

ロッセ・クラマーの詩と自然

The Poetry of Lotte Kramer and the Natural World

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Some artists compose music for piano or harp. Others draw pictures on canvas with paint. And there are some who paint pictures on paper with words that sing. They are called poets. They sometimes create word pictures so that the reader is able to visualize and perhaps be moved by the scene or situation being described.

Lotte Kramer's poems are like that. If you can visualize what she is saying, in a sense you are recreating it and you can, thereby, develop a feeling or an understanding for the poem, which of course is in some way based on your own previous experiences.

But the question remains: How does that come about? I don't know really. But my guess is that the poet's idea of nature, the poet's relationship with nature and that of the reader's plays a role somehow. So it is interesting to observe feelings about and descriptions of nature in poetry.

In Lotte Kramer's poems there are many descriptions of nature: meadows, rivers, trees, seasons, animals, flowers. And moreover, there is usually something else. It may be the recounting of an episode in the past or a hope for the future or a warning. Often the beauty of her poetry is in her description of the natural world. But that's only half of it. It could be said that it is the juxtaposition of the vivid descriptions of nature with the other aspect, the other part of the poem, that in fact makes the one stand in stark relief against the other, enhancing the combined effect. A brief look at a few of her poems will illustrate this point.

"Weissensee"¹⁾

The title of this poem "*Weissensee*" means "White Lake" in German. The poem is divided into three parts: I. "Morning" II. "Evening" and III. "Night."

In part one we are told of a dead rabbit seen the day before.

*We stared and questioned. No blood.
His brown companion hopping around him.
A funeral rite, perplexed. ...*

however:

*... Today, no corpse
But the wild mint profuse at the waterfall,
Strong scent among flowers and raindrops.*

Next, in part two, we learn of...

/How

*Near we are to perfection where tall
Grasses and sedge cull their strength in the wind
And meadows hoard waves that are static
By the edge of the wood. Here the mind
Can not curl its barbed wire mesh of sick
Sorceries; ...*

Note the juxtaposition of the dead rabbit and then the wild mint profuse at the water fall. Note also that the “*barbed wire mesh of sick sorceries*” stands in stark relief against the near-perfect world of tall grasses in the meadows by the edge of the wood.

“**In Praise of Silence**”²⁾

In the poem, *In Praise of Silence*, the noise of the day is contrasted with the magic of solitude. It is yet another example of bold juxtaposition. It begins with a June, 1989 news broadcast about the death of the Shi’i Muslim cleric, poet, and political leader of Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini on June 3rd, and the Tiananmen Square protests for democratic change which climaxed on June 4th. The third and last stanza in this poem is of Lotte speaking:

*In the glass coffin lies the Ayatollah,
Students are crushed and burnt in Peking Square
We sit in front of all that TV horror
...
Yet we must listen to the silent language*

*Inside the grass blade, stone, record the tree.
Remember presences that work their magic
Only in solitude—for none to see.*

The closing lines are a Thoreauvian appeal “*to listen to the silent language...*” There will of course be various interpretations of what or who “*the presences that work their **magic** only **in solitude**—for none to see*” are. Could they be the spirits of the grass blade, stone and tree? Or perhaps the various non-verbal, but influential forces of nature? Or, if one has a literary bent, one might suppose them to be the quiet voices of the poets of the world, past and present. If you are knowledgeable about history and politics, you might imagine silent workers who want to change the world for the better. Whatever the interpretation, however, you mustn’t forget the part about the *magic*.

“Canto” (at Castor Hanglands)³⁾

The setting of this poem is at the Castor Hanglands Natural Nature Reserve near Peterborough, England which is where the poet lives. *Canto* is an Italian word that means melody or song. And the Lotte Kramer poem of said name does definitely have a refrain. The refrain keeps telling us what the poem “is not.” Hence we find ourselves repeatedly wondering what it really is about.

*When evening smudged the trees with sooty fingers
We stood on the path and heard the nightingales singing.
This isn’t a poem about nightingales singing.*

*In stillness we trembled with pleasure and saw the long grasses
Bending and quivering in summer's watery etching.*

This isn't a poem about nightingales singing.

*We knew we were nearing the end of our favorite season
And felt in that passing an unspoken farewell and longing.*

This isn't a poem about nightingales singing.

*We'd been to the pond at the woods dark edge descending
And stared at the quaking and muddying of stagnant water.*

This isn't a poem about nightingales singing.

*Now, in this canto we summon the future rising
Showing us meadows of insects and unmown flowers.*

This isn't a poem about nightingales singing.

*But just on that evening we silently stood by the bushes
And heard the bird's music for always and always and always*

...

This isn't a poem about nightingales singing.

So, now the perhaps superfluous question: What is this poem about? Well, as in all good literature, there can be various interpretations. We do understand that it is not about nightingales singing, however, they are at least the background music. We might be allowed to say that something happens here and those nightingales, though they don't instigate it, by their being there they perhaps

facilitate it or set the mood.

Time is a point of reference in this poem. A bird's song can last one minute or five, but it is not about that. Summer ends at the end of summer, but in this poem, we are summoning "*the future rising*" and are having an experience that is "*always and always and always.*" Are we transcending time here? I wonder.

Be that as it may, for me what I love in this poem, is the combination of "*In the stillness we trembled with pleasure... And heard the bird's music for always and always and always,*" with the chorus refrain "*This isn't a poem of nightingales singing.*"

"After the Flood" (Four Haiku)⁴⁾

After the flood

The impermanent island

Floats like a glass jewel.

The river has lost its way

Usurping the land

With its broad belly.

The sun cares little

For the destruction

But heightens the tragedy

While clouds build their

Gigantic castles

Only to disperse them again.

In Japan the traditional three line haiku, being of 5+7+5 syllables, is a closely woven short 17 syllable poem which contains words that indicate the season of the year. A warbler, for example, would indicate spring, a gold fish would indicate summer, etc. However, there are also less traditional approaches that are not bound by these restrictions, though they too will tend to be short precise poems usually about or at least with references to things in nature.

In “After the Flood” Lotte Kramer presents us with four haiku which may be appreciated separately, but as they are united in their flow of time and theme they can also be treated as a single longer poem.

The first haiku refers to an “island” as “a floating jewel.” Prior to the flood it must have been a hill or a rise in the land. In the next three haiku, and this is typical of Lotte Kramer’s poems, human qualities or abilities are attributed to non-human things. The “river”, for example, has not only “lost its way”, but it is “usurping the land.” (See also “*River Incantation*” from Black Over Red, pages 44-45.) Next comes the cold hearted “sun” that “cares little for the destruction” wrought by the “broad belly” of the “river”, but “heightens the tragedy.” The last in the series of these four haiku tells us of the capricious “clouds” that “build their gigantic castles” in the sky “only to disperse them again.”

Perhaps it is because of the tight weave of the haiku in particular and of poems in general, it seems that attributing human qualities and abilities to non human things does make descriptions vivid... giving them at times fairy tale aspects or in some cases epic proportion.

“Earthquake”⁵⁾

In Lotte Kramer’s poem “*Earthquake*” several kinds of disasters, one of them being an earthquake, are described. People die in disasters and those left behind have difficulty in accepting their deaths. This is because they still have hope. One might also venture to say that the greater the love is the greater the hope. (See also “*A Fable*” in Earthquake and Other Poems p. 22.)

An accountant, his brother lying in the rubble of a collapsed building, pleads for help.

.../

*The rubble falling round him and his head
Dizzy and bleeding. ‘I’m an accountant,
‘Please save my brother, he’s still there’ he said.*

*It took six seconds for the earth to shed
Her mother image and destroy its root
When dust and mortar stiffened him to lead.*

*Too few can crawl to safety from their bed
Escape the knock at dawn, the vicious boot.
‘Please save my brother, he’s still there’ he said*

...

How and why did this terrible death have to happen? As the title of the poem indicates, one explanation would be an earthquake. A second would be the lack of awareness and preparation on the part

of the victim. This second explanation being of the blame-the-victim variety.

A third explanation, though not mentioned in this poem per se, could be to say that, in the event of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, or tsunami, it is the nation's or city's responsibility to warn it's citizens of the impending disaster and, thereby, keep them out of harm's way.

If, however and for whatever reason, it is the "*vicious boot*" of the nation itself that is knocking on doors at dawn and perpetrating the disasters on its own people and/or those of neighboring countries, solutions can be more complicated, they can require more time and the price to pay can usually not be measured only in money.

"Arosa Voices"⁶⁾

In a reading of the more than ten books of Lotte Kramer poetry, one might notice mountain climbing is something she evidently enjoyed for the physical exercise, of course, but also for the calm and serenity experienced close to nature. The setting for the following poem is Arosa, a small resort town in Switzerland of which, presumably, the poet was fond.

"Arosa Voices" is a poem in five parts with five themes: I. View, II. The Lake's Riddle, III. The Trees' Certainty, IV. Meadows, and V. Zauberberg. We will take each part up individually, but please bear in mind that they are, of course, linked.

Arosa Voices I. View

Sunlight on rocks
Twinning shadows
With endurance.
Valley illusions
Pointing at contours
That zigzag the sky.
The woodcutters rasp
Marries the wind.

Notice that the “sunlight” and “shadows” phenomena of the natural world are mentioned in the same stanza as “endurance” and “illusions” which are phenomena that are usually thought of as being human. Notice that the actual human being here is not a lumberjack or logger, but a woodcutter. His “rasp marries the wind.” It seems to blend in with nature.

Arosa voices II. The Lake’s Riddle

The lake has its own language.
It gives back absolutes:
Trees, houses, humans.
When a boat tries to fathom
Its center, no sounds break
The oars’ coaching and slapping
Of the water’s feminine hunger.

*Light can decipher it more easily
 Penetrating below the green surface
 Or feeding clouds as shadows
 To the mirror of its waves. So it will be
 When we lie on the other side of the riddle.*

Does the lake speak to us “in its own language”? How so? Are we listening? Do we understand? Can we ever “fathom,” can we ever “decipher” a lake? How so? What “light” can we use in “penetrating... the mirror of its waves”? Does a lake have a “feminine hunger”? Do the “boat”, the “oars” and the “lake” symbolize something? If so, what? When will we know the answer to the riddle? But, come to think of it, *what is the riddle?* The author of this paper wishes to exempt herself from answering all these questions being as that it is much more enjoyable to just ask them.

Arosa Voices III. The Trees Certainty

Lotte Kramer has often written about trees. In some poems the “trees” are center stage. “*In Southey Wood*”, “*Speculation About A Eucalyptus Tree*”, “*The Chestnut Trees’ Complaint*” are but a few examples. In others the tree helps in the personification of a certain character or theme. In the poem “*Grandfather*”⁷⁾, for example, we learn that this man “*grew out of his small town as naturally as a Black Forest pine tree.*” In another poem, “*Attic*”⁸⁾, we find that the family, in hiding, is waiting “*For my father’s earth-worn footfall / Returning from the darkening trees.*” “*The darkening trees*” obvi-

ously indicate the time of day, but perhaps also symbolize the rise of Nazism in the Germany of the 1930s. In a poem written during or after a visit to her native Rhine country, "*The Sound of Roots*"⁹), the poet is listening to what "*the whispering roots*" are telling her. "*Do you hear? Yes, you listen / And let the blindfold fall from your stranger's eyes and you mourn.*"

Now for a look at trees and roots in "*Arosa Voices III.*"

*Trees are the old certainties.
I look into them, smell their scent,
Breathe in the faith of childhood.
When sun lightens their branches
Stars drip their silent glitter
On the path where pine needles crackle,
Dark roots knot themselves in clusters,
A different haunting hammers answers:
They know of sickness and world sorrow,
Are martyrs to the air's poison
But still stand erect in their sureness.*

Trees symbolize the certainty, the faith of childhood and roots are a well know symbol of ancestors. Living for hundreds and thousands of years trees and roots have been witness to "*sickness and world sorrow.*" This is what the poem *The Trees Certainty* is telling us.

In modern days trees have also become victims of "*the airs poison / But still stand erect in their sureness,*" (except, unfortunate-

ly, the ones growing in the thawed out permafrost.) Let there be no doubt that this reference to the “*air’s poison*” is more than a minor theme. It is not only an accidental reference to the global pollution problem. It does touch lightly on the problem, that is true. It is not hammered into us and in “*Arosa Voices*”, global pollution is not center stage. However, it is not a chance reference. And how do we know that it isn’t? A wide reading of Lotte Kramer’s poems tells us so. I will not go into this here and now, but I suggest that any reader interested in how the theme of the environment is treated in Lotte Kramer’s poems would do well to refer to the following:

**LOTTE KRAMER
ENVIRONMENTAL TOPICS AND POETRY**

poem	book of poems	topic mentioned
<i>Nine Herons on Reclaimed Land</i>	<u>Ice Break</u> , 1980	ominous... sea
<i>Black Forest Sonnets</i>	<u>Desecration of Trees</u> , 1994	acid rain
<i>Dead Rhine</i>	<u>Earthquake</u> , 1994	poisoned river
<i>Before Night</i>	<u>Earthquake</u> , 1994	trees... saying: “Save us!”

<i>Chimneys</i>	<u>Phantom Lane</u> , 2000	sulfur in air
<i>Glacier Song</i>	<u>Phantom Lane</u> , 2000	“know me”
<i>Heat</i>	<u>Phantom Lane</u> , 2000	dryness, water
<i>Message</i>	<u>Phantom Lane</u> , 2000	wild sea

Now let us go on to:

Arosa Voices IV. Meadows

*The meadows are the mothers of us all.
 No chairlift can destroy their welcome,
 Juicy with flowers and fat grass.
 They know the edge of existence
 Where the tree line begins, but their valleys
 Continue for ever. Even concrete
 Can't destroy them. There'll be there again
 Long after our houses have crumbled,
 Shrouding the much-tortured earth.*

In the first line of “*Meadows*” the mother-giver-of-life image is introduced. The meadows are “*juicy with flowers and fat grass*”. “Long after our houses have crumbled” the meadows with their tenacious grass roots will still be alive. They will be “*shrouding the much tortured earth.*” Bear in mind that a shroud is usually a cloth

that is wrapped around a dead person's body before it is buried. But in these last lines, the poet says that the meadows of living grass "*will be there again shrouding the much tortured earth.*" Hopefully, this means that the meadows will perhaps revive and save the Earth. If so, this indicates a belief that the power of Nature is great and benevolent. It indicates that there is hope.

Let us now turn our attention to:

Arosa Voices V. Zauberberg.

The character Hans Carstorp (also Castorp) mentioned here is a character in the German novel Der Zauberberg, (1924), written by Thomas Mann (1875-1955), a German novelist who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1929. His novel Der Zauberberg is titled Magic Mountain in English and is widely considered to be one of the most influential works of the 20th century German literature.

Here, on the 'Zauberberg'
In walls surrounded by trees
And mountains
That bend in the evening sun,
We breathe the air
That could not save
So many from dying.
Here, the magician
Sat and wrote,
Snatching a flame

*From the lives of his puppets
Who loved and talked
On the slopes of this greenness.
Hans Carstorp
Lies on his long chair
Looking into the night
Until his existence
Tumbles into our century's lottery.*

Here again, as in “*Arosa Voices I. The View*”, we have “light” and “shadow”, figurative though it may be. The mountain beauty and the mountain air can be said to be “light”, that is inspiration for poets and novelists and Hans Carstorp, but that this light “*could not save so many from dying*”. This could then be a reference to one of the “dark” periods, the pre-WWI days, during which many people were tumbled into the “*century's lottery*.” At the end of Thomas Mann’s novel, the First World War begins, Carstorp must join the military, and his probable death on the battlefield is suggested.

In a recent letter¹⁰, however, Lotte Kramer explained that her intent was an allusion to the disease of tuberculosis which was a central theme in Mann’s novel, Magic Mountain.¹¹ “Thomas Mann knew all about (tuberculosis) as his wife had been a sufferer of that illness and was a patient there as well in Davos.¹²” She also adds: “...I never mind what meaning people read into my poems or what the reader brings to them.”

Therefore, whether we imagine the “shadow” image and the reference to “endurance” in *Arosa Voices I* to have been taken up

again in *Arosa Voices IV* as an allusion to the looming wars or to the disease of tuberculosis, the fact remains that at that time many of the poets and novelists and Hans Carstorps of the world were impotent, in that they “*could not save so many from dying.*” This leads us to the question: what therefore is the role of literature in such a situation? To what degree can people, poets and novelists included, control their own destinies? Must they “*tumble*” on forever in the “*century’s lottery*”? I think that for Lotte Kramer, the important thing was having been able to survive. Luck often means being able to obtain the help, the “light”, of others or from nature when you most need it. Thus you might be able to avoid the pitfalls of “illusion”. Doing so would be an important factor in survival. Another factor would have been “endurance”, which means never giving up. Somehow this would be connected to having or to discovering a goal in life. And for a poet, one of the goals would be to write poems... Poems that might be able to say something about beauty and light, endurance and survival for self and for others.

In conclusion I would like to say that reading “about” poetry is not the same as reading the poems themselves and I sincerely hope that people who haven’t read Lotte Kramer yet, might someday have the opportunity to do so.

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- 1) Kramer, Lotte, 1994 *The Desecration of Trees*, Hippopotamus Press, London, 1994, pp.41-42.
- 2) *ibid.* p.80
- 3) Kramer, Lotte, *The Phantom Lane*, Rockingham Press, Ware, Herts.,

- 2000, p.44.
- 4) Kramer, Lotte, *Black oven Red*, Rockingham Press, Ware, Herts., 2005, p.45.
 - 5) Kramer, Lotte, *Earthquake and Other Poems*, Rockingham Press, Ware, Herts., 1994, p.11.
 - 6) *ibid.* pp.48-50.
 - 7) Kramer, Lotte, *Family Arrivals*, Poet and Printer, London, 1981 and 1992. (also in *Selected and New Poems*, Rockingham Press, Ware, Herts., 1997, p.22.)
 - 8) *ibid.* p.24.
 - 9) Kramer, Lotte, *Earthquake and Other Poems*, Rockingham Press, Ware, Herts., 1994, p.32.
 - 10) January 8, 2008 letter to Dorothy Dufour from Lotte Kramer.
 - 11) Kramer, Lotte, "View from Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain, Davos", *Selected and New Poems*, Rockingham Press, Ware, Herts., 1997, p.113.
 - 12) Davos is a town near Arosa in the Swiss Alps. The TB sanitarium in the novel Magic Mountain was in Davos.