Guesswork
by Jeffery Donaldson

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

A professor of American literature, poetry and poetic theory at McMaster University since 1989, Donaldson is the author of four poetic works. His first, Once Out of Nature, was published by McClelland & Stewart in 1991. He has since published three more – Waterglass by McGill-Queen’s in 1999, Palilalia by the same in 2008 and this one. Throughout his career, he has displayed a breadth of knowledge of the poetic art.

There is no better example of this than the poem that opens Guesswork – “Guillotine,” the first two tercets of which provide an education in the craft:

Body and mind were never at home
under the one roof, that bare dome, high arched
by design. I often wished for a quiet loft,

a hidden vault’s vertiginous lift,
where a swift whimsy’s flitter and dip
might dart from any sheltered nook. (9)

The rhythm here is exceptional, playing off the implied iambic pentameter base expressed in the last line of the first tercet. Donaldson enjoys creating rhyme – but never so blatantly as in end rhyme. As can be seen in the first two lines, he sets out to disguise the rhyme by bringing it inside through the appendage of “high arched” to the end of that line. He creates another internal rhyme – “lift” and “swift” – in the opening lines of the second tercet. But this is merely one of the techniques he employs. Note the play on the “d” sound in both. This occurs in the form of alliteration proper, where the “d” appears at the start of the word. It also is found with the “d” inside the word. At the juncture of the first and second tercets he ends the first with “loft” and begins the second with “lift.” But he isn’t finished with word play. The word “flitter” in the second line of the second tercet rearranges the letter of “lift.” These two tercets are a treasure trove of poetic technique.

“On Reading When You Are Old” presents another lesson in how to write poetry. Employing quatrains this time, Donaldson creates a conceit to rival that of John Donne’s “compass,” given to those who are in lust, while Donaldson’s “book” conceit is given to those who have found lasting love. But, again, this is not the only lesson to be learned from this poem. Donaldson provides a lesson in the use of endstopped and enjambed lines. He also makes use of Denise Levertov’s statement regarding the difference between a comma and a period, with the former being a half breath and the latter a full one. Consider these two quatrains from the middle of the poem:

And to be honest, we have found
little time for reading, though we have
watched the book grow heavier
with unseparated pages thin as India paper,
and covered with words we imagined
we were still waiting for, the words
that, once we found them, we always said
we would read together in time. (18)

These beautifully wistful passages provide a dissertation on love and aging. The comma at the end of the first stanza barely seems to create a pause, whereas the one at the end of the second leaves no doubt.

“On the Return of Allegory” contains a rather shocking ending for this age of rebirth. The poem begins with “first bells,” a dawning, where not just any castle but an “embarrassed” one rises “clear out of the dissolving fog.” This line creates a highly effective ambiguity as we are forced to question whether it is the fog that’s dissolving or whether it is the castle that’s dissolving because of the fog that’s beginning to clear. The technique of creating ambiguity seems to have been lost in contemporary poetry but, as can be seen here, it still can be very effective. Perhaps it is time to re-examine William Empson’s great book Seven Types of Ambiguity. In this poem, the ambiguity sets the stage for what will follow where, in the end, the king welcomes the strolling villagers:

laughing and talking, they will feel welcomed
to a home made strangely ready for them, its emptiness
like the note left on a table by the one who,
very sad to say, could not be there when they arrive. (23)

They have arrived at the castle – but the castle is an empty shell, an illusion.

Ever since Al Purdy published “Hockey Players” in Cariboo Horses in 1965, a book that won him the first of two Governor General’s Awards, hockey has been a fair subject for poetry. In fact, it has become so fair a subject it now approaches becoming a Canadian tradition, giving rise to the publication of An Anthology of Canadian Hockey Poetry. Although George Bowering published a great poetry book using baseball as its subject matter, called Baseball (Coach House, 1967), only hockey rose to national prominence as a poetic topic. Donaldson was not immune to the allure of this sub-genre, writing a series of hockey poems under the rubric “Enter, PUCK.”

Will this work be Donaldson’s entry into the annals of the Governor General’s Award? Probably not, although Guesswork contains some very strong poetry worthy of readers’ attention.


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