

Review · Tom Hansen

The Other Side of the Story. Richard Shelton. Confluence Press, 1987, 82 pages, paper, \$7.95.

1

The Other Side of the Story, poet Richard Shelton's ninth book, is his first book of prose. Eight of the fifteen pieces assembled here originally appeared in various of his other books. Shelton considers this one to be a collection of embryonic stories, little quasi-fictions "from which several of the elements of modern fiction are missing," rather than prose poems. Yet many of his readers will see these pieces as poems from which several of the elements of poetry are missing—namely, rhyme, meter, and line as the basic irreducible unit.

In all of them, as in prose poems, one hears a distinctive voice—in this case, an "I" that is lost, disenchanted, alienated at times, occasionally trapped in a strange room or town or landscape that we gradually come to recognize as the outer visible counterpart to something internal and unnameable, and frequently visionary in his ability to take us into the inner lives of objects; for example, holes and stones.

Like prose poems, many of these pieces begin with an odd or fantastic given—often a metaphor or analogy indicative of a state of mind unusually receptive to suggestion—and then trace that peculiar beginning, with an obsessive but irrefutable logic, to its conclusion. By the time that conclusion is reached, the world of objective, daylight reality (if it ever really existed) has opened out into another, older world: subjective, lighted by stars.

The atmosphere generated by this voice, its logic, and the implied world in which they both exist is dreamlike, sometimes nightmarelike, and disturbingly persuasive—as if something in us, below the level of what we call consciousness, were able to understand and respond to a way of thinking that makes no sense to the sense-making part of us we think of as the only part there is. More than anything else, this is what makes *The Other Side of the Story* an evocative book: it knocks on old, forgotten doors.

Shelton divides it into four sections according to the dominant fictional

element: Plot, Setting, Character, and Action. The distinction between plot and action is confusing, and the decision to place two or three stories in one section instead of another seems arbitrary. But these are quibbles. The book as a whole is moving and powerful.

2

The three pieces in Plot are not tightly or intricately plotted. They have no real plot at all. In each of them, something is attempted, but what finally happens seems to occur in spite of, rather than because of, human intention.

“The Messenger” demonstrates this failure of intention particularly well. Like much of Shelton’s work, it takes place in an infected world full of apocalyptic omens:

There was no question of waiting for daylight, and I had expected the cold, but not the creaking as some unseen engine hoisted a damaged moon into the sky. Then I saw moulting angels, like scarecrows, standing in the fields while their feathers blew in drifts across the road. But none of this could stop me. I had memorized the message. I had sworn to deliver it. And it would prevent an execution scheduled for dawn.

The first two sentences of this opening paragraph establish the nightmare setting. The mechanical (creaking) and natural (moulting) imagery not only contributes to the supernatural atmosphere, but is primarily responsible for creating it. The four short sentences that conclude the paragraph are preliminary to plot; they establish the life-and-death mission. The remaining seven paragraphs detail the messenger’s success at overcoming physical obstacles and his paralysis — presented as betrayal, not mere weakness — in the presence of others.

“The Messenger” contains several unmistakable allusions to Peter’s denial of Christ. In this version (the other side of the story) we are all implicated — we messengers who choose to wait outside in the courtyard warming our hands by the fire, rather than to deliver our messages from the beyond within:

Each morning we return from sleep as if from a long journey, forgetting the messages we have memorized and sworn to deliver in our dreams. Forgetting even our dreams, the unspeakable solutions to problems we no longer have.

3

None of the six pieces in *Setting* is longer than two full pages. They are less stories than brief moments of vision in which something ordinary becomes extraordinary. The first two (“Holes” and “Stones”) are prose poems of the object-poem kind, reminiscent of Francis Ponge’s work. But Shelton’s surrealism is closer in spirit to warm Spanish rather than cool French surrealism.

The other side of the story of “The Hole,” for example, is that this vacant nothing is full being. The “I” who digs it refuses to take credit for creating it *ex nihilo*. “It was there from the beginning, waiting to be uncovered.” Shelton considers the major existential threat a hole faces (that everything conspires to fill it up), the reason why a hole ranks higher than a cave in the hierarchy of negative spaces (because it is more courageous, exposing itself to the world instead of concealing itself), the two things a hole most loves (shadows and sounds), and the fact that “a hole has only sides and a bottom from which it extends infinitely upward, like a shaft of light; and as the earth revolves, it moves with great care and precision between the stars.”

In pieces like this, Shelton recovers something of the awe that primitives feel when they regard the world as a community of natural objects: holes, stones, rivers. . . . These objects quiver with an all but perceptible life. Though they lack consciousness, they remain real to us in a way that dumb, dead matter never could. For they, too, have a story to tell—to those willing to fall under their spell. Viewed in a certain way, they seem to have an almost spiritual significance.

4

The five short pieces in *Character* are so varied it is difficult to generalize about them. In “Sleep,” an old man and a young man contend with one another, neither realizing that they are each other’s future and past respec-

tively. “Brief Communications from My Widowed Mother” is a hilarious selection of brief quotes from the letters of a quirky elderly mother to her son. “Doing Without” and “The Swimmers” are more typical Shelton pieces. Though the desert is not mentioned in either of them, they emanate from a desert existence, where those who expect nothing receive nothing, and so are not disappointed—and where those who make love their rock-solid foundation slowly discover how rapidly it disintegrates into shifting sand, how brief its unstable half-life is. They wake from the dream of Eden and find themselves together—and so all the more alone.

The Action section consists of one thirty-page story, “The Jericho Road,” a preposterous but highly plausible version of what might have happened had the city fathers of Jerusalem and Jericho decided to mount an all-out education (publicity) campaign (scheme) to counter the groundless (deserved) reputation for banditry which the road between the two cities had gained as a result of the widely known parable of the Good Samaritan. Though Shelton relies entirely on summary unrelieved by scene, the story is fascinating both for its historical flavor and its obvious modern parallels. Only at the end does one realize that this is the other side of the story of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension.

5

It is hard to describe Shelton’s work without using the word *surrealism* or to mention him without calling him a *surrealist*—as if there were an *-ism* he adhered to; as if he were a practicing *-ist*. But he isn’t. Such labels conceal as much as they reveal.

Surrealism results from a method of swift, illogical association which occurs, so the theory goes, when one surrenders conscious control and gives the unconscious free reign. The unconscious responds by juxtaposing disparate images (as in dreams) that the conscious mind dismisses as being absurdly incongruous and therefore meaningless. This is the great obstacle surrealist writing must overcome. It must find, or create, an audience that will give it the serious consideration which it seems, superficially, not to warrant. But because of its almost self-congratulatory unintelligibility, much *soi-disant* surrealism seems little more than mere technique—a substanceless, self-indulgent mannerism that manages to be both decadent and puerile.

In this sense, Shelton's work is not surrealistic. It is wonderfully and terrifyingly real. It speaks from the other side, from some far country whose border is close between us. It knows that the line between sanity and madness is as illusory as the equator. It knows, as French poet Paul Eluard said, that "There is another world, but it is in this one." It has found this world in the forbidding but lush, almost hallucinatory, imagery of the desert. It reveals a spiritual, *not* religious, existence available to those willing to pay the price: to journey alone into the desert out there in order to confront the desert in here.

Shelton's surrealism is not just a way of writing. It is less a method than a content—a world rendered as it is. As it is experienced. Neither a literary nor a philosophical stance, Shelton's surrealism might be described as phenomenological—an attempt to describe a concrete *Lebenswelt* (lived world), a world encountered by those who have, willingly or not, crossed that unmarked border and heard, however faintly, the other side of the story.