

Alexis Almeida's *I Have Never Been Able to Sing* (2018) Review

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These poems resisted me writing about them. Maybe it is because a not unsubstantial part of the sequence is devoted to speaking on non-events. This happens as

I have never moved, I never move.

From the lyric's I denying their moving, motion is effected, in the form of this "I" passing through time, from negation of a past to negation of a present. It also happens as

...I will never look past all these fields in my
mind.

In this line, two concerns – witness and delineation – are brought together, concerns which I see moving in the entirety of the pamphlet. Alexis Almeida's reader can only know the bounds of what is seen within the boundary of the

seer; if the lyric's I strays even a little outside of their mind, the frame of vision will be lost.

It is a forlorn sentence. Of the many fields enclosed, which in turn enclose the speaker's sight, none are worth detailing, and there is a faint, maybe exasperated, screech in the music of "these fields". The poet makes plain the wrench it is to work amongst a standard of seeing and telling, and a standard of limitation. I wonder if the former could be thought of as the metric of disclosure lyric is often held to, and the latter as the momentariness of lyric and/or the strain of sustaining a lyric subject.

Witness and delineation are rendered almost inseparable. Each utterance is framed closely by a subjectivity; in almost every sentence, the first person is present, mostly as "I". The first person is always circumscribing whatever it is that I am once-removed from. The lyric's I speaks of not being or having what I do not know. It is a tense harnessing; often, in these denials, there is a confirmation of the opposite, or a possibility opened onto. In

I don't believe that if something
comes later, it must be better.

both take place. The sentence invites reversal, a one hundred and eighty degree rotation. I feel that the lyric is asking me to reason it out – keep the grammar intact, and (re)write this into its opposite. A whole new text clinging to the underbelly of what is immediately there. Almeida brings these poems into plurality. Reading *I Have Never Been Able to Sing* becomes a kind of darting between surfaces.

In *Semiotics of Poetry*, Michel Riffaterre finds that "poetry expresses concepts and things by indirection" (1), and that displacing is a means of indirection, "when the sign shifts from one meaning to another, when one word 'stands for' another, as happens with metaphor and metonymy" (2). I think Almeida pushes this further, deftly achieving an indirection in which rather than one word standing for another, one sentence stands for another, for its inverse.

This rule of negating, that there should be an "I" for each "no", is not rigid – there are moments of escape, where a disobedient speaking back to the many recurring "no"s occurs. There is

Do people walk to escape walking. Does intimacy
follow the illusion of intimacy...

as well as

...Not wanting can seem powerful...

and

...Leaving can
seem painful.

Of these, most lose the negation when the first person framing is pared away. This marking of absences is simultaneously expected and unexpected. The title *I Have Never Been Able to Sing* sings of gaps, declaring deprivation whilst or despite elaborating a subjectivity. Departure – whether it is done by walking, relinquishing a want, or by leaving – provides the subject matter to be asserted, or at least explained.

I note that when the “I” loses self-referentiality and speaks invisibly that textual reference is made to seeming, to illusion. Almeida turns to questions of performance – these poems perform to frustrate what is expected. In my reading, I found a productive frustration. I asked myself:

Am I uncomfortable when poems do not confirm?

Do I have preconceived notions of a “correct” balance between denial and
admission in poetry?

Why do I feel as if the lyric’s I is closed off to me, despite them speaking to me?

Have I made confirm and affirm mean the same thing in my mind?

In all these admissions, it is important that the lyric’s I has thought about the things that it has not done, and that the lyric’s I is telling me so. Subjectivity happens through speech that does not correspond to a separate act; the act of speaking itself is as good as we will get.

I also see an excavation happening. Almeida uncovers the expansive potential to be found in sentences, stepping out into other genres and returning. I see flashes of conceptual art in these, in particular Barbara Kruger’s ‘Untitled (The Future Belongs to Those Who Can See It)’. Both are charged with a disarming, feminist non-compliance.

Both startle in their use of “correct” syntax to produce a radical subjectivity. Kruger frustrates anticipations of quiet beauty with the garish

colouration of her text. Almeida claims un-music, offering up the juddering song of prose poetry, and her lines breaks frequently take place where it is taboo – articles, prepositions, pronouns.

I consider what difference is made by the absence of visual image in Almeida's work, in contrast to Kruger's. Juxtaposition takes the form of grafting new declarations onto visual images in Kruger; in 'Untitled (The Future Belongs to Those Who Can See It)', this visual layer is a painting. It makes for noncompliant feeling, troubling the expectation that a painting is sufficient and total as only itself, without text. Kruger adds an inflecting surface of text to the painting; now, there are two modes of representing the figure of the woman.

One of Almeida's speakers has also had meaning put upon her; she has

...been told the ways my body is useful.

In the lack of adjectives and adverbs, I read a dispassion and perhaps a reticence to speak. The message is contracted, and tautened further by lack of prepositions that might have paced the sentence. No more words are taken than are needed; than are useful. Throughout, I am taken by the poet's attention to grammar – when writing with the sentence as your unit, devoting yourself to it is vital. I think it is by staying with the sentence that Almeida's poems get their surface; in one layer, the effect of breeziness, and in another, something very living is behind and moving.

Noncompliance is spoken chiefly through the constant refusals – of subtlety, of guns, of dawn rituals, to name a few. I think the jarring, negation, and resistiveness to reading of these poems are all facets of the one thing. Where I mentioned before about the speech of a poem happening according to the limits of the lyric's I's body, I myself pictured a line around the outside of this body, bounding inwardly. In *I Have Never Been Able to Sing*, Almeida inverts, attending to what does and does not escape these bodies. Events and objects are known by the shadows they throw on these speakers. These poems ask us to look at the imprint of their speech.

The assembly of varying genres of sentence also lends itself to defiance. Take, for instance,

...I move toward and away
from the middle. I don't have a favourite memory
of lunch.

These jar the more for the similarity of syntax, which draws them closer together. The second is more transparent in its reactivity; I can make a reasonably accurate guess as to the question that might have, in another mode of speech, prompted the admission. But the first is aphoristic, coming from no distinguishable source. The sentence itself might be coming toward or away from the middle; I could not say.

And images are by no means absent from *I Have Never Been Able to Sing*. Some that particularly stand out to me include

...I like to spread crushed raspberries on
toast.

and

...I grow more hair on the right side
of my body than the left.

It is because of all the denial that these confirming sentences are increased for the better in their intimateness. The sensuousness of the crushed raspberries glistens and sets alight the more abstract delineations. Would

I have never known exactly who to tell

carry such threat or promise of bursting if it were not for the raspberries that will be burst open later.

WORK CITED

Almeida, Alexis. *I Have Never Been Able to Sing*. Ugly Ducking Presse, 2018.

Riffaterre, Michel. *Semiotics of Poetry*. Methuen, 1980.