MOVING POETRY BACK TOWARD THE HEART

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNIE FINCH

Jennifer Schomburg Kanke

Annie Finch's first collection of poetry, *The Encyclopedia of Scotland*, was published by Caribou Press in 1982. Since that time she has published five other collections, including 2010's *Among the Goddesses: An Epic Libretto in Seven Dreams* which won the Sarasvati Award for Poetry from the Association for the Study of Women and Mythology. Additionally she is an award winning translator of the work of the French Renaissance poet Louise Labé. *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* refers to Finch as "one of the central figures in contemporary American poetics" not only for her books of poetry and translation, but for her work as an editor and critic as well. Finch has played a central role in expanding the understanding of modern formal poetry as more than just a conservative old-boys club and has edited anthologies such as *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women* and *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art* as well as books of poetics such as *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse* and *The Body of Poetry: Essays on Women, Form, and the Poetic Self*. Her work has appeared not only in established literary journals such as *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Kenyon Review* but has also been featured on Def Poetry Jam and NPR. Until 2013 she served as the director of Stonecoast, the low-residency MFA program at the University of Southern Maine. This interview about spirituality in contemporary poetry took place via email during the winter of 2014.

Jennifer Schomburg Kanke: Your latest book, *Spells: New and Selected Poems*, contains a section of "lost poems" which you refrained from publishing for many years. In an interview conducted by Alex Giardino which appeared in early 2013 in *The American Poetry Review*, you talk about the climate being more open to the formal aesthetic of the poems. What about the spiritual component of those poems and others included in the collection? Has there been a shift in the way matters of the spirit are treated in contemporary poetry that has allowed these poems to finally have their day?

Annie Finch: I do feel that there is more openness to explicit spirituality in poetry now than there used to be. At the height of the anecdotal free verse movement of the 1970s and 1980s, when I was a student, we were trained to judge a poem's quality based on whether each shred of directly expressed emotion had been "earned" (good) or "unearned" (bad) through the daily experience described in the poem. This approach led to a constipated, restrained poetics, as if poets had to prove our feelings scientifically; with the exception of a few poets such as Robert Bly, it was not a style that was hospitable to the direct expression or exploration of spiritual feeling. The dominance of this approach is beginning to loosen now, and at the same time, there's been an increase of pleasure in the physical sounds and shapes of poetry, which I feel is moving poetry back towards the heart. There may be a gender aspect to this shift as well; that 'evidence-based' period was marked by frequent sexual harassment of female students and by a post-Romantic, ego-dominated poetics in general; by contrast, I would say that the tradition of women's poetry, particularly in the 19th century in the US, has frequently been infused with a less ego-centered and more explicitly spiritual view of the world.

JSK: You've mentioned before that you see a connection between the formal elements of your poetry and your Goddess and earth-centered Pagan spiritual path. In your essay "Incantation," which appears in *A God in the House: Poets Talk about Faith* edited by Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler, you even say that "There's a practical need in Paganism for good poems, not only for meditation but also for ritual. This often means using rhythm and meter." This has me curious about how you feel about the place of spirituality in free verse poetry. Do you feel that there are any differences in terms of the way you engage with your faith when you choose to use free verse versus when you incorporate more formal craft elements?

AF: Absolutely there is a difference. My earliest spiritual poems, such as the title poem of *Spells*, written in 1978 when I was a college student, were in free verse. As I've written in my essay "The Body of Poetry," I feel that free verse is a poetry of the mind and soul and transcendent spirituality (god), and formal verse is a poetry of the heart and body and immanent spirituality (goddess). When I experience good free verse I feel as if I am a spirit larger than the poem, contemplating it; when I experience good

formal verse, I feel that I am a body smaller than the poem, inhabiting it. It's more of a rhapsodic, physical experience. I am really enjoying reveling in the complex and variegated landscape of the physical aspects of poetry these days. And in general, more and more, I consider poetic form as a powerful spiritual tool; to write in a truly difficult form provides a priceless education in humility, patience, flexibility, self-discipline, faith, and nonattachment!

JSK: Many contemporary poets who have a reputation for writing on spiritual matters, such as Mark Jarman, Andrew Hudgins, and Marc Gaba, do so in a way that often feels uncertain or questioning, sometimes almost even apologetic in their striving for connection with deity or mystery. Your poems don't strike me this way. They seem to embrace this connection more fully without going full-on Wordsworth, who sometimes feels to me that he comes to his relationship with the spirit from an ego-driven place. I'm thinking specifically of your poems "Earth Goddess and Sky God" and the series "Poems for the Wheel of the Year." Would you agree or am I cherry-picking my examples too much?

AF: I think you have it exactly right. My religion is marginal and misunderstood; it's also ecstatically satisfying to me. It has saved my life and helped me to find my bearings as a woman and a poet in this wounded and wounding culture. Questioning may be very appropriate for those engaged with a powerful, centuries-old religion with a lot of blood on its hands—but after decades of spiritual doubt and agony where I tried to fit myself into the tethers of the Abrahamic religions, I'm no longer interested in questioning when it comes to spiritual matters. I'm too busy loving the Goddess, dancing, and getting the word out to others who may need and treasure witchcraft as much as I do.

JSK: You've mentioned before that you're one of the few openly Pagan poets in the contemporary poetry scene, Stacia Fleegal being another. Why do you think that is?

AF: If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that Pagans tend to be extremely independent folks, many of whom have traced a difficult path to discover their spiritual identity, perhaps striking out on their own and educating themselves quite differently from their family. This profile may not fit

easily with the professionalized profile of the typical contemporary MFA student who has the leisure and support to pursue writing professionally. So the poetic-minded pagans out there may simply not be getting the professional literary training to get their voices into the mainstream. My own trajectory was extremely unusual; both my parents were activists and intellectuals who immersed themselves in studying arcane spiritualities, including paganism, and in literature and writing. So my poetic and spiritual education happened largely before I entered an MFA program. It's hard to imagine how I would have obtained it otherwise in the current educational system.

JSK: You've been working on a memoir called "American Witch" and your blog has that same name. There's even a line of American Witch products available on Zazzle. I have one of the coffee mugs that I love because it has your "Winter Solstice Chant" printed on it, which I find to be very comforting and calming. I'm wondering though if there's been any backlash or any unforeseen challenges as you've become more vocal about your own spiritual path and its intersections with your poetry. In some parts of the world women are sometimes still killed for being considered witches. Do you ever have any hesitations about the public nature of the path that you're on?

AF: I do have hesitations, of course. And, almost more so because of the hesitations, I feel called upon to take a public path. That's how freedoms increase—when those who have the privilege to speak out decide it is more important to do so, for the sake of those who are still silenced, than it is to be "safe" and silent. When I think about the women being killed as witches, for example—a subject I blogged about recently at the *Huffington Post*—it makes me want to help those women by raising awareness about the true nature of my religion. But there's also a fun side to going public in the U.S., at this moment when witches have more religious freedom and more public understanding than ever before. I love sharing witchcraft with women who don't know about it yet—so that's one of the joys of starting American Witch, which I hope to grow into a successful business (we already have Twitter and Facebook pages and a pilot website). I'm thrilled that you like the Solstice mug!

JSK: During your time working with the low residency MFA at Stonecoast and also the MA program at Miami University, you built a reputation of

being a supportive mentor. I remember when you were at Miami. I was working as a hall director there and found out that you were bringing Carolyn Kizer to campus for a week-long residency. I contacted you out of the blue and begged for a spot in the workshop, and you said yes! (At least I think it was you, I've always remembered it as you!) And even though I ended up not being able to go because my (evil) supervisor rescinded her permission for my time away from work (no…I'm not still somewhat bitter about it thirteen years later, what would make you think that?), it's always meant a lot to me that you were willing to let me in even though I had no connection with the Creative Writing Program there and no degrees in English or pedigrees to back me up. I guess what I'm getting at is that this kind of acceptance from within the academy felt like a rare gift to me at the time, and now that I'm in the academy I hope that I can do the same for others. Hmm…there's a question in there somewhere! Ah yes, here it is: I've heard stories of workshop leaders who won't even let students turn in poems that are overtly spiritual because they feel it's too difficult to get students beyond the clichés. Since poems of a spiritual nature can sometimes get a bad reaction during workshops, what advice can you give to those of us new (or even not so new) to teaching workshops in terms of being a good mentor for these students?

AF: Among the reasons I'm proud to say that some of my ancestors were Quakers is that Quakers were the first to post prices on their merchandise in the marketplace, so that everyone would be charged the same price for the same item. That's how I feel about poetry workshops: they should be fair to everyone who comes looking for guidance, regardless of the student's aesthetic taste or subject matter. The idea of banning certain topics is anathema to me. I would show such students examples of great religious poems, preferably connected with the same religious tradition they are writing about (Herbert or Hopkins for a Christian, for example) to demonstrate that spiritual clichés are not necessary. Every student deserves to have their chosen subject matter treated with respect. As much as possible, I would encourage displacing discussion of subject matter with instruction in poetic form—chapters 11 to 14 of my new textbook *A Poet's Craft*, for example, will give a poetry class something far more worth sinking their teeth into than the students' choice of subject matter, which seems to me essentially a personal choice.

JSK: And, since I'm asking for advice already, I might as well press my luck

and see if I can get just a little bit more wisdom from you before I start trying your patience. In the interview with Alex Giardino that I mentioned earlier, you say that you're hoping for a "widespread turn in a new direction—a turn towards one another." What do you think are the first few steps that can get the momentum going on that turn?

AF: I was moved by a tangible manifestation of such a turn at the launch reading of the *Villanelles* anthology I coedited with Marie-Elizabeth Mali for Everymans Library. The book was the manifestation of a twenty-year-old dream of mine, and even so, the launch was far more moving than even I could ever have imagined. The reading brought together poets in their 20s and their 70s—slam poets, exploratory and language poets, and narrative free verse poets as well as formalist poets—all sharing their villanelles from the anthology, and enjoying and appreciating each others' work in a way I literally can't imagine happening in any other way than through form. And the evening was also, incidentally, extremely entertaining for the non-poets in the audience in a way that we have all pretty much given up on being possible for a poetry reading. It was exhilarating. When I made the remark you quote, I don't think I was thinking consciously about form, but now it occurs to me that reconnecting with form may well be one of the best ways for poets to turn towards one another.

JSK: Who are other poets you think have headed or are heading in that new direction? What and who do you recommend we read if we're interested in taking this "turn towards one another"?—

AF: Among contemporary poets, I really appreciate those who are willing to be vulnerable with the spiritual power of their poetry, who are clearly writing in the service of a larger goal. It's more about the spirit than the aesthetic. I find such voices all over the poetry world, from experimental to performance to formalist, though I guess all of them are characterized by a generous and evolved "poet's ear." Joy Harjo, Rosemarie Waldrop, Kazim Ali, Randall Mann, Agha Shahid Ali, Luci Tapahonso, and Molly Peacock come to mind. As always, I'm a big proponent of entering into conversation with poets across the centuries. Gwendolyn MacEwen, Sara Teasdale, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Genevieve Taggard, and Odysseus Elytis are a few of the less-well-known poets where I find this quality of reaching towards a shared center through opening oneself to the spirit of the craft, and W.B. Yeats, Basho, Hart Crane, Langston Hughes, Thomas Hardy, Muriel Rukeyser, Audre Lorde, and Emily Dickinson among the better-known.