Fresh Paint: Brueghel Revisited
by Anne Simpson

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A crown of sonnets is a rare thing to find nowadays. No wonder: its composition involves joining seven sonnets and binding them in such a way as to make a whole poem out of seven minor texts. It begs the question: do the sonnets retain a modicum of independence or are they subsumed within the larger work?

Looking at Anne Simpson’s “Seven Paintings by Brueghel”, a poem from her 2003 book Loop, may provide us with a valid answer. By definition, a painting is supposed to stand out by itself, encompassing all it means to convey in a single, powerful image. We are to “read” actions and events by looking at motionless entities. Causes and consequences, motivations and sequences: it is up to the viewer to provide the necessary unity, thus complementing the painter’s task.

Simpson seeks to paint Brueghel anew, or so it seems. Drawing inspiration from the Flemish master, she combines a vivid imagery in her poem(s) by juxtaposing glimpses of events, much like the old master does. Reading this text (and the texts inside this text) will help us to see the extent to which the poetess owes her technique to Brueghel’s own.

“The Triumph of Death”

Then gunshots: plastic bags on fences. Snapping.
Or loose. Thank you — shop — at. The lovers see
nothing. He plays a lute. She sings. Clapping —
machines sift through debris for the remains.
A sales receipt, a shoe. The silvery rain.

(Starmino 2005:58)

“The Triumph of Death”, c. 1562, oil on panel, 117cm x 162 cm, Museo del Prado,
Madrid, Spain.

One of the main difficulties when looking at a painting by Brueghel
is searching for the centre of the picture. In this example, many events
happen simultaneously, and the viewer must find a way to knit them
together. Simpson does precisely that: not only has she paid close attention
to some striking details in the painting (the lute player, the wheels), she also
adds some contemporary elements (“Death’s /dark sky — a grainy
docudrama.”)

“Landscape with the Parable of the Sower”
A sales receipt, a shoe. The silvery rain
has many hands. A stream — Fresh Kills — elides
with river. Thick and slow. A landfill plain:
a ghost in biohazard gear. Gulls ride
the thermals, circling high as barges come,
a linking chain. Blue metropolis, far-
off glints of light. The cranes all lift and hum,
making hills of metal, bone. Crushed cars.
So garbage rises: this stench is monument.
Yet Brueghel’s farmer takes the seeds, flings wide
his arm. A miracle: small event. We meant
to go, but every boat was laden. Tides
pulled home, pulled here, then left us for the birds.
We take the shape of soil, abandon words.

(Starmino 2005:58)

“Landscape of the Parable of the Sower”, 1557, oil on panel, 70 cm x 102 cm, Timken Art Gallery, San Diego.

“Landscape of the Parable of the Sower” is a very fine example of how Brueghel often chooses to turn his subject into an apparent detail in the painting, leaving much more room for the scenery. Perhaps this has provided Simpson with the perfect pretext to fuse her contemporary percep-
tions of reality with the Flemish masterpiece. In fact, “Brueghel’s farmer” appears unexpectedly in this poem. The description of the lifting of the debris is mixed with the “birds” identifiable in Brueghel’s “Landscape”.

“The Tower of Babel I”
We take the shape of soil, abandon words.
The world will change without us. Did we glean a little shine? Perhaps. These wheeling birds drift down to earth. Crying. The air, unseen, seeks entry without keys. All locked, shut down. A spackled light gets through. We merely craved a taste. Hello, my name is ______. A crown, a king. One makes the other into slave.

“The Tower of Babel”, c. 1563, oil on panel, 114 cm x 155 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.
Behind is Babel’s core. Red as a heart
opened for bypass. Laid bare. Wind, idling.
It’s quiet. Still. The horses, loaded carts,
are stuck. The ships, the docks. Thin bridles
of cloud. All stopped. Each thing unclocked, undone.
A man who kneels to plead his case. Warm sun.

(Starmino 2005:58)

Once more, some features of the original painting (“Babel’s core. Red as a heart/opened for bypass”, “A man who kneels to plead his case.”) are discernible in Simpson’s text. The light colours of this painting are all the more striking when compared to its “twin” painting.

“The Tower of Babel II”

That man who knelt to plead his case, that sun:
they’re gone. In time, air hardens, growing dark.
The wars go on; beyond the TV, guns
talk to themselves. One, two. They whisper, bark.
Erotica. And Babel: height’s desire
is weary of itself, but there’s no end
to greed. A cruise, a condo. Guests for hire.
On the rug: a shirt, a shoe. Whatever bends
one body to another. We’ve forgotten.
Those painted clouds are knives. Slipped in walls
between the ribs. This plot device: rotten —
the thing exploded from within. Small
papers, white flakes. Last wish. Someone’s cellphone.

(Starmino 2005:59)
Brueghel has considerably darkened the scene, conveying the grimness of the deserted Tower as opposed to the living crowd that previously surrounded it. Simpson has followed the painter in this respect: “That man who knelt to plead his case, that sun: /they’re gone. In time, air hardens, growing dark.” It is interesting to see how the perspective has changed. The Tower seems to have rotated, with its reddish core turned away from us. It is probably an effect of further building before mankind was scattered. “And Babel: height’s desire /is weary of itself, but there’s no end/to greed. (…) This plot device: rotten — /the thing exploded from within.”
“The Slaughter of the Innocents”


(Starmino 2005:60)

Simpson represents violence using vocabulary which is more graphical in its nature than Brueghel’s own painting. The painting is visually subtle, almost subdued.
In Brueghel’s painting “The Massacre of the Innocents”, the vast array of small groups that catch our attention clearly dominates the picture, as opposed to several other works where the main action is subsumed within a larger scenario. It is interesting to note that a man is apparently pleading to a horseman on the left, in a similar position to the pleading man in “The Tower of Babel”. It remains to be seen whether this coincidence is accidental or not.

“The Massacre of the Innocents”, 1565-7, oil on panel, 109 cm x 158 cm, Royal Collection, Hampton Court Palace, London, United Kingdom.

“Hunters in the Snow”

Who knows what happened? A short straw of fate,
all that. Years ago. But now we’ve changed;
those terrors tucked back in the heart. “Just great,
that weekend special: everything arranged.”
We return; the house looks strange. Each thing
deceives. The counters, cutlery. Believe
the chairs; they guard the table in a ring.
The hunters come. They’re trudging, slow. Reprieve makes curving flight, a song in evening’s sky: pale green at dusk. Some children skate; they laugh. And history has no place. Easy to lie on queen-sized beds, dream a little dream. Half-heard, the phantoms speak: No you weren’t there — We turn; we sleep. But once there was a prayer.

(Starmino 2005:60)

“The Hunters in the Snow”, 1565, 117 x 162 cm, oil on wood. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

“Life as usual” is questioned as a concept in this poem. The desire for peace and a return to normalcy are apparently disturbed by lingering memories (the “phantoms”). The slow trudging home of the hunters may be due to something other than weariness after the hunt, in such a context.
“Christ and the Adulteress”

We turn; we sleep. But once there was a prayer, a way to finger mystery. It floats, one plastic bag, freed from the fence, that snare with loops of wire. We translate into motes, a glimmer in a shaft of sun. One glide, we’re gone. A painted scene: against this plea is set a stone. An end. Each thing is tried. A man makes notes in sand. The wind goes free. One gust: his words are ghosts. The dust, absolved, has vanished too. First kiss, last glance. Tick. Tock. All goes to ground. We kneel down and dissolve. Turn in. Turn out of time. Where nothing’s clocked. A touch: so light. Love’s breath. Things we can’t hold: these watches. Ticking. Still. Each hour is cold.

(Starmino 2005:61)

One of the limitations of painting as a medium is its necessary treatment of one precise instant. Simpson envisions what might happen after her re-writing of Christ writing in the sand. “The dust, absolved” may move on, redeemed. Curiously enough, redemption seems to imply physical and/or spiritual destruction — “We kneel down and dissolve.” Taking the presence of the Redeemer at face value, one may view this as the necessary death before Resurrection.

If we take into account the inspiration for this poem — the brutal disappearance of the Twin Towers in 2001 — we discover how this remarkable crown of sonnets is also a powerful meditation on how fragile life is. It is also a reminder of the close links one can establish between such different arts as literature and painting, and between these and the life outdoors.
“Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery”, 1565, oil on canvas, 24 cm x 34 cm, Courtauld Institute Galleries, London, United Kingdom.

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Abstract

Anne Simpson’s “Seven Paintings by Brueghel” is a crown of sonnets, a specific way of exploring the possibilities of the sonnet as a fixed form. Rather than dwelling on the noble history of this technical exploit, though, we are to observe the relation between Simpson’s text and the paintings by Brueghel she draws ideas from. We intend to examine in detail how Simpson paints her own images over Brueghel’s, while never losing sight of the Flemish painter’s stark imagery. Also important for our paper will be trying to find a common thread uniting the paintings, as well as the treatment given to Brueghel’s work by other authors.

Keywords

Simpson, Brueghel, Poetry, Sonnet, Painting.

Resumo

“Seven Paintings by Brueghel”, de Anne Simpson, é uma coroa de sonetos, um modo específico de explorar as possibilidades do soneto enquanto forma fixa. No entanto, em vez de nos determos na nobre história desta proeza técnica, iremos observar a relação entre o texto de Simpson e os quadros de Brueghel nos quais se inspira. Pretendemos examinar em detalhe a forma como Simpson pinta as suas próprias imagens sobre as de Brueghel, sem que ao mesmo tempo se perca de vista a forte imagética do pintor flamengo. Também será importante para esta comunicação tentar encontrar um traço unificador comum aos quadros, bem como o tratamento dado por outros autores à obra de Brueghel.

Palavras-Chave

Simpson, Brueghel, Poesia, Soneto, Pintura.