

Hearing the “Voice of the Infinite” In the Poetry of Luci Shaw

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While breaking taboos seems to be the function of art today as one thinks of the National Endowment for the Arts's gallery of homoerotic horrors or rap music's vicious incantations, I believe the greater harm lies in another, more subtle direction: the widespread reduction of art to trivia. This is the poisoned fruit of deconstruction, the artists's branch of moral relativism, which denies fixed meanings and leaves us with shallow literary journals where a fictional character's greatest insight is that Elvis really is dead or with art exhibits featuring yellow Dollar Store plastic bags. “Everything that is really good and beautiful, of inward moral, spiritual and sublime beauty in human beings and in their works comes from God”, Van Gogh wrote, but even the church has lost its vision, substituting the weight and glory of the cross for hurriedly-written “Christian” commercial fiction, for generic “love in any language” pop songs, for greeting card verse and flat-topped church architecture.

It is against this desolate cultural shore that Luci Shaw's poems shine as treasures, poems as varied and beautiful as seashells, and lustrous with the glow of her faith in Christ. The author of six books of poetry (one not yet published) and of several non-fiction books, she is also a photographer, editor, and founder with her late husband of Herald Shaw Publishers, besides being the mother of five now-grown children. A passion for God pervades her poetry, expressed in juxtapositions of images both homely and transcendent as in “Mary's Song” from Listen to the Green. This is the first of Mrs. Shaw's poems with which I was acquainted; I regard it as one of her finest:

Blue homespun and the bend of my breast
keep warm this small hot naked star
fallen to my arms. (Rest...
you who have had so far
to come.

She describes the Child's breath as being “so slight it seems no breath at all”, a breath that

“once ruffled the dark deeps/to sprout a world.”

A radical shift in tone and diction characterizes “Flower Head”, another poem written to praise one of the paradoxes of Incarnation, in this case the impossible actuality that a believer would have the mind of Christ. Here, the images, though “not gentle”, nevertheless celebrate what C.S. Lewis calls “the very quiddity of a thing”. The poet uses a technique of employing the face value of words—in this case “the mind of Christ”—as a vehicle for discovering myriad meanings suggested by those words. I quote the poem in full as an example of Luci Shaw's virtuosity:

Perched on the high end of its
spinal stalk the brain blooms
like a pink cabbage rose

Peel back the blunt bone like a bud—
it will be meaty to touch, the
corolla folding in, folding in to echo
within the sepal skull
a blink of light, logarithms, a view
of ships in harbor, a word just now
rescued by memory, clipped arbor vitae
how it smells—spiced

Here God lives, burrowing among
the petals, cross-
pollinating. Here is Christ's mind
juiced, joined, fleshed, celled.
Here is the clash,
the roil, an invasion, not gentle
as dew; the rose is unfurled
violently until the scent explodes
and detonates in the air

And oh, it trembles—
thousands of seeds ripen in it as
it reels in the wind

(How I love this view of ships in the harbor, these logarithms, like miniature TV images in my brain!)

Though most of her work is written in open or free form, Mrs. Shaw writes some traditional rhyme but usually manages, unlike many poets who rely on predictable rhyme schemes, to spring surprises. In “Some Christmas Stars” (from Postcard from the Shore) she likens a spider's silver thread to “asterisks ... spread/to ornament your manger bed”,

and asks,

Where does a spider find the skill
to sew a star? Invisible,
obedient, she works Your will
with her swift silences of thread.
I weave star-poems in my head;
the spider, wordless, spins instead.

However, the medium of free verse, which Mrs. Shaw prefers, most ably conveys her literary gifts, though the term is somewhat of a misnomer since poets of this school usually impose upon themselves exacting forms which are often discovered through the writing process. For example, in “The Foolishness of God” from *The Sighting*, Mrs. Shaw's first stanza sets forth the requirements of God's law, spoken in tough, blunt imperatives designed, we learn later, to produce a feeling of despair:

Perform impossibilities
or perish.... Hate parents, friends and all
materiality. Love every enemy...
Hack off your hand, or else,
unbloodied, go to hell.

The second stanza mirrors the first except that the language is more euphonious and the images mystical, suggesting faith through grace:

Leap from your weedy shallows.
Dive into the moving water.
Eyeless, learn to see
truly. Find in my folly your
true sanity.... Probe, hold
my unhealed hand, and bloody, enter heaven.

Thus, “The Foolishness of God” is a formal and tightly constructed poem whose tonal shift perfectly embodies its theological vision of law and grace.

Polishing the Petoskey Stone, a collection of new and selected poems published in 1990, includes work from her other volumes: *Listen to the Green* (1971), *The Secret Trees* (1976), *The Sighting* (1981) and *Postcard from the Shore* (1985). Besides her skill as a wordsmith, Mrs. Shaw writes with a certain humility and wisdom, producing the kind of poetry that, in the words of William Cullen Bryant, “finds[s] its way to the heart”. Luci Shaw's poems have power to move—to disturb, to bless, to widen one's angle of vision.

The other striking feature of her work is precision of detail, particularly when she draws on images from nature, revealing her deep affinity for the created order—for the “blast of

gulls”, for a river “Like silk sliding away”, for trees that “turn candle” in the “sweet chill/of spring light glittering through an intricacy/of leaves”, for “a black thread of ants”. These sights and sounds, minted in silvery words, become metaphors for larger meanings. In her book *God in the Dark*, a journal of her husband's illness and death by cancer, Mrs. Shaw recalls a walk along the beach. Armed with her camera and an acute eye, she says, “I am alive”, and notices “the way the sea-grapes grow, each leaf a joining of two flattened circles to a central rib. The new buds”, she writes, “push out first as a glossy lime green, then, unfolding, enlarging, burnish into copper and finally a fiery red—losing the sheen with time, but gaining color—a parable of youth and age?” Even her lawn becomes emblematic: “The rain of last week made the grass grow like green fur...I am greening too. The winter of bereavement...is over and gone.... The wounded body of earth is being healed over by the new skin of sod.”

It is not surprising, since for the Christian loss is gain, that Harold's death and other sorrows have served to add a deeper resonance to Mrs. Shaw's recent work, which she considers “some of my best stuff”. “On the River Bank in Bibury”, like certain other new poems, has a tender and tentative quality:

Why do you suddenly ask me am I happy?
I am only combing my mind, like water
searching the green weed.

The poem's conclusion suggests her growing sense of mortality as the mysteries of God take a darker turn:

how fixed and finite
lie the dark stones at river-bottom.

In her striking poem “When Your Last Parent Dies” we find the same vulnerability as we see the speaker standing

There on the final step
with nothing to hold to, and emptiness,
and the glancing of stars falling,
and cosmic dust stinging your eyes...

“You are the final clasp”, she writes, “that buckles earth to heaven” and concludes with the paradox that life in the face of loss weighs more than death: “You hold the ladder up, heavy with life.” In “A Bird in the Church”, a blackbird settles “on the arm of the crucifix” and “lodges at last/where vertex and horizon meet, resting/in the steady pain of Christ's left eye.” Again, we see a steepness about Mrs. Shaw's newer poems and a Job-like, searching quality: not a loss of faith, only a greater awe.

One can trace Luci Shaw's Christian outlook, her wide range of knowledge and interest,

and her sense of adventure—both in actual life (she is an experienced sailor) and in her uses of language—to her beginnings. The daughter of missionaries, Mrs. Shaw's father was an Australian surgeon who “was a pioneer in the Solomon Islands beginning in about 1902, when the threat from cannibals was still real”, she writes in a personal letter. She says her father “once attended a native feast and was handed—to eat—what he recognized as a woman's thigh bone.” After the death of his first wife, he married Luci's mother “not realizing how frail and unfitted for the tropics she was... Dad turned from bodies to souls and began a conference preaching and teaching ministry which took him all over the world for the rest of his life.”

Luci was born in England when her father was 56 and her mother, 42. She and her brother, born two years later, attended private schools in England, Australia, and Canada. Her father “was a warm, wonderful man who, though old enough to be my grandfather, was a marvelous companion, teaching us to swim, sail, skate.” To him she attributes her “taste for adventure, and a certain restlessness.”

Mrs. Shaw says she wrote poetry “as far back as I can remember—I thought everyone did.” She says she “got a pretty good, though scattered education... somehow, in our travels, I totally missed math and got large doses of language and literature.” Mrs. Shaw attended Wheaton College in 1951 where she credits Dr. Clyde Kilby with changing her life: “He got me to believe in my writing.” She had four majors “before deciding on English Lit. and a New Testament Greek minor.”

Graduating magna cum laude in 1953, she married Harold, began having children, and with her husband started Harold Shaw Publishers in their home. After years of active membership in a Plymouth Brethren church, they moved to the Episcopalian denomination whose rituals and symbols enliven many of Mrs. Shaw's poems. As revealed in *God in the Dark*, the couple enjoyed a close and happy marriage for 33 years before Harold died after a two-year battle with lung cancer. In January of 1991, Luci married John Hoyte, a widower, and moved from the Chicago area to Menlo Park, California. She is writer in residence at Regent College (Vancouver) where she teaches “on and off”. Her latest book, *Horizons*, combines poetry and text with the calligraphy of Timothy R. Botts. The book is a treasure; I read it with my children before bed to set the clock of dreams with one hand pointed toward the world's wonders and the other hand pointed toward God. I would also recommend Shaw's *LifePath*, a book about the art of keeping a journal.

One of the most rewarding aspects of Luci Shaw's writing is the mixture, rare in today's secular literary atmosphere, of true poetic achievement with a genuinely Christian orientation. By Christian I mean that her considerable body of poetry embraces a full range of human experience, *including* (rather than denying or ignoring, as secular writing does) the revealed truths of God. It does not mean she is a 'Christian' writer in the sense of limiting herself to religious themes. It means rather that her faith is diffused through her poems as spiritual light. “I'm learning to trust that mind [of Christ] which is at work within me”, reflects Mrs. Shaw in an interview published in 1991. “Part of that is being

attuned to what the Bible says, because that is the authoritative word of God. You do have to test what you're writing against Scripture—that is the standard. Scripture has been woven into the fabric of my life and gets into my poetry whether I plan it or not.”

Reading Mrs. Shaw's poems reminds one that the raw material of art need not be epochal, that the common things of life—“a copper kettle on the shelf”, “a flurry of starlings”—can serve as indicators of divine meaning. Her poetry embodies Robert Frost's dictum of beginning in delight and ending in wisdom. Without this upward reach, literature becomes lifeless and trivial, failing in its most important service of enabling the reader, in the words of Kilby, to “hear the voice of the infinite”. In his introduction to *Listen to the Green*, the Christian scholar and critic says, “When she writes of a christmas tree, or a star, or a sonic boom, or a gull, or a garbage truck, we can, if we read with care” hear the One whose glory fills the earth.