

PETE SMITH / “margarine in the aisles of hope”: towards a thinking about Sharon Thesen’s writings

I

Sharon Thesen’s poems move through the world in a knowing yet guarded way. Some strut and shout, some dance an edgy tease, some whisper in the corner of the room. Some retain flavours of poems brushed up against, but none kiss ass. They stand or fall by their gestures and postures—including the gestures not made and the postures abandoned.

She writes long sequences and short occasioned poems. Often within a given book, the short lyrics will connect by image and content with others directly adjacent or at a further remove, making those poems also a sort of serial poem. Wallace Stevens’ remark fits her well: “The collecting of poetry from one’s experience as one goes along is not the same as merely writing poetry.” Thesen is a fine lyric poet by virtue of her musical intelligence, but her probing critique of the social and poetic culture that surrounds her, and restlessness born of a mixture of scepticism and hope, extend the boundaries of lyric poetry.

Thesen needs the poem to be true (not to carry Truth, but to be honest), to be vital, to burst any bubbles of pretension the poem may flirt with, to write as woman without the warp of a prescribed ideology, to assert her poetic place, and to write from a position of mature sanity rather than a perpetually defended fortress-self. Such a contingent poetics calls for personal openness and vulnerability, not simply mastery of a set of poetic techniques.

Thesen’s poetics is mined from various strata of objectivism, projective verse, romanticism, confessional verse, and language-led writing. She has written in company with others: Olson, Creeley, and Spicer when the “American boys” came to Vancouver; Webb, Marlatt, McKinnon as Canadian kin; and the long-term friendships with those transplanted Americans, Blaser, and Stanley. Given her disregard for geographical or individual dominations it is unsurprising that, after the initial exposure to the big names of Black Mountain and the San Francisco renaissance, Thesen found herself drawn rather more to such as Gilbert Sorrentino and Duncan McNaughton. She remains open to new voicings and the company of others contin-

ues to mark her work: Michele Leggott, Brighthurst's Skaay and Ghandl. Her poetics and readings may be described as generally opportunistic in the service of experience, and at her most experimental edge ("gala roses") language seems primarily the experience. Thesen continues to explore ways of approaching the work and the life. She remains wary of the glib and the trendy and of any attempt to prescribe an exclusive way of writing poetry.

II

Reading through Thesen's books of poetry I was struck by her frequent juxtaposition of the banal and the transcendent. At first I thought of this as binary thinking, but have come to regard it as working within a continuum. Miriam Nichols, in her essay "Love Will Eat the Empire," usefully describes a similar phenomenon in Robin Blaser's work. Describing some "pairs," personal-cosmic, public-private, inside-outside, self-other, she writes:

These pairs are not identical to the binaries so handily deconstructed by poststructuralists... What polarity means in the context of Blaser's essays and poems is a Mobius-like relationship between the perceiving self and the world. The "flowing boundary" as Blaser calls it, is a twisting of inside and outside into porous, mobile forms... (371)

Such pairings in Thesen's works include past-present, scepticism-hope, inside-outside, repressed-liberated, ludic-serious, and banal-transcendent. The last pairing is the focus of this brief appreciation. It is present in Thesen's work from the beginning. In "Mean Drunk Poem" she writes the imperative:

Sing Om as you take the sausage rolls out of the oven (ARH 19)

The offsetting of banality and transcendence has become more complex and integrated as the work has developed.

The practice of polarity includes her uses of speech-figures such as simile, metonymy, chiasm. She uses these tools, not simply for purposes of comparison, but in order to hold at least two realities in mind at once, a version of

Keats' negative capability. An example from the past-present polarity is in the brief poem "Bike Ride to the Rib House" (*The Good Bacteria* 55), where we note that the poem takes place within a changing mind, perception replacing perception, and ends back at its first wrong perception.

More than one pairing will appear in a single poem, as in this brief section of "The Fire":

The thread moves to the right
or to the left like a barker's booth
at the circus where you throw softballs
at the passing ducks, it looks so easy

and you really want to win the large pink jaguar (*TGB* 78)

The simple simile puts you in both the present (threading a button back onto a garment while under threat from a huge wildfire, seeking the comfort of that mundane act) and a past place of safety, the comfort of that soft toy (and the poetic risk of that banal image). Arguably, safety as a transcendent emotion (trust is the first stage of psychological growth in infancy and undergirds our adult patterns of emotional well-being) is stitched into the memory of the banal (even sentimental) soft toy.

Banalities and transcendence may also occur alongside the inside-outside pairing. In "Wish" there is a ghost-poem within. The outside is the girl whose image, an action, & the flickering pedestrian traffic sign, trigger the poet's mind with concern about making her hair appointment on time, but this is still the outside. The hairdresser's use of the word "skull" ignites the 'second' poem, and links it back to the "wing bones" image of the first stanza, sending the poet deep inside her coffin. This is the opening for transcendence, woman totally aware of mortality preparing to share her last thoughts, "wishing"—'I'd spent more time with...', 'had written The Great Canadian whatever ...', 'not done such & such', but no:

"I'd bought those brown Prada shoes..." (36)

How absurd, real & right—in terms of the artifice of the poem.

Sometimes Thesen's imagination is briefly sparked by dynamic polarity (Blaser, qtd. in Nichols 383),¹ but sometimes the whole poem is built on a polarity. I read the strange "How Post 9-11 The Mystery of Love Became The Mysterious Mr Love" as such a poem. Without "Post 9-11" it would be 'merely' a film-noir poem as flagged by the poem itself, "Like about ten movies / she's a woman alone" (TGB 52): a mundane isolated set, chores are done, the rug hangs on the clothes-line or porch rail, her stove is shiny clean, and there is the ominous undercurrent. But what we're reading, we slowly see, is more than that: the woman is playing with words in her head, "tongue, tounge, tonuge, tong" (52), in a banal yet reaching manner. (Ludic poet at work.) Details step out of the mundane: the "old crop-duster in the barn" and the city car "looking for something." In the shadow of 9-11, the plodding investigation has been going on. The banality of it all belies the terror unleashed in New York. Terror is the transcendent other-side of the banal which had been present only in brief detail, the title's emphasis and by means of polarity: banality containing terror.

So, returning to the strange title: we find we have Love personified in the investigative agent in the poem. The word-journey from "tongue" to "tong" in the woman's mind is as short as the journey from Love to Evil would be in the title. "Evil Personified" became the rallying cry for parts of the western world. The very polarity that makes the poem's quietness work as a statement of horror also undergirds the fundamentalist opponents, both of whom can present the God of Love as their calling card. Banality generates the transcendent terror through the Love-Evil polarity (Paz 88).²

1 Blaser writes: "Coleridge's argument then in a few phrases: 'polarity is dynamic, not abstract'—'a living and generative interpenetration'—'where logical opposites are contradictory, polar opposites are generative of each other'—'the apprehension of polarity is itself the basic act of imagination'—'it is not a matter of 'pictures of bodies already formed'."

2 Paz writes: "As if he were making an advance commentary on certain contemporary speculations, Chuang-Tzu explains the functional and relative character of opposites thus: 'There is nothing that is not this; there is nothing that is not that. This lives in relation to that. Such is the doctrine of the interdependence of this and that. Life is life in relation to death. And vice versa. Affirmation is affirmation in relation to negation...'"

In a review of *The Beginning of the Long Dash*, & in the context of certain poems there, Stephen Scobie suggests we should read the banal as ironic. His reading, however, of the banal last three lines of "The Landlord's Tiger-Lilies" as a target of satire can be contested: "Even so, he [Rilke] was wrong / not to go to his daughter's wedding / & hurting people's feelings." The day's shine, on the gilded lilies & the sun-caught jet-trail, might have been expected to come from more aesthetically-pleasing sources than dog-piss and a plane's excreta: Rilke's angels may have spoken to him through the presence of his daughters if he'd paid more attention to the living than to perfecting his thought. The banality undercuts the desire for ecstatic experience at the expense of human contact: banality is the weapon, not the target.

In a recent poem, "How to Stay Sane" (TGB 51-52), Thesen's poem-I is in a department store: quasi- religious language satirising the advertising world occurs, with some irony no doubt; but when the line reads, "I for one am glad of these mood-lifting changes!" is that irony or can it not be an amused acceptance of some of the world's ludicrous ways, or both simultaneously? Or, may it be read as an inclusive satire given the frequency with which self-deprecation occurs in the poems? The male reader may require irony, where the female writer proposes interdependence and nurture. There are differences beyond the genitalia.

With her belief in the poem's "capacity to carry truth and vitality . . . as a matter of process," Thesen's poetry is working out a sane place in a crazed world. The dailiness-of-living provides the context for the work's life. The great abstracts work themselves into concrete images that can shift and argue with themselves from poem to poem as different life-events call forth different responses. A contingent poetics, indeed, that can produce much pleasure. The banality-transcendence polarity produces lines of sheer delight:

"Waiting For Telescope Time" concludes:

The otherwise mostly hopeless astronomers &
lonesome denizens of the Milky Way stir like women
stirring good soup a fire-blackened cauldron's
starry distillate. They
wear alpaca overcoats and at 75 elegantly know

how to bargain for the ineffable. (*Aurora* 57)

Astronomers on CBC's prime time intellectual program *Ideas* morph into these marvellous women, and although a mere simile, they have the last word. In "How To Stay Sane" again,

you talk about volition and overcoming
I, margarine
in the aisles of hope ... (*TGB* 41)

Works Cited

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