

ROBERT FINCH AND THE TEMPTATION OF FORM

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IT WAS CONSCIOUS CHOICE rather than the “naked non-chalance of chance” which determined the form of the poems in the last section of Robert Finch’s recent (1980) *Variations and Theme*. They are composed of twenty-six lines in thirteen rhymed couplets, a number which even the most casual Tarot student knows has been used since time immemorial as a symbolic representation of death and resurrection in the sense of change, becoming, the perpetual flow of Heraclitus where “Things that are known turn into unknown things.” Change, paradoxically, seems the one constant in Finch’s poetry. It is vividly expressed in his first volume *Poems* (1946):

Lost at the centre of change, seeing how strange is
New beside old, we move, to stranger places
For as we move, our sorrow moves, and passes
Through us and we through it and so all changes

It is the subject of the last poem in the carefully orchestrated *Variations and Theme*, and therefore of some significance. A recent academic article by Finch is also concerned with the theme of change reflected in a very different way and in a different milieu — the use made of the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid by the French poet Benserade in the seventeenth century, a writer, incidentally, just as independent of fashionable trends as Finch himself. “Je suis dehors,” he remarked.

Such overlapping of professional activity and private occupation should alert critics to the possibility of there being more layers of meaning, more subtleties of association in Finch’s work than have been commonly noticed by his reviewers. With the admirable exception of William Walsh,¹ critics have tended to stress the superficial aspects of form in his poetry rather than treating the form as part of a total vision, an expression of patterns of mental structure and sensibility, one of whose outward and visible signs is coherent language. The very expressions used — “casual and arbitrary brilliance,” “careful and consummate workmanship,” “pure surface image,” and others more critical, “neat,” “brisk” — indicate the emphasis. And for all the notice that has been taken of his long involvement with French poetic theory and practice (the French who are so logically articulate

about their poetry) he might as well have been studying the culture of the ancient Sumerians. International, cosmopolitan, European — these epithets certainly reflect a consciousness of his wide cultural interests including German literature — but surely more relevant descriptions are required, and careful studies, to bring out the importance of this French background.

Reviewers have, nevertheless, been perfectly justified in picking up the effect of the gleaming surface, the organized débris of experience (sensation, emotion, memory) which make up the poem. For Robert Finch's eye is fundamentally that of the artist, a painter who has had many successful exhibitions to his credit between 1921 and 1978. He is also a musician, and in his academic persona a critic of aesthetic theory. This combination of visual experience, musical aptitude, and understanding of the creative process in the work of others is unusual in Canada, opening as it does perspectives in criticism as tantalizing as they are impossible to pursue here. To mention merely one example, there seems an obvious parallel between the position of the eighteenth-century French poets studied by Finch in *The Sixth Sense*, who were looking for new modes of expression in poetry and music to match a changing sensibility, and the early work of A. J. M. Smith, Frank Scott, and Finch himself in bringing fresh perspectives into the Canadian poetry of the 1930's and 1940's.

In considering the importance of form in Finch's vision, it seems to be essential to take his painting into account; he has been an artist for as long as or even longer than he has been a poet. From time to time, there occurs a fusion of the two modes of consciousness, and I do not mean by that simply the anthology pieces such as "Statue" or "Train Window" with their realistic evocation of a moment in time permanently caught on the page. In "Sea-piece" the poet uses pictorial terms to conjure up the image:

The pencil lines of the pale brown deck
 explode from the point of the mast's white crayon

 and the white net rope of the rails
 fences this gouache geometry.

Music is not forgotten. There are trombones too.

A more analytic approach can be seen in "The Painter ii" from *Silverthorn Bush* thirty years later:

I first studied bamboo-painting using bamboos
 Themselves as my instructors. Then I tried,
 Unorthodoxly perhaps, with an air of humour,
 In writing, supple, wiry, flowing as wind,
 To paint the sound of footsteps in lonely valleys,
 The colour of voices from a drifting night

Although Finch has experimented with many styles of painting, the element which ties them together, and relates the work to the poetry, is a sense of structure as firm as it is unobtrusive. This is particularly so in paintings where the nature of the subject lends itself to patterns in gouache or watercolour whose original form is architectural — blocks, triangles, oblongs, half-circles of houses and buildings. Their shapes may be very simply suggested *à la chinoise* with a few strokes of crayon or wash; complexities of inner space may be fully explored; or they may be presented flat face, as in a watercolour of a house in Prince Edward Island whose ultimate effect, while suggesting the primitive eye, is nevertheless one of extreme sophistication. There are also pure abstracts where the form is co-terminous with the rich, irregular blocks of colour.

One's first impression is that there are no human beings at all in this continuing panorama. This is curious, for the poetry is thronged with people, either observed passing by in park, street, or corridor, or so closely connected with the author that certain sequences such as no. 3 of *Poems* could easily be interpreted as plots for Jamesian novels or dramatic monologues reminiscent of Browning. This is equally true of individual poems of any date up to the present, including those in the most recent (1981) *Has and Is*, such as "Sight Unseen" and "Enclave," and the complex *Variations* VIII and IX whose shadowy protagonists are known only by the enigma of their responses against backgrounds whose material décor is elegantly sketched. The geography, whether it be town or country, is always more definite than the identities even though the psychological stance of the speaker is precisely indicated.

Finch points out that, in addition to the types of painting mentioned above, he has always executed works arising out of fantasy and dream where figures of people do indeed play a central role. It would be astonishing for someone exposed to French surrealism and the visions of earlier artists such as Odilon Redon not to bear some traces of these influences. But in the poetry, direct references to the subconscious are rare, and it is possible that this aspect of the changing protean psyche has found its most satisfactory expression in forms offered by art rather than in language. There are certainly dream worlds in Finch's literary work, but they are traditional rather than Jungian, idealistic rather than bizarre.

Yet the very absence of the human element suggests its presence off-stage. As in early Di Chirico paintings, there is a faintly disturbing quality about the empty streets and cafés, the quays where no boats dock. Even such differing works as a realistic drawing of ornamental cane chairs (used as a poster for the 1978 exhibition) and a more complex outdoor scene of two lighthouses at Grau manifest this sense of otherness. Who belongs to these seats with their intertwining knots, their Tarot wands-hearts symbolism? And where have all the ships gone? A simple trick of perspective, lines meeting on the horizon, allows the structure to point to more than itself.

ALTHOUGH THE OBSERVANT EYE is of course basic to Finch's poetry, the visual element, especially in his early work, becomes merely one of many in a closely woven network of images, feelings, sensation, and comment. And perhaps because his mind is a naturally reflective one as well as being acutely conscious of its own functioning, one enters into a universe where the moral is as pervasively present as the aesthetic. Birds become part of the problem of religious doubt:

pigeons that flaunt the feigned arcade
 in copper wings and ashen tails,
 that sink their beaks in necks of suède,
 or pinkly drift on smoky sails

("Doubt's Holiday")

The pond in "The Hole in the Day" becomes a symbol of illusion, while both sea and trees are constantly invoked as part of the inevitable process of human decay in time, with its corollary, in Finch's world, of spiritual growth.

William Walsh may be right, in a general way, in pointing out Finch's kinship with Matthew Arnold. But it would be more true to say that long exposure to the French habit of mind, and particularly to the *moralistes* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, has been instrumental in forming his marked tendency to generalize, like the Augustans, on human experience. And from both these sources come the witty epigram, the flourish of the rhymed couplet, the steady practice of poetry as intellectual fun in *vers de circonstance* or verses which are written deliberately in order to become familiar with the possibilities and limitations of a formal metre. The long sonnet sequences of Renaissance poets — Italian, French, English — also come to mind.

"No poem, however light, can afford to be less than perfect." This is the Margaret Avison of 1945, replying in the *Canadian Forum* to a howl from Irving Layton over what he considered an unfair review, and the statement seems to express succinctly the attitude of most serious poets of the forties who were indirectly or directly absorbing the influence of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, and the richly varied intellectual scene in Europe during the first part of the century. As a corrective to parochialism and watered-down Victorianism this experience could hardly have been bettered, and it is clear that in his formative years Finch received earlier, and more directly than most, the impact of a point of view on aesthetics which transcends fashion and which, apart from its classical roots, can be traced in modern terms back to Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier. The latter, pointing out that the artist must work at his medium, said "Que ton rêve flottant / Se scelle / Dans le bloc résistant," and for the poet the "bloc résistant" is language, that infinitely tricky medium facing thought in one direction and music in another.

And one must make it clear here that Margaret Avison was not discussing the merits of metrical or non-metrical verse, she was talking about sloppy writing from a poet capable of better things. Finch's practice, whether he is using metrical forms or not, brings him squarely into Avison's court, into the camp of the *artistes* rather than the *voyants*, artificial though Marcel Raymond's famous distinction may be, and particularly so if applied to English texts. Since some of Finch's most successful effects, such as "Scroll Section" and "Campaspe" are not in formal metre at all, one can conclude that the care for language which will be adequate to the occasion of the poem is for him an aesthetic necessity quite divorced from the choice of poetic pattern.

Useful though the distinction is for academic criticism, I find it difficult as a writer to accept any formulation of the creative act which says or implies that form is imposed upon content. What the reader finds in the poem represents a final crystallization of language dynamically at work in the mind after an infinite number of starts involving echoes and associations which eventually create a *text* that the author (originally struck by a phrase or a rhythm) may never have intended or expected. In this connection, one can say that twentieth-century explorations into subconscious mental processes, and a growing literary interest in authors' drafts, have both contributed to an understanding that the poem is a result of organic growth rather than a content poured into a restrictive form.

Finch is completely aware of the complexity inherent in the poetic process ("The Reticent Phrase," "The Poem") as well as the ultimate mystery of the origins of the word. But since metrical forms do seem to predominate in his work, it seems reasonable to enquire why, and to ask why he has not followed the paths of Dorothy Livesay, P. K. Page, and Earle Birney, whose first publications are roughly contemporary with his own, and who have all shown more enthusiasm for experiment in various ways. It is not as though Finch cannot hear and use the colloquial when he chooses.

One answer may lie in the Gautier quotation above, and in what Yeats called "the fascination of what's difficult." The fixed form, like Everest, is always there as a continual challenge. And if by constant manipulation of a certain form the writer makes it part of automatic or unconscious neurological processes, it is possible to arrive at the stage where the actual germ of the poem occurs as a spontaneously generated unit of language already attached to a rhythm which is characteristic of some fixed form. For some poets, such as Paul Valéry, who left such a valuable record of his creative life, the first intimation of a poem in the hinterland of the mind may even be a suggestion of rhythm without words at all. The value of such deliberate familiarity with form lies here: there is a fusion at the subliminal level of word and metrical stress which allows experiences to rise from the depths not just *in* form but *as* form.

“A shape to hold the form begin to bloom” — there appear to be other advantages offered by the metrical form. For those who enjoy practising it, there is an extra element of linguistic tension added to the already complex variables which make up the poem. Undoubtedly the counterpointing of natural speech against a basic beat allows the poet to create effects which might otherwise go unrealized, just as the search for a rhyme can reveal hitherto unsuspected truths about the realities of a theme which may or may not be the true subject of the poem. Would it be fair to say that all serious poetry, apart from pure narrative, is truth-telling of a kind, whatever the temporary masks donned by the poet for the exercise, and that metrical form helps in the process of listening to one’s truths? “The word on the lips / Only re-shapes / The mask it rips” (“The Words”).

A. J. M. SMITH USED TO STRESS that poetry — or any art — was a way of bringing order into chaos, and that the formal patterns of poetry enabled the poet to tame his experiences by becoming more conscious of them through the very effort of articulation. Finch’s attitude to form seems to take the process one step further, because, as the religious poems in *Has and Is* make clear, the poet’s act of creation parallels the Word: “And yet a Poet by this alchemy / Is making what is His belong to me.” He has exploited an infinite number of metrical effects which, through the counterpointing of voice patterns against a basic beat, provide a continuing framework of musical expectation at a level which is subliminal rather than obtrusive. The patterns exist outside trends, outside time, and they do not depend for their impact on the personality or the emotionally charged voice of the poet at a public reading. But the reader must listen; the syntax may be complicated.

The variety of forms, in spite of the ubiquitous sonnet, is matched by complexity of thought and feeling. Finch’s range is wide. The ironic manipulative wit of “The Rule” where there is just one stress in each line (except line 7 where both monosyllabic adjectives must have equal force) represents a deliberately formal art which simply amuses itself by its own expertise: “Adrift / Lest gift / Of all / Should pall / And much / At odds / With gods / And ends.” In more classic form, the social scene is satirized:

While the refreshments spread and with them girths
As imperceptibly as the conviction
That gratified desire has no connection
With either deaths or marriages or births

(“All Their Parts”)

But this flourish of technique is only, in a sense, the beginning. The door then opens on more deeply felt experiences such as some of the love poems or the simple religious certainty of the last poem of *Dover Beach Revisited*:

Once in a timeless interim I touched it,
 Alone in a crowd, crowding the other lonely,
 Unheard, unseen, with nothing at all that vouched it,
 I touched it, it touched me, once, once only.

(“The Certainty”)

Some of Finch’s most effective work is seen when the natural syntax and emphasis of the voice breathes so easily in the formal pattern that the latter is simply absorbed into the total texture of the poem, as in “Effect of Snow — iii,” part of a suite in *Acis in Oxford* which in 1962 won Finch his second Governor General’s award as well as some criticism from poets who were listening to the beat of more modern drummers. This poem is particularly interesting because, like no. xiv of *Variations*, it suggests the world of dream, maya, illusion, which is never far from Robert Finch’s perceptions (“waking self and sleeping self”) and exists along with the perfectly observed momentary reality:

I have seen the snow like a mirage impending
 Upon the eyelids of the dreaming air

.....

I have heard it sing one note against another
 So quiet only the quiet heart could hear,
 Or lay its silence down, feather by feather
 On the discordant day, the restless fear

The arabesques of thought move out and back until they come to rest in controlled harmony.

The first poem in the suite is much sharper in its effects, both visual and aural, depending as it does on the contrast between black and white, dark sky and white ground, recalling a chessboard with trees as pieces. As so often, the moment is poised in a perilous equilibrium:

What is the move? One move from left to right
 And the whole wood will move from bleak to bright.

What wood? An ordinary Ontario lot? Dante’s? Eliot’s? The tight form allows vistas to open here, although frequently in Finch’s work one finds endings which seem, because of the necessities of the stanza form, to close off the flow abruptly. This is, of course, one of the real disadvantages of formal verse; the second poem in the series illustrates this:

And, with its lacquered cornices of snow
 A white pagoda, once a bungalow.

The descent into suburbia is disconcerting.

Looking at Finch's work as a whole, one is struck not just by his many voices but by the persistence of an angle of vision whose probing illumination spares neither the poet himself nor the *dramatis personae* he conjures up and buries in his well-wrought urns. The technical interest for the reader in many poems of the recent *Variations and Theme* lies in the way a traditional form can hold a subtle and mysterious balance between what is said and what is unsaid, for the poet's Jamesian eye, added to a Racinian sensibility, roves like the shifting camera of a contemporary film over scenes where only a look, a profile, a moving hand define the progress of the action. These scenes are dateless and in their own way timeless, and once the ear gets used to the convention of the rhymed couplet, for example, we are made free of moments of intensely realized drama. There is the ironically presented seduction scene where candles throw a Georges de la Tour light on two figures in a claustrophobic dining-room; on the next page, by contrast, a sunlit Mediterranean salon and garden, fresh as a Matisse, after a decision which seems also to involve a crime:

Hide,
 Leave by the window on the other side,
 From where detection will remain remote.
 Pinned to the pillow is a pencilled note.

Pinned by a stiletto? The high decorum of Finch's art demands that the recipient's hysteria remain unsung.

Any definitive study of form in Robert Finch's work would be bound to consider not only the comparatively modern concepts briefly mentioned here, but also the aesthetic theories of the Renaissance and the eighteenth century when the dynamic relationships between the arts (music, painting, poetry, architecture) were not only more real than they are today, but also apprehended more deeply at a philosophical level. A final word is provided by Louis Dudek, discussing Phyllis Webb: "After all, what matters is the form, whether of joy or sorrow, when it comes to the ritual of art."

NOTES

¹ William Walsh, "The Poetry of Robert Finch," *Bulletin of Canadian Studies*, 2 (April 1978), 1-15.

