

Tony Hoagland

A Sort Of Tango With Pathetic Fallacy

Marcia Southwick

The Night Won't Save Anyone

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The poems in *The Night Won't Save Anyone*, Marcia Southwick's first full-length collection, are of two kinds so distinct in ambition and style that they might have been written by different people. They are partitioned, wisely, into the first two and latter two sections of the book. The first two sections, though imagistically skillful, seem rather typical, unriskey "graduate school" poems, drawing from and improvising upon myths and fables: the fairy-tale persona poem, and the doppelganger poem. Though Southwick handles her material well, the nature of that material — mildly surreal — keeps both the poet and the world at a comfortable remove.

The relative slightness of these poems would not be so evident if not for the superiority of her later work. The book's second half shows the much described but rarely seen phenomenon of a poet finding her subject and mode and diving into them. The long meditative lines of these poems show much less self-restraint. Because of the greater self-exposure in these poems, because they bring so much more mind and feeling to bear, they have much more to teach us. And for all of these reasons, the rest of this review will deal only with the latter two sections of the book.

Somewhere in *On Moral Fiction*, John Gardner says that bad science makes good art. Marcia Southwick's poetry seems to make a particular case for that statement. At first glance, the poems seem remarkably cerebral in subject and diction. They are concerned with the nature of perception and language and the activity of making meaning. Yet they manage at the same time to have a private and human voice, whose restless abstracting intelligence is carried along successfully by its intuitive urgency.

At first I narrow my eyes
because I think that maybe the gulls want more from me
than simply my observation of them,
but then I realize I'm mistaken,
it's just that they are usually thought of as beautiful,
while to me they look like scraps of dirty cloth . . .
(“Winter Gulls”)

In this typical passage, Southwick underscores a few of our literary assumptions about beauty and perception — the notion, for example (Rilke had it also), that things *want* to be looked at.

On a more emotional level, the speaker wishes to understand the true status and function of a human presence in the world. Southwick's poems can be read as the negotiation of a private (almost always solitary) speaker with the external world. What we see taking place is the continuous attempt to adjust the inner world with the outer.

What results is paradoxical: the alienated human nature finding its definition in the natural world from which it is alienated. World and self are confused and united by this process, and it is, of course, a process very basic to poetry. In its typical application, the poet describes the trees as melancholy, the birds as optimistic, etc. — the reader understands these descriptions as projections of the artist's inner state. In Southwick's poems, however, this process is made peculiarly explicit by the extreme self-awareness of the speaker.

Right now the marsh seems unfamiliar
because the crickets have taken me by surprise;
their singing has entered my mind just now,
even though I've been hearing them all along.
So I'm almost afraid,
because there must be other ways
in which I am left out of the landscape . . .
(“The Marsh”)

What is significant in this passage is the focus of the meditation — it is not the cricket's song, but the *perceptual* mechanism that is observed, then that observation is followed by a piece of inductive reasoning: “then there must be other ways I am left out of the landscape.” The extreme self-awareness of the speaker makes the usual poetic situation a sort of tango with pathetic fallacy. The narrator has the recurring realization that the act of conscious perception is an imposed or momentary one and she is therefore distanced by it.

Southwick's poems share an obsession with phenomenology — the way senses and mind compose the world — that seems widespread in contemporary poetry. To list a few titles of poems from recent books will illustrate: “The Coloring of Experience” (Debora Greger); “Determining Location” (Pattiann Rogers); “Harvest For Bergson” (Jorie Graham). Southwick herself repeatedly focuses on matters which would seem to belong more to the realms of psychology or aesthetics than poetry. For example, here is the opening of “The Vanishing Street”:

It is still possible to imagine a landscape uncomplicated
by our idea of beauty . . .

If the analytic quality of this passage does not seem remarkable to us as readers, it is only because we have become accustomed to such talk. No matter how we judge it, the fact is that in an age when science has replaced faith, its jargon has appropriately been absorbed by and elevated to our art. The scientific method and its language are givens of contemporary poetry. Listen to the technicality of these lines:

So my present contains its outcome,
just as sometimes I can know, before having spoken,
all possible routes of the conversation.
Yet it is also an assertion of how my past
does not belong to me,
but to those I have lost,
who each have absorbed a part of my past
into their own conceptions . . .
(“The Vanishing Street”)

In another time, this subject matter and convoluted language might seem less urgent and more technical than generally found in poetry’s accustomed realm. Yet I wish to defend Southwick’s method and to explain to myself why I find these poems so appealing.

One of the justifications for Southwick’s adopted diction and rhetoric is the good use to which she puts it. These poems use the rhetorical thrusts and pivots of argument to structure themselves. Typically, the poems are a series of assertions and qualifications that convince the reader that an argument is being methodically conducted. Actually, the chain of thought and detail is often an associative one, couched in a pseudo-rational manner and pivoting on terms drawn from argument: *yet’s* and *so’s*, *therefore’s* and *because’s*.

So you must accept yourself as contradictory
because even though your thoughts are erratic,
you are always constant,
but in the way that one wave follows another
to a distant shore. In other words,
what you are is never quite as permanent as silence
or the granite sky. What you are is never quite as still
as the woods after a rain.
Therefore you must accept a part of yourself
in which your name is a foreign word,
...
because it doesn’t matter that spiritual progress
isn’t always like dressing in the half-light . . .
(“No Such Thing”)

One might say that this passage is artificial, but it is also rhetorically effective.

Another manner in which Southwick makes her analytic sensibility poetically agreeable is the naive first-person voice of her poems. Though these poems are full of bold assertions (one of their attractive features), the impression of didacticism is avoided because the declarations are self-directed. The tone of personal urgency is enhanced by naive phrasing and even the occasional wordiness of some verses.

This makes me wonder if most people
think that winter is like an equation
to which they are being added.
(“The Night Won’t Save Anyone”)

If this is science, it is naive science — the knowledge arrived at seems more trustworthy for being unsophisticated.

The relentless mentality of Southwick’s work is also offset by the acknowledgement of its own futility. Though these poems are extremely analytical in language and thought, what they serve to demonstrate is the inability of the mind to come to a conclusion. Because the mind is “a snake which coils around a stream of water” the process of these poems is one of constant seeking. Southwick’s speaker never achieves a final adjustment of inner to outer.

What *is* achieved from time to time is an acceptance of the irreducibility of experience.

It’s as if the mallards stay hidden in the grass
for a purpose. But I don’t think they are there
to make me understand what I don’t already know . . .

This balance, even when achieved, is brief — a moment later, the pursuit is on again:

only to point out how often I’m surprised.
(“The Marsh”)

There is something very engaging in Southwick’s restless ransacking of the environment, both in its wealth of intelligence and its underlying seriousness. For Southwick’s subject is a serious one: the exclusion created by self-awareness. Her poems are set in landscapes from which a speaker is divided, and into which, by relentless questioning and cerebration, she attempts to build bridges. Her dilemma is caused by the recurring realization that the act of perception (or of language) is a transformative and therefore alienating one. Not only is this separation painful, it is also something one must take responsibility for.

I am responsible for the way the grass seems to be a witness
 when I search its name for something more
 than green silence,
 and for the way the woods as they lose color
 are an expression of the distance between seasons.

This is a lament not only for the human participant, but also for the elemental world; for the solitude imposed upon the world by the human.

Nor is there an end to my turning inward,
 which has left the autumn day to itself.
 ("The Burning Calendar")

This isolation takes on connotations of the tragic, of the fall from unity into knowledge. Since it has been created by self-consciousness, the speaker must take responsibility for the division between human and environment.

I admire many aspects of Southwick's poetry: its quality of relentless thought, its seriousness, and its dexterity of illustration. I'm also aware that these poems, particularly in terms of sound, don't do everything that poems can. In the service of their admirable clarity and methodicity, their language can be prosaic and wordy. In their caution, they seem sometimes uninspired, making fewer leaps and presumptions than they might. There is also an overreliance upon definition by negatives, one of the most pervasive "tics" of contemporary poetry. Having stated these reservations, I still find Southwick's work immensely appealing, intellectually alive, and intuitively urgent. *The Night Won't Save Anyone* represents a new and remarkable version of what is possible in poetry.