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Review · Hank Lazer

The Red House. Gregory Orr. Harper & Row, 1980. Pp. 64. \$9.95 hardbound. \$4.95 paperbound.

In his review of Gregory Orr's third book of poems, *The Red House*, Charles Molesworth writing in *The New York Times Book Review* concludes that "Mr. Orr's poetry looks easy to write, and with good reason, for it shows no sense of traditional lyric possibilities before, say, the last decade, and little musicality or invention." I begin with Molesworth's remarks because they are so wrong-headed and because condescending, uninformed criticism of contemporary poetry is too often the rule. Gregory Orr's *The Red House* is his best book and quite a fine book of poems. *The Red House* is so impressive precisely because of its musicality—a great advance over Orr's previous books—and because of Orr's sophisticated exploration of two earlier lyric modes. The intense, expressionist imagery, inherited in part from Trakl, is still a part of Orr's writing, but a more persuasive lyric model for the third book seems to be Theodore Roethke's greenhouse poems. Orr's original assimilation of these two lyric modes, Trakl's intense world of strange images pointing toward a nearly insupportable grief, and Roethke's tactile, sinewy, compact memories, is one mark of strength in Orr's new work.

Orr's *The Red House* attempts to move beyond the poet's obsession with grief. Though many of Orr's new poems *do* go back to re-explore the death of his mother and his brother—"Song of the Invisible Corpse in the Field," the last section of "Haitian Suite," the last one-third of *The Red House* sequence—Orr willingly confronts both the strengths and the dangers of his recurring subject. For example, in "There" Orr seems to imply that his own situation as a poet is analogous to Trakl's:

When Trakl crossed over, the angels
accused him of the same poem
again and again. He held up
the face God gave him
and showed them the deep and lovely
line a single, recurring tear,
sliding earthward,
carved on a stone cheek.

Trakl presents but one model for Orr's poetry, by no means a definitive model. Roethke's lyrics, especially the greenhouse poems, provide sustenance for Orr as do Blake's early poems, particularly *Songs of Innocence*, *Songs of Experience*, and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. It is in The Red House sequence that Orr's growth and development can best be seen.

The sequence begins with an epigraph from *The Prelude*, "Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up/Fostered alike by beauty and by fear." Orr's emphasis so far in his writing has been heavily on the side of childhood fears and terrors. The Red House sequence begins to recover a childhood "fostered alike by beauty and by fear." But what Orr is after is more than mere recollection. These poems, like all great poems of childhood—Wordsworth's, Rilke's, and Roethke's—are about the seed-time of the soul, and thus about the poet's own spiritual and imaginative development.

The Red House sequence begins with "Morning Song":

Sun on his face wakes him.
The boy makes his way down
through the spidery dark
of stairs to his breakfast
of cereal in a blue bowl.
He carries to the barn
a pie plate heaped
with vegetable scraps
for the three-legged deer.
As a fawn it stood still
and alone in high hay
while the red tractor
spiraled steadily inward,
mowing its precise swaths.
"I lived" is the song
the boy hears as the deer
hobbles toward him.
In the barn's huge gloom
light falls through cracks
the way swordblades
pierce a magician's box.

It is the image of the tractor spiraling "steadily inward,/mowing its

precise swaths” that I wish to extract as the perfect image for this entire sequence (and for Orr’s poetry generally). As the reader discovers in the light falling through cracks “the way swordblades/pierce a magician’s box,” Orr’s imagery, as it has been from the beginning, is wonderfully precise. This visual precision is the signature of Orr’s work. But now the swaths too are precise. To put it quite simply, with his third book of poems Orr has found an ear for the sounds of poetry, and with this new ear he has at last developed his own sense of the poetic line.

The ear that Orr acquires is sensitive primarily to assonance, and the moments of assonance occur closely together. “The Ditch,” for example, ends with “his father’s red car crossing/the flats, dragging huge plumes of dust.” “The Brave Child” tells of a boy who dives down into a stream on a dare and who rises up from the bottom “with the oozing proof clutched in his fist.” In “Neighbors” after showing his teeth, “five yellow stumps/in a reeking cave,” Christopher Augustinovich asks the child,

Do you know what did it,
old Chris asked
with a grin and wink?
Liquor and kissing.

Or, in “Work Gloves,” the boys watch a burning pile of leaves and roots and “put out its sparks/with quick, flat/slaps of our bamboo rakes.”

With his third book, Orr begins to possess one of poetry’s greatest gifts: the music of words. Thus it is no accident, and no mere wishful thinking, that nine of Orr’s new poems have the word “song” in the title. The poet’s precision, those “precise swaths,” becomes more than just visual precision. The concentration and intensity that Orr’s images have always achieved visually are now given a musical counterpart:

The boy watched the sun
set: gold seed squeezed
in the mountain’s cleft
beak until it bled.

Such musical insistence further increases the concentration of Orr’s already condensed, tight lyrics.

In addition to his fondness for assonance, Orr also has a special affinity for a heavily-stressed, slow, bulky sounding line:

we watched,
from a black thicket angels
lug to field's edge rocks of flesh.

The effect of such a line is one of density. The heavily-stressed lines and the compressed assonance add to the intensity and concentration of Orr's lyrics. Also, such care with the music and rhythm of his poems might help to explain why Orr sticks with his short lyrics, while the current trend in our poetry is toward a longer, looser, meditative poem. A possible source or model for Orr's heavily-stressed lines can be found in Roethke's greenhouse poems. In "Root Cellar" Roethke writes of "Roots ripe as old bait,/Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,/Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks." Roethke's poem "Forcing House" begins:

Vines tougher than wrists
And rubbery shoots,
Scums, mildews, smuts along stems,
Great cannas or delicate cyclamen tip,—
All pulse with the knocking pipes
That drip and sweat.

The effect of such a line, with Roethke and with Orr, is to slow the reader down. Each word with its own stress practically becomes an object: "angels/lug to field's edge rocks of flesh." But the heavily-stressed lines do more than just make the world seem heavy and tangible. As with Roethke's greenhouse poems, the heavily-stressed, nearly overcrowded lines present the reader with a world that is almost overwhelming and suffocating.

In the concluding poem of The Red House sequence, "Lullaby Elegy Dream," we find the most accomplished example of Orr's new sense of music and the poetic line:

Out of the womb:
a ghost, a small one.
Out of the wound:
a tree with gray bark
smooth as wrist skin
rose toward the sky.

Climbed it.
Far in the distance
saw quiet fields
where cows grazed.
Saw a circle of rivers
enclosing us.

Is this the world
where the dead and half
dead live together?
Child ghost held
in the sway of arms;
brother and mother and I.

In part, Orr's clipped syntax of "Climbed it" and "Saw a circle" derives from the first section of Roethke's "The Lost Son":

Fished in an old wound,
The soft pond of repose;
Nothing nibbled my line,
Not even the minnows came.

Sat in an empty house
Watching shadows crawl,
Scratching,
There was one fly.

Beginning with Orr's title, without commas or any other separations, the reader learns of the poem's goal: to feel and express equally the emotions of lullaby, elegy, and dream. The off-rhyme of womb and wound expresses a dominant theme of Orr's poetry: the wound as a place of birth and beginning. But most impressive is the way Orr modifies the rhythm of his poem in the last three lines. The intensity and anxiety of the heavily-stressed lines, reaching a peak with "Child ghost held," gives way to the more relaxed, lullaby-like rhythm of the last line, "brother and mother and I." The poem's rhythm and prosody parallel the emotional resolution that the entire poem establishes.

In the last section of *The Red House* in three poems, "Leaving the Asylum," "After the Guest," and "A Last Address to My Ghosts," Orr

gathers together and clarifies the direction of his poetic development. The three poems constitute a leavetaking (from the nearly exclusive obsession with grief as his dominant poetic subject) as well as an affirmation of a new, more positive direction for his work. Orr's entry into the "new life" is established in "Leaving the Asylum" (which I quote in its entirety):

The metal harps of the high gates
make a clangorous music
closing behind me. They
announce the "new life" of freedom
and only a battered valise
to lug down this alley of poplars.
I repeat the litany of the poem
that released me. Hollow tree
though I am, these things I cherish:
the hum of my blood, busily safe
in its hive of being; the delicate
oily kiss my fingertips give
each thing they touch; and desire,
a huge fish I drag with me
through the wilderness:
I love its glint among the dust and stones.

In this new life part of what the poet cherishes is the world of physical experience. Orr, slowly, has learned to love the life of blood, touch, and desire.

"Leaving the Asylum" is also noteworthy because it establishes another trend in Orr's work. That is, "Hollow tree/though I am" and "the litany of the poem/that released me" are part of Orr's willingness to comment on his previous work. "Hollow tree" points back to "Poem to the Body" (in *Burning the Empty Nests*) which begins, "Hollow tree, you are filled with all the hands/that ever touched you." "The poem/that released me" has to be "Gathering the Bones Together." But Orr's self-commentary is not presented in a narcissistic or self-conscious manner. Instead, Orr writes what I would call a self-modifying poetry that calls attention to its own evolution. His goal is to express the growth of a poet.

In "After the Guest" (which was originally the title poem for the

book), Orr continues this self-modifying impulse. The poem begins, aided by its dedication "For my brother," as a kind of observation or commentary on the poet's own previous obsession:

The guest departs;
it was the briefest
of visits. While my wife
sleeps, I stand at the sink
washing dinner plates
that are smooth as the masks
my grief once wore.

But rather than dwelling on the death of his brother, the poem ends with a release and an affirmation:

Hot water on my tense hands,
soothing as tears.
On the wall there's a photo
of the dead one that I've fed
with my looking
as my wife feeds guests.
When she stirs in her nap,
when she moans or sighs,
it's no hungry ghost the night
has sent, but the simple cold.
I tuck a blanket
around her shoulders;
I pray we'll grow old.

Orr begins to be released at last from his recurrent grief. With the release comes the affirmation of love, especially his love for his wife. This love is part of the poet's way of returning to this world in a hard-earned, joyous celebration.

Finally, in the last poem of the book Orr consolidates his development to date. Orr completes the work of *The Red House* with "A Last Address to My Ghosts":

You accompanied me so far
and with such ambiguous

fidelity: my guides, my ghosts.
I've seen the candles you carried
going out, one by one,
in the darkness of deep woods.

And the path? The destination?
There never was one,
I learned that from you.
There was only the light
edging the leaves,
and now that's gone.

Branches above my head
extend their dark blessing.

Again, it is easy to see the self-commentary in the poem. Given this self-modifying impulse in Orr's work, along with the way that his poems (and books) have continuity and suggest an ongoing poetic development, it is a mistake to read Orr's poems as isolated, individual lyrics. Orr's poems must be read as a body, as a single large collection. His poems, read as if they were an ongoing poem, have a cumulative effect and tell one story.

But what is most important about *The Red House* is the sense of blessing that concludes the book. To understand the significance of the blessing at the end of "A Last Address to My Ghosts," again a reference to Roethke's development proves illuminating. In his first book in "The Feud," Roethke concludes,

You meditate upon the nerves,
Inflame with hate. This ancient feud
Is seldom won. The spirit starves
Until the dead have been subdued.

On his essay, "On 'Identity'," Roethke refers again to this ending to "The Feud":

I remember the late John Peale Bishop, that fine neglected poet, reading this and saying, "You're impassioned, but wrong. The dead can help us." And he was right; but it took me some years to learn that.

Once he learns the truth of John Peale Bishop's remark, Roethke at the end of "Unfold! Unfold!" is able to conclude,

In their harsh thickets
The dead thrash.
They help.

By the end of *The Red House* Orr too learns this crucial lesson. For Orr the helping dead include Roethke, Blake, and Trakl, as well as his brother and his mother. Now that he has exorcised his grief and guilt, now that he has addressed his ghosts and found that they do not condemn him, and given, too, his increasing mastery of musical language and the rhythms of his own poetic line, I am convinced that Gregory Orr has built a careful, elaborate, and wonderful foundation for the fine poetry that he will surely write. And for anyone who values the possibilities of the lyric, *The Red House* is a splendid discovery.