

Ravir: Les Lieux

Hélène Dorion was born in 1958 in Québec City. She studied philosophy at the university of Laval, and published her first collection of poems, *L'Intervalle prolongé*, in 1983. Since then her prolific oeuvre – poetry, fiction, essays, and *livres d'artistes* – has constituted one of modern Quebecois literature's major achievements. She is the winner of the Governor General's Award for Poetry, the Prix Mallarmé, the Prix Wallonie-Bruxelles, the Prix Alain-Grandbois, and numerous other Canadian and international prizes. When *Ravir: les Lieux* appeared in 2005, Dorion became the first Canadian to receive the Prix Mallarmé, while her 2008 collection of poems, *Le Hublot des heures*, won the Prix Charles Vildrac – another first for a Quebecois writer. In 2009, *L'Étreinte des vents* won the Prix Études françaises from the university of Montreal. In 2011, Dorion won the European Prix Senghor.

Dorion has accomplished a great deal in a relatively short time, not just as a writer but as an editor: she was editor for one of the major poetry publishing houses in Quebec, Le Noroît, between 1991 and 2000, sits on the boards of various literary magazines and prize juries, and has produced important critical work on Quebecois and French-language poetry, including an edition of the modernist Quebecois poet, Saint-Denis Garneau. In 2002, the poet and critic Pierre Nepveu published a

selections of her poetry, entitled *D'Argile et de souffle*, and in 2006 a collected poems appeared from Editions de l'Hexagone entitled *Mondes fragiles, choses frêles*.

Though Dorion's poetry has evolved, it has always been limpid and intense, sophisticated in its thinking but elemental in its feel for the world. It is also emphatic about poetry's role in knowing that world, in putting the world to words not in order to name it, pin it down and categorise it, but because expressing the world is also to experience it. As she writes in her essay 'Living in Poetry', 'Poetry is as much a state of being as a mode of writing', and in the same text she describes poetry as a means of 'crossing' language. It is a verb that tells us a great deal about Dorion's approach. Some poets think of themselves as 'using' language, others of being 'used by' it, and all poets rely on particular verbs, particular metaphors, to figure their relationship with language. In Dorion's case, to cross language implies a trajectory through it, an immersion in it, but also the possibility of language as obstacle as well as destination. Throughout her poetic oeuvre we find a probing, tentative consciousness, as comfortable with the idioms of philosophy as it is with the language of lyric poetry. It is the way the two work together, keeping each other's excesses in check – thought enriched by feeling, feeling kept in perspective by thought – that characterises her most penetrating work. This is not poetry that launches itself at its subject, but that feels its way around it. Intensity of expression and attentiveness of vision lead combine to render a sense of the world distilled, and of a language at its most expansive when it is most stripped down and resistant to rhetorical transports.

Ravir: les Lieux, translated here as Seizing: Places, is perhaps her most ambitious work so far, and though Dorion has written plenty since its publication, there is something culminative about this book. It is subtitled ‘poèmes’, a plural that refuses totality though not coherence, and is made of five sequences: *Ravir: les villes*, *Ravir: les ombres*, *Ravir: les miroirs*, *Ravir: les fenêtres*, and *Ravir: les visages*: cities, shadows, mirrors, windows and faces... The verb *Ravir* has so many shades of meaning – to ravish, seize, entrance, plunder, abduct... – that it seems impossible to find a single English verb that would do all the original’s ambiguous – and ambiguating – work. It is related to our word rapture, and posits, too, the poet as raptor, as well as the one rapt and enraptured by the world. As well as the problems such a multiple word as ravir causes the translator, it is worth signalling the ways in which it works across its many connotations in this book.

First, and most obviously perhaps, the poet is enraptured, ravished, captivated by the world. But her task is to capture it in language, to seize it the way one might ‘seize’ an essence or an image. But language too has its lure, is all too easy to be captivated by. These poetic seizings or ravishings are not merely descriptive or mimetic; they are distillations, intensities of perception, memory, reflection and experience that themselves take hold of language, plunder it, leave it exhausted. This is something Dorion’s poetry does well: though the language is often tentative and probing, it is always ready to rise to the high style; she will use abstractions and is not afraid of words like ‘soul’

and ‘void’, words which, to the anglophone ear, might seem to mean so much that they threaten to end up meaning not enough.

The world enraptures us, but we in turn use it, and use it up. Indeed, the way language plunders the world and the way we plunder its resources is part of a subtly framed correlation in Dorion’s poetry, and one of its most daring propositions: we seek meanings from it, prospecting for symbols and digging for significance from landscapes or skies or urban scenes the way one digs for water or prospects for oil.

There is little by way of visual description in Dorion’s poetry, and yet it is full of moments of intense visuality: verbs of seeing and perception abound, while the senses generally – touch, taste, hearing, sight – play a large role in this poetry, which remains close to the senses even at its most cerebral and abstract. It is an unusual combination, but it accounts for the sense Dorion gives us at once of poetry’s slender hold upon the world, and of the massy, weighty pull of language. The lines, with their variable lengths, refuse the tidiness of endstops and are light on punctuation. They are often short and rhythmic, built less around grammatical units than a sort of tempo of perception: the pauses are weighted, the words hang for a moment on the edge of the line, feeling the obstacle and testing the drop, then dip into the next line, the next verset. The page’s native blankness surrounds the lines but also ventilates them, so that the poems occupy their pages with a precarious centrality. That centrality is also modest and unpretentious: the poems are crossed with blankness, just as, we imagine, the poet’s thoughts are crossed with the chaos and the darkness that would abolish them. Their

solidity on the page seems always on the verge of dissolving at the edges, and the poem too invokes edges as places of revelation and plenitude, but also of risk: between earth and sky, between water and land, but also between word and word, language and silence, the written page and the blank page. ‘Writing does not protect me from life’s turbulence, but rather takes me to its most precarious points of equilibrium, where the sense of provisionality is at its sharpest’, she writes in her essay, ‘The Poem’s Detail’.

There is in Dorion a constant feeling for the chaos, the non-meaning, the void, impinging on the slender edifices of sense we that we create. The poet creates her edifices with words, but others create them with figures or formulae, with compasses, graphs, musical notes, paint and canvas, bricks and mortar, tools or machines. One of the convictions in Ravir: les Lieux is that poetry, and literature more generally, is another of the ways by which we make sense of the world. If there seems to be an existential tenor to all this, that is because there is: for Dorion, poetry is a means of orientation in existence, a way of being as well as a way of knowing. This poetry has accepted a dose of darkness, a fleck of the abyss, as a sort of vaccine; hence that sense we have of Dorion’s clarities being surrounded at times by a sort of teeming threat of chaos or oblivion. But though Dorion is not – and certainly not, by Quebecois standards – an overtly political poet, she is a poet quite clearly engaged in the social and political realities of the world outside. The elemental nature of her poetry does not prevent it from being topical or urgent in ways that translate directly into contemporary issues. This is not poetry in retreat, but rather a poetry that presents an alternative to what she

memorably calls, in her essay ‘The Open Window’, ‘a chessboard where the only movements allowed are ruled the verbs to have, to make, and to seem’.

To read Dorion’s poetry is to feel the words themselves thickening, gaining dimension, becoming equal to their task. But they are simple words, most of the time – what makes them difficult or complex is their nakedness and their compression. There is no excess either, nothing is overdescribed, no line overladen, and the poems’ moments of greatest emotional affect are when one mode reaches a kind of tipping point; when, for instance, a series of visual or sense perceptions peak in intensity, seem to crowd in, then suddenly segue into something expansive and almost spiritual in its clarity. However intense and physical the experience, its vanishing point is always a spiritual one – the two are, in Dorion, part of a continuum, perhaps indeed translations of each other. This is one of Dorion’s trademarks: the world comes in from our eyes, touch, smell, the inchoate mass of wordless feelings, sensations, those tropistic changes by which we change internally, unnoticed even by ourselves. Then language makes room for it, is rendered dynamic by the necessity of rendering these experiences in a way that can be understood, and not in some contorted private idiom. One of the ways in which that sense of urgency is carried is found in Dorion’s use of the word ‘Tu’: it interpellates the reader, makes us protagonists of what is unfolding, fellow-travellers in the poem’s motion. We too are ‘crossing’ language.

Dorion is adept at the sequence, and her poetry has always had a probing, tentative, self-refashioning and self-revisiting tendency that works well in the sequence form. In Ravir : les Lieux we have the slow-burning, cumulative mode of a book that gives itself the time and space to unfold, but that allows itself the page-by-page intensities of the fragmentary. Indeed Dorion's is not so much fragmentary thinking as thinking-by-fragments, a very different proposition, because it binds together the very brokenness it proceeds by, and creates a sort of mosaicised mode of poetry. In the first poem of Ravir: les Lieux she describes the 'impossible/ silent mosaic of the journey', and that nicely catches both the questing nature of her poetry, the journey of and in language, and her poems' ability to bring the broken edges into alignment and create patterns from the individual pieces. This is what gives her work its sense of hesitancy and danger, of being on the edge of dissolution, and at the same time driven by a consciousness that threads its perceptions together, that transforms vision into insight. We see this for instance in her use of verbs of binding and cohesion on the one hand and of dissolution and scattering on the other.

Despite the elemental nature of her poetry, there is a weight of literature there, a cultural freight that plays an important role in framing the poems and in evincing an idea of the poet's vocation. Dorion does not pretend that she is making the world anew or seeing it for the first time. There are no false unities, idealised returns or mythical origins. This is one of the book's characteristic achievements: there is no artificial barrier between the made world – the world of poetry, art, fiction, and the cultural markers that Dorion sparingly uses – and the

found world of lakes and mountains and oceans that we all-too-easily place under the rubric 'ecology'. The poem is as much 'at home' (a phrase Dorion would enjoy the irony of...) in the city, in a library, on a busy highway, as it is under the expansive open skies of the prairie. Dorion's poetry makes a nonsense of the false opposition between so-called nature and so-called artifice: we live among what we make as much as what we find. The parking meter measures our time as well as the solar cycle...

We should also remember that Quebecois literature, for all its French heritage, is also a North American literature, and that this seeming juxtaposition of the inherited culture and the found land accounts for the exhilarating strangeness of Quebecois poetry, its alertness to the paradoxes of place, the lures of belonging. Dorion may be a cosmopolitan and international poet, but her poetry is rooted in its landscape too: the wide open spaces, the lakes and mountains, the big skies, the seasons and weather of Quebec; she is also attuned to its urbanism, its cultural accretions, its unique paradox of newness and age.

There are big themes in this book: history playing its 'greatest hits', the 'century's boneyard', the collision of personal biography with collective experience, the knowledge of place as habitat (cities, streets, buildings) alongside more abstract spiritual orientation in space. There are archetypes too, mythic but also contemporary in their relevance: the Geographer, the Navigator, the Carpenter... along with writers such as Woolf and Rilke and Guidacci, and the mathematician Hypatia. The cities of Dorion's imagination are Berlin, London, Paris, Montreal, but

she also describes the spiritual power of landscape, and our hankering for its absent meanings. Dorion's poetry bridges modes of knowledge, and we might say too that its scale is epic, though there is nothing Olympian or sweeping about her way of knowing the world. On the contrary, it is probing, ear-to-the-ground, eye-to-the-surface poetry; it trusts to the senses, to the vagaries of thought, is ready to take up and let go of motifs in a way that remains organic and changeable.

To the ear attuned to the modalities of English-language poetry, this way of writing will probably be unfamiliar. After all, we in English-language poetry write as if we somehow disdained poetry but had faith in language – it's a facet of our national irony perhaps, our suspicion of abstraction, and a sense that poetry somehow denatures ordinary language. Our quest for the demotic and the democratic makes us suspicious of the grand claims of poetry, and of its grand words: the soul, memory, the spirit, and the quasi-philosophical, spiritual language by which much European and some North American poetry has orientated itself. French-language poetry, one might say, is the other way around: it suspects language, which is why French poets always seem to be remaking it, asking the impossible of it, making it fail on a scale which makes mere success look petty. But it retains their faith in poetry: the lyric urge, however broken its movement, damaged its materials, or ironic its gestures, retains its necessity. For Paul Valéry, poetry was not just a language within a language, but an operation performed on language. Poetry may reclaim its birthright from music, Valéry contended, but it always repays its debt

to thought. Dorion's work is in this tradition.

Patrick McGuinness