

from **The Shape of Poetry**

By Anne Simpson

Yet poetry is the attempt to salvage what has slipped away. The poet finds herself in a liminal state, and tries to bring a shadowy, elusive strangeness into the ordinary world. Surely this otherness is the very pith of life—or what Lorca calls *duende*. It is, he says, “the mystery... which furnishes us with whatever is sustaining in art... The *duende*, then, is a power and not a construct, is a struggle and not a concept.”<sup>i</sup>

*Duende* cannot be explained as a concept, says Lorca, but as a “struggle.” Whoever possesses *duende* has to be open to risking oblivion, while at the same time resisting it. Indeed, *duende* has much to do with desire, which is inherent in such a struggle. Desire is dynamic, moving between absence and presence. Since it is consistently frustrated from resting, the structure of a never-ending struggle is sustained. Such a structure depends on the idea that two poles, or two people—Orpheus and Eurydice, for example—remain distinct and identifiable. Once they merge, dissolve, or become joined, desire dissipates. Without a struggle, or the risk of destruction, there can be no *duende*.

Poetry shapes itself around desire, the pith of life, and because it is shaped in this way the wildness inherent in it cannot be duplicated. In the following computer-generated poem, it is the lack of *duende* that becomes most apparent, despite the clumsy gesturing towards desire:

the delicate kiss fell quickly  
the fire fondled a heartbroken mouth  
the flame shouted tenderly you loved us  
a fragile passion kissed us...

And so on. The poem, which has no title, though it is numbered, was created by a digital poetry generator that “randomly originates lyrical pieces of semi-erotic content written in blank verse series of ten lines.”<sup>ii</sup>

Desire is a powerful force, not merely confined to the lover and the beloved. It could manifest itself as an address, redolent with longing, to the land, or the creatures of the land, as in this fragment of a poem by Tim Lilburn:

Listen, listen.

Three years ago, when the gold animal appeared to me,  
a small combed sun, thin road, and took my smell,  
it walked out of the robes of its custom  
and it bent and took my smell.

It came very quickly out of the trees from the palmed night place, the  
west, the labour-field, and lay down in the fire of my smell...<sup>iii</sup>

The gold animal and the small combed sun of this poem haunt me in their foreign, luminous beauty. The weirdness of the wild is always a challenge to the human. "Lonely land," says the poet Alison Pick, "and if you go there you will become more lonely."<sup>iv</sup> The wild exceeds us. It is *more than*. It astonishes; it terrifies. To go towards nature is to move, or try to move, to the very limits of the human. This can be perilous: to press forward is to risk one's sanity. Thresholds may be reached by means of intoxication, dream or insomnia, or states of ecstasy, depression, madness. But if there is to be inspiration, access is needed to what lies beyond the known. This reaching from the known to the dimly perceived is what gives literature its impetus. Alain Toumayan says that "like death, inspiration is ultimately a relation with otherness."<sup>v</sup>

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If we could make a figure that represented desire, it would be metaphor. It reaches out to otherness, yearning for what lies beyond, but like an unrequited lover, it never gets what it wants. Metaphor is always necessarily open. I can take the example of a sunflower, and describe it, adequately enough, as a flower native to the Americas, but metaphor reinvents it as a clock. When I entertain the idea of sunflower as clock, I am jolted, momentarily, out of my usual thinking.

Instead of showing what-is, or what-is-thought-to-be, metaphor offers what-could-be, bringing these things together and letting them shimmer simultaneously. For a mere instant, I slide back and forth between what I'm certain I know and what I realize I don't know. Without even thinking about it, I return to what I know—the sunflower, or *Helianthus annuus*, is a heavy-headed flower on a tall stalk, whose seeds can be processed for oil. How can the description, and, indeed, representation, of the thing called “sunflower” be false? But the possibility that it might not be true remains, disrupting the familiar.

Trickster-like, metaphor's *modus operandi* is to swing alongside something else, indulging in an impossibly agile, acrobatic move, and slipping off before we have time to absorb it. In so doing, metaphor reveals to us that anything at all, from sunflowers to clocks, can be questioned. It points out how the truth of things is in no way fixed, and that language too, representing these things, is both flexible and fallible. Metaphor fails, ultimately, in a spectacular way, because it cannot fasten upon, take hold of, or possess. But this so-called failure is also its success. While metaphor shows us how little we know about sunflowers, exploring and examining the way we represent them, it also makes clear that otherness is a mystery of such infinitude that we cannot describe it.

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<sup>i</sup> Frederico Garcia Lorca, *In Search of Duende*, trans. Christopher Maurer (New York: New Directions, 1998) 48–49.

<sup>ii</sup> N. Millan, “Computer Generated Poetry and the Arts,” M. Sc. Dissertation in Computer Science (Birmingham, UK: The University of Birmingham, September 2001).

<sup>iii</sup> Tim Lilburn, “Now, Lifted, Now,” in *Kill-site* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003), 74-75.

<sup>iv</sup> Alison Pick, “Horseshoe Cliff,” from an unpublished manuscript.

<sup>v</sup> Alain P. Toumayan, *Encountering the Other: The Artwork and the Problem of Difference in Blanchot and Levinas* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), –.