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"these days of grief / Before the grief": Registering Shock in Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* (1985)

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Douglas Dunn was only 39 when his wife Lesley died prematurely of cancer at the age of 37. Out of this traumatic experience, the Scottish poet (born in 1942) composed the celebrated *Elegies* which earned him the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 1985. The first three poems of this poignantly intimate sequence attempt to articulate the numbing sensation of shock at the announcement of such a terrible medical diagnosis and during the few months preceding Lesley's death. These are what the poet terms "these days of grief / Before the grief" (136), a redundant formula underlining the paradoxical nature of the moment, oscillating between the annihilating effect of shock leading to despair and paralysis, and a furious desire to make the most of what little time was left. One of the uniting features of the first three elegies is an altered perception of time and reality. After the initial speechlessness, when logic and language seem to fail ("Second Opinion" 135), the brutality of the announcement of impending death prompts the psyche to take refuge in the unreal of the fairy tale ("Thirteen Steps and the Thirteenth of March" 136-137). But comic self-irony finally comes as a saving grace for the bereaved husband/poet trying to bridge the gap between social and private grief ("Arrangements" 138-140).

Shock and speechlessness

The first poem in the *Elegies* sequence, "Second Opinion," recounts the trauma of the announcement of Lesley's disease through an elliptic style. The six quatrains paradoxically capture the poet's blatant speechlessness during that moment of revelation when facts are bluntly conveyed through the unemotional medical discourse. In "Second Opinion," the unsaid reverberates in the gaps left by the paratactic syntax so that inarticulateness becomes the language of trauma. Foregrounding the dramatic quality of *Elegies*, the sequence begins in *medias res*, *i.e.* after the poet and his wife have had a "first" opinion. The first line of "Second Opinion" is deceptively prosaic: "We went to Leeds for a second opinion." By merely repeating the title, it suggests petrifaction. Unable to name the disease, refusing to accept the diagnosis, the poet is stuck in repetition. Although the mention of Leeds seems to provide a precise element of the situation, it again fails to deliver the truth accurately. "Leeds" is a self-protective euphemism. It turns out to be a metonymy for Leeds General Infirmary, the city's main hospital where the scene narrated in the poem took place. Information gaps abound. Their function is not so much to create suspense as to conjure up an ominous atmosphere of

deathly danger. Lesley, who is the dedicatee of the *Elegies*, is never named in "Second Opinion." She has already faded into the background, being only referred to through the use of the collective pronoun "we," the opening word of the poem, or the singular "her" in the second line. What the poem is really about is the husband's own sense of obliteration when his beloved wife's death sentence was confirmed.

"Second Opinion" is shrouded in a sense of the unmentionable. Just as the first opinion is left to the reader to guess, the second one remains taboo: "'It's large and growing.' 'What is?' 'Malignancy'." In this line, the spoken words are mentioned without any reference to their speakers or without the mediation of an introductory verb. They are juxtaposed in quick succession, the doctor's diagnosis being almost fired like a bullet into the persona's consciousness. The ambiguous pronoun "It" characterizes the doctor's reticence to name the disease. When asked to clarify his meaning, he merely replaces the pronoun with the word "Malignancy," a prudish euphemism for the more traumatic reality of cancer. On the contrary, the petrified husband is desperately yearning for linguistic precision. He seems to be locked in an impossible attempt to try and understand the inexplicable. This is particularly illustrated by his hopeless desire to find logic in the disease, when he exclaims: "Why *there*?" The italicized deictic, however, has not previously been referred to; consequently, the reader is left to wonder about the kind of cancer that is precisely affecting the poet's wife. It is only with the second half of the line that it becomes clearer: "She's an artist!" suggests the cancer is affecting her eye, which in retrospect is corroborated by an initial reference to "those with bandaged eyes and dark spectacles" in the first stanza. The poet's exclamation reveals his perception of the event as tragically ironic, not so much because of the cancer itself but because it is affecting Lesley right at the core of her identity as an artist, as if any other kind of cancer might have been preferable. Out of such a traumatic experience that could easily lead to melodramatic pathos, the poet's talent is to be able to distance himself from his persona to generate self-irony. The overwhelming feeling of injustice and the temptation to self-pity is indeed relieved by the perception of the situation as absurd: the world is shown as upside down; nothing seems to make sense anymore. Besides, the poet represents his persona as equally reluctant as the young doctor to speak openly of cancer, even when this was a previous ground for criticism.

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell defines irony as participating in shaping the memory of traumatic events: "By applying to the past a paradigm of ironic action, a rememberer is enabled to locate, draw forth, and finally shape into significance an event or a moment which otherwise would merge without meaning into the general undifferentiated stream" (Fussell 30). The announcement of the fatal disease has indeed a traumatic impact on the persona. As a means of self-protection against the violence of the

shock, the persona gradually excludes the outside world. The young doctor's words stop being reported directly. Instead, they are internalised, as the narration switches to indirect discourse: "He warned me it might spread." The repetition of the last word of the sentence, "Spread," with a question mark at the end of the line, marks a threshold into the poet's unconscious. At this point, the poem turns to physical sensations in a sort of hallucinated vision, with these lines reverberating with love, suffering and pathos: "my body ached to suffer like her twin / And touch the cure with lips and healing sesames." The persona is cut off from reality, unable to make sense of it, unable to react to it. He is overcome with a sense of annihilation, as suggested by the accumulation of negative forms in the fifth stanza:

> No image, no straw to support me–nothing
> To hear or see. No leaves rustling in sunlight.
> Only the mind sliding against events
> And the antiseptic whiff of destiny.

Life seems blighted, ruined, fixed at the instant of the diagnosis. Sound and light have been blotted out by the psychological shock. The outside world has vanished. Reality has become "destiny," a force out of control, beyond the grasp of ordinary comprehension as suggested by the participle "sliding." The news of his wife's cancer has left the persona paralysed. Unable to move, he has to be literally assisted out of the surgery: "Showing me to the door." Moreover, unable to take in the whole picture as it were, reality becomes fragmented: "a scent of soap, / Medical fingers, and his wedding ring." Just as his life is shattered into smithereens, the poem's syntax disintegrates. The last two stanzas are thus nominal clauses juxtaposed with commas, dots and dashes.

Amidst the difficulty of articulating grief, indicated through the resort to ellipsis, parataxis and disjunction, the most resounding absence or silence is that of Lesley herself. Never named, she remains exterior to the scene, the real subject of the poem being the poet's sense of shock. There are indeed numerous first person pronouns. The initial "We" is soon replaced by a singular: "I," "me," "my." Although the poet wishes to share the pain "like her twin," he seems unable to go beyond the shock effect. Instead, he offers a very self-centrered account of the shock that contrasts even with the doctor's "Professional anxiety." Grief at the announcement of his wife's inevitable death has resulted in the poet being paradoxically cut off from her. The very last image of the poem, the young doctor's wedding ring, sounds like an ironic reminder that the poet is soon to become a widower.

Shock and the unreal

In the next elegy, "Thirteen Steps and the Thirteenth of March," in which the poet describes the remaining few days leading to his wife's death and funeral, the wedding ring indeed features as a token of death and alienation. The persona's poignant lucidity regarding the inescapability of death and his admiration of Lesley's acceptance of it are contrasted with an irrational refusal of the obvious, characterized by a resort to the fairy tale intertext. It provides a deceptively familiar and reassuring image that will be subverted, thus laying bare the intensity of grief. The poem's title, with its binary rhythm and the repetition of what the poet later calls "the unlucky number," sounds as if borrowed from a nursery rhyme or children's literature: "Thirteen Steps and the Thirteenth of March." The couple's house, described as a "high house," with two flights of thirteen stairs "From door to bed" conjures up the image of the archetypal enchanted castle. Characteristically, the princess who remains unnamed lives at the top of the donjon "sat up on her pillows, receiving guests." Her numerous visits are celebrated with a matching array of drinks, "tea or sherry," and so many flowers that the diligent husband, who is running "Up and down the thirteen steps from [his] pantry," "like a butler," is also "running out of vases." The zeugma that concludes the first quatrain reinforces the magic of the setting, and ironically of the surreal situation. Similarly, the flowers are gifted with anthropomorphic qualities as "Even the cyclamen and lilies were listening."

"[T]hese days of grief / Before the grief" (the phrase appears in this poem) seem to be an enchanted parenthesis in the couple's life, paradoxically. Or at least, this is how the persona would like to represent them. However, the distanced perspective offered by the poet discretely lays bare the threads of self-delusion. Indeed, the "high house" is soon to become a prison, as there is no hope of escape or chivalric rescue, except maybe through the power of love and art. The mention of flowers is an ominous intimation of the funeral wreaths to follow. Moreover, the variation on the popular phrase "from door to door" which here becomes "from door to bed" draws attention to sickness, as the princess in her donjon is bed-ridden. Her visitors are administered like drugs, "three, four, five times a day." Moreover, the poet pictures himself as Sysiphus endlessly and hopelessly going up and down the steps. His despair is only allowed to be expressed in the privacy of the pantry, an archetypal feminine preserve underlining the poet's debunking his own lack of stamina: "My wept exhaustions over plates and cups / Drained my self-pity in these days of grief / Before the grief." Despair is called "self-pity," a self-deprecating term. The repressed emotion contained in the metaphor mixing images of domestic life (water draining from the washing-up bowl) with a man's tears is finally allowed to be released in the poignant because seemingly trivial exclamation at the end of the fourth stanza: "Flowers, and no vases left." At this point, it has become impossible to carry on pretending. The fairy tale intertext was but a sham, a literary

mask unsuccessfully trying to hide the terror of impending death and separation from the loved one.

Interestingly, time, which had been accelerating in the first four stanzas, with recurrent references to the husband's running around the house, the endless, surreal procession of visitors, food and flowers, suddenly comes to a halt, after the dots that punctuate the first line of the fifth stanza:

> Tea, sherry, biscuits, cake, and whisky for the weak…
> She fought death with an understated mischief–
> 'I suppose I'll have to make an effort'–
> Turning down painkillers for lucidity.

In the silence that is thus made audible, or at least visible, in the poem, there is room for another time outside ordinary time, a sublime moment of ecstasy in the surrounding terror. Time seems to expand or be suspended: "There was a stillness in the world. Time was out / Walking his dog in the low walls and privet." Such "unique hours" enable the poet to qualify "these days of grief / Before the grief" with intense shared emotion, something he had been unable to do in the first elegy.

Although "The minutes went by like a winter" in "Second Opinion," in the second elegy, night-time provides a privileged moment for the celebration of love and life, contributing to "holding off the real" to use the poet's own phrase. Cut off from the outside world, "with the phone switched off," husband and wife find happiness and respite beyond words. Verbal language fuses with sensuality in the couple's "kissing conversations." They delight in simple non-verbal pleasures in the semi-darkness of the bedroom: "There were mysteries in candle-shadows / Birds, aeroplanes, the rabbits of our fingers, / The lovely, erotic flame of the candlelight." Paradoxically, whereas previously a sense of annihilation or anaesthesia had dominated, life and love come to the fore after the dots of the fifth stanza. With the couple finally united in the bedroom, at the top of the house, the poet seems to be affected by a sense of the sublime which he expresses in very simple terms: "Sad? Yes. But it was beautiful also." Art becomes a redeeming process, allowing the poet to acknowledge the harsh reality of death that had until now been eclipsed by the fairy tale intertext, or kept at a distance in the first poem through ellipses and inarticulateness.

In this second elegy, the poet has been looking for means of expressing his sense of shock. Faced with the brutality of the real, he finds a refuge in the reassuring familiarity of the fairy tale which becomes a mode of expression for an intensely traumatic moment. This intertext

functions as “exorcisme hallucinatoire du réel,” a self-protective instinct leading the subject to switch off reality because it has become unbearable, as Clément Rosset theorizes in *Le Principe de cruauté* (1988). However, this intertext does not seem totally adequate to account for trauma; the poet eventually exposes the poetic artifice, as it only contributes to hiding the reality of his suffering. “Ces babillages sont les subterfuges de l’“allégorie” et de l’euphémie: grâce à eux, l’homme effarouché par l’innommable restera en marge de la question,” Jankélévitch writes in *La Mort* (62). Only by resorting to a truly hallucinated vision, outside ordinary time and place, outside literary commonplaces as well, will the poet be able to articulate the paradoxical nature of the event, composed of a sublime mixture of delight and terror. This is what Dunn refers to as “sanatoria [...] for the spirit” in “Arrangements,” the third poem of *Elegies*.

And yet, despite resorting to various literary artifices, the moment of shock, the moment of impact, remains elusive, as if poetry was unable to represent it. Just as the first shock is cut out of the sequence (i.e. the famous “first” opinion), Lesley’s death seems to resist linguistic or poetic articulation. The terrorizing moment of shock can only be represented by rupture. At the end of the second elegy, after the dream-like quality of moments of shared intimacy between husband and wife, the last two stanzas suddenly come back to ordinary reality with a description of the physical side-effects of Lesley's disease in its terminal phase:

> She wanted me to wear her wedding ring.
> It wouldn’t fit even my little finger.
> It jammed on the knuckle. I knew why.
> Her fingers dwindled and her rings slipped off.

What strikes the reader here is the simplicity of the style; the sentences are short; they are merely juxtaposed. The images ring with tenderness and serenity. Their homeliness contrast with the sublime atmosphere conjured up earlier on in the elegy. Following such a break in the poetic style is a typographic break. The stanza ends here, followed by a blank on the page. The next and final stanza begins: “After the funeral.” The shock of death, which cannot be articulated linguistically, is represented typographically through a blank on the page, a stigma of the shock left in the persona’s consciousness. Shock resists language: “Le caractère évasif de la finitude mortelle est comme un défi au logos, si la vocation du logos est de déterminer et de préciser” (Jankélévitch 60). Like a gnomon, a kind of sun dial used to measure the sun or the moon’s height above the horizon, shock projects but a shadow over the text, a blank space, an absence of articulate language. Shock is paradoxically visible because words are missing.

Shock and irony

In Douglas Dunn's *Elegies*, rupture and disjunction are the main conveyors of shock. In the ironically entitled "Arrangements," the poet offers a tragicomic treatment of shock. "Arrangements" starts in an ambiguous atmosphere of joy and celebration, with the description of wedding parties waiting at the Registry Office, and soon-to-be wed couples "nervous" and "unsteady," only to reveal the persona and his father-in-law as "strangers," characters out of place: "I walk through them with the father of my dead wife." With the substitution of the widower where the bride was expected walking down the aisle escorted by her father, the persona features as an allegory of death. The tableau thus represented is characteristic of the *memento mori*. As if fearing death might be contagious, the persona wishes he could disappear from the picture altogether: "They must not see me. I bear a tell-tale scar. / They must not know what I am, or why I am here." Paradoxically, the poet conjures up the traditional motif of the *memento mori* at the same time as he refuses to accept it. There is a part of him that cannot surrender to the cruel reality of death, as Clément Rosset explains in *Le Principe de cruauté*: "La réalité dès lors que celle-ci est ressentie comme douloureuse [se manifeste par] une *intolérance* de la part de celui qu'elle affecte" (21-22). The only way to make death tolerable is to look at it from a distance: "la mort ne devient pensable que par la distance" (Jankélévitch 33). This is what the poet does when applying a comic paradigm to the situation. It is presented as a comedy of errors, with the persona entering by the "wrong door." His arrival is represented as a mock re-enactment of his own wedding, except this time *he* is going down the aisle "with the father of his dead wife." The poem rests on contradictions and reversals. On the one hand, the poet conjures up grandiose images of death as a rite of passage. He also convokes the religious imagery of Saint Peter welcoming souls at the entrance of Paradise but, on the other hand, all this is debunked by the official treatment of death, as "taboo" and "second-rate." The bereaved husband and his father-in-law are relegated to a "small office" that is accessible through a "small door." The clerk is himself a parody of Saint Peter, "This recording angel in a green pullover" who "doesn't look like a saint." Even the motif of the doors seems absurd. There is a "right door" and a "wrong door" but values seem to have been reversed, as the right door is the one leading to the death certificate that ironically "Everyone receives / You do not need even to deserve it." These constant switches of register create a burlesque effect. However, behind the absurd vision of the official treatment of death, the poet's grief remains acutely perceptible.

The shock effect is now expressed through irony born from the discrepancy between the persona's unfathomable private grief and the social treatment of death as an ordinary event; in other words, the poet dramatises the contradiction Jankélévitch identifies between

personal tragedy and natural necessity: "l'évidence de la tragédie proteste à son tour contre la banalisation du phénomène" (6). This extraordinary event which creates a "terrible bond" between the widow he meets in the Registry Office and himself is reduced to being one among a long list of "names and dates and causes." The singularity of a human life becomes mere "genealogy," "history." When it is not taboo, death is merely "gossiped in the obit. conversations," a disrespectful, careless treatment that does not correspond at all to the poet's trauma. The sublime mixture of awe and wonder in front of death that we identified in the previous elegy is here replaced by mere "bureaucracy" and "morbid particulars." This results in a sense of dehumanisation: "I feel myself digested in statistics of love." The banal treatment of the dead rubs on the poet: "dans l'instant, la mort d'un proche nous révèle que la mort n'est pas seulement pour les autres, ou que je suis moi-même un de ces 'autres'" (Jankélévitch 15). Irony, because it creates a distance between the poet and his subject might be one way of dealing with trauma. It enables the poet to experience the reality that Clément Rosset defines as "cette cruauté mêlée de gaieté" (30). But the irony is also directed at the poet himself in "Arrangements," as he debunks his poetic imagination that would like to picture death as sublime. The reality belies such a vision and imposes the harsh banality of death as an ordinary event.

In these three elegies, the poet manifests his helplessness at dealing with the shock of death. His various attempts at resorting to familiar images and literary conventions eventually prove ineffectual: "No image, no straw to support me," he writes in "Second Opinion." The shock of death and of having to deal with the "morbid particulars" of death result in an impression of estrangement. The poet pictures himself as cut off from society that is represented by the unemotional clerk or the strictly "professional" young doctor. He also feels uneasy with the so-called "loyalty" of his wife's friends. Nothing seems to be able to alleviate his grief. Ordinary language is inadequate, consisting as it does in stereotyped phrases that are "comfortless." The poet's hallucinated visions, his attempt at "holding off the real," the escape from reality expressed in "Arrangements" through the locution "as if" or the adjective "fictitious," testify to the difficulty of facing up to the unbearable reality of death at the moment of shock, a shock that is so violent that it numbs the senses and paralyses. The persona emerges as imprisoned in his grief, totally submerged by it. However, "Arrangements" marks a turning point in the sequence. The poet has displayed his ability to look at his subject from a distance: shock has been *arranged* stylistically. Just as the persona is seen "closing the door behind [him] / Turning the corner on a wet day in March" at the end of the third elegy, the poet is now ready for a new development in the sequence. In the following elegies, the memory of the loved one becomes vivid and brings appeasement to the

poet's suffering through tenderness and nostalgia.

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