

Michael McFee

Not Enough, Or Too Much

The Red House by Gregory Orr.
Harper & Row, 1980, 64 pp.

The Shore by David St. John.
Houghton Mifflin, 1980, 48 pp.

This whole multifarious enterprise of literature and criticism could be boiled down to a few imaginary questions, a couple of conundrums. Faced with the stuff of the poem, the poet asks: "What am I to make of this?" Faced with the finished poem, the reader asks: "What did the poet make of it?" Though the usual reply — "Not enough, or too much" — would indict most of the poems ever written, whatever pleasures they give in part, it may be the peculiar genius of modern and contemporary poetry to have populated these extremes. With our emphasis on making it new, this century will be difficult to characterize and anthologize, except perhaps as The Age of Diversity.

If Gregory Orr and David St. John do not always represent extreme or radically diverse approaches to the poem, they at least display rather divergent ways of making something of their materials. Consider these two "songs," the first from Orr's recent book, *The Red House*:

SONG: EARLY DEATH OF THE MOTHER

The last tear turns
to glass on her cheek.
It isn't ice because,
squeezed in the boy's hot
fist, it doesn't thaw.
It's a tooth with nothing
to gnaw; then a magical
thorn; prick yourself
with it, thrust it in soil:
an entire briary
kingdom is born.

Now this one by St. John, from the *The Shore*:

SONG WITHOUT FORGIVENESS

You should have known. The moon
Is very slender in that city. If those
Letters I sent,
Later, filled with details of place
Or weather, specific friends, lies, hotels —
It is because I took the attitudes of
Shadow for solitude. It is because you swore
Faith stands upon a black or white square,
That the next move
Is both logical and fixed. Now, no shade
Of memory wakes where the hand upon a breast
Describes the arc of a song without forgiveness.
Everything is left for you. After the bitter
Fields you walk grow deep with sweet weeds, as
Everything you love loves nothing yet,
You will remember, days, you should have known.

Neither “Song: Early Death of the Mother” nor “Song Without Forgiveness” may be the best work of its author, but both are characteristic and useful for comparison. The common ground between them is a modest plot — both are “songs,” apparently autobiographical, without much consolation offered — but their modes of discourse are continents apart. Orr is reductive, proceeding by compression, so that he seems not to be moving forward at all but only inward, into the silence of earth and self. Everything about this poem and much of Orr’s work — poems, sentences, lines, phrases, words — is concentrated and circumscribed. As in his early writing, there is a suggestion of surrealism and imagism at once in the curious transformations of the tear, though it is not exactly either. The poem also gives the impression that the poet is extremely taciturn, if not almost inarticulate, especially by comparison with St. John’s fluent and sophisticated work. St. John’s lines don’t jerk and halt: they insinuate their way down and across the page with accomplished variety. His syntax is more complicated than Orr’s at any point, though his poem is only five lines longer, and his language sounds more discursive. Instead of tightly-distilled figures (“glass,” “ice,” “tooth,” “thorn”), there are “attitudes of shadow” and “shade of memory” and the abstract balance of “Everything you love loves nothing yet.” This is an insider’s poem, the argument of the aesthete, full of urban confidences

and analysis — detailed letters, philosophical postures, disembodied sexuality, an ex-lover's tender generalities. How smoothly the poem circles back to the phrase with which it began! What a supreme fiction!

And yet, which poem would our mythical reader prefer? Though Orr's begins with a shamelessly maudlin close-up, his metamorphoses take on a sharpness accurate to both childhood incident and adult interpretation: tooth fairy, fairy tale, myth (both Greek and Biblical garden varieties). Whatever the infelicities of technique — the unremarkable break "hot / fist," the cumbersome sequence of semicolon and colons — there is an intriguing reserve to the poem. Like a parable, it speaks plainly while leaving much to implication and imagination, and it is memorable, if in a small way. The subject and language of "Song: Early Death of the Mother" are clear, whereas the elliptic progression of "Song Without Forgiveness" makes it difficult to tell exactly what St. John is saying to the "you" of the poem. And this is the shortest poem in *The Shore*: these problems of comprehension can seriously detour attention when a poem stretches on for pages. Certainly, there is a freedom from the strict accounting of lyric poems in such longer meditations; but there is also the likelihood of gradual attrition of thought unless the poet involves the reader in his contemplative rhythm.

Not enough. It is not merely the length of many poems in *The Red House* that brings this verdict. It is a qualitative matter, not a quantitative one, the feeling that Orr could have made more of his materials, confused them more. Sometimes less is less, and the poet seems satisfied with understated description where a little dramatization and tension might have helped. After a while, these *sotto voce* vignettes can begin to blur together, like old photos in a family album. Here is "Adolescence":

The dog barks from a cloud
after each car passes
and a fine powder settles
on yard shrubs. In late spring
the county truck sprays
oil on the road, binding
the dust. I strip
catkins from willows
and beat the air
with insane intensity.
Reeds bending in wind;
electrical hum

from a roadside pole.
 Behind the red house, gray
 clouds and the rumble
 of summer thunder. Above,
 yellow, spiked globes swell
 among the deep green
 chestnut leaves. And in the hay,
 can't breathe; can't
 breathe in the hay. Hands
 on skin; how good it feels.

The poem begins with a provocative line, but the rest of the details are flat, accumulated with no apparent calculation in lines or thought. No one would claim a polished style is a guarantee of profundity, but Orr's relaxed prosody leaves the poet cutting a figure which is extremely private, tentative, and introspective. We may admire these qualities in a friend, but they do not often serve a poet well. In particular, the semicolon is a vulnerable stroke of punctuation in a lyric-length poem, and it turns up in *The Red House* every other page or so. It is used in "Adolescence" three times, twice in the last three lines. The effect, especially as a device of closure, is not Frost's prescribed clarification but a kind of guarded mumbling off-camera, like McCabe in Altman's film. The awkward chiasmus and tactile stupor at the end of "Adolescence," hinged by matching semicolons, may be intended to mimic the inarticulate and thoughtless sensuality of that stage of life, but they don't quite work: I found myself trying to figure out how they might have been avoided, the syntax extended or lines rearranged. Orr may have picked up the semicolon habit — and the mode of brief, violent yet tranquil psychological pastorals — from Georg Trakl, the subject of his shortest poem in *The Red House*. But it looks indecisive; it seems a compromise, falling between a period's stillness and the motion of comma or colon. Though it may just be compositional shorthand, like Dickinson's dash, on the printed page it's a risk.

Even so, *The Red House* is Orr's best book yet. He has nearly weaned himself from the surreal pacifier of his first two books, *Burning the Empty Nests* (1973) and *Gathering the Bones Together* (1975), and from the moody bones and stones of those earlier poems. The tone of *The Red House* is more rural than darkly allegorical. The title section sports an epigraph from *The Prelude* ("Fair seedtime had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear"), and Wordsworth may be the spiritual model for Orr's new work, even though his style is still as remote from Wordsworth's as Charlottesville from Grasmere. The dust jacket

calls *The Red House* “a united vision of youth rather than a random assemblage of poems,” and some of the book’s most lucid moments do come from Orr’s remembered childhood — “The Brave Child,” “Driving Home After a Funeral,” the end of “Morning Song”:

In the barn’s huge gloom
light falls through cracks
the way swordblades
pierce a magician’s box.

There are particularly tender memorials to his mother, like the exotic “Haitian Suite” or the conclusion of “Spring Floods”:

Water roiled so deeply
who could calm it
as she once did,
laying her cool hand
on my forehead in the dark
room before sleep?

Even the treatment of that familiar tragedy from his childhood (“At twelve, I killed a brother by accident, / my mother died soon after: my whole life / I sensed as a lugged burden / of the invisible and unforgiving past”) is not as obsessively morbid as before. One wonders what St. John would have made of such a past.

Too much, probably. Here is one glimpse at St. John’s youth, in part VII of “Of the Remembered”:

Earth. The word
Mystified me as a child —
With my parents at Italian movies
I heard the truck drivers on the screen
Call the dark women at the roadside
Cafés: *earthy*. And I imagined their pulses
Circled like the sun’s, with the tides
Of a daily moon. I began to watch carefully
As every leaf uncurled and waved, falling
To the earth. Plums, figs, apricots, cherries —
They all fell, splitting to seed. I paid
More attention to the rivers stroking the calm
Earth, though — finally — I forgot it all:

I lived in small rooms, piling my books against
The closed door, pouring the acrid coffee
From pot to cup.

What precociousness! A child fascinated not with grubbing in the dirt itself, but with the *word* "earth." And not dragged to Disney flicks like most normal kids, but to "Italian movies." And with such an expansive imagination and attentiveness — pulses circulating "like the sun's," *every* leaf and fancy fruit falling, rivers "stroking the calm earth." Finally, he comes to rest in *The Student Garret*, replete with voluminous books (blocking "the closed door": how does he get out?) and (fine Gothic touch) "acrid coffee." As with Orr and "Adolescence," this poetry is St. John at his weakest. Though its prosody is exquisitely controlled and reflects some thoughtful contrivance by the poet, it is simply *too* self-conscious, *too* articulate. Who believes this stuff? Such overwrought poetry, by its very nature, is susceptible to sinking in a kind of bathos, under the weight of a surfeit of humorless, plaintive meditation. For example, in "The Avenues," as the poet wanders the streets alone in the wee hours, he seeks out an all-night café:

I stare at all those lonely pies,
Homely wedges lifted
From their moons. The charred crusts and limp
Meringues reflected so shamelessly —
Their shapely fruits and creams all spilling
From their flat pyramids, the isoceles spoke
Of dough. This late at night,
So few souls left
In the place, even the cheesecake
Looks a little blue.

One searches in vain for a clue that this lingering survey of pathetic pastry is a joke, a parody of the Hopper milieu, however limp. The modifiers ("lonely," "shamelessly," etc.) are ludicrous, the wit (e.g., the pun on cheesecake) is labored and obvious. Throughout *The Shore* St. John indulges settings ripe for melancholy cliché — an old seaside hotel, a bleak factory town, various clubs and bars, his writing desk "very late at night," a crumbling boathouse, even the shore itself with its theatrical cliffs and waves. As the poet himself confesses, "Even / I tire of emblems."

Reading *The Shore* is like watching St. John's Italian movie, or any

other serious European film. It is an intelligent and technically subtle work; it is casually eclectic, integrating a wide range of time and place, of cultural and personal references; and it keeps reaching, with consummate sensitivity, for a deep center of feeling and meaning. Yet for St. John, as for the best of the auteurs, these distinctive qualities can be as much a liability as an asset: after sitting through a Bergman festival, one is about ready for some Clint Eastwood. It is interesting, if not a fair representation of the whole book, that the cover for *The Shore* (Picasso's collage, "Guitare") should refer to its lightest, least reflective poem, "Guitar." The attraction of this modest but most pleasant poem is that it proceeds, unlike the other longer jobs, by a good-natured denial of memory and its suitcase of colorful allusions — exotic childhood, life on the road, and the rest. There is just the image of "the swirling chocolate of wood" and the circumscribing line, "I have always loved the word *guitar*." No child prodigy mooning over the word this time; simply fondness for the sound itself, *guitar, guitar*.

As mentioned, "Guitar" is not really typical of *The Shore*, whose other poems ruminate over the complexities of memory. The back cover says the book "traces the give and take of a modern-day relationship" (ouch!), and there does seem to be an unnamed but specific "you," lost or leaving, to whom many of the poems are addressed. The poet watches, waits, writes:

... if some

Day or night

You take that suitcase packed under

The bed and leave once again, I will look

Back across this room, as I look now, to you

Holding a thin flame to the furnace,

The gasp of heat rising as you rise;

To these mornings, islands —

The balance of the promise with what lasts.

St. John's poems, as in this lovely conclusion to "Blue Waves," are beautifully measured: the poems take their time. There is nothing tentative or awkward here: the characteristic collapsed line is deftly employed, as well as a semicolon that might vex Orr. The poem mirrors his motion of thought. The most ambitious poem in *The Shore* is "Of the Remembered," a nineteen-page ten-part sequence at the heart of the book. It quietly reviews St. John's personal Waste Land, his "remembered" — the ubiquitous "you," his son and parents, the dramatic personae from his past and random travel. Like Eliot's epochal poem, it is

comprehensive and incomprehensible, fragments shored against memory's ruins, full of longing for something which unifies and lasts — "twin memory," "*the melody*," "faith." Like most long poems, it lives in its moments, in melodic passages of tenderness and luminous beauty — at a nightclub in Montreal, by his father's deathbed, with his son in Yosemite:

Walking off into the trees
We'd come onto a clearing of low grass. On my back,
As the sun rose towards noon, almost asleep and
Hidden by the trees, I could hear a file
Of rented horses
Shuffling to their stables in the valley below,
And the voice of one rider cautioning — about stocks —
A friend. I opened my eyes. On his stomach, my son
Had crawled to the center of the meadow
Where a city of ground squirrels teased him, rising
First from the holes in the distance, then by one
Of the tunnels at his knees. Closing my eyes, I
Listened as the horses and voices faded, as
My son began chirping at the dozen gold phantasms;
And I slept, my back against the earth.

It's hard to believe that this wonderful scene could conclude the same section that began, "*Earth*, the word / Mystified me as a child." St. John's last word on terra firma is as true as the first was utter fiction: it's just right, not too much. But this is typical of *The Shore* as a whole and why it is so frustrating: fine writing is yoked to writing of exaggerated sensibility, baffling obliqueness (as in the two italicized sections), and geographic leapfrogging (Baltimore, New Mexico, the Pacific, Montreal, "San Francisco, London, or outside Cheyenne"). When mixed with the constantly shifting tides of time ("now," "then," "later," "once," etc.), the effect is rather more confusing than convincing, however much we want to like it.

Both St. John and Orr have tried to make peace with their ghosts in these books. St. John's phantasms are domestic, romantic, psychological: he weaves a complex cosmopolitan melody in trying to reconcile his past and present, but it finally seems like so many themes (or maybe the same one) without satisfying resolution. Are these meditations what the people wanted who praised the longer poems of *Hush*, St. John's award-winning first book (1976), at the expense of its lyrics? *The Shore* offers ten

extended pieces, one a whopper, out of a dozen in the entire book, and it's simply too much. One longs for the variety and edge provided by shorter pieces. No one will deny St. John his obvious and considerable talent, but after a bookful of smooth nuance and "gesture," of "disguises of omission," one is ready for him to leave the dreamy shore and its ghosts behind.

Orr's ghosts are violent and actual. His exorcisms are not graceful: though he may call some of them "songs," they are less effusions than extractions. When compared with St. John, Orr can seem positively tongue-tied, the country bumpkin stammering before the city slicker. He uses unfamiliar or peculiarly formal words and odd inversions; he has his own brand of solipsism and humorlessness; and his muted technique is sometimes less authentic than simplistic. Decrescendo is not always the right dynamic: "so?" is not what you want someone to say who has just finished one of your poems. But Orr does face his past head-on, without the evident intervention of ingeniousness or artistic self-pity: at his best (as in "Haitian Suite") we forget the limitations of his reticence and admire the gentleness, even shyness, we sense in the poet. And there are hints that he may have written through the obsession with his tragic spot of time. This version of boyhood is more balanced, and the book's benediction is called "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.

If Orr has indeed surrendered his guilty glance over the shoulder, that "Fair seed-time" passage of *The Prelude* contains a fitting epigraph for future volumes, one even St. John could adopt:

How strange that all
 The terrors, pains, and early miseries,
 Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused
 Within my mind, should e'er have borne a part,
 And that a needful part, in making up
 The calm existence that is mine when I
 Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!

You accompanied me to the
 and with such enigmas
 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 paths? The destinations?
 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.

11: Or has indeed surrounded his guilty glance over the threshold, that
 "Pain and time" passage of The Prelude contains a fitting epigraph for
 future volumes, one even St. John could adopt.