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ELAINE FEINSTEIN'S POETRY: AN AUSTERE ART?

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'Elaine Feinstein's Poetry: An Austere Art' analyzes and interprets Feinstein's verse. The methodology is that of neo-formalist technical analysis. Technical features identified are: a largely informal language; free verse; avoidance of rhyme; and use of enjambment. It is an art that denies artfulness. Thematic aspects identified are: a focus on the quotidian, family, and displacement; myth; and specifically Jewish subjects. An interest in women's issues is also apparent throughout. Detailed discussion of poems from different parts of Feinstein's *œuvre* provides evidence for the above.

Key words: Elaine Feinstein; poetic technique; Anglo-Jewish poetry

On Elaine Feinstein's death in 2019, an obituary writer wrote in *The Guardian* that 'Elaine Feinstein [...] was a leading poet and the bringer of a new internationalism to British verse. As a novelist, she was one of the women who transformed literary writing in the 1970s' [Sampson 2019]. She was, indeed, a writer of considerable range and achievement. Her output consists of verse, plays (for stage, radio, and television), novels, short stories, biographies, and translations. Her poetry, too, shows substantial range: short lyric poems, longer sequences, and even a long narrative poem ("Gold" [2000]). The subject matter of her poems is also varied: personal lyrics about the everyday, legendary subjects, women's issues, and Jewish topics. Writing in 2006, Rose Atfield describes her poetry as 'unfairly neglected' [243]. As recently as 2014, Feinstein herself indicated that she felt herself marginalized within British literature. 'I am an outsider who wants to come in from the cold', she confessed to Sasha Dugdale [2014: 59]. [See also Görtschacher, Malcolm 2017: 72–77.] One wonders if this is true. Her work is certainly widely discussed in books and essays on modern British Jewish writing. See, for example, Nadia Valman's introduction to *Jewish Women Writers in Britain* [2014: 1], Phyllis Lassner's chapter on Feinstein in her *Anglo-Jewish*

Women Writing the Holocaust [2008], and Peter Lawson's introduction to *Passionate Renewal* [2001]. Anne Stevenson insists that 'Literature in Britain since 1960 would be much poorer without the almost continuous contribution of Elaine Feinstein' [Stevenson 1995/1996: 63]. All this is praise indeed. However, Feinstein sees herself and is seen by some commentators as writing (in Lawson's words) 'against the grain of the dominant English literary tradition' [Lawson 2007: 132]. Again one wonders what she and others mean by this. Indeed, Feinstein's frequent commitment to 'directness and lucidity' [qtd. in Birkett 1998: 114] might come from a Movement apologia.

In the following, I discuss technical and thematic aspects of Feinstein's poetry. The technical aspects that run consistently through her verse are: a largely informal language, at a relatively neutral level of formality; a predilection for free verse; an avoidance of rhyme; and a disposition toward enjambment. It is an art that almost denies art, or at least artfulness. The thematic aspects of her poetry overlap, but can be distinguished. They involve focuses on: the everyday and domestic, often involving immediate family; temporality; and displacement. They also involve legend and explicitly Jewish subjects. This article is divided according to subject matter. First, I discuss some poems of everyday experience; second, I consider some legend-oriented verse; and third, I look at poems that explicitly consider Jewish subjects. Feinstein's interest in women's issues (Jennifer Birkett [1998: 115] calls her 'one of the pioneers of women-centered poetry in the 1960s and 1970s') will be apparent in the discussions of these subjects.

My examples are drawn from collections printed in *Collected Poems and Translations* [2002]. Although Feinstein published more poetry before her death, *Talking to the Dead* [2007], *Cities* [2010], and *Portraits* [2015], I see no reason to alter my observations based on earlier material. I refer readers to a 2017 interview [Görtschacher and Malcolm], in which the poet largely confirms the approach put forward in this essay (especially, 79–83).

1. The Quotidian

The term 'everyday' is almost never a satisfactory one, for the everyday is surely relative. However, Feinstein's poetry does frequently across her whole *œuvre* address domestic, unglamorous, local subjects and occasions, the quotidian: an aunt's life and death ('Dance for a Dead Aunt'), hope for one's children ('A Prayer for My Sons'), a flower growing by a bus shelter ('Our Vegetable Love'), lying in bed of a morning ('In Bed'), a partner's illness ('Respite'), driving a car up a hill on a March morning ('Paradise'). Alice Oswald writes that 'she admits and delights in smallness' [1995: 128]. [See also Mitchell 1980: 128.] A poem that illustrates this aspect of Feinstein's work is 'Dance for a Dead Aunt' (1966) [Feinstein 2002: 10].¹

The title of the text embodies a paradox at the center of the poem. It points toward the text's being an elegy, but it is also a dance. How can these two types of

¹ All poems by Feinstein referred to are in Feinstein 2002. I only give page references when I discuss a text in detail.

artistic expression – one mourning, dignified, and the other with strong connotations of merriment – be combined? The title also is marked by phonological chiming: the alliteration of /d/ sounds, and the assonance of /a:/ in 'dance' and 'aunt'. (The latter is contentious, but for someone from 'up North' [line 7], these vowel sounds are very close to each other.) Once again, a degree of paradox can be noted. The language is literal, or so it seems, but artistic shaping is apparent on a phonological level.

The poem's primary subject matter is developed clearly and directly. Stanzas 1–3 form a proem, bringing together the occasion for the poem, that is the aunt's death and her niece's response to that death. Stanzas 4–7 set out the aunt's life, one of responsible work and unglamorous decorousness: matron in a hospital, decent clothes, holidays in the Channel Islands. Only the generationally appropriate smoking, cigarette held in the lips while talking, seems racy to the contemporary reader. Stanzas 8–9 reveal a further impetus behind the speaker's reflection on her aunt: she (and others, most likely siblings or cousins, younger, frivolous) has inherited money from her aunt, money that comes from financial caution. In the last two stanzas, the speaker asks how she will be able to thank her aunt now she is dead.

A pattern of repeated motifs holds the poem together. Ashes and greyness stand at the start of the poem, for the aunt has been cremated. These return in stanzas 10 and 11. The cigarette that the aunt smokes echoes these references to ash. Colors are muted: greyness, the aunt's 'fastidious' dress (line 13), her corset, the cleanliness of her virtuous life. These contrast with the aunt's ginger hair, now grey, and the 'lilac knickers' (line 14) that she wears. The neutrality of color in the text is matched by a neutral informality of language. The inverted word order of 'clothes fastidious' (line 13) is the only exception to this feature. The language is prosaic and largely literal. Even the two similes that occur – the comparison of the aunt's bosom to a 'bolster' (line 16) and the assertion that in her virtuous life she is clean like a sea bird – are scarcely *recherché*.

The short lines of the poem seem almost arbitrary fragments of speech, mostly 3 to 4 syllables in length (although some lines have 6, and one has 7 syllables), with 1 to 3 main stresses in each (although line 18, has no main stress). Enjambment runs throughout the poem. There are 13 examples of it in a text of only 32 lines. The poem certainly appears to be a piece of free verse, without any through-text traditional metrical organization or patterning of rhyme. All these features give the poem a markedly unpoetic, prosaic appearance [Mitchell 1980: 129]. Even the motif of ashes and 'grey sand' (line 30) is literal, just as the aunt's cigarette is literally 'smoking' her nose (lines 10–11).

But yet the text is a dance, and the literalness, the domesticity, the quotidian, is infused with art. The two-stress lines that predominate do not just suggest fragments of utterance, but also, contrariwise, the patterning of verse. Twenty-one lines (out of 32) can legitimately be read as two-stressed. (The remainder has 1 or at most 3 main stresses [line 14]; one line [line 18] appears to be accentless.) However, phonological orchestration most clearly marks the artistic, dance-like quality of the poem. Some examples among many must suffice: line 2 –/g/; lines 3–4 –/a/; l. 5 –/f/; lines 10–13 –/k/, /s/, /əʊ/; lines 19–20 –/i/; lines 27–28 –/f/. The text even contains rhyme. The line

‘Back from Sark’ (line 17) contains an internal rhyme. Lines 23–24 have end rhymes, as do lines 26 and 28. Most notable, the poem ends on a rhyme, line 32 rhyming with line 29.

‘Dance for a Dead Aunt’ is domestic in its focus, literal and prosaic in its language. It scrupulously attempts to conjure up a dead person and to deal with the speaker’s complex relationship with her (the poem ends on a question, even if the question mark is absent). Yet the poem transforms itself and its subject. Domesticity and transience are transfigured through patterning of motif, rhythmic cohesion (the two-stress lines), and, above all, a phonological orchestration that makes the elegy a song and a dance.

Such poems run throughout Feinstein’s work. Comparable texts, among others, are ‘In Bed’ (1973), ‘A Favourite Uncle’ (1990), ‘Mirror’ (1997), and ‘Paradise’ (2000). Technically and thematically these poems show variation within a considerable degree of similarity. For example, in ‘Paradise’, the speaker employs longer lines (from 15 through 7 syllables per line) than in ‘Dance for a Dead Aunt’ [Feinstein 2002: 185]. There is no evidence of phonological orchestration, although the poem ends on an isolated rhyme (lines 16 and 19). The poem is a piece of free verse, with stanzas of unequal length, largely without rhyme, and without metrical patterning. As in ‘Dance for a Dead Aunt’, there is a focus on the mundane: music on a car radio, the names of high street stores. This is at odds with the title. As in all Feinstein’s poems of the quotidian mundane, there is an attempt to be true to the *realia* of particular persons, places, and times. In ‘Paradise’, the speaker’s experience is one of feeling free on an early March morning on the average street of an average town, of touching ‘Paradise’ in the material here and now.

But in Feinstein’s poems of the quotidian, the mundane is never entirely the banal (whatever the weight of the everyday). ‘Dance for a Dead Aunt’ is a piece about transience, as is ‘A Favourite Uncle’ (1990). ‘Mirror’ (1997) is a reflection on individuality and family past. Several poems explicitly push beyond the local and commonplace. ‘November Songs’ (1973), an observation of light and trees at the year’s end, achieves this through a rich and elevated lexis. ‘Prayer’ (1997) shifts abruptly but easily from a ‘40 watt light’ to a consideration of the point of prayer and of the nature of the divine, as the text moves lexically from the informal to the more formal, and enjambment is combined with a concluding rhyme.

2. The Legendary

The movement toward giving the quotidian a more general significance is matched by Feinstein’s interest in legendary subjects, drawn from a European repertoire of such topics. Lassner discusses the ‘mythic structures’ within Feinstein’s poetry [2008: 130]. Feinstein’s collection *Badlands* (1986) contains three longer sequences of poems with legendary/mythological subjects, ‘New Songs for Dido and Aeneas’, ‘Three Songs from Ithaca’, and ‘Songs of Eurydice’. Although other such poems occur elsewhere in her output, the concentration and length of these sequences is striking. I will discuss the longest sequence, ‘New Songs for Dido and Aeneas’ [Feinstein 2002: 99–104].

The subject matter is well known and set out in Books 1 and 4 of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The sequence is made up of nine poems. In the first, a narrator focuses on Dido in a garden, just before Aeneas's arrival. Then follow eight poems in which the voices of Aeneas and Dido speak to each other. The text as a whole follows the traditional elements of the story material. Its topics are exile, suffering, care and love, abandonment, the foundation of empire, and death. The poems are written in moderately free verse. Lines are of differing lengths in each poem and throughout the sequence. The number of main accents per line varies considerably within each part and overall. There is no coherent or consistent metrical patterning. There is no rhyme scheme, although occasional rhyme occurs, and in parts 8 and 9 with frequency. Language is not predominantly formal or informal, but mostly neutral. However, it mixes ancient and contemporary lexis. The names of personages are classical, and there are references to ancient sailing ships (6) and Dido's funeral pyre (9). But apart from those, reference is either timeless or modern. [See Sicher 1985: 150 on 'timelessness' in Feinstein's work.] Dido's garden at the sequence's start could belong to any time, although it is very old. Similarly, Aeneas's memory (2) of his mother walking in a war-ravaged city is timeless. But Aeneas explicitly draws the legendary into conjunction with the modern when he talks of the buildings and tramcars of his fallen city (2), and when he declares he is not ready for exile in Australia (4). Aeneas is also explicitly associated not with Troy, but with Europe (2, 9), and with empire and imperial/colonial expansion (8), not with Rome as such.

Technical aspects of these texts deserve some attention. Despite the sequence's being called 'New Songs', individual texts are not very song-like. They resemble speech in their relatively neutral lexis, the presence of enjambment (see, for example, stanza 2 of the first poem), considerably varying line lengths, and lack of rhyme. The mixture of legendary, archaic, and contemporary reference renders the story material timeless, and at least partly modern. The texts are not entirely without song-like elements however. Rhyme does appear prominently in the last two poems in the sequence. This is particularly true of Aeneas's words in poem 8. Seven out of 10 lines rhyme, and, indeed, lines 6–8 repeat the same rhyme. Poem 9 – Dido's final words before her death – also contains rhyme, mostly at the semantically loaded ends of stanzas. Of the poem's five stanzas, three end in rhymes. Rhyme in Aeneas's final utterance emphasizes his certainty, his authority; perhaps it also suggests a rigidity, a limitation. Dido's final words are some kind of response to that, although here rhyme is much more intermittent, and flexible. Thus, the last words of the sequence contain half rhymes (consonance): 'last', 'dust', and 'ghost'.

Indeed, the text as a whole is organized round a contrast between the two main speakers. Aeneas is male and European. His past is one of warfare, destruction, and a cruel history. He sees himself as amongst the cruel, beyond redemption. He is linked to a grand city with gleaming glass, gold leaf, cafés, tramcars, ornate palaces, violin music, and excesses (6, lines 8–9). It all sounds like *fin-de-siècle* Europe, engulfed in the first half of the twentieth century in savage wars. Aeneas suggests this in poem 4 ('Ours was the generation. . . .' [line 9]). But it seems that no lesson has been learned

and that history will repeat itself. Aeneas is also associated with a renewal of those forces that have destroyed his great city. As Birkett writes, ‘Virgil’s epic celebration of empire’ becomes ‘a denunciation of the devouring lust for power that drives the imperialist hero’ (115).

Dido is different, a woman, associated not with Europe but with a much more southern, Mediterranean, or North African landscape, a desert place with scorpions, cactus, and deep-lying waters (1, 4, and 9). She is linked with age, with an ancient order (1). She is also associated with nature, with rain (1) and with the plant life of her land. But her realm is an enclosure that can be breached (1), or is a village state peripheral to the great cities of Europe (4). If Aeneas is linked to war and cruelty, Dido is a figure of care (3) and the erotic (5). But neither of these forces can hold the driven Aeneas, bent on mission and empire. Dido is particularly aware of the limits of what she can do, at least for most of the text. She knows she cannot save Aeneas, and she knows that he is putting them and her world in peril. She is an uneasy figure, and by poem 7, once Aeneas has left her, the violence, pain, and ugliness of his world has entered hers. Only in the last poem (9), at the time of her death and funeral, does she become, in a sense, triumphant and certain [Birkett 1998: 115]. She identifies herself with ‘harsher blood / long ago’ (line 9), with creatures and plants of the desert. Aeneas, she insists, is a tree that despite its attempts to propagate will fall and fail. Her roots go deep to waters, and she will achieve a kind of immortality, at one with the desert, an unscorned ghost.

‘New Songs for Dido and Aeneas’ is a powerful reworking of legendary story material and figures, giving them striking links to a twentieth-century world and a twentieth-century history. Further, the contrast between the diseased and driven male and the (ineffectually) nurturing, abandoned, but finally triumphantly defiant woman gives the poem a feminist edge. In addition, the echoes of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and the contrast between a Levantine, southern Mediterranean world and the great cities of Europe, links the poem to the third aspect of Feinstein’s work that I discuss here, that is the explicitly Jewish subjects that run throughout her verse.

3. Jewish Subjects

A substantial number of poems in Feinstein’s *œuvre* are written on Jewish subjects and with a Jewish voice. Indeed, in many of the poems of the quotidian the speaker’s experience implicitly or explicitly raises issues that run throughout Jewish experience – exile, temporary homes, threat, the power of tradition and inheritance [Lawson 2001: 7–8]. Examples of such are: ‘Buying a House for Now’ (1966), ‘New Sadness/Old City’ (1971), ‘Lisson Grove’ (1997), and ‘Mirror’ (1997). However, there are several poems that directly address Jewish experience in twentieth-century Britain and the wider world. Cheyette sees her as a diasporic author concerned with the complex pressures of history, nation state, and religion on the individual [2003: 53].²

² For a discussion of contemporary Anglo-Jewish poetry [see Malcolm 2021: 19–328].

'Song of Power' (1966) immediately precedes 'Buying a House for Now' in *In a Green Eye* [Feinstein 2002: 18–19]. It is the words of a mother whose son has been baited by other children at school who claim that she is a witch. The speaker interprets this as an assertion of her and her son's Jewish difference from the surrounding community. She calls on the God of the Jews to give her children a 'coherence', a force that will allow them to survive in a hostile world. It is a defiant outcry against hostility and prejudice. As often in Feinstein's early poetry, lines are short, the poem is free verse, and there is much enjambment. It is speech, utterance, that partly hides its poetry. As in the poems of the quotidian, Feinstein suggests that the thing itself, the experience, is more important than music, song, or highly self-referential language. Syntax is at times disrupted, as is punctuation, suggesting the emotional intensity of the experience and the cry [see Atfield 2006: 231]. It is striking, however, that she does not call down the wrath of the God of the Jews on the hostile *goyim*, but rather asks for strength to shape an identity that will help her children be strong in the world.

A later poem that explicitly addresses Jewish experience is 'Amy Levy' (1997), which takes as its subject the nineteenth-century Jewish woman poet and novelist (the first Jewish student at Newnham College, Cambridge) [Feinstein 2002: 156]. This is an important and representative Anglo-Jewish text for Valman [2014: 1]. As in 'Song of Power', the Jewish subject matter overlaps with a feminist one. Levy is not just an outsider because she is Jewish in Cambridge, but because she is a woman. As in so many of her poems, Feinstein's art is very nearly a denial of art. The only formal constraint on 'Amy Levy' is its division into four-line stanzas. Line length, number of main stresses per line, the absence of rhyme and metrical patterning make the poem an utterance in which the focus is much more on the subject than the language used in the utterance. Line division highlights phrases, and asks the reader to pause on parts of the utterance. Thus each separate line in the last stanza is focused on and offered for the reader's consideration – the rich Sephardim of the Levy family past, her alienation from that world because of her desire to be an artist, her alienation from Cambridge because she is Jewish, and the final question as to whether things have changed.

Two other poems that directly address Jewish subjects are 'Allegiance' (1997) and 'Hotel Maimonides' (undated) [Feinstein 2002: 162 and 204–205]. As in much of Feinstein's work, the verse seems unconstrained by any formal shaping apart from recurrent stanza length, and a rough symmetry of line length. Line breaks again serve mostly to highlight phrases. However, in 'Allegiance' there are intermittent rhymes and half-rhymes, for example, in lines 16 and 18 ('could', 'blood'). Here, the lack of obvious phonological patterning, and the use of a half-rhyme to conclude the poem, suggest the very complex nature of the poem's subject. That subject is the contrast between the speaker's allegiance to Israel and her English friend's unspecified distance from modern Israeli politics. But for the speaker, the Israeli soldiers are like her sons, her inheritance is one of exile and flight, and she claims she can taste the 'Hebrew of Adam in / the red earth here' (lines 17–18).

'Hotel Maimonides' also takes the complexities of contemporary Jewish life as its subject. In the first part of the poem, the speaker notes that in Cordoba, the Jewish

past of the city from which Jews were expelled is being restored as a tourist attraction. The speaker remains ‘perplexed’ (line 19), enjoying a pleasant stay in a hotel named for a great Spanish-Jewish philosopher. The second part of the poem moves to England. The speaker wakes early ‘disturbed / by another question’ (lines 5–6). She sets out her dilemma, which she sees as that of a modern British Jew, long settled in Britain, at peace, in a *bien pensant* environment, with children ‘married out’ (line 10). Her sleep is disturbed by memories of exile and hostility that are part of twentieth-century Jewish experience in Europe, although they are not hers directly. Even her quiet garden in England, with its trees and birds, is no protection against them. ‘Over there’, in Israel, her friends (her ‘secular friends’) defend ‘a coastal strip’ (line 46) in the face of a world’s hostility and indifference. The issues are set out clearly, and are complex enough in themselves. Technique serves to highlight particular phrases, and does not detract from the lucidity that Feinstein aspires to. As she writes in the Preface to her *Collected Poems and Translations* (2002), ‘For many years I have worked most of all for directness and lucidity, because I distrust any music that drowns the pressure of what has been felt’ (xiii).

Feinstein’s poetry shows an ability to encompass substantial topics: the quotidian, the legendary, and the Jewish. She deals with these topics in complex and intriguing ways. The language in which these concerns are embodied is often informal and accessible. While her verse is technically resourceful, Feinstein is a poet who almost painfully wishes to be understood directly, to speak complexly but comprehensibly. “I’ve always wanted to express myself nakedly,” she says in her 2017 interview [Görtschacher, Malcolm, 80]. Hers is an austere art, but a powerful one.

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