

BORDER POETICS

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I start with a quote from a three line stanza in a poem I published 1982: “There are borders everywhere / when a difference appears/ a relation is established.”

I was born and raised 160 km inland from the city of Tromsø. As a child I had a talent for drawing, not writing. I made up stories, though, about the people I was drawing, but did not write them down.

I left the north when I was 17 years old and spent three years as a student at the national Art and Craft School in Oslo. After that, I stayed one winter in Copenhagen, in the middle of the sixties – when everything was changing. I participated in protest- and liberation movements and developed what we call social consciousness. I became a believer – first, in the fine arts, then in politics. In this complex and problematic area between the arts and social politics I have written my poetry.

I returned to the North in 1970 and lived five years on Magerøya (The meager island) where North Cape is situated. After that, I spent two years in the most desolate part of Pasvik Valley by the Pasvik River – borderline to the then Soviet Union. In these landscapes of the farthest North, I became a poet.

When I moved from drawing to writing, my images seemed to become more vivid and powerful in the imagery of language. The language of poetry has since then been my main medium of expression.

I published my first book of poetry in 1979, *Den Klare Tonen (The Clear Tone)*. Since then I have published nine books of poetry and translated five books of poetry into Norwegian. I have also written two novels and a collection of essays, though I see myself as a poet – not a storyteller. I have written articles about literature and literary critics, and since 1993 have been teaching creative writing at the University of Tromsø.

For me poetry is a combination of imagery and ideas: what we can visually imagine (in or without language) is infused with the meanings we adhere to in what we see which constructs the meanings of our lives. The saying goes: Poetry is not fiction. Poetry is closely connected to and inseparable from the physical body of the poet, which is always situated in specific times and sites in the world’s topology in what we call reality.

I could define poetry as the activity of border-crossing – or rather living the border, living on the border nurtured by “differences that make a difference.” The Californian language poet Lyn Hejinian writes: “Poetry is the language of inquiry, not the language of a genre.”

Poetry should not be defined by its formal attributes. Prose, for example, is not necessarily *not* poetry. Poetry has the capacity (and obligation) of entering those zones known as borderlands where you meet strange things and foreign people. Borders can be captured in the Greek word *xenos*, a figure of both contradiction and confluence. The guest/host relationship is the outcome of an occurrence, a meeting, an encounter. We have no other experience of living than through encounters, and in these meeting-places language has evolved through a natural necessity of

Nordlit 31, 2014 

communication, probably the reason for language development in the first place. The language of poetry enables us to create new meanings, which help us understand new appearances and new experiences.

In this poetic world view, the border is not an edge along the fringe of lands, societies and experiences, but rather their very middle – and their in-between. We can draw the analogy to dream-landscapes, which are dynamic borderlands between the sleeping and waking person; a zone between our inner life and the world surrounding us. It helps us see the centrality of the border and its location in the middle of human life.

Poetry represents the condition of doubt and uncertainties provoked by being foreign to a situation (which might be life itself) – a condition which is simultaneously an impasse and a passage, both limbo and transit zone – an *agora* in the centre of communal life - and a realm of confusion, which provides us simultaneously with awareness of limit and limitlessness.

Poet George Oppen has written: “Poetry is an instance of being in the world, at the limits of judgment, the limits of reason.” Here we touch the border between aesthetics and ethics, as well as the borders between subjectivity and objectivity – which springs from the same delusion of Western thought: that body and soul can be separated, and the conscious mind isolated from the vast unconscious areas, where brain programs perform their complex, very fast and efficient transformation of information from our bodily situated sense apparatuses to mental attitudes and physical actions.

The structures of language are social structures in which meanings and intentions are already in place, always fighting for power and dominance with rhetorical figures and more violent weapons. Poetry and art works are not isolated autonomous aesthetic objects. The language of poetry has the capacity to question, expose and attack the language of power.

In this perspective, poetry is a site for individual intentionality as well as social history. It puts emphasis on language as a medium, which precedes the individual subject and is shared by all its speakers. It helps to liberate ideas and emotions from the strict limits of the singular “I”, making room for a poetry of complex and densely layered effects as well as rational intelligence.

A Poetics founded on the (philosophically) simple recognition of actuality – “That it is - that which is – as it is,” could ultimately lead to equally simple and non-antagonistic social relationships. A poetics of encounters offers a way of acknowledging the world and other people without seeking to reduce them to objects, and might establish “relationships expressing proximity rather than contemplative or legislative distance.”

This year I am kind of summing up my 33 years in service of language – poetry, prose, critics, reflections and teaching of Creative writing. During these years I have crossed several borders; geographical and social, borders between theory and practice, between thinking and creating. It has led me to the conclusion that art and science must co-operate to create epistemological and ecological models of the human condition on planet earth. The realities we encounter in human life must include both the material and mental aspects of existence.

I am working on a book with the title *North of Intention* - I call it “a scotch to a bio-po-etics” - I use the North as a metaphor for all things and phenomenon that moves beyond the borders of the normal, regular and controlled mapping and planning of where to go, what to do and whom to be. Poetry is crossing the border into the unknown, to be able to get in touch with what one might call a neutral mystery - or an objective miracle - during glimpses of what one might call aesthetic ecstasy when the poetry of the world writes itself through me. This ecstasy however, cannot last. The works of art might outlast the life of the poet, who is condemned to continue his/her passage towards death and extinction.

In the end I quote the last lines of the last poem in my latest book of poetry, (2008) which is titled “When I do not belong.” This paradoxically brings me back to my homeland and birthplace in the North.

I travel towards the border I call soul
the border I call extinction
on my ultimate Thule expedition

...

The poetry has no price
I pay what it costs

When I have travelled long and far enough

to the north
my last poem might end
with a stroke in my heart or in my brain.

(Liv Lundberg: *Når jeg ikke hører hjemme* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2008), 61.

Biographical Note

Professor of Creative Writing, Academy of Contemporary Art and Creative Writing, University of Tromsø. Born in Bardu, Troms County, 1944, Liv's first book of poetry was published 1979. Since then she has published 9 books of poetry and 2 novels, 5 translations of poetry into Norwegian, 1 book of essays on literature, and a volume of selected poetry *Stony head, hit / stony eye, see* (2012).

Summary

The language of poetry is a language of inquiry, not the language of a genre. Poetry has the capacity of entering those zones known as borderlands, where you meet strange things and foreign people. In this poetic world view, the border is not an edge along the fringe of lands, societies and experiences, but rather their very middle – and their in-between. The structures of language are social structures in which meanings and intentions are already in place, always fighting for power and dominance, with rhetorical figures and more violent weapons.

Keywords: Language, poetry, difference, borders, relations, north of intention