

PAMPERING DIVORCE: SEDUCTION IN CAROLINE BIRD'S POETRY

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What does seduction mean to a young person living in Britain today? More precisely, how can it be reflected upon and conveyed by a very young and gifted poet? The following pages stem from a personal curiosity around these questions in relation to the three collections of poems by Caroline Bird, who was born in 1986.

Her first collection *Looking through Letterboxes*¹ was published as early as 2002, but already displayed an impressive poetical maturity. One of its reviewers wrote:

I phoned the Carcanet [Bird's publishing house] people and pointed out their mistake [in their press release]. "I mean," I pointed out, "that would mean that she is only fourteen." "She is," they replied. "But we don't want to make a big deal of it." Quite right too: if the poetry is any good (and Bird's is) the age of the poet is irrelevant².

The great number of prizes awarded to Bird in the following years, culminating in her participation in the London Poetry Olympics 2012, testified to her promising talent, and strengthened her aura of *enfant prodige* of British poetry.

The main point I want to make is that seduction, together with its subtle nuances and implications, might be identified as one of her leading themes. In her first volume, a case in point is certainly represented by the poem "Entirely" (LL 67):

And it was entirely the words that I mumbled in the second
between looking at the carpet and looking at you.

¹ C. BIRD, *Looking through Letterboxes*, Manchester, Carcanet, 2002. Hereafter mentioned parenthetically inside the text, as LL followed by page number.

² UNSPECIFIED AUTHOR, *The Browser*, "The Scotsman", 23rd February 2002, <http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=50;doctype=review> (accessed 8th October 2012).

And it was clearly the drink to my lips
and the whisper of my feet through the air as I tackled
the door to the ground and leapt on the phone.
And it was completely the fact that it was a wrong number
and the stain down my jacket and the empty coke can. [...]

In its anaphorical structure, the whole poem plays on the lures of seduction and their various shades, listing a series of apparently unimportant details which are wittily juxtaposed to (and all of them introduced by) an array of adverbs denoting fullness – a contrast connoting the perceived enormity of the feeling growing between the poetical voice and the object of her desire. In other words, the minutiae of seduction at work.

What seems to recur most in this collection, however, is not the ambivalent feelings connected with seductive games. Bird's maturity is clear in her interest in what happens when seduction has reached its goal, in what lies beyond, as in "Geography Lesson" (LL 59):

When you've reached the peak,
the summit, the end,
you've come to the limit,
let me tell you gently
that the world is round, my sweet,
and it's all a long walk backwards,
starting from here.

A serious relationship resulting from seduction, then, is compared to a "long walk backwards" following an exhilarating ascent. In *Looking through Letterboxes* this might imply having to cope with breaking up or with absence/loss, as in "Passing the Time" (LL 48):

Thirty paperclip statues on every table in the house
and things are slightly boring without you.
I've knitted a multicoloured jacket for every woodlouse
in the park. But what can you do?

I've given all the cracks in the pavement pet names
and taken snapshots of individual specks of dust,
though I am not a trainspotter and denied all those claims
but have developed an interest in rust.
[...]

These lines display two recurrent features of Bird's poetry, which I also consider to be her forte: her penchant for playful irony and hyperbolic, surrealistic imagery. Bird grew up in Leeds like Tony Harrison, but her poetry is not shaped by his civil passion and radical politics, his regionalism or his mixture of sophisticated and vernacular language; nor can Bird be included amongst those feminist authors who focus on the woman's body as a site of political issues³. If one really tried to play the (inevitably over-simplifying) game of literary influences, I would say that one of Bird's models could be Simon Armitage's orientation towards spoken language; or, when her mocking knack for surrealism takes over, the Merseyside Poets' humorous irreverence towards reality as it is usually perceived. This is also evident in "Multitude" (LL 23)⁴, which continues her exploration of that "long walk backwards" by describing a critical phase in a relationship through an Alice-in-Wonderland gothic landscape:

[...] I wish your house would puff away in a cloud
of transparent smoke, would leave me standing here
like a pole staring into space.
But it's getting larger with every lope I take.
The dandelions in the garden have your face,
they frown and shake their heads.
Even the dog dirt looks like you.
How come you have such a big door?
Brass handles, padlock and chains,
an inch of barbed wire over each daffodil,
each flower and weed. I knock, hoping
for some reason, that I might answer the door myself,
and that I might be you, coming to talk it over.

"Multitude" represents, I believe, Bird's precocious poetical talent with regard to her ease in dealing with phonetic patterns: the antithesis 'wishful thinking' vs. 'reality' in the fourth line of the above quotation introduced by "But", for example, is further emphasised by the anagram "pole"/"lope".

³ See, for instance, two recent anthologies: L. MAGAZZENI and A. SIROTTI (eds.), *Gatti come angeli: L'eros nella poesia femminile di lingua inglese*, Milan, Medusa, 2006; L. MAGAZZENI, F. MORMILE, B. PORSTER, A.M. ROBUSTELLI (eds.), *Corporea: Il corpo nella poesia femminile di lingua inglese*, Sasso Marconi (BO), Le Voci della Luna Poesia, 2009.

⁴ See also "A Window Overlooking a Garden" (LL 8) and "My Love" (LL 62).

Many poems from Bird's second collection, *Trouble Came to the Turnip*⁵ confirm the author's humorous attitude. After the title poem, the collection ironizes on a supposedly lost innocence in "Virgin" (TCT 3):

[...]
If I was a virgin, you wouldn't look at other girls,
you would spring-clean your apartment
before you asked me round for supper,
give me your bed, spend the night on the sofa,
dreaming of the gentle way I breathed inside my bra,
[...]

This playful tone is continued, amongst other poems, in "Child Bride" (TCT 64), describing a playground love through the simplicity of childish, mostly monosyllabic utterances, with a subtext mocking Bird's own status of golden girl of poetry:

[...]
Can I see your underwear?
Let's pretend I'm a doctor.
You can bite me if you like,
you can share my crisps.
Peel that scab off your knee,
pass me a piece of mud pie,
let's pretend to make a cup of tea,
would you like to marry me?

On the other hand, *Trouble Came to the Turnip* develops her conflictual attitude towards seduction and its implications. "The Fairy Is Bored with Her Garden" (TCT 41), for example, is an outright rejection of all the embellishments usually associated with charm:

[...] The fairy is bored with her garden,
bored with her windchimes, her lipgloss,
her tiny shiny singing voice.
She wants someone who doesn't need enticing,
who finds her somewhat dull and ordinary,
who picks her sequins off the pillow with disdain,
drapes her with a heavy arm. She wants snores
that rip the darkness, darkness that leaves in the morning,

⁵ C. BIRD, *Trouble Came to the Turnip*, Manchester, Carcanet, 2006. Hereafter mentioned parenthetically inside the text, as TCT followed by page number.

ripe, huge bodies that remain. The fairy wants
to groan, to fart, to stay for breakfast.
The fairy wants to be ripe and huge.

This thirst for a proper relationship with its daily, down-to-earth circumstances is part of a more general striving for something as close as possible to the core of a rapport, stripped of all its superficial elements, as in “Not a Raindrop” (TCT 79):

Tonight, forget I am feeling,
[...]
[...] Pretend we are simple,
one-sided, straight down the middle
and away across the empty sky.
[...]
Pretend we have only one chance,
tonight and then no more,
not a raindrop,
not a single tick.

The other side of this process of stripping down towards some wished-for essentials implies, inevitably, the encounter with silence, loss, absence. With respect to this, “Then” (TCT 84) expresses an unrequited love thus:

If sex was a boarded-up cinema,
if tears were the saliva of dogs,
if tongues were lost tanks in the desert,
if kisses were dishcloths specked with mustard,
if smiles were patches of hair,
[...]
if hope was a church surrounded by wolves,
if my love for you was your love for me⁶.

⁶ Incidentally, the only not-so-positive review that I have found of Bird’s poetry takes exception to her excess of this fantastic imagery in *Trouble Came to the Turnip*: according to the reviewer, sometimes these images “detract from each other and dilute the poems’ power to *attract and seduce* the reader” (italics mine); R. HERBERT, *Robert Herbert reviews Trouble Came to the Turnip by Caroline Bird*, www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/reviews/reviews-archive/185-robert-herbert-reviews-trouble-came-to-the-turnip-by-caroline-bird (accessed 8th October 2012)

The last line finally makes clear that the metaphorical ifs listed by the poem's anaphoric structure are all felt as coalescing in the consequence implied by the title, i.e. a painful desire to be as carefree as the beloved other, in order to avoid suffering.

Bird's third and latest collection, *Watering Can*⁷, shows new perspectives on the shapes that seduction might take in the course of one's life, often revolving around the moments of crisis every relationship is bound to go through. The surreal, pseudo-scientific metaphor of "The Monogamy Optician" (WC 20), for instance, brings to the fore the seduction that third parties inevitably exercise, beyond the power of any 'treatment':

[...]
He [the optician] said, 'Unfaithfulness is a product of surplus sight,
it's the bridesmaid in the corner of the wedding photo.'
He said, 'Since my peripheries were surgically removed,
I've only had eyes for my wife. It's the miracle cure.'
[...]
When we split, I returned to the optician in a sulk.
No cash refunds. The machines looked rusty in the daylight.
He said, 'It's not our fault if your peripheries grow back.'
I trudged home to the park with all the daffodils and stuff.

When commenting on this poem, Luke Kennard wrote that Bird "works extremely well with conceits, refrains and inverted cliché"⁸. If the imagery of the lines above could be simply explained as a literalization⁹ of the saying 'to have eyes for someone', the poem "Our Infidelity" (WC 42) elaborates on the lures of unfaithfulness through a series of magical realist images concretizing a phrase like 'hot affair':

⁷ C. BIRD, *Watering Can*, Manchester, Carcanet, 2009. Hereafter mentioned parenthetically inside the text, as WC followed by page number.

⁸ L. KENNARD, *Difficult for the Poet, Not the Reader*, "Poetry London", Summer 2010, <http://www.poetrylondon.co.uk/magazines/66/article/difficult-for-the-poet-not-the-reader> (accessed 8th October 2012).

⁹ Wendy B. Faris singles out, amongst the distinctive marks of magical realism, "images that take on lives of their own [...] a closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of experience. The magic happens when the metaphor is made real"; W.B. FARIS, *Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction*, in L. PARKINSON ZAMORA and W.B. FARIS (eds.), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 164, 176.

[...]
This infidelity of ours was so steaming hot
the waitresses were dropping plates, running
their fingers under the cold tap, and swans
– as I said – were exploding by the river.

We didn't need to kiss: the sky had already
started burning, people screaming naked
in gasoline coats through the Christmas lights,
[...]
[...] But you were so beautiful,
it almost didn't matter that a car crashed
every time you smiled. I could almost block out
the sound of sirens and apocalyptic distress.
[...]

Significantly for the importance of this theme in Bird's collection(s), *Watering Can* is closed by the poem "A Love Song" (WC 81-82), where Divorce is personified as some slick rascal making his way very early into one's life:

Long before we tie the knot, Divorce moves in.
He sits on the naughty step, patting his knees.
[...]
My mum was incredulous, 'She's only ten,
she can't possibly have made contact with you.'

He clocked my young face and handed me his card.
'Call me when you fall in love, I'm here to help.'

Perhaps he smelt something in my pheromones,
a cynicism rising from my milk teeth.
[...]
The future cut two keys for a new couple.
On my twenty-first, Divorce took the spare room.

He loves to breathe down the spout of the kettle,
make our morning coffee taste mature and sad.

Paradoxically, the poetical voice and her partner's reaction displays an even greater maturity: they accept to live side by side with the seductive presence of Divorce (and its dangers, again expressed through a fire metaphor) while seducing him at the same time, daily and slyly.

Or, to put it more bluntly, to face its unavoidable existence playfully and surreally:

After the honeymoon, we'll do up the loft,
give Divorce his own studio apartment.

We must keep him sweet, my fiancée agrees,
look him in the eye, subtly hide matches,

remember we've an arsonist in the house.
The neighbours think we're crazy, pampering him

like a treasured child, warming his freezing feet,
but we sing Divorce to sleep with long love songs.

This ending reinforces the view of *Watering Can* as “somehow intensified, the themes richer and sadder”, if compared to Bird’s previous collections¹⁰. Kennard emphasizes Bird’s knack for framing bitter-sweet truth, which “pokes you in the ribs as you laugh with it, your eyes shut, and says ‘Uh, sorry, but I was talking about you’”¹¹. And Bird herself conceded to this bittersweet vision when talking about this collection: “Essentially, it’s a collection about trying to be happy. So, in a way, it’s the saddest book I’ve ever written. It’s about watching my friends, and myself, turn into adults, about the gap between who you are and who you want to be”¹².

To close with the Merseyside influence mentioned above, the gap lamented by Bird might be reminiscent of the contradiction emphasized in Roger McGough’s 1967 poem “Summer with Monika”:

Away from you
I feel a great emptiness
a gnawing loneliness

With you
I get that reassuring feeling
of wanting to escape¹³.

¹⁰ L. KENNARD, op. cit.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² K. RICHMOND, *Watering the Words* (review of *Watering Can*), “Tribune Magazine”, 15th January 2010, <http://archive.tribunemagazine.co.uk/article/15th-january-2010/26/-watering-the-words> (accessed 8th October 2012).

¹³ R. MCGOUGH, *Collected Poems*, London, Penguin, 2004, p. 71.