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Beyond Explanation, and Beyond Inexplicability, in Beyond Silence

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A first reading of Eleanor Cameron's *Beyond Silence* confused me. The novel somehow both satisfied what Frank Kermode calls "our deep need for intelligible ends"[1] and did not satisfy it, so that as I finished the novel, I both felt and did not feel that delight in problems solved and suspense fulfilled that I expect from good stories, and that I had felt at the end of her earlier and deceptively similar novel, *The Court of the Stone Children.*

Of these two feelings, the sense of satisfaction the two novels share is easier to explore. Both *The Court of the Stone Children* and *Beyond Silence* begin with a set of three quotations, one about how the past still exists, one about how the future is happening now, and one about the limitations of our conceptions of reality. The idea that the ordinary perception of time's passage ignores a larger reality underlies and gives order to all of Cameron's work. Gil in *The Court of the Stone Children* says, "All time—past, present, and future—is one Time."[2] Dr. Fairlie in *Beyond Silence* agrees: "It's quite possible that all is coexistent."[3] In her discussion of time fantasies in *The Green and Burning Tree,* Cameron herself says, "Time is not a thread at all, but a globe."[4] Furthermore, she praises the English time fantasists for expressing the same idea: "The past and creative magic! Is it the inextricable mingling of these two, the taken for granted presence in their lives of a past thick with myth and legend and fairy tale, that gives the English fantasists, and especially the time fantasists, their depth and their peculiar power of evocation?"[5]

Both *The Court of the Stone Children* and *Beyond Silence* pay homage to that English tradition and its immersion in a living past. But as an American, Cameron cannot take the tradition for granted. In fact, she seems to value it for its distance from contemporary American life, which she finds disorderly and dismisses as incomplete. Of course, life in the past was just as disorderly, just as incomplete; but it was so in a different way, and the difference gives it glamor for

Cameron and for us, a glamor that it did not have for those who were stuck with it.

In English fantasies like Boston's Green Knowe series or Uttley's *A Traveler in Time*, the past comes alive in an old house; in *The Court of the Stone Children* it comes alive in a museum, a reconstruction in San Francisco of rooms from a European house. "These rooms are from my home in France," says Domi, ". . . But it is *not* the same . . . ! This is a kind of strange, twisted dream of my home, the same and yet weirdly not the same" (p. 38). The novel is like its setting, the same as the English time fantasies it is modeled on, and yet weirdly not the same. The difference is that movement across time offers children in the English fantasies a satisfying sense of connection with a place where they already live; but Nina finds completeness by moving away from the jarring anarchy of contemporary San Francisco into Domi's alien and satisfyingly orderly rooms.

In *Beyond Silence* the homage to the order of the past and to the English fantasies that evoke it is even more explicit. Like Tolly in *The Children of Green Knowe*, Andrew hears children of another time sing nursery rhymes. Like Tolly and also like Tom in Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, his contacts with the past significantly involve a tree falling in a storm; and in both *Tom's Midnight Garden* and *Beyond Silence*, a woman from the past marries a man named Barty. Above all, Andrew actually leaves California and seems to feel more at home in Scotland; surrounded by relics of the past, he escapes his own confusion by moving across time.

In fact, *Beyond Silence* shares with *The Court of the Stone Children* and with the English time fantasies a resolution that does literally what all novels do formally. In most novels, Frank Kermode says, "Mere successiveness, which we *feel* to be the chief characteristic of the ordinary going-on of time, is purged by the establishment of a significant relation between the moment and a remote origin and end, a concord of past, present, and future."[6] In both of Cameron's novels, meetings of past and present fortuitously solve problems caused by the past's insistence on being over, problems that have concerned characters in both the past and the present. Nina's discovery of the truth about Domi's father in *The Court of the Stone Children* both makes Domi happy and allows Nina to live with those

aspects of herself that had previously defined her as a lonely eccentric; Andrew's encounters with Deirdre in *Beyond Silence* both save Deirdre's life and allow Andrew to face his guilt over Hoagy's death. By achieving resolution through such meetings of past and present, each novel literally denies mere randomness.

But for all that, *Beyond Silence* does not seem complete. A quick look back through the novel shows why: Cameron has carefully set up many potentially exciting confrontations that never take place. When Andrew first meets Beth McBride, he says, "I felt a kind of immediate recognition passing between us, some instantaneous knowledge that we were drawn to one another" (p. 7). When I first read that, I assumed Beth would figure prominently either in the mystery about Deirdre or in Andrew's self-recognition: she does neither. Cameron also dramatically sets the stage for Andrew to disburden himself to Dr. Fairlie; she sends him on an exciting trip to Fairlie's house involving missed buses and boats and then lets Fairlie make impressively bald statements about the novel's main themes. I expected Fairlie to perform a miracle, save Andrew, solve the mystery; instead, Cameron kills him off in an automobile accident.

That leaves Andrew with no one to confide in, and Cameron seems to have put Dunstan McCallum in the novel for just that purpose; but Dunstan's mere presence causes problems. Since Andrew meets Dunstan by chance, we can believe his wish to confide in him only if Cameron postulates an instantaneous empathy between the two; and in these cynical times, we tend to assume that all such attractions are sexual. So Cameron has to insert an otherwise pointless paragraph about both Dunstan and Andrew admiring a girl who passes them on the street, which establishes their heterosexuality. My first response was to wonder why she went to all this trouble, when she could easily have settled for one of the two confidants she had already set up and then not used, doing without Dunstan altogether.

Even odder is the way Cameron establishes Andrew's antipathy for Phineas Brock and then unceremoniously drops him completely from the novel. Andrew says, "Phineas became my enemy before I had the least glimmering of why he was. He was nosey, yes. Phineas annoyed the hell out of me. But I felt something deeper; instinc-

tively I felt it" (p. 71). Andrew finds Brock grandly evil, even satanic; Cameron supports Andrew's fear of him even by the name she gives him. Phineas means "mouth of brass," like the biblical image for those who lack charity,[7] and a brock is a badger—it is not surprising that Andrew feels badgered by Phineas. Given all that, I expected a melodramatic revelation of Brock as a true limb of Satan, along the lines of characters in Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* or various novels by Alan Garner, and then Andrew's glorious defeat of him. Alternatively, I thought Brock might turn out to be not dangerous at all, so that Andrew would have to face the cruelty of his false imaginings. But what actually happens is nothing at all. Professor Fairlie dies, and "Phineas had packed up and left before Dad and I got down to breakfast the next morning" (p. 168). He is not heard from again.

Cameron also creates unresolved expectations around the pictures of Deirdre of the Sorrows in the musicians' gallery. Deirdre Cames's letter reports the grandmother of the original Andrew saying that the pictures would mean something special to her; we expect something more than the accident of a name. But Deirdre Cames's life was not filled with sorrow, and she does not seem to have cuckolded her husband. And nothing special happens to Andrew in the gallery, either; when he goes to see those paintings that tantalizingly "had reached out to me when I'd first turned and looked up" (p. 99), all that happens is that Brock relates the story the pictures tell. While that story is about Deirdre Cames's namesake, it has nothing significant to do with events of the novel.

Cameron builds up and then thwarts similar expectations about Andrew's interest in the "Western Sea." He connects his first glimpse of it with the story of King Arthur's death told him by his mother and with his brother's death, for he had once planned to travel to that sea with Hoagy; he also connects it with his recurrent dream of drowning. But nothing remarkable happens when Andrew reaches the Western Sea. Instead of a major breakthrough, an understanding of the truth about himself, or about his brother's death, or a vision of Deirdre or King Arthur or even of Brock, Andrew simply has his old nightmare once more, decides anticlimactically that "I must go inland" (p. 177)—and, astonishingly, falls asleep.

Of course, both the paintings and the Western Sea allude to Andrew's situation, even if they come to nothing in terms of plot. Andrew himself connects them to the poem by Walter de la Mare that Dunstan recites to him; it evokes "the musicians' gallery at the end of the dining hall at Cames: its walls full of rich colors, trees and mountains and figures and, as I remembered, a glimpse of the sea" (p. 88). The end of the poem is, "Across the walls, the shadows / Come and go"; not surprisingly soon after hearing it Andrew overhears a conversation "about the space-time continuum and someone named Minkowski and about space and time vanishing into shadows" (p. 106). So the poem, King Arthur's sea, and the paintings all relate to Andrew's crosstemporal experiences. The problem is clear: what makes sense as an allusion to crosstemporal experience seems to create unresolved expectations is terms of plot.

Ironically, the biggest unresolved mystery in the novel is the easiest to accept. The unexpected death of Fairlie and the departure of Brock made me uneasy; but I had no trouble at all with the unexplained contact between Andrew and Deirdre. The whole point is that it is an infusion of wonderful inexplicability into the repressive understandability of normal reality. Andrew says, "Something had happened, something as impossible of explanation, as far outside the usual run of my life as that visitation on the plane" (p. 26). He asks himself, "Why couldn't I accept it and let all this searching for an unattainable solution sink away so that I would be left in peace?" (p. 131). Eventually he does accept it, and in finding peace beyond explanation, he comes to share an attitude expressed by Loren Eiseley in the novel's epigraph: "Nature contains that which has no intention of taking us into its confidence." It is also expressed by Cameron herself in *The Green and Burning Tree,* when she praises books that "let in almost everything; they make welcome the ununderstandable."[8] *Beyond Silence* seems to do exactly that, but in two quite different ways.

First, *Beyond Silence* shows the limitations of understandable reality by describing experiences that transcend rational explanation and by making the rational scientist, Phineas Brock, the villain of the piece. Brock is called the Quark, "a busy little particle of matter" (p. 17); what Andrew resists most is Brock's attempt to explain, and

therefore explain away, Andrew's strange experiences. Brock says, "It would be fatal for you to keep them hidden and unexplained" (pp. 134–35); in Cameron's scheme of things, someone who tries to explain the unexplainable is dangerous.

Cameron may also be confirming her faith in the un-understandable in *Beyond Silence* by deliberately leaving loose ends. All those thwarted expectations may be an attempt to make readers experience for themselves the unsettling state of not understanding something and to have no choice but the one Dr. Fairlie recommends to Andrew: "There's no use wracking yourself over a thing like that. Live with it, Andrew. Accept it. Take it as a wonder—there's so much we can't explain" (p. 158).

If Cameron is indeed doing that, however, there is a tension between her philosophical prejudices and her novelist's craft. For explanations of events and people give meaning to novels and therefore make them pleasurably different from the randomness of mere reality. Seen in this way, life itself is inexplicable, confusingly multifaceted, and novels satisfyingly explain it; Kermode defines a plot as "an organization that humanizes time by giving it form . . . a transformation of mere successiveness."[9] But in terms of Cameron's ideas about time, life is all too suffocatingly "humanized," all too constricted by the limited explanations of merely human scientists like Brock; deeper perception transcends mere cause-and-effect explicability. In her novels, Cameron transforms "mere successiveness" in two opposite directions, into the inexplicability of cross-temporal experiences and into the explanatory connections of storytelling. In *The Court of the Stone Children*, where there are no loose ends, she creates a satisfying unity that may weaken the unsettling wonder we should feel in face of the inexplicable. But in achieving unsettling inexplicability in *Beyond Silence*, she may have deprived it of its unity. Finally, its various threads do not come together; Brock has nothing to do with Deirdre, nor with Hoagy's death, nor with the separation of Andrew's parents. As a story, *Beyond Silence* seems something like Dr. Fairlie tells Andrew his own state of mind will come to be: "You must realize that even if you *can* connect, this might not be the end. That is, it would be an intellectual resolution while very possibly you would still have some way to go emotionally"

(p. 158). The feeling of incompleteness *Beyond Silence* conveys, even though it solves the central mystery about Hoagy's death, is confirmed by the knowledge that Andrew tells his story "six years later" (p. 2). At that distance he should know what matters and what does not; but he continually misleads us, and ends up unsettling us, in ways that could easily have been avoided—if his creator had wanted to avoid them.

Apparently she did not want to. I believe that *Beyond Silence* is complete, but that the way the loose ends are tied together becomes clear only after a reader has been disturbed enough by its apparent incompleteness to look further.

The key to the unity of *Beyond Silence* is its main difference from *The Court of the Stone Children*—the fact that the story is told not by an omniscient narrator, but by its protagonist. Since Andrew is so disturbed by Hoagy's death, the novel is not just a time fantasy, but a psychological case study; it is similar to Judith Guest's numbingly realistic and thoroughly unconvincing *Ordinary People*, in which an ineffably wise therapist helps a boy confront his guilt over his brother's drowning by teaching this restrained child of restrained WASP parents to become open and responsive—as joyously Jewish as the therapist himself.

If the omniscient narrator of *The Court of the Stone Children* had left loose ends untied, we would have to accuse Cameron of bad craftsmanship. But when Andrew tells his own story, we can assume that Cameron's bad storytelling is quite deliberate—that it reveals his character and his situation. And it does. The central situation of the novel is Andrew's incomplete perception. He has forgotten the events leading up to his brother's death; in the imagery provided by his hypnagogic experience, he has built a wall around that memory. For most of the novel, Andrew does not know the whole truth, and it is his own honest reporting of his flawed perception that creates thwarted expectations. But as Andrew's own voice tells him in his hypnagogic experience, "You can't build the wall high enough—you never can. There'll be a crack in it somewhere" (p. 151). Eventually, the wall cracks; the whole truth Andrew perceives confirms that the apparent red herrings introduced earlier were traps, set by his unconscious to prevent him from making his breakthrough.

Seen in this way, Beth cannot figure importantly in the breaking down of Andrew's walls simply *because* he feels such sympathy with her; as he says himself, "She might, in her good common sense, convince me of something I didn't want to be convinced of" (p. 177). She threatens the walls because her loving concern might break them down. On the other hand, Dunstan is no threat at all because he is so uninvolved with the rest of Andrew's life. Cameron seems to have introduced him so tenuously for just that reason. Andrew believes that Dunstan will listen to him without trying to help, so that he can safely unburden himself "just enough to ease the pressure" (p. 177) without actually cracking the wall. Furthermore, Andrew believes that Dunstan has also built a wall to protect himself: "Maybe he was all right as a man because he had the world he'd made for himself" (p. 87); such a person would understand and respect another's need for walls and do nothing to disturb them.

But Andrew's subconscious understands that Brock, the professional psychological investigator, might. What Andrew most hates about Brock is his desire to help him, which his subconscious sees as a matter of hunting him down. Brock really was only trying to help, and really did not have other things on his mind beside the torturing of Andrew; his unceremonious disappearance from the novel and from Andrew's life, for reasons unconnected with Andrew, is quite natural; and it shows Andrew how distorted his perception was: "I've often thought how I'd hated him—bitterly hated him! And so had been incapable of seeing him as anything but a cold, calculating, impervious little manipulator for his own ends" (p. 166).

Andrew is also blind to the fact that Dr. Fairlie, whom Brock worships, shares scientific prejudices and asks Andrew the same questions. Andrew worries that Brock would "break open the privacy, my secret life" (p. 148), but he allows Fairlie to do just that. Perhaps Fairlie, like Dunstan, is safely distant from Cames castle and can thus feel nothing but professional concern for Andrew. Fairlie's death once more shows Andrew that things are not, however, as he perceives them. Not only does he lose his proposed confidant, but Brock's grief over Fairlie forces Andrew to reevaluate Brock. Yet Cameron also allows Fairlie to die and Brock to disappear from the novel, I suspect, so that Andrew's breakthrough will ultimately come

through inexplicable magic, not psychological science. The wall finally breaks down through the hypnagogic experience that provided Andrew with the image of a wall "with the break in it" (p. 187) in the first place.

The expectations aroused and not fulfilled by the paintings in the gallery and the Western Sea also reveal Andrew's unconscious at work, Andrew's flight from the sea as soon as he has his potentially revealing nightmare about drowning suggests how firmly the wall of his resistance stands; his unconscious tells him to leave before any serious crack develops and before he comes to understand what seas and drowning mean to him. But Andrew's unconscious also acts positively, in that it allows the mystical experiences that eventually do break down the wall. Since the paintings in the gallery seem to lose their potential for magic once Andrew hears Brock's dismissing explanation of the story they tell, thwarted expectations about them merely confirm Andrew's unconscious realization that Brock's explanatory mind is deadly to the one thing that can save him.

That one thing is what is still left unexplained—the inexplicable contact between Andrew and Deirdre. But while there is no logical explanation, there is a symbolic one. It involves the idea of going down. Hoagy died going downhill; drowning is going down, and Andrew's recurring nightmare is of Hoagy drowning. Andrew says, "How subtly our dreams express what is deepest: both of us had *gone down*, but only one had survived. As in the sea, so on the mountainside" (p. 189, my italics). On the mountainside, Andrew refused to drive the car, and "Hoagy had *gone down* alone" (p. 189, my italics); that is what Andrew is hiding from himself, and what his nightmare about going down in water expresses, in a disguised way that keeps him from the painful truth. But throughout the novel, Andrew's crosstemporal experiences take him down. When he first walks around Cames, he says that he, "*going down*, left the sunlight and submerged into a dense green shade like a swimmer sinking under water" (p. 36, my italics); once down, he passes Deirdre's house and then reads her letter to the earlier Andrew. Later on, he steps over a wall, and feeling "infinitely remote from all humankind" (p. 93), "*walked on down*. . . . I was lost, because of the gray, drifting, winding obscuring mist" (p. 94, my italics). This is almost like drown-

ing again; but he hears a voice that guides him through the mist and realizes that it "had been Deirdre who'd *led him down*" (p. 96, my italics). Andrew connects the idea of going down underwater with the unconscious—"the unconscious would begin sending up illuminations, rising like bubbles to the surface of simmering water" (p. 186). Deirdre magically guides Andrew whenever he goes down past the wall into his unconscious, so that he does not drown after all. Rather, he comes upon the truth submerged there.

For Eleanor Cameron, the limited world that can be rationally explained is not true, but shifting, insubstantial, illusory. In that world, Cames is not as Andrew's father remembered it; Andrew's girlfriend's "whole life changed, and then she changed" (p. 38); and Beth says, "Never trust that everything will be the same, because it won't" (p. 195). The only permanent truth is in that inexplicable place Deirdre led Andrew down to, which is simultaneously beyond both time and ordinary consciousness. Paradoxically, the explicable workings of therapy do not restore Andrew's memory of the illusory world of reality; inexplicable magic does.

Andrew says of his crosstemporal experiences, "They were mine, of my deepest self" (p. 132). To find those deeps, he goes down into himself just as his mother did in her book, "with time peeled off in layers of reflection so that the whole range of herself as a reading, thinking, feeling, imagining animal was revealed by *going down* and back instead of along in time through the cycle of the year" (p. 112, my italics). And Andrew's father admits that though his "needs will have changed," he will be "always, *underneath,* the same Andrew" (p. 196, my italics)—permanent beyond time and change, beyond ordinary consciousness and beyond explicability. Selfhood is one with magic; both exist permanently outside mere shifting time. Finally, the wrong ideas Andrew has about people in the world of time, the ideas that created our unfulfilled expectations, are just further evidence of the illusory nature of the world we usually perceive.

Whatever one feels about Cameron's ideas of time, the cleverly paradoxical way she expresses them is admirable. Not only does she complete an apparently incomplete fiction, she also presents a psychologically convincing statement about the limitations of psychology. She does admirably what Kermode suggests good novels

must do: she falsifies our expectations, and "the interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected or instructive route."[10] Kermode says we wish to do that because, in the midst of literary conventions, that things we do *not* expect create a sense of reality. But what is most unexpected about *Beyond Silence* is not the way Andrew's psychological difficulties realistically account for the novel's loose ends; rather, it is that inexplicable magic finally dismisses psychological explanations for being as illusory as the incomplete world they describe.

The title of *Beyond Silence* sums it up. The phrase occurs in Dr. Fairlie's statement of faith in wonders: "The thing is, Andrew, we live in a cloud of unknowing, and who knows what lies beyond silence?" (p. 158). Beyond the phenomena we comprehend and therefore can name lies the inexpressible. Not surprisingly, Andrew's mysterious experiences are often voices moving out of the silence, like the voice of the wall builder, or Deirdre's voice in the dumbwaiter. Before Deirdre leads him home, Andrew experiences "utter silence" (p. 92), then moves past a wall into the unknown: "I heard nothing, and so presently I stepped over the wall and continued on down" (p. 93). Once down beyond silence, he is guided by her voice. Later, Andrew's despair about an American who speaks belligerently of Vietnam "stopped whatever words I might have managed to put together" (p. 124). But beyond this silence is an experience in which he shouts to warn Deirdre of danger. The wall Andrew builds around Hoagy's death silences the unspeakable; he remembers "no sound" (p. 32) as he recalls the accident. Dr. Fairlie suggests that Andrew might "see over the wall or through a crack in it" (p. 158); but the wall hides not sights but words, a conversation between Andrew and Hoagy. Other people in the novel also protect themselves with walls of silence. Andrew's mother, "the Quiet One," hides her grief for Hoagy in silence, and Andrew assumes that Dunstan, "big, *quiet*, wounded Dunstan" (p. 177, my italics), has also built a wall around his pain.

Andrew ultimately speaks to Dunstan and remembers Hoagy's words; Dunstan never gets beyond silence. But Nell Cames, whose name is similar to her creator's, finds a way beyond silence that says

much about the making of fiction: "Now that Hoagy was gone," says Andrew, "when I'd come in from school at home the house would be silent, or there'd be the faint tapping from her study upstairs of my mother's typewriter: *tap, tap,* silence, *tap, tap, tap,* sometimes long silence—then the tapping again" (p. 55). What lies beyond speechlessness in the face of the pain and unknowing of being alive is the ordered language of imaginative discourse. George Steiner says, "Possessed of speech, possessed by it . . . , the human person has broken free from the great silence of matter."[11] To find the right words is to triumph over the random, chaotic world the words describe; what most truly lies beyond silence is eloquent fiction, fiction like *Beyond Silence.*

Notes

1. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 8.
2. Eleanor Cameron, *The Court of the Stone Children* (New York: Avon, 1976), p. 142. All further references to *The Court of the Stone Children* are to this edition.
3. Eleanor Cameron, *Beyond Silence* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), p. 158. All further references to *Beyond Silence* are to this edition.
4. Eleanor Cameron, *The Green and Burning Tree* (Boston and Toronto: Atlantic/Little Brown, 1969). p. 71.
5. Ibid., p. 131.
6. Kermode, p. 50.
7. Corinthians 13. 1.
8. Cameron, *The Green and Burning Tree,* p. 134.
9. Kermode, pp. 45–46.
10. Ibid., p. 18.
11. George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1977), p. 36.