

L'inedito

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Kathleen Fraser's Extraordinary Experiences of the Ordinary

Like the swallows, every spring Kathleen Fraser flies to Rome to reinstate herself in her adopted nest in Trastevere, leaving behind winter and her home city, San Francisco.

In the small market in Trastevere's Piazza San Cosimato, Fraser one day bought a perfumed orange wrapped in a thin, beautifully colored and artistically designed paper, so striking that her imagination set her going on an investigation of "the beautiful." Reading "Il Gatto dell'Etna: An Italian Story" we follow the poet in her voyage. Running along the geography of the pages our eyes perceive black words, blank spaces, enigmatic punctuation marks, but our minds are led across territories where everything is projected out of factual reality into a different world. Here words, signs, objects acquire a life of their own, establish special, unique relationships.

"There was an orange in the box of oranges. / It was wrapped in tissue paper."

At the beginning, the poem seems undecided between two possible narrative directions: one heading towards the fairy tale, the other verging towards the descriptive and asking us readers to come closer to reality, experience for ourselves the orange, the tissue paper. Obediently, we focus our attention on the "red square" and the "black circle," strive to see the "ivory blossoms" hidden by the tree leaves, are delighted by a "sky called cerulean or *azzurro* or French *bleu*." Soon we discover that this reality, like the book Lewis Carroll's Alice is reading in *Alice in Wonderland*, is only the surface, the limited factuality, the mirror that we cross through to enter what is hidden behind it. No poem better admits us both to Fraser's background and to her poetics of de-centering, of exploration of the mind as a place where written words and visual images interact, where the blank of the page is also the space the poet uses to draw her wor(l)ds, where the past and the present, the conscious and the unconscious interact, where fragmentation and dispersion, experience of

female identity, and criticism of poetic tradition are kept together by the precise, scientific design of the poem.

Her father, an English poetry-loving architect who changed professions mid-stream to serve in the Presbyterian ministry, often read his children the songs from *Through the Looking Glass* and the nonsense limericks of Edward Lear. Thus has Fraser grafted her memory of this spirited and highly compressed lyricism to her own playful, musical sense of words. Her poetry, like Carroll's and Lear's writings, reveals her taste for language as well as the use of graphic and mental images to move between the real and the imaginary.

Fraser considers herself an heir of the modernist experimental writers. In a key essay published in her collection *Translating the Unspeakable*, she lists her models, "H.D., Stein, Dorothy Richardson, Woolf, Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, Laura Riding, Lorine Niedecker" (34), women whose writings and shared practice of formal innovation she worked to reinstate and reinvigorate through *HOW(ever)* [1983-1991], a magazine she edited for purposes of stimulating new experimental poetry. It has since evolved into the online publication *HOW2*.

But the visual element in her poetry is a legacy of her first fundamental attraction to the graphic preoccupations of The New York School poets, particularly as found in her association with the persons and work of Barbara Guest and Frank O'Hara. After graduating from Occidental College in Los Angeles in 1959, she moved to New York City with the tentative hope of becoming a poet, preceded by her late college encounters with the poems of e.e. cummings, Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams as they pointed her away from the English tradition to "the American grain."

She came to experience the continuum of painting and poetry through following the abstract expressionist work of Willem de Kooning and Joan Mitchell, while the music of John Cage and Cecil Taylor as well as the choreography of Merce Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer revealed the power of an art that ironically and lightly played with a plurality of languages.

"Il Gatto dell'Etna" bears evidence of her beginnings as well as the innovative work she has done in the intervening years, of the experience acquired in her writing of over fifteen collections of poems, experimenting with the interplay of visual and written arts, working side by side with painters. The

levity of the tissue paper, the colored shapes printed on it, we soon discover are only the starting point for the poet's search. Soon the "Gatto dell'Etna," written across red tissue paper, becomes a new story set in a world as strange as that of Alice's, in Wonderland. The cat carefully guards the orange, afraid of whoever might steal it. The red square loudly claims for "more red" while another voice covets the orange and, in a different room, yet others eat their pears.

But, like a dream suddenly gone, the scene vanishes as the story is brought to a halt. A big dot placed in the space where a line usually begins marks the silence, the break in space/time. The blank space that surrounds it, like a fade-off in a film, tells us that we are about to enter another scene, a different dimension.

What follows is a dialogue that seems to take place between interlocutors representing different perspectives, perhaps divided by geographies and histories. The two are actors (in the poet's mind) who differ on where beauty lies. In the mind of the beholder? In the thing itself? The philosophical and aesthetic questions that arrive after a new break, a next dot that introduces us to yet another layer of knowledge, are resolved in a scientific equation:

"holding beauty = being beauty."

The question then leads to a new association of beauty and its source. W.B. Yeats' words from "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," introducing "the beeloud glade," open one to a different experience of the beautiful, where nature and the sounds of solitude become the source of personal happiness and aesthetic pleasure. But the bees in the quotation are immediately associated with the experience of being 'stung.'

The following line correlates the sounds of "stung : Sting," as if the words were two successive drops from a water tap, with a slightly varied pitch and sound color, or as if they were two birds playing on a seesaw. The interplay between the blank space that surrounds the printed words, the colon that divides and balances them, the alternation of the /u/ and /i/ sounds, builds up an increased attentiveness in the reader. A sort of synesthesia unites sound, visual and mental experiences. It also joins the poem and the song and, evoking the music of British singer Sting, connects the experimental poetry of Fraser to the popular culture of our time.

Mental and physical time-frames are in this way restored to the historical present we share with the writer. This, however, has the effect of better emphasizing the following jump back into Alice's world. It is there that the two previous questions multiply, become the Queen's "6 sides to every story," that may lead to the perfect self-contained shape of the hexagon, the shape of the honey-comb in the hive, or to the multiple aspects of the beautiful.

A new break in time and scene: we find ourselves introduced to another experience of the beautiful as we follow "the woman from just barely inside the twenty-first century" in her visit to an exhibition held at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome. She is equally intrigued by "Domenichino's study of the male figure in which a man's right foot breaks / through the *passé-partout*," as she is by the workmanship of the beautifully wrought cabinet that belonged to the painter's contemporary, Giovanni Pietro Bellori, who, after the corruption of Mannerism, theorized the necessity to return to nature's classical and ideal beauty. "Bellori's '*piccolo gabinetto*,'" exhibited as a specimen of created beauty, stands also as representative of our cultivated experience of the beautiful, passed on by the organizers of the Palazzo exhibition as an heirloom: "His beauty now their idea of his idea. Ours."

Rubens' painting of Hero and Leander, on the other hand, leads to a different perspective and to the separation of the created beauty of the artist from God's created beauty that is nature. Painter Joan Mitchell's words "I could never mirror nature. I would like to paint what it leaves me with," finally emphasize the continuum and the reciprocal belonging of human artifice and natural beauty that Fraser seems to share.

Toward the end, the poem veers back to the world where the Gatto dell'Etna lives but does not forget what has happened within its previous lines. As in Domenichino's drawing, wherein a man's right foot breaks beyond the expected frame of it, as seen by the twenty-first century visitor to the exhibit, the cat's tail "breaks the frame of the black circle," refusing to be tamed by "false ideas."

The concluding words in the poem, however, belong to the person who has experienced art in a museum as well as in the beautiful wrapping of an orange. And in the middle of an everyday activity, such as that of hanging curtains, a sudden thought emerges, like an epiphany, and she has a vision of the "ruby satellite" as a metaphor that connects the blood orange, the red square on the tissue paper and Rubens.

Wrapping up her text in a perfect circular frame, Fraser takes it back to the market and to the blood orange. But now, like “the oranges that desire their tissue coverings,” nature desires art. They belong to one another.

In this poem the eye of the American poet has transformed what we Italians may take for granted, that which belongs to everyday factuality, into an extraordinary experience of the beautiful as it reinvents itself in progressive formal manifestations and as it is apprehended by the knowing mind. *il cuore: the heart*, the title of Fraser's volume of *Selected Poems 1970-1995*, betrays her attachment to our country as well as her response to our culture. It is perhaps the anticipation of such extraordinary experiences of the ordinary that, I love to believe, brings Fraser to Italy every year.

Works cited

- Fraser, Kathleen. *il cuore: the heart. Selected Poems 1970-1995*. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1997.
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