DAPHNE MARLATT'S POETRY

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IT IS DIFFICULT TO READ Daphne Marlatt's poetry[1] without seeing the river. Behind each of the books she has published to date, there is a current which flows toward a heightened perception of an immanent world. The current joins each of her works, swelling into the torrent of impressions, sensations, and images which characterize *Steveston*. Linked to this inherent proclivity for movement is a need for poetic progress: each book can be seen as representing some form of search for an appropriate language of relation, for a form of discourse which will find a centre and render in clarity the instantaneous apprehension of things and thoughts caught in flux:

> shapes flutter
> glide into each other
> but the hand
> wanting to know
> picks a thing
> out from the center

Marlatt is involved in a quest for words which will give access to the truth of sight, reflecting not only the moment, but also the dynamic nature of experience and cognition. She arrives at a torrent, but not overnight. In fact, much of the power (and sometimes the weakness) of her earliest work lies in the tension between a tentative, frightened spontaneity, and an ambitious, robust control. So that in her first book, *Frames*, we find her hesitant about the plunge into this river of experience, content at first to watch this movement called Life from the sidelines, as if it were a show: "I'm / on the sidewalk viewing the procession."

Gradually, she compromises, slowly immersing herself in the flow, thereby allowing *Frames* to become more than simply a poeticized version of Andersen's "The Snow Queen." Marlatt reinterprets a number of the tale's motifs, and uses

these to define and call into question her own situation as a poet. The result is an allegorical prose-poem dealing with a search for a form of aesthetic freedom in the face of limitations imposed by style and personal experience. The first lines acquaint us with the themes of imprisonment, escape, and search, while the book at large elaborates upon these themes by examining them in the context of restrictive private and aesthetic frames.

The protagonists are Kay and Gerda, two next-door playmates living in attic rooms. Through the frames of windows decorated with boxes of roses they watch each other watch each other. Sometimes Gerda visits Kay, and listens to his grandmother's stories. Clearly, Kay and Gerda lead a life dominated by images of enclosure which limit and structure their experience of the world. Grandmother's stories constitute the most potent image of confinement, for her words belong to a paralyzed, strictly ordered past divorced from process and liberty: "She hypnotizes me with the past fulfilled, / always filled, as if that should be enough." Until Kay and Gerda and Marlatt herself are "lockt / in the grandmother's stopt voice," and left with no alternative but to survive through fleeing into a story of flow which endeavours to obliterate the incarcerating influence of dead words and frozen time:

> (at your grandmother's
> time is a glacier, bodies of ancestors keep turning up in
> the shadows of afternoon . . . But here, if anywhere, is
> a way out there

Marlatt has every right to join Kay and Gerda in flight, for their predicament, and the development of their story, serves as a metaphor for the problems of growth encountered by a poet struggling to break away from the frames imposed by established word patterns and the falsities implied by a worldview which categorizes experience, storytelling it in standardized form, as if the motion of living was always the same, always sane. Marlatt is not opposed to absolutes, but to the belief that absolutes can exist in isolation. Throughout her works, she insists that experience is a matter of relation. Hence stasis is validated by movement, stability assumes meaning in the midst of chaos, the individual realizes himself through others.

Frames represents Marlatt's initial attempt to formulate a poetry which would establish a correlation between perception and articulation. The task she immediately sets for herself is that of seeing herself seeing the world. She expresses a desire to unite the arts of seeing and telling in a bond so intimate that the eye will be interchangeable with the mouth: "as far as the eye can tell. . . . " Or, she sees herself as a digester of word-phrases-as-food, reorganizing, assimilating, and occasionally regurgitating the words, purging herself through the creation of new pictures which originate in the depths of her system:

thrown up
on each other in a
room word pictures be
come cru
/shall . . .

But she recognizes the difficulty of satisfying her own objectives, and in *Frames* we witness the struggle involved in achieving a balance between language and the reality it tries to describe. Because that balance never quite materializes here, language still manages to subdue the expression of reality, resulting in a strange mixture of fantasy, dream, and fact.

Significantly, both children are driven and controlled by the implications of language, and Kay is immediately presented as the victim of words which affect him in the same way as the fragments from the demon's distorted mirror do in the Andersen tale:

from this we know
two mirror chips divide
love
his vision of love
eyes
his heart

Kay suffers from the effects of a selective vision which ignores and destroys totality. Consequently, he cannot realize the complete poetic vision which, Marlatt implies, is composed of a blending of sight and emotion, heart and eye. The phrases which Grandmother casts upon Kay hypnotize him into believing that reality is the story itself, and so he is blinded to process and the world, stripped of his emotions, becoming a slave to the "Snow Queen" heroine whose tale has overcome him.

Marlatt sympathizes with Kay's plight, for it signifies many of the constrictions that she herself is trying to avoid. More important is the fact that she identifies with Gerda, whose activities assume the form of an aesthetic quest for experience inspired by a thirst for discovery. In the process of her quest for Kay, Gerda reads and interprets a phenomenological universe of signs which direct her towards the object of her search. Marlatt seems to admire Gerda's ability to leap into a flow of experience, and she emphasizes the power of the child's eyes, which are like nets capturing the multitude of images which constitute experience:

Can she see her seeing net

sight, light
start out of her eye!

There is an obvious envy of Gerda's camera-like eye, photographic in its ability to objectively capture the progression of moments constituting her search:

tells her tale
    caught
in camera obscura of her
history, an image
of the search

Clearly, one of the problems in *Frames* centres on Marlatt's dependence upon a character called Gerda: "Gerda, you'd better believe it! I'm clinging to you." Marlatt's reliance upon Gerda signifies a reluctance to assume her own voice, and a fear at the thought of challenging the river alone. At the same time, she wants desperately to discover the child's sense of wonder and immediacy, to move into Gerda's world of relentless and varied experience. So like a child she cries: "Let me come too!" And she does go, but their voyage ends in failure. Although Gerda manages to locate Kay, the poetic release ostensibly to be derived from the movement towards cognition never materializes. The story ends much as it began, with Kay and Gerda once again depicted as prisoners: "Back to back to the room. Where / windowboxes with roses border their image of the world." Any suggestion of the fairy tale is destroyed, and reality returns more heavily than ever, accompanied by a sense of defeat. On one level, the defeat is an aesthetic one, engendered by Marlatt's knowledge of the fact that she has relied upon the medium of Kay and Gerda to transmit her own experience of the world. Like them, she has tried to escape a frame imposed by words, but ultimately she admits the impotence of her own attempt. This aspect of the poetry is best revealed through an examination of the titles describing the seven sections into which *Frames* is divided. She is found, static, in (I) "white as of the white room," moving cautiously through (II) "shadows doors are" into colour and sunlight, where she experiments with poetry as painting in (III) "primarily colours," gradually employing (IV) "light affects," and realizing (V) "visual purple." In (VI) "eye lights," the eye is defined in a play upon the painter's word "highlight." But in the last section, "Out a rose window," Marlatt renunciates all claims to what she herself saw as progress, admitting that her art, which depended largely upon a voice at second remove, never managed to progress beyond a semi-real word encounter with experience. So the image of the window and "containment (not content —)" is reinstated as Marlatt confesses to a lingering predilection for rose-coloured vision.

The story of Kay and Gerda serves as more than a metaphor for an aesthetic impasse. It also describes the very real personal crisis of a woman who has recently abandoned a difficult relationship which threatened to enclose her. In this sense the children can be seen as representing two lovers who have parted. While Kay demonstrated the cruelty of a man whose heart has turned to stone, Gerda is the epitome of a woman enslaved to the memory of a man whose visage continues to haunt her. The distinct note of pain involved in the thought of a

snapshot-captured past is relieved only by the glimpses of freedom and weightlessness which are features of a developing individuality:

> But the whole weight of me shifted, changed value in fact. Without gravity I was absent too. Blown anywhere, clung to any personplace (for reprieval), had to begin to be a . . . will

It is this weight of the past which makes the act of seeing in the present so difficult to realize: "knotted in remembrance, not . . . / seeing." The poetry of *Frames* may have frustrated its creator in her search for words and a style which would accurately reflect the sensation of being a consciousness in the world. But this does not detract from the fact that even in her first volume, Marlatt provides the reader with an example of creative brilliance and stylistic innovation.

ONE YEAR LATER, IN 1969, SHE RETURNED to the public with *Leaf leaf/s*, determined to purify both language and image, and to resolve any discord between perception, voice, and experience. In her second book, Marlatt dispenses with any reliance upon fantasy or assumed voice, and somewhat resolves the conflict between stasis and fluidity by depicting consciousness as a series of instants comprising a flow, rather than as fragments and fluid which cannot mix. Here, Marlatt speaks in images as sharp and precise as photographs. Language no longer reflects upon experience, but *is* experience — the work is concise, immediate, distilled, demonstrating a variety of instantaneous responses to surrounding phenomena:

> that the
> summit of mountains
> should be
>
> hot at that much
> closer to
>
> ah clouds the
> sun

Each poem in the collection can be seen as an image which expresses an abrupt combination of the thing perceived and its effect upon the perceiver. These imagistic poems exist as entities, but they act as a leaf amongst leaves (leafs/s), or as part of a larger totality (tree of life?). The result is a set of perceptions which mirror a portion of Marlatt's awareness.

Leaf leaf/s appears almost as an exercise originating in reaction to *Frames*, and certainly, the reaction is complete. Whereas in *Frames* the syntax was often extended and complex, *Leaf leaf/s* presents a streamlined and extremely pure

arrangement of language. Frequently, words stand alone as poems within poems, or as precious moments related to the whole through imagistic suggestion. The poem bearing the significant title "Photograph" is a good example:

you sd a stalk I look
like a weed wind blows
thru

  singly
  smokes &
  fumes
green's
unripe a colour but
elemental, grass
easily hugs
ground, that's you

Although Marlatt's second book resolves many of the difficulties connected with *Frames*, the feeling remains that there is an overreaction here, that by immersing herself so completely in the experience of a phenomenological universe she ignores several of the questions of relation that remained unanswered in *Frames*. Marlatt is at her best when she qualifies an experience of the moment by relating it to time. A reading of *Rings* (1917) and *Steveston* demonstrates the intensity she can achieve by utilizing public and private history. Both of these later books are strengthened by their depiction of a poetic encounter with diverse forms of process and instantaneity. In comparison, *Leaf leaf/s* suffers, for it is solely concerned with a singular experience of the moment abstracted from duration. Nevertheless, its strong images form a powerful part of the foundation upon which Marlatt constructs the success of her later works.

Rings immediately recalls *Frames* through its introductory metaphors of enslavement, but here, the notion of restraint is highlighted by contrasting images of hope, release, and birth. In one respect, the birth of her child reintroduces the heroine to a whole range of apprehensions which had been stifled in the silence of a difficult marriage. The re-entry of perception is accompanied by a shift in language that becomes more dynamic as the newborn child grows. Although the problems of wedlock are never resolved, there is a progressive emphasis on movement and increased clarity of vision, suggesting the development of a healthy state of control derived from the mastery of language in terms of relation. Now, Marlatt manages to organize and coherently employ many of the qualities which she sees as essential to the poetic act: process intermingled with definition through stability, self-definition realized with regard to an environment of others, the development of a phenomenological approach to seeing matched by an identical approach to the mode of being.

The first words of *Rings* give voice to the heroine's conscious state: "Like a stone." The initial image of weight and stasis gives way to a blending that establishes a correlation between the woman's stifled condition and the suffocating effects of a silent landscape and a brooding husband: "... smothered by the snowy silence, yours. Me?" This pervasive silence is quickly offset by a "jingling of rings," the symbol of an imprisoning marriage. Finally, a myriad of sensory impressions combine, working together to define the consciousness of a woman pregnant not only with child, but with the tensions of a strained marriage. Characteristically, the fear of isolation-separation is linked to a problem of words:

> My nerve ends stretch, anticipating hidden dark. I read too much in your words, I read silences where there is nothing to say, to be said, to be read. Afraid of your fear of the sea that surrounds us, Cuts off roads ...

But this vision of being severed from the world ("disinherited from your claim to the earth") is relieved by the waves of sun breaking through the window, and the ensuing realization that sight has the ability to penetrate barriers and join every object in a multilevelled vision of movement and birth. As the sun "pierces glass (cold) irradiating skin, water, wood," every sense converges in the creation of a picture of hope, and the unborn child "kicks, suddenly unaccountable unseen."

Rings "ii" continues to describe the woman's immersion in a multisensory universe, but an interesting shift occurs, for the barriers between inner and outer begin to disintegrate, making it difficult to distinguish between the seer and what is seen. Marlatt's attempt to communicate the belief that we are what we see finds its best expression in this section:

> Back, back into the room we circle, It rings us. No, grows out of our heads like the fern in carboniferous light, smoke

The notion of perceptual and emotional intermingling develops in the woman's mind until every fact of experience, from the past into the present, intersects in the illustration of the functioning of a complex human state of mind. Marlatt's technical aims are also concerned with a blending, and so are governed by the belief in "image to outer" — the conviction that there is a never ending equivalence between landscapes of the world and mind.

Contained within the third section of *Rings* is the kernel of Marlatt's aesthetic. First, the familiar river image is evoked, signifying an ever-present state of flux and relativity, followed by a compact statement of the poet's concept of her art:

> Like a dream. There is no story only the telling with no end in view or, born headfirst, you start at the beginning & work backwards

The emphasis is upon discourse as a spontaneous act unhampered by structures of

plot or duration. Yet at the same time, creativity and movement are made possible only through a process of self-discovery which involves an investigation of causality. As the woman meditates upon the child floating within her, a parallel is established between birth and creativity. The poet survives in the stream of experience only by continually relocating the origins of flow:

> 'delivered'
> is a coming into THIS stream. You start at the beginning
> & it keeps on beginning

Although fragmented language and images continue to illustrate the presence of a multiphasic consciousness, the fourth section of *Rings* is primarily devoted to an examination of another relation: that between process, purgation, and birth. The metaphor is clear: creation can only be the product of a total release of consciousness. Spontaneity as a diarrhoea of words. The woman's desperate need for intestinal release is emphatically linked to the release provided by birth: "if only / it would all come out. But what if I had the baby in the toilet!" The greatest potential for poetry, however, exists in the actual movement involved in the process of birth, for only then is restraint destroyed to the extent that language cannot help but explode in expressing a tornado of sensation. No wonder the "birth" section of *Rings* is the most intense writing Marlatt has done yet. Absolute abandonment to flow.

The rush of language is succeeded by a placid language reflecting a calmer emotional state. Through the birth of her child, the woman herself is reborn into a world of innocence. In her desire to fulfil the infant's needs, the woman finds herself imagining (imaging) and finally becoming his conscious state:

> this newborn (reborn) sensing, child I am with him,
> with sight, all my senses clear, for the first time, since
> I can remember, childlike spinning, dizzy

The section continues to evaluate the surrounding phenomena in a language as simple as childhood:

> This world. Something precious,
> something out of the course of time marked off by clocks

Reassembling the infant's astonishment. But not for long:

> cars whirr by outside, gravel spews. (A certain motor.
> Gears down, stops. News from outside coming home

Her husband's re-entry is matched by a return to more complex language and thought. Yet in the last section of *Rings* there is a sense of lingering tranquility, not because the marriage is better, but because the new child will add softness to experience. The book ends in an unsteady voyage away from the past and beyond familiar borders, suggesting the possibility of a marital recreation:

> How do you feel about leaving? for good. That question. (If it is good. If we can make it so.)

The book's energy originates in the overall coherence that is established between a variety of conscious states, and in Marlatt's ability to realize a potent equation between sight, language, and thought.

RINGS ENDS ON A NOTE OF DEPARTURE, to be followed by a poetry of return and recognition. *Vancouver Poems* (1972) is a collection of highly polished sketches of city life, made vital by Marlatt's knowledge of Vancouver, and by the research she has done to enlarge upon that knowledge. A glimpse at the credits on the final page serves as proof of Marlatt's increasing concern with an "expanded vision" that sees the present with the aid of historical and sociological information. She is trying to discover an underlying myth which binds the poet into a ritualistic identification with the environment and its history. Consequently, we find poems inspired by the reading of such diverse sources as the *Vancouver Historical Journal*, *Art of the Kwakiutl Indians*, Weil-Brecht-Blitzstein, and *Vancouver from Milltown to Metropolis*. The ritual is discovered as life itself, and the poet incarnates the ritual by becoming the word/world mouth which feeds on vision, growing on the nourishment of phenomena:

> We live by (at the mouth of
> the world, & the ritual. Draws strength. Is not Secret
> a woman gives (in taking, Q'ominoqas) rich within the
> lockt-up street. Whose heart beats here, taking it
> all in . . .

In these poems, Marlatt repeats her habitual contention that the self can be understood only in relation to external phenomena, insisting that "matter inserts relation." Much of the book is devoted to the painstaking examination of the objects surrounding the poet. In fact, the success of Marlatt's effort is indicated by the difficulty which is inevitably encountered in any attempt to describe or classify the inexhaustible flood of images she incorporates. This phenomenological inundation forces the reader to see Vancouver as a tangible reality. It also provides a lesson in the way we can visually restructure (re/see) our own surroundings.

In many ways, *Vancouver Poems* serves as the testing ground for Marlatt's latest book. Every facet of her skill as a poet is demonstrated in *Steveston*. Here (as the epigraph from James Agee indicates), she continues her avowed intention of "seeking to perceive it as it stands," creating word pictures which capture a set of momentary apprehensions. At the same time, she manages to blend those incredibly tight images with a flowing style that speaks for a Heraclitean experi-

ence of flux, discovering the voice which allows her to unite the acts of seeing and telling.

It seems only natural that in this volume, her poems are bound with (and to) Robert Minden's photographs, for her poems, as we have seen, always seek the precision, objectivity, and instantaneous image implied by the photograph, and her books are progressively characterized by an application of photographic principles. In *Frames*, she expressed her recognition of the imagistic power of the photograph, but tended towards the more traditional association between poetry and painting, perhaps because the snapshot then represented a verisimilitude that spoke with frightening ease about reality. *Leaf leaf/s* represented an attempt to create a group of imagistic poems possessing a photographic appeal to exactitude. Then in *Rings* we witnessed Marlatt's endeavour to improve the coherence between several "exposures" of consciousness, and in *Vancouver Poems* she experimented with photographic impressions modulated by the introduction of personal recollection and historical data. *Steveston* is composed of a photographic poetry of immanence that improves upon the experiments of earlier works. But the book is much more than a refined expression of previous vision, for here, the maturation of Marlatt's voice is matched by a growth of self assurance that allows her to see herself in relation to a host of external questions. Throughout *Steveston*, Marlatt is continually examining the nature of her own poetic discourse, reminding herself of the need to remain attentive to the facts of physical reality:

> multiplicity simply there: the physical matter of
> the place (what matters) meaning, don't get theoretical now . . .

Steveston is the antithesis of that reluctant trickling which began in *Frames*. Now Marlatt has unquestionably connected the story with a torrent of visual experience. For her, the book represents a visual reinitiation into life, and its structure describes an expanding rush towards a heightened understanding. At first, Marlatt confronts Steveston in the role of detached alien, capable only of seeing the town in terms of its exterior characteristics, or in relation to the publicized facts of its history. She knows that Steveston is the headquarters of B.C. Packers, but only in the course of her visit to the town does she realize the extent to which the canning industry has relentlessly exploited its resources, both human and environmental. In her desire to know Steveston's present, Marlatt begins by imagining the past of a town stricken by fire in 1918:

> Imagine: a town
>
> Imagine a town running
> (smoothly?
> a town running before a fire . . .

Movement begins with this step into Steveston's past. As her perception becomes

more acute (and involved), she works her way through history into the present, arriving at a characteristic immediacy of sight. From an investigation of the general, she moves to a consideration of the particular, concerning herself first with industrial buildings and groups, and then with individuals, their jobs, their outlook, their home life:

> To live in a place. Immanent. In
> place. Yet to feel at sea. To come from elsewhere & then to
> discover/ love, has a house & name. Has land. Is landed . . .

As usual, Marlatt's perceptions transform her as she transforms through sight. In the end, the identification she realizes is so complete that she once again sees herself as performing the function of a mouth, giving voice to the sight of Steveston. Having assumed this primary role, she then associates directly with the mouth of the Fraser itself, indicating her willingness to explicate spontaneously and to become metaphorically the very symbol of Steveston's lifeblood. She is "at the mouth, where the river runs, in to the/ immanence of things."

This image of the poet-as-mouth-as-river is but another illustration of the repeated connection Marlatt makes between perception, digestion, and purgation. By allowing the phenomena which *are* Steveston to pass through her, Marlatt is able to "digest" the town, regurgitating it as a purged verbalvisual image. Similar images of purgation appeared in *Frames* and *Rings*.

The resulting pictures of Steveston may be pure, but they are not pretty. Dominated by a disinfected, punctuated industrial routine, a multitude of immigrant workers find themselves enslaved and exploited by a packing plant that "packs their lives, chopping off the hours." Indeed, these people face the same fate as the fish which roll smoothly towards a mechanical death on the non-stop conveyor belts of productivity: "the blade with teeth marked: / for marriage, for birth, for death." The mechanical precision associated with the factory also tyrannizes a community suffocated by an overdose of control: "& it all settles down into an order of orders . . . " Until consciousness itself becomes "silent, impassive," waiting in futility for an impossible release from an existence where "nothing moves," where even dream is shown to be an enslaved "pounding with the pound of machinery under mountains of empty packer/ pens."

The effects on an industry which thrives on the exploitation of human resources can be seen in an environment that is ravaged by pollution and destroyed through abuse. In this "decomposed ground chocked by refuse, profit, & the concrete of private property," the inhabitants of Steveston live "as if the earth were dead/ & we within it ash, eating ash, drinking the lead fire of our own consumption."

But it is the Fraser River itself, "swollen with its filth," "sewage," and "endless waste" that reflects in its stagnant waters the most exact image of a town gone

sour. Ironically, the inhabitants must depend for their living on the very river whose pollution and decay symbolizes a human degeneration flowing sluggishly to death. Their "lives / are inextricably tied with the tide that inundates their day," and so "there's a subhuman, sub/marine aura to things," with life seen as static, drowned. Every phenomenon in Steveston points to an overwhelming submergence and stasis exemplifying the predominance of impotence. This infertility is manifested in the undeniable absence of any form of material or human growth. There is only one growth:

> This corporate growth that monopolizes
> the sun. moon & tide, fish-run . . .

Like fish, again, these cannery workers are involved in a futile cyclicality which ends only in the grave. But Marlatt discovers an heroic element in the lives of these people who demonstrate a Sisyphean urge to survive:

> Somehow they survive, this people, these fish,
> survive the refuse bottom, filthy water, their chocked lives,
> in a singular dance of survival, each from each. . . .

Actually, *Steveston* can be seen as an historical, sociological, and geographical study of a region extending far beyond the bounds of Marlatt's consciousness. She moves outward, progressing beyond the Fraser to a vision of the sea. In order to facilitate this outflowing, she first seizes upon the minor phenomena which form the basis of larger vision, ultimately defining herself in the light of others. Because she takes the time to trade stories with an aging fisherman, he "connects" . . . "when the young woman from *out there* walks in." After speaking with a Japanese sailor who insists that she's a hippy, Marlatt sees herself anew:

> I'm clearly a woman on their float. Too weak to lift the pole,
> old enough to have tastes

From "out there," she comes to us, too, saying something radically different, allowing us to see ourselves anew. Definition, light (recognition) sight . . . Marlatt adds detail to detail (re)producing an onrush of purified visual discourse that balances the moment in flow. She remains with the river, writing poetry of immanence at its best.

NOTES

[1] Daphne Marlatt, *Frames* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1968); *Leaf leaf/s* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1969); *Rings* (Vancouver: Georgia Straight Writing Supplement, Vancouver Series No. 3, 1971); *Vancouver Poems* (Toronto: Coach House, 1972); *Steveston* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974).