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Outside, Inside by Michael Penny

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***Outside, Inside* by MICHAEL PENNY**

McGill-Queen's UP, 2014 \$16.95

Reviewed by **MARK BYERS**

Having demanded so long and so unreasonably that it live, the poet is aghast to find that, with its very first breath, the poem makes demands of its own. This is the Frankenstein moment, peculiar to the long poem, which casts the living work in any number of unfavourable roles: recalcitrant child or untameable beast, amoral outlaw, protean shapeshifter, or inconstant, aberrant lover. For John Berryman, the monster was at once a helpless newborn and a taskmaster so severe that federal intervention was needed to protect the poet from his own wayward creation:

'The Care & Feeding of Long Poems' was
Henry's title
for his next essay, which will come out
when
he wants it to.
A Kennedy-sponsored bill for the
protection
of poets from long poems will benefit
the culture
and do no harm to that kind Lady, Mrs
Johnson.

The stakes are especially high when, like Michael Penny, one takes the 'Care & Feeding of Long Poems' to be both futile and imperative; superfluous but also inevitable and—somehow—necessary. The early poems in *Outside, Inside*, Penny's fifth collection, witness both the responsibility of the poet to the poem, and the anxiety that accompanies such a weird guardianship.

The wind blows against my intention
turning me this way and that

Or:

It's always a struggle,
a swim in blancmange

And ultimately:

It's such a chore

Filling pages, filling pages
like something's getting done

Witnessing their own making—or, to be more precise, their refusal to be made—the early passages of *Outside, Inside* recall those psychodramas of later modernist composition: Eliot in "Burnt Norton" ("words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden" (182)), Yeats in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," the Pound who "cannot make it cohere" (816). Indeed, Eliot's struggle with an imperfect medium is remembered in poem 12:

My words are a bridge
with load limits;

sturdily enough made
but there are some weights

just too much, just too heavy
that still insist on crossing.

What is needed, implies Penny, is a leap of faith, a "monstrous paradox" (62)—to adopt Kierkegaard's phrase—which combines absolute resignation to the insufficiencies of the poet's language with absolute confidence in its "deity's eye view."

Outside, Inside lives this paradox through three hundred and four numbered poems comprised of three open, unrhymed couplets. The sparseness of the form, which gestures towards both the haiku and the aphorism, allows Penny

to raise, attend, and resolve one observation, thought, crux, or minor epiphany after another. Cumulatively, this makes for a diaristic account of the poem's own development, which is also an essay towards its ultimate objective: to gauge the myriad ways (physical, social, economic, biological) in which the lyric speaker stands both cognate with, and exiled from, the world around him.

On the one hand are those threads running from the speaker into the fabric of law, economy, administration, and technology. Here the lyric subject is only the sum total of his social affiliations: "I am cards, financial statements, forms / all the numbers and passwords that total me." On the other hand is that more inclusive amity, obscure enough to cause a vague nostalgia: "No matter where I live / home's a foreign land." And for this malady the émigré is consoled, in Wordsworthian mode, by moments of unsolicited correspondence:

We have to find our places:
the rock, the trees

that speak to me.
After all the metaphors are forgiven

where can I find myself
if not in the leaf and crystals of the land?

Such clarity is invariably fleeting, however, swept away in a welter of daily detail and inconsequent data (commutes, résumés, offices, timetables, airports, salaries...). A daybook of unfolding experience, *Outside, Inside* establishes a rhythm between linguistic insecurity, lyric anagnorisis, and the burden of quotidia, both sensory and introspective.

Sometimes too obviously Stevensian ("opportunist of vacancy," "verisimilitude obsequious"), Penny's language is nevertheless nimble enough to follow the

vagaries of such "epiphytic thoughts," its tone by turns hortatory, interrogative, and appealing. Yet the very slenderness of the six-line form leads to a shortfall of which the poet seems, at times, all too aware:

This attempt at shrift misfires:
I am guilty of nothing

but enquiry and despair.

Recording minor resolutions and momentary clarities, the poems' formal shrift discounts grander gestures. Penny's gambit is that consolation for estrangement and "despair" need not be found in supreme fictions, that simple "vigilance" might be, against the odds, enough.

And, indeed, as the speaker's thoughts turn ever more frequently to the "ultimate demolition," when "time will find me out," the mood grows resigned and equanimous. The penultimate poem, which precedes a formal envoi, echoes the first and final propositions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

The world is all it can.
No name, no magic word

will make it more.

No longer wrestling with the demands it earlier made of itself, the forgivable hubris of "writing / an entire world into existence," *Outside, Inside* ends more chastened, more tempered, readier to accept that, "I might be lost / but I am here."

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