Necessary Light

Fargnoli, Patricia

Published by Utah State University Press

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Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9335.
Patricia Fargnoli, in a poem late in this collection, identifies herself (if I may take the liberty of assuming a correspondence between author and speaker) as being in the winter of her sixtieth year. Here, then, is a rarity that is close to an astonishment. For the authors of first books of poetry—and they are each year in the hundreds—are almost all young, and they have almost all of them risen through the same soil: workshops, MFA programs, initial life experiences. These beginning writers are skillful and hopeful; we are happy to praise their promise, their new voices, their energy. Ms. Fargnoli is another case altogether. She is, in personal and worldly matters if not in issues of publishing, altogether grown-up. She has been to the wars, and back. The dexterity and impress of her work, the fluency and clarity of her voice—which, to tell the truth, does not lack energy or tones of speaking I have not heard before—are grounded in rich and recognizable experiences. These are poems absolutely not of promise but of accomplishment. They are not so much about excitement and trial as they are about hindsight, wonder, regret, and rejoicing. They do not avoid the mean or the grievous, yet the note they strike most often is not of tribulation, but of a rugged gladness.

It makes sense, of course. Authority in poems is difficult to maintain if it does not come from the writer as well as the words. It is this force, invisible but in its place, that allows the formal construct of the poem to foster believability, and therefore import. And such authority is essential if the words are to carry us over the wild waste spaces of thought.

Altogether, the poem of experience (rather that the poem of idea) is the mainstay of this century’s work. Such poems fall easily into two categories—some referring to experiences that are extreme, outrageous, and undoubtedly individual, and others to experiences that are usual and familiar: domesticity good and bad, marriage, mothering, work, the passage of time, the constraints of life as well as its resonance. The latter, I think, is the more difficult of the two categories, for when the experience is common, the task of elevation, of making that experience memorable, is all the poet’s work, whereas if the experience to begin with is extreme or odd, an intensity has been achieved even before the scribbling begins. Indeed, transcribing and
illuminating the usual patterns of life is surely among the most meaningful and the most difficult of our human labors.

I do not know how Pat Fargnoli came to her experience and knowledge. No matter how we try to delineate our lives, or are anyway willing to unveil our personal selves, there is a formality within art and a haziness within life that will not mix, and we end up not knowing very much. Neither do I know how she came to such an excellence of craft—except, probably, in the usual way, by the long and private labors: the hand holding the pen, the mind holding itself to the highest office. It takes—I trust you will believe me—a more than usual fortitude to labor well when one is youthful and full of energy, and how much more as the years accumulate, and other responsibilities enlarge themselves, and the body, that co-conspirator of the mind, must rest a little more, and a little more. It takes a perfect piety of devotion to excellence, to appear, not at 20 or 30 but at 60, with such an impressive, unflagging manuscript of relaxed and dancing poems.

Readers will discover many facets of Fargnoli’s voice that I have not mentioned here, among them her affinity to landscape, especially her delicious containments of sky and sea; as well as her saucy and expansive humor, brightest perhaps in “Naming My Daughter” and “Visiting Frost’s Grave.” But I think the two attributes that will most impress readers are, first, the almost shimmering gladness with which she replies to the gifts of beauty and of human love; and, second, the compassion with which she addresses whatever is beyond her own intimate surroundings. Whatever it costs her, whatever it takes, there seems to be for Ms. Fargnoli only one world and only one way to live in it: with a ferocity of attention, care, and response. Central to these wonderful pages are the following lines:

We go on. I don’t know how sometimes.
For a living, I listen eight hours a day to the voices of the anxious and the sad. I watch their beautiful faces for some sign that life is more than disaster—it is always there, the spirit behind the suffering, the small light that gathers the soul and holds it beyond the sacrifices of the body. Necessary light.
I bend toward it and blow gently.

Mary Oliver
I would like to step out of my heart
and go walking beneath the enormous sky

Rainer Maria Rilke: “Lament” from The Book of Hours

For among these winters there is one so endlessly winter
that only by wintering through it will the heart survive

Rainer Maria Rilke: The Sonnets to Orpheus II, 13