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Eldrid Lunden: Dialogues in Poetry

On this occasion, we would like to consider translation and interpretation as a dialogue. Our contribution here is related to our newly released book, *Dialogues in Poetry. An Essay on Eldrid Lunden* (Alvheim & Eide Publishing House, Bergen 2010). The title is on the one hand a concrete and practical indication of the intertwined voices in this project. I have read the poems and tried to offer in-depth and relevant interpretations of some of them as well as of Lunden's entire poetical work. Annabelle Despard has translated the selected poems from Norwegian into English, in itself an interpretative and dialogic undertaking. We have communicated extensively about each other's suggestions and sketches, and also considered the challenges that arise when we try to bridge cultural and linguistic barriers.

On the other hand, the title is an argument in favor of an understanding of Lunden's poetry as a basically dialogical discourse. Contrary to some of the critics, who emphasize the enigmatic and difficult aspects of Lunden's way of writing, I want to foreground the intrinsic communicative energy that in various ways saturates her aesthetic enterprise. Let me try to connect this thesis to the thematic structure of the book, which is organized around the following themes: politics, places, pictures, perception, and parody, – and discuss my point in relation to each topic.

The political dimension in Lunden's work is obvious, but as political art, the poems are not unambiguous and simple expressions of certain values and ideological preferences, or direct descriptions of social injustice. Instead, they discuss implications of policy, such as power, violence, and dominance by means of a performative voice appealing to the reader's own conscience and decision. Also, the feminist engagement is strong; bereft of clichés and over-simplicity, the poems recurrently investigate various historical practices in representations of femininity

and female identity. Deeply embedded in this thematic is an appellative intentionality that aims at questioning gender inequality.

Dialogic traits in poetry are closely tied to rhetoric, and typical means of involving the other – the real reader or an implied "you" – are direct address, questions, staged discussions, or a kind of talk or chatting as if a listener were present. In her texts on places, Lunden's lyrical I not only talks about, but also *to* buildings, gravestones, church furniture, archaeological remnants or fictive persons, thus provoking an animation of dead things. This is most certainly a kind of thinking aloud, or at least a hypothetical communication that aims at openly verbalizing and inviting a discussion of the meanings of places.

A similar feature is observable in the picture poems, where the beholder simply confronts the persons portrayed with her questions and thoughts, or even summarizes a dialogue between them. Visual representations may, moreover, be considered as dialogue partners in the textual genre ekphrasis, which is a more or less free description, interpretation, or discussion with an image. In Lunden's case, the dialogic structure of the ekphrastic poems is usually quite evident, even if the *paragone* effect, which means that the text tends to dominate the visual work, is unavoidable and even defines the genre.

Less obvious is perhaps the dialogic poetics in texts regarding perception and bodily experience. This phenomenological aspect of Lunden's poetry is probably at the same time the most intimate and the most philosophically sophisticated part of her work. Still, I find it useful to think of the transformations between different senses, as in synaesthetic tropes, and between senses, perception, and thought, as a dialogue. I will suggest that poetry – and definitely Lunden's poetry – is a site where not only different voices but also different ways of perceiving and understanding the world through senses are explored as a dialogic phenomenon.

Finally, the ludic quality in Lunden's texts is of course a mode of expression that requires a listener in order to succeed. Poetic laughter is not in a void. But parody also represents a dialogic play with other texts and artistic objects. It therefore supports the overall impression that this poetry is an answer to a call, a response in a situation where someone is spoken to, and a different voice. Lunden's poetry takes part in a mixture of dialogues – intellectual, artistic and popular.

Politics

Second wave feminism, particularly the political issues and discussions, provide an important foundation and are a necessary background to understanding Eldrid Lunden's work. This assertion does not mean

that she writes political poetry so that her texts may act as slogans, provide arguments, or dispense propaganda, but rather that she insists on literature as a way of acting politically. The feminist movement in the 1970s produced a series of cultural products with a clearly political function, but these expressions often also had a constricted purpose and served the day-to-day debate. In contrast, Lunden's poetry engages in more fundamental topics, which nevertheless are closely connected with the basic concerns of a feminist commitment. These issues imply the existential question of identity: of finding a voice and then having the courage to use it in a social situation where women's influence is traditionally inferior to that of men, and where masculine power and domination need to be contested. Her poems are intended as both a voice of this kind on the public scene—although she is perfectly well aware of the genre's marginalized position—and as an intellectual elaboration of the thematic itself.

Three thin volumes with a striking similarity, *Inneringa* [*Circumvented*], 1975, *hard, mjuk* [*hard, soft*], 1976, and *Mammy, blue*, 1977, represent Lunden's definitive poetic breakthrough. These books have become recognized as high poetic points in modern Norwegian literature; *Mammy, blue* is probably the most well known of Lunden's works. The combination of a condensed style and cyclic coherence has influenced numerous other literary endeavors, most notably among young female writers.

Aesthetically *Mammy, blue* is similar in composition to the two previous books, but it also constitutes a new phase as it introduces an "I" and a name searching for a voice. The first of four sections consist of poems focused on Anna, her sensual experiences, and her movements in a coastal landscape. By means of a subtle use of enjambment, metonymical images, and irregular syntax, Lunden creates an atmosphere where the subject's cautious attempts at establishing an identity and finding verbal expressions are reflected in the poetic language itself. The syntax underlines the interactions between a landscape and a human being, a context where the woman seems to see herself mirrored in the various qualities of nature. A fragile self is on its way to becoming both a visible and a verbal subject.

Eg er Anna, eg er tjuåtte
år, eg er synleg
mot entredøra kvar morgon, ei open
rørsle i lufta.

Eg er Anna, eg er tjuette
år. Eg tenker oftare og oftare
på at eg er synleg mot entrédøra
kvar morgon, så sit eg i bilen.

Eg er Anna, eg har
ein flekk på tunga
det er eit ord der, det
veit eg. (98)

[I am Anna, I am twenty-eight
years old, I am visible
against the front door every morning, an open
movement in the air.

I am Anna, I am twenty-eight
years old. I think more and more often
about being visible against the front door
each morning, then I sit in the car.

I am Anna, I've got
a spot on my tongue
there's a word there, I
know that.]

The stanzas repeat their focus on language and the speaking subject who, consequently, is associated with a type of sensual core. They insist on the fact that the thematic of identity and visibility belongs to language. At the same time, language seems to be both hard to find and difficult to articulate, reduced as it is through the metaphorical and metonymical expression “ein flekk på tunga” [a spot on my tongue]. The connotations surrounding this image are intimately tied to that of sensing—taste, touch, speech, and gaze—a fact that emphasizes the perceptual basis of subjectivity.

In Gjenkjennelsen (The Recognition, 1982) Lunden demonstrates a more explicit political engagement than is exhibited in her earlier work. This engagement does not result in poems that are proclamative or prescriptive. On the contrary, while some politically engaged literature of the 1970s was didactic and simplifying in its social analysis, Lunden's contribution in 1982 is instead a recurrent reflection on gendered systems of power and on each gender's responsibility for such systems. Several poems do exhibit, however, the appellative structure common with much politically oriented literature, including poetry, which addresses itself to an implied reader through the use of the direct “du” [you] in the text and emphasizes how language is both performative

and productive in the creation of a reality. The following poem provides a subtle communication of the ambiguities in language and an ironic comment on a quotation from a Dylan text (from the album *Blonde on Blonde*, 1966):

Det heilt spesielle ved
deg
det heilt spesielle ved oss kvinner
at kven som helst kan halde oss fast i bildet
av det spesielle

you've got to be goodlooking 'cause
you're so hard to see?
(153)

[The very special thing about
you
the very special thing about us women
is that anyone can fixate us in the image
of the very special

you've got to be goodlooking 'cause
you're so hard to see?]

The poem begins by pointing at the uniqueness of every individual. As it continues, however, it contradicts this prior assertion as it implies that all women have something in common. How can they simultaneously exist as unique and as part of a cohesive, singular identity? By quoting the popular Dylan song, Lunden stresses the fact that the media produces a double message wherein women are told to “be goodlooking” in a way that meets general standards and ideals. As a consequence, women are caught in a trap in which they attempt to find their individual identity in looking like everybody else. Ironically, when they succeed, the loss of their actual individuality results in a version of social myopia, where the generically beautiful woman fades from view, melding into the undistinguished mass of “goodlooking”-ness.

The relation between gender and language continues to run throughout Lunden's *Gjenkjennelsen*. The following poem thematizes the power of language to constitute the individual.

Du må bestemme deg nå
om du vil snakke
eller om du vil overlate til språket
å uttale kven du er

ditt hemmelege ord er
ikkje noe hemmeleg ord, det tilhører
oss alle (141)

[You must make up your mind now
if you want to talk
or if you will leave it to language
to pronounce who you are

your secret word is
not a secret word, it belongs
to us all]

A strong, demanding poetic voice urges the “you” to be decisive and outspoken. To speak is a matter of will. Certainly we can read this poem as a commentary on the tradition of silent women. Historically, women have had a significantly weaker public voice than that of men, a circumstance that has contributed greatly to the powerlessness of women. Silence, precisely due to its attribution of absence or anonymity to the human being, has been idealized and enforced as a female virtue and even requirement. The other side of the equation, which has been thoroughly substantiated in recent feminist research, is the ability of women to develop other strategies that ensure their voice will be heard after all.

Implicit in Lunden’s poem we also recognize a distinctive attitude toward language that accentuates how the subject is constituted through language in an inter-subjective and social setting. It is therefore necessary to speak in order to be a subject and take part in the signifying process. Language is by definition a common commodity—it is not a “secret,” but rather a creation formed by people and thus is constantly changing. When we become gendered subjects, we are at the same time subjected to language. This linguistic gendering demands a conscious response regarding the implications involved in being a gendered person. I am a woman, certainly, but if I do not intentionally contribute to the production of linguistic meaning then language itself will control me.

Places

Place is essential to Eldrid Lunden’s poetry, although its meanings and implications shift throughout her works. Using the frame of a dynamic, relational understanding of its phenomenology, I have interpreted a selection of Lunden’s most developed (and dissimilar) places: landscapes, places of imprisonment, excavation sites, sacred buildings, and churchyards. I have picked out landscape and churchyard to comment on here.

It is easy to observe that the scenery from Lunden's childhood—the coastal landscape and its wet climate—remains an important force in her texts. Through each of her ten volumes of poetry, we sense a strong bodily and mental attachment to nature and a fundamental understanding of the human as touched and created by his or her physical surroundings. This understanding is perhaps most extensively explored in Lunden's early works, where nature acts as a site of powerful emotions, peaceful sensitivity, and remembrance. The later works can be read as containing more philosophical reflections on nature as a place for perception, mental projection, and artistic interpretation.

After having inscribed nature on the human being and the human being on nature, Lunden catches some of the individuals as they break out of a seemingly deterministic situation. A girl ("ho" [she]) suddenly tears herself away, running as if intoxicated with a feeling of freedom and bodily relief:

ho som plutseleg
rak laus, sprang langs liene
heile hausten
i ein falma bomullskjole,
sprang og sprang
på tvers av elvane
bekkane, til ei underleg
stri væte
braut fram i graset
overalt (38)

[she who suddenly
cut loose, ran along the hillside
all fall
in a faded cotton dress
ran and ran
across the rivers
the streams, until a strange
harsh wetness
broke out in the grass
everywhere]

All the previous nature poems in the volume, which are not concerned with individuals, use repetitive patterns to produce a stern situation where the individual is either generalized by means of the pronoun "dei" [they] or absorbed by nature. Here, "ho" breaks out and comes into sight with a dynamic body, full of energy. The rhythm and the pace of the poem support the liberation that is taking place. The metaphors for time and space—"heile hausten" [all fall], "langs liene" [along the

hillside], “på tvers av elvane” [across the rivers]—indicate that this event is not random or short-lived, but rather an ongoing process. The poem’s end also signals the difficulty of this process; the word “stri” [harsh] is applied to the wet grass itself, an anthropomorphizing move that indicates the possibility for struggle. At the least, it indicates a basic connection between the human body and the landscape that is repeatedly put into focus in Lunden’s poetry.

I will now turn to a poem with a sacred place as its main motif. In this poem, I suggest that we can identify some essential ideas regarding place as it is perceived and poetically expressed by Lunden. Moreover, we can clearly read the poem as a textual intersection where old traditions involving the creation of a sacred place for the dead meet with the modern ideals of urban planning; the poem also provides a (post)modern reflection on this physical and spiritual encounter. The poet’s visit to Le Père Lachaise Graveyard in Paris gives birth to the insight into how the past organizes its death as a massive construction of artistically worked stones. At the same time, she expresses amusement in playing with this overwhelming and alien impression.

Installasjon

(etter eit besøk på æreskyrkjegarden du Père Lachaise i Paris)

Menneskeleg liv

i høg sokkelansamling på kyrkjegarden

sidan 1600-talet

Her går det i stein

Her står dei i stein

Døden organisert som forsteining. Men mosen
har ein sjanse. Den er så grøn. Den er så langsam
Den viser oss sin farge (375)

[Installation

(after a visit to Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris)

Human life

in a congregation of high plinths in the cemetery

from the 17th century

Everything stone

Everyone stone

Death organized as petrification. Yet the moss
has a chance. It is so green. It is so slow
It shows us its color]

The title of Lunden's poem—"Installation"—alludes to a kind of art-work that utilizes different sensual elements to invite the public into a complete, dynamic, and bodily aesthetic experience. In contrast to the modern installation, which speaks via objects from our daily life, in the churchyard the "furniture" is different: the stones indicate something other, something outside the ordinary. According to Lunden, human life is staged as stone sculptures on pedestals. The churchyard challenges our secular knowledge of death as nothingness and represents an intention to create a permanent, solid substitute for a decomposing body. The dead body and the stone sculpture exclude each other; it is possible to understand the height of the many plinths as an iconographic rejection of death combined with a vain striving to ascend and leave the ground behind. The higher the statues in both height and quantity, the lower the significance offered to the decaying bodies beneath. This phenomenon can be explained by the increasing secularization of the grave during the nineteenth century combined with a growing desire to demonstrate the prestige of the individual human being. The monumental statues and mausoleums were not erected primarily to demonstrate a collective belief, but rather to guarantee the dead individual a posthumous, particular reputation.

Between the figurative stones with their massive symbolic past and the contemporary observer, a breach occurs. This opening is not only temporal but also mental: a gap, which in Lunden's rhetoric, refers obliquely to the possibility for comedy. But the poem does not adopt an attitude of disrespect. Toward the end, the poet calmly reflects over the aesthetic form represented in the churchyard stones, namely, an artificial organization of a specific cultural and historic relationship to death. The difference between the museum-like staging of death in the churchyard and the modern poem, which also identifies itself as an "Installation," is thus made clear by Lunden. The poem casts a distant glance at the burial sites, but this glance is sympathetic and warm. It includes the graves in an attempt to perceive connections between the churchyard installation and the poetic installation.

Finally, nature—"mosen" [the moss]—is invited into the text in order to animate the place and underscore the actual presence of life. This gesture touches on another interesting aspect of the modern churchyard, namely its reconciliation between nature and culture. The habit of planting trees in the churchyard dates back to the eighteenth century and was partly hygienic, partly aesthetic in its motivation. A British scientist pointed out that the leaves of the trees purified the air, thus the sanitary incentive. This period was also the era of the park and of pastoral poetry—the aesthetics of the formal neoclassical

garden informed not only landscape architecture, but prose, poetry, and the visual arts. In the new churchyards, nature was integrated within a cultural space that paralleled the Romantic garden, usually overburdened with symbolism: stones and sculptures signified both frozen time and a calm distance. The green plants, which would return year after year, hinted at a death overcome, transformed into an organic rebirth—an eternal life.

Pictures

The cover of Eldrid Lunden's debut volume, *f.eks. juli* (1968), wherein text and image appear as an iconographic expression, is a significant sign of her fascination with the relationship between these two modes of representation. The text-image thematic in her work spans from poems that clearly seek to represent visual art through language—ekphrases—by means of free meditations inspired by visual art, to poems that create a profound uncertainty about the ontological status of the described object. Such poems force the question: is this a mimetic account of the phenomenal world, a projection of mental imagery, or is it an allusion to, description of, or comment on another representation? Inevitably, as a recurring subject in Lunden's poetry, the problem of representation merges with other modes of understanding such as memory, perception, and thought.

To begin, let us look at a poem from *Inneringa*.

Plutsleg ein dag skilir han
i eit andlet
der kjenslene har runne utover. (47)

[Suddenly one day he slips
in a face
where feelings have spilled over.]

The poem most likely comments on an emotional crisis caused by a conflict between two lovers. (As always in Lunden, the context is sparse and the gaps many, so declarative contextualization remains risky.) Here is a man who “slips / in a face.” Whether the face belongs to her or to him is not clear, but the image requires a slippery surface, such as tearful skin, and it unbalances the man. At the same time, the poem provides a possible association with a painting where the colors are not quite dry and the features of a face are blurred in a modernist way. This visual approach to reading the words receives support from the following poems where the use of a variety of colors provides an underlying foundation for this section of the text, which explores both

the mourning over a broken relationship as well as artistic techniques of representation.

Pictorial allusions frequently appear throughout Lunden's poetry, but for our purposes here I will confine myself to commentary on two additional poems from Lunden's subsequent volume, *hard, mjuk*. Both poems exemplify a typical ekphrastic procedure in which a seemingly straightforward landscape sketch results in a complete picture description.

Kvar kveld går ho fram
til ein mørk brunn i vinteren
der isen aldri ligg, biletet
er i svart kvitt. (69)

[Every evening she goes up
to a dark well in winter
where ice never forms, the picture
is black and white.]

The phrase "ein mørk brunn i vinteren" [a dark well in winter] provides a stylized image that hints to the human and interior (mental) dimension of the landscape motif. It is tempting to link this description to both an outer event and an inner mental projection. For example, the black-and-white image refers to photography even as it also implicitly evokes the contrasts of a winter landscape in a dark setting.

The following poem explores how this pictorial problematic can be tied to a reflection. The mirror-like process by which we understand past and present, internalizing past experiences and anticipating future events, is based on our self-perception. The subsequent interpretation provides a thematic link between the interior space of the personal and the exterior projection of the aesthetic product.

Når eg nå tenker tilbake
ligg vinteren stille i
synsfeltet, mørkret er nesten
ute av bildet, noen
kjem (69)

[When I now think back
the winter remains quiet in
my field of vision, the dark is almost
out of the picture, some one
is coming]

The thought is an image, almost entirely static, but then set in motion at the end where “noen / kjem” [some one / is coming]. It is the privilege of the poem itself to blur the information of where this motion takes place: in reality, in memory, or in a picture. Each of these poems illustrates how the theme of understanding is concretized in Lunden as a relationship between text and image. They present intellectual work as a type of inner mental meditation on past events that simultaneously provides a verbal description of—or allusion to—pictures, images, and representations of ocular perception.

Several of Lunden’s poems comment on well-known paintings that do not require an introduction in order for the reader to realize the motif under consideration. Other poems combine a dispassionate description with personal thought and interpretation. In this way, the poem opens up a complex network of tensions—between the text and the painting (which, in turn, may itself refer to other paintings), between the lifeless artwork and the animating gaze, and between the absent object and the present verbal representation. An example of this elasticity in the genre is found in “Leonardo da Vinci: Engelen kjem med bod til Maria” [The Annunciation to Mary]:

Engelen: Høyr på meg! Dette er det største alvor!
Maria: Eg høyrer... men det du seier forvirrar meg... (354)

[The Angel: Listen! This is serious!
Mary: I am listening... but what you say confuses me.]

The poem is neither a description nor an interpretation, but rather a staging of the painted figures as actors and participants in a historical religious drama. It strips the narrative down to pure dialogue consisting of only two lines that underscore the iconic occasion and the possible experience of each character. Another dimension at work in the poem is that of gender: the angel (traditionally male) speaks in an authoritarian language while Mary listens with a reluctant, receptive, but also confused attitude. Even the punctuation illustrates the mechanisms of male metaphysical power: the angel speaks with declarative force underscored by the exclamation marks, while Mary’s hesitancy is evidenced by multiple ellipses.

In *Flokken og skuggen*, Lunden continues to investigate the relationship between word and image through both ekphrasis as well as more mixed literary forms. The poet makes new discoveries and creates new images along the borders between perception, reflection, and representation. Several of these poems contain quite disturbing aspects, as if the images themselves are capable of experiencing pain; such pain

is thematically developed as, for instance, cruelty toward animals in a cellar or as the sight of black crows circling a field.

Let us take a look at the poem about the polar bear.

Bildet av den kvite bjørnen kjem tilbake

Det er nesten berre kvitt. Ei uendeleg kvit
fjellside og den kvite binna
med ungar tumlande mellom beina

Ho snur hovudet mot vinden
Eg tenker på den svarte, fuktige snuten hennar
men ser berre hovudet som søker
fram og tilbake

Ho veit ho kan lukte ein hanne lenge før
han luktar henne. Og at dette er den einaste
sjansen ho har. Hannen trur ungane er rivalar
i paringstida

I det binna drar seg sidelengs oppover vidda og
forsvinn over kanten, glir boka igjen (53)

[The image of the white bear is back

It's almost entirely white. An infinite white
mountainside and the white bear
with her cubs tumbling between her legs

She turns her head towards the wind
I'm thinking of her black moist muzzle
but can only see her head seeking
backwards and forwards

She knows she can smell a male long before
he smells her. And that this is her one
advantage. The male believes the cubs are rivals
in the mating season

As she moves sideways up the mountain and
disappears over the edge, the book gently closes]

The beginning and end of the poem tell us that the bear under consideration might be found in a picture in a book, but the middle section gives the impression that the bear is observed directly. This textual frame identifies the poem as an ekphrasis and, in accordance with ekphrastic conventions, the poetic narrative animates the subject,

causing tension between word and image to surface. The narrative voice describes not only the external portions of the image, but also includes the thoughts of the female bear (“Ho veit ho kan lukte ein hanne” [She knows she can smell a male]) and the male bear’s impression (“Hannen trur” [The male believes]). In addition, the lyrical subject reveals her own thoughts as they arise in front of the picture (“Eg tenker på den svarte, fuktige snuten hennar” [I’m thinking of her black moist muzzle]). In reality, the picture does not show the bear’s snout. Instead, it shows the bear turning its head. This discrepancy highlights the fact that while a static picture does not exhibit motion, a text, though physically similar to a picture in its dimensionality and the permanence of type upon the page, contains the ability to *move*. Ekphrasistic techniques here make it possible for the picture and its content to come to life.

Perception

The reader of Lunden’s poetry quickly encounters the sophisticated manner in which her words articulate impressions made by the body and its sensual apparatuses. In Lunden’s poems, perception provides a basic mode for experiencing the phenomenal world. We realize the surprising variety inherent in the sense qualities as they “touch” reality. Within the framework of Lunden’s perceptual aesthetic, synaesthesia acts as a characteristic rhetorical trope, a fact that causes a number of significant effects. I will now focus on Lunden’s poetic exploration through synaesthesia into perceptual acts and their relationships to physical and mental experiences.

The opening poem in Lunden’s first published collection, *f.eks. juli*, is titled “Ur-klang” [Past chimes], a metaphorical expression signifying the double meaning found in a chime as both a sound marking the present (a clock chime) and a sound that recalls the past (as memory). The chime also provides a concrete way to relate the experience of time to the senses and to music.

Ur-klang

Sekund for sekund
kjem eg tikkande fram
av meg sjølv,
framtid er berre
langvisarar, fortid
ein metallisk klang
i klokka.

Eg veit
at langvisarane
slår fast
summen av sekunda,
eg høyrer
at klokka er
umusikalsk. (7)

[Past chimes

Second by second
I emerge ticking
of my own accord,
the future is merely
minute hands, the past
a metallic ring
in the clock.

I know
the minute hands
state
the sum of seconds,
I hear
the clock is
out of tune.]

As the opening poem of the collection, “Ur-klang” focuses on resonance as it works through bygone dissonances. I suggest that this poem may be read as a verbal image of the tonal quality of poetry itself: past sounds coexist simultaneously with present ticking and the minutehand’s continual addition carries within it the future. These sounds comprise a metaphorical melding of life in both time and space. As such, the poem deals with the capacity of poetry to express multiple memories without erasing their intrinsic lack of harmony. It is an introduction to the following poems, and perhaps even to Lunden’s entire poetic project since it demonstrates to the reader the creation of future sound through the development of an awareness of the echoes from the past.

A more moderate deployment of synaesthesia is evident in Lunden’s *Inneringa*, where the trope is often connected with knowledge as a bodily phenomenon. The act of perception mediates the traditional distance between intellectual comprehension and embodied awareness:

Hausten set eit bleikt teikn
i sommarens farge, når all lyd
har falle til jorda, tek elvane over
regnet og fører det bort. (33)

[Autumn leaves a pale mark
on the color of summer, when all sound
has fallen to the ground, the rivers take over
the rain and carry it away.]

Har ho mørker i kroppen?
Nei, ho har augnevipper
som stryk dagen over
i skugge. (71)

[Is there darkness in her body?
No, she has eyelashes
that stroke the day
into shade.]

Natt i skogen
og ein som varsamt
legg varmen omkring henne
med sin eigen,

ventar heilt til morgonen
på at nattehimmelen skal mørkne
i henne og gå til ro. (84)

[Night in the forest
and one who gently
wraps his warmth around her
with his own,

waiting right until morning
for the night sky to darken
in her and come to rest.]

A sensual plurality—seeing, touching, and hearing—is activated in these poems in order to describe things in terms of their qualities and articulate the mind of the girl with the slim body. The synaesthesia evident in the dampened tone concretizes the ways in which poetry assembles sense modalities in new ways.

In Lunden's most recent book, *Flokken og skuggen*, we encounter a heightened use of synaesthetic expressions, which helps to flesh out the theme of perception, particularly in terms of a dynamic between presence and absence.

The first section of the book is called "Varmen i dyresporet" [The heat in the animal's tracks], a poetic expression of something that, more abstractly, may be identified as the presence of absence. The animal, no longer physically present, is instead evoked through the traces of its passing: the warm tracks, still visible, offer up the past presence of the

beast. This absent presence is intriguingly challenging. Is it possible to touch a track and feel heat? Technically possible, yes, but that possibility is undeniably hypothetical and quite unlikely for the majority of the present human population. This hypothetical quality gives the word “Varmen” [the heat] a figurative meaning in addition to the literal. In other words, heat is not only something perceived by the senses, but also serves as a metaphor. As such, the heat in the animal’s tracks exists as something more than pure sensation; it simultaneously signifies an experience that lies outside the perceptual powers of the senses and instead is accessed on a deeper, linguistic level. This experience is one that can only be expressed through language: it is in language that we find the rhetorical structures and symbolizing processes necessary to approach the ontological and significative paradoxes and problems inherent in our human experiences.

Skuggar i snøen

i grálýsinga. To dyr ute på sletta

eg stár i vindauga
i snøen i det lydlausa auget (9)

[Shadows in the snow

at dusk. Two animals out in the open

I stand at the window
in the snow in the soundless eye]

The poem circles around the visual: it ultimately concerns the act of seeing, and it opens up a field of vision through shadows, soon identified as two animals. The lyrical subject stands at the window, watching the animals. Alliteration and assonance unite the elements of the poem, and the repetition of the word “snøen” [snow] along with the similar sounds in “vindauga” [window] and “auge” [eye] (approximated in English through the rhyme in “window,” “shadow,” and “snow”) create an intimacy between the one who sees and the observed object. The sense of hearing is brought into the poem at the end through the synaesthesia “det lydlausa auget” [the soundless eye]. However, there is no sound to hear, only silence; therefore, the synaesthetic effect is more concerned with highlighting the silence in connection with sight—as if it were an absence—than introducing a new sense quality. In the end, it accomplishes both tasks.

The shadows in the poem are not directly depicted as the shadows

of the two animals; instead they are the visual trace of the animals visible before they have been identified as animals. The shadows remain in the snow. In the morning light we perceive the shadow as a visual phenomenon that creates a contour against the white snow. This contour remains out of focus due to the obscure quality of the light that appears on the threshold between night and day. Hence, the poem—and the book—introduce a gaze directed toward an object, “To dyr ute på sletta” [Two animals out in the open], but they also underscore the way in which the object is seen. This dual investigation of the gaze is achieved by placing the observing eye in front of a window in combination with the changing description of the animals: first as shadows, and later as themselves. The last line, “i snøen i det lydause auget” [in the snow in the soundless eye], continues to elaborate the theme of uncertain perception as it is unclear from the text who, exactly, is standing in the snow. Is it the animals or the perceiving subject? Furthermore, the location of the snow itself is put into question—is the snow actually outside in the open or is it instead an interior phenomenon (the softly obscured inner eye)?

In her most recent collection, Lunden develops her synaesthetic rhetoric into novel, subtle forms. Her interest in the relationship between sensing, perceiving, and understanding the world by bodily means is broadened into an investigation of the space where phenomena and feelings both exist and do not exist, as, for example, in memories and anticipations. The poetic expression also evokes absence in terms of something missing or lost that is also, alternatively, present.

Parody

I want to end this discussion by foregrounding an aspect of Lunden’s style that has appeared in the preceding chapters, but never as the focal point: the humor that no reader—or indeed listener—can avoid noticing. I have touched upon Lunden’s use of humor several times, most notably when a poem hovers between the modal extremes of sincerity and amusement. In such cases, humor unsettles the text, making the reader uncertain as to its meaning. That is, of course, exactly its intended effect and part of what makes Lunden’s humor such an intriguing quality in her writing. But there is more to Lunden’s poetic laughter. To further this investigation into the significance of Lunden’s humor, I will discuss a couple of the poems from *Slik Sett*.

The following prose poem contains a warm humor; it also develops laughter and sight as explicit motifs:

Dei tre vandrar omkring i gammal-nytt butikken
 og finn rare ting som berre kan bli rare når tre par
 auge ser samtidig. Sjå her er glashøner! Og kva med eit
 glasauge? Plutseleg kjøper den eine kvinna eit stort
 halsband av glasperler, og alle tre ler hjarteleg.
 Mannen bøyer seg over kvinna med halsbandet og dei blir
 ståande lenge og snakke om glasperler. Køyr forsiktig!
 seier han med låg røyst til den andre kvinna i det ho er
 på veg ut døra, og ho høyrer at han har fått eit snev av
 optimisme i stemma (284)

[The three are browsing in a second-hand shop
 finding odd things that only become funny when three pairs of
 eyes see them together. Look, glass pussycats! And what about a
 glass eye? All of a sudden one of the women buys a huge
 necklace of glass beads and they all laugh heartily.
 The man bends down over the woman with the necklace and they
 have
 a long conversation about glass beads. Drive carefully!
 he says in a low voice to the other woman as she is
 on her way out of the door, and she hears that he now has a touch of
 optimism in his voice.]

The text narrates a miniature version of a triangular love drama, reminding us of the fact that laughter often goes hand in hand with lust—and perhaps kills lust, too! Two women and a man enjoy themselves in a second hand goods store, discovering odd items that offer them child-like pleasure. Glass pussycats! A glass eye! These objects serve as metonymic representations of the characters and the erotic emotions that resonate between them. Immodest and impulsive, one of the women buys an entire glass necklace, symbolizing an almost insatiable desire, as if she cannot possess enough of the funny items. The man responds to her behavior by leaning over her and talking with her a long time. The other woman leaves and the man urges her to drive carefully. She notices that he has an optimistic voice, and the reader shares her feeling that love is in the air.

Lunden writes a humorous poem that examines how laughter both liberates and hints at an eroticized game. The diction of the text is quite neutral, but the emotional states of the characters are made apparent through the various points of view and their expressive language. The glass objects and beads join in a metaphoric function that alludes to sight and observation—“rare ting som berre kan bli rare når tre par auge ser samtidig” [odd things that only become funny when three pairs of eyes see them together]—at the same time they become fetishist objects that absorb and reflect bodily desire. The traditional motif of

rivalry in the love triangle appears to be absent, but, of course, that option still exists. Perhaps the man will maneuver the other woman away in order to return to her later. His optimistic voice could for that matter be matched with the anticipatory happiness of a promise of things to come.

“Words are a plastic material with which one can do all kinds of things,” Freud states in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Lunden takes Freud at his word in the following two poems, which are not directly witty, perhaps, but which play with an implied eroticism in amusing ways. Both poems use a motif taken from the polar wastelands, and belong to the section “Professor Rubeks siste utsikt” [Professor Rubek’s last vintage point]. The first one alludes to Ibsen’s drama *Når vi døde vågner* [*When We Dead Awaken*]:

Professor Rubeks draum var eit skip som gjekk
heile kysten rundt i ei reise. Ei leppe
kring Nordishavets kant. Krølla (315)

[Professor Rubek’s dream was a ship that sailed
round the whole coast on one voyage. A lip
round the rim of the Arctic ocean. Curled]

The second poem is similar in its cunning combination of eroticism and geography:

Polen som eit brusande kvitt skjørt kring
magnetnåla
Å krabbe fram under polkanten ein dag, plutseleg
som kvitebjørn kong Valemon (316)

[The Pole like a frothy white skirt circling
the magnetic needle
Crawling out from under the rim of the pole one day, suddenly
like the Prince Valemon, the white bear.]

The poem contains a relatively clear analogy to the cover photograph of *Slik Sett*, where a black fountain pen hovers autonomously over a white, curly cloth or napkin that, by association, evokes a small mountain covered by snow. The background is dark and the pen fails to cast a shadow, thus the picture appears rather sterile and formal.

In contrast to controlled environment as evident in the photo, the poem lets loose its energies: the skirt is full of ruffling and someone is crawling forward from “under polkanten ein dag, plutseleg” [under the rim of the pole one day, suddenly]. Someone has paid a visit under the

skirt. And someone has been out with the white bear. The magnetic needle stands seemingly fixed and without vibrations, but everything that happens around it is excessive, out of control. The myth of the pole as a site of stability is ruptured. The pole is not a localizable point with firm borders, but rather a ruffling skirt. Its edge is not a clearly demarcated line, but rather a place where hidden things suddenly, unexpectedly, turn up. The white bear is—in a psychoanalytically inspired interpretation at least—a friendly, but also frightening animal that stands for the desired male, while the fairytale symbolizes the princess's struggle to accept her own mature sexuality. In sum, this poem produces a playful game with a pole, a magnet needle, and a bear—seemingly innocuous until we recognize the underlying uncontrollable powers that cause these things to become charged with a sexualized significance.

Texts like these inspire me to consider humor as an essential part of the aesthetics in this poetic universe. On the one hand, humor is a style, a way of loosening up, perhaps of escaping sincerity when things become too serious and difficult. We recognize the burlesque, the bodily effects, as well as the often tremendous distance between high and low. On the other hand, humor supports a poetics, a hermeneutic conviction that opens a gap within language itself, a hiatus that butts against harmonious solutions and permanent truths. There is a strong theoretical and political dialogue in Lunden's texts, but also a tendency to disturb and challenge it by jokes, puns and enigmas.

The comic dimensions of Eldrid Lunden's poetry are ultimately difficult to identify and to interpret. Certainly, it is the very logic of humor itself to shatter any prejudice that we might have of a complete and stable meaning of an artistic utterance, and Lunden's poetry is exactly a kind of discourse that rejects any attempt at confirming conventions by way of conclusive arguments. It is a restless engagement in social phenomena, cultural expressions and intellectual seriousness, where the humor again and again insists on seeing things differently.