

TROLL TURNING

Poetic Voice in the poetry of Kristjana Gunnars

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TROLLS, THE STORYBOOKS TELL US, are human-like creatures linked to an earthier nature than are the elves of the aesthetic sensibility. Elves are aristocrats and amateurs of arts. Trolls are peasants, mere ruffians. Elf society is feudal. Troll society is familial. Elves are healthy, wealthy, and wise, and they have beautiful manners. Trolls aren't and don't. Elves seem to be immortal, but the troll who is turned to stone by the light of day has died. For the troll is mere clod in the light of reason. Even in the stories where these calibans are permitted to endure the sun, they retain something earthen in their disposition. Ignorant, passionate, primitive, they exist in our own substance as the stony self-absorption of the child.

In literature an element of the trollish is wonderfully antidotal to effete aestheticisms, traditional or avant-garde. But trolls are not fully human. The troll is not yet analytical, ethical, bourgeois.

If one divides the myths and folk tales into greater or lesser degrees of trollishness, the most trollish are those which emphasize Luck, Magic, and Correct Information, rather than resourcefulness or virtue, as the clues to power. Such tales also tend to have a strong thematic concern with survival. Tales in which Valour or Beauty are rewarded may be considered elvish. The large group of didactic tales in which domestic or politic virtues are rewarded with great wealth are less fairy tales than bourgeois fibs. Least trollish are stories such as those about Br'er Rabbit, for whom neither luck nor correct magical information exists and whose street-wisdom is rewarded only with the continuation of her precarious existence.

Nothing could be farther from the pragmatic and intellectual world of Br'er Rabbit's briar patch than Kristjana Gunnars' magic-drenched world of nordic myth. Wotan, the self-hanged god, sacrificed one eye to gain wisdom; in the briar patch, however, one needs both eyes. Nor does Wotanic wisdom translate readily into bourgeois utilities. In Wotan's world, the interest lies in runes, not reason. Wotan's one-eyed perception and a trollish view of knowledge as composed of charms that ensure survival control the three published books of poetry by Kristjana Gunnars, the two-volume *Settlement Poems* (Turnstone, 1980), *One-*

Eyed Moon Maps (Press Porcépic, 1980), and *Wake-Pick Poems* (Anansi, 1981).

I have found it fascinating to chart the turning of Gunnars' poetic voice from the trollish primitivism of *Settlement Poems*, through wrestling with the primitive materials of nordic myth in *One-Eyed Moon Maps*, towards, in *Wake-Pick Poems*, an understanding and exploration of trollishness as it can be represented by the growing human psyche. In *Wake-Pick Poems*, too, her nordic material seems more comfortably in hand than in the earlier books. Not yet in book form is other Gunnars verse, some of which abandons the primitive or trollish voice altogether.

The primitivism of Gunnars' *Settlement Poems* is disconcerting. These poems represent the inner thoughts and daybook notations of Icelandic settlers who came to Manitoba in the late nineteenth century, enduring gruelling hardships. These Icelanders are able to read but, as Gunnars portrays them, incapable of logic. Their biology is more naive than Aristoteleans. They have no philosophy, no politics, no physics, little sense of history, and almost no theology. When they tell a "story" it is not narrative but recipe: How to see better at night (smear mouseblood on your eyelids) or How to keep your lover true (eat a ptarmigan heart) — recipes unaffected by experiential testing or scepticism. They have burned their books before leaving Iceland, and have committed methods to memory, not literature.

 this is the last story i'll tell
 the best way to become fertile: drink
 mare's milk, dry a fox's testicle
 in the shade, stir in wine, drink
 after menstruation

Gunnars gives us characters whose struggle for survival has reduced their culture to rote recitations of magical charms, and their social expression to private notation of disaster or dislike. Their sense of themselves as a people seems to preclude their ability to describe themselves as individuals, and their reluctance to make socially observant or generalizing remarks, in the manner of the standard nineteenth-century traveler's journal, makes them seem unnaturally self-concerned. But, although Gunnars' characters avoid novelistic description, Gunnars works hard to distinguish between her characters, succeeding best, perhaps, in the character of Thorgrímur Jónsson, whose entomological interests colour his growing madness, and in terse characterizations such as that by Stefán Eyjólfsson, scorning the British leader John Taylor who does not "read" nature:

 jón taylor stands on the bank
 seems dark up north
 where the red river current goes
 tell him so, 'it's dimming'

taylor's quiet for a while
 then says i can stay behind
 it's the future, not the sky i saw
 but let him stay flatfooted

W. D. Valgardson speaks of the Icelanders as bringing with them their libraries of poetry and a "written tradition." He says that the difficulty of their life was so great that their tradition of making little of suffering led eventually to a "creative aridity." "Poetry became form without content. Fiction dealt with surface. Nonfiction concentrated on facts."¹ This kind of stoicism may be related to the lack of commentary or analysis made by the characters in *Settlement Poems*, but the characters do not make little of suffering. Instead the expression of pain and suffering is almost numbing. Gunnars' intention, of course, was not to have recreated what her characters might have written in time, but to have expressed to what thoughts and emotions they were reduced at that time. The effect, however, is reductive. Her characters do not seem fully clothed in their century.

TO SOME EXTENT GUNNARS' *Settlement Poems* is an example of a fairly large number of Canadian writings which interest themselves in primitive suffering, nightmare visions, and pre-rationalist magic, as an expression of modern paranoia. Gunnars' next book, *One-Eyed Moon Maps*, retains the blood-and-bones interests and some of the trollish primitivism of the voice of *Settlement Poems* but lacks the narrative excuse. The *One-Eyed Moon Maps* speaker is not dying of starvation or smallpox. Insofar as both *Settlement Poems* and *One-Eyed Moon Maps* direct the reader's attention away from interpretation and towards the blood and magic anecdotes of tabloid or fairy tale, they are both trollish.

The troll's world is the immediate world that presents itself, unpatterned, uncontrollable by reason. Knowledge, unrelated to the extra-self world, becomes a matter of tricks. The wisdom of the troll is dream, and perhaps no poetic voice better expresses our primitive rage, but troll poetry lacks perspective.

Gunnars' *One-Eyed Moon Maps* is filled with poetic suggestiveness. The moon, as a blind, wounded, hanged and hanging stone, like a hanged god or rune engraving, dominates the imagery. Wotan's one-eyed telescope brings gnomish illuminations to the runes of meteor scar and star-splash on the lunar surface. But much of *One-Eyed Moon Maps* seems to be writing from recipe — the author takes a rune, a snippet from nordic mythology, a swatch of lunar nomenclature or astronomy, and juxtaposes them as if she were making a salad. The ingredients are agreeable, but some of the poems lack organic coherence or inner necessity.

GUNNARS

For me the weakest of the *One-Eyed Moon Maps* poems are those in which the speaker imagines herself in a medieval or spooky frame of mind, as in “lots”:

bargain with mock-sacrifice
re-enacting vikar’s calf
intestines round my neck
praying for favourable wind. . . .

for the woman’s serene face
let me hang
with rope around my neck
from the black mountain
between her & the vat

I find the strongest poems where the speaker finds her material meaningful in terms of a modern sensibility, “edge,” for example:

grandfather died
down from the north
for the last time
in the blue coat of youth
tried to make it up the stairs
& fell against me
old man in young arms
i pale, change shape
depending on his movement
my life edged with shadow

he plunged his pocketknife
first time down
into the doorpost
told me to pull it out
told me sigmundur volsungur
pulled gramur from a pillar
but i can’t match his
strength, more than moon
matches crescent

with the quarter phase
moon that judges
with one eye
falls against me in the stairs
i can’t lift
the blue pillar
remove the piercing pain
in his chest, plunging
like a ray of light
from blue earth against
narrow moon

A grandfather who contains Wotan and what Wotan can mean is more poetically usable than Wotan alone; equally the qualities of the moon contained by the child and the old man together are more usable than lunar place names — “fabrioius,” “stevinus,” “orcús,” etc.

Gunnars uses a relatively unworked-over body of material for poetry in English, but it tempts her to rely overmuch on the reader’s sharing her delight in lunar nomenclature or in runic alphabets. At the end of *One-Eyed Moon Maps* Gunnars notes: “Like poems, runes are used both as tools of communication and as a means of intercession with powers beyond human control.” She says also that “the religious connection makes it impossible now to tell what powers the rune names were given,” and that the significance of each symbol variously shifted according to where or on what it was written. But if runes are still to possess magic today, the poet must recreate belief. I no longer possess nordic myth emotionally. For me, it is all footnotes, without the ethical interest or historic contextuality of the Jesus story, without the philosophic pragmatism of Buddhism, without the novelistic interest of the Old Testament. What rune has more magic than the books of Job or Isaiah? But perhaps younger readers, imbued with the nordic sympathies of dragon and dungeon fantasy fiction, may respond more sympathetically.

FORTUNATELY, PERHAPS, Gunnars does not devote *One-Eyed Moon Maps* to a revival of a Wagnerian sensibility. Instead the book seems primarily interested in exploring what her interest in this material — nordic, runic, lunar — means. Her juxtapositions and associations intrigue her, and often us. In *Wake-Pick Poems*, however, her most recent book, she looks instead at the emotions that seek for meaning in charm, herb, and ancient tradition, and here I find her work fully successful.

In the last poem of *One-Eyed Moon Maps* Gunnars speaks of “opening the other eye / at last.” In *Wake-Pick Poems* she has turned her attention away from the moons and its “one-eyed dreams” towards the stone which is earth, house, and home. And it is in *Wake-Pick Poems* that she uses the word troll for unmythic, earthy humans.²

Wake-Pick Poems consists of three separate poem sequences, “Changeling,” “Monkshood,” and “Wake-Pick.” Although the persona of each is not the persona of the next, the first presents babyhood, the second, girlhood, and the last, womanhood. All three retain the charm-and-herb ridden atmosphere of *Settlement Poems*. In “Changeling” the herbs, charms, and rituals are essential in the magical and transitional world of the child becoming human. Moreover, magic “works” in “Changeling” as it can not in nineteenth-century Manitoba. In

“Monkshood” and “Wake-Pick” the herb lore is largely medicinal, and the charms and rituals are matters of tradition more than of magic. But in all three of Gunnars’ books, the reason for magic, herbs, and rituals, is fear.

In “Changeling” the baby, earth-born before it is human born, and alien to the alien world, is afraid of the new world into which it has been thrust. It feels both powerless in body and powerful in will. It must be tricked into staying, coaxed into accepting dirty trollhood, baptized with magical waters. The church is pure ingredient, as chemical as bat dung, to trolls. Gunnars illustrates wittily to what extent baby mind and family are adversary and to what extent the growing self defines itself by others, using both traditional legend material and modern science fiction fantasy.

To this growing child, imbued with science fiction’s stock of other-worldly reference, and finding itself within an ague-ridden, roof-leaking, unsanitary trollstead, the fear of death doubly recurs, both as the possible death of freedom of choice, and as the possible death or injury to the body. To return to the elves, the disembodied, alien world, is a kind of dying. To choose to be a troll is to accept vulnerability, dirt, age, mortality. Trolls “take away your innocence,” says the child. “I learn not to care.” It’s “important to get used to dead wood” — “to adjust your eyes in time / adjust your taste / to time.” The child’s choice to be human is a little reminiscent of the chorus from *H.M.S. Pinafore*. “But in spite of all temptations / to belong to other nations” — “Changeling” is a great romp with folk lore and the self-glory of the human child.

Both “Changeling” and “Monkshood” open with the child sent against its will into a foreign country. The newborn says “think i don’t like snow country.” The older child of “Monkshood,” on shipboard, says: “it’s not a trip i’m taking” and “this isn’t my idea.” She has, however, no choice. She has been sent “from reykjavik to københavn” to visit the rest of her family, and will shortly be sent away to school.

The child speaker of “Monkshood” thinks a great deal about death. Even her initial trip seems to her as “another life.” She knows her grandfather, enfeebled with heart attacks, to be near dying, and death in one form or another — news, history, gossip — forms much of the family conversation. Family interest in potions and poisons makes the sequence almost a herbal of noxious weeds. But this girl child no longer has the other-worldly powers of the baby of “Changeling.” Instead, she is asking the questions: What is self if you are the replica of your mother? What is the reality of memory? What can you die of? What is dying like? She tours the city with her school friends, assists Gitte to bring off a miscarriage with henbane, cooks dogbane for the girls at school (apparently out of academic curiosity) and gets sent back to the farm to contemplate nature, the anciently sacrificed Tollund man, and the possible deaths by poison of country children.

As in “Changeling,” the speaker of “Monkshood,” who has initially resisted identification with the family, grows to accept and proclaim her rootedness in family. And, again as in “Changeling,” the speaker associates the increased sense of family with an increased acceptance of death. The two closing poems of the “Monkshood” sequence are spoken by a grown woman, and associate going back in memory with the going back of a ghost, so that the speaker, remembering, is the returning ghost of the dead. Youth is seen as a time of enclosure or walled-in-ness; maturity seems to be the going ahead, through the wall (which is traditionally broken for the dead) towards death — not the trip resisted, but the trip rejoiced in:

everything moves anti-clockwise
 when youth ends
 even the blackeye bryony in the hedgerow
 recedes during morning song

girls' voices mushroom in the fall air
 with grundtvig's lyrics:
 “du er pá vejen hjem”
 & we've heard the phaedo this morning
 about “borrowed beauty not your own”
 & “fitting yourself to await your journey”

i'm tired of morning enclosures
 tired of song & dance

i want to break down the wall
 get going into the open death

The speaker of “Wake-Pick” is a pre-modern woman surviving and supporting others by arduously carding, spinning, weaving, fulling, and knitting. The title refers to wooden picks used to prop open sleepy eyes during the not-infrequent all-night work periods. Necessity drives her, but she believes “freedom is spun / out of restrictions.” She sees her labour as her own choice:

in my own bed a cold
 cruel mother lies

She expresses her fatigue, her anger, and her pride:

my work is my life
 with it i pay. . . .

the strength of woman is an evergreen spreading
 a cedar of lebanon
 an ancient warp

In choosing to sacrifice herself she would give not one eye but both eyes, and not for magical wisdom but for the practical welfare of her people, the ones she loves whom she will not fail:

though i be put to fulling eternity
 soak me, stiff & small
 wring me in the doorway
 but leave me with hands to tie
 love for my people

This woman, half frozen, half-prisoned, almost stone in her working-place, rises above fear. Her heroism has mythic reference and literary tradition, but her power is not magic — it is only handiwork.

GUNNARS RESISTS THE EXPOSITORY. Her poetry has not been, by and large, written as if spoken to the reader, but rather as if speaking to itself. Her poetry tends, therefore, to have an apparent indifference as to whether or not the reader “gets” the references. But it also has the scenic thickness of a realized geography, and the social thickness of a realized community. The sparse characterizations of *Settlement Poems* mention uniqueness, not generalizations: the “poet” is an incompetent taxidermist, the “reader” of portents a bore. The troll family of “Changeling” have unique hobbies. And the subsidiary characters of “Monkshood” are as sharply sketched as notes for a novel.

The characteristic mode of Gunnars’ verse is indicative or imperative, the characteristic tense present, the phrasing blunt, and the lines tending to begin with a strong beat. Often her characters, speaking as if to themselves, omit unnecessary pronouns, or used clipped colloquialisms. Although Gunnars allows her young girl in “Monkshood” the occasional meditative note, and the speaker of “Wake-Pick” lines from the ballads and psalms, Gunnar’s characteristic sound is assertive, even fierce:

leave his grave flat when you go
 let him throw no sundial
 shadow

Settlement Poems, II, p. 15

burn this house, all that’s in it
 send it to sea
 “smoke,” *One-Eyed Moon Maps*

wrap me in shirt
 in home spun swaddles . . .
 name me leech
 name me woodlouse
 “Changeling”

if i fail you now
 use me at the lake
 when you fish through ice holes

let my corpse gather maggots
 "Wake-Pick"

But in a group of poems from "Whale Constellations," published in the Autumn 1981 issue of *Canadian Literature* (No. 90), Gunnars abandons the primitive voice. In "Whale Constellations" she takes up again the partially unresolved problem of *One-Eyed Moon Maps*: how to combine the stars, nordic tradition, and the voice of the contemporary, thinking woman, and for this uses an intellectual, meditative voice. The poems are beautiful.

For the intellect must never be left out of the poem. Where, for reasons of characterization, as in *Settlement Poems*, or for principles of poetics, as would seem to be the case in *One-Eyed Moon Maps*, the intellectual voice would seem to be undesired, or omitted, the poems suffer. But in *Wake-Pick Poems*, although the intellectual voice is not used, the intellect shapes the poems; in "Whale Constellations" it voices them. "Whale Constellations" also gets along without the herbs and the medievalism. Instead Gunnars shows us the connections between her images, and it is the connecting mind which is the source of our delight. The speaker, remembering her whaling grandfather, and the historic decline of both whale trade and whales, places herself among species and within time:

our life too is a hazard
 even in the brightest time
 a fractured face reveals
 hurt intelligence;
 the habitual suffering
 of suspicion

 and when I strand
 like this on your night,
 remember grandfather
 & the accident of whales

Very few poets have written, in what seems to have been a very short period of time, poems that have varied so much their poetic voice: the troll speaking as troll, the troll turning human, the human reflecting — the primitive, the child, the mature and contemporary woman. With this different tuning of voices and focus, Gunnars renews her material and her possibilities. What the changeling declares of its achieved humanity is true of Gunnars' poetic voice:

i've been given
 the key to the kingdom
 i come & go as i wish
 i surpass mountain-folk

 at being mountain-folk

NOTES

- ¹ W. D. Valgardson, "True Norse," *Books in Canada* (August-September 1982), p. 29.
- ² *Settlement Poems* contains a reference to the semi-human, with notes on how to detect one, and how to be safe with one, but the meaning of the superstition is not probed. The illustration is picturesque in intention, not metaphoric.

BROWN CUP, DIRTY GLASSES

George Bowering

fr George Economou

The white wolf hides in the snow,
a line away from blood belonging
to someone else. The flood of mutters
will find him there, betrayed by
a smart-alec scribbler with chilblains.
Whatever they are.

French novelists
treat life as if it were death, never
carry firearms, talk you to death
at dinner tables.

The white wolf hides under the trees
among the snowflakes, it is early autumn,
the earth tilts & does some people a favour.

A long female neck, now
talk about snow, a long neck like a penis,
full of blood.

Why do we let unpleasant images
push in where things were going nicely?

Why did your favourite family member
choke to death at Christmas dinner?

Why is death
so damned interesting?

The white wolf hates it
when you write black words all over him.