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On Gregory Orr's Poems [with Response]

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## HIS ROOM

The man in the mirror suit  
lives in a completely empty room.  
All the walls are painted black.  
He has only the one suit.  
He sleeps in the center of the floor,  
the suit hanging over him  
like a chandelier, a tree of cold light.

## SOME THINGS

I know some things about death.  
When I was twelve, I killed  
my own brother.  
When I was fourteen, my mother died.  
I have seen some of the things death does,  
and it's not that amazing.  
It's a house made of black glass;  
we'll all live in it some day,  
but so what? It's a long way off,  
and the journey is the difficult thing.

In my dreams sometimes we talk together.  
They are dead, but what does that mean?  
Last night I found a child sleeping on a nest  
of bones. He had a red, leaf-shaped  
scar on his cheek. I lifted him up  
and carried him with me, even though  
I didn't know where I was going.

## On Gregory Orr's Poems

Louise Glück

A poem should read as though it had to have been written. If it is not imbued with necessity it will not draw me into its universe. (This has nothing to do with tone; the poem need not be strident. Nor is humor obviated, there being a difference between earnestness and seriousness.)

Necessity tends to manifest itself in a body of work as obsession. The poet's obsessive concerns are, to my mind, more interesting if not actually named in the

work, not announced. They surface, inevitably, through the objective data of which the poem is composed.

Gregory Orr writes out of this sort of necessity, with this sort of restraint. His characteristic *persona* appears, encased in solitude, against a mutating landscape. A journey is often in process, or about to begin. But a particular kind of journey: pre-ordained, irrevocable. As in "In an Empty Field at Night": "With his steps he traces/the labyrinth scratched on his palm." The atmosphere of predestination is generated by other situations in Orr's work. As in "The Ambassadors": "They kneel before the prince/and unsheathe the sword of bone:/The wars he will fight/are carved on its blade." As in my favorite of the poems here, the controlled, mysterious "Poem," beginning "I will lose you." (Almost all of Orr's work is mysterious, though, without seeming to try to be so; that is, the language is neither circuitous nor insistently prophetic. And always the work is devoid of editorial comment; always the passion is embodied in palpable detail.)

Solitude and pre-ordination suggest impotence; this in no way characterizes the work itself. The poems have the strangeness and authority of dreams; the images slide one out of another, as do those in dreams.

Sometimes, because the images are put forward and immediately moved out of, i.e., not explicated, they remain ambiguous. For example, the first three words of the poem beginning "Before he passes" can be paraphrased as "before his intrusion," in which case the *persona* withdraws illumination from the stones. But the same words can also be taken to mean "in his continued presence," in which reading he endows the stones with light. Probably the first is the intended reading. In any case, the phrasing is typical of Orr; the one word—"sheaths"—generates the mystery peculiar to this work, re-orders the landscape. In like manner the last two lines of "His Room" suffuse the whole poem.

In that the man in the mirrored suit is constant, the two poems mentioned, "His Room" and "Poem" ("Before he passes") seem to be part of a sequence. But the mirrors have come up before, conveying a sense of ego-boundness, as in "The Stone That Is Fear": "The stone sat at a desk lit by a single candle./The walls of the room, like the inner walls of its body,/were covered with mirrors." (Mirrors function in much the same way in "Evolution," although in that poem they take on a somewhat sociological dimension.)

In "Poem" the visual effect is pronounced enough to make the poem seem almost cinematic—the mirrored figure moving among stones, the poet's eye dollying in on that disturbing cross. There is, in the last lines, another manifestation of the irreversibility so constant in Orr's work: the sense of past lives utterly forsaken, impossible to go back to. (Lines from "The Room"—not to be confused with "His Room"—come to mind: "Far ahead in the valley, I saw the lights/of a village, and always at my back I felt/the white room swallowing what was passed.")

In "His Room" the mirrored suit hangs over the *persona*; the phrasing suggests confinement in that the suit seems to have a force superior to that of the man, ascendance over him. The last lines are the strongest; that "cold light"

inches back up through the preceding lines, finally infusing and dominating the poem.

“Evolution” deals with the withering of a structure not necessary to the organism’s survival, in this instance its left side, the side committed to the “dark and unknown.” I wish I were clearer as to the intended significance of that commitment, although it seems ridiculous, a contradiction in terms, to ask for a concrete “unknown.” And God knows the poem is fine enough.

Of the poems here “Some Things” engages me least, notwithstanding its extraordinary last five lines. I think the poem wants to be shorter. The first stanza gives us certain information, some of which the second stanza transforms into image. There’s nothing wrong with the tactic; to my mind, though, it doesn’t work here. The deliberate, laconic language at the poem’s outset strikes me as forced, almost as though the rhythms and vocabulary that make up the world’s “common tongue” do not make up Orr’s. In attempting to speak casually, after this fashion, Orr is least his natural self, and, paradoxically, most mannered.

But this carping must be taken in context: Orr’s is a great gift.

### Gregory Orr’s Response

I find it difficult to respond to an essay which is as kind and intelligent as Louise Glück’s. Perhaps all I can do is sketch a few comments on the poem that engaged her least, the poem titled “Some Things.”

The poem is in some sense a departure for me. It is an attempt to integrate or assimilate certain painful facts of my personal history into the ongoing process of self-understanding that is my poetry.

Let me say at the outset that I don’t consider the poem “confessional” in any sense of the word. Yet there are difficult problems: What place do the facts of personal biography have in the poems, if any? I know they have a causal role, but is it necessary to bring them into the poetry itself? Aren’t they just that which started it all, but which once it is moving are no longer a part of the thing itself? Yes and no. For me, it is now a challenge to find the source and cause (in some limited sense) and attempt to integrate it into the process. I am going further into the past in order to go further into the future. The poem states the past in stanza one. (Again: not to find the cause, one can’t find the cause; the seed is not the tree; one can’t understand the future from the past, that’s not the idea.)

But it can unfold a basic mystery—in this case, the mystery of death. What does death mean? What is the relation of the living to the dead, and of the dead to the living? And of the recurring appearance of the “dead” in our lives (in dreams and thoughts)?

What the poem attempts to say is that without understanding these things, without understanding what death *is*, we can accept them: we can establish a necessary and meaningful relationship to the mystery of death, pick up the child and carry him, even though we don’t know where we are going.

Relationship, even to death, especially to death, is the important thing.

Why the speech of “common tongue” in the first stanza, and why its awkward-

ness? The awkwardness results, I am afraid, because I am not used to confronting my own biography in my work. But the changes in language and tone through the course of the poem are deliberate in the sense that I wanted to distinguish several levels in the poem. The first was the level of biography: baldly stated and un-assimilated. The second was the level of meaning, which I personally find in images, or more exactly, meaning manifests itself to me in images. Actually there are three levels in the poem: 1) biographical fact, 2) the level of dreams ("In my dreams sometimes we talk together") and 3) the world of images (house of black glass, the last 5 lines of the poem). All three are *real*, all three possess their own, distinct reality. (Perhaps the world of image corresponds somewhat to Breton's aspiration in the *First Surrealist Manifesto*: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak.")

Stanza one relates to the past, so that in stanza two I can relate to the future.

Of course, the fundamental danger of personal history in poetry is that being idiosyncratic it may become inaccessible to readers. It may be very difficult, even impossible, for the reader to identify with the fact that when I was twelve I was responsible for a younger brother's death in a hunting accident. Yet the central fact, that of death, is one that everyone can/must relate to. The fact, at many levels, of one's own personal encounter with death. Not just the termination of one's own life, but death as many things, few of them understood or even acknowledged in our culture.