, Phoebus and Sisyphus, and by other daily fictions of common parlance. Fictions indeed are the only vocabulary we have for the "real." Mr. Walsh and the poet are held in an alchemical crucible, "a charred yellow bathtub / in the forest" (42). Then in the next poem,

The shadow of Mr. Walsh
cuts the shadow of
my hair on the ground beside us

like an old play acted upon a sheet. (43)

Layer upon layer of ironic resonance permeates the series—not a comic irony but a deeply thoughtful one. Mr. Walsh's penknife becomes the penknife of the past. Mrs. Dalloway's green dress, always needing mending, becomes the love-life of discarded women. Phoebus, the sun god, modulates to a "puffy tenor singing 'O Sole Mio' . . . / the sun on my face" (41) which reappears in the next poem as "*solutio*, the dissolution" (42). The sound of the blow-dryer, "the sigh of the soul / in a soulless world" (33), is echoed in a later poem by "the graves of tall persons":

The boat of their souls gently unmoored
amid a white smoke of sighs
in some billionth galaxy by a bending,
untying constellation. (37)

Irony, Schlegel said,

should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden. It originates in the union of *savoir vivre* and scientific spirit, in the conjunction of a perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy. It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. (156)

Writers such as Thesen who are imbued with this paradox of language, the “real” hinged to a multitude of fictions, give us some of the most poignant literary works. “Philosophy is the real homeland of irony,” Schlegel thought, “Only poetry can also reach the heights of philosophy in this way . . . pervaded by the divine breath of irony throughout and informed by a truly transcendental buffoonery. Internally: the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations” (148). Like Robin Blaser, Thesen’s vision takes in the whole range of history and human thought as if consciousness within humanity were unified for all time. Thesen’s poems remind us repeatedly of the smallness of human endeavour in the face of vast possibility.

Huge fat guys hunched
in the driver’s seat taking forever
to turn a corner—forever predatory
we watch with our big eyes, big eye
teeth. Rump roast. Business proposition.

Pressed into witlessness yet
wishing something real would happen. (“The Saved,” *Aurora* 17)

Something on the order of the divine, something much larger than the human, is invoked by the irony of the world's contradictory totality. Thesen's poems like Blaser's seem haunted by an awareness of this.

...I'm afraid
we have become television sets.
I fear the distortion as Creeley says
and heavy sleepwalk slavery chained by neck
to corn chips, golf, carpeting, car payments.
Tim Hortons like the arms of Jesus. ("The Plane Ride," *A Pair of Scissors* 51)

The poem neatly evokes humanity on its plane ride through its materialist universe, a crucifixion by Tim Hortons.

In her most recent book, *The Good Bacteria*, Thesen continues to develop sets of interlocking poems full of playful ironic shifts, reversals and resonances, all the more poignant for their underlying concern with human finitude and death (including the death of her friend Angela Bowering, and the death of Frances Boldereff whose letters to Charles Olson she edited). The 12-poem title sequence dances around the good and the bad as these ghostly notions appear to us (infect us?) in the form of bacteria. The opening poem presents a scene of decay: "they were all ghosts in coats" (11) dining while watching night-time city lights and later taking penicillin which kills all the bacteria, good and bad. "No more bloody ghazals! one ghost shouted to another" (11), somewhat in the manner of penicillin to bacteria. But the ghazal keeps creeping back in, in terse two- or three-line verses leaping quixotically in seemingly disjunctive directions throughout this series of poems.

Pauline Butling tells us the Arabic ghazal is usually made of couplets each of which is an independent poem linked to others in the series by rhyme. They may not share a common subject matter. It "typically... moves by associative leaps and a 'free flow of images.'" Its form "facilitates an... image-making process that often leads to surprising semantic and thematic resonances" (61). Interestingly (ironically?), Friedrich Schlegel, the German romantic ironist, was one of the first westerners to write poetry in ghazals ("Ghasel"), perhaps attracted to the form because of its disjunctive quality.

In an astonishing and tightly interlocked network of ironic reversals, Thesen's bacteria poem considers how good knowledge may be bad and how knowledge or knowns infect us or, like gods, hang over us as (holy?) rather tyrannical ghosts. The "Good Bacteria" series then continues to explore, through echoes, rhymes, surreal disjuncts and recontextualization, the nature of knowledge as it infects us or inspires us in dreams, myths or scientific narratives—which may take the form of metaphors' or similes' smiles.

Enter a real guy in a pleated skirt with a sword
Sunk in a scabbard, ten oxen
Couldn't drag him away from fighting.

Inside his myth he's very busy too.
Polishing his scabbard with Silvo, staunching
His cuts and abrasions he goes through tubes of Polysporin. (21)

Thesen's ironic stance offers potent criticism of contemporary greed-ridden society. Yet it also speaks of love, big enough for life and death, the good and the bad.

Paul de Man argues that what's at stake in romantic irony—what got Kierkegaard so upset that he had to "invent . . . a whole theory of history to . . . get rid of Friedrich Schlegel"—is "always the question of whether it is possible to understand or not to understand" (166). We want to pin things down absolutely, to say and know once and for all that this is what some experience means—it's good, or it's bad. We seek to establish total understanding, imagining we have control; but total understanding is death.

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